



WEAVING CULTURE OF MEDIEVAL ASSAM : A PARADIGM OF SELF RELIANCE

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Abstract

Self-reliance helps in individuals personal growth and hence in the growth of the country too. So, for the growth and development of the nation the concept of Atmanirbhar Bharat or Self-reliant India has been forwarded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address to the nation on 12th of May 2020. This was the starting of a nationwide movement once again after the Swadeshi movement of Mahatma Gandhi which was started to support local businesses and boycott goods outside India, in the early 20th century. Gandhiji gave special importance on weaving and through this wanted make the people of the land economically self reliant. As like the other parts of India, people of Assam were also well versed in weaving which traces its root back to the Medieval Assam which was an important occupation of the period. In that period the handloom weavers played a vital role for self reliance and also economic growth of the region. Both cotton and silk fabric like Muga, Paat and Eri were in great demand in Assam as well as in the adjoining countries too. The royal patronage contributed a lot in attaining the high degree of the perfection of the cloths. Spinning and weaving were considered to be part of education of a girl in every household. As weaving culture was existed among the almost every household of medieval Assam it helps people to become more self reliant and hence got much more interest from the state comparing with the other economic sectors of the period. To prepare this research paper an effort has been done to curve out the self reliance amongst the people of Medieval Assam in the field of weaving by studying the weaving culture of the period. This paper is composition of the knowledge about the effort of people of medieval Assam in making cloths on the basis of contemporary records and also secondary sources like books of different authors and also articles from journals and other edited books. A descriptive method has been applied to describe the contents of the paper.

Key Word: Ahom, Atmanirbhar, Self-reliance, Weaving

Introduction

Atmanirbhar Bharat or Self- reliant India is a concept that forwarded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address to the nation on 12th of May 2020. This was the starting of a nationwide movement once again after the Swadeshi movement of Mahatma Gandhi which was started to support local businesses and boycott goods outside India, in the early 20th century . It was believed by Gandhiji that the national movement was necessary to free the country from the yoke of colonial rule, but the prosperity of the nation could be achieved through the economic self-sufficiency of the masses which was also a political need of a newly born independent country like India. Gandhiji laid the foundation of Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) and tried his best during his lifetime to achieve the goal and it is now the duty of every citizen to turn his dream into reality nationwide by participating in the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan forwarded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The five pillars of ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat are economy, infrastructure, technology driven system, vibrant demography and demand and asked the nation of 1.3 billion people diligently to be ‘vocal for local’ , while Mahatma Gandhi was focused on the first pillar of Modi’s Atmanirbhar Bharat i.e. Economy. Gandhiji gave special importance on weaving and through this wanted make the people of the land economically self reliant.He believed in the ideology of Swadeshi , which means to use everything that is made in India. It was very necessary at that time to follow the ideology of Swadeshi as British discouraged the Indian textile industries and promoted the British made goods especially the textiles. So, Gandhi and other leaders in order to promote Swadeshi goods , encouraged the people to spin yarn and weave Khadi. This hampered the British textile industries and provided work to many Indian artisans and weavers as like in Assam too.While coming to Assam, Gandhiji became overwhelmed by going through the work culture of Assamese women and he said that, ‘*Assamese women are born weavers, they can weave fairy tales in their cloths*’. This caliber of Assamese women as well as the weaver traces its root back to the Medieval Assam too. It was an important occupation of the people of Medieval Assam . The Ahom kings appointed skilled artisans in this sector and the textile industry was in its peak at that period of study.Muhammedan historians observed that Assam silk was excellent and it resembled those of China. Tavernier refers to Assam silk as one "produced on trees" and confirms that the stuff

made of them was very brilliant. The fabrics prepared out of *Muga*, *Eri* and *Paat* (Mulberry silk) became the national dress of the Assamese and formed a common costume of the women of the Assam valley. In his book 'An Account of Assam', J.P.Wade observed : "Warlike cloth is made in the following manner. At midnight the cotton is ginned, passed into rollers, spun into thread, manufactured into cloth and worn by the warriors. The work must be completed before daybreak (Wade,J.P,1800, P.33). People of Assam were so much involved in weaving culture that in the oral history like Bihu Naam (Bihu Songs), Biya naam (Marriage Songs), Nisukoni Geet (Cardle song) Fokora Jujana (Proverbs), Folktales also there are mentions about the various cloths like Bihuwan(Floral Gamocha), Riha , Bor Kapur, Cheleng Chadar(Clothings) etc. , various tools like Jontor (Spinning Wheel), Chereki, Tantkhaal (Loom) etc. of the period. Most of all ,in many of the historical works mention have been made about the textile craft, various dresses and also about the people engaged in this craftsmanship like H.K. Barpujari's *The comprehensive History of Assam* , Swarnalata Baruah's *A Comprehensive History of Assam* , Gunaviram Baruah's *Asom Buranji* , S.N. Sharma's *Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam* , Nagen Saikia's *Asomiya Manuhor Itihakh*, Sir Edward Gait's *A History of Assam*, Amiya Devi's *Swargadeo Rudrasingha* and many more. Going through all these an effort has been made to focus on the weaving culture by which the people of Assam made themselves self reliant and hence help the state and the society politically and economically too.

Objective and Methodology

In this paper a humble effort will be done to curve out the self reliance amongst the people of Medieval Assam among the weavers of textile crafts by studying the weaving culture of the period.

So far the methodology is concern , this paper is composition of the knowledge about the effort of people of medieval Assam in making cloths on the basis of contemporary records and also secondary sources like books of different authors and also articles from journals and other edited books. A descriptive method has been applied to describe the contents of the paper.

Discussion

Assam is well known for its handicrafts particularly for the hand woven cloths since long. In other word , it can be said that the land is a showcase of hand-woven textiles. Those were known for their fine quality, brightness of colour and durability and also for beautiful loom-embroidered designs. Assam's silk fabrics have earned immense recognition from all over the world. The state is home to several types of silks, the most prominent and prestigious being *Muga*, the golden silk exclusive to this state. *Muga* apart, there is *Paat*, and *Eri*. The art of weaving was known for its incredible simplicity and peerless charm. The techniques of weaving are handed down over generations and was flourished in Assam is mentioned in many Assamese literature and scriptures, Buranjis, various records of contemporary time, foreign accounts, epigraphs etc. The *Kalika Purana* of the 10th century A.D. and Harsa Charita mentioned that fine cotton garments were used in Assam. In Banabhatta's 'Harsa Charita' it was written that one kind of *Dukula* cotton fabric was sent as a gift to king Harsa by King Bhaskaravarman of Kamrupa. This *Dukula* was made from fine hand-spun white cotton yarn by the Assamese weavers. *Dukula* was the best quality of *Khyom Vastra* made of the fibre of tea bark which colour was as bright as the moonlight of the autumn season (Saikia Nagen, 2013,P. 205) .The *Kalika Purana* also refers to Cotton, *Kambala* (Warm cloth), *Balka* and *Kokhaj* (made from cocoon) used and manufactured in this country.

During the Ahom period, handloom weaving was at the peak of its glory. It was rare to find an Assamese family without a Loom. Momai Tamuli Barbarua, a minister of Swargadeo Pratap Singha, ordered that before the sunset every woman must spin a certain number of hanks of yarn. This rule was scrupulously followed in the Ahom kingdom to avoid punishment. It is an old custom that the mother gives three pieces of silk garment to her daughter at the time of her marriage and complete silk dress to her son-in-law when welcoming him. The women of Assam weave fairy tales in their looms. In earlier times, the skill to weave was the primary qualification of a young girl for her eligibility for marriage. This perhaps explains why Assam has the largest concentration of handlooms and weavers in India. From early times, Eri cloth has been serving the purpose of warm cloths particularly amongst the economically weaker section of the Assamese people. The spinning and weaving activities were popularized and

became an indispensable profession of every Assamese household during the days of Ahom regime (1228-1826). Though, artisans like *Jola*, *Jogi* and *Katoni* were there to do the spinning and weaving, it was no longer confined to these particular community or artisan group but these were produced in every home. People of other castes attached no stigma to weaving and rearing of silk worms. The Brahmins did not rear silkworm though their women too practiced weaving. As S.N. Sharma says that the weaving of cloth was not considered as a degraded profession; rather it was practiced by the Brahmins and lower castes irrespective of their social status (S.N.Sharma, 1989, p.252.)

Textile of the period

The textile industry of Assam is being considered as one of the important industry of Medieval Assam. Both cotton and silk fabric was in great demand of that period. The silk is the royal fabric of Ahom kings who ruled Assam for six centuries till 1826 A.D. (Pathak, M, 2011, P.08). It is known that varieties of silk cloths were woven in the period like *Paat*, *Muga* and *Eri*. *Eri* was the cheapest of all three. Usually rearing of this silk worm had done personally in the household of the period of study. This worm fed on the plants like *Era* and also *Keseru*, *Gomari*, *Gulanchara*, *Bogori* which were generally found in the backyard of the households. The *Muga* variety of silk yield from the worm fed on leaves of *Xom* and *Xuwalu* tree. The *Chapa* and *Mezankari* were occasionally used in rearing the *Muga* Silk. During the reign of Ahom King *Chapa* silk was in great request among the upper classes and was produced in considerable quantities but after the deposition of Purandar Singha the industry was abandoned (Baishya, D, 2009, P.286). Besides *Muga* the *Paat* silk was in great demand among the people specially aristocracy of the period and it was woven only by order and to meet the demand. The worm of this variety were reared on the leaves of *Nuni* (Mulberry). Cotton cloths of the period was known for its durability, brightness and the colour and were in demand among the common people. The cotton cloths were dyed whether the silk cloths were not dyed. The cotton trees were grown in the hills near the land. *Kamarkuchi*, during the Ahom age famed for the best kind of cotton cloths woven with a kind of locally made thread called *Nura-Kota-Suta* (Baruah S.L, 2003 P.438). Momai Tamuli Barbaruah made it compulsory for every female in Assam to spin certain quantity of thread every evening.

Trade :

The Handloom weavers played a vital role for self reliance and also economic growth of the region. Assam textiles were in great demand in the adjoining countries and places like Tibet, Bhutan, Burma, Sikkim and Bengal. Tavernier writes that the *Muga* silk was an article of trade in Bengal as well as in the Coromandal and Malabar coast in the early 17th century (Baruah, S.L,1985,457). According to Sihabuddin Talesh wrote that the Assamese people brought products like gold, musk, aloe-wood, piper and silk cloths and bartered them for salt, sulphur, brimstone and some other Indian goods (Talesh.S,1849/2009 P.53) Ahom kings and nobles established various markets in the land and also near the borders to encourage trade amongst the people. By this the people of Assam exchange their home made products including textiles like Eri, Muga and Paat. By this the Ahom state collected revenue from the Hats and traders. For example, only from *Simliabari Hat*, a revenue of one lakh rupees were collected yearly (Sharma. A, 2012, P.113)

Patronage of Ahom Kings :

Ahom kings in medieval period took personal care and interest in the weaving industry and the royal patronage contributed a lot in attaining the high degree of its perfection. During the rule of the Ahoms, elaborate arrangements were made for keeping in the 'Royal Store' sufficient quantity of clothes of different varieties for presentation to foreign courts and dignitaries. Prior to British annexed Assam, Hamilton has given an accurate account of the state of weaving in Assam. It was said that the weaving industry was directly patronized by the Ahom kings and the queens even established weaving schools in the palace, to teach the art to the daughters of the kings and nobles. Queen Sarbeswari, the wife of Siva Singha (1714-1744 A.D.) is said to have greatly encouraged spinning and weaving by the ladies and also imported designs and patterns from outer part of India (Bhuyan, S.K., 1974, P.30) In the beginning of Ahom rule also, the kings were taking interest in the progress of the textile art. It was known that King Suteopha (1268-1364 AD) engaged a thousand *Chutias* and *Kacharis* to rear worms for silks like *Paat*, *Muga* and *Mezankari*. The Ahom dynasty introduced into Assam silks like *Muga* and *paat*. During the early years of the Koch rule, textile industry had received state patronage in western Assam and Baranagar and was a great centre. But the Ahoms of eastern Assam were

extremely proud of their textiles. The neo-Vaishnav movement of Sri Sankardeva was an equally potent force in the development in the art of weaving, especially of figured cloth like *Vrindabani Vastra*.

Weavers

Prior to the advent of the Ahoms weaving was confined to the Tantie, who formed a separate professional caste in the Hindu society. Among the semi hinduised section of the people and the tribes in the plains, it was prevalent among the *Morans, Barahis, Chutiyas, Kacharies*. Under the Ahoms manufacturing of cloths had been extended to all sections including those of the upper caste in the valley (Barpujari, H.K, 2007, Pp.113-114) . It was written in Buranjis of Ahom period that Momai Tamuli Barbaruah , during the reign of Pratap Singha made it obligatory to spin and weave for every household. Every women in Assam, whether a princess or a commoner, a Sudra or a Brahmana, a Hindu or Muslim knew the art of weaving { Hamilton, Francis. B,1822/1940}. The people of Asham are very expert weavers and knit beautiful cloths of silk and velvet', Sihabuddin Talish wrote in Fat-he-Ibriya (Talesh.S,1849/2009 P. 57)

People of Assam of the medieval period were self sufficient in weaving their own cloths as the demand was not so high. As spinning and weaving were considered to be part of education of a girl in every household, the words *Thuprior Akanji* were being used for that girl who doesn't know weaving and it considered a disadvantage for girl in her marriage (saikia,N,2013,P212). So, we can say that the common people of that period were self-reliant in the field of weaving. To meet up the demand for royal cloths or the cloths for soldiers some professional weavers were appointed. The *Tanti, Jogi, Katoni, Jola* were appointed by the state for the production of large varieties of cloth required for the royal store. As they were employed by the state, they received grants of land and other favours from state. They were generally settled at such places where they could easily obtain the raw materials. During the supremacy of Ahom dynasty, the industry was greatly encouraged and grants of lands were conferred upon the Jogis for weaving caste who were also exempted from personal labour (Hunter, W,1889)

The existence of *Tantikuchi, Jola Gaon, Jola Pathar, Suwalkuchi, Katonibari* says that the Ahom Kings assigned these skilled artisans to live within an area and involved in weaving cloths. *Jogi and Katoni* are the people involved in rearing the silk cocoon and weaving cloths but still most of them involved doing agriculture too (Baruah. G,1972,P.142). It was mentioned in many historical evidence that Swargadeo Rudra Singha (1696-1714 A.D.) brought the *Jolas*(skilled weavers) from other part of India along with other artisans to meet up the growing demand of cloths for royal need or the soldier

Dresses and other fabrics

People during the Ahom period basically used in wearing cotton and silk cloths like *Muga, Paat* and *Eri*. It was known that woolen cloths were imported from Bhutan and Tibbet. But there is a little evidence of the use of woolen cloths among the common people but they used the *Eri* and cotton cloths during winter. General people wore the cotton dresses and the silk, particularly *Muga* and *Paat* were used to make the royal dresses. Though the cotton was used by the common people there were no evidence that the cotton production was surplus in the plains, probably these were brought from the hills in exchange of paddy and rice. The people of that period wore two type of cloths, *Uttariyo-Vastra* (Upper garments)and *Adho-Vastra* (Lower Garments). They used both stitched and unstitched cloths. It can be said that prior to Rudra Singha people used to wear the unstitched dresses but when King Rudra Singha brought the skilled people like Darjees (A Muhammadan Skilled person who was expert in stitching dresses).

Some of the *Uttariyo-Vastras* were like *Challeng* and *Khaniya Kapoor* (Two types of Wrapper). These were used by both male and female and were being made of *Paat* and *Eri* according to their social ranking. *Riha* is another *Uttariyo-Vastra* worn by the womenfolk made of *Muga, Paat* and *Eri*. *Jhardar* or *Mongjuri* used by women just like a scarf but smaller than a wrapper *Chola* (One type of Shirt) was worn by the menfolk and there were varieties of Cholas were like *Enga-Chola, Buku-Chola, Chapkan, Chauga* etc. The kings used a kind of costly shirt called '*Rupor Baridiya Chola*', i.e. bordered with silver. The bridegroom put an ornamented shirt called '*Jama-Chola*'. An ordinary type of shirt called The shirts were all stitched garments and were made of *Muga, Paat, Eri* and cotton (Rajguru, S : Assamese Medieval Society,

Guwahati, 1966, Pp 230-31) Till the reign of Ahom King Chakradhwaj Singha (1663-1669a.D.), the Assamese people never used a piece of cloths that did not belong to Assam It was the Ahom king Rudra Singha(1696-1714 A.D.) who first introduced Mughal dresses viz. *Pag* (Head piece), *Jama* (Coat), *Izaar* (A voluminous long Trouser) in Assam (Rajguru, S,1966, P. 225) Prior to *Pag*, the Ahom kings wore a head gear called Phasow.He also adopted the dresses like *Bochowal* (a cloth worn over the waist cloth) and *Tongali* (a piece of cloth used as a belt) and *Hachati* (a piece of narrow cloths used to hold betel-nut)from the Bhuyans. *Gamocha* (Towel) was used by one and each people of the society.One of the *Adho-Vastras* commonly used by menfolk in the society were like *Dhuti* or *Churiya*.Common men wore cotton *Dhoti* above the knee length whether the Kings, officials and *Satradhikars* used in wearing *Dhoti* that touched their ankle. In that period the Assamese women could not only provide cloths for their family , but also produced sufficient quantity of surplus cloths for export to other countries (Rajguru, S,1966, P.225). *Mekhela* was meant for women and were made of every kind of yarn. *Izaar* was a long trouser used by the King and higher officials. *Ghuri* was a dress like *Ghagra* of north India and were used by the *Sutradhars* of *Bhaonas*.

Besides the dresses the weavers of Assamese medieval society basically the womenfolk used to weave *Kavach-kapoor* for their husbands and were worn by them while going to a battle. The Assamese soldiers while going to the battlefield fastened round their body with a cloth called *Gati*. They were also provided by a trouser and a shirt called *Thenga* and *Kurta*. *Chandratap* (Canopy), *Ketha* (Quilt), *Athuwa*(Mosquito-Net), *Thanga* (A woolen blanket) were also weave by the weavers of that period. They had to weavesufficient quantities of strong clothswere made for the sailsof boats and for tents as both the boats and the tents were in great demand. (Rajguru. S,1966,P.235)

VrindavaniVastra is one of the classic example of the woven cloths of the time. Sankardev, as early as in the 16th century, initiated the use of figured silk clothlike this *VrindavaniVastra*. This unique piece of art today finds for itself a place in London's Victoria and Albert Museum, which is the wonderful visual evidence Vaishnavite ritual of Medieval Assam. . The quality of silk, the design and the blocks of curious angular in woven script, as yet not securely identified or translated.The designs were woven with a large variety of coloured

threads like red, white, black, yellow and green of the colours some were evidently mixed colours. The weavers of this *Vastra* was so much skillful that they weaved the scenes depicted about Krishna's birth in the prison, to the vanquishing of Kansa by Krishna etc. Each scene had its caption below it in beautifully embroidered alphabets.

Conclusion :

Weaving sector of Medieval Assam got much more importance among the people and the state too as it helps them to become self reliant. In the rural areas, weaving activities enhance family incomes and raise standards of living of Assamese people. As weaving culture was existed among the almost every household of medieval Assam it helps people to become more self reliant and hence got much more interest from the state comparing with the other economic sectors of the period. It proved to be a major sector of employment of the period of study. As it was obligatory on the part of every Assamese household to contribute one seer of home spun silk annually to the royal store. These measures not only fostered habits of weaving but also enforcing profitable employment among people. At the same time they had also a far reaching effect of ensuing self sufficiency. In present day Assam , Weaving culture is not found in every household but the textile industries are there in every part of the land and these helps in employment generation in surrounding areas. Coming to the end, we would like to suggest that it will be possible to make India “ Atmanirbhar “ again if we people do something in our own comfort zone as like the people of Medieval Assam.

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