



# Tradition and transformation: assessing the challenges and future of Sualkuchi handloom industry

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## Abstract

The handloom industry of Sualkuchi is widely recognized for producing traditional Assamese textiles such as the mekhela chador and gamosa, which form a vital part of Assam's cultural heritage and economic identity. Despite its historical and cultural importance, the sector is currently confronted with several challenges, including low remuneration for weavers, insufficient institutional support, scarcity of raw materials, limited innovation in product design, and intense competition from low-priced substitutes. Drawing on primary data collected from weavers and loom owners, the present study examines these challenges and evaluates the long-term sustainability of the industry. The findings indicate that without focused interventions—particularly in marketing, financial assistance, and diversification of products and designs—the Sualkuchi handloom industry may face serious difficulties in sustaining itself within an increasingly globalized economy.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, handloom sector, weaving, product diversification

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## 1. Introduction

Handloom weaving has long been an essential component of India's traditional economy and cultural legacy, with Assam occupying a prominent position in this regard. Traditional textiles such as the mekhela chador and gamosa hold deep cultural value in Assamese society. Sualkuchi, popularly known as the "Manchester of the East," has historically emerged as a major centre for handloom weaving and textile production, celebrated for its fine

craftsmanship and intricate patterns.

In recent years, however, the sustainability of Sualkuchi's handloom industry has been increasingly threatened by several factors. These include the expansion of globalized markets, rapid technological advancements in textile manufacturing, the availability of cheaper machine-made alternatives, irregular supply of raw materials, and changing socio-economic conditions of the weaving community.

While earlier studies have addressed general issues related to the handloom sector—such as marketing constraints, raw material procurement, and wage inequalities—research specifically focused on the unique challenges faced by Sualkuchi's handloom industry remains limited. This study seeks to address this gap

by examining the perceptions of weavers and loom owners regarding the difficulties they encounter and the prospects for the industry's future sustainability.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the major challenges encountered by weavers and loom owners in the handloom industry of Sualkuchi.
- To assess the long-term sustainability potential of Sualkuchi's handloom sector.

## 3. Methodology

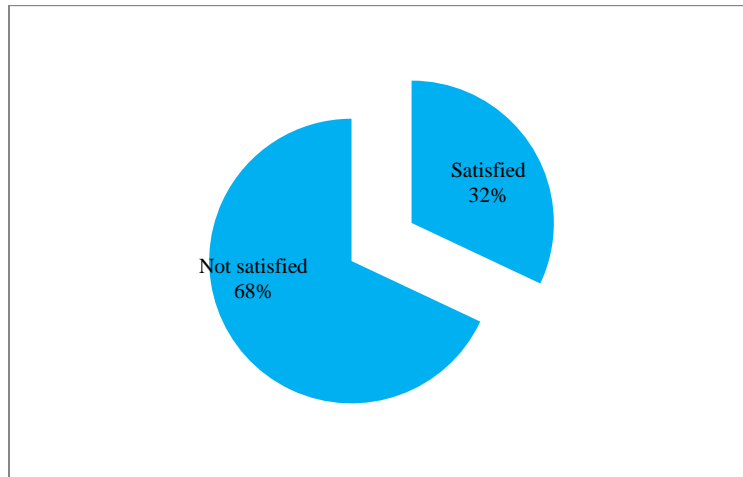
The study was carried out in Sualkuchi, Assam, during the period 2022–2024. A purposive sampling method was adopted for data collection, and structured questionnaires were administered to 150 weavers and 50 loom owners. Primary data were collected on various socio-economic aspects, including wage structure, ownership of looms, extent of product diversification, access to government schemes, and marketing practices.

Secondary data were obtained from official government documents such as the National Handloom Census, along with published reports and local literature related to Assam's handloom industry. The collected data were systematically analyzed to identify key challenges and to evaluate the sustainability prospects of the Sualkuchi handloom industry.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Disparities and Trends in Employment

An analysis of wage satisfaction among paid weavers reveals considerable dissatisfaction within the workforce. As illustrated in Figure 1, out of 150 paid weavers, only 48 respondents (32%) reported satisfaction with their wages, while a substantial majority-102 weaver (68%) - expressed dissatisfaction with the remuneration they receive. This reflects the prevailing income insecurity among handloom workers in Sualkuchi.



*Source: Field Study*

**Fig.-1: Wage Satisfaction of Weavers (%)**

#### 4.2 Monthly Income Pattern of Weavers

Table-1 presents the monthly income distribution of weavers engaged in the Sualkuchi handloom industry. The data indicate that a large proportion of respondents (73.5%) earn between ₹3,000 and ₹5,000 per month, while the remaining 26.5% fall within the income range of ₹6,000 to ₹9,000. Notably, none of the respondents reported monthly earnings exceeding ₹10,000, highlighting the limited earning capacity within the sector.

**Table-1: Monthly Income of Weavers in the Sualkuchi Handloom Industry**

Sl. No.	Monthly Income	Frequency	Percentage
1	3000-5000	110.25	73.5
2	6000-9000	39.75	26.5
3	10000-15000	0	0
4	16000-20000	0	0
Total		150	100

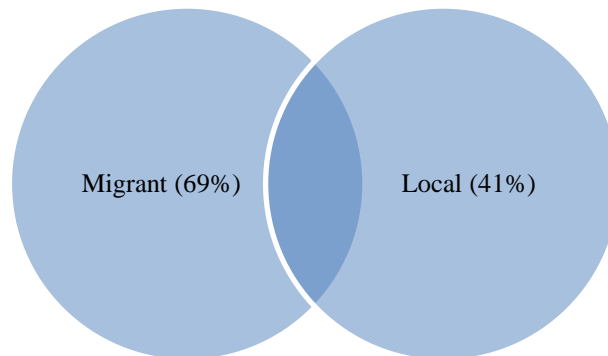
*Source: Field Study, 2024*

The income data suggest an approximate daily earning of around ₹300 for most weavers. When this is compared with the official wage rates prescribed by the Government of Assam (Table-2), it becomes evident that Sualkuchi weavers receive significantly lower wages, even when categorized as semi-skilled workers. Since weavers generally do not receive paid leave, their monthly income has been divided by 30 days to estimate daily wages. Moreover, weavers are compensated solely in cash and do not receive additional benefits such as social security, health insurance, or paid leave. This absence of standardized wage structures clearly reflects income disparity within the industry.

**Table 2: Daily Wage Rates by Skill Level**

Type of Labour	Daily Wage (Rs.)	Wage Difference (%)
Un-skilled	371.87	-
Semi-skilled	432.20	15
Skilled	540.27	22.22
Highly skilled	694.61	15.42

*Source: wageindicator.org, 2024*



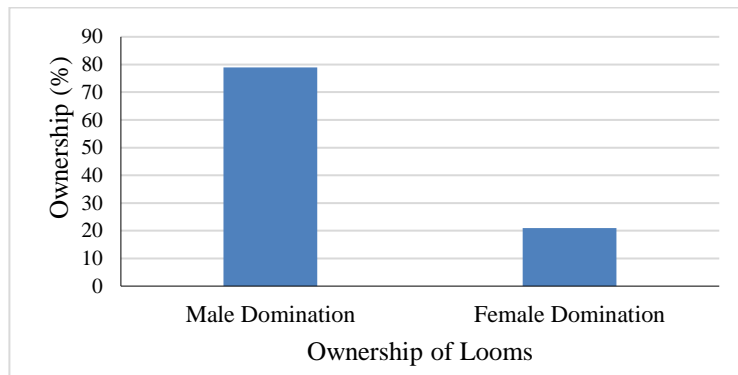
*Source: Field Survey, 2024*

**Fig.-2: Nature of Labour Weavers (%)**

Respondents consistently reported that their earnings are insufficient to meet household expenses, especially when compared to employment opportunities in other sectors. Furthermore, as indicated in Fig.-2, a significant proportion of the workforce comprises seasonal and migrant laborers. This employment pattern restricts access to financial security, institutional benefits, and long-term job stability. The findings also reveal declining interest among local youth, largely due to uncompetitive wage rates and limited growth prospects.

### 4.3 Loom Ownership Pattern

Fig.-3 demonstrates a pronounced gender imbalance in loom ownership within Sualkuchi. Male ownership overwhelmingly dominates the sector, while only 21% of looms are owned by women. This unequal ownership structure restricts women’s participation in decision-making processes related to production, innovation, and marketing. Encouraging female ownership and leadership could introduce diverse perspectives, enhance creativity, and improve competitiveness in both national and international markets.



**Fig.-3: Ownership of Looms by Gender**

### 4.4 Financial Support and Access to Welfare Schemes

Table-3 illustrates the limited access of weavers to financial assistance. Nearly half of respondents reported receiving no financial support whatsoever. Only 29% obtained advance payments from loom owners, while only 10% benefited from government insurance schemes. Access to government loans was also reported by a minimal proportion of respondents.

**Table-3: Financial Support Received by Weavers**

Type of Support	Frequency	Percentage
Government Loan	24	16
Insurance Scheme	15	10
Private Loans	43.5	29
None	52.5	35

Despite the availability of multiple government schemes—such as the Mahatma Gandhi Bunker Bima Yojana (MGBBY), Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY), Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY), health insurance programs, and Deen Dayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana (DDHPY)—most weavers remain excluded. This exclusion is largely attributed to their seasonal employment status,

migratory nature, and lack of formal documentation. Additionally, loom owners are often reluctant to provide financial assistance due to high labor mobility and uncertainty regarding worker retention.

#### 4.5 Training and Skill Development

Although training institutions exist in Sualkuchi, participation among local weavers remains extremely limited. Table-4 indicates that only a small fraction of women weavers received formal training through recognized institutions.

**Table-4: Training Programs Attended by Women Weavers**

Training Program	Percentage
SIFT	13
IIHT	7
Weaver's Service Centre	10
None	70

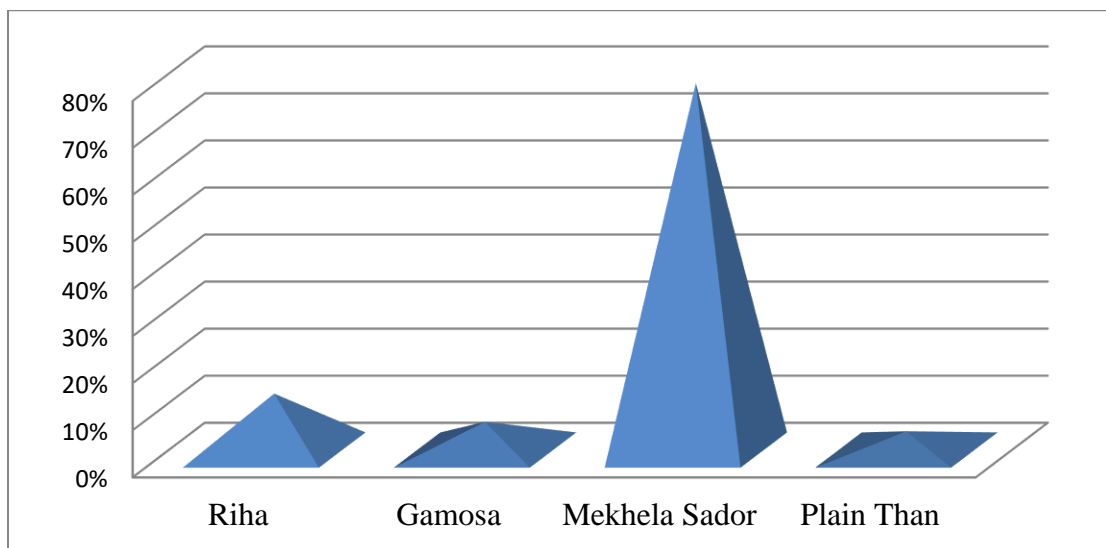
(SIFT – Sualkuchi Institute of Fashion Technology; IIHT – Indian Institute of Handloom Technology)

The majorities of weavers acquire skills informally from family members, master weavers, or loom owners. As evident from the table, nearly 70% of respondents have not received any institutional training. The lack of exposure to modern design techniques and market-oriented production methods limits their ability to meet contemporary consumer demands.

#### 4.6 Availability and Cost of Raw Materials

Muga silk, an indigenous product of Assam, accounts for the highest proportion of domestically available raw materials (83%). However, despite its local availability, current production levels are insufficient to meet the growing demand of the industry. High production costs further elevate raw material prices, compelling loom owners to procure materials from outside Assam.

Consequently, many producers resort to purchasing lower-quality substitutes available in the market, which undermines the authenticity and traditional value of Sualkuchi handloom products.



**Fig.-4: Products Produced by Weavers (%)**

#### **4.7 Product and Design Diversification**

Traditional Sualkuchi designs continue to enjoy cultural significance, yet adaptation to modern market preferences requires greater innovation. As shown in Figure 4, mekhela chador accounts for 78% of total production. The products are predominantly consumed by local and Assamese buyers due to their traditional appeal (Khakhlari, 2020).

However, the sector exhibits limited diversification in terms of products, designs, and fabric varieties. This stagnation is attributed to labor shortages, raw material constraints, and apprehension regarding market acceptance. Moreover, nearly 80% of weavers rely entirely on designs provided by master weavers, leaving little scope for individual creativity (Shazli & Munir, 2014).

Despite these constraints, the industry possesses immense potential to expand into home décor items such as cushion covers, curtains, and table linen, thereby accessing wider domestic and international markets.

#### **4.8 Marketing Strategies**

Data highlights the absence of systematic marketing practices within the industry. Only a small number of loom owners utilize social media (13%), content marketing (8%), customer loyalty initiatives (4%), or event sponsorship (2%). The lack of organized marketing efforts restricts national and global visibility and prevents Sualkuchi from establishing a distinct brand identity.

#### **4.9 Potential of the Sualkuchi Handloom Sector**

The Sualkuchi handloom industry represents a living cultural legacy of Assam, sustained by centuries-old weaving traditions. While the sector faces numerous structural and economic challenges, it holds significant potential for sustainable growth through innovation and strategic interventions.

Design innovation and diversification into home décor and lifestyle products could enhance global market appeal. Additionally, promoting handloom-based tourism can provide visitors with immersive experiences, increasing appreciation for artisans' craftsmanship and ensuring fair compensation (Sharma et al., 2022).

A major concern identified by the study is the declining involvement of younger generations. Factors such as low wages, lack of skill transmission, and limited economic incentives discourage youth participation, posing a serious threat to the continuity of this heritage. Community-based entrepreneurship initiatives could serve as an effective strategy to re-engage younger populations (Sharma & Vijay, 2021).

Furthermore, the establishment of a dedicated e-commerce platform for Sualkuchi handlooms could significantly improve market access and global outreach (Jain & Ratan, 2017).

### **5. Conclusion**

The study highlights multiple challenges confronting the Sualkuchi handloom industry, particularly low wage levels, inadequate financial support, limited product diversification, and gender disparities in ownership. These issues contribute to worker dissatisfaction, labor migration, and declining youth participation, thereby threatening the sector's long-term viability.

Despite these challenges, the industry remains a vital component of Assam's cultural and economic fabric. With targeted policy interventions, enhanced government support, promotion of women's participation, and market-oriented innovation, the Sualkuchi handloom industry holds strong potential for sustainable development. A comprehensive approach addressing economic, social, and institutional dimensions is essential to ensure the resilience and cultural relevance of this traditional craft.

**Conflict of Interest:** *The author declares no conflict of interest.*

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