



Exploring livelihood opportunities and socio-economic realities of handloom weavers: a study of Sualkuchi, Assam

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Abstract

The handloom sector constitutes a vital component of India's rural economy, providing employment and preserving traditional craftsmanship. This study examines the livelihood opportunities and socio-economic conditions of handloom weavers in Sualkuchi, Assam—widely known as the “Manchester of the East.” The research is based on primary data collected from 150 respondents through structured questionnaires and interviews, supplemented by secondary sources. The findings reveal that the industry plays a significant role in income generation, particularly for women, who constitute a majority of the workforce. However, challenges such as raw material scarcity, competition from power looms, inadequate marketing infrastructure and financial constraints continue to hinder sustainable development. The study highlights the need for policy interventions, technological up-gradation and improved market access to strengthen the handloom sector and enhance the livelihoods of weavers.

Keywords: Handloom Industry, Sualkuchi, Livelihood, Women Weavers, Socio-economic Development, Assam

1. Introduction

The handloom industry in India represents more than a mere manufacturing sector; it is a profound repository of intangible cultural heritage, deeply woven into the socio-cultural fabric of India's rural landscape. As the second-largest employment generator following agriculture, this cottage industry sustains millions of families, providing a vital economic buffer in rural and semi-urban geographies (Phookan, 2012). India's global prominence in the textile market is intrinsically linked to these decentralized weaving clusters, which preserve traditional aesthetics while contributing significantly to export revenues. Among these, Assam occupies a privileged position, distinguished by its unique sericulture practices, specifically the production of Muga (the golden silk), Eri (the peaceful silk) and Pat (mulberry silk) (Phookan, 2010).

At the heart of this regional prominence lies Sualkuchi, located in the Kamrup district of Assam. Often referred to as the "Manchester of the East," Sualkuchi is globally recognized as one of the largest silk-

weaving centers in Asia. The town's economic identity is inextricably linked to the production of high-quality silk garments, most notably the *mekhela chador* and indigenous silk sarees. As Bharali (2020) notes, Sualkuchi's evolution from a historical weaving settlement to a modern commercial hub serves as a testament to the resilience of indigenous artisanal practices. Here, weaving is not merely a wage-earning activity; it is a manifestation of cultural identity, passed down through generations as a sacred craft.

However, the industry faces a complex interplay of existential challenges. Kalita (2018) argues that while the demand for handloom products remains steady, the sector is burdened by structural inefficiencies, including volatile production costs, restrictive taxation policies and an urgent need for technological modernization that does not compromise artisanal integrity. These challenges often place the traditional weaver in a position of economic vulnerability. Furthermore, the sustainability of this sector is heavily reliant on the labor of women. Sarmah (2016) and Goswami (1999, 2005) have consistently emphasized that women are the primary custodians of this traditional knowledge system. Their role in sustaining the weaving economy is crucial, yet their contributions are frequently overlooked in mainstream economic discourse, often relegated to the informal sector despite their significant input into household livelihoods and regional productivity (Baishya, 2005; Daimari, 2005).

Despite the rich discourse surrounding the handloom sector, a significant empirical void persists. While existing literature provides a qualitative understanding of the historical and cultural significance of Assam's silk industry (Phookan, 2010; Bharali, 2020), there is a lack of comprehensive, updated empirical data regarding the specific livelihood opportunities and evolving socio-economic conditions of those operating within the looms of Sualkuchi today. The contemporary weaver is caught between the pressures of global market competition and the rising costs of raw materials, creating a precarious economic reality that requires closer scholarly attention.

This gap in the literature necessitates a nuanced investigation into the factors influencing the socio-economic status of Sualkuchi's weavers. By examining the intersection of traditional heritage preservation and the modern economic imperatives of sustainability, this research seeks to bridge the chasm between macro-level industrial analysis and the micro-level realities of the individual artisan. Understanding these dynamics is essential for shaping policy interventions that protect the industry's future while ensuring that the socio-economic welfare of its primary stakeholders—the weavers—is effectively prioritized.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the livelihood opportunities available to handloom weavers in Sualkuchi.
- To analyze the socio-economic conditions of the weaver community.

3. Methodology

To ensure a comprehensive investigation into the socio-economic dynamics of the weaving sector, this study employs a rigorous mixed-methods research design. By integrating both qualitative insights and quantitative data, the study achieves a nuanced understanding of the weavers' professional landscape, balancing statistical trends with the grounded realities of their daily operations. This triangulation of data

sources serves to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, allowing for a multifaceted analysis of both independent and wage-based weaving activities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection Strategies

The empirical foundation of this research is built upon two distinct data streams: primary and secondary.

Primary Data: Primary information was systematically gathered from a sample size of 150 respondents. Utilizing a structured questionnaire allowed for the collection of standardized socio-demographic and economic data, which are essential for quantitative modeling. To provide depth and context to these statistics, semi-structured interviews were conducted. These interviews facilitated an exploration of the subjective challenges, cultural nuances and personal aspirations of the weavers that standardized surveys often overlook. Furthermore, field observations were integrated into the methodology; by documenting the physical working conditions, tool utilization and workflow patterns directly at the weaving sites, the researcher was able to bridge the gap between reported behaviors and actual practice.

Secondary Data: To anchor the primary field findings within a broader scholarly and policy context, extensive secondary research was conducted. This involved a critical review of peer-reviewed journals, academic books and specialized literature pertaining to textile economics and labor studies. Additionally, official government reports and census publications were consulted to verify macroeconomic trends and regulatory frameworks affecting the weaving industry. This desktop research provides a longitudinal perspective, enabling the current findings to be situated within the historical and systemic trajectory of the sector (Bryman, 2016).

Sampling Framework

The study adopts a purposive sampling strategy to ensure representation across the diversity of the weaving workforce. The target population comprises both male and female weavers, acknowledging that gender-based roles and access to capital often differ significantly within traditional craft industries. By stratifying the sample to include weavers engaged in independent production—who manage their own supply chains and market access—alongside those engaged in wage-based activities—who operate within subcontracting or factory-based systems—the research captures the full spectrum of the industry’s organizational structures. This inclusivity ensures that the data reflects varied economic dependencies and operational challenges inherent in the weaving craft.

Analytical Tools

The raw data collected from the 150 respondents was processed through systematic descriptive statistical techniques. Percentage analysis served as the primary instrument for interpreting the quantitative data, allowing for the clear articulation of demographic distributions, income levels and labor-hour allocations. By converting raw responses into percentages, the study effectively highlights prevailing trends within the weaver community, such as the prevalence of wage labor versus self-employment.

Furthermore, these descriptive measures were synthesized with thematic analysis derived from the qualitative interview transcripts. This hybrid analytical approach ensures that the figures are not merely

presented in isolation but are contextualized within the narratives provided by the participants. As noted by Saunders et al. (2019), the application of descriptive statistics provides the necessary structural clarity for identifying industry-wide obstacles, while the qualitative integration reveals the lived experience behind the data. Consequently, this methodological framework provides a robust evidence base for formulating policy recommendations aimed at improving the sustainability and welfare of weavers in the studied region.

4. Results and Analysis

Table 1 delineates the socio-economic structure of the handloom weaving sector in Sualkuchi, Assam, based on a field survey of 150 respondents. The data categorizes these weavers into two primary groups: independent workers and paid workers, providing critical insights into the prevailing labor dynamics within the region’s renowned textile industry.

The empirical evidence reveals a notable reliance on wage-labor within the local weaving ecosystem. Specifically, paid workers constitute the majority, representing 60% of the surveyed population (90 individuals). This prevalence suggests that the industry is largely organized around centralized production units or master weavers, where individuals provide labor in exchange for wages rather than operating as self-employed entrepreneurs. This structure implies a potential shift toward a more formalized, albeit dependent, production model, which may be driven by the need for access to raw materials and established marketing channels.

Conversely, independent workers account for 40% of the sample (60 individuals). These weavers maintain autonomy over their production process, likely managing their own procurement and distribution. While this percentage signifies a healthy presence of self-sustaining artisan entities, the fact that they are statistically outnumbered by paid workers highlights the challenges inherent in maintaining independent operations in a competitive market.

The data underscores a dichotomous employment landscape in Sualkuchi. The dominance of paid labor suggests that while the craft remains culturally significant, its economic framework is trending toward wage-based dependency. Future policies aimed at empowering the handloom sector must address the distinct needs of both independent artisans and the substantial wage-earning workforce.

Table-1: Category of Handloom Weavers in Sualkuchi, Assam

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Independent Workers	60	40
Paid Workers	90	60
Total	150	100

Source: Field Survey

The provided data, derived from a field survey of 150 respondents in Sualkuchi, Assam, offers a clear delineation of the community's marital composition. The statistical distribution reveals that the married cohort constitutes the majority, accounting for 90 individuals or 60% of the sample population. Conversely, the unmarried demographic comprises 60 individuals, representing 40% of the total respondents (Table-2).

From a sociological perspective, the prevalence of a married majority (60%) is consistent with the traditional demographic profile of semi-urban and rural clusters in India, where familial structures remain a foundational element of social organization. Sualkuchi, known as the "Manchester of Assam" due to its historical significance in the silk weaving industry, often hosts multi-generational households that lean toward institutionalized marital unions. The 40% unmarried segment is also significant; in the context of contemporary socio-economic shifts, this figure may reflect a combination of demographic factors, including an increasing mean age of marriage, educational priorities and the migration of youth for employment opportunities outside the immediate textile-centric economy (Table-2).

While the data provides a quantitative snapshot of marital status, it highlights the structural stability of the local population. A comparative analysis with regional longitudinal data would be necessary to determine if the 40% unmarried rate suggests a demographic transition or merely reflects the age-structure of the surveyed group. Ultimately, the figures underscore a community balanced between traditional domestic stability and the evolving socio-demographic realities of modern-day Assam. This distribution serves as a vital baseline for further research into the region's domestic and economic life.

Table-2: Marital Status of Respondents in Sualkuchi, Assam

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Married	90	60
Unmarried	60	40
Total	150	100

Source: Field Survey

5. Livelihood Opportunities in Sualkuchi

Sualkuchi, often referred to as the "Manchester of Assam," stands as a preeminent silk weaving cluster that serves as the economic backbone of the Kamrup district. This historic village represents a sophisticated traditional industry, providing direct and indirect employment to thousands of artisans, weavers and ancillary workers. The socioeconomic fabric of Sualkuchi is deeply intertwined with the domestic hearth; the industry is fundamentally family-based, characterized by the intergenerational transmission of intricate weaving skills (Das, 2012). This apprenticeship-style learning ensures the preservation of unique cultural motifs while sustaining a resilient micro-economy.

Central to this industrial ecosystem is the pivotal role of women. In Sualkuchi, weaving is not merely a subsidiary activity but a primary domain where women exercise significant agency. By actively participating in the production cycle, women secure financial independence, transforming the loom into a tool for socioeconomic empowerment. Their contribution extends across the entire value chain—from the arduous tasks of reeling and spinning thread to the creation of elaborate *Mekhela Chador* sets. This gender-centric labor model bridges household responsibilities with commercial productivity, providing a robust framework for rural livelihoods (Goswami & Das, 2018).

The production process in Sualkuchi is a comprehensive cycle that encompasses sericulture—the rearing of silkworms—and the specialized craftsmanship of weaving. The region is internationally distinguished for its production of Muga silk, the "Golden Thread" of Assam, which holds a Geographical Indication (GI)

tag. The biological uniqueness and labor-intensive extraction process of Muga silk elevate its market value, positioning Sualkuchi as a vital contributor to the local and national economy (Choudhury, 2015). By producing a substantial volume of premium silk fabrics annually, the cluster ensures that Assamese handloom products remain competitive in both domestic and global luxury textile markets.

Ultimately, Sualkuchi encapsulates a sustainable model of traditional entrepreneurship. The synergy between heritage-based skill sets and commercial viability underscores the industry's importance in regional development. However, the sector's future success relies on integrating modern design and market outreach while safeguarding the traditional practices that grant Sualkuchi its distinct cultural identity.

6. Challenges Faced by Weavers

Sualkuchi, often referred to as the "Manchester of Assam," occupies a central position in the state's socio-economic landscape, serving as the primary hub for the production of exquisite Muga, Eri and Pat silk textiles. However, despite its deep-rooted cultural significance and economic potential, the handloom sector in Sualkuchi is currently ensnared in a multifaceted crisis that threatens its long-term viability.

The primary impediment remains the systemic shortage and escalating cost of raw materials. The volatility in the supply chain of high-quality silk yarns, exacerbated by fluctuating market demands and environmental factors affecting silkworm rearing, forces weavers to operate on thin margins. This economic instability is further compounded by the fierce competition from power looms and mass-produced synthetic fabrics. These mechanized alternatives offer products that replicate traditional designs at a fraction of the cost, significantly undercutting the labor-intensive handloom industry and eroding the market share for authentic, handcrafted Assamese garments (Das & Kalita, 2018).

Technological stagnation remains another critical barrier. The traditional pit loom, while culturally symbolic, lacks the efficiency and ergonomic advancements necessary to compete in a globalized economy. The absence of investment in modernizing weaving techniques and design innovation limits both the scalability of production and the adaptability of products to contemporary fashion trends. This technical inertia is inextricably linked to the sector's limited access to formal credit. Weavers, primarily operating in the unorganized sector, often struggle to meet the collateral requirements of commercial banks, leaving them reliant on predatory informal lenders to manage working capital (Saikia, 2020).

Finally, the lack of robust marketing and distribution networks prevents Sualkuchi's weavers from reaching lucrative national and international markets. Without direct access to these avenues, artisans are forced to rely on middlemen who extract the majority of the profit, leaving the primary producers with insufficient returns. Consequently, these structural challenges inhibit productivity and diminish the overall profitability of the weaving craft, necessitating comprehensive policy intervention to transition Sualkuchi from a struggling cottage industry to a sustainable, modern economic powerhouse.

7. Policy Recommendations

The silk industry of Sualkuchi possesses significant potential to contribute to national income and generate employment opportunities. Based on the findings of the study, the following measures are recommended to improve the socio-economic conditions of weavers-

To facilitate an upward trajectory in the weavers' quality of life, the institutionalization of cooperative societies and self-help groups (SHGs) is paramount. These collectives can provide the necessary bargaining power to navigate market volatility (Das, 2021). Furthermore, enhancing financial inclusivity through affordable credit schemes and government subsidies is essential to reduce dependency on high-interest informal lenders, a common trap that perpetuates poverty (Goswami, 2019). The integration of modern weaving technologies, such as improved looms and mechanized processing, is equally critical to enhancing productivity and maintaining global competitiveness without compromising the intrinsic quality of Sualkuchi's handloom textiles.

Market expansion remains a critical bottleneck. Bridging the gap between rural artisans and global consumers requires the development of robust digital marketing platforms. E-commerce integration can drastically reduce the reliance on exploitative middlemen, ensuring a higher share of profits reaches the weaver's household (Hazarika, 2020). Concurrent with technological and market shifts, continuous skill development programs are necessary to keep the workforce aligned with evolving fashion trends and technical standards.

Critically, the industry must address deep-seated wage disparities. Implementing equitable remuneration structures that overlook gender biases and the marginalization of migrant workers is a fundamental requirement for social justice. Furthermore, a comprehensive welfare framework—encompassing robust social security, healthcare access and educational support for weavers' children—is vital. By breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty through education, the industry can ensure that the next generation of artisans is empowered rather than tethered to subsistence labor.

8. Conclusion

The handloom industry of Sualkuchi, often referred to as the "Manchester of the East," serves as a cornerstone of Assam's socio-economic fabric, functioning simultaneously as a repository of intangible cultural heritage and a vital engine for rural livelihoods. This sector is instrumental in sustaining traditional weaving techniques that have been passed down through generations, effectively bridging the gap between ancestral craftsmanship and contemporary market demand. Beyond its cultural significance, the industry acts as a primary catalyst for local economic development, providing essential subsistence for a vast segment of the rural population.

A defining feature of the Sualkuchi handloom sector is its profound capacity for gender-inclusive development. The high rate of female participation highlights the industry as a platform for women's economic empowerment, facilitating financial independence within the household. However, this demographic trend also exposes deep-seated structural vulnerabilities. The prevalence of wage-based labor—rather than independent entrepreneurship—suggests that many weavers function within a precarious economic framework marked by low bargaining power and limited capital accumulation. These structural inefficiencies, coupled with persistent market constraints such as the rising cost of raw materials and inadequate supply chain integration, significantly impede the sector's overall growth trajectory.

To transition from mere subsistence to sustainable economic prosperity, the handloom industry requires a multifaceted policy intervention. Current institutional support remains insufficient to buffer weavers against the volatility of the global textile market. Therefore, strategic focus must be directed toward three critical

domains: technological advancement, financial inclusion and market expansion. Integrating modernized loom technology and digital marketing platforms could enhance productivity and connect rural artisans directly to national and international consumers, effectively bypassing exploitative intermediaries. Furthermore, improving access to institutional credit is imperative to allow weavers to transition from wage laborers to micro-entrepreneurs. Ultimately, by fostering an ecosystem that prioritizes innovation and rigorous market connectivity, policymakers can safeguard the longevity of Sualkuchi's traditional expertise while simultaneously improving the socio-economic standing of its practitioners. Ensuring the future of this industry necessitates a symbiotic approach that balances the preservation of cultural identity with the pragmatic requirements of a competitive, modern economy.

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

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