

Weaving: A Traditional Domestic Expertise of the Rabhas of Assam

The Rabhas of Assam is one of the familiar tribes of the north east India. Rabhas are concentrated in western Assam, Meghalaya and in some parts of North Bengal. They have elegant culture, tradition, religion and language. Weaving is a part of their traditional dexterity and it has handed down from generation to generation. Traditional textile is a mean to identify the society and also to develop the Rabha women as the self sufficient being. The Rabhas wear typical costumes known as Koum Kontong that are woven by women on the back- strap loom. This paper will discuss about the handloom weaving as the domestic expertise of the Rabha women and its impact in the Rabha society.

Keywords: Handloom, Tradition, Rabha, Society, Women, Textile, Weaving



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Introduction

Weaving tradition is indigenous to the state of Assam. Weaving in handloom is one of the most important industries in the state and occupies 2nd position after agriculture. The women of Assam irrespective of caste and creed are accustomed to spinning and weaving. Handloom weaving are also plays a very important role in the socio-economic development of the state. Weaving activities have a glorious tradition in the economy of Assam along with rest of the north east region.

Handloom industry of Assam encompasses cotton and silk textile which are in fact traditional cloth endowing social and moral value in the state. Handloom weaving is a feminine job in the Assam and male were help to make of weaving materials. Assam is well known for silk textile *mulberry*¹ and *muga*² silk as well as *eri*³ textile. In fact 'the golden fibre' popularly known as *muga* is produced only in Assam and it has also tremendous export potentiality. Such activities are intimately linked with the culture and tradition of the Assamese people since time immemorial. The women were having artistic knowledge in designing the cloths. In all the tribal communities of Assam the women folk have expertise in handloom activities. It is a part and parcel of the woman education and also a source of being self dependent.

Review of Literature

"One of the nine Schedule Tribes in the plains districts of Assam, the Rabhas are widely scattered but mostly concentrated in the undivided district of Gaolpara, Kamrup and Darrang. Besides Assam, their distribution spreads over Meghalaya, Bangladesh, Nepal, West Bengal, Manipur etc. According to Lt. Col. Wadel the Rabhas were a branch of the Kacharies and had become almost Hinduised although the process of conversion (to Hinduism) was of lesser intensity than that of the Koches" (Bordoloi, Sharma Thakur, Saikia, 1987, 128). "But E. A. Gait on the other hand identified them as a distinct tribe and said that they were also known as Totlas and datiyal Kacharis "(Census Report 1891). In this regard Rev. S. Endle seemed to have supported Gait by saying that the Rabhas of Darrang used to call themselves sometimes as Totlas. He also referred to the term 'Datiyal Kachari' signifying this tribe in Darrang District (Endle, 1975, 83).

Endle (1975), in the book *The Kacharis* where we found ethnographic remarks on the Rabhas as an integral part of the Kacharis. Bordoloi *et al.* (1987) edited the book *Tribes of Assam Part-1*, which provides brief ethnographic notes on seven tribes of Assam. This book gives a lucid description of the tradition, culture, livelihood patterns, social life and religious outlook of the Rabhas. Borthakur Saikia's (2013) book,

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Studies in North- East India Assamese Textile, is an outcome of a historical and analytical study of the Assamese textile done by the author. The study reveals that the aesthetic imagination, artistic craftsmanship and designs are very much significant to the folk mind and skill.

Objective of the Study

The aim of study is to know about the present status of handloom weaving and its uses among the Rabhas. The study will make an endeavour to examine the aspects of indigenous technological knowledge involved in the traditional system of domestic expertise which has occupied a distinctive place in the economic and cultural field of the Rabhas.

Methodology

For this study both primary and secondary data is used. Primary data is collected from the villages of Kokrajhar, Goalpara and Udalguri districts of Assam. Unstructured interview method is used for data collection. The primary information is collected from the Kolabari village of Kokrajhar district and Baida village from Goalpara district. And in Udalguri district, data is collected from the villages namely Botabari and Sondiyabari where the dwellers are mainly the Rabhas. The Rabhas of these villages are the experts of the purely traditional practices, basically of the weaving tradition. For the secondary sources the researcher took the help of books, online journals, published papers and also by internet browsing.

A General note on the Rabhas

Rabha is a branch of the Bodo group of the Mongolian race, who entered North-East India in groups, from the north western side of this country. The origin of the Rabha is obscure. According to Endle (1975: 85-85), they are believed to have originated through the marriage of Hindu man with Kachari woman in the remote past. For this reason, the Rabhas has a higher social standing than the Kacharis and so no Rabha takes the food cooked by a Kachari, though a Kachari can eat food cooked by a Rabha. Gait (1892) writes "there seems to be a good deal of uncertainty as to what these people really are. In Lower Assam it is asserted that, they are an offshoot of the Garos, while in Kamrup and Darrang it is thought that they are Kacharis in the road of Hinduism. However, they belong to the great Bodo family is certain." (Das,1960,3)

The Rabha tribe comprises of the socio-cultural groups like Pati, Rangdani, Maitori, Totla, Bitlia, Dahari, and Kacha. They are distributed in Kamrup, Goalpara and Darrang (all undivided) district of Assam. A sizeable section of the Rabha also inhabits the northern region of the East Garo Hills of Meghalaya. Their main concentration is found in the districts of undivided Goalpara and undivided Kamrup district of Assam. They are also found in West Bengal.

The Rabhas are plain dwellers and their mainstay is agriculture. Previously they were matrilineal and at present due to the diffusion they became Patrilineal. Diffusion is acute among some Rabha groups like the Patis who have lost their

pristine language. Previously they were animists, but at present most of them profess Hinduism. Some of the Rabha have adopted Christianity.

The Rabhas wear typical costumes known as *koum kontong*⁴ that are woven by women on the back strap loom. These costumes are usually very elegant and colourful costumes that are wrapped as a skirt around their waist. A *kambang*⁵ covers the upper part of the body in the nature of a stole. Rabha women also adorn themselves with colourful blouses which they make themselves. The women also wear a delicate belt made of several small conch shells or pearl balls around their abdomen that is known as *labok*.⁶ The designs colours worm and patterns of Rabha are different from other textile like Bodo, Karbi, Mishng, etc. The entire textile is hand woven on loom for short width, while the larger width fabrics are woven on fly shuttle loom or khaddi.

Weaving Tradition among the Rabhas

From the remote past weaving is confined to the women folk of the Rabhas. The Rabha women are expert both in spinning and weaving. Weaving is part and parcel of their material culture. They learned it from their younger generation through socialization. Generally they prepare their own dresses including those used by the males and the essential cloths for the home furnished. The Rabha women themselves rear the *eri*, *muga* and silk worm and cultivate the cotton in the field for spinning thread. But now days, the habit of rearing worms and spinning have gradually dwindled down among the Rabhas. In the past, they used to spin and colour threads through their own traditional process. The women dye their yarns with some particular leaves, barks of the trees or plants. Generally they prepare the colour of red, black, yellow, green, violet, indigo, orange and gray through their own traditional process. Now a day's various coloured thread is available in the market. So most of them have given up this process and dying process is also gradually dying away except among some women inhabiting the interior village. The designs were drawn by the weavers themselves. The Rabha women were not having the printed material for traditional textile designs.

Weaving tradition is the oldest art. The techniques of weaving are handed down across generation by generation. The young girls start weaving with their mothers and grandmothers assisting and guiding them throughout till they reach a considerable level of expertise in weaving. The motifs on them are often inspired by nature with features of flora and fauna. Almost every Rabha women has acute artistic sense and they create beautiful designs which reflect their skill, hard work and their patience. Rabha women engage themselves from their childhood of the age of 15th to 16th years. Generally there is no training programme for them to handle the loom. They acquired this skill as they go on assisting their grandmother and mother while they weave the indigenous cloths.

The weaving excellence of the Rabha women is further testified by their intensive knowledge

in dying yarn purely by indigenous process. It appears that weaving is not 'only a secondary source 'of livelihood to a Rabha woman but a part and parcel 'of her material culture. The loss 'of this culture, it is feared, will tantamount to the loss of her ethnic identity, the ' *Bahurangi*⁷ songs of the Rabha tribe contain sufficient references as to the competence of the Rabha woman in spinning and weaving magical apparels with flower designs that can help in winning civil and criminal cases. In their terminology these designs, are known as '*Mokdamma Ful*⁸ (Rabha, 1981).

Every household of the Rabhas possess a handloom at their yard. The weaving is a part of education for the young girls and it is a primary qualification for marriage of the young girls. The young girls were learned the art of traditional weaving from their mother and grandmothers.

Rabha women know well how to spin the cotton, *endi*⁹ and *muga*. They themselves rear the endi, muga and silk worm and cultivate the cotton in the field for spinning thread. But in the days of modern civilization, the habits of rearing worms and spinning have gradually dwindled down among the Rabhas. Most of the Rabha men buy their indispensable dresses and variegated threads available in the local market. The Rabha women are worshippers of beauty. They are dextrous in designing. They imagine designs in dream and shape it in reality.

Learning of weaving is a must for the Rabha women. The family loom is one of the most essential items of their domestic life. Rabha women weave indigenous textile designs with patterns and colours of perfect taste. They learned it from their homes themselves with the help of their elders. From times immemorial, the Rabhas weave their dresses as own creativity. After a keen survey in the villages selected for field work, it is observed that in almost every household two to three members of the family involve in the practice of weaving.

Table of the Weaving Practitioner

District	Village	Total no of house hold	Number of members in a household (approx.)	No of members practicing weaving	Total population (approx.)
Kokrajhar	Kolabari	100	5-7	2-3	600
Goalpara	Baida	80	4-7	1-3	500
Udalguri	Botabari	53	5-7	0-3	300
	Sondiyabari	46	5-7	1-2	300

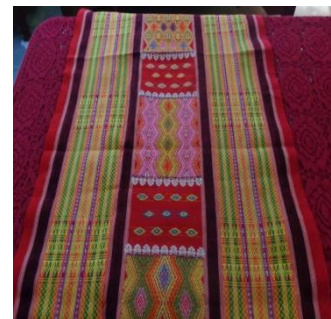
Now a days, weaving culture is not just a tradition it is also a sources of earning money for economic development. In earlier the Rabha women were sold or exchange their making traditional dress when they did not need for future. But now it will become a kind or way of income for their livelihood. The economically backward families used to sell the dresses in their local market and now it grows up and it becomes a business source of the Rabha women. With the establishment of better communication and availability of commercial commodities the importance

of the family loom at present has dwindled down among the Rabha society. Use of traditional loin loom is become rare among the Rabha society which fitting on their waist. Now they prefer the '*tat shaf*¹⁰ which is an essential female property of their matrilineal clans. Now most of the Rabha women weave their essential cloths in flying shuttle loom which are easy process then the loin loom and which are available in the market. Rabha women used to make their traditional textile designs basically in back strap loom by fitting on the waist. But now for the change of modernization and technological effect they now used the general handloom material which is more easy to use than the loin loom.

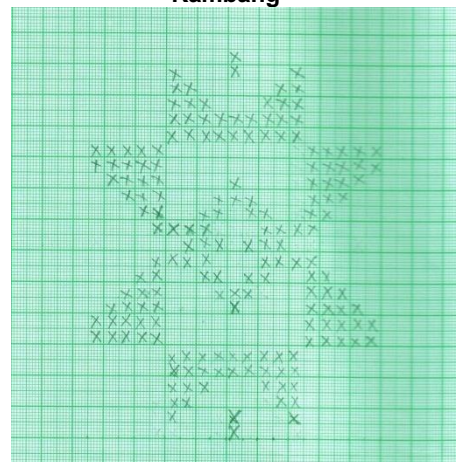
Photograph



Picture 1
Ripun¹¹ (Made in Loin Loom)



Picture 2
Kambang¹²



Kodampar¹³ (Kadam flower)

Conclusion

Studies reveal that Handloom weaving tradition is an integral part of the rural culture and economy of Assam. The growing awareness among various communities about the role of indigenous textile items in vivifying cultural identity has helped in their continuance. Weaving loom is likely to survive and prosper because of the force of tradition as well as for the new meaning and substance acquired by it in the present times.

Textile is an inanimate object, but for the people of Assam it is so dear and near that, it assumes an animate identity. Studies reveal that handloom weaving is still preserved and maintained in the Rabha society. They do not have any institution for training to learn weaving looms so most of the Rabha girls are taking part in weaving looms with their elders at home after they free from all works of home and those who are studying in school they also take part in weaving after the school hours.

The production speed of textile machinery in all fields of textile has increased enormously over the past 20 to 30 years. High operating speeds in textiles usually result in deterioration of product quality unless more sophisticated control system is employed. The handloom products should be produced as per requirements and specification of the customers. The unemployed of young generations is paying attention to the traditional or local businesses of their regions. Promoters of handloom products in Assam have adopted different techniques to run with the changing times to cater to buyers who believe in promoting indigenous handicrafts without putting their fashion quotient at stake.

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Footnotes

1. Artificial silk
2. Silk produced from worm found only in Assam
3. A kind of worm produced silk found only in Assam
4. it is a traditional skirt, Rabha women wear it on waist
5. A wrap around cloth of the upper part of a Rabha women
6. It is a belt which made by small conch
7. Folk songs of Rabha
8. Motif design of spider
9. Local term of eri
10. Flying shuttle loom
11. Rabha woman use to wear on waist as skirt
12. It is use to cover upper part of the body
13. Motif design of flower