

Silk Industry among the Tai-Ahom of Assam, India as an Attraction of Tourist

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Abstract- Silk Industry is an agro based industry, the end product of which is silk. Silk is a protein fiber produced by silkworm for spinning cocoon. Assam enjoys irrefutable reputation for its exquisite silk product. The silk industry of Assam mainly comprises the culture of eri, muga, and mulberry silk. Eri and muga are the exclusive monopoly of the people of Assam. The production of eri and muga silk are mainly concentrated in the Brahmaputra valley and is predominantly based in the rural areas. Mulberry silk is cultivated in less quantity than the others and almost in all parts of Assam. Natural surroundings, climate and humidity etc. play a vital role in the development of culture. Ecological condition of Assam provides help to the production of host plants for the silk worm and the silk fabrics. The industry here is just as old as "Free India". Its advantage, such as, employment potential, assured and regular income of the farmers, reelers and weavers at frequent intervals all round the year, non perishable nature of the final product and high export possibilities etc. caught the attention of people and other organizations too. It is found that silk of Tai-Ahom people of Assam has been attracting the tourists from the earlier period. The industry therefore may be developed as an attraction of both domestic as well as foreign tourists.

In this study, an attempt has been made to introduce the silk industry of Assam and its relation to the tourism sector. Problems related to the production, spinning, weaving, selling and focusing of the products, economic upliftment, modernization of the products, government and other organization efforts in this connection is also mentioned in the study. The study is based on primary and secondary data collection.

Index Terms- Eri silk, ethnic tourism, muga silk, silk culture, silkworm.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Ahom, Tai people, founded a kingdom of their own in their south-eastern corner of Brahmaputra valley, early in the thirteenth century A.D. In the course of the centuries that followed, they establish their sway over the whole of the valley till their kingdom was occupied by the British in the wake of the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-1826. They were thus the ruining people in the Brahmaputra valley for long six hundred years (Sahabuddin Tallis, Fathia-I-Ibriya, translated by Jadunath Sarkar). J.N. Phukan (1990) asserts that the Ahoms were Tai who occupied a part of Yunan, which bulges western towards the Irrawaddy river and at present included in the Dihong Dai Singpho Autonomous country. Immigrating to Assam they moved several places from here and there. Ultimately the troop

leader or the first Ahom King Siu-ka-pha built the capital city at Choraideo. They ruled in Assam from 1228 to 1818 A.D. covering a period of six hundred years. Now they are distributed in all over Assam particularly in the district of upper Assam viz., Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sibsagarh, Tinsukia etc. The latest available census records slightly over 2 million Tai-Ahom individuals however, estimates of the total number of people descended from the original Tai-Ahom settlers are as high as eight million.

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood of majority of Ahom people as their staple food is rice. They bought with them the cultivation of rice like wet rice-cultivation. The dry rice cultivation is also done in some places. Animal husbandry, like keeping of cow, buffalo, pig etc. is practiced. They are live in plinth houses. Ploughing with bullocks or buffalo is considered as very convenient. Rites and rituals and festivals are always related to agriculture. Three bihu festivals of Ahoms are the manifestation of agrarian culture. These festivals are performed by those in a spar with gaiety, cheerfulness, and enjoyment, namely Rangali, Kangali, and Bhogali bihu. Rangali bihu is the festival of spring. After Rangali bihu the agricultural cycle is started. In three types of bihu, the ancestors and deities are worshipped by offering oblation.

The Ahoms at later stage accepted Hindu religious practices as stated by B.J. Teriwal, Padmeswar Gogoi and others. Also the religion of the Ahoms in the 13th century, many scholars hold divergent views. According to some, the Ahoms had animistic religion, with mixture of Hinayana Buddhism. Due course of time, the Ahoms had accepted the good traits of the Hindu Religion and culture. A large part of Ahom people accept Vaishnavism in the later period. In spite of all they retain their traditional originality on some rites and rituals viz., Me-Dam-Me-Phi, Ompha, Phra-lung, performance of Rik-khan and Deo-ban, offering xaj (ricebeer) to the god and ancestors, the Ahom terms and addresses, the dresses like, Chowga-chap- kon, turban, mejankari mekhela made of muga silk etc. (Chetia, Satyanath, Tai Ahom Marriage, 2005).

The Tai-Ahom community is well known for their artistry of silk cultivation and weaving on the loom. Their artistry has added glory to the overall spectrum of the handloom designs of the region. They are cultivated three main types of silk i.e. muga, eri and mulberry. They are still maintaining their traditional customs. Weaving is the know-how for the rural Ahom girls. Particularly, reeling, spinning and weaving of silk is very prominent among the Ahom girls and women. The Tai-Ahom women wear mekhela chadar woven with muga, mulberry silk or any other materials and cheleng- chadar and other piece of cloth riha (breast cloth). Chadar is the upper garment and lower garment is called mekhela. A blouse is also wear by them. The

traditional attire of men folk is kurta or shirt and Dhoti that is the lower garment. They also wear gold, silver and bronze ornaments according to their status. Jonbiri, dholbiri, dugdugi, jang-phai, keru, lokapar, chandhar, silikhamoni etc. are the type of ornament wearing by Tai- Ahom women. In The Tai- Ahom society, monogamy is mostly accepted while polygamy is also not rear. Their traditional marriage system is called as chak-long. Dowry and bride price are not compulsory; it is regarded as gift in the traditional society. Widow Remarriage is prevalent. Some of the Tai- Ahom of Assam are cremated their dead bodies and other buried.

The Tai-Ahom constituted a great part of past and present Assamese society. According to an interpretation the state name Assam is the phonetic variation of the word Ahom, the Tai-Mongoloid race ruling over most of present Assam valley for 600 years till coming over the British in 1826.

II. ORIGIN AND DISTRIBUTION OF SILK IN ASSAM

Growth and development of silk industry in Assam was significant from very early period. Assam was probably known even in the time of Ramayana as a country of "cocoon rearers". In the Kiskindhyakanda, for instance while mentioning the countries are passes through going to the east, the poet refers to Magadha, Anga, Pudra and "the country of cocoon rearers" which must be Assam. In Arthasastra, Koutilya extolled the richness and beauty of Assam's silk as being as "as red as the sun, as soft as the surface of the gem". In the epic Mahabharata, Assam is called Suvarnakanakanan, meaning the silk producing province, where muga and pat fabrics are produced mainly. It is also known as the land of golden silk. The culture is probably evolved in China and travelled to other parts. A trade like famous silk road to northern India, Bhutan and Tibet along the valley through Kamrupa or ancient Assam. The first official record of muga silk worm relates to 1662. The famous European Traveler Jean Joseph Tavernier wrote that "the silk are good but the people produced little more than they require for use", and made special mention of a silkworm variety from Assam that remained on trees all the year round and the brilliant stuffs made of them, this reference should be to muga silk worm. It is the most precious, durable, warm, strong, lustrous, elegant and the best material for every woman in society on every festive occasion including marriage ceremony. On the other hand, creamy, white eri silk is warm, strong, durable and resistant to sunlight, acid and alkalis. Fabrics become bright and glossy after every wash. The eri cloth remained "the poor men's silk". Till the advent of mill made cloth, eri fabric had been used as winter wear and bed spread by the villagers. An early record speaks of eri silk of three hundred years ago as "a silk that is remarkably soft, white or yellowish and the filaments so exceedingly delicate as to render to impracticable to wind off the silk. It is therefore, "spun like cotton". Mulberry thread is called a "dried in shadow and keep in hand". Off white coloured mulberry silk worm have two indigenous breed as "sarupaat" and "barpaat". Indigenous motifs give gorgeous look to the silk cloth. In the earlier days, the Ahom king patronized the development of sericulture in Assam. Sericulture was made on obligatory household work. Rearing, reeling of silkworm and weaving were a daily routine in the rural set up of ancient Assam. Muga culture decline during British

regime due to lack of development support and wrong taxation policy adopted by Colonial Government, even muga food plantation assessed for taxation. Since then declining phase set in and the area under food plantation s reduced considerably. During the middle of this century, around 1950 there was a great earthquake in upper Assam and large area under muga food plantation was destroyed. The muga silk production indicates a fluctuating trend and the maximum production till now was 95000kg produced in the year 1957. Ericulture is almost an exclusive monopoly of Assam. Of the aggregate production of 1, 30, 00 million kg of eri silk produced in the country, Assam accounts for 1, 06, 00 million kg constituting about 94 percent.

The distribution of muga silkworm is mainly confined to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam and foothills of Meghalaya. Its distribution in the wild state however, extends from western Himalayas to Nagaland, Cachar district of Assam and south valleys of Kumaon and Kangra in the western Himalayan hill range. However, commercial production of muga silk worm is restricted to north eastern India due to suitable climatic condition. The climate of north eastern India is very distinctive, it is sub tropical and there are four distinct seasons viz., summer, autumn, winter and spring. Like the muga silkworm, eri and mulberry silk are also exclusively produced by these people. Assam was the original home of eri silk from time immemorial. Traditional dresses made from muga yarn are mekhela chadar, riha, chapkon (a kind of shirt), etc. But in present situation different items are prepared by silk, like, gamocha (a piece of cloth used as handkerchief), blouse, sarees (ladies garment), curtain, cushion cover etc. These items made by using of various designs are adored far and wide. Creamy white and golden yellow in both the colours silk reflects the aesthetic and majestic moods as well as the ethos of the Ahom people of Assam. The art of fine weaving and the complex processes of loom embroidery have been perfected by those people from time immemorial. The craft is mostly hereditary and they qualities required of a true artisan are apprenticeship devotion to duty and cooperation.

The environment, topography, soil and ecology of upper Assam is best suited for the rearing of silk worm. Among the varieties of silk the muga worms are reared outdoor and the host plant required for muga are Som (*Persea bombycina*) and Soalu (*Litsea monopetala*) tree. On the other hand, eri and mulberry is the indoor rearing worm. The scientific name of muga and eri silkworm is "Antheraea assama" and "Samia ricini" respectively. Moreover, Bombyx is the scientific name of mulberry silk worm. The host plant required for eri and mulberry are plant of Castor (*Ricinus communis*) and Keseru and mulberry plant respectively.

The industry is invariably linked to the socio-economic life of the people. In one year, six overlapping cocoon crops are harvested viz. Jarua, Jethua, Akharua, Bhodia, Kotia and Aghania. As like as eri worms can be produced. Among them they has been rear minimum two broods of each silk worm. Complete life cycle of the worms is about 44 to 85 days in summer and 81 to 85 days in winter. Thus, the people spent enough time in a year to produce these silk. In a suitable condition maximum production of muga silk yarn would be 9-10 kg. Muga silk production is more commercialized then eri and mulberry silk yarn because of its high price. On the other hand eri and mulberry production in a year would be 1-2 kg and ½-1 kg

respectively. Eri and mulberry are generally produced for domestic purpose.

III. SILK INDUSTRY AND TOURISM

The silk industry may be a motivator of travel and tourism. Tourism is the movement of people away from their normal place of residence and worked for a period of not less than 24 hours and not more than 1 year. A traveler, now a days is called as a tourist. The tourist is who spent more than 24 hours in a destination. Silk industry may be culture based tourism. Cultural tourism has been defined by Ritchie as an element in the attractiveness of tourism regions. Silk of Assam as an object that attracts the people visiting there for any purpose. From the earlier period, silk has been a major attraction of tourist. Due to this attraction, "silk route" was begun in 200 B.C. for meeting to exchange silk along with other materials among the countries. Though the traditional craft is located throughout the rural areas of Assam yet one come across the major and most important silk producing centers in the Brahmaputra valley of upper Assam. In the northern bank of Brahmaputra, Dhakuakhana and Dhemaji are the viable zone and popularly known for boast of producing the largest quality of silk fabric but Sualkushi of Kamrup district is the commercial center for silk marketing. Most of the household located in Tai-Ahom villages of upper Assam have taken this craft as one of the sources of livelihood. The areas therefore are considered as having ideal representative areas as far as practice of silk producing is concerned. People from different areas of state and outside moves upper Assam in search of excellent type of silk yarn, silk products and seeds since past. Businessmen, scientist, researchers, designers, scholars etc. revisited the silk producing areas for their own business. It is therefore as good as tourism professional to be utilizing in develop its tourism product. Thus, commercial production of cocoon is done mainly in upper Assam. Most of the commercial cocoons are purchased by the traders from Sualkuchi who have the monopoly on the business and also on marketing. They organized reeling and weaving muga fabric are in high demand in functions, marriages and festivals as ladies and gents attire. Accordingly prices increases muga fabric have heavy demand both inside and outside of the state and a large number of domestic and international tourists are interested to see and bought them.

However, Sualkuchi is famous for the silk industry in Assam which is called as "Manchester of East". A section of the inhabitants of Sualkuchi had remained engaged since antiquity in the production and distribution of mulberry silk and muga fabrics of various artistic design and patterns. Nearly 92% of the workers are engaged in non-agricultural activities and among these 95% are engaged in handloom and muga silk reeling activities. Therefore, a flow of tourists are generating to Sualkuchi that is in 32 km west of Guwahati. Due to the connection of PWD road and feasible communication Sualkuchi become a favoured destination for the tourist from any regions having greater dressing sense. Thus, the weavers of Sualkuchi produced dresses and making designs according to the demand of tourists. Their traditional patterns of designs thus take a new form and manipulation occurred there. Sometimes, the tourist activities influence the local culture and diffusion takes there.

Designs and motifs in the dresses of tourists may create attraction to the local weavers and designs and thus it is diffused from one group to another.

As a result of tourism, the tourism products of local people have change in style and form, also in the purpose for which they are produced. Silk products formerly produced for domestic purpose are now produced for sale. Earlier, it was a female oriented industry, but now the concept is changed. Due to outside contact three major phases of changes may be occurred-

- (1) The disappearance of traditional artistic designs,
- (2) Sometimes, this is followed by the growth of degenerate, unsophisticated replacement which develops in association with mass production technique,
- (3) This is often followed by the distinctive style incorporating the deeper cultural beliefs of the host society,

However, tourism has accelerated the promoting of art of silk production. Modernization of the design and product now attract the domestic as well as foreign tourists. People must have to give a look to the natural manufacturing process of silk and silk cloths along with several other items. People are responsible for the development and operation of tourism and these cultural institutions. The silk producing area is really very unique one. Visiting foreign tourists to observe the silk culture, activities, process and technique is a common motivation. Tourism in silk industry may be change the silk culture, occurred acculturation and cultural drift and inter-cultural communication and the marketing of silk material. It has earned foreign exchange from various countries of the world. The important and main foreign countries where Assam silk are exported are England, Japan, Nepal etc. So, while Assam facing serious problems of unemployment, growth of tourism with silk industry can play a vital role in reducing the problem of unemployment by attracting the tourists to the region.

However, the industry is encountering serious problems, caused by indigenous and exogamous factors such as,

- (1) Lack of skilled manpower
- (2) Lack of basic necessities like adequate power and water supply
- (3) Lack of knowledge for scientific plantation
- (4) Obsolete production method
- (5) Increasing pollution
- (6) Lack of fund etc.

Still, the silk producing area may be a great destination if many forms of tourism, such as, mass tourism, ethnic tourism etc. offer incidental opportunities to learn about the silk culture of the destination.

IV. MEASURES FOR DEVELOPMENT OF SILK TOURISM

Tourism therefore may provide a market that has helped to run the traditional art forms and keep culture alive. Of course, variation will occur in motivation, task, business, performance etc. The host must also play a role in the communication process and this part may be a cultural broker. He or she acts as a mediator between tourists and host society normally as translator

and guide. He or she also may be manipulating local culture for tourist purpose, without affecting the cultural identity of the host society in a detrimental manner.

A main problem in case of host society is that the problem of language. Therefore the host society must be aware of some common language mostly used for interpretation of tourists. Generally the drivers, tourist guide, hotel people and shopkeepers are ones who frequently come in contact with the tourist and knowledge is important for them. In the silk producing and marketing area good communication facility provide enough opportunities to focus this as a tourist attraction. Moreover, the politeness of host people in public vehicles and places makes one tourists feel comfortable. To make the silk producing area as tourist hot spot accommodation problems must be avoided. They should be available in all ranges. In different tourist places the waterfront scores of hotels with varying tariffs have come up to cater to the budgets of different categories of tourist.

Thus, the spot should be developed for both the middle and upper class tourist from outside and local tourist. Accommodation and transportation at reasonable cost would be the main consideration. Moreover, welcome to someone must be free from the barriers like, class, caste, race and religion.

V. CONCLUSION

Time is fading away but not the vibrant colours and gorgeous looks of the silk. In Assam, however, tourism is yet to develop on proper lines and become an organized industry. Both government and host society are responsible for them. From the above discussion it is clear that Assam is well known for its quality and originality of silk thread. In order to revitalized the handloom sector, various schemes have been introduced which include providing avenues for the quality fabrics, modernization of loom, motivation of weavers for taking up the industry as commercial lines, intention of training facilities to artisans etc. Government of India has initiated several development measures through Central Silk Board to give impetus to the growth and development of silk industries. The Central Silk Board has put a lot of efforts to promote muga industry in the north-eastern region. Setting up of a Regional Muga Research Station in Mirza (Assam) is a major step in this direction. The Central Silk Board also set up a Muga Raw Material Bank at Sibsagarh with sub-depot at Dhakuakhana in upper Assam in the year 1981, to give necessary price support to the commercial muga cocoon producers. Moreover, in Sualkuchi the Khadi Production Center (KPC) of the Assam Khadi and village industries Board, The Export Oriented Handloom Project of the Assam Government Marketing Corporation (AGMC), The Assam Apex Weavers and Artisans Corporative Federation (ARTFED), Centre and Sales Emporium of AGMC are working. Besides this, very much research and training institute, production center of silk etc. are made in different places of Assam. Cooperative societies are helped in collecting and marketing the product at remunerative price. Tourists always attracts to the original object. These

societies can provide the silk items in a reasonable price. Government may arrange some package tour to see the silk producing process in the rural areas. The tour may be extends to the reeling, spinning and weaving centers too. To promote and sale of the silk of Assam a web page can be set up also, because, abundance of local talents can come up with many more ideas. Thus, the culture will be diversified and standardized. Then the traditional silk industry can be metamorphosed into modern industry, what is necessary to courage and enterprise, imagination and guidance.

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