

Workplace Environment, Worker's Performance and Job Satisfaction Among the Workers of Silk Industries in Assam, India

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ABSTRACT Workplace determines work atmosphere and the level of a worker's performance along with the type of outcome. Working conditions are said to be at the core of paid work and employment relationships. The paper tries to give an overview of the social structure of the Sualkuchi silk industry in Assam, its working condition and also to highlight the various issues faced by the silk weavers. In the present research work, an exploratory research design has been adopted. The paper is exploratory, as the problem of the research has not yet been studied clearly and sufficient information is not available about the issue. For the present study, Sualkuchi in the Kamrup district of Assam in India has been chosen. It could be seen that some of the basic facilities in the workplace are lacking. The study analyses the opinion of the respondents regarding their work, relation between owners and weavers and between workmates in the workplaces. The paper concludes by identifying the problems and bottleneck issues in order to find measures to reorganise this sector, which is important for the development of the weaving industry in Assam, particularly the silk centre, Sualkuchi.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace determines work atmosphere and the level of a worker's performance along with the type of outcome. Working conditions are very important factors in any paid work and employment relationships. Working conditions usually cover issues, from working time, that is, hours of working, rest periods and work schedules, to remuneration, as well as physical conditions and mental demands that exist in the workplace. As Tausig (2013) in his work analyses that there is a relationship between work and mental health. He says that there are certain approaches, which reflect sub-disciplinary interests, but collectively they present a broad sociological perspective on the relationship between work and psychological wellbeing.

As described by Sinha (2000: 49) in his work, large organisations are preferred by researchers principally because of their vast pools of respondents and other facilities. Smaller organisations have largely been neglected by scholars as well as policymakers, except for the lip service paid to them in policy documents. Smaller enterprises are deeply embedded in their community and have the potential to respond quickly to the local business environment and provide quality

products and services to the people. Because these industries are rooted in the local environment they initiate locally relevant economic activities, generate employment, draw on local resources and meet the needs of their surroundings. Chakraborty et al. (2010) in their work discuss the know-how in the field of sericulture and weaving in Assam blended with modern techniques in order to sustain modern day market competition. Jain and Ratan (2017) also analyses the sustainability of the handloom silk industry at Sualkuchi, Assam and discuss a conceptual model using concepts of distributed designs to preserve the unique culture of the region through tourism and e-commerce platform.

Mahan (2012) in his work reveals that Sualkuchi is the centre of the silk handloom industry of Assam since the 17th century. He said that till the 1930s, only the Tanti community would perform the activities, which later expanded when Koibarta and Brahmin communities started showing interest in silk weaving. The silk industry flourished during World War II due to growing demand for fabrics. It also led to the set up of commercial weaving factories, which hired wage weavers.

A clear division of labour refers to the fact that within a bureaucracy, each individual has

a specialised task to perform. It could be seen that today's workplace requires a faster pace, more problem solving and a flexible approach to work. Another social scientist Sarmistha (2015) emphasises that although the urban sector has been widely studied by social scientists, not much research has been done on the non-agricultural rural informal sector, which has witnessed significant growth in the recent past. She also describes that social networking in the handloom industry has arisen from caste and religion, which can be associated with notions of being embedded and social capital.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the social structure of the workplace or the weaving units in Sualkuchi.
2. To examine the working conditions of the industry in Sualkuchi.
3. To highlight the problems of silk weavers in Sualkuchi.

METHODOLOGY

In the present research work, an exploratory research design has been adopted. The paper is exploratory in nature, as the problem of the research has not yet been studied clearly and sufficient information is not available about the issue. Sualkuchi in the Kamrup district of Assam, India is chosen for the present study. Sualkuchi is known as the largest silk weaving village of northeast India located at a distance of about 30 kilometres from Guwahati city in the Kamrup district of Assam. It is situated on the north bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra. Sualkuchi is considered the 'benchmark' of commercial handloom production units of Assam. Mahatma Gandhi during his visit to Assam gives his statement about Assamese in his article published in his paper *Young India*: entitled 'Lovely Assam'. He said...*Every woman of Assam is a born weaver and weaves fairy tales in their clothes*" (Bhuyan 2000). Sualkuchi is the textile centre of Assam and is known as 'The Manchester of Assam'. Silk weaving is not uncommon in other parts of Assam, but Sualkuchi claims a technique, quality and reputation of its own which are unique in so far as muga and pat silk fabrics are concerned (Bhattacharjee 2014).

The respondents for the present study are the owners of looms and hired weavers. Primary data from a total 130 respondents were interviewed of which 30 are owners of looms and 100 are hired weavers of their respective weaving units. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling and were administered with an interview schedule. The views and opinion of the respondents on their respective working status and living conditions is taken into account. In addition to owners of looms and hired weavers as respondents to the study, 10 government officials under the central and state government were also selected for the present study. Secondary data are from government reports of government organisations and departments like, the Central Silk Board, Regional Office, Guwahati; the Regional Silk Technological Research Station, Guwahati; and the Handloom and Textile Department, Ambari, Guwahati, Assam.

For the study a well-structured interview schedule is administered for collecting primary data. The questions were both open-ended and close-ended in nature. The schedule is prepared keeping in mind the category of respondents. The first is for the sociological survey of Sualkuchi in order to tap information regarding the industry in Sualkuchi. It is designed to collect information regarding the Silk Industrial Centre. The other interview schedule is designed to collect information from the respondents.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social Structure of the Weaving Centre

The Sualkuchi hand weaving industry is based on traditional customs, practices and heredity knowledge of the silk weavers. Working in the cottage industries creates a work culture among the people through which their various emotions, sentiments, feelings, habits and attitudes towards their life can be expressed. The organisational actors of the Sualkuchi silk industry are the owners of looms and the weavers. In Sualkuchi, the handloom weaving community is totally based on the relationship between owners of looms and the weavers who are occupying different positions with different roles connected to each other in the weaving practice. The owners of

looms are the entrepreneurial group who invest their capital in the several stages from production to marketing of the finished products. These stages include buying of raw materials, colouring and preparing yarns, weaving and marketing of the finished products. The chain starts from purchase of the yarn to delivery of the final products. The hired weavers on the other hand, are the class of employees who perform the process of weaving and after finishing the product they are paid wages. The hired weavers are not acquainted with the network of markets directly. Shaw et al. (2015) in their work describe that the weavers possess strong cultural capital (art of weaving) than other resources. In the handloom industry, the art (knowledge and skill) of weaving is primary cultural capital rather than education of the weavers. The authors further say that the handloom weaving is always complex work, as it is a continuous learning process since childhood, like education. The art of weaving cannot be learnt efficiently unless born in the family of weavers. As revealed by Phukan (2010) in his work that most of the factories are equipped with semi-automated fly-shuttle looms for weaving silk fabrics. The handloom owners gradually turned into small factory owners and they hire employees to work in their looms and lead the industry. The transformation of the earlier working class (weavers) to entrepreneurs (master weavers) has also generated job opportunities at their household looms. Kudri and Thakur (2014) in their work dealt with certain sociological analysis on the impact of weaving on the family environment, and also the processes and production of handloom weaving in a sociological setup. They say that knowing handloom weaving conditions and production allows one to understand the issues that the industry is facing in current times. They studied that the production of handloom fabrics shows its due influence and impact on the socio-economic lives of the poor weaver labourers.

Working Conditions and Basic Amenities

An unorganised sector like the handloom industry does not have labour law coverage, as these are seasonal and temporary nature of oc-

cupations. This paper attempted to deal with the weaving activity, number of working hours, type of looms used, type of work sheds, availability of facilities such as electricity, water, sanitation/toilets, proper ventilations and so on, availability of welfare schemes, health benefits etc.

A working day begins at 8:00 AM and continues up to 10:00 PM with breaks in between. It was found that fifty-two percent of weavers work for more than 12 hours. All workers are entitled to breaks while they are at work, and rest periods between working days and nights. There is no explicit minimum daily rest period. During festival time the weavers have to put in more hours in weaving activity. With each workload increase, there is less leisure for the weavers on the work. Baishya (2005) highlighted the decaying condition of traditional industries in his book and advocated for modernisation so that the socio-economic system does not face labour alienation.

The study reveals that eighty-five percent of the weaving houses or sheds are equipped with electricity and fifteen percent weavers say they do not have proper electricity in their work sheds. Proper water facility is the most important necessity for life, but still weavers are devoid of this facility. In case of a drinking water facility, sixty-four percent weavers are provided with a proper water facility. Thirty-six percent do not have a proper water facility. With regard to sanitation or toilets, there is no one hundred percent proper toilets and sanitation facility in the weaving units.

With regard to wage satisfaction, out of 100 hired weavers, fifty-two percent are satisfied with their wages and forty-eight percent are found to be not satisfied with the wage they receive. It was stated by the government that no industry could be permitted to run its business if it was unable to pay the minimum wage to its employees. Wage fixation is a very important subject in any social welfare programme.

Conditions of Weaving Workplace/Work Sheds

In Sualkuchi, the type of the looms has its own impact. The physical structure of the looms is different from most of which are used in other parts of Assam. The types of handlooms used

here are mostly semi-automated fly shuttle looms. These looms have almost replaced the traditional throw shuttle looms, which helped weavers in increasing their productivity and difficulty in weaving. Bhat (2000) in his work described industrial sickness. He says that industrial sickness carries serious psycho-socio and economic crises, and that sickness converts productive assets into non-performing ones and renders the employed manpower jobless and limits the loaning capacity of financial institutions.

In the Sualkuchi weaving centre the weavers call the weaving place as a 'factory', which looks nothing like the factories in cities with signs of mechanisation, industrialisation and anxiety around production. As a factory is an establishment to carry out manufacturing processes with the help of men, machines, tools and materials. The housing pattern is similar to that of the general condition of housing in the blocks and villages in the district. The wooden or bamboo sheds constructed for weaving has typified the traditional architecture, and the walls are coated with mud to keep interiors cool. The Assam type houses or 'ikra' type, locally named Ikora, style houses with tin roofs are generally a single storey house made largely using wood-based materials. It was found that seventy percent of the weaving houses are thatched bamboo huts. Sixteen percent are Assam type sheds and fourteen percent of the weaving units are above or in the basement of RCC or Reinforced Cement Concrete buildings.

The most important condition required for working efficiently is proper ventilation and proper light in the work sheds. Out of 50 weaving houses 89.2 percent of the work sheds are acquaint with proper ventilations. 10.8 percent of the working places are found to be gloomy and with low light.

Eighty-six percent of the owners provided proper lighting facilities to the weavers to work productively. They use generators in case of load shedding. Fourteen percent of them do not have proper facility of light.

Social Security and Job Security

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) considers social security to be one that is based on the recognition of the fundamental social right

guaranteed by law to all human beings who live from their own labour and who find themselves unable to work temporarily or permanently for reasons beyond control. At the international level, the preamble of the Constitution of the ILO also refers to the need and protection of workers against sickness, disease and injury arising out of their employment in countries other than their own.

Social security enhances not just structural and technological change but also the globalisation challenge and to its potential advantages in terms of greater efficiency and higher productivity. Providing the necessities and emotional security creates efficiency and productivity. Social security to the workers involves giving such schemes or facilities, which may enable the schemes or live a decent life and has financial and economic security.

Social security and labour welfare falls under a concurrent list. Generally, India's social security schemes cover the following types of social insurances, such as:

- a. Pension
- b. Health Insurance and Medical Benefit
- c. Disability Benefit
- d. Maternity Benefit
- e. Gratuity

In India a majority of the population is working in the unorganised sector and may not have the opportunity to participate in each of these schemes unlike the ones employed in the organised sector who are entitled to coverage under the above schemes. India has always had a joint family system, which used to take care of the social security needs. However, with the rise of urbanisation and industrialisation, the presence of the joint family system has declined. Hence, there was a need for a formal system of social security. The unorganised sector does not have labour law coverage. These are seasonal and temporary nature of occupations.

In the Sualkuchi weaving units, it is found that there is no other financial assistance provided to the hired weavers. Ninety-three percent of the paid weavers do not avail any other financial assistance provided to them. But the owners grant loans or provide advance payment in case of need. Out of 100 hired weavers, thirty-four percent say that they are provided advanced

payment by their loom owners, while sixty per cent did not receive any financial assistance.

Types of Benefits Provided to the Weavers

In Sualkuchi it was found that the condition of the weavers is poor and they are deprived of certain facilities such as, health benefits, accidental benefits and maternity benefits. Health benefit or insurance is a payment received through a health insurance. This covers the whole or part of the risk of a person incurring medical expenses. As per the Government of India and the Ministry of Textiles, the health insurance scheme for weavers was implemented during 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 all over India. The health insurance schemes for weavers in India aims at financially enabling the weaver community to access the best healthcare facilities in the country. Only a few have got the opportunity to avail themselves health benefits. These weavers were helped by their owners to avail such health schemes. 92.8 percent said that they have not been provided any such benefits or are unaware about it.

As the paper reveals, there are certain training units in Assam and in particular in Sualkuchi, but only a few are fortunate enough to take the opportunity. Majority of the hired weavers did not have any formal training in weaving. They were either trained by the owners or have inherited the art from their family members/elders. It could be seen that seven percent attended training under the Weaver's Service Centre and three percent under the Indian Institute of Handloom and Technology (IIHT). Almost ninety percent did not receive any training in weaving. The paid weavers are not provided training in any training centres and because of this they are not capable to weave complex designs as per demand of the modern market.

Here, majority of the weaver respondents find the working condition fair. They have no complaints about the working status of the weaving unit they are working in. Twenty-four percent of the weavers say that the working condition is good to work in, and six percent say that their working condition is quite poor.

Every worker has different needs. Creating meaning to jobs and motivation must go hand in

hand to engage properly in work. With the goal to increase the motivation of weavers, the respondents shared certain views, which they apply to motivate the weavers. As Watson (2017) says that the attempt by managers to motivate workers is not by meeting needs as in classical theory, but by negotiating with or persuading workers with a particular bundle of reward as an offer is fair in return for the effort they put in. The paper shows that twenty percent of owners look into the needs of weavers, and eighteen percent of owners give control to the weavers regarding weaving and designs. Thirty percent of owners say that they communicate with the weavers daily and they communicate better in order to boost their working instinct and seventeen percent provide incentives to the weavers such as advance pay or extra money for overwork, while fifteen percent say they do nothing of such sort to motivate the weavers.

In the present paper the respondents' opinion on the new generation adopting weaving as a profession was asked and it was found that forty-four percent of respondents say that the new generation is willing to opt for the weaving activity, while twenty-eight percent say that they are not willing to take up weaving activity as a profession. Nowadays, the younger generation are more interested in education than earlier. Most of them are interested in wholesale or retail business. It was stated in an article in *The Assam Tribune* dated 16 November 2014 that the beleaguered traditional silk industry is now relying on the new generation of Sualkuchi and their innovations for its survival. Although the respondents also said that several youths have come forward to help this centuries-old silk industry with their innovations. These youths are confident that their silk industry would be able to overcome all the hurdles if new but local innovations concerning weaving and designs of fabrics continue to come at a faster pace.

Issues Relating To Strikes and Protests in the Silk Town of Sualkuchi

A strike is caused by the mass refusal of employees to work. A strike usually occurs in response to employee grievances. Protests are the result of actions by individuals, groups, organisations, coalitions and movements seeking

to change or prevent change in institutional policy (including policies of the government, corporations, religious organisations, etc.). In the work of Gamson (1990), he asserted that the organisation and tactics of a social protest group strongly influence the group's chances for successes.

Nath et al. (2013) in their work say that since the past few decades, the handloom sector is facing intensive competition from the power loom industry and also from foreign countries like China and Bangladesh. Also, the mass is not aware and assured of the value of the handloom products. There is an absence of reliable information regarding the marketing of handloom products. In Sualkuchi the weavers and small handloom entrepreneurs are fighting against some unscrupulous traders who are endangering the glorious handloom industry of Assam by importing huge quantities of pat (mulberry) fabrics by copying the designs and motifs of Sualkuchi pat fabrics. To resist the flow of such products from outside the state, there was a protest by these traders on 29 and 30 March 2013. The protest provided the much-needed impetus to launch agitation programmes at different places of Assam. Whereas the people, who are busy weaving round the clock, hardly had time to spare to take part in any such programme. The objective of the Sualkuchi outburst was to stop the selling of imported silk fabrics, to provide subsidy in mulberry yarns to the weavers, to set up yarn banks at Sualkuchi, to set up a weavers' training institute to cater to quality control, to frame guidelines on handloom products, so as to help the weavers and master weavers coming from different districts, to provide subsidised electricity to the weavers, etc. Moreover, the demand for trademark and geographical identity for Sualkuchi pat fabrics was another important demand of the people (The Assam Tribune, Guwahati, Tuesday, 7 January 2014).

In Sualkuchi there is no union of weavers but there is one NGO working for their welfare and some cooperative societies as well, which deal with certain issues related with the weavers' problems.

When asked about the strikes and protests in the weaving centre of Assam, it was found that twenty-nine percent participated in the protests to safeguard the weaving industry, while seventy-one percent did not participate. The respondents' views on strikes and protests are

depicted as that fifty-six percent of respondents think that going for a protest is a great initiative to safeguard the weavers' interest. Ten percent of respondents said that it is of no use and thirty-four percent have nothing to say regarding strikes and protests.

Relationship Between Weavers and Owners of Silk Looms

In the present paper an attempt has also been made to understand the relationship between owners and hired weavers. The functioning of industry depends on the organisational capability of those who carry on and manage it. An organisation refers to a planned process through which the resources of an enterprise in men, materials, machines and money are brought together, as said by Sarma (2007) in his work. According to him, the success of any organisation depends on many factors and industrial relations can be considered as one important factor in this regard.

The paper also reveals how the weavers got engaged to weaving in Sualkuchi. Majority of the weavers themselves came asking for work in the weaving units. Twenty-five percent got engaged to the work through friends and relatives, and nineteen percent had a personal contact with the owner and his family. Thirteen percent were hired by the owner himself to work in his factory. There is a cordial relation between the weavers and owners and between workmates.

Willingness could be seen among the weavers to go for some other jobs if the opportunity arises. The weavers, when interviewed, shared that fifty-eight percent are willing to switch jobs if a better prospect is provided and would like their children to go and work somewhere else rather than with handloom weaving. This is due to low profit in weaving and minimum wages and because of this the weavers when asked say that they would like their children to work somewhere else. The reasons to go for some other work are low wages, long working hours, lack of progress in this work, due to family issues, health problems and so on.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study thus discussed the social structural condition of the silk industry.

The study analysed the opinion of the respondents regarding their work, relation between owners and weavers and between workmates and so on. It is a study that can identify problems and bottleneck issues in order to find measures to reorganise this sector, which is important for the development of the weaving industry in Assam, particularly the silk centre, Sualkuchi. The paper tries to analyse the structure and division of work among the various categories of silk producers. The weavers are often poorly paid and this low wages and poor living condition discourages weavers from staying in Sualkuchi for long periods. These migrant weavers are not well paid, as the owner cannot pay them more. A large number of looms in Sualkuchi are lying unutilised due to shortage of weavers. There is an urgent need to overcome these problems. Sualkuchi weavers have made a distinct place in India. This sector has not attained proper awareness as far as weaving related challenges are concerned. Most of the weavers are not aware of the various welfare schemes provided by the Handloom and Textile Department and Central Silk Board. Even though some schemes exist on paper, they are often not advertised widely enough to become aware of them. Only a section of people get the benefits of such welfare schemes. In Sualkuchi these are weaving centres housed in an ordinary building, with around 4 to 20 looms. The majority of people are paid weavers who earn minimal wages despite working for more than ten hours a day. Weavers migrate to Sualkuchi from other places, and engage themselves in weaving. The Sualkuchi weaving industry plays a vital role in providing sustenance to a large section of people and in social and economic upliftment. For this it is essential to understand the role of this cottage industry in its proper perspective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In spite of the magnificent role played by this weaving industry in the economic and social spheres, the owners and entrepreneurs are suffering from inherent operational problems, like idle and discarded looms due to shortage of weavers. The handloom weaving sector here is dying, with inadequate resources and the knowledge to compete in the open market. Hence, the

role of the government agencies becomes crucial for the survival of handlooms. With regard to planning and policies of the government organisations and institutions to safeguard the silk industry, various schemes, both at the central and state levels, are launched in Assam with the objective of welfare of the weavers. The central and state government organisations should take measures to popularise weaving practices through implementation of different schemes. The weaving industry can be considered one of the best to engage in a native place, which gives the unemployed avenues for self-employment and wage employment.

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