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Preserving craft, empowering communities: An exploration of traditionality and modernity in Assamese handloom through social entrepreneurship

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Abstract

This research paper explores the relationship between traditionality and modernity in the context of the Assamese handloom industry, and how social enterprise can intervene to make handicrafts more relevant to changing times. The study takes a closer look at how social enterprises can promote craft preservation while simultaneously ensuring economic independence for artisan communities through in-depth interviews with local artisans and community mobilizers, the paper highlights the grassroots-level impact of intervention in terms of raw materials, design, and sales, and how it influences artisan communities directly or indirectly. The evolution of Assamese motifs is traced in order to understand the impact of contemporization on the design process. Finally, the paper discusses the role of contemporization in the handicraft sector and its identity, and how social enterprise can help strike a balance between tradition and modernity, ensuring the sustainability of the industry for future generations.

Keywords: Handicrafts, Assamese handloom, motif evolution, traditionalist, modernity, social enterprise, craft preservation

Introduction

“Handicraft is the second largest source of employment in the country, after agriculture. Yet India’s hand industries are in a crisis of misunderstanding”.

– Crafts Council of India 2011

Handicrafts have been an integral part of India's cultural and economic heritage for centuries. The country is renowned for its diverse range of handcrafted items, including textiles, pottery, jewellery, paintings, sculptures, and many more. The significance of handicrafts to India can be traced back to ancient times when artisans and craftsmen were considered important members of society. Handicrafts in India are not just about creating beautiful and unique products but also about preserving traditional skills and techniques that have been passed down from one generation to another. They are an expression of India's rich cultural diversity and the unique identities of its various regions and communities. The handicraft industry in India provides employment to millions of people, especially in rural areas, where traditional crafts have been the main source of income for generations. Many of these crafts have been handed down from one generation to another, and the artisans have developed their unique styles and techniques over the years.

India is an artisan economy. An artisan economy is a subset of a cultural economy and centres on indigenous, handmade production embodying creative and cultural heritage (craft, art, food, tourism). One of the largest sectors of employment globally for underserved communities, it is mostly informal, comprising diverse skill sets and undocumented low-tech. Artisans are not regarded merely as hand workers but also as potential entrepreneurs, custodians of best practices, and co-creators. Transactions are often linked to caste, identity, and kinship ties outside of formal institutional frameworks [1]. India handicrafts constitute a significant segment of the decentralized sector of its economy and it provides employment to millions of artisans scattered especially in the weaker sections of society such as SCs, STs, and women, producing goods worth thousands of Crores of Indian Rupees per year [2].

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There is growing research on the Indian handicraft industry and its implications on the economy of the country. Studies have shown that with the implementation of innovative techniques and methods, adequate development of resourcefulness and conscientiousness amongst the artisans and the craftsmen, provision of financial assistance, and generating awareness amongst them about modern designs, forms, and structures would contribute to the increased production of handicrafts. However, a majority of the studies limit themselves to interventions in the production, sales, manufacturing, and marketing levels. Very little is discussed about the social structures within artisan communities and the rapidly dwindling number of artisans in India. India at the moment is noticing a rise of what can be termed as “the new formal”. It is an emergent hybrid approach that combines best practices of the ‘informal’ (cultural networks, behaviors) and the ‘formal’ (social protection, data, mobility) in India’s artisan economy. Informal modes of work among rural creative cultures inform business models of creative enterprises that adapt to local contexts to drive productivity, profits, and innovation^[1]. While social enterprises focused on the upliftment of artisans through employment generation are rapidly cropping up across the continent, there is no study that analyses their model of economic independence and craft preservation. There is a significant gap when it comes to our understanding of modernity in the context of handicrafts. Specifically, we try to investigate the following research questions in the context of Assamese handloom:

- How are social enterprises oriented toward handicrafts able to ensure craft preservation along with the economic independence of artisans' communities?
- Can handicrafts be made relevant to current times without losing out of their essence?
- How does craft contemporization impact the design process?
- Can the process of modernization of craft cause it to lose out on its identity or is that the only means to ensure craft survival?

To address these research questions over a period of 4 months, we carried out a study in Assam (India). We visited an organization that has established a handloom project in Assam that closely works with the women weavers of the region to promote the traditional weaving craft of Assam. The project has a very unique take on tradition because of its innovative product range. We wanted to understand whether traditionality and modernity can go hand in hand, in turn, promoting and preserving the craft. In order to get an understanding of a variety of points of view, in-depth interviews were carried out with the local artisans involved in the craft, and workers of the organization who manage marketing and sale. This paper seeks to make the following contributions.

- We report on the grassroots-level impact of intervention in terms of raw materials, design, and sales and how it influences artisan communities directly or indirectly
- We trace the evolution of Assamese motifs and how they act as an extension of the lives of the people
- We report on whether contemporization can act as a boon or bane for the handicraft sector and its identity.

Review of Literature

Assam's weaving crafts are essential to the state's cultural heritage and have significant economic importance. The weaving industry in Assam is diverse, encompassing different

materials, techniques, and styles. Though the weavers work hard, their lack of awareness about government programs and help provided by the private sector makes it hard for them to monetize their goods. To address these issues, several social enterprises have emerged in Assam, working towards empowering the weavers and promoting their crafts. These enterprises provide design, training, and financial assistance support, helping the weaver’s access markets and enhance their bargaining power. These efforts are crucial in ensuring the sustainability of the weaving industry in Assam and preserving the state's rich cultural heritage through motifs, colours, and techniques.

India's northeast is renowned for its excellent crafts, varied traditions, and rich cultural history. The Indian government has been actively marketing the region to promote its unique culture and tradition to the world. Assam holds a significant role in this project as the entrance to the Northeast. Even though Assam has a long history of crafts, not much is known about how these crafts are doing now.

The women of Assam have succeeded in revitalizing the weaving industry, providing for their families, and revitalizing their communities despite the lack of documentation. This exemplifies how crafts may enhance local economies in rural areas and benefit communities. Studying Assam's craft-based livelihood model might also inspire the development of comparable ones in other regions of the nation. Many artisans who are trying to make ends meet in rural areas might benefit from the growth of livelihoods based on crafts. The success of Assam might act as a model for other areas where traditional crafts are still fighting for survival. Crafts offer a great deal of potential to encourage self-sufficiency and protect a region's history and culture. In addition to giving rural people a means of income, the development of craft-based livelihoods helps to maintain traditional knowledge and skills. By giving them chances to make a living and support their families, craft-based enterprises have the potential to empower women and advance gender equality.

Assam, India's largest northeastern state in terms of people and second largest in terms of territory, with a land area of 78,438 square kilometres. It is situated in the North-East of India and shares borders with Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Bangladesh, and West Bengal. Assam is home to three of the six physiographic divisions of India, namely the Northern Himalayas (Eastern Hills), the Northern Plains (Brahmaputra plain), and the Deccan Plateau (Karbi Anglong)^[3]. Assam is blessed with enchanting natural beauty, consisting of beautiful lush covers of greenery, hills, and rivers such as the Brahmaputra and the Barak. The state has been the living place of various races, tribes, and ethnic groups since time immemorial. The contemporary name Assam is said to be an anglicization of the term 'Aham' or 'Asom' given by the Ahoms who arrived in Assam in 1228 A.D^[4].

Methodology

We conducted research in Assam for more than a week. We acquired qualitative information by engaging in participant observation. Participant observation is a research technique that includes the researcher becoming fully immersed in the surroundings of the people or communities they are researching. Through active observation, the researcher can gain a thorough understanding of the social norms, customs, and practices of the group they are researching. This approach aids researchers in understanding the setting in which

participants live and conduct their everyday lives in order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants. Additionally, the researcher has the chance to speak with participants directly and observe how they behave in social situations, giving them the chance to gather detailed and rich data on social interactions, power relationships, and cultural norms. Another popular form of social science research is interviews, in which researchers have direct conversations with participants. It is possible to conduct organized, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews, to name just a few. Compared to structured interviews, which employ pre-defined questions, unstructured interviews allow for more spontaneous conversation between the researcher and the participant. Through interviews, researchers can gain detailed information about the beliefs, experiences, and opinions of people in communities. Using this method, it is possible to learn about people's unique experiences as well as their viewpoints on societal issues and cultural norms.

By conducting interviews, taking notes, reviewing papers, and taking pictures, we actively participated in the study. All of these serve as tools for grouping and analyzing our data points in order to summarise our main conclusions and suggestions. Our primary research was divided into the following phases.

Motif Documentation: Assamese motifs are intricate designs that are typically inspired by the natural world, including plants, animals, and geometric patterns. They are often used in textiles and other handicrafts and are an essential element of Assamese art. However, many of these traditional motifs are not well-documented, and there is a need for more comprehensive research to preserve them for future generations. In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in traditional Assamese motifs, and efforts are being made to promote their use in contemporary art and design. Designers and artists are incorporating these motifs into their work, both to celebrate Assamese culture and to preserve these designs for future generations. Our visit to Assam was in collaboration with a woman's rights organization that links with rural and urban women and civil society organizations on issues of development, social and gender justice, and environmental justice in Northeast India. This project initially

began with a group of 30-odd women weavers from the Missing tribe in the Sonitpur district and later expanded to include women from several other communities across Assam. The project began as an attempt at promoting and preserving the traditional throw shuttle loom weaving of Assam. The NGO works in close collaboration with local communities to identify women who are victims of domestic violence and provides them with training and employment opportunities in weaving. Through this initiative, the NGO aims to provide these women with a source of income and a sense of independence. We visited their office in Guwahati. The objective of our visit was to understand how the design process works, how they come up with product ideas and what sort of response have they been getting through their initiative. We interacted with the NGO members, saw their product range, and documented the motifs they were using which we then compared to the indigenous motifs of the region. To gauge an understanding of the traditional motifs used in Assam, we visited the Assam State Museum, with due permission, we clicked images that would help us trace the motif evolution and understand how the craft is being contemporized through color, design, technique, and end product.

Interviewing village mobilizers: We visited the Kamrup district of Assam which is 50 km from the city of Guwahati. Gramin Mahila Kendra. The village mobilizers at the Mahila Kendra are responsible for receiving designs and orders from the NGO and conveying them to the artisans. To understand the NGO's approach and its impact, we interviewed the village mobilizer who works closely with the NGO. The village mobilizer is responsible for identifying women who are in need of support and connecting them with the NGO. During the interview, the village mobilizer shared insights into the NGO's operations, including its selection process for identifying women weavers and the training programs provided to the women. The village mobilizer explained that the NGO works closely with the local communities and encourages the women to develop their own unique designs and patterns apart from those given by the design team.

Table 1: Details of the interviewees

Interviewee No.	Age	Role	Yrs. of NGO association	Yrs. of Exp.
1.	51	Artisan	3	41
2.	27	Artisan	0.25	0.25
3.	35	Artisan	4	25
4.	30	Artisan	1	18
5.	55	Artisan	3	37
6.	34	Artisan	2	14
7.	80	Artisan	No longer weaving	62
8.	45	Artisan	2	35
9.	37	Artisan	2	4
10.	25	Artisan	1	4
11.	24	Community Mobiliser	3	-
12.	43	Community Mobiliser	4	-

The village mobilizers go on weekly rounds across the village to collect finished products and to supply raw materials such as yarn etc. We went with them on one such visit of theirs to interview the artisans who work as part of this initiative. Conducting research in a cultural context with a language gap can pose a significant challenge. However, it is essential to ensure that the voices of the artisans are heard and their perspectives are documented accurately. We worked with the village mobilizer, who was proficient in both Hindi and

Assamese, to bridge the linguistic divide. The translator was essential in establishing communication between us and the artisans because she made sure that the inquiries were translated precisely and that the answers were correctly understood. We utilized an open-ended questionnaire during the interviews to let the artisans express their thoughts and experiences in their own terms. This strategy made it easier to get to know the women and gave them the confidence to speak openly. Wide-ranging subjects were covered in the

questionnaire, including the importance of weaving in their lives, how the craft has evolved over time, and their perspectives on its significance. We recorded the interviews to confirm the accuracy of the information gathered.

We spoke with a number of weavers to better understand the significance of weaving in the lives of Assamese artisans. They emphasized that weaving was an essential component of their tradition and heritage in addition to being a source of income. They explained that weaving is a skill that has been passed down from parent to child and helps to preserve their cultural identity. The craftspeople discussed how weaving has changed over time during the interviews. While traditional methods are still employed, new materials and technologies have been incorporated into the craft. For instance, the adoption of power looms has sped up and improved the weaving process, yet these artisans still like the traditional handloom since it enables them to produce distinctive designs and patterns. The artisans also discussed how their views on weaving have evolved through time. They explained that while weaving used to be considered a hobby or a side job, many artists now pursue it as a full-time career. They also expressed delight in their work and the national and state attention their art has garnered. The interviews also made clear the difficulties that weavers endure as artisans. Some artisans expressed concerns about the declining demand for traditional textiles, as younger generations are more inclined towards modern fashion. Others shared their struggles to compete with machine-made products, which are often cheaper and produced in larger quantities.

Findings: This section presents the findings organized into seven categories generated from the data analysis.

Raw Material: For ages, weaving has been a major aspect of Assamese culture. For many families in the area, weaving has been a vital source of income that has been passed down through the generations. In the past, Muga silk, cotton, and jute were the main natural fibers utilized by weavers to make their textiles. These locally sourced natural fibers were in great supply in the area. Due to its simplicity in cultivation and processing, cotton was particularly well-liked. But as

market demands and technological development have changed over time, so have the materials used by Assamese weavers. The popularity of synthetic or mercerized cotton threads has increased at the expense of natural fibers like jute and Muga silk. The market accessibility of these materials, along with the convenience they provide in terms of usability and durability, has led to this transition in materials. We learned from one of the discussions with the weavers that they previously used golden Muga silk to create items like jackets at home. They would buy Muga cocoon from the neighbourhood market, spin it into yarn, and weave it into whatever they wanted. They would sell the finished product in the adjacent market after finishing it. But today, cotton is the primary material used to make the majority of goods. A second weaver similarly said that they had previously utilized raw cotton, rice starch, and traditional motifs to make their fabrics. The threads were strengthened while the fabric was on the loom with rice starch, and the larger, totally handcrafted motifs. Today, mercerized cotton is used instead because it is more durable, aesthetically pleasing, and easier to weave with. Historically, Eri cocoon was used by weavers who would boil and dry it, spin threads with a drop spindle, and then weave the finished item on a loom. However, the availability of collared mercerized cotton thread has eliminated the requirement for cleaning and washing, making it simpler to begin weaving. The raw, unstarched cotton (matihuta) with a single hue was historically utilized by weavers to create their items. But nowadays, weavers use a wide range of colours with cotton or synthetic bases. While using synthetic materials may have some benefits, such as stronger threads and more vibrant colours, it's important to keep in mind that they might not be as comfortable to wear as garments made of natural fibers in the past. The oldest weaver we interviewed was in her 80s and had been weaving for more than 60 years. She told us how in the earlier days, the fabric would strengthen with every wash and survive generations. The temperature of Assam is humid but the material would keep its wearers comfortable allowing them to work in fields for long hours during the day.

Design

Table 2: Assamese motifs (past)

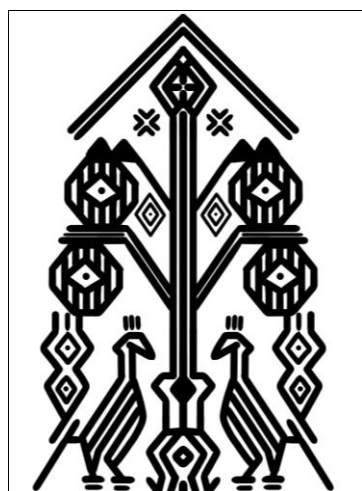


Fig 1: Jamiliaman

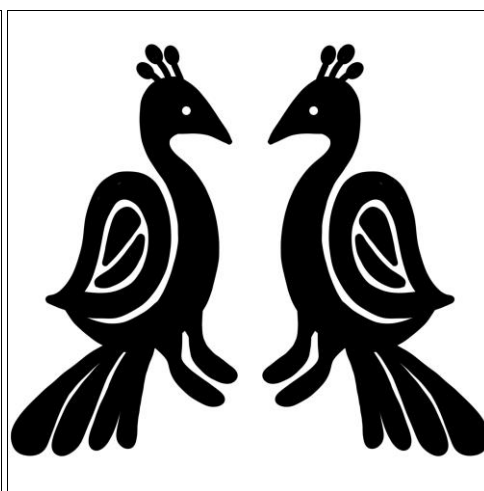


Fig 2: Mourah

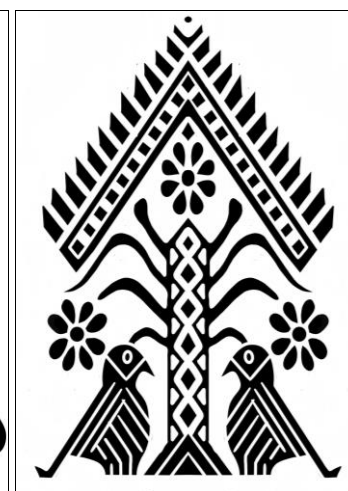


Fig 3: Gach

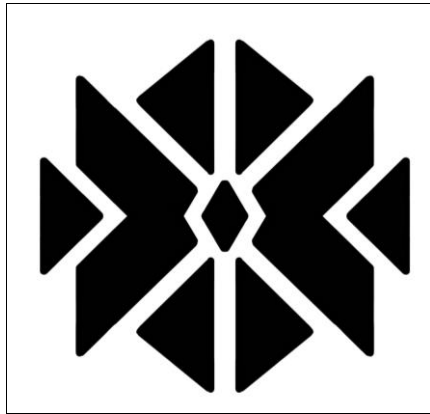


Fig 4: Phool Buta

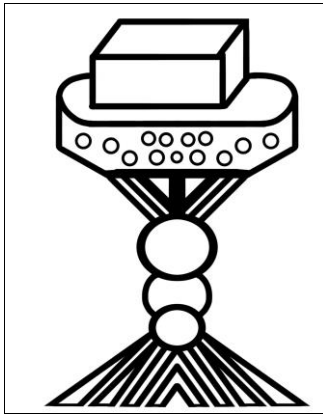


Fig 5: Bhagavat Sarai



Fig 6: Japi



Fig 7: Pokhila

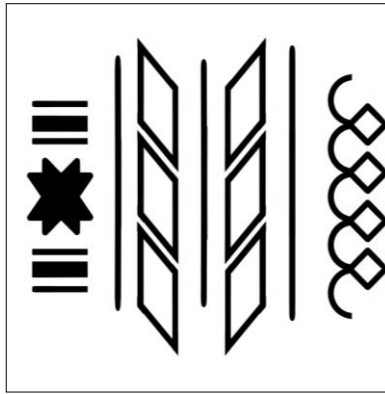


Fig 8: Kesh Baccha



Fig 9: Joon biri



Fig 10: Lata

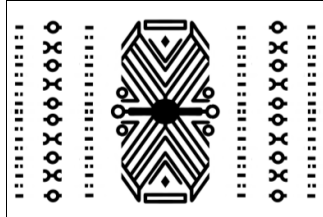


Fig 11: Thoka



Fig 12: Kakhori basoni

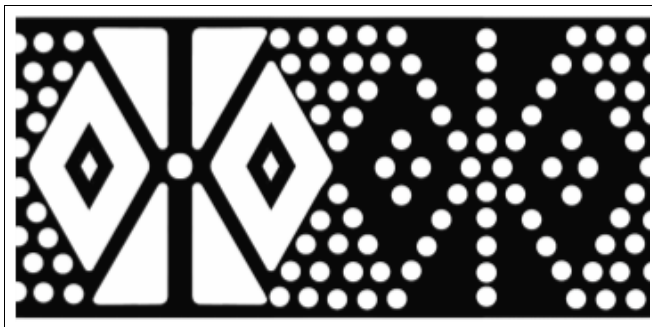


Fig 13: Kabootar ki aankh



Fig 14: Kinkhap

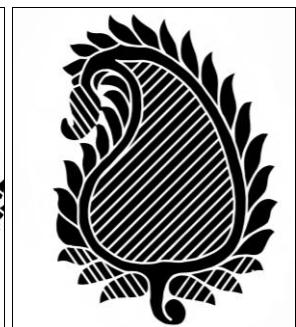


Fig 15: Kolka

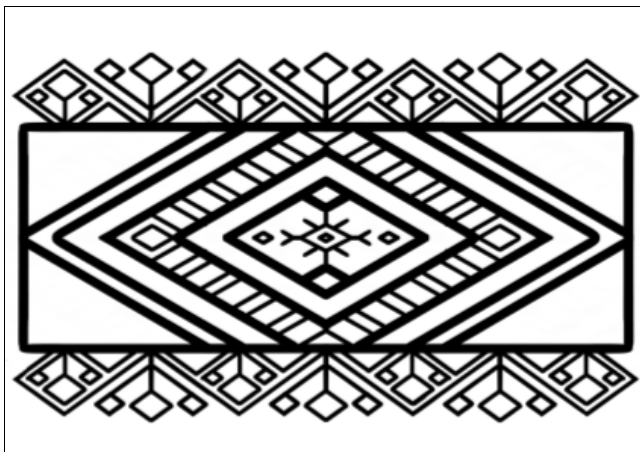


Fig 16: Mishing

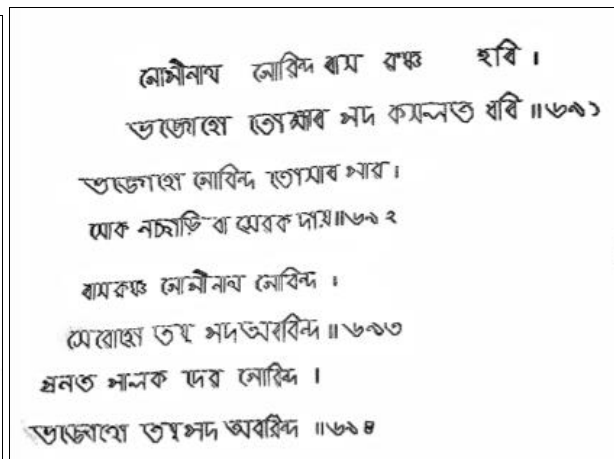


Fig 17: Phrases

Assam has a rich legacy of art and craft. The development of beautiful motifs is an essential part of Assamese culture. These motifs are deeply rooted in the state's history, epics, and natural beauty. The use of these motifs has been widely incorporated into the Assamese textile industry, where each design holds significant cultural and symbolic implications. Assam has a diverse range of flora and fauna, and the state's weavers were initially inspired by the natural world around them. The earlier weaving techniques used by Assamese women featured intricate motifs such as trees, peacocks, and butterflies, woven into the fabric to represent the beauty of the natural world and connect the wearer with their surroundings. Few examples of traditional motifs that were used earlier -

Figures

Figure 1: Karbi designs and patterns, particularly the Jamilyaman motif of two birds sitting on a tree facing each other, are commonly used in Assamese traditional garments.

Figure 2: Peacock motifs, or Mourah, are a popular design element found in Assamese silk garments.

Figure 3: The tree motif, known as Gach, is also prevalent in traditional Assamese garments, with varying shapes and designs depending on the skill of the weaver.

Figure 4: Phool Buta, or flower motifs, are a common representation of nature found in Assamese traditional garments.

Figure 5: The Bhagavat Sarai motif depicts the brass platter used to mount and keep the sacred Bhagavat Gita at prayer rooms.

Figure 6: Japi motifs, inspired by the traditional headgear once worn by noble and wealthy women, are often found woven into traditional Assamese garments.

Figure 7: The Pokhila pattern, inspired by the butterfly and known as such in the local language, is a popular motif woven into the Mekhela Chador, with varying shapes based on the weaver's skill.

Figure 8: Kesh Baccha motifs, depicting the hairline or braid of a woman, are commonly used at the borders of horizontal lines in textiles.

Figure 9: The Joon Biri style is characterised by the crescent

moon shape of the Assamese neckpiece of the same name.

Figure 10: Lata is a motif that represents a creeper of flowers.

Figure 11: While Thoka represents the flower of the Lata motif.

Figure 12: Kakhori Basoni is a border design that features half flowers and is often used in conjunction with the Lata motif.

Figure 13: Kabootar ki aankh is a motif created by repeating very small circular designs across the fabric, signifying the eyes of a pigeon.

Figure 14: The King Khap style draws inspiration from the Ahom dynasty and represents the regal and grandiose nature of the former kingdom. The design is heavily influenced by the region of Thailand, where the Ahoms originated.

Figure 15: Kolka, also known as paisley, is a popular and contemporary design found in Assamese weaves. Modern versions of this design are often larger in size and can also be found in other Indian weaves.

Figure 16: Mishing Design or motif is a colorful and opulent design traditionally woven by the Mishing tribe in Assam. These small motifs are commonly woven on cotton fabrics.

Figure 17: Phrases are another type of Assamese motif, featuring text written in the Assamese script. The text is typically religious in nature, featuring phrases such as Hare Rama, Hare Krishna, and other religious texts.

However, with the passage of time, the use of traditional motifs in Assamese textiles has evolved. The motifs inspired by flowers like Phool Buta, Lata, Thoka, and Khakori Basoni have become more prevalent. These floral motifs have become a staple of Assamese textiles, representing the beauty of the local flora. These motifs are still used, but they are losing their authenticity and the intricacy of the craft. The main reason for this is the preference for simple and easier motifs to weave, which helps weavers to produce more and generate more revenue. Apart from the floral motifs, there are several other motifs in Assamese textiles. The Kolka, King Khap, Kabootar ki aankh, Gach, Jamilyaman, Dholbiri, and Pepa are some of the most common motifs used. These motifs represent cultural and traditional aspects of Assamese life,

such as music and nature. For instance, the Pepa motif represents the traditional wind instrument played during Bihu, the state's most significant festival. Though the motifs have an authentic and traditional value, the commercialization of the craft is leading to the loss of intricate aesthetics. The traditional motifs, which had a deep cultural and symbolic significance, are now losing their importance as they are simplified to make the process of weaving faster and easier. The modernization of the textile industry has also led to the creation of motifs that do not hold any cultural or traditional value. These motifs are used purely for aesthetic purposes and are devoid of any symbolism or significance.

The social enterprise model

The NGO mentioned in the interview is working towards reviving traditional Assamese handicrafts and empowering local artisans by providing them with training and market access. One of the strategies they have adopted to make their products more marketable is by incorporating contemporary designs and styles with their traditional Assamese motifs. To cater to the urban clientele, the NGO has created a social media presence where they showcase their products and engage with potential customers. They have created a range of contemporary-looking products such as table mats, table runners, cup holders, tote bags, and indo-western tops that incorporate traditional Assamese designs and motifs. When asked about the market demand for their products, the NGO representative mentioned that it varies from place to place. In Delhi, for example, cushion covers and table runners are in great demand, while traditional Assamese products like Mekhela Chador may not sell as much due to their high cost. The representative highlighted that while a machine-made saree in Delhi can be bought for as little as two hundred rupees, their hand-woven Mekhela Chador may cost anywhere between three to four thousand rupees. Due to this, customers tend to hesitate to buy expensive products that they may only wear once or twice. The representative mentioned that they usually sell their products through exhibitions locally and in different cities, and not through online stores. This could be because their target market is more likely to attend exhibitions in person and have a better understanding of the value of hand-woven products. When asked about the design of their products, the weavers mentioned that the NGO provides them with traditional designs to work on. The organization also trains new weavers on product dimensions, weaving techniques, and color combinations that will work in the market.

Work-from-home model

The NGO works towards providing employment opportunities to women weavers who are victims of domestic violence. The NGO also takes the responsibility of procuring and providing any specific loom parts that may be required by the weavers to complete their orders. This saves the weavers the inconvenience of going to the market and bargaining themselves. These weavers are trained and provided with looms to work on at their homes, allowing them to balance their household duties with their weaving work. This arrangement provided a level of flexibility that allowed the women to balance their daily chores and earn an additional income from weaving. During our field visits, we observed that many of the women were also farmers and had small patches of land around their homes where they grew produce. Despite their busy schedules, they managed to take care of their farms, ensuring that their families had enough to eat. In

addition, every household had several animals, including dogs, cats, goats, and even pigeons, which they reared for eventual sale in the market. Additionally, they were responsible for taking care of their children, husbands, and the elderly in the house. With so many responsibilities on their plate, weaving for them has become an activity that provides them with a creative outlet. The NGO plays a vital role in ensuring that the weavers are not burdened with the additional task of procuring raw materials and other supplies required for weaving. Instead, the focus is entirely on their weaving work. The NGO's dedicated team ensures that the raw materials and other necessary supplies reach the weavers on time so that they can complete their orders within the given deadline. Most of the weavers we interviewed said that they thoroughly enjoy weaving and are very happy with the level of flexibility they get.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, we sought to investigate the impact of social enterprises on craft preservation and economic independence of artisan communities in the context of Assamese handloom. Our focus was on understanding the evolution of Assamese motifs and how they act as an extension of the lives of the people, whether contemporization can act as a boon or bane for the handicraft sector and its identity, and the grassroots-level impact of intervention in terms of raw materials, design, and sales, and how it influences artisan communities directly or indirectly. Our study was carried out over a period of four months. For our field study, we visited an organization that has established a handloom project in Assam, working closely with the women weavers of the region to promote the traditional weaving craft of the region. The project has a unique approach that combines traditionality and modernity to promote and preserve the craft. We conducted in-depth interviews with the local artisans involved in the craft and workers of the organization who manage marketing and sales. Our findings indicate that social enterprises that are oriented toward handicrafts can ensure craft preservation and economic independence of artisan communities. The NGO's handloom project in Assam has been successful in this regard, empowering women weavers and enabling them to become self-sufficient while preserving their cultural heritage. We observed that the evolution of Assamese motifs reflects the changing times and the struggles of the people. The motifs tell a story, representing the life of the weaver and the community they come from. As such, they are an essential aspect of Assamese culture and need to be preserved for future generations. The challenge, however, is to contemporize the motifs to keep them relevant while also preserving their essence.

The findings of our study showed that artisans belonging to remote, disconnected regions of the country often benefit tremendously through the intervention of social enterprises that offer flexibility of work. Most of the artisans engage in work other than their craft, which may include agricultural work, rearing cattle, acting as a caregiver, etc. for them, their craft is not a job but a way of life, it is so ingrained in their day to day that they don't treat it as work. We realized that the women of this region rarely leave their villages so for them to access raw materials, and tools, and become aware of the latest trends and techniques would have been a near impossibility if not for the intervention of the social enterprise. Most would have abandoned their looms and over time, the craft would've been lost. The NGO took a

systemized approach from providing designs and raw materials to eventually collecting the finished products from their doorstep gives these artisans a sense of structure. This model allows them to earn without disrupting their daily lives. Our study also explored the impact of contemporization on the design process. We found that modernizing the design process leads to a transition in the identity of the craft which if not done in close collaboration and partnership with the weavers at the grassroots level, could result in a loss of craft identity. We realized that it is crucial to give artisans autonomy in the design process, allowing them to experiment and innovate while holding on to their cultural heritage. Therefore, it is important to strike a balance between traditionality and modernity, enabling artisans to hold on to their culture while staying relevant to changing times.

Limitations

We acknowledge the limitations of our study. The study conducted by us explored the traditional handloom weaving practices in Assam and the role of social enterprises in promoting and sustaining these practices. While the study provided valuable insights into the experiences of weavers, village mobilizers, and NGO representatives, it also had certain limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the study had a small sample size, which limits the generalizability of the findings. We were only able to interview a select group of weavers and village mobilizers in the Kamrup region, as well as visit the NGO's office in Guwahati. While we tried to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, and weaving experience, our sample size was limited by our time and resources. Secondly, the study was conducted over a week-long visit to Assam. This time frame was not sufficient to gain an in-depth understanding of the nuances of handloom weaving practices, the challenges faced by weavers, and the impact of NGOs on weaving communities. Furthermore, we were unable to visit other regions in Assam where handloom weaving is practiced, which limits the scope of our study. Thirdly, the study was conducted using a qualitative research design, which has its own limitations. While qualitative research is useful for exploring subjective experiences and perspectives, it can be difficult to generalize findings to larger populations. Additionally, the data collected is heavily reliant on the views and experiences of the participants, and may not reflect the views of others in the community.

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