

SERICULTURE AND WEAVING INDUSTRY OF THE BODOS: A BRIEF DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

The hand-woven textile has occupied an important place in the culture and civilization of India since very ancient times. Bodo people living in the side of North-East India (Brahmaputra plain of Assam) were influenced in their textile production by the elements of physical environment as well as by their folk song, rituals, myths, legends, ceremonies festivals, social organizations and cultural norms. The indigenous inhabitants of most of this largely hill region are Bodo. There is an immensely rich assembly of tribal culture in this region. The beautiful hand woven product of the Bodos of this region not only reflects the skills of individual weavers but the creative capacity and deep perception of beauty in variety color and design of the Bodo people as a whole. The very socio-cultural life of the Bodo communities is revealed significantly in their clothes. Silk culture is a traditional cottage industry rooted in the life and culture of Bodos. Sericulture of Bodos comprises mulberry (pat) and non-mulberry silkworm culture. The later includes endi, muga and oak-tasar, Endi and muga skills are considered to be of indigenous origin and found only in foot hills of Himalaya. Largely, the Kachari Bodo tribes practice this culture during their leisure time, but it helps to improve their economic condition a lot especially of women.

KEYWORDS: Sericulture, Bodo Women, Weaving, Small Scale Industry

INTRODUCTION

The art of sericulture and the rearing of different kinds of silk worms for the manufacture of a variety of silk cloths were known to the people of the North – East India since the days of Ramayana and Arthashastra.¹ From the evidence of the Arthashastra, Harsacharita and other classical writers, it is inferred that in the art of rearing silk worms and the weaving of the best kind of silk cloths, the weavers of ancient Assam had earned a reputation that was at par with the Chinese. A famous writer named Quazim observed that Assam produced the finest silk cloths in comparison to those of China.

METHODOLOGY

Accomplish this study, the investigator used survey method. For the related materials investigator collected through the door to door field investigation work. So, in such context work, I have heavily depended on interview, questionnaire and observation method which are consider as my primary source. As secondary data, investigator has taken from all kinds of existing published materials available in the forms of books on language, literature, culture, history, journals and periodicals, newspapers, and documentation in the archives in any form etc.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Travernier indicated that the silk of Assam was produced on trees and the end product was very radiant. W. W.

Hunter also makes an exhaustive survey of the silk industry of Assam. According to him, during the supremacy of the Ahom dynasty, the industry was greatly encouraged and grants of lands were conferred upon the Jogis or weaving caste who were also exempted from the personal labour exacted by the state from all other classes. This caste produced silk from mulberry silk worms and the produce was for the exclusive use of the royal family the climate is eminently adapted to the vigorous growth of mulberry and other silk production of silk, such as mulberry silk, mejankari and muga appointed one thousand paiks from the Chutia and the Kachari community to rear silk moths. Under the patronage of the Koch Kings also, the silk industry made a considerable progress in the Koch kingdom. It is observed that the silk industry has been prevalent in Assam since the days of the Ramayana and the silk fabrics that were produced in Assam received great favor in India and other parts of the world.² He further said whether in the art of weaving and sericulture or working in metal, ivory, wood, leather, cloy, cane, bamboo and the like, their reputation was equal, if not superior, to that of the craftsmen of other parts of contemporary India. This is evidenced by literature foreign accounts and epigraphy, which mention different professional classes, like weavers, spinners, dyers, smiths, workers in ivory, metal, wood, cane, bamboo, etc.³

DISCUSSIONS

Spinning and weaving was universally practiced in Assam as well as Bodos. In Fatiyah-i- Ibriyah it is said – the people were very skilful in weaving embroidered cloth. Every evening a women had to spin a least five ‘sotalahi’, i.e. five conical balls of threads.⁴ W. Hamilton also said besides the professional tantuvayas, we have evidence of the extensive manufacture of cloths, and, of the cottage industries, the hand-loom industry has always occupied an important place in very Assamese house- hold, which probably contained as now a hand-loom, besides other articles for weaving and spinning. Hand-loom of crude form are to be found even to-day among certain tribes. Cotton shrubs were grown for the manufacture of cotton cloths.⁵ The use of karpasa (cotton) garments is also shown by the Kalika Purana, ⁶ of the 10th century A. D. and the Harsacarita.⁷

Anyway, the exact date of introduction of the silkworm into India cannot now be ascertained. Many clues picked out of history indicate that Assam was one of the first places in which the practice of rearing silkworms and using their thread become popular. The silk worm rearing has survived the ravages of time and the downfall of kingdoms, one after the other. Perhaps it was because this was one area which ensured good profits and was always responsible for making a difference in the economy of the people and the state as a whole. In spite of the attraction of imported silk and cotton, the temptation to abandon sericulture in favour of more lucrative occupations, and the high price, silk still remains the raw material for the national dress of Assamese and forms the common costume of the women of the Assam valley.⁸ It has been reported that, there are no less than seventeen varieties of silkworm indigenous to Assam, but there only are used to any appreciable extent.⁹

Of the three silk worms prevalent in Assam, the ‘eri’ worm yields the cheapest form of silk. The eri worm (*Attacusrecini*) derives both its scientific and its vulgar name from its attachment to the castor- oil plant (*Ricinus communis*), called ‘eri’ in Assamese. ‘indi’ in Bodo. The rearing of the muga and silk cocoons for the manufacture of various muga and silk clothes seems to have been an indigenous culture of the Bodos, which had been being maintained since the prehistoric time. Many centuries ago that the Vedic Aryans came to the North-East India, the fore fathers of the Bodos seemed to have been rearing silk- worms profoundly in this region.¹⁰

The fading of the silk worms and the castor oil plants is a tradition of the Bodos and they gave much importance on this industry in the ancient time when the varieties of cloths were not available as in the present time. They planted sufficient castor- oil plants to feed the silk worms and produced huge cocoons out of which eri- threads were spun to weave their necessary cloths. This economic activity carried on by the Bodos and the art of sericulture most probably made the ancient Assam famous as the land of eri and muga in the world.¹¹

Many of the distinguished writers are of the opinion that 'Pat' and 'Chinpatta' cloths were originated in China.¹² W. H. Schoff also contends with such opinion that the silk industry originated in China and later on extended to Assam and other parts of India.¹³

BODO WOMEN AS GOOD WEAVERS

The Bodo women are expert weavers and known as born weaver in Assam. so they can weave all their weaving apparels. A Bodo women who does not know the art of spinning and weaving is regarded as 'auluri' (good for nothing), and neglected by the society. The Bodo women weaves on the simple frame loom (salkhuntha) and produce their own requirement of fabrics in their spare time. Almost each and every Bodo women knows how to weave cloth, rearing of silkworm and spinning of silk. The Bodo women still wear the hand woven traditional 'dokhona' (Bodo female dress), sadri (female dress), 'gamsa' (male dress), bisina si or sima (bed sheet), 'dokhona thaosi' (specially used in the time of marriage for bride) etc. According Rev. S. Endle said that- one of the chief industries, a very profitable one among the Kacharis, is that the culture of the silk – worm known as eri cloth.¹⁴

Again he opines that, the loom employed for weaving the eri silk is of very simple construction, and most, it not all, the material needed for the purpose can be provided by the villagers themselves from local resources.¹⁵ He further said, the actual work is always carried out either by the lady of the house, or by one of her grown- up daughters; and it is in every way suitable to women workers as it requires very little exertion of physical strength, but only a certain quickness and readiness of eye and hand. The condition under which the industry is carried on is in all respects pleasing and satisfactory. Indeed, Kachari women working placidly and contentedly at the eri loom, singing quietly to her in sheer happiness of heart.¹⁶

It is worth mentioned that the Arthasastra and the Harasacharita give valuable evidence on the industrial aspects of the indi (eri) and muga-silk and their products in ancient Assam, especially during the time of Bhaskara Varmana. Ancient Assam was, no doubt, an important commercial center, which must have then contained a settlement of merchants who traded not only in silk but also fabrics manufactured from fibers and fragrant substances.¹⁷ In the words of R. M. Nath, it is they (Bodos) who first introduced the cultivation of Silk of different varieties in Assam in those ancient times, and Assam has, therefore, been famous for her silk from time immemorial.¹⁸

Weaving is an important industry among the Bodos as well as other tribes of Assam. In fact every Bodo girl and women is an expert weaver, A Bodo women without the knowledge of weaving can hardly be given in marriage.

In Assam, sericulture is mainly practiced by the Bodo Kacharis. It is associates with their socio-economic and cultural life. Therefore, number of families engaged in sericulture. Every household of the Bodos there is loom. They produce their clothes how far they have need. Various kinds of clothes they have produced. For examples- dokhna (main female dress), jwmgra or jwmbaigra (a kind of sunri), gamsa (main male dress), sima or bisina si (bed sheet), aronai

(maflar), fali (a kind of towel), endi si (eri cloth), gandu si (pillow cover) etc. Now, the Bodo women have gone to commercial line also by selling handloom industry. There are so many handloom industry lower Assam. Though these industry a large number of poor Bodo women weaver have got scope to engaged herself and maintain their livelihood also. Most of the Bodo workers are small and marginal farmers, or tiny and household industry mainly in rural area. The nature of their work involved in the sericulture industry such as harvesting of leaves, rearing of silkworm, spinning or reeling of silk yarn and weaving are carried out by the Bodo women.

Most of the domestic requirements of cloths are made from the family looms. The cloths woven by them are of highly artistic designs. Marriageable girls weave their own bridal apparels by themselves. Even colours used by them for dyeing yarns are prepared from raw indigo and wild herbs. In the words of Renu Boro, she says that, in those days the raw materials for yielding colours were collected totally from natural plants i.e. from tree leaves, roots and stem of different plants. The Bodo women produced first powder from leaves of Bhaira (a kind of tree), stem of Jackfruit, from oot of Goma kxantho and Mohen (a kind of small tree / herb) for yellow colour, from stem of cherry fruit for brown colour, from leaves of laokhri, Amlai (amlokhi) for black colour, and Mwifrai (pori sak in Ass) for red colour. It should be mentioned that powder of leaves of Bhaira tree was necessary to be used as a first step for dyeing all other colours. There was no use of chemical powder for that. As a process of dyeing, the white thread was kept under water mixed with Bhaira leaves powder for a week or more and after that it should be boiled for a few seconds. After that only it becomes ready for dyeing with other colour. Thus, this process of dyeing colour required time, labour and efficiency of the weavers. But still Bodo women practiced this hard process of dyeing.¹⁹ As such every Bodo family had to practice this sericulture and weaving industry as it had an important role to play in the cultural and economic life.

To conclude, Assam produced all specimens of fine garments, both simple and coloured, and made important progress in all the allied industries.²⁰ Whether in the art of weaving or in the rearing of silkworms and the manufacture of dyed cloths, the tribes, like the Khasis, Nagas, Manipuris and the Bodos in general, had a great deal to contribute towards their development. Even to-day they produce them in plenty and supply the needs of their neighbors.²¹ It is likely that the art of sericulture, weaving, etc. was introduced into Assam at an early period by the pre-Aryans, Bodo and the allied tribes. The place names like Jonga, Donga, etc. occurring in the Arthasasthra,²² associated with the industrial products of Kamrupa, which have a Bodo origin, only support our contention.²³ It is rightly pointed out that coloured cloths are more extensively used and manufactured by the tribes as well as the Bodos than the people of the plains.

The king Bhaskaravarmana presented a cape called ho-la-li made of coarse skin lined with soft down to the Chinese Pilgrim- Scholar and traveller Hiuen-Tsang who came and visited the palace of the former in Kamrupa.²⁴ The word Ho-la-li' or 'Halali' seems to have come from the Bodo words 'Hi' (cloth) and 'lali' (purple tinged). R. M. Nath rightly remarks that 'Halali' is a Bodo word which means luster emitting and Bhaskaravarmana presented a 'Halali' coat' made with Bodo silk to Hiuen-Tsang in the seventh century A. D.²⁵

CONCLUSIONS

The art of weaving is inherited from generation to generation and it plays an important role in the socio-economic life of the Bodos. It is an inborn traditional skill of the Bodos women. There are one or two or three looms in every house. Now it is seem that gradually the looms and technique of weaving have been developing according to the trends of present market needs. This industry can absorb both unemployed educated and uneducated women. So, to create and extend the

market for the production of handloom industry, some effective measures like exhibition, trade fair, study team in and abroad should be taken by the government. Such measures will create more new market in the outside for the peculiar cloths of the Bodos and along with this the Bodo weavers will come to know the latest innovation, emerging trends in technologies, management and marketing of Eco friendly fiber, spinning, dyeing, and all information of new technologies in textiles, crafts and quality management. Then it will be a great industry of the Bodos.

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