



THE ERI: WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP SECTOR OF NORTH-EAST INDIA SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SOUTH-KAMRUP AREA OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT Assam is traditionally famous for sericulture. These are eri-silk, muga-silk, mulberry and tosa. Assam contributes about 77 per cent of eri-silk and 95 per cent of muga-silk to India's total production (sericulture.assam.gov). Annual eri-silk production of Assam is about 3000 metric tonnes. Based on these sericulture productions, Assam is traditionally famous in handloom cottage industries and have become an integral part of the rich cultural heritage of Assam. Basically, the whole north-east region is famous for handloom and textile cottage industries. Among these, the eri-silk is more significant since it is purely associated with the rural economy and women and fulfil both sustainable and inclusive nature of the national development policy. The main driving force of running these agro-based cottage industries are traditional skill and knowledge about the sector. Now the eri silk has been utilized to make various diversified products. There is an increasing demand for the eri-silk fabric both in national and international market. The paper attempts to bring on focus the importance of eri-silk production in the development of rural economy of Assam and women entrepreneurship development. The paper also give importance to attract the new generation about the contribution of the women entrepreneurs in state's economy.

KEYWORDS : Eri-silk, Rural Economy, Agro-industries, Women Entrepreneurship Development, Eri-silk Diversified Products.

INTRODUCTION:

According to the 2011 census, in rural India, out of total female population 36.6 per cent of women are cultivators; 43 per cent are agricultural workers; 5.44 per cent are household industry workers, and 14.6 per cent are other workers. Almost all rural women remain engaged in their family livelihood. These percentages are all higher in rural areas than in urban except for household industry and other workers. Thus, it proves enough women powers are available in rural areas of our economy. Not only that, according to NITI Aayog, agriculture employs approximately 80 percent of rural women, which is 54.6 percent of the total workforce of the country. Agricultural sector of India is already over-crowded along with one third agricultural workforce which is about 25 per cent to 30 per cent of total rural labour. In India, the work participation rate for females in rural areas is higher than urban areas. In India, 20.37 per cent of MSMEs are run by women, where 23.3 per cent of the total labour force are engaged (ABP News channel). Thus, enough women are there to run enterprises. The rural economy of India is dominated by locally available agro-based small-scale cottage industries categorized by MSME which are sustainable on one hand and inclusive on other. The share of MSME products in total Exports of India is over 45 per cent and 30 per cent in GDP. Thus, MSME play an important role in the national economy of India.

In Assam, 18 per cent of total entrepreneurs are woman as against 10.11 per cent in national level. The number of woman entrepreneurs in the state is 154158 which is top among the north-eastern states.

Assam is dominated by rural population. It is 86 per cent of total population and out of which 49 per cent is female population. According to 4th SSI census of India, in Assam, there are 3968 number of registered women entrepreneurs in SSI sector whereas unregistered number is 12435 (ijrar.org). In Assam, around 1,35000 women are engaged in textiles, handicrafts and food processing sectors.

A study conducted by 'Economics of Indian Crafts: Estimating Employment and Value-added in the Handicraft and Handloom sector' during 2025-26, found that in Assam the production of hand-loom and handicraft industries have shown a decreasing trend to about 51 per cent and 54 per cent respectively. It is worrying.

Assam is traditionally renowned for its handloom and handicrafts cottage industries. These are based on sericulture, cotton, jute, bamboo and cane, and bell-metal industries. Among these, the textile is oldest sector of the rural economy of Assam. The famous textile handloom cottage industries of Assam are based on sericulture like eri-silk, muga-silk, mulberry-silk and tosa.

Traditionally, these sericultural products were produced with a marketable surplus, meaning they are sold after meeting domestic needs. It was recently observed that there has been an increasing demand for the sericultural fabrics like muga-silk, eri-silk for last two decades from within the state and outside the state as well. There is a

greater scope to develop and explore the sector from various directions.

Here the paper attempt to discuss the contribution of eri-silk sector in the following two directions:

1. To focus on the contribution of the eri-silk sector to the state's economy as a women entrepreneurship development sector.
2. To focus on the sector as an emerging one to match with skill-based education prioritised by NEP.

Back-ground of the study:

A number of National Policies are adopted for upliftment of women financially in India like 'Lakhpati Didi (Lakhpati Baideu in Assam), Namo Dron Didi etc. In India women are traditionally involved in production sector whether it is agriculture or cottage industries and they are still there. But their financial contribution has not been counted in national economy. This has been raised from very past from different directions.

In case of Assam one such sector is 'eri'. Specially the significant aspect of eri-silk sector is that traditionally this sector is mainly run by women. For that reason, Assamese women are specialized in this particular skill of making yarn from eri-silk cocoon and have knowledge about weaving textile and fabric from it.

Although the entire north-eastern region is famous for producing sericulture products, Assam can be considered a hub for both muga silk and eri silk production. Other states in this region include Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh. In Assam, the main eri silk producing districts are Kamrup, Goalpara, Lakhimpur, and Jorhat along with Udalguri, Darang, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Golaghat, Dhemaji, Nagaon, Morigaon, Darrang, Cachar, Karbi Anglong, N.C. Hills, Kokrajhar and Dhubri districts.

A handful of studies already have established that the women from north-eastern states are traditionally skilled and knowledgeable in weaving and hand-loom textile cottage industries. Some of these are included the writings of Dr. Ratna Bhuyan et. al.(2021), B.B. Hazarika (2020), E.D. Setty et.al.(2010) etc.

Besides, development of rural economy is one of the main priorities of all development policies of government of India. Sustainable and inclusive development can fulfil the true-spirit of this national policy. Argo-based industrial development has not only positive impact on environment but also have a great impact to reduce unemployment and to reduce migration to urban areas from villages (Setty, et.al. 2010). In every year a good portion of working force from villages migrate to urban areas in search of jobs.

Thus, there are greater scope for expansion of existing handloom and cottage industries making more attraction among the new generation to take it as their engagement area and livelihood sector.

Methodology:

The study is an analytical one and based on both primary and secondary data.

Primary data: The primary information are collected through the schedule with both open and closed ended questions. The study areas are four adjacent villages of greater Chhaygaon area viz Kotahi, Hahim, and two boarder villages Malang and chalong of Meghalaya district.

The Secondary data are collected from various studies and internet searches.

The government of Assam recognised the importance of sericulture farm to the state's economy and established 26 number of sericultural farms in different districts out of which two numbers were established in Borduar and Topatoli areas of undivided Kamrup district in the year 1962 and 1978, respectively.

Analysis about the contribution of the eri-silk sector to the state's economy as a women entrepreneurship development sector:

In Assam, at present 68.8 per cent of textile and handloom industries and 44 per cent of handicraft industries have ownership of women entrepreneurs. Thus, the rural women play an important role in the contribution of textile MSME in the state's economy.

Assam is traditionally famous in sericulture. These are agro-based household industries and women are engaged there along with their day to day works. These are agro-based because the growth of silk worm requires the specific plants which leaves are the main food of silk worm. The eri-silk worm requires Castor plant which Assamese name is 'era'. The Silk-worm produces cocoon in one stage of their life. These cocoons are made up by the protein produce by the saliva of these worms.

The muga-silk cocoon is composed of the yarn produce by muga-silk worm but eri-silk cocoon do not contain thread. It is made up of cotton-like substance. The eri-silk yarn is made up from eri-cocoon by a method known as 'takli'. This work is done by women which requires skills. It is done with fingers of two hands. It needs practices. New generation needs training and may show good result inculcating traditional knowledge with their family members having the knowledge. Development of sericulture industries is sustainable since it is agro-based unit.

The main raw materials of this textile sericulture-based industries are concerned cocoon and skilled labour. Nowadays the spinning machine has been developed to make yarn from cocoon which are also operated by women.

Analysis about the sector as an emerging one to match with skill-based education prioritised by NEP

The production of eri-silk grainage is a process carried out systematically in sericulture. It needs knowledge, practices, skills and patience.

The process of eri-silk Grainage:

In the study area, the farmers who cultivate eri-silk worm, collect eggs or seeds from the farms. These are developed to larva by feeding era leaves and finally to cocoon. Actually, the cocoons are one of the stages of life span of silk-worm. These are as follows:

Seed or eggs → larva → cocoon → butterfly.

Butterflies are the adult stage which are responsible to lay eggs.

The process of grainage of eri-silk worm can be divided into two ways: natural and artificial.

In the ancient period the eri-silk cocoons were obtained naturally from the forest. After the discovery of their used value people started their production domestically and naturally as well.

Now grainage of sericulture is done by artificial method. Seeds or eggs are produced in sericulture farm. Though sericulture is a precious activity but it is regarded as poor act as usually carried out by poor villagers of Assam. since these are done by poor people of villages of Assam. But adaptation of cultivation of eri-silk production has become livelihood of eri dominated areas.

The process of eri-culture is different from muga-silk: because the

thread made from this cocoon are twisted or spun and reeled by a traditional technique known as 'takli'. This process is simple and mostly performed by women in their leisure time since it contains only cocoon and the traditional reel made from bamboo.

Its durability nature can last century and becoming finer with time. So it has been costlier since time inception. There is the threat for extending the sector in near-future generation as lot of alternatives are developed in textile sectors.

In order to attract new generation, it needs motivation, awareness, trainings, environment and support about the development of the sector. Thus it can be included into vocational courses prioritized by NEP.

Findings:

1. In the households unit the meant to development textile or fabrics are still traditional hand- looms. Still women are the main driving force of this sericultural production. Among these tribal women can be taken as on focus. Sericulture is the subsequent work along with their day to day works.

2. Sericulture is meant for textile or fabrics for human needs. The traditional devices of making these fabrics were hand weaving and knitting. In Assam, the hand spinning like 'takli' is the oldest and most widespread technique of making eri-thread in sericulture. Even after the application of modern spinning wheels, the traditional methods of reeling and weaving still existed among the small growers of cocoon in Assam. Thus, production is less

3. Nowadays, these products are manufactured to satisfy market demands and economically have characterized as MSME. Entrepreneurship based on sericulture is not much older. Thus, there arise some issues like the production, the marketing and the marketing channels which play an important role to bring reasonable returns to small famers of cocoon producers and fabric makers.

4. There is an increasing demand for the fabric made from eri-silk from outer states even from abroad. There exists a number of middlemen in the marketing of cocoon, weavers and fabrics.

5. The production unit from this sericulture are the households who are engaged in it.

The whole eri-industry bears some peculiar features as the production of eri-silk cocoon, its marketing, textile production and its marketing take place in different unit which are observed in the study areas are given below.

- i) Cocoon Farmerssmall tradersbig traders textile producers 1—household unit —textile producers 1-- textile sellers or outlet holders
- ii) Farmersbig trader textile producers 1—household unit —textile producers 1-- textile sellers.
- iii) Farmersbig trader textile producers —household unit -- textile sellers.
- iv) Farmerstextile producers —household unit —textile producers 1-- textile sellers.

6. Thus, the whole process of marketing has been captured by the middlemen.

7. The common case is eri-cocoon cultivators and eri-textile producers are different persons.

8. The new generation are not interested about the industry for that the number of skilled weaver women have become scarce.

9. Some rural women are very skilled in making yarn from eri-cocoon that they make even finer yarn than machine and fabric made from it is higher demands from anywhere.

10. Traditionally, in South Kamrup, the eri textiles are commonly used as men's and women's warm shawls.

11. Now, the eri-silk textile has been diversified and many luxury and semi-luxury items are made to fulfil diverse demands.

CONCLUSION:

The development of eri-silk sector is needed and govt seriously should take initiatives to extent the sector because people have traditional knowledge about the sector, it is environmentally friendly. It is income and employment generation sector and rural women entrepreneurship development sector. This traditional skill-based sector should be included into the vocational- education in secondary and higher education level.

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