Uplifting the Grassroots Through Community Entrepreneurship Development: A Case Study of Sualkuchi Handloom Town of Assam, India

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ABSTRACT

A strong foundation of the economy lies in strengthening the grassroots. A robust rural economy and sound financial health at the grassroots is imperative for a balanced economic growth of any region. This Covid-19 pandemic and resultant lockdown showed the helplessness of industrialization with 10 million immigrant workers in India rushing back to their native places in search of food and shelter. A sustainable income that provides adequate stability to not just one but future generations is the need of the hour. After agriculture, the largest labour intensive sector in India is handloom. It employs around 4.3 million people, contributes 2.3 % to the country's GDP and 12% to earnings from exports. Total handloom export stood at US\$ 176.97 million (April 2020 to January 2021) as per Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. So this sector has potential for an increased GDP and per capita rural income. Some facts about India's rich history of trade and commerce give an insight into the high demand of Indian textiles all across the globe. Apart from spices, herbs and minerals, India exported silk and cotton textiles to Central Asia, Southeast Asia and even Europe as early as in the 3rd - 4th centuries. Silk rearing and weaving are skills that are passed on from one generation to the other in rural areas of our country. Investments in terms of infrastructure and skill training would be extremely minimal if this tradition is taken up as an entrepreneurial venture within a geographical community. This paper attempts to study the handloom weavers of Sualkuchi town of Assam, their problems and future growth plans. This paper would also try to understand the possibilities of developing a community entrepreneurial programme for these weavers. This would be an initiative to motivate the younger generation to take up this tradition and enjoy a healthy sustainable living within their geographical boundaries rather than contributing towards growing urban slums.

KEY WORDS: COMMUNITY; ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT; SUALKUCHI; HANDLOOM WEAVERS.

INTRODUCTION

Soul of a nation rests in the villages. India is largely an agricultural country with around 65 percent population still living in the villages. Agriculture is the biggest employment provider even today. Handloom and handicrafts are the offshoots or ancillary activities of the agricultural sector, that all villagers, especially women are involved in the rural areas. These are certain skill sets that are being passed over from one generation to

another since very early times. However, because of low financial returns and time consuming work, the new generation of workers prefer to leave the traditional jobs behind and look for more lucrative career opportunities in the urban areas. Thus they end up doing petty work for quick money. COVID 19 pandemic was a major deathblow to these workers who fled to their villages due to loss of work and livelihood during nationwide lockdown.

This can be taken as a wakeup call to the government as well as the policy makers to think about enhancing job opportunities at the grass root level and ensure sustainability and growth. Developing entrepreneurial skills at a community level to practice and earn profit from their traditional skills could be a very practical decision to not only overcome the current crisis situation but also move closer to the government policies of Atmanirbhar Bharat (self sufficient India). Community

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entrepreneurship would ensure sustainable livelihood for the entire community residing within a particular geographical boundary (Ahom 2017).

Research Question: India witnessed a scary picture of 10 million (Government of India) workers migration from urban to rural areas during COVID 19 pandemic resultant lockdown. There arose a situation of unemployment, hunger and hopelessness. This situation led us to rethink about a balanced economic growth with an all inclusive model ensuring equal urban-rural growth. In this context can the traditional handloom industry be developed to such an extent that a good percentage of rural population is engaged within a certain geographical boundary earning a sustainable income? (Anand 2017)

Research Objectives

1. To study the socio-economic condition of handloom weavers of Sualkuchi in present times.
2. To study the reasons of lack of interest of young generation in traditional handloom business.
3. To study the possibility of developing community entrepreneurship to ensure grassroots development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Nature of Research: The nature of research is qualitative. Inductive approach is used to study the data collected through interviews. Narrative analysis is used.

Sampling Method: The study has been carried out mainly through Primary research in the Sualkuchi town of Assam. Survey has been conducted through questionnaire as well as personal interview. Purposive sampling was done. Field study was conducted in the month of January-February 2021. The nature and condition of work of the weavers was observed from close quarters. For this a focused group of 50 respondents were selected for personal interview. These 50 respondents include both contract and master weavers. Secondary data has been collected from available literature like media reports, government reports, research papers, books and internet sources, etc (Chand et al., 2012).

Literature Review: Peredo & Chrisman, 2006, rightly says community-based entrepreneurship involves a process through which new enterprises are created and operate in a community's existing social structure. It means it is possible to develop a community as an entrepreneurial community and help them work towards achievement of a common goal. Phukan.R,(2012) gave a comparative picture of total households involved in handloom in the northeastern states and that of the country as a whole. In his study, he found that the northeastern states of India together accounts for almost 60% of the total handloom households of the country. It is 16.83 lakh household in northeast alone in comparison to 27.83 lakh units in the country as a whole. Even among the northeastern states, Assam alone houses 12.41 lakh, that is, 44.6% handloom households which is indeed a great number.

However, he points out that in spite of this huge involvement in handloom, only 13.4% of the commercial looms of India are in Northeast which amounts to a meager 20% of the country's total handloom fabric output. To quote Phukan.R, "In 2009-10, a total of 1403484 weavers are found engaged in this profession in Assam of whom 147042 are full time weavers while 1256442 are part time weavers." So, the difference between the part time and fulltime weavers is also huge. This definitely implies that the earnings from the sector are inadequate to motivate the workers. Chakravartty. P & Basumatary.K,2018 says that Sualkuchi, situated on the bank of Brahmaputra, about 35 kms west from Guwahati city, also known as "Manchester of Assam" and was developed by Momoi Tamuli Barbaruah, a great administrator of the Ahom kingdom. A large number of master weavers from all over the region were shifted to this village during that period.

(Bajpeyi et al., 2010), rightly points out that handloom weaving is such an integral part of Assam that every women weaves for household as well as commercial purposes. According to (Bajpeyi et al.), Assam has around 13 lakh looms that engages roughly 23 lakh people, out of which 91 per cent are women. However, only 1.50 lakh looms are used commercially at present. It is obvious from this research that production potential is not optimally utilized. The paper further says that Assam is the only state where all the commercial varieties of silk are available. These include Mulberry silk, Muga, Eri and Tasar silk. From the review of literature it is evident that there is ample scope of developing the traditional handloom weaving as a commercial venture, however, it has not been used optimally as yet. In this paper an attempt is being made to study the problems of the weavers of Sualkuchi town and seek solutions these problems through development of community entrepreneurship (Bortamuly et al., 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Grassroots are the very essence of any society. Especially for a country like India which is so vast in size and population that it is the 7th largest country in the world and 2nd most populous country after China. With 1.2 billion people India also provides the largest marketplace to international brands and products. Our rural population stands at around 66% and urban population stands at 34% in 2019 (internet sources). With this huge number of rural population it is humanly not possible for any government to provide employment to all. Out of a total of 501 million workers of India, only 17.3 million are engaged in government jobs according internet sources. So it is well understood that it is a very less number. With a huge population of unskilled workers, how much employment can be provided by the government? Most of the government sector organizations are facing losses due to innumerable causes. We are not going into the details of this (Kaushik 2020).

Even in terms of multinational corporations, it is the manufacturing plants that can provide maximum

employment to the unskilled workforce. The white-collar jobs are limited to the urban areas. In the last 5 to 6 years, our country has made good progress in inviting multinational corporations to start manufacturing plants in India. Such an initiative would ensure higher employment opportunity for both skilled and unskilled workers. There is no denying the fact that for growth, every country needs Unicorns. But for overall balanced growth of the economy and society, developing the grassroots is a priority (Ana & James 2006).

This research paper explored various skills and indigenous entrepreneurial ventures that have been passed over from one generation to the other in our county since ancient times. These skills have become part of the DNA of the people of India. Such skills include handicrafts like brassware work, glassware work, bell metal work, carpet making, jewellery making, bamboo and jute furniture, kagzi work, silk and handloom work, etc, that used to be the mainstay of our people prior to the advent of British colonialists. Gradually, with time, India became the biggest market for the machine made goods from England and led to the natural death of the indigenous industries.

This paper focuses on the handloom sector, particularly that of the traditional silk workers of Assam. Even within Assam, this research pin points to one of the earliest handloom clusters of the region, that Sualkuchi town, just 35 kms from the main city Guwahati. Sualkuchi has stood the test of time from the 7th century CE to present day. For primary study, field trips to Sualkuchi was taken several times during the period January 2019 to December 2020. A focused group of 50 weavers were taken belonging to different age groups, gender, castes, educational levels and status of residence. 'We have learnt weaving from our parents and grandparents. From us our children learn. We don't go to any training institute, this is in our blood,' [translated from local language].

50 out of 50 weavers say that weaving is a tradition for them. It is a way of life that is being passed on from one generation to the other. All of them agree that they do not require any formal training in this profession. It is so true that in Sualkuchi in particular and in rural Assam in general, every household has a handloom in their front yard. It said that in ancient times, a bride needs to weave a piece of garment herself for her groom. It was an essential qualification for a girl of marriageable age. However, most of the handlooms are used for domestic use. For commercial purpose the weavers generally work under a master weaver who pays them commission on per piece basis. A master weaver is a person who owns more than 5 handlooms and takes weaving projects from retailers.

'We are poor and uneducated, so we do not have connections in the cities to get either projects or raw materials. We are only having a hand-to-mouth living with the commission we earn from master weavers. Normally for an ordinary mehkla-sador (2 piece

Assamese traditional wear) we earn anything between Rs1200 – Rs1500. Even this is not a regular income.' [translated from local language]. 30 out of 50 weavers agree to this statement and express their grief over lack of job security, unstable income and no medical insurance. These weavers also said that this is seasonal work. Only during the marriage season or during festivals people buy traditional wear. It is not guaranteed that the same weavers are going to get the assignment in the next season as well. Moreover, in case of any health issues, they are left without any help. So, it means, no . work no pay (Shaw 2019).

The remaining 20 weavers are master weavers who run shops in Sualkuchi town. They informed that middlemen take orders from retailers from Guwahati city (35 kms away) and give to these master weavers. They procure raw material and ask the contract weavers to complete the work for a certain amount of commission. 50 out of 50 weavers agree that the COVID 19 pandemic has ruined their business and they are almost devastated. There are no new assignments as people are not buying products. Their existing stock is getting destroyed by rats and no customers coming in. Personal visit of the researcher during the first wave of pandemic proved beyond doubt that almost all weavers and retailers are sitting idle with markets displaying deserted looks. Marriages are either postponed or conducted without any pomp and show. Moreover people are losing jobs and nobody wants to use their savings for buying handloom silk which are quite premium products.

'We have not seen any government initiative. We are not even aware of what government is giving us. We only get to hear in television news but nothing in our lives have changed. The government has built a training institute here but it is of no use to us,' [translated from local language]. 40 out of 50 weavers are unaware of government policies regarding promotion of handloom. Only few of the master weavers know about some of the government initiatives. However, 50 out of 50 respondents share the opinion that none of the government policies have touched their lives. They are on their own. All the respondents also agree that the Sualkuchi Institute of Fashion Technology is non existent for them. Only outside students come and study there. Local people is not at all benefitted by the institute. 'Most of us do not have bank accounts. We get paid by cash. We do have whatsapp and facebook but that it only to stay connected with friends and for entertainment,' [translated from local language].

45 out of 50 respondents share this opinion of not using banking services or social networking for business purpose. Everybody is using these sites for entertainment and personal chat only. However, 5 out of 50 respondents all of whom are master weavers use net banking and social media for contacting customers. This helps us to understand the level of backwardness and ignorance of the developments of the weavers. It also clarifies the fact that government policies are far away from the real beneficiaries. 'Our livelihood is very unstable. We

are surviving on very limited income. So our children do not want to pursue this tradition of weaving. Once they are educated they move out of Sualkuchi forever and settle down in bigger cities to earn money. Even we do not want them to stay here and struggle,' [translated from local language]. 48 out of 50 respondents are of the opinion that the young generation is looking for greener pastures in bigger cities. It is a fact that under the present state of affairs, there is no point in people continuing with the tradition of weaving and struggle for a good living. People want a sustainable income, growth and development in life. So it is quite justified.

FINDINGS/CONCLUSION

The following are the findings of this research:

- The weavers are quite well skilled and traditionally trained. They are capable of creating attractive products.
- They do not have knowledge of the market trends. They are simply listening to middlemen.
- Only master weavers have knowledge of costing, rest are just working as workers.
- Most of them need knowledge of banking and usage of social networking for business purpose.
- Young generation is moving out for a better life leading to dearth of labour force in handloom sector and natural dying away of the industry.

So, it can be concluded that a well planned entrepreneurial initiative can offer sustainable living to These unorganised workforce of our country.

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