

## CHAPTER – V

### HISTORY, ANTIQUITY AND FOLKLORE

#### 5.1 Prologue

By the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D Indian textiles was favoured by the Persians and the Romans for its brilliant colours. Cotton was called *carbasina* by the Romans which is derived from the Sanskrit word *karpasa*. Indian muslins were fashionable in Rome and were known by the names *nebula* and *venti* which meant “woven winds”. Over one thousand coins of the Emperor Tiberius were unearthed at sites in South India. The Roman historian Pliny insisted that a ban be imposed on the import of textiles from India since it was emptying the state coffers of the time.

The quality of Indian dyes is acknowledged in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Latin translation of the Bible by St. Jerome. Here, wisdom is said to be more enduring than the dyed colours of India”. (*Purbajyoti*, pp.18)

The Arabs also traded Indian textiles. They spread the cotton plant to the Old world and along the same trade route Islamic religion and philosophy. But with the advent of the British and the East India Company in the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Indian textiles and the handloom weavers were almost wiped out of scene in a gradual way. The ‘light weight’ colourful and washable cotton fabric changed the concept of fashion in Europe and dominated the British trade. Traditional Indian patterns and motifs were adopted for the European tastes which were designed by the Dutch and the British artisans. The English patrons demanded repetitive designs rather than any creative endeavour. Increasingly these hybrid designs were later reinterpreted and executed by the calico artisans in India. The flow of calico to Europe undermined the wool and silk industry of the continent and the manufacturers forced a ban on the import of Indian cottons and later export duties were levied on Indian textiles British colonial policies dictated by the law that all the cotton grown in India be exported to Britain at very low prices

while British mill made cloth flooded the Indian markets forcing the locals to buy. This cotton revolution of England and the industrial revolution with the discovery of the spinning jenny and the power loom, the reverse flow of cotton, the machine-made copies all pushed the Indian weaver into socio-economic deprivation. The hand-spun and hand woven textiles were lost and along with it, a whole reservoir of precious traditional and indigenous textile knowledge also disappeared.

It was efforts of Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian freedom movement that revived, reinvented and resuscitated the handloom industry of the country and the creative spirit of the weavers. He strived to make the act of spinning and weaving a political strength. The *charkha* (spinning wheel) became a symbol of independence and self reliance.

## **5.2 History of weaving in Assam**

Each state and region of India has its own indigenous weavers and designs based on the geographical culture, religious and social needs of the area besides historical influences, trading requirements court and temple patronage. Weaving is an ancient craft practiced in the North Eastern Part of India and especially the state of Assam which is world famed for its silks and silk weaving. The sophisticated methods that it has developed through the different stages of processing yarns and weaving have elevated the process to an art form. The craft has been practiced since time immemorial. Unlike in other parts of the country, the art of weaving is the exclusive monopoly of the womenfolk in the North-Eastern part of the country irrespective of any caste or community. Textile production is carried on by every woman and almost every household in the rural area of the region hums with the sound of the loom. Everywoman is expected to learn the craft, particularly in the rural areas, among both the tribal and non tribal communities. Her expertise over the loom marks her eligibility for marriage.

This age old tradition which has been handed down from generation to generation plays a significant role in the socio-cultural life of the indigenous

population particularly in the rural areas. The handloom products of Assam have a distinctive identity in its variety, texture, motif, design, colour and workmanship. Like the culture of the region, the textile tradition of Assam is also a result of the inter-mingling of elements from various communities with different racial stocks.

Covering a total geographical area of 78438 sq.km the state of Assam have two district natural regions- the plain areas on the river Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys and the hill regions. The plains area comprises twenty-five districts while the hill area comprises two autonomous districts- the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills Districts. The state has a population of 3,12,0553 persons ( 2011census) out of which 6.85% falls under the category of Scheduled Caste and 12.41% under the scheduled Tribe category.

The above mentioned river basins of the state experienced separate historical developments and remained susceptible to frequent waves of migration and invasions from time to time.

Accessibility through the mountain passes located in the eastern adjoining territories and the continuous stretch of flat lands. Permitted settlement and movement across the valley. The Brahmaputra Valley displayed prominent Southeast Asian influences while the Barak Valley, located in the Southern proximity of the Indo-Gangetic plains in the east, indicated profound deltaic influences. These established broad regional trends and laid the foundation of the socio-cultural and political characteristics of the societies of the area. All these societies were characterised by several layers of identity with varied cultural backgrounds. The coming together of these people, each with their individual socio-cultural attributes brought about the fusion of the same which laid the basis of a multi-layered and multifaceted society of this region.

The general communities includes the general non-tribal Assamese, Ahoms, Chutia, Matak, Marans, Tea Communities etc. Each community has its own distinct cultural heritage-be it arts, craft, performances like dance and music, dialect, food habits, rituals and customs, and textiles and customs.

### 5.3 The History of Textile in Assam

Historical records provide ample evidence of the glorious textile tradition of Assam. It is referred to in the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. The first direct mention of the textile tradition of Assam appears in the *Harshacharita* of Banbhata (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D). Here it is mentioned that Harshabardhana the king of Kanauj received silken gifts from the King of ancient Assam, Bhaskarvarman (594-650A.D). Hiuen Sang, the Chinese traveller of 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D also left invaluable records about the textiles of Assam. The chronicles of the Ahom period like the Tripura *Buranji* (History) also provides information about the variety of the textiles produced and used in that period. During this period the textile industry of Assam excelled under the patronage of the Ahom kings. The royal harem housed the looms which were wrought by the female attendants. Many Ahom consorts like Queen Sarveswari, wife of King Siva Singha personally supervised the activities of the loom and training of young girls. The government appointed personnel to supply raw materials for these looms. Further, higher rank officers like the Raidangia Phukan and Raidangia Baruah were appointed to supervise the work of the people of supplying yarns and other raw materials to the royal looms. The skilful weavers were expected to supply the royal wardrobe with textile products.

King Suteupha ( 1268-1281 A.D.) engaged about a thousand Chutias and Kacharies to rear worms for silks like *muga*, *pat* and *megankari*. During the reign of the Ahom King Suhungmung ( 1497-1539 A.D), Some Muslim elements like the gold and silver threads and embroidery entered the textile repertoire of Assam. Among the captured Muslims during his reign, there were many artists who excelled in the art of *Gunakara* and *Chola-sia* or the making of gold and silver threads. And it was during the reign of kind Jayadhaja Singha ( 1648-1663 A.D), Muslim embroidery experts were brought from Northern India and the craft was handed down to many Assamese artisans. The Ahom monarch King Pratap Singha (1603-1641 A.D), took great interest and steps to uplift the textiles industry to great heights. During this period, Momai Tamuli Barbauah, a minister to the king ordered that every women in Assam was to spin yarns during the day

and in the following morning, the *Gauburah* or village headman would come to inspect at every household. Each and every housed hold had to supply 250 grams of spun silk to the king. This boosted the overall production of textiles in the country. King Pratap Singha also settled many weavers at Sualkuchi and till date, this place is one of the most important weaving centres in the state. During the reign of Rudra Singha ( 1696-1716 A.D) the royal attire for men included the *churia* ( a king of Dhati), *chola* (shirt), *Jama/chapkan chola* ( Frock-coat) *Paguri* (Turban), *Buku chola* ( Tunic),etc while that of the women included the *Mekhela* (lower garment) and *Riha* ( upper garment). It was during his reign that many Mughal elements of textile weaving and costumes entered the repertoire of Ahom textiles. It is believed that it was during his reign that exquisite brocade work was executed by either bringing in the weavers or the products from Varanasi or Gujarat though there are no written account of this. These brocades are known as *kinkhabs* which engaged the interweaving of coloured silk and gold threads to form the most attractive floral designs. The *kinkhabs* were without doubt, the most gorgeous and fascinating of silken fabrics of India.(*Purbajyoti* pp24)

Under the royal patronage of the Ahom regime, the textile craft reached its zenith and the textile products of Assam were either gifted or traded to Bengal and the rest of India. In his monograph on the cotton fabrics of Assam, H.F Samman wrote, “The Ahom Rajas kept skilled weavers to supply the royal wardope with cloths, and it is related how in the reign of Purander Rajah ( 1818-1819 A.D.), one Madhuram Tanti excelled all the other weavers of the day and was, for his services to the royal family, granted land free by the king.” (*Purbajyoti* PP.24) A tradition of inscribed textiles with figural designs flourished in the *Vaishnavite* institution of Assam. Srimanta Sankardeva, as early as in the 16<sup>th</sup> century initiated the use of figured silk cloth as alter covers of which the *Vrindavani vastra* is one of these classic examples. It is mentioned in the *Gurucharita* of Ramcharan Thakur that during the reign of the Koch King Naranarayana, the great spiritual leader, Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Shri Madhabdeva move the *Vrindavani Vastra* which was approximately 60 metres long and 30 metres broad. Here, scenes from the life of Lord Krishna

starting from his birth to the killing of Kansa are depicted through exquisite weaving. During the life time of Sankardeva, tapestry weaving developed under his direct supervision. He took up the project of tapestry weaving for which he engaged the weavers of Tantikuchi (present Barpeta) under the master weaver Gopal Atta, for a commission for Prince Chilarai of Koch Behar. From the descriptions it is found that the tapestry took about a year to be completed. Since the scroll depicted scenes from *Krishna Leela*, it was known as the *Vrindavani vastra* after the childhood home of Krishna. But unfortunately this type of textiles now exist only outside of Assam like in the British Museum, London and AEDTA collection, Paris. (*Purbajyoti Sangrahalaya* PP.25) The textiles associated with the *vaishnava* culture of Assam are mostly woven in silk and are characterised by designs more often associated with manuscript painting than textile decoration. The designs often depict scenes from the life of Krishna through scenes from the Ramayana and other incarnation of Vishnu like *Matsya* (the fish), *Kurma* (the tortoise), *Narasimha* (the man-lion) are not uncommon. Apart from this, the repertoire of the textile with religious connotation includes the *thapona* or *gosain kapur* (alter cover) and the *sarai dhaka* (cover of the traditional tray for the offering to the God). These are often richly adorned with floral and geometric designs and sometimes verses from the religious texts like the *Namghosa* and *kirtana* are woven on the cloth. With the advent of the British in Assam in 1826 A.D. the indigenous textile tradition faced keen competition from the mill made products. Even though the textile craft has lost its past glory and degenerated, the handloom industry of Assam could not be completely obliterated as the textiles are literally woven into the social fabric of Assam. Till date, both the tribal and non-tribal women of the rural areas are strongly attached to their looms and produce a variety of products for their costumes as well other religious and secular use. In the urban areas, traditional and the contemporary co-exist and complement each other. No matter to what extent the Urban people have adapted to western and other costumes for practical reasons, still drapes their traditional attire in festive and ceremonial occasions. Apart from the written history, the oral narratives in the form of folk songs and tales speak volumes of the weaving craft of Assam and the

North-east. References of the textiles and weaving are found in the innumerable *Bihu* songs of Assam.

An Assamese proverb defines a fine cloth produced in ancient Assam as one which could be hidden within the closed fist and which could be dried even in the shade. There are tales of how the Assamese warriors moved to the battlefield wearing their *kavach-kapur* or *talisman* cloth which are supposed to be ginned, pressed into rollers, spun into thread, woven into cloth within the night by the women. The *Aronai* of the Bodos also had the same connotation and significance and used to be a type of talisman cloth. The Singphos attribute the invention of weaving to the spider and its web. The Kaman Mishmis narrates how the first weavers, who were taught the art by the Gods, learnt their designs by watching the waves and the ripples of water. The silks produced in Assam are of two varieties. Mulberry silk includes *eri* and *muga*. *Paat* is a mulberry silk. It is produced from two types of worms-*Bar polu* (*Bombyx textor*) and *soru palu* (*Bombyx croesi*). Both are reared inside and are fed on the leaves of mulberry (*morus indica*). Assam leads in non-mulberry silks which includes *endi/eri* and *muga*. Sericulture seems an ancient vocation practiced by a large number of cultivators during off-season.

*Endi* derives its name from the castor leaves (*ricinus communis*) on which the worm feeds itself. This silk has a yellowish tinge, is of both rough as well as smooth variety. It is used in the winters for warmth.

#### **5.4 Handloom weaving during Ahom rule**

Like the nobilities in Japan, the Ahom kings in Assam took personal care and interest in the silk industry, and due to the Royal patronage this industry reached get another stage of advancement. The fabrics prepared out of *Muga*, *Eri* and *Pat* (mulberry silk) have become a national dress of the Assamese and have formed a common costume of the women of the Brahmaputra valley. The Sibsagar district which was the capital of Ahom kings became the home of all varieties of silk.

The cultural life in Assam during the reign of Ahoms was also developed. The Ahom rulers had even taken the initiative to develop different cottage industries within the territory and for this purpose certain persons who were expert in their own field were brought by the rulers and managed their settlement within the state in order to boost up the rural economy. In this connection mention may be made that during the reign of Swargadeo Rudra Singha (1696-1714), eight Muslim families expert in their own branches of profession, were brought and encouraged to be settled under the Royal supervision. (Das, 1986, pp.31)

During the reign of Rudra Singha when necessary patronage was founded by the state, a critical situation also developed in regard to dress of the high dignitaries. But, we must also admit the fact that, there was an example of patriotism and national feelings among the high public officials in the court premises during the reign of Rudra Singha. The king who presented to his ministers a set of garments of the Mughal fashion consisting of clocks head dresses and shoes was embarrassed by the attitude of three '*Dangarias*' (Principal Ministers), who in fact did not accept them and ultimately returned them in the court premises by saying who should we wear these presents imitating the fashions of foreigners in supersession of our own indigenous customs (Das, 1986, pp.81). But it is heartening to note that those dresses were mainly confined amongst the high dignitaries in the court of the kings and it could not be popular amongst the common men during that period.

The versatile genius in the Assamese women is well represented through preparation of a special type of cloth with their lovely hands and indomitable aspiration. The special cloth mentioned above which were manufactured during the Ahom rule were known as '*kavash kapor*' (war cloth) in respect of which many folk songs were there in vogue. There has been legend that, anybody going for a war has in case used this type of cloth would not lose the battle. The manner of preparing war cloth has been as follows –

“at midnight the cotton is ginned pressed into rollers, spun into thread, manufactured into cloth and worn by the warriors in the morning.”



The warriors used to hold the wearing of this type of cloth as a good symbol and fortune. History relates that the great Ahom general phrasengmung Borgohain, husband of Mula Gabharu, Parishad in the battle field as he went there without being equipped with this protective garment. It is natural that the presence of this cloth in the person of the soldiers, a hardwork of their wives and sisters, sharpened the blades in their hands and served as the voice of duly heard amidst the crack drums and the splintering of spear-shafts. All these well demonstrate the efficiency of Assamese women in weaving practices during Ahom rule. (Mazumder, Labanya, 2013, pp. 27-28)

The Ahom rulers has also taken the measures to settle up systematically 'certain professional community and placed them under different 'khels' and 'castes' in the province especially during the reign of king Pratap Singha. Accordingly in the districts of Kamrupa also the weavers from Southern and other parts were organized and settled at Sualkuchi. Probably this may be one of the factors that may also be attributed to the present position that is being occupied by Sualkuchi being well represented as an important centre in the silk map of Assam in particular and India in general. Even now also one hears the sound of drum-wrapping and handloom weaving in every household of the village where large number of professional weavers are concentrated and can be compared only with a very few silk weaving centres in India.

The rulers of this part of the country were also concerned in the education of women for whom they have taken certain steps to develop the inherent caliber and traditional quality and skills of the women. The education of women has been imparted in a limited way. Bhuyan writes that, "Queen Sarveswari Devi, consort of king Siva Singha (1739-44 AD) admitted girls of the neighbourhood within the palace enclosures and taught them to spin. As a culmination of her efforts for the promotion of artistic weaving in Assam, Queen Sarbeswari Devi collected patterns and specimens of brocades and flower-designs for borders in vogue in different parts of India for reproduction by Assamese weavers". This was definitely a rare example shown by a Queen in the middle part of eighteenth century in India, which only proves the interest and love of the kingdom to give a

fillip to the local cottage and household industry as well as promote the culture of the reign. (Baishya, Prabin, 1989, pp.133)

The pioneering efforts of the Ahom kings were mainly contributing towards the development of 'King-khap', 'Mejankari' and silk and *muga* industry in Assam. Even the princesses and wives of the other high dignitaries were proved to be expert in the art and practices of manufacture of clothes of various designs. (Kalita, Mrinal Chandra, 2009 Souvenir)

N.C. Das expressed his presumption that, the use of hand woven dress by the Assamese men-women was initiated during the Ahom period. Only the Assamese women in India used three garments, namely, *riha*, *mekhela* and *chadar*.

Already, mention have made to the use of various types of king-khap, Mejankari and other embroidered cloths by the Ahom Swargadeo and other high dignitaries of that period. But it is also correct to note here that some changes had been noticed in case of practice of using dresses and other garments which mainly influenced during the Mughal period. The dresses, namely, '*Jama*', '*Pagaijar*' and '*Fatuai*' were also used by the kings and other dignitaries of the court. It can undoubtedly said that the Ahom rulers and their subject contributed a lot towards the development of textile industry and nature of using different dresses on different occasions. It can also be asserted that due to the prevalence of certain rules, regulations and customs as regards the use and practices of wearing clothes for royal palace, development was noticed for various types of dresses and their method of use.

In certain cases where it becomes necessary to develop certain trades and also for overall development of the state, the Ahom rulers permitted the men from outside the state to practice their occupation and trades. Bhuyan wrote that 'the Ahom rulers encouraged men from India to come and settle in Assam provided their introduction was of advantage to the country'. Artisans, craftsmen, weavers, clerks, accountants, scholars and saints, both Hindu and Muslim were freely

admitted and occasionally brought by special arrangement with the rulers of Hindustan as there was an inadequacy of such men in Assam. (Das, 1986, pp.34)

In Assam, due to the efforts taken by the Ahom rulers the industry and crafts developed to a great extent.

The industry lost much of its eminence through the ages. Gradually, it was on declining trend especially during the British regime. Another factor which had contributed for its decline was that in most of the noted centres, the industry flourished under court patronage. When the court patronage declined, the industry received a great set-back. The Britishers instead of patronising the weavers and their craft encouraged the process of its gradual decline. There was no endeavour to expand the raw material base and encourage the artisans to retain their traditional art and culture for the production of varieties of loom-made clothes. Instead more and more mill-made clothes were allowed to be imported. Attracted by the sophistication and cheapness of the mill-made fabrics, people gradually developed to the use of fancy imported clothes. This gradual process of decadence of the rich heritage of weaving and thus the traditional cottage industry was threatened with extinction.

But it is heartening to note that the people of Assam got the opportunity to join with other fellow-men of India in the struggle for freedom and '*Swadeshi*' movement at the call of Mahatma Gandhi. Because of the independent mentality of the people the artisans also made an effort to revive their lost art of spinning and weaving on a large scale. The people of Assam also joined the "All India spinners Association" during 1934 which can be termed as a renaissance for the revival of this cottage industry of India.

Somehow the industry in Assam has also survived the critical period. Since then the handloom industry that has carried with it a chequered history of long tradition and past glory has continued to occupy an important place in the socio-economic life of the people of Assam.

## **5.5 Tribal Art and its contribution to Handloom weaving**

Prior to bifurcation of the different status of the North-eastern region reference to Assam handloom automatically covers handloom weaving by tribals and non-tribals including the hills and plain tribes. In fact, in the enrichment of the traditional art of handloom weaving, tribals can claim as much credit as the non-tribals. As Choudhury rightly observes: “whether in the art of weaving or in the rearing of silk worms and the manufactures of dyed clothes, the tribes like the Khasis, Nagas, Manipuris and the Bodos in general had a great deal to contribute towards the development of handloom weaving. (Das, 1986, pp.23) If it has taken into consideration the free mingling of the people of the hills and the plains in the past and the cultural exchange between them, then it is likely that there might have been substantial influence of the method and art of tribal weaving on the non-tribal. This is further confirmed from the richness and variety of tribal designs and motifs used by the tribals in the valley. In this context reference may be made to the observation of Duncan, who said, Nayas have been expert dyers and produced extremely brilliant colours. As to the skill and artistic designs of the Manipurians, Duncan went on to observe that they may have been better in this respect than any people of Eastern India. While elaborating on the tribal influence on the cultural life of the Assamese people, Bhattacharya was of the view that the Mongoloids and Kirats exercised considerable influence on the habits and customs of the Aryans, particularly in the weaving of pat silk clothes (Das 1986, pp.24). The richness of colour in the tribal dress undoubtedly points to the facts that they are expert dyers. The tribal designs of the region of especially the Naga and Lushai (Mizo) handwoven fabrics are universally admired even today. In the plains as well as in the hills the Abors and Mishimis weave clothes which are of attractive designs for their shawls, blouses skirts etc. The Miris, Akas, Dafalas, Apatanis, Kacharis, Mikirs, Lalungs are various other tribes living in this region and have their own traditions and culture in the matter of production of fine good textured textiles with simple geometrical, floral designs and intricate patterns using some natural dyes in the yarn. The artistic mind of the tribes can be seen if one observes at the placement of right colour combination in designs. In the field

of textiles the contribution of Manipuris in the North Eastern Region is great. Every Manipuri girl like other Assamese girls knows weaving with the inevitable pattern of refreshing colour combination. Of the various types of Manipuri clothes, the Lyshemphi, a kind of thick cloth made of cotton silvers, bed covers and *sarees*, etc., are famous for their beauty and utility. Manipur weavers living in certain parts of Assam still maintain their distinctive ability and quality in the matter of production of 'Lysheonphi' which has got a very good demand in an outside the state. Now also one can see the women of Dimacha Kachari, Kuki and Zami Naga living in N.C. Hills and Karbi Anglong district of Assam are engaged in weaving in their traditional designs.

Handloom weaving as a folk art in Assam, forms an integral part of the cultural heritage of different ethnic groups having diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. The indigenous traditional handloom fabrics of Assam not only unfold the talent of Assamese weavers; but also an indispensable aspect of the socio-economic life of the village communities. In this section, based largely on secondary sources of information, an attempt is made to provide the ethnic cultural profiles of various communities of Assam.

### **The Bodo Kacharis**

The bodo kacharis are believed to be the original inhabitants of Assam. They ruled in the north eastern region of India since the days of Ramayana and developed a distinctive civilization which thrived till the later part of eighteenth century (Choudhury M.M. 1980, p.17). The Bodo Kacharies migrated to the Southern submontance region of the Himalayas. Gradually, they spread over a considerable portion of the Brahmaputra valley to Nilachal hill near Guwahati. From Nilachal they migrated to the south-east and established a kingdom on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra with its capital Dimapur.

The Kacharis called themselves Bodos or Bodo-fisa (sons of Bodos) in the Brahmaputra valley and Dimasa or Dim-fisa (sons of the great river) in the North Cachar Hills. About the origin of the terms "Bodo" and "Kachari", it is said that a

sizeable branch of the race lost itself for centuries in the land locked areas of Tibet. In earlier times it was known as Bodo and hence the name Bodo or Boro. Bodo or Boro is believed to stand for a group of people speaking the Bodo or Boro language, of which Kachari is the dominant section.

At present the Bodo kacharis, with their traditional language and culture, can be seen in particular tracts mainly in the districts of Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Kamrup, Nalbari, Baksa a portion of Darrang and in the two hill districts of Assam. Agriculture is the mainstay of the village economy of Bodo kacharies and paddy is the chief crops that is cultivated. According to some scholars, the Bodo kacharies were the first agricultural nomads to have entered Assam. They were also the first to introduce silk culture in this region which is now reckoned as the pride of Assam (Choudhury 1980:20)

The Bodo folksong stated that the Bodo girl can weave different natural picture flying butterfly on flower flying bird under the sky. The spinning and weaving are also age old tradition of Bodo-kachari tribes.

The Boro people use different traditional costumes such as *Dokhna*, *Aronai*, *Gangrachi*, *Bodo swal*, *Fali* etc.

### **The Rabhas**

The Rabhas, one of the scheduled tribes of Assam plains, are distributed in Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta, Goalpara, Darrang and Sonitpur districts of Assam. A section of Rabhas also inhabits the northern slopes of the Garo Hills (in Meghalaya), bordering Goalpara. There are varied opinions regarding the origin of the Rabhas. According to some scholars Rabhas form a distinct tribe, while others say that the Rabhas are an off-shoot of the Kachari tribe. The Rabhas comprise a number of socio-cultural sub-groups, viz, *Rangdani*, *Moitori*, *Pati*, *Dahari*, *Bitlia*, *Totala*, etc. The Rabhas speak a language slightly different from that of the Kacharis, though both belong to the same branch of Tibeto Burman. At present, the Rabha language is spoken by Rangdani and Maitori sub-groups of the tribe. These two sub-groups, which inhabit the region of Goalpara and northern slopes

of the Garo Hills, retained much of their traditional culture. The Rabhas are agriculturists with paddy being the chief crop. The ideological and behavioural conceptions, which they have developed since time immemorial under the influence of a typical ecology, have still retained their grip on the people. This is generally found to be true not just among the Rabhas but, among all the plains tribes of Assam. (Choudhury M.M. 1980, p.65)

The Rabhas also cremate their dead. They observe a yearly festival for the dead kin of the clan which is known as *Farkhanthi*. Their biggest festival of the year is *Baikhu*, which appears to be a festival. Kingfisher is their sacred bird, and they respect it almost like a totem. They use a replioca of the bird as a mascot during the performance of traditional religious dances. Rabha women are expert both in spinning and weaving. Usually they weave clothes in throw-shuttle loom but now they are also using fly-shuttle looms. It appears that weaving is not only a secondary source of livelihood to a Rabha women but a part and parcel of her material culture. 'Bahurangi' songs of the Rabha tribe contain sufficient reference of the Rabha women that they are expert in spinning and weaving of magical apparels with floral designs. In their own technology these designs are known as 'Mokdamma Ful'. The eight star motifs, floral and geo-ornamental forms besides long and broad stripes are commonly made. Sometimes on the same piece of costumes all above motifs are woven with blending and matching of colours on a single colour ground (Ancient Assamese costumes and designs by HRD Directorate of Handlooms and Textiles, Assam, p.31)

The Rabha people use different traditional costumes. Such as –

*Ruphan, Kambang, Pazal, chola, Angsa, Khadbong, Riphon Dukhuri, Riphon Sakkai and Khore* etc. A majority of the Rabhas have adopted Hinduism. Among others also, the traditional religion has incorporated elements of Hinduism.

## The Deories

While the Bodo-Kachari and the Rabhas are typical tribes of Lower Assam plains, the Deories are tribal people of Upper Assam plains region. The Deories are recognized as one of the important schedule tribes of Assam. The term 'Deori' is said to be derived from the word 'Deva' which means God. Hence, the people conducting religious performance in the temples or elsewhere on different occasions are called Deori (Choudhuri M.M. 1980:94).

At present the Deoris are living mainly in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur. Deori villages are generally found in the river in areas having fertile arable land. The houses are built on bamboo platforms, raised about 5 to 6 feet above the ground on wooden posts and always facing towards the east. It is interesting to note that while the Kacharis and the Rabhas live in houses with earthen plinth like those of other Assamese peasantry, the Deoris though plains inhabitants still prefer to live in platform houses. Agriculture is the main economy of the people and paddy is the chief crop cultivated. The Deoris are bilingual and speak both Assamese and their own dialect. Deori is still the language used at home. They attach much importance and value to their religion. The Deoris usually cremate their dead.

The Deoris folksong state the use of different textile design of both plain and hill people like tiger within flower, cock under the earth, yellow bird, tree-creeper, flower leaf, triangle, square, various kind of bird, butterfly, peacock in the position of spread the tail and hold it erect. The knowledge of weaving is considered in Deori society as a qualification for bride and the women also feel ashamed of if they do not know the art of weaving. The Deori people use different traditional costumes, such as – *Egu, Riha, Luguru chiba Baiga, Jakachiba, Gatigi, Eku, Icha, Muka* or *Gujima* etc. The Bohag Bihu and Magh Bihu observed in the month of Bohag (April-May) and Magh (January-February), respectively, are their main festivals. These are closely connected with the religious and agricultural life of the Deoris.



## **The Mishings**

The Mishing officially recorded as 'Miri' is one of the major groups of plains tribes of Assam. Etymology of the term 'Miri' is debatable which now appears derogatory to the people (Gait Edward 1926 p.373) noted that 'Miri' means 'go between' or middle man. It is said that they were really go between in the matter of trade between the Government of Ahoms and the hill men. The Mishing was originally a hill tribe and inhabitant of the sub-Himalayan region of north east India. They migrated down to the Brahmaputra valley through different routes perhaps in the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD (Pegu Manumati 1981, p.3). Gradually, they had to adopt themselves to the new environment in the valley and thus, grew up a new social order in the areas north of the river Brahmaputra in Upper Assam. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family of the great Mongoloid race and have Mongoloid features.

The present habitat of the Mishings is on the strips of alluvial land along the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra from the large island Majuli to the river Dehong, the northern branch of the Brahmaputra. Mishing villages have spread over wide areas of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts and even small parts of plains portion of Arunachal Pradesh. The Mishings generally build their houses by the bank of a river, perpendicular to the mainstream. Like the Deories, the Mishings also build the houses on bamboo platform raised about 5 to 6 feet above the ground supported by rows of wooden posts. The Mishings are essentially agriculturists. They concentrate their efforts in the paddy cultivation, which occupies a very significant place in their socio-cultural life. In earlier days a plot of land was especially kept for cotton farming. The indigenous cotton was much in demand for use in weaving of Miri jim (called gadoo by the Mishings), a special type of cotton rug. By faith the Mising people were originally worshipper of '*Donyi-Polo*' (Sun-Moon) cult practiced in the Adi hills (Lower and Upper Siang districts) of Arunachal Pradesh but their thoughts and beliefs have been largely influenced by the Hinduism. (Labanya Mazumder 2013, p.10) The Vaishnavite Satras near the Mishing villages in Majuli also have great influence in their socio-cultural life. 'Ali-aye-ligang' and 'pro-ray' are the

most important social festivals celebrated by the Mishings. Ali-aye-ligang is celebrated invariably in spring and generally on the first Wednesday of the month of fagun (February-March). It is considered to be a festival of rich cultural significance. It is a festival of praying, dancing and drinking when the ceremonial sowing of a handful of Ahu paddy seeds in the earth is performed. The closing of harvest is marked by another celebration called Po-rag, observed either in autumn or spring or also after an interval of two to five years, because of expensive and elaborate arrangements.

Hereditarily, the Mishing women earned the knowledge of weaving. So their relation with loom like a soul. The young girls are mainly engaged in weaving and they store their self-woven colourful cloth for future use. They use loin or shuttle looms for production of cloth. The mishing also cultivate cotton, rear eri and silk caterpillar. They totally stop their weaving work on the day when any of the family members or neighborer of the village incidentally died. If the head of the family goes to any religious work, then women stop their weaving activities on that day. The traditional costumes used by Mishings are – *Gero*, *Ege*, *Ribi-gacheng*, *Galuk* or *Mibugaluk*, *Miri Mekhela-chaddar*, *Ribi Maflar* etc.

The popular non wearing item of Mishing is Mirijim. It is a cotton rug with furry surface use in winter season. It is prepared by thick cotton yarn use in wrap and cords of cotton silvers in the weft after 3 to 4 ground picks. It is a belief in the society that every Mishing mother should be able to provide a Miri-jim or Gadoo to the children when they get married. The fabrics woven in narrow width and two such pieces are stitched together to bring the size 2.75 meters in length and 1.20 to 1.80 meters in breadth. The weaving of Mirijim is one of the laborious and time consuming processes.

### **The Phakeals**

The Tai-phakes of Upper Assam, also known as Phakials, are one of the ethnic groups of the Tai-family. The Tai is a general name denoting a great branch of the Mongoloid population of Asia. (Barua, B.K. 1969, p.8) The river

Burhidihing, the banks of which are the abode of the Tai-phakes, originates in the patkai Hills. After leaving the hills it flows along the southern border of Dibrugarh district and passes through Margerita, Jaipur, Naharkatia and Khowang. Accordingly, on reaching Assam, the phakes started living on the banks of the river Burhidihing (Rajkumar 1955:26-27). Agriculture is the major occupation of the Tai-phake people and they concentrate all their attention upon this economic activity. The phakes are bilingual. Amongst them they speak the Tai-language, but they use Assamese language with Assamese people among whom their villages are located. The Tai-phakes although a lesser known Buddhist population with its microcosmic existence, is still preserving the traditional traits of their socio-cultural life to a considerable extent (Sharma Thakur G.C., 1982, p. 237)

They practise their own religion which is Buddhism. Each Tai-phake village has a Buddha Vihar (temple) constructed in a central place. All the religious beliefs and practices of phakes centre round the Buddha Vihar. Poi Chang Ken i.e. festival of bathing the images of Lord Buddha and poi-kitting, the festival of offering a symbolic dress to the image of Lord Buddha are the major festivals of Tai-phakes. Death is considered as a natural phenomenon among phakes. In disposing the dead bodies, cremation is the rule for natural deaths in the case of abnormal deaths, burial is prescribed. (Labanya Mazumder 2013, p.11)

They love contrasting colours. Florals are not so common, but checks and stripes are the most conspicuous designs. Colour-contrasts on their woven clothes make a deep impact and sometimes evoke memories of their Burmese connections besides their common historic association with the Mongoloid races.

The costumes of Tai-Phake are not decorated. They practice indigenous dyes and weaving cloth to fulfill their domestic requirement.

The Phakeals use different traditional costumes such as – *chin*, *Fa-nungi*, *Nangwat*, *pha Fek Mai* and *Thung*.

## **The Karbis**

The Karbis are one of the distinctive Tibeto-Burman tribal groups of Assam and recognized as a scheduled hill tribe. They are said to be one of the few most ancient races of Assam. Karbies call themselves Arleng, which mean man. At one time, all the hilly areas from east of Guwahati to Bokakhat (in Golaghat district) were habitats of the Karbis. According to (Gohain, Arunima 1984, pp.1-2) the karbis living in the district of Karbi Anglong are decidedly the most colourful of the tribes. Moreover, the karbi people living in the Hamren subdivision of Karbi Anglong district still retain the old traditions and culture of the karbi people.

The karbis, especially the hill karbis, are generally agriculturists by profession. Though at present a few of them are being absorbed in other occupations the people stick to agriculture as the main source of livelihood. Generally the Karbi villages consist of a number of households under a village headman and very often the name of the village is given after the name of a headman. Basically the Karbis belong to Mongoloid group, while linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group (Bordoloi B.N. 1982; Preface). The original religion of the karbis have many similarities with Hinduism, Hemphu means God of the house, is the supreme God who is supposed to be the owner of the karbi people. They cremate their dead. After death, the body is bathed and dressed in new clothes. Chojun puja or swarak puja, Rongker and Sock-eroi are observed as their annual festivals, out of which the Rongker, meaning worship, is considered as the annual festival of the village. It is celebrated generally at the beginning of cultivation.

The high land karbis practice Jhum cultivation and plain Karbi are done cloth Jhum and wet cultivation. In Karbi society without having knowledge of spinning and weaving is unthinkable. Most of the clothes for domestic use are produced in their family looms, i.e. throw shuttle and loin loom. The rearing spinning, reeling and weaving of *endi* cloth are a habitual practice in the karbi village. Besides warped, eight star motifs, diamond and other geometric designs

are very much common in their handloom products for day-to-day use and dresses wear on special festival occasions. The traditional costumes of karbi people are – *Pini, Pekok, Pe-cheleng, Wankaak, Fali* etc.

### **The Ahoms**

The Ahoms, an offshoot of the Tai or shan race of the Mongoloid group came to Assam in the early part of the thirteenth century. The Ahoms are the only Mongoloid race, whose arrival in Assam is historically recorded. From the time of their coming in 1228 AD, a systematic history of Assam is also found. They recorded their own activities from the beginning called buranjis (Gait Edward 1926, p.71). The Ahoms established their settlement first in the valley of Namrup River, which at the later stage they developed into a kingdom. In the course of time, they became very powerful and the whole of present day Assam came gradually under the way of Ahom Rulers. Since they believed that they had no equals, they called themselves ‘Asam’ (peerless), from which are derived the words Ahom and Assam (Barua, B.K. 1969, p.4)

Besides the historical facts about the origin of Ahoms and their arrival into Assam, like all ancient people, the Ahoms too have their own legends about their origin. These legends described them as descendants of the Lord of heaven, whom the Hindus call Indra and the Deodhs designate as Lengdon. (Labanya Mazumder, 2013, p.12)

During their reign, the Ahoms brought into existence a stabilized policy, a balanced society, a liberalized economy and an efflorescent cultural life in Assam (Basu N.K. 1970, p.342). Specially, Rudra Singha had a very wide cultural vision and during his reign Assam established widespread cultural contact with the rest of India. According to (Bosu 1970, pp.162-167) due to the patronage of the Ahom kings the craft of handloom weaving flourished and developed. They took special care and evinced keen interest for the development of this traditional craft. (Barua, 1969, p.104-105) Ahom kings patronized the production of all kinds of silk in Assam. They established a department of weaving and maintained skilled weavers

to supply the royal wardrobe with clothes. These weavers received special incentives like grants of rent free lands and other favours in return for their services. It was during the Ahom period that the traditional dress of Assamese woman began to be made from muga and pat silks. (Dasgupta 1982, pp.189-191) The Vaishnavite satra institution came into existence during the Ahom rule. The Ahom kings and nobles, who accepted Vaishnavism, strengthened the satra as a great social force. These satras played an important role not only in the sphere of religion, but it enriched the Assamese life socially and educationally and also contributed a great deal to the cultural life of the people of Assam. The reign of Ahoms came to an end in the year 1826 with the annexation of Assam by the British. Though scattered all over the Brahmaputra valley, the largest concentration of Ahom population is to be found in Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur districts. (Labanya Mazumder, 2013, p.13)

### **Dimasa**

The Dimasa are one of the oldest inhabitants of the North Eastern region. The Dimasa Kachari is mainly found in Dima Hasao District. They also have a sizable population in Cachar, Karbi Anglong, Nowagaon and Karimganj District of Assam and also Dimapur and jiribum region of Nagaland and Manipur state respectively. The dresses of Dimasa Tribe in Assam are very similar to the Bodo tribe. The men and women of Dimasa wear clothes made in looms of household.

Spinning as well as weaving are considered as obligatory duties by the Dimasa women and as such every Dimasa girl is properly trained in the art of spinning and weaving as soon as she comes of age. She weaves artistically designed clothes to be required in her marriage. The coloured yarns are also prepared themselves from the wild herbs. The rearing of Endi silk worm is also another important cottage industry of Dimasas. (Ancient Assamese Costumes and Designs).

## **Lalung**

Lalung are concentrated mainly at Nagaon Karbi Anglong and in the foot hills of Mikir hills bordering of Nagaon district. They introduce themselves as 'Tiwa'. They entered Assam through the North Eastern hills tract of Assam from their original habitat, the Tibetan plateau. Probably, Tiwas are the last Bodo group entering Assam through this tract Tiwas are expert in rearing, spinning as well as weaving of eri, pat and muga.

Most of their domestic requirements of clothes are met from the family looms (Loinloom). Clothes are very artistic in colour and designs. The plain Lalung women wear dresses similar to those worn of other rural Assamese women. (Ancient Assamese Costumes and Designs)

## **The Assamese Muslims**

Migration of Muslims into Assam and their integration into the indigenous social framework has added colour and variety to the pattern of life in Assam. It is evident from the historical records that the Muslims first came to Assam in the early part of the thirteenth century. Muhammad Bin Baktar Khiliji, a Muslim general of Qutubuddin invaded Assam in 1205-1206 AD, but lost the battle. It has been presumed that some Muslim soldiers preferred to live in Assam instead of going back with their defeated leader. Therefore several attempts at invasion of Assam by the Muslim rulers continued intermittently with varying degree of success. Each time Assam was invaded, some Muslims were left behind in Assam and gradually they settled in Kamrup and Goalpara districts. Many Muslim saints entered Assam with the invading Muhammadan army. Some of these saints stayed in the region while others might have returned after a short stay. Moreover the Muslim religious leaders or pirs used to visit Assam to minister to the spiritual needs of the Muslims. They were encouraged by the Ahom monarchs to settle down in Assam by granting revenue free lands known as Pir-pal- lands. Thus, a traditional Assamese Muslim community gradually came into being. This includes the descendents of the Mughal soldiers left behind in Assam; the Muslim saints,

Muslim religious leaders or Pirs; other immigrants who came in small number at different periods.

The cultural similarities between the two are also noteworthy. This is perhaps due to the fact that conversion generally took place through marriage. Moreover there was no large scale migration of Muslims in the past. They came in smaller numbers at different times and gradually became part of the greater Assamese community. The contribution of the Assamese Muslims in the development of art and crafts, especially in the field of textiles, is worth mentioning. From the historical records it is evident that Muslims had introduced several techniques and designs in the Assamese textiles and contributed with their sincere service in the development of this craft in Assam. (Labanya, Mazumder, 2013, pp.12-13)

### **The Assamese Caste-Hindu Peasantry**

In addition to the Ahoms, the Brahmaputra plains of Assam is the abode of a number of Hindu caste populations. The Hindu caste people in Assam are recognized in two broad categories. These Bamun (Brahmin) and the Sudur (Sudra: non-Brahmin) (Das B.M. 1987, pp.12-13). The Brahmins are widely distributed in Assam plains, though their number may not be large in the context of particular villages where they live. The traditional calling of the Brahmins is preaching, priesthood and teaching though many Brahmins are basically dependant on agriculture they do not themselves operate the plough. It is considered taboo for them to handle the plough and bullocks to till the land. There is, however, no ritual restriction in other associated tasks of agriculture and many Brahmins in the rural areas do, in fact, work in their respective fields, except for the ploughing operation. In recent years a large number of Brahmins are found to be in Salaried occupations, made possible by the spread of modern education.

The Sudur group includes several castes of different socio-religious positions. Among them, the Kalitas form the most populous and dominant caste of Assam. The Koch is another agricultural caste and forms a large population of



Assam. The Koches ruled for a long time over Assam and North Bengal till they were ultimately over-thrown by the Ahoms and the Muhammadans about the beginning of the seventeenth century. In the districts of Goalpara, Kokrajhar and Dhubri. Kochs are known even to this days as Rajbongshis, which means men of royal lineage.

The Chutiya kingdom formerly extended over the present districts of Jorhat, Sivasagar and Lakhimpur up to Sadiya in the extreme northeast. It was finally conquered by the Ahoms in 1500 AD. The chutiyas absorbed a good number of Ahom through inter-marriage and other social exchanges. This ultimately evolved a new section of people called the Ahoms-chutiyas. The other castes, who belong to the sudur fold are the Kaibarta, the keot, the kumar, the Hira, the Nath etc. Most of these castes are named according to their traditional occupations. The traditional occupation of the Kaibartas is fishing. The Keot is an agricultural caste, Hiras are potters, who make pottery with hand without using the potter's wheel. The Kumars make pottery with the help of the wheel. Mulberry silk culture is the traditional occupation of the Naths. They are also known as Jugi's or Katonis. (Labanya, Mazumder 2013, pp.14-15)

Among all these caste groups of Assam, weaving is extensively practiced at home by the women folk to meet day-to-day requirements. It is because of this, that in Assam, there is no separate caste of weavers or Tantis, as is to be found in most other parts of India.

## **5.6 History of weaving in Hajo Circle**

It had traced elsewhere the history of Sualkuchi to the days of Kautilya. According to Kautilya's Arthashastra there was a principality named Suvarnakundya in ancient Kamrup, famous for its silk industry. Historians like K.L. Barua and following him B.K. Barua and P.C. Choudhury had identified a village Sonkudiha, a few miles south of Nalbari town, with Suvarnakundya. We had humbly differed from this view on several grounds. As Suvarnakundya was famous for silk industry there must have existed a Tantubaya or Tanti community

alongwith traders or Mudois in fabrics. But in present day Sonkudiha there is no trace of either the Tanti or Mudois community whereas Sualkuchi has these communities till this day. As a matter of fact, whatever might be the antiquity of Sualkuchi; its history may certainly be traced back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Three Ahom chronicles, viz., Assam Buranji, Kamrupar Buranji and Purani Assam Buranji had narrated an historical event of removing some Tanti families from Sualkuchi to other places when the Ahom soldiers had occupied Hajo and Sualkuchi in 1636 by defeating the Mughal General Satrajit who had his fort in Sualkuchi.

The contention of the 1961 census Authorities that Satrajit had imported the Tanti community and settled them in Sualkuchi is also not at all tenable, for it implies that the Tanti community was absent in Assam till the 17<sup>th</sup> century whereas weaving of Karpasik (cotton) and silk fabrics was a profession in Assam since the days of Kautilya. Whatever might be the antiquity of the Tanti community of Sualkuchi, pottery and weaving are as old as human civilization itself and in Assam too these professions are as the civilization of Assam itself.

The researcher had also collected information from the older generations of the 1970s of the last century. Most of them said that there were several villages now in the bed of the Brahmaputra and the name of one village was Swarnakuchi where from the Baosoria or Basathargharia Brahmins used to go on foot to perform their priestly duties at Kamakhya temple. In the context it may be recalled that the main stream of the Brahmaputra had flowed past by Hajo till the angles like bend of the river at Agiathuri. From Pandu to Hajo was straightened by Chilarai, brother of king Naranarayana of Koch Behar in 1563 and since then the mighty river had been flowing by the present Sualkuchi. That there were villages in the bed of the river is also proved by the boulder made footway to the Siddheswar temple on the south side towards the Brahmaputra. From Swarnakuchi the name Soalkuchi/Sualkuchi may arise as a dialectical variation and the name Swarnakuchi itself may be a variation from Suvarnakundya of Kautilya's Arthasastra like Manchester of England arising from the Roman name Mancunium.

Upto the 1930s the weaving industry of Sualkuchi remained almost confined within the Tanti community of Tantipara (around the present Bazar Chowk). As regards identification of the *tantis*, it is more a fit job of the anthropologists. There are many hamlets of villages known as Tantipara or Tantikuchi like Tantikuchi of present Barpeta area referred to in the Gurucharit, a classical work on Vaishnava saints, where from the *Brindavani* fabric depicting the divine plays of Sri Krishna were got woven in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Sankardeva. There are also several Tantiparas around Nalbari town like Tantipara of village Pakowa, of village Guwakuchi etc. All these hamlets are inhabited by people belonging to Saha, Sahu, Sau/Saud or Baishya or Bania (Trader or Mudoi) community. According to Dr. Amalendu Guha this was a small trading community of lower Assam and *Chand Saudagar*, the medieval folklore figure of *Manasa Kavya* is said to have belonged to this caste (Baishya, Prabin 2005).

### **5.7 The Factory System:**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> World War had boosted up the weaving industry of Sualkuchi with demand for fabrics rising with increasing prices which encouraged some 10/12 Tanti families to start weaving factories engaging wage weavers. The other important event of technological upgradation was the introduction of the fly shuttle loom by one Kaliram Karikar (Karikar means an expert artisans) at the suggestion of one English Superintendent of the weaving department. Side by side, the Assam Cooperative silk House, the most successful a co-operative weaving society was formed in 1938 with a sales centre at Guwahati for marketing the products. This same person, Karikar was the President of the co-operative while one Kamala Kanta was the Secretary of the society and they remained in the office for life. It is reported that the conservatives did not like the introduction of the fly-shuttle loom and several incidents of stone throwing at the residence-cum-factory of Karikar took place. After a few years, however, realizing the higher productivity of the fly-shuttle loom, other families had also replaced the throw-shuttle loom by the fly-shuttle and thus this improved loom developed by an English “half-weaver and half mechanic” John Key in 1733 was

introduced in Assam after more than two centuries of its invention. (Information collected in field survey)

The factory system had gradually extended to other areas inhabited by other communities. The wage weavers engaged in the looms were mainly the local poor or “loomless proletariat” from the Bamun-Sualkuchi area of the East and Bhatipara hamlet of the west. Data on the number of looms during the 1950s are, however, not available although the Textile Enquiry committee (Kanango Committee) of 1954 had mentioned about the commercial looms of Sualkuchi, Karimganj and Silchar out of 4.5 lakh handlooms of Assam. The 1961 census Authorities, however, had published a report on selected Handicraft of Assam and this report had given the number of looms in Sualkuchi as 1200. Baishya Probin, while understanding his research project small and cottage Industries had conducted two-time point surveys in Sualkuchi and some other areas of industrial concentration in the erstwhile Kamrup district in 1970-71 and 1980-81. As per these surveys there were respectively nearly 2,200 and 3,000 silk looms in Sualkuchi which had increased to about 1,700 in 2002 as per the current survey and these looms were found in 1,077, 1,478 and 2,968 establishment or households respectively.

The looms are engaged in weaving traditional fabrics used mainly by the female folk viz, Mekhela and Chadar, garments respectively for the lower and upper parts of the body, plain pieces or Thaans or plain sheets of 10 meter length which may be stitched as *Mekhela*, shirt, *chadar* etc. The products, particularly the Mekhelas and chadars are classified as (a) Simple pair (*Jora*) (b) medium pair and (c) highly decorated *jora* according to floral designs woven in the fabrics. The more are the floral designs woven in the fabrics, the better is the quality of the product, of course, given the texture and quality of the yarn.

Besides the traditional products for the Assamese female folk, some looms are also engaged in weaving Dhara and Jainsem, the traditional female dress of the Khasis and Jaintias of neighbouring Meghalaya which was earlier a distinct of undivided Assam. Some of the looms are also weaving *sarees* and some of these

*sarees* particularly *Muga sarees* were reportedly sold in the Kolkata market during the sixties of the last century. It may also be mentioned that the looms weaving *Mekhela* and *chadar* also weave blouse pieces to make a complete female dress.

For designing the fabrics both *Jaquards* and *Dobbeys* were used *Jaquards* for border flowering and *Dobbeys* for designing the middle part of the cloth. But as *Jaquard* weaving takes a lot of physical toil of the weavers, now-a-days only *Dobbeys* are used and the floral borders of the cloth are woven separately in the same piece of *chadar* or *saree* and stitched by tailors in the *chadar* or *saree*. The designs are drawn on a drawing paper by design specialists, then hard board cards are punched and fitted to the *Dobbey* and while shedding the wrap, picking or throwing the shuttle through the warp weavers the design by beating the sley. Besides this mechanical designing, small flowers all over the pieces of the cloth are also done by the skilled hands of the weavers who selects the necessary picks and weavers the art threads. Thus the weaving process is very labour intensive. Weaving of a takes about 2 days' labour, *chadar* takes  $\frac{3}{4}$  days labour while a *saree* takes a minimum of a week's labour. Wages are paid to be weavers on the basis of the number of floral picks woven in the piece of fabric plus general weaving charges of the pieces of cloth. The punched card indicates the number of designs with picks of 100 called a unit or *Muthi* and wages are paid on the basis of units.

It is to be mentioned that the artisans of Sualkuchi weave only *Pat* and *Muga* fabrics although now-a-days *Tasar* is also woven in a number of looms. But *eri* is not woven at all in Sualkuchi although some cloth dealers sell *eri* fabrics also which they buy from a few looms (85) of neighbouring villages and particularly from the Palasbari/Rampur areas of South Kamrup. The *paat* yarn woven in the looms are brought from Bangalore, *Tasar* from Kolkata while *Muga* yarn is reeled here by buying *Muga* cocoons from Upper Assam, Boko and Garo hills areas of South Kamrup and Meghalaya respectively. Formerly the weavers and *Muga* dealers used to go to Upper Assam viz., Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Dhakuakhana etc to collect cocoons; but now-a-days petty traders of Upper

Assam and Palasbari – Boko areas bring *Muga* cocoons to Sualkuchi and sell them in the open Market.

The number of *Muga* looms, however varies in response to the availability of *Muga* cocoons. As per our previous surveys *Muga* looms in Sualkuchi had declined from 806 in 1970-71 to 318 in 1980-81. According to our present survey (June 2015) the number of *Muga* looms had increased to 2645. This rise in *Muga* looms is indicative of rearing of more *Muga* cocoons in Assam as well as in Meghalaya. The figure of *Muga* looms is however – doubtful for many household use *Tasar* in their looms and they might have reported the looms as *Muga*. But many households had reported their *Tasar* looms too and the present survey data showed 1384 *Tasar* looms. Anyway, it is a fact that the number of *Muga* looms in Sualkuchi has increased by several times. The use of *Tasar* yarns or production of *Tasar* fabrics in the villages under study eighties of the last century. *Tasar* yarn used to be sold by some Kolkata dealers here. The price of *Muga* yarn. Ordinary customers cannot distinguish between the *Muga* and *Tasar* yarn and fabric. *Tasar* yarn is generally used as warp and *Muga* is used as woof and the fabric is sold as *Muga* at a very high price. The high profit encouraged other master weavers to follow the same type of deception; hence the abnormal rise in the number of *Muga* looms. There are however honest master weavers using *Tasar* in both warp and woof and selling the fabrics also as *Tasar* at a lower price than that of *Muga* fabrics. The cloth dealer can however easily distinguish between pure *Muga* and *Tasar* mixed fabrics simply by touch which the customer cannot. It is also worth mentioning here that durability of *Tasar* yarn is like the durability of cotton although in glaze of the golden colour it is as good as *Muga*. After one or two washes the fabrics loses its lustre while the glaze of muga remains unchanged for many years.

## **5.8 Growth and Development of Handloom Industry in Hajo circle:**

Setting up of an industry has a multiplier effect and very often it leads to the growth of downstream industries and sometimes upstream industries. The industry has also its spread effect; with the establishment of one industry imitator

entrepreneurs emerge to set up the same type of industry. It happened in Assam itself with the starting of tea plantation by the British colonialists; several imitator entrepreneurs including Maniram Dewan the martyr of the 1<sup>st</sup> war of Independence of 1857 had started tea plantation during the fifties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In our country several place bound regional concentration of small firms or factories has emerged. Such types of a particular industrial concentration takes place due to (1) geographical proximity, (2) specialisation in a particular art, (3) close inter-firm collaboration or competition (4) emergence of marketing facilities for the products (5) availability of raw materials and other equipments (6) availability of labour (7) facilities for credit (8) spread of information and knowledge (9) emergence of sub-contracting system etc.

Some of the well known industrial clusters in India are (1) the Ludhiana woollen knitwear cluster of Punjab, (2) the Agra cluster of the footwear industry (3) the rubber footwear cluster of Kottayam of Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu (5) the Diamond cutting and processing (6) cluster belt of Mirzapur-Bhadohi in the Allahabad and Koshambi districts of Uttar Pradesh and neighbouring villages of Bihar etc.

In the comparatively backward state of Assam such industrial cluster are few. No doubt tea garden clusters had sprung up in the earstwhile Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts of Assam during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but modern industrial clusters as such are rare. In the cottage industries sector, a bell metal industrial cluster was formed around Sarthebari of the present Barpeta district covering some 5/6 neighbouring villages.

In Hajo circle the Sualkuchi silk handloom cluster covering 15 villages around Sualkuchi within about 100 sq. Km began to form since the seventies of the last century. In the context it may be recalled that the neighbouring villages are inhabited by peasant household and weavers for the looms of Sualkuchi used to continue daily from these villages. Some of these weavers as well as other

peasants seeing higher income than from agriculture proper started one/two looms in their homes. The process of capital formation and investment for this industry is also very interesting. The hired weavers in the Sualkuchi factories often take advance money from the master weavers. The wage weavers having intelligence and good character starts one/two looms with his primitive accumulation plus the advance amount taken from the master weaver/Mahajan. Seeing the rise of wage weaver to the position of a master weaver the well-to-do peasant household also starts one/two looms taking yarn/art thread etc. on credit from the dealers of Sualkuchi and gradually emerge as master weaver employing wage weavers. Now-a-days educated youth while not finding white collar jobs have also undertaken the weaving industry by borrowing money from friends, relatives and if possible by taking bank credit.

Some of the newly emerged master weavers also work on a sub-contracting system; they buy yarn and art thread on credit from the Sualkuchi store keepers and offer the fabrics at a slightly lower than the market price. Some other work also on the “putting out system” of taking raw materials from the co-operative societies or master weaver. They deliver the products to the raw materials supplier and take the weaving charges or wages which are generally double the normal rates prevailing for covering the pre-loom processing coats etc.

The loom owners of the cluster are getting a ready market for their products in the Sualkuchi fabrics dealers. The producers often come to Sualkuchi with a bag of fabrics; offer them to the storekeepers either on cash or on credit for a few days or weeks. Sometimes the storekeepers suggest designs and quality of the fabrics according to their requirements. Many of the storekeepers also move to the villages and collect the fabrics from the weavers either on credit or cash.

Thus, Sualkuchi has a long tradition of silk weaving at least since the 17<sup>th</sup> century as it has been shown in their chapter by citing historical evidences although the evidences since the day of Kautilya are hazy. Higher income from the profession has led to vertical occupational mobility from agriculture and other cottage industries. Comparatively higher wages of weaving has also attracted over



10,000 migrant weavers including more than 5000 Bodo female weavers from different districts of Assam. Comparatively higher profit or margin than the agricultural and other cottage level industrial income has also helped expansion of the weaving industry to the neighbouring agricultural villages leading to the growth of a silk industry cluster or belt. The active silk and cotton looms in the cluster has provided direct employment to more than 2300 weavers, about 8000 helpers and more than 4000 persons on management or simply more than 34000 persons are earning their livelihood with a comparatively better their livelihood better standard of living. This is a very prominent contribution of the handloom industry in creating employment avenues and generating income among the rural households in a situation where the rural folk in other areas remain unemployed or underemployed due to absence of employment avenues. Technological upgradation like introduction of semi automatic handloom or simple powerloom side by side with product diversification are likely to generate more employment and create more income. In this way, the wave of weaving in the village Sualkuchi got succeed in spreading its commercial means of weaving to the entire Hajo circle which may be called as Sualkuchi cluster.

## **5.9 Folklore in Weaving**

### **The Assamese culture and handloom Weaving**

The culture and tradition of handloom weaving is best illustrated by the remark passed on Assamese womanhood by the Father of the Nation. Mahatma Gandhi, whose celestial virtues included the admiration of beauty in any form, paid the highest compliment to Assamese women when he said, ‘every women of Adam is a born weaver. No Assamese girl who does not weave can expect to become a wife. And she weaves fairly tales in cloth. Some of the old pattern showed to me were of matchless beauty. And as I saw these beautiful patterns, I could not help shedding a silent tear over India’s past glory and her lost wet’.

Again, Gandhiji also highly appreciated about the art and culture of weaving of the Assamese women when he visited an exhibition of *Eri* and *Khadi*

clothes at Sualkuchi ( a noted silk weaving centre of India) on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, 1946. He got amazed when he had seen that two expert weavers of that place had depicted him in the loom and one goldsmith engraved his snap in the place itself. In that exhibition the founder of the *Khadi Pratishthan*, Satish Chandra Das Gupta also remarked that “it is a matter of proud to the weavers of Sualkuchi maintaining their traditional skill in weaving by overcoming the competition against the manufactured cloth.”

There are also many evidences of paying glowing tributes to the Assamese women by many distinguished writers of repute. Bhuyan also referred about the tributes paid to the Assamese women while discussing the culture of weaving “the universal popularity of weaving in Assam, and the consequent partial solution of the problem of existence led the great Bengali preacher and savant, Pandit Sivanath Sastri to remark during his visit to Assam in the last century”, that it was only in Assam that he found a justification for the alleged derivation of the word wife from weave ( N.C. Das 1986 page 25-26).

All these references about the tradition and culture of weaving represent the past glory. The art of weaving has reached a high perfection. Skill in the art of spinning and weaving has held to be one of the highest attainments of the Assamese women. Almost all the terms expressing excellence of attainment in woman can be traced to this idea of skill in spinning and weaving. Even in case of marital relation also there was a tradition that when the proposed of marriage comes the first question asked whether the girl knows ‘*bowa-kata*’, that is, whether she is expert in weaving and spinning. Thus in course of time the earlier functional caste system has given way to its universal use by the Assamese womanhood in general. A unique feature of Assamese society is the absence of any specific class reserved only for weaving. Every Assamese woman, whether she is a daughter of a *Brahmin* or a *sudra*, a Buddhist or an animist, a Muhammad or a Christian, a prince or a beggar, is a weaver by birth. All these clearly demonstrate that the industry has abandoned its old functional caste and weaving has been resorted to in general by all the people of the state.

Handloom weaving is a proud privilege of the Assamese women. They generally pursue weaving with zeal and enthusiasm. It can be termed as a folk art for the Assamese society. In the earlier days there was hardly a village or a family which possessed no loom. Not to speak of a village or a household, but every member of a family possessed a loom. In most cases the handloom has been treated as an essential piece of furniture. While weaving is done in other parts of India by certain low caste communities only and is considered inferior for people of the higher castes, every Assamese girl, whether high or low born, is expected to be aware of this art.

The loom was as precious to the Assamese maiden as life itself. There is a folk song that the loom also wept along with the members of the family on the departure of the bride after marriage.

*“Rargharat kandile make bapeke*

*Moralat kandile bhani*

*Barir pisfale kande tatar shale*

*Aideuk bia dibar shoni”*

Which literally means- on hearing the finalisation of marriage of the damsel of the house, parents started weeping in the dwelling house and the younger sister wept in the marriage pandal while the loom also takes part in weeping behind the dwelling house.

The weaving culture also expressed the desire and aspiration of the Assamese women towards the loom which was treated just like a beloved of any person. He referred the following folk song which presents an idea of love and affection of an Assamese girl for her day-to-day used loom.

*Dear is the reel of muga, oh dear one*

*Dear is the shuttle of my loom;*

*Dearer still is Bihu of Bohag*

*Let's not mar it with gloom.*

The is also an age old tradition in Assamese society that a groom up girl should make a present of self-woven ‘*bihuwan*’ ( *gamosa*) to her beloved as a token of love and also to her elders as a symbol of respect. Even in case of marriage also he knowledge of weaving was counted. In Assamese folk song in this respect depicted such a picture.

*“Aru beli kaisila hasati dim buli  
Aibeli katisa paji,  
Tomare hasati Amake nalage  
Tirota ani lom kaji”*

Which means.....

I asked for a flowered towel  
Only now do you roll the cotton.  
No use for me your towel,  
One more expert I’ve brought.

(Goswami 2003, pp.64)

Which literally means – previously you promised me a *gamosa* ( towel); but now you are preparing the slivers only; so, I do not want your *gamosa*, rather I shall marry an expert (girl) weaver.”

When a woman is at work in her loom, she weaves here designs with her deep feelings and emotions by using brilliant colour combination. The designs which are used by the weavers of this state reflect their social and cultural behavior. The motif underlying weaving also reflects tradition, customs and the culture of the people. As used in a ‘*bihuen*’, it has been very beautifully expressed in the following Assamese couplet.

*“Moromor digh di senehar bani lai Hepahar asure boa  
Soponar fulere fulam more bihuan  
Mon di abeli loa:.*

Which literally means – “Oh my darling accept the bihuan ( Assamese towel) now with all your heart, because I have made it with the warp of love and the weft of affection, which is being bordered with my eagerness and embroidered with dreamy flowers”.

It is a matter of prestige to have a loom in an Assamese household. “Every household possesses a loom and weaving is carried on by the woman of the family principally for making clothes for domestic use.”

At present also one can see in the countryside that an Assamese woman wearing the clothes manufactured by their own hand which itself signify their love and affection to homemade fabrics. In spite of the increasing import of calico, muslim and other finer fabrics; *muga* and silk (*pat*) garments, continued to be the standard dress of the upper and the middle classes of both the sexes, while even the indigent ones endeavoured to warp themselves up in winter with a piece of *endi* cloth. All these forms the culture of the Assamese people. It is part and parcel of a girl to know weaving alongwith other domestic work. Generally, there was a tradition to carry her own requirements of clothes from her mother’s house after marriage which is woven by herself. Even at the time of engagement of the marriage the girl will send a set of clothes woven by her own hand to her would-be-bridegroom. This practice was there even during the Vedic period among the Aryans. Therefore the system might have come from old Aryan culture.

*“Ga dhui chanamai Mokok sudhile*

*O’ma ki kapoor pindhilo paihe*

*Chate sukowa Muthile lukowa*

*O’ma sei kapoor pindhilo paihe.”*

It is reflects in various Assamese Loksahitya that in time of wedding, when the bride came out from bathroom through the crowded of female, she asked her mother “What dress may I wear mother”. Mother replied her wear dress which dried in clips of hand. This fabric widely reflects the character of Assamese silky cloth.

We got different folk prose like “*Silanir Jiyekar Sadhu*” “*Tejimala*” where different types of prose included and from whom we able to know about weaving activities of Assamese weavers. In folk prose ‘*Tejimala*’ there is the famous folk songs like –

*“Hato nemelibi phulo nisingibi*

*Kore Naworia tai*

*Pat Kapoor logote Mahi aai khundile*

*Tejimalahe moi”*

The literary meaning contained in these lines are –

*Tejimala* is a visionary character painted by the creative brush of renown Assamese literature, Lakhsminath Bezbaruah in his most fascinating story – ‘*Tejimala*’. *Tejimala* is a daughter of a rich merchant from his first wife. But unfortunately, after her mother’s death she fell the tragic victim of hatred and violence of her step mother. When, the merchant was out of home for quite a period, her step mother plan-fully killed her and pounded her alongwith her silk cloth she was wearing by a wooden padel (*Dheki*) and then thrown off.

Later on, she was reborn in the shape and size of a flower somewhere in the river bosom. Meanwhile the merchant travelled back home. Being fascinated by the beauty and fragrance of the flower, the merchant ordered his boatman to pluck the flower as he wished to present it to his loving daughter *Tejimala* whom he had left home.

As the boatman stretched out his hands to the flower, to the surprise of all, the flower spoke out in human voice, which forbade the boatman to pluck her and narrated her fateful condition, under which she had fallen a victim.

How old handloom in Assam is no one can definitely say, but the fact remains that it has become a part of the cultural heritage of the Assamese people and a matter for pride and glory. It is part and parcel of a girl to know weaving alongwith other domestic work.

Generally there was a tradition to carry her own requirements of cloths from her mother's house after marriage which is woven by her. Even at the time of engagement of the marriage, the girl will send a set of clothes woven by her own hand to her would-be-bridegroom.

All these references make us to believe handloom weaving has been on is related with every culture of the Assamese people.

The two types of fabrics called "*Gamocha*" and "*Anakata*" has its culturally distinctive character (Chapter-V). *Gamocha* is a piece of cloth having multiple uses and meanings. *Gamocha* is an indispensable part of Assamese life and culture, intricately and intimately woven into the social fabric of Assamese.

Assam was probably known even in the time of Ramayana as a country of "cocoon rearers". Evidence of this may be had from the reference made in the *kiskindhyakanda*, as to the countries one come across while heading towards the east.

The Arthasastra, while mentioning the varieties of textile commodities known as dukula says, that "the product of the country Suvarnakundya is red as the sun, as soft as the surface of a gem, being woven while the threads are very wet, of uniform or mixed texture.

Kautilya also refers to the varieties of fibrous garments known as '*patrorna*' and remarks that the one which is produced in the country of Suvarnakundya was the best.

*Tasan Suvarnakundyaka Srestha*" Das 1986, pp.17

Undoubtedly, Assam is one of the most beautiful and attractive regions of our Indian Union. It has a greater variety and colourful natural scenery, associated with cultural treasures of the people that inhabit it. Equally important, it has the largest number of tribes in the country with varied tradition and culture.

The Chinese traveller Hiuen Sany visited Kamrupa during the reign of Bhaskarvarman who was a historical figure and ruled over the kingdom of Kamrupa extending upto Bihar on the west in the seventh century AD and Pragjyotishpura (present Gauhati) was his capital. At that time Bhaskara's contemporary was the Emperor Harsha of the northern India, who was one of the greatest and most powerful of the Hindu monarchs in ancient India. According to some historical accounts, such as the Harshacharita (life and deeds of Emperor Harsha), Bhaskarvarman was a mighty king and the only peer in the whole of India of the Great Harsha. There is evidence of gifts being presented by Bhaskarvarman to the Emperor Harsha as a symbol for mutual friendship. The royal presents which Hamsavega (the emissary) carried to Harsha from Bhaskarvarman included 'Silken cloths pure as the autumn moon's light', soft loin cloths smooth as birch bark', sacks of woven silk' wrappers of white bark silk' and various kinds of smooth-figured textiles. (Das 1986, pp.18)

Bana too mentions about the '*Abhoga*' umbrella sent to Harsha by Bhaskarvarman. The umbrella sent to him was in the case made of (*Dukula*) white silk. There were also certain other presents which included (a variety of pat cloth, such as sacks of silk, woven out of pattasutra. Choudhury came to the conclusion that presents included all the best specimens of *endi*, *muga* and *pat*. (Das 1986, pp.18)

Barua also refers to a gift by Bhaskarvarman to Hiuen Sang. The gift mentioned was a cap (called ho-la-li) made of "coarse skin lined with soft down and was designed to protect the pilgrim from rain whilst on the road'. The knitting of the cap, referred above points to the existence of soft textiles which were used in the ancient Kamrupa in the traditional style. (Das 1986, pp.18 & 19)

The early history of weaving also refers to the existence of a class of weavers community known as '*tanti*' or '*tantubai*'. The '*tanti*' or the '*tantubais*' were generally responsible for supplying the requirements of the royal family and the other dignatories of the kingdom, and in return were given land-grants. Tracing out the history of the early case system in Assam, Gait also refers to the



'existence of such castes as '*Kumar*' (potter) '*Kahar*' (Bell-metal workers), *Kamar* (Blacksmith) and *Tati* (weavers). Mention may be made of Gunakatias a class of skilled artisans engaged in the embroidery work with the help of gold and silver wires (*guna*). Unfortunately, the class of '*gunakatias*' has gradually becoming extinct. '*Gunakatias*' no longer depend 'on their professional occupation for a livelihood, but have taken to agriculture or other more profitable employments and are fast losing or have lost already their knowledge of art for which they were once so famous.

Assam was equally prominent in the art of embroidery and allied industries. Assam occupied an important position since the early days particularly in respect of manufacture of dyed cloths. Reference to the coloured clothes was made by Bana, that Bhaskara sent to Harsha variously coloured and painted clothes, and smooth as birch bark with the patterns of Jasmine flowers. Its comparison with birch bark indicate that perhaps it was the '*muga*' silk which is very soft and tawny in colour like birch bark. (Das 1986, pp.20-21)

Certain references are also found regarding the ornamented clothes offered to different deities and also the use and practice of manufacturing various coloured clothes like '*rautam*' '*Kanseyam*', '*nilam*' in connection with the worship of deities. It may be very easily established from the aforesaid references that the art and skill in respect of dyeing and colouring were known to the people of Assam, since early period. A variety of methods of dyeing techniques were prevalent among the people in the ancient Assam, some of which we can see even now also in certain weaving centres of Assam. It can be observed that in some cases the threads were dyed before it comes to the loom for weaving, for the purpose of manufacture of variously coloured clothes. In certain other cases the finished garments were dyed. In most cases the clothes were dyed in red, black, yellow, blue and the like. The materials used in dyeing clothes were not only lac and the indigo (called '*rumdye*' in Assam) but were also prepared from various roots, leaves and barks of trees. (Das 1986, pp.21)

### **5.10 Some beliefs related to weaving process:**

During the period of field survey some questions were asked whether they have treated the loom or the looming process as their spiritual feelings. It was revealed as a sacred operation in nearly all the communities of Assam. As such, it is considered as a craft with religious significance. For instance, Lord Biswakarma is worshipped as the God of this craft by the weavers having Hindu affiliation. In every step in the process of weaving even while starting a complicated design, the weavers pray to Lord Biswakarma for successful completion of work. Further, it has been observed in the region that on the last day of Durga puja young girls perform some task related to weaving. It is considered as a part of the puja, the underlying belief being that by doing so, Goddess Durga will bless the young devotee to be a skilled weaver.

A wealth of information gathered from the field investigation also indicated the socio-cultural significance of weaving in Assam. The people themselves refer to weaving as something far more important than mere production of fabrics for daily use. “It is something more dear to us than our life itself”, said an 70 years old woman. The observances and taboos related to different steps in the mode of production, as narrated below, are also marked in all the study villages.

As expressed by the respondents warping is not done on Thursday, as this day is believed to be the birthday of the art of weaving. The preparation of yarn for warping, the warping itself and looming are not done on the day of the full moon; the day of the conjunction of the sun and moon and the eleventh day of the lunar half of the month. It is believed that the cloth woven under such conditions will not be auspicious. If anything goes wrong in the loom in the course of weaving the weaver herself or some other well-versed woman recites the relevant prayer for setting everything all right. Weaving is not done if there is a death in the village. During the celebration of occasion like Bihu Durga puja and Biswakarma puja weaving is not generally undertaken.

The weaver has to be in a state of ritual purity while weaving cloth for ritual usage. The design catalogue is always considered auspicious, which has to be handled with purity. After completion of weaving, it is the tradition to apply water with a wet strip of cloth across the warp. A few warp yarn is cut and interlaced first at the two edges, then in the middle. It is still found in most of the house in the region. They have a strong conviction that by applying water to the warp ends, the weaver too will get the last drops of water in her mouth before death and her body will be taken to the cremation ground in a proper manner. After cutting the warp, the floor has been cleaned properly so that the next looming warp would be fitted in the loom in a proper direction and would create no problem for the weaver.

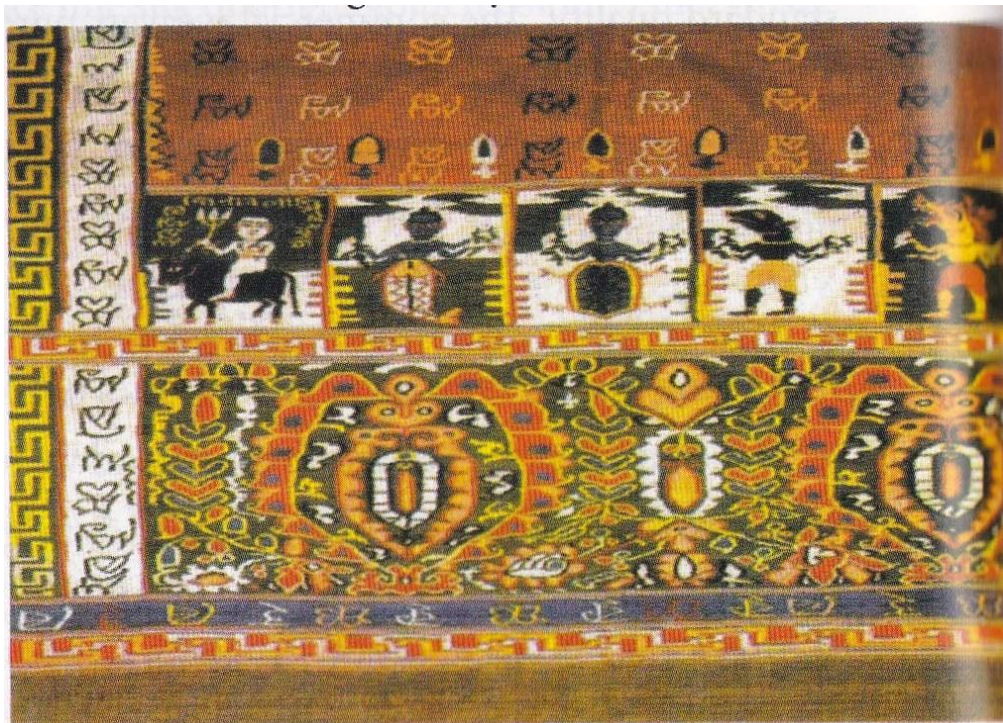
All these religious, cultural and spiritual thoughts and feeling has been obeyed traditionally by the weavers in the region. But the respondents also said that as the looms has gone towards commercialization the spiritual beliefs with the loom has also been showing a declining trend among the weavers gradually.



**Vrindavani Bastra**



**Scenes from Vrindavani Bastra**



**Scenes from Vrindavani Bastra**