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A STUDY OF TEXTILE CRAFTS PRODUCTION IN MEDIEVAL  
ASSAM DURING 13<sup>TH</sup> TO 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES: AS REFLECTED  
IN MEDIEVAL SOURCES

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**ABSTRACT**

The essays at bringing together the knowledge of textile crafts production in medieval Assam as derived from various sources such as local sources, Persian travellers account and other contemporary records as well as secondary works. Here also tried to look at the textile manufacture related information of different historical events are used in those sources, and the context in which they are applied their relevance to one another to build a hypothesis about the issue of textile crafts production. An attempt has been made to identify the textile manufacture and its demands in Assam and her neighbouring regions as well as its impact on economic life of the people of Assam.

**Introduction:**

The Medieval Assam had a great reputation for wide variety of textile crafts production of her neighbouring regions as well as the Mughal court, as is evident from historical records. Various artisans classes of people were engaged craftsmanship like textiles, metal, ivory, wood, leather, clay, cane, bamboo works and the like, the reputation of Assamese artisans was equal to that of the craftsmen of Bengal as well as the Mughal empire of India. The major crafts industries weaving in Assam during the period under study were textiles, pottery, black smithy, bell metal and brass-metal works, goldsmiths, village carpentry, bamboo and ivory works, etc. Many of the works by modern scholars focus more in the rulers and political history, but inadequate information is available on textile industry and except that some works on textile production have been done by scholars

like, H.K. Barpujari(The Comprehensive History of Assam), Sir Edward Gait(A History of Assam), A. Guha, (Medieval and Early Colonial Assam) J.N. Phukon(The Economic History of Assam under the Ahoms), S.L. Baruah(A Comprehensive History of Assam), JahnabiGogi Nath( Agrarian System of Medieval Assam), P.C. Choudhury( History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century AD) , RajenSaikia ( Social and Economic History of Assam (1853-1921)) deserve to be highly commended. But these works dealt with the political and socio- economic lives and less talk about the textile crafts production in medieval Assam. Therefore, it appears that the hypothesis has never been examined in depth rather touched upon only a few aspects. It is, therefore, my humble devotion to the theme in present paper which deals entirely the aspects of cotton textile manufacture in medieval Assam, in the light of travellers' accounts, Persian sources, local sources and other evidences.

### **Methodology**

To build our description, we have used primary sources used by the historians to reconstruct history of medieval Assam searching facts related to textile crafts production. I have tried to look at how the textile related words and information of different historical events are used in those sources, and the context in which they are applied their relevance to one another to build a hypothesis about the issue of textile crafts. I have used contemporary records, Persian sources, Ahom Chronicles' record, travellers account as well as some secondary works which provide some details about the textile manufacture during the period under study.

### **Results & Discussion:**

Before the established Ahom rule in Assam the weaving was practised only tribal people and lower Hindu caste professional group of people called Tantis. Therefore it did not gain the reputation as a large-scale industry in Assam. After the establishment of Ahom rule and their patronage textile crafts industry emerged as a reputed craft industry in Assam. Under the patronage of the Ahom kings textile craft industry acquired a national symbol among the people of Assam therefore; every Ahom women were very proficient in weaving. It became customary on the part of an Ahom wife to equip her husband with a garment called ranuakapor or kavachkapor or protection garment whenever he proceeded to the battle field against the enemy. The thread of this garment must be spun and weaving completed within the course of one single night. In conformity with their earlier tradition Ahom rulers adopted all possible measure to encourage weaving by the people irrespective of their caste or calling. Early in the seventeenth century King Pratapasimha made it compulsory for every capable adult woman to spin certain quantity of yarn every night before retiring to bed. Queen Sabesvariwife of king Sivasimha had been opened a school within the palace walls to impart training in spinning to girls belonging to all caste and communities. She collected through her ambassadors the specimens of patterns and designs from other parts of India for adoption by the weavers in Assam. As a result weaving became a popular craft among the women in Assam. In fact every Assamese woman whether she is a prince or a common

house-wife, a high-class Brahmin or a low-caste Sudra, a Hindu or a Muslim, knew the art of weaving. As H. F. Samman mentioned, weaving among the Assamese forms a part of a girl's education and a part of women's ordinary household duties.

The professional weavers like those of the Hindu Tanti and of the Muslim Jolah were however continued to be employed by the state for the production of large varieties of cloth required for the royal store. Some of these were imported from Koch Behar and Bengal. As they were employed by the state, they received grants of land and other favours from state. They were generally settled at such places where they could easily obtain their raw materials. In Kamrup, Sualkuchi was an important centre of weaving. In 1636 A.D. Lanmakhruchetia Barphukan the Governor of Lower Assam caused the transfer of certain families of Tanti (weavers) from that place to Bamunkuchi on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. In the sixteenth century Bardua in Nowgong, was an important centre of weaving. Mention may also be made of Kamarkuchi of Hajo, Laskarpara of Rangia, North Gauhati and Puranigudam in Nowgong. Traces of settlement of the professional weavers known as Katanigaon are also found in Upper Assam particularly near the administrative headquarters.

The majority of the people in the plains used the handloom which was the same as that used in Burma, Laos and other parts of South-East Asia. But the waist-loom, or a small loom tied to the waist on one side and fastened to the ground with a peg on the other was used chiefly by the Kacharies and the Miris. The art of weaving was also known to the hill tribes who had probably acquired it from the plains. According to H.F. Samman the hill tribes with the exception of the Hill Miris and possibly the Akas knew the art of weaving. They produced cloths from cotton as well as from the fibres of trees and plants that grew wild. They would use the waist-loom.

Varieties of cloth were produced of cotton, muga and silk. Of these mention may be made of kapor and bar-kapor (a piece for weaving round shoulders of men in cold weather, it is about 6 cubits long by 3 wide), Chadar, gamocha (towel), hachati (a small piece of cloth for keeping betel-nut, lime, etc.) tangali (a cloth girdle), paguri (turban), dhuti also called Churia (man's garments), riha (a kind of scarf of the women) and mekhela (a sort of petticoat).

The Ahom rulers also showed keen interest and encouraged the production of various kinds of silk textiles. The Naobaicha Phukanar Buranji refers that as early as the fourteenth Century king Shu-tupha (1369-76 A.D.) permanently assigned one thousand families for producing silk. Three main varieties of silk were produced in the kingdom viz- muga (antheraea assama), edi (attacus ricini) and pat (bombyx textor). There were also some less known varieties such as mejangkari, champa and ketkuri.

The worms fed on the leaves of the som tree (*Machilus odoratissima*) produced a kind of silk called muga; it was of yellowish colour with the tinge of gold. The state allocated large tracts of land for raising som tree; such areas were known as muga-somani or somanibari. For rearing the muga worms paiks were employed by the state. Since no restriction was imposed on the rearing of muga by other persons the people showed keen

interest in its culture. But its culture was considered as below the dignity of the high caste Hindus, as such it was confined chiefly to the Ahoms, Chutiyas, Kacharis and other Mongoloid tribes. Muga constituted the dress of the middle ranks. The worms fed on leaves of adakuri also called mejangkari (*litesoeacitrata*) tree produced a kind of silk known as mejangkari; its colour being of a whiter and better description than that of muga. It constituted the dress of the higher ranks. The champa silk obtained from insects fed on the leaves of Champa tree (*michelia*) was the fine white silk which was the dress of the Ahom royalty.

The worms fed on the leaves of trees called ketkura, phutukala and bagari produced a kind of silk known as ketkurimuga; in quality it was considered inferior to muga. Silk produced by the worms fed on the leaves of the castor plant (Assamese *eda*, *ricinuscommunis*) was called *edi*. The *edi* cocoons were reared indoor. Some writers claim its culture in Assam since very early times. Due to the more durable nature of the *edi* thread and the absence of any administrative restriction on the rearing of *edi* cocoons, the *edi* cloth formed the dress of the common people. its culture was therefore extensive in the valley of the Brahmaputra. Some hill tribes more particularly the Jayantias are known to have adopted its culture, probably from the plains.

Silk obtained from the worms fed on the leaves of the mulberry tree was known as *pat*. But the rearing of its cocoons being restricted by usages to the yogis (also called *Katanis* in Upper Assam). The Ahom rulers however engaged some Chutiyas and Kacharis to rear mulberry silk worm to increase the output of *pat* silk. Since it was the dress of the members of the royal family and the nobles the wearing of garments made of it was prohibited for common people. Hamilton writes that it was used for the *dhutis* of the great nobles.

**Conclusion:** In short we conclude that textile weaving was one of the important craft manufacture in Assam during the period under study. Assamese textiles were in great demand in the adjoining countries of Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim, Burma and Bengal. The Mughals also prized Assamese silk textiles which were either sent as gifts to the Mughal court or were exported for sale. Assamese textiles were known for the fine quality, brightness of colour and durability. On the other hand, cotton goods were known for the bright colours, durability and the bold loom-embroidery designs, the motifs of which, though taken from nature and were given abstract and geometrical shapes.. Another special feature about Assamese textile weaving was that it was not confined to any particular community or artisan group. Textile weaving was a woman's work and 433 was produced in every home. To orthodox Hindus, no stigma was attached to weaving and rearing of silk worms by members of other castes. The Brahmins in Assam did not rear silk-worm though their women too practised weaving. Writing in the early 19th century, before Assam was annexed by the British, Hamilton has given an accurate account of the state of weaving in Assam. This industry was directly patronised by the state, so much so that queens established weaving schools in the palace, to teach the art to the daughters of the nobles. Widows and other female members of the household of executed prisoners were also employed by the state for spinning and weaving as a means of subsistence.

The neo-Vaisnava movement of Sri Sankaradeva was an equally potent force in the development in the art of weaving, specially of figured cloth. Though textile weaving dwindled like all other arts with the fall of the Ahom rule, it never became extinct as many other branches of Assamese art. It is still a living practice among the people of Assam and as much in demand as it had been in the medieval period.

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