

CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Textiles in Human Civilization

Textile is one of the oldest crafts and industry of civilization. Industrial revolution was initiated with textile. It has happen to be the growth engine of all developed and developing countries. All big cities of the world have textile as their economic backbone. It is the interlacement of the two sets of treads longitudinal and across, which is termed as weaving, the fundamental technique of which has been known to the mankind since the days immemorial, as its culture has been a necessity for production of cloth at least for the purpose of covering the human bodies.

Textile is a combination of both art and science. This is one of the industries which is not purely engineering, but a blend of technology and engineering, a fusion and it can never be like the rocket science. The depth of this industry is an ocean. A meter of fabric, weighting few grams, may be composed of trillions of fine fibres of varied characteristics, arranged in a way to transform into yarn and then from thousands of yarns into fabric. And the process still does not end. It passes through various processes finally to become user worthy and user friendly. Like an evolution it then evolves as an expression, style, fashion or a lifestyle and it goes on ----

Long before human begins to weave cloth, they had been using non woven cloth, skins of leather for clothing and a wide variety of other purposes. The non-woven fabrics felt and Bark cloth consist of fibrous materials which can be made into a continuous length without spinning or weaving. The processing of felt and Bark cloth was an important activity in different parts of the world in early times. The simplest of the non-woven cloths to produce is Bark cloth , which is made by soaking the inner bark of suitable trees in water and then beating the strips with a

special wooden implement like a mallet, until the fibres fuse together to form a sheet of fabric of the required size and thickness. Bark cloth is essentially, both in origin and use, a tropical or sub-tropical material, and is produced in parts of central and South America, Africa, Indonesia and the Pacific. The finest bark cloth in the world comes from Polynesia, Polynesian Bark cloth which is generally called '*tapa*' was made from various kinds of trees. The best quality *tapa*, however, come from the bark of the paper-mulberry, a tree which is not indigenous to the pacific area and was introduced centuries ago by peoples migrated from South-East Asia. The paper-mulberry trees were cultivated by female members of the family, although husbands and other menfolk help in cutting down the slender stems and carrying them to the village. The actual craft of *tapa*-making was practiced only by women who were responsible for the whole process of stripping, soaking, beating, drying and finally decorating the cloth. (Mankind, vol.17 pp.2155)

Tapa was widely used for clothing and was worn as a loincloth or simply wrapped around the body, without being tailored or sewn, as a skirt or robe. It was also used for curtain, hangings, matted and as bed covers. *Tapa* also had considerable ritual significance and besides garments, was used for symbolic gift-giving on important occasions and as a wrapper for divine images.

After being dried in the sun, *tapa* cloth became white. Sometimes it was left plain, but more often geometric patterns in black, brown, reddish brown or sometimes yellow were applied either painted by hand pressed on using natural leaf forms or printed with wooden or cane patterns boards. Sometimes *tapa* was coated with vegetable gum to make it more resistant to damp, but as a fabric its usefulness of the polynesian was measured less in terms of durability than of its lightness and absorbency which made it eminently suitable for their climate and way of life. By the time Europeans introduced manufactured woven cotton cloth which quickly displaced *tapa*. In East Africa, especially amongst some Ugandan peoples, barkcloth was also formerly the material for clothing, bed-clothes, mattresses and for drying house interiors. In contrast to the Polynesian practice of cutting down trees to obtain the bark; check tribes like the Uganda removed the

bark from the living tree in one piece. In a very short duration a second bark formed which was of better quality than the first, while the third and fourth were the best bark the tree yielded. Many of the trees would actually yield as many as thirty (30) or forty (40) barks. Most of the Ugandan Bark cloth was simply left its natural colour after being dried in the sun. Different trees were known to give bark which would produce cloth of different colours, ranging from light brown to terracotta and at one time a special kind of trees was cultivated for a white cloth which was reserved exclusively for the royal family. A few cloths were coloured by being soaked in red or black dye, or were painted by hand with black geometric patterns and it was said that some royal cloths were painted with blood by princesses who drew their own for the purpose.

The other important non-woven cloth, which is produced from animal hairs rather than plant fibres, was felt. Felt were made by a process akin to that use to make barkcloth, although it takes longer time and was more complex. The method of manufacture varies in detail from place to place, but basically depends on the fact that wood, fur and some fine hairs will naturally mat together when dampered, heated and pressed – a process known as ‘fulling’. Very little was known about the origin of the fuller’s craft except that it appears to have been associated with herding peoples since earliest times. In the present day, Felt was made from sheep’s fur. Iranian and Turkish tribesmen were expert in the ancient craft of fulling and produce complete coats in felt with the sleeves and hood all made in one piece. This was done by pulling the felt over a wooden form to shape it at various stages during the fulling process. They also decorate felt rugs with ‘fulled-in’ patterns of dyed wool. One colour of wool is introduced at the first stage of the fulling process, the roll was then opened and a little more of the desired pattern is marked out by placing continues of a second colour before fulling continuous again. In this way the coloured pattern becomes an integral part of the felt.

Like barkcloth manufacture, the production of felt has declined in course of time.

The first garment that human used to cover their body was probably the skin of an animal they had killed and eaten. The simplest way of treating skins called dressing, was a very ancient craft with a wide distribution among those traditional cultures who obtain skins either by hunting wild animals or from their own herds. The treatment or dressing of the skins were the works of women, who followed a simple and time-honoured process. The plain Indians of North Asia were a classic example of a traditional society with such a marked dependence on and highly developed use of skins.

In western countries today, although leather is still an important material, it is rapidly becoming a luxury and is being replaced by plastic and synthetic imitations which are more economical to produce.

Although spectacular discoveries like stone, tools, the use of metal, electricity and atomic power determine the overall/pattern of human technical evaluation, the whole process of development is one of very great complexity. Many discoveries of a less noticeable kind also played an important part and among these weaving had some of the most widespread social consequences.

As long as human population remained small, particularly when their main means of subsistence was hunting, it was possible for the basic needs of covering and even some shelter to be provided by the use of skins. But when a skin has to be used whole, it can provide covers for only one person. It was also heavily prone to vermin and decay, and as more and more people needed some form of covering other techniques became necessary. Weaving proved the best way to be the best of making cloths from various animal and vegetables which has been provided by natural world. (Mankind vol.17, pp. 2159)

Various ways of weaving were invented in several parts of the world at different times, spreading widely to different societies. However many peoples isolated from these centres of invention never adopted weaving, while for others different types of material answered their needs. Some found weaving incompatible with their nomadic way of life or with their local raw materials.

Among many of the societies which have produced woven cloth in recent times, a whole range of techniques can be found from the simplest to the next complex. These suggest some of the different stages through which weaving may have developed in the past.

In some of its simplest forms weaving resembles basketry, from which it may have developed. The Maori, a tribes of New Zealand devised ways of making cloth by a technique brought by their ancestors from central Polynesia-originally used for making baskets and fistraps. The stems of a local flax were soaked and pounded to produce a tough yet soft and flexible fibre. For some cloths these fibres were used loose and untwisted, but to make it stronger and compact it was twisted into string by rubbing against the thigh with the flat of the hand. A pair of weft threads was taken at a time and by turning these wefts around one another each time they crossed a wrap thread an effect known as 'twining' was produced. When the wefts are inserted manually, the process was known as 'finger weaving'. The Maori stretched the first pair of wefts between two sticks fixed in the ground, so that the wraps hung down and the weaving proceeded downwards. Although weaving was a skilled craft, the Maori weavers were women who still performed all their usual tasks. They did not make a living as specialist weavers. This was also quite widespread and just as in other craft occupations specialization while common in the more complex civilization was by no means universal. Especially where simple looms are employed, weaving can often be carried on as a part-time activity, as it is still in many parts of Africa and Asia.

The Indians of the North West Pacific coast of America used similar methods to those of the Maori. They made a type of blanket, the chilcat, which was very fine and bore the most marvelous designs. These chilcat were worn as cloaks, and were similarly an indication of the wealth and status of their owner. They were also used as part of the ceremonial exchanges, like the potlatch, which were an important part of the life for many North East Coast Indian peoples. Among these Amerindians, weaving was again an occupation for women who would carry out their normal domestic duties as well. They suspended the warp threads from a fixed wooden beam onto which the cloth was wound as the

weaving progressed. The material most commonly used was cedar bark fibre but the more precious wool from the mountain God was also employed. Yellow, black and blue-green weft threads were produced by dyeing with plant and vegetable materials and complex designs were woven into the cloth by weaving sections by using different colour wefts.

One tribe, the Salish, improved this technique by passing the wraps around two beams, keeping them in tension to form a true loom. The warp was a continuous length of thread, each loop passing around the lower beam and back on itself so that when this beam was withdrawn the cylinder of finished cloth could be opened flat without cutting the warps. The loom enabled the Salish to use the common form of plain weave. The weft simply pass in and out of the warps, without twining around each other was necessary to anchor the wefts to the warps when these were hanging slack.

The backstrap loom was used by the ancient inhabitants of Peru to weave cloth remarkable for the intricacies of its patterns. These designs were produced by a variety of techniques. For the present day South American Indians weaving is a spare time domestic craft practiced mostly by women. The cloth is produced not only for home use, but also to sell in local markets.

The peoples of the West Africa use this loom for weaving narrow strips of cotton which are sewn together to make clothing. On these African looms two heddles are used on holding the odd wraps and other the even, which makes a shed stick unnecessary. The hiddle threads are strung between a pair of rods so that they can be pulled from below as well as from above. The hiddles are joined by a cord which runs through a pulley above the loom, and each is also attached to a treadle below. As one hiddle is pulled down by the treadle the other is pulled up. Instead of a sword for beating in there was a frame set with strips of reed which pass between each wrap and this was swung against the weft by a cord from above. Both men and women weave in west Africa, but looms of this type were only used by men while women use a broader vertical loom without treadles.

In much of India, where looms of a similar type are used, weaver's usually belong to certain hereditary castes which are supported by supplying the needs of the community. Other castes supply the yarn or dye it and the cloth was sold by merchants. Cotton is the main material woven and cotton cloth is usually plain, often white, although simple stripes or checks following the normal course of the threads, are also made. On the other hand silk may be woven into very elaborate patterns on a similar type of loom. The finest cloths for the wealthy use silver and gold threads made by wrapping fine wire around the thread. Thus the role of the specialist craftsman is changing, and there will inevitably be some people engaged in producing cloth by traditional means and finally survive. (Mankind, Vol. 13, pp. 2160-2162)

1.2 Indian Heritage in Handloom Weaving

The hand woven textiles have occupied an important place in the culture and civilization of India since very ancient times. The art of weaving has enormously contributed to the rich cultural heritage of the country. In fact, the handlooms and the weaving of myriad textiles, often of exquisite finesse and beauty, may be said to represent the very ethos of Indian culture and civilisation.

The artisans living in the Indian countryside were influenced by the elements of physical environment as well as by their myths, legends, rituals, ceremonies, festivals, social organizations, cultural norms and respective textile traditions in a way or the other. As a result each culturally definable region of India has developed distinctive characteristics of its own in the craft of weaving and production of textiles in diverse types and designs. The weavers whether housewives or fulltime artisans', worked not merely to cater to the needs of the individual, the household or the community, but also to satisfy their personal urge for self-expression and creative impulse.

Though in the yester years weaving had been a fairly widespread feminine activity in India, in the course of time, it became a specialized caste-bound craft practiced as a household enterprise by particular groups. The Hindu *Tanti* or the Muslim *Jolaha* in North-India are examples of such specialized

weaver castes. Textile production became the monopoly of such castes that produced various items for the need of the wider regional populations. In areas where weaving became a caste-bound occupation, it became almost a taboo for people of other castes to operate the loom. The exception to this trend was found among some tribal populations in selected tracts. Such tribal groups have retained their age-old tradition of weaving and textile production for their own consumption.

The textile tradition of India is as old as its civilization. Initially used as a means of protection against nature, textiles have come a long way from a purely personal to increasingly satisfy man's aesthetic needs for colour and ornamentation. The history of the Indian sub-continent is multi-layered and multifaceted which has been shaped by the thoughts and ideas of empires, religions and philosophy. The expressions of the master weavers were determined by the climate, salts and water apart from the patronage of the royalty and the skill of the migrating artisans.

In the Rig Veda and Upanishads, the whole universe itself is envisioned as a piece of fabric with a continuous interlocking of the warps and wefts woven by the Gods. Lord Vishnu is regarded as a divine weaver. He was said to have woven the rays of the sun into the garment which he fashioned for himself. The Atharva Veda also states about the weaver and his loom describes that Day and Night spreads light and darkness over the earth as the weaver throw a shuttle on the loom. Hinduism retains the social caste hierarchy and this was reflected in the symbols of the textiles. The Manusmriti states that the sacrificial string of the brahmanas shall be of cotton, that of a *khatriya* of hempen threads and that of a *vaishya* of woolen threads. Manu's writing also indicated the use of rice water as starch for sizing material used in India. These Vedic scriptures were the earliest literary evidences containing references to weaving in India until the discovery of the actual artifacts from Harappa and Mahenjodaro, the centres of the Indus Valley Civilization. The cloth fragments, bobbins, terracotta spindles and a bronze needle found here poses as the first signs of the cultivation of cotton, spinning, weaving and embroidery in India. The discovery of madder-dyed cotton fabric in

Mohenjodaro is an important clue to the textile tradition of India and proves the mastery of the Indians over the complicated process of Manjitha or madder dyeing. The knowledge of cotton dyeing was unknown to the rest of the world till the 17th century A.D. A stone statue of a priest found in Mohenjodaro is seen draped with a designed fabric which may either be woven on a loom or embroidered. (Purbajyoti Sangrahalaya, 2005, p.14)

In the 6th century B.C., two religious thoughts – Buddhism and Jainism emerged which heralded an age of inquiry and evoked different art forms including textiles. References of dyed clothes and embroidery in gold threads are found in the Jatakas, written in the 15th century B.C. Kautilya, the minister of King Chandragupta Maurya documented a department of “Director of weaving and spinning” which patronized this craft form and oversaw the manufacture of cloth made of wool, cotton, silk, flax and hemp. Megasthenes, a Greek envoy who visited the Mauryan capital also wrote about the clothes of the court in his Journal *Ta Indica*. The Zenith of Buddhist art apparently found in the caves in Ajanta near Aurangabad show figures wearing tie-dyed ikat loin clothes, draperies, ornamented with stripes, checks and waves. The Sangam classics produced within the period from the 1st century B.C. to 6th century A.D. refer to the weaving of silk and cotton cloths. In both the Chola and Vijaynagar reign, the weavers lived in the temple precinct and produced fabrics for the temple and the idols. Thus catered not only to the priestly class of people but also to the needs of the locality. In the beginning in the 8th century A.D., India experienced a series of incursions by Muslim invaders Ibn Batuta, a Moroccan who visited and stayed in India from 1333 to 1346 century A.D. Commenting on the greatness of the Sultanate dynasty, wrote that more than 500 specialised artisans produced silk and gold brocades for the royal wardrobe. (Purbajyoti Sangrahalaya, 2005, p.14)

During the Mughal rule, India produced some of the finest muslin’s and brocades. Weavers from as far as samarkhand and Persia were bought to this part of the world and the repertoire of the Indian textiles reached a new height which was a confluence of the Persian culture of the Mughals and the Hindu aesthetics. The Iranian weavers on invitation by Akbar penetrated into Agra, Lahore and

Fatehpur Sikri and created Carpets which were on par with their Iranian and Turkish counterparts. Following the Islamic conventions which prohibited the depiction of anthropomorphic forms, the repertoire of Indian textiles during this period adopted a new arena of designs and motifs which were of a naturalistic form. Floral designs and foliage made way to the textiles of India. With the decline of the Mughal regime, the Persian and Hindu artisans who flourished under the royal patronage later disappeared into areas like Gujrat and Rajasthan who sustained a rich and long-standing textile tradition in these parts of the country till date.

There was intermingling of Persian and Hindu aesthetics in the South under the Persian rulers of the Deccan and this resulted in the fusion of the traditional block-printing and resist dyes with hand-painted Kalamkari and gold leaf techniques to produce works of great excellence. Indian textile was one of the most important items of trade through the centuries. Among the textile examples found outside India mention may be made of the trade cloth discovered at Al-Alfstat near Cairo in Egypt belonging to around 13th to 15th century A.D. Such examples, supplemented by the Asian and European trade gazettes are evidences of a passage through which apart from ideas, religion, philosophy and language, Indian textiles also traveled to the rest of the world.

Babylonian seals suggest an early cotton trade with the sub-continent. Silk yarn from china suggests that there were trade-links between the two countries by an overland route to the countries north of the Himalayas. With the expansion of the Persian Empire to Kabul by the 6th century B.C. the Indus valley was linked to the Mediterranean. India was a major transit point of silk and cotton trade between the East and the West during the Magadhan regime. By the 1st 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 4th century Latin translation of the Bible by St. Jerome. Here wisdom is said to be more enduring than the “dyed colours of India”.

Thus India, a country with diversity is famous for its rich cultural heritage. Handloom industry is a part of the Indian culture and tradition. From the view point of calibre and efficiency, the handloom weaver always possesses a pride of place in the cultural life of the Indian people. “From time immemorial, India has attained a high water mark of excellence in the manufacture of fine fabrics. The tradition of handloom weaving in India has been tony and glorious and the skill of the hand spinner and handloom weaver of a very high order. The artisans of India are also known from early times for hand spinning, hand-printing and hand-dyeing. History says that hand-weaving was in existence in India for over five thousand eight hundred years now. The artisans in this industry have been carrying their profession without having schooling or without any sort of technical training. They are accustomed with the art of weaving as a hereditary occupation.

Down the ages silk was known not only for its artistic value but also for its royal patronage. Kapoor which assessing the heritage of the Indian silk observed that ‘five thousand years ago silk provided the indispensable ceremonial attire for all occasions in India, a humble marriage or a regular durbar. The Rig Veda which is over five thousand years old mentions ‘*Urna*’, generally considered as a variety of silk. The Ramayana also refers to the five silken vestments of diverse colours’ as wedding gifts to Sita. Mentions are there in Mahabharata that Yudhishthira received as gift clothes woven from thread spun by worms. (Das, N.C., 1986, pp. 22)

India was known to the world for its extensive use of cotton and silk goods. From about 1500 B.C. to 1500 A.D. for nearly thirty centuries, India held the world monopoly in the manufacture of cotton goods. Herodotus in the fifth century of the Christian era speaks of Indian cotton in the highest terms. The Indians possess likewise a kind of plant which, instead of fruits, produces wool of a fine and better quality than that of sheep. Of this the Indians make clothes. Many

ancient important centres associated with the manufacture of varieties of clothes like the high quality Dacca Muslins, the Chintaz and Kalamkari of Machilipatnam, Banaras Brocades and silks of Kancheepuram, all these present the tradition and culture which symbolizes the unique cultural heritage of the Indian weaving. The weaving of Muslin was so fine and of such extraordinary delicacy that a single ounce of cotton could be spun to a length up to a few miles was an art of well known and practiced in Dacca. India can claim the production of certain fabrics which represent the most fascinating and traditional designs of the past and at the same time the capability of adopting most modern and sophisticated prints. The country has maintained its distinctive quality for its intricate weaving and colour combination by its master craftsman. Possibly many cottage and small scale industries in different centres of India could survive as most of those industries have cultural and traditional background.

From the origin and past glory the handloom industry may be better termed as a time-honoured cottage industry. No other country in the world has preserved and upheld this ancient craft in such a pure form as India does. It has nourished the cultural heritage of India. By maintaining its tradition and culture, the industry has played an important role in socio-economic life of the Indian people.

But with the advent of the British and the East India company in the 16th 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 artists. The English patrons demanded repetitive designs rather than any creative endeavour. Interestingly these hybrid designs were later interpreted 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 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.

1.3 Textiles in North-East

The North eastern region of India comprises the states viz. Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura including Sikkim enjoys a place of pride in the whole country for its rich heritage of artistic handloom products. There is an immensely rich assembly of tribal cultures in this region. In fact, except for the Brahmaputra and Barak plains of Assam and the Imphal plains of Manipur, the indigenous inhabitants of most of their large hilly region are tribal. The beautiful hand woven products of the tribals and non-tribals of this region not only reflect the skills of individual weavers and artisans, but the creative capacity and deep perception of beauty in colour and design of the people as a whole. The very socio-cultural life of the communities is revealed significantly in their textiles. 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, Nagas have been expert dyers and produced extremely brilliant colours. The tribal designs of the region of especially the Naga and Lushai (Mizo) hand woven fabrics are universally admired even today (Das, N.C. 1986, pp.24). In the plains as well as in the hills the Abors and Mishimis weave cloths 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. Manipur weavers living in certain parts of Assam still maintain their distinctive ability and quality in the

matter of production of 'Lyshemphi' which has got a very good demand inside and 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 engaged in weaving in their traditional designs.

1.4 Textile Heritage in Assam

The handloom industry is the most important cottage industry in Assam which has a glorious past from the time immemorial. It is closely associated with the art and culture of the Assamese society. Skill in the art of weaving and spinning has been placed highly. It has always been held to be one of the highest attainments of an Assamese woman.

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 once come across while heading towards the east; mention being made of Magadha (South Bihar), Anga (Bhagalpur), Pundra (North Bengal) and the country of the cocoon rearers. (N.C. Das 1986)

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 'patrotna' and remarks that the one which is produced in the country of Suvarnakundya was the best, '*Tasam Suvarnavnndya Srestha*'.

The scholars trace the origin of the word 'Assam' to the thirteenth century, that is, the period when the Ahoms conquered Assam. In ancient times Assam, was known as the kingdom of Kamrupa, the capital being Pragjyotishpura (city of eastern light) which was situated in or near the present city of Gauhati. The kingdom of Kamrupa was extended from the Burmese border on the east to the Koratya river in the west and the seas in the south. The kingdom, thus, roughly included within its boundaries the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, the Rangpur and the Coach Behar districts of Bengal and the kingdom of Bhutan.

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 traveler Hiuen Chang visited Kamrupa during the reign of Bhaskarvarman who was of historical figure and ruled over the kingdom of Kamrupa extended up to Bihar on the west in the seventh century AD and Pragjyotishpura 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 Harsha charitra, Bhaskarvarmana was a mighty King and the only peer in the whole of India was 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 carried to Harsha from Bhaskarvarman included silken cloths pure as the autumn moon's light, soft loin cloth smooth as birch bark, sacks of woven silk; wrappers of white bark silk and various kinds of smooth-figured textiles.

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 silk, woven out of pattasutra. Choudhury (1982) wrote that 'presents included all the best specimens of endi, muga and pat.

Barua also refers to a gift by Bhaskarvarman to Hiuen Sang, the Chinese pilgrim. The gift mentioned was a cap (Ho-la-li) made of 'course 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, N.C. 1986)

The early history of weaving also refers to the existence of a class of weavers community known as '*tanti*' or '*tontubai*'. The '*tanti*' or the '*tontubais*' 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. 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. But '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. Das wrote that Gunabhiram Barooah has made mention of the 'Jugi' and 'Katoni' caste, whose occupation was cocoon rearing and weaving. (N.C. Das 1986 pp.18-20)

The use of '*Karpasa*' (cotton) garments is also referred to in the Kalika Purana of the 10th century AD and the Harsacarita. The evidence from the Arthasastra, the Harsacarita and the classical writers among others prove that in the art of the rearing of silk cocoons and the weaving of the finest silk textiles, the weavers of Kamrupa had a reputation at par with those of China. Even now also Assam occupies a prominent place in the production of silk and silk cloths in India. Assam also occupied an important position since the early days particularly in respect of manufacture of dyed cloths. Reference to the coloured cloths was made by Bana, that Bhaskara sent to Harsha variously coloured and painted cloths, which was 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. (N.C. Das p.18)

Das mention that certain references are also found regarding the 'ornamented cloths offered to different deities and also the use and practice of manufacturing various coloured cloths like '*raktam*', '*kanseyam*', '*nilam*' in connection with the workshop 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 cloths. In certain

other cases the finished garments were dyed. In most cases the cloths were dyed in red, black yellow, blue and the like. The materials used in dyeing clothes were not only by lac and the indigo (called 'rumdye' in Assam), but were also prepared from various roots, leaves and barks of trees. (Souvenir, 2000, Ed. Sarma Dev Jayanta)

1.5 Status of Textiles During the Ahom Rule

The field of artistic activity in which Assam excelled during Ahom rule was the art of handloom weaving. Due to the patronage of the Ahom kings handloom weaving as a household craft flourished and developed. Adequate measures taken by the Ahom kings contributed to the rapid development of handlooms and also made the weavers skilful.

The days of King Pratap Singha (1603-1641 AD) witnessed era of state pattroign, under the textile industry. During his reign, under the close supervision of Momai Tamuli Barbarua, a minister made spinning and weaving compulsory craft to be practiced in every household. The administration ordained that every able-bodied woman in the household must spun a certain amount of silk yarn every day before sunset. The defaulters had to face physical punishment. It is said that this was scrupulously followed by the people to avoid punishment. Moreover, every household had to present to the king one powa (approximately 250 Gms) of silk yarn per year. Though such compulsions disappeared in the post Ahom period spinning and weaving were still regarded as necessary accomplishments for women including unmarried girls. (Purbajyoti Sangrahalaya pp.23-24)

From all the above references it may be safely concluded that along with the art of weaving, people were accustomed in use of simple and coloured garments in Ancient Assam from early period and this paved the way for the establishment of allied industries associated with handloom.

1.6 Hajo: A Textile Village

Hajo is a semi urban area of 4.01 sq. km. A cradle of ancient glories with the temple of Hayagrib Madhab, supposed originally to be a Buddhist one and powa Mocca, a sufi shrine, the holiest of the holy places for the Muslims of the eastern region for it being the crematorium of one Giasuddin Aulia, a preacher of Islam in Assam during the 13th century, both overlooking each other from two hill tops as symbols of Hindu-Muslim amity and unity.

In Hajo, the art of weaving is an age-old traditional activity. It is prevalent among all castes and is exclusively feminine one. The textile is treated here as a domestic craft to meet the household requirement of every family. It is only a labour of love. The women used this craft as a vehicle for expression for her cultural imaginations and experiences.

Suvarnakudya was supposed to be a trading centre of the ancient Assam. History says that modern Sonkudiha in Kamrupa stands for Suvarnakudya. According to N.C. Das (1986) the place was famous as a commercial centre and must have then contained a settlement of merchants who traded not only in silk but also in fabrics manufactured from fibres and fragrant substances. It lies in the present district of Kamrup, by the side of Hajo-Nalbari road and only at a distance of 14 km from Sualkuchi, the present famous production centre of *pat*, *muga* and *eri* clothes in Assam. These evidences lead us to observe that Assam even in the fourth century AD was celebrated for dukula fit to be kept in the Royal treasury and was produced near Hajo.

Under the Hajo Revenue circle, Sualkuchi is famous for the silk industry in Assam. Sualkuchi may be compared with Manchester the wealthy village of the middle ages and a manufacturing centre of woolen, linen and cotton goods of every kind with more than ten thousand inhabitants. Like the artisans of Manchester a section of the inhabitants of Sualkuchi had remained engaged since antiquity in the production and distribution of mulberry silk commonly known as *pat* and *Muga* fabrics of various artistic designs and patterns. Its history may be

also traced back to the days of Kautilya (Fourth century BC) and certainly to the origin of Dharmapala of the Fourth century who had established his capital on the Godanda hills west of Guwahati, now a days Gandhama just at the eastern outskirts of present Sualkuchi. By the end of the 18th century Manchester became the textile centre of the world by transforming its traditional weaving industry into modern textile industry. (Baishya, Prabin, 1989 p.133)

The Ahom ruler Pratap Singha also made it possible for many weavers to settle down who were drawn from different places of Assam, in the village of Sualkuchi on the north bank of Brahmaputra under Hajo circle in Kamrup district, Assam. The weavers of Sualkuchi and those of nearby Palasbari on the north bank of the Brahmaputra were experts in both weaving and spinning. Their work attracted the attention of the Muslim invaders who came to Assam during that period. Some of them also learned these crafts gradually and settled down in Assam. They came to be known as Jolaha-Katoni. These villages, particularly Sualkuchi, have even to this day retained their tradition of silk weaving. (Baishya, Prabin, 1989 p.133)

Thus, since time immemorial silk weaving and reeling has been part and parcel of everyday life in Sualkuchi with its techniques passed down the generations. Assamese literature and scriptures bear ample testimony to the silk weaving tradition of this area. In Sualkuchi, every family is engaged in weaving. The hand-woven silk fabrics of Sualkuchi on *Muga* and mulberry occupies a place of eminence in preserving the Assamese heritage and culture. It plays a pivotal role in the economy of the state. The wave of the silk textile industry of Sualkuchi is spread throughout the villages of entire Hajo circle. Now-a-days there is at least one commercial loom in almost each families of the circle. They contribute a noticeable portion to their family income.

1.7 Objectives

- To study the socio-cultural aspects of indigenous weaving.
- To study the history, folklore and technology associated with traditional textiles and weaving in the region.

- To study the changes in the design and motifs as a result of commercialization of the industry.
- To study problems and prospects in the development of traditional textile industry.
- To suggest measures to develop and sustain the traditional handloom industry in the region.

1.8 Justification of the Study

It is hardly necessary to say that the handloom industry is the largest cottage industry only next to agriculture. It is an ancient craft which has survived through the ages and of which the country can be proud. The traditional heritage of the handloom industry has been very rich. The commencement of the machine age has indeed affected it for time to a great extent. Yet handloom weaving continues to occupy a place of pride amongst the cottage industries.

Apart from its artistic and traditional value the handloom industry plays an important role in the national economy. Now, millions of the people working on handloom and are directly sustained by the industry. Apart from this numbers of person also indirectly benefited through commerce and other ancillary industries. Thus the handloom industry by itself provides employment to as many persons as all the organized industries taken together. Besides, the industry meets the country's requirement of cloths and is exporting various to abroad. Although Assam possesses the highest number of looms its production is one of the lowest in the country. This may be primarily due to the fact that unlike in other states barring a small percentage of professional weavers localized in particular areas, it is in the main a spare time occupation. It is of prime necessity to organize as many weavers as possible on commercial line. We have not only to consolidated but expand these activities.

While handloom weaving may be gradually disappearing as one of the main props of our culture, a large number of the population still eke out an

existence as weavers in Hajo circle. For many, in the area, weaving as an additional household activity can enhance family incomes and thus raise standards of living. Thus, development of the handloom sector is of critical importance for the socio-economic upliftment of a large section of our population. There has been hardly any meaningful development and growth in the industrial sectors in recent years in the north eastern region of India. Weaving as a skill among the people is regarded as one of the traditional strengths of the North Eastern region. It is therefore, imperative that the growth and development strategy of Assam and the North East is geared around the region's traditional strengths. Handloom development can be a vehicle for the eventual growth and development of the region.

Handloom can play a vital role in the state economy by providing sustenance to a large section of the people and at the same time, facilitating economic growth of the region. For this, it is essential to understand the role of handlooms in its proper perspective. However, like any other labour intensive industry, hand woven fabrics cannot compete with fabrics woven in automatic machines. Due to economies of scale, the cost of a machine-made low-value product would always be cheaper than that of a handmade product but every product that is made by hand is unique and bears the stamp of the makers individuality. A hand woven product is actually a work of art like any other handmade object. A work of art is valued on the basis of the quality and aesthetics of the end-product.

One can state that the handloom sector has infinite potential to be one of the most important players in the socio-economic growth of the country. Those engage in it must look to this sector as a challenge. The sector has the scope to hitch rides in the era of commercialization and globalization. The day should not be far off when handloom products from this region be promoted through the internet, be marketed globally and would drape the most important locations and people in the world. If the work has not been done its scope and significance would remain hidden.

Handloom weaving has traditionally spread throughout the state, it is not uniformly practiced in entire Assam, but rather concentrated in a few districts mainly due to the locational advantages as well as supply of raw materials etc.

Mention may be made of village Sualkuchi in this context. Sualkuchi is associated with weaving from time immemorial and the economy of the village is primarily dependent on weaving. While referring to Sualkuchi, the census of India 1961 observed: though silk weaving is not uncommon in other parts of Assam yet Sualkuchi claims a technique, quality and reputation of its own which are unique in so far as *muga* and *pat* silk fabrics are concerned. The census Report further observed – Sualkuchi silk is as old as its people. Although the origin of silk weaving at Sualkuchi is still obscure, there is no doubt about its antiquity. During the olden days, the industry appears to have been patronized mainly by the nobilities and the ruling kings of Assam.

According to a survey conducted by the Planning Forums of the local SBMS college during 1978, of the total households of 2236, over 1775 households were engaged in weaving directly or indirectly. This shows that over 79 percent of the total households in the village are dependent on weaving as their principal sources of income. (N.C. Das 1986 pp.44-45) Gradually the wave of weaving at Sualkuchi has spread all over the Hajo circle. It may be demonstration effect also. In this context mention may be made about comparative study of the handloom census 1987-88, 1995-96 and 2009-10 wrote by Girin Sarkar Assistant Director of Handloom and Textile, Sonitput, Tezpur. Major findings of his study was – (1) Numbers of weaver households declined, (ii) Numbers of weavers declined, (iii) Numbers of Handloom declined, (iv) Percentage of fulltime weavers increased and (v) Man days worked per weavers increased.

From a pilot study the researcher found that a region which once the most rich in carrying out traditional handloom weaving is now showing a trend which is happening in the National Handloom census.

But from the evidences, it may be conclude that Hajo and Sualkuchi in Kamrup is occupying a unique position in the traditional handloom and weaving industry in the state. It may be due to the rich heritage of weaving, localization of skills and availability of raw materials.

By the increasing scope of gainful employment in the handloom sector in the state particularly during the recent years, the traditional Handloom weaving activities which were originally a part time domestic job, turned gradually into full-time commercial job for the weavers.

Due to commercialization of handloom products traditional practices of indigeneous weaving is jeopardized. Due to the changes in the society and culture traditional handloom weavers are obtaining newer practices in handloom weaving. As a result the folkloristic elements of handloom and traditional weaving practices is at oblivion. Due to commercialization of textiles indigenous designs and motifs are being corrupted. The need for research work in this field cannot be undermined. Therefore study of this topic is the need of the hour.