

# PROSPECTIVE KHADI INDUSTRY IN ASSAM FACES ADVERSITY - A STUDY

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## **Abstract:**

Khadi, the hand-spun and hand-woven indigenous fabric, once synonymous with the Indian freedom struggle, is now becoming an all-inclusive fashion statement. In the post independent era, Government intervened to develop it. In Assam it has gone through many ups and downs, yet it sustained because of its inherent strength. Khadi is an activity with women monopoly. The objectives of the Study are to assess the status of Khadi in Assam. Khadi Institution in North Eastern Zones are financially weak, their annual turnovers are less, suffer from shortage of working capital. Public fund investment to promote Khadi has remained very scarce and complex to avail. This is not a threat to rural economy alone but to the rich culture and heritage of Assam. The real needs of artisans cannot be ignored. This remains a challenge.

**Keywords:** *Khadi, Assam, Women, Hand-spun*

## **Introduction:**

Khadi, the indigenous fabric, once synonymous with the Indian freedom struggle, is now becoming an all-inclusive fashion statement. It is a form of hand-spun and hand-woven fabric that can be found in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. In a tropical country like India Khadi offers comfort and it can be moulded into any style from everyday wear to formal evening wear (Anita Dongre, Designer). Top designers are highly ambitious about the future of this natural fabric. Designer like Ritu Beri created ceremonial Khadi in 1990. Over time, Khadi has become more versatile, while youth today relate it to the spirit of patriotism at home; it has made its niche globally for its natural environmental friendliness. For Gandhiji Khadi was symbol of self-reliance, sustainability and hard work. For decades it has silently contributed to the rural economy of Assam in a meaningful way. But the contributions of rural women, who are by birth amazing artisans, yet to get recognised appropriately. The history of Khadi in Assam is fascinating. Gandhiji in article *Lovely Assam* said, "Every woman of Assam is a born weaver. No Assamese girl who does not weave can expect to become a wife. And she weaves fairy tales in cloth. Some of the old patterns 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 work" (Young India). In other parts of India Khadi was initiated by Gandhiji as a weapon to fight the British, for rural self-sufficiency,

as an ethical skill, but in Assam meaning of Khadi ran much deeper than that beyond the stretch of time. It is an activity with women monopoly.

In the post independent era, Government intervened to develop Khadi. But in last seven decades this household industry in Assam has gone through many ups and downs. Yet, Khadi sustained itself because of its inherent strength.

**Objectives:** 1. To assess the status of Khadi in Assam; 2. To investigate the socio-economic status of the artisans; 3. To examine if this craft is relevant in the present era of changes and 4. To investigate into the steps taken to strengthen Khadi in Assam;

## **Literature Review:**

Khadi an environment friendly pursued in decentralised mode is an apt tool of development. This textile represents India's self reliance, legacy, tradition and pride of rural productivity. Khadi is handspun, hand-woven skin friendly fabrics that breaths. Khadi has a long history. Dating back to the 12 Century A.D. Marco Polo described Khadi of the Bengal region as finer than a spider's web. The Romans were also great admirers of the Bengal Khadi Muslin and used to import great amounts of fabrics. During the Mughal period, the weavers of Comilla, Bangladesh were known for their distinctive skill and were reported by the Tripura Gazetteer in 1890s. Down the lane, the masterly expertise in Khadi got relegated, yet efforts are on in Bangladesh to keep alive the legacy of one of the finest traditions.

## **Khadi in Assam:**

Gandhi ji said "Maidens of lovely Assam weave poems on their looms". In Assam it contributes significantly in restoring the age-old rich tradition, her culture and the deep-rooted social fabric. Assam is a land where tea is an industry, handicrafts a major occupation. People in rural areas are mainly engaged in primary sector and sometimes all the family members. As a result, marginal productivity of labour is almost zero or even negative. Although there is hardly any Assamese home where traditional weaving is not connecting their lives officially there are only 7083 registered artisans who are engaged in Khadi activities. They work through NGO

called Khadi Institutions (KI) that receive Government of India funds through Khadi & Village Industries Commission (KVIC).

Though our study focused on Khadi, we quickly update the status of Handloom in Assam which unlike Khadi uses mill span yarn to weave textiles. As per Handloom Census more than 14.01 Lakh weavers and 11.11 Lakh looms are available in Assam. Besides more than 16.43 Lakh weavers and allied workers work in Handloom sector. Thus about 30.44 Lakh persons involved in Handloom. Assam has the monopoly in the world in respect of Muga, the Golden Silk, production as more than 97 percent of it is produced in Assam. The state has also achieved the right of Geographical Indicator for Muga thread. The state produces about 56 percent of Eri Silk in the country. The total area under Silkworm Food Plants recorded increased to 33790 hectare in 2013-14 from 26826.5 hectare during 2012-13. The production of Silk in the state was 2700 MT and production of Eri raw Silk was 2545.6 MT during the year 2013-14. As per a report the State Department of Handloom and Textiles covers 13576 villages (total villages 26395) under its 209 Handloom Demonstration Circles with 1316163 weavers for its Handloom activities. The 98 Weavers Extension units and 20 Production Centres produced 65.3 thousand metres Handloom fabrics during 2013-14 (Economic Survey of Assam 2014-15).

Government's intervention to promote Khadi in the State rests with KVIC and Assam Khadi & Village Industries Board (AKVIB), two statutory organizations. KVIC was established through an Act of Parliament in 1957 and the AKVIB was through an Act of State Legislature in 1955. These organizations primarily work through KI, which are registered under Society's Registration Act, 1860 and are certified by the KVIC.

From the performances of last decade, we find the status remained more or less static. The findings of Pesala Busenna and A. Amarendra Reddy in "Khadi & Village Industry: A Case Study of KI in India" said "KI in West and North Eastern Region (NER) are financially weak, and their annual turnover is mostly less than ₹30 Lakh. Most of the KI suffer from shortage of working capital" the report said.

History witnesses that the isolation of the NER began earlier as a result of British imperialism, when the Region was cut-off from its traditional trading partners (Bhutan, Myanmar & Indo-China). Still, throughout its history the NER is known to have been an important physical and cultural bridge between India and South East Asia. This isolation imposed on NER has spread deeply adverse affect on pace of development of this Region, her trade routes were snatched without giving serious thought about her prosperity. Defeating these compulsions Khadi is widely accepted in the South East Asian markets.

### **Methodology:**

The study aims at understanding the status of Khadi in Assam. Social science research is an enquiry or investigation with clearly defined parameters. The study is based on primary as well as secondary data. Information from the artisans and organisations were collected pertaining to core indicators. Structured questionnaires were applied. Secondary data was cross-verified wherever possible between various statistics.

### **Universe of Study:**

Although Assam is our Universe to study Khadi, this textile is not woven in India alone but also in Bangladesh and Pakistan. This may remind us that once these nations were a single. If unity motivates us, Khadi could be a common thread that binds us emotionally with deepening attachments. Bangladesh and Assam are geographically contiguous with deep cultural and socio-economic identities among the people.

Assam is situated in the NER bordering seven Indian States and countries like Bangladesh and Bhutan. The population of Assam is heterogeneous with socio-cultural and ethnic diversity, which stands at 312.06 Lakh. This is 2.6 percent of population in India (Census, 2011). The State's geographical area is 78,438 sq. km or 2.4 percent of country's area of which 98.4 percent is rural and 86 percent live in rural areas. Assam is potentially one of the richest geographical units of the country where the mighty river Brahmaputra slashes a central path between its north and south.

Population dynamics of Assam has two basic components, dynamics through natural processes and dynamics through induced processes. Individual State focussed researches testify the above statement (Panda, 1988, Rai and Goel, 1984). As regards to natural growth rate of population during the period 1971 - 81, all the states in the NER registered higher growth rate than the rate for the whole country (Butola, undated P.32). The same trend continued during the period 1981-91. The increasing population pressure gave rise to linkages between quality of life, population dynamics and environmental degradation. During this period, average annual exponential growth rate was 2.12 percent against the national rate of only 2.11 percent. It is believed that the influx of people from neighbouring countries has a bearing in it which has contributed to alter the demographic characteristics of Assam.

### **Data analysis:**

There are 7083 registered artisans in Khadi production. A Federation of KI was established in 1981 to serve common needs. The following KI are functioning in Assam.

Sr. No	Name of Khadi Institutions / Year of establishment	Artisans
1.	Assam Khadi & Village Industries Board, Guwahati / 1955	1196
2.	Barkhetri Unnayan Samity, Mukulmua, Nalbari / 1975	784
3.	Dakshin Kamrup Samagra Bikash Parishad, Bijaynagar, Kamrup / 1978	753
4.	Gram Swaraj Parishad, Rangia, Kamrup / 1975	630
5.	Gram Lok Seva Sangh, Dhamdhama, Nalbari / 1976	877
6.	Pragatisil Khadi Samity, Kalitakuchi, Kamrup / 1990	330
7.	Mouman Seva Ashram, Boko, Kamrup / 1944	210
8.	Balijana Anchalik Jana Seva Samity Agia, Goalpara / 1976	156
9.	Katigorah Gram Unnayan Parishad, Behara, Cachar / 1979	157
10.	Barkhola Gramodyog Society, Borkhola, Cachar / 1990	40
11.	Sarbhu Gram Seva Sangh, Machkhola, Dhemaji / 1996	80
12.	Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangh, Kumarikata, Baksa / 1962	282
13.	Anchalik Gram Unnayan Parishad, Jania, Barpeta / 1986	70
14.	Beeneez A Social Development Society, Sibsagar / 2008	130
15.	Janakalyan Samagra Bikash Parishad, Borihat, Kamrup / 1988	209
16.	Bogidol Khadi & V.I. Development Society, Sibsagar / 1981	145
17.	Kasturba Seva Mandir, Tezpur, Sonitpur / 1963	57
18.	East India Rural Development Association, Nalbari / 1984	83
19.	Fulguri Ansolik Khadi Gram Udyog Trust, Fulguri / New	166
18.	Brindabani Gramin Bikash Trust, Satpakahli, Kamrup / New	33
19.	Human Resource & Development Society, Rupahihat, Nagaon / New	622
20.	Horizon Welfare Society, Guwahati / New	73
	<b>Total</b>	<b>7083</b>

Out of above around 600 artisans reportedly have shifted to other menial works. These KI receive Government funds. To enable them to receive funds and to ensure the Khadi they produce are genuine the KI are guided by the KVIC's Regulations like Khadi Certification and Khadi Mark Certification. This checks sale of spurious Khadi. The Government supports artisans through Market Development Assistance (MDA) to keep price under control. From 2017 - 18 Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme has been introduced to regulate MDA. However, the DBT regime is not affable to the artisans. They complain DBT is not handy for the rural and illiterate women for its stringent norm, complex it of online banking. There were no social security schemes for the Khadi artisans. In Oct., 2017 KVIC introduced Group Insurance Scheme called "Aam Admi Bima Yojana" for the artisans. This provides insurance coverage against natural deaths up to ₹30, 000 and ₹75, 000 on accidental deaths and disablements. During 2019-20, total 4444 artisans got covered.

Out of 4744 KI in India Assam has only 19 (0.4 percent) of which only a few are performers. Most of these KI were founded in sixties at the pioneering initiatives of few committed persons inspired by the Gandhian ideology. These institutions have silently contributed to the cause of rural reconstruction over the decades. But with change of time and change of outlook importance these grass root organisations have been underestimated.

#### **Field visits and interactions with artisans: Barkhetri Unnayan Samity:**

Visited on 23-09-2018. It was founded with aim to rehabilitate the villagers after the river Brahmaputra washed away around twenty villages. Founder Secretary Umesh Medhi and President Sisher Paul Medhi initiated the rural reconstruction works. Their efforts carried forward the legacy. Today it has artisan base of 710, almost all women. Four artisans Renu Baishya, Golap Jan Bibi, Sahane Bibi and Monirisha Bibi of this KI received national awards in year 2007, 2013 and 2016.

#### **Interactions with artisans of Mukulmua area on 23-9-2018:**

Village Narua - I- The village has around 1000 families. Borkhetri Unnayan Samity has artisan base of 250 in this village, weavers 51 and spinners 199. The improved looms available only in a few weavers' families were distributed in 2007- 08, designed by IIT, Guwahati requires immediate replacements. The spinners mostly use traditional spinning using *Takli*, dropping spindle which fetches marginal income. The village has a high school, LP and ME schools, a Health Centre found not functioning. The MLA is Narayan Deka.

Parul Das (40) is a weaver works on loom 4 to 5 hours a day earning 3000 a month. Tillotoma Das (42) is a weaver works on loom 5 to 6 hours a day earning 4000 a month. Jamuna Das (46) is a weaver earning around

3000 a month. Khiroda Das (40), a weaver, works on loom 7 to 8 hours a day earning 4000 a month. Her husband is a Mason who earns 7000 a month, their 2 daughters got married, the eldest son studied BA and other one is a class - X drop out. These artisans were supported by KVIC, providing work-sheds, each worth 25000 grants, 8 years back. Monumati Das (35) is a *Takli* spinner earning 1,000 a month. Her husband is a day labourer having three daughters and a son, the eldest one reads in class - IX.

**Village Mukulmua:**

Gita Das (40) is a weaver, works on loom 5 to 6 hours a day earning 4000 a month. Her husband works in Home Guard Department, her daughter reads in class - X and son in class - VIII. KVIC gave her a work-shed, worth 25000 around 8 years back. Komola Das (53) is a widow, a spinner earning 800 a month. She is mother of three sons and one daughter, the eldest son is a Mason and the daughter is a cow herder. Radhika Das (40) is a spinner earns 700 a month. She was sad for not receiving assistance under the work-shed Scheme. She lamented for not possessing a loom, else also could have enhanced her income.

Village Tegheriattaryhas 300 families including 50 Spinners who still cling to Khadi productions but said in common that many families in the village are quietly deserting their age-old spinning as it fetches only marginal remuneration. They said those who opted for other livelihood have attained better economic conditions. Minoti Deka (30), a spinner tries her hand on an old ramshackle set of spinning wheel designed by the Central Silk Board. Her husband is a farmer, son reading in class - III and daughter of three years old. She earn 900 a month. KVIC gave her work- shed worth 45000 grants four years back. Mina Deka (50), a spinner tries her hand on an old set of spinning wheel designed by the Central Silk Board. Her husband is a driver. She has three sons one works in private shop and one is car mechanic. She earns 800 a month. KVIC gave her a work-shed worth 45000 five years back.

Met NiruKalita (44), a spinner for three generations they struggled due to soil erosion of River Brahmaputra. After 14 times moving around for lasting settlements, presently settled they at village Tapabori, Nalbaridistrict-built work shed with KVIC's assistance.

**Mouman Seva Ashram, Boko, Kamrup (Rural):**

This KI was founded by Subhas Chandra Das (died in 1983). His wife PraffulaBala Das (died in 2020) carried forward the activities. Paran Jyoti Das, BSc, now carries forward the institution's mandate. The institution possesses 150 bigha land after donating 50 bigha to Vinoba's Bhudan programme. There are 210 artisans, all women, from nine villages like Chamaria, Bhalukata,

Monmar, Jarapara, Chatabari, Choygaon, Kurhala, Paneri and Virpara. The artisans mostly belong to SC. Spinners earn 600 and weavers 1200 a month in an average by working 3 to 4 hours a day.

**Dakshin KamrupSamagra Bikash Parishad, Bijaynagar, Kamrup:**

Visited on 18-08-2018. It operates in two villages Borihat and Sikarhati. Artisans work on Eri Muga and spinners work on *Takli*. There are families who earn as high as 4000. Khushalaya Das (55) of village Sarpara, Vijoyanagar, said her earning a month is just 200 who produce yarn from the wastages of Muga cocoon. It is disheartening to see the condition of their looms. The looms are made of battle-nut trunk as they cannot afford to buy a wooden onewhich costs around 18000. The conditions of loom are so decrepit and weaving on these looms is miserable theysaid. We found conditions of looms of most of the weavers are same. Also, the spinning wheels and other toolkits narrates the plight of the artisans.

**Fulguri Ansolic Khadi Gram Udyog Trust, Fulguri Sikarhati, Kamrup:**

A young girl (20), class - XII pass, Padma Thakuria initiated this KI in 2017. Kundan Rajak is the President. It started with an artisan base of 49 weavers and 196 spinners.

**Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangh (TAGS), Kumarikata, Baska** was inaugurated by Jaiprakash Narayan in 1964. Founder was Rabindra Nath Upadhyay. TAGS is the biggest KI in NER. KVIC granted a training centre to TAGS on Khadi weaving. There were 300 Gramdan villages and trainings were imparted to women of these villages.

**Kawli Area:**

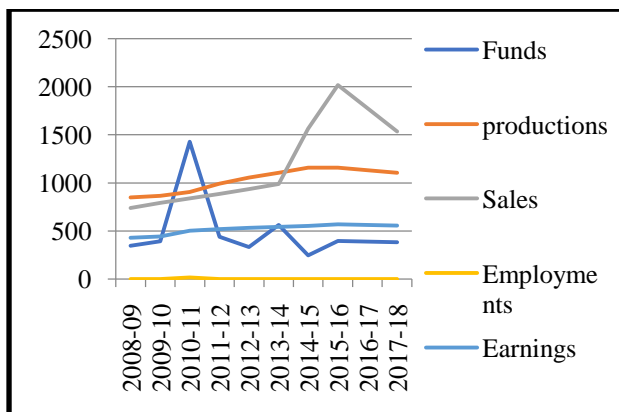
The village Paschim Chandra Nagar received the fury of Bodo movement, 1989. The Khadi Production Centre got damaged. TheKI received fund from BFW, OXFAM in 1980. There were at least four units were working which are being abandoned for long. We interactedwith artisansto understand the plight of their suffering and joblessness. Theyare Rita Mandal Sarkar (50), Renuka Das (57), NirolaBagchi, Astina Sil, Sadhana Chakraborty, Kokila Biswas (30), Mukuti Mitra, Buran Chakraborty, Shanti Bala Das, Minati Sarkar, Kalpana Sarkar, ArunaBala, Maya Rani Das, Sumitra Das, Sweata Mandal, Sakuntala Mandal, PramitaHazdaSaha. They are artisans who need to be given back their job *(all rupees are in Indian currency, ₹)*

The status of funding vis-à-vis output of KI of Assam including AKVIB for last ten years are given in Table 1 as follows:-

Table -1

Year	No of KI	Funds	Productions	Sales	Employments	Earnings
2008-09	19	346.64	849.41	740.09	0.15	429.05
2009-10	19	393.64	866.74	793.68	0.17	441.31
2010-11	36	1429.30	907.55	838.51	0.17	504.50
2011-12	37	441.17	992.83	886.31	0.18	519.48
2012-13	39	334.19	1055.08	935.51	0.19	532.42
2013-14	31	563.98	1105.90	988.09	0.19	544.45
2014-15	32	248.42	1159.77	1563.00	0.19	555.48
2015-16	32	399.14	1159.77	2016.43	0.19	571.15
2016-17	32	391.77	1132.89	1775.72	0.19	564.08
2017-18	34	384.40	1106.00	1535.00	0.49	557.00

Source: Annual Reports, KVIC, Ministry of MSME, GOI for 2008-09 to 2015-16 & 2017-18



**Fig.1** Status of Khadi for last decade

The above graph explains the status of Khadi for last decade. There has been stagnancy in earnings, employments and productions. Barring year 2010-11, funds received from KVIC has not shown progressive increase.

#### Findings and Recommendations:

Khadi has its deep-rooted connection in Assam, which is an inherent strength. Khadi artisans, mostly women work with decrepit tools and equipment, their wage level is low. So they can't have the better looms etc. of their own. The role of KI in supplementing rural economy, in preserving culture and creating livelihood to the vulnerable at their own place, in a eco-friendly way deserve appreciations. There are KI that were founded before independence and over the decades silently contributed meaningfully, but for lack of adequate supports they are fast becoming sick.

The industry has been finding it hard to absorb the jerk of DBT regime. They were not given time to prepare

them. We captured the words heard from their mouths. A separate set of rules at the sideline of DBT regime need to be put in place for them at least for five years as neither there is required banking network nor these artisans are made abreast with online banking operation. It appears the production vis-à-vis wages those artisans earn are poor still these women for decades working. Their earnings need to be enhanced by providing improved tools, creating working ambience like workshop, electricity, water, sanitation, hygiene, road, connectivity etc. The demands of their products are high. In our consistent investigations never, we heard about dearth of market. Khadi, the hand-spun and hand-woven natural fabric, can outlive commercially with supportive pro-rural development policies.

We have encountered, taking the advantage of very nominal institutional supports to the artisans, middlemen, who do not adhere to ethical business standard, has already made entries to these areas, luring the poor artisans offering wages in advances, supplying sometimes spurious raw materials, are succeeding to weave a net of exploitations in form of a debt trap. In fact, public fund investment to promote Khadi has remained very scarce and complex to avail. This is not a threat to rural economy alone but to the rich culture and heritage of Assam.

#### Conclusions:

Khadi has its intimate inheritance in Assam. It has the strength to become a meaningful economic activity for the rural people, especially women, who else, would remain unemployed. The number of registered artisans is just 7083 for many years. This explains there has been something wrong in support system especially when compared with number of artisans in handloom sector. When the demand Khadi textiles has been increasing consistently, there is urgent need to

comprehend how these amazing artisans can be supported the way they deserve. The State Government need to display wisdom by augmenting the efforts of Central Government. The concern is to bring their wages to a significant level. The existing monitoring mechanism is weak, does not help to generate realistic picture of employment, production, number of

functioning unit and utilization of government assistance. The existing KI should be strengthened and more should be created. Their needs to be felt. This remains a challenge. Working among the poor in rural setups altogether a different experiencean opportunity to read the faces to reach deep into their hearts.

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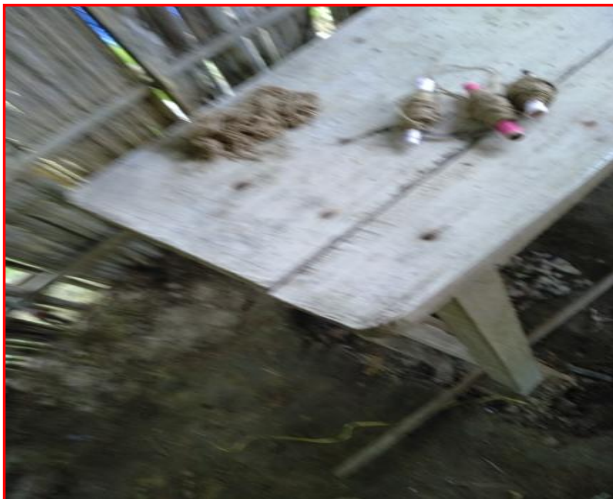
**Photographs:**



Khadi production at Kawli Area deserted after 1989,  
Photo on 12-07-2018



Gramdan Sangha, UNICEF project once Khadi  
production unit need revival Photo 28-10-2018



Khadi Spinning implements reflecting the poor state  
affairs Photo on 10-07-2018



Poor artisan managed to make her loom from battle nut  
trunk as a wooden one can't afford Photo 10-07-2018



Khadi weaving loom of poor artisan need immediate  
replacement Photo on 10-07-2018



Khadi unit at Kawli Area can be revived with Govt.  
support, deserted after 1989, Photo on 12-07-2018



A traditional artisan in Khadi spinning on improved loom, Rangia, Assam Photo on 04-08-2018



KVIC introduced improved tools and equipment needs to put in optimum use, Photo on 07-09-2018



Inside weaver's house with paddy husking equipment & spinning wheel depleted economic condition 10-07-2018



KVIC established Yarn Testing laboratory at the premises of TAGS, Kumarikata Photo on 12-07-2018



The long used traditional decrepit spinning wheel & other implements needs replacement, Photo 10-7-2018



Improved warping drum for Khadi Weaving in Khadi Institution at Rangia, Assam, Photo on 04-08-2018



With artisans of minority community at Pragatisil Khadi Samity, Kalitakuchi, Kamrup on 12-08-2018



Signboard of FulguriAnsolic Khadi Gram Udyog Trust, Fulguri founded by a 20 years old girl



Khadi Mark Certificate to TAGS in 2015, KVIC steps towards building brand image Photo on 12-07-2018



NiruKalita, artisan victim of repeated soil erosions, KVIC provided work-shed photo 12-11-2020



Improved New Model Charka provide by KVIC to Khadi Institution need optimum use Photo 07-09-2018