

LIVELIHOOD VULNERABILITY AND COPING MECHANISM AMONG THE SILK WEAVERS OF SUALKUCHI, ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

For the past few decades, weaver communities have experienced severe vulnerability to recurrent risks, shocks and trends in the face of changing environmental conditions, rising industrialisation and urbanisation, economic liberalisation and globalisation that have caused extreme livelihood deterioration and poverty. The silk industry of Sualkuchi, Assam is no exception to these and has undergone drastic transformation processes affecting the social and economic structures of the weaving communities. The purpose of the study is to investigate the outcome of such macro-level processes on the micro-level unit of weaver households by taking Sualkuchi as an example and to identify the coping strategies adopted by the weavers in the events of crises. Substantiated with data from both desk approaches like research articles, books, journals, govt. reports, census reports etc. and field study using focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and questionnaire survey, the findings indicate that decreasing wages, increasing yarn price, erosion in supply base of weavers, stiff market competition from new technologies in the form of powerlooms and artificial silk fabrics are the major sources of vulnerability in the study area. Depending on the economic status of the households, the major coping strategies adopted by the weavers included migration, occupational change, distress sale of assets, borrowing (in cash or kind), reduced consumption and discontinuing education of children.

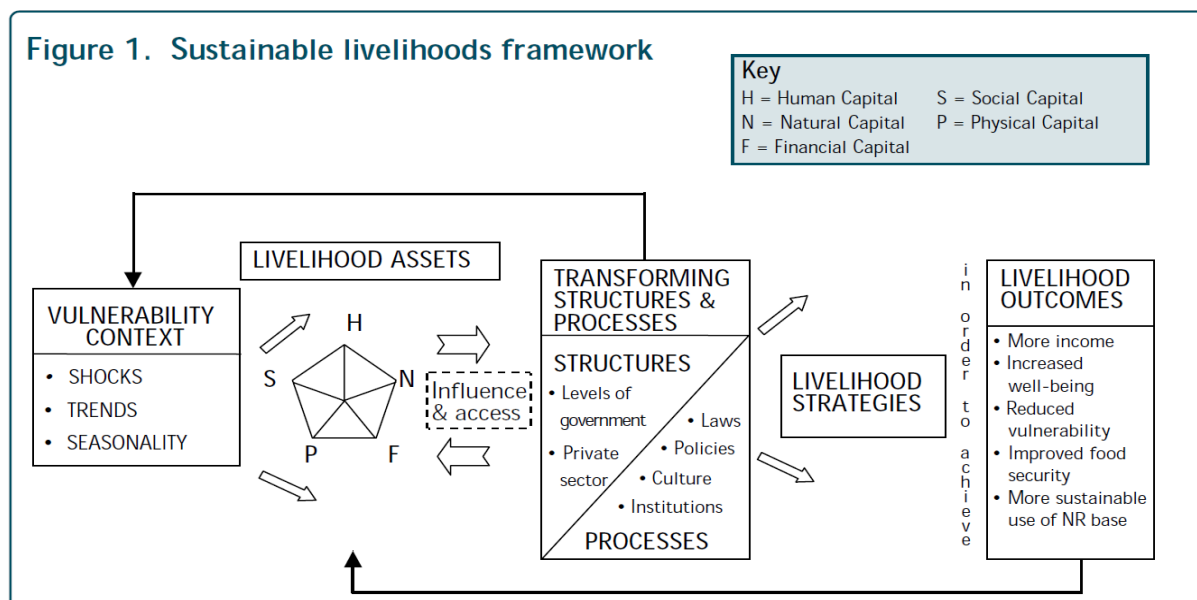
Keywords: Sualkuchi, globalisation, silk, weaver, vulnerability, coping strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Livelihood is seen as a highly complex, all-encompassing concept, which is not restricted to the ecological or to the economic or productive aspects of life. The most quoted definition of livelihood is that given by Carney (1998, based on Chambers and Conway 1992, p. 7): “a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base”.

The Sustainable Livelihood Approach presented by Department for International Development (DFID, 1999) [developed over a period of several months by the Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Advisory Committee, building on earlier work by Institute of Development Studies] is a feasible theoretical instrument to understand the livelihoods of the rural population. In essence, it suggests that: 1. the rural poor derive their livelihoods using five capitals: human, social, physical, natural and financial; 2. livelihood activities are carried out in the context of vulnerability and shocks caused by weather changes, movement of global markets and man-made events such as war; 3. the economic worth of these activities are governed by transformational structures and institutions in the society and polity; and 4. state policies can help improve the capitals, reduce or buffer against various vulnerabilities and induce changes in the transformational structures and institutions (Phansalkar, 2005).

The SL Framework has been derived and developed by the DFID over a period of several months and is basically a tool which helps us to understand livelihoods particularly that of rural communities. The framework presents the main factors that affect people’s livelihoods and typical relationships between them. Feedback is likely between: i) Transforming structures and processes and the Vulnerability context, ii) Livelihood Outcomes and Assets. It is to be mentioned that the SLF continues to be developed. It can be used as a flexible tool and adapted as and when required for individual analysis (DFID 1999).



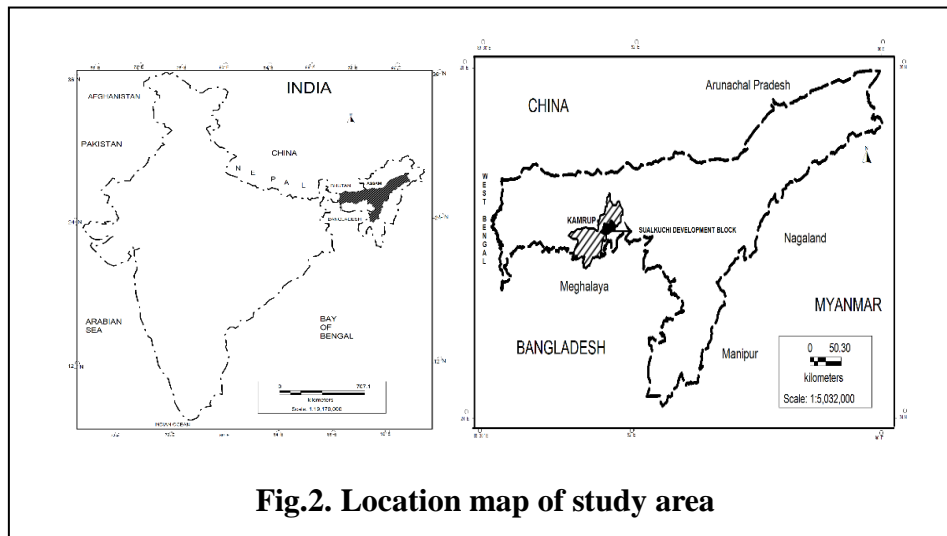
Source: DFID, SL Guidance sheets, 1999.

Fig. 1 shows what a typical SL Framework looks like. On the left hand side is the Vulnerability Context comprising of trends, shocks and stresses (external agents) that may prevent access or support to resources or assets as well as livelihood strategies from being undertaken. The next column is called the Livelihood Resources or Assets that people combine to eke out a living that include 5 assets in totality, namely, human, natural, social, physical and financial. Next to it includes the institutions, policy decisions and legislations determining the extent to which an individual or community can have access to its resources. The next column shows the strategies such as extensification/ intensification, migration etc. that are employed by the people (particularly rural communities) against vulnerabilities. The final column represents the outcomes, aspirations and goals. The sustainability of these Livelihood Outcomes is a key factor in the SL Approach.

The present paper is concerned to investigate only one of the aspects of the SLF i.e. vulnerability context and the mechanisms employed by the rural people against such risks.

2. THE STUDY AREA

Famous all over the globe for its endemic golden silk and recognised by UNDP as the “Manchester of the East”, Sualkuchi is a weaving village in the Kamrup district of Assam located on the north bank of River Brahmaputra. It is Asia's largest silk weaving cluster and is famous for its traditional handloom sarees and mekhala chadars woven from mulberry, tassar and muga silks and has a rich cultural heritage of its own. It offers a unique experience of silk weaving practices right from rearing to reeling to weaving. This is the abode of the Baishyas of Assam, whose primary occupation is silk processing and weaving from time immemorial. About 35 kms from Guwahati, Sualkuchi is a block of Kamrup District with a population of 70,762 (2011 census). There are eight Gram Panchayats in Sualkuchi block, in all of which, weaving is a dominant occupation (Office of the BDO, Sualkuchi Development Block).



3. OBJECTIVES

- a) To identify the factors of vulnerability in Sualkuchi; and
- b) To analyse the coping strategies undertaken by the silk weavers in the events of crises.

4. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

It is based on empirical view substantiated by both primary and secondary data obtained through field visits, project reports and government documents from institutions like the Department of Handloom & Textile, Directorate of Sericulture (Govt. of Assam) and Central Silk Board etc.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises were conducted. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaire surveys etc, were done in a participatory mode. Map was prepared using Map info Professional 10.5 version. The baseline generated by the PRA and survey were used for identifying the present-day crises faced by the weavers of Sualkuchi and the coping mechanisms adopted by them.

Purposive sampling has been done and four sample villages, namely, Sualkuchi, Bathangaon, Srihati and Bamundi have been selected on the basis of highest concentration of weavers in these particular villages. A total of 100 households have been selected randomly, (25 from each village). Data has been analysed with the help of simple statistical techniques and shown through bars, graphs and tables.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 The Vulnerability context and the case of Sualkuchi silk industry

The Vulnerability context constitutes of the external environment in which people exist and over which they have limited or no control. These include, particularly, trends, shocks and seasonality (Trends such as those of population, resource trends including conflict, national and international economic trends, trends of governance and also of technology; shocks such as natural, economic, conflicts etc.; and seasonality of prices, production, health and employment opportunities). All these factors have a direct bearing upon people's assets (DFID 1999).

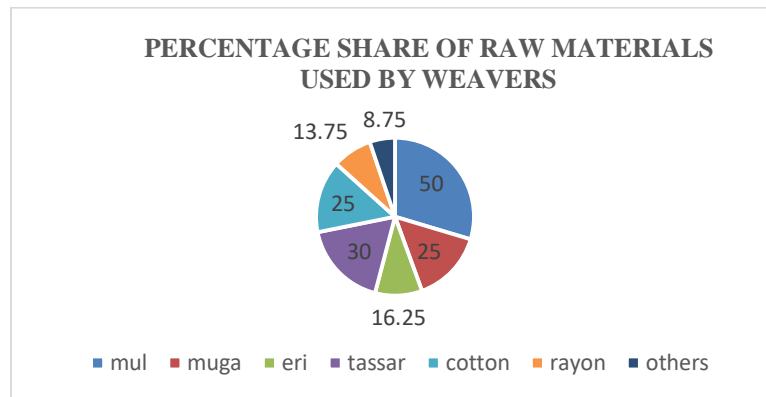
Discerning the vulnerability context is an essential aspect of the SL Framework. However, this becomes very difficult as it remains farthest outside people's control- in the short to medium term. Vulnerability is a function of how a particular household's livelihood would be affected by a particular hazard and the ability to cope with it. On one hand is the stress to which the household is exposed to and on the other hand is the internal side of defencelessness which reduces the ability to cope with the stress. The issue of vulnerability is multi-faceted and the SL approach seeks to mitigate against such insecurities by building up resilience with the help of strategies like diversification, migration etc. (Hautala 2013).

The picture of silk industry in Assam post 1991 reforms is not quite encouraging. Even though the silk industry of Assam is a major contributor to the state revenue, as Eri contributes Rs.31.5 crores, muga Rs.40 crores and paat silk contributes Rs.120 crores generated annually through the silk industry in Assam (Pandey 2003). But there are certain problems inherent within the sector that cannot be overlooked. Infact, Assam's globally recognised silk handloom industry at Sualkuchi is passing through a difficult phase, with several constraints now acquiring global dimensions.

5.1.1 Competition from artificial silk: Globalisation and the opening of the global market have infused competition in the recent years with threats like artificial silks flooding the local markets. Due to low production rates Muga has become a rarity and have made way for Tassar Silk which cost comparatively less. The price of muga yarn varies from Rs.3200 to Rs.5000 per kg while tassar yarn ranges from Rs.1500 to Rs.2000 per kg. Although muga is in great demand and its value has increased over the years, the technology used is still traditional which is not giving the desired results. Tassar Silk- a variety reared and harvested in the states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bhagalpur and Madhya Pradesh is mixed with Muga and sold as Pure Muga. Cheap Chinese Tassar has also made way disrupting the indigenous industry. A set of Sualkuchi mekhala chadar is sold at Rs.3500 to Rs.15,000 while Benarasi items are sold at Rs.3000 to

Rs.4000. Customers therefore prefer Benarasi silk items as they are produced in power looms and the design is more attractive than the handloom products of Sualkuchi.

Fig. No. 3

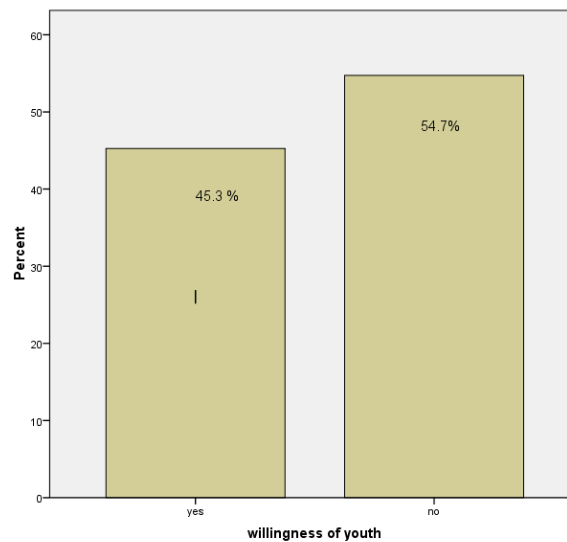


Source: Field Survey, 2015

Muga, upon which the entire silk industry of Sualkuchi was once based has now been increasingly replaced by other raw materials such as tassar, cotton, rayon, mulberry etc. As is evident from fig. no. 3, the percentage share of muga used by the weavers amounts to a mere 25% while that contributed by other varieties and artificial silk comprise the remaining 75% of raw materials used. The main factors identified behind such a decline include the impact of global warming coupled with climate change, rapid proliferation of small tea growers in Upper Assam, indiscriminate application of inorganic pesticides as well as bio-pesticides largely affects muga silkworm rearing and has also led to shrinkage of traditional muga plantations and thereby, its commercial production.

5.1.2 Erosion in supply base of weavers: Due to low profit margins and tedious labour involved in weaving, the younger generations of Sualkuchi are no longer willing to take up weaving as a profession. Most of the weavers working in the looms today are hired migratory workers from the Bodo and Rabha dominated areas of Assam. With the demand for weavers being extremely high, unqualified weavers are likely to fill this mounting need of manpower, which in turn is sure to affect quality. Quality is the hallmark of Assamese silk and as such any compromise on this aspect will spell doom for the industry.

Fig. no. 4



Source: Field Survey, 2015

Fig. no. 4 reveals the fact that almost 54.7% responded that the younger generation of Sualkuchi is no longer willing to take up weaving as a profession in the long run since this age old hereditary occupation of theirs no longer attracts them and is less remunerative compared to the labour involved.

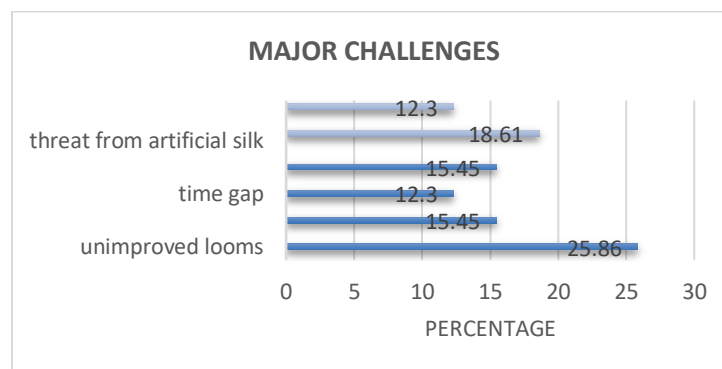
5.1.3 Anomaly in silk yarn distribution: Sualkuchi weavers are resenting anomalies in silk yarn distribution at mill gate price by six depot operating agencies who are supposed to supply pat yarn at mill gate price under mill gate price scheme and supplying yarn at 10 per cent subsidy under 10 per cent subsidy on hank yarn of cotton and Indian silk scheme to the beneficiaries of Sualkuchi. But these agencies sell the silk yarn in open market and misuse the mill gate price scheme.

It may be mentioned that the objective of supplying yarn at mill gate price is to make available all types of yarn at mill gate price to the eligible handloom weavers so as to facilitate regular supply of basic raw materials to the handloom sector and help utilize the full employment potential of the sector. The 10 per cent price subsidy on hank yarn of cotton and Indian silk is to provide explicit subsidy on hank yarn cotton and Indian silk to mitigate the cost disadvantages of the handloom sector due to long lead time in weaving due to its complex and exquisite designs and lower productivity as compared to power loom.

5.1.4 Clandestine sale of imported silk as indigenous silk: Recently in March 2013, the weavers of Sualkuchi went on a vandalism spree to protect their craft and livelihood, against the illegal sale of imported silk in the name of indigenous silk. The weavers and small scale handloom entrepreneurs are facing an uphill task as some unscrupulous traders are endangering the famed handloom sector of the state by importing substantial quantities of *paat* fabrics by copying the designs and motifs which have been perfected by the weavers of Sualkuchi. A section of wholesalers had flooded the local shops with Benarasi silk items and local weavers and traders are fast losing market. Some traders had given their exquisite designs to artisans in Benaras who were producing items using the indigenous design of Sualkuchi. Customers therefore prefer Benarasi silk items as they are produced in power looms and the design is more attractive than the handloom products of Sualkuchi.

5.1.5 Other issues

Fig. no. 5



Source: Field Survey, 2015

When the problems as suggested by the weavers working in the industry were summarised under the following six headings (evident from Fig. 5), almost 25.86% of the respondents said that the biggest challenge confronting them today is that of unimproved looms. This is due to lack of dissemination and also reluctance on the weavers' part to adopt them due to his belief in the age-old traditional technique he is used to. The second biggest problem faced by them include threat from artificial silk like Chinese tassar, rayon, etc (18.61%), next in line are poor marketing and lack of raw materials (15.45%), insufficient finance (12.3 %) and time gap to realise money invested in silk yarn (12%).

Thus, it can be analysed that the impact of globalisation on the traditional silk industry, from production to marketing, is tremendous. In the current economic climate of international markets and globalisation, the future of a traditional economic activity like that of sericulture is more

uncertain than ever. Given these present trends, the study shall now look into the ways in which the different weaver households in Sualkuchi rely on varying combinations of activities or coping strategies during periods of crises and the factors underlying peoples' choice of that particular strategy.

5.2 Preparedness and coping mechanisms to reduce vulnerability

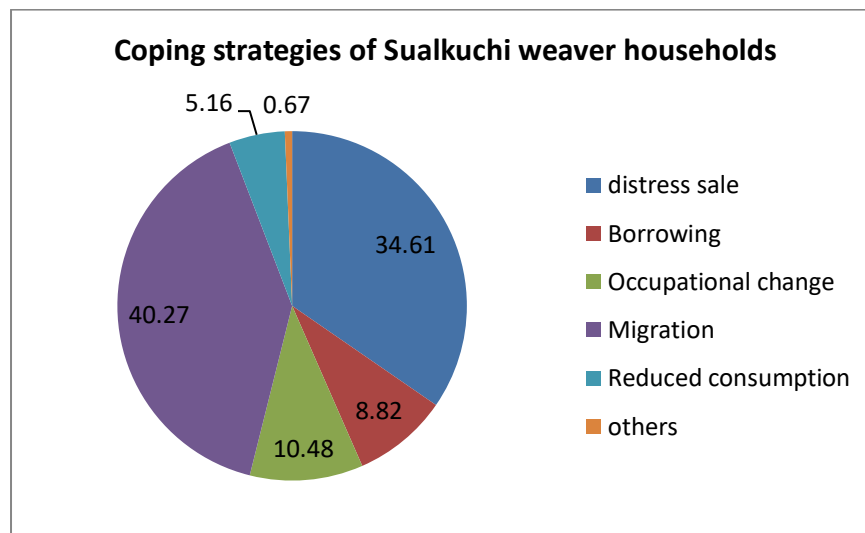
The term 'livelihood strategies' is defined as the range and combination of activities and choices that people undertake in order to achieve their livelihood goals. The more flexible are the people in their choice of strategies, the greater is the ability of the particular individual, household or community to withstand the shocks, seasonality and trends of the vulnerability context (DFID, 1999). Several studies like that of (Apparao and Venkata Rao 2012) (Alemu 2012), (Xu, et al. 2015) (Khatiwada, et al., 2017) etc. conducted on dominant livelihood strategies undertaken by poor people across the globe highlight the fact that livelihood resources are used in combination to pursue livelihood strategies and overall three main clusters of strategies have been identified which include: agricultural intensification/ extensification, diversification and migration. However, at the current conjuncture, bringing more lands into cultivation or intensifying the land-use is preferably not possible, hence the importance of the two other clusters of strategy is highly accentuated for ensuring survival and reduced vulnerability.

From what we understand by an appraisal of the occupational status of the people of Sualkuchi is that the primary occupation here is weaving and other allied activities. A very small proportion of them are engaged in agricultural operations who perform it only on a subsistence basis and not for commercial purpose. We find that of the total number of main workers in Sualkuchi, only 16 percent of them are engaged in agriculture (14 percent as cultivators and 2 percent as agricultural labourers) while 36 percent of them are engaged in household industry i.e. in the silk industry. In case of marginal workers too, 16 percent are in agriculture (6 percent as cultivators and 10 percent as agricultural labourers) and 44 percent as household industry workers (District Census Handbook, 2011). Weaving is a hereditary occupation which the people of the region have tried to keep intact even today. Hence, agricultural intensification/ extensification as a livelihood strategy is not an option in Sualkuchi.

On the basis of our understanding of the occupational pattern in Sualkuchi, we find that the HH income is derived from a number of sources such as the household silk industry and its allied activities, from agriculture on a meagre basis, from wage labour both in Sualkuchi as well as from outside, piece work, trade, government as well as private sector jobs. This reveals the importance of alternate livelihood strategies across the study area. The study confirms 6 major and minor livelihood strategies adopted by the HHs in various combinations across the sampled

villages. In particular, these strategies are reviewed in the context of their access to the platform of certain basic livelihood assets or resources.

Fig. no. 5



Source: Field survey, 2015-16

As is evident from the above figure, the most common livelihood strategies discerned in Sualkuchi weaver HHs include the following:

- i. Migration,
- ii. Distress sale,
- iii. Occupational change/ diversification,
- iv. Borrowing,
- v. Reduced consumption and
- vi. Others (such as reducing luxury lifestyles, withdrawing children from school, reducing social and ceremonial obligations etc.).

Following Devereaux (1993) and Davis's (1996) classification of livelihood strategies undertaken by rural poor, the present study has tried to categorise them further into adaptive, accumulative, survival and coping strategies.

- i. **Migration:** Migration is found to be the most common livelihood strategy in Sualkuchi. As a whole, 40.27 percent of the HHs here have been applying this strategy so as to evade livelihood insecurity associated with the silk industry in the present times. The dominant source of income of the weaver HHs in Sualkuchi is through remittance sent by young men who have migrated to nearby towns and cities in search of better job

opportunities. Push factors in the place of origin have compelled them more to move out. Disillusioned with poor returns from silk weaving, the youth have taken up migration as an adaptive/ accumulative strategy with a view to augment their household income. Men find petty trade, wage labour jobs, jobs as construction workers in nearby cities more lucrative than spending their time idly in the village. Moreover, as communication networks have become better and the villages of Sualkuchi have become more accessible connected by road networks to Guwahati, migration has become a common phenomenon here.

One important feature of migration in Sualkuchi is that such movements include that of individual family members rather than of entire HHs. Another important feature is that it is extensively a male phenomenon. Evidence from the villages suggest that mostly men in the age-group between 20 to 40 years move out as migrant labour. Generally when adult males migrate alone, they leave responsibilities at home and this in turn adds more burden of looking after the family on the womenfolk in addition to their daily household chores.

The household's choice of a particular livelihood strategy is conditioned by its status of asset holding. Since migration requires a certain amount of human capital (education, skills etc.), social capital (networks and connectedness that allows people to access jobs elsewhere), financial capital (travel expenditure) and physical capital (road and market access), there remains a section of the rural households that are not able to migrate.

- ii. **Distress sale:** Distress sale basically implies the sale of assets or stocks in an urgent manner, most often at a loss, to repay debts, medical expenses or such other kinds of emergencies. The weavers of Sualkuchi are forced to make distress sale of their genuine products at throw-away prices when they are in great need of money to run their family. This happens if there is any kind of seasonal fall in demand for fabrics. Under such circumstances the weavers are compelled to make distress sale to the traders and this forms an essential survival strategy for the weaver households in Sualkuchi. Almost 34.6 percent of them have reported to have resorted to distress sale in times of crises. Apparently, the major problem in Sualkuchi seems to be more market-oriented in nature. The demand for Assam silk is found to be declining as compared to other types of silk but when analysed further it is found that there is not much of a difference in the prices of the original silk fabrics that are produced in the silk centres across our country. A significant difference in the cost of the fabrics arises only when natural silk is blended with cheap artificial synthetic fibres imported from China. Taking undue advantage of this situation, some unscrupulous traders are earning huge profits by passing off blended products as pure silk fabrics. Following this, the weavers of Sualkuchi are not able to

attract customers and are forced to make distress sale to the Mahajans or to the bulk buyers.

- iii. **Occupational change or diversification:** By definition, rural livelihood diversification is the process by which rural households construct an increasingly diverse portfolio of activities and assets in order to survive and improve their standard of living (Ellis 2000). Diversification explicitly draws attention to a variety of dissimilar income sources as its chief characteristics. (Neihof 2004). It is generally observed that not all individuals or households collect all their income from one source, hold their wealth in one asset or utilise these assets or wealth in one kind of economic activity. In fact, a number of multiple motives identified as 'push' and 'pull' factors prompt individuals and households for livelihood diversification. Push factors include incomplete or weak financial systems, constraints in land and labour markets or climatic uncertainties such as in agriculture while pull factors include local engines of growth such as commercial agriculture, etc. or proximity to an urban area (Barrett, et al., 2001).

In the case of Sualkuchi, Community based tourism has proved to be a potential engine of rural growth and development and has been benefitting the people of the region to a considerable extent. It needs to be mentioned here that recently in the year 2004, an Endogenous Tourism Project (ETP) was started in Sualkuchi under the leadership of the Centre for Environment Education (CEE) in partnership with the Union Ministry of Tourism (MoT) India and UNDP India, out of a total number of 36 ETP sites across the country. Under this project, an operational community managed rural site has been established along with a 17 member registered body under the name of Tourism Development Society, 12 member trained Hospitality group is engaged in receiving the tourists, two dance groups, one Bihu and the other Bodo, is receiving laurels by their dance performances abroad, a 12 member cuisine group is engaged in preparing food for the tourists, 7 youths are engaged as tourist guides and 30 SHGs have become operational since then. Overall, a total of 80 families are making a living directly or indirectly in Sualkuchi through this ETP. (Kalita 2010).

Weaving is a full time commercial activity in Sualkuchi and it is mostly during the lean season that some of the weavers diversify to other locally available, low value options. There has been not much significant diversification in the region. Overall, only 10.48 percent of the HHs here have taken up this as an adaptive or accumulative strategy.

- iv. **Borrowing:** Borrowing as a seasonal coping strategy has been undertaken by only 8.82 percent of the total number of weaver HHs in Sualkuchi. Srihati village reflected a higher incidence of borrowing money and other necessary items from their kith and kin as an immediate coping strategy when incomes turned low during seasonal fall in demand.

Livelihood approaches generally suggest that the poorer HHs have lesser access to livelihood assets (e.g. land, animals, implements, education, skills, social and financial capital etc.). As such they have limited options available to them than others and are more vulnerable to risks (Morris, et al. 2002). In the present case, the 8.8 percent of the households have limited access to other capitals, so they cannot resort to migration and occupational change but to borrowing in events of transitory income insecurity.

- v. **Reduced consumption:** Reducing the frequency and quantity of meal consumption is another minor strategy of coping with seasonality among 5 percent of the weaver HHs here
- vi. **Others:** Besides, migration, distress sale and occupational change as major adaptive strategies identified in Sualkuchi Development Block, a few other minor ones such as reducing luxury lifestyles, withdrawing children from schools and reducing social and ceremonial obligations are recognised and undertaken by 0.67 percent HHs in Sualkuchi.

Understanding livelihood strategies is pivotal towards understanding of the weaving livelihoods in Sualkuchi. Migration is found to be the most remunerative strategy here, followed by distress sale and diversification to non-weaving sectors. About 38.7 percent of the total respondents in Sualkuchi being dissatisfied with their present jobs were reluctant to let their children continue this occupation which they had been carrying on since generations. They made sure to educate them and seek employment elsewhere. 48.9 percent of the youths in the study area were unwilling to carry forward this age-old weaving activity of their fore-fathers and were looking for better and alternative sources to augment their household income.

6. CONCLUSION

The current economic climate of liberalisation and globalisation, stiff market competition and changing environmental conditions have made the traditional handloom weavers of Sualkuchi extremely vulnerable. The weavers have adopted coping mechanisms over the time to evade livelihood insecurity associated with it. However, governmental interventions are necessary to sustain the poor people at the marginal level. Above all, schemes and policies should be employed synergistically towards building true adaptive capacity for the weaver communities of Sualkuchi.

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