

## A Journey from Production of Liquor to Handloom: Weaving Organizations Transforming Lives of Bodo Women

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### ABSTRACT

*The socio-cultural and economic status of a society is reflected in its patterns of livelihood. Being a rural based society, the traditional livelihood of Bodo women revolves around agriculture, weaving, production of local liquor, rearing domestic animals and allied activities. However, not all Bodo women experience a dignified means of livelihood. This study explores the role of two weaving organizations, the Bagurumba Weavers Development Trust and Aagor Dagra Afad on Bodo women on transitioning their livelihood from production of liquor to weaving handloom products. The study is conducted on 50 women weavers of the two weaving organizations. The findings reveal this livelihood shift empowers women to challenge gender roles, increase their income, and provide better education for their children, breaking the poverty cycle. It highlights the importance of collective action in fostering solidarity and addressing societal stigmas, concluding that empowering women in marginalized communities can drive significant social change.*

**Keywords:** Livelihood, Bodo women, production of liquor, weaving, socio-economic transformation.

### INTRODUCTION

The North-Eastern region of India is home to many diverse tribes, with the Bodos being the largest plain tribe in Assam, primarily settled in Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar, and Udalguri districts (Brahma, 2019). Compared to other communities, Bodos are socially and economically less advanced (Kachari and Maity, 2015). About 90% of the Bodo population lives in rural areas, with 77% of workers engaged in agriculture and related activities (Basumatary, 2021).

The culture of Bodos is deeply rooted in Indo-Mongoloid traditions. Fishing, poultry rearing piggery, and rice cultivation are key aspects of their social life. Despite changes over time, many traditional practices remain intact in their socio-cultural life (Das, 2020). Agriculture and allied activities, weaving and sericulture, production of rice beer are integral part of Bodo socio-cultural life involving women of the community (Islary, 2020). Bodo women enjoy a relatively higher social status compared to women in other Assamese societies. While the father is typically the head of the family, women actively participate in economic activities (Boro, 2017). They handle domestic chores such as cooking, washing, child-rearing, and weaving (Islary, 2021). Their significant contributions to

agricultural activities support the family's economic growth and overall development (Basumatary, 2022; Islary, 2020).

**Production of liquor as livelihood:** The production of liquor has significant cultural and economic importance for the Bodo community. They produce a traditional alcoholic beverage known as "Jou" or "Jumai" (Saikia et al., 2022). For some poorer members of the Bodo community, it serves as a means of livelihood. However, this practice is often stigmatized due to the negative social impacts associated with alcohol consumption. According to the WHO, 55% of domestic abuse cases involve alcohol use, which often leads to men becoming unable to work, leaving families without income. Consequently, women, familiar with brewing, often sell local drinks to support their households (Rogpi, n.d.). Choudhury (2018) studied the impact of alcohol in the tribal community of Boko, Assam, highlighting its role in disrupting family dynamics, causing disputes, and depleting household income. The Bodo Mahasammlan has decided to ban alcohol production due to social evils associated with it (Narzary, 2019). Many social organizations are actively working to provide dignified livelihoods for Bodo women.

**Weaving as an alternative livelihood:** In addition to liquor production, weaving has become an important livelihood for Bodo women. In the patrilineal societies of Northeast India, weaving empowers women by promoting self-reliance, economic activity, and collective strength. Engaging in weaving enhances their socio-economic status, instead of sitting idle at home (Devi, 2013). According to the 4th All India Handloom Census (2019-20), Assam has 12.69 lakh handloom households and 12.83 lakh weavers, out of which 11.79 lakh are female weavers. Weaving is a vital traditional skill among Bodo women, essential for completing domestic chores (Swargiary and Boro, 2017). Historically, Bodo women wove clothes for domestic use, but this has shifted to commercial purposes, indicating economic progress within the community (Swargiary, 2020). Today, weaving is a significant source of livelihood for Bodo women. Compared to production of liquor, weaving is considered as dignified livelihood. Various organizations, such as the Bagurumba Weavers Development Trust and Aagor Dagra Afad, provide financial assistance to support and promote weaving activities.

**Case Studies of women transitioning from liquor production to handloom weaving:** Few case studies of women weavers of Bagurumba Weavers Development Trust and Aagor Dagra Afad who switched their livelihood from production of liquor to weaving handloom are discussed below:

1. Rwimali, a 40-year-old woman weaver has worked with Aagor Dagra Afad for 10 years. Before joining the organization, she reared cattle and produced local liquor for living but earned very little amount of money through it. Her husband passed away at a young age

leaving her with financial burden of the family. Her neighbour suggested joining the organisation, and now she earns well from her woven handloom products.

2. Somaina, a 34-year-old unmarried weaver, faced verbal abuse from her brothers for being unmarried and a burden to them. She made little money producing liquor, but it didn't stop their taunts. She joined Aagor Dagra Afad, and now her earnings are enough to stop their taunting.
3. Nijora (name changed), a 45-year-old widow with two children, was married at young age in Chatra village to an alcoholic husband who spent all their savings on alcohol. She made country liquor to support her family but couldn't afford quality education for her children. She later joined Bagurumba Weavers Development Trust as a weaver and now lives a dignified life without financial worries.
4. Jyotsna, a 26-year-old unmarried woman, lived in poverty with her family. She helped her mother produce liquor for profit, but the earnings were insufficient for her higher studies, leading her to drop out of college. Now, she weaves clothes at home with the help of Aagor Dagra Afad and makes good income.

#### **Theoretical framework:**

The study is grounded in feminist theory, emphasizing gender equality and the empowerment of women in marginalized communities. The experiences of the women weavers illustrate key feminist principles, such as empowerment and economic independence through their transition from liquor production to weaving, which allows them to challenge traditional gender roles. Additionally, the weavers act as catalysts for broader social change, uplifting their status while preserving their cultural heritage through traditional practices. The study also highlights intersectionality, showing how Bodo women navigate unique challenges related to gender, class, and cultural identity. Furthermore, the formation of weaving organizations demonstrates the power of collective action, fostering solidarity that helps women confront societal stigmas and improve their conditions. Overall, this feminist framework underscores the resilience and agency of women in transforming their lives and communities, setting a powerful example for social change.

#### **Review of Literature:**

Brahma (1998) noted in his book 'A Study in Cultural Heritage of the Bodos' that liquor consumption is part of Bodo culture. Bodos produce local liquor known as "Jou" or "Jumai," which was traditionally used for welcoming guests, relaxation, medicinal purposes, and festivals. But today, it is often sold for profit. Islary (2020) revealed that Production of rice beer known as 'Jou' is an indispensable part of Bodo socio-cultural life. Women who used to make rice beer for their families are now selling it commercially. While advantaged section of the society disapprove and don't support this activity, they don't try to stop it either. Currently, only economically disadvantaged and less

educated families are involved in selling rice beer. They acknowledged that their work is looked down, but they do it to make a living. Narzary (2009) studied the economic vulnerability of internally displaced people in Assam due to ethnic conflict between the Santhals and Bodo tribe. The study found that women sell country liquor to supplement their household income, despite it being viewed as a low-status job. This occupation can put women in vulnerable situations.

These studies highlight that liquor production is part of Bodo culture and involves women. Only marginalized Bodo women produce and sell liquor for economic gain. Despite knowing that society disapproves of this work, they continue because it is their means of livelihood.

Basumatary and Khawzawl (2024) highlighted the crucial role of Bodo women in preserving cultural traditions and gaining economic independence through weaving. The study revealed that despite a patriarchal system, many women have become successful small-scale entrepreneurs by producing and selling woven goods. Sarkar and Pradeepa (2024) conducted a study on weaving culture of Assam revealing that women in the state are economically independent and significant decision-makers, contributing to the State's GDP. The weaving industry empowers them, and their talents are recognized globally. Narzary (2021) found that turning traditional weaving into a business has improved their economic status, reduced dependency, and increased family financial stability. Bodo (2016) conducted a study on sericulture and weaving industry of Bodos which stated that weaving is a traditional skill passed down through generations and is crucial to the socio-economic life of Bodo women. Most households have one to three looms. The weaving techniques are evolving to meet current market trends. This industry can employ both educated and uneducated women. To expand the market for handloom products, the government should take measures such as organizing exhibitions, trade fairs, and study teams both domestically and internationally.

These studies show that the culture of weaving has significantly contributed to the economic development of Bodo women.

**Research Gap:**

There are few existing literatures on production of liquor by Bodo women and weaving for commercial purpose. But no detailed studies on socio-cultural impact of production and sale of liquor on Bodo community exists. Little interest can be seen among researchers on transformation of livelihood among Bodo women. Additionally, existing literature on socio-economic impact of weaving organization on Bodo women weavers is also very rare.

**Objective of the study:** The present study is designed to fulfill the following objectives:

1. To study the role of weaving organizations in transitioning livelihood of Bodo women from liquor production to handloom weaving.
2. To explore socio-economic impact of weaving organizations on Bodo women.

**Area of the Study:** Nalbari district and Chirang district of Assam is selected as the area of the study. The study is based on two weaving organizations: Bagurumba Weavers Development Trust situated in Nalbari district and Aagor Dagra Afad situated in Chirang district.

Bagurumba Weavers Development Trust was started by women from Chatra, a Bodo village in Nalbari district, to shift from liquor production to weaving as a sustainable livelihood. The village, struggling with poverty, relied on homemade liquor, leading to low income, domestic violence, and earned it a reputation as a 'liquor den.' In 2009, the women established the trust with support from NGO Gramya Vikash Mancha, which provided essential weaving training. Starting in a temporary shed with a few looms, they wove traditional Assamese and Bodo garments like Dokhona, Aronai, Gamocha, and Mekhela Chador. Financial and infrastructural support from Northeastern Development Finance Limited (NEDFi) later boosted their efforts. The initiative successfully ended liquor production and improved the village's image.

Aagor Dagra Afad: In 2002, the NGO "The Ant (Action North East Trust)" started an informal weaving program in Chirang district, Assam, to empower rural Bodo women and preserve traditional weaving. This initiative attracted women previously involved in liquor production, animal care, and manual labor. Inspired by its success, 'Aagor Dagra Afad' (Motifs Weavers Organization) was established in 2005 in Chirang district. The trust specializes in traditional Bodo clothing like 'Dokhona' and 'Jwmgra,' and later expanded to Indian traditional wear and home furnishings. Their designs attracted major brands like Fab India and Big Bazar and were featured at Lakme Fashion Week in 2016. Now, the organization produces modern clothing, including skirts, tops, jeans, and trousers. They have an independent weaving center with accommodation, allowing weavers to work there or from home.

## METHODOLOGY

**Method:** In this study, a mixed-method approach is employed, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method is used for tabulating and quantifying the responses from weavers obtained through semi-structured interviews. The qualitative method is utilized to analyze the qualitative data collected from interviews, personal narratives, and secondary sources, providing deeper insights into the gathered information.

**Sample:** The sample for this study consists of 50 women weavers from two weaving organizations: 'Bagurumba Weavers Development Trust' and 'Aagor Dagra Afad.' A purposive sampling technique, which involves selecting a sample based on certain criteria required to meet the purpose of the study, was used. The criteria for selection of sample were women who previously relied on liquor production for their livelihood and later switched to weaving.

**Source of Data/ Tools used:** The current research data was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was acquired through semi-structured interviews and personal

narratives, while secondary data was obtained from various sources such as websites, documentaries, and articles focusing on weaving organizations.

**Procedure of Data collection:** Procedure of data collection for the present study involved field visit by the researcher and collection of data through semi-structured interviews with the weavers, gathering of personal narratives and observation.

**Analysis and Interpretation**

**Previous occupation of the weavers:** Before joining the weaving organizations, none of the women considered weaving as an occupation. They mainly produced and sold local liquor to support their families since their husbands or male family members couldn't cover expenses. Additionally, they earned money by rearing domestic animals like pigs, chickens, ducks, and goats, and sometimes worked as wage labourers.

**Reasons behind choosing weaving:**

**Table 1: Table showing reasons given by weavers behind choosing weaving**

Reasons behind choosing weaving	Number of Respondents
Dignified occupation	18 (36%)
More income	15 (30%)
Cultural sentiment attached to weaving	8 (16%)
No formal training is required	9 (18%)

\*N=50

**Interpretation:** 36% women chose weaving over selling liquor because they considered it as a more dignified occupation compared to production of liquor. 30% women reported earning more through weaving as the reason of choosing it as occupation, while 16% chose it for their cultural sentiment associated to weaving. 18% women, who were already skilled weavers, found the idea appealing as it required no formal training. As stated by one woman weaver of Agor Agor Dagra Afad, Bodo women are known for their weaving skills, and she is an expert weaver, so when the idea of choosing weaving as a source of income came up, she could not deny it.

**Earnings per month:**

**Table 2: Table showing earnings per month of the weavers**

Average Income per month	Number of Respondents	
	Before joining weaving organization	After joining weaving organization
Below 5,000	37 (74%)	0 (0%)
5,000 to 10,000	13 (26%)	8 (16%)
10,000 to 15,000	0 (0%)	22 (44%)
15,000 to 20,000	0 (0%)	16 (32%)
Above 20,000	0 (0%)	4 (8%)

\*N=50

**Interpretation:** It is found that weaving organizations have helped the women weavers earn more. Before joining the weaving organizations 74% of women earned below 5,000 rupees but after joining the organization, their income hiked to a range of 5,000 to 20,000. This indicates that weaving has helped them earn more compared to earning through production of liquor.

**Educational Support:**

**Table 4: Table showing educational support received by the children of the weavers**

Children enrolled in educational institution	No. of Respondents	
	Before joining weaving organization	After joining weaving organization
Private institution	4 (13.33%)	17 (56.67)
Government institution	18 (60%)	10 (33.33%)
Dropout children	8 (26.67%)	3 (10%)

\*N=30

**Interpretation:** Out of 50 women weavers selected for the study, 35 were married, and 30 had school going children. Before joining the organization, only 4 women enrolled their children in private schools. After joining, this number increased to 17, whereas, before joining the organization, 18 women enrolled their children in government schools, but this number dropped to 10 after the women joined weaving organization as they claimed to believe that compared to government schools, private schools offer better education although its fee structure is higher and enrolling children in private schools will higher their positions in the society. Additionally, 8 women claimed their children dropped out of school or college as they could not afford their education but the number dropped to 3 after the women joining the weaving organizations. This shows that the women began to earn more after joining the organization and are able to provide quality education to their children.

**Social Status:**

**Table 5: Table showing reasons for increase in social status of the weavers**

Reasons for increase in social status	No. of Respondents
Stopped production of liquor	28 (56%)
Providing financial support to family	16 (32%)
Enrolling children in private educational institution	6 (12%)

\*N=50

**Interpretation:** Weavers reported an increase in their social status after joining the organization. 56% claimed their status improved because they stopped producing liquor, which had a negative impact on society. Now that they have stopped liquor production, they feel respected in the society. 32% women reported their status increased due to higher earnings that allow them to support their families financially. Additionally, 12% said their status improved because they admitted their children to private educational institutions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Before joining the weaving organizations, all the weavers lived in poverty and relied on liquor production to support their families. However, this work was not seen as dignified, and their earnings were insufficient. They shared common goals: to escape low social status, support financially the dependent family members, and achieve economic independence without relying on men. By choosing weaving, they increased their monthly income, provided better education for their children, and improved their social status.

Analyzing the experiences of the women weavers from a feminist perspective reveals several important themes related to empowerment, agency, and social change.

1. **Empowerment and Economic Independence:** The shift from liquor production to weaving handloom signifies a major step towards economic empowerment for these women. By choosing a dignified livelihood, they regained their independence and proved they can support their families without depending on men. This challenges traditional gender roles that often place women in subordinate positions in the household and society.
2. **Redefining Social Status:** The weavers' efforts to improve their social status highlight a key feminist principle- the importance of dignity and respect in women's work. By leaving a stigmatized occupation, they enhanced their self-worth and challenged societal views on women's roles, rejecting patriarchal norms that devalue their contributions.
3. **Collective Action and Solidarity:** The women's decision to form weaving organizations showcases the power of collective action, central to feminist movements. By uniting, they created support networks that help them challenge systemic barriers and enact social change in their communities, emphasizing the importance of collaboration among women.
4. **Cultural Preservation and Education:** Their commitment to better education for their children and preserving cultural heritage highlights the feminist focus on intergenerational empowerment. By investing in their children's futures, these women uplift their families and help ensure the continuation of their cultural identity, which is often threatened in marginalized communities.
5. **Social Change as a Catalyst:** The women weavers act as catalysts for social change, demonstrating how women's empowerment can lead to poverty alleviation and better educational outcomes. Their stories challenge stereotypes and inspire others, showing how women from marginalized communities can drive transformative change in society.

**Challenges and recommendations:** The researchers faced few challenges in collecting primary data for this research study. One of the main challenges in this study was that some women were unwilling to share their past experiences. Therefore, it is recommended to build rapport with



participants through multiple visits and informal conversations is essential before conducting the study. Another challenge was the language barrier. Most participants were fluent only in their mother tongue i.e., Bodo. They communicated well with researchers only in that language. Thus, it is advisable to hire a local person when conducting research in remote villages. The third challenge was locating the weavers who worked from home. Geographical accessibility to remote villages required careful planning, collaboration with other workers of organizations. Therefore, employing local guides is recommended for conducting such study.

### **Conclusion**

The study reveals the transformative impact of weaving organizations on Bodo women from a feminist perspective. Before joining the organizations, these women faced poverty and stigma for their involvement in liquor production, limiting their economic opportunities and dignity. Through handloom weaving, they achieved economic independence and improved their social status. The findings reveal that by choosing a dignified livelihood, these women challenged traditional gender roles. Their increased income has enabled them to provide better education for their children, breaking the cycle of poverty. The study also highlights the importance of collective action, as weaving organizations foster solidarity among women, helping them confront societal stigmas. It can be concluded that empowering women in marginalized communities can lead to broader social change. The experiences of these weavers illustrate that when women have the opportunity to shape their own paths, they can significantly improve their lives and their communities. Organizations like the Bagurumba Weavers Development Trust and Aagor Dagra Afad have effectively revolutionized the socio-economic prospects of these women, catalyzing significant social transformations in remote Bodo communities. Such organizations should be regarded as role models for uplifting marginalized women in society. When more such organization will receive support from government, they will be successful in making remarkable social change.

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### **Author's contribution:**

Both the authors contributed equally to the theoretical development, analysis, interpretation and writing of the manuscript.

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