

Self Help Group – A Policy for Revival of Culture: A Study in Assam, India

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Assam is one of the north eastern states of India surrounded by other administrative units, namely: Arunachal, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya and also by foreign countries like Bhutan and Bangladesh. The region with its geographical and ecological diversity is a place of magical beauty. Its surrounding verdant forests, exquisite flora, turbulent streams and lofty mountains make it a unique place.



Figure 1: Map of North East India

Nature has ungrudgingly blessed the region with an abundance of scenic grandeur and a wealth of rarest wildlife.

Assam has a long glorious cultural history. The region is the habitat of



heterogeneous population including various castes and tribes. Different local rulers always patronized different art forms, which are now visible in every sphere of the lives of Assamese people (one who lives in Assam is called Assamese irrespective of any caste or tribe)

The rich and vibrant culture of Assam had also experienced the impact of globalization. This worldwide phenomena affected the entire life style of the people of Assam. Along with economy boost up and other positive impact on the region, there were negative influence also. People of Assam started neglecting their own tradition and culture while welcoming others. The changes were visible in almost every aspect be it tradition, cultural practices or food habit or dress pattern or any other behaviour. Long time negligence ultimately corrupted the basic practices of their life style. The rapid growth and development due to globalization also resulted into migration. More and more alternative options outside Assam made people to go for better financial security and better life style. Thus both globalization and migration had contributed for a changing scenario of Assam.

In such a global phenomena and its impact, the local government of Assam promoted the concept of forming self help group. Self help groups are village based micro organizations, where people from a particular area with same type of problems, may it be financial or social form a group to become financially secure. Self help groups may be registered or unregistered. Members of such groups mutually agrees to contribute for the development of any socio-cultural or financial issue with a goal to meet their basic needs through financial stability. Most self help groups are located in India, but also found in other countries of south Asia and south east Asia. India has a long history of such groups but the history of self help groups in Assam is a recent phenomena. Though initially the aim was to enhance the self sustainability of underprivileged and economically backward section of people in the society, yet, it resulted into drastic change in the socio cultural sectors also.

Changes occurred in every aspect of life style of the Assamese people. Self help groups restarted producing traditional Assamese dresses in their



Figure 2: *Chadar* made of Assam Silk



handlooms, which is a time



Figure 3: *Gamocha*

consuming affair. To produce a complete female dress it takes almost 5-7 days. The hub of Assam Silk – Sualkuchi

regained its own lives, weavers went back to their looms and started translating their imaginations to vivid products. Their products got recognition in the markets of the entire country. Young youths who are by profession living outside the state initiated new ventures and



weavers got encouragements. In the religious practices required all the accessories which were gradually loosing their positions were made available by self help groups. For example, for any religious occasion, *Gamocha* – a kind of cotton hand towel is essential. But due to unavailibility of required thread and other mechanism weavers stopped creating those and were replaced by some *Gamocha* made in machines outside the state. But once the self help groups were formed, they started producing *Gamocha* again in their traditional handloom keeping the traditional patterns intake. The traditional food habit of the people of the region gained popularity again. The traditional cakes and other variety of rice products have been made available to the urban people, new even food courts were established by young educated youths, hence giving them financial security.

However, when self help groups restarted their traditional practices and produced large quantity of materials, requirement of some institution began. Concern was where and whom to sell the products, in other words, how to bring the products to market or make available to consumers. Thus local government started few non profit making organizations like NEDFI. But those organizations were completely financial in nature and were least concern of the revival of traditions. In such circumstances, the role of Srimanta sankaradeva Kalakshetra is worth mentioning.

Shrimanta Sankaradeva kalakshetra capital of Assam, Guwahati. It is a agency for promotion and



is located in the government aided preservation of



heritage north east region of India. It was established in the name itself implies that it is an institution or place for arts named after the great saint of Assam

Srimanta Sankaradeva, who introduced neo vaishnavite movement in Assam. He was the socio cultural and religious reformer of Assam. Kalakshetra houses a



museum, a library, conference and seminar hall, an artists village, an open theatre hall, a crafts demonstration cum sale area and a few temporary exhibition halls. Everyday kalakshetra receives thousands of visitors. It houses a museum, a library, conference and seminar hall, an artists village, an open theatre hall, a crafts demonstration cum sale area and a few temporary exhibition halls. It organizes temporary exhibitions, workshops, seminars, conferences, special lectures etc. where artists get the opportunity to showcase their work. Through the workshops artisans are encouraged and made aware of the importance of their work. Exhibitions are held from time to time where artists display their art work. Besides, the *Shilpagram* bordering Kalakshetra is one of the most striking components. *Shipagram* is the artists village, an area for selling products. During major festivals of Assam like *Bihu*, more and more

products are sold and artists are involved. Since Kalakshetra is the hub of Assamese culture and everyday it is visited by thousands of people, *Shilpagram* gets good buyers also. As the self help groups produce authentic and traditional products, they are always adorable as traditional products and people agree to pay higher amount for that. The exhibitions in Kalakshetra is perhaps the best place for Assamese artisans specially the weavers. They are promoted in wider way and through Kalakshetra they get the opportunity to showcase their work outside the state. Some of them have even gone outside the country as representatives of India. Thus Kalakshetra is promoting, encouraging people to get involved more and more in their traditional practices. In other words, it is preserving the rich heritage of the region through promotion and encouragements. The museum of Kalakshetra again acquires from time to time different ethnographic and religious objects. People feel proud to donate or sell their belongings to the museum where their heritage is preserved.

Thus in the context of the rich heritage of Assam, the role of local government is very important. Once almost vanishing rich culture of the region and also migrated population regained their loss through the self help groups. It is with government aided institution like kalakshetra that today artisans of Assam get encouragement and inspiration to continue their traditional practices. This policy of the government is preserving the heritage and providing financial security to the people as well.