

# ***THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES***

## **The Golden Weavers' Project by Grameen Sahara: A Hope to Provide Livelihood for the Poor Rural Female Weavers of Assam**

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**Abstract:**

*Grameen Sahara is an institution in support of sustainable livelihoods, basically for the women. The main branch of this NGO is in Kulshi Road, Chaygaon of Kamrup district of Assam. Sericulture or Eri Silk production which evolved the 'Golden Weavers Project', with people working as spinners. They have more than 5000 women spinners. The 'golden weavers' have come as a producers company after 5 years of its initiation. Through this paper, I want to study how the NGO Grameen Sahara improves the standard of living of the eri weavers through "Golden Weavers Project".*

*For this paper basically I used primary information. The data are collected through simple random sample method from the village Borduar.*

**Keywords:** eri, weaver, Grameen Sahara

### **1. Introduction**

The name "Eri" is developed from the Assamese word 'era', which means castor as the silkworm feeds on castor plants. Eri Silk comes from the worm *Samia Cynthia ricini*, found in north east of India and some parts of China and Japan. It is also known as endi or errand in India. The woolly white silk is often referred to as the Ahimsa silk of the fabric of peace as the process does not involve the killing of silk worm. The heavy rainfall and humid atmosphere of the region suits the eri culture. Eri silk is also known as poor persons silk as it is not as high priced as other type of silk. The life cycle of eri silkworm has four stages- eggs (koni), larva (polu), pupae (leta) engaged in a cocoon and adult moth. A complete life cycle lasts for about 44 days in summer and 85 days in winter.

Grameen Sahara is a development support and facilitating organization initiated in "support of sustainable livelihood" in the year 2002. The organization has been incorporated as a not-for-profit organization under the Societies Registration Act XXI of 1860. Since its inception, it endeavours towards bringing significant changes in the livelihoods of the poor and underprivileged through its different livelihood programmes and micro-finance services. Presently the organization has been working with around 40000 families from three districts of Assam and two districts of Meghalaya through different livelihood projects including microfinance with staff strength of 150. (Annual Activity Report, Grameen Sahara, 2013-2014). Their main aim is to develop the society through the development of the female in the family. They believe, if the female in the family is independent and empowered then she will lighting the life of four members in the family, as a result the society will be develop.

It is an organization for capacity building, research and livelihood projects in the social sector. It support, facilitate, initiate processes for increasing opportunity and choices for deprived, disadvantaged people of the region and more specifically to uplift the women class of the society. They mainly focus on organizational self-awareness and assessment, livelihood, linkage and promotion etc. The head office of this NGO in Chaygaon of Kamrup Rural district of Assam.

The major projects undertaken by Grameen Sahara are presented below.

1. Golden Weavers Project: Working with the eri silk spinners. They have already been organized into a Producers' Company with shareholdings of the producer/ spinners.
2. Diversion Based Irrigation Projects: To support agriculture based livelihood through provision of diversion based irrigation, community mobilization and organization, adoption of sustainable agriculture practices.
3. System of Rice Intensification (SRI) Projects: Working with small and marginal farmers in Kamrup and Goalpara district.
4. Micro finance services: Working with families with easy and affordable credit who are not reached by formal banking system.
5. Water Hyacinth Craft Project: Working with artisans from Chaygaon development block and Rampur Development block of Assam and Tikrikilla development block of Meghalaya.
6. Asian Mud-Eel Project: Worked with 100 small fish farmers in Tikrikilla development block of Meghalaya.
7. Centre for Microfinance and Livelihood project: Working with small NGOs in all the states of north eastern region.
8. ICCO Project: To strengthen the rights of women in conflict and fragile areas, grameen sahara in collaboration with Assam Mahila Samata Society and Reach India with support for the first time from ICCO India Trust, New Delhi have initiated the project.
9. Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana: Empowering women in agriculture in selected districts of Assam.

10. Grameen Silk Producers' Company limited: Grameen silk producers' Company Ltd. is a result of transformation of the Golden Weavers' project.

11. Arpan Trust: Teach my village: Teach my village is an educational project under "ARPAN" Trust of Grameen Sahara.

12. Saranarathi Leasing and Finance Pvt. Ltd: It is a non banking financial company registered under RBI, by section 451 A of the RBI Act, 1934.

13. Pratishruti, Rural Retail Mart: It is a small step taken by to help the deprived people of the rural area by which they can sell various products through the unit.

14. Pakshalika Producers' Federation: To increase the skill of the women eri spinners and to increase the income, a community based institution was registered as MBT (Mutual Benefit Trust) on 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2014 named 'Pakshalika Producers' Federation'. (Annual Activity Report, Grameen Sahara, 2013-2014).

Under the Golden Weavers' project, the NGO covers some villages like Borduar, Hahim and many more other hilly villages near Meghalaya boarder.

### 1.1. Objectives

The main objectives of the study are:-

1. To know and analyse about 'Eri' production and marketing system, project undertaken by Grameen Sahara.
2. To analyse the livelihood of eri weavers.
3. To emphasis the health condition and medical facilities of the weavers.

### 1.2. Methodology

The paper is basically based on the primary information. The data was collected through direct personal interview by simple random sample technique, where fifty households were considered. The place of our study is Borduar village of Chaygaon. The survey was done with the help of the NGO 'Grameen Sahara'.

## 2. Study

### 2.1. About the Weavers of the Bordua Village

During the field survey it could be recognized that the members involved with the NGO 'GRAMEEN SAHARA' particular with the ERI production, 100% respondents were female. Out of total number of respondents, 90% of the respondents were married. The educational qualification of the respondents is not so much satisfactory. All respondents are under matriculation level (10<sup>th</sup> standard). But the good thing is that, they are very much conscious about their children's education. Most of them regularly send their children to schools and colleges. The family members of all the respondents includes 3-5 members or above. 30.76% of respondents have a family of 3 or less members and 69.24% people have 5 or above members. In the time of interview, the weavers mention that, after getting help from the NGO, 3 to 5 weavers make a group and purchase machinery and start the eri production together. They divided the total amount of profit among themselves.

### 2.2. Motivation

The females are known as born weaver in Assam. The respondents did this weaving activity from their childhood. They have learned to make eri-thread, chadar, gamocha from their mother, grandmother as well as mother-in-law. The weavers never took any professional training. The NGO Grameen Sahara of Chaygaon locality, after demonstrating their works motivated them to do this professionally. The NGO inspired them to use this skill a means of livelihood.

The weavers mention that if they will get proper training in near future than they will be more beneficial and they are able to produce more. In fact they are very much interested to take professional training.

### 2.3. Source of Getting Input and Cost of Production

During the survey by asking several women, it was found that the inputs of Eri-marketing were provided to them by the agent of their local NGO 'GRAMEEN SAHARA'. The agents bring the required inputs and give them to produce the output. Moreover, the women workers bought the inputs from their local market Chaygaon or Bijaynagar as well as they them self cultivated some required inputs of Eri in the paddy field within their own locality. Though these are the sources of getting the input, yet most of the women depend to a large extent on the NGO 'GRAMEEN SAHARA' for the essential inputs for producing Eri products. The collected data during the survey is seen that the cost of production per unit is Rs200/- (approximately), in case of raw materials are not provided by the NGO. Most of them are engaged in weaving chadars, mekkelas, gamucha, etc. Cost of production includes -raw materials cost, machinery cost, depreciation cost and electricity cost. Some of the weaving centre uses electrical machines to cut thread.

### 2.4. Occupation and Marketing Channel

Majority of the people in the 'Borduar' area is associated with agriculture and weaving. The males are engaged in agricultural field and females are in eri production and piggery. We surveyed a total of fifty families and from them we came to know about the project of 'Eri' by 'Grameen Sahara' and also about its benefits to the people.

The ERI production and marketing business started in the year 2007 with an amount of loan being borrowed from the NGO "GRAMEEN SAHARA". This NGO provides micro loan to the females. They provide an amount of Rs15000/- at the rate of 4% for a

period of 50 weeks. Sometimes they also use the loan to make piggery, animal husbandry or some other small businesses. The amount of loan is changeable with respect to the income earned by the producing unit.

Sometimes the NGO provide eri, cotton and 'kon muga' tread to the weavers and they produce mekhela-sador, eriyarn, shawl, gamocha etc. They sell their products through the NGO, middleman or directly in the nearby market. The weavers mostly sell their products i.e. gamocha, eriyarn, eri mekhela-sador in Chaygaon market, Bijoynagar, Handloom Expo and exhibitions held in nearby areas and even in Guwahati. People buy various kinds of unique traditional dresses from them. They also supply their products in various boutiques in Guwahati city. People can also purchase these products from the houses of the weavers.

## 2.5. Income and saving of the surveyed households

### 2.5.1. Profile of the Sample

Table 1 shows the profile of the surveyed households.

Sl. No.	Size of Handlooms	Total No. Of weavers		Average monthly money income (in Rs)	Average Monthly Savings (in Rs)	Duration of Involvement with the project
		Male	Female			
1	1 to 3 Small Size weaving firm	0	28	4,000	500	1 -2 years
2	4 to 6 Medium size weaving	0	17	5,000	800	1-2 years
3	7 and more Large size weaving firm	0	5	5,500	1000	1-2 years

Table 1  
Source: Field Survey

Table 1 shows that income and savings of these families is very low. It is because they hardly make much profit from their products. The reason behind this low income is low wage rate. The weavers are only get Rs 200/- for one mekhela or Chador or Rs 500/- for a set of mekhela sador. They sell per piece of Gamocha at Rs30/- only. This system is prevails only if the thread is supplied by the NGO. In some cases, the problem of middleman in marketing causes low profit to these people. While we talking about their expenditure for livelihood, they said that they are not required to purchase rice, vegetable, fish, etc. because they themselves produces these type of commodities. Even they also produce their cloths for self consumption. They inform us that their monthly expenditure for necessary commodities is very less. So, their real income is much higher in comparison to their monthly money income.

After the production, the products are sold to the market in a lower price and so the amount left with them are very small. When they able to sell their products at a higher price, they have a larger amount in their hand. And sometimes this helps them to buy machines and raw materials. From time to time they have to keep their savings for the wear and tear of the machines. Again at the time of doing these types of work many women faces lots of health's problems so a little amount of savings are used in purchasing medicine and visiting doctors.

## 2.6. Communication

Borduar is a backward area with lack of proper transport and communication of the people living in the interiors of the place. Yet the people engaged with the eri business are provided with transport facilities by the NGO for caring the products to its sale site.

## 2.7. Financial Support

Not any extra financial support is given to the weavers by the government through that they can further develop their business and uplifts their life style. They are only depends on the fund provided to them by the NGO Grameen Sahara. The weavers mentioned that if they get financial support and proper training from the government, then their quality and production can be increase and it may help them a lot.

## 2.8. Health Problems

On asking the respondents about this particular question they said that they faced many health related issues after doing the job among which some are also severe issues. The health problems faced by them are headache, back pain and eye-problem. These three are the main problems faced by most of the respondents. As they have to get engaged with the thread weaving and clothes making continuously for a longer time every single day so they have started losing their eyesight which may even lead to headache. They

suffer from back pain because of continuous sitting and weaving for longer period of time every day. Thus, these are the health problems faced by them.

### *2.9. Medical Facilities*

On asking the respondents, whether they get any medical facilities for the health problems faced by them, they said us that no medical facilities is being provided to them neither by the NGO (GRAMEEN SAHARA) to which they and their work are engaged and nor by the government. Though, the organizations have made many promises to the weavers regarding providing them with good medical facilities but either of the promises is not fulfilled till date. No health schemes are made for these poor people by the government. Directly or indirectly these poor people are working for the project of the NGO 'GRAMEEN SAHARA' and the government. But still their problems are not given attention by these organizations. Thus, their health is deteriorating day by day due to lack of medical facilities.

### **3. Conclusion**

It is clear that after the introduction of the NGO (Grameen Sahara), the people have got an easy access to loans and there is a rise in their income, standard of living, saving etc. The loans provided are basically women centric. The weavers said that before starting the business with the NGO Grameen Sahara, they are not even able to save one third of their present saving amount. Now they are financially strong, they are able to give better education to their children, helps their husbands in financial matters and also save money for their rainy days. In one word, they have a better standard of living.

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