



Preservation of Karbi textiles: Challenges, revival, and the role of GI tags

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Abstract

India has a rich heritage of traditional crafts and is the land of beautiful textiles. Craft clusters, particularly in regions like Assam and other Northeastern states, play a significant role in preserving this cultural wealth. However, many of these clusters like Karbi Textile Products, face severe challenges today due to the absence of formal documentation, leading to a lack of awareness, especially among the younger generations. This disconnect is causing a decline in traditional crafts, which have long symbolised cultural identity, power, status, and ambition in these regions. The research aims to explore the struggles faced by such traditional craft clusters in Northeast India and investigate how the introduction of Geographical Indication (GI) tags can aid in their preservation and revival. GI-tagged textile crafts such as Muga Silk of Assam, Manipuri Wangkhei Phee, and Mizoram's Puans have benefited from legal protection, yet many other crafts remain under threat. One of the key focuses of this study is to examine the gap in awareness about endangered crafts and propose strategies to increase their visibility and recognition, both within the region and globally. This research emphasises the challenges faced by traditional crafts, raises awareness among the youth, and highlights the need for greater recognition and documentation efforts. The ultimate goal is to ensure these crafts are preserved and celebrated as vital elements of India's cultural heritage.

Keywords: Geographical Indication (GI) tags Cultural heritage

Introduction

India's northeastern states are home to a rich and diverse cultural heritage, with traditional crafts and textiles playing a vital role in preserving this legacy. However, many of these crafts like Karbi Textile Products, are on the verge of extinction due to inadequate preservation efforts, leaving younger generations unaware of their significance. In states like Assam, efforts are being made to revive traditional craft clusters, but the challenges remain significant. Understanding why these revival attempts are focused on the Northeast and how they differ from similar initiatives in the Southern regions can shed light on the dynamics of craft preservation and revival across India.

Tourism has played an important role in giving people greater access to the rich cultural heritage of the Northeast. Events such as the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland and the Ziro Music Festival in Arunachal Pradesh have brought the region's unique traditions to a larger audience, creating opportunities for cultural exchange and boosting the visibility of local crafts. Assam's vibrant culture, with its rich textile traditions, can also leverage these opportunities to gain more recognition and support for its craft clusters. One way to ensure the survival of traditional Assamese crafts is through innovative storytelling and product diversification. By integrating narratives and write-ups with craft products, we can create an emotional connection between consumers and the artisans, allowing for a deeper appreciation of the culture. Additionally, Assamese textiles can be contemporized and integrated into modern product categories such as bottle holders, napkin holders, pillow covers, and home decor items like cushions, making them more appealing to today's consumers. The digital sphere offers another powerful tool for preserving and promoting traditional crafts. Digital preservation techniques such as blogs, hashtags like #LoveYourCulture, and social media campaigns can raise awareness, particularly among younger

audiences. These efforts can be supported by developing a cohesive brand identity for Assamese crafts, helping differentiate them in the market while highlighting their cultural significance. Additionally, collaboration among weavers from different communities can be fostered to create a product development centre where artisans work together on contemporary designs and innovations, ensuring the craft's relevance in modern markets. Currently, much of the knowledge about these crafts is passed down orally, resulting in the slow erosion of legacy as newer generations move away from these traditions. Establishing formal networks for craft development, along with digital archives and storytelling platforms, will help preserve these traditional practices for future generations.

A Geographical Indication (GI) tag can be a crucial tool in this process, providing legal protection and recognition for Assamese crafts while enhancing their commercial appeal. By linking cultural heritage to consumer products in a meaningful way, this research will explore how these strategies can ensure the survival and growth of Assam's traditional craft clusters in a rapidly changing world.

Literature Review

1. Overview of Northeast India's Craft Heritage

Northeast India is the home of a large number of tribes and sub-tribes. They have a vigorous craft tradition and every tribe excels in craftsmanship: this excellence manifests itself in the various products its member's produce. (Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 2024). Handloom industry of Assam, a northeastern state in India, is one of the aged as well as important sectors of this region. In Assam it is mostly accomplished as a home-based industry. Handwoven textile is practised here both for commercial as well as domestic purposes. Apart from economic importance, the hand-woven textile practice is also a part of traditional belief and custom. Thus, the Assamese culture consists of a

variety of traditional textile motifs and designs, which evolved with time and situation. These motifs are fading away with the phase of time and hence there is a need to preserve them (Hani, U. & Das, A.K., 2018) ^[10].

2. Karbi Textiles

The Karbis are known to be one of the largest tribal communities in Assam. In Karbi culture, a village, referred to as a 'rong, operates on a communal system where all villagers collectively contribute to cultivation and other economic activities. Karbi Anglong, the largest district in Assam, spans an area of 10,434 square kilometres. It shares its eastern boundary with Golaghat district, while its western borders are defined by Morigaon district and a portion of Meghalaya state (Hansepi, L. and Laisram, R., 2022) ^[11]. The Karbis have long been renowned as exceptional weavers, preserving their traditional customs through generations. Their stunning handwoven garments showcase the remarkable skill and creativity of the artisans. These indigenous weaving techniques are deeply rooted in the tribe's socio-cultural and religious values, symbolising their rich heritage and identity (Kuntala N. Barua, et. al, 2020) ^[18]. The Karbi traditional loom, known as 'Therang, is a simple back-strap tension loom primarily associated with women since ancient times. It consists of a bamboo beam tied between two posts with a bar made of *Mesua ferrea* wood. The weaver adjusts their sitting distance based on the required cloth length, applying body weight to tension the loom. Key components of the Therang include Chek (made of *Bambusa tulda* for strapping the yarn tightly), Owek (with two parts for thread counting and as a weaving projectile, made from *Bambusa pallida* or *tulda*), Berlim (fabricates floral designs, also from *Bambusa pallida* or *tulda*), Theilang-pong (a *Dendrocalamus hamiltonii* cylinder that shifts threads and creates gaps for Owek), Hi-e-pong-lang (checks thread interweaving with attached small threads), Harpi (tightens and attaches new threads, made of *Mesua ferrea*), Adang (a *Bambusa tulda* tool with cone-shaped ends to keep cloth unwrapped), Thening (*Mesua ferrea* wood where woven cloth is wrapped), and Thehu (a cane rope for tying the loom to the weaver's waist, now often replaced by jute rope). Additionally, an improved fly shuttle loom, 'Kor-atherang, facilitates mass production of garments. This comprehensive setup highlights the ingenuity and efficiency of Karbi weaving traditions. The Karbis possess a distinctive art of weaving motifs, integral to their socio-psychological and cultural life. Their motifs often draw inspiration from nature, including flowers, leaves, trees, birds, and animals. The butterfly motif, called 'Pipli,' symbolises freedom, joy, and merriment, while the flower motif, 'Mir, frequently appears in women's apparel, often paired with leaf designs. The hand fan motif, 'Hijap Amang,' is reserved exclusively for Piba and Pekok garments, never used in Pini attire. The 'Jambili Athan,' an emblem of Karbi culture, represents their rich cultural heritage and has been adapted into modern clothing designs. However, this modern adaptation led to a loss of its original essence, prompting the Karbi Sahitya Sabha to ban its use in textiles. Other traditional motifs, such as Vorale (a bird), Long (wooden mortar), Dumkek (a vegetable), and Thoithe (an edible fruit), are deeply rooted in the Karbis' socio-cultural traditions and reflect their close connection with nature and daily life (Kuntala N. Barua, et. al, 2020) ^[18]. Dyes and colourants play an essential role in textiles, crafts,

cosmetics, and tattoos among the Karbis. Cotton yarn, known as Honki, and silk yarn, called Eri, are the most commonly used materials in Karbi handloom weaving. Their preferred method of textile production remains the traditional handloom technique, with handwoven garments being favoured over synthetic alternatives even today. The Karbis primarily use herbal dyes, derived from natural sources through traditional processes, for their weaving practices. While synthetic dyes are suspected to cause allergies, carcinogenic effects, and other health issues, natural dyes are regarded as eco-friendly and less harmful, offering both environmental and health benefits (Kuntala N. Barua, et. al., 2020) ^[18].



Source: https://karbi.wordpress.com/2006/03/18/photos/100_0520/

Fig 1: A Karbi weaver with her traditional loom (therang)

3. Role of Geographical Indication (GI) tags in craft revival

Geographical Indication (GI) is a tool within Intellectual Property law that identifies products as originating from a specific geographical area. It signifies that these products possess unique qualities and characteristics associated with that particular place of origin. In India, the Geographical Indication of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act of 1999 provides the legal framework for GI protection. GI functions as a marketing tool, adding economic value for producers by providing information about product quality and its origin. Unlike other forms of Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs), GI rights are collective in nature. This means that all producers from designated GI regions can benefit from these rights. GI rights are not transferable since they are community-based (Pratima, 2022) ^[28]. 'One advantage of GIs in this context is that they are a common property instrument. Whereas commercial trademarks are usually owned by individual economic agents who therefore have a monopoly on their use, GIs are instruments that can be used by all genuine economic agents in a specific geographical area, who respect the terms of reference guaranteeing conformity with tradition or not a frozen set of practices but practices judged, after collective deliberation, to be consistent with tradition, i.e. that are genuinely a part of a living culture" (Petit, 2009) ^[30]. The impact the granting of GI's makes on the crafts and thereby the economy of the rural population could have immense potential and deeper impact in both social and economic spheres and therefore needs to be studied in detail to ascertain the strength and gap areas of intervention. GI's are a relatively newer form of protection and countries like India have recently

acknowledged their potential (Kathju, G., 2018) [16]. The full impact of effective GI implementation is yet to be seen and quantified. Identifying and quantifying the socio-economic aspects and in the living conditions of the artisans is essential in the first few crafts that have been granted GI so that relevant implementation could be done in potential crafts which could have GI in near future. (Kathju, G., 2018) [16].

A GI tag for Karbi textiles would protect their traditional weaving techniques and designs, ensuring authenticity and preventing exploitation. It would enhance recognition and value in both domestic and international markets, safeguarding artisans' intellectual property from counterfeit products. The GI would open up better marketing opportunities, allowing the Karbi community to command premium prices and attract tourism, thus boosting the local economy. Additionally, the collective nature of GI rights would benefit all weavers in the region, promoting equitable growth and preserving the craft's cultural significance, leading to sustainable livelihoods and long-term heritage preservation.

The application for registering 'Karbi textiles products' under the Geographical Indications (GI) Act was filed in 2019 but faced several shortcomings and procedural delays. Despite multiple requests from the Registry, the applicant failed to provide the necessary documentation and address key concerns raised during the examination process. These concerns included the lack of historical evidence, proof of origin, and the unique qualities of the product. The applicant was given ample time to rectify the deficiencies but did not respond adequately. During the show-cause hearing in 2019, the applicant argued that the product had a strong reputation in the market, but failed to provide the required supporting documents to prove the historical origin and uniqueness of Karbi textiles. As a result, the GI application was refused, with the Tribunal noting that the applicant did not meet the basic requirements for registration. Since then, no further attempts have been made to address the deficiencies or resubmit the application (Karbi Textiles, n.d.).

4. Challenges and insights into youth awareness and cultural disconnect

In today's world, Assamese weaving traditions, celebrated for their intricate patterns and cultural depth, face numerous challenges that threaten their survival. Deeply ingrained in Assamese culture, weaving is not merely a craft but a way of life for many (Yadav, N. and Bagai, S., 2024.) [41]. The Karbi community boasts a rich and resourceful textile and weaving heritage among the communities of Northeast India. For centuries, Karbi women have preserved this craft as the primary labour force driving its continuity (Kuntala N. Barua, et. al., 2020) [18]. However, a range of factors now jeopardises its preservation and continuity.

- **Economic constraints:** Assamese weaving faces stiff competition from more profitable employment options. Knowledge of traditional designs is gradually fading, and younger generations show limited interest in sustaining and promoting this art form (Kuntala N. Barua, et. al., 2020) [18]. Younger generations are shifting to urban jobs, reducing skilled weavers. Low-profit margins and competition from mass-produced textiles deter artisans, compounded by high costs of raw materials and time-intensive production.

- **Lack of Innovation:** Traditional weaving practices now face significant challenges due to the lack of modernised production techniques that align with contemporary demands. The processes involved are intricate, time-intensive, and yield lower production, making them less sustainable (Kuntala N. Barua, et. al., 2020) [18]. Traditional weaving communities are hesitant to adopt new technologies or contemporary designs. This resistance to change frequently leads to the craft becoming stagnant, which is detrimental to its competitiveness in the contemporary marketplace (Kire, n.d.).
- **Awareness and Promotion:** Assamese weaving often lacks visibility both within and beyond Assam. Awareness campaigns, workshops, cultural festivals, and leveraging digital platforms and social media are vital to attract youth and potential markets.
- **Environmental Challenges:** Climate change and environmental degradation threaten the cultivation of essential silks like Eri, Muga, and Pat. Sustainable practices and resource management are critical to maintain the quality and authenticity of Assamese textiles (Yadav, N. and Bagai, S., 2024.) [41].
- **Educational Gaps:** Traditional crafts are largely absent from mainstream curricula, leading to decreased awareness and appreciation. Integrating these into educational programs can encourage young people to consider weaving as a viable career. Insufficient academic focus and inadequate documentation of techniques and history limit the transfer of knowledge. Collaborative research and publishing comprehensive educational materials can bridge this gap (Yadav, N. and Bagai, S., 2024.) [41].

These interconnected challenges emphasise the need for targeted interventions to preserve Assamese weaving as an enduring element of India's cultural heritage. To address these issues, it is vital to create opportunities that engage youth in revitalising this cultural legacy. Simultaneously, research focused on strengthening and developing the sector, along with value addition strategies, is crucial. Conservation efforts are urgently needed to preserve this traditional craft and its cultural significance, which is integral to the identity of the Karbi tribe (Kuntala N. Barua, et. al., 2020) [18].

Objectives

- Promotion of Traditional Crafts like Karbi Textile Products making through Tourism and Digital Platforms.
- Analysis of Awareness Among Youth in Assam and Beyond.
- Documentation and Preservation of Karbi Textile Products making.

Methodology

- **Interview:** A semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted with a weaver from the Karbi community to explore her perspectives on the challenges faced by traditional weaving and the preservation of cultural heritage. The interview aimed to gather insights into

various aspects of the craft, including its cultural significance, the impact of modern economic pressures, and generational shifts in interest. The questions focused on understanding the weaver's personal experience with the craft, the challenges of competing with mass-produced textiles, and the role of innovation in maintaining the tradition. Additionally, the interview explored her views on the potential benefits of Geographical Indication (GI) recognition for Karbi textiles, how the craft is viewed by the younger generation, and the need for educational initiatives to ensure the sustainability of traditional weaving practices. These questions were designed to provide a holistic understanding of both the individual and community-wide challenges in preserving Karbi weaving traditions.

- **Survey:** A survey was designed and distributed among youth in Assam and across India to assess their awareness and interest in traditional crafts, particularly those from the Northeastern states. The survey targeted individuals within the 15-18 age range and included questions about their demographic information such as age, gender, and location. It began with inquiries into the respondents' familiarity with Assam's traditional crafts, followed by specific questions about their knowledge of Assamese textiles, such as the Mekhela Chador and Gamusa, as well as their experiences with traditional weaving. Respondents were asked to rate their knowledge of Assam's traditional crafts on a scale of 1-10, reflecting their level of awareness. Further questions explored their opinions on the cultural significance of these crafts, the role of the younger generation in preserving them, and their interest in participating in educational initiatives. The survey also examined perceived challenges to the preservation of traditional crafts in the Northeast, including economic constraints, lack of innovation, and insufficient awareness. Additionally, respondents were asked for suggestions on how schools could incorporate more teachings on regional crafts and culture. The responses from this survey provide valuable insights into the attitudes and perceptions of youth towards the preservation of traditional crafts, contributing to the understanding of how these practices can be safeguarded for future generations.
- **Government reports:** The study involved a detailed examination of government reports related to Karbi textiles, particularly focusing on the application for the Geographical Indication (GI) tag for Karbi textile products. The GI reports were analysed in depth to understand the reasons behind the denial of GI recognition for these traditional textiles. The analysis included reviewing official documents, examination reports, and correspondence between the applicant and the GI Registry, which highlighted the deficiencies in the application, such as insufficient proof of historical origin, reputation, and unique characteristics of the product. These reports also underscored the lack of proper documentation, including evidence of the proof of origin, as well as the need for product specifications and quality control measures. This study aimed to identify the gaps in the application process and

understand the challenges faced by the Karbi community in securing the GI tag, offering valuable insights into the procedural requirements and the complexities involved in obtaining such recognition for traditional crafts.

- **Academic papers and databases:** Academic papers and databases were analysed to assess the current awareness of traditional crafts, specifically Karbi textiles and to examine the existing documentation practices surrounding these crafts. The literature review focuses on the challenges, role of cultural festivals, heritage tours, and digital platforms, such as blogs, social media, and e-commerce, in promoting traditional crafts. Additionally, studies on the effectiveness of digital media in preserving and promoting local arts were reviewed to understand how modern tools are being used to revive interest in traditional crafts.

Deliverables

- Comprehensive research report on Karbi Textile Products making clusters in Assam, including challenges and youth awareness.
- Survey from youth and interviews with artisans, showcasing awareness levels and challenges in craft preservation.
- Promotion and preservation methods for promoting crafts through tourism, digital platforms, product diversification, brand identity development, digital documentation and archiving traditional craft knowledge for future generations and using storytelling, social media, and educational initiatives to promote Assamese crafts.

Challenges and Awareness Among Youth

1. Findings from the interview and the challenges faced by artisans

The interview with a weaver from the Karbi community, provided critical insights into the challenges surrounding the preservation of traditional Karbi weaving practices. The respondent, a skilled weaver, highlighted several key obstacles, including economic constraints, limited access to markets, and the declining interest among younger generations in continuing the craft. The weaver explained that the traditional practice of weaving, which had once been a communal and household activity, now struggles to compete with more lucrative job opportunities, leading many youths to migrate to urban centres for better employment prospects. This has caused a gap in the transmission of knowledge, as younger generations show less interest in mastering the intricate techniques required for the craft. Moreover, the interview revealed the weaver's strong belief in the importance of both preserving traditional methods and incorporating modern elements to make the craft more appealing to contemporary audiences. She emphasised that the craft's stagnation could be mitigated by fostering a balance between maintaining authenticity and embracing innovation. The weaver also stressed the need for greater recognition of Karbi textiles, both within the state of Assam and nationally, as a means to elevate their cultural and economic value. Furthermore, the lack of formal education and documentation of the craft was identified as another major issue. The weaver suggested that educational institutions could play a crucial role in preserving the

tradition by including weaving techniques and the cultural significance of Karbi textiles in curricula, thereby fostering a sense of pride and interest among youth. Overall, the interview provided invaluable qualitative data on the challenges facing Karbi textiles and the ways in which the community envisions their preservation and growth.

2. Findings from surveys on youth awareness in Assam and beyond

The survey responses provided valuable insights into the awareness, knowledge, and perception of Assam’s traditional crafts among young respondents aged 15–18

years, predominantly from Assam (70%) and other urban cities like Delhi, Kolkata, Lucknow, and Bengaluru (30%). A majority (80%) of the respondents had heard about Assam’s traditional crafts, with familiarity varying across specific crafts: weaving and cane and bamboo crafts were most recognized (63.3%), while crafts like Gamusa (23.3%), brass and bell metal industry (33.3%), woodworks (30%), and Karbi textiles (20%) had lower awareness. Knowledge of these crafts was self-rated modestly, with most respondents scoring between 4 and 6 on a scale of 1 to 10. This indicates an intermediate level of understanding, with room for deeper engagement and education.

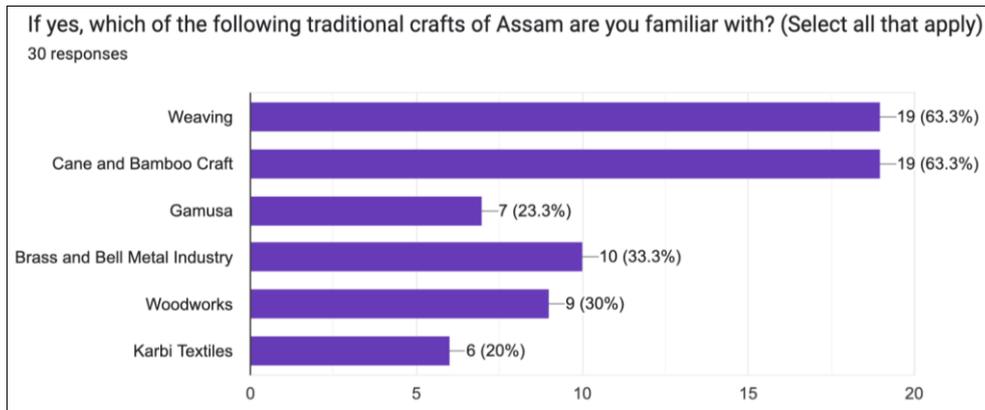


Fig 2: Knowledge of traditional Assamese crafts among the youth

About 46.7% of respondents were familiar with traditional Assamese attire like Mekhela Chador, but fewer (26.7%) understood how textiles like Gamusa are made. Among those aware of traditional textile-making processes, schools were the primary source of knowledge (66.7%), followed by the internet and home influences (16.7% each). However, only 40% had witnessed traditional weaving at home or visited weaving centres, highlighting limited first-hand exposure to these practices.

The cultural significance of traditional crafts was widely acknowledged, with 86.7% considering them ‘very important’ or ‘important’ to Assamese culture. When asked

how the younger generation could contribute to preservation, the most popular suggestions included participating in craft workshops (63.3%), creating digital archives (50%), raising awareness on social media (63.3%), and purchasing traditional products (36.7%). Respondents overwhelmingly agreed (73.3%) that schools should teach more about traditional crafts, with 66.7% expressing interest in learning further. However, when asked about the next generation’s interest in continuing these crafts, only 36.7% believed there was strong interest, while 43.3% remained uncertain.

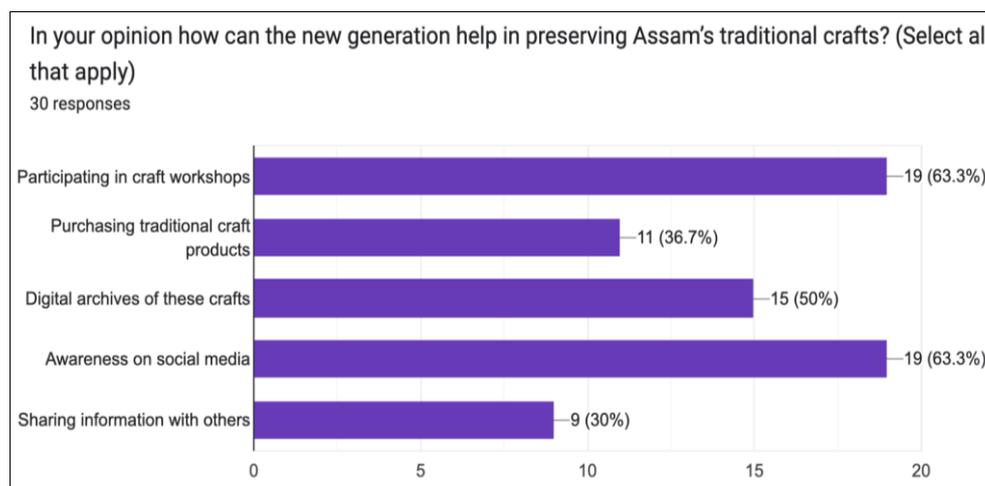


Fig 3: Youth’s opinion on preserving traditional Assamese crafts

The key challenges identified for Northeast crafts included a lack of awareness (76.7%), insufficient documentation and preservation efforts (70%), and declining interest among youth (60%). Other concerns included limited government support (30%) and competition from mass-produced goods

(46.7%). Additional comments emphasised the need for better documentation, increased awareness, and institutional efforts to preserve and promote Indian crafts and culture. This feedback underscores the critical need for educational initiatives, innovative promotional strategies, and

government intervention to ensure the sustainability of Assam’s traditional crafts.

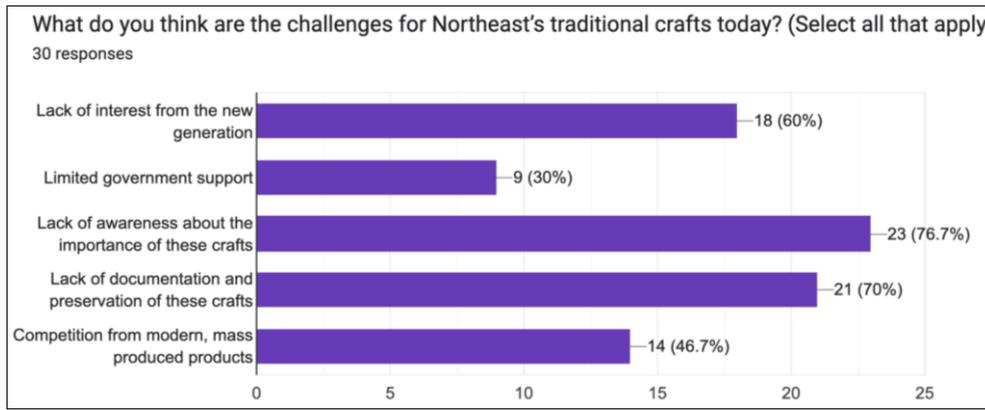


Fig 4: Youth’s opinion on the challenges for Northeast’s traditional crafts

Role of Tourism in Craft Promotion of Assam

Craft tourism revolves around exploring regions where craft culture is deeply embedded in the social and economic fabric. Tourists aim to witness the craftsmanship, understand how these traditions are passed down through generations, and experience the cultural and lifestyle elements tied to these crafts. This form of tourism not only promotes cultural appreciation but also supports the artisans whose crafts serve as their primary livelihood (Hani, U. and Barua, U., 2015.)^[9].

Assam, the gateway to North-East India, boasts a rich tapestry of mixed cultures, ethnicities, and craft traditions. The state is renowned for its diverse cultural elements, including unique languages, music, dances, and an extensive craft culture. This vibrant heritage, nurtured over centuries, has made Assam a treasure trove of traditional craftsmanship. Cane and bamboo crafts are particularly prominent in Assam, with cane furniture being a hallmark of the region. These products are in high demand both within India and abroad. Export initiatives are supported by organisations like the North Eastern Handicrafts and Handloom Development Corporation Ltd. (NEHHDC) and Assam Government Marketing Corporation Ltd. (AGMC), along with private export houses. This demand is fueled by tourism, as visiting foreigners and domestic tourists alike appreciate and purchase these authentic crafts (Hani, U. and Barua, U., 2015.)^[9].

Informal marketplaces like *haats* and *bazaars* serve as cultural and economic hubs, showcasing the skills and products of local artisans. These spaces act as direct platforms for artisans to connect with tourists and sell their authentic, handmade crafts. Tourists value these markets for their guarantee of genuine, locally-made products. To enhance these opportunities, the government could invest in infrastructure such as market sheds and basic amenities, ensuring artisans have better facilities to display and sell their work. Fairs and festivals play a significant role in celebrating rural life and attracting large crowds. These events combine business opportunities for artisans with vibrant cultural entertainment, enhancing the overall tourist experience. By promoting and adding more colours to such events, more tourists can be drawn, benefiting local craftspeople. For example, publishing promotional materials highlighting local fairs, festivals, and crafts can boost visibility and visitor engagement (Hani, U. and Barua, U., 2015.)^[9]. Known as the ‘Festival of Festivals,’ the Hornbill

Festival is a prime example of how a cultural celebration can drive craft tourism. Held annually in December in Kohima, Nagaland, this event showcases the region’s diverse tribal heritage, including its unique handicrafts. Visitors experience traditional Naga art, crafts, and textiles, creating an invaluable platform for artisans to sell their products to a global audience. The Ziro Music Festival is another significant event that blends modern and traditional cultures. While primarily a celebration of music, it also features stalls showcasing Arunachal’s traditional crafts, providing artisans with a vibrant stage to interact with a contemporary, global audience. This festival highlights the symbiotic relationship between cultural events and craft promotion.

By leveraging the appeal of traditional marketplaces, fairs, and festivals like the Hornbill and Ziro Music Festivals, the tourism sector can drive craft sales and cultural appreciation. A collaborative effort between tourism and handicraft departments, including infrastructure development and strategic promotion, can ensure sustainable growth for artisans and their crafts. These initiatives not only preserve traditional art forms but also create economic opportunities and enrich the cultural experience for tourists.

Preservation and Promotion

1. Strategies for digital documentation and archiving craft knowledge

Documentation and research are essential for preserving traditional textile crafts. Efforts are made to record various aspects of textile practices, including weaving techniques, dye recipes, block designs, and other forms of traditional knowledge (Basole, 2015; Da Costa, 2015)^[3, 37]. Institutions like National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) and other academic scholars collaborate on the documentation of these craft traditions, creating archives and publishing research to ensure that knowledge is preserved and shared. This collective effort helps maintain the integrity of traditional crafts while fostering greater awareness and appreciation. Digital technology nowadays is a very common platform for designers, craftsmen and also the clients and marketers to communicate and come up with new ideas and creativity (Marion et. al., 2012)^[19]. The advancement in technology has enabled the process of digitising the traditional textile designs and motifs, which is beneficial in maintaining a balance between culture and

trade (. Cultural or traditional aspects can prove to be an added value for the industry, since they play a very important role in generating fashion trends that come from Asia (Shin et. al., 2015) ^[35]. Today the development of any product is mostly digital with increased productivity and speedy process. It is cost effective and gives a wide range of options (Fixon and Marion, 2012) ^[19].

2. Using social media and educational campaigns to raise awareness

- **Social media:** The evolution of media has transformed the way we connect, communicate, teach, and learn. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and other social media have significantly increased public engagement, with hashtags like *#LoveYourCulture* amassed over 10,000 posts, reflecting growing interest in cultural appreciation and identity. These tools allow students and artists to reflect on their learning, express ideas, and address challenges creatively. In art, the digital revolution has fostered greater connectivity across creation, education, and performance, helping artists recognize its transformative impact. The integration of instructional technology aligns with current policies in art education, offering students more opportunities to personalise and direct their learning (Parrish, 2016) ^[25]. Social media redefines cultural participation, enabling individuals to share opinions and promote cultural artefacts, often surpassing traditional institutions. By producing and sharing content, whether images, videos, or blog posts- users democratise art, reshaping perceptions of cultural hierarchy (Bonita, 2013). This trend is evident in hashtags like *#LoveYourCulture*, which encourages cultural pride and collaboration. Moreover, social platforms play a crucial role in cultural branding, as artists use them to craft authentic digital narratives, enhancing emotional resonance and audience engagement. Digital tools serve both as mediums and platforms for artistic expression. For instance, YouTube and similar platforms have enabled online video art, expanded creative possibilities and illustrated the profound impact of technology on the arts (Samdanis, 2018) ^[33].

- **Skill development Programs:** Numerous organisations and government initiatives offer skill development programs aimed at training and empowering artisans in traditional textile crafts. These programs provide training in various techniques, including handloom weaving, block printing, natural dyeing, and embroidery. By improving the skills of artisans, these interventions facilitate the transfer of knowledge to future generations and contribute to the sustainability of traditional crafts. Research has identified several training forums that have benefited artisans, such as Artisan Training Workshops, Design and Technical Skill Enhancement, Master-Apprentice Training, Entrepreneurship and Business Development, and Cluster-based Skill Development.

- Efforts have been made to improve market access and promote traditional Indian textiles both within India and internationally (Srivastav and Rawat, 2016) ^[38]. To showcase and sell artisan-made textiles, events like craft fairs, exhibitions, and trade shows are organised,

allowing artisans to directly connect with consumers. Additionally, online platforms and e-commerce websites have expanded reach and visibility for artisans, reducing reliance on intermediaries (Sherburne, 2009) ^[36]. Events such as Surajkund Crafts Mela, Dastkar, India International Trade Fair, Textile India, and Crafts Villa serve as key venues, offering artisans enhanced exposure, easier market access, and opportunities for sustainable business growth. These initiatives are vital in securing better livelihoods for artisans while helping them establish lasting market linkages.

Product Diversification and Market Expansion

1. Innovative approaches to craft application

Collaboration between designers, artisans, and craft clusters has played a crucial role in revitalising and modernising traditional textile crafts. By working together, designers and artisans are able to blend innovative techniques with traditional craftsmanship, resulting in contemporary fashion and lifestyle products that both preserve heritage and expand market opportunities for artisans (Mehrotra, 2015) ^[22]. Successful collaborations, such as those between designers like Ritu Kumar and Manish Malhotra with Zardozi and Chikankari, as well as Abraham and Thakore's work with ikat, block printing, and embroidery, highlight how these partnerships help bring traditional crafts into the modern fashion landscape while sustaining their legacy. These collaborations foster both creativity and economic empowerment within artisan communities, opening doors to new markets and opportunities.

2. House of Locals: Case study on a successful craft-modernization model

House of Locals (HOL) was launched in 2021 in Assam as a sustainable startup committed to modernising Indian craft traditions through innovative, contemporary designs while maintaining their cultural essence. Founded by Swagata Gautam, a NIFT alumna with experience in luxury design, the brand focuses on sustainable solutions, artisanal empowerment, and eco-friendly product development. HOL leverages traditional craftsmanship to create products that narrate the stories of North-East India, addressing the lack of cultural representation in mainstream media.

- **Sustainable Practices:** HOL specialises in transforming waste materials such as pine needles and water hyacinth into high-quality handicrafts, aligning with environmental sustainability goals. Their product range includes lights, baskets, furniture, and custom-designed items, promoting eco-conscious lifestyles.

- **Artisanal Empowerment:** The brand has trained over 60 artisans in bamboo carpentry across three villages, enhancing their skills and creating sustainable livelihoods. This aligns with cluster development and skill advancement strategies for marginalised communities.

- **Product Innovation and Customization:** HOL combines traditional craftsmanship with minimalistic and nature-inspired designs, catering to a niche market segment. The brand provides custom solutions for furniture, lighting, and event design, ensuring personalised client experiences.

- **Market Expansion:** Through participation in expos, government programs, and collaborations, HOL has expanded its market presence. Notable achievements include designing sustainable décor for Anant Ambani's pre-wedding event and receiving coverage in *Elle Decor* magazine.
- **Consumer Engagement:** HOL engages with a diverse clientele, from corporate entities and hotel chains to individual consumers, while also leveraging its studio space as a hub for customer interactions, design research, and operations. Their aesthetic studio is a blend of functionality and rustic charm, attracting local and national attention.
- **Recognition and Growth:** Swagata Gautam received the Young Achievers Award for her work, and the brand has collaborated with major influencers, celebrities, and interior design firms. HOL's journey showcases how a sustainable, community-driven approach can modernise traditional crafts while preserving cultural heritage.



Source: <https://houseoflocals.in/>

Fig 5: Products, House of Locals

House of Locals serves as a benchmark in craft modernization by aligning its operations with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, emphasising environmental stewardship, economic empowerment, and gender equality. Their innovative approach has elevated traditional North-Eastern crafts to a global stage, ensuring their preservation and relevance in modern markets.

3. Recommendations for government policies and initiatives

- **The North Eastern Region Textile Promotion Scheme (NERTPS):** The scheme aims to uplift the handloom sector in the North Eastern Region (NER) by providing essential government support to enhance the value and employment potential of handloom products. This is planned through a series of initiatives, including the formation of self-help groups (SHGs) and joint liability groups (JLGs), the creation of consortiums, awareness campaigns, and collaborations with designers. Additionally, the scheme focuses on the use of computer-aided textile design (CATD) to promote innovation in the sector. NERTPS aims to enhance the production and marketability of handloom fabrics by establishing strong market linkages, promoting design innovation, diversifying product lines, and improving access to both domestic and international markets. Through initiatives like national and international

handloom expos, buyer-seller meetings, and designer interventions, the scheme strives to elevate the visibility and market appeal of North Eastern textiles. Additional activities include the creation of an online platform, branding through a regional ambassador, and various marketing events such as fashion shows and quizzes. These efforts aim to provide weavers with continuous employment, improve their living standards, and promote the rich cultural heritage of the North Eastern Region.

- **The Comprehensive Handloom Cluster Development Scheme (CHCDS):** This scheme focuses on creating world-class infrastructure that aligns with the needs of local artisans and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) to boost production and export capabilities. Its primary goal is to enable artisans and entrepreneurs to operate in state-of-the-art facilities equipped with advanced technology, along with necessary training and human resource development. The scheme emphasises market linkages, production diversification, and the creation of Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) that combine standard models of small-scale industries (SSIs) with customised infrastructure to give them a competitive edge. Interventions under the scheme include baseline surveys, skill training, marketing events, improved tool kits, publicity, and design workshops. Additionally, the initiative incorporates the establishment of emporiums, design and resource centres, raw material banks, and trade production centres to further strengthen the sector.
- **The National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP):** Introduced by the Government of India, it aims to foster the growth of the handloom sector by establishing block-level clusters. This initiative consolidates various schemes such as the Integrated Handloom Development Scheme (IHDS), Comprehensive Handloom Development Scheme (CHDS), Integrated Skill Development Scheme (ISDS), and Technology Upgradation. The core concept of the NHDP is to create Common Service Centres and Common Facility Centres at the block level, offering weavers access to essential pre- and post-loom facilities. The program also includes providing computerised designs and jacquard cards for weaving, along with the establishment of a Computer Aided Textile Designing (CATD) unit at the Weavers Service Centre in Guwahati. The scheme further incorporates skill development for weavers in weaving, dyeing, and designing, and provides advanced equipment such as Modern Fly Shuttle Frame Looms, high-quality maintenance tools, and design development technology.
- **Hathkargha Samvardhan Sahayata (HSS):** It is a key initiative under the Comprehensive Handloom Cluster Development Scheme (CHCDS) and the National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP). Announced by the Hon'ble Minister of Textiles during the second National Handloom Day celebration in Varanasi on August 7, 2016, this program is designed to provide substantial support to handloom weavers. Its primary goal is to offer financial assistance for looms and accessories, facilitating technological

improvements that will boost both the quality of the fabric produced and overall productivity.

- **Yarn Supply Scheme:** Handloom weaving is a labour-intensive profession predominantly found in rural areas across India. According to the Handlooms Census of India from 2009-10, this sector employs over 4.3 million individuals in weaving and related activities. The Yarn Supply Scheme is a three-part initiative designed to support this sector, which includes: (i) providing yarn at mill gate prices, (ii) offering a 10% price subsidy on cotton hank yarn, domestic silk, and wool, and (iii) investing in the National Handloom Development Corporation (NHDC). This scheme aims to ensure that all eligible handloom weavers can access various types of yarn at mill gate prices, thereby facilitating a steady supply of essential raw materials and maximising the employment potential within the handloom sector.
- Additionally, the Weaver MUDRA Scheme focuses on delivering timely and sufficient financial support from banks to meet the credit needs of the handloom industry for term loans and working capital in a cost-effective manner across the country.
- The Comprehensive Welfare Scheme for Handloom Weavers aims to provide universal and affordable social security to weavers and workers nationwide. This initiative includes life, accidental, and disability insurance coverage through programs such as the Pradhan Mantri Jivan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY), Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY), and the Converged Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana (MGBBY). Government initiatives like 'Make in India,' 'Skill India,' 'Digital India,' 'Brand India,' 'Swadeshi Products,' 'Atmanirbhar Bharat,' and 'Vocal for Local' have further strengthened the position of handloom weavers by creating more economic opportunities. The Ministry of Textiles has also launched the Repository of Indian Textiles and Crafts, 'vastrashilpakosh.in', established on National Handloom Day 2023^[23]. by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi. This repository aims to collect, organise, digitally archive, aggregate, and disseminate information related to Indian traditional textiles and crafts globally, playing a crucial role in preserving and promoting these cultural assets.

Results and Conclusion

The research highlights a stark contrast between the perspectives of artisans and youth awareness regarding Northeast India's craft heritage, particularly in Assam. While artisans emphasise the need for preservation and support, many young individuals lack awareness of these traditions. However, youth interest in modernised crafts presents an opportunity to bridge this cultural gap through innovative designs, strategic marketing, and educational campaigns. Assam's crafts, such as Karbi textiles, hold immense potential for cultural preservation and economic growth, with Geographical Indication (GI) tags playing a crucial role in safeguarding traditions, ensuring authenticity, and offering artisans a competitive advantage. Tourism initiatives, including the Hornbill and Ziro Music Festivals,

provide platforms for artisans to connect with consumers and promote their work, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between cultural tourism and craft promotion. Case studies, like the House of Locals, illustrate how innovative designs, sustainable practices, and digital outreach can modernise traditional crafts while preserving their authenticity. Strategies such as digital documentation, social media promotion, and educational campaigns are essential to raising awareness and incorporating craft traditions into academic curricula. Fostering collaborations between artisans and design institutions can further bridge the cultural disconnect. A collaborative approach involving artisans, youth, government, and private stakeholders is vital for preserving and promoting Assam's craft heritage. By aligning traditional artistry with contemporary consumer needs through modernization, education, and digital platforms, Assam can position itself as a hub for cultural tourism and a leader in sustainable craft revival, ensuring both economic opportunities for artisans and a richer global appreciation of its cultural legacy.

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