How Aagor Weaves Is Preserving Assam's Bodo Tradition and Empowering Tribal Women

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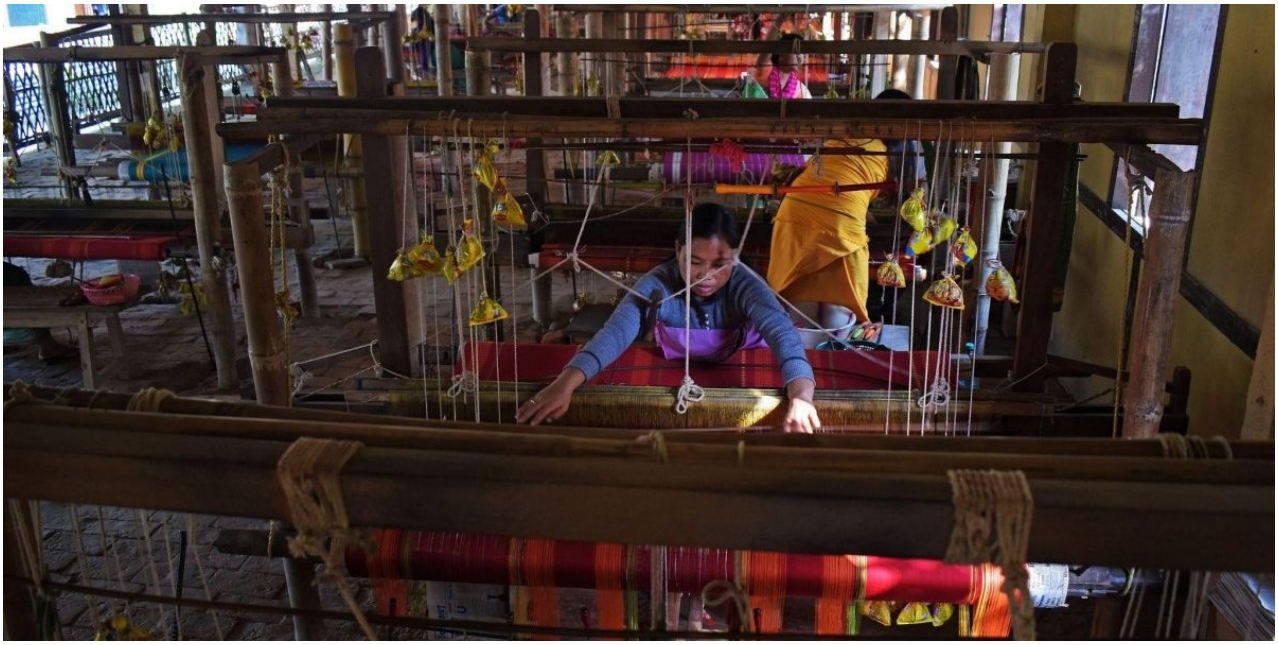

The Ant weaving centre at Rowmari, Chirang District, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry.

analysis

Culture

Based in the Chirang district of the state, the livelihood project run by the ant, a local NGO, provides employment to 70 women. Their exquisite apparel with intricate motifs has enthusiastic buyers in urban metropolises.

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Culture

Labour

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This is the second story in a three-part series. Read Part 1 and Part 3.

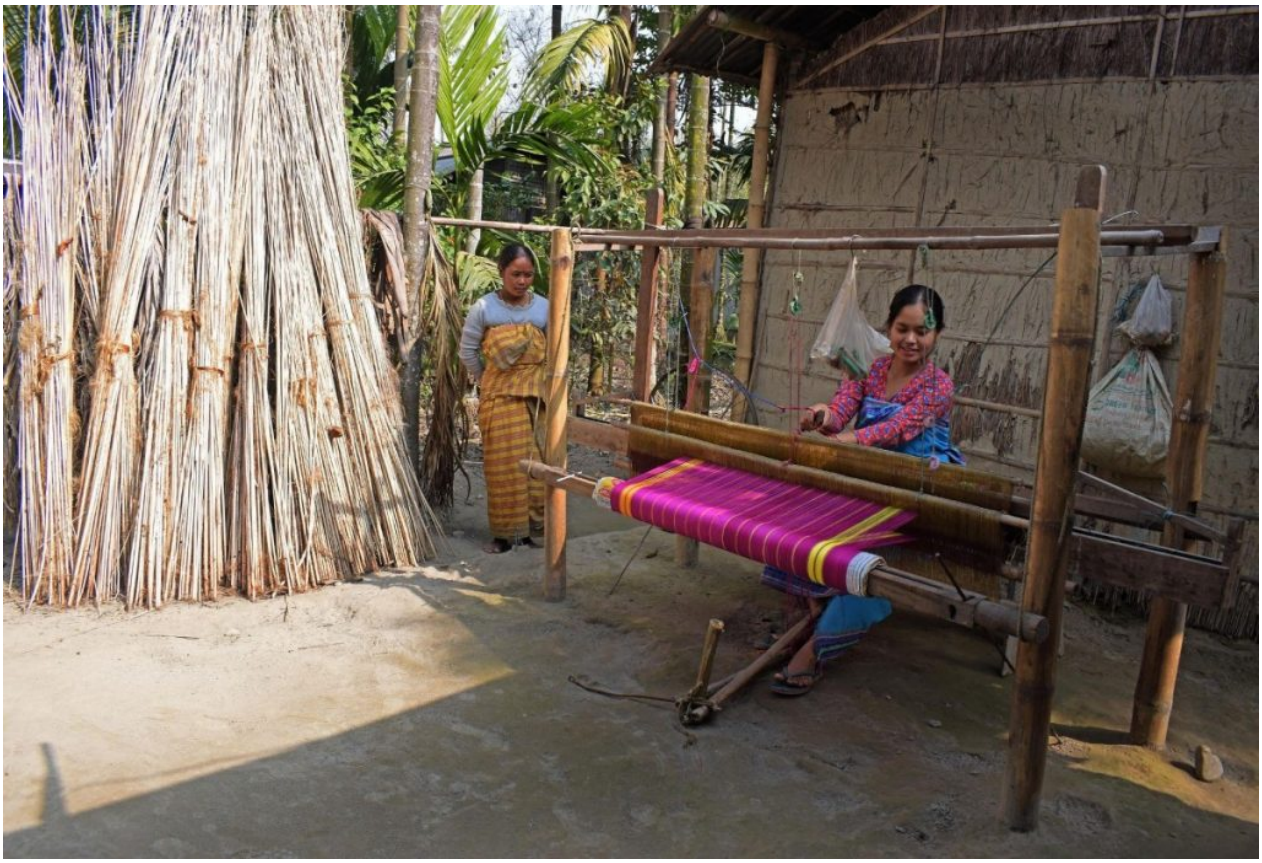
India's geographical identity is shaped by its rich cultural diversity, with a multitude of ethnic and linguistic groups. The nation's tribal communities have played a significant part in adding to this rich kaleidoscopic landscape of cultural diversity. They have their

own distinct cultures, customs, traditions, and languages, unique art forms (traditional music and dance, and handicrafts), the knowledge of which has been passed over from one generation to another, shaping their lives and livelihoods.

However, despite the acknowledged significance of their respective cultural fabric, many of the tribal communities face adverse socio-economic challenges, living in abject poverty, with a lack of access to proper education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. The constitution may have made special provisions to care for these communities' unique position in India's social landscape and to offer significant 'right-based' interventions, yet successive governments have struggled in ensuring an adequate resolution to the issues of these communities and in securing holistic development for tribals. The state of Assam and its own tribal communities positioned in the Chirang district of Assam have been no different in this regard.

Indigenous, distinct ethnic-group populations developed skills that were necessary to survive in some of the most hostile (conflict-affected) environments known to humanity, and the adverse impact of state-apathy and intersectional marginalisation has further had a catastrophic impact on the women of these communities.

As communities struggle to participate in a more integrated economic market-based landscape, everyone's livelihoods consequently depend on not just protecting their identity, but also on securing sustaining livelihoods through work and economic opportunities.



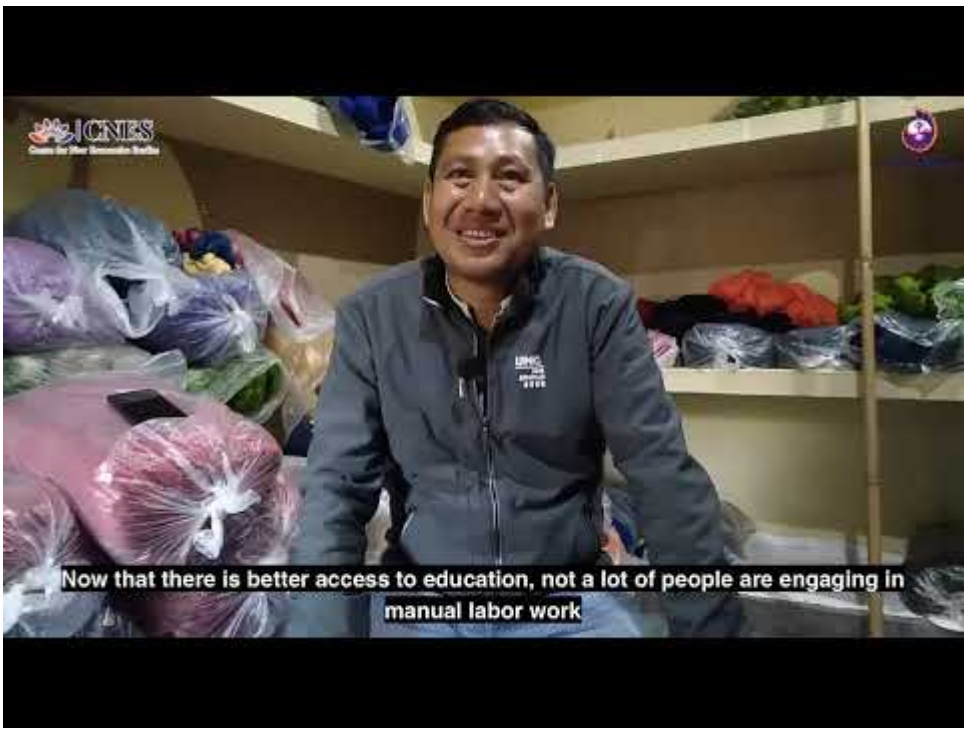
Weaving on a handloom at Topguri village, Chirang district, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry.

With its own cultural and linguistic characteristics, one such artisanal tribe, the Bodos or Bodo-Kacharis, makes up a significant constituent of the various ethnic groups and races residing in Assam.

With its exquisite and diversified traditions and customs, the tribe has been successful in conveying the very essence and synthesis of Assam and the people of Assam. With exotic tapestry and motifs immersed in their indigenous attire, these tribal women, who are self-taught weavers, have been weaving their own traditional clothing for generations, which would be the only garments they would wear every day.

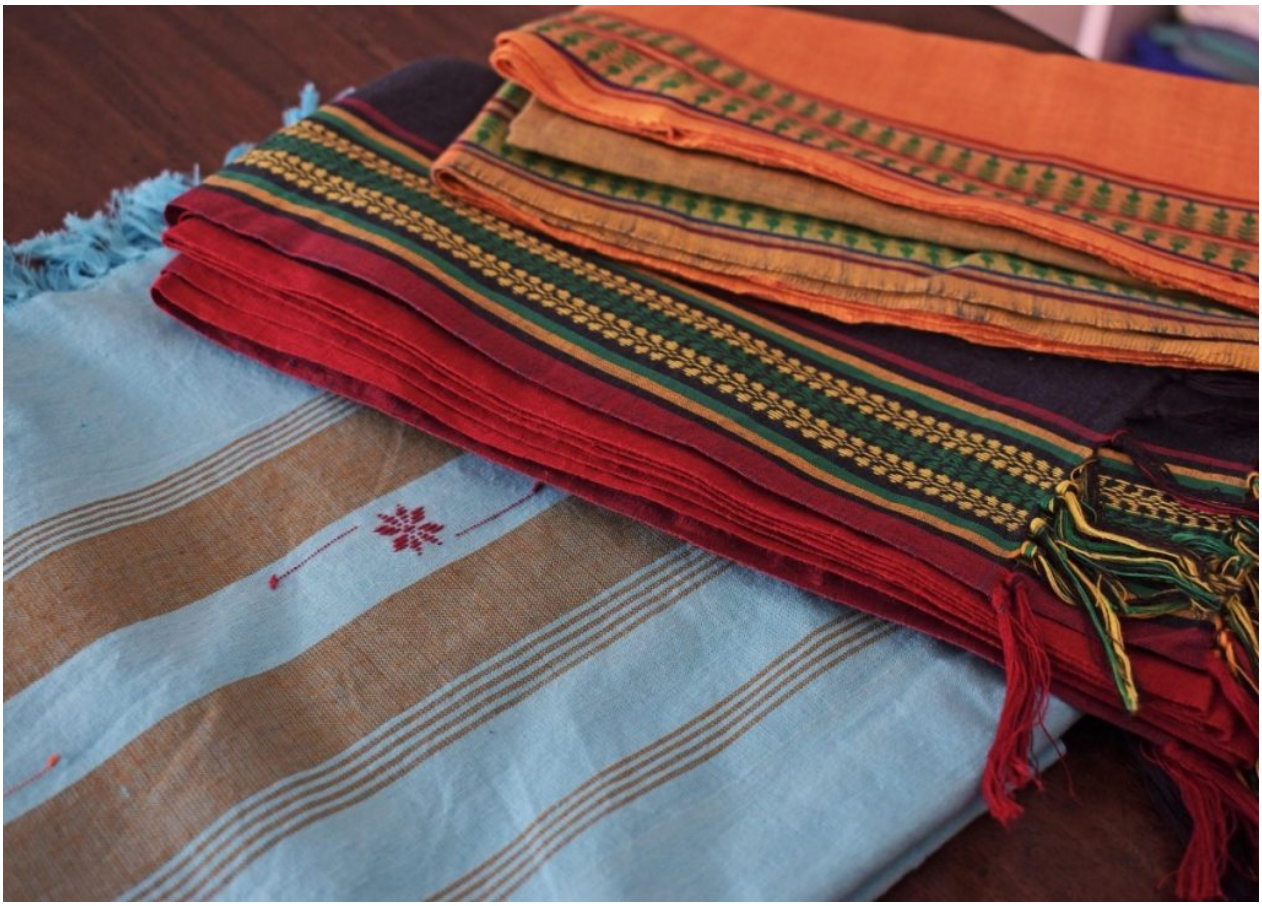
Over the past six weeks, field researchers from the Visual Storyboard Team of Centre for New Economics Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University working in collaboration with the ant, undertook an ethnographic study, documenting the ant's project initiative which developed an all-women weavers organisation: Aagor Daagra Afad, as a separate trust, a voluntary organisation, registered a public charitable trust in Bongaigaon, Assam since October 2000.

Aagor, a Bodo word that means "motifs", not only has a connection to the tribe in its name but also to its craftswomen and administration. Started as merely a livelihood project, *Aagor* provides work currently to about 70 village-based women weavers and runs a weaving centre for up to 30 destitute women to work full-time on weaving as an employment opportunity.



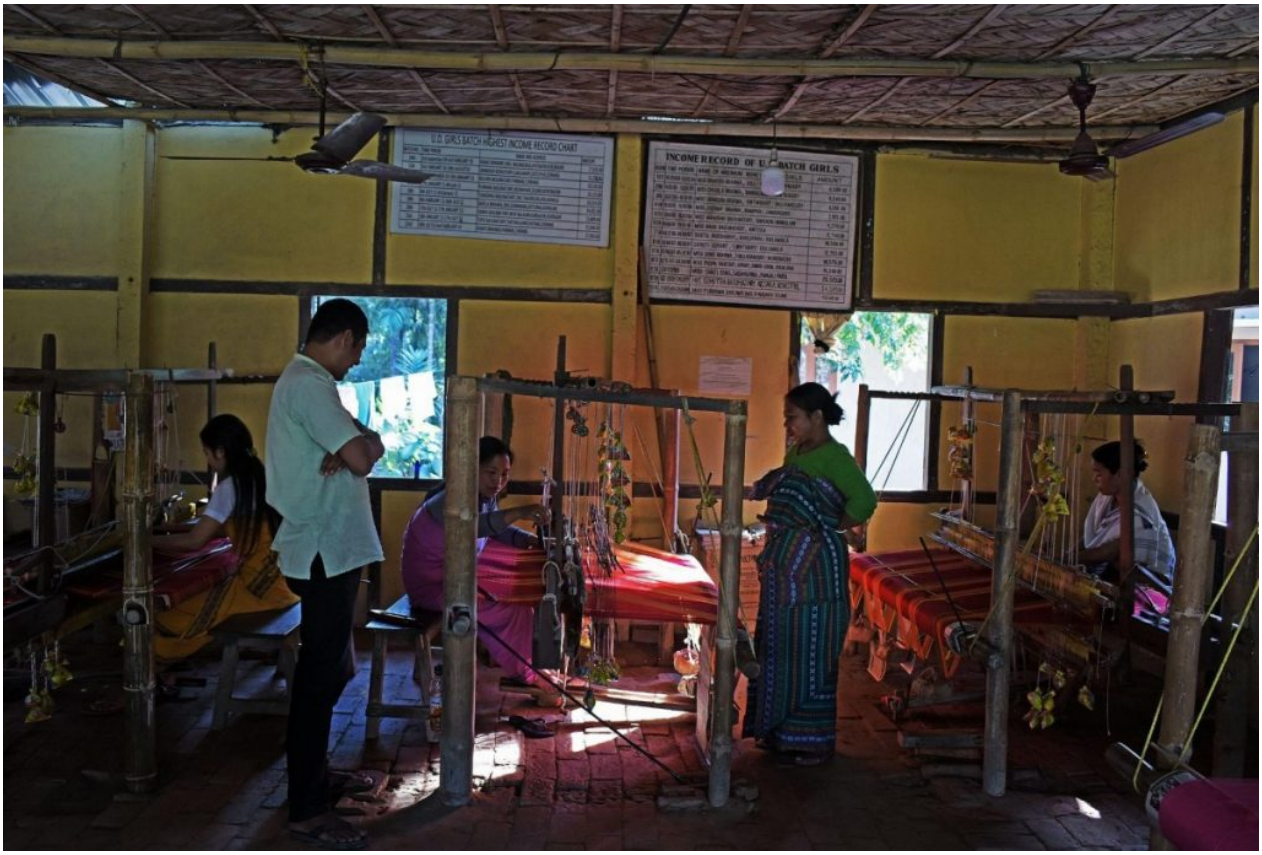
Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/U9KPXvTMfvE

Since the women of the area did not have access to any significant livelihood opportunities other than doing manual work at the farm or in some small enterprises or working as domestic workers, Aagor weaves offered a collectively-independent organisational base for (tribal) women to make their own livelihood and work together for an enterprise that secures their collective material (and economic) interests.



Fabrics on display at Aagor Dagra Afad store at Chapaguri market, Bongaigaon, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry.

Weaving, a craft native to the women of the tribe, was identified by Aagor as a skill tool with the potential to socio-economically empower these women.



Dharmeshwar Brahma, Production in-charge speaks to a weaver at the ant weaving centre at Rowmari, Chirang District, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry.

Aagor, therefore, progressed with a vision to establish a long-term and permanent source of revenue, which could be relied upon by these tribal women, even in the possible event of discontinuation of the ant. An ode to independence, the project focused on filling all executive positions with locals from the community to improve the chances of sustainability of the initiative.

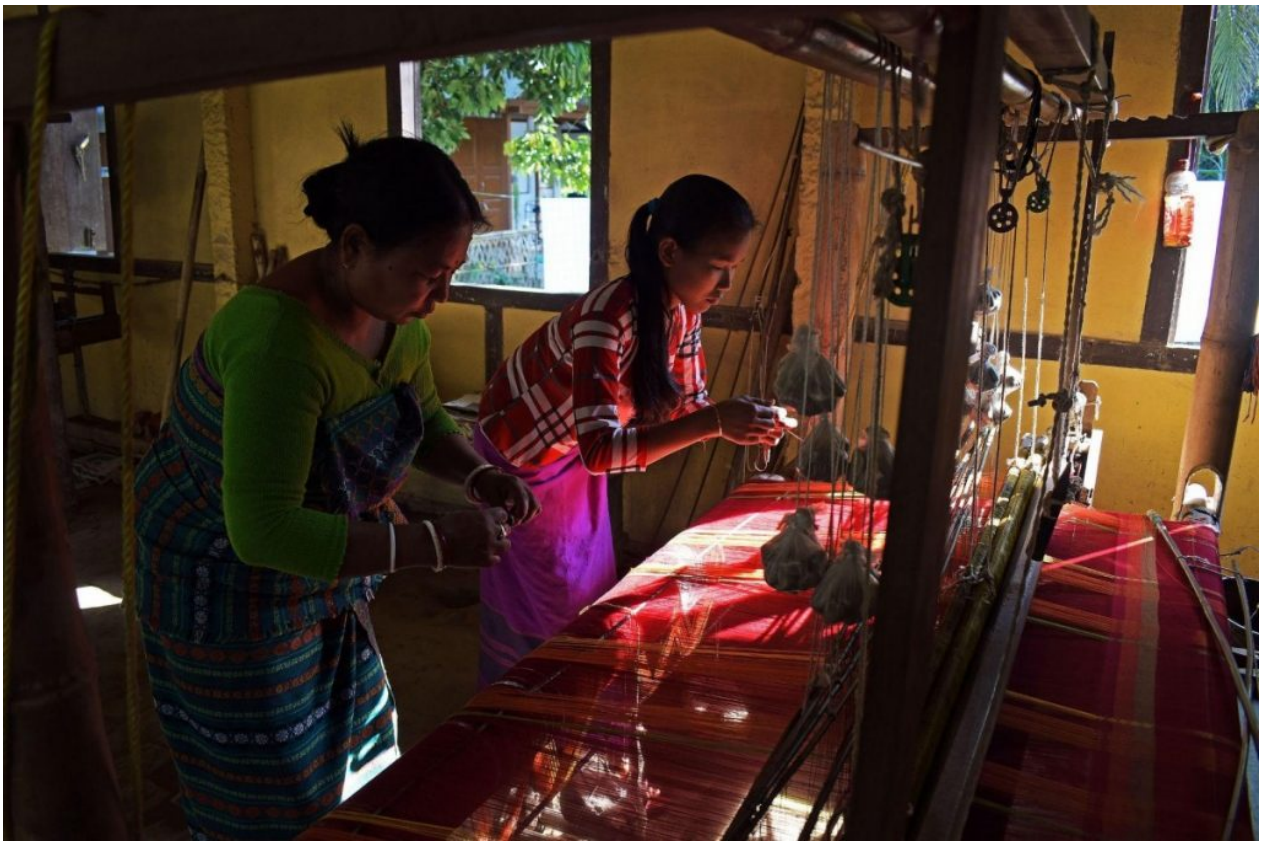
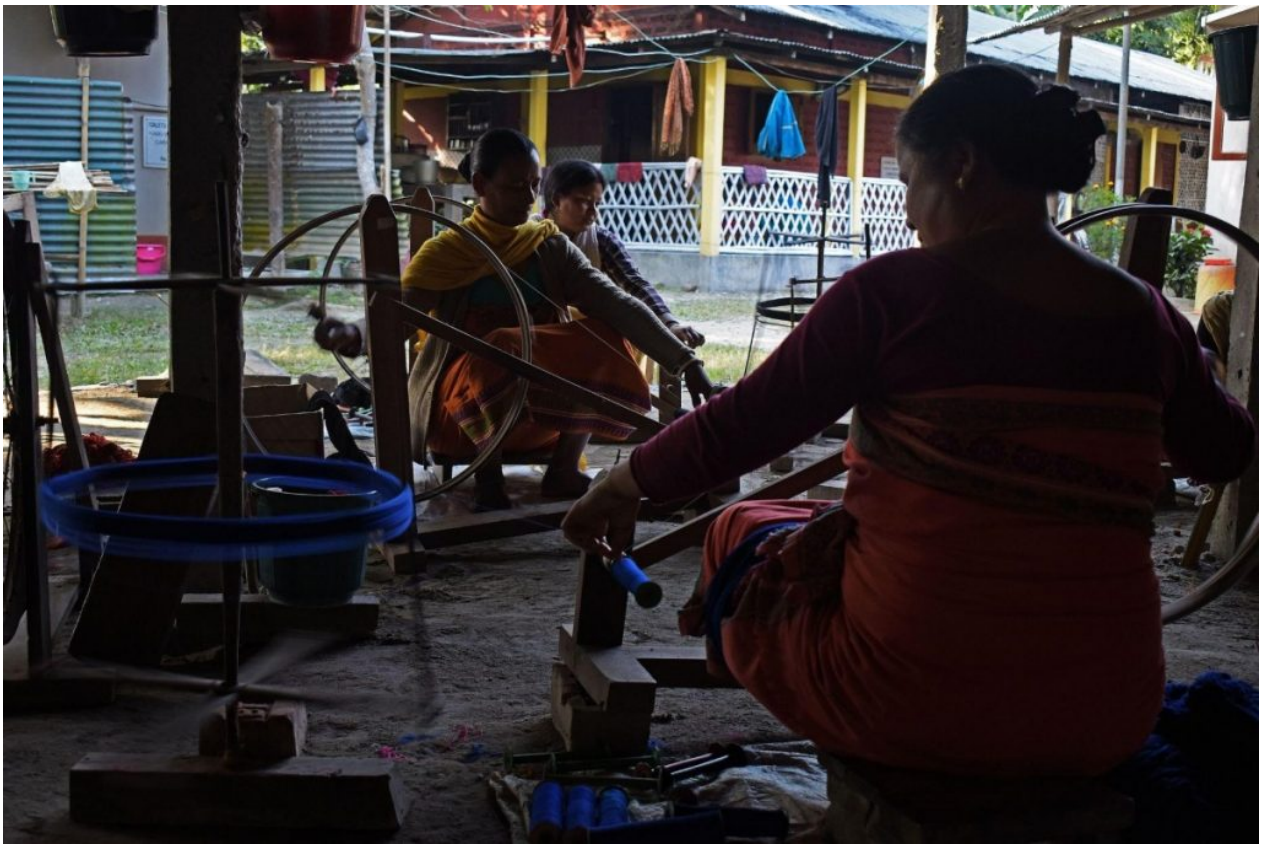


Photo: Jignesh Mistry

The idea of Aagor is deeply interwoven in the ethnic culture of the community. The weaving techniques continue to be conventional and customary to suit women weavers, and the garments continue to feature the motifs and designs native to the tribe, and the textiles, indigenous.

As it suited the economic and situational needs of workers, the production has sustained the employment of indigenous looms already in possession by women for generations. In a sense, the intervention of the ant entailed **converting the native textiles** into products the outside world could use to mainstream the positive stories of the Bodo community.



Women winding Yarn bobbin at the ant's weaving centre at Rowmari, Chirang District, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry.

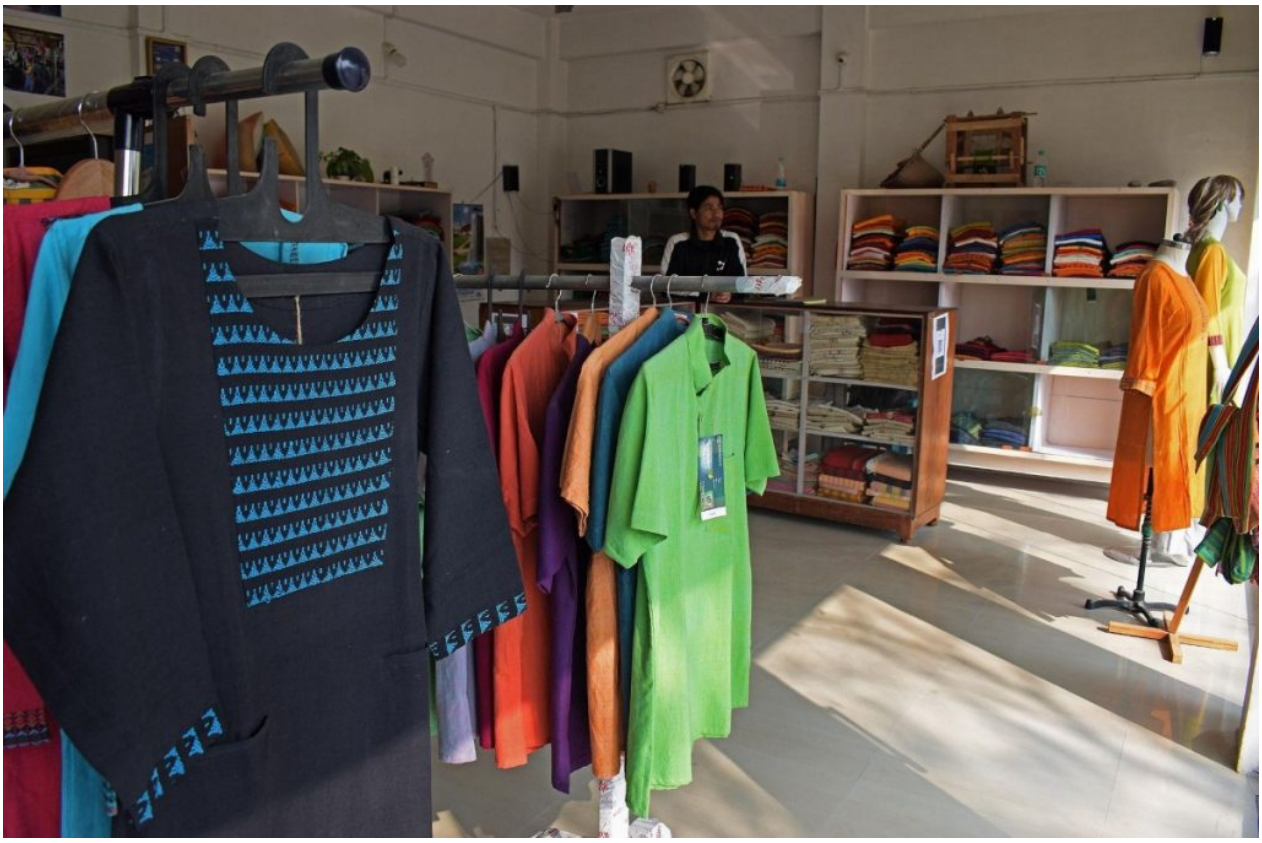
Motifs, modelling, marketability

Since the traditional costumes could be woven by all the weavers and hence couldn't attract a decent living wage, it was decided to use the fabric to stitch apparel worn in metropolises. The exhibitions attended by the organisation were the first time the art was open for the world to witness. As an unfamiliar audience gazed upon the intricate weaving, they were fascinated to look at new textiles and motifs as they all had a story with them.

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/_jyv_GEy8zE

Eventually, the business recognised the need to utilise its products, they slowly transitioned into semi-traditional garments like wrap-around skirts, jackets, and stoles. Later, the products further embraced the dominant market and produced more conventional products like Kurtas and Tops to enable a desired income. Until then, NGOs were only making traditional crafts for traditional apparel, while Aagor entered the market with western wear.

After many such endeavours to commercialise the brand, many dominant market players like *Fabindia* recognised the incontestable talent demonstrated by the women of Aagor. In 2016, Lakme Fashion Week, regarded as the temple of fashion in India, showcased *Aagor Weaves* work exclusively and repeated its exhibit in 2019.



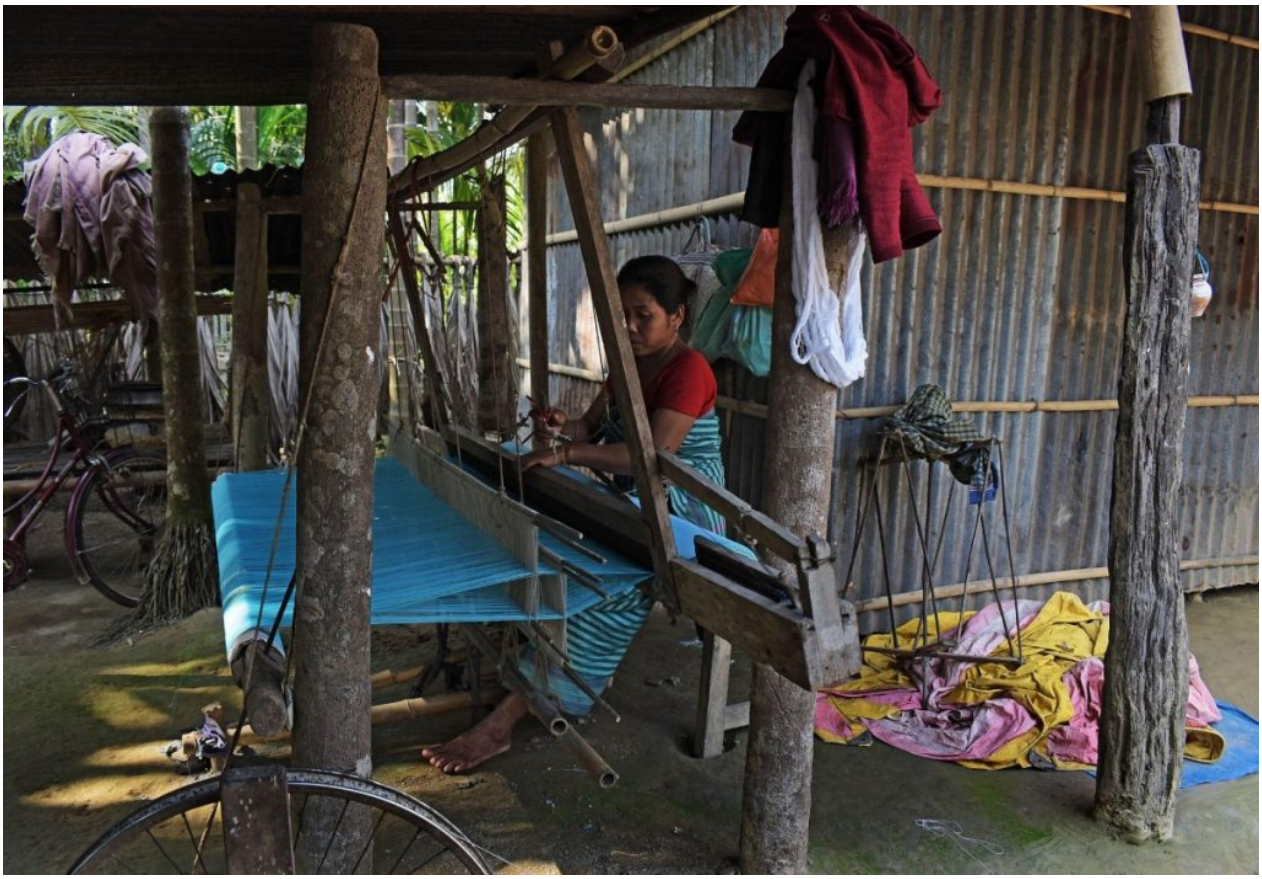
Clothing on display at Aagor Dagra Afad store at Chapaguri market, Bongaigaon, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry.

To date, close to Rs 1.6 crore has been invested into Aagor enterprise and the return has been around six times the amount in the past 20 years. In spite of the progressive commodification of the craft for enabling women's economic interests (providing them with better/higher wages), it has still managed to effectively preserve the traditional roots of the craft by featuring the traditional motifs in the design of the work produced, which is customary to the tribal identity – to which women belong.

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/wmWWqvYyPoI

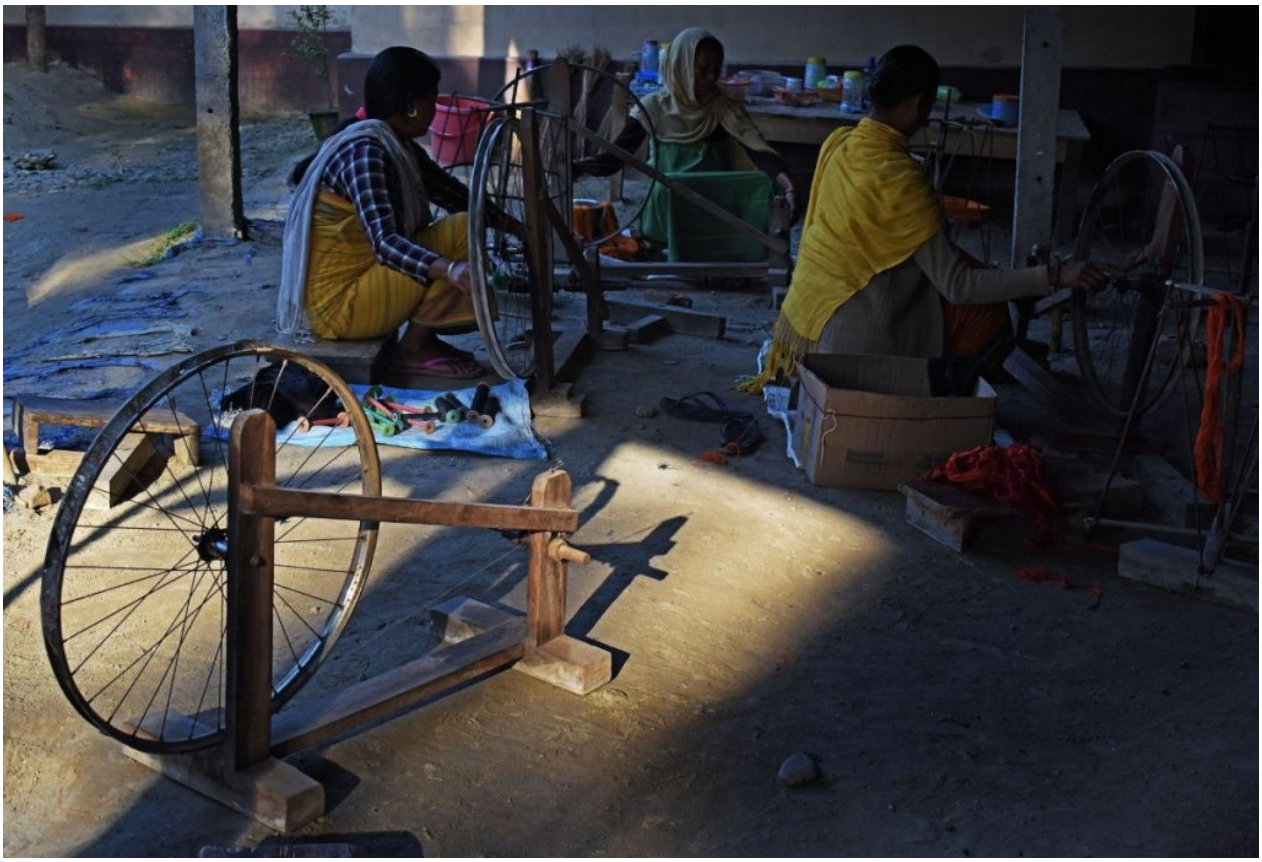
Barriers

Despite the natural appeal of economic independence and popular fashion (media) recognition, the women of Aagor Weaves faced issues from a time-endowment problem, circumscribed with the time spent on household chores and nuptial responsibilities, as against putting more (desired) time to work. Initially, the organisation embodied a flexible approach towards production schedule and let women weave from the comfort of their homes. However, as the cloth demand bumped up the volume, there appeared an imminent need to industrially formalise the workforce constitution.



A weaver contributing to Aagor at Mongolian village, Chirang district, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry.

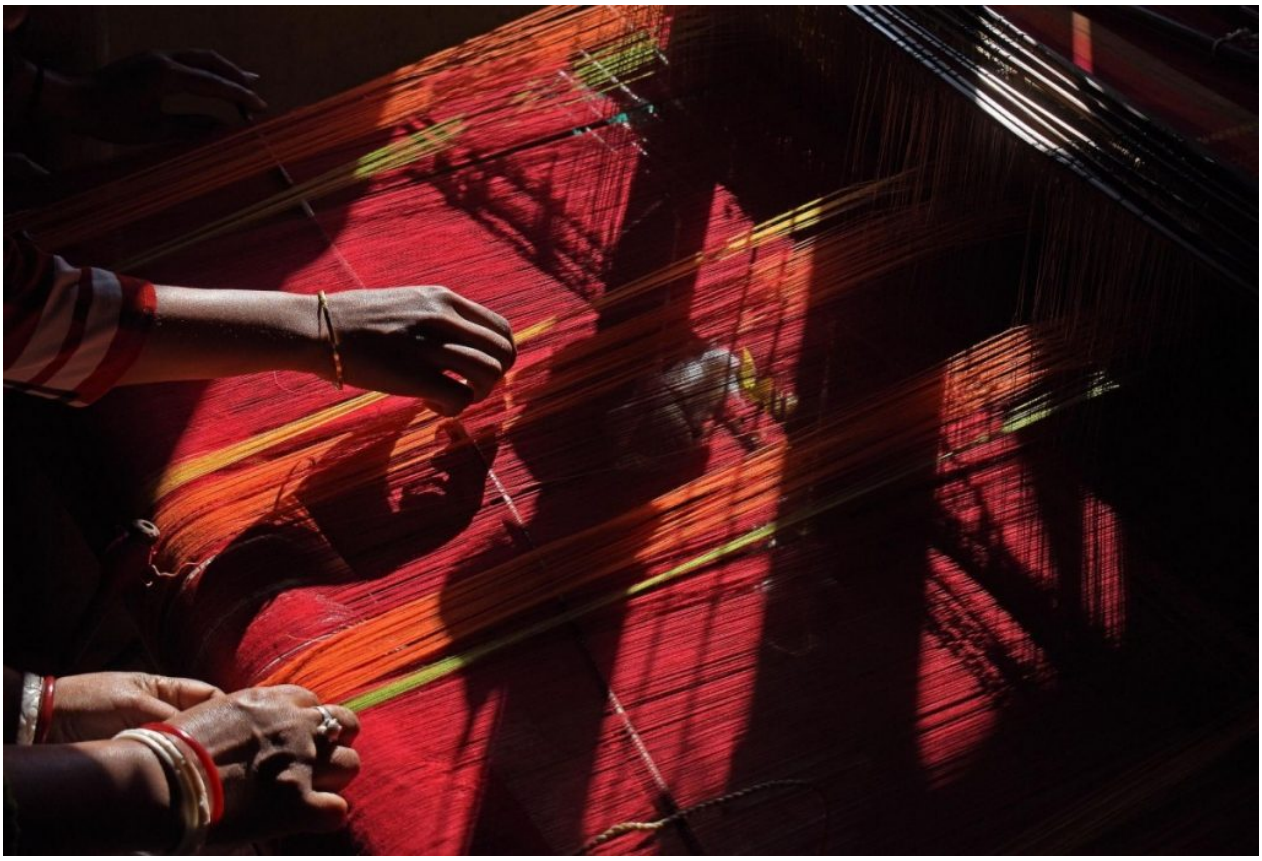
Young, poorer girls from the village followed a trend of migrating to wealthier families to earn an extra buck while reducing the number of members needed to be fed by the poorer households. Even though these girls were treated with much respect and were sheltered as one of their own, working women face issues from intra-household concerns, lack of vocational development, and often quit on any possible concern they face. This created a higher attrition rate amongst working women. Aagor Weaves, thereafter, also gave opportunities to other disadvantaged, abandoned, single or widowed women groups who were desperately in need for livelihood opportunieis, consequently help in their economic empowerment.



Women winding Yarn bobbin at the ant's weaving centre at Rowmari, Chirang District, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry.

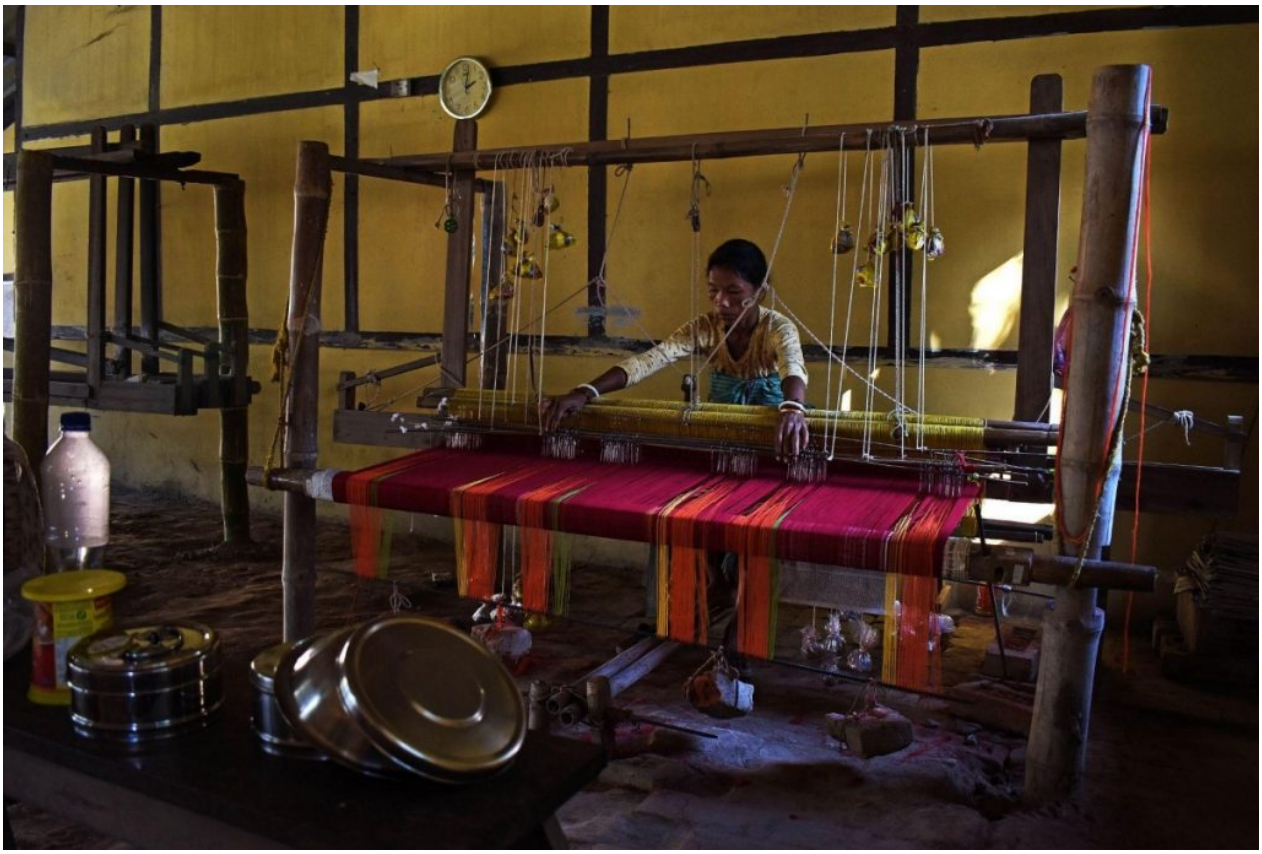
By recognising an intersectional requisite to foster growth amongst such underprivileged women, Aagor initiated a residential center for women to come together and weave. These centers were not merely meant to replicate a factory-like performance but designed as a residential programme where women could come and weave, earn enough to save a corpus and go back home to families and start a business and have an independent social identity.

Weaving, while being an important source of livelihood for many women in these communities, is a tedious and skilled job that requires a great deal of patience and attention to detail. Quality issues and the need for perfect motifs can make it a challenging profession. This, along with the fact that many women opt for easier and less skilled jobs, can make it difficult for women to succeed as weavers.



Weavers adjust yarn threads at the ant's weaving centre at Rowmari, Chirang District, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry.

However, weaving is often seen as a symbol of resistance against existing social structures for the Bodo women. While in many traditional societies, women are often confined to domestic roles and have limited access to education and economic opportunities, Bodo women seldom face resistance or cultural barriers to working outside the home. Weaving, as a profession, has been a way for the Bodo women to gain financial independence, assert their skills and capabilities, and challenge societal expectations and norms.



A weaver on handloom at the ant's weaving centre at Rowmari, Chirang District, Assam. Photo: Jignesh Mistry.

By participating in weaving, Bodo women have gained a certain sense of empowerment and agency. This is also reflected in them being the primary providers for their families, and having a strong voice in decision-making within their households and communities.

This has also helped in breaking down traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Additionally, the traditional crafts and motifs of the Bodo community are an important part of their cultural heritage, and by preserving and promoting these crafts, the Bodo women are also resisting the erosion of their cultural identity.

This study is part of a Visual Storyboard project undertaken by the Centre for New Economics Studies, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, OP Jindal Global University in collaboration with the ant. All photographs and video essays are documented by Jignesh Mistry. Video essays can be accessed here.

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