



## Sualkuchi *The textile hub of Assam*

Design Research Seminar Report : Visual Ethnography

### Project Guide

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## *Approval Sheet*

This Project entitled DRS: ' Visual Ethnography: Sualkuchi ' is approved in partial fulfilment of the Masters Design Degree in Visual Communication.

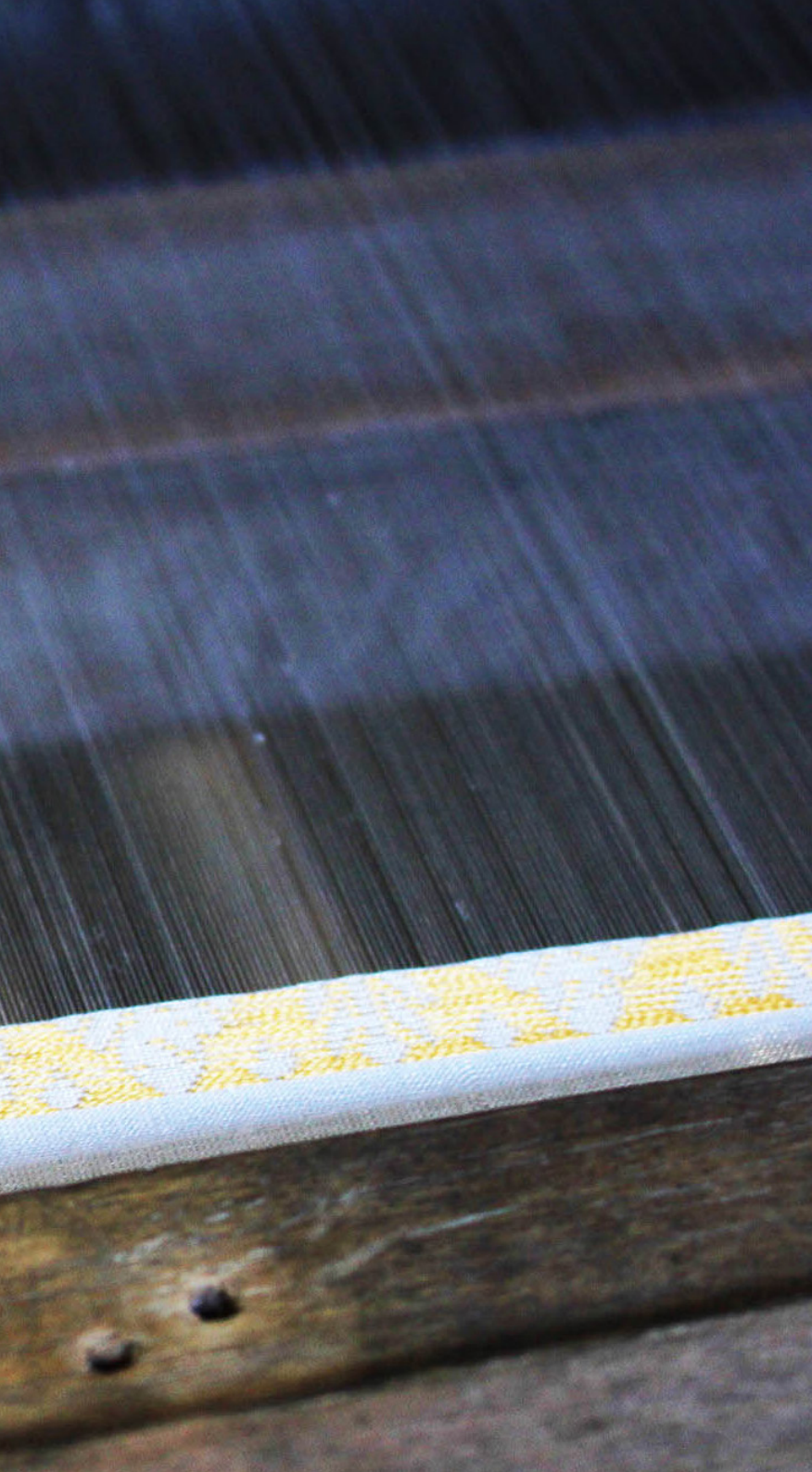
Guide:

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Date:

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## *Declaration Sheet*

I declare that this written submission represents my ideas in my own words and where others ideas or words have been included. I have adequately provided cited and referenced the sources of information that I have included in the study.

I also declare that I have adhered to all the principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misinterpreted or fabricated or falsified any idea/data/fact/source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will cause for disciplinary action by the Institute.

Kavita Brahma  
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Date:





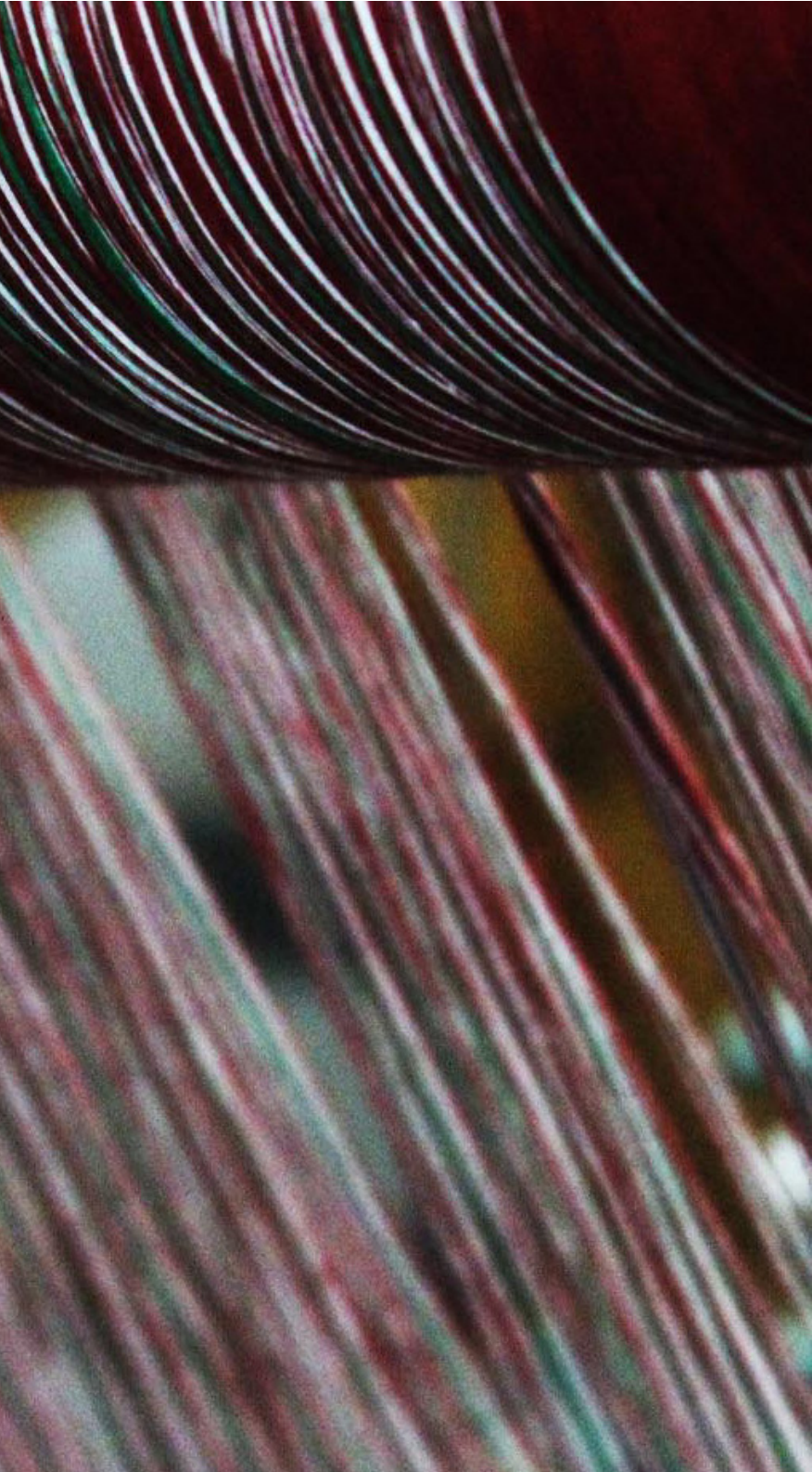
## *Acknowledgement*

I would like to thank to Mr Bipul Das, Mr Biranjay Das, Mrs Tarani Das, Mr Bineshwar Khound, Mrs Sarada Devi, Mrs Anima Kalita for their immense support, cooperation and hospitality.

I would also like to thank IDC and my guide Prof Nina Shabnani for providing me an experience of study which is so closely related to human society. The overview process looked so simple but conducting it made me realise that how intricate and complicated the process was. I still feel that this attempt was just a starting point and I could have added much more in terms of the time period used.

I would like to thank my friends and family for providing me constant support throughout the whole project.





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*India's destiny lies not along the bloody way of the west, of which she shows signs of tiredness, but along the bloodless way of peace that comes from a simple and godly life. India is in danger of losing her soul. She cannot lose it and live. She must not, therefore, lazily and helplessly say, 'I cannot escape the onrush from the west.' She must be strong enough to resist it for her own sake and that of the world.*

*~ Mahatma Gandhi*





# Abstract

When we talk about Indian Independence, The Khadi revolution marks a pioneering event in terms of freedom, empowerment and equality. The Khadi revolution embraced the concept of discarding machine made textiles and creating it at home.

This movement uplifted the concept of hand woven or self-created textiles among many communities in India. This further led to the development of textiles inspired from the cultural and social environments that communities belong and provided them identity in terms of craftsmanship and creativity. One such community is the Sualkuchi community who signified the fiber to become their identity. Therefore with commercialization and globalization, they have ushered their identity to such heights that it has given Sualkuchi (Assam) as a national identity of being called as “the Manchester of the East”.

This visual ethnographic study is an attempt to understand the socio-economic influence and struggle of the Sualkuchi community in keeping pace with the current trends and the traditional essence. This study talks about the complications of surviving and competing in the modern machinery world.



# Visual Ethnography

Ethnography is an investigation and the systematic recording of human cultures. Culture is defined by Massey as being "made up of certain values, practices, relationships and identifications." Culture in its broadest sense is cultivated behavior that is the totality of a person's learned, accumulated experience, which is socially transmitted.

Ethnography is one of the qualitative methods used in anthropology, which is a study of human beings (in social, cultural and even biological context). As a method, it requires complete immersion of the researcher or ethnographer in the field amidst the participants s(he) is studying, for a prolonged duration.

Therefore ethnography done using visual medium such as photography, videography, sketches and illustration, observation is called as visual ethnography.

( Source: [www.dsource.in](http://www.dsource.in) )

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# Methodology

Visual ethnography if we try to understand is focused mainly in the field of study. It requires the person to stay there, imbibe and understand every aspect of the community by close association with the people.

Therefore I started by collating information from the web about what it means? How can it help? How to conduct it? By keeping those inputs in mind I visited the place and started socializing with the people. Since I had the liberty of knowing the local language, it took very less time to mix with the community. As the Sualkuchi community was very close knitted, they helped me immensely in meeting people who eventually became the participators in the visual ethnographic process.

I aimed at studying people who have been in this occupation or tradition for years and who are struggling right now to keep the tradition alive economically or socially. I also aimed at understanding the socio-cultural relationships that have evolved over the period of time. Every house I went to took me to their neighbors and this is how the span of the community introduced me to each other within a couple of days. I chose the people as my participant on the basis of change in societal hierarchy over a period of time and generations involved in this as a family.

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The Sualkuchi Gate (adorned with statues of weavers)

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# Introduction

## About Sualkuchi

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Sualkuchi is located on the northward bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra. The hand-woven silk material of Sualkuchi on Muga and Mulbery occupies a home of eminence in preserving the Assam heritage and culture and plays a vital role in economy of Assam.

This is the textile center of Assam. Muga silk and Pat silk along with Eri silk and Endi cloth from this region is famous for its quality. Mekhela chadors and Gamosas made from these indigenous materials is in demand throughout Assam as well as other parts of India.

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Weaving is the core activity of the people of this hamlet. It is found that 79% families have traditional looms at their home, 17% of them have modern looms for commercial silk weaving. Pat and Muga are the two main silk varieties that they use to produce Sarees, Mekhela-Chadar, Salwar-Kameej, Kurta, Scurf, Gamosa and Chunni etc. Besides weaving people are engaged in handicrafts like basket making, hand fan making from bamboo, etc.

Muga silk is the product of the silkworm "*Antheraea assamensis*" endemic to Assam. The pupa of these silkworms feed on "som" ("*Machilus bombycina*") and "sualu" ("*Litsaea polyantha*") leaves. The silk produced is known for its glossy fine texture and durability. Due to its low porosity the Muga yarn cannot be bleached nor dyed and its natural golden color is retained. This silk can be hand-washed with its luster increasing after every wash. Very often the silk outlives its owner. Assam has received a geographical indication for the production of Muga.

Pat silk is produced by silkworms which feed on mulberry leaves. It is



Every house has a handloom in their house

usually brilliant white or off-white in colour. Its cloth can dry in shadow. Eri silk is made by "*Philosamia ricini*" which feed on castor leaves. It is also known as Endi or Errandi silk. Due to the fact that manufacturing process of Eri allows the pupae to develop into adults and only the open ended cocoons are used for turning into silk, it is also popularly known as non-violent silk. This silk is soft and warm and is popular as shawls and quilts.

The process of cocoon to thread stretched manually



*Sualkuchi is known as the 'Manchester of the east' for its extravagant silk weaving tradition across the North East*



Saraighat Bridge on the way

As a part of my Design Research Seminar I tried to study Sualkuchi as a community.

The DRS was done for a period of two and a half weeks. Herein I studied four families who are surviving on one to two looms. I also tried to focus on the issues, cultural implications that they are facing right now at this present times. The method of visual ethnography was mostly observations, photography and sketching.

As I started from the busy streets of Guwahati and entered the Saraighat Bridge, I felt dizzy and I slept off with the weather being chilly and sunshine beaming in my face. I woke up after a good forty five minutes to see a State Bank of India signage board welcoming me and marking the start of Sualkuchi.

As I entered deeper into Sualkuchi, I could hear the rhythmic sounds of the loom which meshed and matched with the other nearby loom.

Sualkuchi being one of the most advanced in terms of commercialization in textiles is very welcoming to people. Since I had the liberty of being a local so speaking of a local dialect made it easier for me to hunt down people who are the prospective of my study that is the last generation to be involved in doing this as a bread earning profession. After briefing the people, they would have some common name suggestions where they guided me to visit. So I followed their directions and met those people whom I have observed for the rest part of my study. To start off with I would like



Scene from Sualkuchi

to give a general overview of how the place is:

All the houses had a distinct plan. The space division of all the houses was really one aspect of the study that made it very interesting to observe. The houses were merely of two to three rooms, including the verandah. One room was completely dedicated to a loom. They preferred a loom rather than a drawing room. So guests are welcomed and made to sit in the verandah.

Before starting the day in the loom, a cup of black tea with

jaggery is served. After that they sit on the loom till the afternoon. By 12 o'clock they eat a regular combination of dal, veggies and rice and then take rest for about one hour and then start again with the weaving until dark.

The people in Sualkuchi still follow the authentic way of Assamese tradition of serving their guests in brass utensils. They welcome each and every guest by showing them what they are weaving currently

Since I had a proper brief about what I wanted I told them that I am here to observe them and their

surroundings. They welcomed and asked me my background that where I am from. Once they got to know that I am from Guwahati and I belong to IITB they became over enthusiastic about me and started asking many questions as well as started telling me stories about what issues they have thinking that I could solve them directly by conveying their message to the Government. I instead told them that I will observe them without disturbing them.

Firstly they had a lot of questions but I convinced that it is a student project and not a government policy decision that is going to be made according to what I am doing. So they got a little calmed down and they let me sit down and observe. And this is when I started the project and made a rapport with them by talking casually and sitting without any camera and mike. Searching for the right people and convincing them took a day. So I started my field work from the next day.

I started by sitting in a corner with happily agreeing to sketch and observing them and eating whatever they offered me at equal intervals. I also told them to continue their work without getting conscious of me. I must admit that once I started sketching they



A weaver working on a loom



The Sualkuchi People

The place from where I was observing

would take a look once a while and comment and laugh at what I have done. I became conscious and told them this is just for my study and nothing else.

I came across the fact that there is a main person who is the leader who gives them designs and guides them to work on his behalf.

So the next day I decided to meet him. The person at first was a little scared to meet me since he thought that I would judge him based on his designs since I am graduate form NIFT and kept on keeping a count on what I was actually doing. The day afterwards



included him supervising on what I am doing. Without being impulsive I thought of actually meeting him and talking about what he is doing. The main person or 'mahajan' named Bipul Das was very conscious when I first approached me. Then when I told him about what I wanted to do in future he agreed me saying that this is also what he wants to do to revive this dying craft. He also kept saying that NIFT students do not understand much about the technicalities of handloom weaving. And then he started telling me the technicalities of how a loom works. I again cleared that I would come to meet him and discuss about it after some days.

And then I carried forward the conversation and asked him these set of questions. He told



Mr Biranjay Das

*1) Can you tell what do you do for living?*

He told me that he is the Assistant Director of Handloom and Textiles Department (Assam) and he is scared that any crucial information about his private venture might affect his professional career. I assured him that this is just a student project that he is adding information. He agreed silently. He described his venture as a small

scale industry wherein he has given weaving contracts to his neighbors.

*2) How did you start this venture?*

He told me that his forefathers had sustained on this way of living. Since they have been attached for so long and had being weavers for generations, he had decided to make a private venture out of it to supply exclusive designs to selected stores in Assam only. He

also proudly admitted that he is responsible for developing all the major design innovations in motifs and colors largely in Sualkuchi. He also showed me some of his designs saying that the he had developed designed colors and motifs which are not available in entire Sualkuchi. He also told me that earlier it was only men from their colony who weaved but now with the change in times the people who had multiple looms have hired weavers ( mostly women ) from the other tribal areas of Assam and have become only dealers and entrepreneurs who are responsible for collating and selling it in the market.

*3) So what is your contribution so far?*

He told me that this is not what he does for a living but instead his wife has interest in getting the profits involved with it. So he said that it is in his interest that he helps her to get the latest designs made.

*4) He asked me in detail about which stream I am studying and my background so far.*

I explained that I had done my graduation in NIFT Delhi in Fashion Communication and I am currently studying in IDC, IIT Bombay. He specified that he has been part

of the Craft cluster programme in NIFT Kolkata and has been helping out students from there to understand their weaving history and tradition.

After then he asked about a lot of questions as to what I know about textiles. I told him that the course that I graduated in does not involve in the technicalities of textiles. To his expectations he felt a certain level of unsatisfaction that I knew nothing about the basics of handloom weaving. I tried to convince him about that I had specialized in the level of print and I am a graphic designer by profession. To my utter surprise he got excited and told me that he done a one month training session in fashion illustration and softwares. He got confused and amused by my presence and asked me about what I am doing right now.

I quietly comforted him saying that I am here to study the ethnography about these people which would include observing them in the real environment and nothing else. He happily agreed to help me out and helped with more contacts working under him.

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*2) How are the days of past different from what it is today?*

The next day Biranjay Das introduced me to Mr. Bineshwar Khound. Mr. Bineshwar is a lean old man who stayed with his wife and son. He earned his living with one loom where he weaved the clothes according to what Biranjay Das specifically orders. Bineshwar stayed in a three room Assam type house and his thatched loom room was at a 20ft distance. As I reached his son came running with a plastic chair and insisted me to sit. He invited me to the house but I refused saying that I would like to sit in the sun and discuss over the cup of tea. He agreed and we started talking casually. These are the set of questions that I asked:

*1) How many looms do you have?*

He told me that he has only one loom. He also told me that he had inherited four looms from his forefathers. But due to his two daughter's marriage expenses he had to sell his three looms in a span of three years. This led to his minimal and safe income of working under his neighbor Biranjay Das who gives him a constant source of Income and guides him with his exclusive designs.

He told me that earlier they would exclusively weave only Muga silk which is rare to find nowadays. Earlier he and his forefathers would go to upper Assam to buy the Muga worm and rear it in their backyard and spin it to get the fiber. He also mentioned that rearing the Muga silk and storing it had a distinct smell to it when they kept it in generous amount in their house.

He also mentioned that Muga was a commonly used silk then, unlike now. All the people would throw a minimal amount of Muga worm of 5 kgs per day in the nearby river. But the days have changed as the Muga rearing traditions have almost become extinct due to its cost, demand and unavailability.

*3) How is the Muga rearing different from the silk that they produce right now?*

Firstly he boasted by saying that Muga is the most tensile fiber ever. I was surprised to know from him that Muga is the only fiber that is used in the tires of airplanes to provide them grip and is light weight enough to suit the aerodynamic needs. Now he told me that since it is very difficult to rear Muga due to ecological, space and demand constraints (price of



Mr Bineshwar Khaound weaving on his loom

a Muga cloth is minimum 12K) and moreover the existence of a similar looking fiber called tussar (which is cheap also) people have started to leave weaving it in Sualkuchi. So they are struggling to keep their tradition alive by weaving only 'Paat' silk in Sualkuchi which has gradually become their specialty and identity.

*4) Can you tell about the major changes that have happened in the decision of weaving silk?*

He started by saying that the use of colors and treatment of motifs have changed drastically. Earlier

the popular motifs were used which were inspired from the natural environment of people. For egs: House, bird, hills, leaves, trees, flowers etc. But now they have been forced to infuse motifs with external motifs which are very urban and popular such as the paisley. He tried to support by saying that the mixing of two colors of weft and warp inspired from Banarasi silk has also being incorporated in the much demanding supply of current Sualkuchi trademark. People are more demanding about iridescent fabrics rather than the traditional



Mr Bineshwar Khaound's house



Mr Bineshwar Khaound spinning thread

light and primary colors. I think these times mark the new evolution of Sualkuchi silk identity.

*5) What are the challenges that you are facing right now?*

Earlier when I was young, I had started understanding and associating with the tradition by helping my parents in getting the warps ready in the loom. This used to be the first work to be done before going to school. We were also involved in holding and choosing the weft manually for the motifs by each number of weave that our parents would strike. But now the times have changed, our

sons are not interested anymore. They are not even interested to learn the basics. They feel that getting a degree followed by a Government job is the most secure form of living rather than involving with the manual and economical struggle that we are facing. To a certain level I feel that is true. Money and living are correlated to each other. There is no room for tradition if it is not enough to support oneself.

The cloth he is currently weaving



After a couple of days I met Ms. Sarada Devi who is also Mr. Biranjay Das's neighbor and a contract weaver under him. She is also a neighbor of Mr. Bineswar Khound. Sarada Devi was a widow who stayed alone in a two room set house. One of the rooms had a loom and the other one had a chair, a single bed and a table. She had no children from her husband and therefore she was the only sole person in her family. She was a shy middle aged woman who kept smiling blankly while talking to me. I asked whether I could take pictures of her. But she said that I could take only some pictures of her while she is weaving. She also told me that she is scared of her pictures getting misused in the internet. I tried to convince her saying that this is for my project purposes only. Afterwards she kept checking the pictures constantly once I was done clicking it. These are the set of questions that I asked her:

*1) How many looms do you have?*  
 She told me that she had only one loom. Wherein she had put the traditional groom chador (white undyed silk) with guna (gold jari) on it for the upcoming marriage season demand.



Mrs Anima Kalita spinning thread for her next loom



Mrs Anima Kalita's loom room right beside her house

*2) What is her expertise on the type of silk?*

She told me that she likes to weave mostly cotton gamusas (traditional Assamese towels) which are of much loose weaves and require less level of effort as compared to the costly silk. But she says that she has to work according to the client's demands rather than her interest of fabrics.

*3) How is the loom affecting her?*

She told me that since she is a widow, people had a lot of eyes as to how is she going to survive

without her husband. But once the loom was settled, she could get an income to support herself as well as feel occupied and worthy in her life soon after her husband's death.

In Sarada Devi's house, I met Mrs. Anima Kalita. She came to Sarada's house for a casual talk in the afternoon. Seeing a camera in my hand she asked me about what I am doing. Sarada took a call to explain her. She called me to visit her house as soon as possible. I told her that I would come to her place anytime tomorrow. She happily agreed.



The cloth she was currently weaving

Mrs. Anima Kalita was overenthusiastic about my visit. As soon as I entered her place, she showed me the readymade garments that she had made. She showed me a variety of half jackets with proud eyes claiming that these are Modi Jackets.

I laughed a little bit with the satirical relationship of fashion and politics but I decided to keep it onto myself and got poised to see her other creations. I dumbly asked her as to how the jackets were different from Nehru jackets and she proudly clarified showing me the difference between the spaces between the collars. I convincingly agreed to it. She then took me to her set of looms wherein she showed me the different fabrics that were under the process of getting ready for her son's marriage. She added by saying that "If I have a loom and I can weave than what is the point of buying the traditional wedding attire for my son. So I have decided to take a break this season and weave all the garments necessary for gifting the daughter in law and my son required for their wedding'.

I was utterly surprised to see that she was aiming at creating eleven mekhala chadars solely



Mrs Anima Kalita working on the loom



Mrs Anima Kalita weaving in her loom

Cloth (Gamusa: top, sador: bottom) woven for her son's wedding

for the bride. She also took me to show her new constructed house located in the upper floor of the loom house and fed me luci and aloo bhaaji with black tea which I hogged politely. She also kept explaining as to why she has chosen the motifs and colours. She focused on saying that she is planning to weave everything in paat silk and guna. She also gave me references of the TV serial characters from where she has taken inspiration for the colours for her daughter in law.

Since she was already open about describing briefly about what she was doing I decided to keep the flow and did not interrupt the conversation by asking her any questions.





Flat rice, curd and jaggery served in traditional brass bowl



Mrs Tarani Das weaving a gamusa

Biranjay Das called me for lunch at his place one day. I agreed and reached directly to his place. His house was a duplex building with very exclusive selected pieces of furniture. His house had some taste of his modern outlook. His wife Tarani Das entered with the jaggery, soft rice and curd snack served in a traditional brass bowl. They sat down and we started talking casually about what problems handloom weaving is facing. He started by saying that he deals with very few weavers who stays near to his house whereas his brother has a medium scale industry that has 50 looms. He is

doing this as a part of keeping his tradition alive as well as helping the immediate community grow. He also funnily added that he might take a voluntary retirement from his Government job and pursue this venture fulltime. He asked me what my course is about since he did not have any slightest idea of IDC or Visual Communication per say. I described him and once he got to know that I am interested in graphics and print. He got enthusiastic and ran upstairs to show me the calendars and brochures that he has made and had mentioned earlier in his interview. He showed me the

calendar that he had designed for the previous annual year. I with all due respect to his effort told him that he should continue his practice and congratulated him on his efforts. The conversation drifted towards software's, illustration, video and aesthetics, motifs and so on. After having lunch he took me to his warehouse where he kept all the finished silk fabrics. I was so surprised by his collection the colors that I am used to seeing in paat silk were not there. They all looked quite familiar like Banarasi sarees. Since he is the sole person to have seen the widened world, he is modernizing his designs

and using them to sell in design showrooms which love his collection. This is when I deviated from being an unbiased person to a local who felt bad about the change in the taste of authentic handloom fabrics.

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They would mostly keep weaving all the time and keep asking me to eat something or the other. I must add that they would fight to feed me every day and by the end they had started to schedule it among themselves. I was overwhelmed by their hospitality

## *Photo series*

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