

Investigating the effect of microfinance programs on revitalizing Assam's Muga silk weaving culture by enhancing weavers' self-efficacy

Moana Gregori, Class of 2026

When walking down the streets of Sualkuchi, one will hear the sound of weaving shuttles moving back and forth, producing artful fabrics from morning till evening. Shining silk-shops decorate both sides of the main street, offering everything from the historic golden Muga silk, to ivory white pad, to light paige eri or endi silks, accompanied by polyester or cotton fabrics. While the clicking sound might tell a different story, the historic silk village has been significantly impacted by industrialisation and globalization, leading to a slow decline of the Muga, a historically significant element of Assamese identity. Through this project, I set out to learn what it means for a village in which historically every household owns a loom, when this tradition disappears, and how development can be conducted honoring an ancient tradition while also improving the lives of the community. My journey led me from understanding the Muga process from beginning to end, and discovering what indigenous knowledge means in its context, to learning about the complex fabric of KaviKrishna that in many places tries to incorporate “all” approaches into one, using the ancient Muga tradition as a means and an end in itself to ‘unite’, ‘sustain’, and ‘heal’ Sualkuchi.

KaviKrishna is a non-profit research and development organization originally established as a weaver cooperation. Today, it runs a local clinic, Indian Knowledge System Center, Living Muga Silk Museum, Muga microfinance program, and works on the scientific documentation of the Muga silk tradition in Sualkuchi. Next to 3 weeks of literature research, I spent 5 weeks in Sualkuchi, AS, India, interning at KaviKrishna. I conducted interviews, field visits, and participant observations with weavers, weavery owners, and KaviKrishna (KK) Staff. My aim was to understand KaviKrishna's unique approach to development through Indigenous Knowledge, by investigating their microfinance program for weavers.

As I gathered through conversations with KK staff members, and leadership team, KaviKrishna recognizes that conventional loans do not support independent weavers efficiently. Therefore, they employ a new approach focused on not just providing economic opportunities but interweaving the sustaining of the Muga tradition with enhancing weavers' life quality. This means that the microfinance program (fig. 1) can't be seen in isolation, but rather as a cornerstone of a support system including clinic and museum to form a weavers network. This allows for the reduction of weavers vulnerability to shock, transforms the perception of Muga production from being industrial to being a form of art (counteracting the perception of Muga production being a historically low-caste activity), establishes a social network, reduces barriers of entry (which are created through expensive raw materials and absence of training centers), allows weavers to function independently, and documents the indigenous knowledge surrounding Muga which is historically an oral tradition. While successful in improving the immediate situation of weavers, and sustaining the tradition through academic documentation, my research showed a need for innovation and international recognition, to make the tradition attractive to new generations.

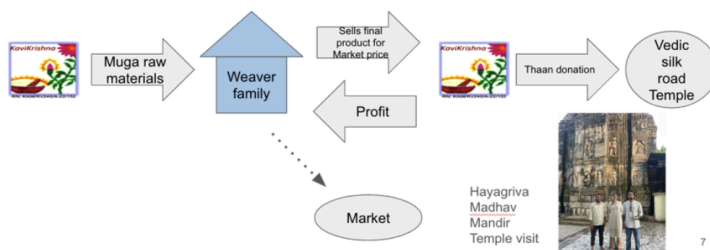


Figure 1: KaviKrishna Microloan structure



Faculty Mentor: Krista Van Vleet

Funded by the Matilda and John Riley Research Award and Bowdoin mini-grant

Supported by KaviKrishna, with mentorship from Dr. Bikul Das and Dr. Lekhika Pathak