



Traditional Dress-Making Practices and Empowerment: A Study on Mising Tribal Women in Assam

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The Mising tribal women have long been associated with traditional weaving practices, which serve as both a means of preserving their cultural identity and a vital source of income. This practice significantly empowers marginalised Mising women to transform at their personal and community levels. This study is articulated by the notion of "Empowerment for Marginalised Women" through a gender perspective, focusing on how participation in traditional weaving allows financial independence and functions as a learning tool for empowerment. Data were collected from 241 participants across different categories in the Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts of Assam, India. The study reveals that traditional dress-making practices support the socio-economic development of marginalised Mising women. Particularly, the popularity of this sector is pronounced in Upper Assam. Participants use these practices to support themselves, strengthen their families, and establish weaving as a sustainable source of income for their communities.

Emerging dimensions of empowerment include leadership roles in Self-Help Groups, ownership of handloom industries, and involvement as shopkeepers, all of which contribute to promoting community well-being. Additionally, participants have enhanced essential skills such as negotiation, linguistic adaptability, and financial management. These skills, developed through informal and formal education, are instrumental in achieving financial independence. By challenging rigid community norms and customs, the women are transitioning to a modern social structure, thereby bridging the gap between traditional and modern economic practices. This transformation contributes to their personal and financial empowerment and fosters collective growth within their communities.

Keywords: mising community, weaving, traditional, dress-making, empowerment, involvement

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1. Introduction

Empowerment is a transformative process that allows individuals to gain control over their lives (Lee & Harrison, 1996). Empowered women play a major role in building stronger families and communities (Purnamawati & Utama, 2019). Through empowerment, women gain the ability to make decisions that influence both the personal and social dimensions of their lives (Sahay, 1998). Access to income sources provides them with financial stability, improving their living conditions. Traditional tribal arts, including dressmaking practices, are deeply rooted in history. This practice showcases aesthetic beauty as well as contributes to the socio-economic growth of Indian tribes (Thosar & Sharam, 2024). Among tribal groups, traditional dressmaking has become a significant source of self-sufficiency for marginalised women (Paray, 2019). Women in this sector promote sustainability, foster self-reliance, and contribute to the Indian economy (Mehta, 2024). This empowerment permits them to make informed decisions, access resources, and enhance family well-being (Singh and Singh, 2008). Furthermore, the sector provides women with a sense of autonomy (O'Connell, 2023). Initiatives like skill training, modern techniques workshops, and business management courses empower tribal women to expand their businesses (Paray, 2019). Policies such as the 73rd Amendment, which reserves seats for women in local governance, provide them with political empowerment to advocate for their rights (B, 2016). However, tribal women often face challenges in breaking traditional gender roles and asserting their identity beyond domestic boundaries. They also experience exploitation by landlords and moneylenders, leading to poverty (Kumar, 2024). Limited access to knowledge and markets hampers their growth and empowerment (Panda, 2017). These systemic issues persist due to societal exclusion from mainstream norms (Selvakumar, 2022). Initiatives like microfinance programs, however, are proving instrumental in allowing tribal women to achieve financial independence and understand their basic rights (Sahu et al., 2024).

In Northeast India, the Mising tribal group is renowned for its traditional weaving practices, predominantly undertaken by women (Pegu, 2019).

These practices are deeply rooted in age-old traditions and contribute to daily life by fostering community bonds and social ties (Swargiary & Pegu, 2020; Doley, 2014). Beyond their cultural significance, weaving serves as both a source of income and a symbol of artistic expression (Swargiary & Pegu, 2020; Chungkrang et al., 2016). However, modernisation and commercialisation have introduced economic opportunities at the cost of eroding the authenticity of traditional forms (Doley, 2014). Despite this cultural importance, the weaving tradition faces challenges related to economic viability and modernisation (Swargiary & Pegu, 2020; Doley, 2014). Predominantly, Mising women are involved in weaving for both personal and commercial purposes, assuming various roles in the process. This tradition represents a powerful form of social action within their community.

This study examines how Mising women participate in the *"dress-making sector.[1]"* as part of their journey toward empowerment. It explores their roles in income generation and the impact of their work on personal and community life. The research highlights how these women adapt to overcome cultural barriers while sustaining their income practices by focusing on their work culture, production processes, and the items they create. Three main objectives guide the study to capture these experiences. These are-

1. To know the nature of work in the traditional dress-making sector.
2. To identify the categories of women's involvement groups within the traditional dress-making sector.
3. To understand how involvement groups empower through income generation in the dress-making sector.

2. Earlier Studies on the Traditional Dress-Making Practices of Tribal Women

The involvement of tribal women in traditional dress-making is closely tied to their domestic responsibilities and family sustenance (Tribal Women in India: A Framework of Empowerment, 2024). For instance, 'Ulap Doyo' fabric artisans in East Kalimantan generate substantial household income through their craft (Norvadewi & Zaroni, 2021).

Similarly, Van Gujjar involved in economic activities that boost their social and financial standing (Nusrat, 2016). In the Nilgiris district of South India, SHGs play a major role in elevating the economic conditions of tribal women involved in this sector. Economic independence supports household income as well as fosters active participation in decision-making processes. Education and awareness of government schemes further empower women, allowing them to make informed decisions (Ravi & Raja, 2016).

Socially, these practices help preserve cultural heritage and strengthen community ties, positioning women as protectors of tradition and identity (Manna, 2024). Metcalfe (2010) highlighted how contemporary designers integrate traditional designs into dress-making to expand market reach, emphasizing the socio-economic value of these practices. Empowering tribal women through dress-making significantly enhances their socio-economic status by providing economic independence and opportunities to participate in Self-Help Groups (SHGs), which offer financial resources and skill development (Khanum et al., 2022).

Politically, women gain decision-making power and advocacy skills through SHGs (Tribal Women in India: A Framework of Empowerment, 2024). In Odisha's Mayurbhanj district, women's entrepreneurship in dress-making has led to increased financial autonomy and a significant rise in the Women's Empowerment Index (Klimczuk-Kochańska et al., 2023). Similarly, SHGs in the Santal community of Jharkhand have facilitated economic independence and social participation (Dutta & Dey, 2012). In Kerala, tribal women have collectively advocated for societal change at local governance levels through SHGs (Nidheesh, 2009). Despite their active role in preserving cultural heritage, challenges such as modernisation, reduced interest among younger generations, and inadequate healthcare facilities hinder their progress (Singh & Singh, 2008). Demand for traditional dress-making is declining due to insufficient awareness about skill transmission and a lack of incentives to sustain these practices in modern contexts (Singh & Singh, 2008). Paray (2019) critiques the undervaluation of tribal women's contributions, noting their roles in collecting forest produce and participating in informal markets often go unrecognised.

In Northeast India, traditional dress-making holds deep cultural significance for tribal women, serving as both a source of income and a means of preserving community identity. Among the Reang community in Tripura, weaving supports cultural identity while adapting to socio-economic changes (Sarkar & Bairagi, 2023). Similarly, the Singpho community in Assam uses traditional arts and crafts as tools for empowerment, promoting tourism and cultural preservation (Tunkhang, 2018). Nongtluh women in Meghalaya sustain traditional textile art through cultural pride and external support, such as government initiatives (Ramkumar and Dias, 2021). Rich in symbolic meaning, Naga textiles reflect historical and cultural significance (Wettstein, 2014), while the *Adi* women in Arunachal Pradesh are involved in weaving practices linked to spiritual beliefs and community heritage (Singh & Singh, 2008). As the second-largest tribal group in Assam, the Misings have preserved their cultural identity through weaving, which is integral to their socio-cultural fabric (Chungkrang et al., 2016). Among the Mising tribe, traditional dress-making (weaving and handloom) is deeply rooted in cultural practices, with almost every household owning a loom. This practice reflects their artistic talents and symbolises love and affection (Doley & Scholar, 2014). Empowerment through weaving is evident as Mising women are involved in handloom micro-enterprises, yielding economic benefits despite global challenges in wages, education, and infrastructure (Basumatary et al., 2023). Despite household responsibilities, these women dedicate time to weaving and producing garments for daily and special occasions, though the sector lacks full-time employment opportunities (Swargiary & Pegu, 2020). This underlines the need for targeted interventions to enhance the viability of weaving as a livelihood and foster greater empowerment (Swargiary & Pegu, 2020). While traditional weaving practices significantly contribute to cultural preservation and women's empowerment, challenges persist that demand initiatives for sustainable development (Shilpi, 2024; Doley, 2022). The modernisation and commercialisation, weaving continues to be a vital cultural and economic practice, though it faces challenges such as limited resources and market access (Deka et al., 2024). This sector not only preserves the artistic traditions of the Mising community but also plays a critical role in enhancing women's autonomy and agency (Chungkrang et al., 2016).

Exploring literature on women's work in the traditional dress-making sector often overlooks the specific factors influencing Mising women's involvement in this practice. While empowerment has been explored, the economic contributions to personal empowerment and the roles of various women groups, such as weavers, handloom owners, shopkeepers, and traders, remain under-researched. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the socio-economic dynamics of traditional dress-making among Mising women and their broader integration into mainstream society.

3. Context of the Study

The Mising tribal community, also known as the Miris, is a major ethnic group in Assam, India, recognised for its distinct cultural and linguistic identity. The Misings migrated from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA) to the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam around the 13th century A.D. (Pegu, 2019), likely due to environmental and socio-political factors, including the search for fertile land and better living conditions (Sarma and Choudhury, 2015). The Mising language, part of the Tibeto-Burmese group of the *Sino-Tibetan* language family, has been studied since the late 19th century, with recent efforts focusing on grammar and linguistics (Das & Doley, 2024). Predominantly inhabiting the upper Brahmaputra valley, particularly in Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts, the Misings largely rely on traditional agricultural techniques. Agriculture employs 86 per cent of the main workers in the community, the highest among all tribes in Assam (Doley, 2022). Men handle ploughing and heavy tasks, while women do sowing, weeding, and harvesting. Women's economic roles extend to weaving, a long-standing tradition producing attire integral to cultural identity (Swargiary & Pegu, 2020), though weaving remains a supplemental income source rather than a full-time vocation (Norvadewi & Zaroni, 2022).

The Mising community maintains a strong animistic belief system, with women playing major roles in religious and social ceremonies. The influence of *Vaisnavism* has introduced new religious practices, yet women's traditional roles remain unchanged (Pegu, 2024; Morang, 2020). Despite educational improvements, Mising women face barriers like early marriage and domestic responsibilities, limiting their higher education and career opportunities (Pangging, 2020).

External influences, such as modern education and cultural exposure, have initiated interaction between tradition and modernisation (Pegu, 2024). Educated women increasingly pursue careers beyond traditional roles, marking progress towards empowerment and professional involvement (Doley, 2024). However, gender-based violence persists, compounded by patriarchal norms and socio-economic marginalisation, leaving women with limited recourse (Gender Issues, Including Gender-based Violence, among Scheduled Tribes-1, 2022). Traditional customs often undervalue women's significant contributions to household and community economies.

The traditional dress-making sector changes the socio-economic status of the Misings women who are involved and has created new opportunities for sources of income. It reflects their potential in community-level income generation. Self-help groups and capacity-building initiatives have improved earnings for women weavers, especially through district-level efforts (Deka et al., 2024). Government support could further enhance weaving's empowerment potential by addressing gender inequality and resource limitations (Raju, 2014; Doley, 2015). While agriculture and livestock farming, such as pig and poultry rearing, remain supplemental income sources (Chauhan, 2022), weaving supports cultural heritage and inter-generational knowledge. Despite these challenges, the community exhibits (*expos*) strength, balancing cultural preservation with integration into broader Assamese society (Choudhury, 2024). Empowerment initiatives and external influences have facilitated this journey, empowering women to play vital roles in the socio-economic and cultural landscape. Their contributions to emerging practices like the traditional dress-making sector reflect a move towards empowerment while sustaining their unique identity.

4. Methods and Materials for the Study

This study concentrated on a mixed-methods approach to explore the empowerment of Mising tribal women's involvement in the traditional dress-making sector. The research focused on four subdivisions, purposefully selected from two districts, Dhemaji and Lakhimpur, in Assam, where traditional dress-making practices are dominant.

The purposive selection of subdivisions and participants ensured a comprehensive representation of dress-making practices within the Mising community. The total sample size was 241, using structured and unstructured interview schedules. The structured interview schedule contained a pre-determined set of questions designed to collect demographic details, the nature of involvement in the sector, and specific socio-economic contributions. The unstructured interviews, in contrast, provided a flexible framework to explore in-depth participants' personal experiences, allowing for an understanding of their empowerment journey. Additionally, the study organised focus group discussions to encourage interactive dialogue and the exchange of ideas among women involved in dress-making. This approach helped a broader understanding of collective challenges, opportunities, and the overall impact of their participation in the sector. The study followed ethical guidelines, confirming informed consent from all the research participants and maintaining their confidentiality.

5. Theoretical Premises

This study is articulated with "*Empowerment for Marginalised Women.*" The term refers to empowering women who face systemic disadvantages in terms of access to resources, agency, and opportunities due to socio-cultural, and political factors in mainstream society.

The core elements of this empowerment articulate their economic independence, social recognition, acquiring skills and knowledge, and political involvement at the grassroots level. In this context, the dress-making sector works as a tool for overcoming the marginalised Misings tribal women. This concept defines control over resources, decision-making, and participation in society. Additionally, it can explore their journey from being economically dependent to contributors to their familial and community well-being.

Maintaining the concept of "*marginalised*", the study addressed the "*Feminist and Intersectional Approaches*" that can be used to analyse structural oppression in marginalised tribal women.

For instance, Simone de Beauvoir argues the historical subordination of women in her book in 1949, and this notion understands the dual oppression through both gender and ethnicity applying to tribal women. Bell Hooks (1981) extended this perspective to include intersections of race, class, and gender that enhance the marginalisation of Mising women in the traditional dress-making sector. Moreover, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of "*Inter-Sectionality*" further elaborates on how conflicting identities magnify their exclusion and limit their access to resources and opportunities as they further their fall into being marginalised. However, "*Postcolonial Feminism*", as articulated by Gayatri Spivak (1988), is the suppression of marginalised voices and the undervaluation of Indigenous labour involving Misings women in the traditional dress-making sector. This sense repeats the struggles of Mising women whose cultural contributions are often overlooked. Amartya Sen's (2000) social exclusion theory further highlights how these women are systematically excluded from education, healthcare, and markets, perpetuating their marginalisation. The underlying empowerment process of Mising tribal women involved in the dress-making sector will be addressed while considering the core ideas of the above-mentioned theoretical premises.

6. Results

6.1. Profile of the Mising Women Involved in the Dress-Making Sector:

The socio-economic standing of women engaged in dress-making reflects various factors, including age, marital status, education, monthly income, and annual income. In this context, the family background and overall status of these women are also examined (as illustrated in Table No. 1).

Table No. 1 presents an analysis of age distribution, showing that the majority of research participants are in the 30-39 age group (32.36%), followed by those aged 40-49 years (26.14%). This reveals that middle-aged participants are central to this sector. Younger participants (15-19 years old 6.64%) and those aged 60 and above (7.47%) play an essential role in passing down the tradition across generations.

Table No. 1: Socio-Economic Status of the Dress-Making Group

Age Range, (Freq. & %)	Marital Status, (Freq. & %)	Educational Qualification, (Freq. & %)	Monthly Income (Freq. & %)	Annual Income, (Freq. & %)
I. 15-19: 16 (6.64%)	I. Unmarried: 73 (30.29%)	I. Class: 1-4: 77 (31.95%)	I. <10,000= 7 (2.90%)	=1,20,000/-
II. 20-29: 36 (14.94%)	II. Married: 128 (53.11%)	II. Class: 5-10: 98 (40.66%)	II. <20,000= 37 (15.35%)	=2,40,000/- =3,60,000/-
III. 30-39: 78 (32.36%)	III. Widow: 26 (10.79%)	III. Class: 11-12: 41 (17.01%)	III. <30,000= 84 (34.85%)	=4,80,000/- =6,00,000/-
IV. 40-49: 63 (26.14%)	IV. Divorced/ Separated: 14 (5.81%)	IV. Graduates & Above: 25 (10.37%)	IV. <40,000= 57 (23.65%)	=7,20,000/- =8,40,000/-
V. 50-59: 30 (12.45%)			V. <50,000= 27 (11.20%)	
VI. 60 & Above: 18 (7.47%)			VI. <60,000= 18 (7.47%)	
			VII. <70,000= 11 (4.56%)	
241 (100%)	241 (100%)	241 (100%)	241 (100%)	-

Source: field data

(Note: This socio-economic table categorises the chosen variable to make clear their different roles among the research participants in the traditional dress-making sector.)

The marital status distribution reveals that 53.11 per cent of the research participants are married, followed by 30.29 per cent unmarried, 10.79 per cent widowed, and 5.81 per cent divorced. Regarding educational qualifications, most participants have education ranging from the 5th to the 10th standard (40.66%), followed by those in classes 1 to 4 (31.95%). Notably, only 10.37 per cent are graduates or above, while 17.01 per cent have completed classes 11th and 12th standard. Monthly and annual income distributions show that the largest group of participants (34.85%) earn below rupees 30,000 per month, with 23.65% earning between rupees 30,000 to 40,000. This income level is sufficient for daily sustenance and facilitates growth opportunities.

6.2. Types of the Traditional Dress Items Produced by Mising Women:

Mising women produce a variety of traditional dress items that represent deep cultural significance in their community (Pegu, 2000, p.161). These items are woven to reflect their customs, festivals, rituals, and ceremonies, also used in their daily lives (ibid., p.161) (shown in the table no. 2).

Beyond cultural use, they adapt their designs to meet the growing demand of mainstream society. The producing women are involved in weaving and others with stitching finished products or knitting or intricately designing different patterns. So, this diversification of activities shows the richness of skills found in the group and their overall team effort. The process of producing shows their tradition of how this tradition comes from generation to generation to connect their art to the global stage.

Table No. 2: Production Items

Local Name	General Terminology	Significant in Cultural
Mosag Egé Gasor	Attire in various patterns of fabric and colours.	High-demand traditional attire featuring beautiful stuff patterns, especially Chadar-Mekhela for women.
Gero	Waist and chest garment of women.	A unique garment reflecting traditional festivals and rituals with aesthetic design.
Mibu Galuk	The traditional shirt is worn by Mising men.	Made from woven fabric, used for festivals, rituals, ceremonial and everyday use.
Ribi Gaséng	The lightweight garment is worn by Mising women.	Characterised by its soft texture and elegant patterns.
Ribi Gasor	Shawl for both men and women	Versatile garments used for warmth and ceremonial purposes.
Gadu	Hand-woven quilt, also known as Miri-jim.	Popularly used during winter nights for warmth.
Pa:re	Special garment worn by Mising women during childbirth	Symbolic and functional attire for cultural practices of reflecting babysitters.
Tapum Gasor	Woven shawl from hand-spun eri-silk yarn.	Known for its durability and unique texture.
Érkog	Small muffler for men.	Lightweight and intricately designed for everyday wear.
Koniyang Gasor	Special garments for women.	Distinct in its design and associated with special occasions.

Source: field study

(Note: The above-listed produced items are only popular and demanding that they earn more income in the study area.)

The traditional dress-making sector among Mising women can be classified into distinct groups based on their contributions (shown in Table No. 3).

These groups include individual weavers who create items for both personal and commercial purposes, emphasizing their integral role in "traditional weaving" and their direct involvement in producing traditional attire. Small-scale weavers working in handloom industries, as well as shopkeepers who produce and sell finished products locally and beyond, are also key players. Traders, functioning as exporters, facilitate the distribution of these goods to national and international markets. Additionally, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) play a crucial role in supporting resource access and skill-building through collective efforts. In the study area, the dress-making groups can be categorized into five distinct groups, each serving a unique function. These categories are illustrated in Table No. 3.

Table No. 3: Categorisation of the Involved Groups

Sl. No.	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Weavers	89	36.9%
2.	Owners of the Handloom Industry	41	17.0%
3.	Shopkeepers	45	18.7%
4.	Traders	28	12.0%
5.	President/Secretary of SHG	37	15.4%
Total		241	100%

Source: field data

(Note: These categories are only segmented through primarily involved practices in the dress-making sector.)

Table No. 3 illustrates the distribution of research participants across different categories of involvement. Among them, 36.9 per cent are weavers, while 18.7 per cent are involved as shopkeepers. Owners of handloom industries make up 17.0 per cent, with their operations encompassing both traditional and modern styles. Leaders of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) account for 15.4 per cent, and these groups are registered under the Directorate of Handloom and Textile (DHT) and the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM, 2014). Traders, acting as intermediaries, represent 12.0 per cent of the participants.

6.4. Choosing Traditional Dress-Making as a Means of Livelihood: Identifying the Influencing Factors:

During field interactions, the research participants shared how they were influenced to choose this sector.

Their influencing factors vary from personal to familial levels, as reflected in their shared experiences. We classified these factors based on their experiences as shown in Table No. 4 to understand how they depended on them as a means of livelihood and a way to regain control and stability in the face of familial and social marginalisation.

Table No. 4: Influencing Factors in the Dress-Making Sector

Sl. No.	Factors	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1.	Interest & Passion	84	35%
2.	Economic Necessity	65	27%
3.	Limited Employment Opportunities	48	20%
4.	Training & Entrepreneurial Opportunities	44	18%
Total		241	100%

Source: field data

(Note: This table represents the distribution of the only primary chosen factors influencing factors in the sector among the research participants.)

The influential factors such as a strong interest and passion are found in 35 per cent transforming it into a source of personal and cultural pride. Economic necessity, accounting for 27 per cent, pushes them to be involved in this sector for their family's livelihood. On the other hand, limited employment opportunities (20%) further force the importance of this sector as a viable income-generating option. The training and entrepreneurial opportunities (18%) give the necessary skills and support. This enhances them to gain economic empowerment and expand their market reach both locally and beyond.

7. Discussion

7.1. Empowerment of the Mising Women Involved in Traditional Dress-Making:

The traditional weaving practice is deeply embedded in the Mising tribal culture, where it is maintained both as a cultural tradition and a source of income. This practice has provided new opportunities for the overall empowerment of Mising women. During the field study, case studies and in-depth interviews dress-making sector has been a significant source of empowerment for Mising women in various ways.

This sector has helped them earn a living, leading to greater economic independence. As a result, their financial stability has improved, and they have gained social recognition, allowing them to participate more actively in community decision-making. Many research participants are expanding their businesses by travelling to different regions. Empowerment has also positively affected their health, family roles, and community well-being. Leadership roles within Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have opened the door to broader political participation. Financial independence has empowered these women to resist oppression and domestic violence. Their stories reflect how they have used their newfound economic power to assert their legal rights. Additionally, digital empowerment plays a crucial role in their continued progress.

This section delves into the new opportunities that have emerged for their overall empowerment, focusing on the significant outcomes, which are explored under the following themes.

7.2. Financial Independence and Empowerment:

Many scholars have found that financial independence helps empowerment in the dress-making sector. Klimczuk-Kochańska et al., (2023) stated that the traditional dress-making sector empowers tribal women by creating sustainable income opportunities, increasing their economic autonomy. The dressmaking sector supported by financial it has emerged as a viable pathway for the socio-economic upliftment of tribal women in India; contributing to a more equitable society (Sahu et al., 2024; Debbarma, 2022). Entrepreneurship, including in sectors like dress-making, is a powerful tool for women's empowerment, enhancing creativity, innovation, and productivity, particularly in emerging economies (Arora & Singh, 2023). Keeping in view, Paray (2019, p. 23) states that the role of economic involvement in tribal women's empowerment is transformative. In this context, working in the dress-making sector has helped the Mising women financially. Overall, 95 per cent of women revealed that they now make family decisions though they live in a patriarchal society. Overall, they have sustained livelihoods and support intergenerational growth through this source of income. Their narratives reflect empowerment beyond financial gains. They have improved their roles in their family as well as community.

Despite their conventional norms, customs, and values, their financial contributions have earned them respect. This changing nature of traditional gender roles can be seen within families as well as in their community. In this context, a 43-year-old woman Mrs L describes her experience, she said, *"My husband and family never allowed me to step out even though I earn money before I joined this sector. Now, since I earn and share family responsibilities, they have stopped restricting me. Earlier, I never really thought about having an open mind. But now, I feel a sense of freedom from the rigid rules and regulations that I grew up following in my home and community. Things have changed—those who used to judge or dictate to me don't say the same things anymore."* Financial stability helps them to raise their rigid customs where they suppress their income. They have now independently guided their children to support their education and their future. There almost 97 per cent of research participants reveal that their status has risen among relatives and neighbours. This confident feeling has also led to increased participation in community decision-making and enhanced social recognition. It has made it easier for them to support and participate in traditional rituals and customs. Approximately 75 per cent of the women participate in community events that are economically strong in this sector. These events showcase their traditional dress and crafts. This reflects cultural pride and redefines their roles in their community. They now transform from dependency to self-reliance. In this purview, weaver shared her experience, she said, *"Weaving gave me the strength to stand on my own feet and support my children's future."* This narrative shows the importance of being economically strong in their family. This experience can be understood through Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of *"intersectionality"*. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and economic status plays a vital role in shaping the weaver's journey toward self-reliance. As a tribal woman involved in traditional dress-making, she faces multiple layers of marginalisation—both as a woman in a patriarchal society and as a member of an ethnic group historically excluded from mainstream economic opportunities. Through her weaving work, she fights against these intersecting forms of oppression, and also achieves economic independence, empowering herself and securing a better future for her children.

Crenshaw's views explain how her identity as a tribal woman enhances her flexibility and ability to face systemic barriers in her sector.

7.3. Empowered Through Involvement and Exposure to Travel in Different Regions:

Many scholars have argued the empowerment gained through travel involvement in the dress-making sector, emphasizing various perspectives. One significant view is that exposure to different regions through travel enhances empowerment by broadening opportunities, skills, and market access. Singh and Singh (2023) and Ramna (2024) found that the rural Indian dressmaking (handicraft) sector employs many women and is witnessing a growing demand in countries like the USA, thus improving the economic status of women artisans. Furthermore, the present fashion industry opens new doors for "global exposure exhibition". It even provides financial independence to empower women (Self-employment Creating Opportunities for Women in Fashion Items and Handicraft Designing in India- A Study, 2022). This demand provides opportunities for involvement in the global market, such as trade fairs (expos) and exhibitions (Bhasin & Kumar, 2022). However, education and socio-economic issues are still prevalent but overcome in the quest for women's empowerment (Malagi, 2013). Initiatives like the Women Empowerment Index for Apparel strengthen and indicate improvement in conditions for women (Das, 2016). Thus, the dress-making women travel in different regions makes them important roles in this sector.

This opportunity is also prevalent among the Misings women involved in this sector as a source of income. They have opportunities to travel across districts and states to expand their business purposes. Overall, 78 per cent (188) of research participants reported that they travel independently for business purposes which is a remarkable transformation (shown in Table no. 5). Earlier, these women could not leave their villages without guidance from peer groups, husbands, or others as they reported. Moreover, overall, 60 per cent of research participants reported that they were taunted by neighbours or villagers, which discouraged them. Now, they confidently assert their ability to travel knowledge, expanding beyond Assam, which reflects their growing confidence and autonomy.

A research participant, 49-year-old Mrs K, reported: "I was travelling only in Assam. I was dependent on others for guidance. Though I had no formal education, now I travel overall six states in India for exhibitions (expos) order and handle everything myself." Such a range of groups, weavers, traders, shopkeepers, and SHG representatives reveal this collective transformation challenging traditional boundaries. There 27.4 per cent of research participants participate in national expos to showcase their craftsmanship and gain broader recognition. A few (12.9%) have even travelled to international markets, promoting traditional designs globally. Their global reach enhances their exposure, networking, and confidence. This sector promotes both personal and economic growth within their community.

Table No. 5: The research participants are distributed about their travel experiences across different regions from broader regions to smaller ones. This distribution reveals a privilege to travel which contributes to enhancing their minimum educational qualification with skills in networking business activity.

Table No. 5: Exposure to Travel in Different Regions

Sl. No.	Category	F.(n)	District (Freq. & %)	State (Freq. & %)	National (Freq. & %)	International (Freq. & %)
1.	Weavers	89	35 (39.3%)	26 (29.2%)	18 (20.2%)	10 (11.2%)
2.	Traders	28	4 (14.3%)	7 (25%)	11 (39.3%)	6 (22.4%)
3.	Owners of the Handloom Industry	41	8 (19.5%)	16 (39%)	12 (29.3%)	5 (12.2%)
4.	Shopkeepers	45	10 (22.2%)	14 (31%)	15 (33.3%)	6 (13.3%)
5.	President/ Secretary of SHG	37	12 (32.4%)	11 (29.7%)	10 (27%)	4 (10.8%)
Total		241	69 (28.6%)	74 (30.7%)	66 (27.4%)	31 (12.9%)

Source: field data

Table No. 5. Shows overall, **30.7 per cent** are working in state-level activities, followed by **28.6 per cent** at the district level. Whereas, **27.4 per cent** nationally, and **12.9 per cent** internationally.

Traders have the highest national (**39.3%**) and international (**22.4%**) exposure, showing their market-driven roles. **Owners of handloom industries** are prominent at the state level (**39%**) and nationally (**29.3%**). **Shopkeepers** maintained balanced involvement, with **33.3 per cent** nationally and **31 per cent** at the state level. However, **weavers** (39.3%) focused locally on district-level activities. As well as Presidents/**Secretaries of SHGs** revealed a district **32.4 per cent** and state **29.7 per cent** level involvement. This data explores the diverse mobility across groups. The traders and owners are leading in broader involvements in travel to exposure. A trader, Mrs H, narrated with a sense of sensation and pride: *"Through this practice, I travelled to London and saw worlds I could never have imagined. It opened my eyes to new regions and gave me the knowledge I never thought I'd gain."* In Postcolonial Feminism, as articulated by Gayatri Spivak (1988), suppression of marginalised voices and undervaluation of Indigenous labour, especially the women in the traditional sectors, are criticised. The story of Mrs H, a trader who travelled to London through her involvement in the dressmaking sector, is a good example of this perspective. Her journey not only underlines the transformative power of such practices but even reflects how the contributions of Indigenous women have gained recognition on international forums.

7.4. Acquiring Formal Skills and Linguistic Proficiency:

Dressmaking practices among tribal women have become a valuable avenue for developing formal skills and improving language proficiency. According to Dassucik et al. (2022); Aprianti & Herlina (2024), stated that training in dressmaking significantly boosts creativity, skill development, and economic independence. Furthermore, entrepreneurial activities like dressmaking foster innovation and productivity, particularly in an expanding economy (Arora & Singh, 2023). These programs offer technical expertise while simultaneously nurturing entrepreneurial skills (Dassucik et al., 2022; Aprianti and Herlina, 2024), making them a vital tool for empowering tribal women in the formal sector. This process allows women to fully participate in socio-economic activities and enhance their livelihoods (Naik & Dasaratharamaiah, 2019; Sonavane & Kulkarni, 2024), improving their communication skills and overall confidence.

This contributes to their empowerment and integration into wider economic and social structures (Maeliah, 2010; Klimczuk-Kochańska et al., 2023).

In the course of the study, it became apparent that many women involved in dressmaking lack formal educational qualifications. As shown in Table 1, only 27.38 per cent of the participants have completed education up to the 11th or 12th standard, or have got above degrees. Despite this, their involvement in the dressmaking sector has enhanced their communication skills to a level comparable with those of formally educated individuals. The study found that 78 per cent of participants reported an improvement in their communication abilities. Among them, 70 per cent learned languages like Hindi and English, which have enabled them to interact with clients and expand their skills in business and community leadership across regions. This involvement in the dressmaking sector equips them with essential skills for success, not just in business, but also in leading within their communities. Many participants, such as Mrs S, noted, *"I have no high formal education, but this work has taught me everything I need to manage my business,"* illustrating the role of this sector in teaching effective communication skills in Assamese, Hindi, and English. Similarly, 65 per cent of participants have gained financial literacy through managing orders, pricing, and sales, crucial skills for running their businesses effectively. Mrs K, a shopkeeper, shared, *"Through market visits and client interactions, I've learned Hindi and English for how to negotiate prices better."* Mrs K's experience reflects Bell Hooks' concept of "Intersectional Feminism," demonstrating how race, class, and gender intersect to shape the lives of marginalised women. Her ability to learn Hindi and improve her negotiation skills through market interactions underscores how economic involvement can challenge systemic barriers. As a tribal woman, Mrs. K's participation in the dressmaking sector has enhanced her linguistic skills and serves as a tool for empowerment, redefining gender roles and fostering independence in marginalised communities. Through mastering the skills required in this sector, these women bridge the gap between traditional livelihoods and formal education, which enhances both their personal and professional growth.

7.5. The Well-being of Health and Empowerment:

Economic stability has become a crucial element in enhancing health and empowerment, allowing individuals to care for themselves, their families, and their communities. Studies by Paray (2019) and Manna (2024) suggest that financial growth provides access to better healthcare and improves diet and nutrition. In the dress-making sector, health outcomes are shaped by several factors, including the techniques used in clothing production and the working conditions, which significantly impact workers' health (Farrer and Finn, 2015; Carpus et al., 2020). However, the situation in Bangladesh's textile industry paints a bleak picture, where inadequate facilities and harmful conditions compromise workers' health, highlighting the urgent need for reform (Zaman, 2017). On the other hand, innovations in garment design, such as creating clothing for elderly care, have shown promise in improving overall well-being. This aligns with Manna's (2024) finding that economic empowerment and access to healthcare are pivotal in improving the lives of tribal women, demonstrating the interconnectedness of health and empowerment.

The field study report highlights the positive impact of economic stability on the health and empowerment of women in the dress-making sector. Research participants shared their experiences, noting how financial independence allowed them to make informed health decisions for themselves and their families. Around 70 per cent of the participants acknowledged addressing health issues they previously neglected, as they had relied on traditional healthcare practices and could not afford costly treatments due to low incomes. Over time, 80 per cent of the women reported improvements in their health, as they could now afford quality medical care thanks to their earnings from the dress-making sector. Additionally, 60 per cent of participants highlighted that their involvement in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) not only provided financial support but also helped them overcome health-related barriers. This shift from traditional to modern healthcare reflects their growing empowerment. Today, these women are more aware of their rights, with 75 per cent of participants feeling empowered to make decisions about their health.

Financial independence has broken barriers, allowing them access to modern healthcare and an improvement in their overall well-being. Around 20 per cent have also taken the initiative to educate others about health practices.

One shopkeeper shared her experience, saying, "With the money I earned, I could afford treatment at advanced hospitals because of my involvement in the dress-making sector. The traditional treatment system is no longer a barrier for us." This statement highlights the transformative effect of economic participation in overcoming social exclusion. According to Amartya Sen's "Social Exclusion Theory," people often face challenges in accessing vital resources like healthcare. Her narrative shows that economic independence has enabled women to access better healthcare, breaking free from traditional treatment limitations. Mising women's involvement in dress-making has provided them with a steady income, improving their access to modern healthcare services. This financial empowerment reduces their dependence on traditional or limited healthcare practices and allows them to explore modern treatment options. The increased financial independence of Mising women, supported by their participation in this sector, demonstrates a shift from exclusion to greater control over essential resources. This progress reflects Sen's "capability approach," which emphasizes economic contribution as a transformative process. The income these women generate moves them from marginalised dependence to active participants in mainstream economic activities. It challenges societal norms and grants women greater autonomy in making decisions about their health. By securing access to advanced medical care, these women set new standards and inspire others to prioritize their health. This shift symbolises a broader transformation in gender dynamics, giving women more control over their lives and empowering their communities.

7.6. Addressing Leadership Quality and Empowerment:

Many scholars have argued that the dressmaking sector enhances women's leadership qualities and empowers their abilities. In Assam, the development of micro-entrepreneurship in the handloom industry has allowed tribal women to acquire the necessary skills and opportunities for leading and managing enterprises (Hazarika & Goswami, 2018).

According to Khanum et al. (2021) and Kočańska et al. (2023), this sector promotes economic independence and enhances decision-making within households. Self-help groups (SHGs) empower women by fostering skill development, economic independence, and community support (Verma & Sharma, 2024; Debbarma, 2022). These groups motivate women to initiate and lead collective actions. Furthermore, microfinance programs empower women's leadership by breaking socio-economic barriers (Sahu et al., 2024). By involving dressmaking in these initiatives, tribal women gain leadership roles and drive community development (Empowerment of Tribal Women through Entrepreneurship for Sustainable Development, 2022; Rani & Devi, 2021).

In the field, the empowerment process is evident among the women involved in these groups, reflecting their growing awareness of political issues at the grassroots level. For instance, 95 per cent of research participants reported increased decision-making abilities, including voting rights, informing enhanced political awareness. Over time, their participation has strengthened, with 80 per cent of participants raising their voices to address women's issues in local governance systems. Now, 65 per cent of participants assert their voices in public forums, challenging local leadership on basic rights. The empowerment outcomes of SHGs have significantly influenced local politics. Women, with growing confidence, are becoming politically active, organizing collective actions, protests, and community meetings. The data from the survey illustrates that leadership in SHGs serves as a stepping stone for broader political roles within their communities. Women now take leadership roles in SHGs and organisations. Solidarity within SHGs enhances their collective strength, allowing them to challenge conventional norms and values. Regular meetings facilitate discussions on business strategies, and training sessions are organised to develop new skills. These roles contribute to grassroots political involvement, as SHGs help raise awareness and advocate for policies that benefit their craft and community. Collective decision-making strengthens their enterprises. Through SHGs, women have access to training, financial resources, and markets. These groups are typically organised around shared goals, such as improving economic conditions and preserving traditional crafts.

Dutta and Dey (2012) argue that SHGs provide platforms for tribal women to develop leadership and influence decision-making, which allows them to expand their businesses and achieve greater economic independence. The formation of SHGs among Mising women involved in dressmaking has led to significant economic growth, social empowerment, and cultural preservation. However, political participation among the research participants has traditionally been limited. As reported by research participants, there is 11 per cent have now joined local governance (Panchayat Raj System) and contributed their leadership skills.

A president of SHG shared her journey: *"I never thought I would speak in public. Representing my group made me realise my voice matters. Now, our former group president has been elected as the president of the Gram Panchayat."* This statement exemplifies the political empowerment process. According to Feminist Theory (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949), women's historical subordination has often limited their social and public roles. The president's realisation challenges these traditional expectations. Through Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989), we see how the overlapping factors of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status marginalise tribal women, but her ability to speak out proves how these barriers can be overcome. Furthermore, Postcolonial Feminism (Spivak, 1988) interprets the suppression of Indigenous voices and labour, yet the president's journey counters this by reclaiming her voice and presence. Finally, the notion of empowerment highlights her transformation from feeling powerless to gaining confidence and autonomy, showing the crucial role of SHGs in empowering women to become active leaders in their communities.

7.7. Addressing Violence against Women and Empowerment:

The dressmaking sector has played a crucial role in helping tribal women get rid of domestic violence through economic independence. Domestic violence is prevalent among tribal women; According to the National Family Health Survey in 2019 report were high rates (Nayak & Alam, 2023). Community programs and feminist movements globally have been vital in fighting against such violence and achieving justice (Hu, 2023). In Odisha, women involved in the dressmaking industry have gained decision-making power within their homes and communities,

as seen through an empowerment index that improved from 0.61 to 1.26 following entrepreneurship programs (Klimczuk-Kochańska et al., 2023). In Gujarat, sewing programs have helped women earn money and contest harmful traditions (Sindhi, 2012). Strong laws, community support, and job opportunities have been key factors that help women resist violence and gain respect.

During fieldwork, many participants openly shared sensitive experiences, including instances of domestic abuse and rigid cultural norms. Their willingness to voice such issues underscores their growing courage. About 70 per cent of participants acknowledged that Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and awareness programs have helped them address these problems. Their stories highlighted how financial independence and collective action allowed them to seek justice and use legal support systems such as domestic violence redressal cells. This newfound confidence marked a critical shift towards empowerment. Furthermore, 85 per cent of participants reported increased political participation, especially in voting, while 70 per cent said that local representatives have begun addressing their needs in development plans. About 65 per cent revealed that they now openly speak out about issues such as healthcare, education, and livelihood schemes. Legal awareness has increased as well, with 30 per cent of participants reporting that they now use domestic violence redressal cells, while 10 per cent use formal legal rights systems. Collective action is another major aspect, with 60 per cent of women participating in meetings, organising campaigns, and engaging in community forums for domestic well-being. This transition reflects a significant change, as Mising women balance traditional roles with active participation in social and political change, empowering them to challenge societal norms. However, 80 per cent of participants shared that without financial independence, they remain vulnerable to abusive relationships. Among widows and separated women, 95 per cent emphasized that without income, they would not be able to escape the violence or marginalisation they faced. Widowed participants (10.79%) and separated participants (5.81%) reported how economic dependency often heightened their vulnerability to violence. Married women, making up 53.11 per cent of the participants, revealed that earning income allowed them to challenge conservative values, contribute to their families, and assert their autonomy.

Financial independence has thus played a transformative role in reducing violence and promoting self-reliance. One participant, Mrs L, a 47-year-old widow, shared, "When my husband died, I had nothing. The dress-making work made me strong enough to stand on my own feet. Today, I can support my family, and I don't have to rely on anyone else." This narrative explains how the sector provides financial freedom, particularly for widows, allowing them to reject violence and change their lives.

Economic independence has also allowed women to challenge oppression and assert their rights. Around 87 per cent of participants reported resisting domestic violence with the help of their newfound economic power. The sector has provided them with the knowledge and confidence to stand up for themselves and seek justice. A trader described her journey: *"Leaving my abusive husband was the hardest decision I ever made. Now, with my business, I found the strength to start over."* This case exemplifies how economic empowerment enables women from marginalised communities to overcome oppression. Through "Postcolonial Feminism" and "Intersectionality," we see how the undervaluation of Indigenous women's labour has been challenged and how economic independence breaks the cycle of gender-based violence and dependence. Economic independence in the dressmaking sector has become a tool for these women to regain control over their lives, paving the way for more equitable opportunities.

7.8. Addressing Digital Literature and Empowerment:

Digital literacy plays a crucial role in empowering research participants by enhancing their digital knowledge and skills. Pila et al. (2024) highlighted that digital literacy empowers youth in the textile industry, particularly in South Africa, making them more employable and competitive. This knowledge has positively influenced the performance of fashion enterprises (MSMEs), allowing businesses to meet product demands more effectively (Purnomo, 2024). The dressmaking industry has adopted digital tools and technologies to improve capabilities and increase market access. Technological advancements in labour practices contribute to the economic development of women (Kumar, 2014), empowering artisans to access broader markets and receive fair compensation, such as through digital retail and product sourcing platforms (Deepshikha & Yammiyavar, 2020).

The integration of "Internet of Things" (IoT) technology further enhances global market competitiveness (2020). Initiatives like DI-Girls are equipping young girls with the digital capabilities needed to enter the digital economy (Hamdan et al., 2024). The "Digitise to Equalise" initiative demonstrates how digital literacy helps rural women access e-commerce platforms (Irfan and Salam, 2020). For example, digitized Filipino "terno" dresses preserve cultural heritage while improving clothing production (Masilungan-Manuel and Villaverde, 2022). In this way, digital technologies are driving growth, cultural preservation, and gender equality within the dressmaking sector.

Digital empowerment has become a transformative tool for tribal women in the dressmaking industry. Exposure to markets beyond their local communities requires access to digital tools. Among the research participants, 56 per cent are educated up to the 12th standard, and 62 per cent have received basic digital training, including smartphone and computer use, as well as financial transactions. An overwhelming 78 per cent reported that using online marketing strategies has expanded their customer base, while 71 per cent indicated that digital tools have significantly reduced their dependency on middlemen. One handloom entrepreneur shared, *"I never knew anything about online platforms, but I learned it, and now my business has started to pick up. I can now sell beyond Assam to international markets."* This statement reflects how learning digital strategies has financially benefited her, as transactions can now be monitored directly, without the need for intermediaries. However, research participants also revealed the challenges they faced before acquiring these skills. About 64 per cent admitted experiencing initial resistance to learning digital tools, due to a lack of confidence or fear of failure. Nevertheless, training programs supported by NGOs and government schemes have been instrumental in overcoming these barriers. Applying the Feminist Empowerment Theory by Naila Kabeer and Amartya Sen, we can observe that digital literacy has empowered the participants to achieve financial independence and take on leadership roles in their communities. Approximately 81 per cent of the research participants reported that digitalization has enabled them to make decisions independently, while 67 per cent stated that it has enhanced their ability to claim their rights.

Digitalization has not only bridged the rural-urban divide in markets but also empowered tribal women to challenge longstanding gender inequalities by providing them with accessible tools, networks, and a pathway to financial and social self-sufficiency.

8. Recommendation for the Future Prospects

To promote the prospects of the traditional dress-making sector among the involved group, an inclusive policy approach is needed from state, national and their autonomous councils. Their Skill development programs can enhance their productivity and product quality. Policies should focus on improving market knowledge such as skills, and training for the participants access by facilitating participation in trade fairs and online sales platforms. It can give them wider exposure and access to national and international markets. Additionally, supporting entrepreneurship through subsidies and low-interest loans for small businesses will empower Mising women to establish their professions. This may lead to the promotion of a sustainable and inclusive economic policy.

9. Conclusion

The Mising community in Assam is rich in traditional weaving practices (recently got GI tag on Handloom products, 2024). The traditional weaving techniques and motifs are passed down through generations and symbolise their community identity. The traditional dress-making sector plays a major role in empowering Mising women in Assam, both economically and socially. Over time, Mising weaving has gained recognition beyond local markets and captured the interest of national and international consumers. The diverse categories of involvement groups ranging from weavers, owners of the handloom industry, shopkeepers, and Presidents/Secretaries of SHG/organisations explore the different opportunities availing within this sector. These roles contribute to Misings women in income generation and enhance social recognition and self-esteem within their community. Present the Mising women achieve greater recognition and empowerment in their livelihoods through this traditional dress-making sector, as they lived earlier in marginalised borders. Moreover, they break free from rigid conventional restrictions like their taboos and customs.

The involvement of younger participants in skill development initiatives showcases the sector's potential for long-term economic contributions. Also, community-based initiatives like Self-Help Groups (SHGs) strengthen social unity and collective work, increasing the sector's popularity beyond the regions. They increasingly open up to improve access to both national and international markets. However, unorganised and lack of business knowledge limited their market exposure which remains a significant challenge. Addressing this gap is central to maximising the economic and social benefits of the dress-making sector.

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- [1] Here the term 'dress-making sector' refers to the group of women who are involved in traditional garment making among the Mising community, including weaving, tailoring, embroidery, and finishing tasks of all garments. This includes artisans such as weavers, owners of handloom industries, and shopkeepers who involve in designing, traders who trade traditional and commercial garments. The sector combines cultural heritage with economic activity and is a primary source of livelihood for them.

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