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## 'Handloom weavers down to 1.05 lakh from 16 lakh'

### Face to Face

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After the Geographical Indication Rights for Gamosa, why is Tezpur University going for 'The Draft Assam Gamosa Heritage (Protection) Bill, 2023'?

The contribution of the Government, Academia and R&D institution for the GI logo "Gamosa of Assam" is commendable. It asserts the intellectual property rights of the authorised weavers with an assurance of quality and design originating from Assam. However, the GI instrument has little provision to restrict unregistered weavers to produce Gamosa in Assam. It cannot stop an unscrupulous producer elsewhere to copy the designs or produce acrylic yarn/synthetic blended textile or sell it as 'XYZ Gamcha'. The Draft Assam Gamosa Heritage (Protection) Bill, 2023 will mitigate the legal, jurisdiction, and supply chain challenges faced by the stakeholders.

**As an educational institution, how is Tezpur University empowered to draft a Bill?**

Higher education institutions have the mandate to resolve socially relevant

problems with local causes that are nationally important. Likewise, TU is taking the initiative to conserve Gamosa institution, safeguard the livelihood of handloom weavers, and develop a roadmap for a regional innovation system. We have competencies in Intellectual Property Rights, Law, Cultural Studies, Information & Communication Technology, Sciences and Business Administration. Under this project, a special purpose vehicle was constituted for the perpetual research process on Gamosa heritage and the drafting of a transnational statute.

**What are the challenges faced by the Gamosa in terms of its heritage value and the livelihood opportunities of handloom weavers?**

The handloom workforce has shrunk to 1.05 lakh weavers in the year 2022 from 16 lakh in 2010. This alarming reduction of 35% downfall in the last decade is due to the approaching end-of-life of traditional handloom apparel production. Unauthorised import, piracy, creative destruction, and misappropriation of its Traditional Cultural Expression

will eventually make the word *Xipinie* obsolete.

**What are the loopholes in the existing ordinances, Acts, and policies to safeguard the interest of the weavers, handloom supply chain, and endemic yarn producers?**

The Handlooms (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act, of 1985 is focused on reactive tactics like seizure of powerloom facilities & penal provisions. This Act lacks a holistic approach to restricting the sale & distribution of *Ghuni* or creating handloom capacity or delegating authority to the implementing departments. As a short-term measure, the State Government promulgates ordinances to restrict powerloom-made items as reserved in the Act. The 06-week duration of the ordinance is too short to prepare test reports from accredited testing laboratories for the confiscated textiles. Likewise, the Swanirbhar Naari programme has allowed polyester/acrylic/wool yarn in the handloom artefacts of Aronai, Karbi

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Poho, Rabha Pazar, Dimasa Risa Basa, and Mising Dumer & Er'kog. Another area of improvement is in the bulk procurement practice of *Tiyoni/Bihuwan* where the Government/PSU is reluctant to follow two bid technical-commercial tendering policy.

**What are the interventions to mitigate the challenges faced by the Gamosa?**

The first is documentation of Traditional Cultural Expression (TCE), Traditional Knowledge, and baseline research. We have selected *Goxain Kapur*, *Thapona Kapur*, *Bihuwan*, *Dora-Baran (Ana-Kata)*, and *Tiyoni* artefacts because these products have significant demand and assert the heritage. The second intervention is establishing standard operating procedure to ascertain quality in these five artefacts and *xipinie* capacity. The third intervention is enabling transparent information sharing between the upstream & downstream linkages and protecting the TCE/weaver's design rights globally using blockchain. The fourth intervention is the incorporation of SPV 'Gamosa Project Management Authority' for the perpetuity of Gamosa research and assist the Governments to enact a transnational Bill through Parliament.

**What are the provisions to protect the TCE of Gamosa and the design rights of the weavers?**

This Bill has provisions to execute blockchain contracts to protect designs, motifs and record information on authenticity such as yarn quality, weave patterns, registered weaver's details, geo-location, design serial number, and the status of the retailer. The community designs are to be uploaded in the blockchain application to assert Sui-Generis (TCE) provision & restrict cultural piracy. There will be a provision of a digital contract between *Xipinie* and the client to use designs, motifs, yarn feature, and weave patterns to satisfy their requirements.

**Who are the partnering organisations / institutions in this initiative of Tezpur University?**

We are thankful to the Ministry of Education, Government of India, Government of Assam, South India Textile Research Association, Assam Government Marketing Corporation Ltd, The Assam State Museum, Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra, IIT Guwahati, Assam Textile Institute, Oriental Insurance Company Ltd and Satras of Majuli, Sonitpur, Nagaon, and Barpeta district for their contribution.

**What are the geographical, economic, and marketing initiatives in the UGC stride project?**

We are working in Chariduar, Nameri, Jamuguri, Majuli, Tezpur, Sualkuchi and Bijoynagar handloom clusters. Two blockchain mod-

els are in progress to support electronic commerce and brand visibility across the world. Customary institutions, Satra and custodians have extensively contributed to this project to revive the TCE and TK of the artefacts. Consultative workshops were conducted with the stakeholders for problem estimation, establishing SOP on artefact valuation, quality parameters of artefacts, and organic dyeing practices.

**What are the innovative and statutory provisions for the custodians of Gamosa institutions, the handloom department, beneficiaries, weavers, and clients?**

The draft Bill has defined the constitution, delegation, and powers to the authorities and the penal provisions. It coined the term "*Ghuui*" to define a deceptive textile in the form of Gamosa. For a registered *Xipinie*, it proposes rights to health, insurance, maternity benefits, and old age protection. It has provision to use blockchain application to achieve transparency and information symmetry across the Gamosa supply chain including clients. For bulk purchases of *Bihuwan* and *Tiyoni*, the State needs to practice two bid weightage procurement system. Guidelines for yarn quality, dimensions, weaver pattern, and use of natural/endemic yarn as well as organic dyeing process are also prescribed.

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