

A New Tactical Approach for the Promotion of Mekhala Chaddor: A Study of Handloom Weavers in Baksa District, Assam

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Abstract: *The handloom industry occupies a critical position in India's rural economy by generating employment, preserving traditional skills, and sustaining cultural heritage. Among India's diverse handloom traditions, the Mekhala Chaddor of Assam represents a distinctive cultural identity deeply embedded in the social and economic life of the region. This study examines the promotional challenges and opportunities associated with Mekhala Chaddor weaving in the Baksa district of Assam, a region characterized by its rich Bodo culture and a significant proportion of women engaged in handloom activities. Using a robust descriptive research design based on extensive secondary data, the study rigorously analyses existing promotional practices, multifaceted market constraints, complex supply chain inefficiencies, and the nuanced impact of changing domestic and global consumer preferences, particularly among younger demographics. The paper further explores the pivotal, yet often limited, role of government schemes, cooperative societies, and the immense potential of emerging digital and e-commerce platforms in promoting this traditional garment. The core findings highlight the urgent need for a sophisticated, integrated promotional framework—a Hybrid Promotion Model—that delicately balances the imperative of cultural preservation with the necessities of modern market adaptation and commercial viability. The study offers comprehensive, strategic recommendations for dramatically enhancing visibility, securing sustainable market access, and ensuring the long-term, equitable growth of the Mekhala Chaddor industry while staunchly safeguarding its inherent cultural authenticity and traditional craftsmanship.*

Keywords: Mekhala Chaddor, Handloom Industry, Promotional Strategies, Rural Employment, Cultural Heritage, Sustainable Development, E-commerce, Supply Chain Management, Bodo Weavers.

1. Introduction: The Socio-Economic and Cultural Tapestry of Indian Handlooms

1.1 Global Significance of the Handloom Sector

The handloom sector globally stands as a testament to human ingenuity and traditional craftsmanship. In many developing nations, particularly India, it transcends mere commerce to become a crucial socio-economic pillar. India's handloom sector, often cited as the largest cottage industry in the world, plays an indispensable role in the rural economy, offering decentralized, sustainable livelihood opportunities to millions, especially women. This sector is not merely an economic engine but is a vibrant repository of intangible cultural heritage, encompassing knowledge, skills, motifs, and dyeing techniques passed down through countless generations.

1.2 The Cultural and Economic Context of Assam Handlooms

Within India's vast handloom landscape, the traditions of the Northeast, and specifically Assam, hold a unique and distinguished position. The Assamese weaving tradition is characterized using unique silks like Muga (Golden Silk), Pat (Mulberry Silk), and Eri (Endi or Peace Silk), as well as intricate geometric and natural motifs. The Mekhala Chaddor, the quintessential traditional Assamese attire for women, stands as the most prominent symbol of this cultural and artistic identity. It is an artifact where culture, identity, and economic activity converge powerfully.

1.3 Focus on Baksa District and the Weavers

The Baksa district, nestled in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam, serves as a crucial microcosm for studying the challenges and potential of this industry. In Bodo-dominated villages across Baksa, handloom weaving is not a supplementary activity but a primary occupation, especially for women, who exhibit exceptional weaving skills. This tradition contributes significantly to household income, female economic empowerment, and the maintenance of Bodo cultural distinctiveness. However, despite the high quality, authenticity, and cultural value of their products, Mekhala Chaddor weavers in Baksa confront a complex matrix of promotional hurdles and market access constraints.

1.4 The Problem Statement and Research Rationale

The growth potential of traditional crafts like the Mekhala Chaddor is being severely restricted by macro-environmental forces: accelerating globalization, the rapid shift in domestic fashion trends, intense competition from low-cost, mass-produced power-loom substitutes, and critically, a marked limitation in modern branding, digital marketing, and cohesive promotional efforts. The current promotional landscape is fragmented, reliant on traditional sales channels (local markets, fairs), and lacks the strategic depth required to penetrate national and international markets. This study is thus motivated by the necessity to move beyond descriptive observation. It seeks to **analyse the current promotional ecosystem of the Mekhala Chaddor and propose a structured, new tactical framework** designed to fortify its market position, ensure fair returns for the weavers, and

guarantee the craft's cultural and economic sustainability for the future.

2. Literature Review

This section synthesizes existing scholarship across four critical dimensions to contextualize the study's focus on the Mekhala Chaddor and lay the groundwork for the proposed tactical framework.

2.1 The Handloom Sector: Socio-Economic Significance and Policy Environment

The Indian handloom sector is universally recognized as a crucial pillar of the rural economy, providing employment and mitigating seasonal unemployment risks, particularly for women (Ministry of Textiles, 2024). Scholars emphasize that beyond economics, the sector is central to cultural sustainability and the preservation of traditional skills (Das, 2017).

However, the sector operates under significant institutional constraints. Reviews of government and policy reports (NABARD, 2023) highlight recurring issues within the existing support structure, primarily concerning the lack of effective credit flow and the limited technical and managerial capacity of many cooperative societies. Tandon (2019) specifically points to the corrosive impact of competition from industrial power looms, which often results in depressed market prices and economic distress for authentic handloom weavers.

2.2 Core Marketing Principles for Traditional and Ethnic Products

Effective promotion of traditional apparel requires a strategic approach beyond conventional marketing. The foundational principles outlined by Kotler and Keller (2016) stress the need for a strong value proposition and differentiated positioning. For heritage products, this differentiation must be built upon their intangible assets—the story, the craft, and the ethical production.

Literature on sales and distribution management highlights that traditional marketing channels often fail to secure premium pricing for high-quality ethnic wear due to fragmented supply chains (Christopher, 2016; Havaladar & Cavale, 2018). Varley (2014) argues that product diversification is essential for specialty retail, moving an item from "occasion-specific" to "lifestyle-integrated" to increase consumption frequency and market relevance.

2.3 Contextualizing the Assamese Handloom: Culture and Challenges

The handloom traditions of Assam, particularly the weaving of the Mekhala Chaddor, carry deep cultural and symbolic weight. The garment is closely tied to identity, womanhood, and social rituals (Kalita, 2021). The cultural uniqueness, driven by the use of indigenous silks and unique motifs (Barua & Bora, 2020), theoretically commands a premium.

Yet, regional studies reveal persistent operational

challenges. An investigation into the Sualkuchi cluster, which deals in similar silk products, documented issues of fluctuating raw material costs, inadequate processing facilities, and a deficiency in branding knowledge among artisans (Sarmah & Das, 2022). Furthermore, cooperative societies in the region often struggle with professional management and market access, as noted in studies focusing on the economics of these organizations (International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications, 2015). This literature confirms that the issues in the Baksa district are systemic to the regional handloom ecosystem.

2.4 Modern Tactical Approaches: Digital Adoption and Sustainability

The strategic opportunities for the handloom sector lie in leveraging global trends: digitization and sustainability.

2.4.1 E-commerce and Digital Marketing

The literature strongly advocates for the adoption of e-commerce to bridge the geographical gap between rural production clusters and metropolitan/global consumers (Panda & Sahdev, 2019). Studies focused on marketing regional products have shown that digital marketplaces offer transparent price discovery and bypass traditional, inefficient intermediaries (Patra, 2021). Current research indicates that successful handloom ventures leverage digital platforms for storytelling marketing, emphasizing the artisan's journey and product authenticity, rather than simply as a sales portal (Kurien, 2025).

2.4.2 Sustainable and Ethical Positioning

Globally, there is a growing consumer preference for ethical and sustainable fashion. The handloom sector, by virtue of its low-carbon footprint, manual production process, and contribution to rural livelihoods, is perfectly positioned to align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Subramaniyabharathy, 2021). Research on sustainability in the sector highlights the competitive advantage gained by promoting aspects like ethical sourcing and ecological attributes (Reddy, 2019; Hasan et al., 2022). UNESCO (2019) strongly encourages governments and industry stakeholders to protect this heritage through policies that support sustainable development and fair-trade practices. Goswami and Jain (2014) provide suitable strategy outlines for achieving this sustainable growth.

2.5 Gap Identified and Theoretical Contribution

While extensive literature exists on the general challenges faced by Indian handlooms and the theoretical potential of digital and sustainable marketing, there is a distinct gap concerning the strategic integration of these elements into a cohesive, actionable tactical promotional framework specifically for the unique and culturally rich Mekhala Chaddor in regions like Baksa. This study aims to fill this gap by proposing the Hybrid Promotion Model, synthesizing macro-economic strategies with micro-level tactical recommendations (Sections 7.1-7.5) to ensure the sustainable and profitable growth of this heritage craft.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employs a **Descriptive Research Design**. This approach is optimal for systematically describing the characteristics of a population, phenomenon, or situation. In this case, it precisely documents the current state of promotional practices, market structure, challenges, and opportunities specific to Mekhala Chaddor weaving in the Baksa district, Assam.

3.2 Data Type and Sources

The study is based exclusively on **Secondary Data**. The comprehensive nature of the analysis necessitates drawing from a wide and diverse range of authenticated sources:

- **Policy and Government Documents:** Annual Reports on Handloom Sector (Ministry of Textiles, GoI); Handloom and Textiles Policy Reports (Government of Assam); economic surveys.
- **Academic and Scholarly Publications:** Peer-reviewed research articles from journals specializing in rural development, marketing, textiles, and cultural studies (as cited in Section 2).
- **Industry and Cooperative Reports:** Publications of state and regional handloom cooperative societies in Assam; market studies by industry magazines and business newspapers.
- **Digital Market Intelligence:** Reports and white papers by e-commerce platforms (Amazon India, Flipkart, specialized ethnic wear sites) concerning trends in ethnic and hand-woven apparel consumption.
- **Historical and Cultural Texts:** Ethnographic accounts of Assamese and Bodo weaving traditions to establish historical context and cultural value.

3.3 Methods of Analysis

- **Content Analysis:** Systematic review and categorization of textual data from reports and policy documents to identify recurring themes, stated objectives (e.g., government schemes), and reported outcomes (e.g., performance of cooperative societies).
- **Comparative Analysis:** Contrasting the promotional strategies and market performance of Mekhala Chaddor with other successful regional handloom products (e.g., Kanchipuram Silk, Pashmina Shawls) to identify best practices and strategic gaps.
- **Trend Analysis:** Examination of longitudinal data on production volume, price points, export figures (where available), and consumer preference shifts (as reported in market research) to project future market trajectories and inform tactical recommendations.

4. The Mekhala Chaddor: History, Craft, and Cultural Significance

4.1 Historical Evolution

The origins of the Mekhala Chaddor are rooted deeply in the history of the Kamarupa kingdom and the subsequent Ahom rule in Assam, with archaeological and textual evidence

tracing its form back to at least the 12th century CE. The garment is a two-piece ensemble: the **Mekhala**, a cylindrical lower garment, and the **Chaddor**, a long piece of cloth used as an upper drape or shawl. The weaving of this cloth has historically been considered a mark of cultural competence and domestic skill for Assamese women.

4.2 Raw Materials and Craftsmanship

Traditionally, the highest value Mekhala Chaddors were woven from the indigenous golden Muga silk—a unique product exclusive to Assam—and Pat silk. More accessible versions utilize Eri silk and various blends of cotton and art silk. The process is entirely manual, utilizing the **throw-shuttle handloom** or the sophisticated **fly-shuttle loom**. This slow, manual process ensures high thread count, unique texture, and a durability that machine-made textiles cannot replicate.

4.3 Motifs as Cultural Narratives

The defining feature of the Mekhala Chaddor is the use of elaborate, symbolic motifs, known as Buta. These are meticulously integrated into the weave. Common motifs include:

- **Kaxol Motifs:** Inspired by birds (e.g., the Peacock or Mayur).
- **Flora Motifs:** Inspired by flowers, creepers, and the natural landscape (e.g., Kolka or Paisley).
- **Geometric and Religious Motifs:** Reflecting celestial bodies or traditional Assamese ornamentation (Japi or traditional hat).

The selection and placement of these motifs transform the garment from a simple piece of clothing into a **cultural narrative** specific to the weaver's community (Bodo, Mising, Assamese) and the occasion. The sheer artistry involved is what forms the basis of its cultural and luxury value proposition.

5. Market Analysis and Challenges in the Promotional Ecosystem

5.1 The Dual Market: Luxury Niche vs. Mass Competition

The Mekhala Chaddor operates in a dual market structure. The high-end segment, involving authentic Muga and Pat silk, is a **niche luxury market** driven by culturally conscious, affluent consumers seeking heritage and quality (often for weddings and ceremonial use). The low-end segment, primarily using art silk and cotton blends, faces brutal **mass competition** from power-loom copies and other standardized ethnic wear from across India, which offer greater volume and lower prices.

5.2 Supply Chain Limitations Affecting Market Reach

A fragmented and inefficient supply chain severely limits the industry's promotional capabilities and market reach (Christopher, 2016). Key limitations include:

- 1) **Raw Material Procurement:** Weavers often purchase silk yarn through local middlemen at fluctuating, high prices, which directly impacts the final product cost and

price competitiveness.

- 2) **Lack of Standardization and Quality Control:** The decentralized nature of weaving leads to variability in quality and standardization, making large-scale, consistent supply to national retailers or e-commerce platforms difficult.
- 3) **Inefficient Logistics:** Poor connectivity from Baksa's rural clusters to major urban distribution hubs (Guwahati) adds time and cost, making the product less responsive to fast-changing market demands.

5.3 Core Promotional Challenges (The 6 Ps of Promotion Failure)

The study identifies six primary dimensions where current promotional efforts fall short, essentially forming a barrier to market penetration:

- 1) **Product Perception (The Occasion Trap):** The Mekhala Chaddor is heavily perceived as occasion-specific attire (weddings, Bihu). This dramatically limits consumption frequency and market size, unlike a saree or salwar kameez, which are often worn daily or semi-formally.
- 2) **Pricing Sensitivity (The Value Gap):** The high labor cost associated with authentic handloom weaving necessitates a premium price. However, consumers outside the niche market are highly price-sensitive and struggle to perceive the inherent **value-for- money** over cheaper, power-loom alternatives.
- 3) **Place/Distribution (The Local Trap):** Promotion is localized (village, district fairs). There is weak integration with modern retail chains, national boutiques, or large multi- brand outlets (MBOs). The product is effectively invisible outside Assam.
- 4) **Promotion Mix Deficiency (The Analog Trap):** Over-reliance on traditional word-of- mouth and participation in government-sponsored Haats (fairs). There is a critical deficit in the use of contemporary promotional tools: professional photography, video marketing, influencer collaborations, and digital advertising.
- 5) **Branding Deficiency (The Anonymity Trap):** Most products are sold anonymously or under generic cooperative banners. There is no unified, high-equity brand identity for the Mekhala Chaddor as a product category, unlike, for example, Ikat or Khadi.
- 6) **Consumer Preference Shift:** Younger consumers, nationally and within Assam, increasingly favour convenient, westernized, or fusion apparel. The traditional, draped attire is often seen as cumbersome, contributing to declining domestic preference.

6. The Existing Support System: Government and Cooperative Societies

6.1 Government Intervention and Schemes

The Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, and the Assam State Government implement various schemes aimed at financial aid, raw material subsidy, and marketing assistance. These include:

- **Marketing Assistance & Service Extension:** Organizing national and state-level handloom fairs and providing stalls to weavers at subsidized rates.

- **Financial Support:** Loans, savings-cum-insurance schemes, and input cost subsidies for yarn.
- **Cluster Development Projects:** Focusing on infrastructural development (dyeing units, design centres) in weaving clusters like those in Baksa.

While critical for survival, the impact of these schemes on **strategic promotion and long-term market access** remains limited due to bureaucratic inertia, inadequate follow-up, and a failure to incorporate modern marketing skill-sets.

6.2 The Role and Limitations of Cooperative Societies

Weavers' Cooperative Societies are foundational to the industry, playing a crucial role in:

- **Organized Production:** Aggregating the output of individual weavers.
- **Bulk Procurement:** Sourcing raw materials more cost-effectively.
- **Limited Market Facilitation:** Acting as the primary sales channel for many weavers. However, a descriptive analysis reveals severe limitations in their capacity:
- **Lack of Professional Marketing Expertise:** Management often lacks formal training in market research, branding, and digital sales.
- **Capital Constraints:** Inability to invest in high-quality packaging, professional photography, or digital infrastructure.
- **Political Interference:** In some instances, management is non-professional and driven by non-commercial interests, undermining business efficiency.

7. A New Tactical Promotional Framework: The Hybrid Promotion Model

To overcome the challenges outlined, this study proposes a **Hybrid Promotion Model** designed to integrate cultural authenticity with modern market dynamics. This model is segmented into five mutually reinforcing tactical pillars:

7.1 Tactical Pillar 1: Strategic Brand Development and Storytelling

The core tactical shift must be the development of a strong, unified brand identity. This involves:

- **Authentication & Certification:** Establishing a geographical indication (GI) tag or a quality mark (e.g., "Handloom of Baksa – GI Certified") to distinguish authentic hand- woven Mekhala Chaddor from power-loom replicas. This justifies the premium price.
- **Emotional Positioning (Storytelling Marketing):** The promotional narrative must shift from product features (thread count, material) to the intangible value. Campaigns should focus on the weaver's story (female empowerment, preservation of a 12th- century craft), the Bodo cultural heritage, and the slow, eco-friendly nature of the production.
- **Professional Visual Language:** Investing in high-quality, culturally sensitive photography and video content that elevates the product from a commodity to a luxury art piece.

7.2 Tactical Pillar 2: Aggressive Digital Promotion and E-commerce Adoption

Digital platforms are the most potent tool for bypassing middlemen and achieving global visibility.

- **E-commerce Integration:** Cooperatives and organized weaver groups must be trained and financially supported to list on national platforms (Amazon Karigar, Flipkart Samarth) and specialized global ethical fashion portals.
- **Social Media Marketing (Visual Focus):** Utilizing platforms like Instagram and Pinterest, which are highly visual. Content should focus on styling tips (fusion wear), behind-the-scenes weaving process, and collaboration with fashion influencers and bloggers known for promoting sustainable or ethnic wear.
- **Geo-Targeting:** Running targeted digital advertisements aimed at the Assamese diaspora, cultural organizations, and specific affluent demographics in metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru, and international markets (US, UK, UAE).

7.3 Tactical Pillar 3: Product Diversification and Market Adaptation

To combat the "Occasion Trap," the product line must be adapted without compromising the core craft.

- **Fusion Wear:** Introducing lines of ready-to-wear accessories (stoles, shawls, clutches, ties) and fusion garments (jackets, contemporary tops) that utilize the traditional Mekhala Chaddor fabric and motifs. This dramatically expands the usage occasions.
- **Home Textiles:** Applying Mekhala motifs and weaving techniques to high-end home decor items (cushion covers, table runners) to access a new, high-margin consumer segment.
- **Standardized Quality Ranges:** Creating standardized, named collections with consistent quality for bulk buyers, simplifying the procurement process for national retailers.

7.4 Tactical Pillar 4: Strengthening Supply Chain and Institutional Capacity

Promotion cannot succeed without the capacity to deliver.

- **Direct Raw Material Linkages:** Establishing direct procurement links between weavers' groups and raw material suppliers (e.g., silk boards) to stabilize input costs and ensure quality control.
- **Centralized Post-Production Unit:** Establishing a common facility centre in Baksa for professional finishing, quality check, standardization, packaging, and logistics management. This professionalizes the last mile

of the supply chain.

- **Capacity Building:** Mandating and funding professional training programs for cooperative society managers in subjects like digital marketing, inventory management, cost accounting, and quality certification (as recommended by UNESCO, 2019).

7.5 Tactical Pillar 5: Designer and Corporate Collaboration (Strategic Alliances)

Strategic alliances lend credibility, visibility, and modern design sensibility.

- **Designer Partnerships:** Facilitating structured, funded collaborations with nationally recognized fashion designers. The goal is to bring the Mekhala Chaddor to national fashion week runways, integrating its motifs into contemporary high-fashion lines and creating immediate media buzz.
- **Corporate Gifting/Procurement:** Targeting major corporations for bulk orders for employee gifting or furnishing their premium office spaces. Positioning the product as a socially responsible, ethical gift choice that supports rural women.

8. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

8.1 Summary of Findings

The study confirms that the Mekhala Chaddor industry in Baksa, Assam, stands at a critical inflection point. While it possesses immense cultural capital and a dedicated, skilled workforce (primarily women), its market viability is severely hampered by fragmented supply chains, an absence of unified branding, over-reliance on traditional sales channels, and an inability to adapt to the digital economy. Existing government and cooperative structures provide a necessary, but insufficient, foundation, lacking the strategic marketing acumen required for growth.

8.2 The Proposed Solution

The adoption of the **Hybrid Promotion Model**, integrating strategic branding, aggressive digital promotion, product diversification, institutional strengthening, and strategic alliances, is not merely an optional strategy but a necessary tactical intervention. This model ensures that the promotional framework is holistic balancing the need for commercial success (modern market access) with the imperative of cultural integrity (preservation of traditional craft).

8.3 Recommendations for Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Recommendation	Actionable Steps
Government/ Policy Makers	Mandate and Fund Digital Capacity Building	Institute mandatory e-commerce and digital marketing training for all Handloom Cooperative Society managers; subsidize professional photography/videography services for clusters.
Cooperative Societies	Invest in Professional Branding	Secure GI or Quality certification; create a unified visual identity (logo, packaging) for the cluster's products; establish dedicated social media channels.
Weaver Groups	Focus on Diversification and Quality	Pilot small lines of fusion accessories; strictly enforce quality standards to ensure consistency required by large e-commerce/retail buyers.
Industry & Designers	Form Strategic, Ethical Partnerships	Enter into profit-sharing agreements with weavers for incorporating Mekhala motifs into contemporary lines; commit to promoting the 'Baksa Handloom' brand.
Development Agencies	Establish Centralized Support Infrastructure	Fund the establishment of a Common Facility Centre for standardized processing, packaging, and logistics management in the Baksa district.

The future of the Mekhala Chaddor industry in Baksa district depends on a concerted effort to shift from a passive, production-centric model to an active, consumer-centric, digitally enabled, and ethically positioned promotional strategy. This proactive approach will ensure that this magnificent cultural heritage not only survives but thrives in the competitive global marketplace.

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