



Problems of Handloom Textile Industry of Nadia and Purba Bardhaman Districts in West Bengal

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Abstract

Handloom textile of Nadia and Purba Bardhaman districts are facing many problems like, Poor socio-economic condition of weavers and disruption in occupation caused by partition of India, weak trade union movement, failure of cooperatives, problems of human resource, problem of production, marketing, lack of education, lack of supports from higher institutions, intervention of the mahajan and master weavers, absence of reliable data, ineffective policy of reservation, problem of flood etc.

Key words: handloom, problems, Nadia, Purba Bardhaman

The knocking sound of handlooms can be heard almost everywhere in Nadia and Purba Bardhaman districts. Weaving is the second field of employment, so the weaving process is no longer only in the hands of hereditary weavers. Other class of people is more or less directly or indirectly involved in the weaving process. The weaving is spreading to other areas where the expansion of other occupations has been stepped. Unlike other districts, not for part time, not even for partial livelihood, most of the weavers in these districts are full time weavers.

The handloom industry has made tremendous progress in recent times in terms of the economy of the whole country. If we go to any big clothing store, you will find a variety of products made of yarn, silk and wool. Bed sheets, towels, handkerchiefs, blankets or shawl, *shari*, costumes, curtains or carpets — everything has a wonderful combination of tradition and modernisation with the latest fashion designs and colors. The handloom weaving industry meets about 30 percent of the total textile demand of the country. But those who are associated with this industry, their conditions are not good at all. The financial condition of the weavers is deplorable. They are deprived of all the facilities that are required to run handloom.

Most of the people in this country still use local clothes and a large part of it comes from handloom weaving. But for those who are engaged in weaving, since it is not possible for them to deliver their products at all levels or to communicate directly with the buyers, they face market stagnation and fall into an artificial recession. Forever, country's market of handloom products are dominated by big merchants and *mahajan*. The ups and downs of the market, depend on their whims and fancies in control. In many cases these ups and downs are artificial. The goods that could have been sold immediately after production, as a result of the

recession created by the traders, began to accumulate in the houses of the producers. The financial crisis escalates when capital sucks. It is sold once or twice a year. Some of it was sold on credit again, and it took a year for the money to come out. As a result, the capital of the producers is strained and the looms are about to close. In that situation they are forced to sell cloth without profit or even at loss. Traders wait for this opportunity (interview of weavers and allied workers). Author has identified some areas of problems, which are impeding the development and sustainability of handloom of these districts. These are as follows:

Poor Socio-economic Condition of Weavers and Disruption in Occupation Caused by Partition of India: The age-old tradition of the handloom industry of India suffered severe oppression and setback during the British rule. Even after the independence, the concerned industry had to face the sufferings of partition of India. For example, during partition, the tradition of weaving of shari, which was shared between east and west sectors of Bengal, was extremely disturbed and the division of the state for administrative purpose proved fatal for handloom. Most of the weavers were displaced and were homeless. Even after they were able to manage shelters for themselves for survival, they were plagued with problems like unemployment, poor economic condition, crisis of migration and consequent rehabilitation in an unfamiliar environment, social alienation and cultural differences (Dogra 2012:12).

Even today, more than 65 per cent of the weavers who were surveyed by the author claim to be migrants from erstwhile East Bengal. They have carried their skills along with them and are engaged in the current production process but have failed to recognize themselves at par with the population of West Bengal. These people are mostly illiterate or are educated only up to a very basic level. Thus, the lack of unity among the weavers coupled with their ignorance of the benefits of organized production acts as major causes for the dispersed nature of the handloom industry and exploitation of the poor weavers by the wealthy master weavers and the *mahajan*. The living conditions of the weavers continue to be dismal and they are sometimes even denied of essential social infrastructure and facilities (Interview of weavers and allied workers of Shantipur, Nadia District on 12.3.2022).

Failure of Cooperatives: The cooperatives are absolutely essential tools for the sustenance and development of the handloom industrial sector. The cooperative experiment has left its own mark on the industry, succeeding in some places and failing in others. The PWCs of Nadia District, besides their limited areal extent and insufficient number of members, are suffered by many other problems such as problems of human resource, production, marketing etc.

Problem of Human Resource: The cooperatives are mainly situated in rural areas they are financially weak and thus it is not possible for them to appoint trained personnel to look after the management. They have to manage with unskilled and inefficient staff, which leads to deterioration in the quality of production and performance of the societies.

Problem of Production: Co-operatives face major production problem due to unstable and inadequate supply of raw materials. They get the least preference when it comes to raw materials supply, thus hindering the constant nature of production. These fluctuations lead to increase in the prices of the products.

Problem of Marketing: Some cooperatives are extremely weak in marketing and sales promotion. They lack the finance and the capability to undertake aggressive marketing activities, due to which they are unable to increase sales (Biswas 2003:43-45).

Lack of Education among Members: Members lack the knowledge and required education about working in co-operatives. They are unable to understand the principles and methodology of the co-operatives which affect the performance of the societies adversely.

Lack of Support from Higher Institution: The cooperatives of the study area mostly lack adequate support from the higher institutions and are unable to render much help and guidance to the primary and grass roots level organizations and the poor weavers. After the establishment of Indian Institute of Handloom Technology at Phulia, Nadia, training of handloom technology started there. The institute is for diploma and graduate degree for students. There also need the training of existing weavers for upgradation of handloom (Interview of weavers and allied workers).

Lack of Loyalty of Members and Intervention of the *Mahajan* and Master Weavers: Many cooperatives have failed mainly due to the selfish objectives of the members, who use the society for meeting their own needs rather than satisfying the objectives of the existence of such organizations. In many cases, the policies adopted by the cooperative are guided mainly by the gains of the master weavers and *mahajan*, who control the working of the societies. Illegal and unwanted political interventions also hamper the smooth working of the cooperatives. Other problems that need mention are inadequate supervision and inspection, lack of proper planning, lack of audit controls, problem of finance and so on (Nambiar 2013: 46-47).

Traders also have an oligopoly on the market for raw materials, used in the weaving industry. When the price of finished products increases due to increase in price of yarn, weavers do not get higher price at par. In order to protect the weaving industry from extinction, some government initiatives, especially in the field of co-operative weavers, have been initiated with the intention of expediting the marketing of handloom. On top of these existing primary societies are the apex societies, whose main function is to properly market the cloth produced by the primary societies. According to the basic arrangement, instead of the scarcity of working capital of PWCs, the system was running smoothly (Kumar and Ganesh 2014: 90-91).

The clothes of apex societies and some other government organizations spread all over the country. They are trying to sell through their own sales center. Attempts have also been made to create market through exhibitions, fairs, advertisements etc. But its benefits did not reach to the weaver. This is because the efforts of the apex societies are small compared to the total number of handlooms in these districts. The top societies could not only meet the needs of the co-operative sector, they were not able to buy even half of the total production of the co-operative societies. Throughout the year, these apex societies do not collect textiles in a balanced manner, depending on their needs (Nambiar 2013: 49-52).

Credit Needs and Overdependence on *Mahajans*: The current credit facilities available to the weavers are not satisfactory. The banks and similar financial institutions are less in number and have lengthy and complicated procedures of availing loans. Even those loans made available through cooperatives rarely reach the section that is in real need. The total scenario is dominated by the master weavers and the *mahajans* who also tend to control a number of cooperative societies and corner a substantial amount of institutional credit. Most of the weavers are found outside the cooperative fold engaging themselves for the master weavers and the *mahajans*. In the existing scenario, the local master weavers or the *mahajans* provide consumption loans and advances, which, over time, render the weavers totally indebted

In a class-divided society like India, the reactionary group is still active and powerful. They are also the initiator of Durga, Kali or Satyanarayana Puja Committee. They also led the procession of puja, arrange entertainment during the puja and accelerated the path of progress as a responsible leader. In this way, the hand of *Mahajani* system spread deep in the society. The profits of the moneylenders have increased many fold in comparison to current market income of the handloom workers. The amount of their property is also increasing day by day. The income tax is being levied to protect the rules - but it is on the lower middle class, it does not matter to the rich money lenders (Interview with old weavers).

As per the interview of experienced senior weavers, the problem of capital is nothing new in the handloom weaving industry. Occasionally there is a terrible recession in this industry. Textiles continue to be made but not sold in the market, or even if sold, should be much less than the actual price. The repayment of loan money was also stopped at one time. That's when the suffocation began in this industry. The big trouble is for ordinary weavers and small traders. They cannot hold the stored goods. As a result, they are forced to sell the goods at very low prices to the moneylenders who are looking for opportunities. In this situation, some people lose their capital and disappear. The problem of capital is a major problem in any industry. The weaving industry is no exception. All the big and small traders and moneylenders have to accept it as the wrong time. These loans bring in very high rates from the interest traders. These interest rates range from 3 per cent to 6 per cent per month (i.e. 36% to 62% per annum). This borrowing has to be done by mortgaging deed papers of house or other valuable assets. The amount borrowed is never more than half of the total value of the goods mortgaged. Mortgages have to be recovered by repaying the loan, including interest, when the demand returns to the market. Solvent can do it, but it is no longer possible to rescue those who are left helpless by the effects of the recession. And the moneylender is giving his share to the weaver keeping the profit of 100 per cent of his investment. Although there is a system of government loan, it is also time consuming. In this case, commercial banks and other banks have failed to provide the required capital to the weavers (Interview of weavers and allied workers).

Problem of Procurement of Yarn: Non-availability of sufficient yarn in the form of hanks has been one of the major problems of the contemporary handloom industry of the Nadia district. Though the mills are supposed to supply about 50 per cent of their total yarn production in the form of hanks to handlooms, it has always been around 20-24 per cent. In addition, there has been gross mismatch between the figures of cloth produced by the handloom sector and the hank yarn received by it. This occurs due to the marketing of power

loom cloth as handloom cloth which is very widespread and takes place with official connivance. Besides, a large amount of yarn in the 20s and 40s count is exported without taking into consideration of the requirement of the domestic market. There is a complaint among the weavers that the N.H.D.C. provides yarn to the weavers only after an advance of 25% of the total amount is provided, which, most of the weavers are incapable to afford (Basak and Paul 2016: 133-34).

The yarn business is an important factor in the flourishing of the weaving industry. Although coarse yarn is made in the state, weavers in Nadia district have to look to southern India for fine yarn. There is no difference. Sometimes the supply of yarn becomes inconsistent. Yarn is not available even with high price. The supply of all the yarn in the weaving industry is hindered by a few moneylenders. As a result, they looted profits during the yarn crisis. Though price of yarn remains same, weavers have to pay high price. The price of weaver's cloth remains same but it does not fluctuate. Despite the state government's announcement of subsidy on coarse yarn, thousands of looms that use thin yarn or fine yarn and sell it in urban areas of the country and in some cases even abroad are now shutting down.

In post-independence period many measures were taken to encourage handloom weaving industry in India. From the designation of certain areas of production to weaving, the provision of market incentives, affordable credit, etc., helped in the rapid development of the weaving industry at that time. In fact, until some time ago, weaving had a certain, peculiar pull, in which many people of different professions joined the loom in rural areas. All these are signs of the dynamism of the weaving industry. Much of these systems associated with the old economy have now changed, and the line of production between the handloom and large-scale textile industries has almost disappeared. The liberal system of discounting the sale price that has been in place for so long has generally been accompanied by a policy of reducing subsidies for handloom in general. The alternative system that is currently in place, called Market Development Assistance or MDA, is tied to the red tape. Making is difficult for ordinary weavers. On the other hand, the price of yarn has also started rising rapidly as the previous system of price control has been relaxed. That is why there is a shortage of livelihood for the weavers to keep the weaving going in the conventional system. Once the loom is closed for any reason, there is no way to weave it again. Powerful policymakers will say that no government-supported industry can survive forever. There is debate as to how arguable this argument is in the case of the handloom weaver or the artisan class in rural areas.

To get out of the crisis, the country is not emphasizing on cotton production and yarn production. Although there is a cotton development board, its benefits have not yet reached the handloom weaving industry. The government's new textile policy shows that restrictions on production at mills run by large industrialists have been lifted. The aim is to force the textile mill owners to cooperate with the loom workers for more profit. The entire eastern part of the country is suffering because cotton or yarn does not come under the tariff equation. In addition, the government's 'cotton exports' and the rise in yarn prices and supply in the region are creating a crisis. Not only this, the price of yarn is also increasing three to five times. In such a situation, some *mahajans* are trying to make huge profits. A class of moneylenders and yarn traders of Shantipur, are making cloth of raw dye and less quantity of yarn and releasing it in the market for several

years, for which the reputation of Shantipuri cloth is being tarnished. At the same time, the market of Shantipuri cloth is also shrinking.

Failure of the Marketing Organisations: There is a significant mismatch between production and marketing of handloom cloth in Nadia and Purba Bardhaman districts. The decline of local markets for handlooms is a reality in present time. The separation of producers from the market has given rise to middlemen who dominate the existing marketing system. They know the market well and thus are able to make maximum profits out of handloom products.

The centralized marketing bodies of weaver cooperatives are also malfunctioning. In spite of constant efforts from the state and the central government, the marketing organizations have failed badly to attain their goals. Many of the organizations like *Bangasree* and *Manjusha* are running on loss and the outlets are closing down. *Tantuja* and *Tantusree* are performing better in comparison to others. They are also plagued with various problems like absence of proper planning, ineffective budgeting and financial crisis. Other problems include indiscriminate procurement of non-moving stock, overstuffing and shutting down of outlets, limited sales in festive season, ineffective marketing and poor sales performance. Money is used on canvassing, rebates and putting up stalls at handloom fairs. Sometimes the products are outdated and overpriced. Some products are plagued with rural bias. There is also little access to modern designs and technical inputs (Poddar 2015: 132).

Most of the *shari* merchants have trade in yarn at Bara Bazar. They pay a part of the price of the *shari* by paying yarn compulsorily, while the rest are paid in cash. There are various excuses (donations, subscriptions, commission, etc.) to deduct money. Despite the reluctance of the traders to accept all that, otherwise the Shari traders and finished weavers will lose the opportunity to sell the products. Recently, the big merchants have made another trick, deducting commission at the rate of two per cent for the whole year before Durga Pujo. They have introduced the practice of deducting commissions while paying off debts for the whole year before Pujo and the Shari traders are being forced to accept it. In the case of general business, there is a practice called 'cash discount' (Basak 1404 bangabda). If it is bought in cash, the buyer is given an additional commission or discount. But the merchants of the Bara Bazar can't call this discount a cash discount, because they never buy in cash. They buy in credit and repay once in a year, even in half yarn, half in cash. Even if the commission goes out of the pockets of the traders initially, it is later recovered from wages of the weavers. In other words, the stealing that is being carried out in the name of the commission in the Bara Bazar are cutting from the wages of poor, ordinary weavers (interview of shari traders at Shantipur).

Problems of climate and flood: The name of the district Nadia is derived from the Bengali word nadi, means river. Nadia is surrounded by many rivers. The district's topography is low. So flood is a common feature in the district. The main problem is that generally flood occurs between August to October months, just before or during *Durga Puja*, when the demand of handloom is highest. During monsoon production also hamper. Common weavers do not have the capacity to store products of summer, winter, autumn. Mahajans take these opportunities and collect product in dry seasons with low price and sell them during peak seasons. Nabadwip, Shantipur, Ranaghat are old localities and very congested. Drainage system is not there in all

areas. Even during monsoon water of river come through drain in many areas, instead of passing through drains. The paddles of loom are situated beneath the floor, if water come there from the surrounding, production becomes stand still. Most of the weavers live in narrow bi lens, so they are unable to make their home high poring soil there with tractors. Price of per tractor soil is around Rs 2000 now a days.

As part of natural calamities, floods are affecting the weaving industry of Nadia and its adjoining Purba Bardhaman districts in various ways. Almost every year more or less floods inundate looms of Ranaghat, Phulia, Shantipur and Navadwip areas. The floods destroyed the traditional weaving and pottery industries in the district. Weavers try to quickly lift the *natas* filled with *tana* from the looms during flood to save them from the water. During the catastrophic flood in the year 2000 almost all loom of these districts sank under flood water. Weavers have resorted to money lenders to resume the weaving process.

Competition From the Powerloom Sector: Despite all regulations, there is a phenomenal growth in the number of powerlooms especially in the last three decades. Powerlooms are also decreasing after the spread of COVID 19 pandemic. In addition to the new powerlooms, in many instances, handlooms are being converted to powerlooms to gain immediate benefits. These are easy to operate and do not require particular skills of weaving. Their production capacity is more than the handlooms and the technology is not labour intensive. Thus, the conversions sometimes render the weavers, especially the hired weavers, jobless. The typical handloom designs are easily replicated by the powerlooms and the products are then sold in the market at lesser price. The common people fail to realize the differences in between the two products and prefer the cheaper cloths. The demand and sale of the handloom products are thus adversely affected and the poor weavers suffer the consequences more.

Unorganized Sale of Products with Limited Export Activities: Except for the weavers under the cooperative fold, majority of them are uneducated and poor. They work as hired labourers for the master weavers and are only paid limited wages for their products. They have no control over the sales. The main market for the products of the handloom industry of Nadia district is Bara Bazar in Kolkata, from where, the products are sent to other national and even international market. *This* market is mainly dominated by the master weavers and *mahajans*. The small scale weavers sell their products at the local *haat* at a very cheap rate and are thus unable to realize more profits which are otherwise available in the urban centers. Some sell from their homes while a few have their own shops and others sell their products to the local shops instead of direct selling to wholesale market. In all these instances, prices are again comparatively low. These unorganized weavers fail to channel their products to proper markets and collect high profits. Not only that, most of them, to meet immediate financial crisis and clear debts of *mahajans*, sell their products to the latter even at losses in dry seasons.

Contrary to this, the cooperative societies support export activities. They have proper infrastructure support, trained weavers, stable financial conditions and constant export orders from other states and abroad. The cooperatives are run by educated people and the poor illiterate weavers are unable to participate in this profitable affair.

Problems for Commercialization of Electric Connection of Weavers Household: The unethical pressure of The West Bengal State Electricity Distribution Company Limited (WBSEDCL) on the weavers creates problems. Domestic electricity connection of the weavers' homes is being converted into a commercial connection under the direction of the State Electricity Authority. Despite the instructions to commercialize the power connection, long before, it was implemented from 2008-09 (interview of weavers of Phulia). In general, if the business is connected with trade or the electricity used in the work is supposed to be marked as 'commercial'. The handloom weaving industry has been a weak cottage industry since time immemorial and has never been able to stand on its own two feet after independence. They never saw the face of prosperity. It is completely unethical to try to increase the revenue of the state power sector by associating the word trade or commerce with the weaving industry. The looms belong to the moneylenders. In many cases the house in the weavers are also mortgaged to the moneylenders. If there are more than two handloom in a house, these houses are treated as commercial electric connection. It is increasing the electric bill of poor weavers many fold.

If there are five to seven people in a weaver family, there may be more than two looms. And if the family is a little bigger, 3/4 of the looms are not enough at all to support livelihood. *Tantipara* in Phulia region still has a large number of joint families. The weaving process is done with the cooperation of all the members of the house. A joint family may have 8/10 looms. Most of the weavers, however, have to depend on moneylenders for yarn and wages. Weavers cannot work without the payment of moneylenders. The entire weaving industry is run by a handful of moneylenders and a few cooperatives. In the morning and in the evening, the moneylenders are trading all that the weavers produce.

If the weaving process has to be called 'commercial', then that is a few. Moreover, most of the time weavers produce weaving cloth in daylight, not more than one or two hours at night. Due to technical reasons, it is not possible to operate the electric fan on the loom while weaving. However, in some cases the electric light has to be turned on in the loom room because some members of the family have to sleep in the loom room, the children who go to school have to study at night sitting in the loom room to save electric consumption in other room. The weaver has to stay in the loom room to guard the moneylender's belongings including yarn and weaving equipment. When the family comes home and those who come from outside as employees, they have to stay in the corner of the loom room to do the weaving work. Again, there is no such thing as a loom house. Cooking, eating, sleeping, sitting, spinning, weaving — all are done in one house, i.e. loom house.

The number of weaver families in the greater Phulia is not less than fifteen thousand. From generation to generation, weavers are forever and innocent. Later those who came to this industry from other professions, from the corner of the state, they too have become very simple people. They don't understand politics; they can't be vocal against injustice. They think that it is destiny to endure everything. But behind the identification of WBSEDCL, weavers as commercial customers are their cruel mentality. Despite the order of WBSEDCL to implement it, for fear, the lower level officials have not taken any initiative to implement it in any of the weaving industries in the state. The weavers, however, joined the mass protest against it in Nadia. Recently

with the initiation of incentive scheme for weavers, the subsidy on electric consumption has been implemented by the state government (Chakraborty 2014: 120)

Absence of Reliable Data: Most of the weavers engaged in the handloom sector of Nadia district are uneducated. They lack the knowledge of the importance of providing correct information and data when the government surveys are conducted. Sometimes they also provide incorrect information which creates misconceptions in the minds of the policy makers. Paucity of reliable data with respect to number of looms or number of weavers and related productivity is a major shortcoming of the handloom industry of the district.

Ineffective Policy of Reservation for Handloom Sector: Since independence, different types of regulations were imposed both on mills and powerlooms to protect the handloom sector from their unequal competition. Following this, in 1950, 8 items of production were reserved both for handlooms and small powerloom units. However, by 1974, almost 90% of the powerloom units were categorized as small units since they had less than 5 looms. The reservation thus, then, actually benefitted the small powerloom sector than the handlooms. To correct this, in 1985, the Handloom Reservation Act was proposed, reserving 22 items exclusively for the handloom sector. However, this could not be properly implemented till 1993 due to the legal disputes posed by the mill and the powerloom sections. To deal with such situation, the Abid Hussain Committee recommended the inclusion of the Act under the Ninth Schedule of Constitution but this was never considered till date. Following this, the Mira Seth Committee recommended the reduction of the number of reserved items from 22 to 11 and the act was then implemented. This act came into effect in 1993, but there were gross violations of reservation policy for handloom. Therefore, in spite of serious requirements, the reservation acts to protect the handloom sector were never been implemented efficiently. Infact, current reports suggest that the reservation policies are uneconomical in the era of liberalization and globalization, thus have to be phased out gradually (Poddar: 2015: 119-20).

Failure of Welfare Schemes: Numerous schemes were introduced both at the state and the central government levels. Most of them failed to perform satisfactorily. In 1993, it was attempted to provide looms to loomless weavers but it was a delayed effort. Again when the immediate concern for the weavers was the procurement of sufficient yarn for current production, policies then were directed towards setting up of CAD/CAM Centers and market complexes. There are market Complex at Srirampur Panchayat of Kalna Sub Division. Added to this multiplicity of schemes (the Deen Dayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana and the Project Package Scheme are conceptually the same) and duplication of efforts by different agencies have been a major problem for the handloom industry of the districts. No serious efforts have been made for the proper rehabilitation of the poor and the migrant weavers. The workers of this sector, when in need, fail to avail alternative jobs in related sectors.

If these problems can be addresses properly, then the traditional handloom textile industry will not only survive, but also provide employment to a larger section of population of these areas as a sustainable livelihood.

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