



Covid -19 and Handloom of West Bengal: Policy of State

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Abstract

Around 3.5 lakhs people are engaged in handloom weaving in West Bengal. Handloom of these two districts has fallen silent at a time when their activity should have been at the peak owing to upcoming *Durga Puja*. The COVID 19 outbreak has hit the sector so hard that many are now migrating to other parts of country for jobs. Free ration and 100 –days work under MNREGA has prevented starvation among weavers and their families. There need a new handloom policy in the new normal world for the survival of the sector.

Key words: *new handloom policy, West Bengal*

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Hand weaving is the primary link between agriculture and Industry. Primitive men started their first industrial activity by weaving fibbers of trees and hairs of animals for making cloth for themselves. With the time being, they learnt how to cultivate cotton or make silk for the purpose of weaving their dress materials. Hand spinning and weaving is the second important art of human civilization after agriculture. Handloom is a loom that is used to weave cloth by hand. In other word handloom is a loom where weaving is done without the use of electric or automatic machine. Perhaps **India** is the country which has maximum contribution in textile, especially in handloom textile to the world. India has the finest textile like Muslin, brightest textile like silk, cheapest textile like jute and strongest textile like ramie

Handloom weaving is a domestic industry where production is conducted mainly with the help of surplus family labour. This industry is not capital intensive one. Having been developed with the life and culture of the people of the country, Handloom weaving had enjoyed patronage of all sections of the society. Especially, the handloom weaving enjoyed the patronage of Indian ruler since early period.

Handloom is the labour intensive among all textile production systems. This is necessary to examine textile policies in general and handloom policy in particular of Central Government and State Government.

31. 45 lakhs households are engaged in handloom activities in India, according to the report of Fourth All India Handloom Census (2019-20). 3.62 lakhs handloom households increased over the last 10 years

Around 3.5 lakhs people are engaged in handloom weaving in of West Bengal. Handloom of these two districts has fallen silent at a time when their activity should have been at the peak owing to upcoming *Durga Puja*. The COVID 19 outbreak has hit the sector so hard that many are now migrating to other parts of country for jobs. Free ration and 100 –days work under MNREGA has prevented starvation among weavers and their families. There need new handloom policy in the new normal world for the survival of the sector.

COVID-19 has caused following difficulties for handloom textile industry:

The sector has experienced sudden stagnation of orders as retail store are closed due to worldwide lockdown and there is hardly chance of immediate recovery.

Cash flow is stopped like all other sectors, so buyers are unable to make payments and no sale occurring during this pandemic.

Buyers and wholesalers are not in a position to make new orders, in the handloom sector. Orders are placed at least 2 to 3 months before, as production takes some times.

Retail events like (fare , hawking) where artisans sale in cash, did not happened for last few months and may not happen for coming few months.

Market of handloom remains good during summer season, when sale is usually much, has lost in this year. . This not only creates a liquidity crisis, but also impacts their ability to invest in yarns for the coming festive season (August to November) and winter and spring season.

Indian handloom has international reputation in traditional aristocrat fashion market, but with this lockdown situation, no orders are coming from abroad. Customer's priorities may change with curtailed budget resulting crisis to the livelihood of weavers.

According to IANS report of, April 19, 2020, small artisans and producer groups do not have the financial cushioning to hold through such a crisis nor would they get credit supplies from raw material suppliers. Being part of an informal economy, artisans are also not able to access credit from banks and financial institutions. While the government provides free ration to some extent, the majority of the artisans who earn on a daily basis working for bigger weavers or traders will find it extremely difficult to feed their families and take care of any medical exigencies.

According to report of "Swarajya"- a Magazine, dated May 27, 2020 ".The handloom sector is one of the worst-hit sectors because of the lockdown. Handloom depends upon mills for their hank yarn supplies and then compete with them in the market. Since mills are under lockdown, yarn supplies came to a grinding halt, hitting the handloom sector severely. Consequently, both the master weavers (who are private operators) and Cooperative Societies have been unable to provide work to the weavers working for them since 10th March 2020. As raw materials simply disappeared from the market, the Master Weavers and cooperative societies could not provide regular work to the handloom weavers and allied workers. The shutdown of Spinning Mills and Silk Reeling Units has become a death blow to the hand-weaving industry. Handloom weavers, even before the spread of the pandemic, are leading a hand-to-mouth existence. Around 67 per cent of the weaving households are earning less than Rs 5000 per month, another 26 per cent are earning between 5001 to 10000, and only about 7 per cent of the weaving households are able to earn above 10000. The lockdown and consequent shut down have led to massive unemployment of weavers, and they were forced to borrow at exorbitant rates even for their very subsistence. Handloom products and handicraft products have a huge export market. Handloom exports in 2018-19 stood at Rs 2280.18 crores. Export markets are now closed. With the closure of both domestic and export markets and non-availability of yarn supplies, the lives of weavers become more precious than before and are likely to face severe starvation in the coming few weeks unless remedial measures are not initiated."

As per report of bengali daily news paper Bartaman, dated October 13, 2020, in the village Rahamatpur of Nadia District, 100 handloom weavers family live there. After the outbreak of Covid-19, loom is almost shutdown. In this area each house hold has two looms on an average. Weavers have engaged themselves as daily labour in half wage to run their family. On 15 October the above mentioned daily reported about the low sale of *tant Kapar Hat* situated at RMC market of Katwa town, Purba Bardhaman District. As the Train service is not in operation wholesalers and weaver from different place are not coming in this *Hat*.

Government Policy since Independence

Cotton Textile Control Order 1948

The Government of India passed the Cotton Textile Control order in 1948. The main objective was to foster the development of handloom industry and to reduce competition between handlooms and mills. It prohibits the production of certain varieties of cloth like *dhoti* with border exceeding $\frac{1}{2}$ " in width, bordered *shari*, *lungi*, *zamkhan*, *chadder*, *bed* sheet, etc in textile mills. This order has been amended many times.¹

Textile Enquiry Commission-1954:

The Government of India constituted Textile Enquiry Commission under the chairmanship of Shri Nityananda Kanungo in the year 1952. It submitted its report in 1954. This commission was to study the problems and prospects of Indian textile mills and also the decentralised handloom and powerloom sectors. This commission was of the view that there was no future for handlooms and recommended a progressive conversion of handlooms into powerlooms through organised efforts over a period of fifteen to twenty years, in order to improve the living standards of the weavers. ²

Karve Committee-1955:

Karve Committee was setup in 1955 to study the problems and prospects of village and small scale industries. The recommendations of this committee were in sharp contrasts with that of Textile Enquiry Commission. Karve Committee not only recommended deferring of any proposal for additional spinning capacity in the mill sector, in order to promote handloom sector.³

Ashok Mehta Committee- 1964:

The Ashok Mehta Committee setup in 1964, nevertheless, echoed the view of Textile Enquiry Commission (Kanungo Committee) and recommended that powerloom be allowed to acquire a paramount position in the textile economy of India. It questioned the long term viability of handlooms and argued for the removal of regulations on powerlooms. Though the Government did not accept the recommendation in total...⁴

Sivaraman Committee-1974: The Sivaraman Committee on handloom was setup to study the crisis of handloom industry. According to the report of that Committee, lack of government support for product reservations and marketing, benefited the powerloom and aggravating the crisis of handloom. The Committee mentioned that for one jobcreation in powerloom, 14 handloom weavers were losing their jobs.

Textile Policy- 1978:

In the year 1978, The Janata Government announced 'controlled cloth scheme', it declared that the responsibility of handloom was to meet additional requirement of cloth arising out of increasing population and improvement in per capita consumption.

Textile Policy- 1981:

The Textile Policy of 1981 wanted to regulate the fresh expansion of capacity of powerloom in order to promote the development of handlooms. This policy also emphasised on the need for the revival of dormant looms as well as sustained modernization of handlooms. 5

National Textile Policy- 1985:

The most important and compact textile policy of independent India was the National Textile Policy of 1985.

Some important recommendations of this policy were as follows:

- Development of handlooms through co-operatives and cooperation to be intensified;
- Special effort to ensure the availability of yarn and other raw materials through the operations of National Handlooms Development Corporation(NHDC);
- Protection of handloom sector under the Handloom Reservation Act;
- Removal of cost handicap of handlooms vis-a vis powerloom products through sustainable fiscal measures;
- To improve the marketing of handloom products, strengthening the infrastructure of marketing complex, organising the training of marketing personnel and intensive publicity;
- To strengthen the database and better planning in the handloom sector a census of handlooms has to be undertaken;
- Welfare schemes for handloom weavers such as a contributory Thrift Fund scheme and work shed cum Housing scheme have to be introduced;
- The entire production of control cloth has to be transferred to the handloom sector. 6

Dr. Abid Hussain Committee-1990:

A number of recommendations were made by the committee to tone up the textile sector as a whole. These were as follows:

- Focus on the weaver rather than looms.
- Area based promotion to enhance weavers' earnings and productivity.
- Search for new organizational forms for target oriented handlooms
- Stepped up plan provision for handloom promotion. 7

National Textile Policy- 2000:

In view of changed scenario in 1990s decade occurring due to globalization and to formulate a new textile policy for the millennium, the Government of India appointed a committee in 1999 under the chairmanship of S. Satyam. Based on the recommendations of Satyam Committee New Textile Policy was announced in the year 2000. The main thrust of this policy was to make the textile industry globally competitive.⁸

The various provisions of the policy were as follows:

- Giving thrust on the availability, productivity quality of raw materials like cotton, silk, wool and jute at reasonable price for the industry.
- Establishing textile/ apparel parks with necessary infrastructural facilities with the financial institutions and the private sector.
- Continuing to accord priority to the handloom sector to develop its exclusiveness for the global markets.
- Training to upgrade skills in the handloom sector and introducing welfare and social security measures for better working environment and better security to weavers.
- According priority to technical textiles by taking into consideration the growing prospects in world markets. 9

.Latest welfare policies taken by the Government of India are as follows:

- National Handloom Development Programmed (NHDP) for providing financial assistance;
- Comprehensive Handloom Cluster Development Scheme (CHCDS);
- Handloom Weavers Comprehensive Welfare Scheme (HWCWS);
- Yarn supply Scheme (YSS);
- Setting up of CFCs at block / municipality level;
- Concessional credit under weaver's MUDRA scheme :

- Introduction of Indian Handloom Brand to enhance market demand.

According to 4th census majority of handloom weavers are not aware of various government schemes introduced for them.

Policy Recommendations after Covid- 19

The 1985 textile policy shifted the Burden of producing Janata cloth entirely to handloom.

Extending loans to the handloom weavers under MUDRA scheme at 3 per cent rate of interest through commercial and rural banks providing the necessary amounts for members of co-operatives towards their share capital contribution so that they become eligible for utilizing funds under NABARD Refinance Scheme will help the sector overcome its working capital requirement.

The co-operative at the village level and the apex level, are burdened with unsold stock of finished garments. There is no other way except to procure accumulated stocks from the cooperatives as well as registered master weavers and NGOs to rescue the sector.

The tax burden on the handloom sector at present is heavy. The weavers are paying GST on yarn, dyes, chemicals, and the consumer on finished products. Providing tax relief and fiscal concession are the need of the hour to overcome the biggest ever slump in the aggregate demand.

Tata Institute of Social Science has made provisions for weavers to seal their products online directly to customers.

As per report of Ananda Bazar Patrika (a Bengali daily) dated October 10, 2020, weavers of Shantipur, Nadia District, are struggling to keep pace with the huge demands of shari at the last moment prior to Durga Puja and mahajans are making profit out of the stock they made during lockdown, when they bought saris in much lower price from bounded weavers. Government should take note of the situation to stop the unholy practice of mahajans and save weavers from oppression and deprivations of mahajans.

According to the report of Bartaman news paper of 9th October 2020, West Bengal Government has applied for Geographical Indication of Taingail, Karial, and Garad shari of West Bengal. The Government has already applied for Geographical Indication of Maslin Shari earlier and logo of Shantipuri shari.

Tantuja, a West Bengal Government undertaking, has purchased handloom products from weavers of Nadia and Purba Bardhaman during lock down. Tantuja organized camps at Shantipur, Fulia, Samudragarh, Dhartigram. . These kind of new policies are necessary for the revival and survival of handloom sector.

End Notes:

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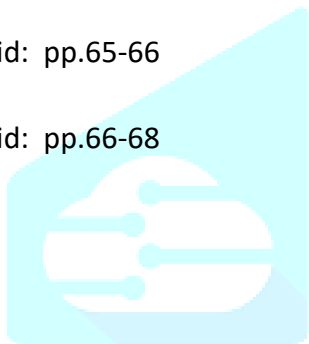
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