



The handloom weavers of Varanasi: A study on their opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

The study conducted in Varanasi, examines the opportunities and challenges of handloom weavers in today's rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. Additionally, it examines the socio-economic conditions of the weavers, including their income, working conditions, and social status. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the handloom weaving industry in Varanasi and provide insights into the broader challenges faced by traditional weavers in a globalized economy. The research highlights the need for holistic support systems that encompass skill development, market access, financial assistance, and cultural preservation. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, government and stakeholders can ensure the sustainability and preservation of the handloom weaving heritage in Varanasi.

Keywords: Weavers, handloom, powerloom

INTRODUCTION

The largest unorganized economic activity in India is the handloom industry. The handloom industry has a long history of high-quality craftsmanship that showcases Indian culture. India's loom weavers are recognized around the world for their hand spinning and weaving skills. The weavers have their bases in rural areas where knowledge is passed down from one generation to the next. Weaving, traditionally a caste based, labour intensive occupation was done on hand looms. The term "handloom" describes a way of living and thinking. The weavers have simple mindset. The process for making handloom fabric is simple, but the finished product is extraordinary. The handloom industry is the country's largest cottage industry, with 23.77 lakh looms (Vijaykumar & Rejitha, 2023). With almost 3 million people employed in related and direct operations, it is also the second-largest employer in the rural area (<https://www.indiantradeportal.in/vs.jsp?lang=0&id=0,31,24100,24112>). India's handloom industry benefits from being less capital-intensive, environmentally friendly, using less power, and being able to adjust to changing market conditions. A total of 3,522,512 handloom workers are employed nationwide, according to the handloom census 2019–20, women make up most of the workforce in this sector, accounting for 72.29% of all handloom employees (Ministry of Textiles, GOI, March 2022).

Varanasi, a pilgrimage for the Hindus, is famous for its handloom products- Benarasi sharees Zari brocades, Tanchui, Munga, and other silk items. The demand for products made from banarasi silk is rising steadily around the world and is particularly well known in India. After agriculture, the textile industry was crucial to the economy of Uttar Pradesh. Both the textile industry itself and its supporting manufacturing facilities offer plenty of job possibilities. The state's development can be greatly aided by the labour-intensive textile sector. Uttar Pradesh supplies trained, semi-skilled, and unskilled labour to textile factories across the nation. The handloom items are still in high demand despite fierce competition from mill-made textiles. The fundamental foundation of hand weaving is its weavers, however they are having many issues one of it is suicides of the weavers. Researcher had the idea to thoroughly look into the current

circumstances of the handloom weavers. In the current study, an effort has been made to track the socioeconomic circumstances of handloom weavers and the difficulties they confront in the sector.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Srivastava & Bishnoi (2023) found that the handloom industry was facing a slump. Numerous weavers had taken their lives in recent years owing to a variety of issues. Weaving was the sole source of income of the respondents. According to the respondents absence of state help, competition from power loom, financial pressure, existence of middleman, were some of the problems faced by them. Most handloom weavers live below the poverty line, lacking pucca housing, nutritious food, and clothing. They would like their children to become goldsmiths or get a permanent government job.

Kalam & Babu (2023) found that though the handloom industry is significant in the development of the state's rural non-farm economy, the remuneration offered to weavers was extremely low, despite the fact that they worked for long hours—10 to 12 hours per day, 23 days per month. Incidents of suicide and starvation deaths were reported among the weaving community

Tarai (2020) conducted a study on the handloom sector in Odisha and found that the durability of handloom products was well acknowledged by the consumers. The author suggested that master weavers should be granted the status of entrepreneurs and included in MSME programmes so that they can easily access bank financing and other government incentives. The author felt that weavers should not compromise on quality, adopt new ideas, keep up with current trends, comprehend market demands, and take part in visits and fairs. The author suggested that the use of technology (where ever possible to improve the quality and quantity of production), sharing of research findings of academic and research institutions with weavers (to help them understand fashion trends, consumer interests, and other merchandising components) formation of weavers clusters, understanding the problems of the weavers and motivational sessions can help to improve the productivity of the weavers.

Paul (2022) stated that labour shortage, unfair competition with the powerloom sector, etc. are destroying the textile industry day by day.

Amaravathi & Raj (2019) found that from the 1980s to the 2010s, there has been a decline in handloom units, weavers, and related workers, as well as in loom availability, handloom exports, the export share of the overall textile and related products market, and the proportion of idle looms. The authors felt that migration of handloom workers to alternative professions, a diminished interest in handloom among the younger generation, low levels of productivity, technological obsolescence, meager income generation, inadequate manufacturing infrastructure, health issues, tough competition from the organized power loom and mill sector, deficient marketing infrastructure, a lack of export initiatives, and insufficient support from the government were the reasons behind the gloomy situation of the handloom sector.

.Singh, Kumar, Jom (2018) found that most of the weavers of Varanasi were aware of the numerous government activities. The government has made numerous efforts to improve the lot of weavers, which are evident in the shape of various programmes and interventions. Healthcare programmes reach weavers more effectively. The CHDS component dealing with marketing and export promotions has a high level of dissatisfaction (47.6%). The primary cause of this was the role of intermediaries, which prevented the weavers from using the service despite being aware of the scheme. The recently opened Trade Facilitation Center and Crafts Museum and Yarn Supply Scheme have a 66.6% popularity rating and an 80% satisfaction rating, respectively. The Trade Facilitation Center provides a forum for individuals to demonstrate their skills in front of customers and increase their profit margin. Crafts Museum and Trade Facilitation Center Initiative Despite the weavers' high degree of happiness, there is little outreach. The master weavers and wealthy individual weavers are more aware than others. Nearly 50% of the weavers are happy with how easily loans are available under the RRR scheme. The women weavers use their health cards to get the services of MGBBY and HIS. Since they believe that education is a pressing necessity, the scholarship component of this programme has been a big factor in its popularity. The most well-liked programmes are the health care plans, followed by CHDS and RRR. Infrastructure development and design input facilities received a lot of criticism, however skill and technology advancement facilities have been operating more or less well. The government was unable to send experienced designers to the weavers service centers, thus the latest, in-demand patterns were not available to the weavers, who were not happy with the design inputs. Roy & Chouhan (2017) found that the handloom weavers of Dakshin Dinajpur (West Bengal) were poor. Shortage of employment opportunities forced young weavers to migrate to other states. Weaving was primarily done by women and the elderly. Weaving used to be their primary source of income but many have switched to agriculture and other occupations to improve their quality of life. The researcher suggested the need for proper planning and implementation of government plans/programmes to ensure well being of the weavers.

Tanushree (2015) found that the handloom weavers of Varanasi have lost their famous heritage and culture. Industrialization, phasing out of handlooms by capitalist manufacturers, the development of the powerloom, rising yarn prices, poor salaries, and labour issues were some of the problems faced by the weavers. The Gaddidars or master weavers, controls the industrial chain, have wealth and influence, allowing them to exert control over both labour and the means of production. With the introduction of powerloom, handloom weavers, master weavers, and Gaddidars shifted to it. The younger generation favours powerloom to handlooms. Handloom weavers who lacked funds to install power looms faced poverty and got into debt. The downward trend of the handloom industry will increase unemployment. The author suggested that to prevent the decline of the handloom business, policymakers should recognise the significance of the handloom sector and allot the necessary money for the upliftment of handloom weavers.

METHODOLOGY**Objectives of the research**

- To study socio-economic conditions of handloom weavers.
- To understand the personal challenges faced by the weavers.
- To understand the challenges with regards to their conditions of work.

In India generating employment is the major problem. The handloom sector generates huge employment especially in rural areas. Handloom is the largest cottage industry of India second only to agriculture. Handloom products also have good export markets. In recent years i.e. in the era of liberalized economy, the handloom sector as a whole has shown sharp decline in the production. It is an alarming situation particularly for those families whose livelihoods are centered around the handloom industry. They may lose their means of subsistence and become unemployed. Moreover, it's threat to the existence of our culture heritage and traditions. These may have long lasting consequences. A study on the problems faced by the weavers can help in exploring solutions for the problems and contribute to improved productivity and increased profit for the weavers thus attracting younger generations to the industry. Grass root level studies may reveal innovative coping mechanisms which can act as inspiration to others.

The study was conducted in Bazardiha and Ayodhyapur area of Benaras. 50 male respondents from Bazardiha and 50 male respondents from Ayodhyapur took part in the study. The researchers used snowball sampling to reach 100 (hundred) respondents. Interview schedules were used for data collection. The researchers used MS Excel and MS Word for data analysis. The researchers made sure that the respondents were fully aware of the purpose of the study. Participation was voluntary. Respondents were assured that their identity would remain confidential. The researchers have presented the acquired data as accurately as possible. The study was conducted in a limited geographical area, on a small number of respondents. The results of the study cannot be generalized.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic profile of the respondents. In terms of age it was found that 14% of the respondents were in the age group of 21-30 years, 17% were between 31-40 years, 20% were in the age group of 41-50 years, 31% were in the age group of 51-60 years and 16% were above 61 years of age. 60% of the respondents had no formal schooling, 20% had primary education, 15% had secondary education, and 5% were graduates, 82% were married, 13% were unmarried and the rest 5% were widowers. 40% of the respondents were Hindu and 60% respondents were Muslims. 11% of the respondents were scheduled castes, 77% were from backward classes (OBC) and 12% belonged to the general category.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the respondents

Variables		Percentage
Age	21-30	14%
	31-40	17%
	41-50	20%
	51-60	33%
	61 and above	16%
Education	No formal education	60%
	Primary	20%
	Secondary	15%

	Graduate	5%
Marital status	Unmarried	13%
	Still married	82%
	Widower	5%
Religion	Hindu	40%
	Muslim	60%
Caste	SC	11%
	OBC	77%
	General	12%

Table 2 shows the details of work life of the respondents. 92% of the respondents choose handloom weaving as a means of livelihood because it was their family occupation and 8% choose weaving out of personal interest. 85% wove banarasi saree and 15% wove both banarasi sarees and dupattas. 7% of the respondents have been working as weavers for less than 10 years, 16% had 11-20 years of experience, 18% had 21-30 years of experience, 28% had 31-40 years of experience, 22% had 41-50 years of experience and 9% had more than 51 years of experience. 7% of the respondents worked for 8 hours a day, 28% worked for more than 8 hours and less than 10 hours, 40% worked for 10.5 hours to 12 hours, 20% worked more than 12.5 hours and 14 hours, 5% worked for more than 14.5 hours and less than 16 hours. 62% bought raw materials directly from the open market and were considered as independent weavers. 6% of the weavers got their raw materials from middleman and sold the finished product to the middleman in return for wages. 32% of the weavers bought their raw materials from both open market and middlemen. 55% of the weavers directly marketed their products, 10% the weavers marketed through middleman and 35% marketed both directly and through middlemen. The earnings of the weavers varied according to the quality of products produced by them. 67% earned between Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000, 18% earned between Rs 15,001 and Rs 20,000. 15% earned between Rs 20,001 and Rs 25,000. Respondents were asked to share the challenges faced by them as weavers. 25% of the weavers shared that they faced late payment issues, 12% faced low income during off seasons. 10% of the respondents faced problems in getting credit, 5% faced problem in getting good quality raw materials, 5% felt that rising cost of inputs was a cause of concern, 80% felt that power loom was a challenge for the handloom weavers. 15% stated that shortage of handloom mechanics was a problem. 50% said that their designs were outdated and so did not attract customers. 15% felt that high cost of finished products was also a marketing challenge for the weavers.

Table 2: Details of work life

Variables		Percentage
Reason for choosing weaving as an occupation	Family occupation	92%
	Personal choice	8%
Items produced	Benarasi sharees	85%
	Benarasi sharee and dupatta	15%
Years of work	Up to 10 years	7%
	11-20 years	16%
	21-30 years	18%
	31-40 years	28%
	41-50 years	22%
	51-60 years	9%
Hours of daily work	8 hours	7
	8.5-10 hrs	28

	10.5-12hrs	40
	12.5-14hrs	20
	14.5-16hrs	5
Source of raw materials	From open market	62
	From middle man	6
	Buys both from open market and middle man	32
Mode of marketing	Sells directly to customers	55
	Sells to middleman	10
	Sells both directly to the customer and to middleman	35
Monthly income of the respondents	Rs 10,000- Rs 15,000	67
	Rs 15,001- Rs 20,000	18
	Rs 20,001- Rs 25,000	15
Challenges faced	Late payment from middle man	25
	Low income during off season	12
	Problem in getting credit	10
	Poor quality raw materials	5
	Rising cost of inputs	5
	Challenges from power loom sector	80
	Shortage of handloom mechanics	15
	Out dated designs	50
	High cost of finished products	15
Secondary occupation if any	Yes	54%
	No	46%

Table 3 shows details of secondary occupation of the respondents. 54% of the weavers had secondary occupations to supplement their income. 19% took to agriculture, 46% worked as handloom mechanics, 35% had set up small stores. The monthly earnings from agriculture was between Rs 2000 -Rs 3,000, the earnings from the shops were between Rs 3000 and Rs 4,000. The earning of the mechanics were between Rs 6000 to Rs 8000.

Table 3: Details of secondary occupation of the respondents

Details of Secondary occupations	Frequency	Percentage	Monthly income
Agriculture	10	19%	Rs 2000-Rs 3000
Handloom repair and maintenance	25	46%	Rs 6,000-Rs8,000
Small general stores	19	35%	Rs 3000-Rs 4000
Total	54	100%	

Table 4 shows the health status of the respondents.84% of the respondents said that they faced different health issues. Among those who faced health issues, 3.5% said that they had diabetes, 14.1% had blood pressure.75.3% faced orthopedic issues and 71.8% faced eye sight issues.

Table 4 : Health problems faced by the respondents

Health problems	Frequency	Percentage
Diabetes	3	3.5%
Blood Pressure	12	14.1%
Orthopedic	64	75.3%
Eye issues	61	71.8%

Table 5 shows that 50% of the respondents enjoyed Handloom Weavers Comprehensive Welfare Scheme and 35% benefitted from Pradhan Mantri Awas Joyana.

Table 5: Government benefits received by the respondents

Name of the scheme	Frequency	Percentage
Handloom Weaver's Comprehensive Welfare Scheme	50	50%
Pradhan Mantri Aawas Yojana	35	35%

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed that there were more middle aged and elderly weavers than young weavers. This shows that the younger generation is not joining the weaving industry. 88% of the respondents belonged to disadvantaged social groups - OBCs and Scheduled Castes. The academic achievements of the respondents were poor. Such findings explain the personal challenges of the weavers. Advanced age, disadvantaged social background, poor academic achievements act as hurdles for the weavers to access/explore/accept new ideas. They may also lack initiative to change age old practices. They may not have exposure to information about government schemes for weavers. 60% of the respondents had no formal education but were engaged in the handloom sector because of the traditional skills that they had learnt from their forefathers. Family occupations still play an important role in employment generation. If the sector is strengthened with proper income generation then the problem of employment generation for a huge group can to some extent be addressed. Some graduates were found working on the handlooms. This shows that young people

with education will also join the sector if the sector gives good returns. It was revealed that respondents who didn't want to continue as weavers didn't have capital, bank support, knowhow and skills to venture into a new profession. So they continued with weaving and were unhappy with the returns from weaving. Weavers mostly produced banarasi sharees because of its high demand and some produced dupattas. Weavers were found to have huge experience, and were hard working but had low income. The low income was because many weavers bought raw materials and sold finished products to the middlemen. Such practices deprived the weavers of their profit. Long working hours, continuous sitting and working on the handloom resulted in multiple health issues for the respondents. It was found that respondents suffered from orthopedic problems, eyesight issues, diabetes, blood pressure etc. Such problems would become severe with increasing age. More than half the respondents had a secondary source of income. Respondents who had acquired some capital had put up small stores in their workplaces which supplemented their income. Some worked as agricultural workers. Some experienced handloom weavers worked as handloom mechanics. The earnings of the handloom mechanics were more than others.. Uncertainty of payments from middlemen, low income during off season, access to credit, raising cost of inputs, high cost of finished products were some of the problems faced by the weavers. The powerloom and out dated designs were reported by more than half the respondents as the biggest challenges faced by them. Weavers benefitted from Handloom Weavers Comprehensive Welfare Scheme and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. Weavers without Aadhar card, Pan Card etc couldnot benefit from the scheme.

SUGGESTIONS

Handloom is a tradition which has to be preserved and promoted. The researchers found that the biggest challenge faced by the weavers was the powerloom sector which weaves faster than the handlooms. Weaving a Banarasi sharee on handloom can take anything between 15 days to months (<https://www.deccanherald.com>) where as the powerloom can weave 2.5 sharees in 14 hours (<https://the.wire.in/labour/banarasi-saree-weavers-stagnating-income>). This increases the cost of the sharees making it beyond the buying capacity of normal customers. Prices also increase because of the middle men involved in the marketing of the sharees. Good marketing strategies and direct sale of sharees to the weavers can go a long way in solving the problem of the weavers. If the returns are good younger generation would be encouraged to join the sector. They can use new technologies for marketing and improve their returns. Special incentives should be given to the youth who want to work on handlooms.

Government (Central, state, local self-governments), the development sector along with the participation of the weavers can bring about changes in the condition of the weavers. The development sector along with panchayat /municipality can help all weavers to get their Aadhar card, PAN card etc which will help the weavers to seek government support. All government schemes/programmes for weavers (other welfare programmes like PDS, government health programmes etc) should be made known to the weavers and they should be helped to apply for such benefits. Many weavers were found to lack formal education. Adult literacy classes can help such weavers to empower themselves. Continuous support in every step can help weavers to access government benefits. This will help to improve the quality of life of the weavers. Civil society organisations can advocate for the weavers to the government to improve the condition of the weavers. Leaders can promote the use of handloom products by being consumers themselves and by advocating for the cause of the handloom weavers. Their services were in great demand and their earnings were high. Some weavers took to agricultural work. The researchers observed that majority of the respondents consumed tobacco products and other harmful products like beetle leaves (pan), cigarettes, bidis, raw tobacco, pan masala etc. Such addictions may result in health problems. According to the respondents without the addiction they would not be able to work. Research and development initiative in handloom has to be strengthened to help handloom products compete with power loom products. Introduction of computerized designs, supply of good quality yarn, provision of loans with subsidies should be made available to the poor weavers. Nationalized banks can help weavers to form self help

groups which can help weavers in getting loans at low rate of interest, procure right raw materials at the right prices and in selling their products directly to customers. Weavers can fall back on the group in case of personal, social, emotional, financial problems. Weavers should be sensitized about online business which can help them to avoid middlemen and reach out to more customers. Government should arrange training and development programs for the young, semiskilled and unskilled handloom weavers to help them improve their weaving skills which will in turn help them to improve their financial conditions. Periodic monitoring and evaluation of such training programme should be made to understand the impact of such programme. Some kind of identification of handloom products have to be made to help customers understand whether a saree is made on hand loom or powerloom. This will help customers understand why the price of some sarees are more than others and help them to make a choice of which one to buy. Special effort should also be made by the government to help weavers reach customers who would buy high priced sarees for example UP state emporiums (which have outlets throughout the country and even abroad) may help in marketing high priced handloom products. The government should organize fairs and exhibitions where handloom weavers can display and market their products. Handloom workers face unique health challenges. Government in collaboration with voluntary organisations/non-governmental organisations should arrange for medical camps and provide free medical benefits for the weavers. They should be enrolled in government health schemes of the state. Diversification of products- to explore making other things from the same material that they produce should also be thought of.

CONCLUSION

Due to the dependence of handloom on local resources, local craftsmanship, and a focus on local markets, the development of the handloom sector was once considered as a catalyst for rural development at the national level. In the early years after India's independence, this was emphasized in all national policies. The handloom industry is currently viewed as a redundant industry and a drain on the finances of the government. In general, political leadership has stopped from advocating for the community of weavers. Today the sector is facing challenges from the power loom sector and handloom weavers are facing existential crisis. The researchers found that though the market prices of banarasi saree are high, the weavers do not get the right returns. Involvement of middleman at every point deprives the weavers of their profit. They have to supplement their income from secondary sources. They also suffer from different health issues. Handloom weavers come under unorganized sector workers and lack welfare and social security provisions. As a result the younger generations do not want to continue with the traditional family occupation. The Government should take immediate steps to save the handloom industry and protect the rich cultural heritage and history of India. Every effort must be made by all the stake holders to ensure that the traditional craft do not face extinction. The importance of the Indian handloom sector for sustainable development must be acknowledged by the government.

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