



## HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN KERALA: A STUDY OF THE PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

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### Abstract

Handloom sector is a major traditional industry in Kerala. A large number of looms were in existence in Kerala from the time immemorial and even during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the factory system of handloom production existed here. This industry faces a large number of problems today in spite of a very glorious past and huge potential for employment generation as well as contributing to the GDP of the state. In this context this paper makes a critical study of the problems and challenges of this industry and offers some remedial strategies and policy options.

**Key Words:** Handloom Sector, Power Looms, Competition, Marketing Problems.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Handloom industry plays a vital role in the Indian economy. This industry helps in the creation of ample opportunities of employment especially for the labour class. It helps in earning considerable sum of foreign exchange to the country thus strengthening the national economy. The handloom industry has developed a lot over a period of time. It is spread throughout the country. Most of the handloom units are run either as sole-proprietors or else they work under master weavers (Bansal, Gaur, 2008) [8]. In respect of Kerala in particular, handloom industry carried a vital role in the state's economy because of its vast employment generation potential. A very large number of looms were located even in rural parts of Kerala. The rhythm of handloom used to be heard in every village. There were both men and women weavers for whom weaving were a way of life. In early days majority of handloom weavers followed the hereditary line. The main communities engaged in weaving were Saliyas and Devangas. Today, in spite of its vast potential and hence growth prospects, many problems and challenges haunt this sector thus seriously affecting its sustainability, particularly in the Kerala context. The looms disappear one after the other, and there is constant decline in the number of handloom workers. This sector is now dominated by the co-operative sector which holds 94 percent of the looms.

### 2. SIGNIFICANCE AND RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

The handloom industry plays a vital role in India's economy. It is one of the largest economic activities providing direct employment to over 65 lakhs persons engaged in weaving and allied activities. As a result of effective Government intervention through financial assistance and implementation of various developmental and welfare schemes, this sector has been able to withstand competition from the power loom and mill sectors. Handloom sector contributes nearly 19 percent of the total cloth produced in the country and also adds substantially to export earnings. However, handloom industry in Kerala faces a number of problems and challenges, and these are adversely affecting its continued growth and sustainability. Only by studying such issues and challenges suitable policies could be framed. This paper is an effort in this direction.

### 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

In view of the crucial significance of ensuring the sustainability of the handloom industry, various issues and challenges need to be studied. Accordingly, this study seeks to (i) study the significance of handloom industry in India, (ii) make a detailed study of the major problems and challenges of handloom industry in Kerala state, and (ii) suggest suitable remedial strategies and policy options for the healthy growth of the handloom sector in Kerala.

The study is descriptive-analytical and is based primarily on the secondary data, and also on primary data collected through interviews with the major stakeholders. The study is also exploratory as it is of ongoing nature and without presuming any ready-made solutions in hand for the anticipated issues and challenges.

### 4. PREVIOUS STUDIES AND RESEARCH GAP

The national textile policy (2000) has proposed a major policy shift for the textile industry comprising of the handlooms, power looms and mills. The significance of the handloom sector in the Indian economy is that it is the major employer next only to agriculture and it experienced severe crisis during the last decade and half. The report of the Satyam committee is crucial to the formulation of the Textile Policy, 2000. One of its principal objectives is coping with the competition in the



international market. It stated that handloom weavers need market. It suggested the government to support the weavers by devising special schemes. The committee also recommend the scrapping of the Reservation Act and Hank Yarn Obligation which despite their ineffective implementation. These legal measures were meant to protect the interests of the handloom weavers. (K. Srinivasulu, 2010) [1]. The handloom weavers are classified on the basis of organization of production into cooperative, master-weaver and independent weaver segments. It is a well-accepted method to analyze the internal differentiation in the handloom sector and to appreciate the problems of the weavers therein. Deviating from this, the report differentiates the weavers into three tiers on the basis of the 'quality' of cloth produced. In the first tier are group of weavers producing unique, exclusive, high value added items. In the second tier producers of medium priced fabrics and made up articles from not-so-fine counts of yarn and in the third tier those producing plains and low cost textile items. The committee had not been made any attempt to estimate the proportion of weavers in each tier either in terms of production of fabric or the volume of employment. For this the committee acknowledges that there is a poor and inadequate database on handlooms and it has not deterred it from making far-reaching recommendations. One of the major assumptions of the committee is that the weavers in the third tier are not only unskilled but also ones who produce cloth that has no market demand. On this basis, the committee recommended to shift the weavers of the third tier to other tiers of handlooms, power looms and other occupations. It is requested that the Government should take steps in the above direction and provide the weavers with semi-automatic looms and requisite training. (K. Srinivasulu, 2010) [1].

Dr. Manoj P K and Rajesh S (2013) [2] have studied the quality of work life (QWL) and such other variables relating to industrial relations scenario in textile units in Kannur district of North Kerala. Suggestions for improving the QWL are made based on the findings of the study. In another study by the same authors Dr. Manoj P K and Rajesh S (2015) [3] the case of unorganized sector workers in the textile industry in northern Kerala has been studied in detail with a focus on the challenges to industrial relations. The need for putting in place more stringent legislations for ensuring the welfare of the informal (unorganized) sector employees in textile and other sectors for bringing in cordial industrial relations has been highlighted in this paper. In yet another study by the above authors Dr. Manoj P K and Rajesh S (2015) [4] the work life in respect of women employees and their job satisfaction have been studied, with reference to textile units in Malabar region (Northern part) of Kerala. Accordingly 300 workers in various units in the unorganized sector were studied. Kannur district of North Kerala. Issues relating to social security, legal protection etc. of women workers of textile units were covered in this study. Suggestions for improving the QWL are made based on the findings of the study.

In spite of a number of studies on textile sector in India and also various macro level studies and reports on the handloom sector, studies that focus on handloom industry in Kerala are rather scarce. Still scarce are the studies on problems and challenges faced by handloom sector in Kerala. Hence this paper seeks to focus on the above research gap by studying the problems and challenges of handloom industry in Kerala with a view to frame suitable remedial strategies.

## 5. HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN INDIA

Handloom industry is unparalleled in its flexibility and versatility, permitting experimentation and encouraging innovations. The strength of Handloom lies in the introducing innovative designs, which cannot be replicated by the Power loom sector. Thus, Handloom forms a part of the heritage of India and exemplifies the richness and diversity of our country and the artistry of the weavers. Handloom production has significant contribution to the National GDP and export earnings. According to the Ministry of Textiles, export earnings as late as 1998-99 was Rs. 1,956 crore. Current figures are also estimated to be around the same figure. The handloom sector provides employment to an estimated 12.5 million people and is the largest rural employment provider next to agriculture – generating jobs in semi-urban and urban areas of India as well. According to surveys conducted by various research institutions over the recent past, the country has more than 38,00,000 handlooms. In north-eastern States, there are more than 15,00,000 domestic handlooms. Handlooms in north and south India are geared for commercial production for domestic market and also exporting their products abroad.(AMS, 2006-07) [7].

The handloom sector had a remarkable change in the nature and structure of production, technology and marketing since the late 1960s in response to the change in the textile production and marketing according to the regional and local specificities. Equally important changes have occurred in the social life of the weaver communities shaping their survival responses. The factor that contributed to this change is the growth of power looms which recorded an unprecedented increase from 1.5 lakh in 1963 to 3.09 lakh in 1975. The direct impact of the power loom growth on the handlooms is that the addition of the power loom resulted in the displacement of six handlooms. Its impact could clearly be seen in the gradual and visible displacement of weavers, decline of their economic well-being and loss of their independence in the production process. It is necessary to



examine the changes in the organizational structure and the relations of production in the handloom industry to appreciate this process. On the basis of this the handloom sector can be divided into (a) Independent Weaver, (b) Co-operative, and (c) Master-weaver sectors. Independent weavers are those who carry on production of cloth on their own, i.e., own the instruments of production, purchase raw materials from the market and produce fabric with family labour and sell the products in the local market or to traders.

## 6. PROBLEMS OF HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN INDIA

With the growth of power loom sector since the sixties, and the low priced power loom products penetrating the market, especially in the country side, the handlooms had to face cut throat competition from the former. Again the rising prices of cotton hank yarn and dyes made the handlooms vulnerable. This was mostly affected by the independent weavers and small master-weavers-cum-traders owning few looms and employing wage labourers. The displacement of the independent weavers led to growth of the major urban power loom and handloom centers under the master-weavers: with men weavers migrating to them and women weavers shifting to beedi making. In urban areas where alternative employment opportunities are relatively better, young weavers taking up job of shop assistants, shifting to construction works etc., as the skilled handloom weaving is found to be less attractive due to low wages and continual insecurity.

The handloom co-operatives are a major segment accounting for a large proportion of weavers, next to the master-weaver segment. The entry of vested interests and their increasing use as channels of political ascendancy by the community elite drifted the handloom co-operatives away from their true purpose. Further, the increasing political and governmental interference, development of bureaucratic tendencies and corruption hampered their autonomous functioning. Again, the ineffectiveness of the co-operatives in ensuring regular supply of the raw materials and the inordinate delay in the payment of wages, has forced the average weaver to prefer to work for the master-weaver. As a consequence of this, a number of co-operatives, which once had successful record, have been rendered non-functional. Some of the bogus co-operatives, floated by influential master-weavers/local politicians and also the power loom owners to corner the public funds and marketing facilities extended by the state apex handloom co-operative bodies, have not only robbed the genuine co-operatives of their due share but also contributed to the credibility crisis of the co-operatives movement. (Srinivasulu, 2010) [1].

In the master-weaver system, master-weaver produces cloth by employing wage labour. He markets the product either directly or sells it to traders. Two types of production practices can be seen under this system. (i) Put-out system, the weaver works at his home on his own loom using the raw materials supplied by the master weaver for a piece-wise wage. The entire family of the weaver is involved in the production process – with the adult members engaged in weaving and the aged and children helping in the preparation of accessories. (ii) In the Kharkhana system, the weavers work on the looms provided by master weaver under one roof.

Critical to the crisis in the handloom industry has been the rise in the prices of yarn and dyes. The fluctuating nature of prices of yarn imposed great hardship on handloom weavers. The trade liberalization initiated as part of economic reforms had made the problem bigger by allowing exports. The master-weavers disinclined to continue production, thus finding them out of work, the weavers were pushed into starvation and suicides.(Srinivasulu, 2010) [1].

The loom-lessness and loom idleness are two aspects of the displacement and marginalization of handloom weavers. When a weaver displaced from work leaves his native village he becomes loom less and his loom back at home idle. The migrant weaver working on the loom provided by the master-weaver does not need loom as much as he needs yarn at reasonable process to continue to be employed. The priority of productivity, efficiency and competition are seen to be lacking in handlooms as against employment. Employment seen as the only consideration for the support to handlooms.

The strength of the handlooms lies in its ability to commercially produce the goods in small volumes, quick switchover to new designs and creation of exquisite designs which cannot be made on the power looms. For this the government has to support to develop new designs, new fabrics and new products having market acceptance and commercial viability, which may not be easily replicated on power looms. (GOI, 1996, 39). On the basis of this, the Mira Seth report recommended an export growth strategy for the handloom survival.

For more than five decades, the poor handloom weavers remained spoon-fed through Government Schemes and they continue to look up the Government for anything and everything. Only the upper crust of the weaver community could attempt to survive the ensuing competition, while the bulk of the weavers have to simply give up their occupation. The



handloom sector presents a quite complex picture of diversity. The strength of the handlooms has been the regional specificity and specialty of their products determined by the historically inherited community skills, techniques and designs and tuned to the local traditions, cultural practices and community needs. Ignoring this reality, if the fashionable prescription of the official policy makers to the handlooms to go 'global' were to be accepted and followed, the end to the handlooms weavers would not be very far away. The future of the handlooms depends on the organized struggles of the weavers against the anti-handloom policy dispensation of the rulers. (Srinivasulu,2010) [1].

**Financial Crisis:** Majority of the handloom units have limited financial resources to spare to put even simple marketing concepts into practice. Many of them are faced with multiplicity of problems. If improvements are provided to their current problems and sincere efforts are made to change the marketing culture in which they are operating, can enable the handloom market to increase the sale of their products and thus increase the overall market demand for their products which will result in an increase in their market share.

Problems in marketing and non-availability of raw materials. The steep rise in cotton yarn prices without a corresponding increase in handloom product prices made the production of handloom suspended in some places, destroying the livelihood of handloom weavers and laying off handloom wage workers. (NHDC, 2006-07) [7].

Stiff competition from power looms. Addition of one power loom resulted in the displacement of six handlooms. The result of the power loom proliferation makes the gradual and visible displacement of the weavers, decline of their economic well-being and loss of their independence in the production process. (Sankaran, 2009) [6]. Today powerlooms dominate textile production in India and have encroached upon the handloom sector's traditional market. Many handloom weavers do not have enough raw materials and it is because the raw material is being diverted to power looms. (AMS, 2006-07) [7].

Non-availability of skilled and specially trained labourers. Organize skill development training programme for poor handloom weavers. Skill training, subsidy loans etc is already given by government. What is needed is to give a country wide movement. Low living style and suicides of handloom weavers due to the entry of foreign companies and their prominence against handloom resulted in low wage rates for handloom weavers.

The Indian handloom is associated with the country's freedom struggle. Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his first radio message urged every Indian to use something made of Khadi – a bedspread or a handkerchief, own a piece of Khadi and it will be a benefit for the poor.

The handloom sector in India is a significant employer across the country. As per Census 2009-10, it employed 43.3 lakh weavers and ancillary workers. Handlooms that account for nearly 11 per cent of fabric production in India contributed Rs. 2812 crore to exports in 2012-13. According to the Labour Ministry of India's quarterly surveys India's textile industry created the highest number of jobs, even more than IT in the first quarter of this fiscal year. Despite the figures, the sector seems to be festering. The number of people it employed dipped by 21 lakh since 1995-96.

According to the Third Handloom Census of India, only 25 per cent of weaver households report that their children are interested in taking up handloom as a profession. Handloom industry, in spite of a large employer in rural India, comprised of a workforce of 77 per cent women, the sector has largely remained poor and lacking in basic facilities for a vast majority among the weaver population.

A common problem in the industry is the difficulty in acquisition of yarn. Currently, the National Development Corporation meets nearly 15 per cent of the yarn requirement of the handloom sector. In many areas, weavers have little or no access to yarn. How weaving works compounds the issue. The master weaver act as middlemen providing yarn, work and pay for others. So democratic access to yarn, dyeing facilities etc are usually not available to everyone.

The Planning Commission recommends common facilitation centers that can be used democratically by any weaver for a small fee. Chanderi weaving cluster in Madhya Pradesh is an example for this model. It has as many as 35000 handlooms and a majority of the weavers working as wage earners. Yarn and dyeing depots were set up for any weaver to use at a nominal fee. About 80 per cent of the weavers work with master weavers and they lack direct access to credit facilities. Nearly 47 per cent of handloom worker households own Below Poverty Line (BPL) ration cards. The NDA government has promised to revive the sector and the UPA-led government also had large welfare schemes for the community. It waived off loans worth



Rs.3,884 crore. It also included a special Rs. 2,350 crore scheme for weaver's credit cards, 3 per cent interest subsidy, margin money assistance (Rs. 4,200-5,400), credit guarantee, 10 per cent subsidy on yarn and transportation subsidy (between 2.5 and 10 per cent). But it is alleged that still the benefits are yet to reach to all the weavers and such benefits utilized by only a few.

Weavers also lack basic entitlements such as healthcare. The nature of weaving – which involves repetitive movement is linked to occupational health hazards. Body pain, pulmonary problems, chronic bronchitis, decrease in hand-grip and eye problems are common. Currently handloom welfare schemes provide life/health insurance. In a detailed evaluation of this insurance scheme seen that weavers don't trust the doctors and clinics empanelled with ICICI Lombard, the implementing agency for the health insurance scheme, primarily due to issues with reimbursement of claims. Only 67 per cent weavers who availed in-patient hospital services, claimed reimbursement due to their view that ICICI Lombard is a company did not settle reimbursement claims. This problem is severe in rural areas.

Due to the above issues, the Ministry of Textiles has accepted the proposal to bring the scheme under the Rashtriya Swasthya BimaYojana and the merger is expected to be completed by the next financial year. By doing so it expects the operational mechanism of the scheme should ensure proper reach of the implementing insurance company, enabling the enrolled weaver's families to get cashless OPD/IPD facilities close to, if not at their door step.

Marketing of handlooms requires urgent attention. Handloom products must be branded and marketed to niche markets, to clients who appreciate the value of hand made products and are willing to pay for them. Sustainability can't be achieved by providing greater quantities at cheaper prices. The handloom sector can also reach out to its customers through marketing its products online through e-commerce. Most resources on the web that promote handlooms are information heavy and rather than facilitating online sales. Tapping the potential of e-commerce to get bulk orders can help improve sales tremendously. Steering Committee on Handloom and Handicrafts recommended to bring together Handlooms, Handicrafts and Khadi and Village Industries under a single label 'Handmade in India'.

Another issue of marketing of handloom is design and its suitability to current trends and consumer orientation. Handloom weavers need a greater design support through workshops and recognition of their role as designers and innovators. Marketing support and design innovations supported by appropriate technology are the central pillars in solving all the issues ailing the sector in general. The handloom industry is a traditional industry of Kerala. Now a day the handloom sector faces many problems.

Finance is the key to all human activities. One of the important financial problem is irregular payment of dues of the products supplied. Lack of rebate assistance to weaving accessories and charging of high interest rate by financial institutions are other financial problems. Another major problem faced is lack of assistance from the government in the form of subsidies to purchase weaving accessories. The banks are not ready to pay loan to the handloom sectors. Some scheduled banks are giving loans by charging high rates of interest.

Competition from power looms is a chronic problem. The power looms, by nature of their organization for production are able to offer products at a lower price. It is possible due to the difference in technology. Power loom production requires less number of labourers and less time. Most of the people prefer power loom products due to its low price which in turn affect the demand for the handloom products.

## **7. HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN KERALA AND ITS PROBLEMS**

The handloom sector in Kerala employs about 1.75 lakh of people directly and indirectly and this stands second to the coir sector in providing employment among the traditional industries of the state. The handloom industry in the state is concentrated in Thiruvananthapuram, Kannur, Kozhikode, Palakkad, Ernakulam, Thrissur, Kollam and Kasargode Districts. The Kerala Kasavusarees are praised by women all over India for their fineness of count and natural colours, texture and golden borders. Kerala is also known for the manufacture of cotton handloom fabrics in Kannur, Vadagara and Kozhikode and has captured an export market. Balaramapuram in Thiruvananthapuram district is the most historically important and one of the oldest handloom centers in Kerala. The weavers belonging to Chaliyas community migrated from Nagarcoil and Thirunelveli in Tamilnadu during the period of Balaramavarma, ruler of Travancore about 250 years back. Kuthampully in Thrissur District is also well known for handloom fabrics. In Kuthampully Devangas migrated from Karnataka are engaged in weaving. It is believed that this community of traditional weavers were brought by the Kochi Royal family about 500 years



back to make dress exclusively for the palace. Chennamangalam in Ernakulam District is also an important handloom centre in Kerala. Here, the weavers are producing the Double Dhoti and Mundu and Neriyathu.

Competition from Tamilnadu handloom sector is another problem faced by the handloom sector in Kerala. This also affects the market of the Kerala handloom products. For the efficient use of all the resources the employment of a suitable human force is essential. The need for capable working force is ever increasing more and better trained employees are constantly needed in all enterprises. Manpower planning plays a vital role in the achievement of the common goals of the enterprise. One of the major problem relating to labour in the handloom sector is training to the labours. The basic requirement for the development of the industry is constant technical improvement. Due to lack of adequate and properly trained workers, the handloom sector is unable to pay constant attention to the technical improvement that makes the handloom cloth more durable and more attractive to the consumers.

Technical and management problem also affect the performance of handloom weavers society. Generally persons with no background of managerial knowledge are appointed to manage the affairs of the co-operative societies. Among the managerial problem the most important is the lack of efficient managing committee. Often retired officers from the industries department with no business ability are inducted into the society.

Some of the Kerala handloom products having geographical indication tags, and these include Chennamangalamsarees, Kuthampullysarees and Kannur sarees. These fabrics are popular among public. The fabrics are coloured with lasting quality materials certified by geographical indications registry. The weavers followed the traditional methods in the early days to produce Indian clothing like Kasavu, double dhoti, veshti and settumundu. All traditional handloom is a part of village life in Kerala. The handwork of traditional weavers is blended with contemporary concept to offer creative value addition to handloom products. Rhythm of the looms weaving together resonates in the air to remind the new generation about the glorious past this cottage industry had in the Kerala society.

#### **8. SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Like any other Industry, the handloom industry is also facing stiff competition. The competition, particularly from the power loom sector, will only increase in the days to come. In order to retain its market share and also to enter new market segments the handloom sector needs some well thought-out and clearly articulated remedial strategies, supported by conducive policy initiatives. Some such meaningful measures, derived based on the foregoing analysis are noted below:

- (i) To prepare the handloom industry, the Government has to take the initiative to re-orient its focus and activities and programmes to create a 'Data bank' in the handloom department so as to build up a reliable Information System for Market intelligence.
- (ii) It is advisable to establish functionary centres in order to collect market facts on products, total market distribution and their channels, consumers competitions, import rules and regulations, economic factors and specific market characteristics and price trends, the availability and requirements of handloom products and disseminate this information among the Weavers Co-operative Societies involved in Export business.
- (iii) The pending disbursements (like, subsidies, rebates etc.) to weavers and other workers in this industry needs to be fully paid so as to motivate them to put in their full potential.
- (iv) Cost competitiveness of this industry segment, at present, is very poor. This in turn affects the profit margins and sales of the product. Stricter measures to control cost through adoption of advanced technologies, engagement of trained and skilled staff etc.
- (v) Specialized training needs to be given to the handloom employees for the meaningful marketing of handloom products through cost-effective distribution channels.
- (vi) Government should encourage the government-owned enterprises to purchase handloom products. It should insist on government employees to wear such garments at least once in every week so as to boost the demand for such products.

Given the definite advantages of handloom products, meaningful strategies as above supported by concomitant policy initiatives by the government would yield good results. Let us hope that the handloom industry in Kerala will pick up momentum in the near future taking cue from the governmental policies, and hence attain commanding heights in the national economy.



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