

THE JOURNEY OF INDIAN HANDLOOM

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Abstract - Handloom weaving represents a rich cultural heritage and a vital source of livelihood in many regions around the world. This study explores the intricate techniques, socio-economic impacts, and cultural significance of handloom weaving in contemporary Indian society. Through a blend of ethnographic research, technical analysis, and market evaluation, the research highlights the resilience of traditional handloom practices in the face of modern industrialization. By examining case studies from various handloom communities the research addresses the challenges faced by handloom weaving in the modern era, including competition from industrial textile production, and explores efforts to preserve and revitalize this ancient craft. The study also covers the government schemes and initiatives for the welfare of handloom weavers in India.

Key Words: Handloom Weaving, loom, yarn, weavers, schemes, Textile Patterns, fabric, craft, power loom, technology

1. INTRODUCTION

India's handloom industry boasts a rich legacy of exceptional craftsmanship, showcasing the country's vibrant cultural heritage. Renowned globally for their expertise in hand spinning, weaving, and printing, Indian artisans continue to preserve traditional techniques. This household-based industry, spread across thousands of towns and villages, relies on family members working together to create unique products. Skills are passed down through generations, empowering rural and semi-urban artisans, particularly women and economically disadvantaged groups. The handloom industry contributes a relatively small portion to India's global exports. To unlock its full potential, efforts are needed to promote and channel its offerings. This study aims to highlight the cultural significance of handlooms by exploring their history, problems and current scenario of handloom industries. Tamil Nadu handloom weavers work on a variety of looms, including ordinary pit looms, pit looms with dobby and jacquard attachments, frame looms, and frame looms with dobby and jacquard. The handloom sector, however, faces major challenges in ensuring consistent employment for weavers. To address this, both the central and state governments have introduced several measures aimed at improving the livelihood and sustainability of this sector through various schemes designed to support handloom weavers.

2. HANDLOOM

A loom is a machine or device used to create woven fabric and serves as the central element in the cloth production process. In simple terms, a loom is a tool designed to weave yarn or thread into textiles. Looms come in a wide range of sizes, from large free-standing handlooms and small handheld frames to massive automated mechanical machines. The term "loom" can also refer to a wiring loom in electric line construction. The primary function of a loom is to hold the warp threads under tension, facilitating the interweaving of the weft strands.

2.1. TYPES OF HANDLOOM

2.1.1. Primitive or Vertical Loom

A primitive loom is generally by sinking the frame into the ground and the work inside the pit by both feet. The framework is of bamboo. This loom had been known to be in use in 5000 to 6000 years B.C. This loom is still used for weaving silk pieces, silk shirting, and sarees, Muslim, etc. by derivative weavers. (6)

2.1.2. Pit Loom

This loom is created by sunken four posters into the ground and with an overhang sley. The threads operate inside the pit, allowing the warp threads to absorb moisture, which leads to improved weaving quality. In this looms the combination of sley & shuttle boxes. In 1733 A.D John Kay of Bury, England invented the "Fly Shuttle". This invention was an extremely important event in the history and development of weaving.

2.1.3. Frame Loom

Frame looms almost have similar mechanisms that ground looms hold. The loom was made of rods and panels fastened at the right angles to construct a form similar to a box to make it more handy and manageable. This type of loom is being utilized even until now due to its economy and portability. (6)

2.1.4. Chittaranjan Loom

The Chittaranjan loom, also known as the Japan loom, is a semiautomatic loom of robust construction made from iron and wood. It is commonly used in Bengal.

2.1.5. Hattersley Loom

In 1856, Hattersley and Hill of Keighley, Yorkshire, designed a loom that functions similarly to a power loom, except for the movement of the sley, which can be operated either manually or by motive power to the top shaft. However, this loom is built with a lighter structure.

3. THE DOWNFALL OF HANDLOOM WEAVERS IN EARLY DAYS

By the turn of the nineteenth century, as British industrialization advanced, Indian weavers encountered two major challenges: the collapse of their export market and the decline of their local markets, which were overwhelmed by an influx of cheap, imported British goods. The decline of the Indian weaving industry began as soon as the British East India Company secured monopoly rights over Indian trade. In the pre-colonial period, Indian weavers had a prosperous industry, producing high-quality textiles such as muslin, silk, and cotton that were in great demand across Europe and Asia. Weavers had autonomy in determining their prices and enjoyed healthy competition among buyers. After the East India Company gained control, it started exploiting the weavers by

3.1. FORCED CONTRACTS

The Company imposed unfair contracts on weavers. They were often forced to sell their products exclusively to the Company at prices far below market rates.

3.2. ADVANCE PAYMENTS WITH CONDITIONS

Weavers were often provided advance payments, but in return, they were bound to supply finished products to the Company at dictated prices. If they resisted or sold to other buyers, they faced severe penalties.

3.3. MONOPOLY ON COTTON SUPPLY

The Company established control over the supply of raw cotton, creating artificial shortages or inflating prices for Indian weavers. This was especially crippling, as raw materials became unaffordable for local artisans, further pushing them into dependency on the Company.

3.4. SHIFT IN TRADE PATTERNS

As British industrialization progressed in the early 19th century, cheap, machine-made textiles from Britain were exported to India in large quantities. These products

were sold at much lower prices than hand woven Indian fabrics.

3.5. DESTRUCTION OF LOCAL MARKETS

The British systematically destroyed the local markets by flooding them with mass-produced goods, drastically reducing the demand for Indian-made textiles.

3.6. MONOPOLIZATION OF TRADE

By securing monopoly rights, the British stifled any local competition. The Indian economy was systematically drained as India became a supplier of raw materials for British industries and a consumer of British goods, leaving little room for indigenous production and markets.

3.7. ECONOMIC IMPACT

This shift had a devastating impact on the Indian economy, particularly on the livelihoods of millions of handloom weavers, who were forced into poverty or had to switch to low-paying jobs in the British factories.

4. CURRENT CHALLENGES FACED BY HANDLOOM WEAVERS OF TAMILNADU

4.1. COMPETITIONS

Handloom weavers face competition from power loom mills and other machine-made products. Power loom industries often receive subsidies, which can create unfair competition.

4.2. RAW MATERIALS

Weavers struggle to access essential raw materials such as yarn and dye, often having to travel great distances to procure them. The supply of essential raw materials like cotton, silk, and dyes was disrupted as transportation may be halted. This made it difficult for weavers to continue their production. Even when raw materials were available, the prices increased due to limited supply and higher transportation costs, further straining weavers' finances. (8)

4.3. POOR QUALITY OF YARN

In the current scenario, the handloom sector's major challenge is the lack of access to good-quality yarn at affordable prices. Most weavers come from economically disadvantaged families with limited access to markets that supply high-quality yarn.

4.4. MARKETING

Marketing plays a vital role in promoting products and services to a specific target audience. Unfortunately, the handloom industry suffers from limited visibility due to

weak marketing strategies. While expanding the market reach is necessary, government-sponsored exhibitions alone are not enough to create widespread awareness.

4.5. FINANCE

Many weavers, especially in rural areas, have limited access to formal banking and credit facilities. This forces them to rely on informal sources, such as moneylenders, who charge high interest rates, further worsening their financial condition.

4.6. CHALLENGES DURING COVID 19

The pandemic severely disrupted the handloom sector, pushing many weavers into poverty and threatening the survival of their craft. The lockdowns and restrictions led to a breakdown in the supply of raw materials such as yarn, dyes, and other essentials. Weavers could not procure these materials, halting production for long periods. With physical markets and exhibitions closed due to lockdowns, weavers lost their primary sales outlets. Many weavers, especially those from rural areas, were not familiar with online platforms, limiting their ability to sell their products during the pandemic. The economic downturn caused by the pandemic led to a significant drop in demand for handloom products, both domestically and internationally. Luxury items, including handloom textiles, were not prioritized by consumers facing financial uncertainty.

5. SOLUTIONS

5.1. COMPREHENSIVE HANDLOOM CLUSTER DEVELOPMENT SCHEME (MEGA CLUSTER SCHEME)

This scheme has been introduced to offer national and international competitive opportunities to handloom weavers' products, focusing on sustainability and reliability. It provides weavers with essential infrastructure support, technical assistance, and guidance for product diversification and design enhancement. Additionally, the scheme facilitates connections with raw material banks and offers support in marketing and promoting their products, along with various other components vital for the long-term sustenance of handloom weavers. [Ashima Anand et.al, 2022]

5.2. EASY RAW MATERIAL AVAILABILITY

In 2016, to enhance the easy and timely access to raw materials for handloom weavers, the National Handloom Development Corporation (NHDC) launched the Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system and the e-Dhaga mobile app. The ERP system facilitates faster material delivery to weavers, while the e-Dhaga app allows them to place orders and make online payments directly through the platform. Additionally, the Government of India introduced the Yarn Supply Scheme to capitalize on the employment potential of

the handloom sector, ensuring yarn availability at Mill Gate Prices for weavers [Khatoon, 2016].

5.3. YARN SUPPLY SCHEME (YSS)

Yarn Supply Scheme (YSS) Government of India is implementing Yarn Supply scheme to make available all types of yarn at Mill Gate Price to the handloom weavers. The scheme is implemented through the National Handloom Development Corporation, a Government of India Undertaking [R Ravi Kumar et.al, 2020].

5.4. GOVERNMENT E-MARKET PLACE (GeM)

The Government e-Marketplace (GeM) was launched on August 9, 2016, by the Commerce & Industry Minister. This online platform enables handloom weavers and handicraft artisans to sell their products directly to government departments and organizations. As of 2021, over 1.5 lakh weavers are registered on the GeM portal, which offers more than 7,400 products across 150 different categories [7].

5.5. TECHNOLOGICAL UP-GRADATION

The Ministry has been implementing the Technology Up-gradation Fund Scheme (TUFS) since 1999 to boost productivity, quality, investment, and employment in the textile sector. TUFS is a credit-linked initiative, providing subsidies on eligible investments through approved lending agencies. In 2012, the scheme was restructured and renamed by it called Revised Restructured Technology Up-gradation Fund Scheme (RRTUFS). Later, in 2016, the Amended Technology Up-gradation Fund Scheme (ATUFS) was introduced with updated guidelines. The scheme now covers segments such as weaving (including brand new shuttle-less looms, weaving preparatory, and knitting), processing, as well as the jute, silk, and handloom sectors.[9]

5.6. AATMA NIRBHAR BHARAT ABHIYAAN

Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan was launched by the Government of India to provide financial support to Indian artisans, businesses, and enterprises, including MSMEs, helping them recover from losses incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the initiative, the Prime Minister announced an economic package of ₹20 lakh crore aimed at making India self-reliant. The Aatma Nirbhar Bharat scheme also sought to connect textile artisans with retailers and exporters across the country through virtual platforms, bringing their products and skills to a global audience. (10)

6. RESULT

The significance of handloom is well recognised in terms of providing job opportunity and value addition to the economy. there are 1139 handloom weavers cooperative

societies in the state out of which, 1053 are cotton primary weavers cooperative societies, and 86 are primary silk weavers cooperative societies. 2.69 lakh handlooms are registered under these cooperative societies which account for around 65% of total handloom capacity of the state (11). Handloom weavers face significant challenges, including competition from power looms and synthetic fabrics, changing consumer preferences toward fast fashion, and low, unstable incomes. Many rely on middlemen, limiting their profits, and struggle with limited access to markets and technology. Rising raw material costs and poor quality further impact their earnings. Government support is often poorly implemented, and many weavers lack social security. Traditional skills are declining as younger generations move away from the craft.

Gender	Type of handloom worker	Rural	Percent	Urban	Percent	Total	Percent
Male	Weavers	73,184	70.1	31,185	29.9	1,04,369	42.8
	Allied workers	9,513	75.2	3,143	24.8	12,656	5.2
Female	Weavers	62,682	67.1	30,766	32.9	93,448	38.3
	Allied workers	24,777	74.9	8,324	25.1	33,101	13.6
Total		1,70,156	69.9	73,418	30.1	2,43,574	100.0

Figure- 1: Gender wise distribution of Total Workforce of Tamil Nadu Handloom Workers

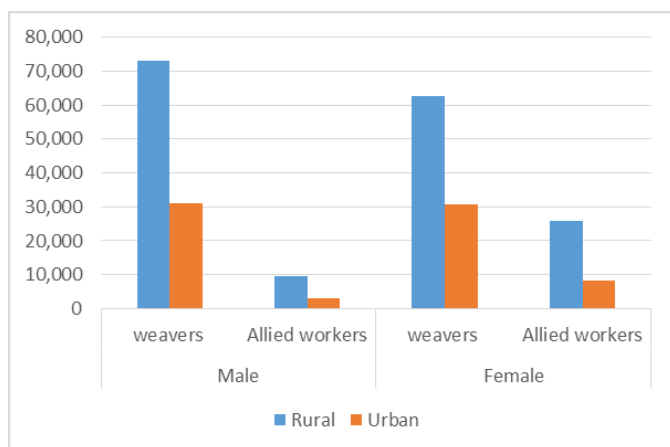


Figure – 2: Gender wise distribution of total workforce of Tamil Nadu handloom workers in the year 2019-22

7. CONCLUSION

Handloom was once a thriving cottage industry in India. In India it had royal patronage from ancient period. This sector still continues in spite of many hurdles and competition. Many weavers lack knowledge of modern techniques in production, packaging, design, and promotion. For the development and promotion of handloom industry it is the need of the economy to make a study on the topic. Further it is suggested more studies are required for

identification of the problems facing by the handloom industry related to production, finance, and marketing and to suggest the suitable measures for development and advancement of industry. As a result of effective government intervention through financial schemes, the handloom sector, to some extent as been able to tide over these problems/ constraints, if proper attention is paid for the development of this sector it may contribute significantly to the generation of income, output, employment and foreign exchange earnings.

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