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WOMEN IN HANDLOOM INDUSTRY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

Recent days, women's empowerment has become a growing concern both at the national and international levels on the subjugated, the disadvantaged and status of women in the society. In India, this concern i.e. women's empowerment has to be focused mainly in non formal sectors, where the women's work force is predominant. One among them is handloom sector. It is one of the largest economic activities, after agriculture, providing direct and indirect employment as well as being predominately a non-farm activity. It has passed on from generations to generations. With the wake of industrialization, our country's own Power loom and Khadi movement totally deteriorated the overall status of handlooms and its weavers. Mainly it burdens the life of women, a major work force in the handloom sector, compared to men. As Jawaharlal Nehru rightly remarked that "the greatest revolution in a country is the one that affect the status and living condition of its women (Sen Gupta, 1974)". Nearly 78% of handloom workers are women, of which the state of Sikkim records the lowest in number, whereas the state of Assam records the highest. Commonly illiteracy and poverty are the two major factors that doubt the elevation and livelihood of these women workers. Thus, the handloom women workers should get benefit from the current scenario; need to move up the economic status in the sector from primary levels. In a whole the purpose of this paper is to familiarize with the current status and livelihood problems of unorganized women handloom workers and also to propose the importance of social protection and security.

KEYWORDS

Skill Development, Livelihood Problems, Handloom Industry, Women weavers, Social Protection.

INTRODUCTION

Handloom sector, predominately a rural occupation, is one of the largest generators, next to agriculture in India. Nearly 23.77 Lakh handlooms provide direct and indirect employment to 43.32 lakh weavers and allied workers, of which 36.33 lakh workers stay in rural areas and 6.98 workers stay in urban areas and 38.47 lakh adult persons are engaged in weaving and allied activities in the country, out of which, 77.90% are women. 10.13% are scheduled tribes, 18.12% belongs to scheduled castes, and 45.18% OBC and 26.57% are from other castes (Handloom Census 2010).

Handloom weaving is one of the skilled professions with craftsmanship that done with utter brilliance and is passed on generations, but the followers of this tradition i.e. handloom weaving have always been the victims of a staunch hierarchical system. Being at the bottom of the system they fall prey to the extreme forms of exploitation and harassment. The British invasion and their free trade policies were further pushed them to the lowest strata of society. It was expected in independent India that the art of hand loom weaving would get redecoration and there would be a development in the status of handloom weavers. In the contrary, the socio economic conditions of handloom workers declined as it was before.

In the current scenario, the handloom workers were the poorest of lot, least respected, socially and economically deprived, living in debts and almost living like an island in the Indian society. Besides, in large parts of India, handloom weaving lost its fame and prosperity. Basically handloom weaving is men's domain but at this juncture we must acknowledge women's significant role in the handloom sector as per the handloom census 2010. Women handloom workers are one of its biggest asserts. They are the pillars and foundations of weaving community. It is splendid to utter that an ancient tradition affords large employment opportunity to women, but they are the victims of subjugation in the family as well as society. Women workers in the handloom sector are mostly illiterate and semi-literate due to low economic conditions. This resultant may brings out livelihood insecurity and social insecurity. Mainly, the women workers, who are from handloom weaving family not permitted to go and learn beyond the weaving activity and their life, identity belongings etc. come from her handloom weaving only. All these consequences doubt handloom women worker's social security, social protection and future aspirations.

WOMEN WORKERS IN THE HANDLOOM SECTOR

Mention may be made that the emergence of industrialization with the wake of industrial revolution in England had an impact in India's handloom sector. It brought out many transformations in the handlooms and it directly affects the empowerment of weaving community. Karl Marx (1853) rightly observes that: It was the British intruder who broke up the Indian handloom weaving and destroyed the spinning wheel. England began with driving the Indian cottons from the European market; it then introduced twist into Hindustan and in the end inundated the very mother country of cotton with cottons".

In fact, this transformation results that the burden is mainly on women weavers and their economy has been in turmoil. They have been subject to domestic violence and victims of violence in many places. Whenever the handloom is in crisis women have been at the receiving end of discrimination of all types, even though they have been the principal stabilization force through years of crisis and problems for the handloom sector. On the other side, transient handloom sector provides largest employment opportunity to women, who occupies a unique position and they are the torch bearers of this age old tradition. Moreover in large parts of India, women's participation as allied workers in the handloom sector is an unutterable achievement, but there is no recognition given to women's work. Third handloom census, 2010 reports that 3,846,835 women workers are the active adult workers in the sector. 1,468,453 women workers belong to Assam, 202,742 women workers are from Manipur, 169,139 workers are TamilNadu workers; Andhra Pradesh has 156,569 adult female workers, and Tripura records 130,169 women workers, etc. 1,210,851 women from India are doing weaving as their full time profession and for 992,171 women workers it is a part time profession. Exactly 77.94% of women handloom workers are engaging as weavers and allied workers, but this major work force has been subjected to subjugation in the name of globalization, industrialization and economic reforms (Table 2.1 shows the number of adult handloom workers in India and table 2.2 shows the number of women engaged in weaving activity by nature of engagement)

TABLE 2.1: NUMBER OF ADULT HANDLOOM WORKERS IN INDIA

States	Total Adult Workers		
	Male	Female	Total
Andhra Pradesh	149,896	156,569	306,465
Arunachal Pradesh	291	29,275	29,566
Assam	15,411	1,468,453	1,483,864
Bihar	14,997	22,728	37,725
Chhattisgarh	2,673	2,218	4,891
Delhi	1,541	976	2,517
Gujarat	4,443	5,053	9,496
Haryana	6,239	1,625	7,864
Himachal Pradesh	2,424	5,306	7,730
Jammu & Kashmir	5,776	14,973	20,749
Jharkhand	10,360	8,081	18,441
Karnataka	35,377	41,472	76,849
Kerala	3,732	10,786	14,518
Madhya Pradesh	5,985	7,196	13,181
Maharashtra	1,850	1,483	3,333
Manipur	1,577	202,742	204,319
Meghalaya	97	12,828	12,925
Mizoram	1,935	39,254	41,189
Nagaland	7,881	57,422	65,303
Orissa	51,154	52,004	103,158
Puducherry	1,122	1,584	2,706
Punjab	1,551	967	2,518
Rajasthan	5,745	24,357	30,102
Sikkim	16	535	551
Tamil Nadu	149,373	169,139	318,512
Tripura	1,573	130,169	131,742
Uttar Pradesh	109,340	107,675	217,015
Uttarakhand	6,415	8,185	14,600
West Bengal	249,699	415,307	665,006
All India	848,473	2,998,362	3,846,835

Source: Third National Handloom Census, 2010

TABLE 2.2: NUMBER OF WOMEN ENGAGED IN WEAVING ACTIVITY BY NATURE OF ENGAGEMENT (2009-2010)

States	Number of Women Engaged in Weaving activity		
	Full-Time	Part-Time	Total
Andhra Pradesh	46,384	6376	52,760
Arunachal Pradesh	9363	16,290	25,662
Assam	6,86,457	702196	1,388,653
Bihar	1783	690	2472
Chhattisgarh	212	6	218
Delhi	115	17	132
Gujarat	726	244	970
Haryana	27	0	27
Himachal Pradesh	848	3724	4572
Jammu & Kashmir	319	1807	2126
Jharkhand	1807	148	1955
Karnataka	8303	480	8783
Kerala	7749	71	7820
Madhya Pradesh	1593	241	1834
Maharashtra	250	8	258
Manipur	1,69,310	29,801	1,99,111
Meghalaya	7015	5519	12,534
Mizoram	6095	32,418	38,513
Nagaland	21,351	23,171	44,522
Orissa	5930	1626	7556
Puducherry	791	103	894
Punjab	289	53	342
Rajasthan	3533	829	4362
Sikkim	264	263	527
Tamil Nadu	77,477	14,539	92,016
Tripura	6489	1,22,302	1,28,791
Uttar Pradesh	21,720	3689	25,409
Uttarakhand	1185	916	2101
West Bengal	1,23,482	24,635	1,48,117
All India	1,210,851	9,92,171	2,203,032

Source: Third National Handloom Census, 2010

SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN HANDLOOM WORKERS

In 1987, the government of India initiated Decentralized Training Programme (DTP) to upgrade the skills of skilled and semi-skilled handloom workers in weaving, dyeing and design technology to enhance their productivity, design technology and the marketability of their products. This scheme modified later in 1995 and 2000. Now in the eleventh five year plan (2007-2012), the ministry of textiles subsumed this scheme in the new scheme Integrated Handloom Development Scheme. This scheme implemented through Weaving Service Centers (WSC) in collaboration with concerned state governments. The weavers and Allied workers are the target beneficiaries of this program. During the period from 1998-99 to 2002-03, a total of 10525 Weavers, designers and dyers had been imparted training in the 15 selected states, out of these, 72.80% were trained in weaving; 9.03% in designers; and 18.18% in dyeing.

Decentralized Training Programme (DTP) had a good impact among women weavers and allied workers. They had a good participation rate, though they faced problems in commuting to distant training venues. In comparison to other states of India, weaving occupation is primarily an occupation for women in the north eastern states. So the female trainees were more than the male trainees in these states. In Manipur and Sikkim, all the trainees were women; the other states where women outnumber men were Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra. In the rest of the states, women had a good participation except in Bihar (18%), Orissa (19%) and Andhra Pradesh (19.34%). The details of trained weavers are shown in Table 3.1.

TABLE 3.1: NUMBER OF TRAINED WOMEN IN INDIA (Percentage)

States	Male (%)	Female (%)
Assam	0.44	99.56
Tripura	33.69	66.31
Manipur	0.00	100.00
Meghalaya	1.33	98.67
Sikkim	0.00	100.00
Tamil Nadu	65.87	34.13
Andhra Pradesh	80.62	19.38
Karnataka	65.71	34.29
West Bengal	67.88	32.12
Orissa	81	19.00
Bihar	82	18.00
Uttar Pradesh	28.93	71.07
Himachal Pradesh	34.8	65.20
Maharashtra	22.54	77.46
Rajasthan	59.20	40.8
Total	45.34	54.66

Source: Evaluation Study of Decentralized Training Programme for Handloom Weavers, 2010. Programme Evaluation Organization, Planning Commission, Government of India. New Delhi.

CONDITIONS AND PROBLEMS OF HANDLOOM WOMEN WORKERS

Women, a major work force used to prefer weaving as their profession which they may think safe and secure though it is a back breaking and poverty alleviated profession. They work 12 hours a day, 30 days in a month, 12 months in a year, respite rituals, festivals and meals time. They have no entertainment like others such as cinema, picnic, chit – chatting, spending time with children etc, where as the only entertaining music program in their life time is their handloom's glaringly monotonous sound. The most important thing in their life is to see their sons to come up in the life with decent salary or a profession other than weaving. In the case of female child, the marriage is the one and only solution to their up gradation, but that too with other than weavers. Another important aspect of their life is to visit sacred places such as Kasi, Rameshwaram, Gaya and Tripathi, etc, a typical rural women's ambition sometimes never been fulfilled in their life time. Though the women handloom workers from all the states of India seem to have difference in dressing, mode of life, social traditions, food habits and child rearing practices, they are similar in attitudes and orientation towards handloom weaving. They love it because it is their tradition. They work ship their looms as if they were their gods.

Major physiological problem for handloom women workers are menstruation. During that period in the name of traditions and culture, they are not permitted to work. Weaving for more than 12 hours in a day, they underwent gynecological problems too. The constant debts of the families, illness and other factors such as globalization, power looms and industrialization retained them at the low level of subsistence. Their low wages went to pay debts and forever they remained in poverty and deprivation. They toiled very hard, but the returns were very few and far between. In most of the weaving families in south India, the men turned to alcohol, neglecting work, indulging in child abuse and the women gradually took over the burden of whole family. As a result, the women suffered with socio-psychological problems such as mental disorder, anger and rage over frustrations etc, Route to economic empowerment in trade also been neglected to women handloom workers, that has been informed by Centre for handloom information and policy on 28th April, 2006 in Hyderabad, where CHIP organized a state level workshop to discuss about gender and trade policy, it observed that women are excluded in the national foreign trade policy, value addition roles and also this negligence reduces their role to routine tasks and increases imbalance between men and women relationships.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN HANDLOOM WORKERS

1. In large parts of remote villages and semi- urban areas in India, the women weavers are quite dissatisfied with being the members of co-operative societies, in order to protect these women weavers, self-help groups could be given rights to establish weavers co-operative societies exclusively for women.
2. Women handloom weavers and allied workers should have specific growth and development programmes and allocations in the national budget.
3. Literacy programmes should be provided to improve the standard of living and escapes from the clutches of master weavers and shed workers.
4. As a result of restless weaving activities, large numbers of women are suffering from gynecological problems. In order to lessen the women casualties, free medical camps and mobile health centers be established in the handloom clusters in all parts of India, in particular government should concentrate the handlooms in hamlets and remote villages.
5. Like Ashram schools for scheduled tribes, Bridge schools for school dropouts have to be established in handloom clusters and villages.
6. Handloom women workers should be brought under the national employment guarantee scheme
7. Minimum wages act has to be amended to enable women to get proper and appropriate wages for their work, while being dynamic to the inflationary trends.
8. Pilgrimage to sacred places such as Manasarovar, Vaishnavi Devi Temple, Rameshwaram and Kasi, to be arranged in order to reduce the expenditure of poor women weavers.
9. Handloom households with problems of hunger should be provided with specific ration cards.
10. Women handloom workers should be given priority to participate in entrepreneurship.
11. Government of India should take necessary steps to frequent supply of raw materials to empower them economically.
12. Skill Development Programmes should be implemented in remote corners of India in order to make easy commutation for the women who are coming from very far.

CONCLUSION

Nearly 2.57 lakh handloom workers (Including women) preferred alternative livelihood and it may be doubled or thrice in the future, unless it is protected and nursed by the government of India. This decline exhibits the social and economic insecurity in handloom weaving though the skill development programmes are initiated by the government of India. Even the wards of weavers are not interested to choose weaving as their profession because of its losing fame and prosperity. Even Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India wanted the weavers to shift from handloom weaving to mechanization. He says "I feel handloom weavers can't survive if they don't change according to the changes in the industrialization". In specific, this change does not improve the structural position of women, except a shift in their skills and increasing burden on their physique. It would lead to deskilling of women and their social position. Only long term vision, strong policies and schemes can protect this age old custodians, in particular, the frequent supply of raw materials will exempted this art and its barriers from the list of endangered traditional arts.

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