

SYNOPSIS

Hand weaving is the primary link between agriculture and industry. Primitive men started their first industrial activity by weaving fibers of trees and plage of animals for making cloth for themselves. Hand spinning and weaving is the second important art of human civilization after agriculture. It is perhaps impossible to assign the origin of any of the useful art like weaving, upon which necessities and comforts of mankind depend. The earliest records of the art of weaving are found in the Old Testament, where frequent hints are made to the handloom and its products, of curtains of fine twined linen of blue, purple and scarlet, with depiction of angel by skilled workers.

Various types of textiles were produced in various parts of the world. Linen is produced from the fiber of linseed trees, which are developed in coastal Europe. Wool most probably developed in colder areas of the world. It is believed that woollen fibers were first developed in Middle East, Afghanistan and Kashmir valley. Cotton fibers were most developed in India and Peru, simultaneously. One of the oldest known specimens of spun cotton yarn was found in the ruins of Mohenjo-Daro, a city in the Indus Valley civilization, which was deserted around 3000 B.C. The irony is that, the word “Cotton” is derived from the Arabic word *Qutun* or *Kutun*, but Arabian countries were not the place of origin of cotton. It might be because Arab was on the route when Indian cotton textiles were exported to Europe. Silk, is considered as the most precious. All silk textiles were produced in and around China nearly 5000 years back. But this relates only to Mulberry silk. On the other hand it seems all other varieties of silk were developed in India.

A 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. Hand weaving is done on pit looms; frame looms and stand looms, generally located in weavers’ houses. Weaving is primarily the interlacing of two sets of yarn- the warp (length) and the woof (width). The device that facilitates this interlacing is the handloom. It is important to mention that “handloom” is different from powerloom, which is a type of loom that is powered mechanically by electric instead of using human power to weave thread into cloth. The power loom is an invention that combines yarns

to make cloth. Powerloom are assembled in the weaving shed of mill and driven by an electric motor by belts from overhead shafting. Powerloom is a major progress over the handloom.

Here is the historical evolution of handloom textile in India. Spinning and weaving were highly advanced in *Rigved* era. Greek historian Herodotus mentioned the presence of the cotton dresses in 445 B.C. During this period, costumes became regional or zonal in character, Royal people, soldiers, priests and other professionals were given separate costumes. Greeks, *Parthians*, *Kushans*, *Shakas* and *Mughals* influenced the Indian dress, as depicted on their coins.

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. Even today Indian handloom and spinning wheel contributes maximum variation of designs and products. India mainly produces cotton textile products. Woolen handloom products are also produced in India.

Different types of handloom products are produced in different regions of India. *Baluchuri Shari* is produced mainly in Murshidabad and Bishnupur areas. *Muslin* was mainly produced in Dhaka district of present Bangladesh. Now some other kind of *muslin* is also produced in Murshidabad and in Nadia districts. Wool is known as *pasham* in India and develops in colder areas like Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, hills of West Bengal, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, and few places of Central and Western India. In Karnataka main districts of silk production are Kolar, Bangalore, Mandya, Tumkar, and Mysore. In Tamil Nadu sericulture was originally confined to Dharampuri and Coimbatore districts, but in recent times, spreads to Ramnadhampuram and other districts. In UP the main silk producing areas are Doon Valley, Ganjam, Gajapati and Kalahandi districts. In West Bengal main silk producing districts are Maldah, Murshidabad, Birbhum and Nadia. In Assam Mulberry cocoon rearing was traditionally grown in Shibsagar district. In Manipur silk producing areas are Laimran, Khur, Khul, Sekhmai and Fayang etc. *Ikat shari* is the unique product of Orissa. *Phee* is the classical product of the state of Manipur. *Dua* and *Puna* are handloom textile of Mizoram. Cloths such as *Rini*, *Basei*,

Risa, Pandari, Kutai, Rikatu, Baki and Kamchai are produced in Tripura. There are also other varieties of handloom products in different corners of the country.

Handloom weaving enjoyed the patronage of Indian ruler since Maurya regime. With the increase of demand of handloom products in India and abroad, complexities in the methods of organizations and operations were also grown. Royal power extended its help, protection and patronage for the smooth functioning and development of the handloom. During the *Mughal* rule, handloom textiles of India became the main item of foreign trade all over the world. Merchants of west European and Scandinavian countries used to collect these products from the notable manufacturing centers, like Bengal, Varanasi, Andhra, Kashmir, Utkal and Baroda to sell almost every country of the World.

As British Government took charge of Indian administration, royal patronage abolished for handloom textile industries. Weavers became independent. To mediate between European traders and weavers, *mahajani* system was emerged. British Parliament passed an Act in 1700 which prohibited the import of Indian Silk and printed calicos in Britain. The cotton fibers of India were so beautiful and cheap, that nearly all the governments of Europe thought it necessary to prohibit them, or to load them with heavy duties, in order to protect their own manufacturers. The demands for the fascinating textile items of Indian origin were remained unaffected in the countries of Europe, even after the imposition of prohibitive barriers against them in those countries till the mid eighteenth century.

The development of cotton textile industry of England was occurred through a biased and selfish commercial policy, designed to cripple its main competitor, i.e. Indian handloom textile industry. This task of destruction of Indian handloom textile was done with the help of royal political power. It was aimed at making Indian textile industry subordinate to the textile industry of Britain and mere supplier of raw materials (cotton) of the textile industries of England.

Since the First World War Indian handloom industry started to increase its dependence on Indian mill made yarn. On the other hand the bulk of the requirement for higher counts cotton continued to flow from the foreign countries, especially from America and England. As a result of the increasing dependence of handloom on mill spun yarn, the system of hand spinning almost ceased to exist. There was a drastic fall

in overall employment power of handloom weaving sector in India. The market for handloom textiles continued to decrease because of the growing supply of cheap mill-made products. It is also important to note that Indian mill made products has little share of the market after the introduction of mill made yarn. Indian mill made products faced discriminations of additional burden of excise duty upon them by the British government.

After independence Central Government formed different commissions, and committees to know the conditions of handloom textile industry. These commissions made different recommendations and government took various policies. The most important policy is National Textile Policy 1985, which recommended for the reservation of handloom products. After the Spread of COVID-19 handloom textile industry faces unprecedented challenges. To meet the challenges, new policy for handloom is required for its survival and sustainability. The main reasons of survival of handloom were specialization in production, designs of different occasions and different tests. The absence of systematic and organized marketing facilities and scarcity of yarn compelled independent weavers to get into the traps of *mahajans* and money lenders.

Handloom weaving of West Bengal had received a great impetus after independence due to immigration of weavers in large numbers from erstwhile East Pakistan. They settled in different parts of the state. At the same time, age-old tradition of the handloom weaving of India suffered severe oppression and discrimination during the colonial ruler. Even after the independence, the concerned industry had to face the sufferings of partition of India as well as Bengal.

Now a days, the structure of the GST is affecting the handloom sector in the following manners. There is 5 per cent GST on cotton fiber in the form of hank yarn, previously it was nil, 18 per cent on dyes and chemicals, and 5 per cent on finished products of up to Rs 1,000 and 12 per cent on finished products priced over Rs 1,000. It was 7 per cent on finished products under the pre- GST regime. All fibers are treated as equal under GST be it natural fiber or synthetic fiber. Now weavers have to pay GST at every stage from procuring yarn to dyeing the cloth, or any other processes the product passes to become marketable. The price of the finished product would therefore be considerably higher, bringing down the competitiveness of the handloom products

in the market. As a result, GST is negatively impacting weavers, master weavers, cooperatives, retailers, suppliers and ancillary workers. Earlier weavers used to get yarn on credit from traders, *mahajans* and master weavers. However, to pay GST on yarn, the weavers will have to buy yarn against payment. This is very problematic for maximum poor weavers.

Other problems are the conservative attitude of the weavers and their lack of proper training and knowledge about the current fashion and trend of the market. These lead to insufficient and inappropriate diversification of the products. States like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu successfully adopted policy of diversification of products. According to the handloom Census 2019-20, 5.6 per cent weavers are under cooperative societies and 5.24 per cent weavers have taken loan from Cooperative societies in the state. This is the proof of very low success rate of cooperatives in West Bengal. Failure of the reservation policy for handloom is also a major problem for the industry. Numerous schemes were introduced both at the state and the central levels, but most of them failed to perform satisfactorily. With liberalization of country's economy, the modern textile industry has posed serious threat to the traditional handloom industry all over the country and West Bengal is no exception. Since the years 1997-98 budgetary allocations shows that the handloom sector funding is not at par with the increase of cost of production and inflation.

There are areas of prospects of handloom, if proper actions are taken for the development of handloom. Provision of rebate is not the solution of handloom textile. In order to get rid of the corrupted policy, the marketing policy should aim at encouraging only the production of those items which can sell without rebate, although able to make profits. To bring more weavers under the umbrella of co-operative societies, those working at present with *mahajans* and master weavers, shall have to be approached. As the products of utility and high artistic value, handloom textiles of West Bengal are looked upon by people throughout the world. In order to popularize the products of handloom weavers, systematic advertisement through electronic media, website, social media and expositions should be resorted. Side by side with the private traders, the government agencies may also collect orders for exploring the foreign markets, which will help survival and development of handloom textile industry of the state.

Through incentive scheme for MSMEs, Central Government and State Governments are trying to eradicate poverty. Micro small and medium scale industries are contributing more than 40 per cent of the total industrial output. Liberalization of economy and globalization are putting various challenges in front of small and medium industries. To overcome these challenges Small Industries Development Organization (SIDO) and NABARD are taking various steps. MSMEs are trying for employment generation of economically backward and unskilled sections of the population.

SHGs in West Bengal are mainly formed under Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) and NABARD helps in collection of capital for the development of economic and health conditions of people using micro-credit and financial services. The State Government has launched Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY) which was further expanded and developed. State government also launched Swayansiddha-Integrated Women's Empowerment Programme (IWEP). Prime Minister's Rojgar Yojana (PMRY) and Rural Employment Generation Programme are merged and new scheme named as Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), was launched. It delivers financial assistance in the form of subsidy of Rs. 25000 for setting up small projects. The scheme has been proposed to be implemented through Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), State/UT Khadi and Village Industries Boards (KVIBs) and District Industries Centres (DIC) of State Government. Government of West Bengal launched Bangla Swanirvar Karma Sansthan Prakalpa (BSKP) for individual entrepreneurs (18-45 years of age) or groups (SHGs) preferably registered with Employment Bank and having monthly family income not more than Rs. 15000. The main purpose of this scheme is to generate employment by setting up of any unit of industry, trade or services etc. or getting loan for existing unit. Another scheme, jointly sponsored by Centre and State is Swarna Jayanti Sahari Rozgar Yojana (SJSRY), where the share of Centre and State Governments respectively is 75:25 per cent. The main objective of this scheme is to provide gainful employment to urban unemployed and poor people through encouraging the setting up of small employment ventures or provision for wage generations.

Through West Bengal incentive scheme-2013 for MSME in Textile sector, 6 per cent interest rebate on working capital loan can be availed from commercial banks, nationalized banks, cooperative banks and other financial institutions by the SHGs, Primary Weavers Co-operative Society (PWCS)/Handloom Clusters, to ensure

maximum capacity utilization of handloom in the state. One important scheme in handloom is Cluster Development Programme under Comprehensive Handloom Development Scheme (CHDS). The aim of the scheme is to facilitate sustainable development of weavers in or outside the handloom clusters into cohesive and competitive socio-economic units with self management. The main components of the scheme concentrate on skill up gradation training on weaving and dyeing technology, design development and product development, purchase of Computer Aided Textile Design system etc. Tanti Sathi is a front line initiative of Government of West Bengal, where new pit looms and accessories are supplied to the weavers and SHGs. Khadi weavers who have no looms or obsolete looms can be benefited with backup support for skill development from West Bengal Handloom Circuit Scheme -2014. State Design Centre for design development has a marketing tie up with Tantuja and Biswa Bangla. MUDRA scheme for weavers is a scheme introduced by Government of India on July, 2016. The ministry is providing subsidized fund directly to the banks as loan up to Rs. 5 Lakh over working capital to potential weavers. MUDRA- Rupay Card with a limit of Rs. 50000 has been issued to the borrower for withdrawing money from ATM as and when required. Success rate of incentive scheme for MSMEs in handloom textile of West Bengal is lower in comparison to national average.

The weaving industry of Nadia district has been divided into two zones - Nabadwip and Shantipur. In Purba Bardhaman district, Kalna and Katwa sub-divisions are mainly handloom concentrated zones. *Baluchari*, *matha* and *jamdani* shari or dhori weaving process of Shantipur, has some uniqueness. *Tangail* and cotton *shari* weaving of samudragarh has also some uniqueness. These two districts have its own handloom production in the context of Bengal's handloom production system. Weavers' happiness, sorrow, joy and exhilaration - all are related to this weaving industry. Weaving is their only hope of sustaining the ultimate existence of life. Shantipur is the originators of *Kheru* folk songs. Many weavers in these districts are living below the poverty line. Most of these families live in houses surrounded by mulberry fences and tin sheets and made of tile sheds or tin sheds.

According to survey, in these two districts most of the weavers are from refugees families of East Bengal. Investigative data from various locations in these districts show that maximum weavers are local people. The head of the household (in most cases the eldest of the family) leads the whole process of handloom production

and the other adult members of the family, including children collectively carry forward the whole production process.

The occupational structure of the handloom community consists of three categories:

- The *mahajans* enjoying maximum profit,
- Some independent master weavers are in the middle position,
- A large number of weavers, depending on piece rate system for their wages, posited at the bottom level with minimal profit.

The *mahajan* and the independent master weavers practically have a similar controlling position in the handloom production. The striking difference is that master weavers generally have their own looms and engage weavers by paying wages to work for them. *Mahajan* generally like the capitalist system, do not run looms and supply yarns to the weavers and also do marketing of the finished products. The weavers are mostly simple, lack formal education and negotiation skill and hence left with no other option other than depending on *mahajans*. They know that the *mahajans* are exploiting them and get the products done at low rates and sell them at considerably higher rates to consumers but are unable to confront the existing system. The district central co-operative bank plays an important role for supporting to the PWCS. Tiny weaver/master weavers / private entrepreneur are not getting substantive supports from them. As per the record of Nadia District Central Cooperative Bank, Only 84 PWCs get Rs. 10crore 50 lakh loan in 2021-22 financial year.

In many cases women workers are being paid less than the male workers, despite the fact that the cloth produced by women workers are being sold at good prices in the market. It is pertinent to note that there is no presence of strong union of workers in Nadia and Purba Bardhaman districts for handloom weavers. However, the cooperatives and SHGs have the support for women workers. Older weavers expressed that their children have nothing to do with the crafts and art of weaving. It is not sufficient income generator to live life with dignity. Handloom weaving appears to be largely an occupation of senior citizens.

Barring these economic issues, there are common health problems which came forward during a discussion with the weavers. The issue that needs attention is the

prevalence of work related stress, problem of spine, back pain, eyestrain, headache, and hearing loss among the weavers of these areas. There is lack of proper medical amenities to address these health problems. Workplaces are congested with non favorable conditions of high temperatures and humidity, poor illumination, and high noise levels. However, many weavers are involved in the process of handloom production and as well as rural labor. The wage of a weaver was 300-400 rupees per ordinary *shari* before COVID-19. Now it is 200-300 rupees per *shari*. At present, there are not many employment opportunities in other states, especially after COVID. So many people rejoin weaving industry after returning from other states or other countries. COVID -19 has created a fear even among large part of the new generation.

More than 65 per cent of the weavers who were surveyed by the researcher claim to be migrants from erstwhile East Bengal. They have carried their skills along with them and are engaged in the current production process but have failed to recognise themselves at par with the population of West Bengal. The living conditions of the weavers continue to be dismal and they are sometimes even denied of essential social infrastructural facilities. Other problems of handloom of these areas are: the cooperatives are mainly situated in rural areas and these are financially weak and thus, it is not possible for them to appoint trained personnel to look after the management. Cooperatives face major production problem due to unstable and inadequate supply of raw materials. Maximum cooperatives are extremely weak in marketing and sales promotion. There is no provision for training of weavers in Indian Institute of Handloom Technology situated at Phulia. Only Diploma and degree courses are studied here for fresher students. Lack of loyalty among members of cooperatives to the PWCs is another problem. Leaders of cooperatives, in many cases want to gain personal benefit from PWCs. District cooperative Bank provides loan to PWCs, not to individual weavers. Political intervention in cooperative formation and functioning are major problems. Mainly weavers have to depend on *mahajans* for working capital.

There are significant mismatch between production and marketing of handloom cloth in Nadia and Purba Bardhaman districts. The decline of local markets for handlooms is a reality in present time. As part of natural calamities, floods are affecting the weaving industry of Nadia and its adjoining Purba Bardhaman districts in various ways. Almost every year more or less floods inundate the looms in Ranaghat, Phulia, Shantipur and Nabadwip areas, especially before *Durga Puja*, when the demands are

highest. In monsoon handloom production also gets affected. In rainy days weaving becomes difficult. Weavers cannot move warp and woof smoothly. These areas are mainly situated in Gangetic plain and low land. Areas like Shantipur, Nabadwip, Ranaghat do not have proper drainage system. Water stagnation is a common problem in these congested areas. As a result water logging in the pit of loom paddles is quite common. Poor weavers do not have the capacity to make their loom room high by filling soil from outside. The price of per tractor soil is around Rs.2000. There is not enough space for entry of tractors, as maximum weavers live by the side of narrow bi lanes. As a result cost of soil is more for them for manual carrying.

Despite all regulations, there is a phenomenal growth in the number of powerlooms especially in the last three decades. In many instances, handlooms are being converted to powerlooms to gain immediate benefits. In many instances powerloom products are sold as handloom products violating Reservation Act of handloom. Domestic electricity connection of the weavers' homes is being converted into a commercial connection under the direction of the State Electricity Authority in many cases. The argument of WBSEDCL behind it is that weaving is a commercial activity, so domestic electric connection cannot be used for commercial purposes. Most of the weavers have common rooms for living and weaving. Numerous schemes were introduced both at the state and the central levels. Most of them failed to perform satisfactorily in these districts.

The areas of prospects are as follows: the handloom products of these districts have good reputation and in recent years, product diversification in the handloom industry has opened new opportunities for their export abroad. This industry, with its environment friendly production trend, requirement of low capital input, demand for human skill and manual labour is extremely suitable for densely populated districts. Especially after partition of the country as far as employment of people are concerned handloom proved most important. Though the handloom sector provides only a meager income to the weavers, still their monthly income is better than the hired labours in the agricultural sector of the region. Handloom has a large share in revenue generation and regional concentration in industrial development. Handloom industry creates different types of linkage, like human linkage, commodity linkage and monetary linkage in these districts. Government should take proper policies for the development and sustainability of handloom, not as subsidy, but as investment for profit generations.