



A Study of the Present Situation of the Traditional Handloom Weavers of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

The Handloom is a traditional industry of India and it provides employment opportunities to millions of people in the rural and urban belts of our country. After industrialization, the handloom industry has been decline. Most of the problems faced by handloom industry are perpetual in nature and hence to sustain the cultural and economic importance of the industry the present study is an attempt to understand the various problems of Handloom Weavers of Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. The problems are invention of new technology (power-loom), capitalist control, drop off in wages, increased price of yarn, and so on. The present study is descriptive in nature. The data have been collected through the in-depth interview, semi structured interview, case study and focused group discussion.

Keywords: Handloom, industrialization, capitalist control, power-loom, yarn price, wage system.

Introduction

The handloom weaving industry plays a very imperative role in the India's economy. In case of employment, it is the second largest sector next only to agriculture. This sector reports about fourteen per cent of the total cloth produced by the country¹. 'A strong and diverse raw material base, cheap labor, an ever-growing domestic market and relatively better technologies are the key strengths of the Indian handloom sector that have resulted in such a pronounced prominence of this industry'². From the early 19th century, handloom industry has been started to decline and lost its market due to industrialization. Industrialization took place in the traditional handloom industry of India when trade liberalization and market liberalization³ came in existence. Roy⁴ stated that 'Handloom weaving occupies a key place in debates about Indian industrialization which tends to be identified with the rise of mechanized factories. Artisans have a marginal role in this narrative. In other view, artisans, particularly handloom weavers, even represent a de-industrialization. Decline and transformation was a worldwide phenomenon in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the artisan group' (p- 507). Increasing use of capital-intensive technology and competition with power-loom cloth are typically the chief characteristics of industrialization. Since that time weaving faced a competitive market with the upcoming new technologies^{5,6} and foreign manufactured products⁷. As a result, the power-loom came in dominate and Indian handloom industries tried to adapt⁸⁻¹¹ in terms of changing conditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because, industrialization in one part of the world imposed large uncompensated costs upon another^{9,4}. In recent years, the power-looms comprise an industry of considerable proportions. The official data shared that power-looms have increased from 37 per cent in 1980 to 68 per cent in 1995 in India's total textile

production^{12,10}. Increasing use of power-looms had influenced on the handloom market. According to Roy⁴ 1.7 million power-loom units had employed 8 million workers in the year 1997. This ratio shows that this employment is more than 20 per cent of all industrial wage labor in India. Thus, the modern power-loom industry is the most significant form of industrialization in India and unquestionably one of the world's largest industries.

Besides this, production system and capitalistic control is another reason behind the decline situation of handloom. The capitalism is another feature of Industrialization. The capitalist merchant wanted to produce larger quantities and to control over the increasing number of laborers. The mode of organization and control over labor process has changed with growing of capitalism. It means under a merchant or mahajan or capitalist system, where the instruments of production possessed by the weavers and the capitalist advances the circulating capital (the wage fund and raw material). The weavers work only for wages. The wages are gradually turned down. The drop off in wages¹³ and wage labor system that causes alienation from the traditional handloom industry. Herewith, increasing price of raw material is also affected the handloom market. The handloom weavers are no longer stay with handloom and they shifted to other jobs. Thus, technological change (power-loom), low wages and rising price of yarn (raw material) have adversely affected the handloom sector as well as handloom weavers.

Viewing the decline situation of handloom, many scholars have showed their interested in find out the problem faced by the handloom industry. Narsaiah and Krishna⁴ studied the crisis in handloom industry. This study found that handloom industry has been facing the problem of improper financial facilities and irregular supply of yarn. As a result the raw material price increase every year and the cost of the handloom cloth has

increased than the power loom Cloth. Gurumoorthy and Rengachary (2002)¹⁵ recognized the main problems are shortage of input, poor working capital, pricing of handloom products, accumulation of huge stock and marketing of handloom products. Mathiraj and Rajkumar¹⁶ demonstrated that the weavers of the Ramanathapuram District are facing the production related problems like short of skilled labor and instability in yarn price. He also made solution that innovative pattern of production, moderate cost, sales design and modernization of handloom can be solved the crisis situation of the handloom weavers. Tripathy¹⁷ also endeavors to explore the problems and perspectives of handloom industry in Orissa. He pointed out that the reasons behind the crisis situation of handloom industry are 'illiteracy of the weavers, inadequate finance, procurement of raw-materials, product developments, quality control, cost control and unable to fix a stable price due to fluctuation in yarn price' etc. Roy⁹ in his study made an attempt to answer for the handloom industry's problem related to productivity and competition. It was replied in the study that handloom industry can survive only with the existence of two factors one is demand for the traditional products and the other one is government policy sympathetic to handlooms. In this milieu, the present paper has tried to find out the effect of industrialization and the problems faced by the handloom weavers of Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh.

Methodology

The urban belt of Varanasi district of Uttar Pradesh was taken up a field site in order to understand the effect of Industrialization of traditional handloom weaving. The Varanasi district is selected purposively because of some principal reasons like for more than thousand years, the city of Varanasi (*Benaras*) has been home to the largest number of handloom weavers in India. According to Mukherjee¹⁸ 'It is estimated that there are more than 125,000 weavers in this cluster and it is one of the largest geographical concentrations of handloom weavers in the country'. The handloom and power-loom are also coexisted side by side in Varanasi. All the weavers are Muslim in community. The data have collected only one handloom and one power-loom cluster. by in-depth interview, case study and focus group discussion. The interview always were semi-structure in nature. From each clusters, 50 handloom weavers and 50 power-loom weavers were selected by snowball technique for knowing the advantage, disadvantage of both looms and wage system. Cases of technology of handloom and power-loom, specific modes of its utilization at different stage of production are also taken. Apart these, 50 *Gaddidars* and 50 Master Weavers were interviewed to understand how they control over labor and market, how they manage production unit and what problem handloom face. The cost of raw material for last ten years (2000 to 2011) has collected from the traders of yarns. They inform the cost of product on the basis of yearly trading. The Focus group discussion has also taken for knowing the perception about the problems of the decline situation of

handloom. The field survey was conducted in the month of September 2012.

The Reasons behind the decline situation of handloom weaving: Production system and capitalist control: The production system of Varanasi runs through an established system. The system is a weaver carry on their work of production either independently or under mahajan/merchant's jurisdiction with a superior base of assets. In Varanasi, the word '*Gaddidar*' is very famous to identify as a mahajan. The *Gaddidar* is the entrepreneurial class often invests their money in several stages of weaving (production to marketing). These *Gaddidars* have adequate resource to support many (at least 20-30 independent) production unit at a time. The *Gaddidars* also play a key role in distribution and marketing of the items apart from their role in the process of production. There are few *Gaddidars* who invest in big scale and are not directly associated with the process of production. Rather they run their business from the profit generated by marketing products. They employ several specialized personnel to perform the specific jobs for them. In Varanasi, such personnel are named as 'Master Weaver' or locally known as '*Grihasta*'. The master weaver is a small entrepreneurial group who supervise the production process in their own production units. The Master Weaver also invests their capital in trading but relatively lesser in comparison to the *Gaddidars*. It is true that the possession of capital had pushed certain weavers into a position of hiring out their labor. Some weavers developed as master weavers by introducing their capital, trading capacity, knowledge and engagement in the market. At the beginning of handloom industry, merchant and weavers, only two performers are found. Even in Varanasi, in earlier times, two types of people are said to be involved i.e. one is merchant or businessman or mahajan (Hindu) and other is a weaver (Muslim). The economic differentiation is the key factor for evolving the class of master weaver from the ranks of the artisans or weavers. Master Weavers came more often from the merchants directly controlling textile production.

The production process in Varanasi runs through the '*Bani*' system. '*Bani*' is one of the ways in which *Gaddidar* exercises control over the weavers. '*Bani*' is a local term in Varanasi and it means wage. The local name of this kind of a system varies. The weavers called '*Bani*' and *Gaddidars* called it '*Majduri*'. Most of the weavers used to work under the *Bani* system. It is seen from the table-1 that 79.5 per cent were under the control of *Gaddidar*. A *Gaddidar* supplies yarn to the small weavers on the condition that all the products are to be sold to him and get their wages. This system has occurred in two ways-in one ways *Gaddidars* or *Grihasta* give the yarn and cash to the weaver. Cash is required for running weaving operations, such as dyeing, warping, weft, denting, drafting and also for the subsistence of the weaver. After finishing of the product, *Gaddidar* subtracts this cash amount from final wages of the weavers. In other way, *Gaddidars* give all things like design, card (*patta*), and warping yarn to the weavers and weavers

weave only for wages. Subsequent to completion of this job, the wage of the 'product' is fixed after the negotiation between the *Gaddidar* and weaver. The wages vary on the complexity of the design and the wages are too low.

In Varanasi, four types of weaver are found such as Independent weaver, the contact weaver, the loom less weaver and the cooperative weavers. The cooperative weavers are the member of the government registered organization which is intervened through the Co-operative institution and it is not under the *Bani* system. The Contact Weavers and Loom-less weavers also work under this system. The contact weaver works on contract basis means they get raw material and other things from the *Gaddidars* or master weavers in terms of getting wages. Wages are determined on the basis of the complexity of the design and bargaining capacity of the weaver, which has weakened considerably during the last decade as the industry is facing a slump. Loom-less Weavers have no loom of their own but employed as a wage earner to others loom or master weaver's factory premises. Another kind of loomless weavers is found in Varanasi i.e. those weavers who have given a loom by master weaver or *Gaddidars* installed at their home and loomless weavers take raw material from the employer and weave a sari. The loom continues to be owned by the trader and weavers take only wage.

The independent or self employed weavers are not under the *Bani* system. The Independent weavers have their own loom, buy own raw material from the raw material supplier on credit, weave the actual product and then sell it to the *Gaddidar* directly or through master weaver. This type of weavers is independent in nature. These weavers can be an individual weaver or a master-weaver, who designs and weaves as well as get other weavers to weave for him on his handloom or on the weaver's own handloom. In previous time, most of the weavers were self-employed weavers. The number of such weavers is on the decline over the last decade. Except master weavers, an independent weaver should get a better price but lack of holding capacity and fluctuating raw material prices force him to compromise with the payment delaying tactics of the traders. And the weavers often fail to meet these requirements as he has not had enough capital to do this job. For performing work, the weaver needs the yarn, has to prepare a warp and more often than not has to confront the volatility of market. So, the only option for him is to come under the control of a mahajan/*Gaddidar*.

Interference of Power-loom: The power-loom sector is of more recent vintage and has shown enormous growth in the 19th and 20th century. In Varanasi, power-loom came with full control in the year of 1950. At present, handloom and power-loom are both exist side by side in Varanasi. The handloom market has now become limited and domain of few handloom owners. However handloom has clearly identifiable advantage in cloths made of certain types of yarn or carrying certain types of loom woven design and it will exist as long as there is

enough demand for these cloths. But Varanasi handloom could not hold the market. It is estimated that approximately 20 per cent weavers are still engaged in handloom where as 80 per cent weavers are joined in power-loom in Varanasi. Mechanization is characteristic features of the early industrialization. Besides, mechanization, there was a mechanism which acted continuously as a stimulus behind the origin or growth of power-loom. These were i. power-loom has comparative advantages over their competitors. ii. acceptance of new invention by the management and the weaver.

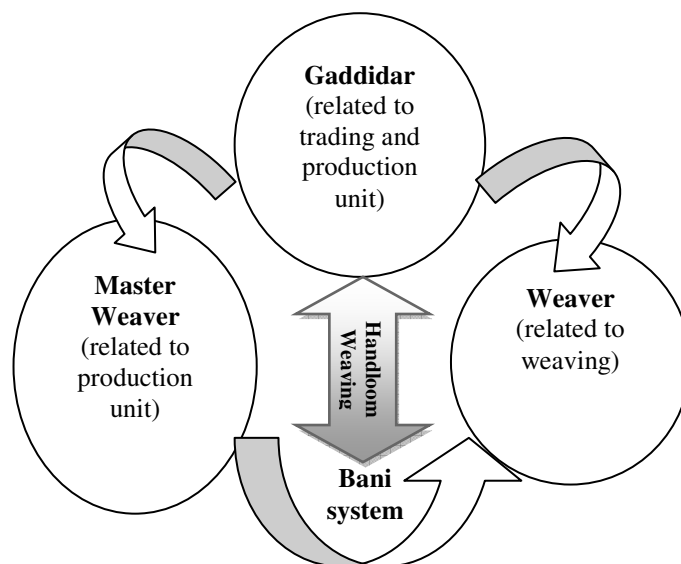


Figure-1
Relational ties of different actors in handloom weaving

Many handloom clusters of Varanasi are gradually switched over to power driven looms, because of getting higher productivity and earning better livelihood. The handloom owners of Varanasi, installed power-loom in their house premises or factory site where handloom was there. The handloom clusters like Bazardiha, Lallapura etc. has become power looms sector. The reasons are i. handloom products are costly than power-loom products. The power-loom can imitate design of handloom product and produce it in low rates. For example power-loom saris start from rupees 300 where as the handloom saris start from rupees 2000. So, in adapting to large-scale mechanical and automates weaving in handloom industry and beyond, the handloom weavers turned away from producing fine quality cloths to lower-quality products made with substandard raw material and sold at low prices. ii. In power-loom always used mixed silk, synthetic, bright, kichhi, polestar, rolex and plastic and handloom used expensive silk yarn. For that reason, the cost of handloom product is high. iii. In handloom one weaver gets rupees 300-500 for weaving of one sari which takes 4-5 days. So, he can weave maximum 6 saris in a month. His monthly income is rupees 1800 to rupees 3000. Whereas a power-loom labor can weave maximum 4 saris in a day if there is no power cut and he gets rupees 5-10 per meter. One sari is about 6 meter length. His income is in a day rupees

150-300 (if he weaves 5 saris). So, monthly income of a power-loom labor is about rupees 4500 to 9000. Table-1 reflects 43 per cent power-loom weavers' monthly income is above rupees 5501 and only 3 per cent weavers monthly earn are below 1500. iv. Handloom is labor intensive job where many skilled people are involved in preparatory and post weaving activity. The power-loom weaving is a totally machine based technology, do not require skilled labor. For instance making design and warp, putting threads into bobbin, polishing etc are done by machine. Many people are not required. One man is enough for manipulating two or three power-loom machines at a time. v. Many customers want to buy a sari in a reasonable price not in high price. When a customer gets a power-loom sari within a budget, then they do not go to buy handloom products. And the shop owners sell the power-loom cloths as handlooms to the customer. The buyer could not identified what is power-loom product or what is handloom one.

Besides these, another reality is management (the agent of capital means *Gaddidar* and master weaver in Varanasi) has adopted the technological change i.e. power-loom machine. As an effect of industrialization, the whole market of India is full of low costs power-loom products. It is fact that the high cost handloom product could not struggle with power-loom product. To compete with power-loom product and to hold the market demand, the handloom weavers, the *Gaddidar*, and the master weaver who have capital installed power-loom machines. Thus, the management uses technology for large scale production with cheaper rate to hold the market demand and to gain more profit and control over the labor process. The handloom weavers adopt only for better income, less labor intensive and better livelihood. The female folk of the family are not essentially required in power-loom. Either they are free or engage separately in another jobs or power-loom activities as a paid worker.

Rising price of yarn: The silk yarn (raw material) is most essential thing in weaving. The yarn comes from Bangalore, Surat and West Bengal and it sells in many '*Mahallas*' of Varanasi. The Madanpura, Reibritala, and Baribazar sites are famous for yarn market. Table-1 reflects that 15.5 per cent Independent weavers (bunkar) buy the raw material from these markets. The independent weavers buy yarn on credit from the silk merchant. In case of credit, some extra money (2 per cent to 5 per cent) could be paid. Table no. 1 shows that 79.5 per cent weavers who are under *Gaddidar* get raw material from the *Gaddidars*. The *Gaddidars* buy yarn from the wholesalers. Sometimes, big *Gaddidars* directly deal the business of silk. The yarn distribution chain is like that: from yarn wholesaler to the *Gaddidars* and master weavers, from *Gaddidars* and master weavers to weavers in one hand and from wholesaler to retailer or small shops, and from small shops to weaver on other hand.

As the yarn is vital resource in weaving, the market depends on its price. The yarn price and product cost are related to each other. With the price hike of yarn the cost of product also increases. In previous time, the handloom weavers used silk

from China. This silk is cheap. In 1995-1998 Indian government imposed a ban on Chinese silk yarns. The idea was that Varanasi sari would only be woven from silk yarns from Bangalore. Bangalore silk is the best in quality but much expensive. Prior to 1990, the cost of this silk used to be Rs. 100/- per kg. Now it is available at more than Rs 1500/- per kg. From the fig.1, it is clear that raw material gradually increases from 2001 to 2010. The yarn price is rapidly increased in the year 2009. The '*katan*' material increases in small amount i.e. average rupees 200 in the year of 2001-2007. After 2009, it increases just double to that of the previous time. The local merchant highlighted that in December 2010, the price of raw material just reached rupees 3500/ kg (in case of *tasar*) and rupees 3200/ kg (in case of *katan*). Thus, it is too tough for the weavers to buy yarn. For that reason, all independent weavers had failed to buy the silk yarn independently. The independent weavers started to work under the *Gaddidar*. Because of continuous increase in yarn price the societies consider high cost of production as a major input related problem followed poor quality of raw material. Sometimes, yarn price is increased due to the crisis of yarn. The *Gaddidars* bought yarn in huge quantity in moderate price and stored. This way many *Gaddidars* invest their capital. When the crisis period of yarn appears in the market then *Gaddidars* sell their stored yarn with high price to the market and get huge profit.

Wage System: The handloom is labor intensive industry where wages should be satisfactory. But it is generally believed that the workers in labor intensive industries generally receive lower wages than the capital intensive industries. The handloom weavers also get low wages in terms of their productivity. A handloom weaver gets usually rupees 300 to rupees 800 for weaving a one sari which takes 4-5 days. The wage range and days depend on the design and complexity of a sari. The wages of *Benarasi* sari is high comparatively than other saris. If a weaver weave a *Benarasi* sari, he gets rupees 1000 to rupees 2000 and he completes the sari in a 12-20 days. So, the returns per labor per day are as minimum as about 75 rupees (in case of other sari) and about 83.33 rupees (in a case of *Benarasi* sari, suppose his wage is 1000 rupees and complete the sari 12 days). This return is more familiar in every household. These wages are too low for their livelihood in present market price. This is the one reason of their poverty and detachment from this job. Table no. 1 shows 47.89 per cent handloom weaving families belong to the income group of rupees 1501-2500 and only 1.41 per cent families are in the income of above rupees 5501.

The wage system in Varanasi is very unpleasant. The *Gaddidars* always offer a post dated cheque to the weavers when they make payments. The weaver always passing through the financial crisis with no bank account gives that to another man who provides reduced cash (2% or 3% cut from actual money) instead of actual amount. This system is called '*Batta Katna*' in Varanasi. The *Batta katana* is famous and the only way to receive cash. The self-employed weavers usually bring yarn from the market on credit and weave a sari according to own

design. Then it is brought to the market and its price is allotted. Finally *Gaddidar* pays a post dated cheque. The weavers do not have enough money to keep the post dated cheque for long time. They need money to pay off their loan, to maintain their family and also for making new products. This circumstance pushed them to go through the *Batta* system. But the receiving money was too low compared to the actual production cost. For that reason they leave this job if other option is open.

Labor problem: The exploitation in this sector has reached the peak. The labors did not get their actual wages. As a result they had begun to search for better opportunity. In Varanasi many skilled artisans have left the handloom weaving and migrated to

Surat, Gujrat, and Bangalor for better income. They are paradoxically joining the power-loom of 'duplicate' sari manufacturing in surat, as it is becoming increasingly economically viable to do that. As a labor of power-loom, they earn good money for their livelihood. Now Varanasi faces the crisis of the skilled labor for handloom. Nobody wants to return in this job. According to a weaver '*Labor faced worst condition than other matters. I had five handlooms earlier, my sons worked in these looms earlier. Now my four handlooms are closed. My son migrated to Surat for better life and I was sustaining my family with only one doomed loom. This scenario is common in every Mahalla in Varanasi.*

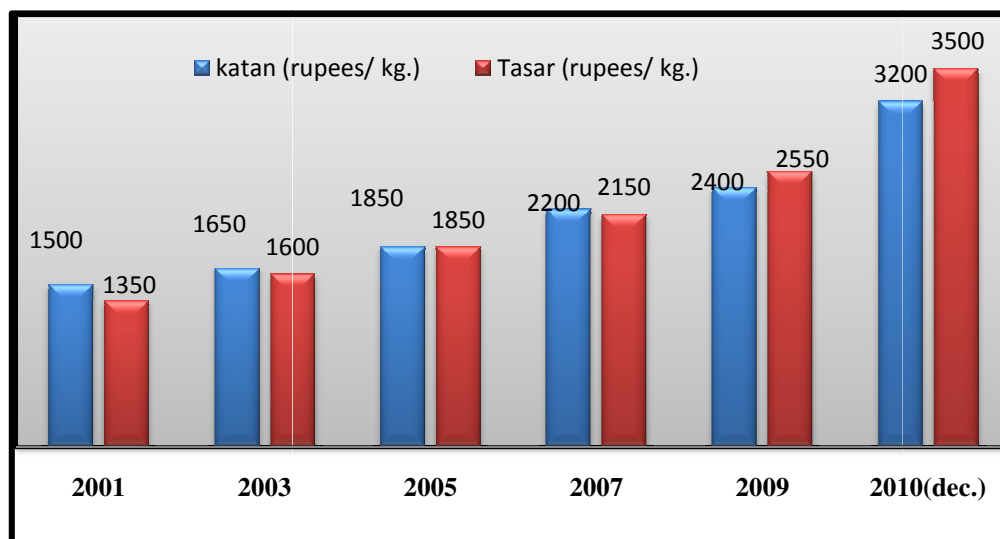


Figure-2
Increasing rate of yarn

Table-1
Categories, possession of loom and monthly income of the handloom and power-loom weavers

Handloom Weaving (N=50)	Percentage	Power-loom Weaving (N=50)	Percentage
Categories of the weavers		Categories of the weavers	
Under Mahajan/ Gaddidar	79.5	Self weaver/ Independent weaver	65.5
Self weaver/ Independent weaver	15.5	Contract / hired labor	34.5
Under co-operative society	5	-	-
Monthly Income of the weavers		Monthly Income of the weavers	
> 1500	26.06	> 1500	3
1501- 2500	47.89	1501- 2500	7.2
2501-3500	14.08	2501-3500	10.8
3501-4500	7.75	3501-4500	15.4
4501- 5500	2.81	4501- 5500	20.6
5501+	1.41	5501+	43
Possession of the loom		Possession of the loom	
One loom	61.61	One loom	2.3
Two loom	30.8	Two loom	30.5
Three loom	5.7	Three loom	16.2
Four loom	1.42	Four loom	18.9
Seven loom	0.47	Seven loom	32.1

Conclusion

The handloom weavers of Varanasi have lost their prestigious traditional industry. It has occurred due to the industrialization in all over India. The capitalist production, invention of powerloom, increasing price of yarn, low wages and labor problem are pushed to handloom to an end. The production system is mostly under the control of a particular entrepreneurial class *Gaddidar* or master weaver. The *Gaddidar* possesses capital and power that they can control over the production unit and labor. Subsequently powerloom was started functioning. For the huge production in short time, better wage, less labor and more profit, the handloom weavers, master weavers and *Gaddidars* have shifted from handloom to powerloom. Mainly it was found that younger generations are interested in powerloom business. They do not want to install handloom no more. Those handloom weavers who have not possessed sufficient capital for installing powerloom, they become poor to poorer. Indebtedness becomes a persistent crisis of the weavers. The weavers do not sustain their life with the handloom. The handloom industry is one of the major industries that need immediate care and attention. With this declining trend in the handloom sector the problems of unemployment will aggravate. So the policy maker should realize the importance of handloom sector and allocate the required funds for the upliftment of handloom weavers to avoid the decline in handloom industry.

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