

Growth of Sari Business and Its Socio Economic Impact on Handloom Weavers in Varanasi

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Abstract:

Banaras, the oldest inhabited city in the world, is well known for its Banarasi saris. Its silk is one of the purest and radiant, whose softness and rich brocade have given rise to the sari industry. The Indian textile industry has an integral presence in the economic life of the country. Saris are made in either handloom or powerloom, with the latter gaining more significance nowadays. With increasing competition in the textile industry, power-loom alternatives have hit the market since they tend to be cheaper and target mass markets at lower prices. ¹ But times have changed, and now weavers don't want to pass their art on to their kids or to the next generation. Due to the low income and unfavorable working conditions, weavers are no longer willing to work in this industry. The paper will focus on the socioeconomic situation of the weavers and how the revolutionising of the sari business has impacted the employment of the weavers. It discusses changes in the weavers' standard of living, access to education, and healthcare, along with their awareness about government schemes. It will also explore the reasons for the shift from handloom to powerloom and the problems leading to the weaver's current situation. The data for the study has been collected through government websites, in-depth interviews, focused group discussions, and detailed surveys.

Key words: Handloom, Power loom, working conditions, textile industry, socio economic

1. Introduction

Sari, a symbol of Indian culture, dates back to Indus Valley civilization and holds a high social and economical impact in India.² Varanasi, famous for the production of brocade saris has seen a remarkable growth in the sari industry which is driven by both domestic demand and increasing global interest. However, this surge has not improved the socio economic status of the weavers. Diana L. Eck once said "The city illuminates truth and reveals reality. It does not bring new wonders into the scope of vision, but enables one to see what is already there. Where this eternal light intersects the Earth, it is known as *Kashi*" ³ and it is now evident that the city has been downgrading in terms of suitable working conditions for weavers. The 800 year old traditional art of weaving is on the verge of extinction primarily due to the shift in technology resulting in an increasing importance of powerloom and the decreasing importance given to weavers.

Power loom textiles are produced using automated machines that weave threads together whereas Handloom fabrics, on the other hand are crafted using traditional, time-honored methods where skilled artisans manually weave fibers together to create beautiful textiles. The handloom industry contributes

4% in GDP⁴ making it an integral industry with a cultural importance. As per Government of U.P, Varanasi hand weaving silk industry is worth 80 million dollars including 20 million dollar exports. In recent years, weavers have started using power looms more often due to external factors which will be discussed in the research paper.

Weavers are dependent on master weavers and *Gaddidars* (traders) who act as intermediaries in facilitating the sale of woven goods. These middlemen often exploit the weavers since they can control their sale of production and have better access to the market. Due to weavers not having access to proper education and perfect information, they are not able to step up and address the exploitation.

Government intervention schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana (MGBBY), MUDRA, Handloom Weavers Comprehensive Welfare Scheme (HWCWS) and Handloom Weavers Comprehensive Welfare Scheme (HWCWS)⁵ have been implemented to support handloom weavers. However, their efficiency is yet to be measured. Thus, this research paper will also study the extent to which these government policies have been effective in improving weaver’s conditions and providing them with a better life.

2. Methodology

Primary and secondary data will be used to answer the research question. Both the qualitative and quantitative factors will be taken into account and the analysis would be done in the following way:

1) I will be analyzing the reasons for the shift from handloom to power loom machinery and how it has impacted the weavers and their living conditions. Moreover, trends will be compared from 2009-2010 to 2019-2020 to find out about their wages, housing conditions, education, healthcare etc. Secondary data will be used to find information about the socio economic status of weavers in Varanasi. The data for this will be taken through official government websites such as handloom census in order to make the data more reliable and accurate.

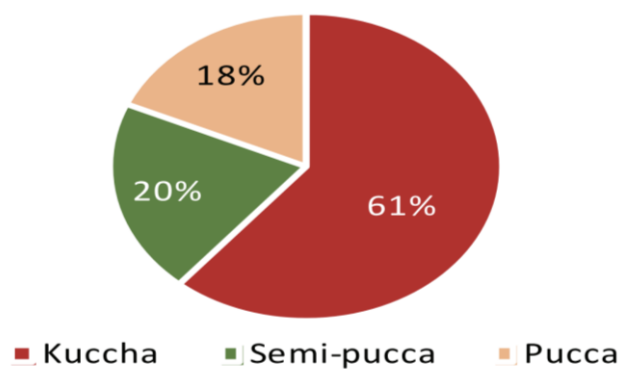
2) 300 weavers will be surveyed and interviewed from different areas of Varanasi such as Ramnagar, Madanpura, Lallapura and Pilikothi. Weavers will be randomly chosen in order to ensure fairness and to make sure that all the different perspectives and biases are included in the survey. They will be asked questions about the effectiveness of the government schemes, living conditions, health issues, the challenges they face and their satisfaction with all the resources that are provided to them.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Socio economic status of weavers

a) Housing conditions

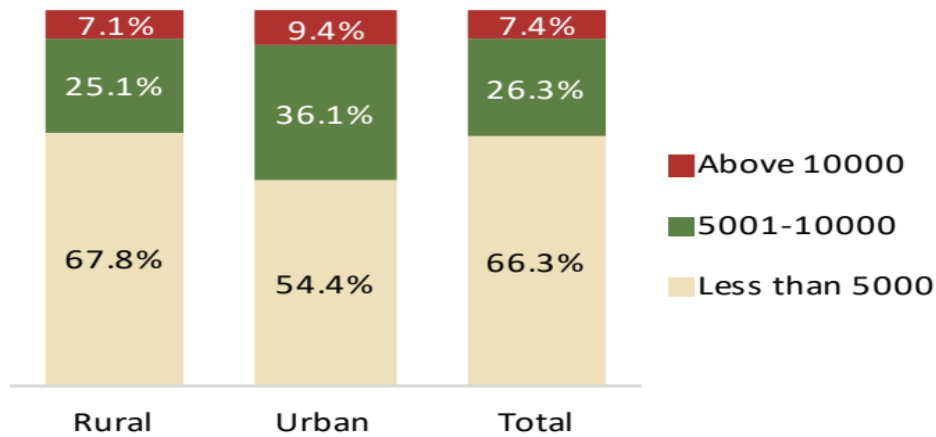
Table 1 showing the different housing conditions ⁶



Reports taken from the Handloom Census (2009-2010 and 2019-2020) indicate that there has been a 7% rise in the *Kuccha* (underdeveloped) houses, resulting in a change from 54% to 61% in 2019. This clearly shows the poor economic status of the weavers since they are not even able to earn enough income to build a house of concrete. Lack of high income along with debts and inadequate housing schemes makes it difficult for weavers to build a basic house.

b)Income

Table 1.1 showing the different income status⁷



Moreover, more than 66% weavers earn an income of less than 5000 rupees per month. This income, which is way too less to meet the daily expenses, has made it extremely difficult to live a normal life. High cost of raw materials, low market prices and the employment of middlemen (*Gaddidars*) has resulted in a below average income with the weavers struggling to make ends meet. Thus, this income indicates their low standard of living which is also becoming a strong reason for the fall in average number of weavers per household. Moreover, weavers between the age of 14-18 working is only 2.4% ⁸ which is a strong indication of the fact that the heads of the family are reluctant to pass the work to the next generation.

c)Educational Qualification

Table 1.2 showing the different educational qualifications⁹

	Never attended school	Below Primary	Primary	Middle	High school/secondary	Above high school
Rural	22.7%	13.8%	17.2%	22.5%	13.6%	10.2%
Urban	22.3%	12.4%	23.2%	17.1%	13.3%	11.6%

As seen in the table, approximately one fourth of all the weavers in both rural and urban areas has never attended school and hence they are mostly illiterate. This is a huge problem since uneducated workers might find it challenging to negotiate for fair wages or for their rights. *Gaddidars* will be more easily able to exploit them by paying them less than the market value, impose unfair contracts and even restrict weaver’s access to broader markets. Weavers may also be more prone to injuries since they are more likely to be unaware of safety precautions and how to treat themselves in case of injuries.

Never attending school will make it highly difficult to break the cycle of poverty since the father/mother(uneducated) will also not get their child educated because they might not understand the importance of it. Hence, worsening their socio-economic status.

Suicide

Over 50 weavers committed suicide in Varanasi in the years 2014-2016.¹⁰ The non compliance of wage systems along with the absence of support systems has resulted in their death. As per the report, the government spent only 0.23 percent of the total budget on professional services for handloom which means that a sum less than Rs 50000 was spent out of Rs 1.93 crore which represents the negligence of government.

3.2 Dominance of power loom

The power loom industry in Varanasi was introduced in the 19th century when the British wanted to boost the country's textile production. It came into full control in the year 1950 with hundreds of looms operating throughout the city.¹¹ Although power loom and handlooms exist side by side, there is a clear decline in the popularity of handlooms. The reasons are as follows:

1. Power looms are able to produce fabrics much faster than handlooms because of which they can meet demands of larger markets.¹² By producing for a mass market, there is an increase in the efficiency which leads to a lower labor and production cost. Since handloom weavers of Varanasi are unable to sell at such lower prices, this has reduced the demand for saris and simultaneously led to a reduction in the job opportunities for handloom weavers. This has resulted in lower income affecting their standard of living and leading to debt and poverty for some weavers.
2. The handloom clusters like Bazardiha, Lallapura etc. have become a power looms sector primarily due to handloom products being more costly than power loom products. For eg. Handloom saris are sold at Rs 2000 whereas power loom saris are sold at Rs 400. Moreover, since power looms can implement the same designs of handloom, it is difficult to differentiate between both of them and hence consumers tend to buy the cheaper saris.¹³ Thus, resulting in a loss of livelihood for handloom weavers due to stiff competition from the rising sector.
3. Powerlooms use technology which require less manual work and hence make it easier for workers to operate them. Moreover, there have been changes in taste and preferences with an increase in demand for fast fashion and inexpensive textiles. This is a bane for handloom weavers since their specialised skill is not valued in the market which leads to a decline in the transmission of these traditional skills to younger generations.

3.3 Challenges faced by handloom weavers

1. **High cost of Yarn:** Silk Yarn, also known as raw material, is the most important thing in weaving. However, India, the largest producer of cotton, has seen an increase in the price of cotton over the past few years. Cotton yarn prices have seen an increment of 39% from ₹110/kg in FY 2020-21 to ₹154/kg in FY 2021-22.¹⁴ As the price of yarn increases, the cost of production also increases which directly reduces the weaver's profit margins. Thus, the low income makes it difficult for the weavers to maintain a proper livelihood since they cut back on essential services such as healthcare which may deteriorate their health. Although the government introduced the Yarn Supply Scheme in 1992 in order to provide all types of Yarn at Mill Gates price, the weavers are unaware about it and thus, are not able to take advantage of the government scheme.
2. **Lack of good credit terms:** Since Handloom weavers work independently and need money to set up their business, they often turn up to banks to borrow some money. However, banks are reluctant to lend them because they believe that weavers are not on good credit terms and will not be able to

return their money. Due to this, the weavers turn towards private lenders to meet their demands. In many cases, the weavers are unable to repay the loan and due to the mental harassment and torture they face, many commit suicide(mentioned in numbers above)

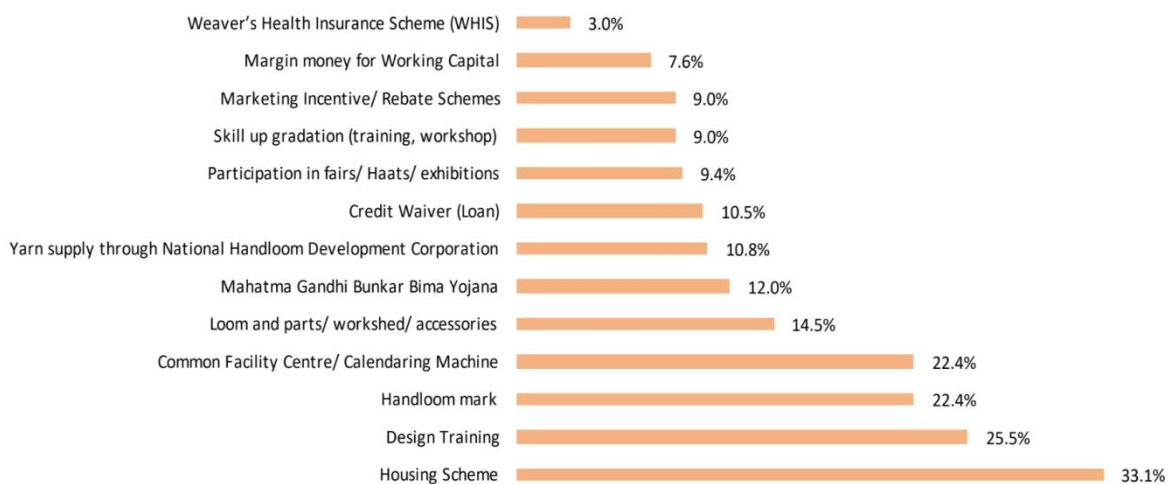
- Lack of market knowledge and advertisement:** As one fourth of the weavers are uneducated, they have imperfect information about the market. Due to the gap between them and the market, they are not always able to produce goods according to the needs of the market. ¹⁵ Moreover, they may be charged extra for raw materials and even underprice their products which results in massive losses for them.

Since they also lack information about the programs or initiatives, they might be unaware of training or healthcare programs. This may lead to them missing out on better opportunities in suitable working conditions.

Without effective advertisement, weavers will struggle to reach a broader audience and promote their products. Unable to do this will lead to customers undervalue their products and without weavers being able to highlight the uniqueness of their products, they will not be able to gain a good customer base and charge high prices. This will lead to lesser buyers which will affect their overall income and hence reduce their standard of living.

- Less knowledge about government schemes:** As seen in the graph, the majority of the handloom weavers have less knowledge about the government schemes which are implemented to help them. Having less knowledge severely impacts the socio economic status of weavers as they will miss out on subsidies for raw materials and other inputs which could have reduced their production costs. Knowledge about Healthcare schemes, welfare programs, educational scholarships and housing assistance would have provided them with a better livelihood and provided them less financial strain.

Table 2 showing the awareness of different government schemes¹⁶



3.4 Results of the surveys and interviews

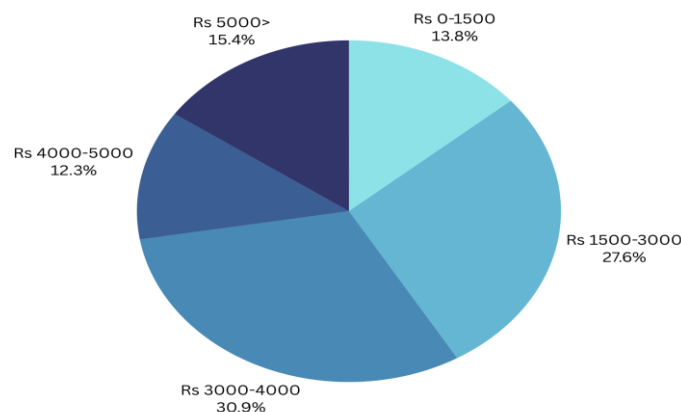
I conducted a random survey along with in depth interviews to find out about the weaver's socio economic status. All 300 weavers from different areas of Varanasi were surveyed and asked to respond to the given questions

Table 3 showing views of weavers in the different problems they face

Sr No	Problems	Yes (in %)	No(in %)
1	Illiterate	87.2	12.8
2	Unaware about government programmes	89	11
3	Poor housing conditions	64.6	35.4
4	Unable to meet basic needs	68.3	31.7
5	In debt	54.7	45.3
6	Low income	67	33
7	Limited market access	58.9	41.1
8	No healthcare support	78.1	21.9
9	Poor working conditions	84.2	15.8
10	Low demand	55.2	44.8
11	Competition with powerloom	74.5	25.5
12	Unhappy with job	97	3

According to the survey, majority of the weavers were facing some kind of difficulties which was making it tough for them to live a proper life. 87.2% of the weavers were found to be illiterate which could be a major reason for 89% of weavers being unaware about government programmes. Although 55.2% found the demand to be pretty low, it is still extremely high because more than half the weavers could not support their family if they had a low demand which also resulted in low income (67%). 78.1 % having no healthcare support means that they were more prone to serious injuries in poor work conditions(84.2% saying yes). This illustrates the low socio economic status of the weavers and how they may not want the next generation to join the weaving industry.

Pie chart showing the different monthly income levels of handloom weavers



Only 15.4% of the weavers earn more than 5000 rupees on a monthly basis which is very difficult to make ends meet. Majority of the weavers earn between 1500-4000 rupees which results in them having no finance for education, healthcare, adequate housing etc. This has been a serious problem and requires immediate government intervention to improve their income status.

4. Conclusion

Industrialization has resulted in the downfall of the handloom industry. Due to high cost of yarn, lack of good credit terms, imperfect market knowledge, unawareness about government schemes etc the handloom industry is on the brink of sinking. Although government policies have been implemented, there needs to be a more direct method of communication between the government and the weavers. Moreover, weavers need to start becoming more educated, fight for their rights and take better control of their product (sarees). They need the Gaddidars to stop exploiting them and provide them with the right prices for the products. It is also important that the government allocates a right amount of funds for weavers which are not misused by top officials and agencies. With handloom businesses dating back to 3000 BC¹⁷, it is necessary to understand its importance and give the right value and respect to both the weavers and the industry. The government has to make sure that a higher usage of powerlooms should not devalue the handloom industry. Also, by spreading awareness about betterment of weavers and the policies through campaigns, posters and advertisements, the weavers will be able to sustain a better life and have an improved socio economic status.

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