

Preserving our Heritage : Protecting and Promoting Handloom

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There is a need for focussed incentive schemes towards handloom research. Technological innovation can create new possibilities for design development and production process. Apart from product technology in terms of equipment and machinery discussed above, it could be process technology in terms of technique of production, usage of machinery and processing of raw materials or finished goods. Innovations in process which save human effort, time and energy are the need of the hour

Understanding the way in which the handloom sector may keep pace with the changing times is not just a matter of academic interest, but is imperative for understanding the varied facets of the sector and planning our policies accordingly. The schemes are to be framed in a manner that addresses the many divergent dimensions of the subject – reviving the age-old tradition in a sustainable manner, increasing income levels, attracting more people to the occupation, reducing drudgery associated with handlooms, enhancing exports and changing the mindset of society in general. Once these issues are clearly delineated, it becomes possible to address each with a distinctly targeted strategy.

Project Handloom As A Niche Product

Handloom is as integral to our cultural heritage as zari is to bridal trousseau. The Rigveda, Mahabharata and Ramayana expound upon the art of weaving. Woven cloth, bone needles and spindles have been found in Mohen-jo-daro and Harappa. A cache of block-painted fabrics, mainly of Gujarati origin, discovered in Egyptian tombs exhibit the demand of Indian cotton textiles abroad and their export since the 19th century B.C.

This tradition of excellence has since been preserved by generations of skilled artisans engaged in the art of weaving by hand. Today, handloom employs over four million weavers and allied production workers, bulk of whom belong to SC, ST, OBC and women. It is the second largest employer next to agriculture. The industry is eco-friendly, decentralized and rural based and is important for our developing economy.

However, the 2010 Handloom Census portrays a dismal trend. The number of weavers is declining at a rate of 7 per cent per annum. The count of handlooms is dwindling. Gen Next is skeptical, disinterested. These indicate that handloom is on the verge of becoming a sunset industry.

The causes for this deterioration are diverse. The Census reveals that a weaver earns merely Rs. 3400 per month, as against the all India average of Rs. 4500 per month for any worker. An art dies if its artisans fail to thrive. Weavers deserve a higher place in the society like any good painter or artist. Hand woven products are unique, they are made with threads replete with passion, patience, elegance and skill. They deserve a matching remuneration. This can be achieved by working the strengths of the sector.

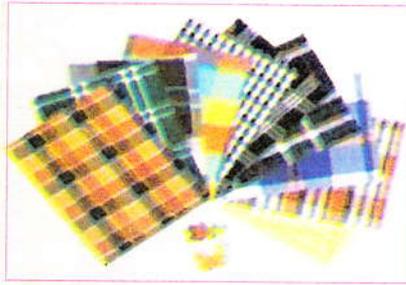
The author is an officer of Indian Administrative Service, 1989 batch Uttar Pradesh cadre. She has worked in the textile sector for 7 years. She was Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Textiles for a little less than 6 years, holding additional charges of Development Commissioner (Handloom), Director General NIFT and Development Commissioner (Handicrafts).

With its quantum and varieties of traditional handloom products, India occupies an enviable place in the world. 85 per cent of the global handloom production occurs here. Other handloom nations like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Indonesia manufacture very limited range of products. These are mainly for domestic consumption. In contrast, our export of handloom products which was US\$ 260 million in 2009-10, increased to US\$ 370 million in 2013-14, registering a growth of over 40 per cent.

This growth rate brings to light the huge potential of the sector. India has the capability to meet the demand for handmade products across the globe due to its demographic advantage and versatile cultural heritage. This requires a targeted approach aligning with the demands of the new era which are multifarious, fast-changing and complex. The weaving industry needs to reflect our rich legacy, and at the same time, imbibe modern designs.

A Benarasi or Chanderi weaver earns more if he contemporises his saree. The earnings increase further if he diversifies into exportable accessories like stoles, scarves, ties, belts, bags, pouches and hand bands or home furnishings such as cushion covers, table runners and curtains. This product development and product diversification calls for a strong collaboration of weavers with designers. National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) has made a good beginning by including cluster attachment in the curriculum. On one hand, a visit to handloom and handicraft clusters sensitizes the students to our invaluable tradition, and on the other, the weavers and artisans benefit in terms of radical design inputs. Jhabua bead dolls can fetch 20 times as much when converted into ear rings and car dangles and upto 100 times when coordinated with handloom pieces for making coasters and napkin holders. Conducting diagnostic studies, documenting them and developing market-friendly products would be a meticulous way of taking this initiative forward. Many more of such long-term

drives would be required to increase the outreach.



Diversified Products

While designers add value to a product, another crucial dimension in the value chain is marketing. Today, the industry fails to recognise the varied needs of the distinct segments of the market. Market segmentation needs to be understood, appreciated and exploited. Premium products like the Patan Patola, the Kani, the Baluchari and the Jamdani should be projected as 'niche products'. With their deft blending of myths, faiths and symbols, weavers provide an appealing dynamism to these unique fabrics. With their inimitable designs and distinct weaving techniques, they should be targeted only at the affluent, and not the common man. Targeting the 'Niche' market segment would get the returns they deserve.



Intricate Designs: Niche Products

The biggest threats in the market place today are powerloom products and cheap imports. Powerloom cloth is cheaper, easier and quicker to make. Moreover, a lay man cannot distinguish between powerloom from handloom. Consequently, unfair trade practices are rampant, powerloom products are clandestinely sold in the name of handloom. There is an urgent need for branding. The Handloom Mark is a guarantee to the buyer that the product is genuinely hand woven, and not a powerloom or mill made item. It certifies the authenticity of the article. But unfortunately, people are not familiar with this mark. There is a need to generate awareness among the general public. Something as simple as a one-line commercial during the daily soaps could be instrumental in enlightening the target group. Only products carrying the Handloom Mark should be exhibited in government sponsored expos in the country and abroad. Apart from raising consciousness, this would ensure that only genuine handloom weavers derive benefits of the schemes.

Your guarantee for genuine hand woven products



Handloom Mark



hand woven
IN INDIA

The social impact, heritage and sheer love for handmade articles are some of the critical elements that will make handloom sustainable. However, this strategy is intended only for the highly skilled weavers with whom designers associate to help them diversify the product base, directed at the elite discerning customers. These constitute only 20 per cent of the weavers who, no doubt, produce 80 per cent of the high-value items. Though this approach serves only a limited segment, it is expected to ensure sustainable revival of the sector. The remaining 80 per cent of

the weavers, for whom handloom is a sole occupation, would need to be dealt with in a different way.

Large Employment Potential: Threats and Measures

We cannot lose sight of the fact that the sector provides direct and indirect employment to more than 43 lakh people, all of whom cannot be trained immediately to make intricate high-end niche products. However, handloom still remains a major source of livelihood in rural and remote areas.

A big threat comes from the powerloom and mill sectors because it is possible to replicate most of the handloom products on powerloom which are easier and quicker to make. Some of the weavers have chosen to update their skillset in mass production. Powerloom has certainly made lives of these weavers easier as it offers scale, accuracy, efficiency and speed. But it has actually taken away the livelihood from many others. People who do not have the means or resources for going into alternative gainful occupations or even for switching over to powerlooms, especially when there is acute shortage of power in the country, are the worst sufferers.

In this scenario, it is essential to implement schemes with the sole aim of helping the sector and safeguarding the livelihood of lakhs of handloom weavers. However, I wish to give a clarification here for the sake of those who argue otherwise, believing that handloom is an antidote to 'development' and 'mass production'



with the help of mills. I wish to emphasise that the two sectors are equally important but are very different and require distinct strategies. The two sectors should not compete with each other. In reality, they

complement and supplement each other; while one can clothe the world, the other can provide employment to millions. Our government has been following a policy of promoting and encouraging both the sectors. However, this article limits itself to the handloom sector and protection thereof.

To protect handlooms from powerlooms and mill sector, the Handlooms (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act was enacted in 1985. Under the Act, 11 textile articles are at present reserved exclusively for production on handlooms (with certain technical specifications). These are not allowed for production on powerloom or in mills. Violation of the Reservation Order invites penalty.

Government also provides subsidized yarn to handloom weavers through National Handloom Development Corporation. With the objective of ensuring adequate availability of yarn to handloom weavers at reasonable prices, a mechanism has been put in place under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955. This is called Hank Yarn Obligation. This makes it mandatory for spinning mills to produce certain percentage of their yarn in hank form, which is required for handlooms.

The mill sector across the value



chain opposes these two measures vehemently. But the need of the hour is to continue with these dispensations as they provide some protection to the vulnerable handloom sector. In fact, the need is to strengthen the implementation machinery and ensure effective enforcement in the field.

Another cause of concern is the availability of credit to the sector. The 3rd Census shows that 61 per cent are independent weavers, 34 per cent work under master weavers / private owners and only 5 per cent are under institutional employment. Further, it is mentioned in the weaver's profile that weavers are generally not cash rich. Agents, master weavers, mediators do not always allow the weavers to get the value for money for their effort. The handloom weavers are not only cash-strapped, but also less educated and less resourceful. Their distress is compounded by the fact that they do not have access to formal sources of credit.

Acknowledging the financial crisis faced by them, the government, in 2011, announced a financial package of Rs 3000 crore for waiving off the loans of weavers and cooperative societies. The objective was to open the choked credit lines and make them eligible for loan again. With very liberal guidelines and interpretation, only about a thousand crore rupees of loan was waived off across all states and only about fifty thousand individual weavers benefitted, apart from handloom societies. The outcome was an eye opener for many. It revealed that not much credit had flown to the sector over the last many decades.

This called for radical measures and the government then decided to extend loan to the sector at 6 per cent rate of interest. This highly subsidized loan can be used for creation of capital assets as well as working capital. This scheme can prove to be a game changer if implemented in the right earnest. This can provide the much needed working capital to the weavers, apart from helping in putting up facilities for dyeing, processing and finishing of handloom fabric.

As regards the educational level of the weavers, the Census indicates that 83 per cent of the weavers are under HSLC level and only 17 per cent are HSLC and above. This points to a very worrying mindset: that the profession is meant for the less educated. This takes away all the sense of pride associated with the occupation. If we want to keep the next generation in the sector, we have to start treating handloom weaving as a modern profession like fine arts, photography, music etc. As a first step, institutes like NIFT can start imparting training in handloom clusters. Their prestigious programs meant for professionals, like the Continuing Education Programme, can be started exclusively for the wards of handloom weavers. A NIFT certificate will instill a sense of pride in them, apart from upgrading and broad basing their skills, which will then become standardized, employable and marketable. It must be remembered that the sector has been sustained by transferring skills from one generation to another and it is crucial to keep Gen Next in the profession.

Need for Technological Upgradation

As per Section 2(b) of the Handloom (Reservation of Articles for Protection) Act, 1985, "Handloom means any loom other than powerloom". As per the Bureau of Indian Standards, "Handloom is a hand operated machine for producing cloth by weaving. In some instances, the shedding is performed by foot operation."

Let us go into the technical details of the process of weaving by hand. As discussed above, weaving in

handlooms involves three primary motions: Shedding, Picking and Beating. Shedding motion separates warp threads, according to the desired pattern to allow for weft insertions. Inserting the length of weft through the shed is the Picking operation. After that, the reed pushes or beats up the weft to the fell of the cloth. These three motions are carried out by a weaver without using power. There is a tremendous scope of mechanizing these motions, without using electricity. In addition, the pre-loom motions like winding and sizing and post-loom operations can also be mechanized, reducing the drudgery to a large extent. This dimension, so far, has remained unnoticed and unexplored. Research in this area will reduce toil without destroying the essence of weaving by hand.

A huge debate is going on in the country on this issue of mechanization of handloom. In 2013, the Planning Commission had suggested to re-define handloom as "any hybrid loom on which at least one process of weaving requires manual intervention or human energy for production." The Ministry had suggested the use of hybrid looms, using power for accomplishing some of the motions involved. As expected, the idea was opposed by the weaver community across the country, and widespread agitations followed. I would say this opposition was right because the move could have crucified the art of handloom in years to come. Powerloom products which are today being clandestinely sold in the name of handloom, would then be rightfully competing with genuine handloom products and defeating them hands down. Powerloom weavers (outnumbering handloom weavers) would have cornered the benefits of government schemes being implemented for protection and development on handloom sector. This would have ensured that the sun sets for handloom sector sooner rather than later. Thankfully, in 2014, the Textile Ministry took a stand to retain the existing definition of 'handloom' as 'any loom other than power loom'. At the same time, it recommended to

review the definition with an aim to achieve better productivity and reduce manual intervention.

I wish to argue that the existing definition does not exclude mechanization of the primary and secondary motions. Mechanization does not imply use of power. It simply means using mechanical energy, tools and technique to improve efficiency and reduce drudgery. It simply means using machines.

In fact, handloom itself is a machine. But it is observed that the conventional loom's structure is not scientifically and ergonomically designed. Conventional techniques involve tedious processes, full-time involvement, physical discomfort, and lesser monetary return. According to a survey, continuous exposure to such horrendous processes caused body soreness and chronic nervous disruption in the palm, hands and legs of the weavers.

What bothers is that there is not much technology induction in the handloom sector, due to the limited research and inherent scope. The traditional techniques are still most popular. As a result, hand weaving remains labour-intensive and low productive as ever.

In order to increase the production of fabrics on handloom, innovation and improvisation become necessary. Mechanization will improve the efficiency of the weaver and the quality of the woven fabric with existing levels of operational skills. The first step towards technological upgradation was the flying shuttle patented by John Kay in 1773. It was a key development in weaving because it made manual skill redundant in the Picking motion. Later, as a part of the developmental activities, various technical interventions have been made in the form of dobby and jacquard for complex weaving patterns, SPS Korvoi sley and Catch cord system for weaving solid borders and multiple buti sley for making many butis simultaneously. These have improved the weaver's efficiency manifold. Twin cloth weaving mechanism for weaving

mats, stoles, etc of narrow width and multiple box motion for continuous weaving of two different kinds of weft also reduce fatigue.

If we wish small units in the handloom sector to take weaving at a commercial level, the work hours spent on loom would be quite longer. The requirements for commercial purpose are different from that of domestic weaving which requires modification of the workstations. Semi-automatic handlooms are a good solution for the common weavers. These could also be coupled with automatic take-up and let-off mechanism. Roller temple could be used in place of wooden/bamboo temple and warp & fabric beams could be provided on the existing handloom. These would combine versatility with ease of operation.

There is a need for focussed incentive schemes towards handloom research. Technological innovation can create new possibilities for design development and production process. Apart from product technology in terms of equipment and machinery

discussed above, it could be process technology in terms of technique of production, usage of machinery and processing of raw materials or finished goods. Innovations in process which save human effort, time and energy are the need of the hour. The secondary motions, i.e., pre-loom and post-loom motions could all be mechanized. In fact, they can even be motorized because they do not form part of the weaving process. In addition, the three primary motions need to be seen individually and tried for technical improvements by operations research so that the strain levels of the weaver reduce. These motions could then be performed mechanically without using electricity.

The biggest challenge is adoption of the new technologies developed. This is due to lack of dissemination and also reluctance on the weaver's part to adopt them due his belief in the age-old traditional technique he is used to. This would require focused attention by making them an integral part of all government schemes. The R&D coupled with its effective percolation down to the field would

manifest as large scale employment and production.

The scenario where handloom fabric is routinely produced on a commercial scale poses problems of marketing. This is where the government would be required to step in again. A demand from the sector is to link it with MGNREGA. This is worth pondering over. As on date, states supplies free uniforms to school children and Anganwadi workers. A decision can be taken to use only hand woven fabric for this purpose. Handloom workers enrolled under MGNREGA and can be given the wages if they manufacture the prescribed length of cloth which can then be supplied to the schools and anganwadi centres.

The challenge for our researchers and scientists is to introduce technology for enlarging the production base and upgrade the process without compromising the Unique Selling Proposition, the distinctive features and the emotional aspect of handloom. □

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