

WEAVING DREAMS, LIVING IN NIGHTMARE: SITUATION OF BANARASI SAREE WEAVING SECTOR OF VARANASI

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Abstract:

The present paper looks into the situational analysis of weavers of Banarasi saree, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. The life of weavers is characterized by abject poverty, chronic malnutrition, varied health hazards and even hunger deaths and suicides. In-put cost is unbearable for many and profit is taken by middlemen. Globalization has severely affected economically vulnerable small weavers pushing them below poverty line. State machinery is apathetic and whatever schemes and programmes exist, fail to do any good to weavers who are battling hard to keep this one of the finest legacies of Indian culture alive. Situation of women and children is worse. Women are engaged in mundane work of thread-cutting, zari-filling and the like and are paid merely Rs.10-15 per day for 12-16 hours of work. Children are denied schooling to speed up saree-production. Suggestive interventions are highlighted in the paper.

INTRODUCTION

Saree – a six yard long piece of cloth – signifies the elegance, charm, grace and beauty of Indian woman. And, Banarasi Saree, with almost eight hundred years old tradition, has an important niche in the cultural contours of India. However, the life of weavers (or creators) of these wonderful banarasi saris is not as beautiful as the creation. Majority of small artisans and their families, though mostly on the brink of survival, are dependent on this traditional crafts for a living. In this era of globalization, the exquisite traditional art of hand woven banarasi saree is under serious threat and is passing through a time of crisis.

During the medieval period, along with Moguls, skilled Muslim weavers from the West Asian countries came to India. These weavers found Varanasi complementing to their art of intricate pattern of weaving and settled there under the patronage of the then Muslim rulers. The fusion of Hindu design pattern with Muslim ones had put Varanasi at the helm of silk weaving activities.

Socio-demographic profile of weavers

There is scarcity of reliable data on the magnitude of weavers and their socio-demographic details. According to a survey conducted by the Uttar Pradesh Handloom Corporation in 1995-96, there are 75,313 handlooms and 1,24,832 handloom weavers and 1758 power-looms and 2645 power-looms workers. However, since then, numbers of looms and weavers has increased

significantly. According to an unofficial estimate, there are around 5,00,000 weavers in the district. Further, the weavers are predominantly Muslim. There are two significant marginalized groups of weavers - poor Muslims and dalits. Majority of them are with little or no education.

There are three types of weavers - Individual weavers, Master Weavers and Weaver of the Cooperative Society. Individual weavers, the most marginalized lot, use their own material, loom, design and colour. However, generally, they are dependent on Gaddidars or middlemen or traders for marketing of their sarees. Gaddidars often control production and marketing of sarees and have considerable influence upon the life-situations of weaving community.

The sari industry is a household industry spread over the entire Varanasi district. As family business, skills in weaving are handed down over generations. In fact, there are no factories that manufacture banarasi saree. Around eighty percent of looms are manual and it takes about a week to fortnight to complete one saree.

Creating banarasi sarees

Since the beginning, banarasi sarees were woven on 'pit-type' handlooms, where a weaver sits with his legs in the pit. The looms are installed within the houses but separated from the living areas and are being run mostly by family members and partly by hired labour. In recent times, power-looms are also inducted. Sarees produced on handlooms are different from those created on power-looms in terms of designs and even production processes. Both types of saris have their separate market niche.

Production of a saree on handloom undergoes many stages - the silk yarn called *Katan* is reeled, bleached and dyed. The dyed yarn is prepared for *Tana* (warp) and *Bana* (weft). The length of yarn reeled on a five feet long warp cylinder is sufficient for six lengths of a saree (33 meters). Yarn for the weft is reeled on a small (few centimetres long) cylindrical object and the process is called *Nari Bharna*. Many such reels are needed to complete a saree. It is used in shuttle (*Dhirri*) and used to bring out designs (*Buti*) on sarees. Once set-up, six sarees are produced in a row till the warp yarn is exhausted.

Many interactional and power dynamics are observed in the production and sale of sarees. Generally, a master weaver supplies material, design, colours and ideas. He engages wage earners, oversees entire weaving process and markets finished products. On the contrary,

individual weavers themselves arrange for raw materials and design sarees in their own way. Sky-rocking prices of silk are out of the reach of many poor weavers who, then, resort to cheap artificial fibres. Using relatively poor quality of raw material fetches weavers lesser piece-rate earning. They do not have control over the marketing of sarees and have to depend on Gaddidars or master weavers. Individual weavers have poor connections in raw material market as well as retail market of silk fabrics. They often overwork hastily to earn more. Traders too exploit weavers in myriad of ways – they point out many defects viz. stains, defective design or pattern, motifs, etc., and only after considerable haggling, the final deal is struck. A weaver, in immediate need of cash, is forced to accept a cheap rate. He is often given a post-dated cheque of a faraway bank, which an agent encashes only after taking 2-3 percent commission. Weavers, cut off from the market, are not able to actively participate in price negotiation of their produce and are at loss. Contrarily, traders enjoy twin advantages — market information and mercantile capital. Interestingly, nearly three hundred traders, mostly Hindus, dominate and control weaving community, who are mostly Muslims.

Sale of saree

Generally, piece-rate of silk saree made on handloom varies from 300 to 1000 rupees, depending on the complexity of design. Independent loom-owners do not have the holding capacity and immediate dire need of money forces them to compromise with lower piece-rate. Also, traders often find excuses on grounds of flaws in the quality of weaving to make deductions from even the agreed price. Consequently, when the product is taken as substandard or there is low demand in the market, weavers have to sell it at a price that may not even cover the labour cost. In the weaving industry, imitation is not valued. As soon as the design is copied, the product gets devalued and weavers have to bear the loss.

Globalization Impact

The Varanasi weaving industry has experienced significant decline since the early 1990s. Policies to promote free trade have harmed the industry. Cheaper textile imports have gained prominence with the advancement of the Negotiations on Non-Agricultural Market Access (NAMA) by the World Trade Organization (WTO), which have lead to freezing or declining of import tariffs including on textiles such as sarees. In 2001, India removed its quantitative restrictions on silk imports. This opened unrestricted import of Chinese plain crepe fabrics – a direct substitute for hand-woven silk sarees, having a crippling effect on Banarasi sarees.

Further, there is decline in demand of Banarasi sarees due to the global economic slowdown. Often perceived as a luxury wedding dress, Banarasi sarees are not in priority list of an average consumer hard-pressed of money. Due to its high maintenance and high cost, people hardly prefer this spectacular attire. And weavers too are neither getting sufficient means to meet both ends nor the social status, through it.

With population growth among weavers, there is more supply of skilled labour and much less matching demand. It leads to unjust price/wages to weavers. Since 1990s labour wages have declined to about half of what they were earlier. Further, fluctuating silk price and artificial shortages created by the suppliers have put weavers in a precarious situation. Also, the power looms are snatching the work from handloom weavers. Middlemen and Gaddidars are living like parasites on their earnings.

Fashion market is denoted by fast changing fads and styles. Today's fashion is marked by convenience and low cost of production. Time-phase when uniqueness of the creation was appreciated and patronised at a great cost has perhaps lapsed. Now, in this changed scenario, large volumes of sarees with low quality are produced that are available at cheaper rates.

In addition, weaving industry is facing crisis due to problems in availability of raw silk. This scarcity is often created by traders. For small weavers buying one bundle (5-6 kilogram of raw silk) is economically strained. Not having enough business reduces their purchasing power. Prior to 1990, silk was available for Rs.100/- per Kg and now it is over Rs.1500/-. Ironically, scarcity of raw material exists despite the free-trade policies.

Imported Chinese silk is cheaper and is available at Rs.1100/- per kg, and hence it has become the choice of most artisans. While multinational players are being given a free hand to operate, potentially weaver friendly institutions such as cooperatives are being allowed to decay, at the cost of the marginalised weaver.

Further, Surat produces artificial silk thread, available at much lower cost. Duplicate Banarasi sarees are being produced using artificial material. This has severely hurt the Varanasi weaving sector, putting pressure to reduce the cost of original Banarasi saree in the market. As the middlemen and shopkeepers do not forsake their profits, the weakest link - a weaver has to bear the brunt, in terms of reduced wages.

Production woes

Power-looms also have their own set of problem - electricity connection is not easily available. Moreover, chronic power shortage cripples the saree production. Lack of natural light and inadequate power supply hampers the work of weavers. Nearly ninety percent of weavers have not been able to pay their electricity bills, which may amount to two lakh rupees. Many families have sold their houses for payment of electricity bills and have gone to the other localities. Ironically, ten percent of weavers having power-looms do not have enough money to get a connection - they are thus stealing electricity.

Economic Vulnerability

According to District Sample Survey (2008), there are 40 percent of weavers living below poverty line. Unofficial estimate by PVCHR brings out that almost double the numbers of weavers are financially strained. As discussed earlier, their economic vulnerability is characterized by shrinkage of demand of hand-woven sarees due to availability of cheap, imported alternatives and inadequate interventions by the government, civil society organisations and others. Consequently, they are left on the brink of survival, to face hunger, unemployment, gross underemployment, poor living and working conditions, consequent poor health and exploitation. Lack of workers organisations in some areas and ineffective ones in other areas further accentuate the problem.

In the cases, when designs are given to the weavers for production their own creativity is lost and their contribution is reduced to merely a skilled labour. As they are cut off from the market, traders dictate their designs claiming to keep pace with changing fashion trends. These issues have a major economic implication for the weavers.

Further, there is no system of written contract for wage determination. Weavers go and buy raw silk from market or from Gaddidars. If it is the latter, then it is an advance by Gaddidars to weavers. Till the time the saree is sold in the market, weavers do not get anything. In order to meet bare survival needs, in the intervening period, weavers may have to borrow money or take advance from Gaddidars, and that is the beginning of a form of bondage with the creditor. Many times, weavers are forced to involve their children to repay the loan.

It is unfortunate that even after two-three generations of weaving occupation, many families fail to own a loom. In many cases, looms are on contract and are owned by Gaddidars. There has been virtually no increase in the wages for the past five years. Most of the weavers' families are virtually living in abject poverty. And to survive, all able-bodied family members including children are drawn into labour market.

Another manifestation of economic vulnerability is seen as many skilled artisans have left weaving and resort to pulling rickshaws, making incense sticks, peeling and selling green chanas (seasonal work), and women are into domestic labour serving middle class families in their neighbourhood. As a survival strategy, many weavers are migrating to Surat.

Women in saree-production

Few Indian bridal trousseaus are complete without the inclusion of an exquisite Banarasi saree. However, the women behind the creation of spectacular yards of fabric are hardly given their due. They are involved in the entire creative process—from weaving to adding embellishments to giving the final touch. Although women are rarely seen working directly on the looms, without them it would be impossible to make a Banarasi saree. Most women work to supplement their family incomes, particularly if family is not in a position to hire workers. Some even work as contract labour, though rarely.

"We have to continuously work for long hours, weaving designs into the sarees, but in the end, it is the men who are known as weavers and we are just referred to as hired labourers," complains Lalti Devi, 48 years, Lohata, Varanasi. The role played by women in Banarasi Saree weaving process is crucial, but they are neither given due recognition nor remuneration.

Banarasi sarees are characterised by their intricate weave and heavy gold and silver brocade work. Women are responsible for filling zari into the design, ensuring that the embroidery is taut, and also snipping off extra threads (called *saree katran*) from finished product—all seemingly menial but critical, strenuous, unstimulating and repetitive chores. They continuously sit for 6-7 hours.

Gender disparity is also seen in terms of wages — generally, weavers earn anywhere between 500 to 1,500 rupees a month, their female counterparts receive a paltry — 200 to 400 rupees a month. The plight of women is such that even if they earn Rs.10/- a day they do not have the right to spend it as per their will.

Children in saree production

Children of the weaving community are perhaps the worst affected lot. They lose out their childhood as their mothers work for long hours, there are no crèche or day-care facility and they loiter unattended. They are denied their right to health, education and other opportunities for development. When uncared, many children are drawn towards drugs, criminal elements and

indulge in other undesirable / anti-social activities.

Further, children are made to sit on looms so as to speed up their saree-production. They help in creating design pattern (Buti) and operating the shuttle (*Dharki phakna*). Children are sold and bought for meagre amount or loan extended to their parents. A bonded person however can move from one owner to another provided the new owner pays off the outstanding debt to the first owner.

Health vulnerability

Weavers and their families suffer from a range of health problems. Many develop respiratory ailments related to breathing in fibres and dust from the fabrics they work with. Exposure to silk and cotton fibres put them at high risk of tuberculosis, particularly Multi Drug Resistance Tuberculosis (MDTRB).

Added to this, malnutrition (both acute and chronic) and exhaustion are common especially among women and children. Also, many weaver-families depend on government-subsided food distribution, which is often delayed. Reportedly, hunger deaths are not rare. In the outskirts of Varanasi, twelve children have died in 2008 from malnutrition (Ahmed, 2008).

Weavers, more often than not, are denied their Right to Health and despite a wide web of primary healthcare system, remain out of the coverage. Indeed, some health coverage is guaranteed to holders of Antodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) cards, which are increasingly distributed to the weaver community. However, in Varanasi, few weavers or other laborers receive proper benefits, which are often only guaranteed if they have political contacts or are willing to give bribes to gain access to government hospitals.

Ironically, since the women in weaving sector as 'workers' are not recognised in the sector, they are even deprived of healthcare benefits. They suffer from backache and poor eyesight as they work in dark dingy places sitting continuously for seven to eight hours. When ailing, women have to shell out money for treatment as they do not fall under any health-schemes. By not providing adequate healthcare and welfare infrastructure for women workers the Government is culpable of making women suffer silently and live considerably reduced life span. Added to this, socialization characterized by patriarchy make women learn to avoid and postpone health service utilization.

Likewise, weavers sit on hand loom machines to weave the sarees. As most of the looms are situated at the residence where there is no adequate ventilation and provision of light, it results in weavers being afflicted by weak eyesight and serious respiratory ailments including byssinosis (An occupational respiratory disease characterised by shortness of breath, cough and wheezing due to allergic reaction to dust and fungi in cotton, flax and hemp fibres. Prolonged exposure may result in chronic airway obstruction, bronchitis, and emphysema with fibrosis, leading to respiratory failure), and is often inadequately diagnosed as Tuberculosis. Also, the loom is partially embedded into the ground, and one needs to make a pit for weaver to be able to keep his legs. In the pit the temperature is different resulting in numbness of lower portion of the body. The health hazards are well put in the words of Arjun, a weaver, "Handlooms today are the graves of living people."

Further, reduction of labour wages has a direct, negative impact on their nutritional status. They fall sick easily, and diseases like tuberculosis, Pneumoconiosis, swelling of limbs, stomach ailments, backache, anaemia, weakness and debility, etc., are common among weavers.

When meeting survival needs is in question, giving priority to health does not exist. Food, housing, transport, loan repayment and other expenses have greater priority in the lives of weavers. Women do not go to seek medical advice unless they are bedridden. Even then, using precarious family finances on themselves put women into guilt.

Over the past decade, situation of most weavers has deteriorated into a pitiful state, as they face increased poverty, hunger, health issues and inability to provide for their families. As a consequence, since 2002, 175 weavers have committed suicide (PVCHR, 2005).

Role of State

The government responded to the plight of weavers by establishing co-operative institutions. The objective was to develop forward (marketing of sarees) and backward (providing raw silk) linkages to ameliorate conditions of weavers. Micro-credit facility forms an important component.

However, being plagued with mismanagement and corruption, cooperatives have failed in fulfilling their objectives. Benefits have not reached to poor weavers. A few resourceful persons among weaver-community have floated fictitious cooperatives and pocketed benefits. These handfuls of beneficiaries within the Muslim weavers emerged as another set of traders calling

themselves as Master Weavers. They get workers cards issued from the silk cooperatives, and obtain silk raw material from the cooperatives as workers. In cooperatives, members have thrift fund and insurance facilities. Master weavers, with dummy membership, try to seize the benefits. Apparently, whole structure of cooperatives facilitates bigger weavers to take advantage of the subsidy offered.

Seemingly, instead of ameliorating the plight of weavers, cooperative institutions of the government have created further misery for them, by helping create another set of exploiters – the master weavers. The cooperative intervention has made a very conspicuous difference in their lives. It has created islands of affluence in an otherwise poor locality of weavers.

The silk price range generally is Rs. 1100-1600 per kilogram. However, reportedly, at times, the price in government cooperatives is higher than the price in open market. During periods of shortages of silk supply some weavers who are in the good books of committee members do get some raw material.

Further, a bank loan of nearly ten thousand is available for setting up handlooms, but is allegedly used by functionaries of cooperatives. Despite high awareness levels, there is apparent apathy to avail services and schemes of the government among weavers.

Suggestive intervention

Viewing the vulnerable conditions of weaving community, multi-stakeholder, multipronged and sustained effort is required so as to improve the situation. Some suggestive actions are placed:

- Establishment or revival of trade unions, cooperatives and other workers' organisations is must for sustainable development. One Bunkar Dastkaar Adhikaar Manch (BDAM, meaning Forum for Rights of Weavers and Artisans) with strength of 500 weavers is formed by PVCHR in 2003 for ensuring rightful share of weaving community. It focuses on - right to health, right to food and revival of the handloom industry.
- An online portal on weaving could go a long way in spreading awareness and promoting sales. It would enhance direct market access to weavers, nationally and internationally.
- Other mechanisms of direct market access can be 'artisan *haats*' in the line of '*Dilli Haat*' and exhibitions at local and national levels. Besides this, up-gradation/integration of weavers' expositions into the traditional *melas* of Varanasi would be beneficial.
- A local museum to document the various practices in the saree-weaving sectors is

required. It would help artisans appreciate their past heritage, instil pride and ownership and understand practices in different sectors and regions. It would also aid in making general public aware of the sector, and appreciate the nuances of production, which is taken for granted.

- Crèches and day care centres and educational/nutritional facilities for children of working mothers are required.
- Preventive and promotive health programmes are required. Since occupational diseases such as byssinosis, numbness in the limbs, deterioration of eyesight, etc., need special attention, which is not available in general hospitals, at least one dedicated hospital is needed for weaver community.
- Sensitisation of government offices especially enforcement wings of labour commissioners offices would ensure better linkage with societal and state resource system. Reforms and transparency in the work of state is needed for schemes and programmes to work.
- Exposure visits for weavers to states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, etc., to learn about best practices in these states on exchange basis would help in quality and innovation in saree weaving.
- Illiteracy leads to ignorance and vulnerability. Establishment of night schools to spread literacy among weavers is needed.
- Further studies to understand the sector better, and map best practices for learning, even from other states are needed. For example, the framework of the Bharat Bunkar Kendra, established by the Govt. during the 1960s needs to be revitalised. Similarly silk licensing mechanism needs to be understood, as politics of licensing is of critical relevance to the upliftment single weavers. Occupational health issues should be researched.
- For increasing market access among weavers, professionally managed cooperatives should be established. This would minimize or eliminate role of middlemen in saree-sale.
- Setting up of cooperative bank/Thrift and Credit Society for weavers would make capital accessible to weavers at low interest rates, thus freeing them from clutches of moneylenders and middlemen.
- Creation of special enabling mechanisms to meet differential needs of women weavers to facilitate their role in the industry is needed. These could include designing special looms, self, help groups and special fund for women weavers to help them become economically independent.

- A special cell is needed in the office of the handicrafts commissioner to address grievances and complaints. Information regarding this cell and its functions should be disseminated widely.
- Study of other weaving systems used in the North – Eastern states and in other countries needs to be undertaken to improve loom design, especially with reference to women's needs.
- Special shops selling the products 'directly from weavers' need to be established, to ensure better prices to weavers.
- 'Silk depots' for easy availability of raw material should be established.
- Better electricity supply would enhance saree-production.

Banarasi saree forms an integral part of Indian epitome of cultural contours. Through this article a small attempt has been made to urge to all the readers to revive, preserve and promote this exquisite traditional art form by doing their bit. And this may, hopefully, provide worth, dignity, creative fulfilment and a rightful place in society to weavers of this astonishing attire.

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