

UPDATE

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Why would Handloom Weavers commit suicide?

The East India Company started the first cotton mill in India in Calcutta and the second in Bombay. Thus the struggle for the survival of the cotton growers and the handloom weavers became the main focus in the struggle for freedom from British rule. This Sector employs nearly 12.40 million people, but today, this sector has been much neglected while India throws open its economy to foreign investors.

Historical Background

The Handloom weaving as an ancient skill has always drawn many to its folds considering the respectability and the remunerative capabilities it commanded. Originally only eighteen caste groups in the central-western and southern states of the country had the privilege of being weavers, as it was a particular skill of weaving art been passed down to them from their elders. These clans expanded to include many more castes in their profession due to the incentives just mentioned.

The profession as a whole prospered until the arrival of the British, who resorted to the harshest of steps to pull down the traditional weavers which were more than good enough to threaten the existence of their own burgeoning cloth industry.

Things industries were not helped much in the post-independence period when apathetic appointments such as the Kanungo Commission (1952) which strongly advocated the promotion of mill cloth at the expense of handloom cloth.

The Sivaraman Committee (1974) reported that for every powerloom set up, six handlooms are rendered dormant. Strong steps advocated to curtail the growth of the powerloom sector came to naught due to the incredible lobbying power of powerloom owners. This resulted in loss of 41.76 lakh jobs during the year 1982-83 in the traditional sector.

The Abid Hussain Committee recommended that all spinning mills are required to produce 50% hank yarn, the kind of yarn used by handloom weavers as against cone yarn used by powerlooms. This rule was brazenly pushed aside in that hank yarn delivered between 1987-88 and 1994-95 never exceeded 26%. Moreover the power mills also arranged the diversion of hank yarn to powerlooms.

Present realities

Yarn prices had risen in the late eighties by an order of above 100% since the 1960s with out a corresponding increase in cloth prices. The indiscriminate foreign exchange gathering drive by the government has

resulted in over export, thus pushing up further the prices of yarn.

On the other hand, the demand for chemical dyes has fallen due to awareness regarding environmental pollution but again due to the indiscriminate export policy, natural dyes are not available in adequate amounts in the domestic market resulting in their high prices.

Eruption of hundreds of bogus co-operative societies masquerading as handloom concerns, but mainly carrying on powerloom production of cloth has only added to the tangle.

Export promoted policy formulation, disguised tax concessions, indiscriminate subsidies to textile mills and so on have only rubbed salt on to the already festering wounds inflicted upon the handloom sector.

Occasionally, the handloom weavers are even forced to take their lives as master weaver declare layoffs when the price of yarn skyrockets, which is not a rare occurrence in the least . By the end of 1991, hundred and ten starvation or suicide deaths of handloom weavers were reported from Andhra Pradesh. The sad fact remains that weavers and farmers are not protected by any labour welfare regulations whatsoever, such as accident compensation, medical benefits, minimum wages, etc. Since handloom weaving is a family based occupation, child labour is common feature.

Governmental measures

The National Textile Policy was the first fertile attempt by the Government to provide for the security of interests of the weavers. The steps outlined in the policy are:

1. Modernization of looms to improve handloom productivity and quality.
2. Necessary measures to encourage and increase spinning in Khadi sector, given its large employment potential.
3. Ensuring the availability of yarn and other raw materials at reasonable prices
4. Encouragement to the production of mixed and blended fabrics on handlooms by making man-made fiber adequately available at reasonable prices by increasing domestic production.

5. Providing market facilities.
6. Introduction of Contributory Thrift Fund and Workshed-cum-Housing Scheme.

The Handloom Reservation Act recommended reservation of 22 varieties of articles for exclusive production in the handloom sector. Powerful lobbies of mill owners succeeded in stalling the implementation of the Act for eight long years. It was with a Supreme Court intervention that the Act was included in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution. But the liberalisation regime dictated otherwise.

Two innovative schemes, the Mill Gate Price Scheme (MGPS) and the Hank Yarn Price Subsidy Scheme (HYPS) were constituted by the Government to ensure a smooth supply of yarn to weavers at reasonable prices. But in the course of time, these government policies also became unsuccessful.

The Loom Distribution Scheme of 1993 also failed to bear fruit as it was just a matter of adding to the existing stock of 2.79 idle looms.

Scheme after scheme kept floating by. The most ambitious one was just round the corner which included a remarkably high cost of Rs. 8449.15 crores - Three thousand Handloom Development Centres (HDCs) and five hundred Quality Dyeing Units (QDUs). But the pace at which this scheme has been implemented runs contrary to its lofty claims and many of the centres under this project are yet to start functioning.

Organisation

The handloom industry consists of three segments:

1. The Co-operatives, which were floated to ensure that the interests of small weavers were protected from the selfish motives of the powerful traders. Instead, bogus co-operatives started cropping up with intentions of cornering benefits like loans and market facilities.
2. Independent weavers own the instruments of production, purchase raw materials, carry on production in their own small way and sell cloth to a merchant or in the market. Considering the meager returns they get, many independent weavers with even two or three looms have left their independent work and are working as wage labourers with master weavers, where the degree of exploitation is too high.
3. Master weavers have been in the business for a long time and have over the course of time become well-established. They are in an unassailable position as far

as their exploitation of shed workers is concerned. They function as money lenders, industrialists, traders and entrepreneurs.

The process of undesirable change in this sector has almost decimated the independent weaver segment. An estimate says that 36% of weavers earn less than Rs. 300 per month while only 12 % earn Rs.1,000 per month. The average daily earnings are merely Rs. 14-15 only putting them well below the poverty line. They thus move into less remunerative but surer jobs such as *bidi* making. Very often women weavers are forced to take on work as sex slaves, as weaving cannot sustain the family .

Independent voices against exploitation

There have been many attempts by weavers and organisations representing them to take on the mighty forces ranged against them. After the starvation deaths of weavers, the handloom weavers of Prakasham district in Tamilnadu were engaged in a heroic struggle. In Kerala, the Handloom Weavers Protection Forum (HWPF), while struggling to expose the corrupt co-operative societies, were also engaged in protecting handlooms from alternative - production and consumption perspectives. The Tamil Nadu Handloom Weavers Union was also organising weavers to stand up for their rights.

A United attempt

The South India Handloom Weavers Organising Committee (SIHWOC), was formed in March 1995. Being a federation of weavers' movements and organisations in South India the SIHWOC aims to form a mass organisation beyond caste, creed, gender and political groupings. It has already organised several campaigns to press for

their demands. Although the lamp has been lit for the struggle of the handloom weavers, there still remains a long way to go. The issue of the handloom weavers has its roots in the colonial period and it still continues in this neo-colonial phase, putting forward a new challenge to the struggle

For your solidarity & more information contact:-

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ACTION ALERT

EVICTON THREAT TO MANAKAVALAMPILLAI NAGAR COMMUNITY

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OVERVIEW:

Manakavampillai Nagar is located 5 kms. away from Tirunelveli Town. Moreover 2000 families are residing in this village of which 1000 families live in Porampokku land. A large number of dalit people who do the Scavenging job for their livelihood, have been living in this place for the past 30 years. They are the first occupants of this place who developed the place for residing. They were paying House Tax, Electricity charge for the past 20 years and they have obtained ration cards. They are included in the voters list too. However, no one could obtain patta for their land. Subsequently people of other communities started to occupy land nearby and they constructed beautiful houses without pattas. The scavengers continue to live in small huts due to their financial crisis. Interestingly, Corporation limit has been recently demarcated incorporating their place, where the scavengers live, as part of the Corporation.

Towards the end of second week of August 1998, the Commissioner of Tirunelveli Corporation issued notice asking the villagers to vacate their houses on or before 31st August 1998, failing which Corporation would demolish their houses. The villagers realised the plot behind and refused to accept the Corporation notice. Subsequently, Corporation authorities send 'Drum Beater' and announced this order in public. This had created panic and a lot of tension in minds of people and they approached Rural Reconstruction Organisation (RRO), a group working with the Scavengers. With the intervention of RRO people started sending 'Telegrams' to the District Collector and the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu. As Chief Minister was planning to come to Tirunelveli, the Corporation authorities have stayed their decision to demolish their houses for the time being. However, the poor people fear that the Corporation is certainly polishing their arms and will strike later.

They had applied for land pattas when this place was under the administration of village panchayat. There was some progress in the matter. However when it was brought under Corporation administration, the story has entirely changed. It is said that the local political mafias and the Mayor demanded rupees four lakhs from the villagers to grant them pattas (the land documents). People refused to give them any bribe. In the meantime, Corporation of Tirunelveli built a number of housing units under Slum Clearance Development Programme. Few people got allotment. But many of them refused to go there due to lot of inconvenience at the Housing unit. Infact, there is not enough space for all the families. 125 families are living in a limited space of 67 housing units.

UPDATE COLLECTIVE

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Lobby behind this Eviction Attempt

The said issue once again affirms that "development process" is at the expense of the poor, marginalised people. It displaces and further marginalise the already deprived people. The local rich and powerful muscle men and the Corporation authorities are hand in glove to facilitate the private concern HUDCO. In the name of Slum Clearance Action, their attempt is to make gain through using HUDCO. However, it is understood this process went without the knowledge of the District Collector. Corporation is continuing its efforts to evict the poor community for making a problem there. The local goondas are used to threaten the people who resist their trials.

Future Action

Following is a brief highlight of the tentative action plan to resist eviction and resolve the problem; RRO will form a coordination committee with the help of following groups:

Dr. Ambedkar Iyakkam, Scavengers Trade Union, CPI(M), Dalit Advocate Association and Village Sangham Leaders. The coordination committee will support Manakavampillai villagers in their struggle. The committee will represent the villagers for all the follow up actions.

This committee will meet the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu on 17th September at Tirunelveli and will submit a memorandum and petition concerning the issue. This committee will consult a lawyer to pursue legal actions.

Four representatives assigned by the committee would meet the District Collector to pursue the matter. Kindly send protest letters/telegrams to:

1. The Chief Minister
St. George Fort
Chennai (Tamilnadu)
2. The District Collector
Collectorate Office
Tirunelveli - 1 (Tamilnadu)

Kindly send your solidarity letters/telegrams to:

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