



ISSN: 0975-833X

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WEAVING AND LIVELIHOOD IN SHANTIPUR OF WEST BENGAL: PAST AND PRESENT

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 16th September, 2013
Received in revised form
11th October, 2013
Accepted 28th November, 2013
Published online 25th December, 2013

Key words:

Shantipur,
Handloom,
Livelihood,
Past and present status.

ABSTRACT

The Weaving community of Shantipur of Nadia district of West Bengal performing the activities as a means of livelihood since long back. Earlier the weaving had potentiality to meet all basic demands of the families involved in the activity. But at present only the weaving alone as an activity failed to provide minimum livelihood support among the weaver. In this paper we have tried to represent the involvement of the community and the past and present status of the weaving as an economic activity.

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INTRODUCTION

The tradition of weaving by hand constitutes one of the richest and most vibrant aspects of the Indian cultural heritage. Handloom weaving is largely decentralized and weavers in the sector are mainly from the vulnerable and weaker sections of the society, who weave for their household needs and also contribute to production in the textile sector. The handloom sector is a major employment generating sector. As per the latest (3rd) Handloom Census of 2009-10, there are 23.77 lakh handlooms in the country, providing employment to 43.32 lakh handloom weavers and ancillary workers. This includes 38.47 lakh adult handloom weavers and ancillary workers, of which 24.72 lakh are engaged full time and 13.75 lakh are on part time basis. The element of art and Craft present in Indian handlooms makes it a potential sector for the upper segments of the both domestic as well as global. As estimated about 84% of total handlooms in the world are in India.

Present Situation

With the largest number of handlooms in the world, India produces approximately 6541 million sq m of handloom cloth annually. West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, and Manipur are the major handloom States and accounting 75% of handloom weaving in the country. As per the Third Handloom Census, (2009-10) Assam (12.41 lakh), West Bengal (4.07 lakh), and Manipur (1.79 lakh)

together accounted for 65.62% of the handloom units. Almost all handloom production in India is for domestic markets. As per the Third Handloom Census, out of the 38.47 lakh adult persons engaged in weaving and allied activities in the country, 77.90 % are women, 10.13% belong to the Scheduled Castes (SC), 18.12% belong to the Scheduled Tribes (ST) and 45.18% belong to Other Backward Classes (OBC). The details are given in Tables 2 and 3 below:

About Shantipur

If there is a place on earth where nearly one hundred eleven different weaver communities cohabit in one place, it is only in Shantipur. Besotted in Nadia District of West Bengal and located about 90 K.M from Kolkata. Shantipur as a single largest sourcing destination for the trademark Jacquard sarees of Bengal or commonly known as *Shantipuri 'Tant' sarees*. The sarees are termed as per the design used in the extra warp meant for side border. The ground base is Cotton but the extra warp or border different textiles yarns *Muga*, Twisted Cotton, Zari, Gold or silver is used. Since ancient times, Shantipur and the surrounding regions have been famous for handloom sarees. It has recently gained the status of municipality. Neighbouring *Fulia*, still a village is often uttered in same breath with *Shantipur*, their contrasting backgrounds notwithstanding. Together they are perhaps the most renowned Bengal handloom saree weaving centre in Bengal. *Shantipur* and *Fulia sarees* are household names across India. Shantipur – *Fulia* region has over 125,000 handlooms, churning out *Shantipuri*, *Tangail*, and *Jamdani* handloom

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sarees in a variety of yarns like cotton, *tussar* and silk. Dhotis, dress materials, stoles and scarves are also woven.

Table 1. Statistics as per Handloom Census of 2009-10 (in Lakh)

Number of looms	23.77
Number of persons engaged in weaving and allied activities	43.32
Number of adult weavers and allied workers	38.47

Source: Third Handloom Census, (2009-10), NCAER, New Delhi.

Table 2. No. of Handloom adult weavers & allied workers by Gender

Handloom adult weavers & allied workers	Male	Female	Total
Number of workers (lakh)	8.48	29.98	38.47
Percentage	22.10	77.90	100.00

Source: Third Handloom Census, (2009-10), NCAER, New Delhi.

Table 3. No. of Handloom adult weavers & allied workers by Caste

Handloom adult weavers & allied workers by Caste	SC	ST	OBC	Others	Total
No. of workers (lakh)	3.90	6.97	17.38	10.22	38.47
Percentage of total	10.13	18.12	45.18	26.57	100.00

Source: Third Handloom Census, (2009-10), NCAER, New Delhi.

Historical view of Shantipur

There are records of handloom *saree* weaving activity in *Shantipur*, a centre of *Vaishnavite* culture and *Bhakti* movement (Collier *et al.*, 1974), as early as the 15th century. Weaving flourished throughout the medieval era, and the famed indigo-dyed *Neelambari* (of a particular *saree*, name derived from *Neel*, its blue colour) made the *Shantipur saree* a household name. There is a strong sense of identity among *Shantipur* weavers. They united to agitate against the stranglehold of the *Dadni* system of the British East India Company and even took their grievances to colonial courts during the 19th century (De, Anup, 2008). The British controlled the industry through their East India Company¹ (Dooley and William, 1914). Those who opposed were severely punished. Finally the control of East India Company came to an end with the intervention of Governor General of Kolkata, for the common representation of grief of the united weavers. The product had its unique specific proposition in the market for its quality of yarn used in weaving. Hand Spun Yarn of 250 - 300 s, which is beyond the scope of mill, was used for weaving, which could counterfeit even the imported cotton yarn of Manchester. In the decades leading up to independence several innovations were introduced in the loom and pattern of weaving, *Shantipur* saw gradual inflow of techniques like the Barrel Dobby, facilitating the conversion from Throw Shuttle to Fly Shuttle (1920s), the Jacquard Machine (1930s), and sectional warping and sizing that allowed production of warp yarns 350 yards long (1930s) (Dubey *et al.*, 2012).

Introducing weaving as a means of livelihood

The weaving activity was initiated in 1409, during the regime of Gaur Ganesh Danu Mardhandev. *Saree* weaving was practiced during 1683 - 1694 during the ruling of Nadia king Rudra Roy (Dubey *et al.*, 2012). The production got

systematised and was well organised leading to good recognition during the period of Mughal Empire. *Saree* was exported to Afghanistan, Iran, Arab Greece & Turkey. The healthy trend continued till the early twentieth century. Now the weaving activity has flourished to a large extent. Officially, there are about 70,000 working looms and more than a Lakh of people involved directly and indirectly in weaving and its preparatory activities. The women basically undertake the preparatory works like separation of hanks, sizing, pirn winding as more labourer job (Government of India, 1996). It is generally observed that all weavers of the *Shantipur saree* cluster inherit excellent weaving skills for weaving *sarees* on Jacquard looms. Weavers possessing traditional skills in Jacquard weaving classified in two main categories namely – *Tangails* and *Dhaniakhails* made in fine cotton and silk yarns weave *Shantipur sarees*.

The endeavour behind this 'creative treatment of actuality' (featuring the weaving process by Jacquard looms, its components, the preparatory activities and the people behind the making of *Tant*) was made with an intention to spread a global awareness to know the art, skill and sweat involved behind this craft and thus raising voice to save this indigenous craft of India, which is on the verge of extinction. During the mid eighties and later in the mid nineties, there were weaver movements for the wage hikes but were unsuccessful for the suppression by these Mahajans. Government has taken an honest initiative to save this crafting heritage by grants, health coverage and providing other Below Poverty Line (BPL) facilities. The Bengal Small Scale Aids Industry Act during the early eighties (1980 -83) (Government of India, 1942), was instrumental support of the government for the growth of the Handloom industry. As per the act, financial aid to a maximum of Rs. 10,000/- in shape of 50% grant & 50% Loan has to be provided to the individual weavers for purchase of looms and Margin money, which is still beyond the reach of most of the weavers. It has even formed cluster consortia for the development of these weavers. But in reality it only exists in papers or probably for too few people and not for the mass. If this continues, India as well as Bengal will lose a century old crafting heritage including a community of craftsmen possessing a rare skill.

Community Involvement

In West Bengal total weaver household is 4.07 lakh (Government of India, 1974) that is 14.6% of total household of India. West Bengal has 62.6 per cent of handloom households belonging to the other caste, another 25.2 per cent households are from the Scheduled Caste (SC) category, and 11.4 per cent households are from Other Backward Caste (OBC) category and 0.8 per cent belonging to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category. The women basically undertake the preparatory works like separation of hanks, sizing, pirn winding. There are around 111 different weaving communities namely the "*Pramanik*", "*Kastha*", "*Basak*", "*Dalal*", "*Khan*" etc. Majority of the weavers belong to *Tantuvay* community. All the weavers have good weaving skills for weaving *saree* on Jacquard looms. 78% weavers belong to the OBC and SC category. From amongst these 46.5% belong to the OBC category and 31.5% to the SC category and 20.4 % belong to general category.

¹ westbengalhandloom.org

Table 4. Female –Male –Ratio (2001)

West Bengal	950
Nadia	947
Shantipur Block	938

Source: Census, (2011),

The table shows that the FMR of West Bengal, according to census 2011 is 950. Besides this, FMR of Nadia district of West Bengal and Shantipur block of Nadia district are 947 and 938 respectively according to same census year is also reflects in the above table FMR of the district and the block under the same district is quiet low than the state level.

Table 5. Literacy Rate

Literacy Rate	Total	Male	Female
West Bengal	68.64	77.02	59.61
Nadia	66.14	72.31	59.58
Shantipur Block	64.16	72.26	55.53
Study	87.27	87.50	87.10

Source: Census, (2001),

The table shows that the total literacy rate of West Bengal is 68.64% according to 2001 census. According to same census literacy rate of Nadia district and Shantipur block are 66.14% and 64.165 respectively. Whereas the literacy rate of the study area is 87.27%, which is higher than all above. Besides the total literacy rate of state, district and block the table also reflects the literacy rate of male and female separately. According to 2001 census, 77.02% male and 59.61% female are literate in West Bengal. In Nadia, it is 72.31% and 59.58% respectively. 72.26% of male and 55.53% of female are recognised as literate in Shantipur block. According to primary data collected from the study area, 87.50% male and 87.10% female are literate. The above table reflects that the rate of total work participation in West Bengal is 36.77. While the rate is 35.09 in Nadia and 43.13 in Shantipur block. Besides this, among male and female participation rate of work in West Bengal the percentage is 53.99 and 18.32 respectively. On the other hand, in Nadia district the rate is 54.96% and 14.07%. Where as in Shantipur block the work participation rate among male and female is above the state and district level i.e. 57.69% and 27.72 %

Table 6. Non Worker

Non Worker	Total	Male	Female
West Bengal	63.23	46.01	81.68
Nadia	64.91	45.04	85.93
Shantipur Block	56.87	42.31	72.28

Source: Census, (2001),

Table 7. Work Participation Rate

Work Participation Rate	Total	Male	Female
West Bengal	36.77	53.99	18.32
Nadia	35.09	54.96	14.07
Shantipur Block	43.13	57.69	27.72

Source: Census, (2001),

Table 8. Distribution of Main Worker

WPR	Cultivator			Agricultural Labourer			Household Worker			Other Worker		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
West Bengal	19.79	21.46	10.57	19.64	19.21	22.05	6.24	3.99	18.66	54.33	55.34	48.72
Nadia	20.46	23.00	4.37	23.37	25.37	10.64	10.28	6.77	32.59	45.89	44.86	52.40
Shantipur Block	12.56	16.41	1.81	15.12	17.41	8.73	32.54	26.81	48.57	39.78	39.38	40.89

Source: Census, (2001),

respectively. In West Bengal, 19.79% of population work as a cultivator, 19.64% as an agricultural labourer, 6.24% as a Household Worker and the rest 54.33% as another worker. In Nadia, the percentage of cultivator is 20.46%, agricultural labourer is 23.37%, household Worker is 10.28% and other worker is 45.89%. Likewise, in Shantipur block the population involve as cultivator, agricultural labourer, household worker and other worker are 12.56%, 15.12%, 32.54% and 39.78% respectively.

The table also reflects the percentage of male and female as a main worker in different categories. In West Bengal the percentage of male and female cultivator are 21.46% and 10.57% respectively, where in Nadia the percentage is 23% and 4.37%. In Shantipur block 16.41% are male cultivator and 1.81% are female. As an agricultural labourer the male percentage is 19.21% and female is 22.05% in West Bengal. In Nadia, 25.37% of male and 10.64% of female population work as agricultural labourer. The percentage of 17.41 and 8.73 are agricultural labourer in Shantipur block. 3.99% of male and 18.66% of female involves as Household worker in West Bengal, besides this in Nadia 6.775 and 32.59% are male and female respectively engage in same category of work, while 26.81% male and 48.57% female work as household worker in Shantipur block. Among the other worker, 55.34% are male and 48.72% are female in West Bengal. In Nadia the figure is 44.86% and 52.40%. The Shantipur block of Nadia district shows 39.38% male and 40.89% of female population engage as other worker. The table reflects the percentage of non worker in West Bengal which is 63.23% of total population, in Nadia district the figure is 64.91% and in Shantipur block it is 56.87%. Among the non worker, 46.01% are male and 81.68% are female in West Bengal. In district of Nadia 45.04% and 85.93% are male and female respectively are non worker. But in Shantipur block 42.31% male and 72.28% female identify as non worker.

Impact

Economic Impact

The handloom industry occupies a unique position in the Indian rural economy in view of its large coverage, capacity and potential in serving as an important source of livelihood of a fairly large segment of weaver population. India has a rich and superb heritage of handloom weaving. The artistic skills of the traditional handloom weavers have its own distinctive excellence. The handloom industry is highly labour intensive, with a decentralised set up. More than 60,000 people are associated with handloom in *Shantipur*. It is clear that most of the population are engaged in weaving activity. Its being a highly labour intensive tiny industry creates large-scale employment especially for women. Handloom weaving is one of the most popular and potential avocation in view of its strategic role in providing wider avenues of income and employment. Handloom provides continuous employment and

sustained economic support to the weaker section of the population especially the women. As a traditional occupation, weaving activities are pre-dominantly pursued by weaver communities and hence handloom aims at not only benefiting this section of the population but also promotes the secondary sector activities as part of household industrial development of *Shantipur* as well as West Bengal.

Cultural Impact

Handloom weaving stands as an epitome of Indian culture and civilization. Handloom items not only meet the basic requirement of the poor, but also meet the elegant tastes and preferences of the affluent section of the community. There are records of handloom *saree* weaving activity in *Shantipur*, a centre of *Vaishnavite* culture and *Bhakti* movement, as early as the 15th century. Weaving flourished throughout the medieval era, and the famed indigo-dyed Neelambari made the *Shantipur saree* a household name. In view of political reasons prior to independence, many weaver families belonging to *Vaishnava* religion migrated from East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) and stalled at the nearby places of *Nabawadip Dham*, which they considered as holy place. So, *Shantipur* and its surrounding areas were rich in expert traditional handloom weavers. In *Shantipur*, most of the populations are *Vaishnav*. There for the *Raas* festival is considered a bigger festival than *Durga puja* for the people. *Raas Utsav* originally derived from *Sri Krishna's Raas Leela* in which he is involved with his soul mate *Radha* and other *Gopinis* (play mates), is basically a festival of the *Vaishnavites*. It has, however, transformed into a festival of the "Saktas" with the changing times. "Saktas" are worshippers of *Shakti* (Power) in the form of mother Goddess who has association with *Sri Krishna*. The celebrations in *Shantipur* begin a day after the start in *Nabadweep* and are called *Bhanga Raas*. The *Raas* utsav mainly takes place in the month of November (<http://feelhandlooms.com>, 2012).

Conclusion

It is unanimous that the weaving as a means of livelihood has high economic impact of *Shantipur* even till today. The primary sector- agriculture alone – as an activity, failed to meet the two ends due to several reasons, like most areas are under mono cropped cultivation, lack of assured irrigation facilities, soil erosion due to flood, etc. Weaving comes as the major occupation not only among the landless families but also for the small and marginal land holdings families. As an activity, weaving demands some specific knowledge and technique. And rightly the weaving community of *Santipur* has a strong cultural consciousness to understand the choice of the

people irrespective of economic condition, caste & community. They even have strong understanding with the regional cultures of your country. Considering all the factors and with their creative knowledge they produce the beautiful '*Nilambari*' to meet the demand of customer and certainly all become satisfied. But after spending around three months to prepare a *Nilambari* the returns they earn is not even enough to provide sufficient food to their dependents. They have to perform other activities as secondary occupation to run their kitchen. The negative growth of weaving is not only destroying a cottage industry but also demolish the traditional culture, skill and creative knowledge of the weaver community. If it is not possible to rescue the weavers of the Bengal by providing special scheme and plan by the State as well as Central Government, the weaving of Bengal will be the history soon.

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