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REVITALIZING THE HANDLOOM INDUSTRY: ISSUES, CONSTRAINTS AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Handloom is an old age tradition of weaving beauty into threads and converting them into beautiful and attractive products. But as time passes this culture has lost its face value due to number of reasons and gradually deteriorated the economic condition of the handloom weavers. Weavers are facing serious issues as weaving is one of the most tedious professions, requiring long hours of static work and production is very less as compared to other industries. The wages are also less for weavers working in this industry and they have low market linkages, less awareness and due to awkward posture and repetitive movements they develop Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) and other health problems. Government and NGOs are working constantly for the growth and upliftment of the traditional handloom industries and to provide them better marketing linkages but due to less awareness among these weavers they are still lacking behind and failed to avail the facilities provided by these organizations. The present paper makes a brief review of the problems faced by the handlooms weavers and the role of Government, NGOs and other organizations to improve their conditions.

KEYWORDS: *Handloom industry, Issues to weavers, Weaving hazards, Musculoskeletal Disorders, Repetitive movements, Loom upliftment*

1. INTRODUCTION

The handloom industry is one of the oldest and most significant sectors of the Indian economy, providing employment to more than 10 million people across the country (Bhatia *et al*., 2016). It serves as a crucial source of livelihood, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, where it supports economically weaker sections and preserves traditional skills. Despite its importance, the sector is confronted with numerous challenges that hinder its growth and sustainability. These include the non-availability of good quality raw materials, inadequate marketing infrastructure, low levels of capacity utilization and intense competition from power loom and mill sectors (Srimannarayana, 2016).

Handloom weaving represents a vital component of India's rich cultural heritage, reflecting centuries-old traditions, craftsmanship and regional diversity (Gera *et al*., 2017). The uniqueness of handwoven products, such as sarees, dress materials and home furnishings, lies in their intricate designs and cultural value. From an employment perspective, the handloom sector ranks second only to agriculture, highlighting its socio-economic significance (Sharma *et al*., 2006). Additionally, it contributes substantially to the textile economy, accounting for approximately 14 per cent of total cloth production and around 30 per cent of total exports, with major markets including Europe, the USA and other Asian countries (Jain *et al*., 2017; Mishra *et al*., 2019).

In recognition of its importance, the Government of India has undertaken several initiatives aimed at improving productivity, enhancing design development and strengthening marketing channels within the handloom sector. However, despite these efforts, many weavers continue to face a severe livelihood crisis due to weak market linkages, inadequate institutional support and technological obsolescence (Goswami *et al*., 2011). The transition of weaving from a part-time activity to a full-time occupation has further intensified these issues. Earlier, weaving was often carried out during leisure hours, but today, many weavers spend nearly 8 hours a day at the loom. Unfortunately, the design and structure of traditional looms have remained largely unchanged over time (Pandora *et al*., 2013), leading to physical discomfort and various occupational health hazards.

The adoption of ergonomic principles in loom design and work practices has the potential to significantly improve the working conditions of weavers, reduce physical strain, and enhance productivity (Chakrabarti *et al*., 2013). Moreover, training and awareness programmes play a crucial role in equipping weavers with modern skills, enabling them to develop innovative designs and diversify their products for both domestic and international markets. Such initiatives can help improve their income levels and ensure better market competitiveness. Given these circumstances, it becomes essential to systematically identify and analyze the key issues faced by

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handloom weavers and to explore effective strategies for addressing them. Therefore, the present review study was undertaken to gain deeper insights into the challenges encountered by handloom weavers and to examine the role of various organizations in mitigating these problems and improving the overall condition of the handloom sector.

2. METHODOLOGY

The data for the study was collected from the secondary sources of data. Various articles have been reviewed from Google scholar, Research gate, J-Gate etc. The data was reviewed and arranged to consolidate main points of all the articles.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Problems and Issues Faced by Handloom Industry

Handloom weaving is increasingly becoming a challenging occupation, as it involves highly labor-intensive processes and demands prolonged hours of continuous, repetitive work in fixed postures. This not only leads to physical strain and health-related problems for the weavers but also reduces their overall efficiency and productivity. Compared to modern, mechanized textile industries, the output of handloom weaving is significantly lower, making it difficult for weavers to compete in the fast-paced market. In addition, factors such as low wages, lack of technological support, limited access to raw materials and inadequate market linkages further add to their difficulties. These challenges collectively affect the sustainability of the handloom sector and the livelihoods of the artisans dependent on it. Some of the key issues faced by handloom weavers are discussed below.

3.1.1 Health Issues: Handloom weavers have to work in static position for a long period of time which results in severe health issues like MSDs , pain in neck, upper legs etc. Several health related challenges faced by handloom weavers are outlined below:

3.1.1.1 Health Issues in Children

Loom working children reported cuts and bruises, fatigue and musculoskeletal symptoms, as well as productive and non-productive cough (Gill, 2017). Physical examination revealed that working children had a higher prevalence of signs of acute injury, musculoskeletal abnormalities, and nasal allergies and also had two-fold greater odds visual abnormalities (Awan *et al*., 2010).Also increased in musculoskeletal and respiratory problems among working children are potentially explained by their occupational exposures (Sharma, 2015).

3.1.1.2 Health Issues in Men

The workers suffer from various work related diseases such as pain in different parts of the body (hand, neck, head and eye sore, legs etc.), suffocation and rheumatic complaints due to long hours of working in a particular position. Most of the handloom workers get ill due to excessive hard work, lack of proper nutritious diet, lack of knowledge about health care etc. (Sreenivas, 2016). The highest number of weavers reported of having neck, low back and leg pain followed by shoulder and ankle pain. Male weavers have problems regarding posture, repetitiveness and respiratory problems (Pandit *et al*., 2013).

3.1.1.3 Health Issues in Women

There is a continuous increase in health problems of female weavers as their work is more physical (Srimannarayana, 2015). Performing loom activity for prolonged time may develop oedema or hematoma in the quadriceps muscle, pressure on fascialata, cutaneous nerves and veins of the thigh etc. (Shazli and Minor 2014). Hard edge of the plank, along with raised plank height, leads to the development of pressure, on posterior thigh muscle. Muscle effort and localized pressure result in a relatively short time physiological responses of muscle fatigue, impeded blood circulation and venous blood pooling resulting in edema at the ankle and feet. Working in looms for long period of time is also making women prone to anemia.

3.1.2 Socio-Economic Issues

The handloom sector, despite its cultural and economic significance, is burdened with multiple socio-economic challenges that affect the livelihood of weavers and the sustainability of the industry. These issues are interrelated and collectively contribute to the declining interest and productivity in this traditional occupation. The major socio-economic constraints faced by handloom weavers are discussed below.

3.1.2.1 Low Income

One of the most critical problems in the handloom sector is the persistently low income of weavers. The earnings from handloom activities are often insufficient to meet even basic household needs, forcing many weavers to depend on additional sources of income. Studies indicate that handloom weaving is frequently treated as a secondary occupation rather than a primary livelihood due to its limited financial returns (Awan and Matta, 2016).

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Moreover, wage levels have shown little to no growth over the past decade and a half, further aggravating the financial instability of weavers. A large number of households continue to live under poor economic conditions, often without proper housing or assets. Data suggests that nearly 57 per cent of handloom households fall under the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category, highlighting the extent of economic distress in this sector (Sharma, 2015). These conditions emphasize the need for effective policy interventions, including strict implementation of minimum wage regulations (Sreenivas, 2016).

3.1.2.2 Gender Disparity

Gender inequality remains a significant concern within the handloom industry. Despite contributing equally in terms of productivity, women workers are often paid less than their male counterparts. Research findings reveal that while productivity influences wages, gender plays a decisive role in determining earnings, particularly among monthly-rated workers (Bortamuly and Goswami, 2016). In addition to wage discrimination, women weavers face the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities. They are expected to manage household duties alongside their work, often under challenging and sometimes unsafe working conditions (Srimannarayana, 2015). Dissatisfaction among women workers is further linked to long working hours, increased workload during peak seasons and lack of basic workplace facilities (Sharma, 2015). Addressing gender-based disparities is therefore essential for ensuring equitable growth in the sector.

3.1.2.3 Lack of Marketing Outlets

Another major challenge is the absence of efficient and accessible marketing channels. Most weavers lack direct access to markets and are heavily dependent on intermediaries, who often exploit them by offering low prices for their products. As a result, weavers remain unaware of the actual market value of their goods (Yadav *et al*., 2008). Although Indian handloom products enjoy global recognition, especially items like durries, the economic benefits do not adequately reach the artisans due to weak market linkages. Limited marketing facilities also lead to accumulation of unsold stock, causing financial losses and, in some cases, temporary unemployment (Kurup *et al*., 2008). While the government organizes fairs and exhibitions to promote handloom products, participation remains limited, with only about 5 per cent of weavers gaining access to such platforms (Awan and Matta, 2016). This restricted exposure further constrains their growth opportunities.

3.1.2.4 Lack of Awareness

A low level of education among weavers contributes significantly to their lack of awareness regarding modern marketing techniques, especially digital platforms. Furthermore, many weavers are not fully informed about government schemes, welfare programmes and sources of raw material procurement. This knowledge gap prevents them from utilizing available resources and opportunities for improving their socio-economic condition.

3.1.2.5 Lack of Awareness About Product Features

Handloom products possess several unique attributes, including eco-friendliness, skin compatibility and the use of natural dyes. They are also valued for their superior quality, craftsmanship and aesthetic appeal. However, consumers often lack awareness of these features, which reduces the demand for handloom goods in comparison to mass-produced alternatives. Enhancing consumer awareness is therefore essential to improve market acceptance and value realization of handloom products.

3.1.2.6 Lack of Education, Skill, Research and Training

The absence of structured education and training systems for the handloom sector limits the scope for innovation and skill enhancement. Formal education in India has not adequately incorporated handloom-related training into its mainstream curriculum (Bortamuly and Goswami, 2016). Consequently, innovation in design and production techniques largely depends on traditional knowledge passed down within families. Due to financial and institutional constraints, weavers are often unable to adopt new technologies or develop innovative products. This lack of skill development and research support reduces their competitiveness in both domestic and international markets.

3.1.2.7 Lack of Appropriate Quality Raw Material

The availability and affordability of raw materials remain a persistent concern for handloom weavers. Essential inputs such as cotton yarn, silk, dyes and zari are often procured from private traders at high costs. Additionally, transportation expenses further increase the financial burden. The rising prices of yarn in recent years have significantly increased the cost of production, making handloom products less competitive compared to power loom alternatives (Goswami *et al*., 2011). Irregular supply and shortages of raw materials further exacerbate the problem. Historical evidence shows that fluctuations in yarn availability have led to multiple crises in the handloom sector (Mishra *et al*., 2019). Ensuring a stable and affordable supply of raw materials is therefore crucial for the sustainability of the industry.

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3.1.2.8 Unavailability of Working Capital

Inadequate access to working capital is another major constraint faced by handloom weavers. Limited financial resources prevent them from purchasing raw materials in bulk, upgrading equipment or expanding their operations. This financial instability restricts their production capacity and limits their ability to respond to market demands effectively.

3.1.2.9 Lack of Technology Development

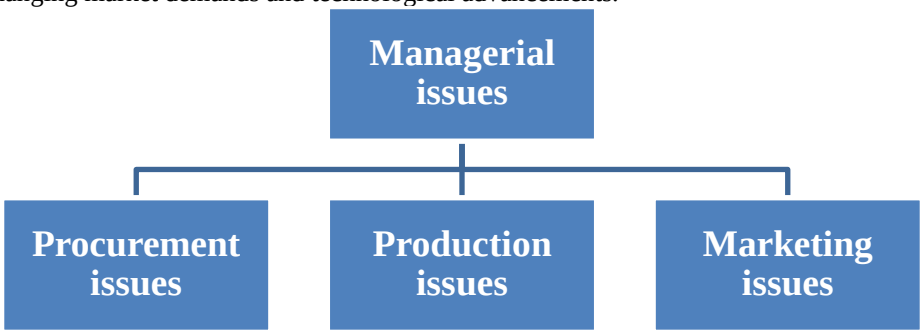
The handloom sector continues to rely largely on traditional production methods due to limited exposure to modern technologies. While these methods preserve cultural heritage, they are often less efficient and physically demanding. In contrast, power loom industries offer higher productivity and lower production costs, posing strong competition to handloom products. The lack of technological advancement thus hinders productivity and reduces the competitiveness of the sector.

3.1.2.10 Lack of Promotion and Advertisement

Finally, inadequate promotion and advertising of handloom products further limit their market reach. Unlike other segments of the textile industry, handloom products receive minimal branding and marketing support. Promotional activities are mostly restricted to exhibitions and fairs, which have limited coverage. As a result, consumer awareness remains low and demand is inconsistent. Strengthening marketing strategies and expanding promotional efforts are essential to enhance the visibility and demand for handloom products.

3.1.3 Managerial Issues

Managerial inefficiencies play a critical role in limiting the growth and competitiveness of the handloom sector. Weak planning, poor coordination and lack of professional management practices often lead to gaps across procurement, production and marketing functions. In many cases, decision-making is not supported by data or structured strategies, which further reduces the sector's ability to respond effectively to changing market demands and technological advancements.



3.1.3.1 Procurement Issues

Managerial challenges in the handloom sector significantly affect its overall efficiency and sustainability. One of the major concerns lies in procurement, where timely availability of raw materials often becomes a problem. Weavers frequently face shortages in both the quantity and quality of inputs, which disrupts the production process. In addition, the specific yarn counts required for producing certain fabrics are not always accessible, leading to limitations in product variety and quality.

3.1.3.2 Production Issues

Production-related issues further compound these challenges. Many weavers continue to rely on outdated looms and lack access to modern equipment and innovative design inputs. This restricts their ability to improve productivity and meet changing consumer preferences. Moreover, there is limited awareness among weavers about current market trends, which affects their competitiveness. The absence of performance-based incentives or bonus systems also reduces motivation and productivity within the workforce.

3.1.3.3 Marketing Issues

Marketing constraints present another significant hurdle. The sector often lacks a structured approach to market research, making it difficult to understand consumer demand and emerging trends. Additionally, financial limitations result in inadequate investment in promotional activities and market expansion. Together, these managerial issues hinder the growth and modernization of the handloom industry.

3.2 Solutions for the Handloom Industry

Handloom industries are at the risk of declining due to various factors like heavy competition from the power loom sector, less innovations etc. Some organizations are playing important role in growth and re-establishment of the industries. These are discussed below:

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3.2.1 Role of Government

Ministry of textiles, Government of India has set up Carpet Export Promotion Council in 1982 which is a non–profit making organization registered under Section 25 of Companies Act 1956 .To support, protect, maintain, increase and promote the export of hand knotted carpets and other floor coverings from India are the fundamental objectives of CEPC (Yadav, 2014).

The Government of India has undertaken a wide range of initiatives to strengthen and modernize the handloom sector, recognizing its importance for rural employment, cultural heritage and sustainable production. Various schemes have been introduced to address challenges related to raw material availability, infrastructure, design innovation, financial support and market access. Programmes such as the Deen Dayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana have focused on the holistic development of weavers by improving their skills, productivity and access to resources. Similarly, the National Centre for Textile Design has played a crucial role in promoting design development and innovation, enabling weavers to align their products with contemporary market trends. The Handloom Development, Culture and Quality Dyeing Unit Scheme have further contributed by enhancing dyeing practices and maintaining quality standards in production (Jain *et al.*, 2017).

In addition to these, the National Handloom Development Programme serves as a comprehensive umbrella initiative that integrates various components such as raw material support, technological upgradation, capacity building and marketing assistance. To ensure the availability of quality inputs, the Yarn Supply Scheme (also known as the Raw Material Supply Scheme) provides yarn to weavers at subsidized rates, thereby reducing production costs and ensuring consistency in output. Earlier initiatives such as the Mill Gate Price Scheme have also played an important role in supplying yarn at reasonable prices and minimizing the role of intermediaries.

Cluster-based development has been encouraged through the Comprehensive Handloom Cluster Development Scheme as well as Block Level Cluster initiatives, which aim to improve infrastructure, introduce modern tools and create stronger market linkages in major weaving regions. Financial inclusion has been promoted through the Weaver MUDRA Scheme (Concessional Credit Scheme), which facilitates access to affordable credit for working capital needs and technological upgrades. At the same time, welfare-oriented interventions under the Handloom Weavers' Comprehensive Welfare Scheme provide social security measures such as insurance and health benefits, thereby improving the overall well-being of the weaving community.

Marketing and capacity-building aspects have also received significant attention. The Handloom Marketing Assistance scheme supports weavers and organizations in participating in exhibitions, fairs and promotional events, helping them expand their reach in both domestic and international markets. Technical and professional guidance is provided through the Bunkar Mitra Scheme, which assists weavers in adopting improved production practices and enhancing efficiency. Overall, these initiatives reflect a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach by the government to revitalize the handloom sector. By addressing key issues across procurement, production, marketing and welfare, these schemes aim to enhance productivity, ensure sustainability and improve the socio-economic conditions of handloom weavers in India. Several steps have been undertaken by Government towards promoting the handloom industry, ranging from endorsing handloom products in global market, training facilities for development of weaving skills, motivating the women weavers to take up weaving as profession (Pandit *et al*., 2013).

The Government of Kerala has introduced special programmes for the development of the handloom industry. It is also requesting the students and teachers to wear hand woven dress on Saturday (Kurup *et al*., 2008). The MSME notified the Khadi Mark Regulations 2013 in the Gazette of India on 22 July 2013 to ensure the genuineness of Khadi i.e. hand spun and hand woven, containing natural fibers (cotton/wool/silk), produced in India. KVIC is the Nodal Agency to monitor, verify and enforce the genuineness of products being sold as KHADI. It had taken the initiative for the registration of Khadi as a brand under World Intellectual Property Organization (Awan and Matta, 2016). Government is providing training to weavers on durrie weaving with latest designs; modification as per the market demand and with modified technologies to women has provided job opportunities to women in rural areas (Yadav *et al.*, 2006)

3.2.2 Role of NGO

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a vital role in supporting and revitalizing the handloom sector, particularly by addressing socio-economic challenges faced by weavers. These organizations act as intermediaries between weavers and markets, helping to improve livelihoods, preserve traditional skills and promote sustainable practices. NGOs often focus on capacity building by providing skill development, design training and awareness about market trends, which enhances the competitiveness of handloom products. In addition, they contribute to social welfare by ensuring access to basic amenities such as education, healthcare and financial support, thereby improving the overall quality of life of weaving communities.

The Rehwa Society is a prominent example of an NGO dedicated to sustaining the handwoven textile heritage of the Maheshwar region. Its primary objective is to preserve traditional weaving practices while simultaneously improving the socio-economic status of artisans.

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A significant focus of the organization is on women's empowerment, as it provides employment opportunities to local women, enabling them to achieve financial independence and better living standards. In addition to livelihood support, the society adopts a holistic approach by offering essential services such as free education for the families of weavers, access to healthcare and housing facilities. These efforts collectively contribute to both cultural preservation and community welfare (Awan and Matta, 2016).

Another important initiative in this domain is RUGMARK, an international non-profit organization committed to eradicating child labour in the carpet industry. It operates by certifying carpets that are produced without the involvement of illegal child labour and ensures compliance through regular inspections and monitoring systems. By introducing a credible labelling mechanism, RUGMARK not only protects children from exploitation but also builds consumer trust in ethically produced goods. This initiative has gained global recognition and has played a significant role in promoting socially responsible production practices within the carpet sector (Gill, 2017).

In addition to RUGMARK, several other labelling and certification programmes have been introduced to ensure ethical production and transparency. The Kaleen label, supported by the Government of India, focuses on certifying carpets that are free from child labour and meet defined quality standards. Similarly, the STEP (Sustainable Textile Production) initiative represents a collaborative effort involving Swiss NGOs and industry stakeholders, working across countries such as India, Nepal and Pakistan, with plans for expansion into other regions. Another programme, Care and Fair, was established by German importers and is actively engaged in improving the living and working conditions of carpet weavers in South Asia. These labelling systems typically involve attaching certification tags to individual carpets, assuring consumers about the authenticity and ethical background of the products. Collectively, such initiatives strengthen the credibility of handmade textiles in international markets while safeguarding the rights and welfare of artisans (Gill, 2017).

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the studies conducted on this area, it can be concluded that hand weaving is high risk occupation with very less profit and at the same time various health and socio economic hazards to the poor weavers. They had to work very hard to just earn three meals a day in poor environmental conditions inside the loom. Lack of awareness among the weavers is further increasing the problem of handloom weavers to a great extent. Suicides are on the rise. Ineffective implementation and awareness of the schemes, increased unfair competition from the power loom and mill sectors are responsible for the crisis.

Most of the health problems in the industry are avoided with the help of proper ergonomic tools and awareness on online marketing can further increase the market links for the weavers and build a new passage for them to extend their products. Government and NGOs are playing a major role to improve the handloom industry. It can further take steps to improve the wage structure of the weaver with the main focus on women working in the loom industry. Hence, further research can be focused on designing ergonomic tools to solve atleast the health related problems of the weavers. Special tools for men and women have to be developed to meet their work demands. Handloom forms a part of the heritage of India and exemplifies the richness and diversity of our country and the talent of the weavers. Various efforts are being made through the schemes and programme to enhance productivity and efficiency of the handloom sector and enhance the income and socio-economic status of the weavers.

Way forward

To bridge gap and overcome the drawbacks in future and for sustainability and success of handloom industry, some of the following steps can be taken: advertising the handloom products in mass media so that large number of consumers are attracted towards it. Innovative measures and modern technologies should be made available to the weavers so that they could compete with the products made from power loom sector.

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