

Dead End at the Silk Road: The Possible Revival of the Banaras Handloom Industry

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Abstract

An emerging market provides an ideal platform for a product or a sector to reinvent itself. The growth that is forecasted for the Indian textiles and garment market can be efficiently utilized by the handloom sector to come back from the cold and become a booming business once again. However, this largely unorganized sector needs active support from the state and the private players in terms of policy reforms and effective logistics management to get back on its feet once again. With the new government's chant of "Make in India," this study reflected the ground realities whilst making in India by shedding light on the grass root level hardships that the weavers of the Varanasi cluster face and went on to suggest certain policy level interventions for the development of the weaver community and the handloom sector as a whole. Furthermore, the paper highlighted how ineffective civic governance can have adverse effects on businesses as well.

Keywords : handloom, Varanasi, weaver, human resources, governance

JEL Classification : J3, J4, J5

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The rapid industrialization and the focus on core manufacturing sectors has somewhere alienated what was one the very key aspects of the contemporary Indian economy and culture as well. Today, several artisans are facing a dilemma over flight or fight when it comes to their traditional skills and means of livelihood. Unfortunately, the artisans don't have the means either to fight - or - flight. They are already marginalized by the slow decay of the handloom sector and thus, they do not have the resources to continue their trade or to switch to something more lucrative.

Considering the times and boom in certain sectors like supply chain and e - commerce, there is a new hope for revival for these artisans. A market can be created for their products through the newfound means of efficient product delivery and promotion of the handloom products that were once known for their intricate design and exclusivity. As an emerging textile market, India has a huge potential for the handloom sector.

Thus, through this paper, I would like to report the existing problems faced by a handloom weaver and suggest possible policy level demand side interventions for those problems. These interventions would help in the overall upliftment of the weaver community and subsequently gear them up for revival through supply side interventions, spearheaded by the private sector. This research paper is a product of an extensive ethnographical study conducted by a team from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

About Varanasi

Varanasi, also known as Banaras or Kashi, is one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. Archaeological

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evidence suggests that settlement around Varanasi began in the 11th or 12th century BC. Situated on the western banks of the Holy Ganges, it is one of the holiest cities for the Hindus. It is lined with numerous “ghats,” each one significant in its own way. The term Varanasi originates from the two rivers that flow or once flowed through the city - Varuna, which still flows and Asi, a small stream that no longer exists. It is said that Lord Shiva himself founded the city. Today, Varanasi is a booming town in Eastern Uttar Pradesh known for its ghats and temples (Varanasi, n.d.).

✍ **Economy and Administration :** Varanasi Nagar Nigam is the city's Municipal Corporation and its main governing body. Also, the Varanasi Development Authority is responsible for the master planning of the city. Tourism plays the most dominant role in the city's economy. Other sectors that contribute to the city's revenue generation are exports of handloom and silk apparels (mainly sarees) and also musical instruments. Varanasi has also emerged as a place of learning thanks to the Banaras Hindu University established by Madan Mohan Malviya in 1916. Approximately 30,000 students study different courses offered by the university at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

According to a report on the city development plan made under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, the city's informal economy has not developed in relation to or as an adjunct to large industrial centers (Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India, Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, 2006). Cottage and small-scale industries form an integral part of the city's economy. This sector accounts for over a third of the city's industrial workforce (Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India, Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, 2006). Silk weaving is considered a cottage industry as well. The city has been a commercial capital and a center of the silk weaving industry since at least the late 1700s (Wood, 2014). According to the Ministry of Urban Development Report (2006), the traditional industry of silk sarees will tend to become sick, and the city will lag within the region if investment in the power and the registered manufacturing sector does not pour in. But according to the survey conducted by us in the field, this would not be the only factor that would be responsible for the failing and a complete extinction of the handloom business in Varanasi.

Jal Nigam, a subsidiary of the Varanasi Municipal Corporation, looks after the water supply and the sewage system of the city. Due to the high population density and increasing number of tourists, the state government, international NGOs, and institutions have expressed grave concern for the pollution and pressures on infrastructure in the city, mainly the sewage, sanitation, and drainage components (Mohanty, 1993). Furthermore, the rising pollution levels of the Ganga has led to widespread but so far futile efforts to reduce the pollution levels in the river. Major programs launched to address this concern include the Ganga Action Plan and the National River Ganga Basin Authority (NRGBA).

The Handloom Sector in India

India, for a long time, was a land renowned for its spices and silks. The people of the Harappan civilization, as archeological findings suggest, were expert weavers. In the pre independence times, Indian textiles competed with the British textiles globally; the erstwhile rulers realized this and created an environment, which suffocated the Indian textile industry back then. However, there was a strong resurgence post Independence and till this date, the textile industry continues to be the second largest source of employment. In 2009-10, the Indian textile industry was pegged at US\$ 55 billion; this number is significantly lower than what was aimed at a few years earlier. In 2005, post the expiry of the Multi Fibre Agreement (MFA), which dictated the textile trade between nations, the Indian textile sector aspired to be worth US\$ 85 billion by 2010. As of 2012, the Indian textile industry contributes about 14% to industrial production, 4% to the country's GDP, and 17% to the country's total export earnings (Corporate Catalyst India Pvt. Ltd., 2014).

Table 1. Area Wise Mapping of Raw Materials Used

Area	Type of Silk / Material Used
Madanpura, Bazardigha, Rewari talab, Nagwa	Silk and silk-cotton, kora silk, mainly Chinese yarn
Lohata, Kotwa, Mangalpur, Harsos, Kudi	Silk-Nylon, Polyester-nylon, Polyester-viscose
Badibazar, Pililothi, Rasoolpura, Chittanpura, Phulwaria, Alaipura, Jainpura, Saraiyan, Lallapura Jalalipura, Katehar	Karnataka Yarn, Satin based products

The handloom sector has a 13% market share in the overall textiles market in India. There are about 23 lakh handloom households in the country and around 29 lakh handloom weavers. However, these numbers too, like the worth of the textile industry, have reduced in the period from 1995 to 2010. In 1995, the number of handloom weaver households were approximately 25 lakhs, this number dropped to 23 lakhs in 2010. Furthermore, the number of handloom weavers too reduced from approximately 35 lakhs to 29 lakhs, approximately in the same period. Another noticeable trend across the country is that the power looms are replacing the handlooms rapidly (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, Office of the Development Commissioner (Handlooms), 2010).

The Varanasi Handloom Cluster

Varanasi has been a center for textiles since ancient times. The Vedas talk about the silks and the apparel of this ancient city by referring to them as “*Hiranya Vastra*”. “*Hiranya*” is a Sanskrit term for gold and “*Vastra*” means apparel or any form of clothing. The art of weaving received a great impetus during the Mughal period, especially during the reign of Akbar the great. Today, the majority of the weavers in the city of Banaras belong to the Ansari Muslim community. The city has various pockets from where the weavers operate. Also, each of these pockets have highly skilled weavers who majorly produce the famous Banarasi Saree, but the type and the quality of the raw materials used by the weavers differ from locality to locality. The Table 1 depicts the area wise mapping of the raw materials used by the weavers.

In Varanasi, the main raw material for the production of the sarees is sourced from three key markets namely - Chowk Market, Bada Bazaar, and Madanpura. The silks used are usually produced in Bangalore and/or are exported from China. Both the silks have varied characteristics, but mainly the silk imported from China is thinner than the one produced in Bangalore. The thickness of the silk is measured in Deniers. The thickness of Chinese silk ranges from 9 to 11 deniers. On the other hand, the silk from Bangalore has a thickness of 28 to 32 deniers, and thus, is considered to be of better quality and costs more than its Chinese counterpart. These two types are of pure silk, there may be variations created by mixing the silk yarn with other fibers like rayon, polyester, cotton, and so forth.

Literature Review

As mentioned earlier, the Indian textile industry contributes 14% to the total industrial production of the country and 4% to the nation's GDP. Production via handloom contributes to 13% of the total textile production. Apparels produced via the handloom have long been associated with exclusivity. This holds true for the sarees produced in Varanasi as well. Since a long time, Banarasi sarees have been revered for their craftsmanship, but due to cultural shifts which accompany every generation, the Banarasi saree is losing its sheen as the Indian society in general has started looking towards the West when making their dressing choices. However, there are hardly any studies that have associated the decline of the handloom industry to a change in cultural and dressing norms of a society.

Few studies exist, which have sought to understand the realities prevailing in the handloom sector at the level of the weavers. Various studies and economic reports cover the textile industry in general and then analyze the macro-level patterns emerging from the findings. For instance, Roy (1998) concluded that the change in the textile industry was a result of the delayed integration with the global markets. Also, Chandra (2008) enumerated the various challenges Indian textile firms face with reference to a larger share in the global textile markets.

The perspective with reference to the handloom sector is associated majorly with the economic factors affecting it. However, some studies have dealt with micro level realities of this sector. Wood (2014) argued how the lack of self-organization within the Ansari community, to which majority of the weavers belong, has led to the decline of their community and trade. He accentuated this by comparing the self organization within the community of the Mallah community of the boatmen in the same city of Varanasi, who have formed several organizations to protect their interests.

The focus of the above-mentioned study can also be bridged to certain studies that assessed the impact of the government's textile policy on the handloom sector and also the impact, reactions, and measures adopted by the communities engaged in the handloom weaving to counter the state policy. The artisanal communities engaged in handloom weaving, in spite of their numerical strength, could show only a limited capability for protest and resistance, and they failed to be heard, and their limited organization fails to threaten the electoral prospects of the governing elite (Srinivasulu, 1996).

Thus, I believe that through this paper, I would like to highlight certain basic factors that need to be considered while planning further policies pertaining to the handloom sector and even to the textile industry as a whole. The points mentioned here would pertain to the wider socioeconomic issues faced by the weaver community of Varanasi, which I propose are intertwined with the lack of organizational and state support to the community.

Methodology

A team of students, of which I was a part, from the School of Management and Labour Studies of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, undertook the necessary ethnographic research, which forms the basis of this paper. Professor Abhishek Kumar of the SMLS, TISS led the team. This exercise was a part of a MoU signed by the Government of Uttar Pradesh and TISS, and was carried out between November 4, 2014 - November 16, 2014. The main objective of this research activity was to conduct a skill gap analysis of the weaver community in Varanasi. The findings and the analysis of the outcomes of the research undertaken by the team from TISS would be submitted to the Uttar Pradesh Skill Development Mission, an initiative of the Government of Uttar Pradesh.

The team from TISS travelled to Varanasi and conducted in-depth interviews of the handloom weavers and other important stakeholders of the Varanasi handloom cluster. These stakeholders included government officials, NGOs involved in working with weavers, artisans, traders, and training institutes. Data collection was done through structured and unstructured interviews. Unstructured interviews were used to capture data from all stakeholders except the labour. Structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the labour in the field during fieldwork. Questionnaires were drafted using Hersey and Blanchard's philosophy. Most interviews were conducted in Hindi.

The first fieldwork was carried out in Bajardiha, Varanasi on November 9, 2014. The entire team was subdivided into pairs to conduct interviews with various weavers and supporting weavers. These interviews with primary weavers were captured on uniform interview sheets that were based on Blanchard's methodology. The second and third fieldworks were executed on November 12, 2014 in Madanpura and Jalalipura. These field visits and interactions were arranged due to the support from the local development office. Many artisans

were interviewed on this day, and their inputs were recorded on the interview sheets. A total of 23 households were interviewed across all the fieldworks, and around 150 artisans were interviewed.

Except for the data collected through these field visits of which I was a part, this research paper does not contain any literature from the report which is to be submitted to the UPSDM by our team. The conclusions and propositions are my own views based on the data collected through the above-mentioned field visits and the data already available in the public domain.

Findings and Discussion

Several key factors related to the ground realities of the handloom sector in the Varanasi handloom cluster were observed after interviewing the artisans and other stakeholders. These factors had a direct impact on the lives of the weavers and the handloom business as a whole. These factors or issues pertaining to the Varanasi handloom cluster range from socioeconomic to governance and policy-related issues.

To begin with, it would be key to understand the profile of a weaver or the handloom worker. The artisan working on the handloom lacks any kind of formal training in the job that he does. The art and skill of working on the handloom is passed on within the family. Also, many of the young weavers whom we interviewed had dropped out of school, and usually, they had not studied beyond the primary standards. This was a result of economic desperation, as more hands were required to operate the idle handlooms, and hiring labor was not an option both economically and technically as well. The reason for non-feasibility due to the latter was the fact that nobody outside the weaver community is trained to operate the handloom, and nobody within the community would be ready to part with their source of help. Thus, many young men were forced to leave schools and join a trade which is labor-intensive and non lucrative.

Another important finding was the various weaver typologies. A weaver may either be the owner of a handloom, a middleman, or simply a laborer working on a handloom owned by another weaver, and he simply gets his wages in return for the work he does. On the market side, there are sattiwalas, grihasthas, and gaddidars, the last two terms often being utilized interchangeably. A Sattiwala, however, is a broker. He intermediates for a commission between the seller and the trader. Grihasthas buy the end products from the weaver and sell to gaddidars/non-local traders; they assume the 'buy-sell risk,' and hence, the margins are not fixed. Grihasthas can either be recognized weavers, or they may not be involved in active weaving. The gaddidars are large traders. Many of them have retail outlets at Banaras and/or sell the output to outstation traders too.

Each weaver has been issued an identity card by the state. However, many non weavers or former weavers, like the Gaddidars, Sattiwalas, and the Grihasthas, who are no longer directly involved in the operation of the handloom too hold the weaver card, and thus, get automatically entitled to the benefits which only a handloom weaver should be entitled to. Mainly, the model works in a way which may be perceived as unfair towards the actual weavers as they invest their time and energy into making a product, and they get remunerated not when they handover the product to the grihasthas or gaddidars, but only when their product sells in the market.

Another key observation is the fact that the weavers are not organized in any formal or informal manner. They don't have self-driven co-operatives or unions. The weavers generally look up to the elite within their communities when it comes to grievance management. The Ansaris' outsider status is an important part of the explanation for handloom weavers' lack of success in forming and sustaining their own occupational associations (Wood, 2014). This is an important factor in the lack of enforcement of a minimum wage law or other mechanism like the Mill Gate Price Scheme.

Moreover, there are several governance, human resource, and infrastructural issues faced by the weavers on a daily basis. The lack of power supply is a major hindrance to production, especially during the summer months, as the handlooms are located in congested localities where natural light is scanty. Thus, the handloom workers have to depend upon the power supply for uninterrupted production. Not only this, the weavers

complained about ineffective implementation of several government schemes. A good example of this would be the Handloom Weavers Comprehensive Welfare Scheme. The scheme was introduced in the Eleventh Five Year Plan. It had two components: an insurance scheme by a leading private bank and the Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana, which provides life insurance. The scheme was meant for providing cashless health care benefits to the marginalized weavers, but a few weavers whom we met said that it was misused by few groups with vested interests, who would use the medical card allocated to marginalized weavers to be produced for the benefits within the scheme in return for cash. Furthermore, there were complaints of widespread red tape, nepotism, and corruption at the local level, which have adversely affected the weaver community in terms of their social and economic upliftment.

Another trend that emerged from the field was that many young handloom weavers were migrating to cities like Bangalore and Surat as these two cities have a flourishing textile industry. As per the Handloom Census of 2009-10, there were 95,372 handloom workers in the Varanasi district. This number is a sharp decline from the 1995-96 figures reported by the Handloom census conducted then, which stated that the number of handloom workers in the Varanasi district was 1,24,832. Migration can thus be a reason for this drop in the number of handloom weavers. Moreover, this trend is seen across the various handloom clusters of Uttar Pradesh. In some districts like Ghazipur, the number of handloom workers has come down from 17,560 in 1995-96 to 357 in 2009-10, as per the Handloom Census conducted in the respective years. This drastic drop in the number of weavers may have directly impacted the national textile production figures.

Lastly, there are plenty of healthcare concerns, which have plagued the weaver community of Varanasi. Malnutrition and tuberculosis is rampant along with a high suicide rate within the weaver community. Since 2002, 175 weavers have committed suicide. It is estimated that over 50% of the weaver's children are malnourished. Inability to afford private healthcare and a lack of access to public health institutions are the chief causes for such a deplorable condition.

Policy Implications and Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to shed some light on the ground realities of the weaver community of Varanasi. Through extensive ethnographical fieldwork spanning almost two weeks, the team from TISS tried to understand the needs of the weaver community. My paper serves as an extension of our efforts. The data gathered from the field suggests that although there are various central and state level schemes for the benefit of the handloom sector and the general welfare of the handloom weavers, but basic micro level governance is missing.

I would like to state that not only business or trade-oriented policies are necessary for the revival and the subsequent success of a trade or an industry, but also basic governance and effective public policy implementation is also necessary. A new holistic policy is required, which would focus on the overall development of the trade and on all the major and relevant stakeholders. Even if any one of the social, political, economic, and managerial variables is missing, then the other variable may not be able to sustain or hold out by themselves. Furthermore, as observed in the case of the weavers, it is not a lack of vision or a one particular policy that has hampered their socioeconomic growth, but it is the failure to effectively implement this vision and the policies that have affected them adversely.

The ground-level research conducted by our team highlighted many grievances of the weaver community of Varanasi. Interestingly, these concerns and grievances were as much related to the handloom or textile policies in general as they were to the lack of civic governance in their areas. In fact, the weavers suggested hardly any policy level interventions, but most of their suggestions were pertaining to effective implementation of the existing schemes, both pertaining to the general public welfare and particular schemes for the weaver community. Lastly, micro level corruption and nepotism are other important hindrances to the revival of the

handloom industry in Varanasi. The case of handloom weavers from the Varanasi cluster can be summed up as how lapses in governance have spilled over to the business.

With the Make in India policy gaining momentum, we need to understand from this example that it is not only important to Make in India, but questions like who should make in India? And for whom should it be made? Thus, it is important that not only effective business environment and protection of all the stakeholders is needed, but there is a need for human resource level interventions like different forms of trainings, right from basic skill development training to trainings that will boost the business acumen of the workforce. Moreover, products from the handlooms should be promoted as niche products, and thus, the workforce and the segment should be effectively incentivized. For this to happen, the handloom segment not only needs to be protected from the power looms and the other mass production machine based works, but also, there needs to be a steady supply of skilled and well trained workforce, which can be attracted through the human resource interventions of an effective compensation and incentive plan for this workforce.

Creation of a market based upon the niche value of the handloom apparels is the need of the hour. Though the demand for textiles and readymade garments has shot up domestically, but contrastingly, at the same time, the handloom industry is witnessing an exponential degeneration. Textiles industry and its labour relations are undergoing profound changes. The retail market has opened, and the producers' control over the product market has increased (Tandon & Reddy, 2013).

Furthermore, India is considered to be an emerging garment market, and with the fashion and the retail industry booming, I believe that the present time is an opportune moment to help the handloom industry get back on its feet and even start sprinting once again. The existing “boutique” culture in the world of fashion can be tapped. Moreover, with e - commerce coming up rapidly, it needs to be checked if several new initiatives can be explored with the e-commerce firms that would directly involve the handloom workers.

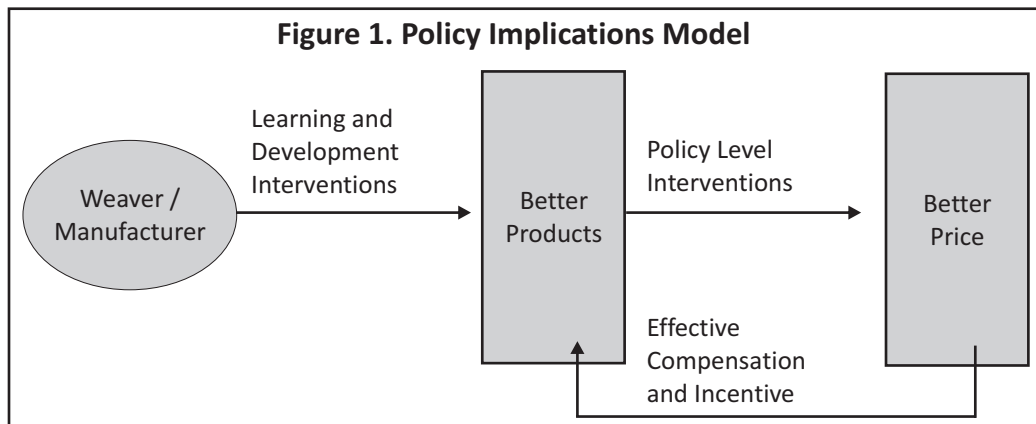
Thus, to sum up, the following policy level and human resource interventions should be deliberated by the administration :

(1) Policy Level Interventions

- (i) No Middlemen :** Direct access to the market for the weavers, which would in turn boost revenue generation.
- (ii) Co-Operative :** Set up a trading hub on the lines of a weaver's cooperative where weavers can gather.
- (iii) Leveraging Online Channels :** Trading stock over the Internet and using IT to gather market intelligence can boost business for the weavers.
- (iv) Effective Policy Implementation and Strict Anti Corruption Legislature and its Application:** Widespread corruption is discouraging the weavers from dealing with the administration, so much so that they are skeptical about availing raw materials at subsidized rates as the officials may demand bribes before realizing the goods for the use of the weavers.

(2) Human Resource Interventions

- (i) Learning and Development :** Training which can focus on enhancing the business acumen of the weavers and also technology training to help them update their current practices of weaving.
- (ii) Effective Compensation and Incentive Plan :** Revised minimum wages for the weavers and minimum price guarantee initiatives.



The Figure 1 describes a model that would emancipate from the suggestions described in this review.

Limitations of the Study and the Way Forward

In this study, I have examined several production and supply-related interventions from the point of view of the sector level and general governance policy. However, I strongly believe that an overview of demand analysis of the handloom products is needed. Furthermore, it can be studied as to how the change in the cultural landscape of the urban and rural parts of the country has affected the handloom sector. Supply chain analysis for the handloom sector can be an area of research coupled with public private partnership and the role of e - commerce in the handloom business. Furthermore, what are the hindrances faced by the administration in effective policy formulation and implementation can also be studied, as these issues did not lie in the scope of the present research.

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