

Chapter 15

Weavers' Livelihoods and the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Analysis of Sambalpuri Handloom, Odisha, India

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ABSTRACT

Sambalpuri Handloom weavers of Western Odisha are known for their rich skill, creativity, and innovative designs. Steady decline in the earnings has resulted in the migration of weavers both professionally and geographically. Economic crisis is forcing these weavers to face livelihood crisis. The weavers who have created history and brought glory by their rich artistry are being forced to change their livelihood. The present study has been undertaken in sixteen clusters of four districts of Western Odisha. It has been observed that the role played by the businessman (middleman) is quite important. Though the price of the product is quite high, the weavers are not satisfied with the emoluments amounts that they receive. The actual benefits from marketing of this handloom are accruing to the middlemen rather than the weavers. The COVID-19 pandemic and economic shutdown has broken the supply chain of both the backward and forward linkage of the Sambalpuri handloom industry. Necessary policy should be made both by the central and state governments to rescue these handloom weavers.

INTRODUCTION

After agriculture, handloom weaving is the largest economic activity, and this sector provides employment to more than 35 lakh weavers and allied workers¹ in India. 95% of the handloom product of the world are being produced in India. By exporting the handloom products, the sector is contributing to export earnings for India. Out of the total cloth production handloom contributes almost 15%. Handloom is identified as a cottage industry in Odisha which helps in rural development. Skill of weaving

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in handloom industry, is transferred from generation to generation. In Odisha, handloom is a traditional cottage industry. This provides about 1.17 lakh handloom workers in the State to earn their livelihood. In Odisha, there are 63,223 weaver households according to the 4th Handloom Census (2019). Out of these, total number of handloom weavers and allied workers are respectively 53,472 and 64,364.

Handloom woven by weavers of Sambalpur are unique for its rich skill, innovative design, and creativity. Livelihood crisis is faced by the weavers which is very difficult for them to manage. The weavers who earlier brought glory in weaving are now forced to change their livelihood. Most often the weavers prefer to work as labourer because of the snag economic conditions. Migration of weavers both geographically and professionally resulted due to the steady decline in the income of the weavers. Poverty reduction strategies were introduced by Government to provide a coherent framework within which different stakeholders can work together towards the eradication of poverty. Livelihood is defined as 'the activities, the assets and the access that jointly determine the living gained by an individual or household'². Large amount of money is being invested by both Central and State Government, but the benefit is not reaching the handloom weavers. Lack of social protection program has jeopardised weaving livelihood. Weaving encourages rural employment and women empowerment. It also creates employment opportunity for many persons.

The COVID -19 pandemic and economic shutdown have disrupted billions of lives and livelihoods. Economies are suffering from a devastating blow in the development progress. Countries are now with the objectives of handling the negative economic spill overs resulting from deep recession. To cope with situation, economies are trying to i) restrict the domestic outbreak of the pandemic and ii) start the economic process after the shutdown. In many developing and emerging economies large share of employment are in the informal sector, operative mitigation measures and financial support are hard to accomplish (World Bank, 2020)³. Now the concern is moving rapidly towards the economic dimensions – given the fall in output and its social effects. Humanity is already under heavy stress as shown by economic insecurity. Economies are shaping a new generation of inequalities (UNDP, 2020)⁴. Forward and backward linkage of the handloom weaving has devastated with the shut down and lockdown of different institutions associated with handloom. On the one hand they are unable to purchase the thread, colour, and dye and on the other they are unable to supply the earlier order taken by them and sell their products in the market. In view of these, the livelihood of the weavers of Sambalpuri handloom needs special attention.

Objective of the Study

Sambalpuri handloom is well known for its delicate weaving design and dying of fabrics. Bhulia Meher community started the Sambalpuri handloom weaving in 1726 AD. Two different communities of weavers namely Coasta Mehers (these weavers weave *tussar* sarees) and Kuli Mehers followed the Bhulia Mehers in weaving the Sambalpuri handlooms (UNIDO, 2008). Delicate design and rich artistry are the main architect of the handloom are gradually losing their importance. The family members of Sambalpuri weavers work as a family business. The weaving technique in most cases, they learn from their ancestors. Besides the weavers, most of the family members spend in preparing and colouring the yarn. In most of the cases the male members prepare the weaving loom and prefer to weave cloths. Female members usually take up ancillary activities associated with weaving.

For most of the handloom weavers weaving and preparing handloom is the only source of livelihood. They do not have any other means of livelihood. In view of all these, the aim here is to find out how the

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