

Of Benaras and Starving Weavers

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Varanasi (or Benaras) is one of the most prominent centres of silk handloom weaving in India. The most famous product of Varanasi's handlooms is the Benarasi silk saree which is most in demand in weddings as bridal dress. Although the Benarasi saree remains as famous as ever, handloom weavers of Benaras are nevertheless passing through a serious livelihood crisis. At its peak (till about a decade back) Benaras silk weaving provided livelihood to about seven lakh people, but this has now been reduced to about 2.5 lakh people, about one-half working on handlooms and about one-half in various supportive activities. The income of handloom weavers has declined to such an extent that they cannot even meet their basic needs—on average a weaver is earning just Rs 50 to 60 in a day, and even this too is not certain. Due to this livelihood crisis and related indebtedness, many weavers in recent times have committed suicide, or they have been selling their blood in order to be able to meet the needs of their family. Such cases, or even a case of sale of small children reported occasionally in local media have highlighted the serious crisis that pervades the daily life of most weavers.

Why has such a serious crisis emerged for people working to make a product as famous as the Benarasi saree? This is not just an academic question as the task of finding appropriate remedies for the current crisis cannot be taken up without a proper understanding of the causes of this crisis. While some causes are related to the overall crisis of handloom weavers in various parts of India, some are specific to silk weavers and some are even more specific to Benaras.

To form an understanding of the causes and possible remedies of the current crisis of silk handloom weavers of Varanasi, a public hearing was organised recently in Benaras city. This public hearing was organised by Human Welfare Association, an organisation working for many-sided welfare of handloom weavers. At the public hearing weavers from four districts including Varanasi, Mirzapur, Bhadohi and Chandauli were present although the biggest representation clearly was from Varanasi.

Dr Rajnikant, Director of Human Welfare Association said in his introduction that the condition of silk handloom weavers is fast deteriorating and as many as 6000 of them have been forced to migrate in a single year to cities like Surat, Mumbai and Kolkata. One reason for this is the WTO trade regime under which silk cloth imports have increased very fast. Another threat is from powerloom owners who have been producing cheap imitation products at various places, helped by computer-assisted copying of designs and selling the cheap imitation products as the famous Benarsi saree. The government has not even carried out a proper survey to get a reliable estimate of how many looms and weavers still survive. Eight-year old data which is no longer relevant is still being used so that available statistics do not reflect the real crisis.

During this period of crisis some relief was provided when many women could take up *zardoji* embroidery work but this livelihood too has been snatched by indiscriminate mechanisation, particularly Chinese machines whom Dr Rajnikant called the Chinese Dragon.

In some villages, he said, where nearly 200 handlooms were running now the number have been reduced to as little as 5. However all is not lost yet and well-organised efforts to save livelihoods can still prove successful. It was due to such efforts that a mega-cluster scheme of the government was recently allocated to Benaras. Similarly efforts of the Human Welfare Association to work with 1200 weavers in villages and organise self-help groups could save the livelihood of some and also prevent their indebtedness.

Amresh Kushwaha said that rise in the price of silk yarn as well as fluctuations in its price have proved harmful for weavers. As a remedial step, a scheme to step up yarn banks has been started. A scheme to providing handloom mark has also been started.

Razizaan Ali, who spoke next also supported these two steps, said that in addition there should be greater opportunities for weavers to sell their products directly. There should be more emporiums where their product is sold and the government should step up the efforts to promote handlooms.

Supporting this Dr Rajnikant added that one should learn from the experience of places from other centres of handloom industry—Pochampally, Chanderi and Kanjeev-ram where patents could be obtained, so that cheap imitations which threatened to wipe out the original art and its weavers could be checked. In Pochampally markets for weavers could be set up where yarn is also available.

Hazi Ishtiyar Ahmed said that the government is promoting a new cluster scheme while a traditional cluster including weaver, master weaver and trader has already existed. This traditional arrangement should be continued and respected. The government starts various schemes but weavers are not even aware of these schemes. He said most weavers don't even know about the existence of 5 to 6 silk yarn banks in Varanasi. Sometimes impractical schemes upset the traditional system in such a way that the weaver does not benefit from the new scheme, yet cannot also now go back to the old support system. So he is neither here nor there.

Aminuddin of Nakhightat challen-ged this view of the traditional working system by saying that the real weaver, the real artisan is exploited in this system. If something is given by one hand, it is snatched by another hand. Rates given to weavers are very low and they can't survive on this. The reality is that most government funds also reach only those who are already rich and prosperous'. He said committees and delegations do not even bother to meet the poor weavers who are the real sufferers of the crisis. "Please meet them and know their problems", he implored.

Vibhuti Shankar, development activist from Mirzapur district, said that at the time of a crisis situation for weavers Central Silk Board is running away from its responsibilities. It is beyond comprehension why the market has been opened so blatantly for Chinese imports while Indian weavers' livelihoods are destroyed.

Hazi Nasir Ahmed said that earlier weaving was an important pillar of Benaras economy but now it is in a bad state. The work of carpets in neighbouring areas has also deteriorated. Problems relating to electricity availability and bills as well as silk yarn should be solved on priority basis.

Nurul Hassan Ansari asked why UP Handloom is not promoting the products of weavers now. He said weavers have suffered due to unjust policies and neglect.

Jagriti, a Gandhian activist emphasised the importance of self-reliance and Mahatma Gandhi's thinking on khadi and handloom for the survival of handloom weaving. Unity of the community and Hindu-Muslim unity is also very important, she said. She said children from weavers' families who come to an educational centre run by them said that they eat only one meal in a day, at other times when they are hungry they just drink some water.

Mohammad Sharif Ansari said that 47 suicides of weavers have been reported here, but the real weaver is still being ignored while the rich persons who dominate their work and its export are cornering all the benefits. He said that some so-called experts and visiting senior officials do not even understand who is the real weaver. They meet traders and exporters in the name of meeting weavers and only listen to the views and opinions articulated by traders and exporters. He said that just as in agriculture there are traders, landlords and actual farmers (cultivators), similarly in weaving there are gaddidars, grihastas (master-weavers) and actual weavers. He said that existing co-operatives should be dissolved as now most of these are not serving the intended purpose of extending benefits and facilities to real weavers. New co-operatives should be opened to take the benefits to real weavers while avoiding serious mistakes made earlier.

Yanim Mobaddin Ansari of Bunkar Kalyan Parishad said that British rule had inflicted the worst injustice on weavers, and subsequently weavers made a very important contribution to the freedom movement. He also said that existing co-operatives should be dissolved. The government should also provide direct relief by waiving loans taken by weavers.

Riyazul Hasan Ansari said that remedial steps which benefit the entire sector should be emphasised. Better quality and stable colours should be available. Training to prepare products more in demand should be provided. Relief from fluctuations of yarn price should be provided by giving agencies for silk yarn to members of weavers' community. A minimum support price for products should be ensured by the government.

Razia Begum, BDC member from Lohta village said women make an important contribution to weaving work. She said that till some years ago weavers could do their work in a satisfactory way. But now the situation has deteriorated to such an extent that after he completes a new sari the weaver cannot be sure whether he'll be able to get some minimum price to support his family and to start work on the next sari. This is why weavers are leaving this work and women too are taking up other work like that of beads. She emphasised the need for girls' education to open up more opportunities for them.

Iqbal Bhai of Kotuwaan emphasised the need of loan-waivers for handloom weavers.

Ainul Haq used to be a handloom weaver who became seriously ill. He came with his small children to the public hearing to tell the story of how in the absence of social security weavers and their families have to suffer greatly when illness disrupts their life. He said even when due to media reports of his serious illness grants were approved by the government for his treatment, formalities like doctor preparing estimates of the approximate expenditure of his treatment could not be completed.

Jaya Jaitly, well-known expert of artisan-related issues, said that during freedom movement Khadi (hand-spinning and weaving) had become an

integral part of the freedom struggle, but in recent times government policies have been moving away from genuine help to handloom weavers. However demand for the quality products of handloom weavers certainly exists, and there must be a way to link this demand to protecting the livelihood of handloom weavers.

One practical suggestion she gave was that representatives of weavers working here should visit other big handloom weaving centres like Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Assam particularly to learn how they are coping with existing problems and particularly to link-up with the wider struggles and initiatives of handloom weavers in the country.

She said that attention should be given to some problems arising from existing govt. schemes. Earlier the government had several schemes to help handloom weavers some of which have been scrapped. The key words for the govt. are 'cluster', 'value-added' and 'exports'. But due to the over-emphasis on exports, some small-scale weavers working independently could be left out of govt. schemes to help handlooms. The scheme to mark or certify handloom products could be problematic if a big fee has to be given for this, as this too will leave out the small-scale independent weavers.

Powerlooms may be creating problems for handlooms, but in some areas and for some demands there can be joint efforts.

She said Varanasi needs a *haat* where weavers can sell their products directly to customers. Till this is provided weavers should try selling their products on footpath.

Other speakers, said that like a farmers' movement there is also need for a strong artisans' movement in the country. Keeping in view many-sided injustice faced by handloom weavers, relief like in the form of loan waivers is their legitimate right. He welcomed the insistence in several earlier speeches on the need to identify the real weavers, and to ensure that government help reaches them. There should be no confusion on whether handlooms can be saved or not. For sustainable development efforts should be made to promote sericulture in nearby forest areas of UP, Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttrakhand.

A journalist said that during field visits to weavers' bastis he was told that about 60% weavers have been forced to leave work in the last five to ten years and now work as construction workers, rickshaw pullers and petty shopkeepers, or migrate for work. However most of them will come back to handloom weaving if conditions of this work improve. People complained bitterly that no govt. welfare funds reach the actual weavers. Even when good export orders are available, the influential persons who dominate the work do not give the handloom weavers more than the subsistence wage of Rs 50 to 60 per day. Secondly their saris are arbitrarily rejected for very minor or non-existent flaws, often as a pretext to make highly unfair deductions in the already meagre payments made to them for their work. Despite these very real problems, he said that it is very important to keep hope alive and to work in a united way for removing the existing problems. □□□