

SILENT LOOMS OF GAZIPUR

Bharat Dogra

AS DISTRESSING NEWS has poured in from Gazipur district (Eastern Uttar Pradesh) about the extreme hardship being suffered by handloom weavers and related artisans, a public hearing on the problems of weavers was organised by Manav Seva Samiti (MSS), a voluntary organisation in Gazipur town. Weavers from many villages in Gazipur district came for this public hearing, and in addition there was some representation also from neighbouring districts like Mau.

Sunil Singh, co-ordinator of MSS said that till about 10 to 15 years back there were about 25000 weavers in Gazipur district. This is the official estimate, he said, the actual number may have been about 30 to 35 thousand. However today only about 8000 to 10000 weavers are continuing this work and that too in very difficult conditions. Other weavers have been forced by worsening circumstances to give up this work and many of them have migrated from this area.

Here weavers got work from neighbouring big centres like Varanasi (for sarees) and Bhadohi (famous for carpets). Gradually the margins of weavers here were reduced. There were problems in getting raw material and increasing exploitation by middlemen. The final shock came in the form of cheap imports of cloth from China which reduced work opportunities of weavers and reduced their earnings greatly.

Istiyat Khan, a weaver from Kasmabad said that earlier his family was the proud owner of about 30 looms but now he has been reduced to working for others.

Vyomesh Chitarvansh, an advocate and social activist, said that wider, globalisation related forces unleashed in the decade of the nineties had an impact on this region also. Many weavers lost their livelihood and started migrating to Surat, Ahmedabad and Mumbai. Their skills, their art are being lost and they are sometimes reduced to selling peanuts and gram. They do not get the promised benefits of government schemes. Several of them suffer from TB and asthma. Several of them suffer from hunger. Gazipur weavers do not have the special identity that weavers of some special centres have and this is one reason why their plight is even worse. Even suicides have been reported here.

Speaking from personal experience, Chitravansh said that two recent incidents moved him deeply. In his ancestral village Nadoi he had a friend Sardulla from a family of well-established weavers. After he left his village, he learnt that his friend had fallen on bad days. Then he came to know that Sardulla has contacted TB. He heard that Sardulla was upset that his family living in great poverty had to arrange medicine and better food for him. Finally, one day news came that Sardulla has committed suicide. The second incident concerned Ramprasad, a person whom he met as an advocate as someone who had been accused of selling his blood illegally. He too had been a weaver and had fallen on bad days. Due to carelessness in use of needles while taking blood, Ramprasad contracted AIDS and finally died.

Ramsrot, a weaver from Mau said that unemployment and starvation among weavers has increased greatly as ready-made clothes are flooding the market.

Sudama, another weaver from Mau said that the weaver has to trudge from one place to another (dar-dar ki thokre kha raha hai) just to somehow satisfy the pangs of hunger. He said the weaver is trapped in such a way that he can neither earn enough in this work to meet his needs nor can he leave this work.

Shabina Khatun from Dharara panchayat recalled better days when women of her village were able to make a reasonable earning from this work but now the wage rate is so extremely low that women can't live on this. She gave a recent example when the work of decorating a saree took four days and only Rs 30 were paid for their work. Till a few years back it would have been possible to get a payment of Rs 100 for this work, she said.

Vijay Kumar, a senior and widely respected journalist of this district said that Gazipur till a few decades back was a big centre of khadi giving employment to thousands of weavers plus allied occupations like spinners, washermen, hand-printers, dyers, packers etc. But the khadi work started declining when at the national level dedicated Gandhians could not remain in the leadership of khadi institutions and bureaucrats became dominant. Under the pretext of encouraging small organisations, the old strong khadi institutions were broken up and divided so that their old strength was lost. Just a few persons with vested interests would form a new organisation and get a lot of benefits by using unfair means. This is how khadi work declined and now only about one tenth of the work remains here. Now there are big locks on the doors of khadi institutions.

Vijay Kumar said that certain areas used to be famous for particular type of work such as Kataila and Dwarju areas for curtains and Paharkut for wall-hangings. Curtains were also exported from this area. But now Gazipur's role is mainly to provide wage workers for the bigger centres of production like Varanasi and Bhadohi so that when a product worth Rs 10000 is created, a worker here may get a wage of just Rs 100 to Rs 200.

Other speakers asserted that more such meetings should take place so that the demands of weavers and related occupations can be formulated properly. Then enough pressure should be exerted on the government for the acceptance of these demands. For this to happen, a broad based unity should be established and mobilisation work should take place on a continuous basis.