

Weaving Woes

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To focus attention on the increasing livelihood problems of handloom weavers and other artisans Benaras Bunkar Samiti, Human Welfare Association, Saksham India Trust and Manav Vikas Samiti organised an inter-action on rights of these artisans as well as the field-level reality of their livelihood problems. This dialogue was held at Parijat Community Hall, Lucknow with the support of 'Find Your Feet'.

Initiating the discussion, Dr Rajnikant, Director of Human Welfare Association (who co-ordinated this discussion) said that Human Welfare Association had initiated a project 'Taana-Baana' for protecting the rights of handloom weavers in villages of Benaras district. However in recent years under the liberalised import regime of WTO induced changes problems for handloom weavers started increasing due to the bulk import of cheap silk (or imitation silk cloth from China) as well as import of embroidery machines. These have been used by some manufacturers to produce cheap imitation products which are making the market extremely difficult for genuine, products such as *Benarasi Sari*. On the one hand several weavers and other artisans have become unemployed, and on the other hand their wages and margins have been reduced to such an extent that they can't meet basic needs. Similarly the machines imported from China are a threat to chikan work artisans also. Keeping in view these fast growing problems of a large number of weavers and artisans a *Bunkar Sandesh Abhiyan* (Campaign on the Voice of Weavers) has been initiated and this inter-action is also being organised as a part of this campaign, with representatives from 17 districts of Uttar Pradesh.

Neelesh Munje, Programme Officer of 'Find Your Feet' said that 'Find Your Feet' in collaboration with 'Saksham India Trust' recently conducted a study on the possibilities of promotion of handlooms in the existing panchayati-raj set-up. This study based on inter-action with officials, elected representatives and weavers revealed that important provisions already exist for promotion of handloom by panchayats and the coordination between the depts. for handloom and panchayati raj needs to be improved to realise this potential adequately.

Vibhuti Mishra, chairperson of Akhil Bhartiya Rachnatamak Samaj (based in Mirzapur), said that the welfare of weavers should be based on the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave. In order to find a ready market for saree weavers of his area he tried to get advance information about marriages which are taking place in the near future so that weavers could directly supply sarees to these families. There are serious problems with existing government schemes for weavers such as the scheme of health insurance. When a weaver goes to a nursing home to get the benefit of this scheme he is to foot a very inflated bill for medicare so that the insurance benefit (which provides limited coverage up to a specified expense limit) is largely lost. So efforts should be made to improve and use government hospitals where cheaper medicare can become available. When weavers and artisans are asked to make separate cards for different purposes then this encourages middlemen who charge them for making different cards. So various purposes like insurance, medicare, professional identity etc. should be covered in a single card.

Sunil Kumar, co-ordinator *Manav Seva Samiti* (Ghazipur) said that carpet weavers in Karanda block of Ghazipur district just can't survive on their reduced earnings of recent years and several of them, particularly women have come for this interaction and protest demonstrations which preceded it. Some suicides of weavers have also taken place here. He said that schemes like handloom mark are important and it is very important to take the information of various government schemes to remote villages.

Savitri Sharma, country-director of 'Find Your Feet' said that it is very heartening to see self-confidence returning to families covered by *Taana-Baana* project. Although the project concentrated initially on protection from middlemen this work had to take up new challenges in the form of indiscriminate imports from China. Good progress has been made in areas like getting geographical indication for *Benarasi sari*.

Nahida, a social activist from Barabanki district said that there are many skills and, products based on these skills in various parts of the state and the government make all efforts to save this heritage. For this people need an organisation with a wide base.

Miraz Khan of Faizabad district said that in this district's Tanda and Jalapur localities had a lot of handlooms but in recent years handlooms have decreased significantly. Similarly the work of hand-made shoes has declined significantly. He said that the danger is not just from Chinese imports, but from multinational companies as well.

Onkar Upadhyaya, a social activist from Bhadohi who had also worked as a weaver said that the weaver insurance scheme has been badly affected by corruption so that hardly any real benefits reach weavers. He said that when he tried to arrange loans for some weavers from banks, he was told by officials that they were not aware of the special scheme for weavers and they did not agree even when they were shown copies of Reserve Bank guidelines. He emphasised that to keep up with changing times one needs new designs, eco-friendly products and natural dyes.

Shivprasad, an activist from Azamgarh district said this region, particularly Mubarakpur had a rich tradition of weaving famous *Benarsi Saris* but at present this is in the grip of a crisis situation. There is adverse impact of overall recessionary conditions also, he said. To cope with these troubled times the concerned people need to spread consciousness about rights and special schemes of the government.

In Mau handlooms have been replaced by powerlooms to a very large extent. Surendra, an activist from Mau said that Panchayati Raj institutions should take up various works relating to the welfare of weavers. Weavers should get help in the work of training, design and subsidies.

Jamal Ansari has been involved in the protection of zardozi artisans of Lucknow during the last 7 years. He said that over one lakh artisans in Lucknow are involved in zardozi and chikan work. He said that most of the zardozi work is hurdled by about 150 to 200 office-wallahs who get orders from Delhi. The artisans have faced very difficult condition in recent years. When he tried to get *Shilpi* cards for some artisans they had to run from pillar to post for 10 months. Then they used right to information act and after RTI applications finally they could get the card. It took a total of one year to get the card.

Chairman of Saksham India Trust T P Singh, who chaired this dialogue, said that in this entire campaign the leadership should be of the community of artisans and weavers.

Dr Rajnikant read out a declaration of this inter-action which was endorsed by people raising their hands. This declaration said that district-level rallies and demonstrations raising the demands of artisans and weavers will be organised. Efforts to contact MPs and MLAs regarding problems of weavers and artisans will be speeded up. Political parties will be approached to give an important place to the demands of artisans and weavers in their election manifestos. Efforts to set up organisations of weavers and artisans at the district, state and national level will be speeded up. The government will be approached to improve ground-level implementation of existing schemes, particularly the cluster scheme. □□□