

HANDLOOM WEAVING – NO LONGER MUSIC OF RURAL HOUSES: A CURTAINRAISER ON THE HALTH PROBLEMS OF TRADITIONAL WEAVERS

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Abstract

The weavers working in the handloom industry are exposed to many occupational hazards and studies bring forth the risks in the textile sector ranging from exposure to noise and dangerous substances, to manual handling and working with dangerous machinery. These hazards have been classified as mechanical, physical, chemical, ergonomical and physiological hazards. This industry already faces criticism as being unremunerative and may soon see the loss of age old handloom skills on one hand and on the other it is contributing to massive job losses. A bigger issue that is going unnoticed in this struggle to protect handloom is the health problems associated with the traditional handloom weavers which may soon result in India losing its Global USP. Hence this paper assesses the health issues being faced by the weavers and suggests measures to uplift them socially- more specifically from the health front.

Keywords: *Occupational hazard, musculo skeletal hazards, bysonis, Maslow's Needs Hierarchy Theory*

INTRODUCTION

Handloom weaving is an ancient industry and it comprises of textile cottage industry, cotton industry, cotton silk and bleaching, dying, finishing, hosiery, lace embroidery, silk reeling and silk twisting. It is the chief means of livelihood of people who entirely depend upon it. On the other hand, weaving plays an important role in state/nation economy. Weaving is the basic process among various manufacturing stages of handloom clothes and is defined as a frame for weaving equipped with some wooden devices. In 2012, a new definition was proposed: "Handloom means any loom other than power loom; and includes any hybrid loom on which at least one process of weaving require manual intervention or human energy for production." Handloom, or fabric woven by hand, makes up just over a tenth of India's total fabric production. A spectacular range is created by weavers across the country, from the Madras checks and Kanchipuram weaves of Tamil Nadu to pashmina and shahtoosh of J&K, from the tie-and-dyes of Gujarat and Rajasthan to the eri and muga silks of Assam. Though, however of late handloom weaving is no longer music of rural homes.

Power loom accounts for nearly 60% of fabrics and, because it is mechanized, works nearly 10 times faster than handloom. Costs differ, but the gap is massive: handloom can cost Rs 500/metre to create, while the same fabric could be woven on a power loom for Rs 30/metre. Average investment in a power loom could be Rs 15,000, three times that of handloom. But many handloom motifs and patterns cannot be replicated on power loom. No wonder power loom associations want the protection for handloom loosened and this means power loom fabric could be passed off as handloom. Already, because the enforcement of the Act is slack, over 70% of fabric sold as khadi and handloom is power loom. This industry already faces criticism as being unremunerative and may soon see the loss of age old handloom skills on one hand and on the other it is contributing to massive job losses. A bigger issue that is going unnoticed in this struggle to protect handloom is the health problems associated with the traditional handloom weavers which may soon result in India losing its Global USP.

RELATED LITERATURE

Studies bring forth the hazards and risks in the textile sector ranging from exposure to noise and dangerous substances, to manual handling and working with dangerous machinery. Each processing stage from the production of materials to the manufacturing, finishing, coloring and occupational safety and health in the textile sector and packaging poses risks to workers and some of these are dangerous to women's health. These hazards have been classified as mechanical, physical, chemical, ergonomical and physiological hazards. Further exposure to cotton causes a disease called bysonis **Fantahum and Abebe, 1999**. Unprotected working condition is a major problem observed in the textile industries. It is also seen that handloom weaving has been India's biggest cottage and labour intensive sector, which has been playing very important role in the country's economy by forming a part of India's rich heritage of weavers. But with modernization and automation of the industry with imports, this industry is facing a tough competition. Above all unhealthy work environment are all causing the decline of this powerful sector. Hence this study will help us analyze the health problems and issues faced by the traditional weavers and take productive measures to uplift them socially and from the health front too taking up Puducherry UT as the sample area of study.



OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To understand a typical weaver's demographic status like gender, age group, educational qualification and family type; to analyze the various health problems of the traditional handloom weavers; to evaluate the level of various factors contributing to the health problems of traditional handloom weavers and to suggest measures.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive study was undertaken in this regard and a survey approach was used. A well structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data from the handloom weavers (cooperative weavers and independent weavers of Pontex, Puducherry) of 50 numbers. The sample respondents were taken using non probability convenient sampling technique.

DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

The major findings of the study are as follows:

Demographic Profile of Weavers

- About 52% of the respondents surveyed were males and 48% were female weavers. A typical weaver was found to be mostly in the age group of 31- 40 years and a majority having less than or equal to standard 10 education level only. Their family type was joint family and 52% having a family size of 4-6 members and 38% having more than 6 members. They earn a salary of Rs.3000-5000 per month which is much less than the average per capita income of our country (Census 2015).
- Majority (60%) of the weavers were cooperative weavers, working 11-12 hours a day. Their standard of living based on basic minimum possessions for a quality life reveals quite a moderate lifestyle. Further it was interesting to note that most of the household gadgets were purchased by them through cash rather than using credit schemes. This is also an indicative of the local government providing a lot of freebies to people during elections.

Health Problems associated with Weavers

- The study shows that major health problems of the weavers are classified under musculo skeletal problems of back pain, knee and joint pain. This is due to the long working hours in various harmful positions on traditional looms and instruments of handloom weaving. Further literature review identified physical work environment as another major influence of health issues and the study observes that physical working conditions like noise, lighting and exposure to dust and fibre were the top 3 rated issues being faced. Also 100 % of the respondents complained of problems like back pain, neck pain, foot pain, joint pain and this is identified to the poor ergonomical design at their work place. An evaluation of the physiological problems at the work place shows that highly rated issues were financial and health problems. As financial problems can lead to health ailments, this justifies the various health issues of the weavers. The lack of safety at the work place was observed from very poorly maintained handloom equipments as all the respondents are of view that the equipment is in moderate condition and there is a complete agreement that there are no safety measures being followed. Also no safety devices like ear plug, mask was being provided to arrest the health issues of the weavers. This finding is in line with **Ahmad E. F, 1988** study that identifies that workers in the factory must be given adequate instruction and training at the start of their employment to enable them to fit the earplug correctly. Though many decades have passed since this study findings, the situation seems to be never the less the same.
- Further the observations show very poor morale existing among the weavers as the first rank was given to employees not interested to work. The hygiene/maintenance factors according to Maslow's Need's Hierarchy theory at work place is being rated the least. This shows a highly de motivated work force.

Health ailments of weavers

- The frequency of various common health ailments of the weavers was studied and it as seen that musculo skeletal problems like back and neck pain received top rank followed by foot pain, head pain, fever, cold and cough, cholesterol , BP problems. These signals cannot be ignored as they are the causes of critical illness in the long run.

Health care system

- A study of the health related service provided to the weaver's shows that regular medical checks are is only provided sometimes or never while accident insurance is being provided. While awareness programs on various health ailments seems to be completely never / nil.



Gender wise distribution of health issues

- On applying independent sample t test to test whether there is any significant difference in the experience of physical problems and physical hazards of the male and female weavers - The two-tailed P value equals 0.8082 for the former hypothesis and by conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be not statistically significant. In the case of the latter - two-tailed P value equals 0.7290 and by conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be not statistically significant. Thus overall health issues being faced by weavers is almost the same and does not exhibit any gender specific differences as revealed by independent sample t test results.

SUGGESTIONS

On analyzing the weaver's socio-economic conditions as well as their various health issues and problems being faced by them, the following suggestions are put forth

- At the macro perspective there is a need for the industry body concerned and the government machinery to pass certain legislations with respect to provision of basic safety and hygienic and clean work environment at handloom mills. A check on whether occupational health and safety standards are being obeyed by must be emphasized.
- At the Industry and organization level steps must be taken to provide awareness of the health issues at these work places so that weavers are ready to follow the guidelines listed to them. As most of the health issues are musculo skeletal oriented, ergonomically designed chairs and foot rest must be provided to reduce these problems. Authorities can educate the weavers on the benefits they can claim through ESI and other medical insurance available. Regular medical camps can also be conducted to improve and monitor their health conditions.

FUTURE DIRECTION

Similar studies in future covering weavers in other geographical areas can be included to enunciate legislation for the handloom weavers and protect the industry from becoming obsolete.

CONCLUSION

This study clearly brings to light the various health issues faced by weavers and there is also no distinction between male and female weavers in respect of the various health issues. Hence it calls for highlighting these problems to the government and industry bodies and make their work places safer and secure through legislations and awareness programs. Further with the onslaught of modernization and automation and the unrenumerative tag facing the industry, our country is in the position of permanently losing a century's old technique and skills. This means India as a whole will lose a global USP and also we may lose a very efficient technology of reducing our country's carbon foot print even as our leaders ponder how to meet reduced carbon emission levels.

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