

# Occupational Divergence in Handloom Industry: Case Study of Howrah District

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**Abstract**—Handloom Industry is the pillar of the Indian economy and is one of the largest unorganized sectors, which provides the widest employment opportunities after agriculture. Despite being the second largest employer in India, the industry suffers from weak infrastructure, low demand for handloom products, income crunch, ineffective marketing and lack of credit facility. The present study was conducted in the Howrah District of West Bengal to assess the occupational shift caused by the socio-economic condition of the handloom weavers. The objective of this paper is to assess the occupational divergence caused due to the socio-economic conditions of handloom weavers. An in-depth interview was conducted to know the present standing of the handloom weavers of Howrah district and the motives behind such occupational shift. The weavers mainly faced two issues: occupational diversification due to economic and social issues. The handloom weavers thereby live in a paradoxical world, where the executives respect them for their craftsmanship while their socio-economic status is lower than other casual workers of the unorganized sector.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Handloom industry is the backbone of the Indian economy and is known for its rich and traditional techniques of production. It is one of the largest unorganized sectors after agriculture, which employs 43.32 lakh weavers and ancillary weavers (Administrative Report, 2017).

Handloom weaving is a family-oriented industry where all the members of the family engage in weaving products and the family members work as one unit. There are four types of handloom weavers:

- **Independent or Entrepreneur weavers:** These weavers are independent and are master of their own. They buy raw materials on their own, design products on their own and market their product through private traders, local market, haat, etc.
- **Laborer weavers:** These weavers work under master weavers for a certain wage. They receive raw materials and design inputs from master weavers, which they use to produce the final product. After the final product is produced, it is sent to the master weaver for which they receive a wage.

- **Master Weavers:** Earlier these weavers were engaged in weaving activities but now they employ laborer weavers at a grass root level wage, supply them with raw materials and design inputs for the production of handloom products. After the final product is received, they sell these products to private traders, local markets, Mahajans and co-operatives societies.
- **Weavers of the Co-operative societies:** These weavers are connected to the co-operative societies, which are under government control. These weavers are given support and assistance from the government for their better standard of living. The weavers under co-operative societies have better access to facilities than independent or laborer weavers. But often these weavers are not assured with long-term employment by these co-operatives.

In spite of cultural and economic importance, the weavers of this sector continue to suffer from persistent vulnerabilities. This is because the weavers of this industry suffer from continuous problems of weak infrastructure, low demand, income crisis, ineffective government support, lack of timely credit availability to name a few (Patra & Dey, 2015).

The social and economic problems that they are exposed to thereby leading to a shift in occupation will form the focus of my paper.

### Objective of my study:

- Assessment of occupational shift in the handloom industry caused by the socio-economic conditions of the weaver.

Based on the above objective, the following hypothesis has been constructed:

- H<sub>0</sub>:** There is no occupational shift caused due to socio-economic condition of the weavers.
- H<sub>1</sub>:** There is occupational shift caused due to socio-economic condition of the weavers.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Sampling:

The Howrah District is considered to be an important handloom area where more than 1,000 weavers weave handloom items such as '*matha sarees*', '*lungis*' and '*gamchas*' (*towels*). The important areas of handloom centers in Howrah are Domjur & Bally Jagacha.

The independent weavers and laborer weavers constitute my sample. 11 weavers, from each category were chosen as sample for this study.

### 2.2 Data Gathering Method:

In-depth interviews were taken for the purpose of building a case study.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 3.1 Occupational Divergence due to Economic Issues

The partial occupational diversification due to economic constraints explained the decline in the interest of the weavers to just weaving occupation. This means that other than weaving activities, the weavers of the Howrah District resorted to other source of earnings as well. The most important reason was crisis in the earning of the weavers. Due to less wage paid to the weavers for their labor and less demand for handloom products, the standard of living of the weavers dwindled.

According to the findings of this study, a weaver earns on an average of Rs. 6000 per month. This includes the mean earning of both the type of weavers: independent weavers as well as weavers who work under private owners. But, it was seen that the earnings per month of a weaver is more when the weavers works for private owners than independently. Estimating individually, an independent weaver on an average earns Rs. 5300 p.m. and weavers who work under private owners earn Rs. 7000 p.m. This earning depends on the number of sarees produced per day or per week, yarn quality and design input.

A weaver employed under private owner on an average earns Rs. 1200- Rs. 1600 per week. The weavers employed get a wage for their labor. This earning is calculated based on the piece-rate. The weavers' earning is dependent on the quantity of items delivered by them week-by-week or month-to-month contingent upon the comprehension between the weaver and its master.

After in-depth interview with the weavers, it was found that weavers under private owners were in ideal situation than independent weavers. No doubt, the independent weavers are master of their own and need not rely on the master for wages, but it was seen that the weavers working under private owners for a long duration feel secured working under masters. Since private owners have proper access to market and traders

outside, they do not face much inconvenience in peddling their products. Hence, the weavers here are mostly employed throughout.

The independent weavers on the other hand face issues in the distribution of the handloom products. The problems faced in marketing the products are: asymmetric information about customer's demand and lack of comprehension about product feature.

The information about designs, color, trend and other information play an important role in the distribution and selling of stocks. To independent weavers this information is obtained through suppliers of input or private traders. At the end when this information isn't passed on appropriately, it prompts heap up of stocks that are not demanded by the consumers any more (Raju & Roy, 2014).

As per the findings of this study, independent weavers rely upon private traders, local shops and haats to sell their products locally, whereas a weaver under private owner do not face advertising issues as they work on demand basis. Another major setback faced was that the consumers of handloom products have less knowledge about the quality of product produced. They are unable to distinguish the better quality handloom products with the power loom products. By and large, the quality of the item delivered in power loom contrasts from handloom. Since, the customers can't acknowledge the items, they are misinformed and consequently end up purchasing items delivered by power loom than handloom. This leads to fall in the demand for handloom products, thereby mounting the stock of the products (Das, Roy & Mandal, 2016).

To clear the inventories, they end up selling at a low price without keeping much profit. To increase revenue, weavers had rented a power loom machine to produce goods at a low rate without much effort. This helps them earn revenue otherwise not earned from handloom weaving (Jain & Tiwari, 2013).

An interview with the weaver working under private owners also stressed the issue of falling demand for handloom products due to rising need for power loom products, which has affected the earnings of the weavers working under private owners.

Low income, ineffective marketing and power loom have cornered the handloom industry. This has resulted in occupational divergence from handloom weaving to other source of income. The other sources of income from the findings of this study list as follows: Agriculture, Livestock, Business, Wage laborer and Power loom. This occupational shift shows the dilution of handloom individualities.

The most important issue that concerns the weavers of Howrah District is the mobility of labor to other occupation from the conventional handloom business to other services. The decrease in the quantity of handlooms and its weavers in

Howrah region is a direct result of accessibility of work from weaving to different occupations.

The weavers bank on other occupation for their earnings such as development projects at adjacent spots to procure a living and enhance their living conditions. The weavers had begun their own independent work business of tea and nourishment moving. Likewise, few weavers had started producing both handloom and power loom items. While the interest for power loom item is more, there has been dreadful decrease in the handloom items.

### 3.2 Occupational Divergence due to Social Issues

Cultural capital plays an important role in occupational status. Weavers possess only one form of capital known as 'cultural capital'. A business or an occupation requires investment in different types of capital. But in weaving an artist needs cultural capital, which comprises of artistic skills, education and knowledge. The weavers possess a strong cultural capital other than resources such as property. In handloom industry, the art of weaving is the primary cultural capital than education (Shaw, Dey & Das, 2015).

Due to lack of other capital resources, the laborer weavers face oppression from their master weavers. The master weavers or private firms dominate the laborer weavers in terms of capital and social status. Because of this coercion, it was observed in Howrah District that young-generation weavers were unwilling to join these weavers under whom their parent's worked for so many years. They do not want to suffer from the same authoritarianism as faced by their parents in terms of wages and benefits.

Handloom is a family-oriented business and the weavers in Bengal are from tanti community. One can learn the art of weaving effectively only if it belongs to the family of weavers. Weavers spend their useful time to learn this artistic skill and devote less time for education and other resource. This creates a barrier in their growth, as other jobs require skills other than artistic skills possessed by weavers.

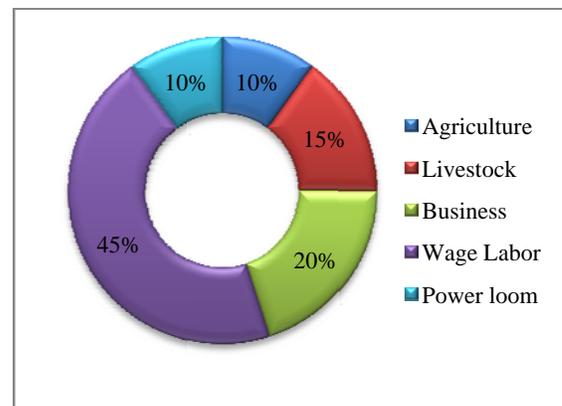
Another reason for occupational diversification from handloom was the pressure coming from social institutions like marriage. In weaver's household most of the work on yarn before pre-loom manufacturing is done by the women of the family. Hence, the younger weavers find it difficult to get married, as the parents do not want to give their daughters to engage in declining handloom related work in addition to household chores.

The weaver households have been investing in the education of their children so that their children can earn more through skilled job opportunities. This had helped some weavers to improve their standard of living and establish a well-settled lifestyle.

Health constitutes an important factor in any occupational efficiency as well as occupational shift. Without protected working condition and environment, there is decline in the

productivity and efficiency of the weaver. Handloom weaving is a labor-intensive profession where weavers fabricate items for more than 8 hours a day, which requires physical strength. Though the process may look spontaneous, but in reality it is an industrious process, involving a number of ergonomic factors like awkward posture, high force, repetitiveness, long duration of work and high visual demand. Past studies have shown different health problems faced by the weavers such as: musculo skeletal problems of back pain, knee pain, joint pain, shoulder pain, low back pain, leg pain and diminished visual acuity, who have grown in this profession (Sarkar, 2016).

Through the analysis of this study, it was found that weavers face various health problems for which they have not taken proper medical assistance in the past and till now. The major health issue faced by these weavers is musculo skeletal problems of back pain, joint pain, shoulder pain and leg pain and diminished visual acuity. These morbidities were observed to be the highest among weavers. Since women participate equally in the pre-loom production process, they likewise experience the ill effects of these medical issues including spinal pain and joint pain. The working environments of weavers are unhealthy and congested, which adds risk to their health. Due to continuous sitting, weavers strain their back and eye the most. At a very early age, the weavers suffer from muscular pain and visual sensitivity. This stands one of the reasons for occupational shift among weavers from their main profession of skilled weaving to other jobs.



**Figure 1: Occupational Shift from Handloom Weaving to other Profession**

From the above analysis, both economic and social issues played an important role in determining whether any statistical relationship exists between socio-economic issues leading to occupational shift. On testing Pearson's chi-square test, it was found that the p-value was 0.00. This means that there exists a significant relationship between occupational shifts caused due to socio-economic condition of the weavers. Table 1. Pearson's Chi-Square Test

#### 4. LIMITATIONS

1. Sample size is limited.
2. Though there is a scope to research on more than 1 district in Kolkata, my study is personalized to just the Howrah district.

Source of Income	Observed Values	Expected Values	P-Value
Weaving	133500	12722.72727	0
Other sources	146400	12722.72727	

#### 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion we can say that all the complications of the weavers are inter-related and they re-enforce each other. The socio-economic status of the weavers of Howrah District demonstrates a declining trend of handloom industry and its activities. Due to this decreasing trend, the weavers have shifted from their main profession of weaving to different occupations for sustenance and better way of life. This transition indicates occupational diversification caused due to socio-economic conditions of the weavers. This change in profession had improved the well being of the weavers to some extent. But this major shift has caused dying of the handloom business that symbolizes rich, tradition and cultural importance to the West Bengal and the Indian Economy. The real concern is that if this shift in occupation keeps on cloning in other locale and states of India too, this can prompt breakdown of the Handloom Industry. To be able to protect the traditional handcrafted handloom professional, real changes should be done at individual, state and central dimensions for the restoration of handloom profession at Howrah District of West Bengal with the goal that other weavers don't trail this pattern.

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