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Correspondence: All correspondence should be addressed to: Editor, Bangladesh Sociological Studies (BSS), Bangladesh Institute of Social Research (BISR), 15/H/1 (3rd floor), Zigatala, Dhaka-1209, Bangladesh. Telephone: +88-02-8612916; Fax: 88-02-8629419; E-mail: bss@agnionline.com; khurshed@bkdc.net; Website: www.bisrbd.org

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Globalization, Occupational Displacement and the Livelihood Issues of the Handloom Weavers in Orissa (India)

Rajkishor Meher*

The present globalisation and economic liberalisation policies pursued in a largely populous and pluralistic society like India have although accelerated country's economic growth, they have generated many negative and unintended effects on Indian society in the forms of widening disparities, deprivation, occupational displacement and threat to self-sustainable livelihood of large many people placed at the bottom rungs of socio-economic hierarchy. In such scenario of development, the present paper makes an attempt to focus on the livelihood issues and the present social and economic conditions of the handloom weavers and the traditional handloom industry of Orissa state in India that provides employment to large many people in the unorganized economy sector. It is observed that as in Orissa, over the years large many weavers in different parts of India have been found occupationally displaced and many more are at the verge of losing their livelihood and extinction of this age-old artistic craft like tie and dye handloom work in the absence of a protective policy package.

Introduction

India's experience with the economic liberalisation and globalisation measures of the economy linked to structural adjustment programme (SAP) to accelerate the pace of economic development in the country is now more than 15 years old. Needless to say, these measures aim at efficient allocation and use of domestic productive resources by eliminating market distortions and improving incentives. As a follow up to these policy measures, the role of the state in shaping the course of development of the economy and society has been curtailed to a great extent. On the other hand, deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation measures to strengthen the market economy have been given prime importance. The logic behind such course of action is that it would help

* Faculty of Sociology, Nabakrushna Choudhury Centre for Development Studies, Orissa, Bhubaneswar-751013 (India) and presently Fellow, Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki (Finland).
E-mail:rajkishor_meher@yahoo.co.in or meher.rajkishor@helsinki.fi

in bringing stability of the macro economy and the complementary measures adopted for the purpose would help to alter the structural characteristics of the Indian economy and necessary environment would be created for sustainable economic growth. However, it needs to be mentioned that in an overpopulated developing economy like India there are many intricate socio-economic problems that cannot be taken care up by the market economy. These are: (i) lowly qualified surplus labour force causing mounting unemployment problem; (ii) high incidence of poverty and low decline in the below poverty line (BPL) category households; (iii) widening regional disparities in growth; and (iv) widespread environmental degradation ultimately affecting the growth momentum of the economy. Unfortunately, the SAP and the New Economic Policy (NEP) of the Government of India during all these years of economic liberalisation have done very little to touch upon the root causes of the problem. As a result, it is now observed that while the privileged sections of society including the high profile white collar and blue collar workers in the organised economic sector have been benefited a great deal, the downtrodden poor and marginalized sections working in the unorganized and informal sector of the economy have been worst affected. Not only there has been a marked increase in the economic inequality between the different segments of human population, but also it has increased both inter and intra-state level development disparities all over the country (Meher 1999 & 2001). As the bulk of the working population (more than 90 per cent) of the country clings to unorganised and informal sector economy in a scenario of low or stagnating growth of this sector, the so-called organised sector supposed to do miracle for the Indian economy in the era of globalisation and economic liberalisation has, of late, started facing the problem of one-dimensional economic growth. This has further generated many negative types of chain effects on the informal sector economy and the weakest among the weak and the poorest among the poor are becoming the worst victims of the open market economy and globalisation policies.

In such scenario of development this paper makes an attempt to focus on the livelihood issues and the present social and economic conditions of the handloom weavers and the traditional handloom industry of Orissa state of India that provides employment to large many people. It is observed that after the implementation of economic liberalisation measures the handloom industry of India faced an immediate set back (Pathy 1995). Over the years, large many weavers in different parts of India have been found occupationally displaced and many more are at the verge of losing their livelihood and extinction of this age-old artistic craft like tie and dye handloom work in the absence of a protective policy package.

Importance of the Craft Economy and Handloom in Orissa

Orissa has one of the richest traditions of handloom and handicrafts in the Indian Subcontinent. The ancient rock-cut caves and beautiful stone carvings engraved in the temples of medieval Orissa, and the famous tie and dye Sambalpuri sarves (apparel worn by the women) provide a glimpse of the rich tradition of crafts, art and sculpture of the state. The handloom and handicrafts products of Orissa are appreciated all over India and also in the overseas countries because of their exquisite designs, natural motifs and superb colour combination. The artisan weavers use various motifs, which have their origin in nature such as the lotus, creeper, trees, conch shell, fish, deer, lion, elephant, swan, etc. and each signifying special hidden meaning in relation to the produced goods. These traditional craft industries of Orissa have, however, historically passed through many up and down stages. The advent of modern factory based production and industrialisation in Europe and the British colonial rule over India led to the decline of handloom industry of the country and in the absence of patronisation and protection of the craft goods the industry had to pass through many tribulations (Gadgil 1972). In post independent India when the Government adopted the path of modern industrialisation through state centred planning to accelerate the pace of economic development in the country, it paid equal importance on the development of labour intensive traditional industry sector such as handloom and handicrafts. In order to solve the problem of open unemployment in a labour surplus economy like India, the Government had no other options. More so, the traditional craft goods and artistic handloom fabrics reflect the cultural heritage of the country and next to agriculture, this sector is the major provider of employment to people in the informal economic sector.

In a poor and less industrialised state like Orissa next to agriculture handloom is the major provider of employment to its lowly educated backward category people. According to findings of different studies carried at different points of time one loom on average provides employment to 2.50 persons and the state as such has more than 100 thousand (one lakh) looms in the handloom sector (Meher 1992, Mohapatro 1986). Of this, almost 40 per cent of the looms deal with production of tie and dye fabrics in both cotton and silk, which are generally called the art textile fabrics. It is observed that all types of handloom cloths including art textile fabrics are woven in manually operated throw shuttle and fly shuttle pit looms mostly in decentralised home-based production process.

There are three different types of production system usually found prevalent in the handloom sector, viz. the independent artisan producers/weavers, the attached weavers working under the master

weavers/artisan entrepreneurs and traders, and the cooperative sector weavers. However, under the present capitalist production system and the dominance of the market economy, the weavers working independently with their low capital base find it too difficult to carry out the occupation without developing any sort of dependency relationship with the traders and middlemen for the marketing of the goods. As a result, the numbers of independent weavers doing home based production by purchasing yarns and other raw materials and by selling the handloom fabrics on their own to pursue their livelihood are now almost an extinct category. Sometimes such category of weavers land up in position worse than the attached weavers and their virtual earning becoming less than the wage/conversion charge received by an attached weaver. The cooperative form of production, which is considered best for the industry and sustainable living of the weavers, is also now found in a very disorganised and haphazard form. Many weavers' cooperative societies in the state in particular and the country in general are now either sick or closed. In fact, the trend of sickness and closure of many handloom cooperative societies in the state had already started long before economic liberalization measures due to vested interests of the petty master weavers/traders (Meher 1997) and this has further culminated with the withdrawal of state support to this age-old industry in the post reform years. So, the only alternative left before the poor, hapless weavers to work under the master weavers/artisan entrepreneurs and traders under putting out system of production on piece rate wage fixed arbitrarily by the master weavers/merchant capitalists. Under this system of production the employer, i.e. the master weaver/merchant capitalist supplies key inputs like yarns, dyes and other chemicals to the weavers and also the designs of the fabrics to be woven in the loom and in return the former pays to the latter the wage/conversion charge on piece rate basis. It is a system of semi-capitalistic mode of production in which the master weavers/artisan entrepreneurs and traders of handloom cloths by supplying key inputs like yarn and by paying arbitrarily fixed wage on piece rate basis virtually reap huge profit and surplus value of the artisan weavers' labour without owning the means of production. Also, the employers, viz. master weavers/traders do not owe any moral responsibility of paying the artisan weavers various social security benefits such as provident fund, paid leave, gratuity, insurance coverage and the like. In some cases without owning any large manufactories the master weavers and the merchant capitalists dealing with production and marketing of handloom cloths under the old putting out system of production are seen to be exercising tremendous power over the poor and hapless weavers in the handloom clusters of Orissa. In particular, in places like Bargarh, Barpali, Binka, Sonapur, etc. in the western Orissa famous for the tie and dye Sambalpuri *sarees* (double *ikat* design), and

Athgarh, Nuapatna, etc. in Cuttack and Berhampur in the coastal region of Orissa famous for colourful silk and cotton sarees woven in single *ikat* tie and dye design, there are many master weavers and traders dealing with production and sale of tie and dye handloom fabrics mostly under the putting out system of production. As there is little market demand of plain handloom cloths and those are less cost competitive vis-à-vis mill-made cloths, none among the master weavers/traders presently goes for production of plain handloom cloths under the putting out system of production.

The Endogenous and Exogenous Problems

The latent and manifest effects of globalisation and economic liberalisation in a largely populous, geographically vast and pluralistic society like India with multi-ethnicity and caste hierarchy are observed to be many folds. They have been interpreted, understood and reacted upon by the intellectuals and civil society in multiple ways in different contexts. In the post reform years notwithstanding higher growth and visible transformations of the Indian middle class, the growth of the economy has been selective: pro-urban and pro-modern sector are more oriented towards the middle classes and rich population living in both urban and rural areas than the poor masses living in backward and remote areas. Not only at the global level there has been a marked increase in economic inequalities between the rich and poor nations (Dasgupta and Chattopadhyay 2004), but also at the interstate level a large country like India has been subjected to increasing socio-economic inequalities. More so, at the intrastate level such inequalities are found to be deepening further between space and people (Meher 2001).

In the post reform years due to the withdrawal of state support to handloom sector and weakening of the cooperative form of production, the major and the widely pervasive form of production of cloth in the handloom is found to be putting out system of production. It is found that the private producers (both trader and artisan entrepreneurs) are mainly interested in production of tie and dye related art textile fabrics, which cater to the consumption needs of middle class and elites. The artisan weavers weaving art textile fabrics usually use finer counts cotton yarn starting from 60 counts to 120 counts and silk yarns of both mulberry and *tasser*. The relatively less skilled weavers weaving plain handloom cloths of coarse variety and catering to the needs of poor and common mass have now been relegated to the state of occupational displacement and in many parts of Orissa the industry as such is found in a state of its extinction. Also, many among the less skilled tie and dye weavers with their little capacity to adopt new designs and artistic weaving method as

per market demand and consumers' tastes are virtually getting displaced and deprived of their traditional means of survival, i.e. caste-based occupation.

Notwithstanding the popularity of tie and dye handloom fabrics all over the country and the promotional incentives provided by the government during different plan periods, the handloom industry of Orissa has passed through many ups and downs. This is because of wide differentiation in the skill level of weavers in Orissa and their fission into different weaving sub-castes according to their weaving knowledge and skill. There are several sub-castes of weavers in Orissa such as Bhulia, Kostha, Kuli, Dera, Saraka, Rangani, Gaudia Patara, Asani Patara, Bengali Tanti, Asani Tanti, Gaudia Tanti, Pana Tanti, Matia, Jhola etc. Besides this, there are scheduled castes like Ganda and Pana and scheduled tribes like Bonda and Kutia Kandha, who also do weaving work to earn their bread. However, the tie and dye handloom fabrics for which Orissa is famous all over the country is mainly woven by the Bhulia weavers of western part of Orissa in double *ikat* (warp & weft design) and the Gaudia Patara, Asani Patara, Kostha, Saraka and Dera in single *ikat* (weft design). The other weaving sub-castes mainly weave plain handloom cloths including checks and stripes designs. As a result, excluding the highly skilled tie and dye weavers constituting around 40 per cent of the weaving population in the state, the fate of rest 60 per cent of the weaving population in Orissa has always hinged upon the government patronage and incentives provided to the handloom industry from time to time at the macro level. More so, the highly skilled tie and dye weavers have had also hand to mouth existence (Meher 1995) and due to low level of earning many among the younger offspring of weavers have virtually opted out of their traditional caste occupation in the past. But such type of voluntary opting out of the younger generation members for upward social mobility has never been a matter of concern for the industry and the weavers in general. However, the recent trend of horizontal mobility of artisan weavers from home based piece rate wage work to casual wage employment in the non-agricultural and agricultural sectors of rural areas or their migration to urban informal sector either as self-employed or wage employed casual workers of the poverty induced unorganised manufacturing and servicing activities is definitely a matter of deep concern for all and the state.

Needless to say, the number of handlooms and the number of weavers doing weaving work in Orissa as well as in the country as a whole have shown wide fluctuations from time to time. In particular, soon after independence and till early 1990, when the state was playing a proactive role in economic planning and direction of growth and distribution of income across regions and different segments of population, the handloom sector has had a steady growth. During British rule the

handloom industry of the country had registered a steady decline due to discriminatory trade policy of the colonial government and import of cheap mill-made cloth from Europe. Also, since early part of the twentieth century the country witnessed the growth of many cotton textile mills under the initiative of Indian capitalist class and the European capital (Desai 1966). This further affected the survival of handloom industry in India and caused massive occupational displacement of the traditional weaving population. During that period the freedom movement and *Swadeshi* (love for indigenous and own country made goods) movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi was growing stronger day by day. So, with a view to pacify the disgruntled elements, the colonial government started introducing some reform measures to protect the handloom industry from the competition of cheap mill-made textile goods. In 1941 the colonial government appointed a Fact Finding Committee to study various aspects of handloom industry in the country. The Committee suggested the government to enact a host of policy measures for organisational and financial interventions and strengthening of cooperative forms of production as an ideal arrangement. Needless to say, since then all other Committees and Working Groups set up by the government in post Independent era during various plan periods put emphasis on the strengthening of co-operative form of production to provide gainful employment and prevent economic exploitation of weavers in the hands of master weavers, middlemen and the merchant capitalists. During different plan periods the government took various steps to improve the socioeconomic condition of weavers by providing them with various incentives and subsidies through the cooperatives. Necessary steps were taken under the poverty alleviation programmes to ensure round the year employment of weavers. In particular, during Sixth and Seventh Five Year Plans the weavers were given financial assistance as well as subsidies to acquire technically upgraded looms and accessories to improve productivity. To improve the work environment the government gave financial assistances for the building of fireproof roofs, electrification of the work-sheds and the like. Weavers servicing centres were opened to impart training to the lowly skilled weavers to improve their weaving skill, learn new designs and make use of improvised technology. Besides that in order to serve the weaving community outside the co-operative fold, government started many Intensive Handloom Development Projects (IHDP) and production centres in various states under the overall supervision of State Handloom Development Corporation.

However, it is observed after 1990 that the handloom industry of India including Orissa *per se* is passing through a very difficult time. The introduction of new economic policy (NEP) and adoption of SAP

(structural adjustment programme) measures by the Government of India since 1990 have resulted in downfall and decelerating growth of the handloom sector in the absence of adequate state sector support and interventions. The primacy of the market economy and globalisation without adequate innovative measures and support for the handloom fabrics have slowly started affecting the growth of the industry and livelihood of the weavers all over the country. In this scenario, a least industrialised and poor state like Orissa has become the worst sufferer. Economic liberalisation measures have generated many negative and unintended effects on the traditional craft industries of the state, particularly the handloom and handicrafts. In the absence of the state patronisation and innovative measures to popularise the consumption of craft goods among the affluent and well-to-do section of people, the traditional craft industries of the state, particularly the handloom industry, have become the major victim of market led growth deceleration and fall.

Table 1. Handloom Scenario in Orissa

Indicators	(in thousands)	
	1987-88	1995-96
No. of active looms	92.00	76.55 (-16.68)
No. of full time weavers	88.41	81.44 (-7.89)
No. of part time weavers	28.43	23.24 (-18.26)
No. of persons in full time preparatory works	76.53	45.21 (-40.93)
No. of persons in part time preparatory works	50.36	58.17 (15.51)
Total weaver workers	243.73	208.06 (-14.48)

Note: Figures in parentheses refer to percentage decline/increase over the period.

Source: 1. Government of India, *Handloom Census 1987-88*, Office of the Development Commissioner Handlooms, Ministry of Textiles, New Delhi.

2. NCAER, *Handloom Census 1995-96*, National Council for Applied Economics Research, New Delhi.

According to the 1987-88 Handloom Census, the weaver population of Orissa was 415 thousand (4.15 lakh). This constituted 1.31 per cent of

the state population as per 1991 population census. The census revealed that in 1987-88 the state had all total 119 thousand (1.19 lakh) looms including factory-based handlooms. However, out of that only 92 thousand (0.92 lakh) handlooms were reported to be active looms and the rest was non-functional. Among the weaver population of the state, the SC and ST weaver population respectively constituted 29.75 per cent and 1.58 per cent of the total respectively. When one looks out at their work participation rate, it is found that 88,405 (21.29 per cent) were engaged in full-time weaving works and 28,429 (6.85 per cent) in part-time weaving activity. Besides that 76,534 persons (18.43 per cent) were engaged in preparatory works on full-time basis and 50,360 (12.13 per cent) on part-time basis. This means among the weaver population of Orissa, 39.72 per cent were full-time workers and 30.56 per cent were part-time workers. This clearly indicates that handloom requires involvement of all family members including women and children and because of the work participation rate of weaver population in the industry as a whole is found to be much higher than the state's work participation rate of population that is below 40 per cent. Thus, in 1987-88 the industry as a whole was providing direct employment to as high as 244 thousand persons, at the rate of 2.6 persons per loom.¹

It may, however, be seen from Table 1 that over the period 1987-88 to 1995-96 there has been a drastic fall in the number of commercial/active looms in Orissa from 92 thousand to 77 thousand. In these looms 81,440 persons were working as full-time weavers and 23,236 were part-time weavers. Added to this, 45,210 persons were engaged in full-time preparatory works and 58,172 persons were employed on part-time basis. Thus, during 1995-96, the handloom industry of the state was providing direct employment to 208 thousand (2.08 lakh) persons² as against 244 thousand (2.44 lakh) persons during 1987-88, a decline of almost 15 per cent over the period. This shows that the handloom sector in Orissa has registered a marked decline in the post liberalisation years (Panda and Meher 2002). It may be perused from the data shown in Table 1 that there has been a marked decline of almost 41 per cent of the workforce engaged in preparatory weaving works. On the other hand, the number of workers doing part time preparatory works in the handloom sector of Orissa increased from 50.36 thousand to 58.17 thousand (15.51 per cent) during the period 1987-88 to 1995-96. This is evidently clear from the state government's statistics also. The number of looms in the cooperative handloom sector of Orissa went down from 104 thousand in 1990-91 to 77 thousand in 1998-99, to 69 thousand in 1999-2000 and further to 60 thousand in 2002-03 (Government of Orissa, *Economic Survey 1990-91, 1999-2000 & 2002-03*). This also supports the findings of many studies that in the post liberalisation years there has been an increase in casualisation of labour in India and deceleration in

employment growth rate notwithstanding higher economic growth (Meher 2001, Papola 1994).

The Effects

In the post reform years of economic liberalization and globalization popularly termed as LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation) growth model, the cooperative system of production that served as ideal survival strategy for the India's labour intensive craft industries is left in total disarray and moribund state. In particular, in the case of handloom industry of Orissa putting out system of production carried out by the master weavers and the traders is virtually now the only mode of production of handloom cloth and this is confined to only tie and dye segment of handloom covering around 40 per cent of the state's weaving population. In this case also, there is an observed trend of switching over of the tie and dye weavers from traditional caste occupation to other horizontal category informal sector occupations like petty shopkeeping, trading, vegetable vending, rickshaw pulling, masoning, painting, etc., when the employers, viz. master weavers and traders resort to arbitrary wage cut to survive in the competitive market of mill-made textile cloths sold at much cheaper prices. Needless to say, the closure of many weavers' cooperative societies in many parts of the state like Orissa and also in other states of India has caused occupational displacement of many weavers, particularly the lowly skilled ones and also suicidal deaths in some cases as often reported in the leading national Dailies like the *Times of India*, the *Indian Express*, *The Hindu*, etc. off and on. Globalisation followed with lack of state support to cooperative sector has caused occupational displacement of many lowly skilled weavers and also miseries for the highly skilled tie and dye weavers dependent on cooperatives. From the status of artisan producers of the cooperative society, even the highly skilled weavers are now reduced to the status of artisan wage workers under the putting out system of production.

Nearer to the state capital Bhubaneswar, the present Khurdha and Nayagarh districts carved out from the undivided Puri district in the coastal Orissa, have large many weaver families belonging to Rangini, Tanti, and scheduled caste weavers like Pana, etc. These weaver families do not have the skill or tradition of doing tie and dye work in their looms. However, before the 1990s thanks to government support to the cooperative societies the handloom clusters of Khurdha and Nayagarh districts were quite vibrant and the weavers were quite happy while working as artisan weavers of cooperative societies and weaving plain cloths in their fly shuttle pit looms. Almost every weaver household in these localities had not less than one loom and at least two from each

weaver household, a man and a woman had full time engagement in the weaving work. However, after the discontinuation and phasing out of the *Janata* cloth (poor people's cloth) production, the cooperative societies became sick and closure of all such societies threw large many weavers displaced from their traditional caste occupation. Having no other source of livelihood in the rural areas, the majority of them have migrated to nearby cities like Bhubaneswar, Berhampur and Cuttack. Many among the women now work as domestic maids, serve as cooks and housekeepers and the male members without having any exposure to hard physical labour mostly work as vegetable vendors, masons, wall painters and rickshaw pullers. Some among the enterprising ones are found to be running jhonpri hotels (eateries catering to the needs of low income migrants in cities), fast food stalls and betel shops.

The miseries and plight of weavers displaced occupationally from the caste based occupation and living the life of migrants in the city slums may be illustrated from the real life story of a hapless woman weaver in Bhubaneswar:

Bimala is a widow and she is hardly 45 years old. She is a Rangini weaver, hailing from a village of Khurdha district and presently residing in an unauthorised slum locality located at the outskirts of the main city area of Bhubaneswar. About 10 years back probably during 1995/96, Bimala with her aged husband and a small daughter arrived at Bhubaneswar to earn their bread, as the handloom cooperative society under which Bimala and her husband were working as artisan weavers was closed. Bimala is an unfortunate woman. As her poor parents could not find a suitable groom of Rangini weaver caste, she was married to an old man of 50 years age at the age of 25 in the year 1985. This man had lost his first wife and although he was having three grown up sons, he decided to remarry at the age of 50. After the marriage both happily lived for quite sometime in their native village by weaving plain handloom cloth in the fly shuttle pit loom. Bimala was a very skilled weaver and she was rewarded by her cooperative society for swift and skilful weaving of cloth in the pit loom. However, after around five/six years of happy married life her household economy was inflicted with the problem of gradual collapse due to falling income from the weaving occupation. Initially, she and her husband with their little new born girl child could manage to withstand the shock of falling weaving income by spending the little savings they had. When the society became totally sick and failed to provide enough weaving work, then they decided to migrate to Bhubaneswar. When the family migrated to Bhubaneswar Bimala's husband was 60 years old and her daughter was just five years old. In this situation having no other alternative Bimala stayed in an unauthorised squatter locality at the outskirts of Bhubaneswar, where many others from her community and village area were residing by constructing temporary hutments on the vacant land. This is how she started her life in the city and as her old husband could not do any hard physical labour and they did not have any money to run a micro business

enterprise, Bimala started working as part time domestic maid in about eight to ten middle class households of a nearby locality from the place of her residence. By working as domestic maid she struggled to meet two square meals for the family and education of her child. In the mean time, when she was planning to save some money for her daughter's education and marriage, her old husband died of long illness and malnutrition problem at the age of 65. So, instead of providing her only child a good level of education, she had to send her to work as domestic maid at the age of 14. This is how the life of struggle of occupationally displaced weavers goes on unending in the slums of cities and towns all over the country.

This type of displacement of handloom weavers from their traditional caste occupation is not atypical to Khurdha and Nayagarh region or among the lowly skilled weavers belonging to Rangini, Tanti or Pana Tanti subcastes. Many highly skilled tie and dye weavers among the Bhulias community of western Orissa reputed for the weaving of Sambalpuri *sarees* in double ikat design and even the silk weavers like Saraka, Patara, Dora, Kostha, etc. are found to have left their caste occupation due to very low level of earning and uncertainty of meeting subsistence needs of the household. Many small towns and semi-urban centres having fairly higher concentration of weaver households in the handloom clusters of Orissa such as Nuapatna in Cuttack district, Hinjalikatu, Berhampur in Ganjam district, Baudh and its periphery in Baudh district, Sonepur, Birnka, Birmarajpur, Tarabha in Sonepur district, Barpali, Bijepur, Remunda, Bheden, etc. in Bargarh district now look less vibrant of handloom weaving and trading. In the very recent past i.e. before 1990, the shops in these small towns were looking more colourful due to massive display of tie and handloom fabrics and sound of running of the handlooms by weavers with many folk songs and the gossip of women in the narrow courtyard of the houses while doing preparatory loom works like warping, reeling of yarn, tying of motifs and designs for the end border of *sarees* and the like. A random visit to all those weaving localities of handloom clusters by an unknown visitor also now creates an impression on him/her that almost half of the traditional weaving households have already left their caste occupation and the rest others are at the verge of leaving this noble occupation and craft work due to lack of state support and patronisation.

Most of the weavers those who stick to their traditional craft are left at the mercy of a few merchant capitalists and master weavers operating their manufactories in a decentralised set up, skirting all labour laws and social security benefits due to the weaver workers. Barring a few large operators, however, many among the merchant capitalists and the master weavers are also found now in distress condition due to their informal nature of production, lack of market accessibility and finance capital at

low rate of interest to withstand seasonal changes of demand for the handloom fabrics. It is found that the private master weavers and the merchant capitalists in Orissa are resorting to wage cut, production cut, etc. to cope with the problem of market economy. These measures, of course, in the absence of increase in labour productivity and reduction of drudgery, affect the quality of life of the artisan weavers, their livelihood and ultimate survival of the craft in the long run. The immediate effects of wage cut and cut in volume of production are diminishing income for the weavers and increasing under employment problem besides unemployment for the newcomers. It has been revealed from the discussions held by the researcher with the weavers of Sagarpali village in the hinterland of Sonepur town of Sonepur district, famous for the production of artistic Sambalpuri silk sarees in Bomkei design, that since 2001 the weavers are facing massive wage cut in the hands of trader entrepreneurs and master weavers due to weakening of the weavers' cooperative societies. The same design saree, which fetched a wage rate of Rs.600 per piece for the weaver in 2001, is now arbitrarily fixed at Rs.450 per piece notwithstanding price rise and fall in real value of money due to inflationary situation of the economy. The weavers report that the trader entrepreneurs/large master weavers in the absence of strong cooperatives have formed a cartel and dictate terms and conditions as well as the wage rate with an alibi that the demand for tie and die handloom fabrics has started falling among the consumers due to high price, poor quality of the fabrics and limited designs and patterns. No doubt, this has discouraged many weavers in the flourishing weaving centres like Sonepur and its hinterland and Nuapatna area of Cuttack district to stick to their traditional caste based occupations. In recent years, many among them have been reduced to the status of migrant informal sector wage or self-employed tertiary sector workers in the nearby urban centres of their original place of habitation. Even some among them have migrated to distant places like Surat to eke out their living in the power looms.

It may be noted that in the first phase of liberalisation and market reforms, many among the less skilled handloom weavers of Orissa were displaced occupationally due to lack of demand and state support for plain handloom cloths. In the second phase after 2001 many among the highly skilled tie and dye weavers are forced to leave weaving due to falling wage rate and lack of state support for the craft vis-à-vis control on trader entrepreneurs/master weavers. In 1990 when the researcher first undertook his study on the handloom industry of Orissa covering two flourishing handloom clusters at Nuapatna of Cuttack district and Sagarpali village near Sonepur town of present Sonepur district, the living conditions of the weavers in both the clusters were found to be reasonably good. Although the earning level of the weaver households

when converted into statutorily fixed minimum wage rate of skilled workers was found lower, almost 90 per cent of the weaver households had round the year weaving work available either from the master weavers/traders or from the cooperative societies. None had the problem of semi-starvation type living. Incidence of poverty among the weaver households of these two clusters was lower than the state's level of around 52 per cent (Meher 1992). Interestingly, village Sagarpali was not a revenue village of Sonepur district till the early 1990s and it was in fact a village of migrant landless weavers comprising more than 500 households. The village became so prosperous due to the prosperity of the craft during the mid 1980s to the early 1990s that it became the favourite spot for migration of weavers from other parts of western Orissa to acquire the new skill for weaving silk sarees. The new designs and skills acquired by the weavers in Sonepur cluster, thanks to the pioneering efforts of a few master craftsmen and master weavers like late Shri Mohan Meher, Shri Chaturbhuj Meher, Shri Radheshyam Meher, revived the moribund tie and dye craft and the famous Sambalpuri *sarees* from their extinction in the mid-1980s. Weaving of silk sarees in tie and dye design called Bomkei silk *sarees* became so popular that even the film stars of Bollywood (Mumbai's film industry) and TV stars at the national level started wearing them during special festivals and functions. The prosperity of the industry and the new designs of Sambalpuri silk *sarees* from mid-1980s to early 1990s in fact made some of the master weavers so prosperous and rich that their success in the trade may be cited as living example of rags to riches.

The industry as a whole helped in generating entrepreneurship among some of the less educated and illiterate weaver households, especially in the tie and dye handloom clusters of Orissa such as Nuapatna and Sonepur. It also attracted many non-weaving castes and individuals to earn their bread by doing weaving work in the handlooms. But now the trend is almost reverse. The same prosperous weaver village Sagarpali in Sonepur has started sending its younger generation weavers to far off places like Sambalpur, Bargarh, Bolangir and even to the state capital city Bhubaneswar to earn their bread in the urban informal sector economy either as self-employed petty hawkers, shop keepers or as non-household sector wage workers. This is also equally true in the case of younger generation weavers of many handloom clusters of western Orissa and also in Nuapatna area of Cuttack, Khurda, Nayagarh, Berhampur, Hinjalikatu, Aska, etc of coastal Orissa.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Although Orissa is a traditionally non-cotton growing state, it has a substantial and numerically larger size of weaving population depending on handloom industry for their livelihood. It is a traditionally caste based occupation and during monarchical rules, the handloom industry and the different weaving sub-castes with their specialities in specific designs and fabrics flourished in different parts of Orissa with the local royal patronage. Since medieval days, it has gained the status of largest craft industry in Orissa and in the post independence era also its importance in the economic life of Orissa cannot be ignored altogether. However, it is alarming to note that the industry is now in its declining stage due to lack of state support in the post liberalisation years. The various types of subsidies provided to the weavers through the co-operative societies in terms of inputs and marketing support are now no longer available from the state sector. The production of *Janata* cloth such as plain *sarees*, *dhotis*, towels, napkins, etc. woven mostly by the lowly skilled backward and scheduled caste weavers of Orissa in the co-operative sector, was stopped all of a sudden when the Government of India launched its NEP and SAP in the early 1990s. It is further observed that, of late the demand for tie and dye fabrics have also substantially been reduced. This is not only causing the problem of underemployment and sub-minimal level of earning among the highly skilled weavers, but also many among the low and medium level skilled weavers are found to be giving up their traditional family occupation due to slump in demand of fabrics woven by them. Sometime during 1999, *The Samaja*, the leading Oriya daily reported that the closure of the Orissa Handloom Development Corporation (OHDC) led to employment insecurity of around 20,000 weaver families in the state. Interestingly, these weavers are relatively less skilled and many of them are of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes origin.

In view of this, there is a need for special intervention measures for the handloom industry and handicrafts of Orissa for the survival of the craft in a globalised market economy after making some improvisation of the existing tools and technology and organisation of production. Orissa, otherwise known for its national beauty and rich culture, has unfortunately acquired the ill reputation of being one of the poorest states of India with acute poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Handloom and handicrafts industry have the potential to provide gainful employment to the weavers and the craft workers with very little financial investment mainly by exploiting their inherent strength. It is necessary to appreciate these emerging challenges and gear up the handloom and handicrafts industry of the country for availing the opportunities, which will help in balanced economic development and equitable growth to eradicate

poverty. The Indian economy in general has to take care of the surplus workforce under the scenario of a rising population. This naturally calls for creation of jobs for the millions without compromising with the wide diversities and cultural heterogeneities of people in different parts of India. For the purpose, the state like Orissa has to tap its strength and advantage of handloom and handicrafts sector to bridge the widening income gap at the national level under the present state of industrial development. Also, the promotion of this traditional craft industry will definitely reduce the involuntary displacement problem of weaker section population caused due to promotion of capital intensive mineral based industries in the tribal regions of Orissa. It will also lessen the environmental pollution hazards and livelihood insecurity problem of ecosystem people. Hence, the policies for the handloom and handicrafts should look into the following aspects for the livelihood security of weavers and the viability of the traditional craft under the liberalized market economy:

- The industry is plagued with several problems such as miserable living conditions of weavers, improper functioning of the cooperative societies, dominance of the industries by the middlemen like private master weavers and merchant-manufacturers, low productivity of labour and the like. So, the first and foremost issue before the Government is to work out ways and means for the smooth functioning of the industry. Although several committees and commissions set up for the development of industry have recommended for the cooperative form of production as the best possible method to improve the living conditions of the weavers, it is observed that this production system has generated little multiplier effects to improve the vocation, skill and economic conditions of the weavers. The cooperatives at many places are found to be managed by people and families, who occupy dominant positions in the village's social, economic and educational status. These are the people who themselves or their family members are least associated with weaving works. In some cases, they are found to be middlemen like private master weavers and the merchant-manufacturers dealing with the trading of handloom goods. These people with ulterior motives and vested interests often work in collusion with the officials of the State Directorate of Textiles to pocket all the benefits provided to the weavers under the welfare programmes and schemes of the Government. Even the sales rebate on handloom cloths are found to be misutilised by this section of people through the maintenance of false production and sales records at the cooperative societies.

As these people are least interested in the smooth functioning of the cooperative societies, they do not take care of the proper circulation of working capital, purchase and supply of raw materials, timely payment of wages to the weavers and also sale and disposal of cloths produced by the weavers. As a result, the weavers are forced to knock at the doors of the private master weavers and the merchant-manufacturers for the smooth operation of their weaving works at home.

- In the post reform years of economic liberalisation and predominance of the market economy the state support to handloom and handicrafts has markedly diminished. Under the circumstances, it is felt that the industry will show better performance if the present cooperative system of production is supplemented with the corporate or company system of production with the existing decentralised form of production of cloth and other crafts at the village level by grooming young entrepreneurs from the artisan castes mainly. For the purpose, the state should play a facilitator role for the young artisan entrepreneurs and should ensure quick delivery of working capital loans by the public financial institutions at cheaper rate of interest under liberal terms and conditions.
- In order to provide a sustainable living to the weavers, the wage rate/conversion charge should be fixed up and revised accordingly in proportion to the rise in consumer price index through state intervention. More so, this should be decided at a meeting with the help and suggestion of the experts by properly taking into account the actual productivity of the loom and the weaver while weaving certain specific designs of cloths. Besides that, like the organized sector workers the weavers and other craft artisans should be provided with provident fund facility, group insurance scheme, medical facilities and the like by the entrepreneur employers through state intervention and supervision. The government should take proper step to regulate the exploitative and personal capital accumulative production system of the master weavers and the merchant-manufacturers of handloom cloths. They should be asked to register their units and to pay production associated benefits such as provident fund, group insurance, etc. to their weaver workers.
- There is a need to improve the productivity of handloom weavers in order to improve their level of earning and also to make the production of handloom cloth more viable and saleable in the market. So, it is high time that necessary steps ought to be taken to improve the productivity of weavers by giving them proper

training at the weavers' training centres and by taking them into confidence at the time of improvisation of looms and their associated tools and techniques. It is to be kept in mind that most of the weavers in Orissa weave tie and dye fabrics in their throw-shuttle pit loom, where the process of weaving of cloth is very slow. Since the weaving of artistic designs cloths through tie and dye process or *jala* method (intricate weaving and incorporation of motifs) cannot be done in any other improved looms except throw-shuttle pit looms, it is necessary to improve the work environment of the weavers in order to increase the productivity of their labour.

- Proper marketing of the handloom cloths necessitates the formation of well-developed marketing organisation. In absence of a well-developed marketing network and good advertising agency to generate demand among the consumers for an increasing consumption of handloom cloth, production of cloths cannot be expanded to a large extent. It is necessary to do market survey and consumer taste survey from time to time in order to diversify and expand the product range besides activating the advertising system. The marketing strategy should aim at expanding the existing markets and to look for ways and means to capture the potential markets both internal and external to a maximum extent.
- Efforts should be made at Governmental level to enliven and expand the handloom and other craft cooperatives at the grassroots level by broadening their aims and objectives. The cooperatives should function in such a way that the member weavers/artisans could derive optimum benefits in an exploitation free environment. The working capital needs of all well-managed societies should be assessed from time to time by taking into account the actual production capacity of all active member weavers during a year or so. Besides that, as yarn market in India is highly fluctuating and purchase of yarn from the mills just immediately after the cotton harvesting season is found to be cheaper than in the cotton growing period, efforts should be made to keep sufficient stock of yarns in the godowns of cooperative societies at least for a period of six months, so as to ensure all the member weavers of the societies adequate and uninterrupted supply of hank yarn round the year.

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Notes

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