CHAPTER - II

WOMEN IN THE HANDLOOM SECTOR
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2.1: INTRODUCTION

Industrialisation and economic development in post-independent India had brought changes in the organisation of the handloom sector. The New National Textile Policy of November 2000, which sought to integrate the industry into the world market, had become the noose for weavers and their families. For these weavers the loom was not only a means of livelihood but a way of life (Krishnakumar 2001:16).

In textiles, during the process of liberalisation, the initial policy of encouraging power looms weakened the handloom sector. The crisis in the handloom sector further deepened with the policy-driven increase in yarn prices, the non-availability of hank yarn, the withdrawal of the Janata cloth scheme all of which almost wiped out the handloom sector. Further, the introduction of jet looms and powerlooms, indiscriminate import of cheap fabrics and sharp increase in power tariffs had made the textile crises more acute. Thus, the issue brought handloom sector to face competition from powerlooms and jet looms. The weavers had been let down by successive policies. This affected the socio-economic position of women weavers. This is examined at firstly, by studying the socio-cultural organisation of handloom sector. Secondly, by examining the government policies of handloom sector and position of women weavers in relation to economic organisation like production, employment and unionization. This will help us to understand the characteristics of the system, which binds the women weavers in the prevailing culture.
2.2: SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF WEAVING

In primitive society, when men were hunters and warriors, women were concerned with food collecting and agriculture. The women then started producing several crafts like pot making, leather making, house building and the technique of cordage weaving. Cordage weaving was the beginning of whole chain of great textile industry. Thus, women should be credited for developing the physics of spinning and the mechanism of loom (Reed 1970:20-38). Now in India the handloom sector has a long tradition of excellent craftsmanship. It is a part of the decentralised sector consisting of cloth production by family units. Even now, it plays a significant role in preserving the culture and heritage of the country. In the early seventies, the report on handloom sector of the high-powered committee under the chairperson of Mira Seth (Government of India 1974:6) described handloom as ‘a work of art craft as well as industry’ representing ‘one of the most aesthetic aspects of existence’. This perhaps still holds true even now.

Despite fulfilling the basic clothing needs at home, or for ceremonial occasion or as a decorative piece, the hand woven textile played a significant role in representing our social and cultural identity, rituals and habitat. Thus, in Orissa, the Dongria Kandha embroidered shawl was one of the cultural objects of the tribe (Jaitly 2000:7). Stratification in society as represented in the textile one wore was also found in Thailand. The hand woven textile Pha Sompak were used only by the governmental employee and the luxurious silk decorated with gold and silver threads were used in special occasion by high status people (Kumar 1999:348).

The design used in the cloth also had a close relation with the rituals and habitat of the particular group. Thus, the circular look - like motif (Khoi Mayek) design in ‘Meitei Phanek’ was derived from 'Lairen
Mathek’ (movement of a python), a ritual performance during the time of ‘Umanglai Haraoba’. The Meiteis also popularly used the fish design, which was either in a horizontal or head downward position to make the impression of living in water. This symbol indicated a happy and prosperous life of the Meities (Bahadur 1997:137-138).

The study of women weavers in three southern states of India (Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala) by Parikh et al. (1991) stated that weaving community consisted of a wide range of ethnic groups. They reflected their caste and community identity in the weaving pattern, style and motifs etc. Any attempt to bring a change in their weaving techniques, modification on the looms and introduction of new fabric, dye and motifs inherently evoked anxiety about their caste and community belonging. However in some case the situation for the weavers is desperate. The legendary Patola silk of Patan that has earned international accolades, has been on the verge of extinction. Of the 700 families of Patola weavers brought to Patan by Raja Kumarpala in the 12th century, only three families have survived as weavers. It takes about three to four months of intense labour and the cost varies from Rs. 70,000 to Rs. 1,50,000 per saree. At such a price, the demand is extremely limited. This being the state of affairs, members of the three families may not engage in weaving after few generation (Nag 2003:3). Unless the government took some interest and invested a little in infrastructure and research of the handloom sector, the condition of the weavers will deteriorate.

2.3: GOVERNMENT POLICIES FOR THE HANDELLOM SECTOR

In the 19th and 20th centuries the modernisation of textile industry, which led to the production of both foreign and domestic mill made cloth, posed
a great threat to the handlooms. They had to face danger of extinction on account of discrimination and exploitative policies adopted by the British rules. Only after the independence of India, handloom sector became the symbol of all decentralised industries and received a great deal of attention from the government.

The government policy on the expansion of mills and the taxes on the mills benefited the handloom sector. It reserved 22 articles for exclusive production in handloom under the Reservation of Articles for Production Act, 1985 and set up unions or cooperative structures (Baud 1991:42). Yet this move met with stiff opposition from owners of mills and powerlooms. In 1996, the government reduced the number of items reserved for handloom from 22 to 11. But as the government has not been serious about implementing the Reservation Act, even these 11 items continue to be produced by powerlooms (Krishnakumar 2001:20).

The successive government textile policies since 1985, which seek to liberalise, modernise and privatise the industry, have marginalised the weavers. In the case of Andhra Pradesh weavers, 20 cases of suicide had been reported during the period of 1998-2001 from the handloom center of Dubakka in Medak district (Krishnakumar 2001:5). Though the Textile Policy of 1985, favoured the handloom sector by reserving 22 items for it and by providing adequate hank yarn, it allowed the increase of commercial powerlooms. This had posed stiff competition to the handloom weavers. When the cost to weave a tie-and-dye *Pochampalli* sari cost Rs. 280 in handloom, it cost only Rs. 60 in powerloom. Thus the market for Dubakka handloom weavers began to decline. Unable to get work, many weavers migrated to Bhiwandi, Solapur, and Surat in search of jobs. However, weavers who work under the cooperatives, producing coarse Janata cloth (saris and dhotis) survived the 1985 Textile Policy. Weavers earned around Rs.1500 per month. But this happy situation did
not last long. With the fall of coarse variety of saris, the Dubakka weavers shifted to the superior quality of tie-and-dye Pochampalli. But work became difficult, as the designs were intricate. Further, the massive export drive launched in 1991, increase the export of cotton and yarn. This led to a sharp increase in yarn prices and pushed up the cost of production. The problem became exaggerated when the Andhra Pradesh State Handloom Cooperative Society (APCO) virtually collapsed in 1996 after the abolishment of Janata cloth scheme. On the other hand, the weavers had neither means to invest in modern technology nor market-savvy master weavers to help them adapt to changing consumer tastes. With their products becoming uncompetitive in the market, stocks mounted, availability of work began to decline and the weavers faced joblessness, mounting debt, starvation and consequently death. But the government officials had an indifferent attitude towards the situation by stating such suicide as a normal phenomenon in Andhra Pradesh (Ibid: 13-221)

The current crisis in the handloom sector is compounded by the structural adjustment programme pursued by the Indian government since 1991. The new National Textile Policy of November 2000 is to make India a global player in textile production, particularly of garment production. The policy has set a target of increasing textile export in the next decade from $11 billion worth to $50 billion and 50 percent increase in cotton production (Times of India News Service 2000:1, November 3). To achieve these rather ambitious targets, the policy seeks to de-reserve garment making from the labour-intensive small scale sector and throw it open to the capital intensive technology investors. To aid this process further, the government is to assist the private sector in financial arrangement. It permits 100 percent foreign direct investment in the textile sector against the earlier limit of 24 percent. It is also encouraging
to set up integrated textile complexes from yarn production to garment making— all under one roof. Under the Technology Upgradation Fund Scheme (TUFS) funds were raised to Rs. 200 crores from Rs. 50 crores to set up 50,000 shuttleless looms and to convert 2.5 lakh traditional looms to automatic ones. This clearly shows that the bright handloom weavers have been pushed to. Yet, the policy does not mention any measure to strengthen institutions such as weavers cooperative societies that protect weavers. The policy also affected the traditional powerloom weavers. Thus the new government policies that focused on the liberalisation, modernisation and globalisation of the industry ignored the livelihood issues pertaining to lakhs of traditional handloom weavers. The problem of the weaving industry which had often been an issue of handlooms versus powerlooms, is no longer valid. With the liberalisation of market the issue is now of small and vulnerable versus the big and strong.

During the late nineteen nineties, the recession period that hit the Surat textile industry in general and the weaving sector, in particular made the Southern Gujarat Chamber Of Commerce And Industry (SGCCI) to appeal for a 50 percent cut in production as a corrective measure during the on-going recession. However, in Surat where 8 lakh people are employed in the industry and work in two shifts per day cutting production by 50 percent means discontinuing at least one shift per day. This would result in a large displacement of weavers (Times of India News Service 1999:5, June 15).

In state like Tamil Nadu, where the weavers were traditionally known for their skills in weaving, received a bad blow by the state government’s recent decision in 2002 on bulk purchases of products. The weavers, many of whom exclusively spun saris and dhotis for government procurement, were paid partly in cash and the rest in yarn. The severe financial crunch prompted the government’s decision in 2002
to stop the scheme under which the state government procured in bulk the handloom fabrics produced by the weavers and distributed them free of cost to the poor during Pongal. This resulted in piling up of unsold fabrics worth over Rs. 400 crore with the weavers. Joblessness and huge debt burdens are reported to have pushed a number of handloom weavers to suicide (Raj 2002:3476). However, to solve this problem, the state government announced relief scheme of Rs. 25 crore to purchase the stocks lying with the weavers and distribution of 20 kg of rice free for three months to the weaver’s family. But these steps are temporary measures.

From the above discussion we can draw the conclusion that the government has been less successful in supporting the handloom sector than it would like to be. The loss of market for handloom products and limited survival options have put the weavers in a vulnerable condition. Neither the government nor the handloom sector and weavers appear to be concerned with the urgent need to review the entire sector and prepare to face the new challenges. Long term measures to revive the handloom sector are urgently required. Technological support is needed to ensure skills and upgradation in production techniques. Linkages need to be established between the changing market needs and the weaver’s production. New potential markets need to be systematically explored and developed. Unless the government support is directed toward the handloom sector the problem of the weavers will increase.

2.4: HANDLOOM PRODUCTION

India had the largest number of looms in the world and second largest number of spindles in the eighties (Bhide 1998:1226). But in terms of productivity the industry was below the world standards. Among the states where there were working looms and for which productivity were
estimated, a survey conducted in the late eighties found that Assam had the highest number of working looms (12,99,000) but had the lowest productivity (0.63 meter per loom per day). Tamil Nadu, had second largest number of looms (4,29,000) and Manipur fourth largest looms (270,000); but both had productivity way below the average Indian production of 5.12 meter per loom per day (Handloom Census 1988:88). The low productivity of handloom in India was a result of four factors—(1) nature of work pattern (2) technology (3) management and (4) market structure. Despite the highest number of working looms, Assam had the least production because majority of the women weavers were part time weavers (Debi 1994). The market structure and management problems started due to lack of raw materials, high cost of capital, rigidities in labour market, cascading taxes, complicated procedures for import, untimely payment of wages and lack of coordination of weavers (D.Singh 1997:36; Bhide 1998:1223). Regarding the market of handloom, Srinivasula (1997:1383) stated ‘the role of handloom is recruited to ‘passively’ responding to the demand when the strategy should be one of actively intervening and influencing the market’.

2.4.1: Employment

Handloom sector was traditionally one of the India’s leading industries providing extensive employment. There were almost 40 lakh handlooms providing employment to more than 30 lakh households and about 124 lakh of weavers (D.Singh1997:12). It was not easy to fully estimate women's employment in the textile industry especially in the decentralised sector. However, in the mills, women formed 4 percent of the total labour force at the national level, i.e. some 40,000 women (SIMA 1979, quoted from Baud 1991:43). Earlier, people wove only for home consumption but now weaving is done both for home consumption
as well as market production. In the contemporary society, therefore weaving became a household activity, carried out by weaver artisans with the assistance of the household members.

In India, textile operations had never been identified with women except for certain specific operation. Generally women did the preparatory work while men did the main weaving job; hence all the credit for weaving went to men (Parikh et al. 1991; Baud 1991:92). The study of women workers in Handloom and Khadi industry (Shram Bureau 1995:27) conducted in nineties, revealed that almost all women were engaged in spinning and winding. The reason was that such pre-weaving activities were available to them at their doorsteps. They did not go out of the house to work and thus let others know that they were workers. Moreover in such homebased work, women could engage in household work and also involved in income earning work. To understand their working conditions, studies had been designed to document women’s participation in economic activities which were invisible to the policy makers in India. Perhaps, the review of problems of women weavers in the report of the National Commission on Self-employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector (1988) has brought national attention. The pre-weaving jobs like spinning, warping, dyeing, winding etc. were time consuming but an essential part for a good quality product. Yet these skills remained unrecognised. Women got very little remuneration for doing any of these pre-weaving activities. The study of textile women workers in Coimbatore by Baud (1991) also found that women got less remuneration compared to men workers. Women work mostly in the pre-weaving sector in the household handloom productions. They worked for 9 to 10 hours per day yet, they were paid low piece rates or flat daily rates. According to Reed (1980:55), the difference between factory exploitation
and family exploitation was that the former was easily recognisable for what it was, while the other was not.

The new technology, which is inevitable for survival in the modern world also affected the position of women weavers. Research studies and evaluatory reports suggested instances of adverse affects of technology on women. The Institute of Social Studies Trust carried out a study in Kashmir on the effect of modernisation on the traditional handloom weaving industry. The study indicated that while the income of some members could go up marginally under the project, the new technology in the form of new looks, new pre-weaving and post-weaving technologies would displace 16,000 women hand spinners. It brought loss of income for 62 percent of workers in the weaver’s household (Jain 1980:25). In a comparative study of workers in mills, powerlooms and handloom in Coimbatore it was found that in the mill sector men substituted for women workers. This did not occur in powerloom and handloom sector. In the handloom sector women were still recruited as cheap labour. The number of women who had access to high paying jobs was lower than low paying jobs. In the handloom sector, sons weaving with the father got some income but for women this was considered as shameful (Baud 1991:92-93,177).

The dual nature of handloom sector as a manifestation of cultural identity and commercial market might have had an effect upon weavers to start weaving at an earlier age. A survey of the child labour in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh by the Institute of Applied Manpower Research, New Delhi found that 60 to 70 percent of children between 5 to 14 years were engaged as unpaid workers in family enterprises (Nijhawan 1998). Similarly, in Manipur children between the age of 9 to 10 years wove after their school hours. Sometimes they dropped out from the school because their mother or grandmother was expecting agents very
soon with orders and the orders had to be executed quickly (Sircar 1984:46-47). There was also a pride in working craft at an early age. So, the entire process was a vicious circle giving rise to an increase in child labour.

Besides this, the control over workers in the workplace incorporated gender and patriarchal aspects. Mukund and Syamasundari’s study of the Handloom Cooperative in Andhra Pradesh (1999) found that the Yemmigamer cooperative society, which was the largest in the country with 2,578 members, paid the lowest wages to the women weavers. Further, to make up their loss, the society had resorted to large scale retrenchment or virtually forcing employees, especially women, to resign by transferring them to sales depots in distant parts of the state.

The study of Patel (1986:1813-20) based on a survey of 639 workers in 66 textile mills of Ahmedabad in nineteen eighties found that there had been a conscious effort to decrease permanent women workers in the industry resulting in an increase of contract workers. She stated that contract work which started in a small way in one of the sections would not have become so prevalent if the dominant textile trade union had not acquiesced.

This shows that the women were the scapegoats for handloom sector in India. They not only occupied a lower position in the job hierarchy but their contribution was invisible to the handloom sector. Next, I will look at the position of women weavers when they become organised like when they are working in a cooperative society.

2.5: WOMEN WEAVERS IN COOPERATIVE SOCIETY
The government of India’s policy for the handloom sector had two objectives (1) social and (2) development (Parikh et al.1991). Firstly, the social objective was to ensure a minimum wage to the weavers and
freedom from the bondage of master weavers. Secondly, the development objective aimed to update old technology, increase productivity, introduce new colour, new designs and export the handloom fabric.

Weaving cooperative societies acted as an agent to render services to the women weavers. There were around 1308 weaving cooperative societies (WCS now onwards) in Assam. Out of 10 to 25 thousand professional weavers, 35 percent of them were women (Riba 1980:205). In Manipur in 1997-98, there were 1057 WCS. Among them Imphal had the highest number (621) (Directorate of Economics and Statistics1998:132-133). However, WCS alone could not provide enough work. So, generally weavers performed work both for the master weavers or merchants and cooperative societies. The master weavers or merchants played the role of supplier. They advanced loans without any legal procedures and hence the weavers found it easy to get money. The merchants also took care of marketing the products. But the case study of the women weavers in Vengamedu, Tamil Nadu, in eighties, indicated that they were exploited by master weavers by paying low wages who thereby made substantial profit (Sundari and Manimekalai 1989:291). Thus, based on the above information, it is difficult to state whether the presence of master weaver is detrimental to the handloom sector or not.

The overall decline in the functioning of the WCS might have increased the emergence of the master weaver. The seminar on 'Causes of failure of weavers cooperative societies and remedies in Manipur', in May 1995, organised by the Manipur Cooperative Society, put forward the following factors for the decline of cooperative societies. They were (1) inadequate income from weaving (2) discouragement of weaving profession (3) illiteracy and ignorance of weavers (4) part time weaving (5) lack of good leadership (6) lack of modernisation of looms (7) lack of marketing facilities and (8) lack of finance (Devi 1995:31; Ch.Singh
Other studies in Andhra Pradesh found that politicisation and bureaucratic control lead to the decline of the cooperative society (Mukund and Shyamasundari 1999:3323). The position of women in the WCS is in a pathetic situation. According to the survey of National Commission of Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector conducted in late eighties, found that women could not take loans from the cooperatives. In places where men were the major weavers, women were not accepted as cooperative members or even if they were, they were often not recognised as a weaver as a woman only practiced pre-weaving skills like warping, sizing, dyeing and spinning. Thus, she remained ineligible for cooperative benefits despite her contribution in the weaving process. In other process where women were eligible for being cooperative members, they still faced problems. In Perujanaickenpalayan, in Coimbatore district, the cooperative gave overly complicated designs. When the women failed to produce them all, their wages were deducted. Besides this, there was irregular payment of wages. Thus, the WCS did not encourage to help women benefit from their service (National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal sector 1988:28-29).

The above discussion helps us to conclude that women weavers were marginalised in the handloom production process, both in home based and cooperative society. Their skills for preparing yarn, which affected the quality of cloth production was not getting any appreciation. Moreover, poor economic condition and non-availability of other jobs made them work at any wage available to them. Since their working conditions were not regulated by productive laws, they could be easily exploited by the master weavers. Besides this, there were limited social studies on how weavers perceived themselves and how they could be employed. Thus, there is a need to study the weavers’ life from a holistic...
approach. It is necessary to understand weavers in their economic role, their role as home-maker, their relation within the family and community and of course, women's perception about their own work, status and other people's attitude about them as a weaver.

Studies have been conducted in India about the working conditions and exploitations about the women weavers in a male dominated section. To widen the scope of our understanding of women weavers in India, it is necessary to see the position and condition of women weavers when they own the whole trade of weaving (with no participation or help from their male counterparts) in places like Northeast India - Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram. So when the whole trade is in the hands of women, does it mean that they do not face problems and discriminations? How does the nature of working condition affect the weavers? What do such weavers feel about their position as a weaver? What are their dreams and aspirations for themselves? What do weavers expect for their daughters' job? What are their contributions to the family and society at large? Exploring the weavers' life is a matter of acknowledging their contributions and understanding how duties and roles are performed on the based of personal capacities, culture and tradition of the society.

2.6: WHY STUDY THE WOMEN WEAVERS OF MANIPUR

With the growth of technology, education and expansion of markets for commodities and labour, the valuation of women's work in its different aspects undergo changes. Because of growth in education during the last century, a new category of work (i.e. work in the formal institution) appears, and people's concept of worthy and prestigious work also change. Women's identities are also thereby reconstituted. Generally
today, if you ask a woman who is a housewife or someone who is working in homebased occupation (like weaving, basket making etc.) – as to whether she is working- the reply would be a ‘no’. It is assumed that ‘work’ means earning wages outside the house in a formal institution. Women working in IS do not acknowledge their work because IS has been perceived as low status.

Moreover, the belief in the patriarchal society that male is the sole economic provider in the household and women as the homemaker devalues the position of women worker of IS. The change in technology also hinders cheap labour which women mostly provide. There is a need to study the nature of working condition of women working in IS and their contribution to the family and society at large. This is pertinent in a developing state like Manipur where there is a tendency of growth of women in the IS. For a better insight of the constraints of the women workers in IS the researcher has focused on the handloom sector. In states like Gujarat, Kerala, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Orissa, women workers in handloom are involved in the pre-weaving sector while men do the main weaving. So, all the credit goes to the men and women's pre-weaving skills are not acknowledged (National Commission on Self-employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector 1988; Parikh et al. 1991; Baud 1992). But in north-eastern India, especially Manipur, weaving was and is exclusively a women’s domain. Next to agriculture, handloom (which plays a major part in household industry) is an important sector of employment for women in Manipur. But in the Imphal district, which is dominated by Meiteis, according to Census of India (1991b), the number of women working in household industry was more than the agricultural sector. It also had the highest number of WCS (Directorate of Economics and Statistics 1998:132-133). Women did both pre-weaving and weaving activities. They also play the role of merchants.
or traders thus joining in the marketing process. Does this mean that there is no discrimination on them? When the weaving sector is dominated by women, how does it affect their socio-economic status? The study of the women weavers of Manipur will widen the scope to understand the women’s role at the pre-weaving and weaving stages in a patriarchal society.

Besides this, the literature available on handloom sector in Manipur was based on productivity, techniques of weaving, types of cloth production and failure of WCS (Hodson 1997; Sircar 1984; Bahadur 1997; Ghosh and Ghosh 1997; D. Singh 1997). There has been no study conducted on the women weavers’ socio-economic status, their life style, the nature of their family, their health status and the role of weavers in the organisation and community. The present study is an attempt to study the vulnerabilities of the women weavers of Manipur, especially weavers of Imphal, as well as how empowered are they to sustain themselves in the society. All these aspects are examined by conducting an empirical study in Manipur.

In order to have a better understanding of the women weavers in IS of Manipur the present study attempts to explore the following objectives. They are –

1. To examine the socio-economic nature of the women weavers.
2. Why do women choose weaving as their occupation?
3. Do these women weavers face any discrimination? If yes, what is the nature of the discrimination?
4. What are the changes in the market structure and how does it affect women weavers?
5. Does weaving increase weavers’ status and how?
6. What are the weavers’ attitudes toward family planning?
7. What perceptions do the weavers have about jobs other than weaving? What do they wish for their daughters?

8. Do weavers participate in community programmes and voluntary organisations?
NOTES TO CHAPTER- II

1. Meitei phanek - A kind of cloth used by the Meitei women to warp around the waist.

2. Umanglai Haraoba - A prime ritual performed by the Meiteis and Lois.