

## CHALLENGES BEFORE THE HANDLOOM SECTOR AND ITS' WEAVING COMMUNITY IN INDIA DURING COVID-19

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### Abstract

The crisis caused by COVID-19 has resulted in a sudden disruption of businesses across the globe, with India not being an exception. All economic activities in the country have come to a standstill owing to the lockdown necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The handloom sector too got severely affected owing to a total closure of the traditional and contemporary markets for artisans. The handloom sector is not only our past glory, but also it plays a vital role even in the context of the present Indian economy. Over 125 countries are now buying handloom products from India. During the period of lockdown the weavers engaged in this sector, mostly from rural and remote areas, have lost their livelihood, owing to large-scale cancellation of orders and/or orders being put on hold. In this gesture, the present article takes a dig into the economic condition of the weaving community of the handloom sector in India, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and also endeavours to assess the impact of lockdown on their livelihood, which seems to have suffered the most during this period. These impacts are most troubling for low-income households, which are less well-positioned to cope with earnings losses during a lockdown, have no alternative earnings and have no social security available. The government also has initiated special measures to help ameliorate the conditions in the handloom sector due to the Covid pandemic and to boost production, marketing and job opportunities in the sector, yet it has achieved only partial success, largely because of implementation failure. Hence, the article highlights the government efforts initiated for the handloom sector as well as the weaving community of this sector and also seeks to figure out the future course of action that can improve their conditions, gives recommendations on how to broaden the support for them across the country and suggest pathways for recovery and transformation of the sector.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Handloom, Industry, Lockdown, Pandemic, Sector, Weavers.

### INTRODUCTION

Clothing is considered to be evergreen until human being resides in this universe. Diversified apparels reveal the status of the people socially and economically. Once human beings learned to behave

in a civilized manner, clothing plays an honoured part which is offered by weavers. In today's scenario, even many shifted to modern lives and wears, still the unique place is there for traditional wear too, which is to be accepted without any hesitation and no doubt, it is only provided by our

everlasting handloom sector (Sasikala & Shaila, 2021). The tradition of weaving by hand constitutes one of the richest and most vibrant aspects of the Indian cultural heritage. Nowhere in the world can so many diverse weaving techniques be found together in one country. The Indian handloom industry is one of the oldest and largest cottage industries in India with a standing ancient tradition dating back thousands of years for their excellent craftsmanship, representing the vibrant Indian culture. Indian artisans dating back to the Egyptian Babylonian times had such fine mastery over their fabrics. They were appreciated globally for their hand spinning, weaving and printing techniques that were handed down from generations (Shanoob, 2020).

Handloom is the second largest employment generating sector in the country, next only to agriculture. Around 31.45 lakh weavers' households and 68.86 lakh artisan households continue to make a living today, due to the support of a civil society that respects the importance of preserving India's traditional heritage. The size of the industry is said to be anywhere between Rs 15,000-25,000 crore, but their misfortune is that the sector falls under the category of the unorganised or informal sector for which there is very little tangible data available (Divya, 2020). Handloom and handicraft industry, jointly, is a source of livelihood for millions of people, a majority of them belonging to economically impoverished and the most marginalised sections of the society in rural and urban India, mainly from the Backward Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Minorities (Rao, 2020). Handloom sector is not just a source of livelihood for lacs of weavers and artisans, but also environment-friendly, less capital intensive, having minimal use of power, a labour-intensive form of art and adaptability to market requirements, that have secured India's presence in millions of homes across the globe -a presence that has been crafted by dexterous hands. The weavers of this industry are keeping alive the traditional crafts of different states. The level of artistry and intricacy achieved in

the handloom fabrics is unparalleled and beyond the scope of modern machines (Lal, 2015).

But at the same time, this industry is facing multifarious problems that some other industries did not face. Over the past several decades, the handloom weavers have battled numerous challenges, from unscrupulous middlemen and predatory retailers to the migration of the youth to urban centres away from their family vocations (Jain, 2020). Most of these workers earn little more than a subsistence wage and have no other means to protect their incomes (Lal, 2015). This sector had already taken a hit with the demonetisation, which irreparably disrupted the largely cash-based value chain of small producers. Another blow came in the form of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), which was an attempt to subsume most indirect taxes and streamline the taxation system but instead caused chaos and catastrophe with its bureaucratic requirements that severely affected the bottom lines of this sector (Muyiwa, 2020). After that, the crisis caused by COVID-19 resulted in a sudden disruption of all businesses across the globe including the handloom (Hindustan Times, 2020). The already ailing handloom sector has been badly affected by the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdown (Chaudhary, 2020). The sector has been severely affected by the closure of the traditional and contemporary markets for artisans (Hindustan Times, 2020). The colossal dip in economic activity and customer demand has made it difficult for them to stay afloat (Jain, 2020). Overall, the coronavirus outbreak has severely affected the handloom-based village economy, in which the weavers and allied workers, mostly women, suffer the most (Divya, 2020).

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In this dynamic era, fast changes in fashion trends have also led to the increasing demand and craze as well, of handloom products, especially among the elites and upper segment of society. Due to their unique rich variety, the Indian handloom industry had a constant high demand in the Indian market as

well as all over the world for their craftsmanship and intricacy of the designs. On the other side of the picture, this industry also facing a lot of issues and challenges as well. The socio-economic conditions of the weavers, the profitability of the handloom industry, challenges faced by the weavers, availability of financial support, and innovative marketing strategy are some of the special issues, which the handloom industry is facing during the last few years, including some perennial ones like unequal competition from power loom and mill sectors, input and credit crunch, low productivity among Weavers, low wages/incomes, firmly entrenched middleman; and some newer ones like the adverse impact of demonetization, GST rollout and the latest one, the corona pandemic-induced lockdown and subsequent disaster faced by the small scale weavers especially. Despite all these, this is neither a dying industry, nor it should be allowed to die. The resilience that handloom weavers continue to show before the corona crisis and even during the pandemic and subsequent lockdown, in terms of survival and ability to innovate, indicates that the handloom sector can still be revived. It is in fact one of the most promising industries and is going through a lot of transformation right now. So it is the need of time to ponder into these issues and formulate such type of strategies, which could help the weaving community and the handloom industry to improve their present conditions, especially, in the post pandemic era.

## CONCEPT OF THE HANDLOOM INDUSTRY

The concept of handloom industry includes the process of operation by hand on a wooden structure, which is called the loom (Shanoob, 2020). Loom is a weaving device to weave cloth, operated manually, that is, wholly or partially by hand or foot power (Lal, 2015). The operations of this industry are primarily household-based, wherein various members of the family put in joint efforts for production (Shanoob, 2020). To improve productivity and reduce the manual labour on

looms, an advisory committee on the Reservation of Articles for Production Act, 1985, in its meeting held on August 10, 2012, recommended the modification in the definition of handloom as “handloom means any loom, other than power loom, and includes any hybrid loom on which at least one process for weaving requires manual intervention or human energy for production” (Lal, 2015). These activities are spread across thousands of towns and villages in the country and involve the transfer of skills from one generation to the next (Shanoob, 2020).

## STATUS OF HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN THE INDIAN ECONOMY

The handloom industry is the largest cottage industry in India, generating direct and indirect employment for more than three million weaver households (Chaudhary, 2020). Of all the art and crafts in India, hand-woven textiles are probably the oldest and most widely recognized. The weaving practice in India has been in existence for more than 5000 years. It is also found in Ramayana and Mahabharata that speaks about the length of the craft. Historically, a few famous hand-woven textiles of India are Banarasi sarees from Varanasi, Bandhani from Rajasthan and Gujarat, Chanderi and Maheshwari from Madhya Pradesh, Georgette from Karnataka, Sambalpuri sarees from Odisha, Baluchari, Jamdani and Taant sarees from West Bengal, Temple silk and South Silk from South India, Kanjeevaram sarees from Tamil Nadu, Bhagalpuri sarees from Bihar, Moonga and Tussur silk from North East and many more (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2019). The Handloom products, produced by each region vary, as each state in India specialises in a different variety of handloom products determined by the culture of that region and the skill of the workers (Shanoob, 2020). This diversity in textiles and the superior artistry of craftsmen is unmatched elsewhere. Despite the magnitude and importance of the handloom sector, hand craftsmanship is on the decline. According to the 4<sup>th</sup> All India Handloom Census 2019-2020, the country is home to over 3.5 million handloom workers today (down from 6.5

million in 1995-96, as per the 3<sup>rd</sup> All India Handloom Census), which includes both weavers and ancillary workers (Raniwala, 2020).

A majority (2.3 million) of handloom workers are female and they mostly belong to the age group of 18-35 years. However, most women weavers are engaged in this activity as a part-time endeavour, as they do it along with household chores and family care work. A higher number of women are involved in allied (pre-loom and post-loom) activities related to handloom (Chaudhary, 2020). The handloom industry is one of the largest industries in India but the welfare work and aid to the weavers is nowhere to its potential, especially in the case of women. Women are still forced to unequal pay even after shouldering half the work (Sarkar, 2020). Most of the handloom workers are from economically disadvantaged groups; about 67% of weaver households earn less than Rs.5000/- a month (Chaudhary, 2020). They are already living in poverty and keep up with limited resources. Due to the lockdown, their livelihoods had badly hit and many of them reached starvation. The handloom industry is significant for the economy not only because of low capital investment and a high potential for export and foreign exchange earnings but also due to its linkage with the rural farm economy. This sector is generating jobs not only in rural areas but also in semi-urban and urban India. Further, there are several sectors, that benefited along the chain including transportation, marketing and financial services (Chaudhary, 2020).

Handlooms contribute to nearly 23% of cloth production in the country and at the world forum, in the production of handwoven fabrics, it constitutes 95% of global production (Chaudhary, 2020). The handloom sector in India is a Rs 24,300-crore industry and contributes nearly Rs 10,000 crore annually in export earnings. In the financial year of 2019-20, the sector earned Rs 2,280.18 crore through exports and Rs 2,75,000 crore in the domestic market (Pati, 2020). Handlooms products have been a major part of the export basket of the country. Sarees, dress materials and home furnishing have been the major contributors to the handloom

exports basket. Furthermore, the majority of these exports have been to the US, Europe and other Asian countries (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2019). In the financial year 2019-20, the US was the major importer of Indian handloom products followed by the UK, Italy and Germany (Chaudhary, 2020). It has special recognition in the country's textiles scenario, for its exclusive handloom product (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2019). The demand for Indian handloom products has been growing globally, with considerable demand from the international "slow fashion" market. Amid coronavirus chaos, the priorities of fashion retailers have been changed and their focus is now on the sustainability of the enterprise (Chaudhary, 2020).

## DEVASTATING IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HANDLOOM SECTOR AND ITS' WEAVERS

In India, the crisis caused by COVID-19 has resulted in a sudden disruption and has had a devastating impact on the handloom sector (Hindustan Times, 2020). It was a battle with an invisible enemy, a virus, that started in China's Wuhan city and has then affected almost all parts of the world and recorded as one of the worst periods in human history. Almost all major economies were under complete or partial lock down. The pandemic has shaken up both the human race and the economies of these countries as well (Mishra et al., 2020). On 24 March 2020, India's prime minister Mr. Narendra Modi declared a nationwide lockdown for 21 days. It was extended till 31 May 2020 in various phases. After the sudden announcement of lockdown, all business activities stopped immediately from midnight on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020. A falling economy, unemployment, reduced spending, the pandemic and subsequent lockdown have had a severe impact on the handloom sector (Pati, 2020). The demand for handloom products abroad and domestic sales has come down to a grinding halt due to the panic situation created by the COVID-19 outbreak. Due to the lockdown, all sorts of textile-related units were closed for a long period of time and almost all buyers

were cancelling or postponing their orders. At that time, it was very tough to hazard a guess when those will be allowed to open. Workers were running here and there amid all sorts of confusion. The all handloom community was scared on account of cash crunch, supply chain disturbance and manpower-related issues (Juneja, 2020).

The national lockdown brought up the worst time for the weaving community of the handloom sector in their whole lives. Though, the lockdown had affected all the stakeholders in handloom sector, the effect had been particularly severe on the weavers, especially the hired weavers and the migrant weavers among them. Without adequate access to a safety net and formal financial institutions, most of the weavers were then, desperate to sell their left over products at lower prices to get minimum cash to buy their minimum necessities. Such precarious conditions made them vulnerable to being exploited by the middleman, who has deeper pockets to take advantage of arbitrage. In the wake of uncertainties at that time, the master weavers discontinued their orders, which left these weavers, most of them women, without any work and payment. Maintaining social distancing was a myth for the weavers at the time of the severe corona crisis, because of their precarious working and living conditions, which were mostly congested. They were not familiar with the life of idleness that was faced by them during the lockdown. Most of them had run out of cash due to lack of work assigned by master weavers and depended completely on them for their financial requirements, as the weavers mostly rely on credit from those master weavers or other informal sources, which had only increased their level of indebtedness at the time of complete lockdown. Without ration cards and other entitlements, that were available for them, many of these weavers survived with one meal a day and were bereft of work and cash, many of them were staring at starvation (Das & Sutradhar, 2020).

Artisans and weavers are the third largest segment among the poor, for whom, it looks like the hardest and longest struggle for survival with no

hope in sight (Pati, 2020). The weavers were forced to take up odd jobs as vegetable vendors and cleaning to make ends meet (Sarkar, 2020). Most of their products are “non-essential” which could be the reason why their alarming situation is getting very little visibility despite the call for “vocal for local” and ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ (Pati, 2020). Like any industry, it has left the handloom industry hamstrung and in shambles. Since people were not going out, weddings or any such events were not taking place during the time of lockdown and even during the unlock phases; and this was continued for a long period of time, it is very hard to suppose how the demand for handloom products would be its earlier self without a stimulus package by the government (Sarkar, 2020). In short, we can say that weavers found it very difficult to run their normal lives during the lockdown. All the business activities went down literally, such as production failure, where weavers could not able to get orders from owners, which made them jobless. When there was no production, it reflected in sales decline and without sales, ultimately weavers faced and experienced the condition of scarcity and their lives were under great threat. This situation even made weavers commit suicide in many parts of the country. As it is transparent, the resources available in India are ample, but exploitation and middlemen interferences, collapsed the overall process and the concerned did not get any benefit ( Sasikala & Shaila, 2021).

## PRIME HURDLES THAT COVID-19 HAS CAUSED

Prime hurdles that the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown have caused resulting in abrupt interruption to the livelihoods of millions of weavers, working in the handloom sector in India are:

- Since the COVID-19 lockdown, most of the artisans have been out of work for a long. At the time of the first phase of the corona crisis and subsequent lockdown, on an average only 15 out of 40 looms were

operational. Stocks have accumulated and they were facing a severe cash crunch (Pati, 2020).

- Cash flow has stopped, with buyers unable to make payments and no sales happening at all.
- The sector has experienced sudden stalling of orders as retailers themselves were closed due to the worldwide lockdown.
- At the same time, buyers were not in the position to place new orders, as there was no demand in the market.
- Retail events through which artisans and weavers get cash sales have not happened during the months of complete lockdown.
- The market of the summer season when cotton handlooms sell mostly was hampered totally. This not only creates a liquidity crunch, but also severely impacted their ability to invest in yarns for creating products for next festive seasons (August to November) and winter & spring (November to February) seasons, which are the other two major selling seasons for the handloom textiles.
- Indian handlooms have been picking up in the 'slow fashion' market internationally, but with the uncertainty, created by the corona crisis, there were no any overseas orders for the months.
- Customer priorities were also changed with tightened budgets, as more than half of the population, have lost their jobs or curtailed their salaries/wages.
- Small weavers and producer groups neither had the financial cushioning to hold through such a crisis nor got any credit supplies from raw material suppliers.
- Being part of an informal economy, artisans and weavers were also not able to access credit from banks and non-banking financial institutions.
- While the government was providing free rations to some extent at the time of lockdown, the majority of the artisans and

weavers, who earn on a daily basis working for bigger weavers or traders, found it extremely difficult to feed their families and take care of any medical exigencies (Hindustan Times, 2020).

## NEGLIGENCE BY THE GOVERNMENT

There are so many instances, which indicate that there are no efforts to support the handloom sector from the government side. The current moves of the government are likely to push the traditional and informal sector of the country into deep crisis, just like the British colonial powers pushed the weavers' into unemployment, poverty and starvation. Self-reliant and independent weavers, who are currently living with pride despite low incomes are going to be forced to work for mechanised production units in the near future as their autonomous enterprises are starved and discriminated against, with the current government policies of neglect and deprivation (Rao, 2020). The clarion call made by the Prime Minister for self-reliant India in a post Covid-19 world, demands a complete revamp in the government's plan for the handloom sector. The budget allocations made by the government over the past few years, however, reflect a story of neglect on the part of government towards the sector. The budget meant for the handloom sector fell from Rs 604 crore in 2017-18 to Rs 386 crore in 2018-19 (Reddy, 2019). Though the allocations for the sector saw an increase to 456 crore, accounting for 7.83% of the total textile budget in 2019-20, it fell far short of the allocation made in the 2017-18 budget (Reddy, 2019). However, this slight increase was far lower than the proportion of growth of the handloom and handicraft sectors in terms of employment and exports. Another incident of negligence is reflected in the fact that, in 2005, the 'Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana' (MGBBY) was introduced by the textile ministry to provide insurance coverage to handloom workers in the case of natural or accidental death and partial disability, but now, the MGBBY has been integrated with 'Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana' (PMJBY) and 'Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana' (PMSBY), which are

meant for the general public (Office of Development Commissioner Handlooms, 2015). Such a merger is another Significant blow to the handloom weavers as PMJBY and PMSBY do not deal with occupational disability, which was one of the sole objectives of MGBBY (Bhowmik, 2019). These factors have already pushed the handloom sector towards a situation where weavers have been struggling to stay relevant, but recently, the unexpected situation arising out of the Covid-19 lockdown, further, has pushed the sector to the edge of extinction (Das & Sutradhar, 2020). Discrimination towards this sector reveals that artisans and handloom weavers are not as important to the government as the industrial capital lobby, which is why there is no mention of handlooms and handicrafts [being] allotted any share of government assistance under the Rs 20 lakh crore economic revival plan of the Atmanirbharta Mission announced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic to revive the economy (Rao, 2020).

## ABOLITION OF THE 'ALL INDIA HANDICRAFTS BOARD' AND THE 'ALL INDIA HANDLOOM BOARD'

The handloom and handicraft sector has withstood several crises since the British colonial era and the subsequent neglect of the Indian government (Rao, 2020). Another instance of this neglect, that reveals the present regime's partisan favouritism towards big industries and the capitalist lobby rather than the employment-generating informal sector is that, on July 27 and August 4, 2020, just days before the sixth National Handloom Day celebration on August 7, the Union Minister of Textiles announced that the government would be abolishing the 'All India Handicrafts Board' and the 'All India Handloom Board', respectively, in consonance with the Government of India's vision of 'Minimum Government' and 'Maximum Governance'. These bodies, set up in 1952 and 1992 respectively, served as advisory bodies, presenting the issues and concerns of the weavers and handicraft communities to the government. Like many other government bodies and focus groups, they too suffered their fair

share of problems, with their purpose being diluted and lost amidst battles for power, awards and red tape. Yet the 'abolishment', rather than renewal, raises multiple questions about the ruling government's new motto of 'Atma-Nirbharta' and being 'Vocal for Local'. In such a time, instead of just being #VocalForLocal, we need to go the extra mile and #BuyLocal (Jain, 2020). The abolition of these institutions also mars the welfare orientation of the current government and its goals of "sabka saath, sabka vikas", considering that even the British rulers didn't deny their importance in protecting the handloom sector (Rao, 2020).

The All India Handloom Board (AIHB), the only organisation working with the government which had weavers and artisans from all over India as its members, was established on the recommendations of a Fact Finding Committee constituted in 1941 to study the serious setbacks faced by handlooms during 1914-1940. The Committee, tasked with suggesting measures to protect the handloom sector, submitted its report in 1942. In its report, the Committee recommended appointing the All India Handloom Board, stressing the need for a bridge between the government and handloom weavers to understand the issues faced by the sector, to advise better means and arrangements to develop the supply of raw material, marketing, handloom cloth production, Research & Development Centres to ensure improvement in the standard of living of the handloom weavers in the country. It also recommended the reservation of certain cloth products exclusively to handlooms to avoid competition with mills, particularly products made of coarse yarn. In this accordance, the Indian Parliament, adopting the Industrial Policy Resolution on 6 April 1948, stressed on rural economic development through the cottage, village and small-scale industries, for the generation of employment and development of rural India. Further, in the same year, the Cottage Industries Board (CIB) was established by the Government of India to promote the rural economy. The All India Handloom Board and All India Handicrafts Board were separated from the Cottage Industry Board in 1952 to retain due

importance for and prioritise the concerns and issues of handloom weavers and artisans (Rao, 2020).

The All India Handloom Board was set up to advise the government in the formulation of overall development programs in the handloom sector. It was also responsible for advising the government on how to make handlooms an effective instrument for reducing unemployment and underemployment, and how to achieve higher living standards for weavers. The Board also formulated the development and welfare schemes of handloom weavers from time to time. Some of the welfare schemes introduced by the AIHB include:

- The Handloom Weavers Comprehensive Welfare Scheme
- National Handloom Development Program (NHDP)
- Handloom Marketing Assistance
- Weaver MUDRA Scheme
- Yarn Supply Scheme (Shanoob, 2020).

The abolition of the All India Handloom and Handicrafts Boards signals the government's departure from the national fostering of the traditional value of production. The abolition of these boards suggests that the government is withdrawing its responsibility to the sector that's struggling to retain its presence in the local and global markets despite the adverse situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Rao, 2020). It is unfortunate that both Boards were abolished by the central government without giving any reason or putting any alternative in place. Both these institutions connected the artisans with the government. They existed to facilitate better understanding, coordination and initiate actions that develop a favourable ecosystem for the local and handmade products (Pati, 2020). It was at the same time, a forum where the government could get direct feedback from the stakeholders (Divya, 2020). The role of the board has been crucial in offering subsidies, grants, and in setting up showrooms in several areas which generated sales, marketing, and training opportunities. The board was also actively

involved in organizing fairs, and exhibitions to uplift the artisans. With the abolition of AIHB, there is no clarity as to what would happen to the state-level associations, and who will organize these events in the future. The decision to abolish AIHB will result in the systematic dismantling of the only bridge between handloom workers and the government. With this move, Indian handloom workers lost the last platform of asserting their rights as informal sector workers and the symbolic presence of a democratic institution built to aid workers' welfare. Some commentators believe that it is a strategy to give private players a greater role in the handloom sector. Keeping the women workforce in this sector, more specifically, a decision of this magnitude will impact women weavers, more dramatically than their male counterparts (Shanoob, 2020).

## THE RESILIENCE POWER OF THE HANDLOOM SECTOR

Despite the above-mentioned hurdles and challenges, especially in the time of the corona crisis and subsequent lockdown, India's handloom sector and its weaving community show a great spirit of survival and resilience power against the adversities they have faced. In spite of efforts from colonial times to the lack of support from government policies, it has still managed to survive. Survival and resilience are built into the systems of production and living among the handloom weavers. They are resilient communities because they don't forget easily. They're able to recall old habits, call upon all of their common, collective knowledge to deal with a situation. Another of these inherent qualities that will help them continue mass-scale production of goods is that their home and work spheres are the same, so their work can continue even with social distancing protocols. It is an example of mass-scale production that's still done in a democratic, decentralised fashion with minimal environmental impact (Muyiwa, 2020).

## INITIATIVES TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT

Responding to the grim circumstances caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 in India, Government of India had announced a special economic package viz. Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan for boosting economy of the country and making India self-reliant. Relief and credit support measures had announced for various sectors, from which the weavers & artisans also can avail benefits of these relief and credit support measures to revive their businesses which had suffered due to lock down necessitated by Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, the government was also aware of the condition of weavers across the country, so to come out of the COVID-19 pandemic situation and for the welfare of handloom weavers and artisans, the following initiatives have been taken by the Ministry of Textiles in the recent times:

- In the face of the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic, it was not feasible to hold conventional marketing events such as exhibitions, melas, etc. To deal with this crisis, the Government endeavoured to provide online marketing opportunities to the weavers and handloom producers.
- In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Handloom Export Promotion Council (HEPC) also took initiative to virtually connect the handloom weavers and exporters from different corners of the country with the international market.
- In the current financial year, 2020-21, 'Handloom Export Promotion Council' (HEPC) had organized 7 International Fairs in virtual mode to facilitate marketing and sales of handloom products in the domestic as well as international markets. Out of these, The 'Indian Textile Sourcing Fair' was organised with more than 200 participants from different regions of the country showcasing their products with unique designs and skills from 7-11 August, 2020.

The show attracted considerable attention of the international buyers.

- HEPC also participated in the 'Bharat Parv Festival' organized in virtual mode by Ministry of Tourism. Besides, 53 domestic marketing events had also been organized in different parts of the country for the weavers to market and sell their products.
- To support the handloom and handicraft sectors and to enable a wider market for handloom weavers/artisans/producers, steps had been taken to onboard weavers/artisans on Government e-Marketplace (GeM) to enable them to sell their products directly to various government departments and organizations. So far about 1.5 lakh weavers had been onboarded on the GeM portal.
- To promote the e-marketing of handloom products, a policy framework was designed under which any willing e-commerce platform with a good track record can participate in the online marketing of handloom products. Accordingly, 23 e-commerce entities have been engaged in the online marketing of handloom products.
- To enhance productivity and marketing capabilities and ensure higher returns on weavers through collective efforts and pooling of resources, 109 handloom producer companies had been formed in different States.
- A social media campaign #Vocal4handmade was launched on the 6<sup>th</sup> National Handloom Day on August 7, 2020, by the Government, in partnership with all stakeholders, to promote the handloom legacy of India and to ensure people's support for the weaving community. It has been reported that the social media campaign has resulted in the renewed interest of the Indian public in handlooms and several e-commerce players have reported an increase in the sale of Indian handloom products.
- During August-October 2020, 534 'Chaupals' were organized in various states

to educate the weavers to avail benefits of various handloom schemes meant for their welfare and socio-economic development.

- The Ministry of Textiles had requested the Chief Ministers of all States and UTs to instruct their State Handloom Corporations/Co-operatives/Agencies to make purchases of the finished inventory available with the handloom weavers/artisans to put some ready cash in the hands of the weavers to enable them to meet their household needs.
- Design Resource Centres (DRCs) are being set up in Weavers Service Centres (WSCs) through NIFT with the objective to build and create design-oriented excellence in the handloom sector and to facilitate weavers, exporters, manufacturers and designers for creating new designs.

Apart from the above initiatives, Ministry of Textiles is implementing various schemes through the Offices of Development Commissioner (Handlooms) for overall development of handlooms and welfare of handloom weavers across the country. The Scheme details are as under:

- National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP), with its components;
  1. Block level cluster
  2. Handloom marketing assistance
  3. Weavers mudra scheme
  4. Hathkargha samvardhan sahayata
  5. Education of handloom weavers and their children
  6. "India Handloom" brand
  7. E-commerce
  8. Urban haats
- Comprehensive Handloom Cluster Development Scheme (CHCDS)
- Handloom Weavers' Comprehensive Welfare Scheme (HWCWS)
- Yarn Supply Scheme (YSS)

Under the above schemes, financial assistance is provided for raw materials, purchase of looms and accessories, design innovation, product

diversification, infrastructure development, skill up-gradation, lighting units, marketing of handloom products and loans at concessional rates. Apart from this, during the corona crisis, States and UTs had created Artisan Welfare Fund (AWF) Trusts intending to extend security and other help to artisans. As per Press Information Bureau, Delhi report dated April 09<sup>th</sup> 2020, Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) have decided to release Rs.1000 per month to each artisan from the AWF Trust. Moreover, Khadi institutions had been directed to release AWF contributions into the bank accounts of artisans in three instalments. The above support is indeed welcome but extremely limiting in coverage as only those artisans, who have worked as a Khadi worker for a period of 240 days are eligible for membership of the fund (Chaudhary, 2020).

Some non-government agencies have also taken steps to protect the livelihood of handloom weavers and artisan. The 'Antaran' initiative, an initiative of Tata Trusts, has devised a user-friendly website to help artisans liquidate their stock on hand to take care of the immediate needs. Exquisite products from the Antaran led community initiatives across four states and six clusters—Assam (Kamrup and Nalbari), Nagaland (Dimapur), Odisha (Gopalpur and Maniabandha) and Andhra Pradesh (Venkatgiri) were being offered by the Artisan Entrepreneurs at lower/wholesale prices and the customers were able to pay online immediately to the artisans. This helped to bring in the much-needed cash flow for artisan entrepreneurs to support themselves and their associate artisans (Hindustan Times, 2020). 'Antaran' is a key intervention of the Trusts' Craft-based Livelihood Programme, initiated to bring seminal changes in craft development. The initiative works towards strengthening craft ecosystems, building core strength of handloom textiles such as natural fibres, handspun yarn and natural dyes while reviving and reinterpreting the traditional weave designs in these selected clusters for wider markets. Artisans also learn about design and business and are empowered toward entrepreneurship and self-employment. During the crisis, this initiative has nurtured and positively impacted the livelihood and

stability of 917 artisan households. It has also facilitated the creation of 37 active businesses and generated sales worth Rs 1.5 crore from campaign activities (The New Indian Express, 2020). Some non-government organisations had also started Ketto/Milaap campaigns to raise money for weavers during the lockdown period. Asma Hussian, a known heritage fashion designer based in Lucknow, supported artisan families by distributing food packets along with financial support for subsistence. (Chaudhary, 2020).

## SUGGESTIVE MEASURES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In an address to the nation on 12 May 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while announcing the Atmanirbhar package, lauded the success of khadi and handloom sectors that have produced a record number of personal protection equipment (PPE) kits and masks as a model to be followed for building a self-reliant India. Behind these lofty claims, however, there is a sector gasping for breath. The demonetisation in 2016, followed by the goods and services tax (GST) and now COVID-19 with the lockdown imposed in the country, have put at risk the lives and livelihoods of lakhs of handloom weavers (Das & Sutradhar, 2020). The handloom weaving community, which belongs to the most vulnerable and deprived section of our workforce, need support in survival and care at this time of corona crisis. The responses to the Covid-19 pandemic should consider both economic and social aspects and aim for increased reach while using a target-oriented approach. The most urgent task today is one devising appropriate institutional and structural supports that could help the industry realise its potential. We are in a perilous economic state where the revival after the pandemic is hard and time taking. Therefore Government should take initiatives for the revival of the economic condition of the weavers of the handloom sector.

History suggests that state patronage is essential for handloom to survive and thrive. Such patronage is entirely justified, not just on socio-

economic grounds (like employment, gender empowerment and making growth more inclusive), but also on cultural-spiritual grounds (like preservation of age-old skills and tradition, aesthetic pleasure and so on). Efforts should be made to promote handloom as premium products that can command better prices in both domestic and export markets. A fusion of classic and contemporary is what gives handloom a cherished possession for the rich. The niche market for the handloom needs to be effectively tapped. It must, however, be ensured that the benefit of such developments trickles down to the common weaver. The government interventions should be planned, considering both short and long-term impacts on the weaving community and the handloom sector. To overcome this crisis, provide relief to the weaving community involved in this sector, retain its market share and also to enter new market segments, the handloom sector needs some well-thought-out and clearly articulated remedial strategies, supported by conducive policy initiatives. Some such meaningful measures are noted below:

- A relief fund may be announced with provisions of short-term measures in the form of subsistence allowance to weavers and allied workers until their business would not get normalcy.
- If handloom weavers and artisans have to overcome this situation, the government has to immediately announce a special economic package for them as part of the Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan.
- As a medium-term measure, the government should also take some initiatives to include handloom weavers under the purview of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to enhance their earnings.
- Any long term measure should be directed towards boosting the sector by way of implementing policies that support in reviving, creating and sustaining employment. Inclusion of handloom under Prime Minister Employment Generation

Programme (PMEGP) may promote large scale and long term employment.

- After the displacement of thousands of weavers, particularly the migrant weavers during the COVID-19 crisis and the subsequent lockdown, the government have to require to make a new and strong handloom database in order to help out the weaving community.
- Handloom products require more visibility in terms of the better and wider market network. One-off exhibitions organised with the support of the government do not suffice. For this purpose, an umbrella market organisation, autonomous and financed by the government initially, should be formed to undertake this task. Organising the special expos, Craft Melas, Urban Haats and marketing complexes is required, as the situation becomes normal in the near future.
- The government should also encourage the adoption of effective marketing strategies during this challenging phase like e-marketing through apps and websites, proper advertisements and sponsored exhibitions, which might soon make way for international shipping also.
- In the case of handloom products, first of all, there is a great awareness about the features and advantages of handloom products. Effective publicity through an appropriate media mix should be done.
- A regular buyer-seller meet is required so that the weavers get a platform to market their products.
- The differentiation in distribution channels can be done to sell the handloom products, such as the tie-up with the boutique owners and a chain selling readymade garments system, such as Westside and Big Bazaar, can be approached.
- Supply-side disruptions may lead international business houses to reduce dependence on distant and global suppliers. So the state and central government have to play enabling roles in promoting the local economy and promoting the consumption of locally made handloom products.
- The Handloom and Handicraft Boards have to be immediately revived and put back into action or have to be established any other forum as their substitutes. Instead of filling these with political appointments who have little awareness about the sectors, capable persons who have rich experience in the field must be appointed as Board members, which alone reflects the government's commitment towards the cause of handlooms and handicrafts.
- The Boards have to function as the facilitators between the weavers and artisans, their representatives and the government and prepare as well as implement plans for the supply of raw material, providing credit support and market linkages, and enable weavers and artisans to access various welfare measures announced by the government.
- To cope with the financial requirements of the sector, adequate funds must be allocated in the plan budgets. The governments should treat this as their immediate responsibility as opposed to waiving huge loans given to big corporates.
- There is a need for new programs that enable the inflow of fresh investments and of new emergence entrepreneurs into the handloom sector.
- To flourish in the markets, the handloom industry needs to bring out renewed designs which can be encouraged by the government. Change is required at multiple levels simultaneously, while designers have played their part in creating an awakening about handlooms, we need a supply chain based on fair wages and rightly priced products keeping in mind that handmade products will be limited in quantity.
- New designs may provide the previous pride and place to the weaving community of the handloom sector as in the pre-

pandemic era. The crisis is being viewed as an opportunity to create new and interesting designs.

- Apart from this, the handloom designs are not protected. As a result, the investors are not interested to bear the risks involved in this sector. For this, protection options such as patenting the designs and varieties, development of handloom/silk/jute marks and registration of special designs/techniques under the geographical indications must be required.
- Product Diversification can be a big stepping stone in the marketing business, since after that, the products could be sold in all sections of the society, keeping in mind the price range and different fashion designs.
- Market Diversification may be another effective method to improve their livelihood conditions.
- For infrastructural development and improved working conditions, the new strategy and set-up is advised to be adopt. Equipments could be made more advanced, efficient and cheap to be affordable. With the presence of virus in air, the infrastructure needs small but important changes, which will ensure the safety of the workers, including larger spaces for work and sanitation most importantly. This could prove a big leap in the development of Indian Handloom Industry in the current juncture.
- In foreign countries, to make handloom fabrics more popular and export-oriented, the quality of fabrics should be increased and enhance the unique design and intricacy of the fabric.
- The quality assessment of yarns, woven fabrics, dyeing, finishing and packaging also should be done nicely. To create a permanent space for handloom products in the national and international market, quality assurance is of utmost importance.
- Increased emphasis on the packaging is the need of the hour, no doubt. Since we're still going through the pandemic, packaging needs to be better and in accordance with the Covid protocols.
- Enhancing the efficiency and development of the Primary Weavers' Cooperative Society (PWCS) may help out in the improvement of the upper strata of the industry as well.
- Adopting the 'Cluster Development Approach' for the development of weavers with their traditional setups in different places, to let out the traditional and cultural designs, which may further spread the business of these households.
- Extension of the credit for the sector, as well as for the weavers, through the banks and non banking institutions can be an effective measure to support them.
- The government may introduce Bank Credit Cards on the pattern of Kisan Credit Cards, through which easy credit may be made available to weavers to meet their requirements related to handloom activities.
- In the post-lockdown phase, the sector have to adapt the changing consumption patterns and coming with new product lines. As work from home is the new norm, the focus must be on production of home products like towels, masks, cushions, bed and table linen, instead of traditional apparels, as the outings and gatherings are hampered due to pandemic.
- At the same time, it is recommended that strong campaigns should be built to have 10% of the wardrobes of every citizen (those who can afford it) filled with handlooms. For the sector to grow, handlooms should become an everyday product and not a special buy.
- There is a need for enhancing the value of handloom products through the utilisation of organic cotton and organic yarn and the

application of natural dyer, as these are the eco-friendly strategies and appeal to modern people most.

- The pending disbursements (like subsidies, rebates etc.) to weavers and other workers in this industry need to be fully paid to motivate them to put in their full potential.
- The youth of the weaving community also needs to be supported and trained, not just in their hereditary skills but also in launching their own start-ups. The regulatory framework needs to be conducive to this.
- Steps should be taken for strict enforcement of the handloom reservation provisions under The 'Handloom Reservation of Articles for Production Act, 1985', so that, this sector has to be protected against power looms and the mill sector, which is the utmost requirement of the present crisis.
- Government should encourage government-owned enterprises to purchase handloom products. It should insist on government employees wearing such garments at least once every week to boost the demand for such products.
- Government should devise a system to buy stock from master weavers and make such types of announcements in the form of Minimum Support Price (MSP), just like in the agricultural sector.
- Also, to motivate younger weavers, some type of incentives in the form of reward or cash for any type of new innovation in designs or production techniques should be provided.
- Weavers also don't know where to approach for help and even to avail the facilities already being offered to them, so some kind of common platform should be created.
- The state should devise a public procurement policy for the handloom sector, including features such as direct

government purchase for the distribution of uniforms in government-run schools/colleges etc.

- Since most of the handloom households earn very little amount, which is grossly inadequate for their survival, it is suggested that income support, in the form of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) scheme be put forward to supplement their incomes. The launch of such a scheme at this juncture will also help boost effective demand, thereby inducing quick recovery from the ongoing economic recession.
- Apart from the government, the corporate sector and the NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) should also extend helping hand to the weavers in the form of developmental and welfare interventions. Expenditure on Handloom should be counted towards mandatory contribution by the corporate sector under its CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility).
- The growth of self-help groups (SHGs) and thrift groups among weavers must be encouraged to strengthen their status and conditions.
- Silk yarn is used in a higher proportion in the country and its major portion is imported from China, the country, which is evidenced by this biggest crisis of human history, therefore foreign trade with China had been badly affected. In this context, domestic production of silk yarn should be promoted, especially, at the current juncture. The weavers are also negatively affected by 30% antidumping levy on Chinese silk yarn. So, the government should take some steps towards reducing this levy suitably.
- The government has created some research and input institutions such as Weavers Service Centres, institutions of handloom technology, NIFT, etc. to help the handloom sector. But their performance has been below par and their presence has not helped in obviating the problems of

handloom weavers. So, there is a great need to improve the performance of these institutions for the upliftment of this sector.

- There could be a collaboration of handloom sector with other departments/sectors such as Khadi and Village Industries and Handicrafts as products of these sectors have common attributes of handmade and also possessing cultural value.
- Women, form an integral part of the handloom industry, as most of the weavers and allied workers are women, but have been facing a dismal situation for their livelihood. They live under poor economic conditions with limited access to health services and social protection. It is an irony that India doesn't have implemented handloom welfare schemes with a particular focus on women. Hence, in the present scenario, they need to be prioritised and probably long-term support.
- Basic facilities, such as land, pure water, proper sanitation, roads, electricity, godowns etc., need to be provided in many places that are a harbour for handloom manufacturing.
- Handloom co-operatives have to become independent in terms of management and decision-making process. These co-operatives should be depoliticised and the steps should be taken for the enhancement of weaver's membership.
- State Handloom Development Corporations as well as, the Apex organisations should be strengthened to provide support to handloom weavers in the respective states.
- Finally, what this sector needs is not just a blueprint approach to its development (which envisages prior planning, from the top, 'for' the people), but a blend of this with what is called a learning process approach (which envisages planning 'with' the people/stakeholders, during the process of implementation of a plan). Such a blended approach will ensure effective implementation of government policy on

the handloom, especially, in the post-pandemic era.

In the form of lockdown, governments have taken the most important public health response but now the requirement is to focus on economic responses, especially for the informal sector workforce. Quick government support will immensely help the handloom sector and its weaving community to recover from the economic impact and protect livelihoods (Chaudhary, 2020). It is important to bring significant inclination of all the stakeholders towards the revival of this weaving community, which has suffered a lot due to the COVID-19 lockdown (Mishra et al., 2020). Due to its ignorance, the industry may take a much longer time to recover after the lockdown. Another lesson to learn is not to depend on a single source (China) for raw material supplies and shift towards localization and variable-cost models (Juneja, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The coronavirus pandemic has forced mankind to not only adopt the new habits of interacting with people but has also made organizations restructure their business operations. It is a privilege of the handloom industry, that it could, however, take the maximum benefits even while following the set norms of the COVID-19 pandemic situation, like social distancing and one-metre distance between people at the workplace (Brahma & Deb, 2020). To reveal the fact that, the lockdown has affected the stakeholders in all the ways, it much affected the hired weavers, leading them to face unemployment and loss of livelihoods, rather than the weavers, who weave on their own. Though the lockdown is relaxed on one side, on another side still the demand for clothing is not to be raised enough, to assign work to the weavers to weave products (Sasikala & Shaila, 2021). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's initiative to favour handloom has done wonders to enhance its reach, but the truth is, a lot needs to be done on the ground. In this gesture, launching a start-up, announcing a stimulus package by the government, requesting allocation of funds from the government

for the betterment of weavers etc. should be more streamlined to get better results (Shanoob, 2020).

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