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Handloom Scenario of India: A Case Study of a Renowned Silk-Village in Murshidabad, West Bengal, India

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Abstract:

Present paper is on mouza Chak Harharia, which is famous for silk weaving in Murshidabad, West Bengal, India. The weavers of Murshidabad are both intelligent and genius in their art, though they live in a very plain simple manner. Unfortunately they suffer from scarcity in every material requirement. From time-immemorial fine products from these weavers have earned wealth for India. If both public awareness and Govt. initiatives can nurture the art and artists properly their products will earn enough foreign exchanges to strengthen the economy of West Bengal. So silk based handloom and Khadi industry should find out the proper way to keep this art cum industry alive and to make it strong further.

Keywords: *artisan, demand, diversification, e-commerce, handloom, innovation, investment, Khadi, marketing techniques, price-elasticity, production, profit.*

1. Introduction

Present paper is on mouza Chak Harharia, which is famous for silk weaving in Murshidabad, West Bengal, India. Silk the queen of textiles dominates the textile industry with its lustre, sensuousness and glamour. The history of silk goes back to 4500 years. India is the second largest producer of silk, contributing to about 18% of the World production. The vibrant colours, light weight, resilience, diversified & beautiful designs and excellent drape have made Indian silk, an irresistible and unavoidable component of the wardrobe all over the world. The silk sarees of India are among the living examples of the excellent craftsmanship of the weavers of the country. The silk industry has been the principal non-agricultural industry in Murshidabad for the last three centuries.

Village handloom industries have been one of the important sources of employment in the rural areas. From such industries spinners, weavers and a large number of allied artisans earn their livelihood. A large number of women artisans are engaged in the spinning segment.

Village industries are broadly classified under the following seven groups:-

1. Agro Based and Food Processing Industry
2. Forest Based Industry
3. Handmade Paper and Fibre Industry
4. Mineral Based Industry
5. Polymer and Chemical Based Industry
6. Rural Engineering and Bio-Technology Industry
7. Textile and Service Industry

- Silk-weaving industry falls under the 7th category

Fabrics originate from fibre. There are four types of fibres that can be used to make fabrics, viz. –

- a) Vegetable fibres like cotton, jute and others from banana, pineapple etc.
- b) Animal fibres like silk from various types of moth and wool from sheep, rabbit, camel, alpaca, lama, goat etc.
- c) Synthetic or artificial fibres like rayon, nylon etc.
- d) Mineral fibres from gold, silver etc.

Silk is a natural fibrous substance, obtained in the form of a long continuous filament from cocoons (pupal nests) spun by a large variety of moth-caterpillars, known as Silkworms. At the end of the fifth or last stage in the growth and development of these caterpillars silk is generally exuded from the silk glands present inside their body through the spinneret to spin the cocoons. Silk filaments from these cocoons are reeled out after proper treatment into raw silk. The journey from silk filament to finished silk product is very much complex. So it can be rightly said that silk made goods are agro-bio-industrial commodity.

Silk-moths are of two types:-

- a) Domesticated type
- b) Wild type

Fine-texture silk is the product of the domesticated type of mulberry-feeding silkworms belonging to the family *Bombycidae*, whereas silk of other varieties, *Eri*, *Muga*, *Tasar* or *Tussah* are the products of the larvae of wild or semi wild types of moths belonging to the family *Saturniidae*.

'Production of silk involves (1) the care of the domesticated silkworm (*Bombyx mori*) from the egg stage through completion of the cocoon and (2) the production of mulberry trees that provide leaves upon which the worms feed. The silkworm caterpillar builds its cocoon by producing and surrounding itself with a long, continuous fibre, or filament. Liquid secretions from two large glands within the insect emerge from the spinneret, a single exit tube in the head, hardening upon exposure to air and forming twin filaments composed of fibroin, a protein material. A second pair of glands secretes sericin, a gummy substance cementing the two filaments together. Because an emerging moth would break the cocoon filament, the larva is killed in the cocoon by steam or hot air at the chrysalis stage. Silk is a continuous filament within each cocoon, having a usable length of about 600 to 900 m (2,000 to 3,000 feet). It is freed by softening the binding sericin and then locating the filament end and unwinding, or reeling, the filaments from several cocoons at the same time, sometimes with a slight twist, forming a single strand. Several silk strands, each too thin for most uses, are twisted together to make thicker, stronger yarn in the process called throwing, producing various yarns differing according to the amount and direction of the twist imparted. Silk containing sericin is called raw silk. The gummy substance, affording protection during processing, is usually retained until the yarn or fabric stage and is removed by boiling the silk in soap and water, leaving it soft and lustrous, with weight reduced by as much as 30 percent. Spun silk is made from short lengths obtained from damaged cocoons or broken off during processing, twisted together to make yarn. The thickness of silk filament yarn is expressed in terms of denier, the number of grams of weight per 9,000 m (9,846 yards) of length. Silk is sometimes—in a process called weighting—treated with a finishing substance, such as metallic salts, to increase weight, add density, and improve draping quality. The de-gumming process leaves silk lustrous and semitransparent; with a smooth surface that does not readily retain soil. Silk has good strength, resisting breakage when subjected to weights of about 4 g (0.5 ounce) per denier. Wetting reduces strength by about 15–25 percent. A silk filament can be stretched about 20 percent beyond its original length before breaking but does not immediately resume its original length when stretched more than about 2 percent. Silk, lower in density than such fibres as cotton, wool, and rayon, is moisture-absorbent, retaining as much as a third of its weight in moisture without feeling damp, and has excellent dyeing properties. It is more heat-resistant than wool, decomposing at about 170° C (340° F). Silk loses strength over a long period of time without appropriate storage conditions and tends to decompose with extensive exposure to sunlight but is rarely attacked by mildew. It is not harmed by mild alkaline solutions and common dry-cleaning solvents. Friction imparts a static charge, especially in low humidity. The rustling sound, or scroop, associated with crisp silk fabrics is not a natural property of the fibre but is developed by processing treatments and it does not indicate quality, as is sometimes believed' (reference: Encyclopaedia Britannica volume IX).

Murshidabad has a rich cultural history in silk weaving. Present condition of this industry is not very satisfactory, yet it has a good prospect provided that it will get proper attention from the state government of West Bengal as well as the Central Govt. We selected the place for survey to judge the present conditions, problems and prospects of the silk weaving industry in Murshidabad.

1.1. Location of the Study Area

The district Murshidabad is the northern most district of the southern West Bengal or the Gangetic West Bengal. It is situated between 23 degree and 43.5 minute North and 24 degree 50 minute North latitude and between 87 degree 49 Minute East and 88 degree 46 minute East longitude. Area of the district is 5324 square kilometer. The district has 5 sub-divisions, 26 Development Blocks and 26 towns. In shape the district resembles an isosceles triangle with its apex pointing to the north-west. It is bounded by its whole eastern frontier by the Padma, the main distributary channel of the river Ganga, which separates it from the district Malda in West Bengal and the district Rajshahi in Bangladesh. On the south it is bounded by the district of Bardhaman and Nadia, the river Jalangi on the south-east forming the boundary between it and Nadia for a considerable distance. To the west lie the districts of Birbhum in West Bengal and Santhal Pargana in Jharkhand.

Mouza Chak Harharia is situated at the right bank of river Bhairab, a tributary of river Padma. The place is nearly 26 kilometer to the east from Baharampur, the main district town. The mouza is under the Panchayet: Chak Islampur, block: Raninagar I, Murshidabad. National Highway 34 runs through Rejinagar, Beldanga, Sargachhi, Baharampur, Palsanda, Umarpur and Farakka of Murshidabad connecting Kolkata with Siliguri. The district also has two State Highways and Morgram-Panagarh Super Highway. Murshidabad has railway connection also. Two important rail-routes are Sealdaha-Lalgola route and Barharoa-Azimgunj-Katoa route.

1.2. Objective of the Study

The main objective is to bring out the demographic features, the socioeconomic conditions and the over-all living status of the silk artisans of Chak Harharia. The present work also tried to realize the problems faced by the artisans and also tried to find out the possible remedies. At the same time we surveyed the physical characteristics of the area. In other words the investigator has tried to prepare a detail survey of the physical, cultural and social landscape of Mouza Chak Harharia.

1.3. Methodology

Academic task of the work has been taken up in several phases -----

- Pre- field work
- On- spot survey work
- Post- field analysis

1.3.1. Pre- Field Work

Before going to the spot, the investigator did some reference works in several institutions, libraries to get an over-all idea of the Physiography, Geology, Economy, Population and also the historical background of the area. Some persons were met, who already visited the place and shared their experiences. Some official letters were sent to the concerned authority of some offices. Then a rough plan was prepared about, how to proceed in the survey.

1.3.2. On- Spot Survey Work

A detail questionnaire was made to carry on survey among the silk-artisans to find out their desire, likings, disliking, need, wage structure, extent of individual capital investment, means of improvement of the living-status etc.

The investigator also interviewed and made extensive discussions with the private entrepreneurs, middlemen, and shop-keepers of the silk industry regarding the investment of capital, availability of silk-cocoons, colours, dyes and other necessary materials and also the overall marketing.

The present surveyor also discussed with the experts, associated with this sector.

The land-use survey of the mouza was completed with the help of the local people.

Data collected by the said processes are all primary in nature.

Block Land and Land-Revenue data and land-records were collected. Thus some secondary data were also collected.

The data collection method can be easily understood by the following chart:-

- DATA – A) PRIMARY DATA (from field source)
B) SECONDARY DATA (from documentary source)

DATA COLLECTION METHOD:-

- DESCRIPTIVE – 1) Questionnaire based narrative interview
 - i) Personal interview
 - ii) Group interview
- 2) Non-questionnaire based narrative interview
- 3) Focus based interview
- NON-DESCRIPTIVE – 1) Case history method
2) Records through photographs

1.3.3. Post- Field Analysis

After coming back from the study area, collected data were analyzed. In other words the investigator has tried to represent an analytical view of the geographical and socio-economic aspects of the study area on the basis of the primary and secondary data collected during the survey.

2. Demographical Features of the Inhabitants

The people surveyed are mainly the silk-rearers and silk weavers.

The number of the surveyed people is 601 (No. of male people: 296; No. of females: 301)

42% of the population consists of infant, adolescent and old people; therefore they depend on the rest of the population for their livelihood.

Literacy rate is high among the males: 83% (approximately)

Whereas literacy rate is slightly low among the females: 78% (approximately)

But only 4% of the females and only 9% of the males are graduates; educational status of 21% among the males and 27% among the females are at below primary level.

Considering the marital status it has been found that 53% of the male people are married, 44% are unmarried and 3% are widower.

Among the females, 52% are married, 41% are unmarried and 7% are widow.

In contrast with the natural trend both in India and West Bengal vital ratio is favourable to female. There are 1030 female per 1000 male in the study area.

Considering the health condition, it has been found that among the infant, 35% of the children suffer from cough and cold, 32% suffer from various kinds of fever, 20% among the children suffer from gastro-enteric diseases and 13% suffer from other casualties. Among the adults 23% suffer from various kinds of fever, 21% suffer from cough and cold, 26% suffer from gastro-enteric diseases, 9% suffer from cardiovascular diseases, 3% suffer from blood-sugar and 18% suffer from other casualties.

b) Socioeconomic characteristics of the inhabitants

2.1. Household Characteristics

No. of households surveyed is 127. Among them 82 are brick-built house, 35 are semi-brick house and 10 are clay or mud built house.

Among the 127 households, 93 are one-storied, 33 are two-storied and 1 is multi-storied.

Roof of 70 houses are made of concrete, for 52 houses roof-material is tiles, 4 houses have roof made of corrugated tin sheet and only 1 house is thatched with straw.

For 117 houses the walls are brick-built and 10 houses have earthen wall.

Floor is cemented in 104 houses and 23 houses have earthen floor.

2.2. Occupational Structure

Among the male workers 47% earn their livelihood by silk weaving, 3% are engaged in silk-rearing, 11% are labourer in silk industry, 12% are engaged in reeling and spinning of silk thread, 20% are traders for raw materials and finished products of silk industry, 7% are engaged in some other occupation.

2.3. Fuel Consumption

In the context of domestic fuel consumption it has been found that, for cooking purpose, 3% families use only kerosene, 14% families use L.P.G., 21% families use coal, 6% families use cow dung cakes, 16% use wood and the rest 40% families use several fuel items stated before. For lighting purpose, 17% of the families use kerosene, 59% of the families use electricity and 31% families use both kerosene and electricity.

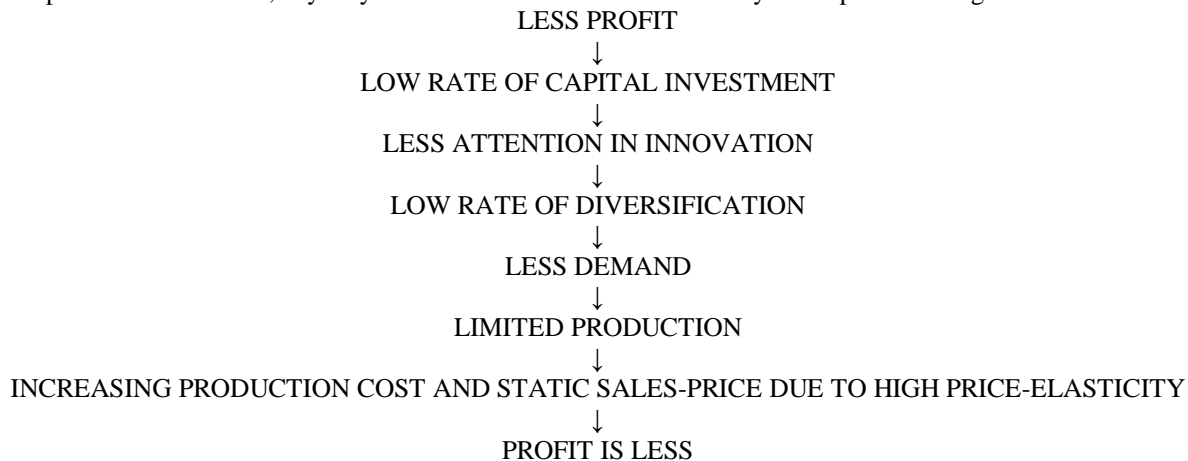
3. Problems and Remedies

3.1. Problems Faced by the Inhabitants

During the survey the investigator has tried to find out the liking and disliking, problems and possible remedies of the people associated with the silk industry. Followings are the summary of the findings of the present work:-

- 1) In the study area some artisans are associated with the N.G.O. s tied up with KVIC (Khadi & Village Industries Commission) and some are associated with purely private sector. Artisans associated with KVIC should be able to enjoy govt. ensured wage structure, other beneficial funds and other facilities as per the govt. policies. But due to operational incompetence of such organizations artisans do not get their wage in proper time, and also are deprived of other govt. facilities. Artisans accused the N.G.O. management for their dissatisfaction and complained to the investigator about their corruption. As wages remain unpaid, the artisans are bound to work in the private sector, but here the wages are uncertain and prone to the instability of the market.
- 2) Provision for quality-checks for silk by suitable laboratories and provision for giving feed-back to the producers is insufficient.
- 3) Proper Government's scheme to create awareness among the artisans, so that they can improve the marketability of their products and attract more customers both in domestic and international market is lacking. Efforts to make modern ready-to-wear silk garments to attract the customers from the young generation are also lacking. Experiments with raw materials, yarn, fabrics, higher processing methods such as dyeing, printing, tailoring, packaging, diversification of products as per customer's choice; are practically absent in the traditional silk-weaving industry.
- 4) Government's scheme like 'Artisan welfare fund' for the financial benefit of the artisans is very much insufficient with respect to the requirements. Suitable micro-finance, bank-loans, provisions for subsidies are also inadequate against requirement.
- 5) Skilled and expert human capital is an important resource in the economic development process. Planned development of human resource in accordance with the up-to-date technology is the need of the hour to achieve the desired level of progress. Proper training programme both in Govt. and non - Govt. sector for the artisans and the entrepreneurs are lacking in the silk-weaving industry.
- 6) Organization of domestic and international exhibitions and other publicity mechanisms are also inadequate in the silk-weaving industry.

If the aforesaid problems are studied, anybody can understand that the silk industry in the present village suffers from a vicious cycle.



If one studies the cycle, the person will find that the most important section of this cycle is the fall of demand and less profit.

The demand function shows the functional relationship between the quantity of demand for a commodity and all factors affecting the demand for the same. So one can state that,

$Q = f(P_1, Y, P_2, P_3, \dots, P_n, A, C)$ Where, Q denotes the quantity of Baluchari demanded in the market over a specific period of time, P_1 denotes the price of Baluchari in that period of time, Y is the income of the buyer, P_2, \dots, P_n are the prices of other substitute goods available in the market, A is the level of advertising, C denotes all other factors affecting demand.

Profits are a measure of the surplus of business income over expenses. It acts as a regulator of efficiency in business operations. Those who accomplish objectives with the least cost are able to make the maximum profits. A major portion of un-distributed profits is reinvested in business for expansion and diversification. One of the major sources of manufacturer's capital is profit. It is profit or expectation of profit which induce manufacturer to innovate. Profits are the lure that keeps the economy seeking new and more efficient ways of meeting real and potential human wants. A portion of business profit is taxed away. The revenue from profits is often used to finance many govt. programmes that lead to social improvement. (Mukherjee, 1996)

If the weaver wants surplus income, he has to produce and sell more products. There comes the importance of proper marketing and advertisement. Since small weaving firm is by and large a one man show, the owner is not in a position to bring a highly scientific and professional approach to bear upon his marketing problems. He tends to tackle his problem of marketing on an ad-hoc and amateurish basis. He has no idea of the market slot he can capture, the price at which he should sell his product, the structure of demand, the marketing channels, the market promotional functions and of market and product development. He tends to tackle his problem on the basis of hunches and intuitions which often result in failure. Thus, weaver fails to increase the consumer base. As a consequence come less income and less profit.

3.2. Possible Remedies

Following steps can be taken to improve the situation:

3.2.1. Government Initiatives

- 1) Govt. should allocate more funds for the benefit of the silk industry. At the same time government should properly monitor the channelization of those funds.
- 2) Khadi & Village Industries Commission (KVIC) inspection team should meet the common artisans and listen to their complaints and opinions.
- 3) Government should provide more micro-credit facilities for the artisans.
- 4) Govt. should make provision for quality-checks for silk by suitable laboratories and provision for giving feed-back to the producers.
- 5) Government should encourage more research and development work in this sector.
- 6) Government should provide proper training programme both in Govt. and non - Govt. sector for the artisans and the entrepreneurs in the silk-weaving industry.
- 7) Government should organize domestic and international exhibitions and encourage other publicity mechanisms for the further progress of the silk industry.

3.2.2. New Marketing Techniques

1) Online marketing through private agencies: A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Development Commissioner for Handlooms, Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India and M/s. Flipkart Internet Private Limited, Karnataka on 25th August 2014 in this regard.

As per the MoU, M/s. Flipkart Internet Private Limited will provide handloom weavers in India online marketing platform and customer acquisition to help them get remunerative prices for their products and scale up their business. It will also help the weavers in accounting, cataloging, inventory and invoice management, packaging transporting returns from buyers, brand buildings, assured automated payment, providing customer service etc. The Agency will charge 3-4% of the product value sold through online. This arrangement will facilitate the handloom weavers to earn more income by eliminating the middlemen and the handloom weavers can sell their product under their brand name and evolve as an entrepreneur selling his products directly to buyers across the country without stepping out of their workplace.

Weavers of Murshidabad can avail such type of opportunities.

2) Exemplary Initiatives of other state - MOU Between Paytm and State Govt. of Gujarat: Paytm, India's leading online marketplace, is set to help local Gujarat (Another state in India) handloom and handicraft artisans to sell their products via its ecommerce platform and grow their business globally.

Paytm will showcase Gujarat State Handloom and Handicrafts Development Corporation's (GSHHDC) exquisite handicrafts and handlooms of the state via its website, by establishing a brand store by the name of 'Garvi Gurjari' on the Paytm marketplace, according to a press release.

GSHHDC has also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Paytm for the same. The 'Garvi Gurjari' store, a well-known brand name in Handloom and Handicrafts, on the Paytm marketplace will sell handloom and handicraft products of Gujarat like patola, mashroo, tie and dye, tangaliya etc. and printworks like Warli, Matani Pacchedi, Rogan etc. among other handlooms and handicrafts made by artisans affiliated with GSHHDC.

State of West Bengal also has brand of handloom like TANTUJA, MANJUSHA, Resham Shilpi Samabay and Bangasree which have their own story to tell. The Tantuja brand, an undertaking of the West Bengal government, was on the brink of a shutdown owing to losses of Rs 14.6 crore until it was drastically revived. It actually made a profit of Rs 19.17 lakh in 2013.

The 'Tantushree' brand of the West Bengal Handloom and Powerloom Development Corporation has, however, been shut down after being declared a sick unit.

State of West Bengal can also tie up with similar organisation like Paytm through their own brand store. The objective will be to showcase the best of the state of West Bengal to the world. Such initiative can give a veritable boost to the smaller artisans and craftsmen of the country through the potential of ecommerce.

3) Individual's initiative to Internet marketing: Small weaving firm owned by master weaver or cooperatives can try their business through internet marketing by the following ways.

- a. Marketing through email
- b. Marketing through social media
- c. Marketing through Website
- d. Marketing through search engine

If village primary co-operatives society or weaver's groups can install a computer at their level and connect to retailers through Internet, for retailer this will reduce the cost because they can place the order directly to the weavers and delivery of products also can be made very fast. Weavers also can put their product on net for retailer's concerned. Now the technology has even made it possible to show your product live on the net so that all aspect of products can be seen and observed by the purchasers. The dynamism and continuous interaction with customer is primary requisite to make this model successful. This model gives an advantage over other by providing exclusive selling rights for specific new design to the original designer. But also put forward a challenge of attracting mass that does not have access of Internet.

4. Conclusion

Murshidabad was traditionally famous for silk-weaving in West Bengal, but in recent days Bishnupur has come forward to take the first position leaving Murshidabad far behind with the famous Baluchari, Swarnachari and Benarasi-Baluchari. The weavers of Murshidabad are both intelligent and genius in their art, though they live in a very plain simple manner. Unfortunately, they suffer from scarcity in every material requirement. From time-immemorial fine products from our weavers have earned wealth for our country. Today also our weaving artists are supplying precious clothes for our wardrobes. If we can nurture the art and artists properly their products will earn enough foreign exchanges to strengthen the economy of our state. So we should find out the proper way to keep this art cum industry alive and to make it strong further. Hope for the best.

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