Handloom Weavers and Lockdown in Sualkuchi Cluster of Assam

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After demonetisation in 2016, followed by imposition of the goods and services tax in the subsequent year, the covid-19 lockdown has turned out to be a final nail in the coffin for the handloom sector in Assam. It has special importance in the informal economy of Assam since it is next to agriculture in creating employment opportunities. An examination of the Sualkuchi weaving cluster in Assam shows the many challenges the weavers, most of them women, face.

In a televised 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 grasping 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 lives and livelihoods of lakhs of handloom weavers.

Importance of Handloom Sector
Despite its sagging fortunes, the handloom sector is still one of the largest unorganised activities in the country, which according to the Fourth All India Handloom Census 2019–20, employs over 35 lakh workers (Ministry of Textiles 2019). Approximately, two-thirds of them are female workers and most of them belong to socially backward categories. More than 60% earn less than ₹5,000 per month. One of the largest cottage industries in the country, the sector still produces approximately 17% of the total cloth production in the country (FICCI 2019). Low capital investment in the sector serves as a safety net for people who lack access to formal finance. Typically located in the rural town, the sector has high forward and backward linkages, serving as an important source of non-farm income for many households in the rural economy. Despite such significance in a vision of more balanced regional development, crisis that the sector finds itself in the wake of lockdown imposed in the country for the past three months has not received adequate attention in policy circles and academia. Several media reports, however, indicate that the already struggling sector is fighting a lonely battle of survival in all major clusters such as Assam’s Sualkuchi, Bihar’s Nalanda (Choudhury 2020), Uttar Pradesh’s Mau and Azamgarh (Kumar 2020) and Benaras (Week 2020), West Bengal’s Nadia district (Loiwal 2020) and Karnataka’s Gadag Betagiri area (Koppar 2020).

The present article examines the challenges of livelihood in the sector by analysing the case of the Sualkuchi weaving cluster,1 the largest handloom cluster in Assam. Ravaged by recurring floods which limit agricultural production to only one season in most parts of the state, agriculture sector is typically subsistence one, marked by low investment in both public and private sector (Goa nd). In such a context, handloom weaving plays an important role in supporting fragile livelihoods of the people of the state. It generates employment opportunities next to agriculture, engaging 11 lakh households in the state. Handloom workers in Assam account for approximately 40% of total handloom workers in the country (Ministry of Textiles 2019). Handloom sector in the state is popular worldwide for the mulberry silk and muga silk fabric, bulk of which is produced at the Sualkuchi weaving cluster. Located 35 km away from Guwahati city, Sualkuchi is a census town2 with a total population of 13,898 (Census 2011). Life and livelihood in the cluster is totally centred around handloom weaving, with almost every household engaged in handloom-related activities such as colouring yarn, spinning, weaving, developing designs in computers, punching design in cardboard cards, repairing dobby machine, retailing yarn, wholesaling fabric, etc. The article builds upon a rapid reconnaissance survey implemented during the second week of May 2020 with respondents who form a subsample of a larger sample interviewed in 2017 during the course of a detailed field survey conducted for one of the authors’ PhD project. The information collated from both the rounds of surveys is relied upon to get insights for the study.

Condition of Weavers
In Sualkuchi, handloom enterprises are a heterogeneous cohort. Owners of large enterprises, referred to as master weavers, operate, on average, of seven handlooms with hired weavers (Das 2019). Small

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enterprises own, on average, only two handlooms, which are operated with family labour. Such enterprises are called own account enterprises (OAEs). Large enterprises account for 37% of total handloom enterprises, with OAEs accounting for remaining 63% of total enterprises. In the recent times, the cluster has been struggling with number of challenges, most prominent being the scarcity of silk yarn and the sale of fake Assamese silk fabric with traditional design made in power looms from outside the state (Das 2019).

The conditions of OAEs have been deplorable, with a typical family worker reporting daily value addition of ₹131, which is much lower than national floor level minimum wage of ₹176 per day in 2017 as reported by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2017. The OAEs operate with very low working capital, which is largely spent to buy a small amount of yarn because of its high price. The small proceeds earned from the final products are then used to start another round of production. They often run out of cash that pushes them to resort to informal sources of credit such as moneylenders, master weavers and microfinance institutions for loans to buy yarn. Unsurprisingly, as much as 10% of such households running OAEs report daily per capita consumption expenditure below urban poverty line of ₹54 and another 10% record per capita consumption expenditure that is marginally higher than the poverty line (Das 2019). However, there are many others among them who remain vulnerable throughout the year.

Master weavers operate their enterprises with hired weavers. More than 60% of hired weavers are migrants, who mostly belong to disadvantaged social categories. Female weavers constitute more than 80% of total migrant weavers. Approximately, one-third of migrant weavers belong to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category—mainly Bodos and Rabha communities from tribal dominated areas of Assam. Another one-fourth of migrant weavers belong to the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category such as Koch-Rajbongshi. Debt-induced tied contracts are a pervasive feature of such labour relations. Employers give advance payments to hired weavers as a mechanism to bind them. The latter have to clear debt advances before they take up another employment opportunity.

These weavers work and live in precarious conditions. On an average, five to 10 weavers work together in a common shed provided by the master weaver. The sheds are usually very congested and the weavers are not even allowed to use a fan as it spoils the yarn. Migrant weavers stay in rented rooms, and share common toilets. Because of their migrant status, they do not have access to government programmes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and ration cards, which deprive them of food rations and other basic minimum entitlements available to the local people.

COVID-19 Lockdown Scenario

The national lockdown imposed from 24 March 2020 could have not been at a worse time for the weavers. Their looms fell silent just two weeks ahead of Rongali or Bohag Bihu, the Assamese New Year which marks the arrival of spring. The period prior to or during the month of Bohag Bihu constitutes the peak season for the silk industry. Though weddings provide another source of income, they happen intermittently. The bulk of the transactions, however, happen around Bohag Bihu that sustain an enterprise throughout the year. The lockdown led to fabric worth ₹200 crore produced in the cluster remaining unsold in the wholesale market in Guwahati alone (Akholiyan Protidin 2020). It is not just the output supply that was affected due to the lockdown. The flow of raw silk also got disrupted as the sector sources mulberry silk from Karnataka and tasar silk from China to maintain its production cycle. Disruptions in transportation are likely to result in sharp spike in the prices of yarn for coming months, dealing another blow to the sector (Akholiyan Protidin 2020).

Though the lockdown has affected all stakeholders in the handloom sector, the effect has been particularly severe on the OAEs and hired weavers, especially the migrants among them. Without adequate access to a safety net and formal financial institutions, most of the owners of OAEs are now desperate to sell their leftover products at lower prices to get minimum cash to buy their daily necessities. Such precarious conditions make them vulnerable to being exploited by the middlemen, who have deeper pockets to take advantage of arbitrage. More than 50% of OAEs do not have their own capital to run their enterprises. They operate in a subcontracting system under which they get raw materials, looms, yarn from master weavers and deliver silk fabrics to them. They are paid on piece-rate basis. In the wake of ongoing uncertainties master weavers discontinued their orders, which left these weavers, most of them women, without any work and payment.

Maintaining social distancing is a myth for the migrant weavers because of their precarious working and living conditions, which are mostly congested. They are not familiar with the life of idleness that is available to them now, and it has come at a heavy price. Most of them have now run out of cash due to lack of work assigned by master weavers. They are mostly relying on credit from master weavers or other informal sources, which has only increased the level of indebtedness. Without ration cards and other entitlements that are available to local people, many of these migrant weavers are now making do with one meal a day. Bereft of work and cash, many of them are staring at starvation. Fifty-five-year-old Sontara says,

This lockdown has shown me the worst days of my life. I want to go back to my village and will work in the field although it remains under water for more than six months in a year. But even after the lockdown gets over, I can’t go back without settling the debt.

Policy Flip-flops

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 ₹604 crore in 2017–18 to ₹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). In 2005, the Mahatma
Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) mandated all states and union territories to create the Artisan Welfare Fund (AWF) to provide a safety net for the weavers. However, lack of awareness among the weavers, who are mostly preoccupied with stringent work schedules, and the restrictive clauses of the AWF mean that a few handloom weavers are members of the AWF. The decision taken by KVIC to release ₹1,000 per month to each artisan from the AWF in the wake of COVID-19 has bypassed most weavers in the sector (Choudhury 2020). To mitigate the crisis in the sector, the state government, in consultation with the central government, should bring all weavers under AWF to give immediate relief to the sector.

The challenges facing the sector in the wake of COVID-19 are unique. The demand for niche and expensive handloom products such as mulberry silk and muga fabric, which are not essential commodities, may take a longer time to recover, given the uncertainties due to a slump in overall economic activities. Further, the market for high-end fashion product that is exported to the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, Germany and Spain, may be disrupted for a longer duration. Till then, both central and state governments, taking a cue from the success of large-scale production of health PPE and masks, must encourage use of locally made handloom products. Further, measures should be taken by the government to ensure procurement of health PPE and masks at the local level to give weavers some minimum volume of business to ensure their sustenance. Moreover, the government should take necessary steps on priority basis to help master weavers in improving infrastructure of work-sheds to maintain social distancing.

Policy Suggestions

Behind the façade of expensive silk and intricate design, there exist in the state thousands of weavers, who form the most vulnerable segment of the handloom fabric value chain. In the wake of COVID-19, the sector is staring at an existential crisis now, which has been worsened by the absence of safety net for the weavers. It is very important that the state steps in with a well-functioning minimum safety net catering to their basic needs. The government statutory body immediately implement the portability of ration cards introduced in June 2020 to provide some relief to migrant weavers.

NOTES

1 A cluster is “a socio-territorial entity which is characterised by the active presence of both a community of people and a population of firms in one naturally and historically bounded area” (Becattini 1992: 28).

2 In India, a census town is one which is not statutorily notified and administered as a town, but nevertheless whose population has attained urban characteristics. Census towns are considered as urban areas by the Census of India (2011).

REFERENCES


