

Living Conditions of Weavers: A case study of Varanasi

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Abstract – The study focus upon the housing conditions of weavers in Varanasi. People of this community are facing acute poverty, making it barely possible to make their both end meet in a day to day life. With increasing competition in the field, availability of cheaper, power-loom alternatives have hit the demand and manufacturing process of saree pushing the workers into much worse conditions. Weavers are living a pitiful life do not wish to pass on this art to their generations to come, hence the future of this tradition is at stake. The paper brings into limelight the poor condition of women and children involved in this art giving a picture of declining economy and various health issues, the torch-bearers of this age old traditions are bearing in this modern world.

The data for the study have been collected through personal interviews, case study and focused group discussion.

Key Words: Poverty, Slum, Weavers, Housing Condition, Living Condition.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain once wrote, "Benaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together", a city famous for its Ghats and sarees has some harsh reality to face. The 800 year old traditional art of weaving is on the verge of extinction and the people involved are living a pathetic life. Their traditional houses are turning to ruins since weavers have no money to invest on their housing conditions. As a basic need of shelter, weavers do have a roof over their head but increasing family sizes generations after generations have led to a situation where they can neither move out of the existing living situation due lack of proper income nor is it easy to live in the existing housing conditions.

Various government interventions like BSUP (Basic Services for Urban Poor), (RAY) Rajive Avas Yojna and Kashi Ram Shehri Garib Avas were implemented but could not prove to be a holistic solution to their housing needs. This study therefore focuses on the housing situation of the weavers living in different slum pockets of the city namely Bajardiha, Badi Gabi and Bunkar Colony, where occupation of the people living is dependent on this traditional art.

According to Handloom Census 2009-10 (as updated on June, 2017), there are 31,378 handlooms and 95,439 handloom weavers. However, there is a significant decline of 16% from 1995-96 to 2009-10 which is because of major shift of people from this sector to other jobs and to power looms. As mentioned by Dr. Archana and Shruti Nagvanshi there are

about 5,00,000 weavers in the district through unofficial source.

Weaving is a fine craft and a home based enterprise in Varanasi district with mostly Muslim's and dalit's employed in this sector generation after generation, though remaining poor and marginalized. Primarily weavers can be categorized in two types – marginalized individual weavers and profit making Gaddidars (traders) or Grihasthas (master weavers). Individual weavers are often exploited by Gaddidars, who after working on their material, design and loom depend on Gaddidars for marketing their finished material, hence taking control of their production and weavers profit share. This exploitation by Gaddidars continues to happen because of lack of proper educations among the weaver community remaining ignorant about the schemes and aids available for them by government.

2. METHODOLOGY

Data collection and analysis was done at three levels City level, Settlement level and Household unit level. Information was collected through interviews at settlement level, from officials of DUDA (District Urban Development Agency), Varanasi Nagar Nigam, Varanasi Development Authority, professors of BHU, trader, doctor in order to understand forward & backward linkages related to this field, identify stakeholders, problem faced by weavers, issues with government policies, socio-economic & housing characteristics in the city.

At Settlement level visual observations were made about the building condition, property use, floor utilization, built form characteristics and also sampling was used to collect data through prepared questionnaires. During the survey, the layout of weavers dominated area was mapped & sketches were prepared showing the land use plan and physical characteristics of the settlement. With the help of local peoples, different typologies were identified within the settlement for the detail study at unit level.

3. CASE STUDIES CONDUCTED

The criteria for selection of case studies was made such that areas with dominant weaver population could be analyzed, area where government interventions have been implemented such as Badi Gabi where weavers have redeveloped their houses under centrally sponsored scheme of RAY. The area selected has a sizeable number of this home Based industry and major environment and health issues among its residents.

The selected slum or maleen Basti are more than 80 to 100 years old with families being 6- 8 generation in the occupation. Most of the family are the last generation who are in this business and do not wish to bring their future generation into this craft because of deteriorating income and high expenses. Most of the houses in these bastis are hereditary; it houses some of the most affluent families of Gaddidars, adjacent to poor weaver's house which could be well identified through the materials used in constructions used by two social strata of the society, as shown below where one on left with lime finish is a weavers house while well embellished with stucco work of stones are the houses of Gaddidars of the settlement.



Figure 1: Weaver and Merchants house conditions

Land is predominantly residential; with Gaddidars conducting their business from home itself as home based enterprises. Open spaces form important form of this community.

3.1 Housing Conditions

The housing conditions are marked with lack of natural light and ventilation inadequate power supply hampers the work of weavers. The families have multiple division of property not just at plot level but at floor level with narrow lane in front of such G+3 -G+4 houses of 8 - 12 household sizes there are stress on resources available. Minimum area for the infrastructure required for layout at residential neighborhood level is not defined.

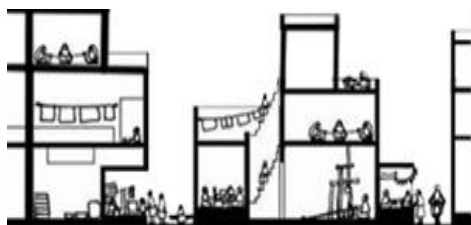


Figure 2: Street Layout conditions in weaver colonies

With time weavers have shifted from handlooms to power-looms, power-looms also have their own set of problem - electricity connection is not easily available. Moreover, chronic power shortage cripples the saree production Nearly ninety percent of weavers are unable to pay their electricity bills, which amount to 20 thousand to two lakh rupees. Many

families have sold their houses for payment of electricity bills and have gone to the other localities. Ironically, ten percent of weavers having power-looms do not have enough money to get a connection - they are thus stealing electricity. A typical house of a weaver would have its ground floor used for weaving along with a storage room used for sleeping at night by men of the house. The loom is partially embedded into the ground, and hence one needs to make a pit for weaver to be able to keep their legs for working.

A typical plan and section of weaver's housing can be shown as below:



Figure 3: Typical Plan and Section of a weaver's house



Figure 4: Housing Conditions of weavers

3.2 Changes in Economic Pattern

According to an article published in Times of India, in 2013 more than 175 weavers had committed suicide from 2002 to 2013 due to debt, poverty, unable to meet their daily needs while majority of skilled artisans have parted away from their traditional livelihood and resorted to occupation's such as making incense sticks, pulling rickshaw's, women working as domestic help in their neighborhood societies of middle class. About 70 percent weavers are living in acute poverty under financially strained conditions, do not have proper education such that even being involved in the profession of weaving they fail to have ownership of their own loom and have to depend on Gaddidars for their grace to provide looms on contractual or rental bases, extracting heavy amounts or labor to pay for the looms. This exploitation continues to happen with the weavers because of lack of any strong and effective workers union or organization which can work together to solve such issues.

In many cases, skilled artisans have left weaving and resort to pulling rickshaws, making incense sticks, as agriculture labors, and women are into domestic labor serving in their neighborhood.

3.3 Condition of Women and Children in the settlement

Weavers are classified as males of the community, while women could never gain that status even though they continue to be informally employed in this craft of saree making, contributing in spin and cut thread works they are never recognized as actual workers even though they work for 7 to 8 hours a day. While an average male weaver earns 500 to 2000 per saree they work as depending on the work they carry out, a female employed in the same field earns one third of their male counterparts, working usually on finishing works of weaving. Not just this, since women are not considered weavers they are therefore deprived of various health scheme benefits. Women health therefore suffers a lot, they are often underweight, have weak eyesight's, anemic, and often keeping their health problems to themselves either due to financial problems or due to social stigma.

Among these marginalized lots, children of the weaving community are perhaps the worst affected. They lose out their childhood amidst of no parental guidance or proper learning environment; they remain unattended most of the time. Young lads are often seen loitering around, eating gutkha, drugs and into anti-social, criminal groups. At a very young age they are denied of their right to health (being mostly malnourished), education and other opportunities for development.

Children are often employed for pattern making, various other small jobs and are made to sit on looms so as to speed up their saree-production. They are also sold and bought for meager amount or loan extended to their parents. A bonded person however can move from one owner to another provided the new owner pays off the outstanding debt to the first owner.

3.4 Common Health Issues due to living condition

Weavers and their families suffer from a range of health issues. They suffer from backache and poor eyesight as they work in dark dingy places sitting continuously for eight to nine hours. As most of the looms are situated in a house where there is no adequate light and ventilation, it results in weavers being afflicted by weak eyesight and serious respiratory ailments, shortness of breath, cough and wheezing due to allergic reaction to dust and fungi in cotton, flax and hemp fibres. Also, the loom is partially embedded into the ground, and one needs to make a pit for weaver to be able to keep his legs. In the pit the temperature is different resulting in numbness of lower portion of the body. The Handlooms today are the graves of living people.

3.5 Role of Government Policies

The government established co-operative institutions in order to improve condition of workers involved in this sector. The objective was to develop forward (marketing of

sarees) and backward (providing raw silk) linkages to ameliorate conditions of weavers. However, being plagued with mismanagement and corruption, cooperatives have failed in fulfilling their objectives. Benefits of it have not reached to poor weavers. Gaddidar's have managed to use co-operatives institutions for their business, marginalizing the poor weavers. They get workers cards issued from the silk cooperatives, and obtain silk raw material from the cooperatives as workers. In cooperatives, members have thrift fund and insurance facilities. Master weavers, with dummy membership, try to seize the benefits. Apparently, whole structure of cooperatives facilitates bigger weavers to take advantage of the subsidy offered.

Seemingly, housing policies at Centre or at State level have never prioritized weaver's community as their focus area because being a small community they do not form a vote bank for any political parties. Under RAY three slums were identified for in-situ up gradation in 2009, but nothing has been implemented on ground yet. And old survey data of 2009 will be used for its implementation even though the situation has changed shall result in its failure. Also there was no integration of slum MIS with GIS though it was required as per the guidelines of RAY 2013-22. Under RAY a common DU layout for all have been implemented irrespective to the needs of weavers to carry on with their home based enterprises.

Some of the individual houses that could be upgraded were the one who had their property paper who were lesser in numbers and a common plan as shown below was implemented for all:

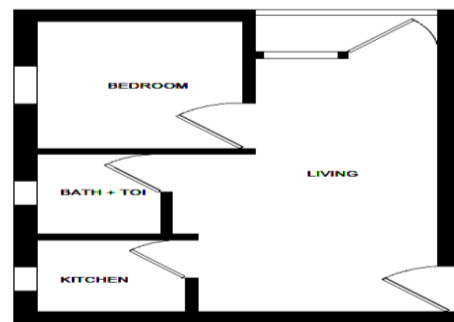


Figure 5: Plan of House constructed under RAY

During the implementation of the scheme no transit accommodation provided to people. The beneficiaries therefore accommodated themselves in their relatives or neighbor's places till the possession were actually given. It was also difficult to have the possession of the house even months after completion of construction the dwelling unit, the house was locked and the owner was deprived of the possession, till the inauguration by government officials.



Figure 6: House constructed under RAY and transit accommodation of the beneficiary

Further, even if a weaver try to setup their own handloom only small bank loan of ten thousand to fifteen thousand is available, even after that the loans available are allegedly used by functionaries of cooperatives.

Despite high awareness levels, there is apparent apathy to avail services and schemes of the government among weavers.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the suggestions in order to improve the living conditions of the weavers of Varanasi at a housing level and at a business level that could be implemented are as follows:

- Subdivision of plots should be stopped (25 sqm is the minimum living area specified in national housing code), in order to stop development of small size plots.
- Plot area less than 60sqm of area should not be permitted for mix use i.e residential and weaving activity. Open courtyard of minimum 15sqm (3m wide), should be ensured if setbacks are left during construction.
- Certain innovative tools such as TP Schemes should be implemented for redevelopment of weaver's community in order to provide better infrastructure and road widening.
- Use of modern techniques of GIS could be used to mark each plots and ownerships to those living for more than 20 years so as to provide them with property documents which could be helpful in getting benefits of different national and state policies from time to time. As well as updating of land records through this.
- Provision of better basic infrastructure, such as electricity, water supply, sanitation should be done.
- Organization's such as trade unions, cooperatives societies should be established in order to have a labor union who could focus on the needs of weavers and encourage the revival of the handloom industry.

- Local and national levels exhibitions can be organized in order to boost the demand of finished product that in Varanasi Sarees in the modern fashion market.
- In order to encourage weavers and inculcate a sense of pride for their work efforts like workshops organized by the weavers also to have shops where weavers get to sell their products directly to the customers or establishing of local museum could be done.
- Education for weavers with the help of NGO's or night schools in order to make them aware of their rights.
- Revision of health policies for the weavers and their families should be done, recognizing it as a home based enterprise.
- Easy availability of raw materials for the individual weavers should be made available.
- Setting up of cooperative bank or Societies in order to make capital accessible to weavers at low interest rates, thus freeing them from clutches of moneylenders and middlemen.

This home based enterprise is under grave crises and is indeed fighting of its existence. Hence this article is an attempt to urge readers to inspect the ground reality of people involved in this exquisite traditional art form and help them in leading a better and a healthy life by doing their bit. And this may, hopefully, provide the weavers a healthy living and housing conditions, respect and a rightful place in the society.

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BIOGRAPHIES



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