

Census weaves rich handloom data

Rajesh Shukla, February 7, 2011

Despite a decline in weaver numbers from 35 lakh in the second census to 29 lakh in the third, there is a sharper focus: proportion of full-time weavers has risen from 44.3% to 63.5%



With a long tradition of excellence in its craftsmanship, Indian handloom is said to have dated back to the ancient ages. August 15, 1947, marked a turning point for the country's handloom weavers. Mahatma Gandhi's use of the charkha, or the spinning wheel, as a symbol of national regeneration and the subsequent focus on the handloom weavers during the freedom movement was largely responsible for the breakthrough.

Later, it was a fragile, bespectacled man in a dhoti, called 'half-naked fakir' by Churchill, who jumpstarted the revival of village handloom and handicrafts. Gandhi's vision has outlasted the grandeur of Five-Year Plans and industrialisation drives in terms of employment-generation capabilities.

In a world increasingly inclined to mechanisation and standardisation, the handloom sector provides a refreshing change of unique richness of manual skill. The sector represents the country's traditional art form that has been patronised and promoted since time immemorial.

State intervention in the form of financial assistance as well as development and welfare schemes have helped it withstand the pressures and competition as a result of economic and technological developments and advancements.

More recently, in December 2010, NCAER completed the Third National Census of Handloom Units and Allied Activity Workers for Development Commissioner (Handlooms), ministry of textiles, aimed to update the database for the handloom sector in recognition of the need to understand the differential impact of policies by planners and policymakers. Major highlights of the study are:

Handloom activity is majorly a rural phenomenon: 87% of total household units (27.83 lakh) are located in rural areas.

Nearly 61% handloom worker households reside in the north-east and are into domestic production. Majority (82%) are weaver households, only 13% households exclusively engaged in allied activities.

But a little over half of the total household units are engaged exclusively in commercial activities.

Nearly 47% of handloom worker households are BPL and rest are non-BPL.

The majority of the household looms in India are Frame Looms (59%), followed by Pit Looms (25%). While over 78% of looms in the north-eastern states are Frame Looms, others regions are dominated by Pit Looms.

Of the total handloom workforce, 29 lakh are weavers and they constitute 76% of the adult workforce. On the other hand, 9.38 lakh are allied workers, constituting 24% of the adult workforce.

Nearly 75% of total workforce engaged in handloom activities is female.

A majority (60%) of adult handloom workforce has attained little or no schooling.

Nearly 67% weavers are engaged full-time.

There are definitional differences between the second and the third handloom censuses. While the second census covered only weaver households and enumerated all workers in these households, the third covered households of handloom weavers, allied handloom workers, as well as households having idle looms.

Thus, a comparison needs to be made of similar elements. There were 25.25 lakh weaver households as per the second census, and this has been found to decline to 22.68 lakh weaver households as per the third census. There is also a decline in the weaver numbers: from 34.71 lakh to 29.09 lakh.

Despite a decline in the overall numbers, it is seen that there is a sharper focus in the activity amongst those continuing the activity, as evidenced by an increase in the proportion of full-time weavers from 44.3% in the second census to 63.5% in the third census, a corresponding increase in the average person-days worked in each weaver household — from 197 days to 234 days — and an increase in the annual household income — from . 17,496 as per the second census to . 41,068 as per the third census.

The income from the handloom sector activity is relevant for assessment only in cases where the worker undertakes commercial production, or a mix of domestic and commercial production. About 15 lakh handloom households (53%) undertake handloom work for commercial purposes only, while another 4.38 lakh households (16%) undertake a mix of domestic and commercial production.

In the northeastern states, it was found that the share of handloom income to total household income is just 19% across all handloom households, while it is 58% for households in the states of other regions where most households work solely for commercial purpose.

The current census was an e-census, i.e., paperless exercise, since entire exercise was undertaken using personal digital assistant mobile technology. Not only does it provide a database of weavers and allied workers and handlooms throughout the country, it also has a photo-linked database of all eligible handloom weavers and allied workers in the handloom sector.

As in the case of every census, there are some limitations in the survey. Third census enumeration had been conducted primarily in the list of locations provided by the state government, although additional concentrations have been covered as well using local knowledge. Additionally, all information collected from eligible households was based on their self-declaration, and it was only possible to physically verify the information on the looms.

The report of the Third Handloom Census (2009-10) has been published on the eve of the formulation of the 12th Five-Year Plan, and we believe that the findings of the census will facilitate in formulating a more effective policy and business decisions for the development of the sector and the welfare of weavers and allied workers.