

HANDLOOMS FOR LIVELIHOOD IN NORTH-EASTERN REGION : PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the problems and scope of handloom sector in north-eastern region of India for economic upliftment of the people. In NE region, women dominate the weaving occupation but in other States like Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, West Bengal, Haryana and Karnataka, men play a major role in weaving while women are involved in pre-weaving. The women weavers of NE region perform multiple roles of being handloom producers and trading of handloom products. As there are no cloth mills, or large number of powerlooms in the region, weavers put their hard labour by working manually. In the process of earning income, they preserve our culture and heritage by laboriously producing traditional clothes. The integral role of women in handlooms in industrially backward States of NE region is worth studying. Handlooms being a traditional occupation, women find it convenient and safe to work. The region has contributed an important share in handloom sector in terms of number of employed or owning of looms. When the number of handloom weaver households decline in India, the region recorded increase of number of weaver households from first (14.6 lakh) to the third (15.1 lakh) census. But the sector is not progressing as expected. Income from handlooms and its contribution in the household economy is less as compared to other States. It is largely dominated by domestic production and part time weaving. Various issues like social and cultural aspects, demographic profile, production, employment, market structure, technology and skill are analysed for understanding the present condition of handlooms. The factors contributing in promoting handloom sector are identified so that mobilisation can be done for promoting it as a livelihood activity.

Introduction

The handloom sector has a long tradition of excellent craftsmanship in India. It is also the country's second largest employment generation sector next to agriculture. The weaving community consisted of a wide range of ethnic groups reflecting their caste and community identity in the weaving pattern, style

and motif. It has been a traditional occupation for women who produce clothes for the family members. It is also a source of livelihood, especially in industrially backward States of north-eastern region (NE region) of India for a large section of rural women. Welfare schemes, financial assistance and health insurance of weavers are some of the interventions for

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development of handlooms taken up by the government. The result of such interventions help the NE region occupy a remarkable place in the country in terms of number of handloom workers, number of handloom households and looms, yet the average working days are less as compared to other States. Owing to large domination of part-time weavers, the economic contribution from the weaving activity cannot be derived fully. Having said this, the region has tremendous potential in promoting handloom sector as a trademark of the ethnicity. There is no social stigma of a woman working as a weaver because culture demands that women know this occupation. In this mechanised and globalised market, the handloom sector is providing a refreshing change in unique manual skill and diversity. It can play a positive role for providing livelihood to a large section of women in NE region.

Objective : The objective of this paper is to examine the profile of handloom sector and its social relevance in the NE region from the following perspectives :

1. Social significance and potential of handlooms as a livelihood activity
2. Demographic and social profile of handloom weavers
3. Impediments in the growth of the handloom sector in NE region
4. To evolve a sustainable mechanism for promotion of handloom as a source of livelihood.

Methodology

As per the Handloom census 2010, out of 27.8 lakh handloom worker households in India, nearly 61 per cent belonged to NE region which comprises States like Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. In terms of total workforce in handlooms, there are around 43.3 lakh weavers in India out of whom 21.6 lakh belong to NE region. It contributed half of the total workforce

in handloom sector. The region is selected for a detailed analysis of the problems and potential of handloom production as livelihood of the weavers. The Handloom Census data of 2010 are presented to analyse the demographic, employment, income and organisation set-up of handloom sectors in NE region and compare these components with other States or national average. Literature related to the issue are reviewed to provide a comprehensive view of the problems of handloom production and suggestions are made for making it a valuable option for livelihood promotion.

Social Significance of Handlooms

In primitive society, when men were hunters and warriors, women were concerned with food gathering and sustaining agriculture. Women then started producing several crafts like pot making, leather making, house building and the technique of cordage weaving. Cordage weaving was the beginning of whole chain of great textile industry. Thus, women should be credited for developing the physics of spinning and the mechanism of loom (Reed 1970). Now it has become a part of the decentralised sector consisting of cloth production by family units. In the early seventies, the report on handloom sector of the high-powered committee under the chairperson of Mira Seth (Government of India 1974) described handlooms as 'a work of art craft as well as industry' representing 'one of the most aesthetic aspects of existence'. This perhaps still holds true even now. Despite fulfilling the basic clothing needs at home, or for ceremonial occasion or as a decorative piece, the hand-woven textile played a significant role in making our social and cultural identity, rituals and habitat. Among the tribal society of Tripura no right or ritual is sanctioned unless it is preceded by a worship of *Riha*, the hand-woven breast cover of the family elders. In Assam, the hand-woven cotton *Ghomsa* which symbolises respect and honour is used to welcome the guest on any occasion. It is also presented by the bride and bridegroom to the elders during the time of

marriage for showing respect and seeking blessings from them. The design used in the cloth also had a close relation with the rituals and habitat of the particular group. Thus, the circular look - like motif (*Khoi Mayek*) design in *Meitei Phanek*¹ was derived from *Lairen Mathek* (movement of a python), a ritual performance during the time of *Umanglai Haraoba*². The Meiteis also popularly used the fish design, which was either in a horizontal or head downward position to make the impression of living in water. This symbolises happiness and prosperous life of the Meities (Bahadur 1997).

Handloom sector is an integral part of the marriage institution in NE region. Weaving was one of the criteria for selection of mate. Among some tribes of Manipur, marriages were solemnised only with persons living in those villages who had weaving skills. Girls who master the weaving were taken for a preference as brides (Gailangam 1997). Besides this, among the tribes, girls expressed their love and care for their beloved by presenting weaving products, the more intricate the design, the more love it symbolises (Paoki 1988). It was a custom among Meities girls to gather in the house of a senior woman and learn the work of spinning and other works related to pre-weaving activity. This custom is known as *Sinnaibham kaba*³ (Bahadur 1997). While marriageable girls learn the art of weaving, prospective grooms interact and mingle with them during *Sinnaibham kaba* which was also socially allowed (Jhalajit 1999). During marriage, important parental gifts for women consisted of weaving tools and looms. These are given so that she can start an economic activity by weaving handloom products. Among tribes, gifts to be exchanged during marriage are woven by women members of the family.

Though all the tribes in NE region produce handloom products, some of them are known for their expertise. Among 20 tribes and 100 sub-tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, the Apatanis are famous for weaving. According to one of the legends, the art of weaving was learnt

in a dream from the goddess, Podi Barbi. Weaving is a full time job for the women particularly, Garo women in Meghalaya. Assamese of Sualkuchi village in Assam are known for its tradition of weaving silk products. Any change in the handloom sector which has a social relevance brings conflict in the society. In 2013, the Sualkuchi witnessed major incidents of violence when local weavers burnt down stocks of textile products imported from other parts of India which were sold in the name of Assam silk. After the incident, steps were taken up by the Government to ban illegal sale of imported silk in the name of Assam silk and set up enforcement squads across the State to keep an eye on any violation of Handloom (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act, 1985. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the modernisation of textile industry, which led to the production of both foreign and domestic mill-made cloth, posed a great threat to the handlooms. They had to face the danger of extinction on account of discrimination and exploitative policies adopted by the British rulers. Therefore, the Father of the Nation symbolised hand spun to self-respect. It played a significant role in Indian war of Independence. After Independence, handloom sector became the symbol of all decentralised industries and caught a great deal of attention from the government. Later on, under the Right of Articles for Production Act, 1985, 22 articles were exclusively reserved for production in handlooms and set up unions or cooperative structures (Baud 1991).

Demographic and Social Profile of Handloom

To provide database, inputs for planning purposes and policy measures related to the handlooms, the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India published Handloom census in 1988, 1995 and 2010. In the third census, identity cards were issued to the genuine weavers so that the welfare schemes will be directly targeted to the beneficiaries without hassle. The Handloom census shows increase of number of

handloom worker households which means households of both weaver and allied activities from 25 lakh in 1995 to 27.8 lakh in 2010. Nearly 61 per cent of these handloom worker households are from the NE region (see Table 1). There is also an increase of full time weavers from 44.3 per cent in 1995 to 63.5 per cent in 2010. But considering only the weaver households in India, it recorded a declining trend from the first (29.9 lakh), to second (25.3 lakh) and the third (22.6 lakh) handloom census. In contrast to the national trend, the sector is gaining momentum in NE region with an increase of weaver households from first (14.6 lakh) to the third (15.1 lakh) census. Out of a total of 23.7 lakh looms in the country, the NE region has 15.5 lakh. The looms which are generally used in the region like loin, pit and frame looms are operated manually. Half of the total workforce in handloom belongs to NE region. Majority of them belonged to adult workers (see Table 2). They are more educated when compared with other States of India. In regard to possession of looms, there are variations in the proportion of households having loom in NE region when compared to other States of India. Out of the total handloom households, 80.2 per cent in NE have looms while in other States of India it was only 45.7 per cent. This indicates that majority in NE region work as independent weavers and less hired by others. They purchase raw materials, make clothes and sell the finished products in the market. Their earnings depend upon market condition, productivity and skill.

There is difference in the composition of social groups of handloom workers in NE region and other States. In NE region, scheduled tribes (36 per cent) and other backward castes (33 per cent) have similar proportions of almost a third of the total weaver households followed by other category (24 per cent), while scheduled caste households (7 per cent) are very less in number. Whereas in India, almost half belonged to other backward castes (45.2 per cent),

scheduled tribes constitute only 18.1 per cent and other category 26 per cent. Thus, scheduled tribes in NE region unlike the other tribes in India involve in weaving and produce wide range of ethnic clothes. Weaving is a traditional occupation for a broad range of social groups in NE region (see Table 3).

In States like West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, weaving had never been identified with women except for certain specific operations. Generally women did the preparatory work while men did the main weaving job; hence all the credit for weaving went to men (Parikh et al. 1991; Baud 1991). The study of women workers in Handloom and Khadi industry (Shram Bureau 1995) revealed that almost all women were engaged in spinning and winding. The reason being that such pre-weaving activities were available to them at their doorsteps, so they could engage both in household activities and income earning works. In the case of NE region, 99 per cent of the handloom weavers are women (Handloom Census 2010). A study of weavers in Manipur revealed that women choose weaving as their occupation because it is easy to earn money, staying at home, being a traditional occupation no formal training required. They could combine the dual roles of weaving and household chores. Thus, the traditional attitude that women are responsible for domestic chores and child caring affected their choice of occupation. Moreover, being confined to home and economic independence gave the woman concerned, a higher socio-economic status rather than working outside the house like construction worker, vendor or agricultural worker (Devi 2012). They learnt weaving from their mothers or female relatives and need not to enrol in formal institute. Children between the age of 9 and 10 years are engaged in weaving after their school hours. Sometimes they dropped out from school because their mother or grandmother was expecting agents very soon with orders and the orders had to be

Table1: State-wise Distribution of Handloom Worker Households

State	Total handloom worker households ('000)	Per cent distribution	Total handloom weaver households ('000)	Per cent distribution
Arunachal Pradesh	30	1.09	23	1.53
Assam	1,241	44.58	1096	72.7
Manipur	179	6.43	175	11.67
Meghalaya	11	0.41	10	0.71
Mizoram	39	1.42	38	2.58
Nagaland	61	2.19	42	2.82
Sikkim	1	0.02	0.53	0.03
Tripura	121	4.33	118	7.87
NE total	1683	60.47	1506	66.44
All India	2,783	100	2,268	100

Source: Handloom Census of India, 2010, Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India.

Table 2: Distribution of Handloom Workers by Age

NER/India	Total workforce (lakh)	Less than 18 years (%)	Adult workers (18 years and above)(%)	Total
North - eastern region	21.6	8.7	91.3	100
India	43.3	11.2	88.8	100

Source: Handloom Census of India, 2010, Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India.

Table 3: Distribution of Adult Handloom Workers by Social Groups

NER/India	Scheduled Castes (%)	Scheduled Tribes (%)	Other Backward Castes (%)	Others
North-eastern region	7.2	34.3	33.9	24.6
India	10.1	18.1	45.2	26.6

Source: Handloom Census of India, 2010, Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India.

executed quickly (Sircar 1984). There was also a pride in working craft at an early age. Their social status increased after becoming a weaver

because they could contribute financially to the family and for knowing a traditional women occupation (Devi 2012).

The analysis of demographic profile and social relevance of handloom sector in NE region reveals scope for the promotion of handlooms in NE region. This depends on adequate income flow from weaving via encouragement of weaving profession, capacity building through literacy, full time engagement in weaving, good leadership, modernisation of looms, marketing facilities and financial support. Women in NE region have been working in handlooms traditionally and it is an accepted activity for women. Hence taking a little additional effort can be a good source of income generation through value addition for their products so that weavers could accept weaving as an occupation for livelihood.

Production, Employment and Income

The nature of handloom production, employment and economic contribution from handloom are examined to identify impediments to the growth of the sector. Majority of the handlooms in NE region could contribute less economically to the family income (19 per cent only) while it is 58 per cent in other States of India (Handloom Census 2010). The region has to increase the average working days for getting higher income. While handloom workers in the region work on an average 140 days, other States in India work for 245 days in a year (see Figure 1). The reason is that the NE region handloom sector is dominated by domestic production (62 per cent) and a large portion of domestic workers work mostly on a part time basis. Other States of India are primarily engaged in commercial production of handlooms. The region also has highest proportion of idle looms in the country. As almost half (45.9 per cent) of weavers worked in domestic production and therefore, there is low productivity. Hence contribution from handlooms to household income remains marginal. However, the weavers support the family by supplying clothes which are used by family members for daily wear, festivals and ceremonies. When compared to States which are primarily engaged in commercial production,

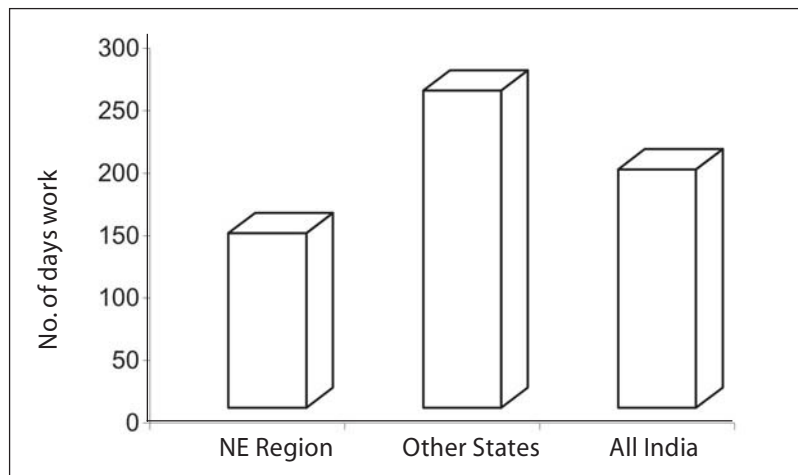
the region recorded a low productivity. While half of the weavers in other States produce above two metres per day, only a few weavers in the region produce above two metres per day. Half of NE weavers generally produce one meter per day. The condition did not improve after two decades because the handloom census 1988 estimated productivity among the States where there were working looms and recorded that Assam had the highest number of working looms (12.9 lakh) but lowest productivity, Manipur fourth largest looms (2.7 lakh); but both had productivity way below the average Indian production of 5.12 meter per loom per day (Handloom Census 1988). The low productivity of handlooms was on account of four factors- (1) nature of work pattern (2) technology (3) management and (4) market structure (Debi 1994). For the growth of handlooms sector the impediments have to be addressed with government support and mobilisation of weavers to change their attitude towards more productivity.

The Handloom Census 2010 reported that the average share of handloom income to the total household income in India is 30.2 per cent, but in NE region except Meghalaya, all the States show below the national average (see Figure 2). Where there is dominance of commercial production the share of handloom income to the total household income is 58.1 per cent. Since the economic contribution is less in NE region, the proportion of indebtedness (1.6 per cent) is also low compared to States like Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Odisha and Karnataka. There is low penetration of mills and powerlooms, so there is less threat in NE region. With proper intervention in terms of market access and organisation of weavers, the sector can be a source of livelihood for women who are either educated or uneducated. Besides this, handlooms being viewed as a cultural accomplishment, 30 per cent of handlooms households in the region reported to prefer their children to follow this traditional occupation. But

in States like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, very few weavers reported to like their children to continue the activity of weaving

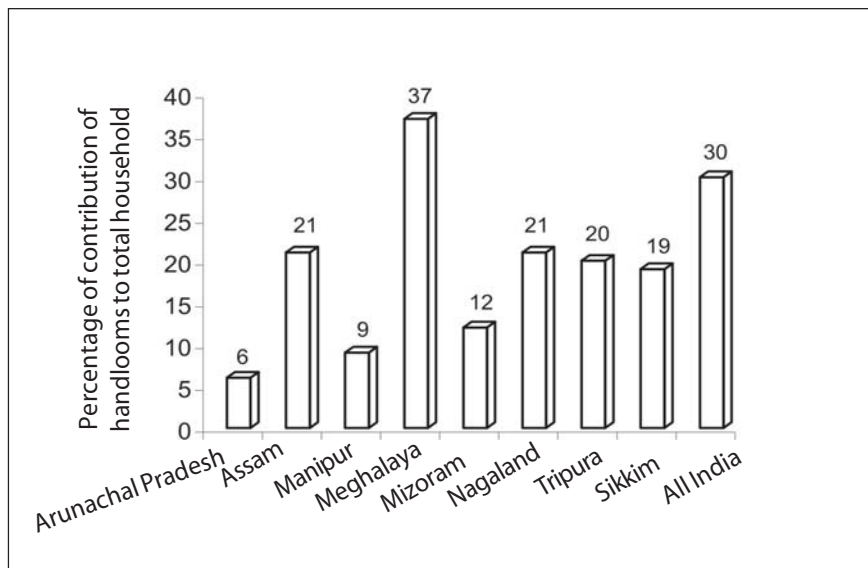
as it is a hard, time consuming and low remuneration work.

Fig.1: Average Working Days of Handloom Workers



Source: Handloom Census of India, 2010, Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India.

Fig. 2: Contribution of Handloom to Total Household Income (%)



Source: Handloom Census of India, 2010, Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India.

A study of 300 weavers in Manipur revealed that the average monthly wages earned from weaving differ depending upon the nature of works. Comparing weavers who are self-employed, to weavers working under merchant and weavers working in cooperative societies it was found that the weavers working under the merchants get lower wages while the self-employed get more wages. Weavers working under merchants got an average monthly income of ₹ 200-600 while self-employed got ₹ 600-1000. The earnings of weavers under the cooperative society were also almost like the merchant weavers (Devi 2012). A study of handloom contractual workers in Assam, by Bortamuly and Goswami (2012) found that among the factors such as age, productivity, gender, experience, and education, only the productivity and gender influenced wage structure. If given a choice, the owners are reluctant to hire females having domestic chores apart from the weaving works, on the same monthly wage rate as that of males. Organisation of weavers would serve as a mechanism to address such problems related to gender and household work related problem, for justification of lower wages paid to the female workers.

Dynamics of Change

Under the Technology Upgradation Fund Scheme (TUFS) the corpus fund was raised to ₹ 200 crore from ₹ 50 crore to set up 50,000 shuttleless looms and to convert 2.5 lakh traditional looms to automatic ones. This clearly shows that the enterprising handloom weavers have been pushed up to adopt modern technology. Yet, the scheme does not mention any measures to strengthen institutions such as weavers' cooperative societies that protect the interest of weavers. Thus, the new government policies that focused on the liberalisation, modernisation and globalisation of the industry ignored the livelihood issues pertaining to lakhs of traditional handloom weavers. The problem of the weaving industry which had often been an issue of handlooms versus powerlooms, is no

longer valid. With the liberalisation of market, the issue now is how to safeguard small and vulnerable sections from the big and strong segments.

Weavers need to upgrade their skill and technology levels to face the changing market structure. Regarding the marketing of handlooms, Srinivasula (1997) stated 'the role of handloom is recruited to 'passively' responding to the demand when the strategy should be one of actively intervening and influencing the market'. Both the government and weavers should become partners to derive benefits from government schemes, infrastructure development, diversification of products and markets. For handloom products, designs add value and price of the cloth. With no training and inadequate infrastructure, weavers find it difficult to use the available designs in catalogues. As the market is globalised, the region also imports clothes and other textiles at cheap rate from neighbouring States and countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh. Thus, traditional weavers were lagging behind in relation to cost, durability and design in their products. On the other hand, male traders, especially the Marwaries handled the market. They also sometimes worked as cloth merchants. While they exported the finished products to places like Delhi and Rajasthan, exhibiting a broad marketing strategy, the restriction on women's mobility forced local weavers to struggle in the local market.

Due to marketing problems, weavers sometimes prefer to work under merchant weaver despite getting low wages. The earnings from handloom are also used in household expenditure, hence can not invest in weaving business. Though financial institutions are ready to give loans, weavers hesitate to take loans, as they are not certain about their income. Other problems are lack of adequate stalls in the market and lack of quality control. To solve the problems some weavers produce only after getting order or organise phi-marups⁴, a process where weavers played the role of a producer, organiser

and distributor. It made the weavers economically secure and also helped the customers by allowing them to buy in bulk on instalment basis. This entrepreneurial spirit is a new development among the weavers.

Promotion of Cooperatives and Organisations

The handloom sector is organised under the umbrella of cooperative society. This is the policy of the government of India and it has two objectives (1) social and (2) development (Parikh et al. 1991). Firstly, the social objective was to ensure minimum wages to the weavers and freedom from the bondage of master weavers. Secondly, the development objective aimed to updating the old technology, increasing productivity, introducing new colour, new designs and exporting the handloom fabric. Handloom cooperative societies act as an agent to render support services to the weavers. Such facilities of the cooperative society are not received by many weavers in NE region because very few of them enrol for membership. In all States of NE region except Meghalaya, membership in cooperative society is below the national average (see Table 4). Tamil Nadu (27.6 per cent) and Andhra Pradesh (18.1 per cent) have cooperative memberships higher as compared to other States of India.

The analysis of handloom census found mixed response of relation between membership in cooperative society and income contribution of handloom to household economy. In States which have low membership in cooperatives like Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, handlooms contributed about 80 per cent of income to the household while those States with high membership have also

contributed much to the household income. Large commercial production, full time weaving and membership in cooperatives are some factors for high income contribution from handlooms to the household income. In NE region, membership as well as contribution of income to household is low. The weavers have to transform from domestic to commercial production for covering a wider range of market. At such juncture organisation of weavers and support from cooperatives may be helpful in strengthening the isolated weavers. Under the Integrated Handloom Cluster Development Scheme implemented at Imphal, Manipur 199 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) covering 2780 weavers were formed till 2012. Out of this, 35 SHGs received credit of ₹ 31.80 lakh and provided market linkage. We need such pattern of organisations to replicate the process to a large section of weavers in NE region. Lack of organisational mechanism may influence the poor weavers to work under the master weavers or merchants. They play the role of supplier and also took care of marketing the products, thus relieving the weavers from marketing problems. Besides this, the master weavers are the source of loan for 44.6 per cent of handloom worker households in India but in NE region their role is marginal. Commercial banks have become a reliable source of finance for NE region handloom workers (see Table 5). But the case study of the women weavers in Vengamedu, Tamil Nadu, indicated that they were exploited by master weavers by paying low wages who thereby made substantial profit (Sundari and Manimekalai 1989). Thus, based on the above information, it is difficult to state whether the presence of master weaver is detrimental to the handloom sector or not.

Table 4: Membership in Cooperative Society 2009-2010

NE States	Number of households reporting membership	Percentage
Arunachal Pradesh	184	0.6
Assam	39375	3.2
Manipur	571	0.3
Meghalaya	1216	10.7
Mizoram	441	1.1
Nagaland	206	0.3
Sikkim	8	1.4
Tripura	3992	3.3
All India	273914	9.8

Source: Handloom Census of India, 2010, Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India.

Table 5 : Percentage Distribution of Handloom Worker Households by Major Sources of Finance

NER/India	Money-lenders	Master weavers	Friends/relatives	Cooperative society	Commercial banks	SHGs	Traders	Others
NE	12.2	6.8	9.0	13.1	30.5	17.7	0.8	10
India	13.4	44.6	4.9	5.9	14.8	5.0	4.3	7.2

Source: Handloom Census of India, 2010, Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India.

Conclusions

The NE region is taking a place in the nation map for handlooms sector and it could find a niche market if proper planning and policies are framed. Women weavers though largely dominated the handlooms sector in this region, with changing market structure and competition, they face conflict and compromise. They are still using manual looms with low technology base which affects production. If appropriate action is not taken, then there is a fear of replacing the handloom products by imported materials. The responsibility is also with designers to focus on the handloom products instead of western garments to bring back a proud tradition. There is an expression of

feminism in the NE region patrilineal society which encourages women to be self-reliant, economically active and collectively powerful. Thus, they felt that engaging in weaving which is a traditional feminine occupation increased their socio-economic status instead of sitting idle at home. However, a strong working organisation among the weavers was lacking to safeguard their security and fight their rights in the society. Mobilisation for forming weaver organisations may enable them to get government schemes, health insurance, credit and market linkages. Efforts need to be made to make the cooperative society sustainable and effective. We also need to acknowledge the significance and openness to new concepts to bring a more

positive understanding of the women's participation in the economic activities because for many of these women, working in the handlooms sector is a matter of contributing economically to the family and supplying clothes for the family members. Increasing productivity by working as full time rather than part time will make handlooms production more sustainable for livelihood. Weaving being a traditional feminine occupation, many women, be they

educated or illiterate, got jobs in this sector. Therefore, with suitable public policies for this sector, large employment opportunities can be created for the women of the region. With the introduction of photo identification in the Handloom Census 2010, the schemes are hopeful to reach to the right beneficiaries. This will give immense opportunity for raising the socio-economic status of the NE women.

Notes

1. *Meitei Phanek* is a kind of lungies used by the Meitei women to wrap around the waist and extend up to ankle (length 1.5 metre, width 1 metre).
2. *Lai Haraoba* is the ritual celebration held only once in a year by the Meiteis to worship their ancestors. Though they are converted into Hinduism, they still worship their ancestors and keep deities at home.
3. *Sinnaibham kaba* is a sort of school at the house of a senior woman to learn pre-weaving and weaving works, embroidery and the art of running home.
4. *Phi-marup*: *phi* - cloth, *marup*- chit fund. Around 10-30 people contribute a fixed amount of money every month and with this amount buy clothes from weavers. One member in a month will be getting clothes. These clothes are supplied by weavers so they are engaged until the *phi-marup* is completed.

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