

Full Length Research Paper

A study of socio-economic status of workers in the unorganized powerloom sector of West Bengal

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The powerloom industry is a weaving sector and an important segment of the decentralized cotton textile industry in India. Powerloom industry weaves grey cotton by power-operated machines or looms and works into a fabric with the help of warp in the form of beam and weft directly through bobbins. Beams come from processing mills and weft yarn from spinning mills. Powerloom industries are functioning the middle level work in the cloth production. According to the demand of time, powerloom industry in West Bengal has been classified as organized sector and small scale unorganized sector. Present study is concerned with only the socio economic status and development of workers engaged in small-scale powerloom sector of West Bengal. This sector contributes 63% of the total cloth production of the country and provides employment to about 48.15 lakh persons in India. In India, as a whole, the powerloom sector, among others, has been producing maximum cloth till today, but in West Bengal, the production of cloth by powerlooms occupies second position. This industry generates a number of employment opportunities. Further, the industry contributes a lot of revenues to the government exchequer. But, there is a lot of problems of the powerloom industry in West Bengal as well as of the workers engaged in the industry and until and unless these problems are solved, the overall improvement of the industry as well as the workers' living conditions cannot be achieved.

Keywords: Socio economic status, Powerloom sector of west Bengal.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most essential commodities of civilized human beings has been the cloth and it comes from the textile industry. The textile industry in India has been classified into three sectors: pre-weaving i.e. spinning, weaving and post-weaving i.e. finishing. The powerloom industry is a weaving sector and an important segment of the decentralized cotton textile industry in India. Powerloom industry weaves grey cotton by power-operated machines or looms and works into a fabric with the help of warp in the form of beam and weft directly through bobbins. Beams come from processing mills and weft yarn from spinning

mills. Spinning mills produce only yarn thread as raw materials to the powerloom industries. Processing mills prepare warp in the form of beam and the powerloom industry used the beams for weaving the projected cloths. So it is clear that the powerloom industries are functioning the middle level work in the cloth production. According to the demand of time, powerloom industry in West Bengal has been classified as organized sector and small scale unorganized sector. My study is concerned with only the powerlooms which are in small-scale sector of West Bengal and this sector is one of the most important

segments of the textile industry in terms of fabric production and employment generation. It provides employment to 48.60 lakh persons and contributes 62 % to total cloth production in the country. In fact, 60% of the fabrics produced in the powerloom sector are man-made. More than 60 % of the fabric meant for export comes from the powerloom sectors. So employment generation is one of the most important reasons for the introduction of powerlooms in the small scale sector in West Bengal. Most of the powerloom workers come from the down trodden families of West Bengal. During 1956-57, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal Dr. B. C. Roy realized that the small scale powerloom industry in West Bengal (SSPIWB) might play a greater role in solving the unemployment problems in West Bengal, especially that of the artisans from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

Scope of the Study

At present, this industry is not in a good position; the unemployed youths of the day are not interested in working in this industry because of low wages and lack of job security. The industrial revolution, socio- economic conditions of the workers and the review of some developmental programmes relating to the workers engaged in small scale powerloom industry in West Bengal are included in the present study. It covers all the districts of West Bengal and the time span covers up to 2006-07.

Review of literature

There is no authentic and huge number of literatures about this area but some literature are there, which are helpful for the study and research purposes, some such references are Book India 2006 a reference annual compiled and edited by research, reference and training division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India. West Bengal Human Development Report, Development and Planning Dept; Govt. of India, first published in may 2004, India Year Book 2004, Institute of Applied Manpower Research, Textile Souvenir-1981-82, Textile Souvenir-1984, 1986, Yojana-Dhanadhanye- June & July-2007, Tex Vision-2008, The Kolkata Gazette-2008, Govt. of West Bengal,

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES OF DATA

Most of the data which have been used in the present study are primary and some are, of course, secondary. The economic parameters have been analyzed with the help of the statistical tools like mean, median, mode, standard deviation (SD), correlation coefficient (r) etc. as the situation demands. Primary data are collected through

convenient sample survey. After independence till date my period of study has a time span of about fifty-seven years between 1950 and 2007. One basic limitation of the study is the lack of availability of sufficient data. I have tried my level best to make the data as current and accurate as possible.

Objectives

The following are the objectives of the study:

- i. To portray the nature of employment of small scale powerloom industries in West Bengal;
- ii. To evaluate the socio economic condition of the workers of this sector.
- iii. To suggest some line of actions that may be necessary for an overall improvement of the workers engaged in this sector.

Sampling pattern

All the small scale powerlooms units in different districts of West Bengal have been visited and surveyed. Randomly 500 workers have been surveyed in 72 powerlooms factories where about 800 powerlooms have been installed.

■ Direct Workers and Employees: Classification

Direct workers are the workers directly engaged in manufacturing or handling products in powerloom industries. They are directly involved in the production process of converting raw materials into finished products. The West Bengal powerloom industry is mainly involved in weaving activities and these are applied for pre-weaving and post- weaving of cloth. In our study, the workers engaged in the pre-weaving and post- weaving activities have not been considered, but only the workers directly engaged in weaving the cloth by powerlooms (small scale sector in West Bengal) have only been considered. The workers directly engaged in the SSPIWB are classified on the basis of their working experience as weavers, winders, jobbers (mistri), drawers and reachers, checkers, electricians, durwans, carpenters, coolies, clerks and managers. Every one of these categories can be more or less found in the co-operative societies, but in the case of individual concerns and partnership firms, generally durwans, coolies, clerks and managers are not found. This is so because the works of the clerks and the managers are done by the owners and partners themselves. The works of the coolies are done by other workers and most of the owners of the individual powerlooms in West Bengal employ weavers, winders and jobbers on full time basis.

Table 1. Year- wise Total Number of Direct Workers in the SSPIWB

Year	Total No. of direct workers (in thousand)	Year	Total No. of direct workers (in thousand)
1980-81	24.00	1995-96	27.50
1981-82	24.00	1996-97	23.40
1982-83	24.00	1997-98	19.30
1983-84	24.00	1998-99	17.25
1984-85	24.77	1999-2000	14.60
1985-86	24.45	2000-01	11.20
1986-87	24.61	2001-02	10.87
1987-88	24.77	2002-03	10.90
1988-89	24.77	2003-04	10.93
1989-90	24.93	2004-05	11.66
1990-91	25.00	2005-06	11.65
1991-92	25.00	2006-07	11.58
1992-93	26.00	2007-08	11.69
1993-94	26.25	2008-09	11.47
1994-95	26.50	2009-10	11.36

Source: Annual Plan different issues, Govt. of West Bengal, Compendium of Textile Statistics 2005 and office records of Dy. Directorate, Powerlooms of West Bengal, 8 Strand Road, New Secretariate Buildings, Kolkata.

The drawers and reachers, checkers, electricians and carpenters are employed on part- time or temporary basis.

Year- wise Total Number of Direct Workers:

At the initiation of the SSPIWB it was the mission of opening a great avenue for generating the scope of employments of the unemployed artisans in West Bengal. How much the problem of unemployment has been solved by the SSPIWB has been made vivid in Table 1:

The tabulated figures are only related to direct employments in the SSPIWB. It is a fact that all the powerlooms in the small scale sector are not automatic; these are run by power and operated by the workers. Consequently, there should be a direct relationship between the number of powerlooms and the number of workers. Again, there is a little consistency between the number of powerlooms and the number of workers. In 1982, there were 8,052 powerlooms in the small scale sector of West Bengal and the number of workers was 24,000 for the said industries. The number of powerlooms decreased to 5,510 in 1996, but the number of workers increased to 27, 500 in that year and in 2009 the number of powerlooms decreased to 4,636, but the number of workers decreased to 11,363. Again, the number of powerlooms in 1996 was 31.56 % lower than the number of powerlooms in 1982 and the number of powerlooms in 2006 was 39.44% lower than the number of powerlooms in 1982 and 11.51% lower than the number of powerlooms in

1996. But in comparison to the year 1982, the number of employment increased in 1996 by 14.58 % and decreased in 2005 by 51.40 % and in 2010 52.65% respectively. The reasons behind this disparity might be as follows:

- 1) A large number of powerlooms were operated by the owners themselves and by other family members.
- 2) A large number of powerlooms remained closed due to irregular power supply, lack of spun yarn, etc.
- 3) The owners (employers) were used to employing temporary workers for every type of job.
- 4) The unemployed youths of the day are not interested in working in this industry because of low wages and lack of job security.
- 5) Besides, low productivity due to the lack of automatic looms, shortage of finance, tax structures and poor organizational efficiencies of industries as well as the owners were identified as other reasons for decreasing employment in the powerloom industries in West Bengal.

With the passage of time, there exists a soft gap between the owners- workers relationship and the owners distance themselves from the looms. They employ low-rate workers hired from outside for the looms and engage themselves in other types of work for earning higher wages. Thus the number of direct workers increased instead of decreasing as the number of powerlooms decreased up to the year 1995- 96, but from the year 1996-97 the number of direct workers gradually decreased at a higher rate than that of decrease in the number of powerlooms in West Bengal.



Diagram-1
Sex and Caste- wise Classification

Table 2. Sex and Caste -wise Classification of Workers

Sex	No. of workers	Percentage	Caste	No. of workers	Percentage
Male	408	81.60	General	360	72.00
Female	92	18.40	SC/ST/ Other	140	28.00
Total	500	100		500	100

Source: Field investigation

Line Chart 1 shows the year-wise movement of the total number of direct workers in the SSPIWB. The Trend Line clearly shows the smooth increase in the trend values of the total number of direct workers in the SSPIWB up to the year 1995-96, but from the year 1996-97 the trend of the number of direct workers is gradually decreased.

Table 2 shows that most of the SSPIWB workers are male (81.60 %) and some are female workers (18.40 %). The male workers are engaged in weaving of cloth through power – operated machines and it is a laborious job, quite unsuitable for female workers. The ancillary works like sizing of bobbins, wandering etc. are generally done by the female workers. Again, out of the 500 sample respondents, 360 workers (72 %) are of general caste and 140 workers (28 %) are from Scheduled Caste / Scheduled Tribe / and other communities.

► **Age Distribution of the SSPIWB Workers**

The workers engaged in the small scale powerloom industry in West Bengal can be grouped according to their ages as shown in the following Table 3

Table 3 shows that the ages of the SSPIWB workers are between 15 and 75 years. Here, out of the 500 workers, 144 workers (28.80 %), the largest, are in the age group of 35-45 years and 126 workers (25.20 %), the second largest, are in the age group of 45-55 years. Again, 6 (1.20%) and 16 (3.20 %) workers are aged below 15 years and 65-75 years respectively.

Diagram 2 clearly exhibits that most of the responded workers are the age of above 40 years. It is very painful to say that 3.20 % of the workers are above 65 years of age when at this stage most of the government employees enjoy leisure and lead an anxiety free life. Another point is found here that 12.4 % workers are below 35 years of age, which signifies that the small scale powerloom industry in West Bengal fails to provide a little solution to the heavily loaded unemployment problems of West Bengal. The workers in the age groups of 45-55, 55-65 and 65-75 years in total of (25.20% +16.00% +3.20%) = 44.40% of the investigated workers said that they joined this industry in the 60's and 70's. At present, the unemployed young generations, who are below 35 years of age, are not interested in joining the SSPIWB due to low- rate of wages and future insecurity.

Table 3. Age Distribution of the SSPIWB Workers

Sl. No.	Age (in year)	No. Of workers	Percentage
1	Below- 15	6	1.20
2	15 - 25	38	7.60
3	25 - 35	90	18.00
4	35 - 45	144	28.80
5	45 - 55	126	25.20
6	55 -65	80	16.00
7	65-75	16	3.20
Total		500	100

Source: Field Investigation.

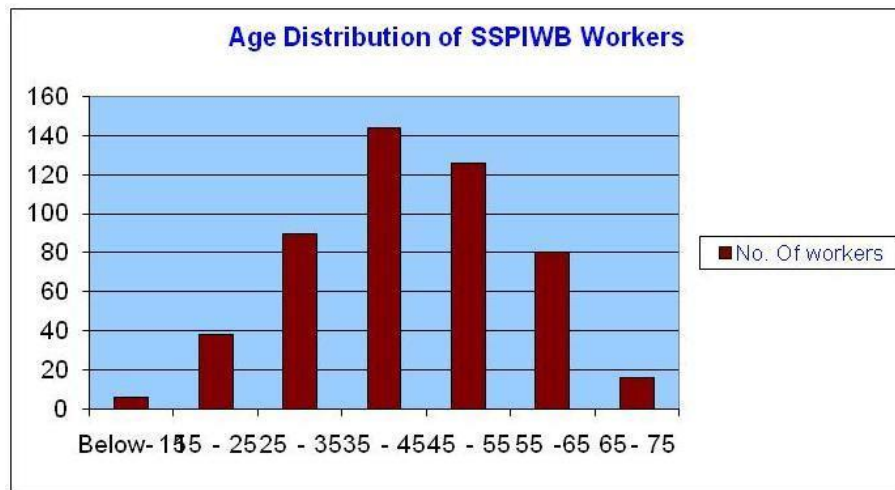


Diagram – 2
Age Distribution of SSPIWB workers is to be shown by the following diagram

Marital Status

It is found that 79.20 % of the sample respondents are married and 16.80 % are unmarried. Again, some widows and widowers (4.00 %) are also engaged in this industry for their livelihood. It is observed that the respondents, in general, have got married at their very young age and this has, to a great extent, compelled them to fall back upon this industry as the last resort for living with their spouse and children.

Literacy of the Workers

Only 19.20 % workers among the total respondents of 500 have no schooling or formal education at any time of their life. We observed that only 12.5 % of these illiterate workers have come under the Adult Education Programme

of the government and the rest totally ignored to achieve this programme. I am pleased to note that, 80.80 % of the sample respondents are literate, though 24.80 % workers have primary education and 22.00 % workers have junior high level education. It is also found that 24.40 % workers have secondary level education and only 9.60 % have above secondary level education. From direct investigation, I observed that out of the 500 sample workers, only 34 workers (6.80 %) have technical education about textile. There are two technical institutions for providing training and education to the powerloom workers in West Bengal and the first one is situated at Dakshindari, Dum Dum, Kolkata, while the second one is situated at Mill Para, Ranaghat, Nadia. The institution runs a very short course of 3 months duration only, but most of the workers are hesitated to acquire the technical knowledge due to some reasons. I may now state the reasons, if the workers take part in this course; they will

Table 4. Total Monthly Earnings of Workers.

Monthly Earnings (Rs.)	No. of Workers	Percentage (%)
900-1000	8	1.60
1000-1100	13	2.60
1100-1200	15	3.00
1200-1300	39	7.80
1300-1400	78	15.60
1400-1500	70	14.00
1500-1600	101	20.20
1600-1700	76	15.20
1700-1800	35	7.00
1800-1900	25	5.00
1900-2000	23	4.60
2000-2100	12	2.40
2100-2200	5	1.00
Total	500	100.00

Source: Field Investigation.

Table 5. Average monthly Expenses of workers for different purposes

Heads of Expenditures	Av. Monthly Expenses (Rs)	Percentage
Food and Provisions	1124.40	61.83
Cloth	177.20	9.74
Medicine	124.90	6.87
Education	126.60	6.96
Recreation	114.04	6.27
Other expenses	151.30	8.33
Total	1818.44	100.00

Table 6. Indebtedness Position of the Workers

Amount of indebtedness (Rs.)	No of workers	Percentage (%)
Up to -1000	130	27.08
1000-5000	201	41.88
5000-10,000	98	20.42
10,000-15,000	42	8.75
15,000 and above	9	1.88
Total	480	100.00

Source: Field Investigation.

lose three months earnings. Besides, the course does not provide the extra benefit to the workers in future and fails to provide their job guarantee.

Health status

It has been found that out of the 500 workers investigated; only 374 workers responded that they were suffering from

a disease for a long time. 19.79 % (the modal percentage) of the workers are suffering from poor eyesight and the disease is widely spread in the industry. Since the inception of the industry, the workers are deprived of the ESI (Employees State Insurance) benefit. Consequently, the workers have to get the medical treatment by their own coins, which are, obviously, burdensome to them. Naturally, they have been suffering from various diseases.

Gradually, they are losing not only their productive capacity, but also shortening their span of life.

Nature of Employment:

At the initial stage of small scale powerloom industry in West Bengal, the owners and their family members used to do the pre-weaving, weaving and post- weaving activities. But with the passage of time, the owners engaged themselves and their family members in other works employing outside paid workers to look after the powerloom industry. Still the same tradition is going on in few places like Aise Tala at Ranaghat (Nadia), Nawbadwip (Nadia), Begampur (Hooghly) and so on. The powerlooms of the remaining centers are being operated by the outside hired workers.

The employment of the hired workers like weavers, winders and jobbers (mistri) is on yearly basis and is made permanent without any job security. Generally, in every district of West Bengal the jobbers and the winders get remuneration on a fixed rate basis; the amount of the salary varies with the number of looms. The jobbers enjoy weekly holidays and they have 14 restricted holidays in a year. The winders are employed for a fixed day rate basis. They enjoy weekly holidays without any pay but 14 restricted holidays in a year with pay. The weavers' remunerations are totally variable as such that they get a fixed portion for attendance and dearness allowance and the variable portion of the salary is on the production basis. The weavers also enjoy weekly holidays without any pay and 14 restricted holidays with pay at a poor fixed rate in a year.

Except these fulltime workers, other workers like drawer, reacher and checker etc. are appointed on part-time basis and they are paid on fixed piece rate wages with some facilities for enjoying holidays. The carpenter and the electricians are appointed completely on a temporary basis and are given remunerations on piece rate system and "no-work- no- pay" basis.

Undoubtedly, it can be said that the workers of the SSPIWB spend their major part of monthly earnings for food and provisions i.e. 61.83 % of the total monthly expenses and 9.74 % of the total monthly expenses spend for cloth, which is one of the basic needs of life. Here the recreation expenses include the expenses for all sorts of social functions i.e. expenses for Puja, Id, attending the relatives' marriage ceremony etc. Other expenses include those concerning their accommodation, addictions etc.

Borrowing

Borrowing is a common phenomenon to the workers of the SSPIWB and almost all the workers (96 % of the sampled workers) borrow money from different sources to meet various purposes and casual contingencies. The average total expenditure per worker (here worker represents the worker's family) per month is Rs. 1716.80, where as the

average total earning per worker per month is Rs. 1818.44. Therefore, the excess of expenditure over income per worker per month is Rs. 101.64. Not only this, they also have to meet the casual contingencies with the borrowed money. The present indebtedness distribution of workers can be better understood from the following table:

The economic conditions and illiteracy of the workers engaged in the powerloom industry in West Bengal, found to be relevant in this context. There are some common diseases they and their family members suffer from and a major portion of their earnings is spent for their medical treatment. It has thus become very difficult to them to keep pace with the steady spiral of rising prices with their little earnings. Many of the workers engaged in the industry are refugees of Bangladesh and due to their poor economic background they are mostly satisfied by their meagre earnings and do not want to go in direct confrontation with the management. Again, they have no idea about the various provisions of the Legislative and Welfare Acts.

So it is found that there is a lot of problems of the powerloom industry in West Bengal as well as of the workers engaged in the industry and until and unless these problems are solved, the overall improvement of the industry as well as the workers' living conditions cannot be achieved.

Developmental programmes

Inadequate marketing facilities have become major hurdles in the way of the development of the industry since a negligible portion of the powerloom products is marketed through government channels and most of the master weavers depend inevitably on private channels to get their products disposed of in the market at unreasonable prices. The fruits of the industry are actually grabbed by extortionate middlemen and as a consequence, a majority of powerloom owners are not showing enthusiasm in this modern industry. On the contrary, the general workers are becoming the victims of the same. The marketing development programme has a vital role in the powerloom sector. So an activity for the promotion and marketing of powerloom products through different mechanisms has to be placed for the implementation and monitoring. For that the following activities can be carried out singly or jointly by the implementing agency:

1) Organizing exhibition and buyer- seller meet

Exhibitions should be held in order to provide opportunity to the powerloom weavers to market their products at regional and cluster levels. In addition to this, different industry associations and other agencies can also organize buyer-seller meet for the promotion of powerloom specific or fibre specific or any other product of the power- loom sector in that area.

2) Seminars and Workshops

Technical seminars and workshops may be organized to discuss and disseminate the new technology and products so that the weavers can highly benefit from them. The basic idea beyond the seminar and workshop is to propagate the new designs, modernization of technology and measures to reduce the cost of production.

3) Publicity and awareness programmes

Publicity is an inevitable part of the marketing strategy and, therefore, it will be a component of the marketing development programme. The purpose of this activity is to project and attract different consumers to the powerloom products.

4) Film on Powerloom

In order to create awareness and understanding among the public about the powerloom sector various types of video clips and tele-films based on a particular powerloom cluster can be made. They can be telecast to highlight the modern technological advancement in this regard.

5) Print publicity

Publicity relating to powerlooms can be taken up by way of printing of pamphlets. Publicity material on various schemes implemented for the benefit of the powerloom sector and the opportunity of the domestic and overseas market can also be taken up.

Development and Upgradation of Skills

The Govt. of India has established 44 Powerloom Service Centres (PSCs) since 1977 at various powerloom clusters for promoting the development and growth of decentralized powerloom sectors and for the proper training and development of the workers engaged in powerloom industries. Out of these, 14 PSCs function under the Office of the Textile Commissioner and 25 PSCs under the different Textile Research Associations (TRAs). Four PSCs are functioning under the Karnataka State Powerloom Development Corporation (KSPDC) and the PSC at Jabalpur is functioning under the administrative control of the state government of Madhya Pradesh.

During 2004-2005 these PSCs trained 6355 persons, developed 3726 designs and tested 75638 samples generating revenue. The PSCs also organized 319 exhibitions, seminars and workshops. Most of the powerlooms in West Bengal are technologically outdated and they need modernization of varying degrees. The sectoral vision of the powerlooms in the state would be to increase the number of the active powerlooms in West

Bengal to 20,000 and to enhance the powerloom output by at least 300% to reach 180 million meters by 2012. To achieve the sectoral vision, the government shall facilitate setting up of three powerloom parks in public-private partnership with comprehensive common support infrastructure, including common facilities for fabric dyeing, processing and finishing. In order to facilitate the modernization of power looms, including the induction of shuttleless, airjet and waterjet looms, the government shall encourage entrepreneurs to avail of the assistance under the Technology Upgradation Fund Scheme (TUFS) and other similar schemes. The government shall also encourage to increase the use of man-made/ synthetic fibres on powerlooms in the state as synthetic fibre manufacturing is taking deeper roots in the state. The government of West Bengal believes that the handloom and powerloom economies can and should harmoniously co-exist since both have distinct markets, focus areas and space for future growth. It shall be the policy of the government to encourage a liberal and harmonious programme in this regard.

CONCLUSION

This industry generates a number of employment opportunities. Further, the industry contributes a lot of revenues to the government exchequer. We found that most of the workers engaged in power loom industries in West Bengal are illiterate in the sense that they have no idea about the various provisions of the Legislative and Welfare Acts. Many of the workers engaged in the industry are refugees from Bangladesh and due to their poor economic background they are mostly satisfied by their meager earnings and they do not want to go in direct confrontation with the management. Almost all the looms used in this sector are less productive, and consequently, the workers have become victims of meager earnings as they are paid on piece rate system i.e. on actual production. Besides, low productivity due to lack of automatic looms, shortage of finances, tax structures and poor organizational efficiencies are identified as other problems. So we found that there is a lot of problems of the power loom industry in West Bengal as well as of the workers engaged in the industry and until and unless these problems are solved, the overall improvement of the industry as well as the workers' living conditions cannot be achieved. So for the overall development of powerloom industries it is required a wholehearted support with proper encouragement from both the State and Central Government.

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