

Women and Woven Craft: A Case Study among the Dera Weavers of Berhampur City, Ganjam, Odisha

Prangya Priyadarsini Sahoo¹, Suresh Chandra Murmu^{2*}

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Sambalpur University, Jyoti Vihar, Burla.

²Associate Professor, PG Department of Anthropology, Utkal University, Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar,

*Email: smurmu10@gmail.com

Abstract

Women have always had a unique relationship with weaving that goes deeper than just making clothes for their household. Historically, Women have been a significant part of weaving craft, whose contribution goes unnoticed, as weaving is an in-house activity for most weavers. The present paper makes a humble attempt to study the role of women in the woven craft among the Dera Weavers of Berhampur City of Ganjam, who are mostly associated with silk weaving traditions & weave the famous Berhampuri Patta Saree. This paper is based on an empirical study & various anthropological methods like observation, interview and case study have been used for collection of primary data in the present study. The finding of the study reveals that the Dera women, along with all household chores, play significant role by assisting their husbands or male members in weaving process of the Berhampuri Patta Saree, as they are engaged in tedious pre & post weaving works, such as dyeing, sizing, piecing and polishing. These works have been unrecognised & unpaid for many decades, due to the patriarchal nature of the Dera society. Dera women do not directly contribute in marketing of the final product, procurement of raw materials and finalization of the designs. Proper implementations of the different govt. schemes are required to address the issues and challenges experienced by Dera women weavers.

Keyword: Woven Craft, Berhampuri Patta, Dera Women, Handloom, Empowerment

Introduction

Handloom is the “traditional craftwork of India” provides employments to large numbers of people in both “urban and rural areas” (Rao et al., 2018) and places unique identity of India in the world map. In India, looking at the “unorganised economic activities”, handloom industry occupies one of the leading positions which employ more than 35 Lakhs individuals in both rural and semi-rural areas. It plays a significant role in “economic empowerment of women” by engaging more than “25 lakh women weavers and allied workers” (Annual Report-2022-23, Ministry of Textile, GOI). The “rich tradition of handloom weaving” can be traced with evidence to the Indus Valley Civilization (Handloom Census, 2019-2020: 20). Numbers of women work in handloom sectors and play a significant role to carry forward the age-old tradition (Premasundar & Kannan, 2013: 34). After agriculture, handloom sector constitutes another major economic sector in India and considered as the rich cultural heritage. The strengths of this industry are “exquisite designs, unique motifs and link with culture and tradition in one hand” and socio-economic significance (Humbe & Bhalerao, 2018:260).

Women have always had a unique relationship with weaving that goes deeper than just making clothes for their household. Historically, Women have been a significant part of weaving craft,

whose contribution goes unnoticed, as weaving is an in-house activity for most weavers. In the silk industry of Assam, almost 60 percentages of weavers are women. Weaving in the Muga and Mulberry industry has empowered the women “in the family as well as society” by engaging them as a weaver. Taking into account around 200 units of silk factories revealed that weaving provides employment to women which ultimately resulting into financial independence not only to themselves but also directly supporting their family and in few cases taking responsibility of the family (Mridula Devi, 2023).

The present study aims to explore the role of Dera women in the entire weaving process. Further, efforts have been put in to analyse the contemporary issues and problems experience by the women weavers and allied workers and to evaluate the role of existing Government plans and programme as remedial measures to address it.

Methodology

The present empirical research was conducted among the Dera weavers of Berhampur city, Ganjam District, Odisha. Anthropological methods such as observation (participant & non-participant) and interview were used for primary data collection. Participant and Non-Participant observation methods were used to examine the role women weavers in different phases of weaving process. Key informants were interviewed using semi-structured interview schedule to understand the dynamics of women’s participation and get insights on different issues and problems encountered by the Dera women weaver.

The Dera Weavers:

Dera People are Telugu Patta weavers of Ganjam District, best known for their silk weaving tradition. The oral history indicates that Dera weavers have come from Rajamundry, Andhra Pradesh by the recruitment of Mahuri King of Ganjam District about 600 years ago to serve Goddess Budhithakurani as her Bunakar Sebayat. It is said that soon after their arrival in Berhampur, for some time they were settled in a temporary settlement, locally known as ‘Dera’. Subsequently, local people started addressing such people as ‘Dera’. They primarily inhabit in different places of Ganjam District, such as Berhampur, Padnavpur, Konkarada, Pitala, Kurlu, Patrapur, Dorabandh & Kabisurya Nagar. Dera or Dewanga is a sub-caste of Hinduism. Marriage within same clan is prohibited. They are well versed with Telugu as their mother tongue, but they speak & understand Odia language.

Results & Discussion

The present study reveals that, there are 112 weavers’ families who still continue the weaving activities in the Berhampur city with a total population of 524 (274 male and 250 female). Looking at the male and female weavers’ statistics indicates that 89% of them belong to male and 11% are female. In 12 households women play the role of main weaver and in remaining 100 households male members play the role of main weavers. However, women play very crucial role in assisting the men in the process. Out of the above active 112 families, total 78 weavers have been registered in either of the following three Co-operative Societies and the rest 34 Weavers have been coming under the Sahukars or doing their weaving activities independently.

Sl. No.	Name of the Weavers Co-Operative Society	Total No. of Working Weavers	Male Weavers	Female Weavers
1	Chowdeswari Silk Weaver's Co-operative Society Limited	24	22	02
2	Berhampur Cotton & Silk Weaver's Co-operative Society Limited	16	13	03
3	The Berhampur Silk Weaver's Co-operative Society Limited	38	37	01
Total		78	72	06

Role of Dera Women in the Weaving Process:

Handloom sector is a household based economic activities. All the members of the family participate in the weaving and other allied activities. Women and adolescent girls play vital role in weaving process of Berhampuri Patto saree. Along with weaving, Dera women performs other associated allied activities, such as winding, warping, tying, dyeing & sizing, which are very important components of weaving process. The role of Dera women in different stages of the weaving process are explained in detail herein below:

1. **Purchase of Yarn:** The women plays no role in this process, even the male weavers have very limited role in this process. The Cooperative Societies as well as Sahukars purchase yarn from Bangalore, Karnataka & Malda (West Bengal). The Cooperative Society or Sahukar provides the yarns to the weavers. The Bangalore yarn is used for tying of the *tasán*, whereas the Malda yarn is used for weaving. For finalisation of two saree, the weavers required 400 grams of Bangalore yarn and 1200 grams of Malda yarn.
2. **Degumming:** For this process the yarn is degummed with the solution of soap at 45 Degree Celsius up to boiling temperature for 1-2 hours. After degumming treatment, yarn is washed well with water. Men and women both take part in the degumming process, after which the yarn becomes smooth.
3. **Silk Dyeing:** Men weavers dye the yarn after removal of the stain from the yarn. Dyeing is carried out for required colour. Synthetic dyes are used for dyeing of silk. After complete exhaustion, the material is taken out, squeezed mildly, washed in warm water, followed by cold water, then squeezed, dried in open air. Women play no role in this process.

4. **Silk Drying:** Subsequent to the dyeing of the silk yarn by the husband, the wife or other ladies of the family would dry the yarn outside of the house for three hours; however they avoid direct sunlight in this process.
5. **Sizing:** Sizing is carried out by the female members of the family. The boiled rice (*peja*) is used for sizing to increase the strength of the yarn & to bear the friction during the weaving. Only the Bangalore Yarn (*Tanisuta*) is merged in this gruel. After sizing, drying of warp is done in Village Street in proper climatic conditions at moderate temperature. It is essential for better weaving & maintaining texture of the fabric.
6. **Piecing:** After the sizing, the warp is wound up over six pairs of lease rod & taken up for piecing, i.e. tying with end pieces of previous warp, for drafting & denting. The process is conducted by some specified women, who belong to Dera community. These specific ladies do not weave and associated indirectly and do this specific task. Normally in every weaver street there is one lady who is doing this special task.
7. **Beaming:** After piecing, the warp is taken to the open space for beaming. The warp threads are kept straight with number of posts. For a single saree, three pairs of wood rod are required for purpose of beaming. Warp threads are wound over a pair of wooden rod for two meters & then another pair is used for the next two meters. This process is done by the male members of the family, with the helps the other brother weavers.
8. **Loom Arrangement:** Fixing the yarn to the loom or loom arrangement is basically done by the male members. The Bangalore yarn which was rolled to the roller is fixed to the *achu* of the loom. Then this yarn is fixed to *dongu* of the loom. Then *Palka* is fixed to the weaving comb (*eni*) and then weaving process is started. Throw Shuttle Pit Loom are basically used by the Dera Weavers in Berhampur City.
9. **Weft Winding:** Weft winding is done by the ladies of the family. The winding process of weft is carried out with the help of *Natai* (*Panti*) through their hand. First plying of threads is done with *Natai*. Then small hanks from *Natai* are taken out and transferred to the *Rati*. They use to take two days for completion of this task.
10. **Pirn Winding:** This work is also performed by the ladies and it will take one day for completing the work. After weft winding the threads transferred to the pirns (bobbins) with the help of *Arata* (*Ratnam*). When the yarn is fixed to bobbin, it is called *Kandi*.
11. **Weaving:** For this activity, for weaving Berhampuri Phoda Kumbha designs, two skilled weavers do their job of weaving. Main weaver operates the loom, to assist him in weaving a side weaver is present. Weaving in a Throw shuttle Pit Loom cannot be completed by a single weaver. So, basically both husband and wife do the weaving process in a weaver's family. Both husband and the wife put much effort in the whole weaving process, because for weaving even a Plain Saree, the body will take four days and the Aanchal will take two days.
12. **Polishing:** After weaving 6 Inches of the saree, it will be polished through a wet cloth, by which the yarn becomes strong. The above process will continue till completion of

the weaving of the saree. In a twelve hand saree will be polished for six times and similarly a fourteen hand saree, it will be polished for seven times. This process is done by both men & women.

13. **Folding and packing:** After completion of the weaving the saree will be taken out of the loom and then it will be folded. After folding the saree, it will be tied in a Malda Yarn thread. Then it will be covered in a paper and then it will once again tie in a plain thread. Folding is carried out by both men and women members.

14. **Marketing:** After completion of the weaving, the marketing of saree are mainly done by the male members of the family, in which women play no role at all. The male weaver of the family use to sell the saree, either to the Co-operative society/Sahukar, in consideration of specified amount.

A comparative account showing the division of labour of the entire weaving process:

Sl. No.	Stages of Weaving	Male	Female	Both
1	Purchase of Yarn	✓	--	--
2	Degumming	--	--	✓
3	Silk Dyeing	✓	--	--
4	Drying	--	✓	--
5	Sizing	--	✓	--
6	Piecing	--	✓	--
7	Beaming	✓	--	--
8	Loom Arrangement	✓	--	--
9	Weft Winding	--	✓	--
10	Pirn Winding	--	✓	--
11	Weaving	--	--	✓
12	Polishing	--	--	✓
13	Folding& Packing	--	--	✓
14	Marketing	✓	--	--

Issues and Challenges Experienced by Dera Women Weavers:

Women in the Dera community who are engaged in weaving process come across different issues and challenges in day to life. The present study highlights following major issues and challenges experienced by the Dera women weavers;

- Nearly 90 % cases, it is found that women are never listed as primary weavers. They are considered as secondary workers, who help the men in weaving process.
- Even if women plays major role in designing & weaving, but do not play any role in activities like, procuring raw materials & selling the finished products etc.
- Women are being marginalised in the sector with little or no ownership over loom.
- They face various health problems like, fading eye-sight, bone related problems, back pain, leg pain, joint pain, anaemia etc.
- Over 50% Dera Women are illiterate or semi-literate and due to low economic condition making them entirely dependent upon either on husband or son.
- The debts, illness and the factors of globalization, sudden domination of power loom and industrialization are also affecting the Dera weavers in general and women in particular.

Governments Plans & Programmes for the Development of Women Weavers:

The Government has formulated various Schemes/Programmes, which empower women who are engaged in handloom sector.

- There is 100% subsidy to the women weavers for the construction of work-shed under National Handloom Development Programme.
- 70% subsidy is provided to women weavers for enrolment under NIOS & IGNOU Courses.
- Under Health Package Scheme with regards to maternity benefits, the woman weaver or women of weaver's household will be entitled to a lump sum grant of Rs. 500 per delivery twice in her lifetime.
- The Ministry of Textile, Government of India have instituted the "Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya National Award" for women weavers and artisans in the 2017. The basic objective is recognising the "excellent craftsmanship and hard-work being put in by millions of women weavers to preserve handloom and handicraft heritage".

Though the above schemes/programmes are meant for women weavers specifically, it is found that the above schemes have not been implemented properly among the women weavers of the Berhampur City. However, as there is continuous decline in number of weavers in the Berhampur City, the following schemes are implemented by Government for both the male and female weavers for preservation and promotion of this age old woven craft.

1. Mahatma Gandhi Bunakar Bima Yojana (MGBBY): The basic objective of this Yojana is to provide enhanced insurance cover to the handloom weavers in the case of natural as well as accidental death and also higher sum assured. The Govt. of India had launched "MGBBY for handloom weavers to provide insurance cover by associating with LIC. Under this Scheme, the Govt. provides insurance that apply to all community weavers in case of natural death, accidental death as well as partial/permanent disability caused to the weavers due to any accident. In case of natural death of the member, a sum assured of Rs 60,000/- will become

payable to the nominee. In case of accidental death or Total Permanent disability, a sum assured of 1,50,000/- and in case of Partial disability a sum assured of Rs 75,000/- will become payable to the Member/nominee” (www.indiafilings.com/learn/mahatma-gandhi-bunkar-bima-yojana-mgbby).

2. Mukhayamantri Bayana Jyoti Yojana: This Scheme provides financial support to handloom weavers of Odisha to purchase an Inverter with Battery, one Ceiling Fan, Two LED Tube Light and wiring material.

3. Promotion of Handloom Industries: This scheme discontinued in the year 2005-2006 which was instituted in the year 1996-1997.

4. Health Insurance Scheme: The scheme provides health care facility to handloom weavers through a health insurance company.

5. Yarn Supply Scheme: This is very important scheme which provides good quality yarn at lower prices than the open market at the weaver’s door steps through depots, which have been very helpful in sustenance of their engagement in handloom trade.

6. Sunetra Scheme: This scheme provides universal eye health care for all the citizens and provides free screening & treatment for all eye diseases.

7. National Handloom Development Co-operation Limited: Objective is for inclusive and sustainable growth of handloom sector with focused, flexible & holistic approach to meet the challenges of domestic, global expansion of overall handloom market through strategic approach to facilitate the raw material supply to the weavers of the Country

8. Raw Material Bank: The main objective is to impart knowledge to weavers on procurement of raw materials, marketing and production of fabrics. This scheme protects the local weavers from paying extra cost while buying the raw material. There are three raw material banks in Ganjam district.

9. Self-employment Programme: Under this scheme Mudra loans, raw material, looms and accessories are being provided to weavers to encourage self-employment.

Remedial Measures:

Suggestions for development of Dera women weavers

- Women weavers should be brought under the National Employment Guarantee Scheme.
- Encouraging women weavers to participate in entrepreneurship on priority basis.
- Implementation of skill development programmes for the Women weavers to empower them economically.
- Establishment of free medical camps & mobile health center in the handloom cluster.
- Establishment of Weaver Co-operative Societies by Self-Help Groups exclusively for women weavers.
- Literacy programme for women weavers.

- Proper skill training to women weavers on the material & designs.

Conclusion:

The study revealed that the Dera women, along with all household chores, play significant role by assisting their husbands or male members in weaving process of the Berhampuri Patta Saree, as they are engaged in tedious pre & post weaving works, such as dyeing, sizing, piecing and polishing. These works have been unrecognised & unpaid for many decades, due to the patriarchal nature of the Dera society. Dera women do not directly contribute in marketing of the final product, procurement of raw materials and finalization of the designs. They are exposed to different health problems associated with weaving. Concerted efforts are required to restore the centrality of Dera women in this age-old woven craft, make their invisible roles more visible & strengthened their capacity to carry on the weaving legacy. By providing marketing support, Government aid, basic training facility, Dera women weavers can be empowered using their traditional skills. Handloom Industry is a great platform to show the skill and talent of women weavers at the top level. The problem of female weavers can be handled by qualitative modification, guidance & protection for the balanced development by Government in Handloom Industry (*Shazil & Munir, 2014, 83*) [11].

References:

1. Premasundar B. & Kannan J. 2013, Women in Handloom Industry: problems and prospects, EPRA International Journal of Economics and Business Review, Volume1, Issue I, 32-38.
2. Srinivasa Rao D., Sreedhar N. & Ravi Kumar B., 2018, Involvement of Women in Handloom Segment: An empirical study with reference to Krishna District, Andhra Pradesh, American Economic & Social Review, Volume No. 3, 1-11.
3. Humbe Veena R. & Bhalerao Pallavi. 2018, Social Media - A tool for empowering Women Working in Handloom Industry, International Journal for Innovative Research in multidisciplinary Field, Volume 4, Issue 5, 260-265.
4. MRIDULA, D. (2013) Women empowerment by way of Muga Silk Industry. Global Research Methodology Journal, Vol-II, 8th issue. p. 1-8 Available from:<http://www.grmgrlaranya.com>[Accessed: 10th January 2016].
5. Shazil Tasneem & Munir Abdul. 2014, Female Work Participation in Handloom Industry-A Case Study of Mubarakpur Town, Azamgarh District, U.P, Journal of Education & Social Policy, Volume 1, 76-83.
6. www.indiafilings.com/learn/mahatma-gandhi-bunkar-bima-yojana-mgbby retrieved on 17.02.2025.
7. Annual Report-2022-23, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India
8. Handloom Census, 2019-2020, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India.