The Textile industry has occupied a unique place in our country and its contribution to industrial production, employment and export earning is very significant. While Indian handloom weavers had a wider market in ancient times but have faced several challenges with the advent of textile mills. At present the industry is passing through a crucial juncture – it is trying to gain niche markets through its unique product style and modernisation of the craftsmanship. However, the condition of workers in this sector continues to be bleak and unless they are taken care of, the sector will die just because of lack of skilled manpower. Handloom industry in Tamil Nadu has in its fold more than five lakh handlooms providing direct employment to about 13 lakh people and livelihood to about 30 lakh people in associated areas. The industry has different types of handlooms such as: looms for weaving cotton clothes, producing silks, art silks and other cotton products. A survey in Madurai district of Tamil Nadu which is third largest handloom producing district of the state throws up interesting perspective on this issue.

Majority of respondents work for 8-10 hours per day, while about ten per cent of workers were observed to be working for 12-14 hours per day. The wages of handloom sector workers are based mostly on piece rate. However the rates are quite low and therefore most of the respondents belong to the low income group with income ranging between ₹ 500 to ₹ 1000 per month. Just about two per cent of the respondents have income above ₹ 3000 per month. The remunerations are therefore much below even those under MGNREGS. This shows that the handloom weavers have very low bargaining capacity while deciding the remuneration rates. As a result we find that the handloom weavers not only suffer from lack of nutritious food and low standard of living, but also most of them suffer from debts. The working conditions are also not very supportive with majority of workers having only a day’s leave in a month. Basic facilities in the workplace is also lacking and the women workers face additional hardships. Effective steps should be taken both by the co-operative society and the master weavers now towards improving remunerations and working conditions of the actual weavers – the workers.

While this small survey highlights the basic problems faced by the workers in particular, this also points to a malady of the sector in general. Because of the pathetic outcome, young people are not interested in taking up this as an occupation. As a result skill formation is coming to a grinding halt and it would not be long that the sector would face shortage of adequately skilled weavers. That would surely mark deterioration in quality of the products and demise of the sector.

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