

Project Report

Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India

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Our country is a vast reserve of diverse cultural traditions and practices. Textiles has been one of the most significant village industries, employing the largest number of people, next only to agriculture. It is also the largest employer of women. Before the introduction of mill made fabric, the handloom weavers of our country enjoyed a respectable, lucrative profession. Over the years, due to competition from powerlooms, mills and apathy of successive Governments towards the welfare of Handloom weavers, their numbers has dropped. With increasing demand for handloom fabric, there is also a risk of imitation fabric threatening to endanger the remaining few handloom weavers. There is a growing need to protect the Handloom regions and nurture the traditional practices that were followed. To preserve our cultural heritage, studying and documenting such practices and safeguarding the livelihood of our weavers assumes great importance.

The aim of the project was to identify various Handloom Clusters in Karnataka and create an archive of the types of traditional practices followed. Although the initial scope was much larger, encompassing the need to intervene and revive these traditional practices, the initial phase of the project was limited to conducting a survey of the existing traditional practices of the state. DESI Trust, which operates from Bangalore and which has been a frontrunner in the Handloom movement in our country, is implementing this project. Since DESI, along with its sister organization, Charaka, is well versed with the regions within Karnataka, the scope of this project will be limited to the local traditional practices of this region. Similar studies need to be taken up by other such organizations operating in different states.

To begin with, there was a need to understand and define the concept of a “Handloom Cluster”. Once this definition was agreed upon, there was an effort made to travel across the state to various traditional clusters and study them. As part of the Phase I of this project, the weaving intensive districts of Gadag, Bagalkot, Koppal, Haveri were taken up as a case study. Recommendations were documented and put forward after studying these clusters.

Defining a Handloom Cluster

In order to study and document the handloom clusters of our country, a suitable, agreeable definition of the Cluster is necessary. A series of meetings were held during Apr-Jun 2014 to arrive at this definition. These meetings were attended by experts in the field of Handlooms, Management, Textiles and Sustainable Practices.

- A 30 active looms including pre-loom activities may be defined as cluster
- Active loom means that the weaver should be working at least of 100 days in a year
- The weaver groups producing plain cloth should also be included
- Geographical area of such cluster should be well defined and compact
- Powerlooms should be kept out of these clusters

Based on this, there are various types of handloom clusters in Karnataka. Near every major seat of power, historically, there has been a thriving handloom settlement. The handloom clusters in Karnataka can be classified into:

1. The Rural: Gadag, Gajendragad etc.
2. The Classical: Ilkal, Molakalmooru etc.
3. The Tribal: Chamarajnaragar, Raichur etc.
4. New Handloom clusters: Heggodu, Melkote etc.

These clusters can further be classified based on the material used for weaving – cotton, silk and wool.

Handloom Clusters of Karnataka – A Case Study

Gadag Cotton Handloom Cluster, Gadag

Gadag Cluster is a famous cotton trading centre for Jayadhar variety of cotton. It has also occupied a significant place in the Handloom industry of Karnataka. There are about 3600 active working handlooms in the cluster. Around 10000 people are depending in this industry for their livelihood. The cluster is also very much popular for its traditional product called "Gaadi Dhari" saris. These "Gaadi dhari" traditional saris are largely worn by women of north Karnataka and some parts of Masharashtra. These saris are known for their combination of harmonious colours, quality and richness. Other than saris, they produce various other products too. Like towels, bed spreads, chadars etc.

Ilkal Handloom Cluster, Bagalkot







Ilkal town in Bagalkot district is known for its saris. Ilkal sarees are woven using cotton warp on the body and art silk warp for border and pallav portion of the sari. In some cases instead of art silk, pure silk is also used. Ilkal saree has been accorded geographical indication tag. It is an ancient weaving centre where the weaving seems to have started in the 8th century AD. The uniqueness of sari is joining of the body warp with pallu warp with a series of loops locally called as tope teni technique. This saree in contrast colour border has a contrast temple design pallu. The colours traditionally used are pomegranate red, brilliant peacock, green and were produced mainly on pit looms.

Challekere Woollen Handloom Cluster

Challakere, located near Chitradurga, is a town that is known as a commercial centre for woollen Kambalis. There are around 1600 Kambali weavers in this taluka headquarters. The Kambalis woven here are the most sought after in the markets, particularly from Malnad area of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.

It was felt that though there were so many weavers, the market exposure of their product was very minimal. Their product range was also very small and designs very basic.

Molakalmuru Silk Handloom Cluster

Molakalmuru Taluk of the Chitradurga district is synonymous with pure silk sarees and is a well-known handloom industry hub. Here, the purity of silks is combined with the intricate weaving techniques making them the best hand-woven silk sarees ever. Handloom weavers at Molakalmuru employ highly intricate weaving techniques and produce silk sarees that are unmatched in quality. Molakalmuru sarees are predominantly woven under the three-shuttle looms and the speciality of these sarees is their abstract temple motif. Weavers from

Molakalmuru also produce designer sarees consisting of ethnic multi-design and multicolour combinations and such sarees consume up to 40 days to be weaved. Thus, Molakalmuru offers extensive variety of silk sarees to choose from.

At present, this town has around 350 weavers who make their living through weaving. A decade ago, this taluka had weavers numbering over 1,500 engaged in this occupation. Drastic decrease in the number of weavers is due to the very low income that they get. The socio-economic condition of most of the weavers is pitiful and because of this most of them have taken up other occupations leaving the silk handloom weaving industry in a lurch.

Nidagundi Cotton Handloom Cluster, Bijapur



Nidagundi village in Bijapur district is well known for Handloom industry engaged in the weaving of cotton towels, lungies, Bed sheets, art silk sarees and uniforms. Nidagundi handloom products are a house hold name in North Karnataka and many other parts of Maharashtra. Many villages around Nidagundi also are engaged in various pre-loom activities.

Shri. Mohan Nidugundi, one of the trustees of Shri Annapoorneshwari handloom weavers co-operative Society, says that there is a growing demand for their products and slowly the market is expanding. He was hopeful that many organizations such as Desi and Charaka would come forward and provide the necessary market for their products.

One more characteristic of this cluster is that weavers don't work full time on their looms. Based on their convenience, the weavers undertake weaving assignments while holding on to other occupations too.

Kinnal Handloom Cluster

Kinnal is a tiny village in Koppal district. The villages Hosalli. Bevinhalli. Shahpur and Igalkeri surround the village. Around 400 people have taken up weaving as their livelihood. Besides, carpentry being their second major occupation, marvellous wooden art pieces, articles and toys are also produced. The Kinnal handloom weaver co-operative society was established with two throw shuttle pit looms, with the main objective to provide employment to the weavers. In the initial years, weavers produced Gadi dhari cotton sarees and Khanas. Weavers later brought diversification in simple cotton sarees and started producing Ilkal type sarees with cotton as warp and weft, rayon in Pallu (the part of the saree used to cover the head) and also Janata sarees. Janata sarees were woven with 60s and 40s count cotton in warp and

weft, respectively. Borders as well as Pallu of these Janata sarees comprise of series of bands in different colours. They also produce bedspreads and Jamkhanas (floor coverings) of various sizes.

Charaka Handloom Cluster, Shimoga

Charaka is a women's multipurpose industrial co-operative society situated at Bhimanakone Village on the Western Ghats of Southern India. It is a small but significant success story. It produces naturally dyed cotton handloom garments in a composite handloom unit in Bhimanakone. Readymade garments produced here are sold in cities like Bangalore, Mysore, Dharwad and Shimoga at retail outlets under the brand name DESI. These garments are much sought after by the young and the old, men and women.

The most significant aspect about this co-operative is the work it has done in the field of natural dyeing. Unlike other ventures in natural dyeing, Charaka has focused its attention on cost effective production and some of the natural products have become as inexpensive as chemical dyed ones.

In an effort to provide job opportunities to more people, Charaka has de-centralised its processes. People get trained in Charaka on various processes and then they set up their own units in the comfort of their homes. The weavers, dyers or tailors need not travel too far to earn livelihood. Also, most of these workers being women, can balance work and household.

There are currently 2 tailoring units in Sagara 1 tailoring unit each in Genasinakuni and Hebbailu, exclusive Khowdi (quilt) unit and kids wear unit in Heggodu, 1 weaving unit each in Bhimanakone, Handigodu, Purappemane, Murkai and Ragi Hakkalu. An exclusive natural dye unit that specialises in Kasimkari (black) at Atwadi.

Apart from these villages that are within the same geographical area, Charaka also outsource weaving to different self-help groups, organisations and individual weavers outside the district. Naturally dyed yarn is supplied to units in Gajendragad, Mahalingapura, Davangere, Kerur etc and the woven fabric is bought from them.

Dotihal Handloom Cluster, Koppala



This small village in Kushtagi taluk of Koppala district is known for its traditionally woven handloom sarees. It is one of the oldest clusters that is still existing despite the onslaught of machines and powerlooms. Earlier, bedsheets, lungis, towels were woven here. But to promote traditional sarees, since the last decade, traditional Ilkal sarees are being woven here. This is exported to Maharashtra, where there is a great demand for 8-9 yards sarees. The society here has won several accolades for the sustained work that they have been doing despite all odds. This is a very backward region, with sparing facilities. But the undaunted weavers continue to uphold their family tradition of weaving. They conduct exhibitions in various cities and have seen a growing demand for such sarees.

Navalagund Handloom Cluster, Gadag



It hosts one of the best centres for handmade cotton dhurries (or carpets). All the weavers here are women and from minority community. This is a traditional skill that is passed on through generation. The unique feature of this tradition is that the women always teach the art to their daughter-in-laws, but not to their daughters. It keeps the family together and ensures that there is a unique bond formed between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

The carpets are sold to Cauvery Emporium run by the Government. The designs are traditional and borrowed largely from local motifs like peacock design. This is a very old art, practiced from the time of the Nawabs. The dhurries are completely made of cotton. The weaves are of very good quality. There is a common facility centre created where all the women come and work on the weaving.

Mahalingapura Handloom Cluster, Bagalkot



There are some weaving societies in Mahalingapura, which is a traditional weaving area. The societies here are well established and supply fabric, sarees to various organizations, Charaka being one of them. When a team from Desi went for the study, a meeting was arranged to speak to all the weavers directly. Around 40 weavers had assembled. Handloom leader Shri.

Sangappa Hali addressed the weavers and explained to them the significance of handloom weaving, the perils of moving to powerloom and how they are part of the future. The weavers were assured of increase in their wages if they worked hard and be regular.

Shri. Jummanal, Chairman of another organization, the Banahatti Powerloom and Handloom Weavers Society, addressed the gathering and urged the Govt. to implement the Handloom Reservation Act effectively. Handloom weavers faced a lot of issues like non-availability of markets, no assurance of livelihood. He welcomed organizations like Desi and Charaka who have come forward to secure a market for their products and assured that people were ready to return to Handloom.

Shri. Shivashankar Mudalagi, head of the society at Mahalingapur, proposed a plan for increase of looms, thereby increasing the production.

The team also came across an almost extinct of weaving “Jaadi”, which is woven on a “Kuni” loom. Out of 80 such looms that were flourishing in this place, only two were left. Shri. Beerappa, who works along with his wife on the loom, promised to supply this fabric to Charaka.

Tumminakatte Handloom Cluster, Haveri

Tumminakatte Handloom Cluster has benefited from the Government of India Cluster Development project and has setup a weaving centre that produces towels, bedsheets, and dhoties. Puja vastra, puja dhoti used for religious ceremonies are its speciality. It is supplied all across India.

With increasing adulteration and availability of cheaper imitation fabric, the handloom weavers are losing confidence in their profession and leaning towards powerlooms. Some of the handloom weavers have already switched to powerlooms and many other are contemplating it. If the Handloom Reservation Act is implemented stringently, this centre has the potential to become the number one centre for Puja dhotis and vastra in the country.

Gajendragad Handloom Cluster, Gadag





Gajendragad of Gadag district is a prominent weaving town which consisted of thousands of handloom weavers earlier. A visit to the weavers' colony here reveals the sad state of their being now. With this region under severe water shortage, the people here have to work hard to make ends meet. There is however a ray of hope with organizations such as Charaka coming forward and providing work for the weavers here. Traditional cotton sarees have been revived and are being woven using natural dyes.

Vandala Handloom Cluster, Bagalkot



At the Vandala Khadi centre, the situation is quite different from what was seen at the other societies. Govt. had provided the equipment, the infrastructure and all the necessary facilities. However, there was no emphasis on training the people. Shri. Biradar, who explained the issues said that without proper training and enabling people, the equipment was not put to use. Also, he said that people were not ready to come to work. The production was low only due to non-availability of labour.

Rabakavi Handloom Cluster, Bagalkot



Speaking to Shri. Raghavendra, founder of Women's handloom weavers' cooperative society, which employs around 20 women, the team gauged the situation of handloom weavers here. It was unfortunate that Rabakavi, which was a flourishing handloom town had now lost most of its handlooms to powerlooms. The soothing, rhythmic sound of handloom was missing and was drowned by a deafening noise of the machines running continuously.

Handlooms would give the women the comfort of working from their homes. With powerlooms, they had to travel long distances to the "factories" and had to just wait without work in case of power cuts, which was pretty frequent in this place. The women said that they would be happy to work on handlooms. If they are provided assured market, they were ready to completely convert to Handlooms.

This cluster is located one of the most important traditional weaving area, which has been a stronghold in Handlooms. Every effort needs to be made to ensure that the weavers are not left in the lurch and forced to switch to powerlooms.

Mallapura Handloom Cluster, Bagalkot

This area is known for weaving lungis, towels, and bedsheets. Naturally dyed fabric is being introduced here, the weavers are working with Charaka and Desi to obtain naturally dyed yarn and use that to weave the towels, lungis. The team that went to study this centre met the weavers of Saleswara handloom weavers co-operative Society. A group of 35 weavers working here were part of the meeting. They assured that they would increase the number of looms to support the weaving of naturally dyed fabric.

Guledgudda Handloom Cluster, Bagalkot



Guledgudda is famous for “Kana” fabric. The team was welcomed by the weavers of Shri. Banashankari Handloom weavers co-operative Society and Shri. S.L Ghanti, who had travelled from another weaving town, Kerur, which is 29 Kms away from Guledgudda.

The women weavers expressed their solidarity towards handloom. Another centre at Guledgudda, Banashree Handloom weavers Co-operative Society welcomed the team next. The women there expressed their wish to work for Desi and Charaka as the organization KHDC they are working for was not providing them regular work.

Melkote Handloom Cluster, Melkote

Melkote is traditionally known for silk sarees, dhotis. An organization called Janapada Seva Trust has been making Khadi fabric and supplying it all over the state. There is a very good local market in this area itself, with the dhotis, khadi fabric being consumed locally as well. The silk sarees are supplied to Priyadarshini and other famous retailers.

Hudli Handloom Cluster, Belgaum

On the advice of Mahatma Gandhi, Shri. Gangadharrao Deshpande started Khadi work for the first time in Karnataka during 1923 at Kumari in Hudli. What started as a group of ashrams for the Swaraj movement back then, is now a flourishing Khadi and Gramodyog centre which is well maintained by the society. The society has managed to stay profitable and utilizes local resources for raw materials. In addition to Khadi, this centre also has a pickle making unit, fruit processing unit, bio gas department, and soap department. It has won several national awards. Gandhiji had visited this centre back in 1937 and stayed here for a conference for seven days. A rare collection of photographs of Mahatma Gandhi is a priceless possession of a museum here. The centre takes care of all round development of women and weavers here providing healthcare, insurance and financial help. An in-house training centre to give training on spinning and weaving for artisans to upgrade their skills is a unique plus point of this centre.

Challenges facing Handloom

About 70% of the fabric being sold in the markets today as Handloom is actually powerloom fabric. Since it is not easy to find out, this leaves the consumers cheated. Also, it is one of the greatest threats faced by Handloom weavers as it eats away into their share of the market.

Government has a huge demand for cloth for their internal departments. State Govt itself requires 400 lakhs metres of cloth per year for their departments, this is procured largely from other parts of the country. The Govt. is not showing enough intent towards promoting the local tradition and utilizing local resources to meet the demands

People need to be made aware of the story behind handlooms. That it is not just a fabric and some designs, but a strong social statement, a way of life.

Due to a lot of challenges and hardships faced by the traditional weaving families of handloom, the next generation is moving towards other professions resulting in loss of vital knowledge

Handloom Reservation Act

The handloom act of 1985 reserves some 11 variety of cloth to be woven exclusively as handloom. This ensured that there is a clear boundary for handloom and other fabric. However, the law is being violated by a few greedy traders who have been forcing powerloom weavers to weave these reserved fabric, resulting in the Handloom weavers left to fend for themselves.

Satyagraha

Kaimagga Satyagraha, a non-violent protest was taken up by weavers of Karnataka, supported by weavers from Seemandhra. This is going on since a year, included hunger strikes, Padayatra.

The weavers are fighting for their rights to livelihood, some Key Demands were kept forth before State Government. The loss of livelihood of handloom weavers due to adulteration of fabric is one of the key problems they face. Government is giving additional incentives to powerloom weavers like subsidized electricity and other benefits. Handloom weavers are left in the lurch, to fend for themselves, with no benefits whatsoever. Even the single lamp that is used for lighting in their weaving sheds, which is their only electricity consumption is not subsidized. Giving incentives to powerloom sector is becoming a death knell for handloom sector. So the main demand of the weavers has been “Do not kill handloom”

Recommendations

Based on the studies conducted during the project period and after multiple brain storming session with experts in the field of Handloom, Sustainability, DESI Trust has come up with the following recommendations to establish Handloom Clusters and preserve our cultural heritage.

1. The Government of India needs to recognize and define Handloom Clusters by consulting the handloom organizations which have been working for decades in this field
2. Demarcate traditional weaving regions and classify them as Handloom Clusters to enable the societies in the area to avail incentives from the Government
3. A handloom cluster should be safeguarded from installation of powerlooms within its perimeter. Permission to setup powerlooms should be strictly denied.
4. Government should provide incentives to Handloom weavers and workers
5. State Governments have huge demand for cloth for school uniforms, hospitals, offices. This should be purchased from the same state without having to import it from other states. This will ensure that the handloom weavers are provided assured income.
6. Strict enforcement of the Handloom Reservations Act of 1985 should be taken up with utmost urgency
7. Awareness programmes for consumers of Handlooms should be taken up to help them understand the importance of buying and promoting only authentic handloom