



Socio-Economic Profile of Silk Weavers: A Micro-Level Study of Srinagar City

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Abstract:

Kashmiri silk weavers and silk products are of international repute. Though the Kashmiri silk products are enjoying a ready market both at home and abroad, there are grey areas demanding immediate attention to sustain and further improve this traditional craft and to help the Kashmiri silk weavers to achieve new heights. In the present study, we have analysed the socio-economic profile and the problems of silk weavers in Srinagar city, trying to offer possible recommendations to address the grey areas. This study is based on both primary and secondary data sources. A primary survey was conducted in Srinagar City during the year 2012, consisting of 100 respondents chosen randomly. The study results revealed that the situation of the weavers was worrying: they were feeble due to illiteracy, financial constraints, health problems, meagre remuneration and poor Government support.

Key words: silk weavers, socio-economic profile, weavers' problems, micro-level study, Srinagar City

Introduction

Kashmir has a rich cultural heritage of handloom industry and handicraft. Kashmiris are world famous for their magnificent workmanship and produced the most beautiful and exquisite hand-spun and hand-woven textiles. The artistic skills of the traditional handloom weavers are second to none. Silk weaving was introduced to Kashmir by Maharaja Pratap Singh in the late 19th and early 20th century. In and around Srinagar, the small silk industry produces exclusive super-fine quality silk-chiffon, chinon, tabby, crepe, charmoise satin, satin and habutti silk. This handloom industry survived mainly on its aesthetics, uniqueness and craftsmanship. Fascinating motifs and super design of the Chinon, Chiffon, IAL, Charmous fabric assigned special importance to the sector.

Despite strong competition from mill made textiles, the handmade fabrics are still in demand to a great extent, thus fetching a premium price in the modern industrialized market. 'The hand-woven fabric' is symbolic of man's endeavour to bring beauty and grace into life. Though the methods employed in making handloom fabric are simple, the result is extraordinary. This industry of Kashmir is labour intensive, tradition oriented, having a legacy of unrivalled craftsmanship with a decentralized set-up, that has spread throughout the length and breadth of the state. It is estimated that around 1 to 1.25 lac people are involved in silk and carpet industry, among which silk industry constitutes around 15 %. In Srinagar city the number of people engaged in silk weaving and allied activities is around 3000, though there is lack of adequate information available for silk weavers in the whole *Kashmir* and particularly the Srinagar city. To fill such gap, the present investigation was taken up to study the present status of Kashmiri silk weavers.

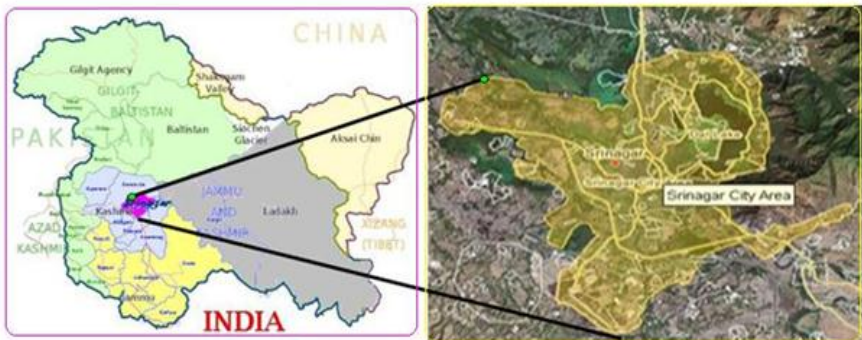
Silk weaving in Kashmir is largely practised in the informal sector. There is only one governmental silk weaving factory in Srinagar at Rajbagh, a situation which adds to the apathies this sector is facing. The traditional art is worldwide famous but despite its rich variety and ingenuity its share in the world silk and carpet industry is only a minuscule percent.

Rising manufacturing prices of the silk products, substandard raw material in the market, competitive global market, low wages of the hard working weavers, large share of profit appropriated by the middlemen, all these are some of the factors in the present times which have led silk and carpet industry in the doldrums. The industry over the past decades have become non-lucrative to the weavers who by sheer skill of weaving form the most essential element in the whole trade chain. The importance of this sector lies in the fact that it has enormous employment potential: it does not consume scarce resources, does not cause pollution and is environment friendly. Therefore, the social cost benefit ratio of all investment in this sector goes up manifold.

Study Area

Srinagar city is situated at an average elevation of 1585 meters above mean sea level and it is spread over in the heart of the oval shaped Valley of Kashmir. It is situated between 74°56' - 75°79' East Longitude and 33°18'- 34°45' North Latitude. The city, with a population of around 12.7 lakh souls (2011), is spread over an area of about 294 Km². It is located in the heart of the Valley on both banks of River Jehlum. It has a rich historical past with bountiful natural heritage, being also the summer capital and a major tourist destination centre of the J&K state.

LOCATION OF STUDY AREA



Database & Methodology

The present study is based on both primary as well as secondary data sources and methods used for data collection, including analysis of archival data and documents on silk and carpet industry in Kashmir. Primary data was collected through a survey conducted in different localities within *Srinagar* City during the year 2012 consisting of 100 respondents chosen randomly. Secondary data was collected from the publications of various governmental agencies, private silk units and other NGO's.

Objective of the Study

In the present study, an effort has been made to analyse the socio-economic profile, problems of silk weavers in Srinagar city and, based on this, we offer possible recommendations to address the grey areas.

Highlights of the Study

Major findings of this study are listed as:

- It was found that this business is mainly a cottage industry type, where the family members of the master weaver work with him.
- Due to the high educated unemployment level, it was found that at certain units even people with good education were working for meagre rewards or accompanying their family in such units.
- Sixty percent of the weavers reported facing health ailments: knee pain, back ache, headache, respiratory ailments and joint pain
- Weavers work in an arrangement with contractor through the debt cycle and one of the respondents told of having a debt of Rs Three Lakh.
- Weavers have ready access to credit but their daily wages are reduced to Rs 180 –190 day. Awareness about reduced wages brings in the feeling of being exploited.

- Most of the weavers responded that they begin silk weaving at an early age. The average age at which the weavers started silk weaving is 15.7 years.
- All 21 women respondents told that they are doubly burdened with responsibility to look after household and to engage in silk weaving.

Major Findings and Results

Table 1. Demographic information **n=100**

Age (in years)	Percentage of respondents	
	Males	Females
Younger (Below 25)	8	03
Middle age (Between 26-50)	65	17
Old age (Above 50)	6	01
Total	79	21

Source: Field study, 2012

Table 1 records the demographic information of the weavers. During data collection it was found that most of the silk weavers belonged to middle age group of 26-50 years, because the productivity is relatively more at this age due to their physical capabilities. Younger generation in the weavers' community preferred to take employment in the cities other than handloom weaving after their higher education. Therefore their involvement is very minimal in weaving. On the other hand involvement of older people was less conspicuous because of their physical health, strength and visual problems.

The weavers' communities have realized the importance of education and the children nowadays are aware about the role of education and therefore they develop their career by higher education. Nearly one fifth of the weavers were educated up to secondary level, and nearly one fourth up to middle school because all weavers could not afford to go in for higher education, due to family constraints, ignorance and encouragement from the family members. Such children had to discontinue their studies owing to financial problem (Table 2).

Table 2: Educational Status **n=100**

Educational Status	Percentage of respondents
Illiterate (unable to read and write)	16
Primary (I-IV standard)	21
Middle school (V-VII standard)	26
Secondary (VIII-X standard)	19
Senior secondary (XI-XII standard)	11
Graduation and above	07

Source: Field study, 2012

Family size and system are important features that contributed to the family income. It is found that the joint family still prevails in the weavers' community with 4-6 members (Table 3). The weaving occupation is one such profession which involves all family members from children to elderly, who contribute their valuable service in pre-weaving, weaving and post-weaving processes.

Table 3: Family Status **n=100**

Family Type	Percentage of respondents
Nuclear	42
Joint	58
Family Size	
Small (up to 3)	11
Medium (4-6)	74
Large (more than 6)	15

Source: Field study, 2012

Table 4: Economic Status **n=100**

Annual income (Rs.)	Percentage of respondents
Low income (Below 50,000)	37
Middle income (50,000-80,000)	59
High income (Above 80,000)	04

Source: Field study, 2012

Handmade fabrics are always having tremendous competition with power loom fabrics. Many times there is a set

back for handmade silk products because of the relative price flow of the variety of power loom inexpensive silken products in the market, lack of demand and fashion issues that in turn affect the socio-economic condition of the weavers. Approximately sixty percent of the weavers' population in *Srinagar* belonged to middle income group and others to lower income group. (Table 4)

Srinagar is dominated with the wage weaver type: in other words, weavers either are working for master weavers or in family based silk weaving units, very few being independent weavers and master weavers. Therefore the annual income of the family is very low. It has been found that about 68.7% of the weaver members engaged in weaving activities are employed for about 180 days in a year. Further, it has been revealed that 58% of the weavers are engaged in weaving for 11-15 hours a day, while 29% of them work for period of up to 10 hours hours per day. (Table 5)

Table 5: Working Status **n=100**

Category	Percentage of respondents
Independent weaver	07
Master weaver	04
Working with master weaver	45
Working in Family Owned Units	44
Working Hours /Day	
Up to 8 Hours	13
8-10 Hours	29
11-15 Hours	58

Source: Field study, 2012

As mentioned earlier, weaving requires whole family cooperation. The family members, irrespective of their age, stretch their helping hand to improve the family living. The weaver's children do work hard along with their parents and they do not receive any particular weaving training. The majority of the weavers in *Srinagar*, who inherited weaving from their forefathers, insisted to continue the family profession (Table 6). This mind-set and nature of weavers all

over India is found to be the same in various areas and it focuses on the respect, regard and honour for the profession, whether profitable or not. Their wish to continue traditional weaving is mainly related to preserving and protecting the inherited tradition alive.

One noteworthy aspect that also came to the forefront from the field study is that many children were supporting their family business despite being fairly educated, because of the prevailing high rate of educated unemployment level in the state generally and in Srinagar city in particular (Table 6).

Table 6: Socio-Personal Status **n=100**

Preferences	Percentage of respondents
Inherited	65
Job opportunity	14
Interest	03
Educated Unemployment	18
Training	-

Source: Field study, 2012

Raw material plays a vital role in the production of any product. It is found that three-fourth of the silk weavers purchased raw material i.e. silk from master weaver and the main mode of payment was found to be on credits of about sixty percent. Purchasing raw material from master weaver is convenient for the weavers in terms of time, energy, and money saving and reduces the risk of stock accumulation. On the other hand thirty five per cent of the weavers purchased raw materials on both cash and credit bases and very few purchased on cash payment (Table 7). Factors like the socio-economic status of the weavers might have influenced the mode of payment.

Table 7. Procurement of raw material by the weavers **n=100**

Source of procurement	Percentage of respondents
Master weavers	76
Local Silk dealers	18
Owned Sericulture Units	06

Mode of Payment	
Cash	04
Credit	61
Cash & Credit	35

Source: Field study, 2012

Silk weaving requires long and patient hours of work in various harmful positions on traditional looms and instruments of silk weaving. In addition, most of the looms on which weavers work are situated next to windows of the room in a very small space. Work is done in the natural light and unhygienic rooms or places, considering the strain which eyes, joints or the whole body go through during silk weaving. Overtime people engaged in silk weaving start facing health ailments due to the hard working conditions. The major health ailments which people face are muscular-skeletal in nature and they suffer mainly from headache, knee pain, joint pain, back ache and weakening eyesight. Table 8 shows the major ailments which people are prone to in silk weaving. The major ailments were joint pain and back pain, while above sixty percent of the respondents were suffering from one or another disease associated with silk weaving. Only about thirty percent were free from ailments associated with it.

Table 8: Major Health Ailments **n=100**

Name of Ailments	Percentage of respondents
Eye Sight Weakness	03
Back Ache	15
Knee Pain	08
Joint Pain	28
Respiratory Ailments	10
Total	64

Source: Field study, 2012

Conclusions:

From the present study it is concluded that the Silk weavers in *Srinagar*, mainly those who have inherited this occupation, are in a pitiable condition owing to the poor socio-

economic conditions. The majority of them are wage weavers who earn minimal wages in spite of working for more than ten hours a day. It is interesting to note that the educational status among the weavers community was not discouraging. Almost sixty per cent of the community belonged to middle income group, engaged with Master Weavers or in the family owned units. The basic raw material required for the production of silk products was silk purchased largely from the local market but sometimes from Master Weavers or local dealers, on credit.

A number of modifications and adaptations in the silken products were made in the age old traditional silken products to meet the demand of the consumers drawn from various socio-economic positions. Provision for raw materials at reasonable price, special training to improve existing weaving technology, knowledge about scientific and low cost techniques of weaving, dyeing and finishing, financial assistance and other necessary inputs is the need of the day as expressed by the weavers. Hence, to open a new panorama for these delicate and wonderful silk made-ups, the prevailing silk weaving sector need to be centralized to enhance consistency, regularity and uniformity in the production so that an appropriate channel for marketing silk products as well other diversified silk goods can be opened.

The *Kashmiri* silk goods have a ready market both at national and international levels; however this industry needs immediate attention by the State Government to improve the socio-economic status of local weavers. Further there is a necessity to publicize and expose *Kashmir* silk products through advertisement, exhibition, displays and trade fairs, to showcase the variegated silk made ups in co-operatives, allied institutions and showrooms.

Recommendations

- a) **A multi-pronged strategy** is required to revive the silk weaving sector, which includes the following:
 1. Addition of new designs and product diversification needs to be carried out.

2. Productivity of weavers needs to be improved through enhancement of skills, introduction of more efficient looms and other related equipment.
3. Greater market access needs to be provided to the silk products produced in the state through effective marketing strategy and appropriate incentives.

The National Handloom Development Corporation Ltd. (NHDC), the only national level organisation in the handloom sector, in its endeavor to provide marketing infrastructure to the State Handloom Organization, has launched a project under which marketing complexes in some major cities including Delhi, Jaipur, Hyderabad are being set up, where the State Handloom Agencies can acquire showroom premises. This could serve as an effective mechanism for marketing of the state's handloom products.

b) **Awareness**

Weavers are aware of health ailments which they and other weavers face. But the adverse impact which these ailments can have on their health and life in the long run needs to be shared with them in an articulate manner. Campaigns in association with government doctors at block level can be conducted to bring awareness, free health check-up of the weavers and steps to be taken by the weavers to prevent health ailments.

Weavers should be made aware of new technology (modern loom) citing the benefits in comparison to existing looms. The government has taken initiatives to promote handmade carpet weaving and Indian Institute of Carpet Technology runs training centers in the Kashmir valley for training weavers on the modern looms. One such center has been running in Nowgam. The weavers should be made aware on all such initiatives as they still are at a distance from all the programs and schemes being run for them.

c) **Self-Employment**

Weavers themselves expressed their willingness to start their own venture. The major hurdle which they face in this is the existing debt and hurdles in accessing loan to start their

own venture. If the issue of access to loan is addressed, possibility of weavers' starting their own venture can become a reality.

Some of the weavers were aware of government schemes and were also availing the facilities. Networking with concerned government departments (Department of Handicrafts & Department Handloom and Textile) at the village level in order to bring awareness and implementation of existing schemes can lead to the improvement of weavers' conditions.

d) **Weavers' Co-operative**

Weavers' Co-operative or society can be formed for the benefit of the weavers. The carpet weavers in these villages are unorganized as they work from home and no association covers them. By registering themselves as society or a co-operative, weavers can protect their rights and they can easily avail government schemes and subsidized loan from Khadi & Village Industries Board. Weavers' dependency of financial resources on contractors can be addressed through it. The co-operative can provide them an option to access larger audience (investors and buyers) for their carpets. Accessibility of money from banks or line departments will also become easy through the channel of co-operatives. Weavers' cooperative can be a solution to the issue of debt cycle faced by the weavers. If the weavers are registered as an artisan under Department of Handicraft they become eligible for health insurance under Rajiv Gandhi Shilpi Swasthya Bima Yojana which covers four members of a family including the artisan insured. The contribution as a premium required from weavers is only Rs 75 to 150 per annum.

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