

Globalization and the Indigenous Artisan Economy:
A Case Study of the Varanasi Silk Sari Industry

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Nesar Ahmad

Introduction and Background

For centuries, the weaving cluster of Varanasi has been renowned for its fine silk fabrics. It is estimated that there are more than 125,000 weavers in the cluster, making it one of the largest geographical concentrations of handloom weavers in the country. However, there is no concrete data available and estimates of the total number of weavers vary widely. A local NGO, PVCHR, estimates that there are approximately 500,000 weavers in and around Varanasi¹. Over the past decade, however, handloom production in the cluster has been experiencing a rapid decline, displacing the livelihoods of traditional weavers in the region.

In this background AIACA decided to conduct a case study of the Varanasi cluster with the following objectives:

- Collate available statistics on number of weavers in the cluster, and decline in employment over the past decade
- Hold public meetings with weavers to record their testimonies on problems faced by them
- Identify and catalogue grass-roots NGOs working in the area, who can be part of development initiatives in the cluster.
- Ascertain, through desk research and conversations with weavers, the causes for the decline of the handloom weaving cluster.
- Review correctional measures taken by the government, if any
- Recommend potential interventions to increase market-led growth for the Varanasi Handloom cluster

The study adopted a case study method. We interacted with all the stakeholders involved including weavers, master-weavers, *grishathas/gaddedar*s/traders², government officials,

¹ Francis and Lenin (ed.) (undated) "*Handloom has become live grave for weavers*" published by Jan Mitra Nayas, Varanasi and Voice of Voiceless Weavers, by PVCHR and FWRA, Varanasi

² The terms *grihastha* and *gaddedar* were often used interchangeably to refer to different types of traders by the weavers we interacted with, but there are subtle difference in how they operate. *Grihasthas* get saris woven by the weavers on contract, paying them wages, and also buy the finished saris woven by the self-employed weavers and master weavers. *Gaddedar* refers to traders who are primarily selling to outside

bank officials, local NGOs, weaver organizations and leaders in the city. The report is organized into five sections including an introductory section, a concluding section and a section giving recommendations on next steps. The first section looks into the production process and structure of the Varanasi silk sari industry as well as the recent changes taking place. The second section discusses the support mechanisms provided by the government and other agencies like cooperative societies. The local initiatives and struggles of weavers to fight for their livelihoods are presented in brief in the third section that is followed by a section on conclusions and recommendations.

Looking Backward: History and Structure of Varanasi Silk Sari Industry

Change and Continuity

Banarasi silk saris are woven by the highly skilled weavers of Varanasi (Benaras) in Uttar Pradesh (UP). It is believed that the popularity of these saris are the result of artisans' mastery in intertwining gold with yarn to produce *zari*³. The tradition is estimated to be 8 to 10 centuries old. These saris woven on handlooms are famous for their artistic designs, beautiful *butis* and exclusive motifs. However, over the past two decades, these saris are also being woven on powerlooms⁴. Though the total number of handlooms and handloom weavers engaged in the work are not known as no updated survey of Varanasi weavers is available, according to a 1995 survey conducted by the Uttar Pradesh (UP) government, there were 1,25,000 handloom weavers and 75,000 handlooms in the cluster as well as 1,785 powerlooms and 2,645 weavers working on them. However, it should be noted that this survey is more than a decade old and the current statistics may be altogether different.

markets including export markets. *Gaddedars* can serve as an additional middleman, sourcing products from the *Grihastha* and selling to outside traders and markets. *Grihasthas* are typically small traders and *Gaddedars* are larger traders, selling a much higher volume of goods. In the case study, the term "traders" is used interchangeably to refer to both these types of traders.

³ The process was called *tarkashi*, which was earlier done in Varanasi. But now *zari* is made on machines and mostly imported from Surat, Gujarat. *Zari* is now made using silver with gold coating on it or using copper or even made of plastic.

⁴ Based on interactions with local weavers

During the last fifteen years, the structure of the Varanasi silk sari industry has undergone some important changes. The silk sari industry structure is a complex web of many actors like weavers, master-weavers, traders, raw material suppliers (who are big businessmen), and people involved in dyeing silk, designing, card making (which are used in the handloom to guide the silk according to the design), and *zaridozi* (embroidery). Though changes have taken place in the structure of the industry and in the relationship between various actors involved in handloom production in the cluster, it continues to be primarily feudal in nature. Before discussing the structure of the industry, production-relations and changes taking place in them, it would be useful to understand the production process of the *Banarasi* sari.

Production Process

Production of *Banarasi* saris involves a number of pre-weaving and post-weaving activities. The silk yarn called *katan* is reeled, bleached and dyed. The dyed yarn is prepared for *tana* (warp) and *bana* (weft). Four to five people are needed to reel the warp. The length of yarn reeled on a five feet long warp cylinder can be sufficient for up to six saris. Yarn for the weft is reeled on small cylindrical object in a process known locally as *nari bharana*. The weft-yarn is used in a shuttle called *dharki*, which is thrown from one to other side while weaving. Children in the household help in the weaving process by throwing this shuttle while sitting beside the adult weaver on the loom. This is also a method by which the weaving skills are taught to the children. *Nari bharna* is a continuous process as long as the loom is running. A *charkha* (spinning wheel), now made of a bicycle rim and a paddle, is used for reeling the yarn on *nari* and is usually done by women.

The specific designs of the saris are created by skilled designers/weavers who work on their own (freelance) or are employed by the traders. The designs are sent to specialized shops that translate the designs into a series of punch cards. These punch cards are sewed

in a specified series and are installed into the jacquard device atop the loom, which guides the yarn (warp) according to the design⁵.

The saris are also woven on powerlooms. Though there are still some designs which cannot be woven on the powerlooms, many of the *Banarasi* sari designs are copied and used by the powerloom owners. Every trader that we interacted with and even some of the master-weavers now operate both handlooms and powerlooms. On a handloom, a sari can take one to two days to be woven. But one person can weave four such saris on a powerloom in a single day, provided electricity supply is regular. Both kinds of products have their own market niche, but powerlooms products are increasingly sold by being misrepresented as handlooms. Most of the weavers we interacted with pointed to this misrepresentation – of powerloom products as handloom products - as the source of their economic hardships as they are unable to compete on price with the machine-made fake product. Though the Handloom Reservation Act prohibits 11 items (including saris) from being woven on powerlooms, we found no evidence that it was being enforced in the cluster.

Production Relations

The sari weaving industry is largely a home-based industry. The weavers, the main workers, who do the actual job of weaving a sari, can be separated into distinct categories.

1. **Self-employed Weavers:** These are weavers who have their own loom, buy their own raw material on credit from the raw material supplier, weave the actual sari and then sell it to the trader or exporter directly or through an additional middleman. The trader may help them in getting the raw material on credit. These weavers can be an individual weaver or a master-weaver, who designs and weaves as well as get other weavers to weave for him on his handloom or on the

⁵ A complete and detailed description of the Jacquard Weaving Process is given on the AIACA-run website: www.craftmark.org

weaver's own handloom. The number of such weavers and master-weavers is on the decline over the last decade.

2. **Contract Weavers:** These are individual weavers who get raw material from the trader or master-weaver and weave a sari for wages. The wage is determined on the basis of the intricacy of the design and bargaining capacity of the weaver, which has weakened considerably during the last decade as the industry is facing a slump. If the weaver is working under a master-weaver, his wages are even lower as the master-weaver takes a cut. Based on our observations, weavers who work under a master-weaver earn only 80% of the wages they would have received if they were working directly under a trader.
3. **Loomless Weavers:** The weavers who do not have their own loom may be employed as a wage earner on a handloom by the trader or master-weaver, where they are supplied the raw material and weave the sari. Another kind of loomless weaver is one who has been given a loom by the trader which is installed at their home and they take raw material from the employer and weave a sari. The loom continues to be owned by the trader and weavers is paid a wage for his work. Loom-less weavers are typically found in rural areas.
4. **Cooperative Society Members:** Some weavers are members of cooperative societies, But according to weavers, a majority of the cooperatives are controlled and 'owned' by the traders themselves. Most of the traders are members of the cooperatives and also have their own business in the form of a registered firm. The poor weavers are rarely members of these societies and even if they are members they get no benefit except for getting job-work weaving orders placed by the traders. As Nizamuddin, a weaver leader from Nati Imli Bunkar Colony asks, "But who are the members? None of us are the members of any cooperatives run by them [traders]." Weavers we met mentioned that in the annual meetings of the cooperatives some of the members may be called and ". . . given some amount of money and/or a box of sweets." However, the main benefits of the cooperatives including subsidized raw material, credit facilities, and access to markets are appropriated by the traders. It is one of the biggest complaints made in the city by all – weavers, master-weavers, traders who are not affiliated with any cooperative

and leaders of the weaving community – that the cooperatives are a source of corruption, appropriating benefits of the government programs and that there are many fake cooperatives with fictitious members just to access money through government schemes.

Faiyaz sahib of Pili Kothi, a trader himself, states that the, “root of all the problems here is cooperatives.” “The government should cancel their registration in one go” he demanded. He also felt that they [traders running the cooperatives] are too powerful” and it is not easy to take action against them. Aziz Akram, a weaver said, “their cooperatives get all the benefits. We could not get even a single paisa for our cooperative for last 30 years but they get all the government benefits.” (See Box 1).

It is estimated that presently 95% of the weavers are working for wages⁶. Besides the above categories a lot of weavers also weave on the powerlooms for daily wages. As noted above, almost all the traders and even some master-weavers operate powerlooms. The wages on the powerlooms too are not paid on daily wage basis. Powerloom weavers also get wages on piece rate (fixed rate for a sari or on per meter basis in case of a running fabric). Since there is piece rate system of wages, the powerloom weavers’ income depends on many factors like electricity supply and availability of work

The traders have access to the market and demand trends as well connections to raw material markets. Besides these, the traders control access to capital, to credit and to other support services provided by the government to the cooperative societies. So the terms of trade are tilted heavily towards the traders and they control the whole handloom trade in the region.

If an individual weaver takes his sari to sell to the trader, the trader will point out numerous defects in the sari and the price of the sari offered to the weaver declines accordingly. The weaver, who has woven the sari by taking raw material on credit, has no

⁶ EDI, undated, Diagnostic Study of Handloom Silk Cluster Varanasi, EDI, pg. 6

option but to sell it at the price offered by the trader. Even if the weaver has woven the sari for wages, these defects are still pointed out by the trader and money is deducted from the weaver's wage. "What can we do except for accepting the wage they give as if we complain they say to give up the job or go to some other weaver", says a weaver from Loheta. "The jacquard on the top on the handloom needs to be oiled and even a single drop of oil on the sari or the cloth being woven will be treated as a defect and money will be curtailed from the wage/price for dry cleaning" says Md. Mushtaq, a weaver. There can be various other defects, like the sari could be dirty, or there can be defects in its design pattern or motif - the list is endless and so apparently are the ways to exploit the weavers.

Another form of exploitation occurs at the time of payment of wages to the weavers. The weavers are not paid in cash. Instead, they are given a post-dated cheque, usually drawn on a bank which is not in the immediate vicinity. In need of cash, the weavers have no choice but to give the cheque to commission agents who pay them cash after taking 2-3% commission. "They [commission agents] are their [the traders'] men and have their stalls outside their [traders] shops", says Aftab, a young weaver leader from Loheta and an elected Block panchayat member, a fact attested by many other weavers in the area. These deductions from the weaver's paycheck contribute to the sharp decline in real wages for the weavers over the last decade. The wage for a sari for which they used to get Rs. 1,600 earlier is now just Rs. 700-800.

A common weaver today is cut off from the market and has no information on demand trends. He is totally dependent on master-weavers and traders to access the market. The increasing prices of raw material, and decreasing demand of their sari, have made it almost impossible for the weavers to produce and sell the products on their own. Aftab, the weavers' leader states that earlier the weavers would sell their products to the traders directly but in 1986-87 there was a crisis as the prices of silk yarn doubled from Rs. 800 per kg to Rs. 1,300 per kg and there was a very big meeting of the weavers in which the smaller traders (*Grihasthas*) insisted that the weavers should sell their saris to them only. This, it seems, was done as some kind of strategy against the bigger traders.

Most of the weavers / master-weavers are indebted to the traders and to raw material suppliers. The traders give them debt for purchasing raw material as well as for other needs like health expenditure or other emergency needs, which the weavers repay by working for them. If a weaver wants to change his employer but has no money to repay the debt, the new employer repays his debt to the old one and that way the weaver remains indebted and works for the other employer.

Till the recent past the *Banarasi* silk sari trade was almost entirely in the hands of Hindu traders whose shops are located in the *Kunjgali* locality in the city. Weaving, on the other hand, was entirely in the hands of Muslim weaving community (*Ansaris*) in the city. The small-traders (*grihasthas*) would be almost all from this community only. But with the the help of benefits appropriated under the cooperatives, which traders registered decades ago and became chairmen themselves, now many of these small-traders have become exporters themselves and are into the business parallel to the earlier Hindu traders.⁷ Weaving is done in rural areas as well and presently it is estimated that 70% of the weaver labor force are located in the city and remaining 30% are in the villages. About 90% of the weavers in the city and 30% of the weavers in the rural areas are Muslims⁸. In rural areas, other backward castes dominate the weaving population.⁹ However, estimates are that more than half the weaving is done in the city itself.

Recent changes in the Weaving Industry

The demand for *Banarasi* saris have been on the decline over the past decade. We observed, while visiting the *mohallas* of the weavers, that every household had more non-functional looms than functional ones. Declining demand for saris, on one hand and increasing supply of skilled labor (weavers) due to population growth on the other has led

⁷ This has given rise to the communal tensions in a city (also known as the city of temples) where temples and mosques juxtapose each other. The communal riot in the city in the year 2000 was allegedly linked to this communal divide in the industry (See Communal Business in Communalism Combat, July 2000, Mumbai).

⁸ Francis and Lenin (ed.) (undated) "Handloom has become live grave for weavers" published by Jan Mitra Nayas, Varanasi and Voice of Voiceless Weavers, by PVCHR and FWRA, Varanasi

⁹ EDI (undated), Diagnostic Study of Handloom Silk Cluster Varanasi, EDI, Ahmedabad, pg. 11.

to declining wages and incomes for the weavers. This is resulting in increasing hardship for the weavers and news of starvation deaths and suicides among weavers are common in the local newspapers. Local NGOs have also come out with reports on starvation and starvation deaths in the area¹⁰. Weavers are compelled to resort to menial labor, pulling rickshaws and doing construction work to survive “The poor weavers go to other parts of the city to pull rickshaws as they are ashamed of doing it in their own *mohallas*”, says Md. Subhan of Bajardiha, which is one of the biggest weavers *mohallas* in Varanasi. Subhan himself was a small trader who had 60 handlooms 10 years ago. Today, he has just two. He said that in addition to menial work, weavers are migrating to other cities and working on powerlooms .

In our interaction with local stakeholders in the trade – weavers. Master-weavers, traders – they considered two factors to be primarily responsible for this slump:

1. Increasing prices of raw material (particularly silk yarn) and 2. Imports of textiles from China. Two places, Surat (Gujarat, India), which is a big cluster of powerloom products and China, a country exporting both silk yarn and textile to India are at the center of their understanding of the problem.

Though there is a consensus about the fact that the industry is facing crisis¹¹, the different stakeholders perceive the reasons of the plight of the weaving community differently. The weavers think that the powerlooms are the biggest culprits. Every design, which they innovate and prepare and weave on the handloom, is copied on the powerloom and that leads to decline in the price of the new design. Md. Nizamuddin, a weavers’ leader and a weaver himself whose looms have been idle for the last year, does not agree that demand for the *Banarasi* sari has gone down. “If there is no demand then why are they copying

¹⁰ See, for example, Francis and Lenin (ed.) (undated) “Handloom has become live grave for weavers” published by Jan Mitra Nayas, Varanasi and Voice of Voiceless Weavers, by PVCHR and FWRA, Varanasi

¹¹ Deputy Director (Weaving) of the Weaver Service Centre’s, Varanasi, a government of India agency to provide technical training and support to the weavers, disagrees. He states that the trade might have declined in the city but it is stable in the rural areas, if not growing. Another argument given by him is that the weavers based in the city are now working on powerlooms. So it is diversification of livelihoods and not an absolute decline.

and weaving our designs on powerlooms?” he asks. The Handlooms (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act, 1985 prohibits the powerloom owners from weaving 11 articles on powerlooms, including saris. Earlier there were 22 articles in this list but the number was reduced after two amendments to the Order in 1999 and 2000. However, the government machinery does not seem to be serious about implementation of this act. Unlike the weavers, the traders are happy with non-implementation of the reservation and feel that, as one trader puts it, “in the liberalized era, this act is not very relevant.”

The traders feel that the import of Chinese fabric, which is also, used as a sari after embroidery work is done on it (there is a significant increase in embroidery work in the city) and the Surat powerloom-woven saris (of synthetic fabrics) are the main reason for the declining demand for *Banarasi* saris. The price rise of silk imported from China is also adversely affecting the weavers. The local master-weavers claim that the rise in prices of Chinese silks have also driven up prices of the Karnataka silk which has traditionally been used in the city .

The silk yarn trade in the city is controlled by five big businessmen who enjoy a monopoly on silk yarn supply in the city. “They increase the prices of silk like share market prices. It increases every hour.” Complains a master-weaver of Pilikothi. The government has some schemes to provide silk yarn to the weavers on subsidized rates but these benefits are not passed on to the weavers by the cooperative societies.

Diversification into Other Products

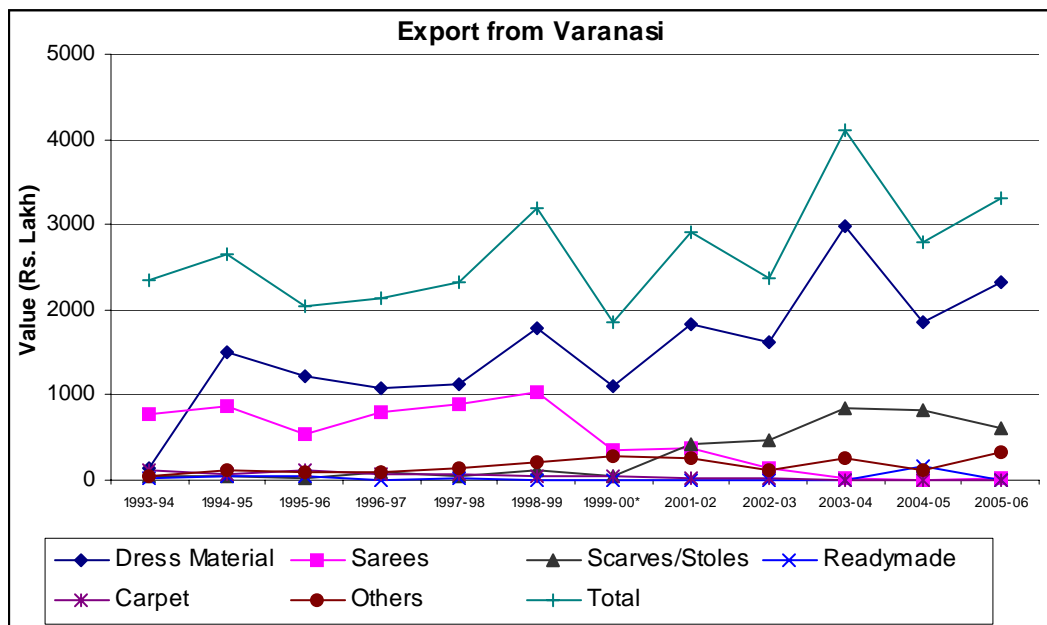
A very small section of the handloom owners are now diversifying into other products to remain in the trade. Fabrics for cushion covers, sofa covers, made-ups like stoles, scarves, ladies top and suit material, silk towels for Buddhist (Tibetan) monks and even decorative items of jute are being made by the weavers. Weavers claim that they can produce anything the traders ask them to produce. However, we observed that most of these products were being produced more on powerlooms than on handlooms. Powerlooms in Varanasi are now producing running fabric, made-ups etc. of both silk and artificial yarn. Loheta, a very big village located at the outskirts of the city, is famous for its nylon

product produced on both handlooms and powerlooms. Though no data is available on total production or item wise production in the city, it is estimated that saris still constitute a majority of production in the cluster, and other products account for only a small proportion of the total production. We noticed that there seemed to be a greater degree of product diversification amongst those using powerlooms than those using handlooms.

Product diversification trends can also be seen in the export data available with the Central Silk Board’s Certification Centre at Varanasi. It should be noted that the export figures available with the CSB are only indicative and not comprehensive as, after 1992, it was not mandatory for exporters to get a certificate from the CSB certification center.

As the graph below shows, total exports show a clear increasing trend, although the export of saris has declined over the years, particularly after 1998-99. The increase in total exports is a result of increasing exports of dress material and scarves and stoles. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that a majority of these products are produced mainly on powerlooms, Mr. Vivek Kumar of CSB/SMOI insists that approximately 55 to 60% of exports from the Varanasi region consist of handloom products.

Figure 1: Exports from Varanasi Cluster



Notes: * Data for April to October only; Data for the year 2000-01 is not available.

Source: Appendix Table: 1 A

Another type of diversification that is taking place is in the form of value addition. Embroidery is now being done on many of the saris produced, both on handlooms and powerlooms. According to traders, there is greater demand for saris with embroidery in the market. In addition to weaving, there has been a tradition of embroidery-work being done in the city. Historically, the cluster embroidered badges for British and Indian army personnel and for Christian priests. Now, embroidery is being done on base powerloom fabric from Surat and Varanasi to convert it into saris and ladies suit material. This has generated some employment for the weaving communities. In Lohita, the weavers told us that the embroidery work now available for women had provided an alternative livelihood source and provided a daily income ranging from Rs. 20 to Rs. 40 per day for the family.

Government Agencies and other Support Mechanisms

Both the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India and the Department of Industry, Government of Uttar Pradesh (UP) have their agencies in the city and have various programs to support the silk sari industry and the weavers. The Weavers Service Centre (WSC), which comes under the Ministry of Textiles, is the main agency involved in providing technical support to the weavers. The WSC is supposed to provide training to weaving industry in designing, dyeing and weaving. The WSC runs two types of courses in designing and dyeing. The center offers courses in its office and organizes training camps in rural areas. Weavers participating in training camps are paid Rs. 100 per day as compensation and they are provided the raw material used for the training. Selected weavers and designers are also sent to national level institutes to get training. The beneficiaries of the capsule courses, which run for 2 months, are generally the local people of age range 16-40 years, who pay Rs. 300 or Rs.600 as fees for the course. The courses are open to all, and we observed that many young boys and girls of non-weaving

families also join the courses. The Deputy Director (Weaving) of the Centre said that children of well-off weavers who have become traders also participate in the courses.

Integrated Handloom Cluster Programme (IHPC)

The Development Commissioner - Handlooms, Ministry of Textiles, has now launched a cluster development programme in 20 selected clusters. In Varanasi, the Cluster development Program is being implemented by the Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India (Ahmedabad, Gujarat), which has an office in the premises of the WSC. The Project is being implemented in association with the WSC. The project aims at providing supply-side support by linking to the raw material market; technical support like providing training on dying (sending them to other cities where dying work is done), training on designing (sending the designers to institutes like NIFT and NID); institutional development by federating men and women weavers into SHGs, initiating a cluster consortium of prominent stakeholders; improving the brand image by appointing brand ambassadors; providing quality assurance by providing silk testing facility to weavers through Central Silk Board laboratory (which is already in service); by launching a Handloom Mark which will certify genuine handloom products; and by providing financial linkages through involving NABRAD and SIDBI. A Common Facility Centre is also being planned, which would function as an information center and would have a dying center and computer aided design (CAD) facility which can be used by local weaver groups. The project aims to reach 5,000 weavers in the initial stages.

Box 1: Bunkar Colony

Nati Imli Bunkar colony is a telling example of the hardship and exploitation of weavers and the fate of the government schemes for weavers. In the 1970s, 100 weaver families of Madanpura were approached by the government for shifting to a *bunkar* colony, which would have all the facilities needed for a weaver. The hundred families became part of a housing society, which was supposed to do weaving business as well. They got their houses in the colony as well as a work shed to have their handlooms and work and a place for *tani tanana* (the process of reeling yarn on the wooden cylinder of the handloom for warp.) But during the last three decades, their cooperative has been unable to get a loan. The workshed and the open place for *tani tanana* have been grabbed by the powerful *grihasthas* of their own community and 50 to 55 weaver families have sold their homes to traders and have left the colony.

Besides these schemes run by the central Government, the UP government's Joint Director of Industries and District Industry Centre in the District administration have their offices in Varanasi. But the handloom sector is the responsibility of Directorate of Handloom (DoH). Additional Director of Industries - Handloom is the concerned officer in the area. According to the Additional Director of Industry - Handloom, the office mainly implements the central government programmes/schemes for the weavers. The directorate is issuing a weaver identity card (bunkar card) to weavers. A health insurance scheme for weavers with ICICI bank has just started which will cover the health expenditure of the weavers up to Rs. 15,000 in a year. This insurance is also done from the same office. According to the Joint Director Industries (JDI) since there is DoH all the schemes for weavers are run from that office. However, there are general schemes like PMRY (Prime Minister Rozgar Yojna) under which weavers also get benefits (loans up Rs. 2 lakhs are given under this scheme with a subsidy of Rs. 7,500, and payable within 7 years). Another scheme which the individual weaver can get benefits is the Differential Rate Interest (DRI) scheme under which only 4% per annum of interest is charged on loans. The JDI admits that the problems of the weavers are multifaceted, but he asserts that government cannot intervene directly in purchasing and marketing and can only provide support like training and infrastructure. For marketing support, an Urban Haat is being built in the city that will have 45 shops.

The National Handloom Development Corporation (NHDC) implements the Mill Gate Price Scheme which provides silk yarn to the weaver cooperative societies with a subsidy that covers the transportation costs from the government. An Assistant Manager of the corporation has now got an office in the city (in the premises of of the WSC) and two cooperatives have open depots to provide yarn to other cooperatives under the scheme.

The various schemes and agencies to provide support to the weavers can be summarized as follows:

Table 1 – Schemes and Support Programs for the Cluster

Nature of support	Agency	Scheme / programme	Target	Activity
Skill	WSC	Training	Weavers	Training in campus and outside
Marketing	Cooperatives' apex bodies, DoH		Cooperative societies	Urban Haat
Health	DoH with ICICI bank	ICICI bank health insurance	Weavers	Health insurance
Raw material	NHDC	Mill Gate PriceScheme	Cooperatives	Providing raw material at mill rate
Integrated and comprehensive support	Min. of Textiles, implemented by DoH	Deen Dayal Hastkargha Protsahan Yojna (DDHPY)	National and state level organizations, cooperative societies, SHGs	A centrally sponsored scheme to support purchase handloom, working capital loans, product development, infrastructure support, supply of equipment and marketing support etc.
IHCP	EDI / WSC		Entire cluster	
Brand image	Textile Committee	Handloom Mark	Handloom products	
	SMOI / Central Silk Board	Silk Mark	Silk and silk products	

Credit support is provided mostly to the cooperatives under various programmes/schemes. However, as discussed above it is also available to individual weavers under schemes like DFI. Under DDHPY, the loans can be provided to the SHGs as well. But, as an officer in the SIDBI, Varanasi branch informs, for any loans, the banks must assess the capacity of the weavers to repay the loan. And on this count the individual weavers certainly will not qualify on the banks criteria. Additionally, according to the officer, the textile sector is in the region in decline and is not in the preferred sector of the banks for providing loans. As far as loans to SHGs under DDHPY is concerned, there are currently no SHGs among the weavers in Varanasi. The Cluster Development Project intends to organize weavers under SHGs.

Silk Mark and Handloom Mark are two major brand promotion initiatives of the central government. The Silk Mark, launched in 2004, by Silk Mark Organization of India (SMOI), an organization promoted by Central Silk Board is aimed at certifying silk and silk products, giving the customer an assurance that the products they are buying is of pure silk.

Similarly, the Handloom Mark, launched in 2006 by the Prime Minister, is a label to distinguish genuine handloom products from machine-made products in the market. The Textile Committee is the organization responsible for implementation of Handloom Mark scheme and individuals/organizations wanting to get their products labeled with the Mark would have to register with the local offices of the Textile Committee. Though the mark has just been started weavers in Varanasi are happy to know that now there would be a label on their products to give it identity and authenticity as a genuine handloom product.



Beside the above schemes and programs the state and central governments also have various welfare programs for the weavers. But , during our visit, none of the weavers we met had been able to access these schemes. Some weavers have managed to get the weavers identity card (*bunkar* card) and some have taken the insurance under the recently launched health insurance scheme with the ICICI bank, which is for free now (earlier the weavers were charged Rs. 200 for the insurance). Other studies also have come out with similar findings. According to the EDI diagnostic study, out of 88 weaver families interviewed only one family got insurance and one family got a work-shed. According to the study, out of 88 weaver families, 40 were aware of the WSC and only 7 of them had taken any benefit from the centre (of which 6 weavers got design support).¹² According to JDI, 1500 *bunkar* cards have been issued so far. However JDI thinks that these cards

¹² EDI, *ibid*, pg. 39

are not of much use for Varanasi weavers, as they do not go to other cities to sell their products.

According to him the weavers of Bhadohi and Mau who weave carpets and travel to other cities to sell their products need such cards as proof of identity and occupation which they can show to authorities in case of a problem (like being suspected to be illegal Bangladeshi immigrants). According to NGOs working with the weaving communities, it is difficult for the weavers to get benefits of other development and welfare schemes. They face difficulty in getting even ration cards. They are not considered eligible for a red card (ration card for the families below poverty line) as they generally possess a small *pucca* house (we noticed that their houses are actually only semi-pucca). They also lack government education, health and *anganbadi* centers in their *mohallas*.

Cooperative Societies

The handloom cooperative societies in the city and the rural areas need special mention. The cooperative societies were envisaged as a structure to increase the bargaining power of poor artisans in the market. Cooperatives were supposed to provide poor weavers a mechanism to become a strong stakeholder in the production and marketing process. But the story of handloom cooperatives in Varanasi is altogether different.

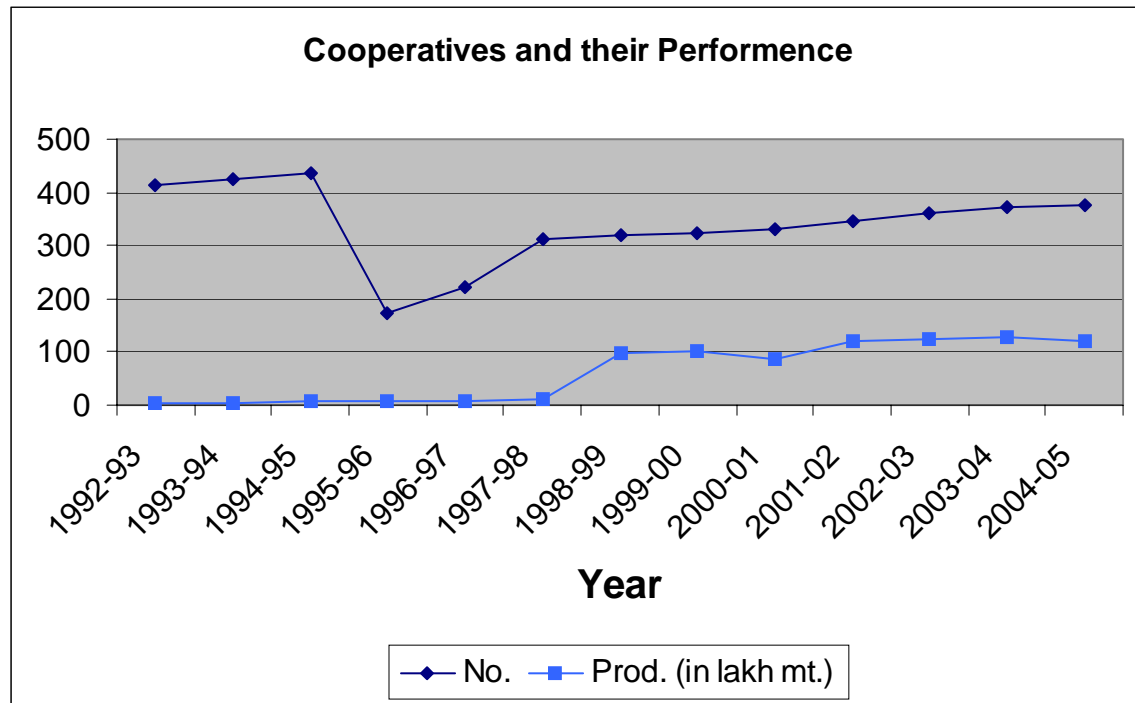
According to the Statistical Patrika of Varanasi district available on the state government's Planning Department website, there are 376 handloom cooperatives in the district, with 20,680 members in 2004-05 (see the chart below). These cooperatives produced 120 lakh meters of cloth during the year 2004-05. But the common weavers and even some traders expressed unhappiness with the functioning of the cooperatives.

Interestingly, even though the handloom sector as a whole is facing recession the production of the cooperatives is on a slow rise since 1997-98 and so is the number of the cooperative societies.

Box 2: Fate of a weavers' cooperative society

If some weavers come together and form a cooperative society it is almost impossible for them to run it successfully. Phoochand (65), a weaver from the dalit community from Loheta village formed a cooperative society (Anusuchit Jati Bunkar Cooperative Society) in 1983 on the suggestion of a leader of his own community. 24 members deposited Rs. 100 each and the cooperative was registered. First they received Rs. 18,000 as loan from the cooperative bank. They participated in an exhibition and Rs. 12,000 was spent. The rest of the money was taken by the leader who helped in getting it registered, claiming that he had spent this money for registration. They got another loan of Rs. 52,000, which also was expended. Ultimately, the cooperative society has an outstanding loan of Rs. 70,000. Phoolchand, being the chairman, is responsible for this loan. He met the manager of the bank and said that he could not pay this big amount. The manager said that he would have to pay.

Figure 2 : Cooperatives and their Performance



Source: Appendix Table 2

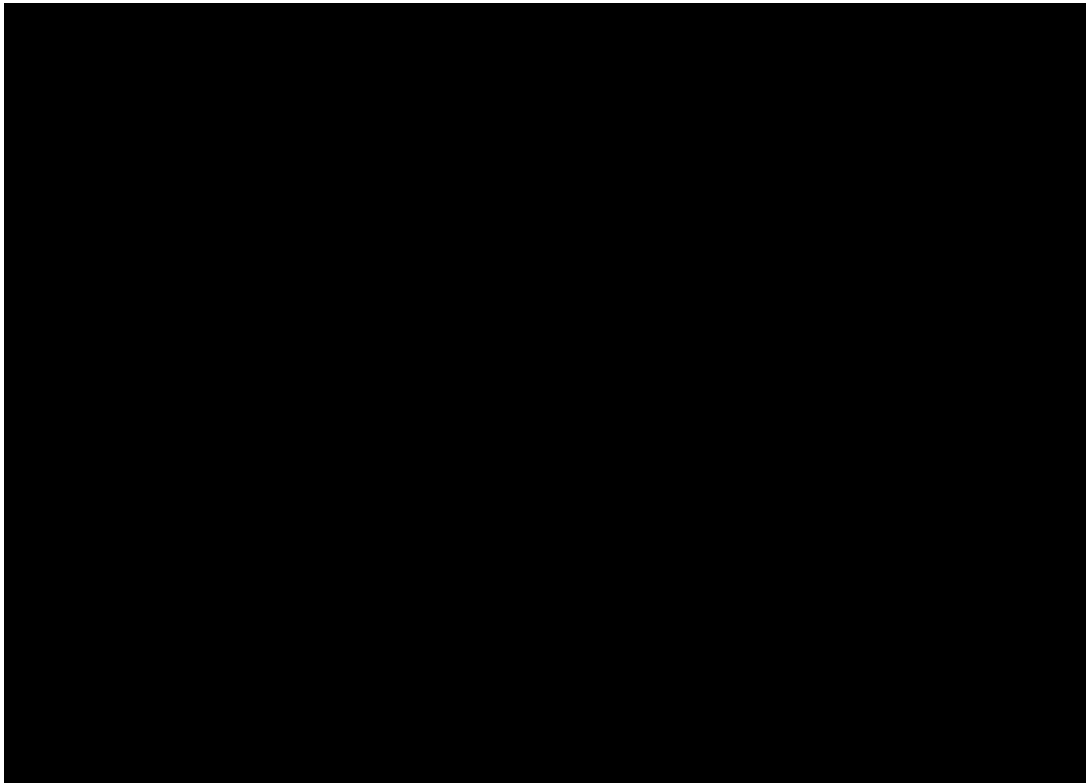
As discussed above, most of the cooperatives are run by traders and common weavers are not getting any benefits. According to an exporter who heads a cooperative and owns a firm as well, the cooperatives provide the weavers assured employment and timely payment of wages. However, we found it difficult to find weavers who were members of functioning cooperatives during our visit. It is a common complaint that most of the cooperative societies are registered by the traders, have fake members and exist only to appropriate benefits of the government schemes. The weavers, struggling for their existence and just wages, even demand scrapping all the handloom cooperatives and enquiry into their corrupt practices.¹³ According to weavers, sometimes the cooperatives are registered by people who are not in the weaving trade at all and have registered cooperatives just for appropriating benefits.

¹³ See the news story on weavers protest in the Dainik Hindustan, Varnasi/Lucknow (Hindi daily), dated August 4, 2004

Local Initiatives and Struggles

The handloom weavers of Varanasi are caught up between the local feudal production system and the increasingly free trade economic regime of the country. As discussed above, the serious crisis faced by the Varanasi handloom weavers are a result of many factors including competition from powerloom products, changes in protections offered to the handloom sector, increasing prices of raw silk and shifts in market demand. The competition from imported silk fabric is another important factor responsible for the slump of the Varanasi handloom sector. With abolition of quantitative restrictions, and declining tariff on textile import the Varanasi silk sari producers are facing serious competition from cheap imports, especially from China. As the figure below and Appendix Table 3 show the import of silk yarn and silk fabric has increased manifold during 1999-2000 to 2004-05.

Figure 3: Textile Imports



Source: Appendix Table 3

As we have seen above, local stakeholders – weavers, master-weavers, traders – have their own analysis of the problem. Though the weavers are economically in a very difficult situation, there are also examples of local initiatives to face the crisis. The unorganized weavers are organizing themselves under different banners. Dastakar-Bunkar Adhikar Manch (Weaver-Artisan Rights Front) is one of the organizations which is trying to bring together both the weavers and artisans involved in embroidery. The front has brought senior weavers and artisan leaders onto one platform. Highlighting the contribution of women weavers, which goes largely unnoticed, is also on their agenda. The Front’s representatives were invited to the brainstorming session on the condition of weavers for the Eleventh Five Year Plan chaired by Ms. Sayeeda Hameed, Member-Planning Commission, where they described their plight and their views on how the weavers’ condition could improve. Providing marketing facility and purchasing the sari directly from the weavers by opening depots, timely payment of the wages and sari

prices, same day encashment of postdated cheques, opening special units in the hospitals and labour department offices are the demands raised by the front. However the weavers are aware of the fact that the struggle has to be waged at both local as well as national/international levels. The front is raising its voice not just against local traders but is also concerned about larger issues like trade liberalization and WTO agreements.

Bunkar Panchayat, Chaudaho¹⁴ is another group, which raised its voice against the condition of the weaving trade. The panchayat, led by some traders, is actually a social organization which rarely takes up such issues of economic interests. “But things have become so difficult now for weavers that we could not sit idle,” says Maqbool Hasan, sardar of the panchayat and a small trader himself. Their main concern is the increasing prices of silk yarn. They gave a memorandum to the Prime Minister raising demands for duty free import of silk yarn from China so that the silk yarn could be available at lower prices. Their demands also included raising the import duty on silk fabric import to the country. Other demands include availability of raw material from NHDC (both from Karnatka and imported silk yarn from China), ending the corrupt practices of cooperative societies, providing cheap electricity, and providing 30% reservation to the weavers in Indian Institute of Handloom Technology (IIHT)¹⁵. The Madanpura traders also gave a memorandum to ADI, having similar demands of flat electricity rate, providing cheap raw material and providing marketing and purchasing their products.

Though the cheap import of silk yarn would favour the Varanasi silk sari industry the import of silk fabric poses a serious threat to the industry. However, it should also be noted that the cheap import of silk yarn goes against people involved in sericulture for their livelihood. This poses a serious dilemma. In the 2004-05 budget, import duty on silk

¹⁴ Pancho, Chaudaho, and Baisee are social organizations of the Muslim weaving community (Ansaris), which have their Sardars and Mahatos. These communities set norms and take decisions on social issues like marriage, divorce, etc and generally don't play any direct role in economic matters, except for the instances where a weaver is not able to pay his debt to his trader in which case he may be boycotted by the community and other traders of other community would also not employ him. Additionally the Sardars and Mahatos of these community organizations are all traders themselves.

¹⁵ IIHT is an institute in Varanasi run by the Ministry of Textiles, which runs a three years diploma course for students in handloom technology. The students generally go to big firms after they finish their studies and the institute practically has no links with the Varanasi silk sari industry.

yarn and silk fabric was raised from 20% to 30%. The traders are in favour of high import duty on silk fabric but against it in case of silk yarn.

As is obvious from the above discussion, the concerns of the common weavers and traders are common on some issues but are different on other issues. The weavers want freedom from the exploitative production system, they want timely payment of fair adequate wages, and they want access to better raw material and marketing facilities. The weavers are aware of the reasons of their plight and the linkages between local level players and national and international level policy changes. As a weaver of Nati Imli bunkar colony asks: “Why only weavers’ situation has deteriorated; why are they [the traders] getting prosperous day by day? If things are worse for the trade it should affect both the weavers and traders.”

In contrast, the traders’ concerns are related to cheap raw material supply and marketing facilities. They obviously would not be happy with the weavers raising issues like fair wages and timely payment. Weavers’ leaders like Nizamuddin and Siddique Hasan raise broader issue of democracy and exploitation of weavers by the “capitalist” traders. “Why is the handloom reservation act not being implemented? Why has the government entered into WTO without consulting weavers? How can a democratic government do this? Why every time they [government/policy makers] consult only the traders and not the weavers? How can they know what is the remedy without talking to weavers? The recent consultation at the Planning Commission is the first example of its kind where a common weaver was invited to share his views.” Nizamuddin participated in the consultation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Some of the major findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

- The industry is facing a severe crisis of declining demand and competition from powerloom and imported fabric. This has impacted handloom weavers the most. Their wages and net income have declined. In absolute terms, it is now half of

- what it was five years ago. Payments to weavers are often not made immediately and given through a post-dated check.
- The structure of the industry has undergone major changes during the last 15 years. Most of the weavers are now wageworkers, working for a master-weaver or a trader and they are totally cut-off from the market. The design function has also gone from their hands to the master-weavers or local designers employed by traders.
 - The Muslim small-traders have become *gaddedars* – large traders with the help of benefits from the cooperatives and some of them are directly exporting various textiles, including saris.
 - The import of silk fabric has increased during the last decade, which has adversely impacted the industry. These fabrics, as well as local powerloom fabric, is converted into sari after doing embroidery work on it, which is still much cheaper compared to a authentic handloom *Banarasi* sari.
 - Increasing prices of raw material is a key concern for the traders as well as the common weavers.
 - Cooperatives are mostly controlled by traders and, in some cases, by people who are not even associated with the handloom sector in any way. Most of the weavers we interacted with are not members of functioning cooperatives.
 - There are local level initiatives to face the crisis. The weavers' organizations are struggling at the local level against exploitation of weavers by the traders. At the same time these organizations are also aware of the larger issues of trade liberalization and WTO rules which are impacting the industry and are actively opposing such initiatives.
 - The traders have their own organizations and are also making their efforts for policy changes and getting maximum benefits.

Recommendations

The *Banarasi* silk sari has three unique features which distinguish it from other saris. First, the yarn it uses is high quality silk yarn from Karnataka. Though now the Chinese imported silk is also being used and they are not of the same quality. Secondly, weavers

claim that the saris woven on handlooms are of much better quality, not only in terms of design and motif but also in terms of weaving quality and durability, than those that are copied on powerlooms. And, third and the most important, the artistry of Varanasi weavers in designing the saris is unique to the cluster. **The challenge is to present these saris as a brand, highlighting these three features.** The efforts to put labels like Silk Mark and Handloom Mark, if implemented properly, can help to establish the distinctive identity of the Banrasi saris in mainstream markets.

However, efforts to promote *Banarasi* saris as unique products have to involve all the stakeholders in the cluster collectively. Lack of ownership amongst stakeholders is a significant bottleneck. Though the traders are making profits selling *Banarasi* Saris, they do not seem to invest in improving production in the area. For them, running their business and getting orders is what matters most. Most of them deal in a range of textile products (powerloom products, handloom products, made-ups etc. of both silk and non-silk yarn) and have inadequate incentive to invest in improving handloom quality and production to regain lost market share. The weavers, who are the real stakeholders and take ownership of the weaving occupation (“our forefathers have been doing it, how can we leave it” or “it is our forefathers’ occupation”), are into weaving more by compulsion than choice. Additionally, these poor weavers are cut-off from the market and are too unorganized to make any difference. They lack resources, access to market, credit and raw material and any form of organization to have an effect on the market.

The need is to create and promote structures that organize the weavers to collectively engage with the market; provide them with quality raw materials and other facilities; and consequently, enhancing their bargaining power in the production process. Identifying existing structures that can be promoted and initiating new collectives of weavers should be given the greatest priority.

Such collectives would also enhance the ability of weavers to access market information. Diversification into other products is taking place mostly into the powerloom products. Diversification by the handloom weavers is very limited and is mostly by compulsion and

not by choice or any sustained market strategy. There is a need to create structures that enable weavers to access market trends and respond to them accordingly.

The value addition in form of embroidery work (*zaridozi*) seems to be providing opportunity for diversifying and generating employment. As a trader from Madanpura said the *Banarasi* saris with *zaridozi* work is more in demand now than the ones without *zaridozi* work. There is a need to identify and explore further such trends and encourage the production of new product lines to take advantage of it.

At the policy level, the industry needs some form of protection from the cheap import of silk fabric and from the powerloom sector. The act banning powerlooms from producing saris and other items needs to be implemented more seriously.

Appendices

Appendix Table 1 A: Variety- wise export of natural silk goods from Certification Centre, CSB, Varanasi – Value (Rs. Lakh)

Year	Dress Material	Saris	Scarves/Stoles	Readymade	Carpet	Others	Total
1993-94	131.25	763.03	45.04	28.33	116.90	51.99	2346.52
1994-95	1513.92	870.68	39.33	36.89	67.95	128.47	2657.25
1995-96	1220.61	550.60	26.90	38.27	114.31	96.24	2046.94
1996-97	1083.39	798.37	86.56	7.14	75.65	85.33	2136.44
1997-98	1123.20	902.25	50.65	16.49	81.72	141.81	2316.12
1998-99	1792.28	1026.20	116.83	10.84	47.26	208.42	3201.83
1999-00*	1098.72	355.40	53.44	6.17	55.79	289.99	1859.50
2001-02	1842.00	385.28	420.34	6.63	14.79	266.70	2915.73
2002-03	1629.14	137.00	458.19	6.34	29.29	119.33	2379.28
2003-04	2972.00	22.37	848.97	2.07	2.10	255.38	4103.28
2004-05	1845.84	5.24	821.93	171.83	6.77	118.30	2803.50
2005-06	2332.79	34.20	617.87	0.00	0.00	334.30	3305.65

Appendix Table: 1 B: Variety wise export of natural silk goods from Certification Centre, CSB, Varanasi – Quantity (Sq. Meter)

Year	Dress Material	Saris	Scarves/Stoles	Readymade	Carpet	Others	Total
1993-94	1323815	369322	29851	2557	1648	26234	1753427
1994-95	1330360	404804	26244	7778	1081	59806	1830073
1995-96	1024184	228233	14553	7481	1946	45782	1322179
1996-97	830162	421391	71340	1476	1094	110457	1435920
1997-98	820107	381862	15256	4823	1690	49586	1273324
1998-99	1194856	425177	38161	4505	602	84933	1748234
1999-00*	714607	135072	15620	3811	626	90958	960694
2001-02	167897	138932	128258	2065	225	106407	1343784
2002-03	794520	46871	122313	5554	293	51728	1021280
2003-04	1491104	5366	221238	1338	28	129681	1848755
2004-05	812223	1707	245126	719		65859	1125683
2005-06	753576	6273	190915			96164	1046361

Notes: * Data for April to October only; Data for the year 2000-01 is not available.

Appendix Table 2: Primary Industrial Cooperative Societies of Weavers

Year	No.	Members	Long term capital (Rs. million)	Production	
				Cloths (Meter Lakh)	Cost (Rs. Million)
1992-93	414	11866	0.23	5.10	3360.15
1993-94	423	13316	0.33	5.50	3502.25
1994-95	437	14424	4.21	8.80	6160.00
1995-96	174	6800	0.37	5.94	118.80
1996-97	220	8990	0.59	6.10	157.50
1997-98	312	9360	62.36	9.70	169.75
1998-99	318	17593	63.24	97.00	169.70
1999-00	322	17793	64.49	101.15	2028.00
2000-01	332	17893	13.34	88.15	132.22
2001-02	347	18893	13.50	121.20	1818.00
2002-03	361	19727	13.91	122.27	183.40
2003-04	372	20454	14.36	129.25	193.87
2004-05	376	20680	14.47	120.05	180.07

Source: Government of UP, Department of Planning

<http://upgov.up.nic.in/engspatrika/zspmenu.asp?state=V2>

Appendix Table 3: Import of Textiles

Item	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
Woolen Yarn & Fabrics	0	0	10.29	14	17.8	100.96	167.93	172.86
Cotton Yarn & Fabrics	0	0	107.48	139.57	232.26	424.9	652.98	844.22
Man made filament/spun yarn (inc. waste)	0	0	966.91	984.37	1389.77	1922.42	1912.04	2116.09
Made-up Textiles Articles	0	0	114.45	191.05	171.95	191.26	375.67	264.43
Other Textile Yarn, Fabrics & Made-up Articles	0	0	1002.2	1208.46	1407.46	1647.54	1963.38	2465.13
Readymade Garments (Woven & Knit)	0	0	69.94	97.83	172.53	115.93	177.83	143.23
Raw Jute	50.54	86.38	139.31	79.5	95.68	134.77	93.92	31.79
Raw Silk	218.33	259.36	412.74	473.26	624.73	647.15	629.17	604.72
Raw Wool	600.42	490.3	491.93	457.81	623.56	801.83	870.61	825.95
Synthetic & Regenerated Fibres	465.43	290.87	184.3	271.19	272.15	364.15	268.51	330.2
Silk yarn & fabrics	0	0	61.97	91.02	172.99	293.04	529.89	731.27
Woolen and Cotton Rags etc.	129.13	103.22	101.68	144.09	107.09	83.9	134.6	108.19
Cotton Raw & Waste	80.65	381.11	1253.93	1184.73	2053.62	1237.61	1570.03	1099.6
Textile Yarn, Fabrics & Made-up Articles	1518.73	1921.91	0	0	0			
Total Textiles imports	3063.23	3533.16	4917.12	5336.89	7341.57	7965.46	9346.55	9737.68
Overall Imports	154176.3	178331.7	215528.5	228306.6	245199.7	297205.9	359107.7	481064.1
% of Textile Imports	1.99	1.98	2.28	2.34	2.99	2.68	2.6	2.02

Note- DGCIS has discontinued posting data against Sl.No. 14 "Textile Yarn, Fabrics & Made-up Articles and has split into sl.no.1,2,3,4 & 5 from 1999 onwards.

Source: Foreign Trade Statistics of India (Principal Commodities & Countries) DGCI&S, Kolkata

Taken from the Ministry of Taxes website, accessing the following links.

<http://texmin.nic.in/ermiudel/Textile%20Imports%20Ninth%20Plan%201997-2002.pdf>

<http://texmin.nic.in/ermiudel/imports.pdf>

Appendix Table: 4: List of people contacted during Fieldwork

Name (age)	Occupation	Address
S P Singh	Deputy Director-Weaving, WSC	WSC
Kamal Kishor	Manager, NHDC	NHDC, WSC compound
Tejeskar Pandey	Deputy Director, Handloom and Textiles	Rathyatra
Vivek Kumar	CSB/SMOI	
VB Vahan	Jt. Director Industry	
Rajiv	Manager, SIDBI	Rathyatra
Shailendra	Programme Officer, IHCP	EDI
Dr. Lenin	NGO Leader (PVCHR)	
Md. Tanweer	Advocate	
Md. Mustafa	Weaver	
Md. Nizamuddin	Weaver/ Weaver Leader	Nati Imli Bunkar colony
Aziz Akram	Weaver	Nati Imli Bunkar colony
Maqbool Hasan	<i>Gaddedar</i>	Pili Kothi
Faiyaz	<i>Gaddedar</i>	Pili Kothi
Ramzan ali panchrangi	Weaver leader	
Aftab	Weaver/Weaver leader	Loheta
Md Rais Ansari	<i>Gaddedar</i> /exporter	Nati Imli Bunkar colony
Haji Rahmatullah Ansari	<i>Gaddedar</i> /exporter	Nati Imli Bunkar colony
Abdurarahman		
Md Aslam	Former master-weaver now in <i>zardozi</i>	Gauriganj
Md. Idris	Weaver	Bajardiha
Maqsood Alam	Weaver	Bajardiha
Md. Subhan	Weaver	Bajardiha
Md. Jamil ansari	Weaver	Bajardiha
Tufani (25)	Weaver	Baghwanala
Siddiq Hasan	Organiser, Bunkar dastkar Manch	Pitarkunda
Phoolchand	Weaver	Loheta
Badruddin	Weaver	Loheta
Shamsudoha	Weaver	Loheta
Md. Saleem	Weaver	Loheta
Ramzan	Weaver	Loheta
Shamsher	Weaver	Loheta
Mumtaz	Weaver	Loheta
Nasruddin	Weaver	Loheta
Rakhruddin	Weaver	Loheta
Kallu	Weaver	Loheta
Md. Abdullah	Weaver	

Md. Mushtaq	Weaver	
Md. Siddiq	<i>Grihastha/Gaddedar</i> (powerloom)	Loheta

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AIACA website: www.craftmark.org | www.aiacaonline.org