THE FABRIC OF HEALTH: A STUDY OF THE FACTORS AFFCTING THE HEALTH STATUS OF HANDLOOM WEAVERS OF VARANASI

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

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CERTIFICATE

This dissertation entitled *"The Fabric of Health: A Study of the Factors Affecting the Health Status of Handloom Weavers of Varanasi"* is submitted in partial fulfilment of six credits for the award of the Degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY of Jawaharlal Nehru University. This dissertation has not been submitted for the award of any other degree of this university or any other university and is my original work.

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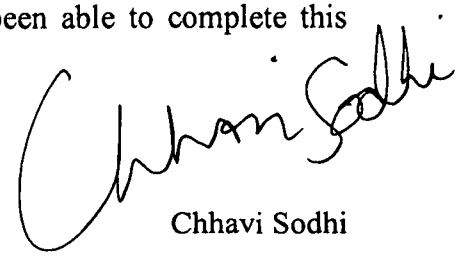

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Acronyms

AAY	Antodaya Anna Yojana
ADI	Additional Director of Industries
AD	Anno Domini
AP	Andhra Pradesh
APL	Above Poverty Line
BC	Before Christ
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CMO	Chief Medical Officer
DDUHPY	Deen Dayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana
GIDS	Giri Institute of Development Studies
HES	Handloom Export Scheme
HIS	Health Insurance Scheme
HUDCO	Housing and Urban Development Corporation Ltd.
JCHP	Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms
IHCDP	Integrated Handloom Cluster Development Programme
ILO	International Labour Organisation
MGBBY	Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MGPS	Mill Gate Price Scheme
MPP	Marketing Promotion Programme
NAMA	Non-Agricultural Market Access
NCAER	National Council of Applied Economic Research
NCEUS	National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector
NHDC	National Handloom Development Corporation
NISHW	New Insurance Scheme for Handloom Weavers
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
NSS	National Sample Survey
NTP	New Textile Policy

OBC	Other Backward Castes
PDS	Public Distribution System
SC	Scheduled Caste
ST	Scheduled Tribe
SSI	Small Scale Industry
TB	Tuberculosis
TFS	Thrift Fund Scheme
TN	Tamil Nadu
UP	Uttar Pradesh
UPICA	Uttar Pradesh Industrial Co-operative Association
WCH	Work-shed-cum-Housing Scheme
WPR	Work Participation Rate
WSC	Weavers' Service Centre
WTO	World Trade Organisation

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Beginning

Human beings are social creatures. The emergence and evolution of human civilization, in its various facets, has materialised out of this social nature of man. Throughout human history, men and women have come together to live in social units, either big or small. Social structure and social institutions have cropped up to govern relationships between fellow human beings and groups of human beings. Living in society has undoubtedly had an influence on the health and well-being of individuals and groups of individuals. Borne out of these troubles pertaining to health, have been efforts to deal with and overcome problems experienced by the people. These efforts, brought under the ambit of the term 'public health', have historically depended upon the nature and perceived criticality of these problems as well as the level of knowledge available regarding them. Social, political, cultural and economic influences have played an important role in determining the nature and course of such attempts. Development of health services has been one of the various endeavours to deal with the problems, relating to health, afflicting people. Arrangements extending from provision of adequate housing to drinking water to social security too have marked human efforts to improve health of people[1].

The identification of the importance of environmental factors such as housing, sanitation, supply of drinking water and maintenance of a clean and hygienic environment stretches back to ancient civilisations such as that of Egypt, Incans and the Indus Valley civilisation[2]. Recognition of the importance of these factors in influencing health is amply encapsulated in the following words of the Hippocratic doctrine, "the well-being of man is influenced by all environmental factors: the quality of air, water and food; the winds and the topography of the land; and the general living habits.... Health is the expression of harmony among the environment, the ways of life, and the various components of man's nature"[3].

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1 McKeown, T. (1971): 'Historical Trends and Future Prospects in Public Health,' in G. McLachlan and T. *McKeown* (ed.): *Medical History and Medical Care: A Symposium of Perspectives.* London: Oxford University Press, pp. 57-64.

2 Rosen, G. (1958): *A History of Public Health.* New York: MD Publications, Inc., Ch.1, pp. 25-29.

3 Turshen, M. (1977): 'The Political Ecology of Disease,' *The Review of Radical Political Economics*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 45-60.

The belief in the ability of these aforementioned factors to promote the health of populations was further strengthened with the experience derived from Europe in the 19th century, where large-scale declines in human mortality took place towards the latter half of this century. They were largely attributed to sanitary reforms being undertaken in these countries. The industrial revolution had brought about rapid urbanisation resulting in cramped, degraded, overcrowded and unhygienic housing and living conditions[4]. Working conditions were equally poor, characterised by immeasurably long working hours, with little or no breaks, unventilated rooms resulting in overheated conditions and swirling toxic gases. They too impacted health conditions, resulting in high disease and death rates among the working classes[5]. Diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid and small-pox were common. Epidemics of cholera in 1831 and 1832 too ravaged the population. The sanitary reformers led by Edwin Chadwick pinned the blame for such diseases and destruction to 'miasmas' arising from the filthy and insanitary living conditions prevailing in the cities of England. This led to a period of sanitary upliftment resulting in provisions for clean drinking water, sewage disposal, cleaning of streets, resulting in spectacular decline in diseases such as cholera and typhoid within a short time span. Working conditions too were regulated[6]. Improvement in the standard of living and nutritional status of the population during this period also played an important role in bringing about an improvement in the health of people and a corresponding decline in mortality through communicable diseases[7].

Thus, in finality, it may be said that apart from biological factors, health is also influenced by material conditions, chief among them are the levels of nutrition of the people, their housing and working conditions and clothing. Also important within this matrix is health care, a function of the health services system. In other words, the concept of health may be understood as an interface of the biological factors with the wider cultural, social, economic, political and ideological systems of the community[8]. Economic factors, including the level of income, assume importance in influencing

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4 Ross, E. (1994): 'The Origin of Public Health: Concepts and Contradictions,' in P. Draper (ed) *Health Through Public Policy: The Greening of Public Health*. London, Green Print, pp. 26-40.

5 Turshen, M. (1977), *op cit.*

6 Ross, E. (1994), *op cit.*

7 McKeown, T., Brown, R.G. and Record, R.G. (1972): 'An Interpretation of the Modern Rise of Population in Europe,' *Population Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp.345-357.

8 Qadeer, I. (1985): 'Health Services System in India: An Expression of Socio-Economic Inequalities,' *Social Action*, Vol. 35, pp.199-223.

health, as they are a factor in determining the position of a person in the social order. A person's position in the social hierarchy affects their access to services such as education, decent housing facilities, sanitary facilities and clean drinking water, among others[9]. Meanwhile, political systems gain importance as they affect development and positioning of these social institutions, with respect to different groups of people[10].

Such a comprehensive notion of health is diametrically opposed to the more prevalent medical model of health, which takes an individualistic view of the concept. It presumes a single factor – particular micro-organisms – as being responsible for producing disease in man[11]. Within such a Cartesian perspective, the human body, instead of being seen as a whole, is viewed as the mere sum total of its parts – the various cells and the organs that make it up are perceived as separate entities. The body is akin to a machine and thus disease affecting a particular organ within the body of an individual is seen and treated in a similar manner to part in an object or a machine being repaired and restored to its normal routine functioning. Such a germ theory of health sheared away the role of wider social and economic factors, among others in producing illness and disease as well as health within a population[12].

The medical model, derived from a reductionist view of the human body, propounds an incomplete understanding of the comprehensive concept of health and has been severely criticised in failing to take into account the wide-ranging nature of this concept. The historical backing enjoyed by the former more inclusive model further negates the latter mechanical conception of the paradigm of health. The present study takes into account the former perspective in understanding the concept of health.

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9 Marmot, M. (2002): 'The Influence of Income on Health: Views of an Epidemiologist,' *Heath Affairs,* Vol.21, No.2, pp.31-46.

10 Qadeer, I. (1985), *op cit.*

11 Nayar, K.R. (1991): 'Interdisciplinarity in Social Sciences in *Health*: A Re-examination of the Linkages between Social Psychology and Health', Research Paper Series, School of Social Sciences, JNU.

12 Qadeer, I. (1985), *op cit;* Djurfeldt, G. and Lindberg, S. (1980): *Pills against Poverty: A Study of Introduction of Western Medicine in a Tamil Village.* New Delhi: Oxford and IBHP Publishing Co., Ch.1, pp.20-26.

1.2 The Dilemma: Workers – Healthy or Unhealthy?

Given the influence of a variety of factors encompassing almost all aspects of social life, on the health of populations, the health of workers too may be understood as a function of the environment in which they live and work. Apart from the above factors, Qadeer and Roy (1989) state that socio-economic determinants of the work-force too play a part in affecting the health of workers[13].

Health is perhaps the most important asset available to workers. This is especially so for those engaged in manual labour. For such workers, their health is their greatest wealth. This is due to the fact that their ability to earn a daily living is strongly linked to their health status. An episode of ill-health has a direct bearing on the productivity of workers, which consequently impinges upon their working and earning capacity. Furthermore, sickness within the family of workers too has serious repercussions for them as resources of the entire family are diverted to taking care and nursing the sick individual back to a better state of health[14].

Thus, health is central to the notion of well-being (physical as well as material) and thus influences the basic capability of workers. Material conditions, as mentioned above, hold direct sway in the promotion of health. These material conditions are, in turn, affected by socio-economic position of people, which not only determines the presence of basic amenities in their immediate environment, but also accessibility to these services including nutrition, health services, housing, sanitation, drinking water and education.

The present study on factors influencing the health of handloom weavers of Varanasi city attempts to place the health concerns of the weavers within the context of their working and living conditions as well as their socio-economic state. The handloom weaving industry is a part of the unorganised sector of the economy, characterised by low wages and insecurity of work tenures. The implications of these aforementioned conditions on the health of weavers engaged in this industry will be more evident in the following sections as the concepts of unorganised sector and home-based work and the characteristics of these systems are further elucidated upon.

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[13] Qadeer, I. and Roy, D. (1989): 'Work, Wealth and Health: Sociology of Workers' Health in India,' *Social Scientist*, Vol.17, No.5/6, pp.45-92.

[14] Chatterjee, M. (1991): 'Occupational health of Self-employed Women Workers – Experiences from Community Based Studies of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA),' in *Proceedings of the ITGWF-TWARO West Asian Workshop on Health and Safety,* Bombay, pp.1-16.

1.2.1 Creating Social Identities: Socio Economic Determinants

Socio-economic factors such as caste, class and education play a vital role in ascertaining people's position within the highly differentiated labour force of the country. Qadeer and Roy (1989) refer to a study conducted in 1984 in Shahdol district in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh which clearly revealed that while the higher placed permanent workers, skilled as well as semi-skilled, belonged largely to upper and middle caste families. On the other hand, most of the lower placed contract and casual labourers were from the community of Scheduled Tribes, Harijans and other lower castes. On the basis of the above example and other such studies, they conclude that the upper and the middle castes are largely placed in higher level managerial jobs, requiring a high skill level. Meanwhile, a majority of the low-paying unskilled casual jobs fall into the domain of people belonging to the category of scheduled castes and other such lower and backward castes. They further underline the role of factors such as kinship and social bonds in gaining access to such jobs and securing promotion[15]. Thus social identities and allegiances play an important role in defining one's position in the labour hierarchy. Societal stratification thus gets mirrored and perpetuated within the workforce. The concern that arises from such a situation is that working conditions for those placed at the bottom of this hierarchy are truly dismal as such "informalised labour not only lacks rights, it lacks stability of income and occupation." As incomes remain low in such employment, workers often themselves take up the onus of maximising wages by increasing number of hours and days worked[16]. All of this further takes a toll on their health as the consequences of long and unregulated working hours in a poor working environment, with barely adequate wage levels and resultant scarce food consumption, have been demonstrated in the previous section.

Thus, it may be said that as socio-economic origins and social identities play a decisive role in influencing the level of education and skill levels and access to various jobs, thus the poorer the socio-economic background of people, the greater likelihood exists of taking up lowly and unskilled jobs, with all of their attendant health hazards[17].

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[15] Qadeer, I. and Roy, D. (1989), *op cit.*

[16] Harriss-White, B. (2004): *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy.* New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, pp.19-20.

[17] Qadeer, I. and Roy, D. (1989), *op cit.*

1.3 The Big Debate: Unorganised Sector

The following section aims at developing a greater understanding of the concept of unorganised sector and the informal workforce. It is important to note that the handloom industry in Varanasi is a home-work industry, where a majority of the production process is carried on within the households of the handloom weavers. Homework industries constitute an integral part of the vast and extensive unorganised sector that exists in the country today.

The Indian national economy is frequently cited as having a 'dual' nature, characterised by the existence of an organised formal sector alongside a rural agrarian dominated economy and a vast and diverse unorganised sector[18]. Within these two sectors, workers are either formally employed in the formal as well as the informal or unorganised sector or work informally in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy[19]. A National Sample Survey conducted in the year 2004-05 revealed that 7.62% of the 457.46 million strong workforce in the country was formally employed. The rest of the 92.38% or 422.61 million workers were informal workers. Informal employment in the informal sector constituted about 86% of the total employed workforce[20].

Before moving further ahead in this section, it is important to develop a greater understanding of the concept of the unorganised sector, to which category homework belongs. Broadly it may be defined as the sector which does not fall under the ambit of any factory legislation implemented by the government[21]. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) defines the unorganised sector as one consisting of "all incorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households engaged in the sale and production of goods and services operated on a proprietary or partnership basis and with less than ten total workers." Further the NCEUS defined employment in the unorganised sector as "unorganised

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[18] Holmstrom, M. (1985): *Industry and Inequality: The Social Anthropology of Indian Labour.* London: Cambridge University Press in assoc. with Orient Longman, pp.13-25.

[19] National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2009): *The Challenge of Employment in India: An Informal Sector Perspective*, Vol.1. (Chairman: Arjun Sengupta). New Delhi: Dolphin Printo Graphics, p.9.

[20] *ibid*; Bairagya, I. (2010): 'Liberalisation, Informal Sector and Formal-Informal Sectors' Relationship: A Study of India,' Proceedings of the 31st General Conference of The International Association for Research in Income and Wealth, 22-28 August, 2010. (Available at: http://www.iariw.org, accessed on 29th June, 2011).

[21] Parthasarathy, G. (1996): 'Unorganised Sector and Structural Adjustment.' *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 31, No.28, pp.1859-1861 & 1863-1869.

workers consist of those working in the unorganised enterprise or households, excluding regular workers with social security benefits, and the workers in the formal sector without any employment/social security benefits provided by the employers,"[22].

The unorganised sector workforce has been defined by the First Indian National Commission on Labour (1966-69) as, "those workers who have not been able to organize themselves in pursuit of their common interest due to certain constraints like casual nature of employment, ignorance and illiteracy, small and scattered size of establishments,"[23]. Other features of unorganised sector employment as outlined by the above National Commission on Labour are low levels of capital investment and low productivity levels per person employed in this sector and the greater power of the employer (whether functioning individually or in combination) vis-à-vis the workers. This leads to greater exploitation of the latter at the hands of the former[24]. Lack of security of work as well as lack of social security and low levels of income earned are other persistent problems faced by informally employed workers.

1.3.1. Home-based workers

As stated above, the handloom weaving industry as prevalent in Varanasi (largely a home-work economic enterprise) constitutes a part of the burgeoning unorganised sector of the economy. Mehrotra and Biggeri (2007) state that within this larger domain of workers informally employed within the Indian economy, home-based workers form the largest category of workers. Home-based workers are workers who perform work within the precincts of their household premises or in nearby grounds and are recompensed for their labour. Both self-employed and paid workers (working for others) belong to this category of home-based workers. Within this broader category of home-based workers lies the sub-category of home-workers, who are basically 'industrial outworkers' working from within their homes and get paid for their work. They are either employed directly by firms or work for intermediaries or

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22 National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2007): *Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector.* (Chairman: Arjun Sengupta). New Delhi: Dolphin Printo Graphics, p.3.

23 Naik, A.K. (2009): 'Informal Sector and Informal Workers in India,' Proceedings of the Special IARIW-SAIM Conference on "Measuring the Informal Economy on Developing Countries," 23-26 September, 2009. (Available at: http://www.iariw.org, accessed on 16th October 2010).

24 Ahmad, F. (1999): *Labour in Informal Sector.* New Delhi: Manak Publications (P) Ltd. Ch.1, pp.5-8.

sub-contractors and are usually paid on a per-piece basis[25]. Some of the features of home-based work (mirrored in the case of the Varanasi handloom weaving industry in India) are lack of access to either guaranteed work and employment benefits. Being a part of the unorganised sector, it remains outside of the purview of government legislation protecting the rights of workers. Furthermore, home-workers working within their households are inclined to remain cut off from their fellow workers and thus there is a far lesser chance of them coming together to form trade unions, thus decreasing their ability to draw attention to their legitimate needs and demands with reference to their employers' as well as government authorities. Another concern of home-workers, especially those indulging in manual labour, is the low wages received by them. Moreover, the overhead costs of production, including expenses on utilities, space and equipment, often have to be borne by the workers themselves, which further decreases the net remunerations received by them[26]. Not only do home-workers purchase machinery out of their own expenses, but also have to take care of all expenditure relating to the maintenance of such machinery and its tools. Given such circumstances, it should come as no surprise that the net wages of home-workers are the lowest among all groups of workers[27].

In India, the low priority accorded to home-based workers is visible by the fact that no official policy has been formulated by the government for the protection and promotion of these workers in the country. The Minimum Wages Act, 1948 too does not cover all the trades in which these workers are engaged, thus excluding a large number of workers from its scope[28]. A 2002 report of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) states that a major problem that arises with home-work is the identification of the 'employer' of the home-worker – whether it is the intermediary who directly deals with the worker and supplies material to them or is it the supplier who puts out work to the intermediary. Whether the employer should be identified as

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[25] Mehrotra, S. and Biggeri, M. (2007): 'The Empirical Context and a Theoretical Framework,' in Mehrotra, S. and Biggeri, M. (eds.) *Asian Informal Workers: Global Risks, Local Protection.* London: Routledge, pp.3-27.

[26] International Labour Organisation (2002): *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture.* Geneva, ILO. Available at: http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2002/102B09_139_engl.pdf, accessed on 3rd June, 2011, pp.43-49.

[27] Bhatt, E. (1987): 'The Invisibility of Home-based Work: The Case of Piece Rate Workers in India,' in Singh, A.M. and Kelles-Viitanen, A. (eds.) *Invisible Hands: Women in Home-based Production.* New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., pp.29-33.

[28] *ibid*

the manufacturer who contracts work to the supplier or should it be the retailer, within this long value chain, who finally sells the product to the consumer. Though often it is argued that the final lead firm in this value chain should be deemed as the employer, yet a lack of clarity persists on this issue. This confusion leads to a problem of identifying and subsequently pinning down accountability on any one particular entity for protection of the rights of these workers and ensuring just wages for them. The considerable distance between the lead firm and the home-workers (due to the existence of a long sequence of intermediaries) that exists heightens uncertainty over who is liable for increasing the wages of these home-workers and providing them with certain basic social security benefits. Such a situation further weakens the bargaining power of these workers[29]. The system is, however, beneficial for the lead firms, who are able to capitalise on the lack of 'information' of the workers and also exploit them due to lack of other employment opportunities available to them and even pass some of the risks associated with production to vulnerable self-employed home-based workers. In being able to hire these workers, the former is also able to bypass strong labour legislations and other such protections available to workers under the labour laws of the country. In such a situation, the home-worker may not really have a free choice but to take up such work at subsistence level wages (or even less than that), due to the absence of better alternatives available to him/her[30].

The extent and magnitude of the difficult conditions under which home-workers work can be further gauged from the fact that employment itself is quite erratic and highly uncertain for these workers, corresponding to demand for their products. Thus though work may be available during peak season, during the lean months, a large number of these home-workers often find themselves out of work. Their services are deemed redundant at these times to accommodate the profit-making motives of businesses, with hardly any thought being spared for the needs of the retrenched workforce. In other words, insecurity is an intrinsic part of conditions of work of these workers, who are utilised and dispensed with as per the needs of the business[31].

[29] International Labour Organisation (2002), *op cit,* p.45.
[30] Mehrotra, S. and Biggeri, M. (2007), *op. cit,* p.15.
[31] Bhatt, E. (1987), *op cit.*

1.4 Deciphering the Health of Home-based Workers

The following section attempts to assess the health conditions of home-based workers and tries to place the within the context of the living and working conditions of these workers and their nutritional status. It further elucidates upon the conditions of poverty that a large number of home-workers live in, a derivation of the exploitative relations of production and the 'powerlessness' experienced by these workers in challenging such uneven production relations.

1.4.1 Living Conditions

Adequate housing has a significant impact on the health and well-being of people. Urban home-workers often live together in large compact clusters, resembling slum settlements characterised by the absence of civic amenities. Similar is the situation of a number of such clusters of weavers, in Varanasi city. Lack of proper garbage and sewage disposal facilities and proper toilets within the homes of these workers, open and overflowing drains characterised by regular flooding during the monsoon season and poor quality of drinking water are some of the features of their living environment[32]. Lack of a clean drinking water source within the premises of one's house is another common feature of such slum settlements, due to which they have to rely on open public wells situated in the vicinity to fetch water. The risk of water contamination is higher in such cases. Moreover, water for utilisation will almost always be available in insufficient quantities within the house if it has to be brought in from outside, resulting in hardships for the concerned workers and their family members[33]. All of these factors taken together do not bode well for the health of workers' living in these areas.

1.4.2 Nutrition

Health of people is also intrinsically related to their level of nutrition, which in turn is a function of the amount and quality of food consumed by them. Not only does a poor level of nutrition pre-dispose people to infection by reducing their level of resistance to disease agents, but it also impacts their ability to recover quickly from a bout of infection[34].

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[32] *ibid,* p.35.

[33] Nayar, K.R. (1997): 'Housing Amenities and Health Improvement: Some Findings,' *Economic and Political* Weekly, Vol.32, No.22, pp.1275-1279; World Health Organisation (1989): *Health Principles of Housing.* Geneva, Switzerland, p.3.

[34] McKeown, T., Brown, R.G. and Record, R.G. (1972), *op cit.*

The level of nutrition and food intake by a household is a direct corollary of the income earned by that household. Zurbrigg (1984) states that in situations, when securing daily-wage employment is in itself an onerous and difficult task, then balancing an adequate diet within the economic means of the household becomes a dicey proposition. Failure to secure work for even a temporary period leads to a corresponding period of starvation. This further decreases the worker and his family's ability to work and also results in their increased vulnerability to disease, based on malnutrition-infection cycle. She further goes on to illustrate the irony of the situation – the people engaged in manual labour work the hardest in society and expend the maximum amount of energy in their work, yet they are the ones who have to survive on a subsistence level diet, which is unable to meet the calorie requirements of their body. Critiquing the unequal distribution of resources in society, she claims that this results in an unequal burden of health in society because it is precisely the people who are unable to afford three adequate and balanced decent meals for themselves and their families are engaged in the most arduous physical tasks. These are the people who are also least able to access and seek treatment for diseases brought about by their all-round miserable circumstances[35]. Thus, Zurbrigg, in her study on rural labouring families, vividly brings out issues relating to ill-health arising from nutritional insecurity. They stem from exploitative working conditions that landless labourers across the country are forced to undergo each day in rural India. A study exploring the various dimensions of health needs to be conducted in the context of urban labouring households. The present study attempts to fill certain gaps in this regard.

1.4.3 Physical Conditions of work

The physical conditions of work of these home-workers too paint a brutal and discouraging picture. They work for long hours often in small enclosed tiny work spaces, which often have low roofs and poor ventilation facilities. Lack of ventilation results in working conditions becoming almost unbearable for the home-workers, especially during the summer season. The workers are thus compelled to shifting working hours to late evenings and nights. This not only affects their natural cycles but also means that they have to work in relatively poor lighting. Working without

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[35] Zurbrigg, S. (1984): *Rakku's Story: Structures of Ill-health and the Source of Change.* Bangalore: St. Paul Press Training School, pp.50-52 & 125-126.

adequate lighting takes a toll on the eyesight of these workers. Even during the day time, inadequate provisions for ventilation mean that natural light available from the windows is insufficient in meeting the needs of the workers. Inadequate availability of light also impacts the production process, especially when work such as handloom and carpet weaving, requires utmost precision. Proper lighting is required for ensuring that quality is maintained during the production process, since even the slightest of mistakes can result in the developing of knots in the cloth being woven. Workers have to bear the brunt of such slip-ups and since payments are usually made on a piece-rate basis, they often find their wages being deducted for these mistakes. Thus, a relatively simple variable such as deficient lighting has a serious potential impact upon the quality of work of a home-based worker (in this case a handloom weaver)[36].

Working for long hours in relatively unventilated spaces has other serious implications for health – sustained exposure to such conditions can result in respiratory diseases among workers. Furthermore, since the living and working area is the same for these workers, it results in cramped conditions and insufficient space being available for both living as well as working[37].

1.4.4 **Conditions of Exploitation**

Home-work, being carried on within the household of the workers, it is assumed that workers have the right to regulate the duration of their work – the number of hours worked per day as well as the number of days worked in a week. Since wage levels in home-work (paid on a piece-rate basis) are typically low, they are compelled to work for long hours with the aim of maximising income. During peak seasons, they sometimes work under tremendous pressure for as long as sixteen hours a day. While the industry and contractors thrive at the unabashed exploitation of the cheap surplus labour, the unlimited work hours put in by these workers (in a bid to enhance income earned) means that not only do they have little spare time left for meals, but such long hours are also physically draining for them. Not only are such conditions exhausting for the workers, but the insecurity that is such an intrinsic and inseparable part of sub-contracted home-work has significant negative connotations for their mental health too[38]. Work-days taken off too are professedly dependent upon the will of these

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[36] National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2007), *op cit,* pp.30-32.
[37] *ibid,* pp.30-32.
[38] Turshen, M. (1977), *op cit.*

home-workers, but any leave taken by these workers is unpaid. In other words, they have to forego earnings for any day taken off from work. Even leave taken for work-related injuries is not recompensed to the worker and a severe injury may also result in loss of work for such a worker. The rationale being that the process of production cannot be delayed or stopped for any injured worker[39]. In order to prevent further loss of income, they put further pressure on their bodies and return to the site of their work as soon as is possible, foregoing rest periods required for recuperating from injuries and other health concerns. In the long run, this further aggravates their poor health status[40].

The fact that home-workers, especially women home-workers, are among the lowest paid workers in the world reiterates the abysmal conditions in which they work as well as their vulnerability within the work and production hierarchy. In context of women embroidery workers based in Delhi, Rao and Hussain (1987) state that contractors often demanded completion of work on the same day as its delivery as they feared that garments would get dirty in the unclean and muddy houses of the workers. Directly succumbing to the exploitative demands of their contractors, women had to work late hours at night to complete these rush-orders[41].

1.4.5 Power Relations

The nature of working conditions in the home-based informal sector industry (including handloom weaving in Varanasi city), by and large, fulfils all the features of 'precarious employment.' Employment may be defined as 'precarious' if it is characterised by low wage levels, which are hardly able to ensure even subsistence level existence for workers and their families and lack of social security benefits. High work insecurity (which may be understood as the difference between the levels of security the person experiences in their work and the extent that they would prefer) are another feature of 'precarious employment.' Another abiding feature is 'powerlessness,' which characterises production relations between the employee and

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39 National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2007), *op cit,* pp.33-36.

40 International Labour Organisation and Centre for Health Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (1999): 'Women's Occupational and Reproductive Health: Research Evidence and Methdological Issues,' Report of the Workshop, 23-25 February, 1998. (Available at: http://www.cwds.ac.in/library/collection/elib/public_policy/pup_womens_occupational.pdf, accessed on 13th July, 2011).

41 Rao, R. and Hussain, S. (1987), *op cit.*

his contractor or employer. Powerlessness is brought on by the absence of legal measures preserving the rights of workers engaged in this industry as well as by the nonexistence of trade unions to fight for the enforcement of such rights, including those relating to minimum wage levels and adherence to certain basic standards of working. These factors thus increase the defencelessness experienced by home-workers in their work relations as their capacity to resist and fight such lopsided working relations is dulled in the absence of institutional mechanisms to protect their legitimate rights[42].

1.4.6 Conditions of Absolute Poverty

In order to gain a greater understanding of the socio-economic implications of being a part of the home-work labour force, as in the case of the handloom weavers of Varanasi, an insight into the high levels of poverty that is faced by the informal workforce in the country is necessitated. A 2007 report by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) states that an overwhelming 79% of the unorganised workforce belongs to the category of 'poor' and 'vulnerable' in the country. The report defines 'poor' as those who have a per capita per day expenditure of just Rs.11.6, while 'vulnerable' are those with a per capita per day consumer expenditure of Rs.20.3 only[43]. Such a level of earning is even beneath a subsistence level of existence, if the high and increasing prices of commodities, especially food items, in present times are factored into the equation. The fact that workers have to continue working in such miserable conditions is a testimony to the lack of more viable alternatives available to them. Breman (1976) refers to them as the 'sub-proletariat,' a group, which he states, is typically characterised by an excess of expenditure over earnings, living in deplorable conditions and often even in make-shift housing facilities[44].

Another feature of this category of people is a lower level of education, as children are often required to forego education to contribute to meagre household incomes[45].

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[42] Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2007): *Employment Conditions and Health Inequalities.* (Chairpersons – J. Benach, C. Muntaner and V. Santana). Geneva: World Health Organisation (WHO), p.56.

[43] *ibid,* pp.5-8.

[44] Breman, J. (1976): 'A Dualistic Labour System? A Critique of the 'Informal Sector' Concept – III: Labour Force and Class Formation,' *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol.11, No.50, pp.1939-1944.

[45] Mehrotra and Biggeri (2007), *op cit,* p.15.

Educational levels are critical in gaining access to more quality employment, associated with more decent wage levels[46].

1.4.7 Occupational Health Hazards

Since industries comprising the informal sector fall beyond the purview of state legislation on factory legislation relating to maintenance of certain basic standards of work and wages, working conditions in this industries within this sector have generally been observed to be worse off than their counterparts in the formal sector. Occupational hazards, a result of the unsafe working environment, are commonly reported in firms operating in this sector. Long working hours and lack of regulation often result in greater exposure for workers to toxic chemicals, including pesticides for workers engaged in such occupations. Working in uncomfortable and awkward postures, extremely loud and noisy environments, characterised by poor sanitary facilities, with little or no provision of protective equipments to safeguard their health, makes them more prone to ill-health. Low levels of training for working in difficult and harsh environments also increase their susceptibility to accidents and injuries, frequently resulting in loss of limbs and sometimes even death. Workers in these settings are also more vulnerable to exploitation and violence and even sexual assault at the hands of their employers and have few formal mechanisms for redressing of their legitimate grievances[47].

Thus, as stated above, poor and hazardous working conditions invariably have an effect on workers' health and safety. A high rate of accidents has been reported among underground mine-workers, along with a high incidence of tuberculosis and pneumonoconiosis and other lung diseases due to its unsafe work environment and the high levels of dust prevalent in the atmosphere. Similarly, a 2003 study by the International labour Organisation (ILO) on home-based tobacco *bidi* workers in four states of India reported high levels of dust in the godowns where women were engaged in production, giving birth to respiratory problems in numerous workers. Furthermore, sitting for long hours in a constant posture resulted in body aches, back aches and spondilitis and lower limb swelling among these workers. Eye-

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[46] National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2007), *op cit*, p. 25.
[47] *ibid*, p.64.

strain too was frequently reported and digestive problems; in particular constipation was reported by these workers. Women workers also experienced leucorrhoea and heavy bleeding during their menstrual cycles and some attributed miscarriages to the strain of the posture in which they had to maintain their body for hours[48]. Certain industries have particular occupational health hazards associated with them such as high incidence rates of silicosis among silica mine workers, as in Bihar, asbestosis among asbestos workers and high prevalence rates of lead poisoning among workers dealing with batteries, have been reported[49].

An occupational disease commonly associated with cotton textile workers is byssinosis, a disabling lung condition, which is brought about by long-term exposure to dust from cotton or other fibres. Its symptoms include breathlessness and tightness in the chest and working in relatively unventilated spaces increases risk of contracting this occupational disease[50]. Qadeer and Roy (1989) refer to an Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Technical Information Bulletin of 1967 which found prevalence rates 8.4% of byssinosis among textile workers[51]. Dogra (1985) refers to a study carried out in three textile mills in the city of Bombay (now Mumbai) between the years of 1970-1975, which reported an incidence rate for byssinosis of 12% among the textile workers. While an incidence rate of 7% was observed among those who had worked for five years or less in these mills, a significantly higher rate of 18% was byssinosis was noted among the longest serving workers[52]. Another study conducted among textile workers in Pondicherry in 2004 reported a 17% prevalence rate for chronic bronchitis, with higher rates of prevalence among those workers who were above forty-five years of age. Furthermore, the same study found that 32% of the workers who were suffering from byssinosis also had chronic bronchitis[53]. Singh et al, 2005 too reports a high morbidity level among textile workers in Rajasthan,

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48 International Labour Organisation (2003): 'Making Ends Meet: Bidi Workers in India Today: A Study of Four States,' Sectoral Activities Programme, *Working Paper, International Labour Organisation.* Geneva, ILO. Available at: http:// www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/sector/papers/food/wp202.pdf, accessed on 4th June, 2011.

49 Qadeer, I. and Roy, D. (1989), *op cit.*

50 Dogra, B. (1985): 'Health Hazards of Cotton Textile Workers,' *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol.20, No.7, pp.267-268.

51 Qadeer, I. and Roy, D. (1989), *op cit.*

52 Dogra, B. (1985), *op cit.*

53 Mishra, A.K. et al (2004): 'Epidemiological Study of Chronic Bronchitis among Textile Workers in Pondicherry,' *Indian Journal of Community Medicine,* Vol.29, No.4, pp.167-169.

with aches (including body, back and head aches) being reported by 19.4% and respiratory problems by 12.1% of the workers. General weakness and anaemia too was widely reported by 66% of the textile workers in this study[54]. The above studies on occupational health morbidities of industrial workers do not go beyond the direct implications of working conditions on the physical health of workers. They do not explore factors relating to exploitative working conditions, under which workers are compelled to work in such unsafe conditions.

A study conducted in the year 2010 by People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (PVCHR), a Varanasi-based non-governmental organisation working with handloom weavers of the district, too observes the prevalence of byssinosis among the workers engaged in this industry, which it claims is often wrongly diagnosed as tuberculosis by the local health-care providers[55]. Among other respiratory ailments commonly afflicting the handloom weavers of Varanasi were tuberculosis, including Multi Drug Resistance Tuberculosis (MDR-TB), developed due to the inhalation of dust from the silk and cotton yarns they use in their work. A five-month study conducted jointly by PVCHR and the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) in 2008, among the handloom weavers of Lohta, Varanasi reported as many as sixty-seven cases of the tuberculosis within the community, suggesting high prevalence rates of the potentially disabling disease[56].

Apart from the above mentioned occupational diseases commonly observed among textile workers, including the home-workers of the Varanasi handloom weaving industry, other health related problems that arise in such work are usually those associated with long hours of work. A study, conducted by Vijay (1997) on the home-based women handloom weavers of Karur, Andhra Pradesh revealed high levels of physical discomfort experienced by the respondents in their work – 80% of the study respondents complained of body aches and head-aches, while 60% of them experienced eye-pain, 40% stated that they had experienced back pain and rheumatic pains in their work. Tuberculosis was also reported by 12% of the respondents. Nearly half of these women worked on the

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[54] Singh, M., Fotedar, R. and Lakshminarayana, J. (2005): 'Occupational Morbidities and their Association with Nutrition and Environmental Factors among Textile Workers of Desert Areas of Rajasthan, India,' *Journal of Occupational Health,* Vol.47, pp.371-377.

[55] Lenin, R. and Nagvanshi, S. (2010): 'Banarasi Sari Weaving Sector of Varanasi: A Study of the Working Conditions of the Unorganised Workers of this Sector,' Unpublished study, People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights, Varanasi.

[56] People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (nd): *Suicide and Malnutrition among Weavers in Varanasi.* Lucknow: Action Aid.

handlooms for ten to twelve hours in a day. Workers also reported feeling a sense of entrapment being enclosed in a single room for such long hours. Dealing with the continuous noise of the handloom machine and the constant synchronised movement of arms and legs required in the process of weaving resulted in nausea and dizzy spells for a number of these respondents[57].

The report of the Task-force on Health (1988), National Commission on Self-employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector too reiterates the difficult working conditions of home-workers. It states that the posture of the workers in a number of home-based work activities, including handloom weaving, requires the workers to bend, crouch and stoop for several hours at a stretch, resulting in considerable occupation-related morbidities for these workers. Furthermore, it claimed that the repetition involved in such work resulted in not only fatigue but also dullness of the mind of the worker[58].

The association between long hours of work in handloom weaving and back, knee and other joint pains was also reported by Tom (1989), who carried out a study on women workers engaged in the silk handloom industry in Anekal and Ramanagaram districts of Karnataka, India. In her study, 72.2% of the study respondents suffered from such pains as a result of their work, while 50% of the sample experienced sore throat, constant cough, chest pains and other respiratory problems, including tuberculosis, due to their working conditions[59]. A study conducted on the carpet-weavers of Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh in 1992 too reported high prevalence rates of back-aches, cough, cough with expectoration and watery eyes among the workers engaged in such work[60].

Similar findings have emerged in a 2000-2001 survey on the women home-workers engaged in the zardosi industry in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, conducted by United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) and cited by Mehrotra and Biggeri

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57 Vijay, S. (1997): *Factors Determining Health of Home-based Women Weavers – A Case Study of Karur.* Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation. New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University.

58 International Labour Organisation and Centre for Health Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (1999), *op cit.*

59 Tom, I. (1989): *Women in Unorganised Sector. : Technology, Work Organisation and Change in the Silk Industry in South India.* New Delhi: Usha Publications, pp.51-52.

60 Das, P.K., Shukla, K.P. and Ory, F.G. (1992): 'An Occupational Health Programme for Adults and Children in the Carpet Weaving Industry, Mirzapur, India: A Case Study in the Informal Sector,' *Social Science and Medicine,* Vol.35, No.10, pp.1293-1302.

(2007). Of the total women workers surveyed, 21% reported the prevalence of watery eyes, 20.6% had poor vision, 24.9% complained of shoulder pain and 28% experiences back pain as a result of their work. During the peak season, the women workers spent nine hours a day on their embroidering work, the study reported[61].

A 1991 study on the occupational health problems of self-employed women workers, engaged in the ready-made garments industry in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, revealed that 80% of the workers suffered from pain in the limbs while at work. Forty-seven percent reported back pain, headache was felt by 41% respondents, while 26% complained about pain in the eyes and 23% experienced dizziness during work hours. Posture adopted for work was felt to be the primary reason behind most of these health troubles. Occupational health problems, experienced and reported by these respondents immediately after the completion of their work, included dizziness (49%) and exhaustion (47%). Lingering pain in the limbs was reported by 33% women workers, while 18% experienced pain in their eyes immediately after finishing their work. More than half of these women workers reported experiencing multiple maladies, both during the time of their work and immediately after it. Thus, high morbidity levels, brought about by a daily routine of eight to twelve hours of work, were reported by the respondents in the above-quoted study[62].

1.5 The Discourse - An Afterthought

A perusal of the above literature, thus, makes it amply clear that issues relating to the health, well-being and safety of workers share a direct link with the forces and relations of production and the social fabric underlying them. Mudgal (1991), in context of her study of the informal sector based stainless steel making units of Wazirpur Industrial Area in Delhi, states that a worker earns a meagre income after a long and strenuous day of work, which is hardly able to sustain the basic needs of his family. In such circumstances, he/she is compelled to curtail expenditure on housing, clothing, food and health-care, among others. The situation is further compounded by a lack of job security. Insecurity of tenure is an inherent feature of their working

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[61] Mehrotra, S. and Biggeri, M. (2007): 'Homeworkers,' in S.Mehrotra and M.Biggeri (eds.) *Asian Informal Workers: Global Risks, Local Protection.'* London: Routledge, pp.96-103.

[62] Chatterjee, M. (1991), *op cit.*

conditions, which undoubtedly influences their living conditions. They are thereby forced to live in a cramped, dirty and unsafe environment, with bare access to the basic amenities of life[63].

Low wages received by home-workers (including Varanasi handloom weavers) are a function of abundant supply of cheap labour (which makes them easy to replace) as well as the profit maximisation motives of large-scale business interests. Cost reduction is an inherent strategy that arises out of such a motive. Thus businesses are drawn to reducing the wages of workers to a bare minimum level to maintain competitiveness. Sub-contracting production allows firms to get away with such flagrant exploitation of labour as well as shift costs of overhead production onto them. Unsafe working environments with little provisions made for workers' safety are a product of such business interests, which has little concern for the health and well-being of workers. Lack of unionisation on the part of workers' reduces their capacity to bargain for and demand for increased wages and safer working conditions[64].

Hence, as visible from the above discourse, an understanding of the concept of health for workers, including the home-workers of Varanasi, is inseparable from the issues of subsistence, which constitutes a big part of the struggles that is the daily lives of these workers.

Thus, while the combination of poor living and working conditions play an inevitable role in influencing the health and well-being of home-workers (dealt in the previous section), factors such as the amount of income earned too have a direct role in influencing health.

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63 *ibid*

64 Mudgal, J. (1991): *Issues in Workers' Health of Unorganised Sector: A Case Study of some Stainless Steel Utensil Making Units of Wazirpur Industrial Area.* Unpublished M.Phil dissertation. New Delhi: *Jawaharlal* Nehru University.

CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGY

2.1 Rationale of the study

The holy city of Varanasi is among the oldest living cities in the world. This ancient city is said to be the abode of Lord Shiva in Hindu mythology and for centuries has been an important pilgrimage centre for Hindus across India and the world[65].

Apart from its religiosity, the city of Varanasi is also renowned for its brocade saris, which are inextricably linked with the ethos and the culture of the city. References to the woven fabric of the city are as old as 500 A.D., while the earliest mention of the reputed silk and gold brocades of Varanasi dates back to 1465 A.D.[66]. Though the Banarasi silk sari is a closely associated part of the city's identity, more important, in the contemporary context, is the fact that this industry is a source of livelihood to hundreds of thousands of weavers' working as a part of it. The essence of the handloom sector lies in its potential to provide large-scale employment to the masses.

The weaving industry of Varanasi is undoubtedly the nerve centre of the city's economy with a 1995-'96 survey by the Uttar Pradesh Handloom Corporation, cited by Raman (2010), putting the number of handlooms at 75,313 and the number of weavers of the famed Banarasi sari at 1,24,832[67]. Apart from providing direct employment to such a large number of people, lakhs more are gainfully employed within this cottage industry as allied workers. In the past, despite being able to survive the onslaught of competition from cheaper fabrics (to which many of its counterparts succumbed), it seems now that fate has finally caught up with this industry in Varanasi as well. The crisis facing the industry in Varanasi is well documented and the processes of globalisation and the neo-liberal policies of the government are ostensibly being blamed for it[68].

The decay of the handloom industry in the city spells misery and doom for the millions for whom the industry is a not just a source of income, but a way of life as well. The collapse of the industry in Varanasi does not bode well for the larger textile industry of

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65 Eck, D.L. (1983): *Banaras: City of Light.* New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., pp.4-5.

66 Du Bois, E. (1981): 'Banares Brocade' in *Ars Textrina*, Vol.3, p.209.

67 Raman, V. (2010): *The Warp and the Weft: Community and Gender Identity among Banaras Weavers.* New Delhi: Routledge, pp.100-101.

68 *ibid;* Francis, B. and Raghuvanshi, L. (2005): *'Handloom has become live grave for weavers.'* Varanasi: Jan Mitra Nyas.

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India too, the second largest employer in the nation after agriculture. The changing fortunes of the industry are closely linked to that of its serving weavers and thus, it becomes crucial to study the state of these weavers still employed within the industry and examine the affect of such changes on their health and well-being.

The introductory chapter dealing with the living and working conditions of workers, particularly the home-workers, clearly revealed the need to assess the health status and concerns of such workers in a holistic perspective. Health of populations is inseparable from the broader environment that they live and work in. It is a composite of biological factors interacting with the wider cultural, social, economic and political systems of the community. Despite the wide-ranging basis of health, a large majority of the studies on the health problems of workers, including home-workers (referred to in the previous chapter), did not deal with socio-economic basis of ill-health and thus propounded an incomplete understanding of the concept. The present study aims at developing a holistic perspective of the concept of health, in the context of home-based handloom weavers of Varanasi. This becomes especially important, given the steadily deteriorating conditions of work being faced by a majority of the workers engaged in this industry, which have an important impact on the issues of livelihood and sustenance and thus on the health of weavers.

2.2 Objectives

The proposed research study aims to study the aspects that shape and influence the health status of the weavers of the silk handloom industry of Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh. This involves an investigation of the socio economic, living and working conditions of the weaver, the impact of institutional factors that perpetuate conditions and concerns related to health.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- To gain an insight about the socio-economic and living conditions of the silk weaver community in Varanasi.
- To understand the working conditions of the weavers.
- To develop an understanding of their health conditions with reference to the above living and working conditions of the weavers.
- To understand the ways by which the community addresses its health problems in relation with the existing health service facilities.

2.3 Operational definitions

The following terms and concepts were frequently cited in the literature on the handloom weavers of Varanasi and have been extensively used in this study. A discussion on the meaning of these terms, as used in this study, is thus necessitated.

Handloom – The Oxford English Dictionary defines a loom as "an apparatus for making fabric by weaving yarn or thread." A handloom is thus defined as a "manually operated loom" or in other words a loom which is operated by hand.

Weaver – The Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms, 1995-'96 defines weavers as "persons who actually operated looms at least for a week during the last one year[69]." Conversely, a former handloom weaver was defined as a person who had not operated a handloom for even a single week in the past one year and at the time of the interview, was employed in any other occupation.

Household – A household comprises of "a person or a group of persons who live under the same roof and share the same kitchen and have been living together for more than six months[70]." People living within the same house but eating their meals separately and not sharing food expenses were not considered as constituting a single household[71].

Weaver household – A weaver household unit has been defined in this study as one in which any member of that unit operated handlooms at least for a week in the last year, either inside the household premises or outside of it. Based upon the place of operation of the handloom, the 2009-'10 Handloom Census of India has classified weavers into the following categories:

- Households who own and operate handlooms within their household premises
- Households who own and operate handlooms at any other place, outside of their household premises
- Households who do not own handlooms but weave nonetheless on handlooms placed inside their household premises
- Households who do not own handlooms but are involved in weaving in a place

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[69] Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms, 1995-1996: Handloom Sector. New Delhi: National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), p.xvi.

[70] Handloom Census of India, 2009-10. New Delhi: National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), p.6.

[71] *ibid* p.6.

outside of their household premises and do not have any handloom placed inside their household premises[72].

The present study uses this distinction between the different categories of weavers, based upon the ownership of handlooms and their placement within or outside of the household, in its classification of the different type of weavers that exist in the Varanasi handloom weaving industry.

Types of weavers – Weavers in Varanasi are not to be viewed as a single homogenous entity. Based upon the aforementioned differences between the weavers regarding the proprietorship, placement and operation of the handlooms, this study has grouped the weavers of Varanasi into the following domains:-

- **Independent weavers** – An independent weaver is one who purchases his/her own raw materials from the market, uses these materials in weaving and then sells the final finished product to the trader or even directly to an exporter. The independent weaver may either work singularly as an individual weaver on his own handloom or employ other weavers to work under him. In the latter case, they are referred to as master weavers. The design used by such a weaver may either be his own or supplied to him by the trader or exporter (as the case may be), but the cost of execution of the design is entirely borne by these weavers. These weavers are also referred to as 'self-employed' weavers.

- **Contract weavers** – are hired weavers, working for wages for either master weavers or traders (directly or through middlemen). These weavers are supplied with both design and raw material by master weavers or traders to weave on their own handloom. Upon completion, they return the finished good to the latter. These weavers receive wages on a piece-rate basis.

- **Loom-less weavers** – too are hired weavers and similar to the contract weavers work for wages for a master-weaver. However the main distinction between contract weavers and loom-less is that while the former work on their own looms, either inside or outside their household premises, the latter do not own handlooms and work either inside their household premises on handlooms placed there or outside their household premises on their master-weavers' handlooms.

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[72] *ibid*, p.6.

Master-weaver or trader – In the Varanasi handloom weaving industry, a master-weaver is also referred to as a *'gaddidar.'* A master-weaver has several contractors working under him, who in turn, outsource work to the contract and loom-less weavers. A master-weaver may also work directly with independent weavers.

Various production relations exist between these master-weavers and contractors and independent weavers. In case of dependent production relations, the master-weaver supplies the latter with the design and the sized-yarn and buys the woven fabric from them at fixed rates. In the reverse case, the latter sell their woven products (prepared by using their own design and inputs) to the former after bargaining for a price. In certain cases, they have set up sheds for weaving, wherein weavers are hired to work.

Thus, master-weavers get fabric woven from the weavers, following which they get this fabric processed, before supplying it to the retailer. In some cases, they own retail outlets too.

2.4 Research design

The present research study is qualitative in nature. The attempted research is both exploratory as well as descriptive. For the purpose of the study, both primary and secondary sources of data collection were utilised.

2.4.1 Study area

The study was conducted in the northern Indian city of Varanasi, located in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). The study universe included handloom weavers, who can be further categorized into master or independent weavers, contract weavers and loom-less weavers, former handloom weavers i.e. people who, at any time in the past, had worked as handloom weavers but had now moved on from that occupation to another, master-weavers as well as government officials and health service providers.

2.4.2 Sampling

The study relied on purposive sampling method for the selection of the sample of weavers. At the outset, areas in Varanasi densely populated by weavers were ascertained. A number of heavily concentrated pockets of weavers were identified in both rural and urban parts of the city. However, this research study focused only on weavers in urban Varanasi. Next the research closed in on two particular areas – Lallapura in western central Varanasi and Bazardinha in the southern part of the city,

based upon purposive sampling method. While the former is an old and well-established weaving centre located in the heart of the city of Varanasi and is said to be the abode of relatively well-off and affluent weavers, the latter is a recently developed weaving centre and is often termed as an 'urban slum.' The rationale was to gain a wide-ranging perspective on the living and working conditions of the different types of weavers in Varanasi.

For the selection of the final sample of weavers, a sampling matrix was created. The three categories of weavers, as mentioned above – independent or master weavers, contract and loom-less weavers – were all included in the study. In addition, age of the weavers was also selected as a criterion while opting for the sample. Three age-based categories – 15-30 years, 30-50 years and 50 years and above – were created for the same. The aim was to ensure that experiences of a wide-range and typology of weavers is included in the sample study. The rationale for including age as a category in selecting a sample of weavers was to get as much information as possible on perception of the weavers, across a range of ages, of the prevailing crisis in the industry and its effect on their work. Thus, a total of twenty-nine weavers were studied in the present research – fifteen from Bazardinha and fourteen from Lallapura area.

A total of ten former handloom weavers (five each from Bajardiha and Lallapura) were probed in the current research study using the snowball sampling technique. The perceptions of these erstwhile handloom weavers (who have now moved into different occupations) about their reasons for departure from the handloom weaving industry and the existing circumstances in this industry are important in further developing a perspective of the recent working conditions of the weavers. An attempt was made to select respondents from as diverse an array of current occupations as possible as well as to cover a broad range of years over which these people had quit handloom weaving to move onto their respective occupations.

A single weaver from each household was interviewed. This was done so as to include a variety of responses based upon varying experiences of weavers from different households. All the interviews with the respondents were recorded on paper in the regional dialect. These were later translated for the benefit of this dissertation.

Furthermore, key informant interviews were conducted with two traders or master weavers involved with the handloom weaving industry in Varanasi as also with government officials including the Assistant Director of Industries (ADI), Handloom (Varanasi) and Deputy Director, National Handloom Development Corporation (NHDC), Lucknow.

Similarly, key informant interviews were also conducted with four doctors – one each from Lallapura and Bazardinha and the remaining two from welfare hospitals catering to the afore-mentioned weavers' localities, including one DOTS provider. These four doctors were selected purposively based upon the responses of the weaver. For the doctors' based in the two localities, the rush of the patients to their respective clinics was also observed before including them in the sample. During this process, a doctor in Lallapura refused to participate in the study and was, thus, duly replaced.

2.4.3 Tools for Data Collection

Both primary and secondary sources were utilised during the data collection exercise. Multiple tools were used in primary data collection. A number of primary data collecting techniques were employed in order to ensure the comprehensiveness of the data collected. In other words, the data was triangulated using a 'multi-method approach.' Triangulation, according to Fetterman (1998), is 'basic in ethnographic research' and 'at the heart of ethnographic validity[73].' Triangulation refers to an assessment of the quality and validity of data collected from one source or method, by contrasting its results with data collected from an alternate source or method[74]. Keeping this in mind, the study relied on using diverse methods and sources of data collection such as interviews and observation and weavers, former weavers and gaddidars.

The following tools were used in primary data collection:-

- **Interview** – were conducted with both present and former weavers, with the help of an interview schedule. Information was elicited from the respondents on various facets – their housing and living conditions, access to basic amenities,

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[73] Fetterman, D.M. (1998): *Ethnography: Step by Step (Applied Social Research Methods).* California: Sage Publications, Inc., pp.93-94.

[74] *ibid;* Mays, N. and Pope, C. (1999): 'Quality in Qualitative Health Research,' in Catherine Pope and Nicholas Mays (eds.): *Qualitative Research in Health Care*, Second Edition. London: BMJ, pp.57-58.

family particulars, socio-economic and working conditions and changes in working conditions experienced over the years, their income, expenditure and debt status and perceived health problems, including those attributable to their occupation of handloom weaving (Annexure 1 & 3).

Interviews were also carried out with *gaddidars*, government officials and doctors to gain further information provided by the weavers regarding their working conditions and health problems, respectively.

- **In-depth interviews** – were also carried out during the data collection exercise with seven weavers, five in Lallapura and two in Bazardinha, using an interview guide. Detailed information regarding the living and working conditions as well as case histories of illnesses faced by the respondents or their families was charted out with the use of this tool (Annexure 2).

- **Observation** – An observation checklist was created to guide the observation of the researcher in the field and help enhance understanding on the living and working conditions of the worker. The pointers to observation in this checklist were as follows–condition of the house of the respondents including space for the rooms, road and sanitary conditions, work spaces for the weavers, its ventilation, lighting, posture adopted by the weavers at the time of work and the process of weaving itself.

Secondary sources – In addition to the data collection using primary sources, the study also employed secondary sources for information gathering. Secondary data sources comprised of government reports, including the National Handloom Censuses of Weavers and reports on unorganised sector too were instrumental to the research. Anthropological studies on Varanasi weavers and other literature amassed through the World Wide Web was utilised. Other sources included newspaper articles and reports of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), published as well as unpublished and various other records collected form the field.

2.5 Process of Data Collection

The field work for the study was conducted in three phases, commencing with a visit to the city of Varanasi to carry out an initial reconnaissance visit, succeed by another brief spell in the city used for conducting the pilot study. These visits were followed by the

final field work.

The initial reconnaissance visit was carried out in mid-September. The visit lasted for four days. The purpose of such a scouting investigation was to gain familiarity with the field, including the processes involved in handloom weaving and identify the prospective areas for field-work. In other words, the intent was to build up an understanding of the various facets of handloom weaving in Varanasi and the workers involved in it, including their working and living conditions. Keeping in mind the purpose of such a visit, a number of localities, with a large presence of handloom weavers', were identified. In areas such as Chittanpura, Pili Kothi, Bajardiha and Lallapura, a transit walk was undertaken to determine the relative presence of this traditional crafts-based industry in these localities. Basic interactions with weavers were also conducted, which helped develop a greater understanding of the technique of production in handloom weaving. A visit to the Weavers' Service Centre was also done for the same.

The pilot study was conducted subsequently. Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001 cite Baker, 1994 in stating that the general aim of a pilot study or the 'feasibility study' is to 'pre-test' or 'try out' a research instrument that the researcher plans to use in the final data collection process[75]. With this aim in mind, the interview schedule to be administered to the weavers in the study was 'tried-out.' Important considerations included checking the wording of the questions asked to eliminate bias in responses, identification of potential inadequacies and time taken in administering the schedule. The pilot study was conducted in the month of October and a total of four interviews with weavers (including one of each type – independent, contract and loom-less) were conducted, two each in Bajardiha and Lallapura. Interviews with two erstwhile weavers, both powerloom workers, were also held. Both these sets of interviews helped in further strengthening of the interview schedule by making certain adjustments to the original draft. Thus, the research instruments, including the interview schedule and observation checklist, had been suitably amended, prior to the beginning of final field work exercise.

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[75] Van Teijlingen, E.R. and Hundley, V (2001): 'The Importance of Pilot Studies,' *Social Research Update,* No. 35, pp. 1-4, Department of Sociology, University of Surrey. Available at: http://www.sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU35.html, accessed on 14 April, 2011.

The final data collection process began in the final week of October and was continued until the first half of December. Data collection was disrupted for a period of ten days in mid-November as both the festivals of Diwali and Id-ul-Zuha were celebrated within a week of each other. This was done, as most weavers prefer not to work at the time of their festival. Field work lasted for a period of approximately four weeks – in late October and the early part of November, data from various sources was collected from the locality of Lallapura. The second innings for the data collection exercise commenced in the second half of November and lasted till the first part of December. During this period, data was collected from Bajardiha, from both weavers and former weavers as well as the two traders from Lallapura and Madanpura. Interviews with local doctors, one each from Bajardiha and Lallapura and from the two welfare hospitals – Janta Hospital and Public Welfare Hospital were done during this time. Similarly, government officials too were interviewed and the latter source was also used for collecting secondary data on weavers.

2.6 Data analysis

Analysis of the data collected with the use of the aforementioned tools and the procedure listed above was performed primarily by quantification of the collected data. This helped in operationalising the data and contributed in increasing reporting accuracy as well. These frequency tabulations formed the basis for further analysis of the texts.

A number of categories for analysis were also identified from within this collected data and the formation of such analytical themes and categories was based keeping in mind the aforementioned objectives of the study. The research, however, remains largely descriptive due to exploratory nature of the study.

2.7 Limitations

A number of limitations must be acknowledged in the research study. They are as follows:-

- The time-span for conducting the field work in this study was quite limited, thereby leading to a selection of a small sample size. The restrictions to time were recognised beforehand and the sample size was appropriately determined. The findings cannot thus be generalised to handloom weavers spread across the other

areas of the state as some of the issues and concerns of the weavers in this sample may not necessarily resemble the needs and concerns of weavers in the other areas.

- The presence of employers, during interviewing of loom-less weavers, put forth certain constraints, with respect to spontaneous responses on the part of the weavers.
- The use of a vernacular language, Bhojpuri, by the respondents led to some communication blockage which affected the free-flow of the conversational interviews.

CHAPTER 3

OVERVIEW OF THE HANDLOOM WEAVING INDUSTRY IN VARANASI

3.1 Introduction

Besides being an expression of artistic creativity, crafts are also a mode of industrial production. They not only symbolise the artistic endeavours of men who have nurtured and developed these traditions over the course of centuries, but also fulfil the economic needs and desires of those engaged in such work. The preservation of such crafts in modern times allows us to take a glance into centuries of human history and into the minds of individuals and communities who invented and later on, innovated upon them in accordance with the changing times[76]. The craft of handloom weaving, as it exists in Varanasi, is a supreme embodiment of such a craft in our country that has evolved in the city over a period of many centuries. Its rich and detailed designs are representative of the imprint of different cultures and ideologies that the industry has been witnessed during the course of its unique history. Yet today its future is under threat and unless its deterioration is stemmed, handloom weaving in Varanasi may soon become a relic of the past.

The present chapter attempts to locate the passage of this famed and historic craft of handloom weaving in Varanasi from its origin to the present times. The chapter begins with a background of the sacred city of Varanasi, tracing its history of this great city from ancient times to the bustling town that it has been transformed into today. This is followed by a section on the main livelihood patterns of the city in present times, largely dominated by the spinning and weaving industry. Then the chapter moves on to the evolution of the craft of brocade weaving in the city to a mass industry which generates maximum employment among the citizens of this historic city. It also takes a brief look at the eminence of the Momin Ansari community among the ranks of the weavers. Subsequent to this, is a section on the process of handloom weaving and the features of the industry as it exists today in Varanasi. This is followed by a detailed look at the present conditions facing the industry, including a look at the declining number of handlooms and large scale outward migration of people and families associated with this craft for generations, due to decreasing wages

[76] Pal, M.K. (1978): *Crafts and Craftsmen in Traditional India.*New Delhi:Kanak Publications, pp. 1-3.

and closing looms. The threat posed by the expansion of the powerloom sector in the city as well as the staggering rise in the price of silk yarn on the industry too has been discussed. The chapter finally closed with a look at the role of the government in the making of the handloom sector as well as a look at the institutions and policies framed by it for the upliftment of this industry.

3.2 Varanasi

The district of Varanasi is located in the Northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). The district comprises of two tehsils – Varanasi and Pindra – and eight blocks – Arazilines, Kashi Vidyapeeth, Harahua, Sevapuri, Chiraigaon, Cholapur, Pindra and Baragaon. Four towns and 1336 villages dot the landscape of this large district[77].

The city of Varanasi is the administrative headquarter of the district. Varanasi is the official or the administrative name of the city which is better known by the names of Kashi and Banaras. Varanasi city or the Varanasi Urban Agglomeration is divided into seven urban sub-units[78].

3.2.1 Geography

Geographically, Varanasi district is situated between 82° 56' and 83° 03' East longitude and 25° 14' and 25° 23.5' Northern latitude and has a geographic coverage of 1550.3 sq kilometres. The district is bounded by Jaunpur district in the north, Chandauli in the east, Sant Ravidas Nagar to the west, while Mizapur district lies towards its south-west. Within this district, the Varanasi Urban Agglomeration is spread across an area of 112.26 sq. kilometres[79].

Varanasi city is situated between the Varana and the Assi rivers. The former merges into the river Ganges in the north, while the latter converges into it towards the southern end of the city. The land of the city, located at the heart of the Indo-Gangetic plains in northern India, is extremely fertile due to its favourable location along the left bank of the river Ganges and between the Varana and the Assi. Today, however,

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77 District Statistical Magazine (2007): *Varanasi District at a Glance.* Available at: http://www.varanasi.nic.mht, accessed on 7th May, 2011.

78 Urban Health Initiative (nd): *Varanasi City: Expanding Contraceptive Use in Urban UP – Varanasi City Profile.* Available at: http://www.uhi-india.org/Varanasi city profile, February, 2010, accessed 7th May, 2011.

79 Government of Uttar Pradesh: *Varanasi.* Available at: http://www.uponline.in , accessed on 8th May, 2011.

Assi River has dried up and just briefly comes alive during the rainy season[80]. The city is essentially located at a level slightly higher than its bordering rivers, with the mean elevation being 80.71 metres[81].

3.2.2 Climate

Varanasi, situated in the Indo-Gangetic plains and lying in the Tropic of Cancer, comes under the sub-tropical climactic zone. The climate of the city is characterised by extremely hot summer weather and a reasonably cool winter season. Thus, a sizeable variation exists between the temperatures of the summer and winter months. The dry summer season stretches on from March to June, with May and June being the hottest months and temperatures even crossing 45 °C. Hot and dry winds, called in local parlance, *'loo,'* engulf the city during these summer months. They are followed by the humid monsoon season which lasts till October. The annual rainfall received by the city ranges from 680 mm to 1,500 mm. Next comes the winter season, beginning in December and lasting till February. Night temperatures reach as low as 5 °C or even less, during this time. Fog often appears in the district during this time of the year[82].

3.2.3 Population

The total population of the district of Varanasi, as per the 2001 Census of India, is 3,138,671 of which 1,260,571 (40.16%) lived in urban and 1,878,100 (59.84%) were settled in the rural areas. Out of the total population of 3,138,671, the district has 1,649,187 males and 1,489,484 females. The total number of households are 430,651, out of which 256,278 (59.51%) are in the rural areas and the remaining 174,373 (40.49%) are in urban Varanasi. Varanasi district has a density rate (number of people per sq. kilometre) of 1995 persons. This is significantly higher than the state (Uttar Pradesh) average of 689 people per sq. kilometre and is, in fact, the highest density rate among all the other districts in UP[83].

The religious composition of the district is as follows: Hindus are the most dominant religious group, making up 83.72% (2,627,565) of the population followed by Muslims at 15.85% (497,516) and 0.14% (4,499) are Christians. The total Schedule

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[80] Eck, D. (1983): 'Banaras: City of Light,' New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., pp. 26-27.

[81] Municipal Corporation, Varanasi (2006): *City Development Plan for Varanasi (Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission)*. Available at: http://jnnurm.nic.in/nurmudweb/toolkit/VaranasiCdp/PART1.pdf, accessed on 15th April, 2011.

[82] *ibid*

[83] Census 2001, Government of India.

Caste population of the district is 435,545, constituting 13.9% of Varanasi's total population. The number of Schedule Tribes is negligible at 769 (0.02%) of the population[84].

Table 3.1 contains a list of the essential demographic details of the district, taken from the Government of India, 2001 Census data.

Table 3.1: Demographic details of Varanasi district and the state of Uttar Pradesh

Indicator	Varanasi	Uttar Pradesh
Population	3,138,671	166,197,921
Male	1,649,187 (52.54%)	87,565,369
Female	1,489,484 (47.46%)	78,632,552
Urban	256,278 (40.16%)	34,539,582
Rural	174,373 (59.51%)	131,658,339
Schedule Caste	435,545 (13.9%)	35,148,377 (21.15%)
Schedule Tribe	769 (0.02%)	107,963 (0.1%)
BPL population	96,334	
Literacy rate	66.12	57.36
Sex ratio	903	898
Population density (per sq. km)	1995	689
Average household size	7	6.4

Source: Census 2001, Government of India.

3.2.4 History

Banaras or Varanasi is one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world and is as old as the cities of Jerusalem, Peking and Mecca. Indeed the recorded history of this city

[84] *ibid*

stretches back to nearly 3000 years. Eck (1983) renders a detailed account stating that the earliest reference to this historic city dates back to the closing of the second millennium B.C., when the Aryans ventured deeper into the Indian sub-continent and subsequently, established a new outpost in the Gangetic plains of north India. They called this place, 'Kashis.' Doubt however remains over the veracity of the claims that this outpost is where modern day Varanasi is situated[85].

Over the centuries, though the city lost its significance as an important political entity, it made a name for itself as the principal cultural and religious city of the subcontinent. It developed into the most eminent Hindu pilgrimage centre in the world[86]. It is considered to be the dwelling place of Lord Shiva on earth. According to some sources, legend has it that Shiva was so captured by the beauty of this 'forest of bliss' that he hatched an elaborate plan to eject the then king of Varanasi, Divodasa, so that he could establish his abode here. Varanasi is thus the holiest city in Hindu religion today – this is the city that Shiva never forsakes and it is considered to be so pure that it has the capacity to purge oneself of all their worldly sins and free them from the cycle of birth and death, whereby they can attain '*moksha*' or salvation[87].

Varanasi is revered not only by the Hindus, but is also one of the sacred '*tirthas*' (sites) in Jain religion, two of whose *tirtankars* were born in this city and even, Mahavira, the last '*jina,*' came here on his forty-second year of travelling life. Buddhism also occupies central place in the history of the city, with Gautam Buddha delivering his first sermon at Sarnath (a suburb in Varanasi) after attaining enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. In fact, Hiuen Tsiang, on his visit to the country in seventh century A.D., mentions the presence of about thirty monasteries and three thousand monks in the city[88].

Despite the physical attacks in the last millennium, the city has still managed to play an important role in the intellectual and religious life of the country.

Though the 'forest of bliss' no longer remains in Varanasi, yet in today's day and age, it has retained a significant part of its original culture and tradition and its 'other-

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85 Eck, D. (1983): *Banaras: City of Light.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

86 *ibid*

87 Bigger, S. (1990): *Hinduism.* Available at: http://eprints.worc.ac.uk/962/1/HINDUISM..pdf, accessed on 4th May, 2011.

88 Eck, D (1983), *op cit.*

worldliness,' that set it apart from its contemporaries in India and indeed, across the world. Pilgrims, sages, *sanyasis* (people who have renounced worldly pleasures) scholars, widows, the elderly and tourists – all flock to the city to partake in the holiness and spirit of this city, which lies on the western bank of the divine waters of the river Ganges.

3.2.5 Patterns of Livelihood

Varanasi's history as a religious and cultural centre attracts tourists in large number, thence the tourism sector substantially dominates the economy of this city. Tourists, from various parts of India as well as from countries across the world, flock the city for its religious and spiritual significance. Cottage and small scale industries (SSIs) too constitute an important economic activity for the residents of this city[89].

The total number of people employed in Varanasi city, as per the 2001 Census conducted by the Government of India, was 320,871. Thus the total work participation rate (WPR), or the percentage of total workers (main and marginal workers combined) to the total population, of the city stands at 28.7%. This rate is not only lower than the WPR of UP which stands at 32.5%, but is also considerably lower than the national WPR of 39.9%[90].

Of the total number of people employed in Varanasi city, the manufacturing sector alone accounts for 10.69% of employed population, followed by trade and commerce accounting for employment to 6.80% of the working population. From within the former sector, spinning and weaving generate the maximum employment – an overwhelming 50.70% of the total workforce employed in manufacturing is from this industry. Next in line is the metal and metal products industry which provides employment to just 14.91% of the workers in the manufacturing sector[91].

Spinning and weaving is largely a home-based cottage industry, with most of the production taking place within the homes of individual weavers. As per the 2009-'10 Handloom Census of India, 96.9% of the total number of working looms are owned by households in the state of Uttar Pradesh, in which Varanasi city is

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89 Municipal Corporation, Varanasi (2006), *op cit.*
90 2001 Census, Government of India.
91 Municipal Corporation, Varanasi (2006), *op cit.*

located[92]. In present times, household industries (forming of the informal sector of the economy) are a source of employment to nearly a third of the total number of industrial workers in the city and the spinning and weaving sector is, by far, the most important household industry in the city[93]. Large-scale presence of tourists in the city too has been a boon for the weaving industry as it ensures a regular demand for their products[94].

3.3 Handloom weaving in Varanasi and its origin

The pre-eminence of the industry of handloom weaving necessitates a look at the origin of the craft in the city and its development across a period of time to its present state.

The history of silk weaving in India is an astounding four thousand years old, dating back to almost 2000 B.C. Excavations conducted at the sites of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, in the then north western part of India, have yielded physical evidence of both dyed and woven silk cloth. A mention of gold and silk woven cloth has been found in Vedic literature too (1200 B.C.)[95].

Handloom weaving, in the city of Varanasi, has a relatively more recent origin. The earliest reference to cloth woven in Varanasi occurs in a Buddhist Sanskrit text of the Gupta period (350-500 A.D.). Though the text mentions various types of fabrics being woven in the city, silk is not mentioned as being one of them[96]. The fertile lands of the city (cotton was grown in abundance in the surrounding areas of the Indo–Gangetic plains) and its importance as a trading centre of northern India had ensured that a vibrant textile market existed here during this period. However, the earliest printed concrete record of brocade weaving in Varanasi occurs only centuries later in the year 1465 A.D., through an illustrated manuscript from Juanpur[97].

In the subsequent centuries, brocade weaving thrived in the city, due to the patronage

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92 Handloom Census of India, 2009-10. New Delhi: National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), p. 27.

93 *ibid*

94 Kumar, N. (1988): *Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and Identity, 1880-1986.* New Delhi, Orient Longman, pp. 21-24.

95 Du Bois, E. (1981): 'Banares Brocade' in *Ars Textrina*, Vol.3, p.209.

96 Pandey, B.P. (1981): '*Banaras Brocades: Structure and Functioning,*' Varanasi: Gandhian Institute of Studies, p.16.

97 Du Bois, E. (1981) *op cit.*

that it enjoyed, extended to it by the Mughal rulers, particularly Emperor Akbar. Silk fabric that was produced was mainly consumed by the affluent sections of society and it was especially worn on ceremonial occasions. Under Akbar's reign, costume trends underwent several changes and dresses for both men and women became more elaborate. Turbans and girdle worn by the men were, in particular, draped in silk brocade. He even established workshops in a number of cities, wherein these dresses and costumes worn in court could be manufactured. Persian weavers too were recruited for producing these famed brocades[98]. At the same time, the *gathwa* (thread frame) was introduced into weaving, by a Persian man named Khwaja Abdul Samad Kashmiri. This development facilitated the weaving of various new designs on silk fabric using gold and silver threads[99]. The successors of Emperor Akbar, Jahangir and his wife, Nur Jahan and their son, Shah Jahan too tendered widespread support to the industry. Designs and costumes too changed as time passed but impetus to brocade weaving continued unabated.

With the Mughal Empire on the wane in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the brocade weavers now sought employment with the local rulers and their fate thus ebbed and flowed with that of the local patrons. In 1764, the administration of the city passed into the hands of the East India Company and with it, stability returned. This resulted in a period of prosperity in the city during which the Varanasi brocades were restored to their former glory. This happened as many of its erstwhile benefactors returned from exile to once again settle here[100]. This is evident through the travel memoirs of George Viscount Valentia, who travelled to Varanasi in the early part of the 19th century and commented upon its prosperity. This flourish, he attributed to the brocade industry, which exported its products as far and wide as Europe even in those days[101].

Pandey (1981) cited in Pandey (1983) states that with the progression of colonial rule in India, the weaving communities of eastern Uttar Pradesh faced severe 'economic and social dislocation.' The period of late seventeenth and eighteenth century witnessed variations in demand for the products of these handloom weavers[102]. The

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98 *ibid*
99 Pandey, B.P. (1981), *op cit.*
100 Du Bois, E. (1981) *op cit.*
101 Pandey, B.P. (1981), *op cit.*
102 Pandey, G. (1983): 'The Bigoted Julaha,' *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol.18, No.5, pp.19-28.

overall demand for their products fell as the fortunes of both the nobility and local aristocracy declined. Silk weaving communities in Varanasi however survived these difficult circumstances due to the fact that the demand for their product extended much beyond local areas[103].

The silk industry in Varanasi also survived the attempts of the East India Company to replace local production of goods by the cotton and mixed silk textiles being imported from Manchester and the rest of Europe. Though they challenged locally produced goods in a number of areas, yet in this case, they were unable to outdo the local industry. This was not only due to the unique character of the goods being produced here, but also due to the large number of tourists visiting the city, who kept demand alive as well as the centuries old trading infrastructure of Varanasi, which the British did not tamper with. The industry did suffer from two cyclical slumps, once in the mid-1880s, which lasted till the mid-1890s and the second time, during the 1940s and early 1950s. However, it emerged stronger after these two cycles of downturn and subsequently, 1950s witnessed a hitherto unparalleled expansion, with Thailand and North America emerging as strong export markets. The fact that this industry thrived is evident from the increase in the number of workers from roughly 2,000-3,000 in 1881-1891 to 20,000 to 30,000 in 1961, while during this same period, the population of Varanasi registered an increase from 2,00,000 to just 5,00,000. In other words, while the population tripled, the number of workers increased by ten times. Another important change that occurred within the industry during this period was that in the 1930s, production shifted from weaving of brocades to that of the sari, which is the primary good being produced by the industry even today[104].

Another important point of note of the handloom weaving industry in Varanasi is its virtual synonymity with the Momin Ansari community, which dominates the ranks of weavers engaged in this sector. Most of the weavers based in Varanasi city belong to this Muslim community of Momin Ansaris. Hindu weavers too exist, but a large portion of them are concentrated in the rural areas of Varanasi district. Mostly lower caste Hindus are involved in this occupation as weavers.

At the other end of the spectrum exists the trading community, which is heavily

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[103] Haynes, D.E. and Roy, T. (1999): 'Conceiving Mobility: Weavers' Migrations in Pre-colonial and Colonial India,' *The Indian Economic Social History Review,* Vol.36, No.1, pp.36-57.

[104] Kumar, N. (1988), *op cit.*

dominated by upper-caste Hindus, particularly the Hindu Banias. Till about the 1970s, the Hindu mercantilists enjoyed unrivalled domination over the business. However since then a few among the Momin Ansaris have risen from among the weaver ranks to join these Hindu mercantilists. They have developed direct connections to the market and do not have to rely on their Hindu counterparts any longer[105].

The existence of the craft of handloom weaving predates the arrival of the first Muslim settlers in India, which raises questions about the predominance of Muslim weavers over this craft. Various explanations have been floated to explain this phenomenon – one among them being that in the early days, the occupation of weaving was largely entrusted to the Hindu lower caste group, Khatris, who trained the migrant Muslims in this craft and subsequently marketed their products. Thus with the passage of time, Hindus have come to dominate trade, while the Muslims have taken over the skill of weaving[106]. Others accounts claim either the large-scale conversion of Hindu weavers to Islam or the bringing in of previously skilled Muslim weavers from western Asia, whose numbers gradually increased with extension of state patronage to their craft. Whether these factors have worked in conjunction or even singularly to ensure the preponderance of Muslims among the ranks of weavers and Hindus as traders in not known for sure, what is definitely known is that such religious profiling exists among the people involved at different levels of this trade[107].

The Momin Ansari community that exists in Varanasi may be defined as an occupation-based endogamous caste group (similar to a Hindu caste group). They were earlier referred to by the appellation, *'Julaha,'* a word they sought to reject due to the negative connotations that were attached to it by the ruling British class. They were labelled as 'bigoted,' 'stupid' and 'cowardly' among others and were blamed for their role in instigating a number of riots in districts across eastern UP in the nineteenth century. Thus the widespread adoption of the term *nurbaf* (weavers of light) or 'Momin Ansari' by this community – Momin refers to 'men of honour,' while Ansari is named after an 'Arabic ancestor who practised the art of weaving'[108].

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[105] Raman, V. (2010): *Warp and the Weft: Community and Gender Identity among Banaras Weavers.* New Delhi: Routledge, pp. 87.

[106] Singh, A. and Naik, S.D. (2009): 'Status of Banaras Weavers: A Profile,' *Karnataka Journal of Agricultrual Science,* Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 408-411.

[107] Kumar, N. (1988), *op cit., pp.50-51.*

[108] Pandey, G. (1983), *op cit.*

Similar to other caste groups, the Momin Ansari community in Varanasi is characterised by a distinct set of rules, culture and leadership structure, dominated by the Sardars and Mehtos. These Sardars and Mehtos are the traditional leaders of this community and are known as *bavani ke sardar* (headman of fifty-two localities), *baisvi ke sardar* (headman of twenty-two localities), *chaudvi ke sardar* (headman of fourteen localities) and *paanchvi ke sardar* (headman of five localities), based upon the area they command[109]. Today, much of their power has been eroded and they largely preside over matters pertaining to marriage and divorce within the community, whereas earlier they held caste-panchayats and presided over all matters relating to the Momin Ansari community in Varanasi. One of the reasons for the decline in their influence has been that they have no authority over the Hindu traders who command this occupation and are thus unable to address problems such as those relating to alleged illegitimate cuts in the income of the weavers by the Hindu businessmen. This system, which is distinctive of the Momin Ansari community of Varanasi, is thus gradually fading away[110].

3.4 Handlooms: The process of production

The process of weaving for the handloom weavers of Varanasi begins with the attainment of yarn, which is the central element in the entire production process[111]. However, before the yarn is acquired by these weavers, it undergoes numerous preparatory processes. The first step begins with the rearing of silk-worm cocoons by farmers[112]. After this, cocoons are boiled and reeled and the process yields strands of raw silk, which are then twisted, either onto each other or onto separate strands of raw silk. The yarn for *tana* (warp, threads placed longitudinally on the handloom machine) and *bana* (weft, which move horizontally across the surface of the warp thread) threads is separate (depending upon the number of other strands of raw silk it has been twisted with)[113]. The yarns are then de-gummed (treated in boiled water), after which they are bleached and then dyed into various different colours. Yarn, which has not been de-gummed is referred to in local parlance as '*kora* silk' and is also used

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[109] Bismillah, A. (1987): *Jheeni Jheeni Beeni Chadariya.* New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.

[110] Raman, V. (2010), *op cit.* pp. 94-98.

[111] Khasnabis, R. and Nag, P. (2001): 'Labour Process in the Informal Sector: A Handloom in Nadia District,' *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 36, No. 52, pp. 4836-4845.

[112] Tom, I. (1989): *Women in Unorganised Sector: Technology, Work Organisation and Change in the Silk Industry in South India.* New Delhi: Usha Publications, pp. 32-35.

[113] Du Bois (1985), *op cit.*

directly in manufacturing. Sometimes, the weavers dye the yarn themselves in their homes[114]. In present times, the silk used in the handloom industry in Varanasi is supplied from either Bangalore or China – majorly the latter.

The yarn is now obtained by the weavers, they either directly purchase it from the market (as in the case of independent weavers in Varanasi), or the yarn is supplied to them by their master-weaver or trader (in case of contract and loom-less weavers). After procurement, the yarn is yet again worked upon before it is ready for the process of weaving. In the initial stages, it undergoes the two opposing procedures of unwinding, followed subsequently by winding. These twin procedures help in strengthening these frail threads and make them ready to face the travails of the impending weaving process[115].

Under the process of unwinding or throwing, the yarn is first unravelled. This is done on reeling machines. This is succeeded by winding, wherein the weft thread is wound or rolled, on pirns or bobbins using a *charkha* (a spinning wheel). The aforementioned pre-weaving processes of 'throwing' and 'winding' are almost universally performed by the women in weavers' households[116].

The next step in the pre-weaving process is 'warping,' which refers to the wrapping of a sizeable number of warp threads on the warping machine. The threads are concurrently coiled. Usually three-thousand such threads are used in a forty-six inch wide sari and at each such warping session, threads lengthy enough to weave around three to four saris are fitted[117]. This is followed by the sizing of warp threads. Both are done in long open spaces, existing in the vicinity of the weavers' houses. During sizing, the surface of these threads is examined to ensure that not a single strand has broken or to correct inter-locking of threads. This time is also utilised for 'piecing' or combining of the old warp threads with the new ones. The process now moves onto 'beaming' under which the yarn is rolled or wound onto a rounded wooden beam, which is ultimately fitted on the rear end of the handloom (on the opposite end of the pit in case of a pit-loom). Care has to be maintained during this process to make sure

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[114] Pandey, B.P. (1981), *op cit,* p.70.
[115] Khasnabis, R. and Nag, P. (2001), *op cit.*
[116] Labour Bureau (1986-'87): 'Report on the Working and Living Conditions of Workers in the Handloom Industry in India.'Chandigarh: Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, pp. 1-3.
[117] Du Bois, E. (1985), *op cit.*

that the yarn has not been rolled too tightly or even too slackly onto the beam. This process too is performed in an open field due to the huge length of the warp threads. Both the processes of sizing and beaming may be carried out by either weavers' themselves along with help and assistance of their fellow workers or by people hired especially to do this work[118].

Next in line is the process of 'drafting and denting.' Under drafting, each warp thread is made to go through the eyes of the heddle[119]. This is done to part these threads and ensure a comfortable channel for the sideways movement of the weft. All of the warp threads are further held up in a reed. This is done by taking up no more than two threads in each individual cell of the reed, which is held up by means of a drawing hook. They are subsequently appended to the cloth beam[120]. A reed is similar to a comb and ensures that the warp threads do not get mixed up with each other and it also keeps the bobbin (in which the weft yarn is placed) firmly in its place and facilitates its horizontal movement during the process of weaving[121].

Design drawing is also a central element in the entire process of weaving and the selection of the coloured yarn, warp joining (depending upon the colour scheme of the design) as well as subsequent processes is all determined by the design to be woven by the weaver. The design (copied on the punched cards, which are stitched together) is affixed to the jacquard machine, which is joined to the healds of the pit-loom and is placed on top of it. Finally the process of weaving begins[122].

In the Varanasi handloom weaving industry, the 'pit-loom with a throw shuttle' is predominantly used in production[123]. A pit loom is one in which a hole is dug into the ground, just ahead of the front portion of the handloom. The weaver sits on the floor (on a *patra* – a slightly raised seat), with his feet are suspended in the cavity below. The pit contains foot pedals and harnesses (the number of harnesses or heddles depends upon the intricacy of the design being woven by the weaver). They are manoeuvred by the feet of the weaver and elevates or lowers the warp threads, as per

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[118] Pandey, B.P. (1981), *op cit, pp. 71-72.*

[119] Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia: *Heddle.* Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heddle, accessed on 8th June, 2011.

[120] Khasnabis, R. and Nag, P. (2001), *op cit.*

[121] Wikiepedia: The Free Encyclopedia: *Reed (Weaving).* Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reed_(weaving), accessed on 8th June, 2011.

[122] Labour Bureau (1986-'87), *op cit.*

[123] Kumar, N. (1988), *op cit,* pp.22-23.

the design requirements of the cloth being woven. He uses his one of his hands to guide the weft, placed inside the shuttle, horizontally across the warp yarn and the other to pull the reed on the woven material to bring compactness to the cloth. Finally after the process of weaving is complete, the woven material is returned to the trader or master-weaver[124]. The latter are responsible for pressing or calendering and further re-working on it – they may get the piece further embroidered and then ensure that the material is polished and finished. Only then is the sari ready for sale to the customer.

During this entire process, the weaver has to sit in an upright position. As explained above, the process of weaving requires considerable bodily movement on the part of the weaver. Weaving is thus quite a strenuous physical activity and one which demands a significant amount of exertion on the part of the weaver.

The number of metres that the weaver is able to complete in a day depends not only upon the number of hours worked, but also upon the skill of the worker, the quality of the silk yarn and also the complexity of the design[125]. The average per day production of silk and zari fabrics in Uttar Pradesh is approximately 2-3 metres, while pure silk fabrics have an even lower per production rate. The average per day productivity of the weavers is an essential factor in determining the income of these weavers[126].

3.5 Features of the handloom weaving industry

Knowledge of the basic attributes and characteristics of this cottage industry is essential in developing an understanding of its basic functioning and the problems faced by the weavers working in it. The following are some of the fundamental features of the handloom weaving industry in India, which are mirrored in the case of Varanasi: -

Handloom weaving is the second largest employer in the country after the agricultural sector. As per the 2009-2010 Handloom Census of India, 43.31 lakh handloom workers exist in the country[127]. On the other hand, in Varanasi, as per the Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms, 1995-'96, a total of 1,24,832 people were employed

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[124] All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association (nd): *Fly Shuttle Durrie.* Available at: http://www.aiacaonline.org/pdf/fly-shuttle-durrie-extended-documentation.pdf, accessed on 8th June, 2011.

[125] Tom, I. (1989), *op cit, pp. 40-41.*

[126] Handloom Census of India, 2009-10, *op cit*, pp.33-34.

[127] *ibid*

in this industry as both full-time and part-time workers. The 1974 Shivaraman Committee estimates that each handloom is a source of employment for 2.4 persons[128].

Handloom weaving is majorly home-work. In other words, work is performed within a fixed location – in most cases, inside the household premises of the weavers, though in some cases, production may take place within sheds set up by the master-weavers or traders for weaving. The entire process of production in handloom weaving that takes place within the house of the weaver involves the contribution of a number of family members, apart from the male weaver himself. Women and children – both male and female – participate in different aspects of production and thus assist in the accomplishment of the process of production[129]. However the labour of the family members is not viewed as distinct from the work of the weaver, resulting in no separate compensation for the former. In other words, it is both unrecognised and consequently unpaid, rather it is subsumed within the efforts of the male weaver[130].

Production in the handloom weaving industry in Varanasi is decentralised in nature and is being carried on in both the urban and rural areas of the district. The production unit, in this case, is the household of the individual weaver. Thus the magnitude of production by each unit is extremely small, given the scale of operations of the entire industry in Varanasi. The form of production may thus be defined as scattered and fragmented[131]. The widespread dispersal of the workforce, due to lack of a centralised unit for production, results in an atomised workforce and acts as a hurdle in the formation of a trade union[132].

Handloom weaving is a skill-based activity, with the production process being highly labour intensive. The industry is characterised by a low rate of capital investment in the process of production. Its energy needs are also minimal – in other words, the production process in this industry is not capital intensive. The industry produces a

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[128] Srinivasulu, K. (1996): '1985 Textile Policy and Handloom Industry: Policy, Promises and Performance,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.31, No.49, pp.3198-3206.

[129] Planning Commission (2001): *Report on Growth and Prospects of the Handloom Industry.* (Authors: Seemanthini Niranjana and Soumya Vinayan).

[130] Raman, V. (2010), *op cit., pp. 87-91.*

[131] Ramanujam, M.S., Prasad, S., Bhandari, U.S., Goel, M.C., Awasthi, I.C. and Yadav, S.K. (1994): *Employment in the Informal Sector: A Study of Selected Towns.* New Delhi: Agricole Publishing Academy for Institute of Applied Manpower Research. Ch. V, pp. 89 – 101.

[132] Singh, A.M. and Kelles-Viitanen, A. (1987): *Invisible Hands: Women in Home-based Production.* New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., pp. 13-15.

wide-range of products from saris (plain to heavily embroidered) to dress materials to suits and even bed-sheets and pillow-covers. The industry displays considerable flexibility in manufacturing of products, in accordance with the changing fashion trends and demands of consumers[133].

The industry in Varanasi is characterised by a lack of uniformity in the relations of production. A number of varying systems exist side by side in the industry such as the independent weaver, contract weaver and the loom-less weaver, while others are members of co-operative societies[134]. Sub-contracting has been on the rise in the Varanasi industry, as elsewhere in the country. This has ensured that the employer is divested of all responsibility in meeting overhead costs or of investing in the primary instrument of production – the handloom device. The weaver is responsible for all such costs[135]. Sub-contracting, based on the putting-out system of production, has alienated the weaver from his own craft, by bringing about a separation in the functions of conception and execution – material used in weaving, design and colour scheme of the product are all decided by the employer rather than the weaver, whose role now remains limited to executing the task of weaving. This is particularly so in vertical sub-contracting, wherein the weaver is supplied with the raw materials by the contractor. Except for an inability to supervise the process of weaving, such a relationship of production results in greater dependence of the wage earner (in this case, the handloom weaver) upon his contractor[136].

3.6 Present conditions

The craft of handloom weaving has existed in the country since the past four thousand years. In the history of this craft in India, Varanasi occupies a central place. The silk brocades and now the silk saris of the city are an intrinsic part of the culture and ethos of this historic city. The industry, based upon this craft, has grown almost unabated (despite facing a few setbacks) ever since its inception. Yet in the past few decades, it has faced new challenges, which are threatening its very existence. Reports of declining numbers of people participating in the industry as well as closing of

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[133] Planning Commission (2001), *op cit,* pp.12-14.

[134] *ibid*

[135] Singh, A.M. and Kelles-Viitanen, A. (1987), *op cit,* p.15.

[136] National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2007): *Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector.* (Chairman: Arjun Sengupta). New Delhi: Dolphin Printo Graphics, pp.58-59.

handlooms, stagnating or declining incomes and migration of weavers to other occupations or other cities are commonplace in the local media. Despite these reports, this industry continues to be a mainstay of the city's economy.

Raman (2010) cites that as per the Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms (JCHP), 1995-'96 conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), the then district of Varanasi has a total of 75,313 handlooms and 124, 832 handloom workers. As per this data, the district consisted of 36,234 handloom weaver households of which 10,246 (29%) were located in the urban areas. While 55,952 persons (including men, women and children) were engaged in full-time weaving activity in this district, 2,567 persons were involved in part-time weaving activity (JCHP, 1995-'96 cited in Raman, 2010). Of the total number of weavers in Varanasi, 10,000 weavers did not own any handloom. In other words, 17.87% of the total handloom weavers in Varanasi are loom-less weavers. The number of persons working full-time in the preparatory processes of weaving was 6,912, while 8,869 people were involved as part-time workers in preparatory weaving work, more than half of whom were women[137].

A serious limitation of our study is that government data on the number of handlooms as well as the actual manpower engaged in the industry in Varanasi is severely lacking. The only such exception is the aforementioned 1995-'96 JCHP, which has released data at the district level as well. This lack of data hampers comparisons regarding the relative growth or decline of the industry in a particular time-frame.

However, the significance of the handloom industry in Varanasi within the larger state of Uttar Pradesh can be gauged from the fact that 39.73% of the total number of handlooms existing in this state are located in this district. On the other hand, 29.67% of the total number of workers engaged in the activity of handloom weaving in Uttar Pradesh belong to Varanasi, as per the 1995-'96 JCHP[138]. Based upon these figures, the centrality of the handloom industry in Varanasi within that of the state of Uttar Pradesh may be gauged.

The handloom industry over large parts of the country has undergone immense changes in the past few decades. It has witnessed continuous shrinkage, in terms of the number of people engaged in this occupation and the number of functioning

[137] Raman, V. (2010), *op cit*, pp. 100-107.
[138] *ibid*

handlooms. The state of Uttar Pradesh, in which Varanasi is situated, is no exception to this rule. This is evident in the reports of the three handloom censuses conducted by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in the years – 1987-'88, 1995-'96 and 2009-'10. The total number of workers (including those involved in weaving, preparatory work and hired workers) engaged in handloom weaving in Uttar Pradesh declined at a massive rate of 36.06% from 657,987 in 1987-'88 to 420,684 in 1995-'96. The number of existing handlooms suffered a decrease of 27.29% from 260,714 to 189,570 during the corresponding period. The 2009-'10 census data reports a further drop in the total number of handloom workers to 273,251 in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand (the former was bifurcated into two states in the year 2000). This represents a fall of 35.05% from 1995-'96. The third handloom census also captures a decrease of 55.66% in the number of handlooms from 189,570 in 1995-'96 to 84,061 in 2009-'10[139].

These figures are reflective of the fact that the handloom industry in Uttar Pradesh, in general, has experienced a massive waning of fortune. Though they do not pertain to Varanasi in particular, yet the latter has not remained immune to this larger trend of decay. As handlooms have closed down across thousands of households, many weavers have begun to move out of this historic craft. A recent study on the weavers of Varanasi conducted by Giri Institute of Development Studies (GIDS) reports closure of almost 30% of the working handlooms as well as a reduction of the employment capacity per handloom (below two people were employed per handloom unit). The reason identified was the reduction of demand for handloom products[140]. Rising incidence of loom idleness as well as loom-lessness among the weavers of Varanasi has had a profound impact on the lives of thousands of weavers who were previously employed within this industry. It has resulted in a large number of people being displaced from their craft. Many have been compelled to migrate to cities as far and wide as Surat and Ludhiana in search of opportunities of work, while others have joined other occupations within the city itself such as rickshaw-pulling and brick-kiln work[141].

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[139] Handloom Census of India, 2009-10, *op cit,* pp.66-99; Joint Census of Handlooms and Power looms, 1995-'96. New Delhi: National Council of Applied Economic Research, pp. xxxii-xxxv.

[140] Singh, A.K., Joshi, A. and Singh, Y.P. (2006): '*Diagnostic Study of Handloom Clusters in Uttar Pradesh,* ' Giri Institute of Development Studies, Lucknow.

[141] The Hindu Business Line (2010): 'Banarasi Pride and More,' 1 January.

A question that arises, given the above state of affairs of the handloom sector in Varanasi, is the reason for such a significant and continuous decline of the industry, despite the proven flexibility of this sector in adapting to changing market and fashion trends[142]. The phenomenal rise and expansion of the decentralised powerloom sector in the city in recent times is often touted as a potential reason for the closure of handlooms on a mass scale across Varanasi city. As per the office of the Assistant Director of Industries (Handloom), Varanasi, their number had increased from a mere 1,758 in 1995-'96 to approximately 30,000 by 2009-'10.

Ahmed (nd) reports that a large number of the well-off traders and even some independent weavers of Varanasi now no longer rely solely on handloom production, but have diversified to powerloom production with the intention of enhancing their income. In other words, they have closed down a number of their handlooms and replaced them with powerloom machines. This has been done as powerloom productivity is considerably superior to that of handloom – the latter can produce a sari in three-four days while the former can produce four saris in one day, depending upon the supply of electricity. Thus production in the former is thus more cost-effective, which results in increased profits for the owners of these powerloom machines[143].

The problem that this infestation of powerlooms presents to the traditional handloom industry of Varanasi is that every single such machine has the capacity to supplant six handlooms, estimates the 1974 Shivaraman Committee constituted by the Government of India. It states that since each handloom provides employment to 2.4 persons, thus every single powerloom machine has the ability to oust fourteen handloom weavers from their traditional occupation[144]. Mass displacement of handloom workers is thus the logical consequence of powerloom penetration within the textile manufacturing industry of Varanasi. The problem that arises for handloom weavers is that the traditional skills possessed by them are not quite required in powerloom production. Thus a handloom weaver who may have been ousted from his traditional occupation due to powerloom infiltration may not necessarily find employment in the latter, thus the "losers are not

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[142] Planning Commission (2001), *op cit*, p.12.

[143] Ahmad, N. (nd): *Globalization and the Indigenous Artisan Economy: A Case Study of the Varanasi Silk Sari Industry.* Available at: http://www. http://www.scribd.com/doc/8962586/Globalization-and-the-Indigenous-Artisan-Economy-, accessed 8th August, 2010.

[144] Jain, L.C. (1983): 'Handlooms Face Liquidation: Power looms Mock at Yojana Bhavan,' *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol.18, No. 35, pp.1517-1526.

necessarily the gainers[145]."

Thus though this intermediate technology does result in an increase in productivity and earnings for the owners of these machines, the poor handloom artisans have to suffer in return. A widespread tendency that exists which tends to exacerbate the problems for the handloom sector is to pose powerloom manufactured cloth as one which has been produced on a handloom and subsequently, sell it in the market. Once a fabric has been produced, it becomes difficult to distinguish whether it was produced on a powerloom or a handloom. Such a practice is responsible for 'cannibalisation' of handlooms by the powerloom industry[146]. All this tends to further displaces handloom weavers, while adding up to the profits of the rich master-weavers or traders. The latter also use the mechanism of co-operative societies and use them as a shield for appropriating benefits extended to the handloom co-operatives by the government for their private gain. This is done by floating fake handloom co-operative societies[147]. Such an activity is injurious to the handloom sector as it results in a diversion of yarn meant for the handloom sector to powerlooms and availability to the latter is thus affected. This makes a mockery of the government provision to subsidise handloom production as well as to reserve yarn for this sector, since benefits do not reach the intended beneficiaries[148].

Furthermore, though the Government of India passed the Handloom Reservation Act in 1985, thereby reserving twenty-two types of articles for handloom production only, in a bid to promote as well as protect this industry from competition from the more powerful powerloom and mill sector, its advantages are yet to be felt by this sector. Although this list of twenty-two reserved articles was constricted to just eleven items in the year 2000, yet as per this act, the production of saris remains solely reserved for handloom production. However adherence to it is rare, rather its violation is the norm in Varanasi and hardly any attempts have been made to curb the blatant violation of this law in the city[149]. The importance of this measure for the survival of the handloom industry becomes more vivid with

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[145] National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2007), *op cit*, pp.60-62.
[146] Jain, L.C. (1983), *op cit.*
[147] Ahmad, N. (nd), *op cit.*; Bismillah, A. (1987), *op cit.*
[148] Srinivasulu, K. (1996), *op cit.*
[149] Ahmad, N. (nd), *op cit.*

the realisation that the 1990 report of the government instituted, Abid Hussain Committee recommended placement of this act in the inviolable Ninth Schedule of the Indian Constitution to ensure enhanced protection of the handloom industry, but to no avail[150].

The threat to the handloom industry from powerloom sector becomes clearer when another government committee - 1996 Mira Seth Committee - admits that with the advent of more technically advanced powerloom machinery in the country "the handloom products are being increasingly replicated on powerlooms at a lower cost." Despite the institution of various committees and repeated promises by the government to strengthen enforcement of laws for the preservation of the handloom sector, precious little seems to have been done[151].

Given such a pernicious effect of the powerloom sector on the well-being of the handloom sector, the downfall of the handloom industry in the city seems imminent. In fact, such large-scale penetration by powerloom machines has precipitated the decline of handloom and has been so injurious to the health of the many thousands of people involved in this sector. As stated above, it has led to the displacement of a large number of people from their traditional occupation and compounded the problem of structural unemployment[152]. This is today being witnessed first hand in the revered city of Varanasi as the handloom industry faces its greatest challenge.

Though powerloom infiltration into the handloom weaving industry of Varanasi is one of the factors responsible for the latter's decay, other factors too have operated simultaneously in recent times to bring about this slide. Chief among them is the rising price of the silk yarn – the principal input in the process of production. The story behind the phenomenal rise in the cost of this critical input can be traced back to the year 1996, when the then Prime Minister of India, Mr. H.D. Deve Gowda, imposed a ban on the import of silk yarn from China. This was done in a bid to boost the demand and consumption of indigenous silk yarn, most notably Bangalore silk. This led to smuggling of silk yarn from China and a demand for an Open General License (OGL) from weavers' for allowing import of such silk. Chinese silk yarn

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[150] Srinivasulu, K. (1997): 'High powered Committee, Low Voltage Report: Mira Seth Report on Handlooms,' *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 32, No. 24, pp. 1381-1384.

[151] Srinivasulu, K. (1996), *op cit.*

[152] *ibid*

is relatively cheaper than that manufactured in Bangalore, thus its usage is preferred over that of its Indian counterpart by a large number of the Varanasi weavers[153]. In December 2010, the cost of Bangalore silk yarn varied at around at Rs.2800-3100 per kilogram, while Chinese silk yarn cost approximately Rs.2300-2700 per kilogram, as per the National Handloom Development Corporation (NHDC). In the year 1999, the Government of India removed the imposition of any duty on the import of plain crepe fabric from China, followed by the elimination of quantitative restrictions on silk imports in the country in 2001. This was done under the Non-Agricultural Market Access (NAMA) negotiations conducted under the ambit of the World Trade Organisation (WTO)[154]. This latter move had a significant impact on the Varanasi silk weaving industry. It led to a massive influx of inexpensive silk fabric into the country – since the year 2000-'01 and up until 2004-'05, increase in the volume of imports was a vast 6560% from 14.48 lakh metres to 9.649 crore lakh metres. Though the import duty imposed on silk yarn was 30%, that on import of silk fabric into the country was a mere 10% – this anomaly has affected the Varanasi silk handloom industry as input costs have risen up on the one hand, while that of imported fabrics, which present a threat to the industry, have remained low. Despite weavers' protests and the imposition of anti-dumping duty on Chinese silk fabric, the trend has continued unabated. Silk fabric imports from China increased by 23% between 2008 and 2010, costing a huge Rs.6.4 billion[155]. In the Union Budget 2011-2012, the Government of India has reduced the import duty levied on silk yarn import from 30% to 5%, while the tariff imposed on silk fabrics has remained stationary at 10%, despite weavers' demand to duly reverse the rate of the latter to protect the interests of the local industry[156].

The major reason that the import of silk fabric from China has an effect on the welfare of the Varanasi handloom industry is that once this fabric is brought into

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153 Gautam, K. (2008): *Dying Skills and Starving Weavers: The Crisis of Banarasi Handloom.* Available at: http://www.centad.org/focus_63.asp, accessed on 7th September, 2010.

154 *ibid*

155 The Dawn (2011): 'Cheap Chinese Copies Shrink India's Silk Industry,' 3rd March. Available at: http:/www.dawn.com, accessed on 14th April, 2011.

156 The Times of India (2011): 'Weavers Want Hike in Import Duty on Chinese silk Fabric,' 15th March. Available at: http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-03-15/varanasi/28690805_1_duty-on-chinese-silk-banarasi-silk-silk-fabrics, accessed on 14th April, 2011.

the country, it is suitably altered, before the product is finally sold to the consumer in the market. Though imported in the form of bales, it is cut into a number of pieces in the length of a sari, then embroidered upon, after which other finishing touches are imparted to it and then it is sold into the market. This cheaper alternative has led to a decline in the demand for the authentic Varanasi product[157].

The popularity of the Varanasi silk products has thus become the bane of the industry, rather than being a boon for it. Another instance of this is the replication of the Varanasi product and its designs by the textile industry of Surat city, in the state of Gujarat in India in an attempt to take advantage of the well-established market of its counterpart. However, the powerlooms in Surat use artificial silk thread in the manufacture of their products. The use of artificial material has harmed the appeal of the Varanasi brand and diminished its sales[158]. At the same time, the rising cost of the raw material in Varanasi too has facilitated the change to artificial silk as silk yarn prices have increased by more than 70% in the past six months[159]. Mass imitation of the once unique product of Varanasi has thus played its role in 'devaluing' or lessening the worth of the original good. The market is today flooded with spurious goods being sold in the name of the original product, all of which not only affect its credibility but also consumer demand[160].

In recent times, frequent episodes of shortage of silk yarn in the market have also affected sustainability of this trade. Such shortage is allegedly the handiwork of influential traders, who deliberately manipulate the availability of silk yarn in the market in a bid to increase its prices. Poor purchasing power ability of the ordinary weaver makes accessibility of this essential raw material difficult. Though subsidies are available to government supported co-operative societies, yet the co-operative structure is such that these benefits do not reach the small weaver but are utilised by the bigger weavers, who dominate these societies[161]. An upward revision in the price of yarn is not the only consequence of such shortages, rather they also affect output and employment, negatively influence the earning capacity of the weavers as well as

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157 Ahmad, N. (nd), *op cit.*

158 Nayak, P., Rout, T.K., Shaikh, S. and Rajanikant (2007): 'Dream of Weaving: Study and Documentation of Banaras Sarees and Brocades,' organised by the Textile Committee, Government of India, Mumbai and Human Welfare Association, Varanasi.

159 All India Artisans and Craftworkers Welfare Association (nd), *op cit.*

160 Nayak, P., Rout, T.K., Shaikh, S. and Rajanikant (2007), *op cit.*

161 *ibid*

influence the competitiveness of the handloom sector vis-à-vis the other sectors[162]. A comparative look at the first and second handloom census conducted in India in 1987-'88 and 1995-'96 is indicative of this trend of declining productivity – production per day per worker dropped from 1.48 metres to 1.33 metres, whereas the production per day per handloom decreased from 2.63 metres to 2.49 metres in this time-span[163]. Productivity directly impinges upon the income of the worker and as it falls, weavers are compelled to decrease dependence on hired labour for pre-weaving processes and increase reliance on the unremunerated labour of family members, including children and women[164].

Thus on the one hand, the costs of production have risen and on the other, the industry has had to cope with reduced demand. The latter has put pressure on the traders to reduce or at least, maintain the cost of the finished good in the market, thus reducing the income of the weavers as both the middlemen and traders have been unwilling to decrease their profit margins[165]. In the long run, though the cost of the final good may have registered a marginal increase, it has not been commensurate with the increase in the input costs. This has led to a situation in which the weaver is unable to recover his own labour costs. In such a scenario, production has tended to become "not only unprofitable but also uneconomical"[166].

These factors, coupled with government apathy, have resulted in the industry being pushed into a downward spiral. The 1985 New Textile Policy (NTP) whereby the government prioritised an "increase in the production of cloth" over the employment generation potential of the handloom sector in India was a foreboding for the future of this industry, from which it is still reeling. Up until then, consecutive governments at the centre in India had accorded principal priority to the handloom sector due to its immense aptitude for employment. A number of policies were devised, including quota and product restrictions on the mill and powerloom sector and reservation of products for handloom manufacture, to provide protection to this sector. Though such protections were routinely encroached upon, yet the intent of the government in lifting the prosperity and ensuring further development of this sector, could not be doubted.

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[162] Jain, L.C. (1983), *op cit.*
[163] National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2007), *op cit,* p.60-62.
[164] Singh, A.M. and Kelles-Viitanen, A. (1987), *op cit,* p.15.
[165] Nayak, P., Rout, T.K., Shaikh, S. and Rajanikant (2007), *op cit.*
[166] Srinivasulu, K. (1996), *op cit.*

However, with the formulation of the 1985 NTP, a drastic change in the intentions of the government could be perceived. The needs of the handloom sector were, for the first time (at the policy level) seconded to the goal of increased productivity in cloth manufacturing, despite recognition of the fact that this sector would not, on its own, be able to compete with the stronger and better-placed powerloom sector. An instance of this was reflected in the delayed implementation of the Handloom Reservation Act, 1985 and after its implementation in drastically reducing the number of reserved items from twenty-two to eleven and finally in making virtually no efforts to prevent breaching of this act by powerloom owners. Similarly, certain tax benefits hitherto extended to the handloom sector by the Indian government were withdrawn[167].

3.7 Effect of these changes on the health and well-being of Varanasi handloom weavers

All of these above-mentioned factors have colluded to reduce the existing handloom weavers of Varanasi to a state of penury and put into jeopardy the future of those who earn their livelihood from it, compelling a number of them to seek refuge in other occupations. This is evident from the report of the District Sample Survey of Varanasi conducted in the year 2008, as per which 40% of the total weavers were below the poverty line[168]. As a result of living in such dismal conditions, starvation deaths, suicides and even instances of selling of blood have been recorded in recent times among the weavers' of Varanasi[169]. With increasing rates of poverty and under-nutrition among the weavers' of Varanasi, they are increasingly becoming more vulnerable to diseases such as tuberculosis. While the number of tuberculosis cases declined from 2693 in 2007 to 2637 in 2008 in Varanasi as per the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) report, the number of cases of the disease among weaver households increased in the corresponding period. While in 2007, weaver households contributed only about 40% of the tuberculosis cases in the district, in the matter of a single year, this figure had crossed 50%. The number of cases of the disease among weaver families has been increasing in dense weaver settlement areas of Lohta, Bajardiha,

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[167] *ibid*

[168] Kaushik, A. and Nagvanshi, S. (2011): *Weaving Dreams, Living inin Nightmare: Situation of Banarasi Saree Weaving Sector of Varanasi.* Available at: http://sapf.blogspot.com/2011/02/weaving-dreams-living-in-nightmare.html, accessed on 14th April, 2011.

[169] Gautam, K. (2008), *op cit.*

Lallapura and Jaitpura in Varanasi. As an industry falls into a slump, so too the fortunes of those associated with it decline as is amply evident in the present case[170].

Further evidence of the pitiable conditions of a large portion of the handloom weavers of Varanasi is the 2009-'10 report of Handloom Census of India, which states that the average annual earning of an urban weaver household in Uttar Pradesh is a meagre Rs.20,588. This translates to an earning of approximately Rs.1716 per month for an urban weaver household. Given the average size of an urban handloom weaver household in the state is 5.56, per capita expenditure available is Rs.308.57 in a month[171]. As per the Planning Commission report of 2007, in 2004-'05 the urban poverty line stood at Rs.538.60 per person per month[172]. Yet the 2009-'10 Handloom Census states that only 3930 urban weaver households (8.26%) in Uttar Pradesh owned Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards and 1489 households (3.13%) had Antodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) cards, which entitle them to government benefits, including access to food items at subsidised rates through the country's vast Public Distribution System (PDS)[173]. These figures clearly point towards an under-reporting of poverty among the weavers of the state, of which Varanasi occupies an integral part.

This sad predicament of the weavers assumes even more significant proportions when contrasted with those living in the southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Tamil Nadu (TN) – both of these states have a substantial population of handloom weavers. The average earning of urban handloom weaver households in the year 2009-'10 in the former was Rs.31,156 and the corresponding figure in the latter state was Rs.25,318. The average family size of such households was 3.78 and 3.64 for the two states, respectively. The percentage of BPL and AAY card-holders among urban handloom worker households in AP in 2009-'10 were 82.77% and 2.93% and for TN, the corresponding figures were 92.93% and 1.66%, respectively[174]. Despite the poor plight and the low earning levels of handloom weavers in the two southern states of India, the weavers in these states are considerably better-off than those in Uttar Pradesh as a significantly larger percentage of their population are under the ambit of

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170 The Times of India (2009): 'People Still Unaware of DOTS, TB Continues to Spread,' 15 January.
171 Handloom Census of India, 2009-10, *op cit,* pp.122-123.
172 Tilak, J.B.G. (2009): 'Household Expenditure on Education and Implications for Redefining the Poverty Line in India,' Background Paper, prepared for the Expert Group on the Review of the Methodology for Estimation of Poverty (Planning Commission, May, 2009).
173 Handloom Census of India, 2009-10, *op cit.*
174 *ibid*

government social safety schemes. This is even though their annual household incomes are notably higher than those of handloom weaver households in Uttar Pradesh. The indifference of the administration to the situation of the handloom weavers of Varanasi is also demonstrated by the fact that though the industry is covered by the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, the actual monthly income earned by those engaged in this industry belies the proper enforcement of this act. As per the Uttar Pradesh government's official minimum wage rates, a skilled worker employed in the handloom industry was entitled to a minimum daily wage of Rs.184.73 in September, 2010, while the per day rate for an unskilled and semi-skilled worker in the same industry was fixed at Rs.145.96 and Rs.166.42, respectively[175]. Handloom weavers belong to the category of skilled workers, yet the average per day wage earned by them, as per a study conducted on the handloom clusters in Uttar Pradesh, including Varanasi, in the year 2007 was a mere Rs.82. For those weavers residing in urban areas, the average daily wage earned was slightly higher at Rs.89[176]. Yet both of these figures are quite extensively lower than the wage rate specified by the Uttar Pradesh government for the handloom industry. These figures display not only a lack of concern of the government to the poor condition of the small and marginal handloom weavers in the Varanasi, but also signify poor governance. A further sign of the government's disinterest in the plight of the handloom weavers is that though a number of schemes have been initiated for their well-being, poor implementation has marred the underlying intentions of the government. The following section speaks about the list of government schemes introduced.

3.8 Government Schemes

A number of schemes and initiatives have been launched by the various state and national governments since independence with the professed aim of safeguarding of interests of the handloom sector in the country. In 1952, the government reconstituted the All India Handloom Board established in 1945 to attune it to the needs of the handloom weavers of the country and supporting them in their marketing initiatives as

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[175] Paycheck India: *Minimum Wages in Uttar Pradesh – Uttar Pradesh: Minimum Wages w.e.f. April 1, 2010 to September, 2010.* Available at: http://www.paycheck.in/main/officialminimumwages/uttar-pradesh, accessed on 18th September, 2010.

[176] Singh, A.K., Joshi, A. and Singh, Y.P. (2006), *op cit.*

well as aid supply of raw materials to them[177] (Planning Commission, 2001). Under the aegis of this board, an All India Institute of Handloom Technology and a Weavers' Service Centre (WSC) were established in Varanasi in 1956[178]. In 1981, the National Handloom Development Corporation (NHDC) was established by the Indian government, with the purpose of ensuring a steady supply of yarn at affordable rates to the handloom weavers across the country[179]. Under this initiative, thirty-one yarn depots have been set up in Varanasi district by the government.

The Uttar Pradesh state government too has taken a number of measures to promote the handloom sector with the state. A Handloom Directorate was established by the state government under the ambit of the Industries Department of the state in the year 1972. A regional office of this department is located in Varanasi. Furthermore, the Uttar Pradesh Handloom Corporation and Uttar Pradesh Industrial Co-operative Association (UPICA) were also instituted. These institutions were responsible for not only providing raw materials at subsidised rates to handloom weavers but also for purchasing their products and providing them with a retail outlet for promoting and marketing of their wares. However, in the past decade both of these organisations have been allowed to decay. They have been blighted by their own internal problems and have thus become ineffective in discharging their mandated tasks[180].

The government has also instituted a number of schemes for the benefit of the handloom weavers. The following section includes a mention of the various such contemporary schemes introduced by the Government of India for the handloom sector, as mentioned in the Brochure on Schemes for the Handloom Sector, Office of the Development Commissioner for Handlooms, Ministry of Textiles. They are as follows:

- **Deen Dayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana (DDHPY)** – This scheme was introduced in the year 2000 A.D. and is the flagship scheme of the Development Commissioner (Handloom), Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. The scheme was formulated with the goal providing a wide variety of assistance to the handloom weaver ranging from provision of basic inputs, including setting

[177] Planning Commission (2001), *op cit.*
[178] Pandey, B.P. (1981), *op cit.*
[179] Jain, L.C. (1983), *op cit.*
[180] Singh, A.K., Joshi, A. and Singh, Y.P. (2006), *op cit.*

up of a loom, encouraging development of new designs, devising of publicity campaigns and providing marketing incentive. Strengthening of the co-operative societies is also one of the professed aims of this scheme. Though it is a centrally sponsored scheme, various state governments are required to contribute an equal percentage of the money disbursed to the weavers under the provisions of this scheme.

- **Marketing Promotion Programme (MPP)** – came into effect in the year 2002-'03. Under this scheme, exhibitions and fairs are organised, Urban Haats and Marketing Complexes have been established and publicity generation campaigns have been organised to promote handloom products.

- **Handloom Export Scheme (HES)** – was introduced in 2003 and is a centrally sponsored scheme. It aims at providing financial aid to various eligible agencies for developing export-oriented products and also assists them in international marketing campaigns. It provides support for design modernisation and product diversification and development of innovative and attractive packaging and also provides for quality control assistance.

- **Mill Gate Price Scheme (MGPS)** – came into effect in the year 1992-'93. The goal of this scheme is to ensure availability of yarn to handloom weaver organisations through National Handloom Development Corporation (NHDC) mandated yarn depots, at its manufacturing price.

- **Work-shed-cum-Housing Scheme (WCH)** – was introduced in the year 1985-'86. Its basic object is to extend financial assistance to weavers so as to enable them to construct appropriate housing units as well as work-sheds for themselves and improve upon their living and working environments. All weavers in the country, whether residing in urban or rural areas, are eligible for financial assistance as per the provisions of the scheme. Funding is jointly shared by the federal government, Housing and Urban Development Corporation Ltd. (HUDCO) and the weaver.

- **Thrift Fund Scheme (TFS)** – was introduced in the year 1985-'86. A thrift fund is similar to a provident fund. An annual contribution of Rs.180 only per weaver is made to this fund. This contribution is shared equally by the central

and respective state governments. The savings generated by the creation of such a fund may be used by the weaver for a variety of purposes, including for meeting of medical expenses of oneself or of family members or for children's education or even construction or repair of a house. In case of death of the holder of the fund, the amount would be payable to his/her nominee. Prior membership of a co-operative society is an important criterion for availing the benefits of this scheme.

- **New Insurance Scheme for Handloom Weavers (NISHW)** – was launched in 1992-'93 and may be availed of by any weaver, whether residing in an urban or rural area. As per the provisions of this scheme, all losses incurred by the weaver to his dwelling place and work-shed in the event of damage due to a fire, earthquake, flood or any other natural or man-made calamity would be covered by this insurance. Funding is jointly shared by the central government (Rs.60 p.a.), state government (Rs.40 p.a.) and the weaver (Rs.20 p.a.) under this scheme.

- **Integrated Handloom Cluster Development Programme (IHCD)** – was implemented in the year 2006-'07. The nodal agency under this scheme is the Development Commissioner (Handlooms), Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. The primary goal of this scheme is to identify and subsequently development handloom clusters in a 'holistic' manner so as to increase the capacity of the concerned stakeholders to meet market forces and challenges on its own. It aims to do this by enhancing co-ordination between the various stakeholders in the weaving process – weavers, traders, exporters, suppliers of yarn and other raw materials, among others – and also provide the cluster with requisite support for its improvement and strengthening. The scheme is financially sponsored by the federal government, whereby it will disburse money in three instalments in the ratio of 25:50: 25 and a total of Rs.2.00 crore will be made available per cluster. Varanasi has been identified as one of the clusters under this scheme. The proposed role of the state government, as per this proposal, is to earmark land for the development of the cluster, where a dyeing unit, showroom and buyer-seller meets would be organised, among other activities.

- **Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana (MGBBY)** – was introduced in 2005 and is being implemented in collaboration with the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) of India. It provides a comprehensive insurance coverage to the handloom weaver in the event of death, whether caused by natural causes or by accident. It also provides for disability coverage, both total and partial disability. An annual premium of Rs.330 is shared by the central government (Rs.150 p.a.), LIC (Rs.100 p.a.) and the weaver (Rs.80 p.a.). Weaver between the ages of 18 years and 59 years are covered by this scheme and a maximum amount of Rs.80,000 is to be paid to the family of the weaver, in the event of his/her death caused by accident.

- **Health Insurance Scheme (HIS)** – was initiated by the Central Government in the year 2005, in partnership with ICICI Lombard. Its objective is to ensure that handloom weavers are able to access treatment at healthcare facilities across the country. The annual premium payable, as per the provisions of the scheme, is Rs.1000. This cost was initially jointly shared by the central government and the weaver in the ratio of 4:1, however this was soon revised and subsequently the central government bore the entire premium cost. Under this scheme, five members of a family can benefit from a single health insurance card and a maximum amount of Rs.15, 000 can be withdrawn in a year under this scheme for treatment of various illnesses (illnesses covered are mentioned under this scheme). Card-holders are eligible for treatment at empanelled hospitals at fixed rates, which are government negotiated[181].

Though a number of such schemes have been implemented by the Government of India for the benefit of the weavers, yet such policies of the government have received particularly severe criticism in the past. They have been termed as part of the 'distress management strategy' of the government. Their main purpose of these schemes seems to be to alleviate the distress of the weavers which has been brought about as a result of the widespread crisis faced by the industry, rather than to tackle the core issue behind the deterioration of the handloom industry itself[182].

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[181] Brochure on Schemes for the Handloom Sector, Office of the Development Commissioner for Handlooms, Ministry of Textiles, New Delhi (nd).

[182] Srinivasulu, K. (1997) *op cit.*

Given the orientation of these schemes, the effectiveness of such temporary measures in curbing the miseries of handloom and ensuring its revival remains particularly doubtful. The implementation track-record of the government too does not bode well for the future of these schemes. The Health Insurance Scheme launched in partnership with ICICI Lombard has already been withdrawn in 2010 due to the large scale discrepancies noted in its functioning in Varanasi. The future of the rest remains to be seen.

3.9 Conclusion

The ancient craft of handloom weaving has been a significant and an inseparable part of the culture, ethos and economy of the city of Varanasi. Regal and aristocratic patronage as well as the buoyant tourism sector of this city has helped the industry thrive as it has ensured a steady demand for its products and also visibility to a wide national and international audience. This has elevated the status of the industry and its products and today it is the largest employer in the district, providing employment to more than half of its total workforce.

In view of the importance of the vast employment generating potential and its centrality in the economy of the city, successive governments, both at the federal and state level have formulated a number of policies for the promotion of this sector. The Handloom Reservation Act, 1985, reservation of quota for supply of yarn to the handloom sector and tax benefits for this industry are some of the measures introduced and implemented by the government for its promotion. Apart from these policies, institutions such as the All India Handloom Board, Weavers' Service Centre, National Handloom Development Corporation and UP Handloom Corporation have been founded to maintain the interests of this sector. Despite such actions on the part of the government, a lackadaisical attitude on its part has prevented them from being effectual in either meeting the interests of this vital sector or in developing its full potential. Instead the industry has witnessed a slump and a consequent contraction – handlooms have been shut, people have migrated and those that remain are facing starvation and disease.

CHAPTER 4
SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE AND LIVING CONDITIONS OF THE RESPONDENTS

4.1 Introduction

Handloom weaving is the main household and cottage industry of Varanasi. Of the various manufacturing industries that exist in the city, spinning and weaving alone employs 65,398 workers. In other words, it provides employment to 50.7% of the total number of workers who work in the manufacturing sector in this industry[183].The industry is thus truly the commercial backbone of the city. It generates livelihood for a significantly large percentage of the entire population of the city. However the unorganised nature of the industry has ensured that conditions of work and living for the majority of the people employed by this decaying industry are abysmal. The industry which lacks a trade union is characterised by a subsistence level wage or even less in return for long hours of work each day.

The following chapter begins with a depiction of the profile of the areas in which the study was conducted - Bajardiha and Lallapura, respectively, followed by a description of the socio-economic characteristics of the sample population of the weavers from within these two locations in Varanasi city. It concludes with a presentation of the living and housing conditions of the weavers, which are inextricably linked to their working conditions as well as their health status.

4.2 Profile of the Areas

As previously mentioned the primary data collection exercise for the present research study in the city of Varanasi was conducted in the areas of Bajardiha and Lallapura to bring out the differences in the working and living conditions of the handloom weavers.

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[183] Municipal Corporation, Varanasi (2006): *City Development Plan for Varanasi (Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission)*. Available at: http://jnnurm.nic.in/nurmudweb/toolkit/VaranasiCdp/PART1.pdf, accessed on 15th April, 2011.

4.2.1 Bajardiha

Bajardiha is located in the southern part of the city of Varanasi. The area forms a separate municipal ward within Varanasi city. Its population, as per the 2001 Census conducted by the Government of India, is 19,812 people. The area comprises of a total of 2,453 households. The population of the area is divided into 10,374 males and 9,438 females and has a sex ratio of 909.7 women per 1000 men. The literacy rate among the population of Bajardiha is dismally low at 42.9%, way beneath the average literacy rate of the district at 66.12%. The average household size of this ward is 8.1 persons, which is quite higher than the Varanasi average. Bajardiha has a miniscule Scheduled Caste (SC) population – SCs contribute to just 4.4% of its total population, while no Scheduled Tribes (STs) reside here[184].

Bajardiha is spread across a huge area of southern Varanasi and is generally considered to be a slum area. It is quite densely populated and the absence of basic civic amenities is a notable feature of large parts of this area. The topography of this area is dotted with a mixture of *pucca* and *katcha (khaprail)* houses. These houses are haphazardly constructed, with some lying on either side of narrow uneven lanes, while others have better physical accessibility, with wide spacious lanes leading up to them. The terrain of Bajardiha is largely uneven and it is interspersed with large open spaces where the activity of sizing of the warp and its rolling on beams is carried out. The lack of cleanliness is apparent in this area with a large circular open water body situated in the heart of Bajardiha, being used as a common dumping site and has now become a mosquito breeding centre. Open garbage dumping sites litter the landscape of the area.

As one weaves their way through the paths of this vast area, the loud rattle of the power looms is quite distinct. At frequent distances, however, this din is replaced by the hum of the handlooms, indicating that these are the main economic activities of the area. In other words, weaving, including both its pre and post weaving processes, constitutes the primary household industry of Bajardiha and the following census data are testimony to this observation.

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[184] 2001 Census: Government of India.

According to the 2001 census conducted by the Government of India, work participation rate (WPR) of the population of this ward stands at 32.6 percent (6,464 persons), with a higher rate of male participation in the workforce at 47.1% relative to the rate of their female counterparts, which stands at 16.7% (Table 4.1). The total WPR of this area roughly corresponds with that of Varanasi district and the state of Uttar Pradesh, at 31.3 percent and 32.8%, respectively[185].

Table 4.1: Rate of employment in Household Industries in Bajardiha

Employment	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**
No. of people in the workforce	4,885	1,579	6,464
Workforce Participation Rate (WPR)	47.1	16.7	32.6
Household industries (main workers)	2,182 (44.7%)	553 (35%)	2,735 (42.3%)
Household industries (marginal workers)	361 (7.4%)	645 (40.8%)	1,006 (15.6%)
Household industries (total)	2,543 (52.1%)	1,198 (75.9%)	3,741 (57.9%)

Source: 2001 Census, Government of India.

Out of this total workforce of 6,464 people, the number of persons who listed work in household industries as their main occupation was 2,735 or 42.3%, as seen in table 4.1. In addition to this, another 1,006 persons or 15.6% of the total workforce stated that they were marginal workers employed within these household industries. Thus the cumulative number of people, in Bajardiha ward of Varanasi city, depending upon household industries for their income, either wholly or substantially or some part of it, stood at 3,741 persons in 2001. This translated to 57.9% of the total workforce of Bajardiha, as illustrated in the table above. Interestingly, though male workers

[185] *ibid*

dominate employment in household industries, among the marginal workers employed within this industry, women significantly outnumber their male counterparts. This points towards the fact that while men working in these industries may be the main breadwinners for their families, women too contribute to a certain extent to the total household income.

Though Bajardiha is an old settlement of Varanasi, as an intense handloom weaving hub, it has emerged only in the past few decades. This has partly been due to the migration of a considerable number of weavers and their families from Madanpura, a traditional weaving settlement (and one of the oldest) in Varanasi. As the latter has expanded and grown more prosperous, the poor have had to make space for their rich relatives and neighbours by migrating to this area, which lies in the vicinity of its more fanciful neighbour. However ties have been maintained as is evidenced by the fact that even now, a large number of *grihasthas* (independent weavers) and *gaddidars* (master-weavers/ traders) farm out their weaving related work to this area. Thus the weavers in the area of Bajardiha shares significant connections with weavers and traders from the more prosperous area of Madanpura. Raman (2010) refers to Bajardiha as the 'other' or the 'underside' of Madanpura, based on the differences between the landscapes of the two areas and relative material prosperity of the weavers from these places[186].

4.2.1 Lallapura

Lallapura, lying in the middle of Varanasi city, is a well-established and traditional settlement of weavers. This area has been divided into two wards by the Municipal Corporation of Varanasi – Lallapura Kalan and Lallapura Khurd. The total population of both these wards, situated in the heart of the city, is a massive 24,508 persons, consisting of 3,204 households. The combined male population total is 13,025 whereas the female total is 11,483. A mere 4.1% of the people in Lallapura belong to the SC community. The area has no ST population, which is similar to that of the population of Bajardiha[187]. The literacy rate of Lallapura Kalan and Lallapura Khurd is 61.2% and 66.8%, respectively, while their combined literacy rate comes to 64%

[186] Raman, V. (2010): *Warp and the Weft: Community and Gender Identity among Banaras Weavers.* New Delhi: Routledge, pp. 111-114.
[187] 2001 Census: Government of India.

which is significantly higher than that of the previous research location. The average household size of these wards is 8.0 of the former, while that of the latter is 7.4[188].

The bustling region of Lallapura offers a stark contrast to Bajardiha. The houses here, huddled together, are largely pucca and concretised (with the exception of a few) and quite frequently one came across houses that were multi-storied. The 'vertical densification' of these old housing units has taken place in the last few years to make up for the limited space in face of expanding family size. Numerous houses were clearly in need of repair.

The locality is reasonably well-off and is considered to be the abode of middle-class weavers' of Varanasi and has a mixed concentration of Hindus and Muslims. It is dotted with narrow by-lanes that criss-cross the entire circle area. These thin streets leading to the households of the weavers' were generally properly constructed and in good condition; however in places they were littered with garbage – sanitary upkeep was poor. Within these slender streets, the loud cackle of the power looms could be heard in almost every corner, overpowering the gentler sound of the handlooms still operating. The former are only silenced by the erratic supply of electricity in the area.

Table 4.2: Rate of employment in Household Industries in Lallapura

Employment	Male	Female	Total
No. of people in the workforce	6023	1379	7402
Workforce Participation Rate (WPR)	46.2	12.0	30.2
Household industries (main workers)	2288 (38.0%)	328 (23.8%)	2616 (35.3%)
Household industries (marginal workers)	413 (6.9%)	572 (41.5%)	985 (13.3%)
Household industries (total)	2701 (44.8%)	900 (65.3%)	3601 (48.6%)

Source: 2001 Census, Government of India.

[188] *ibid*

The total WPR of Lallapura stands marginally below the average of Varanasi district (31.3%) at 30.2%. The workforce is overwhelmingly male in character, contributing to 77.1% of the total number of workers. Overall 48.6% of the total workforce is involved in household industries in Lallapura (Table 4.2). Weaving and embroidering are the most prominent household industries of this area, which is traditionally considered to be one of the strongholds of the handloom weaving industry in the city.

In the past decade and a half, a large number of handlooms have been closed down and been replaced by power looms. Thus a significant portion of the workforce, especially the younger population (including those who had joined the workforce during these last fifteen years and in particular, the last five to seven years), had been diverted to the powerloom sector.

4.3 Profile of the sample population

The present research study was conducted in the two areas of Bajardiha and Lallapura in Varanasi city. From within these two areas, a total sample population of twenty-nine weavers was selected. The handloom weavers of Varanasi are a highly varied occupational group. Three categories of weavers may be identified from within the larger set of weavers, based upon their ownership of means of production and place of operation – independent, contract and loom-less weavers.

A total of eleven independent, ten contract weavers and eight loom-less weavers from both Bajardiha and Lallapura were interviewed for the purpose of this study and they constitute its sample population. Weavers from all age categories, with the youngest being twenty and the oldest being above seventy years, were interviewed to gain an understanding of the changes that had occurred in the industry over the years and along with it, the changing perceptions of the different generations of weavers. The above matrix (Table 4.3) was utilised in selection of the sample population of weavers in this study.

In this study, it was observed that though living conditions in the two areas of Bajardiha and Lallapura were significantly different, with some parts of the former even resembling an 'urban slum,' there existed no significant difference between the working and socio-economic differences in our sample population.

Table 4.3: Age distribution of the respondents

	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Bajardiha				
18-30 yrs	1 (20)	2 (40)	2 (40)	5 (33.3)
30-50 yrs	3 (60)	2 (40)	1 (20)	6 (40)
50 yrs & above	1 (20)	1 (20)	2 (40)	4 (26.7)
Lallapura				
18-30 yrs	1 (16.7)	2 (40)	-	3 (21.4)
30-50 yrs	2 (33.3)	2 (40)	2 (66.7)	6 (42.9)
50 yrs & above	3 (50)	1 (20)	1 (33.3)	5 (35.7)
Total				
18-30 yrs	2 (18.2)	4 (40)	2 (25)	8 (27.6)
30-50 yrs	5 (45.5)	4 (40)	3 (37.5)	12 (41.4)
50 yrs & above	4 (36.4)	2 (20)	3 (37.5)	9 (31)

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

These differences, wherever substantial, have been specified and illustrated accordingly in the remainder of the study. Differences, at times, even stark however do exist between the three different categories into which the weavers have been divided in this study.

The following section deals with the socio-economic conditions of the weavers included in our study.

4.4 Socio-economic profile of the weavers

The handloom weaving artisans of Varanasi city, manufacturers of the famous Banarasi silk sari, belong to the unorganised sector of the economy today. This sector is plagued by low earning levels and consequent poverty among large sections of those who engaged in this sector. Despite being skilled workers, the same plight has today befallen a majority of the weavers in this city, as will be evident in the following section on the socio-economic profile of the respondents.

Table 4.4: General information about the respondents

	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Area				
Bajardiha	5 (45.5)	5 (50)	5 (62.5)	15 (51.7)
Lallapura	6 (54.5)	5 (50)	3 (37.5)	14 (48.3)
Religion				
Muslims	10 (90.9)	10 (100)	5 (62.5)	25 (82.6)
Hindus	1 (9.1)	-	3 (37.5)	4 (17.4)
Age (years)				
18-30	2 (18.2)	4 (40)	2 (25)	8 (27.6)
30-50	5 (45.5)	4 (40)	3 (37.5)	12 (41.4)
50 & above	4 (36.4)	2 (20)	3 (37.5)	9 (31)
Family size				
1 - 5	1 (9.1)	3 (30)	-	4 (17.4)
6 - 10	6 (54.5)	6 (60)	8 (100)	20 (69)
11 – 15	2 (18.2)	1 (10)	-	3 (10.3)
16 & above	2 (18.2)	-	-	2 (6.9)

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

The above table illustrates the basic social and demographic features of the respondents included in the study. As stated previously, the sample population in this study was sourced from Bajardiha and Lallapura areas in Varanasi city, with a total sample size of fifteen weavers from the former area and the remaining from Lallapura.

The majority of the weavers belong to the Muslim community, while only a minority from among the sample were Hindus. All of the Muslim weavers included in this study belong to the Momin Ansari community. As depicted in the table above, Hindu weavers are in a minority in this sample. All the Hindu weavers in the current sample belonged to the category of Other Backward Castes (OBCs).

The age-wise distribution of the sample too has been depicted in the above table. As stated previously, a deliberate attempt was made to ensure that weavers of all age-groups were included in the study. The present sample, however, has a predominance of weavers in the 30-50 years age-category – a total of 41.4% of the sample falls under this age group. Of the remaining respondents, 27.6% are between the ages of 18-30 years, while 31% of the total sample of weavers is aged fifty years old and above.

4.4.1 Family

Weaver households in Varanasi are generally characterised by a large family size, with both joint and nuclear family system prevailing among the Varanasi weaving community, in more or less equal measure. The average family size of weavers in this sample based study is 8.4 persons.

Family is an important asset to a weaver in his/her work. A fabric may be eventually woven by the weaver operating the handloom, but no less crucial is the work of the female members of the household, who contribute to the process by participating in pre-weaving activities such as rolling of the thread on bobbins and shuttles – activities for which they are not paid. The male children gain an entry into the occupation at an early age and assist directly in the weaving process either at home or are apprenticed away at the workshop of an experienced master weaver. Thus, it may be said that production in handloom weaving is the handiwork of not just the weaver, but that of the entire family. However the labour of the women folk in manufacturing (rolling of

the weft on the bobbin and shuttles and accompanying the weaver in the task of weaving of heavily embroidered pieces) is unseen and unrecognised and hence not recompensed at all. Their labour may truly be referred to as 'hidden labour.'

Table 4.5: Socio-economic features of the weavers sample population

	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Educational qualifications				
Illiterate	2 (18.2)	4 (40)	8 (100)	13 (44.8)
Primary	1 (9.1)	5 (50)	-	6 (20.6)
Matriculate	4 (36.4)	-	-	4 (13.8)
Intermediate	-	-	-	-
Graduate and above	2 (18.2)	-	-	2 (6.9)
Others	2 (18.2)	1 (10)	-	3 (10.3)
Insurance				
Yes	2 (18.2)	2 (20)	2 (25)	6 (20.7)
No	9 (81.8)	8 (80)	6 (75)	23 (79.3)
Bank account				
Yes	5 (45.5)	1 (10)	2 (25)	8 (27.6)
No	6 (54.5)	9 (90)	6 (75)	21 (72.4)
Ration card				
APL	9 (81.8)	9 (90)	4 (50)	22 (75.9)
BPL	2 (18.2)	1 (10)	2 (25)	5 (17.4)
Antodaya	-	-	1 (12.5)	1 (3.4)
None	-	-	1 (12.5)	1 (3.4)

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

4.4.2 Literacy rate

Illiteracy was high among the weavers included in this sample. Just over half the respondents – 51.7% had attained schooling of any kind, while the rest were illiterate. While all loom-less weavers were illiterate, in sharp contrast, only 18.2% of independent weavers had never attended a school of any kind. Moreover, while 40% of the sample in Bajardiha was illiterate, a higher percentage in Lallapura, 57.1%, had not received any schooling whatsoever, as demonstrated by Table 4.5.

Weaving is a traditional occupation and children of people involved in this trade are initiated in this work at an early age, leaving them with little time for other activities. Poverty is also a facilitator in this process as the weavers are left with little choice other than to begin their training at an early age as income, even of the most meagre amount, is viewed as a positive contribution to the overall household income, given the overall socio-economic status of the weavers' families. It is this same lack of education which prevents them from taking up other more financially rewarding employment, which aids upward mobility.

However, realisation on the part of the respondents as regards the importance of education was there because 69% respondents claimed that they sent their children to school. In other words, most weavers interviewed were aware that educating their progenies would assist them in getting employment in another better paying job. Md. Riyaz-ud-din echoed the sentiments of a large number of the other respondents when he stated, "I want my children to be educated first, so that they can take up some other work, apart from weaving." A number of parents stated that they wanted their child to be educated and then the decision to join weaving was finally the child's. Thus clearly these weavers felt that education was the ladder to a better future (which did not lie in their current occupation). An independent weaver from Bajardiha, Dawood Ansari, stated that he had been able to educate his children (they had all studied up to graduation level or even further) only because of the help he received from them. He claimed that his children would wake up early each morning and weave on the handloom machines for a few hours before leaving for their school or college and would do the same in their free time in the evening. The economic contribution that they made from their work was re-invested by him in their education. He states that

educating his children would have been impossible without their own hard work; as, on his own, he lacked means to be able afford a decent education for them.

Despite this widespread acknowledgement of the importance of education by the sample population of weavers, they were unable to educate their children properly. A number of them had been withdrawn from school at the primary level itself due to the inability of their parents' to afford their education.

4.4.3 Bank account and insurance

Most of the weavers interviewed in the present study did not possess a bank account in their name. Absence of a bank account acts as a barrier in the path of the weavers in seeking access to organised credit.

Similarly, a large majority of the weavers in this study did not hold any insurance policy. Though the Government of India has launched insurance schemes specifically for the weavers – such as the Mahatma Gandhi Weavers Insurance Scheme and a health insurance in collaboration with ICICI Lombard (though it has now been discontinued) – yet not many weavers were aware of it and thus few owned such policies. In our sample, 31.03% respondents had enrolled themselves into these insurance schemes, including the now aborted ICICI health insurance policy (Table 4.5). Interestingly, it is this latter policy which had the maximum number of respondents as its members, with the other insurance policies having very negligible popularity among the weavers.

The government functionary responsible for the implementation of the scheme, the Additional Director of Industries (Handloom), Varanasi circle, Mr. K.P.Verma, told us of this latter scheme that soon after its launch, 85,000 weavers had received ICICI health insurance cards. However, each year, its membership declined by about a fifth and at the time of its closure, just over 60,000 weavers were still under the membership of the scheme. This number, which comes to nearly half of the total number of handloom weavers, is at variance with our findings whereby just a third of the people claimed to have been registered into the scheme at one time or another.

Under this scheme, five members of a family can benefit from a single health insurance card and a maximum amount of Rs.15, 000 can be withdrawn in a year under this scheme for treatment of various illnesses (illnesses covered are mentioned under this scheme) at empanelled hospitals.

Table 4.6: Monthly income of the Sample Weaver Households

Income group	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Income from weaving				
1500 & below	-	2 (20)	3 (37.5)	5 (17.4)
1500 – 2500	4 (36.4)	7 (70)	3 (37.5)	14 (48.3)
2500 – 3500	2 (18.2)	1 (10)	-	3 (10.3)
3500 – 4500	1 (9.1)	-	2 (25)	3 (10.3)
4500 – 5500	1 (9.1)	-	-	1 (3.4)
5500 & above	3 (27.3)	-	-	3 (10.3)
Median income (weaving)	3000	2000	1800	2000
Household income				
1500 – 2500	1 (9.1)	1 (10)	2 (25)	4 (13.8)
2500 – 3500	1 (9.1)	3 (30)	1 (12.5)	5 (17.4)
3500 – 4500	1 (9.1)	1 (10)	2 (25)	4 (13.8)
4500 – 5500	1 (9.1)	2 (20)	2 (25)	5 (17.4)
5500 – 10,000	5 (45.5)	3 (30)	1 (12.5)	9 (31)
10,000 & above	2 (18.2)	-	-	2 (6.9)
Median income (household)	7000	4610	4350	5000

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

4.4.4 Income

Table 4.6 illustrates the monthly income earned by the respondents. While 17.4% of the total weavers included in this sample earn a monthly income of Rs.1,500 or less from their work, another 48.3% of the sample earns between Rs.1,500 to Rs.2,500 per month from their occupation. Almost the entire sample earns a monthly income below Rs.4,500. The only exceptions were a handful of independent weavers who had, over the years, expanded their scale of operation and employed other weavers underneath them. One such weaver was Jalal-ud-din from Bajardiha, who owned eighteen functional handlooms and earned a monthly income of Rs.7,000 from his work.

Excluding these few exceptions in the sample, the incomes earned by the larger majority of respondents is extremely pitiful and is only enough to ensure that they survive on a hand-to-mouth existence or perhaps, even less than that. This is evident from the fact that the monthly median income of the total respondents is Rs.2000, while that of the loom-less weavers' is even lesser at Rs.1800. In other words, such unimaginably low income levels of the weavers are reflective of the low levels of living of these weavers' and their families, especially given the fact that the average family size of this sample stands at 8.4.

This may be taken as an indication of the fact that in present times, the occupation of handloom weaving is not viable economically. Even after labouring for hours on end, weaving on their handlooms, they are unable to earn a decent living wage. Thus, relying solely on income earned from weaving is not feasible for the vast majority of these weavers, resulting in them diversifying to other occupations.

In lieu of this fact that a number of these weavers earned a mere pittance from their weaving occupation, most of the weavers (86.2%) of them sought to substantiate their incomes through recourse to other means. Either these weavers had other family members such as their sons employed within the same occupation or working on power looms. Female members of the household, including their wives, daughters and daughters-in-law, were employed in other home-based jobs such as embroidering and stitching, sari-cutting, *mala* making. They earned between Rs.300-500 a month for their work.

The male members were relatively better remunerated, especially those working on power looms, though their income too fluctuated as power looms depends upon electricity for its functioning, which was hardly forthcoming. The average income earned from operating a powerloom was about Rs.2000 a month. The total median household income is Rs.5000, though independent weavers, as a category, earn significantly more than their other weaving counterparts. The diversification observed among the families of the weavers is an obvious response to their precarious economic status.

A direct corollary of the low level of earnings of these weavers is the fact that a majority of them – 69% in all – do not feel that their income is enough to meet their monthly expenditure. They, thus, have to resort to either avoiding expenditure on items, including essentials and if unable to do so, have to seek loans from their master-weavers or middle-men or neighbours and relatives. Of the items on the household budget that were sacrificed due to insufficient means required to finance them, food topped the list, followed by a reduction of expenditure on clothes, health and education. The implications of lack of access to food and a balanced diet are obvious. These lead to under-nutrition among the weavers pushing them to the brink of ill-health and disease. Given such a perilous situation, savings were out of the question for these weavers, who literally live a hand-to-mouth existence.

The other option to make up for the shortfall in earnings is to seek loans and the weavers in this sample reported indebtedness on a massive scale. Md. Dawood Ansari, 65 yrs, made a sweeping statement when he declared that, "*poore Banaras shahar mein aaj koi aisa bunkar nahi hoga jo ki karze main na ho.*" Out of the total sample, only 27.3% of the independent weavers were not under any debt. The range of debt of these weavers ranged from Rs.5,000 to Rs.1,00,000. Some of the respondents, however, refused to divulge details about the extent of their indebtedness.

Only a few independent weavers sought loan from bank, the rest had to depend upon unorganised credit, including their employers, friends, neighbours and relatives for extension of loans. The system of taking interest on credit offered does not exist on a large-scale among the Varanasi handloom weaving community. This is because both taking and giving of interest is considered sinful in Islam, the religion of the majority of the weavers. Such practices have come to be followed by the Hindus involved in this business too.

Table 4.7: Indebtedness

	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Debt				
Yes	8 (72.7)	10 (100)	8 (100)	26 (89.7)
No	3 (27.3)	-	-	3 (10.3)
Reasons				
Food	3 (27.3)	3 (30)	3 (37.5)	9 (31)
Health	2 (18.2)	8 (80)	4 (50)	14 (48.3)
Work	3 (27.3)	3 (30)	-	6 (20.7)
Social ceremonies	3 (27.3)	-	3 (37.5)	6 (20.7)
Others	2 (18.2)	1 (10)	2 (25)	5 (17.2)
Source				
Banks	2 (18.2)	-	-	2 (6.9)
Middle-man/master weaver	3 (27.3)	8 (80)	4 (50)	15 (51.7)
Relatives and friends	5 (45.5)	8 (80)	6 (75)	19 (65.5)
Mahajans	-	1 (10)	-	1 (3.4)
Interest paid				
Yes	3 (27.3)	2 (20)	2 (25)	6 (24.1)
No	9 (81.8)	8 (80)	6 (75)	22 (75.9)

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

Thus the existing social networks of the weavers fulfil the credit needs of the weavers in most cases. However, this is not to say that the *mahajans* do not exist here. Md. Naseem narrated his experience by stating that he had to take loan from a *mahajan* for his treatment needs. Though he borrowed some money from his relatives, this did not suffice and he was compelled to request the local *mahajan* for a loan and paid interest at the rate of 3% per month. He even mortgaged his wife's jewellery for the same. Such cases are not very common, however. Md. Riyaz-ud-din (40 yrs), on the other hand, who took an interest free loan form his *grihastha,* declared that this loan taking business had only emerged only in the last 4-5 years, before which he was not even aware of the concept of '*karza*' (debt).

Through the experiences of such weavers, it has become clear that indebtedness, irrespective of the amount of loan taken, is a widespread phenomenon today. The same was not the case a decade or two back, or as common even five years back, but as the industry of Varanasi handloom has declined, so too the weavers have had to adopt these measures. Another fact that is brought out here is that the institutionalised banking system is unable to meet the credit needs of the ordinary Varanasi handloom weaver. It is worth noting that without the cushion of the strong social and filial networks of the weaver, their dependence on the master-weavers and middlemen would have been greater. The indebted status of the weaver ensures that he remains in the clutches of the master-weaver and prevents them from taking any initiative of their own.

4.4.5 Ration card

All, but one, of the respondents, a loom-less weaver, in the study did not have a ration card. Of the total number, 75.9% had above poverty line (APL) cards and 17.2% had below poverty line (BPL) cards, while a single loom-less weaver had an Antodaya card (Table 4.5). A common complaint articulated by the respondents was that though they had applied for BPL cards and some had even fulfilled all criteria (which should ordinarily translate into them becoming owners of BPL cards and thus access government benefits), yet none had been issued to them. They alleged corruption in the distribution of these cards, stating that the needy were being left out of such benefits.

4.4.6 Women in weaver households

As stated above, the task of handloom weaving cannot be accomplished without the contribution of the women of the household. Though women do not sit on the handlooms and independently weave, they do accompany the male weavers in their task of weaving in more ways than one. Their contribution in the process begins with participating in pre-weaving activities such as preparation of the weft which is to be eventually used by the weaver. This is done through carding and rolling of the weft thread on to the bobbin first and then onto the shuttles. The next stage of their contribution commences when they directly assist the male weaver in the process of weaving. They sit along side the latter on the precipice of the pit-loom and assist in the embroidering of complex intricate motifs, which cannot be woven by an individual weaver. They are not paid for this work. Income is earned by the weaver upon completion of each single piece. Each piece is individually remunerated and all such accompanying tasks are not listed separately and thus not rewarded separately. In the houses of independent weavers, post-weaving processes such as sari-cutting were also performed by them, without any corresponding payment. As above, payment for this work is included in the final cost of the sari, which is received by the male weaver. They thus make unpaid economic contribution to their household earnings.

Girl children learn to do these tasks early in their lives, beginning at a young age of around ten-twelve years. After their marriage into a weaver household, they execute these tasks in the husbands' house.

The economic contribution of the women does not end here. The precarious earnings from handloom weaving, particularly last few years, make the survival of an entire family on such a miniscule amount almost impossible. Given such miserable conditions, these women have been compelled to seek employment in a range of jobs, so as to make a more direct contribution to the income of their household and help ends meet.

Women, both wives and daughters, worked as 'casual workers' occupations such as sari-cutting, *mala* making, embroidery work *(aari work)* and toffee wrapping, among others. A number of them have also taken up the work of tailoring – some tailor their own clothes (to save household expenses), while others do it on a professional level

also and earn income from the same. Only in a few instances, did the women of the household venture out of the house for work, when they were employed as domestic workers. The work done by these female members was mostly obtained through a middle-man (most likely a male neighbour or relative) and was almost always erratic. The earnings were miniscule – Rs.25-30 a day, tallying to about Rs.300-500 a month (depending upon the regular availability of work), while the work was tedious (lasting for long hours) as well as strenuous.

Apart from performing such activities, the women of these weaver households are also responsible for carrying out various other household chores as well as rearing of children. They are under tremendous strain themselves, having to bear the burden of such multiple tasks.

Handloom weavers survive in dismal conditions as is evident from the above description of the respondents in this study. Poor educational levels, low levels of income earned, high incidence of indebtedness are common among the weavers. A lack of access to organised sources of credit results in a high degree of dependence upon employers for loans. This leads to perpetuation of the control of these weavers in the hands of their employers and sub-contractors. Poor earning levels also result in the women of the household seeking and gaining employment, as casual workers, in even more low-paying and tedious jobs than their male counterparts. This puts tremendous stress on these women, who besides this work also assist the male members of the house in pre-weaving processes as well as perform household chores and rear children too. Such round the clock work results in deterioration of their health status.

4.5 Living conditions

The conditions in which people live have an important bearing on almost all aspects of their life, including having an immense influence on their health and well-being as well. Factors such as housing, sanitation, supply of drinking water and maintenance of a clean and hygienic environment are inextricably linked with the promotion of good health and have been deemed to be important in mitigating the spread of communicable diseases.

Given the fact that the occupation of handloom weaving in Varanasi is largely a home-based one, the house of the weavers not only provides shelter to them and their families, but it also an aid in their work. Housing conditions as well as access to basic amenities come together in influencing the environment in which they work and consequently their work productivity.

Table 4.8: Housing conditions of the respondents

Area	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Bajardiha				
Ownership of house				
Yes	5 (100)	5 (100)	4 (80)	14 (93.3)
No	-	-	1 (20)	1 (6.7)
Type of house				
Pucca	4 (80)	2 (40)	1 (20)	7 (46.7)
Semi-pucca	-	2 (40)	-	2 (13.3)
Katcha	1 (20)	1 (20)	4 (80)	6 (40)
Lallapura				
Ownership of house				
Yes	6 (100)	5 (100)	2 (66.7)	13 (92.9)
No	-	-	1 (33.3)	1 (7.1)
Type of house				
Pucca	6 (100)	3 (60)	1 (33.3)	10 (71.4)
Semi-pucca	-	1 (20)	1 (33.3)	2 (14.3)
Katcha	-	1 (20)	1 (33.3)	2 (14.3)

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

The data presented in Table 4.8 clearly shows that all of the weavers possess houses of their own, with the exception of some loom-less workers. A large number of these Varanasi weavers live in their ancestral house, which had been

apportioned between the various children and grandchildren of the original forbearer. Over the years, especially in Lallapura, these have, in most cases, been converted into *pucca* houses from their initial *katcha* avatar. However, irrespective of the make of these houses, a sizeable proportion of them were in a decrepit state and desperately in need of repair – walls had visible cracks, window panes were broken, doors were falling off their hinges and some had even partially collapsed. Want of money was the main reason due to which their repair was being held up, the respondents stated. The following examples illustrate the poor living condition of these weavers – the *katcha* house of Abdul Aziz, a loom-less weaver from Lallapura, had partially collapsed and his family did not have the money to repair it, so they leased out the portion collapsed to another family, who had it reconstructed and were now living there. Meanwhile the monthly rent that they were receiving was being used to gradually rebuild the portion of the house that they were living in, which was still in a badly crumpled state. On the other hand, there was the case of Sadrul Islam of Lallapura, whose house was in a good condition, but half of it had to be sold off to pay off a bank loan incurred by his family.

Living in an infirm house is a significant blow to these weavers, as first of all, an adequate house provides as a solid base for smooth operation of home-based economic activities – weaving here. Thus a weak house, on the verge of collapse and in need of repair, as in the case of Md. Swaleh, who lives in Bajardiha, means that he has had to shift his handlooms to a rented accommodation. This he did to ensure that his most precious physical asset – his handloom – is not injured in the event of a highly anticipated collapse of his weak house. Paying of rent is an expenditure that the already deficient earnings of the family of Md. Swaleh could have done without.

The design of the houses was largely similar. Upon entering through the main gate, one is led into the courtyard, flanked with rooms on its either side. Rooms on one side serve as the work-shed where the handloom(s) is placed, and on the other side, the bed-room or the living rooms are located. In the latter, the equipment for other weaving activities including pre-weaving processes is kept – such activities are the domain of the women of the house and usually even cooking is carried on in the same room. However in some of the newly constructed houses, constricted by space a single room serves as the space for both work and living. In such a case, the handloom

is placed in one corner of the oblong room, while the family adjusts itself in the remaining space. In a number of the older houses too, entire families lived together in a single room as available space had significantly shrunk due to partitioning of the houses among the various siblings after the death of the patriarch. Overcrowded living conditions were a common feature in these households.

Inadequate ventilation and a lack of access to direct sunlight is a feature of the houses of the weavers. In Lallapura, the vertical densification that has taken place over the years has blocked off any natural sunlight that the houses might have had access to earlier. Though almost all houses have electricity connections – government or private – the supply of electricity to these areas is extremely erratic. The power shortage peaks in the summer months in both Bajardiha and Lallapura (as in the case of most of Varanasi), not only making work on the handloom onerous in the heat in these ill-ventilated rooms, but this also means that these weavers have to work in relative darkness. Work cannot be stopped depending upon the vagaries of the power supply, as it would mean a decline in per day productivity through less yarn woven and would have a negative impact on income. Various means are adopted to deal with dim lighting conditions, such as placing mirrors near the windows which reflect sunlight onto the wooden beam of the handloom and battery-operated mini-bulbs. Despites these stop gap measures, the weavers have to work in relative darkness, which places undue strain on their eyes. As the living and working environment of the weavers overlaps in large number of cases, thus living conditions, including factors such as electricity supply and condition of the house, has a significant influence on their working conditions.

An important marker of the living conditions in any community is access to basic housing amenities. Most of the workers included in this study do have access to these basic facilities. The presence of a toilet was observed in 93.1% of the total number of weaver households included in the sample (Table 4.9). The few without a toilet in their household premises defecated in the open. Similarly access to water within the household too was observed in a majority (79.3%) of the respondents' houses, as seen in Table 4.9. However, all did not have government water connections. A number of them had hand-pumps or submersibles (installed with the collaboration of other houses in the vicinity and maintained by contributions from all of them) or private water connections from the local Masjid. This was the case particularly in Bajardiha,

which is especially deficient in government provisioning of civic amenities. Open public wells also existed in Bajardiha, which were accessed by the people in the absence of a water-source within the house. Similarly, in both of the research locations, hand-pumps and taps had been erected in the open for common use by the public. A number of those with government water connections did state their inability to pay tax on water use, resulting in indebtedness on this front, though till now, none of their connections had been cut.

Table 4.9: Access to Housing Amenities

	Independent	**Contract**	**Loom-less**	**Total***
Bajardiha				
Water	5 (100)	4 (80)	3 (60)	12 (80)
Toilet	5 (100)	4 (80)	4 (80)	13 (86.7)
Electricity	5 (100)	5 (100)	4 (80)	14 (93.3)
Lallapura				
Water	5 (83.3)	4 (80)	2 (66.7)	11 (78.6)
Toilet	6 (100)	5 (100)	3 (100)	14 (100)
Electricity	6 (100)	4 (80)	2 (66.7)	12 (85.7)
Total				
Water	10 (90.9)	8 (80)	5 (62.5)	23 (79.3)
Toilet	11 (100)	9 (90)	7 (87.5)	27 (93.1)
Electricity	11 (100)	9 (90)	6 (75)	26 (89.7)

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

Apart from issues of access, a common complaint for those with piped connections was regarding the quality of water. At times, the water is dirty and its quality poor due to contamination with sewage water, resulting in diseases like diarrhoea, particularly in Bajardiha. Thus, open public wells situated in the vicinity were used to fetch water. Mohammed Riyaz-ud-din who lived in Bajardiha stated that he had witnessed government officials sprinkling medicines in the wells, which were located near his home, from time to time to ensure that water from them remained fit for consumption.

The state of sanitation is particularly poor in Bajardiha, where garbage collection is not regular and the roads overflow with water from the open sewers and the rubbish thrown by its residents. The inadequate drainage system often results in water logging taking place here during the monsoon season. Water overflowing from the drains even manages to enter into the houses of the weavers and tarnishes both the unwoven yarn and the woven fabric, resulting in a loss of income for the weavers. Thus in recent years, some have raised the floor of the house to cope with this yearly occurrence.

The conditions in which the weavers live are dismal. This is particularly so in Bajardiha, where kutcha and semi-pucca houses abound. Most of the houses in both of these areas are in a state of disrepair, with some on the verge of collapse. The houses of the weavers are ill-ventilated, cramped and conditions are incredibly stifling and oppressive. Though most of the houses have access to basic amenities such as an electricity connection and a source of water within the household, yet supply is sporadic in the former case and quality of water is poor in the latter case. All of these factors influence the work of the weavers and reduces their productivity, thereby further affecting their income.

Socio-economic conditions of these weavers also play their part in determining the living and housing conditions in which they live. The former constitutes one of the important factors in shaping their general environmental conditions. Poor socio-economic conditions of these weavers, including their low income earning capacity, influences their ability to access and afford better amenities and decent housing conditions. The latter conditions, in turn, play a significant role in perpetuating poor earning levels of these weavers. This they do by affecting their work productivity and ensuring stagnation and even decline of incomes earned by them.

4.6 Conclusion

Household industries in Varanasi are dominated by the handloom weaving industry, which provides employment to a large proportion of the total workforce of the city. Household industries provide employment to a sizeable portion of the working populations of Bajardiha and Lallapura. Handloom weaving constitutes the primary manufacturing sector in these areas, within the broader category of household industries. In the present study, the majority of the sample were Muslim weavers belonging to the Momin Ansari community. Close to half of the workers were illiterate, while among the literate sample population, a large percentage had dropped out of school after the primary level. The average family size of the weavers' households was 8.4 and most lacked access to a bank account.

The income levels of these weavers are extremely inconceivably low, as a result of which they are unable to sustain their families' basic needs and expenditures. Due to such a state of affairs, a number of their family members, including women, sought employment in other sectors including powerloom work, while women largely found employment as casual workers, to substantiate household income. Indebtedness was high among the weaver households due to the low levels of income earned by them, with treatment for ill-health and disease being the most popular reason for seeking loans.

Almost all of the weavers in the study owned houses – they lived in their ancestral homes. However, the condition of their houses was appalling – they were falling in places and for some, a collapse was imminent. Access to household amenities such as a toilet within the precincts and an electricity connection was almost universally available among the weavers. Similarly, a source of water was also available within the premises for almost eighty percent of the weavers. However, concerns were expressed regarding the poor quality of water, particularly during the monsoon season in Bajardiha, which resulted in the spread of water-borne diseases. The state of sanitation was poor in both these areas and particularly dreadful in Bajardiha. All this led to a high incidence of illness among the sample population. Along with this, the long and continuous working hours in a single posture in relatively dark and unventilated conditions too had their effect on the health of these weavers.

CHAPTER 5
WEAVING PROCESS AND CONDITIONS OF WORK

5.1 Introduction

The handloom weaving industry of Varanasi is a home-based occupation, in which a major of the portion of the production is carried on within the household of the weaver. Almost the entire family of the handloom weaver contributes in the production process, by actively participating in its pre-weaving activities such as warping, sizing, rolling of the weft on the charkha and into the bobbins, among others.

Production in this industry is largely decentralised and segregated into a number of tiny economic units, with each unit producing in very little quantities. The production technology is elementary in nature and production is largely labour intensive and skill based. Having been present in Varanasi city since at least fifteenth century A.D., the industry has a large number of skilled artisans who have dedicated their lives to this historic craft and ensured its survival for centuries. However, perhaps, the biggest contribution of this industry over the years has been its ability to provide large-scale employment to millions of workers, all across the country as well as in Varanasi and it consistently ranks as the second largest employer in India after agriculture.

Yet today, the industry is facing various pressures, which are threatening its very existence. It is increasingly moving to a contractual form of production relations which has resulted in the development of a large number of intermediaries, resulting in the weavers growing increasingly distant from the market. The intermediaries fill in this space by providing them with forward linkages to the market as well backward linkages (by providing them with raw materials in their work). This development has been necessitated by the small scale of operation of these individual weavers' as due to this factor, they are unable to contend in the market as financially viable entities[189]. Yet this emergence of a chain of intermediaries, ranging from sub-contractors to traders to retailers, has not been entirely beneficial for the ordinary Varanasi handloom weaver. It has resulted in the condensation of wages for these weavers in

[189] Ramanujam, M.S., Prasad, S., Bhandari, U.S., Goel, M.C., Awasthi, I.C. and Yadav, S.K. (1994): *Employment in the Informal Sector: A Study of Selected Towns.* New Delhi: Agricole Publishing Academy for Institute of Applied Manpower Research. Ch. V, pp. 89 – 101.

the long run, as well as facilitated their complete dependence upon them for provision of work.

The conditions in which these weavers work may truly be termed as unfavourable and since the industry falls outside of the ambit of protective labour legislation as it belongs to unorganised sector of the economy, their exists no security of either work or tenure of work. Further it is characterised by economic stringency due to below subsistence wage levels in a large number of cases and lack of access to social security. All of these features combine to work upon the health of the weavers. They are affected not only by the insufficient wage levels prevalent in the industry, which influence health and also access to health services, but are also threatened by the hostile physical conditions in which they work as well as live.

The present data chapter begins with a brief introduction of the different types of weavers working within the fold of the Varanasi handloom weaving industry and their respective places of work, followed by a section on the ownership of handlooms by these varying categories of weavers. Subsequently it deals with the physical conditions and hours of work of these handloom weavers and the seasonal variations in their working conditions. This is followed by a section on the earnings of the weavers and the multiple methods of payment that exist within the handloom industry in Varanasi as well as a mention of the system of extension of loans and advances that prevails extensively in this industry. The chapter now proceeds to examine the perceptions of the respondents (handloom weavers) regarding their conditions of work as well as their reasons for opting to join this industry and finally ends with the experiences of weavers with schemes implemented by the government for the improvement of the state of these workers.

5.2 Types of weavers

The Varanasi sari industry is a complex and multi-layered entity. The handloom weavers constitute just a single tier of this vast industry. Within this more expansive and complex industrial unit, the weavers themselves constitute a widely varied category. Depending upon the category to which these weavers belong – independent, contract and loom-less – they work either in their own homes or in the homes of their employers' (Table 5.1). In some cases, a separate room may be rented by the weaver for placing of his handloom machine. This may happen in case of the precarious

condition of the house or even due to the paucity of space within its precincts. The latter was the case of Abdul Rashid, 46 years, from Bajardiha – he had rented a room where he had placed his three handlooms, on which he and his two sons worked as his house simply did not have enough space for placing three handloom machines. He paid a total rent of Rs.900 a month (Rs.300 per handloom) for this room from his meagre total monthly household income of Rs.4000.

Table 5.1: Types of weavers

	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Bajardiha	5 (33.3)	5 (33.3)	5 (33.3)	15 (51.7)
Lallapura	6 (42.8)	5 (35.7)	3 (21.4)	14 (48.3)
Total	11 (37.9)	10 (34.5)	8 (27.6)	29

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population row wise in each cell.
(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

Weaving, as mentioned earlier, typically encompasses the entire household. All members of the family, be it men, women and children come together to participate in the production process. Children are introduced to weaving at an early age – boys begin to assist in the process of weaving even before they reach adolescence, starting as young as eight years. In fact, 37.8% of the total sample had joined in by the time they were just twelve years old. The median age for entry into this occupation was 14 years for the entire sample. Weavers in Varanasi begin their journey into the world of weaving by either assisting their fathers on the handloom or by working as apprentices with well-established master-weavers in the neighbourhood. The latter receive nominal wages during this period of training, varying from Rs.50-100 a month, usually received only after six months of joining as an apprentice worker. In fact, Md. Nizam-ud-din, 55 years, claimed to have received a sum of only Rs.10 a month when he began to weave about forty-five years ago and this sum has not risen much today even though the value of the money received has gone through a monumental decline. Children, who are enrolled in schools, assist in this work after school hours, thereby ensuring their monthly contributions to the household income

were maintained. These handloom weavers graduate from assisting their fathers or master-weavers to weaving on their own after a period of about two to four years.

Table 5.2: Number of handlooms owned and number operational

	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
No. of handlooms owned				
None	-	-	3 (37.5)	3 (10.3)
1 – 2	3 (27.3)	4 (40)	5 (62.5)	12 (41.4)
3 – 6	5 (45.5)	6 (60)	-	11 (37.9)
7 – 10	2 (18.2)	-	-	2 (6.9)
10 & above	1 (9.1)	-	-	1 (3.4)
Average ownership	6.4	2.6	0.88	3.6
Handlooms operational				
None	1(9.1)	-	8 (100)	9 (31.0)
1 – 2	3 (27.3)	7 (70)	-	10 (34.5)
3 – 6	4 (36.4)	3 (30)	-	7 (24.1)
7 – 10	2 (18.2)	-	-	2 (6.9)
10 & above	1 (9.1)	-	-	1 (3.4)
Average operational	5.2	1.9	0	2.6

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.
(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

A significant finding of our study was that ownership of handlooms was not simply limited to the category of independent and contract weavers. A number of loom-less weavers (37.5%) too possessed handlooms, though none of them were in an operational state at the time of the study. The number of handlooms owned by the respondents varied widely – while the majority owned three or less, some of the respondents like Jalal-ud-din, 32 years, an independent weaver, owned twenty-two handlooms in all. A number of other independent weavers owned powerloom

machines too, alongside their handlooms. While some of them had been placed inside the houses of these weavers and were operated either by family members or hired labour, others (including both handloom and powerloom) had been placed directly at the houses of the hired loom-less weavers, who worked on them and also paid a monthly charge for usage of such machines. Thus a number of systems had been devised with regard to the upkeep of the handlooms in the industry today.

As visible from Table 5.2, though 89.7% of the weavers did possess their own handlooms, including some of the loom-less weavers, not all of them were functional. In the past decade and a half, a large number of handlooms have closed down as many weavers no longer being able to eke out a living from this occupation, as we were repeatedly informed. Thus, though the average number of handlooms owned per respondent, in our study, was 3.6, the average number of machines functional was substantially lower at 2.6 handlooms per respondent.

5.3 Physical conditions of work, hours of work and seasonality

Handloom weaving in Varanasi city is essentially a home-based occupation. In other words, a predominant portion of production is carried on within the household of the weaver, thus production process is decentralised and largely fragmented. Being primarily a home-based economic activity, it does not have any fixed hours of work per day. The number of hours worked per day by the weavers varies from 6 hours to as much as 15 hours a day. This figure also increases during the peak working seasons, which begin in September and lasts till February. A number of festivals (including Dussehra, Diwali and Holi) are celebrated during this time of the year and so sales too are high at this time, leading to a spurt in demand. They also work longer hours during the pre-Id season. This is done with the intention of increasing production and thereby, attaining an increase in earnings, so as to ensure that this festival is celebrated with customary fervour and additional expenses that are required for such celebration can be met.

In normal times, however, the average number of hours spent on working on the handloom in a day is 9 hours for all categories of weavers (Table 5.3). The workers usually work during the day-time, with some beginning as early as dawn and continuing till sunset in the evening. The workers though do not work in one single

stretch; it is interspersed with frequent breaks, depending upon the fancy of the weaver as well as the supply of electricity and the prevailing weather conditions. The discretion of the weaver is paramount in this regard. In the summer months, when the heat is particularly overpowering in the ill-ventilated homes of these weavers, and breaks are correspondingly frequent, they compensate by working extra hours in the morning or evening or suffer decline in productivity. However, given the stringent economic condition of the weavers, the weavers have little choice but to immerse themselves in long working hours and short breaks. This is evident in the case of independent weaver, Vijay Kumar Prajapati, who states:

> "I start work on the handloom early in the morning at 3 a.m. and work till 8 a.m., then I take an hour long break. I resume work at 9 a.m. and till 11 a.m. I complete my pre-weaving tasks (winding of the warp threads). After another hour long break, I weave continuously till nine in the evening and weave even if there is no electricity. Then I use a lantern."

The number of days worked in a month by these respondents stretches from a minimum of twenty days to a maximum of all thirty days of the month, with the average number of days worked per month equalling twenty-five days. Ram Lal Pal, a loom-less weaver from Barani village in Varanasi district, who lives at the house of his master-weaver in Bajardiha, works at a frenetic pace for just twenty days a month. He said:

> "I work 12-13 hours in a day and complete one sari in one day. If I take a break during daytime, then I work extra in the evening or at night to compensate for the break taken. I go back home every month and stay there for approximately seven to ten days and so I try to complete as much as possible when I am here."

Friday is usually considered to be a day of rest for these weavers, though there is no fixed norm regarding this. A large number of weavers work even on this day and given the home-based nature of this industry, there are no weekly or national holidays. As mentioned above, the precarious economic condition of the weavers offers them little scope for taking a large number of days off from work, considering the fact that no work equals to no pay for these weavers, who are paid on a piece-rate basis.

The independent weavers, apart from working on the handloom, have to deal with other aspects of the production process as well, including purchase of raw materials and marketing of their product, which includes regular visits to the market for seeking remuneration from the traders for the material supplied as well as bargaining and negotiating for better prices from the latter. Mohammed Dawood Ansari, who frequently visits the market, put forth his experiences:

> "I visit the *gaddidar* (trader) twice a month for supplying the woven material to him and another eight to ten times a month for payment. He tries to put me off and tells me to come another day or tomorrow before he finally pays me, in cash or cheque."

Another independent weaver, Ansaar Ali stated:

> "I go to the *gaddi* (trader) with the woven sari and they first check it before paying me. If a defect is detected, then I have to sell it to the *gaddidar* (trader) for cheaper. I try to bargain for a better price before selling the latter to him."

Weavers are engaged in this work all-year round, handloom being a perennial industry. In the past two years, in particular, work too has been available to them throughout the year. Apart from experiencing seasonal fluctuations in demand, work is also affected by the weather conditions. Extremely hot and cold weather conditions interfere with work as the yarn contracts and expands (tightens up), respectively and needs to be constantly re-adjusted, thus hampering the pace of the work. The *pagia* cords (lying just above the warp and used for holding it in place) too react in a similar way to such extreme weather conditions. Moreover, in the winter season, insufficient heating in the houses of these weavers means that they have to work in the cold and damp pit looms, which results in their toes and feet swelling up. This consequently hampers the work process as the loom's treadles, suspended in the pit, are manoeuvred by the feet of the weaver. This problem was faced by sixty-year old independent weaver form Lallapura, Jamal-u-din, who said, "*sardi mein thandak se paer ka talwa aur anghootha sooj jata hai aur kafi dard mehsoos hota hai. Isse kaam mein rukavat aati hai* (the chilly weather in the winter makes the palm of my feet and the big toe swell up. This hinders the performance of my work on the handloom)." Monsoons bring their own set of problems, with water seeping into the homes of weavers (especially in Lallapura), handloom production itself has to be closed down. In addition to this, in humid conditions, the yarn becomes difficult to manage – it

entangles up more easily and becomes difficult to manoeuvre. All of these factors do add up to decrease the productivity of the workers, thereby affecting wages.

Apart from weather conditions influencing the pace of handloom weaving, availability and accessibility of silk too interfere with the smooth functioning of this sector. Shortage of this raw material too occurs at times. Independent weaver, Vijay Kumar Prajapati, observed, "When market demand increases, then the price of raw silk increases. When its price falls, then I get scared as it means my earnings too will fall."

The weavers who experienced these shortages alleged that hoarding by the shop-keepers was reason for such artificial shortages. This was done in an attempt to enhance the price of Chinese silk in the market. This ploy had apparently been successful in the eyes of the weavers, as its cost had increased from Rs.1500 to Rs.2800-3000 a kilogram in a space of just the last eight months (from February, 2011 to November, 2011), they stated. Such excessive rise in prices has made it more difficult to access the raw material, forcing imposition of breaks upon the work of the weavers after they had used up their existing stock of yarn. These breaks in some cases lasted up till a week as well.

Under these circumstances, a number of weavers had moved away from pure silk to either artificial silk, synthetic, georgette, polyester, chiffon and even cotton in their work. The rates of these materials were less than that of pure Chinese silk. However, even these products had not remained untouched from price rise, with Ansar Ali, an independent weaver, stated, "In the past three months (since September 2011), the price of georgette had increased by Rs.300 per kg. It used to cost Rs.500 a kg before and now costs Rs.825 per kg." While independent weavers had moved to other materials on their own, for the contract and loom-less weavers, this shift had been orchestrated by contractors and employers, respectively. Mohammed Riyaz-ud-din, a contract weaver from Bajardiha, stated:

> "This is my first *tani* (warp) using *kora resham* (artificial silk), which my contractor has given me to weave. Before this I was using *asli resham* (real silk) in my work. this is because the cost of silk has risen rapidly in the past two months – earlier it was Rs.1500-1600 per kg and now it is Rs.2300-2400 a kg. Even artificial silk has risen from Rs.300 to Rs.650 a kg."

Thus a rise in the price of pure silk yarn, the most essential input used in handloom weaving in Varanasi, has resulted in a lowering of quality of the raw materials being used in the industry in contemporary circumstances. This has occurred due to low investment capability of the small and marginal weavers and their contractors involved in this industry.

For the independent weavers who purchase raw materials on their own, this hike in prices has meant that they now buy them on credit from local shopkeepers. This has brought its own set of problems as shopkeepers are not always willing to allow purchases on credit as was discovered by Vijay Kumar Prajapati, 49 year old weaver from Lallapura. On the other hand, thirty-two year old Jalal-ud-din had to pay an additional amount for purchase of yarn on credit. He narrated his woes by stating, "When I buy silk on credit from the shopkeeper, then he charges me Rs.25-50 per kilogram. I have to purchase yarn on credit as I have a number of weavers working for me and have to meet their yarn needs also."

Despite facing such strains in working conditions, weavers are compelled to buy silk irrespective of its costs as handloom weaving is the foremost means of livelihood for most of them. While prices of this vital input have risen in recent times, prices received by them for the finished good have not registered a proportionate increase in this intervening period. In addition to this, they also have to bear the entire cost for execution of the design, which is finally placed on the jacquard. The self-employed or the independent weaver is thus being squeezed from all sides and certainly their numbers have undergone a decline in the last decade. In fact, at the time of the study, Dawood Ansari, who had previously owned six handloom machines, closed down the last of his machines. He claimed that while he spent Rs.3200 for manufacturing a single piece of sari, he earnt just Rs.2800-2900 in return. The loss was paid out of his savings, which he had now exhausted. Unable to break even, he had already moved onto powerloom production and purchased one powerloom, on which work had recently begun and was on the lookout for procuring more of the latter. The question that remains is that for how long will this situation be sustainable if those very weavers who constitute the spine of this industry are repeatedly crushed.

5.4 Modes of payment

Piece-rate system of payment is in vogue in this industry. Payment given to these weavers depends and varies with the type of piece woven and the intricacy of the design, among other factors. Though sari still reigns supreme, in recent times, it has been displaced to some extent, by other products such as dress material, scarves, bed covers and *thaan* (bale), among others. This has been done in a bid to counter the declining popularity of the sari among the people and thus maintain the feasibility of this industry. Weavers are paid fixed rates for weaving these materials.

Design is another variable determining the level of payment. The more elaborate the design, the greater is the skill, effort and time required in completion of the design, hence greater is the remuneration. Sometimes, a particularly complex motif requires as many as six months to complete. A motif embroidered using pure gold or silk threads would fetch a higher return for the weaver. In contrast, a relatively simple design can be woven in as less as three to four days. The contrast was visible in the following two instances – contract weaver, Md. Swaleh who is above 70 years old, required four weeks or almost an entire month to weave an intricately designed sari, with dense motifs gracing its borders and was paid Rs.2000 per piece. Ram Lal Pal, a 40 year old loom-less weaver, took just a single day to weave a completely plain sari and earned Rs.190 per piece that he wove.

However, in our sample, over ninety percent of the sample required less than 15 days to finish weaving a single piece of fabric, while the average number of days required in weaving the same was 10.8 days.

Thus, payment is commensurate with the design, skill and time required to weave a single piece of cloth. However, weaving of a particularly detailed design – zari embroidering – cannot be accomplished by a single weaver. In this task, he requires the assistance of at least two other persons. The latter are usually women who belong to the household – their work is however not separately counted and thus not individually recompensed. The same is not the case with a simple design, which can be woven by a single weaver, without him requiring any assistance on the handloom.

Table 5.3: Hours worked and earnings in a day

	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Average number of hours worked per day	9.2	9.1	8.6	9
Average wages earned per day (Rs.)	109.4	75.2	78.2	87.9

Source: Household Survey.

The bargaining capacity of the weaver also plays an important role in deciding his wages. This capacity is influenced by the category to which he belongs – independent weavers have a higher capacity to bargain than contract or loom-less weavers. Indebtedness to the trader weakens the negotiating ability of the weaver in this regard. Since a substantial number of weavers, especially the contract and loom-less weavers, are under debt to their respective employers or sub-contractors, the bargaining power of the former vis-à-vis the latter suffers an automatic setback. Table 5.3 is illustrative of the inadequate average daily payment rate received by the weavers for each single piece of fabric woven by them, despite the long hours put in by the weavers in their work each day. The contract and loom-less workers earn a meagre Rs.75.2 and Rs.78.2, respectively, while independent weavers, as a whole, earn a slightly better Rs.109.4 per day for their work. It must also be mentioned that lack of viable alternatives of employment also plays an indirect role in decreasing the bargaining capacity of the weavers.

Different modes of payment exist within the Varanasi handloom industry. While the loom-less and contract weavers are paid in cash, independent weavers are paid via cash as well as cheque. The former are paid on the completion of a single piece. The payment in such cases is either immediate or made within a day or two of submission of the woven fabric and not delayed further. Of the total number of such weavers included in our sample, 55.6% stated that money was, at times, cut from their wages by their employers or contractors (as the case may be). This was done by pointing out *aeb* (faults) in their weaving. Money ranging from Rs.50-100 was cut per piece (in some cases, the amount of money to be deducted was fixed for a particular fault) and

the weavers stated their powerlessness in challenging such cuts. Mohammed Anees, a contract weaver, claimed that though his contractor (a middle-man) cut money from his earnings in lieu of mistakes that he had made in weaving, though he was unable to verify whether such cuts were genuine or not. He states:

> "He takes the sari from me and then checks it and if he finds *aeb* (mistake), he cuts some price from my *mazdoori* (earnings). Rs.50 is cut for a normal fault and Rs.100 for a big mistake. He does not show me the problem however."

A couple of weavers even stated that such cuts were the primary reason that they had changed their *grihasthas* (master-weavers) in the past. In their present situation, though they were informed about any mistake that they had made in weaving, no money was deducted from their earnings. Instead they were berated and cautioned not to repeat the lapse in future.

However, it must be mentioned that working under master-weavers for loom-less weavers has entailed a further reduction in the income earned by the latter as the former deducts his own commission before making payment to those working on his handlooms. Contract weavers are spared such deductions, but then they are burdened with overhead costs relating to the maintenance of their handloom machines, which the loom-less weavers are spared. Forty six year old contract weaver Abdul Rashid, who has worked as a loom-less weaver in the past, stated:

> "One year ago, I worked as an *adhiya mazdoor* (loom-less weaver) in somebody else's work-shed. My earnings were less there, but I did not have to engage myself in pre-weaving activities such as winding in that place. I earned a daily wage of Rs.70-80 there. In *poori mazdoor* (contract weaving), I earn an average daily wage of Rs.100-150. A minimum difference of Rs.25 exists between per day wages of a loom-less and contract weaver, but in the former, we are guaranteed regular work even if the market sales are low)."

Moving on to the independent weavers, they are paid either in cash or via post-dated cheques. The predominant mode of payment depends upon the scale of operation of these weavers. While the small-scale independent weavers, operating just one or two handlooms, are largely paid in cash, payment to the bigger ones is done mostly through cheques. For the former, payment is usually delayed by about three days to a week after supplying the woven fabric to the trader. In fact, after the weaver supplies the fabric to his trader, he is called back after a few days by the latter, who uses this time to thoroughly inspect the piece. Subsequently the weaver is called back to the

gaddidar's (trader) office and payment is made to him. Money is inevitably cut if a mistake is detected and no independent weaver is spared in this regard, irrespective of the size of his undertaking.

Payment for large-scale independent weavers, though on a per piece basis, is done usually once a month. They are usually paid via post-dated cheques which can be encashed only three to six months after their date of issue, as the case may be. The rate of interest on such cheques varies for 1% to 4%. However the weavers do not wait that long, they transfer these cheques to commission agents, who give them the amount mentioned in the cheque immediately after subtracting their commission. Kausar Ali even alleged that these agents work in tandem with the traders, with the aim of further milking the already dissipated income of the weavers. These weavers are sometimes paid in cash as well, but in such cases, their traders do not dispense the full amount due to them immediately. Either they deduct a portion of the income or pay it later in instalments. This Jamal-ud-din claimed was a ploy to ensure that the independent weavers do not deal with other traders at will, but remain bound to the same ones. Another practice which came to light and as stated by Jalal-ud-din Ansari was that if he ever required money urgently, then his trader did issue him a cheque on the spot, but then with-held 5% of his earnings.

Other practices also exist relating to the mode of payment of such weavers. In such cases, traders, while making monthly payment to them, do not pay them for the total number of pieces that have been supplied to them. Instead they pay them, via post-dated cheques, only for that material which the traders themselves have been able to sell forward to other intermediaries in this value-chain. The rest of the payment is withheld and paid off only when their material is finally sold off by the trader and sometimes, if they are unable to do so, then they return these goods back to the master-weavers, who then have to bear heavy losses. They then are compelled to resort to distress selling, that is they sell these discarded and often, faulty goods in bulk to the local scrap-dealer, who deal in such items – for example, a sari which cost Rs.2000 in making will be sold off at only Rs.500.

Mohammed Dawood Ansari, 65 years, who has been in this occupation for close to fifty years, was highly critical of this system of payment of independent weavers

through post-dated cheques. Referring to this practice as one of the forms of 'cheating,' which are rampant throughout the industry today, he observed:

> "Earlier transactions used to be conducted *nakad* (in cash). Sometime around the year 1990, the practice of payment to the weaver through post-dated cheques originated in this industry. Since then, *gadbadi* (wrong practices) have increased in this industry and while the weaving class has gone down, middle-men have benefited."

Thus, no uniformity of practice exists with regard to method of payment of these weavers. Apart from these intricacies of payment, it must be said that the level of payment is not commensurate with the effort put in by these weavers. The large number of intermediaries that exist in this industry, in the form of middle-men, master-weavers, traders, wholesalers and traders has meant that the incomes are further depressed for these weavers and constitute just a small percentage of the final sale price of the good. This is demonstrated by the following value chain of the products made by the Varanasi weavers, which calculates the value addition that occurs at each step of the production process.

This value chain has been formed based upon the information provided by the weavers and the final sale price mentioned in this chain is derived either on the perception or experience (if they have witnessed such final transaction of the goods to the customer) of the respondents. If raw material for a sari with a moderately heavy design, costs Rs.1800-1900 (which includes the cost of the warp and the weft) and the income earned by the weaver, who takes a week to weave this sari, is calculated at Rs.700. Thus, the entire *laagat* (cost) of making it lies at Rs.2600, which would then be sold by the trader to the retailer at approximately 10-15% would bring the cost of the sari to Rs.3000, approximately. The final market price of such a piece would be upwards of Rs.4000-4500, as claimed by the respondents. If additional embroidery would be done on the piece worth Rs.600, then the piece would sell for a minimum of Rs.5000 or even more. If the sari is being exported out of Varanasi, thus the final retail outlet exists in any other city of India and then the price of the sari would be further appreciated, factoring the cost of transportation of the material. This above mentioned value chain does not take into account the cost sustained in preparation of a new design, which costs a total of Rs.6000-7000. Longevity of the design depends upon its popularity in the market and it may last for a mere two months or even ten

years in a rare case. The independent weaver, as the case may be, bears the expense of executing the design.

However, the extent to which a disjoint can exist between the cost of production and the sale price was narrated by Jalal-ud-din Ansari, a 32 year old independent weaver from Bajardiha, who claimed to have once witnessed a transaction where a Varanasi sari was sold for Rs.22,000. This had occurred in Surat. As per his estimates, costs incurred in its making would not have exceeded Rs.2000-2500. However, whether this is norm or an aberration, he was unable to verify.

Thus as is evident, payment to the weaver is just a very small percentage of the total cost of the good and it further shrinks in case of a loom-less and contract weaver, from whose earnings a certain portion is further deducted by their employer or contractor, respectively. The majority of the profits in this industry are garnered by the whole chain of intermediaries that have cropped up over time.

5.5 Loans and advances

Given the low income levels of these weavers, a majority of them depend upon loans and advances from their employers or contractors. These loans may be taken to make up for the short-fall in income that may arise depending upon the need of the weaver concerned. Only a few independent weavers seek a loan from bank, the rest have to depend upon either their employers for extension of loans or upon their friends and neighbours. The Additional Director of Industries (ADI), Handlooms, Varanasi circle, Mr. K.P.Verma, admitted that public sector banks in the city had placed weavers in the low priority group with regard to extension of loans. This was due to non-performing assets (NPAs) that had accumulated over the years on account of non-payment of loans by these weavers. Most often, either the big weavers or the influential ones were only extended loans by these banks.

In most cases, master-weavers or middle-men do extend credit to these weavers and are genial in this regard. Moreover, they do not charge any interest on the principal amount given. They gradually recover these loans from these weavers by subtracting a minimal amount of money – Rs.10-20 – from the each wage payment made to the weaver, earned on a piece-rate basis. In the meantime, if a weaver wishes to change his master-weaver or middle-man midway through repayment of that loan, then he is

allowed to do so. A system exists whereby the new employer pays the remaining principal amount to the previous employer of the weaver and automatically, the weaver is now indebted to his new employer. Thus there is no escape for the weaver from a system which is akin to debt bondage, although the loan may be transferred.

A particularly scathing critique of this system of advances that exists between the weaver and middle-men was issued by the 1942 Fact Finding Committee, while commenting on this pernicious practice. It says:

> "Once a weaver was enslaved to the master weaver, it was rather difficult for him to get out of his clutches. The master weavers advance some money to the weavers for their economic and social needs and then keep them in their clutches [. . . .] The payment of advance is not merely for the convenience of the weaver, it is also regarded as advantageous to the middle-men as it would bind the weaver to the middle-men to work continuously. As in the case of certain classes of agricultural workers, a loan received from the employer gives him a hold over the borrower[190]."

Such a state of affairs is amply prevalent in the Varanasi handloom weaving industry. Though this system has been cloaked under the garb of paternal geniality, where the trader or the middle-man aids the weaver during his time of distress, the reality is that the system of advances is just another instrument for exploitation of the small and marginal handloom weaver.

5.6 Perception about conditions of work in handloom weaving

The following section deals with the views and perceptions of the handloom weaver respondents regarding the conditions of work that exist in the industry. This section begins with a look at the reasons elucidated by the weavers' themselves for joining this occupation before moving onto their feelings regarding the present state of conditions. This has been done to present a contrast between the expectations of the weavers at the time of joining the occupation and assess it alongside their current feelings, which may have changed with the changing fortunes of the industry.

5.6.1 Reasons for choosing this work

As stated before, the city of Varanasi is famous all across India not only as a centre of spiritual and intellectual learning, but also for its glittering silk brocades. Weaving of

[190] Pandey, B.P. (1981): *Banaras Brocades: Structure and Functioning*. Varanasi: Gandhian Institute of Studies, 1981, p.10.

these famed brocades has been the preserve of the Momin Ansari community, which have been involved with this occupation for centuries.

Table 5.4: Perceptions of the weavers' relating to their work

Perceptions about their work	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Reasons for choosing weaving				
Ancestral occupation	7 (63.6)	4 (40)	2 (25)	13 (44.8)
Pressure of family members	2 (18.2)	3 (30)	4 (50)	9 (31)
Lack of alternatives	2 (18.2)	3 (30)	2 (25)	7 (24.1)
Present feelings				
Satisfied	2 (18.2)	1 (10)	4 (50)	7 (20.7)
Dissatisfied	9 (81.8)	9 (90)	4 (50)	22 (79.3)
Attempt to quit weaving				
Yes	5 (45.5)	8 (80)	6 (75)	19 (65.5)
No	6 (54.5)	2 (20)	2 (25)	10 (34.5)
Future of children				
Weaving	2 (18.2)	-	2 (25)	4 (13.8)
Any other occupation	8 (72.7)	9 (90)	6 (75)	23 (79.3)
No response	1 (9.1)	1 (10)	-	2 (6.9)

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

A look into the motives of these weavers for entering this occupation reveals that a large number of respondents, 44.8%, joined it due to the pride that they felt in their ancestral occupation. They had thus joined it of their own personal accord. However,

though this was the predominant response of the elderly weavers, who were driven into this trade primarily due to an innate sense of belonging into this age-old craft but also the material benefits that it had to offer. This was the time when trade was abounding in the Varanasi handloom industry. On the other hand, most of the respondents who were thirty years old or less, felt compelled to join it either due to the pressure of their family members or lack of perceived opportunities in other fields. As Sadrul Islam, 30 yrs, states, "I joined it as our family was in the midst of an economic crisis and money was in short supply. I am the only son in the family and had no other alternative but to join this work." This divergence of opinion between the elderly and the younger generation of weavers over their reasons for joining the trade clearly demonstrates the fact that weaving is no longer viewed as a lucrative and sustainable trade by the latter.

Even 75% of the loom-less weavers and 60% of the contract weavers felt compelled to join to this work and against their own private wishes. These are the workers who struggle to earn a decent minimal daily wage rate from their work and they are also the ones with the most limited opportunities for upward progression in this field. It is clearly illustrative of a sense of doom with which they perceive the industry today.

5.6.2 Current feelings towards their occupation

An overwhelming majority of the sample – 76.9% – in the current research study expressed their unhappiness and discontentment with the occupation of weaving in present circumstances, while only 20.7% professed satisfaction. Poor compensation in return for long hours of work was the primary reason behind this. Abdul Rashid summed when he stated, "the entire family works from 6a.m. till 8p.m. at night and then we manage about Rs.100 per handloom. Now there is money only in powerloom weaving, but who has the money and the space to install that machine." Meanwhile, Anees Ansari, 54 yrs and father of twenty year old Mohammed Anees exclaimed, "when we cannot even eat proper food and I could not even educate my children well, then how can I be *sahmat* (satisfied) with this work!"

Another reason behind such disillusionment, widespread among the weavers was the unavailability of work on a regular basis. Naseem Akhtar claimed that because of this reason he did not feel like continuing with this work anymore. This has led to insecurity in a number of weavers, who expressed mounting stress and tension due to

such a state of affairs. Vijay Kumar Prajapati, a 49 year old weaver from Lallapura stated that after the year 1992 he had only experienced *mayoosi* (unhappiness) in this work and this had only increased in the past 7-8 years. He even likened the handloom pit to a half-dug grave for the weavers. Jamal-ud-din Ansari, a 60 year old independent weaver, similarly averred that handloom weaving, in present times, was in an abysmal state and those involved in it were in trouble due to such poor working conditions. In order to escape such conditions, he declared, a number of weavers, in the recent past, had left the industry and some had even committed suicide. He stated that in the past, traders used to come to him and ask him to do their work and would even offer higher prices, but not anymore. Shamim Ansari, 44 years old, whose five out of six handlooms had closed down in recent years, expressed an extreme view when he said, "*dekhna bhi nahi chahte hain hum isko. Dil jal chuka hai isse* (I do even want to look at the handloom anymore. My heart has lost all interest in it)."

In keeping with the dominant emotion of dissatisfaction with their current occupation of weaving, 65.5% testified that they had made attempts to change their line of work and quit weaving altogether. Contract and loom-less weavers led the way on this front, with 80% and 75%, respectively confirming they had tried to leave this field as compared to just 45.5% of the independent weavers. Although a majority of the respondents stated that they would prefer to leave weaving in favour of any other occupation, lack of knowledge of other occupational skills, apart from weaving, illiteracy, poverty and lack of other viable alternatives were the main reasons that they chose to carry on with their current work.

Though these respondents still carried on with this trade, a large number have already given up and moved onto other occupations in the past few years. Almost every respondent (86.2%) knew of a friend, relative or neighbour who had left this work and taken up alternative employment, in occupations as diverse as construction work, plying cycle-rickshaws, vending, shop-keeping and operating power looms, while others had migrated to Bangalore, Surat, Mumbai and Punjab.

In such a scenario, not surprisingly, 79.3% respondents asserted that they would not prefer their children to continue on in this occupation. Most wanted their children to be educated so that they could do better work and even take up government employment or open up their own shops. As Mohammed Naseem stated, "even

though weaving is a part of our heritage and to see it in such a state saddens me, but if we cannot fill our stomachs then what choice do we have," while former weaver, Bashir Ahmed, emphatically stated that he would never allow his daughters to marry into a family of handloom weavers.

Such opinions, thus, amply demonstrate widespread disenchantment as well as deep-seated resentment felt by the primary propagators of the historic craft of handloom weaving. It also highlights the decay that this art form has had to suffer in the past decade and a half. The situation is so dire now that weavers themselves testify to being witnesses of an ever increasing number of handlooms shutting down with each passing day. They also betray the feeling of utter helplessness and the sense of entrapment that is felt by these weavers, who have been left vulnerable to collapsing traditional structures all around them. They do not really have a choice, it seems, between carrying on with their beloved precious craft or moving away from it to so-called 'greener pastures' because their own survival is in jeopardy if they continue to singularly rely on earnings from handloom weaving, returns in which have been declining with each passing year. This is also contrasted with the experiences of the elderly weavers who joined the industry in its hey-day before the onset of the crisis now plaguing it. While their rationale for choosing this work was based upon expectations of material gain to be made from pursuing this craft, the reasons for joining of the youngest sub-set of weavers (thirty years and below) were completely different – lack of alternative coupled with the burden of family expectations and its responsibility. This difference in itself is illustrative of the sense of doom pervading the mindsets of the people associated with this industry.

5.7 Experience of government schemes for handloom weavers'

A *Bunkar* (weaver) Card is a form of an identification card and is issued to a weaver by the government. Based upon the issuance of this card, a weaver will be able to take advantage of schemes initiated by the state or the central government for weavers. In our sample, only 41.4% of the weavers quizzed had a *Bunkar* Card on them, thus eliminating the former category at the very outset from partaking of the benefits of particular schemes formulated for them by the government of India. None of the loom-less weavers had a *Bunkar* card issued in their name.

Table 5.5: Membership of government schemes

	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Bunkar (Weavers') Card	8 (72.7)	4 (40)	-	12 (41.4)
Co-operative societies	3 (27.3)	2 (20)	-	5 (17.2)
ICICI Health Insurance Scheme	6 (54.5)	4 (40)	3 (37.5)	13 (44.8)
Integrated Handloom Cluster Development Scheme (IHCDS)	2 (18.2)	-	-	2 (6.9)
Any other	1 (9.1)	-	-	1 (3.4)

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.
(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

Awareness of the weavers regarding the various schemes launched by the government for their benefit was quite high, with a total of 72.4% respondents having heard about at least one government scheme, with maximum numbers being aware of the health insurance scheme, launched by the government of India in collaboration with ICICI bank. Awareness is considered important as it not only precedes action, but also spawns it.

Membership of such schemes among the respondents was decidedly lesser than consciousness levels for them. The total number of respondents who were members of at least a single government initiated scheme was 55.2%, while 44.8% of the total respondents had not enrolled themselves and partaken of benefits of even a single government scheme for the weavers. It is significant to note that a total of 44.8% respondents were members of the ICICI health insurance scheme. However, at the time of the study the scheme was already defunct – few were not aware of this fact. Membership to the Integrated Handloom Cluster Development Programme (IHCDP) was negligible – of the two weavers claiming to be members of this scheme, one was a former secretary. While the second member of the scheme, Vijay Kumar Prajapati from Lallapura, pleaded ignorance about its programmes and benefits, he only knew

that he was a member based upon the information released by the administration in response to Right to Information (RTI) petition.

Though more respondents were members of weavers' co-operative societies (17.2) in the two areas of Lallapura and Bajardiha, yet with the exception of one member none had actually received any benefits or availed of any particular facilities by virtue of their membership to these societies. One respondent, Shamim Akhtar, did not even know he was a member of such a society and only when he produced his identification card to the researcher, was it realised that he was a member of one such society. Md. Swaleh Ansari, an above 70 year old weaver, who had joined a society in the year 1990, said that his society colleagues used to misuse their membership by purchasing silk at cheaper rates from the government and instead of using it in their work sold it in the open market at higher rates to make a profit. Neither did he ever follow such a practice nor did he utilise its services for any other purpose, thereby ended his association with his co-operative.

The respondents were united in wanting the government to play a more pro-active role in promoting the fortunes of the handloom weaving industry of Varanasi. The main demands of the weavers were provision of silk at reasonable rates to all of the weavers, purchase of the produce of these weavers so as to ensure that they did not have to suffer loss in their work and also free the industry from the stranglehold of the intermediaries. Promotion of Banarasi silk by the government through organisation of fairs and exhibitions in which all weavers can participate and showcase their wares were also suggested by the weavers. Mohammed Naseem also commented that if the government implemented its own laws better and did not bow down to bribery, then too the industry would benefit. He stated that power looms should not be allowed to copy the designs reserved for handlooms (under the Handloom Reservation Act, 1985, eleven designs are reserved for handloom production), which they were currently doing, both overtly and unabashedly.

Interestingly, the views of these weavers made it amply clear that they foresaw a better future for the industry only if the government played a proactive role in improving its fortunes. Otherwise they had little hope for the industry, which has no formal trade union to fight on their behalf and nor do they see the traditional Sardar-Mehto system of leadership being effective enough today in articulating the just

demands of these weavers. The older weavers stated that over the years these once revered Sardars and Mehtos had lost respect due to both abuse of their position as well as the fact that today the well-off among the Momin Ansaris had monopolised the institution. These leaders were now aloof to the problems of the poor weavers and were disconnected from them. In such a scenario, weavers had pinned their hopes on the government to bring about a positive change within the industry.

5.8 Conclusion

The weavers working in the Varanasi handloom industry are in a distressful state today, as is evident from the above state of conditions. The long hours of work, low compensation levels and work insecurity are a harsh reality of the industry. Though this informal sector enterprise is under the coverage of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, the law is hardly implemented and merely remains a paper provision. Even the Handloom Reservation Act, 1985 reserving products solely for handloom production is routinely violated in Varanasi as weavers' complain that powerloom owners openly copy their design, which hurts their interests. Even the mechanism of weavers' co-operative societies has failed to prove beneficial for them, as the institution has been appropriated by the well-off traders while ordinary weavers remain unaware of its provisions and distant from its benefits. Absence of a formal trade union to fight for and protect the rights of handloom weavers' in face of growing adversity has also affected them. The home-based nature of work and fragmented nature of the workforce acts as a deterrent in the formation of a trade union.

A rise in the contractual nature of production relations has resulted in increased exploitation of the weavers' by their private contractors and declining income levels. As wages have fallen, the family of the weaver, including the wife and children, are increasingly being called upon to contribute their unpaid labour by assisting in the process of production. Low wage levels have increased indebtedness of these workers to their contractors, who use this dependence as a tool for further exploitation of these hapless weavers.

All of these factors combined with long and irregular hours of strenuous work in an unpleasant working environment, take a toll on the physical and mental health of the weavers.

CHAPTER SIX
HEALTH CONCERNS OF THE HANDLOOM WEAVERS

6.1 Introduction

The health condition of the weavers of Varanasi is closely associated to their socio-economic, living and working conditions. Environmental conditions such as their housing conditions, availability of clean drinking water, sanitary and drainage facilities and garbage disposal facilities have a bearing on the health of these weavers. Access to these facilities is in turn influenced by their socio-economic background. On the other hand, working conditions, including the nature of work, too influences the health of weavers. Thus, all of these determine their health and nutritional status and the incidence with which illness befalls upon these workers. The way they address their health problems in relation with the existing health service facilities is another factor influencing the health of these handloom weavers.

The following chapter looks at the nutritional levels of the weavers as well as the health problems faced by them. It further tries to draw linkages and contextualise the health concerns of the weavers within their existing living, working and socio-economic conditions. This is followed by a section on their access of the health service institutions.

6.2 Nutritional status

The implications of poor nutritional status on the health of people are well known. Insufficient nutrition, infection and disease come together to form a vicious cycle. For handloom weavers, who perform a task which requires long hours of considerable physical exertion, their health and consequently, nutritional well-being are of supreme importance to them.

In the present study, the average number of meals consumed by the respondents in a day in the past one year was 2.24. While 69% respondents claimed that they just ate twice a day on an average, 27.6% were able to get three meals a day. Only a single contract weaver stated that he, along with his family, managed to eat a solitary meal per day. Table 6.1 clearly exemplifies the difference in the number of meals consumed between the different types of weavers – while 36.4% of independent

weavers were, on an average, able to manage all three meals in a day, only a fifth of contract and a quarter of loom-less weavers could manage the same.

Table 6.1: Average number of meals consumed by the respondents per day in the past one year

Average number of meals consumed in a day in the past year	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Bajardiha				
One meal	-	-	-	-
Two meals	2 (40)	4 (80)	3 (60)	9 (60)
Three meals	3 (60)	1 (20)	2 (40)	6 (40)
Lallapura				
One meal	-	1 (20)	-	1 (7.1)
Two meals	5 (83.3)	3 (60)	3 (100)	11 (78.6)
Three meals	1 (16.7)	1 (20)	-	2 (14.3)
Total				
One meal	-	1 (10)	-	1 (3.4)
Two meals	7 (63.6)	7 (70)	6 (75)	20 (69)
Three meals	4 (36.4)	2 (20)	2 (25)	8 (27.6)

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

While approximately seventy percent weavers ate food twice a day on an average, most respondents verified that, on occasion, they ate even less than that – either just a single meal or sometimes not even that. This happened if they fell short of money and previous earnings had already been consumed, in which case in the morning or

afternoon, they fed on the leftovers of the previous evening's dinner. Though this happened about two to five days each month, for fifty-five year old Nizam-ud-din, eating just once in a day was a more frequent occurrence. He explained:

> "We eat twice a day, but if we do not have money, then we eat once a day. Seven to fifteen days in a month, we eat just one time. In the evening, we eat one full meal and due to lack of money, only eat roti with chutney. We eat meat and subzi only when we have money in hand."

The contents of a single meal for a large number of the respondents, especially loom-less weavers and contract weavers, consisted of *roti* with either lentils or vegetables, but not both together as they would cost too them too much. Sometimes, they even had to forego the latter two and eat their *roti* with either just salt or chutney. Of the various lentils that are available in the market, these weavers consumed mostly *chana* or *matar dal*, as they were cheaper and within their price range, in comparison with the other which beyond access for them. One such respondent, forty year-old loom-less weaver, Noor Mohammed, spoke of his plight:

> "Twice a day we feed the children, even if my wife and I have to sacrifice on a meal. 3-4 times a month not even once food is made. We are able to afford fruits only with a lot of difficulty – entire seasons pass and we are unable to eat them. We eat cheap foods like *matar ki dal* as we can purchase only them."

Thus, since access to foods depends upon the income of these weavers, as incomes decline access to these food items too declines and since income levels of the contract and loom-less weavers are the lowest, consequently food consumption of their families too would be the lowest.

Fruits too were a rarity for weavers, with some managing to eat them about once a month, while others stated that seasons passed, without them being able to afford fruits. Seventy-two year old loom-less weaver, Abdul Aziz, who entered this occupation over fifty years ago, affirmed:

> "When I started doing this work, I used to have money and food too was not this expensive. Then I used to be able to afford and eat *dal* (lentils), *bhaat* (rice) and *kima* (non-vegetarian food) too. Now do not even eat it once a month. Earlier I used to eat whatever food I desired, now I eat cheaper food items like *matar dal* and fruits not at all."

Meat was also consumed infrequently, around three to five times a month. They felt that in present times, prices of vegetarian food rivalled that of non-vegetarian food and so they ate the latter too. For others, months had passed and they had not tasted meat. This included contract weaver, Mohammed Naseem, who narrated his experiences:

> "It has been two years since I have eaten meat, while earlier I could manage to afford and eat it. I used to eat good food earlier. Now I eat just roti and vegetables and only one lentil- matar dal. Ghee and milk I cannot eat at all now. Now I just anyhow manage to eat two meals in a day, even if I have to take loan for it or I manage through other means."

A few respondents also bemoaned about the quantity of the food they ate as well and one claimed that he was unable to fulfil his entire appetite with the food he ate. However, not all compromised with the food that they ate – 31% stated they borrowed money for this (including 37.5% loom-less, 30 % contract and 27.3% independent weavers), while others such as independent weavers, Jalal-ud-din and Kausar Ali, were able to manage three full meals a day, including frequent intake of non-vegetarian food, from within their earnings only.

The situation of the weavers was better earlier, with the elderly ones stating that they, along with their families, used to be able to eat a full meal, including fruits, *ghee* and meat in their youth, as attested by the accounts of Abdul Aziz and Mohammed Naseem. On the other hand, others claimed that the situation was better than what existed two to four years ago, when earnings became so less, that they were often forced to eat once a day or not even that. Mohammed Muslim, a contract weaver, stated:

> "Though we eat twice a day now and two to five times a month, even once in a day, in 2008, situation was so bad that for an entire month that we did not eat food only on many days. Since my wife was about to deliver her child, I had to take a debt of Rs.10, 000."

Yet even in the present scenario, state of affairs remained gloomy, as a vast majority were unable to access an adequate and a balanced diet.

Testimony to a poor state of nutrition, among a significant proportion of the respondents and their family members, were their thin faces and lean and skinny frames. These betrayed their under-nourished status. Their poor nutritional status and

weak physical constitutions is an outcome of the inadequate income levels of weavers' households. Due to their inability to afford a well-rounded balanced diet, they become particularly susceptible to various diseases and get pushed to the brink of disease and ill-health.

6.3 Illnesses reported by the weaver households

The combination of pitiable living and working conditions as well as poor nutritional status of the weavers' and their families would invariably influence their health. The following section deals with the reported health problems of the weaver households, faced by the weavers and their family members in the past one year. A number of households reported more than one health concern that had afflicted a member of their household in the last year.

The most widely experienced and reported health problem among the weavers and their family members in the last one year were fevers, including cold and cough, which was reported by 55.2% of the respondents, as illustrated in Table 6.2. Such fevers were most commonly reported by contract and loom-less weaver households and the least by independent weaver families.

This was followed by weakness and debilitation, including anaemia being reported by 37.9% of sample households. Women and young children were particularly affected by this. In the past year, at least four households (13.8%) reported having faced tuberculosis, with one particular household being afflicted by two such cases. This figure is quite a bit higher, if the one year recall period is waived. However, during this particular period, no loom-less weaver suffered from tuberculosis – the incidence of this disease was the highest among independent weaver households.

10.3% of the weaver households were witness to an accident and subsequent injury suffered by one of their family members. One of such households was that of twenty year old Abdul Qadir, who stated:

> "My father had an accident eight months ago and suffered a head injury. His brain was bruised and *some* of his teeth also fell out. He was in the hospital for twenty days and the treatment cost Rs.3000, for which I had to borrow money from my *grihastha* (master-weaver)."

Table 6.2: Health concerns reported by the weaver households in the past one year

Illnesses in weaver households in last one year	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Bajardiha				
Fevers (including cold and cough)	1 (20)	3 (60)	4 (80)	8 (53.3)
Weakness and anaemia	3 (60)	3 (60)	1 (20)	7 (46.7)
Tuberculosis	1 (20)	1 (20)	-	2 (13.3)
Accidents and injuries	1 (20)	1 (20)	1 (20)	3 (20)
Others	2 (40)	-	3 (60)	5 (33.3)
None	1 (20)	-	-	1 (6.7)
Total weaver households**	5	5	5	15
Lallapura				
Fevers (including cold and cough)	1 (16.7)	5 (100)	2 (66.7)	8 (57.1)
Weakness and anaemia	1 (16.7)	2 (40)	1 (33.3)	4 (28.6)
Tuberculosis	2 (33.3)	-	-	2 (14.3)
Accidents and injuries	-	-	-	-
Others	4 (66.7)	2 (40)	2 (66.7)	8 (57.1)
None	1 (16.7)	-	-	1 (7.1)
Total weaver households**	6	5	3	14
Total				
Fevers (including cold and cough)	2 (18.2)	8 (80)	6 (75)	16 (55.2)
Weakness and anaemia	4 (36.4)	5 (50)	2 (25)	11 (37.9)
Tuberculosis	3 (27.3)	1 (10)	-	4 (13.8)
Accidents and injuries	1 (9.1)	1 (10)	1 (12.5)	3 (10.3)
Others	6 (54.5)	2 (20)	5 (62.5)	13 (44.8)
None	2 (18.2)	-	-	2 (6.9)
Total weaver households**	11	10	8	29

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

(iii) Multiple responses (health concerns) were elicited from each sample weaver household, therefore ** indicates the total number of weaver households interviewed and not the total reported health problems.

Table 6.2 demonstrates that a substantial portion of the respondents, 41.4%, also reported other health problems faced by them or their family members in the given time frame. Among them were diarrhoea and malaria, both of which (along with tuberculosis) are communicable diseases and are linked to the supply of unclean water and insanitary conditions present in the environment of the weavers. Diarrhoea, a water-borne disease, is particularly common in Bajardiha, informed the respondents. Here complaints regarding the quality of water were more widespread and sewage water often seeped in the underground pipes meant for supply of drinking water, thus contaminating it. Among the other problems reported were breathing difficulties too, including breathlessness, cough and chest congestion. They were experienced by a couple of the respondents, both of whom were above the age of sixty years.

6.4 Influence of working conditions on the health of handloom weavers

The current section throws light on the health problems as reported by the weavers, which they themselves had experienced in the past and which they felt was, in some way, related to their working conditions. A number of such health concerns which were reported by the weavers, faced by them in the past and linked to their occupation.

Pain in the back, knee and other joints – Among such health concerns, the most commonly reported was pain felt in the back, knee and other joints. Table 6.3 shows that 75.9% of the total number of respondents' reported being afflicted by such aches, including all of the contract weavers and 50% loom-less and 72.7% independent weavers. The posture adopted by the weavers in their work, sitting for long hours on the pit loom with their backs and knees bent, was said to be responsible for this pain. Forty year-old loom-less weaver, Mohan, who works in Lallapura in the house of his master-weaver, explained:

> "As I have to bend constantly while weaving, my back aches. I even feel tired after sitting for hours on end. Since the past five to six months, I have been feeling a lot of strain on my eyes too, due to which I cannot even weave properly now).

They also complained of swelling in the feet, particularly in winters due to their work. The damp pit, in which the feet of the weavers are places, is especially chilly in the winter months, causing swelling and pain and also hampering the pace of work of these respondents.

Strain on the eye – Stress placed on the eyes of the weavers due to working in relative darkness, in the absence of electricity supply (often for long hours, particularly in the summer season), was also reported by 31% respondents (Table 6.3). Such working conditions resulted in the weakening of eye-sight of these weavers. Lallapura loom-less weaver, Noor Mohammed (40 years) too complained of this problem. He claimed, "I have weak eye-sight, due to the strain I put on it during work. I need spectacles but I cannot afford them." His household income was a lowly Rs.1600-1700 a month and he had six children to support within this income, which left him with no money to spare on his spectacles. Most of the elderly respondents did report this condition, however not all of them wore spectacles as their vision was relatively steady (though they did have difficulties in being able to see clearly) and had not deteriorated to the extent that they were unable to weave at all without its aid. Inability to afford spectacles was also cited as a reason for continuing to work without it, as evident in the case of Noor Mohammed.

Tuberculosis – A few respondents (13.8%) also reported suffering from tuberculosis (Table 6.3). Some recognised this linkage between their lack of a proper diet and tuberculosis and blamed weaving for low incomes earned due to which they were unable to afford an adequate balanced diet. One such weaver was Mohammed Riyaz-ud-din, who along with his seven year old daughter, has been afflicted by tuberculosis, displayed knowledge of such a connection between their disease and under-nourished status. He stated, "*Doctor ne kaha hai humein ki kamzori se TB ki bimari padi hai* (Doctor informed me that we developed tuberculosis due to our weak constitutions)."

Table 6.3: Health concerns reported by the handloom weavers related to their occupation

Health concerns related to weaving	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Bajardiha				
Pain in the back, knee and other joints	4 (80)	5 (100)	1 (20)	10 (66.7)
Strain on the eye	1 (20)	2 (40)	-	3 (20)
Tuberculosis	-	1 (20)	1 (20)	2 (13.3)
Anxiety and stress	4 (80)	2 (40)	1 (20)	7 (46.7)
Total weaver households**	5	5	5	15
Lallapura				
Pain in the back, knee and other joints	4 (66.7)	5 (100)	3 (100)	12 (85.7)
Strain on the eye	3 (50)	1 (20)	2 (66.7)	6 (42.9)
Tuberculosis	1 (16.7)	-	1	2 (14.3)
Anxiety and stress	4 (66.7)	4 (80)	-	8 (57.1)
Total weaver households**	6	5	3	14
Total				
Pain in the back, knee and other joints	8 (72.7)	10 (100)	4 (50)	22 (75.9)
Strain on the eye	4 (36.4)	3 (30)	2 (25)	9 (31)
Tuberculosis	1 (9.1)	1 (10)	2 (25)	4 (13.8)
Anxiety and stress	8 (72.7)	6 (60)	1 (12.5)	15 (51.7)
Total weaver households**	11	10	8	29

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

(iii) Multiple responses (health concerns) were elicited from each sample weaver household, therefore ** indicates the total number of weaver households interviewed and not the total reported health problems.

Anxiety and stress – Apart from these physical health problems, 44.8% of the weavers also reported feeling constantly stressed by the conditions of work (Table 6.3). They worried about whether they would get regular work and a regular income or not in the future. Some claimed that such anxieties had resulted in them being unable to sleep well at night. Contract weaver, Mohammed Naseem of Lallapura expressed the following feelings about his work, "*zeher kha kar mar jaye, ghut ghut ke jeena nahi chahte. Takleef nahi dekhi jati hai* (drinking poison and dying is better than living in such suffocating conditions. I cannot endure this pain anymore)," while another contract weaver, twenty-year old Mohammed Anees too stated his misery about being compelled by circumstances to continue in this occupation. He stated, "*baap-dada jhelte-jhelte kaam kiye, phir bhi karz hai itna, toh isme hum lagenge to hum par bhi hamesha karz rahega* (my ancestors endured this work and persevered with it, yet they remained indebted, so if I too do this work, I will forever be in debt)." Similarly, sixty year old loom-less weaver made clear his mental agony at the current state of affairs, by stating, "*chinta lagi rehti hai pata nahi aage kaam milega ya nahi* (I am constantly tense as I am not sure whether I will get work in future or not)."

Independent weavers seemed to be suffering more acutely from stress and anxiety related to their occupation than their counterparts. As demonstrated by Table 6.3, 72.7% of independent weavers as opposed to 60% contract weavers and a single loom-less weaver harboured such emotions regarding their present occupation. Clarifying his feelings in this regard, he said, "We have no savings. There is infighting and consequent tension in the house regarding expenses. Though we have *ikchha* (desires) but we have to suppress them." Independent weaver, Ansaar Ali, meanwhile stated the following words regarding his work:

> "*Yeh bahut uljha kaam hai* (this work is quite twisted). There is no free mind in it; mind is always disturbed. There is always tension in the mind that there should be no pause in the work. First there is expenditure in changing the design and time is also wasted in the process and work stops for the corresponding period and we lose income. There is inherent risk and *zabardast darr* (heightened fear) with every new design. Only the trader is free in this work. They just have to spend money in opening up their own business. Tax also we only pay."

Forty-nine year old Vijay Kumar Prajapati stated, "This work has *mann hataash* (upset my mind). Sometimes I loose myself in thought for one or two days in this

thought. This handloom then resembles *aadhi gadhi hui kabr* (half-dug grave) to me." Finally, Jamal-ud-din, who is above sixty years old from Lallapura, made a sweeping comment on the general state of affairs in the Varanasi handloom weaving industry, when he stated:

> "There is too much tension and this work has gone bad now. We are facing a lot of trouble in this work. The conditions which exist in the industry today, people are just living in it. There is no meaning in such a life. That is the reason they are committing suicide."

Such statements are illustrative not only of the respondents' feelings towards their current work but also of the anxieties and apprehensions enveloping their minds due to poor and insecure working conditions. Such a problem was particularly articulated by independent weavers, perhaps due to the inherent risks that exist in their work – whether their material will be sold or not, will they be returned to them and will they have to make a distress sale were some of their concerns. What price will they get for it, how much will be cut, for how much will they be paid immediately and will the rise in price of silk be stemmed were some of the other issues troubling these independent weavers. In contrast, contract and loom-less weavers were affected more by matters relating to surviving on a pitiful income and making ends meet within their meagre means. Other factors which concerned them only related to the regular availability of work, whereas issues relating to timing of payment, rising price of yarn and distress selling does not directly concern them. This difference exists, as the nature of their work does not involve risk like that of their independent weaving counterparts, as they are daily wage earners, working under master-weavers.

6.5 Health service institutions and access to treatment

A variety of health service institutions are accessed by the handloom weavers' for treatment of illnesses befalling upon them and their family members. A number of health service institutions, including public, private and charitable hospitals, are spread across Varanasi city and cater to its population. Sir Sunder Lal Hospital, Banaras Hindu University Institute of Medical Sciences (BHUIMS) is the most prominent government hospital in Varanasi district and is accessed by not only the people from all across Varanasi but also of neighbouring districts.

Before progressing further in the present section pertaining to the various health service institutions accessed by the weavers and their families in times of need and the problems faced by them in accessing these institutions, a look at the institutions available in the relative vicinity of the weaver localities of Lallapura and Bajardiha is necessitated.

Lallapura ward is located in central Varanasi. Among those located in the relative vicinity of this ward and accessed by its residents are trust or charitable hospitals including Marwari Hospital (Gowdolia) and Janta Sewa Hospital (Dalmandi), public health service institutions such as Bhelupura Hospital and the SPG hospital at Kabir Chaura and finally private hospitals like Alliance Hospital (Rama Kant Nagar Colony) and JP Nursing Home (Kakarmatta). These hospitals are located some distance away from Lallapura and the latter two private hospitals are usually accessed by the well-off master-weavers from this area. They both are also empanelled hospitals under the ICICI Lombard health insurance scheme and thus accessed by card-holders under this scheme. On the other hand, health service institutions located relatively close to Bajardiha in southern Varanasi and accessed by its respondents include government hospitals like Bhelupura Hospital (Rewari Talab) and trust hospitals such as Janta Sewa Hospital (Dalmandi) and Public Welfare Hospital (Kamachchha). These latter two trust hospitals almost exclusively cater to the weaver populations residing in nearby areas – over 60% of the total patients being treated at these hospitals belong to weaver families. Apart from these institutions mentioned above, registered medical practitioners (RMPs) abound in both of these areas and are often the first choice for treatment seeking by many of the respondents in our sample.

A private clinic or hospital was the most popular treatment option for various ailments suffered by the respondents. Almost ninety percent of the respondents visited a private medical practitioner for treatment. Trust and charitable hospitals were next, with 48.3% taking treatment there, while only 34.5% visited a government hospital in case of ill-health. While 62.5% of loom-less agreed that they used a government hospital, only 27.3% of the independent weavers used the public institutions (Table 6.4).

Table 6.4: Place of treatment

Place of treatment	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Bajardiha				
Private practitioner	5 (100)	5 (100)	5 (100)	15 (100)
Government hospital	1 (20)	2 (40)	3 (60)	6 (40)
Charitable hospital	4 (80)	2 (40)	1 (20)	7 (46.7)
Total weaver households**	5	5	5	15
Lallapura				
Private practitioner	4 (66.7)	4 (80)	3 (100)	11 (78.6)
Government hospital	2 (33.3)	2 (40)	2 (66.7)	6 (42.9)
Charitable hospital	3 (50)	2 (40)	2 (66.7)	7 (50)
Total weaver households**	6	5	3	14
Total				
Private practitioner	9 (81.8)	9 (90)	8 (100)	26 (89.7)
Government hospital	3 (27.3)	4 (40)	5 (62.5)	12 (34.5)
Charitable hospital	7 (63.6)	4 (40)	3 (37.5)	14 (48.3)
Total weaver households**	11	10	8	29

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

(iii) Multiple responses (health concerns) were elicited from each sample weaver household, therefore ** indicates the total number of weaver households interviewed and not the total reported health problems.

However, treatment from a registered medical practitioner is not immediately sought with the onset of disease for around three-quarter of the respondents. While some try to deal with the problem at home and if possible, avoid professional intervention in case illness is not serious. Only if the condition of the ailing person gains severity, they are taken to a doctor. Loom-less weaver, Naseem Akhtar, recounted his tale:

> "Due to monetary reasons, we avoid treatment. Two months ago, my mother had severe stomach ache. At first, she did not even tell us about her problem. Only when it became very serious and intolerable, did she inform us. We somehow managed money and got her treated."

If the health issue can be altogether avoided, such as getting spectacles made or getting an expensive X-ray performed, then it is altogether side-stepped, just like in the case of the wife of independent weaver, Shamim Akhtar. He claimed, "*Biwi ki kamar mein ek maheene se kafi dard hai, lekin dikha nahi rahe hain* (my wife has grave pain in her back for the past one month, but I have not taken her to the doctor till now)."

If it is unavoidable, then in most cases, lack of money in hand acts as a constraint in seeking treatment. In such cases, weavers' strive to weave as quickly as possible their current piece, so that money becomes available to them and they can thus begin treatment. This usually results in a minimum delay of two to five days between the onset of disease and seeking of treatment, as testified by contract weaver, Gulzar Ahmed, from Lallapura:

> "My son had fever, but conditions were such that I had no spare money at that time for his treatment. My sari would still take two-three days to complete. After I finished weaving it, I took it to my trader, received money from him and then pursued treatment."

However, hindrance to treatment on account of the purchasing power of the weaver does not end here. The entire course of treatment is often not completed or if completed is only done so, after many interruptions, as in the case of the father of Sadrul Islam, an independent weaver, who explained:

> "My father had a brain haemorrhage two years ago. This happened due to excessive stress and tension on his mind from his work. We took him to a charitable hospital as it is cheap. Treatment for his condition is life-long and so we had to stop in the middle. In the beginning, we gave him medicines regularly. When he is fine now, we stop the medicine and when his health gets worse, we start giving it to him again. In the beginning, we had to take money from my brother-in-law and also from my *gaddidar* (trader) as we ran out of money soon enough. The cost of my father's daily medicine is Rs.20 in regular times and sometimes, we have to buy even this on credit."

Similar is the case of seventy-two year old Abdul Aziz, whose wife died in the last one year due to a long-standing illness. Her neck bone had become weak and she was on the critically ill for two and a half years before she finally expired. The entire treatment cost Rs.5000 to Rs.6000 but the treatment was often erratic and irregular, as he was unable to afford treatment costs on a regular basis, from within his paltry

monthly earning of Rs.1000 only. Though he is eligible for old age pension provided by the Uttar Pradesh government, he claimed that he had not received any money under this pension scheme since the year 2008.

Then there is the case of Lallapura contract weaver, Kaleem Asgar, whose wife suffers from anaemia, multiple vitamin deficiencies and severe back pain. He thus stated:

> "The doctor has prescribed my wife a health supplement. One packet of that supplement has to be finished each month. Each bottle costs Rs.130. My wife eats this supplement sparingly and makes it lasts for two months as it is so expensive and we have hardly any money." They are thus able to manage treatment, which would have otherwise been immensely difficult to afford. Ability to take action and seek treatment is thus severely curtailed on the part of these weavers, primarily due to economic reasons.

Despite the poor economic standing of the weavers, a vast majority of them prefer treatment from private practitioners rather than government hospitals. While a few stated that they had never been to a government hospital and a private or a charitable hospital was their preferred treatment option, others who had been there stated a variety of reasons as to why they preferred the latter over the former.

The most common reason, stated by 69% of the weavers, were the long queues at government hospitals, which at times are so long that one's chance comes only after a wait of two or even three days. This is especially so in Sir Sunder Lal Hospital, Banaras Hindu University Institute of Medical Sciences (BHUIMS).

Another frequent complaint was that often machines meant for laboratory testing did not work, so one had to get tests done from outside. If they did work, another queue awaited them at this counter and by the time the test results came in, the doctor who had prescribed these tests was unavailable, resulting in another day's visit to the hospital. Mohammed Muslim, a 27 year old contract weaver, is the only earning member in his family. He lives with his wife and two young daughters in Bajardiha and earns approximately Rs.3000 a month from handloom weaving. Regarding his experiences at a Sir Sunder Lal Hospital, BHUIMS, he observed:

> "For my wife's delivery, we went to a private hospital. Since I am the only man in my house, I have to accompany my wife. I feel if I go to a government hospital – even though I know I will get money there – I will have to stay at the hospital for three days. Although government hospital is

cheap, but I lose time there and so I have to suffer losses in my work. When my sister's son was ill, we went to BHU hospital. There was so much trouble there. The line was very long and no doctor to help. We wanted an X-ray quite urgently, so after we get it done, we have to look for it ourselves in the huge pile. If I could not have read, then what would I do. *Haalat kharaab hai* (situation is bad there). First you get into a queue for meeting a doctor and then a queue for X-ray and when you come back with the results, the doctor has gone and they will also not accept an X-ray from a private clinic."

He was thus, acutely aware of the fact that though treatment was relatively cheaper at a government facility, in the longer run, they end up costing him more as his time on the handloom and consequently his income for the corresponding duration of the treatment is lost.

Similar was the case of independent weaver, Vijay Kumar Prajapati, who had initially admitted his father to the BHU IMS hospital for cancer treatment, but later on shifted him to a private hospital in the city. The reason, he explained:

"Initially we got him admitted to BHU, but then we shifted him to a private clinic which was more expensive. BHU is so far away, there are transport costs and whole day is gone from 7 a.m. till 4 p.m. in going to and staying at the hospital. My own work is down and I had to supervise other people on my other eight *kargha* (handlooms) and that work was also neglected. In addition, I did not get medicines there but had to purchase them from outside. Still despite these problems, I admitted my daughter to BHU again when he was diagnosed with brain-swelling.
However, when my daughter-in-law was diagnosed with TB eight months ago, I first went to local doctor – she had fever, cough and breathlessness – who referred me to a private clinic at Maldahiya. The sputum test was very expensive, in thousands, and weekly medicines at Rs.700-900. I did not take her to BHU this time as there is too much rush there and much time is wasted as well. The whole day is gone. Her treatment was done fully at the private clinic only."

Thus though treatment was overall more expensive in the private hospital, yet he preferred it as the rush was less here and the resultant loss of earnings too was less. Moreover, he experienced greater convenience in seeking treatment at a private clinic than its government counterpart.

Apart from the long queues and distance at which government hospitals were located from their houses (which made physical accessibility difficult, particularly in Bajardiha where the condition of the roads is terrible), other complaints that

respondents had were with the behaviour of the medical personnel at such institutions, which was deemed problematic. The doctors were said to be inattentive and sometimes, rude. In addition, Mohammed Riyaz-ud-din asserted, "Government hospital doctors *kuch batate nahi hain* (do not explain anything). They just give the medicine and say this information is enough for you." Thus this refusal to give full time to the queries of the weavers including in explaining the medical condition of the diseased person was not well received by the respondents. Such an attitude on the part of the doctors increases the social distance of these institutions from the weavers and decreases their acceptability of treatment. They then seek private avenues for the same.

Finally, they also protested about the fact that medicines prescribed to them were mostly not available in the government hospitals. They had to be purchased from outside, thus they felt costs of treatment did not vary much in a private or a government set-up. Mohammed Naseem expressed his disaffection for government hospitals in no uncertain words:

> "Government hospitals are corrupt and do no work. For any medicine they directly send us outside only and so we now just take debt and go to private only. In addition for tests they send us outside too. If the medicine is cheap they give it to us, but if it is expensive they send us to the market to buy it."

Furthermore, there existed a perception that only those with a source in these hospitals were treated efficiently by the doctors, while others, including ordinary weavers, like themselves, were neglected. Some even stated that they had to pay a bribe to be able to gain access to its facilities.

Thus various reasons exist for the displeasure of the respondents with the government health institutions, which deterred them from seeking treatment here. Not only was their unavailability in the immediate vicinity and the behaviour of these institutions towards them seen to be a problem by these weavers, but affordability was also seen as a parameter which held back them back. Though the overt or the direct costs of treatment were relatively less than their private counterparts, the indirect costs, including transportation and bribery costs and opportunity costs such as the loss of income from work during the intervening period of treatment seeking, immeasurably brought up the overall cost of treatment for them. The fact that government hospitals were third in the choice of preference,

behind private and charitable health service providers, for all categories of weavers, especially independent followed by contract weavers, indicates that these perceived hurdles, as articulated by them, are sizeable enough to deter these respondents from accessing government services in the field of health.

A large number of weavers (48.3%) preferred accessing charitable hospitals for treatment rather than government hospitals, despite the fact that they were often faced with long queues here as well (though not as long as the latter, particularly BHUIMS hospital). This was particularly so for the independent weavers, 63.6% of whom stated that they preferred referring to such hospitals for treatment of illness (Table 6.4). This was because of the availability of these hospitals in their vicinity as well as the fact that a large number of tests were conducted here and medicines too were disbursed at nominal rates from the hospital dispensary. Furthermore, they stated that doctors listened to their problems and treated them well. Seventy-two year old loom-less weaver, Abdul Aziz from Lallapura, claimed, "The doctors and staff at the Welfare Hospital are considerate. They see my age and do not make me stand in a queue, but forward my case and ensure I get speedy treatment." Thus, respondents claimed to be reasonably satisfied from their experiences here as well as the facilities available. While Out-Patient Department (OPD) timings at these hospitals are from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., at Janta Welfare Hospital, twenty-four hour emergency services and two ambulances (available at a rate of Rs.50) too have been provided.

The major hurdle perceived in accessing private health services was the high treatment cost. A total of 82.8% of the respondents expressed their unhappiness with the costs associated with seeking treatment in private hospitals. A corollary of such high treatment costs, given the low income levels of the respondents, is that treatment is often not sustained and long and drawn-out, rather the weavers opt for symptomatic treatment (that is treatment for symptoms arising from the ill-effects of a disease rather than curing the disease itself). This is amply demonstrated in the case of fifty-five year old loom-less weaver, Nizam-ud-din, whose wife died of tuberculosis about five ago, at the age of forty-six years. He stated that initially when she was less unwell, they used to go to the local doctor as and when her condition aggravated. The doctor used to give her some medicines which temporarily improved her health, before it flared up again after a while. He further said,

> "We sought treatment at a number of places, but she did not survive. Towards the end we took her to Janata Hospital for treatment. Her condition had deteriorated badly and it was too late by then. Her tuberculosis had spread from her lungs to other parts of the body. We used to pick her up in our arms and prop her on a rickshaw and take her to the hospital. In the beginning, we used to consult a local doctor only as and when she felt slightly unwell. He used to give her medicine, but we could never complete her entire treatment course nor provide her with the nourishment she required."

Another outcome of this is that in cases, where the medical treatment of the patient needs to be reinforced with nutritive food, usually the latter component of the treatment process is ignored. This is typified by the example of Lallapura contract weaver, sixty year-old Mohammed Naseem, who wife is anaemic. She has been afflicted with anaemia for the past two years and is being treated at a government hospital. He buys medicines for her as and when money is available with them. Apart from medicines, the doctor has advised her to eat fruits and drink milk on a regular basis, but they are simply unable to afford this. Even now, after two years, his wife feels weakness, primarily, he claims, due to his inability to provide her with a balanced and nutritious diet.

Similarly, for forty year-old contract weaver, Mohammed Riyaz-ud-din of Bajardiha, along with his daughter, are recuperating from tuberculosis, were told by their doctor to eat fish (as it has high nutritive value and aids treatment), but he states that he can either afford treatment (at a minimal cost of Rs.10 per day per person) or fish but not both. He cannot do so within his nominal monthly household income of Rs.2500, his family consisting of seven members. Due to the same reason – poor purchasing power ability – he was unable to even get an X-ray done to verify if his daughter had actually successfully recovered from tuberculosis. He stated that this costs money and he had none to spare. His illness itself had ground family income to a halt and their economic situation was dire.

In addition, regarding the high cost of treatment, an independent weaver, Shamim Akhtar, separately singled out the rising costs of medicine. He stated that the same medicine which cost approximately Rs.50-55 about four years earlier now itself cost somewhere between Rs.125-150. This was additional to the other remaining costs of treatment.

Thus, though private sector is approached by significant percent of the respondents for treatment, affordability remains the principal concern with these weavers as almost the entire cost of treatment is borne out of the pocket of the weavers.

6.6 Financing of treatment

Of the total number of respondents, only a meagre 13.8% of the respondents stated that they were able to bear the entire treatment costs for any illness which may befall a member of their family wholly out of their household earnings. The remaining, 86.2%, respondents had to seek alternative avenues, as illustrated in Table 6.5. They either had to arrange for loans from their relatives, friends and neighbours or take debt from their employers or contractors, while some had used the now-expired ICICI health insurance cards for meeting the costs of treatment, either partially or wholly.

While most of the loans were advanced to the weavers, without requiring payment of interest on the principal amount loaned (as is the practice among the weavers of Varanasi city), in times of immediate and urgent need, very few weavers were forced to borrow from the local *mahajans*, on which interest had to be paid by them. However, such payment was promptly returned by the weavers, as soon as they arranged for some other means for payment, so that the interest paid on borrowed money was minimal. Contract weaver, Mohammed Naseem (60 years) of Lallapura was such a weaver, who earned a mere Rs.1500 a month from his handloom. His monthly household income was about Rs.5500 – his wife along with his two sons worked as his income alone was not sufficient in making ends meet for his family of twelve members. In this context, he stated,

> "I had to incur debt a few months ago when I suddenly fell ill. I borrowed money from my relatives, but that did not suffice. I even had to borrow money from a *mahajan* (money-lender) at 3% interest rate per month. I returned it as soon as I got well, but had to mortgage my wife's jewellery for that."

Table 6.5: Financing of treatment costs

Financing of treatment costs	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Bajardiha				
Self	2 (40)	-	-	2 (13.3)
Loans	2 (40)	4 (80)	2 (40)	8 (53.3)
ICICI health insurance	1 (20)	-	2 (40)	3 (20)
Selling of household assets	-	1 (20)	1 (20)	2 (13.3)
Total weaver households**	5	5	5	15
Lallapura				
Self	2 (33.3)	-	-	2 (14.3)
Loans	3 (50)	5 (100)	3 (100)	11(78.6)
ICICI health insurance	1 (16.7)	1 (20)	-	2 (14.3)
Selling of household assets	-	1 (10)	-	1 (7.1)
Total weaver households**	6	5	3	14
Total				
Self	4 (36.4)	-	-	4 (13.8)
Loans	5 (45.5)	9 (90)	5 (62.5)	19 (65.5)
ICICI health insurance	1 (9.1)	1 (10)	2 (25)	4 (13.8)
Selling of household assets	-	2 (20)	1 (12.5)	3 (10.3)
Total weaver households**	11	10	8	29

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

(iii) Multiple responses (health concerns) were elicited from each sample weaver household, therefore ** indicates the total number of weaver households interviewed and not the total reported health problems.

Most of the respondents either took loans from their relatives and neighbours or their employers or even both in dire circumstances. A few (17.2%) claimed to have used the ICICI health insurance cards for financing treatment (Table 6.5). While most used their own cards, one relatively well-off independent weaver, Jalal-ud-din, thirty-two years, of Bajardiha, whose monthly income is Rs.7000 and operates eighteen handlooms, claimed to have borrowed his friend's card in an attempt to cover the cost of treatment. He asserted:

> "My wife was suffering from bone TB. She has too much work to do – housework as well as *nari-bharna* (winding the warp thread), so she feels weak also. We went to a private clinic for treatment. Her medicine cost Rs.7000 per month for two months. So I asked my friend for his ICICI insurance card, which covered most of the costs of my treatment."

On the other hand, existed the case of another independent weaver, twenty-six year-old Kausar Ali, who had conversely offered his card to a weaver who worked under him. His monthly household income was Rs.15,000, earned from operating ten handloom and fourteen recently installed powerloom machines. He stated, "We lent our ICICI health insurance card to one of our handloom workers in Lohta. His mother was seriously ill and he needed it more than us. This is a common practice among weavers in Bajardiha."

Of the total number of weavers who had used this health insurance card for payment, more than half complained about it. Bajardiha independent weaver, Ansaar Ali, thirty years old, who owned three functional handlooms and two such power looms and had a monthly household income was approximately Rs.10,000 too conveyed his displeasure regarding his experience on this matter. He stated that he had attempted to use the card about a year ago, when his son was injured in an accident, due to which his brain swelled up. He needed an immediate operation and was taken to a private hospital for the same. Upon being asked for money at the hospital, he tried to pay with the card, but was unsuccessful. The hospital authorities told him that his card was not functioning and they would not perform the operation without being paid first. So he arranged for money from an alternate source, borrowing it from his friend. The hospital subsequently went ahead with the operation, but later on when he tried to claim the money from the insurance agency for the operation, he received no reply and at the time of the study, was still awaiting one.

Another weaver, Gulzar Ahmed (32 years), a contract worker from Lallapura, alleged that he had been duped by the hospital authorities, who had practically emptied the entire contents of the card, worth Rs15,000 per annum. He stated:

> "Three years ago, my son was diagnosed with a stone in his kidney. We took him to JP nursing home (private clinic) for treatment. One day, my wife went there to collect some medicines for my soon and they asked her to show the card as ID proof. They then showed a *farzi* (fake) operation on it and cut money from the card. Later on, my daughter fell ill. I took her to another nursing home and then they said that there is no money in your card. Only Rs.1000 is left in the card. Then for private treatment I had to pay Rs.5500. I had to loan money from my *grihastha* (master-weaver) to pay for treatment."

Thus of the total number of users of this ICICI health insurance card, the experience of the majority of them was filled with disappointment.

Not only the weavers, but also the government functionary overseeing the functioning of the ICICI health insurance policy admitted to a number of discrepancies in its performance. The Additional Director of Industries (Handloom), Varanasi circle, Mr. K.P.Verma stated that the most common grievance reported to him regarding this scheme was, "the money gets over. People complain that we went to the hospital for one day and money is over now." He, however, stated that he had received a number of counter complaints regarding the use or rather the misuse of this scheme by the handloom weavers. He claimed, "No photo proof in the ICICI health insurance card and they sell the card to others who use it in their name and claim *farzi* (fake) re-imbursement." Despite confessing to receiving a large number of complaints, he concluded that in its entirety, the scheme had been a successful venture and benefited 60% of its total number of users. The scheme has now been withdrawn by the Government of India in view of the large scale complaints that had been recorded against it, the ADI revealed.

Upon probing the ADI (Handloom), Varanasi regarding the list of diseases covered under the ICICI health insurance scheme, it was revealed that insurance cover was not extended to tuberculosis. He, however, maintained, "All other diseases are covered under this scheme, but up to a certain limit." A general observation that arises from

the omission of tuberculosis from the list of insured diseases is that this is a critical lapse, given the fact that TB is particularly common in the households of the Varanasi handloom weavers.

Other methods were also devised to meet treatment costs, apart from those mentioned above. In certain extreme circumstances, when the weavers had no one to turn to, then they were compelled to sell their household articles so as to be able to meet treatment costs, as stated by 10.3% of the total number of respondents (Table 6.5). Forty year old Mohammed Riyaz-ud-din from Bajardiha was one such contract weaver who sold off his wife's jewellery, received at the time of their marriage, for Rs.50,000. The entire sum was not used up in treatment costs for tuberculosis of the lungs. Since he was the only earning member of his family, during his illness, he stated that he was unable to work and the family had no other money, so this amount was also used for fulfilling the basic needs of their family, such as food and clothing. He stated that, at first, he ignored the symptoms of the disease, which descended upon him in the year 2008. He had a sustained cough for about five months before he sought treatment from a local homeopathic doctor. After about eight months of such treatment, which did not yield any positive result, he was referred by a friend to a private clinic. By this time, his condition had become so grave that he stated:

> "I could not even stand and had difficulty even in speaking. They had to hold me and take me to the doctor. He looked and me and said that I was going to die. He just gave me medicines for two days and said if he survives then we will continue the treatment further. He said that he will not stop giving the medicines even if I do not have money. For medicine worth Rs.300, he charges me Rs.125. He pays for my transport costs too but told me not to discontinue with my medicines. Now he does not prescribe me medicines which I have to purchase from outside, but gives them to me from his own and charges me less for them."

Furthermore, due to his illness, three of his children also had to be withdrawn from school as there was absolutely no money to pay for their books or stationery. Though he had recuperated from the disease after undergoing treatment for fourteen months, but now his eldest son (withdrawn from school) sits on his handloom and weaves on it from late afternoon onwards, as the patriarch of the house does not have the requisite amount of energy to work on it the whole day. His younger daughter, seven years old, too has contracted tuberculosis from his father. She underwent a six month course at Bhelupura government hospital, but as he stated, "She got no relief. Till now she has cough with

expectoration. So we shifted her to a private clinic too, where we showed her X-ray and she had to leave her studies too due to treatment."

Nizam-ud-din, fifty-five years old and a loom-less weaver from Bajardiha, too had to take recourse to similar means to arrange finances for treatment. First he suffered an accident and required surgery for the same. For this he had to mortgage his house to his neighbour, in lieu of which he received Rs.10,000, which covered the complete cost of treatment. Soon after his treatment, his wife was diagnosed with tuberculosis. In order to pay for her treatment, he was finally obliged to sell off his house to the same neighbour. Ultimately, his wife died of the disease, while their family of nine (now eight) members moved into a one room house, (without a toilet or a water-source inside the household premises), in the same neighbourhood. Injury and disease has thus completely crippled their family and reduced them to miserable circumstances.

Thus, the implications of ill-health in the life of a weaver are considerable. Not only do they affect the concerned person, but the functioning of an entire family of the patient is disrupted due to a case of ill-health. This happens as all available resources of a family are diverted in taking care of the diseased person. As exemplified by the above examples, the burden of ill-health is sometimes so huge that it can completely destroy a family's economy and bring them infinite misery. This happens due to the already strained economic existence of the weavers – the pittance that they earn ensures that they live on a hand to mouth existence. Within the limited wages that they earn, savings are extremely rare and in most cases, almost nil. In this context, forty-six year old Abdul Rashid stated:

> "Just manage somehow. Earnings are the same what they were ten years ago. Within this income, we have to manage rent, medicine and electricity. Fifteen to twenty years ago, we used to have savings of Rs.8000 – 10,000, but are unable to save money anymore. I have to get my daughter married off, do not know how that will happen – I have no savings as of now."

Such a taut household budget means that any emergency, including a health-related one, cannot be met from within the income of the weaver household. Yet this shortfall has to be met. This may have the serious consequence of landing the weaver and his family into an almost never-ending cycle of debt.

Thus, an episode of illness, particularly a prolonged bout of disease and ill-health, has a double effect on the weavers – not only does their health suffer, which undoubtedly has

an impact on their work productivity and their earnings. Even accessing treatment, the costs of which are beyond the income earning capacity of most of them, brings them closer to a state of poverty. Thus, due to the lack of purchasing power, these 'consumers' of health services are unable to afford sustained long-term treatment. These result in prolonging the span of ill-health due to failure to afford regular treatment, which, in turn, further affects their capacity to work and earn. Moreover, due to the weak health of these weavers, these are compelled to take a break from their work for treatment. While work is disrupted on the one hand; on the other, the costs incurred in seeking treatment result in reduction of savings for these weavers and their families, bringing them under indebtedness.

6.7 Conclusion

The weavers included in this study suffer from a variety of health problems closely associated with their working and living conditions as well as their nutritional status. The poor income earning capacity of these weavers, coupled with a rise in food prices in recent years, has limited their access to food and resulted in under-nourishment of particularly women and children in a majority of the weavers' households. Diseases such tuberculosis and diarrhoea too are fairly common phenomenon in their households, brought about by weak nutritional status as well unhygienic, unsanitary and overcrowded living conditions.

In response to these health concerns, maximum numbers seek treatment from private practitioners. Despite perceived higher costs of treatment, private practitioners are preferred to government hospitals as institutional factors such as long queues, physical distance of these health service institutions from their houses as well as the behaviour of medical practitioners deters them from approaching these government health service systems. The heavy cost of treatment at private clinics is often beyond the reach of these weavers, who have to resort to borrowing money or selling their valuable assets to complete treatment, further sinking them into penury. Thus the influence of economic factors on health is two-fold – not only do they curtail access to an adequate and a well-balanced diet and proper nutrition, but also impair ability to seek treatment for diseases arising in response to poor nutrition, environmental and living conditions, resulting in poor health status of the weavers.

CHAPTER SEVEN
EVOLUTION AND DECLINE OF THE VARANASI HANDLOOM WEAVING INDUSTRY AND ITS IMPACT ON WEAVERS

7.1 Introduction

The handloom weaving industry in Varanasi is a dynamic industry and has undergone many changes in the recent decades. The industry of today is manifestly different from the one which existed twenty and even ten years ago. The process of change is a never-ending one and even today, the industry is undergoing new changes. What is recognisable from even a superficial look into the lives of the weavers working in this sector is that the industry is in great turmoil and distress. However, this has not always been the case – twenty years ago, weavers were thriving, whereas today, a large number of them are barely able to even earn a sustainable income from this occupation.

The current chapter deals with the changes that have taken place in the industry in the past few decades, as have been witnessed first-hand by the weavers, followed by a section on the weavers' perceptions of the reasons driving these changes. It concludes with a look at the impact of such changes on the lives of ordinary weavers, a number of whom have been forced to abandon, either temporarily or permanently, this craft-based industry and migrate to other sectors.

7.2 Evolution and decline of the handloom weaving industry in Varanasi

This massive alteration in fortune in such a short span of time necessitates a deeper look into the changes that have beleaguered it. Upon interaction with the elderly weavers, it was revealed that the industry first suffered a '*manda*' (slump) about 17-18 years ago. This fall, initially mild, hastened with the onset of the new millennium and peaked approximately four to five years ago. However, younger weaver who joined this work in the past 15 years trace the downfall only to the last 8-9 years, before which they felt that work had been thriving.

This sag in trade resulted in work becoming erratic for the weavers– work was only available for 10-15 days a month in most cases. In case of Bajardiha contract weaver, Mohammed Riyaz-ud-din (40 years), his handloom was closed down for a month. Young Mohammed Anees too faced immense difficulties in his work and his daily life when he was induced by circumstances to sit idle for eight months in 2006-'07 as his contractor had no work for him. He is merely twenty years old and began weaving six years ago, at the tender age of fourteen years. His *abbu* (father) started weaving twenty-two years as an independent weaver when the *mandi* (open market) system existed in Varanasi. When it closed down in the mid-1990s, then he had to shift from self-employment to working as a contract weaver with a *grihastha* (master-weaver) as he was unable to maintain profitability in his operations while working as an independent weaver after the closure of the open market in Varanasi. Speaking of his experiences, Anees said:

> "Earlier we used to have one handloom at home and only our father used to weave. As we grew up, two more handlooms were installed. We had to take a loan from the *grihastha* (master-weaver) for this purpose. This happened about six years ago, when I started weaving o my own. When the crisis struck the industry, then work closed down. At first, work became irregular, but about four years ago, I stopped receiving work at all for about eight months. The master-weaver used to send me away saying that material is not being sold, so no work is available. My brother and father too were not getting work regularly. I went to my brother's trader too, but he also had no work for me. So I moved on the computer printing. I learned that work for 6-7 months and used to receive a fee of Rs.100 each month during that period of training. After I learnt that work, even that closed down, so I had to orchestrate a move back to handloom weaving. This time, I found work with my brother's trader."

About his current state of affairs, he observed:

> "I have been working with my present trader for two years now. He gives money on time, but pays less. My earnings have declined since I started work, while expenses have risen. Now I get Rs.500 per piece, while I earlier used to get Rs.800-900 to weave that [10-15 days take to weave a sari]. The trader tells me that since cost of silk yarn have risen and material is not being sold, so he has to cut my wages. He also delays after I have woven a sari and the weft yarn has finished, he makes me wait for a few days before supplying me with fresh yarn. We face troubles because of this, thus have to take debt. If I got work regularly, then we will not have to take any loans. We just manage to live and eat somehow – though have to cut back on expenditure on food – and are not able to save any money for future."

The crisis in the handloom industry in Varanasi has thus had a profound impact not only on the work and income of weavers engaged in this sector, but also on their daily living, as is illustrated in the case of Mohammed Anees.

7.3 Reasons for the decline of the handloom weaving industry in Varanasi

A number of reasons were put forth by the weaver respondents responsible for bringing about a decline of the industry in Varanasi. The reasons elucidated in the following section have been derived from the personal experiences of the weavers and contain their perceptions of the factors which have brought about this downfall of the industry of which they are an integral part.

Table 7.1: Reasons behind the decline of the Varanasi handloom weaving industry

Reasons given for the decline	Independent	Contract	Loom-less	Total*
Falling demand of products	5 (45.5)	6 (60)	2 (25)	13 (44.8)
Powerloom infiltration	8 (72.7)	9 (90)	6 (75)	23 (79.3)
Rising input (silk) costs	3 (27.3)	3 (30)	2 (25)	8 (27.6)
Government policies	2 (18.2)	4 (40)	3 (37.5)	9 (31)
Role of traders	4 (36.4)	3 (30)	1 (12.5)	8 (27.6)
Lack of direct market access	8 (72.7)	4 (40)	3 (37.5)	15 (51.7)

Source: Household Survey.

Note – (i) Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages of the total sample population column wise in each cell.

(ii) *Indicates both row and column totals of the sample weaver respondents.

(iii) Multiple responses (reasons for decline) were elicited from each sample weaver household, therefore ** indicates the total number of weaver households interviewed and not the total reported health problems.

As per 44.8% of the weavers, the primary reason behind this downturn was declining demand for traditional Banarasi handloom products, resulting increasing stocks of

unsold goods. One of the consequences of this decline was that a number of weavers moved away from their traditional craft of handloom weaving to other occupations such as rickshaw-pulling and construction work, among them. Mansoor Ali, an independent weaver, even claimed that by 2010 more than fifty percent of all handlooms in Varanasi had closed down. This was corroborated by the Mr. K.P. Verma, Additional Director of Industries (Handloom), Varanasi, who stated that Varanasi had approximately 60,000 handloom machines still remaining in 2010, which was less than half of what existed in the year 1995, while powerloom machines had increased from 2,000 in 1996-'97 to approximately 30,000 in 2010. He traced some of the closure of handloom machines to the operation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), where wages were similar but work was guaranteed and secure.

Conditions have improved somewhat in the past two years, with work being more regular and some of the trend of outward migration having been reversed. However, 72 year old Abdul Aziz, who had commenced work more than fifty years ago and experienced the more prosperous and heady days of the 1970s and '80s, when Indira Gandhi was in power, disagreed by stating, *"ab bazaar mein woh tezi nahi rahi* (market is not doing well in present times)." He further stated that in the 1950s, his profit used to be double the cost of the sari he wove – a sari that he made for Rs.10-12 was sold for Rs.20-22, but today this was not the case anymore. This happened in an era where an open market system existed in Varanasi. Under this system, most weavers wove independently, using their own designs. Though these weavers had direct links with the retailer, yet they were not attached to any one in particular and would sell the good at the place where they received the best price. Moreover, under this system, the final sale of the good to the customer would take place in front of the weavers, so that they were aware of the current market rates and would receive their fixed and definite share. This system came to close sometime around 1995. As the slump came, customers started declining in numbers and such open transactions became rarer. With the rather sudden demise of this system in mid-1990s, the *bichholiye* (middle-men) began to rise and acted as a link between retailer and the weaver. They provided work to the latter and in turn, sought commission from the earnings of the weavers. This squeeze in income accompanied of the weavers further fuelled their dependence on these middle-men, who provided them with the security

of work and guaranteed income, irrespective of the vagaries of the market. This distancing of the weaver from the market also led to the weaver now relying upon the trader for designs and even the colour schemes, which meant that he could now sell his goods only to the particular trader who supplied him with both design and market information, thus resulting in the *bandhua* (bonded) production relations. Independent weavers who felt entrapped by these production relations both lamented about this system which curtailed their freedom and left them virtually clueless about changing market trends. This has propelled significant de-skilling among these weavers as the unity of conception and execution that is a prerequisite of the independent system of production is missing in their production relations, thus alienating them from their own industry.

As the slump gathered severity with the turning of the decade and wages became harder to maintain, such trends were only further strengthened. Such was the case of forty year old Noor Mohammed, who was earlier an independent weaver but now had no choice but to close operations and became a loom-less weaver with his own former employee. Sharing his experiences, he uttered:

> "The market has experienced *bhari giravat* (heavy fall) in the past few years, due to which I faced losses in my work and all of my accumulated savings finished in the meantime. I had no choice but to close my handloom three years ago. I shifted to powerloom then but I came back to handloom as work there depends upon electricity supply, which is erratic, hence there are no regular and fixed hours of work. When I came back, I asked my former employee, who used to work for me about seven-eight year ago, to hire me on his handloom. This fall in the market has forged our dependence on the *grihastha* (middle-men) and as our savings have finished, this dependence has become even more acute."

During this time the industry underwent certain other changes as well. The most prominent being the infiltration of the power looms. While older weavers claim to have first seen power looms in Varanasi around thirty years ago in the late 1970s and early 1980s; in those days, these machines were few and far between. Their numbers have registered a massive increase only in the last 3-4 years. While earlier power looms wove only plain cloth or Indira cloth, as it was called, they did not really pose a threat to the weavers, but about eight to ten years ago, the jacquard began to be installed on the powerloom machine. With this development, it could manufacture

fabric with designs imprinted upon it. Since then, designs woven by handloom weavers have openly been imitated by powerloom owners. This has ensured profits for the owners of powerloom machines at the expense of the handloom weavers. The perceived profitability of this sector, relative to the craft of handloom weaving, has exacerbated the influx of this new technology in Varanasi and it is this penetration that has hurt the weavers the most. In such conditions, the weavers felt that handlooms were unable to compete with power looms as they finished in one day what a handloom weaver took a week to weave. Cheaper costs of production resulted in many traders promoting power looms over handlooms and cheaper powerloom fabric is popular among the customers too.

Another recent occurrence which has hurt the industry has been the considerable rise in the price of silk. In the past one year, it has risen from Rs.1500-1600 in February, 2010 to double the amount by December 2010. This has had the effect of a significant amount of production moving away from the use of this raw material in their work and diversifying to cotton, synthetic and georgette among other materials. For independent weavers, however effects of this have been more devastating. Their cost of production has risen considerably in keeping with the rising input costs, while the remuneration received has remained the same. Mohammed Dawood Ansari, an independent weaver from Bajardiha, who now makes a loss of Rs.200-300 per piece used to earn a handsome profit of Rs.60 per piece in 1974. This state of affairs led to the evaporation of his savings that he had accumulated throughout his lifetime. No longer able to sustain his business he had to close down all six of his handloom machines. He was in the process of installing powerloom machines in the hope of a better future.

Though other categories of weavers were relatively less directly affected by silk price rise, yet the slump did have the severe consequence of income stagnation and in some cases, even a decline in *mazdoori* (wages) over the past ten years. This happened as general cost of living has increased making sustenance difficult for these weavers and their families.

Close to a third of the total weavers (31%) blamed the policies of the government for their plight which had been brought about by the plummeting fortunes of the handloom weaving industry of Varanasi. In particular they blamed the policies and

politics of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), both at the federal and state level, for driving the industry to the ground. Gulzar Ahmed echoed the views of some of his fellow weaver respondents, when he stated:

> "*Karobar* (handloom industry) was doing fine under the Congress government. They had in-depth knowledge about this industry and its needs and framed good policies in accordance with the industry's wants. First Deve Gowda government's *resham niti* (silk policy) affected trade. Next the BJP government came to power and since they did not have much knowledge of the handloom sector they could not formulate appropriate policies and the industry could not thus prosper. Mostly Muslims are engaged in this trade, so the BJP government also tried to put us down. When Congress came back into power, they again showed consideration for our needs and devise policies such as the health insurance scheme and the Mahatma Gandhi Insurance Scheme to help the weavers."

These respondents thus felt that a part of the woes faced by their industry were attributable to the biased policies of the BJP government at the centre, which had deliberately tried to suppress the Varanasi handloom trade in order to curb the rising affluence of the 'Muslim' weavers of Varanasi. Such a perception led to a feeling of minority persecution among these weavers.

7.4 Impact of deteriorating conditions on the handloom weavers of Varanasi city

Accumulation of the numerous factors mentioned above had been liable for the deterioration of this ancient craft and contemporary industry in the holy city of Varanasi. The handloom weavers who form the spine of this industry and are responsible for weaving of beauteous brocades and patterns on the famed Varanasi sari have not remained aloof to the apparent deterioration of their industry. They have had to face significant consequences as a result of this horrific phenomenon. As mentioned in the previous chapters, closure of handloom machines is increasingly becoming a common sight in the city of Varanasi. This raises questions regarding the plight of the weavers who were once employed on these now-closed handlooms. The present study ventured to some extent in this domain and interviewed ten such erstwhile handloom weavers in Varanasi. Apart from these ten respondents, interviews conducted with handloom weavers revealed that some of them too had been compelled by circumstances to move out of the industry in the past, but had now

returned to their beloved parent occupation and their former way of life. The following section presents a portrait of the experiences of these two sets of respondents, beginning with those weavers who had come back to the industry after initially migrating to other occupations, followed by a look at the experiences and perceptions of former handloom weavers.

7.4.1 Comeback, re-union with old occupation (handloom weaving)

Interactions with handloom weavers revealed that at least three of these weavers had, at some point of time in the past, quit the occupation of weaving to try their hand at other occupations. This they had done in the hope of reaping better rewards in other chosen occupations to which they shifted to, but circumstances had re-united them with their old jobs.

Forty-six year old contract weaver from Bajardiha, Abdul Rashid is one such weaver – he was compelled to quit weaving about three years ago, as he was unable to find any work here. Of his experiences, he states:

> "Due to the *manda* (crisis), I received no work. For one year, my handloom was closed. Therefore I shifted to construction work as a daily wage labourer. This happened two and a half to three years ago. Even this work I did not get regularly, but I used to earn Rs.150 per day by working from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. I came back to weaving about one and a half years ago, as the work here is less physically demanding. There I had to constantly work in the sun. By that time, my son too found work in the embroidery business and earned Rs.200-300 a month, so I could come back. I came back and stated working for a new master-weaver as the previous one trouble me too much. I saw my friends getting work and came back."

Thus, he returned to the industry as work became more readily available here. Here too he earns about Rs.150 a day but works for more than 8 hours a day. His desire to come back was also fuelled by the fact that weaving was a more respectable profession than being a construction worker, in addition to the fact that operating a handloom is relatively less physically demanding.

Loom-less weaver, Nizam-ud-din, fifty-five years of age from Bajardiha, returned in early 2010 after spending nearly 10 years away. He was forced to move away after a leg injury (he fell on the wooden beam of the handloom, while attempting to fix a fault) prematurely ended his weaving career. Unable to afford proper treatment for

himself and compelled by circumstances to work, he resorted to doing odd-jobs in a restaurant and even begged for a few months. Over the years as his health improved, he came back here. He stated:

> *"Yeh kaam behtar hai. Woh majboori thi (*this work is better. That was my obligation). There I used to work twelve hours and earned Rs.40. Here I work less hours too (seven hours), am able to read my daily prayers and earn Rs.50 in a day. Work is less here too... It has not been a full year since I came here, only six to seven months have passed. I have done this work for the past ten years, as my leg was injured. I begged also. Then I worked in a hotel in Dalmandi and then at a tea stall. I left. There I used to wash utensils and clean ice. *Majboori jo na karaye* (circumstances compel you to do anything)."

Furthermore, he stated that he was satisfied with his present work. However, though he prefers the working conditions in handloom weaving compared to the work that he did for the past ten years, Nizam-ud-din states that 40 yrs ago working conditions in handlooms were much superior, work was regularly available and earnings, in real terms, were much greater. He himself used to be a prosperous independent weaver 35 years ago when the local market still existed in the city and even had people working under him.

Finally, there was the case of twenty year old loom-less weaver, Abdul Qadir, who earns Rs.4000 in Varanasi working on his handloom, stated that he went to Bhiwandi Bazaar in Mumbai six months ago in the hope of improving his earnings. He lived there for three months and worked on power looms, but left, as he did not like working in night shifts. Moreover, he felt that there expenses on food were more and so more or less the condition was the same.

Thus the major reason for returning to weaving, apart from the monetary considerations which inevitably drive such decisions, is the fact that this work is more respectable and one has more freedom over one's work here. Another important point to realise is that in all of the above three cases, the return to handloom weaving does not signify superior working conditions in this sector but is more of a testimony to the even more difficult working conditions that are prevalent in other informal sectors of the economy which they took recourse to. The latter seems to be the only domain of these weavers in case they decide to leave their present work.

7.4.2 Former handloom weavers

As stated above, ten former handloom weavers, five each from Bajardiha and Lallapura, were interviewed in the present research study. The purpose of such an interaction with former weavers was to help develop a better perspective on the reasons facilitating their withdrawal from handloom weaving. After moving away from their original occupations, these weavers had now moved onto a number of different sectors, including power loom manufacturing, construction work, rickshaw-pulling and *aari* (embroidery) work. Half of them were now currently working in the powerloom sector. All of the respondents had moved on from the handloom sector more than a year ago, with one respondent having left the trade fourteen years ago – this was the time the handloom industry had just been struck by a downward slump, with working conditions not being as severe as they later on became with the onset of the new millennium.

For all of these respondents, handloom weaving was an ancestral occupation and a part of their inheritance and thus leaving this work to move onto other occupations was a grave decision for them. Over the years, they were compelled to leave this occupation, as they were unable to bear the effects of the collapse that this industry has faced in the past decade and a half. A majority of them (80%) complained of declining earnings as being the primary reason for them leaving this sector. This happened as demand for their products declined and work became increasingly unavailable, leading to under-employment among the weavers. As 41 year old Hamid Raza, who had begun to weave at the age of seven years, explained his reasons for leaving the industry and the circumstances that compelled him to do so:

> "I used to be a contract weaver earlier and had a handloom installed at my house. Seven years ago, I did not receive any weaving work for fifteen days and did nothing during this period. I went to a number of master-weavers, asked for work but in vain. Then I went to a trader for work, he told me that since the industry is in a crisis there is no work available, but since he was getting a new house constructed for himself, he offered me the job of a daily-wage labourer at the construction site. Even though I did not know the work, he hired me. It took me a week to learn the trade.
> When I left the handloom industry, then the crisis in the industry was severe. The business had almost closed down. Even my brothers could not find work for one to two months, but they managed as they had savings to rely on, which I did not have, thus I was compelled to seek income from alternative sources.

> The handloom weaving industry in Banaras undergoes a lean period of one or two months in May and June of each year, but that year, the slump was unprecedented, goods were not getting sold at all. The situation in Bajardiha became such that people began to starve. Though work did revive after six months to a year, I stuck to my current occupation."

For some respondents, this period saw a decline in payment per piece as well – Badruddin saw his wages cut from Rs.350 to Rs.250 per sari that he wove – while for other respondents, stagnation of income earned was the reason behind their departure. This occurred in the midst of a general rise in cost of living making his earnings increasingly inadequate in meeting the expenses of his household.

While a fall in demand for Varanasi handloom products was stated as the major reason by the respondents for the declining fortunes of the industry, the increased threat posed by the ever expanding powerloom sector as well as that of rising prices of silk was also underscored by them. Main-ud-din, a powerloom worker, asserted, "*tani mehngi hone se yeh kaam band ho raha hai* (rising cost of silk yarn is the reason for the closure of handlooms)," while another powerloom worker, Ansaar Ali, maintained, "powerloom has affected handloom as they can weave two to three saris in a single day. As there is too much supply in the market, prices get depressed." Apart from these factors, for the older respondents such as Iqbal Ahmad, the end of direct market access was also felt to be a reason which was hastening its deterioration, who stated, "*aaj bhi khuli mandi hoti toh haalat behtar hoti karobar ki* (if open market existed even today, then the situation would have been better)."

However, not all of the respondents left the industry due to a failure to eke out a decent and sustainable income. Twenty-three year old Ansaar Ali, who works on a powerloom machine, left the handloom sector about a year ago despite earning a relatively handsome income of Rs.4000 a month for himself. The desire to further his career facilitated his move to the powerloom industry, as he foresaw no revival of his former sector, stating, "I have no hope of improvement in the handloom business, if I did then I would not have shifted away from it."

This statement does not just echo Ansaar Ali's own feelings, but also of the other ten respondents (and even of the majority of the handloom weavers of Varanasi today) as 90% of them did not wish for their children to join this work. They wanted their

children to be educated and take up some other work, preferably a government job or a shop of their own, but not handloom weaving.

In sharp contrast, 80% of these respondents did express a desire to return to their former craft if circumstances permitted and handlooms were revitalised, though they only saw bleak chances of such an event taking place, even if their hopes had been slightly buoyed up by the visibly improving conditions in the past one or two years. Return to this sector was wished, as there was ample regret on the part of these former weavers for being unable to preserve their ancestral occupation. This was also coupled with the fact that 50% of these respondents did not feel that their life was better off in their present occupations, relative to handloom weaving and so wished for a comeback to their previous jobs. Though none of them complained of wages in their present work, yet conditions in which they worked were a cause for unhappiness.

Even for those now employed in the powerloom sector, the desire to return to weaving was widespread. A major reason for this was the loud and shrill noise that the powerloom machine made. This resulted in headaches and a lot of stress for these workers. For those who had installed this machine in their own house, it meant having to deal with the sound twenty-four hours a day, while those who worked on such machines in twelve hour shifts complained about the frequent change from day time to night time shifts, which they felt negatively affected their body clock. Such was the case of powerloom owner, Badr-ud-din, who averred, "the noise of the powerloom machine gives me headaches and makes me irritable. As we operate this machine at night also, I get quite tired since my sleep too is affected." Similarly, Iqbal Ahmed, 50 years, who had just installed a powerloom machine three months ago at his home, expressed his disapproval of his current work in comparison to handloom weaving. He referred to it as:

> "*Shaitani kam* (devil's work) – we have to work like an ox even at night. If we do not do so, then we will not be able to earn and benefit from this work. We are doing this work only out of our desperation. I hope to return to the handloom one day."

People working in other sectors too felt that working on the handloom was infinitely better than their present occupations. Forty-six year old rickshaw-puller, Mohammed Bashir, who has been doing this work for the past eleven years, stated:

> "People view rickshaw-pulling as a lowly occupation and often speak rudely and act forcefully with rickshaw-pullers, but I somehow tolerate it, though I feel distressed with such behaviour. In contrast, handloom weaving is a 'kingly' pursuit, where one can work at their own pace as per their convenience. There is discipline in the life of a handloom weaver too; all activities including eating, drinking and bathing are carried out properly in accordance with the laws of nature. This ensures the good health of a weaver, whereas now I feel physically weak after pulling a rickshaw for twelve hours a day."

The above account is a testimony to the daily agony and humiliation experienced by Mohammed Bashir in his current line of work. This anguish was further heightened by the regret that he felt for leaving his beloved occupation of handloom weaving, which he felt was more reputable and more amenable to good health than his present occupation of rickshaw-pulling. Similarly, Hamid Raza, who had left this work seven years ago and become a construction worker, too missed the freedom that he enjoyed in his work whilst he was a weaver. Earlier he could regulate his own work hours and even sit and finish his work at night, if need be. However, here he has a fixed time shift and if he ever has emergency work of his own, he cannot even go away for a single hour. If he does, then his entire day's labour and salary is gone. In addition to this, he cannot even wear decent clothes as they get easily spoilt in his present line of work.

These accounts do represent certain wistfulness on the part of these former weavers, who do still yearn to return to handloom weaving, which is more than a mere occupation for these weavers, but a way of life. These view-points also make it clear that, despite recent improvements in working conditions, wage levels in the country have become so depressed in weaving that it is unable to compete with other informal work sectors in this regard. It is indicative of the depths to which this industry has plummeted today that weavers are being forced out of this work, as they are unable to sustain themselves and their families from earnings through their occupation. The fact that hardly any weaver or former weaver is willing to wish such a job for their children is also a pointer to this fact.

A point to note is that all of these former handloom weavers left their occupation and moved into a diverse range of sectors. All these sectors belong to the informal sector of the economy and require no special set of skills to gain entry and similar to

weaving, are characterised by lack of social security, poor conditions of work, insecurity of tenure and low remuneration, among others.

7.5 Conclusion

The lives of ordinary weavers are inextricably linked to the fate of the handloom weaving industry which provides employment thousands of such workers all across the district of Varanasi. A crisis in the industry would invariably impact these weavers, their working conditions and remunerations received by them. This has been abundantly exemplified in the cases of the aforementioned respondents, for whom circumstances deteriorated to such an extent that they had to leave the industry altogether in a bid to ensure their survival as it was no longer capable of providing then with either regular employment or a decent living wage.

CHAPTER EIGHT
CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The handloom weaving industry of Varanasi is largely a home-work industry and a part of the informal sector economy of the country. Low wages, sporadic work availability, an extended network of intermediaries, sustained crisis in the industry due to threat from the ever expanding powerloom sector, apathetic administration and lack of unionisation among the weavers' engaged in this industry have led to a pitiful condition of these largely poor weavers.

The aim of the present research study was to gain an understanding of the health status and concerns of the handloom weavers of Varanasi, as perceived by them, and place these concerns within the ambit of their living and working environment. The study further endeavoured to develop a perspective of their socio-economic conditions and the combined influence of these aforementioned factors on the health conditions of these handloom weavers as well as identify the ways by which they address their perceived health problems, in relation with the existing health service facilities.

The present study was conducted in the city of Varanasi, in the wards of Bajardiha in south and Lallapura in central Varanasi. Field work for the study was divided into three parts, beginning with a brief reconnaissance visit in September, 2010 for developing a basic understanding of the process of handloom weaving and to gain familiarity with the field. This was followed by a visit in the October of 2010 for carrying out a pilot study and finalisation of the research tools to be used in the study. The final field work (for collection of primary data) commenced in the final week of October, 2010 and extended till December, 2010 and was held in two parts.

The tools used for data collection included interview schedules, interview guidelines and an observation checklist. Secondary sources too were utilised for data collection including government reports, newspaper articles, bibliographical studies and reports of non-governmental organisations on handloom weavers.

In the present research study, primary data was collected from twenty-nine handloom weavers and ten erstwhile handloom weavers (now engaged in other occupations). All three categories of handloom weavers (independent, contract and loom-less weavers) were interviewed for the purpose of data collection. The respondents were further sub-divided into various age categories (18-30 years, 30-50 years and 50 years and above). Seven in-depth interviews were also conducted with handloom weavers – two from Bajardiha and five from Lallapura. Key informant interviews with master weavers, government officials and doctors were also conducted.

The basic findings of the study are as follows:-

- Most of the handloom weavers (82.6%) in our study belonged to the Muslim community of Momin Ansaris, while the remainder of the respondents were Hindus, belonging to the Other Backward Castes (OBC) category. Illiteracy was widespread among the respondents, with 44.8% having never attended a school and another 20.6% having studied only till the primary level.

- Monthly income earned from handloom weaving was Rs.2500 or less for 65.7% of the total respondents in the study. Median monthly income for the total respondents was Rs.2000. While it was as low as Rs.1800 for a loom-less weaver, median monthly income for an independent weaver was significantly higher at Rs.3000. Low income levels earned from handloom weaving prompted 86.2% of the weaver households to seek alternative avenues for substantiating of household income. While female members generally sought employment in other home-work occupations such as embroidering and sari-cutting, with monthly remunerations aggregating as low as Rs.300-500, male members generally found employment in the powerloom sector, where remuneration levels were significantly higher.

- An inevitable consequence of low earning levels of weaver households is high levels of indebtedness, with almost all of the respondents reporting indebtedness. Non-institutional sources of credit, including employers and friends and relatives were the primary sources of credit for these respondents. Another outcome of low income earned was avoidance of expenditure on

essential items, including food, clothing and health in a bid to maintain household expenses within income levels.

- Over ninety percent of the total respondents in the study owned a house of their own. While 58.6% respondents owned a *pucca* house, the rest lived either in a *katcha* or semi-*pucca* house. Access to basic amenities such as water, toilet and electricity was widespread amongst the respondents' households. The condition of these houses was, by and large, poor with many of the houses in a state of disrepair and some on the verge of collapse. Houses serve as the site of work for these home-workers (with the exception of loom-less weavers), thus inadequate ventilation and poor lighting conditions negatively influence the working conditions of these home-workers.

- Most of the handloom weavers included in the study (89.7%) owned handloom machines, including a few of the loom-less weavers. Although the average number of handlooms owned per respondent in the study was 3.6, all of these machines were not in operation at the time of the study. A number of them had closed down in the previous decade and a half. Thus, the average number of machines, still in operation, was 2.6 handlooms per respondent.

- The average number of hours worked in a day by the handloom weavers was nine hours. The workers usually work during the day time, but during the summer season, the extreme heat coupled with the lack of ventilation, results in frequent breaks during work hours. They thus compensate by stretching work hours till late evening or begin early in the morning. They are engrossed in their occupation for 20-30 days a month. Handloom weaving is a perennial industry, thus work continues all year round. Periodic fluctuations in demand affecting work availability occur are a yearly phenomenon.

- The industry has been plagued with rising prices of silk yarn, which have doubled in the past one year. Apart from influencing the profitability of operations (particularly in case of the independent weavers), as rise in the cost of the finished product has not been commensurate with the rise in input costs,

it has resulted in a perceptible shift away from the use of pure silk to other materials such as artificial silk, synthetic and even cotton, in production.

- Payments in the handloom weaving industry in Varanasi are usually made on a per-piece basis. While the contract and loom-less workers are paid in cash immediately after the submission of the finished product, the independent weavers are usually paid on a monthly basis by their traders. Payment is made both via cash as well as post-dated cheque system. The full payment is usually not disbursed; some part of it is with-held by the trader and released at a latter date. For any mistakes made in the process of weaving, money is deducted from the earnings of the independent weaver, though the same may not be necessary in case of contract and loom-less weavers.

- The average wages earned per day by the respondents from handloom weaving was a paltry Rs.87.9. The per day wage of the independent weavers was Rs.109.4 and was significantly higher than that of other categories of weavers – contract weavers earned Rs.75.2, while that of loom-less workers was Rs.78.2 per day.

- A majority of the sample of handloom weavers (76.9%) expressed discontentment with their working conditions. Low wages, coupled with long working hours and lack of regular availability of work were the primary reasons for such unhappiness. Due to such factors, 65.5% wanted to move away from their traditional occupation and unsurprisingly, did not wish or their children to continue with their ancestral occupation.

- The deteriorating working conditions in the handloom weaving industry of Varanasi have driven a number of weavers to leave this wok and move onto other occupations in the past. Unavailability of regular work, under-employment and decline in wages were cited as the major reasons by former handloom weavers for leaving their original occupations. Though working conditions in handloom weaving were perceived to be superior than their present conditions of work, in occupations as diverse as powerloom, rickshaw-

pulling and construction work, among others, yet relatively low wages prevented them from returning.

- In the present study, 69% of the respondents consumed, on an average, just two meals a day. Driven by financial crunches, on occasion they were compelled to skip an additional meal a day. The food was too insufficient to meet the daily calorie intake of the respondents. There was considerably less of fruits and meat in their diet. Their diet was largely dependent on cheaper alternatives like *chana* or *matar* dal.

- The reported occupational hazards commonly witnessed are pain in the back, knee and other joints. Strain on the eyes and tuberculosis were other common complaints. Stress and anxiety, especially among independent weavers, due to adverse working conditions were also reported. The health problems faced by the weaver households in the past one year and as reported by them include fevers (including common cold and cough), weakness and anaemia, tuberculosis and others. Accidents and injuries too were reported by them.

- For treatment of illnesses faced by the weavers and their family members, private hospitals were the first choice of treatment. These were followed by charitable and government health service institutions for seeking of treatment. High treatment costs in private institutions were a major problem faced by the weaver respondents, for which a large number had to incur loans and some even had to sell household assets. A few weavers used the ICICI health insurance scheme to pay for treatment.

From the above findings of our study, the distressful living, working and socio-economic conditions of the handloom weavers of Varanasi are amply evident. The following section attempts to discuss the congruence of the broader social, economic and political forces which have resulted in such a plight for the handloom weavers of Varanasi, as is witnessed from our study.

The occupation of handloom weaving in India is four thousand years old. Silk brocades of Varanasi occupy a central place in the rich and distinguished history of this craft-based industry in India. Handloom weaving in Varanasi is today the premium industry in the city, employing over half of the total working population engaged in the manufacturing sector in Varanasi. Despite its pre-eminence as a significant generator of employment, the very existence of the industry is being threatened and its future seems bleak and uncertain.

The age-old industry in Varanasi is dying a slow death, thereby imperilling the sustenance and livelihoods and consequently the health and well-being of hundreds of thousands of handloom weavers engaged in it. Wages earned by people are a primary determinant of their purchasing power ability. In other words, economic power is an essential precursor of health as it directly impinges upon the capability of a family to be able to able to afford a well-balanced diet. Purchasing power ability also affects the ability to afford a decent house, access to basic amenities including clean drinking water and sanitary facilities, clothing, health care and education, among others. These factors, working in tandem, conspire to impair the productive capacity of workers, further entrapping them in a vicious cycle of lower income levels and worsening nutritional and health conditions. In our study, though most of the respondents owned a house of their own and had access to facilities like electricity and water, yet the poor quality of these facilities (living in *katcha* or *semi-pucca* houses, with collapsing walls and broken window-panes), sewage water often seeping into pipes supplying drinking water that work against the health of these weavers.

Bearing the severe consequences of such of a decline are the home-workers of Varanasi, who constitute a part of the unorganised sector labour-force of the country. Moreover, the nature of their work being such – the process of production is confined to the homes of the workers – that not only does it isolate these workers from each other, but also renders them invisible to the rest of the society, including the government machinery. The sub-contractual nature of production relations, based on the putting-out system of production, that is rampant in this industry today is responsible for lack of assurance of work (labour being doled out work as per the needs of the business and demand cycles) and adverse working conditions. Due to such erratic working culture, they become victims of insecurity and abuse. The

exploitative nature of their working conditions is further aggravated by vagueness on the issue of 'who exactly constitutes the employer' of these sub-contracted home-workers, within the rather large chain of hierarchically placed intermediaries, often beginning with a firm in a first world country and ending up in the home-worker. Absence of trade unions to vocalise the distressful nature of their working relations further intensifies the woes of these workers – this added to the inability to identify the employer and the unavailability of suitable employment opportunities further exacerbates the powerlessness experienced by them in challenging these conditions. Availability of cheap surplus labour, lack of access to institutional credit (consequent dependence upon employers for loans) and a perpetual state of indebtedness (almost all of the weavers in our study reported indebtedness, ranging from Rs.5000 to even Rs.1,00,000) too makes them prey to exploitative business practices.

Being members of the informally employed workforce in the country further disadvantages them, as it excludes them from the compass of protective government legislation, thereby making them more prone to exploitation. For instance, the benefit of social security schemes (available to the small percentage of formal sector employees within the rather vast Indian workforce) such as old age pensions, maternity benefits, paid leaves, medical benefits and housing rent allowances, among others are deprived to them. In such circumstances, any injuries incurred by the workers (including those brought about as a consequence of being engaged in relatively hazardous and unsafe working environment), are left to be dealt with by the worker and his family alone. Being outside of the scope of Workmen's Compensation Act 1923 means that they need to devise their own means to deal with the losses thus incurred. These losses are multiple, as they just do not entail a loss of health due to injury and subsequent high costs of treatment in dealing with it, but also a loss of wages for the corresponding period of absence. This constitutes a blow for the weavers and their families as their income levels often rest on the precipice of subsistence and sink even beneath this level with an episode of illness. They thus attempt to rush back to long and hard hours of work without allowing themselves sufficient time to recover and recuperate from the adverse affects of ill-health, thus further harming their bodies in an effort to eke out a meagre livelihood. Such strenuous working conditions (including an average work day of nine hours, as reported in our study) resulted in a high rate of occupational morbidities being

reported by the respondents, including anxiety and stress being almost daily accompaniments of life in handloom weaving, particularly for independent weavers.

The government too has failed to pay heed to the precarious employment conditions of these home-workers. Driven by neo-liberal economic ideals, the New Textile Policy (NTP), 1985 formulated by the government, focused on maximisation of cloth productivity and output as its primary goal for the textile sector of the country, rather than laying any special emphasis on the handloom sector, which employs the bulk of workers within the textile sector. Thus while the powerloom sector has enjoyed the tacit support of the administrative machinery, the handloom sector has suffered in return. Its designs and products are being 'cannabilised' by powerloom sector – even the Handloom Reservation Act, 1985 reserving products for handloom production has remained on paper. A passive government thus shares responsibility for declining wages and increasing miseries of handloom workers in the country, including in Varanasi.

An increasingly globalised world, though a boon for many, has not been particularly kind to the Varanasi handloom weavers. Removal of quantitative restrictions on silk import and reduction of duty on fabrics (under the ambit of Non-Agricultural Market Access negotiations of the WTO) has led to a flooding of cheaper and lower quality fabric into the market. This has exacerbated the displacement being experienced by the weavers, as their product is not only being falsely replaced in the market but it is also facing demand reductions, as customers increasingly complain about the poor quality of these spurious products. Such displacement is visible from the considerably lesser number of operational handloom machines as against the number of handloom machines owned by these weavers (shown in the previous section). Similarly, rising prices of silk, especially in the course of the last one year, have not only led to a downgrading in the quality of raw materials being used in production (which also affects the demand base of the product) but has resulted in rising costs of production. Sub-contractual nature of production has meant that weavers are burdened with the overhead costs of production and in current circumstances, many are unable to recover production costs. While many among the younger generation of weavers are now altogether leaving the occupation and even migrating to other cities in search of better opportunities, many others, especially the older generation of workers, are

compelled to work in such drudgery and increase dependence on contractors, leading to de-skilling and increased alienation of this community from its own craft. Suicides, starvation deaths, instances of malnourishment, reports of selling blood and rising cases of tuberculosis have all been witnessed and reported from among the handloom weavers' of Varanasi.

Despite working and living in such depressive conditions, with little means of being able to even afford three decent meals in a day (as corroborated by close to three-fourth of the respondents), let alone an education for their children and with it, opportunities for advancement, yet the government seems to have remained apathetic and even aloof from their problems. Though average wage earnings of handloom weavers (as a whole) are less than the urban Below Poverty Line (BPL) level – in our study, Rs.87.9 was the average wage earned by the respondents from their occupation – yet severe under-reporting of poverty exists. Thus as social security schemes and interventions of the government have become more targeted and focused, these weavers are being increasingly left out of the purview of these schemes and with no avenues to protest, they have no choice but to suffer in silence.

Thus the combination of economic, social and political factors has worked to ensure that handloom weavers remained trapped in a life of gloom and ill-health. Being engaged in productive activity is essential for subsistence and today almost the entire industry of handloom weaving is being unjustly deprived of opportunities for such meaningful productive engagement, which have serious consequences for the health and well-being of present generation of weavers and their families, but also for the next generation of such workers. In conclusion, it is worth recalling that 'the economy exists for the welfare of the people and people do not exist for the welfare of the economy.'

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Annexure 1

Interview Schedule for weavers

- Name –
- Address –
- Age –
- Religion –
- Caste –
- Education – illiterate/primary/high school/senior secondary/higher/any other
- Bank account – no account/ bank/ post office/ any other
- Insurance – yes/ no
- Monthly income –
- Sources of earning – entirely weaving/ others sources of income
- If yes, what are the other sources of earning –
- Do you have a *bunkar* card – yes/no

Living conditions

- House – Own/rented/any other

  Pucca house/kachcha/mixed/jhuggi
- No. of members in the family –
- Do you have a bathroom/toilet in your house – yes/ no
- Do you get a source of water in your house – tap/hand-pump/any other
- If no, then where do you get water from –
- Electricity connection – yes/ no
- Do you have a ration card – yes/ no
- Does your family have a BPL card – yes/ no
- Have you ever applied for a BPL card – yes/no

Occupation

- No. of years in the occupation –
- Age at which started working –
- Place of work – home/employer (grihasta) /any other
- No. of looms at home –
- No. of looms operational –

- Reason for choosing this work – personal decision/ pressure of family members/ pride in this work (age-old occupation) / no other choice/ any other

Working conditions

- No. of working days in a month –
- No. of hours spent working on the loom daily –
- No. of days taken to weave a sari/ other product –
- Payment received per piece –
- Is payment done at the time of delivering the saris or delayed –
- Is money ever deducted from your payment for various reasons – yes/no
- If yes, please specify –
- Is your income sufficient in meeting all your monthly expenses – yes/no
- Are you currently in debt – yes/no
- Reason for indebtedness –
- If yes, then whom did you approach for a loan –
- Do you pay interest on your loan and how much –
- Is raw material readily available in the market and accessible – yes/no
- Is work available equally throughout the year – yes/no
- If no, then please specify the lean and the busy months of the year –
- Changes perceived in the industry in the past few years –
- Reasons behind these changes – competition from power-looms/ role of gaddidars/ declining demand of your products/ government policy/ rising price of raw materials/ lack of market access/ any other
- Schemes being implemented by the government for handloom weavers – provision of raw materials at subsidised rates/ insurance scheme for weavers/ cluster scheme/ any other
- Are you a beneficiary of any these schemes – yes/no
- Are you satisfied with your current occupation – yes/ no
- If not, reasons for dissatisfaction –
- If no, then have you made any attempts to change your line of work – yes/no
- If not, then reasons for continuing with weaving – poverty/ illiteracy/ lack of skills required for other jobs/ lack of alternatives/ any other reason
- Do you know anybody who has left weaving to take up an alternative profession
- If yes, then – relative/ neighbour/ any other
- Would you wish for your children to become weavers – yes/ no/ any other

Co-operative members

- In which year did you join the co-operative –
- Has your co-operative ever taken a collective loan –
- Was it able to repay it –
- Are you aware of any government policies specially instituted for co-operatives
- What benefits did you get from the co-operative –
- What changes have you observed in your working conditions post your membership of the co-operative –

Perception of health and utilisation of health services

- The number of meals consumed by your family per day –
- Contents of the meal -
- Health problems faced by you/ family members attributable to your work –
- Health illnesses suffered by you or your family in the past six months –
- Where did you go for treatment – self-treatment/ traditional practitioners/ government/ private practitioner
- Were you satisfied with the service provided –
- If not, why –
- If go to private practitioner, then why do you prefer it over government health services - far-away from home/ long wait for treatment/ lack of availability of medicines/ availability and behaviour of the medical personnel/ any other
- Pay for the treatment – self/ relatives and neighbours/ employer/ other source
- What are the problems faced in accessing health services – far-away from home/ long wait for treatment/ availability of medical personnel/ behaviour of the medical personnel/ cost of treatment/ any other
- Avoidance or delay in treatment due to any aforementioned reason – yes/no

Annexure 2

Interview guide for weavers

1. **Living conditions**

- Housing
- Water and sanitation
- Electricity
- Ration card
- Family members – earning patterns (remittances from members who may have migrated, pooling of income or separate household management, pooled kitchens)

2. **Working conditions**

- Entry into the vocation
- Key processes in weaving and responsibilities of the members of the family in performing various tasks related to weaving
- Association with the profession

3. **Trade factors - Gaddidars/ grihastha, raw materials and local markets**

- Phenomenon of sub-contracting
- Affect of this on work
- Dealing with the middlemen
- Raw materials – Chinese and Bangalore silk
- Rising prices of silk yarn
- Lack of local market access for the weavers

4. **Recent changes that the industry is experiencing**

- Changes in recent years in the industry
- Effect of these changes on your work and livelihood/ income
- Growth of power-looms
- Government support to power-looms and hand-looms

- Regular availability of work
- Alternatives sought, if any, to make ends meet during such periods of unemployment
- Feelings about your work
- Attempts at shifting vocations to an altogether new occupation and barriers faced
- Continuation of your children into this occupation
- Ending/crisis of an age-old tradition

5. Remuneration and expenditure

- Income (busy and lean seasons)
- Mode of payment
- Sufficiency of the income in meeting expenses
- Major household expenses
- Expenses curtailed during periods of reduced income
- Loans and debt

6. Government schemes and initiatives

- Bunkar card
- Gandhi Swasthya Bima Yojna
- ICICI Lombard Health insurance Scheme
- Integrated Handloom Cluster Programme
- UPICA *resham* card

7. Co-operative members

- Expectations from the co-operative
- Association, experience and feelings about the co-operative
- Improvement in working conditions since becoming a member of the co-operative

8. Workers union

- Organisation of weavers
- Role of government in promotion of handloom weaving
- Suggestions to improve conditions in the industry

9. Health

- Meals/ food per day
- Health illnesses
- Health concerns due to weaving
- History of the health problem
- Mode of treatment
- Financing of treatment
- The response of the health system towards their health needs
- Accessing health service system

Annexure 3

Interview schedule for former handloom weavers

- Name –
- Address –
- Age –
- Religion –
- Caste –
- Education – illiterate/primary/high school/senior secondary/higher/any other
- Monthly income – own/entire family
- Sources of earning – current occupation/ handloom weaving/ any other

Occupation

- Current occupation –
- No. of years working in this field –
- No. of years since you have left handloom weaving –
- Reasons for choosing this occupation –
- Reasons for leaving handloom weaving – poor wages/ lack of availability of work (under-employment)/ unemployment/ any other reason
- Do u regret leaving handloom weaving –
- Prior to your leaving handloom weaving, changes perceived in the industry –
- Impact upon your working conditions – decline in wages/ unemployment or underemployment/ any other
- To what do you attribute these changes – competition from power-looms/ role of gaddidars/ declining demand of your products/ government policy/ rising price of raw materials/ lack of market access/ any other
- Do you feel that you are better off in this work than handloom weaving –
- If yes, then why – better wages/ better working conditions/ availability of work on a regular basis/ any other reason
- If given an opportunity (if the conditions of work improve in weaving), would you like to go back to the handloom sector –
- Would you wish for your children to become – handloom weavers/ current profession/ any other
- Do you know of anyone else who has left the handloom sector to take up an alternative occupation –
- If yes, then who –

Annexure 4

Interview guide for master-weavers/traders

- Name
- Address
- No. of years as a trader
- Area do they source their products from
- Role as trader
- Monthly earnings
- Commission per piece
- Mode of payment to weavers

➢ **Recent years in the market**

- Economic crisis
- Demand for saris/ products
- Ending of local market in Varanasi
- Role of powerloom and competition faced
- Migration of weavers from the traditional handloom industry
- Surat silk weaving industry
- Diversification of the traditional sari industry
- Weavers' protests

➢ **Suggestions**

- Future of the industry
- Role of the government in improving the fortunes of the industry
- Suggestions to improve/revive the industry

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