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Economic Empowerment of Tribal Women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh through Traditional Weaving: Pinon-Khadi

Satish Chakma¹ & Dr. M. Meera²

¹Research Scholar, Centre for Women's Studies, University of Mysore, Mysuru

²Research Guide & Professor, Centre for Women's Studies & Institute of Development Studies, University of Mysore

Abstract:

This study examines the economic empowerment of Chakma tribal women in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts through traditional Pinon-Khadi weaving. It explores the cultural significance of handloom weaving and its role in preserving indigenous identity, traditions, and livelihoods. Despite prolonged political instability, traditional weaving continues to contribute to household income and community development. The study adopts a mixed-method approach, drawing primarily on secondary data from books, journals, surveys, newspapers, websites, and other publications. It highlights the potential of traditional weaving to promote women's economic independence, cultural preservation, and sustainable development.

Keywords: Tribal women, waist loom, economic empowerment, tribal culture, Chittagong Hill Tracts

Introduction

Handicraft or handloom is the traditional small cottage industry in Bangladesh where a significant proportion of workers and entrepreneurs involved. The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh has turned into peak point which in the last quarter of the 21st century remained out of focus due to the insurgency between the indigenous rebel group and state government which ended in 1997

through the "CHT Peace Agreement". During the insurgency period, tourism has been completely suspended and this region remained out of access by tourists. Hence, the small cottage industry specially the handloom sector gone through the dark phases in the business industry. The cloud has been cleared through the historical peace agreement in order to establish the tranquillity in the

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decades long volatile region. In addition to that, a study conducted by (Gosh & Akter, 2005; Raihan, 2010; Patil, 2012) to find out the reasons why the wheel is spiralling slowly and they have identified shortage of working capital, high cost of material, lack of organizing capability, insufficient technology and efficiency and lack of proper policy support etc. Additionally, lack of government attention, shortage of fund, gradual increment of yarn, dies and other necessities are highlighted. This sector holds the glorious past, challenging present and insecure future and the weaver expect the proper channel intervention from government in order to cope up from the shock (Rahmatulla et al., 2010).

The engagement of the tribal women in weaving is an old age art transfer from generation to generation and dress they made leads to long-standing tradition, cultures and heritage of the tribal people in CHTs and north- eastern region on India (Devi, 2013). In CHTs, tribal people produce yarn from cotton cultivated in *Jhum* plot who played a significant role in respect of their culture, religion, and economic transformation from pre-historic period (Dewan, 2014). In this region, there are around 500 handicraft centres in CHTs earn 45-50 lakh taka every day. The traders from Chittagong and Comilla city come to CHTs to buy handicraft including tourist; but the indigenous product generally prefer to buy by tourist in order to keep memory in the name of visit in CHTs. Several handicraft traders opined

that this sector is working efficiently to mitigate the unemployment. In this context, Ratna Tripura of Bayan Textile in Khagrachhari opined that “most of the product are made by local indigenous people. The business is helping to become financially independent”. The weaver operates the small and medium handloom enterprise and income varies remarkably. Islam et al., (2013) remarks that the income of small and large handloom is extensive than the medium handloom units. They, further, find that small scale handloom sector obtain help from cottage industry and large-scale industry gets benefit from own strive or production. However, the medium scale of handloom industry obtained neither benefit.

Small Cottage Industry Corporation of Khagrachhari (SCICK) estimated that one lakh of the weavers is engaged to produce lungi, gamchha, scarf, chaddar, sari, pinon, thami, bedsheets, shawls and decoration piece from 500 villages and 50,000 waist looms and 60 handloom enterprises are working in CHTs estimated by the Bangladesh Small Cottage Industry Corporation (BSCIC). However, thousand families depend on the weaving sector for their livelihoods. Konika Chakma opined that 1,100 taka she earns every 12 hours and a couple express around 15,000 earn every month. In addition to that, former principal of Khagrachhari College Dr. Sudin Kumar Chakma remarks that “tradition is what guides the people of this area. It gives them financial stability and they are able

to live in peace". The women of tribal community are cited as the guardian of culture at home and their respective society (Jaim, 2015). This sector is affected by various factors such as shortage of capital, high rate of raw material procurement, lack of organising capability, inadequate technology and efficiency, lack of policy support and major forces which are bitterly hit the loom industry (Islam & Hossain, 2012). India has been bearing long standing glory of handloom and Assam is the highest production state in India. A study conducted by Dutta (2015) on the impact of handloom industry in Gerjaipam Village of Assam. She estimated that Assam contribute to 13 lakhs of handloom among 28 lakhs looms in India which is 46.43 percent. The contribution of India through handloom varies state by state. However, Assam alone contribute to employment through this sector (38.6%), West Bengal (17.3%), Tamil Nadu (8%), Andhra Pradesh (8%) and Uttar Pradesh (5.6%) respectively. These five states collectively provide the fourth-fifth (77.8%) of workforce in handloom sector (Patil, 2015).

Objectives

The tribal women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh play a noteworthy role through their weaving skill of traditional dress *Pinon-Khadi* for their own use or commercial purposes that provide economic assistance to their concerned family. The following

objectives have been taken into consideration in this study-

1. To study the handloom sector in Bangladesh
2. To analyse the economic contributions of Chakma women in the weaving sector
3. To discuss the socio-cultural significance of the traditional dress of tribal women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Methodology

Handloom sector is the prime rural based small cottage industry in Bangladesh. It is considered to be the second largest employment sector after agriculture (Raihan, 2010; Devi, 2013) where a significant number of workers and entrepreneurs involved. The secondary data has been used collected from the government and non-government publications, journals, website and books etc. However, the major focus has been given to backstrap or waist loom that produced by the tribal women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh particularly Chakma women who has been engaged with this sector since generations and showed the path to gain economic advantage by producing pinon-khadi (a typical ordinary Chakma dress) followed by the traditional weaving method which is embedded intricate motifs and designs.

Result and discussion

In Bangladesh, there are various types of looms in operation by the artisans. The Jamdani sari is the glory of Bangladesh. After the industrial revolution of 18th

century led by the powerful machine affected handicraft industry severely. In the study of Vyshnavi and Nair (2017) reveal the esteemed of handloom industry. Though the government of India launched a campaign to promote the small-scale industry through “Make in India”, but it does not reflect equally. Thus, the traditional handicraft gradually engulfed by the garments industry.

Operational Handloom in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, there are around 2,90,282 handlooms in rural and urban areas. In rural areas, handloom industry is still surviving and garments sector dominating in urban area. It is, therefore, seen that 1,16,117 handlooms are running from 2,90,282 which is almost 40 percent.

Among the handloom, backstrap or waist loom are highest in number contributes to 1,19,381 (41.13%). The highest number of backstrap or waist looms are seen in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh engaged by tribal women. The second largest production is the semi-automatic loom 75,518 (26.02%) and third largest is the pit loom 71,968 (24.8%).

In 2018, 47.474 crore meters of fabric produced which procure 28% of demand in Bangladesh. It contributes about 0.10% of the national GDP. Hence, handloom sector is considered the 3rd largest economic sector after agriculture, and 2nd in rural areas after agriculture.

Table 1: Number of Handlooms in Bangladesh

Type of looms	Total number of looms
Pit	71968
Semi-automatic	75518
Banarasi	3822
Jamdani	10053
Backstrap loom	119381
Frame	5454
Satranji	285
Power loom	3801
Total looms	290282

Source: Bangladesh Handloom Board (2021-2022)

Periodical Status of Handlooms

The handloom sector of Bangladesh overcomes various difficult phases in several decades. During the time of 1941, it came under the supervision of Textile Commissioner of India estimated total 85,478 looms and in post-independence

period of India in 1951, within 10 years the number of looms increased 1,83,251 to 2,50,000 respectively. Similarly, after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the number of looms increased to 4,28,000 in 1974 followed by 5,05,556 that indicate a significant development of handloom sector in 2003.

Table 2: Number of Looms in Different Years

Year	Source	No. of looms
1941	Textile Commissioner of India	85478
1951	Population Census-1951	183251
1953	Director of Industries	250000
1956	Fact Finding Committee	250000
1974	Bangladesh Jaty Samabaya Shilpa Samiti Ltd.	428000
1978	Bangladesh Handloom Board (BHB)	428000
1987	Bangladesh Institute of development studies (BIDS)	425310
1990	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistic (BBS)	514456
2003	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistic (BBS)	505556

Source: Handloom Census (2003)

Operational and Non-operational Handloom

In 2003, Bangladesh government conducted a nation-wide survey under the Ministry of Textile and Jute in order to find out the total number of looms in division wise. Unfortunately, 2 divisions (Rangpur and Mymensingh) have not been considered in the survey and estimated around 5,05,556 comprised by 1,83,512 units. However, the highest number of units found in Chittagong division ranges from 92,095 followed by 32,968 in Rajshahi, 30,558 in Dhaka and

23,379 in Khulna respectively. Similarly, the highest number of looms are found 1,95,749 in Rajshahi division followed by 1,56,829 in Chittagong and 1,05,467 in Dhaka division. In context of the operational looms, Chittagong division ranked high from 73,988 followed by Dhaka 71,015 and Rajshahi 35,668 respectively. On the other hand, the non-operational looms are found to be the highest in Chittagong division 82,841 followed by Rajshahi 60,081 and Dhaka 34,452.

Table 3: Division-wise Operational and Non-operational Handloom

Division	Total units	Total Looms	Operational Status			
			Operational	percent	Non-operational	Percent
Barisal	2311	4741	1589	33.5	3152	66.5
Chittagong	92095	156829	73988	47.2	82841	52.8
Dhaka	30558	105467	71015	67.3	34452	32.7
Khulna	23379	37855	26038	68.8	11817	31.2
Rajshahi	32968	195749	35668	18.2	60081	30.7
Sylhet	3201	4915	3553	72.3	1362	27.7
Bangladesh	183512	505556	211851	41.9	193705	38.3

Source: Handloom Census (2003)

Male and Female Employment in Handloom Sector:

Handloom is the second largest employment sector in rural areas after the agriculture. This sector is being operated by the male and female or collectively. However, the highest number of male engagements are found in 1986 comprised by 6,48,865 (72.7%) and 2,44,160

(27.3%) by female. In 1987 the percentage of male significantly decreased from 72.7 percent to 55.7 percent and conversely, the percentage of female increased from 27.3 percent to 45.0 percent. It signifies that the female engagement in handloom sector is gradually increasing from 27.3 percent in 1986 to 46.8 percent in 2003.

Table 4: Employment in Handloom Industry by Sex

Items	Years and percentage							
	1986	%	1987	%	1990	%	2003	%
Male	648865	72.7	443135	55	571765	55.7	472367	53.2
Female	244160	27.3	362565	45	455642	44.3	415748	46.8
Total	893034	100	805700	100	1027407	100	888115	100

Source: Handloom Census (2003)

Rural and Urban based Handloom Establishment

Cottage industry is the old age economic sector in Bangladesh provides maximum employment for workers and entrepreneurs. This sector incorporated with the rural and urban areas in order to establish a strong fabric production sector. In this context, the highest number of looms in rural areas are found in Rajshahi

1,90,259 (40.8%) followed by Chittagong 1,32,806 (28.5%), Dhaka 1,00,584 (21.6%) and others. On the contrary, the highest number of looms in urban areas found in Chittagong 24,023 (61.9%) followed by Rajshahi 5,490 (14.1%), Dhaka 4,883 (12.6%) and Khulna 4,097 (10.6) respectively. Thus, the overall rural area contributes to 92.3 percent against urban area 7.7 percent respectively.

Table 5: Distribution of Looms by Urban and Rural Area

Division	Rural		Urban	
	Looms	%	Looms	%
Barisal	4419	0.9	322	0.8
Chittagong	132806	28.5	24023	61.9
Dhaka	100584	21.6	4883	12.6
Khulna	33758	7.2	4097	10.6
Rajshahi	190259	40.8	5490	14.1
Sylhet	4786	1.0	129	0.3
Bangladesh	466612	100.0	38944	100.0

Source: Handloom Census (2003)

Handlooms Units in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

The Chittagong Hill Tracts located in south eastern part of Bangladesh comprised of three hilly districts where majority of the tribal people residing in rural areas, and cultivation of wet rice and *jhum* cultivation (a typical cultivation) are the chief sources of livelihood. Nowadays, due to the unabated migration from plain district into CHT, the cultivable space shrunken remarkably. Despite the native people both male and female are closely associated with the cultivation; they cannot produce for the whole year from the *jhum* cultivation. Hence, in order to supplement the additional food, women nowadays engaged in weaving waist loom. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, it is pertinent to identify the three categories of

handloom ownership units in the rural areas for example family, partnership and co-operative ownership. Rangamati district possess the highest number of total units 17,291 (33.6%) followed by Khagrachhari 16,072 (33.6%) and Bandarban 14,538 (30.4%) respectively. In case of looms, simultaneously, Rangamati district ranked high 24,128 (39.3%), followed by Khagrachhari 19,887 (32.4%) and Bandarban 17,374 (28.3%). Likewise, the highest unit of family ownership controlled by Rangamati district 17,265 (30.4%) lead to Khagrachhari 16,049 (33.5%) and Bandarban 14,531 (30.4%). The maximum number of looms hold by Rangamati 23,969 (39.3%) followed by Khagrachhari 19,759 (32.4%) and Bandarban 17,338 (28.4%) respectively.

Table 6: Handloom in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh

District	Ownership and Number of Handloom Unit							
	Total		Family ownership		Partnership		Co-operative	
	No. of units	No. of looms	No. of unit	No. of looms	No. of unit	No. of looms	No. of unit	No. of looms
Bandarban	14538	17374	14531	17338	5	27	2	9
Rangamati	17291	24128	17265	23969	19	93	7	66
Khagrachari	16072	19887	16049	19759	10	30	13	98

Source: Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh (2011).

Reasons for Shut Down

Handloom sector has been affected by the invention of digital or automatic production system since the industrial revolution in 18th century. In addition to

that there are some internal factors associated with the weakening of handloom sector. However, in respect of Bangladesh, some crucial issues have

been identified which are considered to be the major bottlenecks.

It is found that 79.2 percent identified for not being loom operational because of lack of capital followed by 12.1 percent lack of yarn, 2.0 percent labor shortage,

5.2 percent sales related problem and 1.6 percent other problem in 2003. Similarly, the scenario of non-operational in 1990 was 80.1 percent followed by 8.0 percent, 1.5 percent, 3.8 percent, and 6.6 percent respectively.

Table 7: Reasons for Non-operation of Looms

Reasons for non-operation of loom	Frequency, 2003	Percentage of 2003	Frequency, 1990	Percentage of 1990
Lack of capital	75511	79.2	123597	80.1
Lack of yarn	11566	12.1	12284	8.0
Labor problem	1865	2.0	2334	1.5
Sale problem	4931	5.2	5860	3.8
Others	1509	1.6	10220	6.6
Total units	95382	100.0	154295	100.0

Source: Handloom Census (2003)

Value of the Waist looms

Waist loom or *Ben* is the traditional dress making informal industry of the Chakma community in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. They weaved the dress followed by the traditional method passes from one generation to other, and it has the religious, economic and cultural significance. Similarly, in Assam, weaving is linked with culture, heritage and religion. Hence it is considered as the principal qualification of a girl to get married and has to prove the skill to weave (Dutta, 2015). Through this weaving method the artisans produce

various type of fabric such as *penone-khadi*, three pieces, punjabi, fatua, lungi, small bag, bed sheet, muffler, blanket, duti, fan, carton and napkin etc. In addition to that, they produce the robe for monk within 24 hours producing yarn from cotton. However, the price and producing tenure may vary women to women and place to place. Nowadays, the demand of the Chakma traditional dress as well as other community's costume increased due to the expansion of tourism and imported by the wholesaler to city like Chittagong and Dhaka, and other parts of Bangladesh.

Table 8: Revenue of the production of Waist loom

Product	Revenue (per item)		Production information		Revenue (per week)	
	Retail	Wholesale	Time to produce (hours)	Produced per week (8 hours, 5 days)	Retail	Wholesale
Penone Khadi (cotton)	556	472	4	10	5556	4721
Three pieces	849	718	4	11	9054	7659
Punjabi	718	558	4	10	7176	5583
Fatua	444	372	4	10	4439	3718
Lungi	292	266	4	11	3336	3037
Small bag	575	494	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Bed sheet	1204	1054	7	6	6879	6020
Maflar	183	160	4	10	1831	1597
Blanket	761	664	6	7	5073	4428
Duti	245	245	4	11	2800	2800
Fan	35	35	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Window cover	675	614	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Hassan (2015).

Discussion

The handloom sector of Bangladesh is strongly connected with the rural economy which is considered to be the root financial sources after agriculture sector. In Bangladesh, more than half of the population reside in rural areas where unemployment is severe and scope of the employment is unaffluent. As a consequence, they prefer to migrate to cities for job. In this situation, agriculture and handloom provide scope for earning. Chittagong Hill Tracts, similarly, is not

exceptional. It is also having the ample issues of unemployment where a significant number of individuals engaged in the waist loom or backstrap loom sector in order to provide the financial support to family along with the agriculture. A significant number of Chakma women associated with the waist loom on full time due to the yearlong income facilities than the agriculture.

The dresses of tribal women vary community to community and age to age. Therefore, three types of *khadi* have

generally been used by Chakma women. Notably, they are “Ranga Khadi” (red) used by the girl, “Ful Khadi” (flower) embroidered by different flowers and “Chibuttana Khadi” usually used by the old women. Ranga Khadi and Ful Khadi particularly used by the young girl while Chibuttana Khadi likely used by the old women (Dewan, 2002). Along with the cultivation either wet rice cultivation or Jhum cultivation Chakma women weaved their own dress. Nowadays, due to the globalization and urbanization, the resident of Chakma women in city prefer to wear their traditional dress (pinon-khadi) from the market. In some respect, unfortunately a significant proportion of tribal women forget the weaving skill that has their ancestral lineage passed through.

Conclusion

Handloom sector in Bangladesh provide employment opportunity both in rural and urban area. From the historical context, it has the glorious field that once dominated by the small-scale industries. Unfortunately, this sector became collapse due to the development of the digital machine. In addition to that, shortage of capital, high rate of raw material, lack of organization capability, inadequate technology and efficiency, lack of policy support and major forces, scarcity of yarn, inappropriate marketing facilities, weak design, illiterate and unskilled weaver or worker, illegal import of the sheet from foreign country, lack of government attention etc. have affected the handloom sector severely. The artisans of Chakma

women who make cloth applying their traditional method is not exceptional from this grave concern. The weaver of Rangamati district, however, expresses their concern for gradual increase of price of threads. Sheching Marma, urges to the government provide threads in less price than the market price that help them to produce much. Cotton is the basic material of Chakma women produced in Jhum cultivation for the weaving culture as well as performing the religious function in order to pay respect by lighting the light made from the cotton and in socio-cultural function, such as, blessing the newlyweds couples by elders used cotton respectively. However, in respect of the Chakma community, cloths served as economic product and medium of communication (Dewan, 2002).

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