

Challenges and Coping Strategies of Kuthampully Handloom Weavers: A Socio-Economic Analysis

Aparna R¹, Dr. Sitara V Attokkaran²

¹Post Graduate, PG & Research Department of Economics, Vimala College (Autonomous), Thrissur

²Associate Professor, PG & Research Department of Economics, Vimala College (Autonomous),

Thrissur

Email:¹ aparnarchandran15@gmail.com, ² sitaravattokkaran@vimalacollege.edu.in

Abstract

Clothing is a fundamental human need, and its origins date back to the ancient art of handloom weaving. The handloom sector has become a prominent industry, providing a livelihood for millions of weavers and showcasing exquisite fabric designs. As the largest unorganized economic activity after agriculture, the handloom industry generates direct and indirect employment opportunities for approximately 4.3 million weavers and associated workers. The handloom sector faces several challenges. The present study examined the socio-economic conditions, challenges, and coping strategies of the handloom sector, with a particular focus on the Kuthampully weavers. It is evident that these weavers have a low economic status and poor housing conditions. They face numerous challenges, including health issues, low prices for their products, and inadequate remuneration. The income from handloom weaving is insufficient to meet their family needs. To address these challenges, they have employed coping strategies such as design innovation, authentic traditional designs, quality enhancement, and others. However, these efforts have not significantly alleviated their difficulties. The sector has also been severely impacted by floods and the COVID-19 pandemic over the last five years. In conclusion, the Kuthampully handloom weavers face significant challenges that adversely affect their socio-economic conditions.

Keywords: Handloom, Kuthampully, Weaver, Socio-economic conditions, Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges, Coping strategies

1. Introduction

Clothing is a fundamental human need, and its origins date back to the ancient art of handloom weaving. The handloom sector has become a prominent industry, providing a livelihood for millions of weavers and showcasing exquisite fabric designs. As the largest unorganized economic activity after agriculture, the handloom industry generates direct and indirect employment opportunities for approximately 4.3 million weavers and associated workers. This sector contributes significantly to the country's cloth production, accounting for around 15 percent of total output.

Some of the notable features of this sector include being highly labor-intensive, sustainable, and

decentralized. The handloom industry has an advantage in that it pioneered significant designs that power looms cannot replicate. The industry plays a crucial role in poverty reduction by increasing household income, enhancing purchasing power, and boosting export potential. Additionally, it helps minimize regional imbalances. This sector also provides women with opportunities to work from home. Located approximately 50 kilometers northeast of Thrissur, Kuthampully is a renowned traditional cotton-weaving community. The Kuthampully weavers are celebrated for their exquisite Kasavu handloom weaving, which has been awarded the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) tag. With a rich history spanning over 500 years, the community was introduced to Kerala by the royal family of Kochi to craft Kasavu garments for the aristocracy. The current generation of Kuthampully weavers continues to uphold the legacy of their forebears, meticulously following traditional patterns and techniques. The community, predominantly comprised of Kannada-speaking Devanga Chettiars from Bangalore and Mysore, has taken great care to preserve its historical customs and cultural heritage.

2. Significance of the Study

The handloom industry is a vital unorganized economic sector, second only to agriculture. It has significant potential to meet the substantial fabric requirements of the export-oriented garment industry. However, the sector has lost its cultural value and faced economic decline due to various reasons. In the current era of globalization and rapid innovation, the handloom industry faces numerous challenges, including competition from power looms that produce similar products at lower costs. The handloom sector faces several challenges, including transportation problems, a shortage of skilled labor, volatile raw material prices, working capital and cash flow constraints, and declining exports, among others. The sector has been severely impacted by recent floods and the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating existing challenges. In this scenario, it is important to examine the socio-economic conditions, challenges, and coping strategies of the handloom sector, with a particular focus on the Kuthampully weavers.

3. Review of Literature

The handloom industry is grappling with numerous challenges that threaten its very survival. Studies by Malavika (2022), Kamal (2018), Balasubrahmanyam and Muthumeenakshi (2018), and Kumar (2017) highlight the sector's struggles, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, limited access to online platforms, deprivation of basic needs and fair wages, unsystematic government policies, globalization, and competition from power looms and mills. These challenges have forced many weavers to seek alternative livelihoods, putting the traditional weaving art at risk of extinction. The studies emphasize the need for collective efforts to preserve India's rich handloom heritage, including active government intervention, supporting policies, investments, infrastructure development, and credit facilities to improve the industry's performance and ensure the weavers' socio-economic well-being.

4. Statement of the Problem

A strong and competitive handloom sector is crucial for the employment and inclusive growth of weavers, particularly those from underprivileged sections of Indian society. However, the sector faces numerous challenges, including low wages, an aging workforce, changing demand patterns, and intense competition from power looms. These challenges contribute to the sector's declining tendency. The Kuthampully handloom weaving community is also likely to be affected by these issues. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the socio-economic conditions, challenges, and coping strategies of

Kuthampully handloom weavers.

5. Objectives of the Study

1. To study the socio-economic conditions of the Kuthampully handloom weavers
2. To examine the working conditions and challenges faced by Kuthampully handloom weavers
3. To identify the coping strategies against the challenges of Kuthampully handloom weavers

6. Data Source and Methods

The study's framework was constructed using primary data collected from 50 randomly selected handloom weavers in Kuthampully. The primary data was collected through a field survey using well-structured, pre-designed schedules. Various tables, charts, and percentages were used to analyze the data. A handloom weaver's challenges index was computed to assess the level of challenges faced by the Kuthampully handloom weavers. The Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges was derived from a 5-point Likert Scale response to various challenges faced by the respondents, including inadequate supply of raw materials, poor quality of raw materials, high cost of raw materials, insufficient number of looms, health issues, lack of skill, lack of proper training, low remuneration, lack of market information, low price for products, middlemen exploitation, and lack of marketing facilities. The scoring system was as follows: "Never" - 1 score, "Rarely" - 2 scores, "Often" - 3 scores, "Most of the time" - 4 scores, and "Always" - 5 scores. The Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges was obtained by totaling the scores for all questions. The maximum value of the Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges among the respondents was 60, and the minimum value was 12. The level of the Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges among the respondents was classified into three categories: low (below 30 scores), medium (30-40 scores), and high (more than 40 scores).

7. Discussion of the Analysis

7.1: Socio-Economic Profile of the Respondents

The demographic profile of the respondents reveals interesting insights. In terms of age, 36 percent belong to the 60-70 age groups, followed by 28 percent in the 50-60 age range, 22 percent in the 40-50 age range, and 2 percent in the 30-40 age range. The sample is predominantly male, with 88 percent males and 12 percent females. All respondents belong to the Hindu community and the Devanga Chettiar caste. The education level is relatively low, with 70 percent having below SSLC, 18 percent having SSLC, 10 percent being illiterate, and 2 percent holding diplomas.

A majority of 74 percent own their houses, while 26 percent live in rented houses. The respondents' houses are mostly made of tile roofs (90 percent), concrete floors (78 percent), and mud walls (80 percent). Most respondents (60 percent) hold less than 5 cents of land, while 24 percent have no land.

The monthly income from weaving is mostly between Rs.10, 000-15,000 (66 percent), and a significant majority (86 percent) do not make savings from their income. Notably, all respondents agree that the income from weaving is insufficient to meet their family needs, highlighting the economic challenges faced by these handloom weavers.

7.2: Work Profile of the Respondents

The handloom weavers' occupational profile reveals that all respondents engage in weaving as a hereditary occupation, indicating a strong tradition and cultural significance. A significant majority (92 percent) are independent weavers, while 8 percent work as cooperative weavers. The working hours are long, with 50 percent working between 10-15 hours per day, and 68 percent working between 25-30 days per month. The weavers have considerable experience, with 28 percent having worked for 50-60 years. Most procure raw materials from local dealers (92 percent) and spend between Rs.3000-4000 on raw materials (50 percent). The products woven are mainly sarees (72 percent), followed by dhotis and both sarees and dhotis. The weavers mostly sell their products to local dealers (76 percent), highlighting their dependence on intermediaries.

7.3 : Challenges Faced by the Respondents

Kuthampully weavers face several challenges such as low prices for their products, high cost of raw materials, health issues, lack of market information and middlemen exploitation

7.3.1 : Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges among the Respondents

To assess the level of challenges faced by Kuthampully handloom weavers, an Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges was computed. The Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges was derived from a 5-point Likert scale response to various challenges faced by the weavers, including inadequate supply of raw materials, poor quality of raw materials, high cost of raw materials, insufficient number of looms, health issues, lack of skill, lack of proper training, low remuneration, lack of market information, low price for products, middlemen exploitation, and lack of marketing facilities. The Likert scale was scored as follows: Never (1 score), Rarely (2 scores), Often (3 scores), Most of the time (4 scores), and Always (5 scores). The index was calculated by totaling the scores for all questions, resulting in a range of 12 (minimum) to 60 (maximum). The level of Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges was categorized as follows:

| | |
|--------|-----------------------|
| Low | : Below 30 scores |
| Medium | : 30-40 scores |
| High | : More than 40 scores |

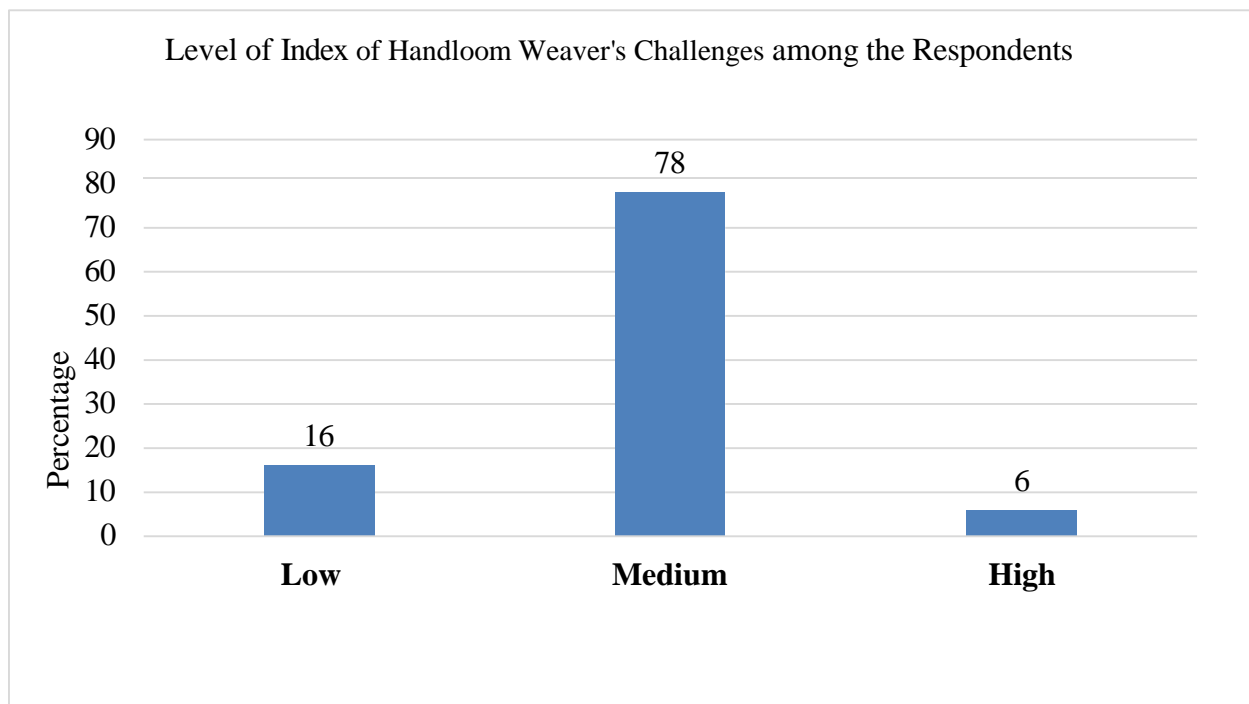
The Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges among respondents is depicted in Table 1 and Figure 1. It reveals that majority of the respondents have a medium handloom weaver's challenges index, 16 percent have a low handloom weaver's challenges index, and only a limited number, equivalent to 6 percent of the respondents have a high handloom weaver's challenges index.

Table 1: Level of the Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges among the Respondents

| Level of Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Low | 8 | 16 |
| Medium | 39 | 78 |
| High | 3 | 6 |
| Total | 50 | 100 |

Source: Primary Data

Figure1: Level of the Index of Handloom Weaver's Challenges among the Respondents



Source: Primary Data

7.4: Coping Strategies of Kuthampully Handloom Weavers

The Kuthampully handloom weavers have employed several strategies to enhance demand and income, including design innovation, authentic traditional designs, quality enhancement, skill upgradation, product diversification, and social media marketing. All respondents adopted design innovation and traditional designs, most prioritized quality enhancement, some upgraded their skills, a few diversified their products, and a limited number used social media for marketing.

8. Conclusion

The study reveals the socio-economic condition, challenges, and coping strategies of Kuthampully handloom weavers. It is evident that these weavers have a low economic status and poor housing conditions. They face numerous challenges, including health issues, low prices for their products, and inadequate remuneration. The income from handloom weaving is insufficient to meet their family needs. To address these challenges, they have employed coping strategies such as design innovation, authentic

traditional designs, quality enhancement, and others. However, these efforts have not significantly alleviated their difficulties. The sector has also been severely impacted by floods and the COVID-19 pandemic over the last five years. In conclusion, the Kuthampully handloom weavers face significant challenges that adversely affect their socio-economic conditions.

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