

Purvanchal: Silence of the Looms

A study examining the impact of the Covid-19 Lockdown on the traditional weaving industry



Executive Summary

This on-ground fact finding mission by Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP) spread over 2020 and 2021, takes a deep and nuanced look at the plight of the traditional weaving industry in Purvanchal (Eastern Uttar Pradesh), especially in wake of the Covid-19 induced Lockdown.

Our 17-member survey team led by Dr. Muniza Khan, Varanasi-based social science researcher, conducted detailed interviews of 204 respondents, 37 video interviews and 19 audio-interviews in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of people engaged in weaving the famous Banarasi fabric and allied activities.

The locations of the respondents were: Varanasi (13 locations), Gorakhpur (Rasoolpur, Purana Gorakhnath), Azamgarh (Mubarakpur, Ibrahimpur, Shahpur) and Mau (Ghosi, Madhuban).

The team took all necessary precautions, including wearing masks, using sanitisers and maintaining social distancing, while conducting the physical survey amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

The detailed analysis and data contained in this report reveal how the artisanal weaving industry as well as the Zardozi industry, that has been in a state of crisis for decades given the ambivalent, if not hostile policies adopted by the government, slid into further despair due to the sudden and unplanned Lockdown.

It caused severe economic and structural blow due to the work stoppages, and led to acute distress, indebtedness, beggary and hunger that any society and state should be ashamed of.

Neither the state government of Uttar Pradesh nor the Centre have shown any sensitivity to the plight of hundreds of thousands of weavers and their families so far, and have failed to respond to the crisis.

The estimated loss stands at a staggering Rs 3,000 crores to eastern UP's handicraft, handloom and power loom business during and after the Lockdown.

Following are some of our most crucial, and frankly shocking, findings:

- A staggering 89 per cent of those interviewed stated that due to a trust deficit, they simply could not or did not approach the local and state government for a variety of relief measures: food rations, monetary assistance, inflated electricity bills, sewage related and other civic problems. Of the 11 per cent who did, they were dissatisfied with the response.
- Absence of access of Central Government schemes:
 - The central government's much publicised Pradhan Mantri Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) (launched on May 1, 2016) has simply not reached persons on the ground. Only 10 percent of the women among our respondents were even registered to get Ujjwala Gas under this scheme; the rest remain excluded, despite multiple attempts to apply for the same.
 - The respondents also found the Prime Minister Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) difficult to access. A staggering 52 percent of the respondents simply did not have the account. Of the 48 percent who did, only 58 percent received cash transfers more than once.
- The weavers who are wage workers or those who have just a few looms belong to communities like Muslim Ansari, Dalit, OBC and some are Muslims who hail from more privileged castes. Today a vast section of this artisanal industry is completely impoverished and invisibilised. Informed and reasoned public dialogue is needed to influence not just political but economic policy and decision making.

- We also reached out to women as they form the backbone of this industry, with their work ranging from actual weaving to allied activities like spool feeding, saree decoration and finishing work. 24 percent of our respondents were women and girls.
- We discovered that most often, their work remains unpaid, even in this day and age, as it is considered part of their household chores.
- The testimonies of these women and girls were sorry tales of malnutrition and attendant health issues, apart from impoverishment, hunger and domestic abuse. Many girls were forced to drop out of school.
- The overall impact of a brute form of targeted communal violence and politics over the past three decades has also had its specific impact on women, specifically Muslim women. This splintering of the gender identity along communal lines has deeply affected traditional gender-driven solidarities that often breached denials and divides of the kind that swept India during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The role of the commercial media, most especially television, in furthering a divisive discourse that, apart from being not based on any fact, was tailored to suit an anti-constitutional agenda, and made the sufferings of all sections of the minority, even the artisanal weaving community in eastern UP, more humiliating and acute.
- A significant number of our respondents spoke of economic boycotts at work in neighbourhoods days and weeks after the spread of the virus was deliberately misconstrued and associated with one community (with terms like *Coronona-Jihad*, *Superspreaders of the Virus.*, being used).

Recommendations to Government and Business, Corporations

- The report makes detailed recommendations for the government, central and state, urging that all stakeholders in the industry are consulted before policies are framed and budgetary allocations (dwindling over the past seven-eight years) are made. An emphasis on State-driven incentives for professional co-operatives at the village, taluka and state level have also been made.
- Authorities should ensure that benefits of all schemes and campaigns should reach every last weaver and artisan.
- The report, invoking the 2011, UN Principles on Business and Human Rights also urges Corporations, Export Houses and Brands that thrive on this rich and traditional art and craft, to respect standards of dignified wage and social security as it is the creator who is central to the products manufactured.
- Public awareness needs to be created around the fact that it is the creators of the Banarasi saree and brocade who are the owners of this intellectual property, a fact little known to the weavers and artisans. (Registered in 2009, under Geographical Indication Handicrafts (<https://search.ipindia.gov.in/GIRPublic/Application/Details/237>))

Call for a National and Regional Campaign

There is an urgent need for a sustainable and concerted national and regional campaign that highlights the following:

- Ensuring a sustained revival of this industry and craft so closely linked to rural-urban livelihoods and the cultural heritage of India
- Democratic engagement before policy, economic and business practices are conceived, emerge or are promoted by the government
- Social Security Schemes for different levels of the craftspersons, artisans and weavers with a special emphasis on women
- Reaching out to Corporations and Businesses to incorporate a component of social responsibility and human rights when dealing with the creators of products
- Ensuring that the elected representatives also respond to the campaign demands in this report
- All Indians, consumers of these products and others, should get involved to raise their voice and ensure that this crucial heritage industry is saved

About CJP:

Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP) is a Human Rights movement dedicated to upholding and defending the freedom and constitutional rights of all Indians. We call our focus areas our Four Pillars. These are:

Minority Rights - Rights of religious, ethnic, caste, gender and sexual minorities as well as persons with disabilities.

Freedom of Expression - A healthy and vibrant democracy always respects free expression and the dignity of different belief systems, cultures and languages. Hate speech, we believe, is an abuse of this freedom.

Criminal Justice Reform - CJP believes that our agencies - investigation, prosecutorial and judicial - need further democratisation to ensure both, quality and quick justice delivery.

Child Rights - CJP works to inculcate pluralism and Constitutional values in young minds. We also work in the field of Juvenile Justice Reform and protection of children from Sexual Abuse.



For more information, please visit <https://cjp.org.in/> or write to cjvindia@gmail.com