The Death of a Wonderful Craft

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Her Excellency, the President of India, Smt Prativa Patil Singh took her oath of office and secrecy on 25th August 2007 clad in a simple, yet elegant spotted mulberry silk saree. The saree in question was a traditional one, with tie-and-dye design, woven by a weaver of Bhulia community of village Hardokhol, near Sonepur.

The Bhulias of Western Orissa, in fact, are the acclaimed weavers of celebrated tie-and-dye textile fabrics, popularly known as "Sambalpuri Cloth". For centuries, they have practised and perfected the local tie-and-dye technique of designing and weaving and zealously guarded the secret from being passed on to others. Sonepur district, being the cradle ground of tie-and-dye textile, nourishes many a great craftsmen of excellence and fame. Many of them have been honoured and awarded prizes, both at national and international level. One of the greatest maestros of the community Sri Chaturbhuja Meher of Sonepur was conferred with "Padma Shree" for his adroit workmanship and innovative skill in tie-and-dye textile designing. Late Krutartha Acharya of Bargarh too was conferred with "Padma Shree" for his unique and monumental contribution in the field of tie-and-dye textile designing.

The Bhulias have a distinct identity and tradition of their own. In early part of twentieth century, the Imperial Gazetteer of India writes, "the flower-bordered saris of Sambalpur are called phullia; and peculiar to the district are the saris known as hansabali, bordered or striped with fantastic animal designs. The hansabalis are perhaps the most artistic product of Central Provinces" Philips Zealey writing in early post-independence period noted that "Among the many styles and techniques of handloom weaving in India, one of the most highly skilled and attractive is the tie-and-dye weaving of Bhulias in Orissa, most of whom are centered in the Sambalpur district. It is said that there are
only two places in the world where this tie-and-dye technique has been perfected, i.e. in Orissa and in Thailand. The Thai weavers are supposed to be descendant of the Bhulias as a result of some long by-gone emigration."

"The Samaj" in its dt.12.09.07 edition reported about the woeful living conditions of 40 thousand Bhulia populations of Sonepur district. However, the report did not focus on the problem of sizeable exodus of weaving population of the district to other informal occupations under the stress of persistent problem of unemployment, low wages and distress sale of hand woven cloth. In fact, all the skilled craftsmen of Bhuliapara of Sonepur town have bundled up their looms and are vending vegetables, pulses and grams in the daily market. Some others are engaged in preparing the delicacy of 'pakodas', 'samosa' and other eatables. Few well-to-do households have trading establishments in the municipal market. Most of them are under the grip of middleman traders, eking out a miserable and precarious living. The problem is not limited to few urban pockets. Many households, predominantly of Bhulia villages, like Sagarpali, Baidyanath, Hardokhol, Lachhipur, Menda, Nimna, Chaidaipank, Kandupali have too felt the heat of shrinking employment opportunities. Many of them have left for Rourkela, Sambalpur and other important urban centres.

Beyond the highly skilled Bhulia caste group, other weaving communities of Orissa are also in desperate condition of wants and miseries. The Dhera, the Kuli, the Mahara, the Ganda, the Kusta communities of Sonepur town symbolize the great upheaval that has swept the handloom sector of Orissa. Their looms have ceased to flutter and crinkle long since. Most of these unfortunate households are engaged now in petty trading, cultivation, agricultural labour, earth digger, rickshaw-puller, vegetable vendors and other myriad informal occupations. Some of them have migrated to Andhra Pradesh, Maharastra, Gujarat, West Bengal and have been working in powerlooms and spinning mills as labourer. Thus, the once prosperous, flourishing, vibrant and lively handloom sector of Orissa is now in a state of ruin and shamble. Some of the village weavers, however, are still plying their traditional looms as a testimony to a glorious tradition of great craftsmanship.

The unprecedented economic hardship the handloom sector endures in Orissa and the Bhulia community in particular calls for urgent attention of the policy makers. It is very important to commend the great genius and ingenuity of the Bhulia community who successfully thwarted the competition of mighty British textile Mills in 19th century and domestic textile industry in 20th century. A part of the explanation could be found in the depressed living conditions of the well-to-do households on the one side and the growing economic clout of the dalit and poor on the other.

The Government in many States, after 90s, have adopted a slew of measures under Budgetary reforms and Financial restructuring. It impacted the state enterprises leading to closure of many weak industrial units. The strong ones were subjected to bouts of retrenchment and lay off Under disinvestment drive, some of these units are being sold out to private operators. Workers engaged in these industrial units, no doubt, suffered from loss of wage income. Besides, many of them are yet to be duly compensated for. Downsizing the work-force has become the norm, both in the Govt. and private sectors. Some Government departments were closed. Many posts in the existing government departments were
abolished. Fresh recruitment into govt. sector is banned. Some of the benefits admissible to the existing Government employees are forcibly held up. Govt. grants-in-aid too are freezeed. The limited employment opportunities created in both govt. and private sectors are of "low paid" category. Contractual appointments with low wages are being encouraged.

Agriculture—the dominant sector of the economy, is again hard hit by frequent droughts and floods. Distress sale of paddy is a recurrent problem affecting production and productivity. Agricultural research has practically failed to yield any breakthrough either in dry-land farming or high yielding seed. Agri-extension services are largely paralysed. The well-to-do section of the society—the chief patron of Bhulia's tie-and-dye products, thus confronts with low level of purchasing power and low level of effective demand.

There are also severe supply constraints. The weaver's co-op Society, the Handloom Development Corporation, the apex marketing society etc. connected with the sale of handloom cloth and ensuring regular employment to weavers have all become sick and many have closed their shutters under the pressure of financial restructuring. Their role are being taken over by few leading middleman traders. But limited capital in their hands fail to put an effective check on the shrinking employment opportunities. On the other hand, the search for profit by them has dampened the prevailing market wage rate. Spurious and inferior handloom products mushroomed that affect the very size of Bhulia's market.

Traditionally, the poor people provide a stable market for many handloom products. But after 90's, this section of the population has registered an appreciable upward movement in their economic strength. One should not however, mistake it as the boon of economic liberalisation. Rather, it is the consequence of a built up hedging mechanism placed in order to safeguard the interest of the poor in the wake of second industrialisation, referred to as inclusive growth. As such, the market wage rate, both nominal and real, has almost been doubled under the influence of minimum wage policy of the Govt. They are assured of regular employment throughout the year under various Govt. sponsored development programmes. They also benefited directly from many Govt. sponsored welfare programmes like mid-day meal, old age pension, Antodaya, Kutira Jyoti Yojana, PDS commodities at concessional price etc. Some of the agricultural labour households have Government land under forcible possession too. Self Help Group and micro credit have practically transformed their life styles. The living condition of rural middle class household has significantly altered the clothing habits of these poor people, In fact, the coarse and medium count handloom cloth has practically disappeared from the market.

The textile policy of the Central Govt. provides the other part of the explanation for the ailing handloom sector. The National Textile Policy 2000, formulated on the recommendation of the Satyam Committee Report single mindedly promoted the case of composite textile mills to augment the export earnings of the country. In fact, the international cloth market is dominated by countries like China, Malaysia, Hongkong and Korea under the regime of multifibre agreement (MFA) concluded between the exporting and importing countries. However, under WTO arrangements, MFA regime has ceased to guide the export trade of cloth between
countries after 2005. Now, the international cloth market is open to all exporting countries. Since Indian cloth is viewed as 'dirty cloth', there is an urgent need to strengthen and improve its competitive strength. The National Textile Policy 2000 has exactly done that. Hence, the handloom sector is substantially less likely to gain out of it. The financial restructuring process of the State Government has already killed the Handloom Export Promotion Corporation. To integrate the Bhulia's tie-and-dye product with the international market is a tall order. It begs more questions than there are answers.

The textile policy generally defines the extent of competition between the organized textile mills and the decentralized textile sector. In the present scenario, there is hardly any competition between them as only a meagre 5 per cent of total production of cloth in the country comes from the composite textile mills. The products are mostly superior cloth meant for export. The decentralized textile sector comprising the powerloom and the handloom meets the domestic need of cloth. Hence, there exists cut-throat competition between them in spite of "Handloom Reservation of Articles of Production Act, 1985."

Secondly, the power loom imitates the design and motif of handloom cloth and sells them cheaply in the market. Thus, the competition between them is largely unfair. On the other hand, many welfare and developmental programmes have been initiated to improve the economic plights of the weavers. But all the benefits of these have been usurped by the office bearers and employees of the implementing agencies.

Thus, the handloom sector of Orissa has already lost its pre-eminence of yester years. You may call it the wonder of 9 percent growth rate. The higher the economy moves in its growth trajectory, the sharper shall be the disappearance of handloom weaver. This is the dynamics of growth and development. We are fortunate that no weaver in Orissa has yet committed suicide as in Andhra Pradesh and Maharastra. The backwardness of Orissan economy have certainly saved them! However, those who will continue to produce ornamental and attractive fabrics will survive to serve the top political class, the bureaucrats, the industrialists and the show industry. Promoting few powerlooms in pockets of concentration of weavers may possibly often a solution.

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