

Odisha Handlooms : Problems and Perspectives

Dr. Gouri Shankar Tripathy

Much has been said, also being talked to, about the problems of handlooms in general and their solutions. In many a meetings, it has been discussed, also being discussed, about the present challenges with reference to their anticipated future shape. No day passes without one or the other newspaper or pamphlet carrying the news of the progress and problems of handlooms and articles discussing remedies. Many national and international conferences have taken place pertaining to the intricacies of handlooms centering round their gradual method of growth in full sawing and their research and relationship with national development with reference to the international reputation.

Handloom is the oldest known form of making cloth by hand. It represents a very early stage of cloth production. Handloom is now the source of livelihood to several millions of artisans and their families all over the world. In the so called third world nations, a few countries still proudly keep on the ancient tradition of hand weaving side by side with powerlooms as the symbols of cultural legacies. Even during the present days when man is trying to win the space, people still look at the handloom as symbol of the glorious past of the entire human race. What is the magic behind ? Handloom products are not merely mere pieces of decoration but also they symbolise the

cultural ethos and the aspirations of generations of people to preserve the best part of culture and civilization. That apart it is the time-honoured legacy from time immemorial that has been passed on to us by our ancestors.

In a decentralised sector like handloom, there are many problems due to illiteracy of the weavers, inadequate finance and vested interests. There are hindrances and difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of our planning and controlling activities like procurement of raw-materials, product developments, quality and cost control. Planning is to be done with the hope that there should be a demand for our products in the market and in case of failure to sell, all our planning will go ineffective. The main problem that often confronts us is the procurement of required raw-materials like yarn, dyes and chemicals at the right time and in right quantities.

Due to violent fluctuations in the yarn prices perhaps frequently due to the fluctuations in cotton prices, it is difficult to stick on to any definite price of the end products. It is a paradox to overrule the possibility of stabilising the prices of yarn in the cooperative sector.

Handloom industry had several jolts in the past on account of a lump in demand and it is still suffering the shock. The industry goes into the

grip of stock accumulation and financial difficulty which faces the industry to reduce its capacity drastically whenever the prices of yarn and dyes shoot up without any corresponding increase in the demand of the finished products. Such unhealthy accumulation also invariably leads to cut throat competition on account of proliferation of weak producers in the sector.

In the rural belts of our country, handloom is the only industry which is capable of creating more employment, next to agriculture. By encouraging the poor weavers after creating the confidence in them, this industry can be expanded with the stepping up of the qualitative production of cloth in the country. This can be done successfully if only the industry is helped to overcome the difficulty in obtaining the raw-materials regularly and in adequate quantities at reasonably steady prices. With minimum capital investment, handloom is capable of creating more employment in the rural areas.

Product development is an essential exercise for any successful marketing strategy. In case of a decentralised cottage industry, this factor gains an added importance. This industry has to face a serious competition from an organised sector like the mills. Despite stiff competition from the mill-made textiles, the handloom industry is thriving owing to its interest potentialities and artistic while the mills find it hard to imitate the intricate handloom designs and tie-ups in mass production of cloth. In fact, it is the beauty and fineness of handloom products that qualify the attention and patronage of the housewife but not in her sentiment. But this idea also has become old and legendary taking the present hard days into account. 20% rebate is the only attraction of the mass in general to purchase handloom goods.

The organised sector has an edge in many respects over the handlooms sector. But it is

needless to mention here that in one respect the handloom sector can score over the organised sector - that is in the field of intricate and attractive designs and colours. This has to be exploited to the fullest extent by the handloom sector to produce a vast variety of varied designs and textures in attractive shades and colours quickly offering each time a new range of products to suit the need of the consumers. It is in this context that product development becomes not only important but even necessary for handloom sector. What is product development ? It means not only developing or adding a new range of products in the handloom sector but it also means developing or improving the existing varieties of products which are clearly in the market all over the country. For this product development the technical personnel should remain in the field in order to impart their technical skill to the illiterate weavers. But practically, it is found that they are wedded to the files in the office. As a result they are not able to devote their time to do justice to their job in the true sense of the term. Hence it is high time for the authorities to give a serious thought to this matter at the earliest if really they want to improve the handloom industry.

An optimist, I would like to believe that our realisation of the problems of handlooms and their link with the problems of our growth and development is not yet acute enough to crystallise in positive remedial measures. But the situation will soon demand for the suitable corrective measures.

The perspectives are rather clear and this is a great measure of agreement on them. Like the artist does a portrait in his cabin, handloom products are unique because the designs are painstakingly hard-woven as such they are not stereotyped prints stamped on a piece of colourless plain cloth. On the top of it a good

deal of ornamentation that comes naturally in weaving in the shape of buties, tie-ups, laced borders etc. whenever desired for in the fabrics.

Fabrics are being developed all over the world. In the traditional textiles, the fabrics developed long ago, have continued upto date and have covered a place for themselves.

A broad understanding of raw-materials, process, intermediate products, finished products, the colour composition of the fabrics, the design aspects, market trends, economics and lastly thorough insight into fabric properties as related to the consumer's requirement are the essential aspects to be understood. The fabric creator has to keep in view several factors like raw-materials count of yarn, threads per unit space, weight per square metre, width, weave, cover, thickness, strength, abrasion resistance, crease, recovery washability, comfort etc. The fabric development personnel should be able to link the dyeing department with this information so that the basic work of matching economical dyeing etc. is completed. The consumer then takes the fabric and gudes the feel and has a closer look to decide about their factors like proper cover, soft touch, a good drape, the proper thickness, weight, lustre, comfort, durability and dimensional stability etc. Of course that follows automatically the

composition, price texture and feel. He would also like to know whether the colour is fast whether the fabric is durable, whether it is anti-creased, threads splippage possibility etc., at the counter.

Hence high standardisation of all the fabric qualities is essential which should be supported with a publicity and promotion in a systematic and scientific manner. A field trial is necessary before promoting a new texture into the market. If a wrong fabric is marketed under a good brand name, it will ruin the reputation built by other good fabrics.

Handloom plays an important role in the process of social, economic development of any country. It is at this level that all the generalists and specialists required for manning key position in productive enterprises, research, and planning in a variety of ways.

The excitement of handloom training, the joy of creation of best designs suitable for markets and the subsequent heat of debate and discussion crystalise attitudes and personalities that moved into scientific and systematic roles in different walks of life.

Dr. Gouri Shanker Tripathy lives at 847, Kapilprasad, P.O. Sundarpada, Bhubaneswar - 751002.