

# Carpet Industry and its Workers: A Case Study of Sikkim, North Bengal

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**ABSTRACT:** This article is about the carpet industry and its workers of Sikkim. Women carpet workers dominate this industry. 2.5% share of total states industrial development comes through this industry. The area of investigation is Sikkim, North Bengal and the entire work is based on the secondary data.

**KEYWORDS:** Sikkim, carpet industry

The tiny and beautiful state of Sikkim lies to the south of Tibet sandwiched between Nepal to the west and Bhutan to the east. Measuring just 65km by 115km, its landscape ranges from sweltering deep valleys just 300m above sea level to lofty snow peaks such as Kanchenjunga (Kanchendzonga to the locals) which, at 8586m, is the third highest mountain in the world. A small but growing network of tortuous roads penetrates this rugged and beautiful Himalayan wilderness. Carpet industry is one of the important industries in Sikkim.

**FIG 1; MAP OF WEST BENGAL**



**FIG 2: MAP OF SIKKIM**



## CARPET INDUSTRY AND ITS WORKERS:

Sikkim's carpets are hand knotted and woven in fixed vertical looms which are kept standing with the support of a wall. This art requires a high degree of concentration. Carpet designs are normally of mythical birds, flowers like the lotus, snowlines, eight Buddhist lucky signs etc. Carpets of different sizes for covering walls, chairs, sofas, beds or divans are made and marketed through the Sikkim Handloom and Handicrafts Development Corporation. The time taken in making these carpets varies according to the size of the carpets, the designs and the ability of the weaver. Carpet workers are mostly

Nepali ethnicity, arriving in search of jobs after the British arrived in the state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Other workers include Bhutias, the Tibetians and the Lepchas. Sikkim is predominately a rural economy with non-workers. Carpet weaving is mainly done by the women of the Bhutia community. Colourful carpets in numerous designs are weaved by them.

## TRAINING PROGRAMMES:

Directorate of Handicrafts and Handloom, Government of Sikkim provides training in carpet weaving for two years to all sikkimese boys and girls between the age group of 14 to 24 years. The Government has been pleased to accord approval or sanction for the revision and enhancement of stipend to the trainees of the Directorate of Handicrafts and Handlooms i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 as under.

1. Existing rate 1st year Rs. 700/- pm. Revised rate 1st year Rs. 1,500/- pm.
2. Existing rate 2nd year & onwards Rs 900/- pm. Revised rate 2nd year & onwards Rs 2,000/-

pm.

During the first year of training, the trainees are imparted knowledge and skill relating to carding, plain weave and yarn spinning. During the second year the trainees are taught how to weave a variety of designs. After training, these trainees can work from their own homes or they can avail of the facilities provided by the Directorate by coming to work as paid workers in the production centres. They can also form craft cooperatives with others. Traditional design used in woollen carpets in Sikkim. The Tanga is actually a medallion or a coin and is popularly used in carpets, wood carving, paintings etc. While the original coin is said to have some words inscribed in the middle these designs in carpets have no inscription.



## PROCESS OF CARPET MAKING:

Carpet industry produces carpets with simple and complex designs including understanding of washing, drying and carding of the cotton/wool yarn. Carpet workers are able to make ball and litchi making. They are also able to do dyeing and spinning. They generally make mattress from cotton yarn. This industry also involves minimal understanding of market demand and consumer preferences as well as lack of entrepreneurial skills.

This carpet weaving also depends on the size of the carpets. Carpet workers should also be able to weave according to the design, which is drawn on graph paper. While the weaving process goes on, ability to use wooden hammers to beat the woven wool is also taken into place. After the weaving is over, levelling scissors are used to make the carpet thinner. Then scissoring is done to give finishing touches to the carpets. Presently, it takes on average of 12-17 months (depending on size) to complete a carpet. Thangka painters make beautiful thangka paintings. Preparation of cloth which has to be painted, which includes sewing the cloth on a large wooden frame, applying glue over the canvas and drying it; knowledge of drawing foundation lines with pencil as well as knowledge of painting using different colours are also required. Knowledge of shading and detailing of the painting are also needed. Carpet workers do also know to apply gold or silver to the painting. Finally the final products should be marketed and branded properly for its religious and spiritual value in a short period of time.

### **WOMEN CARPET WORKERS:**

Growing number of women in rural Sikkim involve themselves in income generating activities like food processing, trading of agricultural products and production of handicrafts and weaving of carpets. The tribal women mostly (Lepchas and Bhutias) even maintain their traditional skills and involve themselves in spinning and weaving thereby contributing subsidiary income of the family. Women main workers in household industry like carpet weaving are 14.04% to total worker.

In recent years, women in Sikkim have been able to put a strong step forward from small scale industries. The Bhutia-lepcha women in the rural areas take an active part in cultivation of the land. Besides they always utilize other avenues for self-employment. Almost in each house both men and women spend their free time in carpet weaving. Carpet making industry may provide more gainful job opportunities to the women workers and therefore, their development should get preference with a policy of providing more employment opportunities to the women workers. In order to increase the supply elasticity of female workers, apart from making special efforts to improve their skills and qualification their availability both geographic and occupational should be facilitated. Better and efficient transport network can go a long way in this regard.

### **TOWARDS HEALTH AND SAFETY IN THE CARPET INDUSTRY:**

All economic activities involve some degree of safety and health hazards to workers and communities. Carpet manufacturing is no exception, introducing several hazards that can and should be mitigated. The industry still engages a large number of children in spite of legal and practical action to combat child labour. This is just one more reason why hazards must be decisively prevented. Many studies have addressed the chemical hazards of the carpet-making process. Some dyestuffs used in materials preparation are toxic. For example, exposure to chromate chemicals and anthrax bacillus causes skin diseases. Dyes can also contaminate water sources if precautions are not taken. The hazards of dust exposure are also well known. One interesting study reports that carpet-weaving children in Jaipur, India had a much higher prevalence of acute respiratory problems than other children (26 percent vs. 15 percent), believed to be a result of cotton dust exposure.

### **NEGLECTED HAZARDS:**

There is a growing body of research to indicate that workers involved with carpet making face a number of serious occupational safety and health (OSH) hazards. These include exposure to toxic chemicals,

inhaling cotton and wool dust, awkward positions, poorly designed tools, repetitive movements and stressful working conditions including insufficient rest periods, inadequate lighting and poor temperature. Most carpet-making activities are not covered by government regulation, and workers are rarely organized in unions and professional associations. Thus, it is easy to neglect safety and health hazards and difficult for government agencies to address them. Lastly, the relevant international OSH standards treat carpet making, among other industries, generically rather than addressing industry-specific hazards.

### **WORKABLE SOLUTIONS:**

Given the practical challenges in government regulation of the carpet industry, certification programs are playing an important role in improving industry standards. For example, the Social Accountability International's SA 8000 and the International Standardization Organization's ISO 26000 certifications, among others, cover basic OSH guidelines based on ILO Conventions. The International Finance Corporation, the private lending arm of the World Bank Group, requires certain standards on social and environmental sustainability be met in connection with its lending practices. Good Weave's new standard also outlines specific worker safety and health criteria its licensed manufacturers must meet, in addition to requiring effective mechanisms for worker grievances. The work of standard-setting and other relevant organizations can open the door to technical cooperation between researchers, business and government in order to tap into existing knowledge of OSH challenges and viable solutions.

### **CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS:**

In conclusion it can be said that developments are improving industry practices, but sound government policies can and should accelerate this process. Occupational safety and health is a business responsibility, yet it cannot be left to industry alone. Governments must protect workers from occupational hazards via effective policies as well as improved or better enforced legislation. The occupational hazards facing working children remain a special concern. Children's work in this industry should be stopped, not improved.

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