

Handloom, Heritage and Identity: The Weaving Industry of Boudh District

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Abstract

The handloom industry of Boudh district in Odisha represents a living repository of heritage, memory, skill, and community identity. Located in the Mahanadi valley belt of western Odisha. Boudh shares cultural affinities with the larger textile tradition of the region, where weaving has long been associated with ritual exchange and regional aesthetics. The weaving industry of Boudh district can be understood through three closely connected ideas: handloom, heritage, and identity. It may be argued that weaving in Boudh district is not only important from an economic point of view, but also serves as a means of preserving designs, skills, values and social status within local communities. At the same time, the handloom sector faces many challenges, such as dependence on middlemen, changing consumer demand, uncertain access to raw materials, competition from mechanized textiles and the declining interest of younger generations in hereditary occupations. By placing Boudh within the broader context of Odisha's handloom economy, the article highlights the need for design innovation, branding, market linkages and heritage-sensitive policy support.

Keywords: Handloom, Heritage, Identity, Weaving Industry

Introduction

Handloom refers to the traditional practice of weaving cloth, using skills and inherited techniques rather than mechanized production. It is not only a method of making fabric but also a livelihood practice deeply rooted in local knowledge and craftsmanship. In this context, cultural heritage and legacy are the traditions that communities receive from earlier generations and preserve through customs, designs, skills, and values. It includes both material and non-material elements of culture that connect the past with the present. Identity refers to the social and cultural sense of belonging that individuals and communities express through weaving traditions. (Hall, S. 1996) Through patterns, colours, techniques and shared practices, handloom becomes a marker of regional distinctiveness and collective memory. Thus, handloom, heritage and identity are closely linked because weaving is not an economic activity. it is also a living expression of culture, continuity and community self-recognition.

The term textile comes from the Latin word *textilis*, meaning “woven,” and from the root *texere*, which means “to weave.” (Joseph, 1977).

Weaving as a technique is believed to be about 6,000 years old and is generally associated with the earliest settled life of human beings during the Neolithic period. (Bargar, 1990, p.132)

The term *textile* originally meant “of or pertaining to weaving” or “capable of being woven,” and it emerged in the 1650s from the noun *textile*, which derives from the Latin adjective *textilis*, meaning “woven.” (Online Etymology Dictionary)

In Sanskrit, *taksati* means “to fashion” or “to construct,” while *taksana* means “carpenter.” Similarly in Persian, *taxs* means “to be active”, in Latin, *texere* means “to weave”, in Greek, *tekton* means “carpenter”; in Irish *tal* means “cooper’s axe” and in Hittite, *taksh* means “to join” or “to build.”

There are some important weaver community in Odisha like- Sarbak community of Cuttack district, Kostas community of Sambalpur and Sonepur district, Devangas community of Berhampur district, Pataras community of Nuapatna Cuttack district, Rangani community of Khorda and Cuttack district Mirgan community of Koraput district and Bhulia Meher, community of Sambalpur, Sonepur, Bargarh and Boudh district. Among them Bhulia Meher are the prominent weaver community in Odisha. Weaving is a systematic and intricate process in which two sets of yarn are interlaced the lengthwise yarn is called ‘warp yarn’ and the widthwise is called ‘weft yarn’. The handloom industry occupies a very special place in cultural and economic life of India. This is one of the country’s largest traditional livelihood platform and continues to support a very large number of weavers and allied workers. In Odisha handloom remains an important part of the regional livelihood to sustain their economy and artistic heritage. In this way, Boudh district represents its understudied cultural importance through weaving skills. The significance lies in the continuity of technological skills, family-based production and association with western Odisha’s textile tradition. Thus, Odisha continues to hold a prominent place in India’s handloom landscape and that Boudh has a long connection with recognized weaving centres such as Manamunda supported by documentary references to cooperative organization, cluster development and award-winning weavers. The weaving industry of Boudh district requires moving beyond a narrow economic approach. Handloom is not only producing clothes but also a social institution rooted in inherited knowledge, symbolic motifs, community organization and regional belonging. In Boudh district weaving connects technical skill with family tradition and cloth with identity. Weaving culture of Boudh has been shaped by the historical role of the Bhulia Meher community household-based apprenticeship and a wider cultural geography linked to neighbouring weaving centres such as Sambalpur, Subarnapur and Bargarh. At the same time the weaving industry has been undergoing structural transformation under the influence of industrial production, changing markets and the aspirations of younger generations.

Historical Background of Weaving in Boudh

Boudh district, located in the central part of Odisha, is one of the traditional weaving regions of Western Odisha. Although it is not as prominent as the neighbouring districts like Bargarh, Sonepur, or Sambalpur, Boudh has a rich handloom and weaving tradition rooted in the cultural heritage of the Bhulia Meher or Mehera community, who are renowned for their *ikat* or *bandha* weaving style. The district’s weaving industry forms an important part of its rural economy and cultural identity. After China, India is one of the largest producers of cotton and silk, contributing 18% significantly to the global textile sector. An early presence of cotton in ancient India is evidenced by archaeological findings from Mehrgarh, while the earliest traces of cotton weaving have been discovered at Mohenjo-daro, which is now located in present-day Pakistan. In Odisha, the tradition of weaving can be traced through the sculptures and carvings of the Khandagiri caves and weaving motifs are also visible in the temple art of Boudh and Sonepur. These sources indicate that weaving has a long and rich history in the region. There is also a historical tradition regarding the origin of the weaving industry in the Boudh-Sonepur region. It is believed that in the

fourteenth century, Raja Ramai Dev of Patnagarh invited one hundred weaver families from Raipur, in present-day Chhattisgarh, to settle in this area. These weavers belonged to the Bhulia community, and many of them bore the title “Meher.” Over time, they became closely associated with the handloom tradition of western Odisha and played an important role in preserving and developing the weaving heritage of Boudh and Sonepur.

Manga as Heritage



Figure No. 1



Figure No. 2

The Meher community of Boudh has long depended on two types of weaving machines like pit loom and frame loom locally known as “*manga*” for the production of handloom textiles. Among these the traditional *manga* represents an older indigenous technology that has been used for generations and continues to reflect the hereditary weaving practices of the region. This pit loom or traditional loom is structurally distinctive because it is designed partly below the ground and partly above the ground. In this arrangement the weaver sits at the edge of a pit, with the legs placed in the underground section which allows easier control of the pedals movements of the loom. There are two pedals known as *Phera*. Which is in right foot in known as “*Bhujni phera*” And which is in left foot is known as “*Debri phera*”.

Owing to this feature, it may be understood as a type of pit loom or weaving device closely associated with older rural handloom traditions. The structure of this traditional *manga* or pit loom reveals the close relationship between local technology, labour and domestic production. Its comparatively small and simple construction suggests that it was developed not for large-scale commercial production but for household-based weaving within a community setting. The loom is functional, economical and well suited to the needs of traditional weavers who worked with limited resources but possessed considerable technical skill. Another important aspect of this machine is its accessibility as both male and female

members of the Meher community can operate it. This suggests that weaving in Boudh has historically been a family-centred occupation in which labour participation was shared rather than strictly confined to one gender. Therefore, the traditional *manga* is not merely a weaving device it is also an important cultural and economic instrument that reflects the continuity of indigenous knowledge, the adaptation of technology to local conditions, and the social organization of weaving within the Meher community.



Figure No. 3

The frame loom or modern “*manga*” used by the Meher weavers of Boudh shows how the weaving tradition has gradually adapted to changing needs and new techniques. Unlike the older pit loom this type of “*manga*” allows the weaver to sit more comfortably and work with greater freedom. The weaver may sit on the ground in a relaxed position and in some cases can also use a chair while weaving. This makes the process less physically restrictive and more convenient, especially when weaving for long hours. The modern *manga* is also larger and better designed for handling different kinds of patterns. It helps the weaver produce a greater variety of designs and gives the cloth a smoother and finer finish. In this sense, it has become an important tool for improving both the quality of weaving and the range of designs produced in Boudh. At the same time the use of the modern “*manga*” also reflects certain changes in the social experience of weaving. It is more efficient and supports more detailed and attractive work, which is useful in the present market-oriented environment. However, not everyone experiences this new technology in the same way. Although both men and women are involved in weaving women are often found to be less comfortable using the modern *manga* than men. This may be related to the physical structure of the loom, the nature of the work, or differences in long-term familiarity and training. Therefore, the modern *manga* is not only a sign of technological progress but also an example of how change in traditional occupations can create different experiences for different members of the weaving community.



Figure No. 4

Structural framework of manga



Figure No. 5



Figure no. 6

The *manga* or loom is made up of many different parts and each part has its own name and role in the weaving process. All of these parts work together from the very beginning of sari making to the final stage of weaving. Some parts are used to arrange and hold the threads properly some help in the movement of the warp and weft and others support the weaver in keeping the design and rhythm of the work. Because of this, the loom cannot be understood as a single tool, it is a complete system in which every part has its own importance. The making of a sari is therefore a gradual and carefully managed process, where each part of the *manga* contributes to the quality and beauty of the final cloth. Understanding these parts and their functions also helps us appreciate the technical knowledge, patience and traditional skill of the weaver. “*Thun*” is a large wooden beam located at the front of the handloom, close to the weaver's abdomen where the weaver sits during the weaving process. It serves as an important structural support for weaving. To ensure that the sari remains firm and tightly woven, the weaver uses two bamboo sticks known as *Kanni Kanta*. To keep the warp threads properly separated and aligned a specially designed frame is used called *Hata*. Each individual thread passes through a separate hole called *Bai* of the *Hata* preventing the threads from becoming tangled and allowing the weaving process to proceed smoothly and accurately. During weaving *Nari* (figure no 6) moves from right to left and left to right. the weaver holds the *Muthi* in the right hand and the *Hata* in the left hand. The *Muthi* functions as the central operating unit of the loom and plays a crucial role in initiating the weaving process. By moving the *Muthi* alternately to the left and right the weaver interlaces the threads gradually producing the fabric of the sari. The structural frame of the thread-rounding machine is known as *Chhatta*. It is suspended by three large wooden supports, among which two are positioned on either side and one long wooden beam is placed underneath these is known as the *Chhatta Stand*. Before the weaving process begins the threads are wound and arranged on the *Chhatta*. When the threads are completely covered and prepared on *Chhatta* it is passed through the *Manga* for weaving. At this stage the prepared threads are known as *Banddha* (thread). Another essential component in the weaving process is the *Phulbai*, which is primarily used for creating designs on the sari. Different types of *Phulbai* are selected according to the desired pattern or motif. It enables the weaver to produce a wide variety of intricate and decorative designs, enhancing the aesthetic beauty and uniqueness

of the finished sarrie. Both ends of the sari are known as *Fula*. Next to the *Fula* is the *Dhadi Fula*. After the *Dhadi Fula* comes the *Dhadi Bandha*, which consists of 55 number of threads. It is also known as "*Panchaban Kari Dhadi Bandha*."

Problem of the study

The weavers are facing problems in obtaining raw materials.

Industrial production has reduced the sale of handmade cloth.

The weaving tradition of the Meheras survives between modernization and cultural continuity.

Objectives

The present article examines the handloom as a livelihood practice, heritage as an inherited as a form of individual, communal and regional self-recognition.

The main argument is that Boudh's handloom tradition survives because it is not a market activity but a deeply embedded cultural system.

To examine the effects of industrial intervention on the livelihood of the weavers.

Methodology

This work is mainly qualitative and case study based. First, I prepared a report on the villagers and explained the purpose, objectives and significance of the study. Then examined their availability and occupational involvement in order to understand their socio-economic conditions. Personal interviews and group discussions were conducted to collect information about their history, weaving techniques, technological interventions, business development and major problems. Through primary data, including interviews and one-to-one interactions, I analyzed government policy support, institutional facilities, levels of exposure and stakeholder assistance. Secondary data were collected from journals, magazines and official letters from the Assistant Director of Textiles, ORMAS, the Textile Committee, the Director of State Handlooms and local NGOs to prepare an analytical report.

Sample Size: 20 respondents from different houses

Findings and Possibilities for Revival

The weavers of the Meher community are facing many challenges in the digital era. The Government has introduced several schemes for the Meher weavers, under which they have received Manga and houses free of cost to support their weaving activities. However, they still depend on third parties for the supply of thread. Due to the unavailability of thread, the weavers depend on a third party for its supply. The third party provides the thread and purchases the finished clothes from the weavers at a predetermined price, thereby earning a substantial profit while the weavers receive only a limited share of the income. During my field visits for data collection, I was shocked to observe that every member of the family worked in the weaving process from morning until night. If all the family members are contributing to the work, they deserve better recognition and fair remuneration for their labour. This situation could be improved if the Government took responsibility for supplying thread directly to the weavers and purchasing their woven products at a fair price. Such an initiative would reduce their dependence on middlemen and ensure better economic benefits for the Meher weaving community.

Secondly, it has been affected by modernity. Although the government has provided modern machines,

many weavers do not know how to access or operate it. To overcome this problem the government should provide special training programmes to help the weavers use these machines effectively.

Thirdly, nowadays the growing popularity of Sambalpuri saree has reduced the production of traditional ordinary cloth. Because of the high demand and better market price of Sambalpuri saris, many weavers are stop to weave the normal clothes about five years ago. As a result, this traditional weaving practice is gradually disappearing. Therefore, the government should take appropriate measures to preserve the production of these traditional clothes as they are an important part of the region's cultural identity and weaving heritage.

The Government of Odisha and India has introduced several welfare and development schemes for handloom weavers. Under the Hathkargha Samvardhan Sahayata (HSS) scheme, technological upgradation is provided with 90% financial assistance, while the weaver contributes only 10% of the cost. The Concessional Credit/Weaver MUDRA Scheme offers collateral-free term loans with subsidy, provides 20% margin money assistance (up to ₹25,000), and keeps the interest rate at 6% per annum for the first three years. Other schemes, such as the Mukhyamantri Hastatanta Bikasha Yojana (MBHY), Mukhyamantri Bayan Jyoti Scheme and the Handloom Weavers' Comprehensive Welfare Scheme (HWCWS) have also been launched. However, many weavers remain unaware of these schemes and are therefore unable to benefit from them. This issue can be addressed through awareness programmes and outreach activities at the village level. Despite these challenges, some active weavers of Boudh district have participated in these schemes and received benefits. The details of such beneficiaries are presented in the data given below.

Sl. No	Name of the scheme	2016-17		2017-18		2018-19		2019-20 (till date)	
		Funds allocated (RE)	Funds released	Funds allocated (RE)	Funds released	Funds allocated (RE)	Funds allocated (RE)	Funds allocated	Funds released
1	National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP)	167.53	153.56	140.24	135.05	138.53	119.72	135.00	97.74
2	Comprehensive Handloom Cluster Development Scheme (CHCDS)	50.00	40.11	32.50	31.82	21.50	16.38	40.00	6.92
3	Handloom Weavers' Comprehensive Welfare	26.56	26.56	25.00	24.98	10.05	2.06	20.00	7.96

	Scheme (HWCWS)								
4	Yarn Supply Scheme (YSS)	261.50	261.35	200.00	199.84	155.41	126.84	195.00	105.03
	Total	505.59	481.58	397.74	391.69	325.49	265.00	265.00	217.65

State-wise and Scheme-wise number of handloom weavers benefited under various schemes of this office in the last three years and the current year are indicated at Annexure-II. (Ministry of Textiles Handloom Weavers, 13 DEC 2019 5:26PM by PIB Delhi)

Sl. No	State	No. of allied workers	No. of weavers
1	Odisha	64364	53472

Statement showing State-wise number of weavers and allied weavers in the country as per the 4th All India Handloom Census (2019-20) (Ministry of Textiles Handloom Weavers, 13 DEC 2019 5:26PM by PIB Delhi)

Sl, No	States	NHDP & CHCDS	NHDP		HWCWS		
		No. of beneficiaries of Block Level Clusters	No. of beneficiaries of Marketing events	No. of beneficiaries of concessional loans (MUDRA Scheme)	No. of weavers enrolled under PMJJY/ PMSBY	No. of weavers enrolled under MGBBY/ converged MGBBY	
1	Odisha	5200	37000	2876	9930	28204	
Total		83210					

Scheme-wise number of handloom weavers benefited under various schemes in the last three years (2016-17 to 2018-19) and the current year (2019-20 till 30-9-2019). (Ministry of Textiles Handloom Weavers, 13 DEC 2019 5:26PM by PIB Delhi)

Conclusion

Weaving is a living tradition of craftsmanship, community and cultural continuity of Boudh district. Despite facing numerous economic and structural challenges, Bhagwati Meher, Arjun Meher, and several other weavers have established themselves as renowned handloom weavers of Boudh district. It is a cluster with great potential for revival of clothes and thanks to its innovative design and sustainable marketing. If

the right directions are given and promoted the weaving industry of Boudh district may be a big component of the rich handloom tradition of Odisha.

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