Working and Performance of Handloom Cooperatives in Kerala: A Critical Evaluation

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Abstract
The handloom sector occupies an important position in Kerala's traditional and rural economy by providing livelihoods, sustaining artisan communities and preserving textile traditions. In Kerala, cooperative institutions have historically played a major role in organizing handloom production, procurement, marketing and welfare activities. This study evaluates the recent working and performance of handloom cooperative societies in Kerala with reference to institutional structure, loom capacity, value of production, sales turnover, number of weavers and employment generation during 2019–20 to 2024–25. The study is based on secondary data compiled from the Economic Review publications of the Kerala State Planning Board and other published government and academic sources. Descriptive analysis and year-on-year growth rates are used to examine changes in the selected indicators. The results show a contraction in loom capacity and the number of weavers over the study period, substantial fluctuations in production and employment, and a pronounced decline in sales turnover. The findings suggest that the sustainability of handloom cooperatives depends not only on maintaining production capacity but also on improving market access, product diversification, design capabilities, digital marketing, remuneration and institutional efficiency. The study concludes that a member-centered cooperative model needs to be complemented by professional marketing, technology-enabled management and stronger market linkages while preserving the traditional identity of Kerala handloom products.

Keywords: handloom; cooperative societies; weavers; production; sales turnover; employment; Kerala; non-credit cooperatives.

1. Introduction

Handloom weaving has long been an important traditional economic activity in Kerala and continues to contribute to the State’s rural and non-farm economy. The significance of the sector goes beyond textile production, as it provides livelihood opportunities, preserves traditional weaving skills and supports the continuation of distinctive textile practices associated with different regions of the State. Handloom production is mainly concentrated in Thiruvananthapuram and Kannur, while smaller clusters are also found in Kozhikode, Palakkad, Thrissur, Ernakulam, Kollam and Kasaragod (Kerala State Planning Board, 2017).

Cooperatives have played a significant role in organizing and supporting handloom production in Kerala. The cooperative sector historically represented a major share of the State’s handloom capacity, accounting for nearly 96 per cent of the total looms according to the Economic Review 2016 (Kerala

State Planning Board, 2017). Although this proportion has changed in recent years, official statistics show that cooperatives continue to constitute an important part of organized handloom production in the State (Kerala State Planning Board, 2026). Primary handloom weavers' cooperative societies support their members through activities such as procurement of raw materials, coordination of production, marketing of finished products and provision of various welfare-related services.

Despite its institutional importance, the handloom sector continues to face several challenges. Competition from power looms and mill-produced textiles, increasing production costs, limited marketing opportunities, inadequate diversification of products and the declining interest of younger generations in weaving have affected the sustainability of the sector (Varghese & Salim, 2015; Aswani & Bhat, 2022; Sishina, 2024). Studies relating to handloom cooperatives in different parts of India further indicate that the performance of these institutions is closely associated with their ability to provide reliable markets, generate income for members and extend effective institutional support to weavers (Datta & Agrawal, 2018; Bhowmik, 2021; Meher et al., 2024).

In this context, the present study examines the recent performance of the handloom cooperative sector in Kerala. The analysis moves beyond a general assessment of the handloom industry and focuses on selected institutional and performance indicators over a period of six financial years. By examining changes in productive capacity, production and sales performance, the study seeks to understand whether the cooperative system has been able to convert its existing production base into sustained economic activity and livelihood opportunities for its members.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To evaluate the working and recent performance of handloom cooperative societies in Kerala.
- To analyses trends in the number of societies, looms, production, sales turnover, weavers and employment during 2019–20 to 2024–25.
- To identify major structural and market-related challenges affecting the handloom cooperative sector.
- To suggest institutional and policy measures for strengthening handloom cooperatives as an important component of Kerala's non-credit cooperative sector.

3. Review of Literature

Varghese and Salim (2015): examined the problems and challenges of the handloom industry in Kerala and highlighted competition from power looms, marketing constraints, declining employment and the need for appropriate policy intervention.

Varghese and Salim (2015): also examined marketing issues in Kerala's handloom industry and emphasized the importance of improving market access, promotion and marketing management.

Datta and Agrawal (2018): studied the economic impact of handloom cooperatives on weavers and recognized cooperatives as important institutional mechanisms for employment and livelihood support, while also noting differences in the effectiveness of cooperative management.

Bhowmik (2021): analysed cooperatives and non-cooperative institutions in the handloom sector using a transaction-cost perspective and linked cooperative organization with social responsibility and sustainable development outcomes.

Aswani and Bhat (2022): studied the problems and challenges of the handloom industry in Chendamangalam, Kerala, identifying raw-material costs, technological limitations, marketing constraints, competition and inadequate awareness of support programmes as major issues.

Sishina (2024): examined the crisis and survival of Kerala's handloom industry, with particular attention to the disruptions associated with COVID-19 and the need for product development, innovation and government support.

Meher, Venkatachalapathy and Panda (2024): compared income outcomes under different production-marketing arrangements in Odisha and found that cooperative participation could provide better outcomes than the master-weaver system, although cooperative employment remained limited in the study area.

Faruque and Guha (2024): showed that access to market information, collective action, credit and transaction-cost conditions influence the choice of marketing channels among handloom micro-entrepreneurs, reinforcing the importance of market institutions.

Dhanya (2026): examined the role of the Balaramapuram handloom industry in rural development and highlighted employment generation and the contribution of the sector to rural livelihoods.

The literature establishes the socio-economic importance of handloom production and identifies persistent constraints affecting the sector. However, there is comparatively limited recent secondary-data research that simultaneously examines the institutional structure, productive capacity, production value, sales turnover, weaver strength and employment generated by Kerala's handloom cooperatives over a common time period. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing these indicators for 2019–20 to 2024–25.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. It is based exclusively on secondary data obtained from the Economic Review publications of the Kerala State Planning Board and other published government sources. The analysis covers the financial years 2019–20 to 2024–25. The principal variables examined are the number and type of handloom cooperative societies, number of looms, value of production, sales turnover, number of weavers and employment generated in person-days.

Year-on-year growth rates are calculated as: Growth rate (%) = [(Current year value − Previous year value) / Previous year value] × 100. The overall percentage change between 2019–20 and 2024–25 is also calculated to identify the direction and magnitude of long-term change. No primary survey or causal econometric model is used; therefore, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive evidence of sectoral trends rather than as estimates of causal effects.

An important data limitation should be noted. The official Economic Review reports contain both aggregate handloom-sector indicators and cooperative-sector indicators. The numerical series used in the tables below are retained from the working dataset supplied for this study and should therefore be cited as the cooperative-sector series. They should not be presented as total Kerala handloom-sector figures unless the corresponding official table explicitly identifies them as such.

5. Analysis of thePerformance of Handloom Cooperatives of Kerala

5.1 Number of Handloom Cooperative Societies

The number and composition of primary handloom cooperative societies in Kerala during the period 2019–20 to 2024–25 are presented in Table 1. The table provides year-wise data on factory-type societies, cottage-type societies, and the total number of registered societies.

Year	Factory type	Cottage type	Total registered
2019–20	180	444	630
2020–21	208	319	628
2021–22	208	319	526
2022–23	208	319	532
2023–24	208	319	527
2024–25	198	341	539

Source: Compiled from the Economic Review publications of the Kerala State Planning Board.

5.2 Number of Looms

The number of looms available in primary handloom cooperative societies in Kerala during the period 2019–20 to 2024–25 is presented in Table 2. The table shows the year-wise variation in the productive capacity of the handloom cooperative sector during the study period.

Year	Number of looms	Growth (%)
2019–20	15,851	—
2020–21	15,405	-2.81
2021–22	13,715	-10.97
2022–23	13,502	-1.55
2023–24	14,064	4.16
2024–25	13,063	-7.12

Source: Compiled from the Economic Review publications of the Kerala State Planning Board.

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5.3 Value of Production

The value of production of primary handloom cooperative societies in Kerala during the period 2019–20 to 2024–25 is presented in Table 3. The table highlights the year-wise changes in the value of handloom production and its growth during the study period.

Year	Value of production (₹ crore)	Growth (%)
2019–20	89.90	—
2020–21	40.66	-54.77
2021–22	95.42	134.68
2022–23	91.81	-3.78
2023–24	96.34	4.93
2024–25	82.05	-14.83

Source: Compiled from the Economic Review publications of the Kerala State Planning Board.

5.4 Sales Turnover

The sales turnover of primary handloom cooperative societies in Kerala during the period 2019–20 to 2024–25 is presented in Table 4. The table shows the year-wise changes in sales turnover and the corresponding growth rate during the study period.

Year	Sales turnover (₹ crore)	Growth (%)
2019–20	208.35	—
2020–21	156.94	-24.67
2021–22	107.91	-31.24
2022–23	98.79	-8.45
2023–24	97.30	-1.51
2024–25	78.35	-19.48

Source: Compiled from the Economic Review publications of the Kerala State Planning Board.

5.5 Number of Weavers

The number of weavers associated with primary handloom cooperative societies in Kerala during the period 2019–20 to 2024–25 is presented in Table 5. The table shows the year-wise changes in the strength of the weaving workforce and its growth during the study period.

Year	Number of weavers	Growth (%)
2019–20	12,666	—
2020–21	12,458	-1.64
2021–22	11,857	-4.82
2022–23	11,559	-2.51
2023–24	12,085	4.55
2024–25	11,085	-8.27

Source: Compiled from the Economic Review publications of the Kerala State Planning Board.

5.6 Employment Generated

The employment generated by primary handloom cooperative societies in Kerala during the period 2019–20 to 2024–25 is presented in Table 6. The table indicates the year-wise changes in employment generated, measured in lakh person-days, along with the corresponding growth rate.

	Employment generated (lakh person-days)	Growth (%)
2019–20	30.14	—
2020–21	10.66	-64.63
2021–22	9.33	-12.48
2022–23	12.37	32.58
2023–24	8.13	-34.28
2024–25	13.57	66.91

Source: Compiled from the Economic Review publications of the Kerala State Planning Board

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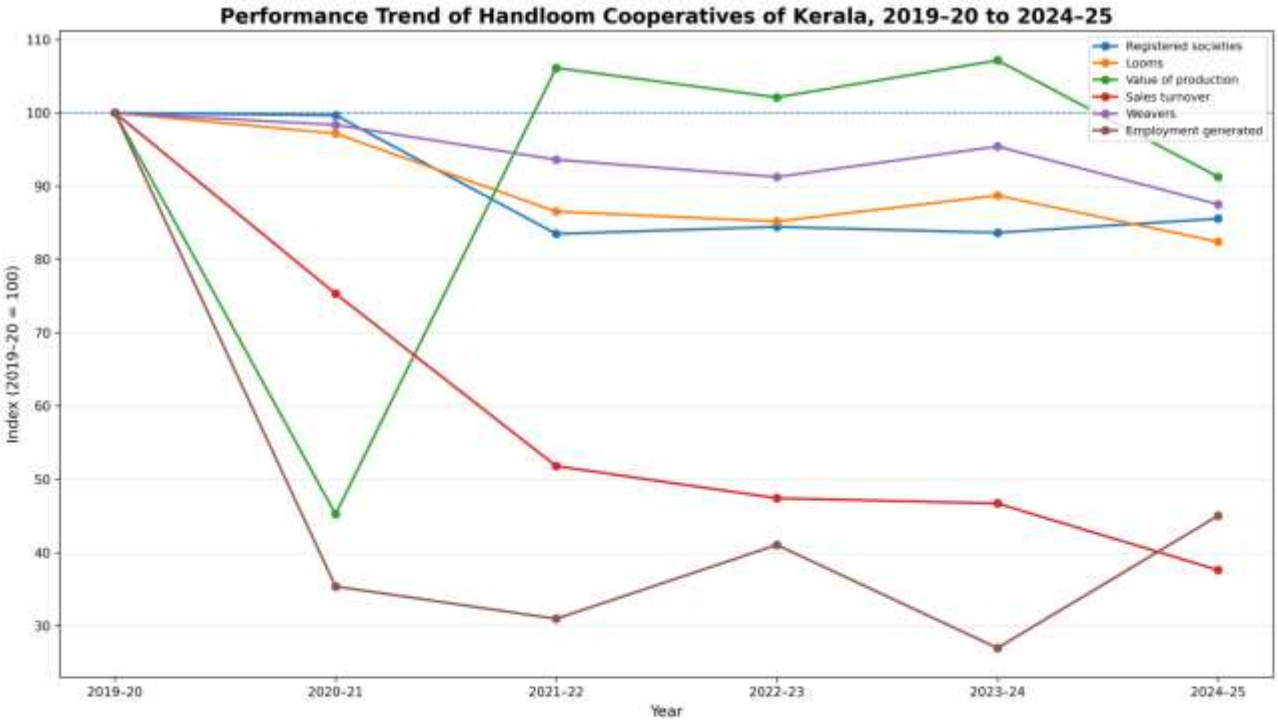

Discussion

The performance of primary handloom cooperative societies in Kerala during 2019–20 to 2024–25 shows several important changes in the structure and functioning of the sector. The indicators relating to the number of societies, productive capacity, production, sales, workforce and employment do not follow a single downward trend. Instead, the period witnessed a combination of institutional adjustments, reduced productive capacity, fluctuations in production, a substantial weakening of sales performance and a decline in employment opportunities. These trends indicate that the difficulties faced by handloom cooperatives are not confined to production-related issues alone. Their ability to maintain viable markets, sustain employment and ensure the long-term economic viability of cooperative institutions has also become a major concern.

The number of registered primary handloom cooperative societies fell from 630 in 2019–20 to 527 in 2020–21. Thereafter, the number remained relatively stable and increased slightly to 539 by 2024–25. This pattern may be viewed as an indication of institutional reorganisation rather than a persistent decline in the cooperative network. Changes in the composition of the societies further support this observation. Factory-type societies increased from 180 to 208 in 2020–21 and subsequently declined to 198 in 2024–25. Cottage-type societies, on the other hand, recorded a considerable reduction during the initial period but recovered to 341 by 2024–25. Therefore, the changes in the total number of societies cannot be interpreted independently of the changes occurring within their organisational categories. The overall pattern suggests that primary handloom cooperatives have been undergoing adjustments in their organisational structure in response to changing economic and operational conditions, rather than experiencing a simple and continuous numerical decline.

A significant issue emerging from the analysis is the decline in the productive capacity of the handloom cooperative sector. The number of looms decreased from 15,851 in 2019–20 to 13,063 in 2024–25, indicating an overall reduction of 17.59 per cent during the study period. A temporary increase in the number of looms was recorded in 2023–24; however, this improvement was followed by another decline in the succeeding year. The reduction in loom capacity has direct implications for the functioning of handloom cooperatives. As looms represent the principal physical asset used in weaving, a sustained decrease in their number can limit the volume of work available to weavers and affect the capacity of societies to maintain regular production. The overall trend therefore indicates a gradual contraction of the physical production base of the cooperative handloom sector.

The movement in the value of production shows a different pattern, with considerable fluctuations during the period under study. Production value fell substantially from ₹89.90 crore in 2019–20 to ₹40.66 crore in 2020–21. It subsequently improved and reached ₹96.34 crore in 2023–24, before declining again to ₹82.05 crore in 2024–25. Despite the recovery recorded during the intervening years, the production value at the end of the study period remained 8.73 per cent below the level recorded in 2019–20. The sharp decline coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions, which likely disrupted production and marketing activities. The strong recovery in the following years indicates that handloom cooperatives were capable of restoring a substantial portion of their production activity. Nevertheless, the decline recorded in 2024–25 after the peak in 2023–24 suggests that the recovery has remained uneven and has not yet translated into a consistent upward trend in production.

Among the indicators examined, sales turnover emerges as one of the major areas of concern. It fell from ₹208.35 crore in 2019–20 to ₹78.35 crore in 2024–25, recording a decline of 62.40 per cent. The extent of this reduction is considerably higher than the decline observed in production value. This difference between production and sales performance is noteworthy, as the recovery in production during the later years did not result in a similar improvement in sales. The divergence between production value and sales turnover indicates a weakening of commercial performance, although the available secondary data do not permit direct assessment of the relationship between annual production and annual sales.

The gap between production and sales also highlights the importance of examining the market position of cooperative handloom products. The secondary data used in the study are not sufficient to identify the specific factors responsible for the fall in sales. However, the observed trend may be indicative of continuing market-related difficulties. Competition from powerloom and mill-made products, changes in consumer preferences, pricing constraints, limited product diversification, inadequate market reach, and weaknesses in branding and promotional activities may influence the sales performance of the cooperatives. These factors require further investigation through primary-level studies. The persistence of low sales even during years when production improved indicates that increasing production capacity alone may not be adequate to strengthen the overall economic performance of handloom cooperatives. Greater attention to marketing, product development and market expansion may also be necessary.

The changes in the number of weavers provide another indication of the challenges facing the sector. The workforce decreased from 12,666 weavers in 2019–20 to 11,085 in 2024–25, representing a decline of 12.48 per cent. A slight improvement was recorded in 2023–24, but this was followed by a decline in the subsequent year. The reduction in the number of weavers is particularly important for an industry that depends heavily on skilled manual labour. A sustained contraction of the workforce may affect the availability of experienced weavers and the transmission of traditional weaving skills. It also raises concerns about the capacity of cooperative societies to attract younger workers and maintain the continuity of the occupation over the long term.

Employment generated by the cooperative handloom sector also shows a considerable decline. Person-days of employment decreased from 30.14 lakh in 2019–20 to 10.66 lakh in 2020–21 and reached the lowest level of 8.13 lakh in 2023–24. Although employment increased to 13.57 lakh person-days in 2024–25, it was still 54.98 per cent lower than the level recorded at the beginning of the study period. The relatively limited recovery in employment, compared with the improvement in production, is significant. It suggests that an increase in production does not necessarily result in a proportional increase in employment within the cooperative handloom sector. Factors such as changes in labour productivity, utilisation of looms, work allocation, production practices and the nature of products produced could influence this relationship. However, establishing the contribution of these factors would require more detailed data and further empirical investigation.

Overall, the findings indicate that the different dimensions of performance in Kerala's primary handloom cooperative sector have moved in different directions during the study period. While the number of societies showed some degree of stabilisation and production recovered considerably after the sharp decline during 2020–21, the number of looms and weavers decreased over the period. More importantly, sales turnover recorded a substantial decline, while employment remained considerably below its initial level. The evidence therefore points to an uneven recovery in the sector. Restoration of production activity by itself has not been sufficient to revive the commercial and employment dimensions of the cooperative handloom sector. A sustainable improvement would require attention not only to productive capacity but also to market development, employment generation and the long-term availability of skilled weaving labour.

The findings are particularly significant when the role of handloom cooperatives is considered in a broader context. Handloom cooperatives are not merely production and marketing institutions; they also serve as mechanisms for providing livelihood opportunities and sustaining traditional weaving skills. Therefore, the decline in the number of weavers and person-days of employment has implications beyond the financial performance of individual societies. A reduction in employment opportunities can make weaving less attractive as a livelihood and may accelerate the movement of skilled workers towards other occupations. Over time, this can create a cycle in which declining employment reduces the availability of skilled labour, which in turn constrains the productive capacity of the sector.

Another important implication concerns the relationship between production and market performance. The relatively moderate decline in production value compared with the much sharper decline in sales turnover suggests that the commercial side of the cooperative system requires particular attention. The sector appears to retain the capacity to produce, but this productive capacity is not being translated into equivalent sales performance. Consequently, policy measures aimed solely at increasing production may have limited impact unless they are accompanied by measures to strengthen market access and demand.

The overall findings therefore suggest that the future sustainability of handloom cooperatives in Kerala depends on addressing both supply-side and demand-side constraints. On the supply side, attention is required to maintain and modernise looms, strengthen the skilled workforce, improve productivity and encourage younger generations to enter the sector. On the demand side, greater emphasis may be required on product diversification, design innovation, branding, digital marketing, market expansion and the development of stronger direct connections with consumers. Strengthening the marketing capabilities of cooperative societies is particularly important in view of the sharp decline in sales turnover despite the recovery in production.

Overall, the evidence does not support the conclusion that the handloom cooperative sector in Kerala is simply experiencing a continuous decline. Rather, it is undergoing structural adjustment accompanied by uneven recovery. The stabilisation in the number of societies and the recovery in production demonstrate the continuing relevance and potential of the cooperative model. However, the contraction in looms and the weaving workforce, together with the substantial decline in sales turnover and employment generation, indicates that this potential has not yet been converted into sustained economic and employment performance. The central challenge, therefore, is to ensure that the productive capabilities of handloom cooperatives are supported by adequate market opportunities and that improvements in production ultimately translate into higher sales, stable employment and sustainable livelihoods for the weaving community.

6. Emerging Challenges

Declining workforce: The reduction in the number of weavers raises concerns about skill retention and the future availability of experienced workers.

Competition from mechanized production: Power looms and mill-made textiles can compete on price and scale, placing pressure on handloom cooperatives.

Rising input costs: Higher yarn and other input costs can reduce margins and affect the income received by weavers.

Weak sales performance: The sharp fall in sales turnover indicates the need for stronger market intelligence, retail strategy and demand creation.

Changing consumer preferences: Handloom products need contemporary designs, colours, product formats and quality positioning without losing their traditional identity.

Technological and design constraints: Digital inventory systems, design development, quality management and appropriate production technologies can improve competitiveness while preserving handloom characteristics.

Youth retention and decent work: Low and uncertain returns can discourage younger workers from entering or remaining in weaving. Policies therefore need to address remuneration, working conditions and career prospects.

7. Suggestions for Strengthening Handloom Cooperatives

The findings suggest that improving the performance of the handloom cooperative sector requires attention to both production-related issues and market-oriented challenges. The adoption of technology can play a supportive role in this process, particularly in areas such as product design, inventory control, quality management, accounting and marketing. However, technology should be introduced in a manner that supports the traditional weaving process rather than displacing it. Such an approach can help cooperatives improve their efficiency and management practices while retaining the traditional skills, craftsmanship and distinctive identity associated with handloom products.

Product diversification and value addition also deserve greater attention. Cooperatives can explore opportunities beyond conventional handloom products by introducing contemporary clothing, household textiles, lifestyle products and other innovative textile items. Developing products that combine traditional weaving techniques with modern designs and changing consumer requirements could help broaden the customer base and create additional market opportunities. A stronger focus on value-added products may therefore enable handloom cooperatives to improve their market presence while ensuring that the traditional character of handloom production is retained.

Marketing and market access emerge as important areas requiring immediate attention, particularly in view of the substantial fall in sales turnover during the study period. Primary handloom cooperative societies need to strengthen their presence in emerging marketing channels by making greater use of digital catalogues, social media, e-commerce platforms and direct-to-consumer sales. Developing a unified Kerala handloom brand could also improve the visibility and market recognition of cooperative products. Such an initiative could emphasise the State's handloom heritage while incorporating features such as assured quality, product traceability and standardised packaging. Better coordination between primary societies and apex-level institutions is equally important. Production decisions should increasingly reflect market information, consumer demand and emerging preferences rather than being determined mainly by existing production capacity.

The long-term viability of the sector also depends on maintaining an adequate and skilled workforce. The decline in the number of weavers and the reduction in employment generation indicate the need for measures aimed at attracting and retaining younger people in handloom weaving. Apprenticeship and skill-development programmes organised in association with cooperative societies could provide young entrants with practical training as well as clearer employment opportunities. However, training alone may not be sufficient to retain workers. Improvements in wages, employment security and working conditions are also necessary to make weaving a financially sustainable occupation. Skill programmes should further incorporate contemporary design techniques, quality requirements and relevant technological knowledge while continuing to preserve traditional weaving skills.

Stronger institutional and technical linkages could further support the development of the sector. Primary cooperatives may benefit from sustained collaboration with universities, design schools and institutions specialising in textile technology. Such partnerships can contribute to new product development, improved designs, quality enhancement and more efficient production practices. At the individual society level, regular monitoring of key indicators such as sales, inventory, production capacity, employment and member participation should also be introduced or strengthened. Reliable performance information would enable cooperative managers to identify emerging problems earlier and make decisions based on evidence rather than assumptions.

Government assistance should likewise be accompanied by clear performance objectives. Financial support and other forms of assistance could be linked to measurable improvements in productivity, market reach, member welfare and the financial and institutional sustainability of cooperative societies. Appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms would help determine whether public interventions are producing tangible benefits for cooperatives and their members. Overall, a coordinated strategy involving government departments, apex cooperative institutions, primary societies, educational and design institutions and market agencies is likely to be more effective than isolated measures. Such coordination can help the handloom cooperative sector build upon its existing strengths while addressing the continuing challenges related to marketing, employment and institutional sustainability.

8. Conclusion

The study reveals that the handloom cooperative sector in Kerala has undergone significant structural changes during 2019–20 to 2024–25. While production showed considerable recovery after the pandemic-related decline, the continued reduction in looms and weavers, together with the sharp fall in sales turnover and employment generation, indicates that the recovery has not been sustained across all dimensions.

The findings suggest that the major challenge lies not only in sustaining production but also in converting productive capacity into viable markets and stable employment. Strengthening product diversification, marketing and branding, appropriate technology adoption, skill development and youth participation is therefore essential. A coordinated approach by government and cooperative institutions is necessary to improve the commercial viability, employment potential and long-term sustainability of handloom cooperatives in Kerala.

9. Limitations of the Study

The study is based entirely on secondary data and is therefore subject to the definitions, coverage and reporting practices of the source institutions. The analysis is descriptive and does not establish causal relationships between institutional factors and performance. Further research based on primary data from selected cooperative societies could examine profitability, member satisfaction, wage levels, productivity per loom, inventory management, digital marketing adoption and the determinants of youth participation.

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