

# Status of Handloom Workers and Causes of Their Migration: A Study in Handloom Industry of Tangail District, Bangladesh

Subrata Banarjee<sup>1</sup> Md. Moniruzzaman Muzib<sup>2</sup> Shumona Sharmin<sup>1</sup>

1.Department of Criminology and Police Science, Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University,  
Santosh, Tangail-1902; Bangladesh

2.Department of Economics, Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University,  
Santosh, Tangail-1902; Bangladesh

\*E-mail of the corresponding author: banarjee.subrata@gmail.com

## Abstract

Handloom industry is the biggest handicraft industry in our country; it is the second largest source of rural employment after agriculture. This industry is an increasingly essential element of economic, social development and it has become one of the largest economic industries in Bangladesh. Handloom industry in Tangail has a glorious history of its own. The “Tangail Sharee” of Bangladesh has a great popularity and reputation within and outside the country. But day by day the number of weavers of the industry is decreasing in alarming rate and the industry is becoming smaller over time. Here the study tries to identify the factors of declining handloom workers in Tangail and their main causes of migration to India. Mainly case studies and interview have been taken to collect the primary data. A lot of research papers, websites, journals, and articles have been reviewed to know the relevant information and describing the history and development of the industry. Factors like fear of communal violence, increased price of raw materials, absence of loan from government, insufficient transport facility, better facilities in India, lack of security has been identified for their rapid migration to India.

**Keywords:** Handloom industry, weavers, Sharee, migration

## 1. Introduction and Background of the Study

Handloom sector in Bangladesh consists of more than 0.183 million handloom units with 0.505 million handlooms and about 1 million handloom weavers of which about 50% are female worker. A manpower of about one million weavers, dyers, hand spinners, embroiderers and allied artisans have been using their creative skills into more than 0.30 million active looms to produce around 687 million meters of fabrics annually. Production of these handloom fabrics is diffused in numerous production centers all over the country which are linked up by a network of primary, secondary and central markets. (<http://www.bhb.gov.bd/>; visited on 14th January, 2013). Handloom industry is the biggest handicraft industry in our country; it is the second largest source of rural employment after agriculture. The knowledge and skills needed for this sector transformed from their forefathers. (Ahmed, 2011)

This industry is an increasingly essential element of economic, social development and it has become one of the largest economic industries in Bangladesh. About 80 percent people of our country live in rural country sides. It is an underdeveloped and agro-based country. Most of the small and cottage industry of this country is built up on the basis of the supply of agro-products. During their economic transformation from an agricultural to an industrial society, most of the developing countries take different necessary steps for the rural development. Handloom weaving is one of the most important nonagricultural sources of income in Bangladesh. It plays an important role in generating local employment and linking with other sectors. It is the second largest source of rural employment after agriculture.

### 1.1 Origin and Development of Handloom Industry in Sub-Continent

Handloom industry is the most ancient (17th century, perhaps earlier) and the biggest cottage industry of Bangladesh. The call of Gandhi under the Swadeshi movement in 1906 to boycott cotton textiles from Lancashire and led to the rise of the handloom industry in East Bengal. This led to the growth of such important present-day handloom centres as Baburhat, Tangail, Kamarkhali, Shahzadpur and others. Bangladesh can proudly claim to have many branches of this ancient art, of which the best known and most popular is the specialty Jamdani, which is one of the varieties of the famous Dhaka Muslin or Mul-mul (Zohir, 1996). It played an important role in the economic activities of the Indian subcontinent. With the division of the subcontinent at independence, the handloom industry of East Pakistan was confronted with serious problems. The supply of yarn was disrupted, as most of the yarn-producing mills were located in India. The 11 modern textile mills located in East Pakistan were composite ones that had little or no surplus yarn for the handloom industry. Moreover, a large number of the traditional Hindu weavers migrated into India. During the Pakistan period (1947-71), the handloom sector experienced a rapid growth in the early 1950s, with the government lifting import restrictions and abolishing sales tax on yarn (Islam M R, 1992).

After independence, total installed handloom capacity at about 437 000, of which two-fifths were idle at

the time (Miyah, 1979, pp. 16-19). A handloom enterprise survey conducted by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) in 1987 estimated the number of looms to be 425300; however, the level of use of this capacity was found to be higher (three-fourths) than the 1978 census (Latif, 1988, pp. 95-108). According to the 1978 census, in the Dhaka division there are 183612 looms, of which 116002 are operational and 67610 are idle. The Rajshahi division has 105300 looms, of which 63 148 are operational and 42 152 are idle. Chittagong has 83136 looms, 48489 operational and 34647 idle, and Khulna has 64967 looms, 32282 operational and 32685 idle. Only about 59% of handlooms are operational (Report on Bangladesh handloom census, 1978). This low usage can be attributed to shortages of working capital and raw material and some seasonal variations in demand. It is to be noted that the Dhaka division, which has the leading share of looms, also has a higher usage – Rajshahi and Dhaka divisions have usages of about 67% and 63% respectively, whereas Chittagong is third with 58% and Khulna has 50%.

Handlooms are traditionally household units. It appears that the handloom industry is dominated by unit sizes of up to five looms; 72% of the total looms fall under this category. Units with 6 to 10 and 11 to 20 looms account for 11% and 6% of the total loom capacity. Units with 21 or more looms are considered small factories; they constitute about 11% of handloom capacity. A 1982 enquiry by the Ministry of Industries, however, shows that small factories have 20% of handlooms (Bangladesh, 1982b, pp. 18-19). Although handloom weaving is carried on throughout the country, it is traditionally concentrated in a few districts-- mainly Dhaka, Pabna, Comilla and Tangail -- in which there are about 70% of the installed looms and more than 79% of the total operated looms. Dhaka accounts for about 33% of the total operational capacity and about 35% of total employment. The next two important centres are Pabna and Comilla accounting for 22% and 16% of the operational capacity respectively. Dhaka has long been established as an important centre for handloom industry because of its skilled craftsmen and specialized products and continues to play a leading role (Routh, 1981, p. 3).

Handloom industry in Bangladesh is having glorious past, questionable present and blurry future due to a lot of internal and external factors that are acting behind the scene (Rahman M M, 2013). About 80% people of this country are directly or indirectly depend on agricultural. The loom industry is the ancient, the biggest and the most important cottage industry of Bangladesh. As it is the biggest handicraft industry in our country, it is the second largest source of rural employment after agriculture (Ahmed, 1999). Though the employment opportunity in this sector has been squeezed in the last 15 years, this sector is still offering employment to nearly 0.9 million weavers in rural area (ADB, 2002). This industry has lots of future prospects as well as glorious past. Handloom products have shown decisive upward trend in the export market since 1972 and Bangladeshi handloom products with their distinctive design and superior quality have created a niche for themselves in overseas markets (Sobhan, 1989).

This ancient and most important cottage industry of Bangladesh is now on the way of extinction because of various problems and barriers adjacent to this industry. Weavers in our country don't get quality raw materials at right time and at right price (Ahmed, 1999). Besides, Weavers are suffering from inadequate contemporary technology and scarcity of working capital which are mandatory to maintain the smooth flow of production (ADB, 2002). The entire improvement, growth and structural adjustment have been achieved near - total absence of public policies and programs (chowdhury, N 1989). At the time of independence over a thousand weavers societies were existed and now almost all of which are dormant due to lack of strategic vision from government to protect and promote this sector (Latif, M.A 1997). Weavers in our country don't get quality raw materials at right time and at right price (Ahmed, M.U 1999). Although, the technical skill of the weavers of Bangladesh is second to none in the handloom-producing world they are lagging behind in capturing the modern technology due to lack of infrastructural support from the government (Sobhan, 1989). Moreover, most of the weavers are Hindus in religion. There are afraid about the religious conflict. After independence, most of the Hindu weaver migrated from Bangladesh to India due to religious conflicts, robbing, lack of securities etc. The process of this type of migration is continued till to date. Thus it is an urgent need to mark the existing problem and future expectations of loom industry in Bangladesh. In our study we find out some problems of loom industry in Bangladesh like poor advertising, shortage of raw materials, inadequate capital, insufficient governmental facilities etc. Our broad objective is to find out the barriers and problems of the loom industry of Bangladesh, to provide a solution to these problems and to identify the potentiality of this sector.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to explore the present situation of Bangladesh loom industry. The key objectives of the study are given below-

1. To evaluate the present situation of handloom industry in Bangladesh;
2. To identify the factors of declining handloom workers in Tangail;
3. To identify the main causes of their migration to India.

### **3. Methodology of the Study**

To conduct the study, we went to Pathrail union (Delduar Thana) in Tangail district, Bangladesh where maximum loom industry is located. This place has a long history of producing Tangail Sharee. Mainly we used observational method to conduct the study. We also took some case studies to find out the causes of migration. For conducting case studies we talked with some households and collected information. For collecting secondary data we reviewed some research papers, websites, journals, and articles to get relevant information. The findings have been analysed descriptively from the case studies and relevant secondary information.

### **4. Findings of the study**

#### **4.1 Handloom Industry of Tangail**

Handloom industry in Tangail has a glorious history of its own. The “Tangail Sharee” of Bangladesh has a great popularity and reputation within and outside the country and this traditional Sharri is only produced in Tangail district and has been named after the name of the district. Each year, this industry produces significant number of Sharri and supplies all over the world. Each week Bangladeshi government exports around 50,000 piece Sharri to our neighbouring country India where the product is very demandable and popular. The international patent of Tangail Sharii bears the handloom industry of Tangail. The soft silk Sharee , cotton silk Sharee , Jamdani Sharee, Benarosee Sharee have brought revolutionary change in handloom industry of Bangladesh. They are widely recognized and reputed worldwide. Although the Tangail Sharee has a great competition with the India Sharee but still it is unique due to its original making process and from the ancient period the workers of Tagail handloom industry learns it traditionally. Historically, the Basak community of Patrail union of Tangail is the oldest one who bears the original making process of Tangail Sharee. Tangail Sharee (Cotton sharee, Half Silk, Soft Silk, Cotton Jamdani, Gas-mercerised twisted cotton sharee, Dangoo sharee, Balucherri) are mainly made in the handloom industries of Patrail union, Tangail Sadar, Delduar and Kalihati, Nagorpur, Basail of Tangail District (Rahman, 2013). The making process of Tangail Sharee needs sophisticated capacity of the workers and huge attention for its design. The weavers sell the Sharee in the nearest “haat” of Bazitpur and Korotia twice in every week. The consumers of this “haat” are mainly retailers who buy products from the weavers and supplies in all over the country. The biggest haat of Tangail Sharee of the country sits in Korotia union of Tangail sadar in every Wednesday afternoon and continues upto Thursday evening. Retailers from all over the country come to this haat and buy Sharee according to their demand. In each haat the weavers sell Sharee about an amount of 7-8 core takas. Fashion houses of Dhaka and other districts also come in Tangail district to buy Sharee from the local weavers and retailers.

Although the Tangail Sharee has a huge demand in various countries of the world like India, different countries of Europe, America, Japan, Middle East, the industry has no longer its old heritage and availability due to various factors. Firstly the price rate of raw materials and machines of handloom industries has increased significantly in recent years. Secondly, the Sharee market of India has developed a lot in recent years due to the availability and low price of raw materials, government’s interfair and their market has already spread its business all over the world. Thirdly, the Sharee industry of Tangail is somehow under the controller of retailers rather than the small weavers. Communal violence in Bangladesh and lack of security in business compelled a lot of hindu weavers to migrate in India since independence. Recent political unrest has also made huge loss of the business. Finally lack of loan support and other supports from the government paved the way to expand the industry widely.

#### **4.2 Causes of Migration**

Migration of labour is not a new issue and trend in national and international level. Like commodity, in free market human resources move from one place to another even across the frontiers wherever the demand exist. Since the pre-historic-period, migrant workers have been setting vestiges on different civilization and cultures in various parts of the world. Migration is generally taken to involve the temporary, semi-permanent or permanent relocation of an individual or a group of individuals a place of origin to a place of destination. Many factors such as unemployment, underemployment, limitation in self-employment, unfavorable state policy, ambition for economic prosperity and betterment of life etc. make people to move and become a migrant worker.

Migration of weavers in Tangail District is a major concern since independence. The handloom industry of Tangail is widely recognized all over the world for its Tangail Sharee and the weavers of Tangail bears the recognition and making process by inheritance. But during the past decades the number of weavers has been decreasing in significant number and most of them are migrating to India. Now many of the weavers who migrated to India are running their business there. The district of Bordhaman of India is the place where maximum migrated weavers are locating and producing Tangail Sharee. In a village named Nolsuda had around household of weavers after independence but only 22 families are living now. The rest have migrated to India in different times. After conducting some case studies and visiting the villages of Patrail the following factors have been found for migration of weavers in Tangail district.

#### 4.3 Fear of communal victimization

In case of hindu community, the number of household is decreasing in a significant number after independence. The village of Nolsuda had 3200 hindu household family after independence of Bangladesh. But it is a matter of great concern that only 20 households are living in the village now. When we talked with some people of hindu community, they expressed their frustration for the decreased number of their community members. According to their view, most of them feel unsecure to live in Bangladesh for communal violence all over the country in different periods in last 43 years. Still they are suffering in fear of victimization as communal violence has been spread out through the country after the election. Although they haven't faced such type of incident in their village but in maximum cases while they left the country for india, it was the impact of communal attack over the hindu community in other districts of the country. During our case study while we asked Polash Basak (Pseudo name), a retailer of loom industry about the cause of severe migration of their community he told that

"I feel that I may be victimized in future. We do not have enough security here. Many of our relatives have already migrated to India because they were feeling unsecure to stay long in this country. For being minority group; we face different types of problems and suffer in fear of victimization"

According to Gonesh Basak, a sixty year old small loom industry owner, In Nolsuda village there were 3200 hindu family. But now, there are only 22 family. Most of us left the country for fear of victimization. We also do not know whether we should leave the country or not. We want security from the government. It's our country too. We have the right to live peacefully here.

So from the above case studies and observation, it has been found that the rate of loom industry households has been decreasing in alarming rate since independence and in most cases this people were from hindu religion and they are migrating to India due to fear of victimization.

#### 4.4 Increased price of raw materials

Increased price of raw materials is another major cause of migration to India. According to Gonesh Basak *while we would buy the cotton in price rate of 3,000-4,000TK we need to buy it in 7,000-8,000TK*. In India the rate of loom products is comparatively cheaper than Bangladesh and is available then here. In maximum case the quality of raw materials is also better than our country. As a result loom workers get more inspiration and confidence to expand their industry then here.

Dearth of raw materials is another weakness of the loom industry and it's a major cause for losing the motivation for running the business here in Bangladesh. The weavers collect raw materials (fabric) from Narayangonj district of the country. Sometimes, they need to collect raw materials from foreign countries. For this reason they need a lengthy process which retard in supply of raw materials. For handling this material they need to expand more money. Again sometimes raw materials are not available which cause breaking in production.

According to Polash Basak, *"In India, they get so much facility for business then Bangladeshi businessman. They get manufacturing flexibility, abundance of raw material, availability of cheap labour"*. *We do not have enough materials here. Moreover, the rate of raw materials is increasing day by day. As a result we cannot rely on our business.*

#### 4.5 Absence of loan from government

Absence of loan is another major cause for not expanding the business widely in the country. While we talked with the producers, they complained that government or other banks do not provide them enough loan and this is why then can't take risk of expanding their business. Government offers them a very small amount of loan facility but the process of taking loan is even more complex and this loan doesn't help them according to their expectation. Many of them expressed that if they would get sufficient loan they could develop their industry, produce more products and enlarge the industry. At present Government is distributing the loan among them who have maximum five looms. But the owners who have more than five looms needs more finance or fixed capital to run and expand their business. According to producer's opinion, they suffer from capital problem and to reduce this problem they collect money from local bank with a high rate of interests.

Concerning the issue of having loan Gonesh Basak (pseudo name) told that "In India, there is a society named "Tangail Cooperative society". This society help the loom weaver to provide loan and other necessary support related to the loom business. They also get security from the government. If government provide loan, we will be able to expand the industry.

#### 4.6 Insufficient transport facility

Sometimes the producer's can't supply their products to different areas of country smoothly due to unavailability of transports. Government doesn't provide us transportation for supplying our goods in cheaper rate. They have to rent transport in higher rates and sometimes they get very small amount of profit.

Polash Basak (pseudo name) a retailer told that "Transportation of products is a complex procedure

here. In last three months we could not sell our products due to unstable political system. It was really difficult to distribute our products around the country. We have to suffer most often for distributing our products. Government do not provide us separate transport system and we have to pay a lot for transportation and it doesn't offer us much profit."

#### 4.7 Better facilities in India

Better facilities in loom industry of India are another key cause of rapid migration during the past decades. Here they get the raw materials very cheaply, they get enough transportation facility. Moreover government provides them sufficient loan by which they get the opportunity to expand their business. Besides the Indian Government buys a good quantity of products from the looms and stocks them. As a result the producers get more motivation and inspiration to produce a good number of products. A good number of Bangladeshi loom workers are migration there for changing their fate and many of them have already succeeded to change their situation.

According to Gonesh Basak (pseudo name) *"They get security from the Indian government. They have a high transportation facility, better social security, loan facility and above all security to live peacefully. We do not get such facility. Please tell government to look after us and help the industry. If government provide support and help us, it will be a reputed industry all over the world."*

#### 4.8. Lack of security

Lack of enough security and increased obstacles during business decrease the desire to run their business effectively. In many cases they have to face local racketeers and pay extra money. The police also do not take steps to prevent this type of anomalies. While the consumers come here to buy products, they need to pay extra money to the local racketeers and this is why the outside consumers do not want to come here and buy their products. Moreover, the villagers of the union fears to go outside during evening as some of them have been attacked by hijackers and dacoits.

According to Polash Basak (pseudo name), *"We cannot go outside for our business during night. We do not have enough security here. Many of our relative migrated to India because they would feel insecure."*

While we talked with some villagers they also expressed their concern about the security and stated that many of their family members have been migrated to India for lack of security here.

### 5. Conclusion

Hand loom industry plays a vital role in our national economy. It has a remarkable goodwill but the growth and market share is not satisfactory of this industry to the national and global context. Many people get employment opportunity from this industry and Govt. is getting huge income tax from the loom industry. But the industry is beset with many obstacles. To operate the business effectively it must be needed a cheap flow of raw materials, security of the weavers, available transportation system, loan from banks without interest, stable political situation and above all a good attention of the government to nurture the industry and thus getting back the reputation of the industry worldwide. Moreover, government should ensure no weaver families leave the country by providing appropriate security and facilities.

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