



**A Report on the Textile Industry at Dommassandra:
Weavers and Dyers**

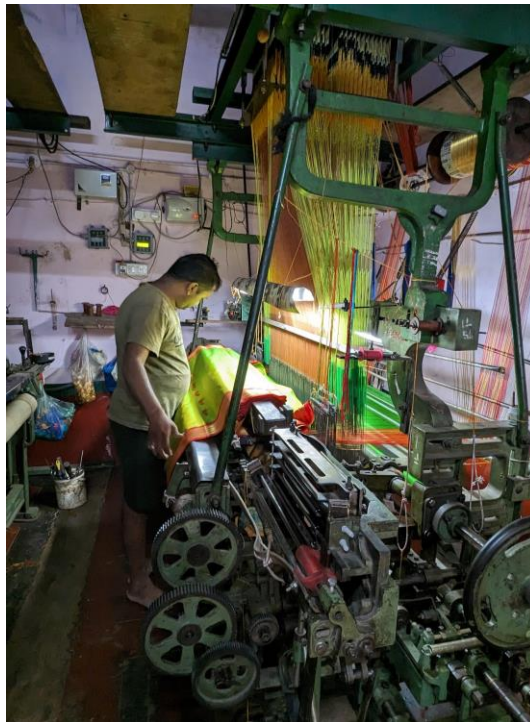
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Dommasandra in Bengaluru Urban district is home to hundreds of silk sari weavers. Walking down the narrow streets of the locality, the air reverberates with the rhythmic sounds of power looms churning out sari after sari. While family-owned and operated units have two to three power looms, big factories which run dozens of looms and employs numerous employees from all over the country also operate in the area. As the weaving of silk saris has seen a shift from handlooms to the more easily operated power looms, more and more weavers have immigrated from their villages to Bengaluru and particularly Dommassandra to work in power loom weaving units. Our study explores the social and financial conditions of weavers in Dommasandra and the problems that they are facing due to the rapid decline of the market.



Power loom weaver examining the sari as it is being made by the loom.

Puttaraju and his family have been weaving silk saris for the last 50 years, shifting from hand loom to power loom 13 years ago. Hand looming silk was much harder work, he says, with little payoff. According to him, younger generations are increasingly disinterested in learning the trade of handlooms. As the older generations of weavers passed, it became harder and harder to find skilled handloom workers who know the trade well, forcing Puttarajan to shift to power looms. Power looms are far more convenient, drastically reducing both the labour and the time required to weave a sari. Where making a sari by handloom used to take four days, now a power looms churns out two saris in a single day. With a computerised system for feeding in designs, like the one Puttaraju has, the task is made even easier. The shifting to power looms has seen a massive increase in the production of silk saris and the low labour required has attracted weavers who earlier practised handlooms. Narayan, who works in Prabhakar's power loom unit in Dommasandra is one such weaver, leaving his old profession in his village to join the power loom factories in Dommasandra. Ajay Gonda and Titu Karashti who work with Narayan, are people from Orissa who have come to Bengaluru in search of work. They, like all other employees in the mills of Dommasandra, have no contract or agreement with their employers, their hold over their jobs rest precariously on their employers' whims and mercies.



Puttaraju in front of his power loom

Weavers send their raw silk to the “Colour Factory” in Dommassandra for dyeing. The Dommassandra Colour Factory operates out of an open-air shed containing five massive furnaces on which the dye solutions are boiled. The factory uses synthetic dyes that come from Chennai, Surat, Bengaluru, as well as China. Dyeing is a labour as well as resource-intensive process. The raw silk threads are washed in water and soap and then boiled in the dye solution containing water, dye, acetic acid, and soap for an hour. During this time, the thread must be rotated and immersed continuously by two men. The thread is then washed again and dipped in a solution of acetic acid, diesel, and shampoo to smoothen it out. The furnaces have to be kept hot throughout the day for the water to boil at 120 degrees. A large amount of firewood gets burnt as fuel every day for this purpose. The use of water for this factory is also very high. The threads need to be washed again and again in clean water, which is obtained from a bore well close to the factory. The wastewater from the factory containing dye pollutants flows out to the nearby Yemere Lake. There is a significant environmental cost to this chemical dyeing unit- apart from the massive amount of firewood and water used, the waste not properly disposed of is also toxic and non-biodegradable. It is also noteworthy that the workers who work 14-15 hours a day handle the dyes, which have been proven toxic and carcinogenic, without gloves or any sort of protection. The coloured threads from the factory are dried through machines and then sent back to the weavers to make silk sarees.

However, has the increase in power loom production of silk saris translated into higher income for the weavers? According to the many weavers we spoke to, the answer is in a resounding negative. The market for silk saris, always a tumultuous business, has seen a steady fall in demand in the last couple of years. Different weavers give different reasons for this. While some say that the blame falls squarely on the shoulders of Covid, others say it is due to a change in the dressing habits of the general public who do not wear silk saris regularly anymore. Shyamsunder, Murugana, and Mohan working at SLV Silk Saris, show a different cause. They attribute the cause of the falling demand to overproduction in the market. Earlier, Bangalore silk saris, which had their own special weaving methods, were exported to different provinces and States- Surat, Salem, Andhra Pradesh etc. With the rise of power looms the knowledge systems required to handloom the saris have become redundant. Cheaper electricity and Government assistance in other states have meant that power looms have sprouted in great numbers in the places that used to import saris earlier. Ironically, as more and more places produce their own silk saris, the demand for them

decreases in the market. Puttaraju's daughter-in-law Priyadarshini talks about how they go for months in a year without any sales. The maximum amount of sales happens during marriage season but for other months of the year families like Priyadarshini's scramble to survive. Employees of the power loom mills are also affected by this. As Krishna, a weaver in Gunda Bhai's mill says, he is paid according to the number of saris he makes. As sales fall, his employer asks him to reduce the number of saris he makes. Employees also work very long hours without adequate pay. Ajoy Gonda talks about how he works a minimum of sixteen hours a day without enough pay to justify his work. The fall in business adversely affects their pay but if the owner makes a profit, there is no corresponding increase in their salary. Therefore, weavers are able merely to eke out a subsistence from weaving and rarely make a profit.

The power loom machine itself is an investment not all weavers can make. With each machine costing about a lakh, only weavers who can afford to buy them continue as independent workers while others have no choice but to either become employees in someone else's power loom unit or abandon the profession completely. Saraswati's family is one of the only surviving handloom sari units in the area. When asked why they have not shifted to power looms, they say that it is not out of loyalty to their craft but the lack of the money needed to invest in a power loom. They cannot afford workers, leading to every member of the household taking on rigorous labour. Materials and designs are brought to them by middlemen who commission them. However, the decrease in demand for silk saris has affected them too- they barely make a subsistence wage for most of the year. The loss of business has affected handloom and power loom weavers alike, ensuring that younger generations move out of the profession.





Some of the last handlooms of silk in Dommasandra.

However, showrooms and big brands across India continue to sell silk sarees at high rates of profit even as the weavers suffer. For most of the weavers in Dommasandra, barring the owners of bigger factories with numerous machines, their contact with the market is through middlemen. Weavers sell their produce to middlemen in Bengaluru city and Chickpete who then sell the saris to showrooms and emporiums at a much-hiked price. Puttaraju points to the saris that he sells for 10,000 rupees that then get resold in emporiums for double the price. Since only someone with an experienced and practised eye can tell the difference between silk saris made by handloom and by power-loom, saris made by power loom are sold as hand-loomed for a much higher price. Despite this, the weavers of Dommasandra are dependent on the middlemen for their contacts as well as

for the designs that they use. Artisans like Saraswati operate as labour working for the middlemen who give both the designs and the raw material for them to make saris.



Saraswati's son Ganesh preparing the spools of thread required for the handloom.

Weavers in Dommssandra face an uncertain future. The shadows of falling demand and growing dependence on middlemen lead to low wages and falling profits. As a result, more and more weavers are moving away from the professions, preferring to work in construction or other avenues of labour. Unless concentrated steps are taken to protect the livelihood of weavers within the city, they are destined to a precarious existence.

About the authors

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