

The looming crisis:

Negotiating the future in face of crisis in the Silk

Handloom industry in Kanchipuram.

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“Indha Thari Thozhil namtalaymurai ode nikkaporathe. Tharike yedirkalam illay.”

This handloom weaving work is going to stop with us. There is no future for weaving.

“Ellarum, Factory ke manase kalakki than poorange”

We go to work in factories with a heavy heart.”- 32 year old weaver

Introduction

In an interview I once had an year back, with C.R Swami¹, one of the famous fifth generation silk sari merchants in Kanchipuram, I happened to ask how big a threat were the SEZ 's to the handloom weaving in the temple town. He replied in turn by asking another question – Can there ever be competition with a dying man? "I'm sandwiched between the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on one side, and the young weaver on the other. The chances of my weavers getting better wages in Sriperumbudur are higher “he said. He had revealed in his interview back then that he had 840 looms three years back and at that point of time only 410 looms under him.

Suggesting, rhetorically of a dying tradition, his statement nevertheless finds resonance with the account of several weavers in Kanchipuram engaged in the work their grandparents and their ancestors did centuries back. One year hence as I revisited the field for this study, my initial interviews gave me ample reasons to believe that the future of the silk handloom weaving of Kanchipuram, the pettni technique and the solid border type peculiar to it were bleak owing to ‘labour’² problems . However gradually into fieldwork I gathered that the work in the looms was connected to a way of living, to the communal life and to one’s caste identity. Moreover, Mattison Mines notes that the ritual and social

¹ Interview taken in March 2011 on a separate project

² The term used often by respondents was “labour la problem” (literally translated to problem in the labour) referring to shortage, unavailability at certain times, with the coming of factory work.

significance of the sari as they are given at life ceremonies and are used to mark status and to bind men in reciprocal and redistributive relationships. Their demand has surely dropped with women preferring lighter fabrics, but families continue to visit Kanchipuram to buy saris in large numbers before occasions like Marraiges reaffirming its place in Hindu sanskritic traditions. Furthermore, the association of Kanchipuram silk sarees with the highest level of purity also makes its appropriation as a symbol par excellence of sanskritisation possible.

However, the rising costs of Zari, and gold, the extremely erratic power supply, and the government's receding role in proactively promoting the industry have made a difficult industry to survive in. The abolition of child labour has meant that transfer of the weaving skill through generations cannot occur. The relatively young are looking for employment in the factories of the industrial corridor opened up vicinities of town attempting to achieve a higher status than that of their parent's generation.

Now, its not only the silk merchant who is sandwiched between the SEZ and the loom . In looking into how these weavers and their families negotiate between the two realities we discover how individuated and diverse their responses can be. Assuming that the lure of higher wages can attract labourers in large numbers is to negate the influence of variables such as education, individual's own experiences in the factory, age , gender, status in the family, economic status etc. Thus, be it the pressures of dowry, the notions of masculinities, or the mere need to find an additional stream of income to tide over the rising costs of living³ various structural – social factors combine with individual agency in shaping decisions.

³ The colloquial term used is "Vellavasi" , this can be translated into inflation, cost of living. Most respondents when talking about living costs spoke of consumer items , health expenses, some food items like vegetables and transportation

The study was conducted over two major weaver colonies in the town of Kanchipuram, with over 60 households and several other individuals. 21 households were those of weavers producing in Cooperative scheme, 38 weavers producing in master weaver scheme and 1 in the Independent weavers. Pillayarpalayam and Ayyambaettai were the two major localities surveyed. The weavers belonged to the Sengunthar Mudalaiyar community. Semi structured interviews were used and some case studies are included here. The first section of the study will attempt to bring out the context and specifics of the problems within the handloom silk sector and also look at some theoretical discussions on SEZ's . The second section is an account of the various responses to the current tussle between the handloom sector and SEZ.

Section 1: the loom vs. SEZ

“You go to any house here; you will find that the family is in some loan or the other. Most of them have loans for a lakh or even two. If you were under the impression that I have a comfortable living here, with 3 looms, you are mistaken. My rent alone costs Rs.3000, When I manage to make around Rs. 5000-Rs.6000 depending on the amount of sari I can get done. Where is the money to feed my children?”

-35 year old weaver from Ayambettai

“At this cost of living, the house will run only if at least people to go to work”

- 54 year old woman from Pillayarpalayam

It is no new information that the Kanchipuram silk industry has been going through a period of crisis and If Swami 's words or the words of other respondents are anything to go by the industry only has a window of 10 years more. This has meant that the perceptions of work by the weaver are already changing. This is often reflected in his attitude towards education. The Gradual devaluation of the

weaving skill is often triggered by both the low returns to the physical labour applied in the loom and the availability of higher paid jobs to 12th class educated people. It has further lead to other attempts to dissociate with illiteracy and expansion of skill base for future generation

Some of the particular charecteristics of the crisis are as follows:

- Gradual disappearance of intergenerational skill transfer with abolition of child labour
- Weavers inability to cope with rising cost of inputs , Zari , Silk and rising costs of living
- Competitive pressure from substitutes for other textiles and power looms
- The receding role of the cooperative sector and the state
- Potential deskilling of the weavers who enter the factory work force

The Silk handloom industry in Kanchipuram is closely set in the lines of decentralized home based production and has some unequal relationships at the heart of the production. Today's dominant mode of production or that of the master weaver system follows a mix of the household production and the 'advance system' *where in the master or merchants give the material and the designs in advance and the price of the final output is controlled by the merchant himself.* With the growing unionization during the 60's and 70's wage scale become generalised. Arturuburn's study states (figures from 1971) that for a Rs. 1000 sari the wage rate in the co.op sector was Rs.180 , for a Rs.200-250 it was Rs.60 and for Rs.130 sari the weaver made approximately Rs.25 (Arturburn,1982) . This was only at a time when the cooperative movement was gaining strength and dependent weavers too had some kind of unions.

In Kanchipuram today, the scenario is such that the wages are set way below the selling price of the sari. A sari produced for Rs. 2000- 2500 sells for a range between Rs. 15000-Rs.25000⁴. Wages for each sari is determined by the design and it purely depends on the producer as to how long it takes to produce. Thus, there is no fixed way of calculating their incomes. Sometimes if a weaver falls ill the sari could take longer than usual or if the weaver decides to hire an extra person (which seldom happens) he may decide to do it in lesser days. Within the cooperative schemes, one of the outlet managers also brought to light the fact that work is distributed on rotation and not all the looms registered within the co.op scheme are engaged at all times.

Some of these observations can be corroborated by newspaper reports as well. Anupama Chandrashekhra in an article for the mint (dated 18th August 2010)⁵ notes that: “With 12-hour workdays, no weekends off and delayed wages, there is little incentive for weavers’ children to follow their parents’ poverty and debt-ridden footsteps.” S. Sujata and K. Sreedevi, (dated 1st August 2012)⁶ quote in the article in the Deccan chronicle, G. Thanigaivel of Kanchipuram Murugan Silk Handloom Weavers Cooperative Society saying that: “A family gets about Rs 2,500 to Rs 10,000 for weaving three sarees. If three family members are involved in the work, it could be finished within 20 days.” S. Keerthana R. Keertana (dated 24th July 2011)⁷ says that : “ The other nagging issue is low payment. The weavers feel that they are underpaid. Lalitha, a weaver, explains, “It takes 10 to 30 days to weave a sari for which we are paid Rs. 7,000.”

It does not take much to tell that work in the loom is very hard and the bodily experience of working in the looms is exhausting .A typical workday starts at 6 in the morning and goes on till 9.pm in the night,

⁴ Figure based on respondents interview and visits to both cooperative shops and private shops

⁵ Article titled Surging gold prices threaten TN’s silk legacy

⁶ Article titled Kanchi weavers’ future not smooth as silk

⁷ Article titled Caught in a cycle of crisis

as far as the eye sight of the weaver permits. Women who work in the loom also have to perform several tasks including preparing the warp, preparing the threads etc. Many weavers are also patients of asthma owing to the inhalation of the finer silk fabrics and arthritis owing to the constant treading on the looms. Homes were cluttered and small. The placement of loom within the house requires that the roofs must be strong enough not to let water/ sunlight as the silk threads get damaged with exposure to these external conditions. The houses were mostly very dingy, with very little space to maneuver. In fact, even today production stops during monsoons as water seeps through the roof and falls on the threads. Some residents had no option but to sleep under the loom area. Some of the houses were one roomed where, packed with threads and other weaving material. Some houses have plastic sheets hanging on to the roofs as a buffer during the monsoons. The size of the house has in itself shrunk with joint families breaking down. Depending on the street the house was located, it had particular facilities. By and large, in built toilets were few, and only some bigger houses had the facility. Water shortage was a severe concern as well specially in pillayarpalayam.

As per local history, told by the caste heads and the elders in the village, the weaving castes of the Kaikoolars (*Kai-hand Kol weapon/ shuttle*) or the *Sengunthar Mudaliyars* (loosely translated into red spears were warrior castes that fought for the chola kings) are considered descendents of lord *Murugan*. Belonging to the Shiavite tradition, the Kaikoolars, through history belonged to left hand castes (Idungkai). Today, the as Mines notes their courage, their loyalty and fierceness are attributes emphasized when they describe themselves (Mines 1985: 55). These attributes are central to the cultural schema of these castes.

Nonetheless weaving is also a way of life. The independence of and control over one's work (except in price determination), over the use of time, use of space and people has its implications. The weaver often uses time during the power cuts to visit relatives. Men often go to tea shops. There is no uniform

required. These conditions go a long way in recognizing the sense of self esteem or 'gauravam' that the weavers often refer to when they compare weaving to the odd jobs assigned to them in factories.

We now move over to the other structural influence on the lives of the people i.e.— Special Economic zones . Literature on the SEZ's has shown that they are highly contested spaces and not merely economic enclaves that promise efficiency and large economies of scale to its investors. Even among workers, they are simultaneously sites for accumulating symbolic capital and for some, are symbolic of an oppressive work culture. We turn to use Jamie Cross's work on the SEZ to understand the importance of skill and education in setting the paradigms within which SEZ experiences are structured. He suggests that, in the rural hinterland of India's second tier cities, special economic Zones have given rise to a paradox (Cross 2009). While on one hand it allows people with ITI degrees to be employed but place them on the other hand in insecure low wage jobs. He refers to the work of other scholars (made on basis of some assumptions) who believe that SEZ provide people with 'low levels of education', significant improvements in their living conditions and better prospects for the education of their children. (Some of the respondents in this study did in fact attach this perception to the prospect of working in the SEZ). His work also indicates that in the account of his respondents' urban factory employment was considered of a higher status than employment in agriculture or fisheries (as the case in Vishakhapatnam is).

However, the SEZ employment requires some basic levels of education to grasp the technical aspects and those who don't have that basic requirement cant avail of those jobs and must take recourse to jobs in departments like housekeeping, maintainance , loading/ unloading etc. Here too we observe that education sets the type of interface with the SEZ. Anyone who holds an educational degree less than class 10th has very limited chance of securing for himself a decent job in logistics department or

sometimes in the assembly line in certain factories , but a class 12th pass with proficiency in numbers could be preferred for the same jobs. Even the ITI training is now being deemed “inadequate” by a few respondents who suggested that an engineering degree or a proper graduate degree is the only way of getting good jobs.

The point of bringing out this discussion on education and its relation to the SEZ is because the traditional handloom industry which required the transfer of skills through generations also required children to become apprentices at a very young age. One of the Sengunthar Mudalair leaders suggests that studies till class 10th was considered adequate no one went looking for jobs anywhere unless they wanted a government employment. Thus many of the middle aged weavers are school dropouts or have very low levels of education. This determines their access to the jobs in the SEZ.

Wages are highly varied in the SEZ as well. Depending on the kind of work, salaries can be given as daily wages or on a monthly basis. Respondents in Kanchipuram indicated a range between Rs.1500 per month Rs.7600 (permanent employee). The SEZ 's spoken about here include factories in both the SIPCOT industrial area and the NOKIA SEZ, both located on the highway between Chennai and Kanchipuram. Connecting buses are sent to Kanchipuram and other neighbouring areas to pick up workers on a shift basis. Presence of factory has changed several spatial aspects of the town with emergence of “ladies hostels” for factory workers. Certain roads have come to be associated with ‘Nokia’ bus routes. Meanwhile, factory going women have triggered certain kind of reactions from the residents of Kanchipuram. Here is an instance of a 63 year old man speaking of the way factories have changed women.

“ Girls are quite determined these days . We can't fully trust these women who go for night shifts. *Ava* “ *Pookevartu seriillai*” (*Their doings are not right*). We don't recommend that kind of work where women have to stay out very far. Ideally we don't /mind if they work near the

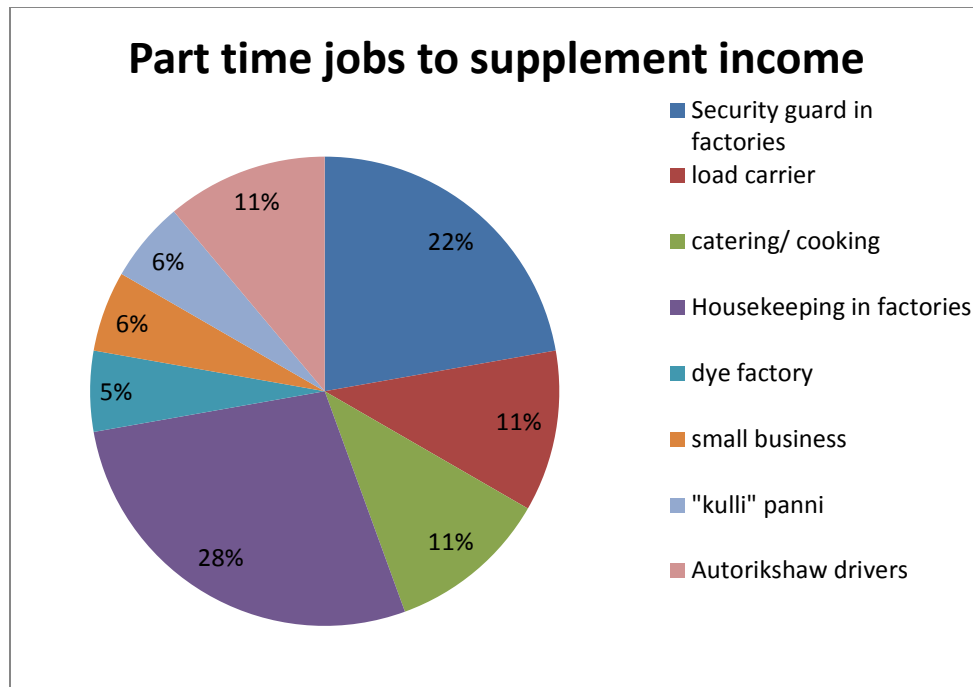
house or take a job in sewing shop, some where we can keep an eye on them. By 10 o'clock at night they should be back."

Cultural reactions such as these affirm to the pervading presence of the factories in everyday life.

Section 2- Negotiating the present and the future

How then do the particular sections of the society respond to the crisis and negotiate their futures. On the one hand there is the prospect of factory work and on the other hand the work in loom. We try and locate the practices, discourses of the people somewhere between these two polar options, as people try to find a way of reconciling both these options by taking into light their individual circumstances, their own position in the sector and their aspirations and choices.

For some sections, certain types of jobs that fall in the 'flexible' type of factory employment is a much needed buffer in context of seasonal nature of work and erratic patterns of distribution of work in the handloom sector itself. Out of the 60 respondents interviewed 18 claimed to have do part time work to keep the house going. Out of this factory related employment like Security guard jobs and housekeeping jobs found some more takers.



The crisis has its largest impact on the middle aged weavers whose resource base was limited; wages were low and they have to support a family of at least 5 members. The education of children, health care and growing costs of standard of living were structural constraints that determined their choice. They also belonged to a generation where the focus was on the skill transmission rather than education the access to limited kinds of jobs with the factories . Some of the security guards who go for ‘night duty’ a have wives looking after the loom at home. Their salaries are also based mostly on the nature of the contract. Most of the respondents claimed that they got to know about these partime jobs through the contractor.

“The problem is that this is the only skill we know. You ask anyone here, how many years of education they have completed, most of them would say till class 5th. People of my age get jobs, but only physically strenuous jobs like carrying load .What else is the way out?”

- Respondent in his late 40’s

The crisis is also felt by a relatively young man starting a family

My wife recently gave birth to our first baby. We are hardly able to save money. Now I am thinking of leaving the work in the loom if I get a chance. My wife is an EX- employee of Nokia, we are thinking of sending her back to work, maybe in some other company now that Nokia has a bad name.

– 28 year old weaver

It is not easy to accept the terms of the contractual nature of work and the type of work for many others who feel that the jobs one could in the factory were of very low status. Jayaganthan was one of the weavers who had also been contemplating taking up a job to meet ends, has two children to support and found that expenses on children's health and travelling by auto were becoming unaffordable.

“The residents of pillayarpalayam have an ego problem. I know the kind of work they are offered I, think of it like this way , how else are you going to pay for your children's upbringing in these times where cost of living is so high.”

– 43 year old weaver (Jayaganthan)

But what happens once these men enter the premises of the factory. There, the question of honour is entangled with the disenchantment with the everyday experience of the disciplining in the factories. The factory disciplining involves not only strict supervision of work by managers, but also a strong implementation of hierarchies between the various categories workers. The bodily experience of work arises in anything from wearing dirty uniform, to dealing with accidents.

“You see, I had worked in Saint Gobbain for a while. It was the worst experience ever. Since we were not educated and the supervisor got to know that we were weavers, we were given the lowest forms of work most in load taking and housekeeping. We were not allowed to walk in the same space as other employees instead we were made to walk through the area that had all the glass slabs lined up , I still have glass cut marks on my thighs, *I don't think anyone from our community will ever want to do this work willingly; **we go to work in factories with a heavy heart.***”

- 32 year old weaver

“During this brief interval when there was no work in the loom I decided to join one of these companies in Sriperumbadur. I had a horrible experience. We had to wear clothes which at least 5 people must have worn before. When they know we are weavers, the factory supervisors start ordering us around to get tea for them , or do some other work. What was worse than all this was that it was like a jail , where you see people standing in queues to put food on their plates. At home we are used to giving instructions to the women in our house .We say , “sambharkondava” (get sambhar) instead of going there standing and begging.

– 28 year old weaver

The two respondents bring us back to the argument that the nature of work or the interface with the industry is always dependent on the subject's skill and educational levels. Both these respondents had not completed their degrees beyond class 10th. In one of the discussions I had with the first weaver, he revealed to me that one person from every household has dabbled at least once in factory work. In the next section we look at another interesting aspect of why young men in particular give factory work a shot.

Fitting into the moulds Modern masculinities

One of the important ways in which the crisis affected the men in particular is that the worth of the weaver has been viewed below that of a company worker. The notion of the modern urban male worker as employed in a company, going to work from home with a secure job and rising wages (Cross 2009) is often a powerful one. The hegemonic influence of such an image feeds into notions of an ideal groom and set the expectations of young women and their families. The perception is that the future in weaving is bleak and being associated with the industrial units was seen a matter of security. However the young men themselves found ways of reconciling this demand with their personal choice of staying back due to the nature of work offered to men with lower education levels

These days they give brides only to men who have a company identity card Even if they agree to give us their daughter, they give their daughters only very few sovereigns of gold. ”

-55 year old mother of an unmarried son

“Yes its very true you need to be working in the company to get a bride these days. What people in my area do is that they work in any job they get with the company, stick around there till the marriage gets over and come back to weaving after a few months. Company work doesn’t suit them.”

– 29 year old weaver from Ayambettai

Background of the groom and his worth is often measured in terms of the dowry he will get

Family business	50- 100 sovereigns
The 'Software ' (computer related jobs) from Bangalore or Chennai	50 sovereigns
Government job	15-30 sovereigns
Company groom	10-15 sovereigns
Weaver	0-7 sovereigns

Tabulated on the basis of an interview with a broker agency (Nandini Thirumana tharagar) and discussions with families dowry and occupations

This however does not mean that all families choose or could afford to get the daughters married to men other than weavers. One of the respondents when asked if he knew about this trend responded by saying that *"There are lots of people who say they won't give their daughters to weavers. But we do continue to see them eventually give their daughters to weavers only. It boils to what dowry you can afford. Families like ours which still depend on weaving for their income cannot afford so much. We just gave 7 sovereigns and 101 items (excluding the bed and cupboard) as dowry in my elder sister's marriage to another weaving family. I have another sister to give away. I don't think I will look for a company groom."* (S. Tharigaivel)

It is however hard to use these impressions as conclusive. Suffice to say that the attitude towards the marriage market cannot be studied simplistically, but these reflections and rumours only suggest that the respondents "cut their coats according to the cloth"

Earn your own dowries

You don't need to send your daughters to work if you have to pay the wedding expenses of just one. But what will I do? Where will I get five sovereigns each for three of them? Certainly not from weaving"

- 50 year old father of three daughters

Delayed marriages are no longer taboo amongst the weavers today. The unreliability of the weaving and rising pressures of dowry have overlapped to produce pressures to send their daughters to work and supplement the money at home. The family uses the buffer zone that is factory work by encouraging their daughters to accumulate their own dowries.

Aihwa Ong (1987) 's ethnography on rural Malaysia shows the transformation of domestic relations with the *Kampung* women going to work . Not only is the marriageable age delayed, but the women themselves get a freer hand in deciding their grooms. However, here we find that daughters have an additional pressure to collect enough dowries to find a groom of a higher occupational status and did not always have the right to choose their husbands.

We will not give our daughter to a weaver definitely. Why do you think I'm providing my daughter with such expensive education? She better work and earn her own money for her marriage. How else can we manage otherwise?"

- Mother of 19 year old working in the Cooperative sector

One of my case studies Yuvarani presents an interesting case in point too. She tells me that she took it on herself to do up the house properly before her marriage. She invested the money she got from her previous work in an automobile factory to invest it in refurbishing her house. She particularly talks with pride about her choice of flooring. When asked , her parents said that they generally used the money to

manage day to day expenses and saved some money for her wedding whenever there was something left. She being an employee in the Nokia factory was exposed to various job profiles and had wanted to be married to someone from “software” background adding that , for her to marry into weavers family would’nt make sense.

This also means that the status of the daughter as an earning member is undermined by the use her salary is put into. In most of the cases where parents were asked how do your daughters manage money,(in case the daughter was earning), the common replies were that the parents controlled the income themselves. Some parents even had access to their daughters ATM. Some like Yuvarani’s cousin another Nokia worker who gave all her salary to her mother, got a monthly pocket money of Rs.100 or more as the occasion demanded.

Lest we consider that women always followed their parents desire to work outside in factory and earn their dowries, we must not forget the how the individual’s own experience and desire counters or reinforces the decision as the case may be. Here we take the help of two case studies to explain the relevance of individual intent specially in the highly gendered context of decision making.

Case A. Yuvarani , a 22 year employee of the Nokia since 2009 is the second daughter of a weaver. Her father now only occasionally sits in the loom and the daughter’s income is important for the family’s well being. She recently completed her third year and got a raise in her salary. She was also upgraded from the assembly line to systems logistics.

In course of her interview Yuvarani claimed that she was excited at the idea of going to work because she wanted to become ‘rich’. Work for her meant wider social networks and new people to hang out with. Work gave her great exposure to people from other parts of the state and world. She often referred to her time in the factory and the connecting bus ride as a “jolly time”

Nevertheless, like other families her parents suggest that they were using her money to finance day to day family expenditure and some money was being saved for her wedding. She also claimed on one occasion that she was proud of supporting her parents and also supporting her own expenditures in course of it. She had certain ideas of a having her marriage in a huge hall and getting musicians to come and play at the ceremony. In this particular case study her own aspirations reinforces her family's decision to send her to work. Her degree also meant her job in the electronics factory was respectable and opened a range of options for her.

Case 2. Padma is a 27 year old unmarried woman, who came from a poorer background and had left her work in export garment factory to come back and assist her father in the loom. Her father falls ill very often on account of his age and hard work, which puts the work in the loom to a standstill every now and then. Padma had only finished her class 10th. As Padma cannot get married owing to some health issues, her future security is closely tied to the money saved by her parents, which also meant the money was tied to weaving. When I asked her why she quit her job at the garment factory, she claimed that it did not suit her (*set avalay*).

She recalls working for over 10 hours everyday , in the factory standing the whole time with very few breaks. She also mentions that she was constantly monitored by her manager and was asked to repeat certain tasks.

Her return to the loom was an act of choice of the freedom from the oppressive discipline of the industries. She preferred staying at home and working for her aging father rather than earning money in the factory. What these two case studies indicate is that agency has its own place and understanding these micro level decision making alone can prevent from assuming that the lure of high salaries is sufficient to enable the movement from the Silk handlooms to factories.

Conclusion

The uncertainty and the crisis in the handloom sector have affected different sections of the society in different ways depending on their interface with the factory work outside. We have seen how different age groups have different concerns and different stakes in the handloom industry and the SEZ. The three different sections explored in the study showed the diverse ways in which the crisis has made them think about work, status and their own choice. It also indicated how decisions regarding work were highly contextual and individualized challenging assumptions that the lure of the factory work in times of crisis can and has led to the mobilisation of the workforce en masse. In fact each decision is a balancing act between individual's own perceptions, the changing values of the community and the atmosphere of uncertainty triggered by the crisis in the industry

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