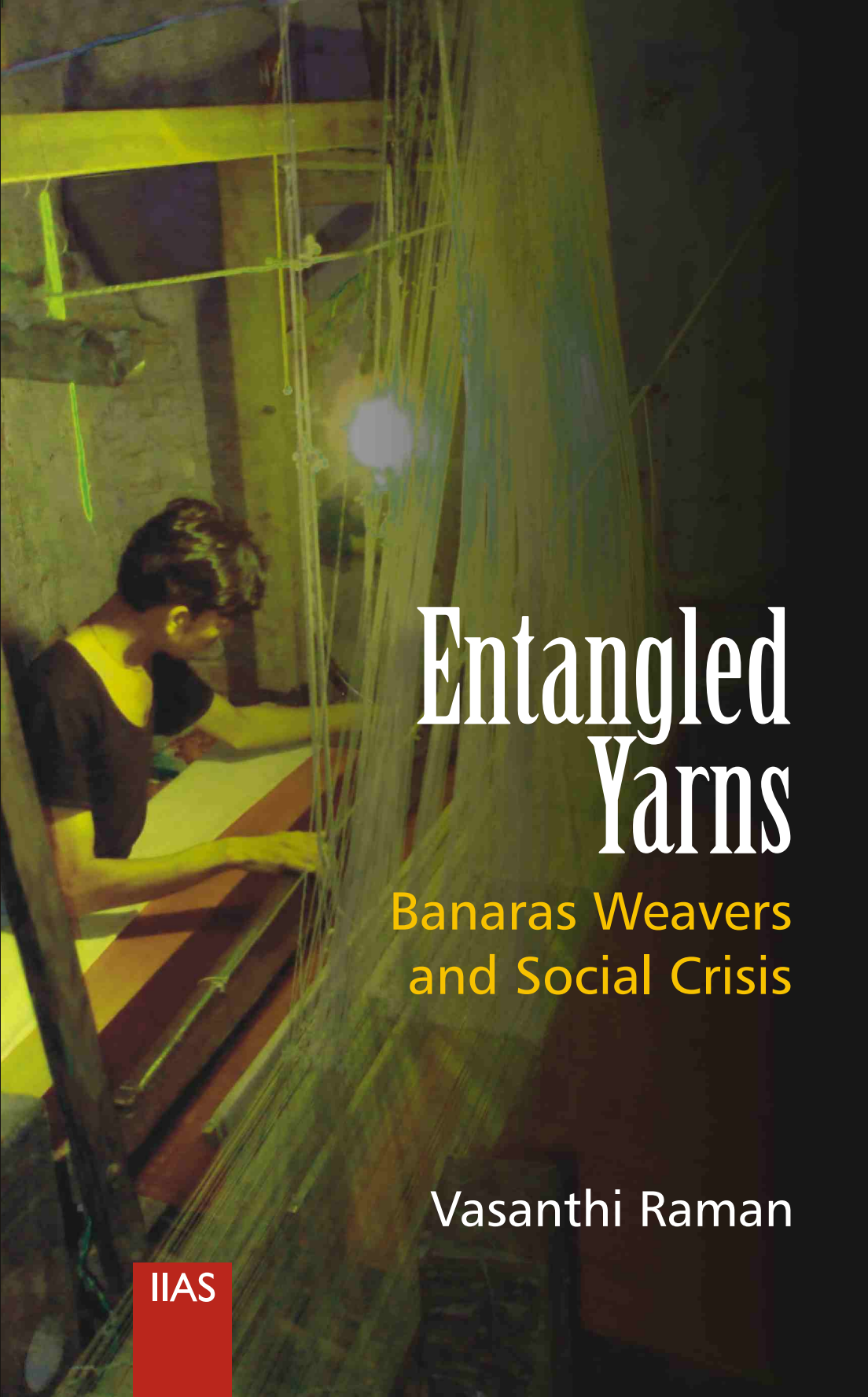

Entangled Yarns

Banaras Weavers and Social Crisis

Vasanthi Raman

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who generously shared their lives,
their anguish and their dreams.

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VASANTHI RAMAN

I

Introduction

Cloth has, since the earliest periods of human history, symbolised the essence of social relations as well as articulated the relationship between human beings and the domain of the sacred. The metaphor of cloth has often been used to describe the content and texture of human social relations but as has been pointed by Schneider and Weiner (1989) social scientists have not only confined themselves to describing and analysing social connectedness but also the softness and fragility of the materials which reflect and capture the frailty and the transient nature of the human condition, subject to the degenerative processes of illness, decay and death (Weiner and Schneider 1989:2).

The philosopher-saint of the weavers, Kabir uses another metaphor, that of the body and its cosmic dimensions and compares the cloth that is woven to the three nerves, eight grooves, the five elements and three gunas (qualities or essences). He highlights the sacred nature of the cloth woven and the profane manner in which it is used by humans and contrasts it with his own devotion and surrender to the Almighty.

Jheeni jheeni beeni chadariya
Kahe ka tana kahe ki bharni
Kaun taar se beeni chadariya
Ingla pingla tana bharni
Sukhman taar se beeni chadariya
Aatth kamal dal charkha dole paanch lat gun beeni chadariya

So chadar sur nar muni oddhe,
Oddhke maili keeni chadariya
Das Kabir jatanse oddhi jyon ki tyon ghar deeni chadariya

He spins in delicate and airy weaves

With what warp and what weft
And what kind of thread the body is knit

The fabric thus woven is made of
Three nerves (Ingla, Pingla and Sukhman)
The wheels rotate round eight grooves
Of lotus, the five elements and the three gunas

And it has taken him exactly ten months
Of toil and craft to handspin this yarn

This cloth wraps itself around the bodies of
Gods, men and sages, yet all soil (dirty) it
It is only your slave Kabir who wears it with care;
And returns it to you as it was.

Kabir — Translated by Nandini Chandra

In a sense, Kabir's use of the metaphor of cloth woven by weavers not only emphasizes the sacred and ethereal dimension of cloth but also touches on the supremely social dimension of it. This in a sense is what Weiner and Schneider (1989) point out when they state that to "seek the symbolic potentialities of cloth in their material properties is only a preliminary step" and only partially compelling" (Weiner and Schneider 1989:3). The human actions that make cloth politically and socially salient are equally important (Weiner and Schneider 1989:3). Cloth is used to both consolidate social relations and mobilise political power.

The story of Kabir's progeny, the julahas of Banaras is what we wish to narrate in the following pages. We trace their origins as humble weavers, weaving cloth for the rich and the mighty as well as for the poor, their long journey over many centuries and their attempt to transcend their lowly and despised status in a hierarchical Hindu social order by conversion to Islam. Their ascent to the status of Momin Ansaris, their careful and meticulous

cultivation of the most prized skills, their pride in their status as artisans and their desperate attempt to cling to the elusive ideal of the independent artisan over the last two centuries is an integral part of the story. During this long journey, they also interacted with other social groups and castes who also became part of the weaving brotherhood over time, groups who were lowly groups of the Hindu social order as well as the merchant groups who historically have been Hindus and with whom they had a very complex and tortuous relationship of dependence and exploitation. The operation of macro socio-economic forces during the colonial period resulted in the fracturing of their social cohesion through economic and social differentiation, leading to the emergence of classes among them. The divergent political articulations and assertions during the critical decades of the 1920s and 1930s, when the depression further impacted their world with lasting consequences, is a major milestone in their historical journey. The partition of the subcontinent was yet another milestone posing agonising dilemmas as well as offering opportunities.

The last years of the twentieth century were decisive since it culminated in a process begun in the early years of the nineteenth century with the penetration of colonial capitalism. And finally the end of the world of the julahas during the fin de siècle, when global capitalism came as a cataclysmic visitation spelling doom for the world of the julahas as it existed till recent times.

The present monograph deals with the impact of the crisis since the latter part of the 1990s on the families of the weavers when many macro processes converged to alter the worlds and lives of the weavers irrevocably. The focus is on the consequences for the family since the artisanal family has been the locus of the weaving industry. An important and continuing element of the Banarasi silk industry is that the relations between Hindus and Muslims is embedded in and intertwined with the relations of production in this artisanal cottage industry. The manner in which these relations have transformed over different phases of the evolution of the industry also constitutes a significant context

within which the industry has to be viewed and analysed. The Banarasi sari industry has been very much the preserve of Muslims historically and even in the present their imprint continues to be indelible although the traders have been mainly Hindu mercantile groups and significant numbers of Hindu OBC groups and dalits have taken to weaving over many decades, i.e. approximately since the 1930s and more specifically, in more recent times, between the 1970s and 1990s. However, the master weavers have remained and continue to remain overwhelmingly Muslims. Therefore the emphasis in this monograph is on the Muslims, while dealing with the consequences for Hindu weaving groups from the lower castes as well. At the same time, gender relations are interwoven within the fabric of the artisanal sari industry and constitute another significant element of the industry, more so in the context of the current crisis and its impact on families.

In the course of this work, I deal with both inter-community and social relations of production which are intertwined, as well as the gender relations that characterised this industry and the transformation that has occurred due to the changes that have visited the world of the weavers, wherein the global has impacted the local with unalterable consequences.

The present monograph grew out of a larger study – titled "The Warp and the Weft: Community and Gender Identity Among Banaras Weavers", (Raman, 2010) – which was based on ethnographic field work done between 2000-2007 which focused on the period since the 1990s. It also traces the lives of the weavers, specifically the Momin Ansaris, in the context of the historical and social processes that impacted the community. However, as the study was nearing completion, the present crisis exploded on the social scene in Banaras affecting their lives in unimaginable ways. The present monograph specifically focuses on the current crisis and its impact on the families of the weavers and is based on ethnographic field work conducted between 2007 and 2008.

The second chapter of the monograph deals with the historical moorings of the weavers in the Banarasi sari industry, who have been predominantly Muslims, specifically Momin Ansaris. The third chapter addresses the processes that occurred during the

contemporary period, specifically the decades following independence till the 1990s. In this section we also deal with the structure of the Momin Ansari community, the archetypal family of the Momin Ansaris, the contradictory texture of Hindu-Muslim relations as it obtained in the industry and in the society at large, along with newly emerging social groups that entered the arena of weaving, specifically the subaltern Hindu castes, like the OBCs and dalits. The fourth and fifth chapters of the monograph focus on the current crisis as it exploded on the social scene of Banaras and impacted the lives of the weavers in the Banarasi sari industry.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Two questions that have come up regarding the weavers of Banaras has been the question of identity and the manner in which this impinges on their lives. When one uses the term identity, the general tendency is to conflate the question of identity with religious identity particularly when it comes to religious community identity, in this case, Muslims. I have tried here to analyse the intertwining of both the community identity and the class/caste identities in the social hierarchy within the Banarasi sari industry. I have focused on the Muslim weavers since it has been the Muslim weavers who have given the industry its distinctive character through almost a thousand year old cultivation of skills. While there are indeed significant numbers of Hindu weavers from subaltern groups (in some rural areas even a majority) who have entered the profession of weaving since the early decades of the last century, it is Muslim weavers in general and master weavers in particular who impart the uniqueness characteristic of the industry.

There have been broadly two approaches to the above mentioned questions. Ciotti (2010: 1-51) in her study of the Chamar community in a village near Banaras poses the questions of the changing identity of the Chamars who also entered the weaving profession in the 1930s. She interrogates certain standard assumptions on modernity and its western moorings and poses the possibility of alternative modernities. Further, her attempt is

to go 'beyond the tension between Western and non-Western modernities'. She brings the 'investigation of forms of Indian modernity one level down' and emphasises 'how a specific set of actors appropriate, transform and desire master narratives of the modern born within the same national context at different historical junctures' (Ciotti 2010: 19). Her focus is on the internal dynamics of the nation state. She categorically states that her work is saturated with ethnos. " This ethnos who has not physically participated partaken global migration flows, with a limited exposure to the global new media, and whose lives are structured by allegiances which find their immediate and vivid reference in the geographies of north India, is located in the trope of the anti-modern par excellence, the village. It is here that the agency of modernity analysed in the book is situated, and its significance needs to be explained" (Ciotti 2010: 21).

Chitra Joshi, on the other hand discusses the question of community identity and its significance but with a focus on histories of Indian labour (Joshi 2008: 439-454). She refers to the lack of rich traditions of cultural and social history of labour in India till the 1980s and points to the irony that it was only in a situation of crisis in labour history that new realms for investigation expanded. She also critiques modernist frameworks, both liberal and Marxist, wherein the persistent and continuing ties of community, region and religion were seen as signs of an incomplete modernity and the relationship between ethnic and other racial identities and working class formation problematic for labour historians(Joshi 2008: 440).

Dipesh Chakrabarty's work, 'Rethinking Labour History' a significant intervention in the writing of labour history is discussed and critiqued. The principal argument in her critique is that Chakrabarty's understanding of culture and community is flawed; while critiquing frameworks for reducing culture to economic determinants, he himself reifies culture by seeing identities as fixed cultural meanings and privileges one identity over others. "He critiques the idea of a totalizing idea of class only to validate the idea of community as a closed and bounded totality"(Joshi: 2008: 442).

As evidence of attempts to critically engage with issues of culture and community, Joshi cites the work of Chandavarkar (1981) and Gooptu (2001). Both these scholars examine the ways in which identities are continually reworked in the urban context and also draw attention to spaces such as the neighbourhood, the mohalla and the gymnasiums and akharas where community identities are reaffirmed, widened and transformed. Here too there were contradictory experiences.

Gooptu has been particularly useful for our work on the Banaras weavers since she analyses the interplay of caste and community identity along with their class moorings in the evolution of the social, economic and political processes during the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. What is of particular significance is also the cleavages and faultlines in religious communities as they mobilised themselves to articulate their grievances and demands. The role of religion in the public domain was a complex issue also because there were contestations between religious groups and the colonial state. The social history of the weavers of north India, particularly Banaras has formed an important backdrop of the present study which has been discussed at length in my work (Raman, 2010).

What is happening to the weavers is part of what Jan Breman refers to as the major "civilisational switch" from a rural-agrarian to an urban-industrial mode of life and work. "The long era, spanning over 2000 years, during which the march of mankind was dominated by peasant economies and peasant societies has ended".

While there have been many bouts of crises that the weavers have faced for most of the last century, this current crisis is different in that it is part of the overall disembedding that is characteristic of fin-de-siecle global capitalism.

II

Historical Moorings and Social Articulation

It is noteworthy that the manufacture of saris is not very old, the origin of sari weaving going back to the early decades of the twentieth century (Kumar, 1988:22) even though the silk industry is of a more ancient vintage, going back to the Buddhist era, when paat (silk) used to be manufactured for both ritual and ceremonial occasions. The principal consumers of silk fabrics were the rich pilgrims who flocked to Banaras, the most sacred city of the Hindus. It is a matter of interest that despite the strict rules of pollution observed by orthodox Hindu pilgrims, those who wove the fabric for gods and goddesses were historically Muslim weavers. This practice continued despite the fact that Muslims traditionally were prohibited from wearing silk, since it was considered too lavish. As Bayly points out, another fabric was designed, mashru, which consisted of one cotton thread and one silk, so that Muslims could wear this, be presentable and yet not violate the Islamic injunction regarding the wearing of silk (Bayly 1986: 290).

Muslims constitute one-fourth of the city's population and form the core of the sari-weaving industry in Banaras. The most skilled weavers of the Banarasi silk sari have been Muslims of the city, while the main traders in the sari industry have been Hindu bania groups; this holds true for the most part even now, despite the fact that some inroads have been made into the trading monopoly by a section of the Momin Ansaris and also despite the fact that significant numbers of lower caste Hindus also weave. The relationship of interdependence that has existed between the two communities has been based to a great extent on the materiality of production in the Banarasi sari industry. However,

over a long period stretching back to at least a few centuries, a sophisticated composite culture, a culture of give and take, has evolved which is reflected in the musical traditions and in the socio-cultural life of the city, leading to it being characterised as Ganga-Jamna tehzeeb or as one of Tana-Bana, i.e. warp and weft.

The defining metaphor of Tana Bana has had a long history and has been used to characterise Hindu-Muslim relations; however the use of this has often glossed over the hard and harsh reality of the recurrent riots that have occurred and have been a characteristic feature of Hindu-Muslim relations in the city for the past at least four decades. The riots since the latter part of the 1960s led to great losses of life and property of the Muslims, significantly their looms in areas like Madanpura, Jaitpura, Alaipura and Bajardeeha. The last of the major riots was in 1991 in Banaras and in 1992 in Lohta, on the outskirts of Banaras. This has muddied the metaphor of Tana-Bana. What is of interest and social significance is that both Hindus and Muslims alike subscribe to the metaphor and perceive Hindu-Muslim relations as one of mutual dependence, despite periodic bouts of communal violence.

The most notable fact about the Muslims of Banaras is that they have been closely tied to the economy of the city and its cultural heritage for at least a thousand years. In fact, one can say that it is effectively a Muslim industry since the skills of fine silk weaving have been the preserve of the Muslims for centuries and even today continues to be so. (The proportion of Hindus and Muslims among the weaving community is a matter of conjecture since the Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms (1995-96) does not give any religion-wise breakdown; it only gives figures for SCs and STs and OBCs; besides, percentages vary from area to area. However, the Handloom Census of 2009-2010 does have a breakdown on the basis of religion. Thus for the state of Uttar Pradesh as a whole, out of a total of 1,10,542 handloom worker households, 94,375 were Muslim households, whereas there were only 16,026 Hindu households). (See Table

3.3 of the Handloom Census of India 2009-2010) It was estimated that about 40 per cent of the weaving population were mainly Hindu lower castes in the urban areas while in the surrounding rural areas, they constituted nearly 80 per cent. (These estimates have also considerably changed since the deep structural changes that have been effected as a result of the crisis in the industry since the latter part of the 1990s.) The greater preponderance of Hindu weavers in the rural areas is due to the fact that they generally combined weaving with agriculture, whereas for the Muslims, weaving has been their sole occupation.

The other significant feature of the Banaras sari industry and the artisanal families that have been the mainstay of it is that women and children's labour is crucial to the entire process of weaving. The weaver is defined as male since it is the male who actually sits at the loom, but the entire process of weaving is inconceivable without the preparatory work done before the actual process of weaving on the looms and the post loom operations. The role of the women and the children in the weaving process is acknowledged and recognised by men. The Handloom and Powerloom Census of 1995-96 has acknowledged the labour of both women and children and given it a degree of visibility. The Handloom Census of 2009-2010 also acknowledges the labour of women and gives a gender disaggregated picture. Out of a total of 2,17,015 adult workers, women comprised 1,07,675 in the state of Uttar Pradesh. However, since most of the weaving has been organised as a cottage industry with family labour as its basis, women and children's labour is subsumed under the category of family labour and therefore is not computed separately.

As per the Handloom and Powerloom Census of 1995-96, there was a total of 36,234 weaver households engaged in handloom activity in the district of Varanasi, out of which 10,426 households (29 per cent) were in urban areas while 25,808 (71 per cent) were in rural areas. All in all, the district had 57,946 looms with 16009 looms (27.6 per cent) in the urban areas and 41,937 (72.3 per cent) in the rural areas. (Banaras city had 16,343 handlooms

and 964 powerlooms, according to information provided by the Additional Director of Handlooms, K.P.Varma). (However, these figures are outdated now, particularly in the context of the present crisis.)

The other significant fact about the Muslims of Banaras is that the overwhelming majority of them are Momin Ansaris, formerly known as julahas, who converted over many centuries to Islam. The julahas who themselves came from diverse backgrounds were considered an occupational caste. Apart from the economic differentiation between master weavers, independent weavers who worked their own looms, and those who worked on the looms of others, there were also distinctions based on "caste". Thus there were the Koli Julahas, Chamar Julahas, Mochi Julahas and the Ramdasi Julahas; and "it is probable that after a few generations these men will drop the prefix which denotes their lowly origin and become Julahas pure and simple"(Crooke, 1896 (1975): 69). In the United Provinces at the time of the 1891 Census, there were 244 divisions among the julahas. The julahas have been historically represented in colonial writings as 'bigoted' and "fanatical' 'clannish', and 'backward' (Pandey, 1990).

According to the Census of 1931, julaha or Ansari weavers formed the largest non-elite Muslim caste group in United Provinces and were reported to number over one million, of whom about 44 per cent were engaged in weaving while the rest were in transport, trade, other forms of labour and agriculture related industries (Census, 1931, pp. 439, 619, cited in Gooptu, 2001:255).

There was a movement among the julahas spanning the latter part of the the ninetheenth century and the early twentieth century to refer to themselves as as 'Momin Ansaris', that is 'pure of heart', honest and whose work was sanctified by the Prophet. The terms '*julaha*', 'Ansari' and 'Momin' signify important aspects of both social reality and social processes, with julaha meaning just a menial, an ordinary weaver, while the term Ansari means a Muslim weaver with some standing and (the status of) Momin Ansari refers to one who has also attained a degree of spiritual

worth (Rai, 2004:143). There was formal recognition and a seal set on this process at the All-India Jamaat-ul-Ansar in the 1930s.

The Census of 1901 had set the process in motion by attempting to classify 'castes' and 'communities' according to their ritual purity and standing in local society. This led to a spate of petitions from various lower caste groups among both Hindus and Muslims for recording their new status and by 1911, the Julahas were already recorded as Momin Ansar or Sheikh Momin in the Census. The Census of 1931 furnishes a list of lower castes which attempted to raise their caste status and claimed new names and even a new descent. Only three Muslim castes are recorded in this report and these are Julaha, Mirasi (Muslim musician) and the Qassab. The new name the Julahas gave themselves was Shaikh Momin or Shaikh Ansari while the Mirasi called themselves Quraishi, Qassab and Shaikh Quraishi (Ansari, 1960:38). The Census itself had become an instrument of social mobility (Ahmad, 1971: 164-91).

The move from being Julahas to being Momin Ansaris was accompanied by the concomitant processes of abandoning their own traditional customs and practices and emulation of the practices and life styles of the *ashraf* groups. Thus if the women of the lower castes were not already observing purdah (either veiling or practising seclusion) they would adopt this practice, and obtain the services of a 'respectable' Maulvi for the performance of their religious rites at marriages and funerals. (Ansari, 1960:38). Another marker of respectable status was the adoption of Urdu speech in place of Bhojpuri or Awadhi.

Origins of the Crisis of the Weavers: Signposts in the Journey From Independence to Dependence

The weaver had long been accustomed to recurring crises accompanied by violent fluctuations in the industry which had unsettled the ideal of the 'independent' weaver. There have been divergent opinions on the causes of the crises and their impact on handloom weaving and weavers. The dominant viewpoint of

the nationalist school of social historians attributes the destruction of the traditional handloom weaving industry to the deep seated changes wrought by British colonial rule and the consequent economic retardation (Bagchi, 1976), while other scholars challenge this viewpoint and focus on the opportunities offered by these changes for a creative reorganisation of the institutional structures (Roy, 1990). The debate on this continues with more specific local studies that focus on local factors that helped indigenous industry to respond to changes that were initiated by British colonial policy. However, what is undeniable " is the differential impact of colonial developments on different sections of the local handicraftsmen, and the sharp fluctuations that accompanied the process of tying up India's regional economies with the metropolitan economy of Britain" (Pandey, 1986: 89). These in turn brought about major changes in the manner in which cloth was produced. For one, there was a disruption in integrated processes like spinning of yarn and weaving of cloth which in turn was a reflection of the violent disruption of the links between agriculture and industry.

Marx's observations on the process seem appropriate here:

> It was the British intruder who broke up the handloom and destroyed the spinning wheel. England began with driving the Indian cottons from the European market; it then introduced twist into Hindustan, and in the end inundated the very mother country of cotton with cottons. From 1818 to 1836 the export of twist from Great Britain to India rose in the proportion of 1 to 5200. In 1824, the export of British muslins to India hardly amounted to 1,000,000 yards, while in 1837, it surpassed 64,000,000 yards'. (Marx, Karl 1979: 128)

The decline of the textile industry could virtually be dated to the first consignment of British textiles to India in 1821 (Das, S.K. 2001: 19). This was accompanied by the role of India as a supplier of raw cotton to Britain which turned to India as early as 1788 with British manufacturers urging the East India Company to supply raw cotton for the nascent British textile industry. Indeed, it has been argued that the development of the railways was

motivated by the desire to transport cotton. One of the far-reaching consequences of India's role as supplier of raw cotton was the decline of handspun yarn. Imported mill-spun yarn and cloth flooded the Indian markets and led to the destruction of the livelihoods of spinners and also in the long run had an impact on the organisation of the weaving industry.

For instance, the Fact Finding Committee (Handlooms and Mills) 1942 highlights one of the significant changes that occurred:

> (W)hen yarn came from a distance and had to be bought, yarn dealers and financiers became necessary, and as the average weaver had little credit, the industry fell more and more into the grip of middlemen. Thus the independence of most weavers disappeared and the great majority of them came to work for a Mahajan either on the contract or on the wage basis. (p. 6)

It would seem that the handloom still managed to register its significant competitive edge in the domestic market till the first decade of the twentieth century, But the growth and consolidation of the mill sector affected handlooms; apart from being dependent on yarns produced by the mills, handlooms were also affected by the production of cloth by the mills during the period of the First World War. Thus a competitive relationship between the two emerged. The Royal Commission on Agriculture in 1928 "expressed the view that the development of this village industry on cooperative lines was essential to the survival of weavers in the face of increased competition from organised industry" (GOI, 1986-87:1). While handlooms continued to grow between the 1920s and 1930s, partly due to the nationalist movement and its focus on cottage industry as well as due to an increased demand for cloth during the Second World War. Yarn prices went up phenomenally due to the war and during the war, pushing raw materials out of reach of the weavers. According to the ILO (1960:7-8), "compared to pre-war conditions, the price of yarn had increased from 600 to 700 per cent while the price of handloom products had risen only by 200 to 250 per cent leading to the closing down of many looms" (Planning Commission, 2001).

In a study on the impact of economic dislocation and its implications for the decline of artisanal industry in eastern Uttar Pradesh in the nineteenth century, Pandey highlights some of the significant features of this dislocation. For one, since the onset of the 1830s, a reversal was witnessed in the direction of flow of textile products between the British metropolis and its Indian colony. The traditional cloth industry could not resist the new pressures and reports indicate that the spinning industry suffered a secular decline in the middle and later decades of the nineteenth century. Moreover, English thread came to be used, instead of local yarn even in the manufacture of cloth for local markets. English twist had started replacing local thread even as early as the 1830s (Pandey 1986: 96-97). While the plight of the specialised spinners was written about in the various reports, little was known or written about the significant amount of spinning carried on by women in weaver households, either part time or full time. By the end of the nineteenth century spinning was described as no more than a spare time pursuit of those who were primarily involved in doing other work and those who were incapable of doing other work, like old women (ibid).

It would seem that while hand spinning was all but destroyed, there were reports and records that showed that the real competition and resistance was from the traditional weaving sector; cheaper and coarser varieties of cloth which was more durable along with finer cloth and mixtures which could not be produced in factory conditions were produced and managed to put up a competition to the mill sector. At the beginning of the twentieth century at least one third of the cloth worn in UP was woven by handloom weavers and perhaps a million people out of a population of 48 million were dependent on the proceeds of weaving (Pandey 1986: 98).

According to the Report of the UP Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30, Vol. III (386-387), for India as a whole, during the five years 1924-25 to 1928-29, handlooms still provided some 25 per cent of the total consumption of about 5000 million yards of cloth, while 40 per cent was supplied by Indian mills

and about 35 per cent was imported. (Pandey 1986: 124)

Regarding the relations of production in the handloom weaving industry and the various types of arrangements that existed between the mahajans and the weavers, Roy refers to the series of reports produced in the 1930s by the Tariff Board wherein a distinction came to be made between the 'rank and file' and the 'waifs and strays of the community' and the large producer for whom the former represented the proletariat. The ordinary weaver, 'wherever he survives today is eking out a miserable subsistence by working as a mere wage earner in the numerous handloom factories and powerlooms'. In the mid-1930s, factory workers were numerically a minority. But even those who were not yet dispossessed of their looms were losing control over output and the labour process (Roy, 1989: PE-21)

This was indeed a reduction of 'independent weavers to various forms and degrees of dependence'. While the process may have meant many different things in the concrete, Roy points out that the distinction between 'independence' and 'dependence' was real and reasonably precise". Independence meant the right of possession over finished goods which was exercised through sale directly to the consumer or to the merchant who offered the highest price. Sale was not tied to a particular buyer. An independent weaver would most often be a travelling salesman, a hawker selling at the village market or working to orders from users. Dependence, by contrast meant tied sale, an arrangement with a particular buyer, usually a merchant who employed many producers. While this definition suggests that the movement was one confined to the sphere of circulation, it is in the distinction between the various forms and shades of dependence that decisive differences in the relations of production become apparent (Roy, 1989: PE- 22).

Information available on the towns in the early 1930s suggests that cotton and silk weavers worked under three arrangements: price contract with yarn merchants, free buying and selling and wage employment (Roy, 1989: PE-25).

The story of United Provinces as recounted by the Industrial

Survey of the United Provinces (ISUP) highlights the connection between towns and wage employment (Roy, 1989: PE -28). In Benares, Mau and Lucknow, centres of long distance trade, capitalists were differentiated to a much greater degree and large producers, 'richer members of the weaving class' formed a distinct category. Correspondingly, with the development of capital, wage contract and tied sale were more common among the rank and file. This included working as hired labourer in the karkhanas, which were in fact large households with 4 to 10 looms each. The karkhanadars in turn sold to professional merchants and were on the whole a prosperous class but 'the conditions of the weavers who work in these factories is very deplorable'. Referring to the karkhanas, the Indian Tariff Board, Sericulture Industry points out " it was practically getting work done on wages with this difference that the middleman does not do any accounting for individual pieces." The difference between this and karkhana work must have been small, just as karkhanadars themselves could be cloth merchants. There is direct evidence that suggests expansion of contract work in general and wage employment specifically. However, employers of wage labour did expand in the intervening one and a half decades (Indian Tariff Board Sericulture Industry, 1940, Written Evidence, :719).

The UP Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee in 1931 noted that the extent of indebtedness of workers in most artisan industries had increased and their dependence on financiers, merchants and dealers had also increased significantly by the early part of the twentieth century. The Handloom and Mills Committee of 1942 observed: "… the working weaver is so inexorably tied to the financier that he is not able to sell his labour in a free market, nor sell his product at the highest available price." The increasing dependence on merchants and moneylenders meant a loss of independent status and much-valued autonomy. While the Banaras silk industry managed to survive the crisis much better than other industries, here too, the hold of the merchant-financiers increased (Gooptu, 2001).

Thus already by the 1940s, the "independent" artisan had all but disappeared. Even where he existed the autonomy of the artisan/weaver consisted only in owning the loom on which he and his family worked, but was entirely dependent on the yarn merchant for supply of yarn, dependent also on the karkhanadar (who may often be master weaver as well) for designs and also for the sale of his product.

The world of the Julahas/Momin Ansaris was already a differentiated and divided one in the early decades of the twentieth century. The volcanic impact of the fluctuations of the market on the conditions of the weavers and the consequent strife had drastic consequences on a community that was dependent on moneylenders, middlemen and a series of intermediaries leading to great social and economic dislocation. Where the moneylenders and merchants were Hindu and the mass of weavers principally Muslim, the conflict assumed the form of Hindu-Muslim strife (Pandey 1990:82).

As early as the 1860s, the deposition of the weavers of Mau to the Commissioner of Banaras that they were willing to make cloth of the finest quality at cheaper rates than coarse cotton cloth since the latter required more yarn indicated that their labour and skills had almost no value (Pandey, 1990:73-74). With the introduction of imported cloth from Lancashire in the middle and later decades of the nineteenth century, the business of the julahas declined and they took to cultivation and various forms of labour (Crooke, 1896 (1975): 70). One of the important consequences of this was a shift from the manufacture of fine cloth to that of cheaper and coarser varieties. While the Banaras silk industry was an exception to this trend, the Banaras weavers were unable to protect themselves in the period of transition when old markets declined and new ones arose and the fluctuations that characterised this transition (Pandey, 1990: 72).

Migration to the cities had already begun and the mills in and around Calcutta and Kanpur had already absorbed the Julahas of northern India. Thus migration had become a reality and a harsh one at that for the Julahas of northern and eastern India

with its attendant disruptions of their ways of life. The Julahas, imaged as clannish, bigoted and backward were to constitute the earliest modern working class of the mills and factories of India. They had to quickly transit from one world to another, from their moorings in pre-industrial artisanal production with its own rhythms of work and leisure and just as quickly and violently had to move into the demanding discipline of modern factory-based production (Joshi, 2003).

The social and political articulation of the Julahas encompassed a wide range of movements and assertions. They were moved by the grand vision of 1857 with its tragic consequences, as well as by the more specific movements for reform and revival of Islamic reformers. During the critical decades of the 1930s and 1940s, the Julahas in their new incarnation as Momin Ansaris were the initiators of the All-India Momin Conference which took a strong political stand against the partition of the country propagated by the Muslim League. They were also in the forefront in the struggles of the putative working class in the cities of Kanpur, Calcutta and Bombay.

The social and economic differentiation that emerged manifested itself in divergent modes of worship among the artisan and labouring communities and the *ashraf* groups, thus accentuating the distinctions in northern Indian Muslim society. Shrine worship was common to popular Islam and popular Hinduism. However, the pluralistic and syncretistic forms of worship were paralleled by another process, the return to a 'purer' Islam. This latter tendency was reflected in the growing influence of the Wahabis whose concern was to 'cleanse' the practice of Islam of non-Islamic and Hindu practices.

The Depression, the Weavers' World and Religious Revivalism

The decades of the 1920s and 1930s were extremely momentous for many reasons. The 1930s in particular saw an intensification of movements among the artisan communities in northern India. The impact of the economic depression and the resultant

economic and social dislocation contributed to their sense of a loss of moorings, both social and spiritual. The rise and intensification of revivalist movements in the United Provinces and Oudh affected the artisans and urban poor deeply. The Hindu revivalist organisations were active in mobilising the lower castes of Hindu society as many of the shudra groups were active in pressing their claims for kshatriya status. The depression had exacerbated marginalisation of the poor leading to massive migration to urban areas and a consequent shift away from traditional occupations. These wider processes constituted the backdrop of the revivalist movements.

The artisanal poor, both Hindu and Muslim were affected by the worsening social and economic situation. But the increasing subordination of artisans, particularly Muslims, to powerful Hindu commercial groups who were becoming aggressive exacerbated the Hindu-Muslim divide. The shuddhi and sanghathan movements were already active during this period, pursuing their agenda of reconverting Muslims to Hinduism. An extremely significant aspect of Hindu reformism and revivalism was the conscious erosion of cultural and social spaces of interaction between Hindus and Muslims, particularly at the everyday level through an aggressive onslaught on the syncretic and composite cultural traditions. Women were also actively mobilised in the project of a resurgent Hinduism, specifically women from the low castes whose social and cultural practices were to be 'sanskritised'; this was to be an important element in the construction and consolidation of the "Hindu community" (Gupta, 2001).

The programme of social and economic boycott of Muslims was, it would seem, an inseparable part of the 'cultural' and 'religious' Hindu revival. The shudra castes were targeted by the Hindu revivalist organisations in order to seek support for the anti-Muslim programmes, the underlying purpose of this being to increase the numbers of Hindus. (An obsession with the numbers of Hindus was an extremely important part of the agenda of Hindu revivalist organisations of this period). This

meant that poor Muslims found it difficult to find employment in the towns and qasbas, dominated as these were by Hindu merchants and traders. Thus the demographic profile of the markets, including bazaar industries and the composition of the labour force in these tended to be overwhelmingly Hindu. There were very few Muslim merchants and entrepreneurs and they were confined to specific trades and industries (Gooptu, 2001: 256).

Hindu revivalism was also paralleled by Islamic revitalisation movements which had begun in the nineteenth century; but these had received a further impetus in the 1920s and 1930s. The main thrust of these movements was an attempt to return to the spirit of early Islam, and there was an emphasis on the texts—the Quran, the Shariat and the Hadiths—and on an emulation of the life of the Prophet. Despite the fact that the leadership of these movements were the ulema from the seminaries (Deoband, Ahle-Hadiths and the Firanghi Mahal), who came from the administrative and political elites of north India, the artisanal poor were fired by the message of reform and a return to the spirit of early Islam. The significant consequence of this was the attempt to cleanse the practice of Islam in India of all traces of non-Islamic and Hindu elements, specifically the veneration of saints at the numerous dargahs along with an increase in the practice of religion in the public arena. Religious articulation was more in the public arena with the poor taking an increasing and active part.

The wider constitutive context of the practice of religion in the public domain consisted of the colonial administration's endeavour to catalogue and document everything regarding Indians with a view to having a comprehensive knowledge of the subjects. The attempt to categorise everything as either 'public' or 'personal', and the codification of 'law' and ' custom' led overall to congealing many aspects of social life. This was to have serious and long ranging consequences for the practice of religion. The colonial administration became the final arbiter for the practice of religion in the public sphere, including the

question of boundaries between different groups and the issue of control over urban space, particularly sacred space.

The participation of the artisanal poor in the public expression of religion and in the various reform movements was impelled by their social and economic dislocation unlike that of the elites who were ruing the loss of political power to the British (Gooptu, 2001:263). The articulation of the artisans' assertion in a religious idiom was only natural, given that the artisanal way of life was one wherein work, worship and culture comprised one integral whole. Since the expression of power of the Hindu mercantile groups was in the religious idiom, their hegemony could be challenged only on the religious plane.

The julahas were caught between the assertion of the Hindu groups, both Brahmin and mercantile, and the militant assertion of the shudra groups on the one hand and the reformist zeal of the *ashraf* to Islamise (Gooptu, 2001:263).

Thus the social base of the artisans' religious assertion could be traced to the disruption of an entire way of life based initially on the unity of agriculture and handicrafts and artisanal production and later on the decline of the artisanal industry itself.

The Politics of the Momin Ansaris

The Momin Ansaris were the most numerous as also the most vocal group among the artisans of the United Provinces. The political party that Maulana Azad Subhani attempted to form was based on weaver and artisanal identities in the early 1930s with the symbol of the *garha* (handwoven cloth produced by Muslim artisans). He tried to mobilise working class groups in the United Provinces to develop a pan-Islamic and nationalist movement. The All India Momin Conference was held in April 1928 at Holiday Park, Calcutta. Maulana Abdul Majid al-Hariri from Banaras was one of its founding members and was its first president (adhyaksh) (Alam, 2001).

The All-India Momin Conference, also known as Jamaat-ul-

Ansar, articulated the aspirations and problems of weavers and artisans. British rule and its depredations were held responsible for their desperate plight. The aim of the Conference was to promote a revival of the traditional crafts, self respect and devout religious conduct among the weavers, the final aim being to restore their independent status. The Conference, with its unambiguous anti-colonial stand was quite close to the Indian National Congress and saw itself as articulating and representing the interests of ordinary Muslims as opposed to that of the Muslim League which was seen as a party representing elite Muslims. In the early 1940s, the Conference passed a resolution against the partition of the country.

The self assertion of Muslim artisanal groups was expressed in the tanzeem (movement). Tanzeem emerged at a time when the impact of the depression was most severe and most palpable when the role of Hindu revivalist organisations was at its zenith, with their agenda of reconverting Muslims. Resistance to this was spearheaded by Baba Khalil Das in Banaras, the main plank of his movement being self-protection and unity, organisation and literacy. But this movement did not enjoy the support of the ulema and the well-to do Ansaris kept away from these initiatives. Tanzeem, in a sense, articulated the contradiction between Muslim artisans and Hindu merchants and financiers. While there was a degree of interdependence, despite an essentially unequal relationship between the two, the economic depression in the 1930s disrupted this relationship. According to evidence given to the Banking Enquiry Committee in 1929, as many as 60 per cent of the artisans worked for middlemen and workshop owners, of whom only 25-30 per cent worked at home. Out of the 35,000 persons engaged in the silk industry, more than half were reported to be only wage earners (Gooptu, 2001: 308).

All in all, political mobilisation along religious lines exacerbated the contradiction between Hindu merchants and Muslim weavers, this being further bolstered by the fact that Hindu merchants were in the forefront, supporting and financing both Hindu revivalism and Congress predominance.

During the crucial period of the 1920s and 1930s, the Momin Ansaris were not a homogeneous community and some differentiation had taken place. A small section of Momin Ansaris, particularly from among the thin merchant stratum had become better off. It was in this group that Islamisation had proceeded apace with some members turning to the purist sect of the Wahabis (also referred to as the Ahle-Hadiths), while the vast mass of weavers continued to practise shrine worship and adhered to the Barelvi sect, the Deobandis occupying a kind of theological middle ground.

The Partition of the country led to significant changes in the composition of north Indian Muslim society signalling despair as well as holding out possibilities for those left behind. There was an exodus of large numbers of elite Muslims from the *ashraf* groups, leaving the Muslims demoralised and leaderless. But this provided the Momin Ansaris and other subaltern caste groups with a historic opportunity. There were other far-reaching changes in the immediate years after independence and partition, like the Zaimindari Abolition Act which affected the remnants of the Muslim aristocracy and led to an overall social leveling.

It brought to the forefront the Kapdawala, the Bartanwala and the Talawala.

III

Contemporary Structures and Processes

The Structure of the Momin Ansari Community

The structure of the Momin Ansari community of the weavers of Banaras has undergone drastic changes in the last couple of decades with the virtual disappearance of the weaving industry due to the macro policy changes since the early 1990s and peaking in the early decade of the twenty first century. One might say that the world of the julahas as it used to be has ceased to exist.

However, it is necessary to document the structure of the weaving community of Momin Ansaris as it existed till a few decades ago, if only to capture the sea changes that have occurred in a short span of a decade and a half in the recent past. Cataclysmic changes have resulted from policy changes under the aegis and hegemony of globalised capitalism.

Abdul Bismillah in his fictionalised account of the weavers of Banaras—*Jheeni Jheeni Beeni Chadariya*—(1987) captures the distinctiveness of the world of the weavers in the following words:

"*Ek samaaj duniya ka hai. Ek samaaj Bharat ka hai. Ek samaaj hinduon ka hai. Ek samaaj Musalmanon ka hai. Aur ek samaaj Banaras ke julahon ka hai. Yeh samaaj kai arthon mein duniya ke har samaj se alag hai.*" (Bismillah, Abdul, 1987:10). While expatiating on the geographical spread of the julahas across different locations in Banaras city, the differences in their ways of life and language, Bismillah avers: *Lekin hai sab ek. Mardon ke paon karghe mein aur streeon ke haath charkhe mein*" (Bismillah 1987: 11).

One significant feature that distinguishes the Momin Ansari community (as in the case of other artisanal communities) is that it has been tightly knit community with great value being

placed on group solidarity and cohesiveness. Such group solidarity and cohesiveness were based on household-based artisanal production. The household was a production unit within a unit of consumption and reproduction (Roy, 1999:35), division of labour being governed by age and gender. Socialisation was geared to promote those values and qualities that were essential for the consolidation of group solidarity and cohesiveness. Socialisation, however, was highly gendered. One important feature of the artisanal family is that the survival of the individual was to a great degree dependent on the extended family, and the kin group was crucial to the survival of the artisanal family. Group solidarity was based on the tight knit structure of the household based cottage industry. It was the group, in this case caste group or biradari that provided identity to the individual, adult or child. This is true even of the growing powerloom industry, which in eastern UP is still predominantly a cottage industry operated largely through family labour.

This tightly-knit structure was further cemented by endogamous marriage, very often spatially restricted endogamy. Thus it has been observed that most of the families in the Madanpura-Rewri Talaab area (an area where the well-to-do Muslims of Banaras reside), are related to each other in one way or another. (Interview with Mohammad Taha)

Occupation and endogamy are organising principles which make for this tightly-knit structure. Gender relations in general and women's roles in particular are embedded in this complex social matrix and linked to the maintenance of boundaries of the community. Marriage alliances and occupational distinctions are extremely important in the maintenance of boundaries. And of course, women were crucial to the maintenance of boundaries. In recent times, observers have pointed out that even sectarian considerations have also begun to influence marriage alliances. The Sardar Mehtos, traditional community leaders, had an important role in the maintenance of this tightly knit structure. However, the role of the Sardars and Mehtos has considerably declined due to the changes that have affected the community as a whole.

The population of the Momin Ansaris of Banaras is contained in four or five residential clusters. In the north of the city in the areas (wards) of Saraiya, Jalalipura, Alaipura, Jaitpura and Nakkighat, reside significant numbers of weavers. Lallapura located in the centre of the city is another centre of weaving, Lohta towards the west of the city, on the outskirts is a centre that has emerged over the last 30 years or so. Bajardeeha on the extreme south of the city not far from Madanpura, is a dense and overgrown settlement of weavers with hardly any civic amenities. And finally there is the well known and prosperous area of Madanpura-Rewri Talaab, which has been a source of envy and pride for most of the Momin Ansaris of Banaras, though even these locations have lost their sheen in the last decade and more.

The community is divided into various *taats*, (loosely translated as lineages or clans who trace their descent from a common ancestor). *Taats* were also geographically bound. Membership in a particular taat could influence marriage decisions. However this too is fast changing.

In the social organisation of the Momin Ansaris, the Sardars and Mehtos, the traditional leaders of the community played a significant role in earlier times. Typical of many artisanal castes, there were caste panchayats, referred to as the Bunkar Panchayat. The Sardars and Mehtos were generally themselves weavers and were usually in charge of particular clusters of mohallas. Biradari is a term often used to describe the caste-like structure among the occupational castes of Muslims. The role of the Sardar-Mehtos was a fairly composite one in earlier times, extending to matters beyond marriage and divorce. The institution has withered due to many of their functions being taken over by the government, courts, the police and the judiciary. The increasing practice of a more purist Islam among the well-to-do sections of the community in which Sardars and Mehtos have no social space has also contributed to their declining importance.

Despite their declining importance, when it comes to closing down of work-murri bandh (shuttles down)-by the entire weaving

community, the opinion of the Sardars do matter. In the recent past, on October 30, 2004, when the weaving community of Banaras went for murri bandh to protest against the desperate condition of the weavers, the Sardars and Mehtos were very much involved in the decision. Even more recently, in 2009, the Sardars and Mehtos were involved in the negotiations with the traders and businessmen for an increase in the wage rates for weavers. There was another murri bandh in November 2010 on the issue of the high prices of yarn. The latter event was significant since it brought together the different organisations of the Sardar Mehtos, the baisi, the chaudhavi and the bavani. (i.e. those incharge of twenty two, fourteeth or fifty-two muhallas).

The Artisanal Family and the Social Organisation of Production

Any discussion of the social organisation of production among the weavers has to factor in the centrality of the family and its role in artisanal production. The fact that the labour of women and children is extremely important in the production of the sari is underscored by the recognition of this in the Handloom and Powerloom Census of 1995-96 and in the Handloom Census of 2009-10. There is a further division of labour according to age in the archetypal artisanal family of the Momin Ansaris, with the older women doing certain kinds of processes and the younger ones doing others and boys and girls being gradually socialised into the different tasks in the weaving process. The organisation of production was centred around the household with family labour being the mainstay of the production process. This holds true particularly for the large majority of the Ansaris who have not graduated to the ranks of the gaddidars, i.e. entrepreneurs and businessmen.

One significant feature of the Banaras weaving industry is that it is characterised by the existence of many tiers and layers and often the dividing lines between the different tiers are blurred. What one could clearly state is that the distinction between the loomless weavers who work on the looms of others for wages at

one end of the hierarchy and that of the gaddidars/grihasthas at the other end is reasonably unambiguous. But the various strata between these two ends was, till recently, characterised by a great degree of fluidity, with loomless weavers often working for weavers with four to five looms, the latter having a relationship of dependence to the grihasthas and/or traders. But this picture has changed significantly, as we show in the following chapters dealing with current crisis and its implications for the structure of the weaving industry.

The Muslim weavers of Banaras could be broadly classified into three groups: those who have their own looms and work only at these and sell directly to the grihasthas or master weavers who are often also traders ; those who have their own looms and work on the looms of others as well and those who do not have their own looms and work only on the looms of others. Many grihasthas had themselves risen from the ranks of ordinary weavers. And above the master weavers are businessmen or gaddidars. The dividing lines between master weavers/grihasthas and businessmen are fluid. And even those who do not directly produce and are involved in purely commercial activities and are gaddidars; have often risen from the ranks of weavers, generally grihasthas most of whom are overwhelmingly Muslim. Thus the social origin and character of the Muslim gaddidars are quite different from the Hindu merchants who have dominated the trade, the latter having been purely merchants from the bania castes of northern India. Here too, some long-time observers from the Momin Ansari community like Abdulla Ansari aver that a distinction needs to be made between the indigenous bania groups from Banaras and those who have migrated to Banaras from other parts of northern India like the Punjabi Khatris; the former, are considered to be more sensitive to the interests of the predominantly Muslim weavers than the latter (Interview with Abdulla Ansari, Rewri Talaab, 2005).

There were hardly any technological changes in the production process in recent times and those that have occurred have not altered the organisation of production: the industry

continued to be a household industry till the last decades of the 20th century. According to Kumar, there has hardly been any structural change between 1880 and the 1980s. Thus three levels of production continued to exist, that is labourers working under another's roof; the weaver working at home for others and finally, the independent weaver. Even though the products have changed, these levels constituted a hierarchy among weavers (Kumar, 1988: 40-41).

Powerlooms were introduced in Banaras in the 1950s. However, the Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms of 1995-96 shows that the overwhelming majority of looms were still handlooms. There were 16,343 handlooms and 964 powerlooms in the city in 2001. But till the 1990s, despite the increasing number of powerlooms, the two sectors were regarded as complementary by most of our informants in the sari business. According to some, the handlooms actually benefited from powerloom production. But when restrictions on the number of items that could be produced by the powerlooms were lifted in the 1990s, there has been an official sanction for powerlooms to produce items originally reserved for handlooms. Since then, the relationship between powerlooms and handlooms has been one of competition, with the handlooms steadily losing out to the powerlooms. However, the powerloom industry in eastern Uttar Pradesh continues to be a decentralised cottage industry operated largely through family labour and the majority of the units consisting of not more than four to five powerlooms.

The Archetypal Family of the Momin Ansaris of Banaras

Weaving is central to the lives and identity of the Momin Ansaris. The long historical process whereby many generations of julahas nurtured this activity, cultivated fine skills and ensured that these are transmitted to the succeeding generations has made the act of weaving critical to the moulding of Ansari identity and culture. And the family is central to it.

The artisanal family, as pointed out earlier, is a unit of

production within a unit of consumption and reproduction wherein roles for each member of the family are well-defined. The division of labour was governed by age and gender. Women's and children's labour was integral to the weaving process. The weaving process subsumes within it a range of preparatory processes, like carding, getting the yarn ready for weaving, rolling onto the bobbins and post weaving processes, like cutting the saris, polishing the zari etc. where women and children are involved in large numbers. Analysis of gender relations among weavers has to be situated within the matrix of the sari industry and also the location of the individual families in the social organisation of the production process.

Children were socialised into weaving from a fairly young age, that is between the ages of eight and ten. Girls learned the skills from the elder women while the boys initially learned from fathers and brothers but were also often sent to work as apprentices to the master weavers, where they might not get paid. Thus a great degree of complementarity has characterised both gender relations as well as the relationship between the generations in a typical weaver's family.

Many preparatory processes and post-loom operations were generally combined with domestic labour and child care and were conducted in women's areas, the domestic space, as opposed to weaving which was done in a separate area of the household where the looms were kept; this was the domain of the men who alone dealt with the outside world of the market and the trade. Thus not only the weaving process was gendered, the weaving space was also gendered. The ideology of separate worlds of men and women, which is rooted in the perception regarding the different roles that they had to perform in society and social reproduction assumes a specific form in the household and family-based production amongst the Momin Ansaris. While a culture of segregation of sexes and their spheres was also prevalent among Hindu weaving groups, it was not that stringent. Despite the existence of a large number of Hindu OBC and dalit groups in weaving, the Momin Ansaris are the archetypal weavers. The

sari is the final product of the collective labour of the family which is then 'priced' and 'commodified', embodying both the labour and the social relations of the weaver's family.

Even in the case of powerlooms, the preparatory work of the women continues. Women sit at the powerlooms and supervise since the processes are mechanised. The fact that the work on the powerloom is largely done from the home makes it easier for women to take on this work since it does not transgress the gendering of the world into the inside and the outside. Men continue to deal with the world of the market and customers.

However, certain caveats need to be entered here regarding the functioning of the weaver's family. The picture that has been sketched above is that of the typical self-employed and self-sufficient weaver household . This is the norm and the ideal that most weavers' households would aspire to live upto. But as the two Censuses of 1995-96 and 2009-2010 as well as our own study has shown, the developments over the last forty years along with the economic crisis that has overtaken the world of the weavers since the early 1990s, accompanied by extreme social and economic differentiation has made the ideal of a self-employed artisan a mirage and beyond the realm of possibility. These developments have long term and unsettling consequences on the structure of the artisan's family.

A new kind of market had emerged which was quite different from what the Momin Ansari males were accustomed to, a market that had been characterised by its good-faith ethos which they had learnt to negotiate over the years . The new market brought into being another world — a world where the artisanal family, social relationships, inter-community dependence had all but disappeared , in the course of just a decade or so.

Differentiation among the Momin Ansaris

From around the 1970s, the community of the Momin Ansaris in Banaras became quite differentiated, and a small though significant section of the Momin Ansaris emerged as entrepreneurs and businessmen known as gaddidars from the ranks

of the weavers/master weavers. They are quite prosperous and visible especially in Madanpura. Having said this, it is important to reiterate that the Banarasi sari business is still dominated by the Hindu traders and financiers. The fact that the weavers were still predominantly Muslim (particularly in the highly skilled silk weaving) and the buyers and traders predominantly Hindu, constituted the basis for interdependence. The large majority of the Momin Ansars are still ordinary weavers trying to eke out a livelihood and continued to be in very straitened circumstances. Thus one can speak of two worlds of Banaras Muslims weavers one exemplified by Madanpura where the elite reside and the other by Bajardeeha which is considered the slum area of Banaras, where the poorer artisans live.

Economic and social differentiation has been paralleled by sectarian differentiation as well. The prosperous sections of the community have taken significant initiatives in promoting education of both the modern, formal kind and the traditional one. As the community got differentiated, the movement towards a pure, scriptural Islam in the practice of religion got accentuated. This process is often referred to as Islamisation which is different from ashrafisation; while the former refers to the practice of religion in the day to day life of people, the latter refers to the emulation of the lifestyles of the *ashraf* groups by the ordinary Muslims in the lower rungs of the hierarchy. However, there is a relationship between the two in that it is generally among the well-to-do Momin Ansaris that there is a discernible thrust towards the practice of a more purist, scriptural Islam and stricter adherence to the Quran, Sharia and the Hadiths, while the practice of Islam among the poorer weavers is manifested in shrine worship and an emphasis on the intercessionary roles of saints. Arshad Alam analyses the social and sociological basis of sectarian differentiation and refers to it as 'a movement from custom to scripture' (Alam 2007: 177-195).

One might even say that Islamisation is an expression of upward mobility (Searle-Chatterjee, 1994: 83-93). Islamisation has meant following Sharia prescriptions regarding inheritance by the

daughters in the family, payment of mehr along with an increasing emphasis on the education of girls. But this emphasis on education is, according to some observers like Professor Taha, not a move from tradition to modernity, as much as a strengthening of tradition; while modernity is essential for material advancement, it also strengthens tradition.

It would seem, according to Professor Taha that modern education is only accentuating Islamisation. Similar processes of the strengthening and assertion of religio-cultural identity are also occurring among the Hindus. Islamisation has proceeded faster among the well-to-do Ansaris rather than among the majority of ordinary, generally indigent weavers who are still illiterate and whose life chances are limited by their overwhelming economic situation. The worlds of the Madanpura Ansari and that of the Bajardeeha, Jaitpura or Alaipura Ansari have indeed grown apart in many ways. (For a more elaborate discussion on Islamisation and its consequences, see Raman, 2010, pp 117-130)

Entry of Hindu subaltern groups into the weaving sector

While the entry of the Hindu lower caste groups into the occupation of weaving can be traced to the 1930s, the period since 1970s saw the accentuation of this process.

This period witnessed the entry of OBC caste groups and dalits into the weaving profession in substantial numbers, particularly in the surrounding rural areas and in the peri-urban weaving centres that emerged in the decades since the 1970s. The period since the 1970s marked a period of expansion of the Banaras silk industy. Weaving provided an alternative occupation and source of livelihood at a time when agriculture was proving to be unviable. These groups also combined agriculture with weaving and added to their incomes. During this period, many of the OBCs and dalits attached themselves to Muslim grihasthas to learn the skills.

The relationship between the Muslim grihasthas and the new entrants into the weaving community is a matter of interest. However, the relationship between the Muslim grihasthas and

the OBC groups and that with the dalits followed slightly different trajectories.

Many OBC groups took to weaving over the last three to four decades, specifically the Yadavs; there are many success stories among them. The case of Girja Yadav illustrates a rather successful case of a transition from dairying to weaving. His family of wife, three daughters and one son have been living in Jalalipura for more than two generations. For them this is a major occupational shift over the last two generations. In the particular area where they live, Hindus and Muslims constitute approximately fifty per cent each of the population. Earlier the Yadavs used to weave at the grihastha's house as labourers on the grihastha's loom. But they bought a powerloom in 2002 and started weaving at home and selling saris to the grihasthas on a piece-rate basis earning about Rs. 4000 per month. Susheela, Girja's wife has been doing all the preparatory work for the weaving. They own a house with electricity and water. His son and one daughter go to school. He had fairly good relations with the Muslim grihasthas and with his Muslim neighbours. He stated : We have no quarrel with the Muslim grihasthas" They eat the qurbani meat that is offered to them by their Muslim friends even though they prefer not to eat at their houses. Their religio-cultural life includes visits to dargahs and mazhars *and* temples (Interview with Girja Yadav, Jalalipura, Banaras, 2005).

There were many Yadavs, according to him, who were shifting to weaving from dairying since the prospects were favourable. Their own occupational shift can be directly related to the period roughly since 1970s when the Banarasi sari industry was flourishing. However, one needs to locate the case of Girja Yadav also in the specific context of Jalalipura, which has been a relatively stable settlement of weavers compared to more recent settlements like Lohta and Bajardeeha. It had not witnessed any serious incident of communal violence in recent times. If one were to rank weaving settlements in Banaras, Jalalipura would represent a kind of midpoint between the prosperous Madanpura-Rewri Talaab, and the slum-like Bajardeeha. While the prosperous

Madanpura has been a reference point for the Muslim weavers of Jalalipura, it was also a locality where some of the residents made a fairly quick shift to the powerlooms, some as early as the 1970s when the Banaras sari industry was at its apogee, like Riazul Haque Ansari who made the shift in the late 1970s, for reasons of efficiency and productivity (Interview with Riazul Haque Ansari, Jalalipura, Banaras February, 2008).

The case of Lohta where significant numbers of weavers from the dalit community entered the weaving profession, abandoning an unviable agriculture and humiliating social and work conditions is different. The riot of 1992 in Lohta was horrific for the scale of barbarity and destruction and loss of lives. While both Muslims and Hindus were affected, the families of the Chamar weavers were particularly affected, with about seven dalit families burnt alive in the Mehmoodpur area in Lohta allegedly by Muslims.

Certain distinctive features of the texture of social relations of the qasba of Lohta need to be foregrounded to locate the emergence of dalits into the profession of weaving. Lohta emerged as a weaving centre only in the last 25 years, and it quickly became a marketing centre, a satti. One feature of such centres is that both the social composition and social relations are fluid and inchoate, with new groups (Hindu dalits, like Chamars and some OBC groups like Yadavs and Koeris) making an occupational shift to weaving from agriculture and dairying. Many of the Muslim weaver families who are residents of the area had migrated from other localities in Banaras proper due to shortage of space. Thus overall there is an atmosphere of social indeterminateness which prevails, unlike the older and more established weaving centres like Madanpura-Rewri Talaab or Jalalipura.

The nature of Hindu-Muslim relations in Lohta is likewise tinged with a fluidity, making the business of maintaining social harmony more difficult. Organic intellectuals and social activists like Dr. Nomani from the Muslim community (who died in police custody in the 1992 riots) made conscientious and dogged efforts

to work out the philosophy of tana-bana in Lohta with the aim of consolidating a degree of equilibrium and of harmony in an unsettled and tenuous social environment. Such endeavours were even more urgent when different social groups were migrating to Lohta: the Hindu dalit and OBC groups moving out of an essentially unsustainable agriculture and dairying, while Muslim weavers were migrating out of more established weaving centres in Banaras due to shortage of space. The situation was laden with immense potentialities of conflict of an almost explosive kind. Anchors had yet to be thrown in fully by both groups and individuals. Shrines helped in mooring groups in newly settled urban spaces, while simultaneously also harbouring the seeds of conflict between groups.

In the early years of the twenty first century, weaving was no longer an option anymore for a stable livelihood particularly for Hindu dalit groups. On the other hand, for the few OBC castes that had moved into powerlooms during the 1970s, the apogee of the efflorescence of the Banaras sari industry in recent times, the future seemed less bleak.

The families of Ratanlal, (dalits from Lohta) whose brother and six persons from his extended family were killed during the riots of 1992, and Ram's family of 14 members were clear that their children would not go into weaving since the future was bleak in this occupation. Sajjan and Dhani Devi are a young Chamar couple with a young son. They had started weaving only in the present generation, and survived on mazdoori at the grihastha's house. Sajjan was clear that his son would not become a weaver since there were hardly any prospects in this sector. Sajjan and Dhani Devi were seriously affected during the 1992 riots when Sajjan's brother was killed and their houses were looted and burnt and they had to flee from home. What is distinct about the dalits of Lohta was that they were caught in the cauldron (both literally and metaphorically) of the highly volatile situation that obtained as both the communal tensions and the portents of the oncoming economic crisis converged.

Jallupur, a village near Sarnath, predominantly of dalits with

about 70-75 households, a place where one could hear the looms clattering rhythmically in almost all the homes, keeping the home fires burning till about 5-6 years ago, was silent in 2008. In almost all the households except two, the looms lie dormant. The men are all out doing what is called 'mota kaam' (masonry, construction work) while the women sometimes sow and reap on the fields of middle level landowners who themselves are white-collared workers in Banaras.

The dalits of Jallupur had taken to weaving about 20-25 years ago during the good old days of the industry, and saw weaving as an escape from the drudgery and servitude of agricultural labour. However, their dreams came to nought with the present crisis and the attendant slump in the market. But from about the mid-70s till the mid-90s, they did well, weaving mostly saris but from cheaper and mixed fabrics. Bhikkhu, approximately in his forties has two sons. His is one of two families that have managed to survive in weaving. Bhikkhu was landless; he did construction work for a while and earned enough to buy one loom and steadily acquired 6 looms, two of which were disposed of after the market slowdown. He operates three of the looms with his wife and two sons, while the fourth one is farmed out to someone else. He sells directly to a Muslim grihastha in Banaras. But he too is apprehensive of the future (Interview with Bhikhu, Jallupur, December, 2008).

Ciotti traces the entry into the weaving profession of a Chamar community in a village near Banaras, in the late 1930s, working initially as apprentices with Muslim grihasthas and then setting up and operating their own looms in their villages on the basis of a "putting out system" (Ciotti, 2007: 321-54). Their relationship with the Muslim grihasthas proved beneficial to the Chamars in a new life free from the indignity and subservience to the upper caste village elites. Besides, it improved their ritual status and helped in generating a sense of pride in their new occupation of weaving. Moreover, many of those who worked with Muslim grihasthas as apprentices cum labourers, made the transition, over a period to being independent weavers aided by state loans

and the improved technology of the jacquard loom and the production of cheaper saris made with viscose and nylon (Ciotti, 2007:323). It would seem that most of the Chamar weavers made the transition from being bani weavers to 'independent weavers' fairly smoothly, without any obstruction from their Muslim employers, weaving saris from manmade fabrics, while silk saris were largely woven by bani weavers since the investment in silk yarn was much more expensive (Ciotti, 2007: 341).

The last years of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty first century also heralded the exit of the Chamars, among others, from the occupation of weaving, when the neo-liberal policy regime with its emphasis on liberalisation and lifting of protective barriers occasioned by the adherence to WTO norms impacted the weaving industry drastically (Ciotti, 2007: 324).

The distinct social signification of the Chamar weavers consisted in their attitude to their work which imbibed certain aspects of modernity, like a 'secular nature', 'depersonalised working relations', and a separation from ritual (Ciotti, 2007:325). These characteristics were in marked contrast to those prevalent in the Muslim weaving community.

The course charted by the Chamars in this case also impacted and transformed their identity as 'Hindus'; thus, once they became 'independent' weavers with their own looms, their dealings with Hindu upper caste traders underwent a change from their erstwhile relations with the upper caste landlords in the village. It was now a more formal, business relation, needless to say impacted by the fluctuations of the market (Ciotti, 2007: 342).

Ciotti refers to the analysis of Gooptu and Bayly while discussing the different trajectories charted by untouchable groups in the transition from agriculture to urban occupations in the early years of the twentieth century. This process actually led to a consolidation or hardening of untouchable identity. There seems to have been a hardening and rigidification of the pollution barrier in the urban areas as untouchables confronted the other shudra castes and upper castes. While Gooptu refers to the compartmentalization of untouchable occupations and the spatial

segregation within the cities, Bayly highlights the point that the hardening of the pollution barrier has its origin not in the traditional relations that characterised different groups in the village but in the employment of unclean castes in the modern arena where they were differently placed and experienced greater discrimination (Ciotti, 2010: 86-87).

In contrast, the experience of the Chamars of the Banaras region in their transition from agriculture to the traditional craft of weaving with the help of the Muslim grihasthas was one which contributed to a more positive self image among the Chamars and a different course of identity formation (Ciotti, 2010). She suggests that colonial modernity leads to identity hardening processes as opposed to the softening powers of traditional industry.

Thus, in the early decades of the 21st century, numerically, weavers from Hindu subaltern groups constituted a significant proportion, facing the ravages of the policies affecting the weaving community, alongside the Muslim brethren.

IV

The Origins and Contours of the Present Crisis

The deep crisis in the handloom industry (and now even the powerloom industry) looms large in the background, heightening the sense of doom among the ordinary weavers and the well-to-do entrepreneurial class. In fact one might even say that the handloom sari industry has collapsed, as we write this in late 2008 and early 2009.

The employment potential of the handloom sector is brought out by the fact that out of 38 million people employed in the textile sector, 33 per cent, that is 12.4 million are concentrated in the handloom sector. Banaras alone had more than half a million involved in the silk industry. Consequent to the second phase of trade reforms in India, a large number of handloom units went out of business. Between 2000 and 2005, the average annual rate of handloom production was -6.99 per cent. The Banaras sari industry generates a revenue of Rs. 4,000 crores annually and is a source of livelihood for about one million people in and around Banaras. The 10,000 or so shops selling Banarasi saris provide a livelihood for several million in eastern UP (Kumar 2010).

The onset of the current crisis in the handloom sari industry can be traced back to the early 1990s; since 1995, the impact of the crisis became visible and acquired full-blown proportions since 2003. The more immediate reasons for this are: the increasing prices of Chinese yarn, the flooding of the market with cheap, powerloom-made cloth and saris, leading to handloom weavers not being able to get the cost of their labour power after weaving a sari for about 15 to 20 days.

The overarching reason of course has been government policy in the liberalisation phase.

The Macro Policy Environment

It would be socially, politically and analytically improper if one were to overlook the antecedents of the present policies in the neo-liberal regime. The marked shift in policy regarding textiles occurred with the New Textile Policy (NTP) of 1985 which in turn was part and parcel of a paradigm shift in the development perspective that marked the regime of the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. The shift was from an emphasis on state controlled import substitution to that of an export-oriented growth with the liberalised market economy playing a significant role. The emphasis was now on modernisation, efficiency, productivity and market competition in sharp contrast to the earlier policy thrust on employment generation, equality and social justice. This shift was favourable to the powerloom and mill sector. Despite the marked shift from past policy, the NTP of 1985 also emphasised the significant role of handlooms and gave assurances to preserve their distinctive character as also to enable handloom weavers to realize their full potential and ensure higher earnings for them (GOI, 1985: 4).

The other significant and disturbing feature is that the new policy initiated a divorce between planning on the one hand, and budget and specific policies on the other. The disjunct between the Seventh Plan document (Planning Commission, 1985) and the NTP was glaring. While the former promised an "employment-oriented plan" (p.x), and identified "generation of productive employment" (p.23) as the central aspect of the development strategy, the latter went against the very basis and premises of the Seventh Plan by emphasising production as opposed to employment and the capital- and technology-intensive mill sector as opposed to the labour-intensive small scale industry.

Besides, it also inaugurated a shift from the fairly well-accepted view of the textile industry among scholars and policy analysts in

terms of sectoral differentiation – the three sectors being handlooms, powerlooms and the mill sector; instead a process-oriented view of the industry was proposed, that is, – spinning, weaving and product-processing. Scholars have argued that such an approach would ignore the specificities of each of the sectors –determined by the requirements of raw materials and capital, labour conditions, production and marketing structure, consumer demand etc., and would effectively treat the different sectors as equal in their ability to compete in the market at different stages. This in turn would necessarily work against the interests of the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, in this case the handloom weavers (Srinivasulu, 1996: 3200)

The Handloom (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act, 1985 (22 of 1985) was a major initiative to protect the handloom from the powerloom and mill sectors, reserving 22 varieties of articles for exclusive production in the handloom sector. In spite of the promise made in the textile policy that this act " shall be strictly enforced and the machinery for doing so shall be suitably strengthened" (GOI 1990:4), the Act was hardly implemented. The Act itself was challenged in court by powerful mill and powerloom lobbies and the Abid Hussain Committee set up to review the progress and implementation of the NTP recognized the strong opposition to the Act and recommended that the Act be "placed in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution in order to avoid legal challenge to this legislation."(GOI, 1990: 13). (The government just sat over the recommendation of this high powered committee.)

The severity of the crisis of the handloom industry and the weavers surfaced from the mid-80s onwards, particularly in Andhra Pradesh. (Banaras was to face the brunt of the crisis almost a decade later.) The consequences of this were large-scale displacement of weavers, decline in handloom cloth production and severe hardships for the older weavers who were on the edge of starvation, while the younger ones shifted to other occupations and/or migrated. While those weavers producing jari, tie and dye and other silk varieties could survive the crisis

due to an assured market, weavers producing cheaper varieties with low count yarn were the worst hit. The most severe crises which attracted national attention occurred in 1988-89 and 1991 (Srinivasulu, 1996: 3203).

One of the causes identified by the Abid Hussain Committee was the high and fluctuating prices of yarn despite the fact that the export of yarn and cotton was promoted under the NTP of 1985 (GOI 1990). Exports of yarn went up phenomenally between 1987-88 and 1991 along with the steep rise in the prices of yarn, particularly of the low counts used by weavers rendering production with these uneconomical. Besides, under the Hank Yarn Obligation, the mills were supposed to supply 50 per cent of yarn in hank form to the handloom sector, but the actual delivery hardly averaged 20-24 per cent.

Two measures (which were part of the reform package) which directly intensified the crisis were trade liberalisation and the devaluation of the rupee to boost exports. Both these measures worked against the textile industry in general and the weavers in particular. Since the textile industry contributed significantly to our exports, the reforms were instrumental in policy-makers resorting to quick and easy means of boosting exports through the export of cotton and yarn for earning foreign exchange, thus succumbing to the exporters' lobby rather than encouraging the export of value-added products (Srinivasulu, 1996: 3204).

Thus if one were to mark the milestones in the story of the handloom weavers and their struggle for survival, one would identify the following:

1) Government apathy, despite the awareness from the 1960s onwards that the unauthorised growth of the powerloom sector was eroding the handloom sector and impacting the livelihoods of handloom weavers. The contraction of the handloom sector has been accompanied by significant changes in the structure of this industry since the early decades after independence, with a continuous decline of the independent weaver and an increase of weavers working for master weavers or cooperatives. However, after the initial period of rapid growth, the increase in the

number of weavers in cooperative societies has tapered off (Chandrashekhar, 2001:12)

The picture that emerges after a perusal and comparison between the first and second census of handloom weavers conducted in 1987-88 and 1995-96 (the latter included power looms) only confirms, a secular historical trend that the country inherited at independence, that is, the move from the status of an independent artisan to that of a dependent.

The census data of 1995-96 confirm the generally accepted view that handloom weaving activity is showing a declining trend. At the all India level there has been a decline of over 15 per cent in the number of household and non-household units engaged in handloom related activities. While the change in the number of workers was minor, the number of looms declined by almost 8 per cent. What this suggests is that there has been a higher concentration of both workers and looms in the units in 1995-96 compared to 1987-88. Whereas in 1987-88 there was an average of 2.25 workers and 1.26 looms per unit, in 1995-96 the corresponding figures were 2.58 and 1.37, respectively.

According to the Population Census the number of persons engaged in weaving and spinning in the handloom sector recorded a negative growth rate of 2.6 per cent per annum during the period 1981-1991, whereas according to the two rounds of the handloom census the rate of decline has been 2.9 per cent per annum between 1987-88 and 1995-96.

The government attempted to check the growth of the powerlooms through a series of measures: firstly, a large segment of excise duties was shifted to yarn and a multiplicity of duties were imposed on mills and powerlooms, together with some concession to handlooms. Secondly, orders were issued by the Textile Commissioner compelling mills to pack in hanks a certain proportion of the free yarn produced by them and also prohibiting mills from supplying sized beams without permission. Finally, of the varieties reserved for the decentralised sector, some were reserved purely for the handloom sector. These measures were unsuccessful and the growth of the powerloom

sector was unchecked, leading to a situation where the powerlooms dominate the fabric producing industry in the country (Chandrashekhar, 2001:8).

One obvious consequence of the proliferation of powerlooms was the decline in handloom production. Even official figures show that the share of handlooms in decentralised sector production fell from close to 40 per cent in 1980-81 to 20 per cent 1991-92. And further, despite an officially recorded increase of handloom cloth production in 1999-2000, the share of the handloom sector in decentralised sector output still remained at 20 per cent in 1999-2000 (Chandrashekhar, 2001:8).

The reasons for the decline of the handloom industry are therefore not hard to arrive at. The most important is the competition from the powerloom sector. Relative to handlooms, powerlooms have the advantage of a more productive technique, despite which the smaller units among them have in the past qualified for support from the government in the form of reservation of areas of production and lower rates of taxation. Interestingly, in order to explain the various exemptions granted to powerloom units with four looms or less, there has been a process of deliberate fragmentation of larger units underway. As a result, even by 1974, 90 per cent of the powerloom sector fell in the size category of four looms or less (Chandrashekhar, 2001: 9-10).

The government's lack of seriousness regarding the handloom sector is reflected in the area where intentions have to be backed by concrete budgetary allocations. In 1997-98, the handloom sector was allocated 27.5 per cent of the total textile budget, whereas in 2006-07 this allocation nosedived to a mere 7.9 per cent. Between these years, the allocations to the handloom sector have been consistently declining. (Kumar, 2010: 3)

2) The New Textile Policy of 1985 that marked a paradigm shift in the very manner in which both development and the textile industry were to be viewed with its emphasis on production instead of employment.

3) The New Economic Policy of 1991 in a sense only

exacerbated and intensified the contradictions set in motion by the New Textile Policy of 1985. The neo-liberal regime, apart from creating conditions that encourage the proliferation of powerlooms, also led to an increase in the consumption of blended fabrics due to the Multi-Fibre Agreement. The subsequent decline in the prices of pure and blended synthetic fibres and yarns due to the reductions in import duties and excise duties also worked against the handlooms (which use only natural fibres) and in favour of the powerlooms, which have a clear advantage in producing blended fabrics. Blended and pure man-made fibre fabrics, which accounted for 23.8 per cent of total cloth production in the country in 1980-81, contributed 50.1 per cent in 1999-2000. Ninety-one per cent of the blended and non-cotton fabric production is accounted for by powerlooms, handlooms a mere 5.3 per cent, and the mill and hosiery sector accounting for the rest.

There has been a sharp rise in exports of cotton yarn with negative and harmful implications for both the availability and the prices of cotton yarn. The only option left for the handloom weavers, faced as they are with a series of onslaughts on their lives and livelihoods, is to further squeeze their wage levels as a strategy of survival. However, the wages were already below subsistence levels and there were hardly any options left (Chandrashekar, 2001).

The exports of cotton and yarn also resulted in steep increase in the prices of hank yarn making handlooms uncompetitive, leading to unsold stocks and deaths or suicides of handloom weavers. Many of these problems were further aggravated by the phasing out of the quantitative restrictions (QRs) on imports in 2001 (in tune with the WTO regime) and the report of the S.R. Satyam Committee set up in July 1998 which led to the formulation of the New Textile Policy, 2000, of the government.

The principal objective of the Satyam Committee Report has been to recommend measures for coping with competition in the international market. Hence, handloom weavers were expected to 'modernise' by shifting to powerlooms and computer

aided designs. The government was to support them in this through special schemes, while the Reservation Act and the Hank Yarn Obligation were to be scrapped as "unsuitable in this globalised world". The Satyam Commission Report presumed that there would be no handloom industry after 2005 and that all handlooms should be converted to powerlooms by then (Chamaraj, 2003:15-17).

The Story of the Crisis as it Unfolded in the Banarasi Sari Industry

The period between the 1970s and 1990s has been termed as the 'golden period' of the sari industry by active participants of the sari industry. Ironically, this was also the time when powerlooms were being established on a larger scale in Banaras. But according to our informants, Abdulla Ansari and Ateeq Ansari, powerlooms were not in competition with handlooms; they coexisted and in fact, the handlooms relied on the powerlooms for the supply of plain grey silk. (Interview with Abdulla Ansari and Ateeq Ansari, Banaras, 2005)

It needs to be emphasised that the powerlooms in Uttar Pradesh are largely in the decentralised sector, unlike those in Surat, Bhiwandi, etc. According to the Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms of 1995-96, there were 23, 304 powerlooms, most of which were in the Mau Mubarakpur area. And 22, 490 consisted of units which had less than five powerlooms.

The period between 1970s and 1990s also saw the development of screen and block printing whereupon a sudden prosperity enveloped the entire industry. There was a certain section that really became prosperous. Haji Mohammed Ishaq Ansari (a leading businessman and entrepreneur from Rewri Talaab) coined a phrase – AT and BT – 'after table' (printing table) and 'before table' to refer to those who were *rais* (rich) before and after the efflorescence of the industry, the old and nouveau riche.

The gradual expansion of powerlooms and the ensuing prosperity absorbed handloom weavers without work. It is estimated that one powerloom displaces 14 handlooms, but from

our discussions it would seem that the penetration of the powerlooms was more gradual, with a brake applied due to the restrictions on the powerloom sector; this gradual pace facilitated the absorption of those displaced. Thus the perception of a contradiction between the handlooms and the powerlooms is a more recent one, more specifically, since the restrictions on the powerloom sector were lifted.

In 1996, the government's decision to ban Chinese silk imports apparently to promote Bangalore silk, affected the Banaras weavers since both Chinese and Bangalore silk are used in the Banarasi sari. (The silk industry of Banaras consumes 12000-15,000 metric tones of silk every year and out of this 60 per cent is silk imported from China) During this period, Chinese silk used to be smuggled in, till the weavers and the trade demanded an open general license (OGL) to import Chinese silk. In 1999, the government's decision to allow plain Chinese crepe fabrics to be imported was a major blow to the weavers. In 2001, the government also abolished its quantitative restrictions on silk as per the requirements under the WTO regime. Since then silk imports have soared. During this period, Chinese traders brought in silk yarn and used the local weavers to replicate the Banarasi sari. On the one hand, there was a policy to allow the import of Chinese silk fabric which was cheaper than the Indian fabric, due to the drastic reduction of import tariffs following the WTO requirements and on the other hand, Chinese yarn was more expensive than the Indian yarn.

Between 2000-01 and 2004-05, Chinese silk fabrics imported to India grew by a steep 6560 per cent, from 14.48 lakh metres to 9.649 crore lakh metres. Thus, according to some in the trade, the policy should have been exactly the reverse, that is, cheaper Chinese yarn and more expensive Chinese fabric, were required if the interests of both the weavers and the Banarasi sari industry were to be protected. The Indian government tried to address the distress of the Banarasi silk industry by trying to increase the import tariffs and bringing an anti-dumping case against Chinese silk fabric, sometime in 2003 as a result of protests from the

weaving industry. However, the WTO negotiations – NAMA – (Non Agricultural Market Access) propose to liberalise manufacturing and industrial trade; and developed countries would seek elimination of import tariffs in certain sectors like textiles, footwear and leather, This would make it difficult for the government to increase import tariffs (Francis and Lenin: July 2003).

After the 1990s, competition from Surat affected the Banarasi sari industry in every conceivable way, with regard to design, material and even prices. The new synthetic fibres that were introduced were decidedly cheaper and there was a large- scale replication of Banarasi sari designs. But the demand for pure silk among the upper classes helped the Banarasi sari industry survive this onslaught. However, since 1998, Chinese silk (crepe) started offering a stiff competition to Banarasi silk. Besides, there has been a change in the tastes of the clientele with a preference for embroidered silk (crepe). There was also a rise in the prices of Chinese silk yarn (Rs. 1,400 per kg.) accompanied by a reduction in the excise duty on finished goods. The Banarasi sari industry was greatly disadvantaged due to these factors. To get around this, many businessmen and even weavers went across the border to Nepal and set up units there; they bought the silk yarn there and produced the cloth and then brought it across the border. The fact is that Banarasi saris cannot do without Chinese yarn – they are woven with one strand of Chinese and one of Bangalore silk yarn.

The weavers and artisans came together in a forum called the Bunkar and Dastkar Adhikar Manch (BDAM) at a convention in Banaras on September 21, 2005 to discuss their plight. One of the leaders of the weavers' community, Mohammed Mohsin said: "If the WTO is going to increase the business of the powerlooms and the Chinese, then our craft will die". Siddique Hasan, Convenor of the BDAM stated: "We want to exclude textiles from the WTO. They want to bring equality among unequals. We want to fight in the WTO to stop Chinese imports. Due to the WTO, there has been a flooding of Chinese cloth" (Bose, 2007).

V

Impact of the Crisis

We discuss the impact of the crisis under the following sub themes: a) Changes in the structure of the industry; b) Impact on the lives of the weavers; c) Survival Strategies – Migration, livelihood options; d) Differentiaton and polarisation as it emerges in the industry and the lives of the weavers; e) Implications for the artisanal family; f) Impact on gender relations.

A) CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE INDUSTRY

The Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms of 1995-96

The current crisis has transformed the structure of the industry unalterably in the last decade and a half. We take as a benchmark, the Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms of 1995-96 to assess the changes that have occurred since. (See Appendix for the relevant tables from the Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms, 1995-96).

The structure of the Banaras sari industry and the weaving population as it has been recorded in the Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms of 1995-95, reveals the following:

According to official government data of 2004-05, there were 75,313 handlooms and 1758 powerlooms in Varanasi and Chandauli districts; (earlier these two districts were one – Varanasi district). And there were 2645 powerloom workers and 124832 handloom workers.

As per the Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms of 1995-96, there was a total of 36,234 weaver households engaged in handloom activity in the district of Varanasi, out of which 10,426 households (29 per cent) were in urban areas while 25,808

(71 per cent) were in rural areas. (See Table 1 in Appendix I, Part I). All in all, the district had 57,946 looms with 16,009 looms (27.6 per cent) being in the urban areas and 41,937 (72.3 per cent) being in the rural areas. (Banaras city had 16,343 handlooms and 964 powerlooms in 2001, according to information provided by the Additional Director of Handlooms, K.P.Varma)

The weavers were predominantly from the Other Backward Classes (OBC) followed by those from the Scheduled Castes and a negligible percentage from the Scheduled Tribes (ST) and other groups. In the urban area, the percentage of OBCs among the weavers was about 96 per cent, while in the rural areas it was about 74 per cent. The majority of these OBCs are Momin Ansaris, particularly in the city of Banaras. (The Handloom Census does not give a religion-wise breakdown)

A perusal of the available data reveals the following features:

The overwhelming majority of the weavers are self-employed, with a thin stratum of gaddidars/entrepreneurs at the top and a thin stratum of wage-workers at the bottom, though the stratum of wage workers is increasing at what might be called geometric progression. The plight of the majority of self-employed is such that it is an arduous struggle to prevent slipping into the ranks of wage workers. Moreover, a point that needs underscoring is that the very category of 'self-employed' is imprecise; this only means that there is a slight degree of latitude with regard to whom one is dependent on for supplies of yarn, and for final sales. A large majority of weaver households owned just one loom. Out of a total of 36,234 households in Varanasi district, 63 per cent of the households owned one loom (in the urban areas it is 68 per cent while in the rural it is 61 per cent); 19 per cent of the households own two looms (the percentage is the same for the urban and rural areas): 6 per cent owned three looms, 3.3 per cent owned four looms and 3.4 per cent owned more than four looms.

The majority of full time handloom weavers operated as independent weavers (83 per cent); in urban areas the percentage was 95 per cent and in rural areas it was 79 per cent. There were

few weavers who despite owning looms were genuinely independent. Most of them were dependent on the grihasthas for the supply of yarn and marketing. This has been the situation since at least the early decades of the twentieth century. The other two important categories were those working under master weavers or under some private owner (who did not weave). Ten per cent of weavers worked under a master weaver; however, this was more prevalent in rural areas where 13 per cent worked under such a system while in urban areas it was only 3 per cent. Cooperatives like the SHDC and KVIC, KVIB were almost non-existent. Weavers working for cooperative societies were 2 per cent in urban areas and 1 per cent in rural areas.

The average monthly earnings of weaver households from all sources were quite low. Two-thirds of the households earned less than Rs. 1,500 per month, while another one-third earned over Rs. 1,500 per month.

There was a concentration of households in the category of Rs.751-1000, 27 per cent. Nearly 5 per cent of the households earned less than Rs 500 per month. There was no significant difference between the urban and rural areas in this regard.

The majority of the weaver households depended entirely on weaving for their source of income and over 80 per cent of their income came from weaving, across rural and urban areas. There were hardly any caste-wise differences in average monthly household earnings from all sources, though the income of the OBC groups were slightly higher than that of the SCs and STs.

The unstable economic situation of the households is underscored by the fact that both across rural and urban areas, 56 per cent of the weaver households earned on an average between Rs. 750-1500 per month, while another 10 per cent earned between Rs.500 and Rs. 750 a month. Even the one-third households who earned over Rs. 1500 per month never went beyond a maximum of Rs.3000/ per month. In the urban areas, those earning above Rs. 1500 per month rose to about 35 per cent and those earning between Rs. 750-1500 to about 61 per cent and those who earned between Rs. 500-750 fell to about

4 per cent suggesting that in the midst of this depressing overall picture, the situation was slightly better in the urban areas.

Women and children were mainly involved in what has been termed as 'part -time weaving activity' and full time preparatory work. While the Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms of 1995-96 has acknowledged and categorised the work that women and children do, it is difficult to separately calculate and attribute a monetary value to it since this is subsumed under family labour. The same is also true for the male weaver's labour. And as many of our respondents have repeatedly emphasised, the work of weaving on the loom cannot even begin without women's (and children's) preparatory tasks.

But this picture-perfect depiction of artisanal production with family labour has had to contend with the reality of fast-paced economic changes which have eroded the world of family-based artisanal production.

The data for the state of UP of the powerloom sector was not significantly different regarding the position of the powerloom weavers. (See the relevant Tables on the Powerloom Sector, Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms 1995-96).

Some data of the sector and the position of the workers, both men and women are as follows:

Out of the total number of workers, 63 per cent were men and 37 per cent were women;

Seventy-one per cent of male workers and 64 per cent of the women workers were skilled;

The overwhelming majority of workers were in the urban areas, that is 78 per cent as opposed to 22 per cent in the rural areas;

Seventy-nine per cent of the women workers were concentrated in the urban areas;

Out of the women workers, the large majority of them (64 per cent) are involved in weaving while 23 per cent are in preparatory work and about 13 per cent in post-weaving activities;

Out of the total number of units, 23,304, 21405 were proprietary units, the large majority being located in the urban areas;

Out of this 23, 304, 22490 had less than five looms.

Out of a total of 1,01,082 workers, 76, 607 (i.e. 75 per cent) earned less than Rs. 1,500 per month.

Even the powerloom sector is still very much a decentralised sector, largely operating on family labour. What is significant is that in contrast to the handloom sector, a large percentage of women workers are involved in weaving activities and a smaller percentage are in preparatory and post weaving operations as opposed to the handloom sector where women are mainly involved in preparatory activities. This could be explained by the fact that weaving in the powerlooms involves mainly careful supervision of the various operations on the powerloom, which are largely mechanised. (It is also significant that in contrast to the all-India trend where women workers constitute only 11 per cent of the workers, in UP, women workers form 37 per cent of the workers in powerlooms.) Even though women have been categorised as workers in the Census, in the cases where the operations are largely performed by family labour, it would be difficult to attribute separate monetary value to it. What is further significant is that the Census does not record children's labour in the powerloom sector. (We do not know whether the children's labour is being entirely dispensed with due to the mechanised nature of the operations) The data from the Census shows that about 75 per cent of the workers earn less than Rs.1500 per month.

Our observation and that of other analysts in Mau Mubarakpur and the surrounding areas is that payment even on the powerlooms is piece rated and workers/weavers are paid per sari that is woven. The question that is of significance is: Does women's increasing participation in work at the powerloom lead to a wider range of choices than for women in the handloom sector? That could obtain only in cases women work for wages on another's loom since family labour does not lend itself to being separately recorded or accounted for.

While more than one of our informants spoke glowingly of women in Mau working at the powerlooms and also pursuing their studies, we do not know whether the trend is sociologically

significant enough as yet. What is certainly a fact is that while women work at the powerloom, dealings with the outside world still continues to be the preserve of the menfolk.

Other studies conducted during the mid-1990s also confirm certain key observations of the Census, particularly regarding handloom weavers. Showeb' s study on the Silk Handloom Industry of Varanasi focuses on important weavers' settlements in the northern, western-central and southern part of the city.

Out of the 300 respondents selected, 118 owned the looms and also had their own raw material and sold their product to either the grihastha and /or to the gaddidar (trader-businessman), while 124 were 'lagar' weavers, i.e. they owned the looms but worked for the master weavers and gaddidars with the capital and raw material supplied by them, and 58 were wage workers, working on the premises of the master-weavers or elsewhere (Showeb, M. 1994: 5-6 emphasis in original).

Thus if one were to peruse the Handloom and Powerloom Census of 1995-96, the picture that emerges is that there was a thin stratum of grihasthas/ gaddidars/ traders at the top, a vast bulge in the middle which consisted of largely self-employed weavers with one or two looms and a thin stratum of loomless weavers or wage workers.

But the picture has drastically altered in the last ten years or so. Now, the image is of a pyramid, with a vast pauperised base of weavers, who are in a sense no longer weavers. In fact one might say the handloom industry hardly exists any longer and the cottage powerloom industry also has been seriously affected, being faced with competition from large factories of 100 and 200 powerlooms. Thus we face the end of the artisanal cottage industry.

The effect of the crisis encompasses all sections of those involved in the weaving industry, including the traders and gaddidars, both Hindus and Muslims. The crisis has had a deep-seated impact on the very structure of the Banarasi sari industry.

The Handloom Census of 2009-10 – Preliminary Observations

The Handloom Census of 2009-10 was released in December

2010. The primary purpose of the Third Census of Handloom Units and Allied Activity Workers was to obtain the total number of units – both household and non-household - engaged in handloom activities, the number of workers (weavers and allied workers) involved in such activities, photograph and individual details of all handloom workers (weavers and allied activity workers aged 18 and above for the issuance of photo identity cards, and count the number of looms (working and idle)available with both household and non-household units. (NCAER, 2010: 2-3)

A comparison of the weavers enumerated in the second and third census shows a decline in the number of weavers from the second census (33.26 lakh) to the third census (29.09 lakh). The proportion of full time weavers was found to have increased from the second (44.3 per cent) to the third (63.5) census. However, the total man-days worked per weaver household during the Census year seems to have gone up from 197 to 234. The share of full time weavers to total weavers has gone up from 44 per cent to 64 per cent.

There is a decline in the percentage of handloom worker households that reported less than a metre of fabric production per weaver per day from the second census (68 per cent) to the third census (46 per cent)

There is an increase in the proportion of households who report more than 60 per cent of income from handloom sources from the second census (31 per cent) to the third census (35 per cent) (NCAER, 2010 p. xxiii)

One of the features distinguishing the present Handloom Census is that it defines handloom workers as inclusive of both weavers and allied workers.

Thus those activities which are preparatory work like winding of the yarn for the purposes of the warp, winding of pirns for the weft, sizing etc. are considered allied activities. Similarly post loom activities like dyeing, post-loom operations, made ups etc. are considered allied activities. While members engaged exclusively in weaving are categorised as 'weavers', even those

who may be involved in allied activities but also undertake weaving on a part time basis are also classified as 'weavers' (NCAER, 2010: 6).

Another defining characteristic of the present Census is that it also provides information on the religious affiliation of the workers.

A perusal of the data for the state of Uttar Pradesh shows that there is a total of 110,542 handloom worker households of which 84,455 were weaver households while 26, 012 were allied worker households. (See Table 3.1 of Handloom Census of 2009-10 in the Appendix) The district level data for Varanasi shows that there were 37,331 handloom worker households.

A significant majority of the handloom worker households were those who belonged to the OBC category and were overwhelmingly Muslims (See Table 3.2 and 3.3 of Handloom Census of 2009-10)). The inference that can be drawn from both of these tables is that both these categories overlap and that the vast majority of Muslims were Momin Ansaris.

The total workforce of adult handloom workers at the state level is 2,17,015 (Table 4.2) while Varanasi district has 82, 796, while the total workers of all ages is 2,57,783 (Table 4.1) for the state as a whole with Varanasi district having 95,439 workers. The number of total adult weavers at the state level is 116,622 (See Table 4.10) while for Varanasi district it is 40,497.

A comparison between the Census of 1995-96 and the Census of 2009-10 shows that the overall trend of decline in handloom activity which was noted by the Census of 1995-96 vis a vis the Census of 1987-88 continues and in fact has got accelerated.

Comparability at the district level is somewhat partial since the 2010 Census data is available only for a limited number of indicators. While we have the data for Varanasi district for 1995-96, the indicators in the 2009-10 deal only with the Number of Handloom Households, Total of Workers of All Ages, Total Workers (18 years and Above), Total Weavers (18 years and Above) and Total Household Looms. Thus the total number of household looms were 57,748 (Table 4 of part II in Appendix –

95-96) while in the Census of 2009-2010 it has declined to 31,378.

The number of total household members engaged in weaving activity in 1995-96 was 58,519 while in 2009-10, the number of total adult weavers had declined to 40,497. Even if one were to take account of the fact that in 1995-96 the total number of household members engaged in weaving activity may also include children working, the decline is still steep. However, the number of household units engaged in handloom activity between 1995-96 and 2009-2010 has actually gone up slightly, from 36, 234 to 37,331. (See Table on District-Wise Handloom Indicators: UP, Varanasi, in Appendix)

If one were to peruse the state level data for Uttar Pradesh, there are significant pointers to the overall decline. For one, the number of full time handloom weavers (18 years and above) has gone down from 1,76,181 to 1,07,877 between the two Censuses. The same is true for part time adult handloom weavers whose numbers have declined from 33,251 to 8,745.

Further, a comparison of the number of men and women engaged in weaving activity by nature of engagement between the two Censuses only confirms the overall trend of decline in weaving activity. The numbers of men and women engaged in full time activity has declined from 1,44,504 for men in 1995-96 to 86,157 for men in 2009-2010. Similarly engagement in part time activity for both men and women has registered a sharp decline from 15,968 (for men) and 31,677 (for women) to 5,056 for men and 3,689 for women in 2009-2010. (See tables 6, Part I of 1995-96 Census for UP and Table 4.12 of Census of 2009-2010 in Appendix)

If one were to compare the working status of full time handloom weavers between the two Censuses, the data show that the number of Independent Weavers (15,4421) has declined in the 2009-2010 Census to 55,331(handloom workers). (A caveat needs to be added here, the Census of 2009-2010 refers to Handloom Workers which includes weavers and allied workers. But the fact that out of the total households, 76.4 per cent are weaver households and allied workers constitute just 23.6 per

cent only means the decline is even sharper for the weavers alone.)

Correspondingly, those working under master weavers has gone up from 14,572 in 1995-96 to 1,59,181 in 2009-2010. Even if one were to take into account the composition of the total workforce in 2009-2010, i.e. 1,16,622 adult weavers and 1,00,393 allied workers leading to a total of 2,17,015, the conclusion that there has been an overall and sharp deterioration is unavoidable. There is a steep descent from the status of independent weavers to that of dependence, on the master weavers. The numbers of those working in cooperative societies has always been negligible and this has gone down even more in the latest Census.

There have also been significant changes in the rural-urban ratios in the composition of the weaving households between the two Censuses. While approximately 72 per cent of the weaving households were located in rural areas and 28 per cent were in the urban areas in the last Census, in 2009-10 the figures were 58 per cent in rural areas and 42 per cent in the urban areas. (See Table 1 of part I in the 1995-96 Census and Table 3.1 in the Census of 2009-10 in Appendix)

These changed ratios are also a significant index of the overall decline of handloom activity over these last few decades. The decrease in the number of households in the rural areas and correspondingly the shift to urban areas is not merely indicative of a locational shift but also a decline in status from self-employed weavers to wage workers.

An examination of the gender composition of the work force in the Census of 2009-10 shows that out of the total numbers of men and women engaged in weaving, an overwhelming majority are full time and the remaining 7.49 per cent are part time. Out of the full time workers, 79.8 per cent are men and 20.1 per cent are women. Amongst those involved in part time activity, 57.1 per cent are men and 42.18 per cent are women. (See Table 4.12 of Handloom Census of 2009-10 in Appendix) A comparison with the Census of 1995-96 shows that the decline is sharp from a total of 2,09,432 adult weavers to 1,16,622 in 2009-10, a decline

of 58,347. The percentage of men engaged in full time weaving activity was 82.1 per cent while that of women was 17.9 per cent and correspondingly the percentages for part time weaving was 48.1 per cent for men and 51.1 per cent for women. The percentage of those involved in full time activity was 84. per cent while those involved in part time was 15 per cent (See table 6, Part I of the 1995-96 of the Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms for UP) The percentage ratio of part time to full time weavers was 18 per cent in the 1995-96 Census while in the 2009-10 it was 8 per cent, recording once again a fall.

There has been a percentage decline in the numbers of women involved in weaving activity, from 23.3 per cent in 1995-96 to 21.7 per cent in 2009-10.

Women have always been predominant in the preparatory and post loom activities. Even the Census of 1995-96 for UP and for Varanasi district demonstrates this. The men and women are no longer part of a single household based unit, since household-based production has become almost insignificant. This is best exemplified by first, a decline in the numbers of weavers between the two Censuses (58,347) and secondly, the steep descent of the category of independent weavers, and the rise in the numbers of those working under master weavers. The overwhelming numbers of weavers are largely wage workers. The sharp rise in the full time weavers and correspondingly the fall in part time weavers suggests that weavers largely work as full time wage workers.

The decline of the artisanal family-based production also suggests that the options for women have narrowed down drastically. Women are also now reduced to wage workers of a piece rated kind with the bichholias (middlemen) getting work for them though the site of the work may still be their home.

The Census of 2009-10 thus records and details the death knell of the artisanal cottage handloom industry.

The Changing Nature of the Composition of Hindus and Muslims in the Sari Industry

As we have emphasised earlier, the relations between Hindus

and Muslims are embedded in the process of and the relations of production in the sari industry. The texture of Hindu-Muslim relations have historically been perceived to be based on a relationship of interdependence, with the Hindus being the traders and businessmen and Muslims being weavers who would go and sell their saris in the Chowk and Kunj Galli to the former. The Hindu merchants controlled the financing, production and marketing of silk cloth and were the creditors. This situation prevailed to a great extent till the 1950s. Needless to say it was an unequal relationship.

We are quoting a description of the impact of the depression of the 1930s on the weavers which sounds ominously like the one that the weavers of Banaras are experiencing today. To quote:

"The slump in demand and prices, coupled with the dumping of cheap artificial silk products on the Indian markets, especially from Japan, adversely affected the silk-weaving industry and had a particularly negative impact on wages. (Handlooms and Mills Committee, 1942, pp18-20) The relatively high price of yarn owing to protective tariff duties further worsened the situation. To add to the troubles of the weavers, the policy of the Congress to promote swadeshi meant that they encountered opposition for using mill-spun yarn. A shift to more expensive handspun varieties would have further aggravated their economic hardships. Moreover, some of the merchant dealers were reported to have refused to buy cloth from the weavers if they did not use khadi and used this 'nationalist' argument to tighten their hold over the weavers. As a consequence of all this, and especially because of falling demand, the weavers would inevitably have faced not only a reduction in their income or unemployment, but also greater indebtedness, especially to merchant creditors, almost all of whom were Hindus." (Gooptu, 2001:308-309)

The purpose of sketching the nature of the crisis in the 1920s and 1930s in the silk weaving industry is to underline the intermeshing and evolution of the relations between Hindus and Muslims with the changing state of the industry and the essentially subordinate status of the Muslim weavers to the Hindu merchants and financiers, as also the striking similarity in the conditions of the weavers in the midst of crisis.

However, this situation changed with: a) the rise of some

weavers to the status of master-weavers and b) the slow rise of a small class of Muslim grihasthas/ master weavers to the status of traders and businessmen. While the process began in the 1940s or so, it got accentuated in the post-independence years and by the 1970s, the Muslim gaddidars had made their entry into both the national and international markets and had, to an extent, eroded the hegemony of the Hindu trading sections. This signaled an important change in the very structure of the industry. From a situation wherein the traders were overwhelmingly Hindu mercantile groups (Agarwals, Punjabi Khatris, Marwaris and Sindhis) and weavers principally Muslim, to one wherein Muslims entered the first tier of the industry, thus altering an age-old division of labour between Hindus and Muslims. It would seem from our interviews and from other secondary material (Malik, 1994: 53-56) that the entry of Muslims into the first tier of traders-cum entrepreneurs began during the first two decades after independence when Muslim grihasthas making use of the state subsidies given to the cooperatives managed to carve out a niche for themselves. The area of Madanpura-Rewri Talaab where the prosperous and successful Muslim gaddidars resided symbolised this transition.

During the period 1970s-1990s, considered the golden era of the Banarasi sari industry, this class of Muslim gaddidars came into their own and made direct links with the market both nationally and internationally. However, this was also the period when there were a series of communal riots, which were perceived as being engineered by Hindu commercial interests which saw the newly emerging Muslim gaddidar–trader class as a threat to their hegemony.

This changed situation also altered the texture of inter-communal relations and a series of communal riots occurred which specifically targeted the Muslim weaving community. Thus the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, the period of prosperity was also ironically the period of communal riots. (And significantly, this was also the period of the expansion of the powerlooms.) In the early 1990s, two riots occurred in Banaras

and Lohta in 1991 and 1992, considered to be the worst in recent times, and coinciding with the rise and consolidation of the right-wing Hindutva forces and the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992. Unlike the earlier communal riots, these were not motivated by merely economic competition; the dominance of Hindutva politics played a crucial role, interwoven with regional political rivalries. The attempt was to target "rich Madanpura" and annihilate the emerging leadership in the community; Dr. Anees from Madanpura and Dr. Nomani from Lohta died in police custody.

The entry of the dalit and OBC communities into the occupation of weaving began in the decades of the 1930s. Intensifying marginalisation of the poor, declining prospects of agriculture leading to migration to urban areas often meant that the dalits and the OBCs were often competing for similar jobs in the urban milieu. The process of entry of the dalits and OBC groups into the weaving profession deepened in the post-independent years. In the case of the dalits, who were most often landless, this proved to be an alternative source of income and less humiliating than working as agricultural labour for the landed elites of the village. For OBC groups, like the Yadavs, dairying was becoming uneconomic and the flourishing weaving industry proved to be an attractive and viable option. Thus the third tier of the weaving industry, the class of 'self-employed' weavers, generally owning their looms and the wage-earning weavers, came to comprise of both Muslims and Hindu OBC and dalit communities. The weaving community particularly in the rural areas, came to consist of significant numbers of Hindus while the Muslims still largely retained their urban character. The percentages of the two groups would, approximately consist of at least 50 per cent of Hindu groups (according to some estimates) while others would contend that they would be the majority in the rural areas certainly. (Interview with Ashok Dhawan, Banaras, December, 2008)

The second tier–grihasthas or master-weavers–have continued to be from among the Muslim community from the inception

and through the crisis of the 1930s and even in the post-independence period. They have retained their preserve in the highly skilled silk weaving all through the 1950s to the present. It is this section that made the transition to the status of gaddidars since the 1950s to the 1990s.

The picture that we have sketched here of the structure of the industry and its ethnic composition matches the findings of many close observers of the Banarasi sari industry as well as participants. Abdulla Ansari, an educationist, who is active in the management of the Qudratullah Girls School, in Rewri Talaab, apart from being a social reformer and a practising homeopath, has been a keen and active observer of and participant in the Banaras weavers' lives. He states: "Earlier, when the CPI conducted a struggle against 'katauti' and post-dated cheques in the latter part of the 1950s, the artisans and weavers were Muslims and the traders were Hindus; but now the traders and gaddidars are both Hindus and Muslims and the weavers too are both Hindu OBCs, dalits and Muslims." (Interview with Abdulla Ansari, at Ramapura, December, 2008) At the other end of the spectrum, there is Ashok Dhawan, a major manufacturer of handloom saris. President of the Banaras Vastra Udyog for many years he is currently member of the legislative assembly and of the BJP; he too concurs with the outline of the structure of the industry and its ethnic composition. Ateeq Ansari, who has been in the sari business and has been a journalist writing columns in *Aaj, Dainik Jagran* and *Hindustan* (three major Hindi Newspapers) for many years on the plight of the weavers and the sari industry as well as covering the many communal incidents that affected the lives of the weavers, also has similar observations regarding the changing contours of the industry and its ethnic composition. He also made another important observation regarding the current changes in the structure of the industry and its ethnic composition: "Over the last ten years, many Hindu OBC agriculturalist groups turned to weaving. Earlier, Muslim weavers would often get work done by the Hindu OBC groups in the surrounding rural areas, whereas now the relationship is reverse, with some Hindu OBC

groups getting work done by Muslims". (Interview with Ateeq Ansari, December 2008, Banaras)

This picture of the structure of the Banarasi silk industry has drastically metamorphosed in the years following 2000, when cataclysmic changes have affected the industry. The Banarasi handloom sari industry has collapsed and the weavers have been pushed to the brink of starvation and desperation. We discuss this in the following section.

B) IMPACT ON THE LIVES OF WEAVERS

The crisis has affected the livelihoods of the five lakh or so weavers around Banaras in a drastic manner, with nearly one lakh looms lying dormant within a 15 km, radius of Banaras. The areas affected most acutely have been Jalalipura, Saraiya, Konia, Bajardeeha, Nakki Ghat, (in the northern part of the city) and Lohta and Kotwa on the outskirts of the city. Madanpura had not been equally affected since most of the traders and gaddidars who reside there could withstand the crisis better. However the situation between 2005 and 2007 has also affected Madanpura, with many of the gaddidars being reduced to doing job work. Even the area of Mau Mubarakpur, principally a centre of powerloom weaving, has been seriously affected.

According to Ashok Dhawan, in the whole of Purvanchal which includes Mau Mubarakpur, Tanda, etc. two lakh families were involved in weaving, which means at least ten lakh persons since the whole family was involved in the weaving.

The industry has collapsed and at least two lakh persons have migrated. Even people with 500 handlooms have migrated since handloom weaving was no longer viable. People from Bajardeeha, Madanpura, Lohta, Kotwa, Alaipura have all migrated to Bangalore, Surat, Hyderabad and even Rajasthan. Madanpura is no longer a weaving centre and even the few gaddidars who had established themselves in the golden era of the Banarasi sari industry–1970s to 1990s–have now been reduced to doing just job work.

The trajectory of the present crisis has to be viewed at various

levels, since the present crisis has differentially affected all sections of the industry. The ordinary weavers, both the 'self-employed' ones and the poor bunkar working for wages have been the hardest hit, especially the handloom weavers. Thousands of handlooms have been rendered dormant, rendering weavers without any means of a stable livelihood. The wages for different tasks in the sari industry have also decreased thus halving the incomes of the weavers.

Shamim Javed, a young man of 26 from Madanpura who does polishing of saris, stated that it requires six persons to polish a sari. In December 2008 the rate was Rs. 5 per sari. Earlier, the rate used to be Rs. 10-15 per sari and for pure silk it used to be Rs.20. But Shamim states that payment is not prompt; instead their money is paid after a year. Sometimes the trader/gaddidar pays them a lumpsum after six months, and even then they are not paid their full wages – a 'discount' is chargeable. This seems to be a common practice among the gaddidars of Banaras. Those who pay their full dues to the weavers are few and far between.

Shamim's family of four sisters and three brothers and parents used to weave saris on handlooms. (Three of his sisters and one brother are married.) They had four handlooms and used to farm out three to others. Since the last three years, because of the slump in the market, their looms are lying dormant and they are into the polishing of saris, which involves getting the starch and polish and doing the polishing. Two brothers (including Shamim) are in polishing and one is in designing. (Interview with Shamim Javed, Ramapura, December 2008)

Shamim further informed that the women who do the stitching of the sequins on the saris are paid piece rates per sari. But here too, different types of payment or non-payment prevail. In some cases, the bichholia or the middlemen who contract out the work to the women, sometimes keep back the money due to the women and give them bits of zari left over after the sari is cut as 'wages' and nothing else.

Most of the pauperised weavers have been forced to move into other occupations. It is estimated that at least half the weavers

(the men) have taken up construction work, rickshaw pulling and vending. It was pointed out by many of our informants that if one were to randomly ask any rickshaw puller as to what he had been doing previously, more often than not the answer would be that he had been into weaving. In extreme cases, there have been instances of weavers selling their blood to earn a few rupees, selling their children or even committing suicide, an extreme act of desperation. The pauperised state of a large majority of weavers' families has also led to starvation deaths. At least 42 cases of starvation deaths had been reported in Varanasi district. (Bose, 2007)

Cases of malnutrition leading to death have been reported from many of the weavers' settlements. In Lohta, according to Virendra Yadav, (a leading activist of the newly formed Rashtriya Ekta Party), who used to teach the children of weavers in Lohta, 18 children, all below the age of six years, died of malnutrition between 2007 and mid-2008. All those who died were children of weavers. The cruelty of the death is further compounded by the fact that it takes another struggle with a callous administration to get it declared as a malnutrition death. (Interview with Virendra Singh, Lohta, December, 2008)

The story of Lohta in a sense epitomises most acutely the severity of the crisis and its impact: both the promise it once held, its rise to the status of a satti (the biggest one in Purvanchal) and its sudden fall to a state of near penury. The very appearance of the qasba reflects the destitute state of the majority of residents. The weavers' houses are in a dilapidated state, while fort-like and mocking, stand the houses of some gaddidars, cheek by jowl.

Weaving was the economic lifeline of Lohta. In 2008, Lohta had a population of 50,000, with an overwhelming majority of the population (90 per cent) being simply wage workers, earning on an average Rs.80-100 per day, working on powerlooms. They were paid by metre of fabric woven and on an average, they are not able to get work for more than 20 days in a month. Lohta was at one time primarily a handloom weavers qasba; today, the ratio of handlooms to powerlooms is nearly 50: 50. Ironically,

amidst so much of destitution, Lohta, we are told, is also a place where there are new machines called pik-um-pik which weave pure silk saris, almost like the handloom ones. The handloom weavers see this as the real threat to the handlooms.

Halim Mahto, aged about 37, owned three handlooms till about 2006, but now works for a wage on a powerloom, and earns Rs.80 per day. Not only Halim, but also his father, his son of 17, and daughter of 18 have all to work if the family has to survive. While the son and father work on the powerlooms, his daughter stitches sequins onto saris. The labour of four fetches them about Rs. 3,000 per month, but with these earnings, he is unable to send two of his children to school, while another child goes to school on a scholarship. His two daughters are of marriageable age, but he is unable to do anything about it. (Interview with Halim Mahto, Lohta, December 2008)

Shahnawaz Khan, a young activist of the Yuva Manch of the Rashtriya Ekta Party, holds that the fall in the wage rates is related to the rise in the prices of yarn, the burden of which the gaddidars and grihasthas pass on to the ordinary bunkar.

Referring to the 'good times', he stated that earlier, people used to buy groceries and supplies for a whole year, but now they do so only for the day. The cascading effect of the crisis has led to the closure of many ration shops. After all, weaving has been the economic lifeline of Lohta and with a slump in the earnings of the weavers, all aspects of the economy were affected.

One can cite thousands of cases of the narrative of what has happened to the weaver in Banaras.

Nakki Ghat, a settlement of weavers in the northern part of the city with a population of 14,000, was a destination for many weavers from other areas of Banaras 25 years ago. Land was cheap then, about Rs. 6000-7000 per biswa. Weavers moved in from Badi Bazaar. But now the settlement is saturated and land costs Rs. 4 to 5 lakhs per biswa.

Farooq, aged 41, told us the story of how the crisis has affected his family. He started weaving as a child of ten. In 2008 he and his three brothers lived in a one-storeyed house with their families,

having separate establishments though under one roof. This was the typical weaver's household. The family earlier lived in Badi Bazaar and his father then owned one handloom. This one handloom, worked with the labour of the entire family was apparently sufficient for his father to raise a family of four sons and three daughters. He soon expanded from one to seven looms, and with the income thereof, he managed to get his daughters married and then moved from Badi Bazaar to Hidayat Nagar in Nakki Ghat. Farooq himself had two handlooms at home on which he and his family used to work and five other handlooms in the neighbourhood where he used to get work done by other weavers. In short he used to farm out work to other weavers. They were doing well enough and he used to save Rs. 2,500 per handloom after costs were deducted. But since the period between 2005 and 2007, all his looms were rendered dormant since running the looms was no longer viable. They were unable to even recover the cost of their labour. The business was affected by heavy losses; they were spending more and the returns were diminishing. The yarn itself was difficult to procure; if they got the tani they would not get the bani and vice versa. It was no longer a sellers market, it was a buyer's market. Most of the karghas (handlooms) in Nakki Ghat have shut down and people took to selling vegetables or rickshaw pulling while women started the work of sticking sequins on saris, on a contract basis. According to Farooq, most families in Nakki Ghat would eat only once a day, though their sense of pride and self-esteem would prevent them from admitting this.

Mumtaz, Farooq's wife, does not herself come from a weaver's family. Her father, Shabbir Khan, first ran a restaurant in Nai Sadak and then moved into ready-made garments. She married Farooq in 1985, when his family was still in Badi Bazaar. She states that the position of handlooms was good in those days. In 1990, the family moved to Nakki Ghat. In those days, they earned Rs.150 per day on each loom.

She recalls her life with her marital family. The family was a joint family of four brothers and three sisters. The economy was

joint and as also the kitchen. The whole family used to work at the looms. Mumtaz herself used to fill the bobbins. With the income generated through weaving, the family was able to marry off the sisters and the brothers. After they moved to Nakki Ghat, the brothers separated, even though they lived together under one roof.

Mumtaz and Farooq also bought a piece of land, one biswa, across the Varuna river for Rs. 35,000 and sold it four years later, in 2004 for Rs. 55,000. They have received only Rs. 25,000 for it, the rest of the money would be paid only after the land was registered. Mumtaz stated that Farooq's brother, Haroon also had eight handlooms. They used to earn Rs. 250 per day on 8-10 handlooms. But now all the handlooms are lying dormant and they have eaten into their savings.

This family has adopted varied survival strategies. Farooq started the tikli business; he goes out ot get work and the women of the family sit and stitch sequins onto saris. Mumtaz works with an NGO, called Vision, which organises non-formal education among the weavers.

Farooq and Mumtaz have five sons and two daughters, The eldest son, Saiful Islam is 18 years old and has gone to Bangalore where he does *ari* work, earning Rs. 200 per day, at which he has to work for almost 14 hours. (Interview with Farooq and Mumtaz, Nakki Ghat, February- March 2008)

Lailunissa stitches sequins onto saris. But her husband, Haroon, alias Malloo, used to weave on Farooq's handlooms, earning Rs. 400-500 per sari per week. Now he says one can only earn Rs. 250 per fortnight. He has started to push trolleys, and earns Rs. 50-60 per day(Interview with Lailunissa and Haroon, February-March, 2008)

Thus in the short span of one generation, Farooq's family has seen difficult times though with hard work, the fortunes of the family rose and they experienced prosperity between the 1970s and the mid-90s – the 'golden period'. But since 2004-05, they have virtually been reduced to being paupers with precious little except a pucca house. Farooq also said that when people come

and see pucca houses, they find it difficult to believe that the weavers are in a state of penury. The grihasthas used to give loans to the weavers to build pucca houses so that the looms could be properly housed and the weaving could be done in relatively protected conditions. But now the weavers are left with pucca houses and little else. Ironically, because of this they are not even able to get BPL cards. This was confirmed by a report in the newsmagazine *Frontline* (March 24- April 7, 2007), titled – The Living Dead. Nizam Ahmed from Shivala, Banaras pointed out that : "It costs Rs. 1,500 to weave a sari. I cannot sell it for more than Rs.600. How do you imagine we eat? In Bajardeeha, Nakki Ghat and Saraiyan, there have been suicides. Families have mixed poison in rotis. Small children beg on the streets". But the fact that they live in pucca houses is enough for the administration to deny them BPL cards. Houses cannot be eaten, as another weaver pointed out.

The impact of the crisis on the Muslim weavers has in a certain sense been more acute than on Hindu weavers. For Muslims weaving has been the sole occupation for a long time, while Hindu weavers, particularly in the surrounding rural areas have often been combining weaving with agriculture. Besides, those who have been traditionally weavers are now unsuited to do other kinds of physical labour, like construction work or rickshaw pulling. This makes the plight of the Muslim weavers more poignant.

The story of the family of Aminuddin of Chhitauni (Kotwa), aged 25, an active member of the Bhagat Singh Youth Brigade, was in a sense typical and reflected the plight of those whose sole occupation had been handloom weaving. Aminuddin was the eldest son of Mainuddin Ansari, the family consisting of five brothers and four sisters of whom two were married. In 2005, there were 13 members in the family which included Aminuddin's wife and his infant daughter about two years old. The family owned two handlooms. Weaving had been the traditional occupation of the family for generations. Mainuddin could not recall even in his grandfather's time any reference to any

occupation other than weaving. Mainuddin told us that even eight to ten years ago, till the latter part of the 1990s, the earnings of his son, Aminuddin and himself were sufficient to run the family of 13 members. Family labour included the labour of his wife, daughter and daughter-in-law. They used to weave about six saris a month. The grihastha used to supply the yarn, design, etc. For their labour they would get paid at least Rs. 150 to 200 for a sari costing Rs. 400. In 2007, they earned barely Rs. 50 per sari. Besides, they did not even weave so many saris. The market according to him was flooded by powerloom-produced saris, with equally good designs which were indistinguishable from handlooms and were decidedly cheaper. The material used varied, with the market being swamped with various kinds of synthetic materials that could pass for silk with only real connoisseurs being able to tell the difference. Mainuddin dismissed all talk of a mandi, (slump in the market) and attributed the handloom crisis to competition from the powerloom sector. He contended that pure silk could not even be woven on powerlooms though this is contested by others. He also added that there was a conspiracy to finish off the Muslim weavers on the part of the BJP and RSS, etc.', this being done by deliberately delayed payments. He stated in a matter-of-fact manner: "There has been no happiness for the last 15 years, and for the last 7-8 years there has been no employment." (Interview with Aminuddin's family, Chhitauni, April, 2005)

Many struggles were launched by the weavers since the onset of the crisis in 2004-05 to draw the attention of the government to the desperate condition of the weavers. A "Bunkar Identity Card" was introduced by the administration (Handloom and Handicrafts Corporation), which was a kind of poverty alleviation measure. The weavers got these cards made on a payment of Rs.200; however, the weavers had not received the cards.

Kotwa is a village in the Kashi Vidyapeeth Block, with a population of 70,000 and a voter's list of 17,000. The population was predominantly Muslim with a miniscule Hindu population mostly Chamars and Bhumihars. What was striking about this

village was the number of one-storeyed large brick buildings. These were the houses of the weavers. The normal practice was that many members of a single joint family lived under one roof; the different branches operated their own looms, and each branch of the family had its own kitchens.

Farroukhbhai of Kotwa is part of one such extended family of 50. He and his nine brothers live with their families under one roof. The plight of the family was similar to that of many others. Despite owning three looms, he only earned Rs. 50 per day in 2005. The nine brothers had separate kitchens and their economies were managed separately. The Bhagat Singh Youth Brigade of which Farroukh is a part did a survey and made a list of about 250 families which they submitted to the administration so that they could avail of some benefits under the poverty alleviation programmes. But all these efforts proved fruitless.

Implications of the Crisis for Women

Incomes have almost halved with a reduction in the wages for different tasks in the sari industry also being reduced. It is estimated that at least half the weavers (the men) have moved on to other forms of earning a livelihood, like construction work, rickshaw pulling, trying to eke out a livelihood somehow. The women started doing sari-cutting for which they got a meagre Re.1 per sari; this job was apparently the sole preserve of women. They also worked as domestic workers in well-to-do homes.

The acute crisis has meant that the burden on women has increased. They have to get work to earn on a daily basis. The job work of sticking sequins on saris is provided by a whole range of middlemen (bicholias). There are at least 5 to 6 layers of middlemen and so they get only Rs.35-40 per sari. It is generally women and children who do this job with men sometimes assisting.

Vision, the NGO working on non-formal education, runs a Shiksha Kendra in the house of Mumtaz and Farooq in Nakki Ghat. A group discussion took place with about six women from Hidayat Nagar and nearby areas. Saira Bano, Zubeida,

Azizunissa, Noorjehan, Shabnam, Mumtaz and Rehana (who nearly sold her son of ten months – Tehzeeb – for Rs.1000) All these women stuck sequins on saris (*tikli chipkana*) earning about Rs. 35 to 40 per sari. It is mostly women and children who were involved in this though sometimes men may also do this work. Rehana worked as a domestic in a house where she earned Rs. 300 per month while her young son (age 10) also worked with a gaddidar, earning about Rs. 300 per month. Her young daughter died of malnutrition sometime in 2004. She also had a seven-year-old son whom she had to provide for. The entire burden of running the family was hers since her husband had deserted her.

Effectively the job of getting a daily wage had fallen on women and children. Abdulla Ansari, an educationist, for example, commented on men's lack of responsibility towards the family, in fulfilling their role as breadwinners. He said that this was actually un-Islamic since according to Islamic principles, the men were supposed to provide for the women and the families, whereas the men were just whiling away their time at tea shops and gossiping. Even in Mau Mubarakpur where powerlooms are the mainstay of the weaving industry, it would seem that it is the women who supervise the production and the men who deal with customers/clients and the market. (Interview with Abdulla Ansari, April 21, 2007)

The condition of widowed, deserted or otherwise single women is even more depressing. They have no option but to somehow work to keep body and soul and together.

Additionally, reports came in of suicides in the newpapers between 2004 and 2007. In Banaras there had been 41 suicides in this period, the most recent was of a man who consumed acid on 17 April (*Hindustan* 17 April 2007, Banaras) There have also been reports of women turning to sex work. Most women would not own up to it. Generally it occurred with women who were either deserted or widowed and who had no source of support.

During the above-mentioned period, Hindi newspapers carried reports of sexual exploitation of women from weaver families.

Generally such reports alleged that weavers (bunkars) had sold their women and girls into bondage to the mahajan and gaddidar families. The implication here was that Muslim weavers were doing so. Such reports predictably led to protests from leading elements in the Muslim community.

The most important factor to take account of is the fact that in the relatively closed and cohesive community of the Muslim weavers where women were very much in the domain of the domestic and private and where in fact the worlds were gendered and strictly separated, the impact of the crisis has had unsettling and traumatic consequences. It has impacted and upset gender roles, affected livelihoods and has impelled the community to confront the stark question of survival. Men have been the 'breadwinners' of the family entrusted with the task of providing for the entire family. This is critical to male identity in most patriarchal societies, more so in the case of a typical artisanal community such as the Muslim weavers. Moreover, according to the dominant and prevalent discourses, male identity was also linked with that of the entire community. Historically, women have been considered the symbols of community honour. Consequently, the overturning of gender roles has been harrowing. The move from a gendered and segregated world, recipients of 'symbolic shelter' (in the words of Papanek) to becoming providers of the family must be traumatic. Muslim women particularly of the poorer sections have been catapulted into being in many cases, the sole providers for the family. Male responses to this crisis have been one of deflation and dejection. Women, on the other hand have had no option but step in to provide for the families, a role which is very much rooted in the traditional role expectations of women as home makers. One does not know how women have rationalised this; perhaps they have not had much time to cogitate over this nor perhaps even have the inclination to do so. The pressures of sheer survival are so immediate and stark. All that the women know is that they have to provide for their families, principally their children. In such a situation, highlighting the issue of sex work to which some

women may have turned is touching a raw nerve of the community's sensibility and women's sense of honour.

Implications for the Powerloom Sector in Eastern Uttar Pradesh.

The powerloom weavers of Mau district and Mubarakpur in Azamgarh district have also been seriously affected by the crisis, particularly since the 2003-04. Extensive discussions at the district headquarters, in Mau with a wide range of people in the industry laid bare the extent of the crisis in the powerloom sector. As mentioned earlier, the powerloom sector and the handloom sector were in a complementary relationship till the 1990s, when the restrictions on the powerloom sector were lifted leading to a competition between the two. One factor that characterises the powerloom industry in Purvanchal, which was emphasised by all our respondents is that unlike western India, the industry is part of the decentralised sector and is a household industry with most of the units consisting of one to four powerlooms, operated largely with family labour.

Mau emerged as an important powerloom centre along with Bhiwandi in the the early-mid 1960s, during the Third Five Year Plan period. However, till as late as 1986, there were more handlooms than powerlooms here. But the lifting of the restrictions on the jacquard machines (which were originally meant exclusively for handlooms) prompted a shift from handlooms to powerlooms. Now, there are hardly any handlooms left in Mau. In 2005, there were nearly ten lakh workers in Mau, Azamgarh and Ghazipur and since 2003, they were in the throes of a severe crisis. An important leader of the Communist Party of India (CPI), Imtiaz Ahmad, made an important distinction between factory-based powerloom production and decentralised, household industry with family labour. The organisation of production in the case of the latter was still domestic production with the weavers selling their saris to the grihasthas or traders. The fact that these workers and weavers were unorganised only accentuated their vulnerability. (Interview with Imtiaz Ahmad, Mau, April 2005)

The collectorate of Mau was gheraoed in Setpember 2003 as part of a historic one-month long strike launched by the weavers and the industry as a whole against excise duty on yarn and finished product. However, it would seem that the grihasthas and traders cheated and started selling their goods on the sly, even though they had sought the support of the weavers on the grounds that the whole trade would be finished if the weavers did not support the strike.

The plight of the ordinary weavers was pitiable with the incomes in industry having almost halved. Till about the late 1990s, on an average, a family of five would earn about Rs.4000 a month, but in 2005 their earnings had halved with the family barely earning Rs. 2000/-.

According to another person also called Imtiaz Ahmed, also a CPI leader, and popularly known as Imtiaz.com, at least 15 persons died due to starvation in Mau between late 2002 and early 2003. The bunkars started plying rickshaws, doing work on construction sites and also rolling bidis. But here too, since the physical stamina required for these jobs was much more, other lower caste and tribals from Jharkand and rural areas in eastern UP were at an advantage since they too were ready to work at much lower wages. Dr. Anand Deepayan, a researcher working with the Gandhian Institute of Studies, Varanasi, pointed out that these contradictions were leading to regional and ethnic tensions with sentiments against the migrants rising amongst the Muslim weavers. (Interviews with Imtiaz Ahmed, in Mau, April 2005 and Anand Deepayan in Banaras, April, 2005)

A shop-keeper from Mau, Jalis Ahmad, and Chirag Azhmi, editor of an Urdu paper – *Bunkar ki Duniya*, both reiterated a point made by other informants that the overwhelming quantum of production in Mau was household production. According to Jalis Ahmad, the competition for Mau was coming from Surat, since Surat had processing plants which smoothen the rough texture of synthetic fibre to make it resemble silk. A concrete step by the government would be to facilitate the setting up of one such plant as well as and a corporation to buy from the

weavers. (Interviews with Jalis Ahmad and Chirag Azhmi, Mau, in April, 2005)

One serious problem highlighted by most of our informants was the shortage of electricity and its erratic supply. Weavers' families could work only when there is power supply. Besides, the rates of electricity per unit favoured the corporate sector rather than the decentralised household sector.

What are the implications of powerlooms for women? The Powerloom Census of 1995-96 has taken note of women's role in the powerloom sector. Out of the work force involved in the powerloom sector, 37 per cent are women, the majority of whom are skilled and categorised as weavers and are in the urban areas. This is a job that women could do at home, – running the loom, supervising work on it. While it does not call for the same kind of specialised skills as handlooms (where women do not generally work on the looms unless there are no male members in the family), the work is quite hard since women have to keep standing. Moreover, the preparatory tasks, like getting the yarn ready for the warp and weft, still have to be done. We met Saima, when there was no electricity and so she could talk to us. Saima and her husband have five daughters and three sons. Her daughters work at the looms and also go to the madrasa. She pointed out that working on the loom was very hard since standing and supervising the running of the powerloom was pretty difficult and led to backaches. However, here, too the negotiation with the outside world, the market, the traders and grihasthas are still the preserve of the men. The gendered division of labour continues to exist.

The differential responses regarding the cause of the current crisis vary among our informants, depending on their social location. One perception which was fairly widespread among handloom weavers was to focus on the question of yarn prices and not so much on the increasing number of powerlooms, or alternatively to point out that the crisis had affected the powerlooms as well. This response is partially accounted for by the fact that, most of the handloom workers look to the powerloom

industry as an alternative source of livelihood, albeit as wage workers. Thus all the weavers of Lohta, whom we had interviewed in December, 2008, and whose handlooms lie dormant, had all become wage workers on the powerlooms. Weavers who at one time had even 300 handlooms, many of which they would farm out to others, had been reduced to the status of wage workers on powerlooms. On the other hand, those who had traditionally been reasonably successful and skilled handloom weavers for many generations, like Aminuddin of Chhitauni were more forthright and vociferous in holding the powerlooms responsible for the crisis in the handloom sector.

Even in Nakki Ghat, while we discussed the plight of the handloom weavers with Farooq and his brothers, all handloom weavers, one could hear the clutter of the powerlooms. The powerlooms are here to stay and this has more or less been accepted by the weavers.

C) SURVIVAL STRATEGIES – MIGRATION, LIVELIHOOD OPTIONS

Migration has been an important survival strategy of the weavers, and a time-tested one at that of dealing with the crisis. On April 14 and 15, 2005, *Amar Ujala* carried a two-part story about the manner in which about 150 families from Mau and Azamgarh pawned off their wives' jewellery and used all their savings to get jobs in the Gulf countries on the assurance of conmen. But they were left high and dry to lament their fate since the tricksters had made off with their money. Weavers from eastern UP have been migrating to western India, (Bombay, Bhiwandi, Surat) and other centres like Kanpur for many, many years. Their long journeys for a livelihood began from 1857 when the handloom industry was nearly destroyed and the journey continued through the twentieth century. These weavers constituted the bulk of the nascent working class of the emerging industrial centres.

There have been migrations and migrations. Apart from the historic migrations, like those after major upheavals like 1857, in recent times, since the 1970s, there have been migrations to

absorb the increased prosperity of areas like Madanpura – Rewri Talaab. As Madanpura prospered, the grihastha-gaddidars bought more land, both in Madanpura and elsewhere to expand production. This meant that many of the weavers who worked for the gaddidars moved to places like Bajardeeha, Lohta, Dhannipur, etc. This was one kind of migration, a migration to ensure and buttress the prosperity of Madanpura. Bajardeeha was in a sense the 'other' of Madanpura. The relationship between Madanpura and Bajardeeha was a dialectical one, wherein one could not exist without the other. We use Madanpura and Bajardeeha as metaphors for the logic of differentiation that characterised the development and prosperity of the sari industry. The point is that there has been migration from the more developed concentrations to the outlying areas of the city, which were less developed, had hardly any civic infrastructure and were poorly serviced in all ways. These were the concentrations of poor weavers, living and working in slum-like conditions.

The logic of differential development that we have referred to above, led to a further cascading effect, with the weavers from the poorer weaving settlements of Banaras, like Bajardeeha, Laut Bhairon moving and settling in Dhannipur. Dhannipur, is an extremely poor village, falling within the Bhatti Gram Sabha, near Lohta. It has emerged as a settlement of weavers over the last thirty years or so. The really poor sections of the weaving community moved here, either due to shortage of space or due to economic pressures. Land here was cheap, and the area at that time was hardly inhabited, consisting mainly of rice fields.

Nasir, a weaver in his mid-forties and an activist of the Bunkar Adhikar Manch, recalls that in his young days as a mere boy, marching in processions demanding roads and other amenities. Now he feels a sense of satisfaction that after thirty years of protests and pleas, an approach to the village was at last being built. Cooperative societies were just frauds, with people who have nothing to do with weaving and do not know what a dhadki or a charkha are, cornering the benefits. He was convinced that the poor are cheated at every step in even the schemes that are

supposedly meant for them. (Interview with Nasir, Dhannipur, December, 2008).

This was also the area when within the last one year, young children had died of starvation.

The major crisis that has hit the industry in the twenty first century, has led to qualitatively another kind of migration, *palayan*, as it has been referred to in the Hindi newpapers.

Large-scale migration to Bangalore, Surat, Hyderabad and Rajasthan, has taken place wherein, lakhs of weavers have left for far-off destinations, to seek another home and another place to work and earn a livelihood.

What is significant about the present wave of migration is that even the once prosperous Madanpura, the source of envy and admiration of most weavers from Banaras, an area from where, observers earlier pointed out, no migrations took place, now has witnessed large-scale migration. An article in a journal called – *Jan Awaaz* – published in 2008 and authored by Sanjay Singh refers to the terrible plight of the weavers. (Sanjay Singh – *Bunkaron Dwara Pahal*). The article speaks of the virtual transplantation of Madanpura in an area called Gurdalli in Bangalore. "If one were to walk through the area called Gurdalli in Bangalore, one would feel that one is walking through Madanpura in Banaras. In Gurdalli, nearly half the population there consists of Madanpurias." (Sanjay Singh, ibid. p.47)

Every evening, there are long queues of people at the PCO booths in Gurdalli waiting to make calls to Madanpura, Rewri Talaab, and Ashfaq Nagar, (all neighbouring areas) from the new migrants to find out the state of the family and kin and more importantly, the state of the market. The other areas in Bangalore where the Madanpurias are settled are Tamanna Gardens and Gauripada. The article further points out that in Bangalore, there are at times 3000-4000 powerlooms where the migrants work; this contrasts with Banaras where at most there would be 100 looms under one roof.

According to Shamim Javed, a young man of 26 who specialises in the polishing of saris, the mohalla in Madanpura where he

resides is deserted since entire families have migrated to Bangalore and Surat. The migration began in dribbles around ten to fifteen years ago, but it picked up momentum over the last 7-8 years. It seems that so many people have migrated that there are not enough mosques in the areas in Bangalore where the weavers have settled!! (Interview with Shamim Javed, December, 2008, at Ramapura)

In Bangalore, the weavers are at least paid their wages on time. He states that there were hardly any prospects of the weavers returning, since their lives are better, their incomes more stable, despite the fact that Bangalore is an expensive city and they have to rent space to live. Shamim himself went to Bangalore and was there for three to four months and came back. He sings the sehra at weddings.

Much has been said of the resilience of the Madanpurias and their ability to quickly adjust to changing conditions of the market. While they can pack up and move to other destinations fast, they can just as quickly return once the winds of the market change. However, this time, it would seem that even the resourceful Madanpurias are unlikely to come back since the work conditions and prospects for a steady income are better in Bangalore and other destinations in the south and west of the country.

What is significant is that whole families have gone, unlike the earlier migrations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when only the males migrated. There has been an attempt to transplant their social and family lives, maintain their kin networks to the extent possible in the new environment. Most often however, the weavers all go to settlements and mohallas where other kin are already resident. Abdul Latif, from Madanpura pointed out that even the oldest and infirm would insist on going to the new destination, on the plea that they also could contribute to building a new life and home. (Interview with Abdul Latif, Madanpura, December 2008).

A significant observation made by many of our important informants is that it is only Muslims who have migrated out of Banaras. The fact is that most of those who have migrated have

been relatively more skilled Muslim weavers from the middle levels of the hierarchy. And they have gone into polishing, dyeing, zari- polishing work and ari work. The really poor and pauperised weaver workers have gone into rickshaw-pulling, pushing trolleys, construction work, bidi-selling and other forms of petty vending. This has been the almost unanimous opinion of persons who are very differently socially located observers of the scene. Thus Tanvir Ahmad, a senior lawyer, associated with the Human Rights Law Network, Mumtaz from Nakki Ghat, whose family has been into handloom weaving till recently and Abdulla Ansari, all adhere to this view. Tanvir Ahmad observed that the present crisis has been so severe and so unlike the previous small ones, that those who have gone into other forms of labour would find it difficult to return to weaving since resources would be needed to set up the looms once again and credit for yarn, which most would find difficult to procure. Besides, with the exit of many of the old weavers also went many traditionally acquired and honed skills, which were passed down from one generation to the next. Thus when there was a slight up-turn of the market in the year 2008, the old experienced weavers were not available. (Interview with Tanvir Ahmad, Banaras, February-March, 2008)

Ashok Dhawan, the president of the Banaras Vastra Udyog Sangh, manufacturer and trader, primarily involved in the manufacture of handloom saris, pointed out that the intensity of the crisis was such that even those who owned 300 to 500 handlooms had been forced to migrate. And as mentioned earlier, the destinations are Bangalore, Hyderabad, Surat and even Rajasthan. He also referred to the tremendous loss of skills that has occurred as a consequence.

He affirmed a point made by many others that the gaddidars with resources and capital, while affected, could branch out into some other areas and survive this crisis if they had the flexibility and the dexterity; while the grihasthas and master weavers were also affected but undoubtedly the hardest hit were the ordinary weavers. He too confirmed that it is only the Muslims who have migrated. (Interview with Ashok Dhawan, December, 2008, Mehmoorganj, Banaras)

Among options there is hierarchy. For the poorest men, the extreme options were selling blood and suicide, while the next one was construction work, rickshaw pulling and/or bidi-selling for men of the weaving community. The next range of options was the descent from being self-employed weavers to being wage workers on the powerlooms. For women choices are stareer.

The traumatic effect of such extreme options on the self-esteem of the weavers can only be imagined. From being skilled artisans with pride in their work, despite decreasing incomes, to descend to the status of just manual labourers must surely have imploding consequences for the entire artisanal community.

D) DIFFERENTIATION, POLARISATION, DE-SKILLING, INSTABILITY AND ATOMISATION

The overarching social processes at work can be summed up by the following: differentiation, polarisation, de-skilling, accompanied by large-scale destruction of productive resources, leading to widespread unemployment, concentration of social resources, instability and atomisation

We have outlined earlier the process of differentiation of the Momin Ansari community which began in the early decades of the last century, was accentuated during the 1950s, peaking between the 1970s and the 1990s. This resulted in social and economic differention with consequences on the religious-sectarian life of the community. A class came into being which threatened the communal-class faultlines that were prevalent till then.

The differentiation that characterised the last two or three decades soon transformed into polarisation from the 1990s onwards. The polarisation had many elements, both economic and politico-communal. The early 1990s witnessed the high point of communal polarisation, with the Muslim weaving community being targeted. Just as the communal polarisation subsided, riding on the back of it as it were, began the economic polarisation occasioned by the economic reforms of 1991. The reforms were to strike the silk weaving industry only after the mid-to late-1990s

with the full blast being experienced by the industry only in the early years of the 21st century.

The tremendous destruction of productive resources that has accompanied the current crisis is of enormous proportions. The closing down of thousands of handlooms and the accompanying pauperisation of lakhs of weavers, has one extremely significant implication and that is the de-skilling of a vast population. Thus, even if the industry revives (as it has been claimed in the last few months of 2008) the skilled weavers are no longer available, since they have been dispersed and dispossessed. One is tempted to recall what happened to the Bombay textile workers in the 1980s, when the textile industry was 'restructured': the workers just vanished among the faceless millions that characterise the metropolis and the mills became shopping malls or high rise apartment complexes for the elite.

In the case of the Banaras silk industry, the destruction of the vast productive resources and more importantly the skills, has not been accompanied by concentration of resources in the hands of the traders and gaddidars of Banaras. They too have been affected. In Madanpura, for example, there are about 141 gaddis, but almost all of them are doing merely job work and are not involved in manufacturing. (Interview with Abdulla Ansari, Ramapura, December, 2008). Anup Gujarati, of Sri Silks in the Golghar area of Banaras, a wholesaler in the trade, pointed out that while many of the gaddidars of Chowk area have been affected by the slump in the market, many have shifted to other products like embroidered materials. While the annual turnover of the Banarasi silk trade has remained at Rs. 1,000 crores, now most of that goes outside to contribute to the economy of other centres like Surat, Bombay etc. and hardly 10 per cent is earned by the weavers and traders in Banaras.

Their view was that the sari industry is central to the identity of Banaras' economy and society. "Can you imagine what Banaras would be without the weavers, and what would we (the traders) be without the weavers and the Banarasi sari industry? Today we may continue in trade, but it is no longer the old kind of trade.

It is no longer Banarasis who are earning from the trade, but others, Bombay and Delhiwalas" (Interview with Shri M.D. Gujarati and Anup Gujarati, Golghar, Banaras, April, 2007).

Thus, concomitant with the widespread destruction of productive resources is also the concentration of social wealth and profits, but that is accruing not to the Banarasi traders and gaddidars but to other centres, thus exacerbating uneven development. (emphasis ours)

Thus the differentiation leading to polarisation affected the Momin Ansari weaving community in severe and far-reaching ways. From being a community which consisted of a large majority of self-employed artisans, somehow managing to retain their 'autonomous' artisanal character, to becoming one wherein the large majority of them have been pauperised by macro-policies and exogenous forces has been a historic setback; in this they have been joined by the relatively recent entrants in the profession of weaving, the Hindu subaltern caste groups.

E) IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STRUCTURE OF THE ARTISANAL FAMILY

The descent of the vast majority of the weaving population into a state of pauperisation has compounded the already prevalent instability in their lives and heightened their sense of vulnerability. The artisanal family has, in a sense disintegrated, that is, the organicity embedded in the artisanal family with its gender and age-specific division of labour does not exist any more. Though the family continues to exist, since it performs the other functions that families normally perform, i.e socialisation of children, the reproduction of the family as a unit, what bound the artisanal family together was that it was also a unit of production and a site of consumption.

The socialisation of the young has also been affected. In the artisanal family of the weavers, the transmission of weaving skills and knowledge with its unique ethos was central to the perpetuation of the artisanal family and an integral part of the socialisation of the young. In fact, transmission of weaving skills has been crucial in the stability and continuance of the Banarasi

silk industry and its expansion in recent years. The vast mass of the weavers, particularly the Muslim weavers have been largely illiterate, and really unprepared to face a world other than one based on weaving. What will the elders of the family now teach their children? Apart from the extreme cases of starvation and suicide which heighten their sense of an all-pervasive instability, there is a sense of total uncertainty regarding the future. It would seem that the very raison d'etre of the artisanal family has vanished.

Here, too, there have been different trajectories. For the class of grihastha-gaddidars that emerged, the functions of the artisanal family had already altered, with women not playing a role in the production process. However, the *value* of the family as a mainstay of weaving has continued.

Abdul Ahat's family claims its descent from a family the genealogy of which can be traced back to six generations, from the time of Pir Mohammed Firangi who was in the sari business. The family traces its ancestry to the family of Taj Mohammed and Waris Mohammed, popularly known as Taja Waris. This is a family of middle level gaddidars, with an annual turnover of Rs. 50 lakhs.

Abdul Ahat, a young man of 32 narrated the story of his family right from the time of his father, Abdul Majid Jaliwala who was in the business of making wire meshes (jali). Abdul Majid started the business sometime in the 1940s when there was a demand for brass wire meshes from the armaments industry. The British encouraged this and in the entire area of Ramapura this was virtually a cottage industry. The family was doing well till the early 1960s, after which there was no longer any demand for these wire meshes. Plastics replaced metal; besides, mechanisation also affected the business. The decades of the 1960s was a bad period for the entire family. The family often ate only one meal a day.

The family decided to move into handlooms in the 1970s. The entire family had to work hard to put the handloom business on a firm footing. The older brothers of Abdul Ahat had to give up

their studies after class 6. They started with one handloom and soon by 1985, they had 70-80 handlooms. They would farm out work to weavers who would be paid a piece rate of Rs. 250-300 per sari, with the designs and yarn being provided to them. During this period, they would also themselves weave at home on five handlooms, with the women of the house doing the preparatory work and post loom operations. Abdul himself began weaving at the age of fifteen. In the mid 1980s they also acquired six powerlooms, though they would only weave plain cloth. The 1980s, according to Abdul, were good days. The customers would themselves come to buy the saris; they did not have to go anywhere. By the end of the 1990s, the market was already slowing down and they stopped all production on handlooms. It was getting difficult to get payments on time and the saris would be returned after a month. In 1998, they already had 20 powerlooms. When they shut down the handlooms, they put the money into printing. Once the powerloom business also started facing a slowdown, the family quickly moved to set up a finishing plant. They have a finishing plant in Lohta; there are eight to ten finishing plants in Banaras. The family currently has eleven powerlooms at home and nine outside the home. The impact of lowly-priced Chinese fabric (Rs. 125 per metre) and highly priced Chinese yarn (Rs. 1,520 per kg) has really affected the sari industry of Banaras. The crisis has been so severe that the once famed Madanpura, the erstwhile nerve centre of quality Banarasi sari production is no longer a producing centre but just a marketing centre. The market slowdown has meant that they have to now go to the big firms to sell their products. They only make pure silk and sell mainly to boutiques.

According to Abdul Ahat, the decisions with regard to the business were taken as a joint family even though the brothers have separate units which they take care of. He was very clear about the *value* of the family (in this case the joint family of three brothers and their families) as central to their lives in the sari industry. The family was the focal point and locus of all the decisions. He pointed out that sometimes there were members

of the extended family who were keen on experimenting with new ideas on their own, but their endeavours came to nought even though they were given the necessary financial backing. Thus to him, the joint family was extremely important in the business. Regarding the future, Abdul was certain that they would continue in this business since it was more efficient and, more importantly, they had control over their time. Moreover, he visualised the future of the business as being inextricably tied up with the family. (Interview with Abdul Ahat, Ramapura, February, 2008)

The family has undoubtedly undergone a change. From being just handloom weavers with the weaving being done at home with the labour of the women folk in preparatory and post-loom labour processes, to being gaddidars (even though middling level ones) has meant the withdrawal of the women in the family from any role in the production process. Desire for upward mobility has meant greater emphasis on formal education for the younger generation including the girls in the family. In this particular case, the family's consolidation played a crucial role in business decisions, specifically in the transition from being simple artisans to being gaddidars. This, we believe might be the case with other gaddidar families, though the specific biographies might be different.

The fortunes of the families of ordinary weavers were, as we have shown above, vastly different. The manner in which the family faces the crisis is really a question of how they as a family will survive.

Despite the drastic implications of the crisis for the artisanal family, from all our interviews across the social spectrum, we note that the family as a value is strongly held. Earlier, even though the artisanal family was impacted and determined by the market and market forces, the family continued to remain the unit through which negotiations with the outside, public domain of market would take place. Besides, the market was a different market; the trust that prevailed in business and money transactions has given way now to a greater importance to money

and the market and the trade itself is marked by greater volatility. With the full scale penetration of market forces, and the sari weaving industry on the verge of oblivion, the manner in which the family faces the world is a matter that will be dependent on many factors, including the response of the community as a whole. The manner in which those who migrated have managed to recreate their worlds in other cities like Bangalore, Surat etc. is perhaps a pointer. Gurdalli and Tamanna Gardens are a mini Madanpura, in Bangalore with the family and kin networks and the full complement of mosques.

Recent Developments

There have been broadly two categories of responses to the crisis in the industry, in tune with the increasing polarisation of the weaving industry. One response has been from among the handloom weavers who have been pauperised beyond measure and have taken to the streets. The essence of their protest has been an anguished cry about the declining value of their products, both from the onslaught of the Chinese silk and also the dominance of the powerloom. In short, theirs is a cry for both survival as an artisanal group and for the survival of the craft/trade. In 2009, they negotiated an increase in the wage rates that were being paid to them.

The other response has been one from the exporters and the businessmen including some gaddidars as well as associations and organisations of the trade. These groups have lobbied for the recognition of the Intellectual Property Rights of the Banarasi sari. Nine organisations which include the Joint Director, Industries (eastern zone), Director of Handlooms and Textiles, UP Handloom Fabrics Marketing Cooperative Federation, Eastern UP Exporters Association, the Banaras Vastra Udyog Sangh among others had applied to the Chennai based Geographical Indication Registry in July 2007. They have succeeded in securing GI rights for Banaras Brocades and Saris. The GI rights are the intellectual property rights that restrict

others from marketing or processing a product in the same name. As per the GI certificate issued by the Registrar of GI, the Banaras Brocades and saris fall in four classes that include silk brocades, textile goods, silk saris, dress material and silk embroidery. (Binay Singh, 18 September 2009, "Banaras Silk Sarees Get Copyright Cover", T.N.N.)

While the GI status would certainly take care of the mass scale reproduction of Banarasi saris, the other dimensions of the crisis would still need to be tackled. The policy measures that have been taken which put the handloom weavers at a disadvantage, namely the high prices of yarn, competition from cheap Chinese fabrics and quota restrictions which facilitated the unbridled expansion of powerlooms. All this indicates that there has been an official sanction to the present crisis.

There have been reports of a revival of the industry. Some even speak of a revival of handlooms. However, the Hindi newspaper reports from Varanasi dated July 2010 have been carrying the most horrific stories of the desperate plight of the weavers. The *Hindustan* of Varanasi dated 7 July 2010 reports that there have been 97 suicides, 90 per cent of them weavers. There have been continuing incidents of weavers selling their blood and in one extreme case, one Ahmad Husain from Kamuli Chaubepur village throttled three of his young daughters aged six, eight and thirteen.

The migration continues. The most preferred destinations are Bangalore and Surat. (Hindustan, 7 July 2010, page 16, Varanasi)

The various schemes that the government is promoting, like the cluster schemes, credit cards and ration cards for the weavers does not seem to reach the majority of the weavers; they are unaware of these. (Hindustan, 7 July 2010: page 8, Varanasi)

Most importantly, skills which were once a source of pride and honour for the weavers are now getting destroyed. Rouffbhai of Lohta poignantly states: "The life of the weavers were spent in Banarasi tana-bana. There was a time when skill was a source of pride and honour. Many big seths dealing in Banarasi saris would come to the doorstep of the skilled but poor weavers. But now

that time has passed nor are there sahukars and seths. Caught between the Chinese silk yarn and the powerlooms, the handloom weavers have been forced to migrate. Those who could not migrate, have been reduced to do hard physical labour on the NREGS sites. Those like Jamaluddin, Akeel, Iqbal and Rais who used to work on the looms in homes are now working on these sites." (Hindustan, July 8, 2010, Varanasi)

For the new class of Momin Ansar gaddidars, to rise from being artisans and master-weavers to being entrepreneurs and traders and then to fall in status, over just two to three generations surely has its own social and political implications. This was the class that traversed the French path – the move from being artisan producers to being entrepreneurs-capitalists.

More importantly for the Momin Ansaris in Indian society, post-Partition, to have moved from being a leaderless and demoralised community to a dynamic, productive and vibrant group, focusing on the advancement of the community by building educational institutions, both of the Islamic kind and modern, secular ones and active participants in the democratic process is an achievement in itself. This was part of a wider process of the rise of the artisanal groups in the immediate post-Partition years. To repeat the words of the late Tahir Ali, (former President of the Sir Syed Society), the kapdawala, the talawala and the bartanwala came into their own, freeing themselves from the shackles of ashraf Muslim leadership.

While the predecessors of the Momin Ansaris, the julahas had played their part, a not inglorious one, in the first Indian War of Independence, the Momin Conference was not far behind in standing firmly with the struggle for Indian Independence and against the two-nation theory. More importantly, the Momin Ansaris had played a significant role in enunciating the whole philosophy of tana-bana over many centuries.

The present crisis is part of a larger paradigm change with implications for the society as a whole. Banaras, an ancient pre-industrial urban centre, an artisanal city, is now steadily giving way to malls. The very identity of the city was inextricably linked

to the Banarasi sari industry. Besides, the metaphor of tana bana which symbolised Banaras and in the evolution of which the sari industry was central, suffused the entire ethos of the city. Another term commonly used was the Ganga-Jamuna tehzeeb to describe the fusion of cultures, an intermingling across social categories and a typical fluidity of a society characterised by an essentially pre-industrial weltanschauung of good faith and trust. Both these metaphors encompassed multiple social processes; the relations not only between Hindus and Muslims but also the plurality of social hierarchies based on caste, ethnicity, and religious community across which a complex but subtle communication did exist and the rich cultural creativity that emanated thereof. There could be no better example of this tradition than Ustad Bismillah Khan who was the quintessence of it and immortalised it in the shehnai, the notes of which woke up the goddesses in the temples on the ghats of Banaras. The weavers were central to this entire edifice.

The sea changes which have swept over the Banaras silk industry over the last couple of decades have far reaching consequences for the city. The weavers have just disappeared. Some have moved to to other destinations to become workers in powerloom factories, many have become faceless pauperised unskilled manual workers, bereft of any pride or dignity. The virtual destruction of the handloom weaving cottage industry signals not only the tremendous wiping out of social resources but also a widespread deskilling.

What is disturbing however is the short-sighted and callous disregard of the government which is destroying the sector which has had the potential to provide employment second only to agriculture. The steps taken to purportedly alleviate the condition of the weavers seem like a mockery given the extent and scale of destitution.

More importantly, the domination of a new and unbridled market will alter all aspects of social life in Banaras and thus rend apart the ineffable fabric of tana-bana.

We had begun with the lines of Kabir. The chadar that Kabir

wrote about has been irrevocably torn to shreds. What half a millennium of changes could not do has been accomplished in just two decades of the reign of global capital. And the makers of the chadar have vanished. They live only as the anonymous and atomised, faceless labouring millions of India.

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Appendix I

Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms - NCAER 1995-96 Handloom Sector VARANASI DISTRICT

CENSUS TABLES

Part I

Table-1
Number of Households Units Engaged in Handloom Activity

Urban/ Rural	Number of weaver households		
	With Looms	W/o Looms	Total
Urban	10227	199	10426
Rural	24276	1532	25808
Total	34503	1731	36234

Table-3
Castewise Distribution of Weaver Households

Urban/ Rural	S.C.	S.T.	OBC	Others	Total
Urban	265	65	10031	65	10426
Rural	5010	598	18888	1312	25808
Total	5275	663	28919	1377	36234

Table-4
Castewise Population of Weaver Households

Urban/ Rural	S.C.	S.T.	OBC	Others	Total
Urban	1690	517	58245	262	60714
Rural	3110	3386	117560	7851	159900
Total	32793	3903	175805	8113	220614

Table-5
Castewise Number of Household Members Engaged in Weaving Activity
(Full & Part Time)

Urban/ Rural	S.C.	S.T.	OBC	Others	Total
Urban	375	91	14566	87	15119
Rural	7879	891	32219	2414	42400
Total	8251	982	46785	2501	58519

Table-6
Number of Men, Women and Children Engaged in Weaving Activity
(Full & Part Time)

Urban/ Rural	Full Time Weaving				Part Time Weaving			
	Men	Women	Children	Total	Men	Women	Children	Total
Urban	14721	167	91	14979	39	87	14	140
Rural	37528	1306	2139	40973	475	1330	622	2427
Total	52249	1473	2230	55952	514	1417	636	2567

Table-7
Castewise Number of Household Members Engaged in Preparatory Work
(Full & Part Time)

Urban/ Rural	S.C.	S.T.	OBC	Others	Total
Urban	11	2	1482	13	1508
Rural	2424	291	10797	761	14273
Total	2435	293	12279	774	15781

Table-8
Number of Men, Women and Children Engaged in Preparatory Work
(Full & Part Time)

Urban/ Rural	Full Time Preparatory work				Part Time Preparatory work			
	Men	Women	Children	Total	Men	Women	Children	Total
Urban	141	211	70	422	165	618	303	1086
Rural	1885	4174	431	6490	1926	4659	1198	7783
Total	2026	4385	501	6912	2091	5277	1501	8869

Table-9
Number of Persons Engaged in Dyeing, Postloom, Madeup,
Marketing and Other Activitites

Urban/ Rural	Dyeing	Postloom	Madeup	Marketing	Others	Total
Urban	681	19	160	77	1115	2052
Rural	1826	136	519	1302	3373	7156
Total	2507	155	679	1379	4488	9208

Table-10
Working Status of Full Time Handloom Weavers
(No. of Weavers)

Urban/ Rural	Indep-endent	Under Master	Under Coop.	Under SHDC	Under KVIC/	Under Privowner	All Weavers
Urban	14243	427	233	4	0	72	14979
Rural	32242	5246	377	51	6	3051	40973
Total	46485	5673	610	55	6	3123	55952

Table-11
Distribution of Households by Number of Loomless Weavers

Urban/ Rural	1	2	3	4 or more	Loomless Weavers
Urban	447	176	86	65	1437
Rural	3018	1176	411	391	8563
Total	3465	1352	497	456	10000

Table-13
Distribution of Weaver Households by Number of Days Worked per year
(No. of Households)

Urban/ Rural	Upto 100 days	101-150 days	151-200 days	201-250 days	251-300 days	Over 300 days	All house-hold
Urban	0	1	25	756	7352	2292	10426
Rural	23	287	1401	5043	13903	5151	25808
Total	23	288	1426	5799	21255	7443	63234

Table-14&15
Number of Days Worked by Weaver Households, Average Days per Household & Average Working Days per Weaver per Year

Urban/ Rural	Total HHold	Avg days per Hhold	Avg Days per Weaver
Urban	30544192	293	293
Rural	7197231	279	277
Total	10251423	283	281

Table-17
Distribution of Weaver Households by Monthly Earnings from All Sources (No. of Households)

	Monthly Household Earnings from All Sources in Rupees						
Urban/ Rural	Upto 500	500-750	751-1000	1001-1250	1251-1500	Over 1500	All
Urban	224	114	3428	1593	1099	3968	10426
Rural	1583	1426	6367	3383	3176	9873	25808
Total	1807	1540	9795	4976	4275	13841	36234

Table-18
Distribution of Weaver Households by Monthly Earnings from Handloom Weaving (No. of Households)

	Monthly Household Earnings from Handloom Weaving in rupees						
Urban/ Rural	Upto 500	500-750	751-1000	1001-1250	1251-1500	Over 1500	All
Urban	328	115	3662	1786	936	3599	10426
Rural	1759	1600	8108	3497	2268	8576	25808
Total	2087	1715	11770	5283	3204	12175	36234

Table-19
Distribution of Weaver Households by Percentage of Total Income derived from Handloom Weaving (No. of Households)

Urban/ Rural	Percentage of Household Earnings from Handloom Weaving					
	Upto 20	20.1-40	40.1-60	60.1-80	Over 80	All
Urban	232	20	337	117	9720	10426
Rural	538	119	1209	1757	22185	25808
Total	770	139	1546	1874	31905	36234

Table-21
Average Monthly Household Earnings (Rs.) from Different Sources

Urban/ Rural	Handloom Weaving	Agriculture	Non-agriculture	Total
Urban	1661	67	9	1737
Rural	1661	101	38	1800
Total	1661	91	30	1782

PART - II

Table-1
Households Classified by Number of Complete Looms Owned
(No. of Households)

Urban/ Rural	No looms	One looms	Two looms	Three looms	Four looms	More than 4 looms	All Hholds
Urban	199	7144	1966	540	322	255	10426
Rural	1532	15702	4913	1773	878	1010	25808
Total	1731	22846	6879	2313	1200	1265	36234

Table-4
Castewise Number of Complete Household Looms

Urban/ Rural	S.C.	S.T.	OBC	Others	All Hholds
Urban	680	93	15332	85	15890
Rural	6989	841	32217	1811	41858
Total	7369	934	47549	1896	57748

Joint Census of Handlooms and Powerlooms 1995-96
Powerloom Sector, Uttar Pradesh

Table-1
Distribution of Units by Type

Uttar Pradesh	Proprietary	Cooperative	Private	Total
Urban	16934	89	1395	18418
Rural	4471	24	391	4886
Total	21405	113	1786	23304

Table-2
Distribution of Units by Number of Looms

	<=5	6-10	11-25	26-50	>50
Urban	17811	444	141	19	3
Rural	4679	151	42	12	2
Total	22490	595	183	31	5

Table-10
Number of Skilled and Unskilled Workers Employed

	Skilled		Unskilled		Total	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Urban	35584	18974	13993	10281	49577	29255
Rural	10618	4522	4431	2679	15049	7201
Total	46202	23496	18424	12960	64626	36456

Table-11
Number of Workers Employed by Activity

	Preparatory		Weaving		Post Weaving		Total	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Urban	6974	6609	35584	18974	7019	3672	49577	29225
Rural	2998	1798	10618	4522	1433	881	15049	7201
Total	9972	8407	46202	23496	8452	4533	64626	36456

Table-12
Average Employment By Number of Looms

	<=5	6-10	11-25	26-50	>50
Urban	4	10	16	33	47
Rural	4	12	16	35	45
Total	4	11	16	33	46

Table-13
Distribution Of Workers By Wage levels

	Wage Levels in Rs. Per month						
	<Rs	501-	701-	1001-	1201-	>1500	Total
Urban	15636	12771	11420	10551	8205	20289	78832
Rural	5518	4131	2527	3834	2054	4186	22250
Total	21154	16902	13947	14345	10259	24475	101082

Appendix II

Handloom Census of India 2009-10

Primary Handloom Census Abstract
(NCAER)

UTTAR PRADESH

Table-3.1
Distribution of Units by Type

Location	Total Households	Weaver Households	Allied Households	Others
Rural	62956	49383	13559	14
Urban	47586	35072	12453	61
Total	110542	84455	26012	75

Table-3.2
Number of Handloom Worker Households by Social Groups (2009-10)

Location	Scheduled Caste 9SCs)	Scheduled Tribes (STs)	Other backward Castes (OBCs)	Others	Total
Rural	5622	980	49895	6459	62956
Urban	5360	374	37081	4771	47586
Total	10982	1354	86976	11230	110542

Table-3.3
Number of Handloom Worker Households by Religion (2009-10)

Location	Hindus	Muslims	Sikhs	Christians	Buddhists	Others	All Categories
Rural	10980	51915	57	2	1	1	62956
Urban	5046	42460	72	0	0	8	47586
Total	16026	94375	129	2	1	9	110542

Table-3.4
Number of Handloom Worker Households by Possession of Looms

Location	Household with looms	Household without looms	Total
Rural	35624	27332	62956
Urban	22316	25270	47586
Total	57940	52602	110542

Table-3.5
Distribution of Handloom Worker Households by purpose

Location	Domestic	Commercial	Both domestic and and commercial	Not applicable	Total
Rural	147	47281	543	14	62956
Urban	87	109533	157	61	47586
Total	234	6537	700	75	110542

Table-3.8
Number of Handloom Worker Households by Type of Ration Card (2009-10)

Location	AAY	BPL	APL	No Ration Card	Total
Rural	4747	11414	41704	5091	62956
Urban	1489	3930	38832	3335	47586
Total	6236	15344	80536	8426	110542

Table-3.9
Distribution of Total Population of Handloom Worker Households by Gender (2009-10)

Location	Male (14 Years and above)	Female (14 Years and above)	Children (Less than 14 years)	Total Population	Average Household size
Rural	94660	96056	139556	330272	5.25
Urban	78565	74694	102932	256191	5.38
Total	173225	170750	242488	586463	5.31

Table-3.10
Average Household Size of Handloom Worker Households by Type (2009-10)

Location	Weaver Household	Allied Household	All Household
Rural	5.38	4.77	5.25
Urban	5.56	4.88	5.38
Total	5.45	4.82	5.31

Table-4.1
Number of total Handloom Workers by Age Group (2009-10)

Location	Total Workforce (All Ages)	< 18 Years	18 Years and above
Rural	136462	21468	114994
Urban	121321	19300	102021
Total	257783	40768	217015

Table-4.2
Total Workforce by Type of Handloom Workers (2009-10)

Location	Number of adult weavers	Number of adult allied workers	Total adult workers
Rural	67121	47873	114994
Urban	49501	52520	102021
Total	116622	100393	217015

Table-4.3
Number of Adult (18 years & above) Handloom Workers by Gender (2009-10)

Location	Total Adult Workers			Adult Weavers			Adult Allied Weavers		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Urban	54986	60008	114994	48290	18831	67121	6696	41177	47873
Rural	54354	47667	102021	42923	6578	49501	11431	41089	52520
Total	109340	107675	217015	91213	25409	116622	18127	82266	100303

Table-4.8
Number of Adult (18 years & above) handloom Workers by Employment Status (2009-10)

Location	Indepen-dent	Under master weavers	Under SHDC	Under KVIC	Under Cooperative society	Under private owners	Total
Rural	45987	67622	373	169	301	542	114994
Urban	9344	91559	577	7	237	297	102021
Total	55331	159181	950	176	538	839	217015

Table-4.9
Number of Adult (18 years & above) Handlloom Workers
by Nature of Engagement (2009-10)

Location	Full Time	Part Time	Total
Rural	97882	17112	114994
Urban	76775	25246	102021
Total	174657	42358	217015

Table-4.10
No. of Adult (18 years & above) Handloom Weavers
by Nature of Engagement (2009-10)

Location	Full Time	Part Time	Total
Rural	61684	5437	67121
Urban	46193	3308	49501
Total	107877	8745	116622

Table-4.11
No. of Adult (18 years & above) Allied Workers by Nature
of Engagement (2009-10)

Location	Full Time	Part Time	Total
Rural	36211	11662	47873
Urban	30582	21938	52520
Total	66793	33600	100393

Table-4.12
No. of Men, Women Engaged in Weaving Activity by Nature of Engagement (2009-10)

Location	Full Time			Part Time			Total		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Urban	45584	16100	61684	2706	2731	5437	48290	18831	67121
Rural	40573	5620	46193	2350	958	3308	42923	6578	49501
Total	86157	21720	107877	5056	3689	8745	91213	25409	116622

Table-6.7
Average Earning of Handloom Households
(Rs./Annum, 2009-10)

Location	All Households	Weaver Households	Allied Households
Rural	24061	25087	20321
Urban	230543	20588	20376
Total	22547	23218	20347

Table-1
District-wise Handloom Indicators : Uttar Pradesh, Varanasi

Location	Number of handllom households	Total workers (All Ages)	Total Workers (18 years and above	Total Weavers 18 years and above	Total looms (with households)
Varanasi	37331	95439	82796	40497	31378
Total(UP)	110542	257783	217015	116622	77527

Glossary of Selected Terms

akhara	a traditional wrestling arena, refers also to any space where physical training is imparted
ashraf	generally used to describe upper caste and elite Muslims, considered to be descendants of migrants from Central Asia, as opposed to *ajlaf* Muslims, who are considered to be converts from the 'lower' castes of Hindu society
bania	Business and trading community
bartanwala	those who make and sell metal vessels
bichholia	middlemen
biradari	caste group/Clan
biswa	a unit of land measurement, measuring 154.32 square yards
bunkar	weaver
dargah	a shrine at the tomb of a sufi saint
garha	coarse woven cloth
gaddidars	traders and businessmen
kargha	handloom
karkhana	factory
karkhanadars	owners of factories
kapdawala	those who make or sell cloth
kshatriya	a caste group, traditionally known as warriors
mahajans	moneylenders
mazdoori	wage labour, wage
mazhar	grave, also graves of saints
mohalla	a Hindustani word meaning street or neighbourhood

OBC	Other Backward Classes (OBC), an official classification referring to the vast range of castes belonging to the middle rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy
purdah	veil
qasba	countryside towns which have been generally centres of artisanal production and also centres of trade in North India
qurbani	lit. sacrifice; sacrifice of animals on the occasion of Bakri Id or other auspicious occasions
SC	Scheduled Caste (SC), an official classification referring to the former untouchable castes who have been listed in a schedule in the Indian Constitution
ST	Scheduled Tribe (ST), an official classification referring to tribal peoples of India who have been listed in a schedule in the Indian Constitution
Satti	A trading centre
Sangathan	Lit. organisation in Hindi, but refers also to the movement initiated by the Hindu revivalist organisations in the 1920- 30s to purify and cleanse Hinduism
Shuddhi	Lit. Purification, but refers here to the movement launched in the 1920s-30s for the purification of Hinduism, directed against conversions to other religions
Tana Bana	Hindustani word for warp and weft
Taats	Lineages or clans who trace their origin to a common ancestor
Talawala	locksmiths
Tanzeem	Lit. movement, used by Muslims to refer to the movement for reform and renewal of Islam
Tehzeeb	Urdu word meaning culture
Ulema	Islamic scholars, plural of alim

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