

# Spatial Disparities and Regional Planning in the Indian Handloom Sector: Revitalising Rural Livelihoods through Decentralised Development

Subramanian Ramachandran (0009-0006-9700-8480)<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. B.P. Chandramohan (0009-0003-4054-4686)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Research Scholar, Department of Economics, VISTAS, Chennai, India*

<sup>2</sup>*Director, School of Commerce and Economics, VISTAS Email: [director.sms@vistas.ac.in](mailto:director.sms@vistas.ac.in)*

**\*Corresponding author:** <sup>1</sup>*Subramanian Ramachandran,*

*\*Email: [subbi\\_r@hotmail.com](mailto:subbi_r@hotmail.com)*

## Abstract

The roots of the cotton textile industry are deeply rooted in agriculture and rural India. Cotton is a critical input for textile-related industrial activity and serves as a major source of direct and indirect employment across rural regions, particularly in the indigenous handloom sector, forming a key component of spatially distributed employment systems. This paper discusses the significance of the handloom sector within the framework of regional economic development and spatial planning in India, examining how geographic disparities and planning failures affect rural livelihoods and traditional crafts. It positions the handloom sector as the earliest and enduring embodiment of Atmanirbhar Bharat, especially in the context of decentralized economic development and local self-reliance. It highlights the sector's historical antiquity, its pre-colonial prominence, colonial decline, and the contemporary socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by handloom artisans in underserved regions. This study traces the sector's spatial evolution from historical prominence through colonial disruption to its present-day fragility, highlighting how planning failures and geographic disparities have undermined sustainable livelihood systems. The paper reviews past and present policy measures aimed at revitalising the sector, protecting weavers' livelihoods, and addressing regional disparities that threaten inclusive and sustainable development. It further explores the structural resilience and competitive differentiators of the handloom sector, emphasizing the need to protect this cultural economy not only for its economic and employment potential but also as a vehicle for spatial equity, knowledge preservation, and social justice.

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**Keywords:** Handloom, Rural livelihood, Spatial development, Cultural geography, Sustainable development

## 1. Introduction

The Indian handloom sector is a micro-informal industry globally known for its spinning, weaving, printing, and embroidery styles. These craft forms are regionally distinctive, shaped by local ecological, cultural, and socio-economic systems. Handloom is the largest cottage industry in India. Its development is a significant milestone linked to the evolution of human civilisation. Since time immemorial, cotton has been used for making clothes, and India has been a pioneer, setting a standard (Lemire, 2016). Cotton is an important cash crop cultivated by farmers in many parts of India and is crucial for India's handloom sector. Its availability is influenced by agricultural planning and regional land-use policies, making cotton supply a critical issue in spatial

development. Its success relies heavily on its availability. Broadly, both the handloom sector and the modern textile industry that produces fabrics from natural fibres are deeply rooted in agriculture. It supports rural employment across marginalized and underserved regions, contributing to spatial equity and regional inclusion. The handloom sector is a direct source of employment and income for cultivating farmers and is the second-largest livelihood-generating source after agriculture. Overall, the national handloom industry gives livelihood to millions, facilitating the growth of trade, tourism, and hospitality sectors. This integration positions it as a key driver of place-based development and rural transformation.

## 2. Significance of the Study

The antiquity of the Indian handloom industry dates back over 9000 years to its unique weaving and printing styles. It held the benchmark for quality and leadership for both business and commercial success for thousands of years (Raman, 2022). It is one of the earliest edicts of Atmanirbhar Bharat, hence needs to be cherished, celebrated, and conserved. Beyond its cultural and economic legacy, the sector is also deeply embedded in the spatial fabric of India, reflecting region-specific traditions and geographic identities. It has for thousands of years remained a prominent and flourishing source of employment and economic growth in addition to playing a pivotal role in preserving the diversity of culture and heritage. However, in recent times, this equation has changed and has the potential to add to the existing burden of unemployment and hinder economic progress. The spatial decline of handloom clusters, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, has contributed to regional disparities and disrupted local economies (Adams, 1897). Hence, there is an urgent need to reimagine the handloom sector as a spatially anchored catalyst for inclusive economic growth. To ensure the craft continues to exist and interact in daily walk of life and remains integral to our heritage, it must be reintegrated into regional development frameworks, local planning systems, and rural employment schemes. We must approach with an open mind to revive it for its reservoir of employment opportunities, as well as associated economic and political gains.

## 3. Methodology

This is a descriptive and exploratory study using secondary data. It integrates regional and spatial analysis to highlight geographic disparities in the handloom sector, using state-level data and development indicators to contextualize employment and livelihood dynamics. While the study is largely descriptive and qualitative, future research could benefit from spatial data analysis techniques such as GIS-based mapping of handloom clusters, spatial autocorrelation to identify high-stress livelihood zones, and location quotient (LQ) analysis to measure regional dependency on handloom employment. Integrating such tools can

guide resource allocation and policy targeting more effectively.

## 4. Significance of the Handloom Sector in Employment Generation

The handloom sector is critical to the performance of the Indian economy. Spinning and weaving with the preparatory, finishing, and ancillary processes is the most widely distributed and decentralised occupation in craft (Vijayakumar & Rejitha, 2023). Skilled workforce that's adept at spinning, weaving, printing, embroidery, and the availability of raw materials make it a competitive sourcing destination for leading global brands. This decentralization reflects region-specific production systems that are deeply embedded in India's spatial economy, particularly in rural and semi-urban zones.

The spread of the handloom can be relatively compared to that of subsistence farming for its nature of organisation, i.e., produced for both self-consumption and commercial purposes. It is one of the largest employment providers with 27.01 lakh looms in the unorganised sector, offering livelihood to over thirty-five lakh persons (4<sup>th</sup> All India Handloom Census, 2019-20), of which the estimated share of women employment in weaving and allied work is over twenty-five lakhs that is a staggering 72%. According to Press Information Bureau (PIB), Government of India (GoI), as of April 2022, there are over 3600 ginning facilities, 1381 spinning mills, 3,85,596 powerlooms, and 28,23,382 handloom units across the country. Table 1 presents the total number of weavers employed in the handloom segment in India. According to the Department of Commerce, GoI, the textiles and apparel industry contributes 2 percent of the GDP, 7 percent of the industrial output, and accounts for 25% of the total global production of cotton. The textiles and apparel industry share in the overall export basket was approximately 15% reaching USD 44.4 billion in FY22 (IBEF). India is the second largest exporter of textiles in FY 2021, enjoying a global market share of 4.6% percent and the largest exporter of natural spun yarn, dominating the global market with a share of 29%. Table 2 presents the details of handloom exports from India (DC Handloom).

**Table 1: Total employed in the handloom segment**

Census	Year	Total Weavers (in Lakhs)	Total Males	Total Females	Full-Time (in lakhs)	Part-Time (In lakhs)
1st	1987-88	43.7			22.4	21.3
2nd	1995-96	34.7			16.5	18.2
3rd	2009-10	38,46,835.00	8,48,473.00	29,98,362.00	24,71,981.00	13,74,854.00
4th	2019-20	35,22,512.00	9,75,733.00	25,46,285.00	17,88,765.00	17,33,747.00

Source: Compiled by the author from multiple sources

**Table 2: Details of handloom exports in USD Million**

Commodity	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Handloom Products	369	360	356	344	319	223	269

Source: India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF)

Hence, the emerging need for the industry, apart from preserving the diversity and vibrance, also includes protecting existing employment opportunities to ensure financial independence and empowerment of women. Despite nationwide dispersion, the weaver households are concentrated in the states of Assam (10.9 lakhs), West Bengal (3.4 Lakhs), Manipur (2.1 Lakhs), and Tamil Nadu (1.7 Lakhs). The four states account for 18 lakhs or 57% of the total households engaged in the handloom sector. This geographic concentration highlights regional dependence on the sector and the urgent need for place-based, area-specific development interventions. This includes aligning handloom clusters with District Development Plans (DDPs), Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDs), and State Rural Livelihood Missions (SRLMs), ensuring planning is attuned to local economic geographies. This uneven distribution highlights spatial concentration and regional dependency on handloom crafts, necessitating area-specific development interventions. Lack of regional infrastructure, poor policy integration, and fragmented support systems in high-density weaving districts, particularly in Assam, Manipur, and West Bengal, contribute to uneven livelihood outcomes. These spatial mismatches often result in distress migration, economic vulnerability, and missed opportunities for sustainable rural development. A geography-informed policy approach is critical to addressing these regional disparities and supporting balanced, inclusive growth. Targeted interventions must account for gendered access to infrastructure, digital services, and market linkages, particularly in the North-East and Eastern states, where infrastructural deficits overlap with gendered labour vulnerabilities.

### 5. Regional Disparities and Planning Deficits in the Handloom Sector

The geography of India's handloom sector is marked by pronounced spatial inequalities, reflecting uneven regional development and access to infrastructure. While some regions like Assam and Tamil Nadu have integrated handloom into rural development planning, others lack support mechanisms. These disparities underscore the absence of a coordinated spatial policy framework for equitable textile-based development. Infrastructure gaps such as poor transport, market connectivity, and digital access widen regional disparities. Even when national-level initiatives exist such as the Handloom Census or

Yarn Supply Schemes their exclusion from integrated spatial development plans at state and district levels perpetuates regional disparities. State development plans often neglect handloom clusters, undermining their growth potential (Ghose et al., 2019). A geography-informed planning approach is needed to identify and prioritize resource allocation for underserved weaving regions. Incorporating handloom into District Development Plans and rural employment strategies is critical for balanced regional growth (Sharjo & Garg, 2025).

In addition to rural planning mechanisms, the resilience of handloom clusters in peri-urban and semi-urban zones demands greater integration with municipal infrastructure planning, such as urban housing for artisan families, access to dedicated workspaces, waste management for dyeing units, and reliable power and water supply. These planning aspects are often neglected in urban development master plans, leaving urban handloom clusters vulnerable to displacement. Incorporating handloom economies into urban local body (ULB) frameworks and Smart City initiatives could ensure their sustainability amid growing urbanisation.

### 6. Indian Handloom Industry before Colonisation

Cotton is a vital natural fibre and cash crop. Its domestication for agriculture and subsequent weaving is a significant milestone linked to the evolution of human civilisation itself. The prehistoric human beings are most likely to have developed methods and techniques for basic clothing and shelter around the same time as they transitioned from nomadic hunter-gatherers to agricultural settlement. Civilizational progress is a testament to progressive advancements in agriculture, clothing, and shelter. These transitions also reflect the early spatial organization of productive settlements and region-based economic systems.

The Indian handloom industry has a rich legacy of antiquity and quality, and possibly precedes the Indus Valley Civilisation (Prakash, 2009). According to archaeologists, Dholavira, an ancient Indus Valley civilisation site, provides evidence predating 7000 BCE of the textile technology development and a thriving cotton textile industry, acknowledging India's role as the epicentre of development and trade of cotton textiles (Viot, 2019). India's handloom sector is characterised by its regional diversities, popularly known by saree names, Bandhani, Benarasi, Baluchari, Bishnupur, Chanderi,

Kora, Maheshwar, Muga, Mysore silk, Paithani, Pashmina, Pochampalli, Sualkuchi, Kangeevaram, Venkatagiri, etc. (Kumar et al., 2021). Each style evolved as part of a geographically distinct production system rooted in local resources, cultural identity, and regional specialization.

Natural fibres offer diverse options like cotton, silk, wool, jute, etc. Thus, providing the opportunity to gain tacit knowledge, technical skills, and competencies, fostering innovation, experimentation, and breeding competition. The value chain of the natural fabric industry includes fibre, yarn, fabric, dyes, printing, kalamkari (pen-worked), embroidery, knitting, etc. Ancillary employment opportunities include bleachers, dyers, darners, warpers, sizers, bobbin-winders, block dye, and tool makers (Prakash 2009; Gorvett 2021). The craftsmen required high degree of specialised expertise, which was passed on as inheritance, and successive generations actively engaged in their respective occupation to keep the heritage and tradition alive (Sharjo & Garg, 2025) For example, the ability to create a cotton filament with a diameter of 25-33 microns, is a key technical parameter in creating a soft yet durable fabric using rudimentary tools is unparalleled, a challenge addressed in the production of the world-renowned muslin. These decentralized craft ecosystems reflected regionally embedded modes of production and labour distribution, which are essential features of traditional spatial economies. Every region evolved to develop its unique style and technique, offering its exclusive range of collection (Beddig, 2008; Anand & Sekhri, 2022). India has been producing handloom fabrics that have intrigued the world's imagination and interest for over two millennia. The dexterity, craftsmanship, inclusiveness, extent of division of labour, and its productivity have been discussed by Taylor and Bedding (Taylor, 1840 & Beddig, 2008). According to Taylor, there were over thirty-six kinds of fabrics manufactured in a single district using yarns of different thickness and qualities of cotton, to cater to different classes, textures, colours, designs, and motifs (Watson, 1866). The extent of division of labour and inclusiveness is worth noting, farmers supply cotton, spinning was done by Hindu women, while bleaching and dyeing were done by different communities; weaving was done by both Hindus and Muslims, embroidery was the niche of and favourite occupation of Muslim women, so was darning, tool making etc. This spatially stratified but interdependent division of labour reflects early models of place-based economic clustering, akin to modern-day regional industrial districts. With each task being performed by a specialist group, the process can be equated to the Marshallian concept of national development.

an industrial district comparable to contemporary districts (Beddig, 2008).

## 7. Transformation of the Handloom Sector

The handloom sector experienced significant transformation during the Industrial Revolution due to:

1. Mechanisation that enabled the British to produce cotton textiles (The Colonial Period and the Story of Indian Textiles)
2. Ability to imitate Indian designs without the labour-intensive efforts, and
3. Concentration of labour and capital under one roof, which were otherwise processed by dispersed multiple groups

These three aspects significantly reduced the unit cost of labour, transforming the ecosystem and directly impacting India (Broadberry & Gupta, 2005). The introduction of machine-spun yarn led to a rapid decline in spinning, causing a severe impact on the industry. Shift in cotton farming (Wight, 1862) and its processing support mechanised and automated spinning and weaving technology, all have had their impact on the fabric production process and the indigenous handloom industry. These shifts also marked a reorganisation of regional economic landscapes, leading to the spatial displacement of traditional production centres. Inclusion of spatial mapping, such as GIS overlays of historical and current weaving clusters, could enrich the spatial narrative and highlight regional contraction or displacement patterns. Table 3 reveals a steep increase in the quantity of raw cotton exported from India to Britain between 1860 and 1870. The export of raw cotton experienced a steady increase between 1861 and 1865, peaking in 1865 and stabilising gradually in the subsequent years. Apart from the protectionist trade policy, Brook Adams and William Digby argued that the influx of Indian treasure and subsequent credit expansion accelerated the factory system and industrial revolution while depriving India of its capital (Digby, 1901).

Imperialism and Colonization are driven by social suppression, mismanagement, and abuses of resources, and prioritises profit over people. It is the unabated plunder, pursued through coercion and control, that has directly resulted in unequal resource distribution, limited human productive capacities, ecological degradation, and social insecurities. This reallocation of economic power and spatial resources weakened localised development ecosystems and disrupted the spatial continuity of rural livelihoods. These resources could otherwise have been redirected to meet the objectives of regional and

**Table 3: Raw cotton export from India between 1861 and 1870**

Year	Quantity (in lb.)	Percentage Increase
1861	392700000	
1862	473678421	17.10
1863	550126402	13.90
1864	525052876	-4.78
1865	893150424	41.21
1866	425568892	-109.87
1867	614056049	30.70
1868	697630796	11.98
1869	554834522	-25.74
1870	577600764	3.94

Source: Harnetty, (1971). Cotton Exports and Indian Agriculture, 1861-1870. *The Economic History Review*, 24(3), 414–429.

During the American Civil War, India was the major exporter of raw cotton to Britain (Harnetty, 1971), to feed its mills. The quality of the textiles also improved with subsequent innovations in mechanisation (Sethi, 2022). This permanently transformed the sourcing of yarn by the handloom weavers from local to distant sources, setting off a growing dependence on transoceanic mills, leading to livelihood loss, subsequent disbandment, and complete workforce dislocation (Mishra and Mohapatra, 2020). This transition led to a spatial reorientation of textile economies from locally embedded systems to externally dependent value chains, causing long-term disintegration of regional production networks. This disrupted the value chain and collaboration established thousands of years ago, and continues to impact weaving.

### 8. Handloom Sector in India after Independence

The All-India Handloom Board was established in 1945 to address the grievances and promote the handloom sector by focusing on procurement, marketing, and financial aid administration.

The Indian handloom industry was catering to 25% of the total global demand for textiles before colonisation. It endured extensive destruction during the colonial era, reducing its contribution to just 2% (Roy, 2020). However, the sector survived both in its organisational and structural form. It continues to retain its characteristics as a labour-intensive rural cottage industry. The production unit is composed of a self-owned mechanical loom made from simple, locally available items, ensuring a self-reliant fabric-making process. This decentralised structure reflects a spatially diffused production model deeply rooted in rural livelihoods.

In the post-Independence period also the handloom sector continues to face competition from locally manufactured cheap machine-made yarns and fabrics, and flooding and dumping of cheap manmade fabrics through imports. The handloom sector is also impacted by design imitations, raw material shortage and cost escalations, unjust pricing,

buyer cartels, monopolies and exclusiveness buying rights, imitations, gradual market withdrawal, and inadequate promotion efforts (Mishra et al., 2016). These structural constraints have a regionally uneven impact, particularly affecting economically fragile and infrastructure-deficient weaving clusters. The sector is facing decline, causing a loss of livelihood for weavers and those in associated occupations. Weavers are quitting without obtaining any productive alternative employment and are not interested in their children inheriting or joining their family business. This exit from generational occupations is especially severe in areas where handloom is a primary livelihood activity, deepening spatial unemployment gaps.

The textile industry consists of two distinct forms of organisations to fulfil the market demand (Mukund, 1992). The modern industrial complex uses automatic machines for mass production, while the rural cottage industry deploys rudimentary machines and labour-intensive techniques. The competition between them has narrowed down to economies of scale and cost advantage rather than on quality, product superiority, and artistic merit. Likewise, the buyer mindset and choices have also shifted from product superiority and heritage to product price and fast fashion. These market dynamics disproportionately affect traditional textile regions, intensifying the marginalisation of artisanal economies in spatial development frameworks.

The Indian Government, post-independence, implemented several policies aiming to promote, revive, and preserve the former glory of the handloom sector. A few are listed in chronological order:

1. The Cotton Textiles (Control of Movement) Order, 1948: It regulated and prohibited the production, distribution and trade and supply of certain types of cloths like sarees and dhoties and to set a limit of 80% of yarn produced to be packed to limit their production to protect the interest of the handloom sector (The Cotton Textiles (Control) Order, 1948).

2. The Khadi and Other Handloom Industries Act, 1953: imposed additional excise duty on mill-produced cloths to make handloom competitive.
3. The Handloom Act. 1985: reserved production of 22 items exclusively for the promotion of the handloom sector.
4. The mill gate price scheme, 1992, was introduced to provide all types of yarns at the mill gate price to the weavers (Ministry of Textiles, GoI).
5. The handloom mark was introduced in 2006 to differentiate the handloom from the powerloom.
6. In 2015 weavers' mudra scheme was introduced to provide concessional credit to the weavers.
7. E-Dhaga App launched in 2016 to address the concerns of weavers regarding the availability and supply of yarn.

While these policies were national in scope, their effectiveness has varied regionally due to disparities in implementation capacity, institutional outreach, and local infrastructure. Future planning must adopt a spatially targeted approach to ensure policy benefits

reach underdeveloped and high-density weaving regions.

## 9. Productivity Challenges of the Handloom Sector

The Indian weavers require suitable yarn for fabric production, as the non-availability of certain quality drives them to procure what is available despite those not being their preference. Handwoven fabrics have to compete in the market for their quality, and not by their price. Table 4 presents the average person days worked by the weaver according to the Handloom Census. It indicates sub-optimal resource utilisation, with average working days close to 200, while for most other industries it is around 300 days. This indicates less productive labour engagement and therefore lower output. This limited utilisation is also linked to uneven access to infrastructure and production resources across different geographic regions.

**Table 4: Average Person Days Worked in Handloom Segment**

	Year	Average person days worked
3rd Census	2009-10	191.00
4th Census	2019-20	206.00

Source: Handloom Census of India 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>

The handloom sector has experienced a decline in weavers and looms since 1987-88, raising concerns about the sustainability of other textile crafts and employment opportunities. This decline is geographically uneven, with more severe impacts in regions lacking institutional support, credit access, and connectivity to raw material hubs. If the cog in the wheel is weak, how long can it sustain to support the spokes, i.e., the other textile crafts and ancillary employment opportunities? In 2011, the Ministry of Textiles identified textile crafts at risk of endangerment. Indigo Dyeing topped the list despite being the most environmentally friendly dyeing technique. In 2022, UNESCO updated the list to 50 (Sethi, 2022).

Despite their dire plight, weavers continue to weave, perhaps not because they possess skill and competency, but also the larger social responsibility to protect and preserve their livelihood, culture, and traditions, and textile crafts heritage. This resilience reflects the deep regional rootedness of textile craft traditions and highlights the importance of integrating cultural industries into regional development strategies (Taheri et al., 2024).

So, this again leads us to the central question: is it the passion for the art or the livelihood opportunity that attracts to practice weaving as an occupation? It is interesting to note that both deliver the same

outcome, which is prosperity, while livelihood opportunities lead to inclusive, equitable, and sustainable growth in the handloom sector. Recognising and strengthening region-specific market systems, resource flows, and planning frameworks is essential for restoring productivity and employment viability. A discourse on market orientation enables relevant product designs to avoid obsolescence to achieve growth. But it is not always the product or the nature of business, but the principle of doing it, with no negative externalities, that ensures sustainability.

## 10. Current Scenario of the Handloom Sector

Despite policies in vogue, little systemic change has been achieved. Structural reasons persist and are firmly holding back the economic systems that derail the process of revival. Acknowledging and thereafter addressing the constraints is crucial to prevent further deterioration and decline of the handloom sector. Figure 1 below pictorially represents the primary aspects impacting the handloom sector, offering a three-dimensional view. And the various aspects to be focused on in each of those dimensions to revive the sector. These dimensions also reflect spatial, institutional, and socio-economic challenges that must be addressed through integrated regional planning.



**Figure 1: Aspects Impacting the Handloom Sector**

10.1. **Forgotten Legacy:** The legacy of the handloom sector promises and reassures its vast potential due to its self-reliance and self-sufficiency in adaptation, improvisation, and innovation. Its uniqueness includes, but is not limited to, being eco-friendly, the ability to deliver small batches, product diversity, and flexibility to choose from a wide range, a niche product with no competition both domestically and globally, and unmatched agility to adapt to meet current consumer needs. Only the handloom sector offers unparalleled nimbleness for experimentation, promoting creativity and versatility, driving inclusive growth, and generating employment to ensure equitable income distribution and sustainable development.

10.2. **Transition:** The transition of the agrarian roots is affecting the economic system. This phase has witnessed diversion of farm inputs for machine-spun yarn and an increase in the share of manmade fibres, causing a decline in the handloom sector. With agriculture constrained in creating new farms, overuse of pesticides has resulted in soil and water contamination, posing serious health risks to humans and cattle. Intensive and unsustainable agricultural practices would eventually stress farmlands and lead to the discontinuation of cotton farming. This disruption also affects the geographic availability of inputs, further limiting the viability of handloom clusters dependent on local cotton supply.

10.3. **Dichotomy:** The two moments, handloom and power loom, cannot go side by side, as there exists a dichotomy of interests between the two. Agriculture as a single point source will not be able to support the growth of both. That said, it is important to recognise that the production of power loom continues to grow at the expense of the handloom. In the eighteenth century, the domestic spinning industry experienced socio-economic degradation,

loss of livelihood, and dislocation. Today, it is the weaving industry in the eye of the storm. The focus on growth, innovation, and investment in factories overlooks the negative aspects of the current situation, implying no social stress or degradation, and there is no other purpose to serve beyond profiteering for industrialists.

10.4. **Participation:** Traditionally, the handloom industry has been autonomous, free from stratified and hierarchical arrangements, contrary to our current definition of organisation and statutory restrictions. This organisational structure is crucial to meet the unique demand for fast-fashion clothing, encourages practical individualism, and admires personal choice. This organisational structure needs to be acknowledged. Shadowed under the current definitions focus on machinery, automation, and factories for production efficiency, capital is directed towards power looms and mills. But workers value regulations that safeguard labour interests, promote creativity, empower individuals, organisations, and communities. A decentralised and participatory governance model can better serve regional craft economies by promoting local ownership and autonomy.

10.5. **Draining Potential:** There is an urgent need to shift perception and view the handloom sector as an intangible cultural asset, hence the need to preserve and protect it. The regional flavours of the textile crafts were the unique selling proposition for its success, livelihood potential and prosperity of local communities, diversity in range of choice, affluence it commanded, and the legacy it retained. It is undeniably the reason for India's relatively healthier economy in the past. The consensus is that history and cultural heritage can potentially stimulate economic growth. This necessitates regionally targeted planning and allocation of resources to drive



balanced growth, rural employment, and spatial equity through the handloom sector. This calls for regionally targeted planning and localised development programs that integrate cultural assets into rural revitalisation strategies. A place-based development strategy can leverage local cultural assets and ensure inclusive progress.

**10. 6. Needless Comparison:** The characteristics of both the segments, mill/powerloom and handloom, are different and distinct in the space of textile and apparel industry. Mechanisation and automation led to a rapid increase in output, but technological limitations restrict the choice to a certain bandwidth. Handloom broadens the range of human capacity for creativity and capabilities to encompass the entire spectrum of possibilities. It would therefore be incorrect to apply the principle of substitution when comparing mill-made fabric and handloom. In a free, fair, and open market, individual buyers have the ultimate choice of preference by their value of money proposition. However, market fairness is compromised by saturating the market with low-cost fast fashion products targeting customers with limited knowledge of quality. This results in the erosion of spatially bound artisanal knowledge systems, weakening local economies dependent on skill-based industries.

**10.7. Losing Sight of Sustainability:** Over the last few decades, Indian consumers, influenced by the Western lifestyle, have shunned their sustainable, mindful consumption mindset to adopt the fast fashion culture. Impulse buying leads to overconsumption, resulting in intensive production, over extraction, and waste generation due to

disregard for utilitarian motives. India generates an estimated 7793 K Tonnes of waste annually, accounting for 8.5% of total global waste (Sethi, 2022). includes solid and liquid pre-production waste apart from post-production consumer waste. Also, the modern textile industry is highly energy and water-intensive and uses synthetic fibres, dyes, solvents, and bleach that are not easily biodegradable. We have earlier discussed pesticide usage for intensive farming. All the foregoing is detrimental to the environment.

**10.8. Desperate for Protection:** The handloom sector focuses on craftsmanship and artistic mastery. Article 15, 29, and Article 16 of the Indian constitution grant individuals and the community the freedom to practice, promote, and preserve their culture and morally obligate the state to make provisions as required towards advancement and enforcement of this goal and ensure equal opportunity for all. Modern powerlooms pose an unequal competition to the handloom sector due to the introduction of mechanised efficiency that impacts both cost and speed of production, enabling mass production, which significantly dents employment sustenance and generation, apart from income opportunities in the handloom sector.

## 11. Differentiators of the Indian Handloom Industry

In a global market system, what sets India's handloom industry apart? These differentiators are grouped under four critical aspects: self-reliance, resources, vibrancy, and market. They are represented in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Differentiators of the Handloom Sector



These variables lead to insignificant barriers to entry and integration with multiple disciplines, promoting a healthier inter-disciplinary and intra-disciplinary approach to market making. They also reflect the adaptability of handloom to local geographies, resource availabilities, and community-based networks, making it a prime example of spatially embedded industry models. These factors evolved over centuries to establish the indigenous textile industry and its commercial success.

## 12. Conclusion

The Indian handloom sector, second only to agriculture in rural employment, is deeply embedded in India's socio-economic and cultural fabric. However, industrialisation and the unchecked expansion of mills and powerlooms have led to severe livelihood disruptions, skill erosion, and decline in textile craftsmanship. Despite protective legislations, current policies favour mechanised production, overlooking the socio-economic consequences of displacement and unemployment. The sector also faces raw material shortages, especially yarn and natural dyes, further compounded by market failures, weak enforcement, and poor institutional support. These challenges have triggered a sharp drop in weavers and looms, driving distress migration and amplifying regional inequalities. Handloom, rooted in innovation, tradition, and sustainability, has been a pillar of local economies for over 9000 years, symbolising the spirit of self-reliance and Atmanirbhar Bharat. Its survival is vital not only for economic revival but also for preserving India's cultural identity. To revitalise this sector, a spatially inclusive development strategy is essential—one that recognises high-density weaving zones as priority areas and integrates handloom clusters into state and district-level planning frameworks. Targeted investment in infrastructure, raw material access, skill development, and heritage conservation should converge through spatial planning instruments, enabling the handloom sector to regain its rightful place in India's economic and cultural future. Bridging geographic and institutional disparities will be critical for ensuring equitable, place-based development, sustaining artisan livelihoods, and reversing the marginalisation of this vital rural economy.

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