Weaving Through Struggles an Assessment of the Socio-Economic Status of Traditional Weavers

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ABSTRACT

Traditional weaving, a cornerstone of India's cultural heritage, continues to provide livelihoods for thousands of families but faces mounting socio-economic challenges in the modern era. This study, Weaving Through Struggles: An Assessment of the Socio-Economic Status of Traditional Weavers, examines the living conditions, income patterns, and social realities of weaving communities in the face of industrial competition, changing consumer preferences, and restricted market access. Sample size 10000, Drawing on field visits, interviews, and secondary data, the research explores key issues including low and irregular wages, inadequate access to education, healthcare, and housing, as well as the intersectional impacts of caste, gender roles, and community structures on livelihood outcomes. The literature review reveals persistent economic vulnerability, social marginalization, and limited policy effectiveness, alongside emerging opportunities from sustainable fashion movements and NGO interventions. Addressing a research gap in localized, ground-level assessments, this study integrates qualitative narratives and quantitative analysis to capture the voices and lived experiences of weavers. The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted policy support, skill development, and inclusive market linkages to ensure both the socio-economic upliftment of weaving communities and the preservation of this valuable traditional art.

Keywords: Traditional weaving, Socio-economic status, Handloom sector, Weaving communities, gender roles

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional weaving has long been a part of India's rich cultural heritage. It reflects not only artistic expression but also the livelihood of many families across the country. However, in recent years, traditional weavers have faced increasing challenges in sustaining their craft and improving their standard of living. With the rise of industrial production, changing consumer preferences, and limited access to modern markets, many weavers struggle to earn a stable income. This study, titled *"Weaving Through Struggles: An Assessment of the Socio-Economic Status of Traditional Weavers"*, seeks to understand the living conditions, income levels, employment patterns, and social challenges faced by traditional weaving communities.

The research highlights the economic difficulties experienced by weavers, including low wages, irregular work opportunities, and lack of financial support. It also looks into their access to education, healthcare, housing, and other basic facilities. Social aspects such as caste, gender roles, and community support systems are also explored to provide a deeper understanding of their overall well-being. The study takes into account the voices of weavers themselves, aiming to present an accurate picture of their everyday struggles.

By conducting field visits, interviews, and data analysis, the study aims to draw attention to the need for policy support, skill development programs, and marketing assistance for traditional weavers. The objective is to not only document their current socio-economic condition but also suggest measures that can lead to sustainable livelihoods and the revival of this valuable traditional art. Ultimately, this study hopes to serve as a step toward creating awareness and encouraging

collective efforts to uplift the weaving communities who continue to preserve an important part of our cultural identity despite many hardships.

2. REVIEW LITERATURE

The traditional handloom sector in India has long been recognized as a vital part of the country's cultural and economic fabric. Historically, weaving has not only represented indigenous artistic expression but also served as a primary source of income for numerous rural and semi-urban households ([3]). However, over the past few decades, the sector has encountered substantial socio-economic challenges that threaten its survival.

2.1. Economic Conditions of Weavers
Multiple studies have highlighted the precarious economic status of handloom weavers. According to the Third Handloom Census of India ([9]), a majority of weaver households earn below the national average, with irregular employment patterns and minimal access to institutional finance. Scholars such as Narayan argue that the income of weavers is often not commensurate with their labor due to middlemen exploitation, lack of direct market access, and the undervaluation of handmade products in mass consumer markets ([7]). Additionally, the rise of mechanized textile industries has displaced many artisans, leading to underemployment and migration.

2.2. Social Dimensions: Caste, Gender, and Community
The social positioning of weavers—often from marginalized caste groups—has compounded their economic vulnerability. Weaving, in many regions, is still practiced by specific caste communities (e.g., Devangas, Padmasalis, Julahas), and their access to resources is frequently shaped by these social hierarchies ([1]). Gender dynamics within the weaving community also play a critical role. Women, though heavily involved in pre-loom and post-loom activities, are often unpaid or underpaid, and their labor remains largely invisible in official records ([2]).

2.3. Education, Health, and Quality of Life
Low levels of literacy and limited access to healthcare further constrain the weavers' ability to improve their livelihoods. A study by Kumar and Singh found that most weaver households have limited formal education, restricting their opportunities to diversify income or engage with government schemes ([4]). Healthcare access, too, is often inadequate, particularly in remote weaving clusters where infrastructure is lacking.

2.4. Challenges in Market Access and Policy Implementation
One of the major barriers for weavers is inadequate access to wider markets. Studies have noted that traditional artisans struggle to compete with cheap machine-made goods and face difficulties in branding and selling their products at fair prices ([8]). While the government has introduced several schemes such as the National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP), the benefits have often failed to reach grassroots weavers due to bureaucratic hurdles, lack of awareness, and poor implementation ([6]).

2.5. Efforts toward Revitalization
Despite these challenges, some studies have also documented positive interventions. NGOs, cooperatives, and social enterprises have emerged as important stakeholders in promoting fair trade practices, improving working conditions, and offering training in design and marketing ([5]). The growing interest in sustainable and ethical fashion has also created new opportunities for traditional weavers to re-enter contemporary markets.

The literature underscores that the challenges faced by traditional weavers are deeply interwoven with socio-economic, cultural, and structural factors. While past research has shed light on various dimensions economic instability, social marginalization, poor access to basic services there remains a need for more comprehensive, ground-level assessments that incorporate the voices and lived experiences of weavers themselves. This study aims to bridge that gap by offering a nuanced, field-based understanding of their conditions and by recommending sustainable pathways for revival and empowerment.

2.6 Research Gap
Although several studies have examined the challenges faced by India's traditional weavers, much of the existing literature focuses on broad, macro-level data, often overlooking region-specific and community-based experiences. The voices of weavers themselves their lived realities, aspirations, and coping mechanisms remain underrepresented. Moreover, there is a lack of integrated research that examines how socio-economic factors such as caste, gender, and access to community resources jointly affect livelihood outcomes.

The influence of modern market dynamics, such as digital platforms and changing consumer preferences, is also under-explored in academic discourse. Additionally, while government and NGO initiatives have been launched to support

weavers, systematic evaluations of their effectiveness at the grassroots level are limited. This study addresses these gaps by offering a localized, ground-level assessment that captures both qualitative and quantitative dimensions of the weavers' socio-economic conditions.

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework on Assessment of the socio-Economic Status of Traditional Weavers
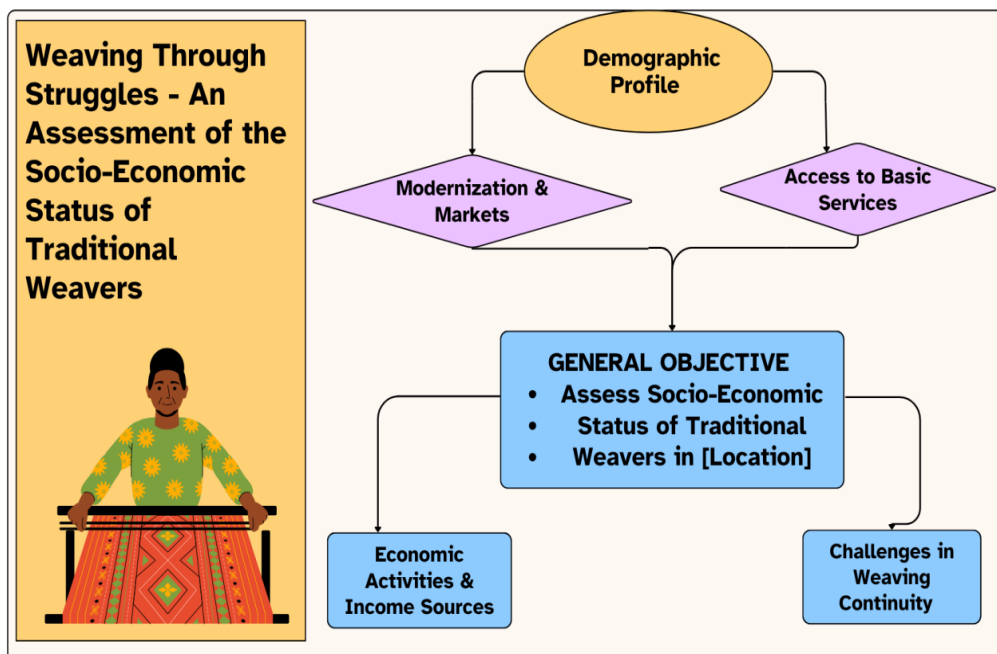
Framed by Author

This conceptual framework outlines the focus of the study *"Weaving Through Struggles An Assessment of the Socio-Economic Status of Traditional Weavers."* It highlights that the assessment begins with understanding the demographic profile of weavers, along with two key influencing factors modernization and markets, and access to basic services. These aspects feed into the general objective of evaluating the socio-economic status of traditional weavers in the selected location. The framework further breaks down the objective into two primary areas of analysis examining the economic activities and income sources of weavers, and identifying the challenges that threaten the continuity of traditional weaving. This structure provides a clear pathway from background variables to the study's targeted outcomes.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design
The present study adopts a **descriptive research design** to examine the socio-economic status of traditional weavers. This design is appropriate for gathering detailed, factual information about existing conditions and identifying patterns, challenges, and opportunities within weaving communities.

3.2 Research Approach
A **quantitative research approach** is used to measure and analyze socio-economic variables such as income levels, employment patterns, access to basic facilities, and market participation. Statistical techniques are applied to ensure objective analysis and reliable interpretation of the data.

3.3 Population and Sample Size
The study was conducted across five districts of Tamil Nadu viz., Salem, Bhavani, Kanchipuram, Thirubuvanam and Coimbatore, recognized for their Geographical Indication (GI)-tagged handloom products. A total of 1,000 weavers (200 from each district) were selected through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. The sample size was determined considering the estimated population of weavers in each area, ensuring representation across different demographics, skill levels, and weaving communities engaged in weaving handlooms for Government owned societies and others, thereby enabling a more comprehensive assessment of the sector.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

3.4.1 Primary Data

Primary data is collected using a structured questionnaire designed to gather quantitative information through questionnaire consists of closed-ended and multiple-choice questions to ensure ease of analysis and comparability.

3.4.2 Secondary Data

Secondary data is obtained from credible sources, including: Government Reports such as the *Third Handloom Census of India*, Ministry of Textiles publications, and National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP) evaluation reports. Statistical databases and handloom policy documents. Reports from non-governmental organizations and academic studies.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data will be analysed using descriptive statistics (mean, percentage, frequency distribution) and inferential statistics (Chi-square test, correlation analysis) to identify relationships between socio-economic variables. Tabular and graphical presentations will be used to display findings for better interpretation.

3.6 Limitations of the Study

- The study is limited to selected weaving clusters and may not fully capture variations across all regions of India.
- The survey period may not account for seasonal changes affecting weavers' income and employment.
- While cost-effective, cluster sampling may lead to higher sampling error compared to simple random sampling.
- The quantitative focus limits the depth of understanding of personal experiences and cultural nuances.

4. MAJOR FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic Profile

➢ Regarding settlement type, majority (54.1%) reside in rural areas, followed by urban (37.5%) and suburban (8.4%).
➢ With respect to age, approximately 78.5% of the respondents are above 45 years of age.
➢ On gender, 60.3% are male and 39.7% are female.
➢ In terms of district distribution, respondents are evenly spread across Highest concentration in Kanchipuram (26.4%), followed by Erode-Bhavani (25.7%), Thirubhuvanam (23.8%), Coimbatore (13.3%), and Salem (10.8%).
➢ Regarding years of weaving experience, 63.9% have more than 30 years of experience in the field.
➢ On educational attainment, 67.3% have primary or no formal education.
➢ With reference to average monthly income, 57.3% earn between ₹6001–₹15000, while 41.4% earn below ₹6000.
➢ Concerning additional income sources, only 3.2% reported having any.
➢ Regarding weaving hours per day, 60.3% spend 6–9 hours weaving, while 25.7% spend more than 9 hours.
➢ On marital status, a vast majority (98.4%) are married.
➢ Regarding family size, 62.6% live in families with 3 to 4 members.
➢ In terms of handloom products produced, each of the five major product types (e.g., Thirubhuvanam silk sarees, Jamakkalam, etc.) accounts for 20% of production.
➢ On weaving generations, 54.6% belong to families with more than 3 generations engaged in weaving.
➢ Regarding working status, 84.6% are associated with cooperative societies.

4.2 Occupational and Socio-Economic Characteristics

➢ On weaving experience, 63.9% of respondents have more than 30 years of experience, indicating deep-rooted expertise.
➢ Regarding weaving generations, 54.6% belong to families with more than three generations in the profession, reflecting a strong heritage of traditional knowledge transfer.
➢ On training, 94.4% have been trained by family members, suggesting informal, experience-based skill acquisition.
➢ With respect to monthly income, 57.3% earn between ₹6001–₹15000, while 41.4% earn below ₹6000, implying economic vulnerability.
➢ Demographic Profile, only 3.2% reported having any, which confirms high dependency on weaving as the sole livelihood.
➢ Regarding social hierarchy, 97.6% reported no issues related to caste or social stratification in their weaving community, indicating inclusivity in occupational practice.

4.3 Settlement & Geographic Distribution

➢ Settlement type majority (54.1%) reside in rural areas, followed by urban (37.5%) and suburban areas (8.4%).
➢ District-wise distribution highest concentration in Kanchipuram (26.4%), followed by Erode-Bhavani (25.7%), Thirubhuvanam (23.8%), Coimbatore (13.3%), and Salem (10.8%).

4.4 Weaving Background & Skills

➤ Weaving Experience 63.9% have over 30 years of experience, 26.7% have 11–30 years, and 9.4% have less than 10 years.

➤ Weaving Generation (Family Continuity): 54.6% from families with more than 3 generations in weaving, 22.4% with 2 generations, 15.7% with 1 generation, and 7.3% are first-generation weavers.

➤ Training Source 94.4% were trained within the family; only 5.6% received external training.

➤ Social Hierarchy 97.6% reported no issues of caste or class discrimination in weaving.

➤ Monthly Income 57.3% earn ₹6001–₹15000, 41.4% earn below ₹6000, and 1.3% earn above ₹15000.

➤ Additional Income Source Only 3.2% have additional sources of income; 96.8% depend solely on weaving.

➤ Type of Loom Used Majority (64.7%) use pit looms, 26.5% use frame looms, and 8.8% use Jacquard looms.

➤ Production Capacity 41.2% produce 3–4 sarees per month, 32.4% produce 1–2 sarees, and 26.4% produce more than 4 sarees.

➤ Market Linkage 55.9% sell through cooperative societies, 29.4% through middlemen, and 14.7% directly to customers.

➤ Raw Material Source 70.6% source raw materials from cooperative societies, 20.6% from private suppliers, and 8.8% from both sources.

Table 4.1 Independent Samples t-Test Results for Gender and Crisis-Causing Elements among Handloom Weavers

Category	t-Statistic	df	p-Value
Socio-Economic factors	0.4463	899.7394	0.6555
Elements causing crisis for handloom weavers (1)	-0.4997	858.1520	0.6174
Elements causing crisis for handloom weavers (2)	0.9803	828.6795	0.3272

The independent samples t-test results presented in Table 1.1 indicate that there are no statistically significant differences between male and female handloom weavers in their perceptions of crisis-causing elements. For socio-economic factors (t = 0.4463, p = 0.6555), the p-value is greater than 0.05, suggesting that both male and female respondents share similar views on the role of socio-economic factors in causing crises. Similarly, for the first set of crisis-causing elements (t = -0.4997, p = 0.6174), the result is non-significant, showing no meaningful gender difference in perception. The second set of crisis-causing elements also produced a non-significant result (t = 0.9803, p = 0.3272). Overall, the findings suggest that gender does not play a significant role in shaping the perceptions of handloom weavers regarding socio-economic conditions or the factors that contribute to crises in the sector, as both male and female weavers perceive these challenges in a largely similar manner.

Table -4.2 ANOVA Results for products type and Elements Causing Crisis Among Handloom Weavers

Category	Sum of Squares	df	F	Sig.
Socio-Economic Factors	2000.164	4	16.671	.000
	29843.995	995		
Total	31844.159	999		
Elements Causing Crisis (1)	295.190	4	6.044	.000
	12149.910	995		
Total	12445.100	999		
Elements Causing Crisis (2)	6431.240	4	36.304	.000
	44065.535	995		
Total	50496.775	999		

The above table 1.2 shows the ANOVA analysis indicates that there are statistically significant differences across product types in all three categories: socio-economic factors, elements causing crisis for handloom weavers (1), and elements causing crisis for handloom weavers (2), with all *p*-values less than .05. For socio-economic factors, the results show a significant difference (*F* = 16.671, *p* = .000), where weavers associated with Kancheepuram Silk Sarees (Mean = 143.71) and Coimbatore Kovai Kora Silk (Mean = 143.19) reported higher mean scores, reflecting better socio-economic conditions compared to those from Salem silk dhotis and Jamakkalam (both with Mean = 140.36). In the category of Elements Causing Crisis for Handloom Weavers **(1)**, the difference is also significant (*F* = 6.044, *p* = .000), with the highest concern reported by Coimbatore Kovai Kora Silk (Mean = 115.11), followed by Kancheepuram Silk Sarees (Mean = 114.05). This suggests a variation in perceived crisis intensity across product types. Finally, for Elements Causing Crisis (2)**,** the most significant disparity is found (*F* = 36.304, *p* = .000), where Coimbatore Kovai Kora Silk again stands out with the highest mean score (Mean = 64.55), indicating that weavers in this group perceive more critical challenges such as market issues, competition, or lack of institutional support. In contrast, lower means were observed for Jamakkalam and Salem silk dhotis (both Mean = 57.76), and Kancheepuram Silk Sarees (Mean = 58.77), suggesting relatively fewer perceived crises among these groups.

Table: 4.3 One-Way ANOVA Results Based on Type of Weaver Across Socio-Economic Factors and Elements Causing Crisis

Category	Group	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	F	p-value
Socio-Economic Factors	Independent weaver	17	136.29	10.32	**52.55**	**.000**
	Working under master weaver	137	137.90	7.64		
	Cooperative society	846	142.52	4.76		
Elements Causing Crisis (1)	Independent weaver	17	111.12	4.62	**29.34**	**.000**
	Working under master weaver	137	112.28	4.15		
	Cooperative society	846	114.42	3.28		
Elements Causing Crisis (2)	Independent weaver	17	56.41	6.15	**15.56**	**.000**
	Working under master weaver	137	56.99	6.90		
	Cooperative society	846	60.34	7.04		

The above table 1.3 shows one-way ANOVA results reveal significant differences across the three types of weavers independent weavers, those working under master weavers, and cooperative society members in all three categories ($p < .001$). In the Socio-Economic Factors category, cooperative society members reported the highest mean score (M = 142.52), indicating better socio-economic conditions, followed by those working under master weavers (M = 137.90) and independent weavers (M = 136.29). The difference was statistically significant (F = 52.55, p = .000). For Elements Causing Crisis (1) (likely structural or economic challenges), cooperative society members again reported the highest concerns (M = 114.42), followed by master weaver workers (M = 112.28) and independent weavers (M = 111.12), with the differences being statistically significant (F = 29.34, p = .000). In Elements Causing Crisis (2) (possibly market-related or operational issues), cooperative members perceived the highest level of crisis (M = 60.34), followed by master weaver workers (M = 56.99) and independent weavers (M = 56.41). The variation was also statistically significant (F = 15.56, p = .000). These results suggest that the type of employment or organizational affiliation significantly influences how handloom weavers perceive both their socio-economic status and the challenges they face.

Table: 4.4 Pearson Correlation between Socio-Economic Factors and Crisis Elements for Handloom Weavers

Variables	Socio-Economic Factors	Elements Causing Crisis (1)	Elements Causing Crisis (2)
Socio-Economic Factors	1	.610**	.230**
Elements Causing Crisis (1)	.610**	1	.118**
Elements Causing Crisis (2)	.230**	.118**	1
N	1000	1000	1000
Significance (2-tailed)	—	.000	.000

Above table 1.4 shows the Pearson correlation analysis reveals the following significant relationships (all at p < 0.01):

• There is a strong positive correlation between Socio-Economic Factors and Elements Causing Crisis (1) (r = .610, p = .000). This suggests that changes in socio-economic conditions are closely associated with perceptions of the crisis among handloom weavers.

• A moderate positive correlation exists between Socio-Economic Factors and Elements Causing Crisis (2) (r = .230, p = .000), indicating a weaker but still significant relationship.

• The correlation between the two crisis elements themselves is positive and weak (r = .118, p = .000), suggesting a slight association between them.

These results imply that as socio-economic conditions vary, perceptions of crisis change, particularly for the first crisis factor. This supports the importance of socio-economic interventions in addressing weavers' challenges.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Strengthen cooperative societies** to improve socio-economic conditions and provide better financial support to weavers.
2. **Implement formal skill development programs** to complement traditional family-based training and enhance weaving techniques.
3. **Expand market access** by promoting direct sales through e-commerce and fairs, reducing dependency on middlemen.
4. **Encourage income diversification** through supplementary activities to reduce economic vulnerability.
5. **Provide targeted financial assistance** for low-income weavers, including subsidies for raw materials and income support schemes.
6. **Introduce age-specific welfare programs**, including pensions and healthcare support for older weavers.

7. **Maintain gender-inclusive policies** as there are no significant gender differences in perceptions and needs.
8. **Support independent and master-weaver groups** with cooperative-like benefits to improve their socio-economic status.
9. **Promote technological upgrades** such as modern looms and better working infrastructure for increased productivity.
10. **Tailor policies and interventions by product type and weaving cluster**, focusing on high-crisis areas like Coimbatore.
11. **Establish continuous data monitoring** for evidence-based policy-making and localized support.

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