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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A STUDY ON CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY TRADITIONAL HANDLOOM WEAVERS IN MEGHALAYA

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Abstract

Handloom weaving is a significant industry in Meghalaya, a major sector that plays a crucial role in rural employment and income generation. It is also integral to the West Garo Hills district. Nevertheless, the industry faces substantial challenges from more affordable, machine-made fabrics that threaten traditional weavers' competitiveness. Additionally, weavers are confronted with health risks arising from extended working hours, inadequate infrastructure, and fluctuating incomes, thereby endangering their livelihoods. In the marketplace, dependence on middlemen and intense competition impede growth and profitability. Collectively, these production and marketing obstacles exert considerable pressure on the handloom weavers. This study emphasizes the primary difficulties encountered by handloom weavers and underlines the pressing necessity for policies that enhance market access, provide financial and health support, ensure equitable trade practices and preserve the cultural and economic significance of this traditional handloom weavers through targeted measures.

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Introduction:-

Handloom weaving represents one of Meghalaya's most significant craft-based industry. This traditional practice involves the manual weaving of textiles on hand-operated looms, devoid of electricity or mechanization. It is a labour-intensive craft wherein skilled artisans meticulously interlace warp and weft threads to produce fabric. With a history extending over centuries, handloom weaving maintains a crucial role in the cultural and economic fabric of the economy. Handloom products, frequently crafted from natural fibres such as cotton, silk, wool and linen are highly valued for their vibrant colours, intricate patterns and distinctive designs. The process necessitates exceptional precision, skill and creativity, with artisans dedicating hours or occasionally days or weeks to complete a single piece, particularly when intricate patterns are involved. In Meghalaya, the handloom sector stands as the largest unorganised economic activity following agriculture and functions as a vital source of livelihood within rural and semi-urban communities.

In Meghalaya, handloom is important because it provides employment and helps people earn a livelihood. It also provides economic self-sufficiency not only to people directly engaged in weaving but also supports the growth and

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development of society at large. As a female-dominated sector, handloom employs a large percentage of the female workforce, especially in rural areas. In Meghalaya, handloom also reflects the culture and identity of a community or ethnic group. The different handloom products clearly show the socio-religious and cultural aspects of a community or ethnic group. Every handloom cloth produced in a region carries with it the tradition of its ancestors and the cultural aspects of its region. It is one of the sectors that preserves a region's traditions.

Review of Literature:-

Sankar et al.(2021) found that handloom weavers face several challenges, including competition from power looms, evolving consumer preferences, limited income opportunities and the need for eco-friendly practices to preserve traditional craftsmanship. K., Nikhilraj.& Joby, Thomas. (2024) examined that handloom weavers in Northern Kerala faced several significant challenges including difficulties in directly communicating with customers, limited access to essential information, a waning interest in the craft among younger generations and issues related to the availability of handcrafted items. Together, these factors threaten the viability of the region's traditional handloom sector. Anupama et al. (2024) found that women handloom weavers face several critical challenges, including extended working hours, inadequate incentives, low pay, and financial difficulties,underscoring the urgent need for focused support and intervention.

Rajyalakshmi et al. (2024) examined the challenges faced by handloom entrepreneurs in Telangana emphasising resource scarcity, marketing obstacles and limited technological advancement particularly after COVID-19. Through secondary data and qualitative analysis, the study highlights critical issues such as inadequate quality control, insufficient marketing support and restricted access to credit. The conclusion advocates policy reforms to sustain the sector and urges consumers to support handloom products to preserve cultural heritage. Poongodi et al. (2022) studied the challenges faced by women handloom weavers in Pollachi Taluk,emphasising their important role in the local economy. Data from seventy-four weavers indicate that most are between thirty one and forty years old, live in joint families and have over ten years of weaving experience. Major issues include low wages, health concerns, income fluctuations during off-seasons and difficulties in sourcing raw materials and marketing their products. The study also shows strong links between these issues and factors such as age, marital status and income level. It underlines the need for support and targeted interventions to enhance their livelihoods.

Objective of the Study:-

To study the production and marketing problems of Handloom weavers in West Garo Hills district. A preliminary study was conducted using a questionnaire and interview schedule, involving 30 respondents (handloom weavers) in West Garo Hills District,Meghalaya. Data were collected using simple Random Sampling Technique. Henry Garrett's Ranking Technique was used to rank the problems faced by handloom weavers. The order of merit given by the respondents were converted into ranks by using the formula.

As per this method, respondents were asked to assign ranks for all factors and the outcomes of such ranking were converted into score values with the help of the following formula:

$$\text{Per cent position} = 100 \times (R_{ij} - 0.5) / N_j (1)$$

Where,

R_{ij} = Rank given for the i th variable by the j^{th} respondent

N_j = Number of variables ranked by the j^{th} respondent

Using Garrett's table, the estimated per cent position was converted into scores by referring to the table given by Garrett and Woodworth (1969). Then, for each factor, the individual scores were summed, and the total and mean scores were calculated. The factor with the highest mean value was considered the most important factor (Dhanavandan, 2016).

Table 1: Problems faced by the handloom weavers in West Garo Hills District N=30

Problems	Garett Score	Mean	Rank
High input cost	1322	44.07	III
Health Issues	1282	42.73	V
Lack of technology	1308	43.6	IV

Problem of transportation	1492	49.7	II
Financial Challenge	2321	77.37	I
Consumer Purchase	1222	40.73	VI
Lack of government support	1310	26.2	VII

Source: Primary Survey

Table 1 presents seven major challenges faced by handloom weavers, ranked from I to VII based on their apparent severity. Financial challenges rank first, mainly due to irregular income, limited working capital and economic insecurity, making them the most critical concern for weavers. Transportation problems rank second because high transportation costs and inadequate connectivity increase the cost of procuring raw materials and accessing markets. High input costs rank third as rising prices of yarn, dyes and other materials reduce profit margins and affect production sustainability.

Technological deficiencies rank fourth reflecting limited access to modern equipment, improved techniques and technological training which restrict productivity and competitiveness. Health issues are ranked fifth, largely due to the physical strain, prolonged sitting, repetitive movements and poor working conditions associated with weaving. Changes in consumer purchasing patterns rank sixth, reflecting the impact of shifting preferences and competition from machine-made products on demand for handloom goods. Finally, lack of government support ranks seventh, suggesting that respondents view inadequate institutional support as a less immediate concern than the direct economic and operational challenges they face.

Table: 2 Marketing Problems Faced by handloom weavers in West Garo Hills District N=30

Problems	Garett Score	Mean	Rank
Price Fluctuation	2132	71.07	I
Storage Facility	1536	51.2	IV
Middleman	1875	62.5	II
Quality issues	1444	48.13	V
Distance location of market	1645	54.83	III

Source: Primary Survey

Table 3 presents five major marketing problems faced by handloom weavers, ranked from I to V by perceived severity. Price fluctuation ranks first, as unstable prices make income unpredictable and directly affect weavers' profitability. Influence of middlemen ranks second because intermediaries often control market access and bargaining, reducing the share of the final price weavers receive. Distance from markets ranks third, as limited access to nearby markets increases transportation costs and restricts direct interaction with customers. Inadequate storage facilities rank fourth, reflecting a lack of suitable space to safely store raw materials and finished products, which may lead to damage and losses. Quality issues rank fifth, indicating that difficulties in maintaining consistent quality may affect product acceptance and competitiveness, although they are perceived as less severe than the other marketing constraints.

Conclusion:-

Traditional handloom weaving is a vital craft-based industry and an integral part of Meghalaya's cottage industry. In the Garo Hills, the sector holds deep cultural and economic importance; however, weavers face ongoing challenges, including competition from machine-made fabrics, low and fluctuating incomes, rising input costs, and health issues. Marketing challenges such as price volatility, reliance on middlemen, and limited market access further reduce artisans' earnings. These obstacles threaten the sustainability of traditional weaving and the livelihoods it supports. To address this, it is crucial to strengthen marketing channels, ensure fair and stable pricing, improve access to financial and health services, and promote equitable market practices—steps necessary to preserve and sustain the region's handloom sector.

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