

Weavers - Think Beyond A Package

Bharat Dogra

The recent Rs. 6000 crore package for weavers announced by the government is welcome but its role is a limited one to provide short-term relief. So this initiative should be seen only as a beginning for more widely based efforts to strengthen sustainable livelihoods of weavers.

In the post-independence period, the influence of Gandhian thought was seen in several types of help being announced for handlooms from time to time. However, due to a number of reasons this help did not really reach the weavers for whom it was meant. The government tried to organize most of the weavers into cooperatives and it was through these co-ops that help was to be canalized to the weavers. However, contrary to government claims, cooperatives failed to cover most of the weavers. The corruption of existing co-ops made matters worse.

At another level the government tried to reserve certain types of cloth exclusively for handlooms, but this reservation was widely flouted. The government also sought to ensure that a certain proportion of yarn produced by mills was reserved for handlooms, but again a big share of this yarn actually found its way to the powerlooms. No matter what the government did the expected benefits generally failed to reach the weavers.

At a time when handloom weavers were facing a severe shortage of cotton yarn, exports of raw cotton as well as cotton yarn were allowed to increase thereby accentuating the problems of weavers. This incidentally was the period when several starvation deaths among handloom weavers were reported.

Yet it is important to emphasize that the situation is not a hopeless one. In an expanding market of cloth production, higher production by the mechanised sector can co-exist with higher production by khadi and handlooms if the potential of the later is allowed to be properly realised. What is important to emphasise is that handloom and khadi have some inherent strengths and some types of cloth is best woven only on handlooms.

Many people who have been using khadi cloth for years say emphatically it is very healthy for skin, providing comfort in summer as well as in winter. With growing health consciousness, this can help to increase the demand for khadi in India as well as abroad. Also the undisputed fact that handloom and even more so khadi generates the most employment per metre of cloth can also be used to promote this cloth.