



## **MIRPUR BENARASI PALLI OF BANGLADESH: LIVING AND LIVELIHOOD OF WEAVERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Bangladesh has a rich and ancient tradition of fabric-based cottage industry. Benarasi Palli and its famous Benarasi Saree is one of the most ancient traditions of Bangladesh. This industry has been bringing name and fame for our country for a very long time. This tradition has mainly come from Benaras in India. The weavers of Mirpur Benarasi Palli migrated from Benaras, India. There are also some Bangladeshi weavers and most of the traders are Bangladeshi. Benarasi is mainly associated for bridal costume. Presently this industry does not get proper attention but it has a great demand in local and international market. Our neighboring country export Benarasi products and we have the potential to export it too. Though the business of Benarasi Saree is very profitable, life-style of the weavers does not represent it. Besides, a clear discrimination in living condition of traders and weavers are visible there. There also lies discrimination in distribution of profit between traders and weavers. So it is very important to know about the present condition of Benarasi Palli and condition of the weavers who work hard to make the beautiful Benarasi Sarees.*

**Keywords:** Weavers, Living, Livelihood, Problems, Benarasi Palli, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

### **Contribution/ Originality**

This study is one of very few studies, which have investigated the living and livelihood condition of the weavers of Mirpur Benarasi Palli. The paper's primary contribution is finding that there lies a discrimination between the weavers and the traders and the weavers are deprived from what they actually deserve.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mirpur Benarasi Palli is situated at section 10 to 11 of Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh. According to traders' association there are about 110 shops, 11,000 weavers, designer and other workers. People migrated from Indian city of Benaras developed the market. Most of the weavers are Bihari Banarasi weavers, who migrated to the then newly form East Pakistan during the 1947 Partition of British India. Banarasi weavers of Bangladesh have lived mostly in the Mirpur area of the capital since 1947. By the 1930s Dhaka had its own Banarasi Silk Industry center in Becharam Dewry in old Dhaka. Because of the partition of the subcontinent, a large number of Muslim weavers migrated from India to parts of Pakistan with their looms and high hopes to Dhaka but their second and third generation descendants are today fighting hard against impediments. Like some members of the Bihari Muslim community, many came from the present day Indian provinces of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan to East Pakistan. Nevertheless, the craftsmanship and artistic quality of the work of Bihari weavers gave them new economic identity while socio-economic factors made many take to Banarasi silk weaving and other weaving jobs. According to the Bangladesh Handloom Board, the migrant community set up the Banarasi industry in Mirpur of Dhaka in 1950. Consequently, the weavers started to weave sarees like Jamdani, Mala and Qatan as well as other products for use by fashion conscious women or as bridal choice.

Government allocated a place for relocation for Mirpur Benarasi Palli at Vashantek, Mirpur 14, Dhaka, Bangladesh. But local people grab the allocated plots illegally. So government should take proper steps to relocate Mirpur Benarasi Palli at allocated plots and improve the condition of the weavers.

This study focuses on the living condition and existing problems of the weavers. For this, mainly primary data has been collected through survey by the authors. Some secondary data has also been used for better understanding.

## 2. STUDY AREA PROFILE

Mirpur Benarasi Palli is spread over section 10 to 11 of Mirpur, Dhaka. Because of good communication system it is easy to go there from each and every corner of Dhaka city. A Weavers' community migrated from the Indian state Bihar and Benaras lives there, which is mainly called as Bihari camp. Business area of Banarasi products is located near the camp. Some of the Bangladeshi weavers and traders also live near there.

## 3. OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

**Benarasi Palli:** Banarasi Palli is the area where Banarasi saree is produced and sold. In this study section 10, 11 and 12 of Mirpur, Dhaka is defined as Banarasi Palli where workers are engaged in producing and marketing of Banarasi sarees [1].

**Benarasi Saree:** Benarasi Saree is a fabric made out of silk and zari (gold threads), which is worn by women in subcontinent, especially women in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Affluent society mainly use Benarasi saree during special occasion [1].

**Benarasi Workers:** There are different types of workers engaged in different stage of Benarasi production such as designer, weaver, thread processor and dyer, loom maker, mechanic etc. [1].

**Karchupi:** Karchupi is a special kind of intricate gold thread work, which is used to make dress materials more attractive. It is the process of embedding beads, zari and other decorative materials by means of a special needle as sharp as fish hook [1].

#### 4. EXISTING LIVING CONDITION OF THE WEAVERS OF BENARASI PALLI

##### 4.1. Life-Style of the Weavers

The weavers have to pass their days in lack of civic facilities like housing, water, sanitation, education, health care as these facilities are not increasing proportionately with the increasing population.

##### 4.1.1. Housing

Accommodation problem is one of the basic problems in the Palli. The weavers live in tin shaded houses having one or two rooms. These houses are too small to accommodate the weavers as most of the weavers live in a joint family. They face lack of privacy because of haphazard living organization. Some of them live with their domestic pet such as goat. Kitchens and toilets are not attached to the houses. They have to share it with others. So with the increasing number of weavers, a congested atmosphere has been created in the Palli. Some of the families have loom at their house and most of the families have 'Karchupi' frames at their house. Their small house cannot accommodate all their necessary things. Housing condition of the weavers is shown in figure 1 and 2.

##### 4.1.2. Utility Services

The weavers also face problem in sanitation and water supply in the Palli. There is a provision for public water facilities (figure 3). But there is no proper system to collect this water. Every family does not have pipeline to get the water. Those who can afford, have water taps in their house.

Bathrooms are separate from toilets. But the condition of the toilets is very poor, unhygienic and unhealthy.

The weavers do not have direct gas line at their house. Most of them use fire woods and 'Kharir Chula' for cooking (figure 4). Those who are in better condition use gas cylinder.

They do not have electricity line at their house. They use Kerosene lamp for their daily life.

#### **4.1.3. Children's Education and Recreation**

Most of the children of the community are engaged to support their family. Due to poverty, they are compelled to start their work at an early age. But generally, they are not willing to continue their parent's business. For the outside job markets, they need education and they are also very eager about that. There is a small room at the Palli, which is used for children's education (figure 5).

Benarasi Community does not discriminate among boys and girls regarding education. The boys and girls study together. They have the passion for study but they do not get proper facilities like books, pencils, proper guidance, teachers, play fields etc.

Most of the families pass their leisure time by gossiping with family members and friends. There is a common TV where they generally watch television together (figure 6). Some of the families have radio at their house for entertainment. Gossiping is the main source of entertainment for women. Sometimes, the whole community watch movie together. For the children, there is no playground. They have to play within the congested Palli.

#### **4.2. Surroundings and Accessibilities**

The Benarasi Palli spreads over Mirpur 10 to 11, Mirpur, Dhaka. The Palli is divided into two parts. One is the Bihari camp of the migrated weavers and houses of the Bangladeshi weavers and traders. The other part is the market place where the traders run their business.

##### **4.2.1. Communication**

The communication system in Palli has both the positive and negative sides.

As the Palli is located near the Mirpur 10 gol chattar, it is easy to reach there from anywhere in Dhaka. The communication system between Mirpur and other places of Dhaka is quite good. At present the construction of flyovers makes it easier for people to visit Banrasi Palli from the northern part of Dhaka within a short time.

But the communication system within the Palli is not much satisfactory. The Palli is somehow scattered. So it is tough to find out all the workers of the Palli altogether. The access roads are narrow. Sometimes there are water clogs in the roads after rain (figure 7). There are open dustbins beside the road and it creates severe odor pollution (figure 8).

##### **4.2.2. Location of Shops**

The shops of the market place are located near the community and adjacent to the roads (figure 9). According to the trader association, there are about 110 shops in the Benarasi Palli. About 11,000 weavers work for the production of Benarasi. There are different types of shops with different types of sarees. Collection of the sarees is not same for all the shops. The quality

and price of the saree vary from shop to shop. The annual profit of this business is near BDT 40 to 50 crore.

Though maximum weavers are migrants from the Benaras of India, the traders are mainly Bangladeshi. There are also Bangladeshi weavers who learned from the Bihari.

There are some traders who use their resident buildings for both living and business purposes. Traders use the ground floor of their house as their shops.

## **5. EXISTING LIVELIHOOD CONDITION OF THE WEAVERS OF BENARASI PALLI**

### **5.1. Working Procedure**

In the world of fashion 'Banarasi Saree' has been a subject of great inspiration and appreciation for worldwide costume connoisseurs. Today there are mainly four varieties of Banarasi saree available. Those are Pure Silk (Katan); Shattir, Organza that is fine kora with zari and silk works and finally the Georgette.

The working Procedure of Banarasi saree is given below:

- i. Step 1: preparation of threads
- ii. Step 2: Rolling threads with "charka" and "tana"
- iii. Step 3: Weaving the saree with "taat"
- iv. Step 4: Making saree more beautiful with "karchupi"
- v. Step 5: Preparation of selling saree in market

The working procedure is also illustrated in figure 10-15.

### **5.2. Working Environment**

Working environment of the weavers is not very hospitable. The working place is very congested (figure 16). There are many looms in one room. So it is tough for the weavers to work properly (figure 17). There is scarcity of air and light. So some weavers face eyesight problem. Besides, the weavers suffer from various diseases because of hard work. They are deprived from the facilities what they deserve. There is lack of sufficient space to set their loom and "karchupi" frame. So they sometimes set it in their living room, which makes their living condition more pathetic (figure 18). There are several sewing machines in some rooms and the workers also live there.

On the other hand we see different scene in working condition of traders. Well established traders have their own place to set several looms. They provide their workers sufficient facilities. The shops of the weavers are full of all facilities. Some of the shops are provided with air condition facility too.

### 5.3. Social Environment

A clear discrimination in social status and living condition between the weavers and the traders is visible in Benarasi Palli. Though the weavers play the main role, their condition is miserable. On the other hand the life-style of the traders reflects the profitable condition of the business. The discrimination can be clearly seen in figure 19 and 20.

The weavers live in congested place. They have no suitable place to perform their work perfectly. They pass their day to day life by working hard. But they do not get proper facilities to live a healthy life. On the other side traders have their own house and they get all the civic facilities.

There is also a clear discrimination in distribution of wage. Weavers do not get proper wage. Traders keep the lion's share of the profit and give a little percentage to the weavers. Weavers have the right to sell sarees but for that, they have to get permission from the traders. Usually traders do not permit this as there is chance to lose the lion's share of profit.

During festival the demand of sarees increases. Traders make more profit. But weavers are still ill paid. There should be well distribution of profit among the weavers and the traders.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

### 6.1. Major Findings

- The working place of the workers is narrow and damp.
- The air, lighting and toilet facilities are not sufficient there.
- The workers suffer from various types of occupational health hazards, like pain in different parts of the body, eye problem etc.
- Each weaver has at least one helper and most of them are male child.
- The people involved in Benarasi do not have enough idea about the changing taste of the customers.
- The relation between workers and entrepreneurs is good.
- There is lack of communication among the workers of different sectors and within the same sectors (such as weavers, designers, thread processors) etc.

### 6.2. Recommendation

- As low wage has previously been identified as the single biggest problem, the increase in the wage is considered to be the most important task ahead.
- Protectionism was identified as a very important factor. So it is necessary to stop the smuggling of Benarasi products from India to save the local industry.
- Government should negotiate with the Indian Government to remove tariff barriers imposed upon Bangladeshi Products to promote easy access of this product to Indian market.

- Government monitoring of the fare price of the raw materials is also another important factor.
- The price of Benarasi should be fixed by the cooperative society.
- Continuous review on design to meet the varied test of the customers is required for increasing demand for the product.
- Better training is a necessary step to improve the design.
- It is also important to improve the relation between the owners and the workers in the industry.

### 6.3. Relocation

The lack of settlements of Benarasi producers has been identified as the most persistent problem for the community. The respondents opined that if the craftsmen were placed in a single area, it would be easier for the government and the craftsmen to deliver the services. Respondents want a territory of their own which will help getting loan. Government allocated land for the Benarasi Palli at Vashantek, Mirpur 14 (figure 21). But corruption is prevalent in the allocation procedure as rich people with no background of Benarasi work are getting the allocation using bribe. The chairperson of Bangladesh Bihari Rehabilitation Center said that without any permanent rehabilitation program by the government they are not going to move out of this camp.

### 6.4. Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to explore Benarasi Palli and find out the existing problems of the Benarasi weavers regarding housing pattern and living condition and distribution of wages. After the study it is found that the Benarasi weavers are living a very miserable, unhygienic and substandard life. It is a major duty of all to try to solve the various problems regarding the poor condition to ensure better life for the Benarasi weavers.

In this study some recommendations have been made to give a direction to solve these problems. If these suggestions are followed then it might be possible to reach a better solution.

Finally, though the study is of a very small scale but the topic is very significant. So the problem should be taken very seriously. The government, policy makers, planners and general people should join hands together for the betterment of the Benarasi weavers.

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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## ILLUSTRATIONS



**Figure-1.** Poor housing condition

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-2.** Community Bathroom

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-3.** Water Pipeline

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-4.** Women cook on firewood

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-5.** Light through learning

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-6.** Community Television

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-7.** Water Logging

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-8.** Dustbins create odor pollution

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-9.** Shops adjacent to road

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-10.** Threads transform into Saree

Source: Field Survey, 2011



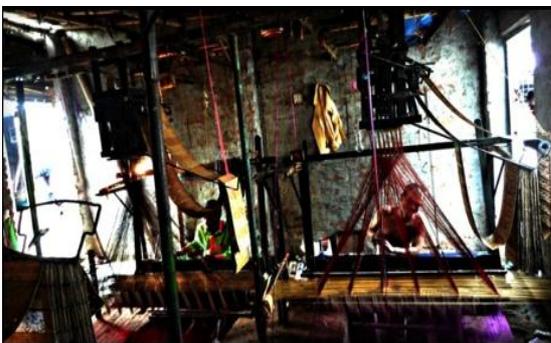
**Figure-11.** Busy with CHARKA (Cycle Wheel)

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-12.** TANA (Steel Plate): Tightening THREADS

Source: Field Survey, 2011



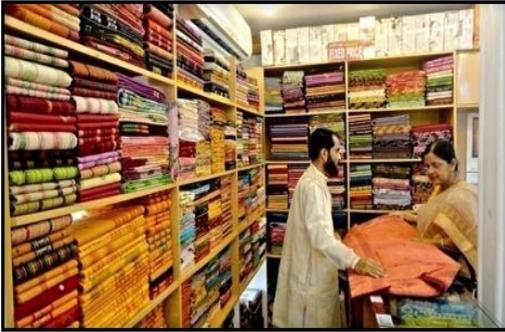
**Figure-13.** Life depends on TAAT

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-14.** Karchupi: Makes saree more beautiful

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-15.** Selling in the market

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-16.** Several looms in one room

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-17.** Congested working place

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-18.** Working in living rooms

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-19.** Mahajans' living Place at the Palli

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-20.** Weavers' living Place at the Palli

Source: Field Survey, 2011



**Figure-21.** The allocated place for relocation of the weavers at Vashantek, Mirpur 14

Source: Field Survey, 2011

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