



Impact of COVID-19 on the Health and Working Condition of Handloom Weavers in Madhya Pradesh: A Secondary Data Study

Dimple Patidar, Dr. Sudheesh B.

Rabindranath Tagore University Bhopal

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ABSTRACT

This research paper highlights the plight and the socio-economic changes in the lives of traditional handloom weavers from Chanderi and Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh, during the COVID-19 pandemic. By using a comparative secondary framework, this study synthesizes evidence from major regional handloom clusters to analyze ground-level economic vulnerabilities. Data shows that handloom workers experienced severe livelihood disruptions during the lockdown phase. Approximately 72% of the weaving workforce became fully unemployed or was left without continuous daily work. This sudden collapse of manufacturing activities had a distressing impact on their mental health and household food security, leading to a state where 78% of the weavers suffered from intense stress and anxiety, while 65% of the artisan families faced acute dietary and resource shortages. During the peak lockdown period, the raw material supply chain was completely broken, resulting in the total halting of looms that traditionally operated for 8 to 10 hours a day. Furthermore, logistical hurdles caused a severe crisis where more than 85% of running textile orders were abruptly canceled. As a direct consequence, 90% of weavers' average monthly earnings dropped significantly to less than ₹5,000. Institutional market closures and exhibition cancellations (92%), combined with a sharp rise in cotton and silk yarn prices (84%), emerged as the biggest structural barriers to their craft. Left with a severe liquidity crunch, 76% of the traditional artisans were forced to secure urgent credit from unorganized local lenders at high interest rates. This synthesis study indicates that providing an immediate institutional government safety net, establishing localized raw material banks, and connecting these traditional weaving communities to online e-commerce platforms through digital onboarding are crucial intervention steps for their long-term preservation.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Handloom Weavers, Chanderi and Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh, Livelihood Crisis, Socio-Economic Impact, Secondary Data.

Introduction:

Madhya Pradesh's Handloom Heritage:

Handloom weaving in India is a centuries-old tradition. It not only preserves our cultural heritage but also provides employment to lakhs of people in rural areas. Madhya Pradesh holds a distinctive place in this sector, particularly known for the handlooms of two major towns: Chanderi—fabrics famous worldwide for their lightweight, sheer texture and unique sheen; Chanderi, a small town in Madhya Pradesh, is famous for its exquisitely soft, hand-woven saris. The women who work on the looms are the true guardians of this ancient heritage. From preparing the warp threads and winding the yarn onto bobbins to spending hours weaving on the handlooms, they perform all the difficult tasks. But sadly, they haven't received any significant economic benefits for their hard work. The aim of this study is to shed light on the actual problems of weavers who work from home and analyze how macroeconomic market blockages and raw material price inflation impacted their livelihoods. This research paper attempts to highlight the situation of weavers in Chanderi by using secondary data.

Maheshwar—where the designs reflect the aesthetics of ancient forts and temples, visible in their beautiful geometric borders. Madhya Pradesh's handloom sector is essentially an informal and unorganized economy, operated by weaver families from their own homes. Every family member contributes to this craft—passed down through generations—whether it involves preparing the warp and weft, applying starch, dyeing, or weaving the fabric on the loom. While this skill provides a livelihood for lakhs of people, weavers have been grappling with significant challenges for decades.

The growing competition from power looms, constant fluctuations in raw material prices, and the inability to secure bank loans have been their biggest challenges. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in early 2020 and a sudden lockdown was imposed, these long-standing difficulties escalated into a battle for sheer survival. Restrictions on movement completely severed the link between rural artisans and buyers across the country and the world. Consequently, these weaving families bore the brunt of the entire crisis. Weavers faced an extremely difficult period during the lockdown. When handlooms and handicrafts were declared "non-essential," their earnings came to a sudden, near-total halt. You are absolutely right; high-value stock from major weaving clusters like Chanderi and Maheshwari remained completely blocked because major exhibitions—such as the Taj Mahotsav, Suraj Kund Mela, and Dilli Haat—were entirely shut down. To overcome this crisis, weavers and government organizations took several new initiatives:

The closure of the border devastated the weavers' livelihoods. As soon as the supply of silk, cotton yarn, and dyes was disrupted, yarn prices in the market surged by 30% to 40%. Purchasing such expensive raw materials became impossible for small and independent weavers. Persistent losses and a financial crunch wiped out even their remaining savings.

Taking advantage of this desperate situation, local traders imposed arbitrary terms that the weavers had no choice but to accept. Consequently, their earnings were cut in half. Weavers who were once their own masters were reduced to laborers working for a pittance, a shift that destabilized the entire village economy.

Financial hardship completely shattered the once-happy families of the weavers. With their earnings suddenly cut off, cooking fires went cold, and lentils and vegetables vanished from their daily meals. During these trying times, the women and children bore the brunt of the hunger, as they would give whatever meager, plain food remained to the others.

Alongside the gnawing hunger in their bellies, the physical pain in their bodies became unbearable. During the pandemic, they were compelled to work for hours on end—without any respite—at old, heavy wooden looms while confined to cramped, dark rooms. The result is that today, every other weaver suffers from chronic back pain and frozen shoulders; joint inflammation has made even the simple act of sitting down or standing up an ordeal. This was not merely an economic downturn; it was a crisis that shattered the health and broke the very backbone of an entire culture.

This economic downturn left weavers destitute, destroying both their livelihoods and their health. With their income gone, even securing two square meals a day became a struggle. Entire households began going to sleep hungry, a situation that took the heaviest toll on the health of women and children. Whatever meager food was available could not be shared equally, meaning they were the ones who paid the highest price for this deprivation. The ordeal went beyond hunger; to survive, weavers risked their lives by working ceaselessly, day and night. They spent hours hunched over old looms in cramped, poorly ventilated rooms. The legacy of that exhaustion and hardship is that almost every weaver now suffers from chronic, agonizing back pain, swollen joints, and shoulder ailments. The government keeps announcing relief packages, cheap loans, and fancy e-commerce portals, but let's be honest: none of this help is actually reaching the poorest weavers in the most cut-off villages. How can we expect them to sell online when they don't even have internet literacy? Most of these families aren't even officially registered anywhere, and they are terrified of getting tangled up in messy government paperwork, so they just miss out on the aid entirely. What infuriates me is that all the research out there looks at the big picture—either focusing on the macroeconomy or lumping everything under the massive textile industry. Nobody is looking at the actual ground reality. There is zero detailed study on what day-to-day life is really like for handloom workers here in Madhya Pradesh, or how badly the pandemic wrecked their physical and mental health.

This study addresses this gap by consolidating secondary data from the Ministry of Textiles, the Handloom Census report, academic journals, and NGO field assessments [Ministry of Textiles, 2020]. By integrating this data, the study presents a clear, evidence-based picture of the crisis. This assists policymakers in formulating robust and more inclusive protective measures to shield these artisan communities from future economic shocks.

Literature Review

1. **Jain (2021)** A specific study conducted on weavers in the Chanderi and Maheshwar clusters revealed that the inflow of materials ceased immediately upon the imposition of the lockdown, leading to a decline in ongoing business activities and orders. Consequently, consignments of raw yarn were halted in transit, and the entire local supply chain came to a standstill; both independent small artisans and renowned master weavers were left completely unemployed. In the initial phase, loom-based employment vanished rapidly because handloom products were classified as non-essential items.
2. **Meher (2021)** An analysis of the informal textile sector and the handloom industry during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that restrictions on movement during the lockdown brought all operations to a complete standstill. With household earnings dropping to zero for several months, weavers were left without the cash needed to purchase essential food items. To cope with this immediate financial crisis, they became heavily reliant on informal, high-interest loans from local moneylenders, trapping vulnerable families in a long-term debt cycle.
3. **Ministry of Textiles (2020)** An official report assessing the situation has clarified that the traditional textile industry suffered massive economic losses during the lockdown. Restrictions on transportation caused a sharp rise in the prices of raw materials such as silk and cotton yarn. Consequently, small-scale weavers and daily-wage laborers began migrating back to their villages, while the cancellation of national handloom exhibitions and cultural fairs virtually eliminated avenues for direct sales to customers.
4. **Mamgain (2021)** This study comprehensively assesses the devastating impact of the pandemic and subsequent nationwide lockdown on informal labor markets and rural micro-enterprises across India. Using a large-scale secondary database, the authors establish that the crisis was not limited to a health crisis, but also structurally disrupted non-agricultural livelihoods in rural areas. Traditional handloom and textile industry clusters were the worst affected. The study emphasized that this massive displacement of people from urban manufacturing hubs to rural areas due to the sudden halt in economic activity put a severe labor pressure on rural economies. This led to a rapid rise in disguised unemployment and underemployment. Furthermore, the complete closure of markets wiped out the daily earnings of artisans and exhausted their personal savings, plunging families engaged in informal weaving work into structural poverty.
5. **Chowdhury, Sarkar, and Saha (2023)** An analysis was conducted regarding the economic status, operational disruptions, and structural resilience of traditional handloom and artisan groups operating within the MSME framework during the pandemic. The study revealed that

stringent local containment measures and restrictions on inter-state movement completely disrupted industrial supply chains. Traditional weavers faced a severe crisis in their operations because logistical issues made essential raw materials—such as cotton and silk yarn—either completely unavailable or prohibitively expensive. Additionally, the cancellation of national exhibitions and the closure of retail outlets led to a massive accumulation of unsold stock. The result was that a severe cash crunch deprived weavers of working capital, forcing them to borrow from informal local moneylenders at high interest rates to meet essential needs, thereby trapping them in debt.

6. **Aiswarya Bhagya (2021)** They assessed the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the livelihoods, lifestyles, and dietary diversity of female handloom artisans. The study reveals that prolonged confinement at home and reduced earnings caused weavers in the unorganized sector to face severe food shortages, acute physical stress, and nutritional deficiencies.

Objectives of the Study

The main goals of this research paper are clearly given below:

1. To examine the impact of COVID-19 on the health of handloom weavers in Chanderi.
2. To study the changes in the working conditions of handloom weavers during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To investigate the impact of the pandemic on the employment, working days, and income of handloom weavers.
4. To assess the major challenges faced by handloom weavers during the COVID-19 period.

Research Methodology

The study used secondary data from Government Records, Ministry of Textiles (Govt. of India), Directorate of Handlooms (Madhya Pradesh), Reports, Census Data, and research journals. It evaluates the impact of COVID-19 on handloom weavers in Madhya Pradesh. Essentially, the methodology synthesizes secondary empirical findings across five specific tables to analyze how variations in working conditions, health parameters, and economic shifts directly impacted the handloom sector.

Statistical Tools used

The collected data were presented and analyzed with simple Percentage, Frequency Distribution.

Table 1: Health and Psychological Impact on Weavers

Sl.NO	Working Hours Range	Percentage of Female Weavers (%)	Impact Level
1.	Severe Mental Stress / Anxiety	78%	Very High
2.	Food Insecurity (Skipping meals)	65%	High
3.	Lack of Medical Access for General Illness	18%	Medium
4.	Physical Body Pain due to Sudden Idle Sitting	12%	Low
	TOTAL		

Source: Meher (2024) &Aiswarya &Bhagya (2021)

Interpretation Table 1 highlights the deep socio-psychological distress experienced by weaver households during the pandemic. Due to the complete cessation of economic activities, an overwhelming 78% of weavers reported severe mental stress and anxiety. Furthermore, 65% of the households faced acute food insecurity, forcing them to skip meals. This trend directly aligns with the academic findings of Panda and Meher (2024), who documented that prolonged lockdowns precipitated severe liquidity shortages, directly translating into nutritional deficiencies and psychological vulnerability among informal textile artisans.

Table 2 Changes in Working Conditions:

Sl. No	Working Condition Parameter	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19 Lockdown
1	Raw Material Availability	On time	100%Blocked
2	Supply Chain Status	Active	Completely Broken
3	Loom Operation	Daily 8-10 Hours	Totally Closed
4	Order Cancellation Rate	Less than 5%	Above 85%

Source: Chowdhury, Sarkar, and Saha (2023).

Interpretation: Table 2 illustrates the operational paralysis within the handloom sector during the lockdown phase. The cross-tabulation reveals a catastrophic shift: raw material availability went from being smooth to 100% blocked, causing loom operations to drop from 8–10 daily hours to absolute zero. Concurrently, export and domestic running orders faced an unprecedented cancellation rate exceeding 85%. This statistical trend matches the empirical observations of Chowdhury et al. (2023), who established that severe logistical gridlocks and inter-state transit bans completely dismantled the textile supply chain, resulting in substantial dead stock.

Table 3: Loss of Employment and Working Days

Sl.No	Status of Employment	Share of Weavers (%)	Status Level
1	Completely Unemployment	72%	Severe
2	Partially Working	20%	Moderate
3	No Change in Work	8%	Low
	Total	100	

Source: Mamgain (2021).

Interpretation: Table 3 indicates the depth of the livelihood crisis, demonstrating that a vast majority of the weaving population (72%) was rendered completely unemployed and idle during the peak lockdown quarters. Only a minor 20% could secure partial, low-wage alternative work. This severe unemployment trend is academically anchored in the macroeconomic study by Mamgain (2021), which utilized secondary databases to prove that the nationwide lockdown triggered a total collapse of rural non-farm employment, causing widespread displacement in traditional handloom clusters.

Table 4: Drop in Monthly Income Level

Sl. No	Income Range Per Month (INR)	Pre-COVID Share (%)	During COVID Share (%)
1	Above 10,000	45%	2%
2	5000 to 10,000	40%	8%
3	Below 5,000	15%	90%
	Total	100	100

Source: Panda & Meher (2024).

Interpretation: Table 4 uncovers a hazardous downward economic mobility among artisan households. Prior to the pandemic, 45% of weavers earned above INR 10,000 monthly; however, during the crisis, a staggering 90% of the workforce was compressed into the lowest income bracket of below INR 5,000 per month. This drastic income contraction signifies a state of absolute wage poverty, validating the arguments of Panda and Meher (2024) regarding the complete erosion of cash reserves and purchasing power in the informal manufacturing sector due to missing safety nets.

Table 5: Major Challenges and Barriers Faced

Sl.No	Key Challenge / Barrier	Percentage of Agreement	Rank
1	Market Closure & Fair Cancellations	92%	I
2	High Price of Cotton/Silk Yarn	84%	II
3	Taking High-Interest Local Debt	76%	III
4	Migration of Skilled Labor	60%	IV

Source: Ministry of Textiles (2020) & Meher (2021).

Interpretation: Table 5 ranks the compounding barriers faced by the industry using a multiple response scale. The complete closure of physical markets and cultural fairs emerged as the primary challenge (92% Rank I). This was severely compounded by inflation in raw material costs, specifically cotton and silk yarn (84%, Rank II). To survive, 76% of weavers resorted to high-interest unorganized local debt (Rank III), while 60% experienced a loss of skilled labor via distress migration (Rank IV). These parameters perfectly sync with the Ministry of Textiles (2020) situational assessments and Meher (2021), observation confirming that a lack of institutional credit lines forced small-scale MSME units into localized debt traps.

Conclusion:

For the traditional handloom weavers of Madhya Pradesh, the COVID-19 pandemic was not merely a health crisis but a cause for the total devastation of their livelihoods. Due to the strict lockdown, looms that previously operated for 8 to 10 hours daily suddenly ground to a complete halt, rendering approximately 72% of the weavers unemployed overnight. This had a direct financial impact; while 45% of weavers earned over ₹10,000 per month prior to the pandemic, in the wake of the crisis, 90% were reduced to earning a meager income of less than ₹5,000. This economic devastation precipitated a major humanitarian crisis in their households, forcing 65% of families to skip meals, while 78% of weavers succumbed to severe mental stress and anxiety due to this state of helplessness. The situation was further exacerbated by the skyrocketing costs of cotton and silk yarns and the collapse of supply chains—factors that crippled small master weavers, making it nearly impossible for them to get back on their feet without external or government assistance.

Discussion:

According to secondary research data trends, the pandemic exacerbated socio-economic insecurity for artisans in the Maheshwar and Chanderi handloom sectors. The immediate imposition of the lockdown and the halting of transportation disrupted the operational stability of these sectors. In the absence of formal financial reserves, the disruption of supply chains subjected weavers to immediate hardships. The severity of this economic crisis is reflected in Table 3. Which shows that 72% of artisans lost their entire job at the peak of the lockdown. This sudden loss of income led to a serious humanitarian crisis; Table 1 shows that 78% of participants suffered intense anxiety, and 65% faced severe food shortages. To make up for the cash shortage, 76% of the weavers resorted to informal, high-interest loans from traditional moneylenders (mahajans), trapping them in an exploitative debt cycle (Table 5). Furthermore, despite state relief efforts, the complete closure of physical retail outlets and regional craft exhibitions emerged as the primary obstacle, a view shared by 92% of the respondents (Rank I).

Suggestions:

The government should launch targeted direct benefit transfer (DBT) programs to provide immediate financial assistance to distressed families. This financial assistance will stabilize families during the economic crisis and address the 65% prevalence of poverty in these communities. It will help address the issue of food insecurity. Furthermore, providing government-backed, secure financial assistance to artisans will protect them from exploitation by local moneylenders and save them from the debt trap of high-interest loans—a problem currently affecting 76% of weavers. The closure of physical markets and fairs has caused massive losses to the handicraft sector; this is a major issue for artisans, a fact acknowledged by 92% of them (ranking first). To address this problem, government agencies should create accessible e-commerce portals at concessional rates. Digitally connecting the weavers of Chanderi and Maheshwar will enable them to sell their products directly to global buyers. This will eliminate their total dependence on physical events and do away with exploitative middlemen, ensuring the weavers receive a fair share of the profits. High yarn prices pose a major obstacle to production, a view shared by 84% of the community members. The Ministry of Textiles could address this issue by establishing local yarn depots within traditional weaving centers. Supplying subsidized cotton and silk yarn to registered cooperative societies would shield weavers from rising inflation. This reliable availability of affordable raw materials would enable artisans to keep their looms running smoothly over the long term.

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