

Kanakalatha Mukund and B. Syama Sundari, *Traditional Industry in the New Market Economy: the Cotton Handlooms of Andhra Pradesh*. Sage Publications, New Delhi, etc., 2001, 169 p., ISBN 81-7829-011-1 (India-Hardback); 0-7619-9522-6 (US-Hardback)

Although the handloom sector in Andhra Pradesh is in severe crisis, the book under review is not a pessimistic book. In fact, the basic argument is that, despite, an increasingly hospitable policy environment, the handloom sector has shown considerable resilience and vitality. Although the policies are based on the idea that the handloom sector is stagnant and fully dependent on government subsidies, the reality is that handloom weavers have adapted themselves to changing environments and new market opportunities. This flexibility and adjustment is not because of government policies; it is rather in spite of them. The authors show and argue how inadequate and ill conceived many of the government policies are.

An example is the Janata cloth scheme. According to the authors (p. 124), this scheme is pushed through by a paternalistic government without any real reference to ground-level realities, with all-round negative results. The scheme was intended to provide employment to weavers outside the cooperatives and also to supply cloth at cheap rates to the poorer sections. In Andhra Pradesh, even cooperatives were convinced to switch over to the production of Janata cloth. This made them very dependent on APCO, the apex cooperative body, for procurement, while APCO had its own major financial difficulties. The scheme has not succeeded in generating employment for unemployed weavers. On the contrary, the scheme contributed only to further deskilling because it made weavers shift to the production of low quality (and almost unmarketable) cloth. This case of the Janata cloth scheme is perhaps rather extreme (but for years it has consumed almost 50 per cent of the total subsidy for the handloom sector). The points it illustrates are, however, not exceptional: lack of understanding of ground realities of most weavers; the desire to come up with uniform solutions for a diverse target group.

The book is also very critical of the way in which cooperative societies function, and analyses the main reasons for their failure. Politicisation is a major problem. According to the authors, cooperatives have become the personal fiefdom of some of the office bearers, who pocket most of the money (subsidies) or distribute it to their clients. Moreover, the management of the cooperatives is not left to the cooperatives themselves, but there are many government rules and regulations related to credit provision, wages, margins etc. Liberalisation is badly needed but not happening. Nevertheless, despite the failures, the authors conclude that cooperatives remain necessary. They argue that it is unlikely that the sector would have done better in the absence of cooperatives, and that, in some localities, cooperatives have functioned well and/or have resulted in an upward pressure on wages.

There is little doubt, indeed, that, on the whole, government policies do not do much good to the handloom sector. It is not only that the special schemes (such as the Janata scheme) and the cooperatives failed: the overall policy environment is unfavourable. Since 1985, the emphasis of the National Textile Policies has shifted from employment protection to efficiency and productivity of the sector as a whole, and therefore more

open support to the powerloom sector. Although lip service continues to be paid to the handloom sector in terms of employment and craftsmanship, protection of employment is no longer a major policy consideration. The latest National Textile Policy 2000 makes it very clear that meeting global standards and withstanding international competition are amongst the main policy objectives.

The emphasis of the book on the strength and dynamism of the sector is therefore an important point. As far as the handloom sector has survived, it is on the basis of its own strength, and not because of the various government policies. On the other hand, one can ask the question to what extent the sector has survived and will survive. Is it really as strong and resilient as the authors claim? True, there are some (master) weavers who have done very well, and who are very sensitive to changes in consumer taste and market demands. But nevertheless, the wages for almost all weavers are extremely low; employment is uncertain and suicides caused by distress and indebtedness occur regularly. It may be that the sector survives, but certainly not all the weavers. There is, perhaps, reason for less optimism than the authors suggest.

On the whole, the book is informative, pleasant to read and well researched. Field visits were undertaken to many handloom centres in Andhra Pradesh. The book discusses both historical trends and contemporary developments. One may disagree perhaps with the extent to which the optimism of the authors is warranted, but the book remains highly recommendable to anybody interested in the survival of traditional industries in modern times.

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