

Mode of Production in Handloom Industry : A Case Study of Nadia District in West Bengal

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Abstract

The study on handloom industry in Nadia district reveals that the sector contains both the elements of pre-capitalism and capitalism in the product market, credit market as well as in the labour market. It appears that the sector is in a transitional situation.

Key- Words : Textile sector ; Handloom industry ; Independent Production System ; Mahajan ; Loom.

Introduction

The textile sector in India is a sector in which the features of pre-capitalism co-exist with those of capitalism. This industry consists of mills, and more recently powerlooms in which the capitalist mode of production based on detailed division of labour has its sway. At the same time, there exists the handloom sector in this industry in which there is household production with small number of looms having rudimentary division of labour that contains the elements of petty mode of production. This is typical to a pre-capitalist economy. However, the handloom sector does not exist in isolation from the market economy.

An Outline of Handloom Industry in the District

Handloom industry in Nadia district is largely concentrated in the southern part of the district. To be more specific, the activities centring around the handloom sector are largely concentrated in Nabadwip and Santipur region of the district. Nabadwip, the centre of Hindu pilgrimage is a traditional centre of trade and commerce. The market for yarn and handloom products has also found a natural centre in Nabadwip. The hinterland of Nabadwip, however, contains a part of Bardhaman district in which the handloom industry has developed since independence. Santipur, on the other hand, is a very old centre of handloom activities. In fact, as the history of handloom industry of Nadia district indicates, Santipur is one of the few centres in India which could somewhat withstand the de-industrialization policy of the British Government¹. In fact, the muslin cloth had been manufactured in Santipur even at the beginning of the present century. In the present day muslin is no longer produced in Santipur. But then, Santipur is still famous for handloom products because of their thin texture as well as embroidered and flowered border work.

At present, according to the report of the Handloom Development Office, Nabadwip (1995-96)², there are 70336 weavers in this district and most of them are highly skilled and have been engaged in the production of tradition *Tangail Sarees* (silk and cotton), *Zamdani Sarees* (Silk and Cotton), *Santipuri Sarees* (Cotton), running length for dress materials and other value added fabrics. Semi-skilled weavers of this district are engaged in the production of cotton

sarees of medium counts, *Lungi*, Polyester Shirting, *Janata cloth*³, etc. At present, Nabadwip-based handloom market is supposed to be one of the biggest in West Bengal. Wholesale transactions of handloom cloths take place in *hat*. *Nabadwip Tant Kapar Hat* is remarkable for wholesale transaction. According to a publication of Directorate of Handloom and textiles, total transaction in a week of different *hats* in Nadia district is estimated to be Rs. 3.20 crores⁴.

The production of handloom cloth in the district is largely organized in the private sector, with a very little role of the co-operative sector. According to Handloom Development Office, Nabadwip (1995-96), there are 432 registered co-operatives in the district, of which only 175 are active societies and the rest remains inactive. According to knowledgeable sources, the inefficiency, selfishness and corruption in the management are primarily responsible for the failure of major co-operatives. The apex bodies of the co-operatives were assigned to marketise the produce of the primary co-operatives. *Tantuja*, *Tantusri* and *Manjusha* took the initiatives in this regard. But their initiatives did not persist for a long time. Often they failed to supply the yarn also; even they failed to pay their dues in time to the primary co-operatives. The co-operatives thus largely failed in the district, except in some pockets in Fulia where the co-operatives seemed to play a powerful role during the time of this survey. The failure of co-operative has strengthened the hands of merchants and users in the handloom industry of the district.

The Issues under Study

The division of labour, the stage of technology, organization of production, role of informal credit and *mahajan*, marketing channel for distribution of raw materials and finished products—are the issues that we would study for understanding the present status of handloom industry of the district. On the basis of this study we attempt to outline the mode of production in handloom industry of the field area.

At the very outset it should be stated that the findings reported in the present study are based on a field survey that was taken up in some pockets of the district. One must not claim that the findings should be generalized; the study is not robust enough to support such a claim. One may, however, submit that the findings may help one understand how the features of pre-capitalism may co-exist with those of capitalist production relations in an informal sector like handloom.

Given this background, we first discuss the methodology of survey in section II. In section III we describe the findings of the field survey that we have taken up. Finally the mode of production in handloom industry of the field area is discussed in section IV.

The Methodology of Survey

For the survey non-probability sampling method has been followed. Data have been collected through structured questionnaire from 170 weavers. After proper scrutiny 4 schedules were dropped because of incompleteness in information. There were thus 166 weavers, of which 100 were loom-less weavers, 46 were weavers with one loom only (one-loom weavers or OLWs) and 20 multi-loom weavers having more than one loom (multi-loom weavers or MLWs)⁵. The sample size is small because it is a type study. We wanted to study the labour process⁶ and

production process by closely observing a select group of units in the handloom sector⁷. Applying the concept of Convenience Sampling⁸, weavers were selected from *Nabadwip*, *Swarupganj*, *Santipur* and *Fulia* of Nadia district and from Samudragarh and *Purbasthali* areas of Bardhaman district⁹. In selecting the individual respondents we followed the Snowball Sampling Method¹⁰ in which some initial respondents were selected by applying individual judgment and additional respondents were then obtained from referrals or by other information provided by the initial respondents. The purpose of such sampling was to capture the various characteristics that are existing in the field area. The survey continued until the information became repetitive. Supplementary information had also been collected from the officials of the Handloom Office and *hat*, and also from the yarn and cloth merchants through unstructured questionnaire. The initial study was conducted in 1993-94. The findings were also supplemented with the information gathered from the field survey in 1994-95. We submit that the information should not be considered as dated because the mode of production is not expected to change radically within a span of five years.

The Findings of the Survey

Technology and Production Process

Technology is simple in this industry and as such division of labour is also simple. Hence, handicraft is the basis in manufacture. Both household and non-household production are organized in the small scale. There are many tiny units in this sector. The total work of weaving can be divided into ten operations. These are : (i) Design drawing, (ii) Dyeing the yarns, (iii) Sizing the yarns, (iv) Rolling the threads in Bobbins through *Charkha*, (v) Rolling the threads in Pirms through *Charkha*, (vi) Warping in Drum and Beam rolling, (vii) Denting and Drafting, (viii) Weaving, (ix) Calendaring, and (x) Carrying the finished products to the market. The sequence of operation is as follows : At first a design of the product is worked out. Next comes the dyeing of yarns. Then some yarns are sized for using in bobbins. The sized threads are rolled in bobbins through *charkha*. The remaining yarns, which are not sized, are rolled in pirms. this operation can be performed either before the sizing or after the sizing. It may also be performed simultaneously with the threads rolling in bobbins. The design of the product may be drawn initially or it may be done after the sizing. It may be noted that design drawings needed to be performed before the threads rolling in bobbins and pirms, because the quantity of thread of different colours contained in the bobbins and pirms depend on the design. The bobbins are then fitted to drum and the threads of the bobbins are rolled in the beam by rolling the drum. This process is known as warping in drum or drumming and beam rolling. In this way a warp (locally known as *tana* or *feti*) is prepared. Then the denting and drafting (locally known as *shana*, *ba*) is done. Through this process all the threads of the warp are taken up in a reed, taking two threads in each cell of the reed by a Drawing Hook. After that, the beam is fitted in the loom (the core instrument of labour) and the pim is set into the shuttle-box. The shuttle-box is then fitted in the loom and then the weaving starts. The weaving is performed according to the design. The weaver may bring some change in the design while performing the act of weaving, but this may be done only marginally. After the completion of weaving, the finished product is calendered either manually or by a compressure machine, as the case may be. Finally, the finished product is carried to the market.

Each process requires the involvement of labour power separately. The entire process or a part of the total process may be organized under a single weaver or each process may be organised under different individuals. Generally dyeing is not done by the weavers. They purchase coloured yarns from the market. In our sample, in case of multi-loom enterprise, we find only one respondent who performs the dyeing by employing family labour and outside labour alternatively. The small weavers own no drum. That is why they do not perform the drumming, i.e., the warping in drum and beam rolling and, therefore collect it from outside (known as *Drummer*). In our sample, no one-loom weaver (OLW) was found to own the drum. At present, some traders are involved in printing of handloom cloth. In such cases, calendaring is not done and the cloths after being weaved in the loom, are sold or carried out to the person with whom the weaver is tied (*mahajan*), as the case may be.

Systems of Production

Independent Production System (IPS)

The independent production is independent of the *mahajan*¹¹. Under this system the weaver buys yarn directly from the market, produces with or without the help of the wage labour and sells the product to the market independently. The weaver under IPS would be either a single loom owner or a multi-loom owner. Predictably, the multi-loom owners are mostly independent producers who do not need the support of the *mahajan*. From Table 1, we find that the large majority (70 per cent) of the MLWs were independent producers. In case of OLWs the percentage of independent producers is rather poor (37 per cent). While no estimation can statistically be performed out of our sample, which is non-random, the description in Table 1 highlights a very important point that one experienced in the field area. The OLW who usually organizes the production with the help of the family labour and himself weaves on the loom normally is a petty producer. And this petty producer is more vulnerable to credit network of the *mahajan*. The *mahajan* may also try to control the multi-loom weavers by supplying yarn on credit or by purchasing cloth through the forward contract but the incidence of such phenomena are rather low. The *mahajani* in handloom is largely a phenomenon that involves the one-loom owners as its client. This is nothing surprising given that the petty producers operate on a poor asset-base. From Table 1, it appears that in a group of 46 one-loom owners, only 16 are outside the credit network of the *mahajan*.

Table 1 : Distribution Of Weavers Under Different Types of Production

Systems Weavers	IPS	DS	FCS	TAS	DS&IPS	DS&FCS	IPS&TAS	Total
Multi-loom Weaver	14*	3	1	-	1	1	-	20
One-loom Weaver	17	10	4	13	1	-	1	46
Total	31	13	5	13	2	1	1	66

Source : Field Survey 1993-94. * Two respondents are co-operatives.

Production Under Mahajan

Dadan System (DS)

Under DS, a master-weaver (*mahajan* in this case) supplies yarn to the small weaver on the condition that all the products produced by the small weaver shall have to be supplied to the master-weaver. In some cases, cash amount is also provided by the *mahajan* to the weaver in addition to yarn. Cash is supplied for running the various operations of weaving, such as sizing the yarns, rolling, warping, denting & drafting, etc, and also for the subsistence of the *dadan* taker. The price at which the products are supplied to the *mahajan* may be termed as 'dadan price' which is below the ruling market price. Through this system a weaver with *dadan* becomes economically tied with the *mahajan*. When a weaver faces continuous working capital problem and marketing problem, he is forced to take *dadan* from the *mahajan*. The *mahajan* charges the yarn price at 'cost-plus' to be given by the *dadan*-taker and fixes the *dadan* price for him.

The *dadan* price depends on the market price. Under the normal market situation, the *dadan* price is lower than the market price because in fixing *dadan* price, *mahajan* plays a dominating role. If the value of the products at *dadan* price exceeds the value of yarn plus cash amount (if any), taken as loan from the *mahajan* to meet the working capital requirement, the excess is receivable from the *mahajan*, and is finally paid by the *mahajan* to the *dadan*-taker. The situation usually is otherwise. The small weaver usually has a negative balance with the *mahajan*. Over time, therefore, the *dadan*-taker becomes indebted to the *mahajan* who gains in two ways, firstly, by charging excess yarn price (difference between transfer price and cost price) and secondly, from excess of market price over *dadan* price.

Forward Contract System (FCS)

Under FCS, a cloth merchant or a big weaver and a small weaver makes a contract so that the merchant or big weaver would purchase the entire output of the small weaver throughout the year at a fixed price. The forward contract price is ordinarily below the market price. Since the small weaver ensures his market through FCS, he is compelled to accept a forward contract price which is below the ruling market price. Of course, the forward contract price is subject to revision when the market price becomes abnormally high or low. Even there, the *mahajan* usually gains from this contract. When the market price is abnormally low, he compels the producer to accept a price, which is lower than the forward contract price, thus flouting the contract that he would bear the consequence of market uncertainty. When the market price is abnormally high, the producer may get a share of the high price — but this is very small compared to what the *mahajan* gets out of the buoyancy in the market. In sum, the market system is underdeveloped and the direct producer suffers more due to market failure.

Tana Ana System (TAS)

Tana Ana means to bring the warp. *Tana Ana* System means to bring the *tana* from *mahajan*. Under this system, *mahajan* provides 'tana' to a weaver for weaving. A *tana* is prepared with the operation of rolling the threads in bobbins, the bobbins are then fitted to drum. The threads of the bobbins are rolled in the beam by rolling the drum. In this way a warp or *tana* is prepared. Sometimes denting and drafting is also done by the *mahajan* in the preparation of *tana*. This production system is mostly found in case of OLWs. The system is more or less the same as the

putting-out system that was developed in the early phase of industrial capitalism in Western Europe. Under TAS, the weaver, after completing the weaving, sends the finished products to his *mahajan* and receives money from him. The money includes wages, loom rent and maintenance cost (if it is borne by the weaver) of the loom.

In sum, the system of production in the field area is not one that can be described in terms of a simplified production system in which the market forces do not play a dominant role. The market for input (particularly that of yarn) as well as that of finished product plays a very important role in shaping the system of production in the field area. There are small producers who own the loom but do not have access to the yarn market because of the paucity of working capital. Again, there are small producers who cannot confront the volatility of the product market because of the poor capacity of maintaining a certain level of inventory, which is necessary to absorb the market shocks. A *mahajani* system that plays intermediary role therefore develops as an institution in the field area. The *mahajani* system operates under the *Dadan* System or the Forward Contract System or under *Tana Ana* System. While under the *Dadan* System or the Forward Contract System, the *mahajan* does not exercise control over the production system *per se*, under the TAS the *mahajan* exercises partial control over the production system by exercising control over the *tana*, i.e., the base on which the weaver performs the weaving. There are, however, the independent producers who do not work under the control of the *mahajan*.

Division of Labour

Skill in this sector is primarily caste-based. It has been found that most of the weavers belong to *Debnath* and *Basak* families who are weavers by caste and remain engaged in weaving generation after generation. This reinforces the understanding that in India, caste had been the basis of the social division of labour and the remnants of such a caste-based social division of labour is still visible in rural India.

Things are changing now-a-days. People belonging to non-weaver castes are gradually entering this area of activity. There is nothing surprising in it. This is what one expects in a transitional economy in which the tillage is gradually being substituted with craft-based activities under growing market pressure. In fact, the power of absorption of labour force is declining in agriculture¹², which is semi-feudal in nature, and weaving is occupying an alternative source of employment in the rural area. The traditional caste-based division of labour is thus being replaced and a new alignment of social forces is emerging in the economy.

Gradation of skill can be done in the following way : (i) special skill — it is required for weaving of *skill saree*, *Jamdani* and *Tangail saree*, where design drawing and design weaving are most important, and (ii) ordinary skill — it is required for weaving *lungi*, *gamcha* and most ordinary *saree* made of low quality coarse yarn for mass consumption. Since the detailed division of labour is simple and handicraft is the basis in production there exists skill (unity between conception and execution in work) the labour process¹³.

Employment of family labour along with outside labour is the feature of this industry. Involvement of family or household labour is more pronounced in case of one-loom weaver (OLW) compared to a multi-loom weaver (MLW). As per our sample, in case of MLWs, excluding two co-operatives, on an average about 48 per cent of total work is done by the

family labour, almost 28 per cent by the outside labour, 18.47 per cent by the family and outside labour alternatively, and about 5 per cent by the *mahajan* (Table 2).

There would be a variation in this pattern if production only under Independent Production System (IPS) or under *mahajan* is considered. Again, there is no homogeneity among the MLWs in this regard. There exists difference among the MLWs as regards the division of labour and

Table 2 : Division of Labour in Production in case of Multi-Loom Weavers (No. of cases)

Type of Labour Operations	Family Labour (1)	Outside Labour (2)	(1) & (2) (3)	<i>Mahajan</i> (4)	Total Respondents (5)
Designing	8	1	3	2	14 ¹
Dyeing	1	1	—	—	2 ²
Sizing the yarn	13	1	4	—	18
Rolling the threads in pirns	9	6	3	—	18
Rolling the threads in bobbins	7	6	5	—	18
Drumming	8	9	1	—	18
Denting & Drafting	2	12	4	—	18
Weaving	5	6	7	—	18
Folding or Calendering	6	1	2	6	15 ³
Carrying the products to market/ <i>mahajan</i>	17	1	—	—	18
Percent in ten operations ⁴	48.40	28.03	18.47	5.10	100

Source : Field survey, 1993-94

1. In two cases, as the weavers weave plain saree no design has been required. In other two cases designing is alternatively done by the respondents and *mahajan*.
2. Respondents generally buy coloured yarn, they do not do dyeing.
3. Three respondents producing *gamcha* generally sell their produce without folding or calendering.
4. [Total of each column + total of column (5)] x 100.

the involvement of the family labour. An independent small MLW depends more on family labour would be lower compared to a big MLW or an MLW working under *mahajan*. When a weaver works for *mahajan*, in most cases the design is supplied by the *mahajan*, and calendering is also done by him. As a result proportion of outside labour in production would be higher in this case. This is a general feature in the field area, as we observed during the field survey. In case of OLWs, taking the average of 46 respondents in the sample, the proportion of family labour in production comes to about 54 per cent, i.e., the family labour performs 54 percent of

the entire job. The share of outside labour is 22 per cent and 2 per cent of the job is performed by family labour and outside labour alternatively. Finally, *mahajan* performs 22 per cent of the job (Table 3). Proportion of family labour is more than the above average in case of IPS and less than average when the production takes place under *mahajan*. However, considering the extent of employment of family labour and outside labour in production, it appears that the employment of household labour as a whole is still predominant in the sector¹⁴.

Nevertheless, market forces are gradually developing in the relation of production. In case of MLWs, the denting and drafting is usually done by the outside labour. In case of the OLWs, denting and drafting as well as drumming are taken as the operations to be done by the outside labour. Such operations are performed outside the production unit. In fact, some households are specialised in drumming as well as denting and drafting operations. Wage labour is also developing in these operations, introducing an element of capitalism in the handloom sector.

Table 3 : Division of Labour in Production in case of One-Loom Weavers (No. of cases)

Type of Labour Operations	Family Labour (1)	Outside Labour (2)	(1) & (2) (3)	<i>Mahajan</i> (4)	Total Respondents (5)
Designing	19	1	—	24	44*
Dyeing	—	—	—	—	—
Sizing the yarn	24	11	—	11	46
Rolling the threads in pirns	35	7	4	—	46
Rolling the threads in bobbins	23	6	4	13	46
Drumming	2	31	—	13	46
Denting & Drafting	6	34	—	6	46
Weaving	45	—	1	—	46
Folding or Calendering	22	—	—	24	46
Carrying the products to market/ <i>mahajan</i>	46	—	—	—	46
Percent in nine operations	53.88	21.84	2.18	22.09	100

Source : Field survey, 1993-94

* Two respondents sometimes produce independently and sometimes work for *mahajan*. When they work for *mahajan*, *mahajan* supplies the design.

The major operation is weaving. In case of OLWs, this is exclusively the domain of the family labour (see row 8 of Table 3). This is not at all surprising. The OLW is a petty producer who opts for weaving operation in order to earn his livelihood. Weaving is, therefore, his own domain.

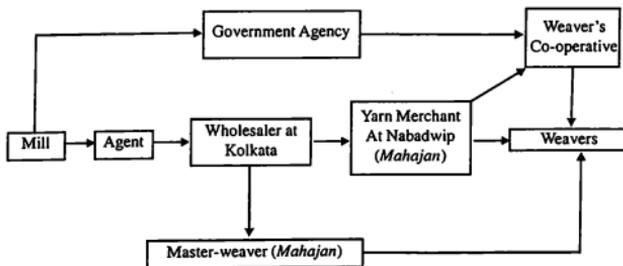
In case of MLWs, as the nomenclature itself indicates in this case, there are more than one loom units. Weaving therefore involves the participation of persons other than the weaver himself. The family labour is, of course, involved but the incidence of involvement of the outside labour is also quite high. The division of labour between the outside labour and the family labour is not quite distinct; more often the family labour shares the work with the outside labour. The ownership of the loom — the major means of production in this operation does in no way create a separation in job specification between the owner of capital and the owner of labour power whose labour is bought from the labour market. This is not surprising in a transitional society where the capitalist relation of production is yet to have its sway over the sector.

Channels of Distribution of Raw Materials (Yarn)

The most important raw material, which controls lifeline in the production of weaving, is the yarn. The yarn policy of the Government of India has a crucial role in shaping the fate of the weavers in the handloom sector¹⁵. The field survey was taken up in a period when the Government of India, as a part of the new economic policy, had been introducing the new yarn price policy that had been reducing the role of a government agency in the distribution of yarn through a regulated market.

In the field area, it was observed that the supply of yarn is controlled by the big merchants, big weavers, and the government regulated agencies. The weavers that we surveyed usually received yarn either from *mahajans* or from yarn merchants. The weavers outside the co-operative did not receive yarn directly from the government regulated agencies. The yarn distribution network in this district may be presented in the following way :

Figure 1 : Yarn Distribution Net Work



The spinning mills have their selling agents in different cities and towns. The wholesalers collect yarn from the agents. In West Bengal, yarn is mainly imported from Orissa, Maharashtra and Gujarat. The yarn merchants and the master-weavers in the district purchase yarn from the wholesalers at Kolkata. The yarn merchants of the district are mainly located at Nabadwip.

The small weavers generally purchase yarn in small quantities in cash from the yarn merchants or take yarn on *dadan* from master-weavers. It has been found also that a weaver purchases yarn from the merchant against *rukka*¹⁶ which he obtains from his *mahajan* and to whom he would supply the cloths after weaving. On the due date, the yarn merchant encashes the *rukka* from that *mahajan* who has issued that *rukka*. A big weaver generally purchases yarn on credit. Generally a big weaver and an yarn merchant make an oral contract to make transaction of certain quantity of yarn. In this case payment is made at an agreed price through the instalments. The final settlement of accounts is done at the end of the year (i.e., at *Chaitra* - last month in Bengali calendar).

The co-operatives (of both primary weavers and loom-less weavers) procure their yarn from the local market and government agencies like *Tantuja*. *Tantuja* and such other agencies purchase yarn from the mills (preference is given to co-operative spinning mill) directly. They sell yarn to co-operatives at subsidised rate, i.e., at below the printed or purchase price. But the yarn which the co-operatives get at subsidised rate is very little compared to their total requirements. So they meet the major part of their requirement from the open market. Sometimes many loom-less weaver's co-operatives sell the yarn which they obtain at subsidised rate to the market at higher prices in stead of producing cloths. These malpractices are encouraged by the high officials of the co-operatives having connections with the political party and officers of the government agencies. As a result, yarn is not consumed in co-operatives for production, rather it is used for unfair trading business.

Marketing Channels

For the weavers working in the co-operative, the marketing problem is taken care of by the apex body of primary co-operatives. As stated earlier, the sway of the co-operatives is rather weak in the district. The weavers usually produce the handloom products either as independent producers or as producers under the control of the *mahajan*. The independent producers sell the products usually in the local market. There exists big market at *Nabadwip Tankapar Hat* or *Chakdaha Rail Bazaar Hat* where the independent producers bring their products, usually once in a week, for direct sale. There are intermediaries in the market and also some wholesalers who purchase the handloom products directly from the independent producers. The mode of transaction takes place usually in cash which the independent producers need for purchasing yarn from the market and also for having his own maintenance. This is true particularly for the petty producers. The multi-loom producers also bring the products in the weekly markets. In the field survey, we also encountered some multi-loom owners who sell their products directly to retailers either in local market or even to distant places like Kolkata.

The small weavers face marketing problem frequently and are forced to make distress sale. It also happens that a weaver takes loan by mortgaging their produce with the moneylender, sometimes with yarn or cloth merchant at a very high rate of interest (usually 4 percent per month in the field area) for continuing further production and meeting the household consumption. They pay the usurious interest for the loan and get a lower price for the product. Thus they are doubly exploited. For the weavers who organise production under the control of *mahajan* sell their produce to their respective *mahajans* either through *dadan* or through forward contract¹⁷. What they get in return is usually the wage-equivalence.

Loom-less Weavers

Employment of family labour as well as outside labour in the production process is the feature of this industry. Wages for outside labourers are paid on the basis of piece rate system. There are different piece rates for different operations. For example, sizing the yarns, rolling threads in bobbins and in pirns, warping in drum and beam rolling, denting and drafting, weaving—each job has a different piece rate.

Lungi, gamcha and most ordinary *saree* are generally standardised products to a great extent. That is why more or less standard price rate are there for weaving these products. The rates are generally revised and increased after every one or two years (generally 10 percent increase over the last year). In case of *saree*, wage rate varies with the variation in design and quality of yarns. In case of *lungi* and *gamcha* wages depend on the number of shuttles required for weaving a *lungi* or *gamcha*. During the time of survey it has been found that wages for *lungi* per *than* (4 pieces = 1 *than*) varies between Rs. 22/- and Rs. 25/-, and *gamcha* between Rs. 4/- and Rs. 10/- per *than*. In very few cases, wages for *gamcha* is Rs. 12/- per *than*. *Gamcha*, generally, can be weaved 10-12 pieces in a day. According to this calculation a weaving worker who weaves *gamcha* can earn Rs. 10/- to Rs. 30/- per day (at 1993-94 prices). *Lungi* can be weaved on an average 5-6 pieces in a day and as such a *lungi* worker's daily earnings may be Rs. 25/- to Rs. 30/-. In case of silk *saree* different wage rates are existing. At the time of survey, the rates prevail in the field area had been ranging from Rs. 50/- to Rs. 500/- per piece. In case of swis-cotton, polyester, *tangail* and *santipuri saree*, wages vary between Rs. 30/- and Rs. 210/- depending upon the design. The difference in wage rate is skill-driven. The variation is high because there exists variation in skill which is reflected in the wide variations in product price.

In the field area, a high percentage of the workers work more than eight hours. It appears that they do work 12-14 hours in a day. Thus, 43 per cent of the loom-less weavers in our sample work more than 8 hours. These working hours are exclusive of times needed for tiffin, meal, rest for fatigue, etc. The workers work for a longer hour to produce more pieces and thereby to earn more wages. One may note that this enables the individual owners to raise more easily the normal degree of intensity of labour. In the field area, there does not exist the time rate system.

Employment in weaving is made on the basis of personal relation between the owner and the person willing to work. Job is permanent to the extent the owner provides the *tana* to the loom-less weaver. The weaving workers face monetary problem very frequently. They need money generally for three reasons, namely, (i) illness of any family member or himself or herself; (ii) when the time gap is large between finishing a warp and starting the new one; and (iii) in rainy season when weaving is hampered due to rainfall and high moisture in the weather. The order to meet these problems the weaving workers take loan or advance from the loom-owners. To what extent a weaver would get such a loan depends on personal relation between the loom-owner and the weaving worker, because the owners usually offer such loan without any interest and collateral security. In our sample of 20 MLWs, 16 respondents reported to provide advances to the workers without interest. The advance is repaid through instalments out of wages. It seems that the job of a worker is enough for security because there is low mobility of the worker — it is not possible for a worker to leave the job and to obtain another job. It seems that the tied relation between the weaver (owner) and the weaving worker that exists in this sector explains this credit without security at a zero rate of interest with an (oral) forward contract for labour.

Unionisation of workers has not yet developed widely in this sector. In Nabadwip area and in Purbasthali near Nabadwip — a border area of Nadia and Bardhaman district, *lungi* workers and most ordinary *saree* workers have formed union. Union has not been formed in case of silk *saree* with design, and non-silk *saree* with design made out of fine yarn. It is to be noted that union has been formed in case of products where there exists little scope for the skill specific variation in wages. In the work in which the individual skill matters, the unionisation has not taken place as yet.

The Mode of Production in Handloom Weaving

The handloom sector in the field area is market oriented. The handloom products are sold in the market. As we pointed out earlier, the total weekly transaction at different *hats* of Nadia district is estimated to be more than Rs. 3 crores. The product market has developed in a big way. But them, in spite of this, the production in the weaving industry does not seem to be fully capitalistic in nature.

The *sine qua non* of capitalism is the generalized commodity production, i.e., commodity production at the highest stage in which along with the product of labour, the labour power also becomes commodity through the buying and selling of labour power¹⁸ and recycling of capital for extended reproduction.

Even if the product has assumed the form of commodity and wage labour exists in the field area, it seems that capitalism is yet to have it sway in the economy of the handloom sector in Nadia. Thus in the product market there exist *mahajani* and *dadni* system that rule over the economy of the small weavers. Because of the poor asset-base, as we observed in the field area, many small weavers depend on *dadni* yarn provided by the master-weavers. For the sale of finished products they go through the *dadan* system under master-weaver and forward contract system under cloth merchant. In the credit market, there exist informal system of credit transactions, which take place through the *rukka* system. The local moneylenders play a significant role in financing the working capital of the weavers particularly of the small weavers. The credit market is usurious in form. The failure of co-operatives has also strengthened the hands of the *mahajans* (i.e., master-weaver, cloth merchant and moneylender). The intervention of *mahajan* in the product market and credit market acts as hindrance to the capitalist development¹⁹ because it thwarts the extended reproduction in the system of production.

Secondly, in the weaving sector, the labour market also remains underdeveloped. In case of the petty producers, the involvement of the outside labour is virtually absent. The labour process in petty production is one in which the direct producer and the other members of the family usually perform the entire job. Labour market has no role to play here. It has the resemblance with the classical economy of the artisan, except for the fact that the product is completely a market phenomenon. In case of single loom, the producer-owner producing under *Tana Ana* System performs the weaving against wage labour but the producer-owner is not alienated from the means of production (loom in this case). Thus in both cases, the labour is not free in the *classical double sense*²⁰ of the term so much so that the labour power does not become commodity as it happens in case of a fullfledged capitalist enterprise. In the multi-loom units where wage labour is employed in production there exists in most cases a tied relation between the workers and owner. In case of a special kind of skill is involved, even the induction of the trainees is selective. Market for labour, if it exists at all, is thus 'unfree'.

For the loom-less weavers there exists a labour market and the wage labour system has developed there to a certain degree. But then typical to an underdeveloped labour market, piece rate dominates over the time rate and therefore the degree of intensity of labour is very high. Again the wage earners get involved in a personal relation with the loom owners through the inter-linkage between the credit and labour relation. This impedes the development of wage labour in the true sense of the term — in the sense of labour power being doubly free.

The situation, however, is not one of pre-capitalism, pure and simple. As we have observed, the product market has developed to a great extent. The commodity relation exists also under *dadan* and *mahajani* system. Again with respect to labour, there exists commodity relation to the extent there exists a market wage rate and to the extent the unionisation of waged workers has taken place in some pockets of the field area.

We submit that the situation is one of a transitional type in which the capitalist mode of production is developing in the handloom sector but there exists a powerful pre-capitalist bondage both in the condition of labour and in the condition of production in the weaving sector. In sum, the product market, the credit market as well as the labour market are not developed properly. Hence the elements of pre-capitalism and the elements of capitalism both co-exist in the handloom sector in the field area. This implies that the sector is in a transitional situation from pre-capitalism to capitalism.

Notes

1. For a discussion on de-industrialisation policy of the British Government, see Bhattacharya, D. (1989), Chapter 6.
2. Handloom Development Office, Nabadwip. 1995-96. Government of West Bengal, *Glimpse of Handloom Industry in Nadia District*, p.1.
3. Recently, the Government of India has closed the Janata Cloth Scheme.
4. Directorate of Handloom and Textiles, Government of West Bengal, *Nadai Zilla Tant Shilpa Nibir Prachar Abijan*, 1989, p.12.
5. At the time of processing the data we have rejected 4 filled-up questionnaire of the one-loom weavers due to insufficiency in information. Hence we have considered the data related to 46 OLWs in place of 50 OLWs and as such the total number of respondents reduced from 170 to 166.
6. Labour process is a process through which man creates use-value. The elementary factors of labour process are (1) the personal activity of man, i.e., work itself, (2) the subject of that work (e.g., raw materials), and (3) its instruments (e.g., tool, machinery and technology). For detailed discussions, see Marx, K. (1986), Vol.1, Chapter VII.
7. It was expected that the enhancement of the sample size could hardly add to the information related to production process and labour process in the sector because the phenomena under observation are type specific. A sample that may represent the type would be sufficient for capturing the features. We went on studying the cases until we found that would be sufficient for capturing the features. We went on studying the cases until we found that the information had been repetitive in nature and a further enhancement of a sample size was adding very little to the already acquired set of information.

8. See Paul, E.G. and Donald, S.T. (1986), Chapter 7.
9. While conducting the survey, we also covered some areas of Bardhaman district. These areas are the adjacent places of Nabadwip region of Nadia District. These areas were included in the study because of the fact that it provides the hinterland of Nabadwip, the major trade centre in handloom in the district. Secondly a section of the immigrant weavers of Bangladesh settled also in these areas of Bardhaman district.
10. See Paul, E.G. and Donald, S.T. (1986), Chapter 7.
11. *Mahajan* is one who binds a small weaver with a contract or obligation to sell his product to the *mahajan* by supplying input (yarn). Often a *Mahajan* does not supply the input but enters into a forward contract to buy the product (at a reduced rate). A *mahajan* may also be a person who finances the working capital at a usurious rate of interest.
12. According to 1981 Census, 60.09 per cent of the total working population of the Nadia district were engaged in agricultural pursuits. In 1991 Census, it has reduced to 56.82 per cent.
13. Deskilling tendency in the labour process has also developed in the sector, though it is not connected with the detailed division of labour. It appears that it is connected with the tied relation between the direct producer and *mahajan* (Khasnabis and Nag, 2001).
14. It may be mentioned here that the bureau of economics and statistics of the Government of Bombay in its survey on weaving industry in Maharashtra reported in 1960 that the household labour in the handloom sector was predominant (74.4 per cent to total labour) compared to wage labour. We have found in the field area that after five decades of independence, the household labour is still predominant in the sector in a district in West Bengal, giving in a non-capitalist character, in the main.
15. The Government went on an export drive ignoring domestic production requirements under the new economic policy since 1991. As a result the export of yarn (includes hank yarn in bulk quantities and it is used by the handloom sector) and cotton were increased. As a part of the liberalisation process, many spinning mills were closed. These created the problem of yarn availability resulting in the yarn price hike.
16. *Rukka* is a local instrument used for credit transaction. It can be discounted with the local moneylender. The rate of interest for discounting is very high. *Rukka* is more or less akin to the Bill of Exchange usually seen in the formal business world.
17. Strictly speaking under *tana ana* system, the direct producer is not entitled to sell the product. He is to hand over the product to *mahajan* and receive compensation for his work.
18. For explanation, see Marx K. (1986). Vol. 1., Chapter VI.
19. For a discussion on the role of merchants and users in the transition from pre-capitalism to capitalism, see Marx, K. (1986). Vol.III, Chapter XX and XXXVI.
20. This happens under the generalised condition of commodity production. Free in double sense implies that the labour is free from the ownership of the means of production and free from the tied or personal relation with the owner of the means of production. For explanation, see in Lenin (1977), *Karl Marx*.

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