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Challenges faced by handloom weavers in Manipur and differences between registered and unregistered weavers

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Abstract

The handloom sector is one of the largest sources of rural employment in India, playing a significant role in preserving traditional skills and supporting livelihoods. Despite its importance, the sector continues to face multiple challenges that affect the sustainability and economic well-being of weavers. This study examines the key challenges faced by handloom weavers in Manipur, with a focus on Thoubal district and Imphal East district. A total of 600 respondents were selected using a random sampling method from blocks of the two selected districts. The study employs the Rank Based Quotient (RBQ) method to identify and prioritize the challenges experienced by weavers. The findings indicate that health-related issues due to prolonged working conditions (RBQ = 82.85), frequent power outages (RBQ = 82.64), and lack of shared infrastructure facilities (RBQ = 79.21) are the most severe constraints. Other significant challenges include inadequate training opportunities, dependence on middlemen, limited market exposure and rising input costs. Further, the study compares the challenges faced by registered and unregistered weavers, revealing notable disparities in access to government schemes, financial services, market platforms and skill development opportunities. While registered weavers have relatively better access to institutional support, unregistered weavers remain largely excluded, particularly in terms of government assistance and credit access. The study concludes that addressing both structural and institutional gaps is essential for strengthening the handloom sector in Manipur. Policy interventions focusing on infrastructure development, skill enhancement, improved market linkages and inclusion of unregistered weavers into formal systems are crucial for ensuring sustainable livelihood opportunities and long-term sectoral growth.

Keywords: Handloom sector, Rank Based Quotient (RBQ), weaver challenges

1. Introduction

The Indian handloom industry represents the largest cottage industry in the country and serves as the second-largest source of rural employment after agriculture. It plays a dual role in supporting livelihoods and preserving India's rich cultural heritage. Despite its historical significance and immense employment potential, the sector has been witnessing a gradual decline due to a range of structural and operational challenges that threaten both its sustainability and the livelihoods of traditional weavers (Olive *et al.*, 2021; Gali & Anjaneyulu, 2022) [7, 3].

A major set of constraints arises from financial and material limitations within the sector. Weavers often struggle with inadequate working capital, low and irregular wages, and limited access to affordable credit, which forces many to rely on high-interest informal loans. In addition, the rising cost of raw materials such as yarn and dyes, coupled with their inconsistent quality and availability, further aggravates production challenges. These financial bottlenecks directly affect productivity and profitability, making it difficult for weavers to sustain their traditional occupations (Kethan *et al.*, 2022; Singh, 2014; Naik *et al.*, 2025) [4, 9, 6].

Operational inefficiencies also significantly hinder the

growth of the handloom sector. The continued dependence on outdated technologies, poor infrastructure, and traditional production techniques limits efficiency and scalability. Long working hours under inadequate ergonomic conditions expose weavers to serious occupational health issues, reducing their overall well-being and productivity (Kethan *et al.*, 2022; Singh, 2014) [4, 9].

In addition to internal constraints, the sector faces intense external competition from power looms and machine-made fabrics, which are cheaper and produced at scale. The growing presence of synthetic substitutes further undermines the demand for authentic handloom products. This situation is compounded by weak marketing systems, including poor market linkages, lack of branding and promotional strategies, and limited integration with modern retail and global value chains. As a result, handloom products often fail to reach wider and more lucrative markets (Das & Swain, 2025; Singh, 2014) [1, 9].

Furthermore, the industry is burdened by broader socio-economic and institutional challenges. High levels of illiteracy among weavers, excessive dependence on government support, ineffective implementation of welfare schemes and the migration of younger generations to

alternative occupations have weakened the sector's long-term viability. Addressing these interconnected financial, technological, marketing and institutional constraints is essential for revitalizing the handloom industry and ensuring its competitiveness in an increasingly globalized market (Olive *et al.*, 2021; Mukhopadhyay, 2022) ^[7, 5].

In the context of Manipur, the handloom sector holds a unique socio-cultural and economic significance, particularly as a women-centric household industry deeply embedded in daily life. The state has one of the highest concentrations of weavers in India, with handloom activities serving as a primary livelihood for a large section of the population. However, the sector in Manipur faces acute challenges such as low income levels, lack of formal institutional support, and heavy dependence on local markets for both raw materials and sales. A large proportion of weavers remain unregistered and excluded from government benefits, limiting their access to financial assistance and welfare schemes. Additionally, issues such as limited market access, inadequate marketing strategies, competition from machine-made products, and lack of modern infrastructure further constrain the sector's growth. Recent socio-political disturbances have also disrupted production and export activities, exacerbating the vulnerability of weavers. Despite its rich heritage and global recognition, the handloom industry in Manipur continues to struggle with issues of commercialization, modernization, and sustainable livelihood generation (Olivia *et al.*, 2026; Government of Manipur; Textile Value Chain, 2025) ^[8, 10].

2. Objective

The present study aims (i) to identify the key challenges faced by handloom weavers in Manipur. (ii) To compare the challenges experienced by registered and unregistered weavers by of Thoubal and Imphal East districts of Manipur.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted in Thoubal district and Imphal East district of Manipur, which were purposively selected due to the high concentration of handloom weavers, as reported by the Handloom Department of Manipur. Within Thoubal district, the study covered the blocks of Lilong, Thoubal and Wangjing Tentha while in Imphal East district, the blocks of Heingang, Keirao, Kshetrigao and Sawombung were included.

A total of 600 respondents were selected for the study using a random sampling technique, ensuring representation from all the selected blocks across both districts. The selection aimed to capture a diverse set of handloom weavers,

including both registered and unregistered individuals, to facilitate a comparative analysis of their challenges.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire specifically designed to capture the challenges faced by handloom weavers and to compare the conditions of registered and unregistered weavers. The responses related to challenges were obtained through a ranking method, enabling the assessment of their relative severity, while comparative aspects were analyzed based on categorical responses.

The Rank Based Quotient (RBQ) method was used to analyze and prioritize the challenges faced by handloom weavers based on the ranks assigned by respondents. This method is widely used in socio-economic studies to convert ordinal data (ranks) into quantitative values, thereby enabling comparison and ranking of multiple factors.

In this approach, respondents were asked to rank the identified challenges according to their level of severity. The RBQ values were then calculated to determine the relative importance of each constraint. The challenge with the highest RBQ value is considered the most severe, while the one with the lowest RBQ value is regarded as the least significant. The RBQ is computed using the following formula:

$$RBQ = \frac{\sum fi(n+1-i)}{N \times n} \times 100$$

Where: fi = Number of respondents assigning the i^{th} rank; n = Total number of ranks; N = Total number of respondents. The RBQ method provides a systematic, reliable means of identifying and prioritizing key challenges, as it captures the collective perception of respondents while transforming it into a measurable index. This facilitates better interpretation and supports informed decision-making in addressing the most critical issues faced by handloom weavers.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Challenges Faced by Handloom Weavers in Manipur

The Rank Based Quotient (RBQ) analysis was carried out to prioritize the challenges faced by handloom weavers according to their perceived severity. The computed RBQ values range from 10.59 to 82.85, indicating considerable variation in the intensity of constraints experienced by the respondents. Higher RBQ values reflect challenges that are more severe and widespread, while lower values indicate comparatively less pressing issues. The results provide a clear hierarchy of problems affecting the sustainability of handloom livelihoods in the study area.

Table 1: Prioritization of Challenges Faced by Handloom Weavers Using RBQ Method

Sl. No.	Challenges	RBQ Value	Rank
1	Health problem arises from prolonged sitting and eye strain caused by intricate thread work	82.85	I
2	Frequent power outages affecting productivity in semi-urban areas	82.64	II
3	Lack of shared infrastructures such as dyeing units or furnishing centres	79.21	III
4	Decreases in sales in the wake of restricting exposure to larger buyer	66.56	V
5	Overdependence on middleman exploiting the weavers and reduce their profit margin	63.27	VI
6	Insufficient training programs to upgrade skills in updated weaving design and innovation	67.06	IV
7	High dependence on seasonal and local demands, leading to income instability	57.05	VII
8	Rising material cost resulting to lesser sales in market	52.69	VIII
9	Lack of awareness to government schemes like weaver MUDRA schemes, yarn supply schemes and training programs	50.72	X
10	Transportation problem	50.83	IX
11	Lack of formal recognition, limiting to collaboration with cooperative or import units	21.14	XI
12	Exclusive from central and state government schemes like the Yarn Supply Scheme and training programs	15.83	XII
13	In ability to participate in exhibition like the Manipur Sangai Festival or state sponsored handloom expos	10.59	XIII

The findings presented in Table 1 assume greater significance when examined in the socio-economic context of Manipur, particularly in Thoubal district and Imphal East district, where handloom weaving is deeply embedded in household livelihoods and predominantly undertaken by women. The most severe constraint identified was health problems (RBQ = 82.85, Rank I), reflecting the traditional home-based weaving system. Poor ergonomic conditions, prolonged sitting and continuous visual focus on intricate designs contribute to physical strain, which is further intensified by the dual burden of household and weaving activities.

The next major constraints were frequent power outages (RBQ = 82.64, Rank II) and lack of shared infrastructure (RBQ = 79.21, Rank III), highlighting critical infrastructural deficiencies. In Manipur, even though weaving is largely manual, electricity is essential for lighting and pre-loom activities, and irregular supply directly affects productivity. The absence of common facilities such as dyeing and finishing units increases dependence on external sources, raising production costs and limiting efficiency.

Among the moderately severe constraints, insufficient training programs (RBQ = 67.06, Rank IV) and decline in sales due to limited exposure to larger buyers (RBQ = 66.56, Rank V) indicate gaps in skill development and market access. Despite the uniqueness of Manipuri handloom products, limited integration with broader markets restricts income opportunities. This is closely followed by overdependence on middlemen (RBQ = 63.27, Rank VI), which reduces profit margins and places weavers in a weaker bargaining position.

Further, income instability due to seasonal and local demand (RBQ = 57.05, Rank VII) and rising material costs (RBQ = 52.69, Rank VIII) highlight economic vulnerabilities. The

dependence on external sources for yarn increases costs and exposes weavers to market fluctuations. Additionally, transportation problems (RBQ = 50.83, Rank IX) and lack of awareness of government schemes (RBQ = 50.72, Rank X) reflect issues related to connectivity and limited institutional outreach in the region.

Although ranked lower, constraints such as lack of formal recognition (RBQ = 21.14, Rank XI), exclusion from government schemes (RBQ = 15.83, Rank XII), and inability to participate in exhibitions (RBQ = 10.59, Rank XIII) are structurally significant, particularly for unregistered weavers. In Manipur, where a large number of weavers operate informally, these issues limit access to financial assistance, training opportunities, and wider market platforms.

Overall, the results indicate that while health problems got the first rank (82.85), second goes to power supply (82.64), and the least rank goes to limited exhibition access (10.59). Deeper issues related to market access, institutional support and formal inclusion continue to affect the long-term sustainability of the handloom sector in Manipur.

4.2 Comparison of Challenges between Registered and Unregistered Weavers

The comparison presented in Table 2 highlights notable disparities between registered and unregistered handloom weavers in Manipur, particularly across Thoubal district and Imphal East district, with respect to access to institutional support, market opportunities, and financial services. Out of the total respondents, 91 were registered weavers, whereas a majority of 509 were unregistered, indicating the predominance of informal participation in the handloom sector in these districts.

Table 2: Comparison of Challenges between Registered and Unregistered Weavers

Aspect	Advantages of Being a Registered Weaver (n = 91)	Yes (f)	No (f)	Challenges of Being an Unregistered Weaver (n = 509)	Yes (f)	No (f)
Government Support	Access to Government schemes	50	41	No access to government support or subsidized resources.	500	9
Market Access	Eligible for participation in state-sponsored expos and fairs.	52	39	Limited to local markets and middlemen for selling products.	186	323
Recognition	Recognized by cooperatives and eligible for collective bargaining power.	43	48	Lack of formal recognition, leading to exploitation by traders.	229	280
Training Opportunities	Access to state organized workshops for skill enhancement.	42	49	Lack of opportunities to upgrade skills and learn modern designs.	253	256
Financial Access	Easier access to loans through cooperative banks or government schemes.	20	71	Difficulty obtaining credit due to lack of formal documentation.	405	104

With regard to government support, 50 out of 91 registered weavers reported access to government schemes while 41 respondents indicated lack of such benefits, suggesting partial reach and utilization even among registered weavers. In contrast, an overwhelming majority of unregistered weavers (500 out of 509) reported lack of access to government support and subsidized resources, reflecting clear institutional exclusion in both districts.

In terms of market access, 52 registered weavers reported eligibility to participate in state-sponsored exhibitions and fairs whereas 39 respondents did not avail such opportunities. Among unregistered weavers, 186 respondents indicated some degree of market access; however, a larger proportion (323) remained confined to local markets and dependent on intermediaries, thereby limiting their income potential,

particularly in rural and semi-urban areas of the selected districts.

Regarding recognition, 43 registered weavers reported being recognized by cooperatives and benefiting from collective bargaining mechanisms, while 48 did not experience such advantages. Among unregistered weavers, 229 respondents reported lack of formal recognition, often leading to exploitation by traders whereas 280 respondents did not explicitly report this issue.

With respect to training opportunities, 42 registered weavers had access to state-organized skill development programs while 49 lacked such exposure, indicating gaps in training outreach. Among unregistered weavers, 253 respondents reported lack of opportunities for skill upgradation, while 256 indicated some level of access, suggesting uneven

dissemination of training initiatives across Thoubal and Imphal East districts.

In the context of financial access, only 20 registered weavers reported ease in obtaining institutional credit whereas a majority (71) faced difficulties. The situation is more severe among unregistered weavers where 405 respondents reported difficulty in accessing credit due to lack of formal documentation, compared to 104 respondents who did not face such constraints.

Overall, the findings indicate that although registration provides certain advantages in terms of access to schemes, markets and institutional support, these benefits are not uniformly realized. At the same time, unregistered weavers in Thoubal and Imphal East districts remain significantly disadvantaged, particularly in accessing government support and financial services, highlighting the need for inclusive and targeted policy interventions to strengthen the handloom sector in Manipur.

5. Summary and Conclusion

The study examined the challenges faced by handloom weavers in Manipur, with a specific focus on Thoubal district and Imphal East district, based on a sample of 600 respondents. Using the Rank Based Quotient (RBQ) approach, the findings reveal that health-related issues (RBQ = 82.85), frequent power outages (RBQ = 82.64), and lack of shared infrastructure (RBQ = 79.21) are the most critical challenges affecting weavers' productivity and well-being. Additional constraints such as inadequate training, limited market exposure, dependence on middlemen, seasonal demand fluctuations and rising input costs further contribute to income instability and reduced profitability.

The comparison between registered and unregistered weavers highlights significant disparities in access to institutional support. While registered weavers demonstrate relatively better access to government schemes, training, market platforms and financial services, these advantages are not uniformly experienced across all respondents. In contrast, unregistered weavers remain largely excluded, particularly in terms of government support and financial access, indicating a high degree of informality within the sector.

Overall, the study underscores that the handloom sector in Manipur is constrained by a combination of structural, economic and institutional challenges. The persistence of these issues, even among registered weavers, points to gaps in policy implementation and outreach. Therefore, there is an urgent need for inclusive and targeted interventions focusing on improving working conditions, strengthening infrastructure, enhancing market linkages, and expanding access to credit and skill development. Bringing unregistered weavers into the formal system through awareness and simplified registration processes is essential for ensuring equitable growth and long-term sustainability of the sector.

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