



THE REVIVAL OF MAHESHWARI SARIS AND THEIR CONTEMPORARY CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS COMMUNITY WELFARE

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Abstract

The Maheshwar region in Madhya Pradesh started emerging as a weaving centre from 5th century onwards. It was given an impetus by Devi Ahilyabai Holkar, who developed the industry as a source of income for women of Maheshwar area. She encouraged the designs on the saris to be derived from the Maheshwar fort. However, with the introduction of industrialization and power looms, Maheshwari saris started experiencing a slow setback. This was noticed by Prince Richard Holkar and his wife Sally Holkar, descendants of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar. They established Rehwa Society in 1978 which is preserving the traditional handicraft of the region along with working towards employment generation, social welfare and environment protection. The work of Rehwa society is an ideal example for other states of India about how to utilize handloom sector as a major contributor to the Gross Domestic Product of the nation thus blending innovation with tradition.

Key words- Maheshwari saris, Devi Ahilyabai Holkar, Maheshwar, Traditional Handloom, Innovation.

Introduction

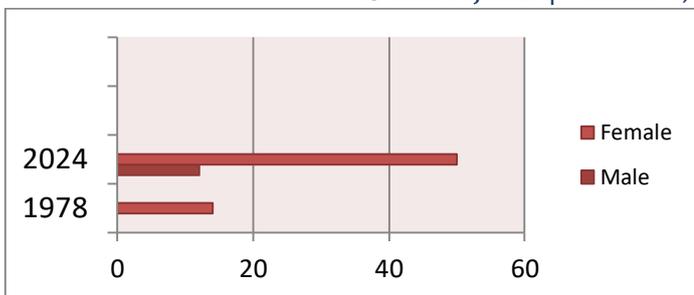
Ancient texts mention Maheshwar as "Mahishmati". The Peshwas of Pune extended Maratha kingdom up to North and placed their confidante as managers/caretakers of the vast northern plains. The Holkars were one such clan which ruled the region around current Madhya Pradesh. Subhedar Malharrao Holkar was the chief of the clan who was instrumental in developing the area of Mandu, Maheshwar and Indore.

However, the reign of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar was remarkable in terms of her efforts to uplift the women, immense social work along with efficient administration. Maheshwar had already started evolving as a major weaving centre around the 12th century and started adopting new techniques in weaving. After Devi Ahilyabai Holkar took over as the Queen of the region, she promoted Maheshwari saris as a source of employment for women. It was her idea to weave designs of Maheshwar fort on the saris. These saris were gifted to royal houses, important people and thus became increasingly popular.

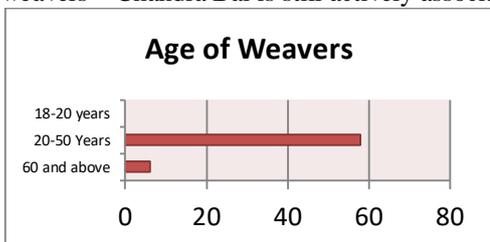
However, with the onset of the British rule and industrialization, the handloom Maheshwari saris faced a setback. With the decline in royal patronage and changing preferences of people, these saris were out of fashion. It was noticed by Prince Richard Holkar and his wife Sally Holkar who decided to revive Maheshwari saris as a source of employment generation and income for women in Maheshwar region. The idea of Devi Ahilyabai Holkar was rejuvenated by the current generation of Holkar family. This led to the establishment of Rehwa Society in the Maheshwar fort complex.

The Rehwa Society and its contribution

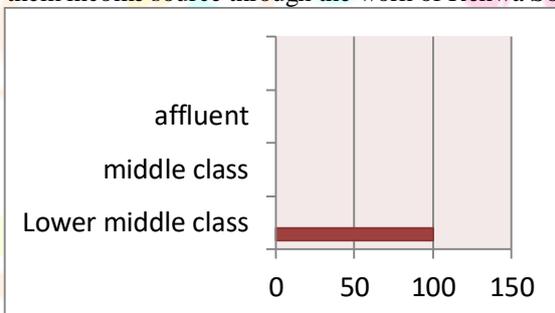
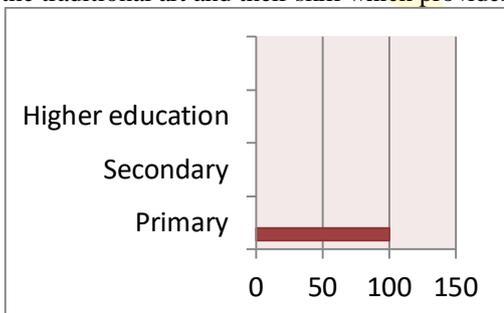
The Rehwa Society was founded in 1978 – 1979 as a non-profit organization working towards reviving Maheshwari saris. They received a grant from the Central Welfare Board and an investment of Rs 79,000/- to train weavers. Mr Ganesh Bichwe – Master Weaver trained 12 women who joined Rehwa Society in 1978. Today, the society has 64 weavers in total which comprises of 50 women weavers and 14 men weavers assisted by 30 staff members.



Closely looking at the composition of the weaver community employed under Rehwa Society helps understanding the valuable contribution it has made to the society. Currently, the weavers are aged between 20 – 50 years of age, dedicating the most productive years of their life to the society. Only 6 weavers are above 60 years of age. It is to be noted that the one of the first 12 weavers – Chandra Bai is still actively associated with the Rehwa Society even today.



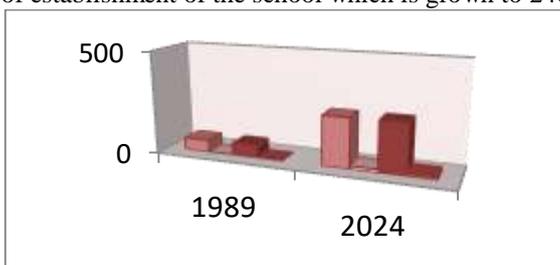
These weavers have completed only their primary education and belong to the lower middle class family background. It is only the traditional art and their skill which provides them income source through the work of Rehwa Society.



The average monthly production of quality textiles by the weavers is approximately 1100-1300 saris. Approximately a weaver needs 1 week to weave 2 Maheshwari saris. The Rehwa Saris cost ranges between Rs. 999/- to 3999/- per piece. The work of 5-6 hours per day gives the weavers a monthly income of approximately Rs. 5000/- to 8000/-.The weavers are provided with the Provident Fund and Health Care facility.

The Rehwa society has built 40 houses with stable electricity and water supply and a hospital in Ahilya Vihar Colony near Ahilya Fort. These houses are provided to the weavers at a subsidized rate. This has improved the standard of living of the weavers.

From the point of view of ensuring a bright future of the children of the weaver community, the society has established Ahilya Bal Jyoti School with the help of BORDA- a German Aid Organization in 1989. There were 60 students and 2 teachers at the time of establishment of the school which is grown to 240 students and 16 teachers currently.



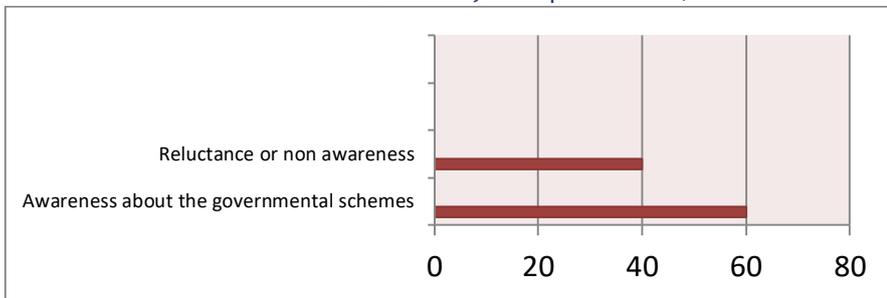
Vision of the Rehwa Society

Though Rehwa Society is the oldest such organization working towards the betterment of the community weavers. It is striving for the betterment of the community further through upgrading the income rendered to the weavers. The power looms have posed a threat to the skilled handloom weavers due to which the threat of losing their livelihood looms over them. The society also aims at improving the education being rendered through the Ahilya Jyoti School to the children of weaver community.

Maheshwari Saris and the Government schemes

This traditional handicraft is a part of initiatives by the Madhya Pradesh State Government under the लघु उद्योग निगम and has acquired the “Geographical Indicator” (GI Tag) status from the Central Government. It is a part of the “Viraasat Scheme” promoting textile heritage by the Government of India.

The weaver community is also aware about the various state and central government schemes working towards the betterment of the community. However, some of the community members are reluctant to opt for the benefits due to large amount of paperwork required.



Conclusion

The work of Rehwa Society narrates the scope of a traditional textile being turned into an income source and a key driver of employment. The textile industry comprises of 5% of the Gross Domestic Product of the Indian Economy. The Rehwa society has employed only 64 weavers out of a total number of 9360 weavers weaving the Maheshwari saris. This highlights the immense scope of textile industry as an employment driver. It stands out as a project since it has blended tradition with innovation, involving men and women alike into weaving not only Maheshwari saris but also dress materials, masks, stoles etc. the use of Azo free products and ski friendly dye makes these products environment friendly and sustainable. The women weavers are respected by the male counterparts leading to change in the attitude of men centric systems.

The example of Rehwa Society and its contribution can work as an ideal example for the other states of India to blend tradition with innovation while practicing sustainability and making textile heritage a key economic force.

Select Photographs



Devi Ahilyabai Holkar



Maheshwari textile



Ahilya Bal Jyoti School



Women weavers

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