

SUSTAINABLE TEXTILES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HAND LOOM WEAVER

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Abstract

What do we mean by the sustainable production of textiles? And what do we mean by cultural heritage? How do these issues relate to the hand loom weaver, his community, his village? This presentation will critically examine these far-reaching questions by taking the case study of the socio-economic, holistic initiative, Five P Venture. Working with hand loom weavers at the grassroots level in the village of Chennimalai, South India, Five P Venture has created an infrastructure which has helped to sustain and develop the core skills of these weavers - learnt by hand and eye over generations – fostering an environment which connects them with national and international designers to create innovative designs in hand woven fabrics in linen, recycled and organic cotton for today's global consumer. The ethos of Five P is to 'Preserve, Promote and Protect our heritage, for our Posterity and our Prosperity. Transforming lives. Transforming villages'.

Keywords: heritage, socio-economic, holistic initiative, Five P Venture

Introduction

Chennimalai is situated in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India. It has a long standing heritage of producing hand loom woven textiles (mostly bed sheets) for national and international markets. For generations, the handloom weavers have continued in their patient and timeless traditional craft, often creating complex woven textiles. However, demand for their hand woven products has steadily declined, losing out to the power loom sector, amongst other factors.

In 2013 Five P Venture was established to take up the challenge of reviving the declining hand loom weaving sector in this semi-rural part of South India with the primary objectives to create a sustainable business model which is socially, environmentally and economically viable so that textiles can be produced by hand loom weavers, allowing them to reclaim their market position, elevate their status, and create designs which adapt to the needs of the global modern day consumer. Or to put it another way, to create sustainable hand woven textiles which were not just kind to the environment but also kind to the hand loom weaver.

This presentation will explain how the issue of sustainability has been tackled and reconstructed by Five P Venture.

Materials and Methods

Five P Venture initially started with a feasibility study carried out by Hydra Consulting from 2011 - 2012 in Chennimalai, assessing the current output, systems of working practises by the hand loom weavers, current business models, engaging directly with the hand loom weavers, and assessing their outlook and needs.[i]¹ A Heritage case study was also carried out, introducing Australian designers to the potential of hand loom weaving and exploring how these traditional skills could be adapted into contemporary designs. [ii]ⁱⁱ

Results

1.1 The problems faced by the hand loom weavers of Chennimalai

Overall, the results of the study identified that:-

- i) there was an overwhelming feeling in the hand loom weaving community in Chennimalai that the status of the hand woven textiles had lost its market place.
- ii) The remaining artisans continued to weave partly to qualify / remain eligible for government subsidies (with female family members taking over if the men worked part time elsewhere) while others who could not do any other work due to their age, continued to weave.
- iii) The weavers had a bleak outlook for the future generations wishing to continue in the handloom weaving profession as wages and prospects were poor, plus it was a physically strenuous job.
- iv) Due to the slower turn-around time of producing hand woven cloth, the weavers were rapidly losing out to the power loom merchants.
- v) Despite subsidies and the cooperatives, they were restricted to producing set patterns and colourways and subsequently unable to create innovative textiles.
- vi) The weavers working under cooperative systems surrendered their creative output and were financially capped.
- vii) The cooperatives were unable to retain the 'value' of their products because the so-called protected designs (assigned by governmental bodies) were being copied by the power loom producers and to the average consumer, the two products side by side would be difficult to distinguish.

1.2 Five P Venture's Strategic Intervention: long-term vision and sustainability

For most handloom weavers in Chennimalai, sustainability means survival and getting respectable work all year round. In this village, there are no lack of skills and technical expertise. However more can be done to inspire creative leadership, courage and commitment. At Five P Venture a positive and proactive approach is followed to develop new strategies based on design. By doing this, there is a clear guide to ensure security and stability. Innovative design coupled with a solid infrastructure can help weavers revive their confidence and restore their competitive spirit.

Five P Venture offers a holistic solution to help the hand loom weavers by working with them at the grassroots level. The aim is to educate the weavers and encourage them to learn and experiment with new designs. The business model is based on inclusive activities, connecting with designers and physically placing them side by side with the hand loom weavers – something that had never been provided for the majority of hand loom weavers under the cooperative systems.

Since its foundation, Five P Venture has connected with national and international designers, based in Australia and most recently, Italy. Having invited them to India to meet with the weavers, these designers saw the potential of their traditional hand woven jacquard techniques and brought a contemporary sensibility to their designs, creating innovative sustainable textiles in (for example) eco denim, organic and naturally dyed cotton.

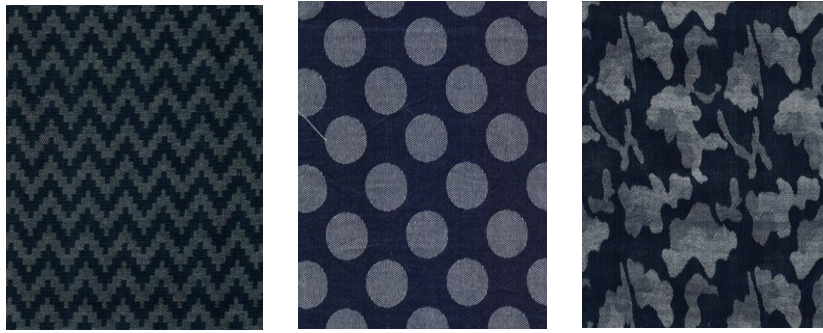


Figure.1. Three examples from the Eco Denim range produced by Five P Venture in collaboration with three Australian designers (examples will be available for delegates to handle at the conference)

The textiles produced by the hand loom weavers are created from organic cotton and recycled yarns, sourced within India. Once the yarn arrives on site, the yarn is hand spun and kept ready for threading into the frame and jacquard looms.

The weavers are paid a substantially higher salary compared to their previous earnings under the cooperative system. They will also eventually be able to draw dividends and have shares in the company. Their working practices comply with ESG standards, ensuring safe working practices which are regularly monitored.

The site occupied by Five P Venture has brand new purpose built facilities for the weavers. Two loom sheds which have been built to be Green Building Compliant have allowed for a greater circulation of air and light. The weavers no longer work in cramped, over-heated conditions. They now work in a light, spacious loom shed where natural light and ventilation, enhanced by natural building materials such as porotherm bricks, ensure optimum working conditions.



Figure.2. Floor Plan and Bird's Eye View plan of the Five P Venture facility in Chennimalai

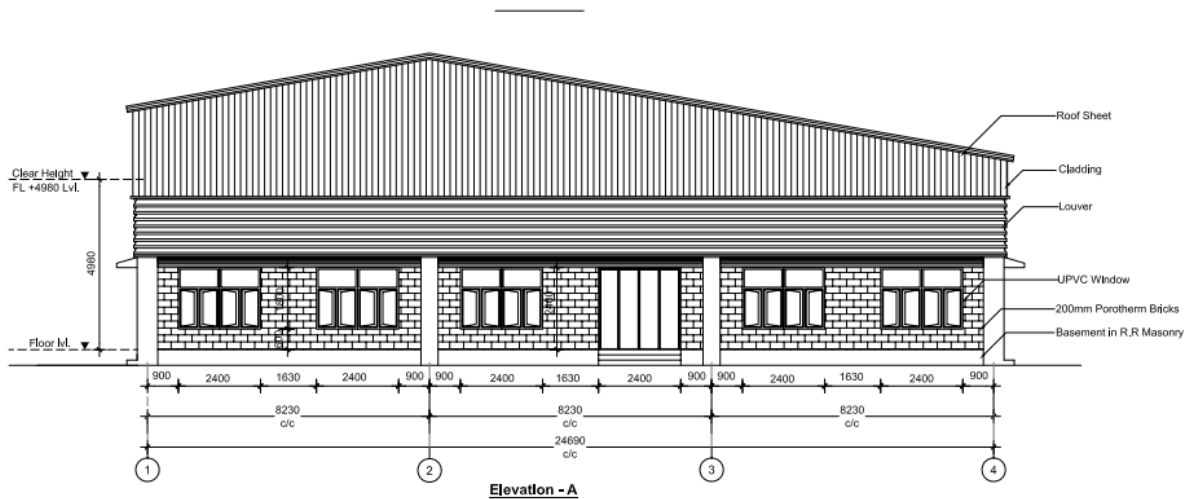


Figure. 3 Side elevation of one of the loom sheds: note the ‘apex’ roof structure, use of natural light and 200mm porotherm bricks



Figure. 4 a. Inside a newly built loom shed at Five P Venture



Figure. 4 b. Jacquard weaver at Five P Venture

The site is further supported by solar panning and solar energy, using natural and recycled materials in the construction of the buildings. The buildings and site are designed so that rainwater can be recycled and harvested, irrigating plants and fruit trees, as well as supplying the water for on site facilities.

Hydra has implemented at Five P Venture the 2PD (Prevent Degradation and Prevent Depletion) x 2 PR (Promote Replenishment and Promote Revitalization) framework which is applied to air, water and soil in almost all major decisions that have been undertaken to date to complete this project. So far, this has been implemented in

- a) Building
- b) Manufacturing Processes
- c) Product Design

- d) The way the products are moved to the shipment points
- e) Packaging material and designs
- f) The way the product is designed to be used / consumed.
- g) The way they are designed to be disposed

As the business expands the site will be developed further to include all facilities on one site such as eco-dyeing, hand-stitching and embellishing units, so that a complete service is carried out efficiently with a minimum carbon footprint.

Currently, Five P Venture produces hand woven and hand embellished apparel for Sita Bell, [3]ⁱⁱⁱ a British fashion designer and produces a niche homeware range for Bandhini Australia.[4]^{iv}



Figure. 5a. Sita Bell website



Figure. 5b. Bandhini website

Conclusion

Sustainable textiles in the context of the hand loom weaver encompasses a holistic vision, taking into account the environment, the physical working conditions of the hand loom weaver, the hand loom weaver's reality in terms of his social and economic status and innovative design.

There are many handloom weaving clusters, such as Chennimalai, which can still chart their own road map to success by placing sustainability as the key focal point of entrepreneurial activity. The core objective of sustainable hand woven textiles is to enhance the quality of life through creative solutions. After all, user-centric approaches to hand woven textile designs can create a sustainable flow.

Five P believes that hand woven textiles produced in an environmentally friendly and safe

environment combined with contemporary design can appeal to a new generation – not necessarily the young – but a new generation who have not been exposed to handloom products – enabling them to discover a unique identity and expression to match their sensibilities and lifestyles. I believe that at Five P, with new design development and diversification, we can leverage a hopeful and strong future for the handloom weaving community at Chennimalai.

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