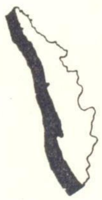
KERALA



Handloom gloom

Though handloom fabrics continue to entice those with a liking for the *desi* look, sales are woefully sluggish. Traditional weavers have to struggle to stay afloat in a market flooded with cheaper and better textiles from the organised mill and powerloom sectors. In Kerala, these weavers are idle for want of work and their children are fast opting out of this non-paying tradition.

Kerala weavers have been especially hit since their products have never, in any case, had a prominent national appeal. The state governments' efforts to improve their lot have been inept. One such attempt is embodied in the Kerala State Handloom Development Corporation Ltd (KSHDC). So far the corporation has been largely ineffective, but it is now reorienting itself to try and lift the Kerala handloom industry out of its morass.

The problem with KSHDC is that it began in 1968 as a financing corporation, giving out loans to Kerala's small scale weavers. Apart from having its loans serviced, the corporation has done little else. It has not given much thought to the consumers, nor has it been overly eager to polish the local handloom industry. Even after it changed into a development corporation, the KSHDC has remained limited in its perspective and has a distorted structure and culture. Admits Darlie Oomen Koshy, managing director, "In 18 years of its existence, the corporation has had no tradition of consumer orientation. Instead, we have had expenditure-oriented government officers eager only to somehow complete projects."

KSHDC has on hand two intensive handloom development projects and one export production project. These schemes, sponsored by the union government, have an outlay of a little over Rs 5 crores. They are concentrated in Kerala's traditional handloom areas — Cannanore in the north, and Trivandrum in the south. In 1985-86, these two areas, comprising 32 production clusters, produced over 2.1 million metres valued at Rs 2.5 crores. The corporation's total turnover crossed Rs 8 crores.

This is a far cry from the 1969-70 turnover of Rs 41.52 lakhs. Nevertheless, one has only to glance across the state to realise how cheerless these figure are. Tamil Nadu's Co-optex has a turnover of Rs 95 crores; up north UP Handlooms has one of Rs 60 crores.

One prime reason for Kerala's lag is the

Koshy: fighting to improve KSHDC

fewer number of active looms. It has 90,000 looms, compared with Tamil Nadu's 556,000, Andhra Pradesh's 630,000 and UP's 590,000. What is worse, only 30 per cent of Kerala's looms are active.

Moreover, Kerala has no product range attractive enough for a wide national appeal. Explains Koshy, who has had 11 years of experience in the trade and was last with the National Handloom Development Corporation, Lucknow, "Kerala handlooms have always been very weak in sarees. Apart from two small pockets of saree weaving, we do not have anything that could have a national appeal. On the other hand, other states have a very strong saree range. Andhra Pradesh has its tye-and-dye and Pochampally, Tamil Nadu its Kanchipuram, Rajasthan its Kota, Madhya Pradesh its Maheshwari...."

Furthermore, Kerala handlooms cannot boast of any high-value items, usually produced from blended yarns. About 40 per ent of its total production is confined to double *dhotis* and *mundu* sets — apparel which has negligible demand outside the south.

Apart from the onslaught of cheaper polyesters, Kerala's range remains narrow because of poor processing facilities. The Common Facility Service Centre at Chirakkal was set up in 1982 to offer pre-loom and post-loom processing support, and assistance for design and pattern weaving. However, it currently provides for only dyeing of yarn. It has no facilities for preparation of warp, sizing, etc. While some machines have yet to be erected, existing ones languish from poor repair and maintenance. Not strangely, the current processing facilities are underutilised.

To turn this situation around and impart some sorely needed allure to Kerala handlooms, KSHDC has recenty roped in a designer from Tamil Nadu and also sought the expertise of the National Institute of Design. The corporation hopes to produce some exclusive design for the government of India's national collection.

Despite the fanfare with which KSHDC opened its exclusive showroom in Cochin recently, its domestic marketing infrastructure is still weak. It comprises 26 showrooms in Kerala (and only 2 outside, in Karnataka) and 86 agency showrooms run on a 12 per cent commission. KSHDC certainly needs more retail outlets beyond its borders if it hopes to have a national presence. More importantly, it needs to inculcate an attribute of marketing it has never had — aggressiveness.

Koshy feels that past state governments have neglected the importance of Kerala's handloom industry. He points to successful Tamil Nadu, which has a separate ministry for handlooms. The Kerala government, he feels, needs at least a secretary for handlooms.

In this gloom, however, one glimmer of hope is the recent achievement of Kerala Garments Ltd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of KSHDC, incorporated in 1974. It bagged an order from an American buyer for 41,000 readymade shirts to be sold in the US under famed brand names like James River Traders and Perry Ellis.

The designs are the buyers', but the fabric is KSHDC's and the shirts will be made entirely by the 209 workers of Kerala Garments. All the sewing workers are women and they can turn out 600 shirts in one shift. The first consignment was partly marred by the presence of some cotton seeds in the shirts. But since then the yarns are specially manufactured for this order by NTC and the Cannanore Cooperative Spinning Mills.

KSHDC's export potential has also been boosted with government sanction for two pre-loom units for readymades, each costing Rs 7.5 lakhs. One is for warp and sizing, the other for impact dyeing.

KSHDC is also eyeing the huge USSR market which it hopes to enter through the STC. Russians, however, have a penchant for fused collar shirts and a fusing machine is what KSHDC does not have. At Rs 15 to Rs 20 lakhs, its cost is prohibitive, but KSHDC hopes to persuade the STC to invest in such a machine. Koshy is optimistic that the STC will do so since no other state sector organisation has a garment factory.

The KSHDC's target for 1990 is a total turnover of over Rs 1,924 lakhs, ie, 13.6 million metres of cotton and 1.65 million metres of polyester. This is an achievable target, but only if KSHDC can ensure adequate and prompt distribution of yarn to the weavers, get them to substantially increase their productivity and, most vitally, inject itself with some marketing savvy.

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