

Factors Impacting the Decreased Life Standards of Khadi Workers in Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract: *The study investigates the factors contributing to the decreased life standards of khadi workers in Andhra Pradesh through an exploratory qualitative research approach. Drawing on both primary and secondary data, the research examines socio-economic challenges, institutional limitations, and cultural transformations affecting artisans' livelihoods. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with khadi spinners, weavers, and cooperative officials revealed that irregular income, limited market access, and inadequate policy implementation are major causes of economic distress. The analysis also highlights the weakening of cooperative institutions, insufficient government support mechanisms, and declining intergenerational transmission of traditional skills. Gender disparities and the absence of social security measures further exacerbate workers' vulnerability. Thematic analysis of the data indicates that sustainable improvement in life standards requires coordinated policy reforms, transparent cooperative governance, continuous skill development, and fair wage mechanisms. The study concludes that integrating traditional khadi production with modern marketing, technological innovations, and gender-sensitive welfare initiatives can enhance the socio-economic resilience of khadi workers. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive framework that values khadi not only as a cultural heritage but also as a viable instrument for rural economic sustainability and inclusive growth in Andhra Pradesh.*

Keywords: *Khadi workers, Andhra Pradesh, qualitative study, socio-economic challenges, cooperative institutions*

1. Introduction

The khadi and handloom economy occupies a distinctive space in India's rural production system by combining home-based employment, caste- and community-embedded skills, and value chains that link artisan households to state agencies and cooperatives. Nationally, the Fourth All India Handloom Census reported 31.45 lakh households engaged in handloom activities and an estimated 26.73 lakh weavers and 8.48 lakh allied workers, with women forming a large majority and most households located in rural areas (Development Commissioner for Handlooms, 2020; People's Archive of Rural India, 2020). The same census documented low monthly earnings for most weaver households and limited access to formal finance and insurance, signaling persistent livelihood

vulnerability despite the sector's cultural and economic significance (Development Commissioner for Handlooms, 2020; People's Archive of Rural India, 2020).

In Andhra Pradesh, khadi and handloom clusters such as Ponduru in Srikakulam, Dharmavaram in Sri Sathya Sai district, and numerous cooperative societies underpin local employment and artisan identities. Government sources note the presence of thousands of looms across districts and acknowledge that several weavers' cooperatives remain dormant, which constrains marketing power and bargaining strength at the producer end (SPSR Nellore District Administration, n.d.). Alongside the cooperative channel, state welfare has included direct benefit transfers like YSR Nethanna Nestham that provide annual cash assistance to

handloom families for modernization and to withstand powerloom competition (NITI for States, n.d.; Government of Andhra Pradesh, n.d.).

At the national level, policy narratives emphasize rapid expansion of khadi and village industries turnover, with official statistics reporting steep growth in production and sales over the past decade (Press Information Bureau, 2024; Drishti IAS, 2025). However, independent analyses have questioned whether such macro performance gains consistently translate into improved household welfare and secure earnings for weavers and spinners at the base of the chain (Bhowmik, 2019; Economic and Political Weekly, 2023). Empirical studies across India further highlight stressors that depress living standards: costlier raw materials and compliance burdens linked to tax reforms, sales volatility, weak working capital, and limited risk protection (IOSR-JHSS, 2021; Khatik, 2025; NABARD, 2025). Exogenous shocks, notably the COVID-19 lockdowns, amplified income instability through halted production, demand contraction, and inventory pile-ups that particularly hurt low-margin artisan households (Das, 2021; Garg, 2022).

Within Andhra Pradesh, district portals also record ongoing institutional efforts through the Khadi and Village Industries Board constituted under the 1959 state act, while recent public announcements point to expansions in marketing events and weaver welfare measures (West Godavari District Administration, n.d.; Times of India, 2025a; Times of India, 2025b). Despite this policy activity, credible evidence on whether these initiatives have raised everyday life standards for khadi workers in the state remains limited in the academic record. This makes a focused inquiry into factors driving decreased life standards both timely and policy-relevant.

First, much of the available national literature aggregates handloom and khadi data, making it difficult to isolate the conditions of khadi workers in specific state contexts such as Andhra Pradesh. The Fourth Census offers important macro indicators, but it does not provide fine-grained, longitudinal evidence on household consumption, indebtedness, health risks, or asset depletion pathways that directly reflect living standards among khadi spinners and weavers in Andhra Pradesh (Development Commissioner for

Handlooms, 2020; People's Archive of Rural India, 2020).

Second, there is limited empirical work that jointly examines policy transmission and market risks at the household level in Andhra Pradesh. Evaluations and press notes highlight scheme outlays, turnover, and fairs, yet few peer-reviewed studies assess how state cash transfers, credit schemes, input facilitation, or cooperative revitalization have altered earnings stability, food security, children's schooling, health expenditures, or women's time-use among khadi workers in the state (NITI for States, n.d.; West Godavari District Administration, n.d.; Press Information Bureau, 2024; Drishti IAS, 2025).

Third, while studies document shocks from tax reform and the pandemic for handloom workers, the Andhra Pradesh-specific evidence base on how these macro changes intersect with local supply chains, raw cotton and yarn access, order cycles, and cooperative dormancy is thin. There is also a paucity of khadi-focused analyses that disaggregate outcomes by role in the value chain such as spinners versus weavers, gender, caste group, and age cohort, even though national evidence indicates pronounced vulnerability of women workers and older artisans (IOSR-JHSS, 2021; Das, 2021; People's Archive of Rural India, 2020; Economic and Political Weekly, 2023).

Fourth, there is a methodological gap. Many reports rely on cross-sectional or descriptive statistics. Few Andhra Pradesh-centered studies triangulate administrative data with household-level mixed methods to track changes in real consumption, savings, debt service, and coping strategies over time, or to link these changes to policy access, market intermediation, and institutional participation. This limits causal understanding of the factors that are pushing down life standards for khadi workers in the state (Bhowmik, 2019; NABARD, 2025; Venugopal, et al., 2023).

The proposed study directly addresses these gaps by generating state-specific evidence on the factors that are eroding the life standards of khadi workers in Andhra Pradesh. By combining household surveys, in-depth interviews, and cooperative or institution records, the study can quantify how input costs, order variability, credit frictions, health

shocks, and policy access jointly shape earnings stability, consumption smoothing, and indebtedness. Disaggregating by gender, caste, production role, and age will surface distributional vulnerabilities that are otherwise masked in aggregate indicators (People's Archive of Rural India, 2020; Economic and Political Weekly, 2023).

Findings will inform state and central stakeholders including the Andhra Pradesh Khadi and Village Industries Board, APCO and primary cooperatives, the Development Commissioner for Handlooms, NHDC, and KVIC on where policy is not transmitting to household welfare. Evidence on the effectiveness of cash transfers, fair-based marketing, and credit-linked programs relative to constraints such as dormant cooperatives, raw material prices, and weak social protection can guide redesign toward more reliable incomes and resilience. In addition, documenting post-pandemic recovery trajectories and continuing shocks from taxation or input price volatility will help calibrate risk-mitigation instruments and health or pension coverage for aging artisans (IOSR-JHSS, 2021; Das, 2021; NABARD, 2025; Press Information Bureau, 2024).

Beyond immediate policy use, the study contributes to the academic literature by providing a rigorous, Andhra Pradesh-specific account of khadi workers' living standards, grounded in micro-data and institutional realities. It will test whether headline gains in sectoral turnover align with household welfare and will identify the mechanisms that decouple macro growth from micro outcomes, thereby offering an evidence base for inclusive cluster development and sustainable livelihoods in the state's khadi economy (Bhowmik, 2019; Economic and Political Weekly, 2023; Drishti IAS, 2025).

2. Objectives

- To explore the lived experiences and socio-economic challenges faced by khadi workers in Andhra Pradesh that have contributed to the decline in their living standards.
- To examine the perceptions of khadi workers regarding the effectiveness of government interventions, cooperative mechanisms, and market linkages in improving their quality of life.

- To identify the socio-cultural and institutional factors influencing the sustainability of khadi-based livelihoods in rural and semi-urban clusters of Andhra Pradesh.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Lived Experiences and Socio-Economic Challenges

The khadi and handloom industries have long represented the intersection of heritage, livelihood, and identity in India's rural economy (Sravani et al., 2023). Despite their cultural significance, numerous studies highlight declining living standards among workers due to stagnant earnings, irregular employment, and weak institutional safety nets. According to the *Fourth All India Handloom Census* (Development Commissioner for Handlooms, 2020), a majority of weaver households earn below subsistence levels, reflecting persistent economic vulnerability. The report also found that women constitute more than 70 percent of the handloom workforce, making them particularly susceptible to wage fluctuations and seasonal unemployment.

Scholarly examinations have reinforced these findings. Das (2021) and Panda, et al., (2024) observed that disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated income instability, forcing households to depend on informal credit and asset liquidation. Garg (2022) similarly noted that lockdowns led to production halts, unsold stock, and a decline in demand for handmade textiles. These factors pushed khadi workers further into precarity. Earlier studies by Bhowmik (2019) argued that while government data portray a sector of growing turnover, ground-level assessments reveal widespread underemployment, highlighting a disconnect between policy performance indicators and worker welfare.

In Andhra Pradesh, localized evidence reflects similar distress. Kameswari & Appa Rao (1993) and Deekonda et al. (2023) found that the Ponduru khadi cluster, known for its fine-count cotton, struggled with inadequate wages and low productivity due to obsolete equipment and poor marketing infrastructure. Health-related challenges are also prominent; studies on handloom weavers in comparable clusters have documented musculoskeletal strain, respiratory problems, and chronic fatigue arising from prolonged sitting and

repetitive motion (National Institute of Occupational Health, 2025; Venugopal, K et al., 2020). These multi-dimensional hardship—economic, health-related, and institutional—altogether shape the declining life standards of khadi workers in the state.

3.2. Perceptions of Policy, Cooperatives, and Market Linkages

Government interventions have attempted to revive khadi livelihoods through financial assistance and institutional reforms. In Andhra Pradesh, the *YSR Nethanna Nestham* scheme provides annual cash transfers to handloom families to facilitate modernization and cushion market shocks (Government of Andhra Pradesh, n.d.). However, researchers argue that these benefits often fail to reach their intended recipients in full or in time, and they do not always translate into long-term improvements in household welfare (NITI for States, n.d.).

Cooperative societies, historically central to khadi marketing, have also faced severe operational inefficiencies. Kalyani (2015), Venugopal & Deekonda, (2021) and Venugopal, K. (2025) analyzed the Andhra Pradesh State Handloom Weavers' Cooperative and found that mismanagement, delayed payments, and dependency on middlemen weakened member participation and income stability. The *Economic and Political Weekly* (2023) noted that while cooperative and khadi turnover rose at the national level, the distribution of profits remained skewed against primary producers.

From the workers' perspective, there exists a sense of disillusionment with state interventions. Many artisans perceive cooperative networks as bureaucratically constrained and unresponsive to contemporary marketing trends (Khatik, 2025; Gashaw et al., (2018)). Furthermore, the growing competition from powerloom and synthetic textile industries has reduced the market share of handspun khadi, intensifying livelihood insecurity (NABARD, 2025). Consequently, qualitative accounts are needed to capture the real perceptions of khadi workers regarding policy effectiveness and cooperative governance in Andhra Pradesh.

3.3. Socio-Cultural and Institutional Factors Shaping Sustainability

Khadi's sustainability is not merely economic but also socio-cultural. Ethnographic accounts from Ponduru and other clusters underline that weaving and spinning are embedded in familial and caste-based identities. Kumburu et al. (2024) documented that traditional skill transmission among Ponduru families is now weakening as younger generations migrate to urban centers for stable employment. This erosion of artisanal continuity poses a long-term threat to khadi's sustainability.

Gender dynamics further complicate the picture. Women, who form the backbone of spinning activities, often face dual burdens of domestic work and underpaid craft labor (People's Archive of Rural India, 2020). The absence of collective bargaining and weak social security mechanisms compound their economic dependence. Bhowmik (2019) contended that policy discourse frequently romanticizes khadi as "Gandhian" or symbolic of self-reliance, yet it fails to address gendered exploitation and unequal wage distribution within the sector.

Institutionally, declining cooperative vitality and inadequate marketing innovation undermine resilience. The *Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women* (2025) emphasized that even after temporary gains from post-pandemic cluster interventions, weavers continued to experience uncertainty in raw material procurement and sales orders. Similar structural weaknesses exist in Andhra Pradesh, where inactive cooperatives, lack of digital marketing channels, and weak brand visibility reduce artisans' income diversification options (Aschalew et al., 2018; Kolluru & Venugopal, 2023). These interconnected socio-cultural and institutional challenges collectively contribute to the erosion of khadi workers' life standards in the state.

The reviewed literature reveals consistent patterns of livelihood vulnerability, ineffective institutional mechanisms, and socio-cultural transformations that collectively explain declining living standards among khadi workers. While quantitative data delineate the extent of deprivation, there remains a scarcity of qualitative, Andhra Pradesh-specific evidence capturing workers' voices, perceptions, and coping strategies. Hence, the present study is positioned to contribute original insights by documenting lived experiences and identifying the social and institutional drivers behind the declining

quality of life among khadi workers in Andhra Pradesh.

4. Methodology

The study followed an exploratory qualitative research design to examine the factors contributing to the decreased life standards of khadi workers in Andhra Pradesh. It relied on both primary and secondary data to gain comprehensive insights. Secondary data were collected from government reports, institutional publications, and previous research studies related to khadi and handloom sectors. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant experience and knowledge of khadi work. The collected information was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns linked to economic difficulties, institutional shortcomings, and socio-cultural influences affecting workers' living conditions. The study maintained credibility through participant validation, ensured dependability by systematically documenting research procedures, and upheld ethical standards by obtaining informed consent and protecting participants' confidentiality.

5. Analysis and Interpretation

The qualitative analysis of this study interprets the socio-economic, institutional, and cultural dimensions influencing the decreased life standards of khadi workers in Andhra Pradesh. The analysis draws upon both field observations and thematic interpretations supported by relevant literature. The themes identified—economic deprivation, policy and institutional inadequacy, and socio-cultural transformation—reflect how multiple structural factors collectively determine the vulnerabilities of khadi workers in the region.

5.1. Economic Deprivation and Livelihood Vulnerability

Economic instability emerged as the most dominant theme explaining the decline in khadi workers' life standards. The Fourth All India Handloom Census reported that a significant proportion of weaving households earn below subsistence levels, with the majority relying on irregular employment and piece-rate wages (Development Commissioner for Handlooms, 2020). This finding aligns with field narratives where workers described the unpredictability of orders, high raw material costs, and meager profits. Similar evidence was reported

by Das (2021), who found that the pandemic further reduced workdays and forced artisans into debt cycles. Garg (2022) observed comparable conditions, noting that lockdowns resulted in halted production and stock accumulation that rendered many small khadi units non-functional.

The analysis reveals that these economic shocks are not isolated incidents but part of a long-standing cycle of poverty reinforced by limited access to formal credit and market instability. Bhowmik (2019) argued that while official data emphasize increased production and sales in khadi and handloom sectors, the benefits rarely reach grassroots artisans. This disjunction between policy-level achievements and real income growth underscores the fragile nature of khadi-based livelihoods in Andhra Pradesh. The qualitative data confirm that low income, occupational health issues, and rising costs of living together lead to a sustained decline in workers' quality of life.

5.2. Policy Implementation and Institutional Gaps

A recurring theme across participants' accounts was disillusionment with government and cooperative institutions. The YSR Nethanna Nestham scheme was cited as a welfare initiative designed to provide financial assistance to weavers. However, participants noted irregular disbursements and difficulties in accessing benefits. This finding resonates with prior observations that state support programs often fail to translate into lasting livelihood improvements due to administrative bottlenecks and inadequate follow-up mechanisms (NITI for States, n.d.).

Cooperative structures, once considered the backbone of the khadi ecosystem, are now perceived as weak and bureaucratically constrained. Kalyani (2015) found that mismanagement and lack of accountability in cooperatives hinder fair wage distribution and market access for artisans. The Economic and Political Weekly (2023) similarly highlighted that even though cooperative and khadi sales increased at the macro level, the primary producers remained excluded from profit-sharing. The qualitative evidence suggests that declining cooperative efficiency and insufficient institutional transparency have reduced the trust of workers in collective mechanisms, forcing many to depend on private intermediaries for work orders.

5.3. Socio-Cultural Transformations and Skill Erosion

The sustainability of khadi production depends not only on economics but also on the transmission of traditional skills and cultural values. Ethnographic documentation from Ponduru indicates that khadi weaving was historically embedded in community identity and familial tradition (Sahapedia, n.d.). However, the qualitative findings reveal that younger generations are increasingly reluctant to pursue khadi work due to low earnings and lack of social prestige. This cultural disengagement signifies a shift from artisanal continuity to occupational mobility, mirroring national trends where rural youth migrate to urban sectors seeking stable employment (People's Archive of Rural India, 2020).

Gender dynamics also emerged as a key subtheme. Women form a majority of khadi spinners and often face dual burdens of household responsibilities and underpaid labor. The absence of institutional childcare, healthcare, and social security further marginalizes their economic participation. Bhowmik (2019) observed that despite the Gandhian symbolism of self-reliance attached to khadi, structural inequities such as gender-based wage disparity remain deeply entrenched. This socio-cultural dimension thus interacts with economic and policy factors to compound the decline in life standards.

5.4. Integrative Insights

The qualitative synthesis of the literature and field-based interpretation underscores that the decreased life standards of khadi workers stem from intersecting structural, institutional, and socio-cultural constraints. Economic distress has been perpetuated by volatile markets and weak social protection, while institutional inefficiencies limit the impact of government schemes and cooperatives. At the same time, erosion of traditional identities and skill transmission threatens the long-term viability of khadi production. The findings point to the need for holistic policy frameworks that integrate welfare measures with marketing innovation, gender inclusivity, and skill preservation.

6. Suggestions

- The study suggests that improving the life standards of khadi workers in Andhra Pradesh

requires strengthening institutional support and ensuring the effective implementation of government welfare schemes. Financial assistance programs such as YSR Nethanna Nestham should be monitored to guarantee timely delivery and equitable coverage. Cooperative societies, which have historically acted as intermediaries between artisans and markets, need revitalization through transparent governance, professional management, and regular auditing. Establishing direct marketing platforms, e-commerce linkages, and fair trade outlets can reduce the dependency of artisans on middlemen and ensure better income realization for khadi producers.

- Another important recommendation is the promotion of continuous skill development and technological adaptation. Khadi workers should be trained in modern weaving techniques, dyeing processes, and design innovations that can align traditional craftsmanship with contemporary consumer trends. Institutional training centres and partnerships with design institutes could enhance product diversification and global competitiveness. Additionally, raw material supply chains should be streamlined to reduce costs and ensure timely availability of quality inputs. Introducing community-level production clusters with shared equipment and marketing support could also improve productivity and economic resilience among artisans.
- Social welfare and gender equity must remain central to policy reforms. Most khadi workers are women who face multiple challenges, including wage disparities, lack of health coverage, and domestic responsibilities that restrict their mobility. Policies should include provisions for health insurance, pension benefits, and microcredit access to enhance financial security. Encouraging women's self-help groups to participate in khadi enterprises can foster collective bargaining and entrepreneurship. Finally, promoting khadi as a sustainable and eco-friendly product through national and international branding campaigns can enhance its market value and attract younger generations to sustain the traditional craft for the future.

7. Conclusion

The study concludes that the declining life standards of khadi workers in Andhra Pradesh stem from persistent economic hardships, weak institutional support, and fading traditional engagement among younger generations. Despite various welfare schemes and cooperative structures, inadequate implementation and limited market access continue to constrain artisans' livelihoods. Revitalizing the sector requires coordinated efforts to strengthen cooperatives, improve access to welfare benefits, promote skill development, and expand market opportunities through modern branding and digital platforms. Empowering workers, especially women, with financial security and social protection will be vital to restoring stability and ensuring the sustainable growth of the khadi sector in the state.

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