

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE WEAVERS OF MUSIRI

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The already vulnerable and underserved handloom industry faced a major hit amid the Covid-19 induced lockdown.

Orders were cancelled overnight and weavers were stuck with a huge stock without payments. The small weavers were burdened with increasing debt as the loom stood still.

We spoke with the weaver societies who explained the depth of the crisis. One of the societies had a stock of 400,000 sarees that the co-optex hadn't bought yet. Due to lack of any business operation along with textile shops shut, the co-optex stopped all purchases from the societies. Krishnan, a member of Mariamman Handloom Society said, "We tried to help the weavers but the economy is at a standstill, we are not getting orders, we have so much stock but no buyers, we don't have an option but to reduce production."

Catering to 130 out of the 350 weavers, the crisis reduced the number to only 30 since only these could afford to function. In fact even these 30 families are producing much less than they used to, and so their income has witnessed a major cut. The other 100 families are unfortunately losing their resolve and leaving behind an occupation their ancestors have performed for generations. Most of the handloom artisans and weavers have no option but to find alternate sources of livelihood. One such weaver is A. Santhanam.

Santhanam had been working as a handloom weaver for the last 20 years. Associated with the Aringar Anna Handloom Society, he used to be an expert at the plain weave for the saree.

For Santhanam, weaving wasn't just the source of his livelihood; it was what gave him pleasure and the one way he knew to be constant. But the lockdown due to the covid crisis robbed him of this pleasure. Unable to earn enough for his family, he left working at the loom and became a mason.

"The hands that created the weave for the garment worn by every Indian woman now lays bricks", said Santhanam.



### Santhanam at his loom

DEF took the initiative to provide some basic livelihood to a few weaver families. With limited resources and few buyers, it could only pledge to support eight weaver families in Manamedu. One such family was Saravanan's. He is one among the many weavers in the cluster looking at the stagnant wheel of the handloom.

We entered his house as he humbly greeted us with a "Vanakkam" and a warm smile. He led us to a large handloom sitting at a corner of his courtyard and said, "This loom is my livelihood. Earlier it sat at the center of the room like a prized possession but now I haven't worked on it since months. Look how it has even gathered dust."

Saravanan walked towards it, sat down and started the click-clack of the handloom. Hearing its crisp sound was enough to bring a smile to his face.

## Saravanan showcasing the workings of the handloom



The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the weavers of Musiri in a big way; 300 of the 350 weavers in Manamedu have lost their only source of livelihood. They have now started looking for alternate livelihood opportunities such as agriculture and masonry.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been pushing away this already-vulnerable artisan community down and without government intervention it would further lead to its demise.



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