

Handloom industry has potential to grow

By Nadeem Saeed

MULTAN, April 29: People engaged in the handloom industry are anxiously waiting to see when the assurance held out by the Export Promotion Bureau chairman to set up a handloom board in the country is materialized.

The proposal about the board to promote exports of handloom products was mooted at a reception organized here recently by the All-Pakistan Bedsheets and Upholstery Manufacturers Association. The EPB chief was chief guest.

Since ages, Multan has been famous for its products woven on manually-operated wooden "khaddis". Product-line of the handlooms ranges like bedsheets, rugs, prayer rugs, napkins, dusters, cotton bed covers, cushions, Afghani lungi, shawls, dress shirting and apparel cloth.

A traditional weaver can be called a jack of all trades as he performs duties of various professionals in doing dyeing, bleaching, sizing, weaving, inspection, trimming, cutting and stitching. But due to lack of needed capital to run the business, the weavers are dependent on intermediaries who provide the finance and, in return, take the ownership rights of the finished products.

In the process, the hand weavers get a rather unrealistic low price of their labour. Moreover, introduction of the latest technology in the textile sector and its sub-fields like

spinning, weaving and processing has overshadowed the cottage industry of handlooms. As a result, a demand for its products has gone down with the passage of time, a fact also reflected by figures that the number of handlooms has decreased from 0.25 million in 1948 to 0.05 million presently.

Of the 50,000 existing handlooms only half are reportedly operative.

Contrary to Pakistan, the number of handlooms has increased in India. At the time of partition, there were 0.95 million handlooms which have now swelled to 2.05 million.

Europe, Australia and the USA are the attractive markets for the handloom products. Presently, only 20 per cent of the total product is being exported. But the actual potential of the industry is still untapped due to unorganized nature of the sector.

People involved in this industry belong to the lower income group of society and prevailing condition in the industry has a direct impact on their socio-economic status. Most of the workers of this industry are self-employed, relieving the government of its duty to provide employment to its citizens, though at a limited scale.

To exploit the full potential of the handloom industry, the APBUMA had presented a working paper to the EPB to point out the structural weaknesses of the handloom sector and to present a strategy for realizing

the potential of the industry. The specific purpose of the working paper was to emphasise the need of a regulatory board to bring the fragmented producers under one umbrella.

The working paper listed following as the micro and macro level problems of the handloom industry:

Micro Level Problems: Virtual absence of scientific knowhow of weaving, dyeing, finishing and designing; lack of financial resources; low literacy rate; lack of essential business, management skills; lack of adequate information about international market; and size of the majority of the units is below the threshold level essential to enter the highly-competitive export market.

Macro Level Problems: No specific body is there to certify, classify, regulate and authenticate the genuineness of handloom products and to negotiate at the government to government level for problems that cannot be resolved otherwise.

To overcome these micro and macro level problems, a handloom board is proposed which will act as a regulatory body of the handloom industry. Approval of seed money up to Rs 1.2 million is sought from the government to run the board as a pilot project for a year on experimental basis. The board, if establishes, will work on the lines of cotton, tobacco and sugar boards.

The board will supply the material to the hand weavers on a no loss no profit basis to save workers from the exploitation of intermediaries besides encouraging them in modernizing their equipment and looms. The board will organize an association of hand weavers to look after the interests of the workers.

Besides, the board will be responsible for certification, standardization, interpretation, authentication, control and promotion of the products and to overcome difficulties that can be solved only at government to government level.

It is estimated that some 500,000 people are directly or indirectly attached to the handloom industry throughout the country, specially in areas like Multan, Kasur, Jhang, Gojra, Kamalia, Ghakkar Mandi and Shikarpur. Handloom products have an international market demand due to their exclusiveness of being made by human hands.

By establishing the proposed board, the government can not only increase exports, but future of traditional weavers will also be secured. The encouraging aspect of the handloom exports is that there are quota restraints on hand-made products. Patronizing this ignored sector of the economy, therefore, may help earn precious foreign exchange.