

The Handloom Industry and Its Socio-Economic Impact: A Study of Dakshin Dinajpur District, West Bengal



Bipul Chandra Barman

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Political Science
University of Gour Banga, Mokdampur, Malda (West Bengal)

Abstract

The handloom industry holds a vital position in India's socio-economic and cultural framework, functioning as one of the largest sources of rural non-farm employment after agriculture. West Bengal, renowned for its rich textile heritage, has been a prominent centre for the production of diverse handwoven sarees. In particular, the district of Dakshin Dinajpur has gained recognition for its traditional weaving clusters, including Gangarampur, Kushmandi, Harirampur, and Banshihari, which have historically contributed to the region's artisanal identity. Despite its cultural importance and role in sustaining rural livelihoods, the handloom sector is currently facing a gradual decline due to multiple structural and operational challenges. These include low-income levels, lack of technological advancement, inadequate market access, and limited institutional support. Against this backdrop, the present study titled "Handloom Industry and its Socio-economic Impact: A Case Study in the District of Dakshin Dinajpur, West Bengal" examines the socio-economic conditions of weavers, the functioning and constraints of handloom units, and the effectiveness of existing government interventions. The study further aims to identify key issues affecting the sustainability of the sector and to propose practical and policy-oriented measures for its revitalization. By addressing these concerns, the research seeks to contribute towards improving the economic wellbeing of weavers while preserving the rich cultural heritage embedded in the handloom traditions of Dakshin Dinajpur.

Keywords: Handloom industry, Socio-economic conditions, Weavers, Rural livelihood, Traditional weaving

Introduction

The handloom *tant* textile tradition of West Bengal traces its origin to ancient times, making the region a significant centre of weaving heritage (Sarkar, 2017; Roy, 2017). Rural weavers have historically played a crucial role in sustaining this handicraft, embedding their cultural identity, aspirations, and lifestyle into textiles through distinctive motifs and vibrant colour combinations, which have earned global recognition (Mitra, 2016). The handloom sector in India largely operates as a family-based enterprise, where house-

hold members collectively engage in production processes (Sadanandam, 2016).

It occupies a vital position in the rural economy, being the second-largest source of employment after agriculture, with nearly 15 million people directly dependent on weaving and many more engaged in allied activities (Roy & Chouhan, 2017). Despite its significance, the sector continues to rely heavily on traditional skills due to limited adoption of modern technology, and it largely functions within cottage and small-scale units (Sarkar & Mukhopadhyay, 2019).

In Dakshin Dinajpur district, prominent weaving clusters such as Gangarampur, Banshihari, Kushmandi, Harirampur, and Kumarganj are well known for their traditional production (Paul, 2019). The district is particularly famous for its *Tant* sarees, which are characterized by slightly thicker textures, colourful borders, and suitability for both daily wear and festive occasions. Additionally, varieties such as Tangail and Jamdani are also produced in this region (Paul, 2019).

However, despite its rich heritage and economic importance, the sector has been witnessing a gradual decline due to lack of technological advancement, low productivity, and subsistence-level income among weavers (Das, 2015; Paul, 2019).

Theoretical framework

The present study is grounded in socio-economic and developmental theories that help in understanding the complexities of the handloom industry and its wider impact on weavers' livelihoods. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework (Chambers & Conway, 1992) provides the foundational basis, as it emphasizes the role of human, social, financial, physical, and natural capital in sustaining rural households. Handloom weaving, being both a livelihood source and a cultural practice, directly relates to these dimensions of livelihood sustainability. Additionally, the Dependency Theory (Andre Gunder Frank, late 1960) is relevant in explaining how handloom weavers remain economically dependent on intermediaries, limiting their bargaining power and perpetuating cycles of poverty.

Another theory I have taken for my research article is the *public choice approach* where I found the *institutional approach* is best suited. Here, in a democratic country the state as web of government structure and institutions performs many functions including formulation and implementation with evaluation of public policies. Firstly, the government gives legal authority to policies. Secondly, the applications of public policy are universal. Here, the chief advocate is According to Thomas R. Dye, governmental institutions represent organized patterns of behavior by

individuals and groups that continue over time (Dye, 1978).

Review of Literature

The literature review is an essential part of the any research programme; it's open the door to additional research. The review of literature will be discussed in shortly below:

Avijit Roy & Dr. Pradip Chouhan, (2017) in their important article name is "*Socio-Economic Profile and Social Well-being of Handloom Industry Weavers of Gangarampur Block in Dakshin Dinajpur District of West Bengal, India*". According to the authors, the handloom industry of Gangarampur, Banshihari, and Kushmandi holds a significant position in India's underdeveloped regions. The article covers introduction, objectives, and methodology, followed by socio-economic conditions, and examines relationships between household size, education, health, and quality of life, concluding with key findings.

Sharmistha Sarkar (2017) in her article is "*A Detailed Analysis of Cotton Textile Industry at Bardhaman Cluster of West Bengal*". The author identifies the Bardhaman cluster as a major centre of West Bengal's handloom industry, dominated by rural artisans. The article is divided into ten sections covering introduction, study area, objectives, methodology, background, handloom in Bengal, cluster concept, Bardhaman cluster analysis, SWOT analysis, and conclusion.

Asit Paul, (2019) in his is one of the most important articles is "*Analysis of Handloom industry and its major problems In Dakshin Dinajpur of West Bengal*". According to the author, over 50,000 people once depended on the weaving industry in Dakshin Dinajpur, but the number has declined to less than 19,000. The article is divided into eight sections covering introduction, objectives, methodology, study area, industrial profile, and finally the problems, results, and discussion.

J. Sankar Basak & S. Dey, K. Sinha Sh. H. Singh, L. Narsimaiah & P. K. Sahu (2018) the name of their important article is "*Impact of GST on handloom weavers - a case study*". According to the authors, taxation is a systematic method for

generating revenue to support defense and development, with roots in ancient texts like the *Manu Smriti* and *Arthashastra*. The article has three sections: introduction, methodology, and results based on 26 variables.

Sayani Das, (2015) in her one of the most important article names is *"Managing the weaver's crisis of Dhanekhali handloom industry"*. The article comprises seven sections: introduction highlighting festive saree demand; historical background of Dhanekhali handloom; objectives and study area; methodology; results and discussion on techniques and socio-economic conditions; and a concluding section with suggestions.

Tanisha Mitra (2016), in her article name is *"Socio-Economic Assessment and Marketing Constraints of the Handloom Units - A Case Study of Bishnupur Municipal Town, Bankura District (West Bengal)"*. The author highlights that handlooms are closely linked to India's cultural heritage and play a vital role in the national economy, providing livelihoods to millions of families. As a key non-farm sector, it holds significant importance. The article is divided into six sections: introduction, objectives, data and methodology, selection of study area, results and discussion, and conclusion.

Dr. B. Sadanandam, (2016) in his valuable article name is *"Socio-Economic Conditions of Handloom Weaving Societies - A Case Study of Warangal District"*. The article is divided into several sections, beginning with references to the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, highlighting India's deep-rooted handloom tradition. It covers the sector's evolution, cooperative functioning, problem statement, objectives, methodology, key findings, policy implications, and concludes with discussions on the world's largest handloom industry.

Dr. Chandan Roy (2017) in his article name is *"Murshidabad Silk Industry in West Bengal: A Study of its Glorious Past Present Crisis"*. The author divides the article into eight parts, focusing on Murshidabad, West Bengal's second-largest silk-producing district with a rich heritage since the seventeenth century. Despite decline during in-

dustrialization, post-independence revival efforts emerged. The study examines factors influencing household income in the silk industry.

Research gap

Existing studies on the handloom and handicraft industry in West Bengal, including Dakshin Dinajpur, largely focus on identifying causes of decline such as low wages, poor infrastructure, competition from powerlooms, and limited technological advancement. While these analyses highlight key socio-economic challenges, they rarely propose comprehensive strategies for revival and sustainable development.

Moreover, there is a lack of spatial analysis comparing variations across different blocks of Dakshin Dinajpur in terms of resources, labour, and market access. Studies also inadequately connect local realities with broader policy frameworks and globalization processes. Therefore, there is a need for research that integrates empirical analysis with practical policy interventions to ensure sustainability and cultural preservation.

Research Objectives

- (i) To identifying the socio-economic circumstances and major issues of the weavers.
- (ii) To analyze the performance and progress of the handloom units.
- (iii) To analyze the current status of industry in Dakshin Dinajpur District
- (iv) To identify other problems faced by the weavers and suggest suitable remedial measures for their wellbeing.

Research Questions

- (i) Which steps have been taken by the central government and state government to improve in weavers industry?
- (ii) Why is the weaving industry so deteriorating?
- (iii) Why weavers do not want to work in weaving industry?
- (iv) Why youth do not want to work in the weaving industry?

Method of Study

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical design to examine the socio-economic impact of the handloom industry in Dakshin Dinajpur. A mixed-method approach combines quantitative and qualitative techniques. Primary data were collected through surveys, structured questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions with weavers and stakeholders. Using purposive sampling, 150 respondents from key weaving clusters were selected. Secondary data were obtained from government reports, census records, statistical handbooks, academic publications, and documents from the Department of Handloom and Textiles, providing contextual and policy insights.

Scope of Study

Research may cover multiple dimensions, but its scope defines the boundaries and focus of the study. It outlines the key themes, issues, and parameters guiding the investigation. Clearly defining the scope helps in organizing the research process, clarifying objectives, and identifying required resources such as time, funds, and personnel. It ensures efficient planning and execution. The handloom industry has a broad scope, extending from local to global levels. It can be studied at various scales, including regional, district, state, or international levels, depending on the research objectives and context.

Discussions

A brief background of the study area

The present study focuses on Dakshin Dinajpur district, which was formed on 1 April 1992 after the bifurcation of the former West Dinajpur into Uttar Dinajpur (Raiganj) and Dakshin Dinajpur (Balurghat) (Government of West Bengal, 2018). The district covers about 2,162 sq. km and shares an international boundary with Bangladesh on its eastern and southern sides, while bordering Uttar Dinajpur and Malda (District Statistical Handbook, 2019).

Three major rivers—the Atrai, Punarbhaba, and Tangon—flow through the district, originating in Bangladesh and joining the Ganga system (Dis-

trict Human Development Report, 2017). Forest cover is limited to about 932 hectares, mainly along the border areas (Government of West Bengal, 2018). The soil is largely alluvial and fertile, though parts of Tapan block also contain lateritic patches (District Statistical Handbook, 2019).

Industrial Profile of Dakshin Dinajpur

North Bengal is often described as an “industrially backward” region, and Dakshin Dinajpur reflects this trend with limited industrial development (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2018). The economy is largely agriculture-based, with slow industrial growth. The district has 956 registered small- and medium-scale units employing about 6,590 people (Government of West Bengal, 2018). Industrial expansion remains modest, restricting economic progress (Mishra & Bhattacharjee, 2017). Major industries include rice mills, oil mills, husking, jute processing, and brick kilns (Dutta & Rani, 2015). In this context, handloom weaving provides significant employment, engaging about 35,506 people (Paul, 2019).

Situation of Handloom Industry of Dakshin Dinajpur

West Bengal hosts over 779,000 weavers and 307,829 looms, though North Bengal activity is mainly confined to Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur (Government of India, 2010; Mishra & Bhattacharjee, 2017). While Uttar Dinajpur saw decline, Dakshin Dinajpur recorded moderate growth. Key centres produce sarees and furnishings (Paul, 2019). However, declining weaver numbers, idle looms, weak cooperatives, and powerloom competition threaten sustainability (Sarkar & Mukhopadhyay, 2019; Das, 2015).

Socio-economic character of weavers of Dakshin Dinajpur

The socio-economic characteristics of weavers in Dakshin Dinajpur show their concentration within marginalized rural communities, where weaving remains a traditional, family-based occupation (Roy & Chouhan, 2017). Production is organized at the household level with gendered roles—women handle preparatory tasks while men operate looms (Sadanandam, 2016). Low

levels of education limit diversification and adoption of modern technology. Weaving serves as both a primary and supplementary livelihood, especially during agricultural lean periods. However, low income, poor market access, and dependence on intermediaries create economic insecurity, leading to declining interest among younger generations (Mitra, 2016; Sarkar & Mukhopadhyay, 2019).

Work Environment and Infrastructure of Dakshin Dinajpur

Handloom weaving requires adequate infrastructure across multiple stages (Ganguly & Ganguly, 2015). However, in Dakshin Dinajpur, poor facilities and outdated looms persist due to limited financial capacity (Kumar & Sulaiman, 2017). The RRR package (2011–12) had limited impact because of strict eligibility criteria (Government of India, 2012; Khatoun, 2016). Consequently, weak infrastructure and financial constraints continue to hinder productivity and sustainability (Varghese & Salim, 2018).

Challenges faced by Dakshin Dinajpur Handloom industry

The handloom industry in Dakshin Dinajpur faces serious structural challenges despite its cultural importance (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2018). Limited access to modern technology reduces productivity and competitiveness (Varghese & Salim, 2018). Marketing constraints, dependence on intermediaries, and fluctuating demand further affect income (Rani & Bains, 2020). Weak institutional support, low awareness, and lack of formal credit hinder investment (Kumar & Sulaiman, 2017). Consequently, economic vulnerability persists, and younger generations are increasingly leaving the sector (Rai, 2022).

Major state and central government Initiative for the socio-economic upliftment of the weaving community

Tantujashree Scheme (West Bengal): Launched in 2018–19, it supports weavers through marketing platforms, fairs, and branding, enhancing market access, sales, and income for registered weavers and cooperative societies.

West Bengal Handloom and Khadi Weavers Financial Benefit Scheme (2024): Introduced in 2024, this scheme provides direct financial assistance ranging from Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000 for loom repair and raw materials, along with higher support for cooperative societies. It targets individual weavers and weaver groups, aiming to reduce financial distress and revive production activities.

Skill Development and Training Programme for Weavers (West Bengal): Strengthened after 2016, this initiative provides free training in modern weaving techniques, design innovation, and entrepreneurship. Stipends are sometimes provided during training. It primarily benefits young and women weavers, aiming to improve skills, productivity, and long-term employment opportunities in the handloom sector.

National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP, 2021-26): The National Handloom Development Programme has been implemented for the period 2021-2026 with a holistic approach to handloom sector development. It provides financial assistance for raw materials, design innovation, technology upgradation, infrastructure, and marketing. The scheme benefits individual weavers, self-help groups, and cooperatives by enhancing productivity, competitiveness, and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Raw Material Supply Scheme (RMSS, 2021-26): Revised and continued from 2021-2026, RMSS provides 15% subsidy on yarn along with transport support through Direct Benefit Transfer. It ensures timely availability of raw materials at affordable prices. The scheme benefits individual weavers and cooperative societies by reducing input costs, stabilising production, and improving profit margins.

SAMARTH – Scheme for Capacity Building in Textile Sector (continued post-2020): SAMARTH focuses on skill development and capacity building through demand-driven, placement-oriented training programmes. It provides free training and sometimes stipends to trainees. The scheme benefits unemployed youth and existing weavers by enhancing technical skills, im-

proving employability, and encouraging the adoption of modern weaving and design techniques.

Key Suggestions

Enhance access to institutional credit through simplified procedures and low-interest loans to support loom modernization. Establish common facility centres for dyeing, design, and finishing to improve quality and reduce costs. Promote skill development and design innovation in collaboration with institutions such as the National Institute of Fashion Technology. Strengthen market linkages through e-commerce and exhibitions with support from the Handloom Export Promotion Council. Expand social security coverage, including health insurance and pensions, to improve weavers' welfare. Reinforce cooperative societies for better procurement and bargaining power, and increase awareness and adoption of government schemes and digital tools.

Concluding observation

The findings indicate that weavers face persistent difficulties in accessing raw materials such as yarn and dyes, especially in Gangarampur, Kushmundi, and Banshihari (Dutta & Rani, 2015). Low wages in Gangarampur, Tapan, and Kumarganj compel many to shift occupations (Patra & Dey, 2015). Working conditions remain poor in Harirampur and Tapan, though infrastructure is relatively better in Gangarampur and Kumarganj (Mustaquim, 2018). A decline in active weavers due to labour shortages is evident in Banshihari, Kumarganj, and Tapan (Ganguly & Ganguly, 2015). Moreover, powerloom competition significantly affects several blocks, particularly Gangarampur, Banshihari, and Kushmundi (Mishra & Bhattacharjee, 2017). Low Income Levels: The majority of weavers make less than 6,000 rupees a month, which is not enough to support them.

1. Poverty and debt: Because of their inconsistent income and lack of financial literacy, many weavers are caught in debt cycles.
2. Child labour was noted; in certain areas, youngsters assist families with weaving-related tasks, particularly during periods of high demand.

3. Trends in migration In search of more financial security, younger generations are increasingly moving to cities or enrolling in MGNREGA.

Limitations of the Study

1. The study used a cross-sectional approach, which leaves out seasonal or long-term variations.
2. Production variations over the seasons, especially during festivals, are not routinely documented.
3. Women weavers make a significant contribution, but their position is not sufficiently recognized.
4. There is no discussion of child work or the participation of young people in weaving homes.
5. Workplace safety, social security, and wage protection are among the labour rights problems that are disregarded.

Conclusion

The region's rich weaving tradition, known for producing Tant, Jamdani, and Tangail sarees, remains culturally significant but economically fragile (Paul, 2019). The handloom sector is currently facing serious challenges due to declining opportunities and adverse economic conditions (Sarkar & Mukhopadhyay, 2019). A large section of the population remains vulnerable, with middle-aged individuals migrating in search of better livelihoods (Das, 2015). Weaving is increasingly confined to elderly individuals and women, indicating a generational shift away from the occupation (Mitra, 2016).

Declining income has compelled households to diversify into alternative livelihoods, particularly agriculture (Roy & Chouhan, 2017). Although various government schemes exist, their impact is limited due to weak implementation and poor outreach at the grassroots level (Basak et al., 2018). Consequently, weavers continue to face economic insecurity, highlighting the need for more effective policy execution and targeted interventions to ensure the sustainability of the sector (Sadanandam, 2016).

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