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## MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD AMONG THE WEAVER COMMUNITY OF SHANTIPUR OF NADIA DISTRICT

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### ABSTRACT

The history of handloom of Santipur of Nadia district has long dating back from 15<sup>th</sup> Century; Where Santipur was placed as the centre of *Vaishnavite* culture and *Bhakti* movement. Even at present handloom is the closest contestant of the primary sector *i.e.* agriculture. People earn their more or less same income through preparing *shrees* than agriculture activities, even some time more from earlier than latter. Though the main share of profit goes to the middlemen, still they are acting as bread provider. The installation charge of a loom is so high which is not possible for any individual in backward class communities to own it and perform their own business. Even if possible the same, but not possible to get raw materials and to market the final product by the poor people.

The present paper seeks to find out the Cost and Benefit of individual weaver as well as middlemen in the locality involved in the activity.

Finding shows that land less poor families got an opportunity to maintain their livelihood through handloom. Middlemen also received the maximum portion of the profit. Still it is not possible to remove the middlemen without finding an alternative who can take the responsibility to supply raw materials and marketing the final product. Again study suggested that it can only be possible through Public-Private partnership.

**Keywords:** Shantipur, Handloom, Middlemen, Livelihood, Cost and benefit

### INTRODUCTION

The dispersed, unorganized and often household based micro and small enterprises are capital-saving, labour-intensive, and eco-friendly avenues of livelihood. In India, they are the largest sources of employment after agriculture and are found in both rural as well as urban areas. In nearly three decades, the structure

of rural employment has not changed much.<sup>1</sup>

Symbolically for Indian culture and heritage, handlooms cater to 65 lakh persons for their living by skilfully blending myths, faiths, symbols, and

<sup>1</sup> Male and female employment in industry in rural areas has risen from 8% and 6.7%, respectively, in 1977–78 to 15.5% and 10%, respectively, in 2004–05. Most of the employment in manufacturing is in textiles (4 million), wood products (3.7 million), non-metallic products (3.4 million), food products (3.1 million), tobacco (3.1 million), and wearing apparel 2.8 million) (NSS 2004–05, Report 515). In services, employment in rural areas has risen from 10.5% of male employment and 5.1% of female employment in 1977–78 to 18% and 6.6% respectively in 2004–05.

imagery. Today, the handloom industry directly and indirectly provides livelihood to 124 lakh people, of which 60% are women while 12% belongs to Scheduled Caste category and 20% from Scheduled Tribe (Ministry of Textiles, 2001). Majority of them have no cultivable land or other assets. While the exact numbers are not available, a major portion of the handloom weavers belong to minority communities.

Indian handloom products range from coarse cloth to very fine fabrics from a variety of fibres such as cotton, silk, *tasar*, jute, wool, and synthetic blends. Each region has its signature handcrafted textiles that are unique in design and style. What is woven is, however, inseparable from where and how it was woven, that was from the structure of production. There were independent weavers, weavers organized into co-operatives, and there were those working under master weavers.

### Present Situation

With the largest number of handlooms in the world, India produces approximately

#### Performance of Handloom Sector during the Tenth Plan Period

ITEM	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Cloth production(million sq. m)	5980	5493	5722	6108	6541
Employment(lakh persons)	65	65	65	65	65
Export (Rs. Crore)	NA	NA	NA	NA	4605

Source: Office of Development Commissioner (Handlooms), Ministry of Textiles.

The bustling town of *Shantipur* in Nadia district of West Bengal, India, is just 90 kilometres (2 hours drive away from Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal) north of the metropolis of Kolkata. It has recently gained the status of municipality. Neighbouring *Fulia*, still a village is often uttered in same breath with *Shantipur*, their contrasting backgrounds notwithstanding. Together they are perhaps the most renowned Bengal handloom *saree* weaving

6541 million sq m of handloom cloth annually. While the total production of cloth has increased by about 30% between 1996–97 and 2004–05, the production of handloom sector has declined by about 23%. Between 2000 and 2005, the average annual growth rate of handloom production has been 6.99%. West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, and Manipur are the major handloom States and accounting 75% of handloom weaving in the country. As per the Second Handloom Census, (1995-96) Assam (10.97 lakh), West Bengal (2.22 lakh), and Manipur (2.15 lakh) together accounted for 64% of the handloom units. Almost all handloom production in India is for domestic markets. According to the Directorate General of Handlooms, though handlooms account for 10% of our textile exports, only 1.3% of working looms produce fabric for export markets. Europe is the largest destination, accounting for nearly half of the total exports in 1999–2000.

centre in Bengal. *Shantipur* and *Fulia sarees* are household names across India. *Shantipur – Fulia* region has over 125,000 handlooms, churning out *Shantipuri*, *Tangail*, and *Jamdani* handloom *sarees* in a variety of yarns like cotton, *tussar* and silk. *Dhotis*, dress materials, stoles and scarves are also woven.

### History

There are records of handloom *saree* weaving activity in *Shantipur*, a centre of

*Vaishnavite* culture and *Bhakti* movement<sup>2</sup>, as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Weaving flourished throughout the medieval era, and the famed indigo-dyed *Neelambari* (of a particular *saree*, name derived from *Neel*, its blue colour) made the *Shantipur saree* a household name.

There is a strong sense of identity among *Shantipur* weavers. They united to agitate against the stranglehold of the *Dadni* system of the British East India Company and even took their grievances to colonial courts during the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>.

In the decades leading up to independence several innovations were introduced in the loom and pattern of weaving, *Shantipur* saw gradual inflow of techniques like the Barrel Dobby, facilitating the conversion from Throw Shuttle to Fly Shuttle (1920s), the Jacquard Machine (1930s), and sectional warping and sizing that allowed production of warp yarns 350 yards long (1930s).<sup>4</sup>

### Traditional Styles

- ***Shantipur saree:***

The ‘*Neelambari*’ saree was the first product that made *Shantipur* famous. The indigo dyed, midnight blue cotton handloom saree was so alluring that it was called “an enemy of modesty!”

The Unique Selling Point of the *Neelambari* lay in the fineness of the yarn and dyeing quality. Very fine hand spun yarn of 250 – 300 s was used for weaving, resulting in a powder fine texture. A heady mix of fine weaving and subtlety of design, the *Neelambari* was the last word in sophistication.

Today traditional handloom sarees woven in *Shantipur* have 68s to 80s counts cotton yarn in the warp and the weft. Cotton and

silk yarn is used as extra warp in the border, and so is zari.

There is also the “do- rookha” technique of weaving double sided design, where the saree looks same on both the sides.

Another unique feature of *Shantipur* sarees is the finishing. The weavers here use starch (made from sago or popped rice) once while sizing the warp yarn and again, either by hand when the saree is still being woven or by fixing the saree to a frame after weaving is completed.

- **Fulia Tangail:**

Weavers of Tangail, near Dhaka in modern Bangladesh, were famous for the incomparable Dhakai Jamdani saree. After partition of Bengal during the run up to the independence, the majority of these weavers immigrated to West Bengal, and settled down at Fulia with government patronage.

Fulia weavers added a new jest to the handloom weaving scenario in *Shantipur* region. They developed their own version of the Dhakai, called ‘Tangail Jamdani,’ and a combination of *Shantipur* and Tangail styles called the ‘Fulia Tangail’.

The Tangail Jamdani is similar to the Dhakai Jamdani in that it uses interlocking extra weft cotton yarn to produce floral or geometric motifs. However, it has a softer feel and sparser distribution of motifs.

The Fulia Tangail incorporates vibrant colours and large, intricate designs woven in double jacquard. These sarees are also being woven in mulberry and tassar silk apart from cotton.

- **Jamdani:**

Traditional Jamdani, the pride of Bengal handloom, is now woven in Habibpur and Ramchandrapur near Fulia. The true Jamdani saree is woven without using even a jacquard machine. The weaver uses fine needle-like spindles to conjure magic with extra weft work that can rival the most intricate embroidery.

- **Muslin yardage:**

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<sup>2</sup> Aditi Mukherjee, Dec.22,2009, Bengal Handloom.com

<sup>3</sup> Aditi Mukherjee, Dec.22,2009, Bengal Handloom.com

<sup>4</sup> Bengal Handloom.com

*Shantipur* and its adjoining areas had a tradition of fine muslin yardage weaving, with 600s yarns being used. However, at present there is no major muslin weaving activity in *Shantipur*. The finest muslins are now woven in *Kalna*, across the *Ganga*. It's not that the Bengal handloom *saree* weavers of *Shantipur* and *Fulia* have remained confined in a time warp (pardon the pun!). A number of innovations in techniques and products have taken weaving in the region to the next level.

#### **Business of Shantipur:**

##### **A. business Partners**

It has been found that there are some divisions in weaver's community. Some of them are master weavers and some are the weavers who work under these master weavers.

**Master Weavers** - Previously this category of weavers were engaged in weaving only, but today they undertake the overall responsibility of this business from of raw material to the weavers, provide design and pay wages to grass root level weavers; and then supply *sarees* to *Mahajans*. *Mahajans* provide design and information regarding colour combination and a better price realization for the *saree*, but on the other hand make the transactions on credit. There are around 700 master weavers actively involved in production activities of the cluster. It is estimated that in total, these master weavers have 16,050 working looms, and equal number of weavers working as labours. A part of the production of master weavers is also sold in the local *hat* i.e. market of *Santipur*. Most of the weavers do possess 4 looms in one shade. There are few master weavers having 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 looms under one shed. The master weavers apart from the weaving earning of one loom earn profit margins from the products weaved on the loom engaged by the labour.

**Weavers** - There are about 20,000 working looms and 60,000 persons involved directly

/ indirectly in the weaving and preparatory activities. The women basically undertake the preparatory works like separation of hanks, sizing, pirn winding.

**Dyers** - Dyeing is basically carried out in the dyeing unit. There are about 90 units engaged for dyeing as a commercial activity. These units, based on the quantity of yarn dyed are categorized into large, medium and small units.

**Designers** - There are about 100 small designers involved actively to create and supply new design after exploring their own creativity and imagination in the line of the demand or choice of the consumers. However our definition of modern education does not allow them to be treated as educated. They have their own mechanism to upgrade their own skills. For Lack of exposure their skill are traditional based. Their main role in the cluster is to do costing for the master weaver, and supply them the punch cards for the Jacquard.

##### **b. Steps of business**

The basic raw material of the cluster is cotton yarn, procured in the form of hank by the weavers / master weavers from the local yarn dealers and *Mahajans*. Besides cotton yarn the cluster also uses art silk and golden *Zari* for designing.

**Bleaching & Dyeing:** The yarns are bleached and dyed in the form of hank and latter dried in sun light putting on bamboo bars.

**Sizing:** Sizing is a process where starch (*Sago* or Boiled Rice or *Khoi*) is coated on the warp yarns for importing strength; enhance abrasion resistance to withstand the stress and strains exerted during weaving process. There by it reduces the yarn breakage and improves quality and efficiency of weaving.

The loom sizing is also carried out after weaving to reduce reed marks, to impart stiffness to the fabric to bring into proper look.

**Warping and Beaming:** The warping is a process of making desired length and width of warp sheet by combining many small packages called bobbins/spools. Sectional warping process is carried on a wooden drum from a wooden peg creel. The Sectional warping process facilitates warp patterning and handling delicates fine spun and filament yarn.

**Pirn Winding:** After dyeing and sizing of weft yarns, the weft package called pirn is prepared on Charkha. Pirn winding is the process of transferring the yarns from the hanks into bobbin/pirn of the shuttles used in the weft while weaving.

**Designing:** Designing through jacquard is the most value addition option for the cluster. New Designs are collected from various sources by the *Mahajans* and converts into new jacquard designs with the help of local designers. Sometimes local designers also introduce some new designers out of their creativity.

**Weaving:** The weaving is performed by the skilled weavers of the family. The looms being used are mainly traditional fly shuttle pit looms with jacquards.

#### C. Type of business

The weaving activity was initiated in 1409, during the regime of Gaur Ganesh Danu Mardhandev. Saree weaving was practiced during 1683 - 1694 during the ruling of Nadia king Rudra Roy.<sup>5</sup> The production got systematized and was well organized leading to good recognition during the period of Mughal empire. Saree was exported to Afghanistan, Iran, Arab Greece & Turkey. The healthy trend continued till the early twentieth century.

Now the weaving activity has flourished to a large extent. Most of the household are engaged in the weaving activities either as their primary activity or secondary. While observing and studying the area different

types of weavers activities are found out. These are discussed below:

#### **Weaver as the Mahajan:**

These traders initially supply the design and colour combination to the master weavers and the master weaver arranges the production. The traders in turn supply these sarees to the traders of Bara Bazar, Kolkata. From Kolkata these products are distributed to different districts of the state and to other country.

#### **Weaver as the Master Weaver:**

Previously this category of weavers were engaged in weaving only, but today they undertake the overall responsibility of supplying the raw material to the weavers, provide the design and pay wages to the grass root level weavers; and then supply the sarees to Mahajans. Mahajans provide design and colour information and a better price realisation for the saree, but on the other hand make the transactions on credit. A part of the production of master weavers is also sold in the *haat* (local Market) of Santipur. The master weavers apart from the weaving earning of one loom earn profit margins from the products weaved on the loom engaged by the labour.

#### **Weaver as the simple weavers:**

These group comes from the middle income group who own at least one loom of their own and do all the works mostly by themselves and sometimes if the situation permits hire labourers. Weavers mainly get orders from the master weavers or the Mahajans and do produce the product in their loom. The women basically undertake the preparatory works like separation of hanks, sizing, pirn winding.

#### **Weaver as the labourers:**

There is also this group who comes from a poor economic background work as labour either in the weaver or mostly in the master weaver's looms. They generally get their wages on weekly basis depending on the number of products they are producing.

#### **D. profit of business**

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<sup>5</sup> Feel Handloom.com

We have shown here two Statement sheet for two products generally produced in this

area one for Scarf and another for Sarees.

**Statement-1 Showing Income & Expenses**  
**Monthly Basic**

EXPENSES	PER UNIT (RS.)	AMOUNT (RS.)	INCOME	PER UNIT (RS.)	AMOUNT (RS.)
<u>Material Cost of Scarf:-</u>			<u>Sales:-</u>		
-Yarn cost of scarf	50	5,00,000	(Average selling 10,000 units of Scarfs)	200	20,00,000
-Dyeing cost of scarf	20	2,00,000			
-Sizing cost of scarf					
-Preparatory cost of scarf	15	1,50,000			
-Finishing & other cost of scars					
<u>Weaver Wages:-</u>	10	1,00,000			
		50,000			
	5				
Total cost:-	70	7,00,000		<b>Total:-</b>	
<u>Profit:-</u>					
(20,00,000-17,00,000)		17,00,000			
		3,00,000			
<b>Total:-</b>		20,00,000			
					20,00,000

- Total net profit Rs. 3,00,000/-
- Percentage of profit Rs. 15%

**Statement -2 Showing Income & Expenses**  
**Monthly Basic**

EXPENSES	PER UNIT (RS.)	AMOUNT (RS.)	INCOME	PER UNIT (RS.)	AMOUNT (RS.)
<u>Material Cost of Saree:-</u>			<u>Sales:-</u>		
-Yarn cost of saree			(Average Selling 20 unit of Sarees)	450	9,000
-Dyeing cost of saree	130	2,600			
-Sizing cost of saree	21	420			
-Preparatory cost of saree					
-Finishing & other cost of saree	20	400			
<u>Weaver Wages:-</u>	15	300			
Total cost:-	5	100			
<u>Profit:-</u>					
(9,000-7,820)					
<b>Total:-</b>	200	4,000			
		7,820			
		1,180			
		9,000			
			<b>Total:-</b>		9,000

- Total net profit Rs. 1,180/-
- Percentage of profit Rs. 13.1%

### Reflection

Statement-1 shows that the percentage of material cost and weaver's wage are 58.8 and 41.2 respectively. At the time of selling of 10,000 Scarfs the master weaver earn profit Rs.3,00,000 after investing Rs.17,00,000 in a month that is 15 per cent (approx). Daily wage of weavers is Rs.140. In case of Statement -2, for the production of sarees the percentage of material cost & other and weaver wage are 48.8 and 51.2 respectively. The percentage of profit of Master weavers is 13.1 per cent. In case of second activity weavers get around Rs. 133 a day, if he or she wants to offer labour. The demand of weavers in this area is much higher because of the huge rate of margin of profit earn by master weavers. Actually master weavers are paying higher attention to run this business. The wage rate in agricultural sector for unskilled labourer is around Rs. 100 a day.

So, ultimately weaving industry is the prime source of livelihood among the poor landless labourer. It is also true that the nature of exploitation by master weavers / middlemen is very high but the weavers have no other alternative. Number of weavers co-operative Societies were formed by the department of Co-operation, Government of West-Bengal with the additional financial help of National Co-operative Development Corporation (NCDC) in this area and naturally they have failed to provide employment opportunity towards land less labourers due to several reasons that is another area of discussion.

So the poorer have no other alternatives but to go with the exploiters (master weavers). Our further study may be conducted to find out the way of reducing exploitation of poor, it may be through Public-Private Partnership (PPP) or other.

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### Concept of Variables

- i) Saree - A dress worn primarily by Hindu women; consists of several yards of light material that is draped around the body.
- ii) Mahajan - The word "Mahajan" is an amalgam of two Sanskrit words: *Maha* meaning great, and *Jan* meaning people or individuals. Over the years, the word Mahajan has come to be used a generic job title that refers to people involved in money lending.
- iii) Shantipur - It is a city and a municipality in Nadia District in the Indian state of West Bengal. This small town has been declared a city recently. The fort area of this city, also known as Daak-Gharh (calling or gathering room) is

thought to have been built by Raja Krishnachandra of Nadia. is famous for handloom sarees from ancient times. After the partition of India, many weavers came from Dhaka of Bangladesh and started to reside here in Phulia region, which is a Panchayat area of Santipur.

iv) Jamdani - It is a type of figured muslin that is one of the greatest accomplishment of the Indian weavers. The origin of figured muslin is not clear. It is mentioned in the Sanskrit literature of Gupta period (4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century AD). It is known that in the Mughal period the finest Jamdani were produced in Dhaka (Bangladesh), the work being characterised by extremely elaborate designs. Nowadays there are two types of Jamdanis are available i.e., Dhakai Jamdani and Tangail Jamdani.

v) Zari - Zari (or Jari as traditionally called) is basically a tinsel thread meant for weaving and embroidery.

vi) Scarf - A scarf is a piece of fabric worn around the neck, or near the head or around the waist for warmth, cleanliness, fashion or for religious reasons. They can come in a variety of different colours.