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# Pride and Prejudice: The Condition of Handloom Weavers in West Bengal

**Rajesh Bhattacharya** [1] **and Sarmishtha Sen**[2]

## Abstract

In India, the relative importance of the handloom sector, one of the largest employers following agriculture, has been declining for last few decades. The All India Handloom Census data for the year 2009-10 however showed a rather modest decline in the number of weavers in West Bengal, in contrast to a 33% decline at the national level in the same year. But share of handloom income in total household income for the weaver households in the state has decreased significantly pointing to considerable occupational diversification among them. Based on a qualitative field study in three districts of West Bengal—namely, Hooghly, Nadia and Purba Bardhaman—this essay presents findings related to the condition of handloom weavers in West Bengal and in the light of the findings, examines two issues—intra-sector and inter-sector mobility of labour as well as weavers' response to changing market conditions. The paper argues for a more labour-focused approach in place of currently dominant tradition-focused understanding of the sector.

**Keywords**: Handloom, West Bengal, labour mobility, artisanal skill

**JEL Classification:** L67, R23, J30

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**Section I: Introduction**

Handloom constitutes the largest component of the craft-based sector in India, with traditional technology and institutions and having roots in the pre-colonial artisanal tradition. However, it saw a sharp decline (Liebl & Roy 2003) between the second and third Handloom Census, conducted in 1995-96 and 2009-10 respectively. Handloom sector employed 43.3 lakh workers on about 23.77 lakh handlooms in 2009-10, down from 65.5 lakh workers and 34.87 looms in 1995-96 (Government of India, 2014b). Competition from powerlooms, uncertain export markets, outdated skills of the artisans and inability to adapt to the changing market environment are the commonly cited reasons for this decline (Menon, 1999, Mukund & Syamasundari, 2001, Solanki, 2008, Subrahmanya, 2011) [3].

The most striking aspect of the weaving sector in India since independence has been the phenomenal growth of powerlooms at the expense of textile mills and in the post-liberalization period, at the expense of handlooms as well. In 2016-17, an estimated 25.75 lakh powerlooms employed 64.37 lakhs people, producing 35672 million sq metres of cloth and accounting for 55.39 per cent of total cloth production (Lok Sabha, 2016a; 2018). Powerlooms now employ many more people than the handloom sector.

In independent India, policy-making on handlooms has often oscillated between two positions—a "protectionist" stance that sought to preserve and nurture the sector for its traditional skills or employment-generating potential or both and a "transformist" stance that viewed the presence of handloom sector on a large scale as an anomaly and argued for its modernization, including transformation into powerlooms (Mamidipudi, 2016). The received wisdom is that most of the textile policies in India - in a bid to protect handloom production from the vagaries of market forces - have helped accumulate inefficiency in the entire structure of production and distribution. Those have also prompted rent-seeking behaviour on the part of the economic agents of the sector (Chandra, 1999, Ganesh, 2002, D'Soua, 2005, for example) which have not necessarily enhanced efficiency of the business and sometimes have jeopardized its prospects for survival. Starting with the textile policy of 1985, there was

3 The literature on handlooms has quite divergent positions on technology and innovation in the handloom industry. Some have argued that the technological changes are not absent in handloom sector, but "remain scarce in relation to the scale of the industry" (Liebel and Roy, 2003: pg 5376); however, such dynamism in the handloom sector includes transition from handloom to powerloom (Roy, 1998: Liebel and Roy, 2003). Yet, others hold a more optimistic view of handloom as a socio-technology with its characteristic set of skills, knowledge and social relations that allow for continuous innovation such "that it is possible to alleviate the weaver's vulnerability through investments in specific solutions at vulnerable points, so that he can sustain himself and his family" (Mamidipudi et al, 2012: pg 51)

a distinct shift in policy emphasis from protection and employment creation to output growth and export-promotion[4]. But the post-liberalization period has also seen the largest decline in handlooms, either because of transition from handloom to powerloom or exit from handloom.

However, the simple story of secular decline in handloom and inexorable rise of powerloom in the post-leberalization phase is not uniform across regions and even over time[5]. For example, the total volume of cloth production in the powerloom sector as well as its share in total cloth production has fallen since 2012-13 (Government of India, 2017), while the same in the handloom sector has registered a rise over the same period. West Bengal and North-Eastern states of India show an increase in the number of weaver households between the second and third Handloom Censuses, conducted in 1995-96 and 2009-10 respectively. There has been very little growth of powerlooms in handloom-major states like Odisha and West Bengal. Roy (1989, 1998) have noted the difference between Eastern states on the one hand and Western and Southern States on the other hand in the handloom sector in terms of relations of production, nature of capital, size of enterprises, rural-urban character etc. which have origins in the colonial era. The Handloom census of 2009-10 also brings out some of these differences sharply.

West Bengal, the focus of this essay, stands out among Indian states with the highest number of looms and highest number of weaver households engaged in commercial production according to third handloom census. The persistence and even growth of the handloom industry in West Bengal between the last two Handloom Censuses call for a closer look, particularly with respect to the condition of handloom weavers. In this essay, against the backdrop of numerous journalistic accounts of a recent crisis in the handloom sector in West Bengal, due to competition from powerlooms and declining export markets, we explore two issues: a) labour mobility in the handloom sector and b) response (or lack thereof) of weaver households to declining markets. Our findings, based on a qualitative field work in three

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4 The export market for India's handloom products has not been stable. India's exports of handloom products increased sharply from Rs. 1252.80 Crores in 2009-10 to Rs. 28111.97 crores in 2012-13 after which it has come down to Rs. 2392.21 crores in 2016-17 (Ministry of Textiles, Goverbment of India, Annual report, Various Years)

5 Even though the number of looms and workers in the handloom sector declined between 1995-96 and 2009-10, cloth production increased from 3120 to 6930 million square metres over the same period. The number of mandays worked, the proportion of full-time weavers and the proportion of weavers who derive more than 60% of income from weaving increased and the proportion of idle looms decreased over the same period (Government of India, 2014b). The total cloth production on handlooms increased to 7638 million sq metre in 2015-16 accounting for 15.3 per cent of India's total cloth production. Around 95% of world's hand woven fabrics come from India.

handloom-major districts of South Bengal confirm a general decline in the handloom sector in recent times, but we do not see this as the 'late' decline of an industry which is a repository of generationally passed-down traditional skills. We find that recent history is not only of exit, but also of entry into the sector along with acquisition of skills by new entrants. This calls into question the dominant view of "skills" in this sector, "skills" being the singular lens through which the handloom sector has traditionally been viewed. Our findings point to the necessity of viewing the sector as any other economic sector, from the point of view of livelihoods-seeking labour force. We argue for a more labor-focused rather than an industry-focused approach to the handloom sector.

The rest of the essay is organized as follows. Section II presents an empirical picture of the handloom sector in West Bengal in comparison with other handloom-major states of India. Section III discusses the methodology of the qualitative field work and compare and contrast the specific characteristic of each region. Section IV presents survey findings on the economic condition of handloom weavers in the study areas. Sections V and VI present survey findings on weavers' response to decline in market for handloom products and labour mobility in the handloom sector respectively. Section VII concludes.

**Section II: The handloom Sector in West Bengal**

The handloom sector in west Bengal exhibited a distinct pattern over time. Table 1 shows the number of looms, across the first three handloom censuses (1987-88, 1995-96 and of 2009-10), in selected handloom-major states of India with predominantly commercial production. West Bengal not only had the highest number of handlooms in India in 2010, but also exhibits little decline between 1988 and 2010; in fact, the number of looms increased between 1988 and 1996.

Non-household handloom sector[6] has recorded greater rate of decline in West Bengal than in the other states under consideration. It has also declined more relative to the household sector in West Bengal[7]. West Bengal has the lowest percentage of non-handloom sector among

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6"A *handloom non-household unit* is an establishment, which could be run by a private owner or a society, such as a master weaver, cooperative societies, handloom development corporation, etc. These could be placed in work sheds in the premises of non-household units, or else, they could be distributed in the houses of the hired weavers. In some cases, a mixed arrangement could be followed, with some of the looms on the premises, and the rest distributed in the houses of the hired weavers. Usually the non-household units operate by employing hired weavers" (NCAER,2010: pg 6.

7 Between 1996 and 2010, number of looms in the Household Sector in West Bnegal declined by 6.53% , much less than the decline of 89.88% in the non-household sector. As a result, the share of household sector in total looms in West Bengal went up from 93.19% to 99.21%.(NCAER 1996,2010)

commercially oriented handloom producing states of India. It is also the only handloom-major state with commercial production to have seen an increase in the number of weaver households between 1996 and 2010.

| **Table 1. Number of Looms in selected States of India: 1988 to 2010** | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **States** | **Number of Looms Owned** | | | **Change in number of Looms (%)** | | **Share of State in All-India Total (%)** | | |
| | **1988** | **1996** | **2010** | **1988-1996** | **1996-2010** | **1988** | **1996** | **2010** |
| **Andhra Pradesh** | 219715 | 202100 | 124714 | -8.02 | -38.29 | 5.81 | 5.80 | 5.25 |
| **Gujarat** | 22573 | 20550 | 3900 | -8.96 | -81.02 | 0.60 | 0.59 | 0.16 |
| **Karnataka** | 81585 | 70835 | 40488 | -13.18 | -42.84 | 2.16 | 2.03 | 1.70 |
| **Odisha** | 119005 | 92869 | 43652 | -21.96 | -53.00 | 3.15 | 2.66 | 1.84 |
| **Tamil Nadu** | 428545 | 413174 | 154509 | -3.59 | -62.60 | 11.34 | 11.85 | 6.50 |
| **Uttar Pradesh** | 260714 | 189570 | 80295 | -27.29 | -57.64 | 6.90 | 5.44 | 3.38 |
| **West Bengal** | **338499** | **350654** | **307829** | **3.59** | **-12.21** | **8.96** | **10.06** | **12.95** |
| **Source: NCAER (2010)** | | | | | | | | |

At the same time, there is indication of greater specialization in products of finer yarn. In West Bengal, only about a quarter of weaver households use yarn up to 40 counts for production. All the other handloom major states, show sign of specializing in the use of yarns of medium counts[8], whereas almost 60% of weaver households use yarn of higher counts in West Bengal (Table 2). This is a significant development, since only 12.35% of household and 29.09% of non-household units in West Bengal used yarn of over 80 counts in 1996 (NCAER,1996); these figures were comparable to other handloom-major states in 1996. Since usage of higher count cotton implies finer fabric, it is possible that weaver households have tried to survive, in the face of competition, by moving on to the production of finer cloth that the mill and powerlooms could not imitate easily—a competitive strategy highlighted by Roy (1989; 1999) and Das (2001) among others.

| **Table 2. Distribution of Weaver Households by Yarn Used: Selected States of India** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **States** | **Cotton Yarn Count** | | |
| | **1—40** | **41-80** | **above 80** |
| **Andhra Pradesh** | 20.21 | 58.41 | 21.38 |
| **Karnataka** | 40.27 | 55.35 | 4.38 |
| **Odisha** | 30.47 | 41.31 | 28.21 |
| **Tamil Nadu** | 41.34 | 31.02 | 27.64 |
| **Uttar Pradesh** | 91.92 | 6.32 | 1.76 |
| **West Bengal** | **26.60** | **13.56** | **59.84** |
| **Source: NCAER (2010)** | | | |

8 UP is an exception since it shows the highest concentration of production in the fabrics using the lowest count (1-40).

A very small percentage of handloom workers are employed under co-operative societies or other formal institutions like National or State handloom Development Corporations or report being members of co-operatives in West Bengal in 2010, in contrast to other major handloom-major states with commercial production[9]. More than 85% of the workers are under Master weavers or private traders. The level of institutionalization in handloom sector has historically been low in West Bengal, compared to other states like Tamil Nadu or Karnataka. Greater dependence of weavers on master-weavers/*mahajans* as well as the absence of relatively large-scale handloom establishments of capitalist nature in the eastern part of India, including West Bengal, as compared to western and southern parts, has been noted by Roy (1989).

Average annual income of handloom worker households in West Bengal was Rs. 26934 in 2010, higher than states like Tamilnadu (Rs. 24707), Karnataka (Rs.25933) and Uttar Pradesh (Rs.23218), but lower than Odisha (Rs.30313) and Andhra Pradesh (Rs.30054). These figures are for weaver households as well as households of allied workers and include income from weaving as well as other sources.

The intensity of engagement in handloom work among the handloom worker households in 2010 was comparatively low in West Bengal. The proportion of adult handloom worker households working annually for more than 300 working days in 2010 was only 46.76% in West Bengal—the lowest among the handloom-major states of India; it is the same if we look at households working for more than 200 average annual working days (NCAER, 20010)[10].Table 3 shows that, among the handloom-major states, West Bengal had the highest proportion of handloom worker households deriving less than 20% and the lowest proportion deriving more than 80% of household income from handlooms. Between 1996 and 2010, West Bengal saw the sharpest reduction (from 72.18% to 42.05%) in average share of handloom in total income of weaver households among handloom-major states.

**Table 3: Handloom Worker Households across Percentage Shares of Handloom in Household Income: Selected States of India**

9 Andhra Pradesh is an exception and is similar to West Bengal in this respect.

10Although the percentage of handloom worker households working for more than 200 days increased from the respective 1996 figures for all the big handloom-producing states, the rise was far less pronounced in West Bengal.Percentage of handloom worker households resorting to part-time engagement in 2010 was relatively high in West Bengal, compared to the southern states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, with only Odisha having a higher figure and Uttar Pradesh a similar figure (ibid).

| States | Percentage Share of Handloom Income in Household Income | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **upto 20** | **20-40** | **40-60** | **60-80** | **above 80** |
| **Andhra Pradesh** | 22.02 | 4.63 | 8.42 | 13.31 | 51.61 |
| **Karnataka** | 1.49 | 8.19 | 17.03 | 23.41 | 49.88 |
| **Odisha** | 5.08 | 5.52 | 9.76 | 20.20 | 59.43 |
| **Tamil Nadu** | 3.21 | 4.60 | 10.05 | 13.54 | 68.60 |
| **Uttar Pradesh** | 0.87 | 2.11 | 5.11 | 13.65 | 78.25 |
| **West Bengal** | **36.04** | **14.45** | **12.03** | **10.60** | **26.78** |
| **Source: NCAER (2010)** | | | | | |

Interestingly, according to the third handloom census, weaver households in West Bengal did not consider the threat from mills and powerlooms as significant—only 16.2% of handloom worker households in West Bengal perceived such a threat, as compared to 84.6% in Andhra Pradesh, 59.1% in Odisha, 46.5% in TamilNadu, 33.9% in Uttar Pradesh and 33.1% in Karnataka[11]. At the same time, there was a low positive willingness of handloom weavers to allow their children to continue in the same occupation (16.4%). The weavers themselves explained the reluctance in terms of factors like time-consuming, hard and un-remunerative nature of work.

Given this empirical picture of handloom industry in West Bengal thrown up by handloom censuses and in the context of widespread journalistic accounts of decline of handloom in recent years, our objective in this paper is to study the economic condition of handlooms weavers in West Bengal, More specifically, we look at the following to issues:

- **a.** What are weaver households' responses regarding product designs and technology in response to market competition?
- **b.** What is the nature of labour mobility in this sector under conditions of declining markets?

**Section III: Survey Methodology and Profile of Study Areas**

For the purpose of this essay, we have conducted qualitative field-work in selected rural and urban areas in three important districts of handloom production in South Bengal—Hooghly, Nadia and Purba Bardhaman.

11 The low penetration of powerlooms in West Bengal may not be an entirely satisfactory explanation for this. In 2016, West Bengal had 10,600 powerlooms as opposed to 1246 powerlooms in Odisha, though it is much lower than in Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka (Lok Sabha 2016b). The Directorate of Textiles, Government of West Bengal, gives an estimate of 16000 powerlooms in West Bengal in its Annual Report of 2016-17 (Government of West Bengal, 2017).

In each district, two areas were chosen—on the basis of maximum concentration of handlooms with well-known cotton sari products. Within the chosen areas, municipalities and/or census towns and villages belonging to one or two Gram Panchayats were chosen in a manner that ensured sufficient heterogeneity among the group of respondents and diversity in institutional nature of production. The six areas studied for these essay—Fulia and Santipur in Nadia district, Dhnaiakhali and Rajbalhat in Hooghly District and Samudragarh-Nasaratpur and Dhatrigram in Purba Bardhaman are some of the most famous handloom-producing regions in West Bengal with established traditions and identities of products. We have focused on cotton products only as it dominates handloom production in West Bengal, particularly in its southern districts. The study also focused on production of cotton *saree*s, as this is the main product embodying the artisanal skills of these areas. Table A of Appendix gives a profile of the six study areas with characteristics of their most significant products, from the point of view of artisanal skills.

The methodology adopted for this study involved a mix of qualitative interviews and discussions based on semi-structured schedule of questions, conducted by authors as a pilot and subsequently conducted by a survey team. Interviews were conducted with key office-bearers of Gram Panchayats (*Pradhan* or *Upa-Pradahan*), weavers with diverse characteristics, key actors in weavers' Cooperative Societies (Secretary, Treasurer, Designer, Trainer), local thread shop owners, local traders or *mahajans* and master weavers—mostly in their offices and shops, except for the interviews with traders or *mahajans* which were conducted mostly in their residences. In addition, to get a fuller picture of the transformations occurring within the handloom sector, interviews were conducted with key respondents in TANTUJA (the Apex marketing agency for all handloom cooperatives in the state), Weavers' Service Center in Kolkata, National Handloom Development Corporation Office in Kolkata, District Handloom Development Offices and some established powerloom units.

With respect to weavers, the survey team interacted with the weavers as a group in selected villages. Our objective was to take into account the heterogeneity within the weaver community, while exploring the condition of weaver households and thus there was a conscious attempt to include both first-generation as well as multi-generation weaver households, weavers from both traditionally dominant weaver communities/castes as well as other communities/castes and weavers who are continuing with handlooms as well as weavers who have recently shifted to powerloom. The discussions with weavers were typically held in the household of one weaver, where other weavers were called in or they entered the discussion voluntarily. As is well known, in close-knit rural and artisanal communities, it is difficult to assemble and interact with people with specific characteristics in separate groups. We were fortunate to have a mix of different 'types' of weavers in our group discussions, which allowed us to trace the differences in perspectives. In certain cases, for example female and migrant weavers, semi-structured interviews were conducted. A total of thirty six interviews and seven discussions with weaver groups were conducted between October, 2017 and February, 2018.

The criteria for choosing these areas were informed by the research questions. The study areas often differ significantly in several aspects. This is true for even neighboring areas, belonging to the same great belt of handloom production. Santipur in Nadia district and Dhaniakhali and Rajbalhat in Hooghly district are old areas of handloom production, with their tradition of handloom production going generations and often centuries back. The other study areas in Nadia and Purba Bardhaman—i.e. Phulia, Dhatrigram and Samudragarh-Nasaratpur on both sides of the river Hooghly, had grown due to the massive influx of refugees and immigrants from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) across the border at the time of Partition of India in 1947 and then again during Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971. They brought with them weaving skills and were rehabilitated both by private actors (private traders or *mahajans*) and the state government, who provided them with land and loom. These provided the refugees and immigrants with livelihoods and helped spread their art throughout Nadia and Burdwan districts on both sides of river Hooghly.

In terms of level of institutionalization of the sector, there is significant variation between these areas. Development of weaver cooperatives, generally and historically low in West Bengal compared to other states, is not uniform across regions. Dhaniakhali is well-known for its traditionally strong cooperative movement and anti-*mahajan* tradition, with almost all weavers organized under cooperatives and hardly any *mahajan* buying from local weavers in the area even today. But it's most famous product, Dhaniakhali Taant, is woven by many more weavers in Rajbalhat area than in the Dhankhali area. The weavers of Rajbalhat, however, are predominantly organized by *mahajans*, despite the existence of several active cooperatives. While Dhaniakhali still maintains its tradition of cooperatives, another old handloom weaving center, Santipur, has witnessed a remarkable decline in active cooperatives or active membership of cooperatives. Phulia, adjoining Santipur, had traditionally more, larger and more prosperous cooperatives and several of them are still active, even though a significant part of the production is organized by large, prosperous *mahajans* [12] . In Samudragarh and Dhatrigram, cooperatives exist only in name—production is almost entirely organized by *mahajans*.

Nadia district, in which Santipur and Phulia are located, has been the only region of powerloom development on a large scale in West Bengal. In particular, Santipur municipal area has seen rapid development of powerlooms in recent times, in addition to the already established powerloom centre in Ranaghat Block of Nadia.

There were hardly any powerlooms in other four areas till recently. Production was mainly for local and regional markets for most of these areas—except for Phulia and Samudragarh-Nasaratpur and Dhatrigram, which had presence in national markets. Only Phulia had presence in the export market. Use of migrant labourers, mostly from districts in North Bengal, was common in Phulia, Samudragarh-Nasaratpur and Dhatrigram, but not so in the other areas, which depended almost exclusively on local labourers.

Though Santipur is an older handloom producing area, Phulia—within the same block and only 11 kms away from Santipur— is more dynamic. Phulia *saree*s are well known for the weavers' skills and innovations in design and adaptation to changing market conditions. In fact, among all the study areas, Phulia is regarded as the leader in design innovation, technology and market success, even though the same Basak community, the dominant weaving community which came from erstwhile Bangladesh, was also dominant in Samudragarh-Nasaratpur and Dhatrigram. Local differences thus appear significant even within a relatively narrow geographical region.

Such differences are perhaps inescapable in the incredibly complex and differentiated world of handlooms and artisanal production. These differences notwithstanding, the chosen areas allow us to explore in some depth the research questions we have set before us in this study—for the following reasons. All these areas are major centres of handloom production in West Bengal, with established brands of cotton saris of distinctive attributes, which have niche markets in regional and national space. These areas, being closer to Kolkata, provide better opportunities for occupational diversification within weaver households as well as greater connectivity to the wholesale market in Kolkata, through which market signals regarding changing consumer preferences reach the weavers through *mahajans*/private traders or

12The effort of *mahajans* in the rehabilitation of refugees and immigrants from erstwhile East Pakistan (now, Bangladesh) resulted in dependence of the weavers on *mahajans* and consolidation of exploitative weaver-*mahajan* relationship, commonly known as the *Dadan* system. Over time, weavers' resistance, greater access to local markets and establishment of cooperatives weakened the degree of exploitation.

cooperatives. Finally, the development of powerlooms is also confined to these districts of West Bengal, particularly Nadia district.

**Section IV: Economic Condition of Handloom Weavers**

In this section, we present our findings from the survey with respect to weaver households only.[13] Our findings confirm the journalistic accounts of a decline in handloom industry[14] in recent times and point to a rapid decline from the levels reported in the third Handloom censuses. The unequivocal response from all respondents in all the study areas is that the handloom industry is in crisis because of low earnings for the weavers. Though actual data in terms of number of active looms, active weaver households or actual production could not be obtained, a rough estimate of the decline was obtained from the respondents, particularly Panchayat officials[15]. In recent years, the decline in active looms ranged from a little less than 10% to over 60% of total looms in different areas (Table 4), depending on the predominant product of the area and availability of alternative livelihoods for weaver households, among other factors.

Earnings per weaver per *saree* vary from Rs. 90 to Rs. 300 in the study areas for the cotton *saree* product for which each area is most well-known and for the variety (yarn, design etc.) which is most commonly sold. Of course, the earnings are much higher for *sarees* with more elaborate designs and/or finer yarn, produced for more affluent customers. But, on average, the earnings per *saree* which is most commonly produced, are quite meagre, being less than or somewhat higher than the MNGREGA wages for unskilled labourers and often lower than the daily wages of construction workers or auto rickshaw drivers. Weavers earn more on powerlooms than handlooms, because of a higher volume of production per day, even though the earnings per *saree* are lower[16]. But, while the loom-owning weavers prefer to work on

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13 Textile weaving involves many types of allied activities, including preparatory work related to sizing, dying, starching, winding, warping etc., each of which is done sometimes within the household by family labour, and sometimes by wage-labourers directly employed by households or in separate enterprises. The fate of these allied workers depends on the economic condition of weavers and their decisions regarding handloom product and household engagement in the industry. We leave allied handloom workers out of the current analysis.

14 See 1. https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/aCt3UOff9OSLrvV4SOyejJ/How-the-Phulia-Tangail-went-from-boom-to-bust.html
2. https://thewire.in/urban/of-love-and-longing-in-kolkata
3. http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/situation-grim-for-bengal-sari-weavers-after-gst/article19447844.ece

15 The Fourth Handloom Census had been completed at the time of survey, but data was not publicly available.

16 On a handloom, for the more skilled weavers, the earning is often Rs.700-800 per week for the type of *saree* that sells most, whereas it can be Rs.1400- 1700 per week for typical cheap imitations of similar *saree*s on powerlooms because of a higher volume of production. Moreover, working hours on powerlooms is not more than 10 hours, while for handlooms, it can cross even 14 hours.

powerlooms in others' households or in enterprises in areas where such opportunities exist, they are unable to find loomless weavers, even migrant weavers, to weave on the handlooms in their own homes. This explains the rapid rise in idle looms. Where growth of powerloom is as yet low and alternative livelihoods are hard to come by locally—whether in agriculture or outside it—the decline in active looms is not significant, rather decline in weavers' earnings is.

The weavers thus live in a paradoxical world, where the official and popular discourses refer to them as *shilpis* (i.e. artists) and respect them as trustees of hallowed and inimitable craftsmanship, while their economic status is lower than that of unskilled casual labourers in the unorganized sector. An exit from handloom or switch to powerloom is the only available option for less skilled and relatively younger population, prompting concerns of a terminal decline.

The average weekly earnings of a weaver household (which requires the weaver's as well as family members' labour) ranges from Rs. 500 to Rs. 1000 in the study areas. For calculation of weekly earnings, the average earning from all products was taken Thus, the weekly earning is not the simple multiplication of earnings per *saree* by the number of *saree*s that are woven in a week. It is also to be noted that there may not be sufficient demand to keep the weaver occupied full-time throughout the week.

Weavers no longer specialize in one product and have diversified by yarn, design and product; to a significant degree, weavers also produce non-*saree* and mixed-yarn products. Thus, the identification of an area with a particular local product—traditionally, a particular type of cotton *saree* with identifiable yarn count, design, weaving technique and even color—no longer applies. Thus, in many areas, 'tradition' is less of an everyday practice and more of a trope for identification and representation of a community of weavers and is deployed as a marker for product differentiation for discerning buyers and in negotiations for patronage by the government or public.

| **Area** | **Number of Active Looms** | **Decline in Number of Looms in recent past** | **Growth of powerloom** | **Average Earnings of Weavers per Week** | **Average Earning of a Weaver per unit product*** | **Number of days needed to weave the product** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Phulia** | 20000 | 5000 | 250 and growing | 1000-1200 | 250-300 | 1.5 days |
| **Santipur** | 20000 | 40000 | 10000 and growing | 600-700 | 90-100 | 1day |
| **Dhaniakhali** | 400-500 | 300-400 | None | 700-800 | 300-400 | 2 days |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rajbalhat** | 2500-3000 | 700-1000 | Negligible | 600-700 | 250-300 | 1.5 -2 days |
| **Samudragarh-Nasaratpur** | 7000-9000 | 8000-1000 | Negligible in the area, but developing rapidly in neighboring areas | 800-1000 | 350-400 | 2 days |
| **Dhatrigram** | 6000-8000 | 1500-2000 | None, but emerging in neighboring areas. | 1000 | 250-300 | 1.5 days |

A number of factors have contributed to this decline of market for handlooms, according to weavers and traders[17]. For some time now, handloom *saree* weavers of these areas have had to cope with competition from powerloom products of Bangladesh. In recent times, powerloom products from other regions in India, including cheap Benarasi *saree*s from Varanasi, have also eroded the markets. The resulting pressure on handloom weavers and *mahajan*s has led to rapid expansion of powerlooms in Santipur (Nadia) and Srirampur (Purba Bardhaman). Other areas are also witnessing the installation of first powerlooms by the handloom weavers[18]. Most of the powrloom are being set up illegally, particularly in residential areas of the village, even though the resulting sound pollution can be debilitating for residents. The sound pollution is due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of the powerlooms being installed, in urban areas as well as within villages, are second-handed discarded machines from Maharashtra and Gujarat, costing around Rs. 65000 to Rs. 85000, with total cost of installation amounting to Rs. 100000-Rs 125000. Thus, these are not sophisticated machines capable of imitating high-end products, but can easily replace *saree*s with simpler, yet distinctive designs, with the same yarn being used for both handloom and powerloom.

The local development of powerlooms has affected the weavers as the machines are catching up with the handloom products, in terms of yarn count, colour and design. The once-vibrant export market for Phulia's products had collapsed with the economic slowdown in USA and EU since the crisis of 2008 and never recovered since. Thus, local and regional markets

17 *Mahajan*s and cooperative societies who experience the change as a decline in sales, often attribute it to "decline in purchasing power of customers". The claim that consumers' purchasing power is decreasing is to be interpreted as a decline in consumers' expenditure on handloom products, rather than total expenditure. In the face of competition from powerlooms, this is likely to be true, since except for the most discerning customers, it is often very difficult to distinguish between handloom and powerloom products and many powerloom products are sold in the retail market as handloom products.

18 Installation of powerlooms requires approval of the Panchayat, based on the neighbourhood having no objection to it. The "approval" from the neighbourhood can be easily manipulated.

remain the only outlet for handloom products. In fact, even in the leading region of Phulia, the consultant to one of the biggest cooperatives of the area—with a deep knowledge of the local tradition of skills and a spokesperson for the famous Basak community of weavers—seemed to accept the inevitability of the expansion of powerlooms, asking only for certain checks on its expansion.

> *[We] have three appeals: 1) powerlooms should only be allowed outside the residential areas, outside the towns, 2) the government should create a Central Marketing Agency which is going to take care of marketing in its entirety and 3) powerlooms should not be allowed to produce sarees in the price range of Rs.1000 and above. More expensive sarees and export products should only be handloom products*. (Interview with the consultant,Tangail Tantujibi Unnayan Samabay Samiti, Phulia)

What is noteworthy about the quoted statement above is the acceptance that handloom *saree*s in the lower price range—which is what the majority of the less skilled handloom weavers were weaving and for which there was a local and regional market before—can no longer be saved from powerlooms in the market. But what is more striking is the apprehension that even more expensive *saree*s, which require skilled craftsmanship, as well as the so-called ‘niche’ export market, need to be reserved for handlooms. The social resistance to powerlooms is eroding fast; ‘noise’ has become the leitmotif of opposition to machinery, hence the demand for its relocation outside residential areas. However, it must be mentioned that only in Phulia were the cooperatives and *mahajan*s relatively more confident of a stable market for high-end handloom products—hence their ‘appeals’. In rest of the areas, the mood was one of complete capitulation—for example, in neighbouring Santipur.

> *There is no solution [to the problems of handloom]. Because powerloom is here to stay, GST is here to stay. Everything is here to stay. Hence, there is no solution—at least to my knowledge*. (Interview with *Mahajan*, Santipur)

The effect of decline in market for handloom products has been compounded in the last two years by two major policy ‘shocks’—demonetization of high value notes in November, 2016 and implementation of Goods and Services Tax (GST) in July, 2017. While the traders/*mahajan*s were negatively affected by both, the weavers were not directly affected by the former. In fact, in a system that runs on credit along the value chain from yarn suppliers to retailers, full and spot payment was a surprise outcome for many weavers who received their full payments in cash during demonetization, as traders/*mahajan*s rushed to get rid of banned notes.

However, GST has had crippling effect on most actors in the value chain. For weavers, purchasing yarn from the open market, raw material price has gone up. For traders/*mahajan*s and cooperative societies, the increase in prices due to GST as well as the increase in expenditure for additional personnel for preparation of invoices, installing new software etc. have resulted in a decline in profit margins. This is mostly due to the fact that the wholesalers and retailers in Kolkata are unwilling to increase their buying price, given market conditions.

**Section V: Weavers' Response to Market Conditions**

If the current condition in the market and the resulting downward pressure on wages persists, it is likely to lead to exit of many weavers, allied workers and small traders from the sector, while others are expected to adopt competitive strategies to survive in the market. Competitive strategies may include enhancing distinctiveness of the handloom products through innovation in design, improvement in product quality and technical upgradation that makes such innovations easier for the weaver.

The handloom industry in these areas has been responding to market pressures for a long time. For example, Dhaniakhali was once famous for *dhutis*, but when the market for *dhutis* declined due to change in everyday men's wear, Dhaniakhali weavers switched to *saree* weaving, which is what they are famous for now. In all areas, weavers no longer specialize in their unique traditional product that give them their distinctive identity—that identification is for brochures, web portals and e-commerce platforms only. In response to market pressures, weavers have continuously sought to bring in changes in their most important product—*saree*s— in terms of yarn, color, design, etc. in addition to producing non-*saree* products.

> *[H]owever, no one works with the same style of saree, everything is 'mixed' now. There is no longer a traditional product, because in the face of market competition, one has to make one's product exclusive. You have to have* Jamdani *style as well* Naksha Par *style, cotton thread as will as well artificial thread in the same saree….ultimately you have to sell, and you do whatever it takes to sell*. Interview with Secretary, Primary Weavers' Cooperative Society, Dhatrigram

Tradition sells, but first, *it has to be sold*—and that calls for departures from tradition itself. Tradition can cut both ways in the market—it can provide a supply of talent and skills for skilful artisanal adaptation and innovation or it can lead to a situation of historical lock-in to the extent that weavers and consumers get increasingly distanced. In the latter situation, weavers' pride faces consumers' prejudice.

For example, Dhaniakhali *saree*s are known to be long-lasting, pure cotton *saree*s of higher count and that is the source of pride for the weavers both in Dhaniakhali and Rajbalhat areas. Yet, since the *saree*s are ‘heavier’ due to dense weaving—which requires harder physical labour on the handloom as it is—it’s more difficult to weave complex designs. Moreover, the traditional use of Dobby instead of Jacquard in these areas limits the scale of design that can be woven into the products. The areas are known for high-quality fabrics, but stagnant and plain design. While for the *mahajan*s in Rajbalhat and cooperatives in Dhaniakhali area, the main problem is the lack of design innovation, the weavers in Dhaniakhali mostly complained about impurity of thread and color available from the cooperatives; they appeared to be firm in their conviction that if the problem of raw materials is solved, they can face the competition of powerloom. This confidence is not echoed by weavers in Rajbalhat, who weave the same Dhaniakhali Taant *saree*, using the same technique and who have no complaint about thread supplied by *mahajan*s there. While they share with Dhaniakhali weavers the pride in the quality of their products, the weavers of Rajbalhat acknowledge that better designs on lighter *saree*s produced either on handloom or powerloom have much more appeal to the customers. In fact, to the extent that handloom *saree*s are now largely used on special occasions or for gifts only and not for regular wear, durability and even yarn quality is not what customers necessarily look for.

In all study areas, in the context of competitive response from the handloom sector, one paradoxically encounters a common complaint of ‘skill deficit’ in a sector that is commonly seen as ‘repository of skills’. This comes forth in responses from weavers, traders as well as cooperative societies. This is attributed either to the “attitude” of the weavers, but more often to a decline in availability of highly skilled weavers, whose products can beat powerloom products. Both have to do with the fact that the group of highly skilled weavers are aged in all areas—making them less willing or capable of adapting to new designs or new techniques -and the fact that younger generations have not been taking up this occupation for some time now.

> *Those [weavers] who are in the 40-50 year age range..we don’t have problems in selling their products. The problem arises with sarees woven by those above 60 years, 55 years….those cannot be sold. Those remain on the shelf. We cannot give new design to them, because they won’t be able to weave it. We accept their products because we are a cooperative, mahajans wouldn’t have bought them..we do it because they are poor people.* Interview with member, Dhaniakhali Union Taant Shilpi Samabay Samiti)

It is to be noted here that design changes continuously in all the areas studied—a typical design lasts for 6 months to a year at the most. It is not the lack of *change* in design that is the problem, rather the lack of *emphasis* on design. Phulia has been more successful compared to other areas, precisely because its innovative designs easily convey the level of craftsmanship of the weavers to the consumers, whereas for Dhaniakhali products, the durability and quality of the product work acts less effectively as a signal of its craftsmanship and its plain design may even signal a relative "absence" of craftsmanship.

Technical change can both reduce the physical hardship of weaving, especially for older weavers, as well as enable more saleable and designs. There are state government schemes to train weavers on Jacquard machines, including training for minor repair work. Some *mahajan*s are even willing to finance the installation of Jacquard machines, provided the weavers are willing to train themselves on the new machines.

> *[But] the problem with us weavers is that we do not want to come out of the tradition to which we belong. We do not have the mentality to move away from the traditional weaving technique [on Dobby in Rajbalhat] to the Jacquard loom.* Interview with government-enlisted trainer at a skill-Upgradation Program in Rajbalhat

When questioned, weavers responded that lack of space in household premises or additional financial burden are some of the reasons why they don't make the switch to Jacquard. A pneumatic Jacquard machine, which reduces the burden of physical labour, is even costlier. The psychological and financial costs of switch in technology may not be an attractive investment for ageing weavers. This is particularly true if the households do not see a future in weaving for the younger generations. It is this latter aspect that we turn to in the following section.

**Section VI: Mobility of labour in the handloom sector**

We have already noted in Section II that, in West Bengal, the total number of looms and weaver households are higher than any other state with commercial handloom production. At the same time, the degree of importance of handloom production to the household, either in terms of number of days worked per year or in terms of handloom's contribution to household income is the lowest in West Bengal. These facts point to an already advanced degree of income diversification within weaver households. The uniform picture in all our study areas is that number of weavers is dwindling because the younger members of the weaver households are not entering the profession or exiting it because of low wages. The sharp decline in weavers' earnings in recent times is likely to exacerbate this trend.

Given the level of wages, workers are shifting from handloom to other occupations in urban areas like construction, shop-keeping and transport (mainly auto-rickshaws, locally called *tuktuks*). Depending on the level of urbanization in surrounding areas or connectivity to Kolkata, younger people have taken up different occupations locally or in Kolkata—but also have migrated to states like Karnataka, Kerala, Gujarat etc. In areas where local economy doesn't provide much alternative employment in agricultural or non-agricultural activities and where connectivity with Kolkata is such that daily commute as a casual labourer is costly, workers are 'stuck' in handlooms despite falling wages. This is true for Rajbalhat area. In those areas, where powerloom has already penetrated, weavers have switched to working as wage-workers on powerloom in non-household establishments (as in Santipur, Dhatrigram and Samudragarh-nasaratpur areas) or installed powerloom in their households (as in Santipur and Phulia).

This exit from handloom is also prompted by pressure coming from other social institutions, like marriage. In weaver households, where much of preparatory work on yarn is done by family members—mostly by women—younger men may find it difficult to get married, as parents may not want their daughters to marry males of weaver families where they have to do handloom-related work, in addition to regular household chores and care work within the family.

> *Weavers' sons can't get married. There may be everything—vehicle, fridge. The house is there. All of these may have been made from work on handlooms. But they are not getting girls. Because, they [women] have to do this work [handloom related]. This may be the reason.* [Interview with female weaver, Dhaniakhali]

Weaver households have been investing more in formal education of their sons and daughters with occupational diversification in mind. Earlier, children would get 'attached' to household looms at an early age, learning the craft as they grew up. The decline in handlooms had made weaver households pushing children of into schools and higher education, even if that means keeping looms idle or selling it off.

> *One thing has changed in our locality—everyone is getting educated. There was a time when you would not have found people with secondary education here.* (Interview with Weaver who has recently installed powerloom in his house, Samudragarh-Nasaratpur)

Within the handloom sector, there has always been a tendency to move from production to trading, because of higher profit margins[19]. Several private traders/*mahajan*s we have talked to started out as weavers and then became pure traders, increasing their scale of operation over time. The low earnings for weavers have prompted some parents to push their young sons into trading of textiles in local hats, while they themselves continued with the production. This way, they can augment their total household earnings, by combining weaver's wages with traders' margins. On the other hand, there have also been cases of reversal. The system of organization of handloom involves many layers between the weaver and the market. A typical weaver weaves 3-4 *saree*s a week, which he brings to the small trader/*mahajan*, who then brings it to the big trader/*mahajan*, who finally sells it locally or in distant markets in Kolkata, Asansol, etc. Many of the small *mahajan*s collect weekly output from 10-15 weavers and bring them to the big *mahajan*. Many of them stopped weaving sometime in the past and rented out their looms to other households. In recent times, however, because of decline in earnings and consequent unavailability of weavers, some of them have been forced to turn back to weaving on their household looms. It is not only weavers but also many weaver-turned-small traders who are seeing a rapid decline in their economic situation.

However, it should not be inferred from the preceding discussion that labour mobility is unidirectional. It is not our intention here to paint the picture of a 'late' decline of an industry that is a repository of generationally passed-down traditional skills. The handloom sector has traditionally been viewed through a historical lens, but it has always been—in the past as well as in the present—an economic sector, like any other, that sees labourers moving in when earnings are high and moving out when earnings go down. These labourers may come from within the community of weavers, but they can also come from outside—from outside family, community or region. The new entrants typically work as apprentices, then as wage-workers and finally acquire their own looms. In terms of labour mobility, the sector is far more dynamic than the dominant discourse would make us believe.

Among the weavers we interviewed, quite a number of them are first-generation weavers, who entered the sector within the last 10-15 years. Some of them have shifted from agriculture either because the earnings were lower in agriculture, or because they didn't want to work under the sun and rain on the field. Some, but not all, kept one foot in each. Over

19 Most of the weavers from the famous Basak community in Phulia, Samudragarh-Nasaratpur and Dhatrigram have moved into trading, many acting as small traders/*mahajan*s and sourcing their products from 10-15 weavers.

time, they have moved away from working on someone else's loom, acquired his or her own and forged a stable long-term relation with *mahajan*. The number of *mahajan*s itself increased in the not too distant past.

Weavers from different castes can be found in almost all areas that we studied. The acquisition of skills is fairly easy, given absence of social barriers to entry. The handloom areas in Santipur and Phulia in Nadia district and Samudragarh-Nasaratpur and Dhatrigram have traditionally employed migrant labourers from North Bengal. In recent times, use of migrant labourers have declined, partly because of the lower wage and partly because many of the migrant labourers have gone back and set up their own looms in their home districts. But, even now, the presence of migrant labourers is not insignificant in these areas. The following conversation with a migrant weaver from a non-weaving background captures how skills "proliferate". This migrant weaver left industrial jobs in Maharashtra and Gujarat to learn handloom in Phulia, so that he can be closer to his home district and visit home every now and then. This weaver reported earnings of Rs. 9000-10000 per month, working 8-12 hours a day, which means the *saree*s that he weaves cannot be of the cheapest varieties—which also explains how this particular household could afford hired labourers.

> *Interviewer: How long did it take you to learn weaving, 4 months?*
> *Migrant Weaver: Yes, 4 months*
> *Interviewer: Did the person who taught you weaving, take you to any training program?*
> *Migrant Weaver: No, No.*
> *Interviewer: He himself taught you here?*
> *Migrant Weaver: Yes, yes.*
> *Interviewer: You do weave, is that right?*
> *Migrant Weaver: yes, I weave*
> *Interviewer: What kind of sarees do you weave?*
> *Migrant Weaver: I am weaving Benarasi, then I also weave Matha saree.*
> *Interviewer: That means you weave all kind of sarees? It's not that you weave only a particular kind saree, but all types?*
> *Migrant Weaver: yes, I weave all types. I weave whatever I am told to weave.*
>
> (Interview with migrant weaver, Phulia)

In fact, the view of traditional skills as a 'stock' rather than a 'flow' needs to be called into question. It is true that there are often skill differences between those with family history of generations of weaving and those who have recently learnt weaving as part of occupational mobility. For the latter, investing in skills beyond a level may not be an automatic choice; it depends on many factors—level of competition, the perceived future of the sector as well as current earnings. However, neither caste nor skill barriers appear insurmountable in these areas. This free entry also partly explains the commonly heard complaints of “skill deficit” when it came to competitive response to decline in markets we discussed in the preceding discussion.

> *It is because of entry of other communities into weaving, that quality of sarees cannot be maintained.* [Interview with *Mahajan*, Dhatrigram]

> *There are not many of the skilled weavers remaining now. Most of the weavers are unskilled or semi-skilled, who have become weavers by learning weaving because factories closed down. For them it is not possible to bring such changes [as required in the presence of competition from powerooms] in design.* [Interview with the consultant, Tangail Tantujibi Unnayan Samabay Samiti, Phulia]

What comes through in these interviews is that the handloom sector, as part of a normal process and like any other sector, attracts labourers, local as well as migrant, from both agricultural and industrial backgrounds and from all communities and castes, who contributes to a certain degree of heterogeneity in the skills profile of the sector. This heterogeneity can act as a source of strength as well as weakness, in the same way that tradition does. Younger generations from traditional weaving communities can leave the occupation, while younger people from non-weaving background may fill the gap. Pride associated with the image of the skilled artisan should not lead to prejudice against the ever-busy, ever-mobile, income-seeking ‘regular’ labour.

**Section VII: Conclusion**

In the context of artisanal skills, typically two powerful opposing views polarize opinion. The more technocratic and teleological view sees the decline of artisanal industries sad but an inevitable, if not desirable, outcome in the face of competition from machines. The more discursive and pluralist view sees the inevitability of decline of artisanal industries as a modernist trope that underlies a politics of marginalization. The former equates tradition with unchangeability, the latter as a source of resilient innovativeness. But in both perspectives, a certain sphere of social production is seen uniquely through the lens of “traditional skills”. However, in the Indian context, the handloom sector is not only a repository of artisanal skills but also one of the largest sectors in terms of employment. These two aspects of the handloom industry in India evoke contradictory responses—tradition calls for a preservationist approach, employment calls for an expansionist approach. This contradiction requires the notion of “artisanal skills” to perform a complex connotative function of invoking scarcity (when it refers to artisanal) and abundance (when it refers to employment) at the same time. Our findings from the survey in West Bengal present a heterogeneous picture of the handloom sector that is in a phase of transition due to the late development of powerloom. It is not clear how the handloom sector is going to respond to it, since the onset of the recent 'crisis' is dated back to not more than 2-3 year. It will be foolish to predict the fate of either powerloom or handloom in West Bengal. However, our findings also suggest that the sector is more dynamic and much more heterogeneous in terms of labor mobility and skill acquisition historically and even in recent decades, than is commonly imagined. The fraternal use of the word 'artist' seeks to unify disparate personal histories and levels of skills of the members of the great weaving community. However, from another point of view, handloom is just part of contemporary histories of labour. While not losing sight of our heritage, we argue for a more labour-focused approach in place of the currently dominant tradition-focused approach to the sector.

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## Appendix

Table A: Profile of Study Areas

| Handloom Study Area | Major Concentration | **Major *Saree* Products** | **Yarn Count** | **Loom Type** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dhaniakhali | Dhaniakhali-I and Somaspur-I Gram Panchayat, Dhaniakhali Block, Chinsurah/Sadar Sub-division, Hooghly District | Dhaniakhali Taant, Taant Baluchori | 100sX100s | Fly shuttle Pit loom with dobby:few jacquards |
| Rajbalhat | Rajbalhat-I and Rajbalhat-II Gram Panchayats, Jangipara Block, Serampore Sub-divisin, Hooghly District | Dhaniakhali Taant (Mach *Saree*, Rangabati *Saree*) | 80sX80s, 80sX100s | Fly shuttle Pit loom with dobby |
| Fulia | Fulia Census Town, Belgoria-I, Belgoria-II and Nabla and other Gram Panchayats in Santipur Block, Ranaght Sub-division, Nadia District | Plain Jamdani, Dhakai Jamdani, Linen, Tangail with Buti | 100sX100s | Pit & Frame loom with dobby & jacquard |
| Santipur | Babla, Haripur and Baganchra GP and Santipur Municipality, Santipur Block, Ranaghat Sub-Division, Nadia District | Santipuri *Saree*--e.g. Matha *Saree*, Tangail Naksha Par | 80sX80s | Fly Shuttle pit loom with jacqard;double jacquard is common |
| Dhatrigram | Dhatrigram, CT and Gram Panchayat, Kalna –I Block, Kalna Sub-Division, Purba Bardhaman District | Tangail, Jamdani | 80sX100s, 100sX100s | Fly-Shuttle pit loom with double jacquard |
| Samudragarh-Nasaratpur | Samudragarh and Nasaratpur GP, Purbasthai-I Block, Kalna Subdivision, Purba Bardhaman District | Tangail, Jamdani, Baluchori | 100sX100s | Fly-Shuttle pit loom with single & double jacquard |