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**Economic and Cultural Significance of The Handloom Industry in  
West Bengal**

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**ABSTRACT**

Workers in the agricultural sector who are unemployed or only work part-time might find job in the handloom industry. Rather of limiting rural women's ability to care for their families, it makes use of their optimal working capability. Employment, revenue, and foreign exchange profits are all significantly impacted by it, making it an essential part of India's national economy. Twelve and a half million people in India's decentralized economy rely on this business for their income. Additionally, this industry generates a substantial quantity of foreign cash via the sale of handloom products. There is a positive balance of payment since the export of handloom items continues to rise. Policy assistance, skill development, and market integration are crucial for the long-term survival of the Bengal handloom sector, which has historically evolved and is socio-economically important. The report also emphasizes the current issues faced by the sector. Protecting Bengal's illustrious cultural heritage and ensuring the continued viability of the handloom weaving industry are mutually exclusive goals.

**Keywords:** *Textile, Traditional, Cultural heritage, Employment, Weaving.*

**I. INTRODUCTION**

The major part of India's craft industry is handloom, which has its origins in the pre-colonial artisanal tradition and uses traditional techniques and organizations. From the second Handloom Census in 1995–96 to the third Handloom Census in 2009–10, however, it fell precipitously. The handloom industry employed 43.3 lakh people in 2009–10, using around 23.77 lakh looms, a decrease from 65.5 lakh people and 34.87 looms in 1995–96. Most people agree that this reduction is due to powerloom competition, unstable export markets, craftsmen' out-of-date skills, and the market's unwillingness to change.

Powerlooms' meteoric rise at the cost of textile mills and, later, handlooms, has been the most remarkable feature of India's weaving industry since independence. Roughly 64.37 million people were employed by an estimated 25.75 lakh powerlooms in 2016–17, which accounted for 55.39 percent of total textile production and produced 35672 million sq meters of fabric. Compared to the handloom business, powerlooms now employ a significantly larger workforce.

By all accounts, the handloom industry stands head and shoulders above the other numerous cottage industries that formerly flourished in Bengal and are reputed to this day. West Bengal has a long history of handloom weaving that is considered an important component of its culture. Rural Bengalis continue to rely on handloom as a major source of income. To this day, West Bengal is



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home to an estimated 3.5 lakh handlooms. Most of West Bengal's handloom is concentrated in a few areas: Nadia district's Santipur and Fulia; Hooghly district's Dhaniakhali and Begampur; Burdwan district's Dhatrigram and Katwa; Bankura district's Bishnupur.

Textile production in Bengal dates back to the dawn of time. It is believed that Bengal's textile industry had already achieved widespread renown while Kautilya was writing the Arthashastra. Notable authors and travelers from all over the world have praised Bengal's illustrious cotton textile industry at various points in history. These include Marco Polo, Ma Huan, Ralph Fitch, Abul Fazal, Tavernier, and many more. The industry's illustrious output paved the way for trade links with the rest of the globe. On the website of the British Museum is a document dating back to 1730 that details the variety of textiles or "piece goods" bought in Bengal by the Company. As a result of their unparalleled quality, Bengali handloom items were the undisputed market leaders in the global textile industry.

Even though handloom goods have been losing popularity in recent years due to the rise of power looms, the Bengali handloom sector is working hard to maintain its reputation for quality and creativity. Reasons why handloom is still necessary include the fact that mills can't weave coarse yarn and the fact that handloom accuracy is the only way to meet the varied demands and preferences of different regions.

## **II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Singh, Vishal & Gautam, Amit. (2022) The export support program for the handloom sector is the subject of this research. A comprehensive literature review and study of government assistance programs for the handloom sector identified four characteristics that contribute to the current export support program. Because it offers so many tax rebates and other advantages, the financial support framework greatly affects export aid. The primary objective of this research is to identify the common thread that exists throughout various literatures about the handloom industry.

Banerjee, Abhradip & Chakrabarti, Gopalkrishna. (2020) A growing number of academics are worried about the potential negative consequences of globalization. The progressive penetration of the market-driven production system and global capitalism among various categories of individuals who make a livelihood as wage workers or craftsmen is a key factor contributing to this growing worry. Folks whose jobs are on the periphery of the country's economy have felt this impact the most. In this borderless world, where resourceless craftsmen are the worst hit on both the cultural and economic fronts, nations are losing their ability to rule and regulate, which is another major cause. This essay makes an effort to look at how the silk weavers in the Bishnupur district in India's West Bengal have been affected by globalization. It takes an emancipatory stance by drawing on contextual reading and ethnographic evidence gathered from direct research with the aforementioned people. Local players and the international process are described in the ethnography in a chaotic and unquantifiable way.



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Sarkar, Sharmistha & Mukhopadhyay, Sayani. (2019) By 1991, the idea of globalization had made its way to the Indian subcontinent. The Indian economy and her billion-plus people have entered a new age with the advent of privatization, globalization, and liberalization. Many people in the Hugli area work in the handloom industry, which has long been considered a cultural treasure in West Bengal. Dhaniakhali–Somaspur, Begumpur, Haripal, Rajbolhat, and Balagar are the five handloom clusters in the district that are the focus of the research. Examining the social and economic impacts of globalization on a community of rural handloom weavers was the primary goal of this article. Additionally, the paper aims to examine how modernity has altered the overall production scenario of the district's handloom sector. You might say that the Hugli district's handloom sector has its fair share of challenges, such as low productivity, an absence of product diversity, and issues with sourcing raw materials. Growing their customer base is of little interest to the cooperative sectors. Even though there are many competent weavers, most of them stick to old methods and practises; very few have embraced contemporary technology. Because of the industry's unpredictability, younger generations are wary of taking weaving as a career path. So that this historic sector can adapt to new trends and reap the benefits of globalization, the article offers advice on how to make this competitive on a worldwide scale, including keeping an eye out for emerging trends, boosting exports, and conducting market assessments.

Mishra, Vandita & Bhattacharjee, M., (2017) When it comes to ancient Indian history, the handloom sector stands tallest. It employs fourteen percent of the poor, is second only to agriculture in terms of employment, and accounts for ten percent of India's total textile exports annually. Mechanization, however, has put this lovely art form of hand weaving on looms in danger of extinction. By painting a comprehensive picture of the value chain in the handloom industry, this article investigates the difficulties encountered by handloom weavers. The sustainability of the value chain is examined through a field research in the cities of Shantipur and Phulia in the Nadia district of West Bengal. Throughout the whole handloom value chain, a cost-benefit analysis methodology is utilized. The value chain of saris from Jamdani, Shantipuri, Baluchari, and Tangail is the main focus. Weavers who are part of cooperative societies and those who work independently are compared in terms of the difference between their short- and long-term profits. While cooperative weavers make a profit in the long run, independent weavers notice a 50% increase in their short-term profits. The findings show that the handloom industry has to organize and grow the market for individual weavers if it wants to remain there for the long haul.

Basak, Nilay. (2015) This article delves into the history and development of Fulia's handloom industry, highlighting its current state and highlighting the challenges that this sector is currently encountering. A variety of literatures have been reviewed and field surveys have been conducted in order to compile this study. Researching and analyzing these data points reveal that the Fulia weavers originated from the Tangail Subdivision of East Pakistan, which is now a district of Bangladesh. They migrated there during the 1947 partition and the 1971 Bangladesh freedom war, and their saris are known as "Tangail Shari." As a result. Although Tangail Shari was developed in Fulia after



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independence, it had several challenges in the subsequent twenty years, such as unfair wages, exploitation by moneylenders, inadequate infrastructure, and so on. In 1977, weavers created a co-op in an effort to secure their livelihood in the face of this critical situation. The Co-operative and the individuals' endeavor are both made feasible by this development. Products are shipped to various parts of India and even other nations across the globe. The Fulia weavers exclusively use the Tangail Shari style, which is centuries old. Competition from powerlooms, rising raw material prices, low wages, commercialization of electricity, sharis imported from Bangladesh, an unorganized marketing system, rejection of exporting clothes, and other issues are now plaguing Fulia's handloom industry. Since Fulia is the sole center of Traditional Tangail Shari in all of India, the study concludes that the handloom industry and the region would benefit greatly from a joint venture between the federal and state governments.

Kundu, Mintu. (2012) Since the era of previous independence, Alipurduar block-II of Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal has lagged behind in terms of industry. Alipurduar Block-II's economy isn't very dependent on industry. The Block's economy is mostly dependent on agriculture and is severely lacking in development. A big labor excess, a lack of infrastructure facilities, a poor yield per acre, a lack of capital, and a slow rate of industrialization are all indicators of backwardness. As a result of persistent migration, the problem of unemployment has reached a peak. A few of the settlements in Alipurduar Block-II still rely on age-old practices for their livelihood. The handloom sector in Alipurduar Block-II has a long history. People who had come from Bangladesh began working as weavers because it was a traditional skill for them. In order to better understand the current state of the handloom industry in Alipurduar Block-II and to propose policy recommendations for its growth, this research was conducted. To ensure the industry's continued success and ability to address current issues, this research also focuses on its potential for growth in the future.

### **III. HANDLOOM SECTOR IN WEST BENGAL**

One of the biggest decentralized, labor-intensive businesses in West Bengal is the handloom industry, which has carried on the state's rich cultural legacy for generations. Manual labor for environmentally friendly material goods is the major emphasis of this industry, which is less capital-intensive. There are 6,31,447 handloom and related workers (~1% of the West Bengal population) and 2,83,404 handlooms in the West Bengal handloom sector, which is a thriving sector as of 2020.

As indicated in table 1, the majority of West Bengal's handloom industry is concentrated in the state's rural and semi-rural areas, which span seventeen districts. West Bengal's handloom industry is responsible for 12% of India's towel, napkin, duster, and gamcha production in addition to 35.3% of the country's total saree output.



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**Table 1: District-Wise Handloom Products Manufacturing Details**

Name of the District	Handloom Products Manufactured
Nadia	Tangail, Jamdani, Santipuri Sarees, Dress materials, Lungi, Exportable fabrics (Scarf, Stole), Coarser sarees, Gamcha
24-Parganas (S)	Fine cotton sarees, Coarser sarees, Gamcha
East Midnapore	Coarser sarees, Shirting, Furnishing, Gamcha
Purulia	Tassar Than, Silk shirting, Coarser cotton sarees, Gamcha
North Dinajpur	Gamcha, Coarser saree, Jute furnishing
Jalpaiguri	Coarser saree, Gamcha
Hooghly	Dhaniakhali, Begumpuri sarees, Fine cotton dhoti, Sarees, Coarser sarees
Darjeeling	Woollen shawl, Coarser saree
South Dinajpur	Tangail saree, Fine cotton sarees
Birbhum	Tassar Than, Shirting
Cooch Behar	Tangail saree, Fine cotton sarees, Coarser saree
Murshidabad	Silk Than, Silk shirting, Korial saree, Coarser cotton saree
West Midnapore	Fine & coarser saree, Tassar Than, Cotton shirting
Bankura	Baluchari sarees, Silk Than, Shirting, Tassar scarf
Howrah	Fine cotton sarees, Dhoti, Shirting, Furnishing fabrics, Gamcha, Coarser sarees
24-Parganas (N)	Gauze, Bandage, Gamcha, Lungi, Coarser sarees
Burdwan	Tangail, Jamdani sarees, Exportable fabrics (Scarf, Stole), Home furnishing, Coarser sarees, Gamcha, Lungi, Cotton dhoti

The West Bengal handloom industry is steeped in cultural heritage and produces high-quality hand-woven textiles. Thanks to its enduring nature and careful transmission down the generations, the craft as we know it today has survived.

A major cause for worry is that it is a labor-intensive sector that continues to depend on antiquated gear. Moreover, this industry has not experienced substantial modernization as the craftspeople involved do not receive any kind of professional training and the vast majority of them lack the necessary education. The commercial manufacturing industry has been more competitive with the handloom sector in recent years. But the handloom industry is a cultural treasure, and the goods it produces are tangible evidence of an irreplaceable history.

#### **IV. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF HANDLOOM IN BENGAL**

Bengali handloom weaving has a long and storied tradition that is intrinsic to the region's society, economy, and culture. The magnificent silk textiles and delicate muslin that come from Bengal have made the city famous as a global textile powerhouse for generations. Bengal muslin, famously



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known as "woven air," was famously delicate, exquisitely fine, and expertly crafted. According to historical accounts, Bengali muslin was so fine that a whole saree could be threaded through a single ring. Bengal became a major node in global commerce networks thanks to its extraordinary textile culture, which showcased the artistic brilliance of its weavers.

The handloom business experienced tremendous growth throughout the Mughal era. Bengal became an important provider of cotton and silk fabrics to both local and international markets, thanks in large part to royal patronage that encouraged textile manufacture. The textiles made in Bengal were highly regarded and brought in a lot of money when they were transported to places like Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Thousands of craftspeople found work in the growing demand for intricately woven textiles, and the craft eventually became a family business. Weaving clusters were the social hubs of these ancient societies, serving as repositories for knowledge, art, and technology.

The Bengal handloom industry, however, faced both possibilities and threats throughout the colonial era. Exports of Bengali textiles increased at first because of the high demand from European merchants. Colonial economic policies and the advent of automated textile manufacturing in Europe had a negative impact on traditional weaving processes throughout time. Handloom manufacturing declined gradually in numerous places due to the emergence of machine-made textiles and the severe competition that followed. As the market for handmade textiles declined, many talented weavers encountered financial difficulties and were forced to give up their traditional vocation.

The revival of the handloom sector was a priority after India's independence. Weavers were greatly helped by government programs, cooperative groups, and welfare systems, which greatly improved their economic situation. By banding together in cooperatives, artists were able to cut out the middlemen and get access to greater marketing prospects, loans, and raw materials. While preserving the integrity of their trade, weavers were able to adapt traditional techniques to new customer tastes through training programs and design development activities.

## **V. IMPACT OF THE HANDLOOM INDUSTRY ON THE ECONOMY OF WEST BENGAL**

The impacts of the handloom industry on the economy of the district are as follows:

### **Employment Generation**

Agriculture plays a crucial role in the economies of these areas. The state's highest-ranking rice-producing district is Purba Bardhaman, while Nadia is well-known for its jute and vegetable crops. Many people's livelihoods depend on the handloom sector. Actually, in two districts, the handloom sector employs about 60% of all industrial workers. By employing many women on a part-time or full-time basis in the processes that lead up to the production of handloom cloth, the handloom business helps to narrow the gender gap in the labor force participation rate. However, male and female employees earn significantly different amounts. Women are often active participants in the



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weaving process, although they are seldom master weavers or proprietors of the manufacturing units. Nadia and Purba Bardhaman are districts with a high population density, high poverty and unemployment rates, and an industrial tendency toward handloom that is well-suited to their needs. During the months when they are not working in agriculture, many of the hired laborers get their hands dirty with the necessary preparations for handloom manufacturing. Workers in various fields, particularly those in agriculture, might find part-time employment with handloom.

**Low Capital Investment and Large Number of Manual Labour**

The handloom industry is a green business model since it uses simple workshop setup, requires little capital investment, and doesn't harm the environment. So, it works well in places where individuals don't often have a ton of money to start a firm. Because of this, the sector fosters an entrepreneurial spirit that would otherwise go untapped due to a lack of startup funding. Mahajans continue to play an important role. A large number of the weavers were able to escape the mahajani's control and establish their own manufacturing operation.

A significant portion of the region's workforce is employed by the handloom industry due to its labor-intensive nature. The industry also upholds long-standing customs and expertise that give handloom fabric its distinctiveness. The handloom sector relies on highly skilled workers for the weaving process itself, although less experienced workers can handle the preparatory procedures and auxiliary industries. The other parts of manufacturing, apart from weaving, really have very straightforward methods that can be taught to anyone in a short amount of time. Aside from males, women and the elderly may all get a little more cash by doing supplementary tasks. Because handloom manufacture is primarily a domestic activity, women may work on it while still attending to other household chores without leaving the comfort of their own home. Women who work outside the house face significant social stigma in our culture. There is often a lack of sufficient care for women, particularly when it comes to matters of health and cleanliness. There are various societal and familial contexts in which women are not permitted to work outside the home. These difficulties are resolved by the labor-intensive nature of handloom.

**Income Generation**

Despite the low wages they receive from the handloom industry, the weavers' monthly income is higher than that of the hired laborers in the region's agricultural sector. Employed weavers in these areas really earn more than their counterparts in the other industrial sector on a monthly basis. There are more opportunities for monthly earnings in the handloom industry compared to the agricultural population. Weavers typically need trained workers, but unskilled or semi-skilled workers can find work in the industry's auxiliary and preparatory tasks. This helps alleviate the region's oversaturated agriculture sector and the hidden unemployment that results from it. Working in the handloom industry tends to offer more stable employment opportunities over the long term compared to agriculture, where jobs tend to be more seasonal.



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**Revenue Generation and Opportunity Creation for Ancillary Industries**

The agricultural industry remains vital to Nadia's economy, although the rural workforce has been shifting away from agriculture in recent years. More than two lakh people are employed in the production system of the handloom industry, which is the dominating player in the district's industrial situation. Both the district's and the state's economies benefit greatly from its operations, as it generates a considerable amount of income.

The handloom industry relies on a number of ancillary companies for its supply chain, including those dealing with cotton yarn processing, dyes and chemicals, loom replacement parts, and many more. The handloom sector relies on various sectors, both inside and outside of the districts, for its raw material needs. The auxiliary sectors that support handloom manufacturing have been on the rise in recent years. In addition to bringing in tax money for the districts, these businesses also employ people in the area, both temporarily and permanently. Master weavers and mahajans in Nadia often own these auxiliary enterprises on a smaller scale, and they attempt to take a cut of the profits from both the handloom industry and these other areas of production. The silk is purchased from the wholesale market in Kolkata rather than being treated locally. The western silk hubs, such as Gujarat and Maharashtra, send their yarns to the capital city. However, silk is used in some parts of the handloom business, particularly for making high-priced items that may be exported.

**Capability for Production of Value Added Commodities**

The final commodities in the handloom industry may command a considerably higher price since the manufacture is skill reliant and distinctive to the location. Additionally, designed goods undergo high percentages of value addition at every level of production. The weavers are able to make a living wage thanks to their talent and competence, even if they don't have a lot of cash to work with. This is especially true for exportable handloom goods that are unique in style, outstanding in quality, and able to command a premium price. Many of the weavers have won national awards. The price of a jamdani silk shari might reach 8 lakh rupees.

**Production for Export and Generation of Foreign Revenue**

Some of the handloom industry's output is sent abroad since its wares are well-liked even by consumers in other countries. Some wealthy groups of weavers are the sole ones involved in this export trade. It improves the economic performance of these areas and gives a major boost to the production sector.

**Linkage Creation**

It is the operation of the handloom industry that gives rise to several forms of spatial connections, all of which play an important part in ensuring the sector's continued existence. links may be broken down into three categories: human links, commodity linkages, and monetary linkages.



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**Regional Concentration in Industrial Development**

The handloom business is highly specialized since it relies on a certain set of skills and is hence quite regional. One hundred sixty-six thousand, or 57.79 percent, of the district's industrial workers are employed by the handloom cluster in Nadia, according to the statistics that are currently available. This cluster mostly includes the Santipur, Ranaghat I, Nabadwip, and Krishnanagar II blocks. According to the District Statistical Handbook Nadia (2010), the aforementioned blocks also comprise 77.73 percent of the whole population involved in the weaving segment of the handloom sector in the Nadia district. The distribution of Nadia's industrial labor is controlled by the handloom industry, the most significant industry in the country. But the district's overall development is skewed because of this concentrated phenomena of the handloom industrial sector's growth. The Purba Bardhaman district has likewise heard the same complaints about regional inequalities.

**VI. WEST BENGAL SPECIAL HANDLOOM PRODUCTS**

**Baluchari Saree**

An intriguing aspect of vintage Baluchar sarees was the incorporation of stylized animal and bird motifs into floral and paisley patterns. Baluchar employed silk yarn that was not twisted, giving it a thick, smooth feel. Bengal Baluchari sarees are charming, alluring, and wonderfully coveted because to the wide range of methods, patterns, and textures used to make them. The governments of India and West Bengal have partnered on a Project Package Scheme for the Bishnupur region of Bankura district to take advantage of the current favorable market conditions and assist weavers in bettering their lives. This initiative aims to diversify our products, improve our craftsmen' technical abilities via training, ensure their employment, raise the living standards of our weavers, and fortify our state's handloom sector.

**Tangail Saree**

The extra-weft buits, which are little repetitive patterns sewn into the fabric of the saree in a manner similar to embroidery on the loom, are a distinctive feature of Tangail sarees. The cities of Shantipur, Dhaniakhali, Bagampur, and Farasdanga are hubs of cotton weaving.

**Jamdani Saree**

Woven on basic frame or pit looms, it was once a garment fabric for both sexes; today, however, it is exclusively produced in saree lengths in an incredible array of patterns with geometrical motifs. Jamdanis are often white. Modern sarees and giant silks also have delicately dyed grounds adorned with white, maroon, black, green, gold, and silver patterns. Jamdanis have traditionally been white with bleached white motifs. Still, modern sarees may be seen with delicately dyed grounds adorned with white, maroon, black, green, gold, silver, and muga silk, a deep golden hue.



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### **Santipuri Saree**

Beautifully organized butis or jamdani motifs in additional weft and stripes of various sorts and widths adorn the anchal or pallava, the part of the saree that dangles from the shoulder. These days, you may also get certain Shantipur saree anchals with tie-and-die patterns. One of Shantipur, Nadia District's traditional handloom specialties. Renown for its uniformly delicate texture. Cotton yarn is available in a variety of counts, from 80s to 100s. The additional warp of side border patterns are what give the varieties their names. The warp below is made of fine cotton. Use saree, mulberry, silk, etc., for additional warp or border muga.

### **Dhanekhali Saree**

The Hooghly district town of Dhaniakhali was formerly known for its exquisite dhotis and sarees. Handspun Khadi yarn has been woven by a number of big cotton weavers' communities since the 1960s.

### **Kantha Stitch Saree**

Kantha is both the most common and the most imaginative. A local culture is reflected in it. The white tread that the kantha-maker uses to cover the whole surface of the work in patterned running threads is its defining feature. Stitches hold the surface and layers together while the kantha-maker creates her needlework, which is a manifestation of her feelings, ideas, and aspirations.

### **Batik Saree**

"Batik" literally translates to "wax writing," which is really the essence of batik. It is a technique for embellishing fabric that involves applying a layer of wax to a section of fabric before dyeing it. After the wax is removed, the pattern is created by contrasting the colored and undyed parts, with the waxed portions retaining their natural color. There are three steps involved in making a batik saree: waxing, dyeing, and de-waxing.

### **Home Furnishings**

A wide variety of items used for the purpose of adorning and enhancing our houses are collectively referred to as "home furnishing." This includes bedding, furniture, fittings, flooring, and many more accessories. Bedspreads, drapes, rugs, durries, carpets, placemats, cushion covers, tablecloths, bed spreads, bath linens, and a plethora of other items are all part of it. Materials utilized include cotton, polyester, silk, suede, acrylic, cashmere, rayon, silk, linen, and wool; they are then embellished with techniques like as zari, phulkari, bandhani, beading, appliqué, and patchwork.

### **Scarves**

Scarves are a kind of outerwear that combines warmth with ornamentation. When the weather becomes bad—rainy, dirty, cold—people put them over their necks to keep warm. People who care about style might also wear them for more aesthetic reasons. Scarves made from wool, cashmere, or any synthetic fiber that mimics the look of animal hair are the most popular.



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## VII. CONCLUSION

The handloom weaving culture is quite rich in West Bengal. Our cultural legacy includes it. On both the national and international stages, Bengali handloom goods have garnered attention. Consequently, our handloom items have gained global notice and continue to carry the enduring legacy of our cultural history. The districts of Nadia, Murshidabad, Burdwan, Purba Medinipur, Hooghly, and Bankura are the most important centers for employment in West Bengal's handloom sector. The master weaver or mahajans will contractually delegate some or all of the task to cooperative and connected groups, while larger autonomous units use division of labor. Household laborers operate almost 80% of the sample units.

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