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Sustainability of Handloom Industry for North East India: A Perspective from Tripura

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Abstract: ***Background: The paper explores strategies to strengthen the handloom sector in Tripura, India, focusing on heritage and legacy, economic status, sustainability aspects, and marketing challenges. The work effectively addresses the issues concerning the handloom sector in the state, which has the second-highest number of weavers per square kilometer among the eight Northeastern states. Design/Methodology: The research investigates the indigenous handloom industry in Tripura using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Field surveys were carried out with 51 handloom units, which included weavers and craftspeople, to evaluate their socioeconomic status, challenges, and aspirations. The survey was conducted through field visits to informants in the South and Gomati districts of Tripura to gather information. Findings: The economic status of handloom weavers remains inadequate, and challenges persist due to ineffective marketing efforts. The paper proposes targeting a value-based niche segment and establishing marketing cooperatives to maximize the return. Additionally, the survey highlights the necessity for effective government policies and training programs. Originality/Value: This analysis of heritage and legacy, economic status, sustainability, and marketing challenges aids in informed decision-making for sustainable textile applications and meeting consumer demands for eco-conscious products.***

Keywords: Handloom, legacy, marketing, sustainability, Tripura, weavers

1. Introduction

The handloom industry, with 2.8 million looms, is the largest cottage industry in the country and the second-largest employment provider in rural areas, employing around 3.52 million people. The 2019-20 Handloom Census revealed a total of 35.22 lakh handloom workers, employs 26.73 lakh weavers, with 72.29% being women. In 2023-24, the export of carpets and textile floor coverings accounted for $1.87 billion [1]. North-East India, with over 100 tribal communities, is a significant hub of handloom and handicrafts, with each region showcasing unique craft traditions. This region, including the state of Tripura, is considered a powerhouse of handloom expertise, with a significant reservoir of these skills [2, 3].The Northeast region's weavers primarily utilize natural fibers and dyes from abundant natural resources like silk, cotton, and wool. Traditional dyeing techniques, including those using plant extracts, roots, and bark, produce environmentally friendly colors in high demand due to their geographical setup [4]. Handlooms vary across states due to cultural influences, climate, and fabric accessibility. They offer minimal capital requirements, innovation flexibility, minimal power consumption, and eco-friendly production processes [5]. In this regard, growth parameters of this segment needs due attention. Drawing on employment density [6], weaver density per square kilometer is an accurate indicator of the expansion of the handloom sector in the NESs.

Handloom weaving is the primary means of livelihood for those relying on it and plays a crucial role in the Tripura's economy. The process involves a frame for weaving equipped with wooden devices, and the sound of the handloom is a rural home's music [7]. Individuals choose handloom occupations to earn income based on their skills, allowing them to support themselves [8]. The handloom sector has the potential to create self-employment opportunities and improve the standard of living for workers. It can produce small-volume products, innovate, adapt to market trends, be flexible, and create excellent designs [9]. Tripura, a Northeast Indian state, is known for its rich cultural heritage, diverse tribal communities, and traditions. The state's history, spanning over 2,500 years, is shaped by oral traditions, folklore, and indigenous craftsmanship. Weaving is a basic economic activity and cultural icon of tribal communities [10]. Indigenous communities, like the Reang (Bru), Debbarma, and Chakma, preserve their traditions through storytelling, weaving, and artistic expressions. The local handloom industry, an important part of Tripura's cultural and economic fabric, is a significant aspect of this heritage. Traditional weaving techniques, based on natural fibers and minimal electricity, are eco-friendly.

The study aims to investigate the heritage and legacy, economic status, sustainability aspects, and marketing challenges related to weavers in India's North Eastern States, focusing on Tripura. It seeks to understand the role of handloom in value creation and the cultural identity of tribal weavers. Additionally, the study will evaluate how traditional weaving practices contribute to sustainability and explore strategies for marketing handloom items to strengthen the industry. The remainder of the study will cover the materials and methods used, present the results, and provide a discussion that synthesizes the key findings.

2. Materials and Methods

Tools: The equipments used in handloom deserve special mention. Informants commonly employ six types of instruments to manufacture handloom-based items. For example, *Chorkhi* for spinning, *Khutui* for cotton processing, *Chorkha* for spinning, *Khubau* for cotton holding, *Khukhli* for cotton beating, and *Natai* for thread processing. This ancient equipment, along with the ingredients, frequently help to preserve the high standards necessary for handloom items.

Ingredients: The primary raw materials for handloom-based items include Khu (Cotton), Wool, Borisrui (a tree that offers dye liquid, Mtui), and Lela (another tree that provides dye liquid, Mtui).

Steps in handloom production

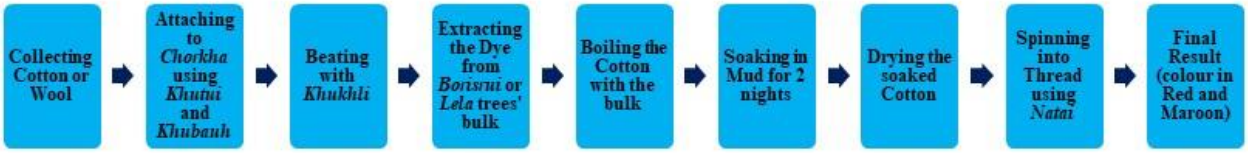

Figure 1: Process of handloom production in Tripura (Source: Author's own)

There are nine phases in the production of handloom-based items, starting with collecting cotton fibers and concluding with applying the final color to the finished products. Completing this process requires master weavers to work for five to seven days. After completing the thread-making process, the weavers move on to the subsequent garment production stages, which include Rignai, Risa, Kamsui, and Kutai, among others.

The article explores strategies to strengthen the handloom industry in Tripura, focusing on development trends, sustainability, cultural heritage, and marketing challenges. By integrating these elements, the study aims to revitalize the promising handloom economy in the region. To gain a comprehensive understanding of Tripura's indigenous handloom industry, the research employs both qualitative and quantitative methods. Field surveys were conducted with 51 handloom units, including weavers and craftspeople. Observations were made to assess their socioeconomic status, challenges, and aspirations. A questionnaire, featuring open-ended and closed-ended queries, was utilized for this purpose. Surveys were administered through field visits to informants, particularly in the South and Gomati districts of Tripura.

Figure 2: Traditional Handloom Dresses in Tripura

The questionnaire consisted of six sections. Section I included four questions focused on the unit details and age distribution of the respondents. Section II contained five parameters aimed at gathering information about the legacy and cultural identity of the participants. The next section focused on the economic profiles of the surveyed individuals. Section IV discussed seven key aspects pertaining to the sustainability of the handloom sector. Section V explored nine key factors that significantly influence the promotion of handloom products. Finally, Section VI highlighted the challenges faced by weavers throughout the state.

Additionally, observational research was conducted to document traditional weaving techniques, natural dyeing processes, and the sourcing of raw materials, offering valuable insights into the sustainability of the craft. The study uses multiple regression, ANOVA, and the Mann-Whitney U test to analyze the hypotheses.

Accordingly, following hypotheses are adopted for the study.
H_1: Handloom weavers' density per square kilo meters in Tripura is best among the NESs.
H_2: Handloom weavers often disregard the preservation of their cultural heritage and legacy.
H_3: Economic status of informants is inadequate to sustain their livelihood.
H_4: Handloom based sustainability parameters are adequate to maintain quality standards of products.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1: No of Weavers in North East Indian States

North Eastern State's	Geographical Area (sq km)	2009-2010* Total workers	2019-20# Total workers	Weavers density (sq km) (Col.3/Col.2)	Weavers density (sq km) (Col.4/Col.2)
Arunachal Pradesh	83743	33041	94616	0.40	1.13
Assam	78438	1643453	1283881	20.95	16.37
Manipur	22327	218753	224684	9.80	10.06
Meghalaya	22429	13612	41221	0.61	1.84
Mizoram	21081	43528	27540	2.07	1.31
Nagaland	16579	66490	43484	4.01	2.62
Sikkim	7096	568	697	0.08	0.10
Tripura	10486	137177	137639	13.08	13.13
Total	262179	2156622	1853762		

* As per 3rd All India Handloom Census 2009-10
# As per 4th All India Handloom Census 2019-20

Table 1 presents the total number of weavers and those involved in the handloom sector across the eight northeastern states (NESs) of India, comparing data from the handloom censuses conducted in 2009-10 and 2019-20. It further analyzes handloom workers' density of NESs concerning the geographical area of each state. In 2009-10, Assam held the highest percentage of total weavers (76.21%), followed by Manipur (10.14%) and Tripura (6.32%), in descending order. Sikkim had the least number of weavers (0.03%). In 2019-20, the number of handloom weavers in the NESs came down by 14.04% from the 2009-10 level. Despite holding the highest number of weavers in 2019-20, the share of Assam came down to 69.26% of the total. Manipur and Tripura's share increased to 12.12% and 7.43%, respectively.

Assam (20.95) was the top-ranked state in 2009-10 across NESs in terms of handloom weavers per square kilometer area. This comes after Tripura (13.08) and Manipur (9.80) based on the same criterion. In 2019-20, Assam again ranked top with 16.37 weavers per square kilometer, followed by Tripura (13.13) and Manipur (10.06). Tripura and Manipur, both with sizable tribal populations, appear to have had the greatest constant expansion of handloom weavers in the North Eastern Region across the two census periods and have never diminished over time. Let's test the H_1 at a significance level of 5%.

Table 2: ANOVA Analysis

Source	DF	Sum of Square	Mean Square	Statistic
Groups (between groups)	4	563133023000	140783255800	F statistic 1.4071
Error (within groups)	35	3501802879000	100051510800	P value 0.2519
Total	39	4064935902000	104229125700	

Source: Calculated from Table 1

The hypothesis H_1 is accepted since the p-value is more significant than α (0.2519 > 0.05) at a 5% significance level. The test statistic F is 1.407108, which falls inside the 95% acceptance range: [0:2.6415]. Thus, it may be concluded that Tripura has the most steady weaver development among the NESs.

Table 3: Handloom weavers' response to maintain legacy and cultural identity

Parameters	Yes	No	Don't know
Legacy of knowledge passed down through generations pulled towards handloom production.	29	11	11
Prioritizing quality standards distinguishes handloom products from the other textile products.	27	13	11
This sector can play a vital role in promoting Tripura's handloom products globally.	26	12	13
Can modern technology be integrated into traditional handloom weaving to improve efficiency?	12	29	10
Does sticking to traditional attires have anything to do with preserving cultural identity of respective groups?	26	12	13

Source: Field survey

Of the informants surveyed, 58.86% agreed that the legacy of knowledge passed down through generations influences handloom production. In contrast, 21.57% disagreed, and 21.57% were uncertain. Regarding maintaining quality standards for handloom products, 52.94% of weavers supported the idea, 25.49% opposed it, and 21.57% were unsure. The global market demand for the state's handloom products is varying, with 50.98% expressing optimism, 23.53% skepticism, and 25.49% remaining uncertain. The majority of weavers (58.86%) are against the use of modern technology in handloom production, while 23.53% support it and 19.61% remain uncertain. Additionally, 50.98% of respondents preferred traditional attire in handloom production, 23.53% were supportive of change, and 25.49% were indecisive.

Table 4: ANOVA Analysis

Source	DF	Sum of Square	Mean Square	Statistic
Groups (between groups)	2	403.6	201.8	F statistic 5.6792
Error (within groups)	12	426.4	35.5333	P value 0.01838
Total	14	830	59.2857	

Source: Calculated from Table 3

Since the p-value is less than the significance level alpha (specifically, 0.01838 <0.05), we reject the null hypothesis H_2. The test statistic F is equal to 5.679174, which falls outside the acceptance region of 95% [0: 3.8853]. This suggests that handloom weavers prioritize heritage and legacy.

Table 5: Age-profile of Respondents

Age groups	Number of respondents	Percentage
19-24	31	60
25-29	9	18
30-34	6	12
35-39	3	6
40-44	2	4

Source: Compiled during field survey

Age profile of respondents indicates 60% of informants belong to the age-group of 19-24, a favorable indicator for pursuing career in handloom sector. Next, 18% aged in between 25-29, 12% between 30-34 years, and 6% between 35-39 years down the order. Except 40-44 age-groups, majority of the weavers/artisans/craftsmen belong to an age of > 40 years, a perfect setting for taking up entrepreneurship in big way.

Table 6: Economic Status of Informants Surveyed - N: 51

Monthly Income Range	Average (INR) (X1)	No of informants (Nos.) (X2)	Total (INR) (Y)
0-5000	5000	3	15000
5000-10000	7500	13	97500
10000-20000	15000	28	420000
20000-30000	25000	7	175000

Source: Field survey. INR: Indian Rupees

Table 6 shows that the monthly income of the surveyed informants is significantly lower than that of Group D service holders in Tripura. 54.9% of respondents fall within the income range of 10000-20000 INR, while 25.49% earn between 5000-10000 INR per month. 13.73% fall within the highest income bracket of 20000-30000 INR. Let us test the H_3 using multiple regression.

The derived regression equation is $\hat{Y}$ = -9625.779626 + 14627.51213X2. The results of the multiple linear regression indicate a strong collective effect between X_1, X_2, and Y, with F (1, 2) = 10.7, p = .082, R^2 = 0.84, and Adjusted R^2 = 0.76. The R-squared (R^2) value is 0.842501, suggesting that the predictors (Xi) explain 84.25% of the variance in Y. The adjusted R-squared value is 0.763751. The coefficient of multiple correlations (R) is 0.917878, indicating a robust correlation between the predicted values ($\hat{y}$) and the observed values (y). The overall regression analysis shows a right-tailed test with F (1, 2) = 10.698477 and a p-value of 0.0821216. Since the p-value is greater than or equal to the alpha level of 0.05, we accept the null hypothesis (H_3). Thus, the test results (H_3) show that the informants' economic condition is inadequate to support their livelihood.

Sustainable Practices

Table 7: Sustainable Practices of Informants

Attributes	No of respondents	%age
Use of traditional weaving techniques	47	92.16
Use of synthetic fabrics	4	7.84
Use of tools made of bamboo and cane	49	96.08
Plastic tools	3	5.88
Natural fibers (cotton, silk, wool)	50	98.00
Plant based dyeing	45	88.24
Chemical dyeing	6	11.77
Cronbach alpha reliability		0.8947
Mann Whitney U test Z score		-1.3887
P value		0.1649

Source: Field survey

Table 7 includes seven sustainability metrics for Tripura's handloom sector. Traditional weaving techniques, which are regarded as cost-effective and sustainable tools, have been used since time immemorial. 92.16% of the informants preferred traditional weaving, whereas 7.84% chose synthetic textiles. 96.08% of respondents utilized environmentally friendly bamboo and cane equipment for handloom manufacture, whereas 5.88% preferred plastic tools. Natural fiber production, such as cotton, silk, and wool, sometimes requires a significant amount of effort on the part of handloom businesses. However, it prevents the usage of synthetic fibers and is quite advantageous for customers. 98% of the informants preferred using natural fibers in their manufacture, with the remaining 2% opting for synthetic fibers. The plant-to-chemical dyeing ratio is 45:6, meaning that 88.24% of artists chose natural coloring. The Cronbach alpha reliability score for the sustainability criteria was 0.8917. Let us test the H_4, applying Mann Whitney U test at 5% significance level.

Table 7 displays the Mann Whitney U test Z score of -1.3887 with a P value of 0.1649 at the 5% significance level. H_4

cannot be rejected since the P value exceeds the alpha value (0.1649 > 0.05). Thus, it can be inferred that handloom-based sustainability parameters are adequate for maintaining product quality standards.

Marketing

Table 8: Handloom weavers' response to marketing parameters

Parameters	Yes	No	Don't know
Directly selling handloom items to customers, eliminating middlemen, proves remunerative for the craftsmen.	18	16	17
Does the local market offer a cushion for weavers to sustain handloom units?	24	14	13
Is loyalty important in retaining customers?	21	16	14
Is the storage capacity adequate to hold bulk handloom items?	11	25	15
Do transportation, communication, and market proximity increase the cost of handloom items?	20	16	15
Is prior payment required for handloom production?	23	15	13
Do you believe the number of rivals reduces the profit margin?	20	15	16
Have you ever considered forming a handloom producer cooperative to promote their products jointly?	21	12	18
Do you believe training programs should be offered to craftsmen to boost marketability?	25	14	12

Source: Field survey

35.29% of weavers believe that selling handloom items directly to customers—thereby eliminating middlemen—proves financially beneficial for them. In contrast, 31.37% disagree, while 33.33% remain uncertain. Additionally, 47.06% of weavers feel that the local market provides vital support for sustaining handloom units, whereas 27.45% think otherwise, and 25.49% are unsure. When it comes to brand loyalty, 41.18% of weavers believe it enhances the patronage of handloom items, 31.37% do not agree, and 27.45% are uncertain. 49.02% acknowledged that their storage capacity is insufficient for holding bulk handloom items, while 21.57% reported adequate storage, and 29.41% were unaware of their storage situation. Weavers' opinions varied regarding the costs associated with transportation, communication, and proximity to markets when selling handloom items. Specifically, 39.22% agreed that the distance to reach the market increases product costs, while 31.37% disagreed, and 29.11% were uncertain.

The need for advance payment reflects handloom manufacturers' working capital requirements, as well as the role of intermediaries in financing manufacturing operations. 45.1% of respondents require advance payments, 29.41% can finance themselves, and the remaining 25.49% are unaware. 39.22% felt that the presence of competing producers reduces their profit margin, whereas 29.41% and 31.37% disagreed and were unclear, respectively. 41.18% of informants contemplated joining the handloom producers' cooperative to improve product marketing, whereas 23.53% preferred to do it alone and 35.29% were unsure. Finally, 49.02% of respondents believed that market orientation training was necessary, 27.45% did not, and 23.53% were unsure.

Table 9: ANOVA Analysis

Source	DF	Sum of Square	Mean Square	Statistic
Groups (between groups)	2	155.5555	77.7778	F statistic 6.8016
Error (within groups)	24	274.4445	11.4352	P value 0.004569
Total	26	430	16.5385	

Source: Calculated from Table 8

Since the p-value is less than the significance level α (specifically, 0.004569 < 0.05), we reject the null hypothesis H_5. The test statistic F equals 6.801618, which falls outside the region of 95% [0:3.8853]. This suggests that improper marketing efforts limit the potential of Tripura's handloom weavers.

4. Discussion

Handloom has provided earning opportunity to thousands of craftsmen in Northeast India, particularly to the tribal folklore across the eight states, and Tripura is no exception. The state was one of the few NESs that consistently increased the number of handloom workers over time, contradicting the regional trend. Tripura placed second in handloom weavers per square kilometer area during two census periods, indicating that the state's handloom weavers have grown consistently. In reality, the state has created the ideal environment for handloom to thrive, as well as an alternative source of employment for the indigenous population in the study region. The test findings indicate this possibility.

Prioritizing sustainability in traditional weaving methods can appeal to environmentally conscious consumers and protect the planet. Tripura's handloom industry can thrive as a sustainable economic approach with government support, training initiatives, and better market integration. This approach empowers artisans, strengthens the local economy, and preserves the region's cultural heritage for future generations. The survey revealed that traditional weaving is preferred by 92.16% of respondents, while synthetic textiles are preferred by 7.84%. Using environmentally friendly bamboo and cane equipment for handloom manufacturing is preferred by 96.08%, while 88.24% of artists prefer natural coloring. Test results confirm that handloom-based sustainability parameters are adequate for maintaining product quality standards.

The economic status of handloom weavers is less than adequate in Tripura. The state government, coupled with central agencies, offers several policies and schemes to support the handloom sector. These include financial assistance, skill development, and market promotion schemes. Notable measures such as the National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP) and the Weavers' MUDRA Scheme provide financial support and credit facilities to weavers. Additional initiatives like

"Rejuvenating the Handloom Sector of Tripura" and "Drudgery Reduction and Income Enhancement of Handloom Weavers" aim to enhance technology and preserve traditional handloom knowledge [11]. Most respondents (92%) were aware of government policies; however, around 50% failed to avail themselves of government assistance in case of need.

Handloom weavers play a crucial role in preserving their heritage and cultural identity by using hand-operated looms. Knowledge and skills are passed down from generation to generation, forming an essential part of tribal life. The emphasis on high-quality, cotton-based handloom products have been a hallmark of tribal craftsmanship throughout the region, setting these goods apart from other textile products. Test results show that handloom weavers are committed to maintaining their cultural history and traditions. However, the mass production of handloom items requires the involvement of a large workforce, which has not successfully attracted a significant number of young people over the years. The age profile of the respondents indicates a group of enthusiastic young individuals eager to engage in mass handloom production. This enthusiasm is particularly encouraged by handloom-friendly policies in India, such as the Start-up India and Skill India initiatives. However, simply creating these policies is not enough; their benefits must reach those in need.

The cost differences between handloom and machine-made products are primarily due to the labor-intensive nature of the handloom industry and the time involved in manufacturing. Despite these differences, both cater to two market segments: economic consumers seeking low-cost products and quality-conscious consumers willing to spend more on handloom-made items. These mass-produced fabrics are often cheaper and more widely available, which makes it difficult for traditional hand-woven textiles to compete. Consequently, the demand for authentic handloom products has decreased over time, despite their artistic and cultural significance. The survey indicates that the weavers face challenges in expanding their handloom industry to national and international markets due to a lack of effective marketing and branding strategies. Again, high logistics and transportation expenses, inability to meet bulk production and limited storage capacity impact the expansion of the handloom industry in Tripura. Test results confirm improper marketing efforts limit the potential of the state's handloom weavers.

5. Conclusions

This article explores the various aspects of growth in the handloom sector in Tripura. This industry is significant due to its labor-intensive nature, focus on bamboo and cane for handloom production, and the use of natural fibers such as cotton, silk, and wool. It also emphasizes the application of natural dyes and low energy consumption. These factors contribute to two key objectives: creating jobs and developing sustainable solutions to maintain product quality. However, the sector cannot thrive without direct government intervention to address challenges related to fixed and working capital financing, as well as supply chain management to enhance production efficiency. Such support would reduce the role of intermediaries while preserving the value of handloom products.

Participants faced several financial challenges, including a lack of funds, high prices for raw materials, substantial taxes on handloom products, and fluctuations in customer demand. The most commonly requested forms of financial assistance among weavers were low-interest loans and subsidies, with 58.8% of respondents expressing it as a necessity. Additionally, 31.4% preferred direct cash handouts for small businesses, while 7.8% sought access to advanced weaving equipment. Only 2% suggested eliminating middlemen from the supply chain. Overall, the survey highlights the necessity for effective government policies and training programs to enhance Tripura's handloom sector.

Value addition in the handloom industry is a common practice among weavers, targeting a premium segment of consumers who appreciate the value of such textile items. This can be achieved by establishing institutions for weavers, providing training in innovative designs and color combinations, conducting quality tests, ensuring colorfastness, and improving product packaging [12]. The Indian government's promotion of high-value handloom production [13] has strengthened the sector in the face of intense competition from power loom-based textile industries. Furthermore, e-commerce offers significant advantages to handloom industries, such as expanding their market reach, improving sales, and enhancing their competitiveness in the digital marketplace. It ensures fair remuneration for artisans by eliminating intermediaries and provides customers access to authentic, high-quality handcrafted products [14]. Additionally, social media marketing can significantly benefit the handloom sector by raising awareness, reducing costs, increasing sales, and providing consumers with information about where to purchase handloom products [15].

Tripura currently lacks handloom-based cooperative societies dedicated to supporting the interests of weavers. Establishing cooperatives equipped with advanced storage facilities and promoting joint marketing efforts could significantly enhance the struggling handloom sector in the state. Strengthening handloom cooperatives would help free weavers from the influence of middlemen, serving as an alternative institution for both input suppliers and the marketing of their products [16].

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