

# Current status and growth potential of the handloom sector in Tripura

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**Abstract:** The Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20 reports that there are about 31.45 lakh handloom worker households in India out of which about 58 per cent are located in the northeast India. Moreover, Tripura is ranking fifth among Indian states in terms of handloom worker households, accounting for 4.4% of the total handloom workforce in the country. The government has identified the vital importance of the handloom industry in providing income generation, poverty alleviation and economic development and therefore has introduced various policies and interventions to generate a sustained livelihood for the handloom workers. But, still it is observed that there is a lack of engagement opportunities for a huge number of handloom workers in Tripura due to which weaving is taken up as a seasonal part-time activity by the workers. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to familiarize with the current status of handloom Industry of Tripura.

**Keywords:** Traditional Knowledge, Handloom, Weavers, Textile, Tripura

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Tripura, a state in the northeastern India, shares its borders with Bangladesh to the north, south, and west. The state is home to various indigenous communities, each possessing unique traditional knowledge systems, cultural practices, and artisanal skills that have been handed down through generations. Among the tribal communities of Tripura, lion loom weaving is particularly prevalent, with the craft being primarily practiced and preserved by women. Traditionally, young girls learned weaving by observing and assisting their elders from an early age as weaving has a long been regarded as a symbol of diligence, skill, and household readiness. In earlier times, a woman's ability to weave was considered an essential quality for marriage eligibility [1].

The handloom industry in Tripura has been a crucial economic and cultural activity for centuries. Beyond its economic value, handloom weaving holds deep cultural and ritualistic significance, playing a vital role in rites of passage, festivals and ceremonies. It is not merely a livelihood source but also a cultural heritage marker that serve as an identity symbol and for Tripura's indigenous communities. According to the Fourth All Indian Handloom Census (2019-20), Tripura ranks seventh among Indian states in terms of handloom worker, with 1,37,639 workers out of the national total of 35,22,512. However, despite this historical significance, the sector remains economically unstable. Only 33% of handloom workers in Tripura are engaged full-time, while 67% work part-time, reflecting the sector's instability as a primary source of livelihood [2]. Many weavers remain underemployed, leading to handloom weaving being taken up as a seasonal or part-time activity rather than a full-time profession.

Given these challenges, this study aims to analyze the current status of the handloom industry in Tripura and assess its potential for transformation into a thriving economic enterprise. By examining employment trends, market limitations, and growth prospects, this research seeks to identify sustainable development strategies and economic revitalization pathways that can strengthen Tripura's handloom sector, enhance its market competitiveness, and secure long-term livelihoods for artisans.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) systems have played a pivotal role in fostering community development, contributing to social capital, sustainable livelihoods, and social harmony [3]. Recognizing the importance of traditional knowledge in development, Moven and Morohashi (2002) highlight the need for a participatory approach that actively involves local communities in identifying and utilizing their indigenous knowledge. This ensures that traditional knowledge is not only preserved but also adapted effectively to address local development challenges [4].

One defining characteristic of India's Northeast region is its multitude of tribal communities, each possessing a unique cultural identity. This cultural wealth holds immense potential for investment opportunities, particularly in traditional industries like handloom weaving [5].

Jose (2012), in his article 'Understanding North East India: Contemporary Cultural Perspectives', emphasizes that tribal communities have developed vast traditional knowledge over time, which has enabled them to overcome environmental challenges and sustain livelihoods. Their expertise extends to areas like water harvesting, irrigation systems, cane bridges constructions in hills, weaving techniques and medicinal plant usage [6].

In the context of handloom weaving, traditional knowledge is deeply interwoven with cultural identity. However, many indigenous weaving communities face serious economic and market challenges due to modernization and declining demand. Vishnupriya et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive analysis of market failures in the traditional handloom sector due to modernization. Their study highlights the following key challenges like competition from power looms, which produce fabrics faster and at lower costs, making it difficult for handloom weavers to compete; lack of design innovation, as traditional weavers struggle to adapt to changing customer preferences and market trends, leading to low market penetration and declining competitiveness; financial difficulties, particularly in Tamil Nadu's handloom sector, where low income levels prevent weavers from upgrading their products to international standards. To revive the traditional handloom industry and create sustainable employment, the study emphasizes the urgent need for effective marketing strategies, technological integration, and product innovation [7].

Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2021), in their study on Manipuri handloom industries in Bangladesh, identify the following challenges: Market competition from alternative textile products that are cheaper and more readily available; and lack of financial resources and low profit margins, making it difficult for weavers to sustain and upgrade their businesses [8].

Devi (2013), in her article 'Handlooms for livelihood in North-Eastern region: Problems and prospects' explores the significance of handloom weaving as a primary source of livelihood in Northeast India. She highlights that handloom weaving has been a traditional occupation for generations, providing income security to thousands of families. The uniqueness of Northeast handloom products (e.g., shawls, carpets, and indigenous fabrics) has helped gain national and international market recognition. However, the sector faces major challenges, including lack of modernization and technological adaptation, competition from power looms reducing demand for handwoven products and inadequate marketing channels, restricting sales growth. The author suggests that government intervention is crucial to reviving the handloom industry, emphasizing policy support and financial aid for weavers [9].

Sengupta (2015), in her article 'Obstacles to the use of indigenous knowledge' argues that traditional knowledge is crucial for sustainable resource management. However, she identifies several obstacles to its integration into mainstream development - lack of recognition by government institutions, leading to underutilization of indigenous skills; domination of global knowledge systems (from universities and research institutes) over local knowledge; and perception of traditional knowledge as outdated and inferior, reducing its application in economic development strategies. Sengupta emphasizes the need to integrate indigenous knowledge into formal development initiatives, particularly in handloom, agriculture, and rural industries [10].

Bora (2017), in her article 'Revival Of The Fading Indigenous Skill Through Livelihood Cluster: A Northeast India Perspective' examines the challenges faced by traditional artisans in the handloom and handicraft sectors. She highlights competition from machine-made products, which reduces demand for handcrafted textiles and the geographical isolation in Northeast India, leading to limited access to national and global markets. To address these issues, the author suggests strengthening the handloom cluster model to improve production efficiency, enhancing marketing and branding strategies to attract buyers, and encouraging

the younger generation to engage in traditional weaving by providing financial incentives and modern design training [11].

While existing studies provide valuable insights into the handloom industry across various regions of India and world, there remains a significant research gap regarding the status, challenges, and opportunities of the handloom sector in Tripura. This study aims to analyse the current state of the handloom industry in Tripura, assess the challenges faced by artisans, and explore its potential for employment generation and economic growth. By addressing this gap, the study seeks to contribute to the sustainable development, market competitiveness, and long-term security of Tripura's handloom sector, ensuring its integration into broader national and global textile markets.

### **III. OBJECTIVES**

1. To analyse the current status and challenges of handloom sector in Tripura.
2. To explore the potential of the handloom sector as a driver of economic growth and employment generation in Tripura.

### **IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study is descriptive and analytical in nature and was primarily based on secondary data. The data were collected from India's fourth Handloom Census 2019-20. The study also considered different series of Annual Reports of the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. The study focused on handloom industry in Tripura which ranks fifth among Indian states in terms of handloom worker households, accounting for 4.4% of the total handloom workforce in the country.

### **V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **i) Current Scenario of Handloom sector in Tripura**

As per the Fourth Handloom Census of India, 2019-20, Tripura ranks fifth in terms of handloom worker households, contributing 4.4 per cent to the national total. And, in terms of total number of handloom workers, the state ranks seventh, accounting for 3.9 per cent of India's total workforce in the sector. Notably, 98% of these worker households are based in rural areas, while only 2% are in urban areas. This highlights the overwhelming dependence on handloom weaving in rural communities, where alternative employment opportunities remain scarce (see Tables 1 & 2).

**Table 1: Number of Handloom Worker Households in Selected States (Ranked by Share)**

<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Number of Handloom Worker Households</b>	<b>Percentage share (of 31,44,839 total)</b>
1.	Assam	12,69,506	40.36
2.	West Bengal	5,42,557	17.25
3.	Manipur	2,21,855	7.05
4.	Tamil Nadu	2,09,582	6.66
5.	Tripura	1,37,455	4.37

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

In terms of number of handloom worker households by social groups, Scheduled Tribes (STs) dominate the handloom sector in Tripura, accounting for 49% of total handloom worker households, followed by Scheduled Castes (SCs) with 27%, Others with 16% and Other Backward Castes (OBCs) with 8%. The high concentration of ST households (nearly 50%) highlights the deep cultural and historical significance of handloom weaving within the tribal communities, where it remains a traditional livelihood activity. This is further reflected in the dominance of loin looms, which are used by 68% of total weaver households in Tripura, making it the most prevalent weaving method in the state. Moreover, Tripura ranks first in India, accounting for 28% of all handloom weaver households using loin looms nationwide (see Table 3 & 4). However, this strong reliance on loin looms presents both advantages and challenges. While it helps preserve indigenous craftsmanship, sustain eco-friendly weaving techniques and uphold cultural heritage, it also limits scalability and productivity as compared to mechanized alternatives, making the sector less competitive in national and international markets.

**Table 2: Number of Handloom Workers in Selected States (Ranked by Share)**

Sl. No.	State	Number of Handloom Workers	Percentage share (of 35,22,512 total)
1.	Assam	12,83,881	36.44
2.	West Bengal	6,31,447	17.91
3.	Tamil Nadu	2,43,575	6.91
4.	Manipur	2,24,684	6.37
5.	Uttar Pradesh	1,90,957	5.42
6.	Andhra Pradesh	1,77,447	5.03
7.	Tripura	1,37,639	3.90

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

**Table 3: Number of Handloom Worker Households by Social Groups**

Location	Scheduled caste (SCs)	Scheduled tribes (STs)	Other backward castes (OBCs)	Others	Total
Rural	36,506	66,005	10,650	21,840	1,35,001
Urban	492	649	478	835	2,454
Total	36,998	66,654	11,128	22,675	1,37,455
Percentage	26.91	48.49	8.09	16.49	100

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

**Table 4: Number of Weaver Households using loin loom in Selected States in order of Ranking**

Sl. No.	State	Number of Weaver Households using loin loom	Percentage share to total household (4,04,102)
1.	Tripura	1,12,389	27.81
2.	Assam	71,050	17.58
3.	Manipur	69,743	17.25
4.	Arunachal Pradesh	61,649	15.25
5.	Nagaland	52,981	13.11
6.	West Bengal	21,205	5.24
7.	Mizoram	13,701	3.39
8.	Meghalaya	1375	0.34

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

In terms of loom ownership and usage, 94% of weaver households in Tripura own looms, indicating widespread access to weaving tools. However, only 20% use looms exclusively for commercial production, while 1% combine both domestic and commercial use (see Table 5 & 6). This is in stark contrast to the national trend, where, except for the Northeast states and West Bengal, 100% of looms across other Indian states are used exclusively for commercial production. This suggests that while loom ownership is high, large-scale commercial production remains underutilized reflecting reliance on subsistence production, limited market linkages, and undervaluation of handloom products. This presents a crucial opportunity for economic growth and employment generation through better market integration, technology upgradation, and policy support.

Currently, 81% of handloom workers in Tripura are engaged in weaving, while 19% are in allied activities. However, employment duration remains significantly lower than the national average. On average, handloom workers in Tripura are employed for only 159 days per year, which is far below the national average of 207 days. Furthermore, it is found that the rural weavers are employed for 166 days whereas urban weavers work for 228 days. On the other hand, the allied workers in rural areas are employed for 123 days, while those in urban areas work for 88 days, highlighting seasonal fluctuations in demand (see Table 7).

Moreover, in terms of nature of employment, only 33% of handloom workers are engaged full-time, while 67% work part-time, reflecting the sector's instability as a primary source of livelihood (see Table 8).

**Table 5: Distribution of Weaver Households by possession of loom**

Location	With Loom	Without Loom	Total
Rural	1,03,401	6,602	1,10,003
Urban	1,748	14	1,762
Total	1,05,149	6,616	1,11,765
Percentage	94	6	100

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

**Table 6: Distribution of Weaver Households by Purpose of Usage of loom**

Location	Commercial	Domestic	Both domestic and commercial	Total
Rural	19,560	82,864	977	1,03,401
Urban	1027	713	8	1,748
Total	20,587	83,577	985	1,05,149
Percentage	19.57	79.48	0.94	100

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

**Table 7: Total and Average Number of days worked by handloom workers per year**

Location	Total days worked (weaver + allied)	Average days per worker	Average days per weaver	Average days per allied worker
Rural	2,13,98,110	158	166	123
Urban	4,66,112	188	228	88
Total	2,18,64,222	159	167	122

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

**Table 8: Number of handloom workers by nature of engagement**

Location	Full time	Part time	Total
Rural	44,579	90,587	1,35,166
Urban	955	1,518	2,473
Total	45,534	92,105	1,37,639
Percentage	33	67	100

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

**Table 9: Number of Handloom Workers by Employment Status**

Location	Indepen dent	Under Master weavers	Under State Handloom Development Corporation (SHDC)	Under Coope rative society	Under Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC)	Total
Rural	1,29,751	3,163	1,073	752	427	1,35,166
Urban	2,003	426	15	26	3	2,473
Total	1,31,754	3,589	1,088	778	430	1,37,639
Percentage	95.72	2.60	0.79	0.56	0.31	100

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

In terms of employment status, nearly 96 per cent of the total handloom workers in Tripura are independent workers, with only a small fraction employed under structured setups such as master weavers, State Handloom Development Corporation (SHDC), cooperative society and Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC). This high percentage of independent workers, combined with a predominance of part-time employment and low average workdays, indicates that handloom weaving is not a stable or primary source of income for most households (see Table 9). This reflects significant limitations in access to financial aid, skill development programs, and organized market linkages, which are essential for scaling up commercial

production and ensuring long-term sustainability in the sector. Strengthening institutional support and structured employment opportunities could play a crucial role in enhancing income stability and economic security for handloom workers in Tripura

Furthermore, the income levels of handloom households in Tripura remain alarmingly low as 86% of handloom households earn less than ₹5,000 per month while 12% earn between ₹5,000 to ₹10,000 per month. Only 1% of households earn above ₹10,000 per month. These figures indicate significant financial insecurity, with the majority of weavers earning well below the national poverty threshold (see Table 10).

**Table 10: Number of Handloom Household by Income from all sources**

Location	Less than 5000	5,001-10,000	10,001 - 15,000	15,001 - 20,000	20,001 - 25,000	25,001 - 50,000	50,000 - 1,00,000	Above 1,00,000	Total Household
Rural	1,17,592	16,041	1,073	185	50	35	8	17	1,35,001
Urban	1,174	1,119	123	35	3	0	0	0	2,454
Total	1,18,766	17,160	1,196	220	53	35	8	17	1,37,455
Percentage	86.40	12.48	0.87	0.16	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.01	100

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

As a reflection of their low income levels, despite 94% of handloom households owning their homes, 91.2% continue to live in kuccha houses, while 5.6% reside in semi-pucca houses and only 3.2% live in pucca houses (see Table 11 & 12). This indicates that despite being engaged in a traditional occupation, most handloom weavers continue to live in poverty, with limited access to basic infrastructure and financial security.

**Table 11 : Number of handloom Worker Households by Ownership of Dwelling Unit**

Location	Owned	Rented	Others	Total
Rural	1,26,779	1,612	6,610	1,35,001
Urban	1,883	378	193	2,454
Total	1,28,662	1,990	6,803	1,37,455
Percentage	93.60	1.44	4.94	100

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

**Table 12 : Number of handloom Worker Households by Type of Dwelling Unit**

Location	Kuccha	Semi pucca	Pucca	Total
Rural	1,23,613	7,303	4,085	1,35,001
Urban	1,697	429	328	2,454
Total	1,25,310	7,732	4,413	1,37,455
Percentage	91.16	5.62	3.21	100

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

The marketing and sale of handloom products in Tripura remain heavily dependent on local markets, as 91% of handloom sales occurs in local markets, with exports and e-commerce contributing to less than 1% (see Table 13). Moreover, participation in fairs and exhibitions is minimal, restricting brand visibility and income expansion opportunities.



**Table 13: Major source of sales of the handloom product by the handloom households**

Location	Local market	Master weaver	Cooperative society	Organized fairs/ exhibition	Export	E-commerce	Others	Total
Rural	1,25,280	2,768	1,199	319	62	63	7,136	1,36,827
Urban	1,890	440	107	70	2	2	358	2,869
Total	1,27,170	3,208	1,306	389	64	65	7,494	1,39,696
Percentage	91	2.29	0.93	0.28	0.05	0.05	5.36	100

Source: Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, Govt. of India

## ii) Potentials and Growth Opportunities of Tripura's Handloom Sector

The handloom sector is one of the largest sources of livelihood in India, providing direct employment to over 4.5 million people and supporting over 10 million individuals indirectly, including a large number of women and the rural population (Annual Report 2022-23, Ministry of Textiles). Additionally, the sector is deeply aligned with several flagship government initiatives, such as Make in India, Skill India, Women Empowerment, and Rural Youth Employment. The promotion of indigenous craftsmanship under Make in India, the enhancement of artisanal skills under Skill India, and the support for female-led enterprises underscore the sector's crucial role in sustainable economic growth. With its ability to generate rural employment and contribute to economic stability, the handloom industry remains a vital pillar of India's socio-economic framework.

Tripura ranks fifth in handloom worker households (4.4% of India's total) and seventh in total handloom workers (3.9%), with 137,639 handloom workers engaged in the sector. This indicates strong potential for employment generation in this industry. Furthermore, Tripura also holds the first position in loom usage, accounting for 28% of total weaver households using this traditional method. These handmade, eco-friendly textiles offer a niche market opportunity for premium handcrafted products. Moreover, handloom weaving is a low-carbon industry, relying on minimal electricity and natural fibers, making it highly suitable for integration into the sustainable fashion movement. This presents an opportunity to attract global consumers and investors seeking ethical and environmentally friendly products.

Despite its rich cultural heritage and economic significance, 90% of Tripura's handloom sales remain confined to local markets, limiting its growth potential. Meanwhile, India ranks as the sixth-largest exporter of textiles and apparel globally, with textiles and apparel (T&A), including handicrafts, contributing 8.21% to the country's total exports in 2023-24 population (Annual Report 2022-23, Ministry of Textiles). This contrast highlights the huge untapped opportunities for Tripura's handloom sector to expand into national and international markets. However, e-commerce penetration remains negligible, with only 65 sales units currently utilizing digital platforms, restricting access to a wider customer base. Furthermore, 89% of handloom households earn less than ₹5,000 per month, keeping many artisans below the poverty line. Expanding into exports and digital markets could significantly increase production demand, leading to job creation across multiple levels, including weaving, dyeing, finishing, and marketing. Strengthening market access through online platforms, trade fairs, and direct buyer-seller linkages can help integrate Tripura's handloom industry into India's growing textile economy, ensuring sustainable livelihoods and long-term economic growth for artisans.

To fully realize these opportunities, the following strategies should be prioritized: First, e-commerce integration must be enhanced by fostering partnerships with major online platforms like Amazon Karigar, Flipkart Samarth, and Government e-Marketplace (GeM) to provide direct access to national and global consumers. Second, increased engagement in national and international trade fairs, exhibitions, and buyer-seller meets will significantly enhance brand visibility and market penetration, providing artisans with greater economic stability. Third, strengthening cooperative societies and self-help groups (SHGs) can help weavers secure bulk orders and fair pricing, reducing their dependence on intermediaries and improving their earnings.

To improve efficiency without compromising traditional craftsmanship, the introduction of semi-mechanized looms should be promoted. Additionally, comprehensive training programs in modern textile design, color trends, and contemporary styles will enable artisans to diversify their products and align with evolving market demands. Expanding into high-value product categories such as fashion textiles, home décor, and premium handmade fabrics will further strengthen the market reach of Tripura's handloom sector.

Despite their significant contributions to the economy, 91.2% of Tripura's handloom workers continue to reside in kuccha houses, indicating poor living conditions and lack of adequate infrastructure. Addressing this issue through Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) will provide better housing facilities, improving the quality of life for artisans. Additionally, upgrading transport and logistics infrastructure will reduce supply chain inefficiencies, enabling smoother trade operations. The establishment of centralized raw material banks will further ensure affordable yarn and dyes, thereby reducing production costs and improving artisans' profitability.

Recognizing the employment potential of the handloom sector, the government has already launched multiple initiatives to support artisans and promote entrepreneurship. However, to further strengthen the sector, young entrepreneurs should be encouraged to launch handloom-based start-ups with government incentives such as low-interest loans and tax benefits. Strengthening cooperatives and SHGs will ensure that government benefits reach artisans directly and improve overall efficiency. Additionally, public-private partnerships (PPPs) should be facilitated to integrate Tripura's handloom sector into India's textile value chain, enhancing access to raw materials, technology, and large-scale buyers. Since handloom weaving has a high female participation rate, special attention should also be given to promoting women's entrepreneurship programs, providing financial assistance, technical training, and leadership opportunities to empower women artisans.

By implementing these strategies, Tripura's handloom industry can transition from a subsistence-level production model to a thriving, sustainable, and globally competitive sector, ensuring long-term economic growth, employment generation, and improved livelihoods for its artisans.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Despite economic challenges, unstable employment, and poor commercialization, Tripura's handloom sector holds immense potential to become a key driver of employment generation and economic growth. With a rich cultural heritage, skilled workforce, and eco-friendly production techniques, the industry has the capacity to thrive if provided with adequate support, modernization, and market expansion opportunities. However, the sector remains largely informal, with limited commercial production, inadequate financial backing, and restricted market access, which hinder its growth and sustainability.

To fully unlock the potential of the handloom sector, strategic interventions are necessary. Strengthening market linkages, expanding e-commerce participation, and encouraging trade fair participation will help artisans connect with national and global buyers, enhancing income stability. Introducing semi-mechanized looms and providing training in modern textile design and diversified product development can help weavers enhance productivity while preserving traditional craftsmanship. Additionally, strengthening cooperative structures, facilitating access to financial aid, and encouraging entrepreneurship among young artisans and women will further boost the sector's economic viability.

Furthermore, improving infrastructure, housing conditions, and logistics is critical for the well-being of weavers and the efficiency of the supply chain. Government initiatives, such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), Skill India and public-private partnerships (PPPs), should be leveraged to enhance living standards and integrate the handloom industry into India's larger textile economy. Aligning with Viksit Bharat 2047, the vision of a developed and self-reliant India, revitalizing Tripura's handloom sector can contribute significantly to rural employment, women empowerment, sustainable development, and cultural preservation. By integrating traditional expertise with modern advancements, Tripura can transform its handloom industry into a globally recognized, economically viable sector, helping to achieve inclusive growth and long-term prosperity for artisans while strengthening India's position in the global textile market.

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