



Outlining the Post-Pandemic Measures for Reviving the Tant Saree Industry in West Bengal: ‘Vocal for Local’ Initiative

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ABSTRACT:

Objectives: This study tries to hold forth the present condition of Tant saree and its way forward to improve its circularization in the market at the best reach in response to ‘Vocal for Local’. This study also suggests a few effective remedies to improve the efficiency and prospects of Tant Saree after the COVID-19 pandemic. **Methods:** The study is based on secondary data collected from the Handloom Census of India and Annual report of the Ministry of Textiles (2020-2021) and the data have been analyzed by simple percentage method and bar diagrams. **Findings:** It has been found that the share of handloom production in West Bengal has increased by 2.64 per cent between third and fourth instalments of the handloom census of India. Despite being the highest producer of Tant saree in India, West Bengal has received the lowest amount of financial assistance from the central government amid COVID-19 (2020-2021). About 86% of handloom households were concentrated in rural areas of West Bengal constituting 89% of the total number of weavers. Moreover, about 92% of handloom households were found with having less than Rs. 5000 while approximately 93% of households have been found in debt due to handloom. **Novelty:** The study is innovative and unique for West Bengal based on the existing literature because it has put forward an effective strategy for making Tant saree famous globally after the pandemic. It is also the first study of its kind after COVID 19 particularly on Tant saree of West Bengal bringing in front of stakeholders as the product of ‘Vocal for Local’. **Conclusions:** Conferring the policy interventions, the government should provide financial assistance to Tant weavers to purchase modern equipment for setting up their place in the national market and to popularize Tant Saree with the help of digital marketing.

1 Introduction

Amidst the pandemic, when the whole world was facing a rambling crisis, the Prime Minister of India announced a package of Rs. 20 lakh crores in May 2020 for making the country self-reliant or “*Atmanirvar*” (1). The idea behind this initiative is to become vocal about our local products which were not given sufficient value. The slogan “Vocal for Local” is embedded in the tactic of the *Swadeshi Movement* which was coined and endorsed by *Mahatma Gandhi* during the independence struggle (2). Like all the local products, local handlooms and handicrafts should be revived for the business of artisans and weavers. After Agriculture, cotton manufacturing in India has historically been the sole sector to produce significant amounts of working-class employment and this industry continues its status in West Bengal as well (3). But in recent days, such

a “Green Industry” like cotton manufacturing in Dakshin Dinajpur of West Bengal is currently dealing with several issues, including a shortage of raw materials, low wages, a sharp decline in the number of weavers, reluctance among the younger generation to choose weaving as a means of subsistence, competition from the power loom industry, a small domestic market, etc (4,5). Meanwhile, Datta (6) found that the educated young generation has been motivated by the cluster intervention program in Bardhaman district because around 47% of the youth were inspired to join the profession of weaving while it was 30% before the intervention. It is necessary to add here that the lack of work opportunities in other sectors also attract youth to join this profession as a means of survival. Another piece of work was conducted by Ghosh and Ghosal (7) in Begampur area of Hugli district of the state, and it also



detected various reasons for endangering the handloom tant sarees and to indicated the ways of revival. The researchers found in their study based on primary data that the reasons behind the decline of the market of tant saree are lack of advertisement of the product and indirect market facilities. Therefore, they recommended the advertisement of the product through mass communication as the means of the revival of tant saree manufacturing. The introduction of GST (Goods and Services Tax) has made an impact on the manufacturing of saree, especially on the labours or tantis as their wage has reduced significantly while the cost of raw materials has increased in comparison to the pre-GST regime (8). A similar study was conducted by Srikumar and Karunambikai (9) in Sirumugai block of Coimbatore district in Tamil Nadu where they also found that the cost of raw materials has increased and the wage of labour has reduced subsequently after GST. Therefore, Sinha (10) urged the concerned government that handloom products and all sorts of raw materials should be exempted from GST under Handloom Reservation Act.

Furthermore, some of the major factors involved in the transformation of several handloom weaving traditions in India have been recognized as persistent difficulties such as severe inequality, poverty, and mass unemployment. (11–13). Banerjee claimed that there is a symbiotic relationship between technology, capital, and labour relations playing an important role in shaping the present transition of handloom whereas, its importance has been declining in West Bengal due to the growing popularity of power loom and collar machine. Despite all efforts of the central and state governments, the handloom sector in India could not gain the desired momentum. The worst thing that happened to this sector was adverse effects during the pandemic COVID-19. The impact of the pandemic on the handloom sector received attention significantly during COVID-19. Few researchers attempted to highlight the status of handloom weavers (14,15) while other researchers measured the impact and performance barrier (16) during the pandemic. The most important contributions that came from the concerned researchers were sustainable marketing strategy (17) and '*Atma Nirbhar Abhiyan*' (18) as the means of the revival of the handloom sector in India.

2 Research Gap and Objective

It is obvious from the existing literature that there is a dearth of research regarding tant saree while few kinds of research

have been conducted basically for finding the reasons for the decline of handloom industries. As per the recent literature, the reasons for declining handloom industries were upheld in the districts like Dakshin Dinajpur (4,5), Bardhaman (6), and Hugli (7) of West Bengal. The research, particularly on Tant saree, was conducted only by a couple of studies (5,7) while the marketing strategy of handloom products was portrayed by another couple of studies concerning before the pandemic (6) and after the pandemic (17). Although, the research conducted by Aruna and Kurisetti (17) is the only study after the pandemic that suggested the measures for '*Durrie*' weaving or handwoven rug but not for Tant saree. Therefore, it is clear that there is an utmost need of drawing some conducive post-pandemic measures mainly for Tant saree of West Bengal as the state is the base region for such sort of saree.

Reviewing the impact of the Prime Minister's appeal, this paper tries to unveil the untold conditions of '*Tant Saree*' handlooms of West Bengal which is one of the archaic textile industries of Indian history undergoing miserable conditions due to the lack of modern equipment and marketing strategies for the sake of '*Vocal for Local*' initiative. This study also draws an effective strategy to popularize the efficiency Tant Saree in the global market after COVID-19.

3 Journey of Tant Saree Industry

Traditional Tant Saree is a special local Bengali product worn mainly by local women. The technique of this finest and most attractive Tant Saree originated in 15th century in Shantipur district of Bengal which was later adopted by the weavers across West Bengal, Bangladesh, Tripura, and the Barak Valley in Assam. Before the partition of Bengal, the government under British Rule attempted to destroy this artistry as Tant Saree was creating a challenge to Manchester's textile industry, but somehow the art of tant survived. After the partition in 1947, this product became famous across the religious and local communities because of its unique art. But unfortunately, this art also faced hardships which confined it to only a few cities in West Bengal and Bangladesh like Dhaka, Tangail, Narayanganj, Murshidabad, Nadia, and Hooghly. A detailed distribution of different types of Tant Saree manufacturing in West Bengal has been mentioned in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Tant Saree and Associated Manufacturing in the Districts of West Bengal

| Sl. No. | District | Types of Tant Saree and Associated Manufacturing |
|---------|-------------------|--|
| 1 | Bankura | Baluchari Saree, Silk Than, Tassar Scarf |
| 2 | Bardhaman | Tangail Saree, Jamdani Saree, Coarser Saree |
| 3 | Birbhum | Tassar Than |
| 4 | Dakshin Dinajpur | Tangail Saree, Fine Cotton Saree |
| 5 | Darjeeling | Coarser Saree |
| 6 | Howrah | Fine Cotton Saree, Coarser Saree |
| 7 | Hugli | Dhaniakhali Saree, Begumpuri Saree, Coarser Saree |
| 8 | Jalpaiguri | Coarser Saree |
| 9 | Koch Bihar | Tangail Saree, Fine Cotton Saree, Coarser Saree |
| 10 | Kolkata | N.A. |
| 11 | Malda | N.A. |
| 12 | Murshidabad | Silk Than, Korial Saree, Coarser Cotton Saree |
| 13 | Nadia | Tangail Saree, Jamdani Saree, Santipuri Saree, Coarser Saree |
| 14 | North 24 Parganas | Coarser Saree |
| 15 | Paschim Medinipur | Fine and Coarser Saree, Tassar Than |
| 16 | Purba Medinipur | Coarser Saree |
| 17 | Puruliya | Tassar Than, Coarser Cotton Saree |
| 18 | South 24 Parganas | Fine Cotton Saree, Coarser Saree |
| 19 | Uttar Dinajpur | Coarser Saree |

Note: N.A. = Not Available

Source: https://www.westbengalhandloom.org/htm/h_map.html

Tant; the Bengali traditional Saree are lightweight and transparent cotton saree. There was a special purpose behind its design and unique feature. It is reported as the best saree with utmost comfort for the humid and hot climate of the Indian subcontinent. Tant Sarees have a wide border, and a beautiful pallav and are woven with several floral, paisley, and other creative motifs (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Tant Saree

Source: <https://www.sanskritivintage.com/blogs/news/88714820-tant-the-time-honored-saree-from-west-bengal-india>



Bengali women wear exquisite silk or cotton sarees that are custom-made for each occasion. The Bengali cotton saree's fabric is one-of-a-kind, with high quality manufactured by local weavers known as "tantis." They are specialists in weaving high-end fabrics with exquisite threadwork. Bengali silk sarees are well-known for their luxurious, refined, and exquisite quality and texture. In festive and religious events, cotton Sarees such as Jamdani, Baluchari,

and Silk Sarees are the most popular choices. In fact, different regions in Bengal and Bangladesh developed their signature variants based on the requirement of the region and the choice of the local people.

The traditional weaving art of 'Jamdani' (Figure 2) is regarded as the best variation of tant clothing which has been designated as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.



Figure 2. Jamdani Saree

Source: <https://www.sanskritivintage.com/blogs/news/88714820-tant-the-time-honored-saree-from-west-bengal-india>

4 Materials and Methods

The study is based on secondary sources of data collected from the Handloom Census of India covering the third (2009-2010) and fourth (2019-2020) instalments of the concerned census. Moreover, the Annual Report of the Ministry of Textiles (2020-2021) has also been used to get the data related to central assistance to the state government for the handloom industry. As per as the methodology is concerned, a simple percentage method has been calculated and different types of bar diagrams along with dot diagram (Figure 3 and 4) have been drawn with the help of Microsoft Excel 2019. In addition to this, Microsoft Word 2019 has been useful for preparing a flow chart (Figure 6) referring to the effective method for making the Tant saree famous globally. While, figure 1, 2, and 5 contained images which have been obtained from different original websites.

5 Results and Discussions

5.1 Current Market of Tant Saree and Economic Policy Status

If we look at the recent statistics regarding the economic status of the Tant Saree Industry, it is quite clear that the

contributions of this industry to the overall economy have been very remarkable and noteworthy. As per the data released by the local government, the Indian textile industry delivers about 5% of India's GDP and 14% of the country's overall Index of Industrial Production (IIP) (19). During the last three years, at least 98 per cent of funding to the National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP) was spent wherein Rs 353.05 crore was granted as an expected amount under grant-in-aid, against which Rs 347.65 crore was spent (20).

Despite Tant Saree manufacturing, the handloom industry has increased its expansion among the weavers. As per the Handloom Census of India, the share of households engaged as handloom workers has increased to 17.25 per cent in 2019-2020 from 14.61 per cent in 2009-10 (Table 2) in the total handloom households of India. The data also demonstrates that the importance of West Bengal in terms of the handloom industry is being predominant in the Indian economy during the recent decade. Although, the state has been paid inadequate attention compared to other states (21).

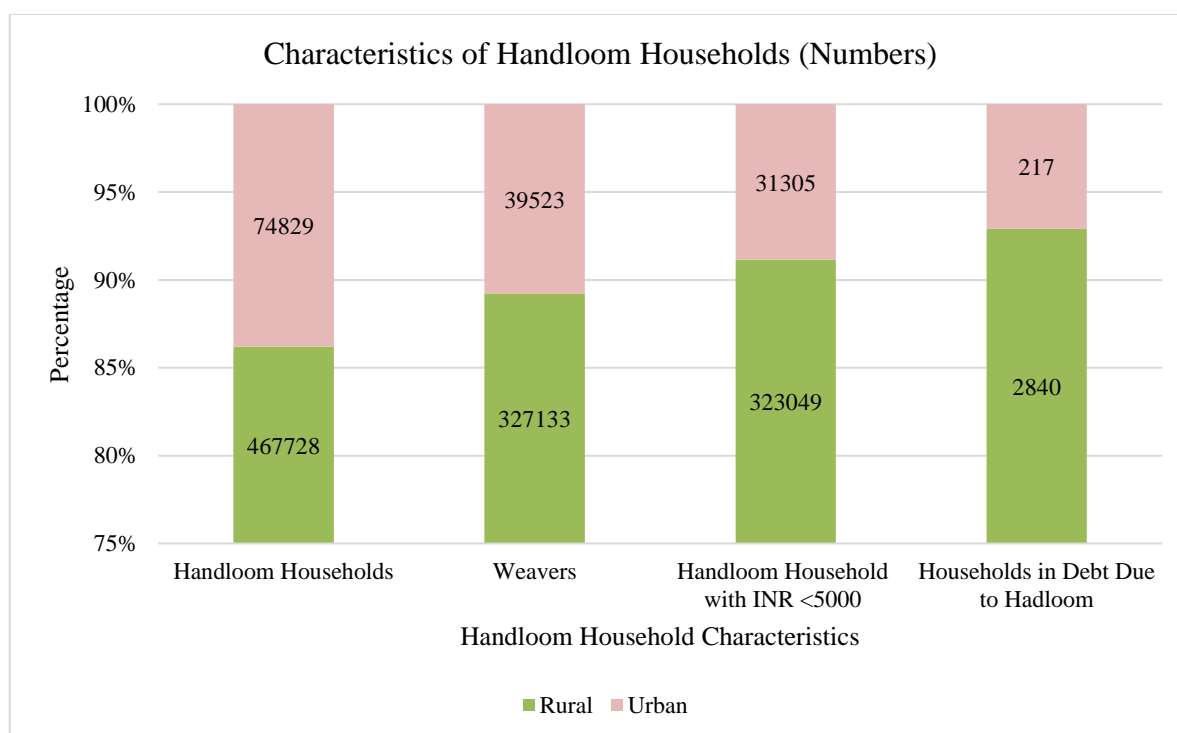
**Table 2.** Handloom Households in West Bengal between Census Years

| Handloom Census | West Bengal (in numbers) | India (in numbers) | Percentage of West Bengal to India |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Third Handloom Census (2009-10) | 407000 | 2783000 | 14.61 |
| Fourth Handloom Census (2019-20) | 542557 | 3144839 | 17.25 |

Source: Handloom Census of India (2009-2010 and 2019-2020)

As per figure 3 based on handloom census data (2019-2020), around 86% of handloom households were concentrated in rural areas of West Bengal constituting 89% weavers of the total weavers. It is a well-known fact that most of the rural population in India is considered poor with very less monthly income which is indistinguishable in the case of handloom households of West Bengal. About 92% of rural handloom households accommodate 323049 out of a total of 354354 households which is a great matter of concern. Such concern may be prolonged with the revelation of the data that the percentage of rural handloom households in debt due to handloom purpose was recorded

at around 93%. In terms of income and debt, urban areas were found comparatively in better condition but the condition of rural handloom households may have become worse after the COVID pandemic. West Bengal stands in the third position after Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh for the number of handloom households with debt. Therefore, rural weavers and handloom workers need to be paid attention by waiving off debt loans (in case of government loans) and providing favourable financial assistance for setting up a sustainable handloom, especially Tant saree making in West Bengal.



Source: Handloom Census of India (2019-2020)

Figure 3. Locational Characteristics of Handloom Households in West Bengal



Undoubtedly, the West Bengal government is trying to maximise the output of the textile industry in the state. The textile policy intends to double the textile industry's part of the state's economy from 5.2 per cent to at least 10% in the next ten years (22). As per pre-COVID data released by the Ministry of Textiles (23), West Bengal constitutes 2,83,404 handloom units and 3,509 power loom units which produce 715 million sq. meters of cloths annually (24). The government of India has also taken some good initiatives for the betterment of this industry. For instance, from the financial year 2015-16 to 2018-19, 412 Block Level Clusters in several states, including West Bengal, were sanctioned under the National Handloom Development Programme and Comprehensive Handlooms Cluster Development Scheme (25). Such initiatives may take this industry to the next level if all the schemes are implemented properly.

The Government of India is working well in promoting and encouraging the weavers engaged in the handloom sector. From time to time, the government helps the weavers through various policies and programmes. The National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP) by the Government of India provides jobs to 43 lakh weavers and allied workers. Most of these workers are from the minority or marginalised section of India. The recent guidelines of NHDP have proved to be extremely useful to weavers across the country.

For need-based holistic development of the handloom sector and the welfare of the workforce engaged in this sector, the government also offers maximum financial

assistance of Rs. 2 lakhs to the New Clusters. Apart from the financial help, the NHDP has offered assistance at various levels which has given a boost to the demand for handloom items both in the domestic and foreign markets. The office of the Development Commissioner for Handlooms has been holding National Handloom Expos and Special Expos as part of its marketing strategy and public relations efforts. These events have grown in popularity over time, and sales made at these events have greatly increased.

5.2 Post-pandemic Scenario of Tant Saree Manufacturing

West Bengal's cotton yarn, fibres, and garment exports have been badly harmed by the Coronavirus outbreak. Handloom weavers and artisans, on the other hand, have been heavily hurt by the sales downturn caused by the lockdown restrictions. Weavers and craftspeople are suffering wage reductions since their businesses, which rely on retail sales, have come to a halt.

Due to the stopping of manufacturing amidst the coronavirus outbreak, sales of West Bengal's handloom tant saree, which is a source of revenue for local weavers and artisans, have come to a halt. In this region, special tant Sarees, known globally for their thread and weaving quality, are mass-produced in large quantities. The comparative representation of West Bengal with the Other States of India in terms of Saree Production and assistance to the states clearly shows that the Tant Sarees need more assistance.

Table 3. Comparative Representation of Tant Saree Production and Central Assistance

| States | Percentage of Saree Production | Percentage of Handloom Workers | Central Assistance to State Government in 2020-21 (Rs. in lakhs) |
|---------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| West Bengal | 35.28 | 17.93 | 8.1 |
| Tamil Nadu | 15.56 | 6.91 | 99.44 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 4.99 | 5.42 | 146.86 |
| Gujrat | 0.32 | 0.3 | 8.95 |

Source: Data were taken from the Fourth Handloom Census, 2019-20 (26,27) (columns 2 and 3), and Annual Report, 2020-21(21) (column 4)

Table 3 denotes the status of saree production in West Bengal compared to its 3 counterpart states Tamil Nadu in the south, Uttar Pradesh in the north, and Gujrat in the west. As per the Handloom Census of India (2019-20), West Bengal has bagged the first position in saree production occupying more than 1/3rd of the total

production of India. It also conceives the highest share of handloom workers but it has received the lowest central assistance among these four states in the year 2020-21 (Figure 4). Such representation reveals that adequate attention has not been paid to the highest producer of



handloom Saree which definitely adds a significant share to the economy of the country.

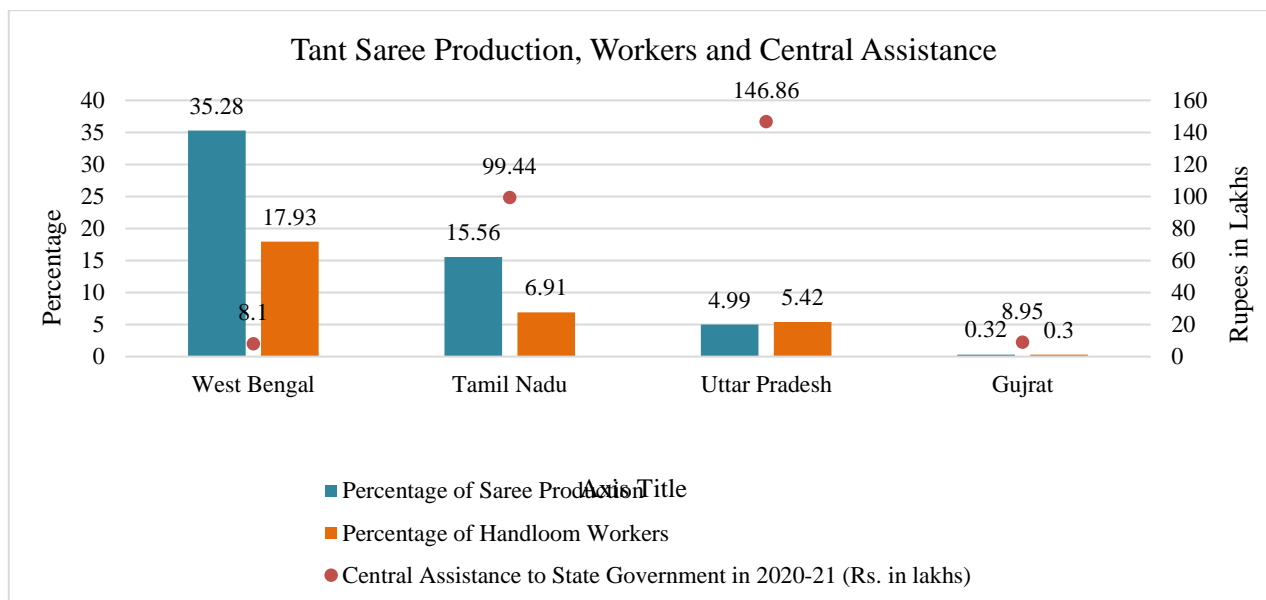


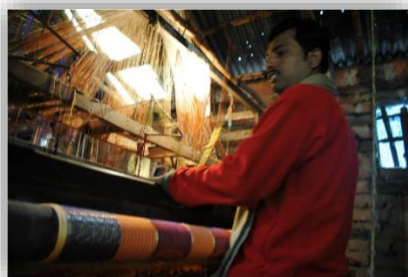
Figure 4. District-wise Comparative Representation between Tant Saree Production, Workers, and Central Assistance from the Government

In West Bengal, over 1.2 lakh weavers are in a similar situation in Nadia's Shantipur-Phulia region, which is the hub of weavers churning out. Shantipuri, Tangail, and Jamdani handloom Sarees are made in a range of yarns like cotton, tussar, and silk. In addition to sarees, these clusters weave dhotis, dress fabrics, stoles, and scarves. To create Sarees quickly in quantity, the majority of them have shifted from handlooms to power looms.

West Bengal Sarees are in high demand throughout the country and are also exported to Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and other countries. Traders from all across the country come here to buy in bulk throughout the year. However, due to the lockdown, everything has come to a halt both in the field of manufacturing and income.

The varieties that one can find in Tant sarees are so wide that they can be used casually as well as officially. Besides this, these Sarees are also worn on special

occasions such as festivals and functions, however, market analysts feel that they should be created for daily usage so that weavers can sell their products throughout the year, allowing them to build a sustainable business. Although both power loom and handloom weavers face some common problems in various fields yet, if compared, handloom weavers face certain dangerous issues due to financial crises. As a result, replacing existing handlooms with power looms (Figure 5) may help to establish Tant manufacturing as a viable industry and provide weavers with a firm foothold in the national and international markets. Chakraborty (3) identified in his study that power looms have been gaining momentum in the upper mid-range markets while handlooms have been losing ground in the low-end markets as a result of the development of new niches.



(a)



(b)

Source: (a) <https://www.bhashabharat.com/weaves-of-bengal/> (b) <https://www.getbengal.com/details/wb-govt-turns-weavers-of-nadia-self-reliant-through-modern-power-looms>

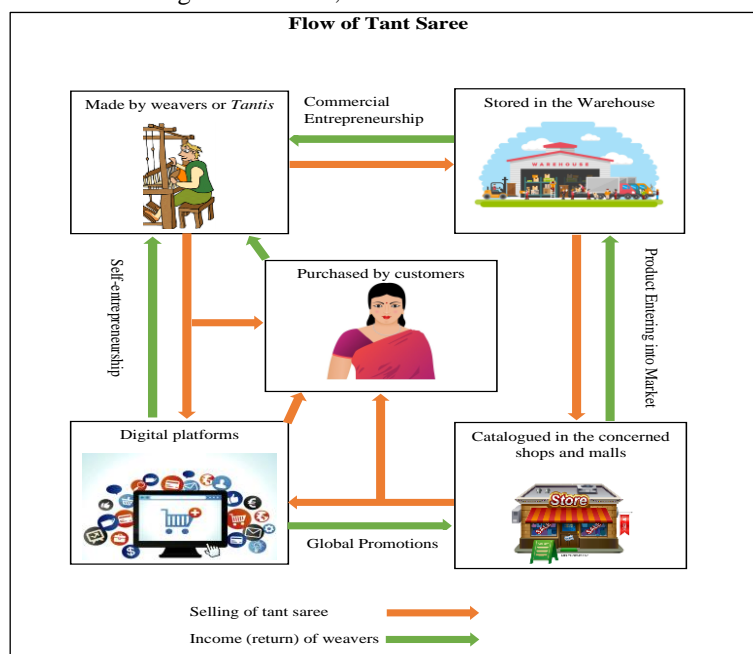
Figure 5. (a) Hand loom and (b) Power loom

5.3 Strategies to Make the Saree Famous in the Indian and International Market

Tant is a versatile fabric that may be used for soft furnishings as well as home linen. This product should be purchased at a reasonable price from the weavers and then warehoused and catalogued at the outlets of all megacities where it requires public attention. The market price will be returned to the weavers in this manner (Figure 6). Digital marketing is the most effective way to popularize this product in all the Indian states and abroad.

'Make in India' and 'buy local' are more important than ever before, because every locally-made purchase directly supports home-grown fashion labels or regional weaves,

and in turn, funds the manufacturers, such as weavers, tailors, embroiderers, and craftsmen. The West Bengal government has put a lot of effort into revitalizing and developing its world-famous Tant goods, which are still woven on handlooms. Tantuja, the largest of the State Government-run marketing groups for Bengali handlooms, has taken the initiative to form partnerships with online retailers such as Snapdeal and Amazon. Through web marketing, tant items can reach the widest possible audience. Subsequently, the tant will be famous worldwide through digital promotions and its export to the international market will also be increased in future.



Source: This flow chart has been prepared by the authors with the help of Microsoft Word online pictures insertion

Figure 6. An effective method for benefiting the tant weavers and making Tant saree famous



6 Concluding Remarks, Limitations and Future Directions

According to the results of the study, the share of handloom production in West Bengal has increased by 2.64 per cent between the third and fourth instalments of the handloom census of India. Moreover, the state being the highest producer of Tant saree in India has received the lowest amount of financial assistance from the central government amid COVID-19 (2020-2021). About 93% of handloom households in West Bengal have been found in debt due to handloom weaving. Hence, Tant weavers are almost at a standstill position and want to leave this traditional profession due to financial strain and dissatisfaction. The government should provide financial assistance to these weavers for purchasing power loom machines, which are faster than handlooms. In 2016-17, the state had an estimated 16000 power looms, employing approximately 40000 people and producing 225 million meters per year, the handlooms are largely traditional, and they are used to make traditional products. Therefore, the study also has drawn an effective strategy for making the Tant saree famous globally by breaking the premise of the local market. This strategy is unique and innovative which was not given by any previous research and the present study is the first study that intends to hold the Tant saree of West Bengal in front of the stakeholders as the product of '*Vocal for Local*'. The suggestions of the study resemble the suggestions of Datta (6) that government should establish establishing distribution and collection centres for finished products; provide additional jobs for rural households and promote women's empowerment; provide technological modernization in the handloom sector. Additionally, the government should provide a common digital platform to the weavers for advertising the Tant saree. Tant manufacturing demands more encouraging policy implications by the government to revive it to its full fledge because Tant Saree is considered the '*Pride of West Bengal*'.

COVID-19 became the main limitation of conducting a primary survey for this study because, without the investigation of ground reality, a conducive conclusion can not be attained. The figures (Figure 1, 2, and 5) taken from secondary sources is another limitation due to the unfavourable condition to visit the study area. Therefore, the study demands an in-depth study in future based on both qualitative and quantitative primary data to measure the prolonged apathy of Tant Saree weavers or '*Tantis*' after the pandemic. Researchers in future can perpetuate a scientific study on '*Vocal for Local*' considering Tant Saree because

it is a promising scheme which tends to revive the epitome of West Bengal in the global arena. Government should shake hands with the weavers before their extinction.

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