

## THE LEGACY OF 'MALLABHUM' WEAVING ART

A Limelight on 'Sonamukhi Silk' and 'Bishnupur Silk'

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### ABSTRACT

"Every weaver has his/her own dream to weave"—This quote justified that weaving includes personal feeling. Hence it stands apart from all other industries all over India. It is a kind of art which involves both the creative power as well as physical power. The cultural heritage and ancient history of India are weaved actually in Handloom or 'Tant. India is the country where women adorned themselves with sharee, the most beautiful product of Handloom. After two repetitive years of pandemic lets discuss the present scenario of this handloom art specially in rural areas like 'Mallabbum' areas (i.e Sonamukhi and Bishnupur). Handlooms are the warp and weft of India. our culture and aesthetics are rooted nowhere but in its threads. Each fabric tells us a new kind of story; the original one.

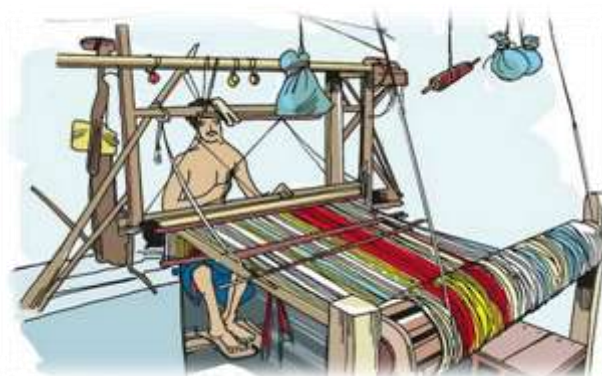
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Pic Source: Twitter

### INTRODUCTION

Indian traditions lie on Handlooms. It is synonymous to the culture and heritage of our country. The word 'handloom' denotes the wooden frames of different types which are used by skilled artisans to weave fabrics usually from natural fibers like Cotton, Silk, Wool, Jute etc. It is a type of cottage industry in which the cloth is process with the contribution of the entire family .Right from spinning the yarn, coloring, to weaving on the loom is done by them. The Indian handloom industry is one of **the oldest and largest cottage industries in India** with a long tradition of excellent craftsmanship, representing and preserving the vibrant Indian culture. Indian artists are appreciated globally for their hand spinning, weaving and printing elegance. Indian handloom is rich in variety and is appreciated all over the world over for its craftsmanship and intricacy of designs.



“I see God in every thread that I draw on the spinning wheel”

The golden words of Mahatma Gandhi fondly called the father for the nation of India proved the importance of Handloom. Handloom has since ages been the thread one talks about hand woven fabrics even time tends to take a poll and it's tempted to turn back the pages of history by a few millennia. The discovery stresses the history of handlooms to Harappa and Mohenjo-daro of Indus valley civilization dating back to 3000 BC the first known reference to the hand woven fabric isn't Vedas during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Indian silk was in great demand and was bartered for dry fruits innovative items and machines from Western countries. Poets like Amir Khusro and others compared Indian muslins to 'open air' 'running water' and 'morning dew'. Sant Kabir who himself was a Weaver immortalized Indian handloom with his Dohas and songs.

In India's struggle for independence in the early 1900s Gandhi introduced khadi as a weapon of Satyagraha to offer concrete expression to the 'Swadeshi' spirit with his 'Swadeshi' call Indian handloom regained its life only to continue its vibrant second innings in modern time.

At present handloom is the second largest profession next to agriculture in India millions of looms across the country are engaged in weaving cotton silk and other natural fibres a glimpse of a few of them is enough to say share the appetite of fashion connoisseurs starting with a northern Himalayan region of the country since the 15<sup>th</sup> century the 'Kashmir shawl' has been an essential part of tradition and culture of this wintry paradise. The handloom art of the northern plains of India that cannot be missed you and handlooms are the topic of conversation is brocade of Varanasi the fabric has made a special place for itself as its artistic nature adds to the ancientness and spirituality of this heavenly city brocade. The handloom art form that is bound to attract interest hailing from the village of Cuttack district Orissa this tie and dye or ikat form is called as Bonda in Odia Moothon thousand people in this village start their daily activities with the sound of artistic ikat weaving the artist weavers here try to decorate and translate their thought process into the fabric. DAV history suggests that technique has existed since 800 years mile the artist transverse is concept onto plane paper contemporary designs and art and designs relating to Lord Jagannath temple are seen widely nowadays the animals birds flora and fauna temple structures etc are taken as the source of designs.

North eastern women weaving the very famous 'moga silk' of Assam the golden yarn only available in India. At South 'Kanchipuram' is handloom art that has never failed to make a mark over the agents handloom in this temple town of Kanchi in Tamil Nadu has a divine history. It is believed that a sage named Markanda weaved the first silk saree for goddess Kamakshi the reigning deity of the town Kanjivaram silk sarees are known for their shine compact texture and quality the traditional designs are inspired by temple. Maharashtra is another handloom wonder one comes across one of the most celebrated hand woven textiles the 'paithani sarees' are woven with wonderful designs and borders made from a very fine. Similarly Handloom Sector in "Mallabhum" is the 2nd employment generating sector in rural economy. There are total 30000 weavers engaged in this profession The weavers concentrated area are Bishnupur, Sonamukhi, Bankura, Indpur, Taldangra, Simlapal and Patrasayer Block. The products of the cotton sector – Bed sheet, Bed cover, Dhuti, Gamchha and Home furnishings. In silk sector specially Baluchari, Swarnachari, Tassar. Slik are produced in Bishunupur and Sonamukhi. The Baluchari saree of Bishnupur has earned Geographical Indication(GI) mark on 01.06.2009.

Now let's move forward to a small Municipal town Sonamukhi, a town with religious importance and also popular for its Kali and Kartick puja. There are many big and small old temples throughout the town and a Mosque near Sonamukhi police station. Sonamukhi is the birthplace of Thakur Haranath and Kushumkumari

Devi. It is also famous for various 'akahara' where many saint lived here in ancient time among them Monohar Das Thakur and Mohanchand Das Thakur are very famous. The city is famous for its Handloom sector .Lets look back the history of Handloom industry in Sonamukhi.

### (I)

In Seventeenth Century a renowned book "Desavali Bibati" written by Pandit Jagmahen mentioned Sonamukhi as the village of weavers. Later Amiya Bandyopadhyay writes, 'Sonamukhi renowned as an important center of textile and Tasar silk weaving-fairly and as 'Deshabalibriti' (17th Century) mentions the place as a hamlet of weavers.

The Tantubaya community has been living in Sonamukhi since before that. The first mention of Sonamukhi is found in the context of the devotee Monohar Das. The people of Sonamukhi Tantubaya community first realized the glory of Monohar Das. So it is easy to guess that they lived in Sonamukhi at that time or even earlier. According to the report of John Chip, in 1789 AD, about three thousand weaver families lived in the area belonging to Sonamukhi and about four thousand weavers were engaged in weaving. Silk and cotton textiles were among the items on which the company began its monopoly trade after its civil gains (1765 AD).

The East India Company established a factory at Sonamukhi in 1745-50 AD and from 1770 AD Sonamukhi's silk, cotton cloth became increasingly famous. At that time Sonamukhi became one of the major centers of Indian trade. But soon it draw the attention of the East India Company and as expected they tortured the weavers of Sonamukhi and forced them to produced more silk . The weavers were also paid less than what they actually deserve . Finally, Sonamukhi weavers, along with Dhaka weavers, sent protest letters to the Baird of Trade against this. (Ref. Proceedings of the Board of Trade, 14th March, 1787).

Sonamukhi's Tantubaya community does not to accept payment from the company. Weavers boycotted the company in 1893-94. John Chip, a resident of the factory, demanded a bond from the weavers. But the weavers of all the regions concerned, including Sonamukhi and Patrasayer, are Refuses to pay. As a result, John Chip Dismissed all the weavers. At this crisis time the garments made by them came to the notice of American traders. In 1815-18 American merchants came to Sonamukhi for garments directly .Which has made an adverse effect on the company's purchases of garments

Later, as a result of the non-cooperation of the East India Company, the garments were laid at Sonamukhi . The quality of production is greatly reduced. As a result the weaving industry failed to reach its glory. The weavers were in dire financial straits. Many weavers were facing the utmost economical crisis. They left the city and went to Kasimbazar of Murshidabad or elsewhere. At that time , The premium quality of Sonamukhi cotton cloth can be inferred from the list below (Pros, Board of Trade, Nov.1792)

Place	Production	Rate Per Piece(Approx)	Total Amount
Dhaka	40500	20	830768
Khirpai	25700	21	529601
KashimBazar	29000	10	291022
Shantipur	53800	7	405152
Sonamukhi	59800	5	323454

Premium quality cottons are made Dhaka , Bangladesh and Khirpai , West Bengal . The price of each clothes is twenty rupees(20) per cloth. Weavers of Sonamukhi were paid less than what they actually deserved .At

Sonamukhi the price per clothe not more than (6) six rupees. According to the official survey of 1905, the 'tassar' garments made by the weavers of Sonamukhi at that time also gained considerable fame. It was also one of the main centers of 'tassar' weaving. (Ref. Report on the State Tasar Silk Industry in Bengal and Central Province, 1905).

There are various types of 'tant' (loom) in the weaving industry. These are two kinds of handloom, first one is machine loom or power loom and another is hand loom or 'tant'. Generally, The weavers of Sonamukhi are all handloom weavers they used to Sit in front of the yarn, weaving various designs on yarn. At present there is about one thousand handloom in Sonamukhi. The most prominent areas where the 'Tanti' live or where the weaving industry flourishes are: Lalbazar, Henspara, Rudrapara, Paglakali Tala, Shyambazar, Guinpara, Pal Para, Katabanitala, Nimtala, Ratanganj.

Raw materials like Silk, yarns brought from Bengaluru of the Karnataka state are twisted and winded at 'Arani' as per the requirement of the single and the double yarns to the bobbins. The silk yarns are then wound to the beams and then taken for the boil off and the colouring process. The hank of silk is boiled in the soap solution for the boil off process and dried completely. It is then dipped in water and immersed in the dye solution which is boiled with acid dyes in the brass vessel by providing heat by the firewood. At first cotton cloth, hand-cotton sari and towel were made. The income was low. Moreover, all these cotton cloths, towels were lower price material. As the production started, the weavers fell behind in the competition. The reasons match Power loom made due to low production cost of cotton towels, cloths etc. They also cost less. Then came the twin weaving and now the silk Weaving, from which silk cloth is made. In Sonamukhi there is a special kind of silk, which is better known and popularly known as 'Sonamukhi Silk'. A rough estimate of the production cost of making a sari Can be 1800 (approx) for raw material or yarn. Whereas the selling price is 2200-2500 rupees. It can be high up to 5000 considering the quality of the silk. The weavers made colorful cloth red, black, yellow almost all of one color. After four or five years, the two-color fabric gradually grew to 7.5 meters Half i.e. 3.25 meters of one color and the remaining 3.25 meters of other colors. Next Black and white check on one side and plane on the other. Then three colors are made Sari. The plan to make these three colored saris is based on Krishnabazar Sonamukhi. The artist gets the idea of the three colors sari from a television serial on Star Jalsha named 'Istikutum'. The three-color sari is popularly known as '3D'. Latter, with the same view sari of different colors is in the market under the name '4D'. In the case of these saris firs the yarn is dyed and then woven into it. Currently, A new design sari called 'Abhinandan' is being made in it, as a tribute to our militant hero Abhinandan.

Lets move forward and have a look how handlooms are made or The major processes involved in it:-



### Raw Material to Yarn Conversion

Yarn is a long continuous length of interlocked fibers. The raw material is gently rolled with palm to form a loosely interlocked cylindrical bunch known as a sliver. This loosely interlocked sliver is then spun on a charkha to make it compact and fine. The spun cotton yarns are braided into skeins and sent for dyeing.

### Dyeing of yarns

Dyeing is a process of colouring the greige yarns. It is a crucial preliminary step of handloom weaving. This process is done by hand in small lots or hanks using natural or chemical colourants. Hank yarn dyeing is predominant in South India, contrary to the North, where fabric dyeing is famous.

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### Bobbin Winding and Warping

With the help of charkha, the dyed yarn hank gets converted into a linear thread form and wound on the bobbin. This process enables laying out of yarn lengths for weaving. Further, warping is done, which is the parallel arrangement and winding of warp yarn from bobbin to the warp beam.



### Sizing of warp yarns

Post warping, the warp yarns are stretched out for size application. Sizing material or starch is applied to add strength and lubricate the yarn. This crucial activity is called "sizing".



### **Dressing and Winding the warp yarns**

Before the size applied warp is loaded onto the loom, the warp yarns are aligned and separated to facilitate smooth weaving. The aligned and starched yarns are carefully wound around a wooden beam and carried to the loom.



### **Weft yarns winding**

For horizontal or weft yarn preparation, traditionally, charka is used. By the fingertips, correct tension is given to the yarn. A hank of yarn is wound onto a small bobbin called "pirn". The weft yarn wound on pirn is then inserted into a shuttle (a device used in weaving to carry the weft thread back and forth between the warp threads.)

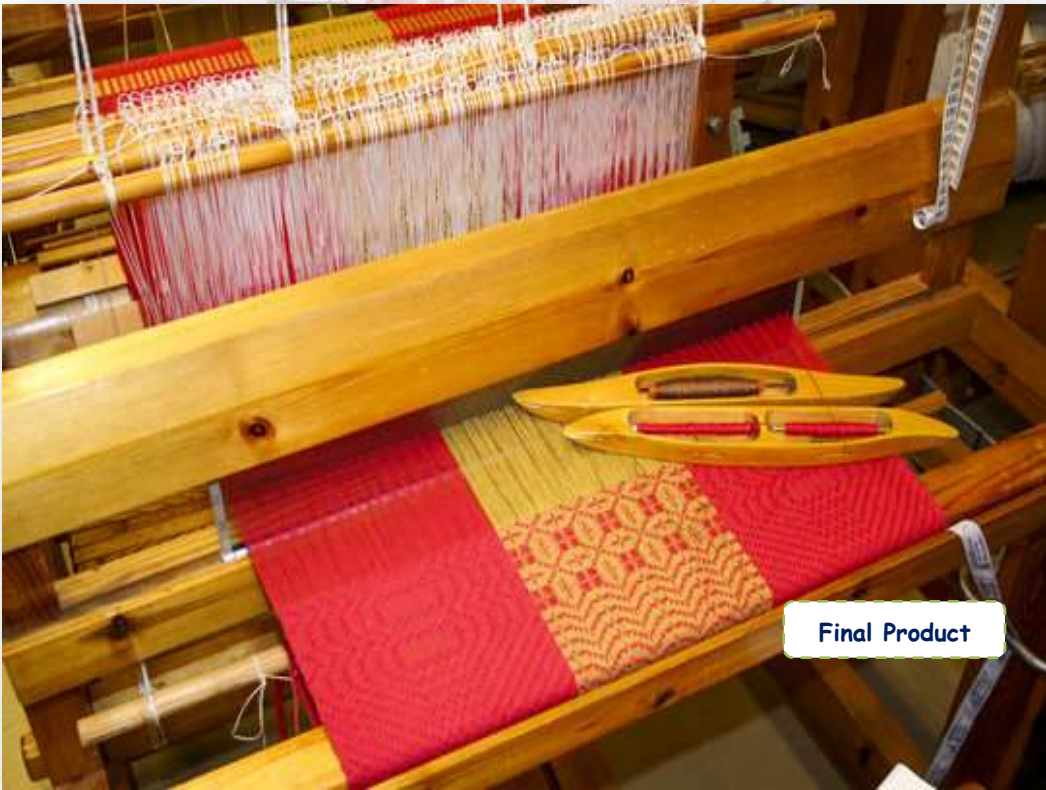
### Attaching Warp Yarns on Loom

Each warp yarn is drawn through heddles and reed and finally tied on both front beam and back beam. According to a pre-determined weave plan, yarns are passed through heddles which separate the warp yarns into two sections between which the weft yarn (horizontal/width-wise yarn) passes.



### Weaving fabric in a handloom

Weaving is the process of interlacement of warp and weft (vertical and horizontal) sets of yarn. The fabrics which are weaved on handloom are known as handloom products. As the name suggests, handloom is a loom that is used to weave fabrics using hands, that is, without the use of electricity. The foot pedals are pressed to lift the respective heddles according to the weave plan and it has to be in sync with throwing the weft or horizontal yarns across the two sections of warp yarns. Weavers continue weaving for long hours in a day which requires immense concentration and physical strength.



The future plans of the Sonamukhi weaver include “Tarakeswar's 'Dabi” To produce clothes on the machine. After making it, the fabric with the picture became the design. The cost of such a device is four and a half thousand rupees. In this, boutique or herb design can be done on the edge or body of the sari. Not only weavers but also people from other communities are involved in weaving Live. Not everyone has their own loom, some have their own loom other works as a labor or hired.

But now at present The weavers are more interested in another profession or job other than Handloom. One of the notable aspects of the handicraft industry is the Mahajani business or Mahajani practice. Work with the lower class poor Tantis'. They spend cash on raw materials. Weavers who are a little better off in their lineage weave at home . They Buy and make clothes and sell them individually in urban areas. Sonamukhi Gandhi Ashram and Sonamukhi weaving Shilpi Samabay Samiti is one of the two notable organizations in Sonamukhi Handloom sector. It was established in 1921 on an area of about three bighas in Sonamukhi Dr. Prafulla Ghosh, Suren Banerjee, Dr. Nripen Bass, Sushil Palit etc. Individuals formed the Trustee Board .This institution was established with a loan from the Khadi Commission for the welfare of weavers.

The Tantubaya community is optimistic about getting more favors from the Government as well as the Handloom Authority of India. Sonamukhi weavers believe that they are blessed by Baba Manehar Das , the omnipresent Saviour of ‘Tanti’ community of Sonamukhi

(II)

“Silk, Shankha and Amburi  
ei teen niye Bishnupuri”

This rhyme was often heard in the people of Bishnupur and surrounding areas. Many more industries were established in the capital city of Bishnupur under the patronage of the Mallya kings. It is true that the growth of these industries has changed a bit today with the passage of time . But it did not stop at all. There is the unique art of Bishnupur Silk which we are going to review.

Silk is an English word. Synonyms' used in silk karsi. Researchers say China is the first discoverer of Silk. Even in India, the use of linen has been around since ancient times. Kautilya's Arthashastra mentions the use of ‘koushik bastra’ .This koushik bastra’ is actually a type of j cloths made with jute. Panini also mentions silk in his writing. Silk produced in India has been exported abroad since ancient times. Rome, Egypt, Indian silk was in great demand in France, Asia and various parts of Europe. Currently Silk is produced in all parts of East-West-North-South of India. Almost every one love to wore Silk sari.

Earlier, silk or linen cloth was considered sacred and they evenworship in religious ceremonies .Now in present day we used to wear Benaresi silk in marriage. It is difficult to say how long the tradition of Bishnupuri silk is. However, it can be said that it is quite old. Hindu Raja and Hindu Samaj spread this art. Even in the Magellan era, it is spreading There was no interruption because in the Mughal kingdom, especially during the time of Akbar, there was considerable improvement in the textile industry. Raw materials are the most important factor in any production. The raw material of silk is silk thread. It used to come to Bishnupur mainly from Malda and Murshidabad.

We are fascinated by the magic of a Tati family behind its production History of young and old women. The production of silk is same as previously describe. As we have said before, Bishnupur has a long tradition in silk production. However, in the recent past, due to lack of funds and other reasons, the trend of silk production is almost over. The weavers were engaged in other weaving. But more It didn't take long,the silk came back again with a new glory.

Many families depend on this industry for their livelihood. For example, one hundred in Bishnupur Families, sixty families in Sainamukhi and seventy-five families in Chandraba. These are all Weaver. Besides, about one and a half thousand lakhs are involved in yarn production. About eight to nine hundred lakhs also work in its branches outside Bankura district. Silk Khadi Sebmandal's initiative in modernizing yarn, above all silk textiles. Undeniable. Moreover, it has to do with the livelihood of so many people. Vijay Kumar Poshari, head clerk of the organization, said that from Kashmir to India There is no province where Khadi companies do not take silk from Bishnupur. Of England From Queen Elizabeth to the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi all have accepted Bishnupuri silk as a gift in limitless delight

### (III)

The pavilion of Bengal, has prominently displayed those products of handicrafts and handloom sector which have been recognised for their unique nature keeping the theme "Skilling India" in view. It was done with a view to facilitate the local Weavers for Producing the Baluchari saree. In this Context, WBKVIB has already organised the suitable skill development Training Programme on weaving of Baluchari saree to the 60 Nos. Weavers of Sonamukhi Resham Shilpi Samabaya Sangha Ltd., Ranpur Mahamaya Khadi Gramodyog Samity and Sri Gandhi Ashram, Sonamukhi, Bankura. But due to paucity of fund as well as lack of awareness among the Societies, the production of fashionable Baluchari Saree has not yet been produced in the locality and the skill of such trained artisans were not properly utilised by those Societies. For development of the Silk Industry, as well as to make proper utilisation of investment made already by the Board. We select the Sonamukhi Block area for producing the Silk Sarees as Baluchari design through the facilitating agencies. Using the latest fashion designs and Craftsmanship particularly Baluchari Saree for women can cater to the huge and fast growing Consumer markets that exist in all Cities, Towns and Districts of India. West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board has already set up a Common Facility Centre at Sonamukhi with a view to provide skill development training to the weavers in jacquard weaving, specially Baluchari weaving, its designing, and diversification.

So far proper utilisation of skill of local weaver, as well as the fund already invested by the Board in the form of soft and hard intervention at Sonamukhi. Board has planned to introduce modern design and look to the traditional Baluchari. It is hoped that proper diversification and Value-addition in these traditional products may increase the demand resulting in development of livelihood of the artisans.

**Laila Tyabji, Chairperson and Founder Member of DASTKAR Society for Crafts & Craftspeople Lamanted and said**

“Two successive years of COVID and lockdowns have changed the Indian economy – destroying lives and livelihoods as a consequence. The handloom sector has been no exception – weaver communities all over India have been decimated.”

She also write down the importance of Handloom Sector in India

“ Handlooms are the warp and weft of India – our culture and aesthetics are rooted in its threads. Each fabric tells a story; the raw material, motif and design rooted in the landscape and community.

Often forgotten is that handlooms are also a major part of our economy. Every year at this time, the Textile Minister sends out a letter to chosen influencers, urging them to promote handlooms on Handloom Day. Everyone – film-stars, tycoons, politicians, socialites – posts selfies of themselves wearing beautiful Patolas, Banarasis, and Kanjeeverams, with ILoveHandlooms hashtags. But handloom and the weavers who weave it need more than a one-day Love Fest. The rest of the year they remain unseen, voiceless and outside mainstream politics and policies – dismissed as part of our cultural past, seldom regarded as an asset for our economic future. We need to cherish and protect these unique skill sets; honouring and investing in their makers. People cite Nita Ambani’s bejewelled 40 lakh sari but no one remembers the names of the weavers who wove it. Its lack of social acceptance that causes weavers to leave the sector, not because no one wants handloom. Handloom’s survival depends on so many external factors – market linkages, access to education, finance, design and market information, the know-how to develop new fabrics for Western cuts and stitched garments....”

Francois de Laval, the French traveller commented in the 17th century that “Everyone from the Cape of Good Hope to China, man and woman, is clothed from head to foot in the product of Indian looms” It could happen again. But every day needs to be Handloom Day instead of 7<sup>th</sup> August.

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