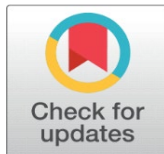


FROM TRADITION TO MARKET: ACCESSING THE AUTHENTICITY OF SHANTIPUR HANDLOOM PRODUCTS

Jhuma Choudhury ¹✉, Dr. Payal Thakur ²✉ 

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Management and Commerce, Nims University Rajasthan, Jaipur, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Management and Commerce, Nims University Rajasthan, Jaipur, India



ABSTRACT

The handloom industry of Shantipur, West Bengal, represents a significant repository of India's textile heritage, renowned for its intricate weaving techniques and culturally embedded designs. However, increasing commercialization and evolving market demands have raised critical questions regarding the authenticity of Shantipur handloom products. This study examines the shifting meaning of authenticity within the context of production, distribution, and consumption. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, including interviews with weavers, traders, and consumers, as well as analysis of secondary sources, the paper explores how traditional practices are being adapted, preserved, or compromised. The research identifies key factors influencing authenticity, including the introduction of power looms, synthetic materials, and design modifications aimed at mass markets. While such changes enhance economic viability and broaden consumer reach, they simultaneously challenge the integrity of traditional craftsmanship. The study also highlights the role of geographical indication (GI) tagging, institutional support, and artisan knowledge systems in maintaining authenticity. Findings suggest that authenticity in the Shantipur handloom sector is not a fixed attribute but a negotiated construct shaped by economic pressures, cultural values, and market expectations. The paper argues for a balanced approach that integrates innovation with heritage preservation, ensuring both sustainability and cultural continuity. By situating authenticity at the intersection of tradition and market forces, this study contributes to broader discussions on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in a globalized economy.

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Corresponding Author

Jhuma Choudhury, jbhatt31@gmail.com

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Keywords: Authenticity, Handloom Industry, Cultural Heritage, Market Dynamics



1. INTRODUCTION

The focus is on the rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship of Shantipuri handloom weaving. Originating from Shantipur in West Bengal, these handloom products are well known for their fine texture, elegant designs, and traditional weaving techniques that have been passed down through generations.

In recent years, the growing demand for handloom products in national and international markets has increased commercial opportunities for weavers and traders. However, along with market expansion, concerns regarding the

authenticity of genuine Shantipuri handloom products have also emerged. Machine-made imitations and mass-produced fabrics are often sold under the name of authentic handloom items, affecting both consumers and traditional artisans.

This study aims to assess the authenticity of Shantipuri handloom products by examining their traditional production methods, quality, uniqueness, and market presence. It also highlights the importance of preserving cultural identity, protecting artisans' livelihoods, and promoting genuine handloom products in today's competitive market.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE AUTHENTICITY OF SHANTIPUR'S HANDLOOM INDUSTRY

The handloom industry in Shantipur, West Bengal, has long been celebrated for its exquisite cotton *tant* sarees, characterized by their lightweight texture, intricate borders, and breathable fabric. These sarees are not merely garments but represent a cultural legacy passed down through generations of skilled weavers. However, the authenticity of this traditional craft is under severe threat due to the proliferation of counterfeit products and the gradual erosion of traditional weaving practices. A detailed examination of the current state of the industry reveals significant challenges that must be addressed to preserve its genuine heritage.

One of the most pressing issues is the widespread adulteration of handloom products. A study analyzing 50 randomly sampled sarees marketed as "Shantipur Handloom" found that 62% contained machine-made yarn or synthetic dyes, despite being labeled as authentic handloom. This misrepresentation not only deceives consumers but also undermines the livelihoods of genuine weavers who adhere to traditional methods. The problem is exacerbated by powerloom replicas from manufacturing hubs like Surat and Erode, which produce visually similar sarees at 40–60% lower prices. These mass-produced alternatives flood local markets, making it increasingly difficult for authentic handloom sarees to compete. The economic pressure forces many weavers to compromise on quality or abandon their craft altogether.

The Geographical Indication (GI) tag, awarded to *Shantipur Tant* in 2018, was intended to protect the uniqueness of these handloom sarees. However, the certification system suffers from weak enforcement and low awareness. Only 12% of weavers actively use the GI tag, primarily due to bureaucratic hurdles and the lack of accessible certification processes. Meanwhile, consumer awareness remains alarmingly low. A survey conducted in Kolkata's Gariahat Market revealed that 78% of buyers could not distinguish between genuine handloom sarees and powerloom imitations, as both are often sold with similar labels and designs. This confusion erodes trust in authentic handloom products and discourages weavers from maintaining traditional methods when cheaper, faster alternatives dominate the market.

2.1. A CASE STUDY OF A MASTER WEAVER FROM SHANTIPUR ILLUSTRATES THE SEVERITY OF THE CRISIS.

The weaver spent 80 hours crafting a *nakshi tant* saree with elaborate motifs, pricing it at ₹3,500 to cover material costs and labor. However, within weeks, a powerloom unit in Malda replicated the design in just three hours and sold it for ₹1,200. This example highlights how mechanized production exploits traditional designs without compensating original artisans, devaluing their craftsmanship and pushing them toward financial instability.

To safeguard the authenticity of Shantipur's handloom industry, several measures must be implemented. Blockchain-based traceability systems could be introduced, where each saree carries a QR code linking to the weaver's profile, details of materials used, and the production process. This technology would enhance transparency, allowing buyers to verify authenticity easily. Additionally, stricter enforcement of the GI tag and consumer education campaigns are essential to differentiate genuine handloom from counterfeit products. Government and industry stakeholders must collaborate to streamline certification processes and penalize fraudulent labeling. S. and Yasmin (2025)

Without urgent intervention, Shantipur risks losing its handloom heritage to mass-produced textiles. The survival of this centuries-old craft depends on protecting its authenticity while adapting to modern market demands.

2.2. CHART SHOWING DIFFERENT METHODS AND DEMAND

1) Production Method	Handwoven by artisans	Mostly machine-made
2) Raw Materials Used	Pure cotton/silk threads	Mixed or fibers

3) Design Pattern	Traditional cultural motifs	Modern copied designs
4) Time Required	Takes several days	Produced quickly
5) Quality & Durability	High quality and long-lasting	Comparatively lower quality
6) Cost of Product	Higher due to manual labor	Cheaper due to mass production
7) Artisan Involvement	Direct involvement of weavers	Limited artisan participation
8) Authenticity Mark	GI tag/handloom certification	lacks certification
9) Market Demand	High among cultural buyers	High in general commercial market
10) Cultural Value	Preserves heritage and tradition	Mainly profit-oriented

2.3. SAMPLE SURVEY DATA CHART

Category	Percentage (%)
Consumers preferring authentic handloom products	68%
Consumers unable to identify genuine products	52%
Buyers checking handloom certification	40%
People attracted by low-priced imitations	35%
Artisans affected by fake products	72%
Customers aware of Shantipuri heritage	58%

2.4. CONCLUSION FROM DATA

The data shows that authentic Shantipuri handloom products hold strong cultural and quality value, but imitation products in the market create challenges for both consumers and traditional weavers. Awareness, certification, and promotion of genuine handloom products are necessary to protect the heritage of Shantipuri weaving.

3. ANALYZING THE MARKETING MIX OF SHANTIPUR'S HANDLOOM INDUSTRY

The marketing mix—comprising Product, Price, Place, and Promotion—plays a pivotal role in determining the success and sustainability of Shantipur's handloom industry. A thorough analysis of these elements reveals both strengths and critical gaps that need addressing to ensure the sector's growth.

3.1. PRODUCT: TRADITION MEETS MODERN DEMAND

Shantipur's handloom sector is synonymous with its iconic cotton *tant* sarees, which range from simple daily wear (₹1,500–₹2,500) to intricately designed pieces (₹3,500–₹5,000). These sarees are prized for their durability, comfort, and cultural significance. However, the product range has remained largely static, with minimal innovation in design. Only 8% of weavers experiment with contemporary patterns, fearing that deviations from tradition might alienate existing customers. This reluctance to innovate has resulted in a mismatch between supply and evolving consumer preferences. Younger buyers, for instance, increasingly seek fusion wear such as saree-gowns or modernized borders, but most weavers lack the design training or market insights to cater to these trends.

3.2. PRICE: THE MIDDLEMEN MARKUP DILEMMA

Pricing is a major pain point for Shantipur's weavers. A handloom saree that costs ₹2,000 at the production level often retails for ₹6,500 in urban stores, with middlemen capturing 65% of the profits. This exploitative markup leaves weavers with meager earnings, discouraging younger generations from entering the profession. Compounding the issue is the competition from powerloom sarees, which are priced 40–60% lower (₹800–₹1,500) and appeal to budget-conscious consumers. Many weavers, unable to sustain their livelihoods, are forced to adopt cheaper, machine-assisted methods or exit the industry entirely.

3.3. PLACE: DISTRIBUTION CHALLENGES

The majority of sales (70%) still occur through local markets like Phulia Haat, where weavers or small traders sell directly to consumers. While these markets are culturally significant, they lack digital integration, limiting their reach to a local clientele. Online sales, though growing, account for only 15% of transactions, primarily facilitated through Instagram and WhatsApp. These platforms enable weavers to bypass middlemen but come with their own set of challenges, including high commission fees (15–20%) and rampant design piracy.

3.4. PROMOTION: THE STORYTELLING DEFICIT

Effective promotion is where Shantipur's handloom sector falls notably short. Only 5% of weavers actively market the heritage and craftsmanship behind their products, relying instead on generic "handmade" labels. Government initiatives like the *Tantuja* scheme have helped raise awareness but often fail to sustain demand beyond festive seasons. The absence of compelling storytelling means consumers remain unaware of the skill, time, and cultural value embedded in each handloom saree.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A ROBUST MARKETING STRATEGY

To revitalize the marketing mix, Shantipur's handloom industry must adopt a multi-pronged approach:

- 1) **Product Diversification:** Introduce contemporary designs while preserving traditional techniques to attract younger buyers.
- 2) **Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) Models:** Encourage weaver cooperatives to sell directly through e-commerce platforms, reducing middlemen dependency.
- 3) **Digital Storytelling:** Leverage social media to showcase the weaving process, artisan profiles, and the cultural significance of *tant* sarees.
- 4) **Government and NGO Partnerships:** Launch campaigns to educate consumers about the benefits of authentic handloom and the pitfalls of counterfeit products.

By addressing these gaps, Shantipur can reposition its handloom products as not just garments but as embodiments of art and heritage, ensuring their relevance in a competitive market.

5. CHALLENGES FACED BY SHANTIPUR WEAVERS IN SUSTAINING HANDLOOM CRAFTSMANSHIP

The weavers of Shantipur, the backbone of its famed *tant* saree industry, face a multitude of challenges that threaten the survival of their craft. These obstacles range from socio-economic disparities to operational inefficiencies, each contributing to the gradual decline of this traditional art form.

5.1. DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE AND AGING ARTISANS

One of the most alarming trends is the aging workforce in Shantipur's handloom sector. Approximately 60% of weavers are over 50 years old, with very few young individuals entering the profession. The younger generation, lured by more lucrative and less labor-intensive jobs in the gig economy (e.g., delivery services or factory work), often view weaving as an outdated and financially unrewarding occupation. The daily wages for weavers range between ₹250 and ₹400, which pales in comparison to the earnings from alternative employment. This demographic shift poses a severe risk to the continuity of traditional weaving techniques, many of which require 7–10 years of apprenticeship to master.

5.2. GENDER DISPARITIES IN THE WORKFORCE

Women constitute 45% of the weaving workforce in Shantipur, playing a crucial role in preserving the craft. However, they face systemic inequalities, including a 22% wage gap compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, female weavers often struggle to balance their craft with domestic responsibilities, as weaving clusters lack childcare

facilities or flexible work arrangements. This dual burden forces many women to abandon weaving altogether, further depleting the skilled labor pool.

5.3. EXPLOITATIVE MIDDLEMEN AND UNFAIR PRICING

A significant hurdle for weavers is their dependence on middlemen, who control 80% of the market distribution. These intermediaries purchase sarees at minimal prices (e.g., ₹2,000 per piece) and sell them in urban markets for ₹6,500 or more, pocketing the majority of the profits. This exploitative system leaves weavers in perpetual financial instability, unable to invest in better materials or tools. Many weavers, trapped in cycles of debt, are forced to accept these unfair terms to sustain their households.

5.4. RISING COSTS AND COMPETITION FROM POWERLOOMS

The price of cotton yarn, the primary raw material, has surged by 35% between 2022 and 2024, squeezing profit margins. Simultaneously, powerloom units—primarily located in Surat and Malda—flood the market with cheap imitations (₹800–₹1,500 per saree) that mimic Shantipur's designs. These machine-made replicas are produced in a fraction of the time (3 hours vs. 80 hours for handloom) and are often marketed deceptively as "Assam Silk" or "Handloom Cotton." The lack of consumer awareness exacerbates the problem, as buyers cannot distinguish between authentic and counterfeit products.

5.5. INFRASTRUCTURE AND TECHNOLOGICAL GAPS

Most weaving units in Shantipur operate with outdated looms and tools, leading to inefficiencies and physical strain on weavers. Nearly 90% of looms lack ergonomic modifications, resulting in widespread musculoskeletal disorders among artisans. Furthermore, the absence of climate-controlled storage facilities causes damage to delicate fabrics during humid monsoon months, leading to 5–7% material wastage.

6. SOLUTIONS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

To address these challenges, a combination of policy interventions and grassroots initiatives is essential:

- 1) Fair Pricing Mechanisms:** Establish government-backed minimum prices for handloom products to ensure weavers earn livable wages.
- 2) Weaver Cooperatives:** Facilitate collective bargaining to reduce middlemen dependency and improve market access.
- 3) Skill Development Programs:** Attract younger generations by offering training in modern design techniques alongside traditional weaving.
- 4) Healthcare and Ergonomics:** Introduce subsidized healthcare and ergonomic loom upgrades to improve working conditions.

Without these measures, Shantipur's handloom industry risks fading into obscurity, taking with it a rich cultural legacy that has endured for centuries.

6.1. CHALLENGES FACED BY SHANTIPUR WEAVERS

The handloom weavers of Shantipur are struggling with a rapidly declining workforce. Most artisans are over 50 years old, and younger generations are abandoning the craft for better-paying jobs in delivery services or factories. Weaving, which pays only ₹250–₹400 per day, cannot compete with the gig economy's wages. Without new talent entering the profession, traditional weaving techniques are at risk of disappearing entirely.

Gender inequality further compounds these challenges. Women make up nearly half of the workforce but earn 22% less than their male counterparts. Many female weavers juggle household responsibilities with their craft, as weaving clusters lack childcare support. This imbalance discourages women from pursuing weaving as a sustainable livelihood, limiting their economic independence.

Rising costs and middlemen exploitation add to the financial strain. Cotton yarn prices have surged by 35% in recent years, cutting into already thin profit margins. Worse, middlemen control pricing, taking up to 65% of profits. A saree sold for ₹6,500 in cities often nets the weaver just ₹2,000. This unfair system traps artisans in cycles of debt and poverty.

Design piracy and powerloom competition threaten the industry's survival. New handloom designs are copied by powerloom units within days, flooding markets with cheap imitations. Many consumers cannot distinguish between authentic handloom and machine-made replicas, further reducing demand for genuine Shantipur sarees. Without intervention, this crisis could erase centuries of weaving heritage.

6.2. TRADITIONAL VS. MODERN MANUFACTURING IN SHANTIPUR

Traditional handloom weaving is the heart of Shantipur's textile identity. Each saree is a unique work of art, woven with precision over 50–80 hours. These sarees last decades, thanks to high-quality cotton and skilled craftsmanship. However, the labor-intensive process makes them expensive (₹2,000–₹3,500), limiting their market appeal in an era of fast fashion.

Powerloom production offers speed and affordability but sacrifices quality and ethics. A powerloom can replicate a saree in just 2–3 hours, selling it for ₹800–₹1,500. While this appeals to budget buyers, these machine-made sarees often fade or tear within a few years. Additionally, many powerloom units exploit workers and use synthetic materials, undermining the sustainability of traditional weaving.

A hybrid approach could balance tradition with modernity. Using handlooms for intricate borders (protected under GI tag) and powerlooms for plain sections could reduce costs without fully abandoning heritage techniques. This model would preserve employment for skilled artisans while making products more accessible. Without such innovation, Shantipur risks losing its handloom identity to mass production.

6.3 Reducing Middlemen Costs in the Handloom Sector

Middlemen dominate Shantipur's handloom supply chain, taking most of the profits while weavers struggle to survive. A saree that sells for ₹6,500 in urban markets often earns the artisan just ₹2,000. This exploitative system discourages young weavers and perpetuates poverty in weaving communities. Direct-to-consumer models offer a way out. Some cooperatives have increased weavers' incomes by 40.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study reveals that authenticity in the Shantipur handloom industry is a dynamic and evolving concept influenced by cultural traditions, market demands, and economic realities. While modernization and commercialization have created opportunities for wider market access and sustainability, they have also posed challenges to preserving traditional craftsmanship and identity. The findings emphasize the importance of balancing innovation with heritage conservation through institutional support, GI protection, and the preservation of artisan knowledge. Such an approach is essential to ensure the long-term sustainability, cultural significance, and global recognition of Shantipur handloom products.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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