



COTTON HANDLOOM SARIS OF WEST BENGAL ARE THE EXCELLENCE OF TEXTILE ART AND PARTS OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE NATION

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Abstract

Bengal cotton handloom saris have made an important contribution to the handloom textile industry. West Bengal are the major handloom sari production state of the country. The significance of handloom sector is that it is second largest industry of India after agriculture and to regenerate importance of employment. These saris are different from each other in terms of form, quality and variety and part of the cultural heritage of our country. The handloom textiles such as Jamdani sari, Tangail sari, Shantipur sari, Dhonekhali sari and Begumpur saris have enriched the country's heritage through different weaving techniques and designs from very old time. The textile industry had been famous worldwide in 17th and 18th centuries. These are being woven in loom in traditional way. It is very much eco-friendly product. Bengal cotton handloom sari represents the authentic style, class and exquisite weaving technique and excellent craftsmanship of weaver's community. Currently, handloom weavers are constantly striving to improve the handloom art. Though jamdani and Tangail saris are originated in Bangladesh, but today the weavers of west Bengal have made systematic changes in the saris and tries to develop and regenerate the cotton handloom industry.

Keywords: handloom textile industry, employment, cultural heritage, eco-friendly, weaver's community.

INTRODUCTION:

Bengal cotton handloom sari is different for its authentic style, class and exquisite weaving technique and excellent craftsmanship. West Bengal are the major handloom sari production state and its shares 35% of overall production of India.¹ It has a great heritage value. It represents the sense of identity, nationalism and exclusiveness of Bengal cultural heritage. As a heritage product handloom sari also represents the weaving community of Bengal. There are several ways in which cultural heritage can directly and indirectly contribute to society and economy.² It is one of the largest cottage industries of the state as well as the country engaging largest number of people next to agriculture.³ It also valorises the past connection and sense of belonging by develops pride and self-respect to their heritage. The weavers are very skilled to weave colourful design on the ground of the sari like an artist and the weaving process takes form of a painting after completion of the work. In this way the weaving technique transforms into an art. The aesthetic value of these saris is part of enjoyment and encourage new creativity.

Handloom consists of two words that are hand and loom. Loom is the wooden weaving apparatus in which weaving is operated by hand. It is completely manual process sans of electricity. The fabric which is produced in looms by hand is called handloom fabrics. Looms meaning is 'Taant' in Bengali and the sari produces in it called 'Taant sari.' Taant sari is an age old and famous craft production of Bengal. The beautiful cotton taant sari is known for its thick border and decorative end pieces which is woven with floral, paisley and different artistic motifs. Cotton saris get in different variation named as Jamdani sari, Tangail sari, Shantipur sari, Begumpur sari, and Dhonekhali sari. The name Tangail, Shantipur, Fulia, Begumpur, and dhonekhali falls after its place name. The handloom saris of different patterns and styles are defined below.

JAMDANI:

Jamdani is highly ornamented designed on fine fabric with floral-vine and geometric motifs. The illustrated craftsmanship leaves a picturesque effect on the sari. It is a miracle of human handicraft which made by the Bengal weavers. It was mainly used by the kings, zamindars, emperors and rich families. Traces found from various historical references that Roman author Petronius in the 1st century of Christian era described it as woven air.⁴ Jamdani was woven in muslin fabric which contents with four hundred to a thousand count thread ranging sometimes even higher.⁵ 'Jamdani reached its zenith in Mughal period. Jamdani was extensively used in various form and style by Mughal emperors. Emperor Akbar had changed the fashion styles of his predecessor. Emperor Babur was from central Asia and he carried the same wearing tradition of thick fabric in India which they wore in cold season.



jamdani

The muslin and silk tradition were started by Akbar for the needs of imperial household. The light fabric like muslin and silk were used as an apparel in the time of Akbar which matched the subtropical climate. Muslin fabric was highly appreciated by the Mughals and it became most common fabric for the higher classes. Mughal emperor Jahangir used to wear a jamdani sash⁶ from his waist. This was similar to waist band. Jamdani is derived from Persian word 'jam' means flower and 'daan' means container. There were another meaning of jamdani. Padmasree awardee master weaver Biren Kumar Basak expressed that decorated pieces of fine muslin cloth had used to cover the 'Jambani' named container. The name 'Jamdani' was derived from the term 'Jambani'. The artwork was transformed into clothes and became famous in the Mughal period.

ORIGIN:

It was historically referred to as 'Dhakai Muslin' for its origin in Dhaka of Bangladesh. Jamdani is a product which weaved on fine translucent Muslin fabric. This fabric is light and perfect for Indian climate. It is the main reason of popularity of jamdani on those time. Hindu weavers' family came India from Bangladesh in the time of partition in 1947 and they were settled in the places of Samudragarh, Dhatrigram, Mugberia, Fulia in West Bengal. They carried with them the rich tradition of Jamdani and had begun to weave jamdani in various patterns. The weaving art of jamdani is honoured by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of humanity in the year of 2013.⁷

TECHNIQUE AND DESIGNS:

Jamdani is a fine design work on the surface of the sari. It is long duration brain work and weaver needs adept knowledge, skill and patience. Weaver weaves motif on the ground of the sari to see the same design in front of his eyes said by master weaver Biren Kumar Basak.⁸ The motifs are done by passing the additional weft threads by a small stick across the warp threads in the loom. This work is called 'Jala' technique.⁹

Jamdani weaver Biren Kumar Basak said that there has need changed in designs to make more vivid the handloom. He weaved totally different designed-sari from traditional Dhakai Jamdani. It took 6 months to 3 years¹⁰ to complete a sari. He weaved designs of epics and stories of old text like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Sakuntala, Hindu God and Goddesses like Ganesha, Mahisasurmardini, etc., the life of noble man of Swami Vivekananda, portrait of Rabindra Nath Tagore, Prime minister Narendra Modi, President Draupadi Murmu, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Bannerjee, Bangladesh Prime Minister sheikh Hasina etc. He said that they are produced and maintained same work in jamdani sari which produced in Bangladesh. There has no difference in the style of weaving. For good profit they used cotton and silk yarn in jamdani weaving. Whereas Bangladesh weavers used only cotton threads in jamdani.



jamdani weaving in samudragarh goyalpara tangail tantubay samity, Samudragarh, East Burdwan, West Bengal



Sunil Kumar Mandal with jamdani sari, secretary of the gholapara tantubay samabay samity limited, Nadia district, West Bengal

TANGAIL:

The name 'Tangail' was originated from Tangail district of present Bangladesh. Previously it was named as '*Begum-Bahar*' where silk warp and cotton weft were used.¹¹ The weaving was loose enough to made the sari light. It was appropriate for home or night apparel for Bengali women.

ORIGIN:

The real place of birth of Tangail sari is a Bangladesh. The Hindu Basak community weavers of Bangladesh had come West Bengal before partition. They have settled different places of Nadia and East Burdwan district. Master weaver Biren Kumar Basak born in the place named Tangail of present day in Bangladesh and bear the identity as a Tangail weaver.

TECHNIQUE AND DESIGNS:

Master weaver Biren Kumar Basak awarded by 'Padmasree' in 2021. He invented new style in Tangail work. This is totally different from old Tangail style. He said that plain border fine cotton Tangail sari was produced for regular uses in the past time of Bangladesh. At present, Tangail sari decorated with heavy designs is made in the looms of the West Bengal. The characteristic of Tangail sari is two weft threads are inserted in each warp thread. The weaving is done by jacket in which yarn is connected with and fixed into the loom. In Present day, it has occupied ornamented designs in border, full body and end pieces. Small Polka (*Buti*), Fish scale (*Aansh*), Flower (*Phool*), Diamond

(*Barfi*), Club (*Ruitor / Chieur*) etc motifs are weaved on the ground of the sari. It is look similar to Taant Jamdani sari. At present, polyester is used to weave Tangail sari in the loom. It is called Tangail silk sari.



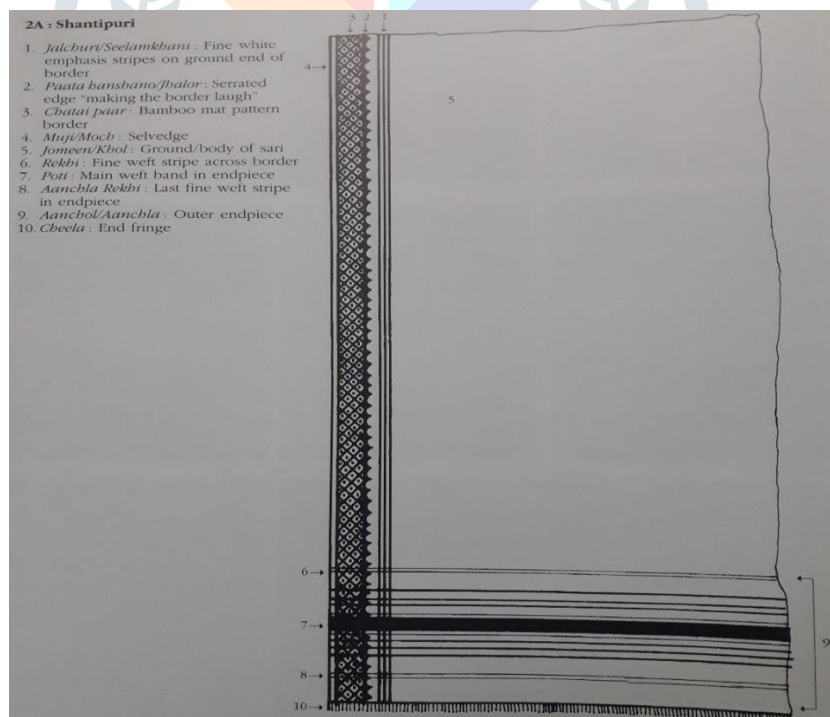
pach-pere or five bordered tangail sari

SHANTIPUR SARI:

Shantipur is situated in Nadia district of West Bengal and the sari bears the same name of its location. It is a sari of west Bengal origin. These saris are famous for its fine and uniform texture. Shantipur sari bears a unique identity of Nadia district in West Bengal.

TECHNIQUE AND DESIGNS:

Shantipur Taant or cotton is a fine textured plain weaving sari. It has obtained Geographical Indication (GI) tag. It is woven with 100 counts to 120 counts of threads for warp and weft portion of the sari to maintain the uniformity. The extra-warp design of upper and lower border of the sari are woven with twisted yarn. Sometimes the enamel work (meena-kaj) is created by passing the colouring extra-weft threads in the design portion. There is another variation seen on the sari is named '*Dorokha*'. Its mean the design looks same in both sides. Other characteristics of Shantipur sari is that the name of the sari decided on the base of the design which it bears in the border of the saris.



shantipur sari pattern

The ground of the sari is unbleached or sometime it is *Neelambari* or Indigo blue coloured. The Shantipur styles are developed by the stripes, check in the ground of the sari. Shantipur sari with stripe is called '*Jalchuri*',¹² which earlier named '*Seelamkhani*'. The parallel lines above the border separates the ground and the border of the sari. The sky-blue coloured *Neelambari* sari is a speciality of the Shantipur sari. The navy-blue colour is resembled with the sky on the moon night. It had found in dark navy-blue colour with the Zari or gold thread border. The serrated edge or series of tooth like edges faces toward the body side near the border is typical style of Shantipur sari. It is called '*Paata hanshano*'¹³ or makes the border laugh.



kalka paar or mango motif border shantipur sari



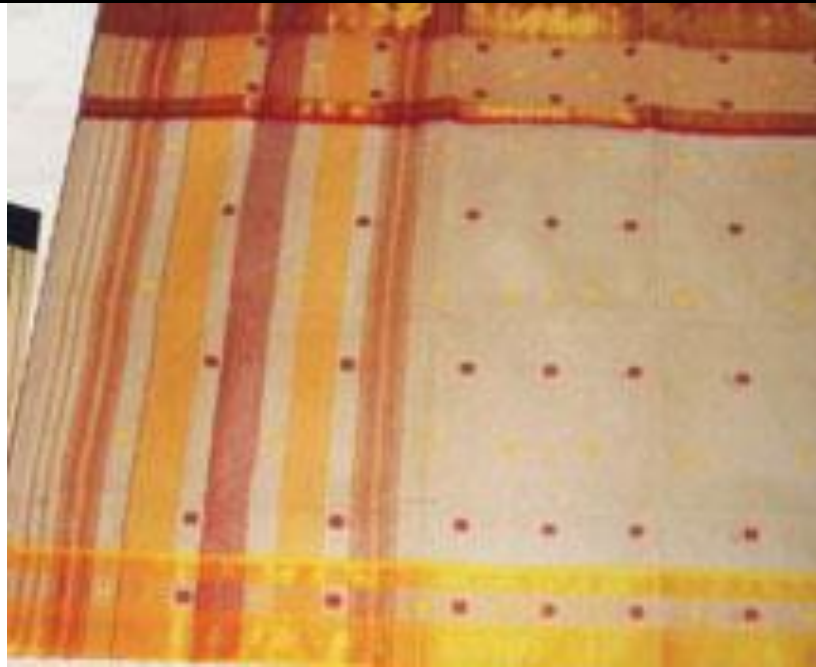
kalas paar or pitcher pattern border shantipur sari

DHONEKHALI SARI:

Dhonekhali or Dhaniakhali sari is an authentic, beautiful cotton sari with distinctive feature purely West Bengal origin. It has obtained Geographical Indication (GI) tag.¹⁴ It is situated in Hooghly district of West Bengal and carried a distinct weaving legacy for many years. Dhonekhali sari and Dhotis are famous for its superfine quality.

TECHNIQUE AND DESIGNS:

It is made of by pure cotton so it is very comfortable to use in any weather. The name of the sari is followed by the place name of Dhonekhali. It is woven in pit loom with 100 counts to 120 counts cotton threads. Baluchari sari pattern is woven in fine cotton thread of 100 count yarn in present days. Heavy designs are made with jacquard machine in pit looms.



dhonekhali sari

There have found many variations in beautiful designs and different ranges of saris in Somashpur Union Cooperative, Dhonekhali in Hooghly district. Floral design, ornamental design and figure motif are in vogue. Godown keeper of Somashpur Union Cooperative, Susanta Bera displays some new patterned sari, such as 60 count matha par sari (plain border), Taant sari, applique work on cotton sari, computer designed cotton sari and Katki sari. 'Taant Baluchari' is their new innovation which looks similar with baluchari sari of Bankura district. Another new patterns like cotton sari with silk border is very common today.

BEGUMPUR SARI:

Begumpur is situated in Hooghly district of West Bengal and the sari bears the same name of its location.

TECHNIQUE AND DESIGNS:

This sari has a special characteristic feature which called *Mathapar*. It means unornamented plain bordered sari. The border parts mainly occupied dark colour like red, black, deep blue etc. and the body part becomes lighter than the border. It is generally found in both forms like coarse cotton sari and fine cotton sari for the purpose of regular uses. Present day linen is used to weave sari besides cotton. These saris are weaving in different types of yarn like 80 counts, 100 counts, 160 counts, 140 counts, 2/100 counts. According to field survey one of the member weavers of Begumpur handloom cluster named Milan De said that a 2/100 count Maslight sari is mainly white and red coloured combination in body and border. 2/100 count means there are used 100 count cotton thread in ground of the sari and the twisted threads are used in border for weaving purposes.



begumpur sari in begumpur handloom cluster

One another characteristic feature said by the weaver that the sari which he has woven called 'Skirt par' or 'Skirt Border' sari. This mean one side border width is broader than the other side border. Nowadays, '*Patiya Naksa*' or small club or '*Chieur*' motif or extra design can see in weft portion which looks like a stripe pattern in the ground of the sari. This small motif normally is woven in the frame fly-shuttle-loom with the help of two or more heddles as per its necessity.



skirt-par sari with floral motif begumpur handloom cluster

Cotton handloom sari or Taant sari of Dhonekhali, Shantipur wears by Bengali women in everyday life. It increases women elegance and beauty in highest level. Sari is a traditional dress and women carry this tradition for generation to generation. Though it becomes rare but till today sari is attire for newly-wed women must to wear after marriage in Bengali families. It becomes an essential part of Bengali life and cultural heritage. Bengal cotton handloom heritage defines the significance social, religion and traditional culture of Bengal. It also reflects the skilled handloom weaving community of Bengal.

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