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# REVITALISING TRIBAL CRAFTS FOR SUSTAINABLE YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN TRIPURA: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT
*The Northeast region of India is home to over 130 major tribal communities, each with distinct cultural traditions and craft practices. Tripura, the third-smallest state in the country, is home to 19 tribes renowned for their unique textile designs, patterns, and handicrafts. Handloom weaving, a time-honoured skill embedded in the daily lives of these communities, remains both a cultural marker and a vital source of livelihood. As the second-largest employer in India after agriculture, the handloom sector has significant potential for sustainable job creation. This study explores opportunities to generate employment among Tripura's tribal youth through the revitalisation of traditional handloom and handicraft practices. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, the research analyses successful craft-based enterprises from across India to assess their applicability in Tripura's cultural and economic context. The findings identify strategic pathways for artisan skill enhancement, market expansion, and product diversification, demonstrating how traditional crafts can foster sustainable livelihoods, preserve cultural heritage, and contribute to inclusive socio-economic development in the state.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Sustainable Livelihoods, Traditional Handloom Handicraft of Tripura, Preservation, Cultural Heritage, Tribal Empowerment*

## 1. INTRODUCTION
The Northeast region of India is home to over 130 major tribal communities, accounting for a significant portion of the 427 total tribal communities in the country (Census 2011). Tripura, the third smallest state in India, shares its borders with Mizoram and Assam to the east and Bangladesh to the west, north, and south, resulting in a rich and diverse cultural landscape shaped by a complex mix of tribal traditions and religious influences.

Tripura is home to 19 distinct ethnic communities, who excel in bamboo and cane crafts as well as in traditional weaving. Handloom and handicrafts are deeply embedded in Tripura's cultural heritage, with each of its 19 tribal communities possessing distinctive designs, motifs, and techniques in their traditional weaves and crafts. These age-old weaving and craft skills have been passed down through generations, preserving the stories, customs, and artistic expressions of Tripura's tribal communities while reflecting their unique cultural identity and craftsmanship. These traditional crafts hold immense cultural value, serving both as a symbol of heritage and a vital means of livelihood for tribal artisans.

Despite their cultural and economic importance, these crafts face challenges from modernization, globalization, and competition from mass-produced goods. Government interventions—through schemes and development programs—have sought to strengthen the sector, yet productivity and income remain low due to issues such as part-time weaving, limited market access, and inadequate infrastructure.

Tripura's weaving traditions and artisanal skills, however, hold immense potential to transform the state's handloom and handicraft sector into a hallmark of its ethnic identity while generating sustainable employment for tribal youth. Against this backdrop, the present study examines successful handloom and handicraft enterprise models from other Indian states, exploring the strategies that underpin their sustainability, market access, and artisan empowerment, and evaluates how these approaches can be adapted to Tripura's socio-cultural and economic context to create meaningful livelihood opportunities for its tribal youth.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW
Globally, the handloom and handicraft sector has been recognized as a powerful tool for poverty alleviation and employment generation, especially among marginalized communities. Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis (2016), in their study on the Western Cape Province of South Africa, investigate the potential role of handicraft micro-enterprises as a catalyst for youth employment, for which the authors collected qualitative data through interviews and observations with crafters, supporters, and buyers. Their findings highlight that, with targeted training, networking opportunities, and better market access, handicraft enterprises can provide sustainable livelihoods. The authors recommended development of policies to encourage youth participation in the sector, to provide training and support services to handicraft workers, to facilitate networking and collaboration among craft workers through the establishment of craft councils, to improve access to credit for handicraft micro-enterprises, to promote

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handicraft education in formal education settings, and to create craft centers for local, national, and international trade.

In the Indian context, multiple scholars have highlighted the significant role of handloom and handicrafts in rural employment and economic growth. Kashyap and Dua (2019), in their article "Sustainability of Handicrafts: A Step towards Good Governance," stress that the handicraft industry has substantial potential for employment generation, but to leverage the full potential, product innovation, alignment with market trends, and globalization are crucial for sustaining the handicraft sector. Singh and Singh (2023), in their article "Handicraft Sector in India: An Instrument for Rural Economic Growth and Women Empowerment," emphasise that the handicrafts industry is highly growth-oriented in India, as there is a consistent increase in the export of Indian handicrafts products in the world market, and the export value is projected to reach 5 billion US dollars by 2025-26. The authors further highlight that Northeast states in India are highly dominant in this sector, indicating that the handicraft industry has the potential to boost the income for artisans from the Northeast region, which will ultimately contribute significantly to the Indian economy. Shrivastava (2020) stresses sustainable approaches to revitalize the handloom and handicraft sectors in India. The author addresses sustainability challenges such as competition from power looms, lack of market demand, and insufficient government support. Furthermore, the author proposes several solutions, including promoting the use of natural dyes and fibres, fostering innovative designs, and strengthening local markets. Bilal et. al (2021) highlight the handloom and handicraft sector as a labour-intensive industry providing direct and indirect employment to millions and proposes an AI-supported E-commerce model to overcome the marketing, branding, export barriers.

At the regional level, the North-Eastern states have a distinct cultural and economic stake in the handloom sector. Devi, V. (2014) observes that women dominate the workforce, making the handloom sector crucial for both cultural preservation and livelihood. The author further highlights that the number of weaver households is growing in the northeastern states; however, income generation remains low due to market limitations and competition from mass-produced goods. Debbarma and Chakraborty (2020) highlight that in the Northeast regions, the handloom weaving is a traditional occupation passed down through generations since time immemorial. The authors argues that a rise in government support through schemes, skill upgradation, financial support, and cluster-based development could help the sector realize its potential for youth empowerment and regional economic growth.

Focusing specifically on Tripura, Dev Varman and Unnikrishnan (2023), in their article "The Risha: History in a Narrow Weave," state that, unlike other tribal communities in Northeast India, which also use wood and metal to create objects for everyday use, the tribes of Tripura have traditionally specialised only in bamboo crafts and textiles. The authors document how loin-loom weaving is done, with young girls learning from elders as part of their cultural upbringing. The ability to weave was considered one of the essential qualities of an eligible woman for marriage, as it signifies diligence, skill, and readiness for household responsibilities. The authors further highlight the significance of traditionally woven cloth known as "Risha," which holds deep cultural and ritual importance in rites of passage, harvest festivals, and sowing ceremonies. This reflects the integral role of handloom weaving in Tripura's tribal traditions, not only as an economic activity but also as a symbol of identity and heritage. This rich tradition, however, faces pressures from modernization and declining engagement among younger generations. These studies reveal that while Tripura's handloom and handicrafts hold immense potential for sustainable employment and cultural preservation, there is a need to adapt successful models from elsewhere to address its unique challenges.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative, descriptive, and analytical study combines primary fieldwork with secondary data analysis to explore the potential of revitalizing Tripura's tribal handloom and handicraft sector for sustainable employment generation. Primary data was collected through visits to three handloom clusters in Tripura, involving direct observation and informal interviews with weavers and the cluster in-charge/supervisor. Secondary data was drawn from government reports, academic articles, industry analyses, and documented case studies of successful craft enterprises across India, including Chizami Weaves, Saneki Weaves, Antaran, Heritage Mizoram, and Diezephe Craft Village. A thematic comparative analysis was employed to identify patterns in artisan empowerment, market integration, skill development, and sustainability, contextualizing these insights within Tripura's socio-cultural and economic realities to generate actionable recommendations for policymakers and development agencies.

## 4. FIELD OBSERVATIONS

The primary data findings, derived from fieldwork at three handloom clusters in Tripura, reveal a significant gap between local practices and the more modern, successful models seen in other states. The specific findings are as follows:

Economic and Production Constraints

- Loan-Based Raw Materials: Weavers do not receive raw materials (yarn) for free; they must take loans from the clusters to access them.
- Repayment Systems: Weavers repay these loans in two ways: by submitting finished products to the cluster in exchange for wages or by paying back the yarn cost if they choose to sell their products independently.
- Minimal Financial Support: Even flagship financial schemes like MUDRA loans have reached only a very small number of weavers. The primary barriers are complex application processes and a lack of local facilitation to help artisans navigate the paperwork.

Market and Digital Gaps

- Dependency on State Outlets: Most weavers sell their products exclusively through Purbasha, the state-managed outlet under the Directorate of Handloom and Handicrafts.

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- Lack of Digital Integration: There is currently no exposure to e-commerce or online marketing within these clusters. This limits the artisans' ability to reach wider national or international markets directly.
- Limited Awareness: There is minimal awareness of available government schemes among the weavers, leaving them unable to take advantage of existing support structures.

Institutional Observations

- Committee Feedback: Cluster-level committees confirmed that the lack of market integration and the difficulty of accessing credit are major hurdles for local artisans.
- Comparison to Other States: These findings stand in sharp contrast to case studies in Nagaland, Assam, and Mizoram, where artisans have successfully leveraged digital platforms, brand building, and design training to achieve independence and higher earnings.

## 5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This study presents a comparative analysis of successful handloom and handicraft enterprise models from different Indian states to evaluate their applicability for revitalising Tripura's traditional craft sector. Drawing on documented cases, the discussion is organized thematically to highlight best practices in artisan empowerment and skill enhancement, entrepreneurship and digital market integration, market access and branding, and community-based craft revival and tourism. Each thematic section includes specific case studies with interpretive commentary on their potential application within Tripura's socio-cultural and economic context.

### 5.1. Artisan Empowerment and Skill Development

**Case 1: Chizami Weaves (Nagaland) and Saneki Weaves (Assam)**

Chizami Weaves and Saneki Weaves are initiatives of NENterprise, a trust registered by the North East Network (NEN). Operating as women-led cooperatives, they aim to provide sustainable livelihoods to rural women while reviving the traditional textile heritage of the region. These enterprises train local weavers in design innovation while preserving traditional weaving techniques and motifs. The model emphasizes community ownership, equitable income distribution, and the intergenerational transfer of skills, resulting in a robust artisan network and stable livelihoods.

Both enterprises have expanded their product range to include cushion covers, pouches, scarves, and home decor items, making their offer more appealing to urban consumers. Their visibility has further enhanced through participation in major exhibitions and festivals, such as the Hornbill Festival (Nagaland); Women of India Exhibition (Dilli Haat, Delhi); NEDFi Craft Exhibitions (Guwahati); TRIFED Tribal Art & Craft Fairs (Delhi, Mumbai); Aadi Mahotsav - National Tribal Festival (New Delhi); Satrangi Red Fort Festival (New Delhi); World Trade Centre Online Exhibition (Mumbai); 'Weavers and Trends' Exhibition by North East Women Entrepreneurs Society (Guwahati); Rupahee exhibition, Guwahati; and Clearance Sale Of Artisanal Products Of Asomi, NESHILP & NEHHDC' by NEDFi, Guwahati. These events have provided valuable exposure, enabling artisans to connect with national and international buyers.

The experiences of Chizami Weaves and Saneki Weaves how community-led cooperatives can balance tradition and innovation. Both enterprises prioritize the preservation of indigenous weaving techniques while introducing contemporary design elements to appeal to modern markets. Structured training, equitable income distribution, and intergenerational skill transfer form the foundation of their success. The use of exhibitions and national craft fairs has expanded their reach and visibility. For Tripura, where women already hold a central role in weaving traditions, adopting similar cooperative structures supported by targeted skill-development programs, could formalize training, attract younger generations, and ensure continuity of traditional weaving practices while enhancing market competitiveness.

### 5.2. Entrepreneurship and Digital Market Integration

**Case 2: Antaran – A Craft-Based Livelihood program by Tata Trusts**

Launched in 2018 with a focus on transforming traditional artisans into entrepreneurs with the right training, digital tools, and financial support. It trains artisans in design, branding, pricing, digital marketing, and customer engagement. It also provides a platform for creative collaboration of textile and fashion designers alongside traditional artisans, making way for the introduction of new product lines while preserving traditional techniques; financial linkages and funding support, which will enable artisans to scale their enterprise sustainably; and direct market linkages, enabling artisans to eliminate middlemen and earn better profits. The Antaran initiative has transformed artisans like Sudhanshu Mohan Das from Odisha, Dipika Kakati from Assam, and Vekuvolu Dozo from Nagaland into independent entrepreneur-artisans, enabling them to expand product lines, access national markets, and leverage e-commerce platforms.

Antaran demonstrates how comprehensive capacity-building—combining business training, financial linkages, and digital outreach—can elevate artisans from subsistence producers to competitive entrepreneurs. For Tripura, integrating a similar program under the Directorate of Handloom, Handicrafts, and Sericulture could bridge current gaps in branding, tap into e-commerce and entrepreneurial skills, thereby opening new domestic and international markets for tribal artisans.

### 5.3. Market Expansion and Branding

**Case 3: Charlee Mathlena's Success with Heritage Mizoram**

Heritage Mizoram was founded by Charlee Mathlena in 2008 to revive the Mizo loin-loom weaving and indigenous motifs while providing sustainable employment opportunities to artisans across Mizoram. It is found that the initiative - Heritage Mizoram has created employment for home-based women weavers from three adjoining villages and three urban colonies near Aizawl, which provides a flexible work environment allowing them to weave while managing household responsibilities. In terms of marketing the products, Heritage

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Mizoram has diversified sales channels, as the finished products are sold through state emporiums and boutique stores in major Indian metros; national and international exhibitions, fashion events, and craft fairs; and agents and suppliers who export products to New York, Denmark, Singapore, and America, increasing global demand for Mizo textiles and digital marketplaces and social media platforms, harnessing the power of e-commerce to connect directly with buyers. Charlee Mathlena, being an educated tribal entrepreneur, has effectively leveraged online platforms and digital marketing to promote Heritage Mizoram's products, ensuring greater visibility and higher sales. However, the case also highlights bureaucratic hurdles in accessing government schemes, which can deter artisans from scaling their operations.

Heritage Mizoram's approach highlights the importance of combining cultural preservation with modern branding and diversified market channels. Tripura can draw on this model to expand its indigenous craft exports, enhance product visibility, and simplify administrative processes to make government schemes more accessible for artisans.

### 5.4. Community-Based Craft Revival and Tourism

**Case 4: Diezephe Craft Village (Nagaland)**

Diezephe Craft Village is a unique model of community-driven craft revival where almost every household is engaged in traditional wood carving, cane and bamboo work, and loin loom weaving. The village has gained national and international recognition for its excellence in craftsmanship, sustainable livelihoods, and efforts to preserve indigenous craft traditions. Through initiatives like Exotic Echo and the International Loin Loom Festival, the village has empowered over 200 women weavers, working on cotton production, organic dyeing, spinning, weaving, and product designing. The initiative integrates traditional techniques with modern design trends, producing bags, cushion covers, stoles, and table runners. Exotic Echo also established a 'Weaver's Place Homestay', featuring traditional bamboo huts, offering visitors an immersive cultural experience, It is registered with the Nagaland Tourism Board, ensuring sustained tourist engagement without overburdening local resources. From 2012 itself, the Weavers Place Homestay' compound was used to host the International Loin Loom Festival, held annually from 6th to 10th December. The festival brings together weavers from across the world, offering a platform to exchange ideas, showcase craftsmanship, and promote cultural preservation. Diezephe village has been recognized for its exemplary efforts in promoting cultural tourism and craft-based livelihoods, and in 2023, it was awarded the Best Tourism Village (Bronze Category), which reflects the success of combining cultural preservation with livelihood diversification.

Diezephe Craft Village in Nagaland exemplifies how craft revival can be combined with sustainable tourism to create diversified livelihood practices. Tripura's rich craft traditions, combined with its natural and cultural tourism potential, could benefit from similar community-led models that merge handloom and handicrafts with experiential tourism, creating sustainable income sources while strengthening cultural identity.

The case studies of Chizami Weaves (Nagaland), Saneki Weaves (Assam), Antaran (Tata Trusts), Heritage Mizoram, and Diezephe Craft Village (Nagaland) demonstrate that traditional crafts can be successfully revitalized into profitable, sustainable, and globally recognized enterprises through skill development, cooperative models, market linkages, and digital integration.

## 6. POTENTIAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRIBAL YOUTH IN TRIPURA THROUGH REVITALIZATION OF HANDLOOM AND HANDICRAFT

The case studies of Chizami Weaves (Nagaland), Saneki Weaves (Assam), Antaran (Tata Trusts), Heritage Mizoram, and Diezephe Craft Village (Nagaland) highlight practical models for transforming traditional crafts into profitable, sustainable, and globally recognized enterprises. Drawing from these experiences, several strategies emerge for Tripura's tribal youth.

**a) Policy and Financial Enablement**

Access to funding and government schemes is the foundation for scaling artisan-led enterprises. Diezephe's recognition as *Best Tourism Village 2023* underscores the role of government-backed initiatives in accelerating growth. However, as noted by Charlee Mathlena (Heritage Mizoram), complex application procedures discourage artisans from applying for financial assistance. Simplifying access to schemes such as the National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP), Mudra Yojana, Skill Development programs under the Ministry of Textiles, and NABARD's artisan training grants is essential. Outreach campaigns, mentoring, and one-window facilitation centres could bridge the gap between available resources and actual utilisation.

**b) Entrepreneurial Development**

The success of entrepreneurs like Charlee Mathlena, Sudhanshu Mohan Das, Dipika Kakati and Velasuzo Shizo shows that traditional craft knowledge can be transformed into profitable enterprises. Tripura's tribal youth can adopt similar artisan-led enterprise models, supported with tools, raw materials, and design mentorship to ensure high-quality, marketable products. Establishing structured cooperatives or producer companies would allow collective bargaining, fair wage systems, and leadership opportunities for young artisans.

**c) Digital Integration and E-Commerce**

Digital commerce can bridge the rural–urban market gap and expand global outreach. Antaran's *Artisan Connect* and Dipika Kakati's revival during the pandemic demonstrate the power of online sales. Tripura's artisans should be trained to use platforms such as Amazon Karigar**,** Flipkart Samarth**,** Tribes India**,** Instagram, Facebook Marketplace, and Etsy. A game-changer could be the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC)—an interoperable government-backed platform that allows artisans to list products once and sell across multiple marketplaces, with integrated payments and logistics. Skill-building in product photography, branding, and customer engagement, paired with an "E-Commerce for Tribal Artisans"

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program, would enable artisans to compete in both national and global markets.

**d) Market Linkages and Cultural Tourism**
National and international exhibitions have been instrumental in expanding the reach of Chizami Weaves and Heritage Mizoram. Providing financial support for participation in craft fairs, government-led export initiatives, and buyer–seller meets can improve visibility and earnings. The craft village model**,** as seen in Diezephe, offers dual benefits—sustaining traditional crafts while attracting tourism revenue. Tripura can establish craft villages focused on tribal weaving and bamboo crafts, offering live demonstrations, homestays, and annual cultural festivals to enhance visitor engagement and artisan incomes.

**e) Inclusive Home-Based Production**
Heritage Mizoram's home-based weaving model has proven effective for increasing rural women's participation while balancing household duties. Adopting similar models in Tripura would expand workforce participation without requiring artisans to relocate, increasing production capacity while maintaining community stability.

**f) Design Innovation and Collaborations**
Collaborations with fashion institutes and professional designers, as undertaken by Chizami Weaves, Saneki Weaves, and Heritage Mizoram, can modernise traditional products, adding home décor, accessories, and corporate gifting lines to appeal to new markets. Government-funded workshops and joint projects with design schools can introduce contemporary aesthetics while preserving heritage techniques.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The tribal communities of Tripura have a long-standing tradition of bamboo crafts and loin-loom weaving, skills that have been meticulously passed down through generations. These traditionally woven textiles and bamboo crafts have a deep cultural and ritualistic significance, playing a vital role in rites of passage, festivals, and ceremonies. Beyond their cultural and symbolic importance, these crafts also represent a vital economic activity and serve as a marker of identity and heritage for the indigenous communities. Revitalizing Tripura's tribal handloom and handicraft sector, therefore, offers immense potential for sustainable livelihood generation among tribal youth, while safeguarding cultural heritage and identity.

Lessons drawn from successful initiatives such as Chizami Weaves (Nagaland), Saneki Weaves (Assam), Antaran (Tata Trusts), Heritage Mizoram, and Diezephe Craft Village (Nagaland) demonstrate that traditional crafts can be transformed into profitable, sustainable, and globally recognized enterprises when supported by entrepreneurial strategies, digital market integration, cooperative business models, and enabling policy frameworks.

With targeted policy interventions, youth engagement, and adoption of modern business practices, Tripura's handloom sector can evolve into a self-sustaining industry that uplifts artisans, strengthens the state's economy, and preserves indigenous traditions. Strategic investments in digital innovation, entrepreneurship, and market expansion will equip tribal youth with the skills and opportunities to transform their ancestral craft into a thriving profession. The roadmap for revitalisation is clear, and with collective efforts from artisans, policymakers, and industry leaders, Tripura's handloom and handicraft industry can flourish for generations to come.

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