



Beyond the Needle: Embroidering Empowerment and Sustainable Women-led Entrepreneurship through Chikankari in Rural West Bengal

Sri Prasenjit Pal^{1*}, Dr. Rupam Mukherjee² Dr. Golam Mostafa³

^{1*}Assistant Professor in Geography, Kabi Sukanta Mahavidyalaya, Hooghly, WB Email: prasenjit@ksmv.ac.in

² Assistant Professor in Economics, Kabi Sukanta Mahavidyalaya, Hooghly, WB Email: rupam@ksmv.ac.in

³Assistant Professor in Geography, Kabi Sukanta Mahavidyalaya, Hooghly, WB Email: golam@ksmv.ac.in

Citation: Sri Prasenjit Pal, et.al (2024). Beyond the Needle: Embroidering Empowerment and Sustainable Women-led Entrepreneurship through Chikankari in Rural West Bengal, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1) 6994-7004
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.10215

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The traditional art of chikankari embroidery has long been a source of both cultural pride and livelihood for many women in rural India. This study focuses on female artisans in the villages of Babnan and Sarap in West Bengal's Hooghly district, examining how this craft functions as a potential path toward sustainable income and women-led entrepreneurship. Drawing on primary data from 78 women weavers and 24 wholesalers, the research evaluates whether chikankari can be a viable economic activity for rural women and identifies the challenges that threaten its continuity. Using a Binary Logistic Regression model, the study finds that women with greater educational attainment, older age, and stronger family support are more likely to view chikankari as a sustainable means of livelihood. In parallel, the Garrett Ranking Method identifies low wages, dependency on intermediaries, and limited access to working capital as key barriers. Other significant issues include physical fatigue, mental strain, and lack of market knowledge. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions, including skill development, improved access to credit, and stronger cooperative structures. Preserving this delicate craft while fostering inclusive economic growth requires policies that directly support women-led microenterprises in rural Bengal.

Keywords: Chikankari, Women Empowerment, Sustainable Livelihood, Rural Artisans, MSME

1. Introduction

Chikankari, celebrated for its exquisite delicacy and timeless elegance, is a form of hand embroidery that mirrors the depth of India's artistic heritage. Traditionally attributed to Noor Jahan, the Mughal empress who is believed to have introduced it from Persia in the 17th century, some scholars trace its origin further back to East Bengal, where the term 'chikan' denoted intricate, refined handiwork. Once practiced on soft 'mulmul' muslin, chikankari has gracefully adapted over time, now embellishing silk, chiffon, and georgette to cater to evolving market preferences.

Though Lucknow is considered the cultural epicenter of chikankari, this craft has quietly taken root in the villages of West Bengal—particularly in Babnan and Sarap of Hooghly district—where a small but resilient community of women artisans uphold this delicate tradition. For them, chikankari is not merely decorative needlework; it is a source of income, empowerment, and identity.

However, despite its cultural significance and livelihood potential, the sector remains beset by numerous challenges—low wages, exploitative intermediaries, inadequate access to credit, and limited exposure to design innovation and contemporary markets. These hardships were further magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted supply chains and sharply reduced demand.

Against this backdrop, the present study explores whether chikankari can serve as a sustainable and dignified livelihood for women artisans in rural West Bengal. It seeks to understand the socio-economic factors that influence their continued engagement and to identify both opportunities and barriers shaping their experience within this fragile craft ecosystem.

Beyond its aesthetic value, chikankari serves as a quiet yet powerful agent of change. It fosters financial independence for women, strengthens their voice within the household, and challenges entrenched patriarchal norms. As women earn, they reinvest in their children's education and health, driving broader social development and contributing to the intergenerational cycle of empowerment.

This study therefore assumes both cultural and developmental relevance. By highlighting the lived realities of chikankari artisans and offering policy recommendations, it advocates for the protection of a heritage craft that not only preserves India's artistic legacy but also holds the promise of inclusive economic growth. Supporting these women means nurturing human potential, fostering gender equity, and safeguarding livelihoods rooted in patience, precision, and perseverance.

The paper unfolds across six coherent sections. Section I sets the stage by presenting the study's context, rationale, and research questions. Section II reviews pertinent literature, clearly identifying the existing research gap. Section III outlines the specific objectives that drive the inquiry. Section IV outlines the data source, sampling framework, and econometric model employed. Section V presents analytical insights derived from the findings. Section VI culminates with actionable policy recommendations that bridge evidence with implementation.

2. Review of Literature and Research Gap:

Although popularly associated with Lucknow, the historical presence and cultural significance of Chikankari in the lower Gangetic Bengal region, particularly in areas such as Babnan, remain underexplored. Despite the region's deep-rooted heritage of textile craftsmanship, scholarly engagement with its embroidered legacy, particularly Chikankari, is surprisingly limited.

Archival records, such as the Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly (1912) and the Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. IV (1876) details the prominence of Bengal's handicraft weaving sector, which was once a thriving economic pillar prior to Partition. Earlier documents like the Bengal District Records (1770–74) and the Revenue Records Proceedings (1859–64) shed light on the socio-economic vibrancy of this industry, showcasing the craftsmanship that drew admiration from royal patrons and British officials alike. Further evidence from Annals of Rural Bengal (1868) and Hugli Jelar Itihas O Bangasamaj underscores the artistic and economic value attached to handwoven and embroidered textiles. Yet, despite this rich documentation, Chikankari itself is largely absent from these narratives, pointing to a crucial lacuna in both historical and contemporary research.

Los (n.d.) traced the evolution of Chikankari over two centuries, documenting its transition from delicate white-on-white embroidery on muslin to more colourful, diverse expressions across fabrics. Bibhudutta Baral (n.d.) offered detailed insights into the materials, tools, and stitches that define the craft's finesse. From a sustainability perspective, S. Pandey et al. (2023) explored innovative reuse of Chikankari waste fabric to create eco-conscious lifestyle accessories, demonstrating the adaptability of the craft in the context of sustainable design.

R. Pandey (2018) examined the trajectory of Chikankari from a heritage craft to one embraced by the masses. This transition, while expanding market reach, has posed risks to the authenticity and quality of the craft. Gangopadhyay et al. (2015) addressed the intense mental fatigue experienced by Chikan artisans in West Bengal, drawing attention to the repetitive cognitive demands of embroidery work. Similarly, Dev (2014) highlighted the physical health toll on female artisans, particularly the prevalence of lower back pain due to prolonged, ergonomically poor work practices.

Despite these valuable contributions, notable research gaps persist. The post-pandemic economic realities of Chikankari artisans in West Bengal remain largely unexamined. The COVID-19 crisis disrupted supply chains, reduced tourism, and shut down local markets, leaving artisans with diminished income opportunities and heightened vulnerability. The influx of cheaper, machine-made alternatives has further strained the sector, yet little empirical research has probed these economic shocks or proposed recovery strategies.

Moreover, limited attention has been given to how demographic and socio-economic factors, such as age, education, caste, or family background, influence artisans' decisions to pursue Chikankari as a livelihood. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for assessing the craft's intergenerational continuity and resilience.

Most crucially, the intersection of Chikankari and women's empowerment remains significantly under-researched. Primarily practiced by women, this art form holds potential for advancing financial independence, enhancing household decision-making, and improving social status. However, existing literature offers scant empirical insight into whether and how such empowerment is being realised through Chikankari practice.

3. Objectives:

The key objectives of the study are to:

- Examine how demographic and socioeconomic factors—such as age, education, household income, and family background—influence artisans' perception of Chikankari as a viable and sustainable livelihood option.
- Explore whether women's engagement in Chikankari arises from opportunity-led choices or is compelled by economic distress and lack of alternatives.

- Identify and rank the key challenges faced by female artisans, with a special focus on those exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as disrupted markets, loss of income, and restricted access to raw materials.
- Assess the degree to which women's participation in this craft empowers them within the family, particularly in decision-making roles, financial autonomy, and social recognition.
- Formulate meaningful policy recommendations to revitalize the Chikankari sector post-pandemic, leveraging its cultural richness and potential for inclusive growth.

Together, these objectives aim to offer a holistic understanding of the present realities and prospects of Chikankari, contributing to informed policy design and sustainable artisan livelihood strategies.

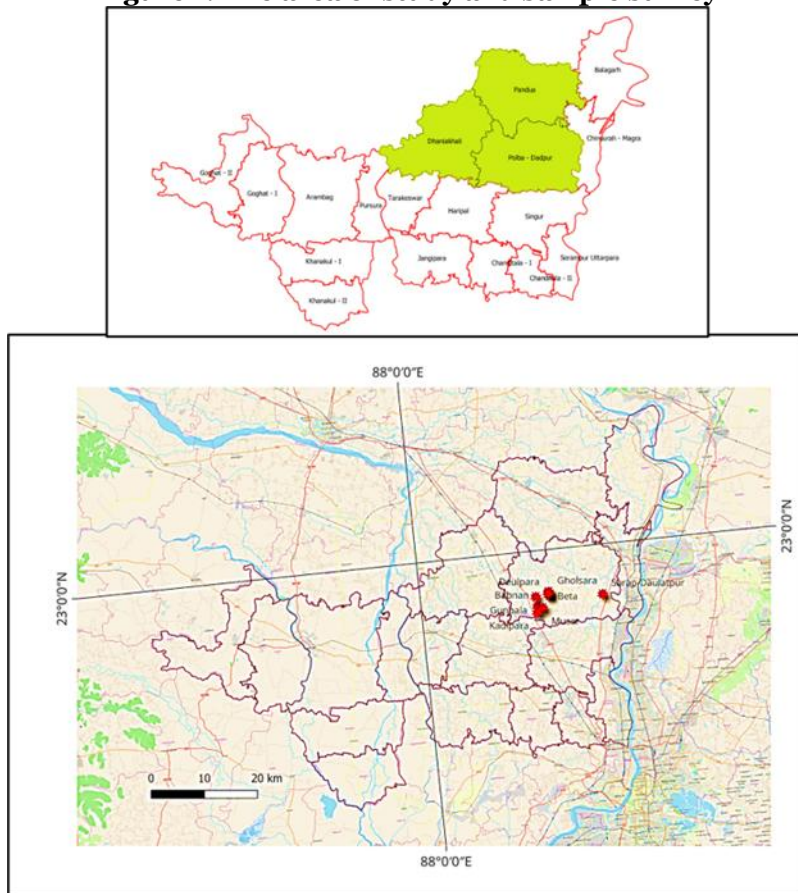
4. Data and Methodology:

This study is grounded in rich primary data, meticulously collected through field surveys in select artisan-dense villages of West Bengal, renowned for their intricate Chikan embroidery craft in January 2024.

• Study Area

The research was conducted in two villages of Hooghly district: Babnan in Dhaniyakhali block and Sarap in Polba-Dadpur block. These villages are home to numerous female weavers whose livelihoods revolve around the delicate and culturally embedded tradition of Chikankari, reflecting a blend of heritage, resilience, and economic dependence.

Figure 1: The area of study and sample survey



Source: Prepared by the author

• Sampling Design

Given the clustered and close-knit nature of the artisan communities, a snowball sampling method was adopted to identify and reach diverse groups of female weavers:

- Independent Weavers**, who manage the entire production and sales cycle themselves;
 - Master Weavers**, who coordinate production by employing others and selling finished goods to wholesalers.
 - Casual Workers**, who engage in support activities like dyeing, washing, and packaging for fixed wages.
- Additionally, interviews were conducted with several local wholesalers to gain an understanding of market dynamics and distribution challenges.

• Respondent Profile

The study interviewed 78 women weavers and 34 wholesalers, offering a comprehensive and ground-level understanding of the Chikankari ecosystem.

• Data Collection Method

Data were gathered through direct personal interviews using a pre-tested, semi-structured questionnaire that combined both open- and closed-ended questions. Focus group discussions were also conducted to gauge the effectiveness and outreach of government schemes supporting the craft sector.

• Analytical Framework

The analysis involves both descriptive and econometric methods. Descriptive tools, such as charts and graphs, visually represent key trends and patterns. For inferential insights, a Binary Logistic Regression model was applied using the Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) technique. This model assesses the probability that an artisan perceives Chikan embroidery as a sustainable livelihood, based on a set of demographic and socioeconomic variables.

The model follows the specification:

$$Y_i = \log(p / 1 - p) = \alpha + \beta_1 X_{1i} + \beta_2 X_{2i} + \beta_3 X_{3i} + \beta_4 X_{4i} + \beta_5 X_{5i} + u_i$$

Where:

$Y_i = 1$ if the i -th artisan views Chikankari as a sustainable livelihood, 0 otherwise.

X_i = Explanatory variables (demographic and socioeconomic characteristics).

α = Intercept, β_s = Coefficients, u_i = Error term assumed to follow a normal distribution.

p = Probability of the occurrence of the event (i.e., the craftsman views chikan embroidery as a viable source of livelihood).

$(p / 1-p)$ is called the odds ratio, where $p = (e^{\alpha + \sum \beta_i X_{ji}}) / (1 + e^{\alpha + \sum \beta_i X_{ji}})$

$i = 1, 2, 3, \dots, 78$ & $j = 1, 2, 3, \dots, 5$

$\beta_1, \beta_2, \dots, \beta_5$ are the coefficients of the eight explanatory variables (X_j s) considered in the study.

The model is chosen because the response variable is binary. It captures the odds of an artisan affirming the sustainability of Chikan embroidery as a means of livelihood.

Table 1 explains the exploratory variables used in the study concerning the respondents.

Table 1: Summary of the explanatory variables considered in the study

Name of the variable	Type	Notation	Measurement
Household Size	Discrete	X_1	The number of members in the family
Education Level	Continuous	X_2	Years of schooling
Age	Continuous	X_3	Years
Income	Continuous	X_4	Rs per month
Family Support	Dummy	X_5	1 = if Yes, 0 = otherwise

Source: Author's Plan

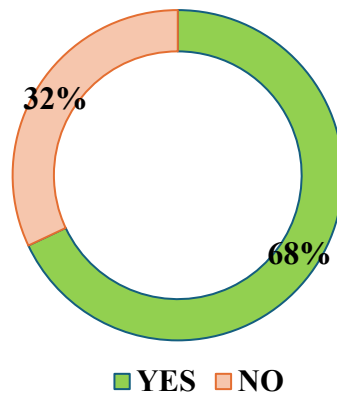
In addition, this research has employed the Garrett Ranking method (1969), a venerable technique used to discern and rank the myriad challenges confronting these resilient women weavers in their noble endeavor to sustain the chikankari business for their livelihood.

5. Results and Discussions:

A. Descriptive Statistics

Data analysis reveals that 68% of the female respondents view the Chikan embroidery business as a sustainable means of living, as shown in Figure 2.

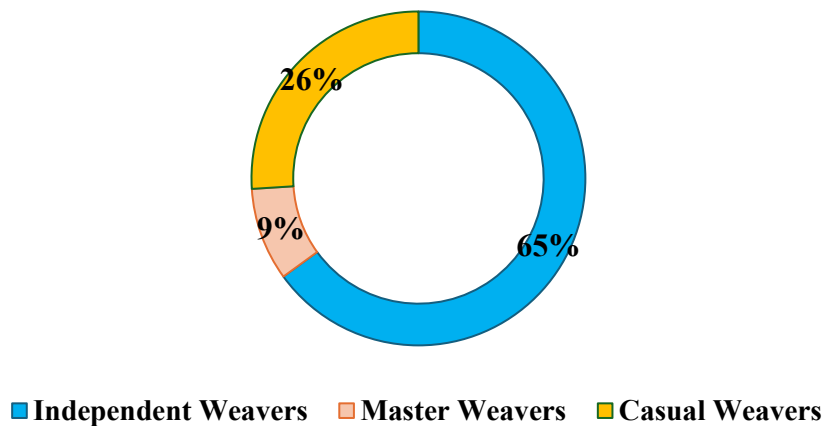
Figure 2: Women weavers who view chikankary embroidery business as a sustainable way of living



Source: Author's calculation based on Survey 2024

Among them, as shown in Figure 3, 65% are independent weavers, 26% are casual workers, and 9% are master weavers. The average household size is approximately 5.6 members. Notably, 63% of respondents under 50 years old consider Chikan embroidery sustainable. Educationally, 79% have only completed primary school.

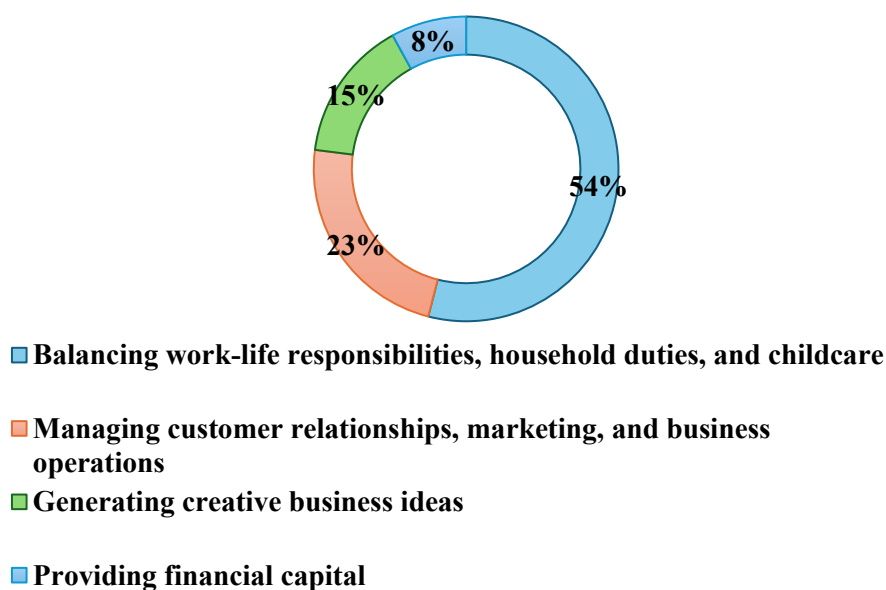
Figure 3: Among women weavers who view chikankary embroidery business as a sustainable way of living



Source: Author's calculation based on Survey 2024

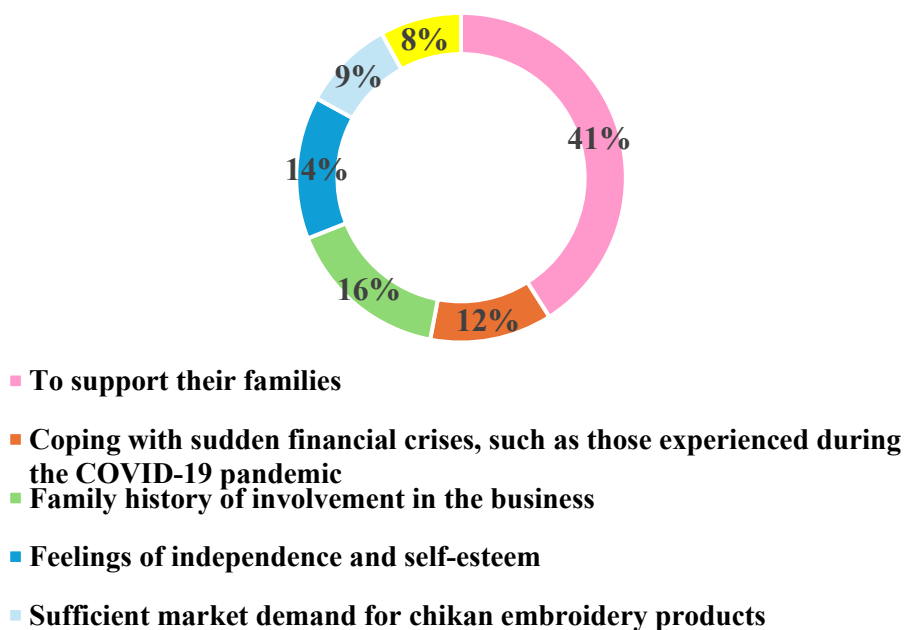
Income patterns show that 66% of respondents earn between Rs 15,000 to 20,000 per month during festive seasons due to high demand, but otherwise, their income is low, barely sufficient to meet basic needs. Outside festive periods, occasional large orders from master weavers boost their earnings.

Support from spouses is crucial for 76% of the weavers who view the profession as sustainable. Spousal support primarily helps in balancing work-life responsibilities, household duties, and childcare (54%). Additional support includes managing customer relationships, marketing, and business operations (23%), generating creative business ideas (15%), and providing financial capital (8%). This is shown in Figure 4

Figure 4 : Spousal support for women weavers

Source: Author's calculation based on Survey 2024

When asked about the crucial factors influencing their participation in weaving activities, the women weavers revealed that most reasons are driven by push factors rather than pull factors. Figure 5 demonstrates the case. Among the push factors, the most significant is the need to support their families (41%), followed by coping with sudden financial crises, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (12%). Conversely, the pull factors include a family history of involvement in the business (16%), feelings of independence and self-esteem (14%), sufficient market demand for chikan embroidery products (9%), and a desire to earn more income (8%). These insights highlight that while necessity often drives these women to weave, elements of tradition, personal growth, and market viability also play pivotal roles in sustaining their engagement in this intricate craft. Thus, the development of this sector holds immense potential to enhance women's empowerment in rural areas.

Figure 5 : Crucial factors influencing women participation in weaving activities

Source: Author's calculation based on Survey 2024

A few independent weavers revealed that to sustain their weaving activities, they often seek loans from local cooperative and commercial banks, which offer relatively low interest rates. However, due to a widespread lack of financial literacy and awareness in the study area, most weavers turn to moneylenders or master weavers for loans, despite the higher interest rates they charge. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some weavers even resorted to various non-institutional sources for borrowing, mortgaging their financial assets to support their families amidst the crisis.

B. Stitching Empowerment: How Female Participation in Chikankari Embroidery Elevates Their Role in Family Decision-Making

The study reveals a transformative impact of weaving on the socio-economic dynamics within families, especially concerning the role of women. A notable 72% of women weavers reported that their participation in income-generating activities has significantly enhanced their involvement in family decision-making. This increased involvement is particularly evident in areas such as savings and potential investments for future returns. By earning alongside their spouses, these women have carved out a space for themselves in financial deliberations, which were traditionally dominated by their male counterparts. This empowerment through financial contribution marks a significant shift towards gender parity within the household.

Furthermore, 63% of the women weavers indicated that their earning capacity has granted them substantial control over family expenditures. This control extends to critical areas such as their children's health and education, which are fundamental aspects of family welfare and future prosperity. By managing these expenditures, women not only ensure better outcomes for their children but also assert their role as key decision-makers in domains that directly affect the family's quality of life.

This shift in decision-making dynamics is a potent indicator of changing gender roles in traditionally patriarchal societies. The financial independence gained through weaving has empowered women to step beyond their conventional roles confined to domestic duties. By contributing to the household income, women are challenging the long-standing norms that have restricted their participation in broader economic and social decision-making processes.

The enhanced decision-making role of women in family matters underscores a broader movement towards gender equality. This transformation is not merely an adjustment in economic terms but signifies a deeper social change. The empowerment of women in these communities catalyzes social progress, fostering a more inclusive environment where gender does not dictate one's ability to influence key aspects of family and community life.

As women gain control over financial resources and family decisions, they are also likely to influence the next generation's attitudes towards gender roles. This change can perpetuate a cycle of empowerment, where young girls grow up witnessing their mothers as active participants in both economic and decision-making processes. This visibility is crucial in shifting societal norms and expectations, leading to a more egalitarian and just community.

Moreover, the economic empowerment of women through weaving contributes to the overall economic health of the community. Women's earnings often lead to better household resource management and investments in areas that promote long-term growth, such as education and healthcare. This dual impact of enhancing family welfare and promoting economic stability underscores the multifaceted benefits of women's economic participation.

In conclusion, the study highlights a critical link between women's participation in weaving and their enhanced role in family decision-making. This empowerment is driving a significant shift towards gender equality, fostering social progress, and contributing to a more inclusive society. As women continue to assert their economic and decision-making roles, the ripple effects of this transformation are likely to inspire broader changes in societal structures, paving the way for a future where gender equality is not just an ideal but a lived reality.

C. Major Findings of the Econometric Model

Before estimating the coefficients of the regression equation by binary logistic regression model, the problem of multicollinearity among the independent variables is checked by the value of the "Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance ($1/VIF$)", as shown in Table 2. The Mean value of the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) among the five independent variables chosen for the study is 1.08, indicating no multicollinearity issues.

Table 2: Values of VIF & Tolerance

Name of the variable	VIF	1/VIF
Household Size	1.05	0.9505
Education Level	1.13	0.8833
Age	1.06	0.9473
Income	1.05	0.9501
Family Support	1.10	0.9098
Mean VIF = 1.08		
Source: Author's Survey		

Table 3 displays that the Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square value is significant at the 1% level, and the Hosmer-Lemeshow Chi-Square test statistic is insignificant. These results confirm that the model is a good fit. Moreover, the pseudo R-squared value is 0.46. To highlight the model as a reasonably good classifier, the sensitivity is 88%, the specificity is 79%, and the overall accuracy is 86%. Sensitivity indicates the probability that the model predicts a positive outcome for an observation when, in fact, the outcome is positive. On the other hand, specificity denotes the probability that the model predicts a negative outcome for an observation when, in fact, the outcome is negative.

Table 3: Goodness of Fit Test

Likelihood Ratio Test	
Likelihood Ratio chi-square (5) = 19.65	Log Likelihood = - 14.5869
prob> chi-square = 0.0015	Pseudo R Square = 0.4625
Hosmer-Lemeshow Test	
Hosmer-Lemeshow chi-square = 4.23	prob>chi-square = 0.8353

Source: Author's calculation based on survey data

Tables 4 and 5, respectively, provide summaries of the estimated coefficients of the independent variables in the binary logistic regression model and the marginal effects.

Table 4: Results of the Logistic Regression Model

Independent Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	Z value	Odds Ratio
Household Size	-0.314	0.237	-1.32	0.730
Education Level	1.514	0.745	2.03**	1.3
Age	0.091	0.050	1.79*	1.09
Income	0.197	0.593	0.33	1.21
Family Support	2.94	1.118	2.48***	19.01
Source: Author's calculation by using STATA				

Note: *denotes that the result is significant at 10% level, **denotes the result is significant at 5% level & ***denotes the result is significant at 1% level

Table 5: Marginal Effects after Logistic

Y = Pr (Is weaver aspiring for entrepreneurship?) (predict) = 0.7616			
Variables	dy/dx	Std. Error	Z value
Household Size	0.057	0.039	1.53
Education Level	0.275	0.137	2.01**
Age	0.016	0.008	1.78*
Income	0.035	0.107	0.33
Family Support	0.561	0.180	3.11***
(*) dy/dx is for discrete change of dummy variables from 0 to 1			
Source: Author's calculation using STATA			

Among the five explanatory variables chosen for this study, three stand out as statistically significant in explaining women weavers' perception of chikan embroidery as a sustainable livelihood: their education level, age, and the family support they receive.

The findings indicate a direct correlation between the educational attainment of female artisans and the likelihood of their perception of chikan embroidery as a sustainable livelihood. Specifically, the odds of viewing this craft as a viable long-term profession is 1.3 times more for educated weavers compared to their less educated counterparts. Marginal effect shows that a one-year increase in schooling boosts this perception by 27%, assuming other factors remain constant at their mean value. These results are significant at 5% level. Education motivates artisans' views on the sustainability of their craft in several ways. Firstly, higher education levels equip artisans with better business acumen, enabling them to negotiate effectively with financial institutions for loans and to engage with customers across various market platforms. This financial and commercial savvy fosters confidence in pursuing chikan embroidery as a sustainable livelihood. Secondly, education enhances the artisans' ability to invest wisely in their craft, leading to improved product quality. Higher-quality goods can command better market prices, increasing sales and income, and reinforcing the artisans' commitment to this vocation as a sustainable career path.

The likelihood of the perception of chikan embroidery as a sustainable livelihood among female weavers increases with age. Specifically, odds of perceiving this craft as a viable long-term profession older weavers are 1.09 times more compared to younger weavers. Marginal effect shows that a one-year increase in age enhances this perception by 1.6%, assuming other factors are constant at their mean value, with results significant at the

10% level. The economic intuition behind this trend may be that older artisans develop a deeper emotional attachment to their craft over time. With limited skills and education to pursue alternative careers, they are more inclined to continue in this field. Their extensive experience, market knowledge, and established relationships with suppliers and clients further solidify their view of chikan embroidery as a sustainable livelihood. These factors collectively encourage older weavers to start and maintain small businesses within this traditional craft.

The perception of chikan embroidery as a sustainable livelihood among female weavers is significantly enhanced by good family support, particularly from their spouses. The odds of viewing this craft as a viable long-term profession for weavers with strong family backing are 19 times more compared to those without such support. A supportive family environment increases this perception by 56%, assuming other variables remain constant at their mean value, with results significant at the 1% level. Family support is critical for female artisans, who often juggle household chores and caregiving responsibilities. This support alleviates their domestic burden, allowing them to focus more on their craft. Additionally, families can provide essential financial resources and business insights, further stabilizing the weavers' professional endeavours. Consequently, women with robust familial support are more likely to sustain and thrive in chikan embroidery as a long-term livelihood.

D. Result of the Garret Ranking Method

The study delves into the primary challenges faced by female chikan weavers, utilizing the Garret Ranking method to prioritize these issues. Table 6 explains the case.

Table 6: The relative importance of various challenges that weavers and traders face in the chikankary embroidery sector

Factors	Average Garrett Score	Rank
Intermediaries appropriate most of the earnings from final product sales	64.1219	2
Low wages for weavers	67.5495	1
Stiff competition from cheaper machine-made products	48.9674	9
Lack of skillsets among the current generation of weavers	52.3170	7
Decline of cooperative societies	50.4065	8
Inability to obtain operating capital and raw materials due to poor income	63.8048	3
Lack of marketing knowledge and skills	59.5203	4
Insufficient access to formal sources of credit	43.1544	10
Lack of trendy variety of products	41.8617	11
Low productivity	40.5609	12
New generations are hesitant to embrace weaving as their primary vocation	57.4065	5
Various physical and mental health issues arising from prolonged weaving	55.3983	6

Source: Author's Calculation based on Survey Data

The landscape of traditional weaving is marred by a confluence of challenges that have profound implications for the artisans dedicated to this intricate craft. Foremost among these is the issue of low wages, a particularly harsh reality for those employed under master weavers or as casual labourers. Despite the intricate skill and labour-intensive nature of their work, these weavers often receive remuneration that barely sustains their daily needs. This disparity underscores a larger systemic issue within the weaving industry, where the artisans at the heart of the craft are undervalued and undercompensated.

Compounding this wage issue is the reliance on intermediaries, a pervasive problem that significantly diminishes the weavers' earnings. These middlemen dominate the supply chain, capturing a substantial portion of the profits that rightfully belong to the weavers. This reliance stems from the artisans' inability to directly access the market, which is often due to a lack of resources, knowledge, and infrastructure. Consequently, the weavers are left with only a fraction of the value generated from their labour, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and dependency.

Independent weavers, striving to carve out a sustainable livelihood, face their own set of formidable hurdles. Chief among these is the struggle to secure operating capital and raw materials, a predicament rooted in their precarious financial situation. The low income of these artisans severely restricts their ability to invest in their businesses, hampering growth and innovation. This financial strain is exacerbated by their limited access to formal credit sources, as traditional financial institutions often view them as high-risk borrowers.

Moreover, the weavers' lack of marketing knowledge and skills poses a significant barrier to business promotion and expansion. Without the ability to effectively market their products, these artisans are unable to reach broader audiences or command higher prices for their work. This deficiency is further amplified by the

intense competition from cheaper, machine-made products that flood the market, eroding the demand for handcrafted goods.

The decline of cooperative societies, once a cornerstone of the weaving community, has also contributed to the industry's challenges. These societies, which historically provided support, resources, and a collective bargaining platform for weavers, have diminished in influence and number. Their decline has left many weavers without a critical support system, further isolating them in an already competitive and challenging market.

A significant technological gap exacerbates these issues. Many weavers are not proficient in using computer-generated designs, which are essential for enhancing productivity and staying competitive in a modern market. This technical deficiency not only lowers productivity but also limits the ability to innovate and produce trendy, appealing designs that attract contemporary consumers.

Additionally, the physical and mental toll of weaving cannot be understated. The repetitive, labour-intensive nature of the work often leads to various health issues, from musculoskeletal problems to chronic stress. These health challenges further diminish the weavers' capacity to work efficiently and consistently, perpetuating a cycle of hardship.

Generational dynamics add another layer of complexity to the situation. Younger individuals are increasingly reluctant to enter the weaving profession, perceiving it as an unviable career option in the face of modern employment opportunities. This reluctance results in a noticeable gap in skillsets among the current generation of weavers, threatening the continuity and evolution of the craft. The lack of adequate skill transfer and insufficient formal training programs only deepens this gap, risking the loss of invaluable traditional knowledge.

E. Wholesaler Insights: Current Trends in the Chikan Embroidery Market

Wholesalers in the chikan embroidery business are acutely aware of the market's vast potential, yet they observe a troubling decline driven by multiple factors. Despite the rich cultural heritage and global appeal of chikan embroidery, these wholesalers struggle with a lack of government support, the inadequate integration of modern technology for new product designs, and the migration of the younger generation to urban centers in search of better livelihoods. This migration not only drains the local talent pool but also signals a shift in priorities among the younger demographic, who see more sustainable and lucrative futures outside the traditional crafts sector.

Although the central government has initiated schemes to protect and revive this traditional craft, there is a significant lack of awareness among weavers about the benefits available to them. This information gap means that many artisans miss out on crucial support that could help them modernize their practices, improve their financial stability, and sustain their cultural heritage. The absence of effective dissemination of information about these schemes further exacerbates the industry's challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic dealt a severe blow to the chikan embroidery business, mirroring the widespread economic disruptions seen globally. On the supply side, pandemic-induced lockdowns caused significant uncertainty in the availability of inputs, leading to supply chain disruptions and increased input costs. This not only made it difficult for weavers to source the necessary materials but also drove up the costs of those materials, squeezing already thin profit margins.

On the demand side, reduced incomes and economic instability led to a sharp drop in market demand for chikan products. Consumers, facing their own financial hardships, cut back on discretionary spending, which directly impacted the sales of these traditionally handcrafted items. While the market is slowly recovering in the post-pandemic period, it has yet to reach the robust activity levels seen before the pandemic. The slow recovery underscores the need for targeted interventions to rejuvenate both supply and demand.

Wholesalers face two major challenges in selling their products. The introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) has complicated their financial management. Many wholesalers lack the accounting expertise to navigate the complexities of GST regulations, which has inadvertently reduced their profit margins. This financial strain is compounded by the lack of information and the necessary procedures to secure stalls at trade fairs, which are crucial for expanding their sales opportunities and reaching new markets.

In response to these challenges, wholesalers propose several measures to support the chikan embroidery sector. One key suggestion is the implementation of direct cash transfers to weavers' bank accounts. This would enable weavers to purchase inputs more easily and maintain a steady flow of production. Such financial support could help mitigate the impacts of fluctuating input costs and supply chain disruptions.

Interestingly, wholesalers have observed that the West Bengal government's 'Lakshmir Bhandar' scheme, which provides financial assistance to economically weaker women, has had a mixed impact on the weavers' dependence on this profession. While the scheme ensures a fixed monthly income, it has somewhat reduced the urgency for weavers to rely solely on their craft for livelihood. This financial safety net allows them to explore other opportunities, but it also raises concerns about the potential decline in traditional craftsmanship as fewer people feel the need to engage in it full-time.

6. Conclusion:

Chikan embroidery stands at the intersection of cultural heritage and economic sustenance, particularly for women artisans. This study highlights that the revival and resilience of this craft depend not only on preserving tradition but also on innovating livelihoods through a strategic blend of skill development, market integration, institutional support, and policy alignment.

Job-specific training must extend beyond craft to encompass financial literacy and digital fluency, enabling artisans to navigate an increasingly complex marketplace. Facilitating access to trade fairs and e-commerce platforms can transform local creativity into a global opportunity. Simultaneously, awareness and uptake of government schemes, currently underutilized, must be actively promoted through grassroots outreach.

Reinvigorating cooperative societies and self-help groups can instill a culture of mutual trust, shared risk, and collective progress. Affordable access to raw materials and working capital will further reduce vulnerabilities and stabilize earnings.

Yet, challenges remain—implementation hurdles, coordination issues, and market uncertainties. Future research must assess the long-term efficacy of interventions and explore digital innovations, gender equity, and policy bottlenecks.

Ultimately, empowering chikan weavers is not merely a developmental imperative—it is a cultural investment and a step toward inclusive growth, where tradition meets transformation, and artistry leads to autonomy.

References:

1. Dev, S. (2014). Evaluation of Low Back Pain among Female Chikan Embroidery Workers of West Bengal. 1(1), 2–12.
2. Gangopadhyay, S., Chakrabarty, S., & Banerjee, S. (2015). Assessment of Mental Fatigue among Chikan Embroidery Workers of West Bengal. 1, 332–340. <http://inet.vidyasagar.ac.in:8080/jspui/handle/123456789/202>
3. Govt. of Bengal (1859-64), Revenue Records Proceedings, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta.
4. Govt. of Bengal (1926), Bengal District Records 1770-74, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta.
5. Hunter, W.W. (1876), A Statistical Account of Bengal, vol.-IV, Trubner and Co., London.
6. Hunter, W.W., (1868, Reprint in 1996), Annals of Rural Bengal, Smith Elder and Co, London: Reprinted by Government of West Bengal, Calcutta.
7. Kundu, J. (ed) (2003), Hugli Jela: Sahitya O Sanskriti (in Bengali), Sahitya-Setu Prokasoni, Hugli.
8. Kundu, J. (ed) (2003), Hugli Jela: Sahitya O Sanskriti (in Bengali), Sahitya-Setu Prokasoni, Hugli.
9. Los, U. M. D. E. C. D. E. (n.d.). CHIKANKARI.
10. Mitra, S.K. (1948), Hugli Jela Itihas O Bangasamaj (in Bengali), Mitrani Prokason, Calcutta.
11. O'Malley, L.S.S. and Chakraborty, M. (1912), Bengal District Gazetteers, Hooghly, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta.
12. Pandey, R. (2018). Chikankari- The Craft of Nawabi Shaan. 5(8), 42–45.
13. Pandey, S., Khandelwal, K., Design, M. O. F., & Departemnt, D. (2023). A STUDY OF SUSTAINABLE CHIKANKARI CRAFT AND THROUGH CHIKANKARI. 11(3), 137–150.
14. Baral B., M. J. A. W. and M. A. K. (n.d.). Chikankari Embroidery of Lucknow II The Craft of Floral Embroidery. 1–25.