

The Changing Rakhain Community of Bangladesh: A Perspective of Balancing Traditions and Technologies in Safeguarding Weaving Industry

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article history:</i> <i>Date of Submission:</i> 10-11-2024 <i>Date of Acceptance:</i> 09-03-2025 <i>Date of Publication:</i> 24-03-2026</p> <hr/> <p><i>Keywords</i> <i>Indigenous-community, Rakhains, Weaving, Technology, Tradition, Bangladesh</i></p>	<p><i>The indigenous Rakhain community living in Bangladesh is renowned for their outstanding skills in manufacturing high-quality textiles. This community, who crossed the turbulent Bay of Bengal several hundred years ago to save their lives from a tyrant dynasty, had a long tradition of textiles craftsmanship in their ancestral homeland. Rakhain artisans initiated textile production in Bangladesh to cater to the demand within the community, and as time went on, many Bengalis grew interested in their phenomenal handwoven items. This study delves into the underlying causes of the deteriorating state of handloom artisanship in Rakhain enclaves and how handwoven fabrics continue to be appealing in contrast to modern fabrics. Using purposive sampling and a semi-structured approach, this study has taken face-to-face interviews for data collection. The findings of this research show a lack of standardization and collaboration with times and markets, as well as changing technologies and diversification of needs, are responsible for this distressing situation. This research unveils several actionable insights for community leaders, NGOs, and government to revitalize this century-old tradition.</i></p>

Introduction

The Rakhain Population in Bangladesh has drastically reduced in number, presumably due to land loss and systematic oppression by the Bengali-speaking community (Roy, 2000, p. 12). The intergenerational trauma of being a minority in the areas where they once initiated settlements around 1800 CE provoked them to

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migrate towards their ancestral land, the Rakhain province of Myanmar (Rahman, Arif & Mahdi, 2022). Having had several lakhs of inhabitants a few decades ago, some 2,242 Rakhains succeeded in overcoming the challenges and are now living in clusters spread out in different upazillas in the Barguna and Patuakhali districts (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022). They turned into landless people in areas where their predecessors initially settled by clearing jungles and confronting wild animals. Several Rakhain villages and localities have had their earlier names changed, reflecting majoritarian superiority, and the process is still in force. Inter-communal harmony has been severely strained in recent days and there are hardly any fruitful initiatives from any end to safeguard their language, culture, and livelihood. This aggravating situation made this community feel disconnected from society and they are making attempts to integrate into the mainstream subsistence systems by abandoning their traditional professions and skills. Their hundreds-year-old practice of weaving quality textiles in almost every household is now limited to just a few households and remains functional mostly during the winter. The decline in handloom weaving can be attributed not only to their disconnectedness but also to factors such as inadequate infrastructure, outdated production systems, insufficient training, shifting consumer preferences, and financial insolvency. It appears that the current weavers may also abandon the profession in the near future, if the necessary safeguarding measures are not taken to support this industry. This research primarily aims to identify the factors contributing to the declining trend. It also seeks a detailed understanding on how handloom products are being promoted instead of finished textiles made by RMG industries. Moreover, with a view to bringing this heritage once again to vitality, it would frame some policy recommendations for stakeholders.

Conceptual Framework & Literature Review

The United Nations (UN) defines the indigenous community in the following words: “Indigenous peoples have in common a historical continuity with a given region prior to colonization and a strong link to their lands. They maintain, at least in part, distinct social, economic, and political systems. They have distinct languages, cultures, beliefs, and knowledge systems. They are determined to maintain and develop their identity and distinct institutions, and they form a non-dominant sector of society.” These communities everywhere in the world are subject to vulnerability since they have sentiments that oppose global capitalism and the supremacy of growing nation-states (Shafie & Mahmood, 2012). One popular approach to addressing this around the world is to integrate them into the dominant culture, resulting in their disappearing as a distinct ethnic community (Partridge, 1996). It involves weakening or replacing heritage and traditions of indigenous cultures in an attempt achieving ‘greater social harmony’ and ‘economic productivity’ (Walle, 2022). Tradition, according to Horner (1990), can stand the act of passing down something; a custom, a skill, or a thought from one generation to the next. Prior to a threat to continuity or the likelihood of not being

able to pass things on, people are not very aware of the process of passing on traditions (Graburn, 2000). A complex interplay of social, economic, technical, and environmental issues threatens the survival of practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills established by communities as traditions in cultural spaces (Sethi, 2022). Handicrafts from the past can serve as a permanent record of traditions because they are based on place of origin, ideas, attitudes, practices, and local knowledge (Brown & Vacca, 2022). Parameswara and others (2022) revealed that Balinese weavers still value handwoven textiles, thus strengthening their sense of identity despite recent developments and innovations. Undoubtedly, the process of weaving and the resulting fabric not only remain a source of income but also hold distinctive significance for many weavers and patrons (Afriyie, Frimpong, Asinyo & Seidu, 2021).

With the impact of modernization, indigenous communities need to comply with the evolving demands of the changing society. Some aspects of their culture are under threat as a result of the phenomenal pace of alterations (Soguilon & Campado, 2022). Partarakis & Zabulis (2023) believe that the declining number of experts and trainees is currently the biggest threat to the preservation of traditional crafts. Safeguarding the customs and traditions of these communities is crucial to preserve their culture, heritage, and identity (Soguilon & Campado, 2022). Cultural heritage experts have given particular emphasis to the importance of safeguarding their cultural legacies not only by preserving their identities but also providing economic benefits and other incentives (Rogerson, 2010). Various attempts have been made to safeguard racial and ethnic diversity in an increasingly interconnected globe, resulting in actions designed to preserve, revive, and pass on weaving traditions among marginalized groups (Shuzhong & Prott, 2013).

Despite the recognition of the handicraft industry's longstanding significance, this sector faced challenges of industrialization and globalization that significantly changed the lifestyle and customer needs (Barber, 2006; Yang, 2018; Mendonca, 2019). As time passes, digital technologies grow and change many traditional approaches in the fashion industry, resulting in a paradigm shift. These transformations in technologies have forced traditional household weave communities, artists, and makers to change over promptly (Bye & Sohn, 2010; Sun & Zhao, 2018). The artists had to lower the prices they charged their products since they couldn't compete with organized and efficient manufacturing plants (Greenhalgh, 2003; Yang, 2018). The sophistication of industrial products drives away consumers of handmade goods, forcing the artists to put down their businesses and move to other professions to make a living. Consequently, many traditional manufacturing skills and techniques have been extinct, as fewer younger generations show interest in mastering expertise in the craft (Cohen, 2000; Yang, 2018). Shuzhong & Prott (2013) reveal the complexities of this type of work, as well as how essential it is to inspire younger generations of the weaving community to master distinctive weaving skills and build a viable marketplace for their clothing items. Restoring quality enhanced its worth by taking on bigger looms, superior dyeing methods, grade-A thread, and

stimulating innovative ideas in the creation of the finished product, all of which boosted the financial gains for the weavers and the community in general (Shuzhong & Prott, 2013).

While several studies have been conducted on the economic vulnerability, technological transformation, and weaving traditions of indigenous communities in global contexts, there has been no academic endeavor in Bangladesh to explore the complexities underlying this tradition and the changing trends.

Research Questions and Objectives

This research is designed to look at the weavers in the Rakhain community living in the various enclaves of the Barguna-Patuakhali districts who are trying to make a balance of weaving technologies and traditions to minimize their economic vulnerability and to continue their century-long heritage of weaving. The research questions are: What specific challenges does the Rakhain community encounter in the domains of weaving and subsistence systems and to what extent have development plans been implemented? In what way does this community negotiate the challenges posed by modernity while simultaneously preserving their long-standing legacies? This article argues that the decline of the Rakhain weaving industry cannot be explained solely by technological change or shifts in market demand. Rather, it shows long-standing socio-economic marginalization and land dispossession that have gradually destroyed traditional livelihood systems of the Rakhain community. At the same time, it suggests that integrating technology with indigenous knowledge practices may help sustain Rakhain weaving. The article is organized into several sections; the first section presents the conceptual framework, literature review, and methodology. The second section examines the history and culture and the changing perspectives of the weaving traditions of the Rakhains. The third section investigates the decline of weaving and the Rakhain model of balancing traditions and technologies to safeguard the weaving industry. The final section of the study looks at the future prospects.

Methodology

This study follows a mixed method, employing in-depth, semi-structured interviews of the weavers and members of the Rakhain community. This research interacted with thirty (30) respondents who have been picked up through purposive sampling. The authors teamed up with a research assistant and several community leaders to facilitate fieldwork and bridge the gap between researchers and the community members. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the different enclaves (*Paras*) of the Rakhain community in the Barguna and Patuakhali districts, the areas that are historically renowned for Rakhain settlement and weaving traditions. The weavers constitute the majority of the respondents. This research also picked some other professionals who switched from weaving and some members of the younger generation to get their impression as well. Consents of the respondents were taken before recording their interviews. This research employed pseudonyms to mitigate potential risks to the respondents. All of the interactions were rigorously transcribed and compiled in written form by the research team, representing the raw data.

The recurring themes, concepts, and patterns were methodically identified from the qualitative data and utilized effectively in this research with the consultation of journal articles, books, newspaper/TV reports, policy documents, and internet resources. Responses were quantitatively analyzed using statistical method and illustrated through graphs. There are a few limitations of the data collection. The fieldwork was conducted in various neighborhoods and age groups. As a result, some indications may differ from *para* to *para* and person to person. In addition, the decline in weaving and their hesitation to speak with the research team resulted in a small sample size.

Findings and Discussion

a. *The Changing Rakhain Community: History & Culture*

“In one day, soon after the conquest of Arakan, the Burmans put 40,000 men to death; whenever they found a pretty woman, they took her after killing the husband, and the young girls, they seized without considering their parents, and thus deprived these poor people of property” (Hamilton, 1992: 82).

The above statement by Francis Buchanan, reported by a police officer who fled from Arakan due to the fall of the Mrauk-U dynasty (1430-1784), posits the extreme ruthlessness and dictatorial nature of the Konbaung dynasty of Burma (1752-1885). The latter, under King Bodawpaya’s tutelage, dethroned the last monarch of the Mrauk-U dynasty, King Tharrawaddy Min, in 1784 and established their authority in the Arakan littoral (Galen, 2008). The immediate atrocities committed by Bodawpaya’s forces, as well as genocide, in the next four decades of Konbaung dynastic rule (1784-1844) resulted in the death tolls of thousands of Rakhains and the forced displacement of many others to British Bengal. A portion of the Rakhains settled in the Cox’s Bazar, and another portion from the littoral crossed the bay and reached the coastal areas of the present-day Barguna-Patuakhali districts. Those who journeyed to the southwest coast met difficulties in turning the thick coastal jungle into a habitable region. There were no other people living in the vicinity at the time. The dense vegetation, rough terrain, and the presence of tigers made it extremely challenging for them to make their settlements. This brave and hardworking community cleared the jungles, converted natural ecosystems into agricultural fields, and built their houses. Chen Chen (22) stated the history of their arrival and early years of habitation in this area.

“Originally, we belonged to the western frontier of Myanmar, the land of Arakan, where chaos now reigns...upon being defeated by the Burmese in 1784, to avoid further ruthless cleansing, around 150 families arrived in the districts of Barguna and Patuakhali after a seven-day boat voyage across the Bay of Bengal. They first arrived at Rangabali Upazila in Patuakhali district.”

The Rakhains then moved to many adjacent neighborhoods of Patuakhali and Barguna districts. For ages, this coastal region has been consistently subjected to the destructive forces of floods, cyclones, and the erosion of beaches and riverbanks. Small to gigantic cyclones form over the Bay of Bengal coast each year and these powerful cyclones with massive tidal surges sweep across the entire coastline (Hasan, 2010). Their population drastically decreased in the early stages due to devastating cyclones that destroyed their possessions and forced them to make their way to Rakhine State.

The Weaving Traditions of the Rakhains: Changing Perspectives

Having stated these few statements about their origin and history, let's get into the main discussion. The Rakhain community is historically considered as highly skilled in handwoven textiles but this is not something that happened on a fine morning. Weaving has been a part of Arakan's history, culture, and economy for many generations. While farming was the main profession their ancestors had in Arakan, weaving was also another key means of earning subsistence. Primarily, the internal need for textiles, coupled with the abundance of raw materials, such as bamboo, cotton, and silk, contributed to the development of Rakhain textiles. The fame of fine textiles and craftsmanship among the Rakhain people soon spread beyond Myanmar.

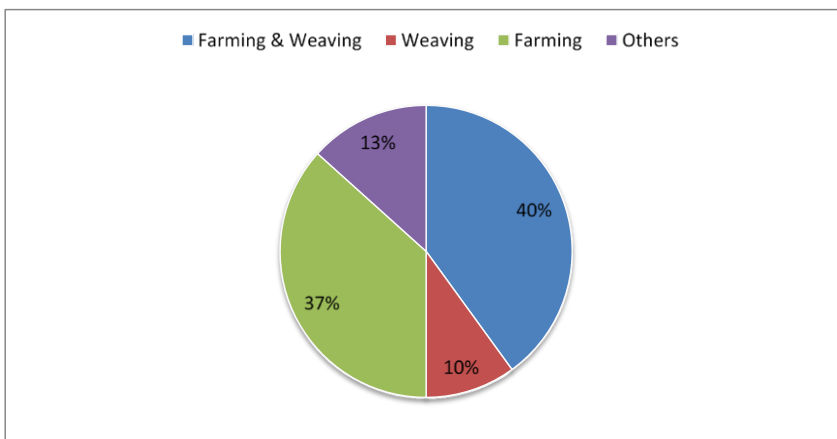


Figure-1: Graphical representation of the responses regarding the occupations of their predecessors in Rakhine state

It was mainly the Rakhain women who had served as the custodians of weaving traditions and passing down the technical knowledge and skills embedded in this craft. Whenever their ancestors traveled towards the coast of British Bengal, they transported the necessary equipment and materials for a handwoven loom. The Rakhains had a tradition of dressing only in clothes they had made. Since there was nowhere to buy traditional Rakhain dresses when they arrived in Bangladesh, they took up weaving basically to meet their internal needs.

When inquired about where the raw materials had initially been sourced, the responses mentioned places like Rakhine, Dhaka, Patuakhali, Barishal, Jhalakathi, Mymensingh, Tangail, and Kolkata. Regarding dyeing, the weavers usually extracted the pigment from the bark to color the yarn. The fabrics they produced earlier generally met all of the internal demands of the community. Until recently, they used to wear the following dresses weaved in their homestead.

Male	Longyi, Shirt Piece, Khaddang (Wool Jacket), Waistcoat, Underwear etc.
Female	Longyi, Thabing/ Thami (blouse), Angki, (headdress), Sharee, Sizu Aizi (a skirt-like attire) etc.
Both	Towels, Mufflers, Bags, Chuddar, Bed Sheet, Mosquito Nets etc.

When asked about the golden ages, Kachang (56) described her experience in the following words, roughly referring to the post-independence era as the most prolific and vibrant in terms of meeting internal demand and economic returns.

“My grandmother was well-known for her ability to weave a variety of clothing, and it was a really inspiring childhood experience for me observing her precise artistry on the loom, whether it was night or day. This was probably 40 to 45 years ago.”

The majority of the respondents considered that the commercialization and large-scale productions of their clothing items began in the 1970s and 1980s.

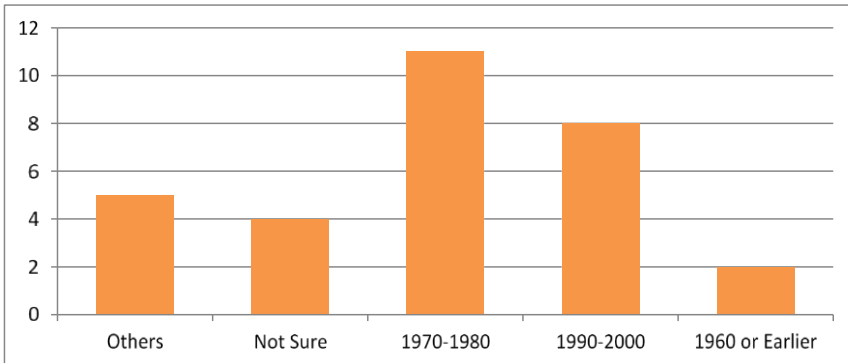


Figure-2: The graphical representation of the responses regarding the Rakhains ‘Golden Ages’ of Weaving in Bangladesh

From a small-scale start to meeting the demand for internal clothing, it quickly rose to national prominence. Mostly the availability of fine cotton and its low price enabled the weavers to manufacture high-quality handmade textiles. The imprint of sophistication and refinement soon made this handmade textile popular both to the consumers inside and outside of the community. Even traders from Myanmar travelled to the Rakhain *paras* of the Barguna-Patuakhali districts to procure apparel items to meet the demand in the Arakan. Because this area did not have any large-scale textile or clothing businesses or providers, the handloom industry evolved remarkably. As a result, some skilled and industrious weavers have taken

it on a professional level. Several elderly respondents reflected on their prosperous pasts when they had an abundance of fish and rice. As they could afford a lot of things, there was a substantial demand for clothing items as well.

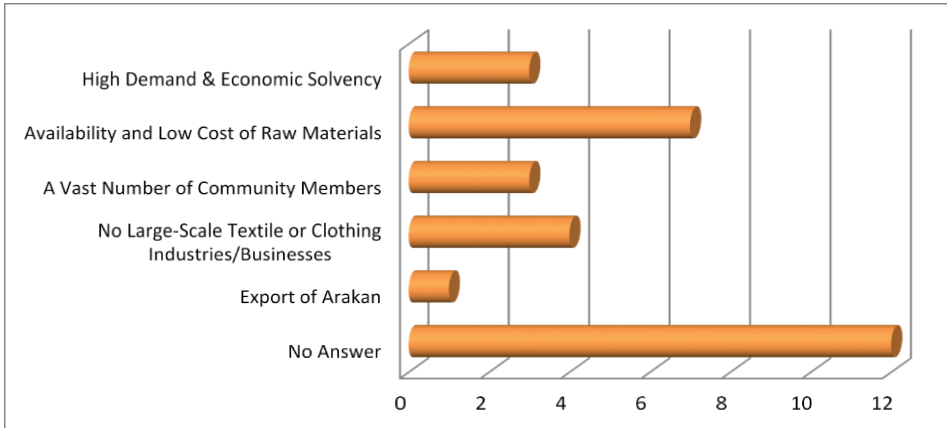


Figure-3: What led to it to gain prominence quickly?

Majority of respondents considered the 1970s-80s to be the ‘Golden Age’ of their weaving traditions. One notable aspect of this era was the prevalence of the intra-community trade. Nevertheless, the clothing trade at that time brought good profits and savings were also considerably high among the weavers. The low inflation along with the cheap price of cotton provided them a very comfortable life at that time. Out of the respondents, only two reported an increase in their profits recently, whereas seventeen stated that they have had prosperous days in the past. This profitable past was not the outcome of technological advancements. Rather, it was basically achieved by old-fashioned equipment that was operated employing physical labor. It was not until around 2000 that modern equipment began to be introduced into the handloom industry.

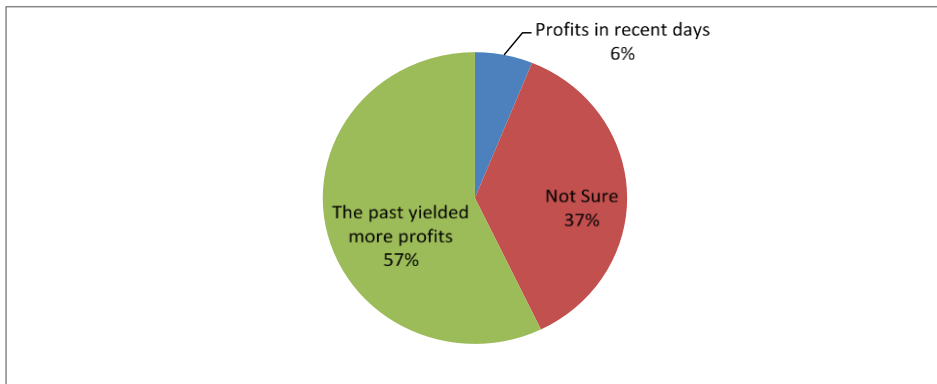


Figure 4: When did you see the highest profits?

b. *The Decline of Rakhain Weaving Traditions: Broken Threads*

The miserable state of the Rakhain handloom industry is easily discernible to the authors during their visits to the Rakhain *Paras*. The ready-made clothing items became cheap because of the nation’s unprecedented growth in the garment sector, and these items are readily available in local marketplaces. Moreover, the economic vulnerability of the Rakhain community, a lack of raw materials, and a declining population forced many weavers to leave this profession. Consequently, many individuals from this community adapted to the clothing patterns of mainstream society, leading to the disappearance of many centuries-old traditional fabrics and styles of dress. Furthermore, the ageing and dying of skilled weavers, along with the indifference of the younger generation towards this craftsmanship, have accelerated the pace. Finally, Sidr is also blamed for sweeping away the Rakhain *paras*, causing deaths to human beings and other domesticated animals and eventually the displacements of the community. Storm surges reaching up to 5 meters have blown away houses, belongings, and trees. This resulted in having no trace of looms that had been in operation for a long period of time. The cost or lack of materials to set up new looms hampered their replacements. The respondents to this research put forward the following factors that are responsible for the disappearance of Rakhain traditional styles of dress.

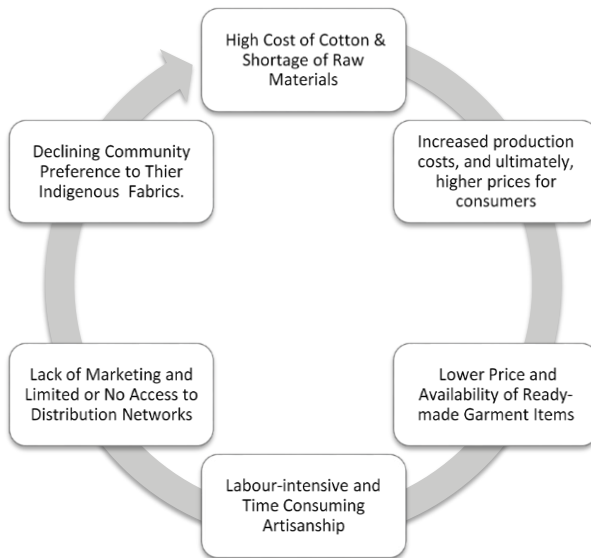


Figure 5: Factors behind the disappearance of Rakhain traditional styles of dress.

In the Rakhain community, the *longyi* is the most popular traditional dress for both men and women. Due to the shortage of thin cotton fabric, they had to sacrifice the comfort of a *longyi* made with such fine lightweight cotton. They used to wear a kind of turban with a wing cloth standing to the left. This signature dress element is no longer being manufactured. One particular type of *thabing*, worn occasionally and embellished with floral motifs, was highly desirable clothing

item for women, but is no longer available. Even the simplest ones are now rare. It needs between 3000 and 4000 BDT to produce this item, whereas previously it was very reasonable and affordable to them. Manufacturing a quality *thabing* requires seven to nine days. As a result they are now accustomed to wearing the *thabings* readily available on the market. When asked about the dresses that have already become extinct or are in the process, Mhen Cho Nei (45) says.

“The chuddar (clothing item) I am wearing is currently unavailable. This was once extensively woven, but it is no longer in production. The *thabing* I am currently wearing is also no longer in production.”

Even a few decades ago, every household owned at least one or more handlooms. The miserable state of the weaving tradition of the Rakhain community is portrayed in the statistical data provided by a respondent from Amkhola *Para* in Patuakhali district.

“The weaving tradition of the Rakhain community is now on the verge of extinction. Out of the 58 families in our *Para* (enclave), only two now have handlooms.”

The development of the transportation network and the growing popularity of Kuakata as a tourist attraction have been closely linked to the rising demand for Rakhain textiles in present days. Compared to before, this research examines into the current demand for Rakhain-woven clothing. When respondents were asked about the demand for their clothing products, 10 were in favor, 13 were against, 6 did not respond, and 1 was undecided.

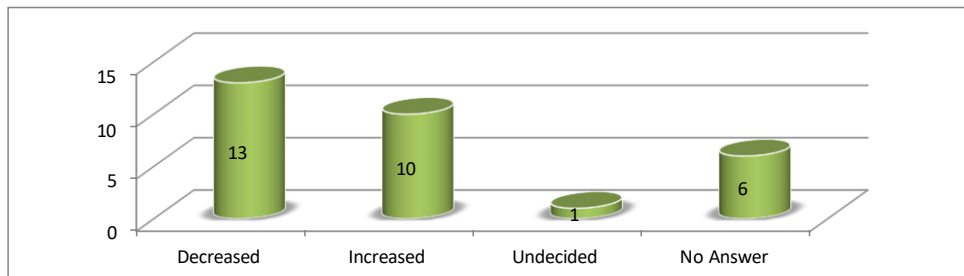


Figure 6: What about the demand for clothing items made in Rakhain enclaves?

Even with steady demand, the profit didn't increase in tandem with the increasing cost of cotton. Lhokhen (35), a weaver of Kabirachora, describes the miserable state of profit in the following words,

“Despite the fact that demand has increased, we are not receiving an equitable price. The product that was previously priced at Tk 300 continues to be sold at that price. When the yarn was priced at Tk 250 per kilogram, a shirt cost Tk 300 and is currently priced at Tk 450 per kilogram; the price of the shirt remains the same.”

This research has revealed that the weavers and traders are dissatisfied with their profit-sharing. This community went beyond the controlled domain of intra-community trade and tended to purchase more expensive modern dresses. Conversely, the Bengalis now show a greater interest in purchasing handmade clothing items from this indigenous community. Unfortunately, these valued customers have been duped by fraudulent businessmen. Under the guise of Rakhain-woven clothing, they are selling ready-made garments or textiles that are manufactured in Tangail. This scenario has ruined the trust and confidence of the customers, and many of them have turned away from purchasing these items. The design patterns of modern textiles had hardly been impacted this centuries-old indigenous weaving industry. The repetitive color schemes and embroidered floral design patterns are now unpopular among consumers with diverse tastes and preferences.

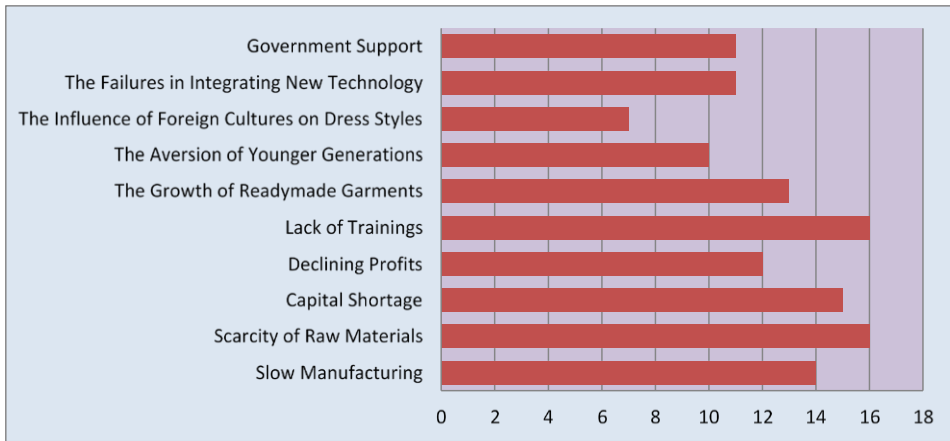


Figure 7: The respondents pointed out applicable factors (he/she thinks) that led to this poor state.

The authors engaged in a close interaction with the weavers about whether the occupation of land had any impact on triggering in the age of depression. A mixed reaction has been reflected, with some strongly suggesting that it would indirectly hinder the industry. When the grabbers target their land, they resort to bribing officials or powerful individuals. As a result, the weavers lose confidence and capital, leaving them economically vulnerable. Due to a lack of landed assets, a majority of the community members of this migrated to their ancestral land. This influenced the weaving heritage in two ways: on the one hand, it reduced the number of consumers, and on the other, it prevented them from managing the necessary investment.

This is the age of the fourth industrial revolution. Digital technologies are becoming an integral part of today’s fashion industry and are starting to disrupt many traditional approaches and practices, leading to a paradigm shift (Sun &

Zhao, 2018). Unfortunately, this community hasn't made any use of digital technologies in their weaving practices. Moreover, fashion education is a highly demanding undergraduate major, and a significant number of Rakhain youth are currently enrolled in universities. However, no respondents were able to identify one person from their community who is currently pursuing education in fashion. E-commerce sites nowadays dominate a significant portion of total sales and are an effective way to reach consumers. Neither the weavers nor any members of the community have any social media-based initiatives to promote or sell their indigenous clothing items. Lhokhen (35), a resident of Chokhera Para, told us that she opened a Facebook page; it was unsuccessful in securing fans or followers, and she decided to delete the page.

However, a few members are putting forth their utmost effort amidst adversities to ensure the preservation of this heritage as well as earning a livelihood. Employing specific mechanisms, the weavers are advocating community support and adapting to modern tastes to reach out to a wider consumer base. Some NGOs have provided training and financial support for allowing themselves to weave using semi-auto looms. Moreover, BSCIC and other government agencies initiated several small-scale projects, workshops, and training programs to revitalize the weaving industry of the Rakhains. The lack of fine cotton made it difficult to address the diversified demand and varying tastes of consumers. Even so, Rakhain textiles continued to improve, particularly in the production of winter dresses. Wool yarn is available and relatively cheap, making it easier to weave heavy coats, sheets, mufflers, and chuddars. These clothing items are highly appealing to consumers owing to their characteristic features of durability and warmth, which in turn serve as a significant incentive for weavers to continue operating their businesses at least during the winter. In winter, visitors from across the country gather in Kuakata to explore the Rakhain *Paras* and constitute the largest consumer base of Rakhain clothing. They shifted this commerce from a community-based system to one involving external actors.

c. ***Safeguarding Weaving Industry of the Rakhains: Balancing Traditions and Technology***

Initially, the Rakhains began weaving using handlooms brought here by boats from Arakan. In earlier times, cloth was woven inside a rectangular wooden frame that was nearly 2 meters in length and 1.25 meters in width (Fraser Lu, 1994: 252). The major parts needed for basic weaving comprised of a cloth beam, a pair of heddles, and a large wooden warp space beater (Fraser Lu, 1994: 258).

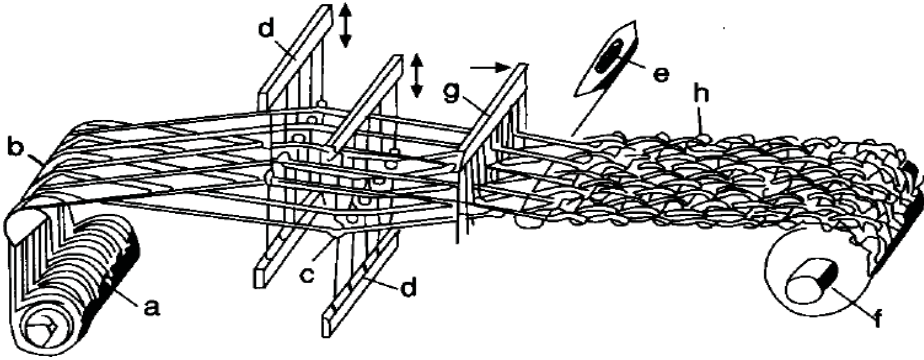


Image-1: The Key Components of a loom: a-weaver's beam, b-back rest, c-heddle, d-head frames, e-shuttle weft yarn, f-cloth beam, g-reed and h-woven cloth. (Source: <http://textilelibrary.wordpress.com/>)



Image-2: A Manual Handloom in a Rakhain homestead of Kalapara Upazilla (Photo-Authors)

This machine is manual and relies solely on physical power for weaving. In a vertical-shaft loom, the handles are set in place in the shaft. The weaving threads in rotation pass through a heddle and the space between the heddles, known as the shad (Phipps, 2011). As a result, half of the threads that pass through the heddles are raised when the shaft is raised, and half of the threads are lowered when the shaft is lowered; the threads that pass through the spaces between the heddles remain in place (Phipps, 2011). This loom, which was invented in the 13th century, simplified the mechanism of weaving but still demanded considerable physical labor to operate. The interactions with the respondents figured out that many of their predecessors couldn't even afford this machine and had to use old-fashioned ways to weave instead. When asked about the traditional machinery of those

who preceded them, Bong Sui (43) responded, “There were no machines for my ancestors to use. They used to weave by hand.”

This group of people was never disconnected from their roots and has maintained a regular and intimate connection with the members of the Rakhain community in their place of origin, as well as other weavers in the country from whom they sourced the raw materials and technologies. Subsequent developments in machinery, dying, and designing patterns in Rakhine and other parts of Bangladesh have also left some impacts from time to time on the Rakhains living in the Barguna-Patuakhali districts. Usually, the traditional handlooms are in operation with a few mechanical alterations and modifications. Many households are still using this labor-intensive and time-consuming outdated machine to manufacture handmade clothing items. Meanwhile, the research team visited several households that are using semi-automatic power looms. Readers can scan the QR code to watch a video of a Rakhain woman weaving a shirt piece using a semi-auto machine in Taltali upazila of Barguna district. (Video- Authors)



Weaving handmade items on traditional handlooms is a time-consuming process that demands substantial expertise, patience, and hard labor. Even semi-auto machines require a significant amount of time, albeit with less physical stress. Char Lal Singh (35) illustrates how this conventional labor-oriented production system requires working time: “It takes two days to pull the thread and arrange the thread into the twine. These have to be done manually, which takes time.” Anchan Rakhin (40) adds, “Weaving a ‘long’ piece takes two days, one day for dyeing, and another day for weaving”. They couldn’t work continuously, largely because they have yet to make this occupation their primary source of income. Furthermore, women make up over half of the weavers in this community. Their responsibilities extend beyond weaving to include caring for children, attending to the home, and agriculture.

This research sought to understand why the weavers couldn’t produce more in a shorter amount of time. Respondents have identified several factors. This would require investment, training, expertise, state of the art technology, and adequate demand. Due to financial constraints, most weavers produce textile items without even installing a semi-auto machine. Since it is a community-centered practice, no other mainstream initiatives or efforts have been added to help the Rakhains improve their weaving skills. Nevertheless, they believe that investing in existing technologies and adding new dimensions is worthless, as this business has likely reached the lowest point. Whenever the electricity reached the Rakhain enclaves, the last page of the calendar had already turned, signaling

the end of the prosperous times.

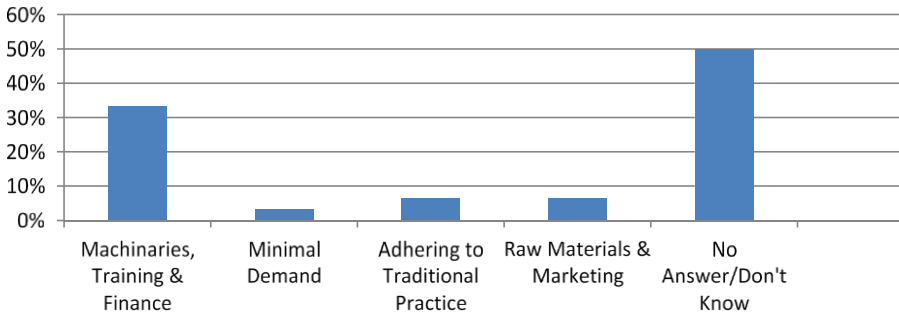


Figure 8: Why aren't the weavers more productive or increasing their output within a shorter time frame?

This research asked respondents about the complications in traditional weaving practices; could this not have been moved to a factory-based production? The responses mostly highlight issues in leadership, entrepreneurship, investment, government support, and demand factors. According to Khaiten Rakhain (40), their economic backwardness, limited access to bank loans and uneven competition with the dominant Bengali-speaking community have all contributed to the failure. Tulen (45), another respondent from Taltalipara, passed the buck to the BSIC.

“There would be a production center in every *Para* (enclave), and someone assigned would take the finished items from these centers. From there, be it through the government or NGOs, export to cold countries like Norway. Wool-based textiles are highly coarse, resulting in the temperature to increase quickly. We could sell these winter clothes in European countries.”

The prices of raw materials are escalating much faster than usual, compared to the prices of finished products. Furthermore, the amount of time needed for handmade textile items couldn't compensate for the labor invested in weaving. In turn, many of them lost their interest in weaving. This is where the emotional appeal of 'tradition' comes in; a specific consumer base has been developed mostly due to the country's unprecedented economic growth in the last few decades. This class has a particular fascination with the handmade products manufactured by indigenous people. Clothing products manufactured with traditional methods or materials are viewed as more durable, unique, and high-quality; justifying higher prices. In order to meet the changing needs of these consumers, the resilient Rakhain weavers who withstood adversity are delegating technologies and innovations that made weaving easier and faster without sacrificing the integrity of centuries-old traditions.

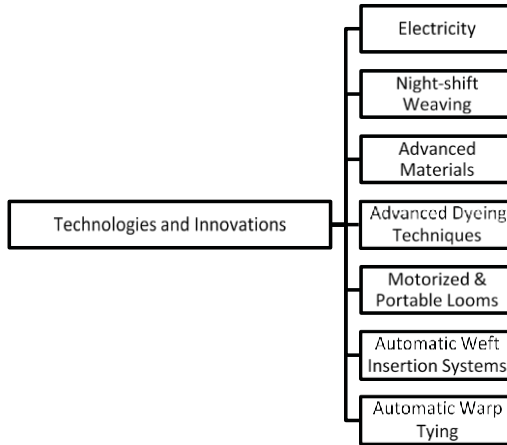


Figure 9: The delegation of technologies and innovations by Rakhain weavers to make weaving easier and faster

Weavers are thus balancing the needs of their customers, making a living, and preserving their heritage by combining the latest technologies and traditional methods. Nearly 46% of respondents claim that consumers purchase Rakhain-made items because these are traditional, long-lasting, and weaved with care by a highly skilled Rakhain craftsmen. Several studies have shown the existence of a positive handmade impact on the attractiveness of products (Fuchs, 2015; Fun, Lai, & Kay, 2024). This effect is strongly influenced by the belief that handmade products essentially ‘contain love.’ This love account is determined by effort, product quality, uniqueness, originality, and satisfaction in handmade productions (Fuchs, 2015). Customers prefer to buy homemade items over machine-made and they are okay and comfortable with paying more for handmade items. They purchase these to express their appreciation and passion for handmade or indigenous things, rather than getting the best-performing ones (Fuchs, 2015). Mohenchan Rakhain (45), a weaver and trader of Rakhain clothes, when asked about this replies that “consumers are more interested in buying handmade dresses than those manufactured by the factories.” Jonarthan Mahathero (55), the principal of a Buddhist Viharas, provides important indications of consumer perceptions toward these items.

“There are still people who tend to buy genuine handwoven cloth at a higher price than its original worth. For example, if he/she hears that the price is Tk 120, he/she buys it for Tk 200.”

Visitors are more likely to buy handmade products manufactured by the Rakhains because of their special passions and enthusiasm for these items, as the Rakhain enclaves are close to the country’s second-largest tourist destination.

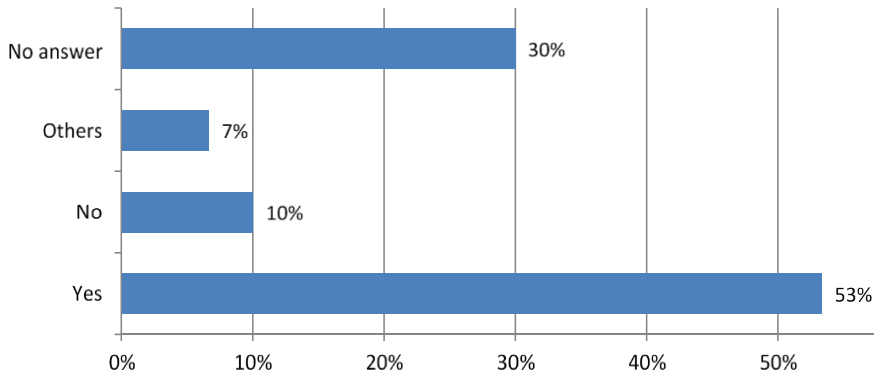


Figure 10: The perspective of the respondents on consumer's cordial preferences for Rakhine-made clothing items.

The respondents of this study were asked what they thought about customer satisfaction if the manufacturing system switched to an automated large scale manufacturing system. Will consumers stop buying their products? Will it be possible to retain the quality of handmade items in a machine-based production system? The majority of responses showed reservations about transition to a fully automated manufacturing system. If this happened, customers who value high-quality handmade clothing items and have a more sophisticated taste would be less likely to purchase them. Lcho Chin Rakhain (52) has stated that customers are less interested in automated production, while they are more interested in the handmade clothing items of the Rakhains. A weaver from Gora Amkhola *Para* in Patuakhali district emphasized on the durability and aesthetic values of handmade items in the following words:

“When we make it by hand, it's perfect. But if we use automatic tools to assist in helping with a large order of 300-400 pieces at once, the quality declines. These hand-made chuddors (indicating a piece over there) are still woven by hand. There is a big difference in quality between chuddors made by machines and those we weaved by hand.”

Choken (65), a retired service holder now engaged in weaving, said,

“Go to Narsingdi and Kuakata, and you could find clothing items curved by semi-auto and automatic looms in Tangail. However, there is a significant difference in quality between their products and ours. It is extremely thin, whereas our handmade version is very coarse, making it comfortable to wear.”

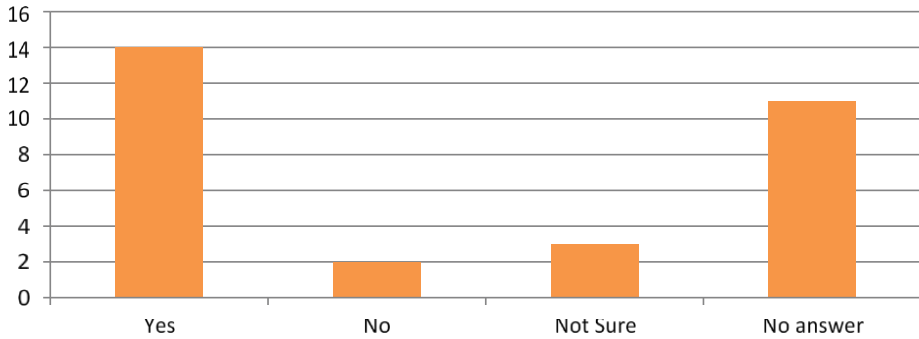


Figure-11: Do you envisage a potential loss of existing customers upon the implementation of an automated production system?

The heightened importance of social media sites during the last decade, has led to rapid transformation across multiple sectors, with fashion being the most prominent one. Finally, this research sought to identify what, if any, changes are under consideration in a rapidly globalizing society. Most weavers are aware of changing tastes and trends; some adapt to them, while the majority adhere to traditional practices. Losu (22), a student and part-time weaver, and a representative respondent of the younger generation, said,

“We must take the varying tastes and needs of the consumer into consideration in a digitalized world. People are now connected to the global cultural and fashion landscape. At the same time, we want to retain our tradition as well.”

d. *Future Prospects and Policy Recommendations:*

The government and a few NGOs have provided financial and mechanical support to weavers to help ease their adversities related to raw materials, looms, and commercialization. Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), Bangladesh Handloom Board, and local administration have been conducting a very short-term training program varying from 3 days to 3 months, mostly to equip the weavers with semi-auto machines, encourage the development of a wider range of clothing items, and enhance their designing skills. The weavers were given microcredit and raw materials support by several NGOs like GIZ, Caritas, RDF, *Taranga*, *Uddipan*, and World Concern Bangladesh. Most of the respondents let the research team know that they are beneficiaries either by getting monetary or machinery assistance from the Government and NGOs. These entities are primarily helping the effort to revitalize this tradition by bringing in motion to production while simultaneously adhering to the preferences of the consumers in purchasing handmade indigenous stuff. However, the initiatives remained futile as they became defaulter to pay the instalments for various reasons. The training programs lacked compatibility with their current infrastructure, and

the funds provided were insufficient to purchase a loom machine.



Image-3: A government-run handloom training center in Agathakurpara (now closed-authors).



Image-4: A banner offering a three-month handloom training program run by BSIC is shown in a Rakhain enclave in the Barguna district (Photo-authors).

The engagement of younger generations is crucial, as it will determine whether the tradition continues to exist in the future and remains capable to adapt and flourish in a changing world. The majority of them lack interest in this vocation due to a lack of training and limited economic prospects. The growing unemployment among the educated Rakhain youths has been a major concern to the community. A few of the interviewees are wondering whether weaving could help them overcome their unemployment. Chi Mongla Rakhain (45) expects that “our desire is for them to become involved with weaving after their studies are over, even though they are studying to get jobs.” Janarthan Mahathero (55), hopes that,

“A lot of young people do graduation and post-graduation from this community. They are doing cow farming after getting their BA, but they do not know that this weaving business is more valuable than cow farming. They need to be trained better. After that, they will definitely be interested.”

While Aung Chand (20), a student from Amkhola Para, expressed her firm determination in keeping afloat this tradition, another respondent conveyed that it ought to be continued by employing an automatic machine, no longer through a handloom. Responses have generally reinforced the idea that the future of weaving must be dependent on striking a balance between technological innovation and the preservation of traditions, ensuring both progress and cultural continuity.

This research seeks to revitalize the weakening weaving industry of this community and to propose some policy recommendations for the government and NGOs emanating exclusively from the respondents and other stakeholders interacted for

this research.

1. Being dependent on others to survive could be relieving in the short term, but it won't have a lasting impact. A few responses suggested creating a cooperative committee in each *Para* to provide necessary training and funds. The elderly and skilled weavers must come forward to train the youths. One alone couldn't do anything that everyone would do together. The entities involved in training should prioritize hiring trainers from the aged members of the community.
2. A concrete proposal has been postulated by several respondents and stakeholders that a dedicated market, research center, and exhibition hall in a multi-storied complex should be built in Kuakata to promote this industry.
3. State-of-the-art equipment and technologies should be introduced to lessen physical labor and make it more profitable keeping the individuality and distinctiveness intact. Publicity increases the extent of consciousness and broadens the reach to potential buyers. Promoting the distinctive characteristics of handmade clothing items through the media could foster the growth of the handloom sector.
4. NGOs like Caritas, RDF, Worldwide Concern, BRAC etc. could take the lead to promote the industry. ARONG, a social enterprise of BRAC, plays a key role in preserving and promoting indigenous craftsmanship. It could alone bring back the good old days to the Rakhain community.
5. The ongoing depreciation of the national currency against US dollar and inflation has reduced the purchasing capacity of the customers while simultaneously increasing the price of raw materials. If yarn is available year-round at lower price and less expensive, they can balance this phenomenon and survive.
6. The government could assist the industry by reopening the training centers and providing easy-to-access financial support to weavers. In addition, BEPZA could establish a special economic zone in this area to support this sector and open up markets for these items both domestically and internally.

Conclusion

The twenty-first century has witnessed staggering transformations across industries, economies, and societies. These transformations have been characterized mainly by innovation and automation. The worst impact of it fell upon the LDCs, and the poor became poorer. Household-based economies, particularly the indigenous communities who usually want to live in detached or safe pockets, are no longer persistent in this uneven competition. The findings show that on one side, the hegemonic or authoritarian approach of the state undermined the Rakhain identity, and on the other, economic and technological drawbacks undermined their distinct subsistence systems. Weaving, fishing, and agriculture were once the primary sources of income for them, but they are now

forced to integrate into the professions like the others. Evidence from this study indicates that a few weavers are striving against the tide to preserve their traditions while integrating the development of mechanization with the heritage of handmade. Several NGOs and government agencies have played an instrumental role in this regard, providing monetary and technical support to revitalize the weavers, but in most cases, this effort has brought limited results. This study puts forward appropriate strategies to preserve traditional weaving methods while also implementing appropriate technologies to reduce physical labor. Thus, it would balance the work performed (labor) and the value added (profits). It urges the government and NGOs to undertake long-term projects and programs to recover the damages that happened to this industry and to lower the vulnerability of this community. Further research on indigenous communities in Bangladesh, with larger sample sizes and neighborhoods, could provide a more reliable and comprehensive assessment of handmade weaving traditions.

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