

The Phulia Story
weaving processes

sasha
the art of giving

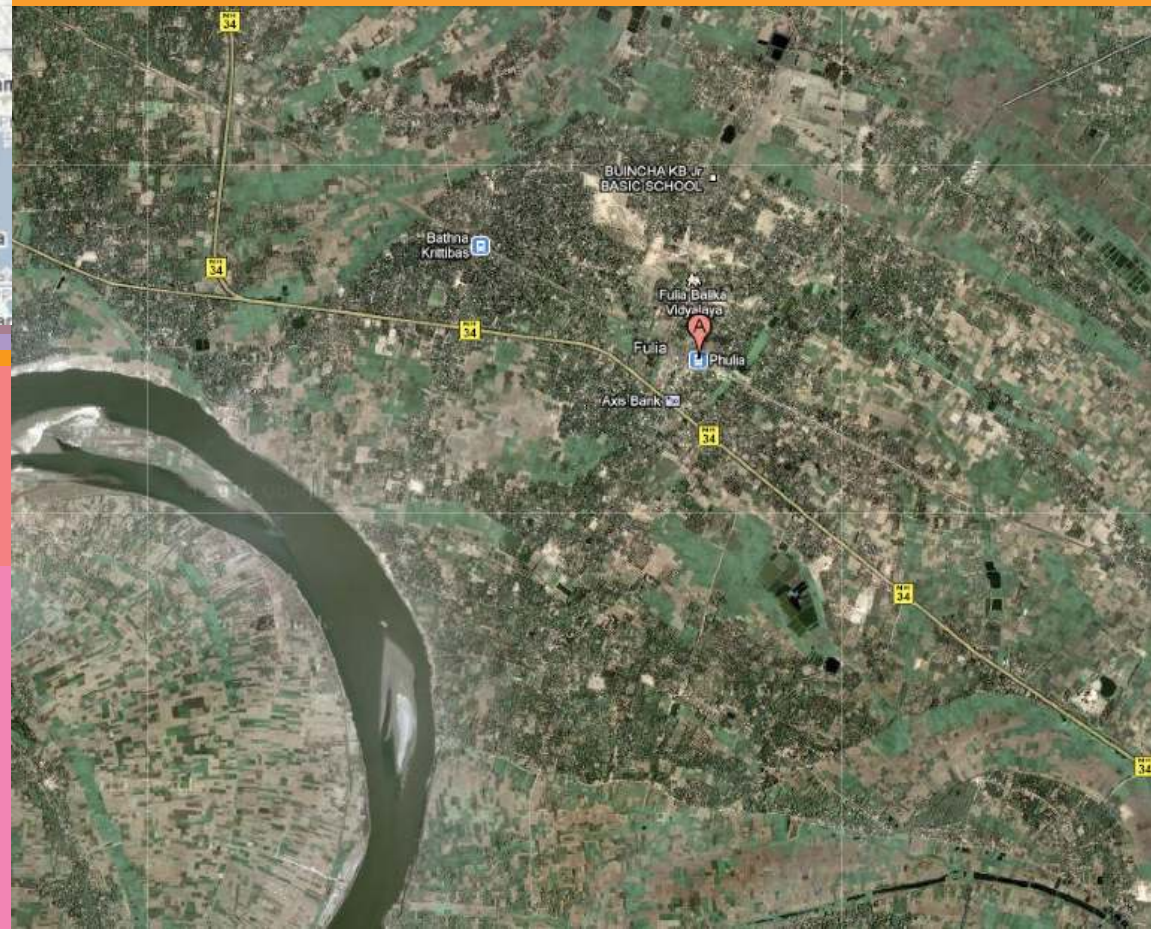




Phulia Town

Phulia (also spelt Fulia) is a town in Nadia district in West Bengal. After the partition of India in 1947, many skilled weavers of Dhaka came and settled in West Bengal in Nadia and Bardhaman districts, both traditionally renowned centres for hand-woven fabrics.

These talented weavers soon revived their ancestral occupation and the art of exquisite weaving once again flourished. Today, finely woven feather-touch textiles and saris in exotic designs and colours are being produced in the vast weaving belt of Shantipur, Phulia, Samudragarh, Dhatrigram and Ambika Kaln - each centre producing superb fabrics in its own unique weaving style. Phulia and Samudragarh specialize in a combination of jacquard and jamdani work.



The Story

A photograph of a dirt floor with shadows cast by a striped object. The shadows are long and parallel, suggesting a light source from the upper left. The striped object is partially visible on the right side of the frame, with stripes in shades of blue, green, and yellow. The overall scene is dimly lit, with the shadows providing the primary source of light and contrast.

The Story

The sound is the first thing that hits you.

Beyond the prayer-songs blaring from the community puja pandal, behind the long, warning horn of the passing local trains, there is the constant chatter of looms.





As you walk through the village, observing the many different processes that go into transforming yarn to cloth,



You cannot get away from the constant clackety-clack of the weavers at work.



It's almost like crickets or cicadas, an aural wallpaper, soothing, reassuring, and like everything else here, completely hand-made.



It's in the lap of this sound that you watch the children play, see people at the tube-well drawing water, catch a woman cooking, her daughter next to her spinning yarn...

*M*en shifting drums out of the way near the rail-
tracks as another train approaches.





It is with this sound-track as accompaniment that you see the colour spreading and tripping into different patterns, literally weaving itself through the rich greens of the vegetation and the flat, light, winter-brown of the earth underfoot.



This is not an island away from the modern world, and when you see the mobile phone tower in the distance, or watch the crowded trains head from one town to another you don't see them as intrusions or oddities.

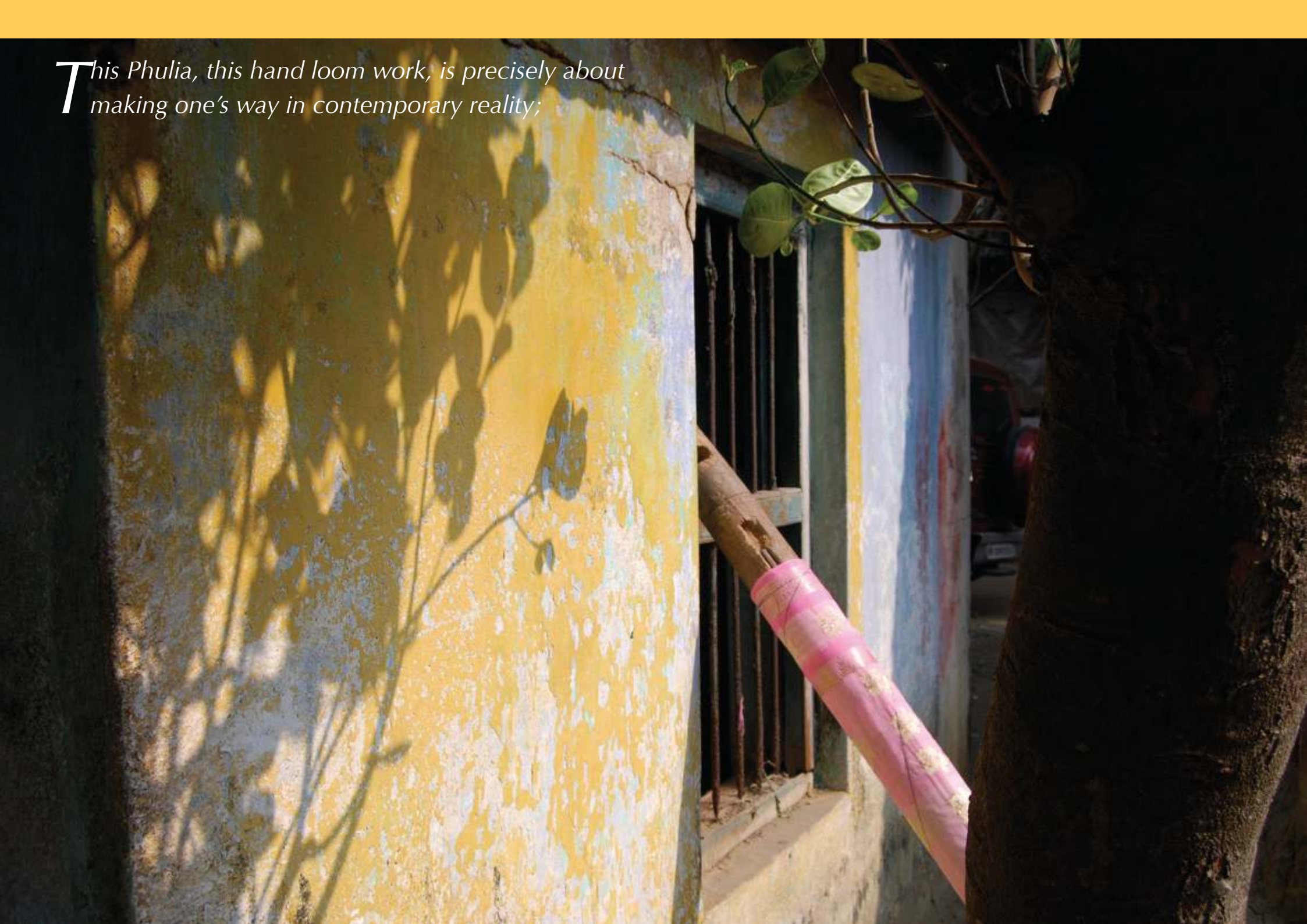


When you walk into a shed full of looms you can see the train-tracks of thread shifting,



When you see a drum being prepared from a grid of small bobbins you realise this is not so far from a network of computers and servers.

This Phulia, this hand loom work, is precisely about making one's way in contemporary reality;





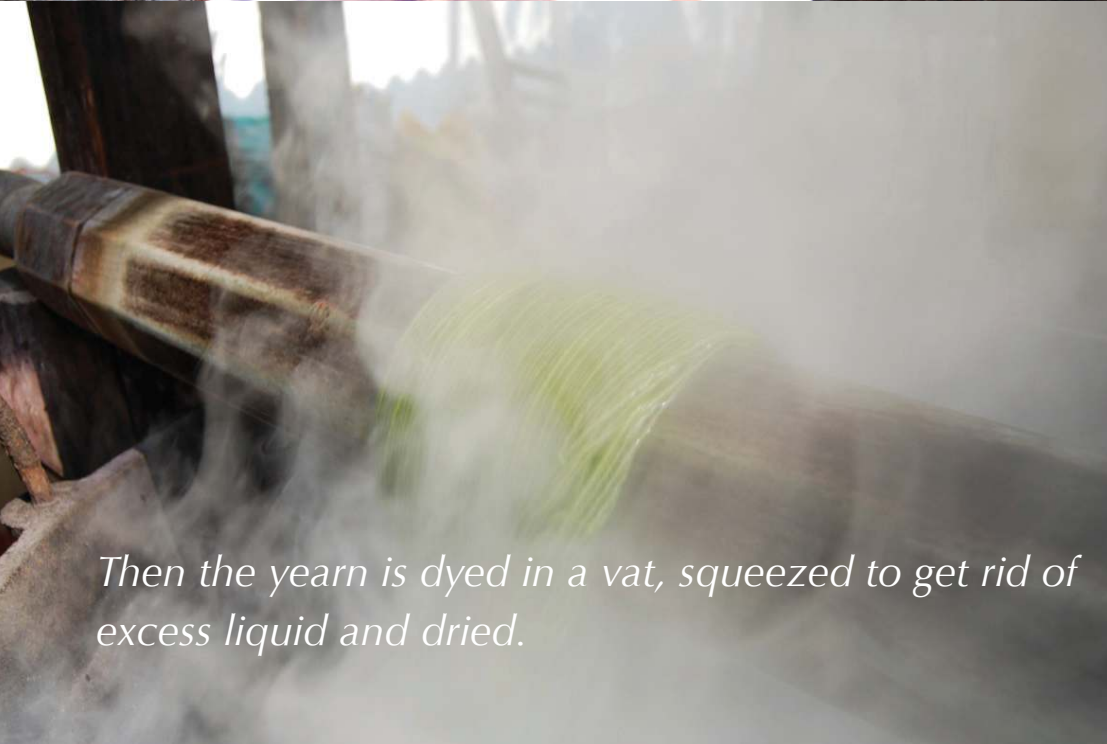
It's just that you feel lucky, fortunate that you've seen it's still possible to do this with such absence of violence to the soul.

The weaving process



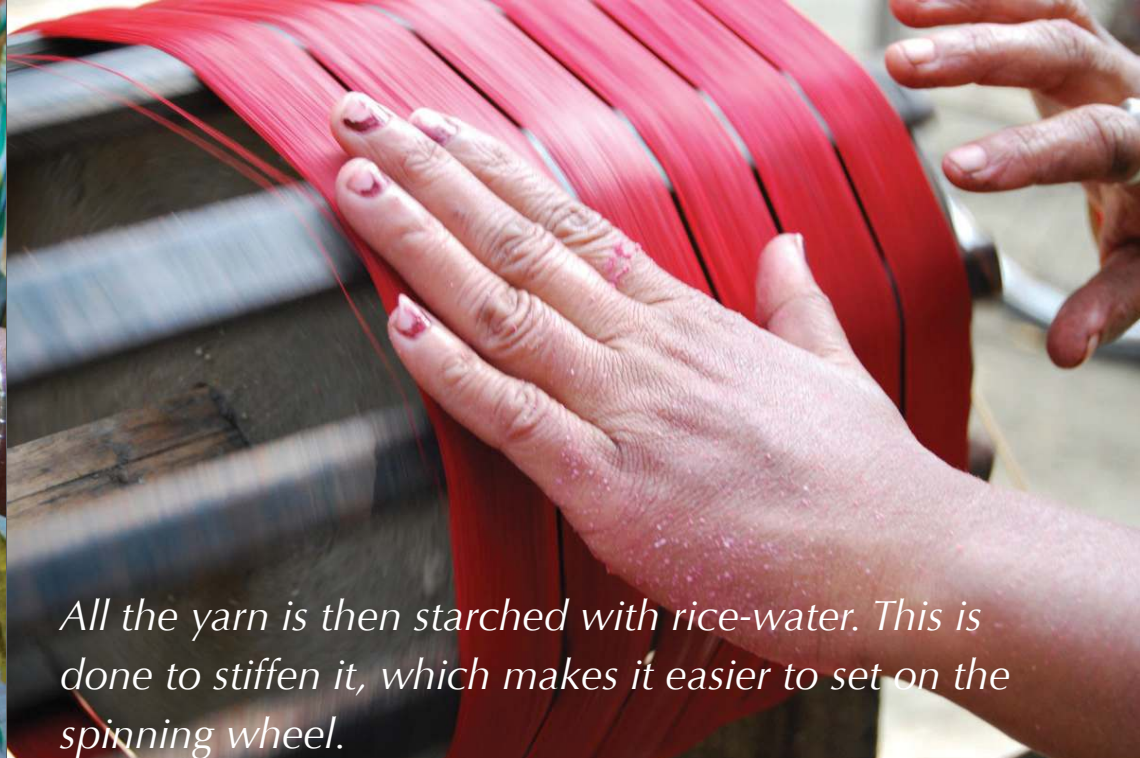
The Weaving Process

Normally cotton and silk yarn is used in Phulia. The first step is thoroughly wash the yarn and de-gum it, in a process called scouring



Then the yarn is dyed in a vat, squeezed to get rid of excess liquid and dried.





All the yarn is then starched with rice-water. This is done to stiffen it, which makes it easier to set on the spinning wheel.

The yarn is then transferred to a spinning wheel





Spinning the wheel transfers the yarn to small bobbins



From bobbins, the yarn is transferred on to large drums, a process called 'drumming'.

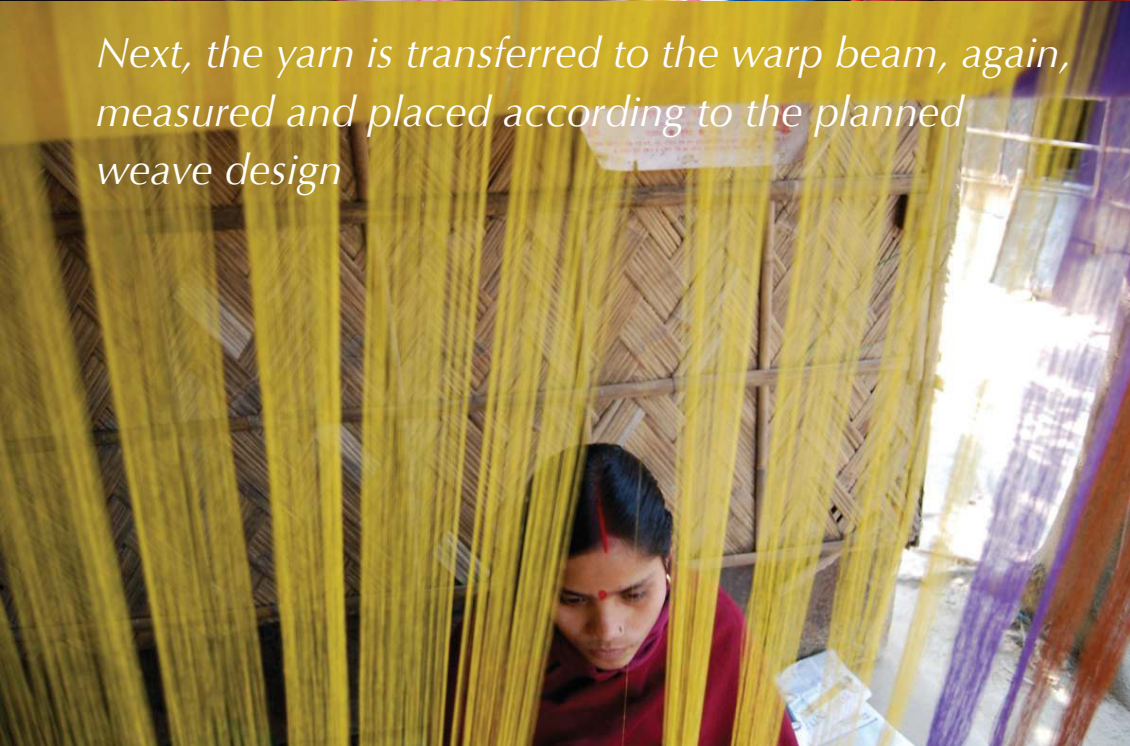


Already, at this stage, bands of yarn are spaced on the drum according to the final design planned





Next, the yarn is transferred to the warp beam, again, measured and placed according to the planned weave design





Drafting: the loom is set according to the pattern desired, the strings pulled through tiny metal rings to set the warp of the weave. The yarn is then 'lifted' according to the number of shafts required for the weave





The beam is taken to the loom, where actual weaving takes place.

This is where we see the result of all the different stages, as the cloth is finally formed. The weaver uses a shuttle to pass the weft through the threads of the warp, or the longitudinal yarn. With his feet he manipulates the warp, and from the complex, fine, interweaving of the warp and weft the fabric is born.



Finishing of the final product





In Phulia, complex patterns with raised thread are made using the Jacquard loom. Here the loom is controlled by punched cards with punched holes, each row of which corresponds to one row of the design. Multiple rows of holes are punched on each card and the many cards that compose the design of the textile are strung together in order.



Amitava Basak- a weaver's story

Amitava Basak, the young entrepreneur from Phulia, one of Sasha's major producer groups has reasons to be proud of his achievements. In his twenties only, his dyeing & weaving unit's turnover of nearly tripled in the last three years and provides employment to around fifty families of weavers. But this is today. The foundation was laid in the past.

Rajen Basak, Amitava's father had migrated from Tangail, now in Bangladesh to settle in Phulia, West Bengal. He had been engaged in the ancestral occupation of weaving and was an active member of the weaver's cooperative (Tantubay Samabay Samiti). Shubhasisni- founder of Sasha knew him from his Samity days. But significant business association with Sasha began in 2002 when the Basaks began to execute export orders of Sasha.

Rajen started his work as an employee at the weaver's cooperative society, all the while practicing & learning the art of weaving. In 1978, for the first time he participated in 'The Festival of India' where handloom Sarees from Phulia were showcased. He left his job, and began organizing looms & weavers to produce handloom products- mainly scarves. During that period handlooms were facing stiff competition from power looms. But Rajen Basak managed to successfully organize them. In 1983 as part of the Festival of India, prominent Japanese designers visited West Bengal & specifically Phulia. They were impressed by Basak's work and placed orders. By this time Rajen Basak had already established his own business and single handedly managed to revive the traditional looms in his area & had been able to employ 50-100 weavers. Along with his son Amitava, he introduced significant changes in the mode of production and made the handlooms export oriented that resulted in better margins & profitability.

In the initial days, the living conditions as well as the social status of these weavers were poor. A situation came when all the looms were on



the verge of shutting down owing to lack of demand in the domestic market. Migration further aggravated the situation with widespread unemployment in the Phulia region. With Sasha's intervention- and export orders for scarves & stoles for fair trade buyers, things started looking up for some of the weavers. Sasha encouraged use of Azofree dyes & safe materials and facilitated improved processes to meet international standards and prevent environmental & health hazards.

With export-led growth, conditions of both men and women within the weaving community associated with the Basaks at Phulia has improved. Today, Phulia scarves and stoles by Amitava Basak have gained almost an iconic status, owing to their exquisite designs and excellent quality & are being featured in catalogues of renowned Fair Trade Marketers in Europe. Rajen & Amitava Basak in partnership with Sasha has brought this weavers group of Phulia into international limelight, showcasing their immense talent and skill.

The Basak's have been motivated by Sasha to make arrangements for systematic effluent treatment and providing extra social benefits to the committed weavers to set an example in the area.



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