



Bengal Silk's Decline And Transformation During Colonial Rule (1800–1900)

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Abstract: *During the early modern and colonial eras, Bengal's silk industry played a significant role in South Asia's economic and commercial history. Bengal, known for its exquisite raw silk and silk fabrics, developed into a significant hub for manufacturing and export under both native kings and European commercial firms. However, under British colonial control, the sector gradually declined and changed during the eighteenth century. The structural shifts that impacted Bengal's silk business between 1800 and 1900 are examined in this article. It contends that Bengal's transformation from a thriving silk-manufacturing zone to a provider of raw materials for European industries was caused by colonial economic policies, the growth of global capitalist markets, technological advancements in Europe, and environmental crises. The impact on peasant and artisan communities, the demise of indigenous weaving centres, the East India Company's role in monopolizing the silk trade, and Bengal's absorption into the global imperial economy are all extensively examined in this study. The essay shows how the evolution of Bengal's silk industry mirrored larger trends of colonial exploitation and deindustrialization in nineteenth-century India through an examination of colonial accounts, trade records, and secondary scholarship.*

Keywords: *Bengal Silk Industry; Colonial Economy; East India Company; Sericulture; Deindustrialization; Murshidabad; Silk Trade; British India; Colonial Capitalism; Nineteenth Century Bengal.*

Introduction: A significant period in the economic and social history of colonial India is represented by the history of Bengal's silk industry. Bengal was well-known around the world for the caliber of its silk goods long before British authority was consolidated. Locations like Birbhum, Rajshahi, Malda, and Murshidabad were significant hubs for silk weaving and sericulture. Bengali silk was exported to Europe, Persia, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, resulting in a thriving network of traders, artisans, merchants, and peasants. Due to Bengal silk's strong demand in European textile industries, European trading companies particularly the English East India Company had a keen interest in it by the seventeenth century. However, a significant turning point in the history of Bengal silk occurred in the nineteenth century. The organization of production and exchange was drastically changed by British industrial capitalism, colonial expansion, and shifting patterns of international trade. By substituting coercive contractual structures for native systems of business, the East India Company progressively monopolized the silk trade. While the export of raw silk grew more lucrative for colonial rulers, traditional weaving industries declined. Bengal became a source of raw materials rather than completed goods as a result of its incorporation into the global capitalist economy. Bengal silk's collapse was more than just a business issue. There were significant social and political repercussions as well. The poverty and debt of thousands of weavers, reelers, cultivators, and craftspeople increased. Colonial taxes, shifting market prices, and environmental problems like silkworm infections put growing hardship on rural people that relied on sericulture. Furthermore, local manufacturing systems were

further undermined by Britain's industrialization, which decreased European reliance on Bengali handmade silk fabrics.

The nineteenth-century decline and change of Bengal's silk industry are examined in this article. It makes the case that colonial rule altered the silk economy to suit the needs of industrial capitalism and imperial trade. Colonial policies subordinated Bengal's traditional manufacturing sectors to the demands of European markets, hastening deindustrialization rather than protecting indigenous industry. However, the article shows that the silk industry did not completely vanish; rather, it underwent a process of change marked by an increase in the export of raw silk, a shift in labor relations, and an adjustment to demands from the global economy.

Historiography: There has been much scholarly discussion on the historiography of India's textile industries during colonial rule. Colonialism was primarily seen by early nationalist historians as a harmful force that led to the downfall of local industries. Economic historians like R. C. Dutt contended that unfair commercial ties and exploitative taxation were two ways that British policies consistently damaged Indian industry. This interpretation holds that the devastation of India's traditional industries was a component of a larger colonial economic drain.

Subsequent historians deepened this discussion by looking more closely at local business networks and industries. Academics like Tirthankar Roy contended that many Indian companies adjusted to shifting market conditions and challenged oversimplified tales of demise. Roy highlighted the variety of local economic experiences during colonialism and the tenacity of indigenous enterprise. Revisionist historians did concede, nonetheless, that colonial absorption into international markets profoundly changed conventional industrial methods.

Particularly, research on Bengal silk has concentrated on the East India Company's function and the evolution of export networks. Om Prakash illustrated how Company officials directly intervened in production processes and emphasized the significance of Bengal silk in eighteenth-century European trade. In a same vein, researchers studying commercial history have demonstrated how the company used systems of advancement, forced contracts, and factory supervision to achieve monopolistic dominance. Deindustrialization is a significant area of research. Whether colonialism led to a complete industrial decline or only a structural change is a topic of discussion among historians. Evidence for Bengal silk points to both decline and adaptation. During some parts of the nineteenth century, raw silk exports increased even as weaving centers declined and craftsman livelihoods declined. Therefore, the idea of "transformation" might be more helpful than straightforward collapse tales.

Environmental influences and labor history have also been highlighted in recent research. The role of women and domestic work in sericulture has been studied by researchers, who have shown how rural households-maintained productivity in the face of increasingly challenging circumstances. Environmental historians have highlighted how mulberry farming and cocoon production were impacted by silkworm diseases, ecological deterioration, and agricultural developments. These methods extend knowledge of the silk business beyond commercial policies and trade data. By integrating economic, social, and environmental viewpoints, this essay expands on these historical discussions. It contends that market forces and industrial competitiveness are insufficient to account for Bengal silk's fall. Instead, it was the outcome of the interplay between ecological instability, global capitalism, technological advancement, and colonial policies.

Bengal Silk before Colonial Dominance: Bengal had one of Asia's most successful silk industry prior to British government rule. Bengal gained notoriety during the Mughal era for producing both raw silk and exquisite silk textiles. The region's rich environment allowed for widespread mulberry production, and talented craftspeople created sophisticated weaving and reeling methods. During the eighteenth century, Murshidabad became the main hub for the manufacture of silk. Merchants from all over Asia and Europe

came to the city. Communities of silk weavers, many of whom belonged to hereditary artisan families, played a significant role in the urban economy. Along with Murshidabad, Malda and Rajshahi developed became significant hubs for the production of raw silk and cocoons.

The Mughal government used networks of favor and taxation to promote business expansion. Silk manufacturers frequently worked within regional credit systems that were controlled by bankers and merchants. Bengal was linked to markets in North India, Persia, and Southeast Asia by indigenous economic networks. Both local marketplaces and elite courts used silk textiles. During the seventeenth century, European businesses entered this thriving commercial climate. In order to obtain silk and textiles, the Dutch, French, and English built mills in Bengal. These businesses initially relied significantly on regional brokers and merchants. But rivalry between European nations grew more intense throughout time, particularly after the English East India Company increased its authority after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. The Company had extensive control over Bengal's trade networks and revenue system by the late eighteenth century. Significant developments in the nineteenth-century silk business were made possible by this governmental shift.

The East India Company and the Monopoly of Silk Trade: Bengal's silk business was significantly transformed by the East India Company. The Company aimed to increase earnings by gaining direct control over the production and export of silk after its political dominance in Bengal. Because they believed Bengal silk was crucial to the production of textiles in Europe, company executives put systems in place to guarantee consistent, affordable supplies. The *dadni* system of advancements was one of the main control systems. Under this arrangement, producers had to supply silk only to Company agents and were given loans in advance. Despite being promoted as business contracts, these agreements frequently turned into coercive agreements. Producers who didn't reach quotas risked fines, product confiscation, or even jail time.

In significant production hubs like Murshidabad and Malda, the company built factories and filatures. These organizations oversaw the reeling process and made an effort to raise the standard of raw silk intended for export. In order to satisfy industrial demands in Britain and continental Europe, European supervisors created innovative production techniques. However, indigenous artisanal production systems were often disturbed by these initiatives. Local merchants and independent traders who had previously been essential to the silk sector were damaged by the monopoly regime. Native American business networks were becoming more and more subservient to corporate objectives. For financing and access to markets, a large number of weavers and reelers began to rely on colonial agents. Their salaries declined as a result of this dependency, which also diminished their bargaining power. Bengal's traditional weaving sector was also harmed by the company's focus on exporting raw silk. Colonial rulers gave priority on exporting raw materials for European manufacturing facilities rather than promoting the production of completed silk textiles within India. This change was a reflection of larger trends in colonial economic policy, where India was mainly used as a market for British-made industrial goods and as a producer of raw materials.

Industrial Capitalism and Global Competition: Global textile industry saw significant shifts in the nineteenth century. Through mechanization, industrial production, and technological advancement, the Industrial Revolution revolutionized European manufacturing. Machine-made items, which could be manufactured more cheaply and efficiently than handmade goods, became increasingly important to the British textile industries. Bengal silk was significantly impacted by these developments. European producers looked for uniform raw silk that could be processed and woven by machines. As a result, Bengali farmers were under pressure from colonial authorities to alter their conventional manufacturing techniques. Indigenous artisanal techniques were frequently at odds with the emphasis on export quality and uniformity.

Bengal also had to contend with increasing rivalry from other silk-producing nations, especially China and Japan. Due to its consistency and high quality, Chinese silk was in high demand in foreign markets. After the Meiji Restoration, Japanese silk exports increased dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Global competitiveness was further heightened by steamship technology and improved transportation networks. Bengal's standing in the global silk market consequently deteriorated significantly. Sharp price swings made it difficult for many local manufacturers to make ends meet. Although some raw silk exports persisted, the industry's profitability decreased. Although they disregarded the underlying disparities brought about by imperial trade policies, colonial rulers regularly chastised Indian manufacturers for low quality. Bengal's silk business was therefore profoundly altered by the shift in global capitalism. The area's reliance on outside markets, over which local manufacturers had little influence, grew. The livelihoods of Bengali artisans and peasants were directly impacted by economic decisions made in Manchester or London.

Decline of Indigenous Weaving Centres: The demise of Bengal's traditional weaving centers was perhaps the most obvious effect of colonial alteration. In the past, thousands of artisans in both urban and rural areas were employed in silk weaving. However, these communities gradually declined during the eighteenth century. This decrease was caused by a number of things. First, the demand for locally woven silk materials decreased as British industrial textiles flooded Indian markets. Products manufactured by machines could be more affordable than those prepared by hand. Second, colonial trade rules restricted Indian production while favoring British imports. Third, local weavers have less access to high-quality silk yarn due to the export-oriented focus on raw silk.

Economic uncertainty among artisans grew. Many weaving families switched from their traditional jobs to wage labor or agriculture. Much of the earlier business success of urban areas like Murshidabad was lost. Observers of the time saw dwindling numbers and worsening living conditions in artisan villages. There were cultural repercussions to weaving's collapse. In addition to being a commercial endeavor, silk weaving served as a storehouse of creative expertise and local identity. As skilled artisans moved abroad and workshops closed, methods that had been passed down through the centuries eventually vanished. However, the procedure was not uniform. In order to adapt, several weaving communities created specialty luxury goods for local markets. Others made it through networks of patronage connected to affluent landlords or princely courts. However, Bengal's silk weaving sector saw a significant downturn during the eighteenth century.

Labor, Poverty and Rural Society: Rural society was profoundly impacted by the change of Bengal's silk industry. The work of peasant households, including women and children, was essential to sericulture. Growing mulberries, raising cocoons, spinning, and reeling required a lot of hard labor that was mostly done within families. These labor relations were changed by colonial commercialization. Producers relied more and more on advances from individual merchants or company representatives. Particularly during times of agricultural failure or market volatility, debt spread widely. It was challenging for many cultivators to break free from cycles of dependency. The intricate interplay between colonialism, global capitalism, and indigenous economic structures is demonstrated by the development of Bengal's silk industry in the nineteenth century. Bengal, which was once regarded as one of Asia's best silk-producing regions, saw significant change during British colonial control. The demands of imperial trade and industrial capitalism progressively overtook the industry that had thrived during the Mughal era thanks to regional craftsmanship, local commercial networks, and international trade.

Conclusion: An important factor in this change was the East India Company. The Company changed the silk economy to benefit European industrial interests through direct participation in manufacturing processes, coercive contractual arrangements, and monopolistic control. The focus on exporting raw silk damaged indigenous merchant networks and local weaving customs, which had previously supported Bengal's economic growth. Bengal was incorporated into a larger imperial economy by colonial policy, although this integration took place under unfair circumstances that favored British producers over regional ones. The Bengal silk crisis worsened over the nineteenth century due to significant changes in the world economy. The European Industrial Revolution changed how textiles were created, making handmade silk goods less

competitive. Bengal's standing in foreign markets was further damaged by competition from silk producers in China and Japan. The globalization of trade was expedited by technological advancements in production and transportation, but local producers were subject to unpredictable market forces.

There were significant social repercussions from the silk industry's demise. As poverty, debt, and displacement increased, thousands of weavers, reelers, farmers, and craftspeople had to deal with it. Traditional weaving hubs like Murshidabad saw social collapse and economic stagnation. Under colonial commercialization, household-based sericulture, which was mostly dependent on the labor of women and children, became more unstable. During the colonial era, several areas of the Indian economy experienced deindustrialization, which was reflected in the decline of artisanal livelihoods. But Bengal silk's past shouldn't be interpreted as a tale of total collapse. Significant change and adaptation also occurred in the industry. The manufacture and export of raw silk persisted in modified forms while indigenous weaving decreased. Certain regional manufacturers responded to shifting commercial conditions, and some silk centers remained through specialized production and local patronage networks. These continuities show that rather than being completely consistent, colonial economic change was diverse and unequal.

In the end, Bengal's silk industry's change serves as an example of how colonialism reorganized regional economies to suit the demands of international imperial trade. Bengal's shift from being a significant manufacturer of completed silk textiles to a supplier of raw materials served as an example of the larger colonial pattern in which India became a dependent and subservient part of the global economy. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the fall of the silk industry within the broader context of colonial exploitation, uneven trade relations, and the growth of industrial capitalism rather than relying just on technological backwardness or market rivalry. Bengal silk research is still important for studying the social and cultural effects of imperial rule as well as for comprehending colonial economic history. The experiences of communities who produce silk show how local societies, labor structures, and artisanal traditions were impacted by changes in the global economy. In this way, the history of Bengal silk provides important insight into the more general processes of social upheaval, economic development, and cultural transition that defined colonial India in the nineteenth century.

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