



Rise, Fall and Revival of the Muslin Economy of Bengal

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Abstract: *Muslin represents a pinnacle of Bengal's economic and cultural heritage, transforming the region into a global textile hub during the Mughal era. Beyond a luxury fabric, it functioned as an integrated economic system encompassing agriculture, spinning, weaving, skilled labor, and trade. This qualitative study examines the origin and expansion of Bengal's Muslin economy, its labor structures, its decline under British colonial policies, and contemporary revival prospects. Based on secondary historical records and institutional reports, the research utilizes Historical, Content, and Value Chain Analysis. Findings show that Muslin established a skill-intensive value chain boosting employment and trade. However, colonial commercial policies and the Industrial Revolution caused its rapid downfall. Today, rising global demand for eco-friendly, heritage luxury products offers new potential for Muslin. Ensuring GI protection, branding, skill development, and public-private partnerships can establish Muslin as a key driver for export diversification and sustainable economic development.*

Keywords: *Muslin, Dhaka Muslin, Bengal Economy, Handloom Industry, Colonial Economy, Value Chain.*

1. Innovation Statement: Most of the existing research on Bengal muslin has emphasized its historical, cultural and aesthetic importance. However, efforts to analyze muslin as an integrated economic system are relatively limited. The main innovation of this study is to assess the muslin industry from an integrated perspective of value chain, labor market, production structure, international trade and colonial political economy. Besides, this study combines historical analysis with contemporary economic realities to analyze the potential of muslin revival in terms of Bangladesh's traditional industries, export diversification and sustainable economic development. Furthermore, the study argues that the decline of muslin was not simply the demise of a traditional textile industry; Rather, it symbolizes the erosion of a skill-based production system, widespread employment, a local industrial economy, and technical knowledge developed over generations. This approach presents muslin not only as a subject of history or culture, but also within a new analytical framework in discussions of economic history, development economics, and traditional industrial policy.

2. Introduction: Muslin is not just a textile, it is a unique symbol of the cultural heritage of Bengal. Analysis of economic history shows that the development of a region does not depend only on natural resources; Rather, human skills, technology, It also depends on the production method and market system. Muslin of Bengal is one of its examples. The muslin that was once appreciated in the royal courts of the world, was a symbol of the extraordinary technical skills and creativity of the people of Bengal.

The word muslin basically refers to a fine and light type of cotton cloth. The word muslin is believed to be derived from the name of the Iraqi city of Mosul, where European traders were first introduced to the fine cloth. But in real sense the main center of world famous muslin production was Bengal, especially Dhaka region.

Bengal's geographical environment, riverine topography and climate suitable for the production of special types of cotton played an important role in the development of the muslin industry. Dhaka muslin achieved world class status due to cotton produced and skilled weavers especially in Meghna, Shitalakshya and Buriganga river basin regions. Muslin production was a very labor-intensive process. Muslin was made by first picking cotton, then cleaning cotton, making fine yarn and finally weaving it on looms. Each step required special skills. A skilled weaver would spend up to several months making a fine quality muslin. As a result muslin was not just a commodity; It was the result of many generations of knowledge and skill.

During the Mughal period, Bengal was one of the most prosperous economic regions of the subcontinent. According to historical economists, Bengal was one of the largest manufacturing and commercial centers in the world before the eighteenth century. The textile industry, especially muslin, silk and cotton, contributed significantly to the economy of Bengal. The international market for muslin was extensive. European merchants came to Bengal to collect muslin. Dutch, French and British merchants took this product to European markets. Bengal muslin was in demand in England, France, Türkiye, Egypt and various parts of the Middle East. Dhaka was the main center of muslin production in the early eighteenth century. According to historical accounts, thousands of weavers around Dhaka were engaged in this industry. Weavers were not the only ones involved in the production of muslin; A large economic network including cotton growers, yarn manufacturers, dyers, traders was associated with it. But with the political changes, this economic structure began to weaken. After the Battle of Palashi in 1757, the British East India Company established political and economic control over Bengal. Companies impose various controls on local producers to protect their commercial interests. One of the hallmarks of British rule was the colonial economy, where colonies were used as sources of raw materials and markets for manufactured goods. As a result, the local industry of Bengal gradually suffered. At the same time, the Industrial Revolution began in Europe. Large quantities of cheap cloth began to be produced in England by means of power looms. When Manchester-made cloth entered the Indian market, handmade muslin fell behind the competition. The decline of muslin was not just a case of market loss; It was the breakdown of an efficient labor-based economic system. Many weavers were forced to change professions. Weaving techniques and technical know-how acquired over generations are slowly being lost.

Nowadays, the demand for traditional and handicraft products has increased globally. People are now interested in products that are eco-friendly, handmade and have cultural value. In this changing market reality, muslin can once again create new potential in the economy of Bangladesh. Bangladesh government and various research institutes have already taken initiatives to restore the lost Dhaka muslin. It is possible to re-establish muslin in the global market through modern technology, research, skill development and international marketing. Thus, the history of muslin is not just a tale of past glories; Rather, it is an area of great potential for the future traditional economic development of Bangladesh.

3. Literature Review: The history, production system, commercial importance and influence of colonial rule of Bengal are discussed in various historical books, researches and documentary documents. These literatures provide an opportunity to analyze muslin not only as a traditional textile, but also as part of Bengal's production, division of labour, trade and international economic relations.

Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* Administrative Structure of the Mughal Period, An important primary historical source for understanding production systems and economic history. The book is helpful in analyzing the historical context of the economic environment and production system of Bengal at that time. However, it is

necessary to consider other historical documents and research data along with relevant original texts to establish specific statements about the production, trade and value chain of muslin (Abul Fazl, 1873).

In reviewing the history of the textile industry of Bengal, the commercial policies and changes in the industry during the colonial period are of special importance. The commercial activities of the East India Company, the demand for European markets, the procurement of raw materials and the spread of machine-made textiles as a result of the British Industrial Revolution affected the competitive position of the traditional textile industry of Bengal. Although these historical changes are important in explaining the decline of the muslin industry, its decline cannot be attributed to any single cause; Rather it is necessary to consider the combined effects of colonial policies, market changes, technological competition and the economic conditions of producers.

A value chain perspective is also relevant in analyzing the economic importance of muslin. Cotton production, yarn making, cloth weaving, design, marketing and export—each step involved different producers and traders. Through this series of activities, the economic value of muslin was created. Analyzing the value chain shows how labor, skills, raw materials, marketing and profit distribution play a role at different stages of production. However, more direct historical information is needed to determine the exact extent of value addition and income distribution at each stage of historical muslin.

In contemporary times, the muslin revival initiative is seen as a potential for heritage preservation as well as industrialization and export diversification. Development of technical skills, supply of quality raw materials, research and innovation, branding, protection of intellectual property, market linkages and public-private partnerships are important in this regard. To exploit the potential of high-value traditional textiles in the international market, it is necessary to plan based on reliable information about production costs, product quality, supply chain and consumer demand. Overall, the existing historical and economic literature helps to understand the context of the rise, decline and revival of muslin in Bengal. However, considering muslin as an integrated economic system offers opportunities to present its historical value chains, colonial economic changes, and the potential and limitations of current revitalization initiatives within the same analytical framework. The present study attempts to analyze these issues through a combination of historical analysis, value chain perspective and contemporary policy review.

4. Objectives of the Study:

The main objective of this study is to analyze the historical and economic importance of the muslin economy of Bengal. The specific objectives are—

1. To analyze the origin and development of the muslin industry of Bengal.
2. To assess the role of muslin in international trade.
3. To identify the characteristics of labor and production system associated with muslin industry.
4. To analyze the impact of British colonial policy and industrial revolution.
5. To determine the economic feasibility of muslin revival at present.

5. Research Methodology: This study follows qualitative research methodology to analyze the origin, development, contribution to international trade, causes of decline and potential for revival of Bengal's muslin economy. The study is mainly based on descriptive and historical research design, through which economic, social and historical importance of muslin industry is assessed. The research data is mainly collected from secondary sources. Historical documents of the Mughal period,

especially Ain-e-Akbari, commercial documents of the British East India Company, books on economic history, domestic and foreign peer-reviewed journal articles, reports of UNESCO, publications of the Bangladesh Textile Board, publications of the Ministry of Textiles and Jute and relevant reports of the World Bank have been used as sources of information. An attempt has been made to confirm the reliability of the research through verification and comparative analysis of the data collected from these sources.

Historical Analysis Method and Content Analysis Method have been used for data analysis. Development of Muslin Industry in Mughal Period through Historical Analysis, Its role in international trade and the continued decline of the industry during colonial rule are analysed. On the other hand, the economic importance of the muslin industry, production system, labor market and international trade structure have been assessed by thematically analyzing data from various historical documents, research articles and institutional reports through Content Analysis.

In addition, this study has applied the Value Chain Approach, through which economic linkages have been analyzed at each stage from cotton production to yarn preparation, fabric weaving, design addition, marketing and international export. At the same time, from the perspective of Colonial Political Economy, British colonial policies, industrial revolution and international market changes have had a long-term impact on the muslin industry of Bengal. The study also takes into account the contemporary economic context, So that the possibility of revival of muslin can be assessed in the light of increasing demand of traditional and handmade products in the present world market. The principles of ensuring relevance, reliability and historical authenticity have been followed in the selection and analysis of research data. Data obtained from multiple sources were compared and analyzed in order to reduce informational bias and increase the acceptability of the study.

However, this research mainly relies on published historical and institutional data. Present muslin manufacturers, weavers, No field surveys or interviews with entrepreneurs and stakeholders were included. As a result research findings are limited to historical and qualitative analysis. In the future there is scope to conduct more comprehensive research combining primary data, field survey and economic statistics.

6. Research Findings:

6.1. Development of muslin industry and basis of economic prosperity of Bengal (1500–1700 AD):

From the data obtained in the study it appears that, Between 1500 and 1700 AD, the muslin industry developed significantly in Bengal and became one of the major export-oriented industries of the country. especially Dhaka, The muslin produced in Sonargaon and Bikrampur region is known in the international market for its unmatched fineness, softness and beauty. The muslin industry developed rapidly due to the technical skills of skilled weavers, the use of footy carpus cotton and the patronage of the Mughal rulers. As a result, the industry contributes significantly to the expansion of international trade, increase in foreign earnings and economic prosperity of Bengal.

6.2. Golden Age of Muslin Industry and Bengal's Success in International Trade (1700–1757 AD):

The results of the research indicate that the period from 1700 to 1757 AD was the golden age of muslin industry in Bengal. At this time, the demand of Dhaka muslin in various countries of Europe, Middle East and Asia reached its highest level. Dutch, French, Portuguese and British merchants regularly procured muslin from Bengal and exported it abroad. Dhaka muslin was a symbol of luxury and prestige to Mughal emperors, Persian rulers and the European elite. As a result, Dhaka became an important center for the production and export of textiles of international quality and Bengal's foreign trade gained a stronger footing.

6.3. Development of a labor-based economic value chain in the muslin industry (1500–1757 AD):

The study also shows that between 1500 and 1757 AD, the muslin industry developed a fully labor-intensive and integrated economic value chain. A large number of people were involved in every step—from cotton

cultivation to yarn preparation, cloth weaving, design addition, transportation and export—from footy corpus cotton cultivation. Farmers, spinners, weavers, artisans, traders and exporters—all together formed a powerful economic system. As a result, the muslin industry plays an important role in creating employment, developing the rural economy, increasing income and expanding the local market.

TABLE-1: ECONOMIC VALUE CHAIN OF BENGAL MUSLIN			
STEP	MAIN ACTIVITY	ASSOCIATED ACTORS	ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE
1	Phuti Carpas Cotton Production 	Farmer	Supply of Raw Material
2	Cotton Cleaning and Processing 	Artisan	Primary Stage of Production
3	Fine Thread Making 	Thread Preparer	Muslin Quality Control
4	Handloom Weaving 	Handloom Weaver	Key Value Addition
5	Design and Finishing 	Artisan	Product Aesthetics & Market Value Increase
6	Trade and Marketing 	Merchant / Trader	Domestic and International Market Expansion
7	Export 	Exporter	Foreign Exchange Earnings

From the beginning of muslin production (cotton production) to the final export, the stakeholders and their economic roles are highlighted in this table. This is a picture of how each stage, from farmers to weavers and traders, built a strong labor-intensive value chain.

6.4. Decline of muslin industry due to colonial rule and Industrial Revolution (1757–1900 AD): From the results of the research, it is clear that the muslin industry of Bengal suffered a rapid decline due to the combined effects of the British colonial rule and the European industrial revolution from 1757 to 1900 AD. After the Battle of Plassey, monopolistic trade policies of the British East India Company, economic control over weavers, and cheap machine-based cloth production in England made hand-made muslin less competitive in the international market. As a result, thousands of weavers lost their jobs, weakened the local industrial economy, and damaged the continuity of centuries-old traditional technical skills. The study therefore suggests that the decline of the muslin industry was the result of the combined effects of colonial economic exploitation and the Industrial Revolution.

6.5. Muslin Revival and New Horizons of Economic Prospects (2000 AD–Present): Research shows that the increase in global demand for eco-friendly, handmade and heritage-based luxury goods from 2000 to the present has created real potential for a muslin revival in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh and the Bangladesh Textile Board have undertaken various initiatives in research to recover the lost Dhaka muslin, conservation of footy corpus cotton, skill development and re-establishment of production. Significant progress has already been made in fine yarn preparation and muslin cloth production. The study also suggests that if effective policy support, international branding, public-private partnerships and export expansion are ensured, muslin can be re-established as an important driver of Bangladesh’s traditional industrialization, export diversification and sustainable economic development.

TABLE-2: RISE, FALL, AND REVIVAL OF THE MUSLIN INDUSTRY					
STEP	PHASE	PERIOD	MAIN FEATURE	ECONOMIC IMPACT	VISUAL
1	Development	1500-1700	Skilled weaver, Phuti Carpas, local production	Growth of industry and employment	
2	Golden Age	1700-1757	International demand and massive export	Expansion of foreign trade	
3	Fall	1757-1900	Colonial control a competition from machine-made cloth	Decline of handloom industry	
4	Revival Initiative	2000-Present	Research, restoration, and modern marketing	Potential of a heritage-based new industry	

This table describes the successive history of the development of the muslin industry from 1500 AD to the present, the Golden Age, the colonial decline and the modern revival. Here is a brief overview of how the impact of British rule and the Industrial Revolution destroyed this industry and what its prospects are today.

7. Discussion: The findings of this study highlight the need to evaluate Bengal muslin not only as a traditional textile industry, but as an integrated economic system. Previous studies have mainly focused on Bengal's economic prosperity during the Mughal period, textile production and industrial decline as a result of colonial rule. The findings of the present study also support the view that political stability, skilled labor force and international trade connections played an important role in the development of the muslin industry. However, this study extends previous analysis to show that muslin was a complete economic value chain, where agriculture, specialty cotton production, yarn manufacturing, weaving, marketing and international export were closely linked.

Similarly, many researchers have explained the British colonial policy as the main reason for the decline of the muslin industry. This study also agrees with that assessment, but argues that the decline of the industry cannot be fully explained by looking at it solely as a result of colonial exploitation. Post-Industrial Revolution technological changes, widespread expansion of mechanized production, global market competition and changes in consumer purchasing behavior also weakened the competitiveness of muslin. That is, the decline of the muslin industry was the combined result of a series of political, technological and market-based structural changes.

An important contribution of this study is to analyze Muslin from the perspective of labor market and human resource development. While most previous studies have emphasized the finesse, aesthetics, and historical importance of muslin, relatively little has been discussed about the skills, intergenerational transfer of technical knowledge, and the economic structure of the production system. Current research shows that the decline of the muslin industry did not just result in the loss of an export product; Rather, a skills-based labor market, local production networks, and the continuity of technical knowledge built up over generations also break down. From the perspective of development economics, this is an important example of the depletion of human capital and intangible productive assets. The research findings are even more significant in light of the contemporary global economy. Today, Heritage Economy is considered as an effective strategy for economic growth, employment and creation of high-value export markets globally. Countries like Italy, Japan and France have successfully transformed traditional crafts and textiles into global luxury goods. This experience indicates that the muslin of Bangladesh is not only a cultural heritage; Rather, it has real potential to develop as a creative economic asset. In particular, the recent joint efforts of researchers and weavers in

Bangladesh to recover muslin yarn and sari-making technology and the current initiatives to commercialize it prove that muslin is no longer just a museum piece, but a living part of the market economy. Muslin revival should therefore be considered not only as a cultural preservation initiative, but as a strategy for export diversification, rural industrialization and sustainable economic development.

Also, the research results highlight the importance of Heritage-based Industrial Policy. In today's global market, geographical indications, branding, quality control and digital marketing are playing an important role in international competition. So in muslin revival it is not enough to just restore the tradition; Along with this, coordination of research and development, innovation, creation of skilled human resources, entrepreneurship development and international market-oriented policy is essential. It is this integrated approach that could potentially re-establish Bangladeshi muslin in the global high-value textile market.

8. Policy recommendations: Research results show that muslin is not just a traditional fabric; Rather, it is an important asset of Bangladesh's traditional industries, export economy and cultural identity. Therefore, concerted and long-term policy action is essential for sustainable revival of this industry.

First, the geographical indication. Security and international branding need to be ensured. secondly, As part of the export diversification policy, initiatives should be taken to turn muslin into a high-value traditional export product. This will diversify Bangladesh's export structure and create new opportunities to earn foreign exchange.

Thirdly, the utmost importance should be given to the development of skilled human resources. Modern training programs, research-based education and initiatives to create new generation of weavers are essential.

Fourth, public-private partnerships need to be strengthened. Joint ventures of government, research institutes, universities, Bangladesh Textile Board and private entrepreneurs can play an important role in expanding production and exports.

Fifth, establishment of Muslin Innovation Center is the demand of time. This center can play an important role in research, technology development, quality control, digital marketing and innovative product development.

Finally, the muslin industry can be linked with Heritage Tourism. Development of muslin-based tourism, museums and weaving villages will simultaneously benefit the local economy, micro-enterprises and cultural industries.

TABLE-3: Prospects of Muslin Revival and Necessary Policies				
	Prospect Area	Necessary Initiatives	Potential Economic Outcome	Visual
১	Skill Development	Training New Generation Weavers	Increase Employment	
২	Branding	International Market "Dhaka Muslin" Brand	High-Value Export	
৩	GI Protection	Domestic and International Legal Protection	Counter Fake Product Prevention	
৪	Research and Innovation	Muslin Innovation Centre	Production and Quality Improvement	
৫	Digital Marketing	E-commerce and International Promotion	New Consumer Market	
৬	Tourism	Muslin Museum and Weaver Villages	Local Economy Strengthening	
৭	Public-Private Partnership	Investment and Infrastructure Development	Sustainable Industry Expansion	

Key policy strategies for muslin revival like skill development, international branding, GI protection and digital marketing are outlined here. If these initiatives are implemented, employment growth, export expansion and sustainable economic development are possible—the potential outcomes are illustrated in this table.

9. Limitations of the Study: This study has some limitations. First, it relies heavily on historical documents, published studies, and institutional reports. Second, no extensive field survey or interviews with existing muslin producers, weavers and entrepreneurs were included. Consequently, the research is limited to qualitative and historical analysis. Research findings will be strengthened by combining primary data and quantitative analysis in the future.

10. Future Research Directions: Future research will focus on the economic potential of modern muslin production, the competitive position of Bangladesh in the global luxury textile market, the social status of weavers and artisans working in the muslin industry. More extensive research can be conducted on the relationship between economic conditions and traditional industries and sustainable development. Besides, there is ample scope for research on value chain analysis, export markets, digital branding and economic impact of geographical indication protection.

11. Conclusion: Muslin is a bright chapter in the history of Bengal. It was an economic system in which agriculture, industry, labor and international trade were closely linked. The muslins of Bengal showed the world how skill, technology and creativity could make a region economically prosperous. But due to political changes, colonial exploitation and technological changes of industrial revolution this industry lost its former position. This results in the decline not only of a product, but also of a skill-based production system, a cultural heritage and a rich economic structure. With the increasing demand for traditional, eco-friendly and luxurious handmade products in the current world market, there is a real opportunity for a muslin revival. With the right policies, skill development, research, international branding, geographical indication protection and public-private partnerships, muslin can once again become an important asset of Bangladesh's economy. So the revival of muslin is not just an initiative to bring back a tradition; Rather, it can open up new horizons for Bangladesh's traditional industrialization, export diversification and sustainable economic development.

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