

## Objective of the Thesis

The title of the thesis makes it relevant to an analysis which covers a period of more than two hundred and fifty years - from the establishment of the Malda factory by the East India Company in 1680 A.D. to the end of the British rule in 1947. Writing the history of a particular industry of a region covering such a long period, undoubtedly, poses some serious problems and may seem to be an overambitious project. This is an attempt to vent some of the justifications we have.

From a first hand knowledge of the silk industry in the Malda region some important questions would arise. First, although Malda for centuries was a centre for silk manufacture - from sericulture to silk weaving, why is it a producer of only raw silk at present? Secondly, how did the mahajani system emerge which is the prime cause of present day malady in the silk industry of this area? From our knowledge about the effects of British policies of trade, land and revenue on the economic life of this region, there are reasons to believe that the existing organisation of the silk industry is a hang over of the colonial days. Hence, our interest in economic history is an outcome of our quest towards an understanding of the problems and studying the colonial process of development in the silk industry of Malda.

Although the debate on the fate of India's traditional industries began since the late nineteenth century, recent studies in 'de-industrialization' have drawn our attention to the differential impact of colonial developments on different sections of local handicraftsmen and the sharp fluctuations that accompanied the process of tying up India's regional economics with the metropolitan economy of Britain. It is this aspect that we have sought to highlight in our analysis of a retrogression in Malda, viz., from manufacturing of silk articles to the production of raw silk, which we believe to be a process of decline. This we sought to do because we observed a few important things in the available historical accounts as well as in the findings of our initial investigations. First, the decline of the silk industry of Malda attained two distinctive stages : (1) from weaving to a specialization in raw silk, and (2) an absolute stagnation in the specialized industry. Secondly, K.N. Chaudhuri while editing a few 19th century writings in his outstanding book "The Economic Development of India Under the East India Company (1814-58)" has given a scholastic analysis of the fact that it was England's strategy to convert, through conscious exploitation, her colonies into primary producing countries; and the political and economic influence of Britain entirely transformed Indian exports into the category of primary commodities. Dr. A. Sarada Raju in her "Economic conditions in the Madras Presidency (1800-

1850)" has also stressed that decline of handicrafts was the most significant feature of the first half of the 19th century. But the effects of this policy on the Malda region, like many other parts of the country, was different in respect of cotton and silk weaving. As against the eclipse of silk weaving, handloom cotton weaving (medium and coarse varieties only) has survived up to the present day. Our specific interest lay in the study of silk weaving only. Thirdly, in the process of colonialization of the silk industry certain related issues arise, e.g. specialization in raw silk and technological change or specialization and the growth of entrepreneurship. Similarly, in the course of colonial development and specialization the real burden fell on the basic growers - the peasants and artisans; such oppression was, of course, met with various forms of resistance. In our study, we have tried to combine these issues with the central issue, because we are of the opinion that they are inseparable.

On the logical plane, the structure of this dissertation requires an analysis of both the general trend in Bengal silk and the particular case of Malda region. The methodology used in this thesis is one of testing the hypotheses posed in course of our discussion on the one hand and analysing primary source materials on the other. For both the purposes we depend on unpublished original primary documents of the Malda Collectorate Record Room and

West Bengal State Archives as well as Published Reports and Proceedings available. We also depend on Gazetteers and similar records and various books, articles, papers, dissertations etc. in the related field of study. We have tried to use these as evidence of the pre-colonial through the colonial policy of commerce exerted by the East India Company and the British crown.

Our special emphasis is on the primary documents of the Malda Collectorate Record Room unused in any dissertation so far. These documents have been available after a good deal of endeavour and have been used in the context of a limited period only - the second half of the 19th century. Discussion of this period has almost been entirely based on such virgin documents and we could not incorporate a large portion of them as they are not directly related to the basic objective of study. In only one context (Chapter II) we quoted from Sushil Chaudhuri's book "Trade and Commercialization in Bengal (1650-1720)" some valuable records important to our discussion. They are some Factory Records of Malda and other factories as well as Despatch Books of the East India Company preserved in the India Office Records Library in the U.K. These records are not available in India and for obvious reasons it was not possible for us to consult the original documents housed in London.

Nevertheless, regarding the limitations of presenting

a dissertation that covers such a long period, we struggled hard to overcome the difficulties involved. Reflections of this struggle might be had on the mode of our discussion. A few examples may be cited. First, in course of narration, a kind of detailed chronological survey was not possible. We were bound to choose an analytical view point regarding the nature and course of development and bound to leap forward whenever required in view of the reasoning : we did not attempt to cover all the events and perhaps that was not possible also. Similarly, on some occasions our discussion may seem to go a little back and forth. This we did to centre attention upon the analytical point in focus; a mere running commentary in chronological sequence is not our objective. Secondly, pruning of documentary materials in hand became inevitable, although we had to <sup>use</sup> ~~use~~ frequently a good number of references to our comments which we wanted to make authentic. This was required specially because the history of the silk industry of this region has not been compiled so far.

In this connection, we would like to mention that Chapter I is not an integral part of the main body of the thesis, but these pages had to be written to highlight :

- (i) that the region enjoys the glory of being the ancient haven of silk which came from China,
- (ii) the pre-British structure of the industry, and
- (iii) the source of attraction of this regional industry to the Europeans. This

chapter has been constructed to assist in a better understanding of the following chapters.

Similarly, in our discussion of the period 1914-47 we did not intend to analyse all the details. What we tried to emphasize was our observation that during this period the conscious attempts to arrest the decline of the silk industry of Malda was bound to be futile under the conditions of a backward organisational set up that had taken a firm grip over the industry by this time. It is also our intention to emphasize here that the same backward organisation prevented Malda from deriving the positive effects of the War impetus.

We had to limit our analysis within such definite lines because our objective is to study the causes and nature of decline with special reference to the British colonial policy as well as the implications of such decline in the subsequent development of the silk industry of Malda region up to the end of the British rule.