

INTRODUCTION

Of the two major industries of pre-colonial Bengal, one being the Silk and the other textile, the silk industry used to play a significant role to provide employment for the Bengal artisans. Silk production was indeed voluminous, and in the domestic market as well as in the export trade, since early 17th century, silk's importance as an export commodity was undeniable. Not only that, even when the textile trade started to decline the preference for Bengal raw silk in the European market was steadily sustained by the in-put requirements of the expanding industrial sector of England. In the years 1775 and 1780 the total textile export of the East India Company amounted to £280190 and £128570 respectively while silk export during the same years amounted to £297645 and £515913. So, for one reason or the other the European Joint Stock Companies which were operating in Bengal since the 17th century appeared to have enhanced their investment in Bengal silk.

But what was crucial for Bengal silk industries was that the East India Company, being the most important of them, not only changed its investment policy but it had changed its import policy too in the 18th century. The imperatives of market for the industrial products of England served to dictate the commercial policy of the East India Company. A preventive tariff imposed by the British Parliament in 1701 on imported Bengal silk fabrics destroyed its competitiveness in the English market, and further, it gradually excluded silk fabric from the E.I. Company's shopping list. Whatever silk product was imported by the E.I. Company that we have collected from the records of the Board of Trade was induced by Bengal silk's non-British consumer market. However, while importing Bengal silk fabric another policy change had been introduced, and instead of importing finished silk products such as Choppis and bandannas i.e., printed and embroidered silk, as in the previous decades, the preference shifted to the import of corah silk fabric, a kind of plain cloth which could be worked upon according to the taste of the European consumers. For all practical purposes,

from the middle of 18th century import of raw silk from Bengal ruled the roost. It is interesting to note that during the early decades of the 19th century another abrupt swing took place in the export market replacing quality raw silk by chussum, a kind of waste silk.

While the market forces appeared to have operated whimsically with reference to Bengal raw silk corresponding to the E.I. Company's ascension to political and economic power, its procurement policies also had undergone debilitating change for the industry. Initially, the E.I. Company acted within the framework of the indigenous market forces and financing policies. From outright purchase the Company switched over to partial financing either through the 'dadni system' i.e., advances offered to the primary producers through the middle men, or by contract, popularly known as 'contract system'. So, the E.I. Company, along with other European companies, had been seeking to set up their Factories in the vicinity of the production centres to gain advantage. And in the process many aurangs i.e., ware houses were also established in the proximity of the silk villages. There was no monopsonistic tendency observable at that time. Nor were the companies appear to be interested to interfere in the production process. A free market economy stimulated production, dictated profit and wages and in the absence of sufficient working capital the industry suffered technology shyness.

But the post-Plassey and post-Dewani phases were significant in the sense that a radical change was introduced in the E.I. Company's commercial policy. It sought to interfere in the production-organisation by disturbing the erstwhile production-relations. From a trading organisation the E.I. Company emerged as a producer organisation by not only introducing filature but also by undertaking reeling operation itself. Besides, in moriculture as well as in sericulture the Company undertook experimental measures with new in-puts. All of it, it is understandable, had been done to step up production and to standardise the product needed by the European market.

Consequently, competitive market had gradually disappeared and all that remained of the Bengal silk industry was a subordinate ancillary of the British textile manufacture. Political power enabled the East India Company to bring about this transformation.

All the studies of Bengal silk industry at the inception were addressed to explore its commercial aspects, examining mostly the European market. Later, after the industry had almost collapsed some efforts were made to understand modalities of production in this industry to revive it. But those exercises appear to us to be insufficient. While the need to revive the industry justifies us to undertake this research, the inadequacy of all previous studies further necessitated our exploring those aspects of silk production which were integral to the system. Marketing mechanism of course has changed over the years and the capital in-put from the official sources too has increased many times, yet Murshidabad had succeeded to produce inferior quality silk only, while Malda could not be activated even now as production centre. Silk does not occupy the place which it once proudly held in the economy of Bengal.

After independence, the service sector has certainly opened new employment opportunities in these regions but the absence of any substitute industry and only marginal improvement in agriculture have left the economic scenario full of misgivings. Therefore, it may be presumed that there is no substitute of silk in this sector. So, its revival requires another serious investigation not only in the export market and the production-organisation but in the vital production-relations also in order to put the industry to familiar terms. The nexus between different caste operating in different ancillaries of the silk industry, the indigenous finance and the marketing mechanism, which had existed long before the intrusion of colonialism and its put-out system, do not seem to have lost all its relevance even now for the resuscitation of the industry. Besides, its employment capacity too has been examined in order to high-light the fact that either the silk industry should be revived to enhance

the employment potentiality in the region to the early 19th century level, or some other appropriate measures should be taken for income generation here.

According to our calculation about 30% of the working population of Malda and Murshidabad had depended on silk manufacture for subsistence. And after its dissipation all of them had turned into economic fugitives. It is not that the technology had disappeared a sizeable section of the population had been dispossessed of a gainful occupation. The collapse of the industry had left a void in employment which continued to survive till today. The burgeoning global silk market has impressed upon the government the necessity of its revival, but what is wrong with the government policy is to try to revive it in unfamiliar grounds, while the experience of the Malda and Murshidabad artisans suggests that the industry should pick up its lost thread from here.

LOCATION MAP OF MALDA AND MURSHIDABAD DISTRICT

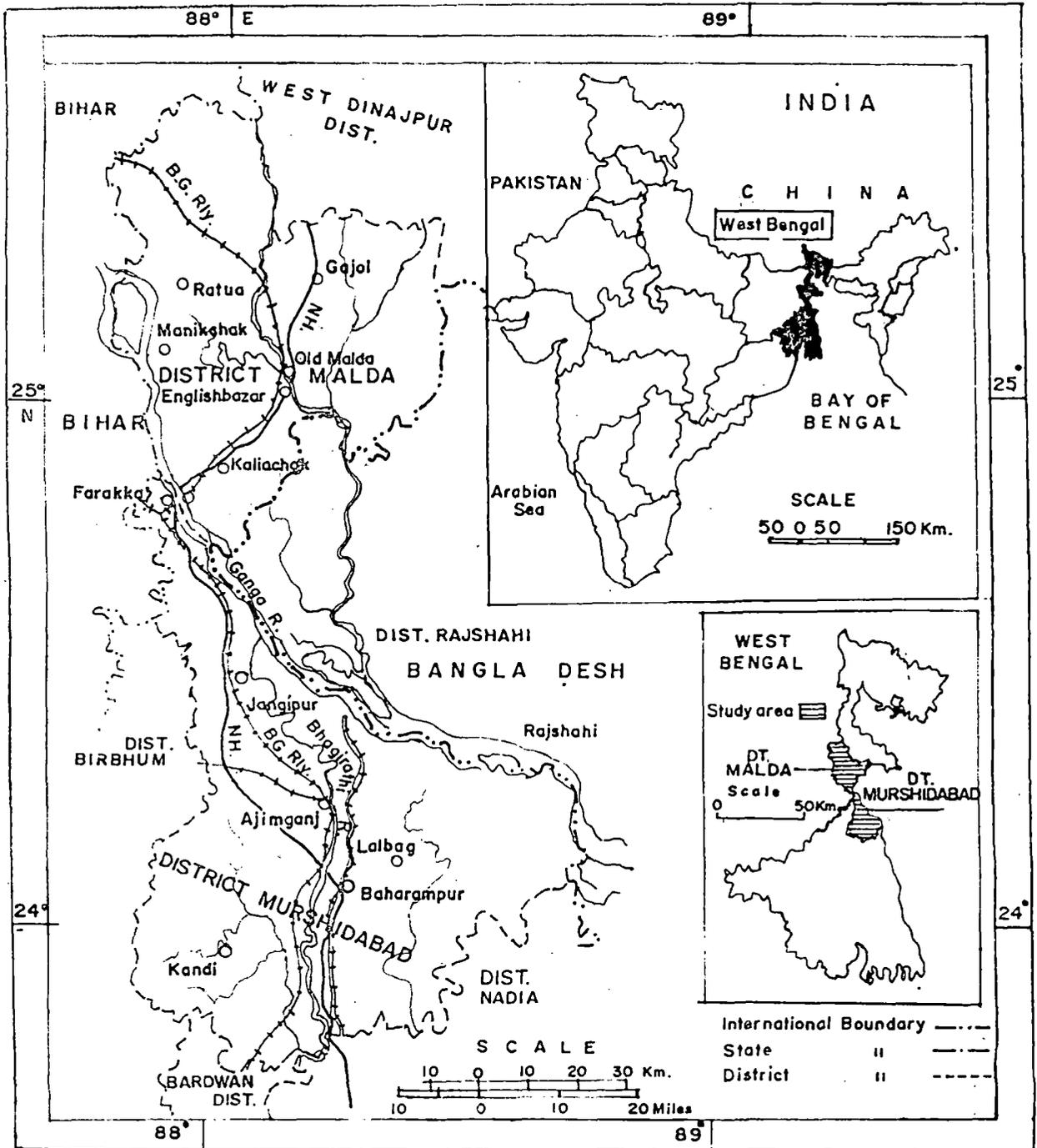


Fig - 1

MAP SHOWING THE RIVERS
OF MALDA AND MURSHIDABAD
DISTRICT

