

CHAPTER - 5

SILK IN THE ECONOMY OF MALDA AND MURSHIDABAD AND ITS DECLINE:

Silk being one of the notable industries of Bengal its decline in the colonial period affected not only the lives of the people of Malda and Murshidabad but the economy of Bengal also. It was not the policy of the East India Company to foster Indian Industries. The main object of the Company was to procure raw silk for the textile industry of Great Britain. The Court of Directors wanted that the production of raw silk should be encouraged and that of silk fabrics should be discouraged.¹ They further directed that the silk-winders should be forced to work in the Company's factories and were not to be allowed to work elsewhere "under severe penalties." A large number of people was engaged in weaving upto the 18th century. A few hundred-thousand men and women eked out their existence by their earnings from spinning and dyeing. But as a result of the policy of the Company the manufacture of Silk declined and the people who were engaged in previous centuries in exporting silk fabrics to the markets of Europe and Asia began to import them in increasing quantities.² Before going into the factors that expedited the decline of the silk industry, I would examine the position of silk in the economy of Malda and Murshidabad and what it had become by the early decades of the 19th century. That would help to disclose the East India Company's exploitation of the silk industry which was once interwoven with the lives and occupation of the people of Bengal.

I

As we have already explained, silk's importance as an article of dress was very old in India. According to Robert Orme it was difficult to find a village in which every man, woman and child was not employed in making a piece of cloth.³ Sericulture was largely practised and the people of Malda and Murshidabad were

expert in it. They knew the subtleness in the art of winding and weaving. Like Malda and Murshidabad there were other places outside Bengal that were also famous for silk manufacture. Benares was famous for the manufacture of costliest silk embroidered with gold threads. This type of silk fabric was not manufactured in Bengal. But the raw materials used in Benares looms were imported from Bengal and the Benares embroidered silk cloths were extensively used by well-to-do people of Bengal. "The silk industry of Benares was intimately connected with that of Bengal."⁴ It was also applicable to the silk weaving industry of Bombay and Gujrat. As the Hindu population of Bengal and other parts of India used indigenous silk cloths on ceremonial occasions, so silk always had a large internal market.

Silk was cultivated in large areas of Bengal. In Murshidabad, mulberry cultivation and cocoon-growing were in vogue in the areas of Chawk-Islampur, Saktipur, Jangipur, Bhadrapur, Balashpur, Rajarampur, Mirzapur, Raghunathganj, Panchgram, Nabagram, Lalbagh, Barwan, Gowas etc. and the silk weaving was carried on in the localities of Nagar, Sujaganj, Bhagwangola, Gowas, Daulatbazar, Manullabazar, Ashanpur etc. Mirzapur was famous for the production of superior silk fabrics. The other centres which were noted for silk weaving were Baluchar, Islampur, Kadai, Saidabad, Beldanga, Hariharpara etc. Berhampur and Jeaganj were famous as centres of trade. The wealthy merchants of Murshidabad used to reside there. In Malda, cocoon rearing and reeling were conducted throughout the district. But silk weaving was carried on at Shibganj, Shahpur (in the Gaur areas) and old Malda. Silk weaving was also practised in Rajshahi and Birbhum.⁵

Trained man power is one of the necessary resources for the growth of any industry. The skilled silk artisans were in abundance at Malda and Murshidabad which helped the silk industry to be prosperous. The weavers of Malda and Murshidabad were specialised in the production of different varieties of silk fabrics. The reasons of specialisation were not hard to

seek. It was the tradition which made them skillful. Moreover, they had their slender and delicate physical frame, and fine sense and taste which helped them in becoming proficient in silk manufacturing. A weaver "among the Gentoos was far from an unrespectable caste and proficiency was transmitted for centuries from father to son."⁶

James Mill said, "it is a sedentary occupation and thus in harmony with his predominant inclinations. It requires patience of which he has an inexhaustible fund."⁷ Climate was another vital factor for the development of silk industry. The temperature and humidity of Malda and Murshidabad were admirably suitable for silk manufacture. "The first factor for sericultural success is climate suitable for the worms which can live, grow, and form cocoons in a temperature between about 60° and 85°F the best temperature being 70°-75°F with about a similar percentage of humidity. Sericulture is not taken up in highly industrialised countries where people find more remunerative occupation in mills, factories etc. and is carried on in countries with poor peasantry."⁸ India was both an agricultural and an industrial country and a large number of the poor peasantry of Bengal, particularly of Malda and Murshidabad, got their livelihood in the production of silk. Before the colonial and in the early colonial phase, the silk industry of Malda and Murshidabad grew and flourished and thereby generated income for the people.

The causes of the concentration of mulberry planters, cocoon-growers, silk reelers, silk weavers and the silk traders in these districts were many - first, the geographical environment was congenial for the culture of silk, second, the availability of raw materials, third, easy transport by land and water, fourth, royal patronage and finally the silk market. The geographical impact and the easy transport by land and water were discussed in the first chapter and the favourable condition of silk market was discussed in the fourth Chapter. I would now analyse other factors for the development of silk industry which played a significant role in the economy of Malda and

Murshidabad.

The essential ingredient for healthy growth of silk worms was the easy availability of fresh and abundant mulberry leaves for feeding. The ecological setting of Malda and Murshidabad was suited to the culture of mulberry trees and the temperature and humidity of the regions were equally suitable for the rearing of silk worms. Thus, sericulture became the common feature of the areas and, thereby, attracted the silk winders and expert silk weavers to be settled at Malda and Murshidabad, more particularly in those areas of these two districts, where sericulture was largely practised. The building up of an industry primarily depended on raw materials, and the supply of raw materials for silk industry was always abundant in these places, though mulberry production varied from place to place. As the mulberry trees were greatly cultivated in the soil of Malda and Murshidabad, and the fresh leaves from them were also available throughout the year, so obviously the silk industry grew and flourished there. The silk growers got the mulberry leaves for rearing silk worms from their nearest places. The silk reelers also got their cocoons for reeling from their place and finally the silk weavers did not have to depend on raw materials from outside for their work. They always got the silk threads according to their needs from the nearest fairs to their villages. The easy availability of raw material helped to grow manufactories and attracted the artisans to concentrate in these regions.

The silk weavers were also encouraged by Royal patronage and this patronisation was one of the important factors for the development of silk industry in Bengal. The Hindu Kings and the Muslim Nawabs were great patrons of silk. "The native princes, and chiefs of various description, the retainers of numerous dependents, afforded a constant employment to a vast number of indigenous manufacturers, who supplied their masters with gold

and silver stuffs, curiously flowered, plain muslins, a diversity of beautiful silks and other articles of Asiatic luxury."⁹ After the establishment of the Mughal hegemony in Bengal, commerce flourished extensively. Silk was the fashion of the Mughal Court. In Ain-I-Akbari, Abul Fazal mentioned the existence of the 'Karkhanas' or workshops where articles of great artistic skill were manufactured.¹⁰ These karkhanas were superintended by the Darogas or Mookeems. The Empress Nurjahan was a great patron of silk fabrics. She brought a change in the fashion of the ladies dresses and encouraged the artisans and manufacturers. Charles Stewart wrote that "the delicate muslins of Dacca and silks of Malda constituted the chief part of the dress of the Imperial Court, whether male or female, and the fineness of its texture was such as can not now be imitated."¹¹ The political tranquility under the administration of Ibrahim Khan, a Mughal governor of Bengal, favoured the growth of agriculture, industry and trade in Bengal. The uninterrupted peace of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa attracted the merchants and traders from outside to trade in Bengal and they carried with them the costly silk fabrics and muslins of the Bengal looms to different parts of the country, particularly to the Courts of Agra and Dacca. The governors of Bengal regularly presented silk fabrics and muslins to the Mughal darbar and these fabrics were in the words of Willaim Bolts, "incomparably finer than anything of the kind produced in his life time"¹² and "they cost ten times the price of any linens permitted to be made for Europeans or anyone else in the Kingdom."¹³

The Silk and Cotton industries were also patronized by the nobility. "The nobles had to present the rarest products, both natural and manufactured, of their provinces, to the Emperor, the princes and the ministers. It would be not only a tactical blunder but also a breach of the accepted rules of social etiquette to approach the great Mughals empty-handed. The nobles, therefore, employed the best local artisans to manufacture for them articles worthy of presentation at the time of their next visit to the Court."¹⁴ The nobles did not maintain the

karkhanas but they encouraged the artisans by advancing money and, thereby, helped to develop the silk industry.

II

In Malda and Murshidabad a great number of people were engaged in different branches of the industry, though due to the lack of sufficient statistical data, it is difficult to assess the exact number of people who were engaged in silk industry. Even the Board of Trade admitted that the number of people engaged by the English East India Company was difficult to ascertain. A regular Census did not take place at that time. Walter Hamilton's book, A Geographical Statistical and Historical Description of Hindostan, was written on the basis of the information given by the Collectors to the Board of Revenue. Though it was a useful work, still we did not get much information about the number of people engaged in this industry. Buchanan Hamilton's Reports, though valuable, did not furnish the same. The proceedings of the Board of Trade (Commercial) contained useful materials about the European Commerce in Bengal. But the information regarding the number of various people engaged in different stages of silk manufactures was inadequate. Nevertheless, it is presumable that a large number of people was engaged in the silk industry of Malda and Murshidabad.

The lives of the people in Malda and Murshidabad turned round silk. In 1801, the total population of Murshidabad was 10,20,572 and in 1852-55 the entire district was surveyed by Colonel Gastrell, the Revenue Surveyor. In his Survey report we found that the area of the district was ascertained to be 2634 sq. miles and the total number of huts and houses was 2,20,014. Allowing 5 persons to each dwelling, the population came to

11,00070. According to the census report of 1872, the total population of the district was 13,53,626 and the total number of manufacturing classes was 31,913.¹⁵

In the Census report of 1872 it was stated that the total population of Malda district was 6,76,426 of which the Hindus were 3,56,298 and the Muhammedans were 3,10,890 and the number of other religious group was 9,238. The number of males were 3,31,087 and females 3,45,339. The proportion of males in the total population was 48.9 percent. The number of Sannyasis, who were wandering religious mendicants of Sivaite faith, was 190. The total number of Tantubaya i.e. weavers, traders, etc., given in the Census of 1872 was 4791 and the numbers of skilled workers, mechanics and artisans, according to their respective trades, mentioned in the Census report of 1872, were as follows:

T A B L E 5:I

Manufacturing classes and Artisans of Malda district.

Occupation	No. of Male Adults
Silk Manufacturers	7
Makers of looms	2
Silk weavers	287
Dyers	65
Silk spinners	107
Cotton carders	143
Cotton spinners	142
Cotton weavers	4654
Tailors	369
Embrioderers	7
Engravers	2
Braziers	561
Indigo manufacturers	6

Source: Hunter, A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol.VII, London, 1876, P.100.

Compared to the dismal picture that emerges from the 1872 Census Return Buchanan's Report which was written almost at the time when the silk industry had already declined had been somewhat close to the reality in the pre-decline era. He noticed about 15,000 looms in Malda alone and if five persons are counted per loom to have been needed the total number of persons engaged in weaving alone would come to around 75,000. And those whose number even Buchanan did not record, people engaged in plantation, rearing, reeling, dyeing, bleaching, darning, embroidering and finally marketing would be many times over. Buchanan stated that five hundred families alone were engaged in embroidery and about 90,000 people were engaged in reeling in Bengal. Although he observed that half of the looms he noted were inactive it indicated that decline had set in. Though no reliable population data of Malda in the 18th and early decade of the 19th century can be had from any source it can be presumed from the population statistics of 1872 that it would be about six lakhs in 1801 counting on the basis of approximately 8% population growth in Murshidabad in fifty years between 1801-1852. It is not unlikely that about 30% people in Malda and Murshidabad were engaged in the silk industry and trade.

The weavers and artisans of Bengal never lacked enterprise. They were always willing to accept the new sort if they were encouraged by higher price. They had the natural propensity in accepting new technique in their work though they were reluctant to leave their traditional abodes. Despite the promise of 'great wages', the Company failed to persuade the 'taffeta weavers' to move from Kasimbazar and settle in Hugli. This immobility, they had, in their nature. After Plassey, the economic policy of the Company struck a severe blow to the interests of the silk weavers of Malda and Murshidabad and as a result, they were deprived of their age long profession and forced to become agriculturists and daily labourers. From the second half of the 18th century, the Company encouraged the production of raw silk and discouraged weaving. The manufacture of silk fabrics began to decline and the large number of weavers

connected with it began to be unemployed. After the decline of cotton industry, a large number of cotton weavers got their livelihood in silk industry. "One important economic point to be noticed about silk cultivation is that it provided employment for several years to many of those who had lost their occupation in cotton industry as a result of its decline."¹⁶ But the decline of the silk industry sealed the fate of the silk weavers and, therefore, the economic solvency of Malda and Murshidabad was lost.

Before the advent of the British in India and at least for one hundred years after their arrival till 1757, silk fabric occupied a major place in the economy of Malda and Murshidabad. "Of commodities of value, cotton cloths and silk stuff Bengal was the grand magazine, not only for the empire of the Great Mughals as far as Lahore and Kabul, but also for all the neighbouring kingdoms and for Europe."¹⁷ Verelst, the Governor of Bengal, depicted the prosperity of Bengal before Plassey to the "cheapness and quality and the prodigious traffic of her manufactures. Besides the large investments of the different European nations, the Bengal raw silk, cloths etc. to a vast amount were dispersed to the West and North inland as far as Gujrat, Lahore and even Ispahan."¹⁸ In the first half of the 18th century there were some factors which caused reduction in silk production and silk trade. The disturbances in the Asiatic countries, the break up of the Mughal Empire, the Bargi incursions into Bengal, the import of cheaper Chinese silk and Dutch sugar to the country, no doubt, led to a temporary reduction of Indian trade and commerce. But in no case the effects of these disturbances should be over emphasised. The Mughal Empire broke down but the tradition of the Mughals did continue. The Mughal noble men felt that they would command respect if only they could make their courts 'miniature replicas' of the Mughal darbar. So, inspite of occasional disturbances, the silk stuff of Bengal was sold as before in different parts of India and the neighbouring countries. At the time of Plassey, the

House of Jagat Seth was at the summit of its prosperity and wealth. The merchants from different parts came and assembled to trade in Bengal. Malda and Murshidabad were the main centres and silk was the main article of trade there. The following statement of William Bolts, though he did not mention the date, was true of Bengal at the time of Alivardi's death. "A variety of merchants of different nations and religions, such as Cashmeerians, Multanys, Patans, Sheiks, Suniassys, Poggyahs, Betteeas and many others used to resort to Bengal annually, in Cafeelahs, or large parties, of many thousands together (with troops of oxen for the transport of goods) from different parts of Hindostan."¹⁹

The total annual export of silk from Murshidabad District to Europe was estimated at 228,000 lbs., which at the average price of Rs. 15 per seer, would be worth £171,000. This only represented the out turn of the European filatures. The amount of native wound silk was also considerable and exported chiefly towards the north west in the form of manufactured goods. Kasimbazar was known as the 'silk emporium' of Bengal. Mirzapur was a flourishing town and it was also famous for silk trade. The weavers of Mirzapur town were numerous and prosperous. It was silk that guided the economy of the district. But with the decline of the silk industry, the towns like Kasimbazar and Mirzapur lost their previous glory, 'an atmosphere of hopeless decay broods over the whole place.' The decline in the silk weaving industry might be realised from the fact that at the time of Alivardi Khan, raw silk to the value of £875,000 was annually entered in the Custom House books at Murshidabad. This was exclusive of the European investments, which were not entered there, as being either duty free or paying duty at Hoogly.²⁰ But Plassey changed the position and from 1757 to 1772, the servants of the English East India Company combined with their agents and gomastas deterred the merchants from coming to Bengal.²¹ The British dominance completely changed the market position of Bengal and the

'prodigious traffic' of her manufactures became a thing of the past. The entire economy of Bengal was dominated by the needs of the European market in the 1760's, 1770's and 1780's.²² " This was the beginning of an economic drain which seriously crippled the resources at Bengal"²³ and almost the whole of the immense sum received from Bengal Subah was finally siphoned off to England. On the other hand the Mughal tradition was replaced by the Marathas. "The Mughals magnificent and ostentatious required every article of luxury. Towns and cities grew out of this spirit. The Marathas were averse from those costly modes of expense. Towns and cities were mouldering fast into ruin. In this cause may be traced the drooping commercial state of the provinces of Hindostan."²⁴ British domination in Bengal and Maratha hegemony in the greater part of India combined to cause the 'steady decline' of the Indian market of Bengal goods, specially of silk fabrics. The other factors like Bargi campaign and Maratha - Afgan contest in Northern India had some effect on the silk market of Bengal.²⁵ The British policy of deindustrialisation caused an enormous distress to the economic life of the people connected with the silk industry.

It is not difficult to understand the hardship that those associated with silk had suffered. If we assume that the monthly subsistence requirement of a family of five to be 4 maunds of rice, 1 maund of bootgram (pulses) and 3.12 seers of salt, then the monthly spending on food would rise from Rs.2.86 in 1700 to Rs. 3.37 in 1750 and Rs. 5.10 in 1800,²⁶ a percentage rise of 51.34. This estimate would exclude extra expenditure on gur, oil, ghee, vegetables, fish etc. The annual expenses of a family of five on their clothing, religious ceremonies, repairs to house etc. in Dinajpore - Rangpur was calculated at 25.8.0 by Buchanan - Hamilton towards the end of the 18th century.²⁷ The total annual expenditure can be calculated at Rs. 95, while the actual earning of a weaver would never exceed Rs.60.

III

The prosperity of Bengal and its abundant opportunity in trade encouraged the European Companies to come to trade in Bengal and "its fabrics, the most beautiful that human art has anywhere produced, were sought by merchants at the expense of the greatest toils and dangers."²⁸

The silk industry went on flourishing in Bengal. It was recorded in 1577 that Sheik Bhik, a silk merchant of Malda, exported to Russia three ships full of locally manufactured silk goods and that Malda alone used to send fifty ships full of silk and cotton goods to foreign countries every year.²⁹ Between 1600 and 1619 A.D., the English Company purchased large quantities of manufactured and un-manufactured silk goods in the shape of yarns.³⁰ The French traveller Bernier said that silk and cotton fabrics were so-extensively manufactured in Bengal that Bengal could be dubbed as the store-house of these two articles, for both Europe and Asia. He also mentioned that in the middle of the 17th century about fifteen to sixteen hundred people were employed in the silk factories of the Dutch and the English merchants. Another French traveller Tavernier also mentioned that from Kasimbazar alone 2200000 livres of yarns (at 16 ounces to the livre) used to be exported to foreign countries. The Dutch also used to export from 600000 livres to 700000 livres of yarns to Japan and England annually.³¹ By the end of the 17th century, the English weavers made an organised protest against the import of Indian calicoes and silks. The imports badly affected their silk industry. The perfect workmanship and 'great cheapness' of the Indian silk fabrics made it a formidable rival to the English silk goods. The Company admitted before the House of Lords that nine-tenths of the Indian silk goods imported into England were used by the people there. It was not possible to ascertain the exact quantity of manufactured silk goods of Bengal consumed in England; "but from the general use of silk in

every class of society, from the throne to the cottage, the quantity must be immense."³² "The exquisite workmanship of Indian weavers proved serious to the English weavers."³³ Therefore, in 1701, an Act was passed by the British Parliament for the protection of the Spitalfields silk manufacture. But the Act did not produce the desired effect, as it failed to check the prodigious import due to tempting cheapness of Indian silk goods at that time. For a long period, Bengal silk goods held their position in the world market which was gradually lost in the colonial age.³⁴

Upto the first half of the 18th century the English Company had to face competition in procuring raw silk and silk goods. The Dutch were not only rival in the field of Bengal's commerce. Other European traders like the French, the Portugese, the Prussians, the Danes, and the Asiatic traders like the Armenians, the Pathans etc., were then actively and widely engaged in the trade of Bengal.³⁵ Hence, the silk trade of Bengal was not a smooth sail for the English Company till the battle of Plassey. But after Plassey, the position was gradually changing and with the acquisition of the 'Dewani' of Bengal in 1765, the entire process was reversed in favour of the English Company. The success of 'Industrial Revolution' in England too depended on the supply of raw material from Bengal.

(i) One of the causes for the decline of silk industry was the degeneracy in silk worm rearing. The Bengal silk worms had lost its high racial quality. The yield of bara palu had diminished by 50% and the silk cultivators of Bengal observed this degeneration of the Bengal species. Some attempts were made to introduce the exhotic breeds, but the results were not satisfactory. Mr. Gallois of Midnapur who was engaged in silk manufacturing thought that the cause of degeneracy was in the cultivation of mulberry, as mulberry was cultivated repeatedly in one spot. Most of the Company manufacturers of silk held the

view that the natives stunted the silk worms and Mr. Atkinson, an English engaged in silk manufacturing said that he found it difficult to arrest this tendency among the local producers. Mr. Malcolm of Ramnagore, in Kandi Sub-division of Murshidabad, mentioned that the silk worms were injured by being forced into unduly rapid reproduction. Formerly, it was found that there were four breeds or bunds in a year. But in later time, it was enhanced upto six to eight.³⁶ The Bengal silk-worms were smaller and biologically of inferior quality than the European, the Japanese and the Chinese worms. Some remarked that the cause for the small size of the Bengalsilk worms was under-feeding. While it is partly true, the real cause of small size was heredity, developed due to malnutrition for generations. The cocoons of the small worms were not better than the average third grade cocoons of the univoltine worms. The silk fabric contained in Bengal cocoons was also inferior in quality. The average weight of a univoltine cocoon and the average weight reelable silk contained in it were respectively 1800 and 200 milligrammes, those of Bengal cocoons were only 600 and 40 milligrammes. The average length of each fibre was 600 and 200 metres respectively. These figures had been obtained from rearing under the same conditions.³⁷ The degeneracy of the Bengal worms was partly responsible for the decline of the silk industry.

(ii) Outside the nobility, silk's demand was somewhat limited. So, with the decay of the indigenous courts, the demand market of fine silk fabrics suffered serious set back. The successors of the nobility changed taste and instead of patronising indigenous silk, as it was done by their predecessors,³⁸ they rather preferred the showy and cheap machine-made silk goods of England. Because "to follow European fashion was considered the hall mark of enlightenment."³⁹ The decay of the indigenous courts and the change of fashion on European style, which the British rule had gradually introduced, were partly responsible for the decline of the silk industry of Bengal.

(iii) However, the Commercial policy of the English East India Company in the 18th and early 19th centuries delivered the mortal blow to the silk manufacture by protective measures against Bengal piece-goods. Due to the discontent of the silk manufacturers throughout England, more particularly in London, and on account of the revolt of weavers from Spitalfields against the import of Bengal silk goods in England, a new decision was unavoidable. The weavers of Spitalfields were benefitted by the supply of raw silk only. In 1697 a Spitalfields mob attacked the East India House. Consequently, the British Parliament was forced to pass an Act in 1701 prohibiting in England the use and sell of all wrought silks from Bengal, and stuffs mixed with silk or herba, and a penalty of £200 was imposed on the person having or selling any of them.⁴⁰ The act of 1701 against woven silks first reduced English demand, and later war, notably from 1756-1763 and 1773-1776, followed by the French Revolution in 1789 hit the European markets for Bengal silk. All these events had no doubt had repercussion on the growth of Bengal silk industry. Despite these events no serious effect was observed on the silk industry of Bengal, as silk piece-goods of Malda and Murshidabad appeared to have been imported in England for re-export to other countries.⁴¹

Since the import of silk piece-goods for the European market was continued by the East India Company for some more years they intended to exercise monopoly control over the entire range of silk manufactures by coercive measures. Post Plassey ascendancy of the Company in Political Power in Bengal stimulated the process. However, a new dimension was opened in the trade; as there was an increasing demand for raw silk in the United Kingdom; sericulture understandably received much more attention from the East India Company than silk weaving.⁴² This important policy shift in the English Company's trade adversely affected the silk weaving industry of Bengal. Further, the weavers were

forbidden to work elsewhere or for other foreign or local merchants until English orders had been fulfilled and they were thus deprived of free competitive markets for their goods.⁴³ Consequently, manufacture of silk fabrics declined and the people who had exported these goods to the markets of Europe and Asia in previous centuries began to import them from England for their own use.⁴⁴ Things came to such a pass that "the sons of the soil are now impotently looking on the foreigner for the supply of even the articles of every day need."⁴⁵

In the evidence of Mr. H.H. Wilson, it was stated in 1813 that "the cotton and silk goods of India upto the period could be sold for a profit in the British market at a price from 50 to 60% lower than those fabricated in England. It consequently became necessary to protect the latter by duties of 70 and 80% on their value, or by positive prohibition. Had not such prohibitory duties and decrees existed, the mills of Paisley and Manchester would have been stopped in their outset..... They were created by the sacrifice of the Indian manufacture British goods were forced upon her without paying any duty, and the foreign manufacturer employed the arm of political injustice to keep down and ultimately strangle a competitor with whom he could not have contended on equal terms."⁴⁶ Many more attempts were successfully made to encourage the British manufactures and to discourage the Indian industries. The import of Bengal silk fabrics to Europe was repressed by prohibitive duties and the export of machine-made silk goods of England was always encouraged in India with preferential tariff. The production of raw silk for British industries and the consumption of British manufactures in India were the two-fold objects of the new commercial policy of England. At the time of the renewal of the Charter Act of 1813, it was the main aim of the Parliament to serve the interest of the manufacturers of England, and the role of the East India Company in India during the years 1793-1833 was reduced to an agent for the implementation of the

economic policy formulated in England.⁴⁷ The Bengal silk fabrics were shut out from England by prohibitive tariffs, because the quality of silk which the Bengal weavers could be able to produce for their professionalism would be a very great impediment to the consumption of British silk. The high production cost coupled with exorbitantly high import duties could have handicapped the Bengal product in a competitive British and later Indian market.⁴⁸ Bengal was required to produce raw materials only. The actual percentage share of the important items of export trade of the East India Company in the total value after 1813 is illustrated by the table no.5:II. In spite of all coercive regulations it is seen that silk market did not altogether shrink, though it had diminished in size.

T A B L E - 5:II

Title: India's exports, commodity composition, percentage shares of selected items in total value.

Years	Indigo	Piece goods	Raw Silk	Cotton	Opium	Sugar
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1814-15	20.0	14.3	13.3	8.0	Not Available	3.0
1828-29	27.0	11.0	10.0	15.0	17.0	4.0
1834-35	15.0	7.0	8.0	21.0	25.0	2.0
1839-40	26.0	5.0	7.0	20.0	10.0	7.0
1850-51	10.0	4.0	4.0	12.7	34.0	10.0
1857-58	6.1	2.9	2.9	15.6	32.7	4.3

Source: K.N. Chowdhury, The Economic Development of India under the East India Company, 1814-1858, Cambridge, 1971, P.26 .

In the words of Dr. K.N. Choudhury, "This broad structure of the commodity composition of India's export trade confirms the widely held opinion that the most striking change in the character of her international trade in the first half of the nineteenth century lay in the almost entire transformation of her exports into the category of primary commodities with a corresponding concentration on manufactured goods in her exports. The manufacturing and commercial interests in England were beginning to be aware of India's position as a potential supplier of raw material and the advantages which accrued from it to the home industries."⁴⁹ Upto the 18th century India was both a manufacturing and an agricultural country, and in the 19th century it was reduced from the state of manufacturing to that of an agricultural country. But the economic solvency of the rural Bengal never depended on her agriculture.⁵⁰ It was due to the economic policy of the Company that most of the weavers were thrown at large, some became sannyasis, some byragis, others coolies.⁵¹ "The disappearance of domestic handicrafts followed closely on the wake of the Permanent Settlement. The weaver-cum-agriculturist had now to depend entirely on agriculture, and this further weakened the position of the tenant vis-a-vis the landlord."⁵²

It was the heavy duties levied on Indian manufactures and later the continental system of Napoleon Bonaparte that affected the silk trade of Bengal in the European market. From 1806 on, the Berlin and Milan Decrees shut the European market for Bengal piece goods. The tariff policy of England and the Napoleonic war, no doubt, caused the decline of Bengal silk trade, but they could not have brought about its practical ruin.⁵³ Infact, the Industrial Revolution and the machine-made products of England that had combined with the commercial policy of Great Britain did bring about the ruin of the silk industry of Bengal. A market demand for the industrial products of Great Britain, which obviously was cost effective, involved the handicraft of Bengal in an unequal competition to which Bengal had virtually

succumbed. The replacement of the indigenous products by the British goods formed 'one of the saddest chapters in the history of the British India.' The decline of the indigenous manufactures hit the economy of the country. For all practical purposes, a few hundred thousand artisans and the silk weavers of Malda and Murshidabad were displaced from their traditional occupation. Obviously, it would have made the economic position of the silk weavers precarious. Having had no 'secondary avenue of employment' they migrated enbloc to agriculture for subsistence. But Bengal's unfavourable man-land ratio could not have sustained the economic fugitives. R.C. Dutt remarked, "a nation which depends entirely on agriculture can not but be poor."⁵⁴ On the contrary, the decline of the traditional silk industry of Malda and Murshidabad and the indifference to any new industrial venture not only caused poverty but caused the establishment of British economic domination also, and India came to be looked upon by the English as "a plantation, growing raw produce to be shipped by British Agents in British Ships, to be worked into Fabrics by British skill and capital, and to be re-exported to the Dependency by British merchants to their corresponding British Firms in India and elsewhere."⁵⁵

(iv) The application of Science and technology in Europe qualitatively transformed the production activity there. "Foreign competition, not because it is foreign, but because it is the competition of Nature's powers against man's Labour, - it is the competition of organised Skill and Science against Ignorance and Idleness, - is transferring the monopoly not only of wealth, but what is more important, of skill, talent, and activity to others."⁵⁶

The invention of powerloom and the increasing use of it, and the establishment of weaving factories in England gave a new turn to the British manufacture; it derived its strength from 'gigantic

machinery, large scale production, complex division of labour etc.' The cessation of Napoleonic wars in 1814-15 removed the constraints from Britain's foreign trade and so the manufacturers of England came to devote their full attention to production. As a result, large quantities of British made goods began to appear in the European market, which was once the domain of Bengal silk and cotton fabrics. Bengal piece-goods were rapidly supplanted by British manufactures in various European countries and "by the year 1827-28 there was hardly any country in the world, to which Bengal piece-goods were sent."⁵⁷ The Industrial Revolution helped England to oust Indian manufactures not only from India but also from the international market. "The Charter Act of 1813 and the cessation of the Napoleonic wars just accelerated the disruption which was but inevitable."⁵⁸

The export decline of country-made silk piece goods had been graphically described by Babu Kissen (Krishna) Mohun Mullick, in his "Brief History of Bengal Commerce," in the following manner.

"Choppas, bandannas and corahs come under this head. In the time of the East India Company, choppas and bandannas were printed at Cossimbazar of various colors and choice patterns, supplied by the Company's agent, and were in those days favorite articles with the English and foreigners, used as handkerchiefs and neckcloths. Their exports were heavy, and would find a ready market in England. But a taste for novelty so common in Europe as well as in other countries, which from time to time influences change of fashions, materially interfered with our printed goods, and printers, both in England and France, were busy in their designs, and printing there was thus stimulated to an enormous degree, upon plain cloths called corahs, imported to a large extent from this country for that purpose. Unfortunately, however, for our native manufacturers, the weavers in Europe stood in their way as regards the silk corahs with which they

took upon themselves to supply the markets of Europe for printing purposes. Although their make and texture are far inferior to ours, specially in point of durability, yet preference is given to them by the mass of the people there, for the sake of cheapness, resulting from the cloths being made of chussum or waste silk, the exports of which, both from here and China, of late have materially augmented, and hence our exports to Great Britain of choppas and bandannas as well as of corahs have dwindled down to mere trifles, as the following comparative statement will shew.

T A B L E 5:III

Title: The exports of country-made Silk piece-goods had declined

	1849-50	Value in Rs	1869-70	Value in Rs.
Corahs in pieces	633,729	34,63,000	80,373	6,21,164
Choppas and bandannas in pieces	69,764	4,01,700	2,167	18,198

Source: Kissen Mohun Mullick, Brief History of Bengal Commerce.

On the other hand, the exports of chussum to Great Britain materially increased; in all 1861- 93 and 1869- 14,000 maunds. This refuse in earlier days was as worthless as jute cuttings were, but now both are treated as important articles of merchandize. ⁵⁹

This position is endorsed by the Customs Department, Lower Provinces. For a statement of export from Bengal in different European countires, indicated not only a change in the export market but also in the commodity pattern as underlined by Sri Krishna Mohun Mallick.

"In silk, raw or chussum, there has been an export of 17,684 cwt., valued at Rs.1,22,83,377, being a decrease of 2,216 cwt. in quantity, and Rs.13,09,707 in value. Of raw silk 8,410 cwt., valued at Rs. 93,82,092, have gone to Great Britain; 1,455 cwt., value Rs.18,95,002, to France; and to Italy 135 cwt., value Rs.1,92,996. Great Britain has taken more than in 1869-70, but France only half of what she took in that year. Of chussum, 6,175 cwt., valued at Rs.5,21,396, have gone to Great Britain, but France has taken more than double of the quantity in 1869-70, viz., 879 cwt, valued at Rs.87,997.

Silk-piece goods have been exported to the value of Rs.10,35,938. Of this, Great Britain has taken Rs.6,98,972 worth in corahs, and Rs. 1,00,019 in tussers and Rs.17,214 worth in choppas. Of this latter description, Mauritius has taken Rs.10,180, and Bourbon Rs.11,110, Of other silk manufactures, France has taken Rs.12,408, Ceylon Rs.17,312, Penang and Singapore Rs.17,073, the Persian Gulf Rs.4,395, and America Rs.11,345."⁶⁰

The Industrial Revolution first started in England in the year 1784. The rapid progress of cotton manufactures in England on account of industrialisation, presumably, affected adversely in its market mechanism the silk trade of Bengal also. Cotton manufactures in England gradually became so overwhelming that it "almost entirely banished silk from the dress of British ladies."⁶¹ The demand for raw silk had fallen so greatly that the price had come down from twenty one to sixteen shillings a pound inflicting a heavy loss on the Company.⁶² It is substantially true that the continued growth of the English cotton industry, producing finer goods more and more cheaply, was to invade the markets for Bengal and English silks first in Europe and the 'Levant',⁶³ and finally in India itself.⁶⁴ In the colonial period, all the avenues for the growth of silk industry were ultimately closed and, thus, the economic growth of Bengal, which was once dependent on the silk industry, was greatly impeded. "There was no agricultural crop which would bring in money so quickly and so many times in the year."⁶⁵

(v) In the process of colonisation domestic market of Malda & Murshidabad silk could not escape but being seriously disturbed. The loss of foreign market was no doubt deplorable, but what was more pathetic was to lose the home market. Bengal had been transformed into an export market of British textile. From the 15th century, silk of Bengal had a great demand due to its name and fame. In fact, the hand-made silk fabrics of Malda and Murshidabad were far superior to those of machine-made silk stuffs of England in point of its quality, colour, lustre and longevity. But the customers cared more for cheapness than for anything else, and the hand-made products could not measure up to the machine made products in terms of production cost. A contemporary traveller Heber wrote that the manufactures of England were preferred by the people for their low prices.⁶⁶ Besides, the people of India were attracted more and more to the English made goods and there was a growing common feeling among them that anything made in England must be good and fine. The fascination for the English goods associated with other factors caused the decline of the domestic market of Bengal silk. D.R. Gadgil remarked that one of the most harmful effects of a foreign rule was the imposition on the conquered peoples of the ideals of the conquerors.⁶⁷

The aim of the English Company was to convert India into a procurement centre of raw materials and a market for British product. The battles of Plassey & Buxur and the acquisition of Dewani gave the Company a monopoly in exercising political power and the Company imposed heavy custom duties on the indigenous silk fabrics and imposed punitive restrictions on the silk weavers of Malda and Murshidabad which forced them to give up their ancestral occupation. As we have seen silk manufacture was costly, so was the mulberry cultivation, Chassars Nacauds and silk weavers had to depend upon 'dadan' and the Company supplied that through their agents. This made them completely dependent on the Company; besides, the silk weavers were not allowed to work elsewhere until "English orders had been completed."⁶⁸ The advances were forced upon them and the Company exercised such an

arbitrary power that "the chassars (cultivators), manufacturers etc. have been obliged to sell their commodities at any price to those employed to purchase for the English."⁶⁹ The prices fixed in 1833 were the following :-⁷⁰

	Rs.	A	
March bund (or crop) large	8	8	Per seer (of <u>silk</u> , to wit)
" " small	7	0	with certain additional
April " " ...	7	0	remuneration for superior
Rainy " " ...	6	2	colour or fineness.
October and November ...	7	2	

It is interesting to note that with a slight change in silk trade policy of the British after the East India Company withdrew from the trade and the market forces were partially allowed to operate freely both silk export and its price in the domestic market indicated an upward swing. The Agri-Horticultural Society gave the figures as the prices of raw silk for the 12 years ending in 1870.

T A B L E 5:IV

Title: A little change in silk trade policy caused
escalation of silk price.

	Per seer					Per seer			
	Rs.	As.	to	Rs. As.		Rs.	As.	to	Rs. As.
1858	8	0	-	16 0	1864	11	0	-	17 0
1859	9	8	-	16 12	1865	11	0	-	19 0
1860	10	0	-	21 0	1866	14	0	-	26 0
1861	9	8	-	19 0	1867	12	0	-	25 4
1862	7	0	-	15 8	1868	11	0	-	26 0
1863	9	8	-	19 8	1869	15	0	-	27 0
					1870	16	0	-	25 8

Source: Report of the Agri-Horticultural Society, 1870, P.85.

All those who were connected with the production of silk could not escape the vicious circle of 'dadan'. Interest accumulated all through the year and "the manufacturers were unable to escape from the obligations except by flight from the profession."⁷¹ The servants of the Company enjoyed all the power but did not take any responsibility of good government. "The banians and gomastahs of the Company and its servants saw their opportunity to turn the power and prestige of their masters to the mutual advantage of both."⁷² Thus the oppression, exercised on the weavers by the Company after the 'Dewani', ultimately destroyed the 'industrial spirit of the people of Bengal.'

The Nawabs of Bengal were despotic. But their despotism, 'never degenerated into absolute oppression.' It was the policy of the English Company to make India's economy to the 'heels of the British economy' and the silk growers, silk weavers and silk traders of Malda and Murshidabad became the worst victim of that. Their bonds were made tighter. The silk manufacturers lacked a free, competitive market for their goods. Due to the decline of the Mughal Darbar and the Nawabs of Bengal, the silk industry lacked the valuable source of indigenous patronage. The alternative outlet was also closed by the activities of the English Company, as it ousted the other European competitors from the market. The influx of Chinese silk in Bombay and Madras squeezed the market in those provinces for Malda and Murshidabad silk. The famine of 1770 carried off 'one third of the population of Bengal.' The servants of the Company at Murshidabad wrote to the President and Governor Cartier of Fort William in their letter dated 11 November, 1771 about the decay and diminution of silk growth and manufacture and they attributed it to the incredible mortality which had happened among the ryots due to the famine of 1770. A great deal of mortality occurred among the chassars, nacauds and the silk weavers. Many artisans had died for want of food, many of them

had deserted, and those who survived were incapable of working.⁷³ The silk industry could never recoup its former shape after the set back caused by the catastrophe of 1770. As the industrial pursuits became less remunerative than agriculture, so a large number of skilled silk manufacturers were forced to seek sustenance from land.⁷⁴ It was no doubt detrimental to the interest of the country and, therefore, Montgomery Martin said, "India is as much a manufacturing country as an agricultural one, and he who would seek to reduce her to the position of an agricultural country seeks to lower her in the scale of civilisation. She is a manufacturing country, her manufactures of various descriptions have existed for ages, and have never been able to be competed with by any nation wherever fair play has been given to them."⁷⁵ Where the interest was the only thing, the question of 'fair play' did not arise. It was always the design of the Company to convert India into a producer of raw materials which altered all previous production relations. The Company, "on the ruins of Indian handicrafts, which could provide jobs to millions, introduced new industrial infrastructure."⁷⁶ Malda and Murshidabad became worst victim of that. "Murshidabad formed one of the few examples of a District which declined in opulence and importance under British rule."⁷⁷ It was equally true of the district of Malda.

Since we have not discussed the Indian reaction to the detritious colonial policy of the British, as it has never been central to our investigation, it would be presumptuous to assume that the Indian manufacturers had suffered without protest. In fact, the whole of North Bengal was rife with discontent, and the entire period between 1780-1800 is marked by organised armed uprisings popularly known as Sannyasi and Fakir revolts. The mendicants from amongst the Hindus and Muslims called sannyasis and fakirs were also itinerant merchants trading in silk and textile. Their dislocation by the post-Plassey trading policy

of the East India Company necessitated the protest. And their leadership in the revolt was occasioned by their wide acquaintance with the terrain, disgruntled manufacturers with whom they had been attached for professional reasons and comparative ease on account of minimal material risk usually involved in similar sub-altern revolts. The revenue policy during the early British rule dispossessed some traditional landlords who enjoyed their title to land since the reforms of Murshid Quli Khan, a Bengal Governor in the early 18th century. The dispossession of the landlords affected their peasant subjects too who became economic fugitives being depeasantised by the five-year settlement policy of Warren Hastings. On the other side the cotton textile and silk manufactures were seriously affected by the imposition of new commercial policies of the Company dictated by political power and economic greed. It also affected the pre-colonial nexus between the producers, finance, marketing communities and the indigenous consumers. The combined effect of this economic dislocation caused armed eruptions and if Majnu Shah, the merchant lead the revolt in one sector, Devi Chaudhurani, the Zamindar lead it in another sector with similar purpose and urgency. Colonial administration finally repressed it in 1800.

The members of the Court of Directors always considered the activities of the Company on the basis of pecuniary returns. As long as the return was safe, they did not bother about the nature of the administration. They were simply satisfied with the profit that they received from their Indian investment. But when the surplus had change into deficit they reacted.⁷⁸ The unjustifiable influence of the Pykars and Dallals over the chassars and ryots helped them to exercise oppressive measures in stabilising their procurement. "The original advances having been studiously made, so as to leave a balance at the close of the year against the industrious cultivator, this balance becomes immediately burthened with an exorbitant rate of interest, which continues to accumulate in such a proportion as

to leave the poor labourer totally incapable of ever satisfying his merciless creditor."⁷⁹ In this way the ryots and the chassars were reduced to a state of actual slavery. If they tried at any time to break the chain of this bondage for getting the right of a free subject, every sort of tyranny and oppression were unleashed and their families were reduced to poverty."With every species of monopoly, therefore, every kind of oppression to manufacturers, of all denominations throughout the whole country, has daily increased; insomuch that weavers, for daring to sell their goods, and Dallals and Pykars, for having contributed to or connived at such sales, have, by the Company's agents, been frequently seized and imprisoned, confined in irons, fined considerable sums of money, flogged, and deprived, in the most ignominious manner, of what they esteem most valuable, their casts. Weavers also, upon their inability to perform such agreements as have been forced from them by the Company's agents, universally known in Bengal by the name of Mutchulcahs, have had their goods seized, and sold on the spot, to make good the deficiency: and the winders of raw silk, called Nacaads have been treated also with such injustice, that instances have been known of their cutting off their thumbs, to prevent their being forced to wind silk."⁸⁰ This state of affair forced the chassars and ryots who were habituated in the life of ease and indolence to give up that branch of culture attended with insupportable bondage and took to other subsistence. It had resulted not only in the diminution of quantity and decrease of quality in silk, but also in some degrees the enhancement of its price. Moreover, the number of weavers in the country had greatly decreased. The servants of the Company were of opinion that an effective remedy ought to be applied so that the evils could be easily removed. The chassars and the ryots should be released from the bondage and oppression of the Pykars and Dallals and should be given the rights of free agents in the disposal of their property at the public market. They held the view that if the chassars and the ryots were given

due encouragement in silk manufacture, and if the coercive methods were wiped out, then this branch of commerce would be restored to its former flourishing state. But that did not happen. On the contrary, it was the only intention of the Company and its 'venerable head' to exploit the revenue of Bengal which came mainly from the industries, particularly from the silk industry of Malda and Murshidabad. The colonial exploitation affected seriously the entire community connected with every stage of the silk industry of Bengal and, thereby, shattered the economy of Bengal. Moreover, the economic drain which started under the Company ultimately ruined the affluence of Bengal. The silk economy was the mainstay of the people in the two districts. But in the colonial age, the British export of raw material threw the people connected with other phases of piece good production out of employment. As a result, people gradually changed over to raw-material production for survival and in the process they not only lost their industrial acumen but also their identity.

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