

The Trade and Trading Items of Colonial Bengal: A survey of Imported and Exported Trade Items (1602-1757 A.D.)

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***Abstract:** A region as geographical units is a historical construction whose boundary is defined and redefined by the contemporary political and culture condition. Our delineation of region depends on our perspective on the history. It is to be noted that, during the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century, we know that the geographical limits of subha was often the exceeded area now presently covered by East Bengal or Bangladesh and the Indian state West Bengal. And also we noted that, during the contemporary time period, a flourishing textile industry, urbanization and trade with the western Gangetic plains, and also Indo- European maritime trade. We see that seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century, Company established trade relations with Bengal only after it had been operating elsewhere in the subcontinent for a period of nearly three decades. But once a beginning had been made, the growth of the Company's trade in the region was remarkable rapid. During the latter half of the seventeenth century, the Bengal trade played a crucial role in the Company's intra-Asian trade. Similarly, at a slightly later date, opium procured in Bihar accounted for a substantial proportion of the total Dutch imports into the Indonesian archipelago. Toward the close of the seventeenth century, as the composition of the exports to Europe underwent a drastic change in favors of textiles and silks manufactured in Bengal and elsewhere, the trade from this region assumed an altogether new significance. This paper we attempt to show about import and export trade items of Bengal from 1602 to 1757 A.D.*

Keywords: Import, Export, Precious metals, Raw silk, Textile.

Imported Trade Item:- Precious Metals and Goods.

We see that contemporary time period; the Company's operations in Bengal (and elsewhere in the subcontinent) were the procurement of export goods for other parts of Asia as well as for Europe. The role of the precious metals and goods imported into the region from Europe and other parts of Asia was chiefly to provide purchasing power needed to buy the export goods. Most of these imports were precious metals because, given the structure of relative prices, the local demand of imported goods was

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comparatively small. The determining consideration with the Council of the Indies at Batavia when it worked out the mix of the goods to be sent to Bengal in a given year was not the ate of profit to be earned on a particular item but the total amount of purchasing power that the sale of that item was likely to generate over the year. In the case of many of the goods, the Bengal factors were authorized to sell even at cost price. Nevertheless, the sale of goods was limited, and an overwhelming proportion of the imports were of necessity in the form of precious metals. Silver imported from Europe included coins such as Mexican, Seville, and Spanish rails, rails of eight, rix-provincial, crown, lion, and cross-dollars as well as Durations. A substantial proportion of the total precious metals imported into Bengal used to be obtained within Asia. This included silver and gold from Japan (the latter being in the form of an Oval shaped coin, the koban) and silver from Pegu, Arakan, and Persia. Small quantities of gold bullion were also imported from Timor and the west coast of Sumatra.¹

The goods the Company imported into Bengal were practically, all of Asian origin. An important constituent was pepper and other spices. Pepper was obtained mainly in the interior of Sumatra and the hinterland of Patani on the Malay Peninsula. The other spices were obtained in the so-called Spice Islands in the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago. Amboina was the chief source of cloves, whereas the other islands provided nutmeg and its derivative, mace. Nonprecious metals such as copper, tin, lead, and spelter were also important items of import. Copper was procured mainly in Japan, whereas the other metals were also important items of import. Copper was procured mainly in Japan, whereas the other metals were obtained in several parts of the Malay Peninsula. Comparatively minor items included cinnamon, areca nuts, elephants, and conch shells from Ceylon.²

Exported Trade Item: - Raw Silk, Saltpeter, and Textile.

The principal items procured by the Company in the region were raw silk, textiles, opium, and saltpeter. Comparatively minor items (constituting the miscellaneous category) included provisions such as sugar, rice, wheat, clarified butter and mustard oil, was, borax, sea shells (cauris), and gunny bags.

Raw Silk:

The Company procured raw silk mainly for the Japanese and the Dutch markets. The three important raw silk-exporting areas in Asia were China, Persia, and Bengal. The principal attraction of Bengal silk was that although it cost substantially less than both the Chinese and the Persian varieties, it usually sold in Holland at a price only marginally lower than that fetched by the former ad about the same as that fetched by the latter. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans on the scene, there was a substantial interregional and

international trade in raw silk from Bengal. The principal merchant groups involved in this trade were those from Agra, Gujarat, and Central Asia. The raw silk procured by the Europeans was produced almost exclusively in the area around Kasimbazar in Murshidabad district in North Bengal. There were three harvests (Called bands) in a year – in November, February-March, and June-July. The lot produced in the November band was by far the best in quality because the dry and cold weather helped the stuff produced by the chrysalis coagulate rapidly. The lot produced in February-March came next, followed by that of June-July.

The raw silk reeled from the *pattani* filaments were of two distinct varieties: *tanna-banna* and tanny. The later was a considerably superior variety that used a larger number of cocoons per unit of output. This variety had reportedly been introduced only in 1669, at the initiative of silk merchants from Agra who were among the principal groups of buyers of raw silk in Bengal. In the case of both *tanna-banna* and tanny, a given quantity of *pattani* filaments generated several distinct sub qualities of reeled raw silk in well-defined proportions. Thus in *tanna-banna*, there were three distinct subqualities: cabessa, bariga, and pee (corresponding to the head, belly, and foot, of the English documents). The first two qualities accounted for 93.75 percent of the total output (the proportion between cabessa and bariga varied between 12:8 and 11:9). The remaining 6.25 percent was equally divided between the third variety and the waste material. According to the Pieter van Dam; one seer of *tanna-banna* raw silk cost Rs. 2.40 and of *tanny* raw silk, Rs. 3.27. An analysis of these amounts is presented in Table 1. The real wage bill works out at 17.5 percent of the total cost in the case of the *tanna-banna* variety and 23.5 percent for the tanny. Raw silk reeled from the potti filaments was also known as tanna-banna, but was of a distinctly inferior quality. The average cost of production of a seer of potti *tanna-banna* silk was estimated at Rs. 2.25. As far as possible, the Company tried to.³

TABLE No 1.
Cost of production of one seer of *Tanna-banna* And *Tanny* Raw Silk

Item of Cost	Tanna-banna (in rupees)	Tanny (in rupees)
Cocoons at 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ seers per rupee	1.90 (12 $\frac{3}{4}$ seers)	2.37 (16 seers)
Wages of the drawers of the <i>pattani</i> filaments	0.19	.031
Food provided to the <i>pattani</i> drawers	0.04	0.09
Wood used as fuel	0.08	0.13
Wages of the reelers	0.19	0.37

Total cost	2.40	3.27
Source: Pieter van dam, Beschrijvinge, II, II, pp. 69-70.		

Procure raw silk reeled form *pattani* filaments alone.

We see that during this time period, the English East India Company was founded on 31 December, 1600 with the blessings of Queen Elizabeth I for the purpose of trade to the East.⁴ Sir Thomas Roe in his embassy to the 'Durbar' of Jahangir in 1615 presented silk cloths of Malda and Murshidabad to the Badshah and tried to get trading privileges in Bengal from him. But he was not successful in his mission.⁵ Nevertheless, Bengal silk fabric continued to lure the English. Richard Hughes, the chief of Patna Factory, reported in 1620 that the trade in Bengal silk would no doubt be lucrative. He informed the Surat Council that the Bengal silk could be easily procured in abundance in Patna at a price 35% cheaper than that of Agra. He further pointed out that at Murshidabad an infinite quantity of 'choicest stuff' could be had, at least 20% cheaper than in any other place of India. Murshidabad had an extensive number of expert workmen and silk winders. Labour was also cheaper there.⁶ Still, the possibility of trade of the English Company in Bengal raw silk had initially failed. It was only in 1651 after the E.I. Company received Farman from Prince Shah Suja and founded the Hugli factory that an extensive silk trade of the Company had started.

Though import of silk fabric was the prime concern of the Company till 1701, raw silk was the most important article of export in the Company's trade in Bengal since the beginning of the 18th Century. In the first half of the seventeenth century, the demand of the English for raw silk was mainly met by the silk of France, Italy, Persia and China. The Dutch Company conducted the profitable trade, but in the middle of the seventeenth century, the Dutch became more interested in the trade with Japan than with Europe. Moreover, the Dutch Company switched over to the trade of precious metals from Persia instead of Persian silk. The export of raw silk to Europe therefore became uncertain and obviously its supply had sharply declined. The English Company seemed to have been interested in the Persian silk trade in the early years of the seventeenth century, and therefore, it had to face a keen competition from the French and the Italian merchants. The monopoly of the Shah of Persia in the silk trade, and exactions and abuses practiced by the officers of the Shah disheartened the English very much, and the Company naturally, turned to Bengal, particularly to Malda and Murshidabad for the supply of raw silk. The opening of the Hugli Factory in 1651, the Kasimbazar Factory in 1658 and the Malda Factory in 1680 by the Company substantially helped them in conducting an extensive trade in Bengal.⁷ In order to ensure steady supply of raw material the Company made strenuous efforts to augment the production of silk. The production and quality of silk mainly depended on the supply of fresh mulberry-leaves to the worms, and the Company, therefore, extended mulberry cultivation and established silk factories and

filatures in the silk districts of Bengal. They realised its importance, and that Bengal silk was an important item in the presents offered to Farrukshiyar by Surman indicated its role in the consumer market. Kasimbazar was the most important centre of silk trade and a large quantity of silk piece goods and of raw silk was exported every year to the European markets from there. The price of silk varied from Rs.3 to Rs. 7 per seer according to quality and supply.⁸

There were several qualities of Bengal raw silk. John Kenn, the chief of Kasimbazar, wrote in 1661 that silk was wound into three sorts- 'head', 'belly', 'foot' i.e., first, second and third quality respectively. The English Company, generally, used to purchase the first two sorts which were known as 'patta' or of short skein. The other kind of silk which was superfine in quality was known as puttany and it would cost Rs. 5 ¼ to Rs. 6 ¼ per seer. The silk purchased by the indigenous merchants for Agra was called 'Dolleria', in which the 'head', 'belly', and 'foot' were all mixed together. The Dutch Company used to mention the three sorts by the Portuguese terms as 'Cabessa', 'bariga' and 'pee'. There were other kinds of silk such as 'floretta' 'yarn', 'punia' silk, 'punjah, silk, 'Goragaut' silk etc.⁹

Bengal silk was the cheapest of all Asiatic silks and throughout the seventeenth century it was much cheaper than even the Persian and Chinese silk.¹⁰ The demand of Bengal silk was always high and the English Company was encouraged by the incredible profit it had earned in Bengal silk trade. In 1683 the Dutch Company made a profit of about 200% in Bengal silk.¹¹ The English Company too made a profit of over 250% in the sale of silk brought by Martha in 1695/96. In 1673/74, the Directors ordered about 470-570 bales of silk and during the years 1674/75 to 1678/79, the orders varied between 600-900 bales. Thus the demand of Bengal silk began to rise sharply and in 1679/80; the order for Bengal silk went upto 1,800 bales, indicating a rise of demand by 50%. In 1681/82 the order for Bengal silk shot up unusually, as the Company ordered for 10,000 bales, each bale containing 160 seers. In 1682/83, the order for Bengal silk was further increased to 11,500 bales, and in the following year i.e., 1683/84, it stood at 11,200 bales.¹²In fact, from the last quarter of the 17th century, the court of Directors urged the Bengal factors to invest more and more in Bengal silk. And the East India Company's investment in silk became formidable by the time it reached the third quarter of that century. "In 1675 they asked the Hugly Agency to take up £20,000 by exchange and invest it in raw silk and repeated the instruction in their letter in 1676."¹³

The most important centers of Bengal silk were Malda and Murshidabad. Silk was abundantly available in Murshidabad, "at least 20% cheaper than any other place in India and is of the choicest stuff, wound of into what condition you shall require it, as it

comes from the worm; where are also innumerable silk winders, expert workmen, and labour cheaper by a third than elsewhere.”¹⁴

The reputation and superiority of the Malda and Murshidabad silk were noticed by everyone, particularly of the English Company, which opened their silk factory at Kasimbazar in 1658. The kasimbazar factory played a dominant role for more than two hundred years in the history of silk industry of Bengal. Since its foundation, the English made a rapid progress in silk trade in spite of the competition of the Dutch. Originally, the Dutch Company was the main purchaser of Bengal silk, but the English Company took a definite lead in the second half of the 18th century.¹⁵ The difficulties of communication and the immobility of labour had helped to make the rural sector of Bengal self-sufficient. Nonetheless, there was an extensive foreign and inland trade in which both the inhabitants of the province and the people coming from the outside participated. The export trade was carried on by a host of merchants who came from different regions of Europe, as also of Asia. People from other parts of India- Punjab, Gujrat, Sind, Agra and Marwar came to Bengal in search of wealth, and many of them were enriched beyond their expectation. Some of the merchant adventures, like the ‘Seths of Murshidabad’, settled in the province and became the founders of a mercantile aristocracy.¹⁶

The outbreak of the European war interrupted the Turkish and the Italian silk trade and the demand for Bengal silk increased considerably. The Directors, therefore, urged upon the Bengal factors to send enormous quantity of Bengal silk. They expected that “raw silk must continue as a commodity of great price as it is now in all parts of Europe.”¹⁷ But the English orders for raw silk in the first two decades of the 18th century were not consistent. The table No 2, for a six year period indicates that.

TABLE No 2.

Title: English demand of raw silk in the first two decades of the eighteenth century.

Year	I	Quantity	Year	II	Quantity	Year	III	Quantity
1702/3		60,000 lbs.	1708/9		110,000 lbs.	1714/15		600 bales
1703/4		190,000 lbs.	1709/10		50,000 lbs.	1715/16		600 bales
1704/5		190,000 lbs.	1710/11		20,000 lbs.	1716/17		600 bales
1705/6		50,000 lbs.	1711/12		40,000 lbs.	1717/18		300 bales

1706/7		75,000 lbs.	1712/13		180,000 lbs.	1718/19		300 bales
1707/8		160,000 lbs.	1713/14		120,000 lbs.	1719/20		150 bales
		725,000 lbs.			520,000 lbs.			2,550 bales
		i.e. an average of 121,000 lbs. approximate			I.e. an average of 87,000 lbs. approximate.			I.e. an average of 435 bales of 127,500 lbs. taking each bale to contain 4 mds. Each md. Of 75 lbs.

Source: S. Chaudhury, Trade and Commercial Organization in Bengal, Calcutta, 1975, p. 185.

On the contrary, Dutch orders for Bengal silk in the first two decades of the 18th century did not fluctuate sharply as could be found from the table given below (3). And the demand of the Dutch for Bengal silk was no doubt greater than that of the English.

TABLE No 3.

Title: Dutch demand of raw silk in the first two decades of the 18th century.

	I		II
Year	Quantity	Year	Quantity
1704/5	270,000 lbs. (Dutch)	1711/12	168,000 lbs. (Dutch)
1705/6	262,000 " "	1712/13	164,000 " "
1706/7	275,000 " "	1713/14	162,000 " "
1707/8	260,000 " "	1714/15	209,000 " "
1708/9	204,000 " "	1715/16	197,000 " "
1710/11	164,000 " "	1716/17	246,000 " "
	1,435,000 lbs. (Dutch)		1,146,000 lbs. (Dutch)
	i.e. an average of 239,166 lbs. (Dutch)		i.e. an average of 191,000 lbs. (Dutch)

Source: S. Chaudhury, Trade and Commercial Organization in Bengal Calcutta, 1975, p. 186.

However, compared to the supply of other commodities, the supply position of raw silk was not so good in European market as was expected. For it was in the silk trade that the European Companies had to face the toughest competition from the indigenous merchants. Up to the first half of the 18th century, the indigenous and Asiatic merchants were the most formidable rivals of the European Companies in the silk market.

Silk industry of Bengal was improved considerably during this period and, so, it had certainly attracted the European Companies for securing raw silk and silk fabrics from Bengal, particularly of Malda and Murshidabad. The exports of raw silk from Bengal exceeded the import from China in England.

TABLE No 4.

Title: The quantities of raw silk imported from Bengal and China are given for decennial periods from 1701 to 1760.

Years	Raw Silk (Bengal)	Raw silk (China)
1701-1710	514364 lbs.	317539 lbs.
1711-1720	578004 “	55180 “
1721-1730	4046861 “	85303 “
1731-1740	1416911 “	77063 “
1741-1750	896052 “	*
1751-1760	428072 “	1299538 “

Source: K.N. Chaudhury, Trading world of Asia and the English East India Company (1660-1760), Cambridge, 1978, pp. 533-535.

From 1701 to 1740 there was practically little import of raw silk from China in comparison with Bengal and in the next decade i.e. in 1741-50 no raw silk was imported from China. But the Anglo-French conflict and the wars with the Nawabs of Bengal upset this splendid trade. During the sixties i.e. 1751-60, the imports of raw silk from China rose three times more than that from Bengal. Bengal witnessed a very serious recession in this phase.

The Company's trade in Bengal raw silk and silk stuffs in the 17th and early 18th centuries it clear that there was considerable export of silk goods from Malda and Murshidabad into England. Because, the fine quality and cheapness of the silk fabrics of Malda and Murshidabad attracted the English customers and use of silk became so common amongst them in the last quarter of the 17th century that the British parliament thought it necessary to enact laws for the protection and encouragement of the woolen industry at home. The act of 1701 declared “that from Michaelmas,¹⁸ 1701, all wrought skills, Bengals, and stuffs mixed with silk or herbs, of the manufacture of Persia, China or the east Indies, should be locked up in warehouses till re-exported; so that none of the

said goods be worn or used, in either apparel or furniture, in England, on forfeiture thereof, and also of £200 penalty on the person having or selling any of them." The act no doubt had a repercussion on the Bengal silk industry. Nevertheless, it was true that it could not affect the industry very seriously. The silk piece-goods began to be imported into England for re-export to other countries.¹⁹ Further, there was a policy shift as much in the import items as in the manufacturing sector. "The point is that as there was increasing demands for raw silk in the United Kingdom, sericulture received much more attention from the East India Company than the weaving of silk fabrics."²⁰

Sericulture did not progress much in the first half of the 18th century as the indigenous workers were non-innovative and tradition bound. The Company also did not get sufficient encouragement from Home and as a result the efforts of the Company were also desultory. Moreover, the political turmoil's of Bengal forced the factories to close. The Maratha inroads into Bengal during the period between 1742-51 forced, the workmen engaged in sericulture to run away at distant places. It had a depressing effect on the industry.²¹ The Company got the 'Dewani' of Bengal in 1765. After the acquisition of 'Dewani' the Company took serious interest in raw silk business. Not only that, their business strategy too had changed overnight. The Court of Directors wrote on 17th march, 1769 to the Bengal Government that the silk manufactures should be forced to work as silk winders to the Company's factories and not to work elsewhere "under severe penalties by the authority of Government."²² The ryots were encouraged for the cultivation of mulberry plants and the waste lands were given to them rent-free for two years. A batch skilled workman was sent to India from Italy and France as we had already mentioned, to teach the Italian method of winding to the indigenous reelers. Simultaneously, the Company took interest in and put a stress on the cultivation of mulberry plants and it was extended upto Purnea and Bhagalpur in the province of Bihar.²³

Opium:

Besides raw silk, the only Bengal item that figured in the Company's intra-Asian trade in a significant manner was opium. The two major centres of production of this drug in seventeenth-century India were Bihar and Malwa. Nit about 1670, the main area to which Bihar opium was sent was the Malabar Coast, but thereafter the Indonesian archipelago became the principal market for this item. Indeed, Bihar soon became the sole supplier of opium to the archipelago. A Dutch account pertaining to the year 1688 estimated the annual output of opium in Bihar in a normal year at 8,700 maunds. This amount was produced in forty-eight parganas, half of which were held in jagir by Wazir Asad Khan, Nawab Shaista Khan, and his son Buzurg Ummed Khan, among others. The remaining parganas, accounting for nearly 61 percent of the total output were administered by revenue officials on behalf of the king as Khalisa lands. Of the total output, 62 percent

was of very good quality. The remaining 33 percent was distributed among various grades in a descending order of quality as follows: Grade II, 8.04 percent; grade III, 9.19 percent; grades IV and V, 8.62 percent each, and grade VI, 3.44 percent. The account went on to suggest further that of the total output, only about 0.6 percent was consumed within Bihar. Another about 10 to 12 percent was sent to other parts of the Bengal region. The exports to Agra and Allahabad reportedly accounted for yet another 34.5 to 46 percent of the total output. The remaining 41 to 55 percent was exported to other national and international markets. The average amount procured annually by the Dutch Company around this time was approximately 1,000 maunds, accounting for about 1105 percent of the total output. This, of course, does not take into account the illegal private trade on by the Company's servants in this item, which often matched the trade carried on by the Company.²⁴

Saltpetre:

During this time period, it is to be noted that; whereas opium was an item exclusive to the intra-Asian trade of the Company, saltpeter figured exclusively in the trade with Europe. This item was not only a high profit-yielding commercial good like any other handle by the Company; it had the added advantage that it could be used to ballast the homebound ships. Saltpeter was an essential ingredient in the manufacture of gunpowder, and its indigenous production in Europe had not been keeping pace with the rise in demand. Saltpetre was produced in the Indian subcontinent mainly Gujarat, the Coromandel Coast, and Bihar. From about the middle of the seventeenth century onward, Bihar became virtually the only supplier of salt petre for the European market. This reflected the distinct advantage that Bihar saltpeter had over its rivals in the form of a lower price and the proximity to the Ganga for a quick and relatively inexpensive transportation to the port of Hugli. Saltpeter was produced in Bihar mainly in the districts of Bihar, Champaran, Hajipur, Saran, and Tirhut. The producers belonged to a particular caste called the luniahs, and the period of production was between November and the middle of June. The first step in the process was the collection of saline earth by scraping the surface of old mud heaps and waste grounds where grounds where saltpeter had developed in a thin white efflorescence resembling frost rind. This earth was then dissolved and filtered through bamboos and grass mats. Next the saltpeter liquor was evaporated to a crystallizing state, which was done in earthen pots fixed in two rows over an oblong cavity dug in the ground, the interstices between the pots being filled up with clay. The product at this stage was known as dobara saltpeter, and contained 80 to 85 percent pure nitre. In order to produce refined saltpeter called dobara-cabessa or kalmi whose nitre content was about 95 percent the dobara saltpeter was re-dissolved and crystallized.²⁵

Textiles:

We see that, Bengal was a major supplier of cotton and silk textiles. Indeed, by the early years of the eighteenth century, textiles were the biggest single item in the Company's export bill from Bengal. The region provided more textiles to the European companies than the rest of Asia put together. The comparative advantage of Bengal in relation to the other textile producing regions of India consisted in the manufacture of fine cotton and silk textiles. In terms of quality, the cotton grown in the vicinity of Dacca did not have a rival in the entire subcontinent. The Company procured cotton, silk, and mixed cotton and silk textiles in Bengal. Among the cotton textiles, the principal division was between the muslins and the calicoes. Of the two, muslins were more loosely woven and, on an average, were made of finer yarn. The best quality muslins were produced in the district of Dacca, where a particularly well-known centre of production was sonargaon, situated at a distance of about fifteen miles east of the city of Dacca. The other important manufacturing centres were the Malda district and Santipur in Nadia District. Comparatively less fine varieties were also produced in Patna in Bihar and Balasore in Orissa.²⁶

Conclusion:

This chapter we have focused mode of trade items and important of trade goods or items. And we have discussed about the imported and exported trade goods. We see that the important trade items have been precious metals and various goods and also exported trade items have been Raw silk, Opium, Saltpeter, and Textile. And also focused, the impact was over the Bengal trade during the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century by the various trade items.

Notes and Reference

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