

Bengal Silk between Tradition and Modernity: Historical Perspectives on Industrial Change

Dr. Santoshi Bhagat

SACT - 1, Department of History, Ramsaday College, Email: santoshi.bhakat@gmail.com

Abstract: *From the early modern era until the eighteenth century, Bengal's silk industry played a significant role in South Asian and international trade. Bengal became a vital supplier to both domestic and foreign markets because of its reputation for producing high-quality raw silk and silk fabrics. But under British colonial control, the structure of labor, trade, and silk manufacturing underwent significant changes in the nineteenth century. This article explores the historical development of Bengal's silk industry between tradition and modernity, examining the effects of global market integration, technological advancements, colonial economic policies, and changing production patterns. The study contends that Bengal's silk industry underwent a complicated process of restructuring in which ancient practices coexisted with new commercial and industrial pressures, rather than viewing the nineteenth century as merely a time of decline. The essay illustrates how producers and merchants adjust to shifting economic situations by looking at labor relations, manufacturing, trade networks, and sericulture. The history of Bengal silk sheds light on larger processes of industrial development, colonial transformation, and international economic integration in South Asia during the nineteenth century.*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 30 March 2026

Received in revised form
10 April 2026

Accepted 15 April 2026

Citation: Bhagat, Dr. S., (2026)

“Bengal Silk between Tradition and Modernity: Historical Perspectives on Industrial Change”, *Pen and Prosperity*, Vol. 3, Issue. 2, April 2026.

Keywords: *Bengal silk, sericulture, colonial economy, industrial change, trade networks, nineteenth century, British India.*

Introduction: An significant period in South Asia's economic and social history is represented by the history of Bengal's silk industry. Bengal was acknowledged as one of Asia's major hubs for silk production long before British colonial control was established. Silk from places like Birbhum, Rajshahi, Malda, and Murshidabad was sold in markets in Europe, Persia, India, and Central Asia. The industry relied on a sophisticated network that linked rural producers with urban merchants and foreign traders through mulberry planting, reeling, weaving, and silkworm breeding. This well-established structure faced many possibilities and challenges during the nineteenth century. Commercial arrangements were altered by the growth of British colonial power, which also brought Bengal closer to international capitalist markets. Technological advancements changed production techniques, new demand patterns appeared, and international trade was modified by foreign competition. Historians disagreed about whether Bengal's silk industry declined, deindustrialized, or adapted during the colonial era as a result of these developments. By analysing the relationship between established production methods and new forms of industrial modernity, this essay investigates how Bengal's silk industry changed during the nineteenth century. It contends that although colonial actions upset long-standing economic systems, the industry did not just fall apart. Rather, it saw a major reorganization marked by changes in technology, labor relations, production, and market orientation.

Historical Background of Bengal Silk: Bengal's silk industry began during the Mughal era, when the area became a major hub for textile and sericultural production. Large-scale mulberry production was made possible by favourable weather and rich soil, and talented craftspeople gained proficiency in silk weaving and reeling. European trading firms, such as the English, Dutch, and French, actively engaged in Bengal's silk trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Silk fabrics and raw silk developed become significant export goods. Under the Nawabs, Bengal's capital, Murshidabad, became a significant hub for the manufacturing and trade of silk. In order to connect Bengal with international markets, merchants built vast commercial networks. Local manufacturing processes were altered by the increasing participation of European businesses. Commercial agents obtained supplies for export and extended credit to producers. However, prior to the establishment of British colonial administration, indigenous artisanal production patterns continued to be prevalent. Bengal had a well-established silk sector by the start of the nineteenth century, with strong trade ties, artisanal skills, and rural family production. However, colonial economic policies and changes in the global economy soon put more strain on this structure.

Literature Review: Historians of economic growth, colonialism, trade, and industrial transition have all shown interest in the history of Bengal's silk industry. Research on the production and trade of silk has offered significant insights into the intricate link between indigenous industries and colonial economic institutions, even though the textile industries of cotton and muslin have been given more attention in South Asian historiography. Four interrelated themes can be used to roughly classify the current literature: trade and commercial networks, labor and social history, technological and industrial transformation, and colonial economic policies and deindustrialization.

The issue of deindustrialization during British colonial administration is one of the most important topics in the histories of Indian industry. Early nationalist economists like R. C. Dutt contended that colonial economic policies, which promoted British manufactured goods and turned India into a raw material provider, actively harmed indigenous industry. Dutt highlighted the detrimental effects of British commercial strategies on traditional crafts and industrial sectors in his analysis of colonial economic development. Bengal's silk industry has been studied using his broader framework, despite the fact that his work was mostly concerned with cotton textiles. In a similar vein, Dadabhai Naoroji created the "Drain Theory," which emphasized the economic transfer from India to Britain. The fall of silk weaving and artisanal production was frequently seen by academics who were influenced by this viewpoint as a component of a broader colonial exploitation process. Colonialism was seen as the primary cause of industrial decline in these early nationalist works, which created a compelling narrative. However, the simplicity of the deindustrialization concept was questioned by later historians. Morris D. Morris and others found that different industries and regions were affected differently by colonization. Instead of assuming a uniform trajectory of collapse, revisionist academics examined the adaptability of local sectors and the resilience of artisan production. This historical shift encouraged more thorough research on industries like silk, whose data showed both collapse and restructuring. Tirthankar Roy's work has made a big difference in this regard. Roy challenges deterministic perspectives of colonial economic history while highlighting the flexibility and tenacity of indigenous businesses.

The pioneering work of Om Prakash on European trade in India highlights the central role of silk in the export strategies of European trading companies. According to Prakash, Bengal's silk industry became increasingly linked to international markets through the activities of the English, Dutch, and French trading companies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. His findings demonstrate that commercial globalization was already influencing production patterns before the onset of direct colonial rule.

Deficits in the Current Literature: There are still a number of gaps in the historiography of Bengal silk despite significant scholarly contributions. First, the nineteenth-century shift is not given enough attention in

the literature, which mostly concentrates on the export boom of the eighteenth century or on more general discussions of colonial deindustrialization. Second, labor and social change analyses are frequently kept outside from quantitative studies of production and commerce. Third, more research is needed to understand how modern technology and traditional artisanal methods interact. Furthermore, there are still few studies that compare Bengal's silk industry to advancements in China, Japan, and Europe. Bengal's changing place in worldwide silk markets might be explained by such parallels, which also shed light on the global aspects of industrial transformation.

Colonial Rule and Commercial Reorganization: The economic climate in which the silk industry worked was drastically changed by the growth of British power. In order to maximize the export of valuable commodities, the colonial authorities aimed to further incorporate Bengal into imperial commercial networks. Beyond trading, the East India Company was involved in the manufacture of silk. Officials at the company made an effort to ensure dependable supplies for European markets, enhance quality control, and control output. Investments were made in filatures, a system of centralized supervision for silk reeling. These businesses were an early attempt to bring industrial techniques into an industry that was primarily artisanal. The export of raw resources rather than completed goods became more and more important under colonial commercial policy. Bengal's place in international commerce networks consequently progressively changed. Locally produced silk fabrics faced increasing competition from automated European industries, even as raw silk exports continued to draw demand. For producers, the reorganization of trading patterns had important ramifications. Many craftspeople became reliant on commercial middlemen connected to colonial businesses as traditional merchant networks were undermined. Merchants, agents, and export-oriented businesses came to hold a disproportionate amount of economic power.

Technology and Industrial Change: The increasing impact of technological innovation on the world's silk output was one of the nineteenth century's distinguishing characteristics. Europe's industrialization brought mechanized textile production techniques that boosted output and cut expenses. The development of technology in Bengal was uneven. Hand reeling and traditional methods of cultivating silkworms were still widely used. Rural farmers still relied on domestic work and hereditary knowledge. However, advancements in reeling technology and quality control were encouraged by colonial authorities and commercial interests. Filatures developed into significant hubs for technological innovation and experimentation. These businesses used centralized production techniques that were created to adhere to global norms. They did not completely replace conventional systems, while introducing aspects of industrial organization. A hybrid industrial structure was produced by the coexistence of contemporary and traditional methods. While upholding long-standing procedures, many producers embraced specific advances. This pattern demonstrated the durability of regional knowledge systems as well as financial limitations. As a result, technological modernization was not a straight line. Rather, it entailed balancing the demands of colonial industrial capitalism with indigenous customs.

Global Markets and International Competition: Bengal's silk industry became further integrated into international markets during the nineteenth century. Growing exports were made possible by increased international trade, but it also exposed producers to new kinds of rivalry. For the majority of the century, there was a substantial demand for raw silk in Europe. However, Bengal's position was gradually being contested by producers in other areas. The global silk economy was revolutionized by events in Italy, France, China, and eventually Japan. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Japanese silk exports in particular became a formidable rival. Japanese manufacturers were able to increase their market shares abroad thanks to improvements in production quality and efficiency. Bengal's silk producers faced additional challenges because to shifting consumer tastes and price swings. The industry was susceptible to external economic shocks due to its reliance on export markets. Thus, the results of trade globalization were

inconsistent. Access to foreign markets opened doors for business growth, but it also increased pressure from competitors and revealed fundamental flaws in the sector.

Labor and Social Transformation: The social structure of the silk business was greatly impacted by shifts in trade and manufacturing. Women and children from rural households, who took part in different stages of production, were crucial to sericulture. Traditional worker relations were changed by the growth of export-oriented production. Producers grew more reliant on market forces as commercial middlemen gained more influence over production processes. Weavers and artisans faced very challenging conditions. The demand for locally produced silk goods decreased due to competition from imported textiles. Many skilled professionals had to deal with dwindling pay and unstable job prospects. Simultaneously, certain groups adjusted to evolving circumstances by turning to the manufacture of raw silk or joining new business networks. As a result, the social effects of industrial transformation differed between geographical areas and occupational groups. Throughout the nineteenth century, women's contributions to sericulture remained crucial. Despite economic difficulties, their work in home manufacturing, cocoon processing, and silkworm breeding helped keep the business afloat. However, these contributions were often overlooked or undervalued in colonial records. The evolution of labor relations was a reflection of larger shifts taking place in colonial society, where market-oriented economic institutions were increasingly interacting with traditional forms of production.

Decline, Adaptation, or Transformation: The nature of industrial change in colonial India has long been a topic of discussion among historians. Early nationalist academics frequently highlighted the negative effects of colonial economic policy and depicted sectors like silk as victims of deindustrialization. A more nuanced assessment acknowledges processes of adaptation and restructuring, even while there is unquestionable evidence of deterioration in some industries. The nineteenth century did not see the end of Bengal's silk industry. Rather, it experienced profound changes that changed its social and economic underpinnings. Production started to focus more and more on export markets. Innovations in technology were embraced selectively. Commercial networks grew beyond conventional limits. Producers, traders, and colonial institutions formed new connections. These findings imply that both continuity and disruption were components of industrial change. Modern organizational structures coexisted with traditional methods, resulting in a dynamic and changing industrial scene. Thus, the idea of transition offers a more thorough framework for comprehending Bengal silk's history. While acknowledging the difficulties brought about by colonialism, it also recognizes the agency of local players who changed with the times.

Conclusion: The complicated interplay between tradition and modernity in colonial South Asia is shown by the history of Bengal's silk industry in the nineteenth century. The industry underwent a complex process of social and economic change rather than a straightforward story of demise. Production and trade patterns were altered by global market integration, technical advancements, and colonial policies. Even though traditional artisanal systems faced previously unheard-of difficulties, they also showed incredible adaptability and persistence. In response to shifting circumstances, producers, retailers, and laborers employed a variety of tactics that allowed some aspects of the sector to endure and develop. The Bengali silk experience sheds insight on more general issues in colonial economic history. Global market forces did not completely determine industrial change, nor was it altogether imposed from above. Instead, it developed as a result of interactions between regional customs and outside influences. Comprehending the evolution of Bengal's silk industry adds to broader discussions about industrialization, colonialism, and economic growth. It shows how traditional sectors managed to maintain significant facets of their historical identity while navigating the shift to a contemporary global economy. Thus, the tale of Bengal silk continues to be a significant illustration of both continuity and change in South Asia's economic history during the nineteenth century. The research that is currently available shows that the history of Bengal's silk industry cannot be summed up as a straightforward chronicle of decline. Despite the major obstacles posed by colonial

economic policies, international competition, and technical gaps, researchers are becoming more aware of the significance of institutional reform, adaptability, and resilience. Nationalist interpretations of deindustrialization gave way to more nuanced explanations that focused on social transformation, technological hybridity, and commercial restructuring. By analysing Bengal's silk industry as a location where tradition and modernity interacted in dynamic ways, this study expands on these discussions. It aims to contribute to a more thorough understanding of industrial development in colonial South Asia by fusing viewpoints from economic history, social history, and global trade studies.

References

- Asiatic Society. Manuscript Collections on Bengal Commerce.
- Baden-Powell, B. H. *The Land Systems of British India*. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892.
- Bagchi, Amiya Kumar. "Deindustrialization in Gangetic Bihar, 1809–1901." *The Journal of Development Studies* 12, no. 2 (1976): 135–164.
- Bagchi, Amiya Kumar. *Private Investment in India, 1900–1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.
- Bagchi, Amiya Kumar. *The Political Economy of Underdevelopment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Bayly, C. A. *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- British Library. East India Company Correspondence on Silk Trade.
- Buchanan-Hamilton, Francis. *An Account of the Districts of Bengal*. Early nineteenth-century surveys.
- Chaudhuri, K. N. *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- Chowdhury, Binay Bhushan. "Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal, 1757–1900." *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 1, no. 1 (1964): 23–45.
- Datta, Rajat. *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal, c.1760–1800*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2000.
- Dutt, R. C. *India in the Victorian Age: An Economic History of the People*. London: Kegan Paul, 1904.
- Dutt, R. C. *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule*. London: Kegan Paul, 1902.
- Gadgil, D. R. *The Industrial Evolution of India in Recent Times*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Government of Bengal. *Report on the Trade Carried by Rail and River in Bengal*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, various years.
- Government of India. *Report on the Moral and Material Progress of India*. London: HMSO, various years.

- Government of India. *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India*. London: HMSO, various years.
- Habib, Irfan. *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556–1707*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Hodges, William. *Travels in India*. London, 1793.
- Hunter, W. W. *A Statistical Account of Bengal*. Vols. VII–X. London: Trübner & Co., 1875–1877.
- Hunter, W. W. *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*. London: Trübner & Co., 1881.
- Marshall, P. J. *Bengal: The British Bridgehead, Eastern India 1740–1828*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Morris, Morris D. “Towards a Reinterpretation of Nineteenth-Century Indian Economic History.” *The Journal of Economic History* 23, no. 4 (1963): 606–618.
- Mukherjee, Ramkrishna. *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974.
- Naoroji, Dadabhai. *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*. London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1901.
- National Archives of India. Revenue and Agricultural Department Records.
- National Library of India. Bengal Administrative Reports and Trade Statistics.
- O’Malley, L. S. S. *Bengal District Gazetteers: Malda*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1914.
- O’Malley, L. S. S. *Bengal District Gazetteers: Murshidabad*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1914.
- Parliamentary Papers. *Reports from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company*. London: House of Commons, various years.
- Prakash, Om. “Bullion for Goods: International Trade and the Economy of Early Eighteenth-Century Bengal.” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 13, no. 2 (1976): 159–187.
- Prakash, Om. *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Prakash, Om. *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630–1720*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Proceedings of the Revenue Department, Government of Bengal. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Records, nineteenth century.
- Ray, Rajat Kanta. *Entrepreneurship and Industry in India, 1800–1947*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Report of the Indian Tariff Board on Silk and Silk Manufactures. Government of India, 1924.
- Report on the Silk Industry in Bengal. Department of Agriculture and Commerce, Government of Bengal, various years.

- Roy, Tirthankar. “Artisan Labour in the Late Nineteenth Century.” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 34, no. 4 (1997): 455–479.
- Roy, Tirthankar. “The Economic History of India: A Survey.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 52 (2002): 5327–5336.
- Roy, Tirthankar. *India in the World Economy: From Antiquity to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Roy, Tirthankar. *The Economic History of India, 1857–1947*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Roy, Tirthankar. *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Sarkar, Sumit. *Modern India, 1885–1947*. New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983.
- Sinha, N. K. “The Economic History of Bengal.” *Bengal Past and Present* 78 (1959): 1–24.
- Tennant, William. *Indian Recreations*. London, 1804.
- Tomlinson, B. R. *The Economy of Modern India, 1860–1970*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Tripathi, Dwijendra. *The Oxford History of Indian Business*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Ward, William. *A View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindoos*. Serampore, 1817.
- Washbrook, David. *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870–1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- West Bengal State Archives. Commercial and Industrial Proceedings.
- Wilson, C. R. *The Early Annals of the English in Bengal*. London: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1895.