

Chapter 4

ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SILK INDUSTRY

A large population of Malda mainly depended on the traditional silk industry for their economically secured life. The economic impact of the silk industry was reflected through the various aspects during the period under review. Sericulture was not only an industry based economic sector; it was also closely related with different agricultural activities. During the colonial period, besides the agriculture, sericulture developed as the most important industrial sector in Malda. Thus, most of the people of Malda were attached with the agro – based silk industry and trade.

Sericulture was a large scale industry, which included both indoor and outdoor processing. This sector was sustained by the plantation of mulberry trees to the making of clothes. People of Malda were engaged in the different stages of the silk industry. Due to the labour oriented industry, all the family members worked in this sector.¹

The outdoor activity mainly included the mulberry cultivation and feeding on mulberry leaves. Indoor activities were more extensive than the outdoor works. But, both were very important and much essential for the development of this industry. The general opinion was that, male members were engaged in outdoor activities whereas, female members were employed in the indoor works. In this sector, women's participation was very remarkable.

¹ Madan Mohan Rao, *A Textbook of Sericulture*, Hyderabad: B. S. Publication, 1998, p.4.

As a household activity, both male and female laborers were engaged in the sericulture production, but some works were outstandingly managed only by women through their traceable efficiency and limitless patience. These works included leaf harvesting and chopping, silkworm rearing in sericulture; cocoon sorting, cooking, floss removal, and filament casting in reeling.² Women laborers did not have any fixed hours for this work; they were involved both the day and night for weaving.³ It was noticed that women of all ages were engaged in the rearing and other works of the silk industry.⁴

We noted that from the various official sources that the mode of engagement of the people in sericulture industry was of two types: part time and full time, or, some cases, direct and indirect engagements. Those silk workers were not involved in the agricultural sector as they were purely full time silk employee. But, those who were only attached with the silk industry during the silk cultivation period besides their attachment with the agricultural farm, were considered as part time silk workers. As sericulture was composed of different segments, thus, the industry provided various employments to the workers. The silk workers carried the facilities through various ways. They obtained economic profit from the silk cultivation, industry and trade. Besides the silk related works, they freely managed other household activities. So, the family did not suffer due to the problem of times and economy. The silk workers of Malda did not face any problem during the pre - colonial period.

² Sanjay Sinha, *The Development of Indian Silk – A wealth of Opportunities*, New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publication, 1990, pp. 23 – 24.

³ R.K.Bhattacharya, S.B. Chakrabarti (eds.), *Indian Artisans – Social Institutions and cultural Values*, Kolkata: Anthropological Survey of India, Government of India, Ministry of Culture, Department of Culture, p. 78.

⁴ D.C. Roy (ed.), *Economy of North Bengal – A District Level Study*, ‘Sericulture as a tool for Economic Development in Malda’ article written by Dr. Dilip De Sarkar, Subrata Saha, Debjoy Bhattacharjya, Siliguri : N. L. Publishers, 2013, p. 629.

In the sericulture sector consisted of different types of workers as per their division of works. A large portion of people were engaged in the production system.⁵ The different classes of workers were named as silk cultivators, rearers, reelers, weavers, cloth makers and others market related sections. In most of the cases, each and every section carried out special dignities, but, main motto of the people of every section was the same: hopeful employment.

Silk industry provided the maximum opportunity in the rural areas. As a rural area, people of Malda got the chance to profit from this sector. The silk industry was especially a profitable sector for the small and marginal farmers.⁶ As the employees were not economically strong, so, could not buy big lands for cultivation nor could they establish an industry of their own, or start any business. In the poorer families, both the husband and wives were engaged in the silk industry. If the wife was engaged in weaving, her husband was engaged for weaves and cleansing the cloth.⁷ Not only male and female workers were engaged in this industry, even children were also involved in the rearing works.⁸ Sericultural activities were maintained through hereditary modes, so the outstanding level of efficiency transferred from generation to generation. An artistic proficiency was proved by the silk workers of Malda region.

⁵ *Survey of Silk and Art Silk Industry; Final Report*, National Council of Applied Economic Research. New Delhi, 1961, p. 26.

⁶ H. G. Hanumappa (ed.), *Sericulture for Rural development*, Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House, 1986, p.126.

⁷ Irfan Habib, *Indian Economy 1858 – 1914, A People's History of India*, New Delhi : Aligarh Historian Society, Tulika Books, 2016, p.130.

⁸ G. E. Lambourn, *Bengal District Gazetteers – Malda*, Siliguri: N. L. Publishers, 1918, p. 67.

Shahpur and Sibganj were the two significant silk-weaving centres in Malda. Silk weavers of these places, made the different types of clothes, although, Udu, Bulbul Chasm, Gultishi were very famous. Silk saris, dhuties, handkerchiefs, and sheets were also produced by their artistic values.⁹

In the history of sericulture, production of silk through the European process was known as ‘filature system’. After the successful establishment of the filature method at Malda, the English East India Company captured the entire silk production centres as well as silk market.¹⁰ First, the East India Company created a good relation with the native silk agent as well as silk businessmen as they wanted to acquire the knowledge of new places and also of the method in which silk was grown by the local cultivators. Second, they wanted to understand the mentality of the native silk *ryots* and other silk workers.

From the beginning, the East India Company wanted to establish their power on the colonial country, although, this power reached the native peoples as colonial hegemony. This hegemony destroyed the peaceful condition of the industrial sector.

⁹ Sailendra Kumar Bag, *The Changing Fortunes of the Bengal Silk Industry 1757 – 1833*, Calcutta: Manasi Press, 1989, p.359.

¹⁰ Letter written by Thomas Henschman, Resident at Malda to Samuel Middleton, President and Member of the Board of Trade at Fort William, Calcutta, 2 February 1775, Fort William the 3rd February 1775, Board of Trade (henceforth BOT), Commercial, Vol. No. 2, 1775, West Bengal State Archives (henceforth WBSA), Calcutta.

The British East India Company invested heavily in the *aurung* of Malda to derive the maximum profit from silk business.¹¹ The Company entered into an agreement with the native silk cultivators through the advance system. Main provision of the system was that the local cultivators were bounded to the regular supply of raw silk.¹² The weavers engaged as an employee under the English East India Company received advances from individuals.¹³ It was very remarkable that during the initial stage, the supply of silk made cloths on the regular basis was available both for internal and external trade.

Thomas Henschman, Resident at Malda, informed that they have dispatched forty four bales of silk piece goods for the Honorable Company.¹⁴ The Estimate amount of the investment for Malda with other factories in the Bengal Province in very careful manner.¹⁵ In the filature silk factory, modern technological methods were adopted. Due to the lack of knowledge about the European process, engagement ratio of the native people was very low. They also fell as victim of the different economic policies of the colonial government.

¹¹ Letter written by Thomas Henschman, Resident at Malda to William Aldersay, President and Member of the Board of Trade at Fort William, 18th February 1777, Fort William the 28 February 1777, Proceedings, BOT (Commercial), 1777, Vol. No.10, WBSA, Calcutta.

¹² Letter written by Thomas Henschman, Resident at Malda to Samuel Middleton, President and Member of the Board of Trade at Fort William, 31st March 1775, Fort William the 14th April 1775, Proceedings, BOT (Commercial), 1775, Vol.No.3, WBSA, Calcutta.

¹³ Letter written by Warren Hastings, J. Clavering, Geo: Monson, Richd. Barwell, P. Francis (Company's Servants) to the Honble The Court of Directors For affairs of the Honble United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies, Fort William, 20 November 1775, Bengal Letters Received, Vol. 14, Public Department General, Letter of this date, Proceedings, Home Misc., I. O. Copy, 1775, Vol. No. 38, National Archives of India (henceforth NAI), New Delhi.

¹⁴ Letter written by Thomas Henschman, Resident at Malda to William Aldersay, President and Member of the Board of Trade at Fort William, 15 February 1777, Fort William the 4 April 1777, Proceedings, BOT (Commercial), Part -1, Vol. No. 11, WBSA, Calcutta.

¹⁵ Enclosed in the letter from the Board of Trade, 15 November 1784, E.W.House 15th November 1784, Signed by Robert Gosling, E.W.H.Kr., Fort William 22 November 1784, Proceedings, Home Misc., Part – 1, Vol. No.43, 1784, NAI, New Delhi.

The impact of British industrial revolution was bad on the native silk producers as well as on the native artisans of India from the different sides. Due to the industrial revolution, there was an increased demand for supply of raw silk in the cloths manufactured sectors. So, the employee of the British East India Company wanted to collect huge quantity of raw silk from the Bengal Province, especially from Malda region. The decline of cotton piece goods created limitless pressure on Company's employee for the export of raw silk from the Bengal province.¹⁶ Due to this, Company's servants tried to collect raw silk from cultivators as well as native agents by all means. As a result, they tried to maintain a unique relation with the silk cultivators of this region. Although at the initial stage, relations were good, but, later the situation worsened. Here, I will try to discuss of other miserable condition. Thus, this Chapter focuses on the state of misery that the silk cultivators underwent.

In 1793, the French Revolutionary War, made dangerous effect on Bengal silk trade. The silk manufactured articles of Bengal lost their market in Europe.¹⁷ Silk workers employed at different stages of its production were exploited by the middlemen.¹⁸ The silk industry of Malda was engaged with the production of artificial foreign silk.¹⁹

¹⁶ Irfan Habib, *Indian Economy Under Early British Rule 1757 – 1857*, A People's History of India 25, Aligarh Historians Society, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013, p. 48.

¹⁷ H. R. Ghosal, *Economic Transition in the Bengal Presidency (1793 – 1833)*, Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1966, p. 42.

¹⁸ H. G. Hanumappa (ed.), *Sericulture for Rural Development*, Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House, 1986, p. 5.

¹⁹ M. O. Carter, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Malda*, Alipore: Superintendent, Government Printing, Bengal Government Press, 1938, p. 23.

The native silk producing method drew competition with the European filature based production process. The price of industry based silk made cloths had been always cheaper than native cloths, which was produced under *khamru* process.²⁰

Thus, native people always wanted to buy imported European cloths. As a region, Malda acquired a prestigious position in the Bengal Province because of the name and fame of the silk clothes during the pre – colonial period, so the colonial exploitation was high in this place.²¹

After the victory of the Plassey, the Company's officials took over the entire inland trade for their own profit. Besides that, they started monopoly in the region based household industry, in this case silk industry.²² During the Mughal period, the rulers were active patrons of the native silk with silk workers. After 1765, both the inland and external commercial trade was captured by the English East India Company. As a result, the native merchants suffered great loss from the silk trade and commerce.²³

²⁰ H.R.Ghosal, p. 45.

²¹ Alok Moitra, 'Poschimbonger Reshom Shilpo (3)', *Grameen* , Paschimbango Khadi O Grameen Shilpo Porshod, January – February 1986, *Poush – Magh* 1392, p.6.

²² Irfan Habib, *Indian Economy Under Early British Rule 1757 – 1857* , A People's History of India 25, Aligarh Historian Society, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013, p.37.

²³ Ibid.

Besides the native merchants, silk cultivators and other engaged class of workers, like as rearers, reelers, weavers, those who were famous in Bengal, known by the name of *mutchulcahs* or *muchalkas*, the winders of raw silk, those who were popularly known as *nagaads*: all suffered due to the colonial motives as well as injustice.²⁴ The real fact was that, all the unfavourable conditions as well as movements against the British Raj, the respected employees of the British Company controlled the situation and moved the condition in favour of them through the pure ability, outstanding perfection and unbelievable sense of humour to collect the profit for their British Raj.²⁵ Since the beginning of the British Colony in Bengal as well as India, the servants of the Company acted as obedient employees under the British Empire. This was how the British Empire made their highly active and outstanding performance in India.

Rural economic condition under the British Raj was very harmful for the silk cultivators. Before the colonial set up in Bengal Province, as well as India, a unique and traditional native economic structure was maintained in India. But with the beginning of colonial rule, the traditional structure was totally destroyed and a new regime of economic infrastructure began in India.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 38.

²⁵ Letter written by William Cowper, Esq., President and Member of the Board of Revenue to John Canning, December 1793, Fort William in Bengal, Proceedings, Home Misc., Vol. No.89, 1793. NAI, New Delhi.

Previously, in Bengal, professional moneylenders: like as mahajans, *sahukars* or *bohras* (and by other names) controlled the economic structure.²⁶ They were helped by the native cultivators through the different ways for their own profit. The cultivators and artisans were habituated with this system and they were worked for their own profit. Generally, they did not protest against the inland moneylenders.

After the establishment of the Empire, the total business community with also cultivators including zamindars was fallen under the colonial wheel shaped battle – order. The inland traders could not remove themselves from the conspiracy of the British Raj, although, they tried hard.

Discussion comparison between pre-colonial and colonial rulers show that the Sultanate or Mughal rulers were great patronizers of native silk industry and other textiles industry.²⁷ But, the colonial rulers always wanted to achieve maximum profit through minimum investment. For instance, in 1769, the Directors of the English East India Company issued a circular discouraging the weaving of silk fabrics, instead encouraged the production of only raw silk for their own profit.²⁸

²⁶ Irfan Habib, *Indian Economy 1858 – 1914*, A People's History of India 28, Aligarh Historian Society, New Delhi : Tulika Books, 2016, p. 74.

²⁷ W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Delhi: D K Publishing House, Volume VII, Districts of Maldah, Rangpur, and Dinajpur, 1974, pp. 94 – 95.

²⁸ Irfan Habib, *Indian Economy under Early British Rule 1757 – 1857*, A People's History of India 25, Aligarh Historian Society, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013. p. 38.

From the above discussion it can be concluded that a large population of the people of Malda region depended on the sericulture for their livelihood since immemorial times. Because, sericulture was an essentially labour oriented economic sector it generated employment in the rural area of Malda.²⁹ Mainly, in the Kaliachak and English Bazar areas of Malda, which were very popular for mulberry cultivation. Besides in that region, the population of Muslim communities and other lower caste Hindus, like as Pundra – Kshatriyas were active and sincerely engaged in the mulberry cultivation, silk industry and other silk related commerce. But the engagement of higher caste Hindu community of the region in the silk cultivation was not seen.³⁰ The economically affluent high status people, especially the Hindu caste, such as the *zamindars* and big money lenders: *Banyan* or *Mahajan* did not depend on sericulture.

The small *ryots* and landless laborers were mainly involved in the silk industry. Sericulture was provided by two types of labour: whole time and part time workers. The male workers controlled both the agriculture and sericulture. The female members of the family were involved in the indoor based silk related works: rearing, reeling, and weaving, even children were attached with their parents in the highly prized silk industry. Thus from the above discussion it may be stated that the silk industry was the main economic source of the people, mainly for those who belonged to the backward classes due to their poor economic condition.

²⁹ Mihir Kumar Goswami, *Analysis of Economic Development of Malda District since Independence with Special Reference to Sericulture and Main Orchard Crop*, Ph.D thesis submitted in the Department of Commerce, University of North Bengal, June 1986, p.96.

³⁰ Saswati Mukherjee, *Sericulture in West Bengal: A Geographical Analysis*, Calcutta: Bhattacharyya and Bros, 1992, p. 101.

As a source of income of the rural areas, sericulture was an important matter. Malda was a very rural area, a large section of the population belonging to the region were economically depressed classes. Besides, in Malda, there were no other important labour oriented popular economic activities, except cultivation and silk industry. One problem behind that, we could not find how many people were engaged in the silk industry³¹ But we may assume that a large number of people were engaged in the silk industry in Malda.³² Sericulture production involved various stages engaging different types of workers.

No region can gain economic prosperity without a strong industrial sector. In remote areas, in this case Malda, household industry was very essential for the growth of the economic condition. Major portions of people were illiterate and female members of the family always wants to free for the covered of home based works. Sericulture was such a unique activity, which carried out both agricultural and industrial features. So, both male and female workers played an important role for development and prosperity of the silk industry.

Since time immemorial, Malda was a world famous centre for the silk industry and trade. During the pre-colonial period, the silk merchant of Malda not only captured the internal market, but also acquired a respectable position in the external market. .³³

³¹ Ranjan Kumar Gupta, 'Birbhum Silk Industry: A Study of its Growth to Decline', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Sage Publications, Vol. xvii, No.2, 1980, p. 226.

³² G. E. Lambourn, pp. 66 – 67.

³³ M.O. Carter, P.18.

Based on the above mentioned arguments, it may be concluded that most of the subaltern people of Malda took to sericulture as a main source of income as their whole life depended only on the silk industry. So, during the period under review, economic significance of the silk industry of Malda was very important, mainly from the perspective of the standard of living of the people.