SILK INDUSTRY OF MURSHIDABAD  A REVIEW

Kalpana Ghoshal (Chatteijee)
Research Scholar, Calcutta University

ABSTRACT In this paper an attempt has been made to survey the silk industry of Murshidabad in all its aspects—from mulberry cultivation to weaving and its problems in the past and in recent past (1960-62) (1972-73) The proposed increase in the different fields of this industry at the end of the fourth plan are also indicated.

INTRODUCTION

Murshidabad is famous for its silk industry both in India and abroad. This industry first started about 300 years back (1972b). Bernier, the French traveller, in his accounts of India, described thus “There is in Bengal such quality of cotton and silk that the kingdom may be called the common storehouse for these two kinds of merchandise, not of Hindusthan or the Empire of the Great Mogul only but of all the neighbouring kingdoms and even of Europe” (1972 a). This industry attracted the East India Company to this district where its enterprise was stimulated by competition with the Dutch, French and Armenians. The centre of the industry was Cossimbazar, where the Company started a factory at about 1658 (O'Malley, 1914).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Murshidabad has not only a time-honoured silk tradition but also a rich silk fauna. The geographical distribution of silk industry is related to the economic conditions. Natural surroundings play a very active part in the development of the silk production, apart from the investment of a large capital and the maintenance of a suitable organisation. The fundamental factors which form a part of the economic environment are:

1. The presence of suitable climatic conditions in the silk-producing countries,
2. The abundance of mulberry trees, whether natural or cultivated,
3. The availability of a large supply of agricultural or semi-agricultural labour,
4. The availability of cheap power (Rawlley, 1919)

Mulberry Cultivation As the silk worms, the source of silk, feed on mulberry leaves, a well-planned cultivation of mulberry is, therefore, a prerequisite to an organised silk industry. The Census reports indicate that in 1857 mulberry was cultivated over 6,879.6 hectares of land which declined to 433.0 hectares in 1932 and 322.1 hectares in 1950-51 (loc cit 1972 a). In 1914 mulberry cultivation was carried on chiefly in thana Barwan in the Kandi subdivision and thana Raghunathganj in the Jangipur subdivision and thana Ramnagar in the Sadar subdivision.

Silk Rearing This industry is purely a sectarian one and born in the community of rearers, reelers and weavers. Their problems of livelihood were acute since the beginning of the industrial age. As regards silk worm rearing there are three seasons locally known as ‘bands’—for hatching the eggs, spinning and gathering the cocoons viz: (i) the November band—from first October to end of February, (ii) the March band—from 1st March to 30th June, (iii) the July band—from 1st July to 30th September. The first is the most important for silk worms thrive best in the cold season, and the silk produced in this period is better in quality and much more valuable. The March band is not so good and the rainy season band the worst. In 1914 cocoon-rearing
was also carried on chiefly in the mulberry-growing areas such as in thana Barwan, in Raghunathganj and in thana Rannagar.

**Silk Reeling**

After they have finished spinning, the cocoons are either taken to the nearest **hat for sale or killed by exposure to the sun in thin layers and reserved for sale until the **pakars or agents of the filatures come round or they are steamed and reeled off into silk. If they are formed in a healthy manner they are bought up for seed by travelling rearers going about in quest of seed. Reeling is mainly done by the villagers.

**Silk Weaving**

Murshidabad is famous for its weavers. But weavers have been in great distress from the beginning of the industrial age. As regards the general position of the weavers, the following quotation (Mukherjee, 1903) is revealing. "There seems no doubt that the silk-weaving industry is on the decline. The importation of foreign stuff has, of course, a great deal to do with this. Another reason lies in the lack of enterprise displayed in disposing of native fabrics. Where there is an attempt at advertisement, it usually meets with great success. There is no doubt that as a class, their condition is not prosperous, and they are deeply involved in debt. They do not, as a rule, work for themselves but for dealers who advance them material and pay them so much for labour. In Kandi subdivision some weavers found the industry so little profitable that they have entirely given it up."

In 1901, according to the returns of occupations, 28,950 persons were supported by silk spinning and weaving; in 1911 the number was reduced to 27,388 persons. In 1901, the number of persons subsisting by rearing were 10,041, while in 1911 the number was reduced to 6,603 (O'Malley, loc. cit.). The number of persons depending on silk reeling, spinning, and weaving was 3,514, and 76 persons were engaged in silk worm rearing in 1951 (Mitra, 1953). The chief centres of the weaving industry in 1914 were thana Mirzapur in the Jangipur subdivision and thanas Hanharpara and Daulatabazar in the Sadar subdivision. The best silks were made at Mirzapur, other important centres were Baluchar, Islampur, Kadal, Sadabad, Beldanga, and Harharpara. The principal centres of trade were Berhampore and Jiagunj.

**Present Trends**

Mulberry cultivation. At present efforts are being made to extend the area of cultivation and also to increase the yield and quality of mulberry leaves by intensive cultivation so that more quality cocoons might be raised. Emphasis is also on planting more mulberry plants in this district every year. For the same purpose, reorganisation work was taken up in the existing Berhampore Sericulture Nursery during the Second Five Year Plan. Area under mulberry cultivation has increased from 322.1 hectares in 1950-51 to 508.5 hectares in 1960-61. In 1965-66, 508.8 hectares of land were under mulberry cultivation. In 1974-75, it is expected that the area under mulberry cultivation will be 346.3 hectares.

An organisation that has greatly helped the mulberry plantation is the Kumarpur Mulberry Graft Nursery established in 1955-56 with financial assistance of the Central
Silk Board It was subsequently included under the Second Five Year Plan schemes in 1958-59. It has so far supplied 100,000 mulberry grafts, saplings and seedlings to silkworm rearers and mulberry cultivators. Supply of mulberry grafts and saplings were 94,910 in 1960-61, which declined to 60,650 in 1965-66, the amount is expected to increase to about 100,000 in 1974-75. At present mulberry is mainly cultivated at Kumarpur in Beldanga, Berhampore, Kandi, Nabagram etc.

In this district mulberry grows mainly from cuttings and graftings. Though leaves of the tree mulberry have more nutritive value, bush mulberry is mainly cultivated here, as the amount of leaves from bushes is higher than that of tree mulberry plants. Emphasis is on the extension of the mulberry lands and improvement of the quality of leaves by supplying improved quality of saplings, cuttings and grafts to the cultivators. Irrigation, which is a problem in this district, is necessary, for mulberry lands. About 20,2 hectares of mulberry lands are irrigated annually with the help of pump sets, which have been supplied to the cultivators. With the increasing demand of Murshidabāc silk fabrics and development of this industry acreage under mulberry cultivation has been increasing. Compared to the area under mulberry in 1857, the present target is low, still it is an improvement and also a reversal of the declining trend till 1950-51.

Silkworm rearing: Silkworm rearing is a small land holding industry. Each rearer has 0.50 hectares of land under mulberry apart from the lands growing cereals and other crops. In this district the number of families rearing silkworm is 4,212, producing 393 thousand kg of silk cocoons every year. Chief kinds of silkworm reared here are Nistari (yellow) which is indigeneous, green white and white. About 23.8°C temperature and humidity from 72-80 per cent is suitable for silkworm rearing. Silkworms reared here are of multivoltine races though the quality of silk yarn of the foreign races (univoltine) is better than that of multivoltine race, the amount of yarn from the multivoltine cocoons is greater than that of univoltine ones. To improve the quality of silk yarn experiments are being made to produce bivoltine races of cocoons by cross-breeding foreign seeds with Indian seeds.

Success of cocoon crops depends on seeds. For increased supply of disease-free layings, three Government granaries at Berhampore, Kumarpur and Balashpur were established from where one million disease-free laying are annually supplied to the silkworm rearers. In 1960-62 rearing of silk cocoons was carried on chiefly in the thanas of Khargram, Nabagram, Beldanga (Block I and Block II) and Berhampore (1961 and 1963). In 1972-73 chief centres of rearing of silk cocoons are in the thanas of Berhampore, Beldanga (Block I and II), Khargram, Nabagram, Barwan, Kandi, Raghunathgarg and Jalangi (1972 a). The total supply from all sources constitutes 92 per cent of the total demand. In this district essential transformation has started with the silkworm seed which from the traditional multivoltine Nistari (yellow) has changed into white bivoltine and has influenced the industry of seed production,
silk worm breeding, the mulberry growing system and even the spinning of cocoons. 

Number of persons engaged in mulberry cultivation and silk worm rearing is gradually increasing. In 1950-51, the number of persons engaged in mulberry cultivation was 8500, in 1960-61 it was 11,315 and in 1965-66 the number rose to 16,850 and the number of persons expected to increase in 1974-75 is about 20,000 (1972 a).

Silk Reeling: Silk reeling was carried on mainly in the thanas Khargram, Nabagram, Murshidabad-Jiaganj, Beldanga (Block I & II), Raghunathganj in 1960-62. In 1972-73 it is carried on chiefly in all the old centres mentioned previously except in Murshidabad Jiaganj and in the new centre of P S. Kandi. Persons engaged in silk reeling in 1950-51 were 1500, in 1960-61 it rose to 2,200, in 1965-66 the number remained the same and it is expected to increase to about 4,000 in 1974-75.

After reeling, the silk thread is twisted to make silk than or cloth. Twisting is mainly carried on at Malda, and Bangalore by a throwing plant machine. Silk fabrics of superior quality is woven from twisted yarns. In Murshidabad district twisting is carried on to a lesser extent. For twisted yarn it has to depend on Malda.

Weaving: At present Murshidabad produces 2 million square metres of pure silk fabrics and 35 thousand kg. of raw silk annually. This district is famous for its weavers and not for raw silk production. The main industry i.e., silk industry gave employment to about 7,300 persons in 1950-51, 12,856 persons in 1960-61 as well as in 1965-66, and it is expected that about 25,000 persons will be employed in 1974-75 (1972 a). In 1960-62 the weaving industry was carried on chiefly in the thanas of Raghunathganj, Rannagar, Berhampore, Haripur, Bhabagain, Beldanga (Block I & II), Barwan, Kandi, Khargram, Nabagram, Murshidabad, Jiaganj (Block I & II) and Sagardighi. At present chief weaving centres are all the centres mentioned for 1960-62 except Beldanga (Block II), Nabagram and Sagardighi. Murshidabad produces about 80 to 90 per cent printed sarees and the rest are than and dhuties. It is very interesting to note that though Murshidabad produces so much quantities of silk than there is not a single unit for dyeing and printing in the whole of Murshidabad district. Dyeing and printing is done at Serampore which is very costly. Non-availability of local skilled labourers is the main reason for the non-existence of dyeing and printing unit here. Skilled workers are to be brought from Serampore at a very high rate of wages which is a great drawback for the industry. There is a plan to establish a printing unit at Jiaganj in Murshidabad-Jiaganj block. The total estimated production in silk weaving is estimated at about Rs. 4.5 crores.

FINANCE
At present the industry is financed by
(a) Registered societies affiliated to the All-India Khadi and Village Industries Commission, Bombay. There are nine such societies in this district. (b) Registered Co-operative Societies (Registered under the West Bengal Co-operative Societies Act). There are about eight such societies in this district. (c) The weavers

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
The author is grateful to the I C S S R. for providing funds to carry on the investigation on "Geographical Distribution and Prospects of Cottage and Small Scale Industries of Murshidabad", to Prof K Bagchi, Head of the Department of Geography, Calcutta University for providing library facilities, and to Dr. R Bhattacharyya for helpful criticisms and suggestions

REFERENCES
Government of West Bengal 1963, Survey of Industries, other than Block Areas, District Murshidabad Statistical Cell, Directorate of Industries, Calcutta.
Government of West Bengal 1972 a, A Short Note on the Silk Industry of Murshidabad, Directorate of Cottage and Small Scale Industries, (Sericulture section), Berhampore.
Mukherji, N G, 1903, Monograph on the Silk Fabrics of Bengal, Cited in the Murshidabad District Gazetteer by O 'Malley.
Rawlley, Ratan, C, 1919, Economics of the Silk Industry A Study in Industrial Organisation, P, S, King & Sons, Lond,
United Bank of India 1971, Report on the Fact-Finding Survey on Murshidabad District, United Bank of India, Calcutta,
INFORMATION FOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THE REVIEW

The Editor desires to bring to the notice of all contributors to the Review the instructions Published in Volume XXXI, No 2, June, 1969 issue of the Journal as regards manuscripts sent for publication. With minor changes the following points are mentioned again for ready reference. The Publication Committee may not accept the articles if these instructions are not followed by the authors.

1. Papers should be typed in double space in foolscap size paper with 3.5 cm margin and should be submitted in duplicate. A carbon copy of the paper should be retained by the author for ready reference, the papers may not be returned to the authors in case of rejection or delay in publication.

2. Manuscripts should contain the following items:
   i) A short title (approximately 35 characters) which can be used as a running head on the top of running pages
   ii) An abstract of the paper not exceeding 100 words
   iii) An introduction at the beginning of the paper
   iv) A conclusion at the end of the paper

3. References should be given at the end of the paper arranged alphabetically by author, followed by the year of publication, name of the book etc., relevant pages, name of publisher, and place of publication in succession.

4. Footnotes should be avoided unless they are absolutely essential.

5. Illustrations should not exceed 20 by 30 cm size. Maps and line-drawings must be equivalent to a professional draftsman’s work.

6. Units of measurement should be in C. G. S. system.

7. The Oxford Dictionaries should be followed for disputed spelling.

Hony Editor

PUBLICATION COMMITTEE

K. Bagchi
S. P. Das Gupta
S. K. Munshi
R. Bhattacharyya
D. Roychoudhury
M. Maity

S. C. Chakraborty
Maya Dutta
Suprova Roy
M. K. Bandyopadhyay
P. K. Mukhopadhyay
S. R. Basu

Editor
Sevati Mitra
THE GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF INDIA

Life Patron
S P. Chatterjee

The Council

President
K Bagchi

Vice-Presidents
D, R Mitra, S P Dasgupta, A B. Chatterjee

Honorary Secretary
S K. Munsi

Honorary Foreign Corresponding Secretary
K N Mukherjee

Honorary Asst. Secretaries
D Ray Chaudhury, M Muty

Honorary Treasurer
R. Bhattacharyya

Honorary Librarian
S Chatterjee

Honorary Editor
S Mitra

Members
S G Chakraborty, M Dutta, S N Mukherjee, U Sen, M K Bandyopadhyay,
A K Sengupta, G R Pathak, S R Basu, R N. Mitra

Honorary Auditor
R C Ghosh

The Review is published quarterly. It contains from time to time original papers read before the Society, but it also includes articles, notes, reviews etc. useful for professional geographers, students, as well as for those generally interested in the subject. Price Inland Rs 7.50, Foreign £ 0.85.

All correspondence regarding the Society should be addressed to Hony. Secretary, The Geographical Society of India, 35, Ballygunge Circular Road, University of Calcutta, Calcutta-19.

All correspondence regarding advertising rates, membership dues, sale of publication etc should be addressed to Hony Treasurer, The Geographical Society of India, 35, Ballygunge Circular Road, University of Calcutta, Calcutta-19.

All communication regarding contributions to the Review should be addressed to Hony Editor, Geographical Review of India, 35, Ballygunge Circular Road, University of Calcutta, Calcutta-19.

Printed at Reliable Printers, 45A, Iswar Ganguly Lane, Calcutta-26
INTRODUCTION

Woollen-blanket industry is not of much importance in Bengal. According to 1921 Census, there was no woollen mill in Bengal, manufacturing carpets or blankets. The manufacture of woollen goods, such as blankets, rugs and such other materials, is carried on as a cottage industry. The manufacturers of woollen blankets are a class generally called Gareries or Bheriwallas. These Gareries belong to lower Hindu caste.

In the District of Murshidabad, this is a traditional industry and is practically confined to the manufacture of coarse blankets. A small quantity of asans or small cushion seats are also made. The statement showing the number of Gareries in 1872, 1881 and 1891 reveals that the industry may be more than a hundred years old. During early period conditions of the industry was good, as the number of Gareries increased from 224 in 1872, 652 in 1881 to 658 in 1891 (Banerjee, 1899).

The blanket-weaving industry, unlike the cotton-weaving industry, is not a profitable one (Banerjee, 1899) and although there are some Gareries whose livelihood depends on profits obtained from rearing of sheep and the manufacture of blankets, the number of Gareries having supplementary occupation is greater at present. They have their own agricultural land and keep up their particular occupation as a hereditary profession. Women, children and old persons of the family often to do the
greater part of manufacturing work, while young men of the family attend other duties to supplement the small household income, obtained from the woollen industry. The weavers generally buy wool from dealers and sell blankets to them at a small margin of profit. Maximum work is done from the month of Agrahayan (November—December) to Baisakh—Jaistha, (April—May).

The weavers are very poor. The profit of a weaver is very low due to low demand for the indigenous products. These woollen materials are not used for clothing by the great mass of the people, and those who can afford to use woollen materials prefer those manufactured by mills. Even in regard to blankets people belonging to higher income groups prefer superior mill-made products.

Blankets, locally known as *kambah*, are made of wool of very coarse and rough texture. They are warm, cheap and fairly durable. The better-made ones are used by the middle classes. Blankets are also manufactured as coverings for horses and as warm body cloths for bullocks. Narrow strips of blankets are made for mufflers.

**RAW MATERIALS, PRODUCTS AND PROCESS**

Wool is generally purchased from the middlemen and co-operative societies and sometimes collected from the *Ganeries*. Wool of both rams and ewes is used, that of young sheep being considered the best. Raw materials are obtained from Purnia in Bihar and Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh.

In Murshidabad simple blankets and *asans* are generally produced. Very little attempt is made at ornamentation. Colour of blankets and *asans* depends upon the colour of wool. Long strips are woven and sewn together to form a complete blanket which may be white, black or grey.

Machineries used are very primitive. Weavers use hand-operated *charkhas*, looms and bows.

The process of manufacture of woollen fabrics is very simple. No attempt is made at improvement of design or pattern of any kind.

Manufacturing processes may be divided into the following stages:

1. Shearing of sheep
2. Scutching of wool
3. Rolling of wool
4. Spinning of woollen thread
5. Manufacture of blanket (weaving)

At present the industry is mainly located at Raghunathganj, Suti, Samserganj, Berhampore, and Domkal. Main concentration is at Raghunathganj.

There has been a gradual decline in the number of units engaged in manufacturing, in the number of looms and of weavers from 1965-66 to 1972-73.

The table 1 shows the number of units in Murshidabad District for the period from 1951 to 1972-73 (Govt of West Bengal, 1957, 1960-62 and Mitra 1953).
If the base year is taken as 1951, then the percentage variations are +408 (1954), -24 (1960-62), +473 (1965-66), +462 and +207 in 1967-70 and 1972-73 respectively.

Between 1960-62 and 1965-66 raw materials were easily available and demand for woollen goods was high during Indo-China border clashes in 1965.

The number of looms, numbers of charkhas and weavers also indicate that the industry has been decaying over the years.

The table 2 shows the number of looms, weavers and charkhas for the period from 1965-66 to 1972-73 (Govt of West Bengal).

Financial conditions of weavers and inadequate supply of raw materials appear to be mainly responsible for the decrease in the number of weavers. For lack of supply of raw materials, production of woollen yarn and woollen fabrics also gradually decreased.

The following statement shows the production of woollen yarn and woollen fabrics from 1965-66 to 1972-73 (Govt of West Bengal).

The reasons behind decline

Main reasons for the decline of this industry can be enumerated as

---

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murshidabad</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>692</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>780</td>
<td>765</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(i) severe continued draught from 1972, (ii) increased demand of mutton in Calcutta causing scarcity of raw materials and (iii) problem of seasonal market. In summer season blankets are purchased by middlemen from the weavers at low price. These middlemen generally come from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In winter, blankets are sold to the poorer sections of people. It is obvious that co-operative societies where the weavers may sell their products at reasonable rates has become a prime need. Due to want of finance weavers are unable to stock raw materials when they are adequately available, so that production lags behind demand owing to the shortage of raw materials.

State-aid to the industry is received from (i) Khadi Commission and (ii) Directorate of Industries (Handloom), West Bengal.

Loan of about Rs 200/- per weaver has already been given to the weavers under Bengal State Aid to Industries Act.

Total capital investment in the industry is about Rs 8,00,000 which is a fixed capital and Rs 12,00,000 is invested as working capital.

Labourers are very poor. Wages of the labourers are very low. Wage payment for a single shan varies from Rs 100 to 1.50 and the rate varies from Rs. 5/- to Rs 6/- for blankets.

SOME WAYS OF IMPROVEMENT

(i) Improved appliances like carding machines, milling machines etc. will have to be introduced for quality production. Machineries now used are of primitive type. It is very difficult to displace the crude weaving appliances by more expensive machinery on account of their cheapness.

(ii) An institution should be established to train weavers in improved weaving.

(iii) For blanket weaving it appears that there is no necessity for improving upon his manufacture. His product is one that is eminently suited in all respects to the needs of poorer section of people. It is cheap, warm, durable and very rough. It is an useful and effective article produced at a minimum expense, and can hardly be improved upon.

(iv) Regular supply of raw materials at reasonable price will have to be arranged, so that the production may be increased to meet the increased demand for woollen blankets.

FUTURE PROSPECT

There is a plan to set up a co-operative organisation where the weavers may sell their products at reasonable rate. Market problem in this way may be solved. There is also a plan to set up a unit to produce woollen garments which will consist of 50 per cent jute and 20 per cent wool, called jute—wool fibre, to meet
military demand. The main advantage of this new industrial unit will be the low cost of production.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is grateful to the I C S S.R. for providing funds to carry on the investigation on “Geographical Distribution and Prospects of Cottage and Small Scale Industries of Murshidabad”, to Prof. K Bagchi, Head of the Department of Geography, Calcutta University for providing library facilities.

REFERENCES


