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## The Structural Dichotomy of Traditional Textiles: Historical Continuity and Contemporary Survival in Murshidabad, West Bengal

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### **Abstract:**

*The handloom and silk-weaving ecosystem of Murshidabad district, West Bengal, stands as an evocative symbol of India's complex artisanal landscape. This paper explores the deep socio-economic and structural transformations within the sector, evaluating the clear divide between highly specialized luxury silk weaving (**Garad, Baluchari, and Matka**) and low-value, utility cotton handloom production (**gamchhas and lungis**). Moving away from basic literal data compilation, this study employs an original qualitative framework that weaves together historical archives, colonial-era trade data, and extensive field observations from regional weaving clusters. The analysis traces how historical shifts from royal court patronage to extractive colonial policies reshaped an independent trade into a fragmented cottage industry. Tracing these changes reveals a troubling process of rural de-industrialization. Generational artisans are increasingly trapped by low wages, high material costs, and competition from low-cost powerlooms, prompting a steady labor migration toward the unorganized bidi manufacturing sector. Finally, this study analyzes primary weaver cooperatives and highlights structural revival strategies including advanced technological upgrades, strict enforcement of Geographical Indication (GI) protections, and direct marketing channels to preserve this historic craft legacy.*

**Keywords:** Murshidabad Silk, Handloom Economics, Post-Colonial Industrial Shifts, Labor Stratification, Cooperative Frameworks, De-industrialization.

### **1. Introduction:**

The historical narrative of Murshidabad is deeply interwoven with the golden luster of its silk. For centuries, this district along the banks of the sacred Bhagirathi River was not merely a geographic location, but a premier global capital of textile luxury. Long before European corporations re-engineered the subcontinental economy, the fine silks of Murshidabad collectively celebrated across international maritime trade networks as "Bengal Silk" commanded immense prestige. This exquisite material clothed the royal courts of the Mughals, travelled via trans-continental silk routes to the Ottoman Empire, and dominated luxury fashion houses in London, Lyon, and Amsterdam. When

Nawab Murshid Quli Khan shifted the capital of Bengal to this region in 1704, he established a golden era of royal patronage. Master craftsmen, particularly the legendary *Baluchari* weavers, migrated to the court, transforming the district into a bustling center of haute couture. The region functioned as an integrated artisanal ecosystem, where mulberry cultivation, silkworm rearing (sericulture), reeling, spinning, and handloom weaving occurred in close proximity, creating a highly organized pre-colonial industry.

However, the entry of European mercantile capitalism initiated a dramatic transformation. Attracted by the superior quality and lucrative profit margins of local textiles, foreign maritime trading firms established heavily fortified purchasing factories (*kuthis*) across the district. Following the Battle of Plassey in 1757, colonial policy systematically shifted focus from supporting high-value woven garments to extracting raw silk filaments to feed the mechanical powerlooms of Manchester. This structural exploitation, followed by twentieth-century industrialization, powerloom proliferation, and severe wage stagnation, fragmented this proud artisanal tradition. Today, the legendary home of *Garad* and *Baluchari* weaves faces a stark structural crisis. While certain elite pockets maintain their prestigious identity, vast northern clusters have been forced into low-value cotton weaving or displaced entirely into unorganized manual labor. This paper explores this fascinating evolution, mapping how a historic center of global luxury now navigates the complex realities of survival, technical obsolescence, and economic reorganization.

## 2. Objectives:

This study analyzes the historical and socio-economic dynamics of the Murshidabad textile industry through the following targeted objectives:

1. To trace the historical evolution of Murshidabad's sericulture and handloom sectors from a system of royal patronage to an extractive colonial raw-material economy.
2. To map the intra-district geographic distribution of weaving clusters and analyze the structural divisions between 'high-skilled silk' artisans and 'low-skilled' cotton weavers.
3. To identify the primary socioeconomic drivers of the contemporary textile crisis and investigate the factors behind artisan displacement into the unorganized bidi industry.
4. To evaluate the operational performance of primary weavers cooperative societies and outline strategic pathways for future technological modernization and industrial survival.

## 3. Methodology:

This study adopts an empirical qualitative research design based on the triangulation of primary and secondary data sources. Fieldwork was conducted from January to March 2020 in selected handloom and silk-producing areas of Murshidabad district, West Bengal, with particular focus on the Samsanganj Block, including the villages of Uttar Chachand and Jaikrishnapur.

A purposive-cum-random sampling technique was employed for respondent selection. First,

villages and occupational groups associated with handloom weaving and silk production were purposively selected due to their historical and economic significance. Subsequently, respondents were randomly chosen from the identified population. The study covered a total sample of 62 respondents, comprising weaving households, silk producers, community elders, displaced textile workers, cooperative members, and local officials.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted during the fieldwork period. In addition, key informant interviews were carried out with the District Handloom Development Officer, Block Industrial Development Officers, officials of the Sericulture Department, and representatives of local Tantubay Samabay Samity (weavers' cooperative societies) to gain insights into production systems, institutional support, and market challenges.

To contextualize contemporary field observations, primary data were supplemented with secondary sources, including colonial census records, district gazetteers, historical studies on Bengal silk, government reports, and peer-reviewed literature on handloom industries, sericulture, labour relations, and rural livelihoods.

#### **4. Result and Discussion:**

##### **4.1. Historical Genesis and Colonial Trajectory: The "Glorious Past"**

The handloom and silk-weaving industry of Murshidabad boasts an ancient heritage that predates the formal establishment of the Nawabi administration in the eighteenth century. Archival configurations from historical gazetteers indicate that vibrant handloom weaving clusters operated along the lower Ganges valley well before the seventeenth century. The sector's initial global integration occurred through early merchant capitalism. In the early 1600s, specialized observers dispatched by maritime trading firms noted that the lower deltaic plains of Bengal produced high-quality raw silk and textiles, describing the region as an ideal hub for large-scale commercial exploitation.

This commercial potential triggered institutional investments by competing European powers throughout the mid-to-late seventeenth century. Each maritime trading power established heavily fortified textile procurement centers (*kuthis*) across the district. The Dutch East India Company established a prominent trading post at Kalikapur in the mid-seventeenth century, followed closely by the British East India Company settling its central raw silk and textile purchasing factory at Cossimbazar with substantial initial capital. The French East India Company completed this competitive landscape by establishing its manufacturing and processing post at Saidabad.

Among these locations, Cossimbazar emerged as the premier marketplace for Bengal's textile trade, handling vast volumes of fine silk and high-grade cotton fabrics. The British East India Company concentrated its financial resources heavily in this sub-division, directing more than sixty percent of

its total regional budget solely to the Cossimbazar factory during the late 1600s. This concentration of capital underscores the region's vital role in global trade networks before the industrial revolution.

Following the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the acquisition of Diwani rights in 1765, the British East India Company systematically reorganized local production structures to serve industrializing British interests. Rather than fostering the domestic production of high-value woven silk garments, colonial policy prioritized the extraction of affordable, raw silk filament to feed mechanical looms in Manchester and Macclesfield. This structural shift led to the installation of large-scale European steam filatures across the district, notably in the Jangipur region. By the early nineteenth century, historical accounts documented these sites as the largest silk processing centers under colonial jurisdiction, operating hundreds of specialized furnaces and employing thousands of indigenous reelers and laborers.

By the late nineteenth century, imperial records documented the immense geographic scale of Murshidabad’s sericulture infrastructure. Official statistical reports from the late 1870s noted that the district hosted dozens of large European-managed filatures alongside numerous locally owned domestic processing units. Imperial census data from 1891 underscores Murshidabad’s absolute dominance over the wider Bengal Presidency, with the district controlling over forty-five percent of all land dedicated to mulberry cultivation in the province.

To illustrate the structural scale of this historic production network, Table 1 details the exact regional distribution of mulberry acreage and silk producers across the undivided Bengal Presidency as recorded in the late nineteenth century:

**Table 1: Regional Distribution of Mulberry Cultivation and Silk Producers (1891)**

District Colony	Area Under Mulberry Cultivation (Acres)	Total Number of Sericulturists & Silk Producers	Percentage of Bengal’s Mulberry Acreage (%)
Murshidabad	62,900	31,698	45.38%
Malda	50,000	38,433	36.05%
Midnapore (Medinipur)	18,500	3,566	13.34%
Birbhum	2,000	8,249	1.44%
Rajshahi	800	8,793	0.58%
Bankura	200	978	0.14%
Hooghly	200	83	0.14%
<b>Total (Bengal Presidency)</b>	<b>134,600</b>	<b>91,433</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

*Source: Synthesized and calculated from historical data compiled by N.G. Mukerji.*

The data in Table 1 shows that Murshidabad was the clear leader, holding 62,900 acres of land dedicated to mulberry cultivation. This area represents 45.38% of the entire province's sericulture land base, supporting an active workforce of 31,698 verified silk producers. This concentration confirms that Murshidabad served as the primary anchor for Eastern India's textile raw-material trade throughout the colonial period.

#### 4.2. Spatial Mapping and Artisanal Stratification: The "Present Crisis"

The contemporary structure of Murshidabad's handloom economy reveals significant fragmentation and regional disparities. Field data indicates that treating the district's handloom sector as a uniform entity underscores sharp divisions in skill levels, raw material access, and economic returns. According to data from the District Handloom Development Office, local weaving practices are heavily stratified by geography, processing techniques, and the market value of the finished products.

This structural divide separates high-value silk processing from low-value utility cotton production. Historically, specialized weaving circles within the Jangipur sub-division, such as Gankar and Mirzapur, represented the pinnacle of regional excellence. Artisans in these clusters were classified as highly skilled due to their mastery over pure mulberry silk filament and their ability to weave intricate patterns into traditional *Garad* and *Baluchari* sarees. These high-value textiles commanded premium prices in metropolitan markets, providing a degree of economic stability to these specialized artisanal lineages.

Conversely, a substantial segment of the district's handloom workforce operates in Samsorganj, Suti, and Farakka. Weavers in these clusters produce basic items like cotton *gamchhas* (hand towels), *lungis*, and coarse cotton sheets. Administrative field data categorizes this cohort as 'low-skilled' cotton weavers because they generally lack the training, technical setup, and specialized jacquard mechanisms required to weave fine silk or complex designs. Instead, they rely on basic, hand-built pit looms locally known as *Thokthoki looms* due to the distinctive rhythmic clacking noise they produce during operation. This technical limitation traps northern weavers in a low-value production cycle with very thin profit margins.

To chart this internal geographic and structural divide across the district, Table 2 maps the contemporary distribution of production hubs, raw materials, and artisanal classifications:

**Table 2: Block-Wise Structural Profiling of Handloom and Textile Production**

Production Hubs / Blocks	Primary Textile Output Categories	Raw Material Base	Artisanal Classification
Raghunathganj-I & II, Gankar, Mirzapur	Garad Sarees, Elite Silk Fabrics	Pure Mulberry Silk Filament	Highly Skilled Silk Artisans
Khargram, Nagar, Burwan, Kandi, Jiaganj	Silk Kora Than (Plain Sheets)	Un-degummed Raw Silk	Intermediate Commercial Weavers

Raninagar-I & II, Islampur	Matka Silk Textiles	Hand-spun Silk Waste Yarn	Intermediate Silk Artisans
Domkal	Mixed Blends (Silk & Cotton)	Silk-Cotton Blended Yarn	Diversified Handloom Households
Samsorganj, Farakka, Suti-I & II	Gamchhas, Lungis, Coarse Fabrics	Low-Count Cotton Yarn	Low-Skilled Cotton Weavers

*Source: Compiled from administrative spatial mapping records from the District Handloom Development Office, Berhampore, Murshidabad, 2020.*

The structural layout in Table 2 reveals a clear economic hierarchy within the district. While southern and central blocks like Raghunathganj, Kandi, and Islampur remain focused on premium silk fibers (*Garad*, *Kora*, and *Matka*), the entire northern border region (Samsorganj, Farakka, Suti) has been relegated to processing low-count cotton yarn. This geographical divide explains why the handloom crisis impacts communities differently, with northern cotton-weaving clusters showing the highest vulnerability to market shocks and automated factory competition.

The qualitative realities collected from the field reveal that the historic handloom clusters of northern Murshidabad are currently undergoing a severe transition. Extensive dialogues with community elders and multi-generational weaving families in Samsorganj highlight a profound disruption in the traditional socio-economic order. Historically, handloom weaving served as the central pillar of rural economic life, with nearly seventy percent of households operating active home-based looms. This self-sustaining network depended on direct market integration. Weavers did not merely produce textiles; they operated as active micro-traders, traveling weekly to major regional wholesale markets (*haats*) across neighboring districts such as Rampurhat, Hirahar, and Suri in Birbhum, as well as seasonal markets in Malda and Balurghat. This extensive trade footprint also included manufacturing durable, thick-bordered cotton sarees specifically designed for *Santhali* communities in the neighboring tribal tracts of Bihar and Jharkhand.

However, this traditional artisanal economy has largely broken down due to several compounding structural factors:

- i. **Technological Obsolescence:** Simple *Thokthoki* pit looms cannot match the speed, volume, and low unit costs of automated powerloom centers located in Shantipur, Dhaniakhali, or Surat.
- ii. **Income Instability:** Stagnant market returns for low-count cotton goods have driven real wages below subsistence levels, leaving weaving families vulnerable to severe poverty.
- iii. **The Rise of the Bidi Industry:** Over the past few decades, a major bidi (local hand-rolled leaf cigarettes) manufacturing sector has expanded across northern Murshidabad. Large bidi firms set up decentralized operations, using local middlemen (*munshis*) to distribute raw tobacco and leaves directly to rural households.

This shift disrupted traditional occupational models. Field data shows a strong correlation between the decline of handloom weaving and the expansion of the unorganized bidi manufacturing sector. As real wages in the handloom sector fell below subsistence levels due to powerloom competition and high yarn costs, artisanal households were forced to reallocate their labor. Large-scale bidi companies established a highly decentralized production network across northern Murshidabad, distributing raw tobacco and tendu leaves directly to rural kitchens through local agents.

Initially, traditional weaving households strongly resisted this transition. The systematic, independent routine of loom-based production carried a level of social prestige that contrasted sharply with the repetitive daily wage labor of rolling bidis. However, the persistent drop in handloom earnings eventually broke this resistance. Field data indicates that a vast majority of families in historically vibrant weaving villages have dismantled their traditional *Thokthoki* looms. Male artisans have either migrated out of the state for temporary construction work or taken jobs with bidi distribution networks, while women roll bidis at home to maintain a basic household income. This structural shift represents a clear process of rural de-industrialization, where specialized, generational craft knowledge is permanently lost to unorganized manual labor.

#### 4.4. Institutional Interventions and the Cooperative Model: Future Pathways:

Reversing this economic decline requires robust institutional frameworks and collective organizational structures. In the late 1970s, local weavers in Samsorganj took a significant step toward formalization by securing official state authorization to establish primary weavers' cooperative societies (*Tantubay Samabay Samity*). Cooperative administrators explain that before formalization, individual artisans were highly vulnerable to exploitation by private moneylenders and independent yarn merchants who controlled access to raw materials and dictated purchase prices. By organizing into cooperatives, weavers gained direct access to state raw-material subsidies, institutional credit lines, and collective marketing channels. During its peak operational periods, individual societies supported hundreds of artisan families and managed centralized loom workshops.

Despite their initial success, these cooperatives face deep-seated social and operational challenges. Members of these weaving communities historically encountered social marginalization that limited their economic mobility and bargaining power in wider commercial networks. Today, these institutional networks must look beyond basic utility textiles to ensure long-term financial viability. Transforming Murshidabad's handloom economy requires several strategic shifts: (i) Upgrading Loom Technology: Transitioning from basic *Thokthoki* pit configurations to modern frame looms equipped with jacquard and pneumatic attachments will allow artisans to move into high-value product segments. (ii) Diversifying Product Lines: Shifting focus from basic cotton items like *gamchhas* to premium lifestyle products, organic home furnishings, and fine export-grade fabrics can significantly boost profit margins. (iii) Leveraging Geographical Protections: Actively enforcing

Geographical Indication (GI) protections for Murshidabad silk will help eliminate counterfeit, powerloom-made alternatives, preserving market share and premium pricing for authentic handloom products. (iv) Strengthening Direct Market Links: Connecting weaver cooperatives directly to e-commerce platforms, state handloom outlets (such as Tantuja), and national fashion houses bypasses exploitative middlemen, ensuring that a larger share of the retail value goes directly to the artisans. To evaluate the regional scale of these institutional frameworks, Table 3 traces the distribution of government-sanctioned handloom cooperative societies across the Jangipur sub-division:

**Table 3: Institutional Distribution of Handloom Cooperatives in Jangipur Sub-Division**

Administrative Block	Number of Sanctioned Cooperative Societies	Primary Product Specialization
Suti-I & Suti-II Blocks	5	Utility Cottons, Traditional Linens
Samsorganj Block	4	Coarse Cotton Fabrics, <i>Gamchhas</i> , <i>Lungis</i>
Farakka Block	4	Thick Cotton Materials, Domestic Garments
Total Institutional Hubs	13	Integrated Coarse Handloom Network

*Source: Compiled from register records provided by the District Handloom Office, Berhampore, Murshidabad, 2020.*

The institutional mapping in Table 3 shows that 13 cooperative societies are concentrated within this sub-division. While these structures provide an administrative framework for state aid, field investigations reveal that they remain heavily focused on low-value products like *gamchhas* and coarse linens. To foster a sustainable economic recovery, these cooperatives must upgrade their production capabilities, shifting away from basic cotton utilities toward high-value textile manufacturing.

**5. Conclusion:**

The handloom and silk-weaving ecosystem of Murshidabad district stands at a critical crossroads. Its historic trajectory reveals a profound economic shift moving from a highly praised global luxury hub supported by royal patronage to a vulnerable, fragmented unorganized sector struggling to survive against industrialization. The contemporary field landscape shows a clear structural divide: while premium silk weaving enclaves preserve their unique heritage, the widespread cotton-weaving communities in northern blocks face severe threats from automated powerlooms and technical obsolescence. This long-term economic strain has driven many generational artisans to abandon their family craft, leading to widespread labor migration into the unorganized bidi manufacturing sector.

Preserving this valuable craft tradition requires moving beyond temporary aid toward comprehensive structural change. Rejuvenating Murshidabad's handloom economy depends on upgrading loom technology, providing reliable access to subsidized raw materials, and strengthening weaver cooperative networks. By focusing on premium niche markets, capitalizing on Geographical Indication (GI) protections, and establishing direct trade channels, the region can transform its historic craft legacy into a sustainable, modern livelihood for its artisans.

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