



**Retrieving Cultural Vignettes: A Study from Spitalfields to
Murshidabad to Mahua Dabar 1722-1857**

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Abstract

The research paper explores the complex relationships between British industrialization and Indian textile manufacturing between 1722 and 1857 and the cultural and economic history of the textile chain spanning from Spitalfields in London to Murshidabad in Bengal and to the village of Mahua Dabar in northern India. This study, based on the examination of primary sources such as parliamentary reports, local newspapers and colonial administrative documents, demonstrates that the relationship between metropolitan capital and colonial production in the British silk trade radically changed with the onset of mechanization. As it will be shown in the paper, the transition of the East India Company from purchasing finished Indian textiles to acquiring raw materials was the turning point in Britain's economic domination of Indian manufacturing. The destruction of Mahua Dabar, which was burned down by British forces in 1857 after British officers were massacred, serves as a microcosm of the violence embedded in the structural economic changes of colonization. Therefore, this study deepens our understanding of the way in which textile manufacturing became a site of imperial exploitation and resistance throughout the era of British colonialism in India.

Keywords: Colonial Textile Economy, British Industrialization, Bengal Silk Industry, East India Company Policies, Colonial Resistance and Violence

Introduction

The history of the eighteenth and nineteenth century textile production shows that the development of industrial life in Britain and the economic shift in the colonial India are deeply interconnected. It is specifically the silk industry that can be viewed through the prism of explaining the multifaceted relationships between technological innovation and labor exploitation, as well as imperial expansion. The paper follows the textile chain of Spitalfields in London where silk

weaving began to the old Mughal capital of Murshidabad in Bengal and the village of Mahua Dabar in northern India, showing how the fortunes of weavers and workers in one place were related to the fortunes of weavers and workers in another place (Parthasarathi 12).

This is the period between 1722 and 1857 that saw radical changes in the production of both the British and Indian textile industry. Water power, introduced to the throwing of silk by John Lombe in Derby in the early eighteenth century, fundamentally transformed the cost of producing silk thread (“Post Boy”). The Indian textile industry that used to provide high-quality goods to the global markets was eventually destroyed by this technological revolution, along with the protectionist tariffs and the colonial policy. This narrative of change is not simply one of economic rivalry but of the methodical subordination of colonial production to the interests of metropolitan industry, carried out through policies that prioritized British manufacturing at the expense of Indian livelihoods.

Mahua Dabar, a village in the present-day Uttar Pradesh, is a very important case study of the human cost of this economic transformation. British army officers who had escaped the mutiny at Faizabad were massacred around this village in June, 1857 and as a result, brutal retaliations and the settlement was destroyed in totality (Kaye 468). The story of Mahua Dabar is a reflection of the violence of colonial rule and of how economic transformation was enforced through military force. This paper seeks to illuminate the broader trends of imperial economic exploitation and resistance by analyzing the textile chain that interlinked Spitalfields, Murshidabad, and Mahua Dabar.

The Spitalfields Silk Industry: Mechanization and Labor

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the British silk industry was revolutionized by the introduction of the water-powered silk-throwing mills. In 1722, John Lombe set up a silk mill at Derby where he hired “some Hundreds of poor People, mostly Women and Children” to make Italian-style silk, organzine, with the technology he had purchased at great personal risk in Italy (Post Boy). This technological marvel which was a state secret across generations in the Italian states allowed British manufacturers to make silk thread as opposed to purchasing it in the continental Europe. The significance of this development cannot be overstated, as it marked the beginning of mechanized textile production in Britain and the prelude to the industrial revolution that would transform economic relationships across the world.

The strategic value of this technology was recognized by the British government by 1732, and Thomas Lombe received fourteen thousand pounds to forgo his patent and put the invention into the open (Derby Mercury). This decision reflected the government’s dedication to encouraging local production at the expense of international rivals. The technology was quickly transported to other towns that were located along the rivers sustained by the heavy rainfall of the Peak District of England, such as Macclesfield, Stockport, and ultimately Manchester (London Evening Post).

The increase in productivity using these water-powered mills and the lowering of labor expenses was dramatic, setting up new demands on hand-throwsters in London in the Spitalfields area.

The social consequences of mechanization became apparent within decades of the Seven Years' War. By 1763, competition from French silk imports and the replacement of hand labor by water-powered machines had plunged the journeymen weavers of Spitalfields into dire economic decline. Contemporary newspaper records document the rampant poverty among silk workers, one manufacturer even said that he could hire only a quarter of the people he could hire before because of the drop in demand (London Chronicle). Women and children were especially affected by it, as they made up much of the silk-throwing labor force. One of the correspondents said that he had met a woman who had six children, but when she paid her rent, she was left with 5 pence to keep her family alive all the week (London Chronicle).

British workers responded to these conditions through both organized protest and appeals for government protection. On October 1763, thousands of journeymen weavers gathered in Spitalfields and hoisted looms and sliced silk to pieces, protesting against wage cuts (London Evening Post). Such upheavals led to the demand of prohibitive tariffs on imported French silk and the government had to take action to save local industry. The trade policy debate showed underlying conflict between free-market supporters who said that no man in trade could persist with a conspicuous loss in sight ahead of him and protectionists who insisted that the state should intervene to save British jobs (Gazetteer). These arguments would carry far-reaching consequences for colonial economic policy in India.

Murshidabad and the Bengal Silk Trade: From Production to Extraction

As British silk workers were replaced by machinery, the Indian weavers and silk winders faced a different but closely related problem: the systematic restructuring of the Indian economy away from manufacturing and toward the extraction of raw materials. When the East India Company was granted the right to collect the revenue in Bengal, known as the diwani in 1765, it gained virtual control over the economic conditions of the region, which allowed policies that favored British industry at the cost of Indian industry (Marshall 72). As a result, the silk industry of Bengal was devastated and the Company used its political power to reorganize production as benefiting the British manufacturers and disadvantaging the Indian workers.

The most extreme form of this exploitation involved forcing silk winders, locally known as nagaads, to labor under such abusive conditions that some resorted to self-mutilation in an effort to escape. European merchant William Bolts, who had fallen into disfavor with Company officials, wrote of how “the winders of the raw silk, or, as they are called, Nagaads, have been subjected also to such injustice, that cases have been heard of their chopping off their thumbs, to avoid being beaten to wind silk accordingly (194). An account by Bolts, subsequently confirmed by a committee in Parliament, shows the dehumanizing practices that were used to extract raw silk in

Bengal to export it to British factories under the administration of Lord Clive (1765–1767), when Company agents used armed force to coerce workers into serving its commercial interests.

The definitive shift of the Bengal economy from manufacturing to raw material extraction was codified in an order issued by the Company's directors in London on 17 March 1769. The directors announced, that there was no Branch of their Trade they more earnestly desired to extend than that of Raw Silk, and directed their presidency in Bengal to adopt all Means of Encouragement, and especially by increased Wages, so as to persuade Manufacturers of Wrought Silk to abandon that Branch, and to replace it with the winding of Raw Silk (UK Parliament 55). This policy deliberately sought to destroy Bengali finished silk production in order to supply cheap raw materials to British producers, a clear example of deliberate deindustrialization.

The implications of these policies were devastating as realized by the Parliamentary committee that analyzed them. The committee decided that the policy of the Company would in a very great Degree operate destructively to the Manufactures of Bengal and that the policy would alter the entire visage of that industrious country, in order to make it a Field to the produce of crude Materials, subservient to the Manufactures of Great Britain (UK Parliament 55). This assessment accurately foresaw the ultimate consequences of British policy for Indian industry. The findings of this committee demonstrate that the decline of Indian manufacturing was not an accidental outcome of free trade but a deliberate decision made to serve the interests of British industry.

The Human Cost: Exploitation and Resistance

The transformation of the Bengal silk industry had devastating human consequences for workers and their communities. According to the Parliamentary inquiry, farmers and producers under the Company's monopoly regime obtained roughly two-thirds of the actual value of their labor, with the rest stolen as profit by the agents of the Company (UK Parliament 51). This organized undervaluation of Indian labor was not merely an economic arrangement but a structure of violence that left communities destitute while enriching Company officials and British manufacturers.

This exploitation was enforced through imprisonment, corporal punishment, and social degradation. According to Bolts, weavers, who dared to sell their produce, and Dallals and Pykars, who have either assisted or been assisted in such sales, have frequently been seized and imprisoned, thrown into irons, fined large amounts of money, flogged, and deprived, in the most infamous fashion, of that which they consider their dearest possession, their castes (194). The particular mention of having lost caste is noteworthy, in that it represents the eagerness of the Company to assault the very core of social identity of Indian laborers, making them the target of achieving financial profit.

The opposition to these conditions by Indian workers took many different forms, including self-harm by individuals, as well as the protest organized by groups. The thumb-cutting practiced by the nagaads was a desperate act of resistance against forced labor, while the flight of weavers from

Company-controlled regions and the sale of goods in illegal markets were expressions of more organized opposition. Such acts of resistance, though largely ineffective, demonstrate that Indian workers were not merely passive victims of colonial exploitation but active participants who sought to defend their livelihoods and dignity against overwhelming odds.

The connection between conditions in Bengal and the British silk industry was explicitly acknowledged by contemporary observers. When the British market in Indian silk products fell following the Seven Years' War, Company officials in Bengal found it impossible to sell their investments at a profit without reducing the wages paid to suppliers. According to the Parliamentary committee, the agents of the Company reacted by attempting to monopolize major products and labor, using governmental power to prevent Indian weavers from selling their products to competitors (UK Parliament 50). This policy linked the suffering of British silk workers in Spitalfields to the bondage of Indian weavers in Murshidabad, both subjugated to an imperial system that placed the interests of the Company above those of human beings.

Mahua Dabar: A Microcosm of Colonial Violence

The village of Mahua Dabar, located in the Gorakhpur district of northern India, provides a vivid example of how colonial economic interests were intertwined with military violence during the Indian Mutiny. Before 1857, Mahua Dabar was a large township with about two hundred houses and served as the centre of a police circle and was the centre of a few marketplaces (Martin 377). It had a heterogeneous demographic structure, which was composed of Muslim and Hindu families, artisans, traders, and agrarian labourers. The village was located on the Manaura River that is a tributary of the Ghaghra, and this location made it an important point in the trade routes within the region.

The economic life of Mahua Dabar before 1857 was deeply embedded in the regional networks of production and trade that characterized northern India under Company rule. Like many settlements in the Gorakhpur district, the village relied on a combination of agriculture and artisan craft, with local weavers producing cotton and coarse cloth for nearby markets. The introduction of Company revenue and land settlement policies over the preceding decades had placed considerable strain on these livelihoods. The demand for cash crops imposed by Company tax collectors forced many agrarian households to reduce subsistence cultivation, creating cycles of debt and dependency that left communities vulnerable to economic shocks. The artisan communities of the village, including weavers and spinners, found their traditional markets increasingly disrupted by the influx of cheaper British manufactured goods, which had been flooding Indian markets since the early nineteenth century and rendering hand-loom production economically unviable. By the mid-nineteenth century, therefore, Mahua Dabar was not simply a prosperous township but a community whose economy had been steadily reshaped by decades of colonial fiscal and commercial pressure. The accumulated grievances of dispossession and declining livelihoods

made the broader political upheaval of 1857 a moment of dangerous potential, as resentments long suppressed found sudden and violent expression.

Mahua Dabar turned into a representation of colonial retribution and ceased to be a flourishing settlement in June 1857. After the mutiny at Faizabad on June 8, British officers tried to escape by boat down the Ghaghra River, suffering losses to enemy forces; a group of seven officers neared Mahua Dabar, where they were attacked and killed by the villagers (Daily News). Individuals that observed the events testify that the police officers were deceived into entering the village and were assaulted by armed locals. Farrier Sergeant Busher of the British was the only survivor of the carnage, who was later rescued by William Peppe, a local British officer.

The British reaction on the massacre was fast and destructive. Peppe, now a deputy magistrate, had organised an expedition of retaliation that wiped Mahua Dabar out of existence. Contemporary newspaper reports documented that Peppe had burned Mahua Dabar to the ground in retaliation for the murder of the officers (Lloyds Weekly Newspaper). This collective punishment reduced a prosperous village to ruins, illustrating the brutal colonial logic by which entire communities were held accountable for the actions of a few.

The burning of Mahua Dabar was not an exceptional act of violence but one episode in a systematic campaign of collective retribution that British forces carried out across northern India in the aftermath of the Mutiny. Villages suspected of sheltering rebels, or of any complicity in attacks upon British personnel, were routinely burned and their populations displaced or killed without meaningful judicial process. Colonial administrators justified these punitive expeditions on the grounds of military necessity and the urgent need to restore authority, yet such measures were applied with a sweeping disregard for the distinction between the guilty and the innocent. The destruction of entire communities served a dual purpose: it removed potential bases of armed resistance while delivering an unambiguous warning to neighboring settlements about the price of defiance. In the case of Mahua Dabar, the swiftness and totality of the British response reflected both the personal authority of William Peppe as deputy magistrate and the broader culture of punitive governance that defined colonial administration during the Mutiny. The village, in this sense, became a cautionary example, its fate a warning inscribed in fire across the landscape of northern India, compelling surrounding communities to weigh the enormous cost of resistance against the enduring weight of colonial rule.

The destruction of Mahua Dabar has to be placed in the context of the colonial economy and its transformation. The position of the village in Gorakhpur put it into the area of fiscal and commercial interest of the East India Company. The Company's shift toward extracting raw materials rather than purchasing finished Indian textiles had weakened local economies such as that of Mahua Dabar, creating a sense of dispossession and resentment that gave rise to anti-British sentiment. The violence of 1857 was thus very entrenched in the economic exploitation which had been the hallmark of the British rule in the area.

The story of Mahua Dabar also reveals the complexity of colonial relations and the agency of Indian actors. The massacre of British officers cannot be dismissed as simple violence but must be understood in the context of the political upheaval and shifting loyalties of 1857. The officers had reportedly been misled by local Burkundages (constables) who had initially offered them protection, reflecting how local power structures were shifting during the mutiny (Busher, qtd. in “Morning Chronicle”). The involvement of Baboo Bully Singh, a local man of influence, who took Sergeant Busher prisoner, led him through several villages, and ultimately released him, further illustrates the complex interplay of power and resistance in the region.

The Textile Chain: Connecting Spitalfields, Murshidabad, and Mahua Dabar

The textile chain connecting Spitalfields, Murshidabad, and Mahua Dabar was not only a commercial network but an imperial extraction machine that took the colonial wealth to the capitalist metropolis. The mechanization of silk throwing in Britain created a demand for low-cost raw silk that could only be met through the organized exploitation of Indian producers. Using its governmental powers in Bengal, the East India Company reorganized the local economy, forcing workers to abandon the production of finished textiles in favor of raw material extraction. This transformation benefited British manufacturers while leaving Indian weavers and Indian society impoverished.

The links between these geographically distant locations were sustained by the institutional apparatus of empire. The policies were discussed by parliamentary committees in London, which would decide the destinies of the workers in Britain and India, as at Calcutta, the Company officials acted on their instructions, which took the interests of the metropolis above the colonial welfare. As a result, the textile chain served as a vehicle for transmitting value from the colonial periphery to the metropolitan centre, made possible by the political and military might of the colonial state.

The violence that destroyed Mahua Dabar in 1857 was the culmination of economic changes that had begun more than a century earlier with the mechanization of British textile manufacturing. The same imperial system that had reduced the weavers of Bengal to a form of bondage ultimately turned its military power against a village that had dared to resist. The killing of British officers and the subsequent burning of Mahua Dabar were therefore not isolated events but episodes in a long history of colonial exploitation and struggle, in which textile production became a source of both economic expropriation and political violence.

Conclusion

The history of the textile chain running through Spitalfields to Murshidabad to Mahua Dabar reveals the interwoven fates of workers and communities across the British Empire of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The mechanization of the silk industry in Britain, the organized oppression of Indian weavers, and the brutal suppression of resistance at Mahua Dabar were not isolated phenomena but parts of a single wide-ranging process of imperial economic

transformation. This history demonstrates that the industrial revolution in Britain cannot be understood without acknowledging the deindustrialization of colonial India, as both were shaped by the policies of the East India Company and the logic of imperial capitalism.

Mahua Dabar serves as a powerful reminder of the human cost of colonial economic policies. The destruction of the village in 1857 was not simply an act of wartime violence but the continuation of a long-term process of exploitation that had impoverished the region and instilled deep resentment. Through the links between Spitalfields, Murshidabad, and Mahua Dabar, this paper has sought to illuminate the broader imperial pattern of exploitation that defined the lives of workers and communities throughout the British Empire.

This history remains relevant today, as contemporary debates on globalization and trade policy continue to examine the relationship between the industrial progress of wealthy nations and the economic conditions of the Global South. The textile network that once connected Spitalfields, Murshidabad, and Mahua Dabar may have dissolved with the fall of empire, but the inequities it embodied persist in new forms. History, therefore, remains our most vital tool for understanding the present and envisioning more just economic systems for the future.

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(Most of the references are culled from the website:

<http://www.pastpresented.ukart.com/mahuadabar/mahuadabar-history.htm>)