



**SILK, TRADE, AND TECHNOLOGY: BHAGALPUR'S TEXTILE INDUSTRY IN
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

Bhagalpur, often referred to as the 'Silk City of India,' boasts a rich history of silk production that spans centuries. This article explores the evolution of Bhagalpur's silk industry, examining its historical origins, the impact of trade and globalization, and the technological advancements that have shaped its development. The study highlights the resilience and adaptability of Bhagalpur's artisans, who have navigated challenges such as colonial disruptions and modern market dynamics. By analyzing the socio-economic implications of the silk trade, the article underscores the industry's significance in India's cultural and economic landscape. The findings offer insights into the complexities of sustaining traditional crafts in a globalized economy and propose strategies for ensuring the future viability of Bhagalpur's silk heritage.

Keywords: Bhagalpur, silk industry, Tussar silk, sericulture, handloom weaving, trade networks, globalization, technological transformations, traditional crafts.

Introduction

Bhagalpur, widely acclaimed as the "Silk City of India," is a historically and culturally significant city in the state of Bihar, known for its rich culture and strong economy. For centuries, it has been famous for producing Tussar silk, a fabric loved for its natural shine and unique texture. The skilled weavers of Bhagalpur have created beautiful textiles that have been worn by both royalty and ordinary people, making the city an important part of India's textile heritage. Silk has always been a symbol of luxury and tradition in India, with its history going back to ancient times. Bhagalpur's silk industry has played a key role in keeping this tradition alive, adapting to changes while staying true to its artisanal roots.

This article takes a closer look at the journey of Bhagalpur's silk industry. It explores its historical beginnings, the influence of trade and globalization, and how technology has helped it grow over the years. By understanding these aspects, we can better appreciate the challenges and opportunities that have shaped this industry. From its start as a local craft to becoming part of global trade, Bhagalpur's silk industry tells a story of resilience and innovation. It shows how the city has managed to preserve its traditions while embracing change. As we explore its history, we also look ahead to a sustainable future for this timeless craft, ensuring it continues to thrive for generations to come. Let's begin by diving into the historical roots of this fascinating industry.



Historical Roots of Bhagalpur's Silk Industry

The roots of Bhagalpur's silk industry stretch back to ancient times, when silk was revered as a symbol of luxury and status. Historical records suggest that the region's favorable climate and availability of mulberry plants made it an ideal location for sericulture. Eastern India, including Bhagalpur, has a long history of silk production, with evidence of sericulture practices dating back to ancient and medieval periods (Varadarajan, 1988).¹ The Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang, during his 7th-century visit to India, noted the thriving textile trade in eastern India, which likely included Bhagalpur's silk (Varadarajan, 1988).² This early mention highlights the region's significance as a hub for silk production and trade.

The artisans of Bhagalpur perfected the art of handloom weaving, using techniques passed down through generations. The production of Tussar silk, derived from wild silkworms, became a hallmark of the region's textile industry. Tussar silk is unique to regions like Bhagalpur due to its natural texture and golden hue, which set it apart from other varieties of silk (Bukhari & Kour, 2020).³ Communities such as the Tanti weavers played a crucial role in sustaining this craft, blending skill and artistry to create intricate designs. These weavers were not just artisans but also custodians of a rich cultural heritage that has been preserved for centuries.

Silk from Bhagalpur was not just a commodity but also a cultural symbol. It was deeply integrated into Indian social and religious practices, often used in weddings, festivals, and temple offerings. Silk was a fabric of prestige and ritual significance, often associated with prosperity and elegance (Roy, 1999).⁴ The golden hue of Bhagalpur's Tussar silk made it particularly prized for traditional attire like sarees and shawls, symbolizing the region's artistic and economic vitality.

Bhagalpur's silk was also a key commodity in regional and international trade networks. The ancient Silk Road, which connected India to Central Asia and Europe, played a significant role in popularizing Bhagalpur's silk beyond Indian borders. Indian silk, including Tussar silk from Bhagalpur, was highly sought after in global markets due to its unique quality and craftsmanship (Ma, 2004).⁵ The Ganges River, which flows through Bhagalpur, served as a vital trade route, enabling the transportation of silk to markets in Bengal and beyond. This integration into trade networks helped establish Bhagalpur as a prominent center for silk production.

However, the arrival of British colonial rule in the 18th century marked a turning point for Bhagalpur's silk industry. The introduction of mechanized looms and factory systems began to disrupt traditional weaving practices, reshaping the industry's trajectory (Jones, 1987).⁶ British policies aimed at maximizing economic gains from India's textile resources led to significant changes in the production and trade of silk. This period also saw the integration of Bhagalpur's silk into global trade networks, as British colonial administrators sought to exploit India's rich textile heritage for imperial profits.

In summary, the historical roots of Bhagalpur's silk industry are deeply intertwined with India's cultural, economic, and social fabric. From its ancient origins to its prominence in regional and global trade, Bhagalpur's silk industry has been a testament to the skill and resilience of its artisans. The arrival of British colonial rule, however, marked the beginning of a new era, one that would bring both challenges and opportunities for this timeless craft.

Silk Trade in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Eras

The silk trade in Bhagalpur has a rich history that reflects the region's integration into both local and global economic systems. During the pre-colonial era, Bhagalpur's silk industry thrived as part of a decentralized and community-driven economy. However, the advent of British colonial rule brought significant changes, as the industry was reshaped to serve imperial economic interests. This section examines the evolution of Bhagalpur's silk trade, from its pre-colonial roots to its transformation under colonial policies.

In the pre-colonial period, Bhagalpur's silk industry was deeply embedded in regional trade networks. The Ganges River, which flows through the region, served as a vital artery for the transportation of goods, including silk. Riverine trade routes were crucial for the movement of textiles and other commodities across northern and eastern India (Chakravarti, 2001).⁷ Bhagalpur's Tussar silk, known for its unique texture and natural sheen, was highly sought after in markets across Bengal, Bihar, and beyond.

The pre-colonial trade system was characterized by a high degree of local autonomy. Artisans and weavers operated within a guild-like structure, where production was organized around community-based cooperatives. These guilds ensured that weavers had control over their craft and received fair compensation for their work (Roy, 1999).⁸ This system allowed Bhagalpur's silk industry to flourish, with weavers producing high-quality textiles that were both culturally significant and economically valuable.

The arrival of British colonial rule in the 18th century marked a turning point for Bhagalpur's silk industry. The British East India Company, seeking to exploit India's textile resources for imperial profits, implemented policies that disrupted traditional trade networks and production systems. The introduction of mechanized looms and factory systems began to displace traditional handloom weavers, leading to a decline in artisanal production (Jones, 1987).⁹ One of the most significant changes under colonial rule was the integration of Bhagalpur's silk into global trade networks. The British promoted the export of raw silk to feed the growing demand in European markets, particularly in England. This shift from local to global trade had profound implications for Indian silk producers, who were now competing with cheaper imports and synthetic fabrics (Ma, 2004).¹⁰ Bhagalpur's weavers, who had once enjoyed a thriving local market, found themselves increasingly marginalized in the face of industrialized production and foreign competition. The colonial policies not only altered trade patterns but also disrupted the social and economic fabric of Bhagalpur's weaving communities. The introduction of factory-produced textiles and the emphasis on raw silk exports led to a decline in demand for handloom products. As noted by Tirthankar Roy, many traditional weavers were forced to abandon their craft and seek alternative livelihoods, leading to the erosion of centuries-old skills and knowledge (Roy, 1999).¹¹

The British also imposed heavy taxes and tariffs on Indian textiles, further exacerbating the challenges faced by local weavers. These policies were designed to favor British manufacturers at the expense of Indian artisans, leading to widespread economic distress in weaving communities



(Kranton & Swamy, 2008).¹² Bhagalpur's silk industry, once a symbol of regional pride, became a casualty of colonial exploitation.

Despite these challenges, Bhagalpur's weavers demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Some weavers formed cooperatives to resist the pressures of colonial policies, while others adapted their techniques to cater to changing market demands. Similar patterns of resistance and adaptation were observed in other silk-producing regions of India, reflecting the broader struggles of Indian artisans under colonial rule (Mayoux, 1995).¹³ In Bhagalpur, the Tanti weavers, who had traditionally produced Tussar silk, began experimenting with new designs and techniques to appeal to both domestic and international markets. This spirit of innovation helped sustain the industry during a period of profound transformation, ensuring that Bhagalpur's silk legacy endured despite the challenges of colonial rule.

This section highlights the transformation of Bhagalpur's silk trade from a decentralized, community-driven system in the pre-colonial era to a globally integrated but exploitative system under British colonial rule. It emphasizes the resilience of Bhagalpur's weavers in the face of colonial policies and sets the stage for the next section, which will explore technological changes in the industry.

Technological Transformations in Silk Production

The silk industry in Bhagalpur has undergone significant technological transformations over the centuries, from the introduction of mechanized looms during the colonial era to modern innovations in sericulture and weaving. These changes have had a profound impact on the production processes, economic viability, and social dynamics of the industry. This section examines the key technological shifts that have shaped Bhagalpur's silk industry and their implications for weavers and artisans.

The advent of British colonial rule in the 18th century brought with it the introduction of mechanized looms and factory systems, which marked a significant departure from traditional handloom weaving. The British sought to industrialize silk production to meet the growing demand for textiles in Europe (Jones, 1987).¹⁴ Mechanized looms, powered by steam engines, allowed for faster and more efficient production, but they also displaced many traditional weavers who could not compete with the scale and cost-effectiveness of factory-produced silk.

The introduction of mechanized looms had a dual impact on Bhagalpur's silk industry. On one hand, it increased the volume of silk production, enabling the region to participate more actively in global trade. On the other hand, it led to the marginalization of handloom weavers, who struggled to adapt to the new industrial paradigm. The shift to mechanized production disrupted the traditional guild system, leaving many weavers without a stable source of income (Roy, 1999).¹⁵ In addition to changes in weaving technology, the colonial period also saw advancements in sericulture, the cultivation of silkworms for silk production. The British introduced new varieties of silkworms and improved techniques for rearing them, aiming to increase the yield and quality of raw silk. These innovations helped boost silk production in regions like Bhagalpur, but they also required significant investment in infrastructure and training (Bukhari & Kour, 2020).¹⁶



However, the benefits of these advancements were not evenly distributed. Large-scale sericulture farms, often owned by wealthy landowners or British entrepreneurs, reaped the most rewards, while small-scale farmers and traditional sericulturists struggled to compete. This disparity exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities within the industry.

After India gained independence in 1947, the government took steps to modernize the silk industry and support traditional weavers. Initiatives such as the establishment of the Central Silk Board in 1949 aimed to promote research and development in sericulture and weaving technologies. These efforts led to the introduction of high-yield silkworm varieties, improved mulberry cultivation techniques, and more efficient reeling machines (Kumaresan, 2005).¹⁷

In Bhagalpur, these technological innovations helped revive the silk industry, which had suffered during the colonial period. The government also established training centers and cooperatives to help weavers adopt new technologies and improve their skills. These initiatives played a crucial role in enhancing the quality and competitiveness of Bhagalpur's Tussar silk (Charsley, 1998).¹⁸

In recent decades, Bhagalpur's silk industry has embraced modern technologies such as computer-aided design (CAD) and digital printing, which have expanded the range of designs and patterns that can be produced. These innovations have helped the industry cater to changing consumer preferences and tap into new markets, both domestically and internationally. The use of geospatial tools and web-based platforms has also facilitated better planning and management of sericulture activities, leading to increased productivity and sustainability (Handique et al., 2015).¹⁹

However, the adoption of modern technologies has also posed challenges for traditional weavers, many of whom lack the resources or technical expertise to keep pace with these changes. There is a need for targeted interventions to ensure that technological advancements benefit all stakeholders in the industry, particularly marginalized groups such as women and small-scale artisans (Mayoux, 1995).²⁰

This section highlights the technological transformations that have shaped Bhagalpur's silk industry, from the introduction of mechanized looms during the colonial era to modern innovations in sericulture and weaving. It emphasizes the dual impact of these changes, which have brought both opportunities and challenges for weavers and artisans. The section sets the stage for the next part of the article, which will explore the socio-economic impact of the silk industry.

Trade Networks and Globalization

The silk industry in Bhagalpur has long been a part of intricate trade networks, connecting the region to markets across India and the world. From ancient trade routes to modern globalization, these networks have played a crucial role in shaping the industry's growth and evolution. This section examines the historical and contemporary trade dynamics of Bhagalpur's silk industry, highlighting its integration into global markets and the challenges it faces in a competitive international landscape.

Bhagalpur's silk industry has its roots in ancient trade networks that connected eastern India to other parts of the subcontinent and beyond. The Ganges River, which flows through Bhagalpur, served as a vital trade route, facilitating the movement of silk and other goods to markets in Bengal,



Bihar, and Central India. Riverine trade was a cornerstone of economic activity in eastern India during the medieval period, with Bhagalpur emerging as a key node in these networks (Chakravarti, 2001).²¹ The ancient Silk Road, which connected India to Central Asia, China, and Europe, also played a significant role in popularizing Bhagalpur's silk. Indian silk, including Tussar silk from Bhagalpur, was highly sought after in international markets due to its unique texture and craftsmanship (Ma, 2004).²² This early integration into global trade networks helped establish Bhagalpur as a prominent center for silk production.

The advent of British colonial rule in the 18th century brought significant changes to Bhagalpur's trade networks. The British East India Company, seeking to exploit India's textile resources for imperial profits, reoriented the silk trade to serve European markets. The British promoted the export of raw silk to feed the growing demand in England, leading to a decline in the production of finished textiles in India (Jones, 1987).²³ This shift had profound implications for Bhagalpur's silk industry. While the volume of silk exports increased, the focus on raw silk production marginalized traditional weavers, who struggled to compete with factory-produced textiles. The colonial trade policies disrupted local markets and undermined the economic viability of handloom weaving (Roy, 1999).²⁴

After India gained independence in 1947, the government took steps to revive and modernize the silk industry, including efforts to expand its presence in international markets. The establishment of the Central Silk Board in 1949 marked a turning point, as it aimed to promote research, development, and trade in silk. These initiatives helped enhance the quality and competitiveness of Indian silk, including Bhagalpur's Tussar silk (Charsley, 1998).²⁵

In the decades following independence, Bhagalpur's silk industry began to regain its footing, with increased demand for handloom products in both domestic and international markets. The government's emphasis on promoting Indian handicrafts and textiles through initiatives such as the Handloom Export Promotion Council further boosted the industry's global presence. These efforts helped Bhagalpur's silk gain recognition as a premium, handcrafted product (Bukhari & Kour, 2020).²⁶

In recent decades, Bhagalpur's silk industry has faced both opportunities and challenges in the era of globalization. On one hand, the liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s opened up new markets for silk exports, particularly in Europe, North America, and the Middle East. The adoption of digital technologies and e-commerce platforms has enabled Bhagalpur's silk producers to reach global customers more effectively (Didelon, 2010).²⁷

On the other hand, globalization has also intensified competition from cheaper synthetic fabrics and mass-produced textiles. Small-scale weavers and artisans often struggle to compete with large-scale manufacturers, both domestically and internationally (Mayoux, 1995).²⁸ Additionally, fluctuations in global demand and trade policies, such as tariffs and import restrictions, pose ongoing challenges for the industry.

To thrive in the globalized economy, Bhagalpur's silk industry must embrace innovation and sustainability while preserving its traditional craftsmanship. The use of geospatial tools and digital platforms can help improve supply chain efficiency and market access (Handique et al., 2015).²⁹



Furthermore, initiatives to promote eco-friendly and sustainable silk production can help differentiate Bhagalpur's Tussar silk in the global market.

This section explores the historical and contemporary trade networks that have shaped Bhagalpur's silk industry, from ancient trade routes to modern globalization. It highlights the opportunities and challenges posed by global trade, emphasizing the need for innovation and sustainability to ensure the industry's future growth. The section sets the stage for the next part of the article, which will examine the socio-economic impact of the silk industry.

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