

Chapter 3

ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SILK INDUSTRY

Sericulture was a labour oriented agro-based commercial economic activity. The availability of cheap labour was one of the pre requisites for the industry. From the history of its origin, the larger portions of sericultural work were same as cottage based industry. The main feature of the sericulture was that it was a significant part of the agrarian economic structure. This explains one of the reasons for its heavy concentration in Malda, which was one of the dominant agriculture based region of Bengal.¹

In Malda, a large number of seasonally employed agricultural labour or cultivators were available for sericulture. Sericulture was comprised of two fold activities: indoor and outdoor. Women participation was very important for the silk industry. Generally, the male members worked in the fields, the female members took care of worms at home.² Sericulture was known as the “industry of the poor”. Therefore, women’s role in the industry was very important as they were recognised in the Indian society as a “marginal section”. In this Chapter, I have concentrated on the two sides on women engagements in the silk industry: first, on women employees in the sericulture industry; second, on the significance of womens’ participation in the silk industry.

Female Employees in the Sericulture Industry :

¹ Saswati Mookherjee, *Sericulture in West Bengal: A Geographical Analysis*, Calcutta : Bhattacharyya and Bross, 1992, p.24.

² Sailender Kumar Bag, *The Changing Fortunes of the Bengal Silk Industry, 1757 – 1833*, Calcutta : Manasi Press, January 1989, p. 38.

Most of the women population of Malda were engaged in all the stages of silk production. In the cultivation of mulberry, women worked with their male colleagues, and played a vital part in helping them in the production.³ Besides, in the history of sericulture at Malda, women played a very active role from the first to last stage for the development and progress of the silk industry.

Women workers carried out approximately 60% of work in sericulture. They were involved at different stages of its production: like as mulberry plantation, weeding, manuring, leaf picking, leaf transportation, leaf chopping, disinfecting, feeding, bed cleaning, mounting, harvesting of cocoons, storage, reeling, and handloom weaving.⁴ Further, some of the women sericulturists participated in the marketing of cocoons.⁵ Women were very essential and helpful for the development of sericulture because of their patience, concentration, and, above all, their management skill.

The original causes for highly engaged of women were:

Sericulture was a home based activity; second, sericulture engaged silkworm rearing and silk reeling which were generally practised at their dwelling houses along with their other home based activities; third, some of the concerned functions, which should be favourable only by female workers;⁶ and, above all, minimum investment and maximum returns.

³ Sujit Chandra Guha, *Silk Industry of Malda and Murshidabad, From 1660 to 1833*, Siliguri: N.L.Publishers, West Bengal, 2003, pp.100-101.

⁴ Sanjay Sinha, *The Development of Indian Silk: A Wealth of Opportunities*, New Delhi : Oxford and IBH Publication, 1990, pp.23-24.

⁵ M. Madan Mohan Rao, *Comprehensive Sericulture Manual*, Hyderabad: B.S. Publications,1999. pp. 54-55

⁶ Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provincial Series - Bengal, Vol.1. New Delhi, Usha Publications, 1984, pp.83-84.

The rearing of the cocoons was a domestic industry; while the male members of the family worked for mulberry cultivations in the fields, women were engaged in rearing the silk worms indoor.⁷

In the following lines, I shall discuss on the different types of works in silk cultivation. Women chopped the mulberry leaves and fed the silk worm from its early stage. The work of rearing the worm was largely done by women.⁸ They maintained the cleanliness of the rearing house and disinfected the *dalas*⁹ by using cow dung and keeping it the heat of the sun. When the silk worms ripened, women with all other members of the family placed the worms in the “*chandraki*”¹⁰ enabling the worms to make cocoons. Stages involving cocoon production was mainly done by women.¹¹

Women also helped male members by drying the cocoons under the sun or by boiling water to kill the insect inside the cocoons for reeling. The thread was always dyed before being woven, and the process of dyeing was performed by the female members.¹²

⁷ Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline – Eighteenth Century Bengal*, New Delhi :Manohar, 1999, p.222.

⁸ G.E. Lambourn, *Bengal District Gazetteers - Malda, Calcutta* : The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1918, p.66

⁹ Dalas are made of bamboo and used for silk – worm rearing.

¹⁰ ‘*Chandraki*’ - it is known in Bengal as talias, chances or fingas.

¹¹ Letter (as a mode of humble petition) written by Zamindars, Pykars and Silk Merchants of Bengal to William Barendish Bentinck, Governor General in Council, Fort William 24 November 1834, Enclosure in a letter from Secretary to Government in General Department, dated 1 December, Letter No.21, Petioners also send true copy to H. J. Princep, Secretary to Government, Proceedings, Board of Trade, Commercial, Proceeding Number 45, 11 December 1834, Vol.542, WBSA, Calcutta.

¹² W .W Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol-7, Delhi : DK Publishing House, 1974 (reprint).p.97.

Those who were engaged in silk spinning were known as 'katanis', and the *katanis*¹³ were also women. Generally, the poor Muslim women were engaged in *matka* spinning. *Matka* spinning and *matka* weaving provide occupation to the poorest of women and the least artistic among the weavers.¹⁴ Specially, women and children assisted the adult male members in preparing the thread and fixing the warp only.¹⁵

Women took an inherent quality and were expert in reeling. Women of Malda, irrespective of caste and creed, achieved the skill in filaturing. Those women, who acquired their skill by culture through generations, developed an acute and delicate touch enabling them to produce yarns, which were finer and far more tenacious than any of the machine spun yarns of Europe.¹⁶

In muslin, the spinning of the finest of the year was confined to the upper caste women of 18 to 30 years of age. But in silk, the work of spinning, reeling and filaturing was done by both the sexes of Hindus and Muslims of all categories, from lower to upper castes.

¹³ Alok Moitra, "Paschimbanger Resham Shilpo," *Grameen, Paschimbango Khadi O Grameen Shilpo Porshod*, Vol.23, October – November 1984, p.7.

¹⁴ N.G.Mukerji, *A Monograph on the Silk Fabrics of Bengal*, Calcutta : Bengal Secretariat Press, 1903, p.22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.41.

¹⁶ S. Bhattacharya, *The East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969, p.175.

In silk weaving, women had to wind off the raw silk from the pod of the worm. “A single pod of raw silk is divided into twenty different degrees of fineness; and so exquisite is the feeling of these women, that whilst the thread is running through their fingers, so swiftly that their eyes can be of no assistance, they will break it off exactly as the assortments change, at once from the first to the twentieth, from the nineteenth to the second”.¹⁷

There are several references of women’s engagement and patience in the weaving field in the ancient religious epics. One of the hymns of the Rigveda personified ‘Day and Night spreading light and darkness over the extended earth like two famous female weavers weaving a garment’ (11.3.6.). From this statement it may probably be deduced that weaving was generally practiced by women.¹⁸

Usually those women were habituated to sedentary work. They had skill and inherent quality in skill weaving too. “They usually work in the morning and afternoon, when the light is less dazzling to the eyes, and there is moisture in the air to prevent the thread from breaking”.¹⁹ The work of floral designs, i.e. butidars was the exclusive preserve of women.

¹⁷ Robert Orme, *Historical Fragments of the Moghul Empire*, London: F.Wingrave, 1805, pp,412-13

¹⁸ R.K.Bhattacharya , S.B.Chakrabarty (Edited), *Indian Artisans – Social Institutions and Cultural Values*, Kolkata : Government of India, Ministry of Culture, Department of Culture, Anthropological Survey of India, May 2000, p.78.

¹⁹ James Taylor, *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca*, Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1804, p168.

Though, women played a vital role in the silk industry of Malda, but, and “women parturient or menstruating were forbidden to approach the sheads”.²⁰ The superstition was so deep in the minds of the people on account of the fact that silk worm was associated with purity that rearers were very particular in maintain the sacredness of the rearing houses also. Purity was maintained from the beginning of the silk production and, at all stages of its manufacture ‘polluted women’ were dissociated from the process.

Significance of Womens’ Participation in the Silk Industry:

Many eminent historians were successfully focused on the region based economy, like as Ashin Dasgupta on the Malabar and Surat , Sushil Chaudhury on Bengal etc.,²¹ Scholarly works in the field focussed on women’s participation in the silk industry and on the question of women’s empowerment.

For many social reasons, the role of women in sericulture remained unrecognized and unrewarded even through the percentage of their work share in sericulture restricted themselves mostly in their household activities was not fair.

²⁰ J. H. T. Walsh, *History of Murshidabad District*, London: Jarrold, 1902. P.106

²¹ Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches- Bengal In the Mercantile Map of South Asia*, New Delhi : Foundation Books Pvt. Ltd. 2006. p.367.

Women in the society, particularly the rural women, were actively involved in almost all the activities in their family works and in assisting male members of the family to uplift the economy. Low level of literacy, lack of awareness on the improved technologies of mulberry cultivation and silk worm rearing, poor level of perception on the technologies, and also lack of empowerment were the major constraints faced by women in sericulture.

In the history of silk industry, the role of women remained untold and was not focussed properly, in spite of their periodic disability their contribution to the development of silk industry in Bengal, and in its worldwide fame was not only necessary but practically indispensable. However, it did never occur to any contemporary observer to study the intricate female association with silk production and examine the process of education through which they reached the state of perfection, which they did to build up the reputation of Bengal silk. Nor, do we have any reference of wages did they earn. Silk remained the “queen of fabrics”, but sericulture was the “industry of the poor” and it is presumable that trough their products might have adorned other, they could not use it is presumable although, a lot of problems faced by women, but womens’ efficiency had been flowed from generation to generation.²²

The complete process of sericulture was an age-old practice. It was very important that a large portion of women labourers were engaged in the silk industry. Silk industry was different from other many industries, because it provided the scope for an involvement of all the members the family. Therefore, sericulture was a very fruitful economic activity; it was easier to earn in this industry due to its labour intensive nature.²³

²² Sailendra Kumar Bag, p.7.

²³ Saswati Mukherjee, p.24.

H. G. Hanumappa mentioned sericulture has vast employment generating capacity both on-farm and off-farm. He emphasised on women's contribution in the sericulture sector, and, also he pleaded for taking up sericulture development activities on a much larger scale in the state as a means for generating higher levels of employment in the rural areas.²⁴

Sericulture was the main source of livelihood either directly or indirectly to a big number of people, majority of whom were from economically retarded section of our society, here specially discussed on 'women'. Demographically, about 98% of workforce engaged in sericulture belongs to Muslim community and most importantly, women folk of all stages of the rearer families played the key role in the industry.²⁵ It was very important to note that female labour participation in that industry was high in Malda and also Bengal.²⁶ The culture provided employment opportunity at various stages: food plant cultivation, rearing, reeling or spinning, weaving, and finally the production of garment. All of these were of much impact on the improvement of rural economy, and provided the base for self - employment.²⁷

In the Bengal Presidency, the region of Malda was famous for sericulture where womens' engagement was very high due its indoor activities. The female workers were mostly the backbone for the development of sericulture. But, the entire process ensured the continued marginalisation of women.²⁸

²⁴ H. G. Hanumappa (ed.), *Sericulture For Rural Development*, Bombay: Himalaya Publication, 1985, pp. 1-9.

²⁵ D. C. Roy (ed.), *Economy of North Bengal –A District Level Study*, Siliguri: N. L. Publishers, 2013, p. 629.

²⁶ Saswati Mookherjee, p. 24.

²⁷ P. K. Mohanty, *Tropical Tasar Culture In India*, New Delhi: Daya Publishing House –A Division of Astral International Pvt .Ltd., 2013, p.3.

²⁸ T. V. Sathe, A. D. Jadhav, *Sericulture and Pest Management*, New Delhi: Daya Publishing House, 2012, p. 9.

In the historiography of sericulture, important role of women workers in the silk industry was always considered negligible and was not focussed with real significance. The colonial Government always wanted to gather a huge profit from silk industry and implemented different new process, as well as pressure on all silk related persons at Malda, and in Bengal in general. As this result, glorious profile of Malda's silk moved under the evil situation during the colonial period.

The proper condition and misery of women workers was fully untold due to the male dominated society. We know that silk made cloths was designated as a 'queen of textiles', but sericulture was the 'industry of the poor'²⁹ and really, women artisans remained the 'ill-fated workers' in the sericulture industry. Further, we are completely aware that women work force were stronger than men, especially in the field of sericulture. So, we never avoid their valuable participation in the different steps of the home based and large scale silk industry. Women always tried to economically help their family through their active performance in the sericultural work. So, we say that the silk made clothes of Malda could not have captured the world market without magical performance and patience of women.

²⁹ Sujit Chandra Guha, p. 102.