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## **Silk Weaving in India: Historical Transition, Labour Relations, and the Crisis of Artisanal Production**

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### **Abstract**

The handloom silk industry in India represents a historically significant yet increasingly marginalised sector of artisanal production. Drawing on historical, economic, and sociological literature, this paper traces the evolution of silk weaving from the pre-colonial period to contemporary times, examining the transformations in production organisation, labour relations, and market structures. It argues that the current crisis in the handloom sector is not a temporary downturn, but the outcome of long-term structural shifts initiated during colonial rule and reinforced through post-independence policy inadequacies and neoliberal reforms. Using Bhagalpur as a regional reference point, the article demonstrates how historical patterns of dependence, technological stagnation, and market vulnerability continue to define weavers' livelihoods. The study highlights the limitations of existing institutional frameworks and argues for historically informed interventions that address structural inequities rather than treating the handloom sector as a residual form of production.

**Keywords:** Handloom industry, silk weaving, labour relations, Bhagalpur, artisans, colonial economy

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### **Introduction**

The handloom industry has historically formed an integral part of India's economic and cultural landscape. For centuries, artisanal weaving sustained rural livelihoods, enabled interregional trade, and generated textiles that were globally valued for their quality and craftsmanship. Silk weaving, in particular, occupied a privileged position within this artisanal economy, associated with courtly patronage, ritual consumption, and long-distance commerce. Centres such as Bhagalpur, Banaras, Kanchipuram, and Sualkuchi acquired reputations as hubs of specialised silk production, where skills were transmitted through generations of artisan households.

Despite this historical continuity, the contemporary condition of the handloom silk industry is marked by decline, uncertainty, and precarity. Weavers today confront falling incomes, unstable employment, rising input costs, technological obsolescence, and intense competition from mechanised production. These difficulties are often framed as recent developments linked to globalization or market volatility. However, such explanations obscure the deeper historical roots of the crisis.

This paper argues that the vulnerabilities of India's silk weavers are embedded in long-term structural transformations in production and exchange. By tracing the historical trajectory of the

handloom industry from pre-colonial organisation to its contemporary crisis, the article situates current challenges within a broader political-economic framework. Rather than treating artisans as residual victims of modernization, the paper examines how state policies, market institutions, and labour arrangements have repeatedly reshaped—and constrained—the possibilities of artisanal survival.

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### **Handloom Production in the Pre-Colonial Economy**

Textile production in the Indian subcontinent predates recorded history and reflects early technological sophistication. Archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley Civilisation indicates the use of cotton and possibly silk fibres, alongside tools associated with spinning and weaving. By the early historic period, weaving had evolved into a specialised craft organised through hereditary transmission and guild-like institutions.

In pre-colonial India, handloom production functioned within relatively stable socio-economic arrangements. Artisan households typically combined production with subsistence agriculture or local trade. The organisation of weaving remained decentralised and household-based, but it was embedded within broader systems of patronage and exchange. Royal courts, temples, and affluent merchant groups provided steady demand, particularly for silk textiles used in ceremonial and elite consumption.

Guild organisations (*śreṇis*) regulated skill transmission, prices, and professional ethics, while also mediating relationships between artisans, traders, and political authorities. These institutions enabled a degree of occupational security and social recognition for weavers. Importantly, production decisions were closely aligned with local markets and cultural demand rather than external commercial pressures.

Silk weaving centres like Bhagalpur emerged within this context as specialised zones of craft excellence. Their location along trade routes facilitated access to raw materials and markets, allowing weavers to sustain their livelihoods through relatively stable demand.

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### **Colonial Rule and the Restructuring of Artisanal Production**

The advent of British colonial rule fundamentally altered the conditions under which handloom weaving operated. Colonial economic policies systematically integrated India into a global capitalist system dominated by industrial production in Britain. Indigenous industries were neither technologically upgraded nor institutionally supported; instead, they were exposed to unequal competition from machine-manufactured textiles.

The dismantling of import restrictions on British cloth and the imposition of duties on Indian textiles eroded traditional export markets. Simultaneously, colonial policies encouraged India's role as a supplier of raw materials—particularly cotton and silk—while discouraging indigenous manufacturing. This transformation disrupted long-standing production networks and undermined the economic base of handloom artisans.

For weavers, the consequences were severe. Declining demand, falling wages, and loss of control over production gradually eroded artisanal autonomy. The replacement of hand-spun yarn by

mill-spun yarn further entrenched dependence on external suppliers. Weavers who had once controlled the entire production process increasingly functioned as labourers within merchant-dominated systems.

The colonial period thus inaugurated a pattern that persists today: artisanal survival through adaptation to disadvantage rather than through institutional empowerment.

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### **Nationalism, Swadeshi, and the Moral Economy of Handloom**

Textiles assumed renewed significance during the nationalist movement, particularly during the Swadeshi phase of the early twentieth century. Handloom weaving was transformed into a symbol of resistance against colonial economic domination. The rejection of foreign cloth and the promotion of indigenous textiles sought to re-embed production within a moral economy based on self-reliance and collective responsibility.

While Swadeshi campaigns revitalised public interest in handloom products, their economic impact remained limited. The movement mobilised symbolic support rather than restructuring market access or production conditions. Nevertheless, it established an enduring ideological association between handloom weaving and national development, influencing post-independence policy orientations.

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### **Post-Independence Interventions and Institutional Limits**

After independence, the Indian state identified the handloom sector as a critical source of rural employment and cultural heritage. Policy measures sought to protect handlooms through product reservation, subsidised yarn supply, cooperative organisation, and welfare programmes.

However, the outcomes of these interventions were uneven. Cooperative societies, envisioned as instruments of collective empowerment, often became vulnerable to bureaucratic control, inefficiency, and elite capture. Many weavers—particularly in economically marginal regions such as Bihar—remained excluded from institutional benefits.

At the same time, the expansion of the powerloom sector blurred distinctions between hand-produced and machine-produced textiles. Powerlooms frequently encroached upon markets reserved for handlooms, offering cheaper imitations that undercut artisanal products. Policy enforcement proved weak, eroding the protective framework intended for weavers.

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### **Labour Relations, Advances, and Occupational Precarity**

Labour relations within the handloom sector are shaped by informality, fragmentation, and dependence. Advance systems remain a defining feature of production, offering short-term financial support at the cost of long-term insecurity. Piece-rate payments rarely reflect the time, skill, or health costs of weaving labour.

The growing dominance of traders and master weavers has reconfigured artisans as dependent labourers rather than autonomous producers. Income instability and lack of social security have accelerated occupational mobility, particularly among younger generations. Migration to

powerloom centres and informal urban employment has become increasingly common, disrupting the transmission of weaving skills.

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### **Globalisation, Liberalisation, and the Contemporary Crisis**

Economic liberalisation intensified pressures on the handloom silk industry. Exposure to global markets increased competition from imported yarn and finished textiles, while reductions in state support heightened vulnerability. For weavers in centres such as Bhagalpur, shortages of working capital, unreliable infrastructure, and restricted access to finance further constrained production. The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated existing weaknesses, disrupting supply chains and collapsing demand. Although policy initiatives promoting digital platforms and branding signal adaptive possibilities, structural constraints limit their reach.

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### **Conclusion**

The crisis of the handloom silk industry reflects a long history of structural disadvantage rather than a failure of artisans themselves. Colonial restructuring, post-independence policy limitations, and market-driven reforms have progressively narrowed the space for artisanal autonomy. Sustainable revival requires interventions that address power relations within markets, strengthen institutional accountability, and recognise weavers as central economic agents rather than cultural remnants.

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