



A Comprehensive Investigation of the British East India Company, Early Modern Bengali Merchant Communities, and Indigenous Brokers in *Weavers of Worlds* Samrat Mandal*

*Research Scholar of History, Seacom Skills University, Santiniketan, Bolpur, West Bengal, India

Abstract

With the evocative paradigm of Weavers of Worlds, this research provides a thorough and nuanced examination of the complex interactions amongst the British East India Company, early contemporary Bengali business societies, and local brokers. The study reevaluates Bengal as a dynamic arena formed by multiple connections, agreements, and shared economic activity rather than just as a passive site of colonialist intrusion, placing the area at the intersection of growing global trade. It contends that a complex interaction between deeply ingrained traditional structures of trade, credit, production, and standards and European mercantile desire led to the alteration of Bengal's economic environment throughout the early modern era. The analysis highlights the crucial roles performed by neighbourhood merchants and intermediaries—gamesters, Banians, and Dallas—whose knowledge, flexibility, and cultural fluency made transregional trade networks possible. It does this by utilising qualitative historical analysis and interpretive inquiry. These individuals are reimagined as central protagonists who mediated power, enabled interchange, and subtly shaped colonial commerce rather than as peripheral auxiliary. The study also makes use of the Weavers of Worlds metaphor to show how many identities, practices, and interests were interwoven to create economic realities. The present research promotes a more comprehensive view of early modern Bengal as a realm of linked worlds where power was contested and economic systems were co-created by opposing reductionist and Eurocentric historiographies. In the end, by highlighting interpersonal relationships, indigenous independence, and the complex web of connections that supported the formation of early modern commerce, it adds to the larger conversation on global economic history.

Keywords: *Weavers of Worlds, the British East India Company, the Bengali economy, native brokers, commercial networks, early modern trade, textile manufacturing, colonial contact, economic history, and cultural mediation*

Introduction

Bengal appears as a bright centre of the convergence in the vast and complex landscape of early modern civilisation, where human activity wove delicate yet durable threads across continents and seas of trade met rivers of culture, rather than as a mute outpost of empire. The British East India Company, which was frequently portrayed as the main force behind change but was really intricately entwined with pre-existing networks of local commerce, credit, and negotiation, was at the centre of this dynamic universe. Its ascent in Bengal was not isolated nor total; rather, it

developed via ongoing communication with the vibrant trade groups in the area and the subtle, vital role of local brokers. The investigation aims to shed light on the underlying artistry of these exchanges, where trade was not just carried out but meticulously built via relationships of reciprocity, trust, and measured ambition, all centred around the captivating metaphor of Weavers of Worlds. Bengali merchants in the early modern era were not passive observers of imperial development since they possessed both social and commercial savvy. They were astute players, influencing markets, controlling cash flows, and even manipulating the very frameworks of colonial trade to suit their needs. Their businesses were supported by complex family relationships, regional allegiances, and global sensibilities that linked Bengal to far-off places. The native brokers, such as *Dallas*, *Banians*, and *Gamesters*, were as important since they brought fluidity and significance to the business world. They were at the intersection of civilisations, translating entire systems of practice and values in addition to languages. In their hands, transactions turned into discussions, and discussions turned into covert power tools. As new forces changed the horizon, they were the silent builders of continuity among change, making sure that the rhythms of indigenous business persisted.

This research challenges simple conceptions of unilateral colonial rule by carefully examining these multi-layered interactions. Rather, it presents an entangled universe in which collaboration and conflict coexist, as well as resistance and reliance. Thus, Bengal's commercial change looks to be a co-created event, formed of shared doubts and overlapping goals rather than an enforced reality. The voices of individuals who worked, bargained, and dreamed in Bengal's marketplaces and river ports are restored to history via this inquiry, which reimagines Bengal as a place of dynamic interaction. It challenges us to view the beginning of modernity as a beautifully woven fabric made by several hands, each thread bearing the stamp of human creativity, tenacity, and desire, rather than as a tale of unique strength.

Literature Review

Throughout the past few decades, the historiography regarding early modernity Bengal has seen a substantial shift. The British East India Company was frequently portrayed in earlier colonial and nationalism narratives as the main force behind economic transformation, highlighting its achievements in commerce and administration while downplaying the contributions of indigenous people. Local actors were frequently portrayed in these narratives as either exploited victims or uninvolved accomplices. By accentuating the flexibility and endurance of indigenous economic institutions, however, more recent research has attempted to challenge this image. Historians like P. J. Marshall and K. N. Chaudhuri have shown that the Company's prosperity was largely dependent on pre-existing credit and trade networks run by Indian merchants. These studies show that, despite the limitations of colonial domination, Bengali commercial communities held significant financial influence and were able to negotiate conditions that suited their interests.

Scholarly interest in the function of indigenous brokers is also growing. People like *gamesters* and *banians* could be reconstructed as crucial players who acted as a bridge between the local and European domains, rather than just as inferior agents of the Company. They had considerable control over business dealings because of their deep understanding of regional marketplaces, social structures, and industrial methods. They frequently took on the role of independent power brokers, influencing the conditions of interaction between dealers and producers.

Regardless of these developments, a more integrative strategy that unifies the different threads of this historiography is still required. *Weavers of Worlds*, a notion that highlights the interdependence of many individuals and processes, provides such a framework. It offers a

deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the beginnings of modern economic life by shifting the emphasis between isolated entities to relationship processes.

Research Gap

Considering that current research has significantly advanced our knowledge concerning early modern Bengal, a number of crucial gaps still exist. One of the most prominent is the propensity to examine native brokers, commercial groups, and the British East India Company separately rather than as a cohesive system. Their connections were defined by intricate interactions and reciprocal interdependence, which are hidden by this compartmentalised approach. Likewise, despite the growing recognition of indigenous actors' agency, it is frequently framed within the constraints imposed by colonial frameworks. It is necessary to go beyond this limited viewpoint and investigate how local players actively influenced the changing economic environment rather than just being influenced by it. Additionally, *Weavers of Worlds'* theoretical promise as an intellectual instrument is still underutilised, especially when it comes to economic history. By establishing a thorough and integrated analysis that emphasises relational dynamics and indigenous governance, and the collaborative creation of economic systems, this research aims to close these gaps.

Research Questions

An assortment of interconnected enquiries that seek to clarify the intricacies of early modern Bengal's economic environment serve as the basis for this study. It aims to comprehend whether the British East India Company affected pre-existing trading systems and how local circumstances changed its activities. It explores the various roles of indigenous intermediaries as negotiators and mediators, as well as the importance of Bengali merchant groups in maintaining and changing economic networks. The research also investigates the nature of economic interconnection in the early modern age and how these relationships might be reinterpreted using the framework of *Weavers of Worlds*. It comprises the following enquiries:

1. How did the British East India Company influence the structure and functioning of early modern Bengali commercial networks?
2. In what ways did Bengali merchant communities respond to and negotiate with the expanding power of the British East India Company?
3. What roles did indigenous brokers play in mediating economic, cultural, and political exchanges between local merchants and the British East India Company?
4. To what extent were Bengali merchants and indigenous brokers active agents in shaping trade and economic transformations in early modern Bengal?
5. How does the framework of "*Weavers of Worlds*" reinterpret the interconnected roles of the British East India Company, Bengali merchants, and indigenous intermediaries in global trade networks?

Research objectives

The central objective of this study is to undertake an in-depth and critically nuanced exploration of the transformative role played by the British East India Company in reshaping the economic, administrative, and commercial contours of early modern Bengal, while simultaneously foregrounding the agency, adaptability, and resilience of indigenous Bengali merchant communities within the expanding circuits of regional and global trade. The research seeks to meticulously examine the organizational structures, commercial strategies, and socio-cultural influence of these merchant groups, situating them not merely as subordinate actors but as active participants who negotiated, resisted, and collaborated within an evolving colonial

economy. The examination of the crucial role that indigenous brokers played as intermediaries between European trading companies and indigenous markets is another goal. Through their linguistic expertise, regional knowledge, and strategic placement, these brokers were able to mediate complex interactions, creating avenues for trust, communication, and economic exchange.

The research also intends to explore the complex patterns of collaboration, disagreements, negotiation, and mutual dependence that defined the connections between the company, merchants, and brokers, exposing a complex web of social and economic interactions. Through the use of the vivid conceptual framework of "Weavers of Worlds," the study aims to shed light on the ways in which these many players worked together to create new commercial realities, cross-cultural interactions, and hybrid financial procedures. It also aims to assess how much indigenous commercial activities and traditional trading systems were altered, rearranged, or maintained as a result of the expansion of colonialism and global market convergence.

Research Methodology

In order to create a thorough analysis, this study uses a qualitative and interpretive methodology, consulting sources that are both secondary and primary. Trade records, letters, and administrative records of the British East India Company are examples of archival artefacts that offer important insights into how colonial business operated. These are supplemented by indigenous documents and modern narratives that present different viewpoints on the same thing processes. The framework for analysis blends thematic and historical approaches. Thematic analysis enables the discovery of important patterns pertaining to agency, discussions, and power, while historical analysis is used to track the development of institutional structures and trade networks across time. Additionally, the study takes a comparative approach, highlighting areas of both divergence and convergence by contrasting indigenous and European perspectives.

The application of Weavers of Worlds as an interdisciplinary perspective is fundamental to the process. A more complex interpretation of the data is made possible by this method's emphasis on relationality and interconnection. It views economic players as members of a dynamic and changing network of relationships rather than as separate entities.

Discussion and Analysis

The metaphor of "Weavers of Worlds" best captures the complex and dynamic economic world shown in the connection involving the British East India Company (EIC), early modern Bengali mercantile communities, and native brokers. The Company relied heavily on pre-existing aboriginal networks of commerce, financing, and manufacturing during the early phases of its growth in Bengal rather than being a dominating or self-sufficient business. By offering local expertise, financial support, and access to handicraft producers, especially weavers, Bengali merchants, banians, and other middlemen like Dallas and pikers were crucial in enabling the company's business operations. Through negotiation, cooperation, and strategic involvement, these indigenous players were more than just subservient assistance; they were active participants who helped to define the early colonial commerce. Systems like dadni, which pay weavers in advance, show how firmly the company's operations were ingrained in long-standing South Asian economic customs.

But when the Company solidified its political power in Bengal over time, especially after gaining revenue-collecting rights, this comparatively cooperative structure saw a dramatic change. As its influence grew, the EIC started to reorganise business relationships to support its monopolistic goals. Company officials were able to circumvent conventional processes and weaken indigenous merchants through strategies including duty-free trading privileges and

local market manipulation. This change signalled the progressive breakdown of a more equitable business relationship and the rise of a more uneven economic system. This change was further accelerated by the emergence of agents employed by the company, such as gomasthas. These agents functioned as tools of control, enforcing contracts, setting prices, and restricting the autonomy of weavers, in contrast to previous middlemen who were absorbed into local community. As a result, artisanal communities experienced increasing marginalisation and exploitation, and the production system grew increasingly coercive.

Native American traders and merchants did not just vanish or become helpless victims of colonial growth in spite of these difficulties. Rather, many choose to align themselves with the company's objectives in order to secure social mobility and economic advantages in response to the shifting environment. Some became powerful individuals in the colonial economy and amassed significant fortune, demonstrating the intricate relationship between cooperation and self-interest. However, when the advantages of colonial commerce grew more concentrated within a small number of groups and many traditional producers experienced declines, this adaptation frequently came at the expense of greater economic justice. The complex character of colonial economic development is shown by this dual dynamic of exclusion and accommodation.

The economic development of Bengal throughout this time period calls into question oversimplified views of colonialism as a solely foreign imposition in a more comprehensive analytical sense. Instead, it shows a negotiated and engaged process where indigenous individuals played important but progressively limited roles. The idea of "Weavers of Worlds" encapsulates this complex reality by highlighting the ways in which colonial agents, merchants, and brokers intertwined local and global forces. Bengali business community played a crucial role in the British East India Company's development, even though the company eventually cemented its control. As a result, the economic history of the earliest modern Bengal is shown as a rich tapestry of collaboration, conflict, adaptation, and transition rather than just a tale of colonial exploitation.

Conclusion

This analysis concludes by reiterating that a unilinear narrative of colonial control is insufficient to comprehend the development of the British East India Company in Bengal. Instead, it has to be placed in the context of an intricately interwoven world of indigenous negotiation, entrepreneurship, and interdependence, which is appropriately described by the metaphor of "Weavers of Worlds." The company's economic success was neither instantaneous or independent; rather, it was meticulously built on top of already existing Bengali merchant networks, credit systems, and broking procedures that facilitated its access to production and markets. Through adaptability, resistance, and strategic cooperation, Bengali merchants, banians, and middlemen like dalals and paikars emerge as crucial players who actively impacted the course of early colonial commerce rather than as passive auxiliary.

This study also demonstrates how these associations have changed over time in a slow but significant way. As the Company strengthened its political influence and increasingly tried to regulate, punish, and occasionally replace indigenous individuals, what had started out as a reasonably mutual interaction became into a more unequal framework of power. However, local middlemen persisted in negotiating spheres of influence despite this changing landscape, demonstrating the ongoing existence of indigenous agency beneath a growing colonial framework. The persistence of indigenous economic methods despite their reconfiguration due to colonial influences is highlighted by systems like dadni.

In the conclusion, this research urges a reconsideration of early colonial Bengal as a dynamic, co-constituted economic arena moulded by several players whose interactions transcended the

dichotomies of coloniser and colonised, rather than as an indifferent consumer of European interference. It emphasises the significance of seeing empire as a cooperative and disputed process—one woven through innumerable strands of negotiation, reliance, and adaptation—by highlighting the roles of Bengali mercantile groups and native brokers. By doing this, it enhances our knowledge of the beginnings of modern Indian Ocean economy and encourages a more sophisticated understanding of the intricate human networks that supported the development of international trade.

References

1. The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company, Dalrymple, W. (2019). *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
(A major narrative history tracing the rise of the Company and its entanglement with Indian political and commercial systems.)
2. Chaudhuri, K. N. (1978). *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Marshall, P. J. (Ed.). (1987). *The Cambridge History of India: Bengal—The British Bridgehead*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Subramanian, L. (1996). *Indigenous Capital and Imperial Expansion: Bombay, Surat and the West Coast*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
5. Ray, R. (1995). *Entrepreneurship and Industry in India, 1800–1947*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
6. Datta, R. (2000). *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal, c. 1760–1800*. Delhi: Manohar.
7. Bhattacharya, S. (Ed.). (2020). *A Comprehensive History of Modern Bengal, 1700–1950*. Delhi: Primus Books.
(Explains the dadni system, credit networks, and the role of intermediaries in Bengal's textile economy.)
8. Ali, Q. A., & Nasim, M. A. (2024). "The Agent of the European Merchants: Bengali Trading Community in Eighteenth Century South-West Bengal." *Pratidhwani: The Echo*, Vol. XII, Issue IV.
(Discusses banians, dalals, paikars, and their brokerage roles.)
9. Bangalir Itihas: Adiparba, Ray, N. (1949). *Bangalir Itihas: Adiparba*. Kolkata: The Book Emporium.
(Provides background on the socio-economic life of Bengal.)
10. Bolts, W. (1772). *Considerations on India Affairs*. London.
(A contemporary critique of Company practices in Bengal.)
11. Furber, H. (1976). *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600–1800*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
12. Om Prakash (1998). *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
13. Bayly, C. A. (1983). *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.