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## Women Textile Producers and the Maritime Silk Economy of Eurasia.

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### KEYWORDS

*Textiles, Maritime, Trade, Gender, Labor, Silk Economy.*

### ABSTRACT

The Maritime Silk Economy of Eurasia between the 10th and 17th centuries was fundamentally shaped by women's textile production, which served as the backbone of long distance maritime trade networks. This study examines the role of women in textile production within maritime silk trade systems, analyzes the circulation of women produced textiles through major trade routes, investigates their socio economic conditions in coastal societies, and explores the relationship between gendered labor and the expansion of maritime commercial economies. The findings reveal that women across India China and Southeast Asia played a central role in producing high value textiles such as silk muslin cotton chintz batik and embroidery which were actively integrated into Indian Ocean Red Sea and South China Sea trade networks. Maritime routes enabled the large scale circulation of these goods through key port cities including Calicut Surat Malacca Canton and Manila where they became major export commodities in global markets. The study further finds that women's labor was structured through household-based production systems, piece rate wages, barter exchange and contract-based arrangements with European trading companies. Despite widespread gender-based wage inequality and social restrictions, women contributed significantly to the household incomes and regional economies. However, colonial interventions by the British East India Company and Dutch VOC increasingly transformed women's labour into controlled export production systems. The study concludes that women's textile production was not peripheral but central to the functioning of the Maritime Silk Economy and that global trade expansion during this period was structurally dependent on gendered labor systems embedded within coastal and maritime societies.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The beat of Maritime Eurasia, long before the advent of industrialization, factories, and capitalism, was maintained not only through the voyages of vessels over the Indian Ocean but also through women's work in households (unrecognized), workshops, and artisans along the coastlines. From the 10th to the 17th century, the Maritime Silk Economy became a large-scale commercial network that stretched across China, India, Southeast Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, East Africa, and some parts of Europe through intricate maritime trade routes. During the period of the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE), Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE), Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526 CE), Vijayanagara Empire (1336–1646 CE), and Ottoman Empire (1299–1922 CE), maritime trade expanded significantly across the Indian Ocean world, linking major port cities such as Quanzhou, Guangzhou, Calicut, Cambay, Malacca, Hormuz, Aden, and Zanzibar. The arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean after Vasco da Gama reached Calicut in 1498 further intensified commercial competition and global textile circulation.



The constant movement of items such as silk, cotton, spices, indigo, porcelain, and gemstones through these maritime systems led to the coast becoming lively economic and cultural centers (Bille et al., 2022). Of all the commodities, textiles were especially crucial in long-distance trade since textiles from Gujarat, Bengal, Coromandel, Persia, and China coasts were highly sought after in Asia, Africa, and Europe (Riello & Parthasarathi, 2011). Despite this, maritime history has always been focused on aspects such as merchants, rulers, expansion of naval power, commerce. However, gendered labor associated with weaving and production of textiles was largely ignored.

The participation of women in spinning, weaving, dyeing, embroidering, and artisan production at home was a vital force in the Maritime Silk Economy. However, their role has mostly remained within the scope of domestic economy and seen distinct from the wider maritime economy. Many coastal societies depended on women working in export textile industries, supplying the maritime economy of Eurasia and ensuring their survival and economic growth (Bray, 1997). However, current literature still tends to overlook the historical economic activities of women producers by prioritizing accounts of commercial history from the men's perspective. Hence, by considering women's textile production in the Maritime Silk Economy, it will not only provide insight into the understanding of maritime trade but also uncover how gender and labor played a central part in the economy of Eurasian commerce (Machado et al., 2018).

### **Statement of problem**

Existing studies about the textile history of the Indian Ocean fully supports the argument about the under-integration of women's labor in Indian Ocean maritime trade historiography. According to Houghteling (2023), despite the recognition of the importance of textiles in Indian Ocean trade relations particularly those produced in Gujarat, Bengal, and the Coromandel Coasts as well as those produced in South Asia in general, scholarly studies remain focused on the pattern of distribution rather than on the process of production. This indicates that there continues to be a production/trade gap in maritime historiography, in which the contribution of women's labor in weaving, spinning, dyeing, and finishing textiles is recognized without being considered as an aspect of the maritime economy. In a similar vein, more comprehensive studies on Indian Ocean textile economies (Machado, Fee, & Campbell, 2018) stress that cloth was the primary commodity of the Indian Ocean but fails to address the issue of gender relations in production networks. This shows that regardless of the current interdisciplinary studies, women producers of textiles have remained marginal concepts for the Maritime Silk Economy paradigm. It is therefore, evident that this research is justified as it attempts to fill this academic void by exploring women as economically relevant entities within the Eurasian maritime exchange during the 10th to 17th centuries.

### **Objectives**

1. To examine the role of women in textile production within the maritime silk trade networks of Eurasia between the 10th and 17th centuries.
2. To analyze how maritime trade routes facilitated the circulation and commercial value of textiles produced by women across Eurasian port societies.
3. To investigate the socio-economic position and labour conditions of women engaged in textile production in coastal trading communities.
4. To explore the relationship between textile productions gendered labor, and the growth of maritime commercial economies in Eurasia.

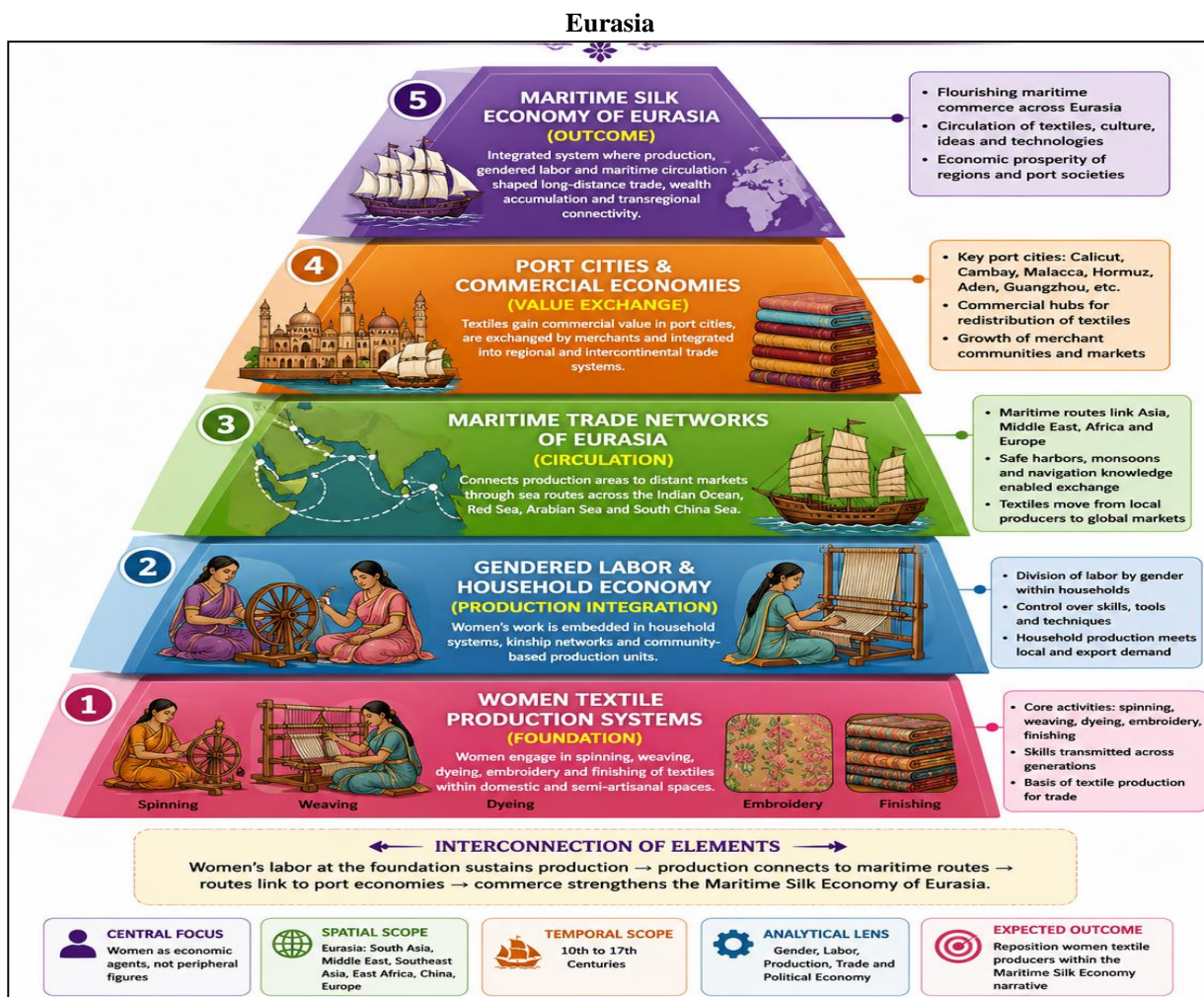
## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The present study adopts a qualitative historical-analytical methodology to examine the role of women textile producers within the Maritime Silk Economy of Eurasia between the 10th and 17th centuries. The analysis draws mainly from secondary literature such as scholarly books, academic papers in peer-reviewed journals, maritime history of trade, gender studies, as well as literature in economic and historical anthropology in order to reinterpret the role played by women in transregional textile production networks. In this study, the interconnected maritime network connecting China, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, East Africa, and some parts of Europe is considered with an emphasis on port towns like Quanzhou, Guangzhou, Calicut, Cambay, Malacca, Hormuz, Aden, and Zanzibar, where textile production and maritime trade came together. The approach adopted in this analysis involves themes and interpretations in relation to labor systems, households, artisans, and gender roles in spinning, weaving, dyeing, and embroidering of textiles. A comparative-historical approach is utilized in analyzing the variation between regions regarding the involvement of women in the economy in various Eurasian maritime zones, thus highlighting continuities and divergences in gender-specific production systems. The use of gender-based analysis allows for a critical review of the prevalent maritime historiography that tends to favor merchants, rulers, and governmental organizations, thus revealing the economic power of women. The utilization of secondary literature rather than primary research ensures that a critical reconstruction of the role of women in the Maritime Silk Economy is achieved, given that gender, labor, and trade were closely connected in pre-modern Eurasian economies.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

**Conceptual Framework**

It is evident that there was a deep interconnection between the production, circulation, and exchange in the Maritime Silk Economy of Eurasia during the period of 10th century through to the 17th century. Figure 1, given below indicates that the activities of women textile producers constituted the fundamental foundation of the whole economic system. The activities carried out by these women such as spinning, weaving, dyeing, embroidery, and finishing did not remain domestic but were part and parcel of the whole system of labour that contributed to the production of textiles in places like Gujarat, Bengal, Coromandel, Persia, and coastal China (Machado et al., 2018). As can be seen from the Figure 1, port cities like Calicut, Cambay, Malacca, Hormuz, Aden, and Guangzhou served as intermediary trading cities in which textiles made by women acquired commercial significance through redistribution within Eurasian trading circuits. At the end, finally, the Maritime Silk Economy of Eurasia emerges as a result of all these processes put together, with production, gender-based labor relations, maritime movement, and commerce all working in tandem to create long-distance trade and economic change. In essence, Figure 1 helps us to see how the role of women textile makers was fundamental and not marginal to Eurasian maritime trade networks from the 10th to the 17th century (Bille et al., 2022).



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Women Textile Producers in the Maritime Silk Economy of Women's Role in Textile Production and Maritime Silk Networks.**

The Maritime Silk Trade Network saw women as its main contributors to the process of textile production during the 10th-17th centuries, with their contributions being indispensable to the processes of sericulture, cotton spinning, weaving, dyeing, and embroidery that made up the core of the textile-based exports throughout Eurasia. Chinese women specialized in sericulture, engaging in processes such as breeding silkworms, winding the cocoon, and spinning the silk threads in the lower Yangzi region (Hangzhou and Jiangnan) whose production supplied Mediterranean and Asian markets (Bray, 1997). As early as the 5th century BC, the contribution of women to sericulture was acknowledged by the official opening of the season by the Empress. In the Song Dynasty, period between the years 960 to 1279 CE, women from Jiangnan, China had begun manufacturing silk textiles that were highly valued commodities in foreign exports, the city of Shanghai, together

with the surrounding areas, focused on making textile products made from cotton in the period between 13th to 14th centuries.

Similarly, for Indian women, weaving was an important contribution to marine trade. Spinning cotton was an activity carried out by women belonging to different classes in the form of supplementary work. This was done especially in places like the Coromandel Coast (Madras/Pulicat), Dhaka for Muslin cloth from Bengal, and Surat in Gujarat for printing cotton fabrics. Bengalis used to weave Muslin, which would even "pass through a ring," but there existed a whole bunch of other domestic factories run by women who spun cotton yarn with their hands. In the 17th century, the East India Companies (founded in 1600, the British; 1602, the Dutch; 1664, the French) were founded solely for trading Indian clothes, which were made by women (Riello & Parthasarathi, 2011). During the period post-1600 when European merchants became more active, the Coromandel Coast was largely trading its products with the Southeast Asia. By 1680s, around 1 million Indian fabrics were shipped annually by the British East India Company to Europe. Majority of these fabrics were produced by millions of women at home.

Women batik and tie-dyeing traditions were widespread in Brunei, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, but especially in Java (Indonesia), where batik was first referred to in cargo invoices of the 17th century (c. 1650). Women of mixed Chinese-Malay origin were engaged in embroidery skills, batik was exported through Maritime Silk trading routes. The industry of Javanese batik attracted thousands of women workers by the 1600s. Dutch records mention women batik makers who exported batik items to India, China, and Europe (Elliot, 2013). Nomadic women of Central Asia were involved in carpet production, which was an important component of trade since the 10th century AD.

Textile production by women was largely based on the household economy (ghor-er karkhanas or home workshops) and was part of an artisan economy, even though some women from elite families were estate managers or caravan owners. The production process was usually referred to as "domestic duty," but it was in fact an economic activity that involved export of goods. Women's labour was indispensable in export activities, because Chinese silk was supplied to the Mediterranean and Asia markets, Indian textiles like cotton, muslin, and chintz became fashionable in Europe, and Southeast Asian batik was mentioned in the cargo bills during the middle of the 17th century. In spite of their subordination in patriarchal societies, women still had agency by participating in the household production, vending at the market, and funding caravans. In addition, women produced silk brocades, silk damask, and cotton calicoes, which became status symbols in the courts of the Persian, Ottoman, and Mughal Empires.

The presence of such textiles produced by women is evident through archaeological evidence discovered from shipwrecks like that of the Belitung shipwreck (approximately 830 CE) and the Cu Lao Cham shipwreck (around 970-980 CE). Ports such as Quanzhou (China), Calicut (Kerala), Malacca (Malaysia), Aden (Yemen), and Venice have received women-made textiles (Bille et al., 2022). In the 15th century, women made textiles in Goa, which were exported by Portuguese traders. During the rule of the Mughals (1526-1857), women made brocades and embroideries to be supplied to the royal households. French travelers such as Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689) and François Bernier (1620-1688) documented women weavers in their accounts.

### **Maritime Trade Routes and Circulation of Women-Produced Textiles**

The maritime trading networks helped in the widespread movement and exchange value of textiles made by women during the time period of 10th – 17th century in the port communities of Eurasia (Davidson, 2012). The Indian Ocean Trade Network (10th -17th century), the Red Sea Passage, and the South China Sea trade passage operated as the main conduits through which textiles such as silk, cotton, muslin, batik, and chintz, which were made by women in China, India, and Southeast Asia, were distributed. The Indian Ocean trade route linked ports such as Pulicat, Masulipatnam, among others on the Coromandel Coast that specialized in cotton textiles along with others to destinations within Southeast Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and East Africa. From the 10th century onwards, following the expansion of Chola influence at sea, especially after the 1025 CE, Chola fleet mission to Srivijaya, ships carried women-made cotton textiles from Southern India to Malacca, Java, and Sumatra. By the 15th century, Calicut emerged as an important Indian Ocean trade center for cotton textiles from Gujarat and Coromandel Coast regions manufactured with the efforts of women, which fetched high prices, with annual export estimates being over 100 ships per year. The Red Sea trade route was established between Calicut and Surat to ports like Aden, Jeddah, and Cairo facilitating the entry of Indian textiles into the Ottoman and Mamluk markets since the 12th to 13th centuries where they found widespread circulation.

The South China Sea route exported Chinese Silk which was manufactured in the Jiangnan areas of Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Shanghai to the Southeast Asian countries, Japan, and eventually Manila via Spanish galleons after 1571. It is estimated that during the period of the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), silk production by women amounted to over 100,000 bolts per annum. Canton (Guangzhou) the main port for export accounted for over 50,000 bolts of silk per annum in the 1500s (Bray, 1997). Malacca Strait was also an important choke point connecting the Indian Ocean and South China Sea trade networks, and by around the mid-17th century, circa 1650, women-made batik fabrics from Java became part of the cargo list in trade. The women-made fabrics entered the long-distance trade through the system of household workshops that supplied fabrics to the trading intermediaries. In Bengal, women who spun the Muslin yarn for Dhaka weaving factories facilitated the export-oriented economy of Armenians and Portuguese traders.



The East India Company (founded in 1600) and the VOC or the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (United East India Company), founded in 1602 established factories in Surat (1612), Madras (1639), and Nagapatinam (1658) to export directly to Europe from these textile centers primarily run by women labour. In the 1680s, VOC was exporting about one or two million Indian textiles every year to Europe. The worth of such materials depended upon the fineness of the fabric, dye, and pattern created. The Bengal muslin cloth was popularly known as 'woven air' as it fetched three to five times the price of regular cotton fabrics owing to the extremely fine spinning method employed that could create fabric finer than 1,000 threads per inch. The textile of Gujarat, known as Kalamkari and Chintz, was highly valued in European markets during 1600-1750 due to complex hand block printing methods developed by women artisans.

The Chinese silk brocades and damasks were also highly sought after, and Manila galleon trade records from 1571 to 1815 show that their prices in Mexican markets ranged from 10 to 50 pesos per piece. Key cities in ports acted as the nodes in this system of redistribution. The city of Calicut (India), which was known as Kozhikode, operated as an important center for trade of Coromandel and Gujarati textiles from the 10th century through the 16th century, receiving more than 100 ships per year by 1400s. Canton (Guangzhou, China) was the main port city for silk exports between the 10th and the 17th centuries with annual exports of more than 50,000 bolts by the 1500s. Surat (India) became a prominent Mughal port city from the 16th to 17th centuries involved in the export of women-produced cotton textiles to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf regions. Manila (Philippines) was the terminal point for the Spanish galleon trade route where in exchange for Mexican silver there were exported more than 200,000 Chinese silks annually. Aden (Yemen) was the entrance point for the Red Sea from the 12th century onwards in order to transport Indian textiles to Mediterranean markets, whereas Venice was an important European port city that distributed Asian textiles between the 13th and 15th centuries (Lemire & Riello, 2006). All these port cities facilitated the distribution of women-produced textiles to different parts of the world and generated enormous profits due to textiles being one of the most important commodities in pre-modern global trading networks.

### **Socio-Economic Position and Labour Conditions of Women Textile Producers**

Socioeconomic status and working conditions of women in the textile industry in trading port societies from the 10th to the 17th century were determined by caste, class, household formation, and the growth of overseas trade (Bose, 2024). This interplay of different dimensions created a hierarchical structure where women found themselves participants as well as victims of economic processes associated with the textile economy linked to international business networks. Women in the textile industry came from a variety of social classes in coastal parts of Eurasia. In India, the involvement of lower caste groups and other disadvantaged groups in production was crucial. The Chakiliyar and Devanga communities in the Coromandel coast of Tamil Nadu took part in spinning cotton and making yarn for the weaving industry.

The women of Gujarat and Surat regions focused on embroidery, fine sewing, and block printing. In Bengal, women belonging to farming communities of Dhaka were engaged in muslin cloth-making. The tradition of spinning was continued through successive generations in family-based production systems. In China, Han women of the farming communities of Jiangnan provinces like Jiangsu and Zhejiang were primarily involved in the practice of sericulture. According to Bray (1997), the contribution of women's silk production towards the household income constituted nearly 60 to 70 percent during the Song dynasty era (960–1279 CE) at Hangzhou. Women in Java and Malaysia used to produce batik textiles, whereas, in Malacca, Chinese Malay women were famous for their embroidery.

The pay for women's textile work took place using a combination of income pooling in the household economy, piece rates, and barter. For instance, women spinning cotton thread in Bengal by the 1600s got 1 to 2 dinars for every 100 fathoms, which accounted for about 30 to 40 percent of household income. In the Coromandel Coast by the 1650s, women weavers were given piece rate wages of 1 to 3 fanams for each cloth woven, but records from Portuguese East India Company showed that women weavers made 15 to 20 percent less than their male counterparts for the same volume of production. During the Song dynasty in China, women working in silk reeling made about 15 to 20 wen for each bolt of silk, accounting for almost half of the household income among farming families.

The exchange of textile products for basic requirements like food grains (rice), salt, and spices was common among women. Batik textiles were traded by women in the pepper-growing regions of Java during the seventeenth century with imported cloth and pottery from India and China respectively. As the activities of the Dutch East India Company grew from 1602 onwards, wages in money started becoming more prevalent. Javanese women were given between 0.5 to 1.5 guilders for a piece of batik textile in the 1680s, but they only received about 30 to 40 percent of the total export price of their produce (Machado et al., 2018). Participation of women in textiles was characterized by heavy patriarchy but at the same time, it opened avenues for economic activity due to an increasing number of maritime trade connections (Riello & Parthasarathi, 2011). Such patriarchy took form of restrictions to produce domestically, exclusion from any guild activities in Asia and Europe before the 18th century, and wage disparity that saw women earning only 40% to 60% of their male counterparts' salaries. Ideologies like the Manusmriti traditions in India and Confucianism in China reinforced the notion that textiles were the responsibility of the woman in the household.



**Graph: Socio-Economic Position and Labour Conditions of Women Textile Producers.**

Graph 1 shows a comparative study of socio-economic standing and labor conditions of women workers producing textiles in Eurasian regions and trade networks from the 10th to the 17th century, focusing on variations in income contribution, wage parity, economic independence, and market entry (Zreik, 2025). The graph indicates comparatively more household economic integration and women's income contribution in areas such as China's Jiangnan and India's Bengal. Moderate wage participation is seen in the export-focused production networks of Coromandel and Gujarat. Meanwhile, in Java/Malay, women's greater economic independence is seen through the local control of batik and textiles markets. However, the VOC colonial trade network shows a decline in all parameters, especially wage parity and independence. What can be discerned from this graph is that even though the contribution of women through their weaving activities was important to the households and economy of various regions of Eurasia, their social status was inconsistent and influenced by regional hierarchies, patriarchal influences, and colonial trading systems. Maritime trade had similar dual impact on the economic standing of women in port towns as well (Davidson, 2012). By the 17th century, women in Calicut and Surat had taken up weaving on contract with Europeans, making the use of male brokers unnecessary. Women in Southeast Asia maintained more control over textile commerce than over other exports, despite colonial policies that started to change after 1650 reducing this independence. The influence of elite women could still be noted in their involvement in textile economy, for example, patronizing embroidery workhouses by Zeb-un-Nisa (1638–1702) popularly known as Mughal queen Nur Jahan or elite women managing silk exports in Canton following their husband's death.

For lower caste women, the increase in export demand increased their workload without any social mobility, which can be gauged from the fact that Bengal produced 1–2 million pieces of muslin per year by the late seventeenth century. There were some opportunities for upward social mobility for some middle-class women in Tamil and port towns due to income from weaving industry, as the income helped build better dowries and facilitated marriages outside their caste or community. The VOC in Java practiced debt relationships based on about 20-30 percent share of the value of production, in Bengal, the British East India Company had the advance system that linked women weavers with company contractors and thus decreased their independence (Parthasarathi, 2011). By the eighteenth century, women textile work was entrenched in colonial trading networks as an activity that was both important for international trade and underpaid, leading to its disruption after 1750 as a result of European mechanization. To sum up, the social and economic role of women in textile producing coastal societies can be seen as two-sided, on their contribution to the textile economy and prevalent gender inequality in all societies.

### **Gendered Labour, Textile Production, and Maritime Economic Growth**

Textile production, structures of gendered labor, and maritime economic trading were strongly interrelated throughout Eurasia during the period of 10th to 17th century, with women's labour forming the basis for construction of the Maritime Silk Economy (Machado et al., 2018). The textiles produced by women constituted those important resources that allowed for distant maritime trade systems and global trade development. If women had not consistently engaged in the spinning, weaving, dyeing, and embroidery of textiles, then those lucrative and influential maritime trade systems could not have come into existence (Zreik, 2025). The role played by women in textile manufacturing was fundamental to the growth of



maritime commerce, as they were involved in making textiles that met the demands of the market. During the 17th century, India became one of the world's leading textile manufacturing nations thanks to the ruling Mughal Empire, with cotton becoming a primary commodity used in exporting goods. The creation of the London East India Company was highly influenced by the demand for cotton textiles in the international market manufactured by women. The production of Chinese silk by women in the Jiangnan area, such as Hangzhou and Suzhou, exceeded 100,000 bolts per year during the period of Song Dynasty, which spanned from 960 to 1279 CE, whereas Canton had been exporting 50,000 bolts or more every year since the 1500s. In the 1680s, the British East India Company had been exporting from 1 to 2 million pieces of Indian cloth to Europe each year.

Gender-based allocation of roles within textile-based economies was made efficient because of the division of labor along gendered lines (Bray, 1997). For instance, women were usually in charge of undertaking labor-intensive operations like spinning, dyeing, embroidering, and processing of raw materials, whereas men controlled loom management, long-distance commerce, and capital-intensive trading operations. In Bengal, women who manufactured muslins managed to get thread counts more than 1000 threads per inch. As a result, these fabrics became highly valued because they had a cost value between three to five times that of normal cotton products. In China's Jiangnan province, women who practiced silk cultivation maintained continuity of production through feeding of silkworms both during daytime and nighttime. Consequently, this resulted in an increased production of about 40 to 50 percent. Particularly within Southeast Asia especially in Java, women who participated in batik-making were able to make 10 to 20 pieces of cloth per household monthly during the mid-17th century with Dutch VOC documents indicating that there was already mass production within households of batik cloth exported to foreign markets.

This resulted in the formation of cottage industries among families catering for international markets (Davidson, 2012). In Bengal, women who used to spin cotton thread for weaving in Dhaka gave the Armenians and Portuguese merchants between 50 to 100 pieces of cloth annually made from their houses. The Dutch East India Company had established contract-based production where between 1650 and 1700, they were offering Javanese women payments of 0.5 to 1.5 guilders on each batik piece made with production targets set at 10 to 20 batik pieces per month per household. On the Coromandel Coast, between 1650 and 1656, women were earning wages of 1 to 3 fanams per cloth produced.

By the late 17th century, advances made by European merchants in particular by the British East India Company placed many weavers especially women under contractual obligation to weave in order to transform their subsistence production into an export system at a larger scale. By the 18th century, textile production in India, China, and Southeast Asia had been completely integrated into the global market for maritime goods fueled continuously by demand in Europe and other trading areas. Women's labor formed the backbone of the Maritime Silk Economy since it supplied most of the export textiles. The Chinese silks, cotton muslin, and chintz from India, and the Javanese batiks, among others, were all mainly manufactured via the systems of women's labor at their households and workshops (Elliot, 2013). The presence of textiles in early cargo shipments can be evidenced by archaeological finds like the Belitung wreck of 830 CE and the Cu Lao Cham wreck of 970 to 980 CE. By the 15th century, the port of Calicut saw in excess of 100 ships transporting textiles, mostly made by women, the Manila galleon trade from 1571 to 1815 saw a transaction of over 200,000 pieces of silk per year from China for American silver. The process of mechanization of industries in Europe starting after 1750 slowly replaced Asian women in their role as textile producers; hence the fact that women's work has always been the competitive advantage in the Asian textile industry is confirmed by history.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The Maritime Silk Economy of Eurasia between the 10th and 17th centuries can be regarded as perhaps one of the widest-ranging and most complex systems of production, distribution, and circulation during the premodern period, connecting China, India, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe through elaborate maritime networks that revolutionized economies and material cultures in regions and on a global scale. In this extensive commercial framework, textiles proved to be the most constant demand and widely distributed good, influencing the dynamics of trade across various imperial domains, port cities, and maritime networks. However, all the other aspects were obvious, including the involvement of traders, the maritime trade networks itself, and the policies of the different imperial powers, there was another important aspect that was largely invisible. Their efforts in spinning, weaving, dyeing, sericulture, and embroidery created the basis of production without which there could be no sustained process of export. With the growth of maritime trade, the localized production systems were increasingly incorporated into a global economy mediated through intermediaries and ports, thus indicating interplay between local labor and far-flung trade networks. Yet, incorporation into these networks did not translate into the socio-economic development of women, as it led to varied impacts, contingent on hierarchy of regions, social stratification within society, and later on colonial interventions in trade.

In light of these considerations, it becomes evident that the Maritime Silk Economy was more than an economic system geared towards expanding trade; rather, it was a gendered economic system wherein women's labour in the textile industry played a critical role as a driving force behind global trading practices, albeit one that remains historically underrepresented in scholarly discourse. It is true that women played a significant role in the economies of areas like Jiangnan China and



Bengal, production methods in the VOC and East India Company were increasingly controlled and exploitative in nature. The women's contribution to the production of textiles, from Chinese silk and Indian muslin to Southeast Asian batik, was crucial to the movement of such valuable commodities in Eurasian markets, influencing consumption patterns and wealth creation processes, as well as cross-cultural interactions. Women's involvement becomes, therefore, part of the necessary infrastructure of maritime economic development and is intrinsic to the success and growth in production and trade. In effect, the reconsideration of the Maritime Silk Economy from this perspective forces us to rethink conventional views on maritime history that have always been dominated by males, to realize that globalization rested on gendered labor relations of an economically essential yet unequal kind.

### **Contribution of the Study**

The paper reconstructs the narrative of the Maritime Silk Economy from the tenth to the seventeenth century in terms of women's labor in textiles as its underlying structure. The article points out the direct connection between household production of textiles in India, China, and Southeast Asia and maritime trade routes and circulation of commodities through them. The article makes clear the importance of gendered labour systems in textile-driven maritime expansion beyond merchants' initiatives.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study is based on qualitative historical analysis which limits precise numerical verification of production levels wages and trade volumes. It relies on secondary historical sources that may reflect Eurocentric bias and incomplete representation of women's labor. The broad geographical and chronological scope also limits detailed micro level comparisons across regions.

### **Author Contributions**

Anwasha Chattopadhyay conceptualized the research idea, collecting and organizing data, conducting historical analysis, and drafting the manuscript. Dr. Shradha supervised the research, contributed to methodological guidance, validation of sources, and reviewed and edited the final manuscript.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study does not involve human participants, personal data, or any form of clinical investigation; therefore, ethical clearance was not required. All materials used are publicly available and have been appropriately cited in accordance with academic standards. ChatGPT was used solely for grammar correction and sentence reframing, without influencing the original ideas, analysis, or interpretation.

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No external funding was received for this research.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Data Availability**

All data used in this study are obtained from publicly available historical records, academic journals, archival publications, and institutional reports. All sources are properly cited within the manuscript and can be accessed through standard academic databases.

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