

Role of Silk Weavers in Promoting Economic Growth: A Study of Bhagalpur Smart City

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Citation: Khatoon, H. (2026). Role of Silk Weavers in Promoting Economic Growth: A Study of Bhagalpur Smart City. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Commerce, Management & Social Science*, 09(01(II)), 48–56. [https://doi.org/10.62823/IJARCMSS/9.1\(II\).8600](https://doi.org/10.62823/IJARCMSS/9.1(II).8600)

ABSTRACT

Traditional artisanal industries continue to serve as important engines of local economic growth in India by generating employment, sustaining household incomes, and preserving cultural heritage. Among them, the silk weaving sector occupies a distinctive place, especially in Bhagalpur, widely known as the Silk City of India. This study examines the role of silk weavers in promoting economic growth in Bhagalpur Smart City, with particular focus on employment generation, income contribution, and the living and working conditions of weaver households. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining primary data from a structured survey of 120 silk-weaving households and interviews with key stakeholders, along with secondary data from government and industry sources. Recent estimates indicate that Bhagalpur has around 30,000-35,000 handloom weavers, nearly 25,000 active looms, and about 100,000 people engaged in allied activities such as reeling and dyeing. The annual trade value of Bhagalpur silk is approximately ₹100 crore, with nearly 50% linked to exports, highlighting the sector's economic significance. Survey findings reveal that silk weaving contributes 55-70% of total household income for most weaver families. However, the sector is characterized by irregular employment, modest monthly earnings (₹8,000-₹15,000), limited access to formal credit, and low enrolment in welfare schemes. Poor workplace conditions and occupational health issues further constrain productivity. While Smart City initiatives have improved infrastructure, electricity, and connectivity, their direct benefits to traditional weavers remain uneven. Many respondents reported minimal income gains and low awareness of artisan-focused schemes. The study concludes that silk weavers make a substantial yet under-supported contribution to Bhagalpur's urban economy. For inclusive and sustainable growth, policy measures must integrate traditional industries into Smart City planning through skill development, technological upgradation, better market access, and expanded social security coverage.

Keywords: Silk Weaving, Economic Growth, Smart City, Handloom Sector, Weaver Livelihoods.

Introduction

Traditional artisanal industries have long formed the backbone of India's decentralized economic structure by generating employment, sustaining household livelihoods, and preserving region-specific cultural heritage. Among these industries, silk weaving occupies a distinctive and historically significant position. The sector is deeply embedded in the socio-economic fabric of eastern India, particularly in Bhagalpur, which is widely celebrated as the "Silk City of India." For centuries, Bhagalpur has nurtured a vibrant tradition of handloom silk production, especially Tussar silk, earning both national and international recognition.

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Silk weaving in Bhagalpur is not merely a craft activity; it is a major source of urban and semi-urban livelihood generation. The industry is labour-intensive and operates through a complex value chain that includes reeling, spinning, dyeing, weaving, finishing, and marketing. Thousands of artisan households depend directly on handloom weaving, while many more are engaged in allied occupations. This interconnected production network strengthens local markets, stimulates trade activities, and contributes significantly to the city's economic dynamism. The annual trade value of Bhagalpur silk, including domestic sales and exports, underscores its continued economic relevance in an era marked by rapid industrialization and globalization.

Figure 1: Traditional Handloom Weaving Activity in Bhagalpur



Source: <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/features/bihar-handloom-weavers-seek-govt-support-to-revive-dying-art20190417101225/>

In recent years, Bhagalpur's inclusion under the Smart Cities Mission has introduced a new dimension to the city's development trajectory. The Smart City initiative aims to enhance urban infrastructure, improve digital connectivity, promote sustainable mobility, and stimulate economic growth. Such initiatives create potential opportunities for traditional industries like silk weaving by improving transportation networks, electricity supply, digital marketing access, and overall market integration. Enhanced connectivity can reduce transaction costs, expand market reach, and enable artisans to participate more actively in national and global supply chains.

However, the integration of traditional industries within modern urban planning frameworks remains uneven. Despite their substantial economic contribution, many silk weavers continue to face persistent challenges such as irregular employment, low and unstable income, limited access to institutional credit, inadequate social security coverage, outdated technology, and substandard working conditions. Occupational health issues arising from long working hours, poor ventilation, and ergonomic stress further constrain productivity and well-being. Moreover, rising urban living costs under Smart City expansion have increased financial pressures on artisan households, reducing real income gains.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to critically examine the role of silk weavers in promoting economic growth within Bhagalpur Smart City. It explores the extent to which silk weaving contributes to employment generation, household income, and local economic circulation. Simultaneously, it evaluates the living and working conditions of weaver households and assesses whether urban development initiatives have effectively supported this traditional sector. By situating silk weaving within the broader framework of inclusive and sustainable urban development, the study aims to highlight the need for policy measures that integrate traditional industries into Smart City planning while safeguarding Bhagalpur's rich silk heritage.

Objectives

- To examine the contribution of silk weavers to economic growth in Bhagalpur Smart City.
- To assess the living and working conditions of silk weaver households in the study area.
- To analyse the employment pattern, income levels, and access to welfare schemes among silk weavers.
- To evaluate the impact of Smart City development initiatives on the traditional silk weaving sector.

Methodology

The present study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both primary and secondary data, to examine the role of silk weavers in promoting economic growth in Bhagalpur Smart City. Primary data were collected through a structured household survey of 120 silk-weaving households from major weaving clusters in Bhagalpur, selected using purposive sampling. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with cooperative leaders, municipal officials, and industry stakeholders to understand policy impacts and sectoral challenges. Secondary data were drawn from recent government statistics on the handloom and silk sector, including data on cluster size (around 30,000-35,000 handloom weavers and 25,000 looms in Bhagalpur) and annual trade value (₹100 crore annually) from official district sources, underscoring the scale of economic activity in the local silk industry. Quantitative data were analysed using percentage analysis and descriptive statistics, while qualitative information was interpreted thematically to provide deeper insights into the economic conditions, employment patterns, and effects of Smart City development on traditional artisanal livelihoods.

Scale of Employment in the Silk Weaving Sector

Bhagalpur remains one of India's most important silk weaving hubs. According to recent cluster data, there are approximately 30,000-35,000 handloom weavers actively engaged in silk weaving within Bhagalpur city and its surrounding areas, supported by around 25,000 looms in active use. The total silk trade in the region is estimated at about ₹100 crore per annum, with roughly half of this value derived from the export market. Additionally, an estimated 100,000 people are involved in pre-weaving activities such as reeling, spinning, and dyeing, linking thousands more families to the silk value chain. These figures highlight the labour-intensive nature of the sector and its role as a major employment provider in the local urban economy.

Contribution to Household Income

For many households in Bhagalpur, silk weaving constitutes the primary source of livelihood. Most weaver families depend heavily on earnings from weaving and allied activities to meet every day needs, including education, food, healthcare, and housing. The sector's output predominantly sarees, dress materials, and home furnishing fabrics feeds both domestic demand and international exports, thereby infusing income directly into local markets. The multiplier effect of this income supports retail trade, logistics, and service sectors within the city, making silk weaving a significant contributor to local economic activity.

Trade Value and Economic Integration

Bhagalpur silk products enjoy strong market recognition both nationally and abroad. The city's silk cluster contributes about ₹100 crore annually to trade, split roughly equally between domestic and export markets. These products particularly Tassar silk sarees are marketed across major Indian cities and exported internationally, enhancing foreign exchange earnings and reinforcing Bhagalpur's economic integration with broader textile markets. The presence of weaver cooperatives and emerging digital sales channels has also begun to improve market access, although many producers still rely on traditional intermediaries. Strengthened infrastructure and better market linkages can augment these contributions further. To understand the economic scale and structural importance of the silk weaving sector in Bhagalpur, important quantitative indicators relating to employment, production capacity, and trade value are summarized. These indicators highlight the magnitude of livelihood dependence on silk weaving and its contribution to the local economy, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Important Indicators of Silk Weaving Contribution in Bhagalpur

Particulars	Details
Number of handloom weavers	30,000-35,000
Active looms	25,000
People in allied activities (reeling, dyeing, etc.)	100,000
Annual trade value of silk products	₹100 crore
Export share of total trade	50%

Source: District Industries Centre (Bhagalpur) and local silk industry estimates.

The above Table 1 shows the substantial economic contribution of the silk weaving sector in Bhagalpur. The data indicate that approximately 30,000–35,000 handloom weavers are directly engaged in silk production, operating around 25,000 active looms. In addition, nearly 100,000 people are involved in allied activities such as reeling, dyeing, and processing, reflecting the sector's wide employment base.

The annual trade value of silk products is estimated at ₹100 crore, with nearly 50% of the total trade contributed by exports. These figures collectively demonstrate that silk weaving is a major source of livelihood and income generation in Bhagalpur, significantly supporting local employment and contributing to regional economic development.

Housing and Basic Living Conditions

- A significant proportion of silk weaver households reside in congested semi-pucca or pucca houses, often located in traditional weaving clusters within the city.
- Many households combine living and working spaces, resulting in overcrowding and limited privacy.
- Access to basic amenities such as electricity and drinking water has improved under urban development initiatives; however, sanitation facilities remain inadequate for several families.
- Only a limited number of respondents reported access to government housing schemes, indicating low awareness or weak implementation of welfare programs.
- Rising urban land prices and rental costs in Bhagalpur Smart City have further increased the economic pressure on weaver households.

Working Environment and Occupational Health

- Silk weaving is largely home-based, with weavers working 8-10 hours daily, often in poorly ventilated rooms.
- A majority of respondents reported insufficient lighting and ventilation, which adversely affects eyesight and breathing conditions.
- Common occupational health issues include:
 - Eye strain due to prolonged focus on intricate weaving patterns
 - Back pain, neck pain, and joint stiffness caused by long sitting hours
 - Fatigue and stress due to irregular work orders and income insecurity
- Very few weavers had access to regular health check-ups or occupational safety measures.
- Despite the Smart City initiative, no specific interventions were reported for improving ergonomic or health conditions in weaving units.

Access to Social Security and Welfare Support

- Social security coverage among silk weavers remains limited and uneven.
- Less than one-third of surveyed households were enrolled in insurance, pension, or health schemes.
- Many weavers depend on informal credit sources due to poor access to institutional finance, increasing vulnerability to debt.
- Female weavers, who contribute significantly to pre-weaving and weaving activities, face double burdens of domestic and occupational work without adequate social protection.
- Respondents emphasized the need for targeted welfare inclusion, especially under Smart City planning, to protect traditional artisans.

To assess the socio-economic well-being of silk weaver households, the study examined housing quality, workplace conditions, health issues, and access to social security. The summarized survey findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Living and Working Conditions of Silk Weaver Households (Survey Results)

Particulars	Percentage (%)
Pucca / Semi-pucca housing	68%
Combined living and working space	72%
Adequate ventilation at workplace	34%
Working hours (8-10 hours daily)	81%
Reported occupational health issues	64%
Access to social security schemes	29%
Access to formal health facilities	38%

Source: Government of Bihar Handloom & Textile Department and Handloom Census reports (Bhagalpur).

The above Table 2 shows the challenging living and working conditions of silk weaver households in Bhagalpur. Although 68% of respondents live in pucca or semi-pucca houses, a significant 72% use the same space for both living and weaving activities, indicating limited separation between domestic and occupational environments. Only 34% reported having adequate ventilation at their workplace, which may contribute to the high incidence (64%) of occupational health issues. While 81% of weavers work long hours (8–10 hours daily), access to institutional support remains limited, with just 29% benefiting from social security schemes and 38% having access to formal health facilities. Overall, the data reflect vulnerable socio-economic conditions and inadequate workplace infrastructure within the silk weaving community.

Employment Pattern and Nature of Work

- Silk weaving in Bhagalpur is predominantly informal and home-based, with limited contractual security.
- The study reveals that a large proportion of weavers are engaged in irregular or seasonal employment, largely dependent on market demand, availability of raw silk, and orders from traders.
- Many households practice occupational diversification, combining silk weaving with daily wage labour, petty trade, or agricultural work to supplement income.
- Women contribute significantly to pre-weaving activities such as reeling, spinning, and dyeing, yet their work often remains unpaid or underpaid.
- Lack of formal employer employee relationships restrict access to labour benefits such as paid leave, job security, and retirement support.

Income Levels and Economic Vulnerability

- Income from silk weaving forms the primary source of livelihood for most households, contributing between 55% and 70% of total family income.
- Monthly earnings of weaver households largely fall within the ₹8,000-₹15,000 range, indicating modest income levels compared to rising urban living costs.
- Income instability is a major concern due to fluctuating silk prices, delayed payments from intermediaries, and absence of minimum wage protection.
- Households with access to cooperatives or direct market linkages reported relatively higher and more stable earnings.
- Limited savings and high dependency ratios make many families economically vulnerable to health shocks and market downturns.

Access to Welfare Schemes and Institutional Support

- Access to government welfare schemes among silk weavers remains inadequate and uneven.
- Only a small proportion of respondents were enrolled in health insurance, pension schemes, or accident coverage, reflecting gaps in awareness and administrative outreach.
- Institutional credit through banks or cooperatives was accessed by less than one-third of weaver households; many relied on informal moneylenders at high interest rates.
- Several respondents expressed difficulty in meeting documentation requirements and navigating digital application processes.
- The findings indicate a need for cluster-based welfare facilitation centres to ensure better inclusion of weavers under existing social security schemes.

Employment stability, income contribution, and access to institutional support are crucial for evaluating the economic security of weaver households. The key findings related to these aspects are compiled in Table 3.

Table 3: Employment, Income, and Welfare Access among Silk Weavers

Socio-Economic Indicators	Percentage / Income Level
Nature of employment (irregular/seasonal)	62%
Households dependent mainly on silk weaving	74%

Average monthly income	₹8,000-₹15,000
Contribution of silk weaving to total income	55-70%
Access to formal credit	28%
Enrolment in welfare/social security schemes	29%
Women engaged in allied activities	67%

Source: Primary field survey of silk weavers in Bhagalpur (2024-25).

The above Table 3 shows that silk weaving remains the primary livelihood for a significant majority (74%) of households in Bhagalpur, despite 62% reporting irregular or seasonal employment. The average monthly income ranges between ₹8,000 and ₹15,000, with silk weaving contributing 55–70% of total household income, indicating strong economic dependence on the sector. However, financial inclusion remains limited, as only 28% of weavers have access to formal credit and 29% are enrolled in welfare or social security schemes. Notably, 67% of women are engaged in allied activities, highlighting their substantial yet often supplementary role in sustaining household income. Overall, the findings reflect high dependence on silk weaving amid income instability and restricted institutional support.

Infrastructure Development and Market Accessibility

- Smart City initiatives have led to improvements in road connectivity, transport facilities, and urban mobility, which have indirectly supported the movement of raw materials and finished silk products.
- Improved digital connectivity has enabled some weavers and cooperatives to explore online platforms and digital marketing channels.
- However, benefits remain unevenly distributed, as most small-scale and home-based weavers continue to rely on traditional intermediaries.
- Traffic congestion and rising urban pollution in core weaving areas have negatively affected productivity and work efficiency.
- Lack of dedicated artisan zones or upgraded weaving clusters within Smart City planning limits the sector's full integration.

Impact on Employment, Income, and Production

- Urban development has created new commercial opportunities, but it has also increased the cost of living, thereby reducing real income gains for weaver households.
- Survey findings indicate that while a small section of weavers experienced improved earnings due to better market access, the majority reported no significant change in income levels.
- Power supply reliability has improved in some areas, positively affecting power loom operations, though handloom weavers reported minimal direct benefits.
- Rising competition from machine-made textiles and imported silk products continues to pose challenges, despite urban modernization.

Inclusion of Traditional Industries in Smart City Planning

- A key finding of the study is the limited inclusion of silk weaving concerns in Smart City development policies.
- Most respondents were unaware of any Smart City-specific schemes targeting traditional artisans.
- Skill development programs and technological upgradation initiatives have reached only a small fraction of weavers.
- The absence of structured consultation with weaver communities has resulted in policy gaps between urban planning objectives and artisan livelihood needs.
- Integrating silk weaving clusters into Smart City plans could enhance both economic growth and cultural tourism.

To evaluate how urban development initiatives influence traditional livelihoods, the study analysed weavers' perceptions of Smart City benefits. The responses regarding infrastructure, income, and awareness levels are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Impact of Smart City Initiatives on Silk Weavers

Impact of Smart City Initiatives	Respondents (%)
Improved road connectivity benefited work	46%
Better electricity supply for weaving	52%
Access to digital/online markets	21%
Increase in income after Smart City initiatives	24%
No significant economic impact observed	58%
Awareness of Smart City schemes for weavers	19%
Participation in skill/technology programs	17%

Source: Primary field survey of Bhagalpur silk weavers (2024-25).

The above Table 4 presents the findings of the Primary Survey on the impact of Smart City initiatives on silk weavers in Bhagalpur. The data indicate that 52% of respondents experienced better electricity supply and 46% benefited from improved road connectivity, showing moderate infrastructural improvements. However, only 21% reported access to digital or online markets, and just 24% observed an increase in income after the implementation of Smart City initiatives. A significant 58% of weavers stated that they experienced no substantial economic impact, reflecting limited direct financial benefits. Furthermore, awareness of Smart City schemes for weavers remains low at 19%, and only 17% participated in skill or technology development programs. Overall, while basic infrastructure has improved to some extent, the majority of silk weavers reported minimal economic gains and limited engagement with Smart City initiatives.

Findings and Analysis

The findings of the study reveal that silk weaving continues to play a vital yet structurally vulnerable role in promoting economic growth in Bhagalpur, popularly known as the Silk City of India. The analysis is based on primary data collected from 120 silk-weaving households, supported by secondary statistics from district-level sources:

- **Economic Contribution and Employment Generation:** The silk weaving sector demonstrates substantial economic significance in Bhagalpur. With approximately 30,000–35,000 handloom weavers and nearly 25,000 active looms, the sector provides large-scale employment directly and indirectly. Around 100,000 individuals are engaged in allied activities such as reeling, dyeing, spinning, and finishing, reflecting the sector's strong employment multiplier effect.

Survey findings indicate that 74% of households depend primarily on silk weaving as their main source of livelihood. The sector contributes 55–70% of total household income for most respondents, underlining its centrality to the local urban economy. The annual trade value of approximately ₹100 crore, with nearly 50% linked to exports, highlights the integration of Bhagalpur silk into national and global markets.

However, despite this scale of contribution, employment remains largely informal and irregular. About 62% of respondents reported seasonal or demand-based employment, reflecting income instability and vulnerability to market fluctuations.

- **Income Levels and Economic Vulnerability:** The analysis shows that the average monthly income of silk weaver households ranges between ₹8,000 and ₹15,000. Although weaving constitutes the principal income source, earnings remain modest relative to rising urban living costs under Smart City expansion.

Income volatility is driven by fluctuating silk prices, delayed payments from intermediaries, and limited direct market access. Only 28% of respondents reported access to formal credit, compelling many to rely on informal moneylenders. The lack of minimum wage protection and contractual security further aggravates financial insecurity.

Thus, while silk weaving significantly contributes to household sustenance and local economic circulation, its capacity to ensure long-term economic security remains constrained.

- **Living and Working Conditions:** The survey reveals mixed improvements in housing conditions, with 68% residing in pucca or semi-pucca houses. However, 72% of respondents use the same space for both living and weaving activities, indicating overcrowded and ergonomically unsuitable environments.

Only 34% reported adequate ventilation at their workplace, and 64% experienced occupational health problems such as eye strain, back pain, and respiratory discomfort. Long working hours (8–10 hours daily) reported by 81% of weavers further intensifies physical stress.

Access to social security remains limited, with only 29% enrolled in welfare schemes and 38% having access to formal health facilities. These findings suggest that despite their economic contribution, silk weavers operate under precarious socio-economic conditions.

- **Gender Participation:** The study highlights substantial female participation in allied activities, with 67% of women engaged in reeling, spinning, and pre-weaving processes. However, their work often remains under-recognized and underpaid. The dual burden of domestic responsibilities and income-generating activities places additional strain on women workers, indicating the need for gender-sensitive policy interventions.
- **Impact of Smart City Initiatives:** The impact of Smart City development on the silk weaving sector appears moderate and uneven. About 52% of respondents reported improved electricity supply, and 46% benefited from better road connectivity, suggesting positive infrastructural improvements.

However, only 21% gained access to digital or online markets, and merely 24% experienced increased income after Smart City implementation. A significant 58% reported no substantial economic impact. Awareness of artisan-focused schemes remains low (19%), and participation in skill or technology programs is limited to 17%.

These findings indicate that while infrastructure development under the Smart City Mission has created enabling conditions, the direct economic benefits to traditional silk weavers remain limited. The absence of structured inclusion of weaving clusters in urban planning has restricted the sector's integration into the broader development framework.

Overall Analysis

The findings clearly demonstrate that silk weavers make a substantial contribution to employment generation, income circulation, and trade in Bhagalpur Smart City. The sector sustains thousands of households and strengthens the local economy through its labour-intensive value chain.

However, the economic potential of the sector is undermined by irregular employment, modest income levels, inadequate social security, poor working conditions, and limited institutional support. Smart City initiatives have improved basic infrastructure but have not adequately addressed the structural challenges faced by traditional artisans.

Therefore, the analysis underscores the need for inclusive urban planning that integrates silk weaving clusters into Smart City development strategies through targeted welfare inclusion, digital market access, skill development, technological upgradation, and improved occupational health measures. Such integration is essential to transform silk weaving into a sustainable driver of inclusive economic growth in Bhagalpur.

Conclusion

The study determines that silk weaving remains a vital driver of economic growth and livelihood generation in Bhagalpur, sustaining thousands of households directly and indirectly through its extensive production and trade network. The sector contributes significantly to household income and local economic circulation, particularly through its strong domestic and export linkages. However, despite its substantial economic contribution, silk weaving continues to face structural challenges such as irregular employment, modest monthly earnings, limited access to institutional credit, inadequate social security coverage, and poor working conditions. While Smart City initiatives have improved infrastructure, electricity, and connectivity, their direct economic impact on traditional weavers has remained limited and uneven. The findings emphasize that without targeted policy support, skill development, technological upgradation, better market integration, and enhanced welfare inclusion, the long-term sustainability of the sector may remain uncertain. Therefore, integrating silk weaving clusters into inclusive urban planning frameworks is essential to ensure balanced, equitable, and sustainable economic growth in Bhagalpur.

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