

Cotton Textile Industry in Howrah District during Colonial Period

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Abstract

The line between two halves of industrialisation era of 19th century is evident. The first half was dominated by small-scale domestic industries and the second half went in favour of steam powered machines. The weaving industry, especially clothes, takes the most importance in Bengal's economy right after agriculture. The traditional weaving is renowned in both local and foreign field. The Company, foreign and local businessmen invested and directed their own mills and employed labours to produce clothes. Sometimes the handloom weavers borrowed capital from the businessmen and made clothes at home with help of family members. The workers were of three types- (a) someone with small capital who produced with help of family and sold the product themselves, (b) someone who borrows capital beforehand with a promise to supply products at a pre-set price and quality, (c) the capitalist kind who invested and directed their own mills and also employed workers. In this third kind, there was role of third party. In this era, weaving of clothes was considered as small-scale domestic industry. The 'Tantis' and 'Jolas' produced clothes by physically operated looms. Most of the raw cotton, essential for this industry, came from Surat, Doab from north India, southern India and Berar

Keywords: industrialisation, capitalist mills, employed workers.

Introduction

The products of handlooms are more expensive because it takes more time to weave on handlooms. Spinning of cotton was mostly done by women. Women were employed to this job and it was dominated by women. People from all social classes and sections took part in this easily. Much like spinning was for women, the men had the job to weave. But children and women also helped them. The Hindus, Muslims, Tantis and Jolas of Bengal used to weave. Handloom Industry is related to Howrah for a very long time. As described by Cesar Fabric, different kinds of loom share were sold by the traders of Betor Port. He also said that Betor was "a place where merchants sold cloth of loombast of diverse sorts." During the invasion of Maratha, many handloom weavers fled Howrah. Based on their own interest, the East Indian Company set up a place for them at the west part of Ganges in 1758. From Betor to Bartala of Kolkata, Jadabendra Basak of Basak dynasty and Mukunda Ram Seth of Seth Dynasty at Darjipara started new living zone at Gobindapur. Manchester became powerful name in cloth industry after the industrial revolution while Indian industry experienced a downfall. In 1800 the Great Britain imposed heavy excise duty on imported industrial products. While Lancashire and Manchester developed, the Tantis, Farmers, Fishermen of Howrah lost a lot. In 1905 it revived again due to the Swadeshi Movement.

Main Subject Matter

Cotton Textile manufacture was the most flourishing industry of Bengal. Yet the locals never managed to gain any profit from it as the Gomostas (native agents) of Company forced the weavers to accept 'Dadans' which in result deprived the weavers of their bargaining capacity.

The Indian textile industry as well as the England and Europe industries was organized on handicraft basis. Lancashire emerged as a producer of Cotton Textiles at a cheap rate with the help of power driven machinery and imported yard from India. Indian calicos and cotton goods were prohibited in Great Britain and Lancashire goods started flooding in India. As a result, Indian cotton industry started declining after 1820. The industry lost business with Africa, other countries of Asia and also a large part of the Home Market.

The road from handicraft to factory stage wasn't smooth in Indian industry at all. There was not only political issue but also lack of economic help. The Iron, Steel, engineering and machine building industries came prior to the cotton industry in England. So these helped cotton industry to develop with the help of water and steam power driven machines. Indian industry didn't have that in their favour and even the coal mines were not explored before 1714.

At that time India was governed by a foreign body which was totally indifferent to the decay of the local cotton industry and didn't take any step to protect it from foreign competitions. The industry was brought down to ruins by political and economical factors, and weren't replaced by factories in time. Hence it is evident that there was a huge gap between industries of 18th century and the beginning of 19th century.

Since the early days of British administration, the cotton spinning and weaving industry have been in close relation with Howrah. Mr Samuel Clark was employed by the East India Company in Ghosuri from where he wrote, "for the past two years in receiving, packing and screwing paut and sun for England". This goes back to 1796. Mr. James Frieshard also wrote to the Judge and Magistrate to ask him to excuse the attendance of "Cali Prasad Lahory, who has charge of our cotton screws at Sulkeah, where were have just received 4000 maunds from the Board of Trade with orders to begin upon it on Tuesday." The first Indian Cotton mill started working in Bauria in 1817 or in 1822 which was about the same time when Mr. Brightman and Mr. Hogue had cotton screws on the Hoogly. Several more cotton mills were established in Howrah after it was made the terminus of railway. These were mainly situated in Ghosuri and Salkhia. We also find mentions of Mr. Robinson and a Parsi in Ghosuri, Colvin Cowie & Co. and Rushton Brothers in Ramkristapur, Collin Fielman & Co. in Shibpur and Santragachi who owned cotton screws. The following table shows the mills working in 1908 with average number of employees, the Bharat Abhyaday Cotton Mills were known as Ramdayal Cotton Mills till recent times:-

Name	Locality	No. of Operatives.
Bauria Cotton Mills (Old)	Bauria	873
Bauria Cotton Mills (New)	Bauria	686
Ghosuri Cotton Mills	Ghosuri	2465
Victoria Cotton Mills	Ghosuri	523
Bharat Abhyaday Cotton Mills	Ghosuri	520
New Ring Mills	Phuleswar	628
Salkhia Cotton Ginning Factory	Salkhia	95
		Total = 5820

Howrah along with the rest of India also entered the factory industry, which was replacing handicrafts, during the 19th century like everywhere else. The Europeans tried to introduce factory system in many industries and got success in a few. The condition was highly

unfavourable for the growth of mill industry India during 1860 to 1870. Both the Handloom and young mill industries were affected by the high price due to the American Civil War at this period. The cotton boom during this time was the beginning of a new era in India. As a result new conditions and systems were introduced. Right after the trade crisis, came the reckless floating of companies for different purposes which resulted a collapse of all credit. India had never seen this before. During the period 1872-73 there were 18 cotton mills in Bombay Presidency and 2 in Bengal. The crisis was actually favoured cotton industry as it demonstrated the impracticability of various schemes that were introduced during the boom period. It also showed that cotton was the only stable and profitable industry. Hence there was a severe increase in number of mills when the industry stabilized itself post crisis. The increase was most evident in the year 1874-75. Post Franco-German War effects on trade was very considerable in the increase in this Industry which later led to the most important factory industry in India. There were only a few number of looms compared to the number of spindles and a large part of the mills were spinning mills. The production of yarn continued to be the most important feature of this industry for a long time. A large number of workers were employed in another section of this industry which was ginning and pressing factories. The American War played the role of a catalyst in the cotton cultivation which along with improved communication led the way to the use of steam presses and steam gins in the cotton tracts. According to Mr. Rivett-Carnac, cotton presses were used only a little in central provinces. It only increased after 1867 before which most of the cotton was sent to Bombay, unpressed. After introduction the progress was rapid and by 1880 only a small part of the cotton sent to ports was unpressed. Even though it provided occupation to a large number of agricultural labourers, it didn't have a great importance in the Industrial development in India. The main reasons behind it were that it was a seasonal industry and it didn't produce cotton products. It only made raw goods export easier.

The period between 1880 and 1895 was favourable to the agriculturists. Handicrafts had continued to fall and the only two types of industry emerged as vital were factory industry and plantation industry. The 1st one was restricted to a small stature till 1880. During this time Indian factory industry was almost only contained Cotton and Jute. It can also be seen that no new industry showed good progress during this time. The progress of cotton industry was evident during the period 1880-95. Even though the rate of growth was not rapid, it was considerably steady and continuous and there was no great fluctuation during this period. After 1885 the rate became prominent. On this Mr. Graham Clarke said, "The year 1885 seems to have marked a turning point in the upward climb, and with the great improvements in cotton mill machinery introduced into India that time, such as ring-spinning and the revolving top-flat card, the mills began to make finer yarns and cloth of more variety and to reach out after new markets for their goods. In the five years from 1885 to 1890 there were added fifty mills which marks the time of greatest expansion. There was a fairly good business and health expansion up to about 1897."

Spinning is a more important factor in industry than weaving. Studies show that there was a growth in number of spindles compared to looms in the first 10 years of this period while the last 5 years show the opposite. The number of looms tends to increase fast and we observe the same here too. At the first stage of the industry the most profitable part was to compete against Lancashire in coarse yarns which became successful and then the spinning shed was a very important section of the industry. It can be concluded that the reason behind success was mainly 'geological'. Regardless, it's above any doubt that the exports grew in a rapid and continuous pace during this decade.

The pace, in which the industry was progressing, came to a detour during 1895 to 1900. Industries like this which depend on the demand in the country, are likely to suffer while

agriculture collapses. Among the larger industries in India, the Coal industry was the least affected by the agricultural collapse. On the other hand, the Cotton industry products such as woven goods had only Indian market and a great portion of mill produced yarn went to the Indian handloom weavers. These weavers mainly produced coarse clothes which were used by the poor and the peasants. When the economic depression hit India, the 1st choice to cut expenses was clothing and hence it affected the weavers and in turn, the mills also. It goes without saying that during the two famines, the cotton industry suffered a severe trade depression.

The great bubonic plague arrived in India in 1896. Even though Indians were no stranger to that epidemic, yet this time it's terrible form frightened people to escape cities including a large part of the cotton industry labours. The plague was preceded and followed by two famines which also affected the industry. In 1902 the American speculation in cotton made its price go sky-high which made the industries and mills unable to get cotton for Indian market which depended on coarse clothes hence having a great unprofitable season. Indians supplied cotton to China in bulk which was affected during this time which led to a great suffers in the spinning industry. Despite having great setbacks during 1896 and 1905 which can be termed and recovery period, it was evident that the industry had a steady growth rate during this time. There was a significant rise in the number of spindles compared to the number of looms during this period. The growth in the number of spindles served to the overstocking in the following years of the China market and the falling off in the demand from that quarter.

Around 1905 when the depression ended, the prosperity of the industry boomed while the raw cotton price came to normal. The growth was fabulous till 1907 when the world trade depression arrived. Although, despite the depression the industry maintained its inclination towards growth and in the year 1914 it was still a prosperous industry.

The two main traits that could be seen in the progress of the industry are as follows, (i) the growth was higher in the number of looms as compared to spindles and it was steady. (ii) the cotton product manufacturers produced fine class of goods. The reason behind the prosperity of the weaving industry is easily found in the vicious fluctuations in the last two decades. At the start of the cotton industry, the market was very large despite the industry itself being very small. The industry followed the road through which profits were easily gained. The profit of loss of the mills had no effect on the payment of the agents. During the last decade of 19th century, foreign market expansion of coarse yarns had been rather slow. Because of the fully captured home market, the industrialists had to look for new alternatives for more profits by 1900. As Lancashire had not yet entered the home market, it was up for grab. It was evident that there was no improvement in the export after the 1890's. hence the industry turned itself towards the home market more with the production of finer yarns and piece-goods as it seemed the more ideal field. Development of cotton industry in Howrah district during 1914 to 1939: After the breaking out of World War-I, cotton industry lost its prosperity though it was for a very short time and as soon as the price of general goods rose, the industry started to make profit again. The situation was bad for both spinning and weaving industries during the 1st part of the war, although by 1916 started its journey to prosperity again. With higher revenue duties and higher freights, it was almost impossible for Lancashire to penetrate Indian industry which widened the demand of the home products. The industry also started exporting some of the neighbour countries such as Persia, East Africa, Mesopotamia etc. The number of looms increased by about 15% during 1914 and 1920 while the number of spindles remained same.

The growth in the cotton industry was much longer than the other industries in post-war era. The demand of cloth genuinely went up which helped in the boom. During the war, the production of handlooms decreased. In the pre-war era, the markets for Indian and English goods were mainly

separate, the expansion of the industry after war drove it to produce finer cloth and brought it to competition. The main trait that this growth showed was, the relative growth in number looms was higher than the growth in the number of spindles. Even though the productive capacity progressed steadily, the production itself fluctuated from year to year. The change in the distribution of production units and production capacity was seen in that time.

At the beginning of the industry, it produced coarse yarns for domestic and foreign use. Then it met the internal demand and then at final stage it turned into an exporter of cloth. These changes came through various stages- (i) increasing number of looms to spindles and complex spinning and weaving mills coming out as dominant ones (ii) the loss of foreign markets for yarn (iii) domestic production of yarn and cloth getting diversified (iv) the amount of import of foreign cloth into India becoming low (v) widening of foreign market for export of Indian cloth.

The industry was hit by world depression in two different ways. The domestic demand decreased because of depressed situation of agricultural area, and the other was foreign competition especially from the Japanese. Several inside political events strengthened this effect on the industry. In 1930, the Swadeshi movement got stronger and more united and it also managed to include mill associations and owners in their movement. Their combined efforts helped towards boycotting the imported foreign cloth or yarn. The mills associated with Swadeshi movement, had authorized labels attached to their products. It was discovered by The Tariff Board in 1932 that Swadeshi movement caused a sharp fall in the in imports of foreign cloth during 1930-31. Hence it helped to boost the production of Indian mills greatly in area of finer goods during 1930-32. It also helped to balance with the protective duties to prevent any more fall in the prices of Indian origin of medium or fine cloth goods.

In years 1928-29, India was uniting more towards its purpose. The striking committees weren't worse than the early unions. The trade unions started to grow in numbers when the earlier ones had success with some series of strikes while the trade cycle was uprising. But most trade unions disappeared soon after a short period and reduced to very low level of memberships and funds. The All-India Trade Union Congress was formed in 1920. The unity of various sub unions such as railwaymen, seamen, post and telegraph workers and other government servants served as its strength. Cotton industry workers were the main units of it. The strikes in the period were amazing because of their characteristics such as their long period and the involvement of large number of workers in them. Most of the strikes were based upon wages and rationalization. The entry of the Communists in union leaderships was another feature in these years which caused more extreme actions in conduct of strikes and also led to the split of the All-India Trade Union Congress at the end of 1929. According to the Royal Commission on Labour, "Although workers may have been influenced by persons with nationalist, communist or commercial ends to serve we believe that there has rarely been a strike of any importance which has not been due entirely or largely to economic reasons." The depression was rising while the trade union was movement was losing its strength. The industry employers were restoring retrenchment and wage cuts and the workers were helpless against them. The harsh and unsympathetic reaction from government towards the labours were largely based on the recommendation of the Royal Commission on Labour. These adverse conditions birthed the idea of Provisional Autonomy.

Since 1919, the erosion in world labour caught attention to the working conditions of labours in India. The Labour Conference at Washington adopted the draft conventions and draft recommendations which suggested a necessary revision of labour legislation. Indian government could not avoid it since India was one of the original members of League of Nations.

The prices started falling after 1927; it stayed at its lowest between 1929 and 1933 and no significant growth was visible before 1937. Workers were the ones who suffered most during

this fall of price. The security of employment decreased along with their wages. It's hard to determine the exact outcome of this situation, but it can be said that it was only trivial because the majority of the workers were already living at the margin of subsistence. The debt of most of them confirms it. The only exceptions were mine and plantation labours. They were mostly recruited from tribal or remote parts of India where moneylenders were not available easily. Most of the labours in industries came from the rural part of the country. Most had their link with their root unbroken which is a conclusive proof of the non-emergence of a permanent labour force. The labours often visited their home village in occasions like, marriage, illness, birth of a child or any major social activities. It was obvious that it costed the industry to an extent but the Royal Commission on Labour decided that it was better to let them have their connection with their village.

The cotton industry in Howrah and overall Bengal was rather a late bloomer. The first cotton mill in Bengal was established in 1905. According to Lokanathan, "the main reason why the cotton industry did not develop was probably the concentration of the jute industry." There were numerous different reasons which can be found in the history pages. Bengal was rich with its unused resources like jute, coal and tea which attracted the European entrepreneurs. The lack of local raw materials was also responsible to certain extent which failed to attract the non-Indian industrialists. The first cotton textile industry of Bengal was a product of pure indigenous Bengali enterprise, driven by Swadeshi movement. The growth of this industry was trivial till the World War I. It was also granted protection in 1926 and it remained protected for 21 years until it was lifted in 1947 due to its considerable progress during the period.

Conclusions

The import was totally stopped from Japan and other countries during World War II. During this time large orders were received from allied armies and the industry met both the civilian and military demand with its maximum capacity of production. The production reached its peak during 1944. After partition, the Indo-Pak trade deadlock disrupted the supply of raw cotton, because 40% of the undivided Indian supply came from the Punjab and Sind provinces. In later years the domestic supply as well as imports from foreign countries such as Egypt, Sudan and U.S.A. was increased to meet the demand.

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