

# The Industrial Revolution and its Impact on India: A Study of Decline of Hand-Woven Textiles and Weaving

Sudipta Sen

Ph.D. Scholar, Deptt. of Islamic History and Culture  
Dhaka University, Bangladesh

## *ABSTRACT*

Before coming of Europeans and the establishment of Rule of East India Company in the country, India had its own independent economy and its industrial products had global market. Although agriculture was the main source of public livelihood and official revenue, however, multiple kinds of manufacturing operations were taking place in the country. India had emerged as a fine centre of manufacturing of hand woven textiles and weaving. Hand woven textiles were manufactured by handlooms. Weaving was a traditional art in which hands and ordinary tools were used in place of machine. The Indian textiles were renowned worldwide for their quality and craftsmanship. Admittedly it represented a significant cultural heritage and provided economic livelihood for millions. But with the origin and development of Industrial Revolution 1760-1830 in England and latter on in European Countries, it crippled Indian hand woven textiles and weaving. The study, therefore, explores and examines the impact of Industrial Revolution (1760-1830) on India with special reference to decline of Weavers and Hand-Woven Textiles in the Country.

**Keywords:** *Industrial Revolution, Textiles, Weaving, Cotton, British.*

### **Introduction:**

Over 5000 years to the Harappa civilization, Indian Weaving and Hand Woven Textiles were renowned globally while Mughal period making a golden age of luxury weaving. In traditional system of Indian weaving vertical and horizontal threads were beautifully knit together for making of fine and beautiful fabric. It involved intricately interfacing cotton, silk, and wool yarn on traditional looms to create textiles. It ranged from fine muslin to rich, zari-bordered fabrics etc. There were many techniques of Indian weaving like Jamdani, Ikat, Banarasi, Kanchipuram, Khadi etc. Jamdani was a delicate, fine muslin textile from Bengal with intricate, hand-inserted motifs. Ikat was a complex resist-dye technique (e.g. Patola in Gujrat, Pochampally in Telengana) where threads were dyed before weaving. A luxurious silk, often with gold and silver zari work was called Banarasi as it had its origin from Varanasi. Heavy silk sarees from

Tamil Nadu known for contrasting borders and temple patterns defined as Kanchipuram. Admittedly, hand-woven textiles were the finished, artisanal products created by hand, whereas weaving was the general process of interlacing threads to make fabric. Hand-woven items were crafted on mutual looms without electricity or industrial automation, offering unique textures of cultural value, while weaving can range from hand operated looms to industrial machine production. In short hand-woven textiles were specific handcrafted fabrics. Weaving is the overarching, technical process of creating any fabric by intersecting warp and weft yarns. It was known to the world and profoundly benefitted Indian traders and rulers, Bengal was much more benefitted by increasing export of textiles and employment was available at some places to the locals. (Kumar 1983:407). According to H.H. Wilson, "the

cotton and silk goods of India, up to 1813, could be sold for a profit in the British market, from 50 to 60 per cent lower than those fabricated in England".(quoted in Sharma1951:512-513) In fact, before the advent of the British, India was far renowned for her exquisite handicrafts, particularly textiles: calicoes, muslins and shawls. These continued to flourish under the patronage of princes, and the support of the guilds and democratically organized village communities. (Sharma1951:512, for details see Dutt1979:84-91)

### **Purpose of Study:**

As the Age of Industrialization was a period of social and economic changes that transformed a human group from an agrarian society into an industrial society, the present study attempts to explore the impact of the Industrial Revolution (1760-1830) especially on hand woven and weaving industries in India. The decline of the weaving industry had a devastating impact on weavers and on their dependants. Many were forced to give up their traditional livelihood and find work in other industries. Many others migrated to other parts of the country in search of work. The decline of the weaving industry also hurt the Indian economy. It is traced and assessed how Weavers, who had once been a vital part of the Indian economy, found themselves struggling to compete with the new machine-made goods and ultimately migrated to others parts of India in search of livelihood.

### **Methodology:**

The study is mainly based on published authored and edited books on Economic History of India. Important facts and materials have also been extracted from various research papers published in journals and proceedings. Writings and reports by noted Indian and foreign scholars available on Google are included in sources that made available data and facts for tracing flourishing status of weaving and hand woven textiles in India before the occurrence of the Industrial Revolution in England (1760-1830).

### **Literature Review:**

There is no dearth of edited and authored books on History of Modern India and Economic History of India, but impact of Industrial Revolution in England 1760-1830 on Weaving and Hand Woven Textiles in India is not traced and examined properly. Sridhar Pandey (1978), R.Palme Dutt(1979), G.Kaushal (1979),L.M.Roy (1986), Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (1990), A.C. Banerjee (1992), Dhanpati Pandey (1994,2016) Girish Mishra(1997), Egnesh Thakur (2003),Abha Tiwari (2008), Bipan Chandra(2009),Ishwari Prasad (2016),Sailendra Nath Sen(2017),Ramchandra Pradhan (2017), L.P.Mathur(2025) and other scholars wrote in brief on the Weaving and Hand Woven Textiles in India but not discussed impact of the Industrial Revolution in England (1760-1830) on Weaving and Hand-Woven Textiles in India. K.S.Gill(1993),A.K.Mittal(2003),Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2004),Bipan Chandra(2009), Suranjan Chatterjee & Sidhartha Guha Ray(2015) and Sailendra Nath Sen (2017) are noted Indian scholars along with noted three authors-R.C.Majumdar, H.C. Raychaudhuri and K.K.Datta 1946, but in all their writings there is short or no discussion of the subject matter properly in Indian context.

### **Industrial Revolution and its Effects on Indian Handicrafts and Weaving Industries**

In view of global changes caused in spheres of technology, production, marketing, trade relations etc. by the Industrial Revolution (1760-1830) , scientifically it was the "transformation in the method of production and transportation through the general substitution of power-driven machinery for hand labour."(Riker1935:412)It brought about a lot of changes in the different European countries(Nehru1934:346,355) .It not only adversely affected the political life of the Indians but also exploited them economically as it gradually ruined "very advanced" (Nehru1934:349)Indian weaving and handicrafts. As a result of Industrial Revolution, the different European countries especially England, the country where it first occurred,began to

manufacture a large number of things and sent them to the world markets. As politically India was under British supremacy, the British first of all began to exploit India thereby disturbing the whole economic structure of the country. In this context the words of John Sullivan are remarkable, "Our system acts much like a sponge, drawing up all the good things from the banks of the Ganges, and squeezing them down the banks of the Thames." (quoted in Mittal2003:207) It finally led to severe economic exploitation of India (Prasad1979:199-200) and destroyed Indian weaving and handicrafts. In this background Salisbury had to say that "As India must be bled the bleeding should be done judiciously." (quoted in Mittal2003:208) It is to be noted that before the occurrence of the Industrial Revolution (1760-1830), the Indian artists and craftsmen used to manufacture some very superior qualities of goods. These goods were in great demand in different parts of global market. (Bhattacharyya2007:78) But as a result of the Industrial Revolution the European countries began to manufacture their own articles on a large scale. The export of Indian articles, therefore, suffered a lot and gradually lost its global market. In quinquennium 1854-1859 imports into India (Rs.15.37 crores) were nearly four times higher during 1834-1839 (Rs.4.97 crores) (Bhattacharyya 2007:69-70) In order to sell their own articles in India, the British began to discourage the production of local articles in the country. The various artists and craftsmen were harassed in all possible ways. It is sad some of them were put behind the bars while the hands of others were cut off. In certain cases such families were renowned for the production of some specific articles. But they were completely scrapped off on one reason or the other. Heavy taxes were imposed on their articles so that they could not compete in the global market. It is rightly observed that "As a result of these measures the once flourishing handicrafts and cottage industries of India began to vanish like dew drops." (Kundra1976:286) According to a noted scholar Tara Chand, "The Company manipulated prices to the detriment of the artisans; it oppressed the weavers

and followed other restrictive policies which ruined Indian industries, particularly the cotton industry of Bengal". (Chand2020:266). As William Bolts observed in 1767, "the whole inland trade of the country, as at present conducted, and that of the country's investment for Europe in a more particular degree, has been one continued scene of oppression: the baneful effects of which are severely felt by every weaver and manufacturer in the country, every article produced being made a monopoly in which English with banyans and clack gomashtras, arbitrarily decide what quantities of goods each manufacturer shall deliver and the prices he shall receive for them." (quoted in Chand2020:266)

Moreover, all the existing taxes on the import of British articles were dropped so that the articles manufactured in England should sell at cheaper rates in India. When the British articles began to sell at cheaper rates than the Indian goods, the people began to buy cheap articles. As a result of these impositions, the Indian handicrafts and weaving industries could not compete with British factories and gradually declined. A large number of artists and craftsmen formerly engaged in the different cottage industries and handicrafts were rendered unemployed. It is rightly noted by Kundra that "It became quite impossible for them to work under the pressing circumstances and to compete in foreign markets. Hence they were forced to give up their professions and it became quite impossible for them to make both ends meet." (Kundra1976:286) The noted scholar Kundra further pointed out that "When manufactured goods from Europe began to pour in large quantities and export of Indian goods was reduced to almost nil, the hoarded wealth of India began to pour in foreign markets and slowly India became poor. For almost everything whether big or small, we began to depend on others. Soon European goods of different qualities including those of woolen, cotton and silken cloth, watches, cameras, glass-wares, toys, paper, stationery, cigarettes, bicycles, motor-cycles etc. began to pour in India and its wealth began to flow to other countries. Soon

India, which was once a very rich country, became intolerable and desperate. They had now to suffer innumerable difficulties as they had no other means of livelihood and hunger was lurking at their door.”(Kundra1976:287) Another noted Indian scholar S.R.Sharma quoted the observation of J.L.Hammond (1925:185-186), “Heavy duties were placed upon Indian cottons and silks in the Home tariff ,and when the Indian market, hitherto the monopoly of the East India Company ,was thrown open in 1813 ,the duties imposed on cotton goods entering India were merely nominal. In 1831 a petition was presented from natives of Bengal, complaining without success of the British duty of 10 per cent on manufactured cottons, and 24 per cent on manufactured skills. The effect of political control ,combined with the inventions, was seen in the figures of our trade with India. In 1815,800,000 yards of British cotton cloth was imported in India, in 1830,45,000,000 yards.( quoted in Sharma 1948:387) British Parliamentary Papers (1814-1856) revealed gradual increase in export of raw materials and decrease in export of Indian textiles as noted below:

Sl.	Year	Cloth exported India to Britain	Cloth imported to India to Britain
1.	1814	12,66,608 Gaj	8,16,208 Gaj
2.	1821	5,34,495 Gaj	191,38,726 Gaj
3.	1828	4,22,504 Gaj	4,28,22,077
4.	1835	3,06,068 Gaj	5,17,77,277

*(Quoted in Mittal2003:197.)*

According to an estimate between 1815 and 1835,the export of Indian cotton textiles to Britain fell from 53 % to 11% of total British textile imports. “The mechanism of making purchases”, rightly observed by Tara Chand, “of Indian goods and providing the Company’s investments in India was so contrived as to result in oppression and in the “defrauding of the poor weaver.”, the once flourishing industrial towns were depopulated and the artisans diverted from their traditional occupations into agriculture in order to find

employment as wage labourers. (Chand 2020 :266,268). The observation of Governor-General Lord William Bentinck (1828-1835) was remarkable, The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India.”(quoted in Pradhan2017:102). Admittedly the Indian weavers had once been a vital part of Indian economy, but after the Industrial Revolution, they found themselves struggling to compete with the new machinery made goods.

The monopoly of East India Company on trade and rise of factory system in Britain were main factors that contributed to the decline of weaving and hand-woven industries in India. The Company Sarkar used its political powers to force weavers to sell their goods at low prices. Moreover, it also restricted the export of Indian textiles. It is to be noted that factories in Britain were able to produce cloth much more cheaply than weavers could ,and they soon flooded the Indian markets with their goods. So the weaving and hand-woven industries began to decline producing devastating impact on weavers in India. Many weavers were forced to give up their traditional livelihood and found work in another industries. Many others migrated to other parts of the country in search of work for subsistence. In brief, the arrival of machinery ended the Indian domestic system and saw the manufacture of textiles move from home to the factory. Textile workers, skilled craftspeople were replaced by unskilled workers who were employed after the looms’ machines. In fact, the Industrial Revolution was significantly responsible for the decline of weaving and hand-woven industries in India. But it was not in isolation as it created a context of economic competition that systematically dismantled traditional industrial base of the country. The competition was also coupled with discriminatory British prices. It had long-lasting consequences as it mainly contributed to economic stagnation and gradually transformed India into a supplier of raw materials for British industries.

## Conclusion:

Thus during the days of Industrial Revolution(1760-1830) the Indian weavers faced several challenges and found themselves in a tough commercial competition with political and administrative torture and exploitation. Soon after the battles of Plassey 1757 and Bakxar 1764,the Company developed a system of management and control to eliminate competition, control costs and ensure undisturbed supply of cotton and other goods to India. As pointed out, this done through a series of steps, including eliminating existing traders and brokers connected with the weaving and hand-woven textiles. These steps led establishing a more direct control over weavers. It also prevented Company weavers from dealing with other buyers through advances. The Company began exporting large quantities of cheap, machine-made goods to India, which led to a decline in the demand for Indian textiles. The weavers also faced a shortage of raw materials, as the British began to export more cotton from India to its factories in England. The weavers, regularly harassed by the Company agents called Gomashtras, were forced to buy raw cotton at high prices while sell manufactured goods at low prices. Even then they could not compete with machine made goods imported to India from England. The people were attracted by the beauty and low price of machine made goods. These factors led to a decline in the weaving industry in India. The weavers also faced several social challenges as they often moved to already overburdened agricultural land. It led to the extinction of several specialized skills. Moreover, they were often treated badly by the British, and they were forced to work long hours for low wages. The weavers also had to deal with the stigma of being associated with a declining industry. Tara Chand rightly observed that “The history of the early period of British rule in India is thus a sordid tale of vandalism, plunder ,oppression and destruction of Indian handicrafts and manufactures.”(Chand2020:268)

## References:

1. Bhattacharyya.Dhires 2007.A Concise History of Indian Economy,Progressiv Publishers, Kolkata
2. Bolts,William.1772.Considearions on Indian Affairs;Particularly Respecting the Present State of Bengal and its Dependencies,J. Almon, London, p-191.
3. Chand,Tara.History of Freedom Movement in India,Vol.1,Publications Division,New Delhi. 2020
4. Dutt.R.Palme1979.India Today, Manisha Granthalaya, Cacutta
5. Hammond.J.L.1925.The Rise of Modern Industry, Methuen & Co.Ltd., London
6. Kumar.Dharma,Meghnad Desai.eds.1983The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol.II, The Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
7. Kundra. D.N.1976.History of India,Gur Das Kapur & Sons (P) Ltd, Educational Publishers, Delhi
8. Mathur.L.P.2025.Adhunik Bharat ka Arthik Itihas,Publication Scheme,Jaipur
9. Mittal.A.K.2003.Adhunik Bharat ka Rajnitik evam Sanskritik Itihas,1707-1950, Sahitya Bhavan Publications, Agra
10. Nehru.J.L.1934.Glimpses of World History, Penguin Books, London
11. Pradhan, Ram Chandra.2017. Raj se Swaraj, Prabhat Paperbacks,New Delhi.
12. Prasad,Sureshwar1979.Visva-Sabhayata ka Itihas, Students' Friends, Patna
13. Riker.T.W.1935.A Short History of Modern Europe, The Macmillan Company, New York
14. Sharma.S.R.1948.A Brief Survey of Human History Karnatak Publishing House, Bombay; 1951.The Making of Modern India,Orient Longmans Ltd. Bombay.

