

THE WEAVING INDUSTRY IN INDIA.**Its past, present, and future.***

With the rapid Economic changes which have been taking place in India from the beginning of the present century a prominent tendency is discernible towards thinking out various ways and means for developing the indigenous industries. Among these, one that carries perhaps the best weight and commands our most anxious consideration is the question of the weaving industry.

From the earliest days of which History has got very hazy records, India was cherishing under her peaceful bosom many industrial activities of note and prominence. "At a time, when the West of Europe, the birth-place of the modern industrial system, was inhabited by uncivilised tribes, India was famous for the wealth of her rulers and for the high artistic skill of her craftsmen."

The excellent progress and improvement of the Indian weavers in the old Hindu times *i.e.* up to the 10th century A. D. is borne out by the testimony of such foreign travellers as Megasthenes, Hienthsang and others. "The skill of the Indians," says Professor Weber, "in the production of delicate woven fabrics, ••••• has from early times, enjoyed a world-wide celebrity." There is evidence that Babylon traded with India in cotton goods and other merchandise even as early as 3000 B. C. Mummies in Egyptian tombs, which have been roughly calculated to be not later than 2000 B. C. have been found wrapped in Indian muslin of the finest quality. During the infancy of European civilization, when Rome was the mistress of the western world, there was a very large consumption of Indian manufactures, especially of woven goods; in Rome, This fact is further confirmed by the elder Pliny who complained that vast sums of money were annually absorbed by commerce with India. The muslins of Bengal were known to the Greeks under the name of *Gangetika*. Thus we may safely conclude that in our country the arts of cotton-spinning and cotton-weaving were in a high state of proficiency even as early as 2000 B. C. It is a curious thing to note that cotton-weaving was introduced into England only as late as the seventeenth century. History furnishes us with abundant testimony which goes to prove

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that at the date of the invasion of Alexander the Great in the 4th Century B. C., as also for centuries before it, the people of India enjoyed a high degree of Industrial prosperity which continued to the breaking up of the Mogal Empire in the eighteenth century A. D.

In the middle ages Venice, the great Commercial centre of the West, carried on, for sometime, a considerable silk-trade with India; and later on Genoa also followed in the footprint of Venice. Marco Polo came to India and he has also left us a Commercial record of those days.

The incessant foreign invasions and turmoils which took place in India just on the eve of the Muhammadan conquest, greatly hampered the industries of the country. But the firm establishment of the Mogal Empire by Akbar in the middle of the 16th Century A. D. fully revived the industrial activities of the country.

The weaving industry, along with many other important branches of manufacture, attained perhaps the highest culmination in the palmy days of the easy Mogal Emperor Shah Jahán. Bernier, a foreign traveller, who visited his Court, has left us a record of his travels in this country from which we know how warm and sincere were his praises of Indian manufactured goods, chiefly of fine embroidered linen-weaving. Tavernier, another foreign traveller, who came to India about the same time, marvels how such fine silks and embroidered muslins can be produced by human hands. Such is the beautiful picture which the Indian weaving industry presented about four hundred years ago. The patronage of one of the richest and perhaps one of the most powerful Courts of the then civilised world, sufficient supply of food-materials at the disposal of the people, the presence of a noble competition among the workers themselves and many other favourable Economic circumstances of those days served to bring the Indian industries to the highest pinnacle of glory and perfection.

During the greater part of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Arabs carried on a large trade with India in cotton and silk goods and during the latter half of the 16th century the Dutch, who then became the masters of the sea-borne trade, took away from India woven goods of both silk and cotton, which for a considerable period, controlled the European market for textiles and finer articles of dress.

When we have been considering the weaving industry of our country, we should not lose sight of the fact that almost the entire work of the whole country was managed by Cottage-industries through hand-loom and manual spinning implements: although it cannot be denied that there

existed several important centres of weaving round important towns like Dacca, Delhi, Murshidabad, and also the modern Malda then known as Goûr which also became one of the chief towns of Bengal where silk-goods were produced to perfection.

It was the reputation of this and other industries of 17th century India that lured the merchants of the West known as the East India Company to trade with this country. The historian Murray says, "Its fabrics the most beautiful that human art anywhere produced, were sought by merchants at the expense of the greatest toils and dangers." (*History of India, P. 27*). We have before hinted that the Dutch and the Portuguese merchants were trading in Indian fabrics. Now, the merchants of England viewed their trade with an eye of jealousy and formed the East India Company in 1600.

"At the end of the Seventeenth Century," says Lecky, "great quantities of cheap and graceful Indian calicoes, muslins and chintzes were imported into England and they found such favour that the woollen and silk manufacturers were seriously alarmed. Acts of Parliament were accordingly passed in 1700 and 1721 absolutely prohibiting the employment of Indian calicoes with a few specified exceptions." (*Lecky's History of England in the Eighteenth century*.) Up to the middle of the 18th century, India was producing the finest woven goods. When Clive entered Murshidabad he highly praised the wealth and resources of the people. At an early period of the East India Company's administration, British weavers had begun to be jealous of the Bengal weavers, whose silk fabrics were imported into England, and so not only were Indian manufacturers shut out from England, but, as Mr. Romesh Chandra Dutt says, "a deliberate endeavour was made to use the Political power obtained by the East India Company to discourage the manufactures of India. In their letter to Bengal dated the 17th March, 1769, the Company desired that the manufacture of raw silk should be encouraged in Bengal, and the manufactured silk-fabrics should be discouraged. And they also recommended that the silk winders should be forced to work in the Company's factories and prohibited from working in their own homes."

Such a tendency on the part of the ruling power and the subsequent regulations of the Government to unhinge the weaving industry of this land, gave a death-blow to the weavers: and what is more to be lamented, very exorbitant duties were laid on Indian Cotton manufactures in England. For calicoes and flowered muslins of the value of £100,

There was laid a tax of £80 to £84 and even on raw Cotton a tax of 16 shillings was laid on every 100 lbs. The Indian weaving industries suffered under the burden, but the charges were not removed or lessened until they had practically died out.

"In about 1780", says Sir Henry Cotton, "the whole Commerce of Dacca was estimated at one crore of rupees. In 1787 the exports of Dacca muslin to England amounted to 30 lakhs of rupees. In 1812 they ceased altogether." Such was the rapid decay of the weaving industry.

India tried, in spite of all prohibitions and restrictive duties, to continue her export business to foreign countries. Mr. Romesh Chandra Dutt, in his *Economic history of British India*, observes:—"In the first four years of the 19th century six to fifteen thousand bales of cotton piece-goods were annually shipped from Calcutta to the United Kingdom. The figure rapidly fell down in 1813. It had a sudden rise in 1815. But after 1820 the manufacture and cotton piece-goods declined steadily—never to rise again."

With the fall of the textile industries of India foreign goods began exclusively to control the Indian cloth-market, which was further facilitated by the nominal duties which were put upon cotton goods from England. Another circumstance crippled our home industries still more. The steam-engine and the power-loom were perfected in England and it was impossible for the Indian weavers to cope any more with the rapid growth of the English weavery.

These are the main causes which brought about the downfall of Industrial India and made it chiefly an agricultural country.

The darkest age of the Indian industries continued up to the greater part of the nineteenth century, from which time, although exports to foreign countries were out of the question, India was again beginning to do something in the way of industrial activities.

"In Bengal," says the *Indian Industrial Commission of 1916-18*, "the hand-loom industry assumed considerable proportions in the 1st half of the 19th century, and, as late as 1850, the value of the manufactures exported exceeded that of raw jute. But it was not until 1855 that the first machine-spinning was erected at Rishra near Serampore, followed after four years, by the first power-loom factory at Baranagore just outside Calcutta. In 1881, 5000 power-looms were at work in Bengal; in 1891, 8000; in 1901, 16000; and in 1911, 33000 in 59 mills, while the latest figures available (1916-17) show 71 mills running, with 39400 looms." Thus we are in a position to find out that from the latter

part of the last century jute and cotton manufactures have been making such progress as it not quite unworthy of our notice in the present discussion. A more detailed statement showing the growth of cotton manufactures within the last 30 years or so, will I think, not be out of place here.

There were only 58 Cotton-mills in the whole of this country in 1878. This number rose to 130 in 1892 and the same on the 31st of March 1908 was 224 with 65741 looms and 5764346 spindles.

With the beginning of the present century, efforts are being made to conduct the Indian industry on modern scientific lines—which spirit had its origin in several historical and national evolutions and circumstances of the time.

The rise of Japan from an insignificant position to a grand national status after the Russo-Japanese War, a close study of the industrial history of the United Kingdom, America and Germany, the germination of a new national feeling in the Indian mind that India, which once supplied Europe with the best shawls, carpets and cotton fabrics should not be a helpless customer of the West and also the healthy idea that no material improvement is possible unless our trades and industries are conducted on larger scales and in the modern scientific fashion—all these propelling factors of nationalism combined with the new forces of the twentieth century, brought about a partial Renaissance in the land which subsequently culminated in *Swadeshism* during the first few years of the present century.

In the enthusiasm of *Swadeshism* men's eyes turned from the professions to business, of which one was weaving as was evidenced by Messrs. Cumming and Gupta. The businesses were entirely managed by the Indians. Such a warm enthusiasm and a sense of genuine regeneration was in the air that, in the last fifteen years, looms have increased by 150 per cent. and spindles by 72 per cent. Of the spindles nearly 72 per cent. were in Bombay, 7 per cent. in Bengal and about 5 per cent. in Madras; of the looms as many as 80 per cent. were in Bombay. It is superfluous to say that Bombay takes the lead in this industry and is largely providing the sister-presidencies with the country-made cloth they require. We find from statistics that Cotton mills employed in 1907-08 nearly 2½ crores of hands besides one lakh of persons engaged in cotton cleaning and other minor employments as against one crore and twenty thousand employed in the textile industry in 1892-93. The capital invested in cotton spinning and weaving concerns was approximately 17½ crores last

year, an increase of 56 p. c. in 15 years. Seventy-one per cent. of the Cotton mills are in the Bombay Presidency, the number being nearly 156 as against 88 in 1892. The spinning of the higher counts of cotton on an increased scale is a noticeable feature of the last few years, Bombay leading the way in this respect also. The quantity of woven cotton goods, including that turned out in Native States like Indore, Mysore, Baroda etc. has more than doubled within the last ten years.

The jute industry of which the most natural centre is Calcutta has also made considerable improvement in a very short time, in as much as the value of the exports of bags and cloth of jute nearly doubled within the last decade. The Indian Industrial Commission of 1916-18 has very aptly remarked that although jute is one of the best products of Bengal, yet the Bengalees have not taken any very prominent part in jute industry. The Bengal jute-mills are financed chiefly by the Europeans and the Marwaris, the people of Rajputana,³ who may be very justly called the 'Royal' Merchants of Bengal. As regards weaving of woollen goods, the progress of our country is not at all promising as there are at present only 6 mills in the whole country. The two most flourishing mills are at Cawnpore and Dhariwal, which are doing considerable service to the country.

Now, before we discuss the difficulties of establishing weaving mills all over our country, we must consider what were the various causes that brought about the partial, if not complete, downfall, of *Swadeshism* as regards the starting of weaving business.

The first and foremost of all deficiencies was the lack of business capacity and want of Commercial experience. People without business experience and even young men with a smattering of technical knowledge could not successfully manage the industry. Secondly, the capital was small and the obvious defect of small capital is that no large-scale production is at all possible. Thirdly, want of skilled labourers weakened the position to a considerable extent. In the fourth place, thread could not be prepared so abundantly as to meet the demands of the whole country. It was a fact and still is, that many of the weaving factories had to depend for thread upon foreign countries.

Then, the want of a spirit of healthy and hearty Co-operation was another cause of failure; to which, I think, we may add, with no fear of contradiction, the want of business morality on the part of the Indians, chiefly of the Bengalees. I need not mention here what

ignominious failures some of the Bengal industrial organisations, had to sustain only for this lack of Co-operative honesty.

Fortunately for the children of India, the hasty, and to some extent unprincipled *Swadeshism* has now given way to a more thoughtful bent of industrial development of sounder principles and more catholic disposition. Through a more favourable and propitious evolution of time we are now come to a position from which we can see into the distant future of our weaving industry and we are gradually learning, from many a painful experience how unity and integrity are, as it were, the very solid foundation on which to build our industrial edifice.

The last War is a factor which we cannot reasonably omit from our present discussion. Many expected and not wholly without reason, that the War would afford facilities for the development of the weaving industries of India, and many hearts leapt at the idea that a revival of the dying *Swadeshism* would come about as an effect. But the war produced a far different and more disappointing result. The jute market fell down on account of the stoppage of foreign exports and consequently the farmers suffered. As a matter of fact, the catastrophe so much affected the jute-industry that mills were actually closed and many workers suffered for want of employment. Another hindrance to the working of Cotton-mills was to be confronted in the shape of the want of thread to weave cloth with, for although spinning is being encouraged in Bombay as also in a very few Bengal industrial centres, yet it is not at all sufficient to supply all the mills with thread.

When the War was raging in its fullest fury and as a consequence the cloth-problem was occupying all heads, some moved a proposal to resume our Cottage spinning as before. The proposal was no doubt an honest one and it was compatible with the old domestic occupation of our country; but the question is whether it is at all possible to supply sufficient thread by this means for all the Cotton mills of this country or not. The question may be immediately asked—how was the matter managed in former times? This question may be answered in one word. It was the custom of old India for every household to spin thread sufficient for the cloth of its members. But that custom has long been given up. Perhaps nobody of the present generation knows how to spin thread—to speak truly, it is now-a-days like a curiosity to us to see one spinning thread. There is another point. With the progress of civilization, we have come to create so many necessities for dressed, so many various

uses of woven silk and cotton, that it is practically impossible for a family to manage its own concerns in this respect. Where in ancient times four *dhuties* and two *chadars* would perhaps be sufficient for one man for a year, now, on the other hand, we cannot manage without at least eight pieces of dhutees, four shirts, two coats and two chadars. Such is the gulf of difference between those good old days and these days of social conventions. In short, the situation is this. An Economic revolution is in progress in the land. The old national industries are gradually dying out of the land. New ones have not yet taken their place. The competition around us is keen and killing. We lack enterprise, capital, experience, scientific knowledge, and what is most needed, sufficient State Protection. However both the Government and the people have done and are doing something by way of improving the indigenous industries. Yet much remains to be done.

We know India produces so much cotton that she can export a very large quantity of it to the foreign lands even after providing for the necessities of all her people. This is a ray of hope which still lurks in the Indian mind for the Indian knows that he would not be in want of raw materials for weaving.

In conclusion, we cannot forego the temptation of mentioning one thing which we should have done in connection with the War.

Now that the War has come to a successful close, the principle of free trade would be promulgated throughout the whole world; and as a result of that—all the fruits of the European industries would be simultaneously poured forth into India and thus India will be thrown into an open competition with the vehement industrial skill of Europe. India will not be able to stand the competition and only Heaven knows what is in store for her after the final settlement of the Peace Conference.

Whatever be the decree of Heaven, the Indians should invest their best capital and labour in the improvement of the weaving industry and all should co-operate heartily so that very large-scale industries are possible, and thus we may very well clothe ourselves with clothes of our own making. Let us all pray for that glorious day to come.

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