



Weavers, Iron Smelters and Factory Owners

Indian Textiles and the World Market

Around 1750, India was the world's largest producer of cotton textiles. This was the period before the British conquest of Bengal happened. Indian textiles had been famous for fine quality and exquisite craftsmanship. Indian textiles were extensively traded in Southeast Asia and West and Central Asia. From the sixteenth century, European trading companies began to buy Indian textiles for sale in Europe.

Many words in English and other languages; in current usage; show the proof of this flourishing trade.

The word “**muslin**” was used to refer to all finely woven textiles. This word has originated from Mosul which is in present day Iraq. This was the place where European traders first became aware about fine cotton cloth from India. The Arab merchants used to bring fine cotton cloths in Mosul.

The word “**calico**” was used as the generic name for all cotton textiles. The Portuguese first landed in Calicut (Kerala). The cotton textiles which they took back to Europe came to be called calico.

The word “**chintz**” is used for cloth with small and colourful flowery designs. It is derived from the Hindi word “chhint”.

The word “**bandanna**” refers to any brightly coloured and printed scarf. This has come from the Hindi word “bandhna” which means tying. This term in Hindi was used to refer to brightly coloured cloths produced through the method of tying and dying.

Similarly, many other words were used which show the popularity of Indian textiles in different parts of the world.

Indian textiles in European markets

Calico Act: By the early eighteenth century, the wool and silk makers in England were worried by the popularity of Indian textiles. They began to protest against the import of Indian cotton textiles. In 1720, the British government banned the use of chintz in England. This Act was known as the Calico Act.

Once the government protection began, the calico printing industry was the first to grow. In this industry, Indian designs were imitated and printed on white muslin or plain unbleached Indian cloth.





New Innovations: Competition with Indian textile also forced various technical innovations in England. The Spinning Jenny was invented by John Kaye in 1764. This machine increased the productivity of traditional spindles. Steam engine was invented by Richard Arkwright in 1786. This revolutionized cotton textile weaving. With the help of these two inventions, cloth could be woven in huge quantities and at cheaper rates.

But till the end of the eighteenth century, Indian textiles continued to dominate the world market. European traders made enormous profits from this flourishing trade.

Textile Producing Regions in India: In the early nineteenth century, textile production was concentrated in four regions in India. Bengal was among the most important centres. Presence of numerous rivers and delta, made it ideal for transporting goods to distant places. It is important to remember that railway and roadways were not developed at that time.

Dacca (modern Bangladesh) was the most important textile centre in the eighteenth century. It was famous for mulmul and jamdani weaving.

A cluster of cotton weaving centre was along the Coromandel coast; which stretched from Madras to northern Andhra Pradesh. The important weaving centres along the western coast were in Gujarat.

Who were the weavers?

Weavers usually belonged to communities which specialized in weaving. The skills for weaving were passed on through generations. The tanti of Bengal, the julahas and momins of north India, and the sale, kaikollar and devangs of south India are examples of some weaving communities.

Spinning was mostly done by women. The charkha and takli were traditional spinning instruments. The thread was spun on the charkha and rolled on the takli.

Weaving was usually done by men. Dyeing was done by the dyer (rangrez); who also came from a particular community. Printing was done by specialist block printers; known as chhipigars.

Handloom weaving and associated occupations provided livelihood to a large number of Indians.



The decline of Indian textiles

The development of cotton industries in Britain affected the textile producers in India in various ways. British textiles were now giving competition to Indian textiles in the European and American markets. High import duties in England made it difficult to export textiles from India.

Thus, the British manufactures cotton textiles ousted the Indian textiles from their traditional markets in Africa, America and Europe; by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In India, thousands of weavers became unemployed. The weavers in Bengal were the worst hit. Rural women who used to earn livelihood by spinning cotton became jobless.

However, handloom weaving did not completely stop in India. Some types of cloths could not be made by machines. Intricate design and embroidery could not be done by machines. Such designs had good demand in the European market. Moreover, the British manufacturers did not produce coarse cloths. The coarse cloths were popular among the poor in India.

Many weavers became agricultural labourers. Some migrated to cities to find work. Some others migrated to work in plantations in Africa and South America. Some of the weavers also found jobs in the new cotton mills which came up in Bombay, Ahmadabad, Sholapur, Nagpur and Kanpur.

Cotton mills come up

The first cotton mill was set up in Bombay in 1854. From the early eighteenth century, Bombay had developed as an important port for the export of raw cotton. The vast cotton growing region was in close proximity to Bombay and supply of raw material was easy for the new cotton textiles mills.

By 1900, over 84 mills were operational in Bombay. Many of these mills were established by Parsi and Gujarati businessmen who had made money through trade with China. Cotton textiles mills came up in other cities too, e.g. Ahmadabad and Kanpur.

Growth of cotton mills created new employment opportunities. Thousands of poor peasants, artisans and agricultural labourers migrated to the cities to work in the mills.

The textiles industry of India faced many problems in the first few decades of its existence. Competing with cheap textiles imported from Britain was difficult. The governments of most of the European countries protected their local industries by heavy



import duties. The colonial government in India did not provide such protection to local industries.

It was during the First World War that there was the first major boost the development of cotton textiles industry in India. During the war, textiles imports from Britain declined and Indian factories were called upon to produce cloth for military supplies.

WOOTZ STEEL

The Sword of Tipu Sultan has been the topic of many tales. The sword was special because it was very hard and had very sharp edge. This quality came from a special type of carbon steel; called Wootz steel. The Wootz steel was produced all over south India. The sword which was made of Wootz steel used to have very sharp edge with a flowing pattern. This pattern was the result of very small carbon crystals embedded in the iron.

Francis Buchanan had toured through Mysore in 1800 and had given a rich account of technique of Wootz steel manufacturing. This steel was manufactured in small furnaces. Iron was mixed with charcoal and put inside small clay pots. Steel ingots were produced through intricate control of temperatures. Those ingots were used for sword making in India as well as in West and Central Asia.

The Wootz steel making process was completely lost by the mid-nineteenth century. This happened because of the steel import from Britain. But iron smelting was quite common till the end of the nineteenth century. Especially in Bihar and Central India, every district had smelters that used to produce iron for a variety of uses.

The furnaces were usually built of clay and sun-dried bricks. Smelting was done by men, while women worked the bellows. But by the late nineteenth century, the craft of iron smelting was in decline. The new forest laws were also responsible for this because finding wood and charcoal was becoming more difficult. New forest laws also restricted the smelters' access to iron ore mines.

Access was granted by the government in some forests, but the smelters had to pay very high tax for every furnace they used. By the late nineteenth century, imports from Britain affected the smelters. By the early twentieth century, iron and steel factories began to come up in India and this proved to be the final blow for the small scale smelters.





Iron and steel factories come up in India

Jamsetji Tata was planning to establish a steel plant in India. His son; Dorabji Tata initially searched for potential location in Chhattisgarh. The Tatas could find iron and ore deposits in Chhattisgarh, but they could not find a good source of water. Water was important for running an iron and steel factory and hence they decided to look somewhere else.

Finally, the Tatas could find a large area of iron ore reserve on the banks of the river Subarnarekha. The Tata Iron and Steel Company was set up at that place and production in the factory began in 1912. This place was developed into a township which is now known as Jamshedpur.

This was an opportune time for TISCO because expansion of railways in India was taking place. Initially, the British experts in the Indian Railways were not convinced about the quality of steel produced in India. But the First World War changed the situation. Steel produced in Britain was being utilised to meet the demands of the war. As a result, the Indian Railways turned to TISCO for supply of rails. The TISCO also produced shells and carriage wheels for the war. By 1919, the colonial government was buying 90% of the steel manufactured by TISCO. Gradually, TISCO became the biggest steel industry within the British empire.





Question – 1 - What kinds of cloth had a large market in Europe?

Answer: Indian cotton textiles which were of fine quality and intricate design had a large market in Europe.

Question – 2 - What is jamdani?

Answer: Jamdani is a fine muslin on which decorative motifs are woven on loom. Such motifs were usually made in gray and white.

Question – 3 - What is bandanna?

Answer: A printed scarf for neck or head is called bandanna.

Question – 4 - Who are the Agaria?

Answer: Agaria are a community from Chhattisgarh. They were the expert iron smelters in the Chhotanagpur plateau.

Question – 5 - Fill in the blanks:

(a) The word chintz comes from the word _____.

Answer: Chheent

(b) Tipu's sword was made of _____ steel.

Answer: Wootz

(c) India's textile exports declined in the _____ century.

Answer: nineteenth

Question – 6 - How do the names of different textiles tell us about their histories?

Answer: Many words in English and other languages; in current usage; show the proof of the flourishing trade between India and other parts of the world. For example; the word "muslin" was used to refer to all finely woven textiles. This word has originated from Mosul which is in present day Iraq. This was the place where European traders first became aware about fine cotton cloth from India. The Arab merchants used to bring fine cotton cloths in Mosul.





Question – 7 - Why did the wool and silk producers in England protest against the import of Indian textiles in the early eighteenth century?

Answer: By the early eighteenth century, the wool and silk makers in England were worried by the popularity of Indian textiles. Hence, they began to protest against the import of Indian cotton textiles.

Question – 8 - How did the development of cotton industries in Britain affect textile producers in India?

Answer: The development of cotton industries in Britain affected the textile producers in India in various ways. British textiles were now giving competition to Indian textiles in the European and American markets. High import duties in England made it difficult to export textiles from India. Thus, the British manufactures cotton textiles ousted the Indian textiles from their traditional markets in Africa, America and Europe; by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Question – 9 - Why did the Indian iron smelting industry decline in the nineteenth century?

Answer: Import of steel ingots from Britain gradually led to decline of the Indian iron smelting industry in the nineteenth century. The new forest laws were also responsible for this because finding wood and charcoal was becoming more difficult. New forest laws also restricted the smelters' access to iron ore mines.

Question – 10 - What problems did the Indian textile industry face in the early years of its development?

Answer: The textiles industry of India faced many problems in the first few decades of its existence. Competing with cheap textiles imported from Britain was difficult. The governments of most of the European countries protected their local industries by heavy import duties. The colonial government in India did not provide such protection to local industries.

Question – 11 - What helped TISCO expand steel production during the First World War?

Answer: The First World War changed the situation. Steel produced in Britain was being utilised to meet the demands of the war. As a result, the Indian Railways turned to TISCO for supply of rails. The TISCO also produced shells and carriage wheels for the war. By 1919, the colonial government was buying 90% of the steel manufactured by TISCO. Gradually, TISCO became the biggest steel industry within the British empire.

