

# **Chapter – I**

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## Introduction

Cotton textile industry of Bengal was the most important industry among all industries that grew as an adjunct to agriculture in Bengal. It was a cottage industry, and innumerable cottages were distributed throughout all villages of almost all districts of Bengal. This industry is marked by its otherwise incongruous combination of the use of extremely simple mechanical device coupled with the exquisite delicacy and beauty of its products. A large number of studies have been made on this Bengal industry, focused mostly on two production-centers in the global context: one at Bengal and other in England. The thrust area of those studies was to identify when and how technological innovations in Great Britain could excel Bengal. This dissertation has its own novelty in that it attempts to analyze the status of the industry in three districts of Bengal, namely Birbhum, Burdwan and Hooghly, something entirely absent or broadly ignored in the earlier studies.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first Section provides a brief description of the industry and its importance in the contemporary economy, and reviews the existing literatures. Section II provides the chapterization of the study along with their brief descriptions, the research questions that are sought to be investigated in this dissertation and the concomitant methodological issues.

### I

Cotton industry in Bengal has had a long saga. It was the staple industry of Bengal even before the colonial period. The status of cotton industry in Bengal bears resemblance with that of silk industry in China, linen industry in Egypt, and wool industry in England. According to Orme, it was difficult to find a village in the province of Bengal where some men, women and children were not employed in

making a piece of cloth.<sup>1</sup> Weaving and spinning were the most important occupation next to agriculture in the village life of Bengal. Long before the British rule in India, the cotton piece-goods of Bengal looms were exported abroad after fulfilling its home demand. The inland and foreign trades of Bengal were prosperous, except the trade with European countries in the first half of the eighteenth century. The Mughal Emperors of Delhi and their provincial rulers used to give possible encouragement to the Bengal weavers. In those times, the cotton weavers of Bengal used to manufacture their goods freely and without any oppression, restriction, limitation or prohibition.<sup>2</sup> The Mughal Empire was foundered during 1739 – 57, and the British took hold of administrative control in Bengal since 1757. Although, British commerce started in the early seventeenth century, the British East India Company dominated the commerce of Bengal since the middle of the eighteenth century.

Since 1757, during the British rule the production organization of the Bengal cotton industry had changed in several dimensions. The extensive export trade of the British East India Company enhanced the total production of cotton piece-goods in Bengal to a great extent. The period under review, i.e., the period during 1757 - 1857, was an important phase when the Industrial Revolution took place in England. The cotton textile industry was an important industry which proliferated in England through Industrial Revolution. So, the Bengal cotton industry was exposed to face severe competition from the English industry. Here, we wish to highlight the growth of Bengal industry through British trade as well as the problems of the Bengal industry and the Bengal weavers under the British rule in India.

The main thrust area of this study, as the title of my thesis indicates, is on the status of the industry in three districts of Bengal, namely Birbhum, Burdwan and Hooghly. The districts had developed many industries and manufactures, e.g., cotton piece-

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<sup>1</sup> Orme, R., *Historical Fragments of the Mughal Empire*, p.409.

<sup>2</sup> Sinha, N.K., *The Economic History of Bengal*, vol.I, p.159.

goods, silk, sugar, iron etc., prior to the establishment of the district administration by the English although they were agriculture oriented. Before the European traders came to the three districts, their rural industries and manufactures met mainly the local needs and to some extent the needs of the neighbouring districts. The entry of the European merchant capital into the districts had increased the productive potentialities of the districts' industry. In the period under review, the economy of the districts had become dependent mostly on the British capital and the districts' industry had become dependent on the investment of the English East India Company. A growing market abroad, particularly in England and in other European countries in addition to the markets in Batavia, Manila and the East Coast spurred on the production of the districts' industry to a great extent.

Thus the role of cotton textile industry was very vital for the economy of the districts as well as for the economy of Bengal as a whole during that period. A considerable size of population of the three districts as well as of the other parts of Bengal was engaged in the industry either as a part-time or as a whole-time worker and made their livelihood from the industry. The immense possibility of growth from the British merchant capital was only partially realized. The colonial framework of the general economy of Bengal and the different policies of the British ruler hindered the growth of the industry in fuller extent. The Economy of Bengal became a feeder economy for the industrial economy of Europe and fluctuated with all the consequences of the recurring economic ups and downs in Europe. The production of the cotton industry of the districts as well as the production of the cotton industry of Bengal became dependent on the changing needs abroad.

The sudden growth through the European merchant capital of the industry did not last for long. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the European war and the prohibitive tariff on Bengal piece-goods in England gradually reduced the European market for Bengal piece-goods. Beside these, the British Industrial Revolution made it possible for the English cotton industry to produce good quality cotton piece-goods which successfully supplanted the Bengal cotton goods from the world market. Since

then British cotton goods started to capture the world market which so long had been dominated by the cotton piece-goods of Bengal. Destitute of any patronage, the age-old glorious industry was caught in serious crisis and its products were being rapidly supplanted by the Manchester goods, and by the European, American, and Asiatic markets. The Indian markets also embraced the same fate. There are many studies on the cotton textile industry of India, and on its competition with that of European countries. Here only important studies relevant to this study particular have been reviewed.

M. P. Gandhi<sup>3</sup> pointed out that India is the birthplace of the cotton industry. The industry was in a flourishing condition even at the time of the Rig Veda. The Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Purans are full of references to cotton goods. He showed that around A.D.1290, cotton was produced and cotton products were manufactured in Gujrat, Cambay, Telingana, Malabar and Bengal. He also showed that during the Mughal period, cotton-weaving was one of the most extensive industries in India and it exported cloths to many countries of the world after fulfilling her domestic demand. He described that under the East India Company's trade, the chief articles of export from India were calicoes, indigo, cotton, salt-peter, spices and raw silk. He mentioned that the export trade by the East India Company created a sudden booming of the cotton industry in India. Gandhi concluded that the prohibition of Indian manufactures in England and every possible effort of the British to push the sale of British cotton goods in India caused the decline of the cotton industry of India in the nineteenth century.

K. N. Chaudhuri in his article on "The structure of Indian textile industry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries"<sup>4</sup> has shown that before the discovery of machine spinning and weaving in the second half of the eighteenth century, India was the world's greatest producer of cotton textile. The cotton products of India

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<sup>3</sup> Gandhi, M.P., *The Indian Cotton Textile Industry: Its Past, Present and Future*.

<sup>4</sup> Chaudhuri, K. N., 'The structure of Indian textile industry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1974, vol. 11, pp. 127-82.

dominated the market of Asian and African countries long before the advent of the European traders. In seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Indian cotton products flooded the European market by the European traders. Chaudhuri also unveiled that the success of the Indian cotton goods in English as well as other European markets was due to their low price and high quality. This low price of cotton goods was due to low production cost. The low cost of textile products in India was possible due to two major advantages: locally produced raw materials and human capital. The labour force of India in textile manufactures was highly skilled and this skill was transmitted from one generation to next generation naturally. He showed that there were four industrial regions in India, viz. Punjab, Gujarat, the Coromandel Coast and Bengal which were specialized in the manufacture of cotton goods for export. Chaudhuri further showed that gradually it became difficult for Indian industry with age-old simple and crude mechanical devices to maintain the competitive position, for its European rival, the English cotton industry, progressed rapidly with modern power-driven machines along with the Industrial Revolution and its concomitant technological innovation.

S. Broadberry and B. Gupta in their article titled “Cotton Textiles and the Great Divergence: Lancashire, India and Shifting Competitive Advantage, 1600-1850”<sup>5</sup> has discussed the state of cotton textile industry in India and England during 1600-1850. They showed that the comparative advantage was with Indian textile industry in early period in terms of unit labour costs and highly labour intensive production methods. From the seventeenth century the Indian cotton products started flooding the market of England. At that time the cotton industry of England started to grow as an import substituting industry, as the new imported Bengal clothes and its patterns as well as designs became increasingly popular fashion in England. But due to higher wages of

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<sup>5</sup> Broadberry, S. & Gupta, B., ‘cotton textiles and the great divergence: Lancashire, India and shifting competitive advantage, 1600-1850’ Discussion Paper, No. 5183, Aug 2005, *Centre for Economic Policy Research, London*. pp. 1-47.

the British labour, initially the English manufacturers failed to implement the labour intensive Indian methods of production and did not find it economically viable to compete with the Bengal products. Gradually the comparative advantage shifted to England from India when the productivity increased in Britain and stagnated in India. The productivity growth in England reached a point where Britain's higher wages were such as to offset the relatively lower wage cost of Bengal thanks to technological innovation. This high productivity and low cost ensured the growing dominance of the British cotton industry in the world market. According to Broadberry and Gupta, there were three stages of the shift of the comparative advantages. The first stage occurred between 1600 and 1700. In this stage the English industry was unable to compete with India although labour productivity was higher in England than that in India. The second stage was between 1760 and 1830. During this period labour saving technological progress raised labour productivity in England to such a level that the comparative advantage shifted in favour of English industry. It successfully ousted and supplanted Indian cotton manufactures from the world market. In third stage, i.e., the period after 1830, further technological progress occurred in England, and the English cotton manufactures became competitive even in the Indian market.

Giorgio Riello<sup>6</sup> made a study on the trade of Indian cotton textiles. The author's explanation exhibits how the European continent especially England had become the core of manufacturing as well as the main carrier of cotton textiles across the globe from the early nineteenth century. He showed that Europe did not suddenly acquire the skills, knowledge and outlook to produce and market cotton manufactures. It was not the simple result of technological innovation but was a long process of learning from India since 1500s, and it took a couple of centuries. He argued that the

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<sup>6</sup> Riello, G. and Roy, T. (ed.), *How India Clothed the World*, Chap, 11: The Indian Apprenticeship: The Trade of Indian Textiles and the Making of European Cottons, Riello, G., pp. 309-346.

international trade of cotton textiles was the key to creating the conditions for the development of the European cotton textile industry.

Riello showed that before the opening up of trade between India and Europe, the European had no useful knowledge of spinning, weaving or printing of cloths and had little consumer experience with cottons. When Indian cotton products flooded in the European market, Europe started to develop its cotton manufacturing and trade. The European cotton industry gathered knowledge regarding products through the import of Indian textiles by the European Merchant companies like the Dutch Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (V O C) and the English East India Company (EIC).

Riello concluded that it was a long process of learning knowledge by the Europeans about cotton textiles as commodities and become a carrier of technologies and taste and the history of development of the European cotton industry was a history of long 'Indian apprenticeship' for Europe.

Prasannan Parthasarathi's study, "The European Response to Indian Cottons",<sup>7</sup> reveals that from the mid-seventeenth century the people of Europe preferred the Indian cotton products for their beauty, convenience and low price. The European textile manufacturers had less support on the influx of Indian cotton goods into their market as it was a threat to their livelihoods. From the late seventeenth century, the European manufacturers gave opposition to Indian cloth imports but at the same time they put effort to imitate them. In different parts of Europe many shops were set up for printing on the Indian white plain calicoes. In the eighteenth century, cotton printing works proliferated across many towns and cities across the continent. Parthasarathi revealed that starting with imitation in the seventeenth century, within less than two hundred years later and certainly by 1850, the Western Europe especially England appeared as the most important centre of the world cotton

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<sup>7</sup> Parthasarathi, P., *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600-1850*, Chap. 4: The European Response to Indian cottons, pp. 89-114.

manufacturing. Since then, Indian subcontinent was displaced as the major supplier of cotton textiles to the world market.

M. Berg<sup>8</sup> made a study on global demand for luxury and quality cotton textiles. He argued that some silk and cotton luxury goods were imported from India and other Asian countries to Europe during the medieval period, but import was very insignificant, and these expensive luxury goods were used only by the affluent section of the European society. He argued that Indian luxury cotton goods got a growing and broader consumer market since the seventeenth century when the Dutch and British East India Companies imported larger quantities of Asian textiles. Since then the growing popularity of the Indian luxury cotton goods encouraged the European trading companies to order cotton goods in India, especially designed for the European market.

Berg showed that from the beginning of the seventeenth century, the English entrepreneurs started to develop their own cotton industry and the British government supported them with encouragement. He concluded that in eighteenth century, tariff protection to the cotton industry and growing world demand for cotton goods encouraged technological innovations in Britain. Thus by the late eighteenth century, Britain became the world leader in cotton textile production and her cotton industry propelled the industrial revolution substantially.

Amalendu Guha made an attempt to estimate the total acreage under raw cotton and the total output of cotton lint in western India around the year 1850 in his article, "Raw Cotton of Western India: 1750-1850"<sup>9</sup>. He described the developments in transportation and marketing of western Indian raw cotton during the period of 1750-1850. His study area covered the present states of Maharashtra, Gujarat and the Old

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<sup>8</sup> Riello, G. and Roy, T. (ed.), *How India Clothed the World*, Chap, 14: Quality, Cotton and the Global luxury trade, by Berg, M., pp. 391-414.

<sup>9</sup> Guha, A., 'Raw Cotton of Western India: Output, Transportation and Marketing 1750-1850', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1972, vol. 9, pp. 1-41.

Bombay presidency of 1930, excluding the district of North Canara. He also showed that prior to 1770, the raw cotton of Gujrat was supplied to Sind, Madras and Bengal for local consumption via sea route. But the sea trade gradually decreased and completely ceased by 1785. From 1770, Gujrat started to export her raw cotton to China and United Kingdom. In January 1785, around 16,000 to 20,000 bales of raw cotton were exported to China. Guha concluded that the main cause of the export of western cotton was the decline of India's domestic raw cotton consumption which occurred due to the decline of her cotton spinning and weaving industry.

D. Washbrook's study, "The textile Industry and the Economy of South India 1500-1800"<sup>10</sup>, deals with the principal weaving centres situated in north and central Coromandal. The author maintains that between sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the cotton textiles of India had become the centre of attraction to the then emerging world of trade, although these were the principal items of ocean commerce long before the sixteenth century. He shows that since the sixteenth century, the demand for Indian textiles expanded to the European market which had been hitherto confined mostly in the Asian market. He maintains that the finest cotton goods were woven in villages in different parts of India, as in Bengal where the raw cotton used to come from long distance mostly through the sea route. Washbrook argues that in South India, the principal centres of the production of fine textiles in the medieval period lay in the environs of the major temples. Here the rules and regulations for the weavers were maintained by the temples. He says that since the sixteenth century, a progressive shift occurred in production when the weavers started to settle towards the coastal area to access the European merchant traders. By the latter half of the seventeenth century, these coastal settlements dominated the production of fine cotton textiles. He further shows that the shifting of the weavers from the temple environs to the coastal areas was not forced. Rather they shifted on their own volition to earn

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<sup>10</sup> Riello, G. and Roy, T. (ed.), *How India Clothed the World*, Chap,6: The Textile and the Economy of South India 1500-1800, by Washbrook, D., pp. 173-192.

higher wages from merchant companies and to get freedom, both economically as well as socially. Washbrook concludes that the cotton industry of India especially in south India grew rapidly due to overseas market till the first decade of the nineteenth century. Since the abolition of the monopoly of the English Company in trade in India in 1813 to the last quarter of the nineteenth century the performance of the industry reveals a decaying, waning phase.

L. Subramaniam in his article, "The Political Economy of Textiles in Western India: Weavers, Merchants and the Transition to a Colonial Economy"<sup>11</sup>, makes an attempt to analyze the structure of the textile business in the late eighteenth century of Western India especially in Surat and South Gujrat. He explains the responses of merchants and manufacturers in terms of the introduction of the East India Company rule, and shows the changes in their responses from pre-colonial to early colonial state. Subramaniam argues that a miscellany of castes and communities like Hindu, Muslim and Parsi were engaged in textile manufactures, and one community used to produce some variety of clothes which others did not. His article reveals that among the Muslim castes, the Momnas, Boras and Bhandarrahs were engaged in the production of coarse clothes for domestic use as well as the production of clothes with gold embroidery or zari. The Khattris, a Hindu weaving caste, were engaged in the manufacture of fine piece-goods. Subramaniam gives an account of the linkages between political power, ritual status and commercial developments which configured the structure of the manufacturing sector and the strategies of the merchants as well as the manufacturers during the century of transition to colonial rule. In the pre-colonial period the weavers were not in a very advantageous position, but they enjoyed more freedom in their works. In the colonial period the merchants and brokers had been able to resist the attempts of the English Company to introduce structural changes in

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<sup>11</sup> Riello, G. and Roy, T. (ed.), *How India Clothed the World*, Chap,9: The Political Economy of Textiles in Western India: Weavers, Merchants and the transition to a Colonial Economy by Subramanian, L., pp. 253-280.

the procurement process and commerce only for some time. Subramaniam concludes that in the colonial period, the political insecurity after the decline of the Mughal, paucity of money, rising prices of yarn and the hegemony of the English Company were the major causes behind the business failures, resistance and desertion by the weavers.

Joseph J. Brenning made a study on "Textile Producers and Production in Late Seventeenth Century Coromandal"<sup>12</sup>. His study areas were the Godavari and the Krishna deltas of Northern Coromandel. In his review, it was shown that among the European traders the Dutch were seeking ways to gain control over their suppliers, the brokers and the weavers. In late seventeenth century, after supplying stable markets in Southeast Asia the cotton industry of Coromandal found a new market for its calicoes in Europe through the European traders. Brenning shows that the Northern Coromandal was famous for checked rumalls, chints and many painted cloths. Beside these, two types of plain clothes, namely muslins and calicoes of Northern Coromandal were exported by the European traders like the Dutch, the English and the Portuguese. The Northern Coromandal was unsuitable for cotton production, and so its cotton industry collected its raw cotton from outside, and mainly from Decan. Here the Banjara, a nomadic tribe, used to supply the Decan cotton by their caravan bullocks. He also mentions that the Banjara trade in Decan cotton was considerable for long-distance overland trade which gave necessary supply of cotton to cotton industry in pre-colonial and even in the early colonial period. Brenning also reveals that a large number of people were engaged in weaving in the cotton industry of Coromandal in the seventeenth century. About 5,960 households and 7,530 looms were engaged in the production of cotton goods. Weaving was a full-time occupation and was restricted to the male members of the household. The weavers had little or no opportunity to earn a supplementary income

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<sup>12</sup> Brenning, J. Joseph, 'Textile producers and production in late seventeenth century Coromandal', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1986, vol. 23, pp. 333-55.

during the weaving season. Brenning concludes that calicoes industry of the Northern Coromandal was an integral part of a local domestic economy, and that despite the importance of the export sector, it was dependent on domestic demand. Due to European Companies trade the capacity of production and thereby employment in the cotton industry in the Northern Coromandal increased to a great extent. The trade by the European Companies gave less than 50 percent of the total employment in this area. Further, he mentions that the weavers were in the central position in the complex inter-relationships between the groups involved in the textile export industry and they had been able to protect themselves from the consequences of the dependence on the European merchant capital in the late seventeenth century.

R. Dutt<sup>13</sup> points out that India was an agricultural as well as a great manufacturing country down to the first decade of the nineteenth century. A large portion of the Indian population was engaged in various industries. Spinning and weaving were the national industry of the people and millions of women used to support their family by their earnings from spinning. Dutt shows that a large quantity of cotton goods of India was exported to England alone till the early nineteenth century. In value term it was £ 7,317 in 1799, £ 27,876 in 1803, £ 118,408 in 1809 and £ 108,824 in 1813. He also shows that since 1790, India started exporting cotton to England. Since then, the cotton export gradually increased. In 1827, the export of Indian cotton reached to 68 million lbs. Dutt further shows that in 1813 cotton goods of India were sold in the English market at a price which was 50 to 60 per cent lower than the goods produced in England. To protect the English infant cotton industry the British parliament imposed duties of 70 and 80 percent on the value of Indian goods and prohibited the entry of some types of Indian cotton goods into the English market. In spite of the prohibitions and the restrictive duties till the early years of the nineteenth century, a considerable quantity of Indian cotton piece-goods was imported in England. This trend drastically fell down since 1813. In 1813 the monopoly of the East India

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<sup>13</sup> Dutt, R., *The Economic History of India*, Chap. 14, 15 & 16.

Company in Eastern trade was abolished, and was exposed to private merchants. The trade of the East India Company gradually diminished and abolished altogether in 1833. Through the private trade, the export increased temporarily in 1815, but declined in the following years. After 1820, a steady decline was seen in both production and export of Indian cotton piece-goods to England and other countries. After 1820 India witnessed a miserable plight in her cotton industry, and started to import British and other foreign piece-goods. Dutt concludes that the hostile British policy gradually replaced the Indian goods by the British manufactures, not only in the world market but also in the home market of India. Thus the selfish commercial policy of United Kingdom made India the producer and supplier of raw cotton for the looms and manufactories of Great Britain by the first decade of nineteenth century.

There are some studies which discuss about the cotton textile industry of Bengal. For example, N.K. Sinha<sup>14</sup> made the pioneering work on the Economic History of Bengal. His study reveals that during eighteenth century, the cotton weavers were the most important among all the manufacturers in the economy of Bengal. He takes into account the cotton industry of Bengal during 1757 to 1848 when it was a rural domestic handicraft industry. Sinha shows that since the early eighteenth century, the weavers gradually became dependent on European merchant capital, and after 1757 the cotton piece-goods production had become dependent mostly on the investment of the English East India Company. The weavers who took advances from the English Company were bound to produce only for the Company. At that time, the weavers had to face much oppression, restrictions, limitations and prohibitions which were imposed by the English Company. The servants of the Company executed oppression on the weavers. The weavers were completely free and faced less oppression before Plassey. Sinha further describes the secret of the success of the weavers of Bengal. The weavers of Bengal used to manufacture many kinds of clothes like *mulmul*, *tanjib*, *abroan*, *sarbati*, etc. He showed that different places of Bengal were

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<sup>14</sup> Sinha, N. K., *The Economic History of Bengal*, vol. I, chap. 1-9 & vol. III, chap. 1-3.

specialized for the production of different varieties of cotton clothes. The weavers of Bengal were indigent, industrious, and skilful, and endowed with a fine sensibility of touch, a nice perception of weight and singular command of muscular action. All these qualities enabled them to produce such fine clothes which were a mystery to the world. Sinha's study exhibits that weaving was confined to a particular caste of the society. Spinning was not a professed trade, but was done by the women of all castes of the society. The women used to spin when they were free from their household works.

According to Sinha, the decline of the Bengal cotton industry started considerably since 1793. Since then, the investment for cotton piece-goods of Bengal by the English Company started to decline considerably. He found that by the first decade of the nineteenth century the Bengal cotton goods had disappeared from the investment list of the English Company and the private trade of Bengal cotton goods followed the similar trend. Due to this disinvestment by 1828 about 10,00,000 people had lost their employment in the cotton industry of Bengal. The author also shows that the export of Bengal cotton textile started to decline steadily from the turn of the eighteenth century. Sinha concludes that since the early nineteenth century the machine made cotton goods of England had been able to replace the Bengal piece-goods from the world market as well as from the home market of India. Sinha further concludes that the hostile British policy helped to kill the Bengal industry more speedily and effectively than the competition of cheap British goods alone would have done.

Hameeda Hossain<sup>15</sup> gives a good account of the cotton weavers of Bengal under the Company's rule during 1750-1813. The author mentions that two important features of the Bengal cotton products were its high quality and low cost. These features resulted from the very simple technique with extreme specialization of function. Here the requirements of capital were minimal. Hossain finds that the production system was highly labour-intensive and caste-biased. The weaving was confined to some

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<sup>15</sup> Hossain, H., *The Company Weavers of Bengal*.

particular castes of Hindu and a specific section of the Muslim community. The author also shows that people belonging to some castes would become weavers at the risk of being outcaste in the eyes of the society. The weavers, who worked under the English East India Company, were hailed as 'Company weavers'. The Company maintained strict control over them. There was no caste bias in spinning. It was a part-time domestic job which was carried on by women. Other than spinning, the weaving, washing and bleaching were done directly under the control and supervision of the English East India Company. Hossain points out that various coarse and fine variety of cloths were produced in Bengal. The coarse varieties were used mainly for domestic consumption. The superfine luxury clothes were used by the Mughal Emperors, provincial rulers and their noble court. Usually standardized, medium and luxury varieties were exported. Hossain maintains that the English Company set up many *aurangs* or the central collection centres in each weaving region where cotton products could be easily procured. The Company established nineteen main *aurungs* or commercial residencies. The English Company was able to exercise greater control over the weavers than other European companies because it acquired political power in and territorial control over Bengal. Although a commercial resident was appointed in each *aurung* for the supervision of collections, the export warehouse keepers also checked the cotton products sent from the *aurung* and rejected some goods due to its inferior quality. Hossain also points out that the policy of the English Company was to maximize profit from the export of the Bengal cotton textiles. The Company did not foster the Bengal industry. They always fixed the procurement price at low level to maximize profit. Rather than providing incentives for higher productivity, the Company was interested to maintain high profit margin. The procurement price was determined at the time of placing order to the weavers. If the price index of essential commodities such as rice, salt, oil and raw cotton had risen in the period between the date of order and the date of supply of clothes, no allowance was paid to the weavers during the intervening period. The procurement price began to look up when the price of raw cotton increased. But the rate of increase in procurement price was proportionately less if the escalation of the price of raw cotton is taken into

consideration. The weavers started to take order from the private traders apart from the order received from the Company. Sometimes the weavers utilized the Company's advances to finance production for the private traders. Some weavers who wove coarse clothes shifted from the production for the Company to the production for the domestic market. Some of them carried on weaving along with agriculture. As a result of all these, the Company would not be able to procure goods on time, and both quantity and quality of cotton products reduced. Hossain concludes that the conflicting pulls to maintain the price level on the one hand, and to obtain subsistence wages on the other, made the procurement of cotton goods gradually difficult for the Company from the early nineteenth century. The author also concludes that in those days the cotton industry of Bengal started to decline due to two factors namely the Company's attempt to pay lower price to the weavers and the imposition of strict control over the weavers. Both of these factors caused large exodus of weavers from the industry.

J.G. Medlicott<sup>16</sup> gives a brief account of the Indian cotton trade with England during 1793-1857 along with a district-wise description of raw cotton in Bengal province during the middle of eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century. Medlicott shows that the export of Indian cotton to England started in 1783 when 114,133 lbs were exported. In the year 1818 India and America entered into competition for possession of the English market. In that year the import of Indian cotton was 247,000 lbs, as against 207,000 lbs of American. In 1857, the import of Indian cotton into the English market was 28,000,000 lbs. The author provides a description of the state of Indian cotton trade, its prospects and difficulties which impeded its growth. Medlicott shows in his study that since the end of the eighteenth century Bengal cotton was exported to many countries of the world. The amount of export was 40,661 maunds during 1796-1805, 349,305 maunds during 1816-1825 and 169,602 maunds in 1845-1854. Medlicott presents a detailed account of the cotton production in every district of Bengal. He takes into account the following various parameters to

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<sup>16</sup> Medlicott, J.G., *Cotton-handbook for Bengal*.

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furnish his information on raw cotton production: (a.) structure of soil and its capability of production; (b.) varieties of cotton produced; (c.) yield per acre; (d.) total area of land used for cotton production; (e.) price of cotton in district bazaar and in principal marts; and (f.) area of land which could be added in cotton production. Medicott concludes that in Bengal, cotton used to be cultivated badly, picked carelessly and wasted at the time of cleaning. Beside these, at the time of trade, the quality of cotton used to get deteriorated due to mishandling.

An account of trade of Bengal cotton textiles during sixteenth century is found in Sanjoy Subrahmanyum's article on "Notes on the Sixteenth Century Bengal trade"<sup>17</sup>. He has studied on the Bengal trade to unravel the enigma of Bengal in sixteenth century Asian trade. On the basis of Portuguese sources, Subrahmanyum's study shows that during the sixteenth century, Bengal was a major exporter of cotton textiles to many regions of Asia when a great part of the Bengal trade and shipping were in the hands of the Portuguese. Bengal cotton textiles were exported to such countries as Malaka, Sri Lanka, Malabar and Maldives. Subrahmanyum describes that raw cotton was imported to Bengal from Gujrat since 1500. The Bengal cotton goods were exported to western India through the Portuguese private traders. The Portuguese private traders used to purchase Bengal cotton textiles. Some of those textiles were consumed in western India, but a large portion went on to the Middle East. Since the end of the sixteenth century the export of Bengal cotton goods by the Portuguese started and increased gradually thereafter. Subrahmanyum concludes that in sixteenth century, the textile trade in Bengal was dominated by the Portuguese, and that the Dutch and the English traders started to give attention to Bengal textile trade since the beginning of the second half of the seventeenth century.

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<sup>17</sup> Subrahmanyam, S., 'Notes on the sixteenth century Bengal trade', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1987, vol. 24, pp. 265-89.

Om Prakash<sup>18</sup> describes that Bengal was a region of major textile production, and also famous for the production of luxury cotton clothes from a very early age. But, before the advent of the European traders in India, the export of Bengal clothes was insignificant in ocean trade. When the European markets opened, they were flooded with and dominated by the cotton textiles woven in Bengal. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, as much as 40 percent of export to Europe from Asia by the Dutch and English East India Company was initiated from Bengal. A substantial portion of that export comprised Bengal textiles and raw silk. Prakash also points out that the European Companies procured cotton, silk and mixed textiles from Bengal. The cotton textiles of Bengal, both muslin and fine calicoes, were procured by the companies. The author gives an account of the volume and value of textiles which were procured by the European companies for export, the process of production and finally, the system of procurement. Prakash further discusses that before 1757, the weavers independently took decisions about production and a certain portion of production was carried on by the weavers' own resources and at their own risk. The bulk of output, however, was manufactured on the basis of agreement between the bulk purchasers called merchants or *paikars* and the weavers about the quality of output, the price and the date of delivery. A part of the final value of contract was given to the weavers in advance. Prior to 1757 both the merchants and weavers enjoyed freedom to decide with whom to carry on business and on what terms. The author shows that the freedom gradually became on the wane after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. In the post-battle period, the English East India Company started to control the larger portion of the textile business in Bengal outmanoeuvring other European rivals. Gradually, larger and larger sections of the weavers and *paikers* were forced to work for the English Company only under the terms and conditions substantially lower than the contemporary market rate. This was nothing but the exploitation of the English Company which then had a politically advantageous

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<sup>18</sup> Riello, G. and Roy, T. (ed.), *How India Clothed the World*, Chap, 8: From market-determined to coercion-based: Textile manufacturing in Eighteenth century Bengal, by Prakash, Om, pp. 217-52.

position in the province of Bengal. Besides, the English Company used to grade the products by different categories and offered different prices for different products. Here the author mentions that the cotton goods classified as third grade and procured at a very low price by the English Company was easily accepted by the Dutch Company as first grade quality. It was another mode of exploitation by the British. Sometimes the English Company rejected some cotton products as 'firty'(damaged) which actually had a profitable market price. The profit from the sale of those goods was shared clandestinely between the Commercial Resident, the chief *gomastas* and the *paikers*. This was another example of exploitation to which the weavers were vulnerable. Prakash concludes that the British rule in Bengal replaced the market-determined system of textile production with the procurement through coercion in the province. He further concludes that in the post-Plassey period, the share of the artisans and *paikers* in the market value of output had been reduced substantially and the large share was appropriated by the procurer i.e.; the English Company.

James Taylor<sup>19</sup> maintains that weaving, embroidering and bleaching were the principal arts of the district of Dhaka since very early period till the end of the eighteenth century. Dhaka was famous from very ancient time for its fine muslins. These muslins were highly appreciated in the European country since the first century of the Christian era. The ladies of the imperial Rome used to offer high price for the Dacca muslins. Taylor mentions that the Dhaka muslins were extraordinarily fine, transparent and soft which could be drawn through a ring of middling size. The Mughal Emperors were the patronage of the Dhaka muslins and they greatly encouraged its production. Taylor shows that till the time when the great perfection in the art of weaving had arrived in Britain, the Dhaka muslins were unrivalled, and it successfully excluded the cotton textiles of the other countries in the world market due to its transparency, beauty and delicacy of texture. Taylor further points out that all the fine muslins of Dhaka were produced by the indigenous cotton of the district.

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor, J., *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca*, Chap. 6.

The raw cotton was imported in the district from different parts of India, but the threads from that cotton were used for the production of inferior quality cotton piece-goods. The import of cotton had diminished greatly due to influx of British yarn into the district since 1787. Taylor also mentions that very simple instruments were used in each stage of production. The women used to clean the cotton and spin the thread. The *cherkee* and *dullun cathee* were used to clean cotton, the dried jaw bone of Boali fish was used for carding, a small bow made of bamboo was used for teasing and *Chwkhee* or spindle was used for spinning. Weaving was done under the roof of the weavers' own house or under a shed raised for the purpose. The instruments used by the weavers were all made by small pieces of bamboo. The author shows that the rainy season was most favourable for weaving the fine muslins. The fine muslins were produced by the Hindu weavers but flowered muslins or *jamdanees* were produced by the Mussulman weavers. The coarser clothes were manufactured by the *Joogees* (lower caste Hindu) and the *Joolahs* (a section of the Muslim community). The art of embroidering on the clothes was extensively practiced in Dhaka. The Muslims were engaged in this profession who used needles for the purpose. The bleaching of clothes was confined to the northern division of the Dhaka district.

Taylor also reveals that the spinning branch of the Dhaka cotton industry began to be affected in 1824, when a considerable amount of English machine-made yarn was imported into Dhaka. Since then, the cotton weavers of Dhaka started to use English yarn extensively. Thus the spinning branch of the Dhaka industry had been ruined by 1828. Taylor further describes that the Dhaka cotton industry received its most severe shock in 1785, when 50,000 pieces of muslins were produced in England by mule twist. Since then, the muslins production grew rapidly through mechanical inventions and 75 percent tariff protection. Thus the export of Dhaka muslins to England steadily declined since the turn of the eighteenth century. The export was 30 lacs of rupee in value term in 1787; in 1813 it became 3.5 lacs and in 1817 it altogether ceased. In 1817, the Commercial Residency of Dhaka was abolished. In 1825, the duty on Indian goods in England was reduced to 10 percent *ad valorem*. But after the reduction of duty the Dhaka cotton industry was not able to revive. Taylor concludes

that since 1824, the large influx of English twist caused the total exclusion of country threads. In this way the spinning industry of Dhaka had been ruined. He further concludes that the loss of English market on the one hand and the production of good quality muslins in England with its high acceptability in the world market on the other hand, caused the destruction of the world famous cotton industry of Dhaka.

Indrajit Ray<sup>20</sup> in his research paper entitled “Identifying the Woes of the Cotton Textile Industry in Bengal: Tales of the Nineteenth Century” critically explains the decay of the Bengal cotton textile industry which occurred in nineteenth century. He has identified the exact period of the decline of the industries and explained the reasons behind the decline. He challenges the earlier hypothesis which showed that the decline of the industry started considerably at the end of the eighteenth century or at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Ray’s paper does not support the reasons like Britain’s discriminatory tariff policy and the loss of English market behind the decay of the Bengal industry. He shows that by 1826 technological innovations in Great Britain made it possible for the English machine-made cotton piece-goods to excel in such a quality as to successfully capture the world market as well as the market of India. According to him, the spread of weaving machinery since 1830s and its improvement by 1940s in England caused catastrophes to the Bengal industry. Ray concludes that the phase of perpetual decline of the Bengal cotton industry started in the mid 1820s. Since then the pace of decline was slow but steady. The industry had reached a gloomy state by 1860 when nearly 5,63,000 workers lost their jobs. He further concludes that the technological innovation in England was the main cause behind the decline of the Bengal cotton industry during the fast half of the nineteenth century.

From the above study of existing literatures we find that a large volume of studies have their focus on two production centres in the global context, with Bengal at one end and England at the other. This is mainly due to the fact that the Industrial

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<sup>20</sup> Ray, I., ‘Identifying the woes of the cotton textile industry in Bengal: tales of the nineteenth century’, *The Indian Economic History Review*, Vol.62, issue 4, pp. 857-892.

Revolution in the latter progressed under severe competition from Bengal artisans. The thrust area of those studies is to identify when and how technological innovations in Great Britain could gain supremacy over Bengal. They have generally made use of available import-export statistics to show that how England won over Bengal competitive edge by the turn of the eighteenth century. They showed that the cotton textile industry of Bengal started declining rapidly from the eve of the nineteenth century. One of the major lacunas is, however, that production-centric approach is almost entirely absent there. In addition to these, there is no literature which gives us the district-wise status of the industry and the exact period as well as the precise reason(s) behind the decay of the industry in a particular district. We only get the description of the industry in Dacca district from the writing of Taylor. So far there is no literary study on the account of the industry in three districts of Bengal viz. Birbhum, Burdwan and Hooghly during 1757-1857.

Thus we find the following research gaps in the existing literatures:

- i) the production centric approach is almost absent.
- ii) no literature reviews the status of the industry in the districts of Birbhum, Burdwan and Hooghly.
- iii) the existing literatures show the commencing period from the view point of the Bengal as a whole. They did not try to identify the period for a particular district. There is every possibility that the period of decline of Dhaka industry and the period of decline of Birbhum industry differ.
- iv) the existing literatures identify the reasons behind the decline of the industry from the view point of the Bengal as whole. But the reasons may be different for different districts. The reasons for the decay of the Dhaka industry may not be the same for the industry in Burdwan, and so and so forth.

## II

Here we discuss the chapterisation of the study, the research questions and the methodological issues.

### **Chapterisation:**

In addition to this introductory chapter, there are six chapters in the dissertation, which are as follows.

Chapter II: Bengal's Cotton Textile Industry Prior to 1757: A Bird's Eye View.

Chapter III: Techno-economic Environment for the Industry: A Comparative Analysis between Great Britain and Bengal.

Chapter IV: Status of the Industry in Birbhum, Burdwan and Hooghly during 1757 – 1857.

Chapter V: Onset of the Industry's Decline: Identification of the Period.

Chapter VI: Onset of the Industry's Decline: Identification of its Reasons.

Chapter VII: Summary of Observations and Conclusions.

I wish to briefly discuss the contents of each chapter below:

Chapter II considers the various aspects of the traditional cotton industry of Bengal prior to 1757. It discusses the historical evidences of the cotton textile industry of Bengal. It explores the trade of Bengal piece-goods in different parts of the World prior to 1757. It shows the prices of various cotton piece-goods of Bengal prior to 1757. It analyses the production organization of the industry in the said period. It also gives an idea about the production and import of raw cotton in Bengal looms.

Chapter III discusses the technological and economic aspects of the cotton industry of the two production centres of the World, Bengal and England, and identifies the factor(s) behind the victory of the English industry over the Bengal industry in the

World market in the first half of the nineteenth century. It compares the technology of production in both centres, the labour cost of production between the two centres and the position of the two centres in respect of the availability of raw cotton during 1757 -1857. It also discusses the economic environment of the two countries that affected the growth of the industry in both the countries.

Chapter IV analyses the various aspects of the cotton industry in three districts of Bengal namely, Birbhum, Burdwan and Hooghly during 1757 -1857. It discusses the different production centres of the districts where the cotton industry was concentrated. The organization of the production will be explained here. This chapter also highlights various aspects of the districts' industry like the numbers of people employed in the industry and their income, the availability of raw cotton for the industry, the cost of production and the price of the products of the districts.

Chapter V identifies the period in which the decline of the cotton industry in three districts, commenced. It identifies the period of decline on the basis of the following aspects like the size of population which was engaged in the districts' industry, the decline of the consumption of raw cotton by the districts' industry, the decline of the investment in the districts' industry by the English East India Company and some contemporary evidences which confirm the decline.

Chapter VI identifies the reasons behind the decline of the cotton industry in the three districts. This chapter considers the following reasons behind the decline of the cotton textile industry of Bengal. The reasons were the industrial revolution or technological innovation in England, hostile British policy, i.e. stringent tariff on Bengal goods in England, and the oppressive measures on the Bengal weavers by the British and the loss of market after the fall of royal courts. This chapter analyses the validity of the above mentioned factors claimed to be responsible for the decline of the districts' cotton industry and identify the actual reason(s) behind the decay.

Chapter VII sums up the major findings and conclusions.

## **Research Questions:**

The following research questions will be addressed in this thesis:

1. What was the status of the industry in Birbhum, Burdwan and Hooghly districts during 1757 – 1857 in respect of employment, consumption of raw materials, local consumption of finished goods and exports?
2. When did the industry start declining in those districts? and
3. What were the causal factors behind the demise of the industry?

## **Methodology:**

This study is primarily based on archival materials. Secondary sources have been consulted to accommodate available views and opinions from the existing literatures. The documents that have been extensively used here are the British Parliamentary Papers, both House of Commons and House of Lords (various issues), Proceedings of the Board of Trade Commercials (various issues), Proceedings of the Board of Revenue (various issues), Proceedings of the Board of Customs (various issues), the imperial gazetteers (different volumes), the district gazetteers of various districts of Bengal, etc. The cross verification of the data and information from different sources has been made to ensure their reliability.

This study evaluates the status of the industry on the basis of the level of employment and its export performance, since data relating to the number of units in this industry are not available because of its cottage system of production. The lack of data regarding the number of units also compels us to identify the commencing period of the industry's decline in the districts on the basis of consumption of raw cotton by the industry and marketability of its product both in the domestic and in the world market.