

INTRODUCTION

COTTON WEAVING INDUSTRY OF NADIA : 1773 - 1977

A CASE STUDY OF SANTIPUR AND PHULIA

Under the above title of my dissertation, though I have detailed the of evolution of handloom industry of Santipur and Phulia but in another way I have strived to present the entire scenario of handloom industry in Bengal as a whole and its gradual evolution, progress. I have considered 1773 as the cut off year, which is the starting point of my research.

The reason behind choosing 1773 as the cut off date was because in that year the weavers of Santipur had raised their voice of protest against the British. Initially it was an appeal and petition and then it hardened into strong protests, picketing, siege etc. In order to present a clear picture I had to go back in the earlier days of History to explain the circumstances under which and how Bengal or India's textile industry came under the influence of different foreign companies. How shrewdly the British curbed the international market of that textile industry and made an entry to grow their complete dominance all over the industry. While drawing the picture of monopolistic dominance of the British many a time I have referred to the significant events like Battle of Plassey, procuring Dewani of Bengal by the British Raj, famine of 1770. This was done to simplify the subject and emotional flow of thoughts. In different chapters I have given details of the ups and downs of the struggle of the weavers and marked 1977 as the landmark of that era because it is in this year when the struggle of the weavers were recognized with respect by the government and the latter helped them forming co-operatives. The year marked the end and fruitful consequence to the age-old struggle of the weavers. Not that all problems had ended, but 1977 was a definite indicator for solution for the weaver's protest.

In the first chapter- 'The evolution of Cotton Weaving Industry of Bengal Till 1833' I have explained the evolution of textile industry of Bengal in the line of Indian textile industry till 1833. Initially I have shown the divisions among the different classes of weavers that had existed, mention of textile in literary works further proved the appeal of the textile and admiration that it used to draw in those days. The British were attracted to Bengal than to places like Gujarat or Madras. Gradually Dacca in East Bengal and Santipur in Nadia district grew up as the two major centres of textile industry controlled by the British. Santipur was an important textile centre of the undivided Nadia district then. In this chapter I have depicted the political predominance of the British rule, their struggle for establishing monopoly over trade and commerce in Bengal, exploiting the weavers in many ways and finally to establish the Industrial Revolution textile industry of Bengal every efforts of the British to strangle it to death. Showing the change in the items of export by the British I have drawn an end to the chapter. I have tried to show how the British in order to establish their dominance have utterly tortured the weavers often choking their voice. In the third chapter I have shown the series of protests the weavers had broken into. Many a phenomenon and development are interrelated hence have been mentioned time and again leading to unintentional repetition.

The 2nd chapter –“Historical overview of Nadia i.e. Santipur and Phulia as a centre of Cotton Weaving Industry” has the naming of Nadia, its geographical features, naming of Santipur and Phulia, its geographical features have been explained. Since Santipur and Phulia are within the district of Nadia, hence it was essential to discuss about Nadia. In this chapter I have discussed how the modern township of Phulia has evolved. In this connection it is to be noted that the history of Phulia has remained silent for about five hundred years since

the arrival of Adwaitya Prabhu. Phulia has come into the limelight of history after 1947 which I have discussed in detail.

In the 3rd chapter – Protest and resistance movement of the Weavers of Santipur - though the main focus was upon the struggle of the weavers I have touched the description of muslin and mulmul saris, weaving finer textile with handlooms and the specialties of Santipur saris. I have mentioned the names of the prominent weavers mention of such finer textiles in literary works to spread the message that it was just not any occupation or income for which the weavers had fought. They fought for keeping the tradition, the rich legacy alive. That is why even after decadence in industrialization the weavers did not stop. The struggle that had started in 1773 continued on. The Swadeshi movement gave new dimension to it and these hard working weavers did not flee the war field and despite all hurdle, changed circumstances they had continued their struggle for existence. Thus they still sustain with their distinct identity and glory. Many a time for the sake of candid detail I have referred to Dacca and places of East Bengal as they played key roles as centres of textile and weavers' movement.

In the 4th chapter –“Role of Santipur Weaving Class - as a reformer of society” I have brought to light the role of weavers in the social reform movement in the 19th century. This is another side of the spirited righteous weavers. They could realise to combat with the British atrocities it was essential that they had gathered strength at base to develop strong mentality. They had strived to revive their own traditional profession to choosing service under the British. Introducing education for all, resistance to child marriage and Polygamy they had championed social causes beyond the comprehension of many. Loom was their base for action and needle acted as the pen and textile was the paper on

which they wrote their protests. The incessant struggle of these poor weavers may have missed the pages of history but the awareness that was created is memorable among the remote regions of Bengal. I have quoted some of the lines of the poetry the weavers had worked upon more than once and such repetition was desired in the respective context.

In the 5th chapter –“Participation and the role of Women in the Cotton Weaving Industry of Santipur and Phulia”, the participation of women in the evolution of the cotton weaving industry has been revealed. I have focussed upon how women had taken to weaving since ancient times yet later they were reduced to as helpers of the weavers. The women used to earn their living by spinning threads, embroidery work and other finer works. Later the exploitation of the British and decadence of industry had left many of these women unemployed or poorly employed. Here I have referred to the letter of a poor lady. Though the letter was written by somebody else on her behalf but it was out and out overwhelmed with the deep grief and misery that she went through. Later during Gandhiji’s Charka Movement women took active role. Currently women have taken to weaving on handlooms at Santipur, Phulia, Samudragarh and other places along with men. At Phulia though numbers are few as most of the women are engaged in making stoles that keep them highly remunerated. Incidentally at Santipur and Phulia wages of women and men are equal irrespective of gender.

In the 6th chapter, -“Problems of Survival: Role of The Co-operative Society”- I have discussed the history of the collective struggle of the weavers to form samity and later with government aid how it has evolved as Samabay Samity. It did not happen in one day and involved years of persistent effort. At first Santipur saw the light followed by Phulia. Government aid rendered assured

future for the weavers. The exploiting attitude of the moneylenders has changed and the Basak community of weavers came forward with support. Problems still exist yet solutions are available now hence at Santipur and Phulia handlooms are found in almost every house. There is hardly any unemployment today. Though my research period is extended till 1977 yet I have given accounts and details upto 2007 to reveal the fact how the work of co-operatives have flourished and earns accolade all over the world.

It is noteworthy that my primary source of reference are magazines or books written in Bengali in that period or later that have been translated into English making every effort to keep the essence and pleasure of reading intact. Yet lucidity in some parts may be missing owing to the limitations of translation, my apologies for that. The archival documents being old, some of the words could not be deciphered. They have been mentioned as SIC. Again the spellings for the names Santipur and Phulia has occurred as both Santipur and Phulia and also as Santipoor, Santipore and Fulia at different time according to the way they appear in different sources of references. Though as proper nouns I have the liberty to use both the spellings. Same logic applies for or Dacca, Madras which has also appeared as Dacca and Chennai.

The period 1773-1977 is long one, the study may reveal some inconsistency. Again on the other hand, while delving into the anecdotes it is obvious for one to be emotionally attached and thereby many a time one may come across unintentional repetitions and sometimes has been done deliberately to induce the thread of link for someone who is new to the chapter or as reminder or reference (to) of the previous episodes for any occasional reader. My apologies remain for any inconvenience that may come across due to it.

My ultimate objective has been to surface the evolution of cotton weaving industry of Bengal in the context of Indian handloom industry. My sole purpose is to highlight the persistent struggle, indomitable courage and die-hard spirit of the weavers along with the glory of India's own traditional and indigenous handloom industry.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the history of the Cotton Weaving Industry, the name of Santipur and Phulia of Nadia district are well known. They occupied a unique place as a producer of hand woven cotton cloth not only in India but also in other countries of the world. Phulia's hand woven cotton cloth even exported to countries outside India. The history of cotton weaving industry or the cotton weavers of Santipur and Phulia of Nadia district deserves special mention. The English East India Company, impressed by its fineness, art and variety, turned back to Bengal from their textile trade of Gujarat and Bombay. It can roughly be said that the English East India Company set up Factories at Santipur after 1672. The fine cloth of Santipur was named as "Malmal" by the English. Its impression was specifically important in the market of Britain. Thus the English Company entered Santipur for the purpose of trade and they put obstruction to other European Companies in order to maintain their monopoly trade in Bengal. As a result, the nature of trade of the traditional Mughol period undergoes a considerable change. This was visible in the field of weaving industry also. This accounts for the economic and social change of Bengal weaving industry.

During 1757-1772, the English East India Company fully captured the position of the indigenous traders of the Bengal cotton business. Bengal's entire economy was controlled by the needs of the European market. For making cotton piece

goods the weavers took advance from the gomastahs of the company and were obliged to supply the product to them. Thus the company maintained their monopoly control on the weavers, though the advance helped the weavers to increase their production. But in course of time, the unequal distribution of advance, forced degradation of the quality of production, less payment on cotton goods by the company made the weavers aggrieved. During this period, the resistance of the Santipur weavers against the English East India Company was exemplary. At a time, when there was no Trade Union or any labour organization, the protest of the Santipur weavers could be set in the framework of sub-altern paradigm. They not only protested but also demanded for high labour rate. Another noticeable feature was that the Santipur weavers participated in the Sannyasi Rebellion in the Second half of the eighteenth century, which was also anti-British in character. But despite their resistance, the English East India Company controlled and forced the weavers to weave for them and to fulfill their designs they tortured the weavers mentally and physically.

The advent of Industrial Revolution Completely changed the scenario. Machine made industrial product became the rival of Bengal's hand made product. After the Charter Act of 1793, particularly from 1800-1801, Bengal's Cotton goods failed to compete with the machine made products. For a long time, high quality and high range was the main characteristics of Bengal's Cotton goods. But to cope with the changing situation, the weavers now compelled to change their weaving pattern. To compete with the progressive industrial low rate product, Bengal Weavers' also began to produce low quality and low-rate product and slowly Bengal's famous weaving textile centre as Dacca, Santipur lost their glamour.

In 1828, most of the English Kuthi stopped their business but Santipur continued their production. The weavers' of Santipur rapidly adjusted themselves with the changing situation. Despite the indigenous thread crisis, they brought high rate foreign yarn and tried to maintain their fineness in production. During the decade of 1890's, due to natural calamity, the weavers of Santipur lost their continuity but their struggling character did not put it off for long. During the time of the partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi Movement, the weavers of Santipur used their profession i.e. "weaving of loom" as a medium of expression of Swadeshi feelings, with this weapon, they not only fought against communal feeling, social superstitions but also against the British Government. But it was for a short period. The Indian National Congress banned their hand made goods because these were made of foreign yarn. Weavers' patriotic feeling got hurt by the announcement of the congress. Not only male members of the 'community but also the female 'helpers, who were dependent in this occupation, put resistance against this.

The emergence of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian politics and his "Charka" movement ushered in new hope among the cotton weavers of Santipur. They began their struggle with new initiative and new enthusiasm and determination. New venture was started for progressive and modern Tant machine for more production.

After independence, displaced weavers community from East Bengal came and began to settle in Phulia in the district of Nadia, West Bengal. A new history of the struggle for survival started by the weavers of Santipur and Phulia during this period. The deficiency of thread and the exploitation by the Mahajan class made them helpless. At last the formation of the co-operative societies in Santipur and Phulia ended the age-long-struggle of the cotton weavers. At present there

is no Mahajani pressure or any gender discrimination on wage of labour. The flourishing industry now demanded recruitment of weaver from outside Nadia.

Most of the researches on the cotton industry of Bengal, which was its premier industry till the first quarter of the 19th century, have mainly concentrated on its decline. The nature of the production organisation in the industry and the changing economic conditions of the weavers have also been analysed. The present study, stems from a feeling that a more detailed study of the changing fortunes and resistance of the cotton weavers of Santipur and latter of Phulia and their success will added a new dimension in this unexplored region.

HYPOTHESIS

The research hypothesis has to be examined in the social, economic and political forces that worked amongst the cotton weavers of Santipur and Phulia and their continuous protest between the period 1773to 1977.

Conclusion of the thesis contains the very short summary of findings of the study. Without any elaboration it will just mentioned some important facts which are already discussed in the course of our study in different chapter.

The appendices contain the lists of some rare documents like Maps, Photographs from some old Books, Journals and some very important documents of the time of English East India Company which were preserved in the archives and old libraries. Some documents are also collected from individual collections of some distinguished personalities of the different district of Santipur and Phulia.