

# Development of Cotton Textile Industry in India From Ancient Ages to 1947: A Historical Review

## Abstract

This paper traces the growth and development of cotton textile industry in India from ancient ages to 1947 ; till India got Independence. Agriculture has been mainstay of Indian economy from ancient times. Availability of rich soil, climatic conditions enabled them to produce aplenty thus producing more than their needs. This led to production of other crops besides grains; cotton being one of them. India thus was one of the major producers of the cotton in the world and also championed the art of weaving finest cotton and emerged as a major producer of cotton textile in the world. But the situation changed once India lost its Independence and became British colony. The mother country exploited its resources for their benefit and reduced them from producer of finest cotton to supplier of raw cotton to their machines at home. Thus India lost its market and their economy dwindled. The very same people introduced Indians to mechanized production and with the help of some Englishmen India saw birth of cotton textile mills. It led to foundation of series of mills across the country producing not only for their own needs but catering to the world.

**Keywords:** Cotton, Textile Industry, handloom, East India Company

## Introduction

Cotton textile industries were among the first to develop in India because cotton was grown here in large quantities since ages. India is believed to be the original home of cotton. The cultivation of cotton is supposed to have started about eight thousand years ago when the human race started cultivation. It is believed that it reached Arabia and Egypt from India. With cultivation of cotton art of spinning and weaving developed simultaneously.

## Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to trace the growth of cotton textile industry in India. The art of spinning and weaving was well developed in India in ancient times; is proved by references in Vedas and Puranas and numerous artifacts found from various archaeological sites. It is interesting to trace this journey from ancient ages to modern time. The study tries to trace the various challenges that Indian textile industry has faced in its journey from its zenith when Indian cotton was most sought after product in the world market forcing other countries to opt for protectionist policy to save their industries to its nadir under the oppressive foreign rule of the British. Indian cotton industry revived again with mechanization and foundation of various cotton textile mills.

People had knowledge of spinning and weaving long before they started weaving cotton and when cotton was available they started making yarns using spindle and these threads was used to weave cotton clothes. Art of spinning and weaving seems to have been well developed in India even in pre-historic age. <sup>1</sup>In Vedas which are regarded as the oldest books in the world there is quite detailed description of the process of producing cloth including spinning, weaving, dyeing etc., various implements used and their parts as well as numerous varieties of cloth and their prevalent uses.

There is description of fabrics made from all four types of natural fibers such as hemp, wool, silk and cotton. <sup>2</sup> There are references of cotton cloth and weavers in Manusmriti, Ramayana and Mahabharat which shows that cotton industry was well developed in that time. Discovery of spindle and spindle whorls and clay figurines clothed in fabric from the ruins of Indus Valley Civilization is clear reference that this art was well developed around 2500 B.C. This art continued to flourish under Mauryan Age which is established by Greek accounts .



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Greek writings of those days abound in reference to Sindon (Sindhu) and Gangetic (Ganges) fabric. Megasthenes testifies to the Indians love of dress.<sup>3</sup> Indian cotton industry revived again with mechanization and foundation of various cotton textile mills. Cotton textile industries were among the first to develop in India because cotton was grown here in large quantities since ages. India is believed to be the original home of cotton. The cultivation of cotton is supposed to have started about eight thousand years ago when the human race started cultivation. It is believed that it reached Arabia and Egypt from India. With cultivation of cotton art of spinning and weaving developed simultaneously. People had knowledge of spinning and weaving long before they started weaving cotton and when cotton was available they started making yarns using spindle and these threads was used to weave cotton clothes. Art of spinning and weaving seems to have been well developed in India even in pre-historic age.<sup>4</sup> In Vedas which are regarded as the oldest books in the world there is quite detailed description of the process of producing cloth including spinning, weaving, dyeing etc., various implements used and their parts as well as numerous varieties of cloth and their prevalent uses. There is description of fabrics made from all four types of natural fibers such as hemp, wool, silk and cotton.<sup>5</sup> There are references of cotton cloth and weavers in Manusmriti, Ramayana and Mahabharat which shows that cotton industry was well developed in that time. Discovery of spindle and spindle whorls and clay figurines clothed in fabric from the ruins of Indus Valley Civilization is clear reference that this art was well developed around 2500 B.C.

This art continued to flourish under Mauryan Age which is established by Greek accounts. Greek writings of those days abound in reference to Sindon (Sindhu) and Gangetic (Ganges) fabric. Megasthenes testifies to the Indians love of dress.<sup>6</sup> Indian cotton was very popular in Rome. Pliny's description need no repetition and Decca was the shiniest star of the Indian cotton textile industry. Throughout the country there were hundreds of centres with their distinctive features. The printed chintzes and calicoes of Calicut, the muslin and doria saree of Benaras, chanderi saree of Kota, bandhanis of Jaipur, kalamkari of Andhra Pradesh to cite a few examples brought tons of precious and yellow metal to India. All this was achieved by hand spun and hand woven clothes. Indian fabric attained greater refinement with marvelous weaving techniques to produce fascinating designs and is depicted in Ajanta Cave paintings. The famous Chinese traveler Huen Tsang who came to India in 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. also testifies it. The European travelers like Marco Polo who visited India in 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. also speak highly of Indian cotton fabric which looked like "tissue of spider's web". Indian textile reached the peak of their glory during Mughal Period.

When the British came to India India was major producer of cotton, jute, indigo, opium tea and coffee.<sup>7</sup> It is mentioned in the book *Naked Truth* published in 1696 that the use of Indian muslin had become quite popular in England by then. As a result of agitation by the English traders the use of 'calicos' (cotton fabrics) was banned in England without much

success. Indian cotton captured market in England and many laborers in England lost their jobs due to recession. Expressing concern over the situation Daniel Defoe said Indians have entered our homes, bedrooms, curtains, chairs and even our beds are made of Indian fabric or raw material.<sup>8</sup> Indian cotton was very popular in England especially among ladies of the time, the brighter the cloth the higher the popularity.<sup>9</sup>

This way import of cotton from India was adversely affecting the British economy. Agitation started against import of Indian goods. According to W.H. Moreland, in 17<sup>th</sup> century India exported nearly eight thousand bales of cotton out of which four thousand were exported to different European countries. As a result a law was passed in 1700 A.D. on all cotton except calicos imported from India, China, Iran or eastern islands an import duty of fifteen percent was to be imposed. As a result import of white cotton increased manifolds which in turn resulted in flourishing of printing and dyeing industry in England. In 1720 a new law was passed restricting use of Indian cotton or silk printed or dyed in England. Anyone breaking the law was imposed with a fine of five pounds individually and every seller was fined twenty pounds for selling such clothes. But like previous restrictions these restrictions failed to check the popularity and use of Indian cotton among English people. Due to restriction import of cotton was slightly declined and it remained 6, 18,678 units in 1722, which increased to 11, 15,011 units in 1723 and 12,91,614 units in 1724.<sup>10</sup> Some writers criticized "passion for their fashion" saying it is responsible for their decline. Not only England even France also followed protectionist policy against Indian cotton to save their industry from competition and imposed a ban on import of cotton from India. Many other European countries followed the same and banned import of cotton from India.

Industrial revolution in Europe resulted in large scale industrialization. The invention of steam engine, spinning jenny, mule machine and power loom with flying shuttle brought in their wake a revolution in cotton textile industry. These developments coupled with rise in British power in India changed the entire scenario of cotton hand spinning and weaving industry in India. Now India was to serve as a supplier of raw material to the British industry. The weavers were forced to weave for English traders only. They were forcibly given weaving assignments and were paid in advance, though payment was much less than the market price, and were not allowed to sell their goods in open markets. Oppositions led to punishment and jail. Thus development of British industry brought destruction for Indian handloom industry. They were paid inadequately. Import duties were imposed on coarse cotton from India in Britain but fine clothes manufactured in Britain were sold in India without paying any import duties. Indian goods were heavily taxed and import of silk was totally banned.

Karl Marx criticized this by saying, "It was the British intruder who broke up the Indian handloom and destroyed the spinning wheel. England began with driving the Indian cottons from the European market; it then introduced twist into Hindostan, and in the end

inundated the very mother country of cotton with cottons.”<sup>11</sup> Had India been independent she would have retaliated, would have imposed prohibitive duties upon British goods and would have thus preserved her own industries from annihilation. This act of self defense was not permitted, she was at the mercy of stronger power ,British goods were forced upon her without paying any duty and the foreign manufacturers employed the arm of political injustice to keep her down and ultimately strangle a competitor with whom he could not have contended an equal term<sup>11</sup>With the acquisition of power from East India Company to the British government India was exposed to whole tribe of British traders and merchants who pounced upon India's economy like falcons. That led Lord Bentinck the then Governor General of India to admit, “Misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of cotton weavers are littering the plains of India.”<sup>12</sup>

It was with the efforts of some Englishmen cotton textile industries were introduced in India. The first cotton mill was established in Kolkata named “Bauria Cotton Mills”, founded with help of British but it was closed down soon.<sup>14</sup> In 1851 Kavasji NanaBhoi Davar , a Parsee businessman established second factory in Bombay . After three years in 1854 it started under the name of “Bombay Spinning and Weaving Company.” Till 1861 only twelve factories were running in India. American war of independence led to the increase in demand of cotton from India as a result price of cotton rose. But after the end of the war again Indian cotton lost the market.

During American War the money earned by supplying raw cotton was utilized in establishing cotton textile mills in India. But once the war ended the trade with India declined, as a result many cotton mills in India were closed down. They could only be restarted after 1871. By 1874 there were fifty six mills in Bombay Presidency with 43,000 employees.

Development of Indian industries posed a big challenge to Lancashire cotton industry. So, gradually import duties on cotton goods from England were abolished. Another provision which killed the Indian industry was stabilizing the Indian currency at the rate of 1shilling 4pence. As a result India lost its profit in Chinese trade also which it could have made with silver trade from China. From 1880 to 1900Indian cotton industry developed but it could not meet up the demands of Indians so import from Britain and America continued. By 1904 India had 104 cotton mills but they could not compete with imported goods

QUANTITY OF PRINCIPAL EXPORT						
ARTICLE	1913-14	1918-19	1928-29	1934-35	1945-46	
<b>COTTON RAW (1000 TONS)</b>	430	391	610	615	136	
<b>TWIST&amp;YARN (1,000,000 lbs)</b>	192	129	31	12	15	
<b>PIECE GOODS(1,000,000 yards)</b>	90	156	71	57	457	

The table shows while export of raw cotton declined from 430 tons to 136 tons in 1945-46 while export of piece goods increased from 90 to 457 lakhs yards <sup>15</sup>India got independence in 1947 at that time it had 394 cotton mills. As independence came with the pain of partition it had to share its resources with the new born Pakistan. As a result India got 380 mills out

and were forced to produce thread in place of clothes.

The Swadeshi movement of 1905 gave a boost to Indian industry .As a result India became a major producer of cotton and by 1914 India was forth major producer of cotton textiles after England, U.S.A., and Germany.

This momentum continued even after First World War But as imports were prohibited during war new machines could not be imported hence no new mills were established during this period and due to lack of machinery and parts many mills were closed down. As a result by 1920 number of textile mills were reduced to 253 on the other hand due to lack of machine made clothes Indian handloom industry flourished. After the end of the war not only mills increased but with the changing atmosphere handloom industry also developed. In 1921-22 Indian cotton mills met forty two percent of demand and handloom industry supplied 32 percent af demand and 26 percent was covered with imported clothes.

The fall in textile industry began by 1921. As a result profit of many Indian textile mills dipped manifolds. Attempts were made to save them by following protectionist policy and an import duty of 15% was imposed on British goods and duty of 20% on goods imported from other countries.

Import of Cotton(in Lakhs Rupees)	
1913-14	54.70
1918-19	52.83
1928-29	72.99
1934-35	27.04
1945-46	23.03

During Second World War cost of living raised and food and clothes became dearer. The war began in 1939 and by 1942-43 the production of cotton in India fell by 240 lakhs yards. But soon demand for Indian cotton increased as it was cheaper than cotton of other countries. Indian cotton was used not only by common people bit for soldier's uniforms also. So World War again helped to raise the demand of Indian cotton when a major part of the world faced acute food and clothes crisis. As demand and production increased two shifts were introduced in cotton mills resulting in increase of production to 487.6 lakhs yards in 1943-44. It was still far behind the demand

of 394 but lost almost 60% of cotton producing area to Pakistan. But with the planned development of Nehruvian Era India set forward new revolution of cotton textile production with theses resources and created a niche for its produce in the world market.

### Conclusion

The detailed analysis of the growth of cotton textile industry in India has shown us that cotton production has made a long journey in India and this journey has been full of various challenges, ups and downs and surprises. From pre historic period till the Mughal rule Indian cotton industry faced no competition and ruled the world market with their finest cotton. But the real challenge came with the arrival of East India Company who destroyed the ancient handloom and weaving industry of India and reduced them to the producer of raw material; thread and yarn to be woven in their mills in England. Indian weavers were forced to weave for their English masters only. This exploitation destroyed Indian people and their economy. Later with the efforts of some Indian businessmen and English people cotton mills were established in India. They developed gradually along with handloom industry to meet up the demand of people. Mechanization brought a challenge to handloom industry which could not match the quantity of cloth produced in mills; thus crushing the indigenous industry. But the cotton textile mills flourished and are catering to the needs of the people.

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