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Occasional Paper No. 41

DETERMINANTS OF TERRITORIAL SPECIALISATION
IN THE COTTON HANDLOOM WEAVING INDUSTRY
IN EARLY COLONIAL BENGAL

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Occasional Paper No.41

Determinants of Territorial Specialisation
in Cotton Handloom Weaving Industry in
Early Colonial Bengal

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Determinants of Territorial Specialisation
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Early Colonial Bengal

Introduction

In Bengal, handloom weaving has a long tradition of survival through centuries, irrespective of the occasional ups and downs. Although the industry is the most important in the cottage sector, supporting the largest number of craftsmen, the present-day spatial pattern of its development in West Bengal shows strikingly localized concentration in a few core pockets in certain districts. It is not always possible to analyse this phenomenon limiting one's perspective within the present time period only, because the recent pattern of distribution of the industry is nothing sporadic, but reflects the locational viability of certain areas where originally the concentration of handloom weavers took place in pre-colonial and colonial days. Looking back into the history, it becomes evident that the concentration pattern did not deviate much from that of the earlier days, barring a few cases where a changed situation added either to the positive or negative aspect of any of earlier locations. It is in this context that it has been felt necessary to analyse the localisation pattern of cotton handloom weaving industry in early colonial Bengal along with an in-depth study of its territorial specialisation which emerged simultaneously with the clustering of the industry in the favourable locations. The object of this study has ultimately been set on finding out the various territorial specialisations and to examine and understand the decisive factors which worked together behind the emergence of such specialisations.

While working on the above theme, attention has been devoted to the discussion of a set of geographical, economic and social factors,

but paucity of relevant primary data has been a major constraint and therefore the discussion has to be mainly based on secondary source of information.

I

It is interesting to note that since pre-colonial days a specialisation in production of cotton cloths was prevalent among the weavers in different weaving clusters in Bengal. The district of Dacca took the leading role in cotton weaving and specialised in the production of different varieties of muslins - plain, striped and flowered, the finest fabrics from Bengal.¹ In this regard, Rennel has remarked that Dacca had "a vast trade in muslins and manufactures the most delicate one, among those that are so much sought after in Europe".² John Taylor, Commercial Resident at Dacca in a letter to the Board of Trade dated 31st May, 1797 mentioned the following varieties of muslins³ : (a) Arawans, (b) Allabalies of five different sorts (c) Buddun Coss (badankhas), (d) Doorias of various kinds such as fine, superfine, middling, Dutchfine, Dutch superfine, Dutch middling (e) Jamdanies (f) Malmals of various descriptions (g) Nayansooks (h) Handkerchiefs (i) Sarbatis (j) Seerbunds (k) Sublims (l) Tanjibs of many varieties (m) Terrindams (n) Sarkaralis of two different sorts (o) Seerhandconnas of several kinds (p) Cossaes (khasas of different description). According to the maximum prices paid, the main varieties of muslins could be hierarchically classified in the following order of fineness : 'tanjeeds', 'mulmulls', 'nansooks', 'terrindams', 'alibalies', 'seerhandconnaes', 'addatties', 'humhums', 'sarnoes', 'cossaes', 'chowtars', 'gurras'. It is however, necessary to mention that one particular variety also had many variations in fineness and any shipment might include 'tanjeeds', for instance, at both Rs.50 and Rs.20 per piece.⁴ Apart from the manufacture of plain muslin cloths, embroidered muslin clothes also

manifested the excellent craftsmanship of Dacca weavers. There were two types of embroidered clothes. One variety was white embroideries in white cotton thread on Tanjibs and Mulmulls which had few types like Azara-Casida, Japonis, Meramats, Domes, Jamdams, etc. Embroideries in colours were also done on fine Sannoes and Bazins.⁵

The important cotton manufacturing centres in the Dacca district were Dacca, Sonargaon, Dumroy, Teetabady (on the eastern side of river Luckia), Jangalbari - Bazitpur auring of Dacca whereas Tanjees were woven at Teetabady.⁶ Sonargaon's reputation was for the production of thin textured muslins and flowered muslins, called Jamdani muslins by local muslin weavers.⁷ Besides these places, different types of muslins were also manufactured at Moorapara, Babapara, and other villages on the banks of the Luckia river and mixed cotton and silk cloths at Abdullapur in Bikrampur Pargana.⁸ A more detailed account of specializations of different aurgings under Dacca factory has been compiled from the letter-books. The account goes as follows⁹ :

Chandpur	-	Adi, Cossa, Laccowric and Nainsook.
Dacca	-	Abrawan, Adi, Buta, Cossida, Chikan Dorea, Jamdani, Jari and Plain cloth.
Dhamrai	-	Butta, Cossida, Terindam and Plain cloth.
Jangalbari	-	Adi, Bafta, Buta, Cossa, Guzee, Kora, Nainook, Plain cloth, Samudralahar thread, Seerhandconnae, Sarkar-Ali and Tanjeb.
Sonargaon	-	Adi, Allaballee, Buneo, Cossa, Guzee, Mulmul, Plain cloth, Samudralahar thread, Seerband and Seerbati.

- Srirampur - Cossa, Dimitie, Hamham, Ijri and Long cloth.
- Titabadi - Tanjeb.

Plain white Muslins and Cassaes were manufactured at Shantipur and Buron in Nadia district.¹⁰ Production of finer cloths was more restricted in North Bengal as compared to that in South Bengal because of the prevalence of silk and mixed goods manufactured there, but still a few varieties of muslins were significant. For example, Maldah, Jagannathpur, Sabashpur in Maldah district, Seerpore in Rajshahi district, Cognari in Mymensingh district specialised in the weaving of muslin varieties like Mulmulls, Tanjibs, Cassaes, Elatches, Humhums, Chowtahs, Totally, Seersuckers etc. for the markets of Busorah, Mocha, Jidda, Pegu, Acheen and Malacca.¹¹ Aurangs at Rangpur district and Ghoraghat and Buddaul in Dinajpore district had Musmulls and Tanjibs in their production lists.¹² However North Bengal weaving centres also produced some coarser cloths like Saunoose (plain cloths for shirts) and Baftas.¹³ In Dinajpur and Maldah where coloured goods were woven, an intermediary stage of dyeing was also introduced.¹⁴ Kheerpoy, Radhanagar, Chandrakona, Canicola and Casijora, the notable weaving centres in Midnapur district were famous for the production of Doreas and Terrindams whereas Mulmulls used to be woven in Canicola and Toques, coarser cloths used by local people for turbans were specialized product of Chandrakona.¹⁵ A few other species of piecegoods were also mentioned as the product of Midnapur district in the district records. These include Charconnaes (chequered muslins), Chucklaes (mixed silk and cotton), Niallaer (blue cloth), Peniascoes, Sannoos.¹⁶ A type of coarse calico called Gurrah, though used to be produced elsewhere, was most abundantly manufactured in Birbhum district and in Sonamukhi in Bankura district.¹⁷ The cotton yarn, used for Gurrah cloths in Birbhum district was of a

middle variety, a rather coarse yarn with very little qualitative variation. Hence there were only three assortments of Birbhum Gurrahs i.e. ordinary, middling and superfine, the latter also known as English Company's assortments. Price of the cloth indicated the qualitative difference. In the context of Danish trade in Bengal cotton cloth in the second half of 1780's Ole Feldbaeck writes as follows :

"The difference is usually reckoned to be half a rupee per piece, so that when, for instance, ordinary or Dutch Gurrahs are bought at 85 rupees per cerge, the good or middling assortments are at 95 rupees and the best at 105 rupees; this should be understood relatively, because gurrahs of the English Company's correct assortment such as the cloths, especially in the bales no. 901 to 951, and 34 other bales nos. 1085 to 1090, 1111 to 1118 and 1156 et seq. in the Dannebrog 1788 are not to be acquired now at less than 110 to 120 rupees per cerge".¹⁸

II

The spatial pattern of distribution and specialisation of weaving clusters in Bengal, discussed so far, was in all possibility guided by the association of a few factors. For example, the role of climate was of major significance in the production of fine muslins in Dacca district. The hot and humid climate of Dacca district was ideal for handling the fine muslin threads while the comparatively dry and arid atmosphere of Birbhum district was unsuitable for weaving finer stuffs. In 1871 the average annual mean temperature of Birbhum district for the preceeding ten years was 77.25°F and average annual rainfall 54" while in the same year Dacca district recorded an average annual rainfall for the preceeding ten years of 75.23".¹⁹ Due to a drier climate Birbhum weavers' specialisation automatically took a turn for coarser calicoes.²⁰

No less important than favourable climate was the availability of suitable raw-material in the proximity of weaving clusters. It will be evident from the following discussion that almost all the weaving districts of pre-partition Bengal were, in common, enjoying one locational advantage, i.e., of having indigenous source of raw-cotton. Bengal weavers used two main varieties of cotton, namely the *Gossypium Herbaceum* (known in Bengali as desee kapas and in Arabic as Kuttum) and the *Gossypium Arborium* (or murmah)²¹. The chief commercial form of the *Arborium* species is the plant, identified by Todaro, as *Gossypium Neglectum*. It is usually grown in large bush as a field crop and is sometimes found not more than 18 inches high. It has bright yellow flowers and deeply segmented leaves, which in shape are hardly distinguishable from *Gossypium Arborium* proper, barring the fact that they are more herbaceous and very much more hairy.²² Todaro categorized all the China and Dacca cottons to the species *Gossypium Neglectum*, on the contrary to Roxburgh who specified the Dacca cottons as forms of *Gossypium Herbaceum*. In this debate, Watt has taken a middle path and has commented that while some of the Dacca cottons belonged to the species *Gossypium Neglectum*, others most certainly did not belong to that category.²³

In another later classification²⁴ of the species *Gossypium Arborium*, based mainly on geographical distribution with which is closely associated genetic divergence in the species, the *Gossypium Neglectum* variety has been included under the race *Bengalense* and *Burmanicum*. The race *Bengalense* is of recent cultivation in the Indo-Gangetic plain and spread westward during the last century from East Bengal. The other race *Burmanicum* had been found in East Bengal.²⁵

The report written by Mr. T. Allan Wise in June 1860 on the indigenous cotton of Bengal recognized eight varieties of cotton as

found in Eastern Bengal, namely (i) Tipperah Hill cotton (ii) Sheraj cotton (iii) Bogga cotton (iv) Borailli cotton (v) Dacca cotton (vi) Dacca Tangori cotton (vii) Common Bengal cotton (viii) Foreign cotton lately introduced.²⁶ The Sheraj cotton, as Mr. Wise points out, "very probably comes from the Garo hills. It is considered after Borailli the second best cotton found in the Bazars of Mymensingh and from it the cloth worn by the better class of natives is made. It is bought by the ryots in the bazars for their wives and daughters to spin into thread, which they sell to the professional weavers to make into cloth or for the markets. The Bogga was a very inferior type of cotton used in making the Do-Suthi or 'two-thread' cloth employed for sails. It was said to come from the mountains of Assam. The Borailli is the finest kind of cotton procurable in the marts and from it is made the very fine thin cloths which the landed proprietors and wealthy natives are fond of wearing. It is the largest cotton plant I know, reaching the height of some eight or nine feet but it only grows in high village lands quite clear of inundation. It bears pods every month in the year for three or four years in succession and being in every way such a different plant from any of the Dacca kinds, I am inclined to think it is peculiar to Mymensingh district, or more probably is a foreign kind imported here by some of the early portuguese settlers who had large villages in the district".²⁷ The Dacca cotton from which the famous muslins were woven was an annual crop, found on the low-lying rich, alluvial lands, which were periodically inundated. It was sown in September or October. Describing the Dacca Tangori Cotton Mr. Wise remarks as follows :

"It grows on the high red clay lands to the north of Dacca and attains the height of five feet. It is sown in July and the crop reaped in February. It bears a light crop for two or three years".²⁸

It is difficult to categorize all these eight varieties as *Gossypium Neglectum* because although it is beyond doubt that *Gossypium Neglectum* species occurred in East Bengal, there were also specimens from *Gossypium Herbaceum* species in this area. It is thus impossible to determine to what species, varieties, or hybrids Mr. Wise's eight Dacca cottons belonged. According to Watt, the Sheraj and Borailli cottons, were forms of or hybrids of *Gossypium Arboreum* while the Dacca Tangori cotton cultivation of which gradually came to an end might have been *Gossypium Neglectum*.²⁹

In a latter report written by H.J.S. Cotton in 1876 'On Cotton Cultivation In The Interior of Bengal' two forms of arboreous indigenous *Gossypium* have been recognized. Of the northern part of Rajshahi he wrote :

"The varieties are locally known under three names, viz., Boyabonga, Chengtabonga, and Buramuri. Mr. Fason, the Joint Magistrate who drew up the report for the district says:- 'there are certainly two strongly marked varieties, both apparently *Gossypium Arboreum*, though neither answer the description exactly. The first of these is an erect, ligneous, slender-looking plant, growing six or eight feet high, with three or generally five-lobed palmate leaves; lobes acute, elongated and lanceolate. The flowers large and showy, reddish pink in colour, with purple claws.... This variety is called Chengta-bonga or Bon Kapas".³⁰

The second variety has been described :

"As having had broader leaves, sub-acute lobes, and more deeply toothed bracteoles, the fruit, 5 celled, the staple less plentiful though longer, and fuzz of a grey colour. This is the Boya-bonga".³¹

Different methods of cultivation of cotton were practised by the highland and the lowland farmers. In lowland areas, two crops were grown every year, the spring crop being more superior. The land was left fallow after an interval of three four years. After the soil was ploughed, the seeds were smeared in, cow-dung manure were broadcast and harrowed in. In lowland plots, the crop was given little attention after the initial ploughing and weeding were over. The cotton yielding coarser types of yarn was often grown by the peasant on the land, adjacent to his house.³² The method of cotton cultivation in highlands differed distinctly from that in lowlands and an account of highland cotton cultivation in Bengal was narrated by a Tipperah beparie who had carried on cotton trade for a number of years :

"In the month of Phalgun, they cut down the hill bamboo, which they burn during the month of Cheyte, and when the showers come in Bysack, they begin to cultivate the jhooms in the following manner: they mix the seeds of cotton and paddy in koharrah or wicker basket which they sling over their shoulders and then scraping the ground with an iron instrument called a Pakeezal which resembles the Bengal codally they sow the seeds of the paddy and cotton in the same cavity and alongside there of and in the same month are also sown other articles Each of the above articles comes to perfection in their own season. In the month of Cartick and Agrahan, the season of cultivation is at an end. They weed and clean the bamboo leaves which have fallen In the month of Asin the pods of the cotton appear and in Cartick and Agrahan they gather them. Cotton ripens from Cartick to Pous and yields small revenue to the Raja which is collected in the manner of a mathode upon the actual produce. When ten or twelve families are collected they are called a Pharwah and such Pharwah is superintended by a Chowdhury who is responsible

for the business of a Pharwah immediately under him to the Roy or Aurang Chuppeah, or Sarkar Dakkuah or Mour who presides over

Thus, in contrast to the lowland cultivation, highland cultivation commonly known as Jhoom cultivation yielded one crop over a period of ten months, extending from March to November or December. Also, in hill cultivation utilization of collective labour was more common than individual farming, practised in the plains. Finally, in highland cultivation yield was lower and coarser than that in the lowlands.

John Crawford, a service holder of the East India Company stated to a committee of the British house of commons in 1830-31 that the fine variety of cotton for the fine muslin was cultivated by the natives alone in Dacca district and was hardly known in English market or even in Calcutta.³⁴ Taylor described the features of such cotton of Dacca district in the following lines :

"The material of which the fine Dacca muslins are made is entirely the produce of the District. The plant is an annual and attains the height of about five feet. It is described by Roxburgh as a variety of the *Gossypium Herbaceum*. It is said to differ from the common plant of Bengal in the following particulars : 1st, the branches are more erect, 2nd, the whole of the plant is tinged with a reddish colour...; 3rd, the peduncles which support the flowers are longer, and the exterior margins of the petals are tinged with red; 4th, the staple of the cotton is longer, much finer and softer they were known by the names of Phuti Nurma and Bairati".³⁵

Commenting on the spatial spread of cultivation of such cotton of Dacca district W.W. Hunter wrote :

"The northern division of the district produces the best cotton, especially that portion bordering upon the Meghna and Brahmaputra in Sonargaon, Kapasia, Tok and Jangalbari in which this article was chiefly cultivated in former times. The soil here, it may be remarked, possesses the different constituents that are supposed to be essentially necessary to the formation of good cotton grown in America.³⁶

Regarding the soils of the district it can be mentioned that the soil of Sonargaon, Kapasia and Jangalbari contained silicious and argillaceous materials which were necessary constituents for cultivation of superior variety of cotton.³⁷ Taylor gives a more detailed account of the cotton growing tracts in Dacca district :

"A tract of land extending from Feringybazur, twelve miles south-east of Dacca, along the banks of the Meghna to Edilpore, twenty miles north of the sea and in some places as far as three in breadth, and situated in the pergunnahs of Kidderpore, Bickrampore, Rajenagur, Cartickpore, Serampore, and Edilpore is allowed to produce the finest cotton (kapas) grown in the Dacca province".³⁸

The other cotton-growing tracts in Dacca district, according to Taylor, included "the banks of the Luckia from the Dulaserree river to a little above Roopgunge, about sixteen miles in length and a few miles on the banks of Brahmaputra, north of the Dulaserree. Of the rest, some was grown in Buldecal, Bowal and Bussora in the adjacent district of Rajeshye (Rajshahi)".³⁹

Even the quality of water sometimes set the geographical limits of a particular phase of production. The hand-spun yarn of Dacca became stronger and finer after bleaching. Its superiority over yarn from other areas was that it did not swell after bleaching due to the skill

of local weavers as well as of the good quality of water around Dacca. In Dacca the best quality of bleaching was maintained in Catorashonda near Sonargaon where the quality of the river water washed the cloth whiter.⁴⁰

Different qualities of raw cotton were either produced or collected in the cotton-weaving districts to be used for the production of varieties of cloths, ranging from coarse to superfine. In Dacca district all the fine muslins like Mulmulls, Allaballies, Dooreas, Terrindams, Tanjibs, Serbetties, and Nayansooks were made of the indigenous Photee cotton of the district while the cotton imported from Mirzapore was used for the Baftas, Hummums and Guzzies and other inferior quality of cloths. The same was true for Arracon cotton. Bhoga cotton, the product of Garo and Tipperah was exclusively used for the manufacture of the coarsest varieties of cloth, worn by the poorer classes in Dacca district.⁴¹ Other districts were also noted for indigenous varieties of cotton from which variation in cotton piece-goods occurred. Maldah's local varieties of cotton were Barrabunga, Biretta and Nurma of which the first one was the best. Of the three varieties of cotton in Burdwan, namely Nurma, Muhree and Bogga, Nurma was the finest variety, used in the production of Nayansooks, Mulmuls, Seerbatis and Dooreas. Muhree, the middle variety was suitable for finer Dhooties, Guzees and Gurrahs while the coarsest Bogga cotton was mainly for the weaving of Gurrahs cloths.⁴² An informative description of Nurma cotton was furnished by Dr. A. Burn in the Bengal Asiatic Society's Journal where he spoke of the habitat which was usually suitable for the cultivation of this particular variety as follows :

"The Nurma cotton is a perennial plant, lasting for four or five years or more. It grows in every kind of soil, but attains perfection only in the light, sandy, gorat lands. The wool is

fine, silky, of considerable strength and fully an inch long. Hedgerows, gardens and groves of trees about the abodes of devotees and temples, are the places where the plant is found. Muslins and turbans are made from it its yield per acre is estimated at one hundred pounds of clean cotton in the first year and in the second at from three to four hundred pounds. The great hindrance to its cultivation is the fact that it requires protection throughout the year".⁴³

Radhanagar in Midnapur district produced three varieties namely Kaur, Muhree and Bhoga of which the first one was qualitatively superior.⁴⁴ From Khirpai local varieties of Lutchee and Kherwah Kapas were produced and sent to Midnapur and Orissa for making fine and superfine threads which were brought back for resale for cloth manufacture. Rangpur weavers used to get the supply of cotton from Rujenie district, Assam, Bhutan and Karibari through merchants. Hill cotton was brought here from Rangamati by paikars who exchanged it for rice, fish and other commodities.⁴⁵ The indigenous varieties of cotton in Hurrupal in Hooghly district included Bogga and Corree of which the former was used for the making of coarser cloths and the later for finer assortments. The local cotton of Santipore was called Kapas.⁴⁶ (See Table below)

<u>Variety of Cotton</u>	<u>Quality</u>	<u>Area of Cultivation</u>
1. Sheraj	Fine	Garo hills
2. Bogga	Coarse	Assam mountains, Garo and Tipperah hills, Midnapur and Burdwan Districts
3. Hotee	Fine	Dacca district
4. Barrabunga	Fine	Maldah district
5. Biretta	Coarse	Maldah district

<u>Variety of Cotton</u>	<u>Quality</u>	<u>Area of Cultivation</u>
6. Nurma	Fine	Dacca, Maldah and Burdwan districts
7. Muhree	Coarse	Burdwan and Midnapur districts
8. Kaur	Fine	Midnapur district
9. Lutchee	Fine	Midnapur district
10. Kherwah	Fine	Midnapur district
11. Borelli	Fine	Mymensingh district
12. Dacca Cotton	Fine	Dacca district
13. Dacca Tangori Cotton	Fine	Dacca district
14. Chengta Bonga	N.A.	Rajshahidistrict
15. Boya Bonga	N.A.	Rajshahi district
16. Kapas	N.A.	Nadia district

III

Facility of communication could not be denied as a factor leading to concentration of weaving population in particular areas. This was evident from a comment by W.H. Moreland who wrote :

"Certain localities had acquired a reputation for special classes of goods while facilities for carriage had led to considerable concentrations of the industry in particular areas either on the coast or along the inland waterways".⁴⁷

A thorough account of the roads and waterways connecting the weaving centres with the rest of the province and country is available from James Rennel's works. The important weaving towns like Dacca, Murshidabad and Patna were connected with Nepal, Bhutan and Sylhet. Other weaving clusters like Chandrakona, Dhoniakhali, Tamluk, Nadia, Radhanagore were linked by different roads to Burdwan⁴⁸: Similarly, Cassimbazar was connected to Patna, Burdwan, Jalangi and thence to Patna, Dacca to Rampur Boalia to Meenkot and Dinajpur, to Ballitungee, to Birbhum, to Maldah, to Rangpur and thence to Rangmati and Gwalpara, to Birkity, to Kandi and thence to Surrol by eleven different roads.⁴⁹ Dacca was connected to Calcutta by two roads. The road from Calcutta to Chittagang and Silhet also passed through Dacca.⁵⁰ An old military road ran from Dacca to Toke in the Kapasia region in East Bengal. Another route stretched from Dacca across Bikrampur from the Padma/Ichamati and passed to through the Faridpur district to Khulna in the Sunderbans.⁵¹

Among the six 'post-roads' mentioned by Rennel, five touched the prominent weaving towns in Bengal. For example, the road from Calcutta to Buxar passed through Chandannagore, Hughli, Cassimbazar, Murshidabad, Arrah etc. while that from Calcutta to Dinajpur continued via Murshidabad. The other two post-roads linked Calcutta and Dacca and Calcutta and Burdwan respectively. Lastly, the road from Calcutta to Balasore connected Midnapur.⁵²

The two main river-routes from Calcutta upwards provided communication with the weaving settlements of Bengal. The one route along Jalangi river passed through Chandannagore, Chinsurah, Hooghly, Harinadi (near Shantipur) Nadia etc.; the other route along the Bhagirathi river continued upto Nadia as before and then went upto Sooty touching the weaving towns like Murshidabad and Cassimbazar.⁵³

IV

The socio-economic and cultural factors of royal patronage as well as heritage of skill in weavers' families were no less important, especially for the production of finer cotton stuffs. Along with the demand in foreign markets, the weaving of such products was given considerable boost by a substantial internal demand that was mainly patronised by the royal and noble families. Royal demand for Bengal muslin dated back to Akbar's time about which reference was made in Abul Fazal's *Ain-in-Akbari*. The Empress Noorjehan was a great patron of the Dacca muslins. Talking about her patronage for the muslin manufacturers of Bengal, Taylor wrote :

"The Empress Noorjehan greatly encouraged the manufactures of the country, and under her patronage the Dacca muslins acquired great celebrity. They became at this time, the fashionable dress of the Omrah at the Imperial and Vice regal courts of Hindostan, while the finer fabrics so exquisitely delicate, as to be styled in the figurative language of the East "Webs of woven wind", 'abroan or running water', or "Shebnem or morning dew" were exclusively appropriated to adorn the inmates of the seragolis",⁵⁴

The demand for muslins in royal families continued during the days of Shahjahan and Aurengzeb. The best quality of muslins used by the royal and noble families used to fetch exorbitant/10 x 2 cubits measurement and only five siccas or 900 grains weight cost Rs.400, while the best Jamdani muslin, specially woven for the Emperor Aurengzeb cost Rs.250.⁵⁵ Abdul Karim has also furnished an account of the royal patronage for Bengal muslins which goes as follows : /prices e.g., in Noorjehan's time, a piece of Abrawan muslin of

"The finest muslins the manufacture of which has been extremely limited owing to long time and superior skill required for weaving each piece were consumed by the household of emperor and nawab of Bengal Those reserved for the emperor were called malbus khas and those for the nawab were called sarkar-i-ali. The sarkar-i-ali was also procured for the use of House of Jagat Seth. In the later period, malbus khas came to be known as malmal khas and the names of malmal khas and sarkar-i-ali were given to two special varieties of cloths.

To procure the finest muslins for the emperor and nawabs of Bengal the Mughal government used to appoint an officer, called 'daroga-i-malbus khas-wa tant khana'. His duty was to maintain looms at different manufacturing stations where weavers were employed to manufacture cloth according to established standards of fineness and texture. Such establishments were called malbus khas kuthi and were of the type of Mughal Karkhanas".⁵⁶

In these kuthis sheds were erected for the provision of working space of weavers who used to work here-under the supervision of daroghas. The weavers working in the Mughal Karkhanas or Kuthis were chosen from the best weavers and were forced to attend regularly at the appointed hours until the piece or part of the piece allotted to each weaver was finished. Mokeems under the Darogha daily checked the thread which the weavers bought for their looms and it could not be used until it was compared with the established muslins and approved of.⁵⁷

Production of plain muslin goods prospered as well to serve the demand of overseas market. By the last quarter of seventeenth century demand grew up substantially for plain cotton cloth for the printing manufacturies in Europe. Manufacture of the finest and most expensive

varieties of muslins, usually the Dacca muslins, were not much patronised by the English East India Company due to the monopolistic trans-action of such varieties by native merchants in the Indian courts and also because of the unsuitability of such material for the West European climate. The costliest muslins bought by the English did not normally exceed Rs.50 per piece (about 21 x 1 yards), whereas the finest varieties woven in Jahangir's times cost Rs.400 per piece.⁵⁸

Manufacture of piece-goods embroideries of Dacca which were mostly worked on finer muslins, namely 'Mulumulls' 'Tanjibs' or 'Cossaes' was to a great extent encouraged by the demand from European clientele. The embroidery was of two types - coloured silk embroidery and Dacca chikan embroidery (cotton worked on cotton). Along with the piece-goods material there were also some demand for ready-made embroidered 'shifts' (a kind of chemise for women).⁵⁹

Apart from the muslins, production of coarser cloths was also significantly patronized by European trade during the late eighteenth century. The account of Ole Feldbaeck points out the amount of such transections.

"It is estimated that 160,000 pieces or rather more, of Birbhun Gurrahs are sent to Europe annually; the English investment in this category is never less than 80,000 pieces. They have at least seven ships annually, and no ship carries less than 150 bales or 12,000 pieces of gurrahs, but generally they carry 200 bales each. A very considerable quantity of gurrahs is sent to Batavia and The East Coast; this quantity, together with that which is used in the country itself, is supposed by far to surpass the quantity exported to Europe, so that probably more than 400,000 pieces are manufactured, in the district of Birbhun in

normal years, but even in December, nevertheless, such a variety of good middling gurrahs might frequently occur, that no quantity can be acquired except for ready money and at high prices. With the exception of English Company's investment natives dominate most of this trade and ready money is, therefore, highly necessary for the Europeans if gurrahs are to be acquired at reasonable prices; so gurrahs have a certain and constant value, lesser alterations in quality, and are not exposed to so many changes as other branches of piece goods trade in which the Europeans - that is, the English - have the largest part and where the sole purpose is to make money".⁶⁰

The manufacture of such fine fabrics as muslins required exquisite skill of the weavers which they used to inherit from one generation to another. As Taylor⁶¹ commented, weaving was the whole-time occupation of the highly-skilled weavers of Dacca. According to K.N. Chaudhury,

"A highly skilled labour force composed of spinners, weavers and finishers had grown up around the provincial capital, out of the chance discovery that the soil in the surrounding area was capable of growing a particularly fine variety of cotton. When competition of machine-made yarn destroyed the spinning industry in the nineteenth century, the handloom weaving was able to survive by drawing on the nucleus of craftsmen already there substituting foreign yarn for the domestic."⁶²

Majority of the muslin weavers belonged to Hindu families except at Sonargaon where the Muslim weavers excelled at weaving Jamdani or figured muslins. The coarser cloths were woven by the lower class Hindu weavers called Jugis and lower class Muslim weavers called Jolas.

The best spinners were Hindu women from 18-30 years of age. The intricate craftsmanship, needed for spinning used to put excessive strain on the spinners' eyes and this limited the participation of older women in spinning.⁶³ A number of stages were involved in the lengthy process from getting the thread from yarn to producing the finished woven materials. Each of such stages needed diversified skill and craftsmanship. Automatically functional specializations occurred and this in turn supported divisions of labour among different communities associated with production of cotton piecegoods.⁶⁴

The above account clearly signifies a localized pattern of concentration of handloom weaving in Bengal in early colonial period. More interesting is the fact that each weaving locality developed its own specialization of either fine or coarse variety or both depending on the nature of demand created by the foreign as well as domestic market. Also decisive were certain factors of production which have already been discussed at length. However, it should be mentioned at this juncture that these locational factors, both geographical and socio-cultural, were not common for every weaving settlement. Rather there were different combinations of factors favouring the emergence of handloom weaving in various localities. As such, it would be rather an over-estimation if one tends to certain generalizations regarding the factors of spatial concentration and specialization in handloom weaving in early colonial Bengal.

FOOTNOTES

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6. N.K. Sinha, The Economic History of Bengal, Vol.I, Firma K.L.M., Calcutta, 1965, pp.167 & 179.
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18. Ole Feldbaeck, "Cloth Production and Trade in Late Eighteenth Century Bengal : A Report from the Danish Factory in Serampore", Bengal Past and Present, Diamond Jubilee Number, Calcutta Historical Society, 1967, p.128.
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26. G. Watt, op.cit., p.10.
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33. *ibid.*, pp.4-5, originally mentioned in B.C.S.C., Range 155, Vol.81, 1790, p.260.
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37. E. Baines, *History of Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain*, London, ~~op. cit.~~ p.62. Also see, James Taylor, *op.cit.*, p.7.
38. James Taylor, *ibid.*, p.11-12. Quoted in K.K. Datta, *op.cit.*, p.428-429.
39. *ibid.* It is mentioned that right upto the beginning of the 20th century the cotton grown for earlier Dacca muslins was grown in the black soil of the districts, adjacent to Dacca town in the north of it, of which area 'Bowal' (Bhowal State) was a part; the black soil extends into North Bengal.
40. K.K. Datta, *op.cit.*, pp.429. Also see Humeeda Hussain, *op.cit.*, p.12.
41. *ibid.*, pp.164-165. Also see D.B. Mitra, *op.cit.*, p.156 originally collected from Proceedings of Board of Trade, 10th August, 1790, Prog. No.60, Vol.87.
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60. Ole Feldbaeck, op.cit., pp.128-29.

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63. J. Taylor, A Sketch of Topography and Statistics of Dacca, op.cit., pp.65-68. Also in Humeeda Hussain, op.cit., p.9.
64. For detailed account of occupational structure of production of cotton piece goods, see Humeeda Hussain, op.cit., Table -1.

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