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Cotton Handloom Manufactures of Bengal 1870-1921

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A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T

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After agriculture the cotton handloom industry was the most important source of employment in Bengal in the eighteenth century. Handloom weavers were scattered in the rural areas as well as the urban centres in almost all the districts of Bengal. Under the impetus of increased demand from European companies, in general, and the East India Company, in particular, weaving of specialised cloths became more organised in the urban centres. One may recall the importance of Dhaka, for instance, whose weavers supplied the English and the European markets with fine muslins - a specialised type of cotton piecegoods.[1]

Nineteenth century accounts[2] and later researches[3] prove conclusively the decline of specialised weaving crafts, in the major urban centres of Bengal in the first half of the nineteenth century. Competition from Lancashire's machine-made, and cheaper piecegoods, and high protective and discriminatory tariff against Bengal's handlooms, had been adduced as the principal reasons for the declining demand for Bengal's specialised crafts. For instance, the decline of Dhaka muslins[4] and the Birbhum garhas[5] may be noted. Along with the ruin of Dhaka muslins, the cultivation of fine quality raw cotton which was grown in Mymensingh and Dhaka districts for the supply of a fine quality yarn to the weavers was also discontinued.[6]

Morris D. Morris, however, refuses to accept this argument.[7] He argues that import of cheap yarn from Lancashire had improved the competitive position of the handloom weavers vis-a-vis Lancashire manufactures. Secondly, he claims that per capita consumption of cotton cloth had increased between 1800 and 1847 and therefore, effective demand for handloom product was on the increase.[8] Besides this, Lancashire

cloth could not be a substitute for the types of cloth demanded by the general run of Indians.

The critics of the deindustrialisation thesis, however, have few empirical data to establish that the specialised crafts of Bengal had not been ruined. Morris' arguments are mere affirmative statements rather than generalisations based on solid research. Import of cheap yarn did increase, but only after the dislocation was nearly complete. As a consequence of increase in import of yarn, since the 1830s, the spinners of Bengal had to quit their profession. Morris fails to take into account the dislocation of the spinners, in particular. There is little evidence to corroborate the proposition that the skilled weavers, who were ruined, had been employed in other manufacturing occupations. Thus, there was no positive substitution. In accordance with Morris' logic, had deindustrialization been checked, W.W. Hunter's Statistical Account of Bengal, written in the 1870s would have depicted the picture of a prosperous handloom weaving industry. No such evidence is available from Hunter. 9

It is known that the weaving industry of Bengal was scattered throughout the rural areas and smaller urban pockets in the various districts of Bengal and these weavers continued to produce goods of a coarser variety which was in demand by the vast majority of rural people, even when the output of the bigger centres of handloom production declined. In those days, (i.e. first half of the nineteenth century) of extreme backwardness in transport it was impossible for the Lancashire men to send their cheap products to the remote corners of the country-side. To what extent cheap imported yarn improved the competitive position of these weavers in the second half of the nineteenth century, when improvements in the communication network had taken place, remains

to be investigated. We have selected the period from 1870 to 1921 for our case study. During this period there was a great improvement in the communication network, which linked the Port of Calcutta with the country-side. As a consequence, the weavers producing coarser varieties faced the competition of Lancashire manufactures. A period of 50 years is fairly long to ascertain, with some confidence, the fortunes of Bengal's cotton manufacturers.

I

Raw cotton cultivation in Bengal

In this connection we provide a brief sketch of the state of raw cotton cultivation in Bengal. The relevance of our discussion is two-fold. In so far as the locally produced cotton is used in local cotton manufacture, the latter may be said to be mainly responsible for the employment and income generated in the cultivation of the crop. Secondly, for small producers supply of raw materials continues to be a problem to this day.[10] Between the middle of the eighteenth and the middle of the twentieth centuries, the handloom weavers and spinners of Bengal seem to have gone through two major phases in respect of raw material supplies. As exports of Bengal handloom products continued to increase in the late eighteenth century, supplies of raw cotton from other parts of India increased. Then when the exports of cotton goods declined, not only did supplies of raw cotton from other parts decline, but the specialized cotton grown for finer quality cloth in some districts also declined. Increasing exports of Indian raw cotton first to China, then to Britain and China and Japan compounded these problems.

In the period before the East India Company more or less converted handloom weavers into wage workers in their aurangs, the supplies

of raw cotton were organised by many merchants working on their own as agents of European companies. With the East India Company as the major exporter of handloom products, the supplies were organized through channels under the control of the Company and the 'independent' merchants working in freedom (and sometimes in competition with the Company). With the drastic fall in exports, such channels of supplies of raw cotton dried up, and supply of the basic raw material which was mainly produced in western, southern and central India became subject to a great deal of uncertainty. A locally available supply would have provided more security to the small producers, at least when the export market for raw cotton was slack.

The General Administration Report of Bengal, for 1882-83 stated that "the cultivation of cotton was not of very great importance in any of the districts of Bengal, with the exception of the Chittagong and Tipperah Hill Tracts", and that, nothing was exported from the districts.[11] In fact, the demand of the spinners had to be supplemented by imports from the North-Western Provinces, and other regions.[12] The picture as regards the source of supply had, thus, changed little compared with the eighteenth century. According to one estimate the local peasants supplied only a little over 12 per cent of the total requirement of the districts of Bengal in the earlier period.[13]

Though marginal in terms of acreage and output in relation to demand in Bengal, the importance of the actual crop produced in the province in the late nineteenth century cannot be denied. Almost all varieties of soils - loamy, calcareous and even sandy - were utilised for the cultivation of the crop.[14] Generally the peasants grew cotton in small plots of land, but occasionally it was sown together with other crops. In Murshidabad, for instance, the peasants planted cotton

along with indigo, and the cotton crop was harvested after the indigo crop was taken off.[15] This feature was also noted in Bhagalpur and the Santal Parganas. After the harvest, cotton was either cleaned by hand or with the foot-roller.[16]

In Bengal, there were generally two cotton crops. The early crop was sown during the monsoon, between April and July, and harvested during the cold weather, between December and February. And the late crop was sown between August and October, and harvested between April and June. The early crop was grown in Jalpaiguri, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Santal Parganas, Hazaribagh, Lohardagga and Palamau districts. Only Bankura and Birbhum were famous for the late cotton crop. Both these varieties were reported to be cultivated in Midnapore, Manbhum and Singbhum.[17] It was generally believed that the late crop gave the best yield and quality.[18] The reports of the district officers submitted to the Agricultural Department furnished numerous vernacular names for the different forms of cotton grown in Bengal.[19] But there can be no doubt that all these were reducible to only a few varieties : the gossypium herbaceum, gossypium arboreum, and gossypium neglectum. According to George Watt, gossypium neglectum may be considered to be the principal variety in Bengal.[20] The characteristic of this species, met with in garden cultivation, is a low tree or shrub, and bright yellow flowers with purple centre or yellow flowers with a purple tinge.

The largest concentration of cotton production was in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Jhumias (that is the tribal people) there, exchanged raw cotton for food crops and other necessities. The bulk of the produce was exported through the traders at Kassalong, Baraduar, Dhaka and Bakhargunge.[21] In the other districts the produce was locally consumed. The local supply fell far short of the demand and,

had to be supplemented with imports from the Northern Provinces.

It is certain that Bengal was not a major producer of cotton. The official argument was that the quality of Bengal's raw cotton was poor, for which the peasants were to be blamed; and the poor quality in turn was a deterrent against the expansion of raw cotton acreage and production.

In some districts of Bengal the climate was appropriate for the cultivation of cotton. In the Santal Parganas, for instance, the soil was found congenial for its growth. It was admitted that, had embankments been thrown across the gorges in the hills, irrigation facility to cultivate the crop could have been secured. As the East Indian Railway ran close to the base of Rajmahal Hills, cotton could be sent easily to Calcutta for export.[22] In spite of all suggestions nothing was done. Therefore to answer the reasons, why cotton cultivation could not be encouraged, we have to look into certain other factors.

Rent demand had increased over the years, either in the form of cash or produce. In some areas, as a consequence of increase in the prices of agricultural commodities and the greater power of landlords, the latter were able to convert many cash paying tenancies and under-tenancies into produce-paying ones.[23] In order to meet the rent demands, many cultivators had to borrow from the rural creditors. Cotton took a longer time to mature than rice or jute. Where jute or rice took less than five or four months in the field, cotton could not be harvested in less than eight or nine months. As the peasant had to pay the rent in 'kists' or instalments, there was no other alternative than to borrow from the trader, moneylender or landlord. The expansion or contraction of acreage under any commercial crop was, thus, to a large extent

determined by these middlemen who knew the market. Moreover, there were few organised markets in the countryside and many grades of intermediaries sprang up between the actual producer and the wholesale merchant. This was a formidable obstacle in the way of the cultivators realising a fair price for the crops.[24] In such a state, thus, crops carrying a greater demand and fetching a relatively higher price shifted the cropping pattern. In Bengal, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, the market for rice and jute had greatly increased.[25] The small peasants, in particular, were persuaded to switch over to more 'remunerative' crops. For instance, cultivation of sugarcane and aus paddy had declined considerably. The new substitute was jute.

Along with the above process there was a perceptible change in government policy. These changes were inter-connected. Partly owing to geo-climatic factors within the imperial framework, Bengal was gradually carved out as a supplier of rice and jute, as Bombay, Berar and Central Provinces were reserves of raw cotton supply [Table I], and the United Provinces and the Punjab emerged as suppliers of sugarcane and wheat. The British cotton textile industry had shifted gradually towards the use of long and medium staple varieties of the fibre. The USA was the major supplier of raw cotton and especially of the long and medium staple varieties. China had since the beginning of the nineteenth century been a major market for Indian cotton. Later on, Japan also joined China as a major buyer of Indian cotton, and an increasing proportion of India's raw cotton exports found their way to the Far East.

J.W.P. Muir-Mackenzie, Under-Secretary to the Government of India, Revenue and Agricultural Department, wrote to the Secretary to

Table 1 Raw cotton acreage in the major cotton growing regions of India and in Bengal, 1892-1917

Year	Five Yearly Averages			Column 3 as percentage of column 2	Column 4 as percentage of column 2
	All India	Bombay and Berar	Bengal		
1	2	3	4	5	6
	Acres	Acres	Acres		
1992-93 to 1896-97	14,473,298	7,543,965	201,300	52.12	1.39
1897-98 to 1901-02	13,791,310	6,731,380	149,740	48.80	1.08
1902-03 to 1906-07	19,240,591	8,134,562	89,180	42.27	0.46
1907-08 to 1911-12	21,458,000	11,035,800	126,600	51.42	0.58
1912-13 to 1916-17	22,221,000	11,080,000	77,800	49.86	0.35

Source: Estimates of Area and Yield of Principal Crops in India, 1892-93 to 1916-17, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta.

the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department on 3rd March 1893 to discontinue the annual forecast of cotton crops in Bengal as it was no longer important.[26] In the editorial of the Bengal Agricultural Journal in 1921, it was clearly state[27]: "Cotton has to compete with jute and as a money making concern it does not stand a chance against it. Then again, the high lands in Bengal are limited and cotton has to compete with such revenue producing crops as tobacco and chillies. The department does not recommend anyone to grow cotton". One local journal also argued the same point.[28] The decline of raw cotton cultivation in Bengal was, thus, accepted as inevitable. Between 1892-93 and 1904-05, the acreage under raw cotton in Bengal fell by 60.93 per cent (see TABLE 2).

Table 2 Acreage and out-turn of raw cotton in Bengal, 1892-'93 to 1904-'05

Year	Area in Acres	Produce in Bales of 400 lbs. each
1892-93	229,900	73,612
1893-94	215,000	59,428
1894-95	206,200	63,871
1895-96	197,900	53,356
1896-97	157,100	40,184
1897-98	174,000	52,590
1898-99	167,900	45,560
1899-1900	160,600	39,705
1900-01	127,700	49,262
1901-02	118,500	32,094
1902-03	100,300	24,366
1903-04	95,800	28,112
1904-05	89,800	25,803

Source: Estimates of Area , and Yield of Principal Crops in India from 1891-92 to 1904-05, Calcutta, 1905.

II

The decline of cotton spinning

The spinning sector had survived on the raw materials supplied from the districts of Bengal and North India. The process of substituting hand spun yarn with machine made yarn had started in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and this process had advanced considerably by the end of the century. The spinning sector was strangled with increasing supply in the market of English and Indian machine made

yarn. In the previous section we have arguod that production of raw cotton was declining in Bengal. From 73,612 bales of 400 lbs. each in 1892-93, the production had decreased to 25,803 bales of 400 lbs. each in 1904-05.[29] The import of raw cotton from North India for production of yarn was also declining. North Indian cotton was exported in increasing quantities from the port of Calcutta to China and Japan.[30] Hand-spinners were no longer in a position to bid for the supplies of raw cotton from outside the province.

In the year 1882-83, the amount of English twist and yarn exported from Calcutta to the districts of Bengal amounted to 1,40,554 maunds. It rose to 1,75,307 maunds in 1885-86 and to 2,07,284 maunds in 1888-89. After that, owing to the manufacture of yarn in the Mills in India, the import of English yarn decreased slightly. In 1895-96, the import of English yarn through the port of Calcutta amounted to 1,66,181 maunds. Between 1889-90 and 1895-96 the import into Bengal of Indian mill-made yarn increased from 27,982 maunds to 62,867 maunds.[31] Though import into Bengal of Indian mill-made yarn had increased the English product dominated the internal yarn market of Bengal.

It was stated in 1876 that in Dhaka, 'the wants of the district for manufacturing purposes are largely supplied by English made thread'.[32] It was at Dhamrai, a place about 20 miles north of Dhaka, that the thread used for the finest muslins was made. Since the introduction of imported thread from 20 counts and upwards weavers had ceased to buy country-made thread. The spinning industry had therefore almost died out. The Collector reported in 1898 that there were only two persons at Dhamrai still living who could spin fine thread which was formerly used in the manufacture of muslin.[33] The number of ordinary spinners in this district fell from 5053 in 1872 to 215 in 1921 i.e. by nearly 96 per

cent.[34] In Bakhargunge, Bhagalpur, Santal Parganas and Mymensingh the decline of spinning was more or less complete by the last quarter of the nineteenth century.[35] In Bakhargunge and Mymensingh, the numbers of spinners in 1872 were 1309 and 2240 respectively : by 1921 these numbers declined by more than 85 and 86 per cent respectively.[36] In Birbhum, wrote F.R.S. Collier, the Collector, in 1897, cotton goods were then manufactured not from home grown cotton and yarn, but from European twist and yarn imported from Calcutta.[37] According to the census enumerations of 1872 and 1921, cotton spinners declined by 99 per cent in number in that district between the two dates.[38] Spinning also declined considerably in Nadia, as the weavers preferred English twist and yarn.[39] In Midnapur, hand spinning totally ceased to exist, as the number of spinners fell from 6713 in 1872 to only one in 1921.[40]

The demand and supply factors gradually cut the ground from under hand-spinning. In Bengal proper, except the districts of Burdwan and Bankura, the number of spinners in 1872 was 57,878; by 1921, the number decreased to 13,275, or the decline was approximately 77 per cent.[41] In 1872, the district of Hughli included Howrah; and the district of Jessore included Khulna; in 1921, these districts were treated separately. In Table 3, which gives district-wise figures of numbers of spinners for the sake of comparison, we have taken Hughli and Howrah together, and also Jessore and Khulna together. In Table 3 we notice a sharp rise in spinning population in 24 Parganas. This might have been due to the growth of spinning mills in this region. In the case of the Jalpaiguri district, where also the number of spinners rose between 1872 and 1921, a possible explanation may be the availability of raw material from within the district (and from Coochbehar). The Mech tribals in this district had supplied raw cotton to the spinners in Jalpaiguri district and this chain was not broken.

Table 3 Total numbers of persons engaged in cotton spinning in Bengal, 1872 and 1921

Districts	1872	1921	Percentage change
1	2	3	4
Burdwan	N.A.	26	
Bankura	1474	N.A.	
Birbhum	4266	21	- 99.50
Midnapur	6713	1	- 99.98
Hughli & Howrah	2375	1016	- 57.22
24 Parganas	1798	3756	+ 108.89
Nadia	1996	80	- 95.99
Jessore & Khulna	1553	58	- 96.26
Murshidabad	2653	214	- 91.23
Malda	1535	258	- 83.19
Rajshahi	1284	151	- 88.23
Pabna	916	877	- 4.25
Rangpur	858	133	- 84.49
Bogra	256	98	- 61.71
Darjeeling	11	1	- 90.90
Jalpaiguri	27	91	+ 237.03
Dhaka	5053	215	- 95.74
Faridpur	2253	731	- 67.55
Bakhargunge	1309	187	- 85.71
Mymensingh	2240	301	- 86.56
Chittagong	8819	4065	- 53.90
Noakhali	2285	712	- 68.84
Tipperah	9678	309	- 96.80

Source: Report on the Census of Bengal, 1872, by H. Beverley, Calcutta, 1872, General Statement VI; and Report on the Census of India, 1921, by W.H. Thompson, Calcutta 1923, Vol.V, Part II, Table XVII.

III

Handloom weaving :

Types of fabrics and foreign competition

The fabrics produced by the cotton weavers of Bengal can be classified into two broad classes - coarser goods made from lower counts of yarn for the consumption of the poorer classes and finer fabrics.

The finer varieties were ruined in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. However, some specialisation continued in some of the centres during our period of survey, such as the weaving of jamdani saris at Dhaka, superfine cotton saris and dhutis at Pabna, and Farashdanga in Hughli district, exquisite embroidered saris at Shantipur in Nadia district, Kulmia cloth at Khanacool in Hughli district.[42] These fabrics were not produced extensively, but had a ready market among the wealthy people. J. Taylor in his Topography recorded that thirty-six different denominations of cloth were still made in his time (1840).[43] But this number probably included, besides the muslins, the various kinds of embroidered cloths which were then made in Dhaka and only a fraction of these were prepared in our period.[44] Kasidas or embroidered muslin pieces, were chiefly used by Muhammadans during prayer time, and also as turbans. The groundwork of kasida cloth was generally woven in villages, such as Shanora, Biliswar, Matail, Dagur etc. But the ornamentation was generally done at Dhaka and at Matail, in the suburbs of the town. The export of kasida had decreased since the decline of Turkish power. During Taylor's time, only 120,000 pieces of this cloth were worked at Dhaka annually.[45]

E.W. Collin in his Report of 1890 observed that there were five hundred families in Dhaka who made ordinary muslin with English thread.

Although Dhaka in his time, did not manufacture the exquisite plain muslins such as sangati (presentation), sharbati (sweet as Sharbat), abrawan (running water) or shabnam (evening dew), it manufactured figured muslins called jamdani saris. In 1890, only about 100 persons were engaged in this work.[46] The author of the Hughli Gazetteer had observed that the trade in the local yarn was extinct, and except in the outlying tracts the manufacture of all but the finest cloths ceased in some of the weaving centres of the district.[47] In the Serampore sub-division, there were said to be 600 families engaged in cotton weaving with outturn estimated at over 9 lakhs of rupees. They were located mainly in Serampore, Haripal and Khanyan. Collin was of opinion that Seram.. re weavers owed the vitality of their trade to an improved handloom they used.[48] Farashdanga, in the French settlement of Chandernagar, had also its own cloth speciality. Shantipur in Nadia district was particularly famous for its manufacture of fine cloth, with colourful, embroidered borders.[49] Collin put it clearly in his Report that though weaving was no longer a profitable occupation, still about 3500 families were engaged in weaving saris with coloured borders in Shantipur alone.[50] Eight years later, N.N. Banerjee asserted that the outturn of cotton cloth at Shantipur was worth about 3¼ lakhs of rupees, of which only Rs.25,000 worth were sold in the town, the rest being exported to other districts annually.[51]

Our enquiry deals mainly with the coarser cotton goods manufactured throughout Bengal, which catered to the mass of population. The districts where the industry was important were Bankura, Hughli, Nadia, Khulna, Pabna, Dhaka, Tripura, Chittagong, Mymensingh. The various products turned out by the weavers were ordinary dhutis, lungis, ordinary saris, special saris and dhutis, mosquito nets, gamchas or towels, chadars, table-cloths etc. According to Collin in the last

decade of the nineteenth century, there were forty families of weavers at Bazitpore in Mymensingh district and a few at Kishoreganj and Kagmari in the same district. Generally the weavers of Mymensingh used imported English yarn, because a standard quality of handspun yarn in sufficient quantity was not available at the village hats.[52] At Chandrakona and Radhanagar in Midnapur district, good quality dhutis, saris and uranis were manufactured and exported in considerable quantities every week to the Howrah mart.[53] Lungis in fast colours were being made in Noakhali, the supply of which was far short of the demand.[54] Coarse cloths, bed-sheets and towels were made at Kushtea, Meherpur, Kumarkhali and Shikarpur in Nadia district.[55] Pabna was another centre of the handloom cotton weaving industry in Bengal. Both dhutis and chadars were exported from the district. The majority of the jolahas manufactured coarse, but very strong red or black bordered cloths with stripes worn by Muhammadan men and women in all grades of life, and native towels and gamchas, samples of which compared favourably with other European and country goods in pattern, texture and durability.[56] Generally imported yarn or thread was used for the manufacture of all types of cloth.[57] In the Satkhira subdivision of Khulna district, the cotton industry was once in a flourishing condition, under the patronage of zamindars; but it had suffered a decline during the later part of the nineteenth century. Still, the Satkhira chadars, dhutis, saris, charkhanas were well known in the market.[58]

During the second half of the nineteenth century, an improved transport network was integrating the rural hinterland with the port of Calcutta. As a result, the coarser varieties faced the competition of Lancashire goods. There was an ever-growing import of piecegoods from the United Kingdom to the Bengal Presidency. Between 1876-77 and 1913-14 importation of piecegoods from the United Kingdom into Bengal Presidency

increased by 115.21 per cent (see Table 4); this period witnessed a distinct upward trend in importation of piecegoods despite fluctuations. From 1914-15 onwards, till the end of the First World War the figures show a sharp decline. Interruption of trade due to the War explains the fall. After the War, from 1919-20 onwards, the importation of piecegoods from the U.K. again started increasing, but far below the pre-War peak. But that does not mean that the volume of total importation was declining. Japan was emerging as large exporter of piecegoods to India.[59]

Did the imported piecegoods compete with all the varieties of handloom products of Bengal or only with a few varieties? From the trade figures of the Customs department, we get a classification of the imported piecegoods. For example, imported grey, unbleached piecegoods were much preferred to Indian made coarse unbleached dhutis, saris and chadars; whereas, coloured, printed or dyed piecegoods ousted the local loommade colourful lungis, saris, gamchas etc. as early as 1879.[60] Tables 5A and 5B show the increasing import of these two varieties. From these two tables it would appear that the value of imports of grey, unbleached goods was far greater than that of coloured or printed goods. Moreover, the imports of the former were rising faster than the imports of coloured or printed goods, Presumably, therefore, they offered stiffer competition to the corresponding varieties which were locally produced than the printed or coloured fabrics. (The figures for the five year period 1915-16 to 1920-21 are not representative, because of the impact of the First World War, the influenza epidemic and other factors).

The structure of demand

The Dufferin Committee Report (confidential) on the Material Condition of the Lower Orders in Bengal (1888), Memorandum on the

Material Condition of the Lower Orders in Bengal in 1891-92 and also 1901-02, Report of the Royal Commission on Agriculture (1929) and the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Report (1930) are significant landmarks of documentation on the condition of the people over the period we are studying. All are unanimous about the poverty of the common people; the degree of indebtedness of the peasantry was high and may have been increasing. Under this condition, the option was not between local or foreign fabrics as such, but between higher and lower prices. Even when it was known that foreign piecegoods were less durable compared to local handloom products and the latter also excelled in fineness and texture, the poorer agricultural classes opted for lower priced piece-goods. J.G. Cumming pointed out that the price differences favoured the English cloth. "Country cloth will last over a year, and imported cloth 7 to 8 months. The cost of the latter is Rs.0-11 to Rs.1-3, of the former Rs.1-12 to Rs.3-0".[61] One explanation for the ill-success of the Swadeshi and boycott movement may be attributed to this. The rural people could not be mobilised for higher-priced Swadeshi products.

There is, however, paucity of material to show the extent to which the swadeshi mills supplied the local demand. Earlier researches have shown that these mills, at first concentrated on the export of yarn, chiefly to the large market in China. In the 1880s Japan entered the field and Indian yarn was gradually driven away from China and Korea. Faced with Japanese competition, the Indian industry shifted its focus to cloth production.[62] The Banga Lakshmi Cotton Mills, for example, not only produced yarn, but also dhutis and saris. Mohini Mills of Kushtea also took up the production of cloth.[63] In spite of these endeavours the rural market was almost the exclusive monopoly of Lancashire. The Indian mill products could not compete with different types of imported cotton piecegoods effectively.

Table 4 Imports of cotton piecegoods from the U.K. into the Bengal Presidency, 1867-1926

Years	Yards in lakhs	Percentage change	Years	Yards in lakhs	Percentage change
1867-68	636,400		1897-98	995,645	- 13.66
1868-69	721,632	13.39	1898-99	1,206,127	21.14
1869-70	539,685	- 25.21	1899-1900	1,254,162	3.98
1870-71	573,520	6.26	1900-01	1,154,423	- 7.95
1871-72	636,400	10.96	1901-02	1,146,908	- 0.65
1872-73	565,277	- 11.17	1902-03	1,215,364	5.97
1873-74	524,622	- 7.19	1903-04	1,118,017	- 8.01
1874-75	669,819	27.66	1904-1905	1,221,633	9.27
1875-76	606,819	- 9.48	1905-06	1,335,955	9.36
1876-77	732,509	20.81	1906-07	1,160,323	- 13.15
1877-78	928,218	26.72	1907-08	1,340,499	15.53
1878-79	718,486	- 22.59	1908-09	978,142	- 27.03
1879-80	843,566	17.41	1909-10	1,255,419	28.35
1880-81	969,910	14.98	1910-11	1,139,394	- 9.24
1881-82	941,037	- 2.98	1911-12	1,237,984	8.65
1882-83	926,650	- 1.53	1912-13	1,564,898	26.41
1883-84	958,644	3.45	1913-14	1,576,462	0.74
1884-85	961,247	0.27	1914-15	1,356,409	- 13.96
1885-86	936,892	- 2.53	1915-16	1,167,629	- 13.91
1886-87	1,187,853	26.79	1916-17	975,616	- 14.44
1887-88	1,030,269	- 13.27	1917-18	765,877	- 21.50
1888-89	1,151,191	11.47	1918-19	512,089	- 33.14
1889-90	1,035,679	- 10.03	1919-20	555,426	8.46
1890-91	1,065,753	2.90	1920-21	578,062	4.08
1891-92	1,005,073	- 5.69	1921-22	632,784	9.47
1892-93	993,965	- 1.11	1922-23	914,269	44.48
1893-94	1,164,452	17.15	1923-24	732.055	- 19.93
1894-95	1,147,436	- 1.46	1924-25	863,992	18.02
1895-96	1,003,151	- 12.57	1925-26	703,155	- 18.61
1896-97	1,153,208	14.96			

Source: Annual volumes : Trade and Navigation for the Bengal Presidency, 1871-72 to 1875-76, Calcutta. Annual Statement of the Sea-borne Trade and Navigation of the Bengal Presidency with foreign countries and Indian Ports, 1876-77 to 1925-26, Calcutta.

Table 5A Import of grey unbleached piecegoods from the U.K. into the Bengal Presidency, 1871-72 to 1920-21

Years	Five-Yearly Averages	Index
	Yards in Lakhs	
1871-72 to 1875-76	433,618	100
1876-77 to 1880-81	632,624	146
1881-82 to 1885-86	673,518	155
1886-87 to 1890-91	792,306	183
1891-92 to 1895-96	788,026	182
1896-97 to 1900-01	877,302	202
1901-02 to 1905-06	902,392	208
1906-07 to 1910-11	870,437	201
1911-12 to 1915-16	1,030,756	238
1916-17 to 1920-21	469,610	108

Source: Annual volumes of Trade and Navigation for Bengal Presidency, 1871-72 to 1875-76, Calcutta; Annual Statement of the Sea-borne Trade and Navigation of the Bengal Presidency with Foreign Countries and Indian Ports from 1876-77 to 1925-26, Calcutta.

Table 5B Import of coloured, printed or dyed piece-goods from the U.K. into the Bengal Presidency, 1871-72 to 1920-21

Years	Yards in lakhs (five-yearly averages)	Index
1871-72 to 1875-76	70,454	100
1876-77 to 1880-81	99,148	141
1881-82 to 1885-86	126,657	180
1886-87 to 1890-91	138,322	196
1891-92 to 1895-96	111,063	158
1896-97 to 1900-1901	114,078	162
1901-02 to 1905-06	127,827	181
1906-07 to 1910-11	121,657	173
1911-12 to 1915-16	133,209	189
1916-17 to 1920-21	61,786	88

Source: Annual Volumes of Trade and Navigation for the Bengal Presidency, 1871-72 to 1875-76; Calcutta; Annual Statement of the Sea-borne Trade and Navigation of the Bengal Presidency with foreign countries and Indian Ports, 1876-77 to 1925-26, Calcutta.

One may argue that the increase in the population of Bengal must have generated an increased demand for handloom products. Between 1872 and 1921, however, the annual average increase of population in Bengal was only 0.6 per cent.[64] And in the environment of continued deterioration of the condition of the lower classes of population in Bengal, one can not expect that any effective demand was generated from the rise in population.

Besides these, a definite shift in the taste of higher and middle class people is discernible. D.R. Gadgil rightly characterised the trend: 'one of the most harmful effects of a foreign rule is the imposition on the conquered peoples of the ideals of the conquerors'.[65] Among the higher and middle classes, English taste and morals had taken firm roots. By the turn of the century, these people became more and more attracted towards products made in England'.[66]

New technology in weaving and government attitude

The patent poverty of the weavers and ruin of artisan manufactures had moved high-ranking officials in the government during the last decade of the nineteenth century. More important than the paternalistic care of the government was the effort of some officials lining up with the new aesthetic movement in England. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy, expressed the views of these officials as well as his: 'But then comes the other or artistic point of view, which appeals, at any rate to me, much more forcibly. I would sooner attempt to revive the rapidly perishing art industries of India, perishing not because a market is not forthcoming for them, but because the already existing market is being lost by short-sighted parsimony, and by the indulgence in vulgar and semi-Europeanized designs'.[67]

A Central Weaving Institute was established at Serampore during Curzon's Viceroyalty. E.B. Havell was trying to popularise the fly-shuttle loom from 1902 onwards. The assumption behind the introduction of the fly-shuttle was that it would improve the productivity of the weavers and thereby their dondition.

The fundamental difference between the loom in use and the fly-shuttle was in the picking motion. In the traditional handlooms the picking motion was performed by the weaver who threw the shuttle with one hand from one side of the loom and held it with the other when it reached the other side of the loom. The chief disadvantage of this loom was that if the width of the cloth woven was greater than the stretch of a weaver's arms, two operatives were necessary, one at each end of the loom. Moreover the weaver had to change his hand constantly to hold the sley in beating up the weft. These looms naturally required great labour and skill to manipulate, yet worked very slowly.[68] On the other hand, in the fly-shuttle loom, two boxes were placed, one at each end of the sley, for the reception of the shuttle, instead of the weaver's hands which had to be held out in the ordinary handloom. In each of these boxes a spindle extending over the whole length of the box was fitted and each carried a shuttle driver or picker, as it was technically termed. Between these a cord was extended and attached to each, and affixed to this cord in the centre of its length, was the peg or handle, by means of which the shuttle was jerked from one box to the other through open shed.[69] From this description it is clear that in the fly-shuttle loom, the necessity of employing two weavers when weaving a wide cloth was obviated by the addition of the shuttle-boxes, and the weaver did not have to change hands, as he could now hold the sley with one hand and throw the shuttle by pulling the cord with the other. According to Cumming's survey, the flyshuttle loom averaged 65 picks while there could be only 25 picks

per minute in the traditional loom.[70] The lowest average picking of the fly-shuttle was 50. Moreover, the adoption of fly-shuttle looms made possible a quicker method of warping; in the old looms a fabric took a day to weave, whereas the preliminary process for the same cloth took at least a day and half.[71] With the new device 100 threads could be laid simultaneously. It was claimed that with the fly-shuttle a weaver could weave 10 to 12 yards of cloth per day as against 5 yards with the country loom.[72] According to N.N. Banerjee's estimate, with an ordinary loom a man could work 1½ yards per day, and with the improved loom he could finish 2½ to 3 yards per day.[73] The two estimates are inconsistent with each other, but both agreed that the fly-shuttle doubles the productivity of the country loom. Thus the fly-shuttle had definite advantages.[74]

In Bengal, two types of fly-shuttle were in use at the turn of the nineteenth century. The pit fly-shuttle, the price of which varied between Rs.20 and Rs.30, and the Serampore fly-shuttle, the cost of which ranged between Rs.40 and Rs.60. About the end of the eighteenth century and probably during the days of Warren Hastings, the fly-shuttle loom was introduced into Serampore by the Danish settlers of the town, but for unknown reasons its spread in the country was checked.[75] In spite of its acknowledged advantages till the end of the nineteenth century the fly-shuttle remained confined to Serampore. The Swadeshi movement which soon followed gave encouragement to the adoption of this loom and by 1908 it was claimed that 10,000 new looms were working in the province, and this was due 'more to intercommunication among the people themselves than to official efforts to popularise the Serampore fly-shuttle looms'.[76]

Almost every District Board of Eastern Bengal had made efforts to introduce the improved looms amongst the indigenous weavers. In every

case, the result appeared to have been a complete failure.[77] Some District Boards such as that of Faridpur, engaged expert weavers to demonstrate weaving with fly-shuttle looms; in others like Dhaka, Mymensingh, Rajshahi and Malda temporary weaving classes were opened; while others in Chittagong, Noakhali and Tripura sent weavers to Serampore and subsequent efforts were made to utilise their services. But in all these cases there were no tangible results.[78] The Director of Agriculture, Hart, remarked in 1912 that some of the swadeshi associations also attempted to extend the use of fly-shuttle looms among the local weavers, but their efforts appeared to have met with no success.[79] With the establishment of the Industries Department in 1921 the drive to introduce fly-shuttle looms was carried out more vigorously. By 1921, of the 213,886 looms in use in Bengal only 53,168 or 24.85 per cent were fly-shuttle looms. The proportion was higher in districts such as Hughli, Howrah, Jessore, Khulna, Dhaka, Bakhargunge, Malda and Burdwan, but much lower in Midnapur, Murshidabad, Bankura, Mymensingh and all other districts generally. There were practically no flyshuttle looms in Tripura State and Chittagong Hill Tracts, two districts with the largest numbers of handlooms per million of the population.[80] A contemporary Bengali journal also pointed to the limited diffusion of the fly-shuttle loom.[81]

The limited success of the fly-shuttle loom among the weavers may be attributed to the high cost of the new technology, beyond the reach of the weavers struggling for existence. Secondly, from the very beginning the role of the Government was half-hearted. At one level, from paternalism they desired to improve the productive power of the weavers. At another level, high ranking government officials including Lord Curzon, the Viceroy, however, were convinced by the beginning of this century of the non-utility of preserving the handloom industry.[82]

As this trend was more dominant, the government did not give the requisite effort to demonstrate the advantages of the new loom. Here again, the government was guided by the 'filtration theory' that education was to reach the masses through some prosperous gentlemen. Relatively affluent weavers were being brought in and taught in the new technological methods in schools. On completion of their course they were provided with looms and preparatory appliances, for which payment was recovered from them by small annual instalments.[83] The attempt should have been to teach the new technology directly to the weavers in the rural centres. The weavers on their part were reluctant to enter schools as it would deprive them of their daily earnings.[84] The following section would elaborate why it was impossible for the weavers to spend a few days in learning the new technology. The assumption of the government that improvement in productivity would reduce the cost of handloom products, and improve the competitive position of the handloom weavers and thereby help resurgence of demand was also wrong. There were other structural constraints. For instance, the government did nothing to improve the financial position of the weavers by emanicipating them from the clutches of the mahajans, nor were any improvements in marketing forthcoming.

Dependent structure of handloom weaving in Bengal

Handloom weavers may be broadly classified into two categories. First, weavers who worked with their own capital. In Pabna, some weavers employed a considerable number of workmen on monthly wages.[85] Secondly, weavers who were exclusively dependent on the mahajans or middlemen. The majority of the weavers, almost 75 per cent for the whole province according to the estimate of G.N. Gupta, were dependent on the mahajans.[86] Even the weavers, presumably the relatively skilled ones, who worked with their own capital and were financially independent of the mahajans had to depend on the traders for the purchase of yarn and sale of

piecegoods.

A contemporary vernacular journal had observed that the mahajans purchased yarn from the Calcutta market and sold it to the mufassil pykars or intermediaries. These pykars either sold the thread directly to the weavers or advanced thread to them and a sum of money for a fixed measurement of cloth.[87] In Birbhum, for instance, the system of yarn advance and through it the control of the middlemen was so strong that either they themselves or their representatives always sat by to see that yarn was not stolen by the weaver.[88] This method of working was called 'baithani kam' in Birbhum and the weaver was paid from two pice to three pice for each yard of cloth produced.[89]

In the countryside, the general feature was the advance of thread for the production of a fixed measurement of cloth. After the cloth was ready the pykars purchased it from the weavers at rates dictated by them. On receiving the goods, the pykars deducted the value of the raw materials and the amount of money with interest and the balance was handed over to the weaver. The weavers were so dependent on these intermediaries that the latter were in a position to appropriate for themselves the lion's share of the profits.[90] The pykars in their turn sold the entire cloth to the traders who had connections with the Calcutta market. The distance between the weavers and the wholesale dealers in the urban market did not lessen over time and the intermediaries continued to mop up whatever surplus there was (and more) and the financial condition of the weavers remained deplorable.[91]

In the rural markets also, the weavers were not in a position to dispose of their goods directly to the peasants. It was through intermediaries and their agents that the produce of one locality was sold in another. And, therefore, the profits were reaped by the inter-

mediaries. Ordinarily an adult person took five days to weave four saris. A pair of long pieces of cloth took 6 to 7 days of weaving.[92] "Assuming 10 annas to be the price of each sari, the price of four saris would be Rs.2 and 8 annas. Deducing the price of the twist required in weaving four saris, about Re.1 and 8 annas, the profit left to the weavers after five days of work, was only one rupee".[93] This reveals the condition of the weavers. Where exclusive dependence on the intermediaries was absent, the condition was not radically different.

National politics and handloom weaving

From our study so far, the waning demand of handloom products and the deplorable condition of the handloom weavers is empirically evident. But, in the first decade of this century, handloom weaving received an impetus from the Swadeshi and boycott movement. The impact of Swadeshi and boycott was illuminating. During 1905-06 there were various attempts to popularise the fly-shuttle loom. Training centres for the flyshuttle loom were organised at Calcutta, Mymensingh, Tangail, Serajgunj, Barisal and Shilaidaha, parts of Jessore, Howrah, and in few centres in Hughli; in Eastern Bengal, it was in use in parts of Faridpur and Comilla also.[94] Cumming, writing in 1907-08, characterised the period as 'a revolution for the time being...' Production of indigenous cloth increased in Burdwan, Bankura and Birbhum.[95] From Eastern Bengal, it was reported: "It looks, however, as if the downward course taken by this, the most important indigenous industry of the province, has at least been checked and a slow but perceptible improvement is visible everywhere".[96] Progress was phenomenal in Noakhali, Comilla, Pabna and Faridpur districts.[97] The greatest success of Swadeshi was of course the Banga Lakshmi Cotton Mills, launched in 1905-06, the Mohini Mills of Kushtea, and many others.[98]

Unfortunately most of these endeavours were short-lived. And this would be evident, all the more, from the trade figures. In the period 1905-06 to 1909-10, the watershed of Swadeshi and boycott, the average import (five-yearly average) of European piecegoods increased by 8.74 per cent compared with the average of the preceding five years, 1900-01 to 1904-05.[99] For the same period, handloom production increased by only 3.84 per cent.[100] The high price of handloom goods and the general poverty of the rural people impeded the success of the Swadeshi and boycott movement.[101] Cumming reported in 1908 that the more prosperous Serampore weavers (earning upto Rs.30 a month) themselves wore mill-made cloth because of its cheapness, and A.C. Chatterjee reported in the same year that many of the weavers of the United Provinces had not even heard of the increased demand caused by the Swadeshi movement.[102]

Decline of handloom weaving

It was observed generally by the official and non-official sources that in Bengal the cotton handloom weaving had declined measurably during the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. It was commonly believed that this condition of the handloom weavers was entirely due to the competition with modern powerlooms of Britain and Europe.[103] Since the introduction of machinemade textiles, indigenous industry had practically died out and the professional position of the weavers as a class had become very unsatisfactory. Many of the weaver castes were appointed by local Rajas and wealthy persons as their weavers. Some of the Hill States of Orissa supplied cloth to the chiefs of these States and their families, and enjoyed jagirs for the same. In Gujarat, for example, they enjoyed jagirs for their weaving services rendered to a chief long after their work.[104] The Civil Surgeon of Hughli, Lieut-Colonel Dutt reported, "large dilapated puckka buildings, temples and

tanks in Hughli and Midnapur districts still remain to attest to the once prosperous condition of the weavers".[105]

From Bogolanondo Mukherjee's Report on the Burdwan Fever (1875) it is known that previously the weavers of the Goghat thana used to send 12,000 thans of cotton cloth annually upcountry. These 12,000 thans kept employed nearly 5,000 weavers. But in 1874, even 4,000 thans of cloth could not be procured.[106] W.W. Hunter in his Statistical Account of Pubna (1876) recorded that the village Dogachi was once an important centre for cotton weaving, the condition of the weavers had declined much and these weavers were now to be seen adjusting with cultivation and as boatmen.[107] Similar concern is evident in the General Administration Report of the Commissioner of Burdwan Division of 1877-78.[108]

The same Administration Report of this Division of 1880-81 attested a further decline. Many weavers of Burdwan had taken to agricultural and other pursuits and their number would further diminish. Imported cloth was much cheaper than those made in the handlooms. The number of cotton weavers was then 20 per cent less than it was five years back. There were 889 looms in the town of Bishnupur alone in Burdwan district. The Collector estimated the profits of the most skilful weavers at Rs.8 a month at the outset.[109] Misfortune of the cotton weavers was reported also in the Presidency Division in 1880-81.[110] Imported cotton manufactures had almost entirely supplanted native-woven material of Chittagong Division. Figures of imports of piecegoods into this division bring out the picture:[111]

1881-82	:	8,975,912 yards.
1882-83	:	9,916,066 yards.
1883-84	:	10,236,035 yards.
1884-85	:	11,489,779 yards.

/The Dufferin Committee recorded in 1888 that a majority of the weavers had given up their hereditary occupation in Midnapur and for those who still continued their hereditary profession, the monthly earning was only Rs.1-8.[112] The Collector of Maldah reported to the Commissioner of Bhagalpur Division on 7th April, 1888, that the condition of the cotton weavers was deplorable and gradually they were switching over to other employments.[113] The Settlement Officer of Bogri and Kesiari reported to the Director of Land Records that the importation of European piece-goods had impoverished the cotton weavers. Many of them had given up their profession; some were employed as servants. Most of them could not afford to have two meals a day.[114] A late nineteenth century vernacular journal lamented the poverty of the lower classes who would not buy indigenous handloom cloths and had to be contented with cheap imported cloth pieces, though these were less durable than those made in the district handlooms.[115]

According to the 1891 Census, there were 25,174 tantis and 313 Jugis in Singbhum district;[116] but of them only 8269 people carried on their caste profession and the rest, i.e. 13,218 persons had taken to agriculture, and service, and some became day labourers by 1898.[117] Cotton weaving was a declining industry in Chittagong district. Native people generally liked to wear locally woven clothes, made chiefly from imported yarn. But falling yarn importation led to the abandonment of weaving. F.H.B. Skrine in his Memorandum in 1892 put it emphatically that the weaver class in this Division were on the verge of misery and had given up the hopeless struggle with steam machinery and had switched over to agriculture.[118] Weavers of Dhaka who in the last generation were the most numerous class of craftsmen, were taking to cultivation, unable to earn a living from their handlooms.[119] Of the cotton fabrics manufactured in this district, only a nominal quantity

was sold in the district itself. Almost the whole of the goods was sent to Calcutta. As no quantitative data are available to show the extent of home consumption, from the value of cotton fabrics exported to Calcutta, the picture of gradual decline of handloom productions can be guessed. The articles included plain and striped muslins, kasida and jamdani.[120]

1858	:	Rs. 10,00,000 to 11,00,000
1864	:	Rs. 7,00,000 to 8,00,000
1873	:	Rs. 5,00,000 to 6,00,000
1894	:	Rs. 4,35,000
1895	:	Rs. 4,09,000
1896	:	Rs. 3,82,000

The Collector of Pabna observed in 1898 that most of the jolahas, the Muslim weaver caste, had taken to cultivation. Some relatively affluent Hindu tantis were also quitting their jobs and were investing their little accumulated funds in other trades instead of investing in the improvement of machinery.[121] The manufacture of coarse textiles in Midnapur district, though far more extensive than the finer ones, was gradually declining, for the people who consumed them were acquiring a taste for better materials and a desire to be more decently clad and were gradually discarding the coarser indigenous for foreign machine-made manufactures.[122] The Collector reported in 1898 that there were 249 villages in Rajshahi district where handlooms were worked to turn out cotton cloths. Within the period of a single generation, the number of villages in which the industry had ceased to exist was 234. Within this same period the number of handlooms had come down from 3340 to 1013, i.e. by about 70 per cent.[123]

The weavers of Dinajpur mostly belonged to the tanti caste. In the cluster of thanas of this district the number of male tantis was 583. But a vast majority of this number had abandoned their traditional occupation and only about 5 per cent lived on the earnings of their looms. As the district did not produce any specialities, the customers of these products sought the cheapest Manchester goods in the market.[124] Handloom weaving of a very coarse nature to provide the local requirements continued throughout the nineteenth century in Bogura district. Formerly the cost of transport and the difficultics of communication rendered the imported fabrics costly in comparison with the local handloom productions. With the opening up of communication, the enterprising Marwaris found it profitable to carry imported piecegoods to the remotest corners of this district. The number of persons engaged in cotton weaving in Bogura was estimated at 800; but those who depended entirely on this industry for their livelihood was believed to be very small.[125] The Collector of Nadia observed in 1898 that coarse handloom cloth had been a rarity for years, having been displaced by European and American bordered and unbordered shirtings which were exposed for sale even in small village hats. In Nadia this industry had died at Chakdaha, Tehatta, Damurhuda.[126] A large number of weavers of Shantipur in Nadia, who had produced fine cloths, found it impossible to compete with cheap imported piecegoods and consequently gave up their occupation.[127]

A government note specifically pointed out that middle class tastes had been attracted by the brilliant colouring and superior finish of the imported machine-made fabrics.[128] Local production was gradually disappearing. Hardly a few families were to be found who were solely engaged in weaving in Burdwan district.[129] In 1872 Census, the number of persons engaged in cotton weaving in this district was reported to be 25109; in 1921, it declined to 3705.[130] The Commissioner of Bhagalpur

Division reported in 1886-87 that there were important centres of cotton weaving in Maldah district around Kaliachak thana and Kaligram in Kharba thana, where sari lengths, chaddars of thick texture, coloured mosquito nets were manufactured in ordinary handlooms.[131] But the production of all these fabrics had declined measurably within a period of three decades and the weavers' condition remained deplorable.[132] During the period of Survey and Settlement Operations of Hughli (1920), it was observed that the weavers in Haripal, and adjoining areas in Hughli district were leaving their hereditary occupation.[133] During the Census of 1872, the number of cotton weavers in Hughli and Howrah was 17531. Within a period of 50 years, the number declined by 49 per cent.[134]

The weavers of Wazirpur and Banaripara in Bakhargunge district made dhutis of the Dhaka pattern; the mosquito nets manufactured at Madhabpasha commanded a large scale demand among the middle classes, and the Maghs prepared coloured cloth for their own use. But machinemade European cloth was gradually driving the local weavers from their looms in this district.[135] In a Bengali journal, the editor lamented the changing taste of people for imported machine made cotton cloth; the weavers in most villages worked their loom in weaving coarse towels, blanket covers, etc. Even these coarse indigenous products had no market as fine and soft imported towels were replacing them.[136] This phenomenon was also observed by George Birdwood in 1880.[137]

This story of decline is supported by the occupational data given in the various Census Reports. We have taken the census figures for 1872, 1901 and 1921 as in these only the numbers of persons engaged in cotton weaving are available. In the Census Report of 1921, cotton sizers were combined with cotton weavers. In other census reports there is no such category as cotton sizers, generally, though the weavers themselves

were sizers. We have omitted the census figures for 1881, 1891 and 1911 as these are not comparable with those that are given in Table 6. The Census of 1881 not only combines the number of persons engaged in different branches of cotton industry, it includes the number of those engaged in flax. In 1891, the numbers of mill-owners, managers and millworkers are included with cotton weavers. And in 1911, the number of spinners is tagged together with cotton weavers. Because of these differences in the computation of occupational tables in these Censuses we have left them out.

Between 1872 and 1901, apparently there were increases in the numbers of weavers in Bankura, Chittagong, Noakhali and Faridpur districts. But the qualitative evidence does not corroborate this increase. As there are no quantitative data which can be compared with the census data it is difficult to arrive at any positive conclusion so far as these districts are concerned. It is possible that there was an increase of weaving population in Noakhali, Chittagong, Tripura, Darjeeling and Bogura between 1901 and 1921 because of the Swadeshi and boycott movement. According to G.N. Gupta, handloom weaving was most noticeable in Noakhali, Comilla, and Pabna districts. But these districts remain very much of exceptions in the general pattern of decline.

One can argue about the precise point at which a decline in the handloom industry started, the factors that caused it or accelerated the process. But from our investigation it would seem that the fact of long-term decline in the industry in Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century cannot be doubted.

Table 6 Persons engaged in cotton weaving in Bengal, 1872-1921

Districts	1872	1901	Percentage change between column 2 and 3	1921	Percentage change between column 3 and 5
1	2	3	4	5	6
Burdwan	25109	8138	- 67.58	3705	- 54.47
Birbhum	7676	4575	- 40.39	4674	2.16
Bankura	6731	10215	51.76	8296	- 18.78
Midnapur	26828	17128	- 36.15	10418	- 39.17
Hughli & Howrah	17531	11276	- 35.67	8948	- 20.64
24-Parganas	7304	3588	- 50.87	3095	- 13.74
Nadia	14096	7917	- 43.83	6900	- 12.84
Murshidabad	12230	5342	- 56.32	6468	- 21.04
Maldah	4826	4179	- 13.40	4065	- 2.72
Rajshahi	6665	2200	- 66.99	517	- 76.50
Jessore & Khulna	20163	19402	- 3.77	12271	- 36.75
Dinajpur	4019	2886	- 28.19	1985	- 31.21
Rangpur	5493	446	- 99.55	370	- 17.04
Pabna	15780	11596	- 26.51	9493	- 18.13
Bogura	3178	1456	- 54.18	1987	36.46
Darjeeling	317	134	- 57.72	223	66.41
Jalpaiguri	1297	2050	58.05	1641	- 19.95
Dhaka	18383	17044	- 7.28	16197	- 4.96
Faridpur	14849	17616	18.63	11493	- 34.75
Bakhargunj	14434	10049	- 30.37	9200	- 8.44
Mymensingh	14596	9908	- 32.11	9602	- 3.08
Chittagong	8830	11333	28.34	14917	31.62
Noakhali	7821	8713	11.40	11276	29.41
Tipperah	20041	12964	- 35.31	14655	13.04

Source: H. Beverly, Report on the Census of Bengal, Calcutta, 1872, General Statement VI.

E.A. Gait, Report on the Census of India, Vol.VIA, Part II, Calcutta 1902, Table XIV.

W.H. Thompson, Report on the Census of India, Vol.V, Part II, Calcutta, 1923, Table XVII.

Notes and references

List of abbreviations used:

BLCP	Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings.
DRA	Department of Revenue and Agriculture.
DRAC	Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce.
GDP	General Department Proceedings.
JRSA	Journal of the Royal Society of Arts.
NAI	National Archives of India.
PPHC	Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons.
PCID	Proceedings of the Commerce and Industries Department.
RDP	Revenue Department Proceedings.
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives.
IESHR	Indian Economic and Social History Review.

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