BOMBAY COTTONS ON (A CASE STUDY OF THE ECONOMIC REVOLUTION IN BOMBAY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO COTTON AND THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY, 1850-1914)
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Published by: Indian History Congress
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44138958
Accessed: 12-07-2019 17:28 UTC
The British textile manufacturers needed cotton for their textile machines and markets for their manufactured piece goods. It was just the natural process of the evolution of economic history, that the Imperial power made their Indian colony, the field for the cultivation of cotton and the market for their manufactured textile piece goods. This international trade passed through the Bombay port. The international cotton trade set off forces of action and reaction, which resulted in the birth of development of the textile industry in Bombay. It is the object of this paper to examine the impact of the international cotton trade and the development of the textile industry on the economy of the Bombay city. It appears that these two factors brought about such a total change in the Bombay economy as to justify the contention that the commercial revolution in Bombay initiated Industrial revolution in the Bombay city.

Before the birth of the industrial revolution in Great Britain the export of handloom cotton manufactures featured prominently in the Bombay export trade. The industrial revolution in Great Britain however split the economic history of Bombay into two parts, the one in which her export trade had a varied picture, with handloom products featuring prominently and cotton featuring negligibly and the other in which the export of handloom piece goods was negligible and the export of cotton was phenomenal.

The phenomenal rise in the export of cotton to Great Britain was not the result of the natural evolution of the economic process under the laissez faire theory, which was then prevailing in England. It was the result of conscious policies deliberately followed by the Britain Government of India even before 1850.

In 1793, the Board of Directors sent the newly invented Saw Gin to Bombay to improve and quicken cotton ginning. In 1840, a number of Americans were invited to India to instruct the Company in the cultivation of cotton. Experimental farms were also established under American guidance. In fact, the imperial interest in cotton cultivation was so great that in 1848 a Select Committee of the House of Commons was appointed to enquire into the growth of cotton in India. Lands were granted on lease on low rents and other facilities were given to British subjects willing to enter into the cultivation of cotton.

As a result of the export of cotton to Great Britain, the Bombay city
got involved in the vortex of international economy and became subject to its booms and depressions. Thus, for example, when the American Civil War broke out in 1861 the supply of American cotton to Great Britain was stopped, there was a literal cotton famine in Great Britain. The price of Surat cotton which used to fetch 4 d. to 5 d. per pound fetched 24 d. to 25 d. per pound during the years of the Civil War. Bombay's export of cotton to Great Britain increased phenomenally and Bombay acquired large fortune. Maclean, in his guide to Bombay, says that the wealth that accumulated in Bombay during the years of the American Civil War was 70 to 75 million sterling. It was the wealth of the American Civil War period, which laid the foundation of India's cotton textile industry.

Bombay later began to establish an export trade of cotton with other countries of the world. Henry Rivet Carnac wrote in 1868-1869, "I have been very much struck with the direct trade in cotton between India and the continent. Last year a French house in Bombay headed the list of shippers from that port. This year, the number of foreign mercantile houses has considerably increased......There is now a branch of the French Bank at Bombay which facilitates all banking transactions with France and other countries in Europe. The French are soon to have a line of steamers to carry full pressed bales direct to the ports of the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal and it is I believe now proposed to establish a branch of the Austrian Bank at Bombay to run a fortnightly service at Austrian Lyoy's Steamers from Trieste through the Suez Canal to Bombay."

The magnitude of the change in the volume of the cotton trade, set into action evolutionary processes, which brought about varied economic activity, urban change and a new class stratification in Bombay.

A vivid example of the slow processes at the onset of the period under survey is given by a witness in his evidence before a Committee of the House of Commons in 1840—"Cotton is exposed to every species of depreciation, during its transit to Bombay. Moving along at the rate of two miles an hour in rude carts or on the backs of bullocks, the dew and dust do their worst to it. The bullocks are loaded twice a day, generally in the neighbourhood of watering places and their packs are rolled in the mud. Each bullocks consoles himself during the march by putting his nose in the leader’s pack eating the cotton." John Chapman, the founder Manager of the G. I. P. Railway writing in 1851, also gives a similar picture. Cotton also came to Bombay by sea in country craft from the ports of Dholera, Broach, Surat and from Malabar through Kumte.

Slow movement of this description could not cope with the demand of the British textile merchants. This was one of the reasons why railway communications to Bombay were developed. The first railway in India, the Bombay-Thana line, was opened in 1853. Shortly afterwards, the
Government of India sanctioned the construction of railways from Bombay to Poona and from Bombay to Ahmedabad. The Khandesh and Berar cotton districts were then linked with Bombay by railway. In 1860, the south-easterly line of the G. I. P. railway was extended up to Sholapur—"ere long to tap the fertile cotton area of the Hyderabad Deccan."8

It was the industrial revolution in Great Britain, the steamship which linked Great Britain to Bombay and the railways which opened up the Bombay hinterland which initiated the commercial revolution in Bombay and brought it into the vortex of the world economy. Aubrey who wrote in 1884, gives a pen-portrait of the business activity at the Colaba Cotton Green. "...Wealthy Banias and Parsi merchants stop from their country carriages, into each other vehicles, sit for a while in the conveyance till the bargain is struck, the poorer trader discusses his business under a coloured umbrella, chattering over files of sordid books to secure an up-country order. English merchants also drive down in the shyram or brougham..."9 He also described the locality as "picturesque, with its brightly clad and toiling women, yellow capped police mounting guard at the gates and the tinkling sound of bullock bells. On the summit of the low walls, cross legged like monkeys, coolies quietly chew betel and pan, their giddy naked progeny playing about; their wives resting in the distance with laughing urchins on the knee..."

The cotton trade of Bombay set into being a new class stratification. It broke up the village self-sufficiency of the traditional society and labour came to Bombay in search of employment. English and Indian merchants, their brokers, and moneylenders and contractors for public works, formed an upper commercial class. Those engaged in the transport of cotton, weighing and pressing it and other forms of coolie labour formed a class of their own. Every action results in a relative reaction. The economic policies of the imperialist power had made the Bombay economy supplementary to the British economy. The Indians were not passive spectators to this economic phenomena. A section of the Bombay commercial bourgeosis realised that they could start textile mills in Bombay. The cotton trade had resulted in the accumulation of capital in Bombay, which could be invested in the textile industry. Bombay which had the best cotton market in Asia, could provide the industry with raw material. The machinery and the technical know how could be brought from Great Britain.

However, if it was not for the phenomenal accumulation of capital in Bombay as a result of the import (sic) of cotton, it would not have been possible to start the textile industry in Bombay. The first textile factory which was called the Bombay Spinning & Weaving Factory was started by an enterprising Parsi merchant, Mr. Cowasji Nanabhooy Davar in 1854. The machinery was supplied and set up in Bombay by Messrs. Plat
Brothers & Company Ltd. of Oldhem, England. This spinning mill was so successful that Mr. Davar started another factory called the Bombay Throstle Mill. Thereafter Mr. Maneckji Petit started the Oriental Mills in 1858. The machinery was supplied by Herington & Sons and Messrs. Sharp & Roberts of Manchester. The venture worked so successfully that it was converted into a joint Stock Company in 1858. Thus we have the initiation of joint stock as a method of finance in Bombay. Sometime, soon after 1868, Mr Jamseji Nasserwanji Tata sailed to England to study the working of the cotton mills in Lancashire and the machinery required to spin and weave Indian Cotton, to the best advantage, in the varying climatic conditions peculiar to this country. Thus it was the enterprise of the Parsi merchants that initiated the industrial revolution in Bombay. Later the Bhatia merchants and then the Muslim merchants joined in the fray.

During the period under survey, India was subject to the colonial-imperial relationship. In the circumstances, the Indian capitalists had an important role to play in the evolution of the country’s economy. It was enterprising talent of the Bombay capitalists that set into action the industrial revolution in Bombay.

The Bombay textile industrialists created a system of their own for the management of the business. The promoters themselves became the self appointed agents. The agents had full incentive powers in the management of the mills and they could be interested in any mill in a similar capacity or deal in cotton or yarn or other commodities on their own account. The shareholders had very little voice in the management of the factories.

The managing agency system had its advantages in honest and competent hands. It turned out disastrous for the shareholders in other cases. The laxity of the agents and their technical incompetence was strongly criticised during the trade depression of 1898-1900. The Indian Textile Journal 1899 remarks—“We have in these columns exposed again and again the rascality and rank dishonesty with which large sections of our mill industry are saturated. It is not possible to be as specific and definite as we might and name those concerns and persons whose affairs merit exposure. We must leave the law courts to do this, bit by bit, as cases come before them. But we must insist upon the urgent need for reform”.

In the early days of the industry the Indian proprietors were ignorant of the plant and the processes of manufacture. The machinery was erected by technicians who were sent down to India by the machine manufacturers of Lancashire. In several cases these technicians who had been sent out by the Lancashire machine manufacturers, were employed in the pioneer factories, in charge of different departments, when the mill began working. The salary offered to the European staff up to 1885 ranged from Rs. 350/-
to Rs. 450/- for the manager and Rs. 250/- to Rs. 300/- for the carder, spinner or weaver. In almost every case free quarter was provided with an allowance for oil, fuel and a servant.13

During the period under survey labour was recruited through a particular category of labour elite, called jobbers. They were individuals, who were stronger and more intelligent than the average worker who came from the rural areas. He could therefore operate the machine more efficiently. It was the duty of the jobber to maintain a full compliment of workers in his department. When young villagers came from the village to the city in search of jobs, they as a rule stayed with a relative in the city. The latter were in contact with the jobbers, who found jobs for the new recruits and charged them for their services. The jobbers also recruited labour from their villages. If a new department was to be started, which needed a large number of workers, a jobber sometimes sailed to his native village and brought a whole compliment of workers.

As the jobbers and the workers were often from the same native village, there was a certain degree of emotional integration among them. The management of the mill found it easier to extract work from the mill operatives through the jobbers. The jobbers were the connecting link, between the management and labour, between the mills and the labour recruiting areas where labour resided in the city, and between the mills and the villages from where labour was recruited.14

Until 1914, at any rate, Bombay did not develop a purely urban labour force, like the way Manchester or London did. The Bombay textile operatives did not break his link with the traditional rural society of the village to which he belonged. He continued to be a member of his caste and his joint family in the village. As a rule, his joint family was in some way involved in the cultivation of land. The textile operatives maintained his link with the joint family and his hold on the land through remittances of part of his wages at intervals. He went there on holidays or at harvest time or in sickness or old age.15

The social institutions of the traditional society with the security and tension which they created must have had some impact on the Bombay labour force. Did the security which the joint family and village land created, make labour less demanding and therefore slacken the pace of the labour awakening? Or did this security make labour more independent of his job and, therefore, bolder to participate in labour organisation? Or did this have different effects on the awakening of labour at different periods of its history?

At any rate we find that by 1882 the textile operatives had become conscious of their utility. The machines may be there, the engines to drive them may be there, but of what use were all these, if labour was not
The publications of the year 1891 which were made in connection with the passing of the Factory Act of 1892, are a commentary on the conditions of the textile operatives the tension that prevailed between labour and management. However in the period under survey, we see that labour is demanding better terms and conditions of service. The concept of equality or the desire to strike had not yet emerged among the textile workers.

The first labour leaders were the jobbers and social reformers. This was not an accident. The caste system had an impact on the emerging class system. For example, it was easier for affluent individuals of the old caste system, to succeed in upward social mobility and join the ranks of the new upper classes. For example, some Brahmin, Marwari and Gujar merchants engaged in money lending both in the Bombay city and its hinterland. Labour often belonged to the lower castes. It was therefore natural that social reformers who were engaged in anti-caste appealed to labour. They, therefore, also got involved in movements for labour uplift. Narayan Meghaji Lokhande and K.S. Bole are examples of such social reformers cum labour leaders.

REFERENCES

2. Report from Select Committee on the Growth of Cotton in India, 1848, p. iii.
3. Ibid.
8. Bombay Chamber of Commerce—One Hundred Years of Bombay, p. 223.