



Partition of India and its Impacts on Handloom Textile of West Bengal

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Abstract

The knocking sound of handlooms can be heard almost everywhere in Nadia and purba Bardhaman districts. Weaving is the second field of employment, so the weaving process is no longer only in the hands of hereditary weavers. Other class of people is more or less directly or indirectly involved in the weaving process. The weaving is spreading to other areas where the expansion of other occupations has been stopped. Unlike other districts, not for part time, not even for partial livelihood, most of the weavers in these districts are full time weavers. After partition of India and erstwhile Bengal many handloom weavers from Dhaka, Nowakhali and Tangail districts came in Nadia and Purba Bardhaman districts and settled there. The article tries to describe socio-economic, political aspects of refugee weavers in particular and handloom textile industries in general.

Key words: refugee weavers, handloom, partition of India.

The weaving industry of Bengal reached its peak during the times of Sultanate and *Mughal*. *Abul Fazl's* book '*Ain-e-Akbari*' mentions textile factories in Bengal. These handloom material production centers were run by the government and produced high quality '*muslin*'. Emperor Akbar was personally fond of liter weaving of handloom. Nur Jahan Bagam was also particularly fond of *muslin* produced in Bengal (Bhattacharya1967: 173-174). Under his patronage and under the direct supervision of the then ruler of Bengal, Ibrahim Khan many muslin factories were set up in Bengal (now in Bangladesh and West Bengal). These factories were run by a class of employees called *daroga* whose wage were paid from the government exchequer. The best textiles produced were exported abroad by Arab merchants. Besides muslin, the names of shari like *Nilambri*, *Meghdambri*, *Near Melani* etc. are associated with Bengali literature and folk culture from ancient time (Mitra 1978: 41). Fine handloom products were exported from Bengal to different parts of Asia and Europe.

Shantipur is the center of weaving industry in Nadia district. The weaving industry of Shantipur is ancient. The weavers' community has been living here since ancient times. The women of their families used to spin the yarn and the men used it to weave dhoti, shari and towels. The raw material required for this, i.e., cotton, was procured from the villages near Shastipur, especially from the villages of Purba Bardhaman district on the west Bank of river Ganga (Tantubai Saranika 1999: 09). These dhoti and sari were made of thick yarn and they met the needs of the poor and lower middle class people of the local and surrounding areas. The original weavers of Shantipur did not know how to cut fine yarn like the weavers of Dhaka and Mymensingh districts of erstwhile East Bengal. At the end of the twelfth century AD, at the invitation of Lakshman Sen, the Sen Dynasty king of Bengal, some weavers from Dhaka district, who were skilled in spinning and weaving fine yarns for muslin cloth, came and settled in Shantipur. Nabadwip was the capital of Lakshman Sen. His aim was to produce muslin cloth by the weavers of Dhaka in Shastipur and export it abroad and earn foreign currency from it. At the same time teaching local weavers the method of weaving fine yarns and weaving of muslin cloth (Das 2001: 15). But the skilled weavers of Dhaka could not weave fine fabrics like muslin due to the difference of climate of Shantipur from Dhaka and lack of fine *karpas* cotton. But the thing they made, it was like muslin and was admired abroad. The name of this garment was *malmal*. Through the sultans and *badshahs* of Delhi, the local merchants earned a lot of foreign currency by exporting it by land and sea routes, outside India, such as Kabul, Baluchistan, Iraq, Iran, Arab, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Italy and other Western European countries. A fine shari would take about 30 to 35 days to weave. No one could cut the fine yarn required for this without skilled yarn cutter and only skilled weavers could weave fine muslin.

As the Mughal Empire weakened, various European countries set up handloom factories in different parts of the country for the purpose of export. The mainstay of Indo-European trade was textile products made in Bengal and in India. Textiles began to be exported, and as a result demand and production began to increase. The trade reached its peak during the period 1600-1700 AD, but textile production in Europe did not begin that period. The demand for Indian textiles in the European market continued to grow as a result of that, to meet the increasing demand East India company established many '*kuthi*' and engaged many *gomastas*, to look after the business and provided advance for production. In that way they monopolized the handloom industry of Bengal.

During the Mughal rule and even during the time of Nawab Alivardi Khan, weavers of Bengal produced clothes independently. At this time, they would not be harassed so much. Weavers used to invest their own capital in the weaving industry and sell the products as per their desire. The weavers of Bengal were very laborious and skillful. It is true that they have developed a wonderful textile industry with a long experience and traditions, but they have had to endure exploitation and oppression at the hands of big business. However, exclusive business did not emerge until the régime of Siraj- Ud-Daula. Weavers had the opportunities to appeal to the Nawab's court for redressal of their grievances (Roy1996: 68-69). That was a good time for the weavers of Bengal in terms of independence of production and income. Nawab Siraj-Ud-Daula put an end to this practice as handloom weavers had to endure a lot of torture at the hands of these

"*dadani* merchants". The English merchants took the place of the native merchant class by introducing a new system of payment. On the other hand, as the demand for Indian textiles in England increased, East India Company became deeply attracted to handloom textile production in Bengal (Baines 1835: 23-25).

Due to the impact of mass production, a number of changes took place in the production system of the East India Company in Bengal. One of these is the infiltration of *mahajans* as capital investors in the production system. The moneylenders employed *paikers*. These *paikers* traveled from village to village to collect cloths from weavers. Provide them advances. Thus, an interdependent, money investment-production supervision and distribution process developed in Bengal. This system was still in use long after the establishment of economic dominance in Bengal. The British organized the textile weaving process in Bengal to protect the commercial interests of East India Company British Traders patronized the textile industry of the country for several years after the fall of the Mughal Empire. Situation began to change gradually from the beginning of the eighteenth century when industrial revolution took place in England (Mitra 1978: 40-42).

Industrial Revolution in England and Misery of Weavers of Bengal: It was at this time that Lancashire's textile manufacturers in England began to make steady improvements in textile production. The British government enacted a law banning the import of Indian textiles on the grounds that workers were not getting adequate jobs and wages in England. The decline has had a devastating effect on the textile production system in Bengal. Company's merchants increased the level of oppression on weavers in the hope of making extra profit. English merchants were forcing weavers to sell goods at low prices. Production also increased manifold in England (Mitra 1978: 51).

The weavers went from house to house took evidence and recorded their cases of oppression by the employee of Company. Submitting their report to the Secretariat of the then Governor General Warren Hastings in Calcutta. The report suggested that weavers should not be forced to advance. The company would not pay weavers by forcibly signing bonds; otherwise company employees would be punished. Local traders would be able to enter into direct contract with the company to supply the required garments. Weavers would have to pay cash. The handloom weaving industry of Shantipur has not made much progress as the company has partially implemented this recommendation (Mallick 1986: 63).

After the entry, the East India Company launched attack on the weaving industry of Shantipur in the name of business. The weavers became aware of the English company from the very beginning. So, they decided to unite for the purpose of resistance. Blackware, a contractor of Company at Shantipur, told authorities that, weavers were avoiding signing contracts and sold clothes under the guise of not signing contracts to other merchants of Dutch or Portugal. Company was forced to raise wages, and the weavers of Shantipur staged a violent protest against Blackware, the contractor of the company's factory. Nine leaders of weavers were arrested. Six were later released on conditions, while the other three were sentenced to imprisonment. Vijay Ram, Lochan Dalal, Ramhari Dalal, Krishnachandra Baral, Ram Das and others led the long heroic struggle of the weavers of Shantipur. A delegation of weavers marched from Shantipur to Calcutta and appealed to the authorities to protest against the inhuman and degrading treatment to weavers

by the employees of the company. Thus weavers of Shantipur formed an organized resistance struggle similar to the modern trade union movement and introduced a formidable united force and struggle against the oppressions of the East India Company (Chakraborty 2014: 8).

The weaver community of Nadia district and Bengal struggled but could not save this unique industry of its own. The all-out resistance of weavers to the onslaught of the English company was defeated and the textile industry of this country was rapidly wiped out by the atrocities and oppression of the employees of the company. Weavers abandoned handloom weaving and became dependent on agriculture as a means of livelihood. The monopoly capital of England created a monopoly market for textile products, produced in England. Broke the barrier of Bengal's advanced handloom industry and made the country a major supplier of cotton yarn to English factories. Foreign yarn imports put them in a fierce competition, and the textile production process in Bengal and India was severely hampered. The Indian economy became dependent on agriculture. After the destruction of the handicrafts, 'Permanent Settlement' was introduced in 1793 and the weavers had to rely entirely on agriculture for their livelihood.

On the other hand, due to the Industrial Revolution in Britain, large quantities of textiles manufactured by British factories had flooded the market of India. British companies above all, the English merchants encouraged the weavers of Shantipur to weave fine cloth. By 1813 the prices of imported textiles from Manchester had become cheaper than indigenous handloom cloth. A good market was created in India for mill made cloth of Britain. The price of indigenous handloom cloth could not compete with the price of British factory cloth. Until 1813 AD, money came to this country from England, France, and Portugal and other west European Countries. After that period, the merchants of those countries started taking a lot of money from this country to their own country. Many weavers left the weaving industry and engaged in goldsmith, iron and other industries. In the 1860s, many people started making a living as independent labours due to the establishment of jute mills on both banks of river Ganges. Weavers became labours in many districts of Bengal (Das 2001: 20-22).

This condition of the weavers was miserable till 1823-24. After 1824 the yarn prepared by England began to be imported to this country. As a result, the financial situation of the weavers changed a bit, but the spinning of the spinning wheel stopped. As a result, the production of fine muslin also stopped. And the ready-made dhoti, *mathapar shari* and towel spread all over the market of India. The production of yarn produced in England continued to support the weavers, but the women who made their living by cutting yarn became jobless. However, they continue to earn a little money by spinning the yarn with the help of *nata* and *chakki*, or by starching yarn of mill. Thus the use of indigenous yarn almost ceased to exist. In 1828, Samachar Darpan published a story about sad yarn cutter of Shantipur (Chakraborty 2014: 10).

In the early twentieth century, Debendranath Mukherjee introduced the jacquard machine for making designs on the edges of Shari. With the introduction of this machine, the weaving industry of Nadia regained some of its past glory. As a result of using this device, weavers started making beautiful designs on the edges of shari. On the other hand, the first two decades of the twentieth century was an era of *Swadeshi* movement in the industrial world of Bengal. Nadia district was pioneer to establish and revive industry in different parts

of Bengal. There is a new impetus for self-reliance instead of foreign dependence. And there was no lack of interest and enthusiasm due to the *Swadeshi* movement. However, the economic perspective of the *Swadeshi* era began to become unclear. In the *Swadeshi* era, about 1200 looms were run in Shantipur and 50-60 count yarn was used in it. It produced an average of 6,400 garments a year and had an average value of Rs. 6,04,600. However, the weavers received half of this value as wages (Chakraborty 2014: 11). At this time, of course, *shari* was worn somewhere in Shantipur on British yarn, but the National Congress called for their boycott. This decline in the production of cotton textiles was partially stopped by the *Swadeshi* movement. Many of the weavers returned to their old occupation in the first two decades of 20th Century.

Another reason behind the revival of handloom was the improvement of the conventional shuttle. The director of Weaving Training Center in Srirampur, B. Havel, replaces the old shuttle with a new fly-shuttle loom. It was used all over Bengal (Bhattacharya 2009: 60-62). Textile weaving schools were set up all over Bengal, including Nadia district, as the initiative of nationalist activists of National Congress and *Swadeshi* movement.

Swadeshi Movement and Handloom: As the demand for indigenous products increased as a result of *Swadeshi* movement, handloom weavers in all parts of Bengal, including Nadia district, increased the level of production. With the help of the cloth produced during this time, it was possible to meet the local demand, even the surplus materials were exported to the adjoining areas. Above all, the demand for Shantipuri dhoti and *shari* were increased. As a result, a new tide came in the process of handloom weaving of Shantipur. The main ingredients of Shantipur's weaving were fine yarn. The use of *charkars* in the basic education curriculum developed under the leadership of Gandhiji. It was new impetus by his followers. Above all, during the national movements led by Gandhiji, like other places, Nadia's weavers also wanted to bring an end to the British rule and develop the weaving industry to help national movements. Weavers thought they were performing their duty to mother land by producing indigenous cloth.

Partition of Bengal and its Impact on Handloom of Nadia and Brahman: The influx of these refugees into Nadia's economy has been various since independence. Along with the refugee problem, there was severe food crisis in almost all parts of West Bengal including Nadia and Bardhaman districts. Added to the food crisis was the question of rehabilitating countless refugees. It is pertinent to mention here that the adoption of the property and public exchange policy of the Central Government resulted in quick resolution of the problem in Punjab. But the problem became critical and long term as the policy was not adopted in Bengal like Punjab. Whether the role of the central and state governments in resolving the problem of refugee in West Bengal was positive at all, is subject to investigation. During the period from 1947 to 1950, the central government spent as little as possible on the relief of refugees in Bengal. In 1950, Union Minister for Rehabilitation Mohanlal Saxena refused to take up the responsibility of rehabilitating the refugees in Bengal. Shyamaprasad Mukherjee and Khitish Chandra Niyogi resigned from the Union Cabinet Ministry in protest (Chakraborty 2014: 27-28). And Nehru believed that refugees from East Pakistan were not refugees at all they had left in fear and would return. Although there does not seem to be any reason behind this belief. Again, Nehru was against the exchange of property in Bengal (Bhattacharya 2009: 71-73). The

then Chief Minister of Bengal Bidhan Chandra Roy also was very much dissatisfied about the fund allocation by the Central Government for refugees of West Bengal.

After the partition of the country, refugees tried to make a living by associating themselves with small cottage industries in Nadia and Purba Bardhaman. In 1950, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru ordered the construction of Fulia suburb in Bengal. He also announced that the Government of India would take up the responsibility of rehabilitating those who had fled the riots of 1950 in West Bengal. The amount of government work required to solve the refugee problem was, in fact, insufficient. At this time the government should open a well-equipped office for small cottage industries in these districts, and introduce comprehensive plans for their economic rehabilitation and sustainable livelihood for refugees of West Bengal (Mitra 1978: 26-28).

Partition upset the well-organized economy of Bengal. Prior to partition, Bangladesh's economy depended entirely on its traditional textile weaving production. Eighty-five per cent of the migrant weavers who came from East Bengal were directly or indirectly involved in mass production, but they were engaged in joint weaving before the partition of the country. The production of *Jamdani* sari in East Bengal was also well-known for its fine craftsmanship and design (Kundu 1950: 41). In particular, Muslim rulers encouraged the production of *jamdani*. Initially *jamdani* was produced only by Muslim weavers but gradually Hindus also mastered this special weaving style and engaged themselves in the production of *jamdani* (Das 2001:71).

After the end of the Muslim rule, during the time of European rulers, Hindu women became fond of *Jamdani* shari. In spite of the division of the country on the basis of religion, West Bengal and India was a big market of handloom textiles. These post-independence weavers from East Pakistan were instrumental in the expansion of the handloom weaving in West Bengal. Returning to their old profession, they got the opportunity to make a livelihood of their choice. The process of identifying who are weavers among the refugee families and settled in Nadia and Bardhaman districts, adjoining to the erstwhile Pakistan started very fast. Organizing themselves, they started *jamdani* weaving and other cloth weaving with which they were already acquainted (Das 2001:73). Very quickly in the early 1950s, various programs were adopted by the government to ensure the proper expansion of the weaving industry in post-independent West Bengal.

Most of refugees belong to weavers' community from East Bengal have come to Shastipur, Nabadwip, Ranaghat, Fulia, Chakdaha in Nadia District and also in Srirampur, Katwa, Dhatrigram, Samudragar of Purba Bardhaman District. These places are adjoining to erstwhile Purba Pakistan. After some time, 'Phulia suburb' was formed with a lot of effort. The handloom weavin started with the activities of the refugee people. Dhakai Jamdani, Matha cloth of Jessore (without design) and Tangail sari of Tangail District of present Bangladesh, quickly became popular. The amount of textile production in Bengal also changes. Between the two world wars, the quantity of handloom cloth in Bengal decreased considerably. Between 1921 and 1940, the number of looms in Bangladesh decreased from 2,13,8 to 1, 42,471. Immediately after the partition of Bengal (1952-53) their number of handlooms in Bengal decreased to 97000. But the reorganization of the weaving industry in the 1980s led to an increase in the number of looms. The number of newly registered looms in 1980-81

stood at 13,500. A departmental inquiry by the Government of West Bengal in 1986 found that the number of looms in Bengal as a whole was 2,12,000. Nadia and Bardhaman Districts were areas where the number of looms increased in Bengal after independence (Chakraborty 2014: 16).

According to survey, most of the weavers in Nadia and Purba Bardhaman districts are Hindus, some are Muslims. Moreover, the exiled refugees from East Bengal, many of whom had never been involved in the weaving process at all, associated themselves with the weaving process as a total alternative livelihood after coming in these areas. However, weavers' refugees from Tangail and Dhaka took shelter at Phulia and kept themselves attached with the traditional handloom production process. And the non-weavers refugees, who come to this country, keeping themselves in tune with the rural economy, engage themselves in the traditional production of handloom. Another big reason to involve them in this production process is that it does not require much investment. Naturally, handloom gained popularity very fast in these districts flooded by refugees after partition. But their socio economic conditions not sufficient for living with dignity. After the spread of COVID-19 weavers' conditions have worsened.

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