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THE ‘GREAT DIVERGENCE’ IN BENGAL-

**AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE EARLY MODERN COTTON
TEXTILE INDUSTRY**

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ABSTRACT

Bengal was one of the leading producers of high-quality textile during the early modern centuries and played a very nodal role in the intra-Asian and global trade. After 1500, with the descending of the European traders on its shores, the cotton textile industry boomed. It accounted for nearly two-fifths of all textile exports to Europe from Asia. I attempt, in this essay, to understand the 'Global Divergence' debate in South Asia with a focus on Bengal and its trade and production in cotton textiles. I situate Bengal as a central region of cotton production and trade in the early modern global economy with regards to not only Europe but also to other parts of Asia and within the sub-continent itself. I reiterate Prasannan Parthasarathi's contribution to the 'Great Divergence' debate to argue that Bengal hosted a thriving cotton textile industry deep into the late eighteenth century. I echo that the destruction of the textile industry occurred in the high days of colonialism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. I attempt to substantiate this by trying to understand Om Prakash's analysis of the methods of procurement of production before and after the ascendancy of the Europeans as political administrators in Bengal; when production by weavers was market driven and when it was driven by coercion and impunity, respectively. I finally conclude by commenting on the limitation of this analysis and the further research scope it holds.

KEYWORDS

Great Divergence, Bengal, English East India Company, Dutch East India Company, Cotton, South Asia, India, Britain, Europe, India Ocean, Weavers, Global Economy, Early Modern.

“Besides their Ryce, much Cotton linen is made there which is very fine, and much esteemed in India, and not only spread abroad and carried into India and al the East parts, but also into Portingal, and other places...”

--- Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, on the cotton trade in Bengal in the late 16th century.¹

1. INTRODUCTION: THE ‘GREAT DIVERGENCE’

The historical understanding of the early modern world and the nature of the transition from pre-modern and pre-capitalist economies, in the decades of the recent past have been debated through the concept of the ‘Great Divergence’ where economic historians like P. Parthasarathi have argued for the existence of multiple avenues of change which were in turn results of the pressures that the dynamic and diversified economies of Asia and Europe faced. There was no single process of development in the vast and intricately diverse geographic terrains of Asia and Europe. Many parts of Europe, primarily Britain diverged from Asia not because of its prowess in rationality or science but because of pressures and the response to it through state policies. He elaborates on this revolutionary process by arguing that “Two pressures were critical in generating British divergence. The first was the competitive challenge of Indian cotton textiles, which in the eighteenth century were the most important manufactured good in world trade and were consumed from the Americas to Japan. British efforts to imitate Indian cloth propelled a search for new techniques of production, which culminated in the great breakthroughs in spinning, of the late eighteenth century. These new technologies transformed the world economy and shifted the centre of global manufacturing from Asia to Europe. The second was shortages of wood, a consequence of deforestation. The British response was the substitution of coal for wood, which sparked the development of the steam engine, new techniques for the smelting of iron and eventually new means of transport, including the railway and steamship.” (Parthasarathi.2011:2)²

However, parts of China, in the lower Yangzi delta, were also equally advanced in land and labour systems, luxury consumption and capital accumulation as has been pointed out by Kenneth Pomeranz, in his model of reciprocal perspective. India too had a flexible social structure which allowed for long distance and expansive networks of commercial and trade activities. But, the socio-political and ecological realities in these regions did not demand the initiation of processes which took place in Britain. Parthasarathi tries to understand this through three principles. “First, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were a variety of economic and political goals which produced plural paths of development. Second, different paths of economic change were the products of human agency and choice and were shaped by social, political and economic context. Context refers to more than economic variables and

¹ John H. van Linschoten, *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten to the East Indies: from the old English translation of 1598*, ed. Arthur Coke Burnell and P. A. Tiele (London: Hakluyt Society, 1885), vol. 1, p. 95.

² Parthasarathi Prasannan, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia did not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600-1850*, Cambridge University Press.2011, 2

institutions, such as prices, markets, property rights and population, or cultural qualities, such as reason and science, all of which have been invoked in the debate on divergence. The essential elements of the context are the specific conditions under which individuals operated and reshaped their economic lives. Since global competitive challenges and ecological pressures varied across Eurasia, it is not surprising that economic actors had different menus of choices. Finally, there is a political dimension to economic life. State actions were critical in determining paths of development in both Europe and Asia from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. State actions encompassed more than enforcing property rights and maintaining the rules of the market. States in Eurasia shaped local, regional and long-distance trade, transformed the ecology, and pushed forward the scientific and technological frontier, among other things, and these actions were economically productive.” (Parthasarathi.2011:9)³

The European path of change from the economic equations of a pre-modern and pre-capitalist society, though magnanimous and extraordinary, was not the result of a unique economic and technological dimension bearing fruit in that part of the world. It is rather to be understood that the responses to these dimensions were exceptional because of the pressures it faced. Such pressures were not felt in India or China and hence those responses were not chosen. China and India were not failures; the choice of path was different which was based on context. Gradually, “by the nineteenth century, the European solutions became the basis for an industrial society, but industrialization in Western Europe did not emerge from an effort to industrialize. It was an unanticipated, unforeseen and unintended outcome of the economic and social needs that were found in that part of the world.” (Parthasarathi.2011:10)⁴

The global trading system of the seventeenth and eighteenth century was not very advantageous to the Europeans. “In the world economy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, silver flowed from west to east, balanced by an opposite flow of manufactured goods.” (Parthasarathi.2011:10)⁵ Imports for the European rich and the elite from Asia like that of cotton textiles, porcelains, silks and furniture gave stiff competition to local manufacturers. One of the most important sectors in eighteenth-century Europe was that of the cotton textiles. The Europeans were facing stiff competition from India and China. “The European encounter with the cotton textiles of India would prove to be the most momentous for the divergence between Europe and Asia. Indian and Chinese manufacturers did not face such global competitive pressures, and, as a consequence, the powerful incentives for innovation that the global economy transmitted to Europe were absent.” (Parthasarathi.2011:10)⁶ Added to his incentives of innovation supplied by the realities of the global economy, ecology acted as the second pressure which prompted parts of North-Western Europe and especially Britain towards divergence. It is to be noted that large parts of East Asia and the Yangzi region in China too faced deforestation and the experimentation of coal as fuel had commenced there as well. But, the extent of this experimentation in using coal as a fuel reached its extreme limits in Britain that set forth innovation in technology and resulted in processes like iron smelting and the invention of the steam engine by the later decades of the 18th century. This was also driven partially by political choices. “While the British focused on provisioning London with coal, a decision which would prove to be of world-historical importance, the Chinese focused on

³ Ibid.9

⁴ Ibid.10

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

providing their populace with grain, which ensured the survival of millions in the eighteenth century but bore less technological fruit in the long run. Such an understanding of these choices can only be reached after the fact, however.” (Parthasarathi.2011:10-11)⁷ The economic and political consequences of the energy revolution in eighteenth-century Britain brought about by coal was completely unforeseen. Its emergence as the foremost industrial and imperial power in the world in the nineteenth century was a direct result which was further instrumented through the exploitation of coal deposits in India which in the previous century did not undergo experimentation due to the abundance of wood.

2. THE ‘GREAT DIVERGENCE’ AND SOUTH ASIA

The eighteenth century in South Asia, for historians, has been a theatre of contestations for the nature of economic flourishing and its relation to the political scenario of the century. The debate centered around whether it was a period of decay and decline or a period of economic growth and expansion. Irfan Habib famously argued that peasant revolts against the Mughals and the endemic state oppression led to a decline in the Empire and caused poverty. K.N.Chaudhuri has argued that the competitiveness of Indian cloth exports resulted in the poverty of weavers in eighteenth-century India. On the other hand, David Washbrook argues that ‘pariahs’ had secure incomes and were quite cemented in the social and economic order. Parthasarathi has put forth the view that even in the late eighteenth century wages in Southern India and Britain were comparable. He says that grave poverty and low standards of living were products of British colonial exploitation and emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth century. (Parthasarathi.2001:1-2)⁸ Latest scholarly work on the eighteenth century in South Asia has revealed to us that “it was a time of commercial expansion, with the establishment of market centres and growth in the use of money. It was also a period of profound political change. States in South Asia were transforming themselves to adjust to the new commercial environment. Attempts were made to develop bureaucracies and to rationalize systems of revenue collection.” (Parthasarathi.2001:3)⁹ The revisionists argued that the colonial rule was not an abrupt break from the pre-colonial past in South Asia, but was instead rooted and shaped by it in many aspects. “The dynamism of pre-colonial commerce and economic activity shaped and limited colonial transformation and rule. In other words, Indian society was not formless clay that the British could mold as they wished, but possessed its own centres of power and trajectories of change.” (Parthasarathi.2001:4)¹⁰

Throughout the early modern centuries, South Asian trade networks remained extensive and functioned exhaustively. These trade networks and their difference in institutional organizational quality are crucial to the understanding of the decline of Indian commerce rather than the sole exception of European institutional quality. This argument put forward by Ashin Dasgupta can be considered the very roots of understanding of the ‘great divergence’ with respect to South Asia. Om Prakash views that the Indian decline happened only in the later

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Parthasarathi Prasannan, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India, 1720-1800*, Cambridge University Press.2001,1-2

⁹ Ibid.3

¹⁰ Ibid.4

phases of European company penetration when direct political power was used as a tool of coercion in the production process of commodities of trade that a denigration process ensued. Another set of views completely concentrates on Europe and prioritises the technological advancement and innovations coupled with labour organizations in Britain for European advancement towards modernity. (Parthasarathi. 2001:13-16)¹¹ However, I would reiterate the argument of Riello and Roy who say by citing the example of the cotton industry that, in addition to the divergence being not that ‘great’, “the European ‘take off’ in the production and trade of cotton textiles is shown to be the result of a long, arduous and not always successful process that entailed not just the successful deployment of factors of production, but also the putting in place of complex mechanisms of knowledge transfer, assessment of quality, fashionability, etc. India’s ‘decline’ was similarly a protracted event whose explanation involves politics, technology, and trade.” (Parthasarathi.2001:16)¹² Thus the path taken by South Asia in the eighteenth century was very different from that of Europe. The complexities of the South Asian economic institutions and technological know-how, ecological conditions, social structures and political dynamics dictated this path. Embedded in the plurality of progress in Pomeranz’s ‘divergence’ theory this path went into degeneration later in the nineteenth century at the extremities of colonial exploitation.

In the next sections, I would make an attempt at understanding the transition to the colonial economy in South Asia, with a special reference to Bengal, by taking up the case of cotton textile trade and manufacturing. I would trace the history of the cotton industry throughout the early modern centuries and observe the impact of the European trading companies and illustrate the arguments surrounding the ‘great divergence’.

3. THE GLOBAL COTTON TEXTILE TRADE AND SOUTH ASIA

Roy and Riello quote 16th-century Dutch merchant and trader John Huyghen van Linschoten marveling at the sophistication and the size of the cotton trade in India in his account *Voyage to the East Indies* (1598) that a “great traffique into Bengala, Pegu, Sian, and Malacca, and also to India”, adding that “there is excellent faire linnen of Cotton made in Negapatan, Saint Thomas, and Masulepatan, of all colours, and woven with divers sorts of loome workes and figures, verie fine and cunningly wrought, which is much worne in India, and better esteemed then silke, for that is higher prised than silke, because of the finenes and cunning workmanship”.(Riello,Roy.2009:1)¹³ Linschoten’s observation of this commercial phenomenon was part of a long economic tradition. India was the largest producer of cotton in the world in the early centuries of the millennium. By, 1200 there is evidence of this production process being commercialised and making it a dominating force in the global cotton trade. From 1500 onwards, “Indian cotton achieved a global reach. Europe, West Africa, and the Americas proved to be fertile markets for Indian cloth, and the infusion of greater liquidity into the global trading system with the discovery of rich deposits of silver in the Americas, and to

¹¹ Ibid.13-16

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Riello Giorgio, Roy Tirthankar (eds)., *How India Clothed the World-The World of South Asian Textiles (1500-1850)*, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden.2009,1

a lesser extent Japan, made demand in these new markets possible.” (Parthasarathi.2009:17)¹⁴ In the seventeenth century, cotton became the most important commodity to be traded in the world. Indian cotton had an intensive mass appeal. “Unlike precious and expensive Chinese silks, Indian cotton textiles reached the most remote parts of the globe and changed the consuming habits not just of the elites but also of poorer consumers. They replaced traditional fibers such as arrowroot and linen, as cottons were both cheap and available in large quantities. Rather than being expensive oriental luxuries in reach of the few, Indian cottons were the first cheap mass commodity satisfying the everyday needs of Chinese peasants, African slaves and European housewives.” (Riello.2016:137)¹⁵

Cotton played an important role in securing huge profits for all the European trading companies in Asia. As, the demand for spices waned over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the intra-Asia trade or ‘country trade’ as it was known as filled their coffers with huge profits. “By the 1770s European traders controlled approximately half of all shipments of goods from Batavia to India. Batavia was the entrepot for trade in various Indian cottons such as guinea cloth and salemपुरi from the Coromandel Coast and Surat. Over 50,000 pieces of guinea cloth and salemपुरi from Coromandel, and baftas and niquanias from Surat were traded each year, most of which found their way to Java, Bali, East Indonesia and other parts of the archipelago.” (Riello.2016:137)¹⁶

Apart from Europe, cotton from India was traded to the Middle East and Anatolia in magnanimous numbers over well-established land routes. The introduction of cotton textiles in the Atlantic world brought a major change to the consumption habits of the societies involved which in turn affected the economy. West Africa was an important junction of the cotton trade, where Indian cotton produced in Europe was sold in exchange of slaves to be sold in the Americas. The West African consumers with their emphasis on the diversity of design provided with a big market. (Riello.2016:140)¹⁷ There was huge demand in the Americas as well. A huge share of this was Indian imports. “Already in 1700 the colonies in North America were supplied with Indian calico quilts exported from London to places such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. By the mid-eighteenth century various types of cotton textiles ('Blue', 'India', 'Negro' as well as printed and painted) were exported from England to the American colonies. 'Casta paintings' (representing the ethnic mix of the Spanish American population) depict men, women and children wearing a variety of high-quality brightly-colored Indian chintzes and calicoes. Indian cottons were commonly used in menswear as confined in paintings and inventories. Cottons included locally-produced textiles (probably of lower quality), canequin (imported from India) and other imported varieties.” (Riello.2016:141)¹⁸

¹⁴ -Parthasarathi Prasannan, Cotton Textiles in the Indian Subcontinent (1200-1800) In Riello Giorgio, Parthasarathi Prasannan (eds)., *The Spinning World- A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850*, Oxford University Press. New York.2009,17-42

¹⁵ Riello Giorgio, *Cotton: The Making of a Modern Commodity*, *East Asian Journal of British History*, Vol 5 (2016), 135-149.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.140

¹⁸ Ibid.141

1200 onwards, the cloth that was sent abroad from South Asia throughout the Indian Ocean world and beyond was printed, embroidered or decorated. Block prints cost less in terms of labour requirements and hence was the most abundant form of design, mainly on low-quality cloth. The highest quality cloth, on the other hand, would come in various print designs and colours. These cloths were consumed from Japan and South East Asia to East Africa, Iran and the Ottoman Empire. The Atlantic World traded in modifications of Indian cloth. The Europeans initially traded in embroidered and quality products with finesse but gradually shifted to the cheaper quality materials of cloth. The European demand brought out some radical changes in the design, patterns and, background colour and processes of production. At the same time, however, the European trading companies were interested in buying a high-quality variant of cloth called muslins. Along with the high-quality calicoes, these fine quality of cloth were highly in demand across the Indian Ocean world and even in Europe. They were staple to the wealthy wardrobe. In South Asia they were very popular with the Mughals; its root being traced to the cultures of the pre-Mughal era. (Parthasarathi.2009:32-36)¹⁹

However, the largest consumer of Indian cotton products was the sub-continent itself, which was diversely painted, embroidered or dyed with respect to the tastes of the regions. The taste of the buyers in the different locales changed over centuries. The manufacturers were quite flexible in meeting the demands of such a dynamic market. (Parthasarathi.2009:32)²⁰ South Asian cotton production boomed from the sixteenth century onwards, mostly owing to the inflow of silver into the global economy. This sharply increased the demand of Indian cotton goods from Japan to Iran and the Ottoman Empire to the Atlantic World. “The inflow of enormous quantities of silver and gold, as well as copper, cowries, and other monetary media, into the Indian subcontinent in exchange for these cottons propelled in the subcontinent itself a commercial boom and an economic expansion. Trade within the subcontinent grew; market activity expanded and flourished. Rulers and states benefited from the new-found sources of revenue and both luxury and everyday consumption of cloth flowered. Therefore, from the sixteenth century there was far greater demand for Indian cotton stuff both inside and outside the subcontinent which was met with higher levels of Indian cloth production.” (Parthasarathi.2009:38)²¹ Parthasarathi points out three major reasons for this boom. “The adoption of new techniques of production; an intensification of work, with a concomitant reduction in quality; and, perhaps most critically, an increase in the ranks of textile workers, especially in the frontier region of Bengal, which accompanied a broader expansion of arable land at the expense of the jungle in that region.” (Parthasarathi.2009:40)²² The development and spreading of technology throughout the sub-continent over the medieval centuries contributed heavily to the change in techniques required for greater productivity and meeting the demands of the expanding market after 1500. “The spinning wheel, for instance, increased productivity several-fold and it appears to have been used more widely from the sixteenth century. It was also adapted for particular spinning requirements. Similarly, cloth printing with blocks may have displaced cloth painting after 1500 as it required less labour.” (Parthasarathi.2009:40)²³

¹⁹ Parthasarathi Prasannan, Cotton Textiles in the Indian Subcontinent (1200-1800) In Riello Giorgio, Parthasarathi Prasannan (eds), *The Spinning World- A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850*, Oxford University Press. New York.2009,32-36

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.38

²² Ibid.40

²³ Ibid.

4. BENGAL IN EARLY MODERN GLOBAL ECONOMY

Bengal, throughout the early modern centuries, was a very prosperous region. Owing to its fertile land its productivity in cheap grains was very high. This made it quite attractive for traders in the Indian Ocean world. The increase in the pace of the eastward agrarian expansion into the swamps and jungles with the arrival of political Islam furthered agrarian prosperity, population growth, and urbanization. As a result, there was an enormous increase in the capacity of production not only of the region itself but also of the sub-continent. “The eastern half of Bengal was largely jungle before the sixteenth century, but by the eighteenth, it had become a highly productive rice-growing region. The growth in population, the establishment of settled agriculture, and the building of towns and cities in this fertile delta added enormously to the productive capacity of the subcontinent as a whole. The textile trades of Bengal, both in cotton and silk, expanded enormously after 1500 and began to meet the demands of both Indian Ocean and global markets. This is why from the late seventeenth century Bengal became the most important textile manufacturing region in the Indian subcontinent.” (Parthasarathi.2009:41)²⁴

The Mughals after conquering Bengal in the late sixteenth century recorded it as one of its provinces which functioned with a certain degree of autonomy and was spread over a vast geographic space. It was an important administrative unit with a very strong cultural and linguistic identity in addition to its prosperous and well-integrated economy. However, Roy says that ‘Bengal’ was also an idea in the imperial circles of Delhi and Agra. He says that the Mughals considered it to be an area to the east of Agra under its regional capital. Hence, he hints at a fluidic positionality of Bengal. This led to a segmentation and a multiplicity of the experiences of globalization in the region. “There were regions within Bengal that did not trade very much between themselves, and that were subject to such severe geographical constraints and high transportation costs as to make hegemonic states possessing the institutional means to generate sufficient income for themselves an impossible project. The account of growth-followed- by-decline is at best a generalization based on the experience of a strip of land in western Bengal and extrapolated to a vastly more differentiated land mass. The segments did not necessarily live in autarky. Many outlying areas had frequent transactions with outsiders accessible to them. Such contact did not everywhere take the shape of commodity trade and precious metal inflow. Our considerably enhanced knowledge of that part of Bengal which supplied European traders needs to be used as a benchmark to read how regions that did not trade so much with European merchants nevertheless charted their own distinct modes of engagement with outsiders.” (Roy.2011.120-124)²⁵ He continues further and says that the fragmentation ran so deep that to understand ‘Bengal’ as one single unit in early modern global economic history would limit its understanding. Or else, Roy argues, it would “risk looking like a projection of post-1857 political maps and recreated cultural identities upon a time and place that had no essential homogeneity. Nor can it be salvaged by having re-course to a core-periphery terminology wherein one zone (in the mainstream view the one exporting cotton textiles) is defined as the core and the others as its periphery (usually the grain producing 'hinterland'). Instead, we should consider a notion of early modern Bengal as a series of parallel

²⁴ Ibid.41

²⁵ Roy Tirthankar, Where is Bengal? Situating an Indian Region in the early Modern World Economy, Past & Present, No.213. Nov.2011. pp.115-146

globalizations formed out of interactions between resources, trade costs, an increasingly ambitious fiscal state, itinerant merchants, and military adventurers.” (Roy.2011.120-124)²⁶ He scrutinises contemporary Bengali literature legitimise his argument and concludes by saying that these fragmented regions through economic and political integration by circulation of capital, state personnel, and labour contributed to a wider and unified conception of Bengal. (Roy.2011: 146)²⁷

I would argue that it is quite difficult to ascertain the depth of a fragmentation in Bengal with respect to their interaction with overseas trade and merchants. For instance, European commercial penetration happened not only in the western part but also to a large extent along the extreme eastern coastal regions of the delta whose hinterlands tended to be more swampy and covered with jungles. Further research would probably give us a clearer picture. In the larger scale of trade, commerce, and productivity, Bengal continued to progress in leaps and bounds throughout the late sixteenth to the eighteenth century. It was not only an important exporter of rice in the Indian Ocean world and but was also an important node in the global market for cotton textile production and trade till at least the late eighteenth century.

5. COTTON TEXTILE PRODUCTION IN BENGAL

The centrality of Bengal in cotton production and textile manufacturing in the early modern global economy has already been mentioned in the previous sections. Although printing and painting of cloth were not widespread, cotton from Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Birbhum, and Dhaka was world renowned for fine quality delicate cloths, especially muslins. (Parthasarathi.2009:18)²⁸ “Before 1500, there are reports that Bengal muslins were exported to China where they were highly prized. These muslins were also sent from Bengal, as well as Bihar, to meet the substantial courtly demand of northern India in Delhi Sultanate and in Mughal times. While cloth painting and printing were not done in Bengal, embroidery was widespread, and was especially important in Bengal's trade from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries. The fine cloths of the region were elaborately finished in a number of ways. In some cases, the cloth was given a fine sheen with smooth chank shells which were rubbed over the fabric. Finishing was also done by ironing and beating with a mallet, but these processes were more expensive than polishing with shells.” (Parthasarathi.2009:21)²⁹ Even in the eighteenth century, the finer cloth was spun by a spindle but the high demand cheaper quality clothes were produced with the spinning wheel. This spinning into the yarn was done by women in Bengal and was not dependent on any particular social group.

The European market was mainly driven by demand for luxury goods. Since Bengal was specialising in high-quality fiber, silk and muslins the Dutch and later the English merchants increasingly came to dominate the market-Bengal accounting for two-fifths of the textile trade to Europe by the eighteenth century. “The staple varieties of muslins procured by the Europeans were *khasa* and *malmal*, both plain muslins of good quality. However, quite a few of the pieces

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.146

²⁸ Parthasarathi Prasannan, Cotton Textiles in the Indian Subcontinent (1200-1800) In Riello Giorgio, Parthasarathi Prasannan (eds), The Spinning World- A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850, Oxford University Press. New York.2009,17-42

²⁹ Ibid.21

procured were brocaded in gold, silver, or silk threads, usually in floral patterns. Many of the pieces also had their borders woven in gold threads.” (Prakash.2009:220)³⁰

I would now try to focus on the process of cotton production and the roles of the various stakeholders and the inter-relations among them. In this process, the basic unit of production was operated by a weaver, after the cotton yarn was bought from the spinner. The weaver shared a certain degree of independence. The production was based on the resources of the weaver. This involved risk. But bulk of the production was overseen through an agreement between a merchant and a weaver. The merchants played an intermediary role and in Bengal they were known as *paikars*. The contract specified the quantity, price and dates of delivery and the money was advanced way ahead of the production period to enable the weaver to buy raw materials and sustain his family through the period of production of cloth. (Prakash.2009:220)³¹ Om Prakash argues that this was similar to the European putting-out-system. He points out its difference with the latter by saying that the “Indian weaver bought his own raw material and exercised formal control over his output. Of course, the merchant who had given the advance had first claim on the output, and debt obligations often rendered the artisans subject to coercive control by the merchants.” (Prakash.2009:221)³² Debt obligations was a serious hindrance to trade. Bad debts as they were called, “the intermediary merchants almost always supplied less than they had agreed to, either because the producers had not fully honoured their obligations toward them or because they themselves had chosen to divert part of the goods procured to third parties at better terms. Second, of all the goods received by the companies, a part was usually found unacceptable because of its poor quality. Finally, even in respect of goods accepted, for reasons of quality deviation, the final price paid to the merchants was ordinarily lower than that originally agreed upon. The result was that quite often the value of the goods accepted by a company from a particular intermediary merchant was less than the sum of money given to him in advance. The balance constituted a bad debt.” (Prakash.2009:223)³³ Investigations and contract curtailment to offending merchants were had minimum effect as, the fear of losing out to competition from other trading rivals always loomed over the head of the Company officials. Coercion was resorted to on the weavers at times by the merchants. Thus, the production process was in its totality controlled by the demands of the market, leading the Europeans to accept poorer and coarser qualities of cloth.

A substantial change was seen in the inter-relations between the European Companies and the intermediary merchants and weavers after the Battle of Plassey and the rooting of the English East India Company as the principal political authority in the region. The freedom of the weavers and the merchants were curtailed. They could not work on their own terms. Business was strictly done on the guidelines of the Company, which were unilaterally determined and executed through extreme coercion. (Prakash.2009:224)³⁴

³⁰ Om Prakash, From Market-Determined To Coercion Based:Textile Manufacturing in Eighteenth-Century Bengal, In Riello Giorgio, Roy Tirthankar (eds)., How India Clothed the World-The World of South Asian Textiles (1500-1850), Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden.2009, 217-251.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.223

³⁴ Ibid.224

Bad debts and high handedness on part of the English East India Company caused resentment among the officials of the Dutch Company and a joint investigating team along with the French was created in the late 1760s. The primary objective was to take into account the complete calculation of the number of weavers, amount of cloth produced, payments, machinery and the role of the merchants. The zones to be investigated were called aurungs. Om Prakash gives an instance of one of the aurungs surveyed by a Dutch official named J Mathias Ross.” The aurung of Chandrakona, Ross reported that the villages and hamlets under this aurung amounted to 47 accounting for about 1,100 looms producing cotton textiles and 200 looms producing silk textiles. About 3 miles northward was Khirpai with 350 to 400 weavers. The nine paikars operating at Khirpai had many weavers also working for them at Radhanagar, Udairajpur, Duanghons, Kajipur etc. with 27 weavers even in Chandrakona. Radhanagar was about an hour’s distance in the south and southeast of Khirpai. It had about a 1,000 looms and had traditionally been a major procurement centre for silk and mixed textiles produced in this entire region. It also had about 100 looms producing cotton textiles. It was well-known that the only major item procured by the Europeans in Radhanagar was *soosies*, a high quality silk textile. Other varieties produced there were mainly for sale in Surat, Mocha and Jidda etc. According to Ross’s calculations, there were about 5,000 looms in Radhanagar producing silk and mixed textiles. At an average of four pieces per month, this would involve an annual output of 240,000 pieces worth around 15 lakhs of rupees at an average price of 6¼ rupees per piece.” (Prakash.2009:240)³⁵ This illustrates how the European enterprises-The English, French and the Dutch, operated with full political authority in the aurungs. The weavers had no freedom of their own when it came to cloth production. The companies worked with complete political impunity. The English Company was in particular responsible for heavy high handedness and misuse of its authority. It even extended the rights to private English traders to conduct business with the weavers and merchants. Coercion by them was given Company protection. The intermediate merchants and weavers faced a wrath which they had never faced before and they were coerced into working at levels substantially below the market.(Prakash.2009:241)³⁶

The political gains of the English East India Company in Bengal in the latter half of the eighteenth century had seminal impact on the textile industry of the whole region. “The replacement of a market-determined by a coercion-based system of production and procurement dealt a heavy blow to the fortunes of the industry. The artisans and the intermediary merchants associated with the industry no longer received their due in the value of the total output of the industry.” (Prakash.2009:250)³⁷ The whole production structure was disrupted and the total output suffered greatly. This accumulated over the consequent decades in the nearly complete destruction of the industry by the middle to end of the nineteenth-century.

³⁵ Ibid.240

³⁶ Ibid.241

³⁷ Ibid.250

6. CONCLUSION: THE COTTON TEXTILE PRODUCTION IN BENGAL AND THE ‘GREAT DIVERGENCE’

The market-driven boom in the cotton production and textile manufacturing in Bengal from the late sixteenth century continued well up to the late eighteenth century at least. The scenario of production and procurement changed after the English East India Company gained political control of Bengal in the mid-1760s. Om Prakash opines that the effects of this change have to be critically understood in both output quantity and share of output value between the different stakeholding groups. “There can be no question that the artisanal and the intermediary merchant groups suffered a substantive shrinkage in their share while the English East India Company and the private English traders were distinctly better off. But when it came to actual output, while a certain amount of dislocation did almost certainly take place in the short run, the long-term implications were evidently not particularly harmful. The system by and large was resilient enough to continue to deliver as would be evident from the continued high and indeed growing levels of trade, both intra-Asian as well as inter-continental.” (Prakash.2009:250)³⁸ He further concludes that it is much later that the destruction of the textile industry takes place in Bengal. “The picture of a ruined textile industry in the region does not conform to the evidence available. It was only in the nineteenth century, particularly in the second half, that the impact of the British cotton textile industry was felt with its full force by the Indian handloom sector.” (Prakash.2009:251)³⁹

The economy in Bengal was at par with those in the more progressive parts in Europe, especially Britain deep into the eighteenth century. I would echo Prakash’s view that the ruination of the cotton textile industry happened in the high decades of colonial exploitation from the middle to the late nineteenth century. Until, the very end of the eighteenth century, in spite of major changes in political authority and methods of procurement and, the consequent stress on the production process; the cotton textile industry thrived in Bengal. But at the same time, I believe that to have a deeper understanding of the cotton industry throughout the eighteenth century, further research needs to be conducted on the wages and standard of living of the weavers and, the economic life of the intermediary merchant groups and their organisation in the business. Staying coherent, with the arguments of Parthasarathi in the ‘Great Divergence’ debate on the need to account for ecological realities, it would be interesting to explore the effects on cotton production and trade of the intense famines of the late eighteenth century in Bengal and, the response of the European companies to it. And finally, I would say that it would be of immense scope for research into understanding this ‘divergence’ in the cotton textile industry by an analysis of the coercion committed by the various stakeholders through the Permanent Settlement Act in Bengal the waning years of the eighteenth century.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.251

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