IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Industrial Revolution, Localized Precarity And British India- An Introspective

Dr. Bijoy Sarmah
Associate Professor
Department of History
JDSG College, Bokakhat
Dist. Golaghat, Assam, 785612

Abstract

The Industrial Revolution marked a period of radical transformation in production, transportation, factory systems, urbanization, and technological innovation, fundamentally reshaping societies. Originating in Britain between the 1780s and 1850s, this era was propelled by the development of advanced transport networks, a growing urban workforce from impoverished rural areas, and the emergence of banking systems that facilitated business expansion. Prior to this shift, India held a dominant position in global trade, particularly through its rich tradition of handicrafts. However, with the advent of British industrialization, the economic focus shifted. The British, rather than continuing to trade in Indian cotton textiles, redirected their interests toward extracting raw materials from India to fuel their own industrial needs. This reorientation led to the decline of India's traditional industries and integrated the country into a colonial economic structure. The Industrial Revolution thus had wide-reaching consequences, both within Europe and across colonized regions like India.

Keywords-Industrial Revolution, Industrialization, Innovation

Introduction

Within the framework of industrial revolution between 1760 and 1840, the period experienced revolutionary changes in the system of production, transport, factories, urban cities, new inventions, innovations and technological changes. It replaced small scale domestic system of production of goods by large scale factory system. Human labor was replaced by machine power. The industrial revolution completely transformed the domestic way of life. Steam was used for driving machines. Big factories grew, where production was made on large scale basis for home and foreign markets. The small owners of domestic sectors vanished. Workers then gathered in large numbers to work in factories. They were reduced to the status of wage earners. In the context of transport facility, railways with steam engines carried goods to distant countries. Production was unlimited and it was no longer limited to home market.

Objectives

The objective of the paper is

- To highlight the impact of Industrial Revolution on British India
- To focus on the condition of India during the period of industrialization, also the changes it brought to the country

Methodology

This research paper is based on secondary sources to analyze the impact of the Industrial Revolution on British India. Data has been collected from a variety of credible sources, including scholarly articles, academic journals, historical records, and published books relevant to the period of industrialization. The study employs a qualitative and descriptive approach to examine the socio-economic conditions of India during the Industrial Revolution and the transformative changes it brought. The gathered information has been critically reviewed and interpreted to understand the broader implications of British industrial policies on India's economy, traditional industries, and societal structure.

Industrial Revolution of Great Britain

The term Industrial Revolution was first coined by the French writer Auguete Blanqui in 1837. In England the force of industrial revolution started in and about the year 1860 and continued up to 1880. Britain was the first country to experience modern industrialization. It had been politically stable since the 17th century, with England. By the end of the 17th century, money was widely used as the medium of exchange. The industrial revolution has brought intensive and fundamental changes in society. In Europe it had buried the traditional domestic production, rural economy, feudal society, monarchical traditions and aristocratic privileges. In the eyes of most of the historians, the take off period of English industrial revolution took place between1760-1780. In England the per capita income had a steep ascent from the 6th to 8th decade of the 18th century. According to historians, the accumulation in industrial growth was its cause. The drain that the Indian economy faced through the continuous process of unrequited exports was enormous in size and critical to Britain. The process of primitive accumulation in capitalism or the initial phase of industrialization is a painful one as the initial capital for investment has to be raised on the backs of the working class or peasantry.[i]

Established in 1694, the Bank of England served as the hub of the nation's financial system. More than a hundred provincial banks existed in England by 1784. By the 1820s, there were more than 100 banks in London alone, and over 600 banks in the provinces. These banks fulfilled the financial conditions needed to start and run large industrial firms.

The industrialization that occurred in Britain from the 1780s to the 1850s is described by the factors, for example, many poor people from the villages became available to work in towns; banks started issuing loans to set up large industries and a developed transport network had emerged. From the 1780s the needs of a "period of mercantile domination" in the British economy gave way to the "priorities of a nation in the processes of the Industrial Revolution".[ii] In India the British had their own priorities and these were shifted from mercantile dealing in manufactured Indian cotton piece-goods to the acquisition of raw materials for the new industries. The seizure of territory in Awadh reflected these "priorities".[iii]Piece-goods were easily the largest part of the "investment" planned by the Company for the first two years of itsrule over its new provinces.[iv] Most of the raw cotton either grown in Awadh or in transit through Awadh to Bengal from the Maratha provinces was to be made up into piece-goods in Bengal; it was not re-exported as a raw material.[v]

The British had always woven cloth out of wool and flax i.e. to make linen. The nation has been expensively buying cotton clothing from India since the 17th century. After gaining political authority over portions of India, the East India Company started importing raw cotton that could be spun and woven into fabric in England. Till the early 18th century, spinning had been too slow and laborious. However, a number of technical advancements have effectively reduced the time difference between spinning raw cotton into yarn or thread and weaving that yarn into fabric. Production eventually moved from the homes of spinners and weavers to factories to increase efficiency. From 1780s the cotton industry symbolized British industrialization in many ways. This industry shared two characteristics with other industries. Much of the completed fabric was exported, and all of the raw cotton had to be imported. This maintained the colonization process, allowing Britain to maintain control over both the markets and raw cotton supplies.

Glimpse of Industrialization in India

In the 1750s the Indian connection accounted for a very small proportion of Britain's overseas trade, and was widely seen as doing more harm than good to British industry.[vi] India's main export, cotton cloth, competed with British textiles and had to be paid for mainly Spanish American silver. The East India Company was able to decrease silver shipments and fund a large portion of its Indian acquisitions with the money obtained from local taxes because of its political dominance over Bengal. Indian exports grew more rapidly but to a large extent as 'tribute' without an equivalent increase of imports from Britain. The early industrial revolution increased Great Britain's overseas sales, but they were made mainly in the Americas, particularly Asia. By I820, British dominion over India was well established, and the Industrial Revolution could not have had a significant impact. During the 1770s the East India Company made some progress in developing Bengal as a source of raw silk.[vii] Otherwise cotton cloth remained overwhelmingly predominant among consignments in Europe.[viii]

By 1800, England was on threshold of completing the conquest of the cotton textile industry by the machine. During the 1830s and 1840s the extension of the machine to most other sectors was to be similarly accomplished, culminating in the construction of railways, a sector that was to dominate British economy.[ix] The need for capital not only continued, but increased.

By the 2nd half of the 19th century with many other countries apart from Britain industrializing rapidly the global demand for food and raw materials had expanded enormously and with the construction of railroads, the opening of Suez, etc., the transportation of heavy commodities had become simpler. India's tribute in this period till first world war began to be realized though a multilateral trading pattern whereby India generated an export surplus with countries in the European continent Japan, the US and other countries by exporting large quantities of food and raw materials like raw cotton, indigo etc. India sent textiles and other manufactured commodities, notably railway stock, to Britain, which resulted in a massive export surplus.

Another factor that gained importance was the gradual encroachment of English industry on the Indian market. The British cotton textile industry consumed 16.1 million lbs of raw cotton in 1784-86; 99.7 million lbs in 1815-17; and 1050 million lbs in 1859-60.[x] The enormous increase could not be sustained by the home market. In addition to destroying the global market for Indian textiles, these exports would force Lancashire to enter the Indian domestic market. When other emerging industries developed mass products, they were driven by a similar desire. So let us take a look into the new industries whose development was assured by the railways.

Cotton Mill Industry

The first of these was the cotton mill industry. As growing up in the face of practical monopoly, the new industry did not replace the old handicraft weavers. The old industry was ruined in Bengal and the Carnatic partly by the high handed methods of the Company. By the collapse of the export trade to Europe it lacked any protection against the machine goods of Lancashire. In the early 18th century the sale of Indian piece goods was forbidden in England as a measure of protection for the Lancashire handicraft industry. But re-exports to Europe continued until the American War of Independence followed by the revolutionary wars virtually ended them. By that time Lancashire's own handicraft industry had been replaced by the new mechanical production. These goods were imported to India by the new mechanical production and by the Company where they could sell any Indian goods within the reach of the navigable rivers. On its side the Company took to exporting from India raw cotton instead of finished products. It was not until 1853 that the first successful Indian cotton mill was started in Bombay. By 1914 India was reckoned to be fourth in the world list of cotton manufacturing countries. Bombay with more than eighty mills was followed by Sholapur, Ahmedabad in Gujarat, Madras and other centers.

Jute Industry

Originally, jute production in Bengal was a traditional handicraft with limited export potential. Its commercial value gained wider recognition in 1838 when exports began to Dundee, Scotland. However, in the early stages, jute cultivation in India lacked standardization, which restricted its usage primarily to local applications within Bengal. Additionally, the absence of mechanized power made large-scale manufacturing difficult. Over time, advancements in cultivation techniques significantly improved the quality of Indian jute, enabling it to compete in global markets. This eventually led to Indian jute replacing Russian jute in the Dundee market.

A crucial development that facilitated the growth of India's jute industry was the establishment of the East Indian Railway, which improved access to Indian coal—a key requirement for running power-driven machinery. This infrastructure advancement made it possible to set up industrial-scale jute manufacturing in Bengal. In 1855, the first jute spinning machine was installed near Serampore, followed by the introduction of the first power loom in 1859. These innovations laid the foundation for a thriving jute industry in Bengal. Over time, jute production became heavily concentrated in this region, turning Calcutta into a major industrial hub for jute, much like Bombay, Madras, and Ahmedabad had become for the cotton industry.

Iron and Steel Industry

In India, the economic policy of the British government proved to be disastrous for the people of India. The English East India Company banned the Indian ships for the purpose of trade and issued order to use only British ships, hence the Indian shipping industry was adversely affected. Associated with the new coal fields came the iron and steel industry. Iron of high quality had been smelted from a very early date. In the early 19th century various attempts were made to start an iron industry. It did not turn out successful until coal was used for smelting from 1875 and again there were technical difficulties that haltered it. Iron and steel production started in 1911 and 1913, respectively. By the end of the period this was the largest single steel works in the world, producing about a million tons annually; India ranked sixth in the list of steel producing countries. It became a symbol Indian enterprise.

Along with these major industries, a number of other industrial activities grew up. Important among them were the chemical industries, industries including rice and flour mills, woolen and silk manufacture sugar refining etc. After a protective tariff was imposed in 1932, the sugar refining industry saw incredible growth, and by 1933, India was essentially self-sufficient in cement. The industrial current began to expand over India around 1860.

Who Benefitted: India or British, a Symbol of Question

India held a unique position prior to the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, when handicrafts were on the decline. Handloom industries and spinning wheel, the heart of Indian society were destroyed to fulfill the zeal of British to trade by exporting Indian goods. The British Government controlled trade and industry purely into a colony. The growth of foreign trade did not contribute to the welfare of the Indian people as the growth was neither natural nor normal. The country was flooded with manufactured goods from Britain and forced to produce and export the raw materials which Britain and other foreign countries needed. As it is a well-known fact that India was transformed into a colony under British rule, for British manufacturers, India was a hub of raw materials, foodstuffs and an important sector for the investment of British capital. Imperial interests benefited from high taxes on its agriculture. The bulk of the transport system, modern mines, industries, foreign trade, coastal and international shipping and banks and insurance companies were all under foreign control. India provided employment to thousands of middleclass Englishmen and spent a huge amount in paying salary to these sections. Despite all, Indian economic and social development was completely subordinated to British economy and social aspects. When Britain was developing into a leading developed capitalist country of the world, India was being underdeveloped into a backward colonial country.

Conclusion

The Industrial Revolution caused far reaching changes in the life of the people. So most importantly what came to our notice is that the invention of power loom industries hampered the Indian life due to which the small scale industries of India got collapsed as a result of colonialism. In the early stage of the Industrial Revolution many people, who served as artisans in the cottage industries were thrown out of employment due to the destruction of domestic system. The growth of large industries ruined the domestic industries. Basically one cannot deny the fact that the coming up of machines hampered the lives of people in many ways at some point of time. The Industrial Revolution led to the emergence of landless, homeless working class who had nothing to live upon except manual work in the factories. In pre-Industrial Revolution, workers were homogeneous in their output. Industrial Revolution and factory system divided the working class into skilled and unskilled workers. Apart from all these the Industrial Revolution led to the growth of industrial capitalism. It created a division between the capitalist employers and the labour. The profit was concentrated in the hands of the capitalist producers while the workers starved. The revolution also led to the ascendency of the bourgeoisie. The old aristocratic and feudal basis began to decay under its impact. The Industrial Revolution revolutionized the whole basis of government and politics. So it is very clear that though India benefitted in some aspects from the revolution ultimately the profit was of the Britishers who converted the Indian market to a mere exporter and importer of British finished goods thus handicapping the Indian traders, market and business.

ENDNOTES

[i] *Aditya Mukherjee, "How Colonial India Made Modern Britain", published by Economic and Political Weekly, December 11-17, 2010, Vol. 45, No. 50, pp.73-82*

[ii] *Rudrangshu Mukherjee, "Trade and Empire in Awadh, 1765-1804", Past and Present, No. 94 (Feb 1982), pp. 94*

[iii] *P. J. Marshall, "Early British Imperialism in India", Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Past and Present Society, Feb 1985, No. 106, pp. 164*

[iv] *Ibid, pp. 165*

[v] *Ibid, pp. 165*

[vi] *J. R. Ward, "The Industrial Revolution and British Imperialism", 1750-1850, Source; The Economic History Review, Published by Wiley on behalf of the Economic History Society, February 1994, New Series, Vol. 47, No. 1, pp. 44-65*

[vii] *Ibid, pp. 44*

[viii] *Ibid, pp. 44*

[ix] *Irfan Habib, "Colonization of the Indian Economy, 1757-1900", Published by Social Scientist, March 1975, Vol. 3, No. 8, pp. 23-53*

[x] *Ibid, pp. 29*

REFERENCES

- *Mukherjee Aditya, "How Colonial India Made Modern Britain", published by Economic and Political weekly, December 11-17, 2010, Vol. 45, No. 50, pp.73-82*
- *Mukherjee Rudrangshu, "Trade and Empire in Awadh, 1765-1804", Past and Present, No. 94 (Feb 1982), pp. 94*
- *Marshall P.J., "Early British Imperialism in India", Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Past and Present Society, Feb 1985, No. 106, pp. 164*
- *Ward J.R., "The Industrial Revolution and British Imperialism", 1750-1850, Source; The Economic History Review, Published by Wiley on behalf of the Economic History Society, February 1994, New Series, Vol. 47, No. 1, pp. 44-65*
- *Habib Irfan, "Colonization of the Indian Economy, 1757-1900", Published by Social Scientist, March 1975, Vol. 3, No. 8, pp. 23-53*