



THE CRAFTS AND CAPITALISM

**HANDLOOM WEAVING INDUSTRY
IN COLONIAL INDIA**

Tirthankar Roy



THE CRAFTS AND CAPITALISM

This book presents a comprehensive history of the handloom weaving industry in India to challenge and revise the view that competition from machine-produced textiles destroyed the country's handicrafts as claimed by historians until recently. It shows that skill-intensive handmade textiles survived the competition on a large scale and that handmade goods and high-quality manual labour played a positive role in the making of modern India. Rich in archival material, *The Crafts and Capitalism* explores themes such as the historiography of craft technologies; statistical work on nineteenth-century cotton cloth production trends; narratives of merchants, the social leaders, the factory-owners; tools and techniques; and the shift from handloom to power loom. The book argues that changes in the handloom industry were central to the consolidation of new forms of capitalism in India.

An important intervention in Indian economic history, this book will be useful to scholars and researchers of Indian history, economic history, colonial history, modern history, political history, labour history, and political economy. It will also interest nongovernmental organizations, textile historians, and design specialists.

Tirthankar Roy is Professor of Economic History, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK, where he teaches South Asia and global history. He is the author of *India in the World Economy: From Antiquity to the Present* (2012), *Law and the Economy in Colonial India* (with Anand V. Swamy, 2016), and *The Economy of South Asia from 1950 to the Present* (2017). His research interests are history and development of South Asia, global history, empires, and environmental history.

‘The literature on decline and survival of the handloom sector in India in the nineteenth century had been ideological, focusing on the British policies of deliberate destruction of the industry. This book, based on data and quantitative estimation rather than preconceived assertions, is a much-needed contribution to the literature. A leading contributor to Indian economic history, Roy more than anybody else is well positioned to write this narrative.’

Bishnupriya Gupta, *Professor of Economics,
University of Warwick, UK*

‘Given the continued importance of artisanship generally and handloom weaving particularly, both in cultural and economic terms, the book would be likely to find a wide audience among development workers, those interested in cultural heritage, as well as anyone interested in economic history more broadly.’

Abigail McGowan, *Associate Professor of History &
Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences,
University of Vermont, USA*

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PREFACE

In 1993, I published a book called *Artisans and Industrialization: Indian Weaving in the Twentieth Century*, which was the first attempt to write a systematic economic history of handloom weaving. To date, it remains the only monograph on the subject. Since its publication, the scholarship on topics related to it has processed a lot more evidence than that which the book had dealt with. I have played a part in that enterprise. A new book has become necessary that can synthesize this material.

Why is such a book needed? It is needed because the research conducted in the last 25 years has completely changed the narrative about the industry, but popular debates and discussions on history are yet to register that change. Popular history books and the hundreds of internet blogs that describe the tragic legacies of British rule in India recycle an essentially obsolete story about the crafts, which said that the British Industrial Revolution and the free trade policy of British colonial rule in India had a profoundly destructive effect on Indian artisanal weaving. That story cannot be right, because the crafts, including handloom weaving, continued in large scale well into the twentieth century.

The alternative narrative developed in the book starts from the premise that handloom weaving was a differentiated bundle of skills so that the effects of British industrialization and free trade on it was differentiated too. One of the main markers of differentiation was design skill that added some dimension of quality to the finished cloth. Consumers understood and valued quality. Those handloom weavers who had the skills that the consumers valued gained from the same processes – free trade and British industrialization – which threw their colleagues into unemployment. Where they could use design capability efficiently, merchants and master-weavers made more money and invested more money than before, increasing inequality within the industry.

As this statement shows, the main drivers of change in the industry, according to the book, were internal to the handlooms rather than the external competition of mechanized cloth producers of England or India. That is how the alternative narrative has changed the scholarship. It invites us to

write the economic history of handlooms by paying close attention to its capability and how that capability needed to adapt to changing patterns of demand for traditional goods, rather than just assume that machines made that capability so redundant that we need not study it at all.

Besides my own writing, a few publications have significantly advanced our understanding of the history in the last 25 years. The most relevant for the project is Douglas Haynes's *Small Town Capitalism in Western India: Artisans, Merchants, and the Making of the Informal Economy, 1870–1960* (2012), along with several of his writings published in the 1990s and not incorporated fully in *Small Town Capitalism*. Although Haynes's main interest is in small-scale powerloom weaving, there are areas of overlap and compatibility between *Small Town Capitalism* and that part of the book which shows how handloom weaving became a field for new types of business enterprise. Haynes makes the argument in a comparative historical framework, which my book will do too, only differently. There is rather less overlap on most other points.

In the years between the first statement of the thesis and this updated and stronger statement, friendship, discussions, and collaboration with Haynes enriched my thinking on textile history. When I began my career around 1990, Dharma Kumar, the maverick historian, saw the significance of my intellectual project more clearly than I did. She thought (I suspect) that *Artisans and Industrialization* had underestimated the significance. This is an appropriate occasion to remember her role in my decision to write this book. Many others also contributed to the shaping of the project, whom I have acknowledged elsewhere.

Finally, I wish to thank two anonymous referees for their positive assessment of the project, and thank Mrinmoyee Roy for the excellent glossary and invaluable help in preparing the biographical sketches that appear at the end of the book.

INTRODUCTION

Until the end of the 1980s, making cloth on hand-powered looms, or handloom weaving, was the largest industry in India measured in employment. The standard historical narrative about the industry during British colonial rule in the region (c. 1765–1947) said that the British Industrial Revolution and the free trade policy followed by the colonial rulers had a profoundly destructive effect on the industry. That narrative did not sit well with the extensive presence of the industry in postcolonial India. In the last 25 years, a literature emerged to offer an alternative account of history. The book restates and illustrates that alternative account.

The reinterpretation consists of several propositions. The most important of these is that handloom weaving was a differentiated bundle of skills so that the effects of British industrialization and free trade on it was differentiated too. One of the main markers of differentiation was the design skill that made a difference in the quality of the cloth. If the advantage of mechanized weaving was to increase the speed of production, '[t]he technology involved in designs,' I said in an earlier work, 'was . . . to the advantage' of the handloom.¹ Every weaver did not command skill, but many did.

Other propositions follow from this. Consumers of cloth minded quality. Some handloom weavers possessed the skills that the consumers valued. Surviving artisans gained from the same processes – free trade and British industrialization – which threw their less-skilled colleagues into unemployment. And these conditions consolidated capitalism; that is, they helped merchants to sell more and factory owners who were making handmade cloth to earn more money and invest more money than before. That process, in turn, encouraged technological change and increased inequality within the weaving industry.

The rest of the chapter summarizes the interpretation that I believe fits the evidence better. Before that, it is necessary to engage with the conceptual tools and arguments used to explain the long-term tendencies in artisanal industries. A good place to begin is the set of two terms – 'deindustrialization' and 'protoindustrialization' – commonly used in comparative economic history to understand the historical experience of the textile artisan since the nineteenth century. How relevant are these concepts to Indian history?

Deindustrialization

Around 1750, India is believed to have supplied a quarter of the world's industrial output. On the Indian Ocean littoral, during the 250 years following Vasco da Gama's discovery of the sea route between Europe and India (1497–8), cotton textiles procured by the European merchants in Gujarat, Bengal, and the Coromandel Coast dominated world trade, eventually shaping consumer preference in the West.² According to some historians, Indian textiles induced import-substituting industrialization in Britain.³

Such prominence reflected the Indians' extraordinary proficiency with a whole range of technologies that went into the making of cloth. The most important element in the basket of skills was the weaver's ability to operate the handloom to make a wide variety of products, from coarse cloth to superfine muslins, cotton to silk, plain cloth to cloth designed on the loom or delivered to the printer, dyer, painter, and embroiderer. Deep knowledge of materials, from cotton to silk to wild silk to organic dyeing agents and gold thread, complemented that ability.

Given how successful Indian handmade cloth was as a traded good, what then happened to it in the nineteenth century must have been a very great shock. Between 1820 and 1880, the Indian weaver's prominence in the world's cloth trade and industry declined, as British machine-made yarn and cloth started trading widely. India's decline together with the rise of the cotton textile industry in Britain led to the narrative that the rich artisan tradition in the region suffered a catastrophic shock in the nineteenth century after imported European manufacturers began to flood Indian markets.

Until the 1990s, there was near-total agreement among historians about the shock, its source, the scale, and its aftereffects. 'Artisans,' wrote S.J. Patel, 'especially weavers and tanners, were faced with the ruination of their occupations by the increasing competition of industrial goods.'⁴ In the process of this ruination, the self-sufficient village economy was destroyed, and a wage-dependent labour force emerged when none had existed before, according to Patel. '[E]vidence does suggest,' writes Amiya Kumar Bagchi, 'the working of a general process of de-industrialization in India over much of the nineteenth century, caused mainly by the decline of the traditional cotton-weaving and spinning.'⁵ Irfan Habib calls the catastrophe the 'eclipse of the handloom.'⁶ 'Traditional industry,' writes Aditya Mukherjee, 'was destroyed.'⁷ Many scholars have measured the extent of the decline and found it of significant order. One of these works concludes, 'total handicraft textile employment fell absolutely over the entire century.'⁸

These claims confirm a proposition the Indian nationalists had made around 1900, that the free trade policy the British Empire had imposed on India took a heavy toll on Indian livelihood.⁹ 'The destruction of indigenous handicrafts,' the nationalists claimed, 'had created unemployment for

millions, forcing them to fall back . . . upon agriculture.’¹⁰ In the historiography of economic change in colonial India (1765–1947), this account has become known as the ‘deindustrialization’ thesis.¹¹

If the fact of a decline in handloom weaving is well established, so is the theory that explains it. What happened to handlooms in India was the inevitable outcome of the British Industrial Revolution, that is, the outcome of the invention of a loom that ran eight times faster than the handloom and the emergence of the factory system enabling its wider use. This was a global process. British industrialization caused an industrial decline in the rest of the world on an enormous scale. ‘The ruin, sooner or later, of the old-style craftsmen,’ wrote Daniel Thorner, ‘was as integral a part of the Industrial Revolution as the coming of the factory system.’¹² The third world paid the price for Britain’s economic emergence. To quote Bagchi again, ‘adjustments to technological change in the advanced capitalist countries took place overseas.’¹³

Economists treat this theory of asymmetric adjustment as a vital piece in the economic history of the world in the nineteenth century. The economist Jeffery Williamson has written articles and books suggesting that industrialization in the western world generated deindustrialization in the rest of the world via changes in relative prices, and, in turn, caused international economic inequality to increase between 1820 and 1950. ‘Britain’s productivity gains in manufacturing,’ he writes, ‘led to declining world textile and metal product prices, making their production in India less and less profitable.’¹⁴

India’s deindustrialization, in this way, becomes a crucial example in a bigger story about the economic history of the modern world. That story is about the origins of international economic inequality in the world from 1820 until 1950. Contributors to this literature hold, usually based on unreliable datasets, that Asians were once better off than the Europeans before modern economic growth ushered in a dramatic reversal of status. The decline of the artisanal textile industry was one of the main reasons and symptoms of the fall of Asia. India enters world economic history as a tragedy largely because of the misfortune of its handloom weavers.

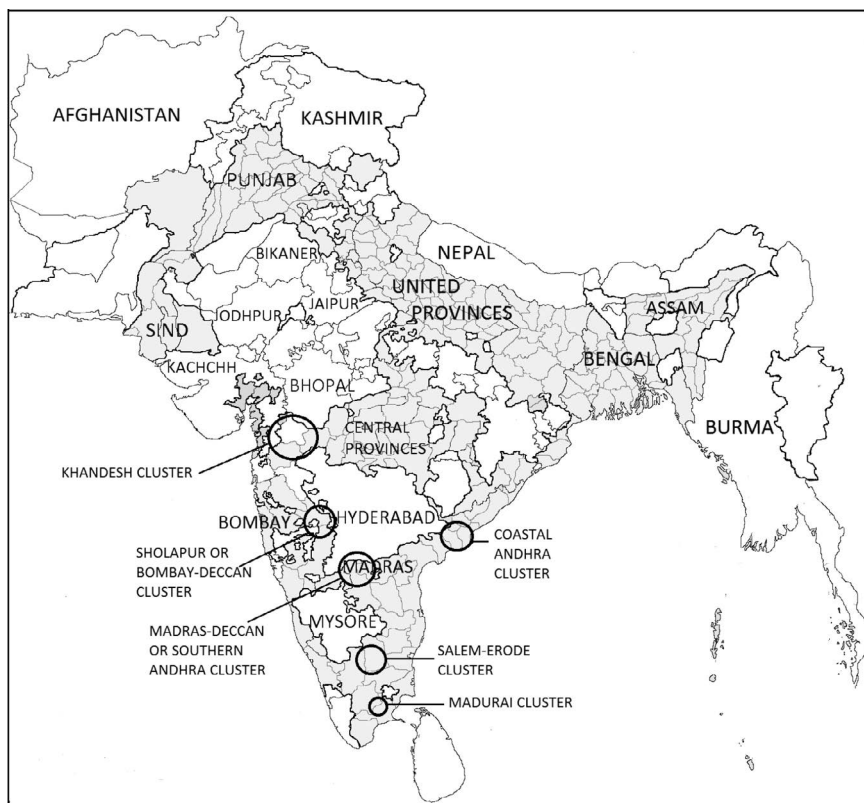
For someone who is mainly interested in knowing what happened to the Indian handloom weaver, this narrative will appear unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, it denies the non-West any worthwhile industrial history. Starting with Karl Marx in the 1850s, arguments in world economic history usually treat the ‘rise of the western world’ as the benchmark narrative and deduce what happened to the rest of the world from what happened in the western world. Following this tradition, economists more recently have used a variety of theories of economic growth to explain the rise of the West. The regions outside Western Europe and North America – the rest of the world – enter the causal theory as regions where the factors

causing economic growth were missing. The deindustrialization argument does exactly that. It identifies British industrialization as the thing to be explained and deduces change in India as an effect of British industrialization. Indian economic history is an inference drawn from studying British economic history. The premise is that Britain changed and India did not change and therefore suffered. But if India did not change, why study India at all? Deindustrialization as a theoretical construction makes it unnecessary to conduct a serious investigation into Indian textile history. Everyone knows what happened to the Indian artisans. They were the victims of the invention of machinery. Why study them, then?

The second problem is theory-fetishism. Causal models of long-term economic growth concentrate on the cause, not the region and its specific history. If Indian textile history is derived from a theory of world inequality, it is worthwhile to concentrate on the theory and not on India. An example of theory-fetishism is Jeffery Williamson's book *Trade and Poverty*. The book explains deindustrialization with a theory of relative price changes. Like any economics book, *Trade and Poverty* takes its theory seriously, so seriously that it fails to notice that the textile history of India had rejected the fact that the theory wants to explain.¹⁵

That brings us to the question: what fact should we be explaining? The next chapter delivers a fuller answer to the question. I select one set of statistics from the chapter to make a quick point. Consider Figure 1.1. Estimates of the consumption of handmade cloth in India confirm that there was a decline in the nineteenth century. *The trend then reversed*. From about 1880, there was a rise in the consumption of handloom cloth, sustained until the end of the data series, 1940. Not only was there a turnaround, but there was also a significant growth in productivity in the industry in the early twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1930, the volume of handloom cloth production about doubled, even as the number of workers and looms did not change (Chapter 5, Table 5.1). As far as we can measure, real wages in hand-weaving held steady, which would mean that profits in the industry increased. Handloom weaving in the early twentieth century was becoming a profitable business.

The turnaround as such is not a new finding. 'At a certain stage,' wrote D.R. Gadgil in 1928, 'a point of equilibrium was reached' in the competition between handloom weaving and machine weaving.¹⁶ Gadgil did not discover this fact but quoted provincial officers like Alfred Chatterton of Madras, C.A. Silberrad of the United Provinces, and Abdul Latifi of Punjab, to restate the fact. These officers and others like them had already produced a significant body of writings on local weaving industries (see also 'monographs' in the Glossary and the 'Selected biographies' at the end of the book). They showed that in most parts of India, the industry was becoming differentiated. That is, one part of it continued to decline, whereas another part was stable, even growing. Figure 1.1 shows that between 1880 and



Map 1.1 India around 1940, showing major political divisions and concentrations of urban handloom weaving

Source: Author

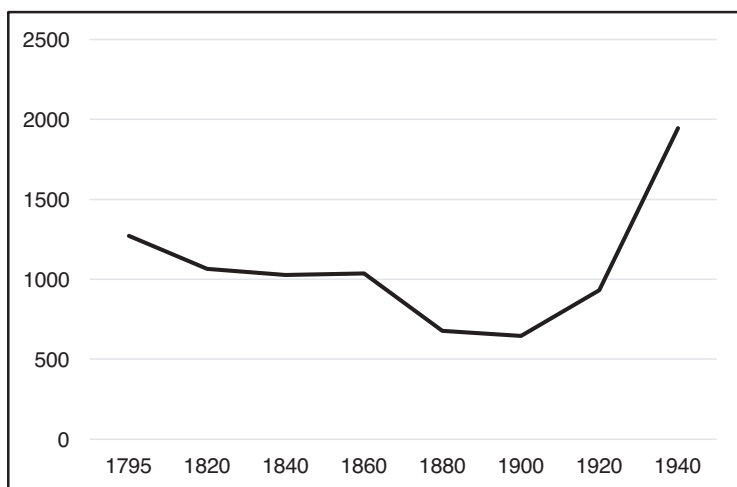


Figure 1.1 Consumption of handmade cloth (million square yards), 1795–1940

Source: Based on Tirthankar Roy, 'Consumption of Cotton Cloth in India, 1795–1940,' *Australian Economic History Review*, 52(1), 2012, 61–84. See also Chapter 2.

1900, growth and decline balanced one another, and after 1900, the growth outweighed the decline. Neither Gadgil nor these officers offered useful generalizations on either the reversal or the differentiation. The paradigm of obsolescence, therefore, met with no effective challenge.

In the 1960s, an American scholar, Morris D. Morris, expressed puzzle over the historians' morbid fascination with deindustrialization (the term was not yet popular when he wrote the piece in 1963). He observed that the handloom weaving industry survived into the mid-twentieth century. In 1901, handlooms engaged about a third of the industrial workforce of 13 million. The proportion came down but was still large in the late-twentieth century.¹⁷ Morris's own explanation for the survival was incomplete. He said that the huge fall in cotton cloth prices in the nineteenth century had an 'income effect' on Indian consumers; that is, believing they were better off overall, consumers purchased both handloom and machine-made cloth in bigger quantities. But why would they do that if the costlier handmade cloth and the cheaper machine-made cloth were identical in quality? The argument makes sense only if we accept that the consumers saw these goods as distinct; this needs to be shown.

After Morris, economists and historians spent a lot of their energy on measuring the extent of the fall in textile employment in India in the nineteenth century (see discussion in Chapter 2). This exercise ran into diminishing returns quickly. Scholars who took part in this exercise behaved as if those who had pointed out the reversal also denied the earlier decline. The new scholarship tried to prove the deindustrialization deniers wrong. Morris was one of the main targets. His critics painstakingly showed that a decline did happen.

The critics missed the point. The point is not whether deindustrialization happened or not. Rather, it was that a turnaround demands of us an analytical narrative on the textile industry that does not yet exist. Whether, in the earlier times, five weavers lost jobs or five million did, the story of technological obsolescence does not change. The story is that, since machine-weaving was eight times faster than the hand-powered loom, the hand-weavers would sooner or later suffer a fall. But precisely because machine-weaving was eight times faster, even if one handloom weaver survived the rise of machines, there is a puzzle to explain. If millions of such weavers survived, as they did in India, the dark and tragic account of the history of the weavers collapses completely and another account becomes necessary. That account must show why the handlooms might have an advantage over machine-weaving. Measuring how many people lost jobs will not supply that account.

Beyond inspiring measurements to prove him wrong, Morris had another effect on economic history. From the 1980s, some scholars mainly using regional experiences as evidence wrote on the industry, suggesting that handloom weaving appeared resilient in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

century.¹⁸ Almost invariably, they cited Morris, though the idea had much older roots, as I have shown.

One of these works, mine, claimed this to be the case for India overall. Collectively, however, these works did not quite deliver a coherent alternative to deindustrialization. These works seemed to agree that product differentiation with machine-made cloth was partly responsible for the survival of handlooms. But they did not offer useful generalizations about how this might work and often contradicted each other. For example, whereas several scholars suggest that handlooms survived by shifting into lower-skilled coarse weaving, my work stressed the application of quality and skill to a greater extent. While suggesting a revision, therefore, these studies did not lead to a paradigm of transition in weaving that could become an alternative to deindustrialization. They did not partly because of their regional focus and partly because macroeconomic data spanning the entire nineteenth century and beyond did not yet exist. Figure 1.1 changes that.

To sum up, observers of the crafts – from Gadgil and his sources in the early 1900s to the historians of the 1990s – saw correctly that handloom weaving had seen a reversal and that the reversal called for a new historiography of the handlooms, but they did not offer a persuasive new narrative on Indian textiles that would account for both the earlier decline and the later reversal within the same analytical framework. The old model of technological obsolescence based on divergent loom speed fails because it does not explain the reversal. If we stick to the idea that the British machines made Indian artisans obsolete, we would need to show that the survival and the rise had owed to technological catch-up. There were indeed numerous improvements in technical and operational efficiency in the handloom in these years, but they do not add up to anything like catch-up. It was still a far slower machine. Obsolescence is just not the right ingredient to construct a new narrative on the textile artisans.

If deindustrialization is unfit as an explanation for the long-term trend in handloom weaving, can protoindustrialization explain it?

Protoindustrialization

Survival of artisans on a significant scale did not happen only in India. In continental Europe and Japan, crafts (like silk in Japan) were the forerunner of factories and machine-using industrialization. Current research on textile history in Asia and Africa continue to discover numerous local cloth-producing clusters that survived British industrialization and trade. Even when trade did destroy the local industry, it did not necessarily displace local merchants, who understood consumer preference, became mobile, and reorganized commerce. Often, they met local tastes by procuring cloth from India or Japan rather than from Britain.¹⁹