

## **THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY OF BENARES: A STUDY OF ITS FORMATION AND GROWTH (1600-1800)**

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The historical writings unfold the history of textile in sundry ways. The Arthashastra of Kautilya apart from its political ideas and discussion deliberately discussed the textile of various types, which accommodate the name Ksma (Linen) of Benares. The phenomenon of the establishment of Muslim power witnessed the great alteration of quotidian attires of the rulers, noblemen and common conglomeration. Therefore, it resulted in rechristening the Indian textile industries and provided it an accomplished dimension. The market requirement of the fancy garments within and outside India led to the immense metamorphose in weaving method of Indian textile industries. The weavers of the hallowed city of Benares could not remain unaffected by it and transformed themselves according to the bazaar demands.

The seventeenth-eighteenth century marked the active involvement of the Europeans in the Indian trade. If we try to ascertain the interest of the Europeans in India, it appears that their major efforts were towards the textile trade. The noted historian John Irwin has marked that, "textiles were the foundation of Indo-European commerce."<sup>1</sup> This paper is an investigation into the formation and growth of the textile industry of Benares during the seventeenth-eighteenth century. Yet little work has been done in this respect. Further, this paper formulates a few questions: What kinds of stuff artisans were engaged in manufacturing? Was there production for only internal consumption? Did the decline of Mughal central machinery affected textile trade of Benares and what were its major repercussions? The paper also examines whether the

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<sup>1</sup> Irwin, J. and Schwartz, P.R. *Indo-European Textile History*, Calico Museum of Textile Ahmedabad, India, 1966, p. 8.

intervention of English East India Company in the region of Benares was favourable for the textile industry or not? The detail of the above-mentioned questions on which the present paper is based also contributes to an understanding of a totally different scenario regarding textile production and its trade. The paper will also try to look as to how textile industry of Benares provides occupation and asylum to the weavers of other states.

The epoch of Akbar as historians produced before us was a period of spreading prosperity and stability in Indian sub-continent. Moreover, it was the interest and curiosity of Emperor Akbar towards the Europeans that resulted in the improvement of Indian textile industries.<sup>2</sup> The *Ain-i-Akbari* of Abul Fazl Allami carried colossal information regarding the various kinds of textiles<sup>3</sup> and steps taken by Akbar for its development. For instance- “Skillful masters and workmen have settled in this country to teach people an improved system of manufacture.”<sup>4</sup> This state of development had also been opening new vent to the textile industry of Benares. During Akbar’s time, Benares was engaged in producing cotton textiles like jhona and mihirkul, one of the categories of Khasa muslin.<sup>5</sup> Further, production of the article by the weavers of Benares had been increasing during Jehangir’s period as Pelseart a Dutch factor at Agra reported that includes-turban<sup>6</sup>, girdle, gangazil<sup>7</sup> and other varieties of textiles.<sup>8</sup>

The first half of seventeenth century or we can say Jehangir’s period was noteworthy for us because our native weavers developed stamina for manufacturing textiles; not only to cater the

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<sup>2</sup> Foster, W. *Early Travels in India*, 1583-1619, Oxford University Press, 1921, pp. 48-59. See also, *The Commentary of Father Monserrate on his Journey to the Court of Akbar*, translated by Hoyland, J. S. and annotated by Banarjee, S N. Oxford University Press, 1922, pp. xv, xvi,1. Maclagan, E. *The Jesuits and The Great Mogul*, Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., London, 1932, pp.23-24, 46-47.

<sup>3</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, edited by H. Blochmann, vol.i, Bibliotheca Indica, Calcutta, 1872, p. 107-11. The validity of this fact become more clear from this reference, for instance- *Makhmal-e-kaashi* (velvet from kashan), *Makhmal-e-Firangi* (velvet from Europe), *kamkhab-e-Vilayati* (velvet from Kabul and Persia), *Makhmal-e-Gujarati* (velvet from Gujarat) etc.

<sup>4</sup> Op.cit, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol. i, p.101, See also op.cit, *The Commentary of Father Monserrate on his Journey to the Court of Akbar*, p.201.

<sup>5</sup> Op.cit, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol. i, pp. 108-9, See also *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol. i, p. 423. In the first volume of *Ain*, where Abul Fazl discussed the varieties of textiles, he did not mention the place of manufacture. But in other section where he is describing the subahs of Akbar’s empire, but these two varieties which are the subject of our concern, produced in Benares.

<sup>6</sup> The word used in *Ain* for Turban is *Chīra*. On the other hand, Francis Gladwin wrote it as *Sirband*. See, *Ayeen Akberi; or, the Institutes of Emperor Akber*, translated by Francis Gladwin, vol. i, London, 1800, p.99

<sup>7</sup> A kind of white cloth covered space in *Ain*’s list. See, op.cit, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol. i, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> Pelseart, F. *Jehangir’s India*, translated by W.H. Moreland and P. Gyel, Cambridge, 1925, p.7.

requirement of internal consumption but for the Export as well. We can find scattered references about the textiles of Benares, in each travelogue and factory records of English East India Company which advocates its magnitude. Although, it is futile to mention here that they did not communicate us with detailed information. It is an established fact that Bengal was a chief producer of raw silk and textiles in India. Hence, each individual European company tried hard to hold control over Bengal. Despite this, the fruit falls in the hand of Portuguese. Therefore, it was not likely for Englishmen to carry their trading activities in Bengal. The demands of the textiles by Englishmen had precisely been fulfilling through the weavers of other parts of the country.<sup>9</sup>

However, during this period English East India Company was operating its trade from Surat. The act of procurement of textiles and other goods accomplished at Agra through the channel of merchants and company's factors. The stuffs such as khasa, bafta, shashes, ambertees, mandiles (a turban-cloth woven with silk and gold threads) etc. were maintaining space in factory records, seems great in demand at that time.<sup>10</sup> Let us start our discussion with shashes, it was one of the textiles were woven in Benares as Ralph Fitch pointed out, "great store of cloth is made there of cotton and shashes [turban clothes] for the moores."<sup>11</sup> Although, there is no other evidence found regarding the production of shashes in Benares. The procurement of ambertee calico mentioned in factory records had been carrying in large scale with Lakhawar (Patna). In contrary to this Abul Fazl did not furnish any information regarding ambertee stuff. Simultaneously, Kenn in his note inappropriately wrote Benares instead of Lakhawar. However, at another place a factor at Patna due to delay in ambertee calico suggest no further investment at Lakhawar, "it will not permit any convenient investments to be made at Lakhawar in the ambertee raw."<sup>12</sup> It is certain that, if they were not investing in Lakhawar, then they might be having other option to execute their requirement. On the other hand, during later half of the eighteenth century, Benares became one of the manufacturing centers of ambertee calico.<sup>13</sup> The mandiles (turban cloth) one of the

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<sup>9</sup> Prakash, O. *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal 1630-1720*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1988, pp.3-8. It is also mentioned here that during this period supremacy in 'Maritime trade' lies in hand of Portuguese.

<sup>10</sup> Foster, W. *English Factories*, vol.i, 1618-21, pp.61-4,73,178.

<sup>11</sup> Op.cit, *Early Travels in India*, p.20. It was also a kind of cloth specially woven for turban. See also, *English Factories*, vol. ii, p.76.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, *English Factories*, vol.i, pp.73,182,192-3.

<sup>13</sup> Mishra, K.P. *Banaras in Transition(1738-95)*, Munshi Manoharlal Publisher, Delhi, 1975, p.132.

articles of Benares as we earlier discussed may be reached Agra from other parts of the country. The testimony of this fact holds by the Ardhakathanak of Banarasi Das, that the trade was carrying between Agra and regions lie in the Ganga Valley. For instance, “my father decided to send me on a trading mission to Agra”.<sup>14</sup> Further “I journeyed in the company of a number of other merchants who were also travelling with their carts in the same direction.”<sup>15</sup> Fray Sebastian Manrique, rendering Benares before us as one of the chief center, which engaged in manufacturing turban cloths, “Very rich head-dressed or turbans are made here, their borders, variegated with gold, silver and various coloured silks, have, as it were, the appearance of a pleasant eternal spring time on brilliant fields. These turbans are wearing all over Turkey, Persia and Corazane, as well as in other countries where our shady hats are not used.”<sup>16</sup> The entire scenario of mandiles procurement made at Benares become more clear if we take this instance- “If Benares mandiles are wanted, it is from hence but a step thither, where doubtless we furnish you..”<sup>17</sup> The exchange rate of species provided by Tavernier also set some light on this fact.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it was a Mughal tradition of presenting articles to the ambassadors, consist turban creates its requirement within our native land.<sup>19</sup> It is noted here that at certain degree gifting splendid garments to the ambassadors was one of the ways to show them how far artisans inclined towards their exertion that resulted in the production of excellent kinds of stuff and it was also another approach to endorse trade across the Indian subcontinent. As we above discussed that numerous substances were exported to the European and Islamic countries.<sup>20</sup> The production of fancy garments by the textile industry of Benares was also made its effects on common conglomeration as Bernier talk about Pundeets of Benares and compared with the Pundeets who were residing in Delhi, “He is stout well-made man, and his dress consists of a white silk scarf, tied about the waist, and hanging half way down the leg and of another tolerably

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<sup>14</sup> *A Half Tale (Ardhakathanak of Banarasi Das)*, translated by Lath, M. Rajasthan Prakrit Bharati Sansthan, Jaipur, 1981. p.42. Abul Fazl did not mention the place of manufacture of mandiles (mandalees).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid, Ardhakathanak*, p.43.

<sup>16</sup> Manrique, F. S. *The Travels of Fray Sebastian Manrique 1629-43*, in two vols, vol.ii, London, 1927, p.147. The stuff like silk and cotton mainly decorated by gold and silver brocades, that work called-zardozi and kalabatun. Akbar paid much attention for the development of these two techniques of cloth decoration. See *ibid, Ain-i-Akbari*, vol.i, p.104 Study also shows that shahses and mandibles were a different kind of cloths used for turban. For detail see, *op.cit, Indo-European Textile History*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Op.cit, English Factories*, vol.i, p.207.

<sup>18</sup> Tavernier, J.B. *Travels In India*, tr. By V. Ball, in two vols, vol, i, London,1889, p.36.

<sup>19</sup> Bernier, F. *Travels in the Mughal Empire*, by Archibald Constable, Oxford, 1916, p 117-8.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Habib, I. ‘Akbar and Technology’, *Social Scientist*, vol. 20, No.9/10, (Sep.-Oct), 1992, p.5.

large scarf of red silk, which he wears as a cloak on shoulders. I had often seen him in this scanty dress at Delhi, in the assembly of the omrahs and before the king..”<sup>21</sup>

The significance of production of trading articles in Benares seems important as well during Aurangzeb’s period as he issued a farmaan to address Abul Hasan in charge of Benares; that make the atmosphere of city peaceful that will help in carrying trade and prosperity in the region.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Benares had been acting as shelter to the weavers of other regions, whenever they face nuisance. Certainly, the amalgamation of weavers was one of the ways to interchange skills and traditions. The interestingly enough, we can mark here that these migrated weavers were sure that they can reinstate their business and easily acquire materials for their vocation and make food for livelihood but all these expectations can only be fulfilled when authority involve to maintain peace and provide everything in best possible manner.<sup>23</sup>

The political commotions in the eighteenth century could not make any repercussion on textile industry of Benares as figure shows. If we look at the figure it clearly appears that within one century production increased, it includes the number of articles which were not manufactured prior to the period of Akbar and Jahangir.<sup>24</sup>

Varieties of Textiles	Prices	Glossary Terms <sup>25</sup>
Khasa	Rupees 250 per score	Plain muslin
Malmal	Rupees 200 per score	Fine muslin, embroidered with floral motives(velvet)
Doria	Rupees 50 per score	A striped fabric of mixed silk and cotton
Chhint	Rupees 22, 20, 17 and 16 per score	A printed or painted calico

<sup>21</sup> Op.cit, Bernier, p.341, See also, op.cit, Tavernier, vol. ii, p.229.

<sup>22</sup> Farmaan of Aurangzeb, Hijri 1069 (1658-59 A.D.), Bharat Kala Bhavan, BHU, Varanasi.

<sup>23</sup> Weavers of Gujarat many time turned towards Benares due to natural calamities and war destructions, to settle down their occupation. See, Ali Muhammad Khan, *Mirat-i-Ahmadi*, edited by Syed Nawab Ali, in two volumes, vol. ii, Central Library Baroda, 1927. pp. 33-34. See also, Jayakar, P. ‘Nakhsha Bandhas of Banaras’, *Journal of Indian Textile History*, No. vii, 1967, p.22.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Naqvi, H.K. *Urban Centers and Industries in Upper India*, Asia Pub. House, New Delhi, 1968, pp.179-86.

<sup>25</sup> Each term has taken from the glossary of textiles provided by Irfan Habib and John Irwin. See Habib, I. *An Atlas of The Mughal Empire*, Oxford University Press, 1982 pp. 69-70. Op.cit, *Indo-European Textile History*, pp.57-74.

Silhati (gazi)	Rupees 7,6-4 and 5-8 per 100 yard	Low priced cotton cloth
Gulbadan	Rupees 9,8,6,5 and 4 per piece	Silken cloth <sup>26</sup>
Garah	Rupees, 27,30,40, per score	Plain cotton cloth
Kharwal	Rupees 17, 20, 25 per score	
Tanzeb (Jahangir)	Rupees 225 per score	Plain cotton cloth(superior quality)
Shahungee	from Rupee 1 to 7 and upward	

In the second half of the eighteenth century textile industry of Benares had been constantly active in producing textiles in large scale. In other words, we can say that the intermeddling period of English East India Company was not making such pessimistic effects especially on weavers or textiles production in Benares. The stuff mashru (permitted) founded as a substitute of pure silk<sup>27</sup>, become one of the manufacturing objects by the textile industry of Benares. Although, if we take works of Sushil Chaudhary and Om Prakash they did not divulge any information about production of mashru in Bengal. Their work consist the Dutch and English sources so; it is also assumed that these European countries had no demand for mashru stuff.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, it is certain that the demands of mashru by Muslim rulers had been fulfilling through the weavers of Benares and Bengal as well.<sup>29</sup> The stuffs mashru and gulbadan were requiring with decoration of aqmasha-e-benares (zari work of Benares). Thus, the charisma of zari works signifies its value on many occasions; that the weavers were not available to accomplish demand within the predetermined period. The term used for weaving method by the weavers were called patan, might be patan was one of the techniques adopted by the weavers after the relocation of Gujarati weavers in Benares. Further, other stuff such as kamkhab found in two categories

<sup>26</sup> The meaning of gulbadan is taken from Steingass, F. *A comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*. The literary meaning is 'body like roses'. Yusuf Ali suggests that in Benares stuff gulbadan is not pure silk, it is cotton mixed. See Ali, Y. A. *A Monograph on Silk Fabric produced in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Calico Museum Of Textiles, Ahmedabad, 1900, p.90.

<sup>27</sup> For prohibition of silk stuff, See, Chaudhary, K.N. *Asia before Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 1990 p.307 See also, *ibid*, *A Monograph on Silk Fabric produced in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>28</sup> *Op.cit*, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal 1630-1720*, pp. 60-65. See also Chaudhay, S. 'European Companies and the Bengal Textile industry in Eighteenth Century: The Pitfalls of Applying Quantitative Techniques', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no.2, (May) 1993, pp. 321-340.

<sup>29</sup> Commissioner's Office Varanasi, List No. 9, Duncan Record, Basta no. 1 Vol. no.5, Appendix no.7, Allahabad Regional Archives, p.129.

kamkhab-i-purzar wa saada (decorated and plane cloth of kamkhab) and phulaam was also in demand.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from this, textiles such as khasa, imbertees, garhashs, lukhowries were continuously woven for export.<sup>31</sup> The production of these stuffs in Benares region noted by W. Hamilton as, for instance-“ Plain and flowered muslins, adapted to common uses, manufacture in northern, baftas in the western, and sanaes in the eastern part of the province.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Barlow in his report on Benares trade<sup>33</sup> suggests big investment in these stuffs, he wrote that, “The cotton piece goods manufactured in the district of Benares amount annually to about seven lacs of rupees, a considerable part of these are consumed in the district, and remainder are exported.” The main reason behind that investment was that they want to exclude Sanyasi and Irakee merchants, who were procuring big amount of cloths of Benares for exportation to Nepal and other parts of country respectively.<sup>34</sup> The significance of the textile trade of Benares lies in the fact that Barlow in his report on Benares mint informs to the Company that abolition of mint of Benares will be affected on the trade and commerce of the city because prosperity of textile industry of the Benares depends upon the mint (circulations of species) and weavers would undergo through the loss.<sup>35</sup> The cloth used for turban as we earlier discussed, which might be replaced by the name Sela (a long cloth used for pagari on head) had also been manufacturing in Benares.<sup>36</sup>

To sum up, on the basis of our entire digging in present sources, we can say that the interactive sessions with Europeans made the great effect on Akbar; therefore it resulted in the development of textile industries in India and especially in Benares. The rivalry between all European

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<sup>30</sup> *The Holy City of Benares as Administered by A Muslim Noble*, translation of the letters of Ali Ibrahim Khan, edited and translated by Shayesta Khan, Khuda Bakhshs Oriental Public Library, Patna, 1993. Letter no. 35, 36, 37, 40, 42,81. Kamkhab,(little dream) an embroidered cloth of single colour. kimkhab an embroidered cloth of divers colours. For this see, *ibid*, *A comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*.

<sup>31</sup> *Selection from the Duncan Records*, by Shakespeare, vol. ii, A. Medical Hall Press, Benares, 1873. p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> Hamilton, W. *The East-India Gazetteer*, in two volumes, vol. i, London, 1828, p. 168.

<sup>33</sup> Khasa (Ghazipur), Imbertees (Muhamdabad), Garhashs (Bulleah) Malmal (Jaunpur). The sircar of Benares created by the Akbar considered as a largest city falls under the Subah of Allahabad. The boundary of the sircar of Benares frequently altered in eighteenth century due to the political upheavals in India. Which later consist Jaunpur and Ghazipur. See, *ibid*, *The East-India Gazetteer*, in two volumes, vol. i, London, 1828, p. 167.

<sup>34</sup> *Op.cit*, *Selection from the Duncan Records*, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> Mint committee proceeding Index 1802-1806, To the Governor General and Council, 10<sup>th</sup> May 1802, National Archives of India, pp. 1-4.

<sup>36</sup> The term dastar also used for turban. *op.cit*, *The Holy City of Benares as Administered by A Muslim Noble*, Letter no. 119.

companies and their huge demand for textiles had worked as a booster for native weavers to produced textiles faster than before. Moreover, constant production and multiplication of articles by the textile industry of Benares suggest its steady growth.