8th – Impact of British Rule on India Part-1 (Weavers, Iron Smelters and Factory Owners)

India Textiles and the World Market : Around 1750 before the British conquered Bengal, India was by far the world's largest producer of cotton textiles. Indian textiles had long been renewed both for their fine quality and exquisite craftsmanship. They were extensively traded in Southeast Asia (Java, Sumatra and Penang) and West and Central Asia. From the sixteenth century European trading companies began buying Indian textiles for sale in Europe.

European traders first encountered fine cotton cloth from India carried by Arab merchants in Mosul in present-day Iraq. So they began referring to all finely woven textiles as "muslin"- a word that acquired wide currency. When the Portuguese first came to India in search of spices they landed in Calicut on the Kerala coast in south – west India. The cotton textiles which they took back to Europe, along with the spices, came to be called "calico" (derived from Calicut), and subsequently calico became the general name for all cotton textiles.

Indian textiles in European markets: Worried by the popularity of Indian textiles Wool and silk makers in England began protesting against the import of Indian cotton textiles. In 1720, the British government enacted a legislation banning the use of printed cotton textiles – chintz- in England. This act was known as the calico Act. Unable to compete with Indian textiles, English producers wanted a secure market within the country by preventing the entry of Indian textiles. The first to grow under government protection was the calico printing industry. Indian designs were now imitated and printed in England on white muslin or plain unbleached Indian cloth. Competition with Indian textiles also led to a search for technological innovation in England. In 1764, the spinning jenny was invented by John Kaye which increased the productivity of the traditional spindles. The invention of the steam engine by Richard Arkwright in 1786 revolutionized cotton textile weaving. Cloth could now be woven in immense quantities and cheaply too. European trading companies – the Dutch, the French and the English – made enormous profits out of the flourishing trade. These companies purchased cotton and silk textiles in India by importing silver. When the English east India Company gained political power in Bengal, it no longer had to import precious metal to buy Indian goods. Instead, they collected revenues peasants and zamindars in India, and used this revenue to buy Indian textiles.

Who were weavers?: The **first stage** of production was spinning – a work done mostly by women. The charkha and the takli were household spinning instruments. The thread was spun on the charkha and rolled on the takli. When the spinning was over the thread was woven into cloth by the weaver. In most communities weaving was a task done by men. For coloured textiles, the thread was dyed by the dyer, known as rangrez. For printed cloth the weavers needed the help of specialist block printers known as chhipigars. Handloom weaving and the occupations associated with it provided livelihood for millions of Indians.

The decline of Indian textiles: The development of cotton industries in Britain affected textile producers in India in several ways. First: Indian textiles now had to compete with British textiles in the European and American markets. Second: exporting textiles to England also became increasingly difficult since very high duties were imposed on Indian textiles imported into Britain. English- made

ABHYAS Academy, Behind Pragat Shiv Mandir, Near Govt. College, Nishat Cinema Road, Ambala Cantt.
Ph No. +91-171-2631595, 9416541198, e-Mail: anusethi1968@yahoo.com Website: www. abhyasonline.in

cotton textiles successfully ousted Indian goods from their traditional markets in Africa, America and Europe. British cotton cloth flooded Indian markets. In fact, by the 1880s two- thirds of all the cotton clothes worn by Indians were made of cloth produced in Britain. Handloom weaving did not completely die in India. This was because some types of clothes could not be supplied by machines.

Cotton mills come up: The first cotton mill in India was set up as a spinning mill in Bombay in 1854. From the early nineteenth century, Bombay had grown as an important port for the export of raw cotton from India to England and china. It was close to the vast black soil tract of western India where cotton was grown. When the cotton textile mills came up they could get supplies of raw material with ease. By 1900, over 84 mills started operating in Bombay. Many of these were established by Parsi and Guajarati businessmen who had made their money through trade with china. The first mill in Ahmadabad was started I n 1861. A year later a mill was established in Kanpur, in the united provinces. Growth of cotton peasants, artisans and agricultural laborers moved to the cities to work in the mills. In the first few decades of its existence, the textile factory industry in India faced many problems. It found it difficult to compete with the cheap textiles imported from Britain. In most countries, government supported industrialization by imposing heavy duties on imports. This eliminated competition and protected infant industries. The colonial government in India usually refused such protection to local industries. The first major spurt in the development of cotton factory production in India, therefore, was during the First World War when textile imports from Britain declined and Indian factories were called upon to produce cloth for military supplies.

The Sword of Tipu Sultan and Wootz Steel: Tipu Sultan, who ruled Mysore till 1799, fought four wars with the British and died fighting with his sword in his hand. Tipu's legendary swords are now part of valuable collections in museums in England. The sword had an incredibly hard and sharp edge that could easily rip through the opponent's armour. This quality of the sword came from a special type of high carbon steel called Wootz which was produced all over south India. Wootz steel when made into sword produced a very sharp edge with a flowing water pattern. This pattern came from very small carbon crystals embedded in the iron. Francis Buchanan who toured through Mysore in 1800, a very after Tipu Sultan's death, has left us an account of the technique by which Wootz steel was produced in many hundreds of smelting furnaces in Mysore. In these furnaces, iron was mixed with charcoal and put inside small clay pots. Through an intricate control of temperatures the smelters produced steel ingots that were used for sword making. Wootz is an anglicised version of the Kannada word Ukku, Telugu hukku and Tamil and Malayalam urukku- meaning steel. Indian Wootz steel fascinated European scientists. Michael faraday, the legendary scientist and discoverer of electricity and electromagnetism, spent four years studying the properties of Indian Wootz (1818-22).

Abandoned furnaces in villages : Production of Wootz steel required a highly specialized technique of refining iron. But iron smelting in India was extremely common. In Bihar and central India in particular, every district had smelters that used local deposits of ore to produce iron which was widely used for

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the manufacture of implements and tools of daily use. The furnaces were most often built of clay and sun-dried bricks. The smelting was done by men while women worked the bellows, pumping air that kept the charcoal burning.

By the late nineteenth century, however, the craft of iron smelting was in decline: One reason was the new forest laws. When the colonial government prevented people from entering the reserved forests, how could the iron smelters find wood for charcoal? Defying forest laws, they often entered the forests secretly and collected on this basis for long/ many gave up their craft and looked for other means of livelihood. In some areas the government did grant access to the forest. But the iron smelters had to pay a very high tax to the forest department for every furnace they used. This reduced their income. Moreover, by the late nineteenth century iron and steel was being imported from Britain. Ironsmiths in India began using the imported iron to manufacture utensils and implements. This inevitably lowered the demand for iron produced by local smelters.

Iron and steel factories come up in India: The year was 1904. In the hot month of April, Charles weld, an American geologist and Dorabji Tata, the eldest son of Jamsetji Tata, were travelling in Chhattisgarh in search of iron ore deposits. They had spent many months on a costly venture looking for sources of good iron ore to set up a modern iron and steel plant in India. Jamestji Tata had decided to spend a large part of his fortune to build a big iron and steel industry in India. One day, after travelling for many hours in the forests, weld and Dorabji came upon a small village and found a group of men and women carrying basket loads of iron ore. These people were the agarias. When asked where they had found the iron ore, the agarias pointed to a hill in the distance. Weld and Dorabji reached the hill after an exhausting trek through dense forests. On exploring the hill the geologist found what they had been looking for. Rajhara hills had one of the finest ores in the world. But there was a problem. The region was dry and water- necessary for running the factory- was not to be found nearby. The Tata's had to continue their search for a more suitable place to set up their factory. However, the agarias helped in the discovery of a source of iron ore that would later supply the Bhilai steel plant. A few years later a large areas of forest was cleared on the banks of the river Subarnarekha to set up the factory and an industrial township- Jamshedpur. The Tata iron and steel company (TISCO) that came up began producing steel in 1912.TISCO was set up at an opportune time.

In 1914 the First World War broke out. Steel produced in Britain now had to meet the demands of war in Europe. So imports of British steel into India declined dramatically and the Indian railways turned to TISCO for supply of rails. As the war dragged on for several years, TISCO had to produce shells and carriage wheels for the war. By 1919 the colonial government was buying 90 per cent of the steel manufactured by TISCO. Over time TISCO became the biggest steel industry within the British Empire.

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