

A Research of Embroidery Industry in Medieval Bengal (13th -17th Century)

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Abstract— The article essays at bringing together the knowledge of embroidery productions in medieval Bengal as derived from various sources such as local, Persian and travellers account. An attempt has been made to identify embroidery productions and its demands in internal and external markets as well as impact on economic life of the people of Bengal. About the embroidery industry during the period under study still exists a gap requiring an inquisitive research which will reveal the exact or near to exact scenario with respect to these aspects of non-agrarian economy so, this study is an attempt to answer such questions, mainly on the evidences provided by foreign traveller's records, Persian sources, and other contemporary records.

Keywords— Medieval Bengal; embroidery; industry; economic life and market.

INTRODUCTION

Among the industries that flourished in Bengal during the period under study, embroidery industry occupies the most important position. Bengal has achieved great fame for this industry since ancient period. We have evidence from *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* written by a Greek sailor in the first century AD who refers to the muslin of the finest quality exported from Bengal.¹ About embroidery productions there still exists a gap requiring an inquisitive research which will reveal the exact or near to exact scenario with respect to these aspects of non-agrarian economy. So, this study is an attempt to answer such questions, mainly on the evidences provided by foreign traveller's records, Persian sources, and other contemporary records

EMBROIDERS

Two types of embroidery work were practiced in medieval Bengal. The first consisted mostly of quilted bedspreads worked with pictorial designs in yellow *tussur* silk made in the Hugli region. Second the needlework covers of almost every square inch of the ground was embroidered muslin fabrics from Dacca.² This needlework was further of two types, coloured silk embroidery in chain-stitch, and 'white embroidery', maybe corresponding to what later came to be known as *Dacca chikan* embroidery (cotton worked on cotton).³ Mention of *shifis* (a kind of chemise worn by women) besides, the above is worth mentioning being used by women. Portuguese are also credited for encouraging the embroidery works of Bengal.⁴ Various types of designs used such as hunting scenes with European figures and illustrations either of Old Testament stories. Besides these European styles Indian Vaishnava representations also used such as of the Great Flood, *Matsya* or fish, etc.⁵ The silk embroidered worked in Dacca were

generally used Hindu and European style rather than Islamic style. Besides these, the designs were birds, animals, flowers, and decorative motives borrowed from both Indian and European style due to the Portuguese influence.

Bengal had a reputation both in design and weaving of cotton textiles in medieval times and it was the basis of trade link between Bengal and foreign countries like Asia, Africa, and Europe.⁶ Sulaiman the 9th century Arab traveller while describing the Bengal textile says that it was extremely a fine fabric.⁷ Subsequently, in the late 13th century, Marco Polo also referred the commercial importance of Bengali fabrics.⁸ Between 1415 and 1432 several Chinese diplomats had visited Bengal and also praised textiles of Bengal such as fine cotton cloths (muslins), rugs, veils of various colours, gauzes (*pers, shana-baf*), material for turbans, embroidered silk, and brocaded taffetas.⁹ These Bengali fabrics were in great demand in China and exported to China based on colour and quality known as *pi-pu* or *bibu* (a woven fine and white cloth), *man-che-l' I* or *manzheti* (a coloured Calico), *sha-na-pa-fu* or *shanabafu* (Persian's *shanbaft* or crepe), *k'i- pari-lei-ta-li* or *xinabaledali* (or *jhanbartali*, a fine muslin), *sha-ta-eul* or *chaotaer* (a fine cotton cloth), *ma-hei-ma-lei* or *moheimoluo* (cotton velvet). *Bibu* was an evenly woven fine white cloth used most likely for lower part of body. *manzhet* was available in yellow colour or ginger-yellow colour. *Xinbaledali* was used as turban *Chaotaer's Moheimoluo* thick velvety. We find the reference to other three fabrics also. They were *sahala* or *sakalat* (light woollen texture) and *zhefu* (Arabic's *suf*), a woollen cloth (blanket type) and *hei-dalibu*, a black coarse cloth.¹⁰

A century later Ludovico di Varthema, who had visited Bengal in the first decade of the 16th century and remarks the importance, that, "Fifty ships are laden every year in this place with cotton and silk stuffs.... These same stuffs go through all Turkey, Syria, Persia, Arabia Felix, Ethiopia, and throughout India."¹¹ Bengal had produced about twenty varieties of cotton cloth with different colours.¹² He further says that *mamuna*, *duguza*, *chautar*, *topan*, and *sanabafos* were very famous.¹³ Referring by Varthema, famous twenty varieties of Bengali textile four of which among them were *chautares*, *beatilhas* and *bierames*, has been properly identified by an eminent scholar Irfan Habib with certain varieties of textiles.¹⁴ Consequently, Tome Pires also remarked that the textiles of Bengal exported to foreign countries through the Indian Ocean, and Bengal was one of the major textile production centres.¹⁵ The exports of Bengali textiles were also great demand in Malacca also.¹⁶

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Portuguese traveller Duarte Barbosa who had visited Bengal in the first half of the 16th Century remarked that, different kinds of cotton cloths which were almost similar to those referred to earlier by Varthema. Praising the textiles of Bengal he says,

“In it are woven many kinds of very fine and coloured clothes for their own attire and other white sorts for sale in various countries. They are very precious, also some of which they call countries. They are very precious, also some of which they call *estravantes*, a certain sort, very thin kind of cloth much esteemed among us for ladies’ headdress and by the Moors, Arabs, and Persians for turbans. Of these great stores is woven so much so that many ships take cargoes therefore for abroad, others they make called *memonas*, *duguazas*, *chautares*, *sinabafes*, which latter two are the best of all, and the Moors held them the best for shirts. All these sorts of cloth are in pieces, each one where of contains about three and twenty or four and twenty Portuguese yards. Here, they are sold good cheap; they are spun on wheels by men and woven by them.”¹⁷

ANALYTICAL RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

The terms such as *estravantes*, *memonas*, *duguazas*, *chautares*, *sinabafes* and *beatilha* have tentatively been identified with *irband*, *malmal*, *dugazi* cloth, *chadar*, *sinaband* and *butidar*. M. Caesar Fredricke and Ralph Fitch also have referred to the manufacture of textile. Ralph Fitch visited the city of Sonargaon where he found ‘the best and finest cloth made of cotton.’¹⁸ Praising the Bengali textiles Barani mentions that *Bard* was another kind of textile sold very low priced in Lakhnauti.¹⁹ Abul Fazl also mentioning the quality of the textiles of Bengal and viewed that, ‘The Sarkar of Barbakabad products, a fine quality of textile called *Gangajal* (Ganges water)’. He further says, “The Sarkar of Sonargaon also products a kinds of muslin very fine and in great quantity”.²⁰ Besides cotton fabrics, Bengal was also famous for jute fabrics productions. The contemporary Bengali literature shows that jute fabrics like *patneta* and *pater pachra* were made during this period. According to Abul Fazl the jute cloth onely produced in the *Sarkar* of Ghoraghat.²¹ Bengal, thus, had been a flourishing state of textile manufacturing, where all kinds of cotton clothes were produced. Mention has already been made of headdress or scarf, turban, chadar or sheets, handkerchiefs, shirts and shawls were available during this period. The Sonargaon, Satgaon, Barbakabad and Ghoraghat were the chief centres of cotton fabric in Bengal.²²

An infrequent Maithili work of the 14th century, known as *Varnaratnakara* written by a Maithili Brahmin Jyotirisvara, has given a long list Bengali textile. It references about thirty types of textiles, additional twenty varieties of *desiya vastra* or country stuff, thirteen of *nirbhusan vastra* or plain fabrics and fourteen of *neta* or fine stuff.²³ It also gives as many as seventeen varieties of *vastra-griha* or enclosures made of textile. But it is very problematic to have an exact idea or meaning of the terms used for various types of fabrics. Despite this, the two terms such as *masahari* and *moja* can easily be understood. The term *masahri* is alike to *musahri* which is described by Jyotirisvara as fitted to the bed of a Prince. This shows that *musahri* or *musari* meant

here mosquito net. The second one is *moja* was most likely stocking, a hosiery produce generally used by people. These two items of textile products were only known during the beginning of the 13th century.²⁴ *Varnaratnakara* of Jyotirisvara also gives very important information that the artisans’ class of people who were involved the textiles productions.²⁵

It is very surprising to note that there is no information in any foreign traveller’s account regarding the class of the people to involve in the textile production. Though the Barbosa remarks that cotton, produced in the fields, was spun on wheels and then it was woven and made into fine fabrics, but he was also silent who were these men engaged in spinning and weaving the textiles productions. But *Varnaratnakara* of Jyotirisvara had mentioned that the last decade of the 13th century or by the beginning of the 14th century artisans class of people appeared. The work of weaving was done by a group or caste of people who were known as *Jola* or *Jolha*, as is exposed by another Maithili works named *Brahmavaivarta Purana* which was written in the end of the 15th century, they subsequently considered as a ‘*Manda jati*’ and were called *dhunia* or cotton carders.²⁶ *Varnaratnakara* of Jyotirisvara and *Brahmavaivarta Purana* shows that the artisans class, i.e. *jola* or *jolha* and *dhunia* or cotton carders were played an important role in the foundation of cotton crafts production during the beginning of the 13th century in Bengal. Before the 13th century in Bengal the Brahmans were degrading the social status of *jolas* and other weaver class due to the Brahmans restricted the social mixture, as a result, this social degradation had a bad impact and also on their profession all this lead to the low textile production. But with the beginning of the Turkish rule, the artisans class becomes free from the social restriction and enhanced the textile productions, they came to the fold of Islam to get rid of their injustices meted out to them on account of being inferior castes. As we come to know that, during the Sultanate period, cotton ginning became an independent profession. As cotton carding, spinning and weaving were also done by the weavers, the increase of cotton cloth during the period of my review gave an impetus to their profession, this lead to increase in the production of cotton crafts. The manufacturing of cotton and silk fabrics made room for the rise of other works such as embroidery and dyeing.²⁷

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