

Cotton, Textiles Production and Trade during the Eighteenth Century Gujarat

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Abstract:

Gujarat has a thriving agricultural economy that produced grains and commercial crops. Cotton stands as one of the important item of trade during the period under study. Since ancient times, the province has been a nexus for trade and commerce. Gujarat's ports, such as Lothal, Broach, Cambay, and Surat played an important part in economic operations of the province. Gujarat received a large amount of spices and exported a considerable volume of indigo, which was a popular commodity in the early seventeenth century. However, raw cotton and textiles replaced indigo as a major trading item in the eighteenth century. It was shipped to Bangal, China, West Asia, and Europe.

Introduction: Gujarat is well-known for its natural richness, which includes rivers such as the Narmada, Tapti, Sabarmati and Mahi. The province's natural richness makes it one of India's most fruitful areas. It produces a wide range of grains and cash crops. Cotton is also produced in huge quantity. Cotton produced in Gujarat was utilized for domestic consumption for manufacturing textiles in industries and for commercial purposes. Cotton textile was Gujarat's most important trade item in the eighteenth century. Cotton has been grown in Gujarat since long time, but its production surged in the eighteenth century, especially from the 1750s.¹ Indigo which was an important commercial commodity during the seventeenth century lost its predominance in eighteenth century and its place has taken by the cotton and variety of textiles.²

Production of Cotton: Cotton was produced in different areas of Gujarat. Cotton was grown not just in Surat and Broach, but also in other regions of the province of Gujarat during this time. Kachh, Navanagar and Bhaavanagar produced a lot of raw cotton contributed to overall supply from Gujarat. Kheda also produce cotton but less in quantity than Broach. Kheda produced *tulubda* variety of cotton which was inferior to *kanun* cotton of Broach. The *tulubda* of Gujarat cotton yielded two alternate crops annually the first in January and the second between March and April. It continued in the ground without removal for at least three years but did not yield a crop until the second year. Four *maunds kuppas* of *tulubda* cotton gave a *maund* of clean cotton, whereas the three of the *kanun* cotton could yield an equal return. Again clean cotton obtained from the *kanun* seed was valued at Rs.4 per *maund* while *tulubda* cotton was less in price.

Cotton was never sown alone in Kheda, unlike in Broach; it was always blended with grains, *bajree*, *bowta*, and *kodra*³. This shielded the delicate plants from the sun's heat until the grain was ready, at which point they had gained sufficient vigor. Cotton appears to have taken up only one-sixth of the space per *bigha*; in one *bigha*, 22 furrows were used for cotton and 110 furrows were used for other crops⁴.

Cotton was vulnerable to such volatility as an agricultural product since agricultural operations and crop productivity were primarily based on adequate rainfall. Cotton was vulnerable to bad weather, and it was possible that an early, insufficient, or excessive rain might ruin the crop. Cotton output can be significantly impacted by even minor harvesting delays. Early modern agricultural crops were highly vulnerable to weather than they are today. There are several instances that cotton output was hampered by insufficient or severe rain during the century. In such conditions, prices would rise, and high purchasing prices would have a negative impact on merchants and marketplaces.

Cotton picking was a labour intensive activity that involved men, women, and children, and it was during this time that a lot of dirt became mixed with the cotton. This was partly due to negligence or design, but it was also due to conditions that were difficult to control to some extent, a labour shortage in Gujarat at the start of the harvesting season was the reason. This was due to the fact that wheat, *bajree*, and other grains ripened at the same time as cotton, and the people's primary concern was to acquire the grains. Deception was aimed to enhance the weight. Due to the delay in plucking the cotton, a large portion of it fell from the pod and landed on the ground or adhered to the leaves. The *kuppas* were once again subjected to different frauds while storing their possessions. The pits in which it was stored at the village *khullee* were frequently left uncovered, exposing the *kuppas* to flying dust and wetness.

Prices appear to have risen as a result of a combination of causes. Crop failure was the primary reason of cotton shortages resulted in hike of price. In 1750 production of cotton collapsed due to lack of rain and an unusually high demand for cotton and textiles caused for rise in price.⁵ Due to supply limitations also, in the mid of the eighteenth century, we find that the average purchase price of raw cotton was generally high. However, the prices started to drop soon after, and the downward trend persisted till mid of 1770s.⁶ Following it, there appears to have been a major surge in cotton demand. Cotton demand increased dramatically in the final few years of the eighteenth century.⁷

There are numerous issues in assessing cotton prices. First, there were several types of cotton, with costs varying according to quality and provenance. Second, the prices may not reflect the actual rate on which the cotton was purchased from the producers. These are the rates on which the Dutch East India Company and English East India Company agreed to buy it from their supplier and brokers. In a given year, pricing varied from one contract to the next. The prices for English records were usually a little more than those on Dutch records.

Manufacturing of Textiles: Textile production, from the field to a finished product, was consisted of few processes. Beginning with harvesting, cleaning, spinning, weaving, dyeing, bleaching, and printing, a large number of individuals were involved in the production process. Cotton was harvested on black sandy soil in several parts of Gujarat, particularly south of Baroda.⁸ Cotton cleaning was the first step in the textile manufacturing process. People used to buy a small amount of raw cotton and clean it before using it. These people cleaned the cotton and then sold it to yarn spinners. Poor people were mostly ready to clean raw cotton. These people occasionally offered their services to those who provided raw cotton to them. Separating raw cotton from seeds was accomplished using a variety of processes, the most of which were labour intensive. In various regions, wheel (*charkha*) was a typical cleaning tool. It was used to clean cotton at Broach. Dr Hove depicts the use of the wheel in minute detail. According to him, the machine used to separate the cotton from the seed is roughly 4.5 feet tall and three feet wide. This is normally done by three women, two of whom rotate the cylinders on the

opposite side and the third of whom is in charge of feeding the cotton to them and keeping it free of seeds.

Spinning would be the next step after cleaning cotton in the textile manufacturing process. Some lower-income families bought a small amount of cotton and spun yarn to sell to dealers. The profits were solely decided by the fineness of the yarn. It was a low-cost business.

Weaving was traditionally a caste-based occupation, with castes from both Hindu and Muslim populations, as well as some Parsi families, specializing in the manufacturing of a wide range of textiles. Weavers from various religions and castes, such as the Bohras, Parsis, Kunbis, Khatris, Momin, and Tahi, worked on textiles.

Dyeing yarn and cloth was another important part of the textile manufacturing process. Professional dyers did the majority of the dyeing, which they supplied to merchants for a fee. As far as cotton yarn is concerned, it was originally red or blue in colour. These colours were made with indigo made locally and sappanwood imported from Southeast Asia for dyeing. The colour and brightness of dyes are heavily influenced by the environment.

The textile manufacturing process included stages such as bleaching, painting, and printing the material. A large number of people were engaged in bleaching, painting, or printing various hues and designs on cloth.

It is difficult to estimate the wages and earnings of weavers. The English East India Company persuaded a group of Parsi weavers to migrate to Bombay and work for them by late 1730s. These weavers demanded five rupees per month in salary. Around the end of eighteenth century a spinner earned eight and half rupees on an average for spinning a *maund* of yarn. It takes roughly eighty days to spin a *maund* of yarn. A daily wagger could earn around Rs.3.18 per month. Despite the low wages it was social constraints such as caste profession compelled them to stay in the profession.

After finishing the items they were sold either in open market or supplied to those who advanced them money. This was very obviously happened that the weavers sell their products to the same merchants who had contracted them and given money at a price that has been agreed upon by both parties. Because of their advance money it is really tough to calculate their earning. Weavers were expected to stand their work due to merchant advances and the assurance that their finished products would be sold. Weavers were usually contracted to supply the commodities at market prices.⁹ These weavers sometimes sold their goods at a greater price to a different merchant than the one who provided the monies in advance. Weavers have also been known to produce textiles of poorer quality than specified in contracts in order for it to be turned down by companies and supplied to other customers. Weavers did not always have to accept advances from merchants because they were in financial trouble. It was a merchant's strategy of assuring the timely supply of required quality and quantity textiles by advancing money to weavers. The weaver was assured of work and income as a result of this arrangement. It also referred to a risk-sharing agreement between merchants and weavers. Depending on the demand for textiles and the market structure, it was beneficial for both the parties must agree on a deal for the supply of textiles.

The evidences available to us supports the hypothesis that cotton production in Gujarat increased significantly during the second half of the eighteenth century. The East India Company's data records from the early nineteenth century show that Gujarat exported a lot of cotton during the

period under review. Cotton that was exported from Gujarat was not only grown in the province but it came from other parts including Malabar and Mandvi.

Trade: The province of Gujarat provided huge quantity of cotton and maintained a prominent place in Indian, intra-Asian, and Euro-Asian trade during the second half of the eighteenth century. Gujarat cotton accounted for a large portion of the cotton utilized in the weaving industry in Bengal. In the 1740s, the cotton trade between Bengal and Surat, which had always been active, has seen a substantial increase in volume.¹⁰ Cotton prices in Surat had risen by 33% in April 1742, owing mostly to a major supply to Bengal by Indian and European traders especially English and Dutch Companies, as well as a poor harvest. Cotton for silk trade between Gujarat and Bengal was a never-ending business for European Companies. Bengal obtained a considerable amount of raw cotton from Gujarat in return for raw silk. This trade between silk and cotton was a significant one, with implications for Surat's money market and credit transfer to Bengal.¹¹ Bengal was the Dutch's main market, and they exported a lot of Gujarat cotton there. In 1762, their superiors in Batavia ordered the Dutch officials in Surat to send around 400,000 to 500,000 pounds (or between 1,160 to 1,450 bales) of cotton to Bengal every year if it could be obtained for £25 per 100 pounds. Following Batavia's orders, the Dutch officials in Surat procured 552,000 pounds (1,600 bales) for Bengal in the same year. However, after the 1780s, in Bengal cotton production exploded, putting a damper on import of cotton from Gujarat.¹² Despite the fact that Bengal had started to cultivate cotton in large amount, it continued to receive sufficient amount from Gujarat.¹³ In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Bengal received more than 124,638 bales (about 43 million pounds) of cotton, with a little more than 49,275 bales (about 17 million pounds) coming from the areas of Deccan and the rest likely coming from Gujarat and Coromandel.¹⁴

China became an important centre of trade for South Asian cotton during the later part of the eighteenth century, putting a significant demand on Gujarat's supplying capabilities. Surat met this enormous demand by associating with the Asian and European private merchants as well as the European Companies. Cotton from Gujarat was continued to be supplied to a number of Asian and European destinations by Asian traders, Private English merchants and European Companies. The Dutch participated in trade with China in the 1750s.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, the English Company was actively involved in raw cotton export from Gujarat to Bengal and China, mainly through English country traders and private merchants. The English Company's proportion in the commercially viable China trade was negligible; the main beneficiaries were private merchants of English Company. The Company was unable to gain profit from the flourishing trade with China by supplying cotton on their credit. However, the servants of the Company and various others got the protection of Company and received licences to earn profit. Besides the fact that China presented promising cotton sales possibilities, the premium given to this sector of trade stand a nice way of collecting tea and transferring capital to Europe prompted many European merchants to ship good amount of cotton from Gujarat to China. In 1787, Gujarat sent 68,000 bales (around 34000 *candy*) of cotton to China. Out of these total around 4,500 bales (2250 *candy*) were shipped on Company's account. It was estimated that the Company sent 30,000 bales (15000 *candy*) of raw cotton from Gujarat to China in 1789.¹⁵

Gujarat meets a huge supply of cotton and silk, and blended cotton and silk textiles in a variety of styles and various substance both nationally and internationally. Gujarat produced a vast range of fine and coarse, mix cotton and silk cloth that was exceedingly sought after in various Asian

and European destinations. The majority of textiles were brought from Gujarat by local Asian merchants, who dominated this sector of the region's trade. Surat based Companies had a network of subordinate factories in various towns and port cities, and with the support of these factories they controlled their trade and commerce. They also sought the assistance of textile suppliers and brokers for this purpose.¹⁶ There is evidence that the merchants' names included the unique item with which they traded. In *Mirat-ul- Haqaiq* of Itimad Ali Khan, Gangadas and Moolchand are described as *abresham farosh* or *abresham wala* (silk seller) while Hasan is referred to as *ahan farosh* (iron seller).¹⁷ This indicates that merchants were very influential to get name and fame through their professions.

The demand for textile in Europe expanded during the latter half of the period under consideration. The trade of Surat with Arabian ports stayed considerable. Gujarati piece goods and other textiles were still being exported by local merchants as well as Muslim merchants of West Asia in Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Every year, piece-products of 1,000,000 rupees or more were assessed to be traded to West Asia, largely by Asian merchants. Cotton and piece goods were predominantly supplied to these Asian ports. The return shipment included mostly of silver and gold coins, and the total annual value of this specie implies that the export to West Asia was significant. Surat's Muslim merchants, large numbers of whom were ship-owners, continued trade links with Jeddah, Mokha, Masqat and Basra. In shipping the Mulla family had a strong presence in this sector.¹⁸ A few information on the delivery constrained by the Mullas are accessible from the rundown of passes gave by Dutch between the years 1707 and 1736, after which lamentably this yearly rundown vanishes from the Dutch papers.¹⁹ Mulla Muhammad Ali would seem to have continued trading at Surat for about ten years. Among the Muslim merchants the Bohras, the Arabs, the Mughals, the Armenians and the Chellabis²⁰ formed a small but significant group whose sphere of trading activities was confined to export trade.

In the eighteenth century, the Dutch Company exported the majority of textiles to their Asian bases. After 1720 more than 60% stayed in Asia and less than 40% was sent to Europe by Dutch East India Company. Earlier majority of textiles was destined for Europe. This notion suggests that there was a shift in the direction of Dutch trade in textiles during the eighteenth century.

Indian textiles have a growing market in Europe in the eighteenth century, and the purchase of textiles was strongly contested by all practitioners of trade, both corporate and ordinary persons.²¹ For the European market, India manufactured a vast range of textiles. The Eurasian spice trade was severely hurt by Europe's growing market for Indian goods especially variety of textiles, cotton, and silk mixed piece goods in the late seventeenth century. European Companies and Asian merchants raced aggressively to obtain the most searched textile varieties.

Around 1785 cotton export to London highly increased, and in 1789 the demand exceeding 500,000 pounds (about 1,450 bales). However, Bengal could only supply around a third of the total, Gujarat supplied a substantial portion of it. Around 1,224 bales (about 612 *candy*) of cotton were sent to London by the English Company in 1790²². English investment in South Asian textiles increased sharply after 1740. Textiles, for example, amounted for 69.5 percent of total export to Europe in 1738-40, and nearly 78 percent of total export in 1777-79.²³ English investment in Gujarat in the second half of the century has developed to the point where other buyers have noticed the negative

effect on textile's quality and prices, especially the Dutch. In the late 1790s, the investment in the textiles by the English Company in Surat or Gujarat increased dramatically.

When the production of cotton drops sharply, the system was that the local industry facilitated first, and the abundance being exported only afterwards. In 1790 when total production at Broach, Baroda, Amod and Jambusar went down less than 6,000 bales (about 3000 *candy*) the suppliers could not fulfil the cotton demand of the East India Company. Since this amount doesn't meet most of the local demand, nothing could be exported at a staggeringly high price of 200 rupees per *candy* for local demand.

Piece goods were purchased at the marketplace and by contract. Many European and Asian traders relied nearly solely on the *bazaar's* textile turnover. They acquired piece-goods through on-the-spot purchases facilitated by brokers. Portion of the Portuguese investments were made through contracts and partially through *bazaar* procurement based on their needs for specific items. In order to sell in the *bazaar*, a number of producers and manufacturers produced their items. Any change in supply or demands in a given season were promptly reflected in *bazaar* prices. The attraction of advances from middlemen or intermediate merchants, on the other hand, enticed many. Weavers, as well as merchants, benefited from the habit of paying in advance. The company's brokers pay merchants and weavers money in advance in exchange for a promise to supply goods, and they do the same with other brokers in exchange for similar promises. Despite the advance payment, weavers have been able to selling their goods to the potential buyer or highest bidder on the condition that they repay the advance money to their former customer.

Some producers, according to contemporaneous commentators, purposefully created textiles of worse quality than those specified in the contracts, hoping rejected goods would command a greater market price. The English and Dutch often accused Portuguese and others of procuring textiles without regard for qualities and paying exorbitant rates. The contractors, who negotiated agreements with the companies, and the subcontractors, who were in close contact with the weavers, were the main beneficiaries. In the 1790s, Mayaram Atmaram, one of the English suppliers, to keep weavers working for the Company, the Company hired 300 merchants from Surat alone. This event clearly shows that by end of eighteenth century demand for cotton textile increased extensively. During late decades English Company faced competition from the Portuguese who enhanced their business by this time again. Thus it can be said that their rewards were as enormous as their hazards. They were always on the verge of losing money invested because of fluctuation in demand and supply.

Conclusion: Gujarat has been a major trading centre from ancient times. This pattern remained throughout the eighteenth century. It is worth noting that both the items of trade and direction of trade have changed during the period under review. Gujarat used to trade in spices and indigo during the earlier centuries, but by the eighteenth century, it had shifted the focus. Cotton, variety of textiles, copper and sugar have substituted them. Gujarat exported raw cotton and textiles internally and externally. Internally it was sent to Bengal at least until 1780, when Bengal began to produce large quantities of cotton on its own, while externally, it shifted from Central and West Asia to China.

References:

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- ¹ Om Prakash, “*European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998). p. 185-6
- ² *Ibid*, pp. 190-5
- ³ Varieties of millet
- ⁴ *Bigha* a measure of land
- ⁵ The increase in cotton prices by 1750s was ascribed to increased external demand for cotton textiles, as well as the loss or reduction of supplies from other places that had previously supplemented Surat's supply potential.
- ⁶ Guha, Amalendu, ‘Raw Cotton of Western India: Output, Transportation and Marketing, 1750-1850’, *IESHR* 9/1 (1972), 1-42
- ⁷ Nightingale, “*Trade and Empire*”, p. 23
- ⁸ In numerous villages of Broach where cotton was produced, Dr. Hove noticed black and light sandy soil. He says that black soil is good for yellow cotton and sandy soil is good for red cotton. He was a Polish scientist visited Surat in 1787-8. ‘Tours for Scientific and Economical Research made in Gujarat, Kathiawar, and Conkuna in 1787-88 by Dr. Hove’, published from the MS in Banksian Library, British Museum, under the care of Alexander Gibson, in “*Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government*”, No.16, New Series (Bombay, 1855), p. 49
- ⁹ Irfan Habib writes: The majority of skilled labourers, even under the system of advances, sold their items at market price, during the seventeenth-century Mughal India. Irfan Habib, ‘Potentialities of Capitalistic Development in the Economy of Mughal India’, in idem (ed.) *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), 185-220.
- ¹⁰ Kristof Glamann, “*Dutch Asiatic Trade 1620-1740*”, (1958), pp. 73-90; Om Prakash, “*European Commercial Enterprise*”, op.cit., p.184-7
- ¹¹ See Ashin Das Gupta, *Trade and Politics in Eighteenth Century India*, in D.S. Richards (ed.) *Islam and Trade of Asia*, (Oxford,1970), p.183
- ¹² Amalendu Guha, ‘Raw Cotton of Western India: Output, Transportation and Marketing, 1750-1850’, *IESHR* 9/1 (1972), pp. 2-3 (BCP 49, Proceedings, Bombay, 9 June 1789, p. 154
- ¹³ *Bombay Commercial Proceedings*, Bombay, 9 June 1789, p. 154; Amalendu Guha, ‘Raw Cotton of Western India: Output, Transportation and Marketing, 1750-1850’, *IESHR* 9/1 (1972), pp. 1-5
- ¹⁴ Walter R. Cassels, “*Cotton: an Account of its Culture in the Bombay Presidency, Prepared from Government Records and other Authentic Sources in Accordance with a Resolution of the Government of India*” (Bombay, 1862), p. 7
- ¹⁵ *Bombay Commercial Proceedings*, Bombay, 11 May 1789, pp. 60-70.
- ¹⁶ Ashin Das Gupta, ‘The Brokers in Mughal Surat c.1740’, in Idem, (ed.), “*The World of Indian Ocean Merchants: Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta comp. Uma Das Gupta*”, (New Delhi, 2001), pp.

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17 *Mirat-ul Haqaiq*, f.348b

18 In all thirty four vessels are shown against members of Mulla family, during the time of Abdul Ghafur, the total was eighteen. His son Abdul Hai died shortly and did not add to the fleet. But Mulla Muhammad Ali grandson of Abdul Ghafur added thirteen. The son of Mulla Muhammad Ali, Mulla Muhammad who later became Mulla Fakhruddin added three more. Mulla Abdul Hai son of Mulla Abdul Ghafur appears as a ship-owner only in the session 1719-20. Mulla Muhammad Ali begins to figure prominently from 1721-22 and Mulla Muhammad Husain made his first appearance in 1732-33. Ashin Das Gupta, 'The Merchants of Surat', op. cit., pp. 207-8.

19 The passes which were issued to anyone have the date of issue, the name of ship, the name of its owner, the community to which he belonged, the name of the *nakhuda* who would command the ship during the intended voyages, the tonnage of ship, the number of its guns and finally its destinations. Ashin Das Gupta, 'The Merchants of Surat', op. cit., p.207

20 M. Afzal Khan, 'The Chalebi Merchants at Surat 16th-18th Centuries', *PIHC*, (Waltair, 1979), pp. 408-416. Sidi Ali Reis was the first Chalebi to establish himself at Surat even if temporarily.

21 Om Prakash, "*European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India*", op.cit., pp. 337-49;

22 Sushil Chaudhury, "*The Prelude to Empire: Plassey Revolution of 1757*", (New Delhi, 2000), pp. 21-2
22 Walter R. Cassels, *Cotton: an Account of its Culture in the Bombay Presidency, Prepared from Government Records and other Authentic Sources in Accordance with a Resolution of the Government of India*', op.cit., p. 7.

23 Om Prakash, "*European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India*", op.cit., pp. 120- 5