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Cotton Trade in Medieval Times Part-II

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Introduction: This article is a continuation of the earlier depiction of the cotton trade during ancient times, from last month's issue. It discusses the incremental pace of the expansion of cotton trade into UK and Europe, the navigational feat which accelerated the flow of cotton goods, the inventions which led to the incremental pace of weaving processes, spinning activities, establishment of looms, cotton becoming an important source of economy, resulting in wars in the US and the expansion of trade in Europe. Much of the events have been chronicled to understand the essence of the cotton trade which existed in the past at a global level. Two inspiring books - Cotton as a World Power by James Scherer (1915) and The Cotton Industry and The Cotton Trade by S. J. Chapman, have served as forerunners in understanding the glorious history of the cotton trade.

Early Medieval Period (before the 14th century)

The European cotton trade flow was triggered with the introduction of cotton into the Spanish looms involved in the manufacture of fustians, helping the spread of the oriental fibre. The cotton trade spread to Greece, Italy, Sicily and Malta which further expanded to the African region covering the shores of the Mediterranean. The larger part of cotton goods from India were brought on camels in great caravans, which remained the chief means of communication, between the nations of Eastern Central and Northern Asia and the countries to the South and West of them. The merchants started initially from Persia by ancient routes visiting farthest places like India and China. Their average travel rate was 18 miles per day. The establishment of commercial gathering places like annual fairs in places like Nizhny Novgorod facilitated periodical meeting between the travellers and the locals. At that time Europe had little interest for Eastern produce. However with the revival of the arts and sciences in Italy, the Republic of Venice focused on commerce and in the



GUEST COLUMN

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year 1204, the Venetians conquered the city of Constantinople from the Greeks and further carried on trade with India. The city remained with the Venetians for 57 years, till in 1261, the Greeks under Michel Paleologus assisted by the Genoese re-captured the city. Thus, Genoa acquired a special status in the cotton trade. The Venetians discarding their inhibited notions of trading with other religious communities made a treaty with the Mohammedans and obtained the Indian produce through Egypt.

The progress of cotton gathered momentum in the 14th century, breaking the restrictions imposed. The fustians and dymities of Venice and Milan became objects of repute in Northern Europe. Half a century later, manufacture was established in Saxony which later spread to Netherlands. At Bruges and Ghent, a large trade arose in fustians which were manufactured in Prussia and Germany from where it was exported to Flanders and Spain.

Discovery of America and its Impacts on the Cotton Trade

Two major events took place at the end of the 15th century, hugely impacting the cotton trade. The first was the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus and the second was the passage to India via the Cape of Good Hope by Vasco-Da-Gama. Christopher Columbus, a Genoese, proposed a plan to sail to India, which was rejected by Genoa and Portugal. Finally, he pursued Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain to grant him two ships. He sailed westward in search of India on the 3rd of August, 1492. When he discovered land, (what is now the Bahamas), he mistook it for India. His vessels were surrounded by the natives who came in canoes, bringing cotton yarn and thread in skeins for exchange. He saw women wearing dresses made of cotton cloth and noticed the strong nets were made of cotton cords. These were tied and stretched between poles wherein they slept in the nights. These were called "hamacas" from which the word "hammock" has originated

Cotton in South America

In 1520, Fernando Megathenes, found cotton being used for stuffing beds in Brazil. The growth and the manufactures of cotton trade was more pronounced in the West Indies as observed by Columbus. This was found to be true in various parts of South America. The existence of the antiquity of cotton in the Eastern

Hemisphere as evidenced by the great civilized structures erected, roads built, water aqueducts constructed for better navigational facilities, indicate that cotton was equally practiced in the "New World" and was not thought as the sole domain of the "Old World". The Peruvians grew the *Gossypium Bourbourne peruvianum*, a red coloured cotton which figured in the manufacture of coloured cotton products. The art of weaving was quite precisely perfected in the early times confirming its importance in promoting cotton trade. In 1532, Pizarro conquered Peru and found that the cotton manufacture still existed and flourished there, Peruvian cotton and wool, especially vicuna was finer than anything known in Europe at that time. He also discovered that the dress of the Inca or the king was truly made of cotton and of many colours by the "Virgins of the sun".

When Cortez conquered Mexico in 1519, the locals neither had flax, nor silk, nor wool of sheep. They presented him with cotton interwoven with fine feathers and the fur of hares and rabbits. The use of cotton was seen in the Aztec hieroglyphics, and was the most diversified amongst the Mexicans, who manufactured clothing of every kind - hangings, defensive armour, etc. Cortez was impressed by the beautiful texture of some articles presented to him by the natives of the Yucatan region. He sent home to Charles V, amongst other rich presents, a variety of cotton mantles - some white, others in diverse colours. A number of handkerchiefs, counterpanes and carpets of cotton were sent to Europe as well.

Vasco De Gama set sail from Tagus on 8th July, 1497. He experienced a dangerous voyage, skirting the south-east coast and arrived at Melinda, about two degrees north of Zanzibar. Here he found the natives who were proficient in carrying out active commerce both locally and with remote Asian countries. He took the help of a few locals as pilots and set sail across the Indian ocean. He landed in Calicut, Malabar (west) coast, India on 22nd May, 1498. It took him ten months and two days to reach India from Lisbon (Portugal). When Odoardo Barbosa of Lisbon visited South Africa 18 years later, he found the natives wearing cotton clothes. In 1598, cotton cloth woven on the coast of Guinea, was imported into London from the Bight of Benin. Modern travellers in the interior of Africa believed that cotton was indigenous there and was spun and woven in every part of the continent.

The Advent of Cotton Trade in England - 14th century onwards

Cotton first made its appearance in English history in 1298, when the first import of cotton has been recorded for use as candle-wicks.

In 1560, England imported cotton from Italy and the Levant as well as that carried from India to Lisbon by the Portuguese and was anxious to compete in the manufactures with foreign countries. In 1585, a fresh influx of skilled Flemish workmen into England took place, when Edward the III, the father of English commerce, invited them for their weaving dexterity in wool. This was the beginning of the weaving profession in England. In 1595 the Dutch East India Company was formed. The English soon followed and five years later (in 1600) the British East India Company was incorporated by the Royal Charter. It immediately obtained the permission from the native princes to establish forts and factories. In 1624 it was invested with the powers of the Government. The Portuguese monopoly of the East was crushed and England and Holland attained naval supremacy and commercial wealth. The introduction of Indian cotton fabric led to the downfall of the woolen industry in England and the weavers were reduced to penury.

Daniel Defoe (author of the epic novel, Robinson Crusoe) remarked in 1778 that "It crept into our houses, over closets, over bed-chambers, curtains cushions, chairs and at last beds themselves were nothing but calicoes and Indian stuffs and in short almost everything that used to be made of wool or silk, relating either to the dress of the woman or the furniture of our houses are supplied by the Indian trade". They were sold at higher prices against the domestic English goods. They became nuisance to the domestic business of cotton trade.

The first arrival of the Indian fabrics occurred in 1681. Ten years later, the Manchester weavers used cotton wool imported from Cyprus and Smyrna to produce fustians, vermillions and dymities. The discovery of new accessible routes made the East Indian trade more profitable. This created unrest because the British weavers were forced to weave Indian cottons. A Parliamentary Act was passed in 1666, which stated that anything other than wool and local fabric should not be used for covering the dead. However, the

Indian cotton fibre silently spun its web over England. In 1696, a pamphlet entitled, "The Naked Truth" declared that the Indian muslins were becoming the norm in England. Such was the impact of Indian cottons on British economy, that in 1700, an Act was passed to repel Indian silks from entering and use in England. In 1720, an Act prohibited the use or wear in Great Britain, in any garment or apparel whatsoever of any printed, painted, stained or dyed calico which if done attracted a fine of 5 pounds. It was further enacted that persons using printed or dyed calico in or about any bed or chair, cushion, window curtain, or any other sort of household stuff or furniture, should be fined 20 pounds and that dealers selling them should equally be fined by that amount.

This was just 20 years before the beginning of the Industrial Revolution which suddenly transformed England by introducing the modern era of machinery. Wool occupied a supreme position when the Industrial Revolution began. In 1740 there was no true cotton manufacture at all, the so-called cottons were made using linen warp. Even the import of cotton fustians, candle-wicks and other products amounted to only 1,645,031 lbs, whereas in 1815, cotton imports reached a volume of nearly one hundred millions. All the industry was domestic - with spinning and weaving being mainly cottage industries. Factories in the modern sense did not exist, both the loom and the spinning methods were equally ancient.

In 1815, men had become "hands" working on a time schedule assisted by women and children. No longer was the activity confined to the rural districts. People in the urban areas began residing by the riverside when the introduction of water power came into use for mills located on the riverside. By 1802, steam power began to supersede water power. Thus the industry drew energy from the streams and erected large manufacturing towns wherever coal was cheap and labour relatively abundant. As summarised by Warner, the industrial revolution brought in enormous changes due to the invention of machinery. The cotton plant of the orient has historically had a major share in benefitting the revolution.

(To be continued...)

(The views expressed in this column are of the author and not that of Cotton Association of India)