

Cotton Textile Industry of Ahmedabad: Its Socio-economic Aspects till 1947

N. Benjamin¹

Abstract

Although the cotton textile began in Bombay, it faced handicaps there and spread to other cities notably Ahmedabad which had a tradition of cotton weaving. In 1850 Ranchhodlal Chhotalal formed Ahmedabad Spinning and Weaving Company and other mills followed. Weavers migrated to Ahmedabad from other talukas and the mills increased the productive capacity of the handloom industry. Conversely, it enabled the mills to expand by providing market for the yarn. Other industrial activities followed. Small leather, carpet, ice, metal, safety match and glass factories emerged. The industry made an impact on the society and economy of the city in other ways too. For instance, Ahmedabad Share and Stock Brokers' Association was established in 1894. It was the second stock exchange in India after Bombay Stock Exchange. There was growth of industrial labour and workers faced problems. Their health was impaired by night work. Diseases of eye and digestive organs afflicted them. Civic life was affected too. There were shortages of tenements, rents were high and amenities inadequate. At the same time trade, education, health facilities, infrastructure, etc., grew.

Keywords: Ahmedabad textile industry, impact on society and economy.

Background

Cotton textile industry was the first modern industry in Bombay Presidency. Although it began in Bombay, it faced some handicaps there. Land prices, cost of power, water tax and labour cost were high. Hence, the industry spread to other cities. Ahmedabad was one of them since it was advantageously placed in many respects. Taxes and warehousing charges were low. Labour was plentiful and cheap. There was already a tradition of cotton weaving. Above all, it was in the midst of a cotton growing region and hence cotton was abundant and its mixing cheap. Therefore, the way was clear for the growth of the industry there. In 1847 Ranchhodlal Chhotalal, a Brahmin, explored the possibility of textile manufacturing in Ahmedabad. In 1850 he formed Ahmedabad Spinning and Weaving Company. Rai Bahadur Becherdas established the second mill. Mansukhbhai Bhagubhai, a Jain merchant, founded another mill. Other Jains criticized him as manufacturing textiles killed micro-organisms and, therefore, caused violence. Ambalal Sarabhai established the Calico Mills in 1885. For half a century it was one of the most modern and diversified mills of the Indian cotton industry. It was the first Indian mill to give shareholders cloth at concessional rates. It was a flagship company of the Sarabhais. Ambalal also established Sarabhai Textile Mills which was one of the largest mills in India at the time. The success of these mills attracted other entrepreneurs and religious objections were set aside. Gradually, the industry was dominated by the Vaishnavas. Jamsetji Tata purchased the Ahmedabad Advance Mills which was on the verge of bankruptcy. He renovated it so that soon the mills was valued at three times the purchase money.¹ Ben and Charles Marsden promoted Marsden Mill and Monogram Mill. Kasturbhai Lalbhai set up Arvind Mill which was the flagship company of Lalbhai group. Examples of many other mills can also be given. However, Muslim millowners were absent. Thus, in course of time the number of mills increased. From only one in 1861, the number of mills grew to 51 in 1918 and further to 77 in 1939. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Ahmedabad came to be known as the Manchester of India.

The early mills were financed by public deposits. About 80 per cent of their outlay was financed by deposits and by the managing agents. People thought that a bank had an office and

¹ Gokhale Institute of Politics & Economics, Pune 411004 (Retd.). E-mail: benjaminaseeb@gmail.com
Contact No.: 9987214070

some papers, while a mill had buildings, machinery, etc. Moreover, banks were unwilling to make advances to mills and charged high interest rates.² Usually the deposits were on long-term. There were four advantages in the deposit system vis-à-vis reliance on the stock market. First, it offered the agents an opportunity to borrow in establishing a mill, later pay off the debt and become its owners. Second, they could make high profits relative to the share capital of the mills. Third, they borrowed at interest rates lower than the prevalent rates. Finally, the deposit system brought more people into financial contact with the mills than investment through shares.³

Textile mills led to other industrial activities. Small leather, carpet, ice, metal, safety match and glass factories emerged.⁴ Gradually then the substitution of hand-spun yarn by cheaper mill yarn was almost complete in the handloom industry. Weavers migrated to Ahmedabad from other talukas. Thus, the mills increased the productive capacity of the handloom industry. Conversely, it enabled the mills to expand by providing market for the yarn.⁵ In 1899 Ardeshir D. Wadia with Motilal Hiralal began as engineers, contractors and manufacturers of cotton gins and other industrial machinery. Factories to manufacture bobbins, shuttles, sizing and mill machinery parts were established. Sarabhai introduced the first plant in India for producing sewing thread in 1922 and diamond mesh mosquito netting in 1937. Some managing agencies diversified in other fields, mainly chemical industry. Ambalal opened a plant to manufacture caustic soda, chlorine and related chemicals in 1947.⁶ Pioneers of new chemical complexes were millowners.

As the industry developed, it made an impact on the society and economy of Ahmedabad in the following respects.

I. Equity Cult

Subsequent to the growth of the industry, Ahmedabad Share and Stock Brokers' Association was established in 1894. It was the second stock exchange in India after Bombay Stock Exchange. Initially its business was primarily confined to the shares of textile mills and of managing agencies controlling them. In course of time its activities diversified.

While creating a way for equity cult, the industry at the same time inhibited its spread. High face value of shares made them beyond the reach of the common people. In 1897 Saraspur Manufacturing Company floated shares of Rs. 1,000 each.⁷ Then, the managing agents were remunerated by commission on sales of cloth and yarn and not on net profits of mills. Often an agent's commission exceeded the profit of a mill several times.⁸ Other grievances of shareholders:⁹

1. Some mills had large reserves which the managing agents lent to others or appropriated for themselves.
2. Ninety per cent directors of mills were nominees of the managing agents who neglected the interests of shareholders.
3. Mills showed their profits incorrectly, depriving shareholders of dividends and government revenue.
4. Some managing agents expanded mills beyond their capital to earn higher commission, leading to their indebtedness. Owing to these heavy commissions an agent managing more than one mill allegedly earned more than the viceroy!
5. They employed their relations and friends on high salaries and appointed them as auditors.
6. They did irregularities in purchasing raw cotton and machinery, buying and selling yarn and cloth, etc.

II. Textile Labour

With the growing number of mills, the number of employees also grew. While it was just 63 in 1863, it became 500 in 1867. Growing labour requirements made the mill magnates look for sources of labour outside the urban economy. They found them in the surrounding country side, particularly the Muslim households (Tais and Bohras) and among the untouchable castes (Dheds and Vakars). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, landless and poor households increasingly

migrated to Ahmedabad from the surrounding areas to work in the mills. The incentive for this was great as wages in the rural areas were far lower. People from as far as Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and even Andhra Pradesh found it lucrative to work in the mills. Consequently, there was an explosion in the population of the city. In 1911, its population was 214,000 which was over 80 per cent compared with what it was forty years back, almost entirely owing to the textile industry. The motley crowd inevitably brought casteism in the mill premises. Production activities were often divided along castes and religions.¹⁰ Even in the eating places, caste discrimination was rampant. Lower caste labourers had separate drinking water taps.

Jobbers recruited and supervised the labourers. The latter disliked the former, accusing them of corruption and extortion. Jobbers physically attacked labourers who lost their employment if they complained against them.¹¹ A labourer reportedly killed a jobber on one occasion.¹²

In this background, the way was clear for the unionization of labourers. In 1916 Anasuyaben Sarabhai (elder sister of Ambalal) and others established the Majoor Mitra Mandal (Society Friendly to Labourers). It aimed to impart education to labourers' children, provide them medical facilities, disseminate knowledge of thrift, promote saving and cooperation amongst their families, and remove their grievances regarding salaries and related matters. Further, it spread information on hygiene and sanitation, teaching labourers the benefits and techniques of keeping homes, bodies and clothes clean, getting roads between chawls, latrines and waste water-pits cleansed with the help and cooperation of chawl-owners and health inspectors, distributing medicines free of charge and referring serious patients for free services. Labourers were indebted paying interest from 30 to 300 per cent. It formed a cooperative credit society of twelve residents of Aarapure chawl to extricate them from the money-lenders. Thus, it was more of a constructive organization rather than a labour union.¹³

From it emerged the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association which was established in 1920. It was an indigenous experiment in trade union movement. It developed under the care of Gandhi who called it as his laboratory for labour work. Anasuben was its president. It functioned on the Gandhian principles. It sought to settle industrial disputes peacefully. Its activities went beyond that. It established Majoor Vidyalaya where selected representatives of labourers were taught elements of economics, commercial geography, history, political science, labour management and Gandhian ideology. It was also instrumental in establishing a co-operative bank with labourers as shareholders to solve the problem of indebtedness. It started an Insurance Department. In the absence of gratuity and insurance, an insurance policy was a welcome relief if a family lost its bread-winner.¹⁴

In 1937 under its auspices the Hindustan Mazdur Sevak Sangh was established for coordinating and guiding the policies and programmes to the trade union movement and for providing facilities for their training.¹⁵

There was a strike in 1878 or so by workers of a spinning mill when a Dhed was employed.¹⁶ Sujata Patel incorrectly says that the first strike occurred in 1891 when the female workers opposed the government's move to reduce the working hours. She writes about a confrontation between millowners and workers when wages were paid on weekly instead of fortnightly basis in 1895.¹⁷ But she has ignored the strike of 1892-93 caused by wage cuts resulting in a shutdown of all mills. It was the first strike involving violent tactics.¹⁸ Patel has numbered 250 strikes during 1917-39 mostly caused by demand for holidays, lighter work load, demand for good quality yarn, fines on damaged cloth, and higher wages and allowances.¹⁹

No account of strikes here will be complete without mentioning the strike of 1918 which involved Gandhiji. The outbreak of plague in the city led to the exodus of labourers and to prevent it the millowners gave up to 75 per cent plague bonus. Once the epidemic was over, they wanted to bring down the wages which the labourers resisted and insisted on higher wages as the prices had skyrocketed. These differences between the millowners and labourers led to labour unrest. Since

there was a deadlock, Anasuyaben wrote to Gandhiji inviting him to resolve the issue. When the millowners refused to settle the issue by arbitration, he advised them to go in for a strike as their case was sound. During this time his chief lieutenant was Anasuyaben. His dilemma, as he stated, was: "... I enjoyed very close and cordial relations with the mill-owners..." including Ambalal who was "The principal man at the back of the mill-owners' unbending attitude towards the strike...." Anasuyaben also went against her brother. Gandhi wrote a news bulletin daily which she published. He met labourers under a tree and in a few days the condition of the labourers became pathetic and their morale began sagging. He recollected, "The attendance at their daily meetings also began to dwindle by degrees, and despondency and despair were writ large on the faces of who did attend." One of them even remarked, "After all, Gandhiji and Anasuyabehn have nothing to lose. They move about in cars and have enough to eat." When it reached Gandhiji, he was not angry but anguished. He announced that he would undertake a fast. Anasuyaben and others shared the strike on the first day and after some difficulty Gandhiji dissuaded them from continuing further. Ultimately, a compromise was made and the millowners gave a bonus of 35 per cent to the labourers.²⁰

There are some other aspects of textile labour which may be mentioned here for the sake of completeness. First, when the handloom industry declined, weavers sought employment in mills. Landless agricultural labourers too joined them. Labour Office reported in 1926 that nearly 80 per cent families came from Ahmedabad or surrounding districts, nearly 11 per cent from Rajputana and only 4 per cent from the Deccan and Konkan for employment. Villagers came to Ahmedabad because of higher wages in mills, amenities of city life and absence of suitable secondary occupation for indebted agriculturalists. Landless labourers came as they could not earn sufficient livelihood. Potidar weavers came to supplement their agricultural incomes. Over 78 per cent families were Hindu, over 20 per cent Muslim and the remaining Christian.²¹

Second, the earnings of cotton mill workers were higher than other workers. Money wages rose by about 11 times between 1900 and 1951. Considering the rise in consumer prices, the rise in real wages was 2.53 times.²²

Third, some mills started creches. Bombay Presidency Women's Council reported that they were airy and well-trained maids looked after the children.²³ Sometimes Dhed children were separated from other children. Occasionally the main crèche was used by the Dhed children while women of other castes made their cradles elsewhere.²⁴ In 1928 Kastubhai Lalbhai established a model crèche.

Fourth, a mill provided facilities for both indoor and outdoor games. Textile Labour Association (TLA) conducted reading rooms, libraries and physical culture centres. It organized sports' meetings and prizes were distributed.²⁵

Fifth, workers faced some problems. Their health was impaired by night work. Diseases of eye and digestive organs were frequent among them.²⁶ They were fined for producing bad cloths. They believed that inferior cotton, bad stores, bad yarn, old machinery, inadequate light, humidity, etc., damaged the cloth. Folding contractors mischievously saw fault in the cloth as they received half the fine.²⁷

Sixth, most working class families were indebtedness owing to expenditure on marriages, etc. Their debt averaged nearly seven times the monthly income. Interest rates ranged from 12 to 24 per cent. In one case it was 225 per cent.²⁸ TLA sanctioned cheap loans and some mills granted petty advances. Others allowed loans for special needs. Only one mill had an employees' co-operative credit society.²⁹

Seventh, workers met with accidents. In July 1924 there were 11 accidents all of which occurred in cotton mills. One accident caused as many as about 26 deaths, 12 serious injuries and 10 slight injuries.³⁰

III. Civic Life

The population of Ahmedabad grew from little over five lakhs in 1872 to 7.96 lakhs in 1901 or by 55 per cent because of growth of industries including textile mills.³¹ Consequently, there were shortages of one and two-room tenements, rents were high and amenities inadequate. B.H. Nanavati, Vice-President, Sanitary Association, Ahmedabad, wrote, "The dwellings of the mill operatives are very imperfect and insufficient in number and in many cases unfit for human habitation. They are in most cases dark, dingy, little cottages, where air can enter in through the small main door."³² This is corroborated by Majumdar who reported that normally the labourer and his family resided in a room that was ten feet long and eight feet broad. The walls were made of clay which were black like coal with dirt covering them. The entrance was so small and low that a tall man had to bend low to pass through it. One corner of it was used as a kitchen.³³ In 1926, 30 mills provided accommodation to labourers which was better. Many of them, especially Muslims, did not like to live in mill accommodation and preferred to live in localities inhabited by their co-religionists. Four persons lived in a tenement but in one case three families lived in one room.³⁴ Some workers resided in tenements of Ahmedabad Mills' Housing Society. It was registered in 1933 to provide sanitary housing.³⁵ There were two registered housing societies (apart from two unregistered housing societies). They supplied housing to scheduled class families of mills.³⁶ Besides, 65 tenements were formed through the efforts of the TLA.³⁷ It estimated that there was a deficit of 20,000 working class tenements.³⁸

When mills provided dining sheds, caste prejudice was evident. They were partitioned or the labourers formed separate groups.³⁹ Sometimes Dheds were separated and took tea, etc., through the windows.

When Ambalal was just 21, the government appointed him in the municipality. As chairman of Ahmedabad Municipality, Chhotalal wrote a memorandum on the civic needs like better water supply, drainage, new thoroughfares, more open spaces, better hospitals, etc. The Sanitary Commissioner described it as "a remarkable document." During his tenure, Municipality was regarded as the best example of local self-government in Bombay Presidency outside Bombay city. Kenneth L. Gillion calls him "the originator both of Ahmedabad's textile industry and of her modern drainage and water-supply."⁴⁰

Millowners made other contributions. Ahmedabad Millowners' Association (AMA) opened cheap grain shops during the World War II. Prices were fixed at wholesale rates and overhead charges, etc., were borne by the Association.

IV. Infrastructure

In 1889 leading men promoted a company to build a railway line from Ahmedabad to Dholera. It was envisaged to pass through cotton fields and enable coal and stores to be imported more cheaply than the BB&CI Railway. But capital for it could not be raised, and silting of Dholera port and Gulf of Cambay made it infeasible.

In 1894 some entrepreneurs founded Gujarat Navigation Company to dredge the Sabarmati River to give Ahmedabad access to the sea. They proposed to use steam launches and tugs. They approached the Government of Bombay for land but it considered the project impractical.⁴¹

V. Miscellaneous

The industry made an impact on the socio-economic life of Ahmedabad in some other respects also. It is mentioned below.

1. When Gandhiji established his ashram in Kochrab (a small village near Ahmedabad), the millowners gave him financial support. Many of them were well-disposed toward him

because he advocated swadeshi as against foreign cloth, etc. But when he admitted a Dhed family in it, the financial support dried up. At this crucial time, Ambalal stepped in and alleviated the distress.⁴² Ramchandra Guha adds that he gave Rs. 13,000 to Gandhi which covered two years of expenses.⁴³

2. Ahmedabad Swadeshi Udyam Vardhak Mandali was established in 1875 and AMA in 1891. In 1903 the Vaishnavas founded Gujarat Vaishya Sabha which was controlled by the millowners. Its activities included vocational training. Swadeshi Sabha was set up in 1930, Ahmedabad Cotton Exchange Association in 1934 and Gujarat Cotton Brokers' Association in 1940. In 1946 the two associations amalgamated. Maskati Cloth Market Association became the distributing agency for the mill cloth. Its members mostly purchased their requirements from mills, relieving them of their responsibility for disposing of their stocks. Besides, they guided the mills to produce such varieties as would be easily marketable. Panchkuva Cloth Merchants' Association members purchased cloth from mills and sold it to merchants. In 1947 Ahmedabad Textile Industries Research Association was founded.
3. The industry contributed towards education. In 1914 Anasuyaben started a small school for the labourers' children opposite the Jubilee Mills. In 1916 Gandhiji visited it and was satisfied with its working. He said, "My regard for Ansooyaben's work has increased. Arrangements made for children are praiseworthy."⁴⁴
4. In 1921 millowners started Ahmedabad Mills' Tilak Swaraj Fund for advancement of education. The money was given to Labour Union for schools of workers' children.⁴⁵ Three mills provided schools for their workers' children. TLA conducted day and night schools, and adult education classes.⁴⁶ Night schools started by some mills had few pupils because of long working hours.
5. Individual millowners took interest in education. In 1903 Mansukhbhai Bhagubhai started an Anglo-Vernacular School for children of all castes and another school for Jain girls. They were maintained by him and imparted free education.⁴⁷ Ahmedabad Education Society was established in 1936 and Lalbhai was its chairman. He was also one of its principal financiers. It established colleges, hostels, teachers' quarters and play grounds. Anasuyabehn established a school for children of working class families and later conducted evening classes for untouchable labourers. She started a night school in 1916. R.C. Technical Institute was opened in 1910. It owed its existence to Madhavlal Ranchhodlal who made a magnificent donation. The Institute was named after his father Ranchhodlal Chhotalal. It conducted certificate courses in mechanical engineering, cotton spinning, cotton weaving and wire men's apprentice course. In 1945 the Sarabhais established Karmakashetra Educational Foundation to promote science and education.
6. The industry damaged the health of workers. Pthisis was the chief disease among them because of inhaling cotton fibres, working in unhealthy and overcrowded atmosphere, undernourishment and long working hours. Malaria was common, while occasionally cholera and diarrhoea broke out.⁴⁸ A reference may be made to Victoria Jubilee Hospital and Ranchhodlal Dispensary. It was established in 1889 by a trust created by Chhotalal. Bhagubhai established a free Homoeopathic and Bio-chemical Infirmary for patients from Ahmedabad and around it. It is one of the oldest maternity and gynecological hospitals in Gujarat. In 1904 Mansukhbhai Bhagubhai established a free Homeopathic and Bio-chemical Infirmary for patients from Ahmedabad and its vicinity.
7. By 1940, 34 mills did not have any arrangement beyond the statutory first-aid appliances. Most mills had dispensaries which contained little more than a small cupboard with some common drugs and bottles of stock mixtures served by a peon, store-keeper, or the head of the department. Only one dispensary was in charge of a full-time doctor.⁴⁹ TLIC reported,

“Pioneering work in the field of medical relief of mill workers in the Province of Bombay is that done by the Ahmedabad Manufacturing and Calico Printing Mills and the Jubilee Mills. There two mills maintain hospitals for indoor and dispensaries for out-door treatment.... We visited the hospital and dispensary of the Calico Mills and were impressed by the good work that was being done there.”⁵⁰ Besides, TLA established Kasturba Smarak Maternity Home in 1945.

8. With the growth of the industry, trade grew. Most cotton consumed by it was produced in Ahmedabad district. Egyptian cotton, textile machinery, mill stores, etc., came through Bombay. The early mills only spun yarn which was exported to China and Japan. Exports declined when the Chinese and Japanese textile industries grew. Calico Mills began spinning higher counts and led the way to recapture the fine yarn and cloth market of India from Lancashire. Yarn and cloth were sold in Gujarat and Upper India. ‘Sengupta’ dhoties of Arvind Mills were popular in the eastern region.⁵¹ However, the structure of railway rates for goods transportation between two inland centres obstructed the industry’s exports.⁵² Besides, freight rates were high, wagons in short supply and they were open.

VI. Conclusion

The textile industry paved the way for socio-economic transformation of Ahmedabad. After initial resistance because the machinery killed micro-organism, the Jains overcame their antipathy and entrepreneurial instinct made them enter the industry. Mills promoted equity cult as they contributed to the establishment of Ahmedabad Stock Exchange. Managing agencies were conducive for the industry but they used it for unfair gratification too. Rural population improved its material conditions through mill employment. There was spread of education and health facilities. At the same time, the industry discouraged the common people from investment in its shares as their high face value made them beyond their reach. Likewise, the malpractices of managing agents aroused the resentment of investors. Labourers suffered from long working hours, insanitary housing, health problems, industrial accidents, etc. Overall, the impact of the industry on Ahmedabad was mixed. Ambalal’s family earned the informal title of ‘Medici of Ahmedabad’ for the role it placed in the development of the city for their progressive activities. His elder sibling Ansuya Sarabhai was fondly called ‘Motaben’ out of love and respect for her contribution to public welfare.

End-notes

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- ⁵¹ A.D. Shroff Memorial Trust, *Builders of Indian economy Kasturbhai Lalbhai A biography* (Bombay: A.D. Shroff Memorial Trust, 1978), p. 87. In this context Chandraprasad H. Desai writes, “The first mango-type borders were manufactured by Ahmedabad mills and these products were capable of satisfying the demands of the formers and the poorer classes.” “Growth and development of the textile industry of Ahmedabad,” *The Indian Textile Journal. Souvenir number Centenary of the textile industry of India 1884-1954*, p. 92.
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