

CBSE Class 8 Social Science History Notes

Chapter 6 - Weavers, Iron Smelters and Factory Owners

This chapter tells the story of the crafts and industries of India during British rule by focusing on two industries, namely, textiles and iron and steel. Both these industries were crucial for the industrial revolution in the modern world. Mechanised production of cotton textiles made Britain the foremost industrial nation in the nineteenth century. And when its iron and steel industry started growing from the 1850s, Britain came to be known as the “workshop of the world”. The industrialisation of Britain had a close connection with the conquest and colonisation of India. The concepts mentioned in this chapter are all covered in our CBSE Class 8 Social Science History notes Chapter 6 - Weavers, Iron Smelters and Factory Owners.

Indian Textiles and the World Market

Around 1750, India was the world's largest producer of cotton textiles renowned both for their fine quality and exquisite craftsmanship. They were traded in Southeast Asia (Java, Sumatra and Penang) and West and Central Asia. European trading companies bought Indian textiles and sold them in Europe.

Words tell us histories

European traders first encountered fine cotton cloth from India carried by Arab merchants in Mosul present-day Iraq. The Portuguese came to India in search of spices and the cotton textiles they took back to Europe, called “calico” (derived from Calicut). There were many other words which pointed to the popularity of Indian textiles in Western markets.

Different varieties of cloth were named differently such as printed cotton cloths were called chintz, cossaes (or khassa) and bandanna. Chintz is derived from the Hindi word chhint, a cloth with small and colourful flowery designs. A craze started for Indian cotton textiles in England and Europe mainly for their exquisite floral designs, fine texture and relative cheapness.

Bandanna, derived from the word “bandhna” refers to any brightly coloured and printed scarf for the neck or head produced through a method of tying and dying.

Indian textiles in European markets

Indian textiles became widely popular by the early eighteenth century, which worried wool and silk makers in England. They began protesting against the import of Indian cotton textiles. In 1720, the British government enacted legislation banning the use of printed cotton textiles – chintz – in England, called the Calico Act.

In England, textile industries had just begun to develop and they wanted a secure market within the country by preventing the entry of Indian textiles. The Calico printing industry was set up under government protection. Indian designs were imitated and printed in England on white muslin or plain unbleached Indian cloth.

In 1764, the spinning jenny was invented by John Kaye. Richard Arkwright in 1786 invented the steam engine which revolutionised cotton textile weaving. Indian textiles dominated world trade till the end of the eighteenth century. European trading companies purchased cotton and silk textiles in India by importing silver.

CBSE Class 8 Social Science History Notes

Chapter 6 - Weavers, Iron Smelters and Factory Owners

Who were the weavers?

Weavers belonged to communities that specialised in weaving and skills were passed on from one generation to the next. Some of the communities famous for weaving were the tanti weavers of Bengal, the julahas or momin weavers of north India, sale and kaikollar and devangs of south India. Spinning is the first stage of production where charkha and the takli were used. The thread was spun on the charkha and rolled on the takli. After spinning the thread was woven into cloth by the weaver. 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.

The decline of Indian textiles

In Britain, cotton industries were developed which affected textile producers in India.

1. Indian textiles had to compete with British textiles in the European and American markets.
2. Exporting textiles to England also became increasingly difficult since very high duties were imposed on Indian textiles imported into Britain.

In Africa, America and Europe Indian goods traditional market was ousted by English made cotton textiles. English and European companies stopped buying Indian goods and distressed weavers wrote petitions to the government to help them.

By the 1830s British cotton cloth flooded Indian markets which affected specialist weavers and spinners. In India, handloom weaving continued as some types of cloths could not be supplied by machines.

Sholapur in western India and Madura in South India emerged as important new centres of weaving in the late nineteenth century. Mahatma Gandhi, during the national movement, urged people to boycott imported textiles and use hand-spun and handwoven cloth. Khadi became a symbol of nationalism and the charkha represented India. The charkha was put at the centre of the tricolour flag of the Indian National Congress adopted in 1931.

Cotton mills come up

In 1854, the first cotton mill was set up in Bombay and it had grown as an important port for the export of raw cotton from India to England and China. In Bombay, over 84 mills were established by Parsi and Gujarati businessmen by 1900. Mills started developing in cities and the first mill in Ahmedabad was started in 1861. Growth of cotton mills demanded labour. Poor peasants, artisans and agricultural labourers worked in the mills.

Textile factory industry in India faced problems such as difficulty competing with the cheap textiles imported from Britain. In most countries, the government supported industrialisation by imposing heavy duties on imports which eliminated competition and protected infant 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.

CBSE Class 8 Social Science History Notes

Chapter 6 - Weavers, Iron Smelters and Factory Owners

The sword of Tipu Sultan and Wootz steel

The sword of Tipu Sultan, was special because it 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 swords, produced a very sharp edge with a flowing water pattern which came from very small carbon crystals embedded in the iron.

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 used for sword making.

Wootz is an anglicised version of the Kannada word ukku, Telugu hukku and Tamil and Malayalam urukku – meaning steel. Wootz steel making process was widely known in south India, which completely lost its existence by the mid-nineteenth century. The swords and armour making industry died with the conquest of India by the British and imports of iron and steel from England displaced the iron and steel produced by craftspeople in India.

Abandoned furnaces in villages

Wootz steel production required a highly specialised technique of refining iron. In India, iron smelting was common till the end of the nineteenth century. In Bihar and Central India, every district had smelters. The furnaces were built of clay and sun-dried bricks. By the late nineteenth century, the craft of iron smelting declined. The reason was the government prevented people from entering the reserved forests.

The government granted access to the forest in some areas but the iron smelters had to pay a very high tax to the forest department for every furnace they used. By the late nineteenth-century iron and steel were imported from Britain. By the early twentieth century, the artisans producing iron and steel faced new competition.

Iron and steel factories come up in India

In 1904, Charles Weld, an American geologist and Dorabji Tata, the eldest son of Jamsetji Tata, travelled to Chhattisgarh in search of iron ore deposits. They wanted to set up a modern iron and steel plant in India. After travelling for months, Weld and Dorabji found Rajhara Hills which had one of the finest ores in the world. But the region was dry and water was not to be found nearby. So, the search continued and the Agarias helped in the discovery of a source of iron ore. A large area 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) began producing steel in 1912.

Before TISCO, India was importing steel that was manufactured in Britain. The situation was changed by the time TISCO set up. In 1914 the First World War broke out and steel produced in Britain had to meet the demands of war in Europe. The war continued for several years, so TISCO had to produce shells and carriage wheels for the war. TISCO became the biggest steel industry within the British empire.

CBSE Class 8 Social Science History Notes

Chapter 6 - Weavers, Iron Smelters and Factory Owners

In the case of iron and steel, industrial expansion occurred when British imports into India declined and the market for Indian industrial goods increased. The development of the nationalist movement and the industrial class emerged stronger, the demand for government protection became louder.

