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## Book Review

### *The Company Weavers of Bengal The East India Company and the Organization of Textile Production in Bengal 1750-1813*

Hameeda Hossain

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There were two sisters named Dukho and Sukh who were cotton spinners, according to a fairy tale or *rupkatha* that once popularly circulated around Mymensingh. They were daughters of a deceased *tanti* – a weaver who had left behind two wives. When a gust of wind carries away a bale of cotton and thread that the two sisters had spun with their mothers, Dukho goes on an epic journey to the moon to retrieve the cotton. She goes to visit the old woman who sits outside time forever spinning thread in the moon – *chander maer buri*. With textiles industries long shaping the economy of the Bengal delta, mentions of textiles production are ubiquitous throughout the cultural history of Bengal, *sutras* (thread) woven into *tantras* (warp) comprising the basis of important formations in South Asian intellectual history. It is the economic workings of a crucial late 18<sup>th</sup> century moment in this larger global history of Bengal textiles that Dr. Hameeda Hossain has in painstaking detail sketched in her book *The Company Weavers of Bengal*. First published in 1988, it remains the authoritative account today of the colonization and collapse of the thriving handwoven textiles industry viewed from East Bengal.

Today in my classroom, I use this book as a teaching tool. Recently when sisters Sukh and Dukho appeared in a draft chapter by Raahi Adhya, my doctoral student who is writing a dissertation on *rupkatha*, I directed her to Dr. Hossain's *Company Weavers* with a range of questions: Tell me how cultural history is connected to economic transformations that take place in the Bengal delta. How is popular imagination connected to the day-to-day lives of the people who recited and refashioned these stories? Can we connect stories of dead weavers, widowed wives, and grieving daughters chasing vanishing wealth to the “histories from below” of textiles production in Bengal? A good place to begin seeking answers to some of these questions, *Company Weavers* is a meticulously researched piece of empirical work that today offers map to the labyrinth of economic records in English, Bengali, and Persian documenting the colonization of the Bengal textiles industry by the British East India Company. From these dry archival materials, the imaginative detail with which Dr. Hossain pieces together the complex collective processes of cultivating cotton, spinning fine threads, and weaving Bengal muslin bear testament to skills in the practice of empirical history that I can only ever hope to impart to students.

Hameeda Hossain undertook the research for this book during the five years that she was living in Britain in exile following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh. Completing a PhD in History between 1977 and 1982, Dr. Hossain worked under the supervision of Dr. Tapan Raychaudhuri at Oxford University. Precisely during the years that Dr. Hossain was training in economic history, Dr. Raychaudhuri launched an important debate against the “Cambridge School” – a group of historians who in the 1980s came to be known as imperial apologists of sorts in South Asian history circles. With histories of the textiles industry often at the center of these debates in economic history, against this backdrop Dr. Hossain produced a work that quietly made numerous interventions that were ahead of their time when *Company Weavers* was first published in 1988.

A major achievement of this book that is never explicitly stated is that it operates as an important corrective to the India-centrism of economic histories of Bengal textiles. From Dr. Hossain's work, we glimpse that the very moments that are collectively remembered by modern historians shift significantly if the view is considered from East rather than West Bengal. For example, since Romesh Chunder Dutt's *Economic History of India* was published in

1902, economic historians have long grappled with the problem of famine. Dr. Hossain draws attention to the geographically uneven attention accorded to different famines which devastated colonized Bengal in the aftermath of ecological events. She writes that “the calamity of 1787-8 has not been given much attention by historians, perhaps because the floods and storms affected only the south-eastern regions” of Bengal. Yet as she notes, “the disaster was recorded in unusual detail in colonial sources,” John Taylor the British commercial resident at the Dhaka Factory writing that “in 1787 and 1788 a great number of Spinners died of famine.” Pointing out a number of these uneven disparities between the empirical evidence and emphases in South Asian historiography, between the lines of *Company Weavers* is a critique of the ways that modern historical consciousness of Bengal is profoundly India-centric – a serious problem that plagues much South Asia scholarship today and is inextricable from the dominance of the Indian nation-state in the geopolitics of the region.

Dr. Hossain’s challenge to the androcentrism of much of the economic history of South Asian textiles industries is likewise executed in particularly understated way in *Company Weavers*. At every step of her storytelling, she is attentive to the gendered division of labor that shapes the industry. The women who cleaned cotton in spaces between other forms of labor, the thread spinners drawn from every caste and class background, the forms of embroidery that created employment for different groups of women, remain at the very center of Dr. Hossain’s view throughout the book. At the time that she was writing *Company Weavers*, in the British context people politicized through various women’s movement were just beginning the task of rewriting history – a field which by its very architecture remains a profoundly masculinist discipline in its priorities and exclusions. With the early 1980s comprising the moment when feminists began entering University History departments with the hope of making interventions into how the very discipline works, Dr. Hossain’s work pre-figures some of these intellectual trends that would ultimately flower in the 1990s. The result is that *Company Weavers* does not loudly declare itself as feminist history - it simply is.

These innovations I have outlined here ultimately culminate in a larger theoretical argument that builds over the course of *Company Weavers*, challenging a key narrative that structure accounts of the modern destruction of the Bengal textiles industry. Since Karl Marx’s writings reproduced the 1834 declaration by William Bentinck, Governor General of British India, that “the bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India”, the established story across the left-right political spectrum has long been that destruction of hand-woven textiles industry in Bengal was driven by the invention of the spinning jenny and the “English cotton machine.” Hameeda Hossain’s work shows that this story is simply not borne out by the archival evidence. In doing so, she implicitly challenges a tale of technological evolution that has hidden within it a claim of European civilizational superiority – the story that in the end *they* had the better tools. Operating as an invitation to examine this racist fiction in greater detail, *Company Weavers* anticipated some of the central questions that would shape the discipline of history in the decades that followed - questions that are being raised yet again today by new generations seeking to decolonize Historical storytelling.