Q12

Examine how the decline of traditional artisanal industry in colonial India crippled the rural economy. (250 words).

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · GS I · 15 marks · Indian Heritage and Culture

Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

Core demand of the question

- Examine how the decline of traditional artisanal industry under colonial rule crippled the rural economy
- Link deindustrialisation to peasant income, land pressure, and village exchange, not only to mill cloth

Revision summary

Mill imports and lost court demand cut weavers, spinners, and village crafts across the nineteenth century.

Artisan households lost a second wage, including women's spinning.

Labour crowded agriculture, raising subdivision, rent, and debt.

Village grain-for-craft exchange gave way to cash and distant markets.

Famine and nationalist economics both recorded this as a structural rural injury.

Introduction

Pre-colonial India had a thick rural web of weavers, spinners, smiths, potters, and oil-pressers tied to peasant demand and long-distance cloth. Colonial free trade, mills, and revenue broke that web. The village then had fewer non-farm earnings, more people on the same land, and a thinner local market.

Body

How traditional industry declined

- Cheap Lancashire and later Bombay mill yarn and cloth, after one-way free trade and the fall of tariff walls, undercut hand-spinners and many handloom weavers who had supplied village and export markets.
- Railways and steam shipping moved mill goods inland faster than they created new rural factories, so the artisan faced competition without a matching industrial job at home.
- Company and Crown demand shifted from Indian fine cloth to raw cotton, indigo, opium, and grain, which turned the countryside into a raw-material hinterland.
- Loss of court and temple patronage after annexation, and the drain of bullion discussed by early nationalists, cut the luxury and ritual orders on which skilled crafts had lived.
- Some crafts survived in niches, and Morris and others have qualified a simple 'deindustrialisation' story, but the rural weaver and village artisan clearly lost share and security

across the long nineteenth century.

How that crippled the rural economy

- The artisan household had been a second income beside the field; when the loom and the wheel paid less, the family leaned harder on tiny plots and on moneylender grain.
- Spinners, often women, lost a home-based wage, which reduced household buffering against a bad monsoon.
- Village exchange-grain for cloth, metal, and pots-thinned, so the peasant sold more in a distant market and bought mill cloth with cash, which raised exposure to price swings.
- Surplus labour that once sat in craft crowded agriculture, which worsened subdivision, rent, and the bargaining power of landlords and revenue officials.
- Famine years became harsher where craft income had been the drought buffer; Dadabhai Naoroji and R.C. Dutt tied this rural weakness to colonial fiscal and trade design.
- Towns that had been weaving centres, from parts of Bengal and the Coromandel to inland qasbas, shrank as rural buying power fell, which further cut demand for village produce.

Limits and later politics

- Not every region deindustrialised at the same pace; some handlooms adapted with mill yarn.
- Swadeshi, later khadi, and post-1947 small-industry policy were political answers to this rural wound, which shows how central the artisan collapse was to the nationalist reading of the village.

Way forward for the answer

- Name mill competition and lost patronage first, then show the chain to land pressure, women's lost yarn wage, and a weaker famine buffer.

Flow diagram

> Free trade mill cloth railways -> Artisan income falls
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> Artisan income falls -> More pressure on land
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> Artisan income falls -> Thinner village exchange
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> More pressure on land -> Rent debt famine risk
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> Thinner village exchange -> Rent debt famine risk
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> Rent debt famine risk -> Crippled rural economy

Conclusion

Colonial rule did not only replace Indian cloth with foreign cloth. It stripped rural artisans of a living, pushed their labour onto over-taxed land, and broke the village circuit of craft and grain. That is how the decline of traditional industry crippled the rural economy, even where some looms survived in a thinner form.

Facts & figures

> **One-way free trade**
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> Nineteenth-century tariff design that opened India to British manufactures while Indian cloth faced barriers abroad.

Dadabhai Naoroji
Early nationalist who linked drain of wealth to Indian poverty and the weakening of indigenous industry.

R.C. Dutt
Historian-economist who argued that colonial fiscal and trade policy deindustrialised India and harmed agriculture.

Hand-spinning wage
Home work, often by women, that vanished as mill yarn spread, cutting household buffers.

Swadeshi, 1905 onward
Political attempt to revive Indian cloth and boycott mill imports as a reply to artisan decline.