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Q13

How far was the Industrial Revolution in England responsible for the decline of handicrafts and cottage industries in India?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · GS I · 15 marks · History of the World

History of the world will include events from the 18th century such as industrial revolution, world wars, redrawing of national boundaries, colonization, decolonization, political philosophies like communism, capitalism, socialism etc. - their forms and effect on the society.

Core demand of the question

- Explain how England's Industrial Revolution affected Indian handicrafts and cottage industries
- Judge how far that Revolution was responsible for their decline

Revision summary

England's mills produced cheap, uniform cloth that undercut many Indian handlooms after trade opened wider in the nineteenth century.

Colonial specialisation pushed raw cotton out and piece-goods in. Naoroji and Dutt named this pattern as drain.

Railways carried mill cloth inland and tied India into that division of labour.

Company monopoly, land revenue, and loss of court patronage had already hurt artisans.

Revisionists note adaptation and later **Indian mills**. Nationalists note a real industrial share loss in regions such as the east.

The Industrial Revolution was a major cause. Empire was the political condition that made it so destructive.

Introduction

The **Industrial Revolution in England** produced cheap machine-made cloth and metal goods that entered Indian markets in the nineteenth century. Indian weavers and metal-smiths did not decline because they forgot their craft. They met mill production from Lancashire and Sheffield, carried on **Company and Crown** ships, under trade rules that were not equal for both sides. The Industrial Revolution was a real cause of the decline of Indian cottage production. It was not the only cause. Tariffs, railways, colonial policy, and changes inside India also share the responsibility.

Body

The mechanism from Manchester to the loom

English **cotton mills** after the late eighteenth century made cloth cheaper, more uniform, and endlessly repeatable. Indian **handloom** had been an export strength. It became an import-competing survivor. After the **Charter Act of 1813** opened trade more widely, **Lancashire piece-goods** flooded presidency ports. **Drain theorists** such as **Dadabhai Naoroji** and **R.C. Dutt** argued that India was made to export raw cotton and import cloth.

That was a colonial division of labour that mill industry in England needed. **Railways** carried mill cloth inland faster than a pack bullock had carried handicrafts. Machine twist and yarn also undercut village spinning. This was deindustrialisation of the spindle before the loom.

Iron, coal, and steam in Britain similarly pressured Indian wootz, village furnaces, and artisan steel, though the story is regionally uneven.

- **Price shock:** Mill cloth undercut many grades of handloom.
- **One-way specialisation:** Raw fibre went out. Yarn and piece-goods came in.
- **Transport:** Rail and steam reduced the protected distance of the interior.

How far "responsible"

How far is not the same as entirely. Company rule had already distorted textiles through monopoly procurement in the eighteenth century. Indian revenue demand pushed artisans toward agriculture. Internal competition, changing court patronage after the Mughal collapse, and later **Indian mills** in Bombay and Ahmedabad themselves displaced some hand production. **Tirthankar Roy** and others stress market integration and artisan adaptation, not only a nationalist ruin story. **Amiya Bagchi** and the nationalist school stress a real fall in secondary-sector share in eastern India.

England's Industrial Revolution supplied the technology and the cheap goods. Colonial power supplied the tariff asymmetry, the unfree political response, and the use of India as a captive market. **Without empire**, Indian states might still have faced mill cloth, as Japan did. Japan had a sovereign tariff. That difference is why England's Industrial Revolution in this question is also **England's empire**.

- **Necessary cause:** Machine production made the price war possible.
- **Not sufficient alone:** Policy, railways as colonial tools, and agrarian squeeze completed the decline in many crafts.
- **Survival:** Handloom did not die. It shrank, specialised, and later received swadeshi and state khadi politics.

Nationalist, revisionist, and a middle line

The nationalist school treated deindustrialisation as proof of drain. Revisionists reply that real wages, regional variety, and artisan shift into agriculture or mill work muddy a single ruin graph. Both can be true in different districts. Bengal's fine muslin story is not identical to western India's later mill story. For a GS comment, the Industrial Revolution remains causally central wherever machine cloth met a non-sovereign tariff. The debate is about how complete the decline was. It is not about whether Manchester's steam mattered.

- **Bagchi line:** There was a measurable fall in industrial employment in parts of the east.
- **Roy line:** Markets, skills, and survival in niches also matter.
- **Exam verdict:** English responsibility was substantial. It was shared with colonial power and internal change.

The responsible verdict is substantial but shared. The Industrial Revolution supplied the cheap machine goods. Colonial rule set the tariffs and the market rules that made those goods so destructive.

Flow diagram

English mill technology -> Cheap yarn and cloth
Colonial tariff and empire -> Cheap yarn and cloth
Cheap yarn and cloth -> Handicraft decline
Railways raw cotton export -> Handicraft decline
Agrarian squeeze internal change -> Handicraft decline

Conclusion

Lancashire mill cloth and a captive Indian market broke the old export supremacy of the handloom and reduced many cottage trades. The Industrial Revolution was a prime cause. It was not the only one. A sovereign tariff and a different revenue state might have helped crafts adapt instead of watching them shrink. That nationalist insight still holds after the revisionists have spoken.

Facts & figures

Charter Act, 1813

Ended the East India Company's monopoly of Indian trade (except tea and China for a time) and widened the entry of British manufactures.

Dadabhai Naoroji

His drain of wealth argument linked colonial rule to the unrequited export of Indian resources, including the textile story.

R.C. Dutt

The Economic History of India argued that free-trade policy deindustrialised India in the interest of Lancashire.

Deindustrialisation debate

Bagchi and others document a fall in secondary employment in parts of nineteenth-century India; Roy stresses markets and artisan flexibility.

Indian mills

Bombay and Ahmedabad cotton mills later competed with both Lancashire and the handloom, complicating a Britain-only villain story.

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