

ENGL1101

Student: John Mays

Instructor: Nathan Camp

“Maharaj Cotton” How the Death of “King Cotton” Led to Increased British Interests in India

In the 1830s, the Southeastern states were developing as a new economic power. The new growth was due to one crop — cotton. By 1860, nearly sixty percent of the total United States export was cotton. This cash crop pushed the young nation onto the world economic stage. In 1861, the nascent Confederacy was totally dependent on this “King” of the economy, and it played a major role in the Confederacy's downfall. As the American War Between the States dragged on and the Union blockade on Confederate ports remained in place, cotton exports decreased from a mighty river to a trickle. British textile mills, dependent on this supply, ground to a halt, and an alternative source of cotton had to be found. The eyes of a desperate Britain fell on India, and as “King Cotton” destroyed one country, it gave birth to another. Though the sphere of influence of cotton during the War Between the States is normally restricted to the United States, the deficit of southern cotton caused an increased British interest in the governing and development of India as a cotton producer.

Prior to the invention of the cotton gin in 1794, large-scale production of long-staple cotton in the South was largely impractical. Long-staple cottons are known and named for their long fibers and high quality, and these varieties were desired by textile mills in Britain because they could be made into high-quality cloth. After the invention of the cotton gin, southern production rose dramatically from just a few hundred bales in the early 1800s to over five million bales in 1860 (Pope). During the same period, India was somewhat restricted in its development because England was at war with France, and the French attacked vessels laden with Indian cotton in an attempt to disrupt the British economy. Chapman notes that during this time America remained neutral, and cotton trade was allowed to flourish (63). During a time when India could have been developing, it was being repressed, and when international conditions allowed trade to resume, British textile mills had already become dependent on American cotton.

British textile mills in the Manchester-Lancashire area of England during the Antebellum years were the world's leading consumers of cotton. In *The History of the Cotton Famine*, Arnold states that the “required food” of the Manchester area textile mills was 1,051,623,380 pounds of cotton. To satisfy this hunger, Britain imported 1,390,938,752 pounds of cotton (37). Of that, America sent over 1,115,890,608 pounds (38). Through simple calculation, one can derive that American cotton constituted eighty percent of British cotton imports. This over-dependence on one source of cotton did not alarm many in position to remedy the problem, and the only real actions taken to diversify cotton sources were a handful of commissions to study India by the Manchester Chamber of Commerce (Silver 60). The government purposefully stayed out of attempts to develop India at this time and refused to finance official expeditions to India (64). Logan writes that in an eerie moment of prescience, a newspaper from Bolton, England raised the question of how an American civil war would “suddenly [choke] the sources of that enormous . . . supply” (qtd. in Logan 472). The newspaper writer was surely not at all surprised when just that happened a few years later.

The attack on Fort Sumter in April 1861 signaled the beginning of Britain's cotton problem. However, many Britons were in disbelief at the seriousness of the coming conflict, and Arnold writes,

“We persisted in believing that this interchange . . . was nothing more than a game of brag” (40). Once the Union enacted the Anaconda Plan and Union ships blockaded southern ports, the export of cotton was almost non-existent. Confederate foreign policy hinged on the dependence of Britain on southern cotton, and an effort was made to force Britain to break the blockade to save their own cotton industry, but this was to no avail. The United Kingdom declared themselves to be neutral and took the risk of their own ruin into their own hands. As a result, the blockade remained in place and continued to restrict trade with the Confederacy. On top of the fact that very little cotton was getting out of the Confederacy, William T. Sherman led his army on a destructive mission through some of the most cotton-rich areas of Georgia and South Carolina. The destruction of this fertile farmland further subtracted from the ability of the South to provide for the massive needs of the British textile industry. In the years between the 1860 and 1870 censuses, cotton production of the South decreased from 5,331,439 bales (2,132,575,600 pounds) to 3,008,848 bales (1,203,539,200 pounds) (Pope). It should be noted that even in 1870, the South could have supplied a large portion of England's demand, but there was also a demand in New England that had to be met. During the Reconstruction years, domestic needs took precedence over foreign ones. Both the scarcity of cotton during the War Between the States and the deficit of production after the war led to a period known in England as the “Cotton Famine.”

The Cotton Famine had been expected by few and affected many. About 440,000 people worked in the textile mills of the Manchester-Lancashire area, and after the cotton supply from the South was cut off, nearly half a million workers and family members were receiving help for their unemployment (Arnold 35; 44). The dangerous dependence on a single supply of cotton could not be ignored any longer. The “game of brag” had become a full-fledged war, and the British cotton industry was caught in the middle. Even after the War Between the States, cotton prices were inflated from \$35.98/bale to \$75.45/bale. This means that the total costs of British imports would have doubled from \$100,374,360.19 to \$210,484,865.93. Aside from the unavailability of southern cotton, Britain had to now consider the economy of continuing to import from the South.

Spurred on by the scarcity of southern cotton during the War Between the States, the British Empire looked to its various possessions and territories overseas, including India, for a new source of cotton. The East India Company had been experimenting with various breeds of cotton since 1811 and found a few that produced bolls of both the quality and quantity of American varieties (Silver 95). When the British government took control of India in 1858, the East India Company had mismanaged the cotton industry terribly. The Company had terrible practices for storing the cotton, including burying it, which irreversibly contaminated the product. Lower-quality cotton was mixed into the cotton of marketable quality. This mixing caused a decrease in the price of the cotton and created problems at the mills in Britain (30). The ryots, small-scale peasant farmers, were only concerned with getting fast payment from the Company and not with the quality of their product (33). In 1861, when the situation became desperate, the government, now in control of India, issued two proclamations with the intention of increasing both the quantity and the quality of cotton produced in India. The first proclamation dictated that each region of India should gather information about how to better the production of cotton in their region. The second offered a reward of ten thousand rupees to the plantation in each region that produced both the highest quality and highest quantity cotton (Logan 474-75). Because of this new monetary incentive, the second proclamation seems the most likely source for the ryots' interest in producing good-quality, high-quantity cotton. Because of the lack of cotton from the South in 1861, textile mills were buying cotton at much higher prices when they could get it. This led to more production simply because of the promise of more money (475). The combination of the proclamations and the rise in prices paid off for British textile companies. In 1862, Britain imported 1,133,000 bales (453,200,000) of cotton and India contributed 1,069,000 bales (427,600,000) (476). Though British importation was still severely depressed from the 1,390,938,752

pounds that they had imported in 1860, they had found a new source of cotton that could be developed into a successful replacement for the deficit in southern cotton production.

Cotton cultivation continued to expand in India throughout the War Between the States to provide for the continual need of the textile mills and to help the economy of the Manchester-Lancashire area to recover. Production rose from 1,069,000 bales (427,600,000) in 1861 to 1,398,000 bales (559,200,000 pounds) in 1864 (Logan 476). This increase in production could not yet replace the billion pounds of cotton that the South exported to Britain every year, but it was the first step.

The legacy of cotton development in India lasts to this day. As of 2009, India was second in both overall production and exports of cotton (Rankings). The influences of cotton in India are not just agricultural. The rise in cotton production brought in much needed outside capital. Government intervention prevented the East India Company from destroying the country in its quest for wealth. Indian infrastructure had to be developed to move cotton from the interior to the sea. This meant the construction of roads and railroads that are still in use today (Logan 474). The ryots became more middle-class and less lower-class. They were able to purchase many items that were previously too expensive for them to afford (Logan 478). Also, the mercantile nature of the British Empire meant that all cotton produced in India had to be sent to Britain, and then Indians had to buy the products of British mills. Mohandas Gandhi protested this policy by spinning his own yarn and weaving his own cloth, which was illegal at the time. In a way, the increased cotton production in India led to the Indian Revolution.

Though 1860 was a long time ago, the events of that time had a great and far-reaching impact. The bond of the United States was put to the test. Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. India took its first steps on its path to economic power. The War Between the States played a much larger role on the world stage than some believe. The United States' single biggest export was the United Kingdom's single biggest import. As "King Cotton" died in the West, "Maharaja Cotton" was born in the East. Some may say, "Britain did not just get cotton out of India," and they are right, but why did Britain go to India in the first place? The need for cotton led Britain to India and created the British Empire as it was known for a hundred years. The need for cotton took India from being a group of warring principalities to becoming a united country. The need for cotton created India as it is today.

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