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**Report on the Industrial Survey of the  
District of Pabna**

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*By*

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## Foreword

Pabna is one of the most enterprising districts in rural Bengal. Its position at the confluence of the great rivers Padma and Brahmaputra gives it a certain degree of isolation. It might be thought, therefore, that an agricultural and rural district in the very centre of Bengal, subjected to heavy flooding annually, would in these circumstances be somewhat backward. This interesting report compiled by Mr. K. D. Guha, now translated to the important post of Technical Adviser on Industries to the Government of Ceylon, shows the case to be otherwise.

Pabna district is not only famous for the qualities of its jute, but Pabna town has made itself famous all over India for the quality of its hosiery. Here is a greater collection of small power-driven hosiery factories situated in rural surroundings in the outskirts of a mofussil town, than exists anywhere else in Bengal. Then again at the "Satsang Ashram", situated on the banks of the river two miles above Pabna town, there is perhaps one of the most enterprising experiments in rural reconstruction, in industrial and agricultural craftsmanship, health culture, etc., to be found in Bengal. This survey also gives detailed information, so far as can be obtained, of the general economic and industrial structure of this typical Bengal district. The object of the survey was to bring up to date the facts already collected in the previous survey of cottage industries in Bengal and published six years ago. It also had the intention of showing the diversity and ubiquity of the large internal trade conducted through the various *hâts* and markets in Bengal, for the reason that in all such places there exist opportunities for the vending of the products of up-to-date small and cottage industries which can be established by the young *bhadralog* of Bengal. Instead of crowding into the city educated young men can find a vocation in these more or less isolated mofussil districts by establishing small industries such as soap-making, umbrella manufacture, glazed pottery manufacture, etc. They can vend their products with suitable publicity and advertisement, in the numerous and regular market centres, such as are here indicated. Out of these small concerns larger and more stable factories will grow. The report also emphasises what has many times previously been mentioned, viz., the ubiquity of the middle-man *bepari* who merely handles to his distinct advantage the products of the craftsmanship of the illiterate and ignorant working people, and who in himself has no practical experience with the industrial processes involved. These circumstances again illustrate the opportunity which lies before enterprising and technically trained young men, to establish small but technically equipped factory industries. In this way and with reliability and enterprise in industry under disciplined control, the more parasitical and less helpful service of the middle-men can be defeated.

Mr. Guha sums up the position by emphasising the three fundamental factors of improvement required through (1) training, (2) financing, and (3) marketing. With regard to (1), the Department of Industries maintain 26 Peripatetic Weaving Schools, 9 District Weaving Schools, 8 Technical Schools and 5 Weaving and Dyeing Demonstration Parties for the purpose of training the young men in the fundamental processes of rural industry.

With regard to (2) and (3), marketing with co-operative organisation, as Mr. Guha suggests, where the co-operative system can be encouraged, the strong position of united organisation will be found to be of unique advantage in this problem of financing and marketing. Where however, owing to difficulties of contact or association or other causes individuals find co-operation impossible, the Department of Industries has now a Marketing and Publicity Officer on its headquarters staff, whose services are available in regard to stuff which could be readily marketed in Calcutta. It is certain, however, that the most advantageous markets for rural cottage industries will be those of their own local *hâts*. And here for any further development the marketing organisation must depend on local enthusiasm and talent.

In these days it is a pleasure to record a considerable awakening of interest in the problem of rural reconstruction particularly with the object of making life in rural Bengal more attractive and self-contained. This survey report is a valuable compendium of basic information on rural economics, compiled by one whose great ambition was to place his talents and experience, and training in India and abroad, at the service of his Motherland for this great and beneficent purpose. The Department of Industries, Bengal, will be glad to consider, as they certainly invite, the careful, constructive criticism and suggestion of the readers of this survey report who are identified with a similar ambition.

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CALCUTTA,

*The 14th September 1935.*

## Introduction.

The present report is the result of a general survey of the main industries of the district of Pabna. An attempt has been made in the report to show the various resources of the district and the different industrial and commercial uses to which they are at present put and to collect materials for the Industrial Directory now under contemplation for the Province of Bengal.

Unlike most of the districts of Bengal, Pabna, although fundamentally an agricultural district, has acquired considerable industrial experiences within the last few decades. Pabna has been famous for centuries for the weaving of cotton-cloths on hand-looms, the products of which have earned a fair reputation on account of their fine texture and have survived the competition of Dacca and other historic seats of weaving industry as well as the competition of mills, both Indian and foreign.

The economic importance of Pabna, however, lies mostly in the production of a superior quality of jute and the financial condition of the district was very much improved with the development of export trade of jute. The various phases of the jute industry and its consequent economic effects on the general condition of the district afford an interesting study. Jute was indeed an old agricultural product and was grown only on a very small scale for local consumption. The growing demand of the fibre in Europe and America opened a new chapter of the export trade of Bengal, a little over half a century ago.

Pabna took advantage of the new position because of the suitability of the local conditions for the cultivation of the best quality of jute and a very important agricultural industry sprang up in the district with Serajganj as the headquarters which at one time used to transact about 50 per cent. of the total jute trade in Bengal and is now second only to Narayangunge of Dacca as a jute exporting station.

Centralised factory system was first introduced by the establishment of indigo factories throughout the district in the middle of the last century by the European industrialists. The cultivation of indigo was carried on very extensively and the revenue map of 1851-52 shows 80 indigo factories and outworks scattered all over the district except the north-western part of it. The factories which were all situated near rivers or channels have long since ceased to work very much because of the organised resistance of the indigo cultivators on the one hand and the success of the synthetic indigo in Germany on the other. Ruins of factory buildings here and a stray tomb-stone there still stand as the witnesses of the contemporary history which unfortunately does not give very happy reading.

Soon after the failure of indigo factories Pabna entered into another phase of industrial experience with the starting of jute press factories at Serajganj. They used to employ about 3,000 hands a few years ago for the pressing of jute into bales before they were exported to foreign countries *via* Calcutta when the trade was good. There is also

a jute-press factory at Bera which is an important part of the district, second only to Serajganj. The jute trade is practically a monopoly of the Europeans and the Marwaris.

The reduced price of jute and the drastic reduction in the volume of jute-trade consequent on the world's economic depression have utterly unbalanced the economic life of the district. The jute-press factories have virtually ceased to operate, the agricultural population have been thrown hopelessly in a state of destitution, their buying capacity being almost reduced to nil. The situation has been rendered more precarious by the damages caused by repeated floods in recent years.

It is interesting to note the present tendency to revive the cultivation of sugar-cane which gave way to the cultivation of jute about half a century ago. The agricultural statistics of the last one hundred years go to show that jute and sugar-cane cultivations vary inversely with one another. A slump in the jute trade on the one hand and the heavy tariff on the imported sugar on the other, have created a condition most favourable for the extensive cultivation of sugar-cane in the district and a few sugar factories have already been contemplated in the northern part of the district, which is more suited for the purpose. At Bera, which is a great centre for *gur*, a small factory for manufacturing sugar from *gur* by open-pan system was recently organised. But unfortunately, the small factory is now lying idle after a very brief period of activity owing to the lack of technical knowledge on the part of the management.

Another industry which has made Pabna well-known even outside Bengal is the hosiery industry, the main products of which are banians, sweaters, socks, etc. Although of recent growth, the industry gave great promise and a number of factories sprang up within a short time. All the factories made very good profits until lately when they have been badly hit by the general depression and, worse than that, by the sinister dumping of the hosiery goods from Japan which has already led four factories of Pabna into liquidation, threatening the rest with the same. Unless more heavy tariff is imposed on Japanese goods, there is little hope of saving the industry from a sure collapse.

Jute weaving is a new industry introduced in the district about two years ago but, unfortunately, it has not been taken seriously yet. I am afraid, the institutions that have taken up the industry, e.g., the Co-operative Society of Serajganj and the Weaving School at Pabna are not serving any useful purpose except perhaps the Noornabi Madrasha of Kazipur. There is absolutely no attempt to popularise the products, yet I have found jute *ashans* and *jayanamas* of Sri Hanuman Mills of Calcutta being sold in remote *hats* and bazars. The statement that there is no market for the products can hardly be justified. The results of the Jute-Weaving Demonstration Party at Bera and Barapangashi are awaited with interest.

Washing soap making is one of the very few chemical industries that have got any attention from the public. A number of small scale factories have lately been started in the different parts of the district. But unfortunately the results are far from encouraging, because of the unsatisfactory management and lack of technical knowledge on the part of the manufacturers. In some cases, factories have been actually started and run by persons with no experience except what little could be gathered from a correspondence-course for a few weeks from a gentleman



of Saidpur. There is no reason why this industry should not pay if run on efficient lines. There are, however, two factories at Serajganj and one factory at Nischintpur near Satbaria all of which are running satisfactorily.

Manufacture of hand-made paper in a small scale has been a very old industry of the district, dating as far back as the Muhammadan period—the main centre being Kandapara, about two miles from Serajganj. The paper is locally used for Zamindari and Mahajan account books and even indented from Assam for the same purpose.

There is an Electric Installation at Serajganj which supplies light and power to the locality. The Company is a limited one and although the prospect of the enterprise is great, the present condition of the concern is not encouraging. It has been involved in certain litigations and the management of the Company is in a state of transition.

There were two refrigerating plants in the district, one at Serajganj and the other at Sara of which the former has long gone into liquidation. The plant at Sara operates from April to December. The ice is mostly used for preserving fish sent to Calcutta from different fish-centres of the district.

There is a number of printing presses at Pabna and Serajganj. A few smaller presses are working in less important places and even in villages. The best of the printing works in the district, however, is working in Satsang Asram in the village of Himayetpur, about three miles from Pabna.

Satsang Asram at Himayetpur is a colony of about 1,000 persons subscribing to a certain form of religion. The Asram, however, attaches much importance to industrial development. There is a power-house in the Asram which supplies power and light to the village. The chemical and pharmaceutical works of the Asram is doing useful work and a big workshop, now under construction, has an ambitious scheme before it. A few visits to the institution have convinced me of its bright future as far as its success in industries is concerned. A corporate life and enthusiasm of the members, both male and female, and above all a general appreciation of the dignity of labour of any description are the assuring factors of its industrial future.

There is a private individual, Dr. Basanta Kumar Chowdhury, at Himayetpur whose name deserves a special mention here in connection with cottage industries. He has a small laboratory and produces varied articles of common use, viz., arrow-root, washing soap, huttons, hair-clips, etc., from mother-of-pearls, ginger syrup, jute *ashams*, etc. The quality of his products is good, specially the arrow-root which is widely used in the district and has been highly certified by several Exhibition authorities.

Cane-basket making, wool-blanket making, bricks and tiles making, pottery, hide-curing and shoe-making, rope, string and bag making, pearl-fishing in the *bils*, oil pressing by *ghany*, black-smithy, carpentry, *biri*-making, etc., are the other important cottage industries of the district.

Fish occupies an important place in the export trade of the district. Fish caught in the *bils* of Kazipur, Faridpur, Taras and Chatmohar police-stations is exported mainly to Calcutta from Bhangura and

**Lahiry-Mohanpur railway stations.** It is rather interesting to watch the brisk loading of wagons at midnight with parcels of fish of all descriptions in the dim light of lanterns. Fish caught in the Jumna is exported to Calcutta from Sthal by steamer. Hilsa fish caught in the Padma is exported by railway from Sara. Dried fish is exported from Padai (Sujanagar police-station) to Calcutta.

Fowls and ducks and their eggs are exported to Calcutta in plenty from almost every station on the Sara-Serajganj railways. Many persons of *bhadralog* class are engaged in the trade.

There is a great possibility of scientific dairying in the district of Pabna. It is said to have been famous for the abundance of milk, ghee and other dairy-products from very early times. The extensive *char* lands on the either sides of the Bural and other rivers afford ideal pasturage for the cattle for a period of ten months in the year. During the rainy season when the *char* lands are submerged in water, the cattle, except the milch ones, are sent to higher lands (viz., Sara) for four months and the milch cows are somehow accommodated in the locality. The dairy activities of the district mainly centre round the villages Rautara and Potazia on the river Bural and control as much as 300 maunds of milk per day during the winter. The quality of the cattle and quantity of milk can be very much improved by careful breeding and selection of cattle.

Although general trade depression of recent years and the reduction of price of jute in particular have disastrously diminished the total trade of the district, an attempt has been made to collect and analyse the import and export statistics with a view to ascertain the course of action to be taken up in connection with the middle class unemployment relief scheme and to incorporate the materials in the proposed Industrial Directory of Bengal.

The active sympathy and co-operation of the commercial community and the public at large are essential in an investigation like this. The District Industrial Advisory Board was, therefore, formed with the most influential officials and non-officials of the district. The purpose of the investigation and the character and scope of the middle-class unemployment relief scheme were explained in the general meetings of the District Board, Mahajan Sabha, Bar-library and of the various other representative bodies of the district and appeals were made for their co-operation and help. But unfortunately all the attempts to elicit informations of statistical nature from the business men proved failure, perhaps, because of the apprehension of any remote chance of the figures being used against their interest.

Closer acquaintance with the mechanism of the import and export trade of the district, however, suggested some useful and effective procedure to collect statistical informations of trade. The railway and steamer stations of the district, Kushtia railway station in the district of Nadia, which is commercially connected with the district of Pabna by boat, Bera which is connected with Dacca, Faridpur and certain other districts by boat, are the points which mainly control the trade of the district. The District Magistrate of Pabna was, therefore, requested to write to the station masters of different railway and steamer stations concerned for the necessary informations. Accordingly the figures in regard to the import and export of certain commodities were

obtained from the different railway stations of the district but no information could be collected from the steamer stations. Besides no arrangement could be made to ascertain the import and export figures of the trade carried by boat which was by no means insignificant. The statistical information thus collected was only a small fraction of the total trade of the district. But with respect to certain commodities, viz., fish, which are exported mainly by train for quick transport, the figures are quite satisfactory.

During my tour, I visited all the controlling centres of trade and industries of the district, viz., Serajganj, Bera, Pabna, Shahzadpur, Bhangura, Ullapara, Ishurdi, etc., and a good number of *hats* and bazars, accounts of which will be given in course of the description.

Serajganj is, indeed, the biggest trade centre of the district, Bera coming next. The main factors for the supremacy of Serajganj are the availability of very good quality of jute in the vicinity, the facilities with which the jute of Mymensingh may be imported to this port and the advantages of both railway and river communications.

Bera, the vertex of the almost isosceles triangle joining Bera, Serajganj and Pabna, has a peculiar position with respect to accessibility and trade in the district. It is almost equidistant from Pabna and Serajganj and the triangle covers within its area and near the base lines most of the important places of the district from commercial and industrial points of view. Bera is situated on the river Hurasagar and commands an extraordinary number of waterways connecting it with almost all parts of the district on the one hand and with neighbouring districts on the other. It may and possibly will claim more attention and prosperity in future when trade will be reorganised under normal conditions.

Another remarkable feature of the district of Pabna is the existence of numerous co-operative banks and credit societies scattered all over the district. The institutions have been very useful ever since their inception in 1906 and have played an important part in the economic life of the peasantry. Unfortunately for the world crisis and reduction of the price of jute which is the primary agricultural produce of the district, the activities of the institutions have been frightfully curtailed and a number of enterprises started by them have gone into liquidation. Whatever might be their present condition due to the extraordinary fall of the price of agricultural produces, the importance of co-operative banking can hardly be over-estimated in any serious attempt for the regeneration of cottage industries.