# Jute and Empire: Industrialization, Labor, and Politics in Colonial Bengal

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# Introduction

This book tells the story of how a plant that thrived in the saturated soils of the Bengal delta became the sinew of an empire. From the rippling monsoon-fed fields where stalks were cut and retted, to the clamorous mill floors that spun coarse fiber into sacks and ropes, jute threaded together distant geographies and unequal powers. By the late nineteenth century, the fortunes of cultivators, brokers, industrialists, and dockworkers in Bengal were entangled with insurers in the City of London, machinists in Dundee, and consumers across Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The rise of jute thus illuminates how commodity frontiers and industrialization were co-produced, how labor was reordered, and how colonial governance adapted to—and profited from—new circuits of extraction and exchange. In tracing this itinerary, the book argues that the making of “jute and empire” was never merely economic; it was profoundly political and social.

At its core, the narrative follows the global supply chain from field to factory to world market. In the countryside, we encounter peasants navigating land revenue regimes, moneylenders, and the risks of flood and failure; we study how agronomy, water, and human skill shaped fiber quality and farmer leverage. Moving along riverine trade routes to port cities, we examine the brokers and beparis who transformed harvested stalks into graded bales and contracts, embedding the bazaar within imperial finance. In the industrial corridor along the Hooghly, we enter mill compounds where time-discipline, machinery, and managerial authority sought to harness—and often fracture—diverse migrant workforces. Finally, we follow finished goods outward, recognizing how demand shocks, tariffs, wars, and the emergence of synthetics destabilized the commodity’s hegemony and reconfigured political possibilities on the shopfloor and in the streets.

Labor stands at the heart of this study. The jute mills recruited men, women, and children from multiple regions, languages, castes, and faiths, assembling new urban communities in bustees and chawls that ringed factory zones. Employers experimented with paternalism and surveillance; workers responded with everyday negotiation, flight, slowdowns, and, at key moments, collective organization. The book reconstructs these struggles—over wages, hours, housing, and dignity—and situates them within wider political forces: the Swadeshi boycott, the rise of left currents and trade union federations, and the juridical frameworks that alternately criminalized, regulated, and recognized labor. By restoring workers’ voices and strategies to the center of the story, we see how industrial capitalism in colonial Bengal was made and remade from below as much as from above.

Urbanization provides the second major axis. Calcutta’s ascent as a port and financial

hub was inseparable from hinterland extraction and oceanic logistics; railway spurs, jetties, warehouses, and insurance regimes created infrastructural webs that bound delta villages to imperial warehouses. Mill towns along the Hooghly fashioned landscapes of smoke, clatter, and crowding, but also of sociability, religious association, and cultural production. These industrial urbanisms carried ecological costs: polluted rivers, hazardous air, and public health crises. The environmental history of jute—its dependence on monsoon cycles, its chemical footprints, its interface with fisheries and drinking water—reveals how industrial growth redistributed not only income and power but also risk and disease. The city became both engine and arena of contestation.

Politics, finally, threads through every chapter. The raw material came disproportionately from what became East Pakistan after 1947, while most mills remained in West Bengal—a geopolitical fracture that sharpened questions of sovereignty, smuggling, and state control. Wartime mobilization and famine reoriented prices, rationing, and labor regimes; decolonization recast the terms of planning, protection, and protest. Nationalists, communists, and regional parties all sought to claim the mills and the bazaar as sites of legitimacy, even as workers pressed their own demands through strikes and new organizational forms. The longue durée of crisis—heightened competition from synthetics, managerial evasion, and episodic closures—pushed jute from imperial mainstay to embattled sector, leaving a dense archive of conflict, accommodation, and memory. Through these upheavals, the politics of jute illuminate the politics of modern South Asia itself.

Methodologically, the book integrates economic and labor history with environmental and urban studies. It draws on company records, government reports, legal cases, union pamphlets, newspapers, and private correspondence; it also attends to oral histories, neighborhood maps, and the materiality of mills and riverscapes. Quantitative series—on prices, wages, output, and trade—are set alongside ethnographic textures of migration, kinship, and religion. This mixed approach allows us to connect macro-structures to everyday life, making visible how policy and profit translated into bodily exhaustion, household budgeting, and collective hope. The result is an account intended for economic historians, labor studies scholars, and readers of industrial heritage who seek a grounded, transregional perspective.

The chapters proceed in roughly chronological order while foregrounding thematic arcs. The opening chapters trace agrarian change and commodity-making in the delta; the middle chapters pivot to technology transfer, factory regimes, gendered labor, and the emergence of unions; later chapters analyze war, famine, partition, and the postcolonial developmental state; the final chapters examine environmental burdens, deindustrialization, and memory. Each chapter pairs local dynamics with global movements, showing how shifts in Dundee or New York reverberated in Naihati or Bhadreswar—and how actions by workers and cultivators in Bengal could unsettle distant markets. Readers may follow this sequence or approach the book thematically;

cross-references highlight connections among ecology, labor, and politics.

To write about jute is to write about the making of modern capitalism at its colonial edges. The fiber’s very ordinariness—sackcloth, twine, gunny bags—hid the extraordinary transformations it propelled: land commodification, new forms of coercion and contract, urban growth, and mass politics. By recovering these entanglements, Jute and Empire invites us to reconsider how global industries are built on uneven terrains of power, how workers and cities shape and contest them, and how their legacies endure in river water, brick ruins, and living memories. The following pages offer both a history and a reckoning—of the rise of jute, the factory towns it made, and the socio-political consequences it left in colonial and postcolonial Bengal.

# CHAPTER ONE: Threads of Empire: Jute’s Emergence as a Global Commodity

Long before the cacophony of power looms echoed across the Hooghly, jute was an integral part of life in Bengal. For centuries, this resilient fiber, known locally as "golden fiber" for its shimmering hue, was woven into the fabric of daily existence. Its strength and versatility made it indispensable for practical items such as ropes, twines, mats, and coarse textiles for clothing. Indeed, historical records from as early as 3000 BCE indicate that people in the Bengal region utilized jute fibers for making fabrics.

The alluvial soils of the Ganges and Brahmaputra river systems provided the perfect environment for the jute plant to flourish. Farmers in the delta, with their intimate knowledge of the land and its rhythms, cultivated jute alongside food crops, utilizing traditional methods of sowing, retting, and extracting the valuable fibers. This was an indigenous crop, deeply embedded in local agrarian practices and household economies.

Before the significant European interest, the trade in jute was primarily localized or catered to regional demands within the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Bengali literature from the 16th and 17th centuries, and even texts like Abu'l-Fazl ibn Mubarak's *Ain-e-Akbari* in 1590, mention sackcloth identified with jute from areas like Rangpur, indicating its established presence as an article of trade. Villagers, particularly the poorer segments of society, wore clothes made from jute, spun on simple hand-spinning wheels and woven on handlooms.

The 17th century marked a subtle shift as European traders, initially the Dutch and French, began to take notice of Bengal jute. The British East India Company, too, recognized its potential, although their primary interest initially lay in commodities like cotton and silk. By the late 18th century, however, the East India Company's interest in jute began to solidify, with early trial shipments of the fiber to Europe. It was in 1795 that Roxburgh, the Superintendent of the Botanical Garden in Shibpur, formally documented the word "jute" in a letter to the East India Company's Board of Directors.

The real turning point for jute as a global commodity arrived in the mid-19th century, spurred by events far from the delta’s fertile fields. The Crimean War (1853–1856) played a pivotal role by interrupting Britain's supply of Russian flax and hemp, which were crucial for manufacturing sacks and other coarse textiles. This interruption forced manufacturers in Dundee, Scotland, then a prominent flax spinning center, to seek alternative fibers. Jute, with its comparable strength and affordability, presented a

compelling solution.

Dundee became the crucible where jute was transformed from a local fiber into an industrial raw material. Scottish merchants experimented with jute, initially finding it difficult to process with their existing machinery designed for flax. However, a breakthrough occurred around the 1830s with the discovery that treating jute fibers with whale oil made them pliable enough for mechanical spinning. This innovation effectively unlocked jute’s industrial potential. The first jute mill in the world was established in Dundee in 1830.

With the mechanical processing hurdle overcome, demand for raw jute from Bengal skyrocketed. The mid-19th century witnessed a rapid expansion of jute cultivation in the Bengal delta to meet the burgeoning needs of Dundee's mills. From modest acreages in the 1830s, jute cultivation expanded significantly, transforming the agrarian landscape. This was a shift that initially complemented existing peasant farming methods rather than completely disrupting them.

The global hunger for cheap, durable packaging materials was insatiable. Jute fabrics, particularly hessian cloth (known as burlap in North America) and gunny bags, became the preferred choice for packaging and transporting a vast array of commodities across the globe: grains, coffee, sugar, cotton, and even guano and cement. The very ordinariness of these sacks belied the extraordinary global trade networks they facilitated.

While Dundee became the manufacturing hub, Bengal remained the unrivaled source of raw jute. The climate and river systems of Bengal were uniquely suited for cultivating the plant, providing a near-monopoly on its production. This geographical advantage would prove to be a crucial determinant in the subsequent industrial development of the region and its integration into the global economy.

The East India Company, and later the British Raj, found a lucrative commodity in jute. Jute exports generated significant revenue, fitting into the broader colonial economic policy that sought to reduce India to a supplier of raw materials for British industries. This mercantile interest fueled the expansion of jute cultivation, even if the benefits were unevenly distributed, often favoring traders and middlemen over the cultivators themselves.

The surge in demand for raw jute initiated a complex interplay of forces in Bengal. Peasant smallholders, already navigating the rigid land revenue systems introduced by the British, found a new cash crop that offered prospects for income. However, this increasing commercialization also brought new dependencies on credit, market fluctuations, and the burgeoning networks of brokers and *beparis* who connected the rural hinterland to distant port cities.

By the 1840s, large-scale jute cultivation was undeniably underway in various districts of Bengal, as evidenced by reports compiled in the 1870s. Places like Rangpur, Bogra, and Pabna saw a gradual but steady increase in land dedicated to jute. This expansion was not simply a matter of planting more; it also involved the intricate knowledge of deltaic ecologies and the traditional processes of retting and fiber extraction that had been perfected over generations.

The initial European trade in jute involved the export of raw fiber. However, the economic logic of locating manufacturing close to the source of raw materials soon became apparent. By the mid-1850s, the idea of establishing jute mills in Bengal itself began to gain traction. This foresight would soon transform the banks of the Hooghly River, near Calcutta, into a sprawling industrial corridor, permanently altering the socio-economic landscape of Bengal.

The journey of jute from a localized, utilitarian crop to a global commodity was a gradual but ultimately transformative process. It was a story shaped by environmental advantages, technological innovations in faraway lands, and the relentless drive of colonial commerce. The unassuming jute stalk, thriving in Bengal’s muddy fields, was about to become a golden thread in the tapestry of empire, weaving together the destinies of countless individuals across continents.

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