

What is History?

History is often taught or written as a series of dates and events that follow each other neatly, with one version of what happened. This is because History is usually presented as a story.

Southern Voices approach History in a different way. We believe that any event affects individuals or groups differently, and that History is a contest between these perspectives.

The world is always changing. Huge movements of people, and the interactions and exchanges between them, change the dynamics between people and nations. This can lead to new ideas and cultural change. History is not just a series of events or processes, but also the different impacts of these on people.

“Until the lions have their historians, tales of hunting will glorify the hunter”, a saying of the Yoruba people, one of the largest West African ethnic groups, who mainly live in Western Nigeria.

Language and images

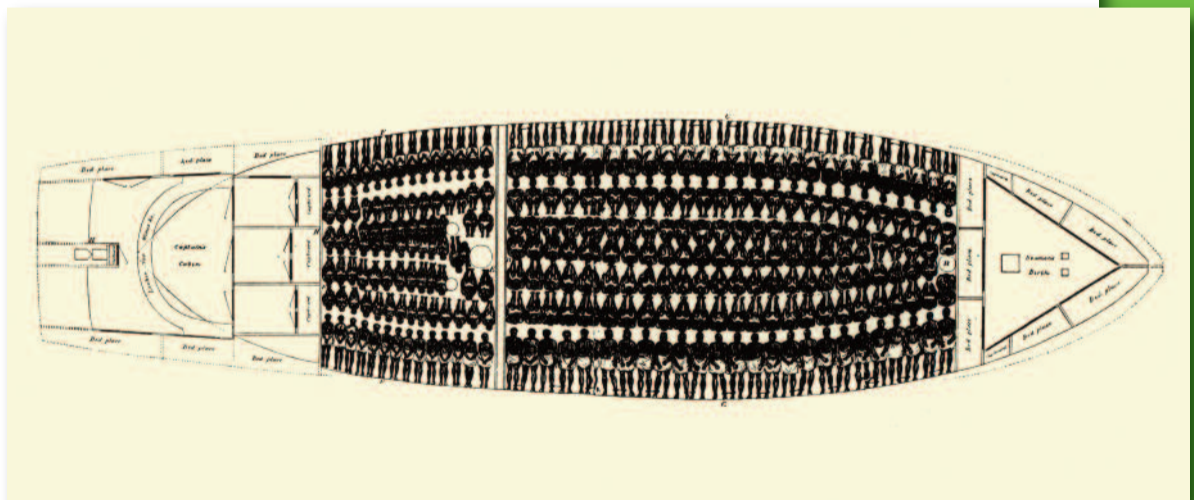
Language and images are very powerful tools. How they are used can influence what people think about a subject.

Some people describe independence as being granted. In reality, it was a hard fought struggle eventually resulting in legal freedom. Indians refer to the First War of Independence in 1857, but to the British, it was known as the Indian Mutiny or Rebellion.

The British Abolitionist movement shows the commitment of campaigners and law makers. It does not reflect the length or scale of protest and resistance by enslaved people or the support of ordinary people who were shocked into action. This was a popular movement against brutal treatment and inhumane conditions.

Images are also powerful and emotive. Those of kneeling slaves used by the abolitionists are familiar. Images of resistance by plantation slaves are equally

important but are less common and were barely used by campaigners, a part of the story which can easily be forgotten.



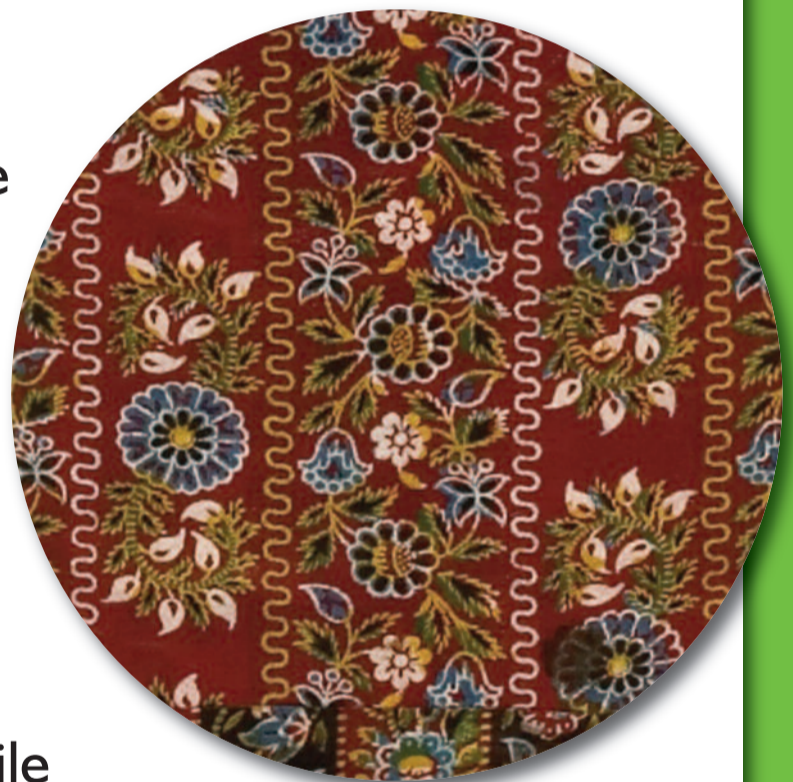
The cotton textile industry

The use of cotton cloth can be traced back over 5,000 years, in places as far apart as the Indian subcontinent, China, West Africa and Latin America. Trade in textiles flourished between India and China long before the arrival of British traders in the 16th century. European demand for quality cotton imports increased steadily in the two centuries after this.

In the 18th century, Britain used money partly earned from the Transatlantic Slave Trade to buy their way into the Asian textile trade. British traders gradually tried to gain complete control over trade in India.

From the 1770s, Britain's textile industry drove the Industrial Revolution. The Government realised that the Indian textile industry was a major competitor and, for a time, it was brutally suppressed to give Britain a monopoly.

“The misery (of the weavers) hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains of India.” William Bentinck, Governor General of India, 1833-1835.



India's cotton industry

The Indian subcontinent had a highly developed textile industry and an established international textile trade when the British arrived. After the Indian hand operated industry had been suppressed, British textile machinery was introduced instead. The first mill opened in Kolkata (Calcutta) in 1818, with others in cities such as Mumbai (Bombay) and Ahmedabad following later.

As British control grew, Indians became angered by the extent of foreign influence, with riots and unrest increasing. In 1857, a rebellion began in parts of the Indian army, spreading to the nobility, landlords and peasants. The combined forces were defeated in 1858 and the country was put under direct British rule.

The Indian textile industry thrived throughout most of the 20th century. Before independence, the industry developed with Indian investment. It was helped by the Swadeshi movement stimulating home demand for Indian textiles. The industry expanded greatly after independence and today it is the largest in India.

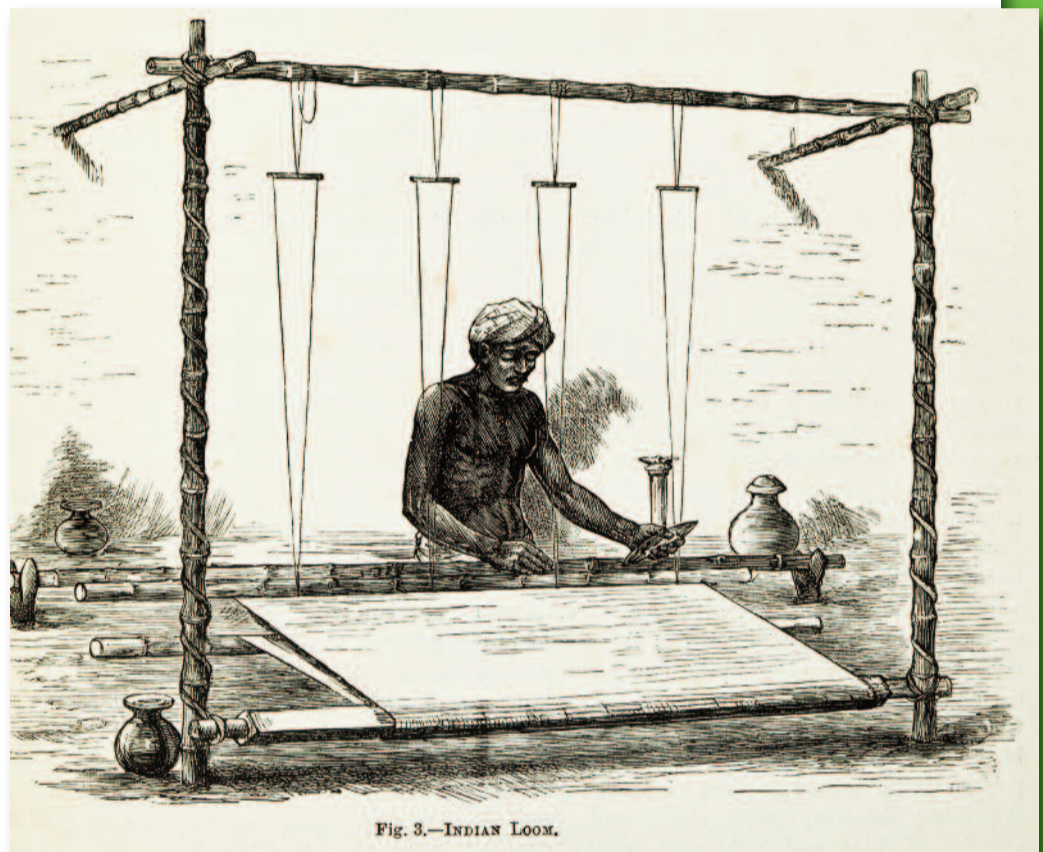


Fig. 3.—INDIAN LOOM.

The Caribbean

The cotton industry is strongly linked with both slavery and colonialism. People were captured and enslaved in West Africa and then transported to the Caribbean islands and North America.

Historians estimate that 11.8 million African people were enslaved as part of the Middle Passage of the Transatlantic Slave Trade between 1500 and 1807. Enslaved people were forced to work on plantations to provide Britain with cheap, raw cotton. This was shipped to Europe and manufactured goods were exported back to Africa.

The British Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807 banned the trade but enslaved people continued to work on the plantations. The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 eventually ended slavery in British territories. Slave owners were given compensation for their loss of property - enslaved humans - but the freed people were not. They even had to carry on working on the plantations until 1838. Slavery was finally abolished worldwide in 1888.



West Africa

African civilisations had existed for thousands of years before European traders arrived in the 1440s. Enslavement existed in Africa as elsewhere. People captured in battles or raids were ill-treated or traded for goods, often highly valued African cloth.

European nations, including Britain, used existing trade networks, often with the help of Africans, but greatly increased the scale and nature of their operation. A Triangular Trade took manufactured goods from Europe to Africa and exchanged these for people, who were taken to the Caribbean and the Americas. The profits were used to buy goods, like cotton and sugar, to sell in Europe.



This form of slavery was known as chattel slavery, as people were seen as goods or property. Conditions for the enslaved peoples were very harsh. Millions died on the way to the plantations or from disease. Punishments were cruel and living conditions were appalling.



African village market scene

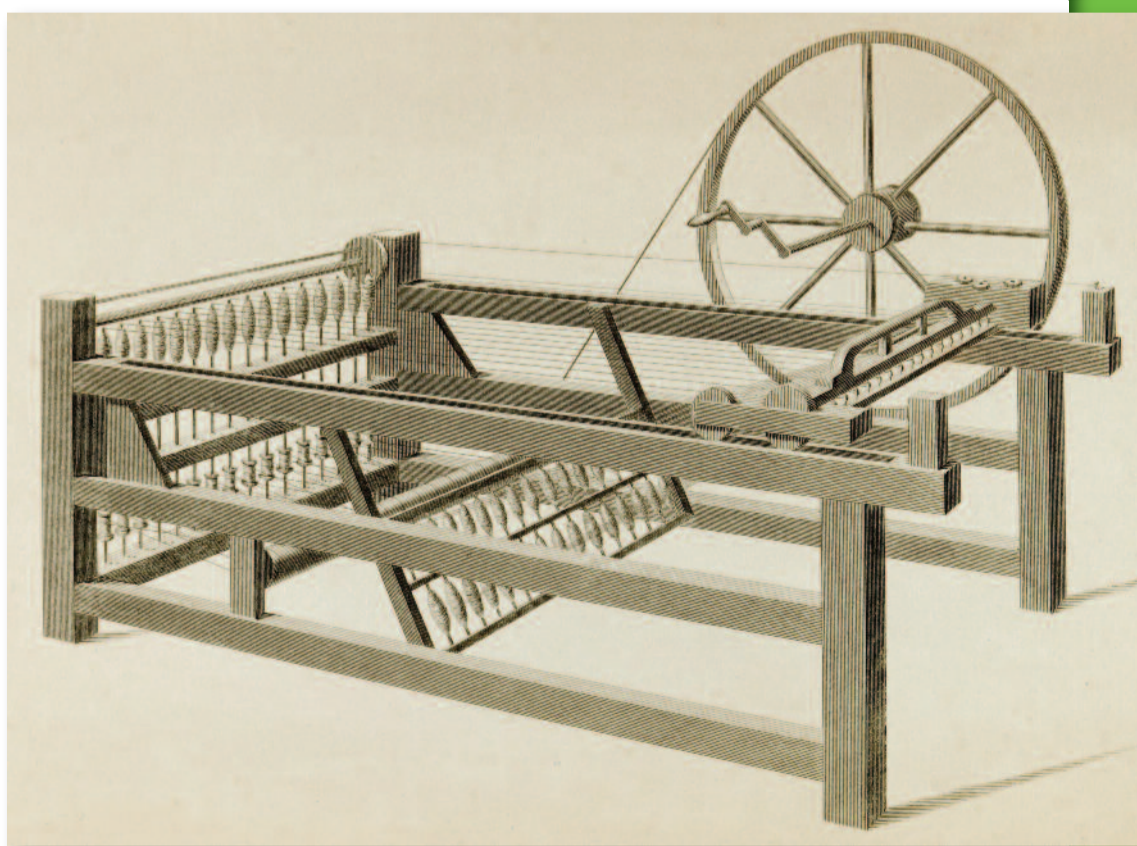
The transformation of Britain

Britain was the first country to experience the Industrial Revolution, with the first factory, built by Richard Arkwright to spin cotton yarn, at Cromford, Derbyshire, in 1771. The cotton industry helped to start a major social, economic, political and industrial transformation in Britain. New inventions appeared, making machines much more efficient and encouraging improvements to other manufacturing processes.

Profits drove industrialisation and this led to a new political belief, capitalism. Although the country was getting richer, most of the money went to a small minority of people, the factory owners.

Those working in factories were doing some of the most dangerous jobs over very long hours. Accidents, sometimes of a very serious nature, were common.

Children from 7 years old, serving apprenticeships, formed an important part of the factory workforce. Conditions were very different from what people had been used to in the traditional domestic textile industry and in agriculture.



The Spinning Jenny

Britain and the rise of the mills

With the coming of steam powered mills from the 1780s, the textile industry moved from the countryside to towns. The main advantage to be gained from this was that the towns were closer to the supplies of coal and labour needed by the cotton mills.

Families left their traditional lifestyles or were divided as some individuals went to find work in the mills to support those who remained in the countryside. This pattern, known as economic migration, still occurs across the world today but the distances travelled have greatly increased.

Living conditions in the towns were often very bad, with overcrowded houses that were unhealthy and poorly built. Mill owners controlled the lives of their workforce in every way, and most put making money ahead of looking after their workers' welfare, although there were notable exceptions.



Resistance

Throughout the British Empire, oppression was resisted. Through riots, rebellions war and sabotage, people fought for their freedom.

In West Africa, the Caribbean and the southern United States, enslaved peoples resisted their treatment. The plantation workers of the Caribbean fought for their freedom. The island of Haiti and the Maroons of Jamaica both established communities free from European control. Slavery was politically abolished in 1888 through international pressure and resistance.

In Britain, Luddism was a form of resistance where textile hand workers protested against the introduction of the new machines that they thought would threaten their livelihoods. Conditions gradually got better for working people through new laws and the creation of trade unions.

By the beginning of the 20th century, colonised people everywhere were calling for independence. India won independence in 1947 but only after a long, political struggle and the Partition of the country into India and Pakistan.

Famine

Under British control, priority was given to cotton over food production. Britain imposed internal trade restrictions, heavy taxation, food price inflation and large exports of staple crops to Britain.

When crops failed, these policies helped to cause widespread famines and millions died. Up to 33% of the Bengal population died in ten months in 1770. Lessons were learnt over time and actions reduced the impact of famine but mistakes in British policy continued. In Madras in 1876, 5.5 million died when those in charge left action to private aid, believing it would be quicker and more effective. In 1896, millions more died as a result of poor British policy.

In the 1940s, Britain put her wartime needs above those of India by refusing aid requests. Since independence, policy changes have prevented famine but hunger remains a problem to be resolved.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 1869 – 1948

Mahatma Gandhi was an important spiritual and political leader in India. He was a leading figure in the Indian independence movement between 1915 and 1948. He believed in non-violent civil disobedience.

After training as a lawyer in London, Gandhi returned to India in 1892. Between 1893 and 1915, he practised law in South Africa and tried to gain civil rights for the resident Indian community.

After returning to India, Gandhi became leader of the Indian National Congress in 1921. He campaigned on many issues, including Indian independence from British rule. As well as non-violent protest, Gandhi also extended his beliefs to include swadeshi. This policy called for the boycott of foreign – especially British – goods, and encouraged Indians to wear home-spun cloth.



Gandhi, Mahatma in Darwen

His policies were not always popular. He opposed the partition of India into India (Hindu) and Pakistan (Muslim). He was assassinated by a Hindu radical in 1948, only 5 months after independence.

Mahatma Gandhi on the state of the cotton trade between India and Britain

“English people buy Indian cotton in the field, picked by Indian labour at seven cents a day, through an optional monopoly.”

“This cotton is shipped on British bottoms [ships], a three week journey...to London. One hundred per cent profit on this freight is regarded as small.”

“The cotton is turned into cloth in Lancashire. You pay shilling wages instead of Indian pennies to your workers. The English worker not only has the advantage of better wages, but the steel companies of England get the profit of building the factories and machines. Wages, profits, all these are spent in England.”

“The finished product is sent back to India on...British ships. The captains, officers, sailors of these ships, whose wages must be paid, are English. The only Indians who profit are [the] lascars who do the dirty work on the boats for a few cents a day.”

“The cloth is finally sold back to the kings and landlords of India who [have] got the money to buy this expensive cloth.”

The Middle East and contact with Europe

Over many centuries, the Middle East had been an unsettled region, with frequent conflict between countries. Once European powers began to take an interest in the region, this added to the instability.

Until the mid-18th century, the Middle East exported cotton cloth and yarn to Europe. This stopped when European governments began to protect their new industries against foreign competition. European industrial goods soon replaced local products in Middle Eastern markets.

The Europeans were attracted to the Middle East for two reasons. Its natural and agricultural resources were useful as food or as raw materials for industry. The region was also of commercial and strategic importance.

Between 1798 and 1801, France occupied Egypt until Britain forced them out. The French occupation did not damage Britain's long term commercial interests or its overland trade route to India, but it showed how important the region had become to European powers.

The modernisation of Egypt

Egyptian leaders responded to European interference by investing money in the country. Agricultural productivity was increased, transport networks were improved and industrialisation began. All this work modernised the country, but put them into debt.

During the American Civil War of 1861 – 1865, Egyptian raw cotton exports were increased to help struggling Lancashire mills that had lost their supply. However, when the War was over, Britain returned to importing cheaper American cotton again.

Egypt was trying to pay off its debts, but after applying military and financial pressure, Britain and France forced her to declare her bankruptcy in 1876. Egypt became a British sphere of influence, with other European nations copying this model in the Middle East. The effects of this policy are still apparent today.

The first successful mechanised textile mill in Egypt was built in 1912. In the 1960s, President Nasser nationalised most of the textile industry.



Ongoing issues

The impact of colonialism did not end with the disappearance of the European empires. There are many parts of the world still affected by it. The current structures of financial power, law and political influence were established by colonial countries hundreds of years ago. The legal systems of many countries have been shaped by European models imposed during colonial rule.

Many of the attitudes and assumptions that exist today were formed in the recent past. Racism, paternalism and notions of superiority were used to justify colonialism and enslavement. These are some of the influences on social attitudes today.

Some of the regions of the world today can trace the beginnings of their troubles to the colonial world. Forced resettlements, partitions and corruption are all legacies of European colonisation.

Britain's multicultural society is also partly a result of colonialism. This vibrant mix of cultures and ideas is both challenging and inspiring.

Cotton today

Cotton goods manufacture has undergone major changes since the Second World War. Most production now occurs where people work for lower wages: the Middle East, South East and Latin America. However, Europe and the United States still hold onto the economic power, which means that the Southern countries do not receive the full benefits of their labours.

Multi-national retailers demand strict production controls and wage rates to guarantee a high quality, high profit product. Working conditions in workshops and cotton fields can be exploitative. In Egypt, a million children a year are taken out of school to help with the harvesting of a high quality cotton crop. In Bangladesh, many workers are employed for over 80 hours each week for as little as 7 pence an hour. These conditions are fuelled by the demand for cheap clothes.

The second-hand clothing market provides clothes to poor Southern people. However, this is a threat to home produced goods.



A textile recycling and export centre

Facts about cotton

Cotton has been used for clothing for over 5,000 years. It is a versatile fabric, making anything from a very fine to a hard wearing cloth. Indian saris are so fine they can be passed through a finger ring but denim jeans were originally intended as hard wearing work clothing.

Cotton has a high environmental footprint. Plantations need lots of water for growing, as do the manufacturing processes. Cotton uses 25% of the world's pesticides, more than any other crop, but is grown on only 3% of the world's agricultural land.

The World Health Organisation estimates that 20,000 people from developing countries die from pesticide poisoning each year. Many of these are from cotton farming, with workers accidentally swallowing pesticides.

Motivated by this and by a fair economic reward for labour, there is a growing demand for organic and fair trade cotton. Recycling of clothing is also increasingly widespread.

