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The Song of the Shirt
Cheap Clothes Across Continents and Centuries

JEREMY SEABROOK
1 | Dhaka, a temporary settlement

I would have begun with the fires in the garment factories that have claimed the lives of many garment workers, but the death of more than 1,100 people in the building collapse on the edge of Dhaka in April 2013 was a story of such appallingenheim human life that it must rank among the most callous in the brutal history of industrialism. Even after the structure had been declared unsafe, workers were coerced into entering the factories under threat of loss of wages. In the tangle of metal and concrete that followed, bolts of cloth had to be used as improvised chutes for bringing people to safety; workers—more skinny and sinewy than police or medical personnel—made their way into pockets where people were trapped, and had to amputate limbs with a saw. The bodies laid out in front of the ruins stretched hundreds of metres in the dust and debris.

Anyone looking at Dhaka and its hundreds of garment factories, its tens of thousands of cycle-rickshaws, its construction workers provisionally living in the shells of apartments they will never own, its maidservants, faces patterned by grilles on the verandahs which keep them captive, can only wonder at the bleakness of alternatives that has driven people to find a precarious sanctuary in this place. For Dhaka—this constricted camp for the evicted of development—scarcely merits the name of ‘city’. Is it the poverty of ancient fishponds and rice fields, fallen orchards and abandoned homesteads that has sent people here, or the promise of wages which are eaten up in advance by the price of rent and food that rises as fast as the greedy floodwaters that have chased them from home?
It is difficult to conceive that the humiliations which young women and men endure in the scanty choices for their labour in this labour camp masquerading as city can be more bearable than the indignities of villages they called home until only the day before yesterday: the woman transplanting rice seedlings, mincing the gestures of her drowned sister in the waters of the paddy field; the woman beating sheaves of rice against the threshing stone; the man carrying his implements over his shoulder at the end of a long day hoeing and weeding on land he will never own; the family contemplating the crooked fields that will be deposited elsewhere as someone else’s fertile silt; the woman for whom the charity of the mosque is the only thing that stands between her children and destitution.

Hope is inscribed in the ugly landscapes of the city, in the white light of its factories that shed their radiance on the slums below, in the market with its pyramids of scarlet and green vegetables, in the rented shelter shared with strangers—hope that has been chased from places where land is lost to the Padma, the moneylender or the shifting topography of the country, where fields can no longer provide sustenance and the ties of kinship have become fetters.

It is not only daily working conditions, an income that limps behind prices, the demands of the home place for remittances that make life in the city appear intolerable. There are sleepless nights under burning tin roofs, the absence of water, the darkness of electricity outages, the airless tenement; to all this is added the harassment from overseers and foremen, compulsory overtime when orders have to be finished, sexual advances by those who exercise power over them, and even worse, periodic catastrophes—explosions, fires and the collapse of buildings that leave scores or hundreds of bodies wrapped in white cerements, where their loved ones can barely recognize them through their disfigurement.

The position of Bangladesh in the division of labour of globalism today is not to clothe the nakedness of the world, but to provide it with limitless cheap garments. The workers are disposable, rags of humanity, as it were, used up like any other raw material in the cause of production for export. Dhaka is criss-crossed with vehicles stamped in red with the words ‘On Emergency Export Duty’, as though it were the highest priority of Bangladesh to send out of the country as quickly as possible all it can produce.
Fire remains the single greatest hazard to workers in the garment industry. The most recent—and deadly—fire in Bangladesh occurred in Dhaka on 24 November 2012, in the industrial suburb of Ashulia. Over one hundred people died in the inferno at the Tazreen factory. In the past ten years, at least five hundred garment workers, mostly young women, have been killed in factory fires. In most cases, doors were locked to prevent pilfering of goods or unauthorized absence from work, especially during night shifts when supervision is less stringent. This event, which threw the light of its flames upon many transnational importers of Bangladesh’s ready-made garments, including Walmart, was described by the owners, by the government and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) as ‘sabotage’. The supply broker had moved orders to Tazreen from the official supplier, without permission from Walmart. Corruption, as well as chains of middlemen, brokers and intermediaries, creates a maze of subcontractors, which permits unauthorized factories to fulfill orders. These are often unsafe, ramshackle and negligent.

As in the Tazreen conflagration, most of the twenty-seven who died by fire in December 2010 at the sadly named That’s-It sportswear factory, also in Ashulia, perished, not from suffocation, but from injuries sustained when they jumped from the tenth floor of the building where the factory was located.

Fire and the fear of fire have haunted the garment workers of Bangladesh ever since the garment sector became a major employer of labour thirty years ago. Twenty-three died in a fire at Macro Knitwear in Dhaka in 2000, twelve at Globe Knitting, also in 2000. In January 2005, twenty-eight were incarcerated at the Shari Knitwear factory in Narayanganj. In February 2005, three disasters struck Bangladesh factories. Fire destroyed the four-storey KTS Textile Industries building in Chittagong, with the loss of at least fifty-four lives. On the same day, fifty-seven workers at the Imam Textile Group in Chittagong were injured in a stampede following the explosion of a transformer. A few days later, nineteen people were reported dead when a nine-storey building collapsed in Dhaka. Forty-five workers, including ten children, were killed at the Chowdhury Garments factory in Shilpgram, east of Dhaka, in November 2006. In February 2010, twenty-one workers were killed and more than fifty injured in a fire at the Garib & Garib Newaj factory in Gazipur. A large stock of synthetic acrylic sweaters burned, producing thick toxic smoke. Exit doors were said to have been locked by management to prevent theft.

All such disasters have much in common: faulty fire equipment, no fire escapes, factories stacked in increasingly high-rise buildings, staircases and doorways encumbered by bundles of flammable material or finished goods awaiting dispatch—synthetic fabrics which burn readily and release toxic smoke.

In March 2011, eight workers died in a fire that broke out in a shed on the roof of a four-storey garment-dyeing factory, where chemicals were stored. According to witnesses, a huge plume of black smoke was seen in the early hours of the morning of 10 March, and the eight victims “were trapped inside their rooms’’. It is quite common for workers to live on rooftops of factories, or in the same spaces where they perform their daily labour, so that their experience of the capital city is one of confinement, if not incarceration. It is not unusual to meet people who have never left the immediate neighbourhood where they live and work. Three of the five rooms in the shed were occupied by workers, the other two by chemicals. The whole building was served by a
single entrance through which 250 workers passed daily. There was no emergency exit. The family of each dead employee was offered 10,000 taka (about $130) “for burial expenses”. The Daily Star reported that between 2010 and 2011, 155 people died in separate chemical-related incidents in Dhaka alone, including some in the—once again—sadly named ‘Goodnight Mosquito Coil and Spray’ warehouse.

Fires are not a recent bringer of death to the cities of Bengal. As early as 1837, it was prohibited to build huts with thatched roofs in Calcutta, since in the preceding years, the Black Town—as the area occupied by ‘natives’ was designated—had been periodically ravaged by fires that spread through the slums that stood in the shadow of the mansions of the rich Bengali baniyas, dewanis and landlords; and it was feared that such fires might also spread to the European quarter.

During one of my first visits to Dhaka, February 1995, at M/S Proser Garments, a joint venture between Hong Kong and Bangladesh, panic over an outbreak of fire caused five deaths, as twelve hundred workers tried to flee the building. There had been a minor fire three days earlier, but at that time, the factory was unoccupied, since it was the time of iftar, the breaking of the daily fast in the month of Ramadan.

A rumour quickly spread that the building was on fire. Four young women in their early twenties were trampled to death, while another was killed when she leaped from the roof of the five-storey building. Many others, injured in the crush, were taken to hospital.

When we spoke to people at the site of the accident, we were told not to believe the official casualty figures: at least one hundred had died. This was an exaggeration, but it is well known that industrial accidents are often concealed or played down by the authorities in order to minimize their impact. It is not unknown for hospitals to dispose of the dead, with the connivance of the police, so that only the grieving relatives
know that their loved ones have perished, and no public scandal occurs. I was reminded of the example given by J.L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond (1925) of mining conditions in South Wales in the early nineteenth century: "The Commissioner of the Children’s Employment Commission) could write as follows of deaths in the mines, 'When a man dies, the viewer looks at the body and sends for the coroner, and unless a case of suspicion is made out, he does not come, but sends an order to the constable to bury, and frequently, the coroner does not attend until there are five or six cases to clear.'"

The site of the Dhaka fire in 1995 was a four-story building. We couldn’t go inside, since there was a heavy police presence. Management representatives explained it was simply an unfortunate accident. If the workers had not panicked, the deaths and injuries could have been avoided. In other words, the victims were blamed for their own deaths.

Blaming the victims or ‘outsiders’ or ‘agitators’ has become a common response to such disasters. If disaffected workers are not the culprits, the ‘hidden hand’ of rival countries—usually India—can be detected. The domestic lack of regard for the cheapest garment workers in the world, and the repudiation of responsibility for them by employers and government, both have a long history in Bengal.

On a piece of ground opposite the factory—not, as far as one could tell, an official cemetery—lay the sad red earth mounds of five newly dug graves of the young women. This also evoked the practice in early nineteenth-century Britain, of burying in the factory compound the bodies of pauper apprentices who had died. The community was tense and uneasy. The factory was to remain closed for three days as a mark of respect to the dead. The workers laid off did not expect to be paid for the period of mourning. The factory was making baseball caps. Deaths, caused by the manufacture of such trivial, often throwaway, items, suggest disproportionate sacrifices.
Was it for this they died, the hundreds of thousands who gave their lives for the freedom of Bangladesh, I wondered, when we went to Kaunia, one of the poorest settlements in Barisal. In this sad ghetto of ill-being, a large number of people suffer some disability or sickness. In a muddy clearing of soaring palms, many of the huts damaged by the cyclone Sidr have not been repaired. On the road, Mohammed Alam, thirty-five, with his five-year-old daughter Fatima, is on a three-wheeler cycle which he propels by hand. At fifteen, he had polio, and a withered leg is folded beneath him. His wife, mentally ill, died recently, and he now looks after the child alone. He bought the tricycle for 4,000 taka ($50), and lives by begging. His income is unpredictable: he monitors the variable generosity of the public mood, and sometimes he feels begging is a humiliation. His daughter—a beautiful, smiling child—.touches the hearts of people his disability cannot reach. They eat sparingly. Hunger is their constant companion.

Nur Islam also had polio as a young man—part of a reminder to the poor that they bear the scars of now preventable illness, which seems to mock what many had formerly regarded as a divine visitation or punishment. Nur Islam, who walks with crutches, does not know his age. He lives by begging, and 'earns' 100 taka a day ($1.2) enough to feed his mother, wife and child. He does not beg in the neighbourhood out of pride, but roams citywide. He says the four members of his family require 1.5 kilos of rice each day. This claims almost half his income, before taking into account the 400 taka monthly rent on his hut. His child goes to a 'non-registered', that is, private, primary school. His hope that she will get an education to keep her from destitution may be misplaced, since such schools are usually businesses before they are places of instruction.

Shiption, seventeen, works irregularly in a biscuit factory, and earns between 1,000 and 1,200 taka a month ($12–15). He was born in Barisal. He had no schooling and cannot read or write. He has one sister and six brothers. His father, who came, landless from Pirojpur, is dead and Shiption is the principal support of his family. Two brothers are working, one as a ferry-wala on the river crossing, the other as a seller of roasted channa. The rent of their hut is 500 taka. There is rarely sufficient food. He would like a better job, but his eyes travel upwards, suggesting this is part of the divine order.

The door of a hut damaged by the cyclone stands open. Inside, it appears unoccupied: windowless, devoid of furniture—there is only what looks like a pile of rags in the corner. But the ragged clothing stirs—it covers the body of an old woman coming out of sleep. Embarrassed, I withdraw from the threshold of the little house. Despite my request to leave her in peace, someone goes in search of her husband. An old man soon joins the group of mendicant people who have gathered—leaning on a stick, elderly, haggard, grey stubble on his cheeks and white beard. He wears a vest which is a lattice of holes, a shabby lungi, plastic chappals. A tunic is tied to his thin upper arm. He is Abdul Majid Kazi. For a moment, he cannot remember the name of his wife, Chunburu Begum. He came with his parents from Greater Faridpur during the British time, when the river took his family's land. They applied for an alternative on our land (chors are new islands and spits of land thrown up when the floodwaters recede). This is government property, and those who have lost land can lay claim to it; but the complicated bureaucratic process effectively prevents poor people from sequential acquisition. Land-grabbers took what ought to have been theirs, and government officials
ceeded the land to those who could pay the highest price.

Abdul Majid Kazi says he is eighty-five. A former rickshaw driver, he can now do nothing. His wife, the woman sleeping in the hut, fell from a rickshaw five years ago. Her leg was broken, but since they could not afford the hospital treatment, it set awkwardly, and she can no longer walk. Their only son has moved away, and they beg for food. Their income is unpredictable, but always slender. They cannot remember a time when they were not hungry. They eat rice and poor quality dal, and occasionally vegetables. Neighbours give biscuits and other small food items, and although they also have nothing, provide them with clothing and blankets. He says his wife was unwilling to go on the road today, since she felt unwell.

In front of the hut is a rough wooden cart, with wooden wheels and a string handle by which it is pulled. Abdul Majid Kazi picks up his wife and carries her outside. She seems almost weightless. As he passes the threshold, her hair becomes unknotted and catches the jagged tin, leaving behind a few strands of grey. He places her in the cart. She blinks in the sunlight. She wears a bright green sari, from which spindly legs emerge, thin as twigs, the colour of molten chocolate; her joints are knobs of bone, obscene protruberances of want. She looks startled; profoundly deaf, she cannot reply to questions. Her husband pulls the cart over the stones of the rough ground, and as it jolts, she grimaces with pain.

"How can the poor fight for justice," asks Zilbham, a woman of about forty-five, "when we have no knowledge and no resources?" She has five children, two boys and three girls. The older boy, twenty-five, was working in a printing press. He lost his hand in the press machine, and has not worked since. He is now in prison, victim of a conspiracy over the land where their house stands. A developer has laid claim to it and wants to evict Zilbham and the family. He tried to take forcible possession of the property. There was a fight, and the boy was arrested and jailed for resisting. Zilbham’s husband, Amir Ali Khan, is a rickshaw puller, earning 100 taka a day. There are seven in the family, including a married daughter, her husband and baby, while the younger son is studying in a madrassa. They live on chapattis and vegetables. Some days there is no food. Seven people require a bare minimum of 1.5 kilos of rice a day. Zilbham picks up wood from the road for cooking fuel. The family came from Madrapasa twenty-five years ago. Her father was landless; the site where they live belonged to her father-in-law. Her husband built the present house, but when her father-in-law died, a wealthy man appeared and said he was the rightful owner. There are no documents to prove otherwise. Traditionally, occupancy is the only proof of ownership—a custom disturbed by the modern world which requires written evidence of their right to remain where they are. Zilbham is resigned to eviction.

This story of land stolen by others recurs almost as frequently as the tale of land eaten by the river. Anwar from Bakerganj had a small homestead, but no paddy land in his village. He was cheated of his small plot by powerful individuals, who altered official records. It is easy for people with money to bribe bureaucrats to change records in their favour. Now Anwar drives a rickshaw, earning 3,000-3,500 taka a month. He pays 400 taka a month in rent for the hut where he lives. He has three daughters. He had no schooling, and neither did they. He will allow them to go to Dhaka to work in a garment factory—a permission which maintains his dignity as father, but born of a necessity he does not wish to acknowledge.
In the early years of the East India Company, the British took the unrivalled materials produced in Bengal—the muslin of Dhaka, the silk of Murshidabad—and introduced them to a wider world. Although the materials were greatly sought after, their distribution had the misfortune of being introduced into Britain in the period immediately preceding the industrial era.

From the earliest years of the East India Company, there had been complaints in Britain against the import of Indian fabrics. The impact of the variety of Indian textiles is attested by the number of Hindi words that entered the language: calico, gingham, taffeta, chintz, khaki, pyjama, secrucker, satin, shawl, etc. As early as 1678, a pamphlet was published by woollen manufacturers, called The Ancient Trades Degraded and Repaired. Again. By 1700, dissatisfaction was so great that Acts were passed which prohibited the introduction of printed calicoes for domestic use, either as apparel or furniture, under a penalty of £2,000 on the wearer or seller. Cotton goods were then smuggled into the country, in defiance of one of the first trade barriers erected by a country which subsequently became the principal proponent of the virtues of ‘free trade’.

But not yet. Britain protected its own manufacturing system in the early days of industrialism. If it had not done so, Indian fabrics would never have been displaced by Manchester cottons. Britain’s conversion to ‘free trade’ coincided with its capacity to impose it coercively upon the world: by the 1820s, the weavers of India had been reduced to misery, and no longer posed any ‘competition’ to Lancashire.
The fashion for wearing Indian calicoes and printed linen became a source of serious disturbances in 1719. A mob of several thousand Spitalfields weavers paraded through the streets of the city, attacking all women they could find wearing Indian calicoes or linens and soaping them with ink, *aqua fortis*, and what were, perhaps euphemistically, called 'other fluids'.

In 1720, an Act was passed prohibiting altogether the use in Britain of "any garment or apparel whatsoever, of any painted, printed or dyed calicoes, in or about any bed, chair, cushion, window curtain or any other sort of household stuff or furniture". In 1774, a law was passed sanctioning the manufacture of purely cotton goods, but still prohibiting the import of such goods, officially protecting the infant industry from foreign competition. Throughout the eighteenth century, improvements in machinery, and the availability of cotton from plantations in the US, gave a powerful impetus to the cotton industry within Britain: in 1733, Kay's flying shuttle; 1767, Hargreaves' spinning jenny; 1765, Cartwright's power loom. British cotton manufacturers also later argued for the imposition of higher duties on the imported cotton goods which threatened them, thus effectively excluding them from, and protecting, the English market.

It was the controversy over calicoes that presented in an acute form to people and parliaments the choice between protectionism and free trade, and ultimately, after a protectionist phase, led to the adoption of those doctrines of free enterprise and laissez-faire, which dominated English theory and practice for many generations. By the mid nineteenth century, highly mechanized 'competition' from British manufacturers was significantly responsible for the decay of Indian handicrafts. The quality of Indian goods remained supreme, but in the question of price, the mass-produced, machine-made goods displaced local production; a process assisted by the fascination of a newly emerging Indian middle class for all things foreign and exotic. The imposition of tariffs also protected the nascent industries of Britain, since Indian goods could have been sold at half the price of fabric made in England. India became increasingly a supplier of raw cotton to the Lancashire industry; while jute from Bengal provided over half the workforce of Dundee in Scotland with employment, making the packaging for imported and exported goods; and by the last decade of the 19th century, Dundee had a virtual global monopoly of jute processing (Alvarez, 1991).

The import of Indian cotton goods to Britain reached a peak in 1798. Even thirty years after the transformation of textile production in England, Indian textiles remained cheaper than machine-made goods. In 1815, Indian cotton goods were 50–60 per cent cheaper than those made in England; in consequence, the latter were protected by duties on the former of 70–80 per cent of their value. A century later, in 1898, India was receiving £28 million worth of imported cotton goods from Britain, while its exports—mainly raw cotton—came to about £14 million. Cotton was no longer available to weavers in India.

There were some voices of dissent. Critics of British commercial activity in India were largely animated by outrage that a 'Christian' or 'civilized' country should exploit its subject peoples. Robert Montgomery Martin, in his précis (1838) of Dr Francis Buchanan's epic survey of Bengal conducted between 1807 and 1814, states:

We have done everything possible to impoverish still further the miserable beings subject to the cruel selfishness of English commerce... Under the pretence of free trade, England has compelled the Hindoo to receive the products of the steam-looms of Lancashire, Yorkshire, Glasgow etc. at mere nominal duties; while the hand-wrought manufactures of Bengal and Behar, beautiful in fabric, durable in use, have had heavy and almost prohibitory duties imposed on their importation into England; so Birmingham, Staffordshire and domestic wares have ruined the native artisan of the East, who endeavoured
to compete in their accumulation of wealth and steam-power in England.

The plunder of Bengal by the British, and the erasure of the most skilled muslin weaving, should not be understood simply as an assault upon what they regarded as 'lesser people'; for nothing the British practised in the extensive territories they annexed all over the world had not already been tried and tested within the British Isles, or at least, was taking place at the same time as ideological and social experiments abroad. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the imperial adventure was a projection onto a wider world of policies of which the people of Britain had been the first victims. Later, of course, the labouring poor would benefit from the incursions of their 'betters' into the lands of others, but not before they had been the object of tests and trials, the 'success' of which emboldened their rulers to pursue them in the remote corners of Empire.

Evictions of the poor, enclosure of common lands, famines, the destruction of cultures (the clan system in Scotland), the bloody penal code, use of the gallows for trivial offences, transportation or exile as deterrent, both to criminals and to dissent—the story enacted within the British Isles would be repeated wherever the British took their buccaneering spirit and their piratical enterprise.

In 1745, after the Jacobite rising (the last attempt to restore the House of Stuart to the English and Scottish throne) was crushed at Culloden in Scotland, the English soldier set out across the Highlands, looting and killing, leaving a trail of devastation. Not content with removing the threat to the throne, they laid waste the landscape, scattered the people and prepared
the way for the destruction of the Highland clan system. They ruined a culture which they perceived as barbaric, backward and brutal. In order to ensure the extinction of that way of life, the government in London enacted vengeful legislation that struck at the heart of that way of life: a law was passed against the wearing of Highland dress: the tartan plaid and kilt were banned. The skills of weaving patterns and making dyes from the herbs of the hills fell into disuse. "The clans were no more, their true identity had gone with the broadsword and their chiefs... The banning of their dress took from the clans their pride and sense of belonging to a unique people. The abolition of the hereditary jurisdictions of their chiefs, which followed, destroyed the political and social system that had held them together" (Prebble, 1962). The Act of Proscription of 1747 banned the wearing of the tartan, the teaching of Gaelic, the right of Highlanders to their ceremonial gatherings and the playing of bagpipes in Scotland.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Highlands were subjected to further violence. Landlords of the estates systematically drove the local people from their homes in order to replace them with more profitable sheep. These ‘clearances’ chased people from their ancestral dwellings; and many took to emigration ships bound for the colonies, or went to settle in rocky coastal areas. The crofters of the Highlands, proud and independent, had been small cultivators, with a little arable land and pastures for cows. The most brutal evictions occurred in Sutherland, the northernmost part of the country. Of those who boarded ships for North America, many suffered from typhus and cholera, and never reached their destination.

Since the reign of Elizabeth I, former common and ‘waste’ land had been enclosed, partly for sheep and the wool trade, and partly to create or expand estates. This process accelerated in the time preceding the industrial revolution, much of it ostensibly in pursuit of agricultural ‘improvements’, but also to make parks and hunting land for the aristocracy, and not insignificantly, for those who had made fortunes with the East India Company. By these actions of privilege, many poor villagers lost their rights to graze animals, to collect fuel, gather wild fruits and nuts, hunt rabbits and birds, and to cultivate the small strip of land which augmented their meagre income as agricultural labourers. They were denied access to small resources which made the difference between bare sufficiency and hunger. Most land was enclosed by Acts of Parliament, introduced by MPs on behalf of individual beneficiaries of the proposed enclosure, against which the poor had little opportunity to protest; and which they were not well enough informed to contest.

During the eighteenth century, draconian laws, mostly relating to property, turned more and more offences into crimes punishable by death. Robert Hughes, in his account of the convict colonies of Australia (1986), wrote:

The most notorious of these laws, passed in the 1790s, and known as the Waltham Black Act, passed by the Commons without a murmur of dissent, prescribed the gallows for over two hundred offences, in various permutations. One could be hanged for burning a house or a hut, a standing rich of corn or an insignificant pile of straw; for poaching a rabbit; for breaking down the ‘head or mound’ of a fish-pond, or even cutting down an ornamental shrub; for appearing on a high road with a sooty face.

Public hangings were festivals of death, which the ruling classes believed would serve as a deterrent spectacle to potential wrongdoers, even though the ceremonial route from Newgate prison to Tyburn gallows often turned into a macabre fair, where the crowds expressed their sympathy with the condemned. However repressive the legislation, crime continued to increase; criminals were detained in ‘hulks’, disused ships lying offshore near the great seaports. Even these became inadequate to hold their cargo of misery, and this led to the introduction of
transportation: between 1788 and 1868 at least 160,000 'felonious' were consigned to the dungeons of memory at the other end of the world.

Transportation also encompassed a wider range of political 'criminals'. The first ship to carry political prisoners, members of the Society of United Irishmen, was from Ireland in 1795. Many more went in the wake of the Rebellion of 1798. Hundreds arrested during the agricultural riots of the 1830s, including the Dorsetshire 'Tolpuddle Martyrs', guilty of an attempt to set up an agricultural trade union in 1834 (they were charged with uttering 'unlawful oaths'), were also forced into exile. Transportation failed either to abate crime or suppress radicalism—facts that did not interfere with the imperial way of exiling, criminalizing or jailing dissenters, freedom fighters and other perceived threats to British rule in the wider world. Efforts were continuously made by the British to stigmatize those fighting for liberation as terrorists. As late as the Second World War, during the Quit India movement, more than 80,000 people were imprisoned, to prevent their activities from disrupting the war effort.

The common experience of the poor of the British Isles and the colonial subjects was noted throughout the nineteenth century. John Cobden (1853) is explicit. Writing of India, he said:

The burden imposed upon the Hindus are precisely of the character and extent of those that have reduced Ireland to poverty and her people to slavery. Besides the enormous rent, which are sufficient of themselves to dishearten the tillers of the soil, the British authorities seem to have exhausted invention in devising taxes. So dear a price to live was never paid by any people except the Irish.

The city to benefit the most, industrially, from imperial protectionist tactics was Manchester. The population of Manchester (with adjacent Salford) was only 25,000 in 1772, just after famine had partly emptied Dacca and Murshidabad. In Britain, the production of cotton had already overtaken the historic staple, wool, even though ships of the East India Company in their voyages to Asia had been hopefully stocked with British woollen goods, for which they, perhaps not unsurprisingly, found negligible demand in the tropical regions for which they were bound. By 1800, 95,000 people were living in Manchester, a time when Watt's rotary steam engine had been installed in over five hundred mills and factories in Britain. The first quarter of the nineteenth century saw the erection of many of the mills, imposing and ornamented, which were to dominate the landscape for the next century and a half, including the Redhill Street Mill. This Tocqueville described as "a place where some 1,500 workers, labouring sixty-nine hours a week, with an average wage of eleven shillings, and where three quarters of the workers are women and children". The mills were the wonder of the world: six or eight stories high, with iron frames, cast-iron columns and sheds with six hundred or more looms; furnished with gaslighting as early as 1810. They soared over the slums, houses packed close to sites of labour to minimize the energy wasted by operatives in travelling to and from most people could be at work within two or three minutes of leaving home. The great buildings shed their
chlorotic light on polluted canals and waterways glittering with waste chemicals—much as today’s factories of Dhaka tower over and illuminate with their even, white light the tenements and huts of the people who work in them. The Manchester—Liverpool railway was opened in 1830, to expedite exports; and from here, many of the cotton goods were dispatched to flood the market of Bengal. Tocqueville wrote of Manchester in 1835: “A sort of black smoke covers the city. Under this half-daylight 300,000 human beings are ceaselessly at work. The homes of the poor are scattered haphazard around the factories. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. In Manchester civilized man is turned back almost into a savage.”

Angus Reach, a journalist writing in the Morning Chronicle in 1849, described it thus:

The traveller by railway is made aware of his approach to the great northern seats of industry by the dull leaden-coloured sky, tainted by thousands of ever-smoking chimneys, which broods over the distance... You shoot by town after town—the outlying satellites of the great cotton metropolis. They have all similar features—they are all little Manchesters. Huge, shapeless, unlighted mills, with their countless rows of windows, their towering shafts, their jets of waste steam continually puffing in panting gushes from the brown grimy wall. Some dozen or so of miles so characterized, you enter the Queen of the cotton cities—and then amid smoke and noise, and the hum of never ceasing toil, you are borne over the roofs to the terminus platform. You stand in Manchester.

There is a smoky brown sky overhead—smoky brown streets all round long piles of warehouses, many of them pillared with stately fronts—great grimy mills, the levitators of ugly architecture, with their smoke-pouring shafts. There are streets of all kinds—one with glittering shops and vast hotels, others grim and little frequented—formed of rows and stacks of warehouses; many mean and distressingly monotonous vistas of uniform brick houses.

The operatives of Manchester are frequently described as ‘stunted’ or ‘stopping’. Their complexions are ‘sallow’ or ‘sickly’, their clothing ‘tawny’ trousers for men, shawls and skirts for women, clogs for both. No greater contrast could be imagined than with the present-day workers of Dhaka, who flood the streets with their vivid colours, their radiant youth and vitality.

The regimented tramp of feet on the cobbled streets of Lancashire is different from the noiseless and graceful movement of young girls going to their place of work in Bangladesh. Perhaps it is because the certain misery of the early nineteenth century has been exchanged for the—perhaps deceptive—smile of hope in a century that promises so much more to its workers, and certainly assures them a longevity unknown to the weavers of Lancashire.

By the 1830s, with over one hundred cotton mills, Manchester was the greatest industrial city in the world. By 1913, it processed about two-thirds of the world’s cotton. The city’s population continued to grow from about 400,000 in 1851 to 553,000 in 1891 and to three-quarters of a million in 1921. The languor and depletion of the Mughal cities of Bengal must have offered a wretched contrast to the dynamic energy of Manchester in the period from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.