

## **Volume 2: Chapter 6**

### **Source 6.2**

#### **A Widow Spinner Recounts Her Suffering**

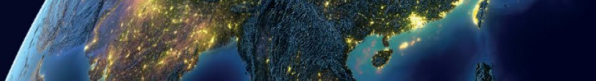
*In January of 1828, a letter signed by “a suffering woman” was published in Samachar-Chandrika, one of eight major Bengali-language news magazines that began publishing pieces about social, cultural, and economic issues in Bengal between 1818 and the early 1820s. These new newspapers provided diverse perspectives from Bengali residents about specific topics such as colonial governance, religious customs, and economic policies.*

*Samachar-Chandrika often advocated against colonial British social and economic policies.*

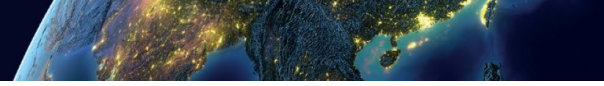
Respected *Samachar* Editor Sir,

I, a woman upon undergoing a great deal of suffering, have prepared this letter and am sending it to you. Kindly publish it in your and others’ respective newspapers. I have heard, should the letter be published, it will reach the ears of the relief-providing authorities. In that case, my wishes will be fulfilled. Therefore, please do not ignore this petition-letter (*darkhastapatra*) because it has been written by a suffering woman.

I am most unfortunate. Were I to recount the details of my suffering, it would be excessive. Still, let me provide some details. I was widowed when I was twenty-two (five and one-half *ganda*) years old. I had given birth of only (*kebal*) three daughters. My late husband, who tried different businesses, did not leave behind any means for me to support aged in-laws and those three daughters. I had to sell the jewelry (*alankar*) on my body to perform his last rites (*shraddha*). Ultimately as those of us alive (*ka-ek prani*) faced the prospect of dying without food (*anna*), God (*Bidhata*) showed me the way out so that we could live (*pran raksha*): That is, I began to spin yarn on *asana* and *charka*. I would wake up early to finish the house-hold chores like sweeping and cleaning (*patti, jhantti*), then sit with the *charka* and spin almost one *tola* of yarn till two in the afternoon, before going to bathe. After my bath, I



would cook and serve my in-laws and daughters, and then eat something myself. I would then return to spin fine yarn (*asana*) on the teko instrument, also in the neighborhood of one *tola*. The weavers would come to my doorstep to buy the yarn thus spun offering the rate of one rupee for three *tolas* of *charka* spun yarn and one rupee for a tola and a half of fine asana yarn. And they would immediately advance as much cash money as I wanted. As a result we did not have any anxiety about food (*anna*) and clothing (*bastra*) any more. Later I gradually became very dexterous as a spinner. Within a few years I was able to save 28 (seven *ganda*) rupees. I got one daughter married. In this fashion, I got the three daughters married. While doing so, I did not fail to fulfill the kinship (*kutumba*) requirements. Nobody treated them with contempt (*ghrina*) as daughters of a widow (*rarh*): since I gave the matchmaker (*ghatak*) and brahman (*kulin*) as much as was expected. Later when my father-in-law died I spent 44 (eleven *ganda*) rupees at his *shraddha* which the weavers loaned (*karja*) me. I repaid the load in within a year and one half. All this was achieved only due to *charka*'s grace (*prasad*). Now for over three years, the mother and daughter-in-law are facing ricelessness (*annabhab*) again. Not only have the weavers stopped coming to my doorstep to buy my yarn, even when I send it to the periodic market (*hat*) they will not buy at one fourth (*siki*) of the former price. I am completely at a loss to understand how this has come to pass. I have made inquiries and have learned that the weavers are using English (*bilat*) yarn now being extensively imported. I was proud of my yarn and believed that no foreign yarn could equal mine. Later when I examined the yarn I indeed found it better than mine; I also learned that it costs only 3 to 4 rupees per *seer*. I hit my forehead exclaiming — Oh God! There must be more unfortunate women (in the world) than I. I had thought all the people in England were wealthy (*boro manus*) and all Bengalis were impoverished (*kangali*). Now I feel that there must be women more impoverished than I; for I distinctly sense their suffering spun into the yarn which could not find market-outlet in its own land, and that is why they have sent it here. Had this yarn



fetches a good price here, I could understand. Instead it has spelled disaster for us. The cloth made from this yarn does not last even two months — with use it disintegrates. Therefore, I beseech the women spinners in England to consider this petition so that they can decide whether it is just or unjust to send their yarn to our land.

--A certain suffering spinner from Santipur.

Source: Brajendranath Bandopadhyaya ed., *Sambadpatre Sekaler Katha* (Annals of the Olden Times as Reflected in Newspapers) v. I, 1818-1830 (Calcutta, 1977): 156-157.

- Why do you think this woman sought to publish her story in a local news magazine?
- What does her account tell us about the social and economic impacts of the rise of industrially-produced cotton in Britain in the early nineteenth century?
- What does the author's perspective reveal about local experiences and understandings of global changes caused by the Industrial Revolution and British imperialism?