

# Understanding the standard of living debate in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain through the writings of Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson and John Burnett

Sukanya Gogoi, Doctoral Fellow, Dept. of History, Gauhati University

## Abstract

Britain was blessed with an environment conducive enough for Industrial Revolution to originate. The coal and iron ore factories located near areas of water transportation, the comparatively fewer social barriers between landowners, gentry and entrepreneurs were among a few factors which accelerated the expansion of industrialization in Britain.

The standard of living debate in the post revolution years in the nineteenth century has been a topic of constant research among historians. This essay aims to deal with the two sides of understanding, i.e. the pessimistic and optimistic way of looking at the consequences of Industrial Revolution. The pessimists focused on the adverse effects of Industrialization, increasing the grievances of the common people. The optimists however tends to focus on the positive effects of industrialization, which according to them improved the living standards of common people. The Industrial Revolution to be sure changed the way people lived.

## 1.1 Ideas of Eric J. Hobsbawm

Eric Hobsbawm in his book named, '*The Age of Revolution*' explains what changes came about in the age of industrialization. Before the nineteenth century the practice of keeping records of demographic change was not prevalent, because of which the accurate rise/decline of population is not clear. 'Britain's population rose from about 900,000 in 1800 to 2,363,000 in 1850'. This noteworthy increase in population turned on the economy.

The age of industrialization also experienced a major change in communication. Railways were improved which eased communication. The improvement of travel and transport facilitated the connection of towns and villages.<sup>1</sup> People preferred settling in the towns because of better job facilities, and this eventually crowded the urban centers around which industrial suburbs developed. 'At the same time great masses of the population remained unabsorbed in the new industries, leaving them unemployed'<sup>2</sup>.

When he talks about the laboring poor of the nineteenth century he provides rather a gloomy picture, against the optimist frame of reference. The laboring poor could not easily adjust to the alterations brought about by the Industrial revolution. Increased factory production replaced production through manual labor. The coming of machines was a threat to such manual laborers. The traditional way of survival of those of who earned their

<sup>1</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, '*The Age of Revolution*', pp 169-171

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 207

living through weaving or knitting was destroyed. The laboring Luddites, the smaller businessmen and farmers demolished the machines which were considered by them to be destroyers of men's livelihood. The government however stood against such actions by passing orders of arrest.<sup>3</sup> The first half of the nineteenth century however witnessed the appearance of labor and socialist movements. Such moves of defiance could not lessen the grievances of the poor. 'Towns and industrial areas grew rapidly without any kind of planning or supervision and no measures were taken for the proper street cleaning, water supply and sanitation'<sup>4</sup> This must have caused a lot of Industrial pollution, including smoke and other smells at the risk of deteriorating health of the middle class and the poor people who resided within the areas near to the industries. But proper action was taken only when the industrial pollution affected the richer section of the society after 1848. The poor people were also pauperized and had to depend on charity for survival sometimes. 'It is not sure whether the real incomes of the poor fell, but their conditions deteriorated.'<sup>5</sup> In the movements against industrialization in the nineteenth century the representation of the laboring poor was one principle aim, but it was never a well developed proletarian movement to overthrow the bourgeoisie.

### 1.2 E.P. Thomson's arguments

E.P Thomson is another historian who looks into the standard of living of the people in the nineteenth century. He categorically looked into the goods consumed by people, the homes in which they lived, the health and living conditions, inclusion of children into the workforce of the industries particularly.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of food consumption, Thompson points out that the per capita consumption of wheat declined in the first four decades of the nineteenth century. With the decrease in the consumption of wheat, the consumption of potato increased. The poor had to survive on a diet of oatmeal and potatoes because the use of wheat, white bread etc was restricted to the richer sections of the society and soon a status symbol was attached to the use of wheat. Meat consumption also stood as a distinction.

Between 1800 and 1830 the per capita consumption of beer also fell, with an increase in the consumption of tea and sugar.<sup>7</sup> Beer was essentially required by the workers to get rid of the tiresome day of laboring and hard work, but beer was easily accessible to the workers being brewed in their homes. The government then implemented the malt taxes to reduce the brewing of beer in homes; it was then that tea replaced beer as a refreshment drink. 'Some contemporaries regarded the imposition of the malt tax an incitement to revolution'.<sup>8</sup> Thompson here tries to provide a pessimistic view whereby the food consumption pattern of the laboring poor deteriorated. They did not have the luxury to intake good food and instead had to survive on mere potatoes and weak tea.

The statistical enquiries of 1840s show that there were problems of sanitation, overcrowding and water supply in the new industrial towns, and more and more homes were used for industrial occupations.<sup>9</sup> The increasing use of more and more places for industrial purposes might have left a huge chunk of the population homeless, which might have forced people to migrate. The most shocking evidence of deterioration in the form of dense overcrowding, cellar-dwellings and filthy environment was seen in the textile districts, as per records of the

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 202

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 203

<sup>5</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Age of Revolution', p.206

<sup>6</sup> E.P Thomson, *The Making of the English working class, Standards and experiences*

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.317

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.317

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.318

period. Such living quality of life also affected their health. But the optimist scholars here tries to contradict the point by arguing that in between 1780 to 1820 the death rate considerably declined because of the improvements in the field of medical knowledge, nutrition and hygiene. This point cannot be neglected completely, as it was based on proper evidence. Thompson also focuses on the condition of the child laborers. The exploitation of children increased in between 1780 to 1840<sup>10</sup>. This period witnessed the highest magnitude of using the children as laborers majorly in mines and small scale pits because children could easily conduct work in the narrow lanes of the mines. The smaller size of the children made them useful for certain tasks in the factory. The increase in the demand of coal in the nineteenth century also increased the demand of child laborers in the coal mines. The optimist scholars here points out that there was nothing new about the exploitation of the children.<sup>11</sup> The conditions in the old industries were as bad in the new industries of the nineteenth century. So, according to them the conditions remained the same and it cannot be said that the conditions of the children worsened if compared to the previous years. But if looked into the situation of employing children positively, long days of labor perhaps disseminated discipline among the children, and if they would have remained idle in those days of fighting for survival, they might have indulged themselves in unlawful activities. Laws were also passed to control the hegemony of the factory owners and limit the use of children as laborers. In 1833, the Factory Act was passed in Britain which banned work by children less than nine years of age and limited work by older children to eight hours a day.

### Other opinions

Historians like T.S Ashton give us a positive picture of the effect of industrialization. The coming of machines according to the optimists eased human labor, made production less time consuming as well. Ashton states that the living standard of the British people, the rich as well as the poor, improved. Unlike the pessimists who felt that the coming of machines affected production through human labor, the optimists felt that the establishment of industries with machines for production has not affected human labor. The machines rather required humans for its operation, employing workers into newly emerged industries like boots and uniform making industries to be supplied during war. Since the majority of the English population was employed in these industries, the economy also became stable.

Hunt and Botham in their article '*Wages in Britain during the Industrial Revolution*' also shows a rise in the economy, improving the standard of living of the people. The wages of the income of the workers who worked in the brick factories also increased considerably according to the statistical reports. The demand for the industrialized goods employed more and more people and their real wages too increased eventually.

### 1.3 Analysis of John Burnett

John Burnett also makes an attempt to examine the living standards of the British population in the nineteenth century. In his essay named '*Plenty and Want*' he points out that due to the class distinctions among the English people, the eating habits of the people also decided their position in the society. This implied that the proper nutritious food were had by the richer sections of the society, not giving the poorer sections the liberty to decide what to intake. The whitest possible loaf was had by the rich and the poor were left to survive on potatoes as already pointed out by E.P Thompson. This was just a social impact of industrialization. Activities like baking and brewing were not performed by the women anymore, they being involved in industrial activities too.

<sup>10</sup> E.P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working class, Standards and Experiences*, p. 331

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.332

In case of the agricultural laborers, their standard of living can be estimated on the basis of the agricultural economy of which he was a part.<sup>12</sup> The Speenhamland system in Britain had the positive effect of keeping wages artificially low.<sup>13</sup> This system complemented the wages of laborers with funds generated from property taxes. But the drawback of the Speenhamland arrangement was that it encouraged landowners to pay low wages with an inexhaustible supply of cheap laborers. By 1830 thousands of laborers had to survive on parsimonious charity. However in 1834, laws were passed to improve the living standard of the laborers making them independent of the charity provided by the parish. With the dispersal of the 'allowance' system a laborer had to make his wife and children work too, in order to maintain their living standard.

Burnett further examines the conditions of the town workers. The optimists point out that industrialization improved the standard of living of the town workers too. The town worker earned high compared to the agricultural laborers. They reflected the positive side of the factory system, organizing the labor, separating work from home and the standard of women too improved after getting employment.<sup>14</sup> But eventually, the wealthy minority grew and the poor majority weakened. Employment was not always regular. Even the skilled workers had to remain unemployed sometimes. They adjusted themselves in between periods of poverty and prosperity. '*Commercial crises and cyclical depressions produced widespread unemployment*'<sup>15</sup>. The standard of living of the casual and seasonal laborers was highly deplorable. And these seasonal workers outnumbered the factory workers, which mean that a large chunk of the population suffered in poverty.

Although the view of the pessimists and optimists do not match, it is sure that the Industrial revolution transformed the way people lived. Industrialization rapidly brought about material progress benefitting the people, but it was perhaps the social and economic inequalities prevailing in the societal structure that the benefits of Revolution could not be enjoyed by all.

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<sup>12</sup> John Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, p. 30

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.33

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.49

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.52