

How India Clothed the World: The World of South Asian Textiles, 1500-1850

edited by

Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy
With the assistance of Om Prakash and Kaoru Sugihara

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SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

From the early-seventeenth century, littoral South Asia played a major part in the maritime trade within Asia and between Asia and Europe. In the late-eighteenth century, South Asia accounted for approximately a quarter of the world's textile output. A long coastline developed manufacturing and shipbuilding traditions, and communities long established as merchant-mariners contributed to the region's pivotal position in the Indian Ocean trade. Within a short time after the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama discovered the sea-route between Europe and India around the Cape of Good Hope at the end of the fifteenth century, European traders entered the Indian Ocean. Europeans utilized commodities, routes, and systems established in the intra-Asian trade. From the mid-eighteenth century, however, export trade from the region became Europe-centred, with increasing dominance of the European component on shipping, on trade, and on regional politics. During these two centuries, the major source regions were Gujarat, Bengal and Coromandel – but the relative importance of regions shifted towards Bengal, with corresponding changes in the direction of exports, participants, and business organization.

The papers collected in this volume revisit this episode in global history, and collectively address three major themes:

1. The importance of trade and the effects of Indian textiles on various world areas

Indian cloth was received in markets that were physically and culturally worlds apart. One of the strengths of the volume is a cluster of papers that looks at non-western markets for Indian cloth, in effect tying Indian textiles with Asian and African producers and consumers. This

section focuses on processes and outcomes of economic and cultural interaction rather than on classic merchant dominated narratives of trade. The essays included in this session emphasise the role played by the so-called 'receiving regions' in their 'commodification' of imported commodities and the role that these played on existing productive structures. The interplay between intra- and inter-regional competition was as important in determining the success of Indian textiles as advantages in the manufacturing and distribution of these commodities. Papers by Reid, Machado, Inikori and Bowen examine the impact of Indian cotton and cotton textiles on areas as different as Southeast Asia, East Africa, West Africa and China. They show how trade did not just bring new commodities and abundant supplies of raw materials. By creating a regional market equipped with both competitive pressures and opportunities for cooperation, India contributed to shaping the economic development of distant areas by both inhibiting and fostering endogenous processes of growth and change. These findings have important implications for the interpretation of the transition to the colonial economy and the fate of India's regional trade. A final essay by Sugihara explains the re-organization and expansion of trade in the Indian Ocean following Europe's prominent intrusion in the first half of the nineteenth century.

2. The role of India as a key global manufacturing area during the early modern period

What were the sources of comparative advantage of Indian cloth? The traditional answer has been low wages, but recent scholarship has suggested that single-factor explanations are insufficient to clarify the complex nature of consumer markets, the effects of manufacturing on specific localities, or the changes in international competitiveness over time. The nexus between prices and the competitiveness of Indian textiles and the success of Indian textiles is at the centre of Gupta's paper. This problem is further tackled by Wendt and Subramanian who consider the main actors involved in the production and trade of textiles and discuss how much, and how profoundly, commerce connected with the regional manufacturing economies of South Asia. These four essays shift the classic analysis of Indian textile manufacturing by positioning it within a broader conceptual and historical context. Agency is taken as a key factor in unravelling the notion and creation of a comparative advantage

beyond the simple and synthetic value of prices and quantities. This shift in focus should highlight, rather than reduce, the central importance of political change for the understanding of changing international competitiveness of Indian textiles. Papers by Washbrook and Prakash contextualise the micro conditions of manufacturing and distribution of textiles within wider macro political and economic contexts (and their respective historiographies) linking textile manufacturing and colonialism in India in the early modern period.

3. The consequences of Indian textile manufacturing and trade on Europe's industrialization

The final group of papers considers the 'extension' of trade in cotton textiles to Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Scholarship has been slow at considering the role of Indian textiles in what is still portrayed a 'European' story of industrialisation and economic development based on the manufacturing of cotton textiles through the adoption of new technology. This group of papers challenge some aspects of such an accepted view by offering a more balanced perspective of Indian and European cotton manufacturing. These papers tackle the issues of technological, productive, and material and knowledge transfer between India and Europe. Riello maps the quantitative importance of Indian textiles traded to Europe and suggests that such trade was fundamental for Europeans to learn about products, consumer markets and merchandising. But Indian textiles did not provide just commercial information and training, Lemire argues that they were also key elements in shaping new notions of fashionability and taste in Europe. Commerce and fashion were complemented by new concepts of quality both for product and manufacturing processes in Europe. The interpretation of British industrialisation process itself is the focus of two papers with contrasting emphases. Berg considers the importance of Indian textiles in setting parameters of quality for European manufacturers in spinning and weaving. Parthasarathi argues instead that the consideration of economic and qualitative parameters can lead us to different perspectives on chronology and causes of economic decline in India in the nineteenth century.

CONTENT LIST

Editors' Introduction, *South Asian Textiles in Global History, 1500-1850*

Part 1. Regions of Exchange: Textiles in the Indian Ocean and Beyond

1. **Pedro Machado**, *Cloths of a New Fashion: Indian Ocean Networks of Exchange and Cloth Zones of Contact in Africa and India in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*
2. **Anthony Reid**, *Southeast Asian Consumption of Indian and British Cotton Cloth, 1600-1850*
3. **Joseph Inikori**, *English Versus Indian Cotton Textiles: The Impact of Imports on Cotton Textile Production in West Africa*
4. **H. V. Bowen**, *British Exports of Raw Cotton and Cotton Textiles from India to China during the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*
5. **Kaoru Sugihara**, *The Resurgence of Intra-Asian Trade in the Early Nineteenth Century*

Part 2. Regions of Production: Textiles in South Asia

6. **David Washbrook**, *The Textile Industry and the Economy of South India, 1500-1800*
7. **Ian Wendt**, *Four Centuries of Decline? Understanding the Changing Structure of the South Indian Textile Industry*
8. **Om Prakash**, *From Market-determined to Coercion-based: Textile Manufacturing in Eighteenth-Century Bengal*
9. **Lakshmi Subrahmanian**, *The Political Economy of Textiles in Western India: Weavers, Merchants and the Transition to a Colonial Economy*
10. **Bishnupriya Gupta**, *Competition and Control in the Market for Textiles: The Weavers and the English East India Company in the Eighteenth Century*

Part 3. Regions of Change: Indian Textiles and European Development

11. **Giorgio Riello**, *The Indian Apprenticeship: The Trade of Indian Textiles and the Making of European Cottons*
12. **George Souza**, *The French Connection: Indian Cottons and their Early Modern Technology*
13. **Jan Parmentier**, *Changing Patterns: Private Enterprise Eclipsing the European Companies in the Indian Textile Trade during the Late Eighteenth Century*
14. **Beverly Lemire**, *Fashioning Global Trade: Indian Textiles, Gender Meanings and European Consumers, 1500-1800*
15. **Maxine Berg**, *Quality, Cotton Textiles and the Global Luxury Trade*
16. **Prasannan Parthasarathi**, *Historical Issues of Deindustrialisation in Nineteenth-Century South India*