

# **Indian Textiles in the Indian Ocean Trade**

## **In the Early Modern Period**

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The Indian Ocean is by far the oldest of the seas in history, in terms of it being used and traversed by humans. Intense commercial activity has been carried out in the Ocean at least over the last two millennia. Networks of trade covering different segments of the Ocean have a history of remarkable resilience without being resistant to innovation. While all kinds of commodities, including precious metals, have figured in the Indian Ocean trade, textiles both for mass as well as elite consumption have always had a very special place, both qualitatively, as well as quantitatively, in this trade. In addition to being used for wearing apparel purposes and as furnishings, textiles have also had an important function to perform in the domain of rituals, exchange of gifts, identity formation and so on. In the domain of economics, textiles often served as currency and as medium of exchange. Being probably the largest, and perhaps the most cost-competitive, producer of textiles of all varieties for centuries, India has been at the centre of Indian Ocean trade in textiles for a long period of time.

Indian textiles have figured prominently both in the trade with west Asia and the Mediterranean via the Arabia Sea as well as with mainland and island southeast Asia via the Bay of Bengal. As for the first of these regions, the first century A.D. Periplus Maris

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Erythraei specifically refers to the trade in cotton textiles from Gujarat, the Coromandel coast and Bengal. The fifth century A.D. cotton fragments discovered at Berenike, a harbour site on the Egyptian side of the Red Sea, are the earliest patterned textiles of Indian origin so far recovered from an archeological context<sup>1</sup>. There is a gap of several hundred years between the Berenike fragments and the next sequence of securely dated archeological Indian textiles from Near Eastern sources, but textual references of their trade to Baghdad during the ninth century suggest a continuity<sup>2</sup>. The Ashmolean Museum at Oxford houses more than 1,200 textile fragments collected in Egypt and involved in the Western Indian Ocean trade.

Textiles with designs similar to those at the Ashmolean collection have also been reported from Indonesia. While many of these bear the Dutch East India Company stamps, a number of pieces acquired from Sulawesi have been carbon-dated to the 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> century. The first piece to be thus identified is also at the Ashmolean Museum<sup>3</sup>. Textiles have reigned as a dominant aesthetic in Indonesia for centuries and have played an important role in various ceremonies in the islands. Foreign textiles, mainly of Indian origin, were quickly assimilated to fit local sensibilities and subsequently were encoded with indigenous meaning. There is evidence that clothes produced in Indonesia were affected by Indian influence. This influence was manifested in terms of designs, motifs, materials and techniques of

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<sup>1</sup> John Peter Wild and Felicity Wild, “Rome and India: early Indian cotton textiles from Berenike, Red Sea coast of Egypt” in Ruth Barnes (ed.), *Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies* (London and New York, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Barnes (ed.), *Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies*, Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Himanshu Prabha Ray, “Far-flung fabrics – Indian textiles in ancient maritime trade”, in Barnes (ed.), *Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies*.

production. One type of technique found in both Indian and southeast Asian textiles is ikat, the tying of the warp or weft yarns before dyeing to create a pattern. The double ikat patola clothes imported into Indonesia from Gujarat exerted considerable influence on cloth designs in Indonesia, especially in the eastern part of the archipelago. Pelangi clothes are luxury textiles used on ceremonial occasions in Jambi in Sumatra. They are usually made of silk which has been tied and sewn before dyeing to create multi-coloured patterns. Both the technique and the design arrangements of pelangi clothes from Jambi resemble those found in Odhani (bandhani) clothes from India, especially Gujarat<sup>4</sup>.

Given the intrinsic spiritual and cultural value associated with the Indian textiles, some of them came to have a central place in rituals in Indonesia, many becoming pusaka (heirlooms). Also, elements from Indian textiles were incorporated into the manufacturing of local varieties, especially in the luxury category. Both the imported and the domestic varieties so produced connoted wealth and respect and sometimes also the spirit of Islam. As Fiona Kerlegue puts it, “As the continuity of the community was affirmed at the weddings and other life-cycle rituals at which they were used, so the textiles came to be associated with the identity of that community”<sup>5</sup>.

The unquestioned domination of Indian textiles in the Indian Ocean trade has to be understood essentially in terms of the subcontinent’s capacity to put on the market a wide range of tradable goods at highly competitive prices. These included large quantities of

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<sup>4</sup> Mary-Louise Totton, “Cosmopolitan tastes and indigenous designs – virtual cloth in a Javanese candi”, in Barnes (ed.), *Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies*.

<sup>5</sup> Fiona Kerlogue, “Textiles of Jamby (Sumatra) and the Indian Ocean Trade” in Barnes (ed.), *Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies*.

manufactured goods, the most important amongst which was textiles of various kinds. While these included high value varieties such as the legendary Dhaka muslins and the Gujarat silk embroideries, the really important component for the Asian market was the coarse cotton varieties manufactured primarily on the Coromandel coast and in Gujarat. In the early modern period at any rate, there was a large scale demand for these varieties both in the eastern markets of Indonesia, Malaya, Thailand and Burma as well as in the markets of the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and East Africa. While it is impossible to determine precisely what proportion of total domestic demand for mass consumption as well as elite consumption textiles in these societies was met by imports from India, the available evidence would seem to point in the direction of this not being altogether insignificant. India's capacity to manufacture these textiles in large quantities and to put them on the market at highly competitive terms made it in some sense the 'industrial' hub of the region surrounded by west Asia on one side and southeast Asia on the other.

The key position of India and Indian textiles in the structure of Asian trade was also reflected in the important role of the Gujarati and other Indian trading groups in the actual conduct of this trade. This role, if anything, was strengthened in the course of the fifteenth century which witnessed the fragmentation of Asian trade into well-defined segments. Increasingly, the participation of the Arab merchants became confined to the trade between west Asia and the west coast of India. This left the trade between the west and the east coasts of India on the one hand, and the eastern Indian Ocean region on the other, almost exclusively in the hands of Indians – the Gujaratis more than anyone else, but also the Chettis, the Chulias and other groups from the Coromandel coast, besides the Oriyas and the Bengalis. The participation of the Chinese merchants was now restricted by and large to

between China and Malacca, while the Indonesian and the Malay merchants hardly seem to have ventured beyond the inter-island and the port-to-port trade in the Malay-Indonesian region. In sum, Indian merchants from different regions of the country constituted probably the single most important trading group operating in the Ocean.

With the rise of an early modern world economy and the arrival of European corporate enterprises in the Indian Ocean from the sixteenth century onward, there was a significant increase in the Indian Ocean trade in Indian textiles. The first of these corporate enterprises, the Portuguese Estado da India was mainly interested in the procurement of pepper for Europe and participated in trade within Asia only in a very limited way. Private Portuguese traders, operating under the protection of the Estado and consisting mostly of the so-called New Christians, however, engaged in a remarkably large amount of trade within Asia, stretching from Goa at one end to Nagasaki in Japan on the other via Malacca and Macao. Indian textiles figured prominently in this trade.

It was, however, only after the arrival of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) into the Indian Ocean at the beginning of the seventeenth century that the Indian Ocean trade in Indian textiles by the European traders really picked up. The VOC was the only major European corporate enterprise to engage in a large scale intra-Asian trade as an integral part of its overall trading strategy and Indian textiles played a crystallizing role in this endeavour. As in the case of all other European trading companies, the principal aim of the VOC was the procurement of pepper and other spices in Asia. Unlike the Portuguese before them, however, the Dutch sought to do this in Indonesia. By the early 1620s, the VOC had managed to acquire effective monopsony rights in cloves, nutmeg and mace in the Spice

Islands. But they soon discovered that traditionally Indian textiles had been used in the region as the principal medium of exchange and no large-scale procurement of spices was feasible unless the Company could lay its hands on a large amount of relatively cheap Indian cotton textiles. The Company could have obtained these textiles at Aceh and other places in the Indonesian archipelago, but its acute business instinct drove it to their source, the Coromandel coast, where four factories were established between 1606 and 1610 covering both the northern and the southern stretches of the coast. This was the starting point of the Company's intra-Asian trade which eventually assumed proportions as large as its Euro-Asian trade. The special privileges obtained from the petty rulers in the archipelago enabled the Company to earn considerably more than the usual rate of profit on Indian textiles. In fact, in a number of treaties the Company concluded in the archipelago, one of the clauses specified the rate of exchange between the particular commodity in which it had been granted monopsonistic privileges and important varieties of Indian textiles that it proposed to import<sup>6</sup>. Another index of the crucial role of Indian textiles is the unquestioned domination of these textiles in the mix of goods the Indonesian and Malay traders carried out of Batavia, where they had obtained them from the Company in exchange for a variety of goods<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Two of these treaties – both relating to pepper – were the 1649 agreement with the Achinese dominions of Tiku, Priaman, and Indrapoera in Western Sumatra (J.E. Heeres, ed., *Corpus-Diplomaticum Neerlandico-Indicum*, Vol. 1, The Hague, 1907, pp.528-531) and the 1660 agreement with the ruler of Padang in the Malay peninsula (Pieter van Dam, *Beschryvinge van de Oost-Indische Compagnie*, ed. F.W. Stapel, The Hague 1927-1954, Vol. 2, part 1, p.290).

<sup>7</sup> The proportion of textiles in the total value of the cargo was 83.52% in 1659, 84.21% in 1661, 76.22% in 1670, 60.50% in 1673, 32.87% in 1674, 41.07% in 1675, 42.68% in 1680, 49.98% in 1681 and 44.62% in 1682. Calculated from the end-of-the-month statements in the *Batavia Dagb-Register* of the relevant years.

The specialization of the Coromandel coast consisted in the manufacturing of relatively inexpensive cotton textiles which were either plain or patterned on the loom. They were often dyed in bright colours with plant dyes. The printing or painting was done in floral and a variety of other motifs. While the northern Coromandel – the area between the rivers Krishna and Godavari – specialized in the production of plain textiles, the specialization of the south – the coastal stretch between Pulicat and Nagapattinam – consisted in the production of the famous painted textiles – the pintadoes. The principal consuming markets served by the Dutch were in south-east Asia and included the Spice Islands (the Moluccas, Banda and Celebes), Java, Sumatra, the Malay peninsula, Siam and Burma. In the Far East, limited quantities of Coromandel textiles figured in the exports to Taiwan and Japan. Other Asian markets supplied with these textiles were Sri Lanka and Persia. In Indonesia, these textiles were used primarily to procure pepper and other spices, but were often also used as a medium of payment to the soldiers in the service of the Company. Throughout the archipelago, these textiles were used primarily as wearing apparel by all sections of the community. While the bulk of the demand seems to have been for the relatively coarser and inexpensive types, there was also a fairly large market for the more expensive and ornamental varieties. In Java, for example, “the principal varieties sold were tapis (including tapi sarassas and tapi chindaes) and goulongs. While the coarser varieties of tapis were partly for ‘the peasants in the hills’<sup>8</sup>, the goulongs, which were patterned on the loom and often incorporated gold thread, were obviously for the better-off sections. In a letter to Masulipatnam in 1617, Jan Pietersz. Coen, the Director-General of the VOC, emphasized that “it was essential that only the best quality goulongs and tapi-sarassas were procured for

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<sup>8</sup> Nationaal Archief (NA), Coen at Batavia to Masulipatnam, 8 May 1622, VOC 849, ff.82v-85v.

Java since these people were very particular about the quality and, given their good buying power on the basis of the high price of pepper, would pay a very good price for the right kind of textiles”<sup>9</sup>. It would, therefore, be quite inaccurate to classify these markets as absorbers merely of coarse cottons. Also, each of the consuming markets, with several sub-segments, was a distinct unit with its own specific tastes and preferences with regard to the colours of the dyes, as well as the patterns and designs created through printing and painting. The orders lists sent by Batavia to Coromandel, therefore, were elaborate affairs, often running into several folios, indicating in great detail the market-wise requirements in terms of variables such as the size of the piece, the colours preferred, the size of the stripe, the pattern of the border, the exact floral design that was to be duplicated, and so on. Thus the eighty packets of tapi-sarassas asked for in 1623 were to have “bright red borders and small flower work in lively colours”<sup>10</sup>.

The Company’s trade with the other major Indian region supplying textiles to southeast Asia, namely Gujarat, was taken up in earnest only from about 1620 onward. In letter after letter, Batavia asked Surat to invest the bulk of the limited funds available in textiles for the southeast Asian markets, because “without these textiles, it was difficult to carry on trade in the southern quarters”<sup>11</sup>. Within Asia, while small quantities of textile exports from Surat

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<sup>9</sup> NA, Coen at Jacatra to Masulipatnam, 30 November 1617, VOC 1067, ff.31v-35v.

<sup>10</sup> “An estimate of Coromandel clothes that could be sold in a year in the Moluccas, Amboina, Banda, Java, Jambi, Patani and other southern quarters”. Prepared at Batavia 27 April 1623, NA, VOC 1080, ff.89v-90v.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Coen to Van den Broecke dated 6 November 1621, VOC 849, ff.26v-27. The letter went on to say that until further orders, no funds were to be invested in any other commodity. Earlier, in his letter of 17 October 1621, Coen had told Van den Broecke to invest money in indigo only after meeting the textile orders from southeast Asia in full. The procurement of textiles for



went to the Middle East (Basra, Gombroon and Mocha), and Sri Lanka, the bulk of the exports were directed at Batavia. From Batavia, an overwhelming proportion of these textiles was sent on to the Spice Islands and Malaya. According to an estimate prepared in 1623, the principal varieties that had a market in this region were baftas, cangans, chelas, cannikens and taffechelas. In the case of varieties such as baftas and taffechelas, there was a fairly large market for the medium and fine qualities. Of the Gujarat silk textiles, the most important variety procured for the southeast Asian markets was patolas. In 1621, good quality patolas with figures of elephants and humans painted on them were reported to be selling in the Moluccas at the extremely high price of 40 to 50 rials per piece<sup>12</sup>.

When the Company came to Bengal in the early 1630s after establishing itself in Coromandel and Gujarat, it was also mainly in quest of goods for its intra-Asian trade. But the commodity this time was not textiles for southeast Asia, but raw silk and silk and mixed textiles for Japan. It is important to realize that together with the spice monopoly, exclusive access to the Japan trade from 1639 onward were the two pillars behind the unusually successful run of the Dutch East India Company's participation in intra-Asian trade through the seventeenth century. This was because following the discovery of new gold and silver mines in the course of the sixteenth century, Japan had become by far the largest supplier of precious metals – mainly silver – in Asia at highly competitive terms. Indeed there were years around the middle of the seventeenth century when the Company procured more silver in Japan than it got from home. By providing large quantities of raw silk and silk and

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Holland was also to be postponed till such time as the availability of funds improved (letter dated 17 October 1621, VOC 849, ff.15-16v). Also see letters from Coen to Surat dated 5 May 1622, VOC 849, ff.85v-87v and 22 July 1622, VOC 850, ff.1v-4.

<sup>12</sup> NA, Coen at Batavia to Van den Broecke at Surat, 6 November 1621, VOC 849, ff.26v-27.

mixed textiles for the Japanese market (in the 1660s, the share of Bengal goods in the total cargo sent to Japan from Batavia was only a little under 50 percent), Bengal played a key role in the successful functioning of the Company's trade with Japan and, by extension, of its intra-Asian trade in general.

What the foregoing rapid survey establishes quite conclusively is that as far as the Indian Ocean trade in Indian textiles carried on by the Dutch East India Company was concerned, by far the most important consuming market was that of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago and the most important Indian region supplying that market the Coromandel coast. The archipelago market accounted for an overwhelming proportion of the total Asian market for Coromandel textiles. This is borne out clearly by the annual order lists sent from Batavia to Masulipatnam which, incidentally, are our only source for a partial reconstruction of the quantitative profile of the Dutch intra-Asian trade in Coromandel textiles. Instructions from Batavia repeatedly required Coromandel to attach priority to the textile orders from different parts of Asia over those from Europe. The extent to which the orders were under-fulfilled (which was mostly the case) depended mainly on the availability of capital with the factors at any given point in time. The value of the textile orders for southeast Asia at 1640-41 prices registered a rapid rise from around f.300,000 in 1617 to f.455,000 in 1626 and to f.824,000 in 1640. Thereafter the rise was even more rapid, and the value increased to f.I.3 million in 1644, and f.I.55 million in 1650<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce, Southern India 1500-1650*, Cambridge, 1990, p.174.

The Company had a nearly captive market in the Spice Islands and exploited this advantage in full by charging prices which were considerably higher than those that other traders used to charge earlier. In fact, in 1618 these prices were reported to be so high as to be almost counterproductive in so far as they adversely affected the delivery of cloves in the Moluccas<sup>14</sup>. With a brisk procurement by the Chinese, Malay and other traders, the sales in the Java market picked up considerably from the 1630s. The average rate of profit around this time was reported to be between 60 and 100 per cent<sup>15</sup>. The 1641 conquest of Malacca helped, and the subsequent decades witnessed a considerable increase in the trade in Coromandel textiles in southeast Asia. Indeed, until the 1680s this market continued to be supplied overwhelmingly by Coromandel.

The only other Indian region supplying textiles for southeast Asia in any reasonable quantity was Gujarat. The bulk of the supplies received from Gujarat at Batavia were sent on the Spice Islands and Malaya. According to an estimate prepared in 1623, the principal varieties of Gujarat textiles that had a market in this region were baftas, cangans, chelas, cannikens, taffechelas and negro-cloth<sup>16</sup>. In the case of varieties such as baftas and taffechelas, there was a fairly large market for the medium and fine qualities. Of the Gujarat silk textiles, the

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<sup>14</sup> NA, General letter from Governor-General Laurens Reael to the Directors at Amsterdam, 20 August 1618, VOC 1068, ff.218-29.

<sup>15</sup> In 1633, the profit on white cloth was reported to be as much as 125 per cent (T. Raychaudhuri, *Jan Company in Coromandel*, The Hague, 1962, p.159).

<sup>16</sup> An estimate prepared at Batavia by Antonio van Diemen of the textiles procured in Surat and the neighbouring areas that could be sold annually in the southern factories, 1 August 1623, VOC 1079, ff.192v-193.

most important variety procured for the southeast Asian markets was patolas<sup>17</sup>. Over the period between 1663 and 1680, for which quantitative information is available, there was an enormous fluctuation in the number of pieces exported by the Company from Surat to Batavia each year. Thus while there was a year such as 1664-65 when the number of pieces exported was as high as 396,570, at the other end of the scale there were years such as those between 1669-70 and 1672-73, when this number was under 50,000. The bulk of the textiles exported were coarse cottons, though fine cottons, silk piece-goods, as well as piece-goods made of a mixture of silk and cotton yarn, were also exported. The profitability in Indonesia was reasonable: in 1679, Surat chintz were reported to have yielded a gross profit of 100-128 per cent, while the following year carricans were sold at a profit of 70 per cent<sup>18</sup>.

The last quarter of the seventeenth century in some sense represented the peak of the Dutch East India Company's trade in Indian textiles in southeast Asia. An overwhelming bulk of these textiles originated in Coromandel. Thus of the total of f.1.26 million-worth of textiles the Batavia Council ordered for this market for 1696 from Coromandel, Bengal and Gujarat together, the respective share of the three sources was 93 per cent, 4 per cent and 3 per cent<sup>19</sup>. It was only from about this time onward that the Company was confronted by the problem of growing competition in Java by the locally produced cheaper supplies of painted

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<sup>17</sup> In 1621, good quality patolas with figures of elephants and humans painted on them were reported to be selling in the Moluccas at the extremely high price of 40 to 50 rials per piece (Coen at Batavia to Van den Broecke at Surat, 6 November 1621, VOC 849, ff.26v-27).

<sup>18</sup> V.B. Gupta, 'The Dutch East India Company in Gujarat Trade, 1660-1700: a study of selected aspects', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University, 1991, pp.311, 337.

<sup>19</sup> Calculated from Pieter van Dam, *Beschrijvinge van de Oost-Indische Compagnie*, II.II, pp.79-80 and 220-21; II.III, pp.104-05. This is the only comprehensive list of orders available.

textiles<sup>20</sup>. While until the 1660s the value of the textiles procured in Coromandel for the rest of Asia had exceeded that of those for Europe, by the end of the century Asia accounted for only about a third of the total value of the textiles procured, the remainder being sent on to Holland. An important development characterizing the period from about 1690 onward was the growing shift in the area of procurement from northern to southern Coromandel, where textiles were available both more cheaply and in distinctly greater abundance. Districts such as Cuddalore, Salem and Tanjavur now provided a large proportion of the total amount procured. Districts such as Madura and Tinneveli, which lay south of Point Calimere and were under the jurisdiction not of the Dutch 'government' of Coromandel but of that of Sri Lanka, were also found increasingly more attractive. In southeast Asia, the Company was now concentrating more and more on the relatively captive markets of Java, southern Celebes and the Moluccas, and increasingly opting out of places such as Aceh, Johor, Kedah, Tenasserim and Pegu where the competition by Asian merchants was turning out to be crippling.

The deterioration in the situation on the Coromandel coast with regard to the availability and the price as well as the quality of the coarse cotton textiles obtained there was reflected in an increase in the procurement in Bengal. But the increased procurement in Bengal also involved problems of rising cost price and deteriorating quality, so much so that in 1715 Batavia reported that the quality of the garras - an ordinary calico-received was "so poor that we do not recall an occasion in the past when such bad quality textiles were received from

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<sup>20</sup> T. Raychaudhuri, *Jan Company in Coromandel*, p.162.

Bengal”<sup>21</sup>. The position did not register any particular improvement over the 1720s and the 1730s. A statement prepared at Batavia relating to the period 1 September 1728 to 30 October 1734 noted that on Indian textiles costing f.656, 279 and sold at the Batavia Castle over the period, a profit of only f.194,497 amounting to 29.75 per cent had been earned. The sales at Bantam were much smaller: over the same period, a profit of only f.17,198 representing approximately a profit rate of 50 per cent was earned there<sup>22</sup>.

The available data do not permit a precise division of the value of the textiles exported by the Company from Coromandel between the European and the Asian markets. There is, however, evidence which suggests that around the middle of the eighteenth century, the share of the two markets was broadly the same with Europe having a slight edge over the East Indies. Thus of the total of f.13.87 million worth of textiles exported between 1744-45 and 1753-54, f.6.79 million worth (or 49 per cent) was destined for Asia, the share for Holland being f.7.08 million. The rate of profit earned on these textiles in Asia was reported to be around 35 per cent<sup>23</sup>. The fact that the Indian merchants operating from Coromandel were still a major force is also suggested by the same report. It is pointed out that from Porto Novo alone, the textiles exported by these merchants to ports such as Manila,

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<sup>21</sup> Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630-1720* (Princeton, 1985), p.144.

<sup>22</sup> Statement signed at Batavia, VOC 2301, ff.3416-3416v.

<sup>23</sup> These calculations are based on the report by Jacob van der Waeyen dated 25 November 1757, NA, *Hooge Regering Batavia* (HRB) 341 (unfoliated). According to van der Waeyen, a total profit of f.2,126,041 was earned on Coromandel textiles in Holland over the ten-year period, assuming a rate of profit of 30 per cent. On this basis, the value of the textiles sold in Holland works out at f.7.08 million. That leaves f.6.79 million worth for Asia, on which a profit of f.2,367,212 (actual and not assumed) was reported to have been earned, suggesting a figure of 34.8 per cent.

Malacca, Acheh, Arakan, Pegu, Mocha and those in Persia and other places amounted each year to 200,000 pagodas (or approximately f.1 million)<sup>24</sup>.

The southern part of the Coromandel coast continued to be the principal supplier of textiles to the Company. The factory at Pulicat in central Coromandel provided expensive varieties such as extra fine rumals, bethilles, gingams, taftas, chelas and fine muris etc. The chintz procured at Sadraspatnam were said to be the best available anywhere on the coast in terms both of the quality of the material as well as of the workmanship in the 'painting' on it. The most important centre of procurement in southern Coromandel continued to be Nagapattinam where Guinea-cloth and muris were woven in the Company's own villages<sup>25</sup>. But as everywhere else, the problem of rising cost and deteriorating quality was getting increasingly more acute at Nagapattinam also. In 1754-55, for example, it was noted that a piece of an ordinary guinea, a salampuri and a parcal, which cost f.5.90, f.2.60 and f.1.40, respectively, in 1690-91, now cost respectively as much as f.9.15, f.4.00 and f.2.10 (both reckoned in heavy money) representing an increase of between 50 and 55 per cent. But the fact that the profit on these and other varieties both in Holland as well as in Asia continued to be satisfactory is borne out by Batavia's exhortations to the factors in 1756 to ensure that the orders for varieties such as fine bleached guineas were met in full even if the price paid had to be pushed up somewhat. Half of these guineas had to be sent on to Holland while the other half was intended for the markets of the East Indies. The other item for southeast

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<sup>24</sup> NA, Report by Jacob van der Waeyen, HRB 341 (unfoliated).

<sup>25</sup> NA, Memoir of the outgoing governor of Coromandel, Pieter Haksteen, for his successor, Reynier van Vlissingen, dated 20 September 1771, HRB 344, ff.119,207.

Asia to whose procurement priority was to be attached was salampuris. The blue textiles for Malacca were to be procured at Porto Novo<sup>26</sup>.

As for northern Coromandel, the procurement at Masulipatnam had to be suspended as of 1750 following the town's takeover by the French. It is not clear whether an attempt to bribe the French governor, De Morain (who had been born in The Hague) with the offer of a 3 per cent commission on all textiles bought in the town clandestinely on behalf of the Company was successful<sup>27</sup>. The varieties hitherto procured at Masulipatnam were now bought at Narsapur, Bimilipatnam, Palakollu and, above all, Jagannnathpuram. The last mentioned town had been taken in farm from the Mughal governor Rustam Khan Bahadur in 1734. In the second half of the eighteenth century, it became an important centre of procurement. The washing, bleaching and starching of the Company's textiles procured in the region had been organized for over a century at its own village of Gondawaran located at the edge of a large tank noted for its alkaline water. Another of the Company's villages, Golepallem, also in the Eastern Godavari delta, similarly specialized in painting and dyeing. These processes were helped by the existence in the village of ground water with specific chemical properties<sup>28</sup>.

A part of the Indian textiles brought in by the Dutch East India Company into Batavia was used by the Company itself. Such uses included the manufacturing of sailcloth for the

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<sup>26</sup> NA, Report by Jacob van der Waeyen, HRB 341 (unfoliated).

<sup>27</sup> NA, Report by Jacob van der Waeyen, HRB 341 (unfoliated).

<sup>28</sup> NA, Haksteen memoir, HRB 344, ff.53-4; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Rural industry and commercial agriculture in late seventeenth century south eastern India', Past and Present, Number 126, 1990, p.92.



Company's ships, the production of uniforms for mounted cavalry and guards, and for use by the Company's personnel on ceremonial occasions such as processions of various kinds, conducting of funeral rites and so on<sup>29</sup>. Another major use to which Indian textiles were put was to clothe the slave population which was obliged to wear distinct clothing provided by the Company. While Guinea cloth was part of this distinct set in the seventeenth century, in the eighteenth the qualifying varieties included only garras, fotas and niquanias. It has been suggested by F.W. Stapel that over the two hundred years of its existence, the Company provided more than one million pieces of clothing to its slave population<sup>30</sup>.

The employees of the Company at Batavia and other places all over the Indonesian archipelago were often paid a part of their salary in Indian textiles. In the Moluccas, for example, where between 2,000 and 3,000 individuals served the Company, half the salary was paid in cash and the other half in textiles. According to the estimates of de Korte, the total burden of salaries paid in Asia between 1613 and 1790 to the personnel on land and ships amounted to a whopping f.179 million. On the assumption that half the amount was paid in textiles, the total amount paid through that medium would have amounted to f.89.5 million including the Company's profit calculated at between 50 and 75 percent on the cost price<sup>31</sup>. Finally, one might note that following the extensive and long-standing usage of luxury textiles from India in gift giving in the Indonesian archipelago, the Company had also adopted the practice on a fairly large scale. Again, according to de Korte, the Company spent a total of f.19 million in gift giving in Asia over the 177 years of book-keeping. Since

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<sup>29</sup> Ruurdje Laarhoven, 'The Power of Cloth: The Textile Trade of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), 1600-1780', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, 1994, p.338.

<sup>30</sup> R. Laarhoven, 'The Power of Cloth', p.79, 339.

<sup>31</sup> R. Laarhoven, 'The Power of Cloth', pp.151, 347-48.

luxury textiles constituted the core of these gifts, probably many thousands of pieces of cloth would have been gifted away annually. The fact that Indian luxury textiles were at the head of the list of the most desirable gifts would be corroborated by the fact that according to an entry in the Batavia Dagh Register of 1648, a Chinese delegation presented the Dutch Governor-General with Indian rather than Chinese textiles<sup>32</sup>.

An overwhelming proportion of the Indian textiles imported by the Company would, of course, have been sold in the market. The single largest market for the purpose was Batavia itself from where, according to the evidence in the Dagh Registers, the bulk of the textiles would have been transported by the buyers to all parts of the archipelago. The result was that Indian textiles reached the remotest parts of the archipelago. While the luxury varieties remained confined by and large to the coastal and the urban areas, the ordinary varieties reached everywhere and constituted the everyday wear of the ordinary consumer. As pointed out earlier, the basic advantage that the ordinary Indian textiles enjoyed over their domestically produced counterparts was that of availability at a cheaper price for comparable quality. It is in that context that one can best appreciate situations arising out of interruptions in the supply of Indian textiles due to whatever reason leading to an immediate resumption of domestic production of the broadly substitute varieties. This is precisely what happened in 1617 when three of the Company's ships, the Aeolius, the Middelburgh and the Duyve – the latter two from Surat – on their way to the archipelago got shipwrecked with large consignments of textiles aboard<sup>33</sup>. The point to emphasize is that while the capability of producing the mass wear textiles for domestic consumption certainly existed in the system

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<sup>32</sup> R. Laarhoven, 'The Power of Cloth', pp.97-100.

<sup>33</sup> R. Laarhoven, 'The Power of Cloth', p.74.

at least to a fair extent, this capability was ordinarily not used because of the availability of cheaper and better textiles imported from India. It was essentially only in situations of interruption in the supply of Indian textiles that the domestic production capacity was activated.

A particularly important destination in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago to which Indian textiles imported into Batavia were sent by the Dutch East India Company was the town of Makassar in South Sulawesi after its conquest by the Company in 1669. An immediate fallout of the Dutch conquest of the town was the initiation in 1670 by the Manila authorities of a new direct route linking Madras and Manila bypassing both the Dutch and Makassar. This trade in Coromandel cloth and Manila silver had grown by the end of the seventeenth century to an impressive over one million florins per annum. In the eighteenth century, 20 to 25 percent of the VOC imports into Makassar valuewise consisted of Indian textiles. In absolute terms, this amounted to about 21,500 rix dollars per annum, with Chinese tobacco worth around 12,000 rix dollars being a distant second. Only after about 1780 did this figure go down to about 15 percent. Private traders who had bought the textiles from the Company at Batavia were also allowed to bring them into Makassar. In addition, there was a certain amount of Indian textiles imported into the city “illegally” from Johor and other neighbouring ports in the Malacca straits. The competition provided by these imports as also by the domestically produced textiles at neighbouring centers such as Selangor and Buton meant that, on an average, around 1710, the Company was able to make a profit of only around 50 percent on Indian textiles imported into Makassar<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Gerrit Knaap and Heather Sutherland, *Monsoon Traders, Ships, Skippers and Commodities in Eighteenth-Century Makassar*, Leiden, 2004, pp.38-39.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the private sector import of Indian textiles into Makassar exceeded 10,000 pieces, more than double those by the VOC. This was reflected in an increasing pressure on the profit margin on the Company's imports. Towards the end of the 1720s, the Company contemplated the possibility of selling at a profit of less than 50 per cent, a figure further lowered in 1730 to 40 percent. Sales, however, did not pick up while the profit margin plummeted in the 1740s to 30 percent. The second half of the eighteenth century witnessed practically an end of this branch of trade<sup>35</sup>.

While the main use to which the ordinary imported Indian textiles were put was everyday mass wear, the story was quite different in respect of the considerable body of luxury textiles imported from India into the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. While these varieties were also used overwhelmingly for wearing purposes, the occasions on which this was done were essentially ceremonial – marriages, death ceremonies and so on. The use of decorative gold thread for borders and stripes constituted a very important element in the overall status enhancing role of these textiles. Indeed, the possession of such textiles became a measure of one's wealth, class, status and power. So often these textiles were also used as a store of value. Further, as pointed out above, the use of luxury Indian textiles for purposes of gift giving was quite widespread. In Ambon, dancing girls invited to perform on special occasions are known to have been paid in Indian textiles<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Knaap and Sutherland, *Monsoon Traders*, pp.39-41.

<sup>36</sup> R. Laarhoven, 'The Power of Cloth', p.90.

It is also important to realize that a long-term exposure of the population of the archipelago to the luxury Indian textiles led to innovations and imitations in the domestic manufacturing of similar varieties of textiles. An outstanding example of an Indian textile leading to such innovation and imitation was the patola which inspired new motifs, designs and patterns in corresponding varieties of Indonesian textiles. The development of batik, however, is a special case because the technique of batik decorating, unlike ikat, is post-loom and seems to have involved initially the use of imported undecorated Indian textiles<sup>37</sup>.

Next to the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, the most important Asian market for Indian textiles was that of Japan. Though not located in the Indian Ocean, Japan was a very major component of the Indian Ocean – South China Sea complex and formed a key trading area for the Dutch East India Company. The principal Indian export to Japan was Bengal raw silk and silk and mixed textiles. Until the 1670s, the share of goods for Japan in the total cargo procured in Bengal for Asia as well as the share of Bengal goods in the total cargo sent to Japan from Batavia was in both cases around 50 percent. But this changed dramatically over the period 1680 to 1740. The share of goods for Japan in the total cargo procured in Bengal was not much more than a quarter in 1681-2, and it came down to under 10 percent in the 1690s. In the 1720s and the 1730s, it fluctuated between 4 and 6 percent. As for the share of Bengal goods in the total exports to Japan, the figure had dipped to around a third in the 1690s, with the figure in 1699-1700, the last year for which information is available, being no more than 18 percent.

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<sup>37</sup> R. Laarhoven, 'The Power of Cloth', p.97.

The radically altered situation of Bengal goods in regard to the Japan trade was in a good measure the outcome of certain policies adopted by the Japanese authorities in the 1680s and 1690s. The introduction in 1672 of the system of 'appraised trade' had forced a substantial deterioration in the foreigners' terms of trade. But it had not been adequate to ensure that the annual specie loss did not assume disturbing proportions. In 1685, therefore, the system of what might be called 'limited trade' was introduced. Under the new arrangement, the Company was permitted to import annually goods whose total sales proceeds were not to exceed f.1.05 million. Further, the amount of raw silk the Company could sell during the course of a year was henceforth to be limited to f.350,000 sale value. The resultant erosion in the role of Japan in the overall trading strategy of the Company was further reinforced in 1696, when the gold content of the koban was reduced from 85.69 percent to 56.41 percent without a reduction in its silver price, making it a much less attractive coin to procure.

The decline of the Japan trade is apparent in the fact that the average annual value of the total Dutch exports to Nagasaki between 1686 and 1700 was reduced to f.630,000. Since the Company could not be certain of the precise quantity of raw silk that would fetch the ceiling amount of f.350,000 in Japan, and because the amount of raw silk exported to Europe was growing at a rapid rate around this time, what often happened was that the amount of raw silk sent to Japan was worth less than the maximum allowed. Throughout this period, Bengal continued to be the principal supplier of raw silk for Japan, but the absolute quantity involved had been reduced considerably<sup>38</sup>. The gross profit on Bengal raw silk was reported

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<sup>38</sup> Thus the amount of Bengal raw silk exported to Japan had come down from 180,000 ponds in 1675 to 124,000 ponds in 1682, and to 44,000 ponds in 1693-94. The figure in 1700-01 was 60,700

to be 63 percent, 74 percent, 85 percent and 68 percent in 1702, 1704, 1715 and 1717, respectively.

By forcing a rapid decline in the Dutch silk trade and at the same time withdrawing the appraised trade system from goods other than raw silk, the 1685 regulations actually promoted the trade in textiles. The first manifestation of this was an increase by 50 percent in the 1686 Nagasaki orders for most varieties of Bengal textiles. Bengal armosins fetched a good profit of 137 percent in 1702, and of 92 percent two years later. In the early part of the eighteenth century, Bengal cotton textiles became a regular item of import into Japan. In 1715, whereas Bengal textiles afforded in Nagasaki an average gross profit of 151 percent, those from the Coromandel coast fetched only 116 percent, while the few pieces imported from Gujarat had, in fact, to be sold at a loss of 67 percent<sup>39</sup>. In the 1720s and the 1730s, the quality of the Bengal textiles sent to Japan probably varied considerably from year to year. Thus while in 1728 and 1729 the quality of the taffechelas ginghams and the tassar alachas was reported to be so poor as to have involved a net loss<sup>40</sup>, a 1731 Batavia evaluation of the lot of Bengal silk textiles received for Japan pointed out that not only had the samples on the basis of which the contracts had been put out been generally reproduced competently, but in many cases they had actually been improved upon in terms of quality<sup>41</sup>.

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ponds, in 1710-11, 42,845 ponds in 1717-18, 33,806 ponds (O. Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, 1985, p.126).

<sup>39</sup> O. Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, p.137.

<sup>40</sup> NA, Hugli to Batavia, 30.11.1730, VOC 2165, ff.20-21.

<sup>41</sup> Evaluation done by Hendrik Haak and Anthony Jubbels at Batavia dated 20.4.1731, NA, VOC 2174, ff.2427-28.

The only other Indian Ocean region to which Indian textiles were exported by the Dutch East India Company in any quantity was the Middle East – Bandar Abbas and Basra in the Persian Gulf and Mocha in Yemen. Since the trade with these places had been organized from Surat as the base, Gujarat textiles had traditionally been included in the cargo sent there together with items such as Indonesian spices. The value of the textiles exported to Persia from the mid-1630s usually fluctuated between around f.50,000 and f.150,000 per annum. In the late 1630s, Surat cargo accounted for nearly half of the total value sent to Persia by the Company. The gross profit earned on the textiles was 40 per cent in 1642 but registered a steep decline thereafter to 4 per cent in 1651 and 7 to 8 per cent in 1659. The export of the textiles, therefore, was curtailed heavily. Between 1660 and 1700, the value of the exports from Surat to Persia was insignificant and often accounted for less than 1 per cent of the total Dutch exports from Gujarat. The only exceptions to this were the years 1664-5, when Persia's share was a respectable 13.9 per cent, and 1668-9 when it was 8.56 per cent. The story was even more dismal in the case of Mocha. The export of Gujarat textiles to this port had begun around 1638, but was terminated in 1656 because of extremely poor profitability. It was only around the end of the seventeenth century that the Company's interest in Mocha had been revived because of coffee. The role of Gujarat textiles in the Mocha trade, however, never assumed any importance, and it was only occasionally that a gross profit of about 50 per cent was earned on these textiles<sup>42</sup>. The profit earned in Persia on the small quantity of Bengal textiles sent there was also quite small and, occasionally, even a net loss was incurred. Indeed, in 1665, in order to minimize the chances of net loss, the

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<sup>42</sup> H.W. van Santen, *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in Gujarat en Hindustan, 1630-1660*, Leiden, 1982, p.17; V.B. Gupta, *The Dutch East India Company in Gujarat Trade*, pp.263-66, 278.



Batavia Council ruled that a minimum of 40 per cent gross profit had to be earned on any given variety in a particular year to qualify it for export the following year.

To conclude, if there was one commodity that dominated the Indian Ocean trade through the ages well into the eighteenth century, it was Indian textiles, made overwhelmingly from cotton but also from silk as well as cotton and silk mixed yarn. This reflected the unusually strong position of India as a low-cost producer capable of supplying textiles across the board on highly competitive terms. That is what persuaded many Asian societies to depend on Indian textiles as an important source both for their mass well as well as for luxury consumption. In the Indonesian archipelago, in particular, Indian textiles also came to play an important role in ceremonial rituals, gift exchange and so on. They also led to important innovations and imitations in the domestic production of corresponding varieties of textiles.

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