

## **The Meanings of Trade: Indian Cotton, Gender and the Fashion System in Europe, c. 1500-1800**

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By 1500, the centuries old trade in Indian cotton textiles represented more than simply an exceptional economic phenomenon, although it was certainly that. The traffic in vibrant printed textiles linked together disparate regions of the world, while the surface designs on the textiles enabled a multi-party dialogue with motifs rich in iconic significance. A “transmission of culture” through trade, as K N Chaudhuri notes, is an adjunct to global exchange; indeed, “the power of objects to locate man within the grids of a social space transcend far beyond its immediate economic value”.<sup>1</sup> Indian cottons were unmatched by other fibres in terms of cost and quality, providing a key medium for the global circulation of print imagery. As I argued elsewhere, the appetite for these textiles made India the source of the most significant global consumer commodity before industrialization. The ambit and chronology of this phenomenon have been confirmed by recent research;<sup>2</sup> however, the complex factors underlying demand for Indian cottons in world markets remains to be fully explored and their comparative

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1 K. N. Chaudhuri, “Trade as a Cultural Phenomenon” in J C Johansen, E L Petersen & H Stevnborg, eds., *Clashes of Cultures: Essays in Honour of Niels Steensgaard* (Odense, 1992) p. 210.

2 John Guy, *Woven Cargo: Indian Textiles in the East* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1998); Ruth Barnes, *Indian Block-Printed Textiles in Egypt: The Newberry Collection in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*, vol. 1 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997); Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian merchants and Eurasian trade, 1600-1750* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994).

features assessed. This paper will contribute to the conversation on cotton's role in global trade by exploring our understanding of fashion in economic history and by analysing the long-term influence of Indian cottons on European markets and society, leading to the development of a fashion system.<sup>3</sup> Fashion, too, has a historic trajectory, arising in urban centres rooted in trade; its self-sustaining momentum in Europe, from the late Middle Ages is a critical phenomenon. As Chaudhuri notes, "trade is an exchange of object which in turn structure and define social categories, practices and values."<sup>4</sup> Fashion's genesis and evolution are exemplary of the power of trade.

While, consumerism, luxury and semi-luxury trades have become the focus of considerable historical research, fashion, as a stimulus to demand, a part of the cultural dynamic of global trade has been too generally neglected by economic historians.<sup>5</sup> The factors that shape demand need to

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3 The phrase "fashion system" was coined by Roland Barthe with regard to the twentieth-century interaction between print and the promotion of fashionable consumption. While this same term is being applied by literary scholars to periods as early as the twelfth century, I do not feel it appropriate for an economic and social context so very distant from twentieth-century France. Yet, a fashion system did evolve in urban centres from the late middle ages onwards. I define the fashion system as a self-perpetuating, dynamic force which framed the cultural stimulus to demand and focused the desire for self-definition; it directed, as well, collective material affirmations among communities defined by age, social rank, religion, ethnicity, or other cultural attributes.

4. Chaudhuri, "Trade as a Cultural Phenomenon", p. 210.

5 See, for example, Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2005) and *In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century* @ *Past & Present* no. 182 (2004); Craig Clunas, "Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West" *American Historical Review* 104:5 (1999) and *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991); Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* (University of Chicago Press, 2000); Jeremy Prestholdt, "On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism" *American Historical Review* 109:3 (2004); Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: the Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1992) and "Fashioning Cottons: Asian trade, domestic industry and consumer demand 1660-1780" in David Jenkins, ed., *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003)

be more fully assessed: factors such as the temporality of fashion stimuli, the social composition of fashion participants and the evolution of fashion from an elite marker, to its demotic form in a consumer society. The chronology of fashion must be reconsidered. Over the early modern era the expression of fashion evolved from an isolated, elite preoccupation to become a fashion system — a self-perpetuating, dynamic force which framed demand and focussed broad-based desires within an evolving form of material self-definition. Asian textiles, like silk, were singularly important as expressions of status in late medieval and early modern Europe, a limited and precious fashion commodity; Indian cottons were integral to the later development of the fashion system in Europe, fundamentally affecting patterns of material culture. India was the world's pre-eminent provisioner of fabrics for soft furnishings and apparel for the broadest market, before and during European industrialization. In cotton, the economic, the cultural and the social are intertwined. Tracing the trajectory of the fashion system, I will also assess the critical issue of gender in this trade history, a feature generally ignored in considerations of global trade and markets. From these perspectives, I will help revise our understanding of the significance of the cotton trade as an agent of structural change.

## **II. Fashioning Cottons**

From the late nineteenth century until late twentieth century, the fashion phenomenon received only sporadic attention in the academic world outside the cataloguing of dress histories. Among the less prominent exemplars of this trend, Caroline Foley, in her 1893 analysis of fashion in

*The Economic Journal*, noted that the “study of the consumer ... is once more occupying the attention of economic science in England” in a way that was “more disinterested and genuine than in the past”.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, fashion and the consumer inspired scholars for brief periods in the early and middle years of the twentieth century, before this more sustained and intensive assessment.<sup>7</sup> The social scientist Georg Simmel offered his theories on the question of fashion at the turn of the century, observing among other things that this phenomenon was to be found in what he termed “higher civilizations”, where the “foreignness” of objects added to their attraction, rather than detracting.<sup>8</sup> In the 1960s there was a further short flurry of other works, several in business history journals, where authors espoused the importance of this study beyond a simple enumeration of changes in dress, fashion being so closely allied with apparel. Dwight Robinson, in a 1963 article, proposed a substantive reason for the consideration of fashion, typically omitted from economic calculations. He concluded that economic theory was impoverished by this neglect, noting that Joseph Schumpeter “omitted almost all reference to the consumer and his insecure tastes.”<sup>9</sup> Robinson insisted on the centrality of fashion and the value of its study for, in

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6 Caroline Foley, “Fashion” *The Economic Journal* 3:11 (1893) p. 458.

7 In addition to the works of Foley and Simmel, at the turn of the century and the seminal work by Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: an economic study of institutions*, 1899 see also, Kent Roberts Greenfield, *Sumptuary Law in Nürnberg: a Study in Paternal Government* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1918); Frances Elizabeth Baldwin, *Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Regulation in England* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1926); and John Martin Vincent, *Costume and Conduct in the Laws of Basel, Bern and Zurich 1370-1800* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935), the questions arising from fashion and its genesis being driven by Kent Greenfield of John Hopkins University.

8 Georg Simmel, “Fashion” *International Quarterly* 10, (1904), p. 136.

9 Dwight E. Robinson, “The Importance of Fashions in Taste to Business History: An Introductory Essay” *Business History Review* 37:1/2 (1963) p. 7. Also included in this special issue is: Herman Freudenberger, “Fashion, Sumptuary Laws, and Business” *Business History Review* 37:1/2, pp. 37-48.

his words, if fashion is “a product of modern society; modern society is in an important sense a product of fashion.”<sup>10</sup>

There is little doubt now that consumers and their proclivities are front and centre in the historical agenda at the present time; male and female, young and old are being subjected to a scrutiny that has paid handsome dividends in terms of historical discoveries.<sup>11</sup> However, with a recent notable exception,<sup>12</sup> fashion as the catalyst to international trade and consumption remains at best a minor feature of most studies of commercial traffic, usually mentioned only in the narrow positivist sense of goods “becoming” fashionable. The generative East/West exchange over centuries, the stimulus to urban societies and cultures across Eurasia and Africa, and the expressions of fashion which underlay global commerce were a driving force at critical junctures. Nowhere is this more evident than in the history of Indian cottons in the global market. The Indian trade in cottons - printed, painted

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10 Robinson, “Importance of Fashion”, p. 10.

11 See, for example, Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*. (London: Hutchinson, 1983); Beverly Lemire, *Fashion=s Favourite: the Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1992); Victoria de Grazia, (ed), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996); Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, fashion and city life, 1860-1914*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (eds), *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650-1850*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Margot Finn, “Men’s things: masculine possession in the consumer revolution” *Social History* 25:2 (2000); Bruno Blondé, “Tableware and changing consumer patterns: dynamics of material culture in Antwerp, 17th – 18th centuries” in J. Veeckman (ed), *Majolica and Glass from Italy to Antwerp and Beyond: The Transfer of Technology in the 16th-early 17th-Century*, (Antwerpen: Stadt Antwerpen, 2002); Giorgio Riello, “La chaussure à la mode: Production Innovation and Marketing Practices in Parisian and London Boot and Shoemaking in the Early Nineteenth Century” *Textile History* 34:2 (2003); Mary K Gayne, “Illicit Wigmaking in Eighteenth-Century Paris” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38:1 (2004); Jeremy Prestholdt, “On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism” *American Historical Review* 109:3 (2004).

12 Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005).

and embroidered - was built to suit markets, societies and peoples around the span of the compass, over countless generations. Did fashion figure in this trade? One definition of fashion emphasizes the systematic interchange between producers and consumers, resting on endless shifts in taste; and this definition does not characterize all markets.<sup>13</sup> From the Classical to the Early Modern Era, empires rose and fell, some cities grew while others withered; but the “archipelago of cities”<sup>14</sup> across the globe drew in quantities of Indian textiles for customers high and low. There is no doubt that at some times, in some urban settings, fashion held sway. Great Indian trading cities, like Goa and Cambay, for example, were “famous and opulent ... for ... commerce and traffic” as François Pyrard reported about 1600,<sup>15</sup> and may indeed have supported classes of merchants and traders responsive to shifting styles for centuries. In the absence of fashion’s insistent pulse, however, regional and cultural preferences shaped demand and India’s artisans were skilled in their response. Mattiebelle Gittinger observes that:

The mastery of the technical aspects of this craft allowed the dyer the freedom to respond to orders for different patterns and designs with assured success. He could meet the demand — in design and, unusually, colour preferences — of virtually any market. Dark maroons, blacks and deep reds — patterned in grids with details worked with ‘nervous’ white resist lines — went to Thailand. To

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13 Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1996) p. 44.

14 Janet L Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: the World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1989) p. 13. The phrase was coined by Richard Haëpke and also employed by Fernand Braudel.

15 *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*, Translated into English from the Third French Edition of 1619, and edited with notes by Albert Gray...., Vol. II, Part I. (London, Hakluyt Society, 1888) p. 249. Generations of westerners arriving in India marvelled at the wealth within commercial precincts, including Clive later in the eighteenth century. Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 113-4.

Southeast Asia went hip wrappers with large saw-toothed borders and fields worked with geometric patterns or small flowers. To Armenia went Christian altar frontals. [And, ultimately,] To Europe went bedhangings with great blossoming trees and dress goods, robes, or vests.<sup>16</sup>

It is now clear that fashion was not restricted to Western locales, despite claims to the contrary.<sup>17</sup> The India trade was, “the backbone of international economy in the Middle Ages in general and the Islamic world in particular.”<sup>18</sup> Fashion’s power affected various Asian communities and may well have flourished in other sites yet unstudied. Over millennia, Indian merchants and producers became skilled in the creation of products suited to varied markets, whether classical Rome, fourth-century Southeast Asia or the sixteenth-century Mediterranean. Carriers of iconic symbols, imbued with exceptional colours, Indian cottons sustained dialogues across cultures where their surface designs, as well as the fabrics’ weight and wear, attracted peoples largely illiterate in written text, but deeply trained in the

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16 Mattiebelle Gittinger, *Master Dyers to the World: Technique and Trade in Early Indian Dyed Cotton Textiles* (Washington, D. C., The Textile Museum, 1982) pp. 16-17.

17 The claim for the Western uniqueness of fashion is offered by Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, translated by Catherine Porter (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1994) pp. 3-8, 15; a similar perspective is offered by Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (New York, 2001) pp. i, 1. Georg Simmel might have disagreed with this claim, having observed at an early date the presence of fashion beyond Western societies, noting its existence among some nineteenth-century South African native communities and its absence from certain European states at earlier times. Simmel, “Fashion”, p. 138. See also, Peter Burke, “*Res et verba*: conspicuous consumption in the early modern world” in John Brewer & Roy Porter, (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, Routledge, 1993; Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge, 1991) and “Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West” *American Historical Review* 104:5 (1999).

18 S D Goitein, “Letters and Documents on the India Trade in Medieval Times” *Islamic Cultures* 37 (1963) p. 188. The scope of Indian trade is also considered by Lynda Shaffer, “Southernization” *Journal of World History* 5:1 (1994) p. 2; G P Baker, *Calico Printing and Painting in the East Indies in the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries* (London, Edward Arnold,

reading of symbols. The printed surface designs were an essential part of their appeal.<sup>19</sup> Distinctive Asian textiles set new standards within global markets, effects that were particularly dramatic in Europe after 1500.

Indian cottons were exceptional products in the global context, but certainly in European history. In the first century of direct trade with India, Europe marvelled at the imagery and wondered at the extraordinary variety of cottons arriving in selected markets. Following direct trade with Portugal, after 1500, printed cottons were absorbed into clerical and secular markets, soon found from Iberia to the North Sea. Design and decorative idioms were transformed within decades of contact with these materials. Before 1600 the unique Southeast Asian iconography was translated by European hands into a wealth of embroideries stitched by amateur and professional needle workers; as well, unknown quantities of coarsely painted facsimiles were produced on heavy canvas, for the decoration of middle ranked homes.<sup>20</sup> Rarities became more commonplace, as testified by mid-sixteenth-century probate inventories from England's south coast and by reference to 'calico' under categories of trade goods listed in Tudor Books of Rates.<sup>21</sup> This first century of direct trade profoundly affected the tastes of Europeans, as the domestication of exotics got underway. The results of their inspired

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1921) pp. 1-3.

19 Goody, *East into West*, pp. 115-6; R M Riefstahl, *Persian and Indian Textiles from the late Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York, E Weythe, 1923) pp. 7-9; K B Brett, "An English Source of Indian Chintz Design" *Journal of Indian Textile History* I (1955); J Irwin and P R Schwartz, *Studies in Indo-European Textile History* (Ahmedabad, Calico Museum of Textile, 1966); John Irwin, "Indian Textile Trade in the Seventeenth Century: Foreign Influences" *Journal of Indian Textile History* IV (1959); K B Brett, "The Japanese Style in Indian Chintz Design" *Journal of Indian Textile History* V (1960).

20 See Beverly Lemire, "Shaping Fashion: Asia, Europe and the Trade in Indian Cottons, c. 1300-1800 c a well-worn tale reconsidered" presented at the GEHN Conference, Padua, Italy, 16-18 November 2005.

21 Edward Roberts and Karen Parker, (eds), *Southampton Probate Inventories, 1497-1575*, vol I, (Southampton, 1992) vol. 1, pp 65-70; 150-2; 159-62; 165-7; vol II, pp 244-52;



needlework now fill museum collections and are displayed at stately homes; indeed, the dramatic response to Asia's manufacturing bounty has long since been accepted as part of the normal trajectory of European material culture, as a natural outcome. In fact, by all criteria, this was one of the most dramatic disjunctures in European history: aesthetically, economically and culturally. The exotic roused an equal measure of official anxiety. After first targeting Asian silks, later in the seventeenth century legislators would turn aim at Indian cottons. But along with official resistance to Asian textiles was a more wide-spread process of interrogation, adaptation and adoption, with the fashion process ignited and redefined. Indian cottons brought to Europe a template for popular fashionability: it had both demotic and elite forms; the aesthetic of print and colour were malleable; while the volume of these products made them accessible to the widest population. Yet, to understand fully the significance of these textiles, we must look more intently at those buying cottons, the vast majority of whom were women. The techniques women employed to enable consumption and women's privileged relationship with domestic textiles makes this history singularly important. With this, the international textile trade can then be more fully explained.

### **III. Cotton Textiles, Gender and Global Trade**

A study of markets uncovers not only the variety of goods sold, but the characteristics of the buyers and the uses to which these goods were put.<sup>22</sup> To discover the full meanings of trade, we must link together markets and commercial networks, dissecting the elements driving demand to create a

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346-7; 358-9;

22 Lemire, "Domesticating the Exotic: Floral Culture and the East India Calico Trade with

fuller picture of the processes of economic and social practice. In this regard, gender is a key element of analysis. Typically, gender has been entirely ignored in the history of global trade, the masculine essence of this endeavour thereby rendered invisible. A similar scholarly pattern was once the norm in a cognate field, imperial history, but here historians of empire have employed gender analyses to great effect. Gender analyses now provide a fuller understanding of the functioning of empires, a development that helped revive imperial history.<sup>23</sup> In economic history, as well, an awareness of gender is required to understand all elements of the trade in textiles, for these analyses disclose key patterns in the interaction of cotton textiles, consumers and markets. In the first instance, gendered patterns among women and men informed the practice of fashion and patterns of consumption. Fabrics like cotton figured in utilitarian and cultural functions, where gender-practice directed the kinds of fabric and uses to which they were put. In most societies, women directed the purchase, use and exchange of household textiles. As a result of these duties, women were directly engaged in determinations of value, in calculations of second-hand markets, in the organization of gifts and the direction of everyday credit, much of which was founded on the manipulation of cloth and clothing. Recognizing women's agency is crucial to an understanding of the long evolution of economic development and is equally central in linking trade patterns with regional development.

Annette Weiner has brought a particular acuity to the study of gender

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England, c. 1600-1800" *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 1:1 (2003), pp. 65-85.

23 Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A new imperial history: culture, identity, and modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840* (Cambridge, 2004) and *The island race: Englishness, empire and gender in the eighteenth century* (London, 2003); Catherine Hall, *Civilising subjects: colony and metropole in the English imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago, 2002); Antoinette Burton, (ed), *Gender, sexuality and colonial modernities* (London, 1999).

and cloth; her observations are rooted in South Pacific communities but have resonance far beyond this geographic locale. “In many societies throughout the world”, writes Weiner, “women are the producers and, in part or wholly, the controllers of highly valued possessions - a currency of sorts made from cloth”.<sup>24</sup> Monetization was a gradual and intermittent process over many centuries, also reversible and at times impermanent. Cultural and economic contexts vary from region to region, but in many instances where monetization was imperfectly in place, textiles functioned as one of the most important alternate currencies.<sup>25</sup> The availability of cloth as a key consumer item made it ideal as an alternate currency; commonly pawned, readily exchanged for other goods or textiles, value was assigned on the basis of utility and cultural desirability. Because textiles were such an important part of household budgets, because their worth was so widely known and readily judged by textile workers, housewives and retailers, these goods likewise formed an important part of the second-hand traffic and were easily pawned.<sup>26</sup> Women were central agents in these economic exercises, typically balancing domestic budgets, or managing small trade or craft enterprises.<sup>27</sup> Such exchanges engendered an important flexibility in the

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24 Annette Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley, 1992) p. 3.

25 In the fifteenth century, by decree, cotton cloth was employed as an alternate currency in Korea, for example, a practice that was revived in specific seventeenth century economic conditions. Heita Kawakatsu, “The Emergence of a Market for Cotton Goods in East Asia in the Early Modern Period” in A J H Latham & H Kawakatsu, (eds), *Japanese Industrialization and the Asian Economy* (London, Routledge, 1994) pp. 25-7.

26 Beverly Lemire, *The Business of Everyday Life: Gender, Practice and Social Politics in England, c. 1600-1900* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005) Introduction and chapter 4.

27 Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: the English Clothing Trade before the Factory* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1997) chapters 3 & 4; Elizabeth Sanderson, *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1996) chapter 2; Abdoulaye Kane, “Financial Arrangements Across Borders: Women’s Predominant Participation in Popular Finance, from Thilogne and Dakar to Paris. A Senegalese Case

marketplace, as well as serving crucial economic and social functions in generations of household economies. In this way consumer goods, like cottons, became important in every market they penetrated, valued for their multiplicity of practical and aesthetic uses.

I initially explored the way the second-hand trade in England allowed labouring and middle ranked men and women to buy desirable new Indian cottons; I showed that through the circulation of alternate currencies and the creative use of second-hand wares the fashion impulse was sustainable at lower levels of society.<sup>28</sup> Subsequent research revealed the tremendous scale of the second-hand trade, nationally and internationally, over many centuries. This practice was critical in urban centres and showed surprising stability and ubiquity wherever trade was advanced. The pawning of household goods, predominantly cloth and clothing, and the varied uses to which materials were put was crucial to credit functions among non-elites, a phenomenon that persisted for centuries in many regions and cultures.<sup>29</sup> New styles added value to goods above and beyond that of utility. Women were the principal organizers of material resources, their actions linking household to markets, local to international trade. The strategies employed by women, to meet personal and domestic requirements and to satisfy

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Study" in B Lemire, R Pearson & G Campbell (eds), *Women & Credit: Researching the Past, Refiguring the Future* (Oxford, Berg Publishers, 2002); Lemire, *Business of Everyday Life*, chapters 2 & 4.

28 Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite*.

29 For a typical example of pawning by the wife of a trader in medieval Cairo see S D Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, Vol. IV, *Daily Life* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983) pp. 332-3. For later European and modern Indian examples see, Laurence Fontaine, "Women's Economic Spheres and Credit in Pre-industrial Europe" and Jayshree Vyas, "Banking with Poor Self-employed Women" and Hotze Lont, "Negotiating Financial Autonomy: Women, Income and Credit in Urban Java" in B Lemire, R Pearson and G Campbell, (eds), *Women and Credit: Researching the Past Refiguring the Future* (Oxford, Berg Publishers, 2002) pp. 15-32, 145-166, 203-222.

material desires, reflect the persistence of malleable economic practices even as the foundations for international capitalism were laid.<sup>30</sup> Fernand Braudel recognized the multi-layered nature of the early modern economy, including what he called a, “shadowy zone, often hard to see for lack of adequate historical documents, lying underneath the market economy”. The importance of this “shadowy zone” cannot be overstated; while attention to gender practices in this analysis of “material civilization” are equally important.

Economic development does not follow a straight line and the strategies to enable demand, to enliven plebeian markets, were of particular significance in international trade. Whether in medieval Cairo, early modern Europe, China or Indonesia,<sup>31</sup> cottons were favoured for reasons of cultural preference, for reasons of utility and for reasons of aesthetics. In Europe, the example of Indian cottons unleashed a pattern of fashion-conscious demand that depended in great measure on the strategies devised by women of middling and working origins. The choices made in these markets affected international trade. We must take all these elements into account, just as we also consider the policies of kings and the responses of governments.

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30 See, for example, Lemire, *et al.*, *Women and Credit*.

31 Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, Vol. IV, pp. 170, 332-3; Maria Bogucka, “Women and credit operations in Polish towns in the early modern period”; Montserrat Carbonell, “Pledges’, transmissions and credit networks: Eighteenth-Century Barcelona”; Hilde van Wijngaarden, “Credit as a way to make ends meet. The use of credit by poor women in Zwolle, 1650-1700’ unpublished papers presented at Session C59, “Women and credit in European Societies: 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries”, 12<sup>th</sup> International Economic History Congress, Madrid, 1998; Lemire, Pearson & Campbell, *Women & Credit*.

#### IV. Conclusion

The arrival of Indian cottons in Europe, in growing quantities after 1500, introduced a new material agenda to that region of the world. Within generations, Indian cottons assumed a place of signal importance in decisions about domestic accessories, in decorative accoutrements and in personal apparel. In 1577 William Harrison wrote that “the furniture of our houses also exceedeth and is grown in manner even to passing delicacy; and herein I do not speak of the nobility and gentry only but likewise of the lowest sort in most places of our South Country”.<sup>32</sup>

Sometime earlier the Southampton merchant Thomas Goddard bought calico sheets, items listed in a probate inventory in 1555 and the widow Margaret Pyd owned calico curtains when she died four years later.<sup>33</sup> These tastes were not unique among their neighbours, numbers of whom also owned some of the brilliant but practical fabrics; and the appearance of calico pillows, curtains, quilts and yard goods, fine and coarse, within their neighbourhood marks a transformative moment in global trade, as material agendas were recast. This was one of many new products to transform the domestic interior, but it was an especially important one, with botanic imagery brought indoor through the designs devised by Indian craftspeople; these became the inspiration for needle workers and would-be printers. A new fashion was ignited, shaping desires, even as the products evolved. In this process, the commercial network included Indian craftspeople and European merchants; but middle ranked housewives, as well as genteel ladies were also part of this global equation, key intermediaries in the

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32 William Harrison *The description of England* edited by Georges Edelen, (Ithica, N Y, Cornell University Press, 1968) p. 200.

33 Edward Roberts & Karen Parker, (eds), *Southampton Probate Inventories, 1497-1575*, vol. I, pp. 70,152.

assigning of resources within the home, the ones who determined the value of colour-fast patterns, the ones who judged these fabrics for their ease of washing and their capacity to please. In 1663, Samuel Pepys wrote of a shopping expedition with his wife Elizabeth in search of the perfect chintz to line the walls of her study. Pepys penned the account of this shopping foray, but there can be no doubt that Elizabeth tastes were also a factor; she, too, was concerned with the practical as well as aesthetic reasons for this choice. After all, it was her study and it was she who oversaw the laundry.<sup>34</sup> Equally, among those with fewer resources, the advent of Indian printed cottons gave them the opportunity to express their aesthetic sensibility, to join with those sharing a similar fashionability. Elizabeth Price was a working woman who prized her printed cotton gown, wearing this emblem of style along with a more traditional hooded wool cloak in 1719.<sup>35</sup> This gown marked her claim as being among the more *avant garde* among her cohort, more in the mode than women conventionally dressed in drab linsey woolsey. This working woman and “the [other] mean People, the Maid Servants, and indifferently poor Persons ... the meaner Sort playing in the Street, or ... the better Sort at Boarding School”<sup>36</sup> had become part of a process of social and economic change and the inspiration for European fashion derived from Asia. The collective decisions of generations of housewives fuelled global commerce; their choices and the strategies they employed to secure these choices are as much a factor in the meaning of trade as the workings of joint stock companies. In early modern Europe, and probably in other regions at other times, international trade reacted with existing social structures to ignite a

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34 Robert Latham & William Matthews (eds), *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* vol. IV, p. 299.

35 *Proceedings on the King's Commission of the Peace ... for the City of London ... held at ... the Old Bailey*, July 1719, p. 7.

36 *The just Complaints of the poor Weavers truly represented*, reprinted in John Smith,

system of fashion-driven consumption. Gendered mechanisms shaped this consumption process.

Making global economic history a comprehensive exercise is a necessary and laudable aim; creating a global history of textiles requires recognition of the breadth of human motivation as adjuncts to trade - exploring the workings of fashion, as well as gender, is an essential part of this project.

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(ed), *Chronicum rusticum commerciale*, (London, 1747) vol, II, p. 195.