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India and the Indian Ocean in Textile Trade



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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 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 archaeological context¹. 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 continuity². 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 14th – 15th century.

The first piece to be thus identified is also at the Ashmolean Museum³. 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 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 multicoloured patterns. Both the technique and the design arrangements of pelangi clothes from Jambi resemble those found in Odhani (bandhani) clothes from India, especially Gujarat⁴.

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”⁵.

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 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 import⁶. 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 goods⁷.

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’⁸, 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 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”⁹. 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”¹⁰.

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”¹¹. Within Asia, while small quantities of textile exports from Surat 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 piece¹².

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 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.

The other major European player in the Indian Ocean trade in Indian textiles in the early modern period was the private English trader. These traders operated from ports on both the east and the west coasts of India. Over the seventeenth and the early years of the eighteenth century, the Coromandel ports witnessed private English trading activity on a much larger scale than did ports in Bengal. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, by far the most important destination for private English shipping from India was southeast Asia and the principal Indian port from which shipping was directed at the region was Madras. Textiles constituted an important part of the cargo carried to the region. The situation had, however,



changed completely by the 1760s when what Holden Furber has termed the ‘commercial revolution’ in the Indian Ocean was well under way. This revolution, completed by the 1780s, consisted in the first place of a clear domination of trade in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea by private English shipping based at Calcutta and Bombay, and in the second of an increasingly central and indeed dominant position of the trade with China and Malaya in the private English merchants’ trade from India. The American War and a Dutch counter-offensive in the Malacca straits, which closed Riau in 1784, temporarily checked the Calcutta shipping’s commercial expansion into Malaya, but in 1786 it took a more concrete form with the annexation of Penang, the first British settlement in Malaya. This was the culmination of the British private traders’ attempts at finding a foothold in southeast Asia which could serve as a base for their shipping and trade. While the principal items of export to China were opium and cotton, textiles constituted a major item taken to southeast Asia on the way to China.

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. Most Asian countries used these textiles for a variety of purposes including, at least in the case of Indonesia, for performing a variety of rituals. The imported textiles also prompted efforts at the production of similar varieties domestically, perpetuating the Indian influence on textile consumption in the archipelago.



NOTES

1 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).

2 Barnes (ed.), *Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies*, Introduction.

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

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

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

6 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).

7 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 Dagh-Register of the relevant years.

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

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

10 “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.

11 Letter from Coen to Van den Broecke dated 6 November 1621, VOC 849, ff.26v-27. The letter went on to



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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 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.

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

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