Indian Textiles, Indian Ocean and the World Economy

In 1500 cotton textiles were the centre of the manufacturing life of the Indian subcontinent and the foundation of a wide-ranging trade that spread from India via land and sea to as far as Indonesia and Japan in the east and Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Egypt and West Africa in the west (Map I.1). Various types of textiles, and in particular cotton textiles, were traded by Indian merchants in exchange for a variety of commodities ranging from spices and foodstuffs to specie and luxuries. The regions of Gujarat in western India, Coromandel in its southern part and later Bengal in the east were among the most thriving centres of manufacturing within a well articulated system of exchange.

Europeans could just marvel at the scale, sophistication and articulation of such trade. John Huyghen van Linschoten noted in his Voyage to the East Indies (1598) a “great traffique into Bengala, Pegu, Sian, and Malacca, and also to India”, adding that “there is excellent faire linnen of Cotton made in Negapatan, Saint Thomas, and Masulepatan, of all colours, and woven with divers sorts of loome workes and figures, verie fine and cunningly wrought, which is much worne in India, and better esteemed then silke, for that is higher prised than silke, for the finenes and cunning workmanship”.

1 We would like to thank Maxine Berg, Patrick O’Brien and Prasannan Parthasarathi for their comments and suggestions. Any remaining errors are ours.
2 For a comprehensive overview of trade in the Indian Ocean before the colonial period see Om Prakash, The New Cambridge History of India; Vol. II.5. European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-colonial India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), in particular ch. 1.
Map I.1. The Indian Ocean in the early modern period.
Fig. I.1. Chart of the Indian Ocean in a portolano (navigation manual) by Joan Martines of Messina, Italy, 1578. Reproduced by kind permission of the British Library, Harley 3450, no. 6.
The complexity and the high degree of penetration of Indian cotton textiles in the consumer economies of most countries facing the Indian Ocean can be fully understood by considering the artefact-based analysis carried out in recent years by Ruth Barnes at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Her research has uncovered Indian textiles in fourteenth-century Egypt similar in design to Indian cottons found in Southeast Asia (Fig. I.1). Such textiles were traded directly by Indian merchants, or through intermediaries and reached parts of Eurasia little known to Indians. By the early seventeenth century great quantities of textiles were sold regularly in Bandar Addas by Indian merchants and moved via land and sea to Persia, Baghdad and Basra where they changed hands again and reached Constantinople via Syria. The caravan trade carried Indian textiles to Ethiopia, especially cheap striped textiles, along with silver and gold, and embroidered luxury cloth as regal gifts. As early as the fourteenth century, East Africa exchanged primary products for Asian manufactured goods, cottons, other fine textiles, beads, copperware, Islamic earthenware, glass and Chinese porcelain. Considerable quantities of Asian textiles also arrived in Congo as luxury cloths designed in rich and colourful ways.

Southeast Asia was another key market for Indian textiles. When Portuguese traders arrived in the area in the early sixteenth century, Gujarati merchants dominated the trade with Melaka from the port of Cambay. Commercial links between South Asia and Southeast Asia were so strong that according to the Portuguese Tomé Pires, Melaka could not “live without Cambay, nor Cambay without Malacca”.

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imported rice, sugar, fish and conserves as well as textiles in exchange for pepper, camphor, spices, sandalwood, Chinese porcelain, silk and metals. Textiles were key in such a pattern of intra-Asian trade. Javanese and Malays, for instance, would not accept any other product, apart from textiles in exchange for foodstuffs and spices. Burma

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11 Ibid., p. 189.
exchanged rice and silver (from Pegu) for the textiles traded by Bengali merchants. Furthermore an overland caravan trade connected India with continental Asia. In the 1660s, 25–30,000 camel loads of cotton material from India reached Persia every year. Cotton textiles changed hands several times and reached central Asia, the Ottoman Empire, Eastern Europe and China.

With the rise of Europe as a new market for textiles from the early seventeenth century, littoral South Asia played an increasing role in global maritime trade. However, the major regions of supply for cotton textiles did not change: Gujarat, Bengal and Coromandel continued to be the main suppliers of textiles to world trade, though the relative importance of these regions changed, with Bengal emerging as most important among these producing regions. Similar changes occurred in the direction of export, participants, and business organization. For example, the pivotal position of Gujarat and Gujarati merchants in the Indian Ocean had been largely mediated by the demand for Indian cloth in Africa, whereas the dominance of the EIC and private traders working under the Company’s implicit (and at times clandestine) guarantee was connected with Bengal’s export trade to Europe. By 1700, Indian Ocean trade was firmly Indo-European in character and the pre-eminent article of trade was cotton textiles, displacing rice and spices that had ruled earlier networks of transaction in the Ocean. Whereas these earlier networks tended to be segmented and particularly focused on Asia, cloth created a truly global network. In the late-eighteenth century, South Asia accounted for approximately a quarter of the world’s textile output and almost certainly a larger percentage of the world’s seaborne trade in textiles. India clothed the world.

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Historical scholarship on the early modern Asian trading world has explored the pivotal role of Indian cotton textiles within this world. Breaking away from an earlier practice of treating Asian trade as a sub-plot in the story of European expansion, or to use J.C. van Leur’s words, of observing Asia ‘from the deck of a ship’, from the 1960s, contributors to this literature sought to establish the Indian Ocean littoral from the beginning of the Christian era to the eighteenth century as a world with its own distinct historiography. Central to this project was a shared understanding that, well before the Europeans began to control Asian trade and directed it to serve European consumption, they had utilized commodities, routes, and systems long established within intra-Asian trade. This scholarly enterprise, aided and constrained at the same time by its dependence on the archives of the chartered companies, has progressed along several roads.

The earliest strand is represented by the pioneering series of ‘company studies’ by Charles Boxer, Holden Furber, and Tapan Raychaudhuri. Soon after these works appeared, and in some cases even before them, historians branched off from the Ocean and the Companies into regions, entrepreneurs, cities, events, peoples and personalities, and territorial politics. The need to create an integrated account tying


the coast to the interior, land and sea, trade and production, and linking the subsidiary commercial spheres in East Africa, the Arab World, India, China, Japan, Indonesia, and continental Australasia, led to bold attempts to seek commonalities that gave the seafaring economy and society a unifying character, one quite distinct from that of the interior regions less dependent on the sea. Inspired by the work of Fernand Braudel on the Mediterranean, and those by Wilhelm Heyd and Henri Pirenne before him, K.N. Chaudhuri and Kenneth McPherson set out to search for the common preoccupations that seemed to define the unity of the Indian Ocean. Both historians emphasize the enclosed nature of the Indian Ocean by comparison with the Pacific or even the Atlantic, the Asian landmass being never too far away from the major East-West routes. Both authors emphasize the influence of the monsoon winds in setting the rhythm of trade and production almost throughout the region, and the waning of that influence from the nineteenth century. And both stress the role of trade as a channel of communication of ideas, cultures, technologies, and religions, the ‘invisible cargoes’ delivered and consumed along with commodities.

Through these works, a rich narrative history of the Indian Ocean has taken shape in the last thirty-odd years. And yet, if global historians today try to fit this history of the Ocean with themes that interest them, the meaning of that narrative could become open to question. The significance of the Indian Ocean and Indian textiles for global history is open to interpretation in at least three distinct contexts:

1. First, the significance of Indian textiles in structuring socio-economic and political relationships within the non-European world is a key subject of recent analyses. This problem is touched upon in several of the essays in this volume when questioning in what ways the trade

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of textiles impacted on cultures and economies across and beyond the Indian Ocean.

2. Second, the significance of Indian textiles within the phenomenon that economic historians call ‘the rise of the west’ continues to be a subject of intense debate. Essays in this volume critically rely on the vast scholarship that has explored how trade impacted upon West-European society in the wake of industrialization by using geographical models based on core-periphery systems.

3. And finally, the new discourse on the rise of Europe in relation to the relative decline of Asia from the eighteenth century, or more familiarly today, ‘the great divergence’, invites us to reconsider what, if any, lessons the Indian Ocean narrative carries for divergence.

The Meanings of Trade: Relational Spaces

The early modern period structured its geographies around networks based on connections, with emporia, producing regions and mobile merchants operating across vast spaces. Cottons were central to this world: they formed long-distance commercial relationships across the Indian Ocean. Cotton textiles were perhaps the most global among the various manufactured and non-manufactured commodities entering long-distance trade in the period between 1500 and 1800.\textsuperscript{17} This explains why cotton textiles have been at the centre of historians’ attention especially when discussing trade in the Indian Ocean and, more recently, when debating the challenges and limitations of early modern globalization.\textsuperscript{18}

The space of the people that purchased Indian cloth was a relational space that dramatically changed during the period here considered.


By relational space we mean locales that were particularly exposed to influences coming in from overseas. Firstly, the period saw a dramatic change in the relationship between India and Europe largely through extension of contact and exchange centred in the Indian Ocean. What direction did the change take? And why did the relationship have to change in this way? Secondly, the space changed in time with the emergence of new trading communities, the expansion of emporia such as Madras, Melaka, Manila or Batavia and the constant reconfiguration of the links forming such networks (Fig. I.2). The Indian Ocean was quintessentially a ‘space of flux’ and a ‘space in flux’. Can we discern an order in this flux?

Indian cloth was one of the agents lubricating the wheels of commerce in the early modern world, and forging closer economic, social and cultural contact between Europe, Africa, and Asia. And yet, the reasons offered to explain why Indian cottons might be in high demand in the regions around the Indian Ocean and beyond, could be quite diverse. Indian cloth functioned, among the many, as currency in Africa, as a wage good in Southeast Asia, and as a fashion article in Europe. As currency, cloth secured the provisioning of other valuable commodities, such as ivory, slaves, or gum. Guinea cloth, for example, was an indigo-dyed cloth with which initially the French paid for their imports of gum from West Africa. The trade in Indian cloth was large; it complemented – and at times displaced – local cloth, and in this specific exchange, Guinea cloth was the main form of payment, eventually turning into a currency. Ironically, the gum it purchased was needed for mordanting in Europe, a process that helped European calico printing withstand Indian competition. Nevertheless, the attempts by French manufacturers to break into the India trade failed because Indian Guinea cloth was both distinctive as cloth, and a unit of account, a function especially evident during military campaigns. Likewise, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, there was concern in Portuguese East Africa that Gujarati cloth drove up the price of ivory. Precisely because of the function of Indian cloth as currency, local and imported textiles did not necessarily compete but served different functions and often existed side by side, as Pedro Machado’s work on Portuguese East Africa shows. In Europe, fine Indian cotton and silk cloth created a different kind of market. We see in this demand not only an attempt by

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19 See Pedro Machado’s paper in this volume.
Fig. 1.3. Fort of St. George on the Coromandel Coast, Madras after Jan van Ryne, mid-eighteenth century. Reproduced by permission of the British Library, P.236.
the cultural and social elite to ‘distinguish’ themselves or mark out a cultural space through the use of new and luxurious articles of consumption: as Lemire suggests, Indian cotton textiles helped to create in Europe a new middle-class and bourgeois notion of fashion.\textsuperscript{20} Once again import substitution was attempted, but these attempts dealt with complex notions of consumption including quality, design, shape, and colour, as well as just cost.

In those areas where Indian cloth also functioned as an article of consumption, its import had different consequences. Import encouraged import-substitution and simultaneously devitalized and revived segments of indigenous manufacturing traditions as illustrated in the papers on the textile trade to Southeast Asia, Europe and Africa. Whereas some kinds of design-intensive cloths were incorporated into elite consumption in these regions – indeed even marked out the ruling classes apart from the populace – in the case of others, import-substitution was relatively easy and occurred frequently between older indigenous textile traditions. The substitution of previously imported goods with indigenous ones as one of the catalysts of economic growth is a model embraced by economists in the 1960s in development theory and readily accepted by historians to explain the economic developments of specific segments of the economy (especially in the production of consumer goods) in different times and periods. But the omnipresence of import-substitution processes occurring in different parts of the early modern world, ranging from Africa to Indonesia to Europe, diminish its explanatory power.\textsuperscript{21} And even the extension of the concept to include the relevance of exporting markets for the rising areas of substitution – what Joseph Inikori has defined as a re-export substitution model – though helpful, does not allow the creation of a comprehensive narrative of economic change.\textsuperscript{22} The importance of import and re-export substitution is particularly evident in current interpretations of European economic growth or, to be more precise, of its process of industrialization.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Riello, “Globalisation of Cotton Textiles”.
INTRODUCTION

The Meanings of Trade: Indian Ocean as a Space System

The themes of import-substitution and industrialization bring us closer to that of the origins of modern world economic inequality: what part, if any, did the Indian Ocean play in that process? The basic narrative of cotton textile manufacturing in the Indian subcontinent in the early modern period rests on the assumption that the story of manufacturing and trade of textiles is linked to the history of economic decline for the Indian subcontinent as a whole, which is located especially in the eighteenth century, though south Asian historians disagree on its chronology, causes and intensity.24 By the middle of the nineteenth century, when we conclude our analysis, India was no longer the world producer of cotton textiles. It was Britain that clothed the world. This did not just happen because of an expansion of the trade in cotton textiles beyond the Indian Ocean, but also because of a shift of the centre of manufacturing from India to England.

Already in 1934, van Leur had advanced an influential interpretation of Asian economies that projected early modern Asia as equal in many essential respects to early modern Europe, with the difference that trade tended to be socially and politically marginal within Asia. The argument contained a hint of the divergence that was to come, rooted in the relative positions of commerce within the larger regional economies. While the van Leur thesis, that Asian trade could be characterized as ‘peddler’ trade, was criticized by later authors, the latter still needed to offer an explanation for the relative decline of Indian seafarers in competition with the English and the Dutch. This was a problem that interested Ashin Das Gupta particularly, who framed his argument in terms of merchant organization. Das Gupta’s critique of the van Leur thesis took place within a context of comparative business institutions. Yet, its relevance to the divergence discourse is unmistakable. Within the mainstream theory of economic history, later inequality tends to be explained by differences in institutional quality, rather the particularities of European institutions. The significance of Das Gupta’s intervention on the theme of European seafarers’ ascendance in the Indian waters is that it potentially integrates these two themes, trade and institutional quality, together.25

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24 See in particular Ian Wendt’s paper in this volume.
25 Ashin Das Gupta, World of the Indian Ocean Merchant, passim.
A more influential form of Europe-Asia comparison is offered by the world systems school, which focuses attention upon positions of regions within a global trading system. An enterprise such as the present volume would connect easily to the world systems approach, which has taught us to think of the early modern world as a field of evolving relationships and exchanges rather than as a field divided into discrete nation states and their respective spheres of control. Extensive commodity trade conducted in capitalist markets has been around from times earlier than nations, and whereas regional states did in the past compete for control over long-distance trade, networks of trade did not ever possess one political centre. The world systems approach problematizes these worldwide and long-lasting networks by shifting the unit of economic-historical analysis from states to territorial divisions of labour. Although not units of analysis, states are important actors, for it is ultimately unequal power that maintains the system. Strong states and strong regions in core areas keep a surplus extraction and transfer-processes going.

The world systems school, despite numerous variations between major contributors and everlasting imprecision over time and space in defining the modern world system, is based on the fundamental idea that a world system is characterized by one international division of labour and that regions tend to become locked into their respective roles in this division of labour. The Indian Ocean trading world, according to this interpretation, was incorporated within the Europe-centred trading world from the eighteenth century, as the latter itself spread out partly in response to crisis at home. India and much of the littoral regions and their hinterlands were incorporated in the nineteenth century world system as ‘periphery’, meaning suppliers of labour- and land-intensive goods and importer of industrial goods.

However, as an explanatory model of the origins of inequality, the world systems approach is less than convincing. The notion that roles in Europe-Asia trade had been in some sense predetermined in favour of Europe recently came under attack from Andre Gunder Frank. Frank, himself a major architect of the argument that Europe's supremacy owed more to trade sustained by power than to exceptional local

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characteristics, made a strong case that the particular advantage Europe enjoyed in an initially Asia-centric trading world was access to silver plundered from the Americas and armed ships. Directly or indirectly, the essays in this volume are influenced by the vision of a world defined by intersecting paths along which commodities, materials, and specie flow. And yet, the essays in this volume stop short of defining this world as a ‘system’.

The difference is apparent in two respects. First, there is avoidance of conceptualizing network relations as necessarily hierarchical. Although many of the essays refer to India as a ‘core’ or manufacturing powerhouse within the Indian Ocean, this volume is wary of accepting a neo-Wallersteinian model based on core and peripheries, for, the so-called periphery had active agency in redefining the roles of all players in the manufacturing and trade of textiles across and beyond the Indian Ocean. Moreover, recent trade history shows that the spatial boundaries of the Indian Ocean remained fluid. The inclusion of China and West Africa shows how the conceptual perimeter of the Indian Ocean went well beyond its physical nature and included world areas that were connected to, but were not geographically part of, the Indian Ocean. Second, the contributions in this volume reassess the role that politically-sustained unequal exchange played in early modern trade. Instead of adopting a plainly political approach, the essays most directly concerned with the question of origins of modern world inequality also consider the role of markets, knowledge, and resource endowments to be important ones. In a large measure this openness on linking trade patterns with world inequality reflects the current state of the global history discourse, which itself has moved away from unequal exchange. This brings us to the theme that has become known as the problem of divergence.

**The Meaning of Trade: The Indian Ocean and ‘Divergence’**

All essays in this volume refer to the ‘age of Indian decline’ and ‘age of European ascendancy’ by drawing on three established images or models. The first is the *imperialism model* that sees the decline of India

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28 Frank added two further theses to this formulation. First, when this cheap source of purchasing power dried up, Europe was forced to find commodities for payment, and invented machinery. Second, the capital needed for industrial investment came from primitive accumulation or a colonial form of plunder.
as a manufacturing crisis. The interference of the Portuguese, and later the English (EIC), Dutch (VOC) and to a lesser extent other European chartered companies in the intra-Asian (the so-called ‘country trade’) and intercontinental trade was perhaps not as deleterious as previously thought. It was a second phase of European interference, this time based on a more direct control of the productive structures of textile manufacturing in India, as considered by Om Prakash and Bishnupriya Gupta in this volume, that produced profound repercussions on the ability of the system to successfully reproduce itself over time.

A second model, based on issues of *industrialization*, shifts our attention away from India and towards Europe. This model does not explain Indian economic decline directly but invokes instead a truncated narrative rather narrowly focused on England in the few decades following the middle of the eighteenth century. The ‘triumphal’ industrialization of North Western Europe is mostly solved by drawing on endogenous causes and in particular the role of technological invention. It argues that the loss of Indian primacy had little to do with India or its political situation but was the result of European achievements in the shape of new organization of labour and new technologies.

For a long time these two models operated on different geographical and conceptual planes. The last decade has seen a revision of this disjunction in response to a third model: the so-called *great divergence* model. Kenneth Pomeranz asks historians to look beyond the divisions of Europe and Asia and towards a reciprocal perspective that attempts to comprehend the dynamics of change of a landmass called Eurasia. His study of China and Western Europe has coined the expression ‘Great divergence’ that encapsulates a change whose agency does not reside in either Asia or Europe.\(^\text{29}\)

This volume is not a straightforward application of the great divergence paradigm to India and Europe.\(^\text{30}\) However, its presence is necessary to contextualise several essays focusing on Europe and Britain in a volume that proclaims to be about India and the Indian Ocean. What connects these essays and Pomeranz’s model is neither the relevance of contingencies or conjunctures, nor the basic questions asked, but a


shared belief in the pan-continental nature of the problem at stake. All essays in this volume embrace a global vision of trade, commodities, oceans, and regions. In order to explain the rise (or decline) of cotton textile manufacturing and trade in South Asia, it is not sufficient to contextualise it within the geographic parameters of the Indian ocean, or even to include casual references to Europe, Thailand, China or West Africa. This volume reflects instead on the global nature of textiles and, in the attempt to provide some explanations, questions the established assumptions put forward by narratives based on ‘miracles’ and ‘disasters’.

It is relevant to notice how Pomeranz has invited Europeanists, as well as Sinologists, South Asianists and global historians to think ‘systematically’ about how Europe’s history of industrialization fits within a global canvas of events that include contingencies and historical conjunctures. Pomeranz’s explanation of the different paths of economic development of China and Europe rests on the importance of two key factors: coal (and more broadly the importance of natural endowments) and colonies (broadly conceived as ‘favourite markets’). These allowed the north-western part of Europe to start a process of continuous economic growth not to be experienced in places like China or India for at least another century.

Divergence has shifted the explanation of a supposedly European exceptionalism (or better to say exceptional economic performances) away from a set of cultural variables that traditional historical models had favoured starting with Weber and reaching the present-day as in the works of Eric Jones and David Landes. Europe’s entrance into the industrial age is no longer seen as a quintessentially ‘European’ problem.

Whilst this book might agree with Pomeranz that a divergence between Europe and Asia came into being, it argues that this was neither ‘great’ nor ‘late’. The European ‘take off’ in the production and trade of cotton textiles is shown to be the result of a long, arduous and not always successful process that entailed not just the successful deployment of factors of production, but also the putting in place of complex mechanisms of knowledge transfer, assessment of quality, fashionability, etc. India’s ‘decline’ was similarly a protracted event whose explanation involves politics, technology and trade.

India in the nineteenth century has been seen as a ‘victim’ of the newly established European cotton textile industry. Yet, to see in this episode of decline a decisive historical discontinuity would be to underestimate two very important forms of path dependence that Indian
textiles generated. In the nineteenth century and during the Industrial Revolution, a part of the Asian manufacturing tradition above described was destroyed, although a great deal survived too to provide an impetus for an indigenous industrialization somewhat later.\textsuperscript{31} The other form of path dependence is more familiar to students of Indian political history. Europeans came to India as traders, and erected trading stations and forts in coastal regions, later to be used as ‘bridgeheads’ of British colonialism in South Asia. Did cloth exports have a role to play in political transition? From the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, the Indian Ocean trade moved from competition to greater concentration and control in the hands of merchants directly or indirectly backed up by political and military power. The key point of transition was the Battle of Plassey in 1757 which gave the English EIC enormous bargaining power with the Mughal authority. Textile history scholarship has noted that thereafter, Company merchants used their authority to coerce weavers, what Prasannan Parthasarathi calls “an interlocking of colonial authority and dominant Indian groups [that] may explain the resilience of colonialism in India”.\textsuperscript{32}

If in these accounts, politics induced changes in trade systems, it seems worthwhile to ask whether or not problems of running the Indo-European trade systems also had an effect in shaping the desire for political control over trade, as hinted by Bishnupriya Gupta’s paper in this book. Historians note almost without exception that the relationship between the English or the Dutch merchant, the Indian intermediary, and the weavers, tended to be deeply and persistently disputatious.\textsuperscript{33}


\textsuperscript{33} Om Prakash, in this volume, calls this a shift “from market-determined to coercion-based” exchange. See also for a similar argument in the context of Bengal, Hameeda Hossain, \textit{The Company Weavers of Bengal: The East India Company and the Organisation of Textile Production in Bengal 1750–1813} (Delhi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); and of Madras, Parthasarathi, \textit{Transition to a Colonial Economy}. 
The source of these conflicts was pervasive asymmetric information and the extreme difficulty of enforcing contracts in the absence of well-developed commercial law or, in some cases, because of the weakness of the territorial authority that might enforce such laws. The Europeans routinely relied on indigenous systems of informal control, for example by contracting with the headman of weaving communities, in order to ensure contract enforcement. But such a system was hardly an adequate substitute for a legal regime, for the headman system also gave rise to abuses of power.

The colloquia on textiles that produced the present volume were, thus, driven by a need to connect the Indian Ocean and Indian textiles more closely with contemporary global history. How is this task addressed in the book?

*How India Clothed the World*

Seen together, and despite differences in the narrative content and regional focus between the essays, three areas of emphasis clearly emerge in this collection. We call them ‘regions of exchange’, ‘regions of production’, and ‘regions of change’.

(i) **Regions of Exchange**

The first of the three parts in which this book is divided looks at non-western markets for Indian cloth, in effect tying Indian textiles with Asian and African producers and consumers. Indian cloth was received in markets that were physically and culturally worlds apart. This section focuses on processes and outcomes of economic and cultural interaction rather than on classic merchant-dominated narratives of trade. The essays included in this section emphasise the role played by the so-called ‘receiving regions’ in their ‘commodification’ of imported goods and its interconnexions to productive structures. The interplay between intra- and inter-regional competition was as important in determining the success of Indian textiles as advantages in the manufacturing and distribution of these commodities.

Reid shows that Indian cotton cloth was the key with which successive traders from ‘above the winds’ unlocked the markets for tropical products of Southeast Asia. The Europeans who entered the Indian Ocean in search of spices similarly used cloth purchases in India to trade against spices. In the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,
however, this trade stagnated under quasi-monopoly conditions, while India found new markets for its cloth in Europe. Southeast Asians, less able to afford the higher priced Indian textiles, increased their own production in the eighteenth century. In the great revolution of 1790-1820, however, British manufactured cloth began its spectacular career as a cheaper replacement for Indian cloth, and took over one Southeast Asian market after another. The paper traces these changes from the viewpoint of the Southeast Asian consumer.

Pedro Machado’s paper moves from the wider political economy governing exchange in the Indian Ocean to considering the role of merchants. His chapter sees the Indian Ocean as constituted by distinct regions that contained networks of exchange catering for specific markets, but also overlapped and intersected in complex webs of economic and cultural relationships to create an integrated ‘inter-regional arena.’ He explores the particularities that structured the chains of relation connecting Gujarat in north-western India to Mozambique and East Central Africa between the second half of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. Although the place of Gujarat has been correctly regarded as central in the history of nineteenth-century western Indian Ocean commercial systems, that of East Africa has tended to be marginalised. His paper emphasises instead the importance of uncovering links of connection for developing an understanding of the dynamics that shaped relationships in this oceanic space.

Inikori considers the relationship between local manufacturing and international trade. There is evidence, the chapter argues, that cotton cloth was an important part of the long-distance trade of West Africa’s sub-regions for centuries before the arrival of European traders on the Atlantic coast in the mid-fifteenth century. The early European traders followed the existing pattern of West Africa’s inter-regional trade and became carriers of West Africa’s cotton cloths from production regions to markets in other regions. Given this long history of cotton cloth production, it is surprising that the cotton textile industry did not develop to the point of proto-industrial organization anywhere in West Africa by the mid-nineteenth century. Inikori’s paper argues that imported textiles exchanged bartered for slaves forcefully procured in the hinterland had adverse effects on inter-regional trade and the growth of the market economy and were the main factors inhibiting the economic growth of Africa and the production of textiles.

Shifting to the opposite end of the ‘relational’ space of the Indian Ocean, China, Huw Bowen examines the role of cotton in cementing
the multinational operations of the EIC. Bowen investigates the role of European commercial and political power in shaping new forms of interactions and connections across the sphere of the Indian Ocean. In the late eighteenth century large amounts of raw cotton began to be exported from India to China, thereby enabling the Chinese cotton industry to survive a period of acute agricultural crisis and dislocation. At the heart of this paper lies a discussion of how British imperial expansion on the subcontinent acted as a catalyst for this process as the Company began to use the trade in raw cotton as a means of transferring funds from India to Canton for the purpose of financing the growing tea trade, thereby facilitating the flow of ‘tribute’ from Asia to London.

Kaoru Sugihara extends the intra-Asian trade story beyond the eighteenth century and beyond Indian cotton textiles. His contribution helps us rethink traditional chronologies that depict trade within the Indian Ocean as entering a phase of contraction in the early nineteenth century to coincide with the rise of a new Euro-centred system of industrial production of textiles. Sugihara’s paper reconstructs trade statistics to argue that there was a growth of intra-Asian trade during the first half of the nineteenth century, and that its size was at least comparable to Asia’s long-distance trade (the sum of exports and imports) with the West. At this time the restrictions imposed by Dutch and English East India Companies and the Qing Government were gradually removed, which provided country traders and Asian merchants with great opportunities for local and regional trade. The growth of intra-regional trade became partly self-generating, and created a new Asian international market for necessities such as grains, other foodstuffs and cotton cloth, going well beyond the intent of colonial rule and the need for long-distance trade settlement. The opium trade, though crucial for the opening of China to the West, represented a limited aspect of this resurgence.

The essays included in this section propose a narrative or commercial, social and cultural contact through the media of textiles that transcends classic interpretations based on the dominance of a manufacturing core (India) over consumer markets across the Indian Ocean, continental Asia and Africa. They show the complexity of commercial relationships, but also the effects and responses on indigenous economies in places as different as Southeast Asia, West and East Africa. All essays here included suggest a more active role of what where once called ‘peripheral’ regions not just in controlling the flow of commodities...
that they received, as well as their quality and value, but also in developing their own autonomous production through continuous processes of import substitution. The world of trade of the Indian Ocean was based on a web of connections with continuous stimuli and responses linking disparate parts of the globe. This system, as Sugihara argues, was not shadowed by the arrival of European traders but continued to prosper and develop well into the nineteenth century, thus suggesting that the classic narrative of the demise of Indian textile production is in need of serious revision.

(ii) Regions of Production: India and the Problem of Decline

The second part of this volume deals with production and exchange of textiles within the major regions in the Indian subcontinent, and discusses how much and how profoundly commerce connected with the regional manufacturing economies of South Asia. Five essays position Indian textile manufacturing within an altogether broader conceptual and historical context. Agency is taken as a key factor in unravelling the notion and creation of a comparative advantage beyond the proximate determinants of prices and quantities. This shift in focus highlights the central importance of political transformation in understanding the changing international competitiveness of Indian textiles.

David Washbrook contextualises the link between textile trade and patterns of economic growth in South India. The southern peninsula of India participated strongly in the expansion of global textile trade in the early modern period. However, few attempts have been made to assess the impact of this trade on the local economy. Washbrook explores these issues by drawing on theories of early modern growth and argues that, while there was a positive response to the trade in terms of the expansion of textile and ancillary forms of production, no lasting basis for economic growth was established. Rather, problems of food supply and of political insecurity were exacerbated by the extension of trading networks. After a period of steady expansion to the end of the seventeenth century, the southern textile industry experienced increasing difficulties during the eighteenth century.

Ian Wendt contextualises previous contributions within their wider historiographical contexts. Generations of historians have been at pains to argue both that textile industry in South Asia made major contributions to the world economy and that it suffered massive decline
in the face of European corporate and colonial exploitation. Wendt’s chapter examines the structure of the early modern South Indian textile industry in its broadest dimensions – from cotton fibres to commerce in finished cloth. Complex forms of specialization, credit relations and production relations enabled the South Indian textile industry to thrive. His chapter appraises in particular disruptions and continuities in the Indian handicraft textile industry: the elimination of female, agrarian and part-time labour, in contrast with the remarkable persistence of handloom weavers and textile merchants. Wendt argues that ‘de-industrialization’ in South Asia can be better characterized as the de-agrarianization, masculinization and professionalization of the textile industry.

The larger context of political and economic change that accompanied early colonial rule in India forms the backdrop to the papers contributed by Om Prakash and Lakshmi Subramanian. Prakash analyses the changes in the structure of textile manufacturing and procurement in Bengal in the second half of the eighteenth century as a result of the assumption of political authority in the region by the English East India Company. Prakash argues that a market-based system was replaced by one embedded in coercion of local merchants as well as artisans. Consequently, the established picture of a ruined textile industry in Bengal seems to be in need of substantive revision.

Complementing Prakash’s analysis, Subramanian concentrates upon the nature of relations between labour and capital in the half century of transition to colonial rule, to identify the strategies that both Indian producers, middlemen and traders deployed to deal with the changing political situation. Revisionist historiography on the eighteenth century has tended to foreground the merchant-financier in the political economy of the successor states. The experience of the merchant groups in Western India endorses this position – here, intermediary merchants and brokers were able for some time to resist the attempts of the EIC to introduce structural adjustments in the existing system of textile procurement and commerce. This did not, however, mean that merchants and manufacturers were operating from positions of great advantage: the prevailing conditions of political insecurity, shortage of money, rising prices of yarn owing to erratic supplies, combined with the company’s policy of trying to restrict the mobility of weavers constituted very major problems that found reflection in business failures, resistance and desertion by weavers. What little remained of their bargaining power depended upon the extent of the Company’s power in the region.
Once this changed, and Surat was annexed, politics entered the equation leaving merchants, bankers and artisans exposed to the full weight of the Company’s hegemony.

This part concludes with a paper by Bishnupriya Gupta exploring the eighteenth-century change in the textile trade between India and Europe. The historical literature notes that the decline in the last decades of the century coincided with the political domination of the Indian subcontinent by the EIC. The literature has seen political factors as central to the decline. As the EIC, the argument goes, acquired revenue rights in Bengal and gained control over the political and legal structure, the exploitation of weavers increased and consequently there was a squeeze on the price paid to the producers. Disputing this supply-side story, Gupta argues that the Company’s agents were less able to impose their command over the market than has been previously suggested. The EIC had limited capacity to impose contract compliance and was a price taker in the world market for textiles. The absence of an increasing trend in textile prices in the European market from the middle of the eighteenth century and the eventual decline in nominal and real terms can explain the failure on the part of the EIC to increase procurement prices.

(iii) Regions of Change: The New European Markets

The final part of this book considers the ‘extension’ of trade in cotton textiles to Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Scholarship has been slow to consider the role of Indian textiles in what is still portrayed a ‘European’ story of industrialization and economic development based on the manufacturing of cotton textiles through the adoption of new technology. This group of papers challenges several aspects of such an accepted view by offering a more balanced perspective of the relationship between Indian and European cotton manufacturing. Papers tackle the issue of the transfer of technological, productive, and material knowledge between India and Europe. They address this important and complex issue by drawing on topics as different as concepts quality, information, fashion and manufacturing skills.

Giorgio Riello seeks to contextualize the trade of textiles between Europe and Asia by analyzing its quantitative, as well as the qualitative impact on the European economy. The records of the English, Dutch, French, Portuguese and Swedish East India companies provide precious information about the import of Asian textiles into Europe. His paper shows how, contrary to what is suggested by most literature on
the so-called English ‘calico craze’, cottons entering Britain were largely white and unprinted. He argues that more importance should be given to the European chartered companies’ strategies of ‘learning’ from Asian producers and traders: the 200-year period during which Europeans engaged in the trade of textiles within and beyond the Indian Ocean served as an ‘apprenticeship’ and should be seen as a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for their eventual engagement in the production of such products at home and their trade within the Atlantic Ocean. The ‘European ascendancy’, if one wishes to still call it so, can no longer be explained in isolation and must recognise and analyse its profound linkages with the history of trade and production within the Indian Ocean.

George Souza develops the analysis of knowledge transfer between Asia and Europe by considering the importance of dyeing materials and the technical expertise of printing on textiles. Rather than unilaterally embracing Europe’s industrial divergence as the linchpin to explain the different economic trajectories of Europe and Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Souza argues that technical convergence was necessary. In order to develop an indigenous cotton textile industry, European textile manufactures had to converge through the acquisition and incorporation of new materials and superior technical knowledge and practice from other parts of the globe. Asia, America, and Africa were the potential sources of supply of new raw materials and India and China, in particular, were the potential sources of technical knowledge in the area of textile production. Souza’s paper examines the comparative superiority of Indian cotton technology. It isolates one example of Indian cotton textile production and compares it with an equivalent cotton textile produced contemporaneously in France. It determines how, for what reasons and which aspects of Indian cotton textile production technology were investigated by the French.

Indian textiles did not just provide commercial, material and technical exemplars. Beverly Lemire argues that they were also key elements in shaping new notions of fashionability and taste in Europe. But commerce and fashion were complemented by new concepts of quality both for product and manufacturing processes in Europe. By 1500, the traffic in vibrant printed textiles linked together disparate regions of the world. Indian cottons were unmatched by other fibres in terms of cost and quality, providing a key medium for the global circulation of print imagery. The appetite for these textiles made India the source of the most significant global consumer commodity before
industrialization. Lemire’s paper examines 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.

Maxine Berg investigates the connections between the global luxury trade and the invention of quality consumer goods in eighteenth-century Europe, and especially Britain. In her paper, she argues that the trade in Chinese and Indian export-ware stimulated both product and process innovation in Europe. Quality was the key priority of the major textile inventions of the period, as it was for improvements in earthenware, glass and metal ornaments. Asian export commodities provided models of product-type and large-scale production; metropolitan market institutions selling Asian luxuries also shaped markets for new British consumer goods. Cotton textiles, especially muslins and printed calicoes, are examples of what Berg calls ‘a quality road to industrialization’ that characterized vast parts of British manufacturing innovation in the eighteenth century.

Prasannan Parthasarathi’s concluding paper takes us back to India in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century. Parthasarathi argues that, for the entire duration of the eighteenth century, the wages and standards of living of Indian weavers were not inferior to those of their European counterparts. The strong manufacturing position of India ensured prosperous conditions and a degree of independence that was not enjoyed by textiles workers in many parts of Europe. This reassessment of the relative position of labour in the Indian subcontinent is used as the background for the analysis of the issue of decline of textile manufacturing in India vis-à-vis the industrialization of Europe. Parthasarathi argues that indeed in many areas of India textile spinning and weaving declined, but that it was mostly the female workforce employed in spinning to be affected in the early part of the century by the import of large quantities of cheap (but good quality) yarn from England. He argues for a more nuanced understanding of decline in which the loss of international markets for Indian textiles in the first half of the nineteenth century is distinct from the success of British wares on Indian markets in the second half of the century.

**Conclusion**

The book hopes to meet two goals. The first of the two aims is to provide both scholars and students with a comprehensive introduction to the
key issues characterising the story of cotton textiles in the Indian Ocean. It does so by drawing on the categories and conceptual vocabulary of global history and on its recent theoretical formulations.

The second objective of the book is to address a historiographical agenda discussed in more detail in the second and the third sections of this chapter. The idea is to revisit the Indian Ocean and Indian textiles in search of new meanings. The idea of the present volume, and the symposia that it follows, is to unpack these two boxes, already familiar to specialist historians, and to re-examine the contents of these boxes, in the light of new themes in global history. Three themes in particular receive emphasis in this chapter: intermediation in knowledge, the need to build a Europe-Asia connected narrative on divergence, and the need to explore relational spaces armed with a wider range of examples than is possible within region-centred stories.

The book proposes a notion of the Indian Ocean formed by fluxes (material, but also webs of power, skills, fashion, etc.) that transcends the traditional geographic boundaries of the Indian Ocean as a maritime space. Central to the theme of this book is an assessment of the relative decline of Indian textile production and trade vis-à-vis the process of economic transformation that characterised European industrialization from the second half of the eighteenth century. Several of the papers here included provide a reading that challenges established interpretations and show the diverse and sometimes persistent role of India’s manufacturing on world history – a position that seems more consistent with the present-day economic resurgence of South Asia than one of decay and decline.