INTRODUCTION: THE WORLD OF SOUTH ASIAN TEXTILES, 1500–1850

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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, because of the finenes and cunning workmanship”.

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1 We would like to thank Maxine Berg, Patrick O’Brien and Prasannan Parthasarathi for their comments and suggestions. Any remaining errors are ours.
Map I.1. The Indian Ocean in the early modern period.