A great degree of Asia’s success in textile production in the early modern period was derived from the technology employed by the region’s artisans in selecting, handling, applying, and incorporating diverse raw materials, especially dyes and mordant, in their crafting of all fibres and in particular with cotton. Regardless of profound differences, textile producers in India and China shared many general and specific textile technologies, especially, in silks and cottons. The technical level was higher in Asia than Europe. This paper examines the comparative superiority of Indian cotton technology in the early modern period by isolating one example of Indian cotton textile production and comparing it with a contemporaneous and an equivalent cotton textile produced in Europe.

Generic terms like ‘Indian textiles’ and even ‘Indian cotton textiles’, it is argued, have to be disaggregated and placed within their geographical, technical, and commercial contexts. This examination, therefore, focuses on the French experience with Indian cottons and wood-block printed chintz technology in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and into the first half of the eighteenth century. While similar comparative opportunities between western Indian and other European (English, Dutch, and, possibly, Iberian) wood-block chintz painting producers may exist, the French example was chosen because of the quality and specificity of the documented evidence and written descriptions that permit such an evaluation. This paper also discusses how, for what reasons and which aspects of Indian cotton textile production technology were investigated by the French. It also seeks to establish whether and by what means, the knowledge that the French acquired was diffused and incorporated into their production methods.

While much has been made of Europe’s industrial divergence with Asia and the rest of the world in the nineteenth century, it should be remembered that before Europe could diverge technically from
other parts of the globe, European textile manufacture had to converge through the acquisition and incorporation of new materials and superior technical knowledge or practice from other parts of the globe. Asia, America, and Africa were the sources of supply of new raw materials and India and China were the potential sources of technical knowledge in the area of textile production. Alternatively, and conjointly, Europe (as well as all other regions around the globe) could advance and develop its textile production through new or incremental advances in technical knowledge, production processes, machines, and apparatus.1

Indian Cottons and Wood-Block Printed Chintz Technology

Three Frenchmen investigated and wrote separately long and highly detailed first-hand reports about Indian cotton textile production in general and its technology, especially the methods of printing, painting, and dyeing in particular in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century. They dealt geographically with some of the primary port city complexes of India and two of the three centres of Indian textile production: first, western India (Surat – Ahmedabad in Gujarat, including Sironji in Rajputana and Burhanpur in Khandesh); and second, southern India on the Coromandel Coast (including, among the many, Masulipatam, Pulicat, Tegenapatam, Tranquebar, and Negapatnam). They did not deal with the third, north-east India or Bengal, including Orissa, and the Ganges delta (Hugli – Kasimbazar).2

The first two authors (Roques and Beaulieux) were representatives of the French East India Company, respectively, a commercial and the

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