Indian cotton is repeatedly mentioned by ancient Greek and Latin authors. The "wool-bearing trees" excited the admiration of Greek historians 1); Indian cotton garments were accurately described 2). Moreover, we are informed by the Periplus maris Erythraei, that Indian cotton goods were exported to the West 3). The cotton-trade to the East is indicated by a Chinese text, which mentions a Gupta king, who sent cotton stuffs to China at the beginning of the 6th century A.D. 4).

A good deal of the cotton stuff exported probably has been manufactured by way of government commission. In the Arthaśāstra 5) we are told that the "Superintendent of yarns" (sūtraḥdhyakṣa) should cause yarn to be spun by women depending on support of the state 6), while

1) See Herodotus VII, 65: "There are trees which grow wild, the fruit of which is a wool exceeding in beauty and goodness that of sheep. The Indians make their clothes of this tree wool."; Theophrastus, Hist. Plant., IV, 4: "The trees from which the Indians make cloth have a leaf like that of the black mulberry, but the whole plant resembles the dog rose. They set them in plains arranged in rows so as to look like vines at a distance".
2) See Arrian, Ind., ch. 16: "There are in India trees bearing, as it were, bunches of wool. The natives made linen garments of it, wearing a shirt which reached to the middle of the leg, a sheet folded around the shoulders, and turban rolled round the head, and the linen made by them from this substance was fine, and whiter than any other".
3) Periplus, ch. 8 ff.; 31.
6) KA 2. 23. 2: ūṛnāvalkakārpāpatilālasanāksaumāni ca vidhavānyangākānyāpraṇājita-danda-pratikārinibhiḥ rūpajīvīmātrākrāhīr vṛddhārajaḍāsābhīr vyaparotpasthānadevadāsābhīs ca kartayaḥ, "he should get yarn spun out of wool, bark-fibres, cotton, silk-cotton hemp and flax, through widows, crippled women, maidens, women who have left their homes and women paying off their fine by personal labour, through mothers of courtesans, through old female slaves of the king and through female slaves of temples whose service of the gods has ceased" (Kangle).
the work of weaving should be done by artisans on the base of a working-agreement 1).

In addition to this state fabrication cotton certainly has been manufactured privately not only for home consumption, but also for self-conducted business. The Divyāvadāna tells the story of a Brahmin woman eager of earning money 2): taya vītiḥam gatvā kārpaṇaḥ kṛitaḥ. tām parikarmayitvā śāksyaṁ sūtraṁ kartitaṁ sobhanena kuśindena kārṣāpaṇasahasramūlayā yamalī vāyita. taya brāhmaṇa uktāḥ: “brāhmaṇa, asyā yaṃ laṭāḥ kārṣāpaṇasahasramūlayam, gṛhitvā vītiḥam gaccha; yadi kacīd yacati kārṣāpaṇasahasreṇa dātavya”, “(The wife of the Brahmin) went to the market and bought cotton. Having prepared it, she spun a fine thread and caused a stuff of the value of one thousand coins to be woven by a skilled weaver. Then she said to the Brahmin: ‘Brahmin, the value of this stuff is one thousand coins, take it and go to the market; if anybody wants it, give it to him for one thousand coins’”. In this passage the manufacturing of the cloth is carried out in three phases: the preparation (parikarma) of the cotton, the spinning (kartana) of the thread and the weaving (vāya) of the stuff. As in the Arthaśāstra, the preparation and the spinning is done by the woman herself, while the weaving is performed by an expert.

The methods of spinning and weaving are well known by modern descriptions and even by ancient texts 3), while the preparation deserves further investigation. The modern, pre-industrial preparation of the cotton for spinning, as reported by some authors of the 19th century 4),

1) KA 2. 23. 7: kṛtakarmapramaṇākālavatanaḥsaptiḥ kārṇiḥ ca karma kāryaḥ, pratisamsargam ca gacchet, “and he should cause work to be carried out by artisans producing goods with an agreement as to the amount of work, time and wage, and should maintain close contact with them” (Kangle). Cf. R. Thapar, “State Weaving Shops of the Mauryan Period”, Journal of Indian Textile History, Vol. 4, 1959, p. 65-68.