

Cotton Textile Exports from the Indian Subcontinent, 1680-1780

Prasannan Parthasarathi¹

Introduction

The scale of the cotton textile export trade from the Indian subcontinent in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is of enormous interest for both specialists of South Asia as well as global economic historians. For the latter, South Asia's place in the manufacturing economy of the eighteenth-century world is of great importance. These goods were a major link between the trading worlds of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans as cotton cloth was needed in massive quantities for the purchase of slaves in West Africa. For historians of South Asia, the scale of the export trade is essential for understanding the structure of the eighteenth century economy and for the transformations that accompanied the establishment of colonial rule in the nineteenth.

Despite the importance of textile trade from South Asia, the data to calculate its size is not available. The purchases of European companies are known with some precision, but those of other buyers are hardly known at all. No records exist for the enormous numbers of Asian merchants who conducted a trade to west, central and southeast Asia and east Africa. The quantities bought by the large numbers of European private traders who were active in South Asia are also a mystery. Nevertheless, it is essential to have some sense of the place of Indian cotton cloth exports, both globally and within the subcontinent. That is what this paper will seek to do.

¹ Boston College. Email: parthasa@bc.edu. Not to be cited without the author's consent.

Textile Exports from South Asia

Textile exports from the subcontinent in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were sent all over the world. The Companies and traders of northwestern Europe sold the cloth in southeast and west Asia, north and west Africa and Europe itself. At the same time, there was a trade to Manila and from there, via Spanish shipping, to the Americas. Armenians and Asian traders carried the cottons to north and east Africa and southeast, central and west Asia. Stephen Dale has documented the expansion of the Asian merchant trading network as far north as Moscow. From the late seventeenth century European markets were largely closed to Indian textiles. And in the eighteenth century the two largest markets for the cloth of the subcontinent, excluding the local one of course, were probably in the eastern Mediterranean, north Africa and west Asia, and west Africa.

North Africa and West Asia

Much of north Africa and west grew cotton and manufactured it into cloth. In Anatolia cotton was cultivated widely and the spinning and weaving of the fiber was carried out both in coastal towns and in the interior. In the Balkans, there were several centers of cotton cloth production, including Thessaly and central Greece. In Arab territories, Syria was well known for its cotton goods, particularly those from the city of Aleppo. Egypt was also a center for both the cultivation and manufacture of the fiber. There was also a significant trade in cotton cloth within this large region the eastern Mediterranean. In particular, cloth from Anatolia and the Balkans was consumed widely further north, reputedly from the Danube to the Caucasus. In the case of Anatolia, according to Halil Inalcik, “the cotton industry, in terms of dimensions of its production and trade, constituted the most important sector of the Turkish economy after grains.”² Despite the scale of local cotton cloth manufacturing, cloth imports from the Indian subcontinent had been popular for several centuries. Drawing upon textiles

² Halil Inalcik, “The Ottoman Cotton Market and India: The Role of Labor Cost in Market Competition,” in his *The Middle East and the Balkans under the Ottoman Empire: Essays on Economy and Society* (Bloomington, Ind., 1993), p. 264.

contained in the Ashmolean Museum, Ruth Barnes has carefully documented the popularity of printed cotton cloth in the bazaars of Cairo in the late medieval times. Much of this cloth also appears to have been of fairly coarse quality, meeting the tastes and budgets of the ordinary buyer.³

It is likely that the trade from the subcontinent to north Africa and west Asia picked from the late sixteenth century as the influx of New World silver fueled trade with the Indian Ocean. Over the course of the seventeenth century it appears that Indian cotton cloth increasingly made inroads in these markets. The features that had made them so attractive to West Europeans--low prices, beautiful colors and designs, and high quality—appealed to consumers in Anatolia, Southeastern Europe, the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire as well as Iran.

It is difficult to obtain direct evidence on the impact that Indian imports had on cotton cloth manufacturing in north Africa or west Asia. However, there are several pieces of indirect evidence that suggest that Indian cloth came to displace local manufacturing in some of these areas in the eighteenth century.

First, exports of raw cotton grew enormously from the eastern Mediterranean over the course of the eighteenth century. Exports of cotton to France from Syria (excluding Palestine and Aleppo) and Izmir, which in this period became the major Anatolian port, grew rapidly over the century, as may be seen from the following table.

³ Ruth Barnes, *Indian Block-Printed Textiles in Egypt: The Newberry Collection in the Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford, 1997).

Table 1. French Imports of Levant Cotton in the Eighteenth Century

(Annual Average in pounds)

	1700-02	1717-21	1736-40	1750-54	1785-89
Raw Cotton	949,520	4,167,680	6,773,580	11,561,000	21,115,380
Yarn	3,728,1200	3,433,540	3,275,580	3,047,660	2,377,100

Source: Roger Owen, "Introduction to Part II," in Thomas Naff and Roger Owen, *Studies in Eighteenth Century Islamic History* (Carbondale, Ill., 1977), p. 151.

Although figures are not available, cotton exports from southeastern Europe also boomed in the eighteenth century.⁴

In this period, the population of these areas remained more or less steady, which suggests no great increase in area cultivated under cotton. Nor is there any evidence of shifts from other crops to cotton or of changes in cultivation technique that would have increased cotton yields. These facts suggest that cotton was being removed from local manufacturing and sent abroad. Local demand for cotton cloth was then being met with imports from the Indian subcontinent.

Second, price data from the eighteenth century also suggests that Indian cloth was becoming more important in Ottoman markets. In Cairo, the price of raw cotton doubled between the late seventeenth century and the late 1740s, and more than doubled again from between 1750 and the 1790s. These price increases may be seen in the following table.

⁴ Bruce McGowan, "The Age of the Ayans, 1699-1812," in Halil Inalcik with Donald Quataert (eds.), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, vol. 2, 1600-1914 (Cambridge, 1994).

Table 2. Cotton Prices in Cairo, 1687-1797

(paras per qantar, in constant prices, 1687=100)

	Price	Index
1687	278	100
1718	273	98
1729	426	153
1731	234	84
1732	300	108
1733	273	98
1734	266	96
1735	259	93
1736	238	86
1742	361	130
1747	558	201
1754	575	207
1782	817	294
1784	1021	367
1789	1200	432
1790	1200	432
1797	1320	475

Source: Andre Raymond, *Artisans and Commerçants au Caire au xviii Siecle*, 2 vols., (Damascus, 1973), vol. 1, p. 65.

While cotton prices rose very dramatically in the eighteenth century, prices of cloth remained more or less stable in the period, which is shown in the following table.

Table 3. An Index of Cotton and Linen Cloth Prices in Cairo, 1700-1789

(1700-1709=100)

1700-09	100
1710-19	134
1720-24	174
1731-39	98
1740-49	115
1750-59	122
1776-81	109
1786-89	136

Source: See Table 2.

Although this cloth price index is not perfect--it is constructed on the basis of prices for both linen cloth and cotton cloth—it does show that the prices of raw cotton and cloth diverged in the eighteenth century. Driven by expanding demand in Europe, raw cotton prices rose dramatically. (For this reason, Ottoman traders were acting rationally when they chose to send more cotton to Europe.) Cloth prices in Cairo, however, did not keep up with the inflation in the price of the raw material. It is likely that in part this was because prices for cloth were determined by the cost of Indian imports and these cheap imports made it difficult for Cairo artisans and merchants to pass on cost increases.

Finally, we have evidence that in the early nineteenth century, Indian cloth was consumed widely in the Ottoman Empire. Jean Aubin traveled through the empire in 1812 to collect information for a cotton manufacturer in Glasgow and reported on the popularity of Indian textiles.⁵ The deep penetration of Indian cloth in the eastern Mediterranean is also suggested by the fact from British cloth that was exported to the region was from the late eighteenth century was marketed under Indian names. These were British imitations of Indian varieties.

⁵ A. B. Cunningham (ed.), “The Journal of Christophe Aubin: A Report on the Levant Trade in 1812,” *Archivum Ottomanicum*, viii (1983).

West Africa

A second major market for Indian cotton goods was in west Africa, where these textiles came to play a crucial role in the Atlantic slave trade. In the case of British trade with west Africa in the eighteenth century, 65% to 70% of exports consisted of textiles. Indian cotton varieties always loomed large in this trade, especially between 1720 and 1750 when about half of all textiles exported from Britain to west Africa were Indian. After 1750, the Indian share of textile exports fell to between 30% and 40%, but in these decades the quantity of Indian cloth sold actually increased.⁶

⁶ Marion Johnson, *Anglo-African Trade in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. J. T. Lindblad and Robert Ross (Leiden, 1990), pp. 28-9.

Table 4. India and England piece goods sales in west Africa by decade, 1699-1808

Pounds Sterling

Decade	India	England
1699-1708	128,752	79,359
1709-1718	101,586	9,216
1719-1728	493,580	75,331
1729-1738	775,805	40,848
1739-1748	627,171	13,887
1749-1758	481,196	329,654
1759-1768	762,427	817,513
1769-1778	1,258,738	797,295
1779-1788	1,166,079	1,098,402
1789-1798	2,404,492	1,847,032
1799-1808	3,207,133	2,895,036

Source: Johnson, *Anglo-African Trade*, pp. 54-5.

From the mid-eighteenth century the export of both Indian and British cotton textiles skyrocketed as British slave purchases took off. Further fueling the explosion in textile exports was the decline in the terms of trade for purchasers of slaves. From the mid-eighteenth century Indian cloth accounted for 1/6 to 1/4 of total British exports to Africa.

Table 5. British and Total Slave Exports from Africa, 1698-1807

Decade	British	Total
1698-1709	164,709	359,940 [1700-1709]
1710-1719	145,365	402,870
1720-1729	242,675	516,650
1730-1739	276,013	599,510
1740-1749	194,570	551,060
1750-1759	251,329	581,890
1760-1769	391,243	783,200
1770-1779	339,593	717,820
1780-1789	349,344	793,860
1790-1799	416,837	759,240
1800-1807	280,831	605,770 [1800-1809]

Sources: David Richardson, "The Eighteenth-Century British Slave Trade: Estimates of its Volume and Coastal Distribution in Africa," *Research in Economic History*, 12 (1989), p. 157, Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 208-9.

As Table 5 shows, the explosion in British slave purchases in the second half of the eighteenth century was part of a broader expansion in the trade in which other Europeans stepped up their demand as well with repercussions for the Indian subcontinent. According to Herbert Klein, "In five selected years (1767, 1769, 1771, 1774, and 1776) slave ships from the port of Rouen shipped a total of 3.9 million livres tournois worth of goods to Africa. Of this figure, 1.4 million livres (60,000 pounds sterling) consisted of Indian textiles." This translates to 36% of the total value of goods exchanged in west Africa in those years. Indian textiles were also 63% of the value of

all cloth.⁷ Between 1761 and 1792, French traders purchased some 720,000 slaves in west Africa, which was a sizable fraction of their total purchases 1.015 million slaves in the eighteenth century.⁸

French and British sales of Indian cloth in west Africa in the 1770s came to about 185,000 pounds sterling per year. This may be compared with a French estimate from 1785 that annual sales of Indian textiles in Istanbul came to 15 million livres tournois (380,000 pounds sterling). According to the same source, the Istanbul market accounted for two-thirds of the Indian cottons consumed in the Levant, which would put total Levant consumption at 570,000 pounds sterling.⁹

Textile Exports and the Economy of South Asia

How important were these textile exports for economic life in the Indian subcontinent? To answer this question requires the values of exports and total production. To obtain both of these figures is hazardous guess work at best because of limitations of information. Despite the paucity of data, several historians have ventured some estimates for the whole or some portion of the export trade as a share of textile output. And not surprisingly, these estimates range from exports being a rather trivial part of cloth production to their great importance for textile manufacturing in the eighteenth century.

The preeminent spokesman of the rather trivial camp is Tirthankar Roy who has argued in several places that textile exports accounted for perhaps 1% of Indian textile production. There are a number of problems with Roy's estimate.

⁷ Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 87.

⁸ Robert Louis Stein, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business* (Madison, 1979), p. 211.

⁹ Gilles Veinstein, "Commercial Relations Between India and the Ottoman Empire (Late Fifteenth to Late Eighteenth Centuries): A Few Notes and Hypotheses," in Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau (eds.), *Merchants, Companies and Trade: Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 110.

The figure for exports of 50 million yards is highly problematic and likely to be wildly off the mark. Roy has obtained this figure from Michael Twomey's essay on employment in the textile industry in nineteenth-century India.¹⁰ Twomey himself did not calculate this himself, but cites R. Robson's *The Cotton Industry in Britain*, published in 1957, as his source. Turning to Robson, one reads in the first paragraph of the work that immediately prior to the Industrial Revolution that the export trade in cotton goods from India was "quite considerable—amounting to perhaps 50 million yards per annum." The methods by which Robson obtained this figure can hardly be called rigorous as they are based on two sources. From one source he obtained a figure for exports to the United Kingdom between 1791 and 1800, which came to about 30 million yards. From the other, a figure was obtained for exports to the rest of Europe, America and Arabia and the Persian Gulf, which came to about 20 million yards. This is not exhaustive research and there are many problems with these figures.¹¹

From the final decade of the eighteenth century cloth exports from South Asia had already begun to decline for a variety of reasons, including the monopsony that the English East India Company had built in Bengal and South India, which blocked many buyers from obtaining cloth. Therefore, even for exports to the United Kingdom, the 1790s can hardly be taken as representative of the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries. In the final decades of the eighteenth century, French East India Company purchases also reached sizable proportions and in some years were actually greater than those of the English Company. This is not reflected in Robson's calculation. Finally, Robson's figure includes only the trade of Europeans so it excludes the sizable exports of cloth that was carried on by Asian merchants.

Roy's estimate for the total output of the textile industry is also flawed because includes the production of India as a whole. This is anachronistic since India was not a political entity in the eighteenth century. More importantly, it ignores the fact that much of the production of cotton cloth for export was concentrated in a few regions of the

¹⁰ Michael J. Twomey, "Employment in Nineteenth Century Indian Textiles," *Explorations in Economic History*, 20 (1983), p. 40.

¹¹ R. Robson, *The Cotton Industry of Britain* (London, 1957), p. 1.

subcontinent, chiefly in Gujarat, Bengal and Southeastern India and to a lesser extent in the Punjab. There were several areas where significant quantities of cotton was grown, spun into yarn and woven into cloth, but were not connected to a very great extent to export markets. In the late seventeenth century, only 7% of English East India Company cloth exports were manufactured in the heart of North India or Hindustan. Nevertheless, the region had a thriving manufacturing economy, largely geared to meeting sizable local market with its major urban centers, courts and armies. And the great cotton centers of the Maratha country were not significant sources of cloth for export. Therefore, any estimates of the significance of the export trade must be done on a regional level since a calculation for the subcontinent as a whole will underestimate the great importance of exports for particular locales.

On a regional level, cloth exports look much more significant. For Bengal, Om Prakash has calculated that cotton cloth exports by the Dutch and English East India Companies in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries accounted for about 10% of employment in the cotton textile industry. While the figures for the Companies' purchases are reasonably accurate, as they are drawn from their records and accounts, the conversion of those figures to employment numbers are crude estimates. Also, the estimate of total employment in the cotton industry is very rough, given that it is based on a combination of population and cloth consumption for Bengal in 1700. These are guesses at best. Om Prakash himself cautions that his numbers are extremely crude, but they do represent a systematic and careful effort to quantify the importance of the cloth exports for the economy of Bengal. And even excluding the sizable Asian trade, exports of the Dutch and English companies appear to have been a significant fact of economic life in Bengal.¹²

Om Prakash's calculations have been criticized by Sushil Chaudhury, but along very different lines and for very different reasons. Chaudhury argued that in his calculations Prakash overestimated the employment effects of Dutch and English Company exports.

¹² Om Prakash, "Bullion for Goods: International Trade and the Economy of Early Eighteenth Century Bengal," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 13 (1976), pp. 159-87.

This overestimation stemmed from errors in converting Indian measures to European, and mistakes in sizes and quality of pieces. All of these would affect the amount of time required to manufacture a piece of cloth and therefore levels of employment. The conclusion that Chaudhury reaches from his critique of Prakash is not that textile exports were not significant for the economy of Bengal. Rather, he argues that Europeans were less significant in Bengal than previous historians have recognized and that the “trade of Asian merchants from Bengal, especially in the two key export commodities, textiles and raw silk, was much larger than that of the European Companies.” While Chaudhury at the end does not provide much evidence to substantiate this conclusion, he appears to be tilting at windmills because many historians would be willing to accept this conclusion. He does provide some interesting data, however, on production and consumption of textiles in eighteenth-century Bengal. At the close of the century, H. T. Colebrooke estimated that textile consumption in Bengal amounted to 60 million rupees a year. In mid-century, the purchases of the Dutch and English Companies amounted to about 4.5 million. These figures would put European Company exports in the same ballpark as Om Prakash’s and certainly far above Roy’s figure of 1% for total exports from India. In addition, Om Prakash, in a response to Chaudhury, quotes a Dutch official who stated that in the 1740s, purchases of textiles, excluding those of the Dutch, amounted to between 6 and 7.6 million rupees per year.¹³

Southeastern India is the other textile-exporting region for which similar calculations have been made. In his studies of textile manufacturing in the northern Coromandel Coast, Joseph Brenning estimated that around half of cloth production in the Godavari Delta was purchased and exported by the Dutch and English East India Companies in the closing decades of the seventeenth century.¹⁴ Such a high proportion for export is plausible for a small area such as the Godavari Delta because local demand was limited.

¹³ Sushil Chaudhury, “European Companies and the Bengal Textile Industry in the Eighteenth Century: The Pitfalls of Applying Quantitative Techniques,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (1993), pp. 321-40; Om Prakash, “On Estimating the Employment Implications of European Trade for the Eighteenth Century Bengal Textile Industry—A Reply,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (1993), pp. 351-2.

¹⁴ Joseph J. Brenning, “Textile Producers and Production in Late Seventeenth-Century Coromandel,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 23 (1986), pp. 343-4.

Population density was low in comparison with other river valleys of southern India and there were no major temple complexes or royal courts that would have represented major concentrations of demand for cloth. The nearest court was in Golconda or Hyderabad, and in the region of that city there were sizable centers of high quality muslin manufacture that would have been meeting the demand for luxury cloth from the city dwellers.

The present author has performed a similar calculation for southeastern India as a whole, including the Northern Sarkars, the Tamil country and Rayalaseema, which was the source of much cotton for manufacturing in that the region. He has estimated that the purchases of the Dutch and English East India Companies accounted for som 22 % of cloth output in the 1720s. As in the calculations already discussed, the cloth procured by the Dutch and English Companies is easily measured. Determining the quantity of total production is again the problem. In this case, the consumption of cotton in the region was used as a proxy for total cloth production. In South India, the alternative uses of cotton were limited. Because of the tropical climate cotton was not used as padding for coats, as was the case in China. Therefore, we can assume with some confidence that cotton consumption was largely for cloth production. The earliest figures for cotton consumption in South India come from the early nineteenth century and these show that around 1815 nearly 22 million pounds of cotton was consumed in southeastern India.¹⁵ Even if we double the cotton consumption figure to 44 million pounds, believing that it is too low, British and Dutch exports would have accounted for 11% of production. The higher figure is extremely unlikely for the eighteenth century, however. In the early 1850s, based on figures for cotton acreage and yield, cotton production in the region was around 50 million pounds. However, this was after several decades of significant growth in cotton cultivation for export to China and Europe.¹⁶

¹⁵ Prasannan Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India, 1720-1800* (Cambridge, 2001), Appendix 2.4.

¹⁶ J. Talboys Wheeler, *Handbook to the Cotton Cultivation in the Madras Presidency* (London, 1863).

These figures for the fraction of output exported were high for pre-industrial manufacturing, but they pale in comparison with those from the nineteenth-century Britain. Between 1839 and 1841, exports of yarn and cloth accounted for half of British production. By the early 1870s, this had increased to about two-thirds.¹⁷ And much of this cotton manufacturing was tightly concentrated in a fairly small geographic area in Lancashire. Even the Bombay cotton mill industry in the late nineteenth century exported about fifty per cent of its product.

Conclusion

The size of cotton cloth exports from the Indian subcontinent is important for giving us a sense of South Asia's place in the eighteenth-century world economy. This paper has shown that these exports played a vital role in the Atlantic trading world and were also a major consumer good in the markets of west Asia and North Africa. In the latter, Indian cloth certainly provided stiff competition for local producers and may have even led to deindustrialization.

The manufacture of these cloths for export was vital for economic life in eighteenth century South Asia. It primed the monetary pump by bringing in bullion and other goods that were used as money. It generated a massive amount of commercial activity and internal trade in cotton, yarn, grain, cloth as well as other goods that made up the basket of consumption for weavers and merchants. The centrality of this manufacturing for economic life became apparent to the British from the late 1820s when the export trade had dwindled to a mere trickle. Company officials in South India and elsewhere were worried about the collapse of the commercial economy in their territories as the trading surpluses that had been earned in earlier decades with booming cloth exports had been replaced by trading deficits.

The debate on the significance of exports in the eighteenth century, therefore, is also linked to conflicting visions of nineteenth-century South Asia. For Tirthankar Roy, the

¹⁷ D. A. Farnie, *The English Cotton Industry and the World Market* (Oxford, 1979), p. 7.

case for deindustrialization in the nineteenth century is vastly overstated, an argument that he has made on numerous occasions. This position fits logically with that for the minimal importance of cloth exports to the eighteenth century economy. It can then be argued that the loss of external markets, which for the first half of the nineteenth century is better documented than the decline in manufacturing activity within the subcontinent, had a minimal impact on industry in South Asia. Therefore, the question of Indian cloth exports and its impact globally and at home links to major problems in eighteenth and nineteenth century economic history.