

Failure and the Industrial Revolution: The East India Companies' Procurement and the Rise of the British Cotton Textile Industry

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Cotton and the Industrial Revolution

Patrick O'Brien in a series of publications co-authored with Philip Hunt and Trevor Griffiths in the 1990s advanced a new and stimulating view of the process of British industrialisation. Moving beyond classic analyses that posited the mechanisation of textile production as the explananda of what is succinctly called the Industrial Revolution, O'Brien convincingly argued for the importance of political economy.¹ The British state fostered the growth of a small sector such as cotton textile manufacturing especially in the north of England. Two conditions internal to the kingdom brought about over time what was in no sense a coherent mercantilist – let alone industrial – set of policies. First, the weight of linen imports on Britain's balance of trade. As woollens and worsteds were quantitatively by far the most important items of export – and they had been so for several centuries – by the eighteenth century, linen was Britain's major import especially from continental Europe and Ireland. Whilst there was no clear idea that cotton yarn and cloth might replace flax and linen, the British state understood that such a heavy reliance on foreign markets was both economically and politically hazardous.² Second, it was thought that the economic system internal to the British Isles might provide a solution to this problem. England, climatically unsuitable for hemp and flax cultivation, had a thriving linen industry.

¹ Patrick K. O'Brien, Trevor Griffiths, and Philip Hunt, 'Political Components of the Industrial Revolution: English Cotton Textile Industry, 1660-1774', *EHR* 44:3 (1991), 395-423; Trevor Griffiths, Philip A. Hunt and Patrick K. O'Brien, 'Inventive Activity in the British Textile Industry, 1700-1800', *JEH* 52:4 (1992), 881-906; Patrick O'Brien, Trevor Griffiths, and Philip Hunt, 'Technological Change during the First Industrial Revolution: The Paradigm Case of Textiles', in Robert Fox (ed.), *Technological Change: Methods and Themes in the History of Technology* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 155-76.

² Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 248-9; David Ormrod, *The Rise of Commercial Empires: England and the Netherlands in the Age of Mercantilism, 1650-1770* (Cambridge, 2002), esp. pp. 152-154, 169-72.

Scotland and Ireland emerged instead within what might be considered an internal ‘colonial system’, as areas for the cultivation of valuable flax.³

This explanation was complemented by the work of historians who put more weight on processes of product innovation than on political economy. The development of new draperies in response to the commercialisation of lighter woollens in Continental Europe was part and parcel of the transformation of a number of productive sectors in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain that included glass, porcelain as well as textile production.⁴ Key to the creation of new products was the inspiration gained from and the imitation of goods imported not just from Continental Europe but also from Asia. The Chinese porcelain and Indian cotton textiles imported by the English and other European East India companies stimulated not just new patterns of consumption but also attempts at substituting these imports with home-produced wares. The economic categories of Import Substitution and Import Substitution Industrialisation were reframed to consider the complex material (replacement of one substance with another), cultural (creation of demand and issues of taste), as well as technical and technological (new techniques and machinery) variables that were part of processes of imitation, invention and innovation in European manufacturing.⁵

O’Brien et al. were alert to the connection between the political economy internal to the British Isles and the global repercussions of trade. The development of a thriving cotton textile industry mostly geared towards the production of printed cottons was strictly linked to the import of

³ Patrick O’Brien, Trevor Griffiths, and Philip Hunt, ‘Scottish, Irish, and Imperial Connections: Parliament, the Three Kingdoms, and the Mechanisation of Cotton Spinning in Eighteenth-Century Britain’, *EHR* 61:3 (2008), 625-50. See also Brenda Collins and Philip Ollerenshaw (eds.), *The European Linen Industry in Historical Perspective* (Oxford, 2003).

⁴ D. C. Coleman, ‘Textile Growth’, in N. B. Harte and K. G. Ponting (eds), *Textile History and Economic History: Essays in Honour of Miss Julia de Lacy Mann* (Manchester, 1973), esp. pp. 8-11; N. B. Harte (ed.), *The New Draperies in the Low Countries and England, 1300-1800* (Oxford, 1997); Maxine Berg, ‘New Commodities, Luxuries and Their Consumers in Eighteenth Century England’, in Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (eds), *Consumers and Luxury in Europe, 1650-1850* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 63–85; John Styles, ‘Product Innovation in Early modern London’, *Past & Present* 168 (2000), 124-69; Id., ‘From Imitation to Invention: Creating Commodities in Eighteenth Century Britain’, *EHR* 55:1 (2002), 1–30.

⁵ Maxine Berg, ‘In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century’, *Past & Present* 182 (2004), 85–142; John Styles, ‘Fashion, Textiles and the Origins of the Industrial Revolution’, *East Asian Journal of British History* 5 (2016), 161–89

Indian calicoes, a rising trade that began in the second half of the seventeenth century and continued over the next century. More than half a million pieces (each c. 15 yards in length) of Indian cotton cloth on average were imported by the English East India Company (EEIC) every year in the period 1660-1760. The size of this trade became so vast that it worried not just British linen producers, but also woollen merchants and silk manufacturers. As in most other parts of Europe, they convinced the British government to ban the sale of Indian cottons on domestic British markets through acts passed in 1701 and 1721 respectively.⁶ Legislative intervention was complemented by a system of duties, bounties and excise regulation that encouraged domestic production both of printed linens and printed and patterned cottons.⁷ Lancashire – and most especially the Manchester hinterland – emerged as centres of cotton and flax spinning as well as the weaving of mixed cotton-linen textiles. The textile printing industry also relocated to this area from Southern England, printing on both linen, mixed linen-cotton cloth, and imported Indian white cotton cloth.⁸

I have here summarised a more complex and chronologically nuanced history of substitution, imitation and industrial restructuring through political economy intervention. For the purpose of the present analysis it is worth highlighting two aspects of this explanation that this chapter would like to query. First, when cotton textiles are considered, the political economy of the British state has been considered different from that of its two main competitors: The Netherlands and France.⁹ The long-term success of cotton textile manufacturing in Britain has been attributed to its subtle policies. Unlike the blanket prohibition imposed in France on the consumption and imitation of all types of fabrics imported from India, in Britain the printing of mixed cotton-linen fabrics as well as the printing of white Indian cloth destined for export

⁶ Riello, *Cotton*, pp. 117-120.

⁷ See William J. Ashworth, *Customs and Excise: Trade, Production and Consumption in England, 1640-1845* (Oxford, 2003), esp. pp. 38-40; Id., *The Industrial Revolution: The State, Knowledge and Global Trade* (London, 2017), esp. ch. 5.

⁸ For a new analysis of the Manchester production before the spinning revolution see: Ariane Fennetaux and John Styles (eds), *John Holker's livre d'échantillons* (forthcoming, 2021).

⁹ There is no analysis of the political economy of the textile sector in the Dutch Republic. For France see: Felicia Gottmann, *Global Trade, Smuggling, and the Making of Economic Liberalism. Asian Textiles in France 1680–1760* (London, 2016).

remained legal.¹⁰ In France this could only happen in special areas outside the jurisdiction of central government. By contrast, mercantile Holland never imposed any restrictions on the trade and consumption of Indian cottons and silks. Here again, the more protectionist position adopted by Britain secured a sheltered niche in which the local production of substitute goods could thrive.

The second point worth highlighting is the implicit assumption that the development of a cotton textile industry in Britain was directly related to the success of Indian cottons. Numerous sources confirm that this is the case and that – notwithstanding the ban and thanks to contraband – over the eighteenth century cotton became an important fabric to complement the other three natural fibres: wool, linen and silk.¹¹ As mentioned earlier, quantitative evidence shows the large textile cargoes of EEIC’s ships. Yet the inference that the EEIC was ‘successful’ in its trade needs to be taken with a pinch of salt.¹² This chapter argues that the opportunities that arose from the development of a British cotton industry emerged because of an overall “failure” on the part of the EEIC to satisfy demand both qualitatively and quantitatively. The assessment of the distinctive political economy of Britain needs to consider the procurement of cotton textiles. Even if the policies focused on manufacturing applied only to the British Isles, their assessment requires us to look well beyond these geographies and incorporate a less well-known story of the persisting problems encountered by the EEIC in securing sufficient and suitable supplies of cotton textiles in India. This chapter is thus part of a new approach that considers the political economy of what came to be the British Empire from the seventeenth century onwards.¹³ As O’Brien has pointed out ‘the paradigm case of large scale reorganised

¹⁰ No restrictions were imposed on the consumption of Indian cottons in the British colonies, a large and expanding market for the mother country in the eighteenth century. Jonathan Eacott, ‘Making an Imperial Compromise: The Calico Acts, the Atlantic Colonies, and the Structure of the British Empire’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 69 (2012), 731-62. See also Id., *Selling Empire: India in the Making of Britain and America, 1600-1830* (Chapel Hill - NC, 2016).

¹¹ How successful is a matter of debate. See Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660-1800* (Oxford, 1991), Id., *Cotton* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (London and New Haven, 2007).

¹² For the trade repercussions see my ‘The Indian Apprenticeship: The Trade of Indian Textiles and the Making of European Cottons’, in Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy (eds), *How India Clothed the World: The World of South Asian Textiles, 1500-1850* (Leiden, 2009), 309-46.

¹³ For silk see Karolina Hutková, *The English East India Company's Silk Enterprise in Bengal, 1750-1850* (Woodbridge, 2019).

textile production in Britain remains inseparable from mercantilism, imperialism, and connexions with the rest of Europe'.¹⁴

European Textile Procurement in India

Since the early seventeenth century, Indian cotton cloth played an important role in European textile consumption. A quantitative analysis of the four main European trading nations in South Asia shows that in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century the Portuguese Carreira da Índia imported into Europe 200-300 thousand pieces of cotton cloth a year. In the second half of the seventeenth century it was the Dutch (VOC) and the English companies that imported the lion's share of Indian cloth, joined by the French East India Company (FEIC) in the period 1730-60. The English was throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the company that most traded back with its home country while the Dutch VOC specialised instead in the vast intra-Asian trade.¹⁵ Cloth was the life and soul of the trade to Europe. Up until the 1780s on average between 50 and 80 percent of the value of all commodities traded by the EEIC was made up of cotton textiles.¹⁶

The EEIC was supplied with cloth from three main areas of production in India: Gujarat on the northwestern coast; the eastern coast of Coromandel; and Bengal in the northeast of the subcontinent. While Gujarat had been the main area of provisioning in the first fifty years of the EEIC's operations in Asia, the following couple of generations from the 1660s to the 1720s were one of particular expansion in procurement on the Coromandel Coast. Bengal became a major provider of textiles from the 1720s onwards and from the 1750s fell under the direct rule

¹⁴ Patrick Karl O'Brien, 'The Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconfiguration of the British Industrial Revolution as a Conjuncture in Global History', *Itinerario* 24:3/4 (2000), 130.

¹⁵ On Prakash, 'The Dutch and the Indian Ocean Textile Trade', in Giorgio Riello and Prasanna Parthasarathi (eds), *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. pp. 147-54.

¹⁶ Riello, *Cotton*, p. 94.

of the Company.¹⁷ However the Coromandel Coast – and most especially Madras, the main EEIC trading port (factory) – retained its centrality in British textile procurement.¹⁸

This paper focuses on Madras and the Coromandel Coast in the key period between the end of the seventeenth century and the 1720s and 1730s at a time when, as we have seen, most European nations enacted bans on imported Asian textiles. During this period the Coromandel coast provided large supplies of cloth not just to Europe but also to Indian Ocean and West African markets. Part of this trade was controlled by the VOC but the bulk of it was in the hands of Gujarati, Muslim and other traders operating across the eastern part of the Indian Ocean.¹⁹ One of the points of strength of Coromandel production was its variety: here the European companies could be furnished with both plain and patterned textiles. Among the most common varieties for sale were loom-patterned rumals (handkerchiefs) and other chequered and striped textiles for European as well as Atlantic markets.²⁰ Printed and painted cotton textiles (chintzes) were also an important category of Indian textiles for European export, though quantitatively they might have not been as important as generations of textile historians presumed. Calicoes – ranging from coarse to finer qualities – were an important part of European cargoes as well as guinee cloth, longcloth and other plain white cotton fabrics.²¹ It is

¹⁷ Om Prakash, ‘The Dutch and the English East India Companies’ Trade in Indian Textiles in the Seventeenth and the Eighteenth Century: A Comparative View’, in Maxine Berg et al. (eds), *Goods from the East, 1600-1800. Trading Eurasia* (Basingstoke, 2015), pp. 185 and 190.

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of the English textile trade in Madras see Jeyaseela Stephen, *Oceanscapes: Tamil Textiles in the Early Modern World* (New Delhi, 2014), pp. 321-86.

¹⁹ Om Prakash, *The New Cambridge History of India. Vol. II.5: European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 108.

²⁰ On varieties traded by the FEIC, see Richard Roberts, ‘Guinée Cloth: Linked Transformations in Production within France’s Empire in the Nineteenth Century’, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 32:128 (1992), 597-627; Id., ‘West Africa and the Pondicherry Textile Industry’, *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 31:2 (1994), 117-45. On the trade to West Africa see: Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study of International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge, 2002). For a comprehensive analysis of production on the Coromandel for international markets see Kazuo Kobayashi, *Indian Cotton Textiles in West Africa: African Agency, Consumer Demand and the Making of the Global Economy, 1750–1850* (Basingstoke, 2019), esp. pp. 127-163.

²¹ Joseph J. Brenning, ‘Textile Producers and Production in Late Seventeenth-Century Coromandel’, *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 23/4 (1986), 334-35.

estimated that at least 150 varieties of cloth were produced on the Coromandel Coast in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²²

Madras had been the key English factory on the eastern coast of India since its establishment in the 1640s.²³ It specialised in the production of mid-quality cloth, a notch up from the cheaper printed cloth procured in Gujarat, but not as fine as some of the products bought in Bengal, most especially the veil-like muslin produced in Dhaka and surrounding areas.²⁴ The rest of the Coromandel coast had an equally varied production: while northern Coromandel provided the best white cloth (unpainted), southern Coromandel specialised in printed cloth and most especially waxed textiles and cheap guinees.²⁵ It is important for us to note that the EEIC operated from Madras in northern Coromandel while the VOC operated from Pulicat (northern Coromandel) and Nagapattinan (southern Coromandel) and the FEIC from Pondicherry (southern Coromandel).²⁶

Both the Coromandel and the other Indian markets were as sophisticated as they were competitive. The European companies did not just compete with each other, but also with local merchants operating in the Indian Ocean. A 1723 report from the Madras Factory illustrates the challenges faced in procurement, and explained that the merchants who acted as middlemen with the weavers:

told us that it was impossible for them to pretend to furnish 4,000 Bales of Cloth which should all exactly answer musters, and that the utmost they can do is to keep their weavers as near as possible to them, But that the very large demand lately made has occasion'd the running the Cloth off the Loom so fast 'tis not practicable to keep them justly to the goodness of the muster. That they can always provide the quantity and much more, but that when they do so they cannot pretend to engage for the Goodness, Since it is certain that the People working in a hurry must be more careless and negligent

²² Stephen, *Oceanscapes*, p. 167.

²³ David Veevers, *The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 57-78.

²⁴ K. N. Chaudhuri, 'Foreign Trade: 1. European Trade with India', in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of India; Vol. I. c. 1200 – c. 1750* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 402.

²⁵ Kristof Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade, 1620-1740* (The Hague, 1958), pp. 132, 135; Knaap, Gerrit, *Shallow Waters, Rising Tide: Shipping and Trade in Java Around 1775* (Leiden, 1996), p. 93.

²⁶ Prakash, *The New Cambridge History of India. Vol. II.5*, pp. 298–9; Gottmann, *Global Trade*, pp. 25-7.

than when they have more time; so that when this place provided 1000 Bales per annum it was very easy to keep them up to the Musters, but that now the demand is encreas'd to four times that quantity it is not reasonable to expect it should be equal in goodness.²⁷

This was not the first, nor the last time, when the servants of the EEIC complained about the challenges of procuring larger and larger quantities of textiles. Demand in Europe was buoyant and the EEIC textile trade doubled in quantity between the 1690s and the 1750s, increasing from 2.3 million to 5.6 million pieces per decade. In expanding procurement, it was not just the quality of what was delivered that was at stake but also the price at which cotton textiles could be bought.²⁸ Fifty years earlier the Madras warehouse claimed to have suffered not just 'by short contents and thinness &c. imperfections of their cloth sent home in Anno 1672' but also because of 'ye dearness of ye same, requiring allowance for it twenty per 100'.²⁹ It was not uncommon for the company to have to pay more than what they had tendered for.

Complaints about the dearness of cloth in India were common for all European companies. Yet procurement price increases especially after 1690 cannot be attributed solely to high demand in Europe. The volume of cloth bought by the European companies pale in comparison with estimates of the overall production of cloth in the Indian subcontinent.³⁰ European traders might have dominated the local production of specific weaving villages but overall remained 'small players' in the large Indian Ocean trade.³¹ More problematic was the fact that the Dutch, the English and later the French competed for the same cloth production. The aversion of one company against the other was palpable; reports of the ways in which other companies were

²⁷ *Records of Fort St. George. Diary and Consultation Book of 1723* (Madras, 1930), pp. 91-2. (29 August 1723).

²⁸ Giorgio Riello, 'Factories before the Factory: The English East India Company's Textile Procurement in India and British Industrialisation, 1650-1750', in Kristine Bruland, Anne Gerritsen, Pat Hudson and Giorgio Riello (eds), *Re-inventing the Economic History of Industrialisation* (Montreal, 2020), p. 267.

²⁹ *Records of Fort St. George. Diary and Consultation Book, 1672-1678* (Madras, 1910), p. 27 (29 September 1674).

³⁰ Sushil Chaudhuri, 'European Trading Companies and Bengal Textile Industry in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century: The Pitfalls of Applying Quantitative Methods', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (1993), 321-40; and Om Prakash's 'Response', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (1993), 341-46; Roy, *An Economic History of Early Modern India*, 77.

³¹ For estimates of the European share of the Indian cotton production, see: Prasannan Parthasarathi, 'Cotton Textiles in the Indian Subcontinent, 1200-1800', in Riello and Parthasarathi (eds), *The Spinning World*, p. 39.

able to secure sufficient and cheap supplies of cloth were not uncommon.³² Perhaps more troublesome for the European companies was the fact that they competed not just in India but also on European markets. Notwithstanding the increasingly rigid regulations on the trade and consumption of Indian cloth in Europe, price convergence indicates a high level of integration of the European textile market for both domestic and imported cloth.³³ Beyond competition, historians have pointed to the low elasticity of production in India: while demand by the European companies increased, the overall structure of production and its productive capacity remained unaltered. As a result, prices of all types of Indian fabrics increased steadily over the eighteenth century.³⁴

By the mid-1750s the VOC complained that the prices of guinee cloth, salampuri and other cloth had increased more than fifty percent in a period of fifty years. The EEIC seemed to be even more effected by increases in purchasing prices: the 1690s had been admittedly a good decade when prices had been low and mark ups (the sale price in London divided by the purchase price in India) high. By the 1750s the price of cloth had more than doubled and the mark-ups were down by 50 per cent.³⁵ While procurement prices in India increased, the price of cotton cloth in Europe decreased. This was a general trend for all textiles: in Britain over the course of the eighteenth century the price of serge and fine linen declined by up to 40 percent while Indian cottons decreased 20 percent in price in the first half of the eighteenth century.³⁶ In such a situation, the EEIC profit margins decreased substantially. As we will see in the next section, the decreasing terms of trade of Indian cloth on the British market, made attempts at import substitution more viable.

Troubles in India: The Companies' Procurement Problems

³² Femme S. Gaastra, 'War, Competition and Collaboration: Relations between the English and Dutch East India Company in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in H.V. Bowen, Margarete Lincoln, and Nigel Rigby (eds), *The Worlds of the East India Company* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), p. 55.

³³ Pim De Zwart, 'Globalization in the Early Modern Era: New Evidence from the Dutch-Asiatic Trade, c.1600-1800', *JEH* 76:2 (2016), 535.

³⁴ Parthasarathi, 'Cotton Textiles in the Indian Subcontinent', pp. 17-41.

³⁵ Riello, *Cotton*, ch. 4; Riello, 'Factories before the Factory', p. 267.

³⁶ Own price database. See also Carole Shammas, 'The Decline of Textile Prices in England and British America Prior to Industrialization', *EHR*, 47/3 (1994), 483-507.

A window of opportunity for the development of a European (and in particular British) cotton textile industry opened because of a connection between the political economy measures embraced at home and the conditions of supply of Indian cotton textiles experienced by the East India Companies. Notwithstanding the bans, the European East India companies did not seem able to cope with expanding demand in Europe. As Jan de Vries pointed out, European demand (especially for textiles) rose at a faster rate than the one percent per year growth of Eurasian trade.³⁷ Normally this should have led to an increase in prices for Indian cloth; yet as many textile historians have pointed out, Indian cotton cloth competed with a series of other local textiles, not just copies of chintzes and calicoes but also white, patterned and printed linens, as well as lighter woollens.

The situation of the companies was no better in India. One is struck by the perduring problems faced in procurement. Why was it so difficult to secure satisfactory supplies of good cloth on the Coromandel as well as other manufacturing areas of India? As mentioned, competition between companies was rife. Throughout the seventeenth century the EEIC seemed to have experienced an endemic lack of funds for the purchase of cloth. Agents in Madras and other satellite factories complained that they had to stretch their credit with merchants in order to avoid having ‘Private Persons buying of the same sorts of goods here untill they shall have been able to Compleat their said Investments’.³⁸ Moreover competition with the VOC was problematic: ‘at this Time that the Dutch Merchants having such great Sumes of moneys given out unto them, and have sent all about the Countrey to buy and the Scarcity of Cotton continuing by reason of last yeares Harvest failed’.³⁹

Credit was at the heart of the production system of India. It is worthwhile explaining that the European companies had little access to production carried out in weaving villages sometimes located dozens of miles inland. They relied instead on a series of intermediaries, the most important among which were wealthy merchants residing in the main ports with capital large enough to coordinate bulk production of cloth. These merchants relied on brokers (sometimes

³⁷ Jan De Vries, ‘Understanding Eurasian Trade in the Era of the Trading Companies’, in Maxine Berg et al. (eds), *Good from the East*, p. 27.

³⁸ ‘Consultation in Fort St. George’, 18 April 1672, in *Records of Fort St. George: Diary and Consultations. Vol. 1. 1672-1678* (Madras, 1910), p. 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

referred to as *delols*), who agreed the type of cloth to be produced, the quantity, price and date of delivery. An intermediary might commission an order by relying on a series of other intermediaries (sometimes known as *picars*) within a weaving village itself: this could be a weaver who acted for the merchant (or broker) and received a small commission.⁴⁰

The relationship between weavers, intermediaries and merchants was contractual and based on cash advances. Advances were given by merchants to middlemen, who travelled to the villages and contracted weavers normally via the village chief (Figure 1). Om Prakash argues that cash advances were necessary to support the weaving household during the months (up to six) when the cloth was being produced. We must remember that advances acted as interest-free loans in an economy like the Indian one in which interest rates of 7-8 percent in rural areas and 12-15 percent in urban areas were not uncommon. Advances also reduced the risk of approaching potential buyers directly, especially by those producers in rural areas with limited access to markets, and circumvented the need for weavers to predict market conditions.⁴¹ The contractual arrangements were flexible though this meant that merchants had little leeway to enforce them. Whilst weavers could simply extricate themselves by returning an advance, the same was not

⁴⁰ This intermediary system differed across areas of the country. For Dacca, see: British Library, IOR, G/40/26: 'Account of the manner of providing cloth at Dacca in the year 1676', ff. 85-86. See also Rasjan Humar Gupta, 'The Growth and Decay of the Cotton Piece-Goods Industry of Berthum', *Bengal Past and Present*, 97:1, no. 182 (1977), 70-1; Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast, 1650-1740* (Delhi, 1986), p. 268; Id., 'Weavers, Merchants and Company: the handloom Industry in Southeastern India 1750-1790', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 17:3 (1980), p. 265; Carla M. Sinopoli, *The Political Economy of Craft Production: Crafting Empire in South India, c.1350-1650* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 186; P. Sudhir and P. Swarnalatha, 'Textile Traders and territorial imperatives: Masulipatnam, 1750-1850', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 29:2 (1992), pp. 148 and 151; Ian C. Wendt, 'The Social Fabric: Textile Industry and Community in Early Modern South India' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2005), 145.

⁴¹ Om Prakash, 'Textile Manufacturing and Trade Without and With Coercion: The Indian Experience in the Eighteenth Century,' GEHN Paper (2005), 7: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Economic-History/Assets/Documents/Research/GEHN/GEHNConferences/conf5/PrakashGEHN5.pdf> [last accessed 20 August 2020]; Vijaya Ramaswamy, 'South Indian Textiles: A Case for Proto-Industrialization?', in Deepak Kumar (ed.), *Science and Empire: Essays in Indian Context (1700-1947)* (Delhi., 1991), pp. 51-2; K. N. Chaudhuri, 'The Structure of Indian Textile Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in Tirthankar Roy (ed.), *Cloth and commerce. Textiles in Colonia India* (New Delhi, 1996), p. 52.

the case for merchants who had to forfeit their advance if the contract was cancelled.⁴² This imbalance meant that it was in the interest of merchants to accept whatever was produced by weavers and convince the Company to accept them in turn. In contrast, weavers could sell their products to someone else and return the advance.⁴³ This was a risk borne (entirely by the merchant) that could only be avoided by what we would today call social control over the weavers.⁴⁴



Figure 1. 'A Weaver', gouache made in Tanjore, c. 1770. © Victoria & Albert Museum AL.9128:14. One of thirty-six paintings of castes and occupations of South India showing a weaver. The East India Companies' servants had very little access to weavers and their villages until the second half of the eighteenth century.

⁴² Prasannan Parthasarathi, 'Merchants and the Rise of Colonialism', in Burton Stein and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds), *Institutions and Economic Change in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 96-7.

⁴³ For the late eighteenth century Subramanian cites the case of a nine percent penalty for undelivered cloth to the EEIC. Lakshmi Subramanian, 'Power and the Weave: Weavers, Merchants and rules in Eighteenth-Century Surat', in Rudrangshu Mukherjee and Lakshmi Subramanian (eds), *Politics and Trade in the Indian Ocean World: Essays in Honour of Ashin Das Gupta* (Delhi, 1998), p. 56.

⁴⁴ In what Parthasarathi calls an 'asymmetry of contracts' merchants did not possess the right to break a contract or demand the return of an advance. Prasannan Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India 1720-1800* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 26-7. Mukund also observes that 'The relationship between the merchants and the weavers was not a simple, unidimensional exploitative relationship as is often assumed. Kanakalatha Mukund, *The Trading World of the Tamil Merchant: Evolution of Merchant Capitalism in the Coromandel* (Hyderabad, 1999), p. 116.

In this complex system of production, European companies had to contend both with the independence of weavers and the power of large merchants. One of the risks was for the weavers to go ‘on the run’ after they had used advances to feed their families. Yet, without advances there was no possibility of finding suitable supplies of cloth.⁴⁵ Middlemen and brokers too could be free riders and were often portrayed by Company servants as ‘perfidious’ and dangerous. Merchants could also become too powerful: leveraging their own money, they could dominate entire markets. This was the case of Kasi Viranna (otherwise known as Cassa Verona or Kasi Veeranna), the chief intermediary merchant for the EEIC in Madras in the 1670s. He was one among a dozen merchants who supplied the Company; yet Viranna alone provided more than a quarter of the 300,000 pieces of cotton cloth that the EEIC purchased on the Coromandel Coast each year.⁴⁶ The case of Viranna was one of potential monopsony that was considered problematic by the Company. The Dutch had already intervened in limiting the power of specific merchants. From the 1660s onwards they imposed a stock company, formed to organise groups of merchants, especially of the Komati caste. The joint stock was based on a number of shares with each partner committing to the business venture solely in connection with the production of cloth for a specific consignment. The merchant-shareholders were not allowed to sign contracts with other merchants not holding the same joint stock.⁴⁷ After the death of Viranna in 1680 the EEIC attempted a similar move but with more limited success.

The European companies faced other problems of a more practical nature as well. The English – as had other companies – had established a clear system for evaluating the quality of the cloth

⁴⁵ This was not just the case of the Coromandel Coast. For Dhaka, see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* (London, 2014), esp. pp. 33-4; and Maxine Berg, “‘The Merest Shadows of a Commodity’: Indian Muslins for European Markets 1750–1800”, in Berg et al. (eds.), *Goods from the East*, p. 128.

⁴⁶ Yogesh Sharma, ‘A Life of Many Parts: Kasi Viranna: A Seventeenth Century South Indian Merchant Magnate’, *Medieval History Journal*, 1:2 (1998), esp. 265, 273-76. On Viranna see also Mukund, *Trading World of the Tamil Merchant*, pp. 109-10; Stephen, *Oceanscapes*, ch. 4; Radhika Seshan, ‘From Chief Merchant to Joint Stock Merchant: A Comparative Study of Kasi Viranna and Pedda Venkatadri, Chief Merchants of Madras’, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 70 (2009-10), 347-53.

⁴⁷ Stephen, *Oceanscapes*, pp. 130-32.

delivered. Patterns were provided to merchants who in turn sent them to weaving villages.⁴⁸ Yet what was supplied was often substandard. As explained, it was in the interest of merchants to get hold of whatever they could. Once the cloth reached the company's warehouse, it was checked according to 'qualities' (first, second, third etc.). There were ways to cheat the system, for instance by placing the best cloth at the top of a bale. Merchants relied on the fact that because of the high volumes, not everything could be checked. This was admitted as a problem by many warehousemen in charge of assessing the quality of merchandise before shipment. In the 1670s, Edward Herrys, an EEIC warehouseman, reported that:

notwithstanding all the care & paines that he takes in the sorting & looking after the qualities of the Callicos, he finds it in a manner impossible to make a thorough examination of the latter in regard of the necessity of receiving & sorting it while through the shortness of time, for want of a stock aforehand to buy it in more early & seasonable in the yeare, when business might be done at better leasure whereas thus a great deal of it is fain to be brought in whited and beaten from the country for the better dispatch, and that which comes brown is hurried away to the Washers without time to looke it over.⁴⁹

The pressure on quantities and the seasonal nature of shipments made it difficult to ensure that cloth attained was of the prescribed quality, and that enough time for bleaching as well as printing was left available. Even packing was often hurried, leaving the cloth exposed to air and sea water in the six-month journey to Europe. Some cloth arrived rotten and rat eaten.⁵⁰

In the early 1720s the Company servants at Madras recommended the Deputy Governor of Fort St. David near Cuddalore, a hundred miles north, not to take in substandard cloth: 'We must remind you that you strictly keep your Merchants up to Lengths and Breadths & goodness of Cloth'.⁵¹ This was a perpetual problem: when raw cotton was scarce or expensive, weavers

⁴⁸ For the VOC see: Femme S. Gaastra, 'The Textile Trade of the VOC: The Dutch Response to the English Challenge', *South Asia* 19 - Special Issue (1996), 91.

⁴⁹ *Records of Fort St George. Diary and Consultation Book. Vol. 1. 1672-1678* (Madras, 1910), p. 75: 'Consultation at Fort St. George: From Mr Edward Herrys to the Honorable Sr. William Langhorn and Council', 27 September 1675.

⁵⁰ Riello, 'Factories before the Factory'.

⁵¹ *Records of Fort St George. Letters from Fort St. George. Vols. 18-19. 1722-1723* (Madras, 1931), p. 7: 'To the Worship. [Will.m] Jennings Esq., Deputy Governor of Fort St. David & C., Councill'. March 9th, 1721-2'.

would produce thinner cloth.⁵² Imperfections would be hidden by ‘conjee’, rice water, thus enhancing the smoothness and consistency of the weave. One servant of the EEIC observed the ‘filling up the cloth with Conjee, Oyl &ca. ... is very liable to deceive the sorters, and occasions its appearing much worse when washed than when taken in Brown’.⁵³ I have argued elsewhere that quality was both a problem and an opportunity. While the EEIC never managed to get supplies that matched their standards, at the same time they continued to enforce those quality standards with consistency, providing a benchmark on which manufacturers at home had to contend.⁵⁴

The mismatch between what was sought after in domestic European markets and what was purchased in India was evident especially for printed and painted cloth.⁵⁵ The success of Indian cloth in Europe over the second half of the seventeenth century was due to its fashionability. Initially adopted for furnishing, Indian cottons came to be used in clothing in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. With his usual sarcasm, the English writer Daniel Defoe complained about ‘persons of quality dressed in Indian carpets’ as he explained that Indian chintzes had ‘advanced from lying upon their floors to their [customers] backs, from the footcloth to the petticoat’.⁵⁶ It was a challenge to satisfy fashionable customers in Europe with cloth produced tens of thousands of miles away. It took the best part of two years from the time orders were sent from England to the time when the final products arrived in London’s docks. Samples were used but it was an imprecise game: ‘The muster is only to shew you the goodness of the cloth, and the brightness of the Dye which last may be mended with you, and you must direct the Weavers when they make them to vary the checks that they may not be too many of one Pattern, and there must be no mixture of Red in any of them’, explained a letter from

⁵² *Records of Fort St George. Diary and Consultation Book. Vol. 1. 1672-1678*, p. 73.

⁵³ *Records of Fort St. George. Letters to Fort St. George. Vol. 45. 1765* (Madras, 1946), p. 180: ‘To the Hon.ble Robert Palk Esq., President and Governor &ca. Council of Fort St. George, from Cuddalore, Oct. 28th 1765’.

⁵⁴ Riello, ‘Factories before the Factory’, pp. 262-75.

⁵⁵ For the VOC see the ‘Eischen van Retour’ (Requests for return), orders of Indian chintzes for the period 1641-1796, compiled by Jopie van Eijkern-Balkenstein, Peter Diebels and Ebeltje Hartkamp-Jonxis, ‘Orderoverzicht van door de VOC uit India ‘geëiste’ sitsen’, in Ebeltje Hartkamp-Jonxis (ed.), *Sits: oost-west relaties in textiel* (Zwolle: Waanders 1987), 113-121. *Sits: Oost-West Relaties in Textiel* (Zwolle: Uitgeverij Waanders, 1987), pp. 113-21. I thank the author for alerting me to these materials. For the EEIC see the database of orders sent out compiled by the University of Warwick’s ‘Europe’s Asian Centuries: Trading Eurasia, 1600-1830’ ERC Project: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/ghcc/eac/databases/english/>

⁵⁶ *Weekly Review*, 31 January 1708.

Madras to Fort St. David.⁵⁷ This was the case for cottons as much as it was for silks: ‘Know this for a constant and general rule that you change the fashions and flowers as much as you can every year, for English ladies and they say the French and the Europeans will give twice as much for a new thing not seen in Europe before though worse, than they will give for a better silk of the same fashion worn the former year’.⁵⁸ Fashion – the timely provision of new patterns, colours and varieties of cloth – was a complex affair that put European imitations of Indian cotton –imperfect as they were – at an advantage, at least in their responsiveness to demand.⁵⁹

How different was the EEIC from the VOC and FEIC in their procurement in India? The FEIC operated from Pondicherry and was particularly active in the textiles trade for about fifty years between the 1720s and the 1760s importing into France on average 175,000 pieces of cloth a year.⁶⁰ This was a relatively small amount compared with the 700,000 pieces a year imported by the EEIC and the 375,000 pieces a year imported by the VOC over the same five decades.⁶¹ The French were latecomers to the Indian trade and to textile procurement on the Coromandel coast.⁶² However, they seemed to suffer the same problems that afflicted the EEIC concerning the quality and timeliness of delivery as frequent complaints in the *Correspondance du Conseil supérieur de Pondichery* reveal.⁶³ This was also the case for the VOC, though the company was in no sense second to the EEIC. Aggregate figures for the trade to Europe hide the large sales that the VOC made in Asian textile markets, most especially in Southeast Asia as well as

⁵⁷ *Records of Fort St George. Letters from Fort St. George. Vol. 23. 1739* (Madras, 1931), p. 31: ‘To the Worsh. James Hubbard Esq. Deputy Governor & C. Council of Fort St. David, July 10th 1739’

⁵⁸ *Records of Fort St. George. Despatches from England 1681-1686* (Madras, 1916), May 20th 1681.

⁵⁹ Riello, *Cotton*, pp. 175-9; Chris Nierstrasz, *Rivalry for Trade in Tea and Textiles: The English and Dutch East India Companies (1700–1800)* (London, 2015), 169-70.

⁶⁰ Haudrère, Philippe, ‘La Compagnie française des Indes, 1719-1795’, *L’Information Historique* 51 (1989), 5; Philippe Haudrère and Gérard Bouëdec, *Les Compagnies des Indes* (Rennes, 1999), pp. 80; Donald C. Wellington, *French East India Companies: A Historical Account and Record of Trade* (Lanham, 2006), pp. 188-89. For a comprehensive analysis of French procurement see Gottmann, *Global Trade*, esp. pp. 18-49.

⁶¹ Author’s database. See also Riello, *Cotton*, pp. 94 and x-xi.

⁶² Arasaratnam, *Merchants*, p. 251.

⁶³ For instance, in 1744 it was observed that: ‘l’année passée, malgré l’augmentation de 7 ½ Rs. par *courge*, qu’on avait accordée aux marchands par les nécessités du temps où on se trouvait, ils n’en ont pas fourni à la visite la quantité pour laquelle ils s’étaient engages, et que moralement même parlant, il n’y a pas eu aucune pièce de la qualité requise’. *Correspondance du Conseil supérieur de Pondichery et de la Compagnie, 1726-67. Vol. 4. 1744-49*, ed. A. Martineau, 6 vols (1920-1934), pp. 43-4.

in Africa. The many company's factories from the Red Sea to the China Sea made the VOC an important player in particular in the seventeenth century (Figure 2). The English complained for instance 'that the Dutch who have made great contracts all along this coast, are tampering with all our weavers to seduce 'em from our service' by offering advances of ten pagodas per loom rather than the normal five.⁶⁴ Several reports highlighted that the Dutch seemed to be more successful than the English in buying printed and painted cloth.



Figure 2. 'D. Cormandelse Catoen Baalen' (The Cotton Bales of Coromandel), c. 1710. Stone, 117.5 x 16.5 cm. Amsterdam Museum, inv. nr. KB 1868.

A European – most probably a VOC servant – is in conversation with a trader. The bales are of guinees for the West Coast of Africa and cloth from Serampore (Kolkatta).

There was a major difference between the procurement of the Dutch (and to a certain extent the French) and the EEIC: the Dutch might have been more successful in securing steady and cheap supplies but their main port in southern Coromandel meant that more than fifty percent of their cloth was made up of printed and painted (coloured) cloth. By contrast Madras in northern Coromandel was at the core of a trade in white cloth. This was particularly the case between the 1690s and the 1720s.⁶⁵ Bengal became a major producer of finer varieties of white cotton – as well as muslins – but the primacy of Coromandel remained unabated. The large quantities of white cloth that the EEIC imported into London were key to the development of a local calico printing industry. The dominance of the EEIC in this market was such that even

⁶⁴ *Records of Fort St George. Diary and Consultation Book of 1701* (Madras: Government Press, 1922), p. 57: 'Generall Letter from Vizagapatam', June 27th 1701.

⁶⁵ Nierstrasz, *Rivalry for Trade*, esp. pp. 157, 171.

the famous Germany calico printer Oberkampf who operated from Jouy-en-Josas near Paris claimed that the best white Indian calicoes could only be sourced in London.⁶⁶

The Political Economy of Textiles

The three main European traders in India all seemed to face similar problems in their textile procurement. The power of Indian merchants and the independence of weavers were compounded by the competition between companies and with Asian merchants. The VOC was marginally more successful than other companies in financing large-scale procurement most especially of printed and painted cloth. In Europe, the millions of pieces of cloth that these three companies imported constituted all but a small percentage of the total textile consumption. Moreover there is evidence that growth in demand outstripped growth in textile imports from Asia into Europe. Import substitution – the replacement of imported cloth with copies made in Europe – was a possible solution. Yet, one insurmountable problem in substituting imported with home-produced calicoes was the differential in production costs in Europe and India: the cost of labour in the Subcontinent was possibly one sixth of that of Europe.⁶⁷ Fortunately, as the purchase price of cloth in India increased throughout the eighteenth century, the price gap between India and European textiles decreased.

Clearly a window of opportunity presented itself for the expansion of European domestic production to satisfy local consumers as well as increasing levels of demand in African and American markets.⁶⁸ Henry Martyn's 'Considerations on the East India Trade' (1701) presented the argument that Indian goods such as textiles were not just finding markets among consumers but could lead to increased productivity and 'invention of Arts' in English

⁶⁶ Maxine Berg, 'Quality, Cotton, and the Global Luxury Trade', in Riello and Roy (eds), *How India Clothed the World*, pp. 407-8.

⁶⁷ K.N. Chaudhuri, 'Some Reflections on the World Trade of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Century: A Reply', *Journal of European Economic History* 7:1 (1978), pp. 227-28. On the difficulty of measuring wages and standards of living in Europe and South Asia see: Prasannan Parthasarathi, 'Rethinking Wages and Competitiveness in the Eighteenth Century: Britain and South India', *Past & Present* 158 (1998), 79-109; Id., *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, esp. pp. 21-39; Stephen Broadberry and Bishnupriya Gupta, 'The Early Modern Great Divergence: Wages, Prices and Economic Development in Europe and Asia, 1500–1800', *EHR* 59:1 (2006), 1-31.

⁶⁸ Giorgio Riello, 'Cotton Textiles and the Industrial Revolution in a Global Context', *Past & Present* (forthcoming 2022)

manufactures.⁶⁹ Yet for a long time historians saw the political economy of the English (and later British) state as less attentive to economic development than the interests of established sectors, first among which wool and silk manufacturers. The quantitative expansion of textile imports from India in the 1680s coincided with a campaign on the part of English textile manufacturers to limit this new source of competition. A first special duty of 20 percent was applied to textiles imported from the East Indies in 1690. This preceded the better known 1701 Act that effectively prohibited the import of printed and painted Indian cottons. Yet, as Ralph Davis noted more than half a century ago, the 1701 Act can be read as ‘the first important modern example of a deliberate industrial protection’.⁷⁰ Prohibitions were not uncommon - as they had been in sumptuary laws – yet the very title of the act (‘An Act for the more effective employing the Poor by encourageing the Manufactures of this Kingdom’) revealed the ‘developmental’ intentions guiding legislators. The Act was part of a wider policy concerning textile production that included the abolition of all export duties on woollen cloth in 1700 and a decade later the abolition of import duties on cochineal and other imported dyestuffs (1714 and 1722). In the 1730s to 1760s other duties were abolished on flax (1731), Irish woollens (1740), linen yarn (1756), and raw silk (1765).⁷¹

Most importantly for the development of a local cotton industry was the fact that the 1701 legislation allowed for the import of plain cottons.⁷² It is true that duties applied on plain Indian cottons in 1701 were increased in 1704 and 1708. An excise was also applied on the production of printed calicoes in 1712 and 1714.⁷³ The 1721 Act forbade the weaving of calicoes that were printed, painted, stained or dyed either for clothing or for household furnishing.⁷⁴ All of these might appear not conducive to local printing on imported white cotton cloth, an activity that

⁶⁹ For an analysis of Martyn’s interesting arguments foreshadowing Adam Smith’s, see Maxine Berg, ‘Political Economy and the Principles of Manufacture, 1700-1800’, in Maxine Berg, Pat Hudson, Michael Sonenscher (eds), *Manufacture in Town and Country before the Factory* (Cambridge, 1983), esp. pp. 35-7.

⁷⁰ Ralph Davis, ‘The Rise of Protection in England, 1789-1786’, *EHR* 19:2 (1966), 309.

⁷¹ Davis, ‘The Rise of Protection in England’, 309, 313-314.

⁷² William J. Ashworth, ‘The Intersection of Industry and the State in Eighteenth-Century Britain’, in Lissa Roberts, Simon Schaffer, and Peter Dear (eds), *The Mindful Hand: Inquiry and Invention from the Late Renaissance to Early Industrialisation* (Amsterdam, 2007), p. 353.

⁷³ Ashworth, *Customs and Excise*, pp. 38-9.

⁷⁴ 7 Geo. I, c 7. Raymond L. Sickinger, ‘Regulation or Ruination: Parliament’s consistent Pattern of mercantilist regulation of the English Textile Trade, 1660-1800’, *Parliamentary History*, 19:2 (2000), 229.

had found a home in the area around London. Yet it encouraged printing on linen as well as on mixed linen and cotton cloth. The 1736 Manchester Act legalised what was already an established practice of weaving mixed linen and cotton cloth, to be sold either bleached or, most commonly, printed.⁷⁵ As the name suggests, this new piece of legislation recognised the importance of a new industry fast expanding in the north of England. It was estimated that by 1750, more than 50,000 pieces a year of printed cloth were produced in England.⁷⁶

Over the next decades and up until the revocation of the ban on Indian cloth in 1774, more concessions were made. For instance, in 1765 it was made legal for the EEIC to import Indian calicoes from abroad if the direct Indian supply was deemed insufficient to satisfy (most especially) African markets.⁷⁷ The logic that slowly emerged was one of complementarity: as Indian cloth complemented existing textiles and markets, so the production of ‘cottons’ (most often mix linen and cotton) and printed textiles (on white Indian cloth) complemented imported calicoes and chintzes. As Philippe Minard and William Ashworth have observed, this happened within a specific political economy context. Far from interpretations that see a liberal regime in England in opposition to a Colberterian one in France, the differing role of the state is highlighted in both nations. Ashworth underlines the importance of the excise in determining precise rules on quality and product specification; Minard the action of the state in establishing regulatory standards.⁷⁸

Yet one has to account for the differing trajectories of cotton manufacturing in England, France and the Dutch Republic. National as well as international conditions might explain this. When in 1686 France enacted a ban on Indian cloth, it might have been more an attempt to limit importation from other European countries than to curb direct trade from India. By this date the FEIC was still a small player in Asia. It could not afford bulk purchase in South Asia as the English company did, nor could it sell Indian cottons on Indian Ocean markets as the VOC had

⁷⁵ 9 Geo. II, c. 4.

⁷⁶ Edmund Potter, *Calico Printing as an Art Manufacture. A Lecture* (London, 1852), 8. Note however that this was less than 10% of the number of pieces of cotton textiles imported per year by the EEIC in the 1740s and 1740s. Riello, *Cotton*, p. 94.

⁷⁷ Sickinger, ‘Regulation or Ruination’, 230.

⁷⁸ William Ashworth, ‘Quality and the Roots of Manufacturing “Expertise” in Eighteenth Century Britain’, *Osiris*, 25 (2010), 231-54; Philippe Minard, ‘Le bureau d’essai de Birmingham, ou la fabrique de la réputation au XVIIIe siècle’, *Annales HSS*, 65:5 (2011), 1117-46.

successfully done for two generations.⁷⁹ The bans had different legal force in England and France: whilst in England only a small number of people were prosecuted for contravening the Act, in France the original 1686 ban was regularly reissued leading to several prosecutions especially in the 1720s and 1730s when larger quantities of Indian cloth started to be imported by the FEIC.⁸⁰ These strict regulations did not provide much space for the legal production of locally-printed cloth or cotton mixes.⁸¹ For instance, white cotton cloth imported by the FEIC was allowed into France only with the condition that such textiles were marked and had plombs affixed. The damage must have been substantial as reports said that Dutch and other traders were falsifying the marks and plombs making their cloth pass as legally imported by the Company.⁸²

The argument presented here is that the political economy embraced by the English state was flexible enough to protect existing markets and at the same time allow for the development of a new cotton industry. This emerged as much from riding ‘the wave of fashion’ opened up by Indian cloth as from supplementing scarce and substandard imported textiles. More than fifty percent of what the EEIC imported from India was bleached, undyed and white cloth suitable for printing in England and this turned out to be a further incentive for the development of a local calico printing industry.⁸³ England had followed in the footsteps of the Dutch Republic where a calico printing industry had developed in the last quarter of the seventeenth century together with the production of copies of Indian woven textiles.⁸⁴ Yet, differently from either France or England, the Netherlands never enacted a restrictive legislation on imported cotton textiles. Attempts were made but they proved unsuccessful: in 1676 the city of Haarlem made

⁷⁹ Indrani Ray, ‘The French Company and the Merchants of Bengal (1680-1730)’, in Lakshmi Subramanian (ed.), *The French East India Company and the Trade of the Indian Ocean: A Collection of Essays by Indrani Ray* (New Delhi, 1999), p. 78.

⁸⁰ *Édit ... qui prononce des peines contre ceux qui introduiront dans le Royaume des toiles peintes ou teintes, écorces d'arbres ou étoffes de la Chine, des Indes et du Levant... Registré à la Cour des Aydes* [le 26 octobre 1726] (Paris, 1726). See also Giorgio Riello, ‘Governing Innovation: The Political Economy of Textiles in the Eighteenth Century’, in Evelyn Welch (ed.), *Fashioning the Early Modern: Creativity and Innovation in Europe, 1500-1800* (Oxford, 2017), esp. pp. 57-58; Gottmann, *Global Trade*, ch. 3.

⁸¹ On the rethinking the led to its repeal in France see Gottmann, *Global Trade*, pp. 150-6.

⁸² Haudrère, *La Compagnie française des Indes*, vol. 1: 302-3.

⁸³ Riello, *Cotton*, pp. 96-7.

⁸⁴ Giorgio Riello, ‘Asian Knowledge and the Development of Calico Printing in Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, *Journal of Global History*, 5:1 (2010), 1-29.

a request to the States of Holland to issue a resolution against the consumption of all kinds of cotton and chintzes ‘both white and printed, coloured and painted’; such a resolution was postponed and never brought back.⁸⁵ The VOC seemed instead to have placated national textile interests by promising to export woollen cloth as in the case of two separate contracts signed with the city of Leiden in 1742 and 1776 respectively.⁸⁶

Notwithstanding the free circulation of Indian cloth, in the fifty years between the 1670s and the 1720s the Netherlands developed a thriving cotton industry. Daniel de La Feuille in a travel guide for Amsterdam published in 1701 mentions the flourishing trade of calico printing around the city where by 1730 nearly 90 printworks were in operation.⁸⁷ Yet by this time Swiss printed cottons were more resistant, cheaper and more beautiful than Dutch ones.⁸⁸ Dutch producers seemed to be at a disadvantage compared with their competitors in London and Paris who could respond more quickly to new fashion trends.⁸⁹ The cost of labour was also higher in the Netherlands than in other European countries.⁹⁰ French printers specialised in high-quality chintzes, carried out research on dyes and adjusted prints to current taste. In contrast to France, in Amsterdam no names of designers are known. Dutch printers did pay attention to changes in fashion, but the French designs were beyond their abilities. At the same time when in France dyes improved, Dutch printers started to use lesser quality to reduce costs.⁹¹ By the mid-

⁸⁵ Willem Johannes Smit, *De katoendrukkerij in Nederland tot 1813* (Amsterdam, 1928), p. 184.

⁸⁶ Valentijn Schenk, “‘Een naare en bedroefde eeuw’: De verscheppingen van Leidse textiel naar Azië door tussenkomst van de VOC in de periode 1770-1790 en de rol van het contract van 1776”, *Textielhistorische Bijdragen*, 41 (2001), 49-64; Femme S. Gaastra, ‘Leiden en de VOC’, in Dick E. H. de Boer (ed.), *Leidse facetten: tien studies over Leidse geschiedenis* (Zwolle, 1982), pp. 53-64.

⁸⁷ Vibeke Kingma, ‘De katoendrukkerijen in Amsterdam en Nieuwer-Amstel’, *Textielhistorische Bijdragen* 38 (1998), 10-11.

⁸⁸ Smit, *De katoendrukkerij*, pp. 155-6.

⁸⁹ Kingma, ‘De katoendrukkerijen in Amsterdam en Nieuwer-Amstel’, 25.

⁹⁰ In 1766 Swiss printers earned 3-3.5 guilders a week; in 1760 the Augsburg printer Schule paid his workers 3 guilders a week. Amsterdam workers earned instead 9-10 guilders a week. Smit, *De katoendrukkerij*, p. 196.

⁹¹ Kingma, ‘De katoendrukkerijen in Amsterdam en Nieuwer-Amstel’, 25. For France see: Gottmann, *Global Trade*, ch. 5.

eighteenth century, the Dutch industry had declined substantially and produced mostly cheaper products of a lesser quality.⁹²

Conclusion

This chapter has brought together two stories that are often seen as separate. The political economy of textiles in Britain as well as in France and the Dutch Republic needs to be read next to a history of textile procurement from India. It is assumed that the East India companies played against domestic manufacturing interests. Their high volumes of textiles imported - legally or illegally – into Europe were perceived as a threat more than as an opportunity. The bans that were enacted confirm this interpretation. I showed instead the limitations of the textile supplies of the East India companies: problems in procurement were endemic as was the impossibility of being supplied with abundant quantities of high-quality cloth that responded to the specifications and tastes of European consumers. Perhaps rather than accounting for the success of Indian cotton textiles in spurring economic dynamism and innovation in Europe, one might consider their limitations as equally important. Yet opportunities for the development of a new cotton industry in Europe could only be realised through a political economy that provided the right level of protection to a nascent industry whilst satisfying established manufacturing interests. England – more than France or the Dutch Republic – capitalised on the importation of large quantities of white Indian cloth suitable for local printing as well as the opportunity to complement Indian cotton textiles with local mixes of linen and cotton. The complex political economy of cotton and linen within the British Isles has a global dimension that connects Indian producers and European consumers and compares different national trajectories within Europe.

⁹² Jan Willem Veluwenkamp, 'De buitenlandse textielhandel van de Republiek in de achttiende eeuw', *Textielhistorische Bijdragen*, 34 (1994), pp. 81-3. On the issue of quality and the development of an English cotton industry see: Berg, 'Quality, Cotton, and the Global Luxury Trade'; Riello, 'Factories before the Factory'.