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Coromandel cotton textiles and French trading in the 18th century : A study in material culture

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Abstract

The French participation in the Indian textile trade began in 1664 through the French East India Company. Pondicherry, Yanaon and Karikal were the three settlements that served the French trade on the Coromandel coast. The French company continued to trade till 1769. The Indian textiles were known for vibrant colours, visual charm and printed motifs. The French, like some other Europeans, carried the Indian textiles to the far-flung regions. Introduction of cheaper and fine varieties of cotton textiles in Europe, Africa and to the 'New World' led to a material change and new forms of comfort in the daily lives of the people.

Keywords

French East India Company, Coromandel cotton textiles, banjara community, gomasthas, cotton textile, muslin cotton, deora, printed cloth, kalamkari, ikat, patola, gingham, chintz, bettela, palampore, rumal, indiennage, Pondicherry, Dupleix.

I. Introduction

Several sources refer to the brisk trade that existed between the European companies and the Coromandel coast, the eastern seacoast of southern India during the eighteenth century. Cotton textiles formed the bulk of exports from India. The Europeans showed keen interest in them as various textile items brought them huge profits. As Laurel Ulrich Thatcher suggests, the history of textiles is fundamentally a story about international commerce in goods and ideas.[i] Introduction of cheaper and fine varieties of cotton textiles to Europe, Africa and to the 'New World' led to a material change and new forms of comfort in the daily lives of the people.

While the aesthetic patterns and the different colours of Indian fabrics had entered the homes of the Europeans, the courser variety served the daily needs of the plebian population. Since the Coromandel coast produced a rich variety of cotton textiles that was much in demand outside India, the English, the French and the Dutch loaded their ships with varieties of cotton textiles for the European markets. Besides the English, the French remained actively involved in this trade till the last decade of the eighteenth century.

The long coastline of the Coromandel portrayed certain features that had tremendous bearing on the internal and external textile trade. In the absence of natural harbours, anchoring of big ships was difficult. Yet, several factories and trading posts (*Comptoir) emerged* of the English and the French in close proximity to each other. The presence of ports with pockets of manufacture adjacent to them, and the habitation of several communities dependent on manufacturing and trading activities brought about a unique element of competition and cooperation between the English and the French.

The French participation in the Indian textile trade began in 1664 through the French East India Company (*Compagnie des Indes*). It continued to trade till 1769, that is, for more than a century. Despite frequent wars in Europe and territorial wars in India mainly with the English, the French trade performed reasonably well between 1720 and 1756. Pondicherry, Yanaon and Karikal were the three settlements that served the French trade on the Coromandel coast. Pondicherry was the French seat of power in the Indian Ocean. By mid-eighteenth century, the port town was well-developed and highly populated. The prominence of Pondicherry was chiefly due to its trade in cotton textiles.

The local merchants and a whole range of skilled artisans that included weavers, washermen, bleachers, dyers and porters played a crucial role in the growth of this port city. This port town and its environs produced some of the best cotton textiles, both white and painted. In the mid-eighteen the century, Joseph Francois Duplex, the French Governor, arranged to invite and assemble various classes of weavers such as Kaikolars, Sedars and Seniyars to settle at Villiyanullur in the vicinity of the town and built houses and arranged looms for them.[ii]

The districts of Ganjan, Vizagapatam, Guntur, Chicacol, Rjamundry and Mustafanager formed the most fertile coastal strip of the Nizam's dominion in north Coromandel. Known for its dyewoods and thick forests, this region furnished some of the most beautiful cotton goods of white and painted varieties. The French and the English were aware of its commercial importance and vied with each other to take possession of this rich tract. One of the oldest ports of Coromandel Coast was Masulipatnam but it had lost advantages to Madras and Pondicherry by the mid-eighteenth century.

The French traders, however, remained active and continued trading operation from here. The rapid rise of Madras, the English domination of this region and the dwindling fortune of the Nizam of Hyderabad, restricted the French trade. The region surrounding

Masulipatnam still survived as a centre of cotton manufacture. The French clung to their limited trade rights and persisted with their purchases of cotton and *chay* goods (cotton cloth of deep red shade obtained from the roots of **Chaya plants**, mainly found in Nizam's territory).

Yanaon was primarily used by the French as a feeder port for Pondichéry. It consisted of about 8000 inhabitants and a good proportion of them were involved in the manufacture and commerce of trade.[iii] The cotton manufactures were concentrated in considerable numbers in this region and could offer goods of the value of 400,000 to 500,000 *livres*.[iv]Coromandel coast was the most commercial sector due to its cotton textiles.

Like cultivators who were dependent on money lenders, the weavers too borrowed money from master-weaver or merchant financier. As Jacques Dupuis wrote, 'Without advances, looms could not work'. The officials of French East India Company like Dupleix, Law de Lauriston, Morocin, the local merchants and Arminians provided loans. Manufacturing techniques of each variety varied according to the type of cloth, pattern and weaver's specialization.

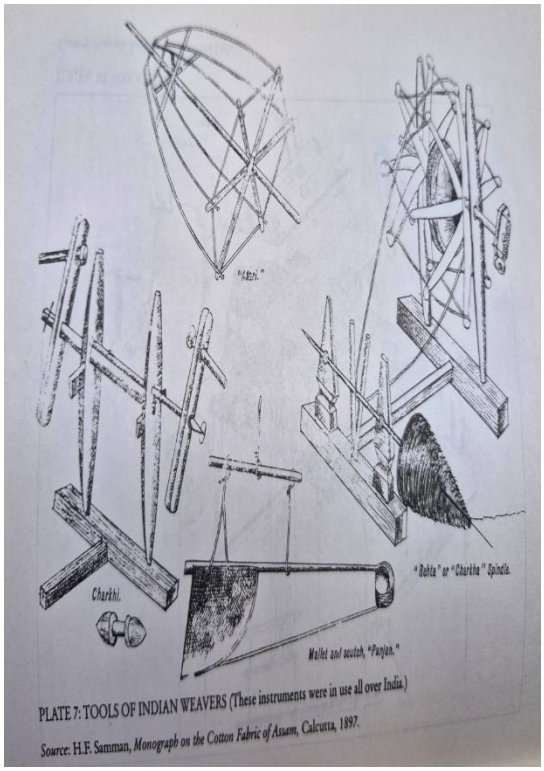
A major portion of investments came from private funds transferred by means of remittance of English officials to London. This was done mainly by European banks like the House of Panchaud, Samuel Ximenes, Robert Herris, the House of Necker of Paris and Bourdieu & Chollet of London. In this way, the Coromandel textiles reached different corners of the globe, to the end buyers of markets in Lisbon, Levant, Gambis, Samuel and West Indies.

II

Manufacture of Cotton Textile

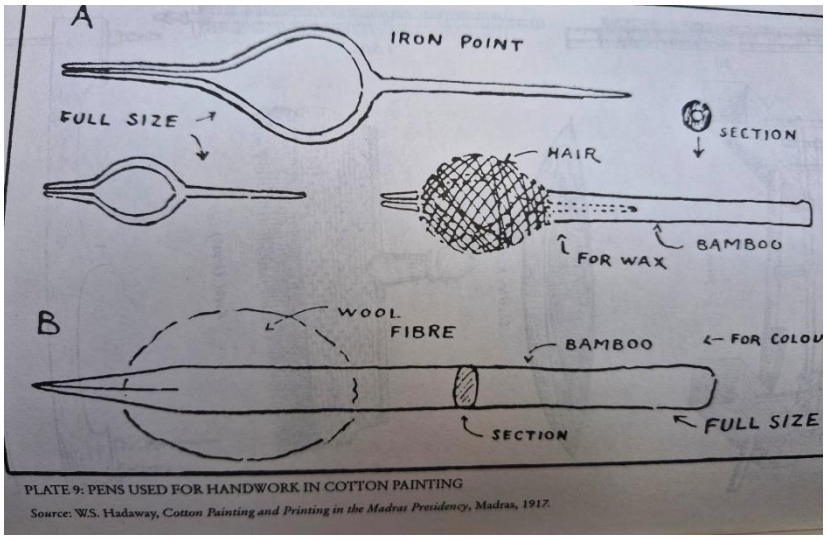
A glance at textile manufacturing reveals different stages of production. The first stage involved procurement of raw cotton through *banjara* trading community who brought cotton from Gujarat and Malwa region. Bulk of raw cotton was purchased from them. A smaller quantity of raw cotton was acquired from land between Koleram and Kaveri rivers. The next stage was the preparation of thread. Women and children were involved in this work. The Company agents called *Gomasthas* purchased threads from them and supplied them to markets and weavers.

During the eighteenth century, weaving relied on traditional manual operated tools – mainly pit looms and frame looms- charkha (the spinning wheel for preparing thread and *takli* (a vertical spindle) and the shuttle looms for weaving. The warping drum was a large circular tool which was used to straighten and measure the warp threads before mounting on the loom. Shuttle was a wooden tool used to pass the weft thread (bana, horizontal or crosswise threads) through the warp called tana). It took several days to prepare a piece of cloth depending on plain or intricately designed or superfine cloth. Washing needed several weeks and needed Reed or Beater Bar to evenly space warp threads.



Tools for preparation of Yarn

This genre of textile was called **Kalamkari** and manufactured in Andhra region. The tools used for painting or making figures were a sort of fountain pen of many sizes and types to suit the needs of rough or delicate patterns. A bamboo stick of about six inches in length was cut at one end into a narrow point, and the point was split through the Centre to form a nib to function as a pen. Just above the point, an egg-shaped ball of fibre or wool was formed forming the receptacle for the colour when the pen was in use. This tool remained in use among the Indian artisans till the beginning of the twentieth century.



Tools for painting cloth, Kalamkari

The printed cloth was prepared by wood blocks for patterned fabric. With the coming of the Europeans, the sale of clothes increased for diverse purposes. Long distance demand developed that was based on regional or caste-based specializations. Orissa, became an ***ikat*** centre, locally known as 'bandha' and for ***patola*** (beautifully designed textile), and Andhra for **'Kalamkari' (**hangings painted textiles), while some areas achieved far-flung reputation for **handkerchiefs (**rumal**)**. Little information on the Indian technique of washing and bleaching is available in the English sources. A French engineer and traveller, Legoux de. Flaix provides us with minute details of its procedure in his two volumes work of late-eighteenth century.



Wooden Blocks

In a memoir preserved in the Bibiotheque Nationale, Paris, he advocates adoption of Indian method of beaching even by the French weavers. This he considered more economical and convenient than the one practiced in France. The Indian method also helped the cloth to become durable. Dupleix, the French Governor made Pondicherry a reputed centre of bleaching by getting a *blanchisseri* constructed in 1753.

Weaving cotton fabric was a specialized activity and was carried out by specific castes, chiefly Kaikkolars, Devangas, Sedars and Seniyars. Later members from the castes of Baligas & Pallis also entered this profession. The weaving of cotton was controlled by a French company through their agents or through company merchants. The textiles were prepared according to company's specifications. Cotton textiles constituted the bulk of the French exports from the Coromandel.

The washing procedure is also described by an Englishman named John Milford.[v] In another memoir addressed to the French Company written in 1733, an elaborate description and details of colouring and dyeing is provided by an anonymous writer. The author mentions not only the process of colouring silk and cotton but also gives the names of the ingredients used in different dyes.[vi]

Colouring components for dyeing cloth

The colouring components that were commonly used include items-like chilly, *ambla*, arrack sandal, *kusum* and gum. Vegetable dyes were used for the purpose of colouring the clothes even till late nineteenth century by the Indian textile producers. Vegetable dyes were considered superior to mineral dyes as with repeated washing, their colour became fast and bright. Blue colour was obtained from indigo, green by mixing turmeric and indigo, yellow from turmeric, black from indigo and gallnuts, maroon from lac and red from logwood or chaya roots.

Describing the mode of dyeing, Pennant wrote, "Though the methods of the Indian dyers are exceedingly tedious and complicated, and though they are utterly unable to explain the rationale of their processes, yet the beauty of their colours cannot fail to be admired, and must inspire us with the opinion that a knowledge of their methods might improve the processes of the European dyers..."[vii]

Legoux de Flaix also described in detail the rich and beautiful red colour of Indian cotton, particularly the dyewoods of the province of Condavir in Masulipatam and ascribed the beauty of colour to the method of dyeing. He wrote, 'It is rightly believed that the beauty of this colour results mainly from the processes of dyeing" ("*On croit avec raison parmi que la beauté de cette coleur résulté principalement des procédés de la teinture*").[viii]

European craze for Indian fabrics

The European craze continued to grow for the Indian fabrics consisting of numerous varieties of cloth such as long cloth, muslin, *dorea*, *mooree*, *betteella* or *bettilles*, chintz, *palempore*, *bafta* and several types of handkerchiefs. It is believed that Coromandel coast produced over 100 varieties of cotton cloth and many of them were exported. The French, like some other Europeans, carried the Indian textiles to the far-flung regions. According to Jean Terrade, the Indian cloths constituted 54 per cent of the total value of goods in French trade with Africa in 1775, which went up to 57 per cent by 1788 and offered sufficient profits from which slaves were purchased. [ix] The bulk of these textiles for Africa were of coarser variety.

Cotton textiles may be considered different from other manufactured creations. The Indian textiles were known for vibrant colours, visual charm and printed motifs. Their physical attributes drew special attention. Cotton textile printing was a collective exercise and was not associated with individual brilliance, each textile piece represented

regional specialization from the point of fibre, shades of colour, brightness of designs, thematic treatment, the cloth texture, embroidery, decoration and washability.



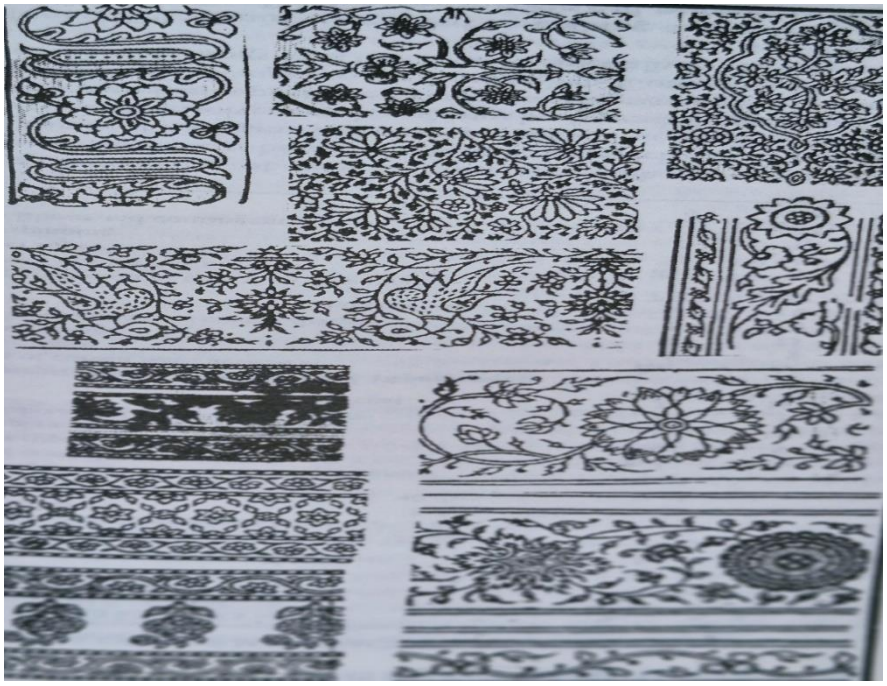
Bed cover and furnishings

The success of the Indian cotton textile producers, according to Geeeiorgio Reeeeiello and Prasannan Parthasarathi, was due to their ability to customize products to suit the tastes and preferences of different markets. It was a key reason for the success of Indian textiles across the world.[x]

Plain and patterned cotton Textile

The Indian cotton textiles may be divided into two major categories – plain and patterned. Within the patterned ones, there were two types a) textiles in which artistic treatment was carried out after completing the weaving, and b) those in which the artistic treatment was carried out on the loom itself.[xi] Most of the patterns were borrowed from themes related to nature. Floral designs included different varieties of flowers, petals, trees and creepers as well as animals such as elephants, birds like peacock or swan, fish besides portraying bold geometrical patterns in bright colours.

Among the plain cotton textiles, the long cloth was very much in demand by the Europeans and foreign traders. This was the largest single variety exported from India to Europe. The **muslin cotton** from Bengal enjoyed global reputation for its quality from time immemorial and fetched fabulous prices. According to the French sources, Coromandel also exported this article. It was a loosely woven cloth, spun from fine yarn. Its advantage was that it could be sold as a semi-finished item for printing, painting and dyeing or as a finished manufactured item.



Popular Cotton Prints

Muslin cotton preparation needed an elaborate effort. Muslin *dorea* was manufactured in the same manner. The washing also required several days of uninterrupted labour. These were transported on bullock carts to Pondicherry where it was sorted at the warehouses. It took fifteen days for two workers, ten days for three and eight days for four workers to manufacture a piece of superfine *mooree* and it took another twenty days to complete the washing before it was delivered to the brokers.[xii]

There was another type of muslin called ***dorea*.** It was a light fabric and usually contained two stripes.[xiii]Among the local people it was called ***Karasari*.** The *dorea* and the ***bettela*** were so similar to each other that they were interchangeable in their sale. Its manufacturing process is described in detail in the French sources. Flaix mentions two varieties of *betteela* – the *parchari* and *dimdisse*.[xiv] The first was prepared with two broad strips with thin strips of 5-6 threads at the middle. *Bettilla dorea* resembled *dorea* of Bengal, though it was of slightly inferior quality.

The region in the north of Carnatic produced superfine quality fabric while southern parts provided slightly lower quality. As Pondicherry was situated in the southern Carnatic, the best variety was not available to the French. ***Chicacole muslin*** was made of fine thread, prepared in the neighbouring villages of Krishna and Godavari rivers, in the districts of Rajamundry, Vizagapatanam, Alipore, Ganjam and Chicacole.[xv] This was used primarily as tablecloths but sometimes used for ladies' dresses.



Cotton fabrics for tablecloth and ladies' dresses





One of the well-known names in cotton textile was **chintz** or *chites* (written in dozen different ways such as *cheetas*, *chinte*, *chidneys* etc.) These were painted cloths, also called *perses*. Although, it did not form a major component of French export, it had a special craze in Europe as it had beautiful finesse. Its possession was considered a status symbol by the aristocratic women and ladies of rich families.



Chemise made from Chintz



Jupes and gowns made of Chintz

A special variety of chintz was known by the name of *Chite metabi*.[xvi] It was a precious article and was regarded as an Oriental luxury. Its export to France gradually declined due to the prohibitory regulations imposed by the French government on the import of painted and printed cloths. Among the decorated fabrics of Coromandel, the flowered and figured weaves called ***jamedani*** enjoyed a worldwide reputation. It was quite similar to ***organdi*** except it was brocaded and stitched.[xvii] Its trade remained mainly in the hands of the English while the French share was very marginal.

Another genre of muslin was ***betteela*** or *bethile* and was an article of some importance in the European trade from the Coromandel. It was prepared in stripes or had flowered designs. It was used for neck clothes and ladies' dresses, and the clearest sort was used for bonnets and veilings. It was procured from Warrnagal and Khammanet districts in Andhra and Cuddalore on Tamil Coast. Its trade suffered when the private traders replaced the French East India Company. It was replaced by the Swiss initiated muslin in the markets of Europe.

Gingham was a pure cotton fabric woven with dyed yarn and patterned in either stripes or checks. It was usually in red or blue shade. This fabric was well known in European markets though some of the European cities like Rouen in France and Birmingham in England had started producing a similar variety.[xviii] However, the excellence of paints and texture of the Coromandel textile could not be matched, particularly that of the four-thread tissue. Of all the textiles bought in the Coromandel region, *Guinea* and the *semi-guinea* formed an important proportion of the French cargo. It was of the same texture and weave as the long cloth but was woven of cotton thread and dyed in bright shades.

One of the famous varieties of textile of the Coromandel was ***Palempore***. According to some the world 'Palempore' is derived from *'Pamampose'* or '*palangposh'* – cloth – decorated by a specific process. This textile represented the artistic workmanship and had quaint illustrations of scenes from the epics: Ramayana and Mahabharat. Based on mythological themes and religious stories it had the same richness of architecture framework that was reproduced on cloths. It created a pleasant cavalcade of motifs and designs, harmonizing block printing and hand painting. It was used as canopies, wall hangings, screen rolls, prayer clothes, jackets and women's clothes, and used as a decoration cloth of carts and temples during processions and festivals.



Palampore

The genre prepared for canopies, screens and decorations was entirely hand painted with patterns of trees or mythological subjects. These were well rinsed in water or in mixture of soap, earth and water mixed with milk. After drying the cloth, the general pictorial outlines were drawn by males while the inner figures and in some cases the colouring of drawings was done by women.

The most sought-after item among the Coromandel cotton textile was the handkerchief (*rumal*) and enjoyed a ready market in Europe and elsewhere. Madras handkerchiefs find mention in the famous American novel *Uncle Tom's Cebin* by Upton Sinclair. It was an important component of cotton textiles exported from India as these handkerchiefs could never be imitated in Europe. As regards the social composition of the Indians

associated with the textile sector of Coromandel, merchants, weavers, dyers and washermen constituted an important segment of the south Indian society. Their importance had increased with the growing demand of the Indian textiles among the Europeans, but not so the fortunes of those who produced them.

III.

Trading Networks

Pondicherry enjoyed the fruits of international trade that linked Coromandel not only with Europe but also with Africa and the West Indies. The intra-Asian trade of the Indian traders had existed for centuries. However, the coming of the European companies intruded into this sphere and during the eighteenth century **and ousted the local merchants**. The Europeans called it the 'country trade'. It linked Coromandel with Bengal, and further east to Malaya, the Archipelago and China in the east and connected the western coast up to Surat with African and Arabian coastline.

Though Dutch were the first to create their foothold in this trade, the French participation increased from 1730s. French participation was in the nature of *family group business* along with some European merchants in their private capacity (including the Armenian Issac Elias and a Portuguese Carvalho) and some Indian Merchants. [xix] Dupleix seemed to have actively participated in this branch of trade and made a fortune for himself. More than any other person, it was Dupleix who placed the French on the map of 'country trade' as an important power[xx].

A memoire of 1764 mentions of the French 'country trade' with China, Manila, Pegu, Ascham Moka, Persia, Merguy Mahe on the western coast of India. [xxi] The French traded in Indian textiles up to Southeast Asia and Manila where there was a steady demand for Indian cotton goods. Often the French found it difficult to procure goods directly from the producers, so they got them from second or third hand sale. The profit margin was quite modest- about 5 to 6%.[xxii] The French participation in the Asian trade showed a fair degree of revival during the 1780s.

According to Furber, all their ships were trading between Pondicherry, Mauritius, Maldives and Colombo.[xxiii] We also find several instances of the French captains taking their ships to Pegu, Manilla, Achem and China in the east and up to Mokha in the West. In fact, Mokha held an important place in the French 'country trade' as they brought coffee that was utilized to fill up their cargo from Pondicherry to Europe and provided nearly 50 percent profit.[xxiv]

In the second half of the 18th century, numerous merchants and trading houses were getting involved in the conduct of this branch of trade. Tuifs de Livourne and Gregoire Sheriman had their correspondents Aruntius Tacob and Johannes Sciammic at Madras. Marseillean shippers Berard Coulon & Co. had their agents at Yanon, Pondicherry and Porto Novo. We find Gonzebat and Amalric and then Amalric Michel Couton & Co. also

engaged in this trade, the last house and possibly the second last too, were the branches of Rabaud.[xxv]

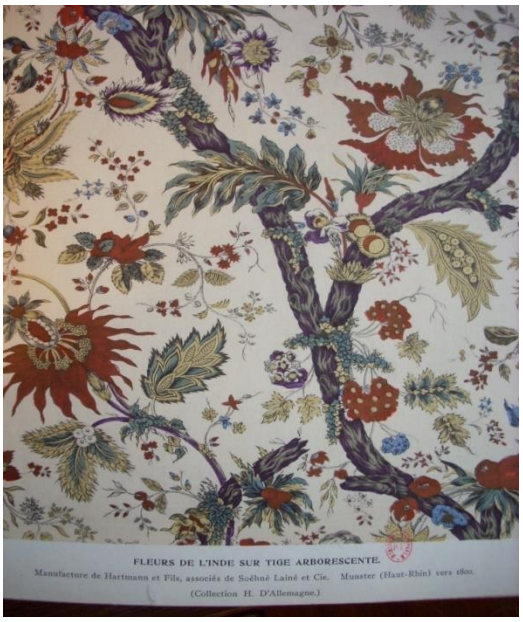
In the course of the eighteenth century, the French had created a global network stretching across east-Asian societies, islands of south Asia, the west Asian ports, African coast and then into the European markets through Lorient and Marseilles. The expansion of commercials had turned the port of Lorient into a focal point of distribution, besides serving the Centre of shipbuilding, fitting out ships to Asia and Africa. The cheap and coarser variety of Indian textile reached African and the French West Indian population that included the African slaves.

Trading in Indian textiles get mentioned in the literary works like Molier's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Pierre Jolle's *Semain Burlesque d'Amsterdam* and Upton Sinclair's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In 1785, another company named *Nouvelle Compagnie des Indes* was formed. However, the French Revolution of 1789 and lack of a consistent policy of the French State deprived the French company of business stability and steady profits.

IV

Impact on Material Culture

The cotton textiles of Coromandel were sold in the European markets. According to Brigitte Nicolas, introduction of Indian textiles into the French market had wider repercussions in France, India and Africa[xxvi]. This is reflective of a shift in certain ways. Indian motifs on fabrics remodelled the sleeping chambers of the rich with hangings, quilts, bedcovers, cushions, curtains and coverlets. Basin was used to make coarse petticoats and curtains, Betille was used for neck cloth, Guinee and Salempore was used by the slave population to cover their bodies. These represented cultural and social transformations and new ways of draping the body.



Indiennage – Imitated textiles in Europe

Due to weaver's protests earlier in France in July 1786, the French government imposed high duties on Indian cotton textiles and prohibited the use of popular items like printed clothes, muslin, tapestry and brocaded stuff.

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Coromandel textiles were gradually replaced by imitated textiles. A large factory was established in 1759 called Oberkampf in eastern Paris in France to copy Indian prints and replace the Indian printed textiles. They could, however, not match the beauty, brightness, variety, artistic designs and durability of the Indian clothes.

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