



STATE OF HANDLOOM WEAVERS, WEAVING AND FABRIC IN TAMILNADU THROUGH THE AGES

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Cite This Article: Dr. S. Sivasankaran, "State of Handloom Weavers, Weaving and Fabric in Tamilnadu Through the Ages", International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities, Volume 1, Issue 1, Page Number 95-103, 2016.

Abstract:

'Weaving' according to historians, is the second product that mankind has learnt in the process of progressive civilization. Since remote antiquity, handloom weaving remains a traditional occupation of India. Belonging to artisan class, weavers always possess a sense of pride in the cultural life of the country. They manufacture fabrics of excellent and splendid quality which have gained global reputation over five thousand eight hundred years. These handlooms are unparalleled in its flexibility and versatility, permitting experimentation and encouraging innovation. Innovative weavers with their skillful blending of myths, faiths, symbols and imagery provide the fabric an appealing dynamism.¹ The quality of cotton fabrics manufactured by our weavers gets approbation from the historians. *Herodotus* applauds that the Indian possess likewise a kind of plant which, instead of fruit, produces wool of a fine and better quality than that of sheep. On this the Indians make cloths.² Further, traveler *Tonnat* who wondered about varieties of clothes made with simple tools says, "in the manufacture of fine muslin in which they excel all over the world, the wheel, the reel and the loom are of a simple and artless structure. Yet the work cannot be equaled with the European machinery aided by every effort of ingenuity and skills."³ *Abbe J.A. Dubois*, who was greatly impressed by the skill and craftsmanship of weavers writes, "the beautiful fabrics are manufactured in wretched thatched huts built of mud, 20 to 30 feet long by 7 to 8 feet broad. In such a room, the weavers stretch his frame, squats on the ground and quality piles his shuttles surrounded by his family, his cows and his fowls."⁴ A *Dutch chaplain* who was in Madraspatnam in 1649 said that the people's chief traffic consists of coloured stuff and the weavers here being famous throughout the Indies as well as their dyes.⁵ *Abul Fazl* says that the Emperor manufactured such excellent silken goods with the assistance of foreign experts employed by him that they could successfully compete with foreign imports.⁶ *Hemingway* in his *Gazetteer of Tanjore District* records that the silk and cotton clothes of Tiruvappur have a considerable reputation and that the scarlet vegetable dyes used there is especially well known.⁷

Tracing the Roots:

The disclosure of slick stones in different parts of South India, makes one feel that the men of Paleolithic age would have known the art of plaiting leaves and barks of trees. It is very interesting to know that loin skins and skin robes became their luxurious dress materials. The late Neolithic men inherited the conception of this art and improved it. But the temperate climate of the subcontinent put off their effort on the advancement of weaving. In course of ages, the cotton, which was a wild stuff in the western parts and Deccan, began to be used for making dress. The plaiting of cotton gave the idea of weaving it with the necessary materials.⁸

The success of manufacture of cotton was taken up and the ancient people thought that there was a heavy demand for such stuff not only in India but also abroad. The cultivation and manufacture of the products induced the men of Iron Age to make improvement on the art of weaving.⁹ According to *Vajasaneyi Samhita* and *Tarittiriya Brahmana* of later Vedic and Epic ages, weavers formed a separate caste. But the caste did not determine their crafts in course of time, especially during the regime of Mauryas. Some of the references reveal the fact that weavers becoming archers, warriors becoming weavers, Brahmins becoming warriors and vice versa.¹⁰ Finest quality of cotton and cloth was prepared by Indian weavers and artisans and exported to other countries during the ancient period. Hand spun and handmade Indian muslin was the pride of India. Dyed cotton fabrics were also used. All colours used in dyeing were of natural origin and were enduring. India produced the finest yarn and had a flourishing trade of cotton and textiles with many countries.

The spinning and weaving cotton cloth was very much a part of everyday life in ancient India. The loom is used as a poetic image in several ancient texts. The *Atharvana Veda* says that day and night spread light and darkness over the earth as the weavers throw a shuttle on the loom. The Hindu god *Vishnu* is called *tantuwardan* or *weaver* because he is said to have woven the rays of the sun into a garment for himself. The words *tantu* (warp) and *ottu* (woof) are to be found in the *Rig Veda*.¹¹ This profession was given importance by the kings and rulers in ancient days. There is a reference about the appointment of a Superintendent of spinning and weaving (*sutradhyaksha*) during the times of *Chandragupta Maurya*.¹² There were Government factories for manufacture of yarn, clothing, mail-armour (*varma*) and ropes.¹³ There were female labourers viz., widows, disabled women, girls, women-ascetics, convicts, and devadasis etc. employed in the government factories for spinning yarn out of wool, bark (*valka*) cotton, silk cotton, hemp and flex. The yarn was received at the warehouse called *Sutrasala*. The wages were paid according to quantity or quality of work turned out and delay in payment was punishable.¹⁴ Thus this weaving profession was very ancient in character. Cotton fabrics is said to be the pearl

of Indian weaving. It was as though these craftsmen were magicians and waved wands to produce what seemed like dreams.¹⁵ Shuttles too were found at some of the excavated sites of Mohenjodaro.¹⁶

Indian floral prints, dating back to the 18th century A.D. were discovered by Sir Aurel Stein in the icy waters of Central Asia. The evidence shows that of all the arts and crafts of India, traditional handloom textiles are probably the oldest.¹⁷ Sir Edwin Arnold sings in 'The Light of Asia', the great poem based on the Buddhist *Tri-pitaka* or *Three-Caskets* text. The reference to the rich gifts of golden trays, the shawls, jade and the woven web - presumably fine muslins to the child Buddha when he was going to take his first seven steps, testifies to the antiquity of Indian handcrafts.¹⁸ Several instances show that native cloth in those days were patronized by many abroad in the East and West.

The fine muslin with a hansa (swan) design from India shrouds the Egyptian royal mummies¹⁹ where the hot dry sand of the desert acted as a preservative. 'Argaratic' muslin²⁰ and silks also were exported to this land of Nile, and Rome from Dhanayakata²¹ (Dharanikotta on the Krishna river, near Amaravathi), as seen evident from 'Periplus of the Erythrean Sea'.²² *Argaru* was the Roman name for Uraiyur in Trichinopoly district, the capital of the Sangam Cholas. *Periplus* also refers to Poduca, i.e. Pondicherry, whose historical importance as a textile centre is evident from the Arikkamedu excavations.²³ The Mughal poets described the scintillating muslins and brocades as *evening dew* as they became indistinguishable when laid on the grass; *evening water* when dipped in water invisible; *Sherbati* because of their cool appearance and feel on the skin; and *woven air* (*baft hawa*) as even a five-yard piece could pass through a little ring. The weightlessness of these fabrics has been sung by many poets comparing them to the *moon light on the tulip* or a *dew drops on the rose*.²⁴

Muslin cloth measuring several yards was reported to have been drawn through a finger ring and parceled in a match box.²⁵ A tale runs that Emperor *Aurangzeb* got fury when he saw his daughter princess *Zeb-un-Nissa* dressed in almost nothing. On being severely rebuked, the princess explained that she had not one but seven *jamahs* (dresses) on her body. Such was the fineness of the hand woven fabrics. The *Ain-i-Akbari* has a lot of citation about the *chint*.²⁶ There is another interesting story about the craftsmanship of workers. *Abul Fazl*, one of the famous ministers of Emperor Akbar, mentions in his *Ain-i-Akbari* that the Mughal emperors maintained skilled workmen in their palaces. Akbar himself was keenly interested in painting and employed a staff of artists so that they might vie with each other in fame, and become eminent by their production. Once a week, he inspected their creations and rewarded them with bonus and premiums according to their worth.²⁷ The commodities, like cotton yarn, gold, thread, raw silk, metal works, woolen products, gun powder etc., required by the imperial Mughals were produced in the *royal karkhanas*²⁸ which were located at Lahore, Agra, Dacca and Ahmedabad.²⁹

The history of South Indian Textile goes back to prehistoric times. Spindles was found in archaeological sites like Paiyampalli in the erstwhile North Arcot and cloth in Adichchanallur and the Nilagiri hills of Tamilnadu. Cotton textiles and cloth of very superior quality were being produced and exported from centres like Kanchipuram, Madurai, Tanjavur. Sangam classics like *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* contain copious evidences to this. *Silappadikaram* refers to the weaving of cotton and silk cloth and its export from the port of Pampuhar, otherwise called Kaveripumpattinam.³⁰ It describes about the separate streets for weavers, known as *karugar vidi*. The *aruvai vidi* is meant for *aruvai vanikan* who was a merchant quiet distinct from the weaver.³¹ Madurai was also boasted of equally prosperous and skilled weavers. *Kautilya* in his *Arthashastra* too refers to the fine textiles of Madurai. Sangam texts describe about beautiful cloth so fine that the eyes cannot follow the course of the yarn and clothe bearing such delicate designs as to make it look like 'the slough of snake'. Some are described as soft as fresh blossoms and others as light as smoke. Fine woven cloth is said to be as delicate and transparent as the vapours of milk.

Specific references to textile technology prevalent in ancient South India are also found in other literary texts. In *Aganauru* as well as *Narrinai*, both Sangam texts, the carder's bow is used as a poetic simile - the feathery clouds in the sky after the rains are said to resemble cotton well beaten by the carder's bow. Such evidences indicate that the bow for carding was introduced in South India presumably between the second and sixth centuries A.D.³²

Cotton Cultivation:

South India is lying in the temperate zone. People of the region prefer to wear cotton cloth only.³³ The cotton was cultivated abundantly in Khanbhami (Coimbatore). The place was known for the production of *Chikili*, the transparent cloth which was sold for 8 to 10 pons.³⁴ Textile came to be associated with social and ritualistic events from very early times. In the ancient books, the universe is referred to as a woven fabric. The garment covering the body became a symbol. It seemed to add to the significance or efficacy of the object of worship. So the sacred images began to be clothed, and different garments were used for different parts of the day, which involved constant changes. Even the linga is covered with a sheath usually of metal.³⁵ From sculptures, paintings and ancient literary accounts, it appears that in ancient days it was the lower strata of people - common soldiers, menials, elephant mahouts, palace attendants, singers and dancers - who wore stitched garments such as blouses, trousers and waist coats. Such garments are not described as the apparel or upper

classes or royalty nor gods and goddesses.³⁶ All of these vary greatly from region to region.³⁷ Tailors are referred to as *tunnakarar*. The references to *tunnar* and *tunnavinajnar* also come from *Manimekalai*.³⁸

Varieties of Cloth:

The handloom weavers produced cloths of various sizes and patterns like dhotis, angavastrams, sarees, lunghis or kailies, Madras handkerchiefs, towels, bed sheets, shirtings, coatings, etc.³⁹ *Tolkappiam* describes the importance of weaving and their allied craft of tailoring.⁴⁰ The Silapathikaram⁴¹ provide information about the different varieties of cloth, dyes and dye products.⁴² The weavers produced various types of cloths for the requirement of the temple, the royal household and the public. In the Sangam age, high quality cotton fabric was called as *Tugil*. The *Jivaka Chintamani* refers to women wore sarees with folds and drapes at the end.

It also provides information that both silk and cotton cloth starched with rice wastes and perfumed with fragrant smoke. Such sarees were known as *Pumpattu*, *Pactchilai Pattu*, *Konkana Pattu* and *Ven Pattu*. Different types of silk materials such as muslin and chintz were produced during the Vikrama Chola period.⁴³ In the medieval literatures, the loom was a part of innumerable poetic similes and metaphors. Saint Manikkavasagar compares flights of fancy to the rapid movements of a shuttle on the loom.⁴⁴ *Palampore* is a bed cover. Canopies is ceiling covers used for pandal or tents or in temple cars. Both small and large square cloths are called *handkerchiefs*.⁴⁵

Centres of Handloom Industry:

During modern times the handloom weaving industry is prevalent in all the districts of the then Madras Presidency except the Nilgiris. The chief centres are Madras, Salem, Aruppukkottai, Kumbakonam, Tanjore, Coimbatore, Dharmapuram, Conjeeveram, Melapalayam in Tinnevely, Chirala in Guntur, Sennimalai in Coimbatore district, Dharmavaram in Anandapur and Malabar. In all these centres, the industry is extant from time immemorial. But in the village of Bhavani in Coimbatore district where the introduction of artificial silk weaving is however of recent date.⁴⁶ Further these centres are classified on the basis of the varieties of cloth produced there. Those centres which manufacture the *coarser variety* are mostly Tinnevely, North Arcot, Coimbatore, Cuddapah, Vizagapatam, Chittor and Malabar districts. Cloths made of *medium counts* are chiefly produced in the districts of Salem, Anantapur, Bellary, North Arcot, South Arcot, Coimbatore, Madura, Ramnad and Tanjore. *Finer counts of yarn* are produced in Kumbakonam, Madura, Salem, Erode, Nellore and Anantapur.⁴⁷ Not less than 125 sorts of cotton varieties are found mentioned in the records of the English Factories in India.⁴⁸

Origin of Weaving Castes:

During the early three thousand years, it may be said that the weaving industry was not based on caste system.⁴⁹ But due to the advent of Aryans, and its resultant castes remains a predominant phenomenon in the social strata and milieu of the Indian community. Dr. Wilson states that the word 'Caste', is not of Indian origin, but derived from the Portuguese term *casta*, signifying a race, mould or quality.

The Indian word for caste is *jat* or *jati*, which has the original meaning of birth or production of a child, and hence denotes good birth or lineage, respectability and rank, and *Jatha* means a well born. Thus, *jat* now signifies a caste, as every Hindu is born into a caste, and his caste determines his social position through out life. In general, the word *Caste* denotes a community or persons following a common occupation, and a community whose members marry only among them. Yet another distinctive feature is that the members of a caste do not, as a rule eat with outsiders, with the exception of other Hindu castes of a much higher social position than their own.⁵⁰ To quote S. Saraswathi, in Sanskrit, the term *varna* denotes the four fold classification of the society the Brahmanas, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya and the Sudra, while *jati* refers to several castes that have developed from the four *varnas*⁵¹ which in Tamil means *Kulam*.⁵² From the standard anthropological views, the castes are referred to as *chiefdoms* or "little kingdom" – at least in South India.⁵³ At national level Bunkar, Joria, Tanti, Kosthi, Patwa, Pattajulkaran and Sale are the designations of various weaving castes, the first two are derived from a root meaning to put the threads together and the others from Sanskrit words for silk cloth.⁵⁴

The handloom industry in the beginning was not based on caste system, but subsequently the industry gradually assumed a caste-basis. As such in India there are several millions of self-employed artisans, engaged in their respective industries or professions, such as hand-weaving and its subsidiary occupations, carpentry, black smithy, stone-carving, cobblery, hair-dressing and masonry etc. These artisans neither have schooling nor undergo any sort of technical training and learnt the art or craft in their own household hereditarily.⁵⁵ The handloom as an occupation is peculiarly suited to the sentiments, habits and caste organisation of the Indian workers.⁵⁶ The craftsmen of India have their own mythological origin.⁵⁷ The Tamil weavers are no exception. The communities which are dealt in this project too have mythological origin. The handloom industry was the monopoly of a particular Hindu caste known as the *Tantubaya* or the *Tanti*. Among the Muhammedans too the weavers formed more or less a caste called *Jolahas*. The hereditary profession of the caste was solely responsible for the preservation and development of the art of weaving through generations.

Prime Weaving Communities of Tamilnadu:

The Tamils are divided into four Varnas, or tribes. The first is called *Pirama*, the second *Sattriya*, the third *Vaisiya* and the fourth *Sutra*; corresponding with the Hindu divisions of Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisiyas, and Sudras.⁵⁸

Simon Casie Chitty opines that the Kaikollar is comprised in the first set of the sudra tribe and the Seder, Saliyar and Seniyer in the second set.⁵⁹ One of the artisan classes weavers, which does not come under Pancalas or Kammalans.⁶⁰ The weavers themselves are divided into various sub-castes, such as the Kaikolas, Jadars, and Patnulkarans of the Tamil countries and Padma Sales and Pattu Sales of the Telugu districts.⁶¹ Usually each sub-caste wove a particular type of cloth, and could seldom be induced to make any other. Only with difficulty they could alter the dimensions of the cloth they wove. They seem always to have been very conservative and very improvident.⁶² Simon Casie Chitty has listed Seder, Kaikoler, Saliyer and Sinoyer under the Sudras,⁶³ perhaps a gross misunderstanding of the then prevalent social strata. The Tamil weavers are grouped into six subdivisions or class; and the Telugu weavers into five are as follow:

S.No	Division of Tamil Weavers	Division of Telugu Weavers
1	Kaikolar	Salay
2	Seringar	Jendra
3	Jendravar	Padmay Salay
4	Saliyar	Thokata
5	Sedan	Devangalu ⁶⁴
6	Silupan	

In the case of South India there were different groups within the weavers communities who specialized in the production of a particular variety. *Kaikkolars* were either Nagas or were descendants of a mixed race of Nagas and Dravidians. The Nagas inhabiting the Eastern Coast in the Pandyan territory were great weavers, and exported a large quantity of cloths and muslins. The Nagas of the Kalinga country were so famous in the art of weaving that the word *kalingam* in Tamil has come to signify a cloth.⁶⁵

Tamil poets allude to a famous chieftain Ay who offered to the image of Siva, one of these priceless muslins which had been presented to him by Nila- Naga.⁶⁶ The Chola inscriptions refer to the kaikkolar activities. During the Chola period the Kaikkolars combined weaving besides the soldering.

They were frequently referred to as the *Terinja Kaikkolars*.⁶⁷ The Kaikkolars are not skilful workmen and weave only coarse white cloths. They had their living quarters near the temples. They assisted temple administration, levy of taxes and their collections. In return the king granted them privileges of using palanquin, and conch during the auspicious days and death ceremony.⁶⁸ *Karurkar*, as a community of weavers, manufactured cloths from cotton, silk and wool.⁶⁹ Known as kammiyar, they lived in the sub-urban areas called Maruvorpakkam.⁷⁰ *Senthan Thivagarram* (8th century), a Tamil lexicon states that the Karurkar are weavers and sellers of cloth.⁷¹ However, Karurkar were exclusively a weaving community in ancient Tamil Nadu and their counterparts in Northern India are said to have engaged in different cottage industries.⁷² *Aruvaiyar* associated with cloth, should have also been weavers. Cilappatikaram and Manimekalai refer to them as the makers of fine coloured fabrics with their yarn.⁷³ However, this weaving community does not seem to have enjoyed as much importance as the Nagar.⁷⁴

The community of *Mannivars* occupies a lower status in the society, who produce turbans. Their products excel in fineness which were supplied to the royal families. Whereas, *Jodars* produce turbans, dhotis, percallaes, handkerchiefs, selas and muslins of all kinds. *Saliars* wove the same cloths as jodars. The word Saliar is derived from the Sanskrit word *Salika*, meaning a weaver. They claim a descent from the sage Markanda, the god of weavers.⁷⁵ During the time of Cholas (10th to 14th centuries), the Saliyars were the major weaving community whereas the Kaikolar who attained prominence under Vijayanagar, came only next to the Saliyar. The Saliyar seemed to have gained importance since the days of Uttama Chola (A.D. 970-85). In fact, they were called *Chola-saliyar*. During this period we are able to trace the existence of *Pattu Saliyar*.⁷⁶ References to this community are found in Chingelput, Tirunelveli, Coimbatore, Tanjore, erstwhile South Arcot and North Arcot.⁷⁷ The community of Seniyans was Telugu textile workers.⁷⁸ *Chenniwar*s wove turbans and the same cloth as kaikkolars. They sometime did the work of fishermen too.⁷⁹ The community of *Kurubans* made kambalis and janapars (gunny cloths). *Koliyars* wove porcelains or long cloth.⁸⁰ The Soliyans are also weavers. They weave coarse coloured cloths for women's wear.

The *Saluppan*s weave only gunny bags and the coarsest kinds of fabrics.⁸¹ At the time of the Nayaks, *Patunulkarars* or *Saurastiries* are believed to have come to the southern Tamilnadu to places such as Madurai and Tanjore from Kathiawar, owing to the oppression of Muslim invaders.⁸² Even now they are the dominant weaving community in Madurai, Dindugal, Ayyampettai, Kumbakonam and Tanjore area. They do not mix with the local south weavers and prefer to live in separate colonies of large towns. *Devangars* are also weavers who followed suit the foot steps of Patnulkaran and settled around their colonies, for they depend and purchase accessories from them. Yet another community, the *Saliyanagarattar* was the cloth merchants.⁸³ They were weavers who sold their own clothe.⁸⁴ They were mostly settled around Kanchipuram region and involved in

trading activities. They had contact with the merchant guilds and exported their cotton cloths to other countries.⁸⁵ Besides, *Adi-Andhras*, *Muhammadans*, *Mudaliyars*, *Chaliyas* in West Coast, etc., are also engaged in this industry. In addition to these regular traditional weaving communities, others like *Pandarams* (Coimbatore), *Vannias* (Conjeeveram) and *Christians* (South Kanara) too engaged in weaving and thus swelled the number of handloom weavers.⁸⁶ Among the weavers, the *Kaikkolars* and the *Devangars* together represent over 60 percent of the total weaving population of Tamil Nadu.⁸⁷

Patronage of Temples:

The *Kaikkolars* had been appointed as officers in the temples. The Madras Museum plate of Uttama Chola provides information about the social services of the weavers. This inscription also describes that Uttama Chola Parkesai donated a land to two classes of weavers (*Patta Salins*) residing in the quarters of Kanchipuram, since there were no managers (*Srikarya*) to supervise the receipts and expenses of the temple of *Ulagalanda Perumal*, he also appointed these weavers as temple managers in *Atimanapati* and *Karuvulampati*.⁸⁸ The weavers donated land to the temple jointly as well as individually. During the regime of Raja Raja I, a *Kaikkola* weaver of *Tiruvalakkoyil*, a hamlet of *Ponvilainda Kalattur* in erstwhile North Arcot made a gift of pan for a twilight lamp in the temple.⁸⁹ There was a tradition of appointing not only female but also male *kaikkola* *devaradiyar* in the temple. A *devaradiyar* was caught red handed for indulging in theft in the temple of *Tirunalkundramudaiya Nayanar*. The grand was forfeited and a hand was mutilated and deported from the village.⁹⁰

Idangai-Valangai Paradigm:

Just as the *varna* system marks a horizontal division of Indian society, or metaphorically of the human body, so the *idangai-valangai* classification marks a vertical division of South Indian society. This however excluded the upper castes, the Brahmins. The members of the two divisions struggle for certain honorary distinctions, such as the use of twelve pillars in the marriage pandal, the beating of five big drums on certain ceremonial occasions, the ride on horse-back or the carrying of a monkey flag. These privileges are claimed by the right hand castes on all public and festive occasions, and whenever any of these privileges are exercised by a member of the left-hand faction fights usually occur.⁹¹ Mattison Mines gives different explanations to the *idangai-valangai* castes. He mentions that the agriculture based castes were designated the right-hand castes, while the artisan merchants and their allies were called the left-hand castes. These castes worshipped separately, lived separately, and took different symbolic insignia as signs of their identity. The *Kaikkolars* and *Devangars* are castes belonged to the left-hand section of castes.⁹² The left hand castes are said to be the priestly castes. Hence, they claim the brahminhood.⁹³ In the Andhra-Karnataka regions, the *Padmasale* and the *Seniyar* are classified as *balagai* (*vadangai*) while the *Devangars* come under the *yedagai* (*idangai*).⁹⁴ According to Hutton, *Kaikkolan* caste belonged to the left hand (*Idangai*) group, but the *Saliyas* belonged to the right hand (*valangai*) group.⁹⁵

Economic Conditions of the Handloom Weavers:

From the early times to the medieval period, the weaving communities had occupied a pivotal position in the economic activities. In the society, the weavers and the smiths were the most prosperous group followed by the merchants.⁹⁶ Although they are said to be belonging to the *sudra* in the *varnasrama* system, they deal with the manufacture of cloths and selling them and thus they are behaving as *vaishyas*.⁹⁷ The evidence of ancient texts points not only to the production and technology of textiles but also to the trade in cloth. The indigenous textile merchants were called *aruvai vanigar*. *Silappdikaram* describes the *aruvai vanigar vidi* or the street of cloth merchants where quantities of cloth woven of cotton thread, hair or silk were sold. Interestingly, it describes the existence of wholesale shop as well as streets of petty shops; the latter perhaps being the place where weavers spread out their goods and sold them.

Cloth merchants are also referred to as *aruvai vanigar* in a Brahmi inscription from *Alaganmalai* pertaining to the second century. A popular poet of the Sangam age was known by the name as *Aruvai Vanigar Elavettanar*, indicating that he must have been a cloth merchant of considerable prominence.⁹⁸ There was an increase of trading activities in the medieval Tamil country. Cloths were either carried on the head (*Talaikattu*) or in bags. During the Chola period, the cotton growing areas and weaving centres were linked with Chola ports. *Madurai* was a centre of cotton production and weaving. The weavers sold their own at the local fairs called *Santai*. *Saliyanagaratar* of Kanchipuram had access to *Mayilapur*, the port city. The antiquity of its commerce is attested to by Ptolemy. His reference to *Mailarphan* is identified with *Mailppur*.⁹⁹ Kanchipuram had a good concentration of weaving communities¹⁰⁰ but was not a port city. However it gains commercial importance due to its cotton textile industries. It was exported to the Arabian ports like *Armuz* and *Aden*.¹⁰¹

Formation of Guilds:

The guild which regulated their trade and industry not only controlled them but also protected them by assuring employment.¹⁰² However, they were fond of drinking and gambling.¹⁰³ *Amuktamalyada* of *Krishnadevaraya* narrates that there were *guilds* for the weavers, goldsmiths, *pattunulkarars* and *komuties* etc. The profession of these people had been inherited by generations to generations. *Allahabad inscription* says that workers of the particular occupation were expected to abide by the rule of the profession.¹⁰⁴ Their affiliation with

temples and the united character of their guilds were important factors for the enhancement of their influence along with the prosperity gained through new economic opportunities.¹⁰⁵

Taxation:

Epigraphical evidences point out the list of taxes collected by the state from the weavers. A variety of taxes were imposed on the Handloom industry. *Tari irai* or *Tari Kadamai* (loom tax) was frequently mentioned in the inscriptions.¹⁰⁶ *Achchutari* was imposed on ordinary loom, as a professional tax.¹⁰⁷ *Nalayam* was the tax levied on cotton thread used for weaving.¹⁰⁸ *Parai – Tari* or *Seniyat – tari* was the tax on hand loom.¹⁰⁹ *Pattadai – ayam* was imposed on weavers of cotton blanket or screen. *Usivari* was the tax probably connected with tailoring.

Status of Handloom Weavers in the Modern Age:

The European countries were attracted to India especially to the South India for cloth trade. The British purchased cloth from the weavers initially by adopting different strategies viz, appointing clerks, deploying soldiers to the weaving centres, employing middlemen and so on. These cloths had been exchanged for spices of Indonesian Archipelago. After the third Carnatic War (1756-1763), the supremacy of English became paramount. With the discovery of the Fly-shuttle loom by John Kay in 1733, the Mute by Loens Paul in 1738, the Spinning Jenny by James Har Grives in 1764, the Western Frame by Arkright in 1767, the powerloom in 1765, the steam engine in 1768, and the jacquard in 1798 a new era of industrial production of cloth began in England. Mr. Harrocks, in the year 1814, devised mass production of cloth by attaching the steam engine for cotton weaving.¹¹⁰ The handloom industry holds a very high place in the economy of the Madras state in the beginning of the 19th century.¹¹¹ Handloom cloth in 1930s was an extremely important commodity and therefore the weavers themselves were important commercially and politically.¹¹²

To conclude that the economic condition of the handloom weavers in the twentieth century underwent a series of turbulent experiments. The weaving communities like Sengundars, Saliyars, Devangars, Sourashttras and so on struggled hard to earn for their daily bread. Except for short a while during two world wars, the pathetic plight of the weavers continued throughout the breadth and width of century due to the mill production, domination of middlemen, high cost of handloom products, non availability of markets for handlooms, duplication of handloom products by mills, politicization of cooperatives, use of low quality of jari and thread etc. The governments at centre and states appointed a number of committees in due course and have implemented welfare schemes packages for the amelioration of economic status of weavers, especially the weavers in the cooperative fold, to be ended with failure because of lack of awareness. The Sengundars, Devangars and Sourashttras are reluctant to engaging their people in weaving. Now the younger generations do not like to pursue their traditional occupation. Instead they have occupied jobs in engineering, medicine, education, administration, industry etc. Altogether, attempting preservation and exaltation of our glorious cultural heritage of handloom fabrics gradually disappear.

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