

Rural Development and Technology – with special reference to Silk Weaving in Kanchipuram

By

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Abstract

This research paper examines the silk weaving industry and the women silk weavers in Kanchipuram District. The study traces the history of Silk industry, the traditional handloom sector and the role of women in silk weaving industries. The paper also briefs about the problems faced by women weavers in India and the suggestions to overcome the issues faced by women weavers of the chosen study area. The paper analyses the history of Kanchipuram and weaving, the life of weavers, and how the textile industry has diluted their rich culture.

Introduction

Development is a process that creates growth, progress, positive change in economic, environmental, social and demographic component without damaging the resources of the environment.

In view of the fragmentation of Social Sciences and humanities and the theoretical gap existent in the distinct development approaches, three basic principles are commonly attributed to the concept: **efficiency, equity and liberty**.

Rural development is a process integrated with economic and social objectives, which seeks to transform rural society and provide a better and more secure livelihood for rural people. Rural development therefore, is a process of analysis, problem identification and the proposal of relevant solutions.

In this perspective, weaving industry is chosen for the study as weaving is one of the oldest crafts in history, dating back to at least 12,000 years ago. Before weaving became solely a textile craft, early humans weaved branches, twigs and other plant fibers to create threads for building homes, baskets and other necessary objects of utility. Today, weaving remains the main production process for textiles, however the craftsmanship of weaving carried cultural importance for a variety of uses around the world. Women have always had a unique relationship with weaving that goes deeper than just making clothes for their households.

Background of the study

Women's weaving skills were powerful and foundational to several distinct societies and have contributed profoundly to technological advancements of today. Women's natural abilities to be patient, detailed, and thorough enable technical talents that are exemplified in the meticulous work of weaving. Although technical and utilitarian, weaving has provided women the craftsmanship to create impeccable works of art and creative expression which are so intrinsic to the divine feminine.

History of Hand weaving

Textiles that are used every day wouldn't exist without the women who weave around the world and those who perfected the process. Textiles have and always been the most functional art form, however their beauty is inarguable. Perhaps the most beautiful part about textiles, specifically handwoven, is how tactical and precise it is to create.

Before mass manufacturing systems were created, women wove everything by hand, creating undeniable value. Historically, textiles, even just one article of clothing, was expensive and signified status because of the appreciated craftsmanship involved to produce them. Created with care and craft, textiles were of the highest quality, lasting lifetimes and were always generational heirlooms that preserved cultures and their histories that is known today. Women' handweaving has been and will always be the ultimate form of slow living that people are obsessed with, and is exactly why we empower the artisan.

India being a developing country with a majority of its population living in rural areas, agriculture is the main source of employment providing work to 70 percent of the rural people besides, handloom providing a major source of employment to the rural people in India. "The spinning wheel is a nation's second lung," said Mahatma Gandhi, The Father of our Nation, who considered the spinning wheel as a symbol of revolution. Hence, handloom weaving is the most important cottage industry and it is also a labour-intensive industry in

India. In India, 72 percent are engaged in cotton weaving, about 16 percent in silk weaving and rest are related to art silk and mixture.

Popularly known as the “City of Silk” and the “City of 1000 temples”, Kanchipuram, is located 70 km away from Chennai and is famous for its handwoven silk sarees with delicate zari work. It is considered to be one of the seven sacred cities in India, as it houses more than 1000 temples.

Kanchipuram, was the vital capital of the State for a long time, from the first century to the seventeenth century and one of the biggest production centres of pure silk handlooms. “It was a gorgeous city laid out in the shape of a lotus. In those days since the town could not have survived on education alone, there was a need for trade and that was weaving.”

Sarees became popular in the Indian subcontinent after the cultivation of cotton, in the fifth millennium BC. The cultivation was followed by weaving, which went on to become a big business after the introduction of dyes. Women traditionally wore silk and cotton sarees with block-prints, embroidery, and tie-dye patterns. Years later, the garment underwent modernisation and women had precious stones, gold threads, and other expensive ornaments woven into their sarees to stand out.

Today sarees are going through a golden phase where the traditional varieties are not only being rediscovered, but contemporary designs are also integrated along with it no matter how simple or how exquisite, the beauty of the garment remains.

SILK WEAVING

Kanchipuram silk sarees are exclusively known for their rich gold borders, traditional designs, and dense fabric in contrast colours. The tradition that is more than 150 years old is purely hand woven from processed silk yarn and “Zari”- a silver silk thread coated in gold colour. An original Kanchipuram silk saree would cost from Rs 5000 to Rs 1,50,000. The most expensive sarees are the one that are designed using pure zari thread and silk. These kinds of sarees are usually worn during weddings and are mainly purchased with an intention to resell it one day.

There are more than 5000 families and 45,000 weavers producing silk sarees in Kanchipuram. But Kanchipuram-style sarees are also woven in other parts of Tamil Nadu such as Mannarkudi, Kumbakonam, and Rasipuram where these sarees are lighter in weight and lack originality.

The basic raw materials required to weave a saree are:

Mulberry silk: This is procured from Karnataka and this tough yet soft silk thread grants lustre and adds a smooth finish to the saree.

Zari: Pure silver thread coated in gold colour is used to add rich-finishings to a saree’s border and pallu. This thread is imported from Surat, Gujarat.

Dye color: Procured from local markets, weavers mix the colour powder with hot water in large copper vessels. Some weavers, especially the government-aided ones, skip this step as they are given pre-coloured silk threads.

Rice starch: Or natively known as “Kanji”, the excess water after boiling rice, is used to add stiffness to the yarn before sent for weaving. This starch is also used on the saree after weaving, before folding it.

PROCESS OF WEAVING

The raw silk is divided into three parts and dyed in different colours to make three different sarees. While the portion of the saree covering the body is dyed using multiple colours to give a contrasting look, the portion of the saree that falls over the shoulder (Pallu) is usually given a single bold colour.

To start the dyeing process, water is boiled in a copper container. Once it is at a high temperature, the dyeing materials - washing soda, soap oil, dye colour are added to the water. The off-white silk yarn is then dipped into the vat and then dropped into a container with normal water, to remove any excess colour. The silk is left to dry for two to three days. The popularly used colours include red, green, blue and variations of yellow. While weavers associated with private organisations dye their thread, government-aided weavers are provided pre-coloured silk to reduce costs on the side of the weaver.

The silk thread and zari, before going onto the weaving loom, is separated neatly using a wheel onto a small pen-like instrument and, to weave horizontally. The silk thread is also separated to avoid any tangles which leave uneven surfaces in the finished product.

The separated silk threads are attached to the weaving loom from end to end. “The yarn ball needs to be carefully placed and there should be 5000 lines of thread, as that count needs to be maintained to stitch a saree,” On top of the weaving loom, there are continuous pages of cardboard stencils that move with stitches made. The designs are first drawn by hand according to the requirement and then designed on the computer. Using a cutting-machine, the design is cut into a cardboard sheet which acts as a stencil on the weaving loom. Then the threads are made to take the shape of the design while weaving.

Traditionally woven sarees are very heavy and soft with fine counts of silk. The weight ranges from 750gms to 1000gms. The pallu and the borders are embellished with beautiful motifs and intricate designs. Most of the designs on the sarees are inspired by the temples in the city. It includes the peacock's eye, swans, parrots,

flowers, statues and more. A popular design in sarees found here is known as “Ganga-Yamuna” design. This refers to two different coloured borders in one saree.

The weavers wake up at 4 am and weave till 10 pm, during the month of December because they need to meet with the demand for January, as all the weavers go on leave for 10 days on account of the festival “Pongal”. But during this time, there is high demand like any other day. They don’t make much of a profit from weaving sarees, and approximately earn Rs 1000 in one day, depending on the design, but the families continue to live on a budget every month, year after year. Apart from living every year on a budget, weavers do not get paid for one full month during monsoons. “The time taken to finish one saree is approximately one week depending on good weather conditions; during rains weavers cannot carry on with business as usual because the silk threads and the woven saree needs to be dried after washing with starch. Every year for one month weavers do not have business because of the rain. The machine absorbs the moisture and does not give the desired results while weaving.

“We get the silk from the government society and then add dye to it. We weave a maximum of four sarees in one month, and get a labour fee of Rs.22,000 from the government, while private weavers only get Rs.15000. Though it is more than what they get, our process is more tedious compared to theirs. With the rise of IT jobs in the city, many youngsters moved away from weaving. I can’t blame them because those jobs pay more and the lifestyle a person can lead does seem better. I will be the last of my family to practise weaving, and wouldn’t want my children doing the same.”

The weaving looms are built-in in each home. Usually, the weaver builds his handloom because the measurements need to be perfect and even if one part is placed differently, or it is misaligned, the final output will not be perfect. There are many machine-operated weaving looms, but that is not the same as hand weaving a saree, as one can see an uneven pattern on the saree,” .

RISE OF DUPLICATE SAREES

As the demand for silk sarees is much higher than what the weavers can supply. To keep the sale going and make profits, many private-owned shops started to mushroom in Kanchipuram. This led to duplication or adulteration of zari, which is considered to be the main element in a Kanchipuram saree. The zari which is meant to be pure silver thread coated in gold is sometimes replaced by plastic thread coated in gold.

Though there are many ways to identify a fake Kanchipuram saree such as seeing a clear demarcation between the saree and the border, the colour of zari, and fine weave lines which can be seen only when a saree is hand-woven in a particular style. “Not everyone can easily learn this method of weaving, it takes many years to learn this technique. Not everyone will become a weaver because if one cannot perfect the art, it is a great loss of money and the government will not provide the necessary raw material,”

The textile industry has grown rapidly over a few decades, technology and machinery have developed so much and has taken away the precious livelihood of many weavers. The machines are designed to make saree faster than a weaver are also equally good. The raw-material used may or may not be pure, but customers cannot tell the difference from original to duplicate by merely looking at it. Taking this to their advantage, many stores sell sarees worth Rs 5000 for Rs 40,000 or more.

POST-GST STRUGGLES

Over the last few years, the sale of silk sarees in Kanchipuram has been hit by many of the continuous changes in government policies. “GST has ruined a lot of business. Customers who used to buy 20 sarees, now they buy only two or three,” With a 5% Goods and Sales Tax (GST) on silk products, the sellers had to first increase the price of sarees by 25% to attract profits.

Another issue faced by the industry is the rising costs of inputs and weavers not turning up for work. Many of them have left the art and moved to the city in search of better-paying, stable jobs. Data from multiple silk weavers’ associations in Kanchipuram show that the number of handloom units has dropped from 2,00,000 pre-GST to just around 10,000 today. This situation has arisen because of traditional handlooms competing with better-equipped power looms while paying the same 5% GST. As a result, hand-woven silk, the product of generations of family trade has not found resonance among the new generation of weavers. “The only way to keep this tradition going is by providing government subsidies for materials, and by providing training and secure jobs to the younger generation.”

Weavers who are members of the silk co-operatives feel that owing to various reasons their satisfaction towards weaving keeps fluctuating. Due to globalisation and modernisation of the textile industry, the handloom co-operative weavers face several problems like meagre wages, poor working conditions, inadequate benefits, and insufficient work throughout the year. The involvement of members and considering their opinions will certainly improve the performance of silk weavers’ co-operative societies.

KANCHIPURAM

Although other cities in Tamil Nadu have caught up with the sale of Kanchipuram silk sarees either by sourcing them from weavers for their stores or by setting up their factory, employing skilled artisans, and sourcing raw materials, Kanchipuram remains to be the go-to shopping destination for any silk related attires. Despite the

availability of authentic silk and zari sarees elsewhere there are other reasons as to why people visit Kanchipuram to fulfil their shopping needs:

Kanchipuram easily has a wide variety of sarees as it is the land of weavers. Even if the sarees are woven by machine using contemporary designs, they lack the traditional touch that only a weaver can give.

Objectives of the study

- **To study the growth of silk weaving industry in Kanchipuram**
- **To understand the role of women silk weavers in Kanchipuram**
- **To identify the problem faced by women weavers in kanchipuram**
- **To provide suggestion for betterment of women weavers in silk weaving industry**

Methodology

This is an analytical study based on a sample survey of **370** silk weavers conducted in their household covering 10 areas in Kanchipuram - Aladithoppu, Kumar Chetty Street, Pillayar Palayam, Ayangarkulam, Kurivimalai, Chinna Kanchipuram, Vaiyavoor, Orikai, Iyampettai and Thirukalimedu. The paper analyses the history of Kanchipuram and weaving, the life of weavers, and how the textile industry has diluted their rich culture.

Occupation

Weaving being the hereditary occupation, women in Kanchipuram work at the loom as full fledged weavers. The study reveals **86%** of women weavers were able to weave all types of sarees like their male counterpart. Besides, majority of the weavers **89.2%** in Kanchipuram sold their finished goods both to co-operatives and to private merchants.

With regard to the knowledge of cooperatives, majority of the women weavers **44%** talented as their male counterpart, have enrolled as members of weaving/marketing cooperative societies. Earlier only men were allowed to become members of cooperative societies. As a result women weavers have not only gained recognition for their work but were also able to procure raw materials and working capital directly and take charge of production themselves. This has enabled them to redeem their sons and daughters from bondedness.

The membership has also made them eligible for benefits such as life insurance, provident fund, bonuses and advance from local cooperative societies. This brought the poor women weavers of Kanchipuram from **invisibility to visibility**.

Ownership of Looms. The study reveals that in Kanchipuram **34.3%** of women weavers owned their looms and **25.4%** worked in hired looms. Besides, **67.6%** worked both for wages and in their own investment in partnership with others.

Investment: The investment required to weave ordinary saree ranges from Rs.2000 to Rs.20,000 and for special sarees Rs.7000 to Rs 50,000 which is either done by societies or the private buyers.

Days required to weave saree : Majority of weavers **50.3%** required 7 to 10 days to weave ordinary saree and **56.2%** weavers required 6 to 10 days for special saree. The number of persons required to weave ordinary and special saree varies from 2 to more than 5 persons. **54.8%** of weavers weave more than 3 sarees per month.

Wages The wages received for weaving an ordinary saree and special saree ranges between Rs.300 to Rs.3000. Nearly **50.5%** of the weavers receive wages ranging between 1200 to 2500. The cooperative societies pay higher wages when compared to private merchants.

Problems of Women Weavers

Kanchipuram weavers have their own serious setback in their trade due to increase in the price of gold/silver, because of tax levied for gold/silver being the reason for increase in the prices of raw materials pushed them back from their steady progress. Stagnation of their finished products due to the arrival of artificial silk saree (power loom sarees) like Apoorva, Dharmavaram and Arani, besides irregular work, low wages, frequent power cut and unfair distribution of raw materials by the cooperative staff became further constrain in weaving occupation. Weaving cannot be done during rainy season as the golden threads get stuck-up in the loom making it difficult to weave. Further there are lesser sales during the month of July/August due to the fact that there are less festivals and it is not a marriage season too.

The world renowned Kancheepuram silk saree industry is facing a severe crisis due to the exodus of skilled weavers who have been involved in the exquisite art of silk weaving for many generations, have started taking up better paying jobs in the newly set up companies, in the area.

Though, Kancheepuram silk is world famous and sold at a high price in the market, the weavers, who know the secrets of the traditional art, are not earning a high income. Those who are continuing in the industry till now are doing so as they do not have options. Elders in the family of those involved in silk weaving for many generations are anguished about the emerging trend but feel that they could not compel or stress the next generation to continue with the trade since it does not guarantee a better life.

. The situation started changing a decade ago with the emerging of many multinational companies in the neighbouring areas of Sriperumbudur and Maraimalai Nagar. Apart from big firms like Nokia and Ford, IT

companies and smaller factories had mushroomed in and around Kancheepuram, resulting in alternative choices for the weavers' families.

According to silk weavers' unions, the number of silk weavers was 70,000 a decade ago and it had shrunk to less than 5,000 in and around Kancheepuram town. There are about 2,000 weavers employed in the 23 co-operative weaving societies. Rest of the weavers were working for private manufacturers.

“Manufacturers are facing a labour crisis now. It is difficult to recruit new people and train them as Kancheepuram silk weaving is a unique art known only to weavers in the town. It is not possible to pay higher wages since the production cost is going up every day. The production cost had also gone up for Kancheepuram silk since the raw materials had become costly. The tradition of weaving was carried on from generation to generation over thousands of years. New workers could not be trained in this since it is a traditional occupation. The youth belonging to the family of traditional silk industry are not only joining new companies but are also taking jobs like cooking and security guards, which ensure regular and good payment

Weavers under private manufacturers are not paid monthly wages. Their wages are calculated by the number of sarees woven. The wages depend on the high quality and creative design. When a weaver completes a silk saree, he will give it to the manufacturer, who had supplied yarn and zari to him and gets his payment. For a low priced silk saree, a weaver gets about Rs 5,000 and it gets higher if the quality and price of the saree go up. A weaver can produce two or three sarees in a month.”

Suggestions

Subsidies

Yarns should be provided at an affordable or subsidized price to make silk handloom products competitive and affordable in the market. While private shops sell adulterated silk sarees at cheap prices like Rs 2500 - Rs 3000, co-operative society shops are selling pure silk sarees, with the same design at Rs 7000.

Modern technology

There must be newer technology for handlooms for better production. Technologically advanced looms are available across the country but they are not available to government-aided weavers in Kanchipuram. Weavers believe this will have a direct impact on the production, productivity, and quality of the sarees. It will also favour diversified products and widen the market.

Transparency

Irregularity in supplying raw materials, inefficient administration, insufficient wages, lack of professional marketing, and operational management, are some of the weaknesses in the co-operative silk societies. Removing these drawbacks will play a pivotal role in the effective functioning of weavers.

Marketing

Finally, creating awareness among the public. This is the biggest influencer in the sale of consumer products. People need to know the difference between purchasing from co-operative societies and private showrooms. “The State Government should launch a special publicity drive to promote silk handloom products,” said a retired weaver who was associated with a co-operative association.

But it is not all negative, some government policies have been introduced over the last decade which have improved the livelihood of the handloom weavers.

Free distribution of sarees and dhotis to handloom and power loom weavers. According to this scheme sarees and dhotis required for distribution is produced by the weavers of co-operative societies, then procured and supplied to taluk office for distribution by "co-optex". This scheme provides continuous employment and also fulfils the clothing needs for the weavers and their families.

Free electricity for the homes equipped with both handlooms and power looms. Electricity up to 100 units bimonthly for handloom weavers and up to 500 units bimonthly for power loom weavers is provided. This scheme is being implemented through the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB).

But there are also schemes which are less heard of in the remote areas of Kanchipuram. Though weavers complain about lack of infrastructure, a crucial scheme implemented across India to improve the lives of the weavers is the “Deendayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana”. According to this scheme, financial assistance is provided for various components such as basic inputs, infrastructure support, and design inputs. The funding pattern of this scheme is on a sharing basis between the Centre and state governments in the ratio of 50:50.

Conclusion

The artisans are intolerant towards the entry of power looms and the introduction of any new techniques of productions. The reason for their continued opposition to modernisation is to preserve their rich tradition of weaving and to prevent the loss of their livelihood. Another reason is that most quality-conscious weavers are concerned about the stable fineness of their handloom fabrics.

In Kanchipuram, there are around 60,000 silk weavers, out of whom 50,000 weavers work under the co-operative fold. These co-operative associations serve as a social asset in terms of giving employment, ensuring a fixed wage, and implementing Government schemes. But at present, these weavers face a number of problems related to their occupation. With the rise of IT jobs in the city, many youngsters moved away from weaving because those jobs pay more and the lifestyle a person can lead does seem better.

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