Chapter 14

Creating Fame and Fortune from the Ruins of Handloom in Kerala, Southern India

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This chapter examines the heterogeneous contexts of ruined, abandoned handloom factories in Kannur, northern Kerala, and their relation to various highly politicized strategies for the revival of the textile industry in the twenty-first century. These debates are part of wider, contested visions of modernization envisaged by various local politicians, manufacturers, trade union leaders, and weavers, and relate to concepts of individual and group identity either materialized through artisanal skills and handloom production or symbolized through investment in mechanized industrial manufacturing. The arguments for and against public support for alternative modes of production reflect both the fissures within the Communist Party, CPI(M), and the wider political context. They are also linked to divergent attitudes among affiliated trade unions, and are bound up in the pragmatic decisions made by weavers as to whether to leave the profession or not when better opportunities to earn a living arise.

While textile manufacturer-exporters have successfully garnered "Geographical Indicator Status" for "Cannanore Home Furnishings" (locally made thick cotton furnishing fabrics with distinctive stripes and checks), the local Chamber of Commerce is also lobbying for central government investment in new technology parks, ports, and airports to develop Kannur (formerly Cannanore) as a major export hub. Perhaps inevitably, local craft skills and related social forms of organization are being reevaluated at the point of their virtual demise; marketed externally by the Tourism Board as being intrinsic to the performance of local identities, moves are being made through a collaboration of different interest groups to establish an incipient living craft museum out of a traditional weaver's settlement and local handloom cooperative.
Kannur is a regional town and administrative district in the north of the Indian state of Kerala. Fieldwork was designed to examine an entire textile industry that may itself be in danger of becoming waste—waste in terms of leftover material detritus and remains; waste as a failure to use potential, skills, and opportunities; and in a wider sense, the "waste" of a community arising as a by-product of a global capital economy intrinsically linked to shifting sites of (over)production, increasing mechanization, and the competition to sell at the lowest possible prices (Rivoli 2005). In India, handloomed textiles (hereafter "handloom") remain a powerful symbol of national ideology, linked to the domestic production of khadi (homespun cotton yarn) originally promoted by Gandhi (Bayly 1986; Bean 1989; Tarlo 1996) and still of symbolic importance today as the dress of politicians (Chakrabarty 2001). But despite its continuing support in the textile policies of the government of India, handloom is of declining economic value; its future and potential for reinvigoration is constantly debated by national policy makers, local politicians, and grassroots organizations.

Kannur has an international reputation for making heavy cotton, handloomed furnishing fabrics, but production is dwindling and products cannot compete on price against fabrics woven on power looms. The handloom that is still produced locally is either made by state-subsidized cooperatives ("co-ops") or by private companies who subcontract to the co-ops, thereby indirectly taking advantage of government funds. But the number of working factories is dropping. In the past fifteen years, the total number of weavers and textile workers has fallen by two-thirds to just over twelve thousand. Almost half of the sixty or so private manufactories have shut down and only three or four of the merchant-exporters operate actual handloom factories. Of the fifty-two registered co-ops only thirty are classified as "working," but in reality nearly half of their looms are idle. Of these working co-ops, only seven show a profit, and only three directly export overseas.

Dilapidated handloom factories litter the tropical monsoon landscape of Kannur. Filled with rotting looms, still strewn with saggy warps and wefts interlaced with giant cobwebs, suckered creepers, and suspended electrical cables, they once produced handcrafted textiles. Alongside finished textiles, polluting by-products such as choking cotton dust, salty wastewater, and scarlet dye run off were the visible signs of (un)healthy production, testament to the vitality of production (Douyon 2007). As handweaving disappears from the local economy, the means of production also lose value, decaying among the fecund landscape.

Surprisingly, in view of the visible decay and common laments of reduced orders, local exporters had successfully lobbied in 2005 to become a designated Centre for Export Excellence, one of only nine at the time in India. Record export figures had secured the fame of Kannur throughout India and abroad, despite union leaders’ estimates that local production capacity was at the most only 50 crores out of the estimated 330 crores value of exports. But in fact the private merchant-exporters do most of their dyeing and weaving on power looms in Tamil Nadu, where labor costs are much lower, technology more advanced, and pollution controls less vigorously enforced. Cloth is then transported across the Western Ghats to Kannur to be sewn into "made-ups" (stitched household items) by young local women, which now comprise over 90 percent of total export value from Kannur. Typically produced in heavier-weight cotton fabric with colorful striped and checked patterns, made-ups include curtains, cushions, tablemats, and kitchen items.

While the factories rot, progressive politicians and entrepreneurial merchants of the town work hard to create glossy images of Kannur’s success that generate fame for the town through skillful lobbying, publicity, industry seminars, and staged ritual functions, all of which use the ideology of Kannur’s handloom heritage as the basis for development. What, then, are the dynamics of the relationship between the visible, material decay in the postindustrial environment and visions of success in the twenty-first century?

RUINS

The idea of a wastescapes conjures up images of a derelict landscape full of detritus, the evidence of human productivity that has moved on, leaving only a space for nostalgic engagement, to be filled by the viewer’s imagination, and natural regeneration (Simmel 1965; Woodward 2002). Desilvey writes eloquently about entropy, how abandoned buildings in the countryside melt back into the landscape, their rotting timbers releasing energy and feeding new life (Desilvey 2006). For Edensor (2005), working in the sanitized, developed world, ruins are disordered spaces, symbols of former ordering that show capitalism’s thirst for innovation and the necessity of accompanying decay. They become spaces for play and transgression. But Walter Benjamin (1999), delving into the rubble of the ruined Parisian arcades, believed that the trash of modernity was evidence of the myth of progress, illuminating the unprecedented material destruction created by the "phantasmagoria of bigger and better" and the technological march of progress (Buck-Mozz 1989).

But in northern Kerala, dying industries are juxtaposed alongside fecund nature and a housing boom fuelled by remittances from the Gulf. The Keralan dream is to have a plot of land with a house and a well, and a few coconut trees in the garden. Kannur is the most urbanized district in Kerala, and undeveloped land is scarce. Plots are divided, and smaller traditional
joint family homes are demolished or obscured, overshadowed by the palatial marble-clad concrete houses constructed for the next generation. In between the bright, shiny homes lie crumbling buildings, damp oases of neglect, with vivid green and black mold staining the concrete below the peeling paint, flowering trees sprouting from walls, and birds nesting in the rafters. Many of these are defunct weaving factories, each one a cluster of a dyehouse with cracked drains, dank handloom sheds with roof tiles missing, and termite-infested checking tables sitting out on collapsing verandas. Some still have storerooms partially stocked with moldy, unsold “finished products.”

This creative tension between fecundity and decay resonates throughout the confused entanglements between people, things, and the tropical environment that link weavers, family firms, political ideologies, state officials, and global networks of provisioning with the vicissitudes of climate, plant life, and the vulnerable materiality of the structures themselves (Latour 1993). The ruined factories rotting in the coconut groves could be perceived as the remains of sacrificial offerings (Küchler 1997, 2002; Pellizzi 1995)—but laid waste to what future reordering? Political debates surrounding the business of weaving and the future of handloom itself vis-à-vis mechanized production continue vociferously. These various actors seek to make the ruined buildings more or less visible in their political strategies, for it is clear that in some contexts these buildings are not “dead,” but merely dormant, awaiting reassembly in a new form.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN KANNUR

In addition to the home-based weaving of simple white cloth for the local market carried out by the Chatiya caste, Kannur has had a long tradition of industrialized handloom, where looms are concentrated in factories and weavers paid piece rates. This was originally started by the Basel Mission in the mid-nineteenth century to provide work for Christian converts; production was geared almost exclusively toward lengths of clothing material and furnishing fabrics for export markets (figure 15.1). During the 1920s and 1930s, many Indian family companies were established using the same principles of industrial production in centralized weaving factories.

After the yarn and textile shortages following World War II, the growth of cooperative handloom societies was encouraged. Often formalizing the existing social cooperative structures of the local Chaliyas, the system came to include workers from all the lower castes. As early as the 1930s, the Thiyu caste was encouraged by both Sri Naryayana Guru and Vaghhabhadananda Guru to improve their economic and social conditions through industrial entrepreneurship, and many joined weaving cooperatives (Chandran 2006). More recently, other marginalized groups also established co-ops as a means of self-improvement and a vehicle for social change, hence the Muslim Weavers Cooperative Society (Muslims form a significant proportion of the local population) and the Harijan Weavers Cooperative Society (harijan, or “children of God” being the term adopted by Gandhi for the untouchable caste). This enabled them to gain access to grants and developmental assistance, but many had no experience of weaving, designing products, or marketing. While some weaved cloth such as shirting, dhotis, and floor mats for the local and national markets, others subcontracted export orders from merchant-exporters, and today many co-ops maintain a mix of the two. Although more profitable, the export trade is riskier, and the co-ops were established to provide basic, secure livelihoods. The Kerala state, dominated by CPI(M) party politics, emerged as a major shareholder of these co-ops through apex bodies (which coordinate policy and funding, help to obtain raw materials, and market products), and indirectly influenced them through a state cooperative banking system. More direct
control is exerted through trade union activities, and the preferential distribution of development loans and grants by government agencies.

Manufacturers started exporting directly in 1955 (Balan 2005), and many more factories opened in the 1970s to cash in on the Western craze for cheesecloth, known locally as crepe or kora, but subsequently went bust when the market collapsed (Swallow 1982). At least some of the ruins are witnesses to earlier shifts in fashion, but as Swallow discusses, to some extent factories lay fallow waiting for potential reopening in a new economic climate. In the 1970s and 1980s, radical union activity supported by a strong state put severe pressure on local businesses to improve wages and conditions. Today, with increasing support from the modernizing wing of the CPI(M), the private sector has the upper hand; they use the co-ops’ loom capacity and indirectly benefit from state subsidies, although they complain that they can’t trust the co-ops not to copy designs or start working with a competitor for a better price. The co-ops worry that their profit margins are squeezed to nothing, orders are falling, and they carry the risk of rejected fabric. Despite subsidies, they are crippled by a lack of working capital as growing interest payments on years of losses accumulate; they have little room for bargaining.

THE IDEOLOGY OF HANDELLOM

Handloom (and handspun, khadi) has a unique place in the ideology of the modern Indian state, and was made especially symbolic by Gandhi; its intrinsic properties, its feel, look, and material connection to the hand of the Indian village weaver, are still espoused by many manufacturers and middle-class consumers alike to underpin its morally enhanced value and encourage buyers to support poor weavers. It remains the second-largest employment sector after agriculture, although in terms of output more cloth is made in the power loom sector. There is much discussion about whether simple handloom products can be competitively made, with a strong (but contested) assumption that handloom needs to move upmarket (for example, see Niranjan, et al. 2006). Under the Handloom Reservation Act (1985), certain products may only be woven by hand, though this is regularly ignored by power loom units across the country. Policy is debated by those arguing for continued protection and national subsidies as a development measure, believing handloom has a viable future, while others favor subsidizing mechanization and modernization for all but elite craft products, to increase productivity and efficiency to levels competitive with the Chinese.

The north Keralan handloom industry is very different from the model of handloom clusters characterized by strong master weavers and unor-
Often men would suggest that handloom dhotis were eco-friendly, but further questioning revealed that generally the term handloom is equated with using cotton fiber rather than a method of weaving, whereas power looms were associated with poly-cotton. Cotton handloom is often perceived to be expensive, rough, prone to fading and sagging, and to quickly look "terrible," "horrible," and "dirty," according to informants. Many mothers would rather buy their children cheaper synthetic mix fabrics that are easy to care for and look smart for longer, while most women prefer mixed-fiber suits and saris, such as poly-cotton or cotton-viscose, for the same reason.

Apart from special, ritual Kerala items such as cheap saffron and black pilgrim’s dhotis, handloom itself is almost absent in Kannur. What remains is barely visible, hidden by layers of cheaper, shiny synthetic cloth used for decorating the home and the body. Unacknowledged outside the routines of daily domestic life, cool cotton handloom fabrics make up the background that cushions and absorbs daily life, a colorful mark in the trampled underfoot, a dhoti to relax in at home, or a traditional white towel to dry off one's head after a thunderous monsoon shower. Hence the struggle by actors on the left of politics to make handloom more visible as an ideological and social enterprise is often at odds with the realities of handloom fabric and the fact that its distinctive qualities have little value in the market.

As part of the dismantling of the quota schemes that formed part of the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA) and subsequent Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC), which regulated imports of textiles into the United States and EU, the removal of international tariff protection for handloom cloth at the end of 2004 hastened the already existing decline in demand for handloom products. According to one leading businessman, Jayachandran: "Powerloom prices are the norm in India, everything is measured against them." He commented that his father’s older foreign buyers are used to paying Kannur handloom prices, and are more open to handloom as a concept, but “once they are out of your net it’s very hard to get a new buyer to swim into it.” Kannur’s reputation is based upon good-quality thick pure cotton woven on wide frames, usually dyed with Azo-free dyes, which are more environmentally friendly than cheaper alternatives. But most international buyers now appear to care little for the aesthetics of the "hand of the weaver," nor do their customers: many cannot tell handloom and powerloom apart, and simply want a "textile" at the best price.

In fact, despite the ideological battle over introducing new technology and claims for the superior quality of handloom, the ultimate aim of the handloom manufacturer is to remove all traces of the body and mind of the weaver. Every inch of cloth can reveal the weaver’s mood, especially when they are tired, distracted or careless with the beating. Male managers complain that women’s cares at home can be read through the cloth they weave. Every time the cloth is wound around the beam, marks from dripping sweat, leaning elbows, and resting bodies soak into the fabric, all of which reduce its value.

Before the changes in trade law, there was a flourishing business in illegally stamped “handloom” certification; now there is little point. To some extent, then, this has always been an opportunistic business that has utilized the economic benefits accruing to the idea of handloom, even while often using power looms (which can be adapted to reproduce the irregular flaws characteristic of handloom). Only niche-mar designs making heavy, complex fabrics use handlooms to make one-off orders for international designers and architects, and this gives their product the market edge of exclusivity; the automatic Rapier looms in neighboring Tamil Nadu may run twenty-four hours a day, but they require minimum orders of thousands of meters.

THE LOCAL POLITICS OF RUIN

After the crepe boom, some family firms spoke of waiting for another upturn, diversifying into hotels, electronics, and plantations and reserving the possibility of reopening their weaving factories, and this flexibility is a strength of a decentralized system (Swallow 1982). What remains is the value in the land itself. The factories quickly become invisible as monsoon vegetation overruns them, termites attack the timbers, fungi and mold flourish in damp corners, animals slip in through holes and shelter under roofs. Disintegration and disaggregation may lead to new enterprises adapting to the market—partnerships are realigned, new names are registered and logos found, looms are cannibalized, and a fresh company starts up. However, just as factories require investment and regular cleaning to preserve order, so they need active ridding to remove them completely; the ruins serve as witnesses to failure but also to potential regeneration in other spheres.

Today, the remaining textile companies are building "brands"; they have smart new buildings in outlying villages, with glass and marble facades in light and airy rooms with spotlessly clean floors, goods are checked and packed, and buyers shown around. The companies appear to be shedding factories, heavy machinery, and organized weavers and dyers in favor of stitching and packing units, lifestyle marketing, and bar codes.

In contrast, most state-subsidized co-ops have not officially been abandoned and continue to function as part of the political and ideological project. The life cycle of these workplaces shifts between that of semiproductive activity and languorous slumber according to sporadic orders and government initiatives; in many, regulated factory time appears to have almost slowed to a standstill, in contrast to nature itself which engulfs
the structures after every monsoon and has to be hacked away again with machine. Attempts to suspend decay struggle against both the impact of global trends for cheaper, faster cloth and the vital forces of nature that smother surfaces and undermine foundations. Many decaying co-ops are signified as dormant, as though mothballed and potentially waiting to be re-enlivened, when in reality they are abandoned. Only the most hopeless are awaiting “liquidation” by accountants, whose attempts to recoup value from material assets are rapidly overtaken by the power of winds and rain, creepers, and tree roots to dissolve the enterprises where they stood.

The District Industries Centre identified fourteen dormant societies and over the course of the year I visited most of them. Some had never actually opened and existed only on the books to access grants; one or two had buildings but never purchased any looms; others had struggled to weave for a year or two. The roofless handloom co-ops at Kadinur and Karivelloor, with collapsed walls and burnt-out chimneys were technically dormant, although when we visited the decrepid buildings, a single weaver had hooked up a power loom to the electricity supply in a gloomy corner. The co-op at Chittariparamba was only three years old; it had apparently had its roof blown off by the wind, and the whole building had collapsed before it even opened; it too was designated “dormant,” though the term belied the ravaged state of the venture (figure 15.2).

In Kannur, traditional, conservative, Communist Party trade union (CITU) officials promote the scandalous decrepitude of co-ops and their capital debt as just cause for the reinvigoration of public subsidies, fearing mechanization, the loss of jobs, and power. They strike against the outsourcing of work to Tamil Nadu, believing there to be a thriving international market willing to pay extra for handloom that is being cheated by substitute products, and seeing this as a double betrayal of local workers as well. Progressive modernizers in the government take the national handloom subsidies, but also encourage mechanization and work toward the creation of a textile powerhouse to rival the Tamil textile towns. Communist ideology in Kerala is thus currently undergoing a power struggle between those for and against different models of modernization, and Kannur is the power base for those pro-capitalist factions who wish to increase private investment in the textile business while retaining traditional patronage networks through the cooperative system. The state government introduces national schemes designed to assist traditional weavers living below the poverty line by bringing new, poorer sections of the rural population into weaving as a means to disburse national grants and extend networks of power, rather than creating viable competitive businesses. Thus under a current scheme called “Kritikha,” hundreds of young women are taught basic weaving skills in crumbling old co-op buildings largely to dole out the 100 Rs daily wage to supporters, and women’s self-help groups are formed to establish weaving sheds with little hope of selling products with or without subsidy. Despite central government policies to move away from supporting co-ops toward cluster development, the co-ops remain a central ideological plank for the CPI(M), and maintaining their visibility and potential viability is crucial to success.

AZHIKODE WEAVER’S INDUSTRIAL COOPERATIVE SOCIETY (AWICS)

Azhikode is a village just outside Kannur and had a handloom co-op, AWICS, at the end of the Chaliya thur (street); it had incurred huge debts, ceased working in 2001, and was clearly dormant. The current president was keen to reopen the society; however, the typical factory, built like an upper-class home with large verandahs, shady courtyards, and solid wood timbers, was falling into ruins. The AWICS was part of an unusual proposal. A local Communist member of the Legislative Assembly, the communist panchayat (village council), the district collector, the State Tourism Department, and the private handloom merchant-exporters had come together to propose a Handloom Tourist Village, apparently conceived as a living folk
museum that would function to encourage tourists to the area by providing a cultural destination close to the undeveloped beach nearby.

Such projects typically surface at the tipping point, when an industry is becoming obsolescent, a means to rewrite the past in order to construct a new future (Hitchcock and Harrison 2005; Hitchcock, et al. 2005; Hobbsawm and Ranger 1983). In this proposal, part of the Society’s land was to be sold to pay the debts, while they hoped to attract state funding to renovate local housing and workshops, and construct walkways through the village to bring foreigners into the heart of the town (all graphically represented in an impressive PowerPoint presentation that included photographs of the decrepit local house-cum-weaving sheds to be improved). There was some disagreement over the future of the co-op itself—some thought that the Society would be refinanced and start up again; it had been the mainstay of work for many of the men and women in the town, and its closure had caused difficulty for most of the street’s older inhabitants. However, as a registered political entity, it was more problematic to deal with.

An early plan envisaged the preservation of the old building, which offered an opportunity to restore a functioning, historically important co-op that could show the development of handloom production in its wider political, economic, and social context. But a later suggestion involved tearing it down and building a modern Visitor Centre in its place, a more radical, forward-looking recontextualization. While elite Keralan families and other foreign tourists value “homestays” in traditional old wooden houses, many local Keralans prefer to build anew in concrete, and rarely would one see well-maintained old buildings of any kind. This provides a counterexample to the creation of “authenticity” identified by Bruner, where heritage sites are developed to satisfy the visitor’s notion of the authentic rather than the locals (Bruner 2004).

While working with weavers in the local town, I tried to find out what the building itself meant to those who had worked there, and whether they thought the seminimused co-op could be restored to prosperity. The co-op had been established with the help of a local industrialist in the late 1940s during the yarn shortages; reminiscing about those early years, there was a great deal of pride in the stories they told, of being one of the leading co-ops and winning prizes, their reputation for Kannur’s most expensive cloth, and the profits made during the boom. Women spoke of camaraderie and friendship, of taking young children along in slings while they sat winding the yarn, for the weavers. Some hung small personal things around the looms at which they worked; an older woman who revisited the abandoned site with me foraged underneath a wooden loom and delightedly produced a small tin in which she had kept her things years earlier. Kids coming home from school would stop and earn a few paisa carrying hawk yarn for dyeing, or take it home for their family to wind or weave in the evenings. Men were pleased to have had steady work, if not well paid, then, at least just enough, with full state benefits for all the registered workers. The co-op was something to be proud of.

But later in the narratives came the disappointments, when they were let down by corrupt officials who ran the business into the ground. During the 1970s cheesecloth boom, the leadership of many established co-ops had become highly politicized, becoming a vehicle for CPI(M) influence. Talking to former AWICS officials and older members who had been politically active, many shifted the blame onto the inexperienced officers who ran it during the Emergency period under Indira Gandhi (1975–1977), claiming it was they who had lost opportunities and failed to understand the business: piles of stock were left unsold, and wages were not paid. But in fact, talking to Chaliya families locally, it was usually after the Emergency, once the CPI(M) were back in power, that huge loans were taken for expensive equipment that never materialized, when building grants were given but works never completed, and slowly co-op land was sold off to pay mounting debts.

Very few Keralan co-ops make a profit; most are heavily subsidized by the state, employing local labor and acting as important nodes in networks of power. This play of politics is understood by all, and few weavers and winders expressed surprise at its eventual decline; the money had all been “eaten up” by corruption. But reversing the decay of the ruin could have tangible benefits for AWICS shareholders: all weaver-members were owed money from payments to gratuity funds, pensions, and insurance, and had been hard hit by its insolvency. Older workers hoped to gain from the settling up of its accounts first, but most shrugged and said that any chance of new jobs was welcome if there was money to make it happen.

Restoring the co-op would create jobs but also reopen channels of investment for local party members. The president, who was also the secretary for the local branch of the handloom weaver’s union, was absolutely sure that the co-op could be dusted down and reopened, and that there was still a thriving market for handloom abroad that was being cheated by the merchants who secretly placed their orders in Tamil Nadu. The factory did look as though it had simply closed down at the end of a working day, and had been left exactly as it was, nobody knowing whether it would be a week, a year or a decade before they returned. Upstairs were the managers’ offices, with paperwork left on the desk, telephones under their customary protective cloths, and religious calendars on the wall. On the walls hung photos of past managers and office staff, formally arranged in groups, wearing crisp white dhotis. But the shutters hung off the windows, door hinges were broken, and thick dust clung to every surface. Downstairs were the sample rooms, checking tables and accounts, rank with rotting vegetation and musty fabrics.
The speed at which the place was decaying was more apparent in the work sheds across the courtyard (figure 15.3). Small trees and bushes were invading the courtyard, and the bright green leaves of fast growing plants covered the pavement like a carpet. Making our way through the undergrowth, we were warned to watch out for snakes, an uncovered well, and broken drains from dye-house wastewater channels. We followed our leader as he expertly picked up a corner of his spotless white dhoti with a practiced flick of his hand, and carefully showed us the way through the warping shed, where rusting wire racks stood like giant upended bed frames (figure 15.4). Cables and creepers were interlaced with strings and spools, and pieces of rotting wood lay about the floor. As we entered the deserted weaving shed, we heard the familiar “clack-clacking” sound of a handloom working, the sound of wood on wood, the shuttle being pulled across, and the beater rhythmically beating in the weft. Looking around in the gloom, we saw rows and rows of old looms (figure 15.5), but it took some time to realize that we were alone; the ghostly sound of the loom had traveled in through the window from a nearby workshop.

Figure 15.3. Internal courtyard of AWICS, viewed from the upper story. It was built in the 1930s as a private factory, which later went bankrupt. It was taken over by the cooperative in the 1950s. Visitors have to make their way through the undergrowth to reach the staircase up to the offices above and the production sheds at the back. Photo by Lucy Norris.

Some looms had high dobby or jacquard attachments, multiple strings to create intricate patterns, hanging like lifeless marionettes. The heddles, warps, and wefts were coated with thick dust, and spiders had spun webs across the threads and onto the beams. Electrical cables hung down from the ceiling, entwined around pieces of rope from which lights would have hung, and snaking across the beaten earth floor and up through the pedals and heddles were yards and yards of creepers. Webs, wiring, threads and creepers all tangled together in the dust; it was no longer really possible to see how man’s work and nature could be disentangled.

The weaving shed symbolized the complexity of values to be found in the leftovers from handloom weaving, capturing the enmeshed hopes, ideologies, and political futures of so many disparate elements involved in its potential regeneration in a new form. The materiality of the building itself, its disintegration and absorption by the creepers mirrored its forgetting by the people who had once formed it in the first place. But the building also represented the tension between the modernizer’s desire to destroy the major part and build something new in its place with the local CPI(M) member’s more traditional belief that it was in some way still alive and could be revived as a working co-op.
Value in Kannur textiles as a brand has been generated for the town through the idea of handloom as it is articulated in a particular locale and its anachronistic, almost symbiotic, relation to the virtual disappearance of handlooms as a viable economic option and the political difficulty of replacing handlooms with updated technology. North Keralan businessmen feel isolated, cut off from the wider world through a decaying transport infrastructure, while their lives appear overdetermined by the excess of left-wing politics in north Malabar, which has to be negotiated at every stage of a deal. The appeal to the past, to core national, Indian values and established international reputations through references to handloom provides a reliable vehicle for enacting underlying change in the local arena, where rotting handloom factories may one day be revived as modern, mechanized textile businesses connected to the modern world.

The Keralan Handloom Exporter’s Organization rebranded itself as the Textile Exporter’s Organization, with offices in a new high-rise glass building in the upper-middle-class part of town. The new organization issued a souvenir booklet to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of direct exports from Kannur (Balan 2005) and contributed to a similar publication by the local Communist Party paper that outlined the untapped potential of Kannur as a tourist destination, with handloom as a major attraction (Deshabhimani 2006). Meanwhile, the local Chamber of Commerce and the modernizing wing of the CPI(M) work together to capture all available central and state-level grant schemes for infrastructural development; they have already managed to attract the first branch of the prestigious National Institute of Fashion and Technology (NIFT) outside a major metropolis, and are successfully campaigning for an international airport, a container port, and improved roads.

Capitalizing on the traditional aura of handloom and national discourses surrounding it, these images of hope and burgeoning productivity stand in stark contrast to the existence of large-scale ruins and a local disdain for handloom, coupled with migrating labor, bad debt, and unbalanced books. Yet it may be the way to restructure the local industry. Seminars are regularly held to discuss the future of the town and its manufacturing industries, including textiles, plywood, coconut fiber, and rubber. At such events, enthusiastically entitled “Vision 2020,” the union minister for textiles from Delhi arrived in a string of official white Ambassador cars and was met by traditional temple drummers and escorted between rows of ritual umbrellas into a marquee. Sited next to a handloom fair displaying local products, the entrance had been decorated with large vinyl images of an airplane flying over the bows of a huge container ship, a theyyam performer (ritual theater), and a large eye somewhat reminiscent of Siva’s third eye taking the place of the o in Vision. The ceremony was inaugurated by a series of officials and included the lighting of a ritual brass lamp and the giving of scarves. The

IMAGES OF SUCCESS

The Geographical Indicator status for "Cannanore Home Furnishings" registered certain characteristics and qualities of types of cloth made in Kannur as being exclusively associated with the area under the 1994 WTO Agreement on Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). The text speaks of the heritage of wide-frame looms in the area; significantly it is not specified that the cloth must be handloom; rather it emphasizes the richness and "lively feel" of the cloth, its thickness, width, and colorfast dyes due to the softness of the local water. In 2009 the proposal was accepted by the National Ministry of Textiles (Government of India 2009). To date no official body has been established to control the awarding of GI status to local manufacturers, but time will tell whether this leads to a resurgence in local handloom weaving, a return to practices of illegal certification, or mechanized production of similar fabrics in Kannur itself. GI status adds to the accretion of characteristics that go to create Kannur as an international brand, rather than define a particular technology or product in exact detail.

Figure 15.5. Looking through a row of Malabar looms in the abandoned weaving shed at AWICS. Photo by Lucy Norris.
ostensibly secular public event was framed by the paraphernalia of sacred Keralan ritual, according the political meeting divine sanction to shape the future. On such occasions all political sectors joined together to work to bring money to Kannur (rather to any other Keralan, Tamilian, or Indian town) to materialize their “2020 Vision” of the town’s future, linked with modern means of production and distribution in a transnational market. Whether as traditional cloths or high-fashion garments, textiles are particularly useful objects for materializing aesthetic, social, and economic ambiguities through the manipulation of their fibrous properties—woven construction, symbolic and contextual usage, being able to simultaneously embody tensions in their structure and symbolize wholeness and transcendence as a form linked closely to the human body (Weiner and Schneider 1989; Wilson 1983). The various contexts of their production and links to a sense of both individual and collective identity are equally complex, with local artisanal wares handcrafted for niche markets at one end and global production chains and mass-produced aesthetics at the other (Goody 1982). While the advancements in textile technologies lay at the heart of the Industrial Revolution (Hobsbawm 1962; Hudson 1992), and cotton has been perhaps the most significant textile material to enact social and economic change across the globe (Mukerji 1983; Yafa 2006), the contemporary elongation and increasing complexity of global commodity chains of various types (Foster 2006) is nowhere more apparent than in the apparel industry (Gereffi 1999; Gereffi and Memedovic 2003; Hale and Wills 2005).

But the contemporary debate about creativity and authenticity through the means of production focuses on craftsmanship, and the skilled use of the hand in particular, as an essential part of being human (Adamson 2007, 2010; Senett 2009), a thread that can be traced back to the Arts and Crafts Movement in nineteenth-century Britain and was active among critics of industrialization in colonial India (Coomaraswamy 1909). Unlike other recognized regional textile specializations in India that have developed local weaving traditions, Kannur’s identity as a textile center begins with, and is bound to, Christian missionaries’ views on work as a civilizing activity (Raghaviah 1990), colonial-subaltern power relations, and later communist politics. Since the nineteenth-century introduction of factories by the Basel Mission in south India, and the twentieth-century shift of laborers from agriculture to industry as a route to economic and social mobility, industrial handloom production has become an integral part of the political identity of Kannur despite its local invisibility. Working in an uneasy relationship with private exporters, the cooperative movement has formed a backbone for organizing production in the post-Independence state, with the balance of power shifting between the two.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps the real debates about how Kannur might successfully compete in the global marketplace are less about the future of handloom vis-à-vis machine-made textiles, and more about the labor relations that underpin local textile production generally. Textiles that embody the principles of fairness, social accountability, and sustainability through their production values (and are marketed as such) may well better represent the ideological underpinning of the modern Keralan state, a challenge that to date only a handful of Western companies in partnership with Keralan co-operatives and local businesses are beginning to do.

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NOTES

1. Communist Party of India (Marxist).
2. Following common Indian and textile industry usage, the term handloom refers to handloomed textiles ranging from simple pitlooms through to highly complex jacquard looms. In this case, handloom cloth is woven on upright, extravert “Malabar” frame looms introduced by the Basel Mission. These use a series of heddles and pedals to facilitate weaving more complicated patterns, with occasional use of dobby and Jacquard attachments. The shuttle is manually passed back and forth, and the weaver beats in the weft hand.
3. In the Indian counting system, a crore is 10 million. During fieldwork, Rs 70 (Indian rupees) was equivalent to approximately £1 (British Pound Sterling). Therefore 50 crore was approximately worth a little over £7 million, and 350 crore approximated to £30 million.
4. The Communist Party of India (CPI) and subsequently CPI(M) have been in and out of government in Kerala continually since their first election in 1957, and had been voted back into power in May 2006 under Chief Minister Achuthanathan.
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