features

The Future of Handloom Textiles in North Kerala

Lucy Norris

On a hot summer’s day during fieldwork in 2008, I was taken around an abandoned handloom factory outside Kannur, a district coastal town in tropical north Kerala. Tripping across the cracked paving and dodging the rusting frames once used for preparing the warp, we entered the deserted weaving shed at the back of the compound, our eyes adjusting to the dark. Suddenly we heard the familiar “clack-clacking” of a working handloom, the sound of wood on wood as pedals were moving the heddles up and down, the shuttle being pulled across, and the beater rhythmically beating in the weft. Peering into the gloom, we saw rows and rows of old looms, but we were alone; the ghostly sound of the loom had traveled in through the window from a nearby house, the evidence of a lone weaver’s creativity a stark contrast to the ranks of wasted machinery lined up before us. Some of the 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 creeping vines. Webs, wiring, threads, and vines all tangled together in the dust, it was no longer really possible to see how man’s work and nature’s growth could be disentangled.

We were guided around this once-famous handloom cooperative by its president, who was also the local representative of a Communist trade union. Everything remained eerily untouched and covered in a layer of dust, left just as it had been on the last day it was open, with paperwork on desks, calendars on walls, and cloth in the store-room. Earlier I had spent time talking to the neighboring families, members of the local weaving caste, whose older members were still weaving in their homes on a piece-rate basis since the cooperative’s demise. There was a proposal to rebuild part of the craft factory as a Handloom Tourist Village, explaining the processes of handloom weaving and its rootedness in the local weaving community. The union leader strongly supported reopening the main weaving sheds and getting the looms back into working order to re-start the cooperative as a going concern.

The abandoned building and its uncertain future epitomized the dilemma facing an industrialized craft industry trying to meet the challenges of global market pressures upon textile production in the developing world. The informal labor sector is estimated to include about 97 percent of all workers in India. Small-scale textile production units remain a major employer in India, whether using powerlooms or handlooms. Hand-loomed fabrics hold a special ideological position, especially when using...
How are Keralans, who have regularly elected Communist-led governments over the past 50 years, engaging with free-market capitalism and the global economy? In the development process, how will various actors negotiate the social values of good quality health care, education, and labor laws famous in the “Kerala model”? There is currently a vociferous local political debate over whether Kannur’s industry should promote itself as traditionally skilled producers of handcrafted items to develop a value-added niche market, and/or invest in new technologies to directly compete with their rivals. Labor unions fear the loss of jobs threatened by mechanization, the demise of the cooperative system, and the outsourcing of work to unorganized, independent weavers or out-of-state factories.

This also reflects an ideological split over the future direction of Communist ideology and the pragmatics of politics in Kerala between the “modernizers,” who embrace foreign investment in the wake of economic liberalization in India, and party members with more traditional views. Each faction has an entrenched power base in the district of Kannur, which was the cradle for the development of the Communist Party of India in Kerala during the 1930s. While this constitutes just one example of a “tipping point” in Keralan visions for future social and economic development, the vested interests on the ground are highly complex.

Historical Context

Before weaving became a significant industry in Kerala, traditional home-based weavers from the Hindu Chaliya caste supplied simple white cloths woven on pit-looms for local clothing needs. Chaliya communities live on long streets known as theru, of which there are over 30 in Kannur district. They continue to take up most of the independent, unorganized sector.

Kannur has also had a long tradition of industrialized handloom production geared almost exclusively toward lengths of clothing material and furnishing fabrics for the export market. This was originally started by the Basel Mission in the mid-19th century to provide work for Christian converts, but in the 1920s and 30s, many Indian family companies were established using the same principles of industrial production in centralized weaving factories. These manufacturers started exporting directly in 1955, building up the international reputation of Kannur. Many more factories opened up in the 1970s to cash in on the Western craze for cheesecloth, known locally as crepe, but several subsequently failed. Only about thirty family firms now survive, making both handloom and power-loom fabrics, and only three or four of the bigger merchant-exporters still manufacture with their own handlooms in factories. If exporters use handlooms at all, they subcontract out orders to be woven by the state-subsidized cooperatives.

After the yarn and textile shortages following World War II, the growth of cooperative handloom societies was encouraged by the British up until 1957. In 1957, the government in Kerala became the world’s first democratically elected Communist government. Often established near Chaliya theru, the system came to include workers from all the marginal and lower social groups, as a means of self-improvement and a vehicle for social change, hence the founding of the Muslim Weavers Cooperative Society and the Harijan Weavers Cooperative Society (“Harijan” was Gandhi’s term for the caste known as Untouchable). This enabled them to gain access to grants and developmental assistance, but many had no experience of weaving, designing product or marketing. While some wove cloth for the local and national markets such as shirting, dhotis, and floor mats, others subcontracted export orders from the merchant-exporter many maintain a mix of the two; the export trade is riskier but more profitable.

The Keralan state and industrialized handloom sectors emerged as major shareholders of the cooperatives, and influence is exerted through party politics, trade union activities, and the preferential distribution of central and state level development loans and grants. These are de facto part of the public sector, managed by the local District Industries Centre. National policies and the considerable subsidies for handloom weaving have developed for the largely unorganized, informal handloom sector across India as a result. The Keralan state’s Ministry of Textiles, then devolved to regional officials, affording considerable leeway in the interpretation and implementation of the relatively better-off labor market. So, though originally started as a means of producing cloth, which was in short supply and providing a living for poor weavers, cooperative activities in general are a mainstay of post-war Communist ideology in Kerala and are embedded within the state’s financial and regulatory framework, as well as remaining instrumental in party politics.

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The relationship between the private and cooperative sectors is therefore uneasy. Cooperatives receive large subsidies, but are dependent upon private export contracts to achieve significant turnover; most claim to be operating without a margin and have little bargaining power. In this part of small-town India, only men wear hand-loomed dhatis to functions or for relaxing at home; handloom fabric itself as a product has little local value as clothing or furnishings, being of low quality and inferior to the brightly dyed, more durable synthetics available in the market. Up-market fabrics made for export to high and middle-range stores abroad are always hidden from the local market for fear of design piracy; as a result, most local people never see such high quality fabric and hence do not see it as an important product to be proud of. For them, handloom fabric is unfashionable and over-priced. Useful for its absorbent properties, preferred as traditional towels for drying bodies or mopping up sweat, or as floor mats made from recycled warp ends trampled underfoot, all are only bought during the government-subsidized seasonal periods. Otherwise, the dusty government-run outlets with faded posters remain empty, and despite political rhetoric, the fabric is largely invisible in daily life.

As the handloom industry finds it increasingly difficult to survive, factories reduce working hours until they shut altogether, leaving the landscape littered with decomposing weaving sheds. As the handloom industry finds it increasingly difficult to survive, factories reduce working hours until they shut altogether, leaving the landscape littered with decomposing weaving sheds, abandoned to the weather and the appetites of flora and fauna. However, what emerges from fieldwork is that the fate of these factories is conceived in different ways by the private and public sectors. Private weaving sheds may have shut down as business develops in other directions, but many dead or dying cooperatives struggle on, officially classified as “dormant” but ideologically very much alive.

Private Firms

After the collapse of the cheesecloth boom, the anthropologist Deborah Swallow found that the decentralized structure of the handloom industry in Kannur allowed it to weather and adapt to changes in the market over the long term. Manufacturers who cut back production or closed their factories down often still perceived them to be assets, potentially available to start up once more should the market revive. Large family houses in the coconut groves are joint homes to many branches of a family, often with the factory premises sited alongside. Relatives diversified into emerging retail sectors that held more promise than manufacturing an uncompetitive product, with its associated labor issues and resistance to mechanization. In Kannur these have been, for example, mid-range hotels for the local business market and electronics shops supplying the increasingly affluent remittance economy, while some exploited changes in markets and subsidies to revive plantations in the hills. Meanwhile the brick and cement factories rot, roofless cave in, tree roots undermine foundations, and animals take shelter inside.

Today many in private industry no longer view these ruined premises as potentially viable handloom export factories. Those who still run textile businesses are under increasing pressure from international buyers, who specify product designs, reduce lead times, and cut margins. Foreign buyers govern these global commodity chains, and to counter this, local manufacturers are developing new strategies to upgrade their businesses, asserting more control over both the products and how they access end markets in order to capture more of the added value for themselves. For example, Kannur cloth merchants export textiles for the international home furnishing market, but today “made-ups” (stitched household textiles) now make up over 90 percent of total export values. These are typically heavier weight cotton fabrics made into curtains, upholstery and cushions, tablemats, runners, and kitchen items, typically in bright and colorful stripes and checks. Leading local exporters had successfully lobbied to become a designated Centre for Export Excellence in 2005, one of only nine in India at the time, ostensibly on the back of handloom production. However, they had achieved this through the strategy of actually dyeing and weaving most of their orders on power-looms in Tamil Nadu, where labor costs are much lower, technology is more advanced, and pollution controls less vigorously enforced. The fabric is then transported across the Western Ghats to Kannur to be sewn into made-ups by semi-skilled young women. Exported as Keralan products, many consignments were also falsely stamped as being handloom until 2005. It can be notoriously difficult in many cases to tell handloom and power-loom apart, with power-loom sometimes being “tweaked” to mimic the idiosyncrasies of a hand-weaver.

These entrepreneurial merchants work hard to create glossy images of Kannur’s success that generate fame and money for the town and create a “Kannur” brand, through political lobbying, publicity, industry seminars, and staged ritual functions. Consequently, modernizing union leaders want to be part of Kannur’s success. As private factories disintegrate into the landscape, male weavers leave for more lucrative professions, and radical union power is tamed. Bright shiny new buildings with big glass windows and air conditioning are springing up in the groves, where women (perceived as easier to manage and cheaper) check orders, pack and barcode them, and ship them overseas. Thus the decaying factories may rather indicate the success of private business through strategies that externalize the risks of direct manufacture. Meanwhile, left-wing communist unions have organized strikes and marches claiming that private enterprise is cheating workers out of jobs in Kerala, taking higher payments for supposedly genuine handloom products but supplying power-loom cloth from “outside” instead. In fact, hand-weaving is increasingly perceived to be a second income for women rather than a viable career for men, who may fall back upon it.
when other work runs dry. However, political and trade union power remains entrenched in the public system; recent grants to train thousands of poor women as handweavers have been channelled through existing structures, thus ensuring continued lines of patronage.

Dormant Cooperatives

The pitiful condition of many state-subsidized cooperatives tell rather different stories. Technically there are over fifty registered co-ops, but of these, less than forty are actually working (and only to half capacity), and only seven make any profit. Those not deemed to be working were officially classified as “dormant,” technically able to reopen. In fact, on visiting many of the dormant and dying co-ops, it became clear that many were simply a means of accessing development funds and diverting money into local politics. One unit consisted of a small shed, whose roof had been blown off before it even opened; pieces of a loom stuck up to the sky, and the undergrowth covered most of the dilapidated walls. One or two co-ops never even got as far as buying any looms before being classified as “dormant.” Others had valiantly struggled on with poor management and unskilled weavers producing unwanted products before virtually shutting down; occasionally someone still worked in a dim corner, or in one case a power-loom worker had moved into an unlit empty shed like a cuckoo in the nest.

But many cooperatives had originally been successful enterprises, bringing weavers into a collective unit to obtain raw materials and sell their products more effectively, and some continue to do so. Workers keep to eight-hour shifts, and are paid all the benefits, bonuses, health insurance, and provident funds due to them, unlike their subcontracted counterparts in Tamil Nadu. With skilled managers and access to good designs, some larger cooperatives had made a name for themselves. But often those running the co-ops became overtly politicized; it has been said that there is “too much politics in Kannur.”

Returning to the cooperative mentioned at the beginning of this article, it had once had such a brand identity. Local elderly weavers sitting in the nearby shru told how it had been formed in a small shed in the 1940s with the help of a local industrialist, and how they had managed to buy out a private firm and move into their premises. There was pride in their products and talk of winning prizes during the cheesecloth boom. Older women joked about the camaraderie in the cooperative, where women wound the yarn onto spools, and the men wove the cloth, while children would earn a few paisa after school carrying hanks of yarn home to wind in the evenings. But like many cooperatives, during the late 1970s they were let down by corrupt officials. Although many placed the blame for the decline on the period of Emergency Rule un-

under Indira Gandhi, it was afterward that huge loans were taken out for equipment that never materialized, grants were improperly spent, worker’s benefits not invested, and the land was slowly sold off to pay debts. Not only was the dilapidated building a testament to the failure of their cooperative enterprise, but all the members were owed money from their pension funds and insurance, and the uncertainty of their futures remained bound up in the fabric of the building. Everyone acknowledged that corruption by local parties was only to be expected, and not many held out hope for the co-op’s future; for some, it had virtually disappeared into the landscape, no longer having any relevance. The proposed Handloom Visitor’s Centre exemplified the potential for handloom fabric to be relegated to obscurity, becoming a cultural curiosity stop on a tourist itinerary (thereby paving the way for a re-envisioned future of technological progress), or a viable means of re-generating and sustaining local employment and using local skills.

Sustainable Keralan Fabrics

In the international textile market, there is a well-documented scramble to manufacture ever-cheaper goods from shifting sites of production. The textile industry in Kannur employs large numbers of women stitching and packing household textiles in good conditions, undoubtedly adding value to the local economy. But the loss of a viable handloom industry does not only mean the demise of the organized labor sector, it also means the shifting of production to less-acc
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strong labor laws and socially accountable legislation developed under Communism more visible? Might this enable weavers to further improve their conditions and increase their wages and retain a stake in the means of production? In addition to social welfare, Kerala also has stricter adherence to its environmental laws than more industrialized states, but there is a danger that these could also be overlooked in the rush to compete on price and speed of delivery for orders.

Often these were cited as drawbacks to working in Kunnur by private manufacturers; workers in Tirupur would work for twelve-hour shifts for less money, didn’t need such good working conditions (often Tamilians were spoken of rather disparagingly vis-à-vis the “requirements” of a Keralan worker), and were less likely to cause trouble via union activity. Very few saw this as an opportunity to market themselves above the baseline of mass-produced high-street retailers who claim to adhere to minimum standards from an arm’s length.

However, a few firms have been moving in this direction, creating small chains of businesses that combine top-of-the-market designs developed between clients and weaving masters, where local private firms that get the orders and manage their delivery work with cooperatives to pay a fair price for fabric made under socially accountable conditions. Although these have to be price competitive, there is a growing market for sustainable, exclusive textiles at the middle and top of the range. The union leaders’ concerns over mechanization and those modernizers on the left who argue in favor of increasing capitalist investments are perhaps missing a rather different opportunity to add value through the hard-won improvements in social and economic conditions of labor. The accumulated value already invested in Keralan workers and the potential for creating sustainable production is one invisible asset that could create added brand value for the whole industry, attracting weavers by paying a fair wage rather than a minimum wage.

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Suggestions for Further Reading


Lucy Norris is a senior research fellow in the Department of Anthropology, University College London, and she has conducted fieldwork in India on issues concerning local textile industries, waste, recycling, and the global trade in used clothing over the past ten years. Her current research focus has returned to the shoddy recycling industry in north India, which imports used clothing from around the world and recycles them into new yarn for weaving blankets and cloth. She is the author of Recycling Indian Clothing: Global Contexts of Reuse and Value (Indiana University Press, 2010). Further information on these projects, together with extensive photographic material, will be available soon at www.lucynorris.co.uk.