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Paper: Rotting ruins in the coconut groves: remainders of handloom in Kerala

Introduction

How might a moribund handloom industry in north Kerala reinvent itself for the 21st Century? Kannur is a small town in the coastal district that formed part of colonial Malabar [map]. The tropical monsoon landscape is littered with dilapidated factories containing rotting looms; warps and wefts are interlaced with giant cobwebs, suckered creepers and suspended electrical cables [slide]. Although there **are** some successful factories producing handloom locally, their numbers are dwindling. In the past 15 years, the number of handloom workers has fallen by two thirds to just over 12,000, almost half the 60 or so private manufacture-exporters have shut down; only three or four have actual handloom factories today. Of the 52 registered handloom cooperatives, only 39 are working and nearly half of their looms are idle. Only seven are in profit, and only three directly exporting.

Ruins

The idea of a wastescape conjures up images of a derelict landscape, an environment full of detritus, evidence of former life and productivity. But northern Kerala is an anachronism in this sense, as dying industries are juxtapositioned alongside fecund natural creativity and a housing boom fuelled by remittances from the Gulf [slide]. The dream of every Keralan, it is said, is to have a plot of land with a house and a well, and a few coconut trees in the garden. Yet in between the bright, shiny homes lie crumbling buildings, damp oases of neglect, with vivid

green and black mould staining the concrete below the peeling paint, flowering trees sprouting from walls, and birds nesting in the rafters [slide basel mission]. 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 verandahs. Some still have storerooms partially stocked with mouldy, unsold ‘finished products’.

For Edensor, ruins are disordered spaces, symbols of former ordering that show capitalism’s thirst for innovation and the necessity of accompanying decay (Edensor, 2005). He views these spaces not as wasted places, but as productive spaces where transgression occurs, (Edensor, 2005). Nature here is the visible transgressor that feeds upon decay, opening up the cracks in the walls with burrowing tree roots and blurring the boundaries with carpets of creepers. But Walter Benjamin’s delving into the trash of the ruined Parisien arcades found in discarded objects what he termed ‘dialectical images’, where ‘what has **been** comes together in a flash with the **now** to form a constellation’ (Benjamin, 1999: N2a,3;462; Schwartz, 2001). History is not moving forward, it simply stands still and gathers dust; the fragment became the trope of the modern. The trash of modernity was self-evidence of the myth of progress; lost and abandoned objects vividly convey the unprecedented material destruction created by the ‘phantasmagoria of bigger and better’ and the technological march of progress (Buck-Morss, 1989: 92)

What, then, are the contexts of these ruins and what might their aesthetics tell us about the future of handloom in Kannur? Actors operate various political strategies to make them either **more** or **less** visible depending upon the networks in which they are entangled. Agents include family firms, weavers, local cells of the Communist party and State bureaucrats but also the agency of plants and the climate along with the vulnerable materiality of the structures and their contents, the earthen floors, wooden looms, cotton threads and metal racks prone to fall apart

(Latour, 1993).

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The premise of this **Keralan** research was to examine a whole textile industry which may itself be in danger of becoming waste – waste in terms of leftover material detritus and remains, waste linked to a growing global surplus of cheap clothes, but also waste as a failure to use potential, skills and opportunities. Unusually, Kannur has had a tradition of *industrialized* handloom production geared almost exclusively towards furnishing fabrics for the export market since the Basel Mission opened factories in the mid-19th century. Today Kannur merchants work hard to export textiles for the international home furnishing market, of which 90% is now in the form of ‘made-ups’ [slide]. These are typically in heavier weight cotton fabrics used for curtains, upholstery and cushions, tablemats, runners and kitchen items, typically in bright and colourful stripes and checks.

But many foreign buyers cannot tell handloom and powerloom apart, or don’t care, and simply want a ‘textile’ at the best price. The dismantling of the MFA and the removal of international tariff protection for handloom cloth at the end of 2004 hastened the already existing decline in international demand for handloom products. New weavers are not entering the profession and handloom is largely invisible in the local market; used largely for floor mats, satin bedsheets and towels, it is only bought during government rebate season, and disdained for clothing or furnishing fabrics. Top export quality is not available locally, and there is no pride in it amongst either lower or middle-class consumers.

Production is unable to compete with lower wages in neighbouring Tamil Nadu, let alone China, and in Tamil Nadu pollution controls are less rigorously observed, shifts are longer and mechanization standard.

Given the decline, it was surprising to find that local exporters had successfully lobbied to become a designated Centre for Export Excellence in 2005, one of only nine in India. This they had achieved through the strategy of actually dyeing and weaving most of their orders more cheaply on powerlooms in Tamil Nadu, It is then transported across the Western Ghats to Kannur to be sewn into ‘made-ups’ (stitched household items) by young women and exported as Keralan products.

This outsourcing of work to Tamil Nadu is a constant source of tension in the town. Of the cloth that is still produced locally, the risk of actually weaving has been passed on to either independent weavers or sub-contracted out to the state-subsidised cooperatives at cost. The **private sector** has the upper hand, they use the cooperatives’ loom capacity and indirectly benefit from state subsidies to them, although they complain that they can’t trust the cooperatives not to copy designs or start working with a competitor for a better price. On the other hand, the **cooperatives** complain that their profit margins are squeezed to nothing, orders are falling, and they carry the risk of rejected fabric. Despite subsidies, they are crippled from a lack of working capital as growing interest payments on years of losses accumulate, and they have little room for bargaining with the exporters.

The ruined factories in the landscape therefore fall into two major groups, private and cooperative, and it is the differences between the two that are the focus of this paper. Private weaving sheds have mostly shut down, but decaying cooperatives struggle on with government subsidies. Keralan politics demonstrates a particularly complex engagement of private enterprise with the State’s current communist ideology, itself now undergoing a power struggle between those for and against different models of modernization, and it is this underlying tension which dominates the way in which various sectors of the industry fare.

Private

Those companies in Kannur that fail to re-structure, fall into dispute with labour unions or lose their buyers, often end up falling foul of family feuding. The landscape was strewn with nearly forty such crumbling factories, often with the large joint family home next door. Closed factories are engulfed by nature, sinking into the foliage they quickly become invisible as the monsoon vegetation overruns them and materials merge into one another (Fig Basel Mission). However, they are never fully erased; just as they require cleaning and regulation to preserve order, so do they need active ridding and investments of time and money to remove them completely. The ruins of former industries may be witnesses to failure, but they can remain as haunting presences until they truly disappear into the undergrowth.

At the same time, disintegration and disaggregation may be swiftly followed by the setting up of new enterprises – partnerships are realigned. The larger private companies still in existence now have very smart new buildings with glass and marble facades, where nothing is woven anymore. In light and airy, spotlessly clean rooms, goods are checked and packed, and foreign buyers are shown around. The private companies are increasingly becoming weightless, in the sense of dematerialisation, losing their direct manufacturing responsibilities, their factories, heavy machinery and payrolls in favour of bar-codes, images and brands.

While the factories rot and workers lose jobs, entrepreneurial merchants of the town work hard to create glossy images of Kannur's success that generate fame for the town, through skilful lobbying, publicity, seminars and staged ritual functions. The State tourist board markets Kannur as the 'Land of Looms and Loes', a reference to both the handloom industry and the seasonal ritual theatre, *theyyam*. This they do through a series of seminars ritually opened by government ministers, tourist booklets featuring handloom as a heritage product, applying for central government funding for handloom, successfully enticing the National Institute for fashion and

technology to open locally, and developing a proposal for Geographical Indicator status. *Idea of handloom* is important for creating imagery of success.

What then is the relationship between the materiality of waste in the industry and the potency of the idea of handloom? It may be useful to consider the ruined private factories rotting in the coconut groves as sacrificial offerings, empty shells whose potency has been transformed into circulating images that may contain the potential for the textile industry's re-enchantment. As the existing buildings are in danger of being absorbed back into the landscape, could textile production re-materialize in another form?

Cooperatives

After the yarn and textile shortages following WW2, and the formation of the world's first democratically elected Communist government in 1957, the growth of cooperative handloom societies was encouraged. While some wove cloth for the local and national markets such as shirting, dhotis and floor mats, others subcontracted export orders from the merchant-exporters; many maintain a mix of the two today. The Kerala State emerged as a major shareholder of these cooperatives through apex bodies, and political control is also exerted through party politics, trade union activities and the preferential distribution of central and state level development loans and grants.

Contrary to appearances, most **cooperatives** have not been totally abandoned and continue to function as part of the political and ideological project. The State government officially continues to support the public sector handloom industry, and local left-wing trade unions regularly strike against any use of powerlooms (slide). While some only work sporadically, about a quarter are technically 'dormant', as though mothballed and potentially waiting to be re-enlivened. The lifecycle of these workplaces shifts between that of semi-

productive activity and languorous slumber according to sporadic orders and government initiatives. Regulated factory-time appears to have almost slowed down to a standstill. However, attempts to suspend time, to keep the empty workshops open for potential business, struggle against both the impact of global trends for cheaper, faster cloth and the vital forces of natural regeneration that smother their surfaces and undermine their foundations.

Some dormant societies now had no buildings, one or two had never purchased any looms, others had struggled for a year or two before closing. The cooperatives at Kadirur and Karivelloor were technically merely dormant, though when we visited a powerloom worker had set up in one gloomy corner (slide). The cooperative at Chittariparamba had apparently had its roof blown off in the wind, and the whole building had collapsed before it even opened; it too was ‘dormant’, though the slumberous term belies the ravaged state of the venture (slide).

The most hopeless are awaiting ‘liquidation’ by the bureaucrats, whose attempts to recuperate value from material assets are rapidly overtaken by the winds and rains that tear off roofs and dissolve bricks and mortar, opening up cracks and fissures that enable creepers and tree roots to exert their stranglehold.

Azhikode WCS

This had been dormant since 2001, and had huge debts. The local Communist Member of Parliament, the *panchayat* office, the District Collector, the Tourism Department and a neighbouring handloom merchant had got together to propose turning it into a ‘Handloom Tourist Village’, and were bidding for funds. Part of the society’s land was going to be sold off to pay debts, and the front part was to be used to create a Visitor Centre, an entry into a kind of living cultural museum incorporating the heart of the *theru*. There was some disagreement over the future of the coop itself – some thought that the rest of the Society would be re-financed and

potentially open for business once again. The Cooperative had been the mainstay of work for many of the older men and women in the *theru*, and its cessation had caused much hardship.

While an earlier plan talked about preserving the old building, a later one suggested tearing it down and starting again. We decided to try and find out how locals viewed the coop. Several older men and women who had spent decades working in the coop explained how it had been a communal effort to establish it in the late 1940s with the help of a local industrialist, and how it had started in a shed elsewhere then moved to its current location. There was a great deal of pride in the stories they told, of winning prizes, of being one of the leading coops in the area, their reputation for Kannur crepe and the profits made during the boom.

But later in the narratives came the disappointment, when presidents and secretaries let them down, running the business into the ground. This was usually blamed by former managers on the inexperienced officers who ran it during the Emergency period under Indira Gandhi's Congress Party rule (1975-77), who lost opportunities and failed to understand the business. But although several cooperatives were popularly said to have started declining at this time, in fact it was after this period, once the CPI(M) were back in influence, that loans were taken for expensive equipment that never materialised, when building grants were given but works never completed, and their land was sold off to pay mounting debts.

Women spoke of camaraderie and friendship, of taking young children along in slings while they sat winding the yarn for the weavers. Men were pleased to have had steady work, if not well paid, then at least just enough, and the Society was something to be proud of. But all were owed money from payments to gratuity funds, insurance and pensions, and many hoped to gain from the settling up of its accounts. But when we asked a dozen older chaliya women to make sketches of their immediate neighbourhoods, none included the building as important in

their maps. If something new came out of the coop which brought work they would be pleased, but there was no apparent feelings for the building itself or the society as an entity, it had been all but forgotten and there was a deal of cynicism about the possibilities for the future of handloom.

We were shown around by Kuduvan Padmanabhan, the Secretary of the local communist handweaver's union and President of the Coop (now all slides). Through the energetic delivery of his rhetoric he assured us that the coop would be re-opened, and that there was a growing market for handloom abroad. Upstairs were the managers' offices, with telephones, books, accounts and calendars on the wall, all left exactly as it had been while still a working business. It made sense that it might just be reopened as it was. And in fact, the Secretary came once a month and still had to submit accounts every year. But shutters hung off the windows, door hinges were broken, the electricity was switched off and dust clung to every surface. Along the walls were photos of past managers and office staff, all arranged in crisp white dhotis. Downstairs were the sample rooms, checking tables and accounts. From the perspective of a visitor interested in cultural heritage, it seemed obvious what a fantastic resource this was for creating a museum to show how a handloom cooperative worked. But the Visitor Centre not to be a museum that interpreted the past but an aesthetic for the future. While elite Keralan families and wealthier foreign tourists value 'homestays' in traditional old wooden houses, local Keralans prefer to build new, and rarely in the area could one see well-maintained old buildings of any kind.

The speed at which the place was decaying was more apparent in the work sheds across the courtyard. Small trees and bushes were growing up in the courtyard, and the bright green leaves of fast growing plants covered the paving like a carpet: we were warned to watch out for snakes and an uncovered well. We followed our leader as he expertly picked up a corner of his

spotless white dhoti with a practised flick of his hand, and carefully showed us the way through the warping shed, where rusting wire racks stood like giant upended bedframes.

Looking around in the gloom of the deserted weaving shed, we saw rows and rows of old looms, some had high dobby or jacquard attachments, multiple strings to create intricate patterns hanging like lifeless marionettes (Fig). 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.

While we poked around, Kuduven Padmanabhan maintained his steady monologue on the possibilities for revival, how the place could be swept out and the looms put back into use once more. The weaving shed came to symbolise 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. 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 moderniser's desire to destroy the major part while fossilizing handloom in a living museum, 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 cooperative.

Conclusion

Capitalising 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, decaying looms, lack of locally available export-quality products and a local disdain for handloom, coupled with migrating labour, bad debt and unbalanced books, all largely ignored in public discourse. The future success of the merchants would seem to depend upon the structural decline of the handloom industry in its current political form, permitting an alternative restructuring of the private business sector to quietly continue in the background, involving mechanization and a shift to apparel production. The political spotlight often focused upon the plight of the (usually male) weaver in a cooperative conceals the growing number of private workshops where Keralan women work stitching, packing and dispatching ‘made-ups’.

Conversely, while traditional left wing politicians and unionists work keep crumbling cooperatives going as a conduit for political support, the vision to really create value from the ethical foundations of a true cooperative remain a wasted opportunity. Rather than competing to produce ever larger quantities of cheaper cloth, Kannur’s history as a centre of industrialized handloom, in the context of Kerala’s relatively good conditions of employment, wages and education could be the basis for building up a more sustainable textile industry. The *idea* of handloom keeps the fame of Kannur growing, but in reality it masks the fact that local mechanization may be the best option. On the back of the few factories certified as Socially Accountable or participating in the growing global markets for Fair Trade products, projects **building** on strong labour achievements might provide a nascent alternative to Benjamin’s bleak analysis of the ruins of capitalism revealing the inevitability of cyclical efflorescence and decay.