

Society of Economic Anthropologists Annual Meeting
Weaving Across time and Space: The Political Economy of Textiles
April 2-4th 2009, Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, Los Angeles.

Longer draft article for publication in edited volume of conference papers

RUINS AND THE IDEA OF HANDLOOM: FAME AND FORTUNE IN KERALAⁱ

Introduction

How might a moribund handloom industry in north Kerala reinvent itself for the 21st Century? The tropical monsoon landscape is littered with dilapidated factories containing rotting looms, still strung with saggy warps and wefts interlaced with giant cobwebs, suckered creepers and suspended electrical cables. Choking cotton dust, salty wastewater and dye run-offs are polluting by-products yet also visible signs of (un)healthy production; now it is the means of production itself that have lost value, decaying amongst the fecund landscape. For although there are successful factories producing handloom locally, their numbers are dwindling. In the past 15 years, the number of weavers and workers has fallen by two thirds to just over 12,000; almost half the 60 or so private manufacturer-exporting companies have shut down; only three or four have actual handloom factories. Of the 52 registered cooperatives only 39 are working and nearly half of their looms are idle. Of the working coops, only seven are in profit, and only three directly exporting.ⁱⁱ

The fieldwork on which this paper is based is part of a broader research project into textile waste as a global flow.ⁱⁱⁱ The premise of this Keralan research^{iv} 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 surplus of goods that cannot be used up, but also waste as a failure to use potential, skills and opportunities. The actors involved are as entangled

and confused as the threads on the loom engulfed by creepers. Local politics demonstrates a particularly complex and vociferous engagement with the State's current communist ideology, itself currently undergoing a power struggle between those for and against different models of modernization.

Perhaps surprisingly then, local exporters had successfully lobbied to become a designated Centre for Export Excellence in 2005, one of only nine at the time in India. This they had achieved through the strategy of actually dyeing and weaving most of their orders on powerlooms in Tamil Nadu, where labour costs are much lower, technology is more advanced, and pollution controls less vigorously enforced. 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. 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 and money for the town, through skilful lobbying, publicity, seminars and staged ritual functions.

Private weaving sheds may have shut down, but many dormant or dying cooperatives struggle on, even though handloom has little local value and is largely invisible, and new weavers are not entering the profession. The difference between the two sectors is important and key to the themes of this paper. Handloom (and handspun, *khadi*) has a special place in the ideology of the Indian State, and was made especially symbolic by Gandhi (Bean, 1989); it remains the second largest employment sector after agriculture (ref). Development policies, reservation quotas and federal budget support continue to support handloom production, and Kerala is eligible for much of this, even though the structure of the industry and the problems of the weavers are often very different to the dominant model on which such official support appears to be based (refs.). Keralan standards of living are relatively high, and weavers leave to get better

paid work elsewhere. Yet there are concerted efforts by the State government (currently Communist) to maintain support of the industry and bring new, poorer sections of the population into weaving, and local trade unions strike against proposed increasing mechanization of the looms.

What then is the relationship between the materiality of waste in the industry and the potency of the idea of handloom? This paper focuses on the materialities of waste and its potential value for regeneration, and suggests that some of the ruined factories rotting in the coconut groves can be perceived as sacrificial offerings, empty shells whose potency has been transformed into circulating images that may contain the potential for the industry's re-enchantment.^v The political discourse surrounding handloom is complex, but the visibility of these arguments masks the real structural changes taking place in the industry. As the existing buildings are in danger of being absorbed back into the landscape, could textile production re-materialize in another form?

The Structure of Handloom in Kannur

Kannur is a town in an eponymous coastal district in northern Kerala. Traditional home-based weavers from the Hindu *chaliya* caste supplied simple white cloths woven on pit-looms for local sartorial needs.^{vi} *Chaliya* communities tend to live along long streets known as *theru*, of which there are over 30 in the district,^{vii} and they continue to make up most of the independent, unorganized sector. Unusually, Kannur has also had a long tradition of *industrialized* handloom production geared almost exclusively towards lengths of clothing material and furnishing fabrics for the export market. This was originally started by the Basel Mission in the mid-19thC 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 (Balan, 2005). Many more factories opened up in the 1970s to cash in on the Western craze for cheesecloth, known locally as crepe or *kora*, and subsequently went bust. Today Kannur merchants export textiles for the international home furnishing market and ‘made-ups’, stitched household textiles, which now make up over 90% of total export values. 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.

After the yarn and textile shortages following WW2, followed by the advent of the world’s first democratically elected Communist government in 1957, the growth of cooperative handloom societies was encouraged. Often originally founded in or near *chaliya theru* and formalizing existing social cooperative structures, the system came to include workers from all the lower castes. In the 1930s, the *Thiyya* caste was encouraged by both Sri Naryayana Guru and Vaghabhadananda Guru to improve their economic and social conditions through industrial entrepreneurship, and many joined the weaving cooperatives (Chandran, 2006). Similarly other marginal groups established cooperatives as a means of self-improvement and a vehicle for social change, hence the Muslim Weavers Cooperative Society and the Harijan Weavers Cooperative Society. This enabled them to gain access to grants and developmental assistance, but many had no experience of weaving, designing products 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-exporters; many maintain a mix of the two: the export trade is riskier but more profitable. The Keralan State emerged as a major shareholder of these cooperatives through apex

bodies, and indirectly influence them through the cooperative banking system. A more direct control is exerted through party politics, trade union activities and the preferential distribution of central and state level development loans and grants.^{viii}

Successful companies are building ‘brands’, moving out of manufacturing handloom. The exporters sell good quality basic textile goods to Western high street stores, while a few companies also weave exclusive handloom fabrics for a small discerning niche market, which is willing to pay for complex, high-quality woven fabrics, handloom companies can make one-off orders in small quantities. This is the main advantage of handloom over the automatic Rapier looms in neighbouring Tamil Nadu, running 24 hours a day and requiring minimum orders of thousands of metres. The exporters’ reputation dates from the days of the Basel Mission, and is built upon both quality of cloth, knowledge of the weavers and the use of azo-free VAT dyes. But the outsourcing of work to Tamil Nadu is a constant source of tension in the town, where unions perceive orders to be diverted elsewhere for local businessmen’s profit, while cooperatives flounder and local workers lose jobs. Of the cloth that is still produced locally, the risk of employing weavers has been passed on to either the independent unorganized sector or sub-contracted out to the state-subsidised cooperatives at cost. Exporting companies work hard to get orders from international buyers, and carefully balance the mix of subcontracting to Tamil Nadu, to local *theru* or coops, as large powerloom orders often subsidise handloom production.

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. 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 by a lack of working

capital as growing interest payments on years of losses accumulate, and they have little room for bargaining.

According to one leading businessman, Jaychandran: ‘Powerloom prices are the norm in India, everything is measured against them.’ He says that his father’s older foreign buyers are more used to paying Kannur handloom prices, and are more open to handloom as a concept, but ‘once they are out of your net its very hard to get a new buyer to swim into it’. Most international buyers now appear to care little for the aesthetics of ‘hand of the weaver’, and nor do their customers: many cannot tell handloom and powerloom apart, and simply want a ‘textile’ at the best price. 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.^{ix} Before the changes, there was a flourishing business in illegally stamped ‘handloom’ certification; now there is little point. To some extent, this has always been an opportunistic business that has utilized the economic benefits accruing to the *idea* of handloom in the West to make a bigger profit with less investment.

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 now empty of people and activity. 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. 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. Kannur is the most urbanized district in Kerala,^x and one can travel for miles and rarely see a stretch of un-built land. Plots are divided, smaller traditional joint family homes are demolished or obscured, overshadowed by the palatial marble-clad concrete houses constructed

for the next generation. 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. 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’.

What, then, are the contexts of these ruins and what might they 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. ‘All manner of elements – people, artifacts, animals, plants, topography, climate, culture, economy and history are knotted together in a unique way to form an unfolding timespace of particular landscapes and places’ (Jones and Cloke, 2002: 9). 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).

Edensor 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. For Edensor, ruins are disordered spaces, symbols of former ordering that show capitalism’s thirst for innovation and the necessity of accompanying decay, drawing on Simmel’s ‘vitality of opposing forces’ (Simmel, 1965), where as some creations are dying off, new forms of life are being fed and nurtured. Exploring ruined factories includes simultaneously within the gaze the building that has seen decades of production slowly crumbling with the frozen

moment of the last piece of cloth never cut from the loom. Walter Benjamin's delving into the trash of the ruined Parisien arcades found in discarded objects '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), and where the fragment became the trope of the modern. The trash of modernity was self-evidence of the myth of progress, the unprecedented material destruction created by the 'phantasmagoria of bigger and better' and the technological march of progress (Buck-Morss, 1989: 92); it is the accelerated progression of economic crises' that keeps history cyclical, where the 'new is always old and the old is always new' (Auguste Blanqui in Buck-Morss, 1989: 107). History is not moving forward, it simply stands still and gathers dust.

'Modern capitalism proceeds by forgetting the scale of devastation wreaked upon the physical and social world, for obliterating traces of this carnage fosters the myth of endless and seamless progress. However, lost and abandoned objects vividly convey this destruction. As previously celebrated and valuable commodities decay and become irrelevant in the continual creation of the new, they can be recognized as the dreams they always were, emblems of the fragility and destructiveness of unfettered capitalistic production. ... What is now classified as waste may once have signified progress.'

(Edensor, 2005: 101)

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, and most trading families admitted that once a successful business was inherited by a group of sons and daughters, many failed to survive the next generation. Siblings set up alternative ventures, jealousy undermines good business sense, and money is siphoned off for ever-larger family obligations. The landscape was littered with up to 40 such closed factories, often with the large family home next door to the

crumbling buildings. Private factories are therefore allowed to be engulfed by nature, sinking into the foliage they quickly become invisible as the monsoon vegetation overruns them and materials merge into one another. Termites attack the timbers, fungi and mould flourish in damp corners, animal slip in through holes and shelter under roofs. 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; their abandonment speaks to shifting sites of interest, of productivity moving elsewhere, of regeneration in alternative spheres.

The ruins of former industries may be witnesses to failure, for the former owners and the workers who used to clock in, but hoping they will be forgotten is not so easy; they remain as haunting presences until they truly disappear into the undergrowth. Woodward observes, ‘The interest of a ruin rarely lies in its reality...to imagine what is missing, that is a rule of the game. A ruin is a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator’ (Woodward, 2002: 135, 139). At the same time, disintegration and disaggregation may be swiftly followed by new enterprises adapting to the market – looms are transported elsewhere and new bits are added, new names are registered and logos found, partnerships are realigned, and a fresh company starts up. The larger private companies still in existence now have very smart new buildings with glass and marble facades located in the coconut groves outside town, where nothing is woven anymore. In light and airy, spotlessly clean floors, goods are checked and packed, and buyers are shown around. The companies appear to be increasingly weightless, shedding factories, heavy machinery and large payrolls in favour of bar-codes and brands.

However, most cooperatives have officially not been abandoned, and continue to function as part of the political and ideological project. The lifecycle of these workplaces shifts between that of semi-productive activity and langorous slumber according to sporadic orders and

government initiatives, just as nature itself engulfs the structures after every monsoon and has to be hacked away again with machetes. Regulated factory-time appears to have almost slowed down to a standstill. While the ideology of the left and government policies continue to keep these sheds alive and active, at least a quarter are classified by bureaucrats as ‘dormant’ and no longer produce cloth, as though mothballed and potentially waiting to be re-enlivened. However, attempts to suspend decay, 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. In an admission of failure, the most hopeless cooperatives 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.

Cooperatives are kept alive through subsidies, signified as dormant when in reality abandoned, liquefied only as a last resort. The handloom cooperatives are eligible for a raft of public grants and subsidies, which are administered by the local District Industries Centre. The environment in the DIC offices themselves are not far removed from the state of the businesses they help to manage, overwhelmed by piles of paper files wrapped with pink ribbons and weighted down against the fans, coated with layers of dust and particles from traffic pollution from the open windows. Despite the mountains of ledgers and books maintained, the annual figures were only available on one piece of handwritten paper. The office identified 14 dormant societies, and over the course of several months we tried to visit nearly all of them. Some had never actually opened, one or two had never purchased any looms, others had struggled for a year or two; these were often projects of the local CPI(M) and a means to gain grants. The

cooperatives at Kadirur and Karivelloor were technically merely dormant, though when we visited a powerloom worker had set up in one gloomy corner. 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.

Azhikode WCS

Azhikode is a village just outside Kannur, in a semi-rural area. ‘Azhikode’ theru itself remains a very poor chaliya street compared to other theru ; the houses still all had handlooms outside or in sheds behind, and only two people had invested in powerlooms – both were unable to meet their loan repayments. The looms were worked mainly by old men and women, making only tablemats for nearby private companies.

At the end of the *theru* was the Azhikode Weaver’s Industrial Cooperative Society [AWICS]. This was currently dormant, and had huge debts. Although it ceased working in 2001, there is still a President (who was the local leader of the Communist handloom weaver’s union CITU), a Secretary etc. The AWICS was also subject to development as part of a very unusual proposal. For part of the society’s land was going to be sold off to pay debts, and the remainder was to be used to create a new Handloom Tourist Village, a kind of living museum located in the *theru*, which was going to be spruced up. 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 men and women in the *theru*, and its final closure had caused poverty and difficulty for most of the street’s inhabitants. I had hoped to follow this development as a case study, but of course during the year deadlines came and went, phone calls went unanswered and the whole thing was beset

with delays. In short, the local Communist MLA, the local CPI(M) panchayat office, the District Collector, Tourism Department and the private handloom merchant had got together to propose this handloom village, hoping to attract state level funding to the village, clearing the debts of the Coop, improving the houses of the villagers, and bringing foreigners into the heart of the *theru* through constructed pathways.

In researching the rather vague plans, I was shown a power-point presentation and some drawings outlining various proposals. While an earlier version talked about preserving the old building, that idea had soon been replaced by another involving tearing it down and starting again. Therefore we decided to try and find out what the building might mean to various people, what the cooperative represented in terms of the future. Several older men and women who had spent decades working in the coop explained their links to it, 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 when a private business went under. 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: piles of stock were left unsold, and wages were not paid. But although several cooperatives were 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 slowly cooperative land was sold off to pay mounting debts.

When asked about their work there, women spoke of camaraderie and friendship, of taking young children along in slings while they sat winding the yarn for the weavers. Other women wove cloth themselves, and hung small personal things around the looms they worked at; an older woman who re-visited the abandoned site foraged underneath a wooden loom and produced a small tin, where she had kept her things years earlier. Kids coming home from school would stop and earn a few paise carrying hank yarn for dyeing, or take it home for their family to wind or weave at home in the evenings. 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. Many still quoted their membership numbers, but all were owed money from payments to gratuity funds, insurance and so on, and many hoped to gain from the settling up of its accounts.

We asked a dozen older residents of the *theru*, mostly women, to make sketches of their immediate neighbourhoods, including places that were significant to them. For all the accounts of the Cooperative's centrality to their lives when interviewed, 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 affection 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. A similar attitude was found towards local private factories. Another older woman spent hours talking of the owners of a local firm as an extended family, describing the close relationship she had had with them, but in her sketch, she didn't include the large factory around the corner she had spent 18 years in.

Their children and grandchildren are upwardly mobile, getting qualifications in new technologies and dreaming of a job in the Gulf; construction work is also a better alternative. If a weaver earns 60-80 Rs a day on piece rate, perhaps 100 Rs in a cooperative with full benefits, a builder is making 200-250 Rs a day and eating 'royal food' for lunch. Ironically, although unions regularly call crippling strikes (*hartals*) over the use of powerlooms, there is a shortage of skilled weavers locally; as men leave the profession, more and more women enter it to provide a second family income.

We were finally taken to see the old coop by Kuduvan Padmanabhan, the Secretary of the local CPI(M) handweaver's union and President of the Coop. In our meeting beforehand he had handed over yet another bundle of Malayalam press clippings concerning the dire plight of handloom weavers, while speaking uninterrupted at length about the healthy state of the CPI(M) and his successful fundraising during the last rally, making conversation and simultaneous translation impossible. 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. In such a positive frame of mind he hopped in the car and accompanied us to the site.

When we first went to look round the building, it was a shock to realise that it had been left exactly as it had been while still a working business. Upstairs were the managers' offices, with telephones, books, accounts and calendars on the wall. It made sense that it might just be reopened as it was. And in fact, despite the fact that it was closed for business, 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 it was a new Visitor Centre that was envisaged, that focused on the future development of artisanship and *chaliya* culture, and not a museum that interpreted the past. 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.^{xi}

But 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. 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 practised flick of his hand, and carefully showed us the way through the warping shed, where rusting wire racks stood like giant upended bedframes. Cables and creepers were interlaced with the strings and spool, and pieces of rotting wood lay about the floor.

Then 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, but it took some time to realise that we were alone; the ghostly sound of the loom had travelled in through the window. Some 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.

While we poked around, Kuduven Padmanabhan maintained another 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 finally 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 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 moderniser'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 cooperative.

Invisibility of handloom cloth

Products for the local market are marketed by the Coops' apex body, Hantex, who stockpile it and sell it at seasonal fairs or through their shops. A similar body, Hantex, coordinates the production of independent, unorganised weavers, but both bodies have been severely criticised for failing to develop appropriate products, poor marketing and lacklustre point of sales (refs). The only time local people buy handloom in any quantity are at the State-run fairs during festival seasons where all the local cooperatives have a stand. The Central and State governments offer a 30% subsidy on all sales, and customers can buy furnishings such as durrie rugs woven out of recycled warp ends, satin bedsheets, hand towels, table linen and throws, the

latter often rejects from subcontracted export orders or made-up from recycled pieces of leftover fabrics.^{xii}

There is little pride or support for the locally-made export products as better examples are rarely sold here for fear of piracy of designs supplied by Western buyers, and wealthier local consumers remain unaware of their quality or reputation. There simply isn't the middle-class market for handloom clothing or furnishings in Kerala to sustain the industry, as a look around the bright printed synthetics in the glitzy new shopping malls springing up in the town quickly revealed. It neither fits the local aesthetic, nor is it economical. Recent initiatives by the Communists to promote wearing *khadi* (handspun) handloom on Saturdays for government employees had met with little success. The famous white and gold Keralan saris and dhotis are made further south near Trivandrum, and are now only worn for temple festivals and some elite weddings; many of these are anyway made on powerlooms in Tamil Nadu. A similar venture espousing handloom uniforms by schoolchildren, had also failed in its first year due to poor quality and lack of availability. Often men would suggest that handloom dhotis were eco-friendly, but further questioning revealed that generally the term 'handloom' is equated with using cotton fibre rather than a method of weaving. Cotton handloom is therefore perceived to be expensive, rough, prone to fading and sagging, and quickly looks 'terrible', 'horrible' and 'dirty' according to informants; mothers would rather buy cheaper synthetic mix fabrics that are easy to care for and look smart for longer, while most women prefer mixed fibre suits and saris for the same reason.^{xiii}

Ironically, although unions regularly call crippling strikes (*hartals*) over the use of powerlooms, there is a shortage of skilled weavers locally; as men leave the profession, more and more women enter it to provide a second family income. But both private and public sectors

claim women's productivity is generally lower, and they tend not to have the physical strength to beat in the thickest wefts on the heavy wide looms. Every inch of handloom cloth can reveal the weaver's mood, especially when they are tired, distracted or careless with the beating in. 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 sweat dripping, elbows leaning and bodies resting soak into the fabric. Despite the ideological battle over introducing new technology, the ultimate aim of the handloom manufacturer is to remove all traces of the body and mind of the weaver.

Apart from special, Keralan items such as the cheap saffron or black pilgrim's dhotis, handloom itself is almost absent in the 'Land of Looms and Lores', and 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 colourful mat to be trampled underfoot, a dhoti to relax in at home, or a traditional white towel to dry off one's head after a thunderous shower. Hence the struggle by actors on the left of politics to make handloom as an ideological and social enterprise more visible is often at odds with the realities of handloom fabric and its distinctive qualities having little value in the market.

Images of Success

Local businessmen and developers complain that Kannur is geographically isolated and politically ignored, and never gets the assistance it requires to compete with the larger metropolises in the south (Deshabhimani, 2006). The infrastructure is much less developed than further south, with seemingly terminal delays on decisions for building an international airport, a container port, and even a functioning highway. North Malabar^{xiv} was the birthplace of radical

communism in Kerala in the 1930s, and the villages around Kannur are still the political strongholds of many of the leading CPI(M) politicians.^{xv} While some privately assert that some factions in the ruling CPI(M) and trade unions are trying to keep their powerbase through blocking development, it is clear that the future of the industry to a large extent depends upon the outcome of the struggle between modernizers and traditionalists within the CPI(M) and its affiliated unions, and the endeavours of the merchant-exporters to raise the profile of the town nationally and internationally.

To this end, 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 at the current time and the political difficulty of replacing it with updated technology. While handloom production has been in steady decline, the State tourist board markets Kannur as the ‘Land of Looms and Lores’, a reference to both the handloom industry and the seasonal ritual theatre, *theyyam*. Record export figures have secured the fame of Kannur throughout India and abroad as a Town of Export Excellence, awarded to the town in 2005 as one of only nine centres in the whole of India, despite estimates that only 50 crores^{xvi} of the 330 crores value of exports was actually made locally.^{xvii}

Of importance to its apparent ‘revival’ is generating images of success for consumption in India and beyond. Over the course of the year a series of seminars and events involving all participants debated the future of handloom and the potential for Kannur’s transformation into an advanced textile economy, a ‘rival to Tiruppur without the pollution and problems’, according to one modernizer from the Communist press. The Keralan Handloom Exporter’s Organisation was renaming itself as the Textile Exporter’s Organisation, and they had offices in a new high-rise

glass building on the upper-middle class part of town. They had issued a souvenir booklet to commemorate the 50th anniversary of direct exports from Kannur (Balan, 2005) and contributed to a similar publication by *Deshabhimani*, the local Communist Party paper, outlining the untapped potential of Kannur as a tourist destination, with handloom a major attraction; many of the older families had also branched out into running hotels in the area (Deshabhimani, 2006).

At the same time local manufacturers have managed to get a branch of the prestigious NIFT (National Institute of Fashion and Technology) to open in a small village nearby, the only one outside a major metropolis. Kannur already has a branch of the IHTT (India Handloom Textile and Technology Institute), and a branch of NID (National Institute of Design) was also proposed. In this respect they have been extraordinarily successful; few locals think they will help produce better handloom or design better furnishing fabrics in the short term, but attracting them creates fame, it creates a brand, and private entrepreneurs hope that it could eventually lead to the revival of fortunes through a shift to powerloom fabrics and apparel production.

More surprising was the proposal to apply for Geographical Indicator status, possibly for ‘Cannanore check’. When we first arrived, most people readily admitted that what they made could just as easily be made anywhere else, and the designs were not specific to the area, generally being developed with Western designers. But by the end of the year meetings were taking place in Trivandrum to put together a bid for the ubiquitous checked and striped thick cottons. Originally introduced by the Basel Mission, it is impossible without further research to say whether the initial influence came from textiles produced elsewhere in India (eg Madras or Bengal, regions famous for checked cloth) or even from rural southwest Germany itself, which still has a weaving tradition making similar patterns; they have become emblematic of Kannur handloom, but have been made in textile centres around the world.

Leaders of private enterprise work hard lobbying government to raise their visibility: private companies run the local chamber of commerce, work lobbying for an international airport, try to capture all available central and state level grant schemes, getting ministers to come and attend functions and trying to bring funding for new projects such as the Powerloom felicitation Centre, Integrated Textile Parks, and Common Waste Treatment and Disposal Plants. Their aim is to bring these to Kerala not other states, and Kannur rather than the south or central regions, and they work closely with the local Communist Party and the public sector to trap these projects.

Politicians from all parties and religious backgrounds are ‘felicitated’ on their arrival, asked to light ritual brass lamps (*vilakku puja*) to inaugurate functions, and honoured with ritual gifts of scarves, flowers and first presentations of books and fabrics. The last of these during the year was enthusiastically entitled ‘Vision 2020’; a Minister for Textiles from Delhi arrived in a string of official white cars, was met by traditional drummers and escorted between rows of ritual umbrellas into a marquee. The entrance had been decorated with large vinyl images of an aeroplane flying over the bows of a huge container ship, a ritual *theyyam* performer, and a large eye somewhat reminiscent of Siva’s third eye taking the place of the ‘O’ in Vision. On such occasions all political sectors joined together to work to bring the money to Kannur to materialise their Vision.

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. The political spotlight often focused upon the plight of the (usually male) weaver conceals the growing number of 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 participating in the ‘long race to the bottom’ to produce ever larger quantities of cheaper cloth (Rivoli, 2005), 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. On the back of the few factories certified as Socially Accountable (SA8000) or participating in the growing global markets for Fair Trade products, such projects might provide a nascent alternative to Benjamin’s bleak analysis of the ruins of capitalism revealing the inevitability of cyclical efflorescence and decay.

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ⁱ I would like to thank the Pasold Fund (UK) and UCL Graduate School for contributions towards the expense of attending the SEA conference at the Cotsen Institute, UCLA in April 2009 at which this paper was first presented.

ⁱⁱ Figures for the numbers of weavers and associated workers in Kannur varied, this approximation was given by Kuduvan Padmanabhan, the Secretary of the Kannur Handloom Weavers Union. The number of private factories still open are approximate, and were supplied by the Kerala Handloom Exporters Organisation. Figures for the cooperative sector are accurate and freely obtained from the local District Industries Centre.

ⁱⁱⁱ The longer project includes on-going research into the shoddy recycling of Western second-hand clothing in northern India as part of the global trade in used clothing. This is itself part of a much larger collaborative project, the *Waste of the World*, <http://www.wasteoftheworld.org>, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK (RES 000-23-0007).

^{iv} Fieldwork was carried out continuously over a year from May 2007 to April 2008. Shibin E. M. and Venu Gopalan offered crucial research assistance, guidance and friendship, and without their

help little could have been accomplished; I thank J. Devika, who put us in touch with each other whilst I was affiliated to the Centre for Developing Societies in Trivandrum. I am grateful to Danny Miller for his guidance throughout the project, and especially his common sense insights during a field visit to Kannur. A rough draft of some of this material was presented at a *Waste of the World* workshop in September 2008, and I am grateful to all participants for their comments, especially the discussants Susanne Kuchler, Emma Tarlo, Lou Taylor and Nicky Gregson. However, all the usual caveats apply regarding my interpretations here.

^v See for example the efficacy of rotting *malanggan* funerary sculptures discarded in the forests of New Ireland; Kuchler has argued that their sacrificial death releases images that can be recombined in new configurations for the next ritual (Kuchler, 1997).

^{vi} Variations included the *torthu*, (a multi-purpose cloth used as a bath towel, head band, shoulder cloth etc), the *panimundu* (a lower cloth) and *lunghi* (lower cloth) formerly worn by the lower castes for work and leisure, *pudava* (a woman's dhoti), *mundu* (dhoti) and *enamundu* (double dhoti) formerly worn by the upper castes (Thappian, 2005).

^{vii} These theru settlement patterns are completely different from other communities' land use, and are often used as evidence for chaliyas claim to have migrated to the area from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh at the invitation of local rajas. With the practical advantage of creating space to lay out long warps for looms, they also facilitate cooperative work through families living together and helping each other with different stages of preparation.

^{viii} The handloom industry remains the second largest employer following agriculture in India. However, central government policies designed to support existing poor, independent handloom workers may not always be best suited to the industrialised model of north Kerala production where a shortage of weavers is the problem due to better opportunities in other sectors. Local

politicians are able to selectively reinterpret the criteria for disbursement, for example setting up projects to bring BPL (Below Poverty Line) women into handloom employment.

^{ix} 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 USA and EU.

^x The municipality of Kannur has only 63,795 residents, but the district has a population of 2,251,727 of which >50% are urbanised (*Census of India 2001*).

^{xi} Just as old housing was continuously torn down to make way for new mansions, so the aesthetics of the local town centre was also being transformed. Low-rise traditional buildings with verandahs, usually painted a pale blue, were rapidly being replaced by glass and concrete shopping malls, the largest of which was a pink palace simply called ‘City Centre’.

^{xii} However, the vast majority of ‘seconds’, rejected fabrics and made-ups, are auctioned off to dealers who transport it by the lorryload back to Karur in Tamil Nadu.

^{xiii} In small towns such as Kannur, there has been no return to cottons and traditional textiles as markers of elite taste, as found in larger cities such as Kozhikode (Calicut) and Kochi (Cochin).

^{xiv} The northern part of Kerala was called Malabar during the colonial period, and was administered as part of the Madras Presidency.

^{xv} Communist Party of India (Marxist). The CPI and subsequently CPI(M) have been in and out of government continually since their first election in 1957, and had been voted back into power in May 2006 under Chief Minister Achuthanathan.

^{xvi} In the Indian counting system, a ‘crore’ is 10,00,00,00, ie 10 million. During fieldwork, Rs 70 (Indian rupee) was equivalent to approximately £1 (British Pound Sterling). Therefore 50 crore was approximately worth a little over £7 million, and 350 crore approximated to £50 million.

^{xvii} Although estimates vary, sources from all sectors agreed that Kannur only had the capacity to weave approximately this amount.

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