

CHAPTER – 10**THE TEXTILE TECHNOLOGY OF
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The history of South Indian textiles goes back to prehistoric times. The spindles were found in archaeological sites like Paiyampalli in the erstwhile North Arcot, Adichchanallur and the Nilgiri hills. Cotton textiles of very superior were being produced and exported from centres like Kanchipuram, Madurai and Tanjavur. The evidence for this is to be found in many of the Sangam classics like *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai*. *Silappadikaram* refers to the weaving of cotton and silk cloth and its export from the port of Pumpuhar, otherwise called Kaveripumpattinam.¹ It describes the separate streets for weavers which were called *karugar vidi* or *aruvai vidi* is meant for *aruvai vanikan* who was a merchant quite distinct from the weaver. Madurai also boasted equally prosperous and skilled weavers².

Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* refers to the fine textiles of Madurai. Sangam texts describe about beautiful cloth so fine that the eyes cannot follow the course of the yarn and cloth bearing such delicate designs as to make it look like 'the slough of snake'. Some are described as soft as fresh blossoms and others as light as smoke. Fine woven cloth is said to be as delicate and transparent as the vapours of milk.³

Specific references to textile technology in ancient South India are also to be found in other literary texts. In *Agananuru* as well as *Narrinai*, both Sangam texts, the carder's bow is used as a poetic simile the fluffy clouds in the sky after the rains are said to resemble cotton well beaten by the carder's bow. Such evidence shows that the bow for carding was introduced in South India between the second and sixth centuries⁴.

Carding Techniques

There is repeated reference to its use in Sangam literature. In the *Agananuru* as well as the *Narrinai* the carder's bow is used as a poetic simile the fluffy clouds in the sky after the rains are said to resemble cotton, well beaten by the carder's bow⁵.

Spinning Techniques And Technologies

The evidence for the continued use of the spindle for spinning yarn in the thirteenth century comes from the Jaina saint and poet Bhavanandi Munivar. In his *Nannul* (a work on grammar) he compares poetic composition to the process of spinning—the words cotton, poetry or metre is likened to the thread and imagination to the spindle (*kadir*). I cite the relevant portions of Bhavanandi Munivar's verse: *Panjitan solla, panuval izhayaga . . . kadire madiyaga. . .* This can be translated as 'with words as cotton, ideas as the thread and my imagination as the spindle (*kadir*) I shall spin my yarn.

While weaving has been a male preserve in most traditional Indian societies (the exception being hill regions and tribal belts), spinning has been exclusively women's work. Vedic texts suggest that Sangam literature refer to spinner as *parutti pendugal* literally meaning 'the spinning women'. Spinning was particularly the occupation of destitute widows, and single women, interestingly those categories of women who had to sustain themselves through their own earnings. In this connection, the English word 'spinster' for a single woman provides an interesting parallel since the word originates precisely in the same context, as a woman who had to spin for her economic-survival.

The *Purananuru*, a Sangam text dated to anywhere between the third century BC and the third century CE, uses the expression: '*Parutti pendir paruvallenna*', for the thread spun by spinsters. Another text *Natrinai* referring to widows/spinners as *alil pendir* which means 'women without men', says that they spun fine yarn. A celebrated more or less contemporaneous text from northern India, *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, states that the Devadasi, who was too old to perform any service in the temple, was employed to card cotton for her livelihood. The association between widowhood and the profession of spinning gets reflected in a quaint oral tradition among the Gounder community of the Salem district. In a ritual called *kadir koduththal* or 'giving the spindle', the father tells his young daughter who has just been widowed:

*Here is the spindle, here is the cotton,
may you live a hundred years,
my dear, spinning for your livelihood.*

Dyeing Technologies

The Indian traditional dyes are proverbial and they largely account for the immense popularity which the Indian textiles enjoyed in world markets. The reference to dyes like *kusumba* (safflower giving red colour), *nili* (indigo), *manjishta* (madder also dyeing red) and *haridra* (turmeric for yellow dye) and others are referred to repeatedly in literature and inscriptions⁶.

The Sangam texts are also replete with references to the dyes. Indigo was a commonly used vegetable dye and cloth dyed with indigo is referred to as *nilikachchai* in *Purananaru*. Huge brick dyeing vats pertaining to the first- and second centuries have been unearthed from

Arikamedu in Pondicherry and Uraiyur in Tiruchirapalli, both known to be important weaving centres from the accounts of *Periplus*⁷.

Information about the various dyes in use, the techniques of bleaching and dyeing and the imposition of a separate tax on dyers comes from literature and epigraphical records relating to the period between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries.

Cloth printing is an important aspect of textile technology but its origin is extremely difficult to determine.

Tailoring

Closely linked to weaving and dyeing is the profession of tailoring. Clear references to tailors are to be found in the Sangam literature. The *Silappadikaram*, describes the king's bodyguards as wearing shirts and turbans on their heads. The 'Pugarkandam', refers to clothes made from silk, fibre, etc., woven by the Karugar (equivalent of Hindustani Bhunkar) and also to *Tunnakkarar*, i.e. tailors. The *Manimekalai* also refers to Tunnar and Tunnavinagnar.

The excellence attained by the art of tailoring in medieval south India and the powerful organizations of tailors is of special interest here. Professional tailors were attached to the Thanjavur temple during the period of Rajaraja I (tenth century CE). An inscription refers to tailors here called *Tayyan* (the root *tayyal* means stitching), and *Peruntunan* (tunnan refers to one who cuts the cloth), who were assigned one share (of temple paddy) each.⁸

Textiles Designs

The Sangam texts and post-Sangam texts, especially *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* contain extensive references to south Indian textiles. The hero of the classic *Silappadikaram*, Kovalan, was a great merchant who dealt in cloth among other things. The textiles of Madurai, Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli (Uraiyur) are described at length in the classic. The *Porunaaratrupadai* contained in the *Pattupattu* refers to cloth bearing such delicate designs, so as to make it look like 'the slough of a snake'. The same text also refers to garments woven with borders or with embroidery on them. Sarees had not do not contain any descriptions of the designs used in weaving⁹ The handloom industry of South India generally prospered during the medieval period except when there were famines or periods of political instability, such as the interlude between the fall of the later Chola empire and the establishment of the Vijayanagar empire. The heyday of the weaving industry was the Vijayanagar period in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, when the kings provided an added impetus to textile production by giving facilities and privileges to weavers and traders of cloth. With economic prosperity there was marked upward social mobility among weavers, resulting in their securing ritual and other privileges from the state and society.

With the establishment of rival European companies in the seventeenth century, the lives of weavers no longer revolved around the temple but around European factories and Black

Towns. The quarrels of the left-hand and right-hand castes invariably involved the question of who was to secure the company's contract for cloth.

The 'Putting Out' system ensured that under the system of advances, the cloth on the loom was already the property of the Company. Sometimes small time weavers were placed under a master weaver, referred to in the Company records as a 'Careedar' (a Hindu term meaning 'Buyer'). It was his job to ensure that the weavers worked to the perfection of the pattern'. This phrase occurs in a letter written by the Directors in London to their Chief at Fort St. George in 1696. This letter urges him to settle the weavers in the Black Town and make them work according to the musters provided to them by Mr. Ongley, the Company's Agent. By this masterly stroke, the imperial East India Company took away from the Indian weavers their creativity, their native imagination⁹.

While merchants turned middlemen, weavers gradually began to work on the basis of company advances; soon a situation was reached when poor weavers 'could not even put the cloth on the loom without an advance', as the Agent of Fort St. George, Langhorne, commented in 1675. Their creativity and skill were also being destroyed since the companies' injunction was to make them work 'to the perfection of the pattern'. With this the age of economic and social power, of the acquisition of land and privileges, of donations to temples and effective corporate functioning, was definitely over for Indian weavers in the South. With the turn of the eighteenth century their plight worsened. The cotton revolution in England rendered redundant the products of Indian handlooms and, instead of Indian cloth being exported abroad, the Indian market was flooded by Manchester and Lancashire goods. The words attributed to Lord Bentinck-'The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India' -are dramatic but apt as a description of the fate of hand loom weavers¹¹

Conclusions

Some broad conclusions can be arrived at on the basis of dyeing, spinning and loom technological traditions in the South India over the centuries. It seems quite clear that the technological processes involved in weaving were a part of traditional knowledge systems. Any changes or innovations whether minor or major occurred as a result of the highly interactive relationship between the weaver and his loom. The weaver's imagination helped to improve and alter the loom. This was the situation till the colonial intervention impinged on the weavers' imagination by imposing not merely European designs but imported technologies in the false belief that these would improve loom performances. The result was quite the opposite and the weavers' resistance to these innovations and his adherence to technologies appropriate to his own habitat and environment was seen sometimes in the English East India Company records and by some European chroniclers as his obstinacy and refusal to change his traditional ways.

END NOTES

- 1 Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Textiles and Weavers in South India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2006, p.1.

- 2 Kanakalatha Mukund, *The Trading World of the Tamil Merchant: Evolution of Merchant Capitalism in the Coromandel*, Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 1999, p.17.
- 3 S. Sivasankaran, “The Socio-Economic Conditions of the Prime Weaving Communities in Tamil Nadu –A Historical Study”, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai,2013, P.4.
- 4 Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Op.cit.* p.2.
- 5 Vijaya Ramaswamy, *The Song of the Loom*, New Delhi, Primus books, 2013,pp.41-42.
- 6 *Ibid.*pp.55-56.
- 7 Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Textiles and Weavers in South India,Op.cit.*p.2
- 8 Vijaya Ramaswamy, *The Song of the Loom, Op.cit.* p.59.
- 9 Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Textiles and Weavers in South India,Op.cit.*p.4.