

Chendamangalam: Threads of History, Stories of Resilience

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Abstract: *The handloom industry in Kerala has deep historical roots, dating back to ancient times when weaving was a household activity and a hereditary occupation. The state of Kerala is known for its five primary regions that specialize in handwoven textiles, which include Balaramapuram, Chendamangalam, Kuthampully, Kannur, and Kasaragod. The enchanting village of Chendamangalam, also called Chennamangalam, is situated 30 kilometers away from the Ernakulam district and is particularly renowned for its weaving traditions. For a long time, talented artisans in Chendamangalam have been producing exquisite fabrics. However, the handloom business in Chendamangalam has encountered many difficulties throughout the years, despite its rich heritage and profound cultural value. Economic pressures, synthetic fabrics, a shrinking labor force, and environmental factors-particularly the effect of flooding on the supply of raw materials- are the main challenges. Despite these challenges, the devastating 2018 floods and Covid-19 pandemic led to innovation and renewal. Along with destruction, it created a strong sense of unity that inspired projects like the Shayya Bed and Chekutty dolls, blending tradition with innovation and strengthening the Chendamangalam handloom industry. This article discusses the history of Chendamangalam handloom, the impact of the floods, and the revival efforts that followed.*

Keywords: Handloom, Industry, Heritage, Resilience, Artisans, Craftsmanship

1. Introduction

The Handloom Textiles constitute a timeless facet of the rich cultural heritage of India. India has a long tradition in weaving, particularly in hand weaving. We are moving through different diversity and Handloom is one of the cultural heritages of our country. With its uniqueness and peculiar design, handloom products are well known across the world. Since Handloom sector kept its rich cultural heritage, it had always found a dominant role in the Indian textile industry. As most of the weaver's societies were situating in rural area, it has major role in improving the livelihood of rural people as well as eradicating poverty in the area. After British capture of India, they took up and nurtured the handloom industry for their interests. However, the monopoly ended in the 18th century and since the 19th century the English people started mechanically producing fabrics in their land.

The handloom industry in Kerala is a vibrant and integral part of the state's cultural, social, and economic heritage. Early references to weaving in Kerala can be found in ancient Tamil and Sanskrit literature, indicating the industry's long-standing significance. The industry flourished under the patronage of local rulers and was influenced by trade interactions with foreign merchants, including Arabs, Chinese, and Europeans. The arrival of colonial powers, particularly the British, brought both challenges and opportunities, as the introduction of machinemade textiles disrupted traditional practices but also spurred innovation and adaptation.

The Chendamangalam handloom industry is a traditional weaving sector located in the village of Chendamangalam in Ernakulam district in Kerala, India. This region is renowned for its rich heritage of handloom textiles, particularly known

for producing high-quality cotton and silk fabrics. The industry has a long-standing history and is an integral part of the local culture and economy. The industry emphasizes sustainable practices. The Handloom weaving in Chendamangalam is not just an economic activity, it is also a significant cultural practice. The textiles produced are often used in local festivals, ceremonies, and daily wear, reflecting the rich heritage of Kerala. Its focus on traditional craftsmanship and sustainable practices makes it unique in the textile sector.

Chendamangalam is not only known for its handloom textiles but also for its unique crafts, including Chekutty dolls and Shayya beds. Both of these products reflect the rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship of the region. Chekutty dolls originated in the Chendamangalam region and have become a symbol of Kerala's traditional craft. They are often made by local artisans, primarily from cloth scraps and other materials. The Chekutty doll has gained popularity as a symbol of resilience and creativity, especially during times when the local community faced economic challenges by flood in 2018. They were initially made by women as a means of livelihood. The dolls are often made from recycled materials, promoting sustainability and eco-friendliness in crafting. Shayya beds are traditional wooden cots that are handcrafted by artisans in Chendamangalam. They are known for their sturdy construction and intricate designs. Both Chekutty dolls and Shayya beds exemplify the rich artistic traditions of Chendamangalam. They highlight the community's commitment to preserving cultural heritage while adapting to modern market demands. The objectives of the study are to trace the historical importance of the Chendamangalam handloom industry within the broader context of Kerala's handloom sector, and to study the major problems faced by

weavers in the Chendamangalam handloom industry. The study also aims to analyze the impact of the 2018 Kerala floods on the Chendamangalam handloom industry and to assess the measures taken for its subsequent revival. Finally, it seeks to identify the successful strategies adopted for empowering artisans engaged in the Chendamangalam handloom industry.

2. Literature Survey

- 1) KKN Kurup's (2008) *India Journal of Traditional Knowledge* Vol. 7 provides an insightful overview of the traditional handloom industry in Kerala, emphasizing its cultural significance and economic potential. The article discusses various aspects such as the types of fabrics produced, traditional weaving techniques, and the socio-cultural implications of handloom weaving. The article emphasizes the role of government policies and initiatives aimed at promoting handloom products, as well as the challenges faced by artisans, including competition from power looms and changing consumer preferences.
- 2) Dr.Dharam Chand Jain, Miss Ritu Gera (2017) conducted *An Analytical Study of Handloom Industry of India*. Their study makes an overview of handloom industry and the problems related to production and manufacturing units. They are the opinion that weavers should be aware about the schemes so that they can avail the benefits from the government and various agencies. They also suggest that proper training and education regarding the new technologies of production should be provided to the employees.
- 3) P.V Sree Vyshnavi and Suja S Nair (2017) conducted a study on *Handloom Sector in India: A Literature Review of Government Reports*. They suggest that here is a need to increase the exports of handkerchiefs, dhoti, lungis, woven fabrics and terry fabrics. The government schemes and initiatives should be properly implemented and audited. India handloom brand promotions, technological up gradation and E-commerce should be used as marketing strategies.

3. Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is qualitative and interdisciplinary combining historical studies and disaster studies to examine the resilience of Chendamangalam. Primary data have been collected through archival sources including government records, historical documents and reports related to floods. Oral histories and interviews with local residents, artisans and community leaders were also conducted. Survey method was also adopted in the Chendamangalam handloom industry. Secondary data includes Literary sources like published books, newspapers, articles, documentaries, government reports, journals etc were used. Web sources were also collected using internet access.

4. Problem Definition

Chendamangalam, located in the Ernakulam region is one of Kerala's major producers of superior fabric. Chendamangalam weavers specialize in crafting authentic Kerala clothes, from the classic "set-mundu" and *kasavu* sarees for weddings to everyday essentials like the traditional bath towel, "thorthu."etc. Since the 17th century, the town developed as a center for craftsmanship, mainly among the Devang Chettiar people, serving as the foundation for handloom arts. These textiles are manufactured by handloom weavers, who require a high level of expertise and patience. It begins with the precise spinning of thread from raw cotton or silk fibers. The use of current weaving machinery and traditional weaving methods ensures the preservation of Chendamangalam 's unique handloom traditions. The *Paliam* family, prominent ministers to the Kings of Cochin, provided support to the weavers of the *Devanga* Chettiar community. The *Devanga* community, spread across the Madras Presidency, consists of weavers who speak *Canaree* or Telugu. Their skill is in creating silk-bordered sarees for women that are entirely made of cotton. They are referred to by various titles, including "Dendra," "Dera," "Sedan," and "Seniyan," all meaning "great men." In Coimbatore, they are called Settukkaran, or economic individuals. There are presently stylized versions of both modern and ancient traditional themes. Narrow borders that run parallel to the wide *kasavu* border are frequently woven in the phuliyilakara design (tamarind leaf) for men's clothing, such as dhotis. Additionally, an extra-waft cross-border called "chuttikara" or "kattikara" runs parallel to the *Kasavu* border and along its breadth. In the past, the main body of the saree and its borders were mostly colored in primary colors, such as red, yellow, and blue, using solely natural dyes. However, synthetic colors, primarily vat dyes, are being employed in addition to these natural pigments. This adds a variety of hues and tones to the outfit.

A unique feature of the chendamangalam handloom sector is that 91per cent of women produces almost 60 per cent of women products. At present, the Handloom industry is declining which has directly affected the women workers of this industry. Their work participation has increased as well as the increase in per day working hours has resultant more health issues, especially about physical problems. The present study has highlighted the work participation and socio-economic condition of weavers of Chendamangalam handloom society.

Since the 1960s, the power loom business has grown and low-cost goods have penetrated the market, particularly in rural areas. This has led to fierce rivalry for handlooms. The growing costs of cotton yarn and dyes made handlooms vulnerable. This was mostly impacted by independent weavers and small master-weavers-cum-traders who owned few looms and employed wage workers. The displacement of individual weavers resulted in the establishment of urban power looms and handloom facilities run by master weavers.

Handloom co-operatives, a significant segment of weavers, have been impacted by vested interests, political influence, bureaucratic tendencies, and corruption. Their ineffectiveness in ensuring regular raw material supply and delayed wage payments has led to the average weaver preferring working for master-weavers.

The Chendamangalam handloom industry, known for its rich heritage and unique weaving techniques in Kerala, faces several challenges that impact its sustainability and growth. With the rise of mass-produced textiles and fast fashion, there has been a significant decline in demand for handloom products. Limited access to modern technology and equipment were another issue.

Weavers often face difficulties in accessing credit and financial support. The handloom sector is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters. Covid pandemic, flood in 2018 created several challenges.

The coming of the Powerloom

The powerloom transformed textile manufacturing by improving productivity and lowering labor expenses. This enabled producers to fulfill the growing demand for textiles in India and elsewhere. The fast commercialization of the power loom business in the mid-twentieth century caused substantial changes in the textile market. While the power loom improved productivity, it also introduced new issues that impacted traditional handloom weaving communities such as Chendamangalam.

Loss of employment

The power loom's efficiency led to fewer workers needed for production, impacting handloom weavers in Chendamangalam. Many workers lost their jobs or had to shift to other occupations, making traditional knowledge and skills less relevant due to industrial machinery's faster and cheaper tasks. The rise of powerlooms in Chendamangalam led to the erosion of traditional weaving skills, as handloom weavers' intricate techniques became less practiced and, in some cases, lost, causing younger generations to abandon the handloom tradition for more stable income.

Economic Challenges

Powerloom-made fabrics replaced traditional handwoven textiles due to cheaper alternatives. Chendamangalam's handloom products, despite their superior craftsmanship, were expensive, making it difficult for weavers to compete. As production costs increased and scaled down, the economic viability of Chendamangalam's handloom weaving declined.

Lack of Technology

The primary necessity for industry development is continuous technical advancement. Traditional weaving processes are widely used by handloom weavers, with no use of technology to make the handloom cloth more durable while remaining timeless and appealing to consumers due to its low cost-competitiveness. The looms used in the production of handloom units are worn out and unproductive, thus handloom

weavers must purchase new looms while maintaining the old ones.

Production related Problems

The handloom industry faces a myriad of challenges that affect its production capabilities and threaten its viability as a source of livelihood for many artisans. Production related challenges encompass competition from mechanized manufacturing, insufficient wages, limited financial backing, and obstacles in obtaining raw materials. Other significant issues include obsolete technology, low productivity levels, and a lack of adequate research and development efforts.

High cost and scarcity of raw materials

The price of yarn has fluctuated in recent years due to the significant fluctuations in cotton prices. Low levels of local production combined with an increase in exports have occasionally resulted in a shortage of cotton in the country. As a result, domestic cotton prices have increased. This puts the weavers in a difficult situation where they must sacrifice profitability in order to maintain capacity utilization. The ineffectiveness of co-operatives in ensuring regular raw material supply has forced average weavers to work in other sectors, rendering one of the five handloom units of the Chendamangalam handloom cooperative society non-functional.

Labour Shortage

The chendamangalam handloom sector is facing a labour shortage due to the low wages and irregular sales of younger generations. These weavers are seeking better lifestyles and employment opportunities outside Kerala, leading to a displacement of existing men to shop assistance and women to beedi making and tailoring. This has resulted in a more attractive skilled handloom weaving profession due to low wages and ongoing insecurity.

Financial Crises

Many handloom units struggle to implement basic marketing strategies due to insufficient resources. Many of them are dealing with a multitude of issues. By addressing current issues and changing the marketing culture, the handloom market can increase product sales and demand, leading to increased marketing challenges and raw material shortages. The shifting nature of yarn pricing caused tremendous suffering for handloom weavers. The handloom cooperative sector refused to continue manufacturing, leaving the weavers unemployed and pushing them to famine.

Finance is crucial for human activities, but irregular payment of dues, lack of rebate assistance for weaving accessories, and high interest rates by financial institutions are significant financial issues. Government subsidies are also lacking, and banks are unwilling to lend to the handloom sector, with some charging high interest rates.

Environmental Challenges

The handloom industry in Chendamangalam faces environmental challenges, including a shortage of raw

materials like cotton and silk. As demand for handloom items decreases, farming becomes more challenging, making it difficult to source high-quality fibers. Climate change's increasing frequency of erratic rainfall, floods, and droughts further disrupts the supply chain, making it even more challenging for weavers to obtain necessary materials.

Impact of 2018 Floods

The 2018 Kerala floods devastated Chendamangalam, home to famous handloom weavers, wreaking havoc across the state. Floodwaters swamped homes, wrecked crops, and badly damaged handloom equipment, hurting hundreds of families that rely on weaving for a living. Weavers suffered considerable losses since raw materials such as cotton, zari, and thread were ruined, and loom workshops were destroyed or submerged. The floods devastated the community's social fabric, leaving families fighting to recover.

Chendamangalam, a small town in North Paravur, faces the risk of losing its centuries-old handloom textiles tradition due to floods. The loss for five societies amounts to approximately Rs 15 crore, potentially ending the craft, which recently gained the Geographic Indication (GI) tag. However, the weaving cluster faced a significant setback in 2018 due to the terrible floods in Kerala. The water devastated the weavers' homes and factories, knocking down centuries-old wooden looms, ruining fabric worth lakhs of rupees, and effectively halting their livelihoods. The weavers suffered a large financial loss.

Covid-19 Pandemic

The handloom weaving community of Chendamangalam, Kerala, India, has faced significant challenges recently, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating 2018 floods. The community has been profoundly affected by these events, which have uprooted their homes, livelihoods, and the spirit of their ancient trade.

In 2020, the COVID-19-induced lockdown significantly hampered operations. The Onam and Vishu festivals are significant to this weaving community; handloom stock sales typically make up 60% and 40% of total sales, respectively. Holiday clothing sales were zero during the 2020 lockdown, which made it extremely challenging to get raw materials.

5. Results and Future Scope

Revival of Chendamangalam Industry

Numerous initiatives were launched in the wake of the floods to support Chendamangalam weavers and revive the handloom industry. One such initiative was "Care 4 Chendamangalam," a collaborative endeavor aimed at providing urgent and long-term assistance to the affected weavers. In order to enable the artisans to return to their job, this effort fixed damaged looms, supplied the necessary materials, and gave cash.

In addition to these neighborhood-based projects, the government stepped in to support the Chendamangalam handloom industry. Numerous financial assistance programs

and initiatives were created to help rebuild the destroyed infrastructure and give the weavers the means to carry on with their craft. The handloom industry in Chendamangalam has been revitalized via collaboration between the government, non-governmental organizations, and local populations.

Chekutty Dolls

The "Chekutty dolls" project was another creative endeavour that attracted a lot of interest. These handmade dolls were created using soiled and damaged fabrics that were saved from the floods, and they were spearheaded by social entrepreneurs Lakshmi Menon and Gopinath Parayil. The Chekutty dolls became a symbol of optimism and resiliency, demonstrating the community's capacity to turn hardship into opportunity, in addition to raising money for the weavers.

The Chekutty Dolls were created by young entrepreneurs and artisans using fabric remnants from Chendamangalam's Kasavu sarees. They became a symbol of Kerala's revival after floods, attracting global support. The dolls showcased Chendamangalam weavers' craftsmanship and promoted sustainable fashion. They also served as a source of income and emotional healing, uniting the community and fostering solidarity.

Shayya Beds

Shayya beds, handcrafted textiles made from flood-affected fabrics, were a key initiative in the revival of Chendamangalam handlooms post-flood. Shayya beds a term derived from the concept of "upcycling," aimed to restore damaged fabrics into new products like home décor and accessories. This initiative encouraged artisans to use innovative techniques like patchwork and embellishment, contributing to a sustainable fashion industry and reducing waste.

Bedrolls, called 'Shayya', are made from scrap PPE from Kerala tailoring units. They are made by braiding leftover pieces, joining them like cloth mats, and require 35 meters of braids to create one bedroll.

Supporting Agencies

The government stepped in to support the handloom industry in Chendamangalam. Numerous financial assistance programs and initiatives were created to help rebuild the destroyed infrastructure and give the weavers the means to carry on with their craft. The handloom industry in Chendamangalam has been revitalized via collaboration between the government, non-governmental organizations, and local populations. Thanks to everyone's united efforts, the Chendamangalam handloom industry has rebounded and is flourishing, providing a steady income for the weavers and safeguarding a significant portion of Kerala's cultural heritage. NABARD and Chendamangalam weavers have worked together to address unpaid salaries and low sales during the pandemic. They developed Coop Loom, an online store for buying handloom goods, and sponsored an exhibition during the shutdown in March 2021, leading to the sale of ₹15 lakhs worth of stock in three days. NABARD also introduced the

"cooploom" e-commerce platform for handloom cooperatives at the second edition of Chela 2022, which was also successful. The Chendamangalam handloom cluster has benefited from NABARD's financial support, infrastructural development, capacity building, marketing, promotion, and policy lobbying. They provided ₹3.30 lakhs for development projects and supported banks in providing loans to weavers.

6. Conclusion

The Kerala handloom industry stands as a vibrant testament to the state's rich cultural heritage and artisanal craftsmanship. It not only provides livelihood to thousands of weavers and artisans but also plays a crucial role in preserving traditional techniques and promoting sustainable practices. By investing in skill development and marketing strategies, the industry can enhance its visibility and reach a broader audience. It also ensures that its rich textile heritage is preserved for future generations.

The Chekutty dolls and Shayya beds are emblematic of Chendamangalam's rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship. Chekutty dolls reflect the creativity and resilience of local artisans, serving as both charming decorative items and symbols of sustainability through their use of recycled materials. Chekutty dolls made from damaged cloth are more than just artistic creations; they represent a powerful narrative of resilience, creativity, and cultural identity in Kerala. They embody the spirit of the community, showcasing traditional craftsmanship while also adapting to contemporary market trends. Shayya beds, on the other hand, represent the enduring traditions of Kerala's furniture-making. Together, these crafts not only contribute to the local economy but also promote a deeper appreciation for Kerala's artistic heritage. By transforming what was once considered waste into beautiful art, artisans not only celebrate their heritage but also inspire hope and renewal in the face of adversity. These dolls stand as a testament to the strength of the human spirit and the importance of community in overcoming challenges.

7. Future Scope

The study points toward significant future research possibilities with special emphasis on the Chendamangalam handloom industry as the core of resilience and recovery. Future studies may critically examine the sustainability and growth prospects of the handloom sector, focusing on the impact of the GI tag on market expansion, branding, and protection of traditional knowledge. There is ample scope to analyse livelihood security, women's participation, skill transmission, and cooperative structures within the industry, as well as challenges such as competition from power looms, declining youth participation, and fluctuating raw material costs. Research may also explore the role of state policies, design innovation, digital platforms, and heritage-based tourism in revitalizing the industry. Comparative and policy-oriented studies can further highlight the handloom industry's potential as a model for heritage-led, community-driven, and sustainable economic development in post-disaster contexts.

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