

Textile Manufacture and Trade on the Coromandel Coast

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ABSTRACT

Textile is an important commodity produced from the early historic period in Southern India. In the early historic period, different types of textiles were produced in Southern India as revealed by the textual sources. In the archaeological context, a few excavated brick structures at Arikamedu have been identified as dyeing vats and evidence of spindle whorls have been recovered from the early historic context. In the medieval period, literature, paintings, and inscriptions offer valuable information on textile production. The communities of weavers known as *Kaikkolars*, *Pattasalins*, and *Saurashtrians* are referred to the medieval inscriptions. In the later medieval period, weavers from Saurashtra in Gujarat and other parts of India moved towards the Coromandel Coast. The colonial period documents the long-distance textile trade of the Coromandel Coast. The weaver communities thrive in certain parts of South India even today indicating historical continuity. The paper presents the research problem related to the history of textile manufacture and the craft groups, long-distance trade in textiles in the Indian Ocean Region, in the context of the Coromandel Coast using diverse sources.

Keywords: *Textile, Coromandel Coast, Sangam literature, Weaving communities.*

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Map of the Coromandel Coast with important sites

Figure 2: Spindle-whorls from Pattanam

1. INTRODUCTION

Textile is an important cultural material fabricated and used by humans as part of their cultural adaptation and creative and innovative solution, at least from the Iron Age-Early Historic period in south India. While a section of the population used clothes made of various fibres, some of the people were using leaf-dresses, as evidenced by the literature and ethnographic accounts. References to varieties of textiles are found in the early Tamil texts datable to the early centuries of the Common Era. Material vestiges for textile production also occur at a few archaeological sites. Among the many commodities that gave importance to the trade activities of the Coromandel Coast, textile occupies a prominent place. The Coromandel Coast along with its hinterland has been one of the major centres of textile production in India and trade for more than two millennia. The Coromandel Coast extends from southern part of Andhra Pradesh to northern part of Tamil Nadu. This paper presents the importance of textile production and trade on the southern Coromandel Coast in the context of the Indian Ocean till the medieval period.

2. PREVIOUS WORK

The textile of Tamil Nadu, including the Coromandel region, has been the focus of investigations from the twentieth century. Vijaya Ramasamy undertook studies on textile production and trade during the medieval

period (Ramaswamy 1985, 294–325; Ramasamy 2006, 1-10; 2014, 91-121). Craft production in the early historical context has been studied by Kelly (2009, 1-14). The textile industry of the early historic- Sangam Age has been investigated based on literary references by Athiyaman and Athithan (2018, 41-50). Several studies are on textile production and trade during the colonial period (Georgia 1990, 332–37; Stephen 2014, 1-10), which is not the focus of the current paper. The nature of textile production in the early historic and medieval periods remains obscure due to the lack of detailed narrative accounts. The research problem concerning the ancient textile industry needs to focus on the diverse sources of fibres, plant domestication, technological processes, and social and economic contexts of production, trade, and consumption.

3. TEXTILE PRODUCTION ON THE COROMANDEL COAST

Coromandel Coast has been a centre of textile production at least from the early historic period, ca.500 BCE (Figure 1). Diverse sources attest to the importance of the Coromandel Coast in textile manufacture in the ancient and medieval periods, and the major resources are discussed below.

3.1. Textile Evidence from Archaeology

Archaeological evidence for textile production in Tamil Nadu has been mainly in the form of spindle-whorls, traces of drapery in terracotta images, sculptures, and paintings, rare occurrences of textile, fibres and seeds, and architectural features of dyeing-vat and the living traditions.

Terracotta spindle-whorls are the most abundantly occurring artefacts from the archaeological sites datable from the early historic to the medieval periods (ca.500 BCE to 1500 CE). Spindle-whorls were used for making thread out of cotton fibre. Spindle-whorls inserted with iron rods have been found intact at Kodumanal (Rajan 1996, 72-86), and at Arikamedu (Begley and Sidebotham 2004, 59), and at several other sites, they are found without any iron rods. They are identified as areca-nut beads sometimes. At Arikamedu report, they are mentioned as terracotta objects (Wheeler et al 1946, 101). The evidence from Kodumanal mentioned above and from Pattanam, where about 60 terracotta spindle-whorls have been reported (Cherian 2015, 46), clearly prove the function of spindle-whorls in textile production (Figure 2).

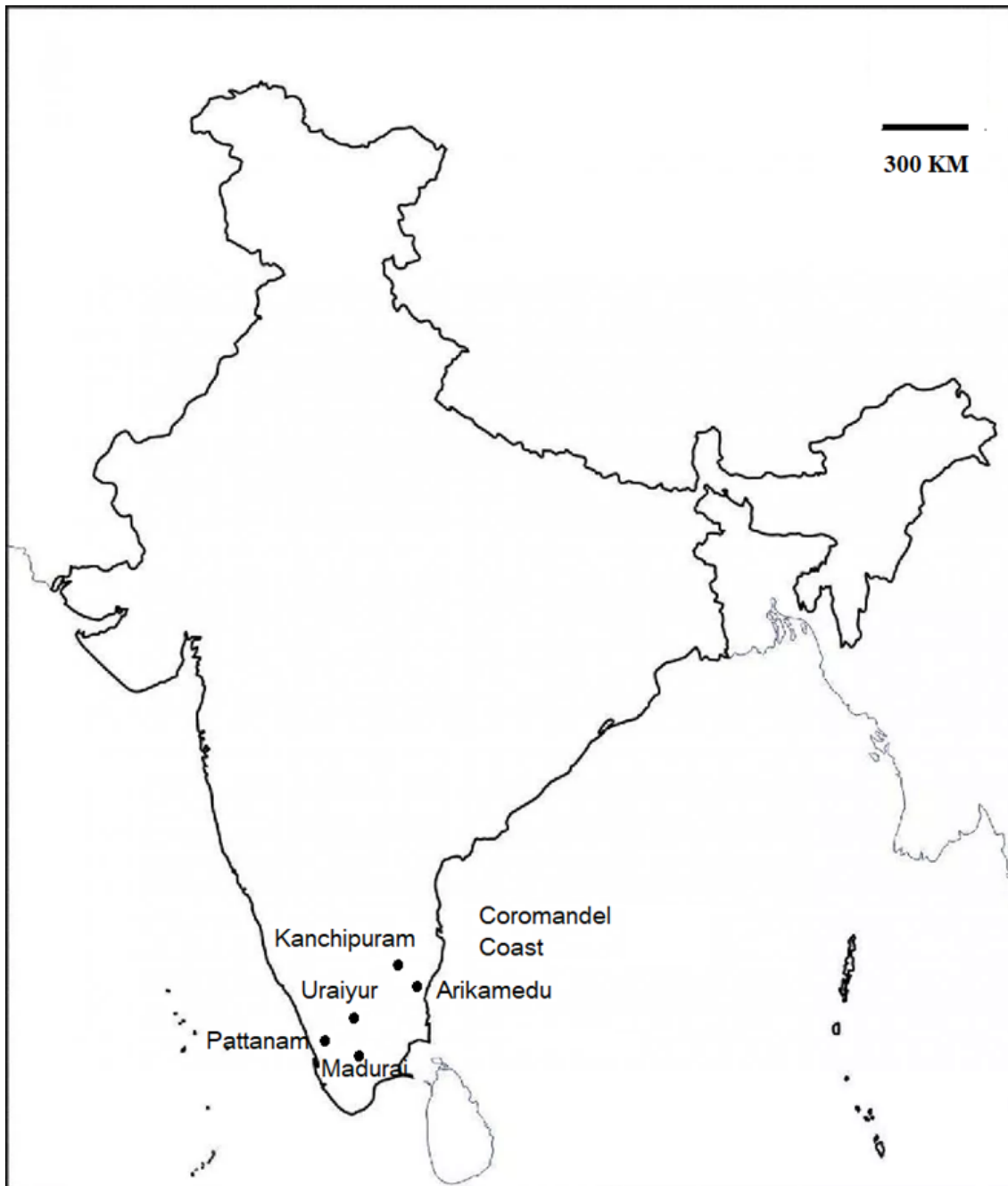


Figure 1: Map of the Coromandel Coast with important sites (Source: Selvakumar)



Figure 2: Spindle-whorls from Pattanam (Source: Kerala Council of Historical Research)

For the actual textile fabric, very limited evidence has been identified from the archaeological context. A piece of woven cotton has been identified at Kodumanal near Erode in Tamil Nadu in an Early Historic context (Rajan 1996, 72-86). A cotton thread preserved in clay has been found at Pattanam in Kerala (Chandran 2015, 29). Textile fabric is reportedly found at Adichanallur (Badhreenath 2021, 6), although full details are not available. Interestingly, textile or fabric impression has been found on the appliqué ceramic decorations from Arikamedu (Begley 2004, 211). A thin thread of gold (*zari* used in textiles) has been found at Pattanam in Kerala in an Early Historic context (Cherian and Jaya Menon 2015, 108). This evidence attests to the textile legacy of ancient Tamizhagam.

Arikamedu has produced evidence for textile production in the form of dyeing vats built of bricks and drainages indicating water usage (Wheeler et al. 1946, 30-34), besides spindle-whorls (Begley and Sidebotham 2004, 59). At Uraiyur near Tiruchirappalli, identified as the capital city of the Sangam Cholas, the excavators have identified a structure as a dyeing vat, based on the similarity with that of a structure found in Arikamedu by Mortimer Wheeler. The dyeing vat was found at a depth of about 235 cm (seven feet and ten inches). A square chamber and a rectangular chamber were found. Both chambers had seven courses of bricks. Bricks measure 43 cm x 22 cm x 7.5 cm (17" x 9" x 3"). The square chamber had a paved-flooring, while the rectangular chamber's floor was covered with earth. The city of Uraiyur is famous for textile production in the Sangam Age as well as in the modern period (Raman 1988, 21-22).

Many of the hero-stones and sculptures reveal the clothes of various classes of people of the medieval period. Evidence of textiles is also found in the form of terracotta images from archaeological sites. An image of a woman found on a pottery sherd as appliqué design from the Adichanallur excavation suggests that the woman is depicted as wearing a dress (Badhreenath 2021, 65). The paintings from Pallavas and Cholas of Thanjavur and those of Vijayanagar illustrate textiles worn by humans as well as deities.

Archaeological evidence of Cotton is reported from the Southern Neolithic Culture, dated between 3,000 BCE and 1200 CE. *Gossypium cf. arboreum* L. has been identified from Hallur (Fuller et al. 2004, 123). Since the crops of the Southern Neolithic culture continued to be cultivated in the Iron Age, it is safe to

assume that *Gossypium* was cultivated in Tamizhagam in the Iron Age. Furthermore, cotton seeds have been found at the site of Kodumanal, Perur, and Mangudi in the Early Historic contexts (Fuller 2004, 5-6).

3.2. Textiles in Early Tamil Literature

Tamil Sangam literature dated between 300 BCE and 300 CE have references to the textiles used by the ancient Tamil people along with the trade activities. The main raw material for textiles was cotton in ancient Tamizhagam (Sasivalli 1989, 77). Cotton derives from the cotton plant, and also from the silk cotton tree. The *Purananuru* 299 mentions the settlements with cotton plants or cotton trees (*Bombax malabaricum*) as boundaries ('*parutti veli seerur*').

Purananuru 326 describes the process of removing the seed and the dust from the raw cotton. To remove the cotton from its seed, the ancient Tamils used a type of bow as known from *Akananuru* 133 and *Narrinai* 247.

Interestingly, it was usually the women who spin the cotton into a thread as revealed by the textual references. There are also references that the widowed women performed this task. They are called *Parutti Pendar* (Cotton Women). *Purananuru* 125 refers to the untangled cotton thread made by the *Parutti Pendar*. *Narrinai* 353 refers to the *parutti pendar*, as women who work for textile production at night with the help of a lamp.

Perhaps men used the threads spun by women to weave intricate cloth. *Purananuru* (383) describes the cloth as fine as the thin inner layer of the bamboo plant. The *Porunaarrupadai* (80-84) describes the torn cloth of the poor bard who was given a new cloth as fine as the skin of a snake, with floral designs. The fine cloth was called *tukil* in Tamil.

A *Purananuru* poem (145) refers to *pataam*, a type of cloth given by the chief Pegan to a peacock. It was perhaps a silk shawl. *Cirupanarrupatai* 85 mentions *kalingam*, as a type of cloth given by a king Pegan to a peacock. *Kalingam* could be a thick material probably like a modern-day shawl or upper garment. This incident indicates the extreme kindness of the chief.

Poetess Auvaiyar in *Purananuru* 392 compares the old, torn dress of the bard with that of the root of the duckweed spread in a well. The *Purananuru* poem 398 graphically describes the cloth as fine as smoke worn by the king. *Purananuru* 400 refers to the old and torn clothes worn by the poor bards who sought gift of fine and soft clothes decorated with floral motifs.

Perumpanarrupadai 468 to 470 refers to the extremely thin cloth (*tukil*) which was as fine as milky-coloured smoke being given as a gift to the bards by the king. *Akananuru* song 11 describes the fine sand as a cloth spread out indicating the fineness.

The Sangam literature refers to clothes made of tree leaves (*Akananuru* 7). It is not implausible to suggest that leaf dresses are used by people who could not afford cotton dresses.

Narrinai 21 talks about the lower garments (*kachchai*) worn on the waist by soldiers. Apart from these clothes, the people would have worn stitched dresses as known from the reference in *Perumpanarrupatai* 69-71. The word *puttagam* mentioned in *Narrinai* 12:17 probably indicates a saree-like clothe.

Nedunalvadai, describes a bed as adorned with:

‘... pearls on fine threads strung
That look like lattice work....
On this, a mattress made of pure white down
Of mated swan is placed and pillows too
Above all this a sheet washed white and starched’ (Chelliah 1946, 132).

In *Purananuru* 393, a bard compared his old and torn dress with that of a tongue of a snake that laid new eggs and asked the king to give him a new garment that folds like the petals of *pakandrai* (*Crotalaria verrucosa*) flowers. In the same poem, poet Nalliraiyinar describes the pleated dress which looked like the petals of a flower.

The white cotton clothes were dyed with colours as known from the Sangam poems. *Kalitokai* (72.1) describes a blue-coloured cloth, while *Narrinai* 33 talks about red-coloured cloth. The colouring of the garments is further attested by the presence of dyeing-vats in excavations at Arikamedu and Uraiyur.

These poetic references suggest that by the early historic and early medieval periods, textile production became common in south India. However, it appears that only from the Late Medieval period, i.e., from the thirteenth century CE, textile use became more common.

3.3. Textiles in Foreign Literature

The *Periplus of Erythrean Sea*, while describing the important port cities in India, talks about ports on the western coast and it describes cotton and silk clothes as important exports along with spices. It refers to an inland town called Argaru which is known for muslin, called *Argaritic* (Schoff 1912, 46). Italian traveller Marco Polo talks about the fine clothes produced on the Coromandel Coast (Eraly 2011, 208). These accounts do suggest the prosperous textile traditions of the Coromandel Coast.

3.4. Communities of Textile Manufacture from Medieval Inscriptions

While the early texts do not refer to any specialised communities involved in textile production, medieval inscriptions clearly refer to textile-weaving communities. Several communities specialised in textiles are discussed in the inscriptions and a few of the groups still survive as caste groups in Tamil Nadu. They are Kaikkolars, Pattasalins, Padmasalins and Devangars. The inscriptions refer to the tax on textiles as *tari irai* (tax on looms) from the Pallava times (Hall 1983, 113; SII 22, 166).

3.4.1. Kaikkolars

Kaikkolar is a caste group of weavers with the title Mudaliyar living in many parts of Tamil Nadu and more particularly on the Coromandel Coast. They are also known as Sengunthar (Frasca 1975, 1119-1123). They

seem to have been associated with the Chola army and the Chola inscriptions refer to *Terinja Kaikkolar* (Heitzman 1997, 118), which was an army wing.

An inscription from Tiruppazahanam refers to one Karrali Battalakan, a member of the regiment *Arumolideva-terinja Kaikkolar*, who offered a donation to feed the Brahmanas, the priestly class (SII 19, 29). Another Chola inscription refers to Sankayan Orri, who was a member of the regiment *Adityapanma-terinda-Kaikkolar* (SII 19, 25). A Chola inscription refers to *Karikala-Chola-terinja Kaikkolar* regiment (SII 19, 27). An inscription from Valikandapuram dated 1227 CE refers to *Kaikkolar* as part of the Pathinen Vishayam merchant guild (Karashima 2012, 15). It appears that the Kaikkolars were employed in the army of the Cholas and were also weavers. They were very active textile manufacturers till the early twentieth century CE. The *Kaikkolar* weavers seem to have attained social mobility and received a number of privileges during the time of the Vijayanagar, which reveals the growing importance of craft production in the economy (Sinopoli 2003, 278). Although it has been often reported that *Kaikkolar* occurs in medieval Tamil inscriptions, a rare Tamil-Brahmi inscription datable to the early historic context from Arikamedu, reads '*Kaikkolar*' (Wheeler et al. 1946, 114) indicating their presence in the early historic period.

3.4.2. Saurashtra / Pattunulkarars

Saurashtra weavers are originally from the Saurashtra region of Gujarat in western India, and they migrated to south India from the time of the Vijayanagara period (Sapovadia 2014, 6-7). A major concentration of this community is found in the Madurai and Kumbakonam regions of Tamil Nadu. It appears that the Indian Ocean interactions and the development of mercantile activities on the Coromandel Coast have induced the migrations of Saurashtra craft groups (Ramasamy 2014, 102-103; Selvakumar and Hauser 2023, *in press*).

3.4.3. Devanga Chettiyars

Devanga Chettiyars are Kannada-speaking weavers found in various parts of India (Haridarshan 2021, 2). They seem to have migrated to the Tamil region during the Vijayanagara period (Palat 1986, 137). They were associated with silk weaving and continue to be involved in the production of textiles even to this day to a limited degree.

3.4.4. Pattasalins and Padmasalins

Pattusali or *Pattasalins* are silk-weaving communities of south India, and they are from the Andhra region and spoke Telugu (Swarnalatha 2005, 30-31). *Padmasalins* were also weavers of Andhra region specialised in cotton weaving (Swarnalatha 2005, 30-31). The weaving communities are referred to in the Madras Museum Copper plates of the Chola king Uttama Chola. It records the presence of *Pattasalins* in Kanchipuram, referred to as Kachipedu. The Sanskrit part of the inscriptions refers to these *Pattasalins* living in the areas of Kanchipuram such as Karuvulan-pati, Kamasahappati, Atimanappati, and Erruvalichcheri. This suggests that the *Pattasalins* were active as early as the tenth century in the Chola regions (SII 3, 128).

4. COROMANDEL COAST AND THE INDIAN OCEAN TRADE

The active participation of the Tamil region in the Indian Ocean trade seems to have begun in the early historic period. The *Periplus* reports the export of silk from the port of Muziris and the Sangam Tamil texts report different kinds of clothes including very fine fabrics. It is reasonable to assume that certain varieties of clothes were exported from the Coromandel Coast in the early historic period. The contextual evidence of pepper found in Berenike and the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions from Egypt and Oman indirectly point towards such a possibility. Berenike has procured cotton textiles possibly from Gujarat (Wild, 2014, 91). The reference to *Argartic* as a type of cloth exported from the east coast mentioned in the *Periplus Marei Erythrea* along with the spindle whorls and the dyeing vat from Uraiyur and Arikamedu may indicate the export of textile from the Coromandel Coast to the Indian Ocean regions.

In the early medieval context, under the Pallavas, weaving gained importance and some of the Pallava sculptural images and paintings reveal the clothes. Kanchipuram which is famous for silk became an important centre of weaving (Hall 1983, 189). The Pallavas had strong connections with Southeast Asia and China where textile export could have taken place.

The South Indian merchant guilds were very active in East and Southeast Asia (Dale 2009, 86) and there is a possibility that textiles of the Coromandel region reached East and Southeast Asia through merchant guilds dealing in clothes. The Chola period was well known for the export of cotton textiles (Devare 2009, 179). The textile trade seems to have reached its zenith during the Vijayanagara times.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The survey of the evidence indicates the importance of Tamizhagam and the southern Coromandel coast in textile production. Based on archaeological evidence, it is certain that the textile tradition of this region can be dated to late first millennium BCE. However, the antiquity of tradition could go back further in the Iron Age or even earlier. The region witnessed migration of craftspeople from the early period. The crafts groups of *Kaikkolkars* were the earliest local crafts groups. Silk textile manufacture probably started in the medieval period during the time of the Pallavas. We need more evidence of silk fabric being produced on the Coromandel Coast in the Early Historic period, although the *Periplus* reports the export of silk from southern India. The mid-late Medieval period witnessed monetization and the movement of various groups of textile weavers into the Coromandel Coast. The development of the Indian Ocean markets and long-distance trade coupled with the higher intensity of state formation and the associated developments in the late medieval period induced such migration of craft persons, more particularly, *Pattasalins*, *Padmasalins*, *Suarashtra/Pattunulkarars* and *Devanga Chettiyars*. Thus, Coromandel coast became one of important hubs of commodity production in the Indian Ocean thanks to the long durée of historical process. Further research including excavation and scientific analysis could throw more light on the dynamics of textile production and consumption on the Coromandel Coast.

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