

6TH INTERNATIONAL MSME DAY: CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN WHO WEAVE FOR THE GODS

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ABSTRACT

*In 2017, the United Nations General Assembly designated 27th June as the Micro, Small and Medium sized Enterprises Day. The theme for 2022 is 'Resilience and Rebuilding'. We celebrate this day in India by remembering the toil and hard work put in by the heroes of our economy. A diverse country as ours has, hundreds of stories to offer on businesses and entrepreneurs who stood their ground in tough times. This article traces the history of one such community who believed in themselves and their artform. Padma Saliyars constitutes a hereditary weaving in Tamil Nadu in India. They engage in handloom weaving and identify themselves as the 'producing communities' of high caste. They believe that they once wove for Gods with a thread drawn from the stem of the lotus plant. The origin of their name is a testimony. Padma means lotus and Saliyar is derived from a Sanskrit word meaning weaver. The article studies Aarti Kawlra's book *We who wove with lotus thread* (2018) along with Meena Menon and Uzramma's book *A frayed History* (2017). Both of these texts highlight the silk and cotton handloom weaving sectors of our economy.*

Keywords- *Padma Saliyars; caste; Weaving; Identity; community*

As a young academician, Kawlra engaged with Padma Saliyars of Tamil Nadu as a part of her PhD thesis. The place and the community, during these years, left a lasting mark on her. This book is an extension of her academic paper. Sociological studies deal with a society in circulation with its shifting trends, which keep emerging and transforming. On similar lines, she explores the themes of the book—identity/'identities' and caste. She seeks to gather as much information from the community in 'their own words' and attempts to write an ethnographic account. The heart of the book lies in the staunch rejection of understanding of caste as a battle between brahmins and non-Brahmins. This overshadows communities like Saliyar, who rearticulate their caste occupation in their daily lives. The study of Indian society, with its interesting mix in caste and class structure, and the changes brought by the modern forces of capitalism has been an area of interest for many academicians. How does a community imagine its own identity? How does the hereditary tradition change in contemporary market economies? These are the questions Kawlra asks and investigates, in her book.

WEAVING A NARRATIVE AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Identity, according to Kawlra is shaped within the community and not outside the discourse of caste. This is what she terms as "crystallisation of identities". This book explores handloom weaving in the light of the different systems of value—craft (as opposed to machine) aesthetic, traditional technology, cottage industry and embodied work. She uses the famous Kanchipuram sari, a tradition of Tamil Nadu, as an entry point of her research. The Padma Saliyars claim that they are the 'original' producers of the Kanchipuram sari. This claim is hinged on the narrative of a shared past, a 'myth' written in Bhavanarishi Puranam that the community wove for the divine beings. The importance of this tradition of saris can be understood well through a common adage among weavers: 'One can go to Kanchipuram and survive by pressing one's feet (on the loom)'. Kanchipuram is imagined and valued in this case as a place of self-reliance and sustenance in the face of uncertainties. But the insistence of community's occupation liberates them even more, as it gives them a feeling of being 'on par' with the Brahmins.

This book is what she terms as a 'community biography' and not merely a social history of a caste group. The writing style adopted by her focuses on what community members do and speak. She has been successful in analysing the tradition of caste in today's webbed patterns of nationalism, capitalism and economic development. In doing so, it is the caste and class which are negotiated as a part of the group's identity in the course of everyday.

Padma Saliyar, is a hereditary weaving caste which plays an important role in the development of silk handloom sari industry in Tamil Nadu. The dark ages of colonial era negatively affected the handloom industry in India. The onset of machinery production in mills met with a vehement criticism by Gandhi in those times. Khadi or hand spun cotton cloth, expressed a moral commitment to not succumb to the economic degeneration of the world. As much as Gandhi was pained with the colonial insistence on machines, he was also troubled with the use of silk by upper castes in Tamil Nadu. The growth of silk handloom industry was different from the journey of khadi handloom industry, since the former benefited with the expansion of the sericulture industry in south India. Colonial policies on handloom, at large were based on their own experience—the European textile history and writings. The concepts employed by the Europeans included the 'putting out' system of handicraft manufacture described by Marx and the medieval guild. The prominence of weaving households in south India confirmed their apprehensions and a stark contrast was made between handloom tradition and the modern industry.

Kawlra draws upon the work of Yanagisawa, who wrote on the handloom industry and its market structure in Madras Presidency in early twentieth century. He concluded that it was due to the changing dressing styles among upper classes which created a demand for superior threads like silk and gold. It was accompanied by more social status given to handwoven cloths, as compared to the ones manufactured by machines. The colonisers soon understood that it was no longer possible to compete with high quality silk saris and privileged few handloom techniques, while reaping the monetary gains from them. This trajectory of silk sari production

shows that it expanded outside the institutional settings. It instead drew upon caste and kin networks of handloom organisation.

Despite their commitment and toil to hereditary work, the caste seeks 'OBC' status within the Indian state's affirmative action programme. Handloom weaving is the primary focus of collective petitions for positive discrimination and subsidies. The community is imagined by the author as the leftovers of a 'tradition', which survives through the ignition of cultural nationalism in India. This nationalism thrives on the 'soft power' which includes dance forms like Bharatanatyam and other art forms. The infusion of Gandhi's swadeshi nationalism also forms a part of this imagination of nationalism.

THE CHANGING TIMES: CONTEMPORARY SETUP

As agents of 'rescue and redemption,' designers in the present times serve to reproduce 'the global hierarchy of value,' confining artisanal work within wider structures of power. The inclusion of community's practices within contemporary global regimes of design, development and trade is a theme, which she believes requires further research. Imagining community as a process rather than a fixed vessel is an invitation to appreciate the 'work of community'. It is premised on viewing community for-itself rather in-itself. 'We Who Wove with lotus thread' is a literature 'of a community' and 'about a community'. She ends the book in style with the words of African-American writer James Baldwin, who wrote, 'You've got to tell the world how to treat you. If the world tells you how you are going to be treated, you are in trouble.'

COMPARING WITH THE COTTON INDUSTRY

This book can be better analysed through the lens of Menon and Uzamma (2017), in their *book A frayed history*. They dedicate this book to the farmers and hand weavers of cotton in India, and highlight the developments in the history of a volatile commodity-cotton. The rich history of Indian cotton had overpowered the European fabric market in a manner which aroused fear and anger in the East India company. Through the eyes of Adam Smith, the strategy to which the colonisers resorted to, was a perfect beginning to the 'mercantile system' which raises a 'wealthy and powerful State' by maximising the exports and simultaneously minimising the imports. Though the journey of two commodities— cotton and silk were completely different, it is interesting how Kawlra maintains her focus on the Saliyar community while analysing the commodity (silk). In the case of Menon and Uzamma, they delve into what can be called an 'ethnography of an object'. This insistence on building upon a 'community biography' is seen throughout the book and the author has done justice to her intended objective

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