CHAPTER II
WEAVING COMMUNITIES AND THEIR GUILDS
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Like other occupation groups of Tamil Nadu, the weavers were organised into a number of castes. The caste was the first level of community organisation. The weaver castes present in Tamil Nadu in the nineteenth century were similar to those present in the region in recent times. When describing about the coromandel weaver castes, a Dutch document records that there were Weavers called 'Saliwaars', 'Kykelwaars', and 'Deerewaars'.\(^1\) In modern transcription these were the Salis, Kaikolars and Devangas.\(^2\) The important Weaver Castes in Tamil Nadu in the nineteenth century were Kaikolers, Devangas, Patnulkarans, Saliyans, Sälé and Sedans to whom handloom weaving was generally the sole means of livelihood. There were some sub-castes


among these weaver castes too. Weaver castes might have also been originated by types of cloths in which a particular group of weavers specialised. In Madras, the English report, weavers who distinguished themselves as 'Moree Weavers' and 'Kaingulong Weavers'. Each of these groups maintained their own account books, implying a degree of corporate structure. Generally, the Kaikolars were the weavers of the ordinary coarser variety of cloths. But the Sāle caste weavers were sub-divided into Padma Salis (Lotus Sālēs) and Pattu Sālēs (Silk Sālēs), the latter group specialising in the weaving of silk and fine cotton cloth. It is said that "usually each sub-caste wove a particular type of cloth and could seldom be induced to make any other". It was difficult to effect a change even in the dimensions of the cloths. Only with some difficulty, they could be brought to


alter the dimensions of the cloth they wove. They seem always to have been conservative and very improvident. 6

In addition to the weaver castes, a large number of Vellalas and Panchamas in Tamil Nadu were also engaged in weaving industry though they were not professional weavers. If the farming work was disrupted, they engaged in weaving to earn their livelihood. 7 Thus the demand for labour in the industry was met by the seasonal enterance of agricultural labourers. Moreover it is evident from the surveys conducted in the nineteenth century that the low caste people such as barbers, chucklers, Dhers, and Paraiyas took it as a part time occupation. 8 The entrance of low status non-weaving castes into the handloom industry was a nineteenth century phenomenon. 9 Even the higher castes occasionilly took to weaving, for it was one of the few

8. Letter from Munro, Board of Revenue Proceedings, 21 June 1804.
avocations, the pursuit of which was, not regarded as derogatory to anybody's dignity. We shall analyse the weaving communities one by one, and their socio-economic status in the society.

KAIKOLAR:

The Kaikolars were a large caste of Tamil speaking weavers found in all districts of Tamil Nadu. We hear about them, as a professional caste weavers, as early as from the Sangam age. There is a mention about the Kaikolars in the literatures and inscriptions beginning from the period of Imperial Cholas. The word Kaikolar is derived from Kai (hand), and Kol (Shuttle). This suggests the traditional association of the caste with weaving industry.

The word Kaikolar is the Tamil equivalent of the sanscrit Virabhahu, a mythological hero, from whom the Kaikolars claim descent. The Kaikolars were also known as Sengunthars (red-dagger) in connection with the following legend. "The people of earth, being harassed

11. Ibid.
by padmasuran and other demons, appealed to Siva for help. Siva was enraged against the giants, and sent forth six sparks of fire from his eyes. His wife Parvathi, was frightened, and retired to her chamber, and, in so doing, dropped nine beads from her anklets. Siva converted the beads into as many females, to each of whom was born a hero with full-grown moustaches and a red dagger. These nine heroes, under the leadership of Lord Subramanya, marched in command of a large force, and destroyed padmasura and all the demons. The Followers of Virabhadha, one of the nine heroes, were called as sengunthars, as they had red dagger in their hand during the war with demons, and they were told by Siva to adopt a profession of weaving.\textsuperscript{12}

The Kaikolar community was divided into seventy-two nadus or desams, viz., forty-four mel (Western) and twenty eight Kil (Eastern) nadus.\textsuperscript{13} All these nadus were subjected to the authority of four thisai nadus, and these in turn were controlled by the Mahanadu at Conjeevaram.


The Thisai nadas were (1) Sivapuram (Walajahbad), east of Conjeevaram, where Kanatchiamman is said to have placed Nandi as a guard; (2) Thondipuram to the north, where Thondi Vinayagar was stationed; (3) Virinjipuram to the West, guarded by Subramanya; (4) Sholingipuram to the South, watched over by Bairava. Each of the seventy-two nadas was sub-divided into Kilaigramams, (branch villages), Perur (big) and Sithur (little) gramams. Each nada had a committee consisted of (1) Periathanakaran, (2) Nattamaikaran, (3) 12 Kariakarans and (4) Sangudi. In Tamil works relating to the Kaikolar caste, Conjeevaram is said to be the Mahanadu and Mahanattan was the head of the Kaikolars or Sengunthar caste. The office of Mahanattan was an hereditary one and he was always respected by the Kaikolars. He often settled the disputes of his caste people with the assistance of two subordinates called Sengili or Gramani and Ural. But if the dispute was complicated one, he was assisted by nine subordinates.

The Kaikolars had their Sabha called Mahasabha at Conjeevaram.\(^{17}\) It was the head-quarters of all the four Thisai nadus. Mahanattan lived there and he was acknowledged by the Kaikolars during his visit among the villages and he used to receive presents from them.\(^{18}\) If the decision of the Mahanattan was not accepted in the caste dispute the Kaikolars concerned were excommunicated from the caste. Mahanattan had the privilege of sitting at council meetings with his back supported by pillows, and consequently bore the title Thindusarudan (resting on pillows).\(^{19}\) Such a high position was given to the head of the Kaikolar caste. Thus the Kaikolar's caste guild functioned as social and to the advantage of the industry.

The census report speaks that there were 111 subdivisions.\(^{20}\) Among these the following were the important subdivisions. 1. Sochia Rattu; Siru tali (Small marriage

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19. Ibid.
badge); Peru tali (big marriage badge) and Conga. The women of the Siru and Peru tali divisions wore a small and large tali respectively. At Sathiyamangalam, they were divided into Chola, Culcundo, Murdea and Conga. But, religious and social customs practiced by all the sections were the same all over Tamil Nadu.

In religion, most of the Kaikolars were Saivites and a few were practising vaishnava cult. Lord Subramanya was worshipped by the Kaikolars. The festival Surasamharam appears to be a much grander affair. It is said that in one village of South Arcot district it lasted for ten days. It was not held in South Arcot district alone, but was common in all the districts of the area of our review. They used to wear a white stuff, said to be vibhuti (sacred ashes) on their forehead. The Kaikolar dragged a car called punder (flower car) during Mariamman festival at Conjeevaram.

Mainly all these Kaikolar caste weavers were engaged in manufacturing coarser variety of cotton cloths. Like other castes, Kaikolars also had their title. They came to be known as Mudalis or Mudaliars. Some were soldiers (Valperra Kaikolar) and this indicates their military prowess and warlike traditions in addition to their hereditary avocation weaving.

CENSUS OF KAIKOLARS

The general census of 1871 was the first attempt at a systematic enumeration of population of the Indian Empire. But although the taking of a census was a novel thing in Bengal and some other parts of India, it was not so in the Madras Presidency. The first attempt appears to have been made to ascertain the numbers of the people in the year 1822. On this occasion the total population of the Madras Presidency was 13½ millions. Another census was taken in 1836-37. The first regular quinquennial census of the Presidency was in the official year 1851-52. But the first published census of the Madras Presidency was the 1871 census in which it is mentioned that there were

26. Ibid.
fifty-two castes included in the weaving community, but some of the names are synonyms. Among the weaving communities, Kaikolars come first in strength. They were the larger in number than any other weaving castes in Tamil Nadu.

There were 10,71,781 persons belonging to weavers castes in the Madras Presidency and the census report shows that among them 5,41,088 males and 5,30,693 were females i.e., 98.1 females to 100 males. Since our area of review is Tamil Nadu it will be sufficient to see that how many Kaikola weavers lived in all the Tamil speaking districts in 1871.

The following table shows us the census of the Kaikola weavers in 1871.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Kaikola Weavers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Chingleput</td>
<td>37,009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>North Arcot</td>
<td>63,034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>South Arcot</td>
<td>45,429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Tanjore</td>
<td>55,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Trichinopoly</td>
<td>34,427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Madura</td>
<td>79,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Tinnevelly</td>
<td>52,476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Coimbatore</td>
<td>90,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Nilgris</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Salem</td>
<td>88,602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Madras Town</td>
<td>9,480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>5,55,596</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Coimbatore, Salem, Tinnevelly, North Arcot and Madura, the great cotton cultivating districts of Tamil Nadu, the Kaikola weaver caste were numerous in proportion to

28. Ibid., Appendix, p.Xliv
the population. They were comparatively rare in Nilgris
district.

The accompanying statement shows the population of
the Kaikolar weavers in Tamil country in 1881. 29

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Kaikolar Weavers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Chingleput</td>
<td>25,307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>North Arcot</td>
<td>37,291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>South Arcot</td>
<td>30,248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Tanjore</td>
<td>34,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Trichinopoly</td>
<td>23,126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Madura</td>
<td>24,954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Tinnevelly</td>
<td>24,696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Salem</td>
<td>32,899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Coimbatore</td>
<td>46,007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Nilgris</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Madras City</td>
<td>2,808</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL** 3,01,680

29. *Imperial Census of India, 1881, Madras, p.141.*
According to the census of 1881, the total population of Kaikola or Sengunthar weavers was reduced to 3,01,680. Further, the weavers belonging to this caste-Kaikolar decreased in number in 1891. In 1891 they were only 1,13,611 in number in Tamil Nadu.\(^{30}\)

It is much to be regretted that the Kaikola weavers population rapidly decayed in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In 1871, they were 5,55,596 in number in Tamil country. But due to the famines occurred in 1876-78, 1884-85, 1891-92, 1896-98, the importation of mill-made piece goods into Madras and the establishment of the spinning and weaving mills at Madurai, Tinnevelly, Coimbatore and Madras in the eighties of the 19th century, the weavers population, particularly Kaikola weavers were reduced to 1,13,611 in 1891 and most of them migrated to some other places in the Madras Presidency and turned to other occupations.

**PATNULKARAN:**

Another community which took weaving as their profession was Patnulkarans. The literal meaning of patnulkaran is Silk-thread-men. They were a caste of

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silk-weavers. They stood second in respect of the population of the weaving communities. They wove only silk cloths. They were the people who specialised in the art of manufacturing the fine and coarser silk cloths. They were chiefly found in the districts of Madura, Salem, Trichinopoly and Tinnevelly and their population was little less in the other districts of Tamil Nadu than the above said districts. 31 They spoke Patnuli or Khatri, a dialect of Gujarathi. They were referred to in the inscriptions of Kumara Gupta (473 AD) at Mandasor, South of Gujarat, by the name of Pattavayaka, which is the sanskrit equivalent of Patnulkaran. 32 The same inscription describes them also as soldiers as well as weavers. 33

The Mandasor inscription further gives a vivid account of the Patnulkarans. The Pattavayas as the caste was then called, were induced to migrate from Lata on the coast of Gujarat by king Kumara gupta to practice there their art of silk-weaving. The city of

33. Ibid.
Dasupura became popular because of the Sun temple built by Pattavayas from the wealth acquired by them by the defeat of their weaving during the rule of one Bandhuvarman. After the destruction of Mandasor by the Muslims, the Pattavayas seem to have travelled south to Devagiri, the modern Douladabad, the then capital of the Yadavas. When the Mussalmans again appeared on the scene at the beginning of the 14th century, the Patnlukarans proceeded to Vijayanagar from where they were invited by one Tirumala Naik of Madura in the 17th century to settle at Madura. From Madura they spread to Tanjore, Trichy, and the other districts of Tamil Nadu. Thus the Pattavayas settlement in Tamil Nadu was augmented by the Nayaks of Madura.

There were fifty-two sub-divisions among the Patnlukarans. But many of these were not real sub-divisions at all. For example, in the 60s of the nineteenth century, 7487 called themselves as Brahmanas, 4341 as Chettis and 17290 as Saurashtras. They claimed to be called themselves in Madura as Brahmins, Iyer, but

elsewhere they were generally called Chettis. It is interesting to note that these patnulkarans when they came from north and settled in the South, held themselves aloof from the Southern weavers and did not mingle with them. In large towns they established colonies of silk-weavers (Patnulkarans) and they lived apart from the ordinary weavers in the country. They were a fair complexioned, handsome and industrious race. The Chief men of these communities were wealthy, dealing on a large scale in raw silk, and disposing of the manufactured articles. Thurston says that it is not an exaggerative account that the proud position of Madura in the nineteenth century as second city in the Madras Presidency was mainly, if not solely, due to her prosperous and industrious community of Patnulkaran merchants and silk-weavers.

The Patnulkarans were also called as Saurashtras as they came from the Saurashtra country i.e., Modern

36. Ibid.
Gujarat. They were 72,700 in number in the whole of the Madras Presidency in 1880s. But in the Tamil country they were only 69,332. They were thickly populated in Madura and other urban areas. Moreover, the Pattulkarans had their representatives in the Municipal Council and in the Local and District Boards. Their perseverance had won for them a place in the Devasthanam Committee of one of the most prosperous temples in the district.

The Pattulkarans were the followers of Hindu religion. They worshipped both Siva and Vishnu, but all of them used to wear big Iyengar namams on their foreheads, even more predominantly than the real Iyengars themselves. They called themselves as Brahmans and took titles like Iyengar, Iyer, Rao, Bhagavathar and Sastrigal. Therefore there was a quarrel among the Brahmans and the Pattulkarans with regard to the using of the title Iyer, Iyengar and the renewal of the sacred thread in the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Brahmans

41. Ibid., XIV, p.319.
42. R. Sathianatha Iyer, History of the Nayaks of Madura, p.193; Census of India, 1901, XV, Madras, Part-I, p.173.
 objected that they (Patnulkarans) should not use the title and customs practised by the Brahmins. They should only use the title Chetti. In order to quell the quarrel, Queen Mangammel of Madura, it is said that, convened a conference of her pandits and sought their advice. On their advice, Queen Mangammel issued a Cadjan (Palm-leaf) Sasanam, which authorised the patnulkarans to follow the rites prescribed for the Brahmins relating to Upakarma (the ceremony of the renewal of the sacred thread). Though the Patnulkarans had practised the principles and rituals of the Brahmins, they were educationally backward, in the beginning of the period of our review. But in the 1880s, they established many schools through their association called Saurashtra Sabha. An English High School was also started for Saurashtra boys and girls in the last decade of the nineteenth century. They obtained grants in aid from the Government to run their schools.

In respect of their craft, they wove fine-silk cloths. They engaged in weaving of fine sari of 11 to

43. Ibid.
12 cubits long—sometimes 16 to 18 cubits and 40 to 50 inches which were in great demand among the women of rich family. They obtained silk from Bombay, Calcutta and Kollegal (inferior silk) in Coimbatore District.\textsuperscript{45} Moreover, they were well versed in using and embroiding gold and silk thread in the silk cloths. They were mainly an urban artisans. They were found practically in the cities of Madura, Tanjore, Trichy, Salem, Kumbakonam, Arni, Rasipuram and Tirupathi producing silk cloths. It is said that, the Patnulkarans as a weaving and mercantile community, had advanced far in trade in cotton textiles, dyes, gold thread and silk in Madura and Kumbakonam.\textsuperscript{46}

**DEVANGA:**

The Devangas were a caste of weavers, speaking Telugu and Canarese language, who were found all over the Madras Presidency. They were employed in weaving women's saries in pure cotton or with a silk border, which were sold to rich merchants in the local bazaar. They were also called in the name of Jadar, Jadaru or Jada (great men). At


Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, they were called Settuakkaran and Jadars. 47

The following is the description in regard to the origin of the caste. "Brahma, having created Manu, told him to weave cloths for Devas and men. Accordingly Manu continued to weave for some years, and reached heaven through his piety and virtuous life. Then being no one left to weave for them, the Devas and men had to wear garments of leaves. Vexed at this, they prayed to Brahma that he would rescue them from their plight. Brahma took them to Siva, who at once created a lustrous spirit, and called him Dvalan. Siva told others that Dvalan was created to weave cloths, to cover the limbs and bodies of Devas and men, whose descendants are in consequence called as Devangas (Deva angam, limb of god). Dvalan was advised to obtain thread from the lotus stalks springing from the naval of Vishnu and he secured them after a severe penance. On his way back, he met a Rakshasa, Vajradantan by name who was doing penance at a hermitage, disguised as a Sanyasi. Deceived by his appearance, Dvalan paid homage to him, and determined

to spend the night at the hermitage. But, towards, the close of the day, the Rishi and his followers threw off their disguise, and appeared in their true colours as Asuras. Daivalan sought the assistance of Vishnu and goddess Chandeswari. Goddess Chandeswari came riding on a lion, and the Asuras were killed. The mighty Asuras who met their death were Vajradantana (diamond-toothed), Pugainethran (smoke-eyed), Pugaimugam (smoke-faced), Chitrasenan (leader of armies) and Jayadrathan (Owner of a victory-securing car). The blood of these five was coloured respectively yellow, red, white, green and black. For dyeing in different colours, Daivalan dipped the threads in the blood". Then the descendants of Daivalan claimed to be called as Devangas.

The Devangas were practically divided into two linguistic sections called Telugu Devangas and the Canarese Devangas. The latter had adopted Brahmanical ceremonials to a greater extent than the former, who were more conservative. Those who wear the sacred thread


seen to preponderate over the non-thread weavers in the Canarese section.\(^50\) Besides, Telugu and Canarese Devangas were the following were the endogamous sections: (1) Hathinentu Manayavaru (eighteen house people); (2) Sivacharu, (3) Ariya; (4) Kodikal Hatakam. But all of them worshipped Siva Vishnu, Chandeswari, a form of Kali. During festivals weaving was completely stopped by the Devangas.

The Devangas considered themselves a shade superior to the Brahmins in Madura and Tinnevelly and never did namaskaram (Salutation) to them.\(^51\) They had their caste leader called Seranga Devaru, whose Matam was at Kumbakonam.\(^52\) He sent his agents once in four or five years to receive presents from the Devangas. Under the leader, there were village Jangamas, whose post was an hereditary one. He collected charity at all feasts and ceremonies. It is said that with the assistance of these Jangamas, the leader or Guru settled disputes and used to levy weighty fines on all those who violated the rules of

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\(^51\) Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1901.

the caste. Buchanan during his visit to Coimbatore reached a place called Dodrapallayam in which he saw 50 houses of weavers, who were all Canarese Devangas. There were many weavers in the neighbourhood of Coimbatore. Those in the town were Jadar (Devangas) and Kaikolar and those in the villages were Canarese Devangas and Paraiyas. In the whole district there were 459 looms. The Jadar manufactured the finest cloths and they were of thin texture. Of the cloths made by the Jadar, the plain ones appeared to be cheap, the figured ones were dear.

The total number of the Devangas in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Madras Presidency was 1,33,335. Among them 66,463 were male and 66,872 were females. But in all the Tamil districts, the strength of the Devanga weavers was 39,050. Billimagga (white loom) and Atagaru (weavers and exorcists) were sub-castes of Devangas. The usual title of the Devangas was

Chettis. But some of them called themselves by the Brahmanical titles of Sastri and Aiyar. Since the Primary occupation of this caste was weaving, none of them was possessing cultivatable land. But they had skill in their craft and manufactured fine varieties of cotton fabrics.

SEDAN:

Sedan is a synonym of Devanga weavers. During the times of censuses, Seda Dasis were the Devanga dancing girls in the Madura district. The following legend is narrated by Bishop Whitefield.

"Once upon a time, when there was a fierce conflict between the men and the rakshasas, the men, who were getting defeated, applied for help to the god Siva, who sent his wife Parvati as an Avatar or incarnation into the world to help them. The avatar enabled them to defeat the rakshasas, and the weaver caste was made to be in the forefront of the battle, by the goddess and

so she became the goddess of the weavers, and was known in consequence as Savadamma, a corruption of Sedan, Amman, Sedan being a title of the weavers. It is said that their original home was in the north of India, near the Himalayas."

The Sedans lived scattered in all the district of Tamil Nadu. They were 34,565 in number and in the whole of the Presidency they were 34,925 in number. 63

SALIYAN:

The Saliyans were a class of weavers found chiefly in Koranad and Ayyampet in Tanjore district. They were a Tamil speaking class who must not be confused with the Telugu Sālēs. The Saliya, the word being derived from Sanscrit Salika, means weaver. They claimed that they were the descendants of the sage named Mrīkanda, the weaver of gods. It is noted that their original home appears to have been the Andhra country, from where a section of the Saliyas was invited by the Chola King Rajaraja I to Tamilagam. 64 But Mr. Venkatrama Iyyer

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63. Census of India, Madras, 1891, XIV, p.319.
differed and held the view that the Saliyans were the indigenous Tamil weavers. 65

The Saliyans who had settled at Mayavaram and Koranad neither inter-married nor interdined with the Saliyans of the Tinnevelly district. The Tinnevelly Saliyans closely followed the Kaikolars in their various ceremonials and in their social organisation. It is recorded that many of the Saliyans of Chingleput district were Kaikolars, that a story is current that their persecution by one Salva Maik (said to have been a Brahmin) made a large number of them to flee from Conjeevaram to Madura, Tanjore and Tinnevelly. 66

In population they stood in the fifth place in the Madras Presidency. Their total number in the Madras Presidency was 51,161. 67 But in the Tamil territories, their number was only 26,427. 68 The Saliyans professed the Saiva faith. They used to wear the sacred thread.

68. Ibid., XIV, p.319.
Yet, they were considered as the lowest of the weaving communities. They produced coarse cotton cloths, dyed the yarns and sold it locally. It is said that the Saliyans were not allowed to sell their cloths as well as other goods except in a fixed spot called mamarathumedu, where they set out their cloths on bamboos. Higher caste people never touched the cloths, except with a stick.

SENITYANS:

The Seniyans were the other Telugu speaking weaver caste akin to the Saliyans. In some places they were called as Padma Saliyans. They used to call themselves as Chetti. The name Seniyan is generally used to denote the Karna Sale weavers, but at Conjeevaram it was applied to Canarese Devangas. The Conjeevaram Seniyans belonged to Lingayat sect, but were not so strict as the Canarese Lingayats.

They worshipped Siva. Among them there was no sub-division. The priest of the Conjeevaram Senians


was a Vellala Pandaram, who was the head of the Tirugnana Sambanda Murti Mutt (religious institution) at Conjeevaram. Their population was only 18,941 in 80s of the 19th century in the Madras Presidency. It is reported in the same year that they were 16,671 in total in Tamil Nadu. Generally, they engaged in cotton weaving and at some times they wove silk also.

SĀLĒ:  

The Sālēs were the greatest weaver class among the Telugu speaking weavers in the Madras Presidency. They were known as Senapathi (Commander-in-chief) and this was further the title of the caste headman. They were very small in number in the Tamil territorial divisions and their number stood at 2073. The Sālēs were divided into two main divisions, Padma (lotus) Sālēs and Pattu (Silk) Sālēs. The Padma Sālēs wore sacred thread but the Pattu sālēs did not. The Pattu Sālēs never took

72. Ibid., Vol.XIV, p.319.  
food or water at the hands of any except Brahmans, whereas the Padma sālēs did.\textsuperscript{75}

The Pattu sālēs wove superfine cloths and in some places worked in silk, whereas Padma sālēs wove only coarse varieties of cloths. The spoken language of both sections was Telugu and they were divided into Vaishnavites and saivites. These religious distinctions were no bar to intermarriage. Thurston very interestingly remarked about them that "the Sālē weaver fixes his loom under a tree before his house in the morning and at night takes it home."\textsuperscript{76}

**KARNA SĀLĒ:**

Another community which took weaving as their profession was Karna Sālē. They were a caste of Telugu weavers, who were called Seniyans in the Tamil Country e.g., at Madura and Tanjore.\textsuperscript{77} It seems that they had no tradition as to their origin. They worshipped both Siva and Vishnu. Their headman was called Setti and


\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.

was hereditary. He was assisted by Pedda Kapu and Nela Setti, of whom the latter was selected monthly, and derived his name from the Telugu nela (month).

In the social organisation, as Mr. F.R. Hemingway observed, "They entirely disregarded the spiritual authority of the Brahmans, recognising priests among the Jangamas or Pandarams. They were distinguished from the Kaikolars, in that they sometimes wove in Silk, which the Kaikolars never did”. Like the Padma Sālēs, the Karna Sālēs usually wove, only coarse cotton cloths. 78

**CENSUS OF ALL WEAVING COMMUNITIES:**

It is unfortunate that there is no uniformity in the occupational returns of the censuses. In 1871, the weavers population was 10,71,781. 79 This includes the weavers, spinners, cotton painters and printers. In 1881, the weaving population was 9,79,062, 80 or a decrease of 13 per cent to the population of 1871. It

78. F.R. Hemingway, *Tanjore District Gazetteer*, (Madras, 1906), Vol.I, p.120.


was due to the severe famine of 1876-78 and constant decline in the price of the cotton fabrics. It went on declining and only 8,71,882 persons were supported by weaving in 1891.\textsuperscript{81} It shows a further decline of 11\textsuperscript{\frac{1}{2}} per cent. In 1901, they returned as 6,23,783.\textsuperscript{82} or 29 per cent decrease to the previous census. Again, the 1911 census shows that there were only 5,80,321.\textsuperscript{83} persons supported by the industry.

As regards the handloom weavers, a useful comparison may be made between 1871 and 1911. In the former period there were 10,71,781 persons supported by this industry as against 5,80,321 in 1911. Thus in the course of four decades there was a decline of 46 per cent in the number of weavers. Thus, the industry had not recovered from the effects of heavy importation of mill made goods, famines which led to the fall in the number of weaving population.

HANDLOOM CENSUSES:

The looms were distributed through the region in a large number of centres ranging from the capital city down

\textsuperscript{81} Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1891, (Madras, 1893).

\textsuperscript{82} Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1901, (Madras, 1903).

\textsuperscript{83} Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1911, (Madras, 1913).
to small villages. Regular censuses of handlooms were not taken in the Madras Presidency before the year 1856. But at times, the Board of Revenue had directed the district Collectors to collect the Moturpha tax (vide Appendix No.1) on looms. During the time of this tax collection the Collectors had given the number of handlooms. But some district Collectors did not give the number of looms except the tax collection amount. The demand and collection of this tax was also not uniform in all the districts. Moreover in some districts this tax was abolished immediately the company settled in the Madras Presidency. For instance in Madurai district it was abolished in the year 1806 itself and so no attempt was made to enumerate the handlooms in this district. 84

The first information we get about the number of looms is from the Collector of Tinnevelly. Mr. Hudleston, the then Collector of Tinnevelly district, had stated that the looms in his district were increased from 3650 in 1815 to 5484 in 1820. 85 In the 12 taluks of South

84. Letter from the Madurai District Collector to the Board of Revenue, Board of Revenue Proceedings, Vol.872, 22 November 1820.

Arcot district during the years from 1822 to 1831 the
looms ranged from 8451 to 9678. During the same period
(1822-1831) in Trichy district the Collector reported that
there were an average of 7286 looms per annum on which
the Moturpha tax Rs. 4696 was collected. The Tanjore
district recorded the highest number of looms during
the company's rule. Mr. Montgomery Martin, the Collector
of Tanjore district in 1844, noted that there were 9098
looms in 1823 and it rose to 15935 in 1844. The North
Arcot district Collector had informed the Board of
Revenue that there were 5828 looms in his district in
the year 1844. Thus, for the sake of levying the
loom tax, the number of looms was calculated and there
was no census on looms in particular.

The first census of the handloom, however, was taken
in 1856. The Census Commissioner reported that in 1856

86. Board of Revenue Proceedings, Vol.1376, 22 August 1833,
p.10030.
87. Board of Revenue Proceedings, Vol.1359, 15 April 1833,
pp.3689-92.
88. Board of Revenue Proceedings, Vol.1942, 28 November,
1844, p.16367.
89. Board of Revenue Proceedings, Vol.1942, 4 October 1844,
p.16354.
90. S.S.R. Iyengar, Progress of the Madras Presidency,
there were 1,97,000 looms in the Madras Presidency. The Board of Revenue observed in 1871 that there were 2,80,000 looms and noticed that there was an increase of 42 per cent over the 1856 census. In 1889 the Board again estimated the number of looms in the province to be 3,00,000. The statistical Atlas of the Madras Presidency, 1901, recorded that there were only 1,67,806 looms. The Census Commissioner reported that there were 92,217 looms in 1900 in all the Tamil districts among which the Salem district stood first, Coimbatore the second, the Chingleput the third in number of looms. C.J. Baker wrote in all these looms, so many different types of handwoven cloths were produced in the Presidency under so different conditions, to cater for varying tastes and needs and for markets wide apart.

WEAVER'S GUILDS:

The factors that contributed to the growth of guild organisations were not clearly known. Probably one of

91. C.J. Baker, An Indian Rural Economy - The Tamil Nad countryside, (1880-1955), (Delhi, 1984), p.396.
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid.
94. Census of India, 1911, Vol.XII, Madras, p.207.
the objects of the formation of the guilds was to secure and maintain for their members equal opportunity and assure for them a good basis of subsistence by restricting or excluding competition. Under the conditions of the working of the guilds it should have been difficult for a member of a profession to carry on business himself unless he identified himself with the guild maintained by his fellow craftsmen. Further it would have been to their advantage if they organised themselves into a body and acted as such in their business or their relations with the Government. It has been said that an important factor in the development of mercantile, professional (crafts) interests at a time when such a combination as they represented was indispensable to the advancement of the middle classes in their struggle for recognition at the hands of both of despotic kings and of an organised priesthood that were bent on suppressing the elevation of the third estate. With the growth of the guilds the new axiom of the later law was evolved, whereby the king was advised not to oppress guilds and not to tax too heavily. So, commerce and professions in the modern sense became possible. 96

96. T.V. Mahalingam, South Indian Polity, University of Madras, 1967, p.393.
The guilds of ancient and medieval period were of two types - the Merchant guilds and the craft (Profession) guilds. There appears to have been a number of merchant guilds functioning in South India for which we have many references in the inscriptions.

**MERCHAND GUILDS:**

These guilds were known by various names such as the Manigrammam, the Nanadesi, Anjuvannam, Ilangai Valanjiyar etc. The Manivannam is said to be the earliest of the guilds. It was organised through the coming together of representatives drawn from several market towns on the coast and the capital cities. In these above said merchant guilds, caste was not taken into account to become a member. Sir Charles Birdwood observed, "The merchant guilds of the great polytechnical cities of India are not, however, always exactly coincident with the sectarian or ethnical caste of a particular class of artisans. Some times the same trade is


pursued by men of different castes, and its guild generally includes every member of the trade it represents without strict reference to caste." 99 It is very clear from the above passages that caste was not the criteria to become a member in merchant guild but a trader or a merchant.

References are found in a number of inscriptions bearing the dates from the eight to the seventeenth century about the Nanadesis, another merchant guild, which functioned from Kolhapur in the north to Tinneveli in the South. 100 Nehru referred to Tisaiayirathu Ainnurruvar, a merchant guild in South India, as a 'Corporation of Fifteen Hundred', a Union of merchants penetrating the regions of the six continents by land and water routes and dealing with cotton textiles, precious stones, horses and elephants. 101 According K.A.N. Sastri, these merchants exported manufactured textile fabrics mostly of cotton, spices, jewels and drugs from South India. 102

CRAFT GUILDS:

The craft guilds were professional associations in which caste and heredity played an influential role. There appears to have been a good number of craft guilds functioning in South India. According to an inscription there were eighteen panas (Sectarian divisions).\(^{103}\) Among these eighteen panas, the panchalas (five sects of smiths), tantuyains (weavers), Vatra-bhedakas (cloth dyers) were important (from the eighth to fifteenth centuries AD).\(^{104}\) The members of these guilds lived in specified localities in urban areas, and met together at a common place like a temple to transact their business. However, the members could have possibly lived outside the urban areas also.\(^{105}\)

GUILD'S PRIVILEGES:

The guilds acquired some privileges from the kings from time to time. But at the same time, the privileges enjoyed by the guilds varied from place to place. For instance, the weavers of Kanchipuram and Vrincipuram

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103. Mysore Archaeological Report, 1918, Paras 84 and 85.
105. Ibid., p.395.
enjoyed the right of using sangu and dandu (Conch and Falanquin), a right which was not enjoyed by other weavers in the regions nearby. Therefore when proper representations were made on this matter to the authorities, the same privileges were extended to them also. 106

The guilds acted not only for securing rights and privileges, but also for making gifts. For instance, all of them made contributions for offerings in temples, at an agreed rate per individual. The weavers contributed cloths to temples while others contributed lands to temples by which burning of oil-lamps and salaries of the priests were met. Further, the caste organisation stood for the fulfilment of the obligations by all its members.

These guilds were having their own rules and regulations. It was expected that every one of the members should follow it. There was a great discipline among them. Those who did not observe the regulations of the guild were punished in the form of social

106. Ibid., p.396.
ostracism. Generally, "the offender was enforced to pay fines. If the offender refuses to pay, and all members of the guild belong to one caste, the guild uses its influence with other guilds to prevent the recusant member from getting work."  

The rights of the member of a guild were explained in Arthasastra also. Because of the guild organisation individual member possessed certain rights. For example, they were protected against injury and theft. A person accused of stealing articles belonging to an artisan had to pay a very heavy fine of 1000 panams. It is said that the guilds of weavers were very prominent during the Mauryan period.

Occasionally, there were some disputes among the guilds. For example, there was a dispute in the Pandiya


Nadu between the betel-leaf merchants and the Kaikolar weavers. The latter staged a walk-out from the Madurai city to protest against the erasure of their inscription. To induce them to come back, it was reinscribed. Sometimes the Government had to interfere in order to solve the problems of the artisan castes. There was a royal interference to check the breach of the rules of Kammalan Caste (artisan caste). During the period of Nayaks in Madura, the inscription, of 1623, record, the King's orders prohibiting the 'five sub-divisions of the Kammalan from communal fellowship, i.e., that they should not intermingle with each other.

**SENGUNTHAR MAHASABHA:**

The craft guilds which existed in the medieval period were also continued in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Tamil Nadu. The guilds were important organisations in the nineteenth century and they seemed to have been very powerful. Because of the

111. 1623, Tamil S.S. 1545, Rudhrigadi, Kartiga, 6, Sunday, Ambasamudram; orders of the priest that the five sub-division of Kammalan be prohibited from communal fellowship, in accordance with the general orders By Visvanatha Nayaka, Virupaksha Nayaka, Muthu Virappa Nayaka, (309 of 1916).
prestige and trust-worthiness of the weavers it is said that these guilds were sometimes used as banks. The weavers deposited their money in these guilds for the sake of security. According to Sarada Raju, "these weavers guilds were numerous, powerful and highly useful, especially in the marketing process". Different weaving castes were having their own caste guild and among those, Kaikolar guild, (Sengunthar Mahasabha) and Patnulkaran (Sourashtra Sabha) guild, were the most important.

The Kaikolars stood first in the total population of the weavers in Tamil Nadu in nineteenth century. Since their original home happened to be Conjeevaram, they had their guild called Kaikolar or Sengunthar Mahasabha at Conjeevaram. Their caste guild was headed by Mahanattan who resided at Conjeevaram and he was assisted by one Periadanakaran, who was the administrative head of one of the 72 nadus, or desams. Viz. forty-four mel (western) and twenty-eight Kil (eastern) nadus. The weavers

112. Sengunthanmitran, July 1971, p.16.
collected a tax from the members of their guild known as 'Mahamal'. Some of the taxes of the weavers were Accutari, paraitari, Salikattari, Tari-irai etc. This tax was levied on the basis of the number of looms. 115

The weaver's guild often approached the Government and got things done for the welfare of the weavers. But at times it failed in its attempts. The Kaikola weavers at Cuddalore as a guild sent a petition through a Vakil (lawyer) to the Government in 1833 for the abolition of the recently levied Moturpha tax. But the Government found no justice in it and passed orders to pay the tax. 116 The Conjeevaram weavers in 1843, as a mob of 6000 weavers resisted the levying of tax on looms for which they were exempted from 1780 onwards. But later by calling the army, the Government arrested the leaders of weavers and realised


the tax from them. Thus the guild had fought against the Government whenever injustice was done to them.

SAURASHTRA SABHA:

The Patnulkaran's guild was called Saurashtra Sabha. The city of Madura became famous because of the fine silk fabrics manufactured by the patnulkarans (Saurashtras). They had their caste guild, Saurashtra Sabha, which was started in 1895. Its office was situated at Madura. Among the laudable objects for which the Sabha was established the following may be noted.


Board of Revenue Proceedings, Vol.1887, 6 November 1843, p.16816.

Board of Revenue Proceedings, Vol.1888, 9 November 1843, p.17134.

(a) To manage the Madura Saurashtra School, and establish reading rooms, libraries etc., with a view to enable members of the Saurashtra community to revive, on moderate terms, a sound, liberal, general and technical education.

(b) To manage the temple known as the Madura Sri Prasanna Venkateswara Swami's temple, and contribute towards its maintenance by constructing, repairing and preserving buildings, in connection therewith, making jewels, vehicles and other things necessary therefor, and conducting the festivals thereof.

(c) To found charitable institutions, such as orphanages, hospitals, poor houses, choultries (resting-places for travellers), water sheds, and other things of like nature for the good of the Saurashtra Community.

(d) To give succour to the suffering poor weaver, and the maimed, the lame, and the blind in the Saurashtra Community.

(e) To give pecuniary grants in aid of Upanayanam (thread marriages) to the helpless in the Saurashtra Community.
(f) To erect such works of utility as bathing ghauts, wells, water foundations, and other works of utility for the benefit of the Saurashtra Community.

(g) To fix and raise subscriptions known as Mahamais,\(^{119}\) (a sort of income-tax) which is still existing even today among the Kaikolars and other weaving communities.

(h) To regulate the prices of the yarn, cloth in the markets.

The Saurashtra Sabha had maintained a bank also called Saurashtra bank.\(^{120}\) The Saurashtra weavers kept their surplus money in the bank and by which the poor brethren were given pecuniary aid. It is stated in the work called History of the Saurashtra in Southern India.\(^{121}\) that "When the Saurashtra settled in the South, they reproduced the institutions of their mother country


\(^{120}\) Ibid.

\(^{121}\) By the Saurashtra Literary Societies of Madura and Madras, 1891.
(Gujarat) in the new land, but owing to the influence of some southern Dravidians, some of the institutions became extinct". Later they started some English Schools, in order to impart general and technical education. To enrich the financial position of the Saurashtra Sabha, they sought the permission from the Governor of Madras, to conduct lotteries to which the Governor refused to give permission.\textsuperscript{122} So, they dropped the idea of conducting lotteries.

The Saurashtra community prospered by their Saurashtra Sabha. They not only wove silk fabrics, but also dyed the yarn and cloths in Madurai. It is said that this Sabha sent its members to Europe in the 1890s to learn about new Synthetic dyestuffs.\textsuperscript{123} As a result, Madurai became Synthetic dyeing centre and the old natural dyestuffs rapidly disappeared from common use. Thus the Saurashtra Sabha was very

\textsuperscript{122} Francis, Madurai District Gazetteer, (Madras, 1906) pp.145-147.


\textsuperscript{124} L.K. Tulsiram, \textit{Madras Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee}, (Madras, 1931), Vol.IV, p.299.
useful for the promotion of the welfare of the Saurashtra Community.

The weaver's organisation into guilds was common. Moreover, the handloom industry in Tamil Nadu was very widely diffused. In spite of the guilds, there were many gradations among the weavers. Some weavers were having independent loom with the capital of their own and marketed their products themselves. There were also weavers who solely depended on master weavers and on advances from the merchants and they were very poor. Therefore, these guilds with the help of the collected taxes called 'Mahamai' not only gave pecuniary aid to the poor weavers but also took steps to educate the children of the weavers, and to maintain hospitals, choultries and temples for the welfare of the weaving communities. Thus, the weavers by their guilds were able to safeguard their own interests.