Chapter - VII

FAILURE OF TRADE UNIONS AND
EMERGENCE OF WEAVERS

The handloom profession and the trade associated with it has been undergoing hardships since its inception. The profession though tiresome yet was not remunerative. The handloom workers had to toil from dawn to dusk to earn their livelihood. The entire family members have to be involved in the production of cloth. The entire work of cloth making is laborious. The first process is to make the thread from cotton. After thread is made through spindles the weavers have to prepare the warp. The warp is dried with porridge paste. The porridge paste is systematically applied by the weavers with the help of special brushes meant for it. Those people who are involved in drying the warp with the paste are especially known as ‘paavu thoyvoor’ (‘paavu’ stands for warp and ‘thoyvoor’ stands for those who are involved in drying the warp).

The raw warp is taken to the ground specially meant for the drying. A strip of land having a length of 700 metres and breadth of 10 metres is earmarked for the purpose of drying the warp. Stone pillars or iron rods having a height of 4 feet are planted in both sides with
intervals along the strip of the land selected. On the row rods or stone pillars a stick is placed touching the opposite side also. Likewise the entire area of 700 metres are covered. On the stick at the threshold the warp is placed to rest and then the warp is spread till the end of the last pillars. The place selected thus is known as “Pakkalam”. The word ‘Pakkalam’ is derived from the words “paavu” and “kalam”. Paavu kalam has been transfigured into ‘Pakkalam’ in Tamil dialect. Paavu stands for warp and kalam stands for the ground where the warp is dried.

As many as 15 or 20 people are engaged in drying the warp having a length of 600 to 700 metres. According to the length of the warp persons are employed. Each person is allotted to dry the warp covering a length of 30 metres. The workers known as ‘paavuthoivoor’ (drier of the warp) with the special brush having a length of one metre, dips the brush into the porridge paste kept beside by the women members of the family and smears the brush on the warp. The warp when applied with the paste is dried up in the sunrays. After having been dried up the warp is rolled and taken to the room or the house where the loom is located. Usually looms are fixed in houses. But the master weavers having a number of looms of their own erect a thatched or tiled shed and the looms are fixed. In certain houses pits are dug up
and the looms are fixed. In the pit the weaver gets himself down. The pits have a depth of one metre which would be upto the level of the waist of the weaver. The sieve is fixed in the centre and the handle is operated by the weaver. In the pit two pedals are fixed. When he presses the right pedal the warp already prepared and joined with the sieve is separated into two horizontally. Simultaneously the weaver operates the handle in the right turn direction. The spindle with the roll of thread inside moves along the sieve across the warp and the weaver operates the left pedal and warp is spun with the web. Thus simultaneously the weaver operates the handle, the pedal and the sieve. The warp is woven with the web and the cloth is produced. Different varieties of cloth are prepared like this. There are certain companies which add the requisite colours also. These companies are known as calendaring companies. Suitable colour and design are applied to the cloth prepared and sold in the market. Usually dhoties are woven. But towels, bed-sheets and sarees are also woven through the handlooms.

Thus the entire making of cloth is a laborious task. At times the customers demand for finer variety of cloth. There are different varieties of thread. Each variety of thread has a special number as 20, 40, 60, 80 and 100. According to the increase in number of the thread the cloth becomes thin and finer. The cloth woven with No. 20 thread
will be coarse where the cloth woven with No. 100 thread is thin and fine. When there was upper cloth controversy in South Travancore the Maharaja of Travancore in 1859 issued an order that the low caste women of Travancore were permitted to wear upper cloth of coarse nature. The coarse cloth was produced by weavers with the thread No. 2.

The weavers had to suffer a lot. They worked very hard. Their entire family has to be involved in the work of cloth preparation from dawn to dusk. But their remuneration was too meagre to meet their both ends meet. So to redress their grievances they formed Handloom Textile Trade Unions. The trade unions tried their best to enhance the wages of the handloom workers but all the attempts of the Trade Unions could not bear fruit. Because the Trade Unions gradually became politically motivated. Hence all the Handloom Textile Unions could not achieve anything. Gradually all the Handloom Textile Trade Unions became defunct.

Due to the continuous strikes and lock-outs for nearly two decades from 1970 to 1990 the handloom industries suffered heavy setbacks. The labourers were thrown out of job. The entire families of the extrile workers had to starve. Due to strikes the owners of the textile factories also had to suffer personally, physically and
financially. The weavers were also clamouring for their salary arrears because payment to the handloom workers were paid by the owners of the handloom factories once in a week. When the work was stopped by the handloom workers with the expectation of getting enhanced wages the owners could pay the additional remuneration demanded by the workers.

This was the time when there was keen competitions from the power loom industries. Power looms produced finer variety of clothes and there was a heavy demand for the products of the power loom industries. People preferred to purchase only power loom goods. Naturally the handloom products were neglected which consequently led to the decline of handloom industry.

The handloom workers depended much on the trade unions. But trade unions could not redress their grievances. Fully frustrated the handloom workers tried to earn their livelihood through some other means. They sought alternative employment. There was a exodus from villages and towns to the estates. Many workers went to plantations to work as coolies to earn their livelihood. Some of them became auto drivers, lorry drivers and many were employed in shops as salesman and attendars. Still others started tea shops and many others became street vendors. Only a microscopic weavers took their products on
their heads and sold the products on the streets. Thus the closure of the handloom factories caused a heavy blow to the weavers.

Those weavers who did not know any other profession except weaving had no other way but to stick on to their original profession of weaving. In this new step there developed two types of weaving group. One is known as the ‘master weaving group’ and the other group is known as the individual weaving group. Certain weavers borrowed money and possessed a few handlooms. They obtained yarn from the cooperative societies and weaving was performed in the looms possessed by him. He employed labourers to operate his handlooms. Those labourers or weavers who came to work in the looms of the owner were paid wages by the owner. The weavers were known as master weavers. The master weavers collected the finished products from his looms and gave them to the co-operative societies. The co-operative societies in turn distributed the needed yarn and the wages for the finished products. Once in every week this transaction will be done. Usually the master weavers would get the remuneration only on Saturdays. After getting the amount from the societies the master weavers disbursed the wages to his labourers. But the pathetic situation is that the master weavers received more wages from the co-operative societies and paid lesser wages to the labourers.
Likewise another group of weavers also emerged. Such weavers possessed their own loom. They got yarn from the co-operative societies converted to products into finished products like Dhithi, lungi, Mundu, thuvarthu and towel. These products were handed over to the co-operative societies and they got wages and yarn. This group of labourers who did independent work was better off than those who were employed under master weavers. In addition to this the master weavers and the individual weavers sold their cloths in public market also.

The master weavers exploited the labourers systematically in Kalkulam and Vilavancode taluks. So there was a sizable migration from these two taluks towards Agastheeswaram taluk. Those weavers who migrated from Kalkulam and Vilavancode taluks were settled in Pallivilai, Vetturnimadam and Vathiarvilai around the Nagercoil Town Railway station. Most of them have sought other works as masons, carpenters and drivers. The master weavers are not willing to look after the interest of the labourers.

During the Tamil month of Adi (July-August) there won’t be much demand for cloths. In such time the weavers who work under

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1 Personal interview, Radhakrishnan, K., Palliyadi, on 9.11.1911.
2 Ibid.
master weavers may not get any income. During this season the master weavers paid only a portion of the wages due to the labourers. The labourers had to get loan from the co-operative societies and they had to wait for a brisk season to receive the withhold wages. The only courtesy extended by the master weaver towards the labourers was that they maintained cordial relationships with the weavers only on one day in every year. On the 1st day of the Tamim month Avani (August) the master weaver paid one ‘panam’ to each labourer and feast is provided to the labourers under the pretext that the master weaver is maintaining good relation with the poor labourers. The labourers forget all the sufferings caused to them by the master weaver and are drawn closer to the master weaver. Thus the master weaver cheated the poor weaving community.

In spite of the exploitation the labourers did not think of any working class movement. The trade union movement had miserably failed in redressing the grievances of the weavers. So the weavers did not think of approaching the trade union Associations. The trade unions in and around Nagercoil also did not come forward to relieve the weavers of their helpless position. The trade unions had a long list of members. As the factories were closed and the master weavers began to take up the position of the trade unions, the membership of
the trade unions considerably dwindled. The master weavers came to
the rescue of the weavers. So the weavers despite approaching the
trade union began to approach the master weavers. So the members of
the trade unions gradually left the trade union organizations. There is
another reason for the reduction of the membership in the trade unions.
Most of the master weavers were the kith and kin of the labourers.
Naturally the weavers preferred protection under the master weavers to
the protection under the trade unions.

So the trade unions in Kanyakumari District did not develop as
the trade unions in the other districts of Tamil Nadu. Consequently
trade unions began to decline and disintegrate in Kanyakumari District.
Mill clothes cause to the market in large quantity because of the
mushroom growth of mills. Power loom mills in Coimbatore,
Poechampally, Kanchipuram and Dharmapuri are some of the
important centres of improved varieties of cloth production. The
weavers who are employed in power loom mills are getting attractive
salaries. But the weavers under master weavers received only very low
wages. Thus the sufferings of the weaving community continued.

The master weavers at present do have another dilemma. Many
weavers left the profession and try to be employed in other works so
that they would be paid better wages. Because the weavers have left
the weaving profession the master weavers have no other option but to convert their weaving halls into marriage halls. Certain other master weavers have converted their work spots into housing plots. Many master weavers in Nagercoil have converted their weaving spots ad marriage halls. In Vadasery, ‘The Sivakaami Ammal Thirumana Mandapam’ and the ‘Raja Thirumana Mandapam’ were formerly weaving centres.

Due to the conspicuous absence of appointment on permanent basis many weavers left the work. The disheartened workers found asylum in other alternative jobs. They are employed in mat weaving, coir preparation works and palmyra based industries such as preparation of jiggery and making of baskets out of palmyra leaves. Still their hardships had not vanished when any weaver is employed in any other alternative work he or she is introduced to the Industrial owner or Superintendent by a middle man. The middle man is known as the ‘Mooppan’. Every time when the labourer gets his salary a portion of the salary should be paid by the labourer to the ‘Mooppan’.\(^3\) Such payment is known as ‘Mooppan kasu’. In addition to this the labourer has to bribe the Superintendent and the writer. Thus the plight of the weaving community has become a long enduring painful task.

\(^3\) George Commission Report, p. 103.
The rate of Mooppan kasu varies from factory to factory. This is a compulsory exaction over and above the usual deduction. The employers of the factories directly deducted the Moopan kasu and paid it directly to the Moopan.⁴

Thus the weavers have been left without any security. Despite repeated requests from the side of the weaving community no progress could be achieved. The Government of Tamil Nadu finally took up the issue associated with the weavers. The handloom weavers problems were taken up by the government of Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Nadu Government through the Department of Handloom Industries came forward to help the weaving community. Textile Corporation Societies have been started throughout Tamil Nadu. Cotton thread bales are supplied to the weavers directly. Every week the weaver directly without any middle man hands over the finished handloom products to the Handloom Society and in turn they receive the due wage and yarn for the production of cotton fabrics. Handloom Cooperative Inspectors are appointed by the Government to check the proceedings of the Cooperative Societies. Once in every three years election is held for the Committee members. The shareholders of the society – the members of the society – have the voting right. The Secretary of each

⁴ George Commission Report, p. 103.
society is a Government servant and he is in service till the age of 58. All other committee members including the President of the Cooperative Societies are elected.

Election for the Cooperative Societies were held. Once in every year the Government encourages the handloom fabrics through exhibitions. Usually in January, Handloom Exhibition is held. The exhibition will have a normal duration of one week. At times the exhibition is prolonged for a fortnight. During the period of exhibition the Government gives 20 to 30% bonus on all the handloom fabrics purchased. Thus the Government encourages the sale of handloom goods. In addition to this the cooperative societies have organized showrooms throughout Tamil Nadu to exhibit the varieties of handloom fabrics. During Pongal (in January on the new year day of the Tamil month Thai) all the people, both men and women, are supplied dhoties and sarees free of cost. Thus all the handloom products are distributed to the people. This supply of handloom products encourages further demand for handloom fabrics and weaving community is highly benefitted. Now-a-days each weaver is provided with free medical treatment in recognized hospitals. The weavers are given free supply of electricity. Each weaver is entitled to have free supply of electricity consumption upto 70 units. Beyond that they have
to remit electricity dues. Thus the Government at present tries to redress the grievances of the weavers. Better wages, free medical aid and free supply of electricity have encouraged the weavers to return to their original profession, weaving. The weaving profession which was at a low ebb has now emerged into high ebb.
CONCLUSION

The present Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu was formerly known as Nanjil Nadu. Nanjil stands for plough and Nadu means a portion of land. Kanyakumari was a fertile region. Farmers cultivated the field and the use of plough in this area was indispensible. Hence after plough or Nanjil the district was named as Nanjil Nadu. Since Nanjil Nadu was then under the control of the erstwhile Travancore kingdom and as the area is located in the southern area of the former state, Nanjil Nadu was familiarly known as South Travancore also.

South Travancore was consisted of four Taluks, Agasteeswaram, Kalkulam, Thovalai and Vilavancode. Of the four, Agasteeswaram and Thovalai are having ample aerable lands while the other two taluks – Kalkulam and Vilavancode are elevated areas with hilly regions. The Travancore kings had Padmanabhapuram an elevated place in Kalkulam Taluk as their capital.

Attracted by the fertility of the paddy fields of South Travancore the Pandya and Chola kings invaded Travancore, not to possess the land but to commit depredations and take away the riches. In the course of long drawn invasions many people migrated to Nanjil Nadu along with the invaders. Of the migrated people one such group was
the weaving group. The weaving group lived in Thanjavur, Madurai, Arcot and Kalakkad.

In 1634 when a war ensued between Thirumala Naik of Madurai and Unni Kerala Varma of Travancore. The weaving community joined the army of Thirumala Naik and came to Nanjil Nadu. In 1526 when the Commander of Viswanatha Naik, Ariyanatha Mudaliar attacked Travancore. The weaving community also joined him and came to South Travancore. After the wars the weaving community did not return to their native places, instead they began to settle in various places in Nanjil Nadu.

In due course the weaving group started their settlements. The Muslims, the Nadars, the Kerala Mudalis and Saliars opted for weaving profession. Continuous drought, unemployment and continuous wars forced these groups to resort to weaving profession settled in Madhavalayam, Kottar and Azhagiamandapam. The Muslim and weavers were experts in silk cloth making. There was a street in Kottar known as “Pattunoolkara Theru”. Pattu in Tamil stands for silk; nool stands for thread; “karar” means men and theru stands for street. So Pattunoolkara theru means the street where the silk cloth weavers were settled. The main profession of the Nadras was palmyra climbing. But certain group of the Nadar community also chose weaving. In
Thengamputhoor, in the southern coastal area of Agasteeswaram the Nadars chose weaving as their profession. Another community, Kerala Mudalis selected weaving as their profession and settled in Amsi, Thengapattanam, Pootetti, Palliyadi, Colachel and Melparai. Likewise another community, Saliar migrated from the East settled at Vadasery. A group of Saliar community is even today known as ‘Vallioor Saliyar’. From this it is ascertained that the Saliyar community migrated from the Eastern side.

Thus these communities involved themselves in the weaving profession. The Muslims were experts in silk weaving. Nadars produced better variety of Dhothies and Bedsheets. The Kerala Mudalis are well versed in the production of Dhothies, towels and sarees. The Saliyas are experts in Dhothies, towels, lungies and turkey towels. The silk cloth and finer variety of dhothies were supplied to the Royal family of Travancore whereas other varieties were sent to Kerala. In Kerala there is a market at ‘Araalumoodu’. The entire cloth produced in Nanjil Nadu was sent to Kerala through the Araalumoodu market.

Of all the varieties the ‘Turkey towel’ produced in the Vadasery area could command a very good market not only in India but also in abroad. Many people who professed the production of Turkey towel
because rich whereas the others who produced ordinary fabrics had to live below poverty line. They had to work very hard. The family members of each worker had to be involved in the spinning and weaving work. But they could not have a happy living because their wages were very poor.

The poverty stricken tendency of the poor weavers intimidated them to form Trade Unions. Trade Unions were formed. Almost all the weavers joined as members of the Trade Unions. The Trade Unions were named as “Paavu Alluvoor Sangam”, “Paavu Niraduvoor Sangam”, “Tholilalar Nala Munnetta Sangam” and the like. The Trade Unions championed the cause of the workers.

By this time the rich weavers had created factories and the weavers were employed in these factories. The owners got a lot of profit while the weavers had to starve. So they approached the Trade Unions. The Trade Unions organized demonstrations. As a consequence many of the factories were closed. The unemployed weavers and their families were confronted with untold miseries. So the Trade Unions approached the Government. In 1956 an agreement was arrived at between the government of Tamil Nadu and the factory owners. The factory owners promised to enhance the wages of the weavers. They promised but nothing was done. In 1970 again the
Trade Unions started agitation. The Government interfered. But the owners refused to raise the wages of the weavers. In 1982 the Government passed an Act to enhance the salary of the weavers. Still the owners of the factories turned a deaf ear to the echoing voice of the weavers. The Trade Unions continued their agitations.

This was the time when the party politics began to interfere in the trade union activities. Each trade union began to be occupied by the parties. The A.D.M.K., D.M.K., Congress and Communist parties began to contest in the trade union activities. When the office bearers’ election for the trade unions were conducted the party men began to participate and the trade unions of textile weavers became trade unions of party men.

So during the election of the office-bearers of the Trade Unions there were clashes based on party politics. The interest of the weavers were shifted from their betterment to the betterment of the party men. As a consequence the trade union activities began to dwindle. The post war economy has also increased the prices of yarn. Many business men began to hoard yarn and yarn was not available in the public market. Yarn was sold at high prices. Because of the rise in price of yarn many factories could not pay the wages to the workers and hence many of the factories were closed. The party-oriented trade unions ended in
miserable failure and they could not redress the grievances of the poor weavers. As a consequence all the trade unions collapsed. In 1990 the weavers themselves with the support of trade unions started agitation.

Women members of the weaving community began to gherao the factory owners. The factory owners finally agreed to increase the salary of the weaving community. Only a few owners accepted the increase of the wages. Many refused. Naturally weavers had no other way but to seek other professions. In this pursuit the Muslims and Nadars gave up weaving profession and began to seek other employment. Many migrated to the estates as coolies. Some of them became drivers and the Nadars began to turn to agricultural activities and activities associated with palmyrahs.

The majority of the Salia community and Kerala Mudali community continued to stick on to weaving profession because they are not accustomed to hard work. Those who stuck on to the weaving profession were divided into two groups. One group is known as the “master weavers” and the other group is known as ‘self made group’. The master weavers had a number of handlooms under their control. They were the owners of the looms. They purchased yarn and employed weavers and paid wages to their weavers. A man who owns his own handloom got yarn from the public market worked on his own
loom and sold the cloth in the market. Such group is known as a self
made group. Since there was no trade union worth mentioning – the
weavers and the master weavers had to take care of their benefits. But
the grievances of the weavers still continued.

For a very long time the Government was a silent spectator at
the sufferings of the weavers. Demonstrations, agitations, hunger
strikes and processions were organized by the weavers and the master
weavers drew the attention of the Government which finally led to the
formation of cooperative societies and the cooperative societies have
begun to take up the problems of the weavers. Weavers with their
looms registered themselves in the cooperative societies formed within
their area. Yarn and wages were supplied by the societies and the
weavers handed over their woven cloth to the cooperative societies.
The Government had also increased the wages of the handloom
weavers.

Many cooperative spinning and weaving mills had been started
by the Government throughout Tamil Nadu. Likewise private persons
had started mills throughout Tamil Nadu. In Nagercoil the Cooperative
Spinning Mill had been functioning. Likewise the Nagammal
Spinning Mill is functioning at Vettunkimadam, Nagercoil. In
Rajapalayam also many spinning and weaving mills were functioning.
The Government and the private persons had employed the unemployed weavers in these mills. Individual weavers were encouraged through cooperative societies. The Government purchased all the handloom textile goods during Pongal to hand over free supply of these goods to the people. Once in every year handloom exhibitions are held throughout Tamil Nadu at 30% rebate so as to encourage the sale of handloom fabrics. In addition to this the Government has opened many show rooms to sell handloom goods. Weavers are supplied medicine free of cost even in private hospitals apart from Government hospitals. The weavers enjoyed the benefit of free supply of electricity. Those weavers who are consuming 70 units and less need not pay electricity charges.

Thus the Government is now encouraging the weaving community in general. Though the weaving community suffered a lot the trade unions came to the rescue of the weavers. But in due course the trade unions and their activities began to be centred round political arena and the interests of the weavers were given up by the Trade Unions. Hence the Trade Unions could not achieve any notable progress in the lives of the people. In Kanyakumari District though the Trade Unions had a good start yet due to internal factories and feuds the Trade Unions associated with the weaving community failed and
the entire responsibility of developing the lives of the weaving was taken by the Government through cooperative societies. The cooperative societies have replaced the trade unions and the weavers find solace under the cooperation societies patronized by the Government.