

Repertoires of Resistance: The Handloom Weavers of South India, c.1800–1960

KARUNA DIETRICH WIELENGA*

School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies, University of Oxford
12 Bevington Road, Oxford OX2 6LH, UK

E-mail: karunamdw@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The article describes and analyses contrasting forms of protest employed by handloom weavers in South India at two key points in time – the early nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Following Tilly, it examines how changes in the state’s regulatory regime influenced modes of resistance, but extends this analysis to the influence of production structures and social/cultural factors such as caste. It also maps internal structures of solidarity and the changing role of caste and class in shaping them. It tries to show how repertoires of resistance altered with changes, not just in the regulatory regime, but the broader socio-economic context, and foregrounds their adaptability and dynamism. It explores forms of protest and organization shared by weavers with workers from a wide range of occupations (including factory workers). Above all, it questions the notion of the unchanging character of “primordial” identities while seeking to provide a fuller understanding of the emerging dynamic of collective consciousness amongst non-factory workers in modern India.

During the past two decades, there has been a concerted effort to broaden the scope of labour history by redefining categories such as worker and the working class – by moving away from a narrow focus on the typical “free” factory (or plantation or mine) worker, selling his/her labour power on the market, in order to include other kinds of workers whose labour power was commodified in other ways, and who were sometimes more (and sometimes less) “free”. These have been variously termed “subaltern workers” or “the labouring poor”.¹

* I would like to thank the editorial committee of IRSH, and Ravi Ahuja in particular, for reading several drafts of the paper and providing searching and constructive comments that enabled me to expand and sharpen my arguments. Also Shashank Kela for his incisive criticism and painstaking editing of the text for language and clarity. Prabhu Mohapatra made useful suggestions about the theoretical framework; Jan Lucassen commented encouragingly on an early draft presented at a conference in New Delhi in 2015. All errors and omissions that remain are mine alone.

1. Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden, 2008), Introduction; and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, “Introduction” in Rana P. Behal and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *India’s Labouring Poor: Historical Studies, c.1600–2000* (Delhi, 2007), pp. 7–19.

This broadening of categories has led to an exploration of diverse forms of organization and protest, rather than focusing upon trade union actions by factory workers alone.² Recent scholarship has also challenged the exclusive association of strikes (or similar actions) with the industrial workforce. It has been pointed out that pre-industrial workers employed analogous forms of protest.³ In a country like India, where the typical factory-based industrial labour force was (and remains) very small, it becomes even more important to study histories of collective action for different categories of labour, broadly defined. Important beginnings have been made in this regard: see, for example, the collection of essays edited by Ravi Ahuja on tannery workers, scavengers, sailors, factory workers, and other casual labourers.⁴

In the European context, scholarship has highlighted the role played by weavers and other artisans in the emergence of the “classical” working class and its politics.⁵ While some historians have emphasized the part played by radical artisans in the articulation of working-class consciousness, others have pointed to contradictions between this form of politics and artisanal identities.⁶

In Indian historiography, however, collective action by artisans has scarcely been explored, with weavers being a notable exception.⁷ However, even in

2. See some of the essays in Behal and Van der Linden (eds), *India's Labouring Poor*. Ravi Ahuja (ed.), *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India* (Delhi, 2013).

3. Jan Lucassen, “The Brickmakers’ Strikes on the Ganges Canal in 1848–1849”, in Behal and Van der Linden (eds), *India's Labouring Poor*, pp. 47–84.

4. Ravi Ahuja (ed.), *Working Lives and Worker Militancy*.

5. The best known historical work on the subject is, of course, that of E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1966). Others include Michael P. Hanagan, *The Logic of Solidarity: Artisans and Industrial Workers in Three French Towns, 1871–1914* (London, 1980); Joan Wallach Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and Political Action in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, MA, 1974). Parallels have also been drawn with other parts of the world. See Ibrahim Abdullah, “Rethinking African Labour and Working-Class History: The Artisan Origins of the Sierra Leonean Working-Class”, *Social History*, 23:1 (1998), pp. 80–96; Inigo Garcia-Bryce, “From Artisan to Worker: The Language of class during the Age of Liberalism in Peru, 1858–79”, *Social History*, 30:4 (2005), pp. 463–480.

6. Thus, while Prothero acknowledges the role played by artisanal organizations in the emergence of larger unions and combinations, he shows how trade-based identities could hinder such a process, and how artisans in the same organization could subscribe to different political views. Iorwerth Prothero, *Radical Artisans in England and France, 1830–1870*, (Cambridge, 1997). Similarly, Tessie P. Liu examining the alliance between handloom weavers and power loom operatives in Choletis, France, argues that while the former played a key role in reaching out to power loom workers, contradictions between their artisanal identities and demands and those of power loom operatives eventually led to a breakdown of the alliance. Tessie P. Liu, *The Weaver's Knot: The Contradictions of Class Struggle and Family Solidarity in Western France, 1750–1914* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), pp. 137–139.

7. Nandita Prasad Sahai's monograph on eighteenth-century Rajasthan is one of the few exceptions. Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in*

their case, research has been confined to the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries with later periods, and especially the twentieth century, receiving very little attention.⁸ Twentieth century studies, until recently, focused largely on factory workers. Here, an important debate has been about the ability (or lack thereof) of the Indian working class to develop class solidarity and class consciousness in the face of “primordial” identities such as caste and religion. Dipesh Chakrabarty (whose work opened up the debate) argues that the lack of bourgeois notions of “equality” and “citizenship”, and the persistence of a “community consciousness” that was deeply hierarchical and based upon birth, prevented the emergence of genuine working-class consciousness.⁹

In turn, other historians, questioning Chakrabarty’s essentializing notions of community consciousness, explored the changing nature of community identities and solidarities and their interplay with those based upon class (forged at the workplace and in working-class neighbourhoods).¹⁰ The work of Raj Chandavarkar pushed the debate forward by emphasizing the importance of the larger political context in shaping working-class politics, and in showing how solidarities based on class or community are formed. He was also one of the first scholars to point to the importance of examining linkages between the politics of factory workers and the much larger working class outside factories.¹¹ Recent studies have

Early Modern Rajasthan (New Delhi, 2006). In the case of handloom weavers, much of the discussion revolved around the “de-industrialization” debate, wherein scholars took different positions on whether and how much the handloom industry was undermined by colonialism. One school argued that its decline was steep; revisionists disputed the extent of decline, and argued that the industry revived strongly in a later period. Recent scholarship, particularly that of Douglas Haynes, has shown how the handloom industry was transformed by capitalist development and how this, in turn, shaped the contours of capitalism in India. For an overview of these debates see Douglas Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism in Western India: Artisans, Merchants and the Making of the Informal Economy, 1870–1960* (Cambridge, 2012).

8. See Prasannan Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India, 1720–1800* (Cambridge, 2001); P. Swarnalatha, *The World of the Weaver in Northern Coromandel, c.1750–1850* (New Delhi, 2005); Sinnapah Arasaratnam, “Weavers, Merchants and Company: The Handloom Industry in Southeastern India, 1750–1790”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 17:3 (1980), pp. 257–281.

9. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton, NJ, 1989). Also see Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Das Gupta, “Some Aspects of Labour History of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century: Two views”, Occasional paper No. 40, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, October 1981.

10. For example, Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories* (London, 2005); Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge, 2001).

11. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, c.1850–1950* (Cambridge, 1998), Introduction. The work of Chitra Joshi and Nandini Gooptu explores the intersections of caste, class, and religious identities in the workplace and in neighbourhoods (see previous footnote). More recent articles by Shahana Bhattacharya on leather workers and by Tanika Sarkar on scavengers reveal the contextual interplay of caste and

shown how, in the first half of the twentieth century, workers from various trades and occupations – weavers, scavengers, tanners, hotel workers, *beedi* (cigarette) workers, dock workers – mobilized themselves, adopting similar forms of organization and a similar language of protest.¹²

In this article, I extend and deepen this exploration by analysing collective responses of handloom weavers in South India to changing conditions – of work, markets, production processes, regimes of labour control, and state policies – at two key points in time: the late eighteenth–early nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. I borrow the term “repertoires” from Charles Tilly to describe forms of collective action adopted by weavers in their contentions with the state and employers. Tilly defined “repertoires” as “claim making routines” adopted between claimant-object pairs.¹³ These forms were part of a limited repertoire that changed only slowly over time through adaptation. Such change, he argued, was strongly influenced by changes in the nature of the state and its policies.¹⁴ As the process of change and adaptation in repertoires is slow, a comparison of two periods separated by a gap should help trace it more clearly.

Such an exercise should throw light on changing forms of protest and solidarity, and help tease out the factors that influence them. I will argue that changes in forms of organization and protest were organically linked to changes in the production process, the policies of the state, the larger political context (particularly forms of politics espoused by workers from other trades), and the labour movement in general.

Thus, while following Tilly in tracing the role played by the state in influencing forms of protest, I extend my analysis to the effects of changes in structures of production, social factors such as caste, and the larger political milieu. In narrowing his analysis to just two variables, Tilly fails to take account of other social, economic, and political factors. As Marcel van der Linden points out, he concentrates largely upon the state and this leads him to underplay mode of production, class conflict, and even social and cultural questions.¹⁵ While tracing changes in repertoires of resistance, I will also explore the changing dynamic of group solidarity and organization.

class in depth: see Ravi Ahuja (ed.), *Working Lives and Worker Militancy*. See also Aditya Sarkar's study of working-class protests in Bombay in the late nineteenth century in the same volume.

12. See the articles in Ravi Ahuja (ed.), *Working Lives and Worker Militancy* emphasizing the importance of contextualizing workers' struggles within larger political processes and labour politics. Ravi Ahuja, “Introduction” in *Working Lives and Worker Militancy*, p. xii.

13. Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago, IL, 2006), p. 35.

14. According to Tilly, every regime creates a specific environment of political opportunities and threats to which makers of claims necessarily respond, and changes in this environment produce changes in contention. Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires*, pp. 17, 43–44. He focuses principally on political regimes; here, I extend his analysis to other kinds of regulatory regimes as well.

15. Marcel van der Linden, “Charles Tilly’s Historical Sociology”, *International Review of Social History*, 54:2 (2009), pp. 237–274.

My methodology will be to describe and analyse certain events, and clusters of protests, around key issues during a period when the handloom industry in South India was radically reorganized. Through this exercise I seek to: a) trace the changing repertoires of resistance employed by weavers; b) understand the nature of ties of solidarity and how these were transformed – the roles played by caste, class, work experience, the wider political milieu; and c) examine the impact of changes in the state’s regulatory regime, the very structure of the handloom production, and the larger political milieu upon repertoires of resistance and forms of solidarity.

REPERTOIRES OF RESISTANCE IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES

This was a period in which many different kinds of weavers plied their trade: some produced directly for the consumer, receiving yarn and weaving cloth in return for an agreed wage. Others wove on their own account, with yarn spun in their own households or bought locally from hand-spinners: the cloth was sold in local markets. Yet others accepted advances from merchants in order to buy yarn and turned the finished cloth over to them. Some worked for the English East India Company (EIC), receiving advances and returning cloth.¹⁶ Weavers worked full-time or part-time, and they belonged to many different castes. Skilled weavers making fine cloth and usually working full-time belonged to castes identified with weaving.¹⁷ Others weaving coarse, durable varieties of cloth, came from both “specialist” and “non-specialist” weaving castes.¹⁸

Many different ways of obtaining yarn, and of selling cloth, were prevalent in the early nineteenth century. These varied by geographical region, the kind of cloth produced, and its intended market. Weavers in areas where cotton was grown had easier access to cotton and yarn: this reduced their dependence upon merchants. Advances of cash were common where cloth was produced for distant markets; and also in the case of fine cloths, which required more time and a greater outlay of investment. When

16. Although the company provided cash advances, it tried, and in some places succeeded, in replacing them with yarn advances. This was widely resented by weavers. For a detailed description of the various ways in which weaving was organized during this period see my doctoral thesis. D.W. Karuna, *Weaving Histories: Aspects of Production, Work and Identities, c.1800–1960* (Ph.D., Delhi University, 2013).

17. Some of the better known “weaving” castes are Salais (or Saliar), Devangar, Pattunoolkarar (or Sourashtras), and Kaikolar.

18. The largest number of weavers from “non-weaving” castes were from “untouchable” groups. For a description of the kinds of cloth produced and the various castes involved in weaving, see my article “The Geography of Weaving in Early Nineteenth-Century South India”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 52:2 (2002), pp. 147–184.



Figure 1. South India with Madras Presidency, early twentieth century.

Source: Based on Edgar Thurston, *The Madras Presidency with Mysore, Coorg and Associated States* (Cambridge, 1913).

weaving coarse cloth for local markets, and poor to middling customers, weavers either bought yarn themselves or borrowed money to do so. Most weavers owned a single loom.¹⁹ A common feature of these myriad ways of

19. Parthasarathi, *Transition to a Colonial Economy*, p. 17; D.W. Karuna, *Weaving Histories*, pp. 133–135.

making cloth was the control exercised by weavers over the production process itself.²⁰

Throughout this period, the EIC was steadily expanding its territorial jurisdiction: by the first decade of the nineteenth century it exercised almost complete political control over the whole of the Madras Presidency (covering most of South India). This had an immediate effect upon weavers in its employ. But laws enacted to control (and repress) weavers who worked for it also fed into general principles and practices of labour regulation.²¹ Added to this was its role as extractor of surplus (in the form of duties and taxes).

We can discern several kinds of collective actions directed at different centres of power. In the case of weavers working on their own account (or for private merchants), the most visible actions were directed against the state machinery: these included the systematic avoidance of duties, active opposition to the loom tax, and vociferous complaints about yarn and cloth markets. Merchants were subjected to less overt forms of protest, such as reducing the quantity and quality of yarn used to make cloth; in addition, weavers might change employers in order to obtain a better price.²²

In the case of weavers employed by the EIC, the company state acted as employer and political authority, combining commercial and coercive regulatory functions. It is here, where two modes of power merged, that the most direct and overt actions of resistance became visible. The repertoire of resistance in the early nineteenth century ranged from everyday forms of protest, such as evasion of duties to petitioning and migration, to, finally, direct actions, such as disruption of yarn and cloth markets, work stoppages, and mass gatherings.

MIGRATION OR COLLECTIVE WITHDRAWAL AS A FORM OF PROTEST

Mobility has long been associated with weavers,²³ including migration as a method of *protest*. References exist from medieval times of weavers quitting kingdoms in protest against high taxes. Rulers were often forced to reduce taxes in order to induce them to return.²⁴ In the seventeenth and eighteenth

20. Most historians working on weavers in the early modern period attest to this fact. See for example, Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, p. 25; Arasaratnam, *Weavers, Merchants and Company*, p. 268. Brenning, *Textile Producers and Production*, pp. 351–352. For a similar conclusion about weavers in Western India see Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism*, pp. 31–36.

21. For an insightful exploration of the labour policies in early colonial India, see Ravi Ahuja, “The Origins of Colonial Labour Policy in Late Eighteenth-Century Madras”, *International Review of Social History*, 44 (1999), pp. 159–195.

22. For examples see Parthasarathi, *Transition to a Colonial Economy*, chs 3 and 4.

23. Douglas E. Haynes and Tirthankar Roy, “Conceiving Mobility: Weavers’ Migrations in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 36:1 (1999), pp. 35–67.

24. Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Textiles and Weavers in Medieval South India* (Delhi, 1985), p. 34.

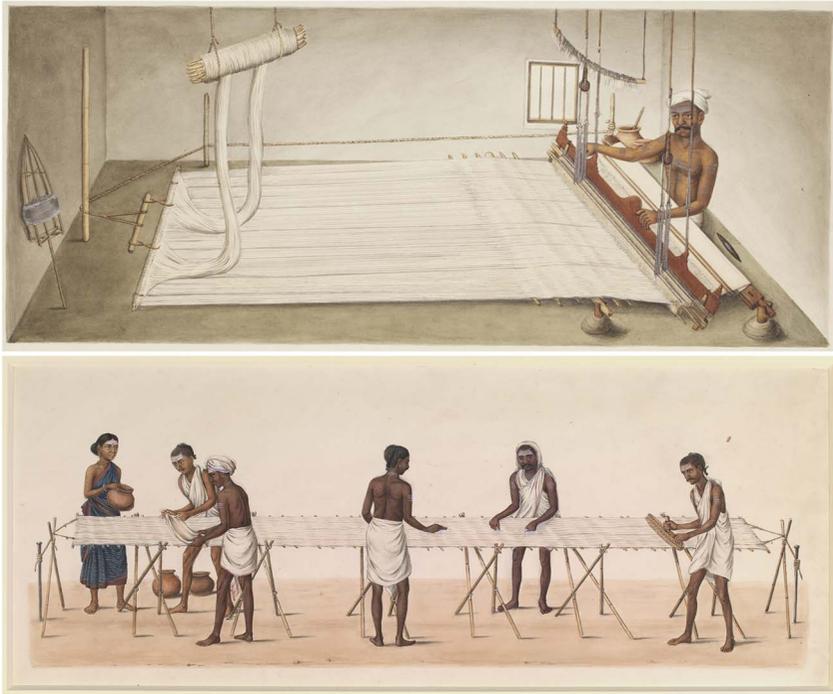


Figure 2. Company paintings from the early nineteenth century illustrating the production process in weaving.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Museum numbers: IS.102-1989 and IS.101-1989.

centuries, there are references to weavers dismantling their looms and leaving without returning advances because of unfair treatment.²⁵ Quite often, they would withdraw to some spot outside the ruler's control and bargain for a change in circumstances to facilitate their return.²⁶

Migration as a form of protest, often described as “the ultimate resource against oppression”, was not limited to weavers: it was actively used by other groups, such as agricultural labourers, boatmen, and carpenters in the early modern period.²⁷ Ahuja sees it as part of a regional political culture shared by various groups, and argues that it was particularly effective in the

25. Prasannan Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, pp. 106–108, 126.

26. Ravi Ahuja, “Labour Unsettled: Mobility and Protest in the Madras Region, 1750–1800”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 35:4 (1998), p. 394–395.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 394. Also see Jon Wilson's article on Bengal: Jon E. Wilson, “‘A Thousand Countries to Go To’: Peasants and Rulers in Eighteenth-Century Bengal”, *Past and Present*, 189 (November 2005), pp. 81–109.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, during a period of greater spatial and social mobility caused by increasing militarization and commercialization.²⁸ However, it declined and almost disappeared in the nineteenth century.²⁹ One of the reasons for this was undoubtedly the consolidation of political power in the hands of a single entity, the company state, for this strategy could work only so long as multiple centres of (real) power existed.

But the disappearance of migration as a form of protest also had to do with a change in the *nature* of the state. Prasannan Parthasarathi argues that the EIC represented a sharp break with previous South Indian political practice.³⁰ While I believe that his depiction of the benevolence (for want of a better word) of pre-colonial rulers in South India needs more empirical substantiation, the argument for a basic shift in the regulatory regime is convincing.³¹

He also argues that revenues obtained from taxing trade were critical to the finances of pre-colonial states – which was why they encouraged weavers and other artisans to settle in their territories (by providing tax exemptions). The company was forced to adopt this practice in order to expand its trade in textiles. However, it never ceased to resent it – the record is replete with officials arguing that such exemptions were unwarranted, and these assertions become stronger as the company's involvement in the textile trade waned.³²

In addition, the EIC put in place legal techniques and regulations derived from English jurisprudence, modified to suit a colonial context.³³ The written contract and its enforcement became central in this new system of jurisprudence.³⁴ Collective withdrawal by weavers was viewed as breach of contract to be dealt with punitively. Its effectiveness as a form of protest also

28. Ahuja, "Labour Unsettled", pp. 401–404.

29. In nineteenth-century sources, we find examples of weavers migrating to neighbouring districts or *zamindaris* to avoid paying certain taxes. For examples see Board of Revenue (hereafter BoR) Vol. 1903, No. 34, 12 February 1844, p. 2578, Tamil Nadu State Archives (hereafter TNSA), BoR Vol. 1369, No. 8, 20 June 1833, p. 7574, TNSA.

30. Parthasarathi, *Transition to a Colonial Economy*, ch. 5.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 93. Also see D.W. Karuna, *Weaving Histories: The Handloom Industry in South India: Aspects of Production, Work and Identities, c.1800–1960* (Ph.D., University of Delhi, 2013), pp. 207–208 for more evidence.

32. BoR Vol. 455, No. 7, 9 November 1807, p. 8790, TNSA; Consultation dated 28 February 1856 in India Revenue Consultations, 5 January to 28 March 1856, P/193/39, India Office Records (henceforth IOR), London.

33. For the late eighteenth century see Ravi Ahuja, "The Origins of Colonial Labour Policy", pp. 159–195; for the nineteenth century, Prabhu Mohapatra shows how the criminalization of breach of contract lay at the core of colonial jurisprudence in India.

34. Prabhu Mohapatra, "Regulated Informality: Legal Construction of Labour Relations in Colonial India, 1800–1926", in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Jan Lucassen (eds), *Workers in the Informal Sector: Studies in Labour History, 1800–2000* (Delhi, 2004), pp. 65–95.

depended upon the willingness of the state to recognize it as legitimate and to engage with its practitioners.³⁵

Thus, the decline in migration and collective withdrawal as forms of protest was linked not just to the political consolidation of the company state, and the consequent decline in spatial mobility, but also to the establishment of new regulatory institutions (such as boards of trade and revenue, courts of justice, etc.) with very different notions of legitimacy. This theme will be explored at greater length in the following sections.

PETITIONS, STOPPAGE OF WORK, THREATS OF VIOLENCE: CONFLICTS OVER THE LOOM TAX AND DUTIES ON CLOTH

Weavers were subject to two kinds of taxes – a tax on their looms and duties on cloth. As the nineteenth century progressed, the drive to raise revenue (informed by prevailing theories of political economy) made officials increasingly reluctant to relinquish the loom tax. The Madras Board of Revenue remained its staunch defender, maintaining that weavers did not pay “any [other] contribution in aid of the public resources”, and recommending its enhancement and extension.³⁶

Meanwhile, revenue officials sought to plug loopholes in collection and introduced tighter systems of surveillance. In 1802, regulations for levying inland duties were introduced. New duties were also imposed on cloth, and weavers were forced to have their textiles “chopped” (signifying a mark/stamp made on the cloth with a chop) at the nearest *chowkee* (or checkpoint) where registers were maintained.³⁷

The introduction of these new duties and procedures led to widespread discontent.³⁸ A common response was evasion.³⁹ For example, weavers (and merchants) in Madura district found ways to imitate the “chop” or

35. This is not to argue that pre-colonial states were more benevolent. They did, however, recognize collective withdrawal as a legitimate means of negotiation. More importantly, they lacked the coercive capacity to force their subjects to return. For a discussion of the limits of power in pre-colonial states see Shashank Kela, *A Rogue and Peasant Slave: Adivasi Resistance 1800–2000* (New Delhi, 2012).

36. BoR Vol. 455, No. 7, 9 November 1807, p. 8790, TNSA; Consultation dated 28 February 1856 in India Revenue Consultations, 5 January to 28 March 1856, P/193/39, IOR.

37. Madura District Records, Vol. 1166, 1 April 1822, p. 351, TNSA.

38. Francis Buchanan records weavers complaining about duties in Salem district. Hamilton F. Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Vol. II (New Delhi, 1988, reprint) pp. 241–242, 264–265. In Rajamundhry, weavers objected to peons “entering their houses at all times to stamp goods in the looms”, and to the new rates, BoR Vol. 380, No. 7, 31 May 1804, p. 4499, TNSA.

39. Madura District Records, Vol. 1166, 24 September 1817, p. 27, TNSA. The EIC came down hard upon these practices, bringing in new regulations to curb them, and sought to prosecute and punish all those evading duties. See Madura District Records, Vol. 1167, p. 183, 253–254, TNSA.

impress made on the cloth by revenue collectors once the duty had been paid.⁴⁰ In the case of the loom tax, weavers might migrate to neighbouring districts during the time it was collected, or try to pass themselves off as company weavers (who were exempt from it).⁴¹

It is during this period that petitioning became widespread.⁴² Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, we find weavers in different areas objecting to the loom tax on the grounds that it is either too high, too unequal, or against “custom”. Requests for exemption were regularly made.⁴³

Some groups threatened non-cooperation or recourse to violence as a way of reinforcing their demands: this happened in Madura in 1839 when weavers rose in opposition and “refused to render any assistance to the collector”. It was felt that any recourse to “compulsory measures [...] would be attended by the closing of the shops, temporary cessation of traffic and general disgust”.⁴⁴ After this, the loom tax was allowed to lapse in Madura district. In Salem, after repeated petitioning, weavers struck work in 1832 to demand its abolition.⁴⁵

In Rajamundhry, when a weaver on his way to sell cloth was stopped and flogged for evasion, others from neighbouring villages “assembled and stopped the markets”. During this protest (as in many others), there were reports of groups moving around convincing (or forcing) more cautious weavers to stop work and join them. A petition against the new duties was also planned.⁴⁶

The longest, most sustained struggle against the loom tax was conducted by the weavers of Kanchipuram, who claimed that they had been granted exemption in the 1780s.⁴⁷ From 1834, when the state tried to re-impose the

40. Madura District Records, Vol. 1164, p. 48–49, TNSA.

41. Madurai District Records Vol. 1129, p. 102, Vol. 1143, p. 53, TNSA; *The Baramahal Records*, Section VII: *Imposts*, p. 24–26.

42. Petitioning as a form of protest was probably used in earlier periods as well. The extent of its use and forms awaits further research. For Rajasthan see Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest*.

43. We find the weavers of Trichinopoly requesting exemption in BoR Vol. 358, No. 37, 15 September 1803, p. 10796, TNSA. Weavers in Cuddalore claim exemption in BoR Vol. 1430, No.120, 24 November 1834, p. 13197–98, TNSA. Examples from other districts are found in Tinnevely District Records Vol. 4711 A, p. 413; BoR Vol. 1374, No. 67, 25 July 1833, p. 9234, TNSA; BoR Vol. 1409, No. 17, 23 June 1834, pp. 5396–5397, TNSA; BoR Vol. 422, No. 5, 10 February 1806, pp. 950–952, TNSA; BoR Vol.1664, No. 31, 11 July 1839, pp. 8604–8605, TNSA; BoR Vol. 1976, No. 6, 18 August 1845, p. 10092, TNSA; Madura District Records, Vol. 4680, p. 121, TNSA.

44. BoR Vol. 1675, No. 2, 10 October 1839, p. 13589, TNSA.

45. BoR Vol. 1326, No. 38, 7 June 1832, p. 5478, TNSA; BoR Vol. 1348, No. 67, 6 Dec 1832, p. 12857, TNSA; BoR Vol. 1312, No. 78, 2 January 1832, p. 238, TNSA.

46. BoR Vol. 376, No. 17, 23 April 1804, pp. 3363–3370, TNSA. Disruption of thread markets appears to have been a frequent tactic to attract the attention of authorities. BoR Vol. 438, 26 April 1804, pp. 3482–3492, TNSA. For more examples see Ian Wendt, *The Social Fabric: Textile Industry and Community in Early Modern South India*, (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005), p. 182.

47. BoR Vol. 971, No. 31, 16 November 1820, pp. 9959–9960, TNSA.

tax, they began writing a stream of petitions to the Board of Revenue, the Government of India, and even to the Court of Directors in London. In 1843, they were finally ordered to pay the tax.⁴⁸

Most weavers in other *taluks* (revenue sub-divisions) did so, but not the Kanchipuram weavers.⁴⁹ When the *tabsildar* (a revenue official) tried to attach the properties of some individuals, about 2,000 weavers assembled and carried off everything that had been distrained. When the *tabsildar* returned with one hundred armed peons, their number had grown to 6,000, armed with sticks and stones.⁵⁰ The revolt had to be quelled by troops, and the ring leaders were arrested. Subsequently, the “heads of [...] weaving villages” met the collector and agreed to pay the tax.⁵¹

Notwithstanding this defeat, the weavers of Kanchipuram continued to petition for annulment of the tax. Some even went to court, but without success. Partly as a result of their efforts, an investigation into the whole class of *moturpha* taxes was ordered in 1861 and this eventually led to their abolition.⁵²

Why was the loom tax so resented? Weavers found it difficult to pass it on to their customers (who were often quite poor themselves), and the burden fell disproportionately on poorer weavers.⁵³ The collector of Kurnool observed that the tax had become a real burden after the general decline in weaving caused by English imports.⁵⁴ Even the rates varied widely, with some weavers being exempted and others paying less or more. This fed the feeling that the tax was essentially arbitrary and added to the perception of injustice.⁵⁵

In some cases, the central issue was not rates, but the very right to levy a tax from which weavers believed themselves exempt.⁵⁶ The weavers of Kanchipuram argued that they had been promised exemption when they settled there after the war with Hyder Ali, and the state was obliged to honour its promise. Officials, on the other hand, argued that it “never could have been intended that this relief and indulgence should extend beyond a few years or at most a definitive period”.⁵⁷

48. BoR Vol.1875, No.12, 14 September 1843, p. 12899, TNSA.

49. BoR Vol. 1887, No. 2, November 1843, p. 16579, TNSA.

50. BoR Vol. 1887, No. 2, November 1843, pp. 16580–16588, 16815–16816, TNSA.

51. BoR Vol. 1918, No. 6, 10 June 1844, p. 7793, TNSA.

52. For a detailed discussion on the tax, see consultation dated 28 February 1856 in India Revenue Consultations, 5 January to 28 March 1856, P/193/39, IOR.

53. Consultation dated 28 February 1856, in India Revenue Consultations, 5 January to 28 March 1856, P/193/39, IOR.

54. BoR Vol. 1972, No. 18, 30 June 1845, p. 8054, TNSA.

55. BoR Vol. 455, No. 7, 9 November 1807, p. 8790, TNSA; BoR Vol. 1908, No. 39, 18 March 1844, p. 4715, TNSA.

56. BoR Vol. 1918, No. 6, 10 June 1844, p. 7792, TNSA.

57. BoR Vol.1873, No. 14–15, 28 August 1843, p. 12139, TNSA.

Caste networks played an important role in these conflicts. When new rates were introduced in the Baramahal district, each caste of weavers (Jaders, Kaikolars, and Koliars) petitioned the authorities separately and sent delegations to get them lowered.⁵⁸ Weavers in the town of Salem refused to pay the loom tax; the collector reported that those of other *talooks* “declare that, if the people of Salem pay, then they are also willing to do so, but the fear of being turned out of their caste alone prevents them at present”.⁵⁹

It took innumerable petitions and struggles, and several inquiries into living conditions, before the Court of Directors finally decided to abolish *moturpha* taxes. An economic depression, particularly acute in the 1830s and 1840s, was reflected in lower revenue collections: this led to calls for a reduction in assessments and other taxes in order to revive agriculture and industry.

VIZAGAPATAM DISTRICT IN 1816–1817: OLD FORMS OF RESISTANCE AND NEW⁶⁰

In July 1816, several thousand men, women, and children from weaving households assembled on a hilltop called Samachellum near Vizagapatam “in the hope of attracting the notice of the company’s servants and thereby be enabled to obtain justice”.⁶¹ The Commercial Resident and Assistant Magistrate persuaded them to send a delegation to Vizagapatam to present their grievances. But as soon as it reached the town, it was placed under guard and peons sent to disperse the crowd. Subsequently, the delegates were released and asked to give their grievances in writing. These petitions were promptly returned by the judge on the grounds that they had not been prepared properly.

According to the Commercial Resident, the petitioners were not company weavers at all, or else were “ring leaders” and “notorious” characters. Once the assembly had been dispersed, the judiciary, the Commercial Resident, and the Board of Trade in Madras closed ranks.⁶²

58. *The Baramahal Records*, Section VII: *Imposts*, pp. 114–116.

59. Collectors of several districts expressed this opinion and called for abolition or reduction of tax rates. BoR Vol. 1312, No. 78, 2 January 1832, p. 239, TNSA; BoR Vol. 438, 26 April 1804, pp. 3482–3492, TNSA.

60. Swarnalatha also discusses this particular episode in *The World of the Weaver in Northern Coromandel, c.1750–c.1850* (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 135–143, using it to draw some conclusions about weaver protests in general, and the attitude of the state. I believe that it can be used to draw other conclusions about the ways in which weavers organized themselves, their methods of protest, and differences from earlier and later periods. Therefore, I have gone back to the sources for my analysis; all quotations are from source documents.

61. Commercial Department Consultations, Vol. 13, 14 February 1818, pp. 546–547 (petition), TNSA.

62. Commercial Department Consultations, Vol. 11, 11 August 1817, p. 1417 onwards, TNSA.

Undaunted, the weavers sent a delegation to Madras to meet members of the Board. They stayed there for several months until it agreed to set up a commission of inquiry to look into their grievances. After much effort and several petitions, the commission was finally formed. Hundreds of weavers and their representatives deposed before it and submitted a wealth of written material including letters, accounts, and *cadjams* (palm leaf records).

Their main complaints pertained to brokers used by the company to make advances for procuring cloth. According to the weavers, these brokers (known as *cobdars*) did not pay the advance in full. They paid it in kind instead of cash (in grain, cotton (or yarn), and tobacco, all charged at high rates). They bought rejected cloth at very low prices to sell on their own account; they also bought ready-made cloth from non-company weavers and lent advances saved in this fashion at usurious rates. If the weavers complained, they were punished and flogged on some pretext. The head servant in the factory used his influence with the Commercial Resident to deny them justice.

It should be noted, firstly, that almost all these complaints pertain to alterations in the *system* of production: the advance of raw materials and supplies instead of cash, tighter control in sorting cloth, the arbitrary distribution of advances, penal punishments for what were essentially commercial disputes.

Swarnalatha points out that the company sought to dismiss the complaints on technical grounds, by harping upon the fact that the weavers had not followed due process. Through new regulations and juridical systems, the state had arrogated to itself the right to define collective gatherings and stoppages of work as “insurrections” and declare them “illegitimate”. Mass protests could not be acknowledged: the Board of Trade could not “sanction combinations of weavers for the purpose of making general complaints”, or acknowledge “persons stating themselves to be agents for such combinations”.⁶³ Weavers were told that they should seek redress from the competent authority: any complaints of ill-treatment should go to the magistrate and grievances about payments to the Commercial Resident.⁶⁴

There are many interesting aspects to this particular episode. The first is the use of collective action, and subsequently the readiness to argue their case by adapting to prescribed methods of presenting witnesses and

63. P. Swarnalatha, “Revolt, Testimony and Petition: Artisanal Protests in Colonial Andhra”, in Lex Heerma van Voss (ed.) *Petitions in Social History*, International Review of Social History, Supplement 9 (2001), pp. 107–129, 109. Also, Swarnalatha, *The World of the Weaver*, p. 139. Hossain makes the same argument in Hameeda Hossain, *Company Weavers of Bengal: The East India Company and the Organization of Textile Production in Bengal, 1750–1813* (Delhi, 1988), ch. 4, pp. 109–123.

64. Commercial Department Consultations Vol. 11, pp. 1422–1424, TNSA.

submitting documents of proof. In order to meet questions about their legitimacy, leaders obtained documents signed by hundreds of weavers authorizing them to act on their behalf. When a delegation was asked how they “become constituted chiefs for the whole of the weavers of Vizagapatam district” it replied that “the weavers constituted us as their agents themselves and assured us of every assistance”.⁶⁵ When asked whether they had any written authority to this effect, they answered that it was with their representative in Madras.

Delegations from different *mocoums*, consisting of six weavers each (but carrying written authorizations from several hundred more), came before the commission to depose. The separate delegations, in turn, authorized one Immandy Ammanah to represent them and give “all necessary details”.⁶⁶ Another leader, Surnumpoody Ramanah, was stationed in Madras along with several other delegates.

Here, we see a very large group of weavers adopting procedures of colonial jurisprudence. After assembling in their thousands, and selecting representatives to present their grievances, they also came up with written documents of authorization when that proved necessary. Despite declaring that it would not recognize weaver combinations, the state was finally forced to set up a committee to inquire into their grievances.

A comparison with earlier protests shows how older techniques of confrontation and negotiation were being altered to suit changing circumstances. Even before this, weavers had presented petitions and approached authorities in Madras. Parthasarathi points to the importance attached to writing in the preceding period.⁶⁷ However, the mass of documentation assembled in this case is quite new. Immandy Ammanah presented accounts written on *cadjams* by *cobdars* – letters/notes telling weavers to collect grain from some merchant, letters instructing them to provide cloth on private account, and so on. He also produced witnesses including Brahmin accountants, *ex-cobdars*, and merchants, and cross-questioned the *cobdars* and the witnesses *they* presented.⁶⁸ Responding to questions by the Commission, delegations averred that they had followed “due procedure”, in that they had first approached the competent authorities, resorting to collective action only when those attempts failed.⁶⁹

Another aspect of the struggle was the creation of alliances and solidarities. As Parthasarathi points out, these are not given, but “made and remade continuously through work, worship, marriage and politics”.⁷⁰

65. Commercial Department Consultations Vol. 13, p. 353, TNSA.

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 398, 400.

67. Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, p. 104.

68. Commercial Department Consultations Vol. 13, pp. 416, 472, 520–521, TNSA.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 386, 392, 411, TNSA.

70. Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, p. 111.

Caste and kinship networks played an important role, and weavers of different castes could join together to make collective demands.⁷¹ This particular struggle reveals an alliance between weavers from the Devanga and the Sale castes.⁷² It was reported that some money had been provided by a member of the Janapa caste (associated with gunny weaving).⁷³ The delegations in Madras received money sent by ordinary weavers carried by those bringing cloth to the city for sale.⁷⁴

Caste networks threw up community leaders, but there were also internal frictions. The *cobdars* and the Commercial Resident managed to get a group of weavers to depose that they were satisfied with the status quo, and sign declarations in support of the company's operations.

In response to this, delegates averred these declarations had been obtained under duress. However, a simple comparison of the number of weavers who signed authorizations and those on the company's rolls shows that not all weavers joined the protest. The very act of assembling, selecting representatives, drawing up petitions, stopping work, and getting others to do so undoubtedly contributed to forming collective solidarity.⁷⁵ It may have been cemented by the fact that most complaints were directed against "*banyan*" *cobdars* (*banyan* or *bania* signifies a merchant caste); the head servant in the factory also belonged to the same caste.

A principal demand was their replacement by men from weaving castes, harking back to recent practice. *Cobdars* acted as brokers between merchants and weavers in some districts of the Madras Presidency. The company aimed to cut merchants out by working directly with weavers through the *cobdars*. In Vizagapatam district, *cobdars* appointed by the company around 1802 came mostly from weaving castes; they were later replaced by *bania cobdars* on the grounds of inefficiency.⁷⁶

Who were the weavers' leaders? The most prominent, as we have seen, was Immandy Ammanah. Surnumpoody Ramanah in Madras was lobbying officials and submitting petitions and information sent from Vizagapatam. Both formed part of the delegation to Madras. Delegates stationed there regularly communicated through letters with weavers back in Vizagapatam.⁷⁷ Petitions were signed both by "head weavers" and "weavers".

Immandy Ammanah belonged to a weaving caste, had once been a *cobdar*, and was clearly a prosperous and influential man. By the time the

71. *Ibid.*, pp. 113–114.

72. Commercial Department Consultations Vol. 11, pp. 1430–1433, TNSA.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*, pp. 1442–1443, TNSA.

75. See Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, ch. 4, for a detailed analysis.

76. Swarnalatha, *The World of the Weaver*, pp. 83–84.

77. See Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, pp. 115–116, on the use of writing by weavers.

protest began he had ceased to work for the EIC. He appears to have risen to leadership during the course of the struggle, and perhaps had a personal interest in the affair, insofar as getting rid of *baniya cobdars* would enable influential weavers (such as himself) to take their place.

Each *mocoum* sent six representatives to the commission. “Head weavers” from every *mocoum* participated in the protest. In many ways, the head weaver appears to be a social, rather than an economic category during this period. He mediated between ordinary weavers and the state: head weavers collected and passed on the loom tax in some places, receiving certain concessions in return. They also arbitrated internal disputes over caste regulations.⁷⁸ Mizushima Tsukasa shows how headmen of the Kaikolar (a prominent weaving caste) were selected by an assembly, and that conflicts could arise over such selections.⁷⁹ During this period, as Parthasarathi, Swarnalatha, and Arasaratnam all point out, weavers were often represented by “head weavers”.⁸⁰ Parthasarathi argues that they played a critical role in the organization and execution of protests in the late eighteenth century. Towards its end, they became increasingly entrenched in the company’s dealings, playing the role of brokers; as a result, their allegiance gradually shifted. In support of this hypothesis, he cites incidents where weavers came together to challenge the power of head weavers.⁸¹

While it is true that relations between head weavers and ordinary weavers became increasingly troubled, I would argue that much depended upon event and context. In 1816, both were on the same side against *cobdars* who, not coincidentally, happened to belong to trading castes. Another fact that comes through clearly is that head weavers, certainly in this case, were strongly knit with the community and did not (or could not) act independently of it. This was beginning to change (as Parthasarathi points out) and they were gaining more power and influence; however, ordinary weavers

78. Vijaya Ramaswamy equates “head weavers” with “master weavers”; however, every other historian working on this period has noted that these “head weavers” were very different from European master craftsmen employing journeymen. Parthasarathi finds no evidence pointing to the existence of “master weavers” owning many looms or controlling the production process. Arasaratnam argues that head weavers were a social rather than an economic category, and distinguishes them from other intermediaries such as *copdars* or *careedars*, found mainly in the Northern Coromandel. These usually came from weaving castes, but were sometimes *baniyas*: they acted as brokers for merchants. It is quite possible that head weavers began assuming the role of brokers as time passed. Sinnapah Arasaratnam, “Weavers, Merchants and Company: The Handloom Industry in Southeastern India 1750–1790”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 17:3 (1980), pp. 265–266; Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, p. 17.

79. Mizushima Tsukasa, *Nattar and the Socio-economic Change in South India in the 18th–19th Centuries* (Tokyo, 1986), pp. 140, 142, 143.

80. Arasaratnam, *Weavers, Merchants and Company*, pp. 276–277; Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, pp. 104–118.

81. Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, p. 117.

were still capable of forcing them to support their demands⁸² or electing new leaders and agents to represent them.

To sum up: weavers in the early nineteenth century defended, as well as they could, their position vis-a-vis merchants, the company, and the state. The main areas of conflict were control over the production process, incomes, and taxes. Their primary target was the company state as employer and ruler. Meanwhile the EIC, in its dual role, was creating new structures of regulation by using its power to legislate. It was also redefining legitimate (and illegitimate) forms of collective action.

While stoppage of work, mass assemblies, threats of violence, etc. persisted, this period is marked by the primacy of petitioning. Petitioning was favoured by the state; and like migration or “collective withdrawal” in an earlier period, it was used by different groups in the nineteenth century.⁸³ In the European context, the practice has been associated with a shift towards more participatory forms of government. In India, Aparna Balachandran argues, it was linked to the assertion of territorial mastery by the colonial state defining itself as the sole dispenser and adjudicator of justice. In other words, petitioning becomes emblematic of the legal regime of an increasingly *coercive* state.⁸⁴

Weavers perforce learned to petition and to assemble detailed documentary evidence in support of their claims. The mass of documentation produced by the weavers in 1816 is clearly something new, a response to new procedures and expectations by the state. At the same time, attempts by the state to enforce “legitimate” forms of grievance redressal were challenged, and it was sometimes forced to respond to “illegitimate” protests. Thus, weavers learned to conform to the state’s demands *without* eschewing mass protests.

Forms of solidarity drew upon existing networks of community reformulated in specific contexts. The role played by caste networks in mobilizing artisans has been pointed out by scholars: these operated at supra-local levels as well.⁸⁵ In some late-eighteenth century protests, weavers from different castes formed an alliance (*samayam*).⁸⁶ In 1816, such an alliance between Salais and Kaikolars, possibly supported by the Janappas, becomes visible. Caste networks sustained the struggle as it sought to confront the state in faraway Madras.

82. In another incident “about 1000 weavers [...] seized the head weavers thereof who were minding the Company’s business without joining them”. Quoted in Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, p. 117.

83. Aparna Balachandran’s study shows how petitioning emerged as an important claim making device amongst outcaste “Pariah” residents of Madras while asserting rights over land. Aparna Balachandran, *Christ and the Pariah: Colonialism, Religion and Outcaste Labour in South India, 1780–1830* (Ph.D., Columbia University, 2008), ch. 2.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

85. P. Swarnalatha, *The World of the Weaver*, pp. 129–130.

86. *Ibid.*; Parthasarathi, *Transition to a Colonial Economy*, pp. 113–114.

In Vizagapatam, the leaders were “head weavers” acting as community leaders. But their role was reaffirmed through wider consultation. Nor was there total consensus: some refractory weavers were persuaded to support the *cobdars*. This is an important factor to be noted in the context of the changing role of the head weaver: in the very different economic, political, and social milieu of the twentieth century, he would cease to play a leading role in protests.

THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: ESTABLISHING THE CONTEXT

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the structures of the handloom industry were almost completely reorganized. The hand-spinner disappeared, and yarn production became the preserve of large mills. As access to yarn and consumer markets became more centralized, the old practice of weaving for customers who supplied yarn vanished. The number of independent weavers buying their own yarn declined. Production organized through merchants and master weavers became predominant.

Master weavers denoted weavers prosperous enough to hire other weavers to work for them and with better access to yarn (and cloth) markets. Some might continue to weave themselves, or shift their attention entirely to putting out work and selling yarn (or cloth). Sometimes, yarn merchants are also called master weavers in the sources. The category was variable: some had hundreds of weavers working for them; others employed no more than a handful.⁸⁷

They played a central role in the organization of production and exercised direct control over the production process, providing the weaver with raw materials and taking back the woven cloth in return for a wage. Production was organized in several ways. In what was called the “*oppundum*” system (*oppundum* means “contract” or “agreement” in Tamil), the weaver owned his loom and worked in his own house (thus exercising some control over work rhythms and space). Concomitantly, there was a rapid increase in the number of loomless or *coolie* weavers who worked in home workshops or small factories.⁸⁸ The vast majority of weavers no longer had direct access to yarn or cloth markets; these could only be tapped through master weavers and/or merchants.

This new configuration of production involved frequent spells of unemployment or reduction in wages during periods of crisis (violent fluctuations in supply or demand in yarn or cloth markets).

87. For a detailed description of the different systems through which textile production was organized see my Ph.D. dissertation, University of Delhi, 2014, “Weaving Histories”, ch. IV.

88. A survey of weavers in the Madras Presidency in 1939 found that about a third (30.5 per cent) of all weavers were hired workers; 46.5 per cent of all weavers were employed under the “*oppundum*” or contract/putting-out system. Development Department G.O. No. 2058, 21.8.1939, TNSA.

This consequence was not entirely market driven, but derived from the structure of the industry that allowed the master weaver or merchant to shift the burden of market fluctuations on to the ordinary weaver by stopping the supply of yarn or by cutting wages.⁸⁹

Master weavers in the twentieth century (unlike head weavers earlier) were not community leaders but capitalist entrepreneurs. They have been described as “weaver capitalists” playing a key role in the revival of the handloom industry.⁹⁰ In touch with markets, intimately familiar with the workings of the industry from the inside, they were well placed to make innovations. I will go on to argue that they were both patrons *and* oppressors of ordinary weavers (who were often in debt to them).⁹¹

Forms of protest and organization also underwent corresponding changes. We have seen that, in the conflicts of the early nineteenth century, the state was the principal target in its dual role of employer and extractor of revenue. Those of the twentieth century pitted the weaver in opposition to the master weaver and yarn dealer (or factory owner). Weavers sought to put pressure upon the state to arbitrate between capital and labour, and get it to act in *their* interests. It is in this period that the state became increasingly involved in conflicts between labour and capital.⁹² It no longer taxed weavers, but its economic policies had a direct impact upon their livelihoods. In these changed circumstances weavers had perforce to modify their repertoire and develop new forms of organization and protest (partly drawing upon older practices and solidarities).

THE RISE OF UNIONS

Weavers continued to use older methods (though petitioning receded into the background with strikes and rallies taking centre stage), and weavers also engaged with new institutions and laws introduced by the state such as Courts of Inquiry appointed to investigate labour issues (in the 1940s), the Industrial Disputes Tribunals (constituted under the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947), and the Non-Power Factories Act and Madras Shops and Establishments Acts (enacted in 1948). But the most striking element was

89. For a detailed description of fluctuations in the handloom industry and their impact upon ordinary weavers see my Ph.D. dissertation, ch. II. Douglas Haynes also shows how master weavers and merchants shifted the hazards of the market on to ordinary weavers by cutting wages and stopping yarn supplies. Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism*, ch. V.

90. Tirthankar Roy, *Artisans and Industrialization: Indian Weaving in the Twentieth Century* (Delhi, 1993) pp. 72–104; Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism*, p. 14.

91. This duality in the relationship between master weavers and weavers is brought out very effectively by Haynes.

92. It played this role quite centrally in the case of large-scale factories (by enacting various laws to do with labour control), but this arbitration also extended, albeit to a smaller extent, into more dispersed industries such as handlooms, tanneries and *beedi* (cigarette) making units.

the rise of unions, involving new concepts of solidarity and new kinds of leadership.

Issues affecting the handloom industry at large (such as the non-availability of yarn, competition from mills, demands for state protection and intervention) were articulated by leaders, who, though from weaving castes, were usually not themselves weavers. On such issues master weavers, workshop owners, and ordinary weavers came together.⁹³ In much the same way, during times of yarn shortage, many handloom weavers' associations came together to ask the state to ensure yarn supplies at reasonable cost.

But on the question of wages, bonuses, and working conditions in factories, a sharp division emerged within weaving communities between master weavers and ordinary weavers. It was these issues that became the focus of union agitations.

Unionization amongst weavers in South India began in the 1930s and became widespread in the 1940s. The first unions were small and local, often containing weavers from a single caste, and dealt with local issues: compromises were usually reached through the intervention of government representatives or community leaders.

In February 1938, a dispute over wages was reported from Arupukottai (Ramnad district) where "large bodies of workers made representations to the master weavers".⁹⁴ The circle inspector of police intervened and the master weavers gave an undertaking not to reduce wages. By 1939, an unregistered union of weavers had emerged in Arupukottai with about a thousand members, all of whom belonged to the Devanga Chettiar caste. The union wrote to the collector complaining of continued unemployment amongst its members, and the refusal of merchants to advance yarn.⁹⁵

Unions rapidly increased in number and strength during the war years. The reason lay in rampant profiteering by yarn dealers and master weavers, laying bare the facts of inequality and exploitation as never before.⁹⁶ When a policy of yarn control and rationing was introduced in response to widespread unemployment (which had led to rioting and looting in many places), yarn dealers and master weavers combined to make huge profits

93. For example, a petition presented by members of the Saurashtra Sabha asked for the establishment of a weaving school and for a member from the weaving community to be appointed to the Legislative Council: see *The Third Tour of His Excellency The Hon'ble Sir Arthur Lawley to Madura and Trichinopoly, November 18–20, 1906* (Madras, 1909), pp. 35–37. Similar demands can be found in *Papers Relating to the Industrial Conference, 1908*.

94. Development Department G.O. No. 618, 14 March 1939, TNSA.

95. *Ibid.*

96. One of the chief organizers of the Tamil Nadu Handloom Workers Federation stated that it was rampant black marketing and profiteering by yarn dealers and master weavers that led to the proliferation of handloom weavers unions. *Janasakthi*, 14 February 1945.

upon the black market. Most agitations during the war period arose over the non-availability of yarn and rampant black marketing.

Textile Control Boards set up by the state at the national and provincial levels were dominated by the big fish of the textile world: mill owners and other capitalists. District advisory boards, entrusted with overseeing the implementation of quotas, were dominated by master weavers and yarn dealers. They were supposed to count the number of looms and estimate the amount of yarn required. Not unsurprisingly, they combined to maximum advantage: master weavers inflated the number of looms under their control to corner more yarn, which they sold on the black market at a huge profit.⁹⁷ Both groups often came from the same families. According to a weaver in Kanchipuram, the official list of looms (above 5,000) was based on inflated figures provided by a few master weavers: he estimated that only around 2,000 looms existed.⁹⁸ Many master weavers or yarn dealers would supply yarn only on condition that weavers deposit their ration cards with them: those who could not get yarn elsewhere had to agree, and future supplies of yarn on that card went to the master weaver.⁹⁹

As for the broader political context, the 1930s and 40s were a very active period of mobilization and protest in general. Coimbatore and Madurai, where handloom weavers' unions were strong, were centres of protest by mill workers. Unions were also formed in many "informal" industries such as tanneries and *beedi* making as well as in the service sector (hotel employees, transport workers).¹⁰⁰

Unions worked to expose black marketing in yarn (as well as food). The institution of ration cards for the supply of yarn was partly a result of their agitations. They also demanded weavers' representation in the Textile Control Commission and District Advisory Boards. Weavers' unions, especially those under the banner of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), gained momentum from the organization of mill workers in cities like Madurai and Coimbatore.

Where unions were strong, the black market was curbed somewhat and weavers were able to obtain some yarn. They succeeded in getting their representatives on many district boards to cross-check the issue of ration cards; and

97. Development Department G.O. No. 2484-2490, 9 June 1944, TNSA; Development Department G.O. No. 2231, 24 May 1944, TNSA; Development Department G.O. No. 5108, 16 October 1948, TNSA; Naidu, *Court of Enquiry*, pp. 14-15; *Janasakthi*, 14 March 1945, 18 July 1945, 20 December 1944, 9 May 1945, 25 July 1945; *Janasakthi*, 20 December 1944.

98. *Janasakthi*, 9 May 1945.

99. *Janasakthi*, 11 July 1945, Development Department G.O. No. 4755, 21 September 1949, TNSA; Development Department G.O. No. 2566, 14 May 1949, TNSA. Naidu, *Court of Enquiry*, p. 15.

100. Ravi Ahuja points out that unions were formed in almost all trades, industries, and services during this period without distinction between "formal" and "informal" sectors. Ravi Ahuja (ed.), *Working Lives and Worker Militancy*, p. xv.

sometimes in getting yarn routed through unions rather than master weavers.¹⁰¹ These successes were balanced by failures in other cases.¹⁰² Meanwhile, master weavers and factory owners got together to form their own associations.

Immediately after the war, when the demand for cloth declined steeply, agitations turned to the issue of wages. In 1945, unrest broke out in Coimbatore, Karaikudi, Auruppukotati, Sankarankoil, and other places. Weavers struck work successfully in some cases, unsuccessfully in others. In Bhuvanagiri (South Arcot), 2,000 weavers went on strike after repeated petitions to the owners' association to increase wages failed to elicit a response. A compromise was eventually brokered and wages raised.¹⁰³ In January 1948, *coolie* weavers in Chingelput district "refused to work under the master weavers as a protest against the reduction of their wages from Rs 10 to Rs 9 per piece". The dispute was settled "satisfactorily" and work resumed.¹⁰⁴ In April 1948, the master weavers of Tiruchirapalli (who had formed their own association) signed an agreement with the handloom workers union, but went back on it after a fortnight. The Commissioner of Labour tried to mediate, but the master weavers refused to take back wage cuts and the dispute was referred to the Industrial Tribunal.¹⁰⁵ The demand for higher wages became a permanent feature of agitations.¹⁰⁶

Weavers petitioned master weaver associations, struck work, and held rallies. In handloom factories, unions turned their attention to working conditions, paid leave, continuous employment, bonus, wages, etc. These struggles were strongest in factories on the west coast. Compromises were sometimes brokered, but unions increasingly began approaching labour commissioners and the Industrial Disputes Tribunal. The new Non-Power Factories Act became a reference point for many struggles.¹⁰⁷ During this period, there were clear echoes of the struggles of workers in large-scale industry (such as textile mills) in the struggles and demands of handloom weavers. An official inquiry into the state of the handloom industry was conducted by Narayanaswamy Naidu in 1948; unions agitated for implementation of its recommendations. They also demanded

101. In Madurai, the president of the yarn dealers association was the head of the district advisory committee; and its secretary was the president of the weavers union. Both signed ration cards issued to weavers and master weavers. *Janasakthi*, 18 July 1945, 25 July 1945, 30 May 1945, 8 August 1945, 14 February 1945; P. Srinivasan, *Communist Heroes of Tamilnadu, Part I (in Tamil)* (Madras, 2005), p. 299.

102. *Janasakthi*, 6 June 1945.

103. *Janasakthi*, 30 May 1945.

104. Development Department G.O. No. 781, 17 February 1949, TNSA.

105. Development Department G.O. No. 4208, 13 August 1948, TNSA.

106. *Janasakthi*, 30 May 1945; Development Department G.O. No. 4208, 13 August 1948, TNSA; Development Department G.O. No. 781, 17 February 1949, TNSA.

107. This legislation was a result of numerous agitations in small-scale industry asking for some form of regulation. Development Department G.O. No. 382, 26 January 1949, TNSA; Development Department G.O. No. 1312–1313, 14 March 1949, TNSA.

that the Non-Power Factories Act of 1948 be implemented and provisions such as minimum wage and bonuses be made mandatory. In western Maharashtra, Douglas Haynes describes similar agitations by handloom worker unions asking for implementation of labour protection laws applied to larger industries.¹⁰⁸

The colonial state's legal framework influenced both the content and form of weavers' struggles. Faced with growing labour mobilization in the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly in cities like Bombay, the state introduced laws in order to rein in and better control such situations. Legal provisions such as registration of unions, sufficient notice before strikes and compulsory arbitration were introduced through the Trade Unions Act in 1926 and amended several times thereafter. While these laws were designed to control labour mobilization they also provided statutory recognition to the *concept* of labour protection. During this period, we find a wide range of workers, including weavers, forming unions and engaging actively with labour laws and state institutions.

In the final analysis, it was the state, through its laws and institutions, that acted as gatekeeper, determining which groups would gain access to legal protection. In the process, a sharp divide between the formal and informal sectors was created. Prabhu Mohapatra describes the role played by the state in the process of informalization of capital-labour relations and labour regulation in the nineteenth century. He argues that "informal" labour relations did not imply the absence of the state; rather, state legislation served to privatize labour regulation by granting the employer disciplinary powers, and helped create the "spontaneous and natural" character of informal relations of labour and capital.¹⁰⁹ In the mid-twentieth century, we find the state playing a key role in creating the formal-informal divide by determining which laws would apply to whole groups and categories of workers. It is no coincidence that many weavers' struggles during this period were centred around the status and definition of worker.

With the setting up of the Industrial Disputes Tribunal in 1947, conflicts began to be examined under legal constructs and weavers had to establish their legal status as workers. Handloom factory owners promptly challenged the jurisdiction of the tribunal. Even when specific disputes were admitted for examination, weavers had to establish their legal status as employees of master weavers or factory owners. This was far from easy as most worked under the "*oppundum*" or contract system. In Alandur (South Arcot), the tribunal agreed to recognize only those weavers who worked under a master weaver in his home/workshop as workers. Others who worked from their own homes were deemed to be self-employed.¹¹⁰

108. Douglas Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism*, ch. 8.

109. Prabhu Mohapatra, "Regulated Informality".

110. Development Department G.O. No. 5190, 25 October 1949, TNSA.

In Tiruchirapalli, conversely, the tribunal ruled that weavers working for master weavers from their own homes were workers, despite master weavers trying to pass themselves off as merchants and describing their relationship with weavers as that of buyer and seller. The tribunal rejected this claim on the grounds that wages were fixed and registered as such in the books of employers. Similar rulings were passed in Sankarapandipuram and Sankarankoil.¹¹¹

But even when weavers managed to establish their status as workers, the struggle to obtain such basic rights as a minimum wage, continuity of employment, bonuses, and other welfare measures was a prolonged and difficult one. Essentially, they came to depend upon institutions of state (such as the Industrial Disputes Tribunal) to enforce protective measures. But the state's main concern was to "protect" small-scale industry – in the sense of protecting capital invested in it. This was amply demonstrated by its policies (designed to encourage investment in the small-scale sector). Small-scale industries were exempted from the Factories Act; and even provisions of the Non-Powered Factories Act and the Madras Shops and Establishments Act, 1948 (ostensibly enacted to protect labour in such industries) were diluted. Thus, in 1950, establishments of "independent" handloom weavers were exempted; in 1952, all establishments employing family labour were made exempt from the Act; in 1953, all persons employed on contract and piece rate basis were exempted; and in 1954, all establishments employing three and less than three persons were also made exempt.¹¹²

This policy of protecting capital at the expense of labour in the "unorganized" sector was to become a hallmark of independent India's industrial policy. During a debate in the Legislative Assembly on implementing labour laws in the *beedi* (cigarette) industry, the Chief Minister of Madras argued that the whole industry seemed dependent upon home labour, and if factory laws were applied to it great distress would be created.¹¹³ This tendency is also evident in the pattern of judgements passed by the Industrial Disputes Tribunal (and the report of the Court of Enquiry). The tribunal consistently ruled that weavers could not claim bonus or continuous employment or any other welfare measures (such as provident fund) *even when their status as workers was established*. The reason given was that master weavers and factory owners could not afford these luxuries!¹¹⁴

111. Development Department G.O. No. 4755, 21 September 1949, TNSA; Development Department G.O. No. 2566, 14 May 1949, TNSA.

112. Development Department G.O. No. 2542, 27 June 1950, TNSA; Development Department G.O. No. 4817, 31 October 1953, TNSA; Development Department G.O. 5120, 10 December 1953, TNSA; Industries, Labour and Cooperation Department G.O. No. 3416, 4 December 1954.

113. Madras Legislative Assembly Debates, December 1953, Vol. 10, No.4, pp. 226–227.

114. Examples of such decisions can be found in Development Department G.O. No. 5190, 25 October 1949, TNSA; Development Department G.O. No. 5973, 20 December, 1949, TNSA.

With state policies tilted firmly towards capital, the dispersed and unorganized nature of handloom industry made it difficult for workers to fight for long-term structural changes, such as permanence of employment, benefits, paid leave, etc. Instead, their struggles became focused on the immediate and the short term: the wage rise and bonus of that particular year. It was only in the 1970s that weavers in Tamil Nadu (carved out of the erstwhile Madras Presidency) managed to claim a cash bonus. Until then, they were gifted some cloth at Deepavali (the most important Hindu festival), and even this was viewed as a paternalistic gift rather than an entitlement. Agitations had to be mounted every year on the question of bonus and wage rates. The weavers' strongest weapon was a strike during the peak season, just before the major festivals, when unions usually arrived with a long list of demands, with wage and bonus rates at the top, and others such as regularization of employment, institution of dearness allowance, etc. at the bottom. Strikes generally wound up with a compromise over wage rates and bonus.¹¹⁵

INTERNAL STRUCTURES OF SOLIDARITY

Though little evidence survives on the internal working of unions during this period, some general impressions can be gathered. As already indicated, the first unions appear to have been organized on caste lines. But cross-caste alliances soon began to be formed. A very large show of strength was organized by the Tamil Nadu Handloom Weavers Federation at its first Provincial Conference in Madurai in 1945. Numerous independent unions became members of the federation. From Tirunelveli district alone eighteen weavers' unions with 14,000 members were reported. In Chingelput district, there were sixty-seven handloom workers unions.¹¹⁶

Newspaper reports and eyewitness accounts describe the gathering held in the dry bed of the Vaigai river, where an enormous tent had been constructed. Around 50,000 weavers and workers attended the conference. Thousands of women (ten thousand, according to one estimate) came with their children. Meena Krishnaswamy, a party activist, recalls how one part of the *pandal* was filled with *thottils* (cradles) in which babies slept.¹¹⁷ Muslim weavers from Ramnad, Devanga weavers from Coimbatore, and Kaikolar (Mudaliar) weavers from Tinnevely attended in large numbers. Different flags – the red of the Communists, the green of the Muslim League, the tricoloured Congress flag – decorated the tent.¹¹⁸

115. Interview with Com. Murugan, Madurai, 3 February 2009 and with P.M. Kumar, senior activist in CITU, 27 January 2009.

116. *Janasakthi*, 14 February 1945 and 28 February 1945

117. Interview dated 8 February 2008 with Meena Krishnaswamy, member of the Communist Party of India, who worked in Madurai in the 1940s. See also, *Janasakthi*, 11 April 1945.

118. *Janasakthi*, 11 April 1945.



Figure 3. Page from *Janasakthi*, 11 August 1945, with, at the bottom, a group photo of some of the volunteers who helped organize the huge handloom weavers conference in Madurai in 1945. The newspaper article mentions that there were 500 volunteers, 300 of them handloom weavers, 150 of them mill workers, and fifty women. This demonstrates that unionization amongst handloom weavers and mill workers was part of the same historical milieu where they shared spaces and converged at particular historical moments. Source: British Library, Endangered Archives Project, EAP372/9/615; Janacakti [11 Apr 1945]. © The British Library Board. Used by permission.

In Madurai, a city with a large handloom industry, two distinct kinds of unions emerged: of Saurashtra weavers (who wove fine cloths and were embedded in the “*oppundum*” system); and those who worked in handloom factories.¹¹⁹ They functioned independently even when united under the same banner (such as that of the AITUC). This was partly due to sectoral differentiation, but caste identity also played a prominent role. Unions in the factory sector contained weavers from several castes such as Mudaliar/Kaikolar, Saliar, and Moopnar. Though caste played a role in union mobilization, shop floor solidarities and those formed in the neighbourhood cut across caste identities.¹²⁰

Such cross-cutting and intertwining of caste and class challenges Tirthankar Roy’s emphasis on community ties in the case of Saurashtra weavers – to the extent of arguing that “the notion of “class”, as consciousness or as bargaining group is conspicuous by its absence in *all* sources on Sourashtras, old or new”.¹²¹ In his pioneering study, Roy argued that in the early twentieth century they actively promoted a sense of community and identity essential to their emergence of artisan-capitalists; he terms this process “cooperative capitalism”. There is no doubt that a strong sense of community and caste played a key role in the emergence of Saurashtra capitalists, and the fact that it was actively constituted. However, Roy’s contention that class played no role at all feeds into the assumption that artisanal communities were somehow incapable of developing class solidarity and consciousness.

The sources show that Saurashtra master weavers preferred hiring workers from their own caste, and that ordinary Saurashtra weavers preferred working for master weavers and merchants from their community (and avoided borrowing money from people outside it).¹²² But this does not prove the absence of class solidarity or of fractures within the idea of a united community. At canteens in railway stations, where separate sections were created for Brahmins and Non-Brahmins, some Saurashtras

119. In both these sectors, a number of unions emerged led by the communists, the Congress and the Dravidian parties.

120. The Sellur area, in Madurai, came to be crowded with factories/workshops, with weavers living in every lane. Each lane was originally occupied by members of one caste, but gradually became more mixed. Neighbourhood solidarities emerged – such as barbers working without payment, and tea shop owners providing tea on loan during strikes (these are strikingly similar to those described by other historians in the case of mill strikes). Described to me in various interviews.

121. Tirthankar Roy, “Capitalism and Community: A Study of the Madurai Sourashtras”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 34:4 (1997), p. 447. Emphasis in original.

122. K.K.R. Sastry, *The Madura Saurashtra Community: A Study in Applied Economics* (Bangalore, 1927), p. 31; Albert James Saunders, *The Saurashtra Community in Madura*, (unpublished manuscript available in the library of the American College, n.d. (possible date 1920s), pp. 115–116.

ate in the Brahmin section while others ate in the Non-Brahmin. According to an American anthropologist who observed this phenomenon in the 1920s, it was connected with the “social status of the individual”.¹²³ Roy argues that the claim to brahminhood helped cement community ties which formed the basis for collective economic success.¹²⁴ While Sourashtra capitalists may have emphasized community identity to appease their employees, they did not necessarily include all Sourashtras in the “Brahmin” fold.¹²⁵ This collective identity was far from homogenous.

The fact that their weaver employees belonged to the same community did not prevent yarn merchants and master weavers from being any less ruthless during periods of crisis. In 1942, the collector of Madura tried to persuade them not to stop production (in order to avoid large-scale unemployment), but failed. This led one official to declare that “the truth of the matter is that the Madura merchants are unwilling to take even slight risks for the sake of weavers from whose toil they have profited all these days”. Some wealthy Saurashtras set up rice doles for the poor, but made it clear to officials that these would not be continued indefinitely.¹²⁶

Saurashtra weavers were amongst the first to organize themselves into unions and figured prominently in the protests of the 1940s. Many Sourashtras, including some who had previously been active in the Congress, joined the Communists. R.K. Sandulal and R.V. Siddha were amongst them: the latter was a weaver who played a key role in organizing the Handloom Weavers Federation. While in the Congress, he was particularly active in the campaign for the boycott of foreign cloth.¹²⁷ When asked in an interview why so many Sourashtra weavers were attracted to the Communist Party and its unions (despite many community leaders being prominent members of the Congress), an old party member in Madurai replied that on the question of fighting the Raj, and political freedom generally, the community was supportive of the Congress; but when it came to economic issues such as wages, unemployment, etc., they turned to Communist unions.¹²⁸ On political or social issues, or economic questions affecting the handloom industry as a whole, the community was more or less united, but when it came to wages and profiteering by master weavers and yarn merchants, the ordinary Saurashtra weaver turned to other forms of solidarity and collective action.

123. Saunders, *The Sourashtra Community in Madura*, p. 26.

124. Tirthankar Roy, “Capitalism and Community”.

125. This claim to Brahmin status should be situated within competing claims made by various castes in the face of the colonial attempt to count (and rank) various castes through the census.

126. Development Department G.O. No. 998 (M15) Ms, 1 May 1942, TNSA.

127. P. Srinivasan, *Communist Heroes of Tamilnadu*, pp. 230, 235.

128. Interview with Mayandi Barathi, a Communist Party worker and one of the editors of *Janasakthi* in the 1940s; Madurai, 18 February 2008.

Thus, the role of caste in the formation of weaver solidarities in this period is a complicated one. It played an important role in labour recruitment and control.¹²⁹ It cemented vertical ties between factory owners/master weavers and workers/*coolie* weavers. Master weavers tried to prevent weavers from joining unions by arguing that these would destroy community bonds.¹³⁰ At the same time, the first unions were formed on the basis of caste/community ties (caste in this case playing a cementing role) even though the targets of union action might belong to the same caste. Union organizers pointed to the individualism of master weavers and yarn dealers as a betrayal of the community in the interests of profit, calling for class solidarity to challenge it. However, they also called upon master weavers to respond to the sorry state of ordinary weavers as good patrons on the basis of community solidarity.¹³¹

We have seen that when weavers agitated against master weavers, negotiations were the usual result; these were mediated by local community/political leaders or government representatives. In all these instances, caste, kinship, and gradations of economic and social status played a role in determining events and outcomes. In a dispute between the weavers and master weavers of Eluvanampatti in Madurai district, a compromise was brokered by the local Congress committee treasurer.¹³² On the east coast, in the weaving centres of Chirala and Perala in 1925, there existed a “Weaving Committee” in which both weavers and employers were equally represented and to which “every dispute which is not settled by mutual agreement is referred for final settlement”.¹³³

The novel *Panchum Pasiyum*, set in the early 1950s amongst weavers belonging to the Kaikolar caste in the district of Tinnevely (who later came to call themselves Senguntha Mudaliars), contains an episode in which the complicated interplay of caste and class can be observed. Ordinary weavers demand an increase in wages; some of the master weavers are sympathetic to their demand while others are not. A meeting is called in the temple of the caste deity, for, apart from the question of wages, certain issues related to the community temple have to be discussed. In the beginning, master weavers assemble to discuss the issue of wages while ordinary weavers wait outside. There is disagreement amongst the master weavers: a few are supportive of the demands, but the majority refuse to give in. After much discussion,

129. See Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism*, pp. 146–157, for an elaboration of this argument.

130. This argument was used by the master weavers of Erumalainaiickenpatti, *Janasakthi*, 4 July 1945.

131. See for example songs criticizing the greed of master weavers in Pandit S. Sivaprakasam, *Pondicherry Handloom Industry: Songs of Inspiration for the Poor* (Pondicherry, 1932).

132. *Janasakthi*, 1 August, 1945.

133. N.G. Ranga, *The Economics of Handloom: Being a Study of the Social and Economic Conditions of Handloom Weavers of South India*, *Andhra Economic Series No. 3* (Bombay, 1930), p. 40.

a compromise is reached. Those waiting outside are called in, informed of the decision, and the meeting goes on to discuss issues pertaining to the maintenance of the deity. The author explains that since matters of the temple concern the entire community, all weavers have the right to voice their opinion and all have an equal say in the matter. In the matter of wages, this does not apply. The weavers subsequently organize themselves into a union, and one of the smaller master weavers faces bankruptcy, deserted by his wealthy fellows.¹³⁴

This particular episode, and other motifs in the novel, illustrate fault lines within the notion of caste and community. On certain matters, such as the upkeep of the community temple, all members are notionally equal. However, when it comes to a discussion on wages or conflicts between employers and employees, ordinary weavers are clearly subservient. But even here the community still has a role to play: appeals are made on the basis of membership in it, and master weavers are implored to treat their fellow members fairly; discussions are held in the community temple.

The rapid class differentiation *within* weaving communities led to a deepening of class based forms of solidarity: this involved reaching out to other weavers and their unions, displayed in the coming together of the Tamil Nadu Handloom Weavers Federation. Meanwhile, master weavers and yarn merchants formed their own associations to negotiate with unions and lobby the state. In Erumalainayakkanpatti (Madurai district), this association threatened to stop supplying yarn to weavers who joined the union. They asked union members to pay their debts immediately, assaulting them, blocking rallies, etc. They also used the police to threaten weavers and got some of them arrested.¹³⁵ Even in the midst of this conflict, the dividing line between weavers and master weavers was not entirely firm. One union leader is quoted as saying that “there are [...] 10 master weavers. Among them only 3–4 of them are harassing us. [...] These are the rulers of the black market”.¹³⁶

Small master weavers were often precariously placed. In an interview in Madurai, a union leader remarked that it was the big players who called the shots. Weavers would often congregate in front of the houses of large owners in an attempt to shame them. Once a compromise was reached, the smaller owners/master weavers generally acted upon it.¹³⁷

In other words, the relationship between master weaver and weaver was not always conflictual, and neither was it based solely upon patronage. Instead, it swung between the two poles depending upon context: caste and class were intertwined and played out in different ways. A union song

134. Ragunathan, *Panchum Pasiyum* (15th edition, Chennai, 2005).

135. *Janasakthi*, 11 April 1945 and 6 June 1945.

136. *Janasakthi*, 6 June 1945.

137. Interview with Com. Murugan, 3 February 2009, Madurai.

addresses the capitalist saying: “You are witness to the cultivator feeding his bullock in times when there is no cultivation; isn’t it your responsibility to feed the worker during times of unemployment?” These lines appeal to his role as patron. At the same time, this song (and several others in the same collection) deplore the accumulation of wealth by master weavers at the expense of ordinary weavers, and describe their relationship as that between capitalist and worker.¹³⁸ In other words, both caste and class played a role in determining how everyday relationships (and conflicts) between capital and labour were worked out. As Neve points out, caste, class, kinship, and religion should not be essentialized, but viewed in constant interaction with each other, in the context of concrete acts of resistance and mobilization.¹³⁹

CONCLUSION

This paper shows how the repertoire of collective action by weavers was modified (with some forms disappearing, others persisting, and new ones emerging) during the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: this process was accompanied by changes in structures of solidarity. While, in the early nineteenth century, the principal conflict was between weavers and the state (in its dual role as employer and revenue extractor), by the twentieth century the chief struggle was between ordinary weavers and master-weavers (as well as yarn and cloth merchants). Key changes in the organization of cloth production, with much greater centralization and rapid class differentiation amongst weavers, were responsible for this shift.

The regulatory regime of the state had a strong influence in determining the effectiveness and legitimacy of various methods of protest. Migration or collective withdrawal disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century, and petitioning became prevalent: this clearly had to do with the consolidation of power by the company state and the establishment of new legal structures and norms of legitimacy. In much the same way, strategies adopted by weavers’ unions in the mid-twentieth century were influenced by the legal framework of the state and its policies.

Changes in the repertoire of protest also involved changes in structures and bonds of collective solidarity. Caste networks (both local and supra-local; confined to a single caste group and between different castes) formed a strong basis for solidarity in the early nineteenth century, but by the mid-twentieth century class was acquiring increasing importance. This was a result of several factors. Changes in the production structure of the handloom industry led to rapid internal differentiation within weaving

138. Pandit S. Sivaprakasam, *Pondicherry Handloom Industry: Songs of Inspiration for the Poor* (Pondicherry, 1932).

139. Geert de Neve, *The Everyday Politics of Labour: Working Lives in India’s Informal Economy* (Delhi, 2005). pp. 12–13, 21–22, 84.

communities: to take one example, head weavers had once acted as leaders of agitations, but master weavers became *targets* of protests by the twentieth century.

The evidence shows that caste or class were not monolithic structures associated with different modes of production or time periods. While changes in structures of production and internal class differentiation did lead to new alliances, bonds of solidarity were created and affirmed, challenged and fractured, in specific situations based on the lived experience of those involved in them. In 1819, in Vizagapatam, caste solidarity and community leadership were not predetermined but collectively affirmed (or contested). Similarly, in the twentieth century, bonds of solidarity were formed through coming together on the shop floor, in demonstrations and neighbourhoods where both caste and class had a role to play.

Thus, I would question Chakrabarty's argument wherein "community" is defined as an ensemble of relationships one is born into, as opposed to "class", which is based on the associational principle.¹⁴⁰ While a caste or religious community *was* something each weaver was born into, the dynamic of solidarity was not static but fluid – in the sense of being actively constituted and reconstituted through interaction with other associational forces such as class. It is here that the wider political climate exerts a strong influence. It is no coincidence that forms of protest and organization by weavers were also shared by other labouring groups. The mid-twentieth century, in particular, saw widespread mobilization by workers from a wide range of occupations, reflecting much the same external factors.

How does the history of mobilization and protest by weavers in south India compare with weavers and artisanal groups in other parts of India (and the globe)? Hameeda Hossain's study of eighteenth-century Bengal and that of Santosh Rai for north India and Douglas Haynes for twentieth-century western India show many similarities with the evidence presented here. Hossain describes the decline of collective resistance in the form of what were termed "combinations" by the end of the eighteenth century and links it to the imposition of new legal measures that declared such "combinations" illegal. This kind of collective resistance was replaced by petitioning.¹⁴¹ Santosh Rai's work on weavers in north India during the first half of the twentieth century traces growing tensions between ordinary, often loomless, weavers and master weavers.¹⁴²

140. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Some Aspects of Labour History of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century: Two views", Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Das Gupta, Occasional paper No. 40, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, October 1981, p. 22.

141. Hameeda Hossain, *The Company Weavers of Bengal: The East India Company and the Organization of Textile Production in Bengal*, (Delhi, 1988), pp. 126–127.

142. Santosh Kumar Rai, *The Changing World of Weavers in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, 1900–1957* (Ph.D., University of Delhi, 2010), ch. 7.

Haynes's important monograph notes the rise of unions in the 1940s and their active engagement with the labour laws. He describes the interplay of caste and class in the everyday world of handloom production, negotiations and conflicts between employers and ordinary weavers, and the building up of trade unions.¹⁴³ In his view, their exclusive focus upon the state (in getting labour laws implemented) rather than bargaining directly with employers was somewhat misplaced, weakening them in the long run. This may well be true; however, I would argue that what is striking during this period is the adoption of broadly similar strategies by factory and non-factory workers (from a wide range of occupations). Political mobilization by formations ranging from the Congress and the Communists to socialist and Dravidian parties was undoubtedly one of the factors leading to this convergence.

Organization and protest by weavers (and artisans in general) has received much more attention in the European context. Their role in early modern unionization and working-class struggles is well established, although the relationship between artisans and industrial workers was a complicated one, artisanal identities intersecting with class-based solidarities in complex ways.¹⁴⁴ The role played by political movements (such as Radicalism) in mobilizing both artisans and the working class at large has been the subject of lively debate between the so-called materialists and culturalists.¹⁴⁵

In comparison, studies on artisanal organization and protest in other parts of the world are few and far between. Inigo Garcia-Bryce describes artisans in Peru adopting new methods of protest and forms of organizing in response to changes in state structures and the political context.¹⁴⁶ However, a strong tendency to view artisanal politics teleologically, as a precursor of working-class organizations and politics persists.¹⁴⁷ This is explainable in the European context by the eventual disappearance of artisanal production in the face of large-scale industry – however, even there, it feeds into static and essentializing assumptions about class-consciousness and solidarity (seen as arising directly from production relations). This viewpoint fails to account for internal fractures and the complex and mediated nature of such bonds.

In the case of countries like India, where artisanal (and non-factory) workers continue to form a large proportion of the labour force, such

143. Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism*, pp. 285–290.

144. See footnotes 5 and 6.

145. Alex Benchimol, “Nineteenth-Century Radical History after the Cultural Marxists”, *The European Legacy*, 5:3 (2000), pp. 415–419.

146. Garcia-Bryce, “From Artisan to Worker”, *Social History*, 30:4 (2005), pp. 463–480; *Idem.*, “Politics by Peaceful Means: Artisan Mutual-Aid Societies in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Lima, 1860–1979”, *The Americas*, 59:3 (2003), pp. 325–345.

147. See Ibrahim Abdullah's attempt to trace the “artisan origins” of working-class formation in Africa. Ibrahim Abdullah, “Rethinking African Labour and Working-Class History: The Artisan Origins of the Sierra Leonean Working-Class”, *Social History*, 23:1 (1998), pp. 80–96.

teleologies are even less helpful. Rather, they feed into schematic expectations of caste solidarity being replaced by class (or, at the other extreme, the impossibility of class solidarity developing at all in the face of caste and religious identities). A more productive approach might involve paying closer attention to how artisans (and other non-factory workers) embedded in a range production structures engaged with the state and broader politics, and how, in this context, factors like caste and class intersected with each other in creating bonds of solidarity.

TRANSLATED ABSTRACTS
FRENCH – GERMAN – SPANISH

Karuna Dietrich Wielenga. *Répertoires de résistance. Les tisserands sur des métiers manuels en Inde du Sud de 1800 à 1960 environ.*

Cet article décrit et analyse des formes de protestation opposées que les tisserands sur des métiers manuels en Inde du Sud utilisèrent à deux moments – au début du dix-neuvième siècle et au milieu du vingtième siècle. Suivant Tilly, l’auteur examine comment des changements dans le régime de réglementation de l’Etat influencèrent des modes de résistance, mais il étend cette analyse à l’influence de structures de production et de facteurs socioculturels tels que la caste. Il représente également des structures internes de solidarité et le rôle changeant de la caste et de la classe dans la formation de ces modes de résistance. Il tente de montrer comment des répertoires de résistance se modifièrent avec les changements intervenus non seulement dans le régime de réglementation mais aussi dans le contexte socio-économique élargi, et met en relief l’adaptabilité et le dynamisme de ces répertoires de résistance. L’auteur étudie des formes de protestation et d’organisation que des tisserands eurent en commun avec des travailleurs de nombreux métiers (y compris des ouvriers d’usines). Avant tout, il remet en question la notion de caractère immuable d’identités “primordiales”, et cherche à mieux faire comprendre la dynamique émergente de la conscience collective parmi des travailleurs autres que des ouvriers d’usine dans l’Inde moderne.

Traduction: *Christine Plard*

Karuna Dietrich Wielenga. *Widerstandsrepertoires. Die Handwebstuhl-Weber in Südindien, ca. 1800–1960.*

Der Beitrag beschreibt und analysiert kontrastierende Protestformen, wie sie von den Handwebstuhl-Webern Südindiens zu zwei entscheidenden Zeiten eingesetzt wurden: Anfang des neunzehnten und Mitte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts. In Anlehnung an Tilly wird untersucht, wie sich Veränderungen im staatlichen Regulationsregime auf Widerstandsformen ausgewirkt haben. Diese Analyse wird jedoch dahingehend erweitert, dass auch der Einfluss von Produktionsstrukturen

sowie von sozialen und kulturellen Faktoren wie dem Kastensystem berücksichtigt wird. Darüber hinaus kartografiert der Beitrag die Binnenstrukturen der Solidarität und die sich wandelnde Rolle von Kaste und Klasse als diese Strukturen prägende Kräfte. Gezeigt werden soll, dass Veränderungen der Widerstandsrepertoires bedingt waren durch Veränderungen nicht nur im Regulationsregime, sondern auch im umfassenderen sozio-ökonomischen Kontext; betont werden dabei die Anpassungsfähigkeit und der dynamische Charakter dieser Repertoires. Es werden die Protest- und Organisationsformen erkundet, die die Weber mit einem breiten Spektrum anderer Arbeiter (einschließlich der Fabrikarbeiter) gemeinsam hatten. Vor allem hinterfragt der Beitrag die Vorstellung gleichbleibender und "naturwüchsiger" Identitäten – im Bemühen um ein genaueres Verständnis der entstehenden Dynamik kollektiven Bewusstseins unter den außerhalb von Fabriken beschäftigten Arbeitern des modernen Indiens.

Übersetzung: *Max Henninger*

Karuna Dietrich Wielenga. *Repertorios de resistencia. Los tejedores manuales en el sur de la India, c.1800–1960.*

En este artículo se describe y se analizan las distintas formas de protesta utilizadas por los tejedores manuales en el sur de la India en dos momentos clave – a comienzos del siglo XIX y a mediados del siglo XX. Siguiendo a Tilly se examina cómo los cambios en el régimen regulador del Estado influenciaron en los modos de resistencia, pero se extiende el análisis a la influencia de las estructuras productivas y a los factores sociales y culturales tales como el sistema de castas. En el texto también se dibuja un mapa de las estructuras internas de solidaridad y del papel cambiante que juegan las castas y las clases en su diseño. Se trata de mostrar cómo los repertorios de resistencia se vieron alterados por cambios, no sólo en el régimen regulador, sino también por el contexto socioeconómico más amplio, y pone en primer plano su capacidad de adaptación y su dinamismo. Se exploran las formas de protesta y de organización compartidas por los tejedores con trabajadores de otros oficios (incluyendo los trabajadores fabriles). Pero fundamentalmente se cuestiona la noción del carácter inmanente de las identidades "primordiales" tratando de proponer una comprensión mucho más completa de la dinámica emergente de la conciencia colectiva entre los trabajadores no fabriles en la India contemporánea.

Traducción: *Vicent Sanz Rozalén*