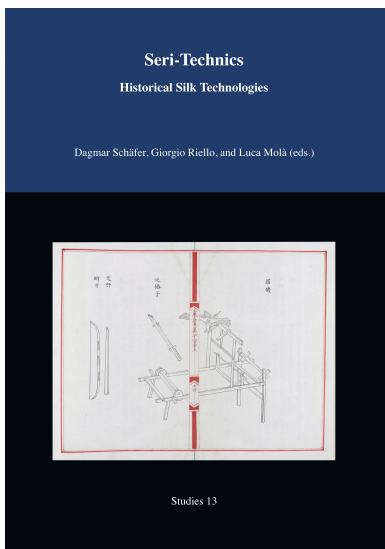


Max Planck Research Library for the History and Development of Knowledge

Studies 13

Vijaya Ramaswamy:

The Culture and Economics of Silk Weaving During the Vijayanagar Era (1336–1646) in South India



In: Dagmar Schäfer, Giorgio Riello, and Luca Molà (eds.): *Seri-Technics : Historical Silk Technologies*

Online version at <http://www.mprl-series.mpg.de/studies/13/>

ISBN 978-3-945561-45-4

First published 2020 by Max-Planck-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften, Max Planck Research Library for the History and Development of Knowledge under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

Printed and distributed by:

epubli/neopubli GmbH, Berlin

<https://www.epubli.de/shop/buch/102619>

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

Chapter 5

The Culture and Economics of Silk Weaving During the Vijayanagar Era (1336–1646) in South India

Vijaya Ramaswamy

This chapter looks at cultures and consumption of silk during and immediately after the Vijayanagar period as reflected in inscriptions and medieval literary texts. In a broader sense, the essay also locates silk in the social and political imagination of the Vijayanagara Empire. Named after its capital (the present-day city of Hampi in Karnataka), the Vijayanagara Empire was based on the Deccan plateau in the south of the Indian subcontinent. I delineate the geographical location of silk and discuss some aspects of the lives and livelihood of traditional and non-traditional weaving castes to unfold the social status and economic value of silk within the framework of some broader issues of silk production and trade in silks in this area before the arrival of the East India Companies.

5.1 Vijayanagara in the Topography of South India

A knowledge of the topography of South India is central to understanding the development of silk weaving and trade exchange as well as the role of silk in this region. Trade was most vibrant in the expanding temple cultures of medieval times. The Vindhya and Satpura Mountain ranges divide India in two halves. Resembling an inverted triangle, the south, also addressed as “Dravida,” is nowadays made up of the four states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu as well as the union territories of Lakshadweep and Pondicherry. Despite politically defined administrative boundaries, “Dravida” inhabitants share common linguistic and cultural traits. The British during the period of their imperial rule collectively referred to the region between the Eastern Ghats and the Coromandel Coast, as the “Carnatic” which mainly covers Tamil Nadu, southern Andhra Pradesh and south-eastern Karnataka excluding Kerala.

South India was a society of migrating communities which is reflected in the multilingualism of its inhabitants. Peoples frequently moved across these areas and hence most “South Indians” speak three or four languages fluently, carrying with them their original language and picking up the languages of the region where they re-located with their families. The multilingualism also testifies to the traveling of expertise. The Devanga weavers from the Kongu region of Northern Tamil Nadu, still speak Kannada and Telugu, the languages of their original homes in Karnataka and Andhra, as well as Tamil, the language spoken in their new settlement. All this illustrates that commerce cut across political and linguistic boundaries within a larger pan-regional entity. The hubs in these networks were *tirumadaivilagam*, which Tamil historians regularly translate as “temple towns.”

Such temple towns emerged since the seventh and eighth centuries in the Vijayanagar period (1136–1646). When state formation took place, every important kingdom would as-

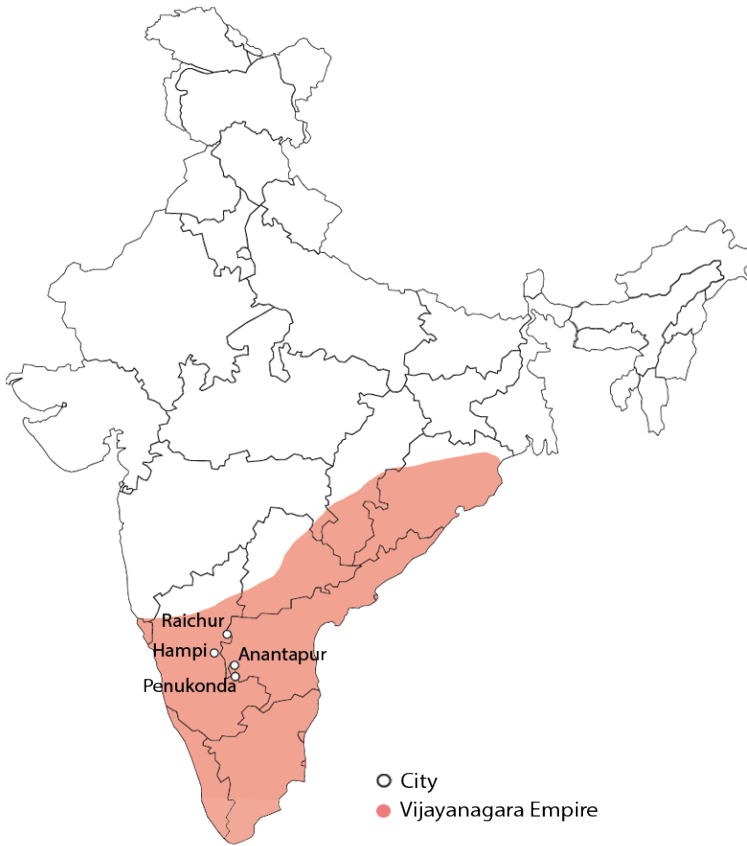


Fig. 1: The Vijayanagar Empire —1336 to 1646. Map designed by Wiebke Weitzmann.

sert its grandeur through a deity and through a temple complex that virtually replicated the palace. The sacred bolstered the secular and vice versa. These temple sites also attracted commercial activities. Many temples were dominated by mercantile corporations, such as *tisai ayirattu ainnutruvar* (the merchants of the five hundred guilds, literally “the five hundred of the thousand directions” often abbreviated to *Ainnutruvar*’ meaning “the five hundred”).

The streets of a temple town radiated from the temple at the centre. These streets were occupied by various artisanal groups—weavers, merchants, musicians and dancing girls besides many other service groups. In contemporary Tirunagesvaram and Kumbakonam, one can still find streets where craftsmen, communities, or caste groups such as Kaikkolar and Saliyar weavers live and practice their profession today. However, in contrast to the modern densely built-up and populated sites, these medieval temple towns, were more “rurally urbanized” or “rurbanized” as historians have called the expansive settlements in which the social, political, religious and professional elite lived spreading over a vast agricultural area

that sustained the town's growing population with food.¹ Craftsmen were also given small pieces of land for tenure farming.

“Vijayanagar” or “city of victory” identifies both a city and an empire. The pan regional empire was founded around 1336 CE. It lasted in its full glory until 1565 when the city was sacked. It continued well into the next century as a mere shadow of its former self, fading out around 1646. At its apogee it stretched from the Krishna River in the north to the extreme south of the peninsula. No other empire in the south has been so extensive, either before or after.

The cultural and economic renaissance during the Vijayanagar period was possible because of a strong resource base. The financial and economic strength of the empire derived from a number of factors including a strong polity, expanding agrarian base and above all a flourishing state of production and commerce. Political stability and commercial expansion provided the background for the growth of silk in the medieval era in the Vijayanagar empire and the neighbouring Deccani Sultanates of Qutb Shahi (1518–1687), centered in Golconda Fort region and the Bijapur Sultanate (1490–1686).

From this point on, medieval South Indian society presents a picture of a social order in ferment. Craft communities, especially weavers and smiths, were catalysts in this process of social change. As weavers of cloth responded to the shift away from a customer driven market for ordinary coarse cloth and began to specialize in fine cottons and silks, they increasingly became an indispensable component of prosperous towns and cities.² Textiles, both fine cottons and silks, especially from Gujarat and the Coromandel Coast, became the most important export item in terms of volume and value. Weavers experienced increased economic prosperity, which led them to seek a more dominant social and ritual role. This situation of social flux continued into the seventeenth century when Vijayanagar ceased to be an imperial power and the last ruler, Sriranga III (1642–78), held no greater title than that of King of Vellore.

5.2 The Culture of Silk and Consumption Patterns

To a certain extent the social role and the increasing prosperity of craftsmen and merchants in the Vijayanagar empire in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was due to active royal patronage and a commodification of society induced by the political elite. Due to a combination of social and religious implications, elite textile consumption entailed both silk and cotton-silk mixtures. On the one hand, the typical luxury cloth was made of silk which, on the other hand, Islamic religious rules prohibited. Weavers compromised by developing new weaving techniques.

The role of the ruling class in promoting commerce is attested in the *Amuktamalyada* (Garland of Pearls, compiled ca. 1515), one of the most famous poetic works of Telugu literature. Attributed to the greatest king of the Vijayanagar empire, Krishnadeva Raya (born 1471, r. 1509–29), this work spells out active encouragement of commerce as a major aim of state policy:

A king should improve the harbours of his country and so encourage its commerce that horses, elephants, precious gems, sandalwood, pearls and other arti-

¹ This phrase, coined by the economic historian Frank Perlin, is a pithy description of early towns with a strong rural component.

² See Riello and Tirthankar 2009 and Riello and Parthasarathy 2009.

cles of commerce are freely imported into his country. He should arrange that the foreign sailors who land in his country on account of storms, illnesses and exhaustion, are well looked after.³

A number of foreign chroniclers testify that this state patronage expanded to merchants. For example, the Portuguese writer and Indian Officer Duarte Barbosa (ca. 1480–1521) observed that as soon as a merchant landed on the soil of Vijayanagara, he was provided with a Nayar (a caste found in the Malabar region) to serve him, and a clerk and a broker to arrange for him to obtain such merchandise as he had need of and to assist him in all matters.⁴

Within this process of commodification, the Vijayanagar and Deccani court nobility adopted elaborate sartorial habits based largely on Islamic fashions. These tastes percolated down to affluent social groups such as merchants, a process I like to define as “Social Sanskritisation” following Wagoner who emphasized in his notion of “Islamicization” that religion soon became a placeholder for this era’s cultural identity and class attitudes.⁵ The term “upper class” refers to, in descending order, the courtly nobility, the regional nobility, bureaucratic officials, and affluent merchants.

Silk was a signifier of courtly culture from ancient to late-medieval Peninsular India. This would also by and large be true of much of Northern India, both Sultanate and Mughal.⁶ The thirteenth century Sufi poet Amir Khusrao (1253–1325) referred to the ubiquitous silken and brocaded garments in the courts of the Khaljis (1290–1320) and Tughlaqs (1320–1413). Khusrao’s poem *Nuh Siphir* (The Nine Heavens) refers to *nasij* (gold embroidered silk); *khazz* (Persian silk); *zarbaft* (shot silk) and *dibahe chin* (Chinese brocade) as well as *aksun*, a type of painted Chinese silk.⁷ Amir Khusrao’s *Khaza-in-ul-Futuh* (History of Sultan Alauddin Khalji’s r.) notes market and price control policy for textiles including silks.⁸

The Deccani Muslim states brought new clothing styles into fashion such as doublets, embroidered jackets and turbans. The fashion-conscious nobility in the Deccan were keen on using silk in its prayer mats but as followers of Islam they were technically forbidden to use silk. In response, weavers developed *mashroo* and *himroo* textiles, mixtures of cotton and silk. *Mashroo* cloth is made up of cotton warp threads on top, and a soft silken weft—thus technically fulfilling the Islamic injunction while effectively violating it. *Mashroo* and *himroo* soon become fashionable across the Mughal Empire and found a lucrative export market in West Asia.⁹

An inscription by the Vijayanagar Emperor Achyuta Deva Raya (r. 1525–42) from Tirupati dated 1538 CE suggests that *himroo* and *mashroo* silks were, by and large, woven by Muslim craftsmen.¹⁰ Cloth and yarn merchants of “Tondaimandalam, Puramandalam, and

³ Raya 2010, Fourth Canto, stanzas 244–45. See also Saraswati 1925.

⁴ Barbosa 1918–1921, Book I, 203.

⁵ Wagoner 1996. It is, however, interesting that while using “Islamicate” or “Islamicization” in a socio-cultural sense and locating it in the realm of material culture, Wagoner does not seem to perceive the same potential in the term “Sanskritization” (see 871–74).

⁶ An interesting paper by Johnson 2010.

⁷ Chandra 1961, 8. Also see Rosati’s chapter this volume.

⁸ Chandra 1961, 8–10: see for details of prices on textiles brought to the Sarai Adl or textile market during the r. of Ala-ud-din-Khalji.

⁹ Ramaswamy 2002.

¹⁰ Vijayaraghavacharya 1936. The terms “Puramandalam” and “Umandalam” refer to foreign and native merchants because *pura* means outside or foreign and *ul* means within or indigenous.

Ulmandalam,” equally conferred certain privileges like free house-sites for Muslim weavers for design or technical innovations. Inscriptions suggest that any Hindu weaver attempting to copy Muslim-specific styles of weaving would be fined with twelve gold *varaha*.¹¹ Such orders were made public “to every Hindu and Muslim dwelling [of the weavers], every cloth merchant and agent for strict observance and application in Tirupati, Kanchipuram and other parts of the South.”¹² Other inscriptions recognize innovative methods. One inscription, for instance, comments on the use of a square frame with diverse threads being used in a new technique which suggests the use of a draw loom. However, the inscription is ambiguous on whether silk or cotton was being woven. It indicates the influence of specialized and powerful merchant corporations, though, identifying weavers’ products as part of a very wide trade network necessitating state regulation and supervision.

Another variety of silk which rose to prominence was *paithani* silk, woven in and around the region of Paithan (today the Aurangabad district of Maharashtra). The technique for this fine silk with heavy gold borders may go back to the Satavahana dynasty (271 BCE–220 CE) located in the Andhra Pradesh region. It is not clear in which relation these stand to the medieval *paithani sarees* which were made of Chinese silk from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, probably as a way to reach out to a larger consumer network. Buddhist motifs such as lotuses, peacocks and flowering vines, which are found in the adjacent Ajanta caves, are very much a part of *paithani* silk designs. During the period of the Deccani Sultanates, *paithani* designs may have also drawn from the *jamdani* silks, which were popular in Mughal India. Interestingly *jamdani* silk seems to have been imported into the region from the North.

In the Tamil region the priests who belonged to the Brahmin caste also used silk, which suggests that, even though silk was produced from silk worms it was not taboo as were other animal products. On the contrary, silk was considered ritually pure as long as it was *venpattu*, cream or off-white silk, and not *colored* silk. Such silks were obligatory wear for the performance of sacrifice or special worship in patrons’ homes or in the temple. The Madhva Brahmins of Karnataka favored red silk on all ritual occasions. Priests were supposed to be “non-accumulative” and depended on patronage (by members of royalty or the upper class or castes) and benefactors for their livelihood. Priests wore silk if it was given to them as a charitable donation (*dana*) by the “haves,” even though silk was produced from silk worms. Powerful Brahmin landlords who flaunted silk also patronized the learned but “needy” Brahmins.

Sources attest that the urge to imitate the life style of the court, the rich or religious nobility, was strongest among affluent mercantile and craft communities and the new officialdom of military and administrative heads of territorial units entitled *Palayakkarar* (an English corruption of the Tamil term *Polygar* for head of a Palayam which was a geographical division under the Vijayanagar empire). Non-Brahmin elites favored in particular heavily embroidered varieties of silken cloth. Affluent merchants and craftsmen, such as goldsmiths, copied the style of the Brahmins. The process of “social Sanskritization” can be seen in the urge among many communities to move from using cotton to silk, especially for display in public spaces. Pure cotton cloth called *sante* or *sandai* by contrast was mass consumed by common people whereas silk in the milieu of medieval Southern India was (and still is) a

¹¹ As the fine is in gold coins (*varaha*) it seems to be quite steep, but in a situation of complete absence of data it is difficult to say what exactly this implies.

¹² I have analyzed this unusual inscription at several places in Ramaswamy 2006, see specially 66–7, and 81.

cultural statement about social superiority and a means of entering into the world of the rich and fashionable. The emergence of affluent social groups became an important factor in the growing consumption of silk.

5.3 Medieval and Portuguese Chroniclers on Consumption of Silk

Abdur Razzaq (1413–82), the Persian ambassador to the Vijayanagar court (1442–44), comments that while the common people and even the king wore a plain cotton garment called *veshti* from the waist down and left their upper body bare, “Mussalmans dress themselves in magnificent apparel after the manner of the Arabs.” Razzaq referred also to the use of brocaded silks and elaborate silk turbans (head gear) that had spread to Hindu royalty and the elite by the time Barbosa arrived in Vijayanagar.

Portuguese chroniclers such as Barbosa testify to the great popularity of Chinese embroidered silk in the Vijayanagar empire, showing that by the fifteenth century domestic sericulture and weavers were no longer able to satisfy the growing demands of the local markets: “Here [Hampi] also is used great store of the brocades of poorer quality brought for sale from China [and Alexandria] [...] and much cloth dyed scarlet-in-grain [...]”¹³ Since Duarte specifies that these silks were of an inferior order, it is plausible that officials and merchants who could not afford the finest variety of silk demanded this quality. Barbosa also suggests that among the inhabitants of Vijayanagar some wore white shorts and lower garments tucked between their legs (*veshti*) made of cotton, silk, or coarse brocade.¹⁴

Apart from Duarte Barbosa who compiled his notes in 1508–09, the Portuguese chronicler Domingo Paes commented on the impact of Muslim culture on the sartorial habits of the Vijayanagar kings and nobility around 1520–22 and his colleague Fernao Nuniz in 1535–37.¹⁵ All mention the elaborate costumes of the Vijayanagar kings. According to Nuniz King Achyuta Raya (r. 1529–42) wore a doublet with a skirt attached to it made of fine *patola* (same as *pattavali pattu*) silk and a cap of rich brocade. Nuniz adds that “the king never puts on any garment more than once [...]. His clothes are silk cloth *pacholis* of very fine material and worked with gold, the worth of each is ten *pardaos*.”¹⁶ Nuniz also provides the cost of a heavily brocaded silk cap in the early sixteenth century as twenty *cruzados* noting that “when he [the king] lifts it from his head, he never again puts it on.”¹⁷ The king’s household also customarily used silks as bedspreads.¹⁸ The king’s demands alone hence must have contributed in significant measure to keeping the silk looms working!

Similarly the court of the Zamorins of Calicut that was active from around the twelfth century to 1806 whose name literally translates as the land that touches the Indian Ocean, (located in the modern state of Kerala) accounted for a sizable share of silk consumption. Barbosa refers repeatedly to the resplendent silken garments of the Zamorin—either very fine cotton, pure silk, very fine scarlet cloth or embroidered silk—depending on the occasion.¹⁹ He comments that the many queens and concubines of the Zamorin, a thousand in all, were

¹³ Barbosa 1918–1921, Book I, 203.

¹⁴ Barbosa 1918–1921, Book I, 205.

¹⁵ For the story of these travellers see Sewell [1900] 1970a.

¹⁶ The word *pacholis* may mean the same as *patola*. Sewell [1900] 1970b, 363. The value of a pardao is said to be between 320 and 360 *reis*, Barbosa 1918–1921, Book I, 203.

¹⁷ Sewell [1900] 1970b, 364.

¹⁸ Barbosa 2000, 20.

¹⁹ Barbosa 2000, 19.

also resplendent in silk: “From the waist down they wear garments of rich silk, above the waist they are naked.”²⁰ It is noteworthy that as recently as the beginning of the twentieth century only women of the Brahmin-Namboodri in Malabar wore an upper cloth.

5.4 The *Kabayi* Silk Tunic and the *Kullayi* Cap in Vijayanagar Courtly Culture

Wagoner inferred from a painting panel in the Virabhadra temple at Lepakshi in Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh datable to the 1530s that both the *kabayi* silk tunic and the *kullayi* cap were a part of the islamicization of Vijayanagar sartorial culture.²¹ Neither the tunic-like *kabayi* nor the *kullayi* cap were new to the Hindus, at this point. Rather at some point between early and medieval times there was a shift in the social groups who wore these as well as their manner of wearing them as the pioneering historian of textiles, Moti Chandra, points out. Many Buddhist paintings of this era at the state capital Amaravati in the region of modern Andhra Pradesh depict both high caps and tunic-like costumes. Such tunics can be seen on representations of foreigners, cavalymen etc. and, as Moti Chandra also observes, such tunics and caps clothed also lower rung service groups like soldiers, cavalymen, bodyguards, musicians etc. but significantly never the upper class.²² This observation is borne out by evidence from Peninsular India for the period prior to the Vijayanagar empire. Paintings from the Pallava (sixth–ninth century CE) and Chola (300 BCE–1279) periods show only certain service groups and entertainers wearing tunics.²³ Evidence of stitched clothes and hence development of textile technology can be seen in the Brahadisvaram Hindu temple of Shiva completed in 1010, located in Tanjavur (modern Tamil Nadu).²⁴ These tenth-century Chola paintings depict attendants wearing frock coats made of coarse cotton with full sleeves. When tunics and caps became fashionable in the course of the Vijayanagar period, the medium used was either fine cotton or muslin and silk. The silk cap in the pre-Vijayanagar days, however, has another historical trajectory as Chola and Hoysala sculptures show some sort of silk cap was worn among the Hindu royalty and elite.

The sculptures and paintings of the Vijayanagar period are, however, unambiguous about the increasing use of the *kabayi* and *kullayi* by the Hindu elite, the process Wagoner has called “Islamicate.” The portrait sculpture of the ruler Vira Narasimha (r. 1505–09) at Tadpatri (in Karnataka) depicts both tunic and cap.²⁵ Another figure on the *gopuram* (gatehouse tower) of the same temple in Tadpatri is shown wearing a cloak-like garment reaching down to the knees.²⁶ The sculptures at Hampi city are replete with many such examples including the famous stone sculpture at the Achyuta Raya temple of the ruler Krishnadeva Raya riding a horse which depicts the king in a peaked cap with a long flowing tunic. The portraits of foreign merchants on the frescoes of the Mahanavami dibba also show them wearing caps and tunics.

²⁰ Barbosa 2000, 28.

²¹ Wagoner 1996, 856–58.

²² Chandra 1950, 132. See also Chandra 1973. This work is a free rendering by Moti Chandra of his Hindi monograph on Textiles and Costumes.

²³ Ramaswamy 2006, 2–17ff.

²⁴ Champakalakshmi 1973, Chamber 9, figures 13 and 14.

²⁵ Reddeppa 2000, 210–11.

²⁶ Champakalakshmi 1973, figure IV, No. 5.

The Lepakshi mural panel dated to the 1530s, shows the donor brothers Viranna and Virupanna wearing full-sleeved flowing ankle-length coats.²⁷ The coats are closed at the waist with waist-cloths in geometrical and floral motifs. The Lepakshi panel depicts the two donor brothers with attendants standing in front of them wearing full-sleeved tunics, though these are knee-length. We can infer that while the tunic material may have been silk in the case of the former, the material could only have been cotton in the case of the latter. Status differentiation can be seen in the material used and the length of the garments.²⁸

5.5 The Value of Silks: Prices and Taxes

Although chronologically interrupted, state as well as merchant records testify to the role of silk as a luxury commodity. A description of the production of raw silk and its processing occurs in the writings of the Chinese traveler Ma Huan 馬歡 (active ca. 1413–31) in the fifteenth century (1409). Ma Huan notes the price of cloth produced at Coimbatore in the Kongu region (a region which he phonetically renders as *cam-pa-mei* 坎巴美) which he equals to “cloth from the Li” (people of Hainan Island)²⁹ as “made up into bolts, four feet, five inches wide and twenty-five feet long”³⁰ at eight to ten gold pieces per bolt. He further elaborates that raw silk was dyed several shades and then woven into flower-pattern cloth, each piece being four to five feet wide and ten to thirteen feet long, and was sold for 100 gold pieces!

Let’s compare Ma Huan’s figures with those provided by Vasco da Gama (ca. 1469–1524) almost a century later. Arriving at the port of Calicut in 1498, da Gama commented that a fine silk shirt, which in Portugal would fetch 300 *reis*, could be had for only two *fanams* (30 *reis*).³¹ Since 1£ would roughly be equivalent to 400 *reis*, 300 *reis* would be around 15 shillings and 30 *reis* would be 1 shilling and 6 pence. Da Gama’s evidence indicates first the high price of exported textiles and second, the enormous profits accruing from foreign trade in cloth. The wide variety available was confirmed by the statement of another European chronicler of the medieval period, Tomé Pires (1465–1524 or 1530) (in Malacca 1512–15), who remarked that at Calicut the Malabar port, “they make many kinds of silken cloths.”³²

Portuguese records show that customs duties charged on silks at the port of Goa and on its pricing for the year 1571, amounted to 4200 *pardaos* which accounted for six percent of Goa’s total revenues.³³ Since silk was taxed at four and a half percent, the total value of silks in Goa (volume not known) can be placed at 93,324 *pardaos*.³⁴ The tax collected from shops selling silk in Goa in 1581 was 1,236,000 *reis* (value of trade being 27,463,920 *reis*)

²⁷ The Lepakshi panel has been analysed by a number of scholars, one of the earliest being Sivaramamurti 1937.

²⁸ This analysis is partially derived from K. Reddappa’s interpretation of the Lepakshi panel; Reddeppa 2000, 12.

²⁹ The rendering “chih-li-pu cloth” (指黎布) is a misunderstanding of the translator, George Philips. The term here should be *Libu* and NOT *Zhili bu*. Li refers to a people/tribe on Hainan Island in the South China Sea (known since the Tang era). The literati Lu You 陸游 (1125–1210) refers to the cloth of the Li people in his poem “Staying at Home” (Jiaju 家居): “the cloth of the Li equals pure and refined silk floss” (*li bu di chunmian* 黎布敵純綿). See Lu 1966, chapter 59.

³⁰ Philips 1896, 345.

³¹ Mahalingam 1975, 176.

³² Pires 2005, ii–78.

³³ de Matos 1999. I am grateful to Prof. Pius Melakandathil for drawing my attention to these documents and for translating some passages from them.

³⁴ These figures have been provided in Varghese 2011, 151.

and the same for 1588 was 1,410,000 *reis* (value of silk trade being 31,330,200 *reis*).³⁵ Pius Malekandathil notes that the annual tax collected from silk-weavers of Goa rose from 1140 *xerafins* in 1548 to 3400 *xerafins* in 1595.³⁶ We can hence see a general trend towards rising prices, although the evidence of the pricing of silk cloth in medieval sources is too scarce to arrive at any clear quantification.

A new variety of silk called *sella pattu* seems to have been the most popular and prized during the period of the Vijayanagar empire, only the *pattavali pattu* could compete. An inscription from the city of Kanchipuram states that during the period of the Vijayanagar ruler Venkatapatideva Maharaya (r. 1585–1614), the port/customs authorities remitted customs duties on both *sella pattu* and *pattavali pattu* brought in by the guild of Nanadesi merchants.³⁷ The Nanadesis (which literally means “from many lands”) were one of the well-known mercantile corporations who evolved in the Hoysala Empire (1026–1343) operating in southern India from the twelfth to the seventeenth century with strong trading networks as far as Malaya, Persia and Nepal. They were one of the mercantile corporations with power and influence in the society and economy of South India due to the very brisk trade both inland and overseas, including the entire South Asian and South East trade and dominating the commerce of the Indian Ocean.

Trade in silk was clearly in the hands of such mercantile corporations and not in the hands of individual weavers. Some of the major trading corporations in medieval India, somewhat along the lines of the Hanseatic league, were: Tisai Ayirattu Ainnutruvar from Ayyavole in Karnataka, the Manigramattar who operated essentially in the Tamil and Kerala regions, the Anjuvannam who are identified with a mercantile corporation of “Black Jews” from Kerala along with several other major and minor mercantile organizations. In terms of their inception and functioning these differed from the guilds of medieval Europe and therefore I prefer to use the term “corporation” rather than “guild” for both the craft and mercantile organizations.³⁸

A late-Pandya inscription suggests that in the fourteenth century, at Piranmalai³⁹ in the region of Tamil Nadu, all the mercantile corporations supervised by the Tisai Ayirattu Ainnutruvar donated to the local temple calculated per head (*talai chumai*), per bag load (*pakkam*), per smaller load (*podu*) and per cart load (*vandi*) on all their commodities. The items of trade ranged from *parum pudavai* (could refer to a simple cotton sari) and for men *pudavai* (fine cottons) to several varieties of silks like *pattavala pattu* and *konikkai pattu*. While *pattavala pattu* refers to tie-dyed silk which is still woven today in the entire belt from Gujarat and Andhra to Karnataka, the description of *konikkai pattu* is unclear and calls for further research into silk varieties which are no longer woven. The most significant aspect of this later-Pandya inscription is that the various mercantile corporations, who were part of this joint donation, signed their acceptance as distinctive organizations. Prominent among these were the “Cloth Merchants of Jayangondamandalam” (*Jayangonda Chilai Chettis*, which is the medieval name for the Kanchipuram region) and “Cloth Merchants of Kongumandalam” (*Kongumandalam Chilai Chettis*, which refers to the modern Salem and Coimbatore belt)

³⁵ 1 Pardao = 320 *Reis* and in the seventeenth century one Portuguese cruzado was reckoned to be 400 *reis*. For more on pricing see Varghese 2011, 195.

³⁶ Malekandathil 2010, 23.

³⁷ Subramaniam 1954, ii, 446.

³⁸ See Abraham 1988; and Subrahmanyam [1990] 2002 and Ramaswamy 2006.

³⁹ Subrahmanya Aiyer 1937

Salem and Coimbatore were, as I pointed out earlier, prime production centers of textiles in the medieval period. The nomenclature “*chetti*” in all the Dravidian languages (languages spoken in southern India) is given to the merchant caste.

Some of these self-imposed levies on textiles from Piranmalai are known:

Material/Goods	Measurement	Levy
yarn (cotton or silk not specified, presumably both)	<i>vandi</i> (cart load)	20 <i>kasu</i> *
	<i>podi</i> (hand cart load)	5 <i>kasu</i>
	<i>pakkam</i> (bag load)	2.5 <i>kasu</i>
	<i>talaichumai</i> (head-load)	2 <i>kasu</i>
<i>parum pudavai</i> (coarse sarees)	<i>podi</i>	10 <i>kasu</i>
	<i>pakkam</i>	5 <i>kasu</i>
<i>nen pudavai</i> (fine sarees)	<i>podi</i>	20 <i>kasu</i>
	<i>pakkam</i>	5 <i>kasu</i>
	<i>talaichumai</i>	5 <i>kasu</i>
<i>konikkai paṭṭu</i>	<i>podi</i>	2 <i>kasu</i>
	<i>pakkam</i>	1 <i>kasu</i>
<i>paṭṭavali paṭṭu</i>	<i>vandi</i>	30 <i>kasu</i>
	<i>talaichumai</i>	1 <i>kasu</i>

Table 1: Levies on different yarns, sarees and *paṭṭu* in early medieval Peninsular India. **Kasu* is a gold coin in currency in early medieval Peninsular India. The fact that the levy on *paṭṭavali paṭṭu* is fairly high suggests that this must have been regarded as an expensive variety of silk cloth which is logical seeing that it also involved the technology of tie-dye weaving.

The fact that the levy on *paṭṭavali paṭṭu* is much higher than *konikkai paṭṭu* suggests that the latter may have been an inferior variety of coarse silk.

The existence of similar corporations trading exclusively in textiles is borne out by inscriptions from other regions as well. Reference to *chilai chettis* also comes from Dharmapuri which is also in the Kongu region but very close to the Karnataka border.⁴⁰ An undated inscription belonging to the period of Vira Pandya (thirteenth - fourteenth century) from the Ramanathapuram district suggests that such traders were living and working together closely, as it mentions the “cloth merchants’ living quarters’ (*aruvai vaniya cheri*).⁴¹ Both *aruvai* and *chilai* are synonyms for cloth.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has endeavored to briefly delineate the history of silk and silk weavers during the Vijayanagar era, roughly from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries in Peninsular India. In particular the article has mapped the changes brought into sartorial habits as well as consumption patterns during the Vijayanagar era from the early medieval period till the

⁴⁰ Subrahmanya Aiyer 1933, no. 583; and *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* 1968, 165 and *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* 1969.

⁴¹ Ramanatha Ayyar [1962] 1986 no. 94 from Edikottai in Ramanathapuram district.

fourteenth century, largely due to the cultural residues of what has been termed “Islamicization.”

Consumption and production were closely linked. We can track a gradual shift from the purely courtly culture of silk-wearing around the fourteenth century to the fifteenth to sixteenth century onwards, when silk became the preferred material of affluent merchants, military chiefs and even wealthy craftsmen. This increase in the internal consumption of silk also led to the importation of cheap Chinese silk. Simultaneously there was a shift in the sartorial habits of the elite with special reference to coats or tunics, *kapayi*, and *kullayi* caps. In the early medieval period, up to the fourteenth century, such attire was worn only by soldiers, bodyguards and service groups. However, during the Vijayanagar period, as the result of Islamic influences coming both from the Arab world and the neighbouring Deccani Sultanates, royalty and the elite adopted both the tunic and the cap with the distinction that these were ornate and expensive. The attire worn by the service groups was marked by its inferiority both in its material which was usually coarse cotton and distinctive in terms of the cut which was usually above the knees.

During the Vijayanagar period weaver communities thrived on the increased commercial demand, but few communities could truly be called “silk weavers.” These were the “Silk Saliyar” (*Pattu Saliyar*; Saliyar identifies the inhabitants of Tamil Nadu) and “those who work with silk thread” (*Pattunulkarar*). In the South Kanara sub-region of Karnataka, there are references to a community of silk weavers called *Patvegar*.⁴² The weavers of the *Devanga* cast are not primarily identified as silk weavers, nevertheless they did a lot of silk weaving. The evidence suggests that all of these weaving groups moved between silk and cotton weaving depending on the historical exigencies. Religious implications further spurred them to develop new production techniques, mixing cotton and silk. Clearly though, those who could afford to invest in silk thread became weavers of silk cloth and many of them soon gained wealth and rank. Many poor, low cast, *paraiyah* weavers wove only coarse cotton, as did the communities of *Jedara* and *Janrewar*.

As many of the most revealing sources, inscriptions on trade and production, are on murals and stones scattered throughout the wide-spread regions in which silk played a role, This essay must perforce remain a work in progress in the continuing process of mapping the social, cultural and religious/ritual significance of silk. This article merely marks a modest beginning in the cultural history of Indian silk.

References

- Abraham, Meera (1988). *Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.
- Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* (1968). No. 18. New Delhi: Director General, Archaeological Survey of India.
- Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* (1969). No. 19. New Delhi: Director General, Archaeological Survey of India.
- Barbosa, Duarte (1918–1921). *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants*. Ed. by Mansel Longworth Dames. Vol. 2. London: The Hakluyt Society.
- (2000). *The Land of Malabar: The Book of Duarte Barbosa*. Ed. by Eṃ Gaṅgādharaṃ. Kottayam: Mahatma Gandhi University.
- Champakalakshmi, Radha (1973). Tanjore Frescoes in the Brahadisvaram Temple. *Journal of Indian History* Golden Jubilee Volume:349–359.
- Chandra, Moti (1950). *Prācīna Bhāratīya veśabhūshā [Ancient Indian Dress and Ornaments]*. Prayāga: Bhāratī-Bhaṇḍāra.
- (1961). Costumes and Textiles in the Sultanate Period. *Journal of Indian Textile History* 6:5–61.

⁴² Rao 2006, 27.

- Chandra, Moti (1973). *Costumes, Textiles, Cosmetics and Coiffure in Ancient and Medieval India*. Ed. by S. P. Gupta, K. N. Dikshit, V. P. Dwivedi, and Shashi Asthana. Delhi: Oriental Publishers on behalf of the Indian Archaeological Society.
- de Matos, Artur Teodoro, ed. (1999). *O Oremto de Estado da India 1571 [Budgetary Calculations for the Year 1571]*. Lisbon: Commisao Nacional (The National Commission for the Commemoration of Portuguese Discoveries).
- Johnson, Donald Clay (2010). “Silk in Mughal India.” Conference “The Culture of Silk in the Early Modern World (Fourteenth to Eighteenth Centuries)” at the Max-Planck Institute for the History of Science.
- Lu, You 陸游 (1966). *Lu Fangweng quan ji 陸放翁全集 [The Complete Writings of Lu Fangweng]*. Taipei: Taiwan zhonghua shuju.
- Mahalingam, Teralundur Venkatarama (1975). *Administration and Social Life under Vijayanagar*. Vol. 2: Social Life. Madras: University of Madras.
- Malekandathil, Pius (2010). City in Space and Metaphor: A Study on the Port-City of Goa, 1510–1700. *Studies in History* 25(1):13–38.
- Philips, George (1896). Mahuan’s Account of Cochin, Calicut and Aden. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 28(2):341–51.
- Pires, Tomé (2005). *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*. Ed. by Armando Cortesão. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.
- Ramanatha Ayyar, A. S., ed. [1962] (1986). *Pāṇḍya Inscriptions*. Vol. 14. South Indian Inscriptions. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.
- Ramaswamy, Vijaya (2002). Interactions and Encounters: Indian Looms and Craft Traditions Abroad—A South Indian Perspective. In: *India’s Interaction with China, Central and West Asia*. Ed. by Abdur Rahman. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 428–44.
- (2006). *Textiles and Weavers in South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rao, Nagendra E. (2006). *Craft Production and Trade in South Kanara: A.D. 1000–1763*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.
- Raya, Krishnadeva (2010). *Amuktamalyada*. Ed. by Srinivas Sistla. Translated by Srinivas Sistla. Visakhapatnam: Drusya Kala Deepika.
- Reddeppa, Kandukuri (2000). *Material Culture Depicted in Vijayanagara Temples*. Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan.
- Riello, Giorgio and Prasanna Parthasarathy, eds. (2009). *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Riello, Giorgio and Roy Tirthankar, eds. (2009). *How India Clothed the World: The World of South Asian Textiles, 1500–1850*. Vol. 4. Global Economic History Series. Brill: Leiden.
- Saraswati, Rangasvami (1925). Political Maxims of the Emperor-Poet Krishnadeva Raya. *Journal of Indian History* 4(3):61–88.
- Sewell, Robert [1900] (1970a). *A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar: A Contribution to the History of India*. Includes a translation of the *Chronica dos reis* de Bisnaga of Domingos Paes (ca. 1520) and Fernão Nunes (ca. 1535). New Delhi: National Book Trust.
- [1900] (1970b). Chronicle of Fernao Nuniz. In: *A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar: A Contribution to the History of India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust.
- Sivaramamurti, C. (1937). Paintings from Lepakshi. *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* (5):184–87.
- Subrahmanya Aiyer, K.V., ed. (1933). *Miscellaneous Inscriptions in Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Kannada*. Vol. 7. South Indian Inscriptions. Madras: Superintendent Government Press.
- ed. (1937). *Miscellaneous Inscriptions in Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Kannada*. Vol. 8. South Indian Inscriptions. Madras: Superintendent Government Press.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay [1990] (2002). *The Political Economy of Commerce in Southern India 1500–1650*. Cambridge South Asian Studies (45). New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
- Subramaniam, T. N., ed. (1954). *South Indian Temple Inscriptions*. Madras Government Oriental Series (121). Madras.
- Varghese, Saumya (2011). Urbanization and Trade in Goa, 1510–1690. *Journal of the Institute for Research in Social Sciences and Humanities* 6(1&2).
- Vijayaraghavacharya, V., ed. (1936). *Inscriptions of Achyutaraya’s Time (from 1530 A.D. to 1542 A.D.)* Vol. 4. Tirumalai-Tirupati Devasthanam Epigraphical Series 112. Translated by V. Vijayaraghavacharya. Madras: Tirumalai-Tirupati Devasthanams Press.
- Wagoner, Phillip B. (1996). “Sultan among Hindu Kings”: Dress, Titles, and the Islamicization of Hindu Culture at Vijayanagara. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55(4):851–80.