

The Transition to a Colonial Economy

*Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India
1720–1800*

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1 Weavers and merchants 1720–1760

It is no easy matter to reconstruct the relationship between weavers and merchants in the early eighteenth century.¹ Much of the material in the European Company records, the major source for the social and economic history of the period, deals largely with the Companies' external trade and their commercial activities in South India. However, the ninety years of documents, from 1670 to 1760, which comprise the English East India Company's Fort St. George and Fort St. David Consultations and upon which this chapter is based, also contain occasional glimpses of local social and economic life. Some of the most valuable insights are found during crises in cloth production. At these times the English interrogated their merchants to understand the reasons for the shortfalls in cloth production and delivery. On occasion, Company servants themselves ventured into the weaving villages. These moments are veritable gold mines for the historian.

In this chapter, the early eighteenth-century sources are supplemented wherever possible with material from later in the century. The later material is much more plentiful and far more detailed, but I have used such evidence carefully. It is not used to introduce new elements to the picture or argument and it is only drawn upon when it is consistent with evidence from the first half of the century. I have used it to fill out the picture – to give it flesh and blood, so to speak. The skeleton, however, has been constructed from early eighteenth-century material.

Much of the material on merchants and weavers in the English East India Company records pertains to weaving villages that supplied cloth to the Company at Madras and Fort St. David (near Pondicherry). This material, which was drawn from a large number of villages dispersed over a wide area of the Tamil country and eastern Andhra, indicates that the relations between merchants and weavers throughout the area were broadly similar. In addition, evidence from other parts of South India –

¹ This point has been made by Arasaratnam, "Weavers, Merchants and Company," p. 258.

dating from both the early and late eighteenth century – suggests that these relations were found widely.

The Weavers

Although in recent times South India has become famous for its silks, especially the lush, silk saris of Kanchipuram, these cloths are of recent origin and they began to be manufactured only in the nineteenth century. Before 1800 cotton and wool were the major fibers in South India, with cotton accounting for much of the total textile production. While cotton cloth was manufactured in many parts of South India, the production of woollens (in the form of blankets or cumblies) was concentrated in the cooler and higher elevations of the interior where herds of goat could be reared. This weaving was done largely by *kurumbar*s who shepherded the goats, sheared the wool, prepared the yarn and wove the cloth.

The majority of cotton weavers in South India were professional weavers; that is, work at the loom represented their sole source of earnings. However, a small number of South Indians took up weaving in order to supplement earnings from other pursuits. This latter group was largely found in the dry or plains areas of South India and their small numbers suggest that they accounted for only a small fraction of total cloth production.² Many were primarily agriculturalists who followed weaving seasonally.³ For them, weaving not only represented some additional income, but may have also provided some insurance to help weather bad times. As was also the case with spinning, weaving was work which could be taken up even in times of drought when work in agriculture was either unavailable or held out little prospect of success. Others who worked at the loom on occasion included barbers, *chucklers* (cobblers), *dhers* (tanners) and scavengers.⁴

These weavers, being of low skill, tended to produce coarser varieties of cloth. This production supplied the needs of the weaver and his family as well as outside customers who by and large tended to be located in the immediate vicinity of the weaver. Of these part-time or seasonal weavers, the majority worked their looms only upon receiving orders for cloth and

² In dry areas agriculture was rain-fed, and thus seasonal. This may be contrasted with wet areas where agriculture was based on river water and extensive irrigation systems. For a discussion of this distinction see David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India* (Princeton, 1985), pp. 20–1.

³ Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar* (3 vols., London, 1807), vol. 1, p. 218.

⁴ Bellary District Records, 1804, vol. 398, pp. 191–8, TNA; “Sundry Information about Weaving in Dindigul Taluk, Measurements, and Nature of Dyeing,” n.d., Mackenzie Collection, Shelf No. D-3014, Government Oriental Manuscripts Library, Madras University.

at that time they were often given the yarn as well.⁵ It was not uncommon – especially in cotton-growing areas – for peasants to obtain their cloth by giving the yarn that had been spun in the household to these weavers, who were then paid for their services. Agriculturalists who engaged in weaving would have produced cloth for the use of their families, but given the small numbers of these peasant-weavers, it must have been rare for South Indian peasants to produce the cloth they wore.

For professional weavers, work at the loom was a full-time occupation. It is this group which is the focus of this work. These artisans produced a wide variety of cloths for both local and long-distance markets, ranging from the coarse counts that clothed the South Indian poor to the very fine muslins of Arni which in the nineteenth century were compared favorably with the more famous muslins of Dacca. The majority of these full-time weavers were drawn from the four main weaving castes in South India: the *kaikolar*, *devanga*, *sale* and *seniyar*. Although the majority of men in these caste groups followed the occupation of weaving, there were notable exceptions. Kaikolars in the Baramahal, for example, were also employed as merchants and as agriculturalists.⁶ Similarly, all professional weavers were not drawn from only these four castes. The finest weavers in the Baramahal, one of the largest weaving centers in South India, were a group of “untouchables” – *manniwars*. They were reputed to weave the finest cloth in the district.⁷

Although information on loom technology in South India is not abundant, we do know that a variety of looms were to be found. Vertical looms were distributed quite widely and used for the production of carpets. Draw looms, with their elaborate apparatus of weaver working in conjunction with a “drawboy,” were utilized in the manufacture of fancy patterned cloths. However, the loom which easily accounted for the bulk of cloth production, and was therefore the workhorse in South Indian weaving, was the pit loom.⁸

The pit loom is a very simple horizontal loom, but several of its features made it ideal for South Indian conditions. First, weavers in South India were often on the move and the pit loom made this possible. The loom itself was relatively light, simply a few pieces of wood tied together, and it could easily be disassembled, transported and reassembled. According to

⁵ “Sundry Information about Weaving in Dindigul Taluk, Measurements, and Nature of Dyeing,” Mackenzie Collection, Shelf No. D-3014.

⁶ English East India Company, *The Baramahal Records*, Section III: *Inhabitants* (Madras, 1907).

⁷ English East India Company, *The Baramahal Records*, Section VII: *Imposts* (Madras, 1920), p. 27.

⁸ Vijaya Ramaswamy, “Notes on Textile Technology in Medieval India with Special Reference to the South,” *IESHR*, 17 (1980), pp. 227–41.

Abbé Dubois, who resided in South India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, “It is by no means a rare sight to see one of these weavers changing his abode, and carrying on his back all that is necessary for setting to work the moment he arrives at his new home.”⁹ Second, the hole under the loom where the weaver sat and worked the pedals – the pit – created the proper humidity for cotton weaving. Cotton weaving is much better performed in humid conditions which prevent the yarn from becoming brittle and snapping. Finally, the pit loom provided a comfortable seating posture for the weaver.¹⁰ In the early nineteenth century an English East India Company servant noted that two types of pit looms were used in South India and that “the same loom which weaves the coarsest cloth cannot be used in the construction of the finer sorts.” No additional details are given, however.¹¹

The pit loom and other tools accounted for only a small fraction of the total capital needed in weaving. According to a Company servant, these items could be obtained for five or six pagodas, a sum which was the equivalent of about three months’ earnings for a weaver of middling quality cloth.¹² Such a figure is consistent with the simplicity of both the loom and the tools used in ancillary activities. Warping, for instance, was done with sticks stuck into the ground and reeling was done with a simple wooden flywheel. The bulk of the capital in weaving went to the purchase of materials, most importantly yarn which was the single largest expenditure in cloth production.

Most weavers purchased their yarn with funds that they received from cloth merchants as an advance, but on occasion yarn merchants and head weavers were known to supply such money. In the early eighteenth century there is no evidence that temples or kings – both of which for several centuries had been important sources of capital in the South Indian economy – were engaged in advancing money to weavers. However, later in the century, a number of South Indian states entered the cloth trade and provided advances to weavers in order to finance production.

The servants of the English East India Company argued that weavers were reliant upon merchant advances because they were too poor to purchase yarn for themselves.¹³ I have shown elsewhere that the poverty of weavers was a construction of European observers and that it is not supported by evidence on weaver incomes.¹⁴ It is likely that many weavers

⁹ Abbé J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, trans. Henry K. Beauchamp, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 1924), p. 36.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Shakeb Afseh for the last two observations.

¹¹ Tinnevely Collectorate Records, 1811, vol. 3587, pp. 428–37, TNA.

¹² Chingleput Collectorate Records, 1793, vol. 445, p. 54, TNA.

¹³ *FSGDC*, 1672–8, p. 74; *FSGDC*, 1693, p. 100.

¹⁴ See my “Rethinking Wages and Competitiveness.”

possessed the funds to work as independent producers and finance production for themselves, but preferred to receive advances from merchants. By entering into such a relationship, weavers forced merchants to bear some of the risks associated with cloth production. These risks included uncertainties in the prices of yarn and cloth, shortages of yarn, droughts and localized shortfalls of grain. A merchant who made an advance to a weaver had to share the burden of losses resulting from economic fluctuations and this gave weavers an enormous measure of security. Such off-loading of risk through creating ties of dependence was found in many areas of economic life in pre-colonial South India and was one of its central features.¹⁵

The weaver household

About one-third of the merchant advance went to the weaver as payment for manufacturing a piece of cloth. Weavers spent much of this on food and other necessities for themselves and their families, but a small amount was used for the maintenance of looms and tools. The loom strings, which had to be replaced every two months, represented the costliest item of maintenance.¹⁶ The remainder of the advance was used to purchase materials. Of these, yarn was the major expense, but small sums were also needed to purchase pieces of cloth and small quantities of rice and oil for sizing the warp.

While the weaver worked his loom, his wife and children were typically hard at work preparing the yarn for the next piece. Weavers who had small families had to hire laborers (“coolies”) to do this preparatory work, which reduced the income of the weaver and his household. This led a late eighteenth-century Company servant to remark that large families yielded higher incomes for weavers.¹⁷ The preparation of the yarn consisted of warping, sizing and readying the bobbins for the shuttle. The warping and sizing were usually done outdoors under the shade of trees, but the weaving itself was done inside the weaver’s house where light was provided by a small hole in the wall.¹⁸

¹⁵ The off-loading of risk was especially important in agriculture where agrarian elites and revenue and political authorities shouldered burdens through guarantees of minimum incomes to producers and advances (*taccavi*) for financing production and agricultural improvement. These are discussed in the following chapter.

¹⁶ South Arcot Collectorate Records, Cuddalore Consultations, 1779, vol. 81, pp. 206–7, TNA.

¹⁷ South Arcot Collectorate Records, Cuddalore Consultations, 1779, vol. 81, pp. 206–7, TNA. Godavari District Records, 1803, vol. 832, p. 412–26, APSA. It was reported that longcloth required seven or eight people to prepare the thread: MPP, 1791, vol. P/241/26, p. 2836, OIOC.

¹⁸ The Paterson Diaries, vol. 9, p. 137, OIOC; MPP, 1791, vol. P/241/26, pp. 2791–3,

For most counts of cloth the preparation of the yarn took as many days as the weaving itself.¹⁹ For this reason it would have been difficult for a weaver to earn a sufficient income by producing a piece, selling it and then using the proceeds to purchase yarn for the next round of production. Therefore, to be able to maintain sufficient earnings, a weaver had to always have on hand enough yarn for two pieces of cloth so that weaving and yarn preparation could take place simultaneously. In order to do this, weavers required a sizable advance. In 1768 weavers who produced ordinary varieties of longcloth earned two pagodas a month, a sum which could purchase about 250 pounds of rice. The same weavers always had on hand at minimum an advance of four pagodas, but often far more.²⁰

Boys were trained in the art of weaving within the household and family. The first step in the long training process was to assist in the preparation of the yarn, which introduced a young boy to the proper techniques for handling yarn. Preparing the bobbins was especially valuable as it was an opportunity for a young child to learn how to reconnect the yarn when it broke. From here the boy would have progressed to more difficult tasks, culminating with weaving itself. A Company servant observed that in the homes of muslin weavers in the *jagir* (Chingleput), teenage boys developed their skills by weaving turbans.²¹ The narrow width of turbans (they were among the narrowest cloths manufactured in South India) may have made them ideal cloths on which to learn the proper techniques for throwing the shuttle and beating the weft.

The weavers' reputation for easy mobility suggests that they led simple lives and had few possessions. A typical weaver's house was constructed with mud walls and a thatched roof.²² In 1698 and 1768 weavers who migrated to Company settlements received five pagodas for the construction of such a dwelling.²³ This figure may be contrasted with the cost of merchants' houses. A Company *kanakkapillai* (accountant) in Madras sold his house in 1714 for 397 pagodas.²⁴ In 1716 the house of a Company merchant at Fort St. David was estimated to be worth 100 pagodas.²⁵ The weavers' diet was also simple and consisted chiefly of grain.

OIOC; Edgar Thurston, *Monograph on the Silk Fabric Industry of the Madras Presidency* (Madras, 1899), p. 12.

¹⁹ MPP, 1790, vol. P/241/16, pp. 340–1, OIOC.

²⁰ South Arcot Collectorate Records, Cuddalore Consultations, 1768, vol. 66, pp. 211–12, TNA.

²¹ MPP, 1791, vol. P/241/26, p. 2833, OIOC.

²² According to Abbé Dubois, weavers worked in “thatched huts built of mud, twenty to thirty feet long by seven or eight feet broad.” See his *Hindu Manners*, p. 81. Some of the highly skilled and wealthier, and thus more sedentary, muslin weavers of Kanchipuram and surrounding towns lived in houses constructed from stone and roofed with tiles.

²³ *FSGDC*, 1698, p. 121; South Arcot Collectorate Records, Cuddalore Consultations, 1769, vol. 67, p. 58, TNA.

²⁴ *FSGDC*, 1714, p. 87. ²⁵ *FSGDC*, 1716, p. 98.

In very prosperous times weavers on the coast may have eaten rice, and even then most likely the cheaper grades, but much of the time, and certainly in times of trouble, the grains of choice for weavers were less expensive millets. In the dry areas of interior South India, however, millets were the staple grain for weavers as well as much of the population as a whole.

Table 1.1 contains information on food consumption by caste or occupation for the inhabitants of the Baramahal (a dry district) in the late eighteenth century. According to this information, brahmins were easily the best fed group in the Baramahal. They consumed a disproportionate share of many food items, especially the highly prized luxury foods, and the quantity, variety and richness of their diets are striking. Brahmins made up only 6.7 percent of the sample, but they consumed 25 percent of the rice, 55 percent of the wheat, and 21.2 percent of the *ghee* and *gingelly* (sesame) oil. The brahmin diet was also superior to those of merchants and trading groups who, however, possessed diets which were far richer and more varied than those of laboring groups.

Weavers were the most prosperous of the laboring groups represented in the table. They were able to afford more rice, pulses and spices than those from other occupations and they were even in a position to purchase a few luxury items such as ghee. It is likely that weavers obtained these items, as well as the others contained in table 1.1, from markets and shops, but they were also supplemented with the produce of their own gardens which yielded, in the words of an English Company servant, “a few brinjalls chillies, etc. vegetables which they chiefly live upon.”²⁶ The wives and children of weavers were probably in charge of these patches as weavers had to preserve the suppleness of their hands and fingers for their work at the loom. Weavers did agricultural and other hard physical labor only when times were desperate. Weavers were also fond of *betel* and tobacco and these they claimed were essential for them to carry on their work. According to a petition from the weavers and painters of Madras: “if we have not or can’t be permitted by reason of a hurry of Business which sometimes happens to get our victuals We can chearfully bear it if we have but Beetle and Tobacco.”²⁷ When purchasing these items weavers were extremely sensitive to their prices. In 1701 and 1733 many weavers left Fort St. David, where there were heavy taxes on both, and settled at French and Dutch factories where these items could be obtained free of all taxes.²⁸

It has been suggested that from the late medieval period weavers were polarized into master weavers, who owned many looms, and cooly

²⁶ South Arcot Collectorate Records, 1803, vol. 111, pp. 163–6, TNA.

²⁷ *FSGDC*, 1735, p. 105.

²⁸ *FSDC*, 1701, p. 3; *FSGDC*, 1733, pp. 184–5.

Table 1.1. *Food consumption in the Baramahal by occupational group, 1797 (figures represent percentage of each item)*

	Occupational group										
	Brahmins	Merchants or <i>marwaris</i>	Muslims	<i>Labbays</i> (traders)	Barbers and washermen	<i>Dhair</i> and <i>chamar</i>	Potmakers and <i>burder</i>	<i>Kurumbars</i> (shepherds)	<i>Oddars</i> and <i>kurchivars</i> (tank diggers)	<i>Jilaha</i> and <i>kaikolars</i> (weavers)	Inhabitants (agricul- turalists?)
Proportion of sample	6.7	6.0	3.3	5.3	1.3	2.7	2.0	4.0	0.7	4.7	63.3
Rice	25	15	7.3	6.7	0.6	0.8	0.7	1.2	0.2	2.9	39.6
Ragi and bajra	2.1	3.8	2.3	5.0	1.5	3.1	2.3	4.7	0.8	5.1	69.3
Salt	7.5	6.2	4.4	8.8	1.9	2.5	2.5	4.4	0.6	3.8	57.5
Chilies	7.5	3.8	3.1	6.2	0.9	1.6	1.6	3.1	0.3	1.2	69.4
Tamarind	18	7.5	5.0	7.5	0.6	0.9	0.6	1.2	0.3	1.2	57.5
Wheat	55	25	10	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Urad	18	8.8	3.8	3.8	0	0	0	0	0	3.8	62.5
Mung	55	25	7.5	3.8	0	0	0	0	0	8.8	0
Chana	31	50	6.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	6.2	6.2
Coriander	12	6.2	12	12	6.2	0	6.2	6.2	6.2	6.2	25.0
Pepper	12	6.2	6.2	12	0	0	0	0	0	6.2	56.2
Fenugreek	19	6.2	6.2	6.2	0	0	0	0	0	6.2	50.0
Turmeric	12	6.2	3.1	6.2	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6	62.5
Onions	0	8.1	5.6	8.1	1.9	3.8	2.5	5.6	1.2	5.6	57.5
Garlic	0	11	5.0	11	1.2	2.5	1.2	2.5	1.2	3.8	60.0
Jaggery	12	6.2	3.1	3.8	0.6	1.2	0.6	1.2	0.3	1.2	64.1
Tar-gur	0	8.3	2.1	3.3	0.4	1.7	1.2	2.5	0.4	3.3	76.7
Ghee	21	11	10	10	0	0	0	0	0	4.3	43.8
Sesame oil	21	11	4.3	4.3	1.2	3.1	1.2	0.6	3.1	6.2	43.8
Betel nut	10	10	3.1	5.0	0.6	0.6	0.6	1.2	0.6	3.8	64.4
Betel leaf	8.8	8.8	3.8	5.0	0.6	0.6	0.6	1.2	0.3	3.8	66.6
Cumin	12	6.2	12	12	6.2	0	6.2	6.2	0	6.2	25.0
Coconut	16	12	3.1	6.2	3.1	3.1	3.1	6.2	3.1	6.2	37.5
Tobacco	1.2	5.6	2.8	4.4	1.2	1.9	1.6	2.8	0.6	2.8	75.0
Bhang	0	12	6.2	6.2	3.1	3.1	1.6	3.1	1.6	6.2	56.2

Reading the table: The figures for food consumption for each occupational group are read down each column and must be understood relative to the proportion of that group in the sample as a whole. For example, brahmins are 6.7% of the sample, but they consume 25% of the total rice consumed by the sample, 2.1% of the total *ragi* and *bajra* consumed, etc. The proportion of each group in the sample is not necessarily reflective of their share in the population.

Source: English East India Company, *The Baramahal Records*, Section IV: *Products* (Madras, 1912), pp. 107–8.

weavers, who worked these looms as wage laborers.²⁹ These claims have been supported with evidence from several temple inscriptions. It has been further argued that master weavers continued to operate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and actually became more powerful and exerted greater control over their coolly weavers. Although I cannot address the arguments for the medieval period, I have found no support for the existence of master weavers in the eighteenth century and the evidence I have come across suggests that nearly all weavers owned their looms.³⁰ In 1771 the English conducted a detailed loom survey of weaving villages in Chingleput. The data show that 1,572 (83.4 percent) of weavers owned one loom; 272 (14.4 percent) owned two looms; 34 (1.8 percent) owned three looms; 6 (0.3 percent) owned four looms; and one household owned nine looms.³¹ These figures show that a large majority of weavers owned one loom and that an overwhelming number (98 percent) owned only one or two looms.

The main piece of evidence for the existence of master weavers in post-medieval South India comes from a Dutch East India Company census of households and looms in five weaving villages in late seventeenth-century Northern Coromandel. However, these data are highly aggregated and give the total number of households and the total number of looms in each village. The ratio of weaving households to looms is the same for all five villages – three to four – which suggests that these numbers were estimates and not actual enumerations. Nevertheless, they do indicate that some weaving households must have owned more than one loom and from this the existence of master weavers has been inferred. However, such a conclusion should not be reached too hastily. The structure of weaver families and households must be considered as well. The predominance of one loom households in the Chingleput survey suggests that the typical weaver household was a nuclear family, but other family structures were also to be found among weavers in South India. For example, in the late eighteenth century an English Company servant came upon a weaving household in the Northern Sarkars which owned half a dozen looms. It was not the household of a master weaver, however, but

²⁹ Vijaya Ramaswamy, “The Genesis and Historical Role of the Masterweavers in South Indian Textile Production,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 28 (1985), pp. 294–325.

³⁰ Another problem with Vijaya Ramaswamy’s work is that she uses the terms master weaver, head weaver and principal weaver interchangeably. The terms head weaver and principal weaver are found in the English records. Neither can be equated with Vijaya Ramaswamy’s category of master weaver. I have nowhere in the English records come across the term master weaver and I do not believe it was used by the English. As will be discussed later in this chapter, head weaver is a literal translation of a term found in Tamil and Telugu.

³¹ MPP, 1771, vol. 106B, pp. 1062–130, TNA.

that of a weaver, his sons and a nephew who were all weavers. Aggregate figures do not capture such variations in weaver family structures.

The rhythms of weaving

Weaving in South India was ruled by rhythms. Many aspects of the working lives of weavers – including the distribution of work and leisure over the year, the pace and intensity of work and the length of the working day – followed set, seasonal patterns. It is likely that weavers rose at dawn in order to work in the cool and greater humidity of the early morning. Early rising may explain why weavers were “according to established custom” in the habit of being “two or three hours in the day idle.”³² There is evidence that weavers stepped up the pace of work at their looms at times of heavy demand. In 1723, in response to English Company complaints about the quality of the cloth, the merchant suppliers said:

the very large demand lately made has occasion'd the running the Cloth off the Loom so fast 'tis not practicable to keep them justly to the goodness of the muster. That they can always provide the quantity and much more, but that when they do so they cannot pretend to engage for the Goodness, Since it is certain that the People working in a hurry must be more careless and negligent than when they have more time; so that when this place provided 1000 Bales per annum it was very easy to keep them up to the Musters, but that now the demand is increas'd to four times that quantity it is not reasonable to expect it should be equal in goodness.³³

Sacrificing quality and intensifying the pace of work was also a way in which the growing demand for cloth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was satisfied.

The climate in South India imposed limits on the working year for weavers. During the rainy season, between October and December in South India but with some geographical variation, weaving came to a standstill for about a month.³⁴ In Kongunad such a work schedule is reflected in the fact that festivals for the left-hand caste, of which weavers were an integral part, were concentrated in the months of the monsoon.³⁵ In Masulipatnam, as well, textile manufacturers celebrated a number of festivals at the monsoon period.³⁶ During the rains, the yarn preparation,

³² South Arcot Collectorate Records, Cuddalore Consultations, 1772, vol. 71, p. 134, TNA.

³³ *FSGDC*, 1723, pp. 91–2.

³⁴ MPP, 1792, vol. P/241/30, pp. 196–201, OIOC.

³⁵ The relationship between work and ritual calendars in Kongunad is discussed at greater detail in the next chapter.

³⁶ Masulipatnam District Records, Commercial Consultations, 1790, vol. 2840, p. 12, APSA.

which was done outdoors, could not be performed. However, the heavy rains of the northeast monsoon penetrated even inside houses and kept weavers from their looms. In 1791 an English Company servant reported that weavers in the jagir (Chingleput) were unable to work during the monsoon because their “looms filled with water.” This was no doubt a reference to the loom pit.³⁷ There were also other features of the South Indian climate that imposed limits on weaving. In the jagir the best months for weaving were October and December through March since there were no land winds in those months. During the rest of the year it was not uncommon for severe winds to break the warp yarns that were fixed in the loom. Weavers tied knots to reconnect the broken ends, which diminished the quality of the cloth. Company servants observed similar winds in Nellore.³⁸

The annual work schedule for weavers was also determined by the demand for cloth, which was not distributed evenly through the year. In South India, as in Europe, it is likely that much of the work of weaving was performed close to the times when cloth had to be delivered.³⁹ Factors such as shipping schedules and sailing times determined the timing of demand for export markets and these in the Indian Ocean were dependent upon the monsoon winds.⁴⁰ Traditionally, Asian shipping in the Indian Ocean set sail from the southeastern Indian coast for Southeast Asia between early September and mid-October. European shipping, however, followed the September sailing time, but also added a second departure between January and March. Therefore, the entry of Europeans into the Indian Ocean may have lengthened the weaving season by creating another peak period of weaving to fill the departing European ships.

South Indian festivals, religious holidays and ritual activities set the calendar for local demand. The summer months, especially May and June, would have been a period of heavy demand. In part this was due to the concentration of weddings in these months. Although the wedding season extended from January 15 to July 15, May and June were the peak months as there was a lull in agriculture.⁴¹ Cloth, and in abundant supplies, was absolutely essential at weddings for the numerous prestations which accompanied the ceremony and the run up to the wedding season would have undoubtedly kept many a weaver hard at work at his

³⁷ MPP, 1792, vol. P/241/30, p. 345, OIOC.

³⁸ MPP, 1791, vol. P/241/26, p. 2832, OIOC.

³⁹ For the unevenness of production in Europe see E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present*, no. 38 (1967), pp. 56–97.

⁴⁰ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500–1650* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 48–9.

⁴¹ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, pp. 213–14 and 217.

loom. In addition, the renewal of annual contracts in the rice-growing valleys, at which time a gift of cloth was made, took place in late June and early July. This would have represented an additional source of demand at the time of wedding activity. A second major period for local cloth demand was in late September and early October during the festival of *Dasara*. The presentation of new cloth was essential to the celebration of this major holiday.⁴²

Weavers had a variety of strategies for coping with disruptions in demand. In 1782 the English had no money to finance cloth production in Vizagapatnam, which led many of the poorer weavers to “quit their native villages to seek livelihood in distant countries by following occupations foreign to the one they brought upon.”⁴³ This passage gives no information on the occupations followed by these weavers, but evidence suggests that it was common for weavers at times of low cloth demand to take up soldiering. By the late eighteenth century this created a serious shortage of weavers and the English Company prohibited weavers from joining its armies.⁴⁴ At times of crisis weavers also took to producing coarser varieties of cloth, largely for local markets. The returns were lower and the credit terms were probably more stringent for these inferior fabrics, but the demand was more reliable.⁴⁵ Movement in the opposite direction, up the quality ladder, was far rarer. The additional skill necessary to move up even one rung in quality was substantial, which limited entry into the ranks of the more highly skilled weavers.

The merchants

Of the cloth merchants who advanced funds to weavers for the production of cloth, the most extensive and detailed information is available for those who acted as intermediaries to the European Companies. Many merchants competed for the privilege of supplying cloth to these Companies as this position as “Company merchant” brought with it major political and economic benefits.⁴⁶ In the case of the English East India Company, merchants who sought this position were required to possess extensive knowledge of the major weaving centers as well as security or

⁴² Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, p. 569. *Deepavali* was also celebrated shortly after *Dasara* and cloth may have played an important role in that festival as well.

⁴³ MPP, 1782, vol. P/240/55, p. 826, OIOC.

⁴⁴ MPP, 1786, vol. P/240/64, p. 1858, OIOC; MPP, 1786, vol. P/240/65, pp. 2245–52, OIOC.

⁴⁵ *FSGDC*, 1693, p. 119; *FSGDC*, 1694, p. 122; *FSDC*, 1743, pp. 22–3. Also see South Arcot Collectorate Records, Cuddalore Consultations, 1786, vol. 86, pp. 12–13, TNA.

⁴⁶ This section is an introduction to the merchants and cloth traders who supplied cloth to the English East India Company. A more detailed discussion of merchants and their position in the South Indian political economy appears in chapter 5.

standing in the community of merchants and bankers. The latter served as collateral for the money the Company advanced to their merchants for the purchase of cloth.⁴⁷ The merchants who satisfied these criteria were a diverse group and they came from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. In Northern Coromandel, the merchants were mainly Telugu speakers. Telugu speakers were also present in Madras and Fort St. David, but south of the Palar River, Tamil merchants were more numerous. In the early eighteenth century, even a Gujarati merchant engaged to provide cloth at Madras. Many of these merchants came from the traditional South Indian mercantile castes, *komaties* and *chetties*, but there were also merchants from other backgrounds. There were even a few weavers who rose to the status of merchants. Merchants were also drawn from both sides of the great social divide in South India, the right- and left-hand castes.⁴⁸

Merchants also varied widely in the size of their capital and the scale of their commercial activities. Some Company merchants ran large mercantile empires and a few who supplied cloth at Madras owned ships and were themselves involved in the cloth trade to Southeast Asia. However, the majority of Company merchants ran small operations. The merchants of Masulipatnam and Madras in general were more substantial men, which was reflected in their connections to the broader trading world of the Indian Ocean, than were merchants to the north or south of these places. The Masulipatnam and Madras merchants, for instance, were able to find buyers for the broadcloth imported by the English. This cloth was very expensive and beyond the reach of all but the richest in South India. A major market for English broadcloth was the court in the kingdom of Golconda, but even after the fall of Golconda, the Madras merchants were able to vend these textiles as well as other European goods. The Fort St. David merchants, by contrast, were never able to find a market for these luxury goods.⁴⁹ There were also substantial differences in the quantity of cloth that merchants could supply to the Company. These differences are reflected in the structure of Company joint-stocks, which were associations formed by groups of merchants to supply cloth. In 1680 the shares in a newly formed joint-stock were distributed among sixty-seven merchants at Fort St. George, but two merchants held 25 percent of the shares, and supplied a quarter of the

⁴⁷ *FSGDC*, 1700, p. 61.

⁴⁸ S. Arasaratnam, *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast* (Delhi, 1986), pp. 215–20. Also see *FSGDC*, 1694, p. 123; *FSGDC*, 1707, p. 54; *FSGDC*, 1717, p. 7; *FSGDC*, 1718, p. 27. For a discussion of the right- and left-hand divide, see also Arjun Appadurai, “Right and Left Hand Castes in South India,” *IESHR*, 11 (1974), pp. 216–59.

⁴⁹ *FSGDC*, 1712, p. 91; *FSDC*, 1740, p. 69.

cloth investment, and forty-three merchants held only 31 percent of the total shares.⁵⁰

Relations between merchants and weavers

The belief that laborers in pre-colonial South Asia were the victims of relentless oppression by their political and economic superiors is deep-seated in historical consciousness. It is a commonplace image that state authorities taxed laborers with impunity, that merchants cheated them at every turn and that laborers were defenseless against these depredations.⁵¹ Such views gave rise to the conclusion that weavers in eighteenth-century India were poverty-stricken and helpless in their dealings with merchants and kings.⁵² However, relations between weavers and merchants in eighteenth-century South India bear little resemblance to this widely accepted picture. Far from being oppressed and defenseless, what follows shows that weavers were in a very strong and secure position within the South Indian economic and political order. In many respects, the position of South Indian weavers was superior to that of their counterparts in England.⁵³

The strong position of weavers was in part a product of the very high demand for South Indian cloth, which translated into very high demand for the services of weavers. This, in turn, placed them in a powerful bargaining position. However, these market conditions cannot fully account for the position of weavers. As we shall see shortly, after 1770, although cloth demand remained buoyant, the power of weavers diminished considerably. The decline in weaver power at the close of the eighteenth century was a result of the social and political changes which accompanied the rise of British rule in South India. Therefore, the powerful position of weavers was due not simply to the market but to the social and political order in pre-colonial South India.

Cloth merchants obtained their goods by making advances of money to weavers. This system satisfied the needs of both parties. Weavers were supplied with working capital, and along with it protection from market fluctuations, and merchants obtained cloth of the proper quality and in the appropriate quantity. It was extremely difficult, and perhaps even impossible, for a merchant to meet the requirements of distant markets, and especially those of European Companies, by buying in country

⁵⁰ *FSGDC*, 1680–81, pp. 48–9. For a similar breakdown also see *FSGDC*, 1698, p. 86.

⁵¹ This despotic view of the state is explored in greater detail in chapter 5.

⁵² See Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, p. 274 and Raychaudhuri, “The Mid-Eighteenth-Century Background,” pp. 17 and 33.

⁵³ See my “Rethinking Wages and Competitiveness.”

markets and fairs. Such markets were suited to local needs, but were unable to supply cloth in sufficient quantity or of proper quality for the highly specific demands of various export markets.⁵⁴ Many cloth merchants, especially those who supplied the European Companies, resided in port towns along the coast and made advances and procured cloth through a network of agents or brokers in the major weaving centers.⁵⁵

When the advance was made an oral contract was struck between the weaver and the merchant or his broker.⁵⁶ This contract specified the size of the advance, the price and quality of the cloth and its date of delivery. In the opinion of the English East India Company's servants, the price of cloth was determined in some automatic fashion by the prices of cotton and rice. These servants assumed that the incomes of weavers were fixed by custom and that the price of cotton set the cost of materials, most importantly yarn, and that the price of rice determined the earnings of the weaver.⁵⁷ My findings suggest that the weavers' incomes were not fixed, but were determined by a process of bargaining over cloth prices. The results of this bargaining process also determined the profits of the merchant. From this perspective, increases in cloth prices, which through much of the eighteenth century accompanied increases in cotton and rice prices, were not automatic, but the product of successful weaver efforts to push up prices to compensate for their higher costs. Merchants, of course, resisted these weaver attempts to pass on costs.

The material given in table 1.2 provides evidence that the price of rice was not the determinant of weaver incomes. The table has been constructed from detailed surveys of costs in cloth manufacturing that were conducted by the English East India Company in 1790. The first two columns of the table report the income received by weavers for manufacturing several counts of longcloth at Ingeram and Madapollam, two English factories in the Northern Sarkars. The third column gives for each count the ratio of the weavers' incomes at the two factories. If the incomes of weavers were determined by the price of rice, this ratio should be the same for each count of cloth and should simply be the ratio of rice prices at the two factories. These ratios, however, range widely from 0.97 to 1.24, which indicates that the price of rice alone did not determine the incomes of weavers. Rather, as the records of the English East India Company themselves suggest, the incomes of weavers were determined

⁵⁴ Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, pp. 254–5.

⁵⁵ *FSGDC*, 1675, p. 73; *FSGDC*, 1688, pp. 130–1; *FSGDC*, 1693, p. 119.

⁵⁶ The reluctance of weavers in Salem to enter into written contracts with the East India Company suggests that the typical contract was oral. See MPP, 1792, vol. P/241/34, pp. 2611–32, OIOC.

⁵⁷ This formulation is also found in Arasaratnam, "Weavers, Merchants and Company," p. 269 and Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, pp. 265–7.

Table 1.2. *Returns to weavers for longcloth, 1790*

Punjam	Returns to weavers			Returns to merchants	
	Ingeram	Madapollam	Ratio	Ingeram	Madapollam
14	0,12,7	0,11,65	1.02	0,4,40	0,6,60
16	0,20,47	0,19,10	1.08	0,4,4	0,7,54
18	0,28,10	0,23,50	1.19	0,4,58	0,8,16
22	1,0,0	1,1,10	0.97	0,7,16	0,7,74
24	1,1,55	0,33,60	1.12	0,8,8	0,8,31
36	4,15,25	3,20,65	1.24	1,27,0	1,27,16

Note: Returns are given in pagodas, fanams, cash.

1 pagoda = 36 fanams and 1 fanam = 80 cash.

Ratio = (returns to weaving at Ingeram)/(returns to weaving at Madapollam).

Source: MPP, 1790, vol. P/241/16, pp. 343-4, OIOC.

by bargaining between merchants and weavers and the relative power of the two parties.

The profit the merchant received for each count of cloth, which is also given in table 1.2, further indicates that there was a process of bargaining. The profit to the merchant varied widely between the two factories, suggesting that these rested on the success or failure of merchant negotiating power. In fact, the profit of the merchant was the product of two bargains over price. The first took place between merchants and the English East India Company and the second between merchants and weavers. The difference between these two prices was profit to merchants. Or to put it more accurately, the price merchants negotiated with weavers determined the potential size of their profits. To achieve this potential, however, merchants had to enforce the conditions of their contracts with weavers, which was no easy matter. The form of contracts combined with fluctuations and uncertainties in South Indian economic life to make it extremely difficult for merchants to compel weavers to abide by their agreements. In particular, merchants had enormous difficulties enforcing quality standards and collecting outstanding weaver debts. These problems were persistent and they made merchant profits at best precarious and at worst altogether nonexistent.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ In contrast to K. N. Chaudhuri who thought the advance system "divided the financial risks equally between the producer and the distributor," these problems suggest that the distributor shouldered a greater burden of the risk. See Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, p. 257, n. 69.

The cloth quality problem

The merchant advance typically consisted of money. With these funds weavers purchased materials, most importantly yarn.⁵⁹ This arrangement gave weavers enormous power to select the yarn that they used in their cloth and, therefore, over the quality of the final product. Their control over yarn purchases also gave weavers the power to set their earnings and weavers could easily increase their incomes by simply spending less on yarn. This could take the form of using less yarn per piece, which resulted in pieces which were short of the proper measure or pieces which were thin and loosely woven. Or weavers could buy less expensive counts of yarn which yielded poor-quality, coarse cloth. In both cases, weaver incomes were further swelled by the fact that poor-quality cloth took less time to weave. To maintain their profits, merchants had to detect such deficiencies in quality and then reduce the price given to the weaver, but neither of these was easily done in the late pre-colonial South Indian context.

Weavers developed sophisticated schemes to conceal defects in their cloth. A common weaver practice, judging from the frequency of English complaints, was to mix both good and poor yarns in a single piece of cloth. At times weavers had no choice about the matter as the proper yarn could not always be found in sufficient quantities. However, the prevalence of the practice suggests that weavers also deliberately substituted coarse yarns for fine in order to increase their earnings. In addition, the different quality yarns were not mixed randomly within a piece, but with great forethought and planning to minimize the chances of detection. This entailed carefully locating the finer yarns in the outside folds of the cloth, which were more visible and easier to inspect. The coarser yarns were then placed in the inside folds, which were less accessible and less likely to be examined by a merchant or his brokers.⁶⁰ This scheme was most effective with longcloth which, as its name indicates, was extremely long, usually running to 34 to 36 yards in length. Its great size made it costly and laborious to unfold and properly examine several thousand pieces.

Weavers also possessed other subterfuges to trick the sorters who were in charge of inspecting their cloth. A particularly effective one was to cover thin or defective areas with *congee* (rice starch), oil or other materials, which, according to the Cuddalore Council, even “deceive the best sorters.”⁶¹ Weavers also used cow dung, which blended in with the

⁵⁹ There were a very few exceptions to this general rule and these are taken up in subsequent pages.

⁶⁰ *FSGDC*, 1693, p. 46; *MPP*, 1762, vol. P/240/20, pp. 174–5, OIOC.

⁶¹ South Arcot Collectorate Records, 1764, vol. 161, pp. 14–15, TNA.

brown color of unbleached cloth, to conceal holes or areas that had been darned. These defects would be discovered only months later after the cloth had been bleached and washed. By then the weaver was long forgotten and the washerman blamed for the holes which had suddenly appeared in the cloth.

Although it was no easy matter for merchants to detect poor-quality cloth, this in many ways was only the beginning of the quality battle with weavers. The identification of poor quality had to be followed by the taking of deductions, or abatements, in the price given to the weaver, but weavers were in a powerful position to resist such abatements. Weavers were protected by the customs of the contracting system which gave them valuable privileges and rights. With these, weavers were able to rebuff merchant demands for lower prices. These weaver privileges were a product of fundamental asymmetries in the weaver–merchant contract.

Asymmetries of contract

Contracts in South India extended to weavers several privileges which merchants were denied. The most important was the prerogative to cancel a contract, which weavers could do at any time by refunding the advance to the merchant. In 1701, for example, merchants supplying the English East India Company contracted with large numbers of weavers and advanced the sum of five pagodas to each. After the contract was concluded, however, merchants supplying the Dutch East India Company lured the weavers to their employ with an offer of advances of ten pagodas. The weavers canceled their contracts with the English Company merchants, which they did by returning the advance. To retain the weavers the English Company's merchants were forced to match the larger Dutch advances.⁶² Merchants, on the other hand, did not possess the right to break a contract. Nor could they demand the return of an advance. Entering into a contract with a weaver obligated a merchant to accept the weaver's cloth. To refuse a piece of cloth was in effect a forfeiture of the advance.⁶³

This asymmetry of contract made it extremely difficult for merchants

⁶² *FSGDC*, 1701, p. 57.

⁶³ *FSGDC*, 1723, p. 92 and *FSGDC*, 1724, p. 117. In 1738 Ananda Ranga Pillai entered in his diary: "[The Governor] explained that, owing to the slackness of business at Mocha, he no longer needed these articles. I told him that it would be impossible now to cancel the orders given to the weavers, because money had already been advanced to them, and some had commenced sending in their cloths. He desired me to do what I best could in the matter, and I agreed. I subsequently wrote in evasive terms to the weavers at Porto Novo, Chennamanayakkan palaiyam, etc., that the stuffs were not required, and that they need not weave or send them for some time." *The Private Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai* (12 vols., Madras, 1904), vol. I, p. 55.

to take price abatements for poor-quality cloth. In these situations, as the merchant could not refuse the cloth, his only option was to negotiate with the weaver for a reduction in price. A late eighteenth-century servant of the English East India Company has supplied a terse description of this feature of contracts between merchants and weavers: “It was the Custom to receive from the weavers all the cloths they made making a proper deduction for the lower numbers as they [the weavers] were unable to take back such as might not be fit.”⁶⁴ It was no easy matter for merchants to force weavers to reduce their prices, however. Rather than submitting to merchant demands for lower prices, the weaver freedom to terminate a contract meant that weavers were free to sell their finished cloth to any buyer and with the proceeds of the sale refund the advance to the merchant.⁶⁵ And in eighteenth-century South India there were no shortages of buyers for cloth. In addition to the European Companies and Asian merchants, many private traders operated in the weaving villages of South India. These buyers, as they did not want to run the risk of making advances to weavers, were willing to accept poor-quality cloth and able to give high prices. Therefore, the combination of the contract asymmetry and ready outlets for cloth meant weavers were under no pressure to accept merchant price abatements or to submit to merchant quality demands.

Evidence from the early nineteenth century indicates that contracts between merchants and agrarian producers also contained this asymmetry:

They [private traders] can extend their offers for cotton beyond what a person regularly advancing and running all risks can or at least has a right to expect[.] [T]he state of the season and demand which is then made for cotton regulates the market and should the individual who has advanced his money object to the price demanded by the cultivator excuses are not wanting to put him off or return his money which the cultivator is enabled to do by disposing of his produce to the highest bidder.⁶⁶

Debt

Previous writers have suggested that weavers were tied to merchants by debt.⁶⁷ However, the mere existence of a debt does not imply obligations

⁶⁴ MPP, 1771, vol. 106B, p. 1006, TNA.

⁶⁵ See, for example, *FSGDC*, 1704, p. 92; *FSGDC*, 1713, p. 136.

⁶⁶ Tinnevely Collectorate Records, 1811, vol. 3572, pp. 239–62, TNA. Weavers were also victims of this asymmetry when spinners to whom they had advanced funds for spinning yarn sold it for a greater profit to other buyers. See MPP, 1791, vol. P/241/26, pp. 2816–17, OIOC.

⁶⁷ Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, pp. 261–2; Arasaratnam, “Weavers, Merchants and Company,” pp. 272–3.

on the part of the borrower. Nor is tying or bondage the necessary outcome of debt. These conditions are products of the political and legal framework in which a debt is situated. The political and legal framework in eighteenth-century South India did not lead to debt bondage. In fact, it was quite the opposite: in the political environment of late pre-colonial South India it was no easy matter for merchants to recover weaver debts.⁶⁸ This is not to imply that merchants had no interest in tying weavers to themselves. This they certainly sought to do. However, the means of attachment was not debt, but the guarantee of a steady stream of advances, which weavers sought in order to be assured of regular employment. For example, in 1694 merchants at Vizagapatnam appealed to the English for advances of money to keep the weavers at work. Otherwise, they said, the Dutch would employ them.⁶⁹ Similarly, in 1697, the Company merchants at Madras said that they had to keep the weavers supplied with money if they were to be kept from working for others.⁷⁰ Additional examples may be cited from the eighteenth century.⁷¹

Merchants employed large sums of capital to supply cloth to the European Companies. The risks of losses were high as advances were distributed to large numbers of weavers dispersed over dozens of towns and villages. Merchants took precautions to minimize their risks, such as keeping advances to a minimum during times of economic and political turmoil as at these times weavers were liable to eat the advance: rather than using merchant funds to purchase materials, weavers purchased food.⁷² However, during times of trouble, merchants also came under pressure to make advances in order to prevent weavers from migrating to other areas.⁷³ For this reason, along with the fact that downturns in the market could not always be anticipated, despite the best of precautions weavers frequently amassed debt.

The accumulation of weaver debts was potentially disastrous for merchants as there were no legal or institutional mechanisms with which they could enforce repayment.⁷⁴ The only way for them to recover their

⁶⁸ FSDC, 1748, p. 34. ⁶⁹ FSGDC, 1694, p. 78. ⁷⁰ FSGDC, 1697, p. 2.

⁷¹ See FSGDC, 1679–80, p. 21; Arthur T. Pringle (ed.) *The Diary and Consultation Book of the Agent Governor and Council of Fort St. George, 1683* (Madras, 1894), p. 70; FSGDC, 1695, p. 13; FSGDC, 1701, p. 29; FSGDC, 1720, p. 30.

⁷² FSGDC, 1719, p. 41.

⁷³ MPP, 1764, vol. P/240/22, pp. 16–17, OIOC. Compounding the pressures on merchants were obligations to care for weavers in various ways. These were necessary to maintain a long-term relationship; see MPP, 1776, vol. 115B, pp. 393–9, TNA.

⁷⁴ According to a Company account: “The weavers being accustomed to squander what property comes into their possession will if forced (as they have been) to receive the advances of others, soon forget their old debts to distant merchants who have not authority to enforce the completing of their engagements.” MPP, 1792, vol. P/241/30, pp. 78–81, OIOC. S. Ambirajan has observed that in pre-colonial India there was “no organized judiciary to secure recovery of loans.” See his *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 120.