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978-0-521-10501-9 - The Warrior Merchants: Textiles, Trade, and Territory in South India  
Mattison Mines

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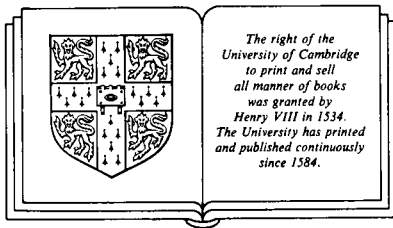
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# The warrior merchants: Textiles, trade, and territory in south India

**MATTISON MINES**

*Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Barbara*



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For Morris E. Opler and C. Natesan

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## Preface

What do we learn about south Indian society by studying weavers? South Indian society has been for millennia a commercial society in which textile production and trade have played a prominent role. Yet the images that India conjures up in the minds of scholars are rarely of artisan production and trade; rather, India is perceived as a rural society characterized by provincial villages and interdependent castes organized by agrarian production. These images ignore the weavers who even today form the second largest sector of the south Indian economy. They also largely ignore the interplay between these different sectors of the economy and the south Indian and colonial states that benefited from them. The image of Indian society that emerges is highly local.

The study of the Kaikkoolar weavers in Tamilnadu reveals that this provincial image of Indian society is misleading. The Kaikkoolars have been organized for centuries into supralocal organizations and have been engaged in commercial, often international, trade. As such they have been both a source of wealth for states and, at times, an independent power with which to reckon. In medieval times, they maintained armies not only to protect their warehouses and caravans but also to plunder the agrarian sector. Until the mid-1920s, weavers engaged in constant competition with the dominant agriculturists for status and for control of their regions. Only occasionally were they able to rival the agriculturists' power, but for centuries they maintained a separate locality-segmented confederacy called the seventy-two *naaDu* and a distinct ritual and status identity in the context of the symbolic division of Tamil society into right-hand and left-hand sections. Both systems have left a legacy of their former importance in the character and shape of modern Tamil society. Much of the Kaikkoolar's *naaDu* sys-

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tem still survives in the Salem District. These council territories are one of several corporations used by the Kaikkoolars to organize their affairs in south Indian polities and to act as institutional bases for caste leaders.

The Kaikkoolars are one of the major weaver castes of south India. The description of their identity and organization requires us to modify our anthropological image of Indian society. This account presents evidence that the Kaikkoolars are integrated differently from the interdependent agriculturists, in part because of the political and economic importance of textiles. Although at the local level weavers and other artisan-merchants appear to have an indistinct status that reflects their separation from agrarian castes, they have impressive supralocal organizations, which they use to administer their relations in trade and to structure their affairs with polities.

I owe many thanks to many people and institutions that helped me in researching and writing this book. The American Institute of Indian Studies funded my research among the weavers during 1978–1979. My gratitude to the institute is not only for research funds, but also for the considerable hospitality its officers extended to my family and me during our stay in India. Special thanks must also go to the members of the staffs of the Department of Anthropology and the Social Process Research Institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara: to Paul Heuston, who drew the maps, and to Rose Mucci, Doris Phinney, Roxann Rowsey, and Deborah McGrath, who prepared the manuscript on a word processor. I thank them for their patience and skill. I also wish to thank Jeffery Serena, who assisted in editing the manuscript. A special note of appreciation is due to the people who read and commented on the manuscript in its earlier versions. Morris E. Opler, Pauline Kolenda, Donald E. Brown, Elvin Hatch, Eugene Irschick, Albert Spaulding, and Arjun Appadurai all devoted many hours to these tasks. The book was enriched and improved by their efforts. Finally, I wish to express my special appreciation to C. Gouri-shankar, whose photograph graces the dust jacket.

To my Indian friends and informants, my debts are legion. To all of them I offer my deeply felt thanks and appreciation for their assistance, information, hospitality, and friendship. Especially important to my research were my colleagues at the University of Madras: Professor D. Sundaram of the Sociology Department who always showed an interest in my work, Professor N. Subba Reddy of the Anthropology Department, and Professor C. Balasubramaniam of the Tamil Department. I also wish to thank Dr. Partap C. Aggarwal, critic and friend—I need a good critic now and then—Suddesh Aggarwal, friend and su-

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perb cook, and C. Natesan. A Tamil scholar in his own right, Natesan has over the years been my guide through the complexity of Tamil society and a special friend. His wisdom has helped me innumerable times.

M. Natarajan sacrificed his own time on many occasions and created marvelous contacts for me. B. Shaktivel was my compatriot and alter ego as my research assistant. In Akkamapettai my many-time host was C. Manikam and his family; in Erode I owe a special note of thanks to R. Lakshmanan and A. Muthuswamy; in Trichengode I especially wish to thank Kasiviswanthan. To all of these people and to more than those I name here: I thank you for innumerable kindness, your friendship, and your enthusiastic assistance in my work.

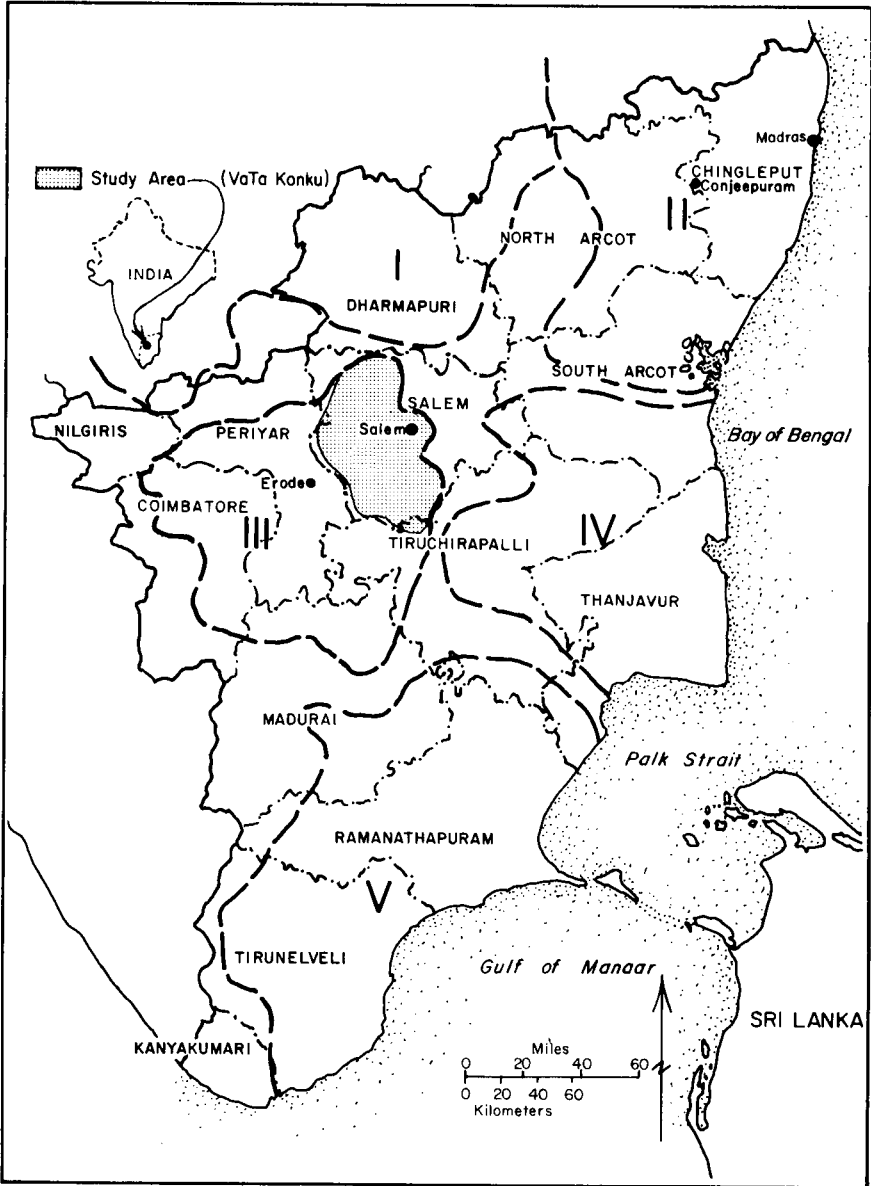
Finally, with special affection, I thank my wife, Barbara, who in a thousand ways made field work possible, and my daughter, Laurel, who when asked what she thought of Madras City, replied: "it's neat—just like Los Angeles."



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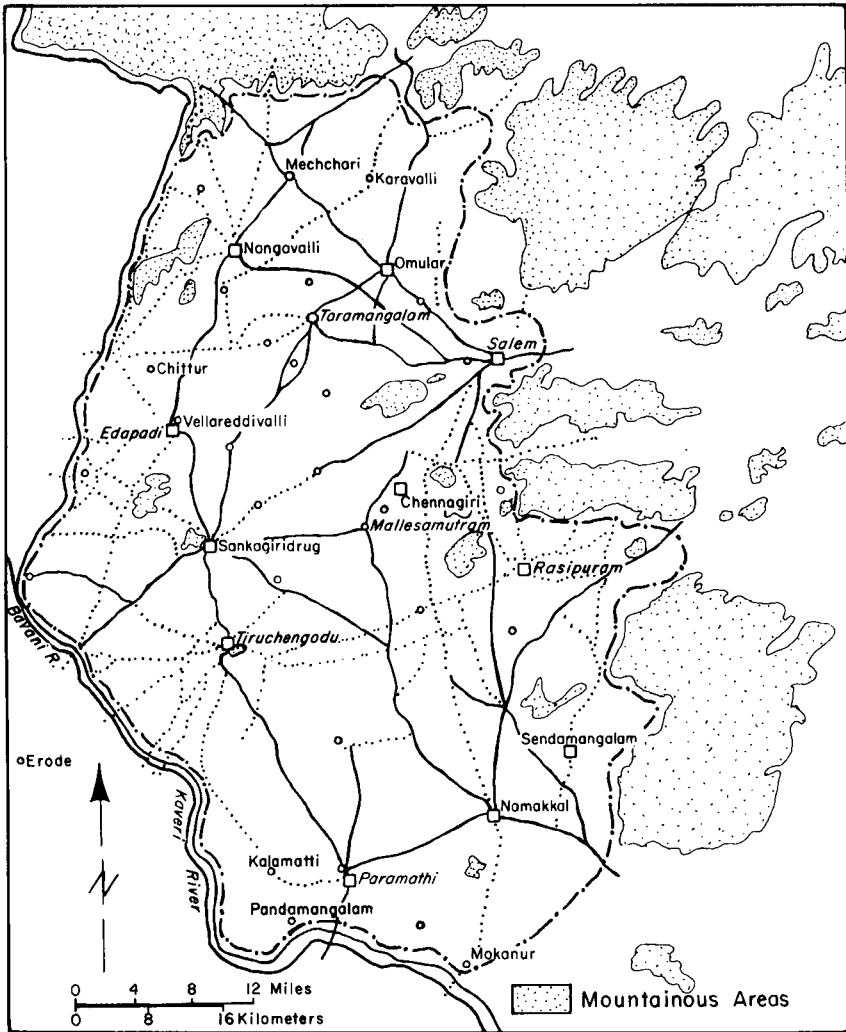
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**Map 1.** Tamilnadu State. The traditional microregions of south India are: I. Kar MaNDalam; II. Tondai MaNDalam; III. Konku MaNDalam; IV Chola MaNDalam; V. Pandiya MaNDalam.

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**Map 2.** Fair Towns, Kasbas, and periodic markets 1750–1800. VaTa Konku and the location of the Seven-City Territory (EeRuurunaaDu). Seven-City Territory council towns are italicized. (Adapted from Murton 1979:23–24.)