

Between the Loom and the Ledger: An Analysis of Community Composition and the Transformation of Chaliya Participation in Handloom Weaving Cooperative Societies of Kannur, Kerala

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ABSTRACT

The Chaliyas are the migrant weavers in Kerala. They have migrated from the neighboring states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. With their fine cotton weaving skills, the Chaliyas contributed to a large extent to Kannur's textile heritage and economic development. For the study, data have been collected from 35 actively functioning cooperative societies. The paper examines the institutional distribution of the Chaliyas and their representation in the present context of weaving transformation.

The study identifies that the occupational identity of the Chaliya is retained through feminine continuity. The societies in the district have now become sites for the intersection of inherited skills, institutional structures, market demands, and changing social aspirations. The paper examines the relationship between community composition and structural changes in occupation, contributing to discussions on occupational heritage, and the adaptive resilience of traditional weaving practices in the changing scenario.

Keywords: Chaliya, Kannur handloom, Weaving Practices, Labour transformation, Handloom weaving cooperative societies Kannur.

INTRODUCTION

The history of civilization and the history of textiles are closely intertwined. Across regions and cultures, weaving practices were part of their identity and heritage. Studies on material culture unveiled the cultural and economic relevance of weaving as an activity with deep roots in the social organization (Ingold, 2013; Miller, 2005). South Indian artisanal communities, particularly the weaving communities, have historically been occupied a distinctive position with their guild system, occupational specializations and caste organization (Michell, 1991; Vijaya Ramaswamy, 1985). These factors were pivotal in regional political structures, and they collectively shaped the artisanal life of the weavers.

Among the handloom weaving traditions of South India, Kannur handloom occupies a very distinctive position. The region has several centuries of weaving craft history, and it emerged as one of the most significant export-orientated production hubs (Logan, 1887; Government of Kerala, 2009). The weaving history of Kannur can be primarily attributed to the Chaliyas, the migrant weaving community from the Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra regions. They were specialists in fine cotton handloom weaving. With centuries of migration, the Chaliyas established their weaving guilds across the region known as *therus*, under the local royal patronage (Logan, 1887; Kurup, 1997). These Chaliya *therus* were considered to be highly specialised socio-spatial institutions that produced the fine handloom textiles. The *therus* were not just production units; these were residential spaces governed by caste systems, ritual practices and sites of knowledge transmissions. The Chaliya *therus* functioned as hereditary weaving settlements controlled by kinship, occupational hierarchy and embedded craft knowledge. The children gradually acquired weaving and craft knowledge through observation and practice.

Continuous social and political changes repeatedly challenged the continuity of the weaving craft. Colonial and missionary interventions, particularly those undertaken by the Basel Mission, gradually transformed the theru settlements. The mission introduced loom work centers and larger weaving units with the latest frame looms. These interventions gradually shifted weaving from the therus to a formal institutional environment. Further, post-independent Kerala witnessed the emergence of cooperative society movements. As part of the weaving practices, cooperatives were also introduced in the Kannur region (Government of Kerala, 2009). These societies, with the support of state mechanisms, emerged as principal institutions in the region. Both these interventions disintegrated the therus and majority of the weavers migrated to the cooperative societies of Kannur. The traditional weaving in the households of Chaliya therus is controlled by caste governance, has been altered to societies with administrative and wage systems.

The region with the cooperative societies has undergone massive expansion during the 1960s to 1980s. The Chaliya-made crepe textiles achieved considerable recognition in national and international markets (Government of Kerala, 2009). The export-oriented production flourished in the region, and a lot of Chaliya and non Chaliya entrepreneurial efforts were initiated in the region. A lot of other community members such as Thiyya also gained weaving knowledge and joined the societies. The economic liberalisation and the globalisation policies introduced in the 1990s brought further transformations in the region and craft. The policies helped global corporates to come with power looms and other textiles to India. Along with other craft sectors in India, the Kannur handloom weaving also entered into heavy competition with power looms both in domestic and export markets (Planning Commission, 2008). Increased competition and wage competitiveness again altered the structure of the handloom sector. The generational occupational mobility had a bad impact on the sector, and a lot of skilled Chaliya artisans left the hereditary weaving job and adopted other jobs and also migrated to Gulf regions. The present cooperatives in the post-millennium still continue with the handloom weaving with increased state support and subsidy systems (Development Commissioner for Handlooms, 2023).

The whole transformations weakened the historical association between Chaliya caste identity and occupational participation. The history of the Chaliyas, their migrations, and settlement patterns have been addressed by the existing literature, but very little attention has been given to the present status of the Chaliyas in the weaving sector, especially the cooperative societies. The region where weaving was primarily attributed to the Chaliya community has changed, and the societies of Kannur increasingly employ workers belonging to multiple caste and religious backgrounds. The present study tries to examine this gap and analyses the generational continuity and occupational identity of the Chaliyas in the active societies of Kannur.

The present-day status in the cooperative societies reveal a gendered labour pattern with more than 72 % of women in weaving and auxiliary jobs. Urbanisation has altered the socio spatial aspects of the therus. The therus have now been converted to normal semi urban spaces without any signs of their weaving heredity. The spaces once echoed the sound of the *Odam* and rhythmic weaving now filled with motor vehicles and other noises. Educational advancements and other career opportunities further changed the aspirations of the younger generation. The Chaliya youngsters continue to pursue careers outside hereditary weaving. The paper is trying to conceptualise the adaptive institutional transformations, the movement of the Chaliya theru to cooperative societies and the evolving identity of the Chaliyas in a changing socio-political system.

Objectives

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To assess the proportion and institutional participation of the Chaliya community within the cooperative societies of Kannur.
2. To analyse the implications of changing community participation for the future sustainability of Kannur's handloom tradition.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a quantitative census-based design supported by contextual field observations. The data for this study has been drawn from 35 registered handloom cooperative societies of Kannur, Kerala. Gender and

occupation wise Chaliya community participation has been collected. The total weavers and allied workforce surveyed is 1815, and out of the total workforce, 445 are identified from the Chaliya community. Descriptive statistical methods such as mean, median, standard deviation, coefficient of variation, Gini coefficient and inferential statistics are used to analyse the data. Ethnographic insights have been derived through field visits in both Chaliya therus and the societies. The study has been conducted in the year of 2026 March and the primary source of information's has been gathered through verification of society registers and interviewing the key administrative persons in the society. Semi structured interviews were carried out with most elderly experienced administrative people available in the societies.

Proportion and Institutional Participation of the Chaliya

The Chaliya community contributes 445 artisans to the Weavers and Allied Workers workforce across 35 co-operative societies in Kannur. This constitutes 24.5% of the total production workforce of total 1815 artisans. This is percentage is substantial considering the share for a single community within the weaving sector of Kannur. But the history of weaving in Kannur once was primarily attributed to the Chaliyas and it is found that there is a decline in the number of people from the Chaliya community. The data is presented in Table 1 (society-wise) and Table 2.

Table 1. Total Chaliya Representation in the Societies

Sl.	Society	Ch. Male	Ch. Female	Ch. Total	Ch. Weavers	Ch. Allied	WF Total (W+A)	Chaliya %	Female %
1	Kannapuram Weavers	5	4	9	9	0	45	20.0%	44.4%
2	Aduthila Weavers	2	2	4	2	0	12	16.7%	50.0%
3	Azhikkal Weavers	0	1	1	1	0	63	1.6%	100%
4	Chirakkal Weavers	22	35	57	50	7	93	61.3%	61.4%
5	Chovva Weavers	1	1	2	2	0	26	7.7%	50.0%
6	Irinavu Weavers	0	0	0	0	0	102	0.0%	—
7	Kairali SC Weavers	0	0	0	0	0	30	0.0%	—
8	Kalliassery Weavers	5	9	14	13	2	197	7.6%	64.3%
9	Karivellur Weavers	8	7	15	13	2	39	38.5%	46.7%
10	KKS Weavers	1	4	5	1	4	34	14.7%	80.0%
11	Kodiyeri Weavers	1	1	2	2	0	7	28.6%	50.0%
12	Kolathuvayal Weavers	2	3	5	5	1	30	20.0%	60.0%
13	Kulappuram Weavers	4	3	7	7	0	35	20.0%	42.9%
14	Kunhimangalam Weavers	2	3	5	4	1	18	27.8%	60.0%
15	Kuthuparamba Weavers	12	6	18	16	2	48	37.5%	33.3%
16	Loknath Weavers	7	4	11	10	1	46	23.9%	36.4%
17	Morazha Weavers	13	65	78	78	0	140	55.7%	83.3%

18	Pallikkunnu Weavers	0	1	1	1	0	7	14.3%	100%
19	Pappinisseri Weavers	7	1	8	8	0	63	12.7%	12.5%
20	Payyannur Weavers	4	22	26	24	2	29	89.7%	84.6%
21	Pinarayi Weavers	0	2	2	0	2	73	2.7%	100%
22	Priyadarshini Weavers	2	0	2	0	2	43	4.7%	0.0%
23	Puzhathi Weavers	0	2	2	1	1	18	11.1%	100%
24	Sankaranellur Weavers	0	0	0	0	0	30	0.0%	—
25	Karivellur HH Weavers	2	3	5	5	0	35	14.3%	60.0%
26	Thaliparamba Weavers	1	2	3	3	0	38	7.9%	66.7%
27	Kanhirode Weavers	22	38	60	48	12	210	28.6%	63.3%
28	Kannapuram (II) Weavers	5	5	10	6	4	64	15.6%	50.0%
29	Kausallya Weavers	0	2	2	1	1	17	11.8%	100%
30	Mayyil Weavers	3	15	18	12	6	78	23.1%	83.3%
31	Royal Weavers	2	6	8	6	2	17	47.1%	75.0%
32	Vanaja Weavers	0	0	0	0	0	10	0.0%	—
33	Vengad Weavers (LL115)	18	22	40	20	20	68	58.8%	55.0%
34	Therumambalam Weavers	4	8	12	7	5	23	52.2%	66.7%
35	Vellur Weavers	3	10	13	3	10	27	48.1%	76.9%
	GRAND TOTAL	158	287	445	358	87	1,815	24.5%	64.5%

Table 1: Society-wise Chaliya Community Representation — Weavers & Allied Workers- Highlighted rows: Orange = Dominant (>75%); Yellow = High (51–75%); Red = Zero Chaliya presence.

Table 2- Summary of Chaliya Representation in the Societies

Dimension	Count	Percentage / Reference
Total Chaliya Artisans	445	24.5% of 1,815 total W+A workforce
Chaliya Male Artisans	158	35.5% of 445 Chaliya persons
Chaliya Female Artisans	287	64.5% of Chaliya persons
Chaliya as Weavers	358	80.4% of Chaliya persons
Chaliya as Allied Workers	87	19.6% of Chaliya persons
Chaliya as % of all sector Weavers	358 of 1,397	25.6%
Chaliya as % of all sector Allied Workers	87 of 418	20.8%

Societies with Chaliya presence	31	88.6% of 35 societies
Societies with No Chaliya Representation	4	Irinavu, Kairali SC, Sankaranellur, Vanaja
Societies with Chaliya majority (>50%)	5	Morazha, Payyannur, Chirakkal, Vengad, Therumambalam

Table 2: Summary of Chaliya artisans in 35 Co-operative Societies

This reveals that out of 35 surveyed societies in Kannur, 31 (88.6%) of them have Chaliya participation, and four societies have no representation of Chaliya artisans. At the same time five societies have the highest number of participations; such as Payyanur Weavers Society (89.7%), Chirakkal Weavers (61.3%), Vengad Weavers (58.8%), Morazha Weavers (55.7%), and Therumambalam Weavers Society (52.2%). In these societies, majority of the workers are from the Chaliya community. These societies preserve the Chaliya weaving heritage in the co-operative sector. These societies are the oldest societies in the region and are located near to the prominent Chaliya therus.

The Chaliya participation in the societies varies substantially with zero participation in four societies. The distribution of the Chaliyas is strongly right skewed. Pearson's correlation is retained where the assumptions were reasonably satisfied and Spearman's rank correlation is used as non-parametric alternative.

Occupational Role

Table 3- Distribution of Weavers Vs Allied workers

Test	Variables	Result	Interpretation
Pearson Correlation	Chaliya Total vs. Total W+A workforce	$r = 0.638$, $p < 0.001$ ***	Moderate- larger societies have more Chaliyas but community composition matters more
Pearson Correlation	Chaliya Weavers vs. Chaliya Allied Workers	$r = 0.321$, $p = 0.060$ (ns)	Not significant; allied participation from weaver strength — society-specific reasons not community driven.

Pearson Correlation & Inferential Statistics — Summary of Tests and Correlations

Out of 445 Chaliya artisans in the societies; 358 (80.4%) work as Weavers and 87 of them (19.6%) are engaged in allied jobs such as winding and warping. Data reveals that the Chaliya weavers contribute to 25.6% of all weavers (358 of 1,397) and 20.8% of allied workers (87 of 418) in the societies. The higher presence of weavers than allied worker is consistent with historical affiliation of the Chaliyas as weaving community as it was the community's primary occupation. The Pearson correlation between Chaliya Weavers and Chaliya Allied Workers in the societies is $r = 0.321$ ($p = 0.060$). The findings are positive but they are not statistically significant. It is observable that, with generic workforce same correlation is visible is $r = 0.638$ ($p < 0.001$). This reveals that Chaliya participation in allied weaving jobs is society-specific not based on community level preferences.

Table 4 - Geographic distribution of the Chaliyas in the societies

Statistics	Total No. of Chaliyas	Male	Female	Representation Rate
N (Societies)	35	35	35	35
Grand Total / Sum	445	158	287	—

Mean	12.71	4.51	8.20	24.5%
Median	5.0	2.0	3.0	20.0%
Standard Deviation	18.44	6.34	13.72	23.6 pp
Minimum	0 (4 societies)	0	0	0.0%
Maximum	78 (Morazha)	22 (Chirakkal/Kanhirodu)	65 (Morazha)	89.7% (Payyannur)
Q1 (25th percentile)	2.0	0	1.0	7.7%
Q3 (75th percentile)	13.5	5.5	8.5	37.5%
Interquartile Range (IQR)	11.5	5.5	7.5	29.8 pp
Coefficient of Variation	145.0%	140.5%	167.3%	96.3%
Gini Coefficient	0.633	—	—	—

Descriptive Statistics — Chaliya Representation Variables across 35 Weaving Societies

The distribution of the Chaliyas in weaving societies reveals unequal participation. The Gini coefficient calculated for the Chaliyas according to their presence in the society is 0.633. This is substantially higher than the general weaver distribution, i.e., 0.439, indicative of specific geographical concentration rather than the presence of a generic workforce. Morazha (78), Kanhirodu (60), and Chirakkal (57) together account for 43.8% of all Chaliyas in the region. The Gini coefficient is used here to indicate that the distribution of the Chaliyas shows a uneven pattern and have higher concentration in few societies. The data shown in the table with analysis reveal that the mean of Chaliya per society is 12.71, but at the same time, the median is 5.0. The ratio between them is 2.54, confirming the strong right skew. The coefficient of variation is 145.0%, which can be considered very high at 145.0%. Half of the societies in the region have a range between 2 and 13.5 Chaliya participants, and few of them have very little representation. Four societies in the region have nil representation from the Chaliya community: Kairali weavers (30 artisans), Sankaranellur (30 artisans), Vanaja weavers (10 artisans), and Irinavu weavers (102 artisans). Ethnographic intervention in the geographical area justifies the nil participation, as there is no Chaliya therus in the proximity of the region, and moreover, it is a Thiyya community-dominant area.

Occupational Transformation of Chaliya Community

Analysis of the Chaliya participation in the handloom cooperative societies must begin with the history of Chaliya weaving and the theru systems. Centuries of weaving in the Chaliya settlements gradually moved to the state-mediated societies. This has altered the social organisation of the craft and completely restructured the household rhythm of production in the societies. The sound of weaving in the therus was indicative of time and community belonging. The therus were places where tacit knowledge has been transmitted through embodied learning. The therus acts as a habitat, as referred to by Bourdieu, a functional social institution with spatial boundaries. The transitions to the societies were inevitable; even though there is a shift in the social organisation of weaving, the societies provide access to welfare schemes, market linkages, and raw material supply. But at the same time the societal system disintegrated the organic integration of the households, particularly for the children, the women and the elderly. The organic rhythm of weaving based on ritual and social obligations became calibrated by the timings and schedule of the society. The majority of artisans in the weaving societies (33.6%) are over 60 years of old (Handloom Directorate 2025). This finding is consistent with the representation of communities in the region. It is found that youngsters embrace other occupations leaving the elderly to continue with the craft.

Feminisation of Weaving

The gendered participation of weavers is clear in the study. Out of the total participation, 64.5% of Chaliya artisans are women (287 of 445), and out of 31 societies, 20 of them have more female Chaliya participation than male. A paired t-test also ($t = 2.197$, $p = 0.035$) confirmed this pattern statistically. In the Morazha weavers' society, 65 of 78 Chaliya workers (83.3%) are women. Similar to this, Payyanur weavers also have records of 22 out of 26 Chaliya members as female (84.6%). A Wilcoxon signed test of society level male and female Chaliya count indicates that it is statistically significant ($W = 82$, $p \approx 0.010$). The paired T test also gives similar conclusion ($t = 2.197$, $p = 0.035$). The study relies on non-parametric results because the distribution is skewed and also certain societies have zero values.

This feminisation of labour in weaving and handloom sector is not an incidental factor. This outcome suggests an important gendered shift in the occupational composition in the societies. The pattern may be related to availability of other occupational opportunities, migrations and also because of the changing economic value of weaving. This pattern is consistent with anthropological literature on South Indian craft communities. Menon and Adarkar (2004) and Burra. (1995), in their studies, point out that the diminishing of economic returns contributes to the acceleration of male artisans to leave from craft participation while female artisans continue with their craft practices. This is again rooted in the unequal opportunities available to men and women in craft communities stratified by caste and gender. Men's access to labour, trade, and service employments with better wage patterns accelerated this transformative trend. Elderly women from the Chaliya therus with domestic responsibilities and limited employment mobility remain in the handloom sector and gradually transform it as a feminised occupation.

The artisans also exhibit another ambivalent implication to the feminisation of Chaliya weaving in the cooperatives. Several women artisans note that the affiliations to the societies exercise direct economic agency and access to their own earnings. A social and career identity beyond the household sphere expressed by the women reveals that weaving is not just an occupational arrangement but also a form of economic citizenship. This participation is often described as self-respect and community pride, as the careers of craft continuity. The duality in this, the exploitation and empowerment, generally can be viewed as the characteristics of craft labour in South India.

Implications for the Sustainability and succession crisis in Kannur's Handloom Tradition

The demographic profile of the Chaliya community in societies reveals an aging pattern also. According to the data received from the Handloom and Textiles Government of Kerala (2025), 33.6% of the workforce is above 60, and only 9% of the handloom sector is below the age of 40. This raises some fundamental questions regarding the long-term sustainability of the cooperative sector. The retirement cohort of the weavers is high without the successors entering the weaving jobs. With the existing age pattern, a majority of Chaliyas will dissociate with societies due to aging. This absence of youth participation and exit of elderly artisans raises a major concern about the future continuity of the weaving workforce and the region appears to have limited replacement for the retirements. Even though the figure does not predict a workforce collapse but indicative of a potential succession if measures not been taken to address them. The highest concentration of the Chaliya is in a small number of societies (58.7% of all Chaliyas) this figure reveals a major structural fragility in the resilience of the Chaliya weaving tradition. The decline of any of these societies because of economic constraints, leadership failure, or natural attrition would represent a major reduction in Chaliya institutional presence.

The Heritage Paradox: Recognition without Remuneration

The Kannur handloom tradition, especially home furnishings, has its cultural recognition as a regional heritage. Even with the ups and downs in the craft tradition, the benefits of the heritage are never enjoyed by the artisans. This case illustrates a specific gap between the cultural relevance and economic status of the weavers. The handloom tradition has significant historical and cultural value yet the wage data reveals economic disparity between the artisans and administrative employees. This raises questions on how the cultural production can be translated into better economic returns for the artisans.

Table 5–Statistical Analysis of Wage pattern in the societies of Kannur

Statistic	Weavers (₹)	Allied Workers (₹)	Employees (₹)
N (Societies)	35	35	35
Mean	7,393	6,955	31,337
Median	7,150	7,200	32,200
Standard Deviation	2,306	2,927	9,397
Coefficient of Variation	31.2%	42.1%	30.0%
Minimum	4,151	2,350	10,000
Maximum	12,500	13,000	48,042
Q1 / Q3	5,250 / 8,888	4,800 / 8,478	26,219 / 35,866
Interquartile Range	3,638	3,678	9,647
Gini Coefficient (inter-society)	0.172	—	0.165

Statistical analysis of wage pattern, source Directorate of Handloom and Textiles, Kerala

Analysis of the wage pattern across 35 handloom cooperative societies of Kannur reveals a two-tier wage calculation, the production tier and the administrative tier. The weavers and allied belong to the production tier earn an average of ₹7,000–7,400/month; at the same time, the employees earn an average of ₹31,337/month. The weavers' wages also vary according to the societies (CV = 31.2%, range ₹4,151–₹12,500). This evidence points to uneven economic viability across the societies in Kannur. The data also reveal that a society where 89.7% of artisans are from Chaliya pays the lowest. This finding reveals direct implications for the economic sustainability of the handloom weavers in general including the Chaliya artisans.

The heritage paradox here is that while the cultural contribution of the Chaliyas is celebrated as the weaving tradition of the region, at the same time the data indicate that economic vulnerability is prevalent in the workforce. This pattern is not a regional phenomenon; it is a recurring theme in the anthropology of artisan communities. The cooperative affiliation here acts as a cultural pride and an economic constraint at the same time. The majority of the societies in the region is in precarity with low orders and totally relies on state mechanisms to sustain themselves, eventually ending up as a passive transmission mechanism rather than an agent of economic transmission.

CONCLUSION

The data on the Chaliya community's participation in the societies reveal a story of both resilience and precarity. Out of 445 identified Chaliya artisans, majority of them are women, and the community has a 24.5% participation in the overall handloom society workforce. The study reveals that the presence of the Chaliya community is highly concentrated in a few societies, and the entry of the younger generation is largely absent. The affiliation of the Chaliya community with the societies is a relationship of negotiated belonging. Their presence in the society offers a symbolic representation of their weaving tradition; at the same time, they are structurally vulnerable because of economic marginalisation. In the present context of Kannur, the Chaliya community adorns a space in the craft ecosystem that is neither traditional nor modern. This liminal positioning is highly vulnerable, as this may lead to the nonexistence of traditional Chaliya artisans in the future weaving craft ecosystem of Kannur.

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