

# The Handloom Industry and Its Market Structure in the Madras Presidency

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This paper aims to analyse the changes in the hand weaving industry in South India, especially in Tamil districts under British rule.

The bulk import of British cotton products into India in the nineteenth century seriously hit the hand weaving of white men's clothes with its high count yarns for the urban consumption; but the production of rough cloth for the rural population and of clothing for women, especially that of high quality, did not suffer so seriously.

After the 1920s, the cotton mills in India rapidly increased their production of cloth, which caused serious competition with the handloom products made of medium count yarn. Many handloom weavers were forced to adapt by shifting their products to, i) coloured cloth using high count yarns, silk threads and gold threads (*zari*) for upper-class consumers, ii) coloured cloths woven with artificial silk yarns and mercerized yarns demanded by the lower-class rural people for ceremonial occasions, iii) coloured cloth for export, and iv) rough cloths for labouring women.

It is important to note that changes in the variety of the handloom products were not only influenced by the competition from mill products, but also by the changes in clothing fashions for each class of people.

Some changes brought about an increase in the demand for the mill products: a reduction in the number of people wearing Angavestram and turbans; the increasing use of shirts and hosiery products,

and of drill shorts in place of dhotis; the popularization of mill made light-coloured sarees among the middle-class young ladies in urban areas, etc.

On the other hand, there were also some important trends which caused an increase in the demand for the handloom products: the increasing use of the bodice by women, which increased the demand for Madras Kaili production; the increasing use of cloth in general by lower-class people including depressed-caste people, especially that of artificial silk sarees for ceremonial occasions.

Our interviews in some hand weaving centres reveal that the lower-class people who used to demand artificial silk sarees are now gradually purchasing a low-quality, cheaper variety of silk sarees for ceremonial occasions.