

HANDLOOMS OF KERALA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN  
CHITTUR AND BALARAMAPURAM

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## Abstract

India has been the home to multiple types of handlooms developed over centuries, each growing into its unique identity and providing employment to millions of artisans. Even during the times of the kings and rulers, there were not just a single type of weavers or handloom. Some weavers wove exclusively for the ruling class and nobility, while there were others who wove for the general public. Some specialized in clothes meant for special occasions while others in daily use textiles. This tradition has been passed on for generations, and although there are no royal weavers anymore, some handloom textiles have become popular internationally while others remain confined to their local regions. The weavers in Balaramapuram were brought from Tamil Nadu to weave for the royal family of Travancore, and today the Balaramapuram Sarees and textiles are known internationally while, unfortunately, many in Kerala itself are unaware of the weaving culture in Chittur.

*Keywords:* House-hold industry, master weaver, cooperative society, work-shed, future, geographical indication.

## **HANDLOOMS OF KERALA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN CHITTUR AND BALARAMAPURAM**

In India as a whole, the handloom industry employs the second largest work force after agriculture and has been doing so since the ancient times. Today, it employs over 43 million workers directly and indirectly. The handlooms of India are famous all over the world, contributing to 95 percent of all world handwoven textiles all over the world. (Annual Report 2017-2018) The art of weaving, however is slowly getting extinct. The cheaper and faster power-looms are taking over what used to be the glory of our nation.

Handloom was an important industry in the state of Kerala as well, with its unique off-white *mundum neriyadum*, *veshti*, and *pudava* as well as the *kaavi mundu*, *thorthu*, *chittada* etc. Unlike most of the other states where one of the local castes are the weavers, Kerala did not have its own weaving tradition, on the other hand several weaving families from Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu were brought by the kings and rulers to weave their royal clothes. So although they have been living in Kerala for generations now, still they speak their native languages: Kannada, Telugu or Tamil at home.

Four to five decades back, all the steps involved in producing a handloom piece of cloth used to take place in the village itself. There were some villages designated for spinning cotton into yarn, the spun yarn used to be bought, followed by processes like winding, warping and sizing which were done there itself and made into the form fit for weaving and then woven into whichever fabric it needed to be. Today, only weaving takes place. The weavers no longer have any clue where the cotton is spun into yarn and the other processes take place in different places across the border in Tamil Nadu in large factories. They receive the yarn in its final form called ‘warp sheets’

(*paavu*) which they transfer onto the weaving beam for the warps (*paavu*) and spin onto small spindles for the ‘wefts’ (*oodu*).

In Chittur, in Palakkad district, there are two ways in which the weavers work, the first are the ones who are associated with cooperative societies and the second are those who work for private buyers. In both cases, the weavers work on a wage per piece system where they are given the required amount of yarn, and on producing the final woven product receive their wages according to the design and type of fabric. Here, the weavers deal directly with either the society or the private buyer. Over in Balaramapuram, in Thiruvananthapuram district, the weavers are labourers who weave the prescribed fabric requirements for their owners who are called master weavers. Due to the close proximity of both Chittur and Balaramapuram to Tamil Nadu or due to their well performing handloom industry, there is close relationship with towns in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu both for raw materials and as a market.

Through this study a comparison between the conditions of the weavers in Chittur, in Palakkad district and Balaramapuram, in Thiruvananthapuram district has been attempted. The differences in the structure of the weaving industry, the social and economic differences have been dealt with. The report starts with a review of existing literature, followed by the objectives and methodology used for the study. The next parts deals with the actual study itself, detailing the observations on field, the results and discussion derived from it, ending with the concluding remarks.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The heritage of India in handloom industry is world widely known and it is one of the oldest cotton producing centers of the world. The craftsmanship in cotton weaving and dyeing is also famous (Western Imperial Gazetteer of India). At a time when handloom was the only textile,

the handloom of India thrived not only in the country but also globally, with high exports (Rao; Sreedhar, 2017). Though in second quarter of the nineteenth century English cloth and yarn got popularized, in 1990s Indian handloom began to grow in the midst of stagnation, low skilled workers and cheap labour. The entrance of *Kharkhanas* or factories, the handloom sector transformed from the hands of household units to non-household units and a price contract system came into existence in the sector where yarn and wage is given to the weaver (worker) who then return the woven cloth to the head weaver (Roy, 1994), a system which is being followed till today. Latifi (1988) explained that an average weaver is thus under the control of the money lenders. The capitalists, especially the banyan and master weavers, were hiring lots of weavers in piece rate contract for the purpose of equipping their looms with improved slays and harnesses. The weavers became the victims of implicit exploitation. (Roy, 1994) The changes in the pattern of production in the handloom sector led to wage problems, fall in employment among others. (Oberoi, 2011)

Profit gaining in the handloom industry was restricted to the money lenders and master weavers having resources in terms of money or raw materials, while the actual weavers became simply the labour. (Saksena, 2002) The production has not seen a significant decline, yet the total earning have been on a constant downward slope, indicating to decrease in the value of production. (Tariff Board 1960) The main feature of this industry is that though its share in total textile industry is only 25 percent it accounts for 85 percent of the textile workers. (Handloom Census, 2009-10) Though this sector was transferred from the hands of independent weavers to middle men, it is still known as a decentralized sector (Akter, 2005) Organizational changes happened due to the intervention of middle men in the industry and local money lenders which reduced the role of weavers in the industry. The state has tried to intervene and reduce the involvement of middlemen in the industry by organizing the weavers into cooperative societies. The primary cooperative

societies, which were set up to provide the weavers with subsidized raw material and direct credit to the weavers, were thought to eliminate the role of middle men, bringing new changes to the handloom sector. (Roy, 1994; FFC Report, 1942; Nambiar, 1995). The response to the cooperatives though has been mixed, with the master weavers and power groups still having power by politicization and bureaucratization and mismanagement of funds, resulting in an inefficient functioning of cooperatives. (Dharma Raju, 2006)

The handloom industry was concentrated among the weaving castes alone like *Chaliyas* or *Khatris* with the weaving castes enjoying a decent social position in the society. But with slow loss in the status of the industry and being termed as a traditional industry, the weaving class shifted to other occupations and people from other castes and classes started to enter into this sector as weavers for less wage and more hours of work. Brenning (1980) suggests that as demand for export quality textiles increased, the original weaving castes ceased to produce coarser domestic fabrics instead opting to produce for export, opening opportunities at the bottom of the weaving industry for non-weaver castes.

With the dilution of the household industry, the weaving industry has seen a tremendous rise in the number of female weavers. (Chen, 2010) When weaving took place as a household industry, the men, women and children all were involved, with the latter two taking part in the allied activities and weaving as well, without any different wages for women. But, with the dissolution of the household industry and rise of weaving work-sheds, it became an employer for rural women. (Krishnaraj, 2009) Expansion of the traditional industries is brought by the over exploitation of female labour which is based on an asymmetric sexual division of labour. (Mies, 1981) Home based work and contract work are the important sources of employment throughout

the world, especially for women, and these works comprise a significant share of the workforce in declining industries (Chen, 2010)

Although Kerala handloom industry upholds a great tradition and gained a global market for a long time today the state only ranks 17th among the Indian states in the number of households involved in the handloom sector, comprising only 0.34 percent of the workforce in the handloom sector all over India (Handloom Census 2009-10). From 1997-98 to 2011-12 alone, the production of the handloom sector has gone down by more than 60 percent. (Economic Review) Although, Kannur and Thiruvananthapuram are the two districts where the handloom industry is concentrated, there are smaller lesser known handlooms across the state. Majority of the weavers are working in non-household units now a days due to the high cost of raw materials which is unaffordable for the weavers and since most of them are from poor family or middle class, their access to credit is also less. Though it is a major source of livelihood for the unskilled and skilled workers in rural areas, the number of people being engaged in this sector is reducing day by day. The competition from power loom sector and mill sector made a negative impact on the growth of handloom sector. It shows a deteriorating trend in this modern era (Handloom survey report 2009)

Today, a few household units, decentralized production units, non-household units or head weaver and even primary societies are present in Kerala. Though State tries to support the sector through the primary societies, it is facing a number of issues (Salim 2015, Industrial Resource Locator, Department of Industries, Government of Kerala).

## **OBJECTIVES, METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS**

During the stages of conception of this project, the idea was to study the difference in the socio-economic conditions of the weavers of a handloom with a Geographical Indication (GI) tag that is, one which was internationally recognized and one which was known only locally. This idea

had to be modified as GI tag was a concept known to almost nobody making it difficult to do an analysis based on GI as a difference. The project was altered as a comparison between the weavers of Balaramapuram and Chittur, with GI just being one of the differences between them. The structure of the weaving sector, the socio-economic condition of the weavers, the impact of the recent changes on the weaving industry, the competitions faced by the handloom sector and finally the future of weavers and the handloom sector as a whole.

The main methodology followed was a questionnaire based survey. The questionnaire was mostly qualitative, both structured as well as semi structured. All the weavers were surveyed using the same questionnaire, both in Chittur and Balaramapuram. Cooperative society president and secretaries in Chittur and master weavers in Balaramapuram were also interviewed to get a better idea about the weaving sector and the working of the handloom industry. There is a big difference in the socio economic conditions of the actual weavers and master weavers or the cooperative secretaries, for this reason, these interviews were only used to supplement the survey on the weavers.

Table 1.

*Composition of weavers that were surveyed*

Area of Study	Location	Surveyed Weavers Composition		
		Male	Female	Total
Chittur	Devangapuram	15	12	27 (16 Households)
	Manchira	0	16	16
Balaramapuram	Balaramapuram Kaithary Street	1	3	4
	Villikulam	0	12	12
	Manjavilakam	1	24	25

The sample for the survey was selected randomly. In Chittur there were two types of weavers, one who were household weavers and the other who were weavers at work-sheds



associated with cooperative societies. While over in Balaramapuram all the weavers work under master weavers. In the household set up, 15 households were surveyed with a total of 27 weavers, while in the work-shed set up, another 16 weavers were studied. In Balaramapuram, 4 weavers from Balaramapuram Kaithary Street, 12 weavers from Villikulam and 25 weavers from Manchavilakam were surveyed.

The president and secretaries from Devangapuram cooperative society and Manchira society were interviewed in Chittur. While in Balaramapuram, 4 different master weavers were interviewed along with one secretary from a *Mahila Samaj* (Women's Self Help Group) were interviewed. The survey and interview were supported by personal observations from the field.

A map showing the area of study was prepared with the help of Quantum GIS and ArcMap softwares using data from Census of India 2011 and the locations of areas visited from Google Maps. Some of the quantifiable data was tabularized with the help of Microsoft Excel.

Like any study, there were limitations to this one as well. The proposal and questionnaire was prepared without visiting the field and thus had to be modified to fit the local context after the pilot survey. Since there is no actual record of the number of weavers in the regions, the sample may not be a statistically accurate representation of the whole population. Weavers are just one part of the entire handloom industry, hence not all aspects of the sector were covered during the project. Like any social survey, one week is not enough to capture all the details, hence this is just a small attempt to understand the weaving sector, and is in no way exhaustive. Another aspect that this survey fails to cover is the people who were once in the weaving sector but have over the years, moved to other occupations. Thus, the reasons for behind their shift and the problems that they faced in the weaving sector causing them to move out were not fully understood.

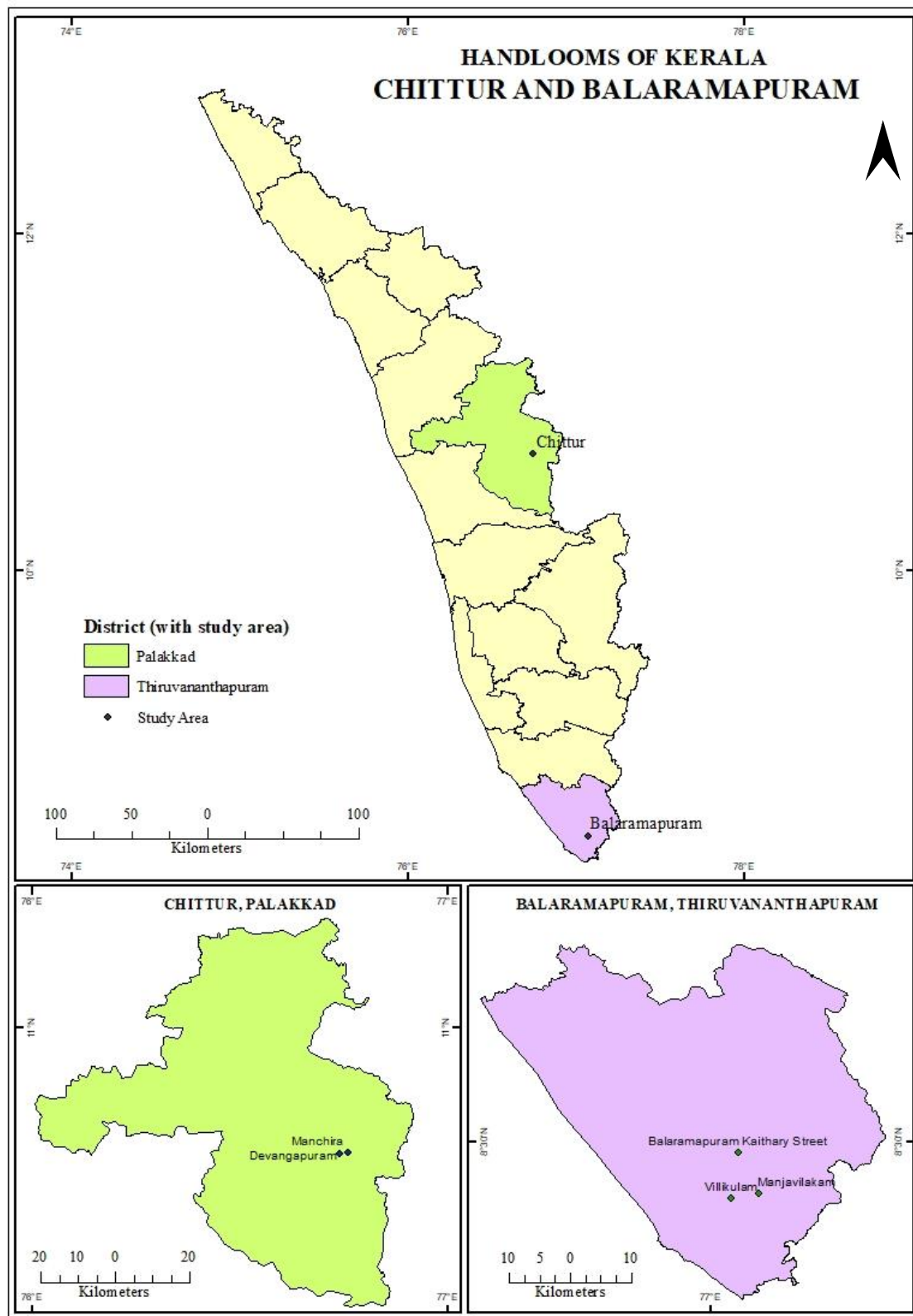


Fig: Map showing Locations of Field Study

## OBSERVATIONS

### Chittur

Devangapuram, or the place of the '*Devanga*' community who are the weaving caste and are believed to be descendants of the God's weavers themselves. The entire village used to house weavers up until maybe a decade or two ago but today many of them have moved on to more lucrative jobs. Today, there are only about thirty households that practice weaving anymore.

### Genealogy

The Devanga Chettiars, were brought to Kerala by kings or they moved away from their actual native place in Karnataka two to three centuries ago and hence speak Kannada at home. The accounts of the people are not clear whether they were brought by local rulers or they fled or migrated, and they say these are just family legends for them now. This land is their birthplace and Chittur is their home. Apart from Chittur, the Devanga Samudayam is also settled in Kuthampully which is another weaving center in Kerala as well as in Pollachi, Madurai and Coimbatore in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu. These are the places that they have their marriage ties with as well, thus marrying their children within the same community. So some of the women have come from Kuthampully, or Pollachi or Coimbatore while there are a few who have married in the same village and their parents' house is just up the street. Like the Kannada speaking *Devanga Chettiyar*, there are a few Telugu speaking *Devanga Chettiyars* and Tamil speaking *Muthaliyars* as well, who have come and settled here, a few generations ago. About three kilometers north-east of Devangapuram is Manchira where the Hanveav Cooperative society is based. Here there is a workshed with twenty five looms which are functioning today. The weavers here do not belong to the Devanga Samudayam or Tamil Muthaliyars, but are locals who belong to lower income families not from the original weaving caste. Most of them are women (twenty four of the twenty five) who

have learnt weaving here at the work-shed itself, trained for six months and now work to earn a supplementary income for their families.

### Work Structure

As mentioned before, up until a few decades ago, all the processes from spinning cotton into yarn to weaving all took place locally, but as people involved in the spinning and allied activities started declining and became commercialized, today only weaving takes place in the villages.

The weavers work on wages according to the piece woven by them. Either weaving for the cooperative society or a private player, the yarn necessary for weaving is provided to them. When working for the cooperative society, the yarn is not starch pressed and made into warps so the weavers have to spend money on getting this done, which is done in large workshops in Tamil Nadu these days, but with private players, they get the yarn which can be readily woven. Although the cooperative society reimburses the money for the starching, the weavers say that the bus charges as well as the two days' work is lost in the process of going and getting it done.

Table 2

*Distribution of Weavers according to Textile Woven and Work Structure*

Type of Textile	Working Structure			Total
	Cooperative Society*	Private Agent*	Cooperative Society Work-Shed	
Silk Sarees	1	4	0	5 Households
Cotton Sarees	4	6	3	10 households
Others	0	0	13	13 Weavers
Total	5 Household	10 Households	16 Weavers	

\* One household had more than one weaver, but work structure was uniform for entire household in Devangapuram, while in the work-shed there were independent weavers.

Another difference, is in incorporating the designs into the saree. The looms used for weaving have an attachment, known as 'Jacquard'. Some people who work for the cooperative society got the Jacquard machine for free, while others bought it with their own money. The Jacquard is a one-time investment, however, just the Jacquard is not enough to add designs, cardboard rectangles with small holes (which act as stencils) are required, when the thread, that is to be woven passes through the appropriate holes and through the jacquard, we get sarees with beautiful and different designs. These stencils which are made from cardboard, soak moisture during the monsoon seasons and get spoilt, and the weavers themselves have to invest almost three thousand every year, if they are weaving for the cooperative. On the other hand, when weaving for the private agent, they get the cardboard stencils according to the need for any particular design in the market.

Transportation of yarn from the private agent to homes and finished sarees back is a time and money consuming process. Some people spend one day a week in this exchange process while others have found ways to simplify their lives. Srinivasan and Ganeshan (names changed) who are brothers have made good ties with the bus drivers and conductors which go from Palakkad to Pollachi. They just load their finished products onto the bus at Chittur and then in the return get their payment and next bundle of yarn. This system allows them the liberty to use an extra day for weaving instead of actually going to Pollachi themselves. Jagadish (name changed) and his wife, who are an elderly couple on the other hand give their finished products at a small collection centre in Devangapuram itself, who are then responsible for the transportation. This however reduces the wages earned by them significantly, as some of it is given to the middle men for transportation.

In Devangapuram, all other economics are same for all the weavers, they start at their work day at five or six in the morning, continuing to work till ten in the night, only taking breaks for

their three meals and a short nap in the afternoon. Women, however have to do household work too in between this. This is the way they work throughout the year. They do not have any difference during peak or wane season, as it is impossible for them to do more than this, they only slow down a bit during the monsoons when due to the moisture, the wooden looms become difficult to run and they have to take more rests in between.

In the factories/ work-shed associated with the cooperative society, the working hours are different, from nine to five or six. Here too, women tend to come later after they are done with their household chores and often leave early for when their children might be getting home. In the Devangapuram society's work-shed, where there are only four men today, use the looms on rent, because they no longer have looms at home, but in Manchira, the weavers do not have to pay anything, but they can only weave for the requirement of the society, not for private agents.

The weavers are not involved in the purchase of the yarn that they use for weaving. It is either the cooperative society or the agent which provides them with the yarn, thus most of them have no idea where the yarn comes from. Two types of yarn are used: cotton and silk, both, they believe are machine spun in Tamil Nadu or in other places. Some people say that the cotton comes from Salem, Thirupur and Pollachi in Tamil Nadu while silk comes from Salem which is imported from China. The gold thread or *Kasavu* is not actual gold, like the one used before, but just gold coloured thread. This thread is spun in Surat, Gujarat and purchased from Coimbatore. Once the saree is woven, it is first hung to dry completely then it is folded and becomes ready to be given to the cooperative society or the private agent. Any packaging, labelling, price tagging is not done by the weavers and thus they have no idea about it.

## **Social Aspects**

While looking at the social structure, there needs to be a clear distinction between the weavers in Devangapuram and the weavers at Manchira cooperative society. Starting with the weavers of Devangapuram. Here, weaving is a family craft and they have grown up in the weaving setting. Although many of the weavers formally started weaving between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, all of them helped their parents with the allied activities like spinning the thread onto spindles, detangling the yarn, starching and even weaving about half a foot when their parents needed a little bit of rest. So, between their school and studies they helped out regularly. Social circumstances forced some people to stop schooling after class five while some people went onto finish their schooling.

Growing up like this, they have never learnt anything other than weaving and thus most have blindly followed their parents into weaving as well. They do not know any other occupation and just want to continue doing this till their bodies give out. On the other hand, there are several neighbours who have shifted from weaving to other occupations like manual labour like painting and construction work etc. where there is a lot more pay and lesser hours of work.

An exception to this trend was one couple, both of whom stopped weaving and went to work with a power-loom company 'Aargee Textiles' but later came back to weaving itself. When asked about the reason they said that although working in the power-loom company was more remunerative and required less hard work, they felt that they were actually insulting their traditional craft when the company was selling power-loom textiles labelled as handloom.

On the other hand, the weavers in Manchira Society are not from weaving families, instead they undergo a formal training of six months where they are taught weaving by the society and after weaving for one year they become members of the weavers' cooperative. These weavers, who

are mostly women, who are married and see this as an additional source of income for home. So they have learnt the craft at very late in their lives, some in their twenties, and others as late as in their thirties and forties.

The question about continuing the weaving tradition is met with a unanimous echo of it being impossible. Neither the weavers from Devangapuram, nor the weavers at Manchira want their children to pursue weaving as an occupation, or want their daughters to be married into families that do. Although there are some who wish their children had at least learnt the art as it is their tradition craft (*Kula Thozhil*) others don't wish as there is no scope or benefits. Weaving is not only a low paying profession, it is also a deterrent when it comes to marriage proposals. Nobody wants to marry their girls to weaving families as it is a family profession, once married, the girl will also have to become a part of the family occupation, and thus be unable to do anything else. When the few kids who were lurking in the corridors were asked if they wished to learn the craft, they vehemently shook their heads with an exclamation of '*Ayye*' as if they were even repulsed by the thought itself.

The actual task of weaving is done by both men and women in a family. In the houses where there is just one loom, the husband and wife work in parts in harmony on the same saree, while in the houses with two looms, each one weaves on separate looms. Another important task involved is spinning thread onto small spindles which form the wefts is done only by the women, although when they were children, even the boys used to do it. All the work involved in weaving is done by the family members themselves and there is no trend of hiring labourers to get some part of the work done. The wages for weaving are so low that they cannot hire anyone.

Like mentioned before, in Devangapuram as weaving is considered a '*Kula Thozhil*' or a family tradition, it is not just a source of livelihood. For this same reason, on the new moon day or



‘*Karutha Vaavu*’ weaving is not carried out. All the other days, be it Sundays or a national holiday they weave. Another observation is that in the small temple like structure in front of the house, along with an idol of the deity and the flowers for offering were small spindles. When asked about their religious practices though, they say, that all of them visit the ‘*kovil*’ or temple on the main street and worship all Gods, though ‘*Saudambika*’ a form of the Goddess is the primary deity.

### **Effect of Recent Economic Changes**

Although the weavers claim that they have not been severely affected by the recent economic changes, they were not unaffected either. During the time of demonetization, there were weeks when even after producing three sarees they were not given their wages. This was true for both the people weaving for cooperative societies as well as those weaving for private buyers, however, the cooperative members had to go as much as two to three months without wages, while the private buyers recovered faster. This even led to few people shifting from weaving for cooperatives to private agents.

The other big economic change was the imposition of Goods and Service Tax (GST). As the weavers receive wages which are independent of the sales, the wages per say were not affected by this. After the introduction of GST, the price of thread increased. For the weavers weaving for the cooperative, the cost of the *Kasavu* (gold) thread increased in the market, but the money given by the cooperative for the purchase remained the same. On the other hand, for the private agents, especially in the case of silk, there was an increase in price, so they started asking the weavers to weave lesser sarees per week so that they are able to pay them fully for what they have woven. Thus, in the end, the final income of a family did go down although it was masked and not clearly expressed.

### **Assistance and Schemes**

The poor delivery of assistance from the side of the government or non-governmental associations is one of the reasons that the handloom in Kerala is not able to sustain itself as compared to its counterparts in the other states. Although the government has released schemes like ‘One loom for One Home’ in which the government pays 75 percent and the weaver pays the rest 25 percent continues to exist, the people who need it are unable to get benefitted from them. Shanti (name changed) and her husband for example, faced a problem while trying to get this scheme because they first needed to show the officials a different room along with the basic stand for the new loom, only then would they be even considered for the scheme. They unfortunately do not have enough money to extend their houses or purchase the stands so as to meet government demands. Another weaver, Ganeshan (name changed) has made the necessary requirements but the government still has not granted him the money to purchase the loom, even after eighteen months.

Another scheme which the government has started is the Weavers’ Card similar to a *Kissan* Card, which allows the weavers to take loans at lower interest rates, however, due to the communication gaps between the government, the banks and the cooperatives, the weavers are unable to receive the lower interest rates and are having to pay the normal market interest rates, the result being that they have lost their trust in banks. Rajalakshmi (name changed) says that initially the government and the cooperative society who helped make the card told them the Weaver’s card could be used in any bank and they took loan from Dhanalakshmi Bank. But later, when they went to avail the subsidy, they were told it was only available in government banks only and not in private banks. Hence in the then they had to keep some of her jewelry as mortgage in order to pay back the loan.

Being a cooperative society member does not give any advantage, all weavers in Devangapuram are members of the Devangapuram Cooperative society. There are pros and cons in weaving for the cooperative or even weaving for the private agent. When weaving for the private agent, the payment is on the spot, and is a little more than that received by those weaving for a cooperative society, however, like working for a government job, weaving for the cooperative society comes with its own perks, which include a yearly bonus at the time of Onam which is proportional to the number of sarees woven throughout the year. But, more often than not, there is a delay in the payment of their weekly wages. Weavers who depend on each weeks wage to survive the following week have a hard time with such erratic pays. The private agents on the other hand even act as money lenders giving wages in advance if the weavers needs it.

### **Competition and Geographical Indication (GI)**

There is no doubt about the competition that the handloom sector faces. The biggest competitor is of course the power-loom sector which produces similar looking textile in one fifth of the price. According to the weavers there are only two types of people who readily buy handloom product, one who are rich and the other who are aged and are habitual to the handloom textile. The latter too usually belong to the high caste and high income bracket for only they can afford it.

The term Geographical Indication (GI) itself is unknown to everyone including the weavers and the cooperative society secretaries but they know that there is something different about the Balaramapuram Textiles and Kuthampully Textiles, which have both received the GI tag. Many even enquired why Chittur was chosen as the area of study instead of Kuthampully which is also in the Palakkad district, for the latter is more ‘popular’ and ‘well-known’. The irony, though is that what is sold in the market as ‘Balaramapuram’ or ‘Kuthampully’ is often woven here in Chittur.

## **BALARAMAPURAM**

Balaramapuram, the name itself has now come to be associated with Kerala's handloom. Due to this association with the handloom industry, town itself is the hub for all things handloom: with all kinds of shops selling everything from yarn to spindles and even loom parts, however, the actual weaving has now moved from the town to adjacent villages and towns. The '*Chaliya*' community similar to their counterparts '*Devanga Chettiyars*' were the weavers here, but over the decades, they have left weaving for other lucrative opportunities. Others have become 'Master Weavers' who employ weavers as labourers to get the work done.

The weavers at three places were interviewed, the Balaramapuram Kaithary Street, Villikumal and Manjavilakam. In all these places, the weavers worked under one master weaver, who own work-sheds with several looms in which these people work.

### **Genealogy**

The original weavers in Balaramapuram belonged to the '*Chaliya*' community who were brought to Thiruvananthapuram by the Travancore king Bala Rama Varma, to weave for the royal family from Tamil Nadu. Today, the '*Chaliya*' are no longer the weavers. They are known as 'Master weavers' who employ other people to weave for them. Like the people from the *Devanga Samudayam* who speak Kannada at home, they speak Tamil at home.

The weavers today are local people, who belong to all castes and communities. About two to three decades ago, they learnt weaving from the actual master weavers and now work for them. They are first generation weavers who don't have any other family members involved in the craft.

### **Work Structure**

Weaving in Balaramapuram is all private, although on paper the most number of the cooperatives in Kerala are in the Thiruvananthapuram. Here the weaving is carried out under

Master weavers. Master weavers are people who have the capital, with a shed full of looms, yarn thread and other weaving equipment and enough money to pay the wages of those working on the looms. These master weavers come from the original weaving families or *Chaliyas*. They had enough wealth to stop weaving themselves and employ others to weave for them.

In Balaramapuram Kaithary Street, today there are only two Master weavers, employing three and one weaver respectively. The actual weavers or workers work from around nine in the morning to four or five in the evenings at the looms and earn rupees 180 for a ‘Double *Mundu*’ which takes them around a day to weave. These weavers don’t have to worry about any other costs. They come every morning, and the master weaver provides them with the yarn, thread, *kasavu* thread, the loom and everything. They sit, weave and at the end of the day, when a product is finished and folded they are given the wages according to the piece woven. This is uniform across all the three places which were surveyed. ‘Double *Mundu*’ is the only handloom product that is being woven in the work-sheds which were visited. No other form of textile can be seen in mass production, although Balaramapuram is famous for its Kerala *Kasavu* Sarees, the *Mundum Neriyathum* (or *Set Mundu*) as well.

Since the weavers in the factories are merely workers, they do not have any idea about the weaving industry or the economics involved in it. To get an idea about it, the master weavers were interviewed. However, as the main focus of the study was to understand the socio-economic condition of the weavers, this was used just a supplementary information.

Like in Chittur, there is a close connection with Tamil Nadu here as well. The yarn and thread is all brought from Tamil Nadu, however, the starching and other processes are carried out both here as well as across the border. It is the choice of the master weaver from where he wants to get it done.

## **Social Aspects**

The weaving caste '*Chaliya*' are no longer the weavers in Balaramapuram. The weavers belong to different castes and communities, mostly from lower economic backgrounds. The reason why many even learnt weaving is to support their families economically. Thus the majority of the weavers are women, working to support their husbands.

All the weavers in Manjavilakam learnt weaving under a master weaver called Mr. Padmanabhan Gopinath, who has established a weaving village where people are trained in the craft of weaving. Up until four to five years ago Mr. Gopinath, called '*Gopinath Master*' by everyone in the village taught more than a thousand people the art of weaving. According to him, the weavers come from all different social backgrounds, the only uniting factor is that they want to acquire a skill and want to use that skill to earn their living.

Similarly in Balaramapuram Kaithari Street and Villikulam as well the weavers today come from local low income backgrounds who learnt weaving from the original weavers or the '*Chaliyas*', but they are not working for them today.

This heterogeneity in the social class of the weavers and disconnect from the craft means that they do not have a particular temple that they visit every day, a ritual they follow before they begin weaving or a particular day, like the new moon when they do not weave.

The question about teaching their children the art of weaving is same here as well. Even ten years back, weaving was a well-respected tradition. Like Geeta (name changed) who travels from Tamil Nadu daily, spending close to eighty rupees, to come and work here. However, the same cannot be said today. Today everyone wants to make '*quick*' money, without hard work. Up until a few years back, doing a skilled labour like weaving meant that the family enjoyed a good status in the society, even though it was not a very high paying occupation. But today, the gap

between the wages earned in weaving and other occupations has been steadily rising, thus discouraging the youngsters from joining the trade.

### **Effect of Recent Economic Changes**

The weavers are unaware of the fluctuations happening in the market like the GST or demonetization. If there is a delay in payment of wages, the weavers move from one master weaver to the next. The Eco Tex Weaving Village for example once had close to a thousand weavers, but as the payment of wages became irregular, many weavers chose to leave Eco Tex to work under different master weavers around Manchavilakam itself. With the introduction of GST or during the time of demonetization, the wage amount did not change and thus the weavers have been unaffected by these recent economic changes.

### **Assistance and Schemes**

In Balaramapuram and the surrounding areas all the handloom weaving has become privatized, hence there are no assistance and schemes from the side of the government. Any support the weaver receives is from the master weaver only. The master weavers too do not do not receive any kind of monetary or other support from the government. According to the master weavers although there are several cooperative societies on paper, and almost all of them are members, they are all just for numbers and none of them operate today.

The Eco Tex Handloom Consortium, started by Mr. Gopinath is a one of a kind establishment, which not only teaches weaving for free but also employs weavers. Today, there are several '*Mahila Samaj*' or Women's Self Help Groups through which this place runs, providing work and support to the local women. The government of Kerala supported this venture, by giving the organization a hefty loan cum grant to help it grow. But, unfortunately the place is not being

able to sustain itself and slowly the weavers are leaving from the organization in search of other places of employment.

### **Competition and Geographical Indication (GI)**

The weavers are unaware of the competition in the market as their only job is to weave irrespective of the highs or lows in the market. The master weavers are aware of the competition existing in the market. It is due to the competition that today most places only weave ‘*Double Mundu*’ or the plain dhoti. The ‘*Set Mundu*’ or Kerala Saree is extremely expensive when handwoven as opposed to power-loom produced. With demand for fancier designs in the women’s textiles, people are opting for cheaper power looms options. Also, the Kerala Sarees only sell during the Onam season. As the demand for handloom textiles are constantly going down, several master weavers have closed down their establishments or reduced the number of weavers which were employed.

The weavers are unaware of the GI tag that Balaramapuram textiles have. Although the master weavers are a little more aware of the existence of a brand or label associated with the Balaramapuram textiles they do not know of any benefits which it brings. The Balaramapuram Handloom is acclaimed for its hundred by hundred count weave, indicating to top quality, today there is almost nobody who uses 100 by 100 count, the maximum going up to 80 by 90 count. The private sellers and retailers stamp the handloom products with a 100 by 100 tag and sell it in the market. Govind (name changed) who was weaving a ‘*Mandra Kodi*’ or bridal outfit says that, “Nobody will be honest with you and tell you that the thread count is not 100 by 100. My master (who is sitting next to him) is a very honest man and that is why he is telling you that this is actually 80 by 80 count.” The weavers or master weavers however do not get any benefits from this, but the final sellers are able to reap the benefits.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

There is no contestation to the fact that the handloom industry is dying a slow death in Kerala. The only questions which need answering are: firstly what are the reasons that people are not interested in continuing the weaving culture and secondly how come Tamil Nadu's handloom industry is thriving as compared to that of Kerala, especially on paper. Finally the reality of geographic indication (GI) tag on ground and its effect on the handloom industry.

The weavers when you ask them about the sustenance of the weaving culture have a unanimous answer, of impossibility. With how the things are today, there is little to no scope of the handloom industry continuing beyond a maximum of ten to twenty years. This is not unique to one location, but for both Chittur and Balaramapuram alike.

The main impediment is the low wages for long working hours, which is more prominent in household weaving units as opposed to the work shed set-up. In the household structure, weaving a saree from start to finish, involves the labour of not just one person but the entire family, especially both the husband and wife. Starting the day at as early as five in the morning, continued weaving till ten at night for two days, with small negligible breaks in between, produces one saree which fetches them somewhere between 800 and 1000 rupees. On the other hand, a manual labourer, who works alone from around ten in the morning to four or five in the evening brings home 500 to 700 rupees every day. Thus, if both the husband and wife went out as daily labourers the daily household income comes out to be 1000 to 1400 rupees daily just working for eight hours, while, but with both of them as weavers, after a fifteen sixteen hour day, the daily household income is only 400 to 500 rupees. So, with half the effort and time put in, the earning is more than double doing manual labour. This brings forth the question of who would continue to pursue weaving as an occupation, making the future of the industry very bleak.

Although in the work-shed type of set up, in Chittur's societies or under the master weavers of Balaramapuram, none of the weavers want their children to learn weaving and come into this industry. Around twenty years back, the weaving industry was a good choice as a profession, as it was a skilled labour which was well compensated, however, today other non-skilled work is more economically profitable. The only reason that the people who are weaving today have not left is because, weaving is an art/ skill that they learnt and don't want it to go waste. In Balaramapuram where 'Double *Mundu*' is woven, every weaver earns only around 180 rupees after a hard day's work, while in Manchira Society where *Kaavi Mundu* are woven, it earns them something similar per day.

Both Chittur and Balaramapuram are situated close to the Tamil Nadu border although separated from each other by more than 350 km within Kerala. Then the biggest question which comes up is why the Tamil Nadu handloom industry is doing well, while Kerala's is struggling to keep its head above water. According to the weavers' the reason lies in the government policies like subsidized electricity and other incentives which are not there in Kerala. But there is another larger aspect relating to the market of the handloom products. Kerala handloom is originally known for the off white colour textiles, whether they are *Mundu*, *Set Mundu*, or even sarees, which are obviously not a practical attire for the working population and thus reserved only special occasions today. Tamil Nadu's handloom sarees on the other hand are coloured sarees, which are perfect as office wear in many places even today and thus have a wider everyday market. Today in Chittur, the same coloured sarees are being woven, but unfortunately, though they have a market, the buyers associate these sarees with 'Tamil Nadu Sarees' and forget they are being woven in Kerala itself. Thus, these weavers from Chittur can never receive a GI tag for their hard work. As these coloured

sarees are not local and the off white sarees that they weave are sold in the market as Kuthampully or Balaramapuram sarees which already have the GI tag.

The aim behind the GI tag is to give a boost to the locally produced goods in the globalized world. Sadly the reality is that the locals who are involved in the actual production of these goods are not receiving any benefits which come with getting the GI tag, like international recognition. Although the general public is unaware of the actual term Geographical Indication, weavers and customers alike they understand that the Balaramapuram Sarees are different from any other Kerala saree and it has its own name. The shopkeepers are the people who reap the profits which come with this 'name brand', selling even power-loom *Kasavu* sarees (off white colour sarees with gold work) as Balaramapuram Sarees.

Several products which have received a geographical indication have a special logo which certifies that the product has a GI tag and has been produced locally. The Balaramapuram Textiles do not have any such logo, so the general public does not have any way of knowing an original Balaramapuram product from a fake replica. This is used by the shopkeepers who market anything termed as 'Balaramapuram Textile' while the hardworking weavers do not get any benefits.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The state of the handloom sector is not in question, its deteriorating state is evident. The reasons for this state and the future of the industry is what needs to be explored. Handlooms are expensive and with cheaper power-loom options it cannot be expected that the common man will always opt for the handloom product. The weavers are earning very meagre wages as compared to the market price of the handloom product. Thus the aim should not be to reduce the price so as to make them more affordable to the public but on the other hand reduce the gap between the weaver and the buyer. There is a twenty percent gain at each stage and as the number of agents in the

middle increases, so does the end price without any increase in the wages earned by the hardworking weaver.

Another aspect is developing an identity and yet moving with the changing times. The Kerala sarees have unfortunately become synonymous to nothing but Onam. On one hand there are few designs which cannot be replicated by the power loom, while on the other, with the increase in working women the demand for off white sarees is falling. Weavers still stick to traditional types of textiles like *Mundu* and Saree, with imitation of the power-loom designs. On the other hand, showcasing the unique handloom designs on the more popular textiles could help boost the handloom industry. A trade off would have to be made between retaining the art of weaving by hand by using handloom for weaving other forms of textiles like Salwar or top materials or sticking to the traditional ‘Double’ and ‘Set *Mundu*’, which are slowly losing in popularity, resulting in a decline in the handloom sector as a whole. In today’s world unfortunately, for something to survive it must adapt with the changes, and the former seems like a good way for the handloom industry to go.

The revival and popularization of the traditional handloom designs and giving them recognition is the way through which the geographical indication tag can further help and support the craft. However, more and more people need to be made aware of the GI certification and the actual artisans need to be the ones that get the benefits from it.

As people become more aware about the efforts such as celebrating National Handloom Day and other initiative both from the government and the general public, the handloom sector will rise once again and the weavers will receive the right payment and respect for their art.

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Annexure

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

**GENERAL QUESTIONS**

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Sex: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Average monthly income: \_\_\_\_\_

**ECONOMIC ASPECTS**

5. Any supplementary income: \_\_\_\_\_
6. What are your working hours? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Are the working hours fixed, or are they flexible? \_\_\_\_\_
8. How are you paid for the work you do? Is it according to the length of textile you weave, or number of pieces? \_\_\_\_\_
9. How do you sell the products that you weave? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Who do you sell your product to? To customers directly, Cooperative societies, to wholesale or retail shops? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. Number of looms owned. \_\_\_\_\_
12. Year of installation of the looms. \_\_\_\_\_
13. Did you get any discount or subsidy while buying the looms? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Is there a time of the year when production and sales are high compared to others? Which is that season? How do you manage during the rush season? Do you hire other workers?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
15. Could you tell me about how you go about the process from start to finish?
  - a. Where do you get your yarn from? Local/ imported? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Is it hand spun or machine made? \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Do you die your own yarn? \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. What are the different types of yarn that are used? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- e. Time required to complete one piece from start to finish. \_\_\_\_\_
- f. What about the *Kasavu* thread you use? \_\_\_\_\_
- g. What do you do after you weave a piece of fabric? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- h. Do you do the packaging etc. by yourself? \_\_\_\_\_

#### SOCIAL ASPECT

- 16. At what age did you start in this work? \_\_\_\_\_
- 17. Have you ever done any other kind of work? Have you thought of doing any other kind of work? \_\_\_\_\_
- 18. Is it a family business? For how many generations have your family been in this business?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 19. Till what level have you studied? What about your children? Are they going to school or have they already completed school? Maybe college? Do your children know weaving as well? Do you think they will join you in this business after their studies are over? What would you like for them, to join weaving or look for jobs outside? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 20. Is the work for men and women different and fixed? Or does everyone do the same jobs?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 21. Are the different roles along the weaving process assigned to different people? Do the children at home help out? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 22. Have you taught your children your craft? \_\_\_\_\_
- 23. Are your children doing weaving as well, or will they when they grow up? \_\_\_\_\_
- 24. Do you get any kind of support from outside? \_\_\_\_\_
- 25. How many people work in your unit? Do you have people who are hired, like on a temporary or permanent basis? Daily labourers? What kind of work do they do? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### RECENT CHANGES AND THEIR EFFECTS

- 26. How have the recent economic changes affected you? \_\_\_\_\_



27. Did you face any difficulty during the time of demonetization? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
28. Has the GST led to any major changes in sale and production? Or the procurement or raw materials? \_\_\_\_\_
29. The fashion styles are changing, people are wearing *salwar-kameez*, shirt-pant etc., how has this affected the demand for the handloom product? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
30. Do you weave salwar material, shirt material, or other materials as well? \_\_\_\_\_
31. Is there demand for handloom *Salwar-kameez*, shirt material, kurta etc.? \_\_\_\_\_
32. In the market, one often finds cotton mixed with synthetic textiles which are comparatively cheaper, do you feel they have more demand? If yes, do you also make sarees/ '*mundum veshti*' etc. with synthetic mix materials? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
33. The new trend of bleached dhotis instead of the traditional off white ones are seen in the market, do you weave such dhotis as well? \_\_\_\_\_
34. Have new designs been incorporated into the products? \_\_\_\_\_
35. What is your opinion about the changing trends? Do you like creating new products or do you prefer the authentic traditional designs? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

#### ASSISTANCE AND SCHEMES

36. The government reports talk about the schemes which have been launched for handloom weavers, are you aware of them? Have you benefited from any such scheme? If yes, could you elaborate on the benefits you received? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
37. How did you get to know about it? How did you receive it? Was it financial help? Help with selling the products? New looms? \_\_\_\_\_
38. If not, do you know if somebody else received such help? \_\_\_\_\_
39. Have you received any kind of financial assistance? If yes, from whom? The bank, cooperative society, the government, NGO? Was this helpful? What kind of help did you get? Have you taken any loans from bank? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
40. Are you a member of any cooperative? What does being a cooperative member entail?

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41. Does being part of a cooperative give you any advantage over being a private weaver?

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#### COMPETITION AND GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION

42. Do you feel there is competition in the handloom industry? \_\_\_\_\_

43. Who is your main competition? \_\_\_\_\_

44. Why do you think the Tamil Nadu been able to do better than Kerala in terms of handlooms?

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45. Do customers understand the difference between hand-woven and power loom textiles?

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46. Have you heard about the GI tag? \_\_\_\_\_

If yes

a. Do you know what it is about? \_\_\_\_\_

b. Do you think it helps the handloom sector? \_\_\_\_\_

c. Has it helped you? (Balaramapuram) or Do you think it will help you if you get it? (Chittur) \_\_\_\_\_

d. Would you like to get a GI tag for the handlooms of Chittur? \_\_\_\_\_

47. What do you do in order to protect your craft? \_\_\_\_\_

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#### SPECIAL QUESTIONS BALARAMAPURAM

1. Do you know that the Balaramapuram textiles have a GI tag? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is the trademark of a Balaramapuram Saree/ *Set mundu* that makes it different from other Kerala handlooms? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Do you think the GI tag received gives it an advantage over other handlooms of Kerala?

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4. Do you think after receiving the GI tag in 2009 the demand for Balaramapuram sarees and textiles has gone up? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Do your customers know about GI tag? \_\_\_\_\_

6. Do they specifically ask about Balaramapuram sarees/ textiles? \_\_\_\_\_

7. After receiving the GI tag, do you think the competition has increased? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Do feel that power loom enterprises market textiles claiming that they are Balaramapuram handlooms? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Thiruvananthapuram is a hub for tourism, do you think it helps with boosting the sale of the Balaramapuram handlooms? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Are the tourists or the locals your major customers? \_\_\_\_\_