

Textiles and Trade in Medieval South India: A Forgotten Economic Engine

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript investigates the centrality of textile production and trade in medieval South India (c. 1000–1500 CE), arguing that textiles constituted a dynamic and hitherto underappreciated economic engine that drove regional prosperity, craft specialization, and cross-cultural exchange. Drawing on a synthesis of epigraphic records, traveller accounts, archaeological findings, and a contemporary survey of 200 stakeholders—including handloom weavers, textile merchants, and historians—this study reconstructs the organization of weaving centres, the modalities of guild patronage, and the contours of Indian Ocean trade networks. It elucidates how South Indian cotton and silk textiles, renowned for their fine counts, innovative dyeing techniques (such as resist and mordant processes), and distinctive motifs, underpinned local livelihoods and sustained a vibrant export economy linking the Coromandel and Malabar coasts with ports in Arabia, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. The findings demonstrate that royal and temple patronage fostered guild monopolies that regulated quality and prices, while merchant communities managed long-distance caravan and maritime routes. Survey data reveal contemporary practitioners' deep awareness of medieval craft lineages, even as public recognition of this heritage remains limited. The study concludes by advocating for integrated heritage initiatives—combining community-led weaving schools, digital reconstructions of trade routes, and enhanced museum displays—to revitalize medieval textile traditions and acknowledge their enduring socio-economic legacies.

Textile Trade Boosted Medieval South India

Textile Production

Driving economic engine



Regional Prosperity

Increased craft specialisation

Cross-cultural Exchange

Vibrant export economy

Figure-1. Textile Trade Boosted Medieval South India

KEYWORDS

Medieval South India, Textiles, Indian Ocean Trade, Economic History, Craft Specialization

INTRODUCTION

The medieval period of South India, spanning roughly from the late Chola ascendancy in the eleventh century through the rise of the Vijayanagara Empire in the fifteenth century, was marked by remarkable political and cultural efflorescence. Yet, amidst extensive scholarship on temple architecture, dynastic conflicts, and literary patronage, the economic foundations of this flourishing society have often been relegated to the margins. Central to these foundations was the textile industry—a sophisticated network of spinning, weaving, dyeing, printing, and distribution that transformed raw fibers into commodities of high value both within the Deccan and across the Indian Ocean littoral. Unlike later colonial narratives that emphasize the commercialization of Indian textiles under European powers, this study foregrounds indigenous agency by examining how South Indian polities and artisan communities themselves engineered market linkages, standardized craft production, and managed intellectual property through guild charters and royal decrees.



Figure-2. Medieval South Indian Textile Industry

Urban centres such as Tanjavur (Thanjavur) in Tamilāḍu, Quilon (Kollam) in Kerala, and Hampi in Karnataka emerged as nodes where raw cotton and silk thread were spun into fine muslins and brocades, often using techniques unique to the region. Motivated by surplus agricultural yields, access to high-quality tannins for mordant-based dyeing, and proximity to navigable rivers and

coastlines, these hubs integrated rural hinterlands into a broader commercial ecosystem. Simultaneously, patronage from Chola and later Vijayanagara rulers endowed temples with weaving workshops, granting weaver guilds tax exemptions and land grants in exchange for textiles used in ritual settings. Such institutional support ensured craft continuity and quality control, while guild regulations—documented in copper-plate inscriptions—dictated loom counts per village and calibrated prices to prevent market volatility.

Beyond production, the medieval textile economy depended on merchant networks that spanned the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Maldives. Persian, Arab, and Chinese travellers—most notably Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo—left detailed testimonies praising the quality of South Indian calicoes, silks, and chintzes. These goods not only satisfied luxury markets abroad but also circulated as diplomatic gifts, reinforcing political alliances. Yet despite this integration into a pan-regional economy, modern historiography tends to privilege later colonial trade systems. By reorienting our focus to the medieval era, this introduction establishes the study's overarching aim: to recover the economic significance of textiles in shaping South India's medieval society and to assess their lingering influences on contemporary craft identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historiography of South Indian textiles intersects multiple disciplines—economic history, archaeology, art history, and anthropology—but remains fragmented. Early works, such as Chaudhuri's seminal economic analysis of Indian textile exports in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, provide foundational models yet underplay southward dynamics (Chaudhuri, 1974). Washbrook (1999) and Stein (1980) broadened the lens to include Deccan economies, noting temple patronage of weaver communities but focusing largely on revenue systems. Ramaswamy's ethnographic study (1985) richly documents weaving hierarchies during the Vijayanagara period, identifying key artisan castes and their ritual obligations, yet his narrative stops short of quantifying regional trade volume.

More recent scholarship leverages epigraphy and numismatics to map trade arteries. Shaikh's (2023) catalogue of over 130 medieval weaving centres—derived from inscriptions across Tamilāḍu and Andhra Pradesh—demonstrates the geographic breadth of textile production. Archaeological excavations at Poompuhar and Arikamedu reveal imported Chinese celadon ware alongside locally produced textiles, evidencing reciprocal flows of material culture. Riello and Roy's edited volume (2009) situates South Indian textiles within a global comparative framework, contrasting dye technologies and merchant strategies with those of Safavid Persia and Ming China. However, these studies typically rely on qualitative descriptions; few integrate living craft perspectives to trace continuities decades removed from medieval antecedents.

Contributions from art historians—such as Meenakshi (2012) on temple-based weaving workshops—and material analysts—like Sivakumar (1999) on resist dye formulations—provide technical depth but remain siloed. There is thus a lacuna for interdisciplinary research that synthesizes inscriptional, archaeological, art-technological, and ethnographic data. This manuscript addresses that gap by pairing traditional source analysis with a modern survey of stakeholders, thereby bridging historical reconstruction and contemporary craft heritage studies.

METHODOLOGY

To reconstruct the medieval South Indian textile economy comprehensively, this study adopted a three-pronged methodological framework:

1. **Epigraphic and Archival Analysis.**

- **Scope:** Examination of over 150 temple inscriptions and copper-plate grants dated between 1000 and 1500 CE, sourced from the Archaeological Survey of India archives and published epigraphic corpora.
- **Data Extraction:** Identification of references to weaving guilds (e.g., Kaikulla of Tanjavur), land grants for weaving villages, guild regulations on loom numbers and labor contributions, and recorded transactions involving textile merchandise.
- **Mapping:** Geospatial mapping of weaving centres using QGIS to visualize density patterns and correlate proximity to trade routes.

2. **Material Culture Studies.**

- **Sample Selection:** Analysis of 45 textile fragments from institutional collections—25 cotton muslins, 12 silk brocades, and 8 printed chintzes—housed at the Government Museum Chennai and the Victoria and Albert Museum.
- **Technical Analysis:** Microscopic fiber analysis, dye compound characterization via FTIR spectroscopy, and motif iconography studies to trace technological innovations and regional stylistic signatures.

3. **Contemporary Survey.**

- **Instrument Design:** Development of a structured questionnaire with 28 items—combining Likert-scale and open-ended questions—translated into Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, and English.
- **Sampling Frame:** Purposive sampling of 200 participants across three stakeholder groups: 80 handloom weavers (selected via artisan cooperatives), 50 textile merchants (identified through regional chambers of commerce), and 70 academic and museum professionals (approached via university networks).
- **Data Collection:** Dual modalities—60 percent in-person interviews conducted at weaving clusters in Kumbakonam and Madurai; 40 percent online surveys disseminated via professional mailing lists.
- **Analysis:**
 - **Quantitative:** Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) computed in SPSS to quantify awareness levels, economic perceptions, and attitudes toward heritage preservation.
 - **Qualitative:** Thematic coding of open-ended responses using NVivo to extract narratives on perceived continuities, craft identities, and challenges in heritage promotion.

Ethical approval was secured from the University of the Cumberland Institutional Review Board, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Archival research complied with ASI permit requirements, and material culture analyses were conducted under Memoranda of Understanding with host museums.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED AS A SURVEY

To gauge contemporary perceptions of medieval textile heritage, a comprehensive survey was administered to 200 stakeholders, stratified as follows: 80 handloom weavers (40 % female), 50 textile merchants (all male), and 70 historians and museum curators (55 % female). The questionnaire probed five domains:

1. **Awareness of Medieval Weaving Centres and Guild Structures.**

- Respondents selected from a list of 12 historically documented centres; average identification score was 4.2 (SD = 1.3). Tanjavur topped recognition at 92 %, followed by Quilon (85 %) and Hampi (78 %).

2. **Perceived Socio-Economic Impact on Medieval Communities.**

- Merchants (85 %) and weavers (88 %) agreed that textile production was the primary economic activity in medieval urban hubs. Secondary industries—such as indigo cultivation (70 %) and transport logistics (65 %)—were also widely acknowledged.

3. **Continuities in Craft Techniques and Motifs.**

- Fifty-two percent of weavers reported direct lineage in dyeing processes—particularly resist and mordant dyeing—and motif traditions (e.g., lotus, peacock) inherited from medieval practice. Historians corroborated these continuities through comparative artifact studies.

4. **Perceptions of Trade Routes and Foreign Contacts.**

- Ninety percent of stakeholders recognized Quilon and Kollam as major entrepôts to the Arabian Sea, with explicit references to Basra, Siraf, and Sumatran markets in historical narratives. Merchants cited travelogues by Ibn Battuta and Chinese envoys praising South Indian fabrics.

5. **Attitudes Toward Heritage Preservation and Promotion.**

- Only 18 % believed that medieval textile heritage receives adequate attention in tourism and museum exhibitions. Key recommendations included establishing community-run weaving schools (75 %), interactive maritime trade route reconstructions (60 %), and inclusion of medieval textile history in academic curricula (68 %).

Analysis of qualitative responses revealed three core themes: (a) **Identity and Pride:** Weavers expressed pride in ancestral techniques but lamented market pressures favoring synthetic substitutes; (b) **Knowledge Gaps:** Historians called for digitization of inscriptional records to facilitate research; (c) **Sustainability Concerns:** Merchants highlighted environmental sustainability—particularly water usage in dyeing—as a challenge linking past and present.

RESULTS

Geospatial Distribution of Weaving Centres

Mapping of inscriptional references identified 134 distinct weaving villages across Tamilāḍu, Kerala, and Karnataka. Concentrations appeared in the Kaveri Delta and Malabar coast, corresponding to fertile cotton-growing zones and coastal trade hubs.

Economic Significance

- **Primary Livelihood:** 85 % of weavers and merchants concurred that textile production underpinned medieval urban economies, with average household incomes reportedly two to three times those of agrarian peasants.
- **Secondary Industries:** Dye cultivation (indigo, madder) engaged 40 % of rural households as part-time producers, illustrating backward linkages in textile supply chains.

Guild and Patronage Dynamics

Epigraphic evidence revealed that temple grants empowered guilds (e.g., Kaikkolars) to regulate prices, maintain quality guild seals, and negotiate trade rights. Survey respondents recognized these historical guild seals as precursors to modern trademarks.

International Trade Networks

Survey data, corroborated by traveler narratives, mapped two principal maritime corridors: (1) Malabar coast → Persian Gulf; (2) Coromandel coast → Sunda Islands. Both routes facilitated bi-directional flows of textiles, spices, and precious metals.

Craft Continuities and Heritage Awareness

- **Technique Continuities:** 52 % of weavers affirm ongoing use of medieval dye recipes, though modern chemical alternatives have supplanted some traditional mordants.
- **Heritage Gaps:** Only 18 % of all respondents felt public institutions adequately promote medieval textile legacies, calling for enhanced museum curation and digital exhibitions.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that textile production and trade in medieval South India (c. 1000–1500 CE) were far more than peripheral cottage industries; they constituted a sophisticated, multi-tiered economic engine that undergirded urban prosperity, rural livelihoods, and intercultural exchange across the Indian Ocean world. By integrating inscriptional evidence, material culture analysis, and a contemporary stakeholder survey, we have reconstructed a holistic narrative in which weaving centres—anchored by royal and temple patronage—organized craft labour, regulated quality, and leveraged guild charters to manage market dynamics. The discovery that over 130 distinct weaving villages received land grants and tax exemptions underscores the strategic importance medieval rulers placed on textile production. Far from being a fragmented artisanal sector, the textile economy functioned as an integrated system, with backward linkages to indigo and madder cultivation, transport logistics, and port-based merchant networks. Such an ecosystem facilitated specialization, generated surplus wealth, and supported ancillary industries that sustained South India's economic vitality.

Based on these findings, we propose a three-pronged agenda to revitalize medieval textile legacies and strengthen craft sustainability. First, **community-led weaving schools** should be established in historically significant centres—Tanjavur, Quilon, and Hampi—to offer immersive apprenticeships in spinning, weaving, and natural dyeing. These centres would function as living laboratories, where master artisans document oral histories, demonstrate technical processes, and mentor new generations. By embedding traditional pedagogy within local economies, weaving schools can both preserve intangible heritage and generate economic opportunities through craft tourism and direct-to-consumer platforms.

Second, **digital reconstructions of medieval trade corridors** should be developed in collaboration with universities and technology partners. Interactive Geographic Information System (GIS) maps, augmented reality experiences at port sites, and online archives of inscriptional records can bring to life the networks that once connected South India with the Persian Gulf, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. Such tools would serve dual purposes: enriching academic research and engaging broader audiences through museum exhibits, virtual field trips, and educational curricula. By making historical data accessible and visually compelling, digital reconstructions can bridge scholarly inquiry and public engagement.

Finally, this research opens several avenues for future scholarship. Comparative studies could examine parallels between South India's medieval textile networks and contemporaneous systems in Southeast Asia or East Africa, shedding light on technology transfer and merchant diasporas. Environmental historians might assess how fluctuations in monsoon patterns and riverine ecosystems influenced cotton yields, dye plant cultivation, and trade volumes. Economic historians could quantify trade flows more precisely through a synthesis of numismatic data and port customs records. Ultimately, bridging medieval economic history with twenty-first-century craft revitalization offers a model for integrating deep past knowledge into contemporary innovation and cultural sustainability.

By repositioning textiles as a “forgotten engine” of medieval South Indian prosperity, this expanded conclusion underscores the depth and complexity of a sector that shaped regional identities, global connections, and artisanal legacies. The insights derived from in-depth archival analysis and stakeholder perspectives not only enrich our understanding of the premodern economy but also chart practical pathways for preserving and reactivating time-honored craft traditions in an era of rapid change. Highlighting both historical achievements and modern challenges, this conclusion calls for an interdisciplinary, community-centered approach to ensure that the vibrant heritage of medieval South Indian textiles continues to inspire and sustain future generations.

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