

Fabric Of A Nation

Posted on



A weaver hard at work at a home-based handloom workshop in Batticaloa. Six family members work here. These large freestanding looms have been modified to allow the weaver to work faster

Sri Lanka's handloom weavers carry a rich legacy of culture and hereditary skills. The industry is experiencing a revival.

Words Daleena Samara **Photographs** Rasika Surasena

The history of Sri Lanka's handloom textiles stretches back in time. The tale of the beginnings of the Sinhala race with the arrival of Indian Prince Vijaya on the island, places Kuveni, queen of an indigenous race of *yakshas* (demons), at work at a wheel, spinning yarn, when the prince first caught sight of her. The year was 543BC. The islanders, like most people elsewhere on earth, had found a way to clothe themselves.

The ancient myth of Kuveni echoes in the present. The village of Thalagune, tucked away in the lush Dumbara valley in Kandy, is just one of many villages in Sri Lanka where handloom textile weaving is a living heritage. The island has many such places, with weaving communities concentrated in Kalutara, Kandy, Matale, Nuwara Eliya, Kurunegala, Batticaloa, Kalmunai, Matara, Galle and Hambantota.

Kuveni, the weaver, was no ordinary princess. She was a *yakkini*, a sorceress. The weavers of Thalagune narrate an episode from the distant past when one of them captured a *yakkini* from the surrounding jungle and set her up at a loom to weave day in and out. She escaped, but not before setting the village, its looms, cotton trees and hemp and the nearby forest, on fire. Chandana Yapage, a young weaver, who narrated this tale says that Thalagune quickly recovered. Magically, the beautiful patterns of their fabrics remained in the ashes, and so they were copied and preserved for use even today.

Traditionally, Sri Lanka's weavers have been divided into two groups: indigenous weaving communities such as Thalagune, and migrants, often master weavers from India brought to the island to make fine gold-woven cloths for ceremonial use and

for the royals. Over the years, the local handloom tradition has also been influenced by waves of foreign immigrants – the island's Moor community, descendants from Arab traders from the Middle East where there is a rich textile culture, and other settlers. They enriched the textile traditions of Sri Lanka.

Unravelling the long yarn strands, we weave

Pressing threads taut on the Poru, we weave

Finishing on the spokes with skilful hands,

The fabrics of Thun-pas Rata, we weave

Birds Kobo and Salalihiniya birds weaving

Sun, Moon and surrounding Stars weaving

Swan pairs and golden peacocks weaving

From a kathurumala [traditional motif] I am a textile, weaving

Pretty parrots on a border weaving

Selalihini birds on a hem weaving

Flower petals in the centre weaving

A cloth to please the eyes of the king weaving.

Handloom textile weaving is largely a home or community-based industry. Chandana's grandmother, Tikirathi, was an expert at the handloom, weaving colourful fabrics and Dumbara mats. A few days before she died 14 years ago, Tikirathi taught Chandana a few *kavi* (verses), also part of their heritage, to be passed down through generations and sung as the family of weavers worked the looms at home. The translations below show how they sum up beautifully the spirit of the Thalagune weavers:

Traditionally, Sri Lanka's indigenous weavers have maintained a different aesthetic from their coastal counterparts. Their patterns and colours tend to be more restrained than the brightly contrasting primary combinations of the east coast

handloom textiles. Yarn was home spun from cotton cultivated in chenas, while natural dyes were used from seeds, flowers, bark and roots.

Nature inspired the forms and patterns. Many of the motifs on the traditional handloom textiles are inspired by the environment, as illustrated by Tikirathi's second *kavi*. Stylised motifs of the mythical serpent-like *kobo* and the *salalihiniya* bird were immortalised at the loom. So were the sun, moon, stars, peacocks and elephants. Geometrical patterns are also common in Thalagune textiles. For example, *katuru mala*, crossed petals like a pair of scissors; *bota pata*, two triangles apex to apex; and *mal petta*, geometrical flower petals.

The last verse of Thikirathi's poem contains a fragment of history, for Thalagune's fabrics captured the attention of King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe (1780-1832), the last king of Kandy who paid them a visit. There he spotted a young woman named Tikirathi, weaving exquisite fabric at a pit loom. He was so impressed that he invited her to participate in an exhibition of handloom textiles in Kandy city and to weave textiles for his own attire. The villagers still talk about the clothes they wove for him.

Today, The Industry Is Experiencing A Revival. Liya Abhiman Handloom Textile Training Centre In Gampaha Are Pulling It Out Of The Doldrums And Injecting It With New Life

Such state patronage was a key factor to keeping the industry alive in many parts of the island. Areas like Maduradamunai and Kattankudy in the east, for example, are home to communities of Moor weavers, said to have been settled there by King Senerath (1604-1635), to weave and dye rich fabrics for him. It is also said that sections of the Salagama caste were Saligrama Brahmins of India, brought to Sri Lanka as weavers for Sinhala kings during the time of King Parakrama Bahu III.

Centuries of colonisation, a 30-year civil war, and the rising cost of raw materials crippled the industry. The war, and the tsunami in 2004, affected in particular the thriving handloom communities along the eastern and southern coastal belts. It is said there were 50,000 looms in operation in Batticaloa district before the war. The number reduced drastically during the war, while the tsunami destroyed numerous workshops.

Today, the industry is experiencing a revival. Organisations such as the Liya Abhiman Handloom Textile Training Centre in Gampaha are pulling it out of the doldrums and injecting it with new life with modern technology and quality materials, while providing employment to many, especially women. Individual artists and designers are inspiring the industry with new ideas. The fabrics are being put to new uses, such as to make fabric book covers and stuffed toys, for an enthusiastic but competitive international market.

As the island's textile industry speeds up in the 21st Century, weaving technology like power looms and mechanised looms are being introduced to improve processes. The impassioned handloom weavers welcome new materials but scoff at mechanised looms. They cannot match the quality of handlooms, they say. The handloom weavers are proud of what their handwork produces.

Weaving at a loom by hand is more than a mere production line. "Long ago," Chandana says, "Thalagune's weavers were masters of dance and drumming."

When they weren't weaving, they were dancing for the kings and for peraheras. Fuelled by their lush surroundings and immersed in the arts, they were very creative. Thus they immortalised their work in verse. The weavers behind the handlooms are part of the rich creative fabric of Sri Lanka.



