



The Kasargod Saree

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Summary: *Kasargod Saree, a unique weave of Kerala, seems to be on its last leg with a shortage of weavers plaguing this small-scale industry though demand is at an all-time high from Kerala and abroad.*

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Introduction

“Nowhere else can you see sarees that can match the quality and lustre of the Kasargod Saree.”

Master Weaver Chandrashekharan, who is tasked with the responsibility of teaching the intricacies of weaving the famed Kasargod Saree to the recruits at the Society, is proud of not just the quality of their product but also its rich legacy while being a little apprehensive of its future. He has been engaged in the weaving of the Kasargod Saree for more than four decades and has been associated with the Kasargod Weavers Co-Operative Production and Sale Society for the majority of it. The Kasargod Saree and the Society associated with it are incredible stories of the perseverance and preservation of traditional knowledge and heritage. Stretching back to at least the eighteenth century, when the members of the Padmashaliya and Shaliya communities (also referred to as Chaliya), whose primary occupation was weaving, migrated to the Kasargod region from Mysore and surrounding parts of Karnataka, the history of the community and Kasargod Saree has been almost synonymous till the turn of the century.



Figure 1. Chandrashekharan, the Master Weaver at the Society who is entrusted with the task of teaching the new recruits to weave the Kasargod Saree. Image:

Kasargod, which is the northernmost region of Kerala, has long boasted the tag of being

a melting pot of different cultures and languages (this is perhaps encapsulated by the epithet ‘*sapthabhasha sangama bhoomi*’, meaning the land where seven languages meet). And the Kasargod Saree is perhaps the perfect embodiment of the rich and unique heritage of the district and the influence different cultures, communities, and people have had on it over the years. With its specific geographical location at the crossroads of various cultures, Kasargod has seen people from different cultural backgrounds, religions, and communities settle there and call it home. The case of the Shaliya community is no different. The unique weaving techniques incorporated by the community were different from the techniques used by weavers in the rest of Kerala, and this led to the emergence of the famed Kasargod Saree.

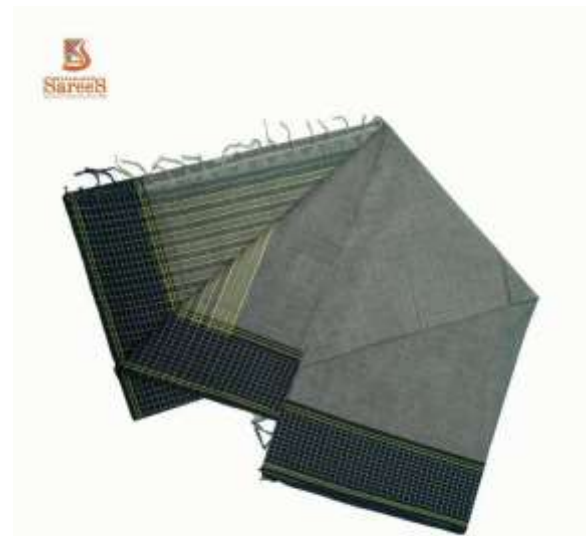


Figure 2. Kasargod Saree. Image: kasaragodsarees.org, March 2024

The Kasargod Saree is quite distinct from its counterparts produced in the other regions of Kerala. The difference in lustre, quality, colour combinations, and fastness that sets it apart are attributed not just to the difference in manufacturing technique, which is more laborious and time-consuming than the others, but also to the quality of raw products used in manufacturing. While the Kasargod Saree’s emergence is rooted in the history of the

Shaliya community, its present-day existence is built on the pillar of the Kasargod Weavers Co-Operative Production and Sale Society, the largest and perhaps, the only manufacturer of this product. The Society has given life to a historically and culturally significant product that would have otherwise waned into the abyss of time. The Society had not just ensured that this product survived but that it thrived, with it being awarded the Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2010 in recognition of its importance and unique place in the Indian handloom sector. This had been despite the many challenges it had faced, which had even resulted in the Society ceasing all activities, including manufacturing, for a long period of time.



Figure 3. Anitha is the current secretary of the Kasargod Weavers Co-Operative Production and Sale Society and looks after its day-to-day operations. Image:

While recent times have seen the Kasargod Saree being recognised for the quality of the product, the story of those who were behind it has been largely ignored. The unique history of the Kasargod Saree and its' weavers deserves to be studied in detail, as it is perhaps not only the best example of how traditional knowledge and practices can be kept relevant but also of the intermixing of cultures and the valuable knowledge and cultural exchanges it can lead to.

The Process of the Making of the Kasargod Saree

"It is a collective effort. Each and every Kasargod Saree is the result of the labour of ten or fifteen weavers." - Chandrashekharan, Master Weaver

As noted, the manufacturing process is indeed what shapes the Kasargod Saree's uniqueness. Not only does it require skilled craftsmanship, but is also an extensive and labour-intensive process. The three-step process can sometimes take months to craft a single saree. The steps are winding, warping, and beaming.

When one walks into the manufacturing area of the Kasargod Weavers' Co-operative Production and Sale Society in Vidyanagar, the first thing that catches the eye is a group of old ladies operating the charka on the veranda. One of the ladies, Chithravathi, has been working at the society for the past twenty-five years and has mostly been engaged in the winding process for the majority of that time. She mentions patience and concentration as the attributes necessary to successfully do this job for hours at a time. The process of winding is known as '*nalli chuttal*' in Malayalam, basically referring to the action of wrapping the threads around the bobbin. This initial process is quite similar to the techniques used in other saree-making processes.



Figure 4. Chithravathi engaged in the process of winding using the charka. Image:

The second process is known as warping. The materials that have been winded are transferred onto a large rectangular wooden structure known as the '*paav maram*'. This process is quite difficult to do and requires expertise. Warping is also time-consuming and entails periods of resting in between. One warp can provide the material required for thirty-three sarees, states Chandrashekharan, Master Weaver.



Figure 5. The tool on which the process of warping, the second process in the three-step making of the Kasargod Saree, takes place, known in Malayalam as the '*paav maram*.' Image:

Chandrashekharan notes that it is in the third state of beaming that one finds the techniques that differentiate the Kasargod Saree from others and provide it with the signature 'zero finishing' effect, that is, lustre. This process consists of twisting the warp after loading it onto the loom, which requires at least five people. Only the experienced operate the looms, especially as the process of 'sizing the warp', that is, applying the adhesive agent to the material, is done while it is on the loom itself, unlike in the making of other sarees. The looms are operated throughout the day, with few breaks in between, with some of the older weavers ensuring that the air is filled with the sounds emanating from their radios.



Figure 6. A worker engaged in the process of 'sizing the warp', that is, applying the adhesive agent while the still loom. Image:

The weavers here are proud of their craft and have a sense that they are keeping alive a long and illustrious legacy. Ramachandran is one of the longest-tenured members of the society, having worked there for more than 35 years. He has been associated with the weaving industry since his childhood, when he used to watch his father work at the looms. As he talks about the superiority of the Kasargod Saree, the quality of the yarns used for its making, its exquisite design, quality, colour pattern, and borders, one gets the sense that even after all these years, the awe and fascination of a young boy watching his father at work is still present within him.



Figure 7. Yarn being stored before processing into various products. Image:

The Shaliya Community

“Ever since I was a child, I have been doing this. It has become second nature to me.” - Ramachandran, Weaver

As mentioned earlier, the history of the Shaliya community is intrinsically linked with that of the Kasargod Saree. How the community came to Kerala is explained by two stories, with both linking their arrival to the demand for their weaving skills and royal patronage. While one story notes that it was the Samoothiri who brought them to Kerala from Tamilnadu to make clothes for the royal family, another version, repeated by Ramachandran, narrates that they were brought to Kasargod by the local ruler from their homes in Mysore and surrounding areas of Karnataka. There are fourteen settlements of the community, from Panambur in Mangaluru to Pattuvam in Kannur.



Figure 8. Ramachandran, belonging to the Shaliya community, has been a member of the society for more than 35 years and has been engaged in weaving since his childhood. Image:

Weaving was their caste occupation, with each individual home being the basic unit of production. The members of the society belonging to the Shaliya caste reminisce that families used to be very large and that the whole family engaged in the process of weaving. Chandrashekharan's vague comment that it seems as though their lives began and ended at the loom perhaps encapsulates the notion of caste occupation

with no scope for pursuing any other avenue of life. The community, and their product, the saree made with warp being sized on the loom, were famous all over the region and were in much demand. The unique manufacturing technique, which supposedly could not be emulated by others ensured that the monopoly in the production of the Kasargod Saree remained with the Shaliya community.

As times changed and families became smaller, they were no longer feasible as the units of production of the Kasargod Saree. Hence, certain families that were comparatively better off were the only ones who could afford to continue making the Kasargod Saree. They hired other members of the community as labourers. These labourers were often paid a pittance for their hard work. This period also saw a decline in demand for the saree.

In the modern day, there are very few members of the Shaliya community who are engaged in weaving. As access to education and the possibility of social mobility came along with modernity, very few chose to continue in the weaving industry.

The Kasargod Weavers' Co-operative Production and Sale Society

“Yes, there is no doubt that the Society is the only thing that is keeping the tradition of the Kasargod Saree alive. But more than that, we have been able to provide many people with jobs throughout the years.” Lokanathan, ex-secretary of the Kasargod Weavers' Co-operative Production and Sale Society

Known simply as the Society among the people of Vidyannagar, the Kasargod Weavers' Co-operative Production and Sale Society's importance is seen in the words of its' ex-secretary Lokanathan. It was founded in 1938, mostly by those who had been working as labourers in the homes of those who could afford to run production units. They formed the co-operative society as an alternative and became,

simultaneously, members and owners of the society. Hence, they get a share of the profits, the result of their hard work, rather than the pittance they were being paid as a salary.

This Society, which began out of a single small room in a building in the Old Town area of Kasargod, has seen many rises and falls in its fortunes over the years. Initially, there was no specific area for production. The purchase of land at Vidyanagar and the establishment of the production unit came much later, when the society started doing financially well after several years. The constant demand ensured that the Society was financially stable, even though many members of the Shaliya community moved away from the weaving industry. They incorporated people from other communities, especially from the surrounding areas of Vidyanagar. They were trained for long periods before starting work on the Kasargod Saree. They were first taught the intricacies of the trade by learning to make dhotis, churidars, towels, etc., which would also become major products of the Society. Nowadays, the Society also makes school uniforms.



Figure 9. A worker using the loom to make a *tuvarth* (bath towel). Image:

The economic liberalisation policies greatly hurt the Society and started its gradual decline. Around 1990, the Society, which had around five hundred active members, saw its membership and activities gradually dwindle. From 1995 on, it went into a period of rapid decline, which eventually resulted

in the Society ceasing all operations in 2001. It was the concerted efforts of a few members of the Society that resulted in its restarting in 2003, despite the huge financial burdens it had acquired. The jump in demand for the saree ensured that the fortunes of the Society improved, and within a few years, it had more than a hundred people working there. At present, the Society is still reeling from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown. While the demand for the saree has reached pre-pandemic levels, many of the older, skilled workers stopped coming to the factory even after the lockdown restrictions were lifted. The lack of availability of skilled workers and the long time required for beginners to become proficient in the techniques of manufacturing have led to barely 25 people being actively employed at the Society.

What does the Future Hold for the Kasargod Saree and the Society?

“The lack of availability of labour is the major issue we face today. Unless we can find a solution to it, the future of the Kasargod Saree and Society does not look too bright.” - Anitha, Secretary of the Kasargod Weavers’ Co-operative Production and Sale Society

While the younger members of the Shaliya community have seized the opportunity to break the shackles of hereditary occupation under the caste system and have achieved social mobility using their access to modern education and other means, the fascination of the rich and globalised with tradition (a sizeable chunk of the customers of the Kasargod Saree are Malayalis living in other countries) has ensured that the demand for it is consistent. Again, while this demand led to the knowledge of the production of the Kasargod Saree being shared with members of other communities, the low wages, hard labour, and long training periods made weaving an unattractive career prospect for many.

Even at a time when demand was low, the Society was successful in marketing its product and driving its demand back up. However, the shortage of labourers might be the Achilles heel of the famed Kasargod Saree. This lack of availability of workers is what worries those associated with the Society who even fear that they may have to go through another period of closure but that this time it might be permanent.



Figure 10. Many of the looms lie without being used due to the shortage of workers. Image:

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