



Aesthetics and ethics: Upgrading textile production in northern Kerala[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that producers in developing economies aiming to get a better deal may choose upgrading strategies that are highly influenced at the local level by relative positions of power in horizontal networks, and not only approaches aiming to increase value capture along vertical global production chains. Using the case study of a declining handloom industry in northern Kerala, the paper examines why local marketing strategies do not do more to capitalise on the brand value of Kerala's achievements in social development and attempt to engage with ethical consumption initiatives in end markets. Rather, while cooperatives seek to gain more of the labour value of the goods they produce, local merchants focus upon aesthetic qualities and claims to regional authenticity through accreditation with Geographical Indication.

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1. Introduction

Throughout the district of Kannur (formerly Cannanore) in northern Kerala, small weaving units produce thick cotton furnishing fabrics, hand-woven in bright checks and stripes on wide, wooden Malabar frame-loom. While some eke out a living supplying local markets, a few subcontract orders from local merchant-exporters, producing cloth to designs largely supplied by home furnishing retailers in developed economies. These global production chains have been stretched via the introduction of agents and middlemen, and are increasingly experienced as 'buyer-driven' (Gereffi, 1999, p. 54), prompting local merchants to work hard to develop upgrading strategies and strengthen the global branding of textiles from Kannur.

Larger merchant-manufacturers struggle to maintain handloom¹ as an economically-viable fabric within a range of textile products; having mostly closed down their own local handloom factories, they have largely transferred the risks of direct manufacturing through outsourcing, subcontracting orders to village hand-weaving cooperatives (co-ops), local independent weavers working on piece-rate, and small powerloom units. Many larger merchants are also exporting high volumes of cheaper power-loomed fabrics and 'made-ups' (stitched household items) from Kannur, although much

is sourced from automated factories that they may own or subcontract to across the border in Tamil Nadu, which operate 24 h a day on much lower wages.

The merchants' efforts to upgrade across their product range include promoting the aesthetics of 'Cannanore handloom' as a low-volume, high-quality artisanal fabric, supported by the recent success of obtaining Geographical Indication status. This strategic focus on aesthetics and authenticity to add brand value is preferred over drawing attention to the achievements of the left-wing political movement for Kerala social development that might feed into wider consumer discourses of fair trade and social accountability. For whilst official employment conditions are better than in other Indian states, explicitly building ideas about ethical consumption and social development into the merchants' upgrading strategies risks transferring more power to organised labour and may lead to higher production costs, a greater distribution of profits and reduced competitiveness.

A curious incident during fieldwork highlights how embedded social values and qualities within a product are constructed, negotiated and presented to others within the broader commodity network. Here the local politics of visibility leads to confusion surrounding the construction of the 'aesthetics of ethics'. Traditional weaving sheds have floors of beaten earth, local timber or sometimes the once ubiquitous unglazed terracotta tiles, which soak up moisture and prevent slipping; they are dusty, noisy, and festooned with lint, threads, cobwebs and precarious lighting. But one co-op was working with a large private company that was particularly concerned to be seen to abide by international standards of social accountability (e.g. SA8000) such as providing a clean workplace, access to drinking water and separate changing facilities for women,

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¹ Hand-loomed fabric is commonly referred to as 'handloom' in India, and this usage is adopted here.

as well as improving the hand-woven products it traded in. The company had helped the co-op apply for state subsidies to buy new looms and to tile one half of the old shed floor with new white vitreous tiles to accommodate them.

That end of the shed did indeed look cleaner and the floor dazzled in the sun. However, many of the weavers preferred to work on the beaten earth floor; it absorbs the natural vibration of the heavy looms, and the expensive brass ends of shuttles that fly off the loom tend to break on the hard tiles. But a group of foreign buyers visiting the site had been told in advance that not only were earthen floors traditional, they were ritually pure, a reference to the wider Indian practice of smearing cow dung on floors in rural homes to purify them. Local merchant-exporters promote handloom as a traditional product, while helping to transform weaving sheds into clean and modern environments. In contrast, these foreign buyers also valued the aesthetic elements of the supposedly traditional units, resonating with weavers' own preferences. And while visitors might perceive cooperatives to be equitable production units that adhere to socially-accountable labour standards, in fact the application of changing aesthetic standards to both product and workplace serves to render invisible the essentially exploitative relationship between the merchants and local weavers.

This research contributes to a significantly under-researched aspect of global production networks, namely how vertical paths interconnect with horizontal social and economic relations at the local level. Specifically it examines how local power relations constrain the choice of upgrading strategies available to independent weavers, small producers and workers' cooperatives, leaving them struggling to negotiate for the smallest margins while merchant-exporters nurture international contacts, appropriate state resources and keep wages low. It draws on a year's ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Kannur between summer 2007 and 2008, investigating efforts to revitalize the declining handloom industry following the end of the Multifibre Agreement in 2005. Formal interviews and informal discussions were conducted in English with a wide range of State officials and local government agencies, merchant-exporters, cooperative managers and trade unions officials; these complemented on-going conversations with weavers in Malayalam facilitated by trained research assistants.

1.1. Global value chains and upgrading strategies

Value chain analysis provides a tool for understanding the distribution of gains along a global commodity chain, and explaining its production capabilities and structure of governance (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994; Schmitz, 2006). As Schmitz admits, development economists know that the amount of trade affects development, but less is known about how it is affected by its organization. Gereffi's original work on the garment industry stressed the role of global buyers in organizing trade (Gereffi, 1999), which allows them direct control over product definition and reducing supplier failure while reducing their own capital investment. Significant interest has since focused upon 'upgrading' strategies pursued by suppliers to redistribute the gains in their favour. As Kaplinsky asserts, income growth depends upon identifying and capturing areas of value accretion that are protected from competition; these protected spheres are characterized by economic rents and unequal access to scarce resources (Kaplinsky, 1998). Strategies of upgrading have been characterized as either following the 'low road', with its potential for 'immiserising growth' in its race-to-the bottom approach, or the 'high road', where upgrading is a relative concept associated with competitive innovation (Kaplinsky and Morris, 2001).

High road strategies include product, process, functional and inter-sectoral upgrading (Schmitz, 2006). However, Ponte and Ewert

challenge the assumption that producers will eventually perform more functions and acquire more skills higher up the chain, following knowledge transmission from buyer to supplier, and claim that taking the 'high road' is not necessarily always the best route (2009). They characterize the literature on upgrading through two strands, that which focuses upon identifying capabilities to access new markets and increase competence (whether knowledge transmission occurs across horizontal clusters or vertically along the chain), and that which considers development more widely, i.e. which conditions lead to a 'better deal' overall for suppliers. The latter involves balancing rewards with risks, and not necessarily going up the value-assessed ladder of upgraded products, processes and functions. Instead suppliers may focus on more efficient management systems, faster lead-times, higher standards and new markets, and may develop a portfolio of products that covers a range of values, where a high quality item creates brand value and market entry for larger volumes of cheaper goods. Alternative strategies include achieving fair trade certification or an indication of geographical origin, neither of which change the intrinsic qualities of a product (Ponte and Ewert, 2009, p. 1639). Since it is becoming harder to compete on price, 'capitalists increasingly seek to trade on values of authenticity, locality, history, culture, collective memories and tradition' (Harvey, 1990, p. 109); 'what is changed is not the means of production but how meaning is produced, or how the relationship between persons and things is constructed and managed' (Foster, 2008, p. 10).

Since the liberalisation of the Indian economy began in the 1990s and the end of the Multifibre Agreement in 2005, Indian textile producers are having to increase competitiveness (DFID, 2006a, 2006b). The industry in northern Kerala includes amongst its strategies: product and process upgrading and downgrading, operating in several chains at once at different levels and 'leveraging competences between them' (Schmitz, 2006, p. 557), acquiring Geographical Indication for premium products, and balancing a mixture of high and low road strategies including taking advantage of poorer working conditions across state borders. The notable exception to capitalising on local value(s) is the failure to mention achievements in labour and social development, what Kerala is perhaps most famous for.

Understanding the complexity of production networks rather than chains allows for the consideration of 'multi-stranded connections between a variety of significant and related actors' (Hughes, 2000, p. 177). Research into networks' cultural environments connects to the literature on clusters and their potential success in responding to global challenges through agglomeration and collaboration (Kennedy, 1999). Kennedy's research on tanneries in Tamil Nadu shows how, when threatened with closure by the Indian Supreme Court for environmental pollution, local firms combined to operate common effluent treatment plants. Cluster cooperation was boosted through shared social, religious and kinship ties, though there were inevitable problems with monitoring and compliance. However, work by Schmitz (1999, 2006) on the hard-pressed Brazilian footwear industry points to a failure of clustering in attempts to upgrade production. A handful of the largest producers put their relationships with lead firms ahead of SME cluster partners; they conclude disintegration was exacerbated by the failure of the State to mediate between (vertical) business alliances and (horizontal) entrepreneurial associations (for example Schmitz, 1999). In Kannur, State efforts to cluster co-operatives have failed to deal with their subordination to merchant-exporters who dominate the export trade and indirectly appropriate State subsidies.

1.2. Geographical Indication and value differentiation

As value is created through a network of producers and consumers, different segments may contain their own internal logic for maximising value; the 'follow the thing' literature demonstrates this by using multi-sited fieldwork to make visible the often

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