

Our Ancestors who Exported Textiles

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A person exploring the history of Sri Lanka would discover that Sri Lankans have inherited a multifarious wealth of technology from their ancestors. Our historical chronicals begin with the story of prince Vijaya's arrival in the island in the 6th century B.C.. One of our earliest chronicles, the Mahavamsa records that Kuvenni when she met prince Vijaya was spinning cotton yarn. If so, the making of textiles using cotton thread would have already been in existence in this country at a very distant date. The Mahavamsa records that at the time of the death of King Dutugemunu, King Saddhatissa, brother of Dutugamunu, had the upper portion of the partly built Ruvanweli Dagoba covered with white cloth to make it appear complete. This is clear evidence of the fact that the textile industry existed in our country prior to the year 137 B.C.. Fa-Hien the Chinese monk who visited Sri Lanka in the 5th century, had noted that either side of the rout of the procession of the Tooth Relic was decorated with drawings. It could be assumed that these drawings had been done on cloth.

The book called "Theertha Kalpa" makes mention of a merchant who took textiles from Sri Lanka to the port of "Bharu Kachcha". The chronicle Rajatharanganie which belongs to the mid 12th century

mentions that during the reign of King Meerakula, cloth was taken to that country from Lanka. Bhuvanekabahu the 1st in a letter he sent to the Sultan of Egypt had mentioned that in addition to merchandise such as pearls and gems he could also supply muslin cloth and cinnamon too. In the book called Paththippalai there is reference to a merchant who took textiles to the Kaveri Peninsula from Sri Lanka in the 1st and 2nd centuries.

Other than in such ancient times, in the Mahanuvara and Kurunegala periods too the various flags belonging to the two periods bear evidence to the textile technology which prevailed at that time. Ummagga Jathakaya, a prose composition in Sinhala, contains an interesting episode in which a woman is engaged in cultivating a cotton field.

Textile Weavers

It is mentioned that there were two categories of textile weavers living in Sri Lanka. The first included the 'Salagama's and the drummers who arrived from India. The drummers were the local cloth weavers. Those in the second category, played the drums and also engaged in astrology. During their spare time after playing the drum and astrological forecasting, they engaged in textile weaving.

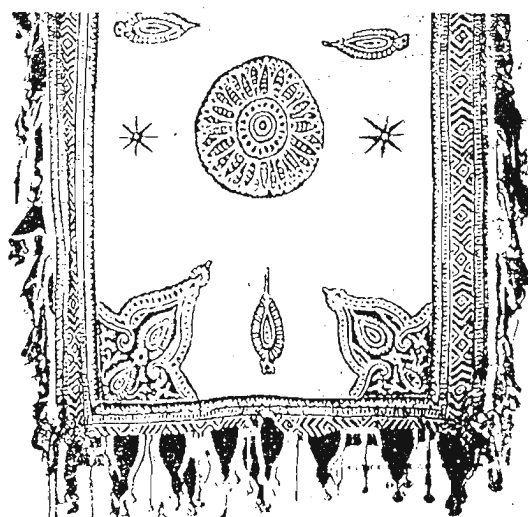
The history of the Salagama's is as follows. King Vijayabahu the 3rd of Dambadeniya, who was highly appreciative of the art of textile weaving, sent gifts, tributes and letters through a Moslem named Pathiveera Lebbe and got down persons skilled in textile weaving. On the orders of the King, Pathiveera Lebbe brought eight instructors in textile weaving to this country. The king not only bestowed land and titles on them but even provided them with wives and made them settle down in this country. Later on, their successors earned the wrath of the Kandyan kings and moved to the east coast. Later they learnt to cultivate cinnamon and to crush cinnamon as required by the king. Thereafter they became the cinnamon crushers of this country. Later they were engaged for the same activity by the Dutch and the Portuguese.

Drummers who became the local cloth weavers had woven cotton cloth using plain yarn in the villages. Later, the entire hill country became renowned for the processing of cotton yarn and textile weaving. However the weaving of cotton cloth is done now only in the hamlet called Thalagune in Uda Dumbara. In recent times cotton cloth had been woven in a village close to Balangoda too. The eastern garments woven at that time were not made up by cutting and stitching cloth but were woven on the batten as a complete item of cloth.

Accordingly, the cloth that were woven were of diverse sizes and shapes and were of different categories. There were napkins and towels (kerchifs) garments for men (thuppotti), garments for women (paada haela), men's bathing cloth (diya kachchiya), handkerchiefs and shawls (kerchief scarves), belts, mats, bed spreads (ethirily), rugs (paramadana), covers for pingo pots (gahoni), robe jackets, hats, pillow cases and betel bags. Plain cloth were measured in according to the measurement called

'waduriyan' length wise while the width was measured by spans.

Although the 'thupottiya' has now become a rare antiquity, it was one of the most important item among the garments that were widely used during the Kandyan period. This is a two piece garment which is firmly joined together at the centre and has a length of about eight or nine 'riyana's (4-4 1/2 yards). The 'than' cloth was known as the "paadaya". Its length was 4-6 spans. The breadth was determined according to the caste of the wearer. Persons of low castes were permitted to wear only narrow clothes. In place of the 'ohory' or the cloth and 'choli' worn by females of the high castes, the low caste women wore two short pieces of cloth-one around the waist and one around the shoulder.



Specimen of "Viyana" or a canopy used overhead along the route whenever the reliquary was taken in procession together with the sangha for ceremonial occasions.

Bathing cloth

This has a broad cover piece hanging in front and a narrow band of cloth at the back. This was useful for tying round the waist.

There was no decorative work on it. The villagers called this a span cloth. This was also a under garment of the Kandyan male at that time and it was also his bathing cloth. It was useful in running too. The “diya kachchiya” had been worn by persons in all walks of life in ancient times. It had a length of 5 - 6 feet. The front cover was around 1 ½ to 2 feet long. The ‘Gahoniya’ which was bell shaped was the cloth that was used to cover the vesseis containing food or other items being carried to the temple or to the king. A wall painting at the Degaldoruwa temple shows a pair of ‘gahoni’s and a pingo stem.

Somana

There were ‘somana’s of different types. ‘Somana’s worn by kings were called ‘Raja Somana’s. Likewise, Mudaliyars, Vidane’s, Arachchis and farmers had ‘Mudali’ “Arachchi” ‘Vidane’ and “Govi” somanas respectively. It is therefore evident that the somana worn by persons in different positions in society at that time varied according to their status in life. The patterns used in the ‘somana’s also varied according to their status in life. The somanas’ worn for different occasion also varied. However the somana was not worn at religious ceremonies. The largest ‘somana’ on display at present is 26 feet 4 inches long and around 4 feet wide. A special feature of this garment is that the colours of the somana never fade.

Among the patterns and designs used for somanas were flowers, fruits and leaves in addition to animals such as swans, eagles, parrots etc. Blue, yellow and scarlet were the colours frequently used. Another special feature was that all these patterns were separated by lines. Designs known as ‘panawa’ (comb), ‘lanuwa’ (rope), ‘ditta’, ‘rosamal’ (rose), ‘gal binduwa’ and ‘haras pethi mala’ were used to decorate the ‘Somana’.

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Plain cloth

Such cloth were often nearly 28-30 ‘riyana’s long. These were the cloth used as curtains at funeral ceremonies. Plain cloth has been used in making beetle bags. All this cloth were of plain white colour. Other than green, red, white and blue were the only three colours found on decorative textiles. The item of textile that is woven mostly at present at Thalagune are sheets. The larger spreads were 4 ½ x 2 ‘riyana’s (11x5 feet) in size. Smaller sheets of 6 x 3 ½ feet or smaller than that were also in use. A sheet was also known as “Erattuwa”

‘Aluva’

The loom was known as the ‘Aluva’. The weaving machines and weaving techniques found in our country are similar to those found in India and in Burma. The ‘aluva’ or the loom was fitted in an open shed. This shed was known as the ‘alge’ meaning ‘the loom house’. It was built adjacent to the outer veranda of the weaver’s house. The material and the equipment required for weaving were thus stored in a room.

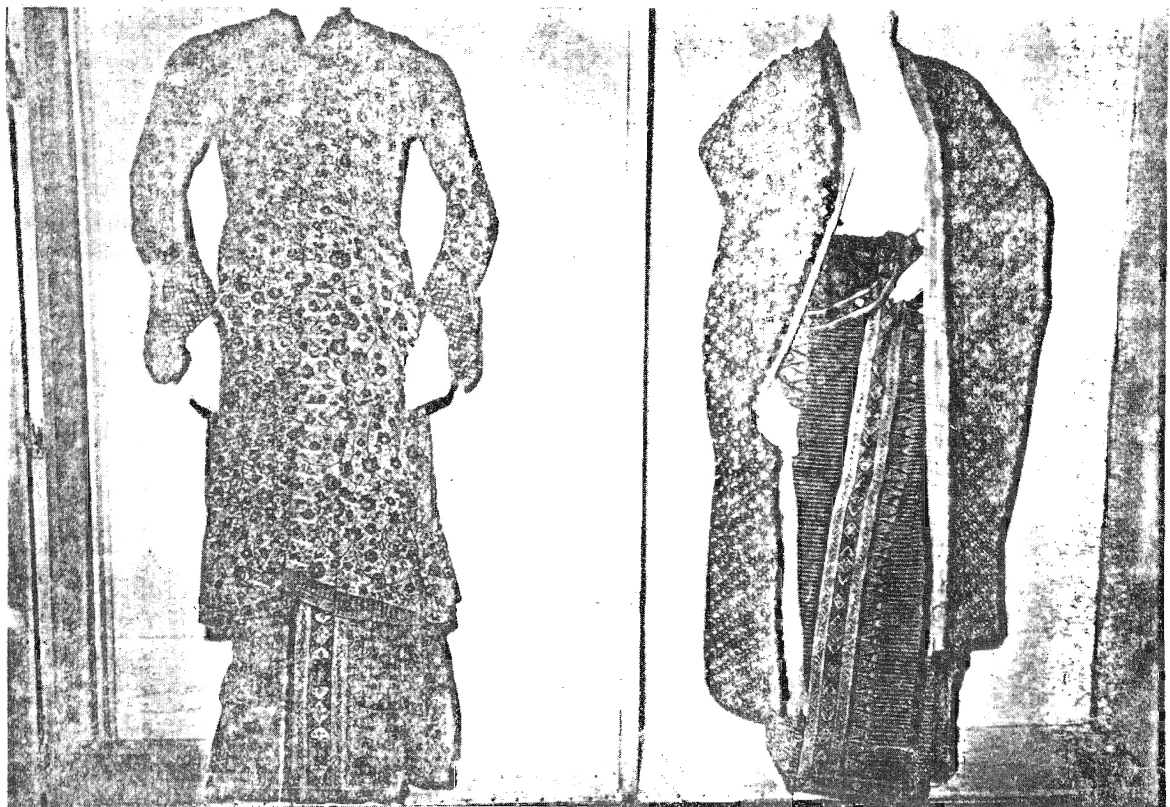
When alternate threads are being selected from the warp by the shuttle ropes in weaving plain cloth, the shuttle moves to either side. The loom was operated by treadling.

Designs

Designs are actually symmetrical geometric creations. These designs were known as “Pannan Koora” “Heen ratawa” “Mahagal ratawa” “Gal piyuma” “Domba mala” “Bopatha” “Ata pota lanuwa”. The names of some of the designs seen in the Thalagune area are “Heenmal peththa” “Maha mal peththa” “Atapethi Mala” “Para mala” “Dethi mala” “Kathuru mala” “Paehena mal peththa” “Maha mal peththa” “Haali Dangaya” “Heen negi dangaya” “Depota Lanuwa”. “Valalu Lanuwa” “Diya vella” “Bokola” and “Iri thonduwa”.

Spinning of yarn

Cotton was grown as chena cultivations in the highland areas in ancient times. From the hill country to Anuradhapura and in all other areas cotton was a major trading material. Cotton was not spun in the chena. The cotton plucked from the chena were dried and cleaned in the home compounds. The seeds were removed by passing the cotton through bars in the cotton ginning machine. Thereafter wicks suitable for spinning were prepared by beating the cotton with a bar and winnowing and rolling



Man and Woman- This picture on exhibition at the Museum shows how an ancient man and woman were clad. On the left is a man wearing a mudliyar's overcoat of the Kandyan period, while on the right a woman is seen covering her bust with a “lansoluwa”.

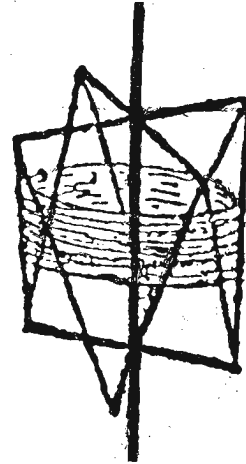
Designs were also woven manually. These are known as hand work. Hand work include designs such as birds, snakes, Bo leaves and large flowers.

Cotton was spun by women. It was customary for a large number of women to gather together and engaged in the spinning of cotton and they sang while at work. The

songs were selected from the Wessanthara, Magamaana and Vidura jathaka stories. The yarn woven lightheartedly in this way by the women are wound on a wheel made out of bamboo strippings. From these it is wound on a large wheel called "Madaawa" made out of bamboo striping and thread. The robe offered to the Buddhist priests during the "vas" ceremony which is a very special religious ceremony, is prepared and completed by spinning and weaving the cloth and preparing the robe on one and the same day. Ordinary people join the king and the ministers in performing this meritorious act.

When we examine the reasons for the decline of the textile industry which was being carried out according to a highly advanced technology at that time, the main reason appears to be the import of textiles from India. However we are fortunate that we have been able to preserve this technology which we may call our own, through the efforts of a few individuals.

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