

Negamam cotton sarees: A distinct handloom tradition

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The Negamam cotton sarees are traditional hand-woven fabrics that depict historical significance in the region. This paper discusses the historical, geographical and technical factors behind the existence of the Negamam cotton sarees. The main aspects covered in the paper include the traditional weaving practices and migration of the Devanga Chettiar community and the effect of local climate on cotton weaving. The latter played a significant role due to the high level of humidity that tends to make the yarn brittle. The technical processes used in making the Negamam cotton sarees involve using “80’s count of cotton yarn” for warp and weft and a high number of picks per inch – 86-90. The weavers also make sure to keep the saree medium in terms of weight and body. Most commonly, the saree is 7.3-8.2 m long. The extra-weft patterns using dobby or jacquard attachment are made on a pit loom. To summarize, the Negamam cotton sarees are traditional weaving items made with exceptional skill and adapted to the local climate.

Keywords: Devanga community, Handloom cotton sarees, Heritage textiles, Negamam sarees, Palakkad Gap

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India boasts of its rich variety of handlooms. The weaves found across the country differ from region to region. Each has its own style, design, variety of looms, and uses various weaving techniques. In addition, local availability of resources plays a great role in deciding the patterns and motifs of any particular handloom industry¹. Negamam Cotton saree is a special handloom product that is native to Negamam village in Coimbatore district in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. This saree is woven from pure cotton that is of the best quality and has a plain body, borders, and pallu, and a highly durable and tightly woven pattern.

This textile is woven using 80s count cotton yarn on a pit loom using dobby or jacquard. Traditional Negamam cotton saree has a length of 7.3-8.2 m inclusive of the running blouse piece and has a good width with a fine-to-medium weave of 86-90 PPI. The craft of Negamam cotton saree weaving has been thriving in the region due to the continuous production of these unique and high-quality sarees.

The existing documentation of the Negamam saree is fragmented, with a geographical indication register recording its provenance and design details while

omitting technical processes, and a socio-economic survey considering the weavers’ livelihood issues without exploring construction and production specifics^{2,3}. Recent studies emphasize the importance of weaving community, which has been declining at an alarming rate⁴, and underline the need to compile and record relevant data before it disappears altogether. A study that would unify the historical, geographical and technical processes in one framework exploring the connections between them does not appear to exist, and the current research aims to fill this gap.

Historical background

The cotton sarees of Negamam were woven in the village of Negamam in Pollachi located in Coimbatore district. In the year 1871, this place was granted a permanent sanad and consequently became a center for trade and weaving of hand-woven cotton textiles. The sarees were in demand in the nearest markets, and the product acquired the status of “Negamam Cotton Saree” by its unique geographical indication, the name of the village.

This administrative and commercial history is substantiated by later regional records that identify the Devanga weavers as the predominant weaving groups and Negamam as a significant

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handloom producing region from the mid-twentieth century onwards^{5,6}.

The craft tradition is closely related to the weaving community of the Devanga Chettiars which is a Telugu and Kannada speaking group of people belonging to the former Madras Presidency. The community represents an old state tradition that has been existing for about 2000 years, since the Sangam period⁷. They have been an inseparable part of the cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu. According to existing records, Devanga Chettiars migrated to Negamam from different parts of Kongu Nadu or Kongu region also known as Erode, Coimbatore, and Tiruppur, which are present-day districts of Tamil Nadu. This territory has a centuries-old textile tradition and is known for its yarn and markets where textiles were traded.

Epigraphic and regional-history sources further trace this migration to the Vijayanagara period, recording Devanga settlement across the Kongu region's traditional weaving villages, and attribute the toponym "Negamam" to an earlier Tamil term for a traders' settlement⁸. These sources situate the community's presence in Negamam within a longer regional weaving lineage than is captured by oral tradition alone.

Traditionally skilled in weaving silk and cotton fabrics, the Devanga community acquired a good reputation for their handloom products. The demand for the products led to the expansion of weaving activity from Negamam to other villages in the Coimbatore region. In the past, the people of Kongu used to buy coarse and coloured cotton sarees. In response to the demand, weavers used to use coarser yarns such as 20s and 30s. Later, they started using finer yarns such as 40s, 60s, and 80s. Indeed, the use of finer yarns and complicated patterns required a great deal of effort. As a result, the weavers often faced eye strain, backache, and leg pain⁹.

This turn towards finer yarn counts is independently documented in contemporaneous cooperative society records that note the adoption of 40s, 60s and 80s combed cotton for Negamam saree production³. An empirical study of Negamam weavers also reports that increased costs of raw materials, long working hours and irregular income in addition to the physical workload are contributing factors, though that study was focused on socio-economic issues rather than the

production process, which provides the impetus for the current study.

Community narratives also contain a mythical account of the origin of weaving. It is believed that weaving was invented by Lord Siva, who created Devalan to dress the Devas¹⁰; the descendants of Devalan were known as Devanga. Thus, the hereditary profession of weaving held religious significance in the community.

Geographical area of production

Negamam cotton sarees are woven in the panchayat town of Periya Negamam (10.7333°N, 77.1°E) close to Pollachi in Coimbatore district. The region is located near the Palakkad Gap (Western Ghats), which is a natural pass in the mountain range that connects Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

The mountain range allows the moisture-laden southwest monsoon winds to enter the interior of western Tamil Nadu, which means that the relative air humidity is fairly high (up to 80% during the monsoon season). The increased relative humidity reduces the amount of flying (fiber dust) and yarn breakage during weaving. This is particularly important for "technological refinement" of the craft – the higher the level of moisture, the higher the tensile strength of the yarn (delicate 80s cotton count), which makes the saree fabric soft but dense¹¹.

The production was once restricted only to Negamam, but later it began in other regions, including Udumalpet and Palladam. Currently, there are about 15 weaving societies in the Pollachi region (Sulur, Kinathukadavu, Anamalai, Udumalpet taluks), and more than 4500 looms are used to make sarees.

This cluster size is comparable to the loom coverage reported in the product's Geographical Indication registration, which formally acknowledges Negamam Cotton sarees as a unique regional product². At the same time, recent field observations suggest that the weaving communities are small and ageing, with little incentive for the younger generation to take up the craft, and that detailed technical descriptions of the kind developed in this study are badly needed⁴.

Product specification

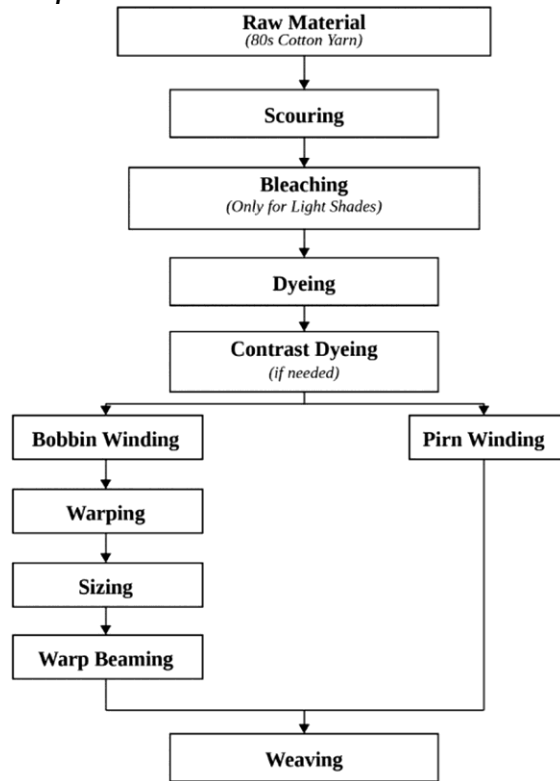
The design specifications of the Negamam cotton saree are given in (Table 1). It has a high density and thus the sarees are durable and have a good drape. Some of the specifications are given in the table below.

Table 1 — Negamam saree specifications

Product	Specification
Negamam Handloom sarees	Cotton Dyed
Korvai, Rudhraksha, Neli and Normal Komai	80s x 80s
	Plain weave
	86
	86
	86-90
	70-76
	48.5 inches
	37 metres
	7.3-8.2 metres
	~6.2 metres
	Rs. 2000 to Rs. 3500 per saree
	Design Specifications
	Temple / Komai motifs
	Normal komai
	Tower komai
	Thalambu komai
	Oosi korvai komai
	Rudraksha
	Peacock
	Annam (swan)
	Mango
	Thilagam
	Elephant
	Horse
	Simple kattam
	Coin
	Straight geometries
	Broader range including abstract shapes and layered geometry
	Animals
	Birds
	Dancing lady motifs (stylistically evolved)
	Muthu checks, Neli, Kattari, Moghu, Vangi, Button, Kammal
	Contemporary motifs introduced based on market demand
Kattari and Button	
Uruvam	
Moghu	
Oosi korvai komai	

Production method

Process flow chart



Raw materials

The main raw material in the production of the saree is the cotton yarn. The handloom co-operative societies procure the yarn mostly from the National Handloom Development Corporation (NHDC) while independent weavers purchase the required yarn from private traders or directly from the spinning mills depending on their requirements. The yarn that is used for weaving purposes is mainly of 80s count (Fig. 1).

While the yarn procured from the NHDC is sent to the dyeing units for processing before weaving, the handloom co-operative societies are required to dye the yarn in government approved dyeing units.



Fig. 1 — 80s Cotton Yarn

Scouring

The first step involves the separation of grey yarn bundles for subsequent processing. The yarn is then subjected to scouring, boiling in an alkaline solution which includes Turkey red oil (TT oil), caustic soda and soda ash. This process removes natural waxes, oils and other foreign substances from the yarn while leaving the desired fibre qualities intact. Scouring effectively eliminates hydrophobic waxes, pectins and fats which are present on the cuticle of cotton fibre thereby improving its absorbency¹².

Washing

Following the scouring operation, the yarn is thoroughly rinsed in clean water to eliminate residual chemicals. This step is essential to prevent interference with later treatments, particularly dyeing.

Squeezing

After rinsing, excess water is removed manually by squeezing the yarn bundles. This facilitates better dye uptake in the next stage of the production process.

Dyeing

Yarn dyeing can be achieved by using appropriate dyes and auxiliaries. Dyeing is actually a process of fixing colour onto grey or bleached yarn. Dyes can be classified on the basis of their chemical composition, method of application and performance characteristics.

For obtaining lighter shades, the yarn is bleached before dyeing so that the colours appear bright and yellowish. On the other hand, darker shades are obtained by dyeing the scoured yarn.

The first step of the dyeing process is to prepare the dye-bath. It is done by dissolving the required amount of vat dyes in hot water with the addition of chemical like caustic soda and sodium hydrosulphite. Preparation of dye-bath is a very important step because accurate proportion of the chemicals determines the correct shade of the dyed yarn.

An experienced dye master decides upon the dye combinations and proportions for the desired colour shades. The yarn is then dipped into the dye bath for about 30 min. The yarn is also adjusted periodically after every 5-10 min to ensure that all parts of the yarn surface are subjected to uniform dyeing.

After dyeing, the yarn is rinsed and then dried under shade for a couple of days. This shade drying is crucial, especially in case of vat dyes, to allow oxidation and hence, better colour development and colour fastness. The yarn is then bundled and sent to winding.

Sometimes, depending on the design specification, the yarn may have to undergo another round of dyeing process. This is done to introduce contrast borders in the textile. The contrast borders are usually seen in sarees, either in the blouse portion or in the pallu. These areas are then tied and bound properly so that the dye does not colour them. Only the exposed portions are dipped in the dye bath of the contrasting colour. The yarn is then rinsed and shade dried again to allow colour fastness before being sent to further processing for weaving (Fig. 2).

Pirn winding (weft preparation)

For weft insertion, the dyed yarn is wound onto small cylindrical packages known as pirns. This operation is performed using a manually operated charkha (Fig. 3). The filled pirns are inserted into the shuttle, which facilitates the passage of the weft yarn across the warp during weaving.

Warping

Warping refers to the arrangement of the yarns from various bobbins in the form of a parallel sheet of

required length and width for weaving. In this process, the yarn from different packages is drawn and wound in an orderly manner on a warp beam or other suitable package.

Drum warping is the mostly practiced warping system in the Negamam cluster (Fig. 4). The processed warp is then taken for sizing.

Sizing and gumming

In the past, gumming treatment was at times practiced to provide additional bonding and consolidation of the warp yarns; this technique is rarely practiced in the present.

Sizing is done to improve the properties of cotton warp yarns such as tensile strength, smoothness and resistance to abrasion. Since the warp yarns undergo immense stress, sizing reduces yarn breakage and improves loom efficiency. Most importantly, during sizing, it is essential to maintain the stretch or extension of the yarn in the wet state (also referred to as "near-zero or negative stretch"), because otherwise the yarn will be brittle due to loss of elongation; this increases the warp breakage in the loom¹³.



Fig. 2 — Dyeing of Negamam sarees



Fig. 3 — Pirn winding



Fig. 4 — Drum warping

Potato starch, coconut oil, maize starch and rice gruel are some of the natural materials traditionally used in sizing. The current sizing process uses a spraying system; the warp sheet is brushed to ensure uniform application of the size. This process was traditionally done by the weavers in the open air at early hours of the day.

Although sizing improves the yarn properties, the sized yarns have a tendency to stick together. The adhesion is prevented using lease rods which helps in keeping the yarns spread out and in alignment. At least four workers are required to align the yarns before weaving can commence.

Preparation of warpbeam

Beaming is the process of placing the prepared warp sheet on the weaver's beam that is attached to the loom. It is done manually in the Negamam cluster. An open space usually a street longer than the length of the warp is required for this purpose.

The first step in beaming is to fix one end of the warp sheet on an iron rod tied to a firm post and to hold the other end till it is fixed at another post after measuring the required length of the saree. The warp is then examined for any weak or broken ends and they are mended. The measurements of the saree are also marked on the warp during this process. When the whole warp is thus readied it is rolled on to a wooden beam and taken to the weaver's house for loom preparation.

Drawing-in and denting

The process of drawing-in consists of feeding individual warp threads from the weaver's beam through the heald eyes (heddles). This operation facilitates their placement one above the other to form the shed during weaving. In addition, this operation allows you to determine broken threads in a timely

manner when weaving on a loom.

After that, the warp threads are inserted into specific dents of the reed, taking into account the set weave and tissue structure; this process is called denting. Attaching the new warp to the remnants of the previous one still attached to the reed is called warp piecing. By tradition, this work is also done manually by the Negamam using a special twisting method.

Such labor-intensive and tedious jobs are usually performed by free weavers or family members who know the techniques of weaving.

Weaving

The Negamam sarees are mainly woven on pit (Fig. 5) and raised pit looms with fly shuttles. The raised pit loom is a simple structure without a highly developed wooden superstructure and a comparatively light sley. The healds of the fly shuttle pit looms are mostly home made of nylon filament.

During weaving the weft yarn wound on pirns is often treated with rice water (rice starch solution) for better handling properties and increased strength. The pirn is inserted into the shuttle which is driven manually through the shed. By moving the shuttle back and forth the inserted picks are compressed due to the forward movement of the suspended sley.

One of the features of the traditional Negamam cotton sarees is the considerable number of picks (86-90 picks per inch). A heavy and hard fabric, which has a certain stiffness, is formed due to the small space between picks.

Distinct features

- Thick, high-density cotton saree with contrast borders and extended traditional length (7.3-8.2 m).
- Fully handwoven in Coimbatore using generational skills.



Fig. 5 — Pit loom weaving

- Breathable and climate-suited for Tamil Nadu; durability improves with washing.
- Preserves traditional structure while remaining relevant today.

Conclusion

The Negamam handloom cotton sarees are woven with the traditional skills of the Devanga community in the Pollachi region of Coimbatore. The weavers' ancestral craft is enhanced by the humidity of Palakkad Gap as well as the special dense cotton structure.

As a fine and hardwearing handmade textile, the Negamam saree is considered a traditional and contemporary favorite among locals as well as the wider industry.

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Author Contributions

VRB: Conceptualization, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing. KBM: Investigation, Field data collection,

Formal analysis, Visualization (figures/tables), Writing – original draft. HR: Investigation, Field data collection, Formal analysis (assisted), Visualization (figures/tables).

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The study involved voluntary structured interviews with artisan weavers. No personally identifiable information was recorded. Informed verbal consent to participate was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI-assisted tools were used only for language editing and improving readability, while all scientific content, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions were developed and verified by the authors.

Data Availability

The images and tables supporting the results of this study are included within the article, and the original database is available from the first author or the corresponding author upon request.

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