

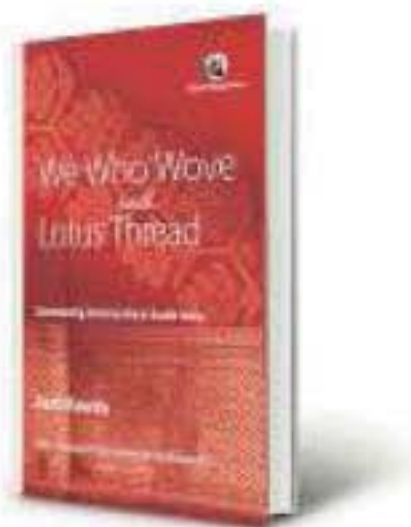
# The silk route

## Inside the world of weaving and the Kanjeevaram sari

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No ceremonial gathering in south India would be complete without the flash and flourish of Kanjeevaram saris. During the reign of Uttama Cholan and the Pallavas, the Telugu-speaking Padma Saliyars from Srisailam were brought to Kanchipuram to produce beautiful textile for the king and his family. The people of this community eventually bore the right to weave silk cloth for the royal household and temples.

However, during the freedom struggle Gandhi's insistence on hand-spinning as a symbol of resistance to British rule aimed to bring conscious political practices into people's everyday lives. Gandhi disapproved of the use of silk among upper class Tamil women, terming it ostentatious. Cut to the present handloom weaving in south India has taken a different trajectory from the one envisioned by the advocates of khadi because silk weaving itself has come to be valourised as an aspect of tradition. The book under review traces the silk route across diverse domains.



■ **We Who Wove with Lotus Thread: Summoning Community in South Asia**  
Aarti Kawlra  
Orient BlackSwan  
₹695

The author claims to see community “as a contested field of meaning-making intertwined in the economic as much as in the cultural and political.” *We Who Wove with Lotus Thread* thus upholds the claims of a group in the shared pursuit of value in everyday life. Work, labour, society and aesthetics intertwine in an act of collective engagement.

Seldom do we come across such studies which engage with the polemic of culture and identity in fields such as this, cutting across artisanship within histories of capital and labour. It proffers a sumptuous multi-faceted study of silk weaving. Using the Kan-

jeevaram sari as an entry point of research, the author traverses multiple sites of meaning associated with handloom weaving. *Kanchipuram ponal kalaati pozhaikalam* (in Kanchipuram one can survive by pressing one's feet on the loom) states a Tamil adage. In such a claim Kanchipuram is imagined and valued as a place of self-reliance and sustenance in the face of economic uncertainties.

The author traces the rise and social organisation of Padma Saliyars as the dominant weaving caste in the region. Their legendary narratives outline the birth of Bhanarishi or Bhava Narayana from the sacred fire bearing the knowledge of weaving which is then passed on to the original Padma Saliyars for use in the making of cloth. Interestingly, the author also argues that thus gaining the status of horizontally constituted supra-local groups, the Padma Saliyars as a community are able to sustain themselves through resisting brahminical orthodoxy. This erudite book inspires the reader to enter into the space of the loom and its socio-political process.