Design Resource

Veshti Weaving

The Craft of Salem Veshti Making

by
Mr. J. Antony William, Mr. Susanth CS and
Ms. Amruthalakshmi Rajagopalan
NID, Bengaluru



Source:
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Introduction

Veshti and Angavastram: Traditional Men's wear in Tamil Nadu:

A veshti is a white or off-white unstitched garment worn around the waist by men in Tamil Nadu. It is paired with the angavastram or thundu that is worn as a shoulder drape or knotted around the waist. A traditional garment, the veshti-angavastram is worn in different styles depending on region, occupation and occasion. The simplest of drapes is when the length is folded in half, wrapped around the waist and tucked in.

The everyday veshti is about four gajam (Tamil equivalent for yard) in length and 52 inches in width. The angavastram is three gajam long and 36 inches in width. For religious ceremonies in certain communities, the veshti is tied in a style called the pancha kkacham. For this drape, the length of the veshti is 4.5 to 5 gajam and the angavastram 2.5 to 3 gajam. This set is called pathu-aaru (ten-six) or ombodu-anju (nine-five) denoting the number of muzham (length in hands, equivalent to half a yard). Salem district is one of the largest manufacturers of veshtis in Tamil Nadu. Both silk and cotton veshtis are produced here. Salem silk veshtis are renowned for their whiteness and for pure zari work.



Silk Veshtis with different types of border.



Silk Veshti with thin border

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Various colors on borders symbolize different things-whether to be used for specific community or for ritual.



Yarns kept for drying.



Colored threads for making borders.

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Artisans set the warp on the streets. The process is carried out early morning to avoid the heat of sunlight.



A view of the village.

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A Veshti being weaved/woven on a loom.

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Tools and Raw Materials

Nool (cotton) veshti is woven in various counts of cotton. 20s, 40s, 60s, 80s and 100s count cotton are woven where 100s count is the finest. Cotton veshtis are used everyday and silk veshtis are worn on special occasions. The handloom cotton veshti weaving industry suffers from stiff competition from the power loom industry as the production rate is faster in power looms.

Types of Nool Veshti:

• White/ off-white cotton with gold half-fine zari border.
• White with red border on one side and green border on the other side with extra-warp zari patterning and small mokku (triangle formed by the interlocking weft technique).
• White with plain red or green borders in gundanchi or paavanchi style.

Materials used are:

Pattu / Pasathu : Silk yarn
Nool : Cotton yarn
Paav / Thani : Warp
Adai : Weft
Kanji : Rice starch
Kondhu passai : Gum arabic
Padamaram : Cloth beam
Thiravattam : Used for winding yarn
Valathadi : Used to hold the opened up hank of yarn for winding
Taar Suthurai Rattai / Reto : Bobbin winder
Naada : Shuttle for passing the weft through the shed
Taar Kuchi/ Rithakando or Kando : Plastic weft winding pin to be used inside the shuttle



Silk in the form of bundles as bought from the market.



Tool used in making warp.

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Warp is wrapped on the bamboo stick.



Small bamboo sticks used to tie threads.



Geru used to make mark on the warp.

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Tools used in making reed- measuring tool, cutting tool and finishing tool.



Thin bamboo sticks, cotton threads (thin and thick) are used to make reed.



A bamboo Reed used in weaving.

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Any kind of stain or dirt on the woven Veshti is removed with the help of a chemical. The chemical is filled in this machine and sprayed on the stain. The force of the spray and the chemical helps in removing the stain.



The yarns are dipped in water mixed with bleaching powder to make it white.



A small amount of neel/indigo is poured into water to bring brightness in the yarns.

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Making Process

Division of Work:

The process of making veshti is divided into following stages and the division of work is done as below:

1. Reed Making: Men (Lubbai community)
2. Heald Making & Denting: Men and women (Lubbai community)
3. Warping : Machine warp
4. Piecing : Women
5. Lease insertion, Measuring veshti lengths and Rolling warp: Family and neighbors
6. Weaver : Men
7. Weft reeling : Women
8. Cleaning the loom : Women
9. Folding finished veshti : 1 man and 1 woman together

Process:

Reed Making:
The Labbai or Bai communities in Ammapet are small and cater to the reed and heald making for all the hand-looms in the area. They speak Urdu and Tamil. Both men and women work on reed-heald making. About four to five families work on bamboo reed making, heald making, drafting of the healds and denting of the reed. The reed-heald setup is a vital part of the loom that controls the way the threads are lifted. Over the last ten years, number of orders has dwindled and people have changed their occupations. The younger generations are not involved in the craft. Some bamboo reed makers are now involved in sourcing and servicing reeds. To make one set, they are paid 600 rupees for angavastram and 1000 – 1500 rupees for a veshti. Making the Thattupannai (bamboo reed), Irumbupannai (iron reed).

• Reeds are made from bamboo.
• The bamboo is soaked to soften in water for two days and then thin splinters are sliced.
• The bamboo slices are further slimmed using a blade positioned in a split bamboo stand.
• The fine strips of bamboo are cut into equal sizes and their edges shaped.
• They are then knotted on two horizontal thin bamboo rods using nylon yarn.
• Once knotted, the edges are trimmed and softened so that the threads that will pass through it will not get damaged.
• Veshti ragam (density of veshti): 1 kunjam = 120 elai (yarns) = 60 eki (dents)

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Most weavers have switched from bamboo to iron reeds as they last longer. The bamboo reeds while producing a more pliable, softer fabric tends to open up near the selvedges and needs fixing often.

Heald Making:
After the reed is made, cotton yarn is twisted to make leases and dented in the slots of the reed. Once the denting is done, 8 kols (bamboo rods) are positioned for the 4 shafts and healds are tied by threading through the warp ends. Plucking each warp end and looping the heald eye around it from both the face and back makes the eyes of the healds. Once the healds are made, the setup is ready to be collected by the weaver. The weaver sends the setup and the warp roll to be pieced together.

Warping (Paavodurdhu):
The cooperative society provides yarn to the weavers. The yarn is given out for warping and starching to the machine-wrappers for a sum of rupees 500. The length of the warp is 40 gajam (yards). Piecing (acchupunaikardhu): Piecing is a process where the existing ends on the reed-heald setup is joined with the ends from the new warp by twisting. This pre-weaving process is undertaken by older women. For cotton, the piecing wages are between 80 to 100 rupees per warp for a veshti.

Adding Leases & Marking Veshti Size (Allu Pudikardhu):
Once the piecing is done, the weaver unrolls the warp out on street on stilts to insert lease rods and to mark out the length of each veshti. This is done between 6 and 9am in the morning to avoid the heat. Around four to five people are required for this process. The whole family and some neighbors assist. The leases are inserted. Markings are made at every yard using a bamboo stick and damp kumkum. After every four yards a different mark is made to denote the end of one veshti. The warp is then rolled on the metal cylinder that acts as the warp beam. The setup is then taken indoors to be fitted onto the loom.

The Loom:
The loom used for veshti weaving is a melthari (raised-pit loom). A cement seat is constructed for sitting and the local aasari (wood craftsman) makes all the parts of the loom and assembles it. It costs about 20,000/- Rs to set-up a loom including the wood and cement work. Traditionally, rajendram wood (teak) was used to make looms. Today, any kind of wood is used for the purpose. Looms do not require frequent repair but needs work once in 10 years when parts get worn out. The jacquard attachments, if used are an additional cost and the weaver has to change the set up according to changes in patterning. Several attachments like the pet potti, kolpotti and jacquard are kept in store and used according to the pattern commissioned by the cooperative or private dealer. In the past, rajendram (teak) wood was preferred for the loom parts as it was considered long lasting. Looms are made to order according to the body proportions of the weaver.

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Setting up the Loom for Weaving:
The warp beam is fixed in its position on the loom and the warp stretched out. The border pattern warp ends are hung using vertical nylon threads and connected to the patterning box on top. The patterning box, depending on the complexity of figuring/ design could be a sungu system, pet potti, kolpotti or a jacquard attachment with punched cards with the sungu being the oldest and the jacquard being the latest is patterning technology.

Winding Weft:
Weft yarn is wound on a metal cylinder from the pootu (hank) and allowed to soak for two hours. The cotton is then wound on smaller shuttle sticks (Taarkuchi) and allowed to soak for another two hours. Soaking the weft yarn ensures dense packing of weft and a smooth finish. The weft yarn is wound as the weaving progresses. This is done mostly at home at leisurely time.

Making Cloth:
The body of the veshti is woven in a plain weave and the cross border (kambi) is woven in a rib weave. A sedukat-tai is used to keep the width constant and is adjusted after every few inches of weaving. In the case of cotton, the yarn is woven wet whereas in silk, the warp, on loom is starched every few meters with kanji (rice starch) and kerosene. In both cases, the zari is soaked in water overnight and woven wet. This prevents the zari from coiling on itself or tangling. After every few inches of weaving, a solution of kondhupassai (gum Arabic) is applied to the zari to stiffen it and the white borders are smeared with cooked rice and rubbed down to make it stiff. The folded front of the veshti is rubbed down with a metal plate to blur the weft. This makes the veshti smoother in finish and gives it shine.

Folding:
After every 2 veshtis are woven (8 gajam), the padarmaram (cloth beam) is changed. The cloth beam that has been removed is left out in the sun for a while to stiffen the starch and gum Arabic that had been applied on the veshti while weaving. Once dried, the veshti is folded in a set pattern. It takes two people to do this task. It is usually the husband and wife who do this and tie the veshti with thread. The veshtis are stacked and covered with fabric, ready to be delivered to the client.

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Bundle of yarn as bought from the market.



Yarns when bought from the market are boiled in bleaching powder to make it white.



Washing of the yarns in old water with small amount of neel/ indigo in it.

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Yarns are dried underthe sun after washing.



Woman involved in piecing.



Winding of the weft yarn is done by the woman in their free time.



Artisan involved in setting the warp yarns.

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Warping is done early morning on the streets.



Tangles and breakages in the warp are removed by hand. Two ends of the broken yarn is tied together manually.



At least 4-5 people are involved in making the warp.

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Women adding leases in the warp.



Artisan adjusting the piecing bamboo.



Veshti are measured and marking is done with the help of kumkum.



Woman wrapping the thread.

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The wooden beam is tighten on the role.



The role of warp is fixed tightly.



Artisan rolling the warp yarn.



The warp is finally wrapped on the beam.

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Artisan of Lubbai community cutting thin strips of bamboo.



A locally made tool with blade fixed on it is used to scrap the layers of bamboo and convert it into thin smooth strips.



Bamboo strips and cotton thread are main raw materials used to make reed.

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Strips are arranged according to size.



A wooden tool with blade at one end is used to measure size and eventually cut strip of equal sizes.



The damaged bamboo strips are removed from the reed.

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Thin bamboo strips are fixed between two parallel bamboo stick.



The strips are tied with cotton thread.



Strips are adjusted with the help of knife.

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The edges are scraped to smoothen the surface.



Proper gaps are made between the strips.



Finally the looms are set and weaving process starts.



Finally the looms are set and weaving process starts.

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The zari border is applied with a mixture of edible gum and water to make it stiff.



Two people are required to fold the Veshti to be finally sent to market.



People sit on the floor and fold the completely woven Veshti.



The Veshti is properly pressed and folded.

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Rods are used to make crease and for folding the veshti properly.



Two rods are used simultaneously to fold the Veshti.

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Products

Venpattuveshti:
The Saurashtrian community weaves Venpattu or white silk veshtis and angavastrams in Salem. The body of the veshti is white, off-white or sandal. It has a warp-wise zari border close to the selvedge and a weft-wise border at the end of the veshti. Salem venpattu is registered under the Geographical Indications of Goods Registration and Protection Act 1999. Silk veshtis are worn for weddings and festive occasions along with the venpattuangavastram or upper cloth and a venpattuangavastram is used for the Githopadesam ritual of the sacred thread ceremony.

Noolveshti:
Nool (cotton) veshti is woven in various counts of cotton. 20s, 40s, 60s, 80s and 100s count cotton are woven where 100s count is the finest. Cotton veshtis are for everyday use and silk is worn on special occasions. The handloom cotton veshti weaving industry suffers from stiff competition from the power loom industry as the production rate is faster in power looms.


Bundles of Veshti displayed in the shop.


Various kinds of Veshtisfor normal use and for temples.

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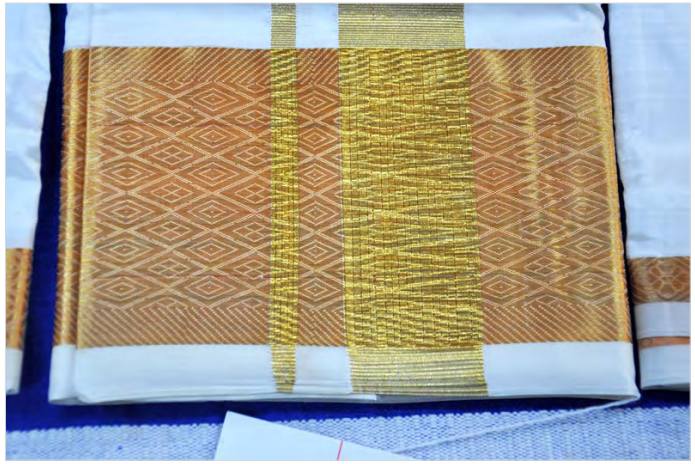
Borders of different widths are made as per the requirement.



Simple Veshtis with variation in borders.



Simple Veshtis with variation in borders.



Veshti with broad border used for marriage purposes.

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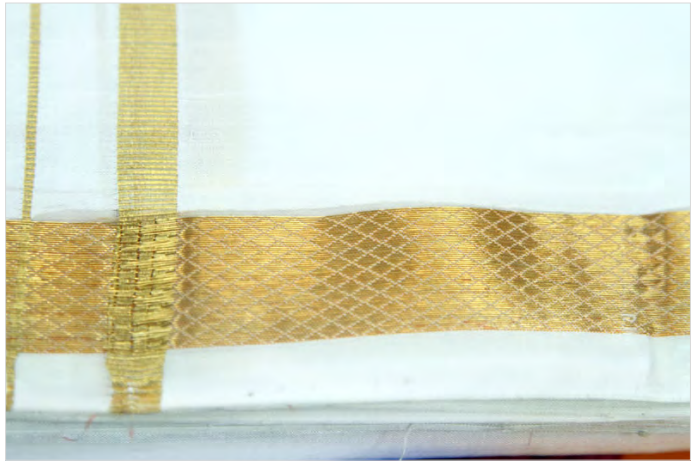
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Red border Veshtis are generally worn by priests or in the temples.



Veshti for different political parties.



Borders have a self-pattern on them.



Artisans also make cushion covers.

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Curtain woven in silk.

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