

Reinventing Livelihoods: A Case Study of Kammalar Community in Alleppey District of Kerala

Dr. Rani Maria Thomas

Associate Professor

Department of Economics, Assumption College Autonomous, Changanassery

Email: dranimariathomas@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper discusses the unique historical identity gained by the Kammalar community in South India due to their contributions to temple arts and crafts. A brief analysis of the factors responsible for their settlement in Kerala is attempted. Besides, the study investigates the push and pull factors that contributed to job mobility from the traditional crafts, especially among the younger generations of this community. The primary survey-based investigation of the Kammalar community in the Alleppey District of Kerala shows that education, competition from machine-made products, and declining preference for conventional art have contributed to this adaptation to modern markets.

Keywords: Job mobility, Kammalar community

JEL classification: J6, J15, O5

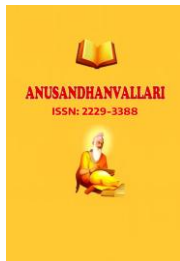
1. Introduction

The Kammalar community, known for their skills in jewellery making, artwork, and craftsmanship in metal, wood, and stone, has contributed to the economy and society of South India. Their roots can be traced to thousands of years ago, as they are linked to the Viswakarma lineage. The Community gained a unique historical identity in the southern part of India, due to their contributions to temple architecture, metalwork, and other crafts essential to religious and social life.

In Hindu Mythology, Viswakarma is identified as a divine architect, who is considered as the creator of the Universe and the noble craftsmanship. According to legends, Vishwakarma's five sons were each assigned specific artisanal tasks—blacksmithing, carpentry, bronze work, stone carving, and goldsmithing—representing the various divisions within the Vishwakarma community. The Kammalars consider themselves descendants of one or more of these groups, depending on their region and specific task.

Historical evidence suggests that the Kammalar community has been present in Kerala since ancient times. The various Maharajas who ruled Kerala over several decades encouraged this community to settle in their kingdom and provided them with all the facilities as they valued their craftsmanship in temple construction, weapon-making, and jewellery-making. Their skills in bronze work, in particular, became highly prized for creating temple idols, lamps, and utensils used in Hindu worship. Kerala's rich tradition of bronze casting and the intricate details found in its temple architecture reflect the influence of the Kammalars (Srinivas, 1962; Dirks, 1987).

The Kammalar community in Kerala has shifted to several non-traditional jobs due to several reasons. Some of them have left their native places and migrated to towns or foreign countries in search of better job opportunities. Today, they are largely integrated into the mainstream by taking up modern jobs. However, even now, the Kammalar settlement and their traditional craftwork are seen in districts like Alleppey, Thrissur, and Palakkad. Several cultural initiatives by the NGOs, government, and private agencies in Kerala have attempted to preserve and promote their craft, recognizing its importance to Kerala's heritage. Since Kerala is known for



tourism, the members of the community have started making miniature artworks, souvenirs, etc., for the tourists, for their livelihood. One of the major settlement areas of the Kammalars in Kerala is Alleppey District, hence the study.

2. The Economic History of the Kammalar Community

The economic contribution of the Kammalar community to the region of South India or Kerala is not very significant. But it is interesting to note that the economic position of the community has evolved over centuries, shaped by changes in patronage, demand for craftsmanship, and industrialization.

In ancient India, the Kammalars enjoyed a high degree of economic stability and social respect due to their specialized skills. The work of Kammalars was popular in the society, especially in crafting tools, weapons, agricultural implements, and religious artifacts. They were instrumental in temple construction, creating sculptures, idols, and intricate metal and stonework that adorned Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist temples.

The Kammalar community got prominence in the South Indian kingdoms like the Cholas, Pandyas, and Cheras during the medieval period. The Kings patronised these craftsmen and encouraged them to come into the mainstream society and economy. During this period, Kammalars were employed not only for temple construction and maintenance but also for producing ceremonial items. The Bhakti movement gave momentum to the temple arts as the temples became central to the economy, serving as hubs of wealth and power. Kammalars became wealthy during this period as their artworks were in high demand and earned well due to this royal patronage. The guild-like communities where the Kammalars lived, were often tied to royal courts and enjoyed certain privileges, including land grants or tax exemptions. One noteworthy aspect of the community's life in this period was that the skills were passed down through generations, creating an intergenerational continuity of craft knowledge and economic livelihood.

India's traditional industries faced a setback during the colonial period. The British suppressed indigenous art forms and culture. They drained the resources of India and imported finished products from Britain. The rise of industrial production and imported goods significantly reduced demand for hand-crafted tools, sculptures, and agricultural implements. The pro-British policy during the colonial period discouraged local producers and badly hit communities like the Kammalars, causing a steep economic decline.

During this period, many Kammalars were forced to seek alternative employment. Migration and switching occupations forced the community to take up roles as labourers, factory workers, or petty traders, while others sought new markets by adapting their traditional skills to cater to changing demands. The situation changed during the late colonial period, as interest in Indian handicrafts grew among European and urban Indian elites. The artisans who adapted to create decorative items and souvenirs gained a niche market, though it was smaller and more competitive than the traditional temple economy.

Post-independence, due to rapid industrialisation, the Kammalar community faced a horrendous decline in demand for traditional crafts, which resulted in the marginalisation of the community. This forced the community to find alternate job opportunities in construction and industry.

There has been a revival of the Community's traditional art and craft work in the 1970s and 1980s due to the deliberate attempts made by the government of India. Artisan cooperatives, handicraft exhibitions, and government schemes were introduced to provide support for communities like the Kammalars.

3. The Kammalar Community in Alleppey District

The present study is based on forty-six Kammalar families settled in Thathampally in the Alleppey district. Data has been collected using an open-ended questionnaire. and focussed interview of eight heads of the

families (P A Rajamani, T S Rajan, C M Vincent, C P Vidyanathan, C Rajamanikkam, Prasant C P, T S Vasanthy and M Nirmala).

The Kammalar community settled in Alleppey around AD 1745. Originally from Tamil Nadu, the migration was mainly due to the high demand for jewellery making and temple arts. The Maharaja was very supportive, and the socio-economic conditions in then Travancore were conducive to their flourishing and peaceful coexistence with the native inhabitants in Kerala. The Kammalars in Alleppey are skilled in various crafts, such as bronze casting, metalwork for religious and decorative items, Jewellery and the creation of tools and implements. They craft items like bronze lamps, ritual items, and metal utensils that are often used in households and temples. Their stone and wood carvings, which are typically used in temples and traditional homes, also highlight their contribution to Kerala's architectural heritage.

The following section explores the socio-economic conditions of the Community.

Table 1 Housing Facilities

Housing Facility	Number of Families (Percentage)
Own House	15(32.60)
Bhajana Madam	14(30.43)
Homeless (Staying in rented house)	17(36.96)
Total	46 (100)

Source: Data collected by the researcher

It is evident from Table 1 that 36.96% of the families do not have their own houses. Bhajana madam is a housing cum association facility in a spacious one and a half acres of land, provided by the Archdiocese of Changanassery. At present, fourteen families stay in Bhajan Madam. The Archdiocese has been very supportive of the community's holistic development since its settlement in Thathampally.

Table 2 Male- Female Labour Force Participation

Head of the Family	Number of people working (Percentage)
Male	46(100)
Female	8(17.39)
Total	46 (100)

Source: Data collected by the researcher

Only 17.39% of women (heads of the families) are employed, whereas all men heads of the families are employed. As opined by the respondents, the women take care of the family matters, especially those of the children. Men are the breadwinners of all the families, though women in the present younger generation work in different fields. This inference is in line with that of the national and state level scenario regarding the male-female labour force participation. This gender gap has to be closed to achieve workforce gender equity.

Table 3 Level of Education of the present generation

Level of Education	Percentage
Upto Plus Two only	30%
Graduation	60%
Post Graduation and above	10%
Total	100

Source: Data collected by the researcher

There has been a substantial change in the education levels of the current generation of the Kammalar community. The educational attainment of the current heads of the families (male and female) is below plus two levels, whereas 60% of the current generation are graduates. Only 30% are plus two or below. Ten percent are postgraduation and above qualified. This shows the immense possibilities of job opportunities the present generation can take up in modern times. This is cited as one of the major reasons for the shift in the occupational structure of the members of the community in modern times.

Table 4 Occupational Structure

Occupation	Number of people
Jewellery	4
Truss Work	5
Wiring & Electrical work	6
Medical Store	3
IT	8
Pump	5
Coolies	8
Cooking	6
Construction work	10
Total	55

Source: Data collected by the researcher

The members of the community were traditionally engaged in temple and church art, articles, and jewellery-making. The respondents opined that only 4 members are now actively involved in jewellery making. Though there is still demand for the final touching work of the jewellery, it fetches them very low income.

Table 5 Reasons for the Occupational Shift

Reasons	Number of respondents in Percentage
Bulk orders in limited time	4
Decline in demand for traditional work	15
Educational Attainment	30
Competition from machine-made products	40
More lucrative job opportunities	6
Lack of expertise to make modern designs	5
Total	100

Source: Data collected by the researcher

Table 5 explains the major reasons for the shift in the occupational structure of the members of the Kammalar community in modern times. Forty percent opined that competition from machine-made products is the primary reason for the decline in their opportunity in the jewellery-making field. The educational attainment provides the younger generation with a wider canvas of job opportunities that are more lucrative and less time-consuming. Declining demand for traditional patterns, more lucrative job opportunities, lack of expertise in making modern patterns, and huge orders in limited time are also cited as other reasons.

The average annual income of the family is around Rs 15000. The community used to be economically well off as the demand for jewellery making was very high three to four decades back. Now, the entire community

is exploring other avenues for their livelihood. The older generation finds it hard to cope with the changing trends. Since the Community has contributed to the society and economy, especially in the southern part of India, several schemes have been introduced by the government to revive and support them.

While there are no specific schemes exclusively for the Kammalar community, which is part of the broader Vishwakarma artisan group in South India, initiatives aim to support artisans, craftsmen, and traditional workers. These support programs provide resources, financial aid, skill development, and market access for Vishwakarma communities in general and the Kammalars in particular.

4. Government initiatives for the Kammalar Community

The Vishwakarma Yojana was announced in 2023 to support traditional artisans and craftsmen, including blacksmiths, carpenters, goldsmiths, and metalworkers. The various schemes under this aim to provide skill upgradation and training programs to improve craftsmanship and quality, financial assistance and loans with minimal interest to help artisans expand their businesses, access to modern tools and equipment to improve productivity and marketing of the products and promotion through exhibitions, online platforms, and government-supported trade fairs.

The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship provides training for artisans and workers in traditional crafts through the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY). The Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana (AHVY) was launched in 2001-2002 to promote and develop traditional handicrafts by assisting artisans with resources, training, and financial support. Under this scheme, several design and technical training workshops were organised, and it facilitates the formation of SHGs and provides financial assistance for setting up Common facility Centres.

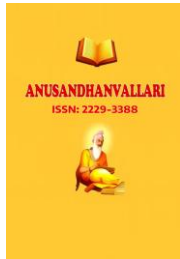
The Credit Guarantee Fund Scheme for Micro and Small Enterprises (CGTMSE) is intended to provide financial backing to artisans with limited assets to secure loans and invest in business expansion. Under the Marketing Assistance Scheme by Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), Kammalars who produce handicrafts or metal products that can be marketed under the Khadi and village industry label.

The Kammalar community can avail welfare benefits like pensions, healthcare, and life insurance under the Craftsmen Welfare Scheme (Pension and Insurance). Besides, the National Handicraft Development Programme (NHDP), under the Ministry of Textiles, aims to support artisans in traditional crafts by providing financial and infrastructural aid, training, and market linkages. Under this scheme, there is a provision for financial aid to artisans for raw material procurement, design innovation, and participation in exhibitions. The Community can also benefit from the One District One Product (ODOP) Scheme.

The Kerala Artisan Welfare Fund Board provides welfare benefits, skill training, and insurance for registered artisans, including Kammalars. All these programmes and schemes aim to nurture the artisan talents across

5. Summary

The economic history of the Kammalars reflects several stages of ups and downs in their economic status. Once central to India's temple economy and societal structure, they faced hardship under colonial rule and industrialization but found renewed relevance through government support and tourism. The younger generation of the community has already changed their career paths in tune with the modern market requirements. This is clear from the case study of the community in the Alleppey District. The preference for traditional jobs is coming down drastically due to economic, social, and market-related factors. Adaptability is the most important determinant of their future economic stability and freedom.



Competition from machine-made products, educational attainment, and a decline in demand for traditional crafts and art are the major reasons for the occupational shift among the youngsters in the community. However, the study highlights the fact that Kammalars in Alleppey play a vital role in maintaining Kerala's rich heritage of metal and stone crafts, though they face economic challenges due to modern market changes. With support from government programs and tourism, there are opportunities to sustain and grow their contributions to the region's economy and cultural identity.

References

- [1] Thurston, E. (1909). Castes and Tribes of Southern India. Madras: Government Press.
- Dirks, N. B. (1987). The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom. Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Fuller, C. J. (1979). "Gods, Priests and Purity: On the Relation between Hinduism and the Caste System." *Man*, 14(3), 459–476.
- [3] Srinivas, M. N. (1962). Caste in Modern India and Other Essays. Asia Publishing House.