

## **‘Selling of Identity’: the Dumbara Hand Weavers of Thalagune**

Sulari de Silva  
University of Moratuwa  
sularidesilva@gmail.com

The hand weavers of Thalagune are well-known for the art and the tradition of Dumbara weaving which brings with it, all the elements that represent the craft's place of origin and its artistic representation. Thalagune is a remote village in Udu-dumbarain Kandy District, where most of the Dumbara weavers have been living for centuries. Today, in Thalagune, there are about nine families engaged in Dumbara weaving. They rely on the sale of their products as the sole means of living. Their textile products were used mostly by the Kandyan aristocrats in ancient times and are much sought after at present as well. Established as a craft community during the Kandyan period, it became a significant political and sociocultural institution. During this period, the community's social position and identity as a less privileged service caste in the agricultural society were determined not on the 'auric value' of the craft which was based on the distinctive motifs, choice of materials, skills and knowledge of weaving; but on the 'cultic value' which was based on the social traditions and its organizing structure of the mode of production of the craft such as social hierarchy, production relations, sense of duty, obligation, and cults and myths. At present, even under the capitalist system, 'commoditisation' of traditional crafts has brought about changes in the designs and the methods of production, and has severely affected the authorship and the authenticity of the craft. Many Dumbara weavers of this community are becoming deskilled, losing their traditional knowledge, role and the industry; and they have begun working instead in other professions. The reason for this appears to be that the weavers have not benefited either from the feudal or the capitalist socio-economic systems, and continue to lead underprivileged lives. The main purpose of this study is to understand the changing nature of the craft and the weavers' community of Thalagune. Why is the weavers' community less privileged and has not benefited from the capitalist economic system? Why are they unable to sustain their industry in its original form? Why does the weavers' community have to change their identity while others sell their identity to earn profits? Why cannot they be a part of the economic growth of the country? The analysis of this study draws on Newton Gunasinghe's *The Changing Socio-Economic Relations in the Kandyan Countryside* in which he considers the causes of this situation. Gunasinghe explains that 'the capitalist growth was not a simple phenomenon in traditional societies like it is in Sri Lanka, as such societies have a specific characteristic in it, to reproduce, under its hegemony, the production relations of the pre-capitalist era. According to Gunasinghe, this occurs because of the 'reactivation of archaic production relations in peasant agricultural society under conditions of peripheral capitalism'.