

## Textile Industry of Ancient Sri Lanka.

Anuruddhika Dilhani

### Abstract.

Textile Industry could be identified as one of highly valued industries in ancient Sri Lanka. The origin of the Textile Industry is indefinite. But there is adequate proof that this industry was been in existence during the period of various civilizations of different country. The first example of textile appears from the Neolithic period. Only Linen clothes were produced in Egypt. Information and paintings regarding the production of Linen are illustrated in most of the grave yards and machines made of timber have been used for weaving textiles from the ancient times. It has been revealed from archaeological excavations carried out on pre- historic civilizations in Indo River valleys that prior to the arrival of Aryans, people living in India have been using unstitched clothing in the form shawls covering the body. Factors regarding clothing in Sri Lanka is very scarce. According to chronicles and inscriptions, there is proof that people of Sri Lanka have been engaged with textile industry during the period prior to the Christian era earliest sources are not available regarding any of the attire used by prince by *Vijaya* or *Kuveni*. It could be implied that people of his island may have been making their own clothing at the time of the arrival of Aryans too. The objective of this study in related to the nature of ancient textile industry during the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa period.

Key Words : Textile Industry, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, ancient Sri Lanka.

### Introduction.

When considering about the manufacture of textiles in ancient Lanka, it is really worth to pay our attention towards the raw materials, other components and accessories used for the industry. The most ancient proof of cotton industry in Lanka is the fact that at the time of the arrival of prince *Vijaya*, *Kuveni* had pretended to be a cotton thread spinner. But there is no clear evidence about the specific areas where cotton was grown. During the medieval period, there is evidence that mostly cotton was grown in the up country. But there is no clear proof about the ancient sources of the textile industry in Lanka.

According to certain information available, the nature of clothing could be decided in terms of different period in ancient Lanka. Therefore, the objective of this study is to ascertain according to primary and secondary sources, the nature of ancient textile industry in Sri Lanka with limitations to Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa period. Attention was paid towards the use of clothing by different statuses of the society and the about the techniques made use of for the manufacture of textiles.

### Textile Industry of Ancient Sri Lanka.

Textile Industry could be identified as one of highly valued industries in ancient civilizations. Vedic Aryans too have been using cut and unstitched shawl like attire as their favorite garment. It is attired around the waist and is known as “*Neevie*”. (Hettiarachchi, 1967, 97p) The proof that cotton textile industry existed in Indus valley is available from a few pieces pasted on to a side of a silver container. Erudite Author Martin Wickramasinghe states that Ancient People used clothing not to cover their bodies but to keep the body warmed. Africans used clothes to cover their secret body parts in order to avoid any evil effects. During the earliest stages, people have not worn any clothes. (Wickramasinghe, 1993, 04p) There is evidence from ruined statues of Indo valley civilization that people have worshipped the nude images of God *shiva*. People lived during Indo valley civilization have used clothes made out of cotton, animal hide, tree barks etc. (Wimalavansa, 2000, 100p)

According to the Mahavamso when prince *Vijaya* arrived in Sri Lanka, *Kuveni* had been spinning cotton. (Mahavamso, 1959, 07:11) Professor H. Ellawala mentions that cotton cultivation had been in a highly developed stage. (Ellawala, 2002, 136p) There is also evidence from *sikha valanda* that people of Sri Lanka and India have been using clothing made out of grass spreads and tree barks. (sikha valanda, 1934, 96p) But *Saddharmaratnavaliya* evidences there had been people who did not wear even a waist string to cover their body. (Saddharmaratnavaliya, 2007, 990P) When the sacred Sri Mahabodhi sapling was taken in procession there had been craft guilds of eighteen castes in the guttering represented by cloth weaving castes among them. (Mahavamso, 1959, 07:11) It could be concluded that people with craft skills in the textile industry have arrived in the island with the occasioning of the sacred *Sri Mahabodhi* sapling in Sri Lanka. After the planting ceremony of *Sri Mahabodhi* sapling at the times of designating the textile weavers, the leader was offered the honors of “*Mahaseena*”. *Bodhiwamsa* mentions that the textile workers were regarded highly as such because they had been attending to the preparation of the surrounding completed with flags, banners, streamers and curtains for the ceremony. (Bodhiwamsa, 1999, 202p)

Epigraphs denote the textile industry in the terminology of *pehekara*. Galkandegama inscription mentions about a *pehekara* village where cave of *Summa pehekaragamaka* and the cave of his younger brother “*Thisa*” are dedicated for the benefit of the community of *bhikkus* of the four directions.

“*Sidham pehekara gamakahi sumaha lene mala-tisaha lene*”

(Paranavitana, 1970, No.1145,91p)

Hittaragamahinna inscription proves that people who were engaged in the textile industry have lived separately in different villages. (Paranavitana, 1970, No.1160,92p)

The inscription of Kanduruweva mentions about a tank used by textile workers named *pehekara wapi*. (Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1983,71p) This tank is named after the caste of the textile workers. As such, it is evident that this tank had been constructed by the representatives of the textile workers.

Veherakema inscription depicts a wording as “*Tatavaya-pugaha lene*” (Paranavitana, 1970, No.696a,52p) which means “*Tatavaya*” according to professor Paranavitane is the “grade”. (Paranavitana, 1970, xcvi) It is clear from this phrase that the textile industry was a well-organized corporation. It could be concluded that textile industry emerged in ancient Sri Lanka with the participation of the textile worker caste who arrived when the sacred Sri Mahabodhi sapling was brought in procession. It is evident from *Mahavamso* that *Kuveni* hosted the crowd,

arrived with prince *Vijaya* and appeared before them at night adorned with valuable jewelry pretending as a sixteen year old lass. (Mahavamso, 1959, 07:26) Earliest sources are not available regarding any of the attire used by prince *Vijaya* or *Kuveni*. But during the early stages such as the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the only evidence about the existence of cotton cultivation is the *Kuveni* was spinning cotton when prince *Vijaya* arrived in the island. Professor H. Ellawala states that the production of cotton textile had been in a well-developed status even in the ancient times. (Ellawala, 2002, 136p) *Maharathmale* inscription reveals that cotton and silk cloth production had existed in Sri Lanka from ancient times. It also states that rain capes, short and upper shawls had been manufactured during the ancient times.

There is epigraph evidence that a very smooth cloth named “*muslin*” had been manufactured in Sri Lanka. (Ellawala, 2002, 128p) and the princess of king *Mihirakula* of *Rajatharanganie* had been attired with clothing made in Sri Lanka. (Stein, 1970, No.294,44p) It is also stated that when giant *suranimala* was sent to Brahmin *Kundala* of *Doramadalawa* by prince *Dheegabhaya* to ascertain the skills of *Suranimala*, the Brahmin had sent a couple of valuable attire named *Punnawardhana* to the prince as a gift. (Mahavamso, 1959, 23:33) The prince also was very happy and sent gifts to prince *Gemunu*. (Mahavamso, 1959, 23:37) *Sahassavattupakaranaya* confirms that king *Dharmashoka* gifted a couple of attire to king *Devananpiyatissa* which could be cleaned by fire. (Piyarathana, 1999, 191p) *Dhampiyaatuwagetapadaya* confirms that there had been a silk jacket named “*peravi pata setta*”. (Dhampiyaatuwagetapadaya, 1974, 266p) It is evident that various types of textiles have been manufactured in Lanka during the ancient times. Further, import of foreign textiles also has taken place.

*Sahassavattupakaranaya* mentions that king *Dutugemunu* had requested from a trader in Anuradhapura for one hundred Chinese cloths and one hundred of each of cloth of the pictures of animals and with flowery designs, when he was at *Magama*. (Sahassavattupakaranaya, 1999, 102p) It is mentioned in *Rasavahiniya* that king *Dutugemunu* got a pavilion made by giant *Gotaimbara*, covered with flowery and colorful textiles to celebrate his victory. (Rasavahiniya,

1961,89p) King *Kavantissa* had donated robes for *bhikkus* which were imported through five hundred ships. (Dhatuvamsa, 1961, 68p) *Visuddhimagga* mentions that silk clothe and cloth made of goat fur along with many other types of textiles.(*Visuddhimagga*, 2002,150p) Therefore, it is evident that textile trade had become one of the main items in the foreign trade. Sometimes, textiles have been exported from Sri Lanka to other countries. During the medieval period, people have used cloth made of just and silk for their clothes. *Gaiger* mentions that the cloth named “*china*” may have been imported from china. (Ariyapala,1969, 64p) Many types of textiles had been manufactured in Lanka during ancient times.

Various types of textiles had been manufactured to suit the different types of status and identities of the kings and princesses, distinguished elites people and common people in the society.

A special consideration had taken place regarding the garments of royal families from the past. *Ramayanaya* mentions about various types of garments worn by king *Rawana*. (Ramayanaya, 2000, 04, 23,249pp) *Deepawamsa* mentions that when Lord Buddha arrived in Lanka the tribe of Naga had constructed a pavilion made of gold and laid beautiful cloth in different colures. (Deepawamsa, 1959, 02:53) Nothing is found to be mentioned from the sources regarding any attire of prince *Vijaya* who arrival here during the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. But it is believed that he may have worn the contemporary Indian attire.

It appears that ancient kings have used a normal shawl and an upper shawl. An upper shawl was an essential need for kings. King *Kavantissa* had offered his upper shawl to *Thripitaka tissa thera* and had said that a single shawl is not sufficient for him according to *Dhatuvamsa*.(Dhatuvamsa,1961, 67p) It could be assumed that both the shoulders could be covered by the upper shawl. It is sided to partial at the times of worshipping. When king of *mahanaga* went to worship sacred frontal bone relics of Lord Buddha, he had kept his upper shawl only on one shoulder. It appears that there two parts of the shawl, as lower and upper shawl. (Dhatuvamsa,1961, 54p) The plaque inscription no.02 of king *Mahinda IV* in *Jethawanarama* mentions that after providing clothing and food the balance would be used for industries and that if there is no balance, a portion of the profits from clothing would be used for industries. (Wickramasinghe, 1904, 232-233p)

There is proof that certain kings have used blankets at times. It is mentioned that king *Subha* who was afraid of king *Vasabha* had given the valuable blanket used by him and his daughter along with other royal provisions to a friendly tile worker. (Mahavamso,1959, 35:102 ) It is also mentioned king Maha Parakramabahu on his way to Polonnaruwa, had stepped into the camp and worn a red blanket. (Mahavamso, 66:101) it is clear that they have used blankets over the normal clothing during the cold climate. Carvings and sculptures stand evidence for the garments of the ancient times. ( Wijesekara,1970,48p) it could be assumed that mostly the kings wear beautiful costumes and for special occasions they had worn an upper shawl.

There is evidence the royal princesses had worn an upper shawl in the past. Ramayanaya mentions that princess *Seetha* had worn an upper shawl. (Ramayanaya,2000, 78p) At the time of king *Pandi* sent his messengers to *Madurapura* to bring a princess for prince *Vijaya* and wives for the ministers, the king sent a drummer to announce to the effect that anybody who likes send his daughter to Lanka may keep his daughter in front of the house attired with a shawl in two fold along with a body covering to be identified. (Mahavamsa,1959, 07:54)

Accordingly, the damsels of *Madurapuaru* attired with a shawl and covered the body with another shawl. As they were arranged for a special journey they may have worn two shawls. After arriving in Lanka, they may have worn two shawls for special occasions. There is evidence that princess have used various colorful royal clothing. It is mentioned in *Dhatuwamsa* that princess *soma Devi* and her companion escorts were attired with blue. Gold shred and white clothing when they attended the sacred relic treasure ceremony.( *Dhatuwamsa*,1961,83p) Therefore, it is clear that there had been a coloring art for textiles in existence at that time. Professor *Malinga Amarasinghe* states that the best example for the people using colorful Sigiri frescos. ( *Amarasinghe*, 2000, 43p).

According to a inscription of *Kataragama* the chief princess had been attired with blue color shawl and pearls and gem studded earrings.

*Taraṅga – vālā – rali ot maha muhund me nil –  
diyul han numba gaṅga me dala lele mut harin hobanā*

*hal udā giri kulu me mini kodulu palan dambadi ... ..*

(Paranavitana, 222p)

Sigiri frescos which belong to the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. reveal the nature of clothing of princesses. *Martin Wickramasinghe* says that the females in sigiri frescos have not worn anything for the bust but the opinion of Bell is that they have worn a coat covering the lower portion of the body and a transparent jacket to cover the bust. (Wickramasinghe,1993, 38p) These *Sigiri* damsels have worn stripped clothing in red and green colour to cover the lower portion of the body. In one of the graffities, it is mentioned as “*Osariya*”. (Mudiyanse,1963, no.103)

The colour combination of sigiri frescos reveals the nature of clothing clad by princesses of ancient times. The manufacturer of textiles may have applied colours also on cloth in addition to weaving of the same. It could be assumed that the colour combination on textiles may have been a team work.

During the ancient times special garments have been manufactured for government officials and noble ladies in addition to that of kings and princesses. Kings, ministers and other noblemen

have used shawls and covering too as their normal attire. It is mentioned in “*Sihalavattuwa*” that during the period of king Saddhatissa, privileged males were awarded with crowns studded with valuable gems. (Sihalavattuwa, 2002, 79p) during the ancient times, manufacture of clothing for ordinary people uniforms of minister etc. have been carried out. It is mentioned that father of minister *Sangha* at time of his death, he had left his valuable pair of shawls worn by him, the sword and necklace to be used by his son “*Sangha*”. (Sahassavattupakaranaya,, 1999, 171-176pp) it is implied that valuable clothing have been manufactured not only for kings but also for the ministers during the early period. At the time of Dutugemunu – Elara war, the war uniforms of both the parties have been of the same appearance and it is said that they have killed their own colleagues but later the uniforms of king Dutugemunu’s soldiers were changed by way of a “*satyakriya*”. (Mahavamso a, 1959, 25:16-18) certain information is available in *Ramayanaya* regarding the war uniforms of warriors. (Ramayanaya, 2000, 15p)

*Mihintale* inscription of king *Mahinda IV* states as follows which means that each textile supplier would be gifted with a measure of weight called “*kalanda*” every year.

“*Havuruduvakat pilivarat eknat ek kaland bagin isa.....*”

(Wickramasinghe, 1904, 95p)

In the same inscription, there is a statement as follows which means that each textile supplier in terms of “*Rattansutra mahabodhi mangala*” a wage of one measure of weight called “*kalanda*” would be gifted.

“*ruvan-asun-maha-bo- mangulehi piliyat ek kalandak isa*”

(Ibid, 1904, 95p)

Noble women are said to have used only a single clothe very often. Period of king *Saddhatissa* the seven nephews of *chula sumana* who lived in “*Vatha gandamalaya*” had got jute clothing and that they had given it to her. (Sihalavattupakaranaya, 2002,171-176p) from the creations *Thivanka pilima geya* which belongs to the *Polonnaruwa* period during 11<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> centuries information regarding clothing used by women at that time could be obtained. There are flowery designs in the attires of high caste females. The designers of the early period have made their utmost effort to display the contemporary social status through their painting. Attire used in the images of *Thivanka pilima geya* depicts the nature of colourful dresses used by women of that period.

It shows that during the early period, the textile manufacturers have taken to painting of textiles in addition to their weaving the same. Images of that period depicts various types of garments which may have been used during the said period. Those garments may have been used by high caste females during the polonnaruwa period. In most of the painting the bust is left bare and

below is decorated with a “*Jothiya*”. When observing these garments, it could be assumed that the textile industry had been on a very considerable position.

Sources reveal that the garments worn by commoners are of very simple nature. During the period of the famine, people in Anuradhapura had worn rags and barks of trees. *Martin Wickramasinghe* mentions that people during the period of king *Dutugemunu* had covered their public areas with clothes made of leaves of trees and grass while some have remained naked. (*Wickramasinghe, 1993, 80p*) Story of *Pandukabhaya* confirms that rural boys have worn only single cloth. (*Mahavamso, 1959, 10:09*) the description about king *Saddhatissa* in *Sihalavattu* mentions that farmers wore yellow clothes. (*Sihalavattuparakanaya, 2002, 28p*) *Sasadawata* too confirms that females used a cloth covering the bust. (*Sasadawata, 1961, no.52*)

Using jackets by women is confirmed by “*Rohini katha vastuwa*” while the sources reveal as to how they had got these jackets stitched. Information about growing of cotton, making thread, painting and tailoring is also available. (*Dhammapadatha kata, 1922, 491-492p*) An outfitter named Tissa had earned his living by tailoring during the period of king *Saddhatissa* in Anuradhapura. (*Sihalavattuparakanaya, 2002, 01p*) *Samantapasadikawa* mentions about items such as needles, thread etc. used in dress-making. It could be assumed that weaving of textiles and dress making would have been very popular industry during this period. (*Samantapasadikawa, 2003, 25p & 193p*) *Poojavaliya* mentions that eighty Katina robes had been made overnight completing all the workmanship including stretch from plucking cotton up to the finishing point. (*Poojavaliya, 1999, 795p*) it is clear by the above statement that the textile industry had been carried out in mass scale. Most of the kings have paid the wages of workers by way of money, jewellery food and garments. (*Mahavamso, 1959, 29:19-21 & 30:13*) All the offerings of textiles would have been made by textile manufacturers. It is mentions that king *Mahanaga* had donated the weaving village named *Jambala* to *mahavihara* and clothing for all three *nikayas*. It could be assumed that the textile industry would have received royal sponsorship. (*Mahavamso, 1959, 40:96*) It is believed that king “*Vijayabahu III*”, sent a muslin person named “*pathi meera lebbe*” to south India with a latter and had got down eight textile manufacturers in order to develop the industry in “*Dambadeniya*” period. (*Coomarswami, 230p*) It becomes clear from the nature of dresses and other types of garments of ancient kings, distinguished elites, princesses and ordinary people. It is clear that the textile industry had been well developed during the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa period.

## Conclusion

It is evidence that the textile industry had been in a highly developed stage in ancient times. Various types of textile had been manufactured to suit the different types of status and identities of the people in the society. Information about growing of cotton, making thread, painting and tailoring is also available. Sometimes textiles have been exported from ancient Lanka to other countries. However, they have catered for the requirements of kings, royal officials, and robes for Buddhist monks and all others, Kings have paid wages to his workman by way of textiles. It is undoubtedly evident that the textile industry had been in highly developed status during ancient times.

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