

Wool-pile carpets in colonial Madras and the lost Saidapet woolly-sheep breed in Madras of the 1870s

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The Agricultural School in Saidapet (13°02'N; 80°22'E), slightly southwest of Madras CBD was the first formally set-up agricultural training institution in India, established on the banks of Adayar River in 1865. This institution grew into a college offering three-year training in agriculture in 1875 and functioned until 1906, when it was shifted to Coimbatore for various political reasons. Its founding superintendent William Robertson and his deputy Charles Benson experimented with many agricultural commodities from 1865. One was the development of a new sheep breed – the Saidapet breed (Saidapet spelt also as Sydapet, Sydapett). John Augustus Voelcker in a report refers to the Saidapet sheep breed, although the post-1900 literature makes no mention of it. The experiments of Robertson–Benson on sheep breeding commenced in 1869 utilizing the 'Mysore', 'Coimbatore', 'Patna', 'Nellore', and 'Madras' germplasms available in Madras. Many trials were made, of which one was successful, resulting in the Saidapet breed. The strengths of this breed were that the progeny bore wool that could be used in making carpets, and the breed also supplied meat for human consumption. Within a decade or two of production, this breed had disappeared: reasons are unclear. Carpet-weaving occurred pre-eminently in the Eluru–Masulipatnam–Warangal stretch of the erstwhile Madras Presidency (now in Andhra Pradesh and Telengana). This note chronicles the evolution of wool-pile carpet production that flourished more as a cottage industry in the Eluru–Masulipatnam–Warangal region, thus providing a contextual backdrop for the interest in producing new breeds of woolly sheep in southern India.

Acharya¹ lists the 'Bellary', 'Coimbatore', 'Deccāni', 'Hassan', 'Kenguri', 'Kilakarsal', 'Māndya', 'Nilgiri', 'Madras red', 'Mecheri', 'Nellore', 'Tiruchy black', 'Ramnād White' and 'Vembur' as native sheep breeds and the 'Kannai-ādu', 'Malabāri', 'Osmānābādi', 'Sangamneri' as native goat breeds of southern India.

John Shortt, who served the Government of Madras as Deputy Surgeon-General and who was also a trained veterinary surgeon from the UK in the 19th century², in his *A Manual of Indian Cattle and Sheep – their Breeds, Management and Diseases*³ has written on the native Indian sheep breeds. His list includes the 'Bellary', 'Nellore', 'Coimbatore', 'Mysore' and 'Dumba' (the 'fat-tail' sheep) as native breeds of the Madras Presidency (pp. 115–151). Shortt also describes certain individual sheep as J. D. B. Gribble's ram, J. J. Corbett's hornless ram with mane (p. 117), Dr Shortt's Mysore ewe and ram (p. 120), Colonel Macaulay's four-horned ram, and one-horned sheep (p. 122), because of their unusual phenotypic features. He supplements his notes on these sheep with India-ink illustrations (note 1). In sheep-breeding exercises carried out in Madras town at that time, Australian Merino rams were used, which improved the

quality of native sheep breeds of the Madras Presidency in terms of overall size, quality of meat and wool. A Persian breed identified as 'Heeratee' (note 2) was imported into South Canara (modern Dakshina Kannada and Udipi districts of Karnataka and Kasargod district of Kerala) via ships from Arabia (note 3). A Chinese sheep breed from Shanghai was brought into the Nilgiris in the 1860s, which was primarily used in crossbreeding with native sheep breeds of the region to achieve better quality meat. Later efforts made by crossing the Chinese and Leicester breeds resulted in the progeny, which were not healthy animals and consistently suffered lung inflammations. Some of the English sheep raised in the Lawrence Asylum (the Lawrence School, Lovedale today) offered quality meat and significant mass⁴.

Production and sale of value-added wool products are justified in North India that experiences intensely cold to dry-cold weather with defined winters (November–February). Production of wool-pile carpets and wool blankets occurs extensively in these areas even today. Sultan Zain-ul-Abdin of Kashmir introduced wool carpets into Kashmir in the 15th century⁵. Jahāngir (Mirza Nur-uddin Beig Mohammad Khan Salim, 1567–1629) encouraged wool-carpet

production in North India. This resulted in a revival of this industry, since ornate carpets came to be seen as measures of wealth and aristocracy. Persian travellers to India supplied designs to local craftsmen involved in carpet-weaving. One C. M. Hadow, a dedicated carpet dealer and exporter, operated in Srinagar, Kashmir, in the 1880s (ref. 6).

Wool-pile carpet weaving

The Madras Presidency, which nearly fully covered the peninsular India during colony days and which experiences a tropical wet, wet-dry weather, includes multiple records of wool-pile carpet production at least from the 1670s. Harris⁷ (pp. 3 and 4) provides many historical details on carpet-weaving in the Madras Presidency by drawing statements from Streynsham Master, who was the East-India Company's Political Agent stationed in Madras between 27 January 1678 and 3 July 1681 (note 4). Master travelled from Madras to Northern Decan by land and recorded his observations variously⁸. He mentions that the wool-pile carpet production skill was introduced into India by the Saracens (note 5), long before the Persian influence that occurred during the Mughal period⁸. This

comment, however, needs verification. The *Dictionary of Textiles*⁹ clarifies ‘Madras rug’ as a fine, brightly coloured carpet made, of wool and stained with vegetable dyes that were created in the Madras Presidency⁹ (p. 376). This dictionary also provides a second explanation for the Madras rug as the ‘carpet’ woven in the Deccan region of southern India in the 19th century (p. 376; note 6). The carpets made in the Deccan were largely woven in Cocanada (Kākinādā) and were known as the ‘Cocanada rug’. These rugs (= carpets) were transported by road to Madras city and exported. Prisoners were used, and thus were trained in carpet weaving, from the Mughal period, but a majority of the products coming out of jails were cotton-only rugs¹⁰. In later years, pile-wool carpets were also produced in jails¹¹. The Harris volume dated 1908 includes notes on woolly-carpet production in the jails of Vellore (North Arcot, Tamil Nadu, notes supplied by G. Cloney, the Superintendent) and Bangalore (Karnataka, notes supplied by P. S. Achyutha Rao of the Mysore Medical Service)⁷.

According to John McCulloch¹² (p. 270), while referring to pile-wool carpets in southern India, comments

The muslins of Chicacole, the woollen carpets of Ellore, and the silks of Berhampore (Ganjam), are of old celebrity; ..., (note 7)

and signposts that pile-wool carpet industry in Ellore (Eluru) was operating from a little before the 1850s. A group of Persian-carpet-weavers settled in Eluru during the Golconda Sultanate (1518–1687), mainly due to the plentiful availability of plants such as *Senna auriculata* (= *Cassia auriculata*, Fabaceae) that were useful to them in colouring the wool-pile carpets¹³ they weaved¹³. Use of various dyes of natural origin, e.g. indigo (various species of *Indigofera*, Fabaceae) and turmeric (*Curcuma longa*, Zingiberaceae) in cotton and other fabric-material industry was common in India. Naturally, India possessed a rich knowledge of these dye-yielding plants¹⁴. The descendants of the 17th century Persian settlers in Eluru wove wool-pile carpets. In later decades, Warangal and Masulipatnam followed suit. Carpets woven in the Eluru–Warangal–Masulipatnam stretch came to be recognized as Deccāni wool-

pile carpets, which had a unique style (for art-related notes and colourful images of the Deccāni carpets of Eluru–Warangal–Masulipatnam, see Walker¹⁵). In high likelihood, the practice of wool-fibre extraction was done by manual depilation of the pelts of sheep slaughtered for meat¹⁶ (note 8). In the 1900s, about 100 factories with 400 looms engaging 3000 workers existed in Eluru. The looms generally were 12’ (3.6 m)–18’ (5.5 m) wide. Cotton fibres for warping and hemp fibres for woofing were used. Arbuthnot and Co and Binny and Co in Madras were the primary procurers of the Eluru–Warangal–Masulipatnam carpets, and they exported the products to England and continental Europe from Madras¹⁷. Although the use of vegetable colours indeed made the Eluru–Warangal–Masulipatnam products vibrant, the European market, at the turn of the 20th century, saw these products as monotonous and dull, because they lacked lustre and were repeating archaic designs. By this time, the symmetrically knotted, machine-made, wool-pile carpets manufactured in Savonnerie, France established by Henry IV in 1608 were gaining popularity¹⁸.

Sheep-breeding trials in the Saidapet Experimental Farm

The Saidapet Experimental Farm (SEF) in 1863 (Saidapet Agricultural School until 1875, Saidapet Agricultural College from 1875) proved that its sheep-breeding trials resulted in improved sheep progeny offering harvestable wool as well as meat. Based on two wool samples from SEF sent for evaluation in 1872, an anonymous London wool broker commented that they were fair East-Indian yellows, worthy of pricing from 1 shilling 1 pence to 1 shilling 1.5 pence per pound, whereas the ordinary Australian and New Zealand wools sold at an average of 1 shilling 2.5 pence per pound in London⁷. The above comment pertained to broken strands and locks and not for fleecy wools, which were more worthy⁷. The Saidapet breed of sheep (SBS) was developed as an ‘improved’ variety by William Robertson, who was superintending SEF, and his deputy Charles Benson in the 1860s (ref. 19). Benson clarifies that their trial on the development of SBS intended first for wool and second for meat¹⁶: thus it served meeting two

human needs. In his unpublished notes, referred as the ‘Saidapet Agricultural Farm Records’²⁰ (p. 23), Benson says:

Sheep are extensively raised as a source of animal food, but as yet there is no general demand in the country for the supply of well-fed mutton. There appears to be no reason why over extensive tracts, Southern India should not compete in the supply of fine wools for manufacturing purposes.

According to Benson²⁰, more time was necessary for SBS to be established. He further suggests that it would be appropriate to procure a few rams of a short-wool breed from either northern Australia or southern Europe and by judicious crossing, better results could be achieved. Hunter²¹ (p. 9) remarks:

Experiments in breeding sheep have been made at the Saidapet farm, with fair success.

No further details on the sheep-breeding effort made in SEF are available. However, John Augustus Voelcker²² (p. 212), clarifies:

At the Saidapet farm, a fresh cross-breed called the ‘Saidapet Breed,’ has been established.

Unfortunately, Voelcker too does not elaborate on SBS. Moreover, SBS does not figure in the list provided by Acharya¹. However, Shortt³ (pp. 158–161) remarks that sheep-breeding experiments commenced in SBS in 1869 with a selection of stock consisting of ‘Mysore’, ‘Coimbatore’, ‘Patna’, ‘Nellore’ and ‘Madras’ breeds, which over the previous two or three years had been intercrossed; from the cross thus formed, a breed with definite characteristics was created. Robertson, the Superintendent of SBS named it the ‘Sydapet breed’.

Until the 1880s, sheep in southern India were raised for meat for human consumption. This means that wool was not a serious economic commodity, although sporadic reports on wool carpet-weaving did occur as outlined earlier in this note. Lack of focus on wool industry at that point of time in the Madras Presidency is reasonable, given that the generally warm and humid climate of southern India did not necessitate the use of wool and its value-added products. In

the 1860s, SBS emerged as an answer for both wool and meat needs of the Madras Presidency⁷. According to Benson²⁰, SBS was developed through improved sheep quality, managed by cautious weeding of the flock and using the best available rams. For instance, the 'Patna' breed and its progeny withstood the dry hot summer of Madras and it performed far better than the southern Indian germplasms, viz. 'Nellore' and 'Mysore'. Before producing SBS, various other germplasms, such as the 'Nellore', 'Mysore', 'Bengal' and 'Patna' were screened in Madras. The 'Patna' breed was found as the best suited to Madras environment. However, a sheep-pox epidemic in Madras affected the 'Patna' breed considerably, necessitating the importation of two half-bred Southdown-Mysore rams (note 9) from Kunigal farm, Mysore (note 10). Use of these rams resulted in sheep with better quality wool and also with better character.

Conclusion

Two strange elements feature in this note. The first is regarding how in a warm, humid, tropical climate landscape – where night temperatures never drop to low scales similar to the arid region of Rajasthan – wool-based carpet production occurred. To Robertson and Benson, the economic reason of establishing an industry that supplied raw materials to England seems to have been the primary driver in developing an 'improved' variety of sheep, which supplied wool, further to supplying meat for local human consumption. Whatever that could be, use of prisoners in India in carpet-weaving, including the Madras Presidency, impresses as a critical sociological development, serving two purposes: (i) engaging the prisoners in a productive activity and thus skilling them, and (ii) the government gained economically by marketing the jail-woven carpets. These two features seem to have made an indelible mark in the evolution of sociology of prisoners.

The second element is that no later literature, say from the 1900s referring to sheep breeds of India, speaks of SBS. Bhatia and Arora²³ in their catalogue of the genetic traits of various Indian sheep breeds indicate that the 'Coimbatore' and 'Bellary' breeds provide wool suitable for carpet production, whereas the 'Nilgiri' provides wool of apparel qua-

lity. The 'Nilgiri' was developed from a crossbred base of unknown levels of the 'Coimbatore', 'a local hairy', 'Tasmanian merino', and 'Southdown' in the 19th century by local farmers^{1,24}. The Australian merinos were introduced into Mysore as early as 1840 (ref. 25) during the administration of Mark Cubbon and hence obtaining that germplasm from Mysore to Madras by Robertson would not have been a hassle. Benson emphatically speaks of the harvestable wool of SBS in addition to its usefulness in providing meat, although no further details are trackable¹⁶. N. Kandasamy (formerly, Tamil Nadu Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, Chennai), while reviewing this manuscript commented, 'no more than 500–1000 animals of SBS could have been produced and they were lost within a decade of production', although the reasons are unclear.

Notes

1. The names, 'J. D. B. Gribble', 'J. J. Corbett', 'Dr Shortt' and 'Colonel Macaulay' mean nothing, except that John Shortt found these sheep of unusual phenotypes in the properties owned by the named people.
2. An ancient breed from Herat, then a part of Persia and presently a part of Pashto Province, Afghanistan.
3. Could mean either Saudi Arabia or any Middle-Eastern country.
4. Edgar Thurston, a surgeon by training and who superintended the Madras Museum (1885–1908), had written a monograph entitled 'Woolen fabric industry of the Madras Presidency' included in volume 3 of *Art in Industry Through the Ages (Monograph Series on Madras Presidency)*, which has been reprinted by Navrang Publications, New Delhi. Unfortunately, this monograph was inaccessible.
5. Saracens are the people who lived in and around the Roman Province of Araba Petraea, who followed Islam, but were not Arabs. The term Saracen was used widely by European writers of the Middle Ages.
6. Tortora and Johnson⁸ use the terms 'rug' and 'carpet' interchangeably for the same manufactured item.
7. Chicacole-Srikākulam; Ellore-Eluru; Berhampore (Ganjam)-Baharāmpur (West Bengal).
8. Hameeda Sana (<http://krishikosh.egranth.ac.in/bitstream/1/76699/1/D9737.pdf>, accessed on 20 October 2017; pp. 61–62) indicates that hand-operated pairs of shears are currently used to cut wool from the Deccani breed in the Hyderabad re-

gion, although the process of cutting presents as macabre (figure 3.2b, p. 62).

9. The Southdown breed of sheep originated in the UK and was brought into Australia in 1783. The Southdown has been used widely throughout Australia by crossing with various breeds of sheep, resulting in the production of sheep with prime-quality wool.
10. Kunigal farm was established by Tippu Sultan as a facility to breed horses in 1790. Kunigal presently is zoned under Tumkur district, Karnataka. It is not clear whether the 'Southdown-Mysore' rams were from the Kunigal farm set up by Tippu Sultan.

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