BOOKS in review

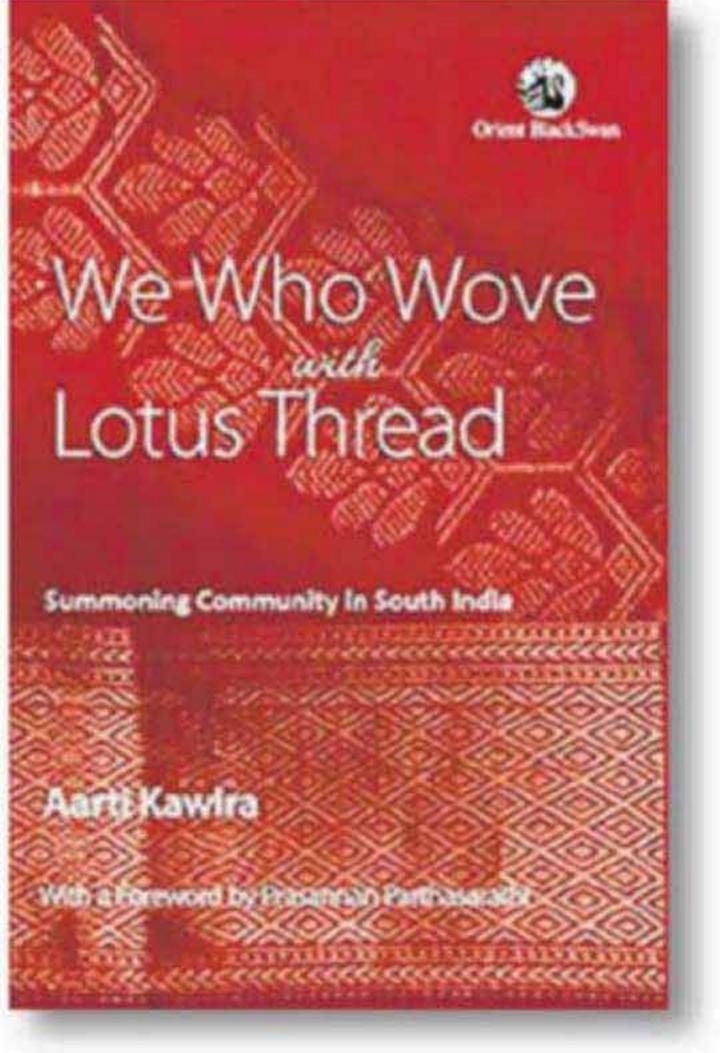
## Caste as capital

The book makes important observations on the relevance of caste affinities for minority caste groups, such as the Padma Saliyars, whose trade interests are protected not through class alliances but through the creation of a caste identity. BY ANANDHIS.

THE plight of handloom weavers in Tamil Nadu is marked by poverty, misery and distress leading to suicides among them. Two instances that conjure up an image of weavers in distress are the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam-initiated community gruel centres for starving weavers, and the Tamil film Kanchivaram with a captivating plot on the sufferings of silk weavers.

The protagonist in the film, Venkatam, an impoverished silk weaver, despite silk threads stolen from mobilisation has been a interiority of caste. and Nalli Next, are ex-

The book under review, ulted in caste and in terms of its production caste group has no political



**We Who Wove** with Lotus Summoning Community in South India

By Aarti Kawlra Blackswan, Delhi, 2018 Pages: 187+xxiii Price: Rs.695

generations of his family We Who Wove With Lotus caste-based mobilisation tus Thread follows the being involved in silk Thread, neither offers such gaining significance in above trend in nuancing weaving, does not find a images of weaver vulner- politics, and it is not sur- the caste history of the piece of silk cloth to wrap ability nor does it offer any prising that south Indian Padma Saliyars, a minority his father's body with. The resolution of class collect- history, too, has predomin- caste group with a populadesire to weave a silk sari ivism. Instead, it invites us antly focussed on the tion of eight lakhs, that is, 1 for his daughter's wedding to look at how caste serves theme of caste. In post-co- per cent of the population is thwarted by the horrid as social and cultural cap- lonial India, the politics of in Tamil Nadu. While they circumstances of poverty, a ital in protecting the ma- caste-based reservation, are mainly weavers, a few dysfunctional family and terial interest of the Mandal Commission like Nalli Chinnasamy labour exploitation. The Telugu-speaking silk mainly, brought in fresh Chetti and his sons and endless mental agony weaving community of debates on the questions of grandsons have entered makes him poison his Padma Saliyars of Tamil silence and speakability in the sari trade. Nalli Chindaughter, whose body he Nadu under harsh condi- terms of caste, leading to nasami Chetti Pvt Ltd, and covers with the incomplete tions of economic distress. renewed interest in study- the group's various entersilk sari he had woven with The politics of caste ing caste identities and the prises such as Nalli Silks

yarn meant for making a major theme in writing the The myriad ways of en- amples of a successful sari for a temple deity. The history of colonial and gaging with the caste ques- model of entrepreneurship film ends with a commun- post-colonial south India. tion has also led to in the silk sari trade across ist resolution of weavers' The centrality assigned to enquiries on everyday the world. cooperatives for ending the caste in colonial gov- transactions of caste within Interestingly, being a ernance in south India res- the household and beyond, minority community, this

and reproduction, mainly in the context of labour and capital. An example of this is David Rudner's influential study on the Nattukottai Chettiars (the banking caste) that tells us how members of this caste group intensely invest in caste as their social and symbolic capital through their close attention to ritual prerogatives, marriage alliances and gifts and endowments, which in turn enable capital accumulation, distribution and investment.

We Who Wove With Lo-

representation and its mo- Padma Saliyars, whose body represented the mon among the upwardly bilisation has been mainly trade interests are protec- loom. Vishnu Puranam mobile caste groups in as weaver-entrepreneurs ted not through class alli- mentions weavers who Tamil Nadu, was closely ances but through the wove with the lotus stem linked to their primary However, as this book creation of a bounded that emanated from Vish-concern of protecting their highlights, there have been caste identity. nu's navel. The Padma work identity by distin-

TRADITIONAL silk sari weaving in Kancheepuram, Tamil Nadu. A file picture.

interesting historical mo- Importantly, it ex- Saliyars believe that guishing themselves as ments when this caste plains how the consolida- Vishnu ordained them to "auspicious weavers". For group did make a political tion of caste collective weave.) instance, the thread cererepresentation to be in- could counter effectively mony performed for male cluded in the Backward the internal differences AUSPICIOUS WEAVERS Padma Saliyars, although Caste category and later in among community mem- This, according to the au- resembling the Brahmin the Other Backward bers, whose vulnerability thor, served the purpose of ritual practice, was not Classes. But until the late to class conflicts have been distinguishing their work meant to assimilate the 1990s, the Padma Saliyars accentuated by neoliberal practices from other community into brahminhad no significant pres- economic transforma- weavers and producers of ism but to claim equal ence in public service or in tions. cloths by attributing a spe-status for their artisanal

education. The author ob- constructed their distinct piciousness to their bour" performed by Brahserves that there was only weaver caste identity in weaving. mins as preachers and one male engineer from terms of their hereditary What is also distinct interpreters of the Vedas. the community during talent of weaving with the about the Padma Saliyars ("They have the Vedas, we that period. fibre of the lotus stem is their claim to upper have the weaving," was This excellent mono- thread. (The Padma Sali- caste status on a par with their assertion to such a graph on caste and work yars trace their ancestry to Brahmins through their claim.) makes important observa- the mythical Bhuvanar- adherence to Sanskritic Similarly, their claim tions on the relevance of ishi. He embodies their Hinduism. However, such to caste privileges as dicaste affinities for minority work culture as legend has a claim by the Padma Sali- vinely endowed silk

professional courses in The Padma Saliyars cific cultural value of aus- work with the "mental la-

caste groups such as the it that every part of his yars, though not uncom- weavers who were ritually

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power with merchants.

was also to overcome their strates, the Padma Sali- call here Ram Manohar

tion of weavers and en- The neoliberal context any cost or premium that We Who Wove With abled them to become of market volatility and the makes the system more re- Lotus Thread remarkably employees in the state- vanishing handloom in- silient and durable mainly unsettles such tendencies promoted handloom in- dustries revealing the in the eyes of those "in- of boundary setting or surdustry. community's extreme vul-siders"/members of caste veillance by caste groups In independent India, nerability and the fragility groups. Caste as social with its sympathetic yet the Hindu revival politics of the caste guild, has solidarity, even when eco- impartial enquiry into the of the Padma Saliyars, as pushed the Padma Saliyars nomic cooperation fails or Padma Saliyars' conthe book claims, enabled to re-articulate their caste fragments under the new sciousness of caste as an them to combat intra- identity as ritually en- market system, matters to articulation of privilege as caste class conflicts dowed work identity. the Padma Saliyars, and well as subalternity in their

triggered by uncertainties In the light of the above this matters to many such encounters with neoliberal in the handloom industry  $\,$  contexts, the book strongly "minority"  $\,$  caste  $\,$  groups  $\,$  production relations.  $\,$ and served the interests of recommends a re-reading that are otherwise fragile Anandhi S. is a professor a few caste entrepreneurs, of such caste histories in and insecure in the polit- at the Madras Institute of who had to ensure that the the light of how caste ical/public sphere. It is Development Studies, weaver-caste guild worked serves as social and eco- with such boundedness, Chennai.

these caste groups tended to practice segregation by denying similar social security to other "minority" castes from below, such as

In recent years, learning about caste-based societies has got entangled in identity fixing, which has ossified discussions on caste, class and gender as relational categories.

"Who speaks for whom", though very important, has contributed to the limiting of liberal knowledge practices and new enquiries in studying caste, as in the case of the Nadar caste protests against a historian's account of colonial conditions of existence for this caste or in the controversy over the visual representprivileged to offer the efficiently in order to en- nomic security, mainly for ation of B.R. Ambedkar in temple flag in silk (for kodi hance their silk sari trade. artisanal and working a political science text-

Such surveillance, status of numerical minor-yars' claim as weavers of Lohia's insightful observ-boundary setting and ity among other weaver silk cloth for god enabled ance about caste serving as policing of academic encommunities and to im- them to overcome their social security for many in quiries on caste and caste prove their bargaining minority and "subaltern" India: "Caste is presum- histories have contribstatus among the other ably the world's largest in- uted, in no small measure, Connecting the colo- weaving communities and surance for which one does to the freezing of caste nial history of such caste caste groups and take ad- not pay a formal or regular into ascribed and embodclaims, Aarti Kawlra vantage of the state's pro- premium. Solidarity is al- ied qualities without alshows how the claims to gramme for development ways there when lowing us to investigate ritual purity and high so- of handloom weaving and everything else fails." the relational aspects of cial status enabled this promotion of craft For Lohia, it is this sys-caste as material and lived caste to avoid peasantisa- heritage. tem of insurance without reality.



Andhra Pradesh. A salesman displays the "vasthram" at Nalli Silks in T. Nagar, Chennai, which specialises in weaving it.

utsavam, or flag festival) As the book demon- caste groups. One may re- book.

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at the service of capital.