

# Art of the LOOM

Save our South Indian handlooms before the dwindling demand leads to the loss of an ancient heritage



**CREATIONS**  
Nanditha Krishna

for their expensive preference for Indian muslin.

The Greek *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* mentions the southern Indian town of Uraiyur. Apparently a hub of the cotton trade, this was where Greek and Roman traders came to buy cotton and silk fabrics, particularly cotton calicoes. Since the Romans paid for their purchases in gold, their preoccupation with Indian muslin is said to have contributed to the economic decline of the Roman Empire. Indian fabrics were in great demand in the ancient world, which included the Assyrians, Persians, Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans. Even today you can find Indian muslin in museums around the Mediterranean. No doubt its importance as an item of trade continues to this day, with India's WTO talks at Doha.

Both then and now, South India and Gujarat led the textile trade. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* describes Madurai as a prominent centre of cotton weaving, while the *Mahabharata* mentions Thanjavur muslin. There are several references to silk and cotton weaving in Tamil Sangam literature, especially the epic *Silappadikaram*, which describes the weavers of Kaveripattinam.

The textile trade was so important to South India that the capitals of all the kingdoms were situated near cotton growing areas. Uraiyur, the Chola capital, Kanchipuram, the Pallava capital, Madurai, the Pandyan capital, and the Coimbatore region (Kongu Nadu), where

the Chera kingdom was situated, were all traditional weaving centres. They are still noted for their textiles.

Silk made its entry, thanks to the flourishing trade between the Indian subcontinent and China. The old Tamil word for silk, *sinam*, means both Chinese and silk. *Pattu*, its present substitute, actually means a fold or folded cloth. This was derived from the ancient practice of honouring a person with a folded cloth (now replaced by a shawl or ponnaada). With references to this custom dating back to the 11th century, it is obvious that the habit of honouring people with a silk folded cloth — formerly

cotton, later silk — gave the fabric the name *pattu*. As for the exotic and alien mulberry plant, it was imported, together with the silk worms, by some enterprising traders.

Weavers were an honoured and privileged class; those in Kanchipuram could actually use the *sangu* (conch) to announce their arrival, and a palanquin for travel. Earlier, Kumbakonam was the centre of silk weaving. In the 18th century, Tipu Sultan captured Kanchipuram and brought weavers from Benares to develop the Kanchipuram silk sari. In recent times, most weavers belong to Telugu-speaking communities.

The Kanchipuram sari is unique in that the border and *pattu* are woven separately and then attached to the body of the sari. Except in Kerala, where the *Kasavu* is of white cotton with a gold *pattu* and border woven into the fabric, the typical sari of the south is made with contrasting borders on either side, and a broad *pattu*.

Since the saris of the South are more famous for their bright colours and contrasting *pattu* and borders, few people notice the intricate decoration woven in gold or coloured thread. Some of the designs are geometric: the *rudraksham* (seed), *vanki* (armlet) consisting of horizontal parallel Vs, *kuyilkan* (eye of the cuckoo), *mayilkan* (eye of the peacock), *uthiripoo* (loose flowers) and *gopuram* (temple doorway). Some are derived from nature: the *kalamam* (lotus), *hamsa* (mythical swan), *mallimoggu* (jasmine buds), *kodimalar* (flowering creeper) and *maanga* (mango). Other designs are derived from common objects such as the *salangai* (anklet) and *kodivisiri* (fan creeper). In recent times, saris have been developed along themes: famous films, the dance of Shiva and so on.

Being a native of Kanchipuram myself, I remember our regular visits to the weaver's loom. My mother, grandmother and great grandmother would spend hours with the weaver, discussing colour schemes, the detail of the design on each border and *pattu* and the weave of the body of the sari — should it be plain, have a *veldhari* (bow weave) woven in, or even tiny *kottadis* (checks). Cholis would be embellished with delicate jasmine buds. A wedding meant several days of designing, several months ahead of the event. Each sari was unique, a creation of love and beauty. The cholis were also designed with care, with different colours for the body and sleeves. The sari was never the same colour as the choli. While some were of cotton, most were of silk. Attempts were made to recreate a few of the damaged saris belonging to their peers, but it was often too late. By the second half of the 20th century, many of the earlier weaves were lost. Even Kalakshetra, which did much to revive lost designs and weaves, could not replicate many of them.

Despite the fondness for silk, the inherent cruelty in the silk-making process — which involves boiling baby

worms in hot water, even as they are snuggled up in their cocoons, to make them release the slender silk threads they hold firmly — resulted in older women shunning silk for cotton. This has resulted in a search for 'ahimsa' silk, which has yet to be perfected.

Another danger posed by the continuing market for silk saris is the gradual decline of handloom cottons. The Venkatagiri, with its soft fabric and delicate borders and *pallu*, was once a favourite in the Chennai market. Now, it has become rare and consequently, expensive. Kanchi cottons have become less visible than the expensive Kanchi silk, and while a few "specialist" shops still produce the Madurai tie-and-dye (*shungudi*), it is no longer 'tied' and 'dyed'. The dots are now obtained by printing the background in a different colour. Not many are aware that this was an ancient skill from Saurashtra (in Gujarat), introduced to the South by the members of the Saurashtra community (the *Pattunoolkaaraas*) when they fled Muslim persecution in their homeland. Contrasting borders were added to cater to South Indian preferences, for the same. Thus, the tie-and-dyed borderless *bandhini* Gujarati sari transformed into the Madurai *shungudi*, with contrasting borders, *zari* designs et al. Another variety with an *ikat* weave, the *Pochampalli*, seems to be more popular among foreigners than Indians, today. Similarly, even the Chettinad sari is suffering from declining sales, despite all efforts of the enterprising Chettiars.

"Drip-and-dry" and "wash-and-wear" saris are definitely preferable to the modern working woman. However, an alternative is possible, with cottons now being mixed with 30 per cent polyester to produce 'polycot' saris in Kanchipuram. Together with Oriya cottons, they represent a practical approach to handlooms. More importantly, they will prevent our weaving traditions from disappearing.

Beautiful designs and a unique sense of colour have always set South Indian handlooms apart; a heritage which weathered the destructive efforts of British colonialists. However, present dangers include the general lackadaisical attitude to weaving traditions in the South. Take the recent mass suicide of cotton farmers in Andhra Pradesh. Cottons and silks have been dismissed as textiles for the rich alone, mainly due to the maintenance of one and the prohibitive price of the other. This is definitely not sustainable, so unless the middle class decides to step in, we will soon lose a great heritage.

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