

An overview of Kanjeevaram silk sarees of Tamil Nadu

Kanjivaram sari is a spectacular commencement of the craftsmen living in a small town Kanchi (Kanchipuram) a famous historical town 60 kms from Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. Be it simple contrast border silk saris or those with gold zari patterns, the kanjivaram silk saris continuous to hold pride of place amongst the various silk saris variety available in the country. Thesesaris represent the essence of women hood and they speak of beauty, grace, dignity.

Origin of Kanjivaram saris

Historical records reveal that it was during sovereignty of Krishna Deva Raya that silk weaving came into existence. Kanchipuram city came into eminence our hundred years back when these two weaving communities namely Devanga and Saligar migrated to the city from Andhra Pradesh and the Kanchi silk weavers of today are known to be the descendants of these two communities.

This tradition of silk sari weaving also arose out of temple traditions as there are more than 129 finely crafted temples in the state with the Kamakshi Temple being the most famous one. These saris are also worn on weddings and other festive occasions. Today, they are over 30,000 weavers in the town and their creations are marketed by number of co-operative societies located all over the state in South India. These saris, designed in rare colour combinations are considered very special, more like an object of luxury.

Threads used in weaving

About 75% of Kanchipuram city's popularity is dependent on Silk Sari Industry, directly or indirectly, yet the city does not manufacture silk or any other raw material used in the weaving of these saris. The extremely fine and durable mulberry silk comes from Karnataka which has astonishing lustre, typical texture and sturdiness. The silk threads used for weaving the sari are made up of three single threads twisted together. These threads are then dipped in the rice water and dried in the sun. The twisted yarn is said to be much stronger than crepe and guaranteed to last for 30-40 years.

Zari threads

Zari is a silk thread twisted with thin silver wire then immersed to pure gold in liquid form. It is believed that the tradition of making zari started during the Mughal period. The gold coating of silver enhances the beauty and value of silk. The quality of zari also determines the quality of the sari. If the quality of zari is good then the lustre of sari would linger for longer extent hence the cost of the sari will also be more.

Manufacturing process

The length of raw silk is first divided into three segments using rubber tube to make three saris at a time. These silk segments are coloured separately as per the requirement. The border and pallu of a silk sari are dyed in single colour but the body of the sari is dyed in contrast colour of border and pallu.

To start dyeing process, water is boiled in a huge copper container. Then dye materials—washing soda, soap oil, dye colour are added to the boiling water. The off-white silk yarn is dipped into the coloured boiling solution. After dyeing, the coloured yarn is immersed into normal water to remove excess colour. The yarn is taken out from the container and it is allowed to dry for two to three days. Red, green, blue and mustard are the popular colours used in dyeing process.

Process of spinning

The coloured silk is brought for spinning process. The yarn bundle is first spun onto a traditional bamboo spool locally called as 'Parivattam'. Then, the yarn from these spools is again spun onto spindles with the help of spinning wheel. These spindles are used to insert into fly-shuttle, which is used while weaving to weave the weft. The spinning process is done to avoid entangles in the yarn and to ensure the easy weaving.

Process of warping

The warping is carried out in streets preferably early morning, so that the colour of the silk yarn would not be sun-bleached. The length of the yarn is tied between the two poles and the warp is stretched. Entangles in the yarn are checked and then knotted. A cotton thread is laced into the warp as it helps to trace the entangled silk threads. Once the warping is complete, the yarn is dipped in rice starch solution-KANJITO to obtain more shine and lustre. Then the yarn is loaded to warping machine to prepare a warp beam. The length of the warp 18 meters which can make three saris of 6 meters each. Nearly 3 to 5 artisans are required to complete the warping process. Count of warp threads ranges 5000 to 6000. Each thread of warp is two ply and weft is four ply.

Process of warp loading

The loom setting activity is done before weaving process. The yarn after warping is prepared into warp sheets by rolling the length of yarn to an iron rod. The process of transferring the warp sheet into weavers beam is called beaming. In this process the strands of yarn pass through the reeds and heedless. This is done by joining each silk strand to the old warp threads manually. It takes nearly 2-3 days to complete the joining process which is generally done by women.

Process of punch card making and loading

Technology is also a part in the production of silk saris. The automated design process has replaced the traditional design process. The image of the motif is first scanned and then it is traced and filled with bitmaps. Finally the image is transferred to the punch cards. Now the punch cards are attached in the form of a chain and loaded into the jacquard machine to start weaving. This automated process is simple and time saving.

Weaving in handlooms

Weaving is done on fly shuttle pit looms. The shuttle passes through the shed that opens when the pedal is operated to interlock the threads of warp and the weft. Once the shuttle is passed, the suspended rope from jacquard is pulled to form the weave. After weaving of six meters of weft, the portion of unwoven warp is intentionally left after the sari weaving which is later knotted for fringe. When the weaving is complete the unwoven stands are cut with small metal blade and sari is folded in traditional manner for marketing. It takes nearly four to five days to complete one sari.

Designing of the sari

In the Traditional Design Process the design was drawn on the graph sheet using tracing paper. The same design used to appear on the Sari but in a reduced format when compared with the graph sheet. The punch card were prepared manually taking the design from the graph. It was a slow and tedious task more over it required very skilled labour.

Now days the designs are first scanned on to the computer, which are then traced and filled with bit maps. The image is then transferred to punching card software 'Tuchman'. After the punching cards are prepared they are shifted to jacquard machine. Interlocked zari border are fixed on both sides of the sari and the garment is finished with matching gold zari pallu. This joint is woven so strongly that even if the sari tears, the pallu or border will not detach.

Colours and motifs used

The saris are usually fashioned in brightscarlet, brilliant red, saffron-orange, emerald, henna green, maroon, black, peacock blue, turquoise and ochre with bright divergent borders. Even the colour combinations are vibrant. A mango yellow body is set off by deep maroon border. A parrot green body is complimented by a bright pink border. These days, silver is also being used in addition to gold. The tissue saris are also being made by using only golden and silver metal threads by the weavers.

The motifs used in this saris' pallu are most often temples, palaces and paintings. The traditional design found in the body of sari includes pyramidal temple borders, checks, stripes and floral buttas.

Emblematic motifs such as fresh mango, sweet grapes, flowers, lotus, creeper, the sun, the moon, chariots, swans, elegant peacocks, parrots, elephant, lions and depiction of stories from mythology are very common in kanchipuram saris. Some of the traditional motifs featured in kanjivaram saris are rudraksham (representing rudraksha beads), gopuram (representing temples), mayilkan (peacocks eye), kuyilkan (nightingale) border. Patterns are also formed using lines and squares. When floral motifs are found either in inside a square or scattered all over, it is called mallinaggu. The thandavalam motif has a parallel line running all over the body of the sari. However, these days' scenes From Ramayana and Mahabharata, along with BhagwatGeeta are also being used as motifs.

The trade of Kanchivaram saris

Weavers in Kanchivaram are divided into two broad groups.

Cooperative fold

Some weavers have come together to form cooperative societies, called The Weavers' Cooperative Societies. There are 23 such cooperative societies today in Kanchipuram town providing employment to more than 30,000 silk weavers. These cooperative societies supply raw materials to the weavers and also arrange for the sale of the saris produced by them. The Weavers Service Centre at Kanchipuram, established in 1956, monitors the activities of these cooperative societies. This centre is a collection of technocrats, skilled craft persons and designers catering to the needs of the whole handloom industry. The three different sections the Dyeing Section, the Art Section and the Weaving Section form the core departments of the Centre.

Private sector

Large wholesalers and retailers of silk saris usually engage these weavers to get saris woven for them. They supply the raw material required for the master weavers and pay them wages for the work done. These retailers form their own small medium firms and sell saris at profit. This is a flourishing business and has gained lot of mileage due to improvisation in design making. This business is reaching greater heights with more and more firms coming into the industry. The market for these saris is expanding at a rapid pace as a result of computerization. Today, nearly 40,000 weavers are engaged in the handloom industry in the private sector.

Normally the co-operative societies do not undertake dicey experiments with new colours or designs. Private merchants, on the other hand, offer a much wider choice which is the distinctive attribute of private enterprise

Initiative by Tamil Nadu Government

The Tamil Nadu Government and TIFAC (Technology Information Forecasting and Assessment Council) have mutually set up a testing unit for zari in kanchipuram, which checks the gold and silver content in zari. This facility can be used by co-operatives and individuals both by paying a nominal fee. The Government is also planning to assign a special logo to kanjivaram silk saris to certify their authenticity and to protect the interest of the weavers.

This industry has been passing through a crisis on account of the availability of fake kanchi silk saris. In order to prevent that the silk yarn should be purchased from the Government shops, through centralised purchase committee to ensure its quality.

The government has undertaken a campaign to eradicate child labour from the kanchipuram silk industry. Under this campaign, the committees have been formed to inspect sari producing units. To discourage the use of child labour the government has developed an equipment, which costs ₹ 500, that performs the job of a helper.

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Until now the silk sari has not been duplicated by the power looms due to its uniqueness, but industry should be prepared well in advance to face stiff competition from the power looms as well. The government's support has become vital for the

industry to keep up the healthy performance. Hence it is important that this sector, which provides livelihood to thousands of families, is backed by the government in these tough times.

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