

Case Study

An Overview of the Growth of Kanchipuram Silk Industry

D. Pushpa Gowri

Research Scholar

Bangalore University, Bangalore

Email: pushpagowri31@gmail.com

Anitha Ramachander

Research Guide, Bangalore University

Email: anithar72@yahoo.com

Introduction

Silk is a symbol of luxury and class which no other fabric can match in glow and elegance. The touch of silk reminds the very thread of history, a shimmering fabric of unparalleled grandeur.

India has a glorious silk tradition of its own which no other country in the world can share. Tamilnadu occupies the fourth position in silk production in the country and silk weaving is a long standing tradition here. Kanchipuram is world renowned for the gorgeous handwoven silk sarees of myriad rich colours, famed for their luster, finishing and their matchless beauty.

Kanchipuram is a town which has been established and flourished during the reign of Krishnadevaraya. It is one of India's seven sacred cities which was the historical capital of the Pallavas and Cholas. It is also known as 'SILK CITY' as the main profession of the people living in and around the city is weaving silk sarees. The silk weavers have settled here for more than 400 years giving it an inevitable reputation as the producers of the best silk sarees in the country. 75% of population in the city are dependent on the silk saree weaving either directly or indirectly.

In the past weaving silk clothes and wearing them were a sign of custom and tradition which continues even today. The weavers migrated from Andhra Pradesh and settled in Kanchipuram. They

started their hereditary profession and were famously called as Devangas and Saligars who recognised themselves as descendants of Sage Markanda, the master weaver for gods.

Kanchipuram is called as temple city which is known for its rich heritage and weaving industry. The sarees woven in this town famously came to be known as Kanchipuram sarees which are called as "Queen of all sarees" in India and all over the world. It is an extraordinary type of saree with the rich and traditional look. It is also expensive because of its superior manufacturing quality and glow.

Production Process

China is the largest producer of silk in the world, but the silk used for world famous Kanchi sarees is mulberry silk which is grown in Karnataka and Tamilnadu. The jari (a gold coated silver thread) is used for borders and the pallu is from Gujarat, which gives a metallic look and brightness to a saree. It consists of 57% of silver and 0.6% of gold.

Weaving a Kanchipuram saree is very different from any other saree. The skill of weaving Kanchipuram saree has been passed on from generation to generation, with great care and elegance. It is an art that was inherited, taught by the elders and honed by practice, creativity and vision. Weaving a Kanchipuram saree is tedious but has a stamp of splendour and durability.

A Kanchipuram saree is distinguished as body portion, border portion, and pallu portion. It is called as "Korvai", where body and pallu are woven separately and then interlinked together. It is interlinked in such a way that the joining is not visible to the naked eye. It is a symbol of identification and differentiation of Kanchi saree from other sarees. The width of typical Kanchipuram saree is broader by 3 inches. The standard silk saree is 45 inches in width. Using a double warp for weaving is its speciality where each thread is actually made up of three single threads twisted together which makes it much stronger and expensive from its counterparts from Banaras or Dharmavaram. Initially, these sarees were woven in 9 yards, but today 6 yards saree is the trend followed everywhere.

Contrast jari border is a distinguishing feature of this saree. It is a silk thread which is twisted with the silver thread over it and dipped into pure gold to make jari border. However, now a days tested jari is used where the thin copper wire is electroplated with silver.

The major reason for the consistency in the quality of the sarees is the dyeing process followed from hundreds of years. River Palar which flows across Kanchipuram is a boon to this city. The stiffness of the saree is only because it is dyed in the Palar river water. In order to bring thick consistency in the saree, silk yarn is dipped in rice water and dried in the hot sun.

Uniqueness of Kanchipuram Sarees

A special technique is used to weave these sarees where three single threads of mulberry silk yarn is twisted with jari to produce a saree which is not seen elsewhere. Its excellence lies in formation of motifs, (design or pattern) by trained weavers. These motif designs are taken from sculptures of temples which has brought the name to the city as "Temple City." Some of the common motif designs are peacock, leaves, mango, rudrakshi, stripes, elephants and so on. We can also see motifs from the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Geographical Indication

To present the traditional Indian heritage Kancheepuram sarees have been brought under

Geographical Indication Act. Kancheepuram sarees are India's alluring exquisite sarees originating from the district of Kancheepuram in Tamilnadu. Only pure Kancheepuram sarees are awarded with silk mark by the Silk Board of India and this label on saree is the guarantee of its genuineness.

Kanchipuram sarees have got (GI) from Government of India in 2006 which gives it a distinctive identification and recognition in India and all over the world. This (GI) tag has proved to be a marker to build the brand name Kanchipuram. According to this (GI), it should maintain standard weight, quality and jari mark as it is mentioned in the norms of the Act.

After receipt of the (GI) mark, sales of Kanchipuram sarees have been increased all over the world.

Marketing

Previously Kanchipuram sarees were marketed only through co-operative societies. There are around 60,000 silk weavers in the city out of which 50,000 weavers work under the co-operative fold. Retailers had to register themselves as the member of these societies and purchases could only be made through these societies. Kamatchi Amman, the first Kanchipuram co-operative society was established in 1942 at Kanchipuram and later extended its branches all over Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. At present 24 co-operative societies are working in India. Slowly the trend changed and weavers started selling their products directly to wholesalers and retailers which brought them reasonable profits.

As the days passed, there are new trends in marketing these silk sarees such as online marketing, social media marketing, etc. The price ranges between Rs. 7000 and Rs.2,00,000. The worth of today's Kanchipuram industry is 20 million dollars.

Silk showrooms also provide with customisation of these sarees by having their own artisans who hand weave the sarees of customers' choice. It takes 15-20 days to complete one single saree depending on the intricacies of design.

After globalisation, Kancheepuram sarees are available all over the world. It makes the job of

selection quite challenging because of its dazzling colours, designs and variety. There are 60,000 looms in Kancheepuram with Rs.200 crore turnover and Rs.3crore of exports. They are now shipped abroad to cater to the overseas Indians. Kancheepuram sarees have crossed the Indian boundaries and have inspired the international apparel industry. Some of the acclaimed designers like Chanel, Alexander Mc Queen and Louis Vuitton have received inspiration from the brocades and silks. Alexander Mc Queen's 2008 collection was based upon the theme of 'British Royalty Meeting Indian Regality'. It was noticed as sovereign masterpiece in the show. (Kishore Balakrishna- author)

Current Trend

Authentic, unique and handpicked handloom silk sarees from across South India add elegance and style to woman. The changing consumer tastes, especially from traditional handlooms to fancy light sarees are the signals to the industry to reorient its production plans to suit the changing demand patterns.

Today powerlooms have overtaken handlooms and made the work easy and fast. Adoption of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in production and marketing process has increased both demand and supply. Implementation of Computer Aided Design (CAD) / Computer Aided Motif (CAM) has given rise to exploration of new modern designs in borders and pallu.

Times have changed and Kancheepuram sarees have also undergone a transformation. Embroidery and crystal works are done on the traditional

Kancheepuram sarees. Due to the demand for lightweight Kanchi sarees, weavers blend cotton and kora while weaving these sarees. In the modern world consumers prefer less costly and weightless sarees that are of light colours and simple designs.

To cut down the heavy cost of saree and to make it available for all type of customers weavers are producing sarees with single side border which brings down the cost by half.

Implementation of above strategies has badly affected the sale of pure Kanchipuram sarees. Instead of using Pure Jari which would cost Rs.3000 and above, tested jari (artificial jari) of Rs. 300 to Rs. 400 is being used in the borders of sarees.

Conclusion

Kanchivaram is the king of Indian silks. It is special with fine texture, soft feel, quality, craftsmanship, superior weaving technique and colour combinations. The whole culture of South India can be seen in a single sari. By taking its birth in a small town of Tamilnadu, it has proved its worth all over the world. The wardrobe of Indian women is incomplete without one Kanchi saree. It has maintained its position in the minds of customers for decades. Though it has changed its traditional look, it is the symbol of auspiciousness to wear a Kanchipuram saree in festivals and ceremonies.

Even though the industry has changed from traditional handloom to modern powerloom, it has maintained its outlook by satisfying the modern customers.