

PRECIOUS THREADS

Stuart Forster visits the city of Kanchipuram to see what makes their silk sarees so special

Every April Kanchipuram – located in Tamil Nadu state – holds a mass marriage festival. The festival commemorates the marriage of deities Shiva and Pavarti beneath a mango tree in the courtyard of the Ekambareswara temple. Whilst the city's close association with high status marriages has its origins in mythology, in reality its reputation is firmly established by exquisite silk sari production.

The city's sarees are regarded as symbols of beauty, grandeur and tradition in India. Cottage industry produces the silk fabric worn at thousands of weddings each year. Women, particularly from affluent families in the south, aspire to wear a Kanchipuram sari for their wedding ceremony.

I went the whole nine yards – the ideal length of one of the sarees – and headed to Kanchipuram to investigate why its sarees are held in such high regard. Mettu Street and Gandhi Road are dotted with cooperative and private showrooms displaying the produce of the 'City of a Thousand Temples'. On request salespeople unfurled material and allowed me to run the thick fabric between my fingers. Kanchipuram silk is heavier than the everyday chiffons, south Indian silks, crepes and georgettes of Bangalore and Mysore.

The luxurious, hushed rustle of a Kanchipuram sari whispers quality. It is woven from thread created by winding together three, or, in some

cases, five, silk filaments. Prior to being woven the silk is dyed, so the material drapes and the sari attains a lustrous sheen. Finished sarees can weigh anything between 800 to 1,500 grams and have a wonderfully rich feel.

Traditional motifs are frequently found in the broad borders – depictions of peacocks, mangos, elephants, lotuses, parrots and diamonds. In the most expensive sarees embellished scenes are woven into the pallu – the wide, decorative end of the sari. The patterns are created from a precious thread, known as a jari to some and zari to others. A salesman explained that the jari is produced by wrapping silver wire around a silk thread. The filament is then dipped into 24 carat gold dust.

Unlike weavers in other places, those in Kanchipuram have not been tempted to trade their handlooms for mechanised equipment. Nobody knows the exact number of looms in the city – estimates suggest there may be as many as 32,000. Of Kanchipuram's 164,000 inhabitants, approximately 50,000 work as weavers, albeit some part-time.

Many weavers are members of co-operatives, which became popular in the late 1940s and exist to provide for the welfare of members. The livelihood of three-quarters of the urban population is, either directly or indirectly, dependent upon the silk industry. That's significant, given the number of tourists and pilgrims who pass through in order to visit its

many temples. Hindus regard Kanchipuram as one of India's seven holiest cities, and for centuries palm leaf libraries made it a major seat of Hindu learning.

Sari production is labour intensive. Even a simple Kanchipuram sari takes two weavers around ten days to complete. Those with complex patterns – the type deemed typical of the city – are on the loom for approximately 25 days. Skilled weavers develop their own styles and might be regarded more as artists than artisans. The design of each of their sarees is unique, adding to the value of their work. This means the wearer can step out at a wedding or an important occasion safe in the knowledge that nobody else will be wearing the same garment.

Modern designs can depict anything from animals to classical dancers and come in a wide variety of coloured silks. Traditional, attention grabbing colours – bright and rich reds, oranges and yellows – are now supplemented by pastel hues and more subdued tones. Bearing in mind the work that goes into a Kanchipuram sari, their cost, which can be upwards of 45,000 INR (c.£450) and is dependant on the desired level of embellishment, remains reasonable.

Ostensibly similar sarees such as those from Dharmavaram in Andhra Pradesh, which is also known for the skills of its weavers, sell at half the price of those from Kanchipuram, or