

Kanchipuram Sari: Design for Auspiciousness

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This paper examines the design and technique of the Kanchipuram sari in order to demonstrate the unity in cultural practice and technical design (hitherto disassociated) as found among the Padma Saliyar community of weavers in Tamil Nadu.¹ Its goal is to locate design integrally into the discourse of culture by showing how the silk wedding sari, when worn or gifted, is related to the auspiciousness of events and persons, not merely on the surface, but in its very design concept. In other words, the present study will show that the cultural value of auspiciousness is intrinsically related, both to an instrumental activity, weaving, and to a seemingly rational sphere, the *korvai* design technique of the Kanchipuram saris, handwoven in a special manner that distinguishes them as unstitched garments. Unlike fabric produced as continuous yardage, each sari is woven as a complete garment unit with an inner and outer surface, top and bottom, front and back, which are in a determinate relationship to one another. I will show how the “design,” viewed as the unity of opposed elements, of the Kanchipuram sari emerges in the *korvai* technique of weaving the sari. The etymology of the Tamil term *korvai* reveals that the technique is characterized by a “unity” and “opposition” of elements.

The *korvai* design of opposed borders “joined” to the main body of the sari, it will be seen, mirrors the cultural value expressed in the Tamil term for auspiciousness, *raasi*, also viewed as involving the conjunction of opposed elements. Even the practice of weaving will be seen to enhance the auspiciousness of the sari when it is woven by weavers specializing in the same. Using the case of the Kanchipuram sari, this paper will highlight the crucial link between design and the pursuit of auspiciousness (as an individual and/or collective goal of life) in artisanal praxis² anywhere.

Design: Unity and Separation

In regular weaving, particularly in fly-shuttle and power-loom weaving, the weft (width-wise set of threads) yarn forms the unbroken single thread passing from edge to edge at right angles to the warp (length-wise set of threads). The *korvai* technique, on the other hand, entails the use of two or more shuttles, carrying two or more separate weft yarns, to constitute a single weft passage. The resulting effect is a border(s) “joined” to the main body of the sari.

- 1 The Padma Saliyars originally belong to what is now Andhra Pradesh. It is said that a section of the community migrated south into present-day Tamil Nadu sometime during the Chola period, ca. 900–1300 AD. They maintain marriage links there even today. Although there are other silk-weaving communities in Tamil Nadu, the Telugu language and worship of their caste deity, Bhavana Rishi, clearly distinguishes the Padma Saliyars from other groups in the State.
- 2 Praxis refers to the unity in human activity between the strictly rational (instrumental) and the symbolic (expressive).

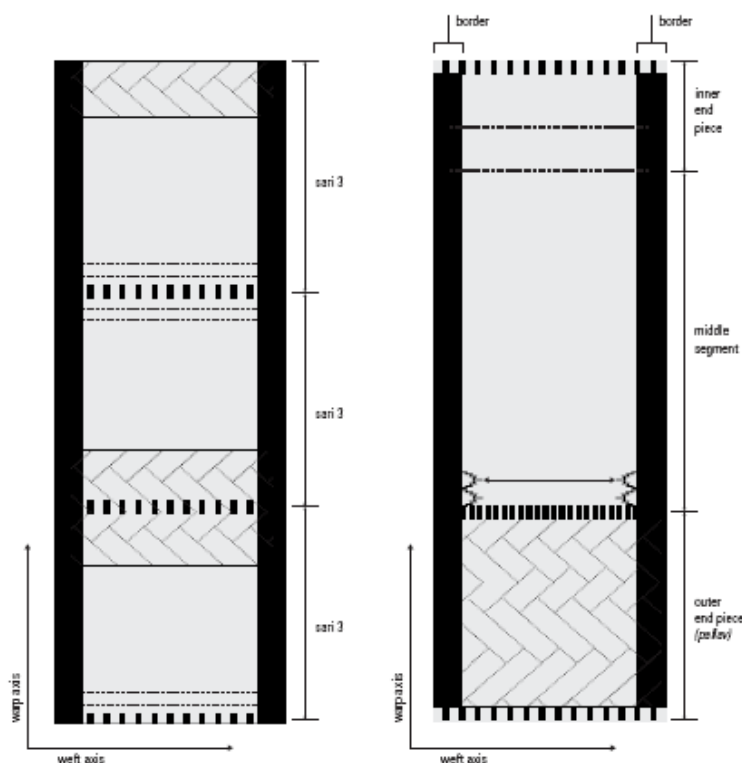


Figure 1 (left)

A warp demarcated as three separate, yet united, saris.

Figure 2 (right)

Three constituent parts of a *korvai* sari.

- 3 The average length of a sari is 5.5 m, and its width is approximately 1.5 m. The borders are anywhere between 8 cm and 24 cm, and the outer end-piece is between 65 cm and 75 cm, while the inner end-piece ranges from 40 cm to 55 cm. Often, a blouse piece of about 50 cm–75 cm may be woven next to the inner piece, which easily can be cut and separated from the sari without changing the proportions of the three constituent parts.

In Tamil Nadu, *korvai* refers to this “joining” of supplementary warp threads (in a contrasting color) at certain fixed points along the length of the warp. The product of a single warp is not a homogenous fabric length (*gaada*), nor even a single sari. Rather, it is a *group* of saris, each of which is cut from the warp as it is completed, and weaving of the next sari begun on the same warp. The length of the warp is determined by the number of saris to be woven, and is marked at regular intervals accordingly (Figure 1).

The warp of each sari is further segmented according to a set proportion, so that each sari has two well-defined borders, a middle portion and two extremes, the front and the rear (Figure 2). The division of the sari into its three constituent parts: the edges or border(s), the middle or ground, and the two end-pieces is achieved in *korvai* through three formal elements of design: (1) opposition or contrast; (2) balance, symmetrical or asymmetrical, inverted or reflective; and (3) rhythm or repetition and alternation. These now will be examined in more detail.

On the horizontal axis, the *korvai* technique involves the joining of supplementary threads on the sides of the main warp. These constitute sari borders on the lateral edges of the warp, and are contrasted in each sari from its respective middle and extreme ends:

1. The width of the additional warp always is less than, and never more than, the total width of the main warp.⁴

2. Its length is equal to, and not greater or less than, the total length of the entire warp.

3. The opposing borders never meet throughout the length of the sari and, in that sense, establish the laterality of the sari.

4. The borders are either symmetrically balanced, in that they are of the same size, or asymmetrically balanced so that either one border is entirely absent or of a different size, color, texture, and ornamentation.

5. The joining of the borders also follows an overall balance. The interlocking motifs at the junction between the borders and the middle part of the sari are executed in a pointed zigzag fashion⁵ in smooth or serrated lines, and in motifs that repeat and alternate regularly. Regardless of their permutations and combinations, the motifs must be in an inverse relation so that the apex of a peak on one border matches that of the opposite border (refer to Figure 2 above).

On the vertical axis, the warp also is divided into three, discrete parts:

1. There are two asymmetrically balanced segments that constitute the two end-pieces; the frontispiece is broader and more elaborate than the inner end-piece, that is simple in comparison.

2. The segments are opposed to one another and must always be at either end of the length of each sari, thereby establishing (and uniting with) the middle segment.

3. They are perpendicularly opposed to the borders, and are together united with the borders (in color, texture, and ornamentation) in opposition with the middle of the sari. Crucially, they fall within the border segments and do not alter the existing borders.

4. Only the frontispiece warp threads are "joined" (and separated) to the main warp by passing them through the reed in a technique that is different from *korvai*. For our purposes, however, it is sufficient to note that both of the end-pieces, too, like the borders, are differentiated from the middle segment.

Color

In Tamil Nadu, the *korvai* technique is employed to highlight the distinctiveness of the border and end-pieces from the middle portion of the sari by creating color oppositions. Supplementary threads are placed on either sides of the length of the warp, such that they are together opposed in color to that of the principal warp. The distinctiveness of the *korvai* technique lies in the creation of a solid rather than shot bordered sari (see Figure 3a). A three-color opposition also may be created in *korvai* weaving by using three different colors in

4 In double-side border weaving, when the supplementary warps on either ends are equal in width to each other and to the width of the main warp, the entire warp is divided into three equal parts. This is done for weaving the *mumbaigham*, literally "tri-partite," sari comprising two large borders equal in width to the middle segment of the sari.

5 Sometimes the "joining" is done without introducing an element of design, and therefore shows as a plain line of stitch-like interlocking.

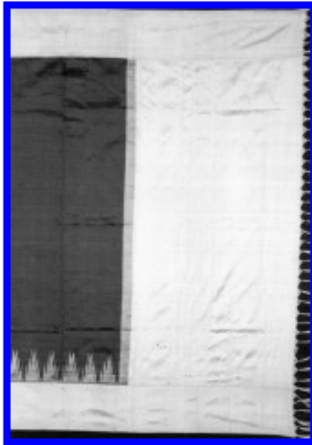


Figure 3a
A two-color opposition in a *korvai* sari.

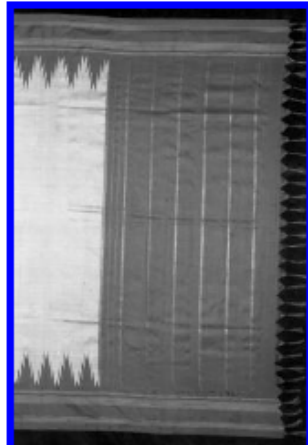


Figure 3b
A three-color sari.

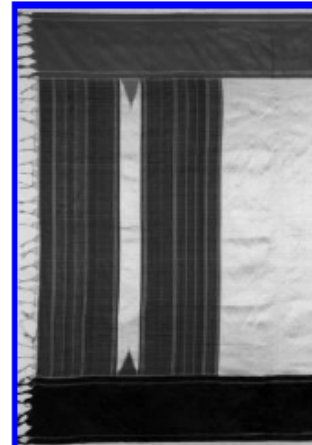


Figure 3c
A *korvai* sari with a shot body.

the warp, as well as in the three respective shuttles. Saris woven in three colors are referred to as morning-evening (*kaalai-maalai*), or Ganga-Jamuna, highlighting the alternation between light and dark in the borders of the sari, united by a third color in the middle portion (see Figure 3b).

Sometimes, the same effect of a solid border is created differently by interlacing the warp with the separate shuttles. Then only the colors of the shuttles are reversed—the two border shuttles are in the same color as the warp, and the shuttle working the middle portion of the warp is in a contrasting color. This results in the middle portion of the sari being woven in a shot rather than a solid color (see Figure 3c). In either case (i.e., whether in differentiating the color of the warp at the time of laying it or at the time of interlacing it with the shuttles), a color opposition is created. Below is a table showing the preferred contrastive color combinations in a *korvai* sari.

Table 1
Border-body combinations indicating preference for contrasts.

BORDER COLOR	BODY COLOR	
	Preferred	Restricted
Vermillion (red)	Green, Turmeric	Purple, Brown
Turmeric (golden yellow)	Green, Vermillion	Cream, Orange
Dark Green/Blue	Turmeric, Vermillion	Shades of Black

The treatment of the end-pieces in *korvai* saris also follows this relation of unity and opposition. The frontispiece is wider and more elaborate than the other, and is always a solid color as compared to the smaller end-piece which is a narrow band woven in a shot color created by the admixture of the warp color with a contrasting weft color. The extreme ends of the sari are necessarily contrasted from its middle section through the use of opposing colors, but at the same time united with the borders which must, crucially, be of the same color. Thus, if red is used in a sari for its borders, then the color invariably will be repeated at the end-pieces.

Texture

Weaving involves the creation of a surface that not only has a length and a breadth, but also a certain density and coherence, referred to as the *raham* of the sari. The crossing at right angles of the warp threads with the corresponding weft threads at the site of the warp shed results in an intermeshing, whose permeability depends on how tightly the pick (weft thread) has been packed or beaten-in. A loose construction therefore will have fewer threads per inch of cloth woven,⁶ as compared to a cloth of a closer, much tighter weave.

Textural combinations (i.e., dense and compact versus sparse and loose), are accomplished by altering the nature, amount, and quality of thread used. In addition, varying weights and twists of silk thread may be used. Weavers may create a distinct border and end-piece in a sari by contrasting the two with a different raw material for the main warp that constitutes the middle segment of a sari. For instance, cotton is used for the main warp and silk for the borders and end-pieces in saris woven in Gadwal, Andhra Pradesh. The effect is that of disparate borders and end-pieces, "joined" to the main warp in a sari.

Textural variations also are created by varying the relative densities of the threads (the thread count) in the warp to create different effects at the selvages, borders, and middle segment. The selvedge borders and middle segments also are opposed in texture to the loose junction between two saris where they are cut off and separated from each other. A further textural opposition is provided by the unwoven warp threads at either ends of a sari which are braided into tassels at equal intervals, one end inversely related to its opposite end to prevent unraveling.

Ornamentation

Ornamentation is a third mode whereby the unity and opposition of the three parts is accentuated in a *korvai* sari. It is created by using supplementary yarn in a variety of colors and materials (silk, cotton and gold and silver wire thread) over and above the ground weave, resulting in a raised effect or brocade. The brocading patterns are encoded in lifting devices that are attached separately for the borders and for the end-pieces. Not only are the two contrasted in technique,

⁶ Generally, the weft yarn is never of the same thickness as the warp yarn. Therefore, the picks per inch will never be equal to the ends per inch.

in that borders are warp-patterned whereas the frontispiece is weft-patterned, they also are perpendicular to one another. The brocading on the frontispiece forms a weft-wise cross band, and that on the borders is a warp-wise strip running along the sari length. The ornamentation consists of ornamental and interlocking geometric and figurative motifs (Figure 4a and b) that repeat and alternate at regular intervals. The overall pattern of the main end-piece is in a relation of asymmetric balance with the opposite end-piece that is a simple band, usually with a few gold brocade stripes. In its ornamentation, the frontispiece is in a relation of unity and opposition with the borders. If the adornment at the borders is a row of swans amidst foliage, then the composition is repeated in the frontispiece, only it is more elaborate and sometimes even larger in size, as compared to the borders.

The border and end-pieces together are united in contraposition to the middle of the sari that is either plain, with uniform checks or stripes, and/or embellished with sequestered extra-weft motifs evenly distributed throughout the segment. It is crucial that the ornamentation of the middle part does not interfere with that in

Figure 4a (below)
Ornamental Motifs

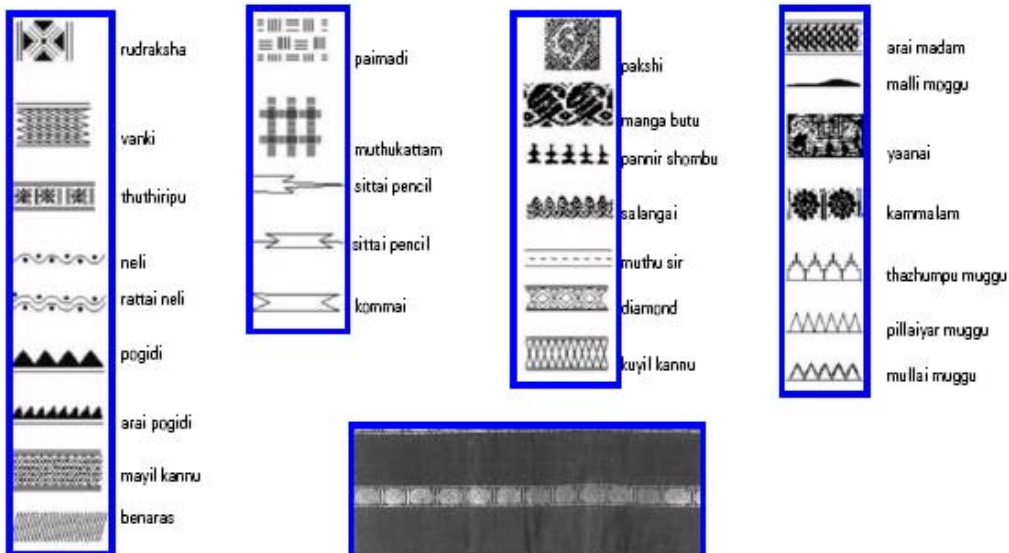
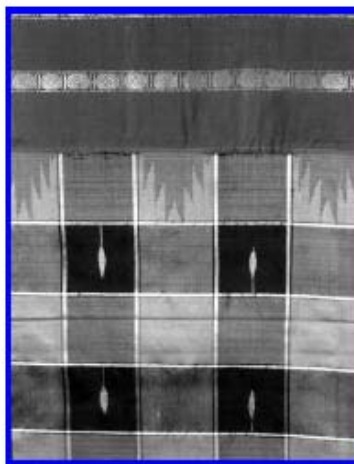


Figure 4 (right)
A black and mustard check *korvai* sari with vermilion red border. Note the placement of the rudraksha motif in the borders and the malli moggu motif in the middle segment.



the borders and end-pieces. Thus, the middle motifs invariably are neutral in their spatial orientation, without clear orientation. Those at the borders and end-pieces, if spatially specific, are always aligned such that their tops direct inward toward the middle segment. This establishes a relation of unity through rotation, between the three constituent parts of a sari (see Figure 2).

The *korvai* technique thus highlights the “design” of the sari as a complete garment by differentiating its three parts from each other and together uniting them as a bounded whole from the homogenous warp. Indeed, in Tamil Nadu, a sari without a border and a frontispiece, ceases to be a sari and instead is considered as plain yardage.

This “design” of the silk *korvai* sari is implicated in the technical and cultural perception of the sari as a “cloth-body” (as opposed to a mere covering for the body or body-cloth) in Tamil Nadu.

The “Cloth-body”

The correlations between the borders, the two end-pieces, and the middle of the sari form a set structure that corresponds to an abstract body. The tassels made from the unwoven threads separating two saris in a warp are deemed like hair whose strands are cut and braided. The narrow and compactly woven selvedge protects the sari from wear and tear as do nails in a body. The borders on either side help maintain balance and establish the laterality of the sari, like hands and feet. Joined, yet opposed, to the limbs is the torso which is the middle segment of the sari. The distinctive face belonging to this abstract body is the ornate frontispiece and even is referred to as “self.” The embellishments on the frontispiece and borders in gold and variegated silk thread are like the flowers and jewels that beautify the face and limbs. The ground weave and texture of the sari gives it a skin surface with pores, but which is impervious nevertheless. The motifs and colors that repeat and alternate give the sari its mobility as a body in motion, while the differentially textured and weighted borders and end-pieces give it its characteristic carriage or posture.⁷ Weaving therefore can be seen as entailing the genesis of a breathing, eating, growing body. It is a cloth-body whose structure is prescribed and set, not by the individual body of the wearer, but by abstract body principles with an identity of its own.

Indeed, in Tamil Nadu, the three essential parts of a *korvai* sari are even named as body parts: the frontispiece is termed *mundaani* or “cloth woven in front.” It also is referred to as the *talaippu*, literally the “head” of a sari. The middle segment of the sari is called the *vodal* or the “body” of the sari. And finally, the borders are *karai*, meaning “boundary” or “river bank,” and are suggestive of the hands and feet as dividing the body laterally.⁸ Conceived as a cloth-body, the sari is even worn or draped in accordance to a real body: the borders fall at the feet and around the arms, the ornate end-piece covers the torso, and the plain end-piece covers the loins (Figure 5).

7 The density of the middle segment of the sari is necessarily less than that of its borders, and certainly not greater than that of the selvedge. Otherwise, the sari would become imbalanced—the torso heavier than the limbs, and limp compared to the weight required to stand.

8 Even the Tamil word *pudavai* used for the sari echoes an abstract body reference. Thus, *pudai* means “bulge,” “site,” or “location”; and *vai* is “to keep” or “place” implying body contours and cloth drape.

Figure 5
At a festive gathering in Tamil Nadu, note the frontal placement of the ornamental end-piece of the saris worn by all three women.



Auspiciousness: Conjunction and Opposition, and the Concept of *Raasi*

The unity of cultural practice and technical design achieved in the weaving of the *korvai* sari brings craft praxis into the discourse of auspiciousness (and inauspiciousness). Thus far, this has been explored in Indian social anthropology mainly to highlight its analytical distinctiveness from Hindu notions of purity and pollution, and in terms of its significance in questions pertaining to social structure. In both cases, auspiciousness has been examined only with reference to ritual contexts.⁹

Thus in south India, Beck informs us that color (and heat) must be encompassed, so that in the Tamil ritual context, "... coolness both precedes and follows a brief interlude of heat."¹⁰ In ritual, Beck notes once again that colors are found as forming a "continuum," wherein each color is in a relation of association and contrast with other colors, and together point to a transformation of states. Daniel¹¹ uses the terms "compatible," "appropriate," "equilibrium," and "conjunction" to describe the intersections of planets which are harbingers of "well-being." Although not immediately concerned with auspiciousness, Christian, in her description of the festival calendar in a Telugu village, nevertheless notes that: "Auspiciousness derives from the uniting-reuniting or the celebration of that union-reunion of diverse elements."¹² Despite the tremendous value of this literature, nowhere has auspiciousness been examined as an outcome of mundane or practical activity in this world. The present analysis examines auspiciousness, defined as having to do with intersections and conjunctions of opposed elements and their transformations, in the context of weaving the *korvai* sari. Here the technical (instrumental) and cultural (expressive) truth of the body are simultaneously

9 See, for instance, Srinivas (1952), Das (1982), Carman and Marglin (1995), Marglin (1995), Madan (1997), and Raheja (1989).

10 Brenda E. F. Beck, "Colour and Heat in South Indian Ritual," *Man* 4:4 (1969): 566.

11 E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

12 Jane M. Christian, "The End Is the Beginning: A Festival Chain in Andhra Pradesh" in *Religious Festivals in South India and Sri Lanka*, G.R. Welbon and G. E. Yocum, eds. (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992), 261.

- 13 M. Winslow, et. al., *Winslow's English-Tamil Dictionary* (1888), 3rd edition revised, enlarged, and Romanized by C. Appaswamy Pillai (reprinted New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, 1989), 1223, 1510, and 254.
- 14 Madras University *Tamil Lexicon*, 6 vols. (Madras: Macmillan, 1962), 3423.
- 15 See, for instance, Obeyesekere (1976), Kemper (1978), Zimmerman (1979), and Egnor (1983).
- 16 Frederique A. Marglin, *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri* (Delhi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 302.
- 17 See, for instance, Beck (1973), Reynolds (1980), McGilvray (1982), Marglin (1995), Good (1991), Hildebeitel (1991), Tarlo (1996), and Visveswaran (1996). In Tamil Nadu, a girl child is made to wear a long skirt and blouse, usually made from her mother's old sari. At the first signs of maturity, she begins to wear a half-sari that covers her torso and bosom, and is worn over the full-length skirt. It is only after attaining puberty that an adolescent girl in south India begins to wear a full sari.
- 18 Brenda E. F. Beck, "The Right-Left Division of South Indian Society" in *Right and Left: Essays on Dual Symbolic Classification*, Rodney Needham, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 411.
- 19 "Turmeric often is rubbed on a young woman's body before her bath to cool her and to remove pollution ... A piece of turmeric may be used in place of a wedding necklace. This spice has a very strong association with fertility and prosperity. It is so auspicious that widows are not allowed to use it." (Beck 1969: 559).

realized at the level of design. It is this which renders the product of this activity significant for human identity and exchange. The cloth-body—the *korvai* sari—when worn or gifted is intrinsically related to the auspiciousness of events and persons.

In its literal application, "auspicious" refers to a "sign" of the zodiac to denote an individual's planetary constellation.¹³ According to the *Tamil Lexicon*, it is a word borrowed from Sanskrit and means "collection," "disposition," "harmony," and "luck."¹⁴ In Tamil, the term *raasi's* usage is based upon the assumption common to South Asian systems of healing and astrology that the individual body must be viewed in relation to the environment, which is ever-changing with respect to both time and place.¹⁵

According to this schema, any individual, regardless of his caste status,¹⁶ is prone to both "auspicious" (*nalla raasi*) and "inauspicious" (*ketta raasi*) influences. In Tamil Nadu, it is not unusual for individuals to consult astrologers and the almanac regarding auspicious time periods before embarking on important tasks. In every weaving household, often pasted or hung by the side of the loom, is a daily or yearly chart indicating auspicious and inauspicious periods. Indeed, even the loom space is constructed appropriately (i.e., in accordance with the weaver's own planetary configuration) so that the pit itself is *raasi* for the weaver. No wonder then the effect of a "conjunction" or "joining" of contrasting colors in the *korvai* technique points to the movement and transformation of the person to another state, whether of well-being and misfortune, life-affirmation or its negation.

My research draws attention to auspiciousness as a cultural value created in the daily practice of a craft which relates the individual and the community to the cosmos. For the Padma Saliyars, the pursuit of auspiciousness is apparent in their adherence to certain weaving techniques particularly intended for the augmentation of this "well-being" and the mitigation of misfortune for the users of their products. This is achieved not only in the weaving, but also in the wearing and exchange of *korvai* saris.

Saris in India are seen to be indicative of a particular stage in a woman's life-cycle.¹⁷ Indeed, in Tamil Nadu, the silk *korvai* sari, distinguished by its contrasting borders, is a conspicuous "marker" of a woman's *sumangali* (literally woman with *mangalam* or "auspiciousness") or married status. Thus, a *sumangali's* sari always must be bordered, whereas a widow's sari is virtually plain and undifferentiated.¹⁸ The sari worn by the married woman is metonymically related to other "markers" of a *sumangali*: the wedding necklace; gold ornaments; flowers for the hair; yellow hue apparent on the face, hands, and feet from the use of turmeric during ablutions; and the round vermilion mark on the forehead. Significantly, in the Tamil context, widowhood is marked by the divestiture of these very markers of auspiciousness.

Colors such as vermilion red and turmeric yellow, which already are part of an auspicious married woman's toilet,²⁰ are preferred in the wedding sari. For a sari to be auspicious, it must be bordered, and in color combinations considered more contrastive than others. For example, the color white, seen as renunciatory and life-abnegating in its properties as a cooling color²¹ when woven along with red, becomes associated with fertility and life affirmation. Among many non-Brahmin communities in Tamil Nadu, a red-and-white check cotton sari is the traditional wedding sari. White often is the color worn by widows, but its union with turmeric yellow, the color of "human auspicious increase,"²² transforms it completely. The Padma Saliyars's wedding sari is a white sari dyed in turmeric, and signifies life-giving fertility and prosperity.

The undifferentiated color black is similarly correlated. Most Padma Saliyars hesitate to weave a black sari, for it is considered ominous for the weaver and his family and will cause misfortune to befall them. Saris exchanged and worn during the *sunangali praarthana* ritual for auspicious married women are enjoined to be woven without black thread²³ Interestingly, even a widow is proscribed from wearing all black because it heightens her pollution. Yet the use of an otherwise malevolent and life-threatening color such as black in combination with other colors, however minimally, is seen as a protection against evil and destruction.²⁴

In Tamil culture, the search for "well-being" (equally the evasion of adversity and misfortune) through work and worship is the quest not only of material well-being, but also a moral enhancement. Auspiciousness thus is really the optimal fulfillment of one's life-aims. Given life's sorrows and joys, failures and fortunes, vices and virtues, auspicious procedures—whether weaving a particular sari or referring to the almanac—tend to keep the balance more towards the latter than the former states. Quite clearly, a coherence and consistency between different levels of one's life and work—pragmatic, erotic, spiritual—will tend to enhance this elusive bargain in one's favor. Viewed in this light, the *sringara rasa* of Indian art and aesthetic theory²⁴ begins to approach the *raasi* of life and work activity. If then the *korvai* sari is both good and beautiful and true, it is a measure, surely, of similar qualities in the weaver.

Padma Saliyars: Specialists in Auspiciousness

The Padma Saliyars are known, not only as a traditional silk weaving community, but also as providers of a very specialized product—silk saris for auspicious occasions. Their saris are valued for their characteristic weight, durability, luster, and bright, contrasting color combinations. The phenomenal sales of such saris during festival and marriage seasons every year is testimony to their popularity even when compared with saris from Benaras, the traditional silk center in the north.

20 Prema Srinivasan, "The Sari Unwinds: South Indian Traditions, 1850–1983" in *Pudu Pavu*, Exhibition Catalogue (Madras: Co-optex, 1983), 559–560.

21 *Ibid.*, 559.

22 Rathi Vinay Jha, "Kanchivani: The Saris of Kanchipuram," *Marg* XLVI:3 (1995): 87.

23 Susan Hanchett, *Coloured Rice: Symbolic Structure in Hindu Family Festivals* (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1986), 289.

24 Amrit Srinivasan, "Art as Vocation: Issues Arising from Bharata's Natyasastra" in *Proceedings: Seminar on Natyasastra: Text and Context?* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Academy, 1992).

For the Padma Saliyars, weaving saris meant for auspicious occasions is more than just the production of a commodity for exchange in the market. Indeed, it is the “work ethic” of the Padma Saliyars to adhere to appropriate procedures—from laying out the warp on the loom to the final weaving and selling of the cloth—to ensure the overall propitiousness of their work and its products.

There is an explicit “moral” correlation between the producer and the product.²⁵ In her account of the theory and practice of the craft of the Vishvakarmas, Sashikala Ananth emphasizes that: “The sculptor learns to represent on stone, wood, metal, or earth the essence of his inner understanding....The *shilpi* creates the *shilpa* out of himself as it were, and all his feelings are reflected in the manifested form.”²⁶

For the Padma Saliyars, to conduct one’s life and work in accordance with certain “good practices” is to automatically heighten auspiciousness. These good practices are believed to become infused into the very cloth they weave and sell. Weavers of *raasi* saris are known for their strict adherence to various prescriptions during the preparatory and weaving processes. It is believed that auspiciousness will accrue if the star or lunar asterism and the solar planetary conjunction of the weaver “matches” that of the merchant’s on the day weaving is begun. In fact, the merchant’s profit depends on this practice. Even Lord Vishnu, the Padma Saliyars believe, is said to have given out the lotus stem yarn only after having selected an “appropriate” time to commence weaving. During life-cycle rituals, and certain calendrical times and days, the loom is the object of ritual avoidance. Failure to follow these prescriptions if greedy for more income may prove inauspicious and even harmful to the cloth, the weaver, the merchant, and even to the wearer.

Once taken off the loom, the sari is susceptible to pollution unless it is sold within a certain acceptable time period. The sellers of “new” cloth perceive themselves as selling auspiciousness. Once sold to a potential user, it becomes “old” even if it has not been actually used. It is thought to have lost its auspiciousness. Sari retailers seldom take back saris once sold because they believe that the sari is no longer fit for use. It is the responsibility of the retailer, whom his customer trusts, not to sell her inauspicious, impure, soiled cloth; which may have been imbued with the unknown and harmful qualities of the body that first donned it. When customers insist on returning or exchanging saris, the latter are kept aside for discount sales in which there is no guarantee of the auspicious status of the cloth. In fact, the month of Adi, otherwise an inauspicious month for marriages and other ceremonies, is a month when Radha Silks holds their largest discount sale. Saris bought and sold during this period come with the clear understanding that they are with some flaw, and hence the lowered price. Saris that have been on the shelf for longer than sixty to ninety days also eventually find their place in discount sales since they are of “old” stock.

25 Marcel Mauss has explicated the relationship between a person and a material object in the context of his analysis of the “gift” which, according to him, “... is a person or pertains to a person. Hence, it follows that to give something is to give a part of oneself In this system of ideas, one gives away what is, in reality, a part of one’s nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence.” *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, translated by Ian Cunnison (New York: The Norton Library, 1967), 10.

26 Sashikala Ananth, “The Institutions of the Vishwakarma,” *Architecture + Design* (Sept.–Oct. 1991): 79.

Wedding saris therefore are never purchased at discount sales. Ideally, wedding saris are custom-made to the specified orders placed by the client, either with the retailer or directly with a weaver. When this is not possible, then it is the responsibility of the trusted retailer to provide saris that are “fresh from the weaver’s loom,” and auspicious in every respect. It is not enough that a sari be “auspicious” at the time of purchase. In fact, the selection of a wedding sari and even the first stepping into a sari emporium after a marriage is finalized, is done only on auspicious days,²⁷ that together “match” with the individual horoscope of the bride and groom.

Moreover, people are known to buy the bridal sari only from the particular shop they believe to be *raasi* for their family. A silk sari shop often may even acquire the reputation for providing such a service, and come to be known as an “auspicious shop.” The Padma Saliyar-owned concerns, Nalli Chinnasamy Chetti and Radha Silk Emporium, have their respective clientele who believe that buying the first sari from them soon after a marriage is fixed will bring “good luck” to the newlyweds. “Nallis brings good fortune” is a common phrase employed by families who have been purchasing their wedding saris from Nalli. The Radha Silk Emporium, in fact, also is known as “Rasi,” from the letters Ra and Si in their name but, as they insist, it is also the word *raasi*, to stand for “auspicious.” Writing about the jewelry, sari, and utensils shops in the vicinity of the Kapaalishvara temple in Mylapore, where the Radha Silk Emporium also is located, Michell notes, “Women do not come to Mylapore to buy just any sari, but the most important wedding sari at famous shops whose dazzling brocades are fit for a goddess or for a beautiful bride.”²⁸ So inextricable is the Padma Saliyars’ identity with auspicious occasions that traditionally in their community the groom was made to weave his bride’s wedding sari, which was not only a symbol of a fruitful marriage but, in many instances, constituted the auspicious act of marriage itself. By giving a sari to a woman, a man stated his intentions very clearly.

That the Padma Saliyars truly believe that they are not just sellers of textiles, but providers of auspicious cloths, is apparent from the way they transact business with their customers, especially those who come to purchase saris expressly for weddings. Once selected, the actual wedding sari and the groom’s *veshti* (the lower unstitched garment worn by men) are ritually exchanged, not across the counter, but in the presence of the shop deity appropriately wrapped in a “pure” white cloth with auspicious vermilion and turmeric marks. Every day, a piece of cloth, usually a blouse piece, is ritually offered at the Radha Silk Emporium to the last marriage party that enters the showroom.

I have sought to demonstrate the strain towards holism, identity, and difference in craft through an examination of a particular product of weaving, the *korvai* sari. I have focused on the technical and cultural aspects of craft work, as embodied in the Padma Saliyar

27 Tuesdays and Saturdays usually are not considered auspicious days for making purchases according to most almanacs. Silk shops expect little business on these days of the week.

28 George Michell, ed. *Temple Towns of Tamilnadu* (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1993), 120.

community, in order to demonstrate: (1) its auspiciousness; (2) identified in the coming together and setting apart of opposed elements (i.e., a “conjunction”); and (3) constituted in the weaving process through the *korvai* technique of “joining” a contrasting border to the main body of the sari. The Padma Saliyars thus are engaged in the task of creating auspiciousness in the very *design* of the saris they weave.

This paper has endeavored to interpret artisanal design and technique—embodied in products such as the *korvai* sari—as combining worldly goals as well as those pertaining to the hereafter. Viewed thus, creativity and innovation become possible within, rather than without, formal parameters dictated by tradition. It is hoped that the “design” of traditional crafts have achieved a deeper significance when viewed as mirroring universal principles and cultural values.

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