

Sarees traditionally woven in the Thanjavur region between the 17th and 19th centuries

Dr. J. Sumathi

Assistant Professor

C.P.R. Institute of Indological Research

Abstract

In a tapestry of timeless elegance, cultural heritage, and artistic finesse, the saree stands as a symbol of grace and sophistication. Woven with threads of tradition and draped with stories of generations past, the saree encapsulates the essence of the diverse and vibrant cultures of India. Its intricate weaves, vivid colours, and exquisite designs have captivated the hearts of people across the globe. The saree is a powerful symbol of Indian cultural identity, representing tradition, artistry and femininity, with its diverse styles and fabrics reflecting regional differences and historical significance. Sarees have been an integral part of Indian culture for centuries, representing elegance, finesse and tradition. Over the years, the art of saree weaving and drapery has evolved, reflecting the rich heritage of India and the cultural diversity of its regions. There is evidence that the people of Thanjavur were involved in traditional and specific types of handloom weaving. This paper proposes to study three types of woven sarees prevalent in early modern period and the present day recreations of similar types of sarees.

Key words – Thanjavur, traditional saree, Kodali Karuppur sarees, Kuttuni saree,

Introduction

In the 17th and 19th centuries, Thanjavur and surrounding villages had weavers. It is worth noting that those who excelled in the weaving industry in each region enjoyed individual recognition. In the 1800s, quality sarees came from Thanjavur areas like Kumbakonam, Karuppur, Myladuthurai and Ayyampet¹. The region produced silk sarees as well as cotton sarees, like Kuttuni sarees, Kooranadu sarees, cotton sarees, Kodali Karuppur sarees, carpets and silk sarees. Evidence of this can be seen in the paintings of the Maratha and Nayak eras of rule in Thanjavur. It is noteworthy that we can see fabrics related to Thanjavur in many museums.

Kooranadu saree

Kooranadu is a village in Myladuthurai which may have perhaps been the original producing centre for the Kooranadu silk saree in innumerable designs². This region is famously known as Kooranadu due to its specialty in weaving of cotton sarees. The famous Kooranadu fabrics are chiefly of the plain striped patterns with lace threads mixed in the warp or the woof. The greater part of the cloth consists of silk. Country dyes

¹JasleenDamija, (etd.), (1995), *The Oven Silk of India*, Marg Publications, Bombay, p.95.

²Kamala S. Dongerkery, *The Indian Sari*, All Indian Handicrafts Board, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, New Delhi. pp.61-63.

are used, and the predominant colour is orange (a local natural dye called *kapili*). Kooranadu saree is usually red or mustard in colour³. The Kooranadu sarees of the South have also always been woven in heavy silks, in similar colours, but specialised in wide ornamented borders with linear patterns and check designs, sometimes in gold-yellow silk and sometimes in gold⁴. Today, many colours like purple, blue, pink, green are also used. These have expanded the Kooranadu saree to include countless colours that touch every aspect of the rainbow. Wedding rituals connect the bride and groom in an eternal bond. The Kooranadu sarees are worn by women from certain castes of the Hindu community of Tamil Nadu for the long journey of marriage. One of the most distinctive features of this saree is how the cotton checks are formed, that is, by the interlacing of warp and weft during weaving⁵. According to Mahatma Gandhi, silk sarees were at first locally manufactured at Kooranadu (near Mayavaram, the price of the saree is Rupees 10 to 30). Later, it was done in Kanchipuram and Bangalore⁶. In the 19th century, the very old and traditional pattern of the red colour saree was preserved in the Glasgow museum (fig-1)⁷.



Fig-1 Traditional Kooranadu saree
Courtesy - Glasgow Museum Exhibition – 1888.

Karuppur saree

Karuppur village, nestled by the river Kollidam, once thrived with a centuries-old textile industry, renowned for crafting Kodali Karuppur sarees. A small group of cotton textiles, probably woven for the court of Thanjavur at the end of the eighteenth century and later, featured an extraordinary combination of *jamdani* brocading and dye-painting. Unique among Indian textiles for their technique and style of patterning, the few dhotis, sarees and turban cloths that survive may have been produced at the nearby village of Karuppur near Trichy. The Karuppur textiles were worn mostly by the Thanjavur nobility who also gifted them away as dresses of honour. In several Maratha states such as Baroda, Kolhapur and Satara, the Karuppur saree was considered an essential element of a bride's trousseau, as was the Karuppur turban for the groom. It has also been suggested that these cloths may have served some ritual function in the temples of Thanjavur. The

³ Knight Douglas, (2010), *Balasaraswathi Art & Life*, Wesleyan University Press, p.81.

⁴ Bhavani Enakshi, (1969), *Decorative designs and craftsmanship of India with over 10,001 designs and motifs from the Crafts of India*, D.B. Taraporavela Sons, Bombay, p.22.

⁵ Kamala S. Dongerkery, *Ibid.*, p.63.

⁶ Mahatma Gandhi, (1941), *To the Women, Tamil Sisters Again*, Law Journal Press, Allahabad. p.185.

⁷ Askari Nasreen, (1999), *Uncut Cloth*, 1999, Merrel Halbert, London. p.29.

Karuppur saree, which evolved under the patronage of the Maratha rule; has a unique place among the textiles. The design vocabulary of the Karuppur textile appears to have been a limited one⁸.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, small pieces were still being produced. The first stage of the patterning process in the Karuppur textiles was the *jamdani* brocading with gold or silver *zari*, while the cloth was being woven. In the end-panel, most remarkably, the *zari*-brocaded areas did not serve as a pattern. They were, in fact, the background to a pattern that was to be resisted and dye-painted after the weaving was complete. Unlike the brocading of the negative space in the end-panel, small motifs in repeat arrangement were directly inlaid into the field and borders. The interstices of these would eventually receive the resists and dyes. After the cloth was removed from the loom, the outlines of the principal pattern of the end-panel and the interstitial devices of the field and borders were reserved with wax by means of a *kalam*. Other details were worked carefully with the mordant for red and black. The initial dye-bath yielded a deep maroon-red, which was further enriched in selected portions of the design by a second dyeing. This process also coloured the core yarn of the *zari*, softening its lustre and merging the brocaded areas with those that directly received the dye. It is worth noting that in many of the historic examples, both surfaces of the cloth were equally worked. In some, only one surface was dye-painted and a few appear to have been printed with the aid of blocks. In all cases, however, their production required a pre-determined layout and understanding of the design and, thus, a very close collaboration between the weaver and the dye-painter or printer⁹.

The design vocabulary of the Karuppur textiles appears to have been a limited one. Most areas were patterned with a stock range of small geometric and linear motifs of a style that recalls the *saudagiri* textiles exported from Gujarat to South-east Asia. The vestiges of a Gujarati dialect still prevalent among the textile craftsmen of the Thanjavur area, as well as of other parts of Tamil Nadu, reinforces the possibility of an ancestry in western India¹⁰.

In early days, a small square cloth was printed and were borders for dhotis introduced. This cotton was brocaded with gold and resist-dyed and was made in Karuppur village for the Court of Thanjavur, South India in the 19th century. The dhoti is of white cotton and is of the long type worn in South India. The end-borders are woven bands of gold, enriched by dyeing in red. The side borders are brocaded in gold with three bands of simple floral ornament, enriched by patterns worked in wax-resist and dyed deep red and black. Of the three brocaded bands in the border, the outer two are identical. A round flower of eight petals alternates with a pointed leaf. The flowers and the leaves are dyed red, with broad outlines reserved in white.

⁸Rita Kapur Chishti, Rahul Jain, (2011), *Traditional beyond – Handcrafted Indian Textiles*, Roli Books, New Delhi, p.129.

⁹ John Irvin and Margaret Hall, (1971), *Indian painted and printed fabrics*, 'Gold brocade and Resists Dyed cottons from Karuppur near Tanjore 19th century', Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmadabad, pp.131-141.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

The ground of these bands is dyed black, with a fern-like leaf scroll reserved in white outlines and filled with red. The head and the curved tail of a bird appear as if from behind a brocaded flower. The central band of the border is brocaded with the same flowers, but alternating with pairs of small round balls. The brocading is dyed red, with broad outlines reserved in white. The ground of this band is dyed black; with a pattern of pairs of formal leaf scrolls reserved in white outline and filled with red. The dhoti appears to be of early date. The quality of the design and the workmanship are very fine, which closely resembles a dhoti worn by Raja Shivaji (Fig-2). (1833-1855 A.D.).



Fig-2 Dhoti worn by Raja Shivaji (1833-1855 A.D.).

Courtesy - John Irvin and Margaret Hall, *Indian painted and painted fabrics*, 'Gold brocade and Resists Dyed cottons from Karuppur near Tanjore 19th century', 1971, Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmadabad.

In Karuppur, sarees were made exclusively for widows during the Maratha period. The following saree was worn by the widowed Maratha queen at the Thanjavur palace (Fig-3) in 1953. The borders have the fine technique and intrinsic simplicity of early work, and there is no over-painting of yellow. The field border consists of five rows of flowers woven in gold, set within an ogee pattern (the double-curved form of arches) which is resist-dyed. Each gold flower is encircled by a leaf-stem. The narrow guard-borders are of small round flowers.

At the edge of the field is a row of fine red lines, pointing inwards, and now trimmed for the seam of the new field. Part of the original end-panel (*pallav*) remains, separated from the field-border by a narrow line woven in gold and dyed red. Adjoining the field-border is a line of spots brocaded in gold. The ground of this band is dyed red with a reserved pattern of delicate fern-like leaf-scroll. The gold spots are outlined with black and surrounded by an outer line of small white dots reserved on the red ground. A narrow line, woven in gold marks the edge of the next strip, which is decorated with a resist-dyed pattern of stepped squares, interspersed with a delicately drawn leaf design. The last remaining border of the *pallav* is a band of small formal trees growing from stepped-mounds, woven in gold, and interspersed with gold-brocaded leaves. The ground is filled with fern-like leaves, reserved in white on a red ground.

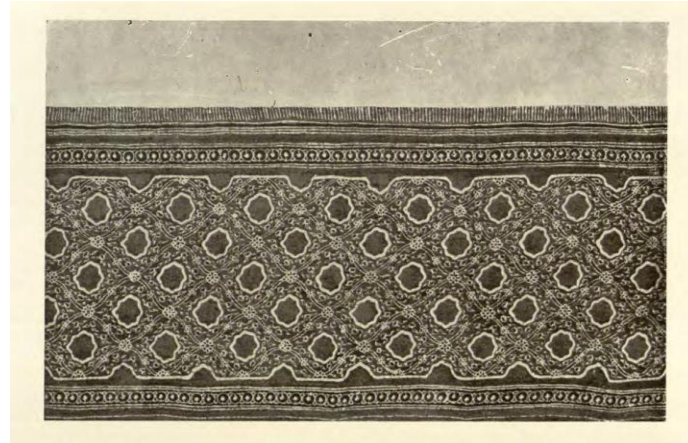


Fig-3 Widow saree of the Maratha women in Thanjavur Royal court.

Courtesy - John Irvin and Margaret Hall, *Indian painted and painted fabrics*, 'Gold brocade and Resists Dyed cottons from Karuppur near Tanjore 19th century', 1971, Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmadabad.

The normal six-yard saree's woven design follows the traditional form of a patterned field surrounded by a series of borders, and a deep end panel (*pallav*) which is richly decorated. The field is filled with quatrefoils of leaves, brocaded in gold, and dyed red with outlines of blacks and white. The interstices are filled with a leaf-scroll pattern in white, red and green on a ground dyed black. In the lower right hand corner of the field, three small quatrefoil designs have been drawn in error in place of the leaf-scroll. At the edge of the field is a narrow border of small trees growing from stepped mounds, brocaded in gold and set between narrow lines of gold. They are dyed red with outlines of black and white. Between the trees, a leaf-scroll pattern is reserved in white on a ground dyed black; some of the leaves are dyed red. The field is surrounded by a broad border of stepped lozenges, brocades in gold chequers. Within each lozenge is a gold flower, surrounded by a quatrefoil of gold leaves. The gold pattern is dyed red, with outlines of black and white. The ground within the lozenges is dyed black, with a leaf-scroll pattern reserved in white and tinted yellow¹¹.

The *pallav* is richly brocaded, with a broad central band of gold on which a row of eleven large formal flowering plants is woven in white, with a row of white flowering plants above and below. The gold ground of the border is dyed red, and the flowering plants are outlined and decorated with black and yellow. The guard-borders are bands of gold within which chevrons are brocaded in white; the chevrons are dyed black, with small flower-springs reserved. This chevron pattern in turn has narrow guard-borders of gold spots, dyed red, on a ground dyed black with a leaf-scroll pattern reserved. The outer borders of the *pallav* are bands of trees growing from small stepped mounds, brocaded in gold. The trees are dyed red, with outlines of black and white. Between them are flowering plants reserved in white on a ground black. The flowers are coloured red and black, and the leaves tinted yellow. At the lower end of the *pallav* is a resist-dyed pattern of red chevrons.

¹¹ Gittinger, Mattie Belle, (1982), 'Master dyers to the world: technique and trade in early Indian dyed cotton textiles', Textile Museum, Washington, D.C. p.129.

The intervening triangles are dyed black, each with a small flower reserved in white and tinted yellow. Below this is a band of small *tumpals* reserved in white on a black ground(Fig-4)¹²



Fig-4, Karuppur saree made for the Maratha rulers of Thanjavur, 19th century.
Courtesy - George Hewitt Myers in 1935, the Textile Museum, Washington.

In a historical context, Karuppur clothes are easily observed from the Saraswathi Mahal Manuscript and Thanjavur paintings from Egmore museum. “Raja Rani Seated” painting shows the Maratha King Shivaji and his wife Saitamba Bai in a sitting posture. In this picture, we can see the king wearing a long robe with a turban and the queen wearing a Karuppur saree (fig-5A). Next picture shows the Maratha King and Queen in a standing posture. They are shown with folded hands in a worshipping pose. Their dresses are adorned with gold leaves(Fig-5B).



Fig-5A & 5B Maratha King and Queen

¹² John Irvin and Margaret Hall, (1971), *Indian painted and painted fabrics*, ‘Gold brocade and Resists Dyed cottons from Karuppur near Tanjore 19th century’, Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmadabad, pp.131-141.

Courtesy - Paintings from Egmore Museum

The Saraswathi Mahal library manuscript of Tulajaji with his *darbar pandit* clearly shows the Karuppur attire (Fig-6A). In the portrait of King Serfoji II with his son Shivaji II; he is seen sitting in the court wearing the Karuppur cloth made into a long frock (Fig-6B).



(Fig-6A). Tulajaji with his *darbar pandit* & (Fig-6B) King Serfoji II with his son Shivaji II
Courtesy – Dr. Nanditha Krishna & Dr. Rajamani Manuscript painting from Saraswati Mahal Library – 1994.

Karuppur textiles were once the special monopoly of an exclusive class of weavers of Karuppur. They were in the employ of the Mahratta Rajahs of Thanjavur. “Among all the decorated cotton of India none are so individual and so pleasant and satisfactory both in pattern and colour as are the Karuppur examples. Gold thread formed an important part of the pattern and such clothes were not so far as is known, made elsewhere than at Karuppur”.¹³ Thus writes Prof. Hadaway of the Madras School of Arts in his report in the year 1915 and he values each saree at Rs.500. After machine printing was introduced, the craft of *kalamdar* and block printing of cloth gradually disappeared¹⁴. Although (figures 2,3 and 4) above were made in Karuppur for the ruling royal family of Thanjavur, it is clear that they were not distributed in significant quantities elsewhere. The surviving fabrics are generally believed to have been made for the last king of Thanjavur and the ladies of his court in the nineteenth century.

Ayyampettai Kuttuni Saree

Ayyampettai is a small village located in the Thanjavur district of Tamilnadu. It is well-known for its traditional handloom weaving industry which has been in existence for over 500 years. Ayyampettai weavers are renowned for their unique and intricate designs woven into silk fabrics. Kuttuni fabrics made by the Patnalakarans with silk warp and cotton weft. They specialised in silk and gold thread textiles.

¹³The Tanjore Art Exhibition (1955), souvenir p.42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Ayyampettai produced the finest variety of Indian satins called Kuttuni and Susani. They are not plain satins but woven with exquisite geometrical patterns¹⁵.

The silk is made so that the silk is visible on one side and the cotton on the other. The pattern of these cloths is obtained by dyeing the warp in a length broken by white patches. When the silk is soaked for dyeing, it is tied tightly at intervals of an inch or two so that the dye cannot penetrate into the tied area, and as a result that area comes out white. These cloths were very popular as tartans (*kylis*) for Mohammedans and as petticoats for women; but English cambrics are softer and cheaper and almost as bright, and thus, the demand for Kuttuni cloths has gradually decreased¹⁶. It is said that the current weavers of Thanjavur and Kumbakonam are not familiar with the intricacies of Kuttuni sarees. The production of these fabrics has gradually decreased and weavers have gone to other occupations as there is no tradition of learning it. The Kuttuni saree is preserved and on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Fig-7). This saree is in the colour of saffron and has small knots that can be called pearls on the body. The edge of the saree is woven in *ikkat* method with *mayilkan* pattern. Only silk threads have been used.



Fig-7, Ayyampettai *ikkat* Kuttuni saree
Courtesy - Victoria and Albert Museum – 1855

This same saree is also described by J. Forbes Watson in his *Textile Manufactures and Costumes of the people of India* (1867). It is deep crimson silk checked with white silk (Fig-8). The borders are 7 inches wide, 3 inches being woven in silk in imitation of gold and silver lace, the rest consisting of coloured and figured stripes. The figured stripes at the principal end in this instance extend only to the inner edge of the border which runs through the whole length of the piece. These stripes are green and white, and orange and white alternately, with two rows of small pines in white floss silk. Rather more than a yard of the secondary end consists of coarse yellow silk, with stripes of crimson and white. Length of piece, 8 yards ; width, 1 yard 3 inches ; weight, 1 lb. 6 oz. ; and cost \. 5s.¹⁷.

¹⁵ Soul B. Chouhan, (1893), *The Colombia Gazetteer World*, Columbia University Press, New York, p.254

¹⁶ Hemingway, F.R., (1906), *Madras District Gazetteers*, Tanjore, The Superintendent Government Press, Madras, p. 133.

¹⁷ Forbes Watson J., (1866), *Textile Manufactures and costumes of the people of India*, (printed for the Indian office), London. p.50.



Fig-8, Ayyampettai *ikkat* Kuttuni saree pieces

Courtesy- Forbes Watson J. (1866). Textile Manufactures and costumes of the people of India, Vol-5

Conclusion

Thanjavur, a significant cultural and political centre of South India, underwent profound changes during the Maratha rule. The cultural legacy of the Maratha Empire, particularly in Thanjavur is a lasting testament to the impact of Tamil and Marathi influences coming together to create a vibrant and enduring cultural centre. It continued from the late 17th century to the early 19th century. The Maratha influence in Thanjavur was marked by significant political, social and cultural changes that left a lasting mark on the region. In the Thanjavur Maratha paintings, we can see how much value was placed on fabrics woven in a small village at the royal court. The Karuppur fabrics tell us about the importance of the Maratha court and the non-Indian nature of the culture. Looking more closely, evidence of excellence in the handloom industry in Thanjavur can be seen through the Kuttuni, Karuppur and Koorainadu sarees.

In recent years, the government has recognized the importance of supporting the handloom weaving industry in India and has taken various initiatives to promote and preserve this traditional craft. This has given a boost to the Kuttuni weaving industry and has helped to create new opportunities for the weavers in the region. The revival efforts of the Kodali Karuppur saree serve as a constant reminder that art never dies and its legacy will live on for generations. At Chennai Sundari Silks, for instance, they are constantly on a quest to uphold the diverse indigenous art forms. The founder, Mr.K. Rajaram is actively involved in the revival of the Kodali Karuppur craft form and is dedicated to preserving and propagating India's diverse weaving heritage. The Handloom Weavers Cooperative Society in Tamil Nadu have recreated the traditional craftsmanship by incorporating the *pallav* of the saree with the plant pattern of the traditional Karuppur saree.

In the modern context, many independent textile designers are coming up with creative ideas by combining traditional weaving techniques with modern innovations. One such example is the Yatri weavers Company, in collaboration with Selvaraj from Ayyampet, who produced the Victoria and Albert Museum saree in the same pattern in 2023 - traditional Kuttuni variety of sarees from Thanjavur. Mr. Senthil quit his job to pursue

weaving full time, following his father's footsteps. Similarly, many such independent modern textile designers are recreating¹⁸.

Handloom weaving is not just about making clothes; it is about preserving a piece of history and keeping the memories of our ancestors alive. The handloom industry, a vibrant part of history and culture, needs continued support and conscious consumer choices to thrive. By embracing the beauty and sustainability of handloom products, we can preserve the legacy of skills, empower communities and ensure that this precious heritage continues to thrive. Even in today's modern era, the younger generation is showing interest in wearing handwoven clothes. By recreating old sarees in modern times, we can celebrate the craftsmanship and its historical significance.



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¹⁸ *Recreating a Rare Thanjavur Ikat Saree: A Journey Through History and Craftsmanship*, 11th August, 2023. <https://yatriweaves.wordpress.com/2023/08/11/how-we-recreated-a-rare-thanjavur-ikat-saree-from-the-victoria-albert-museum-archives/>, accessed on 5th April, 2025.