

Temple Architecture and Traditional Indian Silk

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Abstract -Indian textile industry is known world over and is a very vital part of the India's economy. The practice of sericulture has spread across India and has a long tall standing weaving tradition in states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, West Bengal, Assam and Uttar Pradesh. Silk has been an essential part of the culture and life of Indians from the time immemorial. The word 'Silk' evokes the feeling of royalty and delicacy. Silk is popularly known as the queen of all textiles due to its unparalleled beauty, luster, natural sheen, soft touch, and affinity for dyes. Silk garments have always been the first choice of the royals and truly the art of weaving got patronized under various kingdoms. The popularity of silk amongst Indians is the living example of excellent and fine craftsmanship of the weavers across the country. The aesthetic and artistic sense of the weavers is recognized by the craftsmanship they show in creating beautiful designs, motifs, textures, geometry and patterns on the striking colours of the fabric. The southern part of India is famous for silk weaving and the reflection of their inspiration for the design can be vividly seen through the masterpieces curated by the artisans. The paper makes an attempt to enlighten the age-old relationship between the traditional Indian silk and Temple architecture as one of its primary sources of inspiration.

Key Words: Cultural heritage, Silk saree, Hindu mythology, Motifs, Temple architecture

1.INTRODUCTION

India is rich in the tradition of silk manufacturing due to its diversity. It offers a wide spectrum of textiles encapsulating different techniques and designs as compared to the rest of the world. Every fabric of India has something different to offer due to its geographical location, its climate, culture and inspiration from the surroundings. Traditional silk keeps a sacred place in the cultural heritage of the Indian society. It has got intertwined with the culture and life of the Indians. The first written information about the fabric and its art of weaving has been mentioned in the Rigveda. Silk fabric keeps an important place in the customs and traditions of Hindus. It has been a long-driven practice of wearing garments made out of silk especially during the auspicious day, religious offerings or rituals, as silk is believed to absorb and attract the electromagnetic energy created due to the friction between the body and fabric. The most common form of garments in silk worn by women are sarees and by men are dhotis. Thus, silk forms an essential part of every Indian festival and traditional ceremonies. Silk has always been the part of fashion for the past 5000 years. Indian silk weavers have contributed in making the garment popular across the globe. Indian silk garments are the best example of an excellent craftsmanship. Weavers from every nook and corner of the country have contributed in giving a special touch to the fabric through differently inspired designs thereby imprinting their own identity. This art of weaving has been passed down

from generations to generations. Their mastery over the work is reflected through the choice of vivid colours, patterns, textures, geometry, Motifs and above all its durability. The weaving centers in India developed and flourished in and around the kingdom capitals or the holy cities due to the constant demand from the royal families and temples. Different states in India have their own hallmark for different variety of silk also with its unique identity in design, quality and the art of weaving. This paper primarily focuses upon the silk sarees from the southern part of India.^[1]

2.HISTORY OF SILK ROUTE

Silk/ Resham/ Pattu was introduced to the mankind during 27th century B.C. It is believed that silk was first discovered by a Chinese Queen Xi Ling Shi. It is quoted that she was sipping a cup of warm tea sitting under the mulberry tree. One of the cocoons fell into her cup and to her surprise the fibers of the cocoons got separated due to the warm temperature of the liquid and thus the new fabric was invented and became one of the best resources of wealth generation for the Chinese. However, the art of acquiring the silk threads from the cocoon was kept secret for almost 30 centuries. Chinese traded silk and acquired gold, silver and wool in return. The literature about the silk route between the Chinese and the Roman empire can be traced back to 300 BC. The marriage of Chinese princess with the King of Khotan ended the monopoly of China over silk as she carried with herself silkworm eggs and the seeds of the mulberry trees. Soon this knowledge was procured to India and Persia.

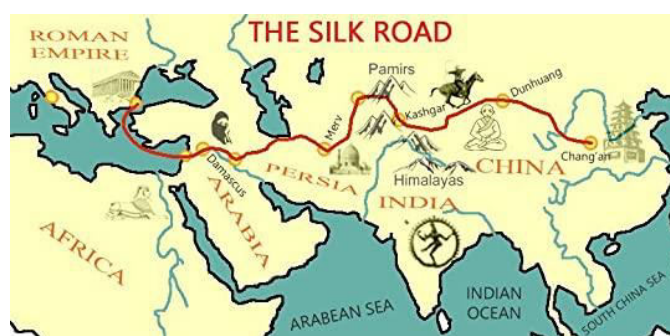


Fig -1: The silk route

Archaeological discoveries in Harappa quoted that the art and knowledge about sericulture was known to the South Asia during the time of Indus Valley Civilization dating back to 2450 BC. The discussion about the silk fabric was mentioned in the Vedic literature and the production of silk was carried out in and around the areas of Sindh during the ancient time. The silk weaving got new dimensions each under the influence of Hindu culture, Buddhism and Mughal era. Silk garments are thus considered very luxurious and royal and are passed down as heirloom from one generation to another.^[2]

3.TEXTILE TRADITION OF SOUTH INDIA

The southern part of India possesses a rich textile tradition that amalgamates the finest elements of design, colours, patterns and motifs taken from the mythological and cultural history of the region with the skill of explicit craftsmanship. A special relationship between the weaver and the weave is seen through the deep connectivity of the weaver rooted in rituals, customs and religious fervor. It can be seen that the pattern harness which travelled from Varanasi to the southern part of India by the late 19th and 20th centuries and the temple motifs were increasingly seen in the silk fabrics of Mysore, Bengaluru, Ilkal and Molakalmuru from Karnataka, Venkatgiri, Dharmavaram and Armoor from Andhra Pradesh, Gadwal and Narayanpeth from Telangana and Thanjavur, Madurai and Kanchipuram from Tamil Nadu.^[1]

The weavers were greatly influenced by the temple motifs like *Latha*(Creeper), auspicious symbols like *Mamidi*(Mango paisley), *Hamsa* (Swan), *Gajendramoksha*(Crocodile) with *Patted Hasu* (Cow), *Patted ane*(Elephant with upturned trunk) and *Pattadkudre*(Horse). The reflection of the motif of *Gandaberunda*(double headed eagle) on the silk fabric of Karnataka was seen derived from the temples of Halebidu, Hampi, Belur, Hubli and Sringeri. The dominant motif of *Yazhi*(part of lion/ horse/ elephant) was introduced on the fabric in Tamil Nadu, inspired from the temples of Thanjavur, Madurai, Rameshwaram, and Kanchipuram. The Dravidian motifs were adopted from various regions and civilizations but have been customized to embark upon the true identity of its own. These architectural marvels manifest the mythology in myriad expressions and flaunt these symbols that give them a deeper meaning. A range of motifs that appear on the fabric unfolds the true story of this marvelous piece of art.^[3]

4.THE KANCHIPURAM SAGA

Kanchipuram silk has formed an essential commodity of the south Indian culture and has a bright history of over 500 years. The sheer beauty of the fabric lies in the bright beautiful colours rich in the threads of gold (*Zarigaipattu*). The elegance with which the weavers have adopted the temple art into weaving patterns in textile can be seen through the Temple murals, Thanjavur paintings and paintings by the royals. The true identity of Kanchipuram silk is the beautiful blend of *zari* (Golden thread) – thin strips of metal wound around the fiber core. Over the period of time, several patterns and motifs have become the characteristic elements of the design. Apart from being decorative, these motifs and patterns had a symbolically strong connection with the Hindu mythology and traditional folklore. The intellect of the weavers is not just limited with the choice of motifs, but also the proper use of these motifs in a proper fashion. The finest and choicest mulberry silk in making the fabric comes from the South India, whereas the *zari* comes from Gujarat. The traditional motifs either serve the purpose of protective function or serves auspiciousness to special occasions. They reveal the stories of rich history procuring from the sources beyond textiles. These symbols highlight the cultural

significance, religious and other symbols with the similarities through the context.^[3]

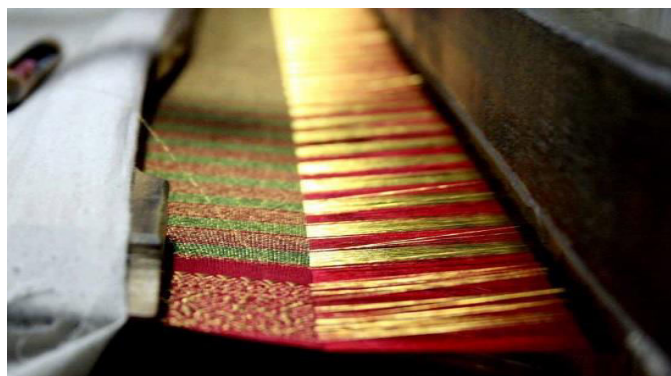


Fig -2: Weaving of Kanchipuram silk saree

4.1. Timeline of Kanchipuram Silk

The silk has borrowed its name from the place of its origin, Kanchipuram (*Kanjeevaram*) from South India is a counterpart to the popular Banarasi silk from the North. It has been popularly known for its figured and brocaded silk sarees. The art of weaving a Kanchipuram silk saree was kept alive by the temple and royal patronage. Weavers from this temple town have incorporated the art of ornamentation of motifs as portrayed in the temples of Kanchipuram. The story of Kanchipuram silk begins with the Hindu mythology. It is believed that the Kanchi silk weavers are the descendants of Sage Markanda, who himself was considered as the master weaver of God themselves. The city of Kanchipuram was built by the great Pallava rulers as a place of intense worship and learning (*Ghatiksthalam*). The city is one of the important pilgrim sites for Hindus. Pallavas worshipped lord Shiva – not known for needing grand ceremonial robes. The simplicity was seen through the white cotton *veshti* as an offering. The *veshti* was woven by the finest weavers of the land from the cotton that grew in that region.^[4]

Under the Chola rule, more temples were built making Kanchipuram a very important religious center and a place for spiritual nirvana. Cholas being Vishnu worshippers, flamboyant temples were constructed. Vishnu is believed to be a flamboyant lord and hence the cotton *veshti* had to undergo a change. The *veshti* made in cotton was replaced with silk because silk was considered pure and became a necessity for worship. With the migration of weavers from Saurashtra during Mohammed Ghazni's invasion, a new '*Korvai*' technique was born. By the end of Chola rule, the temple city of Kanchipuram came under the rule of Vijayanagara kings. It was the king Krishna Dev Raya who glorified this craft and picked up two weaving communities – the Devangas and the Saligars, major weaving communities from Andhra Pradesh who were well known for their weaving skills.

The weavers used their excellent weaving skills to replicate the images and sculptures found on the temples around. The *Yazhi*(mythical creature), the mango motif from the Ekambareshwara temple, the classical temple borders inspired from the huge gopurams of temples from south India, the *Rudraksham*(holy beads), *Hamsam*(Swan) all carved on the walls, ceiling and pillars of the temple where it came alive in the weave. Kanchi's ancient temples are the primary source of inspiration. Motifs like swan, birds, animals, flowers, vines

are acquired from the intricacy of the carvings found on the pillars, walls and vimanas of Kailasanatha, Ekambreshwara, Vaikuntha Perumal and Sri Varadarajaswamy temples.^[5]

4.2. Motifs of Kanchipuram Silk

Apart from using the motifs on the body of a saree, weavers also engage themselves into creating a variety of geometric patterns to break the simple monotony. Checks (*Kattam*), diagonal lines (*vari*), circular forms (*Buttis*) and other such elements enhances the weave. Studying the brief context of Kanchipuram, its history and the overall layout, a brief information about the animal and bird motifs that adorn this beautiful drape are as follows ^[3] –

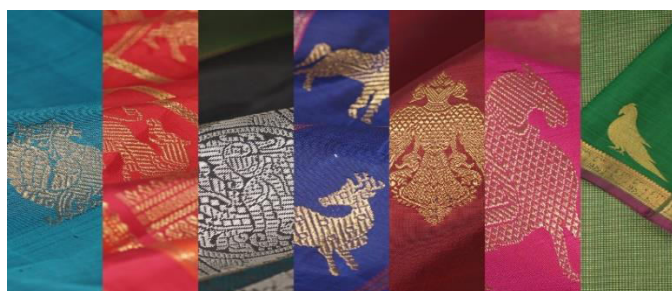


Fig -3: Motifs of Kanchipuram silk saree

A. Annapakshi (Hamsam) –

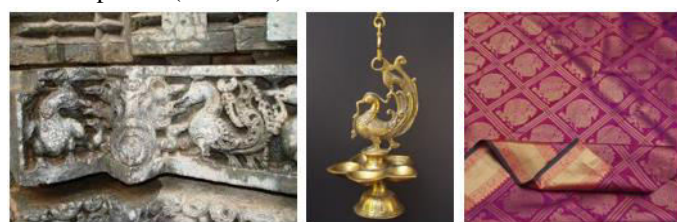


Fig -4: Somnathpura Temple, Mysore

Celebrated by poets and philosophers, this beautiful swan is a repetitive motif on the silk drape, taken from the walls and ceilings of the Kanchipuram's temples. This Annapakshi motif that appeared in the Gandhara and Kusha scriptures was later transformed into the Hindu iconography and temple sculptures. This bird which is rather curvy and round with a paisley shaped feather though resembles like a peacock (*Mayura*) is an Annam holding a flowering vine in its beak. Referred to as 'Chakravaha', this graceful bird has indeed shaped in a way into the lives and wardrobes.

B. Iruthalaipakshi (Two headed eagle) –



Fig -5: Keladi Temple, Shimmoga

The importance of 'Garuda- dhwaja' as an emblem of victory is found in mythology. The Two- headed eagle has been present in imagery from the time immemorial in various civilizations of the world. In India, Mysore Kingdom bears the title of 'Ganda- Bherunda' (a double headed eagle) as one of

the insignias of the famous Wodeyars. Later, the same symbol was also used in the mints of the Vijayanagara. Thus, it also found its way as a motif into the textiles, woven on the body and pallu.

C. Kili (Parrot) –



Fig -6: Chennakeshwara Temple, Belur

Parrot has always played a very vital role in Tamil culture, representing truth and transmission of teachings by the divinely scholars. It is believed that Saint Suka and Saint Arunagirinathar took the form of a parrot and recited and recorded many great shlokas. Goddess Meenakshi and Saint Andal are also associated with this parrot motif as a God of Love – Kama. Apart from Kanchipuram, this motif is also found on the fabric of Paithani and Patola. Not only the shape of a motif but also the distinctive green colour of the bird is charming.

D. Mayil (Peacock) –



Fig -7: Peacock carvings on temple

Peacock is associated with royalty. The national bird of India (peacock) is also associated with Lord Murugan as his *vahana*. A text written in the 12th century by the name Yaperungala Vriti, mentions the Kanchipuram city as Peacock. Athiyur, location of SriVaradarajaswamy temple is mentioned as peacock's head, whereas the Shiva Kanchi temple forms the body. There is no doubt that the famous 'mayil chakram' motif has its roots deeply attached with the spirituality.

E. Simham (Lion) –



Fig -8: Pallava temples, Kanchipuram

While walking along the outer praharam of VaikunthaPerumala temple, one come across the lion sculptures on the mandapam pillars curated by the pallavas. These were not just adornments of the temple architecture but also the symbols of victory by the Pallavas over other Kingdoms. It is quite evident through sculpture and texts that

when the temple was consecrated (*kumbhabhishekha*), the lions embodied the brilliant conquering power (*tejas*) of Goddess Durga. The lion sculptures are beautifully captivated in the monuments of the Pallava Port in Mamallapuram too. The king of animals was an emblem in all the civilizations across the timeline and in the textile design of Tamil Nadu. It is often associated with the mystical beast *Yazhi*. The motif is mostly found on the pallu of Kanchipuram saree.

F. Yazhi (Mythical Creature) –

The motif is most common in the Temple architecture as well as on the Kanchipuram saree. *Yazhi* is a composite animal of part-lion, part-elephant, part-horse. It is a popular creature that guards the entrances and corridors of most of the temples. The majestic *Gopurams* of temples of south India has a row of lines specially crafted for depicting the *Yazhi*, popularly known as *YazhiVarsai*. The common motifs in textile design are *SimhaYazhi* (Lion yazhi), *YanaiYazhi* (elephant yazhi) and *HamsaYazhi* (Swan yazhi).



Fig -9: Meenakshi temple, Madurai

G. Maan (Deer) –

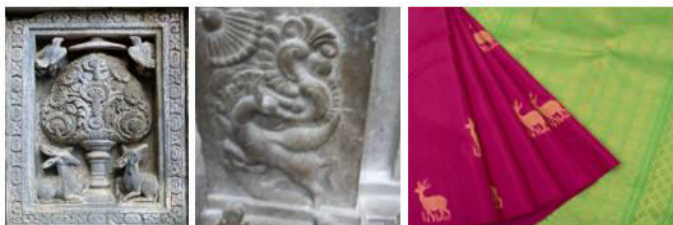


Fig -10: ThiruvanaikoilSiva temple

Described in the Ramayana, the Golden deer (*Kanchan mriga*) is a symbol of innocence and non-violence. The subtle nature of this animal is brought to life on the finest silk fabric of Kanchipuram. The animal is also associated with the iconography of Lord Siva and as the *vahana* of Vayu (Wind God).

H. Yanai (Elephant) –



Fig -11: Airavateshwara temple, Darasuram

Elephant, an auspicious animal has always been associated with Goddess of wealth, *Laxmi*. In temple architecture, one can notice the row of elephants on the plinth as though the entire structure is resting on its back. Elephants are the symbol

of power. An elephant row marching along the border of the saree and on the pallu is a visual delight.

I. Kuthirai (Horses) –



Fig -12: SriRenganathaswamy temple, Srirangam

This majestic creature is a predominant feature of the mandapas of the temples. Predominantly in South India, the depiction of the horse is a feast to the eyes of the annual Chithirai festival of Madurai, where Lord Kallazhgar is mounted on his golden horse, enters the Vaigai river. The grandeur and festivity of this procession finds in most of the Kanchipuram temple processions as horse, the *vahana*. The sculptures made from the terracotta horses known as '*mannkuthirai*' of Ayyanar have drawn an inspiration for the different form of the motif.

J. Rudraksham (Holy beads) –



Fig -13: Halebidu temple

The weavers have inspired from the prayer beads of Lord Siva and translated them onto the fabric. These beads are worn by lord Siva around his neck. They are known as *Thirukanmaniin* Tamil and are considered very auspicious for performing of the sacred rituals by the Saivites.

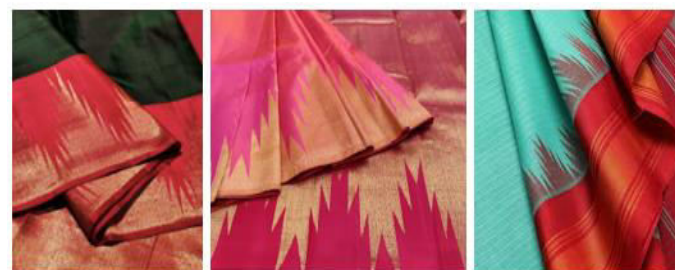


Fig -14: Temple motif border (Reku and Moggu)

The temple motif has always remained a distinctive feature in the design vocabulary of Dravidian and Deccani style of weaving. Towering Gopurams is the striking feature of South Indian temple architecture. *Gopuram Darshanamis* an alternative to those who cannot visit the temple to offer worship to the preceding deity. The scripture regarding the same is found in the verses of Tamil literature – *Gopura darshanamkotipunyam*. The weavers had blended this design

with giving justice to its meaning and value. The motif goes in a design as a row of huge triangles, interlocked in *Korvai* pattern, that resembles the temple gopurams and are referred to as *Reku* (bundle of Kewda grass – Thazhampoo) or mottu (flower buds) for small triangles. This temple design motif is represented as *reku* on the dhotis and sarees of South India narrating a story of our true cultural identity. Smaller *reku*s are often referred to as *Pillayarmoggu*.^[6]

5.THE GLORY OF GADWAL

Gadwal sarees constitute an important part of the rich and long history of traditional Indian textiles. These sarees are predominantly produced in the southern part of Andhra Pradesh and were originally meant only for *Puja* or prayer sarees. Gadwal sarees are known for their rich look, bright colours and ornate zari design work. The specialty of traditional Gadwal is that its body is woven in cotton while the border and pallu are made in silk. The sarees are simply the same in silk with plain or butti design weave motif on the edge border of saree in golden. These motifs can range from floral leaves or temple architectural inspiration of motifs. The interwoven weft technique used in the design of Gadwal saree is known locally as '*Kupadam*' and the weaving style of the border as '*kumbam*'.^[7]

5.1. Origin of Gadwal silk

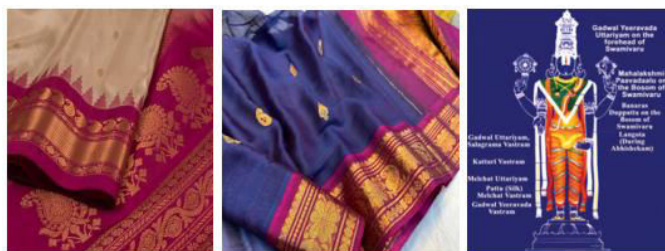


Fig -15: Gadwal: SheshaVastram

According to the mythology, it is believed that the Gadwal silk weavers were the direct descendants of Jiveshwar Maharaj. The weaver community were sent to Banaras (Varanasi) so that they could excel in the art of weaving. Despite being perfected in Banaras, it is seen that the art has a zero influence from the state of Uttar Pradesh and completely relies upon the inspiration taken from the southern part of India. The origin of these sarees can be traced back to nearly 200 years, till the time of about 200 years, to the time of Gadwalsamasthanam and the efforts of Queen Maharani *Adhi Lakshmi Devamma* who promoted this art^[7]

5.2. Motifs on Gadwal silk

The traditional motifs of Gadwal are primarily inspired from the temple architecture and nature. The motifs have always been under the fold of temple and religious places. Apart from these traditional motifs, now-a-days geometrical motifs are also vividly seen. These motifs remain in the zari work, in gold and silver on the border and on the body made out of silk.^[7]

5.3. Honour of Gadwal

The weavers of Gadwal enjoys a special privilege of weaving the *seshavastram* or the ‘*Eruvada Jodi Panchalu*’ for Lord Venkateswara at Tirupati during the annual festival of *Brahmotsavam*. The weaving of the holy fabric begins in the month of August and the pure silk fabric is woven in the colours of maroon, green and yellow. The *GadwalYeeravada*, a 24”x5” inner cloth is draped as a cushion onto the forehead of the deity before a diamond studded crown is adorned. This is a long running tradition and the cloth is still being prepared and handed over to the *Devasthanam* by the *Gadwaludyogasamsthanam*. The *vastram* is woven on a special loom and weavers follow a strict personal regimen by chanting *Sri Venkateshanamavalu*– ‘Govinda’ for 41 days during the weaving process. Once completed, weavers’ hand over the *vastram* to the main temple priest. This kick starts the annual *Brahmotsavam*.^[8]

6.THE SUBLIME ILKAL



Fig -16: Ilkal saree with temple border and Kasuti embroidery

Ilkal sarees are one of the popular garments worn by the women of North Karnataka and South Maharashtra. It is the main source of income for the weavers. The history of the saree dates back to the 8th century. The saree is mostly woven in the small villages of Kamatgi, Nidigundi and Kolhar from the Bagalkot district of Karnataka. The saree is famous because of its unique weaving technique of *Topi Theni*. The weaving technique is passed down as heirloom from one generation to other. The saree is either woven in pure cotton or mixture of silk and cotton or even in pure silk. Pure *zari* in gold is also being used for the borders. The sari has silk *pallav* and cotton or rayon border and grounds. In early times only cotton or silk was used, however rayon being cheaper is now mostly favored. The ground colour of wrap is usually black cotton and weft of coloured rayon.^[9]

6.1. Motifs

The distinctive feature of Ilkal saree is the embroidery called *Kasuti*. The embroidery is a special craft mainly practiced in North Kannada district. This technique is done by counting the threads of weft and warp. The history of *Kasuti* art dates back to the *Chalukyan* period. The word *Kasuti* is derived from *Kai* (meaning hand) and *Suti* (meaning cotton). Thus, it purely means that this art is done on cotton by hands. It is believed that women courtiers of Mysore kingdom in 17th century were mastered in 64 arts and *Kasuti* was one of them. It is believed that *Lambani* clan from Rajasthan left their homeland and settled in Karnataka bringing this art along with them. The design mostly includes the traditional patterns like palanquins, elephants, lotuses, chariots. The embroidery done on the *pallav* is called *bugadi*. The chariot or a tree with peacocks or flower motifs becomes sparse as it moves away from the

pallav, becoming small dots which come into the pleats of the saree.



Fig -17: Ilkal saree with Rath and Gopura motif

The *Kasuti* art has been inspired from the temple structures. The various motifs embroidered in *Kasuti* on saree includes *Gopuram*, *bells*, *raths*, temple sculptures, flowers and animals. Various designs include *Dagabaji Gopura*, *Gandolagida*, *Tulsi*, *Vankipatti*, *Kayapatti*, *Gopi kamala*, *Chittu kamala* and *Gandala Gopura*. All the geometric designs of the *Kasuti* are inspired from the temple structures. *Gomi* is an arrow shaped pattern used in the border. This is mostly seen maximum in the *Ilkalsarees*. Many new motifs like *Kaddichikki* and *kondichikki* were also introduced.^[10]

7.OBSERVATION

The history of the silk fabric is scooped out of a lifelong fascination with the customs, rituals and traditions of South India. They offer a systematic guideline specifying the fabric to be worn for various events thereby marking different stages of life. South India is a vast textbook with chapters defining the art, culture, history and heritage of the region. The great dynasties of the Pallavas, Cholas, Cheras, Pandyas, Nayakas and Vijaynagaras left back their immortal imprints on the sculptures and design of the temple architecture. The richness and the intricate weaving patterns of the motifs stretches back to its antiquity in temple and textile traditions and the blend of two can be vividly seen through this art. The silk fabric and weaving of the motifs inspired many new thoughts in spiritual thinking, the thread that connected culture in due course of advancement with other arts and crafts. Usually, motifs are seen on the paintings, fabrics and architecture giving a sneak peek into the timeless era. These motifs have been inspired from the local landscape and are taken down onto the fabric as a reverence to nature. It can be seen that the artisans were mastered in the weaving patterns with their creativity along with the blend in techniques and designs. The most admirable motifs are inspired from the architecture of thousands of temples around and thus are seen in most celebrated woven patterns. Thus, the handwoven silk in the narrow lanes of the quaint towns of South India are renowned world over, bearing an eloquent testimony to its glorious Dravidian heritage.

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