

Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices

Dr. Rajarshi Sengupta

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur (IITK)

Week - 02

Lecture – 08

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta and we are in the week 2 of the course ... Threads of Visual Exploration. So, in this case, what we are doing today, in this lecture, we will be focusing on the Kanji Puram Sarees of Tamil Nadu. In this discussion, what we will try to do is to try understanding ... some of the salient features of the Kanji Puram or Kanji Varam Sarees of Tamil Nadu, and then also its relationship to the architecture in the vicinity, as well as ... architectural theories. So, we will start discussing the idea of ... Kanji Puram Sarees. But before that I just wanted to show the two kinds of fabric that we find in this area. So, Kanji Puram district in Tamil Nadu is famous for its temple architecture as well as like, I mean, it has been the seat of many Dynasties, at least since the 7th century. So, in this region, what we find that simultaneously there are many kinds of craft making that had existed that has survived at the same time, they have flourished.

Among them, silk brocade making is one of them. I wanted to show the silk



brocade, the one we see on the right side of the screen, side by side with the one which are

definitely not silk brocade, but like I mean the regular cotton weaving. So, we find that I mean both cotton and silk weaving have existed in this region for quite some time. And as I have already mentioned that this brocade silk sarees or any kind of garment is not something that we see people to use them on a daily basis, but they are always reserved for particular occasions, usually the auspicious occasions.

Now, for that reason, we can also see that in the region, we will find that there are many different kinds of cloth which are found and a lungi that we have in the left side of the screen that comes from mid-19th century, 1855 also shows how the simple the stripes, at the same time the arrangement of the weft threads that sort of makes this the stripes whether the thinner stripes or the broader stripes to be prominent on the body of this wearable fabric.

Now, on the other hand, when we see this that the particular kind of Kanchipuram sarees that we have, they are mostly known for the ones which are used in the weddings. And they are also considered to be something that had been used as heirlooms that which are passed on in generations. I mean one saree would be worn by the senior members of a family and then it would be passed on to people, the younger ones in the family. So, this is how we find that how this kind of sarees they do not just have their value for craft skill or like I mean their luster and of course their visual appearance, but also they become very much part of the familial histories and the way like a community interacts with them in the larger spectrum of culture. Now, the kind of sarees that we see in Kanchipuram and especially the silk brocade sarees and the traditional ones like the ones we see fitted for the purpose of wedding or the auspicious occasions are called the Korvai sarees and which are woven in this Korvai technique. In this Korvai technique that we find there and that is something that is very specific to making the Kanchipuram sarees.

So, the communities of the weavers that we find in the Kanchipuram area and they will be predominantly from two groups and one would be the Padmasaliar community or the Padmasali community. So, the Padmasaliar community are the ones who have who are thought to have migrated from parts of Andhra Pradesh today, the Telugu speaking regions

and then they have migrated and settled in the Kanchipuram region for centuries. Now, they are the ones who are worshippers of Markandeya Rishi or and of course, Lord Vishnu and for that reason what we find that I mean they believe in this origin myth in which Markandeya Rishi was the one who was considered to be the first weaver who had woven a fabric out of lotus stem yarn. So, we do not know that I mean if a particular kind of weaving is associated with that or not but that is the story that we hear. Now, for that reason like I mean another the patron saint for the Padmasaliar community we find that I mean that is Bhavana Rishi. And then we also have the Devanga communities and the Devanga communities are also the ones we find them predominantly in the Telugu speaking region both in Telangana as well as in coastal Andhra. So, these communities we see that I mean they have stayed in the Kanchipuram region for centuries and they have excelled making this particular kind of Korvai Saris.

So, in Korvai Saris that we find and where like I mean textile scholar Aarti Kawlra argues that Korvai Saris are not something that is understood as a piece of fabric even though sari is definitely it is an untailed piece of fabric, which is not stitched anywhere and that is the reason it is wrapped around the body and worn in that way. But the thing is that I mean how this particular kind of sari is different perhaps from a lungi that does not have border that does not have a frontispiece or perhaps it also differs from its uses it can be a ritualistic use, it can also be used in the cultural setting. So, all these things something that I mean how Aarti Kawlra textile scholar Aarti Kawlra she argues for that reason we find that Korvai Saris is something that is understood as a complete garment and not just stitched piece of fabric.

So, this idea of the garment that we find in this case that I mean why this Kanchipuram Saris, the Korvai Saris are considered as this complete garment is something that we find that it does not really stay only in the materials that is used for making the sari or the particular kind of technique but also like the kind of belief systems and also the way we see the sari as a body. [Korvai Sari] is something that I mean perhaps something that breathes, something that also grows with people. So, those ideas we find that to be much ingrained in this idea of the Korvai Saris. Which sets it apart from the other kind of

brocade saris, as well as the other kind of woven fabric that we find the wearers would wrap them around their body like a lungi. So, what happens in this particular kind of brocade that we find that it is predominantly silk and sometimes I mean of course it is in silk and sometimes we also have zari which is used with silk for executing the motifs. In this case we do have the warp and then like I mean there is one layer of the weft that is the continuous weft and on the top of that we also have the supplementary wefts, which would be used for making the motifs. And this is again something that we can understand that it is done in this draw loom or today a lot of times we also find that how the punch cards from inspired from the Jacquard looms are used there for executing this motifs, this complex motifs that we have on the surface of these saris. Now the other thing that we find that I mean when this Korvi Saris are made perhaps it is not very clear in this image but the borders are considered to be different, separate from the body of the sari. and then there are also clear marks in these cases where we can find how the borders are joined during the weaving technique. so what happens in this case that I mean the border is something that is understood as a separate entity and then the body of the sari is considered as the separate entity and then of course the frontispiece or the palla/pallu here that we have here so this is also something that we understand as like I mean three separate entities are there, which would be sort of joined together, through the technique of making the sari, as well as through joining of this three symbolic elements into a sari which makes a complete garment.



So, these are some of the things that we find in these cases and perhaps what we also find that I mean there are when these borders are joined to these saris there

are specific kind of ways in which we see that the color and then like I mean the distribution

of motifs and everything that work out. So, for example in these cases what we find that there are opposition of elements which are emphasized in these saris, something that Aarti Kawlra also points out. If we think about the border being a separate entity from or like I mean a separate being from the body of the sari in this case in the image that we have we clearly see that the border this yellow border is something that is contrasting with this dark green body. and it is a marker for the way we understand that I mean how this two opposing elements there is a sort of like I mean coming together in this case and the border is not something that is appearing in one side of the sari but both sides of the sari. It can vary but certainly we do find that I mean how in these two cases the borders would have a different combination of color or motifs from the body part of it. Now this is also something we can understand that I mean today we have a lot of Kanji Puram saris which have been done with much experimentation with the intervention of the designers as well as like I mean the market demand. So, not all saris would be considered as this particular kind of this Korvai saris the ... saris woven in this Korvai technique, but the ones we see here are like I mean at least in this images here we can consider them as like I mean the much more traditional ones which are which are also understood as the ones jokingly always attributed to the grandmas or like I mean the older generations of our society.

So, what we say in this that I mean the first thing would be the opposition of the elements that we have in this saris as like I mean as the how the borders would be different. and then like the borders would always run parallel with the warp threads. and for the warp threads that we find that it's not just one set of warp threads but there are at least two different colors of the warp threads which will be there and that's the reason what we also see that I mean there are all those opposition of the elements that I mean the warp threads as we see in this Korvai saris are not something that is like I mean two warp threads will be in the same color scheme but usually they are either complementary or contrasting color schemes and that is how like the opposition of the element that we see them in the border and the body it will also be working out in the distribution of the warp threads as well. and for the warp threads we also find that there are varying density of the warp threads or the yarn that is used for making this saris and for that reason like I mean the opposition is something that is not just exemplified in the use of color, but also in the mass and the density of the

material that is also used for making the sari. So these are the different kind of issues that we find them that I mean how this opposition of the elements work out in this Korvai saris. The other thing that we also find them there are that I mean there are balance there is balance between the opposition elements. So how this balance is achieved is basically through how we see that I mean even though there are contrasting colors but they do not seem to be moving towards different direction, they do not seem to be like I mean talking about a chaos, but they are in synchronization with each other they combine into a body of the sari so that is something we find and that's the reason that I mean the balance the way we see them is something that is very much there embedded in this sari motifs, as well as like the entire distribution of color and patterns all over. Another thing we also find in this case is that I mean in this the distribution of the color and something that I mean as we see that I mean a very conscious choice of contrasting colors are used in the Kanji Puram saris is something that is also understood with different kind of metaphors so in that case we see the color symbolism that ... also comes up in this saris. For example, we have like I mean this we have like I mean a particular kind of sari which would have kalai malai which means like morning, evening and or like ganga yamuna or like ganga jamuni so this kind of and in this cases I mean we find that I mean at least three colors in the warp are used in this cases. and so in in this kind of issues what we find that how the metaphors of morning and evening is something that is then like I mean sort of transferred to making of the saris, that morning is something that is understood as the starting of the day evening is something that is understood as the perhaps transition of the day into night or the end of the day. But then bringing these two things together is the way we see the cycle of time sort of moves on so without these two things we cannot really find a balance and this is a reminder that I mean how our life and like I mean how our days and nights and everything else are also even though they seem that I mean they are in contrast with each other but they are also in somehow connected. So this connectedness and like I mean of course like I mean finding a middle ground between them is something that the Kanchipuram Sari weavers also strive for in making this very specific kind of saris and that is how like I mean the Korvai saris come into being.

Now with the color symbolism we also find that there are particular kinds of colors which are definitely encouraged but also there are particular kinds of colors which are restricted. In that case what we find that of course one of the colors which would be discouraged for this kind of saris would be pure black and that's because black is considered as inauspicious in many of the religious sects, and then of course black is something that is considered to be a color which is not encouraged in the marriages or in many other auspicious occasions in the Hindu auspicious occasions. So in this case what happens that we find that in a lot of Hindu marriage rituals how the brides are advised for not wearing something that has a combination of the color black is something that we also find that to be also reflected in the combination of the colors that we find in this korvai saris for the bridegrooms it's always the off-white or white colored veshti and something to wear in the upper body, upper garment so those kind of. But like I mean for the bride it is always important in terms of like I mean how the religious the customs and this issues they sort of encircle around the choice of color that would have been there. And this kind of color would also perhaps are symbolically related to the well-being of the bride and eventually like I mean the health of the bridegroom as well. So those are the reasons we find that the color symbolism is something that not just like talk about the opposition of elements and bringing them together but also the kind of sacredness of the color, auspiciousness of the color, which colors to use which colors to avoid. At the same time we also find that with particular colors what kind of colors can go with what color. So even like I mean not just thinking in terms of the religious or like I mean the cultural perspectives but also in terms of like ... making aesthetic value judgment that which color goes with which one. and we are not talking about monochromatic colors or like I mean the colors which fall on the same perhaps like category like red, brown or like I mean yellow these colors will probably not be in the same saree if we are thinking about saree with red body and brown border that would not be possible in the khanchi puram sarees and so for that reason we can think like I mean what kind of contrasting color with red might go and then like I mean those colors are selected for the borders and as well as for the pallu or like the frontispiece. Why I call it frontispiece it is something also that Aarti kaulra's discussion that sort of addresses that when the women like when the Iyer women would wear the saree or like I mean so in this case what we find that the palla/pallu would usually go here on the torso and so this is

something that we see that that how this palla/pallu is actually in the front and it kind of like I mean constitutes part of the body. Whereas like I mean the borders they stay in the margins and then like I mean of course how is that is different. Now the other thing that

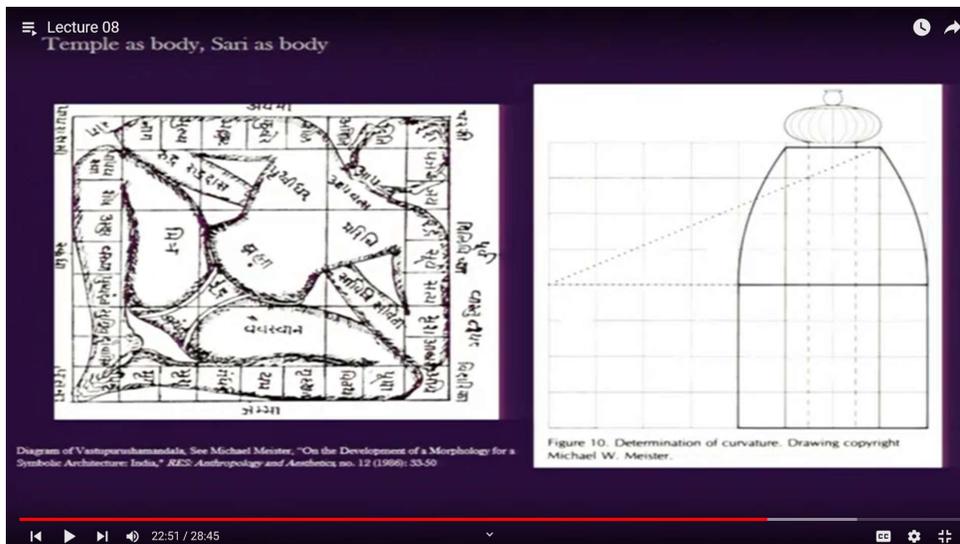


we find that I mean that also makes the case for this saree being considered as a body or like I mean a complete garment that also comes there more strongly is because this I mean in this korvai sarees we find that I mean there are three parts that the frontispiece is usually called as talaippu which means head, and then we also have the middle section or like the body which is called vodai and that also means body, and then we have the borders which are which are like I mean the ones in the margins which are called karai and that means boundary or river bank. So these are the kind of terms that ... we find them to be associated with the korvai sarees and this is how like I mean the symbolism of the body are also ingrained in making the border, body, as well as like I mean the frontispiece of the korvai sarees.

Now with those things we also find that a number of different kind of motifs are there in this korvai sarees and a number of them will find them to have like I mean particular kind of relationship with the objects or elements that we find in nature. So for example we have a bird motif, or like I mean we have rudraksha, or like I mean we also have like I mean this mayil kannu that means like I mean the peacock's eyes and things like that we also have like kamalam or like the lotus and then very interestingly we also have the malli moggu

Gopuram that sort of rises, and also we might think that I mean how this kind of motifs might have some kind of relationship to the temple motif. However, we will sort of like I mean look into little in depth of the kind of like I mean the relationship we want to explore with the architecture and sarees and we will probably not subscribe to a simplistic understanding of this is a temple tower and that is the temple motif so those two things are connected. Perhaps the relationship between them is not as simple as that.

So temple as a body that we see that I mean that has been there which is discussed in a number of the theories of architecture and of course like I mean when the ground plan of the temple is something that is considered. This is diagram of the Vastu Purusha Mandala



that we see there in this prolific work of Michael Meister, art historian Michael Meister. In this case

what we find that in the north Indian temple plans Michael Meister had worked on this issue in which we find that either the I mean this dire area like I mean the area of the main sanctum sanctorum the temple in this case what we find that I mean that is considered as this square area which is then like I mean of course then this it is divided into like I mean either 64 or like I mean more than that like I mean these sections. And in this case what we find that how the central portion which is then attributed to Brahma is left empty. and then like I mean this portions of the of this architecture would be filled with wall and all like I mean you know that that is the place which is considered to be like I mean the supporting areas around the deity. So these are something that we find that I mean how this idea of a temple proper or like a sanctum sanctorum is something that is understood as the body of this Vastu Purusha. And here we can clearly see that I mean how this idea of this Vastu

Purusha is also mapped onto this square diagram of the temple sanctum sanctorum. So this is something we find it there, and of course like I mean how this square ground plan is something that is not just there on the ground but it also sort of like I mean translates to the vertical growth of the temple as well, and that is also something we find. So this idea of the Vastu Purusha or like this body of the Vastu Purusha is something that is understood as which sort of like I mean gives the basis of any Hindu temple in the North Indian context of course in the Nagara context we find it. But the thing is that I mean this this idea of the temple as a body is something that has been sort of like I mean discussed in depth in Michael Meister's work. Now even though, I know that I mean we are talking specifically about Kanchipuram district which would not have the same kind of like I mean this Vastu Purusha mandala in this case. But we also find it there that I mean how some of this this key principles about like I mean understanding the the ground plan of the temple of this body and then like I mean building a temple on the top of it which also like I mean symbolizes the body and everything is something that is exemplified in the temple structures there as well. For that reason what we see there is that I mean this this idea of the temple architecture being something that is also associated with this saree that I mean as we have already mentioned that I mean in terms of like I mean this Korvai sarees which is very much ingrained in the Hindu ritualistic customs. Of course, with the auspicious customs and in this case what we see there that I mean the temple which is there, side by side which is also part of like I mean the religious lives of communities as something we find in both cases there is this emphasis on the body that I mean how the temple is something that is understood as a body, and then we also see that the saree is also something that is understood as this complete garment according to Aarti Kawlra. And then that is also something we can extend that to understand that I mean it has a life of its own, almost it functions as a body. And then there are also some of the accounts in which we find that how this Korvai sarees are not considered to be inauspicious when someone wears it or like I mean it is not usually considered that it needs to be washed after every time it is used. Because silk is something that is understood in this particular context that is already sort of like self purifies itself. So this idea of auspiciousness, sacredness, purification and their relationship to both saree and temple are something that we find to be much more sort

of intertwined in both cases. We'll continue on this discussion more on the next lecture, thank you.