



Marriages Made in Heaven: Semiotics of Saree Shops in Hyderabad

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The last time I went saree shopping was for my own wedding a couple decades ago. While there was the usual frenzy associated with the big fat Indian wedding then, there was none of this new-fangled fondness for creating an aura of tradition and religiosity that I found in my recent shopping experience. Weddings in India are customary rituals that are observed with all the show and pomp. Rarely does one observe simple civil weddings, even if one goes through a civil ceremony; it is often followed by sort of celebratory event that alludes to various elements that are indicative of one's status and identity.

Rituals, such as weddings always involved consumption of goods and symbolic acts, but never have they been propelled by economies as in recent past. Not necessarily ritual per se but culture as such has come into the marketing purview of business enterprise. One needs only look around to see how little-known festivals, traditions or aspects of culture have been commercialised all over the globe. India is not far behind with a surfeit of traditions and practices lending themselves to marketability. The Indian wedding is a big fat one, as huge amounts of money and preparation are involved. In fact, Indian weddings are a big business, and they are considered an industry, estimated to be worth around 40-50 billion. The saree shops where people go for the wedding sarees are just one part of this burgeoning culture of Wedding Industry.

What prompted me to chronicle, as in a way of taking a few photographs, is the sheer visual spectacles that the saree shops have become. I was quite taken in by the grandness of it all each saree shop vying to up the ante with elements that spell luxury, tradition and religion or divinity as it were. As we move increasingly towards a culture where what one consumes is so actively cultivated and made visible as performative act, the displays at retail spaces should be acknowledged as one of the many forms of strategic communication

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designed to capture attention and create mindshare (Shroeder 2006:1)¹ and as Sarah Pink² has argued, sensory ethnography, in this case through the visual medium of photography, allows researchers and audiences to share other people's multisensory experiences which capture, with immediacy, the contexts and locale.

While there were many saree shops that deliberately created an aura of authenticity, the Kanchi Vara Mahalakshmi saree shops stood out in the way they turned secular act of buying into a sacred realm. The photographs are mainly from the Vara Mahalakshmi outlets in Hyderabad.



Figure 1: the Grand entrance to the Kanchi Vara Mahalakshmi Saree Shop



Figure 2: The wooden façade of the Kanchi Vara mahalakshmi Shop



Figure 3: Greeted by symbols of prosperity and wellbeing

The entrance to the saree shop located in an upmarket Jubilee Hills and Secunderabad is grand: complete with elephant frescos, grand staircase, polished wooden columns, and intricate woodwork etc., all these elements are a far cry from glass and chrome finish of 'modern' departmental stores. These elements that are observable in the facades of many of these temples like saree shops immediately conjure images of the past and of a rich heritage and tradition.

While there are sculptured manicured plants outside the shops, more than often there is the presence of banana trees in many of the saree shops and marigold flower. The banana trees with the trunk, and sometimes with the flower still on the tree, are considered a symbol of bounty, prosperity and fertility. And so, for wedding ceremonies in South India a banana tree is a necessary sacred accoutrement. Marriage, for most part, has larger social significance in Hindu cultures than mere conjugality. An aspect that gets highlighted in various rituals associated with marriage is the procreation and extension of family dimension. The saree shops often greet their customers

with banana foliage and the marigold flowers that are so tied to the symbolic meanings of marriage.



Figure 4: The ornate entrance door

Marigold festoons serve decorative purposes no doubt but they also symbolise goodness. The saffron colour in the Hindu tradition has great significance symbolising surrender to the divine among other things. Marigold is also associated with the gods Vishnu and his divine consort Lakshmi, besides signifying wealth and wellbeing Vishnu and Lakshmi are considered ideal couple. All visible symbols of prosperity and associated symbolism of fertility bounty are well in place. Even if the audience is not self-consciously aware of these symbolic significances one is greeted with familiar and sacred images of continuity with tradition.

And as you enter this sacred space that are set apart from the mundane secular aspect of the market, even though one has gone to the saree shop with the express purpose of buying, you are yet again enveloped by grand

luxurious, resplendent and awe-inspiring space. The ornate entrance door, the painted ceiling, the chandeliers, the very highly wrought trailings evoke a classical heritage and evoke a sense of the past. The paintings on the walls are in some remote way, an obeisance to Tanjore paintings. The Tanjore (anglicised from Tanjavur) paintings or Tanjavur paintings are painting tradition from south India dating back to sixteenth century.

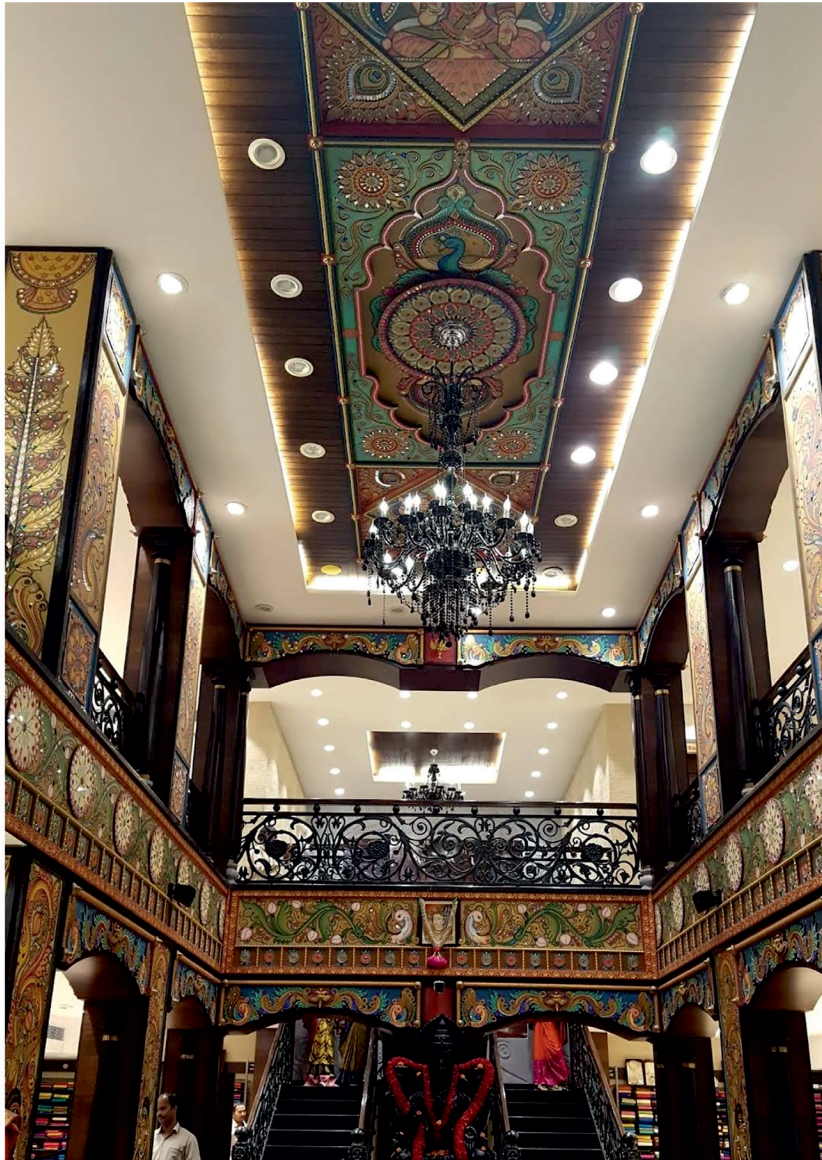


Figure 5: The foyer of the saree shop



Figure 6: The Tanjore style paintings

These paintings, with their extravagant embellishing of gold and semi-precious stones and glass were patronised by the Nayaka kings. When the royal patronage ceased with decline of various ruling monarchies it was the merchant class of Chettiyars who continued to patronise this art. Unlike the miniature art the Tanjore paintings were painted on larger surfaces, mostly wood. Many Chettiyars commissioned artist to paint on surfaces of the amazing mansions they built. The traditional paintings used gold and semiprecious stones and glass and beads. Only the richest patron could own a Tanjore painting or have it commissioned for their mansions. It is another thing that the proliferation of Tanjore paintings is made possible using less valuable ornamentation and therefore accessible. But the paintings did stand for luxury, a classical tradition that was also part of the sacred realm. Like many classical paintings or frescoes paintings were integral part of buildings or temples, reflecting the uniqueness

of the building. And people traveled to these temples and buildings to be awed by these artistic images. The images did not travel to the audience as they do with advent of photography. One perhaps has seen various images of the Tanjore paintings, perhaps in advertisement, on billboards, in TV advertisement. But to see the large-scale paintings you still have to go to spaces which have them; much like one visits the Louvre to see the real Mona Lisa. In a world surfeit with images and their reproducibility, the physical space where image is located then becomes unique. And that is what these saree shops tries to achieve, they are not any ordinary space, not any saree shop, not any building but set apart, sacred as it were to use a Durkhiemian distinction; sacred in the sense that the paintings transcend the quotidian dull everyday life. It takes you away from all those mundane things like our jobs, our bills, and our rush hour commute; that which is profane. The themes depicted in Tanjore paintings are largely religious and mythological, based on *puranas* and various other texts of ancient past.



Figure 7: The temple like walls

Invoking the sacred or allusion does not stop with Tanjore style paintings, an actual temple like feeling is created by the use of grey granite stone walls reminiscent of temples complete with deities carved on them and with fresh garlands of flowers adorning them indicating reverence and piety and daily observance of worship, just like in a temple. At every step of the way one is made to feel one is entering a temple.

The town of Kanchipuram, besides being famed for its silk saree tradition, is known for its temple architecture. It is in fact called the city of thousand temples. The city has long history, the earliest mention is a Sanskrit inscription from the Gupta period- (325–185 BCE)³ the city is considered a sacred city, and it's often referred to as the Benares of South. Like Benares, pilgrims travel to the city for attaining a permanent deliverance or *moksha* from the cycle of birth. The temple architectural elements are incorporated into the shop. I am no expert to ascertain whether they are specific elements to Kanchi Temple architecture, but there is deliberate attempt to allude to the sacred geography of Kanchipuram and its famed temple architecture.

The nostalgic evocation of the long history associated with Kanchipuram or the painting traditions of bygone era are self-consciously evocative. They are images of the original, pure aesthetic, removed from the mass-produced aesthetic that is not exclusive.

Referring to the past or traditional has been part of advertising strategy⁴. According to Elizabeth Outka such evocation of the nostalgia of the authentic the “non-commercial aura made them appealing: their underlying commercial availability promised to make the simulation better than the original, for these new hybrids were accessible, controllable, and – in their ability to unite seemingly antithetical desires—tantalizingly modern” (Outka, 2009:4)⁵. But although nostalgia draws from the past, it is clearly a product of the present. As India has globalised and liberalised, it has witnessed the hectic redefining and cannibalising of historical, folk and classical forms (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995: 5). Appadurai suggests that: “The past is not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronised warehouse of cultural scenarios. . . .” A constructed landscape of collective aspirations, which is no more and no less real than the collective representations of Émile Durkheim, now mediated through the complex prism of modern media⁶. Appadurai calls this nostalgia, an “armchair nostalgia” – one without lived experience or collective historical memory (1997:78)⁷. Such nostalgia creates the simulacra of periods of time – periodicities – that constitute the modern imagining subject’s flow of time often comprising of a present conceived as lost, absent or distant.

Religion is part of that past, as well as present, which addresses the mysteries of life and death, offering meaning. These narratives of the past and of larger cosmology, of which religion is a part, provide a society with a meaning that goes far beyond the self to a space of belonging. And as Durkheim argued that there can in fact be no society unless it has such shared overarching stories. For many today, in areas of economic disruption and dysfunctional states, religion and the enchanted world of the past seems to provide architectures of symbolic sense. And it is surely part of the reason why across much of the world, religious imagery and narrative is back in public, seemingly secular places such as retail spaces.

As Panelas (1979) argues nostalgia is always evoked in the context of current modern fears and anxieties. Shopping malls resolve the modern societies' anxieties through providing security in all their entrances, offering a controlled environment cleansed from the unexpected events. While security concerns, whether from the pandemic or from unwanted elements or trouble-makers are in place, it is the need for *ontological security* that is attended to. Anthony Giddens (1991) uses the term *ontological security* to refer to a sense of order and security that people seek, so as to derive meaning in society that is increasingly fraught with *risk*. It becomes important therefore that before embarking on life's rights of passages, be it marriage or any other important event one takes blessings and benevolences. The presence of an idol of the deity, in this case of the Vara Mahalashmi in the shop looms large as one enters the shop through the security gate where there is perfunctory frisking and sanitisation (we happened to go soon after the lockdown was lifted from the COVID pandemic). The presence of the Idol and that of Vara Mahalakshmi is not lost on the audience, or many of them, as one of my companion interlocutors expressed: "she is a wish fulfilling goddess". Vara in Sanskrit means boon. The goddess Vara Laxmi known for wealth and prosperity is propitiated by married women -- *sumangali* for financial prosperity, removal of miseries, the longevity of husband, the wellbeing of family and progeny. One could seek the Goddess' blessings with the help of a priest, who in fact beckons and encourages the buyers to come and offer prayer. Naturally money is offered too.

The purchases are then placed in front of the idol for blessings and the priest does the necessary rituals to seek the blessings of the Goddess.

Not so incidentally, the Kanchi Vara Mahalakshmi retail space was inaugurated by religious figure Sri Sri Sri Tridandi Srimannarayana Ramanuja Chinna Jeeyar. A religious ascetic guru who follows the Vaishnavite tradition, in fact, he is considered the torch bearer of Sri Vaishnavism⁸. He was previously



Figure 8: The Priest blesses the patrons at the saree shop



Figure 9: The saree purchases are kept in front of the deity for blessings

involved with helping the Telangana government for the renovation of a temple. He has cultural and spiritual centers in USA, where he travels to frequently. In more ways than one this saree shops moves away from the rational world of the market to an otherworldly world of 'enchantment' to use Weber's term. The fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the 'disenchantment' of the world. The spectacle laden world of glorious past, a living tradition of religion, all in one space of these retail outlets seem to offer the patrons who visit these places the possibilities of re-enchantment.

Notes

1. Schroeder, J. E. (2006). 23 Critical Visual Analysis. *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, 303-321.
2. Pink, S. (2015). *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. Sage

3. Sharma, Tej Ram (1978). *Personal and Geographical Names in the Gupta Inscriptions*. Concept Publishing Company. p. 255.
4. Jackson Lears and Michael Kämmer both point to the conflict between nostalgia and progress in nineteenth-century commercial culture. The past was commonly invoked but usually to ground a sense of modern improvement. It wasn't until the Depression that progressive idioms were seriously challenged by the value attached to tradition. Lears suggests that in the 1930s "advertisers began an unprecedented effort to associate their products with the past." The rediscovery of folkish imagery and the validation of heritage was a response to economic crisis, a new "pseudotraditionalism" creating a mythic version of the American past that could, it was hoped, restabilize confidence in modern business. See Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, 1994), 383; and Michael Kämmer, *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture* (New York, 1997), 125-142.
5. Outka, E. (2009). *Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified authentic* (Vol. 1). OUP USA
6. Appadurai, A. (2015). Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. In *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory* (pp. 324-339). Routledge
7. Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Vol. 1). University of Minnesota Press.
8. The Sri Vashnavitradition was founded by Nathamuni (10th century), who combined two traditions; drawing on Sanskrit philosophical tradition and combining it with the aesthetic and emotional appeal of the Bhakti movement pioneers called the Alvars. Alvars are the Poet Saints of south India (present day Tamilnadu and parts of Andhra), scholars suggest they lived during 5th to 10 century. They professed *bhakti* (devotion) to the Hindu god Vishnu in their songs of longing, ecstasy, and service. They are venerated in Vaishnavism, which regards Vishnu as the Ultimate Reality. The legacy was carried on by Ramanuja (1013-11370) the most influential saint figure of Sri Vaishnavism (John Carman (1974). *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding*. Yale University Press.)

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