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The 'soft' corner for silks



The 'Silk King' will turn 60 this year. Looking back from the new millennium, Nalli Kuppusami Chettiar has much to be happy about. The Nalli empire extends far beyond the borders of Chennai to commercial centres such as Bangalore, Coimbatore (the textile city), Tiruchi and Madurai, going right down to Tirunelveli, the tip of the South.

For the elite of Delhi, shopping for silk sarees is almost synonymous with buying from Nallis, either at South Extension or Connaught Place. Beginning from Kanchipuram, the 'Nalli' silk route traverses continents, having its branches in the US, Canada and, nearer home, the shopping paradise of Singapore.

Born into the Padmasaliyar weaving community, which has a hoary tradition going back to the Chola period, Nalli Kuppusami Chettiar is proud of his lineage. While the Saliyar community claims descent from Markandeya Maharshi, Kuppusami traces the Nallis to the 'gotra' of Vijaya Maharshi.

His early memories begin with the time he joined the family profession of weaving. His father, Nalli Narayana Chettiar, died when he was just 12 and by the time he was 15, Kuppusami had given up schooling and was weaving full time.

Way back in 1923, Kuppusami's grandfather, Nalli Chinnasami Chettiar, used to sell hand-woven sarees door to door in Chennai. The commercially busy T. Nagar area of Chennai (where the Nallis have their biggest shops today) did not exist then and the nearest station was Mambalam. By sheer dint of hard work, Chinnasami bought a modest, 200 sq ft commercial space at Panagal Park in 1928. The transformation to the present 20,000 sq ft, three-storey Nalli showroom in T. Nagar owes in no small measure to Kuppusami's stewardship over five decades.

The market for South Indian silk sarees, popularly known in North India as 'Kanchipuram silks' irrespective of the place of production -- Arni, Bhuvanagiri (Thanjavur) or elsewhere -- is growing briskly. The quantum leap for Nalli silk sarees can be gauged from the fact that between 1928 and 1940 (when Chinnasami opened shop in T.Nagar), the turnover in Chennai was Rs. 2.5 lakhs; between 1948 and 1953 during the time of Nalli Narayanasami Chettiar it was Rs. 20 lakhs; between 1960 and 1983 when Nalli Kuppusami began expanding his silk empire in Tamil Nadu the figure rose to Rs. 14 crores. In the 1990s, daily sales at the Chennai centre averages around Rs. 25 lakhs while the annual turnover crosses Rs. 70 crores! Apparently, the Delhi chapter of the Nallis has proved even more profitable.

The Nallis are master-weavers as well as merchants. Their expansion has been both vertical (beginning with the primary processes involved in silk weaving such as yarn preparation and polishing -- 'chamki' -- to calendering as preliminaries to the actual weaving) as well as horizontal, with the silk business expanding in Delhi, Mumbai, Singapore and beyond. While taking pride in the employment his silk business has generated, Kuppusami makes the interesting observation that he employs around 50 Muslim families in the Kanchipuram region alone. Muslim workers are specialists in preparing the yarn (the Tamil term is 'pannai') and in 'chamki' and calendering.

Given the tremendous expansion in the Nalli business, there must necessarily be a wide range of customers for these silks. Nevertheless, Kuppusami classifies his customers into two categories -- the ones who look at the price and the ones who demand quality.

Kuppusami recalls with nostalgia the early 1920s and 1930s when there was a one-to-one equation between the production of the silk saree and the buyer. Says he: "Any reference to quality brings to mind the unique sarees of Muthu Chettiar of Kanchipuram. Muthu Chettiar had given up the family business of weaving and become a disciple of the celebrated Kanchipuram musician and patron, Naina Pillai. When his guru died suddenly, Muthu Chettiar was desolate. He had no family (having given up marriage for music) and no profession. He returned to the family profession of weaving. Every saree was a labour of love and produced under his direct supervision without allowing any compromise on quality. Today if we use one mark of zari (gold lace) costing Rs. 2,900, Muthu Chettiar would have opted for the most expensive zari which costs Rs. 4,500. As a consequence his sarees were 50 per cent more expensive than those produced by business houses like the Nallis."

Yet he had exacting customers like the Indian Bank founder's daughter, Balambal, who would never wear sarees woven by anybody else. Kuppusami reminisces that every discerning master-weaver and customer could recognise a Muthu Chettiar creation straight away.

Kuppusami recalls an interesting feature of silk weaving. Zari procured from Surat is usually gold wire on silver or gold-electroplated silver wire. However, pure gold zari was in use even until the early 20th century.

Kuppusami laments the unavoidable loss in excellence as zari is today made from copper which is electroplated with silver and given a gold coating. In commercial terms, this is called 'tested zari'. The gaudy shine is produced by treating the zari chemically and the 'gold' borders become lack-lustre within five years. He says, "To those who look at price we give tested zari and the pure zari to the ones particular about quality".

The maximum length possible on a traditional loom is a 18-yard warp which meant that no more than three silk sarees could look exactly alike. In the new millennium, as the 'Kanchipuram' silk route traverses continents, hundreds of sarees designed to stand up to dardised tastes, are produced on the power looms.

The race in silk production became competitive with the emergence of new silk houses in Tamil Nadu. The Kumarans set up business in Chennai in 1955 and the exclusive Kumaran silk showroom opened next door to Nallis at T. Nagar in 1966. The most recent firm to give the Nallis a run for their money is Pothis which has just started business at T. Nagar. Kuppusami

acknowledges that the Nalli empire has been affected by competition but he is not despondent. The founder of Kumarans was also a Padmasaliyar, P. G. Chengalvaraya Pillai. According to Kuppusami, almost 95 per cent of the total silk business in Chennai is controlled by the two leading Padmasaliyar firms of Nallis and Kumarans. The ill-effects of close business rivalry, which are felt immediately in price wars, have been somewhat neutralised by the matrimonial alliance cemented between the two families. The present partner in Kumarans and son of Chengalvaraya, Jayaraman, is married to Kuppusami's daughter Jayashri. The other daughter, Geetha, has been married into the house of the Kanchipuram silks entrepreneur, A.C. Venkatesulu. Kuppusami's father had cemented the Nalli business in a similar manner by arranging his son's marriage with Alamelu, daughter of Ranganatha Chettiar from Tirucheru, the owner of the famous Radha Silks (Rasi). Family alliances have been the strength of the Nalli business.

Quo Vadis, Nallis?

Turning 60, among Tamils, is considered an important milestone in a man's life. Thus, as Kuppusami turns 60, where does he see the family business heading? The eldest son, Ramanathan, holds a degree in textile technology with special training at Harvard. Moving out of textiles, however, Ramanathan is involved in running a liquid glucose factory at Rajahmundry in Andhra Pradesh. The other son, Viswanathan, wants to be a successful industrialist and is now an agent for a readymade garments firm. Though Kuppusami remarks that he does not discuss his 'family business' with his sons, the 'Silk King' is not afraid that the bells may start tolling for his silk empire in the new millennium. He believes his sons will continue the family business, as will their sons after them because the Padmasaliyars have been weaving for a thousand years and will continue to do so.

Millennium yards

Members of the Saliyar community are spread throughout South India. The Padmasaliyars community, to which the Nallis belong, migrated into Tamil-speaking regions from areas which are now in Andhra Pradesh. They continue to speak Telugu at home. After migration, the Padmasaliyars lived in 'Saliya Teru' (weavers' street) specially assigned to them by royal patrons centuries ago in the temple town of Kanchipuram. The copper plates of Uttama Chola, dated 985 A.D., speak of the Pattusaliyars, who occupied the four main quarters of Kanchipuram. They were entrusted with the trusteeship and administration of a massive cash grant made by the king to the Varadaraja Perumal temple. In return, the 'Choliya Saliyars' got total tax exemption on their looms.

The looms that bring Nallis their silk sarees can be traced to the Saliya Theru in Kanchipuram. Interestingly, the region traditionally produced only cotton textiles and sericulture was a colonial introduction into Kanchipuram. Today, perhaps Kanchi silks are better known than Kanchi cottons. Nalli Kuppusami Chettiar also owns 50 looms in Arni and 10,000 looms in textile centres such as Kumbakonam and Salem.

Kuppusami remembers, "My ancestors lived and produced exquisite sarees in the 'Chetti theri' of Chinna Kanchipuram (perhaps at the same site where the Choliya Saliyars lived). Every home had a loom and the weaving of a saree was a collective family enterprise with the young boys holding the bobbin or the design cards since the heavy gold-laced borders had to be woven separately from the main body of the saree." The task was rendered even more difficult by the fact that the traditional 'Kanchipurams' (as the silk sarees are called) have a double-side border.

Boys grew up in an atmosphere where no one was educated. Homes resounded with the sound of the loom with the men weaving and the women spinning cotton and winding silk and zari (gold lace). In a penetrating observation, Kuppusami links the continuity of the weaving tradition among the poor Padmasaliyar with their lack of education. He believes that the Saliyars have been weaving for a thousand years and will continue to do so because they are wedded to a tradition, a way of life. The lack of educational opportunities and employment avenues has led the poorer weavers into a virtual trap where poverty and excellence go hand in hand.

V.R.

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