



Tana Bana

THE WORLD OF
SAREES

SOWMYA
REDDY
SHAMANNA



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About the Author

Sowmya Reddy Shamanna, the author is a saree aficionado. She inhabits the saree, believes in celebrating and enrooting it with meaning and purpose. Sowmya grew up in South India, providentially has travelled the world and now lives in Dreieich, Germany.

This book is her endeavour to acquaint the readers to different sarees and to guide them to reimagine the saree with all its glory of beauty, versatility and strength.

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INTRODUCTION

The master weaver ran bright
coloured threads across
the sky,
To weave the mornings and
later dyed them in orange,
And black to make the evenings
and nights.
From the magical skin
we wear,
To the fabric of the sky,
The master weaver weaves
them all – finely, expertly .

**– A poem by Sant Kabir, a
weaver poet from the 15th
century.**

Tana Bana – the World of Sarees (Tana Bana is a weaving term, meaning the warp and the weft. In simple terms, the threads that make the fabric. It also means the warp and weft of time and space as the synergy of existence). Sarees are versatile six yards of unstitched fabric, which can be draped in any way one desires. It is a flexible, changeable garment and not frozen in time. A saree reflects the needs and imaginations of its wearers, which can be re-created for oneself, for the day and age, for that moment in time and for who you are at that moment. You just wrap a saree around yourself, tuck here, tuck there, make the pleats, hold the palla in place. Not that difficult! A saree has never demanded what you do when you drape it. In fact, if your palanquin is late, you can simply hitch up your saree a little and jump onto a bike. If the day is windy and the palla flies, refusing to stay in place, you could hum a romantic Bollywood song or, if not in a frothy mood, grab it none too gently and tuck it into the waistband and carry on with your life. A saree will not mind. If you're at a wedding, you can let your saree stylishly sweep the floor. If you do not own a blouse, wear it over your crop top and trousers. A saree will never demand what you do or how you wear it.

Starting from the fabric of the saree to the colour or design, it is matchless, distinct and highly appreciable. Every Saree is unique since the weavers take the initiative of doing every weave in an exceptional way; every length that comes out is something different from the rest. The handloom sector is the largest generator of non-farming rural employment in India and instils a firm place in enhancing the economy and the best part of such beautiful creations of sarees is the immense contribution of the weavers of India. Their skills get a chance to come out to the public eye. This helps them to lead lives of dignity and progress and pass on their beautiful legacy to their children and stop that rural bleed to the cities to find better-paying jobs resulting in loss of a legacy of skill. Saree weaving supports livelihood, more than 4.3 million weavers are working in this field. So, when you buy handcrafted sarees, you are, in a way, boosting their livelihood. Doesn't it give you a nice feeling, deep down?

Going further, most handloom sarees are made from natural fibres and this can be counted as the foremost reason for choosing handloom sarees. Sarees display the vastness of Indian culture; handloom industry not only helps to uplift the artistry of weavers but also showcases the rich diversity of Indian culture. Every state of the country has a different artwork to boast and so does its weaves. A weaver from Bihar would bring forth excellent Madhubani art on a saree, while the weavers from South India can weave excellent work on a Kanjeevaram silk saree. With unique painting, needlework and weaving design, each handcrafted saree is exclusive and different from the next and it is tempting not to want to own a weave from every state and craft. Do we need more reasons to embrace the saree?

It occurred to me that while I have seen my mothers and grandmothers in sarees all through my childhood and growing years, our youngsters are not treated to such visions of beauty anymore. In the generations that follow, it will be almost rare; I really don't want the saree to go the Kimono way. So, with this intent, I started writing this book to bring about awareness on the aesthetics and versatility of the saree, a contribution to the dying art and legacy of weavers who have given so much to India's history to create weaves of extraordinary heritage quality. It is also an endeavour to make millennials interested in the indisputably timeless sarees, coax them gently with a little flattery to accept the drape as sartorial clothing, open up windows to a plethora of weaves and embroideries to them and embrace handloom woven sarees.

I wish this book instils interest for the saree in you while acquainting you with 50 different kinds of weaves, fabrics and embroideries of India from my personal collection. You will find information about each saree, a glimpse into the fascinating history behind it and the importance and meaning of the geographical indication (GI) tags given to them. I hope you discover and enjoy the love and warmth of the saree through the pages as I have writing this book.

Come and join in spreading the saree love.

Warmly,
Sowmya Reddy Shamanna





KASHIDA ARI

Saree

Love Chained with Embroidery

Nature has bestowed immense scenic beauty upon Kashmir and a versatile flora and fauna, which is deeply intertwined in the crafts and weaves of Kashmir. This is poetically and charmingly portrayed in Kashida Ari embroidery.





A popular legend in Kashmir, India tells the tale of a Rafoogar (darker) named Alibaba, who was very proficient in his job of stitching and mending torn clothes. He spent all his days doing countless stitches and bringing old clothes back to life. One day, a fowl stepped on a white cloth while running around on his porch, and the imprints of the fowl's feet caught Alibaba's attention. He wanted to preserve this print. With some coloured thread, he stitched around the print, upholding it for a lifetime. Thus, a new form of embroidery called Kashida Ari came into existence.



Kashida Ari evolved under the court patronage of Mughal emperors and their Persian influence. The word Kashida comes from the Persian word meaning 'free-flowing cursive writing'. Another story tells that the craft of Kashida Ari embroidery came with a Sufi saint and his skilled disciples from Persia. Due to lack of evidence regarding the proof of these stories, the exact origin of Kashida Ari embroidery remains unknown. It is, however, a definitely thriving art in the valley of Kashmir.

The process of making Kashida Ari embroidery is interesting. The craftsmen sit in a peculiar posture, with their knees up and their backs against a wall. A hard cushion or a wood plank acts as a backrest. Men do the embroidery, and the women prepare the yarn. A thimble called Nyatth is worn on the index finger of the right hand, and the embroidery is done with multi-coloured threads, using broad stitches on the saree. The needle is held only in the right hand. No left-handed craftsmen do Kashida Ari embroidery. The exact reason for this unusual custom is not known. The embroidery on the saree goes through sequences of many skilled hands before it is completed. A single-sided embroidery pattern is called Aksi (reflection), while a double-sided embroidery is called Dorukha (double-faced). The chain stitch used is called Arikaam and is carried out with a special, crooked needle. Kashida Ari embroidery draws one's attention to its unique raised flower and floral designs.

The traditional motifs are highly influenced by Persian and Muslim culture, but over time, they have been adapted with a Kashmiri zest. The most popular motifs and patterns on the embroidery are the Gulab (rose), Badam (almond), Chinar (maple leaf), Dainposh (pomegranate), Pamposh (lotus) and Dachh (vines).

Featured in the image is a robin egg blue silk Kashida Ari embroidery saree with floral patterns in multi-coloured threads. The raised flowers and the intertwining vines make it a visual treat. Indeed, beauty at its best!







— The Heritage — BOMKAI OR SONEPURI Saree

Odisha has always been in the limelight for its fabulous sarees that come with a delicate, intricate finish. Amidst all the glories of Odisha, its sarees are highlighted as ‘threads of elegance’ and the Bomkai saree is an exclusive and heritage weave of Odisha. It originated from a picturesque village called Bomkai, in Ganjam District of Odisha.



The sarees woven in Bomkai used an extra weft technique, also known as jala work, and was extremely popular amongst the elite. With the gradual passage of time, only four to five weaver families were left in Bomkai village. The Maharaja of Sonapur in Western Odisha then shifted these remaining jala weavers to Sonapur and patronised them in order to innovate and create embroidery using their extra weft technique. Thereafter, Sonapur developed into a big craft centre for extra weft embroidery techniques and wove exclusive sarees. The name Bomkai remained, even though they were now woven in Sonapur. In Odisha, however, they are known as Sonapuri sarees. Influenced by and Banarasi sarees, the young weavers in Sonapur developed and created their own motifs. The palla, for example, became totally different from the original sarees woven in Bomkai. The unique Bomkai bird and bitter gourd motifs that were woven in Bomkai village were no longer seen. The borders now had fine Ikat temples and Rudraksha motifs (holy seed) in them.



Before the sarees are woven, the fabric undergoes a tie and dye process which gives its beautiful finish. Later, in the end, the two contrasting threads of the warp are twisted together to attach it to the palla or border. All this culmination of ornamental thread work on the borders and palla in vibrant colour palettes results in an elegant and traditional saree. Bomkai sarees bear a GI tag.

Bomkai or Sonepuri sarees are woven in both cotton and silk. The cotton fabric is heavy and coarse. The most common design seen in the Bomkai sarees is the fish, which symbolises prosperity and success. Other designs and patterns found are small flowers, peacocks, hourglass drums and dolls.



Featured in the picture is a cotton doll or putli motif Bomkai or Sonepuri saree in a bright magenta and black border with Rudraksha (holy seed) motifs, white temples in the body and a decorative palla with hourglass drums and dolls.

A Bomkai or Sonepuri weave is so intricate that no power loom can replicate its vibrancy.





— The Charm of a — **CHIKANKARI** Saree

Come summer, thread work embroidery evokes a classic picture of a Chikankari work saree in one's mind. The exquisiteness of the thread work embroidery on a Chikankari saree lends itself beautifully to tropical climates.



Chikan, in its literal sense, means 'embroidery'. This traditional embroidery style is one of Lucknow's most ancient and well-known art forms. It goes as far back as the early third century, with one tale mentioning the story of a traveller who taught Chikankari work to a peasant in return for a drink of water. However, the most popular and factually checkable story is that of Empress Noor Jahan, the wife of the Mughal Emperor Jehangir, who introduced this Persian art to India in the 17th century. She herself was a talented embroideress and had a particular fondness for this art. Her husband is said to have loved Chikan work too. Chikankari embroidery started as a white-on-white embroidery form, and the favoured fabric was muslin or mulmul as it was best suited to the warm, slightly humid climate. After the decline of the Mughal



Empire, Chikankari work artisans spread all over India, but Lucknow remained the main centre with Awadh a close second.

The Chikankari technique practised today has two main production steps: the pre and the post preparation stages. The pre-work involves determining the design and engraving it onto wooden block stamps. These stamps are then used for block printing the saree. The next step is the actual embroidery process, in which the fabric is set in a small frame, part by part, and needlework embroidery begins, tracing the ink patterns. The type of stitching depends on the speciality of the region as well as the type and size of the motifs. Some of the most popular stitches in Chikankari include the backstitch, chainstitch and hemstitch. The finished saree is first checked



for consistency and neatness, then washed to remove all traces of ink. Its delicate and artful hand embroidery gives the saree a look of elegance and skilfulness.

Chikankari work may have started out as white-on-white embroidery work on muslin cloth but has now evolved and incorporates the use of colours. Floral patterns and Chikankari work go hand-in-hand. Due to its strong Persian influence, flowers have always been a staple with the use of stems, buttas and leaves added to complete the design. Traditional muslin cloth that the art was established on originally has now been substituted by lighter



fabrics, such as cotton, silk, chiffon and organza, to make sarees.

Featured in the image is a sky blue, georgette saree with Chikankari embroidery in white threads. It has a beautiful overlay of floral patterns with precise handwork. Chikankari hand embroidery sarees give a very subtle yet classy feel that modern embroidery techniques lack.

This excellently embroidered saree, which is a 400-plus-year-old art form, today remains a global sensation.





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