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# How to Dress a National Elite: The Case of the Kalakshetra Sari

Kaamya Sharma

## Abstract

This article looks at the emergence of the Kalakshetra sari as an object of consumption for the Indian nationalist elite in the 1930s within the context of the Theosophical Movement, preoccupations with the role of women in public life, and the material culture practices of colonial South India. The Kalakshetra School of dance and music, founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale, is considered a leading institution in the classicisation of the performing arts to promote pan-Indian nationalism. This article looks at the way discourses on female attire, women's cultural role in society and middle-class nationalism were shaped by the Kalakshetra School through its strategic use of colour and design in the Kalakshetra sari. The visual-material atmosphere the sari created and inhabited off-stage reinforced the aesthetics and classicism of on-stage performances. In the process, the Kalakshetra sari became part of the visual palette of elite nationalism in colonial and post-colonial Madras/Chennai.

**Keywords:** India, Kalakshetra, sari, dress, art, elite, nationalism, gender

## The making of a sartorial icon

The nationalist discourses propagated by various subaltern elites at the turn of the twentieth century in colonial India were all indelibly concerned with the question of gender, and more specifically, that of womanhood. Partha Chatterjee's seminal essay "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India" (1989) provided a pioneering explanation of the nationalist dilemma of repudiating colonial orientalist narratives about Indian women (as oppressed, backward and victimised) whilst preserving the traditional, spiritual core of the nation (believed to be embodied in its women). This dilemma was resolved by a formulation of womanhood that required women to be educated and progressive while simultaneously embodying the nation's spiritual traditional core. This formulation continues to exert its presence within dichotomies in being and performing womanhood in urban India today.

Chatterjee notes the effect of this resolution in splitting public and private spheres into the outer, material, masculine contrasted against the domestic, spir-

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itual, feminine. Indeed, domesticity was a recurrent preoccupation in multiple, sometimes overlapping projects of cultural reform, often linked to projects of womanhood (Hancock 1999: 149). This link between domesticity and womanhood, prevalent both in Victorian thought and Indian nationalist discourse, served to foreground debates surrounding the moral, social and sartorial propriety of women. These dilemmas were most visibly resolved in the matter of women's dress, through the nationalisation of the sari as a sartorial code for traditional feminine respectability (Bhatia 2003). The sari has been a subject of fascination since colonial times and is one of the signal tropes of the exotic "Indian woman", popularised by Raja Ravi Varma in his famous nineteenth century portraits (Thakurtha 1995, Jain 2007). The depiction of Mother India in the Nivi sari<sup>1</sup>, from Abanindranath Tagore's paintings to its dissemination in popular visual culture in India, aided the nationalisation of the sari "as a material symbol of nation, draped and duly contained from rapid erosion by English mill-made fabrics and the tyranny of colonial rule" (Kawlra 2014: 217). The integrationist rhetoric of post-independence Indian policies resulted in the sari embodying both the material representation of ideal womanhood and the nation's unity-in-diversity. Today, it enjoys a degree of continuity with a steady, if varying, role in urban Indian women's wardrobes and their social lives.

Mary Hancock (1999: 149) describes the "efforts to frame homes both as (feminine) 'backstages' of new (masculine) public realms, and as sites for producing new nationalized and classed subjects who espoused modernist values of individualism and scientific rationality" as part of elite nationalist projects. While these debates were dominated by men in the nineteenth century, women became more actively involved in the twentieth (ibid.). The Swadeshi and Home Rule Movements, propagated by the cultural elites of the time, were involved in the mobilisation of colour-scapes that explicitly linked morality with design and aesthetics in articulations of Indian national identity.

This article discusses a particular instance of sartorial reform that was intimately entwined with the classicisation of the performing arts within the nationalist movement: the establishment of the Kalakshetra School of Fine Arts by Rukmini Devi Arundale at Madras in 1936. Rukmini Devi staged classical dance (Bharatanatyam) as a spiritual and nation-building activity. Kalakshetra's co-optation into the nationalist ethos created a template of the classical performing arts, tradition and femininity in an elite, upper-caste mould.

While Kalakshetra's on-stage performances have been extensively documented and analysed, the institutionalisation of the Kalakshetra sari, which is

1 The Nivi sari was developed in 1866 by Jnanadanandini Devi, wife of civil servant Satyanendra Nath Tagore and sister-in-law of Rabindranath Tagore. She adopted the Parsi style of wearing the sari with a *choli* (tailored blouse), and petticoat with the *pallu* draped over one shoulder. This style of drape "took on political dimensions in the early twentieth century when women involved in the nationalist movement adopted the style" (Kawlra 2014: 30).

a relatively unexamined by-product of this process, has not. The politics of colour and design usage in the Kanjivaram saris of Madras/Chennai are an instance of this “material”-isation of femininity, revealing homologies between colonial knowledge productions about Indian textiles and post-colonial preservationist attitudes towards handloom textiles as national heritage. I argue that the Kalakshetra sari played a key role in the transformation and reassertion of tradition, femininity and everyday aesthetics.

Through an analysis of writings published by the Kalakshetra Foundation, biographical texts (books and interview material) about Rukmini Devi, magazine articles and exhibition catalogues about the Kalakshetra sari within the historical and religious context of the Theosophical Movement, I suggest that Rukmini Devi’s efforts in building Kalakshetra as a school of traditional dance and music, with all its attendant visual atmosphere, were aided equally by her off-stage displays of the Kalakshetra saris produced at the Weaving Centre. Clothing and costume symbiotically re-fashioned an ideal of womanhood in elite, upper-caste terms that helped reconcile the moral perils of public performance with middle-class feminine respectability. This was established through contiguities between the on-stage dance performances of the Kalakshetra School and the off-stage performances of the “feminine” through the school’s sari.

## The Empire’s anxieties about Indian textiles

Textiles as objects of aesthetic and utilitarian value characterised a fundamental concern about the complex relationships between Britain and India during the nineteenth century. Even as an exploitative trade market selling British cloth was set up in India, Indian textiles formed part of a circulatory transnational space between India and Britain, contributing to conflicting opinions about India. Even as some eminent figures expressed concern about preserving the “purity” of Indian textiles in the use of natural dyes and “native” ornament, sartorial practices were increasingly designed to create distance between coloniser and colonised, resulting in dilemmas amongst Indians (men in particular) about the degree to which they could adopt Western dress (Tarlo 1996).

Under the auspices of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the 1880s, the ideologies championing the “decorative arts, the vernacular and the politics of work” were united under a single banner (Greenhalgh 1997: 25). Within this juxtaposition of increasing industrialisation and the concurrent romanticisation of village life, the notion of India as an artisanal haven became important to the Arts and Crafts Movement (Venkatesan 2009). Colour and ornament came to be symptomatic of the corruption of the Indian aesthetic by Western influences, with the use of synthetic dyes in Indian textiles repeatedly decried

as a harmful influence by important artistic figures such as George Birdwood, William Morris, Thomas Wardle and Owen Jones. As Sonia Ashmore notes, “Indian dyestuffs were among the natural materials and ‘vegetable’ products displayed at the international exhibitions as products of empire. Raw materials, recipes, and dyeing methods were meticulously recorded in India and displayed at the exhibitions” (Ashmore 2009: 3). Owen Jones’s *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), which was intended for didactic and imitative purposes, dwelt with energy on the restraint in the use of colour in Indian textile samples. George Birdwood, an Anglo-Indian official and commentator on Indian art, remarked on “the natural beauty of the dyes used, and the knowledge, taste and skill of the natives of India in the harmonious arrangement of colors [...] the simplicity and treatment of the decorative details” (Birdwood 1880: 298–99). Many articles in *The Journal of Indian Art*, published between 1886 and 1916, lamented the loss of native taste in clothing. Accounts of the textile industries of various provinces reported the substitution of Indian natural dyes with “sight-killing and offensive” European dyes, which are “gaudy, fine and pleasing” initially and “become too ugly for a second wear” after washing (Sastu 1890: 23). The “decline in taste” was viewed as a tragedy, a result of “the use of bright but fugitive aniline colours” and an increasing “demand for cheap and bright-looking articles” (Mookerji 1894: 2).

This discourse was appropriated and subverted by the visual imaginaries of the Swadeshi Movement. The homology between “colonial ways of knowing” (Venkatesan 2009: 7) and nationalist appropriations of the aesthetic discourse around textiles can best be understood through Gauri Viswanathan’s principle of complementarity in the “capacity for transference, in criss-cross fashion, of any one or more of these factors – subject, agent, event, intention, purpose – not in the sense of wholesale borrowing, but of readaptation” (Viswanathan 1989: 8–9). If colonial administrative powers orientalist India through the acquisition and display of Indian textiles, the nationalist bourgeoisie appropriated such orientalisations for their own purposes. Tropes of the exotic (such as the use of vibrant hues and pleasing designs in saris) were absorbed and reclaimed in the image of the Indian woman who donned the Kalakshetra sari, as we shall see in the following sections.

## Theosophy in the Madras Presidency

The seeds of Kalakshetra as an institution and zeitgeist were sown by the establishment of the Theosophical Movement at the end of the nineteenth century in Madras. Madras, as the earliest established British colony and administrative stronghold of South India, was the site of an incipient nationalism, located predominantly within the city’s burgeoning educated

middle classes. This form of bourgeois nationalism was bolstered by the establishment of institutions such as the Theosophical Society. With the increasing presence of women in public debate at the turn of the twentieth century, imaginaries of ideal womanhood began to circulate among different actors from the nationalist patriarchy, transnational feminist movements and subaltern elite groups (Hancock 1999). As the Home Rule Movement gathered momentum, the suburb of Adyar in Madras became the headquarters of the Theosophical Society in 1895 led by Annie Besant, Madame Blavatsky, C. W. Leadbeater, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and George Arundale. As one of the progenitors of the Home Rule Movement in India, Annie Besant “wrote and spoke extensively on nationalism and education, women’s suffrage, the simple life, and cultural revival, as well as establishing the Hindu university at Varanasi and the Home Rule League” (Eaton 2013: 627).

As a syncretic religion that relied heavily on discourses of spiritualism, rationalism and eugenics, Theosophy aimed to “create a synthesis of ‘east’ and ‘west’ which would be simultaneously spiritual and scientific, traditional and modern” (Dixon 1999: 195). The Theosophist ideal of Indian womanhood was similarly embodied in a syncretic amalgam of traditional and modern virtues (ibid.). Besant produced the idea of the “World Mother” in 1928, a syncretic amalgamation of mother figures across religious faiths (Srinivasan 1985: 1874). This World Mother was now to be represented by Rukmini Devi, as the ideal Indian woman who was a synthesis of traditional and modern values, who could participate in civil society, and who had “racial purity” (ibid.). Through their championing of Home Rule and the “nationalisation of Indian art and life” along with other figures such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, E. B. Havell, and Rabindranath Tagore, Theosophists won over the native Indian elite (ibid.). Later, Rukmini Devi would also deploy the rhetoric of the World Mother in her writings as a figure that would “serve to spiritualize the politics of the modern nation-state in both ‘east’ and ‘west’” using tropes of “purity, refinement and delicacy” (Dixon 1999: 204).

Rukmini Devi was born in 1904 in Madurai to an upper-caste (Brahman) family. Exposed to Theosophist ideas at an early age, she embraced the movement completely after her marriage to Theosophist George Arundale. Following Annie Besant’s call to work with her, the couple moved to Adyar. In her biography, Rukmini Devi characterised Besant’s influence upon her: “She encouraged me to be true to the most beautiful and simple traditions of Indian life. She said, ‘I do not like Westernised Indian women’. She told me to wear only beautiful colours, never white without any border, nor black or brown” (Samson 2010: 53).

Colour was an important element of theosophical thought. Besant and Leadbeater, in a book called *Thought Forms* (1901), sought to establish a link

between thoughts and their material manifestations; the mental plane was believed to be possessed of matter, and they wished to capture, in words and images, how thoughts looked when manifested materially. The book outlined three basic principles governing the “production of thought-forms”: 1) the quality of thought determines the colour; 2) the nature of thought determines the form; 3) the definiteness of thought determines the clearness of outline (Besant / Leadbeater 1901: 21).

In a chapter devoted to ascertaining the meaning of colours, they assigned emotional qualities to different colours<sup>2</sup>, noting that the “brilliance and depth of the colors are usually a measure of the strength and activity of the feeling” (Besant / Leadbeater 1901: 24). Evidently, Theosophy used colour as a crucial link between material and moral-spiritual dimensions of universal being, by developing a “theory of moral colour-space [...] in which colours are experienced by their auras, or ‘thought forms’” (Eaton 2013: 624). Colour could bleed into the dimensions that separated the material and spiritual, blurring the distinctions between the two. Dress and colour are thus meant to act as mediators between the inner spirit and the outer material world – sartorial codes were not only expressions of the moral being, but a form of moral praxis. In this context Annie Besant firmly believed in the need for a revival and patronage of the Indian arts:

The inner feeling and outer expression often go together, and he who westernises his outside attire is very likely to grow western *inside* as well, and therefore instead of strengthening he really tends to weaken his motherland. [...] And this leads me to the next point: namely, that it is the bounden duty of every patriotic Indian to encourage Indian art, Indian manufactures and Indian labour; and not to go across the seas to bring here endless manufactured articles, but to give work to his own people [...] in the Indian [goods], the colours are most delicately graduated and blended giving an exquisite softness of shading to the Indian carpet, and this is the result of generations of physical training in the sense of colour; while in the carpet of foreign manufacture, it is harsh and crude, and there is no need to print upon it “manufactured in Germany” for you only have to look at its colouring to know it is not Indian (Besant 1895: 25–27).

Theosophists thus employed the rhetoric of spirituality and eugenics, playing on the already racialised discourse that separated Brahmans and Non-Brahmans in Tamil Nadu. Opposing social reform, Besant believed that the best course for Indian women was to return to the traditions of the past. This created oppositions between the Dravidian movement, which believed in radical social reform, and the Brahman-dominated Theosophical Movement. The tensions between the two were notably manifested in their perception and treatment of the much-maligned community of Devadasis.

2 As, for example: red means anger, brown means avarice, orange denotes pride or ambition, green denotes adaptability and yellow intellectual gratification, etc. (Besant / Leadbeater 1901: 22–24).

## Devadasis and the anti-Nautch movement in colonial Madras

In spite of extensive public debate and literature surrounding the history and role of the Devadasi, she is still a figure spoken for rather than speaking, frozen in what Davesh Soneji terms “unfinished gestures”, insufficiently able to participate in the modernity she was instrumental in creating (Soneji 2012: 226). Devadasis were part of a heterodox tradition, which involved being “courtesans, secular dance artists [...] temple workers” (ibid.: 3). Their ambiguous social position stemmed historically from their being in “quasi-matrilineal communities, non-conjugal sexual relationships with upper-caste men” (who were frequently their elite patrons) and having access to financial independence and literacy (ibid.). The launching of the anti-Nautch movement by British and Indian social reformers in 1892 witnessed the conflation of Devadasis with prostitutes and “dancing girls”, in the heyday of Victorian morality. From this period until independence, the collusions between transnational first-wave feminism and the nationalist patriarchy framed monogamous conjugality as the sole means of legitimising Indian women’s rights to the resources of citizenship (Sreenivasan 2011).

The consolidation of this view resulted in the legal and social disenfranchisement of the Devadasis through The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947. While the Dravidian movement sought the erasure of the Devadasi through her portrayal as a prostitute, the “revival” movement dominated by the Theosophical Movement and the Congress depicted her as a “nun”, a figure of religious piety and devotion cleansed of the taint of sexual promiscuity (Srinivasan 1985). Within this context, Rukmini Devi appropriated the Devadasi dance form of Sadir and recast it in the image of Bharatanatyam, the dance of the nation. Rukmini Devi’s travels abroad, a notable encounter with Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova and interest in dance inspired her to learn Sadir under Gauri Ammal. As an upper-caste woman, this was culturally taboo at the time, occasioning outrage from both Brahman and Devadasi communities – the former considering the dance vulgar and unfit for performance and the latter considering the art form the prerogative of their community.

## The Birth of Bharatanatyam

The reconciliation between womanhood of the past and womanhood of the present was effected by the transference of the wifely qualities of ideal Indian womanhood beyond the bounds of domesticity, into fighting the good fight for the nation (Chakravarti 1989: 52). Thus, the spiritual potential of women in resolving the crisis of national identity lay in their role as *sahadharminis*, part-



ners in religious duties (*ibid.*). Rukmini Devi used this desexualised construction in her own project for cultural reform. Her Theosophist education and the influence of Annie Besant resulted in a life-long concern with dance, aesthetics, national identity and the role of women in the nation. Influenced by the orientalist Theosophist narratives of Indian womanhood as embodying restraint, refinement and beauty, she set about enacting a project of cultural reform that began with dance and eventually extended to the realm of clothing. She gave her first performance at the Theosophical Society in 1935, which was lavishly described by Leela Samson: “then thirty-one years old, yet slim and girl-like, extremely beautiful, with long, dark tresses, and with mystery surrounding her new-found passion for the dance of the Devadasis, [she] danced her first performance of Bharata Natyam, the ancient and classical dance art of South India” (Samson 2010: 87).

Another description of that performance by S. Sarada attests that “she had proved that this physical art, when presented with purity, devoid of vulgarity, could convey the soul-uplifting message of ancient India” (*ibid.*). Descriptions of her dance performances continued in this transcendent vein; the stylisation of the physical body, its adornment and disciplining through dance would eventually lead to the uplifting of the soul. Though many have rightly read her sanitising influence on Bharatanatyam as an erasure of its erotic and sensual propensities, Rukmini Devi believed principally in spiritual uplifting through bodily discipline and aesthetic conditioning. Hence, the engagement with corporeality and material aesthetic was justified and cleansed by its larger spiritual promise. The sanitising of Bharatanatyam was two-fold – it was desexualised and decommercialised, *i.e.*, removed from its original socioeconomic context where performance was a means of livelihood. Rukmini Devi’s message of art for art’s sake, as being “devoid of vulgarity and commercialism”, refashioned performance in elitist terms and birthed a new generation of dancers drawn predominantly from upper-caste, upper-class families who could afford to take up dancing as a “hobby” (Ganesh 2016).

In 1936, she established the International Academy of Arts at Adyar in Madras, which would later be renamed Kalakshetra – a temple of music, dance and fine arts. Rukmini Devi’s project of aesthetic and cultural reform, posited as a national concern, was strategically rationalised using the teachings of Theosophy. Motherhood was often deployed in her writings but its physiological necessity was removed from its link to the programme of cultural reform as “she emphasized the link between motherhood and cultural creativity, and redefined all of women’s creative endeavours as a manifestation of ‘that great spirit of Motherhood’” (Dixon 1999: 204). The spirit of motherhood was believed to characterise all of women’s cultural and political endeavours, but not necessarily its bodily reality. Motherhood linked domesticity to women’s participation in civil and political society. Tropes of the home were transmuted

to the nation through this carefully constructed image of women's work. Though motherhood had been deployed as a metaphor in both Dravidian and pan-Indian imaginaries of the Indian nation (Ramaswamy 1993), the sartorial ideal affixed in the Nivi sari was furthered by Rukmini Devi's use of the Kalakshetra sari as an aesthetic and cultural index of womanhood.



Figure 1: Students at the morning prayer, Kalakshetra

© Kaamya Sharma (2015)

The Kalakshetra campus was constructed along the lines of the Swadeshi-inspired aesthetics of Shantiniketan, also inspired by Rukmini Devi's encounter with Rabindranath Tagore (Samson 2010), emulating a rural utopia entirely lacking signifiers of modernity through the use of "wooden panels of the brick and stone rooms [...] an auditorium constructed of bamboo and an assembly area at the roots of a sturdy Banyan tree" (Aggarwal 2012: 84). The project of artistic revival and the reform of sartorial modes went hand in hand for Rukmini Devi. When asked about her weaving centre, Rukmini Devi would say:

What I want is not merely to encourage dance, drama and music, but to have the arts of the people that will create the atmosphere of nationality. I will start a weaving centre too. I have discovered that wherever I go, it is hardest to find a beautiful Indian sari. Fashionable saris with a European touch that even they don't use are now found in our markets (Samson 2010: 99).

## The project of aesthetic reform

Rukmini Devi adapted Theosophist ideals to a project of cultural reform through the strategic deployment of syncretic ideals and images of womanhood. Beauty of form for her was not merely an aesthetic goal but a spiritual one. In a pamphlet entitled *The Message of Beauty to Civilization*, she wrote:

We have to learn more and more of the beautiful. The more we respond to the beautiful, the more will our religion become beautiful. The more will our civilization become beautiful, the more will our daily lives become beautiful, and we shall get rid of the many ugly things that exist in the world (Arundale 1904: 9–10).

She advocated a stylised idea of gender and womanhood, believing the creative spirit to be the true core of womanhood. The reinfusion of aesthetics into everyday life would be accomplished by the stylisation of the feminine, both sartorially and socially as an embodiment of the ideal of the beautiful. Art and womanhood were considered kin in their emotional spirit in an interesting inversion of the traditional nature/culture – female/male binary; thus, she wrote that “if these two can combine, whether in the home or in politics, whether, according to modern times, even at a typewriter, then woman can be her real self and can express herself through all the graces of life, the beauties and the refinements of life, and the influence she can bring upon her surroundings” (Arundale 1904: 17–18).

Kalakshetra as an academy for the fine arts was inaugurated and organised in this spirit of beauty as embodying an inner spiritual core – in the visual atmosphere of the school and the colours that students were allowed to wear. In a letter to potential students of Kalakshetra, Rukmini Devi wrote: “Most important of all, is to have good taste. This has almost entirely vanished from the educated classes in India and it is in this field that I have the hardest work” (Samson 2010: 105).

Though much of her writing emphasised the spiritual and internal revolutions necessary for a creative revival of an art form, Rukmini Devi was considerably preoccupied with costuming the dance form differently, as she felt that the Devadasis “used saris with lots of false lustre and tinsel” (Devi 1983: 63). Through the study of scriptures and temple sculpture, she introduced several changes in costume (Samson 2010: 126).

The choreography of dance dramas based on religious and mythological themes enabled her “to revive the ancient presentation with the very costumes and hairstyles which carried a stamp of authenticity, based as they were on the essential characteristics of the ancient Tamils” (ibid.: 108). Ironically, the portrayal of the Devadasis as figures of cultural degeneration coincided with the development of much of the repertoire of Bharatanatyam today (Soneji 2012). This growth was unmistakably aided by the urban, cosmopolitan nature of

Devadasi performance in the Madras Presidency as “salon dances”, which were private performances conducted in the homes of Indian elites and Europeans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While salon culture gave way to the rise of *sabhas* (cultural organisations) later in the twentieth century, the composition and patronage of the audience as middle-class or elite Tamil Brahmans was important to the constitution of respectability in the dance itself (Meduri 1988). Indeed, the performative dimensions of spectatorship remain as crucial to on-stage performance in contemporary Chennai today (Ram 2011). Spectatorship as a means of participating in elite, nationalist identity-formation was also aided by the aesthetic and performative dimensions of the Kalakshetra sari, as we shall see later on.

Reviews of Rukmini Devi’s project from her peers and protégées also attest to the specificity of her aesthetics, her certainty that only some dance forms, saris and costumes were appropriate. This is contextualised as appearing in a place-time when aesthetic taste in the material was in a welter of confusion, in “chaos because handloom merchants tried to cater to the market by weaving a hotchpotch of designs incorporating European motifs and other innovations which they felt were saleable” (Ramani 2002: 12).

## Weaving and sartorial praxis at Kalakshetra

Narratives about Rukmini Devi supposedly encountering a sari with a gramophone motif on it demonstrate the birth of the Kalakshetra sari as a “clarifier of taste”. The inappropriateness of the design on the sari, believed to have been a part of the art-deco and art-nouveau traditions, consisting of aeroplane and gramophone motifs favoured by the mercantile elites at the turn of the century (Kaul 2016: 16), spurred her to further exploration of traditional textile crafts. In a magazine article about the Kalakshetra tradition, Shakunthala Ramani, an associate of Kalakshetra, writes, “It was a time when traditional designs in textiles were considered outmoded and the wearing of handloom saris was given up by the newly westernized bourgeoisie” (Ramani 2006: 28). Rukmini Devi considered it her calling to bring the traditional sari back into vogue, and to give its aesthetics a politics of purpose.

The link between sartorial and artistic revival was further bolstered by the inauguration of the Weavers’ Service Centre on 19 September 1937 with one loom at Adyar. At the inauguration ceremony of the Weaving Centre in Kalakshetra, Rukmini Devi made the following statement in her speech:

In this centre we hope to weave all kinds of different material both in cotton and in silk. As far as possible we will try to keep the idea of beauty as our main object and that what we weave must be totally INDIAN in design, material and colour [...] our aim is not to set up a huge factory but rather try in a small way to produce fine materials of

beauty and simplicity. We hope that what we produce here will reflect the most wonderful things that have been produced in our country in olden days (Ramani 2002: 14).

From its inception, the Weaving Centre took up all aspects of sari-making, such as yarn-dyeing, spinning, and weaving. Production, though slow to meet the growing demand, was centralised and experiments were made with using natural dyes for silk and chemical dyes for cotton. The weaves and motifs of the neighbouring town of Kanchipuram were emulated in the making of these saris, with contrasting colours in the body and wide borders. The saris used by the students at the dance school, the costumes for their stage performances and the saris for women who ordered them were all made at the Centre, reinforcing the contiguities between everyday clothing and stage costume. The Weaving Centre expanded from one loom to about twenty by 1954, but shrank again when handloom co-operatives were established by the government to support weavers closer to their homes. The work of the Centre shifted focus later, to concentrate on the processing and development of natural dyes. The saris produced from these looms were soon heavily in demand, and were considered fine collector's items by the elite of Madras. Women would custom-order saris from the Centre, giving them colour and design suggestions; though these saris were meant to be Kanjivarams (produced in the design grammar of Kanchipuram's weaves), they came to be known as Kalakshetra saris for the bold proportions and wide borders.

In the process of creating "traditional authenticity", a design data bank was assembled with saris obtained from Rukmini Devi's circle of friends, largely bourgeois, upper-caste, upper-class women. "Fresh colour combinations and innovations" were made "within the framework of tradition", in addition to the assignation of "appropriate traditional names" to these new combinations (Ramani 2002: 14). Positioning itself as a nationalist response to the flood of British cloth, bizarre designs and synthetic dyes in local markets, the Kalakshetra sari appropriated discourses of Indian tradition and heritage in particular ways that derived from the aesthetic palate of Swadeshi, a movement that began as a rebellion against the production and use of synthetic dyes and foreign cloth.

The Kalakshetra sari made it possible for the affluent public to participate in the atmosphere of art, cultural heritage and nationalist pride spawned by the institution without being an actual practitioner of the performing arts. The act of consuming the sari, or its imitations, became part of the performance of bourgeois nationalism, along with the consumption of Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam as classical dance. As a cultural niche garment, the Kalakshetra sari effectively became a byword and visual representation for high aesthetics in the burgeoning visual culture of Tamil Nadu as a post-colonial regional state.

## Colour and the Kalakshetra sari

The use of colour for legitimation is evident in the textual productions of Kalakshetra, for instance in statements such as the following: “Indian tradition had a well-defined grammar with reference to colours” (Ramani 2002: 50). The *abharya* (costume) section in the *Nrittasutra* and *Chitrasutra*<sup>3</sup> were both referenced as valuable sources of ancient India’s perception of colour. Colour is romanticised as present in a shared vocabulary between weaver and wearer for traditional saris such as *manthulir* (russet red and green of the tender mango leaf), *mayil kazhuthu* (the iridescent blue and green of the peacock’s neck), *kempu* (ruby red), *arakku* (deep lac red) (ibid.). Natasha Eaton has emphasised the chromatic preoccupations of the Swadeshi Movement wherein Sanskrit treatises that dealt in colour and costume such as the *Natyashastra* were combed for insight into assembling a newly minted, completely Indianised visual palette (Eaton 2013).

Sartorial reform consisted of an underlying critique of the western notion of originality as newness, contradistinguishing the Indian sartorial aesthetic from the West as eternal and unchanging. The intent was not for the weavers to constantly innovate at their loom, but rather to create permuted and combined versions of existing elements that were recognised mutually between creator and buyer. Artisanal praxis was balanced on the delicate creation of beauty within the limited variables of colours, motifs, patterns and proportions. The sari as an object of “fashion” did not apply here. Those “fashion designers of the West” who produced something new every season were derided and regarded as harmful to the weavers who imbue their craft with artistic vitality as well as spiritual significance (Ramani 2002: 51).

Playing on the discourse of racial distinctions between North and South, Brahmans and Non-Brahmans, the Kalakshetra sari also sought to fix the image of the South Indian woman; hence the emphasis on how the “the sari tradition in the south of India is much older to that found in the north, and has retained its Hindu character” (ibid.: 54). The production of particular designs and colours in saris were socially legitimised as being more distinctly “Tamil”. The aesthetics of authenticity are materially manifested in the Kalakshetra sari:

While handlooms in the north have been greatly influenced by Moghul designs those of the south, especially the saris, have remained untouched by outside influences [...] the Benarsi design is rich with floral vines and creepers, delicate buttas, guldastas and similar motifs, which have a cameo-like fragility, while Kanchipuram designs are more geometrical, with simple lines and checks, forming the body of the sari design (Ramani 2002: 54).

Thus, institutions such as Kalakshetra were as much a stakeholder in affirmations of a South Indian essence as the actors of Dravidian nationalism. The

3 The *Nrittasutra* and the *Chitrasutra* are part of the *Vishnudharmottarapurana*, a Sanskrit treatise on music, dance and painting written roughly between the 6th and the 8th centuries.

design grammar of the Kalakshetra sari was perceived to be authentically south Indian, with ornamental excess being othered. The traditional vocabulary of the Kalakshetra sari preferred the simple to the over-embellished, evoking the simplicity of artisanal and rural life as opposed to the labyrinthine complexities of industrial urban life.

Mythologies about Rukmini Devi frequently emphasise the importance she gave to harmony in colour combinations. She reportedly “had no qualms about ripping it all up and starting from scratch” if the colours were perceived to be out of sync (Guhan 2006: 26). In a magazine article about the Kalakshetra sari, Rukmini Devi’s associate Shantha Guhan reports having observed her cross out a request from a customer for a pale blue and pink sari, stating that “these are not traditional colours”:

She was absolutely clear on what was acceptable and what comprised an aesthetically appropriate sari [...] Kalakshetra saris embodied an aesthetic that emerged from the colours of the earth, from the saris that mothers and grandmothers had worn and loved, from saris which suited the complexion of the wearer and the life she lived (Guhan 2006: 26).

In this description, the mill-made, “ill-made” colonial sari with foreign motifs and brash colours requires replacement with the more subdued, refined hues of the Kalakshetra sari, reflecting a preoccupation with womanhood itself as ideally embodied in restraint. Though the “colonial” saris are reviled as aesthetically and morally reprehensible, the manner in which the Kalakshetra sari was rationalised in discourse “made (it) available to the European gaze” through “a certain structure or order” that “had to be discerned beneath the surface” (Weidman 2006: 209). Thus, European epistemes were deployed even in the antithesis to a so-called Western aesthetic.

The importance of bringing the aesthetic and functional together in harmony was consistently emphasised – the sari made with true integrity would achieve a synaesthesia of sorts, of sight and touch. In a conversation with the dancer Chandralekha for a newspaper article, Rukmini Devi highlighted the three-dimensional nature of the sari and the importance of a garment having atmosphere, pointing out that in the past, women would customise their clothes in very subtle, quiet ways – suiting them to their bodies and appearances using “colours that echoed sun, sky, earth [...] directly related to the colour of the women wearing them” (Devi 1983: 63). Racial and aesthetic essentialisations are united in this discourse of stylised womanhood. The “daring proportions” of saris such as the Mubbagam saris of Kanchipuram (saris segmented into three parts with three complementing colours, where the borders are one-third the width of the body) supposedly demonstrated a “sophistication in colour usage [...] in the way colour works to melt the initial divisions even as it accentuates them” (ibid.). The Kalakshetra sari was thus presented as a way to look distinctively Indian by enacting “traditional” aesthetics that could affirm elite,

upper-caste status through distinctions in taste and morally appropriate consumption. Rukmini Devi created a standard in her reform attempts, one that fixed the image of ideal womanhood in explicitly bourgeois, Hindu, upper-caste tones, similar to other “disciplinary projects that regenerated societal inequalities, as they asserted racial and national homogeneities” (Hancock 2001: 903).

In a signal instance of auto-exoticisation, the Kalakshetra sari appropriated discourses surrounding colour use and design sensibilities generated by the orientalist and imperial exhibitionary complex of the nineteenth century. The sartorial indexes of tradition thus became synonymous with handloom textiles and natural dyes, expelling the synthetic and artificial, which was considered representative of the “western”. The Kalakshetra sari was meant to reclaim the province of good taste from the coloniser, by disrupting the narrative of the “noble savage”, and appropriating orientalist narratives of colour. The use of muted colours was metonymic of Rukmini Devi’s prescriptions for ideal womanhood as subdued and refined. The rhetoric and method was also focused on paring down excess, the removal of extraneous motifs and loud, garish colours. Yet the process of determining extraneous features was largely ad hoc, derived from the saris owned by a particular class of elite women and relying on reconstructed memory. Kalakshetra saris powerfully indexed the past through visual and discursive references to female genealogies, particularly in their status as the saris “mothers and grandmothers” wore.

Chandralekha, the dancer and contemporary of Rukmini Devi, was to say later in an interview (about Rukmini Devi):

I was able to see from very close quarters, her work and her personality, the tremendous aesthetic quality of her life. I was not seeing her dance as much as the entire aesthetic environment that she would always carry with her. If there was a performance, the way she arranged the flowers or the costumes, the colours, it was tremendous; I thought she was the best-dressed woman in India.<sup>4</sup>

The heirloom saris produced by Kalakshetra continued to be imbued with sticky associations to Rukmini Devi’s personal charisma, as elite Tamil Brahman heritage. The clothes had exceeded the wearer. Thus Kalakshetra, founded on an ideology of artistic and aesthetic revival within the nationalist framework, functioned as an index of “tradition”, “culture” and the “fine arts” in Chennai, with state recognition as an Institute of National Importance since 1993 (Kalakshetra 2017a). The Kalakshetra website emphasises the importance of the Kalakshetra sari in the cultural milieu by stating that “50 designs have been licensed to the Tamil Nadu Handlooms Directorate, and marketed as Kalakshetra saris” (Kalakshetra 2017b), which resulted in an exhibition-cum-sale jointly organised by Kalakshetra and Co-optex (the retail face of the Tamil Nadu State Handloom Weavers Cooperative) in 1990. In a message

4 Television interview with Chandralekha on NDTV Talking Heads in November 2000.



prefacing the exhibition catalogue, the then President of India, B. Venkataraman, wrote in praise of Rukmini Devi's work, "They [Kalakshetra saris] teach us that colour, like music, does not have to be high-pitched to be appealing; that patterns like dance need balance to be beautiful".<sup>5</sup> Evidently, this description plays on the "slippage between traditional textiles and classical music" (Weidman 2006: 134). The President was continuing the language of "purity, refinement and delicacy" that had been given a gendered, eugenic spin by the Theosophical Movement and deployed by Rukmini Devi for her project of cultural-aesthetic reform (Dixon 1999: 204). Though the Kalakshetra sari is considered by some of the older and middle-aged residents of the city to have passed its heyday<sup>6</sup>, the Tamil Nadu Handlooms Directorate cites an ever-present demand for Kalakshetra saris (TNHD 2017).

## The Weaving Centre today – reified, displaced pasts in the present

Today, the Weaving Centre is housed in the Craft Education and Research Centre (CERC), consisting of the Handloom Weaving Unit and Kalamkari Unit.<sup>7</sup> Kalakshetra has been involved in the last few years in the revival of the Kodali Karuppur sari<sup>8</sup> in another of its indexations of saris as affective objects of cultural value. The Weaving Centre today is partially self-sufficient, with spinning and weaving done there and yarn dyeing done partially at the centre and partially elsewhere.

A conversation with the master weaver at the Weaving Centre in Kalakshetra yielded interesting insights into the narratives that legitimise his presence. When I questioned him about the designs and colours the centre's weavers used on the saris, he repeatedly used the Tamil word *parampariya* (which is often translated as "traditional") or the word "traditional" (in English) to denote the woven features of the sari.<sup>9</sup> Evidently, the Centre follows existing patterns and the instructions received from the director or administrative body of Kalakshetra regarding the saris to be woven. Customers are shown existing

5 This citation is taken from the foreword of *Homage to Rukmini Devi*, the catalogue that was published when Kalakshetra and Co-optex organized the exhibition of Kalakshashmetra saris together in 1990.

6 During an interview on 8 November 2014, a volunteer at a Crafts NGO remarked that Kalakshetra saris today were nothing compared to what they had been, citing also the actual shrinkage in the size of the Weaving Centre. Thus, there was a meta-narrative of decline even within the patronage of Kalakshetra, which positioned itself as a response to decline.

7 Kalamkari refers to a kind of hand-painted or block-printed textile, *kari* meaning "craftsmanship" and *kalam* meaning "pen".

8 The Kodali Karuppur sari is described as being made by a "combination of wax resist hand painting, block printing and intricate weaving" woven "exclusively for the Maratha queens of Tanjore until the end of the nineteenth century" (Craftrevival 2017).

9 Interview by author with Krishnan in Kalakshetra on 25 July 2015.

templates of saris either as samples or images; the interaction between weaver and wearer is not merely mediated, but completely determined by the elite actor who steps in as the creative director of this revival of traditional styles. The application of “traditional” to a range of weaving practices demonstrates the word’s role in legitimising heritage both in terms of the Centre as the site of its production and the sari as an object imbued with performative value.



Figure 2: Weaving Centre, Kalakshetra  
© Kaamya Sharma (2015)

The master weaver’s native town was the weaving centre of Arani, and he came from a generation of weavers. Contrary to the dominant narrative of weaver families transferring to other occupations, both his children were to continue the family occupation of handloom weaving. His presence in Kalakshetra was an index of authentic heritage, his artisanal praxis signifying traditional practices and aesthetics. When asked about the weaving process, he affirmed that at the Weaving Centre, they tried to replicate as far as possible the weaving practices of his home town. Thus, the production and performance of Kalakshetra as a heritage site was premised not only on the availability of Kalakshetra saris, but also on the aesthetic and performative trope of weaving as authenticity – in this case, displaced from its original context. Though the master weaver’s presence provided the vital stamp of authenticity to the proceedings at the Weaving Centre, he was subordinated to the agency of the

Weaving Centre, which would really determine the production and consumption of the Kalakshetra sari.

## Conclusion – the heritage body

Uma Chakravarti wrote of the recasting of ideal womanhood in the image of the “Aryan woman of the Vedic age” as a collusion between nationalist patriarchy and orientalist nostalgia, noting the elisions of caste and class in such a formulation, creating “a narrow and limiting circle in which the image of Indian womanhood has become both a shackle and a rhetorical device that nevertheless functions as a historical truth” (Chakravarti 1989: 28).

However, I argue that such a carefully orchestrated image of femininity also provides opportunities for self-assertion, as Rukmini Devi’s life demonstrates, born out of the appropriation and erasure of other identities. The project of creating a bridge between art and craft, between everyday life and aesthetic contemplation, was carried out in the ambiguous drapes of the Kalakshetra sari, which was both performance and not, everyday and special, a conscious re-crafting of “a sartorial unconscious”. Everyday life itself became an enactment of an aesthetically, materially crafted tradition and the female body, which was the site of this enactment, became a heritage body. By linking nostalgic memory to the presence and performance of saris, Kalakshetra signalled a key moment in the search for a national essence, as auto-exoticisation that appropriated the colonial-orientalist narrative of Indian womanhood (Kondo 1997).

This history of the institutionalisation of a garment also reveals the confluence of economic and cultural factors that make the sari an object of class display in present-day Chennai. Performances of clothing in arenas such as *sabhas* (concert halls/cultural organisations) and other venues with cultural value place a premium on particular elite identities – such that national and cultural legitimacy is the province of the elite, upper-caste Hindu. But dress has simultaneously rendered these identities ambiguous because legitimacy is accessible to anyone who can perform it. The globalisation of Bharatanatyam as a dance form is also an extension of its inextricable links to colonial modernity and the transnational community of Tamil Brahmins who are its custodians, a sign of how “Brahmin taste is universalized through Chennai’s global, neoliberal economy” through the “marriage of capitalism and heritage” (Soneji 2012: 224–6). The Kalakshetra sari abetted the visual atmosphere of elite performance, spectatorship and patronage that continues to inform Bharatanatyam as the “dance of the nation” today. By cleverly inserting herself into what Swarnamalya Ganesh terms “nation-state womanhood”, Rukmini Devi rendered herself indispensable to the incipient project of Indian modernity (Ganesh 2016).

The economic reforms of the 1990s witnessed the rise of a “nouveau riche” class in India, characterised by conspicuous consumption in contrast to the socialist austerity ideals of earlier times. The preference for handlooms and revivalist projects such as the Kalakshetra sari are presently perceived as indexing an older, cultural elite characterised by restraint in taste (Kaul / Varma 2016: 44). The Kalakshetra sari may also be read as an effort of this elite class to assert its aesthetic and moral superiority over the nouveau riche class. The fears that impelled the mobilisation of the Kalakshetra sari are, in many ways, more realised today than they were in the time of its inception. In spite of the efforts of the state to promote handloom textiles invested with discourses of moral integrity, consumer culture in Chennai is largely determined by global capital flows and the proliferation of synthetic clothes (sarīs being no exception). A vast majority of the lower-middle and lower classes wear synthetic sarīs because of their cheap prices and low maintenance costs; the fashionably-minded middle classes wear chiffon and crepe sarīs alongside the inroads made by the salwar kameez<sup>10</sup> as a garment of daily use.

In spite of these transformations, the Kalakshetra sari is emblematic of a lingering narrative of alter-modernity and nostalgia that has co-opted performances of a nationalist, Theosophist ideal of womanhood in the cultural landscape of contemporary Chennai.

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10 Two-piece dress consisting of a tunic and loose trousers, originally from North India and now universalised in India as dress for urban, mostly young women.

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