

# Chasing Kanjeevarams in Chennai

Beyond its fame as a premier IT centre, and home to prolific Kollywood, Chennai is also perfect if you're on a bridal shopping expedition.

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When I tell friends in Mumbai that I'm going to be spending a week or more in Chennai, for chauvinistic reasons, they say they can't imagine what I could possibly find in the sea-facing city that's not available in their metropolis, but I just smile and reply they don't know what they're missing.

As many brides-to-be from the South will tell you, Chennai is where you can easily pull together the whole kit (from wedding invitations to jewellery to saris), even on short notice, like back in the '90s when NRI boys would come home on a visit and go back to the US as married men. Even if you're not the one getting married or planning a wedding, come along on this shopping tour. I promise you will find treasures as well.



The sari was made in the exact shade the Carnatic singer M.S. Subbulakshmi wished, and since then the colour known as 'MS blue' is a staple of their palette.

#### BRING ON THE BLING

Since you will be in T. Nagar for saris anyway, you can easily visit Prince Jewellers or Khazana, for wave upon wave of wedding sets and diamonds. If you take in a movie while in Chennai, you'll see from the ads that there's a putsch on to encourage the purchase of platinum rather than gold, but as Ishwarya Ramasubramaniam, the recently married niece of a friend told me, "Some youngsters might like it, but gold still has more status."

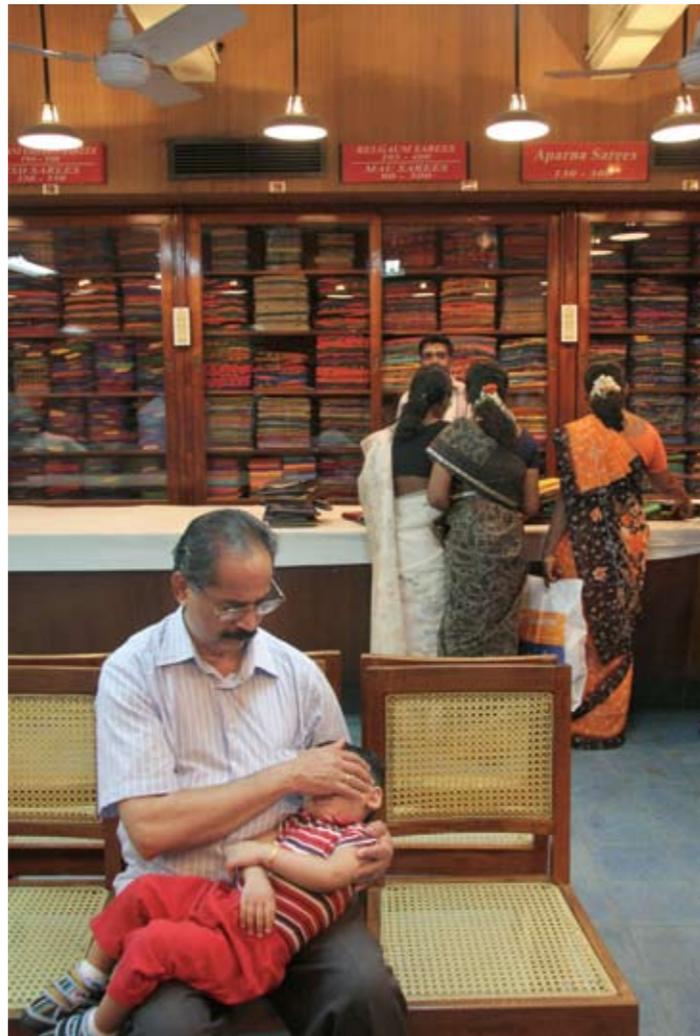
Now the high point of the pilgrimage, as far as Chennai is concerned, remains saris. You know you're in a city where the Kanjeevaram is an important cultural touchstone when even a statue of the Madonna at Santhome Cathedral is artfully swathed in a luminous soft grey silk sari with a baby pink border.

Most brides-to-be will head to Panagal Park, in the central Chennai neighbourhood of T. Nagar. The most frequently mentioned sari houses – Nalli, RmKV, Sundari, Kuamaran and Pothys – are all either along bustling Usman Road or nearby. They draw clients from all over India and beyond.

Having gone to Nalli in the past to buy cotton fabric for *kurtas* (traditional shirts), I decided to return for some saris for a wedding I was attending. A visit soon becomes quite dazzling. You point to some rolled up saris, the salesman flings them open for you to see, and I dare you to be less than amazed at the mixes and matches of colours, sometimes two tones blending or separating depending upon the angle you drape the fabric. Then there's the *zari* (gold embroidery) work, the heavier the better.

My visit began gathered around a large white mattress on the floor, next to 10 heavily bejewelled women. One salesman showed us a 1.5-kg sari (with the *zari* outweighing the silk). It cost Rs 1 lakh and took somewhere between 45 and 60 days to weave. Another sari had a large splattering of Swarovski crystals and cost Rs 24,000. The *pallu* (the end panel of a sari) of a deep forest green sari contained a large portrait of baby Krishna and his mother, who bore a striking resemblance to southern film actress Hema Malini.

Nalli's was established in 1928 in T. Nagar by Nalli Chinnasami Chetty, who liked the proximity to the





railway station. The shop became an anchor of sorts, with other shops soon springing up around. In 1951, the Carnatic singer M.S. Subbulakshmi came to Nalli's with a blue thread and asked them to make a sari for her in that colour, which was not readily available in stores. The sari was made in the exact shade she wished, and since then the colour known as 'MS blue' is a staple of their palette.

#### THE PACKED AISLE

By 11 am, the main floor was thronging with families. One older man, resting on one of the seats in the centre aisle, said his group was buying six saris for a brother-in-law's daughter's wedding. On the same floor, an Italian couple marvelled at the colours and patterns, but the husband wondered "Five and half metres of fabric, what do you do with it?" Several chairs ahead, Deepak, 20-something and from New York, waited while family from Bengaluru shopped. At a back counter, mother and daughter examined a variety of maroon saris with mustard yellow details, discussing in English and Bengali. The daughter explained they were shopping for the female relatives of her brother's Scottish fiancée, who were all going to don saris for the occasion. They were driving to Bengaluru and it was her mother who wanted to stop, but she now interjected, "I think we should hurry. Daddy's getting restless."

The day you go shopping, have a good breakfast, because you'll need your energy, and at times you will need sharp elbows to

navigate the crowds. Nalli's can sell between 4,000 and 5,000 saris in a day, and when it's festive season, sales can reach 10,000 in one day alone. After a while, the choices can become overwhelming and a kind of Stendhal syndrome sets in. If you're deciding between two or three saris, hold onto them, because we all covet what our neighbour has, and if you look away for a minute, that peacock-coloured one you were falling in love with may go waltzing down the aisle over another girl's shoulder.

When discussing her own wedding, Chennai-born writer Menaka Raman remarked with dismay on one new trend in local fashion: "A lot of girls for their wedding reception now prefer to go for chiffons, and georgettes, and crepes which have a lot of sequins. South Indian saris are beautiful, and Kanjeevaram saris are beautiful and I think if you're from *TamilNad* you should wear them with pride."



## THE INVITATIONS

Assuming you've got the marriage hall booked, you'll need something lovely to send to those hundreds of relatives and friends you want with you for the special day. Two big names that repeatedly pop up in conversations about printers are Olympic and Menaka.

Once you circulate around Chennai a couple of times, you may spot a large, eye-catching motto spanning the side of a building by a flyover: "Marriages are made in Heaven, marriage cards are made in Menaka." I had to see what was behind the sign.

When you arrive at Arcot Road, which has many printers side by side, you learn there are actually three Menaka shops (Popular, Premium, and Chinthamani), depending on your choice of readymade cards, designing your own, and your budget. Reality will soon sink in about the number of choices that still lay ahead. You thought you did a lot of searching and sorting to find a perfect mate, just wait until you have to consider if you want an inky navy card or a rich maroon, then which of the 2,000-plus Ganesha designs to grace the overleaf, and then, if you want additional embellishments, like crystals. The most expensive cards go for Rs 500 each.

I was only buying *grahapravesam* (house warming ceremony) cards – for a smaller audience – but still, by the time I had flipped through the design books to find just the right Ganapati, I needed a filter *kaapi* (coffee). The woman next to me, who glided easily between Tamil and American-accented English, was there for wedding cards for her brother back in the US.

Mrs D. Revathy, wife of Director S. Murugan, told me that Menaka opened in 1980 and produces all its cards at a factory in the southern seaport of Tuticorin, employing some 600 people. It takes a year to train the printers. The company has established dealers in Canada, France and the US, as well as around India. When the final product was delivered, I was so pleased that I framed and hung one card in the hallway by the front door.



## QUICK FACTS

### GETTING THERE

**By Air:** Jet Airways has daily flights to Chennai from most major cities across India.

**By Rail:** Chennai has connections to every part of the country. The two major railheads in the city are Chennai Central and Egmore.

**By Road:** There are plenty of luxury buses operating between Chennai and the other major cities in the South.

### ACCOMMODATION

Chennai, being a big metro, has stay options spread out across many areas. However, for closer proximity to the shopping district of T. Nagar, the Nungambakkam area and Usman Road has several options.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to [www.tamilnadutourism.org](http://www.tamilnadutourism.org)