

Celebrating National Handloom Day
An exhibition exploring the rare collection
and distinct aesthetics of:

KODU KATTAM KORVAI

The Sarees from the Houses of
Chettinadu

21st -30th August 2026

Organised by
DakshinaChitra, Chennai

In collaboration with
Indian Institute of Crafts and Design (IICD), Jaipur
As Knowledge Partner

Exhibition report
by
Dr. Bessie Cecil



Introduction

ww: The Sarees from the Houses of Chettinadu was organised by DakshinaChitra, Chennai, in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design (IICD), Jaipur, as Knowledge Partner. The exhibition was presented from **21 to 30 August 2026** as part of the National Handloom Day programme.

The exhibition presented **20 sarees selected from a collection of 56 historic cotton sarees** held by DakshinaChitra. The sarees are approximately 80 to 120 years old and were donated to DakshinaChitra by **Ms. Julie Wayne**.

The exhibition focused on the material and visual characteristics of the collection, including weaving techniques, yarns, colours, patterns, borders, Korvai construction, dimensions and ownership marks. These aspects were considered alongside oral histories, collecting histories, conservation observations and historical references to place the sarees within the wider context of Chettinadu and the Nagarathar community.



Background and Development

The exhibition developed from a long-standing interest in the Chettinadu saree collection at DakshinaChitra. The project gained momentum in 2026 through discussions between DakshinaChitra and IICD, leading to the decision to develop the exhibition within a short period.

Dr. Bessie Cecil undertook the research and curation in consultation with the DakshinaChitra team. **Prof. (Dr.) Toolika Gupta, Director, IICD**, supported the collaboration and provided institutional support for the project.

As the research progressed, it became clear that the information associated with the collection could not be adequately presented through the exhibition alone. An accompanying academic catalogue was therefore developed to document the collection and the research undertaken around it.



The Collection

The collection comprises 56 cotton sarees associated with Chettinadu. The sarees display a range of stripes, checks, contrasting borders and Korvai constructions. Their designs are achieved through combinations of a relatively limited palette of colours.

The sarees vary considerably in length and width. Several carry initials, predominantly in Tamil script, with a few examples in Roman letters. These markings became an important area of inquiry during the research.

During the interview conducted for the catalogue, **Ms. Visalakshi Ramaswamy** provided information on the practice among Chettiar women of marking personal belongings, including clothing, with initials. This contributed to the interpretation of the markings as evidence associated with individual ownership.

The collection was therefore examined not only as a group of historic textiles, but also as material evidence relating to household life, ownership, weaving and textile practices in Chettinadu.



Research and Documentation

The research began with the objects themselves. Examination of the weave structures, borders, colours, dimensions, initials and other material characteristics raised questions about their production, use, ownership and circulation.

These questions were explored through oral history, historical references, technical examination, conservation assessment, photography and collecting narratives.

An important component of the research was an interview with **Ms. Visalakshi Ramaswamy**, whose knowledge of Chettinadu culture and the Nagarathar community provided an oral-history perspective on the collection and its context. The conversation was conducted by **Prof. (Dr.) Toolika Gupta**.

The project also examined the terms Kandangi and Chitradai in relation to the terminology and history of Chettinadu dress. The research identified the need to understand these terms within their historical and linguistic contexts rather than relying only on their current associations.

The Founder and the Collector

The collecting history of the sarees was documented through the accounts of **Dr. Deborah Thiagarajan**, Founder of DakshinaChitra, and **Ms. Julie Wayne**, the donor of the collection.

Dr. Thiagarajan's account describes the early search for objects representing the material culture of the Chettiar community for DakshinaChitra. During one of her visits to Chettinadu, she discussed with Julie Wayne the difficulty of finding traditional Chettinadu sarees.

Wayne subsequently offered her collection of Chettinadu sarees to DakshinaChitra. Dr. Thiagarajan travelled to southern France to collect the sarees, with the assistance of Kausalya Jagmohan.

Wayne's account, *Confessions of a Chettinadu Saree Collector*, describes how her interest began with the discovery of an old cotton Chettinadu saree in Karaikudi and developed into a sustained interest in collecting and documenting South Indian textiles and material culture.

These accounts provide information on the movement of the sarees from Chettinadu households and the antique market, through private collecting, to institutional preservation at DakshinaChitra.

Technical Study

The technical study was carried out jointly by **Dr. Bessie Cecil**, textile researcher, and **Mr. Ulaganathan**, a practising master weaver.

The examination focused on weaving techniques, yarn counts, pattern construction, borders, Korvai, colour arrangements and dimensions. The study combined textile research with the practical knowledge of a practising weaver familiar with loom construction and weaving processes. The study also raised questions concerning the materials used in the sarees, particularly the fibres, yarns and dyes.

Conservation and Storage

The physical condition of the sarees was examined by **Ms. Dingdi Gangte**, Conservator at Dakshina Chitra. Considering their age, the sarees were found to be generally in good condition. The conservation assessment considered creases, fading, stains, repairs and tears as part of the material history of the textiles. It also addressed storage, handling, housekeeping and display requirements.

A number of the sarees are understood to have been preserved in trunks and storage cupboards in Chettinadu houses before entering the museum collection. At Dakshina Chitra, storage arrangements are determined according to the condition of individual textiles, with sarees requiring additional support stored on rollers to reduce folding and handling.

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Photographic Documentation

Photographic documentation of the collection was undertaken by **Ms. Rekha Vijayashankar**. The photographic record supports both the exhibition and the catalogue and provides a visual record of the collection for future reference.



Gallery Display and Design

The gallery display was carried out by **Dr. Bessie Cecil** in collaboration with the DakshinaChitra team.

Twenty sarees were selected from the larger collection to represent the range of patterns, colours, borders, weaving techniques and structural variations. The display was organised around the three elements of the exhibition title—**Kodu, Kattam and Korvai**.

Mr. Sharat Nambiar, Director, DakshinaChitra, and **Ms. Indumathi Mohan**, Senior Manager, DakshinaChitra, were instrumental in coordinating the exhibition process. The wider DakshinaChitra team supported the preparation, installation and presentation of the gallery.

Ms. Havisha Ramanan was responsible for the visual design of the exhibition creatives and the accompanying catalogue. She worked closely with Dr. Bessie Cecil on the catalogue layout, integrating the research text, images, captions and other visual material into the publication. Her contribution was particularly important in developing the catalogue within the short preparation period leading up to the exhibition.

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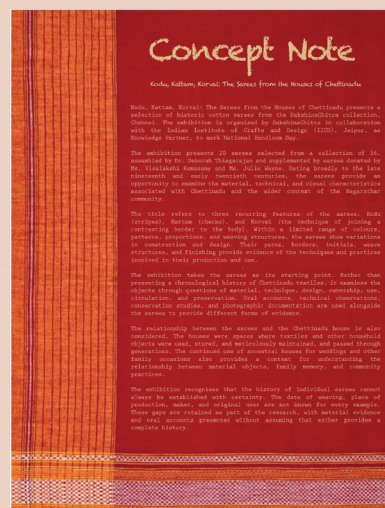
DakshinaChitra X IICD



Inauguration

The exhibition was inaugurated on 21st August 2026 in the presence of Ms. Visalakshi Ramaswamy and Mr. T. N. Venkatesh, IAS, Principal Secretary, Handicrafts, Handlooms, Textiles and Khadi, Government of Tamil Nadu, as Guests of Honour.

The programme began with the lighting of the lamp, followed by the opening address by Prof. (Dr.) Toolika Gupta. Mr. Venkatesh and Ms. Ramasamy subsequently addressed the gathering. Dr. Bessie Cecil delivered the vote of thanks.



Academic Catalogue

The exhibition was accompanied by an academic catalogue documenting the collection and the research undertaken around it.

The catalogue brings together information on Chettinadu and the Nagarathar community, the history of the collection, oral histories, weaving and technical studies, conservation, photography and material analysis.

Ms. Havisha Ramanan designed the catalogue and developed its visual structure in consultation with the research and curatorial team. The publication was prepared alongside the exhibition within a limited timeframe and was intended to provide a more permanent record of the collection and the research undertaken.

The catalogue records the information available at the time of the exhibition while also identifying areas where further research is required. It is intended as a reference for researchers, students, conservators and others interested in Chettinadu textiles and material culture.



Institutional Collaboration

The exhibition was the result of collaboration between DakshinaChitra and IICD, bringing together museum resources, academic research and specialist knowledge.

DakshinaChitra provided the collection, museum infrastructure and institutional support, while IICD contributed academic and research inputs.

The project brought together expertise in textile research, weaving, conservation, photography, history and design. **Mr. Muthuswamy, Director, Weavers Service Centre, Chennai**, contributed by clarifying aspects of weaving practice and encouraging the research team.

The coordination and support provided by the DakshinaChitra team, particularly during the preparation and installation of the exhibition, were central to completing the project within the available timeframe



Outcomes

The project resulted in:

- Documentation of 56 historic cotton sarees;
- Exhibition of 20 selected sarees;
- Technical examination of weaving, yarns, patterns, colours and dimensions;
- Photographic documentation of the collection;
- Conservation assessment and storage observations;
- Recording of oral histories and community knowledge;
- Documentation of the collecting history and available provenance;
- Development of exhibition creatives and visual communication; and
- Publication of an academic catalogue as a longer-term record.

The project also identified areas requiring further research, particularly the historical terminology, production, use and circulation of Chettinadu sarees.



Conclusion

Kodu, Kattam, Korvai: The Sarees from the Houses of Chettinadu brought together a historic textile collection and the different forms of knowledge required to document and interpret it.

The project began with the sarees and expanded through oral history, technical examination, conservation, photography, historical research and collecting narratives. The process demonstrated the value of examining textiles through both their material characteristics and the histories associated with them.

The exhibition provided a public presentation of the collection, while the accompanying catalogue records the research undertaken and the information available about the sarees at this stage. Together, they provide a basis for continued study, documentation and conservation of the Chettinadu sarees held at DakshinaChitra.



Thank You