

# Blooming desires

Photographer NAVYA JAYAMOHAN travels around South India's buzzing flower markets documenting ornately-decked female vendors who take pride in their daily shringaar. By AVANI THAKKAR



**A**t 2am, while the rest of her family slumbers, 40-year-old Lakshmi gets ready for another day of work at Koyambedu flower market, one of Chennai's busiest wholesale venues. You'd think that having to begin working at an ungodly hour would mean doing away with a beauty routine or fussing over what to wear, but Lakshmi

offers a contradiction. Choosing a happy-hued cotton sari from her steel almari, stacking her arms with glass bangles, wearing her gold jimmikis (earrings) and nath (nose ring), wrapping fresh gajras around her neatly knotted hair—Lakshmi is one of the many middle-aged women across South India whose livelihood depends on gathering fresh flower produce before the crack of dawn.

Inextricably linked to the country's social and cultural fabric, the plenitude of gulaab, kamal, chameli and genda is

evident in every festival, nuptial and gifting checklist, adorning homes, hair, deities and temples everywhere. In South India, the onset of Onam is marked by pookalam (flower rangolis) decorating doorways to welcome King Mahabali for a good harvest. Travel to Karnataka during Ugadi and you'll see marigold and mango leaf torans draped across front doors to ward off nazar. India's flower business (valued at ₹26,200 crore last year as per market research firm IMARC) is dependent on people who



TIME IMMEMORIAL

The flower vendors lensed by Navya Jayamohan find an escape in their family heirlooms, choosing to deck up in ornate jewellery at the crack of dawn for their early day in the flower markets

have dedicated generations to the trade despite reaping few benefits in return.

"I've been coming to this market for 20 years. It's difficult to wake up this early, but getting ready and looking my best gives me energy and enthusiasm to make good sales," Lakshmi replies in Tamil, when Kochi-based photographer Navya Jayamohan approaches her during peak business hours in the morning. Like Lakshmi, many of these ladies rely on their clothes and beauty rituals as a source of tenacity. Perhaps they seek to unconsciously emulate the vibrancy and vigour of the mounds of jasmine and marigold

beside them. This congruence between their garb and goods caught Jayamohan's lens. She now ritually visits flower markets around her area to document the jewellery worn by these female vendors.

The 28-year-old photographer credits her fascination with ornaments to her father introducing her to the work of Malayali artist Raja Ravi Varma. "I love his artistic interpretation of femininity and grace, enhanced by traditional ornate jewellery on women such as the goddesses Sita and Lakshmi as well as the Travancore royal family and their subjects."

Many of the designs documented in Varma's detailed works continue to influence jewellery-making even today. In one of his most iconic pieces, *Reclining Nair Lady* (1902), a noblewoman sprawled across a sofa is being fanned by a maid-servant using a palm leaf vishari. Wearing a mundun neriyathum sari with gold borders, Varma's muse is seen with a kasu malai (a garland of gold coins) and ruby-studded bangles, reflecting his romanticised view of women, who sometimes arrive covered in jewels.

Having been exposed to Varma's depiction of women, as both opulent god-



desses or humble dasis, and their relationship with their jewels, Jayamohan soon began rummaging through her own family's jewellery collection to play dress-up.

Growing up in Poovarani, a village in Kerala, Jayamohan soon began channelling her preoccupation with jewellery through photography. Instead of focusing on subjects with deep pockets or high-end designs, Jayamohan's muse sat in the local phool bazaar, a mish-mash of sensory influences, injecting her with an "instant dopamine hit". She notices the female vendors perched beside their fragrant produce in comfortable cotton saris with the pallu tucked in at the waist for ease of movement. Hailing from all over Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai and Kochi, their devotion to dressing for no one's pleasure but their own brings these women together. The essence of shringaar is often kept on a pedestal only in the context of big fat Indian weddings, but Jayamohan's work highlights its significance in the mundane.

The protagonists in her images deliver a masterclass in layering jewels: wearing mookuthi (nose studs on both sides), kappu (bangles), mothiram (rings) but also metti (toe rings), thodu (stud earrings), jimmikis, karnphool (flower motif earrings attached to strings of beads that hook onto the hair), maalai (chain accessories) and anklets.

It's rare to spot them without a galaxy of ear piercings, and dedicated regional designs exist for each type of placement. Clove-shaped studs with floral heads such as the koppu (in Tamil) or bugudi (in Kannada) are worn in the helix, mini jimmikis or marigold shaped studs in the tragus and karnphools dangle from the earlobes. Historically, longer earlobes were perceived as a distinct mark of a woman's wealth and beauty while bare earlobes signalled widowhood. Meanwhile, mookuthi, the nath's Tamil equivalent, symbolises a woman's marital status or 'saubhagya' but has regressive patriarchal roots. The word 'nath' is derived from the Hindu term 'naath' that means lord, master or husband.

"It's also a sort of status symbol that shows they've done well. Many of these women haven't received education, so the



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only thing they can show outwardly is personal adornment in the form of jewellery. These pieces they wear, no matter how small or old, are precious assets," says Uma Kannan, author of *Madurai Malligai*, who has studied these women up close for her book on South India's jasmine trail.

While some of them have inherited these pieces from their grandmothers, others either received them as part of their wedding trousseau or have saved for decades to afford something to pass on to their children. If all these jewels could speak, what stories could they tell? If I could take a guess, it would be tales of the women before them, their grandmothers and mothers, who perhaps grew up in less favourable conditions but gath-

ered all they could to leave their daughters a piece of themselves. Stories of often-pricked hands, concealed only by the tinkle of colourful glass bangles as they string together garland after garland in commendable dexterity. Stories of hopes and aspirations to give their children a more comfortable life. Children who will one day remember their amma by the trinkets she left behind.

#### THROUGH THE LENS

Jayamohan credits her love of documenting female vendors in South India's flower markets to her father, who introduced her to Raja Ravi Varma's paintings at an early age. Their depiction of women influences her creative direction even today