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**EXPLORING THE SILK WEAVERS OF MADURAI: AN
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY**Poornima Shree T M^{*1}¹Assistant Professor, Maharani Lakshmi Ammanni College for Women (Autonomous), 18th Cross Road, Malleshwaram, Bengaluru, Karnataka – 560012Corresponding author email address: poomashree2020@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.59415/mjacs.308> | ARK: <https://n2t.net/ark:/26340/MJACS.v4i5.308>**Abstract**

Using an autoethnographic lens, this paper explores the cultural sustainability of the Sourashtrian silk weaving community in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. It documents my personal experiences alongside the collective memory of my family and community, beginning with our migration from the Saurashtra region of Gujarat to southern India. The study traces the community's journey, its cultural identity, the traditional profession of weaving, and the distinctive practices that have been passed down through generations. Through both narrative and analysis, the paper examines the reasons for the decline of handloom weaving, including industrialization, economic disparity, and generational shifts in livelihood choices. It also describes the current state of the community and the challenges faced in sustaining this heritage. By focusing on cultural sustainability, the paper argues for the urgent need to preserve such traditions as a means of safeguarding diversity, fostering inclusive growth, and strengthening community identity.

Keywords: Sourashtra, weaving, migration, cultural sustainability**1. Introduction**

I grew up in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, speaking Tamil and Sourashtra, unaware of the differences that shaped my identity. I watched Tamil films and listened to Tamil songs from childhood. The first time I realized I was different was, when my friends heard me converse in my mother tongue, Sourashtra, with my family. I felt like I belonged to Tamil Nadu but spoke the language of a migrant group. This dual identity—a belonging to Tamil culture yet carrying a distinct language and heritage—forms the basis of this paper. It aims to reveal the intertwined cultural, linguistic, and occupational identity of the Sourashtrian silk weavers of Madurai.

Saunders (1927) documented the early presence of Sourashtrians in Madurai, while Sapovadia (2012) and Frasca (1975) examined their language and weaving traditions. However, few studies adopt an insider perspective. This work bridges that gap by combining historical sources with autoethnographic reflections, contributing to the discourse on intangible cultural heritage.

The study uses autoethnography, intertwining personal narrative, oral histories, and ethnographic observation with secondary sources. This approach captures lived experiences of weaving families while contextualizing them within larger socio-economic and cultural frameworks.

History of Sourashtra:

Sourashtra is a community of silk weavers, who have migrated to South India from Saurashtra region of Gujarat. In present day, the people of community are spread throughout South India in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra and Telangana. In Tamil Nadu, they live almost in all major towns and cities but largely found in Madurai, Paramakudi, Tanjore, Dindigul, Tirunelveli, Ramanathapuram, Kumbakonam, Kanchipuram, Trichy, and Salem. They consider Madurai as their cultural headquarters. There are several beliefs about their migration to Southern India.

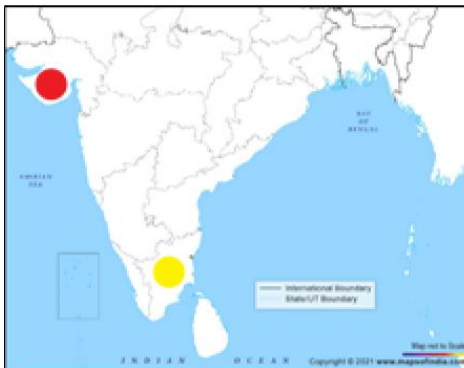


Fig 1. The red spot marks Saurashtra in Gujarat where they are originally from and the yellow spot is Tamil Nadu to which they have migrated.

They have managed to maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage. Saurashtra people are called as ‘Pattunulkars’ or ‘Pattunulkarars’ which means silk weavers. They are addressed as ‘Palkars’ and ‘Sourashtrians’. Oral traditions recount that they moved from Saurashtra southward when Mohamed Ghazni had invaded Somnath and looted their riches. Their reasons for their migration are the instability contributed to frequent plunders and invasions. They moved to the Vijayanagara Empire in Karnataka. Weaving was their traditional occupation and their fineness of their work caught attention of various kings. They were granted royal patronage and began weaving silk exclusively for these kings.

The rulers of Vijayanagara Empire designated governors known as ‘Nayaks’, who helped them govern in regions far away from their capital in the Empire. When several parts of Tamil Nadu were annexed by these kings, ‘Nayaks’ were appointed for these regions. Tanjore and Madurai were main cities where they settled in. Along with them, Saurashtra weavers also moved to these cities.

When Vijayanagara Empire fell after a couple of centuries, the Nayaks declared themselves as rulers. Saurashtrian weavers lost their patronage and they had to migrate southwards. They settled in Salem and other southern cities. And that’s how there is a large population of Saurashtra live around the Tirumalai Nayakkar palace in Madurai.

Language:

The community speaks Saurashtra, a dialect of old Gujarati enriched by Marathi, Kannada, Telugu, and Tamil influences (Sapovadia, 2012). The language, though it has its own script, is primarily oral. This language has taken in lot of words from Marathi, Kannada, Konkani and Telugu, the languages spoken along the route of their migration to Tamil Nadu. The script of this language exists, but not many know about them.

Distinctness of the community:

The present culture we hold upon to is the mixture of the beliefs from the traditions that they brought along and few things from Tamil culture. Apart from vegetarianism and Brahmanical practices, lot of things are similar to the culture of Tamil Nadu.

The cuisine of Saurashtra is largely vegetarian and but also includes non-vegetarian. Few of their specialties are mullu murangai vadai (a green poori made from five different healthy greens mixed with pepper and stuffed in rice patties) served with idli chilli powder, halkadhowra dhido (spicy dosa with spices including ginger, cumin, curry leaves, coriander), ambad bhath (tamarind rice made with variation in ingredients giving a unique flavour) and Sekki bhath (rice cooked in cottonseed milk and flavored with palm jaggery). There are quiet distinct flavours and family recipes which are passed through generations. Films and dramas in our language are produced, but they are not popular. Attempts to produce literature in this language are also being made.

Weavers of Madurai:

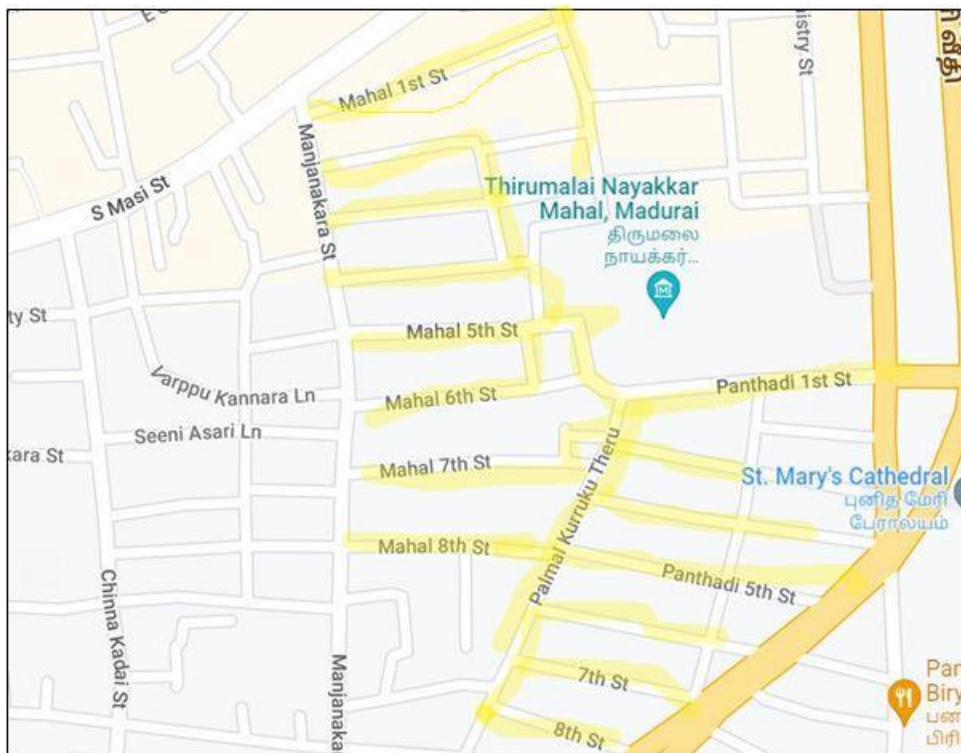


Fig.2- This map shows the region with a higher concentration of Sourashtra residents who have lived for more than 300 years.

Most of the Sourashtra families have settled around Tirumalai Nayakkar Palace in Madurai. Both my paternal and maternal families are from this region. The small, narrow streets around this palace have homes that are more than 100 years old, along with reconstructed modern buildings. My grandfather had his home there but sold it off, as his kids were educated and moved away from the profession and the locality. But still, people live near the bustling street of 'Panthadi', 'Mahal', 'Veli' and 'Masi' streets. My parents spent their childhood around Tirumalai Nayakkar Palace. People from our community live in Lakshmipuram, Kaithari Nagar, Kanpalayam and Avaniyapuram areas in Madurai.

One of the major professions of the group is weaving and trade of handloom sarees. Loom is the machine used for weaving. It is not a single man's profession, but involves almost all the family members throughout the process of weaving.

Weavers of the community either weave silk or cotton or polyester sarees. They have trade guilds and some are merchants, while others are laborers. So, the system works in a format, where a merchant provides raw materials to the weaver to weave the saree and return to him. They are given wages according to the type of saree. Since many people are involved in this process, the wages are split in between them.

My great grandfather once owned a dyeing factory in Coimbatore until he was 85. When the power loom was introduced in 1970s, he had to close the dyeing factory, as there was an acute shortage of the labourers and reduced demands in the market. So, he wound up the business and returned to Madurai. My grandfather and his siblings became weavers and few of their families continue weaving even today.

My grandfather was the head of the family. He involved all his children, from their young age in the process of weaving. They lived in a small home with a couple of rooms with the loom taking most of their living space.

My grandfather was the last weaver of his family, as his children graduated and moved to other jobs. As a young boy, my father had helped him in the process of sourcing raw materials. He holds immense pride when he recounts about my grandfather who was a weaver for over 70 years.

My father's experiences had shaped my initial impression around the practice of weaving. The sounds of the traditional loom interweaving yarns were a part of my childhood as I lived in the area of Krishnapuram Colony, which had many weavers weaving in their houses. They led simple lives. I have always heard the sounds of weaving and been fascinated by the process. I observed both men and women weave with the hand loom and it required a lot of strength and a long period of time to create one saree.

Weavers of the communities had these looms at home and their whole life was surrounded by this loom. Anandakumar, a weaver from Kaithari Nagar in Madurai, said that, “All my life, since I crawled, I saw the looms moving as I lay beside the loom. The art of weaving is not taught, instead it is acquired.” This is one of the instances which shows loom being a part of their integral lives. Loom is a symbol of both pride and livelihood.

Role of loom in our community:

Loom is held as a symbol of pride and mark of history. Loom was celebrated as it was the only profession and passed on for generations. It is considered as the symbol of uniting the community. As Sourashtrian community is a linguistic minority, there is an urge in the community to keep it alive through intra-caste marriages. This has been alive for almost centuries and as almost all families knew weaving, the bride or groom knew how to weave, so the profession was passed on to the next generation.

The whole business of selling sarees in our community runs based on the trust and communal ties. Common identity is the base of trust and the weavers and the merchants were in contacts. Most Sourashtra weaver families work in stable and long standing contracts with Sourashtra merchant. (Raman,2015)

Traditional Weaving Practices:

Weaving is the process of intertwining threads at right angles to one another. It involves lot of processes, which requires many families to work together. From the beginning to end, it requires a lot of hands to get the finished product in hand. They used two kind of looms- the pit loom and Chittarranjan loom. A primitive loom is generally laid, by sinking the frame into the ground and the work inside the pit by both feet.

In the initial stage, yarns are made by turning threads into spools through different stages (*achhu sandhariyo*, *ponni kerariyo*, *padi borariyo*, *kenda borariyo*). In *achhu sandhariyo*, the warp threads are passed through a reed called an ‘Achu’, to align them for the weave, ensuring that the tension is correct and no threads are missed. In *ponni kerariyo*, threads are warped and they are stretched to a predetermined length and wound on the beams. In *ponni kerariyo*, these yarns are now dried before they are put in smaller rollers. *Maga lambu kerariyo* is when the yarn is stretched by tied to wooden beams.

In the community, weaving involved the entire household. Men, women, and even children shared tasks—preparing threads, warping, dyeing, and finishing sarees. The pit loom and Chittarranjan loom were common tools.

The loom takes up most of the space in the household of the Sourashtra. Houses were never silent but always filled with the sounds of the loom. Its rhythm came from the *panchula* (pedals) pressed by strong feet, the *neli* (shuttle) carrying the *kenda borariya* (spool) across the threads, and the *ponni* (reed) striking each line into place. These actions had their own names in Sourashtra—*neli dhamariya* (shedding), *picking*, and *hath uchariya* (battening)—words that still echo in memory. The loom was not just wood and thread; it was the sound of life unfolding in narrow streets, heard from morning until night.

Designs and patterns gave another layer of beauty. With the *Jakkat Pedi*, borders and motifs were woven into sarees, and later the Jacquard loom replaced the old *drawboy* system, allowing more intricate *buttas* to be created. Yet, whether on the humble pit loom or the newer Jacquard, weaving remained the same at heart: a patient joining of threads, a rhythm passed down through families, and a craft that held our identity together.

There are two *Jakkat peddis*, where one is used for printing the border and the other for the body of the saree. The designs were originally done with a cardboard and now, it is done by using machines with the aid of the computerised designs.

‘Kodambakkam’ design cotton sarees are one of the popular products of the weavers. It is made of partly silk and cotton. After the saris are spun, the kids in the family are taught to fold the saris. Sourashtra artisans have practiced batik and tie and dye technique, also called Sungudi, for decades. But in recent years, the number of artisans have declined significantly.

Reasons for disappearance:

Weaving is a labor-intensive process. The process of weaving has a lot of processes before and after weaving the saree. Since many people are involved in processes of making sarees other than the weaver, the wages are usually split among them. Anandakumar says that, “Almost 40% of the wages are lost in division and also for replacing damaged parts of the loom, which is required to change occasionally. With the remaining wages, it becomes difficult to lead a life.”

The industry is dominated by power looms. People recount that, as Industrial Revolution and power loom made its way into the country, the condition of the weavers started to decline. As power looms reduce the labor cost and increase in production, it flourished and the handloom sarees has taken a hit. When their earning started to decline, people had a very difficult decision to make. So many of them chose to give up their job.

There has been a lack of development of the machinery. For the last 50 years, no significant development has happened in terms of the handlooms to make the production quicker in terms of techniques. So traditional handloom practices are continued to be used even today.

The inaccessibility to education was one of the major reasons for not diverging from the art of weaving. Education was not considered important when weaving gave them enough income. All the families in the community had more than three children. Since they were not going to schools, they became a part of the family's profession and started helping the weaver in the family. In few families, both the mothers and fathers weave or either one of them knew to weave. But as time went, the children in families started to get educated, as they considered it to be important. Lot of them got educated but still helped their parents.

My grandfather prevented his children from pursuing weaving, as he wanted the poverty to end with him. Their condition improved once my uncle graduated and got a job.

One of the main reasons for the weaving to disappear, are moving away from the community base. The 'Mahal Streets' and the 'Panthadi streets' were filled with our community people who were largely in the profession of weaving. But as education became accessible and their economic condition improved, people started to move from these regions to quieter outskirts of the city for a better lifestyle. Due to this, there was a lack of workforce and accelerated the rate of decline of weaving business. Today, the weavers are in poverty, as their wages do not meet their ends. People are abandoning their profession due to these reasons. The introduction of power looms have tremendously affected the handloom weavers.

Today, class distinctions have emerged within the community. Those who left weaving for white-collar jobs often view the remaining artisans as belonging to a lower status. This division has weakened traditional bonds, creating economic and social fragmentation.

As I spoke about the disappearance of the loom, the weaver's words struck in their mouth but had a grim ray of hope.

I have undertaken this project as there is little to no records about the weavers of our community and their significance. And there is a necessity to record these experiences as little research has been undertaken here. I have tried recording the experiences of the weavers trying to understand the traditional techniques, their attachment to the profession, their current state, and the loss of the industry.

Cultural Sustainability and the Way Forward

Cultural sustainability helps us reimagine weaving not just as labor but as heritage. The loom, language, and oral histories together form a cultural ecosystem that deserves preservation. Reviving the art requires collective effort—through documentation, linguistic preservation, design innovation, and policy support.

As I revisited the weavers of Madurai, their pride in craft remained, even amid hardship. One weaver told me, "The loom is in our blood. We may stop weaving, but we will never forget the sound of it." This resilience reflects the strength of cultural identity despite economic loss.

Promoting sustainable fashion, creating digital archives of weaving stories, and introducing weaving in educational contexts can strengthen this heritage. Weaving is not merely a profession—it is a testament to survival, memory, and artistry.

Conclusion

Through this autoethnographic reflection, I reconnect with the threads of my ancestry. The decline of weaving mirrors the loss of many traditional art forms in India, yet its memory endures through those who lived it. By narrating these stories, I hope to preserve the dignity of a community that once thrived on the rhythm of the loom.

Preserving the weaving heritage of the Sourashtrian community is not only an act of remembrance but also of renewal. By sustaining language, art, and shared memory, we can ensure that the loom continues to weave our identity into the fabric of time.

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