CHAPTER - III
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THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SAURAHSTRANS IN MADURAI

Multi-Cultural Groups in Tamil Nadu

The Indian social structure and cultural pattern are characterized by unity as well as diversity. Within the state, the population is divided into various castes and religious groups and each of them has its own subdivisions. This presents a complex cultural trait of the Indian society. Historically, Tamil Nadu has been hospitable to numerous groups of immigrants with varying degrees of civilization. Recognising the ethnically diverse nature of Tamil Nadu, Kalidos described the land as an ethnological and linguistic museum.

From first century A.D. to seventeenth century A.D. Tamil Nadu was ruled by successive empires such as the Cholas, Pandyas, Cheras and Vijayanagara. Latter it came under the rule of Nayaks and the British till India's freedom was achieved in 1947. This frequent change in political power has brought a tremendous impact on the social and cultural life of the Tamil society. In fact large scale migration towards Tamil Nadu took place when Tamil Nadu

1. R. Kalidos, History and Culture of the Tamils (From Pre-historic Times to the President's Rule), Vijay Publications, Dindugal, 1976, p. 11.

was absorbed into Vijayanagara empire. During this time many Telugu and Kannada speaking people made their entry into the state. The main factor responsible for the migration of the Telugus and the Kannadigas was the policy of the emperors of Vijayanagara and the Nayaks in favouring them for the various administrative and military positions. This undoubtedly led to their influx into Tamil Nadu.

On the other hand, the Maratha conquest of the Carnatic and the establishment of Maratha rule at Tanjore also resulted in the influx of the Marathi-speaking people into the land. The Muslim conquest (Madurai Sultanate) brought in through forceful means more people who profess a different faith (Islam). The proselytising zeal of the British and the secular attitude of the Nayak kings allowed the growth of Christianity. And each of these minority groups besides living side by side, and adjusting with Tamils, strove to preserve its ethos through organised efforts. As a result noticeable changes occurred in Tamil Society.

Artisan Community in Tamil Society

The caste distinctions and rivalries are more acute in Tamil Nadu than anywhere else in India. Historically caste feelings became strong among the Tamilians in the times of Chola (850-1279 A.D.).

Interesting studies have been made on the caste structure of Tamil Nadu by various scholars. 3

The peculiarity of caste system in Tamil society is the grouping of castes as Right-hand (Valangai) and Left-hand (Idangai) which roughly classified as Agricultural (Brahmins, Vellalas, Naidus etc.) and Artisan castes (the producers of textiles and goldsmith, blacksmith, carpenter and some other service castes like barbers etc.). Ghurye notes that the right-hand faction had sixty castes in it and the left hand faction had only six.

These two major groups were often rivals in the pursuit of status and power. Heesterman⁴ argues that the right-hand section is characterised by the kingly model of behaviour, (which articulates the relationship among land, power and ritual interdependence among the castes). Castes once belonging to the left-hand section are characterised by the priestly model of behaviour (which stresses interdependence among jatis and purity). Stein⁵ characterises the left-hand castes as the 'outer core' of society in medieval times, as opposed to the 'inner core' by the agrarian castes (right-hand division).

3. contd...

- E. Thurston, *Caste and Tribes of Southern India*, Govt. Press, Madras, 1909;


The right hand faction, being the landholders enjoyed a better position and had control over the left-hand faction. Although the artisan groups were relatively poor and few in number, at times they gave stiff resistance to the dominance of agricultural groups. One disadvantage for the artisan castes was that they did not have roots in the villages. They moved towards city or town seeking feudal patronage and to carry out their skilful occupations.

Some recent researchers have shown changes in the caste structure of Tamil Nadu. Modern scholars have identified three broad divisions such as Brahmins, Non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidans. Each of these segments consists of several sub-divisions. Andre Beteille and K. Gough in their studies on caste structure in Tanjore region of Tamil Nadu have referred to the transfer of power and position of upper caste Brahmins to the middle ranking non-Brahman castes like Vellalars, Kallars etc.

6. Historians have noted that some of the artisan castes like Kalkkolars were capable of maintaining armed units under the Indigenous kings.

7. Since Chola times, many weavers have lived in commercial towns rather than agrarian settlements.


The most important weaving communities in Tamil Nadu at present are namely (1) Sengunthars (or Kaikkolars); (2) Devangars; (3) Saliars and (4) Saurashtras. Except the Sengunthars all the other three caste groups are products of migration. While the Saliars and Devangars are migrants from the adjacent states like Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka respectively, the Saurashtras came from Gujarat.

A survey conducted by the All India Handloom Board has revealed that the above four castes constituted a total of 67 per cent of the total weaving population in Tamil Nadu. The below chart shows the representation of various communities of weaving in the state.

The Predominant Weaving Communities of Tamil Nadu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Castes</th>
<th>Percentage to total weaving population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sengunthars</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saurashtras</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devangars</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saliars</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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The traditional weaving castes placed the non-traditional weaving castes at the lower rank. They believe that the weaving skill is not only something an individual acquires through the learning and working experience, but also something he acquires through his caste membership. Of course, there are obvious differences between
Saurashtrans and other weaving communities at many levels. Apart from physical appearance and linguistic differences, there exists lifestyle differences, variations in customs, festivals, social activities, occupational and social mobility patterns. The Saurashtrans are Northern in their customs and behaviour. The other weaving caste groups possess Dravidian cultural traits, although a few among them claim Brahmanical status. But among all the artisan communities in Tamil Nadu, the Saurashtrans occupied a higher status due to their silk weaving, elaborate rituals, smart physical appearance and their intellectual attainments.

Very recently few studies have been made on weaving communities by historians as well as social anthropologists. Vijaya Ramaswamy tried to understand the socio-economic organisation of weavers during the medieval period. She focussed her attention on Sengunthars in a socio-historical perspective. She made use of a wide range of sources like temple inscriptions, travellers' accounts, European company records, Tamil literature, caste histories, folk songs and proverbs etc. to study the position of weavers during this period. She measured the socio-economic rank of weavers by the weavers' association with the emperors, temple activities, formation of guild system etc. She makes an important observation that the Vijayanagara period saw a partly successful struggle by the weavers and other artisan groups

for higher social status. Her study has been found useful in understanding the Saurashtra's status as weavers during the Vijayanagara period.

Next, Mattison Mines in his socio-historical monograph on the Kaikkolars deals with the social status and beliefs and economic and political vicissitudes of the community in a wider framework. His discussion centres around the changing political and social contexts of the Kaikkolars in the 19th and 20th centuries in Tamil Nadu. He has shown how the Kaikkolars have been able to reorganise themselves with the establishment of Senguntha Mahajana Sangam in 1920. The Sangam cut across the traditional caste councils like 'Nadu', 'Pavadal' system of organisation. He further states that the establishment of weavers' co-operative societies further weakened their traditional caste councils.

Although many communities practice weaving, they differ considerably in their social organisation. Yvonne J. Arterburn's study on silk weavers of Kanchipuram (north of Tamil Nadu) reveals the trend of internal organisation and external relationship of various traditional and modern weaving communities. She found that each weaving group maintains its own traditions and responds differently to modernization.


She has broadly classified the social events that exist among the weaver neighbourhoods as follows: (1) Joint, those in which all residents participate; (2) Inter Caste; (3) Inter-personal; (4) those of conflict. She noted that the occupational activities and religious worship bring closer the individuals. Differences are seen in the matter of caste identity, administration, settling dispute, performing ceremonies and establishing social contact. She has also touched upon the weavers' co-operative movement in bringing about changes in kinship system.

Saurashtrans as Immigrants

Saurashtra is identified with Modern Sorath in Kathiawar on the Gulf of Kanthi or Kachi in Western India. In ancient times this kingdom was rich and prosperous due to trade and was frequently visited by merchants for trade and by warriors for fighting. But later in 17th and 18th centuries this place saw severe drought and famines.

Saurashtrans are one of the oldest immigrant groups settled in Tamil Nadu. Exactly how long Saurashtrans have been living in this place is difficult to determine, but they arrived in large numbers

during the Nayak regime in Madurai. The history of the community is traced by many scholars through oral tradition, myth, social customs, and some documentary and inscriptive evidence. And there have been conflicting views among the historians over when and why the Saurashtrans' migration began. It is often suggested that the large settlement of Saurashtrans in South was prompted by political, social and economic factors. But the scholars are unanimous in their opinion that the Saurashtrans are originally migrants from the western Gujarat.

Local tradition says that their ancestors belonged to 'Sorath' or Saurashtra Desa, now a part of Gujarat State. They first went and settled in Devagiri, the present Daulatabad of Maharashtra, during the regime of the Yadava kings. After the fall of Yadavas, they moved further south east and reached Vijayanagara. The expansion of Vijayanagara empire brought the Saurashtrans into Tamil land.


16. The Nayak Kings who allowed the Saurashtran immigrants to settle in their domain were said to be Tirumalal Nayak (1623-1659) and Rani Mangammal (1689-1706).
In Tamil Nadu, the largest section of the Saurashtra people are concentrated in Madurai, while others are scattered over various towns like Thanjavur, Trichi, Paramakudi, Palayamkottai, Kottar and Salem.\(^{17}\)

Saurashtrans' migration can also be understood from their unique custom during the marriage ceremony called Bhovlas.\(^{18}\) It covers the various stages of their emigration from Saurashtra till Madurai. A day prior to Saurashtran's marriage the bride groom's party visits the bride's party and tells them that they are from Saurashtra, who left their home for Devagiri so as to escape from the onslaught of Mohammad Ghazni.\(^{19}\) After staying there for some period of time, they travelled further towards Vijayanagar.\(^{20}\) From there due to the invitation of Nayak kings of Madural, they came to Tamil Nadu, where they finally settled. The bridegroom's party then ask the brides' party the same question and receive the same reply.

17. The map of Tamil Nadu showing major centres of Saurashtran settlement is annexed in the appendix.


19. Muhammad Ghazni invaded Somnath in 1025 A.D. Iswar Prasad-\textit{A History of Medieval India}, 1952, p. 93; But Devagiri the capital of Yadavas was founded only in 1187 A.D.; R.D. Bhandarkar, \textit{A History of India from Prehistoric times to the Fall of Vijayanagar}, 1957, p. 117. Therefore, we can only infer that the Saurashtrans left their home about 1025 A.D. We have no proof about their habitat till 1187 A.D.

20. Vijayanagar empire was founded in 1336 A.D.
Randle\textsuperscript{21} who studied the history of the community believes that the silk weavers migrated collectively from the province of Lata to Dasapura - Modern Mandasor - before 437 A.D., possibly at the time when Chandra Gupta II conquered Saurashtra.

Krishnamoorthy\textsuperscript{22} critically looked at the available writings which deal with the history of Saurashtran migration. He does not agree with the view that every successive migration of Saurashtrans was caused by political invasion. He says such an idea is a baseless assumption. He asks as to why the Saurashtrans did not go back to their native land after the Islamic invasion ceased and why only the Saurashtrans among the Gujarati groups were affected by invasion.

Their migration from Vijayanagara to Tamil Nadu is well described and clear to the historians. The travellers like Nicolo De conti, Domingo Paes, who visited India during this time left written evidences about the Vijayanagar empire which then included the Saurashtrans. Rangachari, the noted South Indian historian, states that the Saurashtrans who took such a large part in the industry and trade of the Vijayanagar empire, and whose cloths were so highly esteemed, were treated with greatest consideration by the rulers. They became a rich and influential community, and it was from Vijayanagara that silk weavers at first in small numbers, but later,

\textsuperscript{21} op. cit., p. 33.

at the overthrow of the Vijayanagara empire (1565), practically the whole community - emigrated still further southward, settling down permanently in such centres as Madural, Salem, Kumbakonam.\textsuperscript{23}

We have very few primary historical sources that give clues about the history of this immigrant community. There are a few inscriptions which speak of Saurashtran's settlement and traditional occupation. For example, they are referred to in the inscriptions of Kumara Gupta (A.D.473) at Mandasor,\textsuperscript{24} south of Gujarat, by the name of Pattvayaka, which is the Sanskrit equivalent of Pattunulkaran. Sethuraman\textsuperscript{25} refers to the Pattiswaram inscriptions of Thanjavur as evidence of Saurashtran's appearance in that place during the mid 16th century. He also looked at the community's socio-religious and occupational patterns by analysing these inscriptive evidences. But A.S. Krishnamoorthy throughout his writings criticised the various hypotheses of migration put forward by the scholars of his own community. The Sasanam of Queen Mangamma\textsuperscript{26} of Madura, speaks of them by the name Pattunulkaran, but lately they have taken to calling themselves Saurashtras from the country from which they came.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} For details of migration see, V. Rangachari, "The History of the Nayak Kingdom of Madura", \textit{Indian Antiquary}, 43, 1914, p.7.
\item \textsuperscript{24} This inscription speaks of a guild of silk weavers who came from the district of Lata in Gujarat and settled at Desapura. These weavers might have originally come from the Western Gujarat but after staying in South Gujarat for a period, they migrated to Southern India. Hence, these were probably the ancestors of the Saurashtrans settled in Tamil Nadu.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Sethuraman, op..cit., pp. 10-15.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Quoted by Thurston, op..cit., p. 160.
\end{itemize}
In the Manual of the Madura district, the Pattunulkarans are described as:

"A caste of Surat silk-weavers, whose ancestors were induced to settle in Madura by one of the earlier Nayakkan kings, or in response to an invitation from Tirumala Nayak, and who have thriven so well that they now form by far the most numerous of all the castes resident in the town of Madura. They are very skillful and industrious workmen, and many of them have become wealthy. They keep altogether aloof from other castes, and live independently of general society, speaking a foreign tongue, and preserving intact the customs of the land of their origin. They are easily distinguished in appearance from Tamils, being of a light yellowish colour, and having handsomer and more intelligent features. They are called Chettis or merchants by Tamils."

Of course, this community has made a great contribution to the literary and cultural heritage of South. It also contributed to

the education and economy of the region. No doubt the Madurai Saurashtrans played a notable part in the growth and prosperity of the city. Thurston notes in the following lines about their contribution:

"The proud position of Madura to this day as second city in the Presidency is mainly, if not solely, due to her prosperous and industrious community of Saurashtra merchants and silk-weavers, who have now grown into nearly half her population, and who have also come to a foremost place among the ranks of her citizens."\(^{28}\)

Regarding their migration and contribution Saunders\(^ {29}\) comments:

"The Saurashtrans were driven by prosecution from their ancestral home, and after many wanderings found a hospitable kingdom which allowed them freedom and an opportunity to live their own life, to follow their own occupation and religion, and in so doing they have not only increased in numbers, affluence, and influence, but they have also contributed largely to the wealth and progress of their patron city"

\(^{28}\) E. Thurston, op. cit., p. 165.

From the above mentioned points one can safely arrive at a conclusion that the Saurashtrans coverted Madurai into one of the greatest weaving centres of Tamil Nadu.  

Social Division Among Saurashtras

From the viewpoint of an outsider the community may be seen as a homogenous one. However, in reality many subdivisions exist among them at various levels. First of all they consider themselves as belonging to distinct occupational groups and also behave as such in the social context. Each of these groups has distinctive socio-economic status, privileges and opportunities in Tamil Society. Such actions inevitably, have brought about intra-communal tensions and anxiety among the various sub-groups.

The Saurashtras may be divided into three sects on a religious basis. viz.,

(1) Pure Vaishnavites, who wear the vertical Vaishnavite mark, and call themselves Vadagalais or northerners;

(2) Those who are Smarthas, who wear horizontal marks;

(3) Madhvas who wear gopi (Sandal paste) as their sect mark.

All the above three divisions intermarry and interdine, and the religious difference does not create a distinction in the caste.

30. All these three quotations refer to the dominance of Saurashtrans in Madurai City. Thereby their status as a pioneer urban community of Tamil Nadu is confirmed.

31. Their religion is Hinduism, and they were originally Madhvas. After their settlement in Southern India, some of them, owing to the preachings of Sankaracharya and Ramanujacharya, were converted into Saivites and Vaishnavites respectively.
A Madurai Saurashtra Sabha document\(^{32}\) says that the Saurashtra classify their ancestors as originally belonging to the two lines of Thiriyarisham and Pancharisham descent groups. They are further sub-divided into Gotru (Gotra).\(^ {33}\) Each Gotra consists of different Ghaeru Navum (Family names).\(^ {34}\) The entire community consists of 64 Gotras but only 36 of them are found in Madurai. Marriage between boys and girls of common Gotra are prohibited.

The stratification within the community can be better understood while looking at the family names. Sethuraman holds that the present family names designate their ancestral occupation. The family name is said to be closely linked with status and prestige. Even at present, to some extent there is an association between the possession of family name and accumulation of wealth. It was observed in the field also that members belonging to particular family groups like Natamai, Koduva etc. became affluent and gained much influence within the community. A few respondents told the researcher that such an association is manifested more during the election to the Sabha Council and in the management of the temple affairs. Some complained that certain people change their family names after making progress in the economic field.

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32. For details see *Madurai Saurashtra Sabha Varalaru* (in Tamil) A Madurai Saurashtra Sabha release.

33. The details of gotra are elaborately mentioned in a palm leaf *Vaalaajaa peetal-p-pokkisam*.

34. Some of the family names are viz., Nattamai, Siddha, Ramia, Kuduva etc.
As the community progressed in business and education there arose a class division within it. The residential pattern of the community reveals this distinction clearly. Occupationally the Saurashtrans in Madurai may be classified broadly as weavers, traders and white collar employees of which the majority of them are weavers. The weavers and traders are mutually interdependent on each other. The traders are well placed but the weavers are a socially and economically disadvantaged section within the community at present. It is upon the hard work of the weavers that the trading class has emerged.

Among the Saurashtrans there exists a regional level variation also. The Madurai-based Saurashtrans consider themselves superior to others of their kind. The did not exchange marriage alliances with outsiders. This is mainly because the Madurai Saurashtrans were quick in making progress in trade and industry due to collective mobilization, Sanskritisation and relatively high level of education. They have made use of all the opportunities available in the town.

Saurashtrans as Weavers

There is a strong evidence to show that the Saurashtrans are experts in weaving. Since they are skilled in silk weaving they are known as Pattunulkaran in Tamil Nadu. Besides weaving they are

35. It is important to note here that the Saurashtrans living outside Madurai town stick to their traditional occupation of weaving.

36. 'Pattu' in Tamil means Silk and 'Nul' denotes thread.
masters in dyeing, spinning and printing etc. Before the synthetic chemicals came into use they used vegetable dyes for the purpose of dyeing. The textile products of this community are valued not only for their utility but also for their artistic excellence and tradition. But now a majority of them concentrate more on producing products of art-silk and cotton varieties. The famous saries of Kodambakkam and Chinnala Patti varieties are made by them. The principal reason to switch over to cotton weaving from silk weaving is said to be partly due to the lack of adequate support from the government and partly due to the changes in public consumption. Most of the weavers in our study fall under the category of art-silk and cotton weaving.

Saunders who has seen the community in a socio-historical perspective writes:37

Madura is the most important weaving centre in Southern India: It is a cottage or handloom industry, and is almost exclusively a Saurashtra industry. The fabrics which they weave are better woven and of more varied designs than those of any other place, and their products are exported in large quantities to Madras and elsewhere. Their white cloth made from European yarn and ornamented with borders of gold and silver threads are especially famous. This community is the

37. A.J. Saunders, op. cit., p. 797
only caste in the district which manufactures all silk goods, as distinct from those containing admixture of silk ornamented with silk borders."

Now this community as a whole lacks the traditional features of skill in weaving.

The Saurashtrans produced various types of cloth for the requirements of the temple, the Royal household and the common people. They were closely associated with Madurai Meenakshi Temple where from they got orders in bulk for making special cloths. One of the great features of this Temple was its employment potentiality and its capacity to provide material comforts to many people. This temple during the rule of Pandya and Nayak kings played a very influential part in the general progress of these silk weavers. The rulers also greatly admired their work and occasionally provided them with lands and gifts as incentives. The skill of the weavers was also praised by many of the Tamil poets. Their occupation was respected and they were placed high in society. There was considerable prosperity among them during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. But unfortunately Saurashtrans could not enjoy their status and income

38. The Saurashtrans were represented on the various Devastanam (Temple) committees of Meenakshi and Kalla Alagar Temples in Madurai.

39. Vijaya Ramaswami who studied the condition of weavers in medieval period noted that the extensive donations to the temples made by the weavers is proof of their having been an important and prosperous professional group in medieval society. For detail see "Some Enquiries into the Condition of Weavers in Medieval South India", Indian Historical Review, vol. 6, 1979, pp. 119-140.
for a long time. Several external and internal factors have forced many of them to give up weaving and take up new occupations suitable to them. Especially, the technological and political changes that took place in the 19th century changed them a lot.

Of course, some positive as well as negative developments are taking place as far as the weaving industry is concerned. On the positive side today, the central and state governments are taking special efforts to preserve the handloom products as well as to improve the welfare of weavers. As a result, weavers' co-operative societies are established, and weavers' colonies are constructed, and various concessions to weavers are granted. Special Handloom Boards are set up to look into the policy matter and occasionally sample surveys are conducted to find out the problems of implementation. Of course, this has made a tremendous impact on the social and economic life of weavers. But on the negative side, the fast development of mill technology, poor demand for handloom products and changes in the preferences of public have caused poverty and unemployment among some sections of the weavers. The principal reason underlying the danger posed to the handloom industry by the presence of the mill and the powerloom industries is that it is possible to manufacture products similar to - indeed often of better quality than - that produced on the handloom at a lower cost. This is made possible through the use of advanced machinery and expanded division of labour which contribute to a higher labour productivity and lowered costs in the mill and the powerloom sector.
Several recent field studies have also shown that the handloom industry's condition today is not a satisfactory one. Despite the Government's efforts to improve their position, the weavers do not even get enough work and sufficient wages. Many master weavers owing to inadequate financial resources have wound up their business and taken up other trades. Thus, many weavers have been thrown out of employment.

Arputharaj made a detailed study of weavers in some of the important weaving centres of Tamil Nadu. He points out that most of the weavers in the selected centres are reported to be in debt from time to time for their basic needs of life. He says that no single category of weavers could be pointed to be better off than the others in this respect. Several economic surveys conducted in Tamil Nadu have also shown that the handloom industry has experienced a retarded growth. According to Pupul Jayakar, the loss of court patronage, drastic changes in the dress habits of well-to-do classes, incapacity of the industry to adapt itself to the changed requirements, and the prevalence of a demoralising system of middlemen, caused a decline of the handloom industry.


There is a social stratification even among the weavers. These strata include the independent weavers, apprentice weavers, co-operative weavers and daily wage weavers. The independent weavers are self-sufficient, many of whom in spite of their limited resources have become master weavers. The daily wage weavers seldom rise above the poverty line and they are always in debt. With the establishment of the co-operative societies, many weavers were released from the clutches of master weavers and attained economic independence. The Madurai Saurashtra Sabha has also brought about many reforms for the weavers of the community. The economic condition of Saurashtran weavers in Madurai is much better compared to those of other places or any other weaving community in the state at present. Even in the past, these weavers fared better than the others. Thurston writes:

As a rule, Madura Saurashtreans are in a flourishing condition, and much better off than the Saurashtra weavers in Salem. This is probably due to the fact that the bulk of the Madura trade is in a higher class of cloth than at Salem, and the weavers are consequently less affected by fluctuations in demand for their goods due to seasonal variations."43

43. E. Thurston, op. cit., p. 170.
The Backward Classes Commission Report states:

"The Saurashtras of Madurai town are comparatively more advanced educationally and economically than their kinshmen elsewhere and also the other weaving communities viz. Sallians and Devangas."\(^{44}\)

Saurashtrans as Traders

The Saurashtrans' role is a significant factor in understanding the development and changing status of the community. They emerged as a dominant group only after taking up the role of businessmen. The early well-to-do merchants built a strong foundation upon which the successive generations of the community secured their position in the social and economic structures. The Madurai Saurashtrans monopolised the trading of weaving industry since a very early period.

The textile trade in South during the early medieval period was highly organised in the form of merchant guilds.\(^{45}\) The weavers sold their goods directly to their immediate local merchant guilds who carried out marketing. During the late 16th and 17th centuries, the prominence of 'merchant middleman' increased. And in course

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45. Some of the names of the Merchant Guilds (Trade Associations) are viz. Nanadesis, Tisalayirattu, Nagarattar, Anjuvanattar, etc.
of time many of these merchant middlemen and independent weavers rose to the rank of merchants. In the 18th century Madurai flourished as an important centre in the trade of dyes, chemicals and cotton textiles. And a significant number of Saurashtrans utilised their skills in these fields and monopolised the trading sector. In this way Madurai Saurashtrans made quick progress on trade.

Some affluent families of this community even took part in international commerce. Raman Mahadevan's study of Merchant Community in Tamil Nadu brings out in detail about the emergence of Saurashtran entrepreneurs. He says that the change in the social and political structure of colonial countries in south and southeast Asia made the Chettiar to lose the business which enabled Saurashtrans to take up industrial entrepreneurship. He further states that over the years the process of differentiation within the community had reached an advanced stage and by the turn of the 20th century a few families through a system of credit advances had come to dominate the entire trade of their prosperous handloom industry. Moreover, the tremendous profit made during the war years by a section of the Saurashtra community enabled them to shift a part of their capital into organised industry.

Their close community networks in the city enabled them to trade and speculate more effectively. The Saurashtran merchants

invariably employed their own kinsmen and community members to assist them in their business. These young apprentices subsequently started new branches of their own after gaining adequate wealth and experience with the support of kinsmen or previous owners. The Saurashtran success in trade could also be attributed to their political leaders who were interested in the prosperity of the community in general and business in particular. K.R.R. Sastry who made an economic study of the community also appreciated the trading techniques of the community. 47

"In Madura town the Saurashtrans, a community of dyers and weavers who had migrated from Gujarat, formed almost a third of the population and dominated the trade and manufacture of cotton products. In the 20th century, in the wake of declining weaving profession, many traders tried a number of alternatives for their younger generation and some found fresh prospects of livelihood in modern type of business."

Traditional Social Organisation of Saurashtrans

Saurashtrans have been traditionally an orthodox and closely knit community. They are essentially northern in their customs, manners and social structure. Traditionally, joint family was a social

and economic unit for them. They respected and encouraged large joint family because of the nature of occupation they were doing. The occupation of weaving needed the co-operative efforts of many persons. Moreover, the pattern of joint family helped them transmit their traditional culture to the younger generations.

The main social customs among the Saurashtrans consist of six social ceremonies in the life of a person. (1) the naming ceremony; (2) the sacred thread ceremony; (3) puberty; (4) marriage; (5) the attainment of the age of sixty; (6) the funeral rites.

The rites that are performed following the birth of a child are known as jathakarma. The naming ceremony in particular is known as namakaranam. The main aim of performing these birth ceremonies is to purify and to safeguard the child from diseases. These rituals are believed to check the ill effects of Planetary movement. The above rites were carried out on the eleventh day after birth of the child. Grandfather's name was much preferred for a male child and the name of a female deity was suggested for female child. However, they commonly used Vaishnavaite names as many of the Saurashtrans in Madurai belong to the Vaishnavaite group.

48. The following Tamil proverb stresses the importance of joint living of weavers, "The Chetties lost by partnership while the weavers came to grief by isolation."

49. If a man reaches the age of sixty with his wife still living, a great festival is held in his honour amid much-rejoicing.

The vaduhom ceremony (Sacred Thread ceremony) of Saurashtrans resembles the upanayanam ceremony of Brahmins. This ceremony is exceedingly important among them. This is performed between seventh and thirteenth years. In rare cases when the sacred thread ceremony was not held in the young ages, it would be performed at the time of marriage. The goal of this ceremony was to highlight their Brahminical status. During this ceremony there was much feasting and entertainment which lasted for four days.

Among the Saurashtrans, attaining puberty was the greatest event in a girl's life. They performed a pre-puberty marriage like Brahmins. Ucida Norihiko\textsuperscript{51} describes the event as follows. "The puberty celebration was performed in an isolated room meant for menstrual women and used exclusively by women folk. They felt free to talk of sex during this celebration. They sang erotic songs to impart to the girl the sex education necessary for the marital life." He also adds that they have long given up open celebration of the event. Now-a-days talking about sex is regarded as very indecent probably due to influence of Western prudery.

Death rituals are termed as abarakkirigal or andhiyaeshti in the Saurashtran community. Andhiyaeshti means the last or final fire. These rituals are carried out by the eldest son of the deceased. In case of no son, the relatives carry out the last rites. Kartha is

the name given to the one who carries out this rite. The performance of the rite signifies the belief that the life is continuous and does not end by one's death. Further, the deceased are believed to reach the level of the deities. The period of mourning lasts for ten days, but it is repeated every year in the form of sraddha ceremonies.

Among all the festivals, marriage is an occasion when the Saurashtrans used to have much more fun and fair. The wedding ceremony lasted 11 days with as many as 36 rituals. Commenting on ceremonies during marriage, Saunders says, "...These ceremonies of marriage are great social events and all the relatives of both families participate, but unfortunately my space will not allow me to relate what takes place." All these rituals were conducted by the Saurashtran priests who were a separate clan in the community.

The Saurashtrans have their own marital arrangements. Before a marriage is fixed, a long negotiation takes place between the parents of both partners. Being traditional orthodox Hindus they are very much particular in matching the horoscope of the couple. A man may claim his maternal uncle's daughter as his wife, and polygamy is permitted. Girls get married at an early age. Thurston notes that a girl's marriage was usually celebrated before puberty, sometimes

52. Sowlee discusses in detail the rites and ceremonies performed at the time of betrothal ceremony of Saurashtrans in his book Bhoguluvas. Saurashtra Literary Society, Madras, 1981.


when she was a mere child of four or five. Saunders'\textsuperscript{55} study shows that sons were married at any time between the ages of fifteen and thirty years. But most of the girls were married between the ages of ten and twelve, or about the time of puberty. Marriage within common \textit{gotra} was strictly prohibited among them.

Traditionally, within the Saurashtran household all the members worked together and were economically very active. Although both men and women worked together, the eldest male member of the house was the head of the household who distributed work to junior family members. This does not mean that the Saurashtran wives were always subordinate to their husbands. The women of this community too shared in decision-making in all important matters of the households. The following observation of Saunders clearly indicates the place of the womenfolk in a Saurashtran family:\textsuperscript{56}

"A man may have more than one wife but usually not more than two. Theoretically the wives have equal status, but if one is younger and more beautiful than the other, the more desirable one naturally has the place of honour in the home. The one bearing a son or sons is sure of the place of honour, and the property will go to her sons."

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} A.J. Saunders, op. cit., p. 792
\item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p. 792.
\end{itemize}
The Saurashtrans are of a religious bent of mind and they value morality and high character. The chief divinity of Saurashtran is Venkateshwar of Tirupati. Among other Gods they worshipped Sun God, Rama etc. They made regular visits to Meenakshi temple. They have their own community temple called Prasanna Venkateshwara Perumal where they conduct a very important festival. They celebrate Kolattam and Ramanavami with great enthusiasm, and observe Deepawali, Vaikunta Ekadasi as important religious days.

Though they claim that they are Saurashtran Brahmans their customs and traditions are different. Their present social customs differ markedly from the traditional pattern and bear a close resemblance to those of Tamils. Only some orthodox well-to-do merchant families stick to their older customs.

Social, Political Awareness of Saurashtrans

(a) Status Consciousness of Saurashtrans

The attempt to equate social and economic status with the ritual status was made by the weavers in several ways.57

1. The demand for social privileges;
2. The ascribing of mythological origins and the claiming of Brahminical status;
3. Left-hand right conflicts within the professional castes and
4. social protests.

Some weaving castes in Tamil Nadu attempted to raise their status in the ritual hierarchy by dissassociating themselves from their occupation, while others tried to raise the status of their occupation. The Sengunda Mudaliar disclaim weaving as their original profession and they claim to be descendents of warriors. The Padma Saliars do not deny weaving as their original caste occupation, but assign a high birth status to those engaged in weaving. The Saurashtrrans' claim to Brahman status and their involvement in weaving is recognised by hypothetical differences in the status of weaving in North and South India. When weaving castes rank other weaving castes they never claim superior rank by denying their caste occupation. On the contrary, caste skill is used as the explanation for differences identified by ritual criteria. For example, the Saurashtrrans took pride in calling themselves as Pattunulkarar.

The Saurashtrrans have always been conscious of their status in society. Throughout history they have striven for a higher position through Sanskritisation, publishing caste magazines and several other means. The well-to-do merchants and the intellectual class of the community played a notable part in this connection. They made frequent attempts to raise their position to that of Tamil Brahmins. But unfortunately such attempts ofthe Saurashtrrans were met with violence and conflict from the side of Brahmans and non-Brahmans.

58. Many studies indicate that the Saurashtrrans lost their wealth on wasteful expenditure on Brahmanical ceremonies.
The wearing of sacred thread by Saurashtrans in Madurai invoked a sharp reaction from Tamil-Brahmans which ended in physical violence and arrest of 18 Saurashtran members in the year 1705.

Thurston writes: "Though they delight to call themselves Saurashtra Brahmans, the Tamils consider them to be a low caste. Like the Brahmans, they wear the sacred thread, and tack on their names such titles as Iyengar, Iyer, Bhagawathar, Sastrigal, and so forth... but a claim to Brahmanhood is difficult to establish." He also noted that the Saurashtran's social status in Tamil society was quite unsettled.

Individually a person may feel better placed and financially more secure, but his status in the society is still determined by the caste group he represents. Despite the Sanskritisation and material advancement of a section of the society, for various reasons this community as a whole could not secure its desired status from the non-Saurashtrans. The weavers who formed the majority of the community earned a bad reputation with their meat-eating and drinking habits and to some extent moral degradation. The non-Brahmans never extended the Saurashtrans Brahmanical status. As a result, the Saurashtrans occupied a marginal position between the Brahmans.

60. Ibid., p. 160.
61. This was probably due to the loss of feudal patronage and their placement in a contemporary setting where they have had to interact with other groups on a competitive basis in political and occupational spheres.
and non-Brahmans. The Saurashtrans did not want to identify themselves with non-Brahmans. To quote the Madura district Gazetteer, "As to the caste of the Saurashtrans there has been a great deal of controversy, Sir Alexander Garden, at the laying of the foundation stone of the Saurashtra High School in Madura, July 27, 1917, called the weavers "a non-Brahman community", and thereby aroused a great discussion."

It is claimed that the Saurashtra leaders sought in the Congress "Supra-local connections to redress the local imbalance and that their objective was to achieve local supremacy under cover of the Civil Disobedience Movement."  

(b) Leadership Within the Community

Traditionally, the Saurashtrans have been under the guidance of their leaders. The people were divided into four heads, among them the Goundas are the chiefs or judges held responsible for the civil and criminal affairs and they were assisted by Saulins (elders), a body of nobles. The Voyddoos (Pandits) and the Bhotuls (priests) looked after the religious and important occasions of community members.


64. E. Thurston, op.cit.,pp.166-167.
Irschick\textsuperscript{65} also noted that in the second decade of 20th century the Saurashtrans emerged as a dominant group in social and political life of Madras Presidency. It may be mentioned that the Saurashtrans emerged as the dominant social group because of their collective mobilisation, intellectual leadership, education, wealth, trade and enterprise. There are several instances when the leaders of the community organised the weavers and made social and economic protests. The well-to-do merchants of the community made donations to T.N.C.C. for Salt Satyagraha and welcomed any form of Swadeshi agitation which favoured Indian cloth.\textsuperscript{66}

The leaders who came to lead the community were not always from the upper class. Tulsiram, who led the community in Madura, was not born into the aristocratic family.\textsuperscript{67} With his own efforts he travelled abroad and learnt new dyeing techniques which brought prosperity to himself and to the community in general. Tulsiram at first supported the non-Brahman movement in Tamil Nadu. When he earned the displeasure of his community members who were fighting for Brahmanical status, he changed his mind and supported the cause of his own people. He got elected as Municipal Chairman in 1921

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amidst a fierce contest. During his tenure he brought many reforms within the community. When he lost his hold in Municipal Council, he became a prominent organiser of non-co-operation movement. Later he impressed the Congress Party and became the leader of the merchants. In this capacity he strove hard to raise the prestige and position of his caste fellows.

N.M.R. Subbaraman, another leader of the community, financed and led the Civil Disobedience Movement in Madurai from 1930-32. Later he expressed his dissatisfaction with Civil Disobedience. He felt unhappy about the expenditure incurred on the agitational activities. He mobilised his followers into Municipal politics with the help of Venkatamarama Iyer faction under the Congress banner. Regarding the political motive of Saurashtran leaders, C.J. Backer writes:

"...the Saurashtra leaders took up the torch of Civil Disobedience, and they moulded the campaign to their own ends. They took strongly to temperance campaigning, as it fitted in well with their plan of community uplift, and wholly ignored the idea of boycotting foreign cloth since they themselves dealt in it."

The caste leaders also tried to enhance the prestige of the community by eradicating the social evils, especially from the lower and middle class sections of the community. Although they could

68. C.J. Backer, op. cit., p. 217.
not bring radical changes in the habits and practices of the people, they could bring about some reforms within the community.

(c) **Enthusiasm in Voluntary Organisation**

It is the characteristic of every immigrant group in the host society to form its own association for the protection of its cultural and traditional identity. The prominent leaders among the community arose in the late 19th century and felt the need of organising the community. At first, the Madurai Saurashtra Sabha was formed in the year 1895 and it was formally registered in the year 1900 with many objectives. The formation of this Sabha was the first step towards social mobilisation. The Sabha's administration is carried out by elected councillors and office bearers. It has its own rules and regulations regarding holding of elections, rights and duties of office bearers and celebration of social functions. The election to the Sabha is held once in three years. The present Saurashtra Sabha in Madurai consists of four office bearers and 200 elected councillors belonging to 20 different wards in the city.

Saunders comments the function of the Sabha in the following lines:

"The social life of the Saurashtra in Madurai city is controlled almost wholly by the Saurashtra Sabha. This organisation
is a committee of the leading men of the community, which manages and controls all the schools and public institutions, the temple and its worship, and all political, religious, and social questions among the Saurashtrans.  

Apart from the Madurai Saurashtra Sabha several other important organisations are created with a view to mobilise their members in diverse fields. The Saurashtra Mathiya (central) Sabha, which has its headquarters at Madurai now, Saurashtra Old Boys' Association at Mahal, the Saurashtra literary club etc. are formed by the youngsters of the community who have taken up educational, cultural, recreational and welfare activities. They all use their caste magazines numbering more than ten, as a medium of approach to their people.

They have taken keen interest in educating the community. They have built many educational institutions and thereby raised the educational standard of the community. At present, two elementary schools, three secondary grade schools, one polytechnic and a co-educational college, are functioning under their management in Madurai.


- Some of the caste magazines are viz., Saurashtra Jothi, Saurashtra Times, Makkal Ratham, Bhashabimani. Except a few all other magazines are in Tamil language.
Many well-to-do merchants and philanthropists of the community have contributed substantially to the growth of these institutions. Today, the Saurashtrans are represented in white collar jobs and professions in large numbers.

Very recently, due to changes in education and occupation, the Saurashtrans are drawn into such groups as specific occupational association, social-welfare associations, Rotary and civic clubs, sports units, cine-star fans association, music and several other entertaining clubs and activities. Membership in these voluntary associations has changed some aspects of their outlook. However membership in co-operative societies, trade unions and commercial associations is the common phenomenon among them. Some of these organisations cater to the members' economic needs and have provided professional security also.

The above socio-historical analysis of Saurashtran immigration throws some light on the traditional nature of the community with some features of change. It may be said here that the traditional Saurashtrans lived as a homogeneous group and quite often expressed their identity through a common occupation, language, residence and peculiar social and religious practices. Now the constant interaction with Tamils and stratification in their occupation have brought about certain changes in their social organisation. The actual changes in kinship commitments, occupational mobility and adaptation patterns are dealt with in detail in the empirical part of this study.