



# THE WEAVER'S LOOM AND THE MERCHANT'S SCALE: SOURASHTRA IDENTITY FORMATION THROUGH GUILDS AND OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALIZATION IN PRE-COLONIAL MADURAI

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**Abstract :** The urban fabric of pre-colonial Madurai was shaped by intersecting forces of royal authority, sacred ritual, and commercial vitality. Within this landscape, the Sourashtra community - historically known as the Pattunulkarar or “silk-thread people” - emerged as a distinctive collective whose linguistic and cultural persistence challenges static conceptions of caste and identity in South Asia. This paper interrogates the formation of Sourashtra identity during the Madurai Nayak kingdom (c. 16th–18th centuries), arguing that it was not a primordial inheritance but a product of political economy. Through monopolies in silk and fine cotton production, guild-based organization, and a symbiotic relationship with the Nayak state, the community institutionalized its socio-cultural distinctiveness and secured a prominent civic presence. By reframing Sourashtra identity as an artifact of occupational specialization and economic strategy, this study contributes to broader debates on migration, material culture, and the dynamic constitution of collective identities in pre-colonial South India.

## I. INTRODUCTION: UNWEAVING THE THREADS OF IDENTITY

The urban landscape of pre-colonial Madurai was a complex tapestry woven from threads of royal power, sacred ritual, and vibrant commerce. Among the most distinctive and enduring patterns in this fabric was the Sourashtra community, historically known as the Pattunulkarar or “silk-thread people.” Their persistent linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, maintained for centuries within a predominantly Tamil-speaking region, presents a compelling historical puzzle that challenges simplistic narratives of cultural stasis. Traditional accounts often treat caste and community identities in South Asia as primordial and static essences, inherited from time immemorial. However, the Sourashtra case, with its clear historical trajectory of migration and socio-economic ascent, demands a more dynamic and materialist explanation. This paper, therefore, seeks to answer a central research question: how was a cohesive Sourashtra collective identity constituted, institutionalized, and sustained during the pivotal period of the Madurai Nayak kingdom (c. 16th to 18th centuries)? It will be argued that the socio-cultural identity of the Sourashtra community was not a pre-existing cultural relic but was fundamentally forged in the crucible of political economy. Their identity was an artifact of their guild-based monopolies over the production and trade of high-value textiles, particularly silk and fine cotton. The internal social structures of the community, its symbiotic relationship with the Nayak state, and its marked civic presence within Madurai were direct and deliberate outcomes of this specialized and highly lucrative occupational niche.

## II. SITUATING THE ARGUMENT: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND METHODOLOGY

This article engages critically with several historiographical streams. It builds upon, yet refines, Burton Stein’s concept of the segmentary state by highlighting the central role of urban merchant-artisans in the more centralized Nayak polity, which was characterized by a pronounced military fiscalism. It dialogues with David Rudner’s work on Nakarattar merchant banks, applying a similar lens of caste-based commercial organization to an artisanal context. Furthermore, it challenges anthropological portrayals of the community that prioritize cultural traits in isolation, insisting instead that such traits were embedded in and reproduced by specific economic institutions. Methodologically, this study adopts a source-critical approach, triangulating evidence from Tamil and Telugu epigraphical records from Madurai’s great temple complexes, the travelogues and factory records of European contemporaries who were keenly observant of the textile economy, and later Sourashtra community chronicles, read with an awareness of their retrospective and identity-shaping intentions. By weaving these sources together, this paper will demonstrate that the loom and the merchant’s scale were not merely tools of trade but were the very instruments through which Sourashtra identity was woven into the historical record.

### III. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE NAYAK STATE AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TEXTILES

#### *The Military-Fiscal State and the Urban Ecology of Madurai*

Emerging from the fissures of the declining Vijayanagara Empire, the Nayak state was a centralized, militaristic polity heavily reliant on revenue extracted from trade and commerce. This was not a realm sustained solely by agrarian surplus; it was a state that recognized and actively cultivated the fiscal potential of luxury goods to fund its wars, its courtly splendor, and its monumental building projects. The segmentary state was characterized by the existence of numerous centres, not a single political apex. Power was distributed and shared in a series of nested segments, with the sovereign's authority radiating outward in diminishing intensity<sup>i</sup>. The city of Madurai itself functioned as a multi-nodal center where political authority, embodied by the Nayak's court; sacred power, radiating from the Meenakshi-Sundareshwara temple; and economic activity, concentrated in its specialized markets and artisan quarters, were inextricably linked. This urban ecology, with its demand for prestige goods and its concentration of capital, provided the essential stage for the Sourashtra drama of identity formation. Their settlements, or pettahs, were not merely ethnic enclaves but were destined to become the vital industrial and commercial districts of the capital.

#### *The Primacy of Cloth: Weaving as a Political and Economic Engine*

Within this context, textiles served as a primary engine of the economy. The demand for luxury cloth was insatiable, driven by a dual-market system. Internally, the conspicuous consumption of the royal court and the local elite, for whom specific silks and fine muslins were key markers of status, created a stable and prestigious market. The Nayaka state was a 'military fiscalism,' where the court's primary function was the redistribution of resources extracted from trade and agriculture to its warrior chiefs and allies, creating a culture of spectacular gift-giving and patronage<sup>ii</sup>. Externally, the arrival of European trading companies—the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English—transformed the Coromandel Coast into a hub of global commerce, creating an export market that prized the region's brilliant silks and intricate cotton weaves. It was within this context of intense, dual-pronged demand that the Sourashtra community found its historical agency. Their specialization was not in ordinary cloth, but in the high-value, complex production of silk and the finest grades of cotton. Control over such an industry required not just artisanal skill but significant capital, complex logistics, and a high degree of organization—preconditions that the Sourashtra, through their guilds, were uniquely positioned to meet, setting the stage for their rise as a socio-political force.

### IV. THE INSTITUTIONAL ENGINE: THE SOURASHTRA GUILDS (NAGARATTAR)

The formidable economic power of the Sourashtra community was channeled and amplified through a sophisticated institutional structure: the guild, known in contemporary records as the Nagarattar. These were not simple craft associations but functioned as powerful corporations that governed the entire lifecycle of textile production and distribution.

#### *The Architecture of a Monopoly: Internal Governance and Control*

Internally, the guilds were likely headed by a chief merchant-artisan, often styled as the Pattakkaran, who presided over a council of elders. This leadership was responsible for a comprehensive regulatory regime that standardized quality, fixed wages and prices, controlled apprenticeship, and managed the all-important procurement of raw materials, including the import of raw silk from distant regions like Bengal. By monopolizing these upstream and downstream processes, the guilds created a closed economic circuit that was difficult for outsiders to penetrate. This internal governance ensured uniformity and high quality in the finished product, which was essential for maintaining their premium brand in the marketplace, but it also served a critical social function. The guild's authority extended to adjudicating internal disputes, managing communal resources, and enforcing social norms, effectively acting as the de facto government for the Sourashtra people within their pettahs.

#### *From Loom to Market: The Integration of Production and Commerce*

The genius of the Sourashtra economic model lay in the seamless integration of the artisan and the merchant. While the loom was the symbolic heart of their industry, the merchant's scale was the engine of their wealth. The guilds did not merely produce for a local bazaar; they operated within extensive regional and international trade networks. The Coromandel Coast was not a passive recipient of global trade but an active participant. Its weaving communities, producing for both internal elite consumption and the export market, became pivotal to the region's political economy<sup>iii</sup>. They possessed the capital and the logistical acumen to finance trading missions, negotiate with European factors at ports like Tuticorin and Porto Novo, and navigate the complex political landscape of the era. The Textile Trade of Seventeenth-Century Northern Coromandel: A Study of a Pre-Modern Asian Export Industry<sup>iv</sup>. This dual role as producers and traders allowed them to capture the full value chain, from the cost of raw materials to the final sale price of the luxury cloth, maximizing their profits and insulating them from the vulnerabilities faced by weavers who were dependent on intermediary merchants. It was this consolidated control over production, finance, and trade that transformed the Sourashtra from a skilled labour force into a formidable economic and, consequently, political entity within the Nayak state.

### V. THE STATE AND THE GUILD: A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between the Sourashtra guilds and the Madurai Nayak state was not one of subservience but of strategic symbiosis, a partnership forged from mutual interest.

#### *Patronage and Privilege: The Fiscal Compact*

The state, perpetually in need of revenue to fund its military ambitions and grandiose architectural projects, recognized the guilds as a reliable and concentrated source of wealth. In return for their economic services, the Nayak rulers bestowed upon the Sourashtra community a range of privileges and honors, meticulously recorded in temple inscriptions. These epigraphs detail grants of land (manyam), exemptions from various taxes, and the honorific rights to use certain palanquins and emblems—public markers of elevated status in a highly ritualized political culture. Such patronage was not mere generosity; it was a calculated investment. By freeing the Sourashtra from certain fiscal obligations, the state was effectively nurturing the goose that laid the golden egg, ensuring the continued prosperity of a critical industry. Merchant banking castes operated through a system of 'caste capitalism,'



where kinship and community networks were the primary vehicles for building trust, securing credit, and facilitating long-distance trade<sup>v</sup>.

### ***The Guild as a Quasi-State Authority: Revenue and Administration***

Beyond being mere beneficiaries of royal favour, the Sourashtra guilds were integrated into the very administrative fabric of the state. They functioned as intermediary revenue-collecting bodies, responsible for ensuring the flow of taxes from their own commercial operations and perhaps even from their wider urban quarter back to the royal treasury. This delegation of fiscal authority is a telling indicator of the trust and leverage the community commanded. The guilds provided the state with more than just money; they were a source of stability, maintaining order within their populous settlements, and a source of prestige, supplying the court with the magnificent silks that adorned its nobility and served as diplomatic gifts. Merchant guilds like the \*Manigramam\* and \*Ainnurruvar\* were not just economic bodies; they acted as diplomats, bankers, and landlords, wielding significant political influence and autonomous jurisdiction over their members<sup>vi</sup>. European factory records occasionally note the need to negotiate with the leaders of the "Patnoolers," acknowledging them as the necessary point of contact for securing consistent quality and supply. This ability to treat with both the Indian court and European traders on their own terms underscores the unique position of power the Sourashtra guilds occupied, a power derived directly from their indispensable economic function.

## **VI. FORGING IDENTITY: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL OUTCOMES OF ECONOMIC POWER**

The economic dominance of the Sourashtra guilds did not exist in a social vacuum; it was the primary catalyst for the formation of a distinct and resilient socio-cultural identity. The wealth and organizational power derived from the textile trade were consciously and unconsciously channeled into building a cohesive community, creating visible markers of distinction, and reinforcing internal boundaries. This process transformed economic capital into social and cultural capital, ensuring the community's survival and prominence.

### ***The Sacred and the Urban: Ritual Patronage and Spatial Delineation***

A primary manifestation of this identity-building was through ritual patronage and the deliberate shaping of urban space. The economic surplus generated by the guilds was lavishly deployed in the sacred geography of Madurai, most notably through the construction of and endowment to temples. The famed Ayiramkaal Mandapam (Hall of a Thousand Pillars) in the Meenakshi Temple complex stands as a monumental testament to this patronage. Such acts were not merely pious donations; they were powerful political statements that inscribed the Sourashtra community into the city's sacred landscape, asserting their status and claiming a permanent stake in the spiritual and civic order. Simultaneously, their residential and commercial quarters, the pettahs, evolved into more than just industrial zones. The spatial organization of these areas-with weaving units, merchant homes, community halls (mandapams), and their own temples clustered together-created a fortified socio-economic microcosm. This urban morphology physically reinforced community cohesion, facilitated the guild's regulatory control, and visibly demarcated the Sourashtra from neighbouring communities, making their distinct identity a tangible feature of the city's map.

### ***Language and Endogamy as Mechanisms of Preservation***

The preservation of the Sourashtra language, Patnuli, and the strict practice of community endogamy, while often analyzed as cultural traits, must be understood as strategic outcomes of their political economy. In the context of a highly competitive and secretive luxury industry, language functioned as more than a vehicle of heritage; it was a practical tool for commercial confidentiality. Patnuli served as a trade vernacular within the guilds and workshops, protecting business transactions, weaving techniques, and dyeing formulas from outsiders and competitors. Likewise, the rigid enforcement of endogamy was a crucial social technology for protecting the community's most valuable assets: its specialized knowledge and accumulated capital. By restricting marriage to within the community, the guilds ensured that technical skills, trade secrets, and financial resources remained within the collective, preventing the dilution of their economic advantage. Thus, these seemingly cultural practices were, in fact, integral to the maintenance of the guild-based monopoly, allowing the Sourashtra to reproduce their distinct identity across generations as a function of economic necessity.

## **VII. CONTOURS OF DISTINCTION: DEMARCATING SOURASHTRA FROM THE SOCIAL OTHER**

The formation of a strong internal identity for the Sourashtra community was intrinsically linked to the process of differentiating itself from other social groups in the Madurai region. This demarcation was not passive but an active and continuous negotiation, driven by their unique socio-economic position and aimed at preserving their privileged status.

### ***Beyond the Loom: Contrasting Guild and Non-Guild Weavers***

A critical dimension of this differentiation lay in the contrast between the Sourashtra and other, often Tamil-speaking, weaving communities like the Kaikkolars or Saliyas. While these groups were also skilled artisans, they typically lacked the consolidated, guild-based structure that characterized the Sourashtra. The Sourashtra were not merely weavers; they were Pattunulkarar-the silk-thread people-a title that denoted a specific niche in luxury production. Temple inscriptions detail grants of land and gold to specific weaving communities for the regular supply of cloth for ritual purposes, illustrating the deep entanglement of temple economy, royal patronage, and artisan groups<sup>vii</sup>. Their organization into powerful, state-recognized corporations, their claim to a migrant, Vedic-conscious heritage, and their linguistic distinctiveness set them apart socially, even if their manual occupations appeared similar. The guild system allowed them to negotiate with the state as a corporate body, whereas other weavers often operated in a more fragmented, less powerful manner. This structural difference created a social hierarchy within the artisanal landscape, with the Sourashtra leveraging their economic organization to claim a higher ritual and social status.

### ***The Performance of Status: Ritual Rank and Public Persona***

This claimed superiority was meticulously performed and publicly asserted. The privileges granted by the Nayak state, such as the right to use specific palanquins or ceremonial emblems, were not merely private honors but were tools for public display. These visible markers of royal favor created a "theatre of status," distinguishing the Sourashtra elite in civic processions and public

events. Furthermore, their patronage of grand temple architecture and their adherence to specific Brahmanical rituals (such as the Sama Veda tradition) were conscious efforts to align themselves with the symbols of high social and ritual rank in the South Indian context. This performance was a dialectical process: their economic power enabled the performance, and the successful performance of high status, in turn, legitimized and solidified their economic and political position. Caste is not a static, religiously prescribed hierarchy but a 'cultural system of political society, a fluid product of historical processes, state formation, and political struggle'<sup>viii</sup>. It created a social moat around the community, reinforcing the message that the Sourashtra were not just another artisanal caste but a distinct and powerful corporate entity integral to the kingdom's functioning.

## VIII. NEGOTIATING MODERNITY: THE SOURASHTRA COMMUNITY IN THE COLONIAL TRANSITION

The collapse of the Nayak kingdom and the gradual entrenchment of British colonial rule in the 19th century did not erase Sourashtra identity but fundamentally transformed the terrain upon which it was negotiated. The community faced a dual challenge: the slow disintegration of the pre-colonial political economy that had underpinned their guilds, and the emergence of new colonial categories of caste, law, and education. Their response was not one of passive decline but of active adaptation, demonstrating the resilience of a corporate identity even as its original institutional foundations shifted.

### *The Unraveling of the Guild and the Rise of Caste Associations*

The British colonial state, with its different revenue systems and legal frameworks, had little use for the autonomous, fiscally powerful guilds of the Nayak era. The privileged tax exemptions (\*manyam\*) were systematically dismantled, and the guilds' role as intermediary administrative bodies was supplanted by a centralized bureaucracy. However, the social capital and organizational habits forged in the guild system did not disappear; they were transmuted. The 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the decline of the Nagarattar guild and the concomitant rise of modern Sourashtra caste associations, such as the Sourashtra Sabha. Patnūlkaran<sup>ii</sup> provides descriptive details on 19th/early 20th-century Sourashtra marriage customs, religious observances, and occupational patterns, which can be used to illustrate the persistence of certain cultural markers<sup>ix</sup>. These new organizations took up the mantle of community governance, but their focus shifted from regulating a production monopoly to navigating the new colonial landscape. They petitioned the government on behalf of the community, established modern educational institutions, and began to formally codify community history and social norms in print, using the new technology of the vernacular press to create a standardized and disseminated narrative of Sourashtra heritage.

### *Re-articulating Identity: Education, Print, and Social Reform*

Faced with the decline of their traditional handloom industry due to competition from British mill-made cloth and changing consumer tastes, the Sourashtra elite strategically pivoted towards new avenues for social mobility and status preservation. Education, particularly English education, became a new form of capital. Community funds were channeled into establishing schools, reflecting a conscious decision to trade the loom for the ledger and the textbook. Simultaneously, the advent of print culture allowed for a profound re-articulation of identity. The Political Authority of the Sourashtra Governors of Tirupati: A Note on the 19th Century Nayakars<sup>x</sup>. Sourashtra intellectuals began publishing histories, journals, and pamphlets that systematically documented their language, customs, and, crucially, their "respectable" Vedic heritage and historical importance. This literary project served to objectify their identity for both internal consumption and external presentation, often aimed at securing a favorable position within the colonial census and its rigid caste hierarchies. This period thus represents a critical transition where the community's socio-cultural heritage, once rooted in the political economy of weaving, began its complex journey into the realm of modern identity politics, education, and historiography.

## IX. CONCLUSION

This study argues that the socio-cultural distinctiveness of the Sourashtra community in pre-colonial Madurai was not a primordial inheritance, but a historical construct meticulously woven into the fabric of a specific political economy. Their identity was fundamentally architected through their guild-based monopolies over the production and trade of high-value textiles, which provided the material foundation for their social and political ascendancy. The Nagarattar guilds were far more than economic cooperatives; they were the primary institutions through which internal governance was exercised, state relations were negotiated, and a cohesive community was forged. The symbiotic relationship with the Nayak state, characterized by the exchange of fiscal support for tangible privileges and administrative responsibilities, elevated the Sourashtra from a group of skilled artisans to an indispensable pillar of the kingdom's political and economic structure. Consequently, the key markers of their identity—their spatial segregation in urban pettahs, their monumental ritual patronage, and even the preservation of their language and endogamous practices—emerge not as isolated cultural traits but as logical, strategic outcomes of their need to protect and perpetuate a lucrative economic niche. Just as their ancestors mastered the transition from migrant weavers to established power, the community's modern history would likely reveal another fascinating chapter in the negotiation between economic change and cultural endurance, a narrative whose origins are deeply rooted in the guildhalls and weaving centers of pre-colonial Madurai.

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