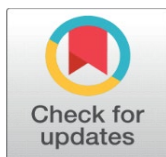


THE TIMELESS APPEAL OF SUNGUDI SAREE: PRESERVING TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

Indian weaving possesses an intrinsic value that extends beyond mere monetary gain and profitability. It serves as a vital connection to the past, preserving cultural significance and ensuring its endurance for future generations. This study aims to safeguard the traditional expertise imparted by the weavers in Indian villages, with a specific focus on documenting the Sungudi Srees of Thoonganagaram, a captivating city in Tamil Nadu, India. By exploring and contemplating cultural phenomena, it aims to address the challenges associated with cultural erosion and harness the intellectual potential of the weavers. Collected comprehensive data on saree production, an ethnographic research approach accompanied by visual documentation was employed. The ultimate objectives of this endeavor are to enhance the income generated from these products, sustain the valuable skills involved, and safeguard traditional weaving knowledge.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Sungudi sarees have a rich history and can be traced back to the Saurashtrians of Gujarat who migrated to Southern India approximately 500 years ago. [Madurai Sungudi Traditional \(2023\)](#) During the late 16th century, these artisans from Saurashtra settled in the Madurai region of Tamil Nadu, where their artistic traditions thrived under the patronage of the Nayak Dynasty. They found their place within the kingdom and crafted sarees for the royal Nayak kings, [Grandma's Legacy \(n.d.\)](#) while also acquiring knowledge of Vedas and serving as ministers in the king's palace. The term "Sungudi" was coined by the pattu-noolkarar, referring to the Saurashtrian community, and is derived from the Sanskrit word "sunnam," meaning "round." [eSamskriti \(2023\)](#) This name signifies the distinct feature of ringed dots that adorn the entire saree, lending it a unique and

exquisite appearance. Sungudi sarees were highly esteemed and worn by queens during the pre-colonial era, earning great reverence in the kingdoms of Tamil Nadu. [Grandma's Legacy. \(2019\)](#) The creation of an authentic Sungudi saree requires meticulous attention to detail. Each stage, from weaving to tying and dyeing, demands significant labour and time to achieve an effortless final product.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study implemented an ethnographic research design with the primary objective of acquiring qualitative data. This research approach involved multiple visits to the locale of Thoonganagaram City, where a targeted group of weavers was the focus of observation and interaction. A semi-structured interview was conducted, and the weavers were engaged in interviews, which allowed for a more nuanced exploration of their craft and practices.

3. ANCIENT PROCESS

The Sungudi tradition is upheld by a small community of around 300 artisans and weavers from the Sourashtra community, who migrated from Gujarat and settled in the city several centuries ago. [Madurai Sungudi Traditional \(2023\)](#) Following the downfall of the kingdom, this community continued crafting Sungudi sarees and expanded their reach to various parts of India and even overseas due to the admiration of women for their exquisite craftsmanship. Madurai Sungudi sarees have gained fame for their exceptional tie and dye work, and Mr. A.K Ramesh and his team are dedicated to preserving the traditional value of Sungudi sarees exclusively using natural dyes, [Madurai Sungudi Traditional \(2023\)](#). Located near Madurai, the village thrives as its residents passionately devote their days to weaving this beautiful textile. Sungudi sarees serve as the primary source of livelihood for over 10,000 individuals in the Madurai region. The community of Madurai Sungudi belongs to the Sourashtrian community from Gujarat, with its primary manufacturing unit and establishment in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. The production of authentic Sungudi sarees relies on traditional techniques passed down through generations. In the early days, men would dye the hand-woven saris in the backyards of their homes, while the women meticulously worked on the knots. These women employed rudimentary methods such as using mustard or peppercorn seeds to tie the knots. The organic dyes were created by combining dried flowers, leaves, tree bark, fruit peels, and herbs. Different shades required specific combinations of ingredients. Once prepared, the dyes were boiled on firewood for several hours to ensure purity.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF SUNGUDI SAREE IN INDIAN TEXTILE HERITAGE

The Sungudi sarees have a significant cultural and historical importance within the Indian textile heritage. These sarees occupy a special place in the traditional attire of Tamil Nadu, symbolizing the essence of the region's vibrant culture and deep-rooted traditions. Since ancient times, Sungudi sarees have been cherished and embraced, with each region incorporating its distinct style and traditional techniques that have been passed down through generations. The production of Sungudi sarees is deeply intertwined with the time-honored practice of handloom weaving, a craft that has been revered for centuries. The artistry involved in creating these sarees encompasses a meticulous process of tying dots on the cotton fabric,

followed by resist dyeing and handloom weaving. The technique of dot tying holds immense significance and serves as a defining characteristic of this art form. One of the remarkable aspects of Sungudi sarees is their ability to transport us to a bygone era. The designs and motifs adorning these sarees reflect the culture and traditions of ancient times, evoking a sense of nostalgia and reverence for the past. Sungudi sarees are not only admired for their aesthetic appeal but also regarded as a sustainable heritage. They possess durability while being biodegradable, aligning with the principles of a sustainable future. The unique identity of Sungudi sarees beautifully harmonizes with the inherent qualities of cotton, further highlighting their eco-friendliness and commitment to environmental preservation.

5. TRADITIONAL TECHNIQUE OF SUNGUDI SAREES

Process of Production: - There are several useful Tamil local language terms that can be mentioned, such as "pattu" (silk) or "paruthi" (cotton) & "cheelai" (saree in Tamil), and "paruthicheelai" (Cotton saree) crafted from mercerized cotton. The state of Tamil Nadu in India is home to the production of these sarees, which takes place in various cities including Karur, Salem, Kanchipuram, Coimbatore, Pudukkottai, and Madurai. This region is renowned for its cotton textiles, which are highly regarded for their quality and durability. The Process of the Sungudi saree is an artwork that needs patience with calculations and pattern knowledge: in earlier days, there were masters in making Sungudi sarees. [Madurai Sungudi Traditional \(2023\)](#) textile methods such as tie, dye, and batik are still practiced in Madurai.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Each Saree Would Have 10,000 to 21,000 Dots and Take 15 Days to Create

6. TRADITIONAL MOTIFS AND DESIGNS OF SUNGUDI SAREE

Inspired by the elegant hairstyles of women in Madurai, skilled weavers ingeniously incorporated circular patterns onto the fabric, mimicking the shape of a bun. The dots featured in these saris are reminiscent of the expansive cosmos, giving Sungudi saris a captivating resemblance to a starry night. [Isha Sadhguru \(2023\)](#) This arrangement of dots resembles scattered stars across the nocturnal sky, leading to speculation that the designs draw inspiration from celestial constellations, giving birth to these circular motifs. [Sundari Silks \(2023\)](#) To achieve a polished and symmetrical appearance, it is advised to maintain a three-inch gap between the body and the zari border, as well as the pallu. This technique enhances the visual appeal of the natural dots present in the design. The art of Sungudi encompasses seven foundational designs, which can be customized through various combinations and permutations, allowing for a diverse range of styles that highlight the artisans'

creativity. [Isha Sadhguru \(2023\)](#) During the early stages of Sungudi production, people employed simple and traditional techniques like using mustard or peppercorn seeds to tie knots. Although these methods may appear basic and unrefined, their effectiveness lies in their simplicity.

7. NATURAL DYES IN SUNGUDI SAREE

The Sungudi saree can be rightfully referred to as an 'eco-friendly saree' due to its use of natural dyes extracted from leaves, which eliminates the risk of allergies. [Madurai Sungudi Traditional \(2023\)](#) Various natural dyes are employed in the coloring process of Sungudi sarees. One such dye is Annatto, derived from the seeds of the achiote tree, producing shades ranging from brown to yellow to orange. It is highly resistant to fading and washing. The peel of pomegranate fruits is utilized to create a yellow dye that is incorporated into the dyeing process of Sungudi sarees, known for its antibacterial properties. Indigo, a deep blue dye obtained from the leaves of the *Indigofera* plant, is also widely used for dyeing the fabric. It is one of the oldest and most commonly used natural dyes. The madder root offers a range of red shades, from vibrant crimson to rust, and is renowned for its excellent light and wash fastness. Additionally, the Manjistha root is utilized for natural dyeing and imparts a rich red hue to the fabric, characterized by its long-lasting color retention.

Turmeric is a golden yellow dye that is obtained from the roots of the turmeric plant. Turmeric is one of the most commonly used natural dyes in India.

Figure 2



Figure 2 Boiling the Knotted Fabric in a Boiling Dye Bath for 15 to 20min for the Dye to Stick to the Saree, Ootucharam a Naturally Available Fixative is Used for Colour Fixation, and the Fabric is Dried in the Shade for 1 Day.

8. CHEMICAL DYES AND COSTING

When it comes to chemical dyes, the commonly employed standard colours include green FFB, red, blue, yellow, and orange. By combining these colours, various other hues can be achieved. Fixatives such as caustic, hydrosulphate, nitrate, and sulphate alumina are used in the dyeing process for different colours. The cost of the rice used for a chemically dyed batik-printed saree ranges from 800 to 2000 rupees, depending on the chosen colour.

Figure 3



Figure 4 The Contemporary Method-Batik Dyeing with Chemical Dyes

9. NATURAL DYE

Temoca flower, Myrobalan, mahogany, guava leaves, and banana flower extract are commonly used dyes as a fixative a white stone, in Tamil known as ottucharam, is used. The price for a hand-knotted, naturally dyed Sungudi ranges from 30,000 to 60,000 depending upon the number of knots and designs.

10. SYMBOLISM AND INTENTION OF MOTIFS SAREE

The essence of an impeccable Sungudi saree encompasses grace, beauty, and effortless elegance, harmoniously blending these elements into a work of art. [Sundari Silks \(2023\)](#) Sungudi sarees embody the allure of simplicity, understated elegance, and a natural charm. These sarees are crafted from lightweight, pure cotton, ensuring a breathable and airy feel. They offer versatility, allowing for easy draping

Figure 5



Figure 5 Contemporary Motifs for the Batik Method of Sugudi Saree Preparation

and wearing, while also showcasing a vibrant range of colors. Comfortable and vibrant, Sungudi sarees truly encapsulate the essence of timeless style. The Sungudi print saris are very lightweight and comfortable to wear. By the 80s, the original art of hand tie and dye was slowly disappearing from Tamil Nadu as manufacturers began switching to chemical dyes, block prints, and power looms.

11. EVOLUTION OF SUNGUDI SAREE IN MODERN TIMES

The simmering speed production of the hand-tie artisans was no match for this. They became a dying breed. Work dwindled; newer generations of women needed more patience and passion for pursuing the art. It left the weavers and dyers looking for external patronage to support them. Modern Sungudi sarees include various patterns and motifs, such as flowers and peacocks, and thus bear little resemblance to the authentic Sungudi sarees have kolam and constellation patterns.

Figure 6



Figure 6 The Similarity Between Bandhani and Sungudi in Using Dots

12. INNOVATION IN DESIGN, PATTERNS, AND COLOUR PALETTES

- 1) Consequently, the resemblance between Bandhani and Sungudi lies in their utilization of dot patterns.
- 2) The traditional Madurai Sungudi sarees draw inspiration from both Kolam patterns and celestial constellations.
- 3) As the Sungudi fabric emerged, the entire city became adorned with a vibrant array of colors, including kempu (crimson), pacchai (green), paasai (olive), manjal (yellow), arakku (lac red), and neelam (blue) hues, embellishing the Sungudi sarees.

13. CONTEMPORARY MARKETS AND DEMANDS FOR SUNGUDI SAREE

With the growing demand, block printing, screen printing, and artificial dyes made their way into Sungudi sarees. While the fabric's original purpose was for creating sarees, the local demand has expanded its utility to include shirts, Salwars, shawls, handbags, and bed covers. A variety of Sungudi sarees are available, including Cotton Sungudi batik sarees, Bandhani-style Sungudi cotton sarees, and Sungudi printed cotton sarees.

14. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF SUNGUDI SAREES

Sungudi sarees have a profound socio-economic impact on the weavers in the Madurai area, providing livelihoods for over 10,000 individuals. These sarees are not merely garments; they represent a way of life that has been passed down through generations. Weavers who have dedicated themselves to the textile industry in South India heavily rely on Sungudi saree production for their

sustenance. The uniqueness of Sungudi sarees lies in their handmade nature, and they serve as a source of self-employment for weavers who work from their homes in rural areas. The handloom sector has significantly contributed to rural entrepreneurship, with Sungudi sarees playing a crucial role in promoting traditional handicrafts and generating self-employment opportunities in rural Tamil Nadu. These sarees are created using traditional methods that have been passed down through generations, and their designs and colours reflect the rich cultural heritage of the region, setting them apart from other sarees available in the market. Weavers dedicate their lives to crafting these garments and possess extensive knowledge of traditional techniques and cultural symbolism. This expertise adds value to their work and sustains their livelihoods. Sungudi sarees are not just a means of income but also a way for weavers to preserve their cultural heritage and showcase their craftsmanship to the world. By continuing the tradition of Sungudi saree-making, weavers contribute to the local economy while upholding their cultural legacy.

15. THE ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF SUNGUDI SAREE TO THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Sungudi sarees have garnered significant international demand and are exported to various countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and South Africa. This increasing interest from global markets has created valuable opportunities for self-employment, enabling individuals to establish small-scale enterprises. Many women work as part-time weavers from the comfort of their own homes, augmenting their income through this craft. The production of Sungudi sarees holds immense importance for the livelihoods of these weavers, serving as a substantial source of sustenance. The economic impact of Sungudi sarees is noteworthy due to the sustained demand for these products. The retailing of Sungudi sarees presents a promising opportunity to promote local and regional businesses on a global scale, as they continue to be exported to different countries. By supporting the textile industry in Tamil Nadu, Sungudi saree-making plays a vital role in the preservation of traditional crafts and weaving techniques that have been passed down through generations. As a cherished traditional handicraft of Tamil Nadu, the Sungudi saree not only contributes to the local cultural heritage but also attracts tourism to the region. This, in turn, has a significant positive effect on the local economy, as tourism generates employment opportunities and supports regional businesses through direct and indirect spending.

16. CHALLENGES AND THE CHANCES IN SUNGUDI SAREE

The emergence of power looms in textile mills has introduced a challenge for handloom weavers as it allows for the production of large quantities of sarees within a shorter timeframe. This poses a competition dilemma for handloom weavers who struggle to keep up. The demand for handloom sarees in the market can be unpredictable, fluctuating with fashion trends and customer preferences. Market demands are a challenge for weavers due to the uncertainty they face. Consistency is difficult to maintain while using traditional handloom weaving methods to produce sarees in bulk. The lack of modern equipment and techniques handicaps the ability of handloom weavers to compete with power looms and meet market requirements. Receiving wages below the minimum standard poses a problem for weavers struggling to sustain their livelihoods. The utilization of natural dyes has a direct impact on the production of Sungudi sarees, resulting in escalated costs in

comparison to synthetic dyes. It takes both time and expertise to master the process of using natural dyes, causing an increase in expenses for the weavers. Hurdles arise in obtaining uniform coloration with natural dyes due to their intrinsic fluctuations. These challenges highlight the need for support and initiatives to address the issues faced by handloom weavers. Modernizing equipment and techniques, providing fair wages, and exploring solutions to reduce the cost and variability of natural dyes can help sustain the handloom industry and the art of creating Sungudi sarees.

17. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF SUNGUDI SAREES

Modernization is significant for the Sungudi saree industry to meet the market demand and compete with power looms. It is good to adopt modern weaving equipment and techniques which enables weavers to produce high-quality sarees in large quantities. The Sungudi saree industry must continue to promote sustainable practices by using natural, eco-friendly dyes and reducing their carbon footprint.

The diversified product range designs can create a unique niche or add more options to the ethnic and global markets, making the Sungudi saree industry more attractive. There is an opportunity to develop an active marketing and branding strategy to create greater market awareness for the Sungudi saree industry, especially at a global level.

18. CONCLUSION

The research paper highlights the economic contribution of the Sungudi saree to the local economy by generating employment, providing a source of income for weavers, and promoting local and regional businesses on a global scale. It identifies several challenges that hinder the Sungudi saree industry growth, such as competition from power looms, inconsistency in demand, lack of modernization, economic uncertainty, and challenges with natural dyes.

It sheds light on the chances for the Sungudi saree industry's eco-friendliness and sustainability, renewed demand, diversification, increased tourism sales, and government initiatives. The findings suggest that the Sungudi saree industry has good growth potential, and stakeholders must identify strategies to address the challenges and seize opportunities to sustain the handloom industry's future. The paper concluded highlights how the Sungudi saree is a cultural symbol and an integral part of the South Indian economy.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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