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Madurai Sungudi: Whispers of Migration and Assimilation in its Tie-Dyed Designs

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The Madurai Sungudi is a sari with tie-dyed designs. It is produced by descendants of weavers who migrated from Saurashtra in Gujarat, a state in west India, to Madurai in Tamil Nadu, a state in South India, about four centuries ago. It tells a fascinating story of migration and assimilation.

Guest edited by Brinda Gill

In India, over the centuries, the patronage of rulers encouraged the crafting of beautiful handmade

textiles. At times, rulers invited textile artisans from other regions to settle in their kingdoms. One such textile -that reflects migration and assimilation-is the Madurai Sungudi, a sari produced in the city of Madurai; a sari is a length of unstitched textile, draped around the body, worn by women. Madurai, located in Tamil Nadu, a state in South India, is regarded as the cultural capital of the state. It is famous for its deeply revered centuries-old temple of Goddess Meenakshi whose four gateways still soar above the city's 21st century skyline; the Madurai Sungudi that received the Geographical Indications tag in 2005; and its fragrant jasmine flowers called Madurai Malli that received the Geographical Indications tag in 2013.

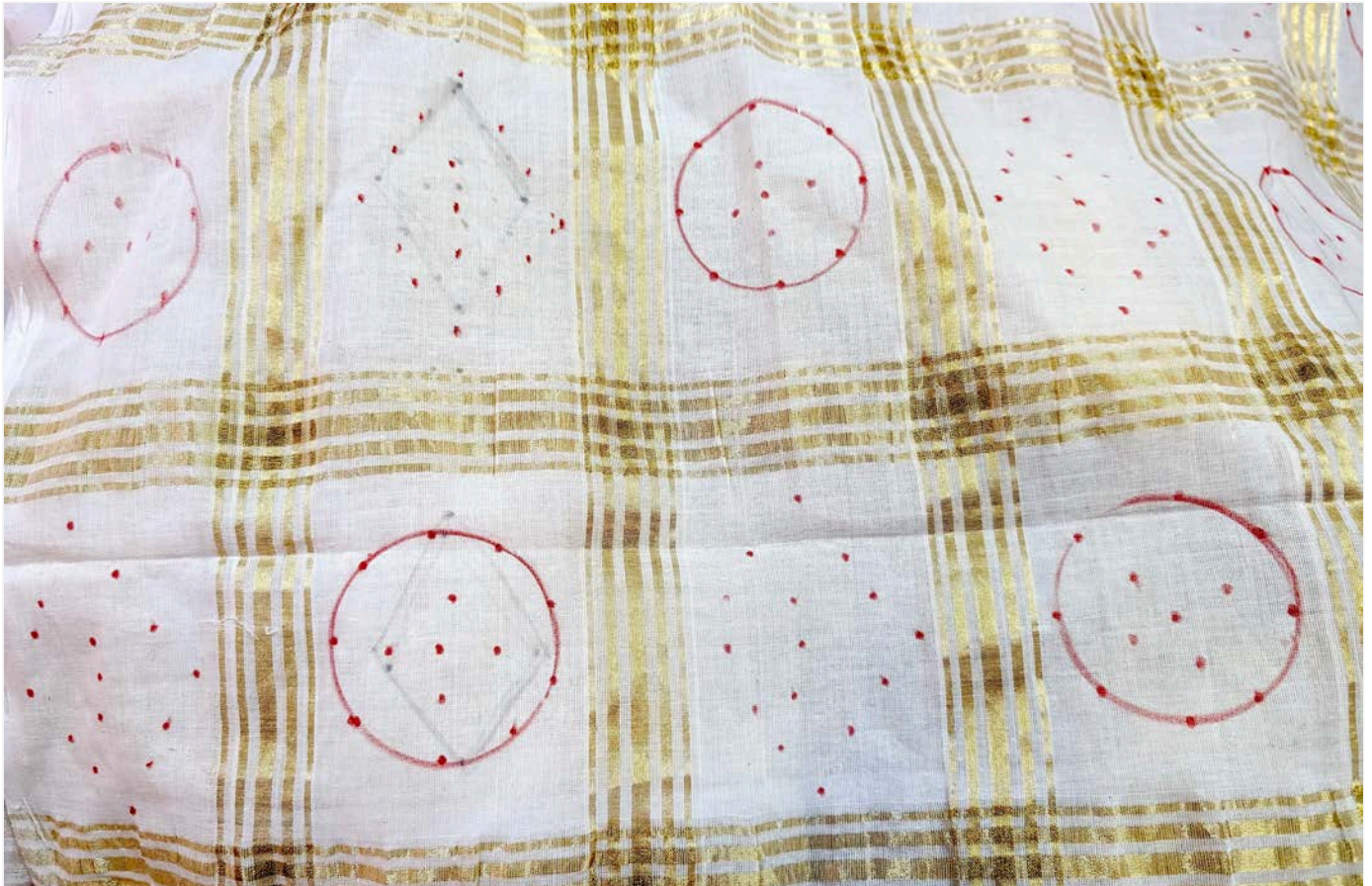


Image: Designs are drawn on the cloth to guide the tying of knots for a Madurai Sungudi. Image Courtesy Satyajit S Gill. Image above: A diagonal grid with dots within each square in the body of a Madurai Sungudi. Image Courtesy Satyajit S Gill.

The Madurai Sungudi Sari

“In the early 16th century, weavers from Saurashtra settled in the Vijayanagar Empire, in South India, during the reign of King Krishnadevaraya (1509 – 1529). In about the mid-17th century, King Thirumalai Nayakar, who ruled Madurai 1623–1659 and was a great patron of arts and architecture, invited the descendants of the weavers to settle in Madurai, the capital of his kingdom, to weave textiles. Their lineage being from Saurashtra, the weavers also knew the tie-dye technique practiced there. In Madurai, they developed the tie-dye technique to create their own unique style. This led to the emergence of the Madurai Sungudi, a unique cotton sari. The features of an authentic Madurai

Sungudi is that it is of a hand-woven fabric; has linear/geometric hand-knotted tie-dye designs; and is dyed with natural dyes”, says A. K Ramesh, Secretary, Federation of Tie & Dye Hand Printed Textile Cluster –SHG, Madurai, and Ex-Secretary Madurai Sungudi Sangam. He is a descendant of the Saurashtrian community that settled in Madurai in the mid-17th century as is his wife Vasumathi. At home they speak Saurashtra language that has its own script. They also speak Tamil, the local language, English and a little Hindi.



Image: The Triple Vanki pattern on a Madurai Sungudi. Image Courtesy Satyajit S Gill.

The tie-dye technique, practiced by Madurai Sungudi artisans, involves pinching the cloth with the finger tips and tying a tiny knot with a thread around the pinched cloth; the finger nail or an accessory is not used to push up the cloth (from below) for tying it in knots. The work requires concentration,

as minute knots are tied, in pre-determined places, according to the pattern drawn on the cloth.

After all the knots are tied, the cloth is dyed. Subsequently, the cloth is dried, the threads (used for knotting) are removed and the patterns are revealed through small circles that appear on the cloth. The circles are of white colour (that is the ground colour of the cloth), while the inner space of the circles and the background are of the colour the cloth is dyed in. “The word Sungudi derives from Sunnam, the word for zero in Sanskrit language, and ghadi, the word for ‘tie’ in Saurashtra language. As the textile was filled with circles created by tie-dyeing, it came to be called Sungudi”, says Ramesh.

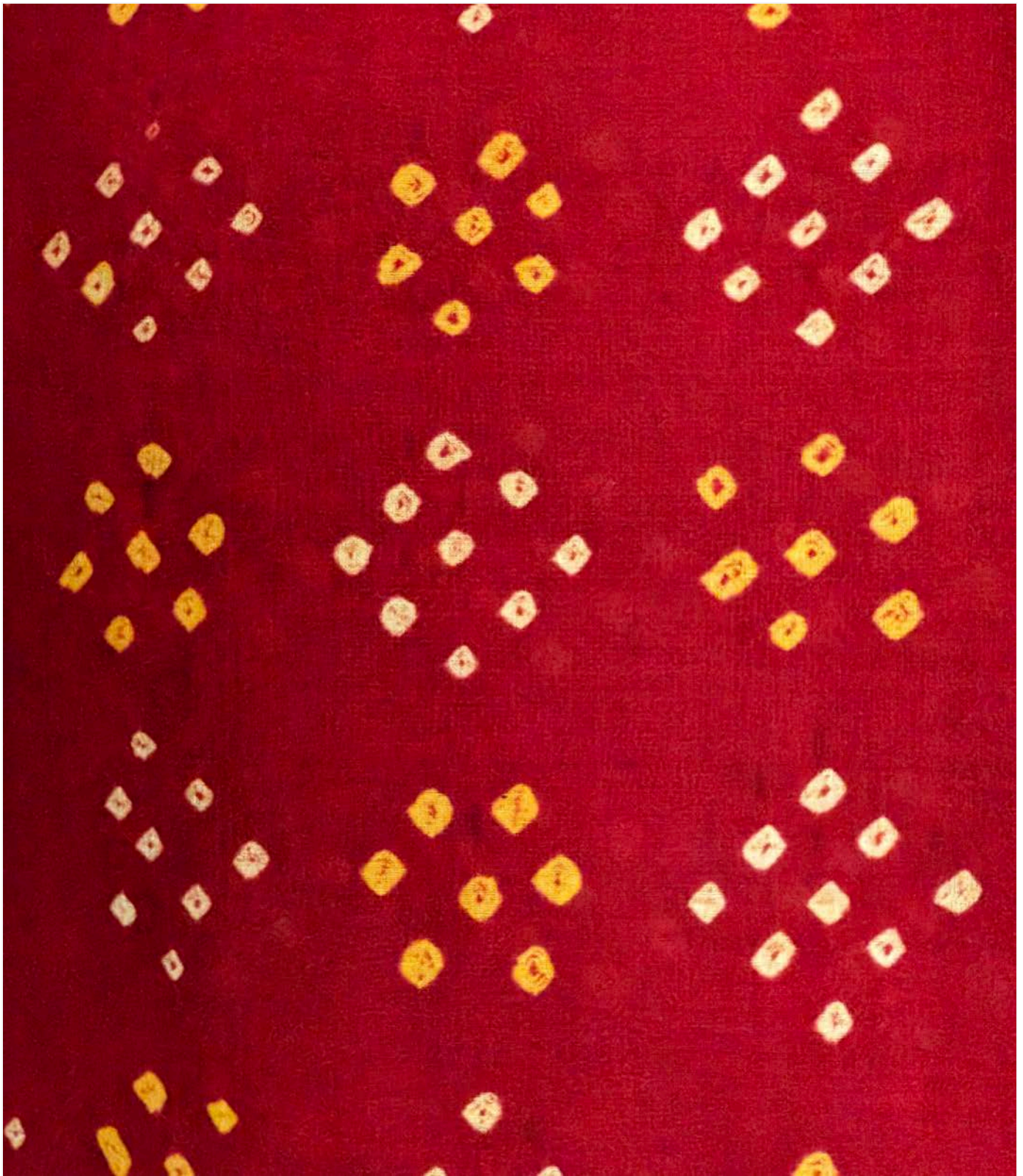


Image: Designs of knots of two colours on a Madurai Sungudi. Image Courtesy Satyajit S Gill.

The Designs

Ramesh attributes the inspiration of the initial Madurai Sungudi design to the night sky. “It is believed that centuries ago, a Saurashtrian weaver from Madurai lay down to rest in the open post-sunset. He watched the moon rise and the sky fill with stars. He was so taken up by the beauty of the starry sky that he decided to replicate the same on cloth. He tied a cloth with lots of small knots and dyed it in dark blue or black. When the knots were removed the cloth was filled with small white circles that

looked like stars shining in the night sky. This all-over pattern continues to be created even today. This is the uniqueness of Madurai Sungudi.”

A variety of linear and geometrical designs typically adorn the Madurai Sungudi. These are leheriya (wave pattern) of diagonal lines (created by dots) across the body of the sari (this design is called “saivu kodu” in the local Tamil language); the grid pattern with patterns inside the squares; and squares composed of dots called ‘batti kattan’. Circles with patterns inside them are also designed.

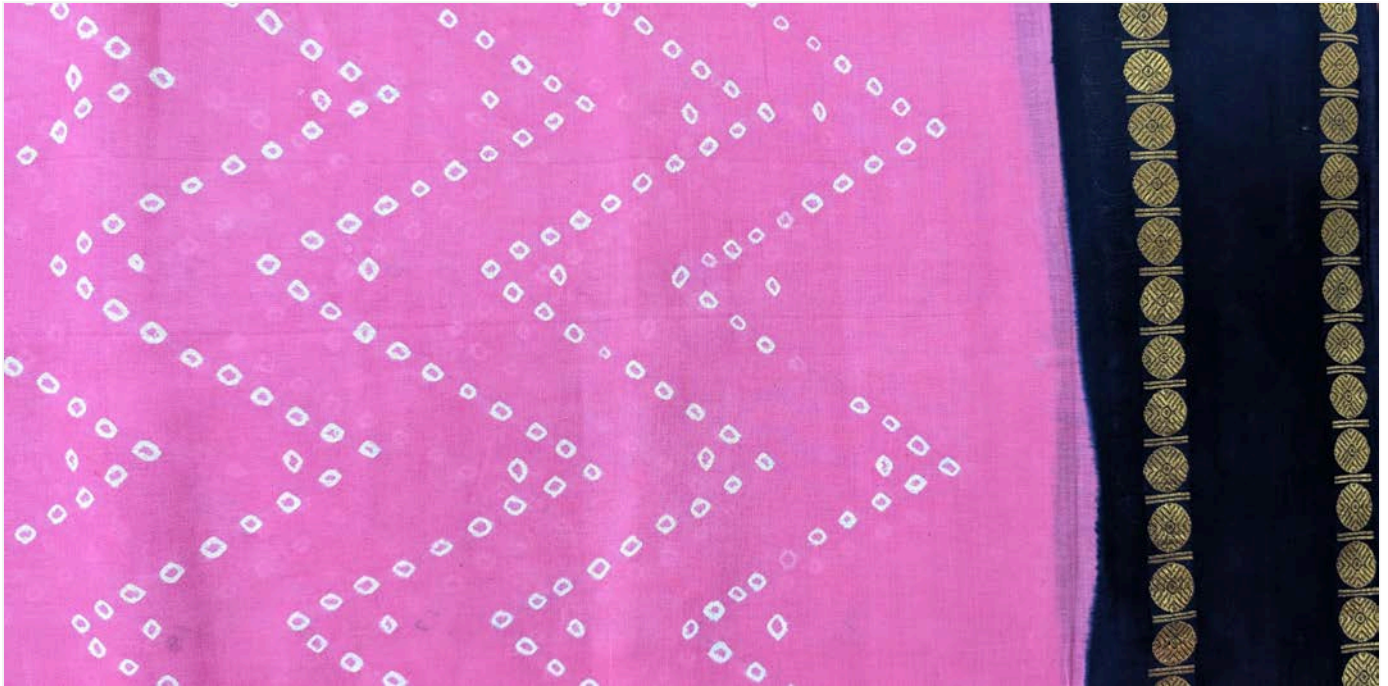


Image: The Vanki pattern on a Madurai Sungudi. Image Courtesy Satyajit S Gill.

Drawing from local culture is the ‘vanki’ motif that is a zigzag line of V shape; the shape draws from the vanki that is a V-shaped armband. Variations of the vanki design are created by adding multiple lines to the V shape; for example, a V of three lines is called ‘triple vanki’. Another design inspired by local culture is ‘kolam’ that recreates the rice powder patterns made, on the ground, at the entrance of homes in Tamil Nadu. Typically, the ‘kolam’ design has flowing vertical and horizontal lines, rendered without a break to create an interesting composition.

Interesting is the “London Museum Sari” alluding to Madurai Sungudi saris with mango motifs, woven with metal yarns (zari), in the border and in the two corners where the end-panel of the sari starts. The end panel is densely woven with metal yarns, while the body of the sari is filled with a design of tie-dyed dots. “Very long back, one of the community forefathers sent a Madurai Sungudi of this design to the **Victoria & Albert Museum**. In 2017, a customer from USA sent me a photograph of the sari and asked me to make it. It took us one year to produce it. Since then, we have made more, and it is called ‘London Museum Sari’ locally”.

Vasumathi adds that almost any pattern can be made with the tie-dye technique as she shows us a wall

art of a yazhi/yali that is a mythical composite creature created by combing features of different animals such as the head and body of a lion, trunk and tusks of an elephant, and tail of a serpent. The yazhi/yali is seen sculpted in temples in Tamil Nadu, especially on temple pillars.



Image: The 'London Museum Sari'. Image Courtesy Satyajit S Gill.

The Community

The technique of tying the knots and dyeing the cloth with natural dyes has been passed down the generations from elders in the family and community to the younger members. Ramesh and Vasumathi (who learnt the art of tying knots from her grandmother) have taught the tie-dyeing technique to their daughter, daughter-in-law, other family members and friends. Presently about fifty members of their community are involved in the art. “We have also taught the art of knotting and dyeing with natural dyes to over 2000 design students and textile enthusiasts from India and abroad. This has preserved the art. In 2015, there were less than ten persons involved in the craft”.



Image: Close-up of knots. Image Courtesy Satyajit S Gill.

Vasumathi says it usually takes 20-30 days to tie knots for one sari; it could take more time if the design is intricate and elaborate. They source hand-woven saris, of off-white colour with metal yarn borders and end-panels, from local weavers. The woven metal yarn sections (in the borders, body and end panels) are of different patterns (such as stripes, decorative motifs in the borders, grid in the body), and the knotting (for the tie-dye patterns) is worked between these sections.

Product Diversification

Ramesh has diversified the Madurai Sungudi technique to span saris, dupattas (long drapes), stoles, bags, coasters, shirts, kurtas and dress material. While Madurai Sungudi was earlier only of cotton, they are now also of silk. A growing repertoire of patterns along with a wide range of colours used for the dyes has kept the expression vibrant. Clamp dyeing is also practised to obtain different colours for the borders and body of the sari. Designs with two colours are also produced, by repeating the tying and dyeing process; this sari takes about fifty days to produce.

Natural dyes produced from leaves, flowers, fruits, vegetables and roots are used for the dyeing. The natural dyeing is done in their home. Separately, some textiles are dyed with synthetic dyes; this dyeing is done at a unit about 8 kms from their home. Ramesh, Vasumathi and their group of family

members and friends produce about 30-40 saris per month. In recent years they have seen an increase in demand for natural dyed saris.



Image: Close-up of the woven fabric with hand tied knots for a Madurai Sungudi. Image Courtesy



Earlier we would get orders for about five natural dyed Madurai Sungudi saris in a year. vve now make three to four each month. It is heartening that there is an interest in natural dyes. They are safe for the skin. Natural dyes encompass Pancha Bhutha (literally five elements) that are the basis of all creation. These are Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space”. The price of the saris (and other products) vary according to the fabric (hand-woven or power-loom, cotton or silk); the quality and amount of the metal yarn woven in the cloth; the intricacy and number of the knots; and dyes used (natural or synthetic) for dyeing the cloth.

Madurai Sungudi saris are sought after in Madurai by residents and tourists, and also by sari lovers in India and abroad. The product diversification has been useful as the new products have a wider appeal. Ramesh is grateful to the support of the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India; the Crafts Council of India- Chennai; and the community for preserving the Madurai Sungudi.

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