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Saurashtra: A Language, Region, Culture & Community

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Prologue:

Saurashtra is primarily known as a region in western part of India and people in the region speaks Gujarati language. Saurashtra is a language in South India spoken by Suarshtrian community. Suarshtrian community might have migrated Saurashtra region of Gujarat many centuries ago, but have similarities in culture till date. Saurashtra in context to language and community is written with some variations like Souarashtra, Sourashtram, Soaurashtrians etc. Suarashtra in context to region is also known as Kathiawar and Sorath. This paper is substantially a compilation of detail of the region, language and community captured from online open sources on Wikipedia & various blogs to describe culture, relation, commonality, linkages and contrast between western India's Saurashtra region and south India's Sourashtrian community & language.

Region:

“Saurashtra” is a geographical region situated in Gujarat's semicircular area located North West of Arabian Sea. Politically “Saurashtra” is comprised of 11 districts; namely Rajkot, Jamnagar, Junagadh, Bhavnagar, Porbandar, Amreli, Surendranagar, Devbhoomi Dwarka, Morbi and Gir Somnath. Referred to as Surashtra also have some other names as well over a period of time, since the Mahabharata and Vedic period, this region is mentioned again as Surastrene, or Saraostus in the 1st century CE Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. Saurashtra is a location of midwestern India, located on the peninsula sea shore of Gujarat verbalise. The peninsula is also called Kathiawar. The Peninsula is common with the Kachchh realm which occupies the northward, Saurashtra or Sorath forming the southern parceling; on eastern part, the Cambay gulf. See the map of Gujarat below:



Language:

Saurashtra carrying alternate names and spellings like Saurashtram, Sourashtra, Sowrashtra, pattunulkaarar, Palkar, Saurashtri etc. and also the name of an Indo-Aryan language of Kathiawar- Saurashtra. Saurashtra Language is not spoken in the Saurashtra region. They speak Gujarati and its dialect popularly known as kathiawari. People of this region who migrated to Southern India many centuries ago who are settled in towns like Madurai, Paramakudi, Salem, Tanjore of Tamil Nadu and part of Andhra Pradesh still preserve and speak the language "Saurashtra". The script of this language is derived from the Devanagari Script and shares similarities with modern day Gujarati. However, after migration of this community in 11th century, Gujarati is influenced by Arabic, Urdu, Portuguese, English and Parsian differs in many respect with Surashtra language. On the other hand, the community who travelled from Suarashtra to South India through Surat, Marathwada, Ratnagairi, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh during several centuries took colour from languages & cultures of all the regions they crossed. The Sourashtra Community has its own language and script. The Sourashtra script looks very much like Tamil script, although you can also find an infusion of Telegu and Devanagiri alphabets in it. It is closely related to the Gurati language also. This script began development towards the latter part of the 19th century. Sourashtra Community members living in the Indian States of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (mainly in cities Madurai and Salem), speak this language and use its script. It belongs to the Indo-Aryan group of languages.

Culture:

The people of Saurashtra are adventurous, brave, adept in trade and commerce, and therefore they have established many commercial colonies in foreign countries, from ancient times. The Saurashtrians had settled in Africa, Mauratius, Ceylon (Shrilanka), Burma (Myanmar), Indonesia (Java), Sumatra, Indo China, Cambodia, Malayasia and Philipines and Fiji. The Saurashtrians are also spread over various parts of the Indian homeland, taking prominent part in the commercial field, which is more suitable to their nature. It is quite natural that the origin of many words of trade, commerce, business and measurements found in various Indian languages can be traced to Gujarati language.

The reference of Saurashtra found in the Mahabharat, 'Arthashastra' of Chanakya, Deval Smriti and Buddha stories written during the 1st century A.D. have references to Saurashtra in the stone inscriptions at mountain Girnar, of Maha Kshatrap Rudradama of 150 A.D, of the remains and reminiscences of the people living at Rozdi (Shrinathgadh) near Gondal in Saurashtra of 1850 B.C. and different strata of cultural life found at various places prove that the culture of Saurashtra is 4,000 years old.

Most places in the peninsula retain a small town feel, local cadences of Gujarati called Kathiawadi, and a tradition of a daily siesta when everything shuts down. The region abounds in religious shrines, wildlife sanctuaries, palaces and relics of royal legacies. From the Asiatic Lions of Gir and the Jain temples of Palitana to the ancient ruins scattered in the Barda Hills and the laid-back Portuguese-influenced enclave of Diu, the region offers a wide spectrum of

fascinating places to visit. As poet Navalram observed, people from Saurashtra are hardy, well built folks, daring, warlike and emotional. The community is said to be sturdy, prolific and active race, have audacity, love of adventure, a gay endurance, chivalry that often lead to buccaneering, exploration but too often due to greed there are some enterprising characteristics of people of Saurashtra. (Reference Rajputs of Saurashtra by Shri Virbhadrasinghji)

Meaning:

As per one school of thought, "Saurashtra" mean Sau + Rashtra (100 nations), but as per another school of thought, this is a fractured speech of "Su-Rashtra" meaning Good Country. "Kathiawar" or "Kathiawad" was popularised by Marathas in its reign.

Saurashtra Geography:

Arabian sea lies between African and Saurashtra, but in early days it was believed to be a wonder how western part of India (Gujarat) matches exactly with eastern Africa, later geologist confirmed the theory of one continent and its division into many continents and geographical sub continents, many geologist believed that Saurashtra was a part of Africa considering its Flora and Fauna, trees and animal habitats.

If the mythological parts of Dwarka is said to be true then Dwarka must have been fortified island and must have been surrounded by Arabian Sea, that could be a reason why Lord Krishna choose Dwarka to be their capital city, may be during Tertiary age Africa and Indian sub-continent might have been joined just by Saurashtra and some eruption / volcanic activity separated Saurashtra from Africa. Lion are the best example of the connection also some of the southern village of Junagarh has presence of African Negro Community, which could be an added example as well.

Early Civilization:

Pre Christian era civilization like Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa must have flourished through Saurashtra as Saurashtra was the only connecting link between Lothal and Sindh. Earthen ware from these civilisation are found near Lakha-bawal in Jamnagar District. Evidence of port at Dholka and Lothal confirms that there was sea between Saurashtra and Gujarat. In the granite hills near Palitana, Sihore was the capital of the Gohil Rajputs in the 17th century, and being the rulers of a prime coastland often faced battles and skirmishes with neighbouring rulers. Sihore Darbargadh was built to defend Gohilwad from the Kathi darbars of the Kathiawad hinterlands.

West of Palitana is Mount Girnar, which rises 3660 ft over MeanSea Level on the outskirts of Junagadh city. The 12th century temples on the summit are exquisitely carved and superbly designed. Near the foot of Mt Girnar are relics of another religion, Buddhism, which like Jainism preached non-violence. The edicts of emperor Ashoka, the Mauryan ruler who helped spread Buddhism throughout south and south eastern Asia in the 3rd century BC, have been inscribed on basalt rock enroute from Girnar to Junagadh. The hills around Junagadh have Buddhist cave complexes dating from the rule of the Kshtrapas. One of these is in the Uparkot fort, which rises from a hill over Junagadh city. The Uparkot was believed to be a walled citadel upto the 5th

century AD and again during Chudasama Rajput reign from the 9th to the 15th centuries. The fort has a high wall strengthened by bastions, with a huge moat inside the walls, granaries large enough to withstand a long siege, a Rajput palace that the sultans partially converted to a mosque after their conquest of Junagadh, Ottoman canons, and two imposing stepwells. The Mughals conquered Gujarat from the sultans and their subhas(governors) of Sorath were based in Uparkot fort. After the decline of Mughal power, the subhas founded their own dynasty, taking on Babi as their last name, and became the Nawabs of Junagadh. During their reign, Junagadh saw the rise of numerous buildings including palaces, the imposing Baha-ud-din college, the old maqbara and the fun-fairish 19th century mausoleum complex. A selection of their howdahs, palanquins, textiles and furnishings can be seen at the Durbarhall museum.

South of Junagadh is Somnath, well known for its temples. The Somnath temple is believed to have been built by Gods and their avatars(incarnations) but the earliest recorded phase in the history of Somnath's Shiva temple is the 10th century Solanki reign of Gujarat. The temple was subjected to plunder and destruction by invaders over the centuries, and each time the resilient devotees restored it to its former glory. The present temple building was renovated in 1950 AD under the leadership of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Near the temple is the Prabhas Patan museum which houses architectural fragments and sculptures from the original temple of Somnath. A Sun temple, lord Krishna cenotaph and the Ahilya Holkar temple are other devotional monuments of Somnath. Lord Shiva, while stating he was omnipresent, mentioned that Somnath was one of his 12 important abodes, the reason the shore temple here is revered as a Jyotirlinga. Somnath was invaded by King Mohmed Gizni in 11th century. As one school of thought, khatri community, who were expert in weaving fine silk cloths, migrated to save their art & culture to South India now known as Palkars or Sourashtrians. The ancestors of Sourashtrian community living near Madurai in Tamilnadu are believed to be behind the architecture of Somnath.

Saurashtra state:

After India's independence in 1947, 217 princely states of Kathiawar, including the former kingdom of Junagadh, were merged together to form the state of Saurashtra on 15 February 1948. Initially, it was named United State of Kathiawar which was renamed to Saurashtra State in November 1948. The exercise took up a lot of Shri Vallabhbhai Patel's time to convince the local princes and petty subas (total 222 in Saurashtra alone).

On November 1, 1956, Saurashtra was merged into Bombay state. In 1960 Bombay state was divided along linguistic lines into the new states of Gujarat and Maharashtra. The territory of Saurashtra, including that of the former kingdom of Sorath or Junagadh, is now part of the state of Gujarat.

Sourashtra as community:

Sourashtra or "Sourashtras" refers to a community of people who had their original homes in Gujarat and presently settled almost in all major Towns of Tamil Nadu and are concentrated more in Madurai which is considered as their cultural Headquarters, but have also settled in Bangalore of Karnataka and in Tirupati of Andhra Pradesh. After 20th century, some families have settled in Mumbai, New Delhi and in foreign countries like USA, UK, Dubai, Singapore

etc. The origin of the name date backs to the time when the ancestors of these people inhabited the kingdom of Saurashtra in Gujarat State. The Tamil name by which these people is known in Southern India is Patnūlkarar, that is silk-thread workers or weavers who speak "Pattunuli" or "Khatrī", a dialect of Gujarati. The details about Saurashtra community is discussed by A.J. Saunders. Dr. Uchida Norihiko of KOBE, Japan, came to Madurai in 1972 and stayed for two years to do post doctoral research as a Senior Fellow in Linguistics under the auspices of Annamalai University, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu. With help from O.S. Subramanian, Dr. Uchida Norihiko is working on 'Origin and Development of Saurashtra Language'. A.J. Saunders has authored 'Oral Literature of Saurashtrians' (1979), The Language of the Saurashtrians in Tirupati (1983), A Saurashtra-English Dictionary (1990). The community is densely found in south east part of India as shown in following map:



Saurashtra, also known as Palkar. Sowrashtra, Saurashtram, is an Indo-Aryan language derived from Sauraseni Prakrit. The Ethnologue puts the number of speakers at 510,000 (1997 IMA), although the actual number could be double this figure or even more.

"Equivalent of Saurashtra in the Linguistic Survey has been recorded as Saurashtri which is yet another name of Patnuli dialect of Gujarati spoken by the silk weaving community of Madurai who are considered to have migrated from Gujarat to the south several centuries ago. On the basis of current preference for the name of their mother tongue, we have, however, adopted the name 'Saurashtra' and not Saurashtri. On account of several generations of association in the Dravidian Language area, the speech is supposed to have been strongly affected by Dravidian traits. We preferred to call that dialect of Gujarati with such traits as Saurashtra. ... Regarding Saurashtra, however, some interest has been shown, of late, on the technical aspects of this variety while the inclination to affiliate it with Marathi is also visible among some scholars. In any case, some authoritative work on this variety of language remains to be done. Pending the same, however, we have to keep it under Gujarati according to the Linguistic Survey." vide Census of India 1961 Vol.I INDIA Part II –C (ii) Language Tables, Published by the Manager of Publications, Civil Lines, Delhi, pp. CCXLIV + 554, (1967).

Oral tradition says that they have migrated on the fall of 'Somanath Temple' when Gazni Mohammed invaded and plundered Hindu Temples. It is said they lived for about two centuries in Devagiri and later moved to Vijayanagar Empire at the invitation of the Kings. They

manufactured fine silk garments for the use of Kings and their families and were engaged in Silk trade.

When Nayak Kings started to rule Madurai, they were invited by the Madurai Nayak Kings and were given accommodation around Thirumalai Nayak Palace, Madurai, where even now there are many Sourashtra families living. The migration might have taken place in various groups at different times and they settled in many places in Tamil Nadu. Later Hyder Ali invited some families from Thanjavur to settle in Srirangapattanam in Karnataka. Those people are now in Bangalore after the fall of Srirangapattanam and they are called as 'Jamkhaanadavaru'. Similarly some families went to Andhra and settled in Tirupati. Because of lack of frequent communications, there are so many dialect variations in this Language. The majority of people are settled in Madurai.

In history they are referred to as Patkar, Pattegar, Patvekar and Patnulkarar. In Tamil the weaving community is referred to as 'Kaikkolar'. In Tamil Nadu State they are called Sourashtra (Patnulkarar) or merely Palkar. Edgar Thurston refers this Community as Pattunulkaran. The details about Sourashtra community are discussed by A.J. Saunders. A History of the Sourashtras in Southern India by the Sourashtra Literary Societies of Madura and Madras was published on 17 January 1891 under the Chairmanship of Sri T.M.Ramaswamaiyo, the Secretary being Sri K.V.Subbaiyo. In that book, it is stated that the following books were consulted: Dr.Balfour Encyclopedia of India, Ramesh Chander Dutt's Ancient India, Alexander Cunningham's Ancient Geography of India, Tod's Rajasthan, Professor Lassen on Prakrita Languages, Bombay Gazetteer, Researches of the Asiatic Society, A Grammar of the Gondian Languages.

The Ethnologue puts the number of speakers at 310,000 (1997 IMA), although the actual number could be double or even three times this figure or even more because many people wrongly stated their mother tongue as Tamil in census enumeration as it is not taught in school and it remained mainly a spoken language, though Literature are available in Sourashtra, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Roman and Devanagari Scripts. Now Journals in Sourashtra script are published, such as Bhashabhimani, Zeek, Jaabaali, and Sourashtra Mithran.

Classification:

Sourashtram is classified under Indo-European Family – Aryan Sub Family -Indo-Aryan Branch – Inner Sub Branch Central Group-and pending some authoritative work, is tentatively grouped under Gujarati according to Linguistic Survey of India. vide Census of India 1961 Volume I INDIA Part II-C (ii) Language Tables p.ccxvii,published by The Manager of Publications, Civil Lines, Delhi, 1967.

"Saurāshtra is, through and through, an Indo-Aryan language. Saurāshtran publications are sufficient proof that it is an adequate medium for literary expression" vide The Saurashtrans of South India, By Dr.H.N.Randle, Plate VIII, published in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, London October, 1944. "sou" in Hindi means 100 and "rashtra" refers to region so in general sourashtra refers to a province of 100 regions. Another meaning for Sourashtram is WEALTHY KINGDOM. That is why Mohamed Gazni invaded Saurashtra and looted Somanath Temple and carried away the treasures.

"Sourashtra Brahmanargal Sarithiram" is a well renowned book in Tamil which describes about their ancestry, how they descended south during Ghazni's invasion. Mostly they are categorized as Brahmins and when there was argument between them and Tamil Brahmins during "Upakarma" at Vaigai river, Madurai, they were arrested and presented in Nayakkar's court. Local Brahmins claimed that Sourashtra people were doing same kind of rituals as Brahmins and they want to understand how ritual they were. Thirumalai Nayakar ordered a debate to test their knowledge on Vedas and Upanishads. Without any doubt, Sourashtra Brahmins were able to answer all questions with rich explanations and Nayakar ordered a "Pattayam" stating that Sourastras are considered as Brahmins and they have right to use Iyers and Iyengars surname. This "Pattayam" is still found evident in Sourashtra Club, Madurai.

Geographical distribution:

The speakers of the Saurashtra language, known as Saurashtrians, maintain a predominant presence in Madurai, a city, also known as 'Temple City' in the southern part of Tamil Nadu. Though official figures are hard to come by, it is believed that the Saurashtra population is anywhere between one-fifth and one-fourth of the city's total population.

Also Saurashtrians, maintain a predominant presence throughout the Tamil Nadu starting from Salem, a city, to be believed to have derived its name from the Tamil word Selai (Sari) (a traditional dress worn by women) because of the Saurashtrians weavers used to weave silk sarees (Pattu Selai). Still many of the Saurashtrians residing in main land Salem (areas including Ponnampet, Ammapet) used to weave silk dhoties. Silver leg chains are produced in (Shevapet) Salem and it exported to all over world. They also present in the districts of Namakkal, Dindigul, Madurai, Vellore, Tirunelveli.

It is not known how many groups migrated from North India to South India. But because of absence of contact among the groups for a long time, dialect variations have emerged based on the place of their settlement. The alternate name of Sourashtra is PALKAR which term is used colloquially among them. But all associations are named as Sourashtra Sabha/Association only.

Though there is little historical evidence available to support the argument that the Saurashtrians lived in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat in Western India, folklore, and recent linguistic and genetic researches have been able to establish, that this region was indeed once the habitat of the Saurashtrians. However, their language has more similarities with Marathi and Konkani, both Indo-Aryan languages of Western India, than it does with Modern Gujarati, the language of present-day Gujarat. Linguists have been able to explain why it is so: Both Saurashtra and Gujarati branched off from a common parent, and have since taken completely different paths to modernity. Gujarati came under the influence of Hindi, Persian, and Arabic, whereas Saurashtra, taking off from Gujarat before it had made any Muslim contact, was influenced by Marathi, Konkani, Kannada, Telugu, and finally, Tamil. It has been acknowledged that Persian and Arabic have had only limited influence on Marathi and Konkani, and this is why they still retain a good amount of vocabulary and grammar derived from Sanskrit, as compared to other daughter languages of Sanskrit. It is possible that the vocabulary and grammar shared between Modern Saurashtra and Marathi is what was originally derived from Sanskrit.

The southward flight of the Saurashtrians seems to have been triggered by the frequent Muslim invasions, most notably by Mahmud of Ghazni, of their homeland and the instability caused by it. No details are available whether it was a mass migration and when it took place. They found safe haven in the Vijayanagar Kingdom, with its capital at Hampi in present-day Karnataka, which was then expanding southwards. Weaving being their traditional occupation, they were able to win the attention of the Emperor and were soon elevated to the position of royal weavers. Telugu and Kannada were the court languages, though other languages such as Sanskrit and Tamil were also in use. It was during this period that Saurashtra started absorbing Telugu and Kannada words into its lexicon.

Vijayanagar rulers had the practice of appointing Governors, known as Nayaks, to manage far-flung regions of the empire. When Madurai and Thanjavur were annexed to the empire, Governors were appointed to administer the new territories. A part of the Saurashtra community may have moved to Madurai and Thanjavur at the time to serve the Governors.

The Vijayanagar empire collapsed after more than two centuries of rule, in 1565, after the Sultans of Deccan Confederacy won the battle of Talikota, thus opening up southern India for Muslim conquest. Soon afterwards, the Governors of Madurai and Thanjavur declared themselves the new rulers of the respective territories.

The Saurashtrians had to migrate again since they no longer enjoyed the royal patronage they were used to, and so, once again, were on the move. As there were Saurashtrians already present in Madurai and Thanjavur, it was only natural that they migrated further south to join their folks living there. The language would undergo one last alteration, this time influenced by Tamil, to bring it to its modern form. To this day, Saurashtrians are densely populated around the Royal Palace of Thirumalai Nayak, the greatest of the Nayak Rulers that ruled Madurai. There are good number of people staying in Mumbai(Maharashtra) in a place called Cheeta Camp and also in other parts of the city, but they all migrated from Salem etc. places within a period of a century. Marathi-speaking community in Thanjavur is different than Saurashtrians. The Marathi community arrived in Thanjavur during King Serfoji's reign and they are culturally and linguistically distinct from Saurashtrians. The greatest of the Nayak Rulers had great liking for silk wears and as the Saurashtrians were specialists in the weaving trade, they were invited by the King for weaving special silk clothings for the palace dwellers and that is how they settled around the palace of Thirumalai Nayak.

Sourashtra Vijayaaptham:

Sourashtra Vijayaaptham denotes the era of Sourashtra Migration. It commences from Tamil Calendar Chitrai 1st. It is derived from subtracting 1312 from the Gregorian Calendar year. It is 697 from 14 April 2009 to 13 April 2010. It is not known how the Era started. But currently it is stated in the Almanac Panchangam and people are using it.

Sourashtra Writing System:

The language has had its own script for centuries, the earliest one available from 1880. Dr. H.N. Randle has written an article 'An Indo-Aryan Language of South India—Saurashtra Bhasha' in

the Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies (BSOAS) 11 Part 1 p. 104-121 and Part II p. 310-327 (1943– 46) Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of School of Oriental and African Studies.

This language is not taught in schools and hence had been confined to being merely a spoken language. But many great works like Bhagavath Gita and Tirukkural were translated into Sourashtram. It is now a literary language. Sahitya Akademi has recognized this language by conferring Bhasha Samman awards to Sourashtra Scholars. Most Saurashtrians are bilingual in their mother tongue and Tamil and are more comfortable using their second language for all practical written communication though of late, some of them started writing in Sourashtram using Sourashtra script.

There is an ongoing debate within the Saurashtra community regarding the use of the script for the Sourashtra language right from 1920 when a resolution was passed to adopt Devanagari Script for Sourashtra Language. Though some of the books were printed in Devanagari script, it failed to register the growth of the language. But in practice because of lack of printing facilities, books are continued to be printed in Tamil Script with diacritic marks with superscript number for the consonants ka, ca, Ta, ta and pa and adding a colon to na, ma, ra, and la for aspirated forms, which are peculiar to the Sourashtra language.

For writing Sourashtram using Devanagari Script, one require seven additional symbols to denote the short vowels 'e' and 'o' and four symbols for aspirated forms viz. nha, mha, rha and lha. We also require one more symbol to mark the sound of 'half yakara' which is peculiar to the Sourashtra language. The books printed in Devanagari Script were discarded because they did not represent the sounds properly.

The Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities, Allahabad by his letter No.123/5/1/62/1559 dated November 21, 1964 Communicated to Sourashtra Vidya Peetam, Madurai that the State Government were of the view that as only one book in Sourashtra Language had so far been submitted by Sourashtra Vidya Peetam for scrutiny, there was no point in examining the merits of only one book specially when the question regarding the usage of script - Hindi or Sourashtram, was still unsettled, and that the question of text books in Sourashtram might well lie over till a large number of books is available for scrutiny and for being prescribed as text books in Schools. The Leaders in the Community could not realize the importance of teaching of mother tongue in schools and did not evince interest in production of textbooks in Sourashtram for class use. But, now an awareness has arisen in the Community, and Sourashtra Vidya Peetam wants to teach the Sourashtra language through multimedia as suggested by Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities in his 42nd Report for the year (July 2003 to June 2004). Of late in internet, many Sourashtra Yahoo groups in their website use the Roman script for the Sourashtra language. A journal, Bhashabhimani, is published from Madurai, in Sourashtra Script. Another journal, 'Jaabaali', is also published by the same Editor of Bhashabhimani from Madurai. The 'Zeeg' Sourashtra script practice Magazine is also published from Madurai only. All the three journals support the Sourashtra script only. There is no journal in Devanagari.

Dialects:

Each of the traditional Saurashtrian settlements has its own dialect. Since there is not a central linguistic body governing the rules, and establishing what is standard and what is not, each dialect speaker considers his own the standard form. Because people were not used to write their language, proper study of the dialect variations were not undertaken. Recently only an awareness has arisen and people are slowly practicing written Sourashtram. Dictionaries have been compiled, but dialect variations are not properly noted. One Saurashtra-English Dictionary by Uchida Norihiko is available. Saurashtra-Tamil- English Dictionary one by K.R.Sethuraman (in Tamil Script) and another by T.V.Kubendran (in Sourashtra, Tamil and Roman script) are available.

Sourashtra Vidya Peetam:

Sourashtra Vidya Peetam is the oldest body which is working for the cause of the language by preserving the Script and the old literature. The earliest Sourashtra Book printed in Sourashtra Script available now is SOURASHTRANADHI by Pandit Lakshmanachariyar (1880). T.M.Rama Rai is the doyen of the development of Sourashtra Script and Literature.He published many books in Sourashtra Script and wrote Grammar and Text books in Sourashtram.

Sourashtra Evolution:

Sourashtra though refers to a migrated community, also refers to the language spoken by the Sourashtra community people (or Sourashtrians). During their migration from the north-western region of Bharada Khanda (ancient Indian peninsular region or present day Gujarat), they adapted to the regional and cultural aspects of the particular region they reside. In this way, Sourashtrians acquired proficiency in the regional languages but without losing their own language. When various technologies developed, they never failed to record their literature with the modern developments. Around 1850s to accomplish the vision of Sourashtra Literary Laurels, due to the hardwork of several visionaries for more than four decades a unique writing system developed which represents the originality, significant features of Sourashtra language. Sourashtrians are mostly silk weavers and silk thread merchants, originated in the Saurashtra region (present day Gujarat, and parts of Maharashtra) in Northern India and later settled in Madurai and surrounding regions of Tamilnadu, few centuries ago.

The origin is certain, and research has proved the current day Sourashtra spoken by us is a modern form of pre-Gujarati spoken thousands of years ago. "...Their home language (Sourashtra language) is still a modern form of the old Saurashtri or Pre-Gujarati as it was over a thousand years ago, which was the language they brought with them through Maharashtra and Andhra to Tamilnadu. This language preserves, naturally enough many archaic features of Gujarati and at the same time shows influence of the sister Aryan languages of Konkani and Marathi and of Dravidian Telugu besides of course Tamil which has now virtually become the second mother tongue of the Sourashtrians...." says Suneetkumar Chatterjee a famous linguist. But the time period when they migrated from Saurashtra region to south is still uncertain. Following theory is prevalent:

Theory 1:

The first theory is that, during the times when the infamous Ghazani Mohammed invaded Northern India from Afghanistan, a few families might have migrated South to escape from the series of invasions.

Theory 2:

Another assumption is a few families that came with the entourage of Shatrapathi Shivaji when he invaded south, might have stayed back to form their own community.

Theory 3:

This is the most popular and widely accepted theory by historians. During the Vijayanagaram Empire rule in Northern India, the Nayakars ruled the South as part of the empire with Madurai as their capital. During that period a few families from the Saurashtra region were called into Madurai to be the "Royal Weavers" for the Nayakars. This would explain very high concentration of Sourashtrians still today around the Thirumalai Nayakar Mahal, the Nayakar's Palace. Since Sourashtrians are Silk Weavers by profession it would also disprove the theory that they came with Shivaji.

Later Sourashtrians settled in Madurai, spread around to Trichy, Salem, Kumbakonam and other surrounding areas as the population grew, but still managed to keep their unique language, and culture intact. Current day Sourashtrians, refer themselves as Tamilians as their identities and still speak Sourashtra at home. An estimated half a million Sourashtrians are living now mostly in Tamilnadu and a few are spread around all over the world.

Unique characteristics of the Saurashtrians in South India:

This history of the Greater Saurashtra and Greater Gujarat is very glorious and interesting. In this history of the Greater Saurashtra, it is remarkable that the Saurashtrians who have settled in South India are distinguished clearly, in some important aspects, from the other Saurashtrians who have migrated to other places inside or outside India. There are some unique characteristics, which draw our special attention.

Firstly, the Saurashtrians who have migrated to other places have not gone there collectively in larger groups at a time; while the Saurashtrians in South India have migrated there in larger collective groups at a time in a planned manner.

Secondly, these Saurashtrians in South India had gone there, equipped with the art of weaving silken cloth. The whole community or tribe has got remarkable skill in this single profession, and yet their mode of living as well as their family-names are obviously Brahminical. They are introducing themselves even to day as Saurashtri Brahmins. The other Saurashtrians who have migrated to other places have not taken with them a collective industry or art and the groups of Brahminical mode of living have not gone elsewhere in a collective manner.

Thirdly, the Saurashtrians who have migrated to other provinces or foreign countries have been in some sort of direct contact with the original homeland. For example, the Saurashtrians who had migrated to Africa have always returned (at least some of them and at least for some time) to the homeland sooner or later. In the case when these Saurashtrians have lost the link with the homeland, they have not been able to preserve the linguistic and cultural heritage of the homeland. On the contrary the Saurashtrians in South India have lost all the direct contact with their homeland, to such an extent that for some time, they did not know exactly where the homeland Saurashtra was geographically situated ; but even then they have been proud of being Saurashtrians and with a sense of pride they have preserved the old language and culture of Saurashtra. They knew only a few years ago where the homeland Saurashtra was exactly situated. Even now some of them have a notion that South Gujarat is a part of Saurashtra (3 bookmark). Even though they had lost the correct geographical location of the homeland Saurashtra, they had not forgotten or lost the language and culture of Saurashtra. They have persevered strongly to preserve the linguistic and cultural tradition of Saurashtra as it existed eight hundred years ago when they migrated from Saurashtra. No other Saurashtra migrants have preserved the tradition to this extent inspite of their being cut off completely from the homeland. They forgot the exact geography of the homeland, but the pride of the homeland was a life-force with them; the original language and culture were never obliterated.

New light on the form of the old language of Saurashtra:

If one study the linguistic, literary and cultural tradition of the Saurashtrians in South India, it is found, to a certain extent, very obviously, the Marathi, Kannada, Tamil and Telugu influence, external as well as internal, in its formation. If we can isolate this influence, it is probable that a study of the residual material will throw a new light on the language, literature and culture of Saurashtra as it existed eight hundred years ago. The English colonists who have migrated to Iceland and other islands have preserved in a pure form some special characteristics of the old English language such as old pronunciations and typical form of the old English language. This has supplied some important material for tracing the evolution of the English language. Similarly the study of the Southern Saurashtri language can supply some important material pertaining to the old language of Saurashtra and Gujarat. The Parsis who have migrated from Persia to Gujarat have adopted the Gujarati language almost as the mother tongue, and they have not continued the usage of their original language even in their intra group communication. But the Southern Saurashtrians have preserved very strongly their original linguistic traditions. Their pride of being Saurashtrians and their insistence on being called Saurashtrians are very strong. They had lost the geographical idea of their original homeland Saurashtra.

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