

# Visual Ethnography: Stone Craftsmen Of Thirupuramkundrum

A Design Research Project | Guided by Prof. Nina Sabnani

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# PREFACE

My childhood was deeply rooted in Madurai, where I attended my first school, lost my first tooth, swore for the first time in my life and also the first time I was left speechless by the marvel of human history taking the worldly form of Madurai Meenakshi Amman temple. For a seven year old who barely reached four feet from the ground level, the temple was a monument that exceeded the depths of my imagination. I grew up a proud resident of Madurai, the home of the Meenakshi Amman temple. Then our family migrated to Bangalore. Roots were forgotten and the memories gradually faded into the back of my mind.

There was always a sweet nostalgia about my childhood, which crept in every now and then, and an occasional excitement during the sessions of Dravidian architecture during my history of architecture classes reminding me of my early childhood and my life in Madurai. Reminding of that Sunday evening when my parents took me to Meenakshi temple. I always wondered who were responsible for such feat.

And during December 2016, I saw Visual Ethnography as an opportunity to go back in time to embrace and reconnect with those memories. And get an answer to the ever-lingering question.

Who are these people?

# INTRODUCTION



A section of the Thousand Pillar Hall ; Photo Credit : Jomesh

Tamil civilization is among the oldest of civilizations in our world. Pandyan, Chera and Chola dynasties ruled Tamilakkam (Tamil Nadu) and together they shaped Tamilakkam with a distinct culture, tradition and language, contributing to the spur the progress of Sangam Literature, which is considered among the ancient of the world literature. Marutham is referred to the type of vista of the Sangam age (300BCE - 300CE), and the name Madurai was derived from the word Marutham. Madurai is also referred to as Koodal, which aptly translates to a congregation or assembly of scholars, pointing out to the three Tamil Sangams, held at Madurai.





The Rice paddy as the primary crop, Madurai was traditionally an agrarian society. To increase the revenue from agriculture, the regions with black soil in Madurai district was introduced to cotton crop cultivation during the Nayakar rule in the 16th century.

Fast forwarding to several centuries, Madurai city is the administrative headquarters of Madurai District and is the second highest populated city in Tamil Nadu.





Aerial View, Meenakshi temple Photo Credit : Jorge Royan

The year 1991 marked the liberalization of Indian economy and this attributed to the arrival of Small Scale Industries, the industrialization of Madurai increased employment across the district. The city is now the abode to various chemical, granite, rubber and automobile manufacturing industries. Madurai has shaped itself as a second-tier city for information technology.



# Stone craft in Tamil Nadu



Sculptures inside the temple; Photo Credit : Reji Jacob

Meenakshi Amman Temple, Thirupuramkundram Murugan temple and Pazhamudircholai Murugan temple are the most prominent among the various historical monuments of the city. Meenakshi Amman Temple is located on the south side of the Vaigai River in Madurai and is one of the most outstanding landmarks of the city. Madurai is built with Meenakshi Amman Temple as the geographic and ritual core of the ancient city.

Eight kilometres away from Madurai meenakshi amman temple is Tirupparankunram, a hill where the Hindu god Murugan is said to have married Deivanai. The Tirupparankunram Murugan temple is among the Six Abodes of Murugan and is one of the most visited tourist spots in Madurai, next only to the Meenakshi Amman Temple.

The stone carving is exercised in Annamalaikadai, Mylaudy in Kanyakumari District, Pasumalai and Thirupuramkundram in Madurai district, Kazhukumalai in Toothikudi district, Thirunelveli, Ramnad and North Arcot districts.

No recorded evidence is available which explains the origin of stone craft in Mylaudy. With several centuries old Jain





Sculptures inside the temple Photo Credit : unavailable

stone carvings, the Kazhukumalai in Toothikudi district has a prominent place of archeological studies. The artisans of Kazhukumalai specialized in sculptured panels and pillars. Massive pillars as well as small icons were produced by the artisans in and around Mamallapuram, who chiseled it out of blocks of granite. The depiction of bird and animal life is one of the trademarks of stone carving practices in Tamil Nadu. It can be explicitly seen in the carvings and stone works at Mahabalipuram. A combination of a lion and an elephant known as Yali is widely found in South Indian temples. The Tirupparankunram Murugan temple has a wide range of Hindu gods carved on the walls. The garbhagriha is monolithic rock carving and the temple is believed to be in existence for many centuries. The walls and the pillars are adorned with carvings and sculptures that still astounds the visitors.

A small faction of Vishwakarma or kammaalar community also known as Asari (craftsman) in Tamil Nadu, through many ages has practiced stone carving and stone crafts. These artisans are called as Sthapathis or Asari. The Craftsmanship is widely done for the temples. A section of the artisans from the community also are the architects, who design and build the temples.





Lord Natarajar at Temple Museum; Photo Credit : Rengeshb

An Extraordinary level of patience is required to master this art form. The thorough mastery of the craft with the incredible patience a block of granite is transformed into a marvelous sculpture with all the “bhavabhinayas” drawn out in the ‘Shilparatna’.

They use traditional methods approved in the Shilpa Shastra for stone carving. Sculptures are polished by machine or hand to give the sculptures a lustrous appearance. The primary tools until yesteryears of sculpting were chisel and hammer. But with the intervention of modern technology, there has been a paradigm shift from how stone sculpting was practiced through the ages. But even today sculpting techniques and measurements are done in accordance to the Shilpa Shastra.







Analysis of the quality of the stone, colour , maturity, texture etc. is equally crucial in stone craft. The stone should have no flaws or kalanga (stain), rekha(patch) or bindu(spot). The tools used by the sculptors are made of mild steel in various sizes. The image is always carved over the stone laying it flat on the ground whether the posture is seated or standing to prevent the stone from cracking from the vibration of the instrument.



# Kalaivani and Kalaimakan sirpa kalai kudam



The community of the artisans in Thirupuramkundram was setup by sirpy(sculptor in Tamil) Murugan's father in the year 1980, and since then Kalaivani Sirpa kalai kudam ( sirpa kalai kudam translates to sculptor art gallery) is run by sirpy Murugan's family and the people working in the place are related to one another, in one way or the other thus making it community of sort. The establishment is handed over from one capable member of the family to another. Most of the artisans remember being at least the third generation stone craftsman, if not more.

The Craftsmen start their work around 9:30 am and break only at lunch which spans from 2pm to 3pm, Most of them tend to eat Parota and Vadiyal (half fried eggs) and then they collect their daily wages around 6pm and report at 9:30 the next day, so on so forth. After the working hours some of the artisan Kalaimakkan sirpa kalai mandrum stay in the workshop and play carom and chat till diner, and then disperse to their respective home. Almost all the artisans live in 5-kilometer radius from the workshop. On Sundays the children join them for the game of carom and also try and learn basics of sculpting.





Rules of learning and growing are same to all. At the beginning one or two years, the new cadets do not do much of craftsmanship as much running errands for craftsmen. Then one is gradually allowed to pick up tools and are assigned crude tasks in Thon-dumanam or made to work on basic sculpture such as lingam (Shiv ling) or nagam etc. and then they gradually work their way up in the art community. The Kalaivani sirpa kalai kudam is structured in such a way that artisans are aware of all the tasks, but they hone their skills in one particular department and refine all the nuances of it and gradually perfect it, henceforth the produce coming out of it condenses all the essence of Tamil craftsmanship and give it a form. Even after years of learning and practicing, the artisans humble admit that they have a great amount of nuances that need to be learnt and acknowledge that lifetime isn't enough for mastering all of stone craft. This humility for the artisans is a way of living.







# Process



**Step 1 :**  
The stone Acquired from Quarries in Tirupur, and are stored in the storehouse in the workshop which is later removed for working as shown in the image.





## Step 2 :

A Sketch of the statue to be sculpted is done by an artist who specializes in drawing sketches for statues. Then it is roughly translated on to the stone.

The length of the head is decided (which is called *Mugam*) and the rest of the shaped accordingly;

*5 mugam* is the height of the statue in sitting posture.

*9 mugam* is the height of the statue in standing posture.





### Step 3 : Alavukurithal

An elaborate plan is laid on the stone using scale and ink made out of the mixture of red paint and brick



**Step 4 : Thondumanam**  
Thondumanam or digging out is the process where the artisans dig out the preliminary shape of the sculpture.







**Step 5 : Uruvārām**  
 The process of shaping and adding gesture to the statue is called Uruvārām(Shaping).









**Step 6 : Outer**  
The process of removing the excess stone from the statue and final shaping of statue.



**Step 7 : Puram parthal**  
The process of flattening the back of the statue.





## Step 8 : Polish

The sculpture is polished to its finesse.



## Step 9 : Abharnam

The process of designing and sculpting details of jewelry on the statue.





## Step 10 : Mugam Parthazal

The process of sculpting of facial features  
onto the sculpture



## Step 11 : Enna Kappu

Apply Gingili oil mixed on the statue giving its final appearance.









Tools of the trade





Tools of the trade



# Artisans of Thirupuramkundrum



## Muthu

**Experience:** 25 years

**Work:** Thondumanam or digging out is the process where the artisans dig out the preliminary shape of the sculpture.

**Prior occupation:** Started learning stone craft at the age of 12.

**Children:** He inducted his son to work in welding workshop due to the hazardous working condition caused by the modern machinery

**Family occupation:** His father his forefathers practiced stone craft from Madurai district. He made a transition from chisel and hammer to modern machinery after several years of working with primitive tools and has been practicing with machines for 19 years.

**Thoughts:** Majority of digging and shaping up of a sculpture is done in this process

**Salary:** 600-700 per day, (the salary varies from department to department and also with experience.





## Krishnamoorthy

**Experience:** 15 years

**Work:** The process of shaping and adding gesture to the statue is the main task of Uruvārām(Shaping).

**Prior occupation:** He worked in a Lathe workshop and manufactured grinder stones.

**Children:** Has two daughters. Both of them are in schools.

**Family occupation:** He remembers up to his father and grandfather being in the field of stone craft, but his brother has taken job in carpet industry.

**Salary:** 500 per day.



## Murugan

**Experience:** 20 years

**Work:** He removes protrusions from the sculpture's outer areas and cleans the sculpture to be given to the finishing department.

**Prior occupation:** None

**Children:** He inducted his son to work in welding workshop due to the hazardous working condition caused by the modern machinery

**Family occupation:** He remembers up to his father and grandfather being in the field of stonecraft. And he hails from Madurai itself. He didn't make a transition from chisel and hammer, started learning sculpting with the help of machines and other modern tools.

**Thoughts:** He observes designs from various temples and incorporates it here and there.

**Salary:** 600 day.





## Narayanan

**Experience:** 40 years

**Work:** Puram parthazal He removes protrusions from the sculpture's outer areas and cleans the sculpture to be given to the finishing department.

**Prior occupation:** Started learning stone craft at the age of 8.

**Children:** Has two sons. One works as an electrician and the other works in lathe workshop.

**Family occupation:** His father his forefathers practiced stone craft from Madurai district. He made a transition from chisel and hammer to modern machinery after several years of working with primitive tools and has been practicing with machines for 19 years.

**Salary:** 700 per day.



## Periyayya

**Experience:** 30 years

**Work:** Does finishing works such as jewelry design and final ornamentation.

**Prior occupation:** Owned a Lathe workshop, manufactured grinder stones.

**Children:** A daughter and a son. Daughter is married to a NCC personal. Son is Engineering Student (Electrical Engineering), his son wasn't interested to pursue a career in art.

**Family occupation:** His father did ornamentation in beams and columns for temples and his forefathers practiced stone craft from Vadikottai, Tirunelveli district. He migrated to Madurai in search employment opportunity. He didn't make a transition from chisel and hammer, started learning sculpting with the help of machines and other modern tools.

**Thoughts:** He observes age old sculptures from various temples and also looks for contemporary jewelry design for inspirations and interprets those observations and translates them on the sculpture adding a little creative here and there.

**Salary:** 500 per day



# Conclusion



## Asari community in Tamil ecosystem

Craftsman (Asari) fall in other backward castes (OBC), and are generally respected communities. This could be attributed to the influence of sangam literature and attitude of kings towards the artisans during sangam period, my assumption is that this has transcended to contemporary Tamil Nadu.

Most Artisans of Thirupuramkundram live in nuclear family and have an average of two children. The wives of the artisans are generally homemakers, and the parent of artisans may also reside with them. Even though most of them may live in a nuclear family, they also tend to reside close to each other. This is notably the general structure of communities in Tamil Nadu, i.e., that families belonging to a particular caste have been staying in a close-knit community. The streets are divided on the basis of castes. E.g. there are entire streets or even cluster of streets of Brahmins, called the Agraharam, or of the Thevar community called the Thevamar theru or of the Asari community called the Asari Theru. In such a setup there is not much room for inter-community interaction. But in the current scenario this trend has changed,





today you may find an Asari family staying adjacent to a Thevar family in an Agraharam. The change might be attributed to social reformers of Tamil Nadu such as Periyar, Mahakavi Bharathiyar, Anna, etc., and also due to the modernization, which encourages younger generations to take new career paths and migrate to various places in search of opportunities. This phenomenon has created a paradigm shift in Tamil Nadu's social structure. Flipside to this is that previously close-knit communities have started to slowly drift apart and the dialogues within communities have started declining exponentially as well.





## Contemporary stone craft in Tamil Nadu

The knowledge of stone crafts has exclusively passed down from one generation of Asari to another. With time, the techniques and the knowledge of stone craft propagated within the community and the knowledge base seldom reached outside the community. But in the recent times the children of artisans have taken up various professions. And this posed a serious threat for the survival of stone craft of Tamil Nadu, hence it paved the way for the interested candidates from other castes and backgrounds to learn and work their way in the stone sculpting community. This has made stone craft reachable for everyone.

Traditionally the stone sculptors of Tamil Nadu were taken under the wings of the kings. This gave them time and resources to hone their skills. During those times, the date and time of consecration was decided on the basis of sculptor's ability to deliver the statue. And an artist may even take a whole year to "perfect" the sculpture. The situation in contemporary Tamil Nadu is such that the date of the



consecration is decided prior to ordering the sculpture; the clients have a history of coming up with unrealistic demands for completion. And also due to competitive arena, the artisans are forced to either meet the demands or stay unemployed. Thus the sculptors rush towards keeping up with the clientele needs and this sometimes becomes fatal for the artisans. The stories sculptors getting amputated by machines are around every corner.





## Health hazards

To understand hazardous conditions the artist have subjected themselves to, I took the same the precautions that an artisan in Thirupurmkundram would take. This involved me not wearing any protection for eyes such as eyeglasses, Not wearing any masks but just wrapping a cotton cloth around the lower part of my face, barely covering my nose and mouth. And the result of this little experiment was shocking. Within day two, I was neither able to sleep nor was able to close my eyes, since the dust of granite stone remained under my eyelids even after many washes. By the end of the week, I suffered from chronic coughs and sore throat. My hearing was also affected by constant noise made by the machines such an extent that people had to shout at, for me to hear. By the end of the 3rd week, I started falling ill and finally was bed ridden for two days, and still after that it took me a complete week to recover my strength.

Then on a further conversation with Kumar, I found out that all of the artisans of Thirupurmkundrum suffer from one ailment or the other. These Artisans have a high probability of losing sight, since the dust particle gradually scratches the pupil leaving one visually impaired over period



of time. The answer to them not wearing a protective gear over their eyes was that, when the machine pumps out dust while sculpting it covers the glass and thus not allowing the artisans to look where they are running their machine into. This, many a time becomes fatal to the artisans. There were incidents where the artisans have been amputated, and even sirpy Ganesh had an accident where the machine bounced made a deep cut on his right shoulders, two months prior my visit.



## Final thoughts

I went in search of these craftsmen of Madurai with a grave misconception as a primitive dwindling species of artisans still wielding tools of the ancient era. But my misconceptions were shattered as I found out these artisans were not only surviving, but thriving in the present time. Their transition from traditional tools to modern machinery is noteworthy. And this has helped them to meet their needs, but has also created various health hazards to them. And this Con is something that is not to be ignored.

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