

Women as Custodians of Intangible Cultural Heritage: An Empirical Study of Cultural Participation and Continuity in Chettinad, Tamil Nadu

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500230>

Received: 28 April 2026; Accepted: 05 May 2026; Published: 28 May 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examined women as custodians of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) practices in Chettinad, Tamil Nadu, India with a focus on socio-cultural reproduction and cultural continuity. From the primary survey (N=126), the study develops a Cultural Participation Index (CPI) and examined the cultural practices of heritage conservation and transmission as outcomes of the regional women's participation and contribution. The present study conceptualises cultural participation as a mediating process between structural conditions, such as family type, migration and digital access, and outcomes of cultural sustainability, focusing on the perspectives of ICH and gender-based cultural agency. which. The findings show that although the level of cultural participation is mostly moderate, there is a strong relationship with familial and social contexts, with joint-family structures supporting a higher participation and preserving traditions across generations. Contrary to the linear understanding of cultural erosion, migration does not seriously affect the continuity of cultural practices across different spatial contexts; instead, it maintains resilience and adaptability of cultural practices. The study goes further to underscore the new role of digital connectivity as an enabling mechanism in the sustenance of cultural knowledge and practices. The results of the study substantiate UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) framework, which specifically emphasises community involvement and intergenerational transmission. The study contributes to broader debates on gender, heritage and community identity by positioning women as agents of cultural reproduction, and demonstrating how cultural reproduction can be found in everyday practices that resist change in fast-transforming socio-economic contexts. The results also support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, such as SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 4 (Quality Education).

Keywords: Women and Heritage, Heritage Agents, Cultural continuity, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), Custodians of ICH, Cultural Participation Index (CPI)

INTRODUCTION

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is defined in UNESCO's 2003 Convention as the practices, rituals, festivals, culinary traditions and oral knowledge that societies transmit from generation to generation and are constantly evolving to adapt to new circumstances. The transmission of these traditions is not reliant on formal methods of preservation, but rather on the day-to-day practices of families and communities.

Women are considered the most important and least recognised custodians/bearers of rich traditions. In South Indian communities, women are the anchors of culture as they cook traditional meals, plan festivals, practise family rituals and pass on knowledge to their children. But their cultural abilities are being transformed by education, work, migration and other social developments. These factors are both threatening and changing the cultural practices they uphold. This is evident in Chettinad, Tamil Nadu, South India. The Chettinad is the hometown of Nagarathar, a merchant community. It is famous for its architecture, cuisine, and social organisations. The migration over the past 50-75 years has dispersed its people far beyond its traditional boundaries, making Chettinad an intriguing example of how cultural heritage perseveres, and even flourishes, in the diaspora. There's been an explosion of interest in heritage conservation, but little empirical work on the role of women in these processes. Even a very few studies that explored how family, migration and digital media influence women's cultural participation and interest in preserving. This study tries to address this conceptual gap. The Cultural Participation Index (CPI) has been developed based on a primary field survey to analyse women's participation and contributions to preserving Chettinad's intangible heritage. This study traces the link between socio-economic conditions, cultural participation, heritage preservation, and intergenerational transmission in the process of heritage preservation. The results also support the United Nations' Global SDGs, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities). This research also tries to interlink and understand the relationships among socio-economic factors, cultural participation, heritage preservation, and intergenerational heritage transmission.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Intangible Cultural Heritage and Cultural Sustainability

The concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has gained momentum as a result of UNESCO's Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), which emphasises living traditions, community involvement and intergenerational transmission. The practices covered by ICH, incorporated in daily life, are rituals, festivals, oral traditions, performing arts, and traditional knowledge systems (Smith and Akagawa, 2009; Blake, 2015). In contrast to tangible heritage, ICH is dynamic and constantly recreated, and its sustainability is based not on the preservation but on the active social interaction (Kurin, 2004; Lenzerini, 2011).

Recent research also theorises ICH as a dynamic and adaptive mechanism, which is influenced by modern socio-economic changes (Blake, 2020; Harrison et al., 2020). Cultural sustainability is therefore associated with the capacity of communities to reform and retain traditions in evolving situations (Soini & Dessein, 2016; Meier and Frey, 2020). New research also emphasizes that ICH is integrated into the frameworks of sustainable development, and cultural heritage is becoming a major source of resilience and identity of the community (Duxbury et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022).

2.2 Women as Custodians of Cultural Heritage

There exists a large amount of literature that acknowledges women as key participants in the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage. Women tend to be the most common bearers of the culture especially in areas like food culture, rituals, language practices, and social practices (Deacon et al., 2004; Momsen, 2009). Their daily activities in homes make them major actors in maintaining cultural continuity between generations. Culturally speaking, gender means that cultural transmission is directly associated with social roles and division of labour in a family (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 1999). The domestic and community roles of women make them mediate between the cultural practice and change, adjusting it to the modern contexts (Rao, 2012; Uberoi, 2006). Newer research also emphasizes the fact that women daily practices are also a location of cultural reproduction and identity negotiation (Arizpe, 2020; Bebbington et al., 2021). Nevertheless, researchers also insist that the role of women is still underestimated in the official heritage discourses that tend to focus on the monumental and institutional histories (Smith, 2006; Labadi, 2020). Modern studies demand a more comprehensive concept of heritage that accepts the role of women in constituting and maintaining cultural practices (Daskon and Binns, 2021; Girard and Nijkamp, 2022).

2.3 Migration, Mobility, and Cultural Continuity

Migration has been the one that is linked with cultural transformation but recent research opposes the idea that migration will cause cultural erosion. Rather, migration is becoming more conceptualized as a process that facilitates the restructuring and resistance of cultural practices in translocal spaces (Levitt, 2001; Vertovec, 2009). Migrant communities tend to have a high level of cultural attachment, in terms of rituals, festivals and family contacts, which help to ensure continuity even across geographical boundaries. Recent studies also prove that migration may reinforce cultural identity through the promotion of conscious preservation activities (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2021; King et al., 2022). Agricultural communities in India like Nagarathars of Chettinad have preserved their cultural heritage despite large-scale migration (Rudner, 1994; Chari, 2004). Women are also instrumental in this process as they uphold cultural practices in migrant families and as they aid in the passing of these practices to the generational level (Anthias, 2012; Gallo & Scrinzi, 2021).

2.4 Family Structure and Cultural Transmission

The family systems are the most important in the passing of the cultural knowledge especially in the societies where the traditions are practiced in the daily life. The joint family systems enable the intergenerational learning by ensuring that there is a co-residential living and by being involved together in the rituals and social practices (Shah, 1998; Uberoi, 2006). These settings also offer chances to observe, practice and enforce cultural traditions. Nonetheless, the socio-economic factors like urbanisation and migration have also led to the alteration in nuclear family formation (Desai and Andrist, 2010). Recent literature indicates that nuclear families can lessen the chances of direct transmission, however, they adapt to cultural practices in other ways, such as extended kinship ties and online communication (Ray and Qayum, 2020; Sarkar, 2021). This brings out the changing situation of cultural transmission in a family.

2.5 Digital Technology and Cultural Preservation

The blistering development of digital technologies has changed the methods of preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. Digital transformation attracts younger generations, as it offers ease of documentation, distribution, and regeneration of tacit knowledge beyond boundaries (Giaccardi, 2012; Hafstein, 2018). According to recent research, digital tools have become important in aiding community-based heritage programs and cultural awareness (Kenderdine, 2021; Drotner et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Online accessibility enables people to exchange cultural traditions across social media, online archives, and online communities, which makes cultural traditions more accessible across geographical boundaries. Nevertheless, researchers also note that there is a necessity to create a balance between digital accessibility and the issue of authenticity and change (Labadi and Logan, 2020).

2.6 Cultural Participation, Cultural Capital, and Heritage Sustainability

The popularly acknowledged mechanism that connects the socio-economic conditions and heritage sustainability is cultural participation. Involvement in cultural practices makes the continuation of traditions and preservation of traditions through participation possible (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). The cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu is a handy concept that can be used to explain the process of transmission and reproduction of cultural knowledge within families and communities. Recent studies build on this view and associate cultural participation with wider notions of sustainability and resilience (Soini and Birkeland, 2014; Throsby, 2021). The role of such factors as education, access to the Internet, and social networks is also noted in studies to influence the culture participation patterns (Brook, 2020; O'Brien et al., 2020). These observations help to emphasize the fact that cultural participation should be considered as a dynamic process and influenced by a number of interacting variables.

2.7 Research Gap and Contribution

Although literature on the subject does offer important information on intangible cultural heritage, gender roles, migration, and cultural transmission it is still lacking in integrative empirical research studies that investigate

these areas in a specific regional setting. Specifically, little studies have investigated the interaction between socio-economic factors (family structure, migration experience, and digital access) in determining the cultural role of women in heritage-based destinations such as Chettinad. This research fills this gap by setting up a conceptual framework in which cultural participation is laid out as a mediating factor between the structural conditions and cultural sustainability. The emphasis on women as the main agents of cultural reproduction makes the study relevant to the interdisciplinary discussion of heritage, gender and development and offers the empirical data on how the intangible cultural heritage is reproduced in the modern socio-cultural context.

STUDY AREA: CHETTINAD

The current research is based on the **Chettinad region of Tamil Nadu**, which is mostly found in the districts of Sivaganga and Pudukkottai in South India. Chettinad is a well-recognized place with its unique architecture, culinary customs, rituals, and culture of the community. In the past, the region was the cultural homeland of Nagarathar (Nattukottai Chettiar), a trading group with a network spanning South and Southeast Asia in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Chettinad landscape (villages and towns) is characterised with a grid layout traditionally planned around nine clan temples. The majority of houses in this area possess many sustainable practices, including large courtyards, eco-friendly materials, and are called Chettinad mansions. These are houses that embody a combination of both the local craftsmanship and the international influences, and use materials and design elements that are found worldwide due to the historical trade routes.

Besides its architectural value, the area also represents a rich network of intangible cultural heritage, including food lore, religious practices, linguistic customs, and local celebrations. Females are at the centre of support of these cultural practices. In Chettinad families, women tend to take care of day-to-day cultural rituals like cooking traditional food, arranging of festivals and rituals, the family traditions, and keeping oral records about heritage houses and objects. These day-to-day activities form a significant part of the region's cultural heritage. Migration has also influenced the cultural environment of Chettinad.

In the past, a good number of Nagarathar community members had to go to urban centres and other foreign destinations in pursuit of trade and business. Although this movement has resulted in a geographically spread community, cultural links with the home territory have not been broken. Social events such as festivals, weddings, among others, tend to bring back families to Chettinad, which strengthens common cultural identities. Although social and economic changes in the last several decades have been very fast, cultural traditions remain a crucial element in the life of the community. This is why it is necessary to understand the role of women in maintaining such practices in order to record and preserve the intangible cultural heritage of Chettinad.

3.1 Conceptual Framework

Chettinad is a living legacy of strong traditional roots, historical diaspora, and ever-evolving socioeconomic developments. This provides a perfect case study for understanding how intangible heritage is preserved. Women are the main celebrants of this context, as they negotiate the balance between tradition and modernity on a daily basis. Chettinad's women are not cultural bearers, but negotiators.

The women in Chettinad, particularly elders, are regularly engaged in cultural preservation and transmission during festival rituals, sharing a recipe with a daughter via modern communication channels, or upholding a household practice while working full-time. To capture this, a comprehensive framework beyond preservation is needed. This research offers a conceptual framework that maps the influence of socio-economic factors on women's cultural participation and how this participation supports cultural heritage preservation. The conceptual framework of this study is given as below Fig. 1:

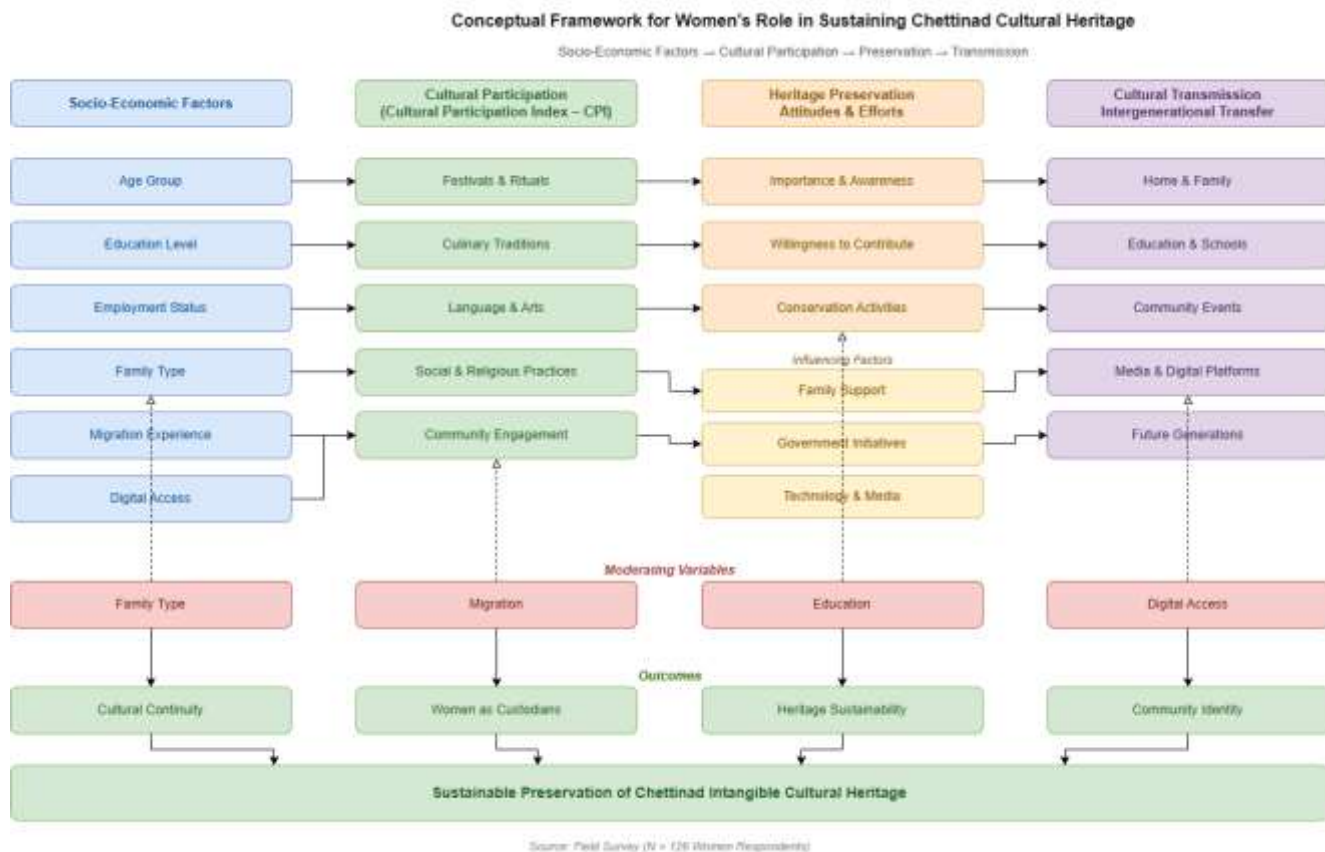


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework

As shown in Figure 1, the framework is constructed on **three layers**. The **first layer determines the socio-economic circumstances** that create how much women participate in their culture. This is completely based on factors like age, education, employment, family structure, migration and access to digital technologies/internet. These are quantified by the Cultural Participation Index (CPI) that quantifies participation in domestic rituals, food traditions, festivals, and daily transfer of knowledge. The **second layer examines women's participation** in cultural practices. Whenever women actively participate in cultural life, they are more likely to build up awareness of what is at stake and be willing to take action. In this meaning, participation is not merely an outcome - it is the linkage between the situation of a woman and her mission as a heritage keeper. The **third layer is the transmission of traditions across generations** - family life, older teaching, spiritual events, community events and more and more via the digital medium. In this case, migration and access to digital determine what is feasible: they may open or close the doors, depending on a woman's circumstances. Collectively, these three layers lead to the outcomes that are profoundly meaningful, a stronger sense of belonging to the community, and the long-awaited recognition of women as the custodians of living heritage, not only in Chettinad, but also in its diaspora communities, around the world.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This work is a part of a research project - "Digitalising Chettinad Architectural and Cultural Heritage in Tamil Nadu to Sustainable Knowledge Management". The objective of this research is to map the tangible and intangible aspects of Chettinad heritage and to construct knowledge systems for preserving and sharing the region's tacit knowledge. The current study is a quantitative, cross-sectional study. An online survey was conducted using Google Forms titled "Comprehensive Multi-Generational Interview Questionnaire on Mapping Women Lives in Chettinad" with 126 women aged 18 or older based in the Chettinad region. The questionnaire was aimed at documenting the daily lives, cultural roles, and practices of women across generations. Fig. 2 shows a screenshot of the questionnaire.



Fig. 2 Sample image of Google Form questionnaire

The survey captured six broad areas:

- Demographic and socio-economic background
- Family type and household structure
- Migration history and residential status
- Frequency of cultural practice participation
- Attitudes toward heritage preservation
- Digital access and technology use

4.2 Variables

The **independent variables** were socio-economic factors such as age, education, employment, family type and migration status. Cultural heritage variables, such as cultural participation and preservation attitudes, were the **dependent variables**. The two sets of variables were used to explore the factors that influence women's cultural participation.

4.3 Cultural Participation Index (CPI)

To get a broader picture than individual survey questions, the study developed a **Cultural Participation Index (CPI)**, a composite measure of overall heritage engagement which comprises four factors: participation in practice, preservation attitude, continuation of practice outside the home region and digital engagement with culture. Responses were scaled and added together to create a score, which was categorised into High, Moderate, and Low levels of participation.

4.4 Data Analysis

Three steps were used for data analysis: descriptive statistics were used to describe the profile of respondents. Using cross-tabulations and chi-square tests, we explored relationships between socio-economic factors and participation. Finally, multiple regression analysis was used to determine which variables are most predictive of CPI. The analysis was performed at the 95% confidence level ($p < 0.05$).

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This chapter outlines the findings of a survey of 126 women from Chettinad. The study explores socio-demographic factors, cultural participation trends, the role of family and migration, trends in digital access and

a composite Cultural Participation Index (CPI). Where relevant, chi-square and regression analyses are used to highlight significant associations. The results are discussed thematically to provide a holistic account of women's engagement and preservation of intangible cultural heritage in modern Chettinad.

5.1 Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

It is important to understand the characteristics of the respondents to draw conclusions about their engagement with cultural heritage. This sample's socio-demographic profile is quite unique: young, educated and tech-savvy, might be expected to be turning away from the past. However, the data tells a very different story.

5.1.1 Age Distribution

This sample is young, with 93.7% aged 18 to 35 years and 6.3% aged 35 to 60 years. This is the age group most likely to be engaged with higher education, work and digital media, and also the one most likely to be thought of as abandoning tradition. The case of their engagement with Chettinad heritage contradicts this.

Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage
18–25 years	79	62.7%
26–35 years	39	31.0%
36–50 years	6	4.8%
Above 50 years	2	1.5%
Total	126	100%

From Table 1, the 18-35 years old cohort is a group to watch. Cultural heritage scholars have traditionally linked this age group with urbanisation, new media and higher education, and as a result, cultural disconnection. Here we find that this is not the case. This demographic is still engaging in cultural practices, thereby challenging an assumption.

5.1.2 Current Residence

With reference to Table 2, most of our respondents (84.1%) continue to reside in the Chettinad region. This is no coincidence. Living in the same region as their family homes, temples and extended family networks facilitates cultural engagement in ways that cannot be easily replaced.

Table 2: Current Residence of Respondents

Place of Residence	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Within Chettinad	106	84.1%
Outside Chettinad (within Tamil Nadu)	12	9.5%
Outside Tamil Nadu (within India)	6	4.8%
Outside India	2	1.6%
Total	126	100%

The smaller group living outside the region (15.9%) provides a comparison group, and is discussed in detail in Section 5.9.

5.1.3 Educational Profile

The measured sample in the survey is highly educated. As per Table 3, 43% have a bachelor's degree and 36% a higher degree, with almost four fifths of respondents having gained at least a bachelor's degree. This is much higher than the national average for women's education in India.

Table 3: Educational Qualification of Respondents

Educational Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Below Secondary (up to Class 10)	4	3.2%
Higher Secondary (Class 11–12)	22	17.5%
Undergraduate (Bachelor's Degree)	54	42.8%
Postgraduate (Master's or above)	46	36.5%
Total	126	100%

The study shows that these educational levels strongly influence the continuity of heritage. In modern society, as women move into professional settings and migration, in some cases, education is seen as a barrier to maintaining and continuing traditional practices. However, the study shows that education, migration, and modernity strengthen cultural awareness.

5.1.4 Employment Status

With reference to Table 4, as expected, given their age, most respondents (73.8%) are students. The remaining respondents are distributed across various employment sectors, with a smaller proportion in professional or homemaking roles.

Table 4: Employment Status of Respondents

Employment Status	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Student	93	73.8%
Employed (private sector)	14	11.1%
Employed (government/public sector)	7	5.6%
Self-employed / Business	5	4.0%
Homemaker	7	5.5%
Total	126	100%

5.1.5 Family Structure

Another key variable of interest in this study is family structure, which is theoretically significant for cultural transmission.

Table 5: Family Type of Respondents

Family Type	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Nuclear Family	89	70.6%
Joint / Extended Family	33	26.2%

Single-person household	4	3.2%
Total	126	100%

As shown in Table 5, 70.6% of respondents are from nuclear families, and the 26.2% belongs to joint or extended families. This high level of nuclear-family structure is due to the shift in transformation brought about by migration and modernity. The results on cultural participation (see Section 5.7) show that living in a joint family remains a strong factor in cultural participation.

5.1.6 Consolidated Socio-Demographic Summary

Table 6: Summary of Socio-Demographic Profile

Variable	Dominant Category	Share	Secondary Category	Share
Age	18–25 years	62.7%	26–35 years	31.0%
Residence	Within Chettinad	84.1%	Outside Chettinad	15.9%
Education	Undergraduate	42.8%	Postgraduate	36.5%
Employment	Students	73.8%	Employed	16.7%
Family Type	Nuclear	70.6%	Joint / Extended	26.2%
Digital Access	Smartphone users	92.0%	No smartphone	8.0%

As shown in Table 6, the consolidated socio-demographic profile of the respondents, age group, education, and family structure are influencing factors in the study.

5.2 Participation in Cultural Practices

As this study mainly examined the frequency of Chettinad women’s engagement in cultural practices, the survey focused on how often they participate in Chettinad cultural activities, including festivals, religious rituals, cooking traditional food, and folk music and crafts.

Table 7: Frequency of Participation in Chettinad Cultural Practices

Participation Frequency	Number of Respondents	Percentage	Cumulative %
Very Frequently (multiple times a week)	14	11.1%	11.1%
Frequently (at least once a week)	14	11.1%	22.2%
Occasionally (1–2 times a month)	43	34.1%	56.3%
Rarely (a few times a year)	38	30.2%	86.5%
Never	17	13.5%	100%
Total	126	100%	—

The Fig. 3 illustrates the frequency of participation in Chettinad cultural practices across the age groups and demographics.



Fig. 3. Frequency of Cultural Participation

We found that 56.3% engage at least occasionally. This is a high percentage when the sample is composed mostly of young, student women. It is also important to note that the remaining 43.7% who participate rarely or never should not be taken to be culturally apathetic. As Section 5.4 demonstrates, many of these women are active in their support for heritage preservation. Their lack of participation is likely to be circumstantial rather than indicative of cultural indifference.

5.3 Perception of Heritage Preservation

Respondents' perceptions of heritage preservation were also studied with respect to the interest in preserving Chettinad's cultural heritage for future generations.

Table 8: Perceived Importance of Preserving Chettinad Heritage

Level of Importance	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Extremely Important	64	50.8%
Important	40	31.7%
Somewhat Important	14	11.1%
Not Very Important	6	4.8%
Not Important at All	2	1.6%
Total	126	100%

The results are impressive. Tables 8 and 9 reveal that over 80% of respondents (82.5%) showed a higher rate of interest in preserving heritage (as important or very important). As the majority of respondents are young students, the results are very promising for preserving the heritage in the coming years.

Table 9: The Attitude-Participation Gap

Metric	Percentage	Visuals
		
Rate heritage preservation as Important / Very Important	82.5%	
Participate occasionally or more frequently	56.3%	

Gap (attitudes vs. active participation)	26.2%	
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In particular, Table 9 depicts that the 26.2 percentage-point discrepancy between attitude and behaviour is a significant policy implication of this study. As people are interested in preserving Chettinad's culture, it is the right time for the Government and Non-governmental institutions to create a policy to remove barriers with respect to time, access, and community infrastructure. Thus, the gap can be bridged.

5.4 Continuation of Cultural Traditions Outside Chettinad

A key question in the study is the relationship between migration and cultural persistence. Does migration to places outside Chettinad result in cultural isolation? Our research suggests it does not.

Table 10: Continuation of Chettinad Traditions Among Respondents Living Outside the Region

Level of Continuation	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Fully continue all major traditions	8	35.7%
Continue most traditions with some adaptations	9	40.2%
Continue a few key traditions only	4	17.9%
Rarely continue any traditions	1	4.5%
Do not continue any traditions	0	1.7%
Total (outside Chettinad)	22	100%

As per Table 10, 22 respondents living outside Chettinad, among them 75.9% still practise most or all of their cultural practices - a statistic that contradicts the theory of cultural loss through migration. These women continue their practices actively by visiting family for festivals, preparing traditional foods, practising religious rituals, and increasingly engaging with digital media to keep up to date on community events.

5.5 Digital Access and Its Role in Cultural Engagement

Theoretically, there is a clear connection between digital technology and heritage preservation. However, with respect to the literature, there are fewer empirical studies to substantiate the concept. This study fills that gap. Table 11 proves that the respondents are highly using digital devices and technologies. This shows the significant association with digital access and heritage appreciation/preservation.

Table 11: Digital Access Among Respondents

Type of Digital Access	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Smartphone with internet	116	92.1%
Computer / laptop with internet	73	57.9%
Both smartphone and computer	65	51.6%
No digital access	10	7.9%
Total	126	100%

Table 12: Digital Access and Heritage Preservation Attitudes (Cross-Tabulation)

Digital Access Level	Heritage is Very Important	Heritage is Important	Neutral / Low
High (smartphone + computer)	58.5%	29.2%	12.3%

Moderate (smartphone only)	47.1%	35.3%	17.6%
Low / None	30.0%	40.0%	30.0%

With reference to Tables 11 and 12, the highest proportion of respondents with high heritage appreciation is among those with access to both a smartphone and a computer (58.5%), compared with those without digital access (30.0%).

The correlation is not statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) but the pattern is consistent and plausible. It seems to be a multiplier of cultural activity. It enables women to discover heritage material, connect with others, document practices and share knowledge across space. It's not a substitute for face-to-face participation, but it helps make heritage relevant and present throughout the day-to-day, and it helps maintain identity in subtle ways.

5.6 Age Group and Cultural Participation

Age is an important factor in cultural participation, but not a simple one. As Table 13 indicates, older age groups participate more often. Among people aged 36 or older, 50% participate frequently. Among 18 to 25 year olds, 18.9% report frequent participation.

Table 13: Age Group and Participation in Cultural Practices (Cross-Tabulation)

Age Group	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely / Never	Total
18–25 years	18.9%	32.9%	48.2%	100%
26–35 years	28.2%	35.9%	35.9%	100%
36 and above	50.0%	37.5%	12.5%	100%

There is a clear trend in the data: the older the respondent, the greater the participation. The age group 18 to 25 is made up of students, many of whom are away from home in hostels or other forms of accommodation, away from family or community activities where cultural activities can happen. It's likely that age is a factor in this group due to circumstances rather than generational differences.

Statistically, the Chi square test ($\chi^2 = 4.21$, $p = 0.121$) shows that the association between age and cultural participation is not significant (at the usual threshold), and age is not a predictor of cultural participation.

5.7 Family Type and Cultural Participation — The Central Finding

In this study, the family type is an important predictor of cultural participation among the variables considered. The correlation between joint family and sustained cultural participation is both statistically and theoretically strong and meaningful.

Table 14: Family Type and Frequency of Cultural Participation (Cross-Tabulation)

Family Type	Very Frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Total
Joint / Extended Family	21.2%	17.3%	42.3%	15.4%	3.8%	100%
Nuclear Family	6.7%	7.9%	30.3%	38.2%	16.9%	100%
Single-person	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%	50.0%	25.0%	100%

Table 15: Chi-Square Test — Family Type and Cultural Participation

Statistical Measure	Value
Chi-square statistic (χ^2)	13.42

Degrees of freedom	4
p-value	< 0.05
Cramer's V (effect size)	0.33 (moderate)
CONCLUSION	Statistically significant association

From Tables 14 and 15, in joint families, 38.5% of women participate frequently or very frequently in cultural activities. This drops to 14.6% for women in nuclear families, a difference of almost 24 points. On the other hand, the percentage of women in nuclear families who never or rarely participate in cultural activities is 55.1%, almost three times that of women in joint families (19.2%).

From the results, it is clear that cultural learning occurs continuously in a joint family. Grandmothers play a pivotal role in teaching their daughters and granddaughters, from cooking to religious rituals. Elder women tell stories of family and community traditions. All of this is done "incidentally". It occurs through common activities, cohabitation, and eating together. In nuclear families, this transmission needs to be deliberately organised and, in our fast-moving world, this kind of organisation is the first casualty.

This observation is in line with Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital, which asserts that cultural knowledge and skills are socialised through immersive environments and not through direct teaching. The joint family is, therefore, an educational cultural institution.

5.8 Migration Experience and Cultural Participation

The following cross-tabulation, as given in Table 1, follows up on the qualitative evidence in Section 5.4, by testing the statistical link between migration and the level of cultural participation, as measured by the CPI.

Table 16: Migration Experience and Cultural Participation Index (Cross-Tabulation)

Migration Experience	High CPI	Moderate CPI	Low CPI	Total
Lived outside Chettinad	27.3%	54.5%	18.2%	100%
Always lived in Chettinad	25.8%	52.6%	21.6%	100%
Chi-square result	$\chi^2 = 1.98$	df = 2	p = 0.371	Not Significant

One of the key findings of the research is the almost identical distribution of CPI scores between migrants and non-migrants. This suggests that migration does not affect cultural continuity in a statistically significant way. Women who have lived away from Chettinad have equal levels of cultural engagement to those who have not. This finding confirms the transnationalism studies (Vertovec, 2009; Levitt, 2001) that view migrant communities not as uprooted but as culturally resilient - negotiating identity across borders through conscious practice, community organisation and through ever-expanding digital connections.

5.9 Education Level and Heritage Preservation Attitudes

There is no theoretical relationship between education and heritage engagement. On the other hand, education enhances critical awareness of one's cultural heritage.

Table 17: Education Level and Heritage Preservation Attitudes (Cross-Tabulation)

Education Level	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Below Secondary	25.0%	50.0%	25.0%	0.0%
Higher Secondary	45.5%	36.4%	13.6%	4.5%

Undergraduate	50.0%	33.3%	11.1%	5.6%
Postgraduate	56.5%	28.3%	10.9%	4.3%

Given in Table 17, the trend is consistent: the higher the level of education, the higher the percentage of respondents who consider heritage "Very Important"; from 25% of those with less than secondary school to 56.5% of postgraduates. This proves that education can stimulate critical awareness of the stake in heritage loss instead of creating disinterest about heritage preservation.

5.10 Cultural Participation Index (CPI)

The research uses a Cultural Participation Index (CPI) to measure women's overall cultural engagement. The CPI combines four dimensions: the frequency of regional women's interest/participation in cultural practices, women's perceptions of the importance of preserving cultural heritage, their cultural participation outside Chettinad, and their online engagement. These dimensions are normalised and a composite score is calculated, which categorises women into three groups of cultural engagement.

Table 18: Distribution of Cultural Participation Index Scores

CPI Category	Score Range	Number of Respondents	Percentage	Cumulative %
High Participation	75–100	33	26.2%	26.2%
Moderate Participation	45–74	67	53.2%	79.4%
Low Participation	Below 45	26	20.6%	100%
Total	—	126	100%	—

From Table 18, it is clear that 79.4% of women have moderate to high cultural engagement. This challenges the idea of cultural decay among youth and educated regional women. The results do not reflect the difficulties of preserving culture among youngsters. Instead, it tells a story of a community changing, youngsters are finding new ways to retain traditions and cope with life.

Table 19: CPI by Key Demographic Subgroups

Subgroup	High CPI %	Moderate CPI %	Low CPI %
Joint / Extended Family	45.5%	45.4%	9.1%
Nuclear Family	18.0%	56.2%	25.8%
Age 36+	50.0%	37.5%	12.5%
Age 18–25	21.5%	54.4%	24.1%
Postgraduate education	30.4%	54.4%	15.2%
Higher Secondary only	18.2%	50.0%	31.8%
High digital access	32.3%	52.3%	15.4%
Low / no digital access	10.0%	50.0%	40.0%

With reference to Table 19, the combined table of sub-groups (replacing four cross-tabulation tables in the original analysis) makes sense: joint family members and older age groups have the highest CPI scores. Access to digital media and education is a significant positive factor. Living in a nuclear family and youth are associated with reduced engagement, although even these groups have largely moderate participation.

5.11 Regression Analysis: Determinants of Cultural Participation

In order to determine the most significant predictors of cultural participation, a multiple linear regression was run using the CPI as the dependent variable and five socio-economic indicators as predictors. The regression model is depicted in Table 20:

Table 20: Regression Model — Predictors of Cultural Participation Index

Predictor Variable	Beta Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Significant?
Family Type (Joint = 1)	0.31	0.09	3.44	0.001	Yes ✓
Age Group	0.22	0.10	2.20	0.029	Yes ✓
Education Level	0.14	0.11	1.27	0.206	No
Migration Experience	0.09	0.10	0.90	0.371	No
Digital Access	0.11	0.09	1.22	0.224	No
Model R ²	0.28	—	—	—	—
Adjusted R ²	0.25	—	—	—	—
F-statistic	9.32	—	—	p < 0.001	Significant

According to the illustration of the regression model (Fig. 4), it accounts for 28% of the variance in cultural participation scores ($R^2 = 0.28$), a significant result for data on social behaviour where we know individual agency, life experiences and informal community relations account for much of the variance unattainable through quantitative instruments.

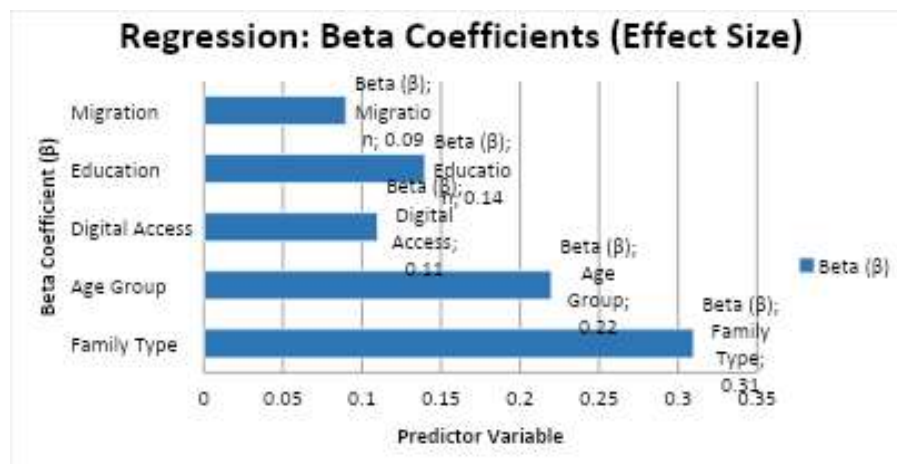


Fig. 4. Regression: Beta Coefficients (Effect Size)

Furthermore, as per Fig. 4, two predictors reach statistical significance: family type ($\beta = 0.31$, $p = 0.001$) and age group ($\beta = 0.22$, $p = 0.029$). The most important predictor in the model is joint family status: a woman in a joint family is more likely to have a higher CPI score. Age comes second: older women are more engaged, as found in the cross-tabulation. Education, migration and digital access reflect positive beta coefficients, which suggests they are moving in the right direction in terms of their posited relationships as facilitators of cultural engagement, but not at the $p < 0.05$ level individually.

OVERALL FINDINGS

The results clearly show that Chettinad women, regardless of age or geographic boundaries, are actively engaged in their cultural practices. They are not simply the passive preservers of tradition; rather, they are the custodians of everlasting culture and heritage. Further, it is clear that, largely young, well-educated women respondents are

still interested in engaging in festivals, rituals, and cooking practices. The study also tells that modernisation and tradition are not mutually exclusive.

Three patterns stand out.

- **Family type is a significant factor.** Thus, married women in large families typically partake more in cultural activities than those who are married and live in a small family unit. The generational experience of living together allows for the sharing of culture in everyday ways such as when cooking, performing rituals, telling stories, and so forth. Statistical analysis with a Chi-square indicates that the results of this comparison are statistically significant, rather than coincidental. There is a difference of views towards the institution of marriage and family, causing a shift from multi-generational, joint family units to single-generational, nuclear families, therefore reducing the opportunity for cultural transmission to take place in a natural setting.
- **Migration does not stop the transmission of culture.** A number of women who lived outside of Chettinad do continue to practice cultural aspects of their heritage to some degree. This demonstrates that the women have demonstrated resiliency and are attempting to carry on the customs and traditions passed down from previous generations. It appears that cultural identity can be relocated.
- **Digital media increases the level of cultural awareness.** Of the population surveyed, over 92% owned smart phones, therefore, utilizing digital channels has enabled participants to connect informally, share cultural aspects of their heritage (for example, recipes, or recording rituals or sharing knowledge about cultural aspects of their heritage). Digital means of connecting do not necessarily cause participants to participate in heritage activities, but they support the attitude needed for participants to engage in heritage participation. Over 50% of those surveyed viewed the preservation of heritage as important to them therefore, this positive attitude is supported through the use of digital media.

Overall, the findings confirm the research's conceptual approach. Women's participation in culture is the link between their socio-economic status and the future of heritage. Women are not the passive bearers of tradition. They are the regular custodians, maintaining Chettinad's intangible cultural heritage through their flavours, festivities, teachings and carry-ons.

CONCLUSION

This study concurs to the notion that Chettinad's intangible cultural heritage sustenance has been heavily influenced by the women of Chettinad through engagement, perseverance, their attitudes and practices, and the ways they transfer culture from one generation to another. The results support our hypothetical framework. With small actions and ongoing efforts, regional women continue to contribute to the maintenance/transmission of culture across generations. Responses show that, while their daily practices maintain and create transformation through culture/heritage, day-to-day activities of women are a way of preserving/carrying out culture(s). Evidence also confirms that there is much support from multi-generational family units to enable women's close relationships with elder relatives to assist in the passing down of culture. Most importantly, migration has little effect on participation in culture. Women living outside Chettinad also carry their culture with them, demonstrating the strength of this cultural identity. There is a consistently high level of awareness amongst women regarding the importance of preserving their culture, thus demonstrating in their desire to preserve their culture. These women not only practice their culture but also value the significance of their practice in connection to their culture. This reflects in their interest in the preservation of this practice. Evidence of technology being a very integral to these activities; enabling knowledge sharing; connecting communities geographically removed from Chettinad; enabling new ways to document and. As such, this study has supported the hypothesis. Women from Chettinad are the cornerstones of their cultures.

FUTURE ENHANCEMENTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our research has shed light on a whole new area of questions. There are several avenues for future research and practice. Alongside our findings, there is much more to grasp. This cross-sectional survey is like a snapshot.

Conducting longitudinal research over several years would show how cultural engagement evolves alongside events such as marriage, travel, career shifts, and motherhood. Future studies may analyze additional populations and age groups, which would help include the voices of older women. Digital heritage is worthy of further exploration. Social media, virtual archives and online community forums have all been used for cultural preservation, yet there is still a need for more empirical data on how these platforms can be used. In terms of public policy, community-led cultural preservation is the most effective form of preserving cultural heritage. To this end, non-traditional funding and resources should be directed at women for cultural education, training in traditional knowledge systems and support for inter-generational knowledge sharing within families and communities. Cultural heritage cannot occur in isolation; it necessitates human effort, time and funds. Broader partnerships must also exist. Governments, cultural organizations and educational institutions all have roles to play in documenting oral history, supporting traditional arts and providing educational opportunities. All of these activities can be accomplished at a relatively low cost; instead, they are investments in the continuation of culture. Finally, the quantitative profile provided in this study could benefit from a qualitative supplement. Qualitative research conducted through in-depth interviews and ethnographic studies would offer additional detail about individuals who make up the statistically significant samples used in this study, while providing greater context for the quantitative results and offering greater insight into the challenges being faced by cultural stewards within Chettinad today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is supported by the ICSSR, New Delhi for the Research Programme titled “Digitalising Chettinad Architectural and Cultural Heritage in Tamil Nadu for Sustainable Knowledge Management: An Empirical Analysis” (F. No. ICSSR/RPD/RPR/2023-24/34 Dated: 23/03/2024).

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