Traditional teak wood articles used in households of Nilambur and Malapuram areas of Kerala

Sani Lookose
Teak Museum, KFRI Sub-Centre, Nilambur, Kerala
E-mail: sani_lookose@yahoo.co.in

Received 19 July 2007; revised 22 November 2007

The heartwood of teak is one of the most durable woods and used in structural needs like furniture making, ship building and even for the construction of railway sleepers in the olden days. But the use of teak in traditional households is totally neglected today due to the wide use of metals and other synthetic materials like plastic. Traditional teak wood household articles used in Nilambur and Malappuram areas of Kerala have been described. Lack of social awareness on these traditional teak wood articles and the importance of transferring this knowledge to younger generations have been emphasized.

Key words: Traditional teak wood articles, Traditional household articles

IPC Int. Cl. 8: D06C, D06F

Teak (Tectona grandis L.F) is one of the most valuable timbers of the tropics and India is one of the major teak growing and utilizing countries in the world. The heartwood of teak is one of the most durable woods and used in structural needs like furniture making, ship building and even for the construction of railway sleepers in the olden days. The name Teak originated from Tecca, which was in use for centuries in South India. Teak belongs to the genus Tectona. The generic name Tectona is derived from the Greek word Tecton, which means carpenter and grandis in Latin means large. As the name literally means, it is easy for the carpenters to work on teak wood and is widely preferred. History of teak in Kerala begins with acquisition of Malabar by British during 1792. Till then, Malabar coast was generally known to western world for its spices. Malabar teak became world famous with the advent of British regime in Malabar. In India, traders and timber users recognize several varieties of teak suitable for different end uses. The uses of teak in domestic building and construction purposes and furniture making were well studied and reported. But the use of teak in traditional households is totally neglected today due to the wide use of metals and other synthetic materials like plastic.

A study conducted in Teak museum at Nilambur as part of the educational programmes, with different sections of the society, viz. students, teachers, agriculturists and the general visitors revealed that our new generation (students) have the least knowledge on the traditional teak wood articles used in the households of Kerala in olden days. This shows the importance of transfer of our traditional knowledge on this to younger generations. The paper discusses about information on traditional teak wood household articles used in Nilambur and Malappuram areas of Kerala, lack of social awareness on these traditional teak wood articles and the importance of transferring this knowledge to younger generations.

Methodology

The Teak Museum with thematic exhibits describing the historical, aesthetic and scientific aspects concerning teak tree established by Kerala Forest Research Institute at Nilambur attracts hundreds of visitors everyday. Apart from the thematic exhibits, environmental education, nature conservation awareness and forestry information facilities are also available to the visitors through an audiovisual section and library of the Museum. To make the Museum more educative and informative, different educational programmes are organized in the Museum. The present study entitled “A study on social awareness of traditional teak wood articles used in households of Nilambur and Malapuram areas of Kerala” is a part of the programme under the Educational project of Teak Museum. Teak Museum
has displayed some collected traditional household articles exclusively made of teak wood. Information on traditional teak wood household articles was gathered through collection visits to antique articles godowns, Nilambur Kovilakam and also through interviews with housewives, carpenters and members of Nilambur Kovilakam. The following are the details of some of the teak wood household articles investigated.

**Avanipalaka**

*Avanippalaka* is commonly seen in *pooja* rooms of the Hindu *tharavadu* households and other sacred places (Fig. 1). *Avanippalaka* is a specially designed wooden plank used by priest (*poojari*) to perform *pooja*. The *poojari* sits on the *avanippalaka*, enchanting *manthras* and performing the *pooja* rituals. There is an ancient belief that when Brahmins perform the *pooja*, the tail end of the *avanippalka* should direct towards the right side and in case of *kshatriyas* it should be towards the left side. Unlike other items, it is still commonly used in all the temples of Malabar.

**Bhasmakkota**

*Bhasmakotta* is a type of wooden basket made of teak wood to keep *Bhasma* (Fig. 2). *Bhasma* is prepared by burning dry cow dung together with *agarbathi* incense sticks) and *carpooram* (camphor). Usually, *bhasmakotta* is hanged with a chain device in front of the *poomukham* (portico) of the house. It is usually in pyramidal shape and the shape varies with caste and locality. The shape is also diversified with beautiful carving, adds to the beauty of *Bhasmakotta*. It is one of the oldest *pooja* materials in Malabar area.

**Abharanapetti**

*Abharanapetti* is a type of box designed to keep ornaments made of gold, silver and gems (Fig. 3). This box is preferably made of teak wood, which has several concealed chambers to keep different types of ornaments. The shape of the box changes with the size of the ornaments and the artistic sense of the owner. In most case it is beautifully carved with designs and sometimes in- laid with gold, copper, silver and brass on the outer surface of the box. Ivory, horns of deer and other animals are also used for the inside works of the box. Usually the old lady of the house is the custodian of the box.

**Chellapetti**

*Chellapetti* is a special type of box commonly used by old people to keep natural *paan* masala used for chewing (Fig. 4). The box has different chambers to keep *paan* items like betel leaves, tobacco, arecanut and lime. Sometimes there will be chamber to keep even a small knife. In Malabar, the chewing of *paan* masala is called *murukkal* and the box is called *murukkan petti*.

**Masalapetti**

*Masalapetti* is a wooden box used for keeping condiments spices in the kitchen (Fig. 5). It has got 5-6 chambers for keeping different condiments. This box is preferably made of teakwood.

**Oushadhapetti**

*Oushadhapetti* is used for keeping medicines especially Ayurvedic medicines (Fig. 6). The box is usually made out of teak wood and is common in Malabar and other parts of Kerala.

**Panapetti**

*Panapetti* is the cash box of olden days, which is provided with several chambers (Fig. 7). Some important documents are also kept in the *panapetti*. Teak is preferred for *panapetti* as its hardwood is termite and insect resistant. It is decorated at corners and edges with brass, silver and iron metals.

**Pettakam**

It is used for keeping clothes (Fig. 8). The box is usually made out of teak wood and was common in Malabar and other areas of Kerala.

**Cherivu Mesa** (Writing table)

It is a small table with a slanting portion, which is usually used for keeping the paper to write (Fig. 9). It was common in commercial and textile shops.

**Merika**

*Merika* is container equipment used for keeping salt in kitchen (Fig. 10). Salt can not be kept in any other mud or iron vessels since salt absorbs atmospheric moisture and the vessel gets rust.

**Thudi**

*Thudi* is a special type of wooden pulley for drawing water from the wells (Fig. 11). It is made of teak wood and it makes loud noises while drawing
water. Teak is used for making this because of its durability. It is still in use in old houses of Malabar especially in Palakkad district.

**Vellikkol**

*Vellikkol* is a balance of the olden days used for weighing spices and other agricultural products (Fig. 13). It is mostly made out of teak wood but can be replaced with rosewood or ebony. This is a spindly shaped wooden rod having graduations, each unit being a *palam* (1 *thol = 3 palam = 1 *rathal*). The two ends are covered with silver decorations, hence the name *vellikkol*. On one end, there is a hook on which one can hang the material to be measured. The rod is adjusted with a movable thread, with the help of which the measuring is done. Unlike the other modern balances, *vellikkol* has no zero error. The farmers and merchants were fully depending on this balance for their day-to-day business in olden time. Carpenters and blacksmiths make this balance based on the *thachushasthra*, science of ancient architecture.

**Pallamkhuzi**

It is a play device used in olden days. Children used this device for playing with *manjadikkuru* or *kunnikkuru* (Fig. 12).

**Kayillattakkotta**

*Kayillattakkotta* is a hanging stand with a number of small holes to keep spoons (Fig. 14). It is made of teak wood because of its durability.

**Results and discussion**

Teak Museum has a collection of most of the above described teak wood household articles. In the present study, particular bay of teak wood household articles were taken in the museum during the educational programs organized for different sections of the society Students, teachers, and people with agriculture background. The groups were given worksheets separately to identify the names and uses of ten selected teak household articles in the museum by disguising the labels on it.

Analysis of the study reveals that most of the relevant information related to the household items are not known to younger generations and has to depend on old people. Among four sections of the participant categories, students have the least knowledge about the traditional teak wood articles used in households of Nilambur and Malapuram areas of Kerala. Many of these household items are not used by the people now and are replaced by metal or plastic materials. In some houses, these teak wood items are kept neatly and others have dumped in some corner of the house.

**Conclusion**

Museums are fundamentally and necessarily educational institutions and an appropriate educational role in museums includes social action. This is the true significance of the progressive tradition in education, long a part of museum practice and history. There are many means for museums to express this social, progressive component of education. Museums can support growth and development for all individuals in myriad ways. It is the responsibility of the museum community to acknowledge this task and exploit its opportunities. The study on social awareness of traditional teak wood articles used in households of Nilambur and Malappuram areas of Kerala reveals that our new generation (students) has the least knowledge in this aspect. This shows the importance of transfer of our traditional knowledge to younger generation, so that this traditional knowledge may not become obsolete.

**Acknowledgement**

The paper is being presented with the kind permission of the Director Dr R Gnanaharan, Kerala Forest Research Institute, Peechi, Thrissur, Kerala.

**References**