

Traditional knowledge of folk crafts in Tamil Nadu

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Folk craft is one of the significant areas in the study of material culture. It is social rather than individual. The traditional craftsmen serve the purpose of fulfilling some of the socio-cultural needs of the society and they are generally identified by their traditional occupation. The paper gives attention on three traditional folk crafts, i.e. earthenware by Kullalar, grass mat weaving by muslim Labbai and basketry by Malai Kuravar community. It documents the traditional techniques of crafting and analyses the role of crafts and craftsmen in socio-cultural context and the changing scenario of folk craft in contemporary context.

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Traditional knowledge refers to knowledge systems, creations, innovations and cultural expressions which have generally been transmitted from generation to generation and are constantly evolving in response to a changing environment¹. The nature and use of such knowledge and expressions are transmitted to enhance, safeguard and perpetuate the identity, well-being and rights of the indigenous peoples². Folklore is traditionally transmitted, preserved, created and recreated in the society. Material culture may be considered as tangible but the traditional knowledge about the material is intangible. Each material culture reflects the cultural identities of a particular people in a particular region. The traditional knowledge of material culture refers the techniques, skills, recipes and formulas transmitted across the generation. How men and women in traditional societies build their homes, make their clothes, prepare their food, farm their fish, process the earth's bounty, fashion their tools and Implements and design their furniture and utensils are important that are concerned with material culture³. In every rural society, there are particular socio-cultural groups, which are traditionally specialized in crafts. In southern Tamil Nadu, Kullalar community is expert in pottery, Malai Kuravar community is specialized in basketry and Muslim

Labbai community is specialized in grass mat weaving. Though there are many other cultural traits practiced by the crafting communities, they are generally identified by their traditional occupation. For example, basketry is an identity for Malai Kuravar, earthenware is an identity for Kulalar and mat weaving is an identity for Muslim Labbais in a particular region. District Tirunelveli is situated in south of Tamil Nadu. The hills, which form the western boundary of the district, are a continuation of the great chain of the Western Ghats. It has all five geographical traditions mentioned in Tamil literature, Kurinji (mountains), Mullai (forests), Marutham (paddy fields), Neithal (coastal areas) and Palai (desert)⁴. Most of the population (80%) in this region is employed in agriculture and agro-based industries. Pottery and grass mat weaving are important folk crafts of the region. In the paper, three folk crafts practiced by three particular communities at Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu have been discussed.

Methodology

The paper is primarily based on empirical data and secondary sources are also consulted to enrich the paper. Ethnographic/folkloristics research methodo-

logy has been followed to accumulate data. Primary data were collected through fieldwork in the natural context of craftsmanship. Fieldwork had been carried out at selected villages of *Karukuruchi*, *Pathamadai* and *Samathanapuram* famous for the folk crafts.

Earthenware by *Kullalar*

Karukurichi is a village situated in Tirunelveli district. About 20 *Kullalar* families are engaged in their traditional occupation. There is a myth that explains the origin of *Kullalar* community and the reason for which they are traditionally engaging in pottery⁵. Clay is an important raw material for earthenware. *Kullalar* get clay from the nearby lakes like *Udaikulam*, *Pathamadaikulam* and *Thalaimaraikulam*. Fine sand is mixed with clay in the ratio of 4:1 (Fig. 1). Then little water is poured on the mixing and left overnight. The next day morning, clay mixing is pressed with foot for some time and then it is knead with hands. The clay gets processed and gets ready for fabrication, locally known as *Manaitthal* (Fig. 2). Traditionally, a wheel, a bamboo stick, iron needle and a bit of cloth is used for fabricating earthenware. Earlier, wheel operated manually was used but now-a-days, electrical wheel is used. The first stage of fabricating a pot is to fabricate the upper portion. A particular quantity of clay is kept on the wheel and the craftsman fabricates the mouth portion of the pot with his hands keeping their left hand on the outer portion and right hand on the inner portion of the fabrication. The size of the pot is measured with hands or sometimes a small stick is used to measure the mouth of the pot. An iron needle is used to cut the unwanted portion of clay during fabrication. After finishing the upper portion, the lower body of the pot is fabricated continuously. Traditionally, fabrication (*manaitthal*) is done only by the men folk of *Kullalar* community. The next step of fabrication is *Thatuthal* i.e tapping the pot. After fabrication, the pot is removed from the wheel and the bottom of the pot is tapped in order to get it shaped. A small flat stone is used to support inside the bottom of the pot and a wooden bat is used for tapping from the outside of the bottom. Generally, women folk perform this work. By tapping, the pot gets a fine shape. A huge kiln (*choolai*) is used to bake the earthenware. *Choolai* is made of bricks. A huge cylindrical drum made of bricks is at the top of the *choolai* and holes are made under the drum to make fire. The earthenware are arrange in a circular way inside the

drum. Straws and woods are used in between earthenware in order to avoid damage. There are several sizes of drums. Generally, in a drum 1,000 items can be burned at a time. After arranging the items in the drum, the mouth of the drum is covered with paddy straws and husk. Then fire is made in the holes under the drum with firewood. Large number of firewood is required to burn the earthenware. The earthenware is kept in *choolai* for about 6 hrs. Then the baked pots are taken away from the *choolai* and arranged for marketing.

Basketry of *Malai Kuravar*

Basketry is a traditional occupation of *Malai Kuravar* domiciled at Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu. *Malai Kuravar* is also known as *Vedar*, *Vettuvar*, *Vettaikaran* and *Veduvar*. *Malaikuravar* are divided in to 6 sub groups; *Kaval kara kauravar* (watchmen), *Uppu kuravar* (salt mongers), *Thappai kuravar* (bamboo splitters), *Karuvappalai kuravar* (curry leaves sellers), *Patchai kuthu kuravar* (tattoo markers) and *Koodai ketti kuravar* (basket makers). These subgroups are based on their traditional occupation and vary from place to place. In *Malai kuravar* society, both men and women folk are engaged in basketry. Earlier, when they were in the jungle they used to collect bamboos- the raw material from the forest but in recent time they buy it from the market. To make the bamboos suitable for weaving, the bamboo sticks are first vertically cut in to pieces (Fig. 3). The number of pieces depends upon the size of the basket; if the size is big bamboo is cut into 4 pieces and if it is small is cut into 8 pieces. These pieces are sprinkled with water and left to dry for few hours; then these pieces are further splitted into 3 pieces, called *thappai*. *Thappai* are polished with the help of a small sharp knife in order to make it fine. These *thappai* are classified into *Muthuku thapai*, *Vaithu thappai* and *Ilan thapai*. *Muthuku thapai* is the outer portion; *ilan thapai* refers to the middle portion and *Vaithu thappai* refers to the final portion of a bamboo piece. To make the baskets more attractive, colours are applied. Colour bars are dissolved in a bucket of hot water; *thappais* are dipped into the water for few minutes and then dried. With these *thappais* designs are made on the baskets.

After processing *thapai*, weaving of the basket starts. The first step of weaving a basket, *adipodal* refers the base or foundation for a basket. Some bamboo reaps are arranged one upon another in a

circular way and a knot is made in the middle. The numbers and the length of reaps depends upon the size of the basket. Then, *thappais* are interlaced on the base. This stage of weaving is known as *meleluputhal* (weaving the upper portion); the final part of weaving basket is *vaimudipu* (binding the mouth). Here, the ends of *thappais*, which are interlacing upward, are bent inward and tugged. There are several kinds of baskets. *Kanji koodai* (rice basket) is used to filter the water from cooked rice. *Azhukku koodai* is used for storing the soiled clothes. It is about 92 cm in height and circular in shape. Paper basket is about 31 cm height and circular in shape; used as dustbin. *Appla koodai* (*pupped* basket) used to keep fried puppets circular in shape with broad mouth. *Kooperai moodi* is a round disk is used to cover water containers. *Kaikari koodai* (vegetable basket), about 15 cm in height is used to store vegetables. *Prasadha koodai*, a small basket is used to carry *puja* items while going to temple. *Thelli koodai* is a basket used for keeping trapped fishes alive. The mouth of this basket is narrow and volume of it is large. Apart from baskets, they also prepare a window mat made of bamboo and *nanneriver* (a kind of root). This window mat is used as a curtain in the window in order to make the room cool. Besides these, in monsoon season, they make some other type of baskets. Since, bamboos are not available during monsoon; they prepare baskets with the fine rods of *udai* or *koolathi* trees. These kinds of baskets are generally used to carry cow dung. The produced baskets are sold in the market⁶.

Grass mat weaving of Muslim Labbai

Muslim Labbai families are domiciled at Pathamadai village in Tirunelveli district. Both men particularly women folk are traditionally engaged in grass mat weaving. Pathamadai village is prevalently branded for its grass mats. Looms are owned by every home and all family members are engaged in mat weaving. *Korai*, a kind of grass is used as raw

material for mat weaving. *Korai* is largely available in the river Tamirabarani. *Korai* is gathered, tied into small bundles and kept in sunlight for about 10 days for drying for getting golden colour. These *Korai* is again tied as small bundle and kept in current water for 7-10 days; then the rotten and wastes are removed and divided on the basis of its length. Only the lengthy grasses are used for mat weaving. Every *Korai* is spited into 2 with a small sharp knife and the inner portion of the *Korai* is removed. These *Korai* are identified with counts like 100, 120, 140 based on their thickness and softness. *Korai* is dyed with natural colours. Herbs like *Sambangi pattai*, *Kasarasan* are mixed with a bucket of water and boiled for some time; *korai* is dipped into this water. Lamp oil is also mixed with the water in order to make the colourings effectively. However, these days artificial colour powders are also used for dyeing. Cotton thread is an important raw material for mat weaving. These threads are identified with counts like 40, 50 and 60. The counts like 40 and 50 are used to weave ordinary mats and the count 60 is used to weave silk mats.

A particular kind of loom used for mat weaving consists of the several parts (Fig. 4). The local names that are used to mention the parts of the loom are *munthandu*, *pinthandu*, *anaikuzhal*, *mukkali*, *maandon*, *thoduvattam*, *viluvattam*, *achu* and *kuchaani*. Here, *achu* is the main tool for weaving. *Achu* is nothing but a kind of axle made of a wooden pole with holes in a horizontal line. Separate *achu* is used to weave different mats. The size of the holes is differing according to the kind of mats. Cotton threads are first horizontally woven in the loom and then *korai* is interwoven vertically in between these threads. Generally, 3-4 days are required to produce an ordinary mat and 10-15 days are required to produce a silk mat. *Korai* that are used for silk mats are very thin therefore it requires more expertise and time. After weaving the mat, a border is stitched with



Fig.1 Mixing of sand & clay



Fig. 2 Manaithal



Fig. 3 Loom used for weaving



Fig. 4 Sticks cutting for basketry

cloths at the 2 widths ends; knot is made with the woven threads at another 2 ends of the mat. Different kinds of mats are produced in Pathamadai. The quality of the mats is identified with the counts of *korai* they used. Separate numbers (30, 40, 50, 100, 120, 140) are given to each kind of mats. Here, lesser the counts, smaller the quality and higher the counts, greater the quality. The counts also refer the number of threads that are woven in the particular space in the mat⁷. The production of mats is more during summer and is less during monsoon. The fashioned mats are sold in the cooperative society. Also, the mat weavers sell the mats at streets in various places. The silk mats are costlier than all other mats. The craftsmen apply several modern designs and colouring on the mats.

Cultural context of folk crafts

Folk crafts are not only the traditional occupation of a particular community but also play a vital role in the socio-religious celebration of the region. The earthenware produced by *Kullalar* takes a significant place in folk religious practices. Offering of *Theechati* (firepot) and *Ayeram kan paanai* (pot with 1,000 holes) is an important ritual performed by the devotees as fulfillment of vow. These pots are considered as sacred. Devotees give some money together with betel leaves, areca nuts and vermilion as an advance to produce the sacred objects. *Kullalar*, who produces these sacred objects have to observe fasting to produce these sacred objects. *Kullalar* are expertise not only in pottery but also in the art of making the images of Gods and Goddesses. They also produce several votive offerings like horse, elephant, etc. Most of the images of the folk deities are made of terracotta. Generally, *Kullalar* produces these terracotta images. Devotees, who wish to erect a new temple for a particular deity in his village, take some sacred sand, locally known as *pidimun* from the origin temple of that deity and give it to *Kullalar*. *Pidimun* is mixed with the clay during the fabrication of the sacred images. The *kullalar* completes all the artistic works of the images other than draw the eyes of the image. On a particular day, the sacred image will be handed over to the devotee and will be erected in the new temple. Generally, the new images are installed during the annual folk religious celebration. During the celebration, the *kullalar* performs a ritual in order to give soul to the sacred images. This ritual is known as *kanthirathal*, i.e. opening of eyes. The sacred

images are covered with cloth and the *kullalar* perform some *puja* and draw the black portion of the eyes in the images. It signifies that the image got its divine power. In some folk religion, devotees offer the images of the gods and goddesses as fulfillment of vow. For example in *Isaki Amman* worship, devotees offer the terracotta image of the Goddess to the temple. The traditional potters produce these votive images. Similarly, the grass mats also have significant role in some traditional marriages. The bride and the bridegroom should sit upon the mat to perform the marriage rituals. These examples signify the importance of the traditional crafts and craftsmen in the socio-culture.

Modern context of folk crafts

The traditional folk crafts and the craftsmen are seriously affected by the modernization and urbanization; plastic and metal products are replacing the traditional materials. The raw materials are replaced with synthetic fibers and metals. The traditional craftsmen are forced to compete with the modern industries for their survival. The craftsmen are also changing their production according to the needs of the society. *Kullalar*, who were producing large number of earthen utensils for cooking are now concentrated on flowerpots and water pots. Grass mat weavers are changing their traditional colouring and started applying synthetic colours. The amount that they earn from the crafts is not enough to meet their day-to-day life. The younger generation is not concerned about their traditional occupation. Consequently, the transmission of the traditional knowledge of folk crafts will become endangered. The traditional craftsmen emerged as the most marginalized section of the society. In the general process they have been relegated to the outer edge of the society economically, culturally, politically and socially. They loss their cultural ideas and values like solidarity, communitarian spirit, cooperation, team work, sharing, sociability, direct face to face relationship harmony with nature and environment, etc. that have been traditionally transmitted over generations is also lost sight of. Modernization keeps the traditional craftsmen in nostalgia about their crafts, which becomes a survival problem of them.

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