



Carvings on the spokes of the wheel

The simple bullock led cart, as per its namesake has—for a long time—been part and parcel of Sri Lankan life; it was the most convenient and preferred mode of transportation at a time when motor cars were scarce. An afternoon spent at Raman Maama’s workshop gave me an insight on the making of this vehicle of yesteryear.

Words Hansani Bandara **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe

One of my initial encounters with a bullock cart was when I read ‘*Gamperaliya*’, a celebrated composition of Sinhala literature. I remember so fondly imagining the blissful cart journey made by Piyal and Nanda along with their families, to the Paragoda *Viharaya* (temple) to offer *Na* (Ceylon Ironwood) flower offerings.

“All women of the group sat on the two benches that were fixed on to the rack of the decorated bullock cart. Men were to follow the cart on foot. The dim light from the two barn lanterns—one hung on the hood and other at the end of the rack from behind—barely faded the darkness dominating the surrounding,” Martin Wickramasinghe, ‘*Gamperaliya*’.

While such accounts reveal the inseparable connection between the bullock cart and Sri Lankan lifestyle of yesteryear, Raman *Maama* (uncle Raman) has led a life that has been closely knit to carts. His family has been the only cart maker in the Katana area for over 40 years.

The lively atmosphere of Raman *Maama*’s workshop made me all the more inquisitive to find out more about the birth and making of what was once the most preferred mode of transportation of the country. In one instance, the *Maina Hama* or the pair of bellows gave out hot fumes fiercely burning the metal bar, which bore each hammering made to mould it into shape. Then Raman *Maama* would slice a piece of wood to make another part. He explains that the first step in making a cart is selecting the proper types of wood. The commonly used are Domba, Gansooriya, Halmilla, Milla and Burutha (Satinwood).

After selecting the wood, Raman *Maama* begins to make the ‘*bone lee*’ or the wooden beams that connect the yoke to the cart. Domba is used for this purpose. Then the rack of the cart is made out of Gansooriya. The rack is usually made to be six feet long and three feet wide, so that it is able to carry a fair amount of weight. As such the ‘*bone leeya*’ is made to a length of 12 feet.

Types of carts

Thirikkale

Thirikkale is a single seater bullock cart, which was mainly used for racing

Barabage

Typically used for the conveyance of heavy loads, the Barabage was also used for travelling

Then comes the toughest task, which is making the wheels. The shape of the wheel is made connecting six bent wooden planks or '*wangu*' on to a frame made using twelve wooden spokes. According to rural diction, the wooden spokes of a cart wheel are called '*garadi*'. The hub of the wheel or '*boas gediya*' is made using satinwood to facilitate the firm holding of the wheel to the axel. Made out of Halmilla and Milla, it is 45 inches in diameter. A metal strap is fixed around the wheel to be able to travel in harsh roads.

Once the rack, '*bone leeya*' and the wheels are completed, they are then fixed together to complete the cart.

Giving an artistic touch to the typical wagon, he would then give the final touches with carvings that are done on the wheel and the rack. This is a trait he has mastered over the years and one that is unique to the carts made at Raman *Maama's* workshop.

"The entire process takes about a month," says Raman *Maama*, adding that now there is an increased demand for bullock carts since many people are fond of keeping them as decorative pieces.

The bullock cart took me down memory lane, to the simplicity of country living and the times of yesteryear, where the pace of life was slow and charming. It was a revisit to the past or better yet, a hope for the future.

Making of a bullock Cart

