Wooden Art of Moratuwa

Posted on



The logs being stripped at a timber mill

The timeless craft of carpentry meanders on in Moratumulle, an ancestral heirloom passed down the generations.

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Cutting the planks to the required size

It’s not for nothing they say that Moratuwa is where all the trees of Sri Lanka meet; where sap greets sap, and heartwood kiss heartwood. For this town, 12 miles south from Colombo, has been the traditional ancestral home of the wood industry, where the nation’s furniture demand has been met for decades by generations of carpenters.

Moratuwa is a kaleidoscope of motion; and though woodwork takes foremost place in its hall of fame, it is also well known for fishing, trading, music, sport and religious activities. Sitting by the banks of Sri Lanka's biggest natural lake, the Bolgoda Lake and the sea to its west, it is also a land of song, ringing with the voices of a whole orchestra of original artistes. It has also been the home ground of some of Sri Lanka's best known cricketers.

Divided into 24 main sectors, the hub of carpentry is located in the area known as Moratumulle. Here, down Idhibadde road, almost every other house is a carpentry workshop: and almost every other building a furniture showroom, showcasing the works of Moratuwa craftsmen. They still produce the old divans, armchairs, wardrobes, single double canopy beds, octagon round tables on tripods and, of course, *pettagams*, the famed Dutch boxes.

But things, certainly, have changed in the bark and sap of the old Moratumulle tree. Gone are the old tools upon which carpenters used to swear by. The driller, the wood planer, the emery stone, the oil stone, the mallet – they just hang around as museum pieces in a forgotten nook in the workshop; and the saw sulks in a corner like a guest who has outstayed his visit. For most of the work is now mechanised. Art's hand has been replaced by the robotic drill.

Secondly, the carpentry works is no longer a one stop shop where once the carpenter was the jack of all activity. Today, items of furniture are produced in the same way that Detroit produces its cars – in a sort of assembly line where different parts produced by others who specialise in that aspect, are put together and made ready for sale. Each aspect of production is outsourced.

For instance in the making of the divan or *kavichchiya*, a most elaborate piece of furniture coming with intricate carvings on heavy wood, the process involves many stages of production and the help of many hands.

The main carpenter takes the first decision as to the choice of timber. Traditionally *kavichchis* are made out of ebony, satin, suriyamara, nadun and teak. But with ebony having placed itself beyond the purse of affordability and the cutting of nadun trees now banned, the most popular wood available is teak.

Once the logs have arrived, it is sent to the mills for stripping. It is essential for the timber to be seasoned in the sun for four to five days. Else the risk of warping can occur, and months after the furniture has been crafted the almirahs, doors and

chairs would begin to warp and go wobbly, a waste of hours of labour.

> An experienced wood carver will take approximately two days to carve out the delicate designs on the wood.

Once the stripped planks have received their due dose of sunshine, it is further stripped into the sizes required for the work in hand. This is usually done at the producer’s carpentry shop. The sapwood, which is the ring that forms closest to the bark and thus softer, is the area most vulnerable to woodworms. The woods called Nadun and suriyamara are known to contain a species of white worm that grows up to half an inch in length.

Out of the many different woods used in today’s furniture, the most susceptible to worm attack is mahogany. This is removed in the stripping process and only the heartwood is used. This of course reduces the quantity of the wood available, however in Moratuwa quality triumphs over quantity at anytime.

Thereafter individual pieces are placed on the drilling machine. Following a template, which marks the intricacies of the design, the basic shapes are carved out from the wood using an electric all purpose drilling, smoothening, planing machine. The legs are outsourced where different machines will be used to give it the rounded shape the design may demand.



Now redundant tools like the oil stone, emery stone plainer, mallet, chisel, and driller

Once the individual pieces have been subjected to the process they are assembled together. This is done by bonding the pieces together by means of a very powerful adhesive and by driving wooden nails where appropriate. Fitting takes an average of two day after which the items are placed in cramps to hold it together until the adhesives dry.

Now that the basic divan has been assembled, the finishing touches to add the magic lustre, which will attract a sale, have to be done. An experienced wood carver will take approximately two days to carve out the delicate designs on the wood. In case a mistake slips in, a new small piece can be chiselled and glued to the main frame.

Thereafter the item is sent to the factory, which specialises in polishing. Here, after smoothing has been done, it is varnished in the required shade. Yet, a hallmark of Moratuwa is the unpolished display, which allows customers to inspect the wood;

with quality assured they have nothing to hide. The naked furniture is stacked along the roadside or in the workshop, a proud display of craftsmanship.

Once polished it is cushioned or weaved with cane, which is a process that takes another day. Then it is ready for public acclamation and sale at a furniture showroom.

Today while a continuous demand exists for sitting room furniture, dining tables and almirahs, the demand for *kavichchis* and pettagam or the hefty treasure chests have dramatically declined. *Pettagams* used to be made out of ebony to give extra weight and to prevent its easy removal by thieves.

Today with ebony being far too expensive, it is made out of teak and is only used as ornamental pieces. The elaborate divan is also considered out of style, beyond the purse, and far too bulky to be accommodated in today’s space restricted homes and are mainly made to order.

The major difficulty threatening the craft today is the scarcity of experienced wood carvers. The carpenters of Moratuwa have to hope for a renaissance in the trade and innovation in the face of a decline in the availability of quality wood. But more than that, they have to pray that the young would continue the legacy of Moratuwa’s prized creations and would take the traditional craft to the future.

As the hammering and sawing echoes, Moratuwa’s wooden heart still beats.






