



Coconut leaf craft

A participatory reflection on reviving an ancient art tradition

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Coconut, the versatile tree crop, profoundly influences the socio-cultural and economic activities of people in various parts of the world. It is eulogised as 'Kalpavriksha' – the 'tree of heaven' as each and every part of the palm is useful to mankind in one way or other. Coconut leaves have an important role in the rural life. The human-coconut leaf relationship starts right from the childhood and it continues up to the last rites. Coconut leaves are used for making toys and craft items, decoration and ritual purposes and different stages of leaves, from tender leaves to dry leaves are used for different purposes.

Coconut leaves and leaf craft

Dry coconut leaves and leafstalks were used for fuel purpose in rural homesteads. Some rituals were performed under the light provided by burning 'olachoottu', small bundle of dry coconut leaves tied together. Plaited coconut leaves were extensively used for thatching roofs of houses, for sunshades, matting for floor as well as walls. Shelters made from coconut fronds

are cheaper and cooler than brick and mortar structures. For construction of Pandals (big halls) for meetings, marriages etc plaited leaves are used. Big baskets also made from half split coconut fronds which is dried and plaited. Coconut leaves have a prominent place in the ritual worship of village deities like *Theyyam*, *Thira*, *Padayani*, *bhoothakula* etc. Tender coconut leaves are liberally used in the costumes of these deities, especially *Theyyam* and *Thira*. During 'Hosanna' or 'Palm Sunday' tender coconut leaves (kuruthola) are used. The same is used during 'Ash Wednesday' as well.

Tender coconut leaves are used for decorating purposes in auspicious functions. *Thalappoly*, the traditional welcome of guests/ dignitaries, tender coconut leaves and split coconut in which the vick is burned in coconut oil is used. In household medicinal preparations also coconut leaves find a place. The extract of tender leaves is administered in cases of body pain. A symbolic treat offered all throughout Indonesia is rice cooked in packets made from fresh coconut leaves called ketupat.



The art of using coconut leaves for decorative purposes is popularly known as puni in the Philippines.

The economic and socio-cultural activities of people of Lakshdweep islands are closely woven around coconut palm and coconut leaves have a role in the major sources of livelihood in the Islands viz., fishing, copra making and tourism. Coconut leaf is an unavoidable component in the traditional fishing boats. The baskets for fish collection, different types of hats etc are made of coconut leaf. Dry coconut leaves are used to make temporary fences and floor used for drying of copra. Natural huts with thatched coconut leaf roof are a fascination for the tourists from various parts of the world visiting the islands and children holding toys made from coconut leaves are a regular feature of the beaches.

The rich heritage of coconut leaf craft which was integral part of socio-cultural and daily life of rural people is slowly fading away. In this fast paced modern era synthetic materials like plastics are replacing the coconut leaves for the varied uses in crafts and even in rituals. Meaningful interventions are required for reviving the rich tradition of coconut leaf craft.

Workshop seminar and exhibition on coconut leaf craft

A workshop-cum-seminar and exhibition on coconut leaf craft was organised during 06-10 September 2016 at CPCRI campus, Kasaragod with the objective to create awareness among the present generation about coconut leaf craft tradition and to discuss about ways and means of sustaining it. The programme was conducted by ICAR-Central Plantation Crops Research Institute as part of its centenary celebrations in collaboration with Folkland (International Centre for Folklore and Culture), an organization devoted for conserving intangible cultural heritage and INTACH, Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage.

About 20 selected coconut leaf craft artists from different parts of Kerala state participated in the programme, besides designers and artists with other backgrounds. It was a residential programme and workshop sessions with discussions, demonstrations and hands on training sessions on leaf craft designs involved lot of time and hence the sessions were stretched to late evening hours. Sessions were mostly lead by Theyyam artists since they are the main stakeholders of coconut leaf crafts. The programme also had the presence of eminent academicians in the field of art history, social anthropology and folklore studies in the inaugural function, seminar and valedictory function. Scientists from CPCRI participated in the seminar and lead the discussion on the research needs for evolving techniques for preserving coconut leaf craft materials and enhancing storage life. As part of the programme children from nearby school were facilitated to meet and interact with the coconut leaf craft artists at work and they also had the opportunity for hands-on training for making toys and craft items using coconut leaves.

Workshop was inaugurated by eminent art historian Mr. K.K. Marar. In his inaugural speech, he gave a brief account of coconut leaves in the life of people of Kerala. Dr. H.P. Maheswarappa, Director -in- Charge of CPCRI presided over the inaugural function. Dr. V. Jayarajan, Chairman of Folkland and Convener of INTACH Kasargod Chapter made introductory remarks. Prof. A. Sreenath, and Dr. K. Muraleedharan offered felicitations. Dr. C. Thamban, Principal Scientist and Head of the Division of Social Sciences, CPCRI, welcomed the gathering and Advocate P. V. Hareesh, Co-convener of INTACH proposed the vote of thanks.

The artists and craftsmen who led the workshop included 89 year old Mr. Andi Panikker an eminent coconut leaf crafts man and Kerala Folklore Academy



fellowship recipient, Mr. Ravindran Panikker, eminent coconut leaf crafts man and Kerala Folklore Academy Award winner, Mr. Avala Shivadasan, Mr. Pradeep, Mr. Sukumaran, Mr. Ashoka, Mr. Ramesan, Mr. Jithin, Mr. Chandrasekharan Nambiar, Mr. Manoj, Mr. Madhusoodhanan, Ms. Aneesha, Ms. Rajitha, Ms. Sreeja and Mr. Sureshan.

During the workshop the artists and craftsmen demonstrated use of tender coconut leaves for making toys like birds, flowers, watches, spectacles, flies etc, decorations and craft items for ritual purposes, use of mature leaves for making different types of baskets, coconut leaf umbrella, coconut leaf chappels etc, and use of dry leaves for making roofing, fencing, curtains, partitions etc. Mr. K. R. Babu, eminent mural painter made a stage decoration design with tender coconut leaves. He was assisted by artists Mr. Unnikrishnan, and Mr. Purushothaman. Large number of people including students, artists and media personnel visited the workshop site and interacted with the artists and craftsmen at work. Besides, during the workshop there was lot of interaction and cross learning among the participants about various aspects of use of coconut leaves for various purposes.

The seminar was held on 8th September 2016 on

the theme 'Coconut leaf craft and Kerala society'. Dr. C. Thamban, Head, Division of Social sciences, ICAR-CPCRI welcomed the gathering. Dr. V. Jayarajan, Chairman, Folkland was the moderator of the seminar. He introduced the theme and scholars presented papers in the seminar.

Eminent Theyyam artist and scholar Aduthila Kunhirama Peruvannan in his presentation narrated the use of coconut leaf crafts in the ritual dance of Theyyam especially the extensive use of 'flowers' made out of coconut leaves in the costumes of Theyyam. He cited the example of the very famous deity, Muchilottu Bhagavathi and said that even though tender leaves are not much used for its costume, the head gear is brightened with beautiful flowers called "Mallika" made of coconut leaves. He also described the use of coconut leaf craft in many other Theyyam deities such as Vishnumoorthy, Chamundi, Pottan etc.

Dr. Dineshan Vadakkiniyil, Assistant Professor Government Brennen College, Thalasseri in his presentation spoke on the changing socio-economic and cultural values of coconut leaves in the lives of Keralites. Though the dependence of rural population of Kerala on coconut for their economic needs is on the decline, coconut leaves have a prominent place in the cultural life of the Keralites. They are still extensively used in the ritual worship of village deities like Theyyam, Thirabhoothakula etc.

Dr. Shameena Beegum, scientist, ICAR-CPCRI briefly narrated the use of coconut leaves for various purposes by people in different regions of the world. She described how coconuts leaves continue to find a prominent place in the major income generating enterprises in Lakshadweep islands. She further presented the details of experiment conducted at ICAR-CPCRI for evolving methods to preserve the fresh colour of coconut leaves. The practical difficulty experienced by the performers of rituals as well as craftsmen was the difficulty to preserve the fresh colour of various coconut leaf based craft materials. Bruises/cuts made on coconut leaves while preparing craft items hasten the loss of colour and appearance. Taking into cognizance these constraints, a preliminary experiment was initiated at ICAR-CPCRI with the objective of assessing the materials and methods of preserving the fresh colour of coconut leaves especially the tender leaves. Experiment was designed taking into account the basic concept of cut foliage. Cut foliage can be defined as leaves or part of leaves along with stems, branches with / without decorative fruits or other parts. It can be used in interior decoration and also for bouquets.

Once the petiole is cut for collecting coconut leaves, an atmospheric pressure forces air into the water duct leading to creation of vacuum which results in wilting



Chowdappa offered the support of CPCRI in the efforts for reviving the coconut leaf craft tradition. He thanked Folkland and INTACH for collaborating with CPCRI for conducting the workshop and seminar on coconut leaf craft.

Dr. V. Jayarajan, Chairman Folkland and Dr.C.Thamban, Principal Scientist and Head, Social Science Division, ICAR-CPCRI in their introductory remarks described the background of planning and implementing the collaborative efforts for bringing together artists/craftsmen and successfully organizing the programme.

Certificates were distributed to the participants by Dr.Chowdappa, Director, CPCRI. Mr. K. Sureshan welcomed the gathering and Dr. D. Jagannathan proposed the vote of thanks in the valedictory session.

Way forward

Many suggestions were made by different stakeholders during the discussions and deliberations of the programme to revive the tradition of the coconut leaf craft art tradition. Important among them are furnished below.

- Programmes are to be implemented to promote coconut leaf craft as an intervention to foster environment friendly culture in the present day context of environmental pollution caused by the indiscriminate use of synthetic materials like plastics. Such programmes to promote coconut leaf craft would provide an opportunity to people of this generation to realise the close relationship that human being once had with the nature but lost in the course of modernization.

- It is necessary to formulate and implement interventions to provide opportunity to children to interact with artists and craftsmen involved in coconut leaf craft and learn from them the art and skill. An enquiry should be made to know the possibilities of converting coconut leaf craft as a vocation.

- Training-cum-workshops on coconut leaf craft are to be conducted at different localities to benefit rural youth and self help groups who show keen interest in acquiring the required skill in coconut leaf craft. Expertise available with the experienced traditional artists and craftsmen can be effectively utilised for conducting such capacity development programmes.

- The potential of effectively linking the coconut leaf craft with tourism should be fully utilised. In the craft villages, coconut leaf artists and craftsmen should be provided with facilities to work, exhibit and sell their products.

- The vast potential of using eco-friendly coconut leaves for stage decoration for marriages and other functions needs to be effectively utilised. Programmes organised by government agencies also should make use of coconut leaves/leaf craft for decorating stage and pandal.

- Currently the coconut craft items are mostly hand made. To enhance the efficiency, the possibility of utilising machines/equipments to prepare coconut leaf crafts should be explored.

- It would be ideal if organisations like fine arts academies/folklore academies institute awards to honor senior artists/ craftsmen who excel in the coconut leaf art, especially who are connected to the ritual art forms

- Difficulty to prevent wilting/loss of fresh colour of various coconut leaf based craft materials is an important problem experienced in coconut leaf craft. Hence, it is necessary to initiate research to evolve and standardize techniques for preserving coconut leaf craft materials and to enhance their storage life.

- Coconut leaf craft is to be recognised by Commissioner of Handicrafts Govt of India, in order to encourage this craft by extending identity cards to the crafts men, insurance benefits, awards etc. ■