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Traditional Basketry in Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

Basket making is one of the oldest enduring traditional crafts in India. It reflects the art and culture of Indian tradition. Locally available plant-based materials are often used for basket making. It is a well known cottage industry and plays a vital role in maintaining the socio-economic and cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu. This study focused on documenting the indigenous knowledge in basket making in Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu, India. The primary data was collected by direct interviews and observations. *Bambusa*, *Dendrocalamus*, *Borassus*, *Gigantochloa*, *Cyperus corymboses* and *Musa paradisica* are used for making baskets. Malai Kuruvar domiciled in Tirunelveli district is weaving the basket by using the bamboo sticks. Different kinds of baskets are worn by society. Palm leaves and stems give various range baskets. Winnowing trays are prepared from palm, bamboo and rattan (*Calamus*) sticks. Traditional basket weaving deserves planned and continuous attention by the government to preserve the indigenous craft and cultural heritage of local villagers.

Key words: traditional basket weaving handicraft, interview, plants, skill, winnowing tray

Background:

Basket making from plant parts is an art that has been practiced since ancient times in various parts of Tamil Nadu. It is an ancient craft and an inherent part of everyday life today and has multipurpose uses. The knowledge and skills required for making these baskets are passed from one generation to the next (Danerek, 2022). Academic research on basketry in

Indonesia and Malaysia has been documented by Sellato (2012). In Japan, studies have been conducted by Butcher (2015), Cort and Nakamura (1994), and Marks (2012), and while in the Philippines, research has been done by Capistrano-Baker (1998), Lane (1986), McKay, and Perez (2018), as well as Silvestre (2000). In Thailand, the work of Cohen (2000) is notable, while in China, Lijun Zhang et al. (2022) have contributed to the field. The knowledge and skills developed over generations have been passed down among indigenous communities. However, due to the invasion of new technology, use and throw culture, and modern lifestyles, the art of basket weaving from plant parts has been neglected and is now only practiced in certain pockets of the district. There is an urgent need to preserve this unique treasure of traditional knowledge. Basketry is a three-dimensional form and characteristic features of baskets include the use of techniques that employ tension or friction to hold the baskets structure together (Nemirovsky et al., 2022). There was no study focused on plants used for basketry and related activities in Tirunelveli District. The aim of this study is to record the plant species and techniques used for basket making in rural communities of the Tiruenlveli District, Tamil Nadu.

Materials and Methods:

Study area

Tirunelveli is a district in the Tamil Nadu State of India. There are 11 Taluks in this district. The total area of the district is 6,693 square kilometers. This district includes 53 towns and 465 villages. The population of Tirunelveli District in 2021 is estimated 4,277,354 (according to aadhar uidai.gov.in Dec 2021 data). People living in Tirunelveli District depend on multiple skills. The total number of workers is 1,436,454 out of which 876,175 are men and 560,279 are women. The villages such as, Mannur, Manapad, Radhapuram, Ambasamudrum, Kalakad and Devarkulam in Tirunelveli District are famous for basket making.

Methods

During the course of the present study, field trips were carried out in the area from January 2020 to March 2022. During the field work, both primary and secondary data were collected. The primary descriptive data was collected through unstructured interviews, field observations and perceptions by the authors. The primary data was gathered from 35 informants (22% male and 88% female). The secondary data was collected by exploring various resources, such as existing research papers, books, and government project reports. The study is mainly

descriptive in nature and is delimited to some of the most distinguished crafts marketed in Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu. To interview skilled workers, questions were formulated to obtain clear data on the availability and marketing of baskets. i) the name of the baskets ii) the use of the baskets iii) the processing techniques and production of baskets iv) the basic source materials for the baskets. Plants used for basket making are collected from the weavers and identified with help of standard literature (Gamble & Fischer 1915-1935; Mathew 1983 -1988).

Results:

Plants used for Basket making

Bambusa, *Dendrocalamus, Borassus*, *Gigantochloa, Cyperus corymboses* and *Musa paradisica* are used for making baskets.

Tools used for basket weaving

Pen knifes, wooden handle awl, hammer, plank, scissors, tape, soaking tank (buckets) are the common tools used during basket weaving.

Preparation of plant materials

The plant materials were collected from the wild. The petiole of *Borassus* or stem of the plant materials is cut into the required lengths. These heavier materials are used to form spokes or ribs of the basket. Smaller reeds are twisted several times and used to make the base of the baskets. The plant materials are treated with warm water for ten to fifteen minutes. When flexible, the plant materials are removed and dried. Again, they are soaked in water for three to four days to make them soft. The whole plant material is split down the middle and shaved by a penknife and cut into different pieces. Slightly hard reeds are used for the purpose of siding, handle making, bottom making etc. Flexible thin strips of light and sturdy wicker are made from soaked reeds.

Dyeing of wickers

Loosen the coil of reed and soak them with natural dyes or artificial dyes in a dye bath. The duration of the dying process may vary depending on the plant material and dye used.

Traditional basket weaving

Different types of basketry works are practiced in Tirunelveli. Checker work, wicker work, crossed weft and diagonal or twilled work are common. These baskets are traditionally worn by women. Warp and weft are the basic elements in basket making. The basket making

process starts with base making. During weaving checker work, light and sturdy flexible thin warp and weft are cut into uniform sizes. The weaving starts with 3 x 3 straight spokes in the centre and requires a number of spokes to be added on either side. In wicker work, a rectangular or square shaped base is laid by twining the elements over one and under one of the other. Three pieces of flexible reed are used in triple twining. The hard spokes are used as warp in wicker type weaving. The flexible small weft passes under one and over one of the former. Warp and wefts are run diagonally in diagonal or twilled weaving.

Fig. 1: Baskets marketed in the study area

The reeds of the traditional round base baskets radiate from the middle. The reeds are woven like the wheel of a two wheeler. The reeds are like spokes, placed at an equal distance from each other. The reeds are curved down consistently. The spokes are pressed evenly in close circular rows and tightly packed. Weaving is continuous until the base of the basket is complete with several rows of reeds. The size of the base determines the height of the basket. Two-ply weave methods are commonly practiced for weaving the sides of the basket. Depending on the size and shape of the basket, weaving in a twisting pattern is continuous on the side, and constant pressure is put on the reeds for tight and compact packing. After completing the side, the remaining spokes are interwoven on the back side in compactly packed squares. From the base of the side of the basket, new reeds are inserted on the back side at regular intervals to weave the handle of the basket.

Some baskets are typically woven with the dried leaves of *Pandanus*. The leaves are left to dry and the thorny side is removed. Then they are straightened with a knife and sliced into different sizes. The variation in colour brightness is obtained by exposing the leaves to the sun for different lengths of time. The bottom of the basket is woven first and then the sides are woven around a wooden box. The handles are added last and the basket is finished by sewing the rim with a needle and a thin piece of *Pandanus*. Lightweight bags are prepared from pseudo-stem fibres of the *Musa*. *Gleichenia* hard sticks are used to weave small mouth wrappers for cows. Small round multihole plates are used to cook food (Idiyyapam) under hot steam. Circular bamboo or rattan plates are produced to dry the food items and also used in rituals. Coconut leaf baskets are loosely woven and weightless. They are traditionally used to carry flowers and garlands. Kinnu petti is a shaped small bowl and lidded container that has traditionally been a part of ceremonial and everyday activities in many villages. It is made from *Borassus* petiole fibre. A centrally crafted single handed multipurpose basket is also used to keep fruits and vegetables, and traditionally used to carry pooja materials for worship of God. The double-handed baskets are used in agriculture and construction work. Table hand-less baskets are round or oval bamboo baskets, though some have cane siding. They are destined for keeping fruits and vegetables.

Many large sized cylindrical baskets are traditionally used in villages around the study area. They are used in day to day activities and ceremonies. They are made up of *Borassus* fibre

and the rim is made of stick of *Borassus*. The closed *Borassus* leaf box is commonly called Mittai Petti, traditionally used to carry sweets. A small compacted *Borassus* leaf box is used to pack Sillu Karrupatti. Sillu Karupatti is one of the traditional and healthy sweeteners, which is Palm Jaggery infused with Ginger and Pepper for a mouth-watering taste. Leaves of *Typha angustifolia* are used to produce rope baskets. The *Cyperus coymboses* (Kora grass) leaves are used for small domestic baskets.

Malai Kuruvar domiciled in Tirunelveli district, weave the baskets by using bamboo sticks. Different kinds of baskets, like Kanji Koodai (rice basket), Azhukku Koodai (for keeping soiled cloth), Appla koodai (pupped basket) (Figure 1), Kaikari Koodai (vegetable basket), Prasadha Koodai (for pooja items), Thekki kodai (to trap fish alive), Vengaya koodai (onion basket) and Kooparai Koodai (round disk to cover water containers) are worn by the Malai Kuruvar society.

Palm leaf and stem give various range products, like Winnowing Basket, Storage Container, Marriage Seer Petti or Arisi Petti, Rice Container, Vegetable Containers, Return Gifts, Palm Leaf Pencil Box, Boxes, Baskets, Purse etc.

Winnowing tray

The usage of Winnowing tray (Muram or Solavu) is common in the study area. It may be circular or elongated (Figure 2). The women populations in the study area engage in beedi rolling. For beedi rolling, the tobacco leaves are kept in circular trays. Winnowing trays are prepared from palm, bamboo and rattan (*Calamus*) sticks. The outer shiny striped fibres are spitted from the sticks (petiole or rachis) and processed by soaking in water. The elongated winnowing tray is used for domestic purposes, such as drying food materials, removing stones and waste from rice etc.

Discussion:

From time immortal, the indigenous basket weaving technique has been practiced in Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu. It is a plant-based craft that is important for the rural economy. Basket weaving is a major source of income for the Koraga tribe in Kerala (Kakkoth 2005). This centuries-old-technique still relies on skills of rural women. It is a versatile and traditional art form, with a wide variety of baskets being used over time. Many beautifully decorated baskets are utilized for various of purposes (Kaminsky 2003). Basket weaving reflects the beliefs and

perceptions of the people. Basket makers use a variety of plant materials. Newman (1974) reported that materials such as Grass, fibres from banana, sisal and papyrus, palm leaves and petioles, woody stems from bamboo, rattan and willow and rushes were used for making baskets. Sweet grass is predominately used in basket weaving in North Carolina and Texas, in the USA (MicKissic 1988). The plants used for basket making have been documented in many studies (Musacchio & Barone Lumaga 2003; Salerno et al. 2005).

The utilization of sweetgrass (*Muhlenbergia sericea*) used in basket-making (Hurley et al. 2013). An invasive grass, *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus* is used for basket weaving in the village Maranola, Municipality of Formia, Latina province, Central Italy (Novellino Dario 2006). *Bambusa bambos, Borassus flabellifer, Corypha umbraculifera, Ochlandra scriptoria* and *Ochlandra travancorica* are used to weave baskets (Shetty et al. 2002; Shanmugam et al. 2012). Subrahmanya Prasad and Raveendran (2012) listed 29 species of plants used by the Koraga scheduled tribe, Kasaragod District, Kerala for weaving baskets.

Basket weaving is a skill-based handicraft. Basket making includes weaving, knotting, twisting and twining of plant-based products (Hill & Gunn 1977). The basket weaving technique involves winding up the plant fibres like a snake (Hebert 2001). Simple coil baskets are woven using old clothsline for the wrap and yarn for the weft (Mirja 1993). The "stake and strand" technique of basket making was reported by Walpole (1989). Long, flexible split strips from reeds, bamboo and cane are required for the plaiting technique of basket making (Hill & Gunn 1977). Macrame, fitching, pairing, ranging, upsetting and waling are different techniques in basket making (Amenuke et al. 1991). Basket making has been recorded in Portugal and Spain by ethnographers and archaeologists (Carvalho 2005).

Conclusions:

Today, basket weaving falls under the category of cottage industry in India. Many new varieties of baskets made from plant materials adorn shops. Basketry provides support for the rich culture, tradition and heritage of India. Traditional craftsmanship plays a big role in the identity of the country. Today, the cultural changes, globalization and lack of skilled labour pose significant challenges to the survival of traditional basketry. There is an urgent need to preserve the knowledge and skills related to traditional basket making and pass them on to future generations.

Declarations:

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