



The many shades of old wood

Wood wonders

How the beauty of South Indian wood inspired a woman to start a shop in homage

By Sushan Shetty

IF you thought period furniture was prohibitively expensive, Maram will change your mind. Buried in the heart of RMV Extension, Maram is not easy to find, but when you do discover it you will also discover that it was worth the journey.

Maram, meaning wood in Malayalam, is run by Sheila Panjwani Baru and her husband Krishna. The seven-year-old shop came into being as Sheila realised what beautiful crafts-

manship was available in South India and how good the woodwork was. It was also a very good excuse to travel in South India. For a person born and brought up outside India, Sheila believes this is the best way to get in touch with one's roots and acquaint oneself with our rich cultural heritage.

She sources her raw material from villages in South India, picking up doorways, pillars and furniture that nobody wants and transforming it into exquisite pieces. There are people who believe that a thing of beauty is not to be tampered with to suit our convenience. Sheila is not among them. "Our needs and lifestyle has changed much over the years. Back then, only men slept on beds, women slept on the floor, that is the reason why the beds were so small. Now, of course, no woman would agree to such an arrangement. We can and do make changes.

"To suit modern requirements there have to

be additions in the furniture like extra keyboard shelves in tables. People are growing taller, in each generation so there are a few inches added. In those days people were thinner and leaner so you find the seats were small," reveals Sheila. Old wood is used to make all such modifications.

Sheila's favourite work is the type that comes from Kerala, "The artisans from Kerala prided themselves on their craftsmanship," she says. "It was simple, not heavily carved - they valued wood." The results were beautiful creations in teak, rosewood and jackfruit wood, with ebony inlays that made their craft distinctive.

Sheila has come across very little furniture that actually belongs to Karnataka. "Probably because Karnataka has been very minimalistic, the only wooden furniture seen here has been made in Andhra or Tamil Nadu," says Krishna. Andhra furniture has heavy geometric carvings rather than floral motifs that are popular in other countries.

"In Tamil Nadu," adds Sheila, "the first owner would put his initials on everything from furniture to ceramic ware." Sheila is a mine of such interesting bits of information. A trip through her vast shop floor can enrich you about life in the era gone by like no textbook on history will. Because this is about the common man, not the exploits of Kings.

So Sheila is partial towards South Indian furniture for its excellent craftsmanship, affordability and the fact that in North India the wood used most often was sheesham, which is not the best kind of wood. Her shop floor has pillars, cupboards, doors, chairs, sideboards - all less than a 100 years old. "Because about 15 per cent of our clientele is for-

eign, they cannot take anything more than a 100 years old abroad. That is also the reason why we don't buy things from temples and religious places."

They are proud of a partners desk they made recently, which is a wide table where two people can work. "A partners desk is a very colonial tradition," says Sheila, "and colonial furniture has bits of the French, Portugal, English styles all made with Indian teak wood."

Priced between Rs 2,000 and Rs 22,000, their furniture includes unheard-of antiquities like a dowry box with secret compartments, an Ayurvedic medicine chest and camphor-wood boxes

that preserved precious silks in the days gone by. There are also ceramics imported from Holland that were custom-made for the Indian market and made-to-order planters chairs - "that is not something that can be used as it is, because they were made for tall, European planters," says Sheila.

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