

An Investigation of Key Factors to Uplift Traditional Lac (*Laksha*) Craft in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Lac craft is a traditional craft in Sri Lanka and it has a traditional immense and endurance history. Lac is one of the decorative medium that can be applied on different types of materials, such as wood, ivory, pottery, clothes, horns, shells etc. Lac craft is an identical precious craft in Sri Lanka. But in current society it is not uplifted to cater present social needs. This can be considered as a dying industry and as a traditional craft that was continued from generation to generation, even though it is not continued as before. As the knowledge is not transferring to future generations; it will become a dilapidated craft in the craft milieu after three or four generations. It is needed to accompany for future generations to identify their tradition ethics, tools, equipment, decorations, manufacturing methods and market opportunities.

This research oblige to identify the key factors that can affect endangered and upgrade to cater the present social needs which is a current need of the craft industry in Sri Lanka. It is a cast based industry and it was continued in several rural areas in Sri Lanka with a traditional identity, by the way still it continues in few areas in country. Especially craftsmen of Kandy and Matale districts still continue their practices in traditional manner. This research generally considers the craft places in central province to gather factual data.

The methodology of the research was based on the Grounded theory method. The research followed the quantitative and qualitative research methods. The required data were collected through an extensive literature survey, case study use of variety of Lac crafts and structured questionnaires given to the people who are engaging in Lac work in Pallehapuwida to identify main factors that are affecting to uplift the Lac craft. The research identifies main six key factors in order of the importance as introducing new technology, new designs, new materials, introducing new colour by experiments, conducting trainee programmes, and teaching as a traditional technical subject. These are the main key factors that should be considered to uplift the dying tradition of Sri Lankan lac craft to get keen and endorsed future.

Keywords: Uplifted, Traditional, Design

1.0 Introduction

Sri Lanka had a great endurance history for traditional art and craft industry. It was famous through the world for its exquisite handicrafts and elegant handicrafts sectors were established all around the country. Lac work or *Laksha* is one of the superlative craft category that could be identified in the craft milieu.

Lac craft is a cast based industry. It was continuing from generation to generation, even though it is not continuing as before. The origination of this craft goes back to back feudalism era. People who engaged in the Lac craft had to serve the king ship serving with different types of objects out of Lac work. The material usages of Lac work were hundred percent natural and consisted with eco-friendly substances. It can be identified as one of the decorative fusion that can be applied on different types of materials such as, wood, ivory, pottery, clothes, horns, shells. It had a great and endurance history, but in current society it is not uplifted to cater present social needs and social demands. It will become a dilapidated craft in the craft industry, after few generations. The industry has been identified as one of the elegant handicraft in Sri Lanka. It was observed that Sri Lankans have resorted to introduce new materials, techniques, Designs and new avenue to preserve this craft.

Thus the main objective of this research is to identify main key factors to uplift Lac craft industry in Sri Lanka. The paper begins with literature review, research limitations, research method, historical background of lac craft, manufacturing processes, results and discussion, conclusion and recommendations. Finally, it tries to identify the key factors to uplift the traditional Lac work.

2.0 Literature Review

The craft is based on the Natural Lac, which is a main material of the *Laksba*. It can be recognized in different names like Lac, *Laksba*, *Lakiri* and also identified as a surface decoration method for the materials as mentions (see section-0.1). It helps to add additional value to the products. Lac craft is not originated in Sri Lanka. It was transferred from other countries with their cultural influences. Lac craft had a golden era in the feudalism period. According to the legend they had to serve to the kingship providing with different products.



Figure 2.1: Lac work object – Colombo National Museum

Origin of the Lac craft goes back to pre-historic era. As a legend it transfers from the people who came with queen *Baddhakachchayana* or *Theri Sangamiththa*. It is quite doubt full how it was established in Sri Lanka, any way it proved that it was transferred from India. And in the other hand one of the legends has discovered that Lac work have had a grate era; because a king of *Divya Kasasthawansha*. He made eight *karadus* out of lac work. Mostly lac workers are identified as *I-vaduo*; people who make arrow; the legend discovered that *beeya*, and *hella* is made in the period of Ramarawana. According to these facts, Lac industry has had a great history. People who are engaged in the lac craft had a talent to make quality products to challenge Indian products. such ornament in kandyan districts is almost invariably confined to incised lines and circles similar to work from Jounpur in India” Coommaraswamy (1979). It is proved that Sri Lanka had a great history for the Lac craft specially in the mediaeval period.



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3.0 Research Limitation

In past Lac craft was spread out all around in the Sri Lanka, but in present it is continuing in several rural areas and has become a delapidated craft. In Kandy district still it continues as a traditional manner with cultural identity. This research is mainly focusing on the craft places in central province. Pallehapuvida in Matale district is famous for Lac craft from the ancient time. Still they continue their craft in traditional manner. It was famous for *Niyapothuweda* rather than the *Pattabweda*. Because of that, this research focuses on the village of Pallehapuvida to gather factual data.

4.0 Research Method

The research method was based on the Grounded theory method and the required data were collected through an extensive literature review, actual description of observer, experience of the craftsman, case study use of different types of Lac work use in current society. Quantitative and qualitative research methods are adopted to collect data. To collect factual data structured questionnaires were given to the people who are engaging in Lac work in Pallehapuvida to identify main key factors that are affecting to drawback the Lac craft. The questioner consisted with 20 questions which are followed open needed and close ended questions. It was distributed among 50 people who are engaging in Lac craft in the Pallehapuvida.

5.0 Historical Background of Lac Craft and Craft Evolution

Lac work in Sri Lanka is a famous handicraft in Kandyan era. During the Kandyan kingdom from the 15th to 18th centuries, art and craft became extremely organized and received royal patronage. Lac workers or *I- Vaduo*, literally “arrow makers” are the lower division of the *archario* or *Namandanno*. As mentioned above they had to serve the king ship. There are two types of manufacturing methods in the process of Lac work. Generally they did both the wood turning and ornamentation. They had to provide bows, arrows, spears, staves, and bed legs, handle of cressets, banner poles, powder horns, oboes and book covers out of Lac.

At the beginning this craft was established in several areas; but in present it can be considered as a dying industry and as a craft that was continued from generation to generation, but it is not continuing as before. This craft still continues in several places, specially Central province in Matale district Pallehapuvida, Hurikaduwa, Balangoda- Pallekanda, and down south Angalmaduwa near Tangalle.

Lac is a nontoxic natural resin secreted from the bark of certain trees that have been infested with the Lac beetle. Ceylon Lac is the product of two species of the Lac insects.

1. *Keppetiyā* or *Kon-Lakada* – It is collected from the trees of *Keppetiyā*, *Kon*, and *Hinguru* tree
2. *Telakiriya Lakada* - It is collected from the *Telakiriya* tree, the special thing is *Telakiriya Lakada* is brighter and clear quality rather than the *Kon-Lakada*.

These are the trees that can be collected from the *Laksha* in Sri Lanka; sometimes used Indian Lac. Nowadays imported wax called shallack is used instead of Lac obtained from insects and produce.

6.0 Manufacturing Processes of Lac work

6.1 Traditional Manner of making *Laksha*

Lac craft has a quite interesting manufacturing process. Beginning to end of the product it was handled by manually. As special features they have keen and quick talent to produce crafts stage by stage. As mentioned above Lac is a resin secreted from the bark of certain trees that have been infested with the Lac beetle. The resin is scraped from the bark, melted and strained.

“The freshly collected twigs bearing the lac insects are dried in the sun; the resin is then removed, pounded, and winnowed or sifted. The crushed lac is enclosed in narrow bolster shaped bags of thin cloths; the bags are heated over charcoal fires and twisted till the melted lac oozes through the cloth. The lac is scraped off; a part of it is next softened over a fire and attached to the point of a small stick, and then again warmed and a second stick attached” (Coomaraswamy A., p.216). According to the above explanation, a clear idea can be obtained about the process of traditional lac preparation. It is not a simple process but the people who are engaged in the craft served their *rajakariya* as well.



Figure 6.2.1: Original Lac colour

6.2 Colour Preparation

Colours are playing a main character in the Lac craft. Color is one of the silent elements and it can express meaning and add an additional value to the product. Heavy and bright colors were used in the Lac craft industry. Coomaraswamy (1979) explained that, Sinhalese lac work is characteristic by great brilliancy and gaiety of coloring. People did creative decorations sensitively and pleasantly, it was proved by the products that they made. Limited colors were used to decorate Lac work. Red, Yellow, Green, Black are the main colors of the Lac craft. Bright colors were used to fill the surface background and light colours were used to create the decorations. Original lac color is Bright golden brown, the pigments can be applied to the lac by melting the component and pounding the coloured powders. Color pigments are prepared out of natural elements.

Red Colour – Vermillion (Sadilingam)

Yellow Color – Orpiment (Hiriyal)

Green Color – Orpiment +Indigo

Black Co.our – Soot of lamp



Figure 6.2.3: Coloured Lac Strips

Colours were used to apply in background surfaces and also for inlaying in ivory hone and chunk work in past. Common wooden elements, such as *Sesath* poles, Working stick (*Heramity*),



A



B

Figure 6.2.4 (A,B) : Inlaying on Ivory
Colombo National Museum



Figure 6.2.5: Working Sticks

6.3 Colour Applications and Decoration Methods

Lac is allied in two different techniques, *Niyapothu weda* (Nail work) and *Pattal weda* (Pool work /Lathe work). Hurikaduwa in Pathadumbara and Angalmaduwa near Tangalle on the south, are the famous places for *Pattal weda*. The method call *Pattal weda* is practiced with applying in a stick of Lac to the object fixed in to a of a lathe machine. The resulting friction caused by revolving objects melts the Lac making it apply on wooden layer to increase glossy effect. Limited number of objects can be made out of lathe machine. All the items are commercial and the importance is carving and engraving methods can be applied simply. Limited design patterns were applied in the *Pattalweda*, just concentric bands of color known as *adara kondu*. Ornaments, ash trays, walking sticks, wooden handles, latter openers, book ends are examples for products of *Pattalweda*.

Hapuvida in Matale district is famous for *Niyapothuweda* (Finger Nail work) not only that but also they were doing *Pattalweda* in small scale. The work is done mainly with the finger or thumb nail without using any machinery. It is quite interesting process; craftsman has special talent to do it carefully with keen and tiny. First they apply basement layer using with Lac piece and threads used for the decorations on top of the wooden base. The technique involves drawing heated and softened Lac in to a fine threads and laying it in a pattern.

It is proved that; The Lac worker sits with a *chatty* (pot) containing a charcoal fire nearby, for the Lac and objects to be decorated has to be warmed continually. The tools consist of short sticks with a colored lump of Lac at one end; also a strip of the leaf of the tali pot tree, first the object is coated with the ground colour, after which it is warmed over the fire and Lac pressed and smoothed with the talipot leaf. A lump of Lac is warmed and a small piece held between finger and thumb while the rest is pulled away. The Lac is served with the thumb nail and smoothed with the talipot leaf (Serandib, November 2010). Traditional motif were used to decorate the Lac surface like, Floral patterns, *Velpota*, *Kalasdagaya*, *Kolawela*, *Bokola*, *Arimbuwa*, *Pthura*, *Adara kondu* (plain lines), *Binduwa* and *Galbinduwa*, *Kolawela*, *Palapethi*, *Lanugeta*, *Dela*, *Sulivela* are some of them.



Figure 6.3.1: Melting Lac Figure

6.3.1: Niyapothuweda Figure

6.3.2.: Making Laksha Thread

7.0 Identification of the Village Pallehapuvida

Pallehapuvida is the village created for the people of the Lac work during the Kandyan period; it was located in the hills near the Matala, 24km from Kandy. It is the only place where Lac work can be found in traditional manner. The village of Pallehapuvida is renewed for *Niyapothuweda* (Nail works) from the ancient times. The more recently introduced *Pattalweda* or lathe work for Pallehapuvida village. According to the folktale the villagers of Pallehapuvida, they had to gain currency in the period of king Vijayapala of Godapola. And according to another folklore, “was where it all began. Villagers recount how, in the 1630s, King Rajasinghe II sent a messenger throughout the kingdom requesting a craftsman to create window panels with lac-work - probably based on the existing Indian version - for the palace. In a distant village a man named Pusappu hailed the messenger to undertake the job. Indeed the king was so pleased with the work that he gave Pusappu some land, and 30 apprentices, accompanied by an elephant who migrated there. On arrival the elephant lay on its side to relax, so the village was called Hopi hida (“where the elephant lay down”), later Hapuvinda, and finally Pallehapuvida” Hussein (2003). It can be identified that Lac craft was originated in this village.

7.1 Products and manufacturing methods.

In past they used *keppetiya* trees from Nayakumbura to obtain Lac. The name called *Tattu kramaya* was the method of applying *Lakada pati* to the revolving wood, One after the other to form layers of different colors. First, they applied Yellow colour, then Red and finally applied Black and after that it is polished with *wetakeiya* or talipot leaf. They used *Ketayama katuma* to engrave the design. Finally they obtained valuable creative art pieces by their incredible talents.

7.2 Designs, Materials and Technology

They were doing same processes and same techniques of Lac melting as mentioned before. They made *Lakada Kooru* out of *Puwak* wood. They used traditional decorations to carving, engraving and inlaying methods. *Galbindo* (diamond shaped spots), *Palapethi* (petal pattern), *Dela* (net pattern), *Patura* (elongated isosceles triangle) are decoration patterns that were commonly applied on the Lac objectives. Other than that they used traditional motives to embellish their products. *Hansaputtuwa* (pair of swings), *Bherunada pakshiya* (double headed eagle), *Gajasinghe* (elephant –lion), *Liyavela* (creeper) were used to decorate the Lac objects. Finally product was polished with talipot and *wetakeiya* leaf. Specially they produced products like, *Bastham* (staffs), *Kodi-mitiya* (flag poles), *Hella –miti* (spear handle), *Pot Kamba* (Book covers).



Figure 7.2.1: Carving on Lac layer



Figure 7.2.2: Lac Product

8.0 Result and Discussions by Questionnaire survey

The main findings of this research identify six key factors in the order of the importance as, Introducing and developing new technology, Designs, Materials, Colour experimentation, conducting trainee programmes, and Teaching as a technical subject. These are the main factors that should be considered to uplift the dying tradition of Lac craft in Sri Lanka.



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In the traditional approach of applying Lac work uses three dimensional forms by roaring and pasting method. Other than that, it can be tested in the two dimensional forms, it can be changing turning and heating methods. It will be a new avenue for the traditional Lac craft. Design development is another fact that needs to be developed. Still Lac works have limited applications such as banner polls, boxes, book covers, walking sticks etc. But it can be explored rather than that accessories, jewellery, furniture items, and interiors as new trends. Design should be modified to cater to the present social needs and trends and it should be updated to set consumer preferences.

In past, several types of materials were used for Lac works. But in present it is limited to wood, but it should be explored to the other materials such as clay, ivory, clothes, horns, shells etc. It will help to add an additional benefit to the Lac craft in a modern way, as people like to buy new designs made out of new materials. Colour is a significant fact in Lac craft. They were using limited number of colours for *laksha* strips. As an experiment it can be changed by applying engraving and inlaying methods. And also the *tattugema* and *walakulgema* are new methods for color experimentation. The main reason to the low quality of the Lac is today lacquer work produce by the inferior method of painting the object and use varnish to get shine effect. It is a main threat for the workers who work in correct manner. Varnish products are sold in cheapest price and it competitively effect quality products. If it happens in long duration, future generation would not know about the quality of the Lac craft.

Another reason is that craft is not continued as before, because of attitudes of people. Because of that the methods and techniques are not transferred to the younger generations. In 1980 they won Vishwakarma award and president award in 1990. they have the talent but it not transferred to the younger generations. They have social issues; it is required to set their mind to re-generate the industry. If special workshops or trainee programmes can be arranged in villages, the youth could work together in a dynamic environment and share their ideas to set their mind.

Another finding is training as a technical subject. Sri Lanka has a new trend to reestablish traditional art and craft to enhance the Sri Lankan purity. It can be introduced to the school or university teaching level, and high education. It will be helpful to set the mind of the younger generations. Rather than that government solution conduct diploma or

trainee programmer to give opportunity. It would be helpful to set the mind of the younger and add some status to the craft people in the society.

In present it can be identified as a dilapidated craft, it should be preserved for the future generations as it has a traditional validity and traditional identity. It is required to be uplifted by identifying their weaknesses and their threats. It is important to introduce new technologies and designs, colour experiments, application of new materials by keeping its' traditional identity.



Figure 8.1: New Trends of Lac work
Source - Student Work

9.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Lac craft is a valuable handicraft in Sri Lanka. It can be developed and protected for the future generation and it is a requirement of the current society. Hence this research has made an attempt to identify the prevailing situation of the Lac craft and areas which need to be developed to uplift Lac work tradition. It has been proved through this questionnaire survey and case study consequently identified six key factors, accordingly introduce and develop new technology, designs, materials, color experimentation, conduct trainee programme, and teaching as a technical subject are the main key factors that should to be developed to protect Lac craft. These criteria can be used to improve the quality of Lac work and to keep the dying tradition as a traditional craft. Achieving these key factors will help to reach to climax of the traditional Lac craft in Sri Lanka.

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