

Lacquer Stories from Burma: Burmese Lacquerware in Nattukottai Chettiar Families

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Figure 1. A Burmese betel leaf box from a Chettiar household, early to mid 20th century. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board

The Burmese Connection

The *Nattukottai Chettiars*, or *Nagarathars* as they were known, were a community of traders and private financiers originating in the Chettinad region of Tamil Nadu (the ancestral homes of the Chettiars are spread across 75 villages east of Madurai and the south of Thanjavur and Thiruchirapalli). Their presence in modern Southeast Asia can be traced back to the 1820s.

They settled across Burma (now Myanmar), Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaya during the period of colonial expansion. In Burma, it was the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the passing of the Burma Land and Revenue Act of 1876, that brought about the first substantial movement of Chettiars into Burma (Turnell 2005). Yangon, Bago, Moulmein, Kyauktan, Kyikkaw, and Rakhine state were some areas they were extant in; temples constructed by the Chettiars in these districts still stand testimony to their presence in the region. By 1936, the Chettiars owned 25 per cent of agricultural land in Burma, up from six per cent in 1930 (Than 2006, 169).

Lacquer for Chettiar Ceremonies

Bright red, untouched, immaculate examples of Burmese lacquerware boxes, containers and trays can be found across Chettiar households even today. These lacquerware boxes, vessels and containers attest to the Nattukottai Chettiars' affluence in Burma during the colonial period. They were given as dowry, commonly known as *seedanam* in Tamil, to a Chettiar bride for use in circumstances of need.¹ Interestingly, unused articles like these lacquerware objects would be transferred from one generation to the other, through the female line. Burmese and other Southeast Asian lacquerware (called *maravai* in Tamil), and enamel ware (called *mangu saman* in Tamil) were taken back to India, and incorporated into the traditional Chettiar wedding ceremony as *seedanam*. This is but one example that demonstrates the cross-cultural influences on diasporic communities settled across Southeast Asia.

These traditional Burmese lacquer boxes are constructed with a foundation of fine bamboo splints and horse hair, the latter forming the weft of the basketry (Isaacs and Blurton 2000). This creates a thin walled, flexible and light-weight finished article, even after several coats of lacquer. Betel leaf boxes are one of the most ubiquitous types of Burmese lacquerware. Figure 1 shows an example from a Chettiar household which was probably used as a decorative article. They bear Burmese inscriptions and narratives typical of Burmese lacquerware produced in the late 19th to early 20th century in Bagan.

Certain pieces, such as the *kudam* (water pot) in Figure 2, would have been specially commissioned in the design of a traditional vessel used to carry water in southern Indian custom. In the early 20th century, lacquer finished jackwood and bamboo pots were used by Tamil communities in Myanmar to transport water. These therefore, catered to the southern Indian rather than the Burmese aesthetic, eventually finding place in the Chettiar household.



Figure 2. A *kudam* or lacquer pot, early 20th century. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board.



Figure 3. A wooden plate with lacquer finish and gilt embellishment. The reverse of the plate displays ownership initials in Tamil script, reading அ மு or *a mu* and அ ன க ம or *a na ka ma*, possibly originating from Palembang, Indonesia. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board.

The Chettiars typically belonged to large joint families, with each branch of the family owning very similar objects of their diasporic heritage. It was important to etch their belongings, valuable or utilitarian, with initials clearly indicating ownership. The style of initialing would also provide a sense of dating. In the case below, Tamil initials have been inscribed on the back of the plate.

After their exit from Burma, mostly between 1948 and 1962, following the Japanese Occupation of Burma, the Land Nationalisation Act of 1948, and Burmese programmes of nationalisation and indigenisation, the Chettiars and other Indian communities repatriated to India, or dispersed to other British colonies in Southeast Asia, including some arrivals in Singapore. While examples in museum collections, such as the lacquerware discussed above, are important relics of the rich and varied diasporic experience of Chettiars in Southeast Asia, objects such as these still have a functional and ritual role in the lives of both source and migrant communities. □

The lacquerware mentioned in this article can be viewed at Level 4 of the Indian Heritage Centre's permanent gallery, under the Roots and Routes section.

Notes

1. The dowry was given for the bride, in the event that she was widowed, for her financial security. In the event that the dowry was unused, as in most cases, it was passed on from generation to generation through the female line.

Bibliography

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