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THE FURNITURE AND JOINERY INDUSTRY IN SRI LANKA ^{1/}

by

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1. Current status of the furniture and joinery industry in Sri Lanka

a) Private Enterprises

Almost all the requirements of household furniture for the Island are fulfilled by the private manufacturers scattered throughout the country. Most of the owners of furniture shops have their own small carpentry shops and the items are manufactured employing skilled carpenters. Some of such sellers buy the items manufactured by individual carpenters and in such cases the finishing (sanding and polishing) work is done by the seller itself. Usually the manufacturers produce according to their own designs. If a customer needs a particular design he could get this done separately. The material used is mainly solid timber. The commissioning of the wood-working complex of Ceylon Plywoods Corporation made it possible for these manufacturers to buy chipboards - both in veneered and unveneered forms - to manufacture their furniture. The timber used by them is air-seasoned as no kiln facilities are available. These private enterprises also carry out the manufacture of carved furniture and this type of furniture seems to have a good export market. In this country carved furniture has a long history and these have been in use for a very long time. Only very few of these manufacturers have even the basic woodworking machinery required to carry out their work; almost all the work is done by hand and skilled workers, carpenters, are available at low cost. All this furniture is for the local market and few manufacturers have recently started the manufacture of furniture for export.

Another kind of furniture which plays a prominent role in Ceylonese market is the furniture manufactured using cane. Cane grows locally in this country. The main items manufactured using cane are easy chairs and sitting room settings.

There are very few manufacturers of steel furniture too, in this country and in this case the whole work is carried out by the manufacturer itself.

b) Organisations sponsored by the Government and Government owned Organisations

b.1) Ceylon Plywoods Corporation is a Government owned organisation and at the moment all the woodworking units come under it. It comprises the following units.

1. Wood Working Complex at Kosgama

This consists of a plywood and veneer factory producing mainly the tea chests required for the tea industry of Sri Lanka; it also supplies plywood and veneer required for the furniture factory.

- a chipboard plant
- a saw mill and
- a furniture plant which is fully mechanised.

All these are integrated so as to get the full utilisation of the available materials and other resources. The furniture factory has all the machinery required for woodworking and is intended to produce items using the materials received from other three factories. The factory was commissioned about 2 years ago and the following items are produced at the moment.

- Doors, door frames, office tables and chairs, windows and window frames, folding chairs, coffee trolleys, magazine racks, coffee tables, side tables, dining tables etc., tea chest battens and joinery work such as wall panelling and panels required for railway compartments is also done in this factory. Another product which it was not expected to produce at the planning stage are shuttles required for textile industry. Shuttles are produced on a small scale at the moment and it can be expected that in future this might become a main product of this factory.

- Work has been started to produce a model pre-fabricated house and it is expected, if this is accepted by the Government and the other authorities concerned, to produce it on a mass scale as it would be of great help for them in their low cost housing schemes. The other items which will be produced in future may be bed-rooms and dining room settings, benches for sewing machines, and block boards etc.

The furniture plant was started with workers who did not have prior training or knowledge of woodworking machinery and modern techniques of woodworking industry. Technical assistance was provided by the Romanian experts who were the suppliers of the machinery and other installations for the woodworking complex. Except in case of the chipboard plant within the first year after starting the production in the furniture factory some export orders were also carried out; up to-date the following items have been produced for export: doors, coffee tables and side tables, dining tables and chairs, school furniture sets and bacon boards. The countries are mainly Australia and Japan. It is expected in future that more and more export markets, particularly in the Asian region, could be explored with the tremendous capacity of the furniture plant.

11. Carpentry Division

Seven carpentry units which are scattered throughout the island come under this. These were earlier under the national Small Industries Corporation and about 2 years back were taken over by the Plywoods Corporation. One of these units has all the wood-working machinery and the others have very few machines - mostly up to 3 or 4 basic machines. All these units produce the furniture required for Government Department and Government institutions, such as schools and hospitals. Almost all the work is done by hand and skilled carpenters have been employed at a cheap rate in these units. They use partially air dried timber for their work as seasoned timber is not available. The work is done in the traditional way and flow line arrangement has been introduced recently in most of these units and more and more chipboards - both veneered and non-veneered forms - have been introduced in the products. Earlier about 500 different items were produced in the carpentry division and now the items have been standardised and the number of different items has been reduced to about 80.

b.2) In addition to above there exist some co-operative unions of carpenters and Government owned carpentry schools. The co-operative unions of carpenters have been formed by the carpenters of the different areas and they execute the furniture orders required for Government schools. Local bodies such as village councils and parents' unions of schools help such unions of carpenters; the aim of these unions is to provide employment to the carpenters in the respective areas. The carpentry schools have been established with the view of training carpenters.

As a whole in Ceylon, furniture items have not been standardized and steps have been taken by the Plywoods Corporation to standardize them.

Fittings:

The metal fittings required for furniture production are now produced by the local manufacturers itself but the quality has to be improved further. These fittings are of conventional type, in most of the cases, and with the help of Romanian experts action has been taken to get more and more rationalized fittings to suit modern furniture designs.

Finishing Materials

In most of the cases local furniture manufacturers use French polish for their finishing work. Since the petroleum based products are expensive, this is now being replaced by teak oil which is cheaper. Petroleum products are used only in those cases where it must be used.

Upholstery Materials

Foam rubber has been replaced by Ceyesta, a cheaper material which is produced locally. Still the required cloth has to be imported and as such the prices of upholstered furniture have gone up tremendously in the last few years.

2. Future prospects for the industries' development

From above it is seen that there is a possibility to get the full utilization of the excess labour available in the carpentry division workshops; it is expected to integrate these workshops with the

furniture factory at K. Ganga. Mechanical processing could be done at Kespam and the part of the work can be transferred to the individual carpentry units for the finishing work, assembling and for dispatching. The finishing section of the furniture factory then will be able to concentrate more and more on the items produced for export markets. This will enable the carpentry division to produce furniture for better quality using seasoned solid wood and chipboard.

It has also been arranged to carry out research work on shuttle production and this item will have a good demand in future in this country. If the research work yields good results a separate section might have to be established to produce shuttles so as to meet the country's demand.

3. UNIDO could provide assistance in the following ways

i) To train the managerial and technological personnel in a suitable country which should have long experience in furniture production. The product design should be given priority in such a case. This will help the country upgrade the production in the factory by using the designs which will be more suitable for the country and batch production which will be possible in the furniture factory.

ii) To explore deeper the export market potential; this will mainly be the Asian market.

iii) Tool and tool maintenance -

The services of an expert would fulfil this requirement. At the moment no one has been trained properly in this field and it has caused so many difficulties.

iv) Surface finishing -

The work in the finishing section has to be improved from its present state. The services of an expert would be required to bring the work up to a good standard.

v) Production of shuttles -

At the moment only solid wood is utilized for shuttle production. UNIDO will be in a position to help to carry out the research work in the case of shuttles.



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