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# BRASSWARE INDUSTRY

## UPHOLDING THE FLAME OF SRI LANKAN TRADITION

Illumination is very much part of our lives. Since the history of mankind, fire has been linked to our civilisations, transforming our lives with its heat and radiant glow. The flames were held in various vessels in different cultures including iron, brass and clay lamps.

The use of brass lamps in cultural and ritual traditions can be traced back to centuries in Asia. We see brass lamps in various sizes adorning homes, places of religious worship, hotel lobbies and museums. Apart from its intricate aesthetic appeal, the brass lamp symbolises life, its flame ushers the dawn of new hope, when lit. These antique lamps are considered a part of a family's heritage and can be traced back to decades, sometimes even a century. The lamp with the rooster is the most popular design, and this lamp is kept at all auspicious events.

On a recent visit to Pilimathalawa (Kandy), I observed some shops selling an assortment of brass items. The traditional brassware industry of Kiriwawula, Pilimathalawa is a national icon within the domain of traditional crafts in Sri Lanka. These families have dedicated their working lives to upholding this tradition of creating brassware. I engaged a few of them in conversation. These humble people have managed to keep this art alive even through the pandemic, amidst many challenges.

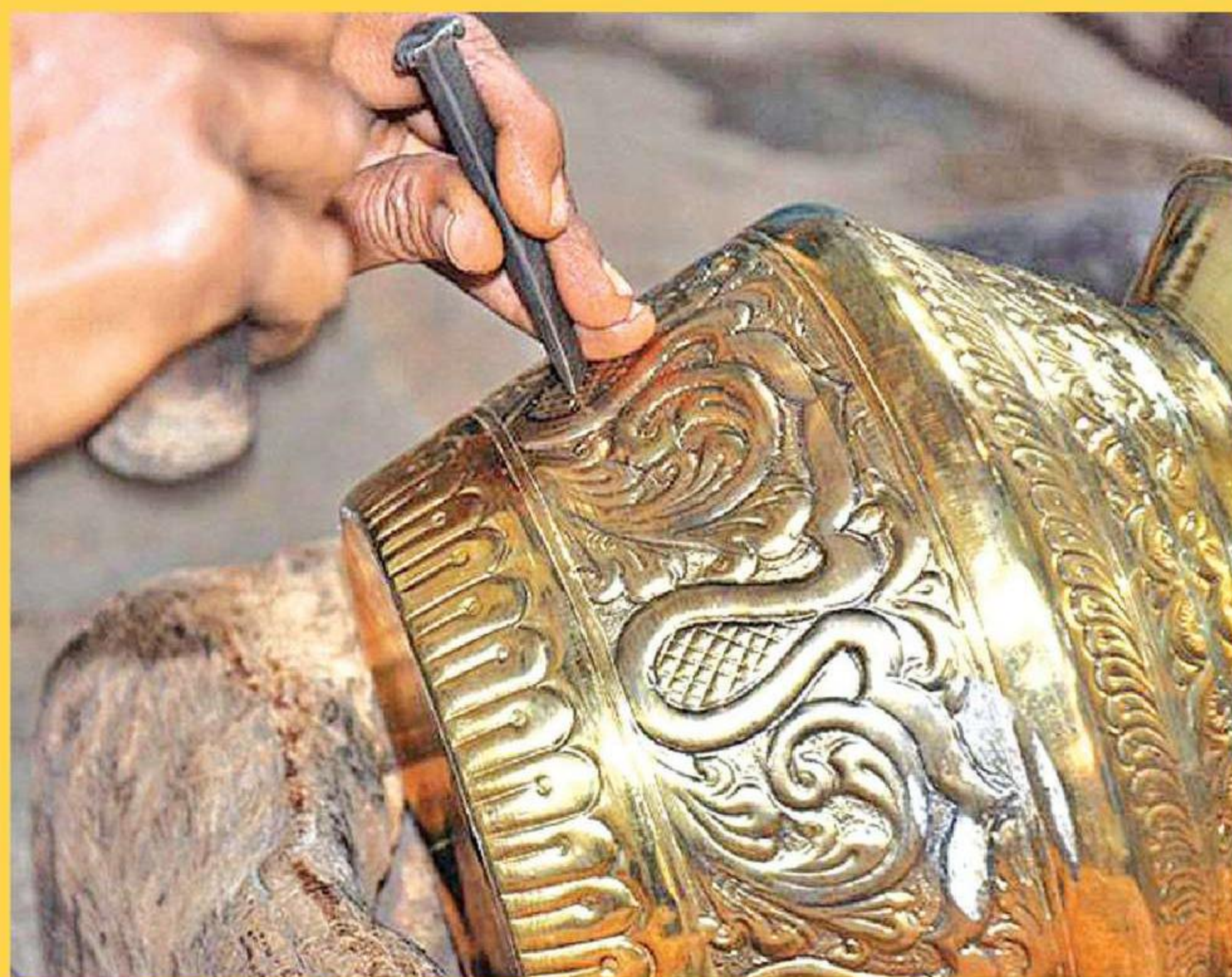
One of them shared his views. Brass lamps are very much part of India, our friendly neighbour across the sea. The lighting of the lamp is known as *yaham* in Indian households. According to oral tradition, when some Indian princes came to vintage Ceylon, they brought with them their craftsmen skilled in the brass making. One of the oldest brass lamps in Sri Lanka is said to come from the period of King Parakramabahu, in Polonnaruwa. This large suspended lamp had taken the form of an elephant, and the prudent craftsmen had duly fashioned the stomach of the elephant to hold the coconut oil.

We know that brass is not an original element; it is an alloy of Copper and Zinc. By varying the quantity of these two ingredients, the colour, shine and density of the production can be determined, which these workmen have perfected with decades of experience. I realised that the majority of brassware manufacturers used to fulfill their raw material needs by recycling waste products of copper and zinc that are provided by various sources.

There are two main techniques used by brassware producers, which have been passed down for generations. They are wrought and cast. Tea trays, ashtrays and some small ornamental items are produced in wrought techniques. On the other hand, comparatively large items such as pots, bowls, oil lamps, vases, trinket boxes, relic caskets and temple bells are produced by using the cast technique. This is perhaps more challenging as the items are bigger in size and require precision measurements.

An old man attired in a white sarong told me about the old method used to create brass items. They had made their ornaments by the wax method. In this technique, the model of the sculpture is made in wax and covered with clay. When the molten brass is applied (*Thalaya*), the wax is melted out leaving the mould made of clay. Then the clay mould is filled with the molten brass. Although this method is productive in making fine and subtle monuments, it consumes time. Some tourists walked into the shop and began bargaining. Brass items would make lovely souvenirs to take back home.

Amidst economic restraints and staying with the needs of the modern homes, many brassware craftsmen have turned to alternate fast selling products. Instead of making ornamental items, several families have prudently shifted to produce household items such as door locks, hinges and window handles. This trend could be considered as a pragmatic approach that duly responds to the growing market of the building and construction sector in Sri Lanka. There is an appreciation for a house that reso-



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nates with the antique touch from a bygone era. In past decades, brass hammers were used by skilled workers as they had fewer vibrations. The brass mallets did not leave any marks on the surface.

Brass bells are found in temples, churches and kovils all across Sri Lanka. There is a scientific reason for ringing a bell at a religious place. In ancient times, bells were made and rung to invoke a sense of calm prior to worship. When the brass bell is rung, it resonates for seven seconds and brings the right and left lobes of the brain into total harmony. The sound of the brass bell touches the



seven *Chakras* of the human body. A *Chakra* (wheel in Sanskrit) symbolises the flow of energy in our body. The seven *Chakras* generate our emotions. I assume in this modern day, many did not realise the role of the brass bell in their chosen religions.

Every traditional industry in Sri Lanka faces challenges. The brass craftsmen of Pilimathalawa have their own concerns. The most obvious one was that the children of these craftsmen do not want to engage in this trade. They feel stagnant. A few feel these trades are not recognised in modern society, compared to the time of our glorious kings who appreciated and rewarded these brass makers. Some have ventured to Colombo for a better lifestyle at least that is their perception. Several other factors are responsible for the deterioration of the brass craft market. As one vendor pointed out in the past two years there was a drop in tourists, which affected their business.

The purchasing power of customers for quality brassware, especially lamps is another issue. The vendors at Pilimathalawa feel the requirement for brassware of current middle class families is gradually declining and only wealthy customers will buy in the future. The handicraft industry was hit in another manner. In the past decade, the customer's values have been replaced by Western values in terms of cultural items.

Some time ago, I spoke to a trader at the Piththala Handiya in Colombo. This vendor made a wise observation saying plenty of modern art and new design handicrafts are flooding the local market at cheaper prices in comparison to quality brassware. Imported ornaments and gifts sell for less and have a better demand. He also added that brass items are heavy and are a hassle to carry as a gift, unless it is a small ornament. I too have observed that families having large brass items do not take time to polish and maintain, and polishing is rather expensive. As modern lifestyles influence us in major cities, who is going to display antique brass lamps? May the blissful glow of brass lamps illuminate our rich culture for decades to come.

