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Solely Hand-Crafted



*Engineer-turned-woodworker **Soheli Contractor** is marrying traditional skills with modern technology to manufacture bespoke, hand-crafted furniture under the brand 'Solli Concepts' which, he promises, will become family heirlooms. Dhananjay Sardeshpande visited his workshop in Mumbai, heard his story and sensed his passion for all things related to wood.*

Even as a pre-teen, Soheli remembers, he had a knack of "building things with my hands" – not merely tinkering with materials. His parents were generous enough to lend him one balcony in the house, where he would assemble a variety of things, fetch pieces of wood and work on them with his increasing collection of various basic tools.

Often he would invite carpenters to this balcony and watch them work, absorbing considerable knowledge and skills from them. He was also fascinated by the logs and sawmills near his father's factory for automotive spare parts, near the Mumbai docks and the timber market in Sewri.

"I loved watching huge logs being sliced in the

busy timber market nearby," he recounts. "In their death, I could read the lives of the trees from their rings and the grain. I believed that timber was still alive, just in a different form."

It was this fascination that led to a better understanding of wood; and it would come back to help him play out his passion many years later.

In between, however, Soheli completed his engineering degree and began working in distant New Zealand. But he was never interested in continuing with his father's automotive spares manufacturing business. On a vacation to Mumbai in 2005, he made some furniture and helped furnish a house for his friend.

Learning curve

That “first step in furniture production” taught him the vagaries of sourcing, rigour of budgeting, tips in resource allocation, and tricks in handling labour for the project. It also made up his mind not to return to New Zealand, and to take the plunge into furniture making!

Sohel began doing projects for friends and family acquaintances, and credits them with being “generous enough to let me experiment”. But he had to take utmost care and do thorough research in order to retain their trust. The training in engineering helped, but he had to do much more to understand wood and its qualities.

One book that helped him the most was the revised edition (1944) of *Common Commercial Timbers of India and its Uses*, by H. Trotter, a former Utilisation Officer with the Forest Research Institute, Dehradun. “To this day it is an authoritative encyclopaedia of all Indian tree species and their timber,” Sohel insists.

It was a time when traditional Indian craftsmen were flourishing and their skill in carving was at an all-time high. But Sohel wasn’t taken in by the “opulence” of Indian furniture; preferring instead the subtle and simple joinery from Europe, Japan and China.

“In India, if you had the money to build a house, opulence had to be clearly displayed,” he says. “But good craftsmanship need not be loud.”

Design dilemma

On the general lack of good furniture design in the country, Sohel bemoans the fact that designers do not understand trees, wood and the nature of its fibres. Wood is stronger than steel, more resistant to shocks and fire, it is more flexible and bendable – and yet hard at the same time – than most building materials.

Designers fuss over ergonomics and functionality; but there is a harmony in wood pieces that brings solace in human interactions with it. He stresses, “Proper understanding of wood breaks down barriers, transcends boundaries, and extends the possibilities and opportunities in furniture design.”

While good joinery and adhesives can do most of the job, there are times when screws and clamps are necessary; but these must be done scientifically and neatly, so as not to harm the form and symmetry of any finished product.

Sohel invariably discusses each design with his team before building a mock-up, then a testing prototype, before it goes into production. He also walks the talk on optimisation of wood to reduce wastage. At his workshop, off-cuts are used to teach children basics of furniture making, and the sawdust is sold to a briquette manufacturer.

Sohel now runs a “white label” production house that caters to projects from architects, real estate developers, boutique hotels and corporate clients. The focus here is on manufacturing processes, product quality ▶

1 A buffet cabinet in American walnut (L) with recessed shutter opening slots (R).





Wood brings solace in human interactions with it. And hand-made furniture has a connection with its maker; his/her personality stays with each piece for life.



– Soheli Contractor,
owner of Solli Concepts

and consistency, all within the pre-determined time and budget constraints of each project.

Hand versus machine

But his interests go beyond that, and so began Solli Concepts, a bespoke studio that hand-crafts “statement pieces” of furniture that he is sure will become coveted family heirlooms.

Soheli is passionate to the point of being fastidious. That has resulted in setting up of in-house facilities for steam bending of wood and laminate pressing, along with metal fabrication for furniture fittings – customised chair and stool legs, shutter hinges, runners for drawers, knobs and handles.

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2 A customised desk-and-chair set (L) with details of steam-bent back supports (R).

Even some of the hand tools are fabricated within the workshop using imported steel!

But why hand-made furniture when one can go in for mechanisation? “Hand-crafting gives you feedback from the piece of wood or furniture you are working on. Its qualities, advantages and limits are transmitted to you instantaneously,” he says.

Machines are good for better accuracy, consistent finishing and reducing wastage, he agrees. “CNC machines are a great invention for furniture makers; but if you do not have the feel and feedback from working with your hands, machines can be a limitation in themselves,” he says. “On the other hand, if you have that intimate understanding of wood, machines can be a boon.”

Additionally, he feels the need to keep alive traditions of hand-crafting. Towards this end, he employs seven master craftsmen from the Vishwakarma community from Rajasthan and experts from Bareilly, in Uttar Pradesh. There are other carpenters employed to assist them, depending on the nature of the work at hand.

‘Defects are good’

Soheli has an eye for the unusual – for his Solli Concepts brand, he sifts through scrapped piles of wood in the timber market to look for the hardest pieces to work! “Defects are interesting,” he says, “the ones with knots, and with interlocking grains, or grains that go in all directions, are the hardest to work with. But they give me my inspiration,” he gushes.

He uses all types of wood, but mainly repurposed teak extracted from beams in old demolished houses. That way he is resurrecting seasoned wood from the trash heap. “Teak in old houses comes from trees that have survived many years. It is costly, but is worth its weight in gold,” he says.

Plantation teak, on the other hand, is harvested early and may not have the ▶





3 *Sohel's experiment with wood and water resulted in the success of wooden wash basins (L), which he attributes to great joinery (R), superb oil-based finishing, and a combination of form and function.*

strength, flexibility and grain density of old teak. For Sohel, teak trumps other hardwoods because it sets the bar in terms of its hardness, easy workability and lovely finish.

He also buys oak from North America and Europe as it has consistent hardness, good grain patterns and is wonderful to stain. "My corporate clients love it," he says.

He finds walnut tricky as it is "not happy" in Indian climatic conditions. "We have to buy wet logs and have to air-dry them for 3 years before we can saw them. Even after cutting the logs relevant to my next project, I have to wait another 3 months for the wood fibres to settle down," Sohel says.

For Solli Concepts he also stocks Indian red and white cedars (for outdoor furniture), maple, acacia and mango – "It has a fungus growth that stains the wood and leaves an imprint just like wood grain!" – and softwood such as pine, for children's furniture.

Wood worries

Wood seasoning is the most important treatment required for timber from all tree species; yet it is the most neglected aspect of woodworking in India. Timber has to be kiln- or air-dried to stabilise it for strength and remove excessive moisture to prevent infestations, Sohel notes.

Internal moisture has to be preserved at the appropriate levels to maintain the flexibility and workability of wood. "I prefer air-dried timber because it is a longer process that helps it gain stability. Kiln-drying is a hastened process that does not leave the fibres fully settled," he opines.

On the dwindling supplies of native hardwoods, Sohel agrees that India seriously needs to adopt a "wood-for-furniture" policy.

Plantation timber is mainly directed at feeding the proliferating plywood and pulp-based industries. He also vouches for wood-based composites – "Why insist on hardwoods when you can manage well with new-age composites?"

Sohel dreams of some "big players" entering the India market with properly seasoned and treated, milled and dimensioned timber that furniture manufacturers can buy off the shelf.

On the emerging global pressure for certified timber, he says although there is awareness of sustainable forestry practices among Indian manufacturers, such practices come at a cost – which the price-conscious Indian consumers are not ready to pay for yet. However, furniture manufacturers, specifiers (architects and builders) and buyers must be more demanding, he feels.

Boredom's child

Boredom can turn into a brainwave for a new idea. Sohel wanted to experiment with wood and water – playing with fire, in a manner of speaking! He believes wood and water are fine with each other, within reasonable limits.

"We trust our lives travelling in wooden boats, don't we?" he asks. Proof of this concept is the many wash basins he has made from Burma teak, and now teak sourced mainly from South India.

Teak has oils that it secretes to ward off water seepage into its fibres. "Water should run off (the wooden surface), not stay on. I have even tested my sinks with acid (HCl) – there is no effect on the wood," Sohel claims.

He uses "versatile" adhesives from Titebond (US), because they develop bonds stronger than the wood itself, have faster setting times, are amenable to sanding, and are not affected ▶



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4 *Sohel has also designed all-wood telescopic channels for drawers (L) and runners for this bar cabinet (R).*

by finishes. Oil finishes, Sohel feels, are simpler and easy to repair; but need periodic maintenance.

The first wooden sink prototype, made 8 years ago, is still with Sohel, serving as a showpiece; but he has made and sold many-many more! He attributes the success of these hand-made sinks to great joinery, superb oil-based finishing, and a combination of form and function. None of the sinks he has sold so far has had a problem.

IKEA & design

On the advent of the Swedish furniture giant IKEA in India, Sohel is effusive in his welcome. "It is a positive development because it is an education of the masses. It will bring about awareness about design simplicity and product quality. It will afford people the experience of these, even on a budget," is how he sees it.

He hopes IKEA will also inculcate a do-it-yourself culture among Indian consumers and raise the ante among woodworking professionals in the country.

So far as online furniture portals are concerned, he clearly states that they are no competition because they're not in the same league. People sometimes compare pricing of products by online retailers with those from Solli Concept. "I would like to tell them, you can buy 10 pieces of furniture of your liking online; but buy that one masterpiece from me!" Sohel says in earnest.

He believes that, with penetration of the Internet and availability of options for professional education, Indian designers and woodworkers are coming into their own. "We must learn to respect our designers and furniture experts. They can deliver quality and consistency using sustainable material and processes," he signs off.

5 *The Solli Concepts workshop (L) has steam-bending and laminate pressing facilities. Some of its hand tools (R) are fabricated within the workshop using imported steel.*



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