

Dindigul's Lock Industry Locked Away As History?

In the wake of globalisation and fast life, the unique art of lock making is slowly dying away

By Anushree Jonko



A discarded and rusted handmade dindigul lock (Credits: Anushree Jonko)

The Dindigul Lock Worker's Industrial Co-operative Society looked as ancient as the Dindigul's locksmithery. Being a Sunday, the unit had only three workers on duty. Wearing soiled vests and khaki-coloured shorts, these locksmiths work tirelessly to at least make two locks per day. Dust was settled everywhere one's eyes rested and rusty metal parts were strewn around everywhere. In spite of working in an unacceptable environment, they focus all their energy and skill into making these locks which even have their own GI (Geographical Indication) tag now. Also popularly known as the Lock City, iron abundance in the region is the main reason behind the success of this industry.

Even before the new-age security mechanisms, like password-based access turned up, these handcrafted Dindigul locks constituted the main body of security. Dindigul has become synonymous with locks mainly because of the various innovative types of locks that the lock units produce. These locks are handcrafted from scratch using metal sheets. These metal sheets are bought from Tiruppur and Madurai while the levers and keys are bought from Aligarh. Levers are mostly made of copper and the part of the lock where the keys are inserted are also made of copper in order to prevent rusting. Full copper locks are also available but are

expensive. The locks are available in different sizes such as 55mm, 63mm and 75 mm. On a daily basis, five to six 55 mm locks and two to three 63mm and 75mm locks can be made. Each 55 mm lock costs about Rs 76.



Rajakumar working on a lock

Lock making as an industry in Dindigul is unorganised due to which the lock making units face a lot of issues. There is no regulation involved in this industry. There is a serious wage problem which is why a lot of youngsters are opting out of lock making and getting absorbed in other skills or businesses. There are no health regulations resulting in poor health conditions in these working units. "I have severe breathing issues because of continuously inhaling metal shavings since the past 30 years," said Rajakumar who was also wearing eye-protective sunglasses purchased with money from his own pocket.



The inside of a newly made lock

Dindigul locks are famous because of their variety. There are over 50 types of locks and all of these locks are made in a unique fashion with an entirely different lever pattern. Mango lock, trick lock, door lock, bell lock and burglar lock are the most popular ones. Despite being an interesting industry and having a distinctive value, it is on a decline since the past few years. "Customers would come and get locks otherwise the government is our only customer nowadays," said 70-year-old Sreekumar, who started working as a lock maker when he was only 18. According to Sreekumar, they previously had a lot of government orders for railways, for door handles of compartments but now it has boiled down to only orders for locks with two keys which they use for the railway tracks. These locks operate in a way that at one point of time both the keys have to be inserted then the lock will open which is used to divert the tracks of the trains that come.



The lock makers tire their eyes easily because of the lack of light in the workspaces

“Even Tamil Nadu government is not placing orders. We used to receive orders for prisons and dams,” says Murugesan. For dams, another variety of innovative locks were put to use. There are supposed to be 25 locks for in one set and each lock is supposed to have one separate key. These separate keys will not fit in other locks. There is supposed to be one master key that can be used to open all locks. The production of these kinds of locks has totally stopped and has rendered the lock makers of Dindigul redundant.

The main issue faced by these lock units is the lack of workers. The Public Works Department of Tamil Nadu also places orders for locks from the Dindigul Lock Worker’s Industrial Co-operative Society. Last year there were 875 orders but they could not meet the deadline due to insufficient lock makers. When Rajakumar started working in 1985, there were 50-60 employees in his unit but now it has dwindled to 5 workers.



Keys and lock parts strewn around on the ground

“In a village of 400 houses, there used to be around 300 lock making units. Now, you hardly get to see any such units. At least our unit has machines for dyeing and drilling. There are other lock making units in Dindigul where they do not even have that facility. Facilities are not provided because the usage is so low. It is a sad situation for us,” said Murugesan. Nowadays only temples and a few government offices in Tamil Nadu use Dindigul locks.



Murugesan while describing the sad situation of Dindigul lock makers

There are a lot of reasons why this industry is at a decline. On the report of the Dindigul lock workers, the youngsters have found better means of living and no one wants to be a part of this unique and dying art. Lock makers are not willing to adopt modern technology or opt for machines that might make their work easier as even the smallest of fittings are done by hand and embracing new technology might mean inching closer to being unemployed. Being unorganised also adds to their woe as there are no proper steps taken for their safety and wage.



Dindigul will always be synonymous with locks

The workers, however, believe in not glorifying the dying state of their industry and want people to know about the craft so youngsters take an active part in lock making and salvage it. Incentives are not very promising. "Workers get incentives from the co-operative society like an umbrella to work for 25 years and steel vessels to work for 45," Rajkumar pointed out. Even though buying machine-made locks at any shop has become quite easy, there can be no match for a solid and heavy handcrafted Dindigul lock.