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Nilambur Teak: The Golden Pride of Kerala

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Forests have always been an important part of Kerala's rich heritage. They were never mere landscapes- they were and always will be an open book to Kerala's past, traditions and most importantly the culture. If we go back in history, we can see that forests and its produces have always influenced Kerala and its livelihoods. Almost 29.65% of the total geographical area of the state is covered by forests. The main forests regions in Kerala are the Silent Valley forests, the Periyar forest, the Wayanad forest, Parambikulam forest, and finally, the Shendurney forests.

Among these, there is another forest region in Nilambur, which is in the Malappuram district. Lying in the foothills of the Western Ghats, and on the banks of the Chaliyar river, Nilambur forests are rich in flora and fauna. This region is famous of its timber supply as timber trees like Teak, Rosewood, Bamboo and Mahogany are abundant in the area. Among these Teak (*Tectona grandis*) is especially famous. Nilambur is often called the "The Land of Teak", due to its abundance of the famous Nilambur Teaks. To add to this, Nilambur hosts the world's oldest teak plantation - The Canolly's Plot, established in 1846. Nilambur Teak is well-known for its high-quality timber, with a exceptional durability and its beautiful golden colour. In 2017, Nilambur Teak became the first forest produce to get a Geographical Indication (GI) Tag, which prevents it from unauthorized labelling and selling. This article will dive deep into the history, importance, uses and most importantly the GI of Nilambur Teak to identify how the Geographical Indication tag will help to increase the value of forest produce.

Origin and History of Nilambur Teak

When a Malayali hears the word 'Teak', Nilambur comes to their mind. Why is that so? How did Nilambur gain its name for the world class Teak Plantations? What began it all? The answer is very easy- it was the Zamorin of Kozhikode who gifted a few of the teak saplings to a few property owners from Nilambur. When the British started their colonization in India, they started focusing on India's forests and their local produce. That is when they found Nilambur and its Teak. Infact, there has been an extensive timber trade in and around the Chaliyar river mainly focusing on Teak. This is what caught the British's eye. When the word of the quality timber that Nilambur teak has, many agencies started scouting for them and started felling more trees. This led to a crisis. The availability of the Teak started going down and the Britishers had to

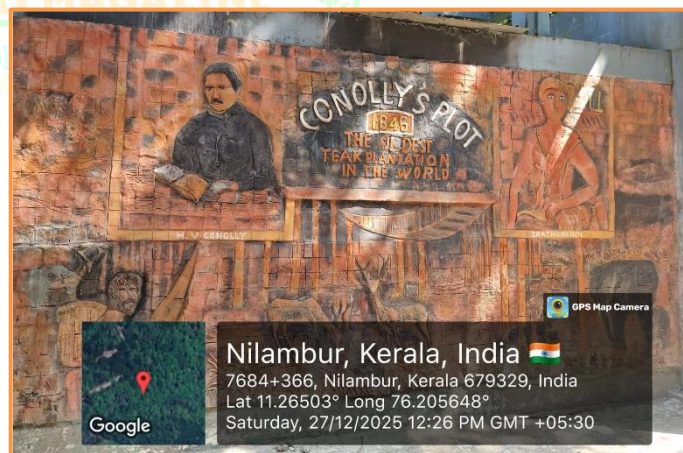


Fig 1: Canolly's Plot, Nilambur

find a way to conserve them. In 1792, the Bengal Bombay Joint Commission issued an order which prohibits the felling for the trees below 21 inches from the Nilambur forests. It was in 1942 Mr H V Conolly started an action plan to conserve the teak forests of Nilambur. As a part of this, 30000 seeds and almost 10000 seedlings were planted on the banks of the river Chaliyar. In 1944, the first 1500 acres of the teak plantation were made. It is still maintained by Kerala Forest Research Institute and is one of the major tourist attractions of Nilambur and is now known by 'Canolly's Plot'.

Unique Characteristics of Nilambur Teak

So, what makes this teak wood from a small town in Kerala special? The answer is very simple. The quality itself is the main highlight of Nilambur teakwood. The durability of this wood is worldclass and can even be used in building ships. Similarly, the teak trees are huge in size which is another great advantage to the cultivars. A unique characteristic of Nilambur Teak is its rich golden yellow colour. It gives the wood its beauty, grace, elegance and antiquity. This colour makes the wood stand out more compared to other timber producing trees. The furniture made from this Nilambur teak is stronger and more durable. It is resistant to fungal attacks and pests like dry termite. Another added advantage of this teak is that it is easier to work with compared to other varieties.

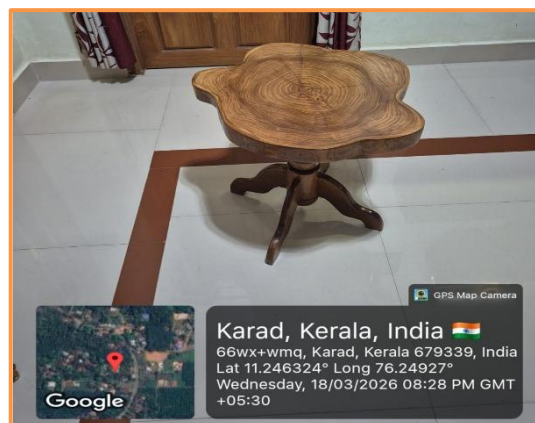


Fig 2: A Cross-Sectional image of Nilambur Teak.

Cultivation and Growth of Nilambur Teak

Talking about the cultivation aspects of the Nilambur teak, the climatic and soil conditions of Nilambur indeed play a major role. Nilambur's climate is greatly assassinated with rainfall and will always come in a range of 21-38°C (recent changes in climate has made it go even higher up to 44°C), along with the heavy rains and bright sunshine, helps the teakwood thrive. Coming to the soil aspects, teak does not require a particular type of soil to grow. But the major factors that affect its growth and quality are depth, structure, porosity, drainage, and its moisture-holding capacity. This is where the Nilambur soils help. It is a loamy soil with medium acid content. It is rich in NPK. These factors help the Teak to thrive in Nilambur. The propagation of Nilambur teak is mainly by seeds. Pre-treatment of the seeds is done, and they are usually planted in nurseries from which the seedlings are transplanted to the main field. 12m x 1.2m x 0.3m is the slandered bed size in nurseries, and up to 3-5kg seeds can be sown in a single bed. In addition to this, stump, seedling, and root-trainer seedlings can also be used as quality planting material. Coming to the main field planting, seedlings can be planted in blocks, linear strips, or staggered, depending on the area available. The spacing should be 2x2m or 2.5x2.5m for block planting. Pre-monsoon showers are the preferred time of planting, and weeding is done thrice in the first year, twice in the second year, and only once in the third year. Thinning is necessary and is usually done in the 5th, 10th, 20th, 30th, and 40th years. Fertilizer application is usually limited to FYM @ 3kg per plant. Cow dung can also be used instead of FYM.

Geographical Indication Tag of Nilambur Teak

In the introduction section, it was mentioned that Nilambur Teak is the first forest produce to receive a Geographical Indication (GI) tag. But before going deep into that, we must know what a GI tag is. It is a label that is given to the produce originating from a specific region and which has some unique properties or features due to its location in that region. Nilambur Teak is also a product like that. A GI tag prevents the selling of lower-quality duplicates in the name of the original products in the market. It also helps the consumer from being

cheated. So, when and why did Nilambur teak get a GI tag? Let's begin with the why part. A lot of fakes were being sold in the market in the name of Nilambur teak, which not only affects the consumers who end up getting less quality furniture after paying a lot of money, but also affects the cultivars and the government that produces real quality timber. This was the major reason why the need for a GI tag for Nilambur teak was high. Now coming to the when part. It was in 2017 that Nilambur Teak officially received the GI tag. The application was approved towards Nilambur Teak Heritage Society under the guidance of Kerala Agricultural University, Thrissur. The type of good is included under class 31. So, what did the cultivars and government gain from this GI tag? According to sources, the export rate has increased tremendously after receiving the GI tag. The timber, which was already popular with the world, gained more popularity and many more people started looking for this timber. The market value also has gone up since 2017. And counterfeits have been found less in the market. But after all these, was there a limitation for its marketing? Yes. There are still plenty of people, even in Nilambur who are unaware of the GI tag. Another fact is that the regulation of the teak grown by different planters are still a task. But we can surely hope that within a few years, these challenges would be completely resolved.

Economic Importance of Nilambur Teak

So, what do we do with all this timber? Easy - Nilambur teak is famous for its high economic importance. The furniture and other articles made using this wood are of high quality and durability. As mentioned before, the golden-yellow colour of this timber gives it a special grace and elegance. People all over the world admire Nilambur teak for its beauty. The best examples of these uses would be that this wood has been used to do the interior of the luxurious Rolls Royce cars. The main reasons for this are its warm tones and durability. Another example would be the famous ship RMS Titanic. It is said that the beautiful interior of the ship, which was once called the unsinkable, is made using Nilambur Teak. I feel like it is worth mentioning the fact that The Buckingham Palace, which houses the royal family of Britain is said to have the interiors of Nilambur Teak. Now, coming to the current usage of Nilambur teak, the furniture made using this timber is highly sought after by the world. It is a high-income source for Kerala and its farmers. The domestically cultivated Nilambur teak is sold for around 1,800-2,000 rupees per cubic foot. This type of teak is cut after 15-20 years and is typically sold to traders. Then there is the teak acquired from the forests of Nilambur. It is cut after around 40+ years, and its economic value comes around to rupees 3000-5000 range. This type of wood has the most demand from all over and outside of Kerala. Among all the varieties of Teak available in Kerala, Nilambur teak is the most sought out and has the most demand in and outside India. The Uru, which is a special kind of boat, made in Beypore, is exclusively made from this teak.



Fig 3: Furniture made using Nilambur Teak

Tourism and Cultural Value

The abundance of teak and teak plantations in Nilambur is one of the major reasons this small-town is popular among its tourists. The town's lush forests and beauty is another reason for this. Talking about the teak-based tourism, Teak Museum and Conolly's Plot, along with Nedumkayam reserve forest the Bangalow Hill comes first. The Teak Museum is located 6km away from the main town of Nilambur. It is the World's first museum solely for teak. Along with a museum, it also has a beautiful Botanical Garden with polyhouses and a beautiful butterfly garden. It is one of the top attractions of Nilambur. Then there is the Conolly's Plot- the oldest teak plantation in the world, which is named after H V Conolly,

who was responsible for the plantation. It had a beautiful suspension bridge over the river Chaliyar, which was unfortunately destroyed in the 2018 floods. Now the plantation is accessible to the visitors via boat services. They also offer a medicinal plant garden. The Nedumkayam reserve forest and the Bungalow Hill are also a site for tourists who enjoys nature and long walks.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the Teak (*Tectona grandis*) from Nilambur is one of the most sought after and best timber in the world. Its strength, quality, colour, and durability make it a one-of-a kind product with a huge number of economic uses. The fact that it was the first forest produce to receive a GI tag is enough to say about its importance in the world market. With proper conservation and sustainability, this timber from a small town in Kerala can become more popular and important in the World.

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