

# TAKING A DIG AT THE PAST

SHEILA PANJWANI GIVES  
OLD FURNITURE A NEW  
TWIST. ARADHANA BHOLA

TALKS TO HER ABOUT HER WOODEN HEART

**I**N Sheila Maryse Panjwani's hands, old furniture assumes a new look and utility. An 'urli' (old cooking pot) becomes a planter; an Ayurvedic medicine chest is transformed into a CD holder; a dowry box turns into a coffee table. Once in a while though she just throws up her hands. Like when she couldn't find any use for an old, rather gigantic wooden biryani stirrer.

All of these and more find a place in 'Maram' (meaning wood in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada), a traditional wooden furniture boutique run by Sheila in Bangalore.

Born and brought up abroad (Sri Lanka, Africa, England and the United States), Sheila moved to India with her parents in the early nineties. After a brief stint at Holiday Inn (now Le Meridien, Bangalore), she worked for Prasad Bidapa. It was Bidapa's knowledge of antiques that got Sheila interested in traditional wooden furniture. About four years later, she started a business of traditional wooden chests. She insists on differentiating it from antique furniture, which by definition is over a hundred years old. Sheila who eats, sleeps and drinks wood, talks wood here:

**In what way is 'Maram' unique?**

**T**hrough 'Maram' I try to promote artistes of South India.

I offer a specialised service to my clients by blending old traditional furniture with my customers' modern needs. With a

touch of imagination, almost every piece is made functional to meet the requirements of my clients. For example, I had an old boat suspended from chains to form a buffet table for one of my clients abroad.

I have consciously kept affordable furniture. In fact, there is nothing that values more than Rs 15,000 in my boutique.

**Who are your sources for furniture?**

I get most of my furniture from various artists and dealers in Kerala. The best stock is available between November and February since a lot of European buyers come in during that period. Tamil Nadu is also a good place to hunt for traditional wooden furniture. I also get furniture from people who approach me to sell their old traditional furniture, and the rest from what I pick up at various auctions.

**What are your hottest-selling items?**

Tiles really sell in Bangalore. Clients want them used on tables, beds, cupboards and doors. Baby furniture — baby baths, cradles and closets are equally in demand.

**What has your experience as a single woman entrepreneur been like?**

Nobody has ever called me Miss Panjwani; it's always Mrs Panjwani. Even my mail is addressed to Mrs Panjwani. Quite often I am asked where my husband/children are. This usually happens with my Indian clients; most of the foreign ones aren't as presumptuous about my marital status.

**What do you see in the crystal ball?**

Possibly, an expansion. I may open a branch in Mumbai or Delhi. I am also a furniture buyer for two shops in the US: 'The Antique Furniture Mart' in Florida and 'Indica' in Texas. This means more travelling and more furniture, just what I enjoy.

FURNITURE WITH  
A DIFFERENCE

