

The Golden Padauk – The Flower of “Thingyan”



- The Myanmar lunar month of *Tagu*, which usually falls in the month of April, is the month of the Myanmar New Year. *Thingyan*, the Water Festival that lasts for three days (or four, if it happens to be what is the equivalent of the leap year) ushers in the New Year. April is almost the height of summer when temperatures soars, skies are blue, and the sunshine is almost blinding although at times the skies maybe overcast. At this time of the year the leaves of most trees, large and small, have dried up, curled crisp and fallen. But one large tree stands tall and green with its canopy of emerald leaves. That is the ‘*Padauk*’ – the gum-kino tree (*Pterocarpus macrocarpus*). The Padauk is waiting for the first rain showers to burst forth into bloom with its tiny fragrant yellow gold flowers. The first light showers of April usually herald the Thingyan Festival and bring the Padauk to bloom in all its glory.
- During the Water Festival, the water thrown gleefully on each other by the young, and sprinkled more sedately with Thabye (*Eugenia*) leaves on senior citizens, more or less symbolizes the washing away of the sins, anxieties, problems and discontent of the old year. Resolutions are made on the New Year to start afresh and lead a better life with renewed hope, joy and good will. There are other pre-Buddhist legends attached to the Water Festival with overtones of Vedic rituals and beliefs. But the actual celebrations are typically Myanmar in character from the taunting chant of slogans and limericks and jokes at each other’s expense during the three days of drenching, to the more devotional rituals on New Year’s Day. On this, the first day of the New Year, religious and meritorious deeds like fasting, the freeing of birds and animals and the paying of obeisance to parents, teachers and elders are done. But the festivities of Thingyan are given an added glow by the Padauk, the April shower of golden flowers.
- For the Myanmar people the Padauk tree is also a symbol of strength and durability. The leafy bower not only provides cool shade for the weary traveller but also produces a beautiful hardwood, patterned with whorls and twirls that gives out a high sheen when polished. It is most suitable for making furniture, house posts and parquet flooring. In rural areas the timber from the Padauk is used to make cart frames, wheels, ploughshares and even circular grinders for oil presses. The wood is very strong and hard. The tree is also easily grown. In areas that enjoy heavy rainfall, one just needs to cut a fairly mature branch and stick it deep into the earth with the onset of the rains – and

it thrives and grows! But it also flourishes in dry places like Mandalay if it is regularly watered in the earlier stages of growth. Once it has matured it needs very little nurturing.

- But the golden blossoms of the Padauk are what the Myanmar people love and romanticize about. For although, depending on its age, different Padauk trees may flower at different times but all within the month of April, each Padauk tree blossoms but once a year and but for a day. When the Padauk blooms with the first light showers of April, most trees turn gold overnight and Padauk lovers go crazy. Regrettably, sometimes, whole branches are cut off to get at the flowers. The flower sellers in the markets do a brisk trade, for people are eager to offer the first blooms to the Buddha, either at the pagoda or to the Buddha image in the family shrine. The rest are for the adornment of the fairer sex. On the day a Padauk tree blooms you see young maidens with coronets of Padauk flowers encircling their hair or some who are more modest, with just a sprig in the chignon on the nape of the neck. Almost every female, young or old can hardly resist wearing these flowers. If the flowering of the Padauk tree coincides with the Thingyan festivities (and they usually do), branches of green leaves flecked with the tiny gold flowers decorate the posts and roofs of the water-throwing pavilions. The floats and open cars of revellers who tour the town to have water splashed on them by the girls and exchange naughty banter, are also decorated with bunches of leaves and flowers.
- The Padauk is the flower of Thingyan and of the people. For them it signifies youth and love and romance, and many Myanmar poets, ancient and modern, have waxed poetic about it. The most popular verses are those of the 17th century poet king, Natshinnaung. His delicate and touching sonnets, odes and lyrics occupy a special place in the hearts of Myanmar lovers, poets and even soldiers. They are all enchanted by the story of his enduring love for the much older widow of his cousin, Princess Datukalyar whom he had to woo for many years to win. The verses of this soldier king that express the yearning he felt each time the Padauk bloomed when he was far from love and hearth and home at the battlefield, have also enthralled and moved readers throughout the ages. His poems have been set to music and these romantic songs are still popular today. Natshinnaung put into poetic form his deep longing to pin the tresses of his Princess Datukalya with the first sprays of the golden Padauk and young lovers who are far apart from each other are particularly moved by his emotive verses.
- Other equally famous poets and writers have also extolled the beauty of the Padauk flower which covers the entire tree with its mantle of gold, and the air around it with its elusive fragrance. They however, devote their verse to the natural beauty of the flower - a beauty that bewitches the eye and stirs the heart.

- I once travelled the route from Thaton to Mottama on the west bank of the Thanlwin River with my family – a route lined on both sides of the road with towering Padauk trees. The trees, most fortuitously were in bloom that particular day. I shall never forget that magical moment when we moved through a road carpeted with fallen golden blossoms under an emerald and gold roof formed by the branches that meshed overhead to provide blessed shade and coolness.
- I think everyone of us, has had a similar experience with the Padauk at least once in our lives – a wondrous and memorable experience.
- No wonder then that the Padauk figures so largely in our lives and has earned a place of honour in the life and heart and soul of the Myanmar people. The Padauk is indeed the flower of the Myanmar people.

Kyi Kyi Hla

Padauk is known as Angsana in Singapore and Malaysia