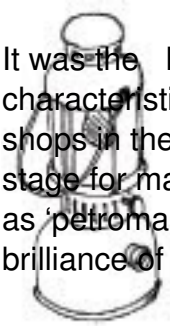

by Tony Fernandes

It was the light source that brightened many great and important occasions with its characteristic and luminescent white light for over three generations. It was also used in all shops in the towns and villages. The well-known and proven 'Petromax' lantern held center stage for many nightly functions, celebrations and festivities in Goa. It was called colloquially as 'petromas'. Till today, nearly a century after its invention by two German brothers, the brilliance of the Petromax has not faded.

In the absence of electricity in the old days, the 'petromax' was very popular mainly due to its use on significant and auspicious occasions that were held both indoor and outdoor. It adorned many high places like the 'matou' (canopy) for wedding celebrations at night, at sung litanies in homes, salves, vespers and feasts in churches and chapels, at school functions, Christmas and New Year dances, nataks and tiatros, at zagors and zatras, and at open-air night fairs and celebrations, for bhajans in the temples as well as at religious festivals like Divali, Dasera and others. Its main advantages were its reliability and portability. It shed its light all around during Ganesh Chaturthi festival and often led the procession to the river or pond for immersion. It also brightened the pre-wedding ritual of 'ros" at the bride and bridegroom's houses, and lit the way from the traditional 'matou' to the 'xim' (boundary line) at the concluding post-wedding finale when the relatives and guests from each side of the respective families parted ways.

At least three households in our small village owned a Petromax in the early fifties. Later by the early 1960's my father had purchased one especially for my elder brother's wedding. To get it working required some level of skill. At sundown just before the Angelus prayers I watched my father as he literally brought this amazing innovation to light. At the time I thought it seemed as though it was quite a ritual till the time it finally shed its super incandescent light on the surroundings. My father was quite adept at lighting it. I was quite young then. "Someday I got learn to light this thing', I said to myself. I also closely watched my older brother as he trimmed and primed this awesome light source. As days went by, I was assigned with minor tasks before this self-contained apparatus delighted us with its full glow. The training involved fetching the kerosene container and funnel, filling the tank and cleaning the round glass cover with a soft cloth.

As a young lad I admired the elders in the village when they lit this lantern, going through the various stages of the entire procedure in the fading evening twilight. It was always at twilight time when we got around to lighting it. It had a great effect in brightening up an entire community. We had a special iron hook fitted to one of the roof beams to hang it after lighting it up.

I had always appreciated this shiny nickel-plated gadget, but did not have the slightest clue why it took so long for it to emit the bright light that it was so famous for. At the same time I also thought that this appliance was not something to fool around with. It appeared to be an appreciable appliance yet cumbersome and complex in its operation. It was only when I was in my mid-teens that I understood the working of this superb invention. Finally I was successful in lighting it all by myself, but of course with Dad's supervision and I clearly recall my first experience in lighting it and became easy over the years.

Although we owned a petromax we used it only for certain important occasions like feasts and litanies whenever my father or brother came home for holidays from Bombay. Our village neighbours often borrowed it whenever they needed it. Lighting it up always made me wary as it involved an element of risk – a rather potentially flammable substance with increased risk from the pressurized tank and the flame itself.

The petromax had an enormous lighting power of the value of 500 candlepower. It had a luminosity equivalent to 4 units of 100 watt tungsten bulbs. Its bright white light was nearly 5700 lumens. The white-washed walls reflected the light and enhanced the interior of the house even more.

As a self-contained and independent apparatus, this powerful light-source had a huge candle power to match. It comprised of many different parts and features. It had to be first primed or pre-heated. This was done by igniting spirit in the receptacle inside the round glass cover above the tank through an opening below its chimney. To provide pressurized kerosene to light up, it had to be pumped by hand. Among its other important features was an air-pressure gauge that needed constant attention. The complete pump assembly was fitted into the tank. The piston, rod and washer assembly were retrievable for checking the expansion of the washer into the cylinder. This had to be kept in a trim shape making sure it fitted snugly in order to provide optimum pumped pressure into the tank quickly. This assembly locked in, and out of the way into the side of the tank with a quarter-turn. Its most delicate part was the light source itself – the mantle – a mesh bag of fabric made from rare earth elements. If touched, rattled or shaken after it was lit and cooled after its first use, chances were that its very existence could be history, as it would just fall apart and disintegrate rapidly, crumbling and falling to pieces at the base of the glass cover. Amazingly, this fragile net was the hub of the light source. A torn mantle emitted diminished light with a reddish glow. A new mantle could be installed by removing the top cover or hood and tied around the inverted flange of the nozzle. The mantles could be purchased from dealers in the towns. They felt like silk to the touch and came flat. On lighting up the mantle resembled a modern incandescent light bulb.

The nipple had to be cleaned periodically - a manoeuvre requiring a special technique. The automatic cleaning or the ‘pin-mar’ operation required deft expertise. It was done by rapidly turning the cam-operated hand- wheel clockwise and anti-clockwise within a fleeting fraction of a second. This wheel could be also used to shut it off with the arrow on the wheel pointing upwards. Holding it any longer than the ‘prescribed’ duration would mean throwing the whole venue, litany or a mando-singing competition into complete darkness while at the same time also demonstrating one’s incompetence publicly!

A quick ‘pin-mar’ action instantly gave the petromax a renewed brightness. The mechanism consisted of a knob that operated a lever/cam fitted in turn vertically to a fine pin to clean the tiny hole of air/fuel mixture nipple. The pre-heater nozzles had to be cleaned manually by inserting a pin that was attached to the end of a teaspoon-sized holder through a side opening.

I remember the time when we all sat around our sala for an occasion or immediately after the litany when someone among the guests remarked in Konkani: “Pin mar-re teka’, after noticing a slight drop in the glow of the petromax. In technical terms this meant that the nipple must be

cleaned with the pin action by whoever is in charge. At this juncture I tend to wonder whether the expression ‘pin marli’ in Konkani by any chance has been derived from this action.

The original glass came in as one cylindrical piece. Local innovative craftsmen were able to replace broken ones by putting together thin strips of glass placed vertically around the grooved metal frame at the top and bottom. In fact I felt that the glass strips were better as they gave out a prismatic effect.

The petromax reigned supreme and had successfully proven to be a very reliable and powerful light source for large nightly gatherings for many decades. In the old days many shops that did not have electricity used a petromax lantern. And those that did have electricity used it as an emergency light source or back-up.

There were also special ‘petromax’ lamps that could be rented from dealers and suppliers in the towns. Some of these appliances were used for tiatros and nataks. These special types were fitted with remote pressurized tanks that were placed on the ground while an assembly of two lamps was hung high in front of the stage facing the actors. They were connected by means of copper tubing to the tanks. The complete assembly was even fitted with hinged flaps which could be lowered, thereby partially dimming the lights. Thus, the ambience of a particular stage scene in a Konkani or Marathi drama could be altered in order to successfully create the required effect or to set a melancholy or sad mood. An expert with a couple of assistants manned this system of lighting during the entire show.

The petromax had proven to be very useful in lighting up social and cultural events for many years. But then some years later when electricity came to the villages along with the availability of portable generators, fluorescent tube lights and re-chargeable battery-operated lanterns, the use and popularity of these grand old lamps eventually diminished. They can still be seen around being used in road-side tea-stalls, by hawkers and other vendors at the beaches, fishermen and contractors, and in emergency situations.

A table model kerosene mantle lamp, with an elegant and pleasing appearance, that was easier to use, was also visible on the night scene. This was none other than the great Aladdin lamp. These types of lamps are collector’s items now. With their characteristic tall glass chimney and distinct chrome-plated vase-type base, they once stood tall and graced the centre or side table of many white-washed ‘salas’ (sitting rooms) in Goan homes of yesteryear. Many were brought in by Goans working in the Arabian Gulf in the late 1950’s. My cousin brought one for us from Bahrain and we used it until circa 1970. It was a pride to own one and also brought in extra joy and happiness in the home. More light about it in another episode about the illumination devices of a bygone era. Source