

'SHOLAPITH CRAFT' OF MURSHIDABAD- PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF THE ART AND THE LIVELIHOOD OF THE ARTISANS

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ABSTRACT

Sholapith craft is one of the primordial handicrafts of the District Murshidabad (Ghosh, 2015). Sholapith Craft of this district recognized as one of the best example of craftsmanship. Sholapith items form an integral part of the major religious rituals in the district as well as State of West Bengal. A particular community popularly known as Malaker is involved in making such beautiful craft. They are very skilful and artistic secrets by profession and earn their livelihoods. This paper aims at identify the preparation of these unique handicraft requires specific techniques within different method such as Malar Kaj and Daker Kaj, with particular tools used. It also give the detail idea of the indigenous knowledge based techniques used for making such beautiful handicraft and the artisans socio-economic status.

Keywords: *Sholapith, primordial, craft, techniques*

INTRODUCTION: The term craft is derived from the Anglo- Saxon word craft meaning strength or skill or thoughtful creation of objective. Craft includes all activities of human being revolving in or around their social life through the production of objects by manual means without the use of mechanical aids where individuals and group satisfaction are visible (Ghosh, 2015). Handicraft products is an art and such products can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional tradition, religiously and socially symbolic and significant. Here an attempt has been made to analyze the present status of sholapith craft of village Hatinagar and the artisans' socio economic conditions.

STUDY AREA: Hatinagar village is located in the Berhampore Block of Murshidabad District, West Bengal. Here number of main worker is 2402 and the marginal worker is 470. This village is located nearer to the urban area of Berhampore Town. The total population of this village is 8057 where as male is 4117 and female is 3940.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

1. To find out the production process and raw material used and technological aspect associated with these product.
2. To find out the artisans socio economic status and their attitude towards next generation involvement.
3. To find out its role play as a soviniour product and employment generation of the study area.
4. To suggest possible measure for an effective development of the craft.

METHODOLOGY:

The study has been done mainly in two stages-

- 1st- An intensive field survey based on face to face interview has been performed over the study area using well structured questionnaire.
- 2nd- The survey data are analysed by statistically and representd by cartographically and some information collect from research articles, paper and different types of publication.

SHOLAPITH CRAFT:

Sholapith is a milky-white sponge -wood which is carved into delicate and beautiful object of art(Mukherjee et al, 2016). The plant grows wild in marshy waterlogged areas. Artisans use it for making artifacts used for decoration and ornate head-wears of bridal couple.

RAW MATERIAL: Two types of shoal are used for the making craft are *kath* shoal and another is *Bhat* shoal. Kath shoal is rather hard than the bhat shoal(Ghosh, 2015). Good quality pith is white.

RAW MATERIAL READY FOR CRAFT MAKING: The best time to harvest the shoal plant is in winter when the plant is mature. If the plant is cut down before the flowering period, it affects the whiteness of the pith. On the other hand if the plant is cut down after a long period of flowering it became hard and reddish in colour. The uprooted plants cut by *hansuli* or *catari* and these are then dried under bright sunlight for 3-4

days. The pith gradually turn brown and becomes lighter. After that the brown outer skin is peeled off to reveal the soft core and is ready for processing.

TOOLS USED AND PROCESS OF CRAFT MAKING: The tools used for making craft by artisans are simple. They used a special iron blade known a 'kath' fashion intricate objects out of the shoal. The soft core is first cut into pieces of various lengths as required. It is then sliced into paper then strips termed 'paturi' or shaved into sheets termed 'kaap' and then shaped by the artisan. Shapes of different size are cut and joined together to make various objects. Flat sheets are rolled together tightly to form a block. Using their creativity the artisans then makes serrated block of shoal which can be further cut to create geometric shape. The process is simple but the craftsmanship requires a steady hand and great dexterity.



Figure - 1: Process of Craft making

TECHNIQUES INVOLVED IN MAKING CRAFT: Initially the segmented shoal stems each with 75-90 cm long are allowed having sun drying under bright sunlight for 3-4 days until lush green colour of stems turn to become brown, which are then ready either for storing or for immediate processing for making decorative items. One bundle containing dry segmented shoal stems is called Jhapi, which has 300 pieces and costs around 200 rupees.

METHOD: There are two types of method involved in processing of shoal pith from stem as; (i) Malar Kaj, (ii) Daker Kaj.

'Malar kaj' is mentioned to be a crude method that usually does not require quality shoal pith and skilled artisan as well. For 'malar kaj', hard brown cover needs not to be peeled off from shola stem during processing (Mandal et al, 2014). The product of 'malar kaj' have cheap rate of price and take less time spent for their manufacturing.

'Daker kaj' is another one as mentioned to be a sophisticated method that requires both skilled artisans and quality shola pith.

STATUS OF ARTISAN'S FAMILY: The artisans of sholapith of Hatnagar village are not well established in finance and they belong to poorer socio economic status. In the whole village least amount of artisans are still continuing their craft making process, where only 75 responder has been found to carry out the research work. At a time most of the villagers are involved in this work, but for facing different types of problems they are slightly change their occupation for their better livelihood.

Table: 1. Age composition of Workers:

Age(years)	No.of respondent	Percentage
Below 20	5	6.66
20-40	32	42.66
40-60	25	33.33
Above 60	13	17.33
Total	75	100

Source: Field Survey (2016)

Table: 1 Shows the age distribution of worker. It reveals that highest portion i.e. 42.66 per cent of worker aged between 20-40 years followed by 33.33 per cent in between 40-60 years. A few percentages of people of over aged engaged in this work because this is a minimum energy requirement

Table: 2. Educational Status of Worker:

Educational Status	No. Of Respondent	Percentage
Illiterate	2	2.66
Primary Dropouts	9	12
Primary Passed	32	42.66
Secondary/H.S	18	24
Graduate	14	18.66
Total	75	100

Source: Field Survey (2016)

Table: 2 shows the educational status of the workers. As per study it shows that most of the workers are educated and illiterate persons are very few it is only 2.66 per cent. Primary dropouts found 12 per cent and they are mostly aged persons. They are concious about education because in this village two primary and one high school are present. So they are not bound to go the village for their basic education

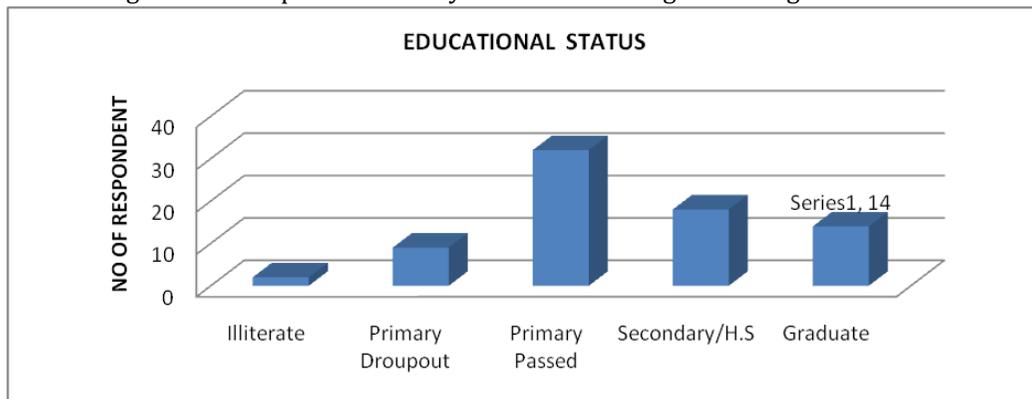


Figure - 2 : The Educational Status of Worker

Table: 3. Family Size of the Workers:

Family Size	No. Of Respondent	percentage
Below 4 member	22	29.33
4-6 member	41	54.66
Above 6 member	12	16
Total	75	100

Source: Field Survey (2016)

The table shows the family size of the worker. It clearly represents that near about 55 per cent family falls under 4-6 member and about 30 per cent family size is below 4member. This reflects they are concious about their family planning and 30 per cent family belong to nuclear family.

ITS ART OR FOLK ART PLAY AS A SOVINIOUR PRODUCT AND SOURCE OF INCOME:

Handicraft play significant role infamiliarizing the country’s tourism resources, attracting tourists, stated the inhabitant of a country engaged in handicraft work. The handicraft used in house decorating could also make a contribution in familiarizing the culture of a country. It consists of centuries-old traditions with production techniques carried on from one generation to the other. And these handicrafts are the best souvenir for the tourist from ancient time to till now(Mukherjee et al,2016).

According to the respondent in the time of Zamindari System the artisans enjoyed a respectable position in rural society. Without their handmade product no religious function was held. No marriage would be celebrated without the ornamental shoal headdress for the bride and groom. Kadam flower made by them are constantly use today in the Bengali new year in the month of *Boishak*(April-may).This indicate that it is a folk art .On the other side recently artisans are made different types of home decor products, which falls into the category of fine arts. They creates statutes, idols, children’s toy models of flower, exotic display object like elephant - howdals, peacock-boat etc. The finest Dakersaaj used in the idol of Durga are also fall in this category because this fine art have great demand on the outside of the country.

Table: 4. Importance of Sholapith work in employment generation

Importance of Sholapith work	No.of Respondent	percentage
Formost Source of income	58	77
Suplimentary Source of Income	27	36
Total	75	100

Source: Field Survey (2016)

Table represents that 77 per cent worker are directly involves in this craft making process where as 40 per cent worker take it as a supplementary employment generation. Most of the worker leave this production process due to low income level and they got other income sources for their livelihood.

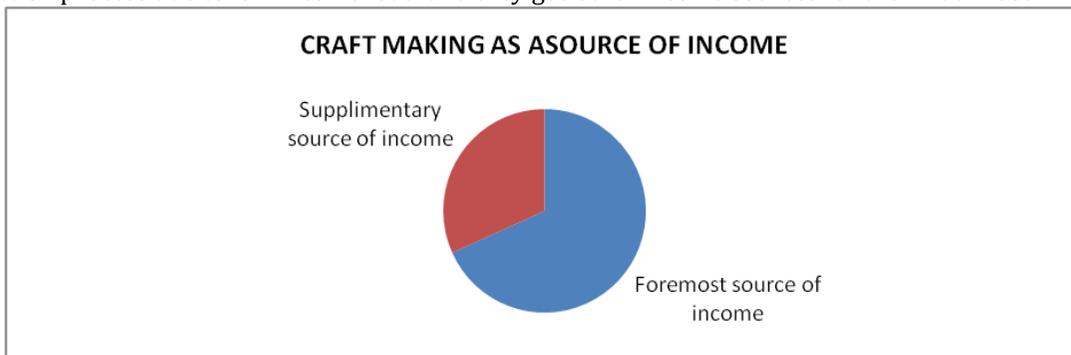


Figure - 3: Craft as a source of income

Table: 5. Marketing system of the product:

Mode of marketing system	No.of respondent	Percentage
Direct to Market	25	33.33
Through middleman	45	60
To the Govt.	00	00
NGO	05	6.66
Total	75	100

Source: Field Survey (2016)

This table shows that most of the worker sell their product through middleman and few sell their product direct to the market and only 6.66 per cent worker are sell to the NGO. It is clear that least amount of worker are involved in the Government scheme. Due to middleman effect they are not getting their original price of product.

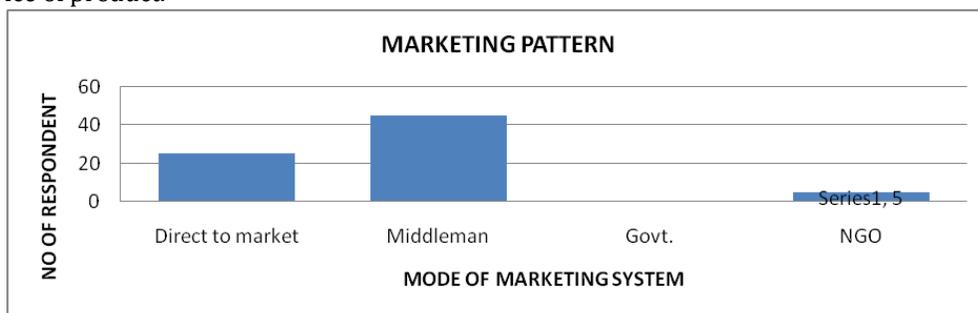


Figure - 4: Marketing pattern of craft

NEXT GENERATION INVOLVEMENT:

According to most of the respondent the present generation is not too much interested with sholapith craft making due to their perception is that the Sholapith craft is obsolete earning and that cannot provides the better standard of living.

PROBLEMS FOR CRAFT MAKING:

1. The artisans of Hatinagar village are facing a common problem i.e high rate of raw material.
2. They do not have the own farmland for harvesting shola plant.

3. Only one or two persons are trained but, most of the artisans are making craft by looking and doing process.
4. No training centre has been arranged in this area.
5. They do not know the actual price rate of raw material and the product craft.
6. Packing system of product craft is low category. In most cases the crafts are sold to the middle man.
7. Most of the villagers are not known the term 'Handicraft Mala' conduct by the Government of West Bengal.
8. Proper marketing system is absent.
9. Only one or two resources persons awarded by the state Government for the making craft, they are shifted to another place for their better living. So they do not involve the craft development process in this village.

RECOMMENDATION:

1. To avail easy loans engaged in local and national bank
2. Introduction of training centre in this village for new design of the craft making.
3. The craft men must be moulded out of traditional approach to handle the sholapith material and design new products.
4. A proper marketing system should be conduct by the local government.
5. Local govt should connect to the nearer Textile Technology College (Berhampore) for technological development of the craft.
6. Resources persons should be engaged in this field and encourage the craftsmen.
7. An awareness program has to be launched in the study area to engage young talent to be part of the sholapith craft in different capacities.
8. A common facility centre has to be developed to tap the international market and connect to the buyers and the customers directly. It also helps to know about different Government Scheme on Handicraft.
9. For exporting product the packaging system must be developed. If it can be done then middleman effect will cut down.

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