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Sholapith Craft of West Bengal: An Overview

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Abstract

Sholapith craft is one of the primordial handicrafts of the state. Sholapith craft of West Bengal recognized as one of the best example of elegance, exquisite beauty and finest craftsmanship. Sholapith items form an integral part of the major religious rituals in West Bengal. The people engaged as sholapith craftsmen are known as Malakar. This paper aims at identify the production cluster of Sholapith craft of West Bengal. It is an effort to find out the cultural Significance of Sholapith craft and classify the products according to their uses. The present study tries to understand the production process of Sholapith crafts, the implements and raw materials used in it and technological aspects associated with these products. The data are collected through observation, semi structured, indepth interviews and group discussion. The data were textual and contextual type i.e. the former is from the documents and the latter is from the studied areas.

Keywords: Sholapith craft, handicraft, rituals, Malakar.

Introduction:

The term craft is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word craft meaning strength or skill or thoughtful creation of object. 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.

Anthropologist prefers to signify craft as technology to refer to the process of manufacture and material culture for the artifacts related with the crafts (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences; Vol. 3; 1968).

Scholars opine that it is a skill or manual art (Bark, 1978) and Chattopadhyay (1975) said that it is man's creation. The craft is mingled with emotion, expression and feeling of the creator in one hand and an integral component for regulating one's own social functions, economic and religious performance on the other.

Craft is the repertoire of symbolic abstractions of emotions (Dhamija, 1977) and exhibit widest canvas of creativity and broadest spectrum of development (Jaitly, 1990). Crafts stands for men's endeavour to bring elegance and grace in otherwise harsh and drab human existence.

Handicraft articles are those which are produced either out of the use of hands or with the help of some kind of tool. It is such an art form which requires more of manual work and less amount of machinery. Such products can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant. Here an attempt was made to analyze the present state of Sholapith craft of West Bengal.

Objectives:

The objectives of the present study are as follows-

- (1) Identify the production cluster of Sholapith craft of West Bengal and Classification of Sholapith products
- (2) It is an effort to find out the production process of Sholapith crafts, the implements and raw materials used in it and technological aspects associated with these products.

Methodology:

The present effort is grounded by the ethnographic approach and methods. The data were textual and contextual type i.e. the former is from the documents and the latter is from the studied areas. The secondary sources of the data include books, journals, published and unpublished research work etc. The techniques of primary data collection were observation method, non-structured, semi structured and in-depth interviews.

Sholapith craft:

Sholapith craft is one of the primordial handicrafts of the state. Sholapith craft of West Bengal recognized as one of the best example of elegance, exquisite beauty and finest craftsmanship. Sholapith items form an integral part of the major religious rituals in West Bengal. Fine examples of craftsmanship can be seen during the Durga Puja celebrations. Every community in each village, town and city needs an idol as fine as they can afford, so the craft flourishes there.

Significance of Sholapith craft:

Shola is pure and sacred, because it grow on marshy water logged areas. Sholapith items have some Cultural value. Culturally the Sholapith craft came into being and continues to be practice mainly because-

- (a) This Hydrophyte plant is easily available.
- (b) Shola is very soft and thin in nature. It is very light by weight. It is suitable for craftsmen to use and depicts some aesthetic sence and imaginary power on it.
- (c) Its white colour, suggestive of purity and sacredness. Shola is a symbol of purity and sacredness.
- (d) All products have some sacred value. Common people use sholapith item during rituals as a symbol of sanctity and sacredness. Common householders use hanging the decorative products made of Sholapith inside the sacred rooms as a symbol of sanctity.
- (e) It has greater durability, if protects from moisture.
- (f) Shola is eco-friendly, in view of its biodegradable feature that does not make any pollution wherever it is used.

Malakar community and Sholapith craft:

Sholapith work popularly known as '*Sholar Kaj*'. The people engaged as sholapith craftsmen are known as Malakar, meaning "maker of garland", probably because they made garlands made of shoal for idols and for the noble class. The Malakars belong to the Nabasakha group of artisan class and they are involved in this craft from generation to generations. The nine craft communities are *Kumbhakar, Karmakar, Malakar, Kangsakar, Sankhakar, Swarnakar, Sutradhar, Chitrakar and Tantubaya*. According to the Brahma Vaivarta Purana their ancestor was born of divine Viswakarma and pious Sudrani mother Ghritachi, a cursed Gopi girl. Their progeny were named as Malakar. In Brihad Dharma Purana, the Malakars are referred as the progeny of Brahman father and Vaisya mother.

The Malakars believe on their divine origin i.e. they are the descendants of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati. There is a legend behind the use of shola crafts in India. It is said that while going to wed Himalaya's daughter Parvati, Shiva desired to wear a conical white hat. As the celestial artist Vishwakarma began looking for an appropriate material to make the hat, a kind of plant grew in the wet land as desired by Shiva. This was the shola or sponge wood plant. But Vishwakarma was used to working with only hard materials like stone or wood and not with soft shola. Once again at Shivas desire there appeared in the marsh a handsome youngman and he was named Malakar. All those who are now connected with the sholacraft are thus know as Malakars and belonging to the Hindu community. Malakars worship Shiva as they believe they owe their existence to Shiva and therefore are obliged to worship him.

H.H. Risley (1891) wrote about Malakar that ‘ in Bengal the caste is included among the Nava Sakha and its members profess to trace their descent from the garland maker attached to the household of Raja Kansa of Mathura, who, when met by Krishna, was asked for a chaplet of flowers and at once gave it. On being told to fasten it with a string, he, for want of any other, took off his sacred thread and tied it, on which Krishna most ungenerously rebuked him for his simplicity in parting with his *paita*, and announced that for the future his caste would be ranked among the Sudras. Like others of the higher castes, the Malakars claim to have originally come from Mathura in the reign of Jahangir.’

Like many other traditional crafts, it had its origin in the ritual and religious requirements of old days. There was a time when the Malakars, enjoyed a respectable position in the village society. In ancient time this artisans held a respectable position in society and used to supply the *Daker saaj* for the regional deities on occasions. They used to supply wreaths and flowers for the village deities and for the religious and social functions of the village society. No puja or marriage could be celebrated without the floral decoration for the deities or the topor made by the village Malakar. They are few in number, but in every Hindu village there is at least one representative, who provides the shola products for the temples and marriage tiaras for the village maidens. The art of making the decorative items using this material is seasonal.

Classification of Sholapith craft:

Sholapith craft products can be classified into six broad categories according to their uses. This are-

- (i) Sholapith products related to religious activities- *Sholar mala* (Sholapith garlands), *chandmalas* (literally moon garlands with filigree discs linked into elaborate chains), Kadam flower, *Laxmi jhara*. Here religious and historical aspects are kept in mind while making these craft.
- (ii) Sholapith products/items related to marriage rituals- conical *topors* (worn by young boys during their naming ceremony and by bridegrooms) and the *sithi mukut* (worn by the bride), *Sholar mala* (Sholapith garlands).
- (iii) Sholapith products related to death rituals- *Phulghor-Rathghor*.
- (iv) Sholapith products related to decoration- ornaments of sholapith (idol/deity decoration), mask of sholapith (Gamira dance and Malpaharia dance), Sholapith flowers (home decoration), sholapith toys and dolls (during rash jyatra) etc.
- (v) Utilitarian items made of Sholapith- Sholapith haat, packaging purpose, repairing clock etc.

Production cluster of Sholapith craft:

In West Bengal this craft is mainly practiced in the districts of Alipurduar, Bankura, Burdwan, Birbhum, Darjeeling, Dakhin Dinajpur, Hooghly, Howrah, Murshidabad, Malda, Nadia, South 24 parganas, Coachbehar. Craftsmen of a particular area, however, have specialised in a particular line of production.

Table-1 Monthwise use of Sholapith items and production clusters

Sholapith Items	Production cluster/area	Function/Use	Months of use/ Season
Bisohari pot	Dinhata, Bhitaguri (Coachbehar)	Rajbansi community used it during Manasa puja	Srabon
Cytol pot	Kaligunj (Coachbihar), Kharibari (Darjelling)	Rajbansi community used it on the birth rituals of a new born child and during marriage rituals	Any month of the year
Chandmala	Sundurush (Hooghly), Mahespur (South 24 parganas)	Various types used during various pujas	Bhadra, Magh, Ashin
Dharmachata	Krishnanagar (Nadia)	Dharma puja	Magh
Jhara	Ghatal (East Medinipur), Sundurush (Hooghly), Pukuria	Laxmi Jhara for Laxmi puja, special	Ashin

	(South 24 parganas)	types of Jhara used for Bara puja & Satyanaranyan puja	
Jati	Mukshipur (South Dinajpur), Dinhata, Bhitaguri (Coachbehar)	Used by Rajbanshi community in any rituals, it attached on Mangol ghot.	Any month of the year
Kadam phul or Bhapla	Ghatal (East Medinipur), Sundurush (Hooghly), Pukuria, Gokulnagar, Mahespur (South 24 parganas)	Used during <i>Halkhata</i> by Hindus, <i>Jatra puja</i> by Rajbanshi people	Baisakh, Ashin
Laxmi Mukhra	Krishnanagar (Nadia)	Laxmi puja	Ashin
Mashan	Baladanga (Coachbihar)	Rajbansi community used it	Any month of the year
Mandush	Old Malda, Englishbazar (Malda)	Rajbansi community use to curve monoshar Monjusha during the auspicious Manasha Puja	Last day of Srabon
Melli	Mukshipur (South Dinajpur)	Used in Basupuja	Any month of the year
Patimour	Krishnanagar (Nadia)	Itupuja	Every Sunday of Aghrayan
Phulghor-Rathghor	Ghatal, Siddha (East Medinipur), Bhandergacha (Howrah)	Death rituals	Any month of the year
Rash rachana and Rash tree	Ramesharpur (Howrah), Sundurush (Hooghly), Mahespur (South 24 parganas)	Rash yatra of Sri Krishna	Kartik
Shola mask	Mukshipur (South Dinajpur), Baladanga (Coachbihar), Mrigi (Nadia)	Gamira Dance, Gajan and Malpaharia dance	Any month of the year specially Jaistha, Aghrayan and Chaitra
Shola garland or mala	Sundurush (Hooghly), Pukuria (South 24 parganas), Siddha, Khannadihi (East Medinipur)	Used by Hindu community in any rituals or pujas, it attached on <i>Mangol ghot</i>	Any month of the year
Shola ornaments of deity	Bankapashi (Burdwan), Krishnanagar (Nadia), Kirnahar (Birbhum).	Shola decorations and ornaments (<i>Sholar Saaj</i>) of unusual size and dimentions for deity	Ashin (Durga puja), Kartik (Jagadharti puja)
Sholapith flower	Mahespur, Gokulnagar, Pukuria (South 24 parganas)	Home decoration	Any month of the year
Sholapith Hats (<i>Tupi</i>)	Kaligunj (Nadia)	a necessary article of headwear for protection from the hot mid day sun of India	Biasakh-Jaistha
Sholapith model, decorative items (faces of gods and goddesses, elephant howdahs, peacock boats, palanquins)	Khagra, Baharampur(Murshidabad), Banibon (Howrah)	Home decoration	Any month of the year

<i>Tusu Choudol</i>	Bishnupur (Bankura)	Tusu festival	Last day of Poush
<i>Topor-Sithimukut</i>	Mahespur (South 24 parganas)	<i>Topor</i> -worn by young boys during their naming ceremony and by bride grooms. <i>Sithi mukut</i> -worn by the bride	Baisakh, Jaistha, Ashar, Srabon, Agrahayan, Magh, Phalgun

Sholapith plant -principal raw material:

The word craft include two major aspects viz. raw materials needed for the craft production and manufacturing craft items using those locally available raw materials with some aesthetic sense. Shola plant is the principal raw material of the craft. Sholapith is a milky white sponge-wood which is carved into delicate and beautiful objects of art. It is a Hydrophyte plant. Shola is a plant which grows wild in lakes, ponds, trenches of paddy fields, flooded low land area and marshy waterlogged areas and is partially submerged in the water. Shola plant grows particularly in the marshy areas of Eastern India i.e. West Bengal, Assam, Orissa. Sholapith plant belongs to the family- Fabaceae or Leguminosae and Genus- *Aeschynomene*.

There are two species of shola- *Bhat shola* (*Aeschynomene aspera*) and *Kath shola* (*Aeschynomene indica*). *Kath shola* is rather hard but *Bhat shola* is light in weight and soft. Almost the whole of the shola plant is its stem. Its bark is grey and inner body white. It grows to a height of 5-6 feet. The sholapith is the cortex or core of the plant and is about 2-3 inches in diameter. The pith plant is recognised by the shallow layer of leaves that float on the marshy water at a depth of two to six feet.

Good quality pith is pure white and smooth with a soft bark and no nodes, while poor quality pith is one where the core is reddish with a hard bark and has many nodes. The pith collector wades into the water to collect this reed, which is then dried thoroughly and sold as sticks in length of two to three feet.

Shola seeds usually get germinating at the advent of pre-monsoon when fields get moisture. Dormant seeds which remain deposited in the soil get sprouting and take three months to become full grown plant. It has full blooming during the months of September-October, followed by fruiting.

The best time of harvesting Shola plant comes when flowering period is ending with commencement of pods. This time shoal plant becomes mature and suitable for craft work. If shoal plant cut down before flowering period, we can't get pure white colour of pith. On the other hand, if shoal plant cut down after a long period of flowering, it is not suitable for work, because it becomes hard and redish in colour. The craftsmen used the portion of shoal plant for their work which remains submerged. Generally the collectors are engaged in uprooting of shoal plants from their waist height water level. They clean the leaves, branches and roots from the stems. Then make them into two to three segments with the help of *Hansuli*. Sometimes, the entire shoal plants are brought into home after being uprooted from ponds and lakes. The some family members take part in trimming of stem; make them into two to three segments with the help of a *Bati*.

After that the segmented shoal stems are allowed having sun drying under bright sunlight for 3-4 days. Gradually the green colour of stems becomes brown. This plant becomes light when dried. The outer skin is brown. Then it is ready either for storing or for immediate processing for making sholapith craft products.

Generally the collectors belong to Schedule Caste category in respect of Indian Constitution. In Nadia and East Medinipur they belong to Bagdi community and in South 24 parganas they are from Poundra Khatra community. Both male and females are engaged in this work. They earn their livelihood by collecting shoal plants and after cleaning and drying sell them to the Malakars.



Figures: 1. Sholapith plant, 2. Shola seed, 3.Storage of dry sholapith stick

Collection of Sholapith:

The best time for the collection of pith is between the months of December and February. Formerly there had been no regular market for sholapith. Recently, however, with the increasing demand, seasonal markets crop up during October- December where villagers bring matured shola stems and artisans and traders collect their yearly requirements.

There are some markets from where the craftsmen collect the sholapith. Malakars of Nadia and North 24 parganas collect shoal from Ultodanga haat (every Sunday), Howrah and Hooghly district collect shoal from Munshirhaat (every Friday), and South 24 pargana district from Pukuria haat (every Saturday).

Now a days, the shola art supplies are available for trading every Saturday from 4a.m. to 7 a.m. at the Pukuria market. Hindu and Muslim farmers from villages like Bankar Dar, Ishwaripur of the Joynagar, Raidighi, Kashinagar, Mathurapur and Magarhat police station bring shola plants for selling in the market. Bundles of shola plants are referred to as *Tari* in the regional language. One *tari* comprises of 8-12 shola plant. Thin shola *tari* may cost Rs.24 while a good quality shola *tari* may be upto Rs.70. Infact Pukuria haat sell all things related to shola from implements, raw materials, seeds, semi finished products to finished products made out of Sholapith. The cost of shoal plant depends on quality of plant i.e. colour and thickness of sholapith plant.

Shola buyers from different parts of West Bengal mainly from Diamond Harbour subdivision purchasing them during September to November. Sometimes they carry the sholapith bundle in truck. A truckload consisting in 1200-1400 bundles costs Rs. 10000. Some buys the Sholapith sticks once a year and store them.

This is an agro-based industry. Shola farming is also speading to some areas like Jaynagar and Amtala in South 24 Parganas, Purbostholi in Burdwan, Jhakari in Hooghly, Pataspur and Pashkura in East Medinipur district. A few farmers cultivate it on their own land. The cost of one kg Shola seed is Rs. 200-Rs. 250

Implements and Raw Materials Used:

These craft requires no complicated tools. The tools used are simple and comprise of knives of different size and shapes, small batali, paper cutting scissors, needle, wire cutter, measuring tape, plastic scale and geometry box. In West Bengal the iron knife called *kath*, is used to shave the outer cover of the stalk, so that the white core is exposed. The stalk can be shaved further into thin or thick sheets and shaped with a knife or scissors. A piece of wood (*Bali kath*) also required for sharpening *kath* with the help of sand.



Figures: 4. Kath, 5. Knife, 6. Scissor, 7.Bali kath.

Beside sholapith stick and sholapith sheet (*Shola pata*) the few items that the artisans use include coloured paper, nylon thread (*kor*) or cotton thread, rubber bands, aluminium wire, bamboo sticks, coconut stick, gum or adhesive, ribbon, glitters, water colours etc. The craftsmen themselves make pasting gum from the tamarind seeds. These days they also used gums from the market. They used these to make the sholapith craft more attractive. These articles are purchased from the local market.

Methods of Sholapith craft:

For making the Sholapith items craftsmen used two methods- engraving method and painting method. By engraving method the craftsmen produce Topor-Sithimukut, mask, sholapith toys and dolls, ornaments of deity etc. it is very difficult work for the craftsmen to depicts or engraved the designs on soft material like sholapith. There is a high chance of accident if any mistake occurs. But they are habituated with this skill by hereditary.

On the other hand, they used colour on some items. They colour on shoal paper or pata with their own traditional process of painting. The products are different *Bisohori pot*, *Sitol*, *Mandus*, *Mashan*, *Laxmi mukhra* etc. Colour soap easily on shoal and it stay long time on the products. All finished products show some aesthetic sense of the craftsmen.



Figures: 8. Topor and Sithimukut, 9. A singhasan decorated with *Rash rachana* at Mahespur village, 10. Lankeshwar Malakar at Alipurduar Durgabari haat with *Sholapith pot*.

Technique of preparation:

Shola is very light by weight. Inside the course grey outer layer of the reed is hidden a soft white inner core. The core of this reed is white in colour and is exposed when the outer layer of the stalk is shaved. The core is sliced into strips, and made into sheets, cubes, cones and slices which can be shaped according to the artist's imagination.

The artisan cuts the stem into pieces of 4 /6/8 inches according to his requirement. He then deftly cuts paper like long sheets termed *Kap* or thin slices termed *Paturi* with his long sharp blade. He also makes serated blocks or design blocks and cuts slices thereof for decorative purpose. In some cases, specially for toys and doll and human and animal forms, plaster moulds are used, where shola sheets are pressed to shape and layers of paper are pasted at the back for reinforcement. Once the flat sheets are made, a dozen of these can tied at one end and cut into pieces to create various shapes, geometrical and floral.



Figures: 11. Long Shola steams are cut into small pieces, 12. Brown outer layer of the stalk is shaved, 13. The white colour inner core reed.

About a meter long Shola steams are cut in 12 cm long pieces and then from each piece, the thin bark is removed and very thin white Sholapith sheets are taken out with the help of a *kath*. The thinness and polish of the

sholapith sheet depends on individual skill. The sheets are rolled to make 20-25 shola sheet rolls and are then packed in a bundle. The cost of each Sholapith rolls is Rs.10. Each bundle costs about Rs.200 to Rs.250. The large number of labourers are involved in producing Sholapith sheets (*shola pata*) for ready to use by the craftsmen.



Figures: 14.The Shola sheets are rolled, 15. Storage of sholapith paper, 16. Womens are engaged in Making of Kadam flower.

The colouring on the finished product, if required is done with bright coloured paint. Earlier paints made from natural sources (i.e. herbal paints) were used and different shades of red and black were used, but now-a-days artificial paints are also used and more colours are being tried in addition to the traditional colours. After the final touch of the artisan the aesthetic quality of those is really sumptuous. The process is simple, but the craftsmanship requires a steady hand and great skill.



Figures: 17. Making of Kadam flower, 18. Laxmi jhara , 19. Sholapith stick of Gokulnagar village, 20. Packaging of sholapith flower, 21. Marketing of sholapith products.

Division of labour:

Craftsmen spend several months on a piece to meticulously curve out the details. With hand operated simple tools they used to engrave exotic designs on the sholapith. It was very labourious and time consuming job. No part of the pith is wasted and leftover bits are used for making flowers, birds and animal figures. Here entire families are engaged in the craft, yet it is the master craftsmen who take charge of the most intricate works.

Heredity and oral tradition of learning:

From the very young age they are trained to make some sholapith articles. Heredity have developed in them perfected forms and motifs and their inborn sense of art displays itself in the use of these forms and motifs to create one of the most impressive item of decoration and ornamentation. By helping the elderly artisan in crafting the sholapith as well as through day to day experience the young craftsman acquires the training at home. Oral tradition of learning the technical skill of the craft is the only means to train the novice artisan. In Maheshpur village i find a sholapith craft training center supported by Department of Rural Development, Kolkata where the women and younger craftsmen can learn to create new designs or different objects to fulfil the demand of the modern taste.

Change of sacred value of products:

In those days an artist (*shilpi*) used to create varied types of motifs by hands with simple tools. Those were the product of the emotional feelings, experiences and aspirations of the artists. Their imaginary power to creat such motifs on the shola products used to reflect their aesthetic sense as well as traditional knowledge. The sacred value of the articles are gradually transforming into the secular or commercialized form. The changing value

system of the modern society does not make it mandatory for the Hindu urban married couple to wear *Topor* and *Sithi mukut*.

Conclusion:

In earlier days sholapith craft used to maintain an economic bondage within the locality as well as outside the locality. It was the center of bondage to maintain the interethnic relationship and also has encouraged the other crafts. There was a direct contact between the customer and the craftsman. The *jajmani* system is abolished and the transaction exists between the middle man/exporters and the craftsmen that lead to the abolition of economic independence of the craftsmen.

It is interesting to note that when modern technological influence is striking in society, the traditional techniques still exist in their society. The workshops, in most of the cases are not generally located in a separate room rather in a separate place adjacent to the living room, verandah or in the courtyard. Most of the cases the condition of the workshop is very filthy, damp, clumsy and unhealthy.

It is supposed that the total control in acquiring raw material and selling of the finished goods are under the authority of the traders and the mahajans. Naturally the profits go in favour of mahajans or traders. It is noticeable fact that the artisans do not have any co-operative society, which is very much active among some of the other artisan communities of West Bengal. If the government would take direct responsibility of purchasing and making the artworks, then the middlemen who do not do any of the work would not be able to make these huge profit margins.

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