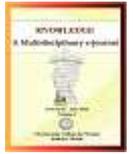


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### **A Traditional Craft Practices in Transition- An Ethnographic Account on a West Bengal Village**

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#### **Abstract:**

*The importance of handicrafts is both cultural and economic. Sholapith craft is a traditional ritualistic craft, recently gained importance in the global market. The present study was conducted in Mahespur village of South 24 parganas district, W.B. during the period of October- November 2014. The study includes three-fold research objectives that are as follows- (1) how the production and marketing process of Sholapith craft function in Mahespur village? (2) how the sacred value of the articles are gradually transforming into the secular or commercialized form to fulfil the modern demand? and (3) how the artisans faced various problems related with this craft and they became the victim of exploitation of the middleman and the emerging entrepreneurs or exporters? The present effort is grounded by the ethnographic approach and methods, which became the principal pathway for collecting, sorting and interpreting the data. This study is qualitative in nature. The craftsmen narrated their experiences of how and why they faced problems with this craft. Total 40 participants were selected through purposive, convenience sampling. The craftsman, workshop owner, labours, exporters were interviewed, and who are directly involved with the sholapith craft. The present effort as an output is looking forward to contribute knowledge for better policies and action for the craftsmen of studied village.*

**Key Words:** Handicraft, Sholapith, Ethnography, Entrepreneurs.

#### **Introduction:**

The Indian handicraft industry represents the rich Indian culture, traditions and heritage along with the modern and trendy touches. (Ghouse, Suhail M. 2012) The Indian handicrafts industry is highly labour intensive, eco friendly, unorganized household sector, with huge potential of employment generation and foreign exchange earnings and practiced extensively in the rural areas. (Vijayagopalan 1993, Jain, Rahul, 2015 Jadhav, S.) The importance of handicrafts is both cultural and economic. The cultural importance of handicrafts leads to the preservation of the heritage, traditional skills and the art. Its



economic importance lies in high employment potential, low capital investment, high value addition, and potential for export/foreign exchange earnings. (Vijayagopalan, 1993) India is one of the important suppliers of handicrafts to the world export market and handicrafts developed Indian economy in general and rural economy in particular after agriculture. (Thakur, Vijay 2012, Towseef Mohi-ud-din et al 2014 Jain, Rahul et al 2015)

The strength of Indian craftsmen lies in their traditional skills, their understanding of their materials, their taste and of course, their grasp of the design, form and decoration of their products all acquired through generations of caste-bound practice. (Sen, P.1994) This skill is handed down from generation to generation in the form of family tradition. (Jadhav, S.) Such products can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant. (Singh, Dr. Anoop Kumar, et al 2015) With advent of commercialism and industrialization, the old order being replaced by new values. Technologies and socio-economic structures have greatly influenced the evolving process of the craft tradition. The age-old traditional crafts of W.B. have been so well molded according to the present day demands that it seems that these artisans, apart from their traditional skills, have an expertise in the art of survival as well. Here the current paper will throw a luminous focus on Sholapith craft of Mahespur village under Mandirbazar police station of South 24 Parganas district.

**Objectives of the research:** The objectives of the present study are as follows-

- (1) how the production and marketing process of Sholapith craft function in the studied village.
- (2) how the sacred value of the articles are gradually transforming into the secular or commercialized form to fulfil the modern demand.
- (3) how the artisans faced various problems related with this craft and they became the victim of exploitation of the middleman and the emerging entrepreneurs or exporters.

**Material and Methods:** The present effort is grounded by the ethnographic approach and methods, which became the principal pathway for collecting, sorting and interpreting the data. This study is qualitative in nature. The craftsmen narrated their experiences of how and why they faced problems with this craft. The participants were selected through purposive, convenience sampling. For qualitative data like sholapith products making, marketing system, social connections, hierarchy, power relation 40 participants (20 craftsmen, 10 workshop owners and 10 mahajans) were selected according to the available informed consents. The craftsman, workshop owner, labours, exporters were interviewed, and who are directly involved with the sholapith craft. 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.



Semi structured, focus group interview, case study and participant observations have been recorded, transcribed and analyzed.

**Sholapith craft of West Bengal:** Sholapith craft is one of the primordial craft of the state. Sholapith craft of West Bengal recognized as one of the best example of elegance, exquisite beauty and finest craftsmanship. In West Bengal this craft is mainly practiced in the districts of Burdwan, Birbhum, Hooghly, Howrah, Murshidabad, Nadia, South 24 parganas and some other parts of this state. Craftsmen of a particular area, however, have specialised in a particular line of production. Thus, the craftsmen of South 24 Parganas are noted for their beautiful chandmalas, topors and other forms of floral decorations. Sholapith craft 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. 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. (Chakraborty, S et al 1991)

**Mahespur-the village of study:** Present studied village Mahespur is situated under Jagadishpur gram panchayet, East Gopalnagar post office, Mandirbazar police station and block, Diamond Harbour subdivision of South 24 Parganas district. Mahespur is a multiethnic village. The first shola works started here in the Mali neighbourhood (*Mali para*) of Mahespur village. Particularly, this is a Halder neighbourhood (*Halder para*), as all artisans here have Halder surnames. It is interesting that no craftsmen of this village are belongs to Malakar community. But since they creat Chandmala and other decorations for deities, they are refered as Mali/Malakar. Some of the artisans of this village have surnames like Gayen, Mondal, Naskar, Banik and Mukherjee. But among them Halders are numerically strength. They generally belong from Paundra kshatriya, a scheduled caste group of Bengal. Their traditional caste occupations are fishing, cultivation, trading etc. Their position is low in caste hierarchy. (Explorations in Anthropology, 2006, p.558) About 90% of the total village population engaged in Sholapith craft belongs to Scheduled Caste. The first shola works started in this village approximately 300 years ago. Gradually the shola works spread to the neighboring villages like Bazarberia, Gokulnagar, Hathtola Makhimpur, Pukuria, Ratneshwarpur etc (Mondal, S. 1984). Sometimes after marriage the girls of this village continue the works in their in- laws house. Thus sholapith craft spread in the neighboring areas. Some of the famous artists of this village are Rabindranath Halder, Amay Halder, Sachindranath Halder, Shib Halder, Basudeb Halder, Sanath Halder.

**Classification of Sholapith craft:** The sholapith craft of Maheshpur village can be classified into two categories. One is the ritual related items and utilitarian items and the other one is sholapith decorative items like Sholapith flowers, toys and dolls etc. In case of the first one religious and historical aspects are kept in mind while making these craft. Traditionally ritualistic items includes garlands, deity ornaments (*sholar saaj*), chandmalas (moon garlands with filigree discs linked into elaborate chains), Kadam flower, conical *topors* (worn by young boys during their naming ceremony and by bridegrooms) and the *sithi mukut* (worn by the bride). The art of making the ritualistic items using this material is seasonal. But shola craft have in the contemporary time found a wider application in home decoration, as artistic objects with an aesthetic dimension. Now-a days, mostly decorative item are made and it still has demand in this era of plastic technology.

**Sholapith plant-principal raw material:** Before going to detail description of the Sholapith craft of the village Maheshpur, it is very important to know about sholapith plant. It is a milky white sponge-wood. Shola is a plant which grows wild in lakes, ponds and marshy waterlogged areas and is partially submerged in the water. It is an herbaceous plant, which grows particularly in the marshy areas of Eastern India i.e. West Bengal, Assam, Orissa. There are two species of shola- *Bhat shola* (*Aeschynomene aspera*) and *Kath shola* (*Aeschynomene indica*). Bhat shola is light in weight and soft, where as Kath shola is hard in nature. ( Prain, D. 1981 *Bengal Plants*)

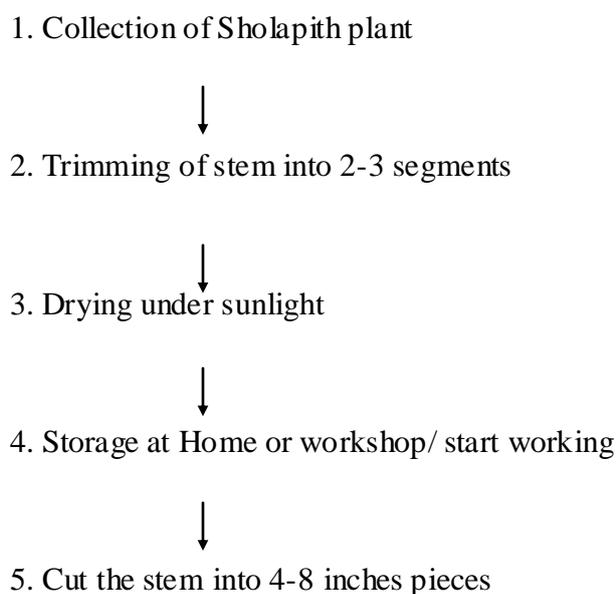
**Sholapith Market or Haat:** The best time for the collection of pith is between the month of December and February. Formerly there had been no regular market for sholapith. Recently, however, with the increasing demand, seasonal markets crop up during October- December where villagers bring matured shola stems and artisans and traders collect their yearly requirements. There are some markets from where the craftsmen collect the sholapith- Ultadanga haat (every Sunday morning) and Munshirhaat (every Friday). But at present the workshop owners collect the sholapith from local Pukuria haat, which is held on every Saturday from 4a.m. to 7 a.m. at Pukuria. 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 10 pieces shola plant. Thin shola *tari* may cost Rs.40 while a good quality shola *tari* may be upto Rs.90. Infact Pukuria haat sell all things related to shola from implements, raw materials, seeds, semi finished products to finished products made out of Sholapith. 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. Some buys the Sholapith sticks once a year and store them on their house or workshop (Ghosh, Kundan 2015) Due to rising demand, shola craft has become an ago-based

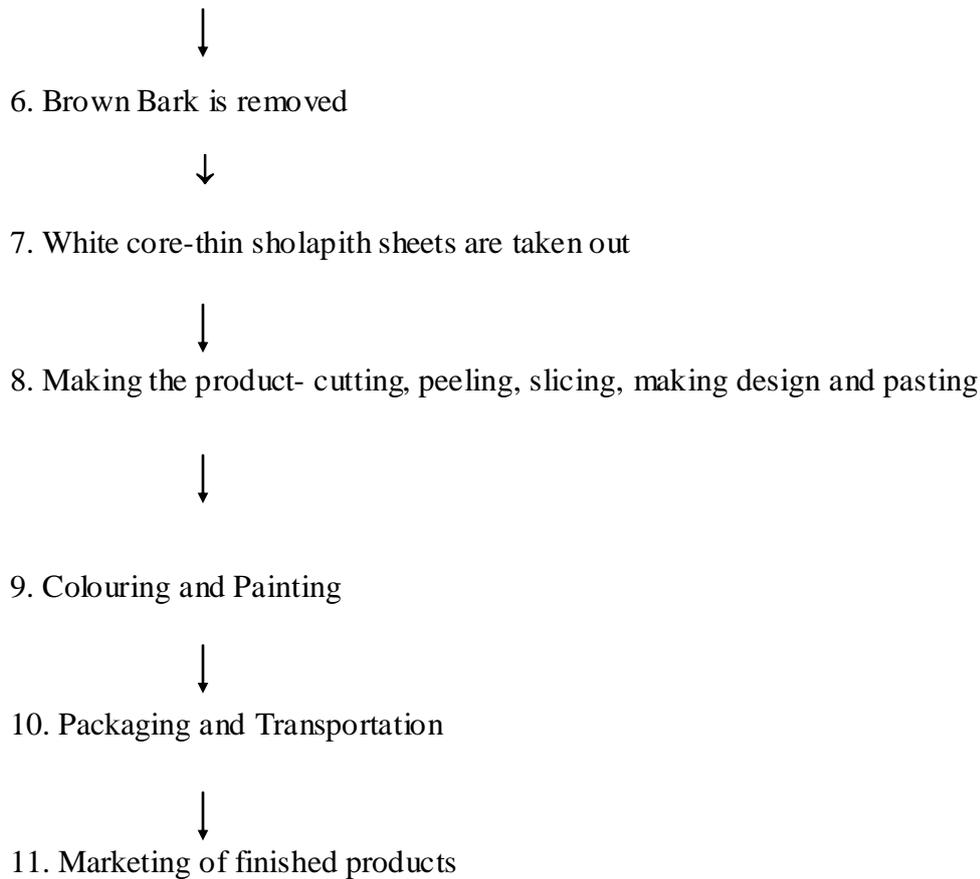


industry. Thus not only sholapith craft, but shola farming is also spreading to some areas in the South 24 Parganas and Medinipur. Shola plant does not grow so widely in Mahespur village, but a few farmers cultivate it on their own land. Sholapith is now brought from the market.

**Implements and Other Raw Materials Used:** 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. These craft requires no complicated tools. The tools used are simple and comprise of knives (*kath*) of different size and shapes, small batali, paper cutting scissors, needle, nurun, wire cutter, measuring tape, plastic scale, dice, a piece of wood (bali kath), bowl or tumbler- for colouring and dyeing Sholapith, Handmade measuring tool made of Sholawood and geometry box. 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. They used these to make the sholapith craft more attractive. These articles are purchased from the local market or Pukuria haat on every Saturday.

**Technique of preparation:** Sholapith work is marked by a series of processes. There are 11 operations have observed in the field area. Each of the 11 operations is not executed by one person. Many people require for this job. The complete process of making the product from the first stage to the last is shown below as a flow chart-





**Division of labour and Hereditary oral tradition of learning:** Craftsmen spend several months on a piece to meticulously carve 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. Here entire families are engaged in the craft, yet it is the master craftsmen who take charge of the most intricate works. The cutting of Sholapith and finishing touches of product done by male artisans and females are involved in setting jori and chumki at ornaments, making garland of shola (*mala*) and *Laxmi jhara*. 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. (Ghosh, Kundan 2015)



**Attention in the Global Market:** The Sholapith business of this area expanded in the late 1990s when more and more export houses realized the potential of this beautifully crafted products export significance in the foreign countries. Since then this craft has gained attention in the global market. Shola works are in demand abroad for cinema decoration, interior and exterior decoration. Craftsmen in Mahespur village, South 24 parganas mainly cater to the export market by producing large quantities of artificial flowers of various kinds with shola. These shola products are exported to USA, France, England, Russia, Hong Kong and Singapore through Madras. Thus Sholapith craft has successfully contributed to the local economy provides means of livelihood to hundreds of families.

**Changed scenario with modern demands:** Culturally the sholapith craft came into being and continues to be in practice mainly because of its white colour, suggestive of purity and sacredness. 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. The sacred value of the articles are gradually transforming into the secular or commercialized form. With the change of time and changing value system of the modern society, new kind of demand took place. Craftsmen these days also make various toys, birds, flowers and dolls. Sholapith craft have in the contemporary time found a wider application in home decor, as artistic objects with an aesthetic dimension. Shola decorations of olden days have reappeared with slight modifications to lend brightness and elegance in interior decorations and social functions. The traditional designs and the motifs that was associated with the symbolic meaning of good omen have changed to fulfil the modern demand. Utility and decorative items have added a new dimension to the craft. This transformation somehow helps few craftsmen in remaining attach with the craft technology. This age old craft has become a blessing for the artisans and provides a way to earn their living. Now-a-days the sholapith craft is making waves and more and more city dwellers are discovering the beauty of shola product as the products are eco-friendly and biodegradable. Shola plants have an important role to play in the natural and social environment of the country.

**Emergence of new entrepreneurship and Sholapith workshop:** The commercialization of the craft has created a great impact on the structural and functional aspects of sholapith craft and its organization. Two distinct categories of persons have emerged with the introduction of exporters. They are the new entrepreneurship i.e. a middle man class and the rest of the craftsmen or labour (*Karigor*) class.

**(i)Sholapith Workshop:** Some of the villagers of Mahespur build their own sholapith workshops (*karkhana*). The workshops produce the sholapith products as per the order by the exporters. The design of the product and its quality, the time of supplying the products were controlled by the



exporter. The exporters give samples as guide to produce the order. Sometimes the workshop owners creat new samples for the exporters on their own initiative. The samples of the new designs are shown to the exporters for approval. The exporters place the production orders on the basis of these samples.

**(ii)Products made at this workshop:** Some of the products made at this workshops or factories are- Sholapith Kali ball, Sholapith Gulab stick, Sholapith Lily stick, Sholapith Pana flower, Sholapith Belly flower, Sholapith Jui flower, Sholapith Rose flower, Sholapith Jasmine, Sholapith Chrysanthemum, Sholapith Cabbage ball, Sholapith Lata ball etc. Several flowers are made like Jasmine, Rose etc. These are strung on a thin wire to make crescent shaped veni stringled flowers with a wire fastener to go round the bun of hair. Slit tin foils are used for extra decoration, which is cut into different sizes and pasted to the pith pieces.

**(iii)Labour (Karigor):** The owner of each workshop involved some labours to produce the sholapith products. They employed skill craftsmen from any communities as hired serfs or contract labourers to manufacture products as per demands of the customers or exporters. There are about 5-20 labours in each workshop. The labours carry out different works like sholapith sheet/paper bundling, cuts the sholapith paper to appropriate sizes, shape to the flower petals, drawing to produce the final flowers etc. Each labourer's salary or wage depends on the number of products they produce. The workshops start at 8am every day and runs till 5pm in the evening. The labours work for 3-4 hours every day after finishing their household work. In case of big orders and which has to be completed in short time, labourers work extra time to cover these orders.

**(iv)Distribution of works:** Sometimes the workshop owner distributed works to the labourers in and around the Mahespur village, based on the demand and needs of the order. Every day the labour collects the raw materials and delivers the finished products. Most of the labours are women. They work from their own home whenever they gets free time after completing their household work.

**(v)Marketing of the finished products:** These new entrepreneurs purchase the sholapith products from the local artisans in cheap rate and sell those goods to the firms based in Dharmatolla, big shops owners or in the big fairs or run business of their own. In this way they are getting exposure to the open market where as the actual craftsmen are loosing their importance. The artists themselves get very little of the profits, and are barely able to survive.

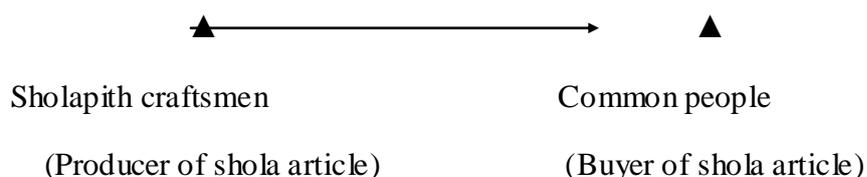
The exporters (company) sell the Sholapith products produced in sholapith workshops to the international buyers. The finished sholapith products are packaged in containers and exported outside the country via ships from Tuticorin harbour in Madras (Chennai). A few examples of exporters are Tristarr Hotitech, Fauna International, Ramesh Folwers etc. The owner of the workshops delivers the finished sholapith products to the exporters once a week.

**(vi)Controlling of Capitals:** During the fieldwork, it is found that middle mans possess and compete for all four forms of capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) in Sholapith craft. The craftsmen or labour (*Karigor*) possess strong cultural capital than other resources. Different degree of accumulation of capital formed the hierarchy, power relation and domination within this sector. Middleman class tops the hierarchy and have power to dominate the labour (*Karigor*). The craftsmen or labour (*Karigor*) class, by virtue of their cultural capital, also have power to resist domination. But they frequently fail and negotiate in that because they survive on those capitals at the mercy of more powerful ones (middleman). 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.

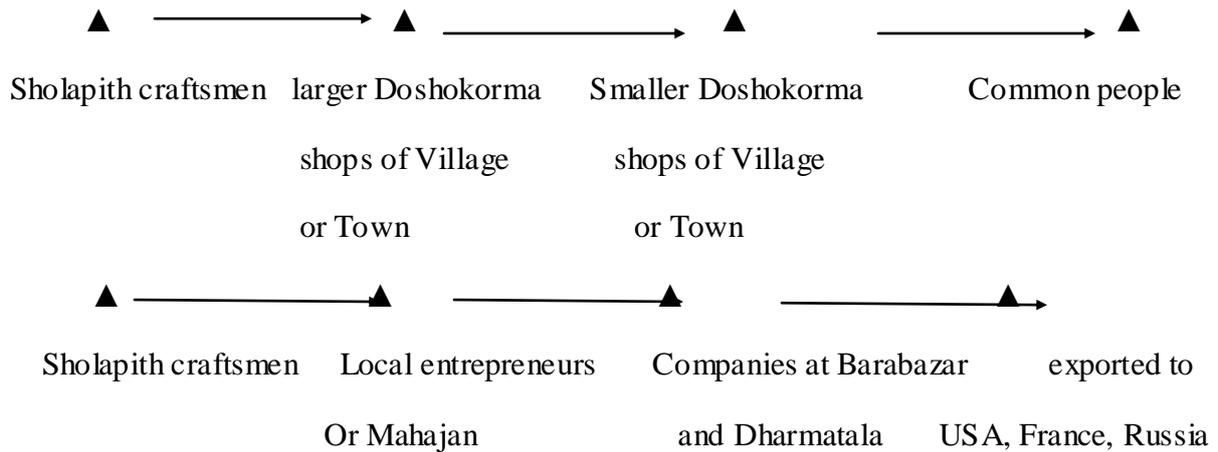
**Changes in the exchange system:** In earlier days sholapith craft used to maintain an economic bondage within the locality as well as outside the locality. It was the center of bondage to maintain the interethnic relationship and also has encouraged the other crafts. There was a direct contact between the customer and the craftsman. But in the present situation to collect raw material and to supply finished products they have to depend on the local middleman/ businessmen or big shop owners. The direct contact with the customers is not in vogue amongst the craftsmen while the local businessmen either directly sell the products or they supply the products to different shops. Middleman are rich traders have the marketing control over the marketing of the finished products. Sometimes the poor craftsmen borrow loan from the local middle man from whom they work. The nature of jajmani system is changed and the transaction exists between the middle man/exporters and the craftsmen that lead to the abolition of economic independence of the craftsmen.

A trend of occupational mobility from the traditional craft to other jobs, business etc. is found among the age group 20-35 years. I had a discussion with the younger craftsmen about the recent change in this craft. It is understood that the younger generation has different of opinion than that of their elders. They feel that the change is needed to sustain their livelihood to cope with the changing socio-economic situation. New products should be needed to satisfy the customers of modern outlook. Shola flower and flower stick attract the urban customers and also the tourists.

**Exchange system of earlier time:**



**Exchange system of present days:**



**Key challenges faced by the artisans with Sholapith craft:** The traditional glory of Sholapith craft now in crisis due to globalization and modernisation. The owner of workshops and labours faced some problems with this Sholapith craft occupation. The following problems were discussed in detail with the respondents:

**(i) Damage of the product:** They have to face a loss due to product damage during product delivery to the exporter. When enquired by the exporter it noticed that the products got damage during transportation and could not be used, so it was rejected. Sometimes whole production not damaged, only a part destroyed. Then the total number of order flowers decreases, so they get less money.

**(ii) Rejection of orders:** Sometimes they have to face tough time when their products are rejected by the companies, because it was not up to the mark according to them. If the companies buying the shola products find any minor defect in the quality of the products, then they return the entire package. Specially it happens in case of exporter's order of colour sholapith flowers. Sometimes the colour not totally matched with the order sample.

**(iii) Lack of Quality Raw Materials:** If they do not use good quality of shola to make flowers, they would not get enough prices of flowers because the cost depends on the quality of the flowers. During the rainy season if there is less amount of rainfall, then the height of the sholapith plant does not grow much and the quality of the plant also degrades. At that time the cost of raw materials also become high. The production of Shola plants becomes decreases. Some time there was no favorable environment for plantation of Shola plant. Most of the ponds and lakes have no water in monsoon season, so it is difficult to grow

**(iv) Labour problem:** sometimes the owner of the workshop face labour problems. In the rainy seasons the sholapith production is affected due to scarcity of skilled labour availability. At that time they get involved in preparing the agricultural field for rice cultivation.



(v) **No fixed profit margin:** there is always ups and downs in this business. Some months, the artisans remain very busy and make considerable amount of profit, where as few months go dull without any work. As this profession is like no work no pay, hence at this time they remain in poverty. Their monthly profit is not fixed.

(vi) **Lack of funding and exploitations of money lenders:** the main hurdle is their low financial capital. They need a strong financial back up regularly to buy raw materials and run workshops efficiently. Most of the cases, there is no provision of bank loans for them. Other cases the artisans face a number of difficulties to get loan from banks which results in unwillingness to get loan from banks and they are attracted to local money lenders who finance them with high interest rate. During the peak season they have to borrow money from middle man or entrepreneurs. In Mahespur there are some mahajans, who supply the amount to the craftsmen.

(vii) **Poor infrastructure of workshops:** All weather shade is not there, during monsoon it becomes difficult for them to work. As I found in Mahespur the craftsmen do not have any proper workshop for doing craftwork. 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. Not all work happens at this workplace. A major portion of work is outsourced from labourers living in Maheshpur and around the village.

(ix) **Changes in the raw materials and Emergence of alternative products:** It also faces competition from similar and cheaper synthetic materials. Plastic decorations seem to be the order of the day for wedding and puja pandals. The advancement of plastic technology and thermocol has hit this craft badly. Now a day's chemically made thermocol which almost looks like shola, rather they are more attractive and more durable, have greater demands in market. Shola products are replaced by other raw materials. Previously craftsmen works on only Shola ornaments, but now he mixed some jori and chumki on shola ornaments for deity.

**Conclusions:** The emergence of new entrepreneurship actually creates competition for the real artisans who with minimum support of traditional tools and method become unable to compete with those better finished products manufactured at those workshops. For this they are suffering from the identity crisis and also loosing their status as artist (*Shilpi*) to labour (*Karigar*). The high illiteracy rate, poor economic condition, non availability of raw material in subsidiary rate and lack of proper marketization of the commodity, the sholapith artisans became the victim of exploitation of the exporters and the emerging entrepreneurs (middle man). Though it has demand in global market, a trend of occupational mobility from Sholapith craft to other jobs, business etc is found among the



artisans. I have found major reasons which lead the artisan to shift in other jobs are no fixed profit margin and economic insecurity, market control by the entrepreneurs. In view of shortage of financial resources, advertising publicity cannot be undertaken by artisans. Absence of systematic marketing network has been a discouraging factor in this sector. Hence it is suggested that the government required to play a vital role in solving the marketing problems faced by the artisans. The craftsmen do not have any co-operative society. 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. Voluntary associations also need to put sincere effort for the better working condition of the Sholapith craftsmen. The artisans could be taught to innovate and improvise, use better tools and better raw materials. Innovative techniques can be taught to the workers through government sponsored programmes. Care should also be taken to popularize crafts in home markets creating awareness among the home consumers. Hopefully happy times lie ahead for Sholapith crafts and artisans can look forward to a bright future.

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