

THE STORY OF INDIAN CORK







~ THE STORY OF INDIAN CORK ~

Documented by
Eshna Roy Chowdhury



Guided by
Dr. Manohar Desai Prof. Nitin Gawai Prof. Rahul Despande





Preface

Sholapith, often called the “ivory of the East,” is a delicate yet enduring craft form rooted deeply in Bengal’s cultural and spiritual landscape. Traditionally shaped into intricate decorations for rituals, weddings, and festivals, it reflects both artistic finesse and symbolic meaning. This book is an attempt to document and celebrate the legacy of Sholapith and the Malakar artisans who have preserved its grace for generations. From its botanical origins to its ceremonial presence, each piece tells a story of patience, precision, and pride. Through these pages, I hope to honour a timeless craft and the community that breathes life into it.






Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION TO SHOLAPITH	02
2. WHERE IT ALL BEGAN	04
3. OTHER CRAFTS OF BENGAL	05
4. THE COMMUNITY	06
5. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE	08
6. REGIONAL VARIATIONS	12
7. ENVIRONMENTAL VALUE	15
8. EQUIPMENTS	16
9. PROCESS	18
10. COLOUR PALETTE	20
11. MARKET	22
12. CHALLENGES	28
13. MEET THE ARTISAN	30



Introduction to Sholapith

Shola pith craft of West Bengal recognized as one of the best examples of elegance, exquisite beauty and finest craftsmanship. In the village of Bankapasi, located in Mangalkot of Burdwan district, there are currently 70 shola craft units run by leading craftspeople, continuing a rich legacy of skill and tradition. Known scientifically as **Aeschynomene aspera**, the shola plant is an annual aquatic herb that grows in the wild, flourishing in marshy and waterlogged areas. Its inner core referred to as sholapith or Indian cork ideal for artistic manipulation.

Deeply woven into local folklore and spiritual belief, shola craft carries a sense of sacredness and purity. One legend tells of how Vishwakarma, the divine architect, was commissioned to create a pure white crown and garland for the wedding of Shiva and Parvati. Unable to find a material pure enough, Lord Shiva dropped a lock of hair into a pond, from which the shola plant sprang forth. From another strand of hair, the first garland-maker emerged bestowing the craft with divine origin and bestowing its artisans with sacred lineage. In another tale, Lord Krishna appeared suddenly before his friend and devotee, Sudama, who humbly offered a garland made of shola.



Where it all began...



Bardhaman

Is one of the most prosperous districts in West Bengal. Bardhaman is known for its traditional arts, crafts, and festivals. Durga Puja, Kali Puja, and Rath Yatra are integral to the city's identity. These festivals bring the community together in joyous celebrations, showcasing the vibrant cultural life.

Being in a geographical position it acts as the lifeline for the whole state as the main transport and river system passes through it. It has a multicultural heritage throughout the history. During British rule it used to be an important center as it was in the times of the Mughals, Pathans and the Marathas.

Other Crafts of West Bengal

Dokra



01

Bankura

Teracotta



02

Bishnupur

Jute



03

Murshidabad

Wooden Dolls



04

Bardhaman





The Community

Artisans who practice this craft are traditionally called malakars, meaning makers of malas (garlands). 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. Like many communities in India, the Malakars too believe that their ancestry can be traced to divine origins. According to Brahma Vaivarta Purana, the first Malakar was the progeny of the god Vishwakarma.



Cultural Significance

Sholapith craft holds deep cultural and ritualistic significance in Bengal, where it is intricately woven into religious and social ceremonies. One of its most iconic uses is in Bengali weddings, where the topor and mukut delicate headpieces worn by the bride and groom are crafted from shola to symbolize purity and auspiciousness. During Durga Puja, artisans create the elaborate daak-e-shaaj an ornate white decoration adorning the goddess, adding a divine aura to the celebration.



Additionally, in villages like Muragachha Colony and Borboria in Nadia district, sholapith is skillfully used to make the torsos and heads of traditional puppets, showcasing its versatility beyond ritual use, while keeping local folk art and storytelling traditions alive.

These creations not only enhance the visual grandeur of Bengal's festivities but also preserve the spiritual essence of its age-old traditions, serving as a timeless bridge between heritage and contemporary celebration.







Regional Variation

In West Bengal, Sholapith is practiced mainly by the Malakars in the districts of Bardhaman, Murshidabad, Birbhum, Nadia, Hooghly and Malda. In the province of Odisha too Sholapith is immensely popular as it's widely used for decorating the Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra in Puri and also to make other handicraft articles like boats during the celebrated festival of Ratha Yatra. It also features prominently in the odissi dance form, as a headgear. In Tamil Nadu, the craft is known as netti and holds regional importance.





Environmental Value

Beyond its artistic elegance, sholapithcraft is environmentally sustainable. All products are biodegradable, making them easy to dispose of without causing harm to the environment. This is especially important in rituals where items are often discarded after use. The eco-friendly nature of shola craft gives it a unique edge over synthetic materials and positions it as a green alternative in the world of decorative arts.





The Shola pith plant, native to West Bengal, Odisha, and Assam, has roots tracing back to Sub-Saharan Africa and spread across South Asia and parts of Southeast Asia. It thrives in swampy areas, especially during the monsoon months of June and July, and reaches full bloom around September to October. Growing up to six feet tall, Shola is cultivated mainly in South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, where the best quality pith is now grown due to shrinking marshlands. The plant's soft, milky-white core is judged by the smoothness of its outer bark. Harvesting is usually done by women using a crescent-shaped sickle called a hansuli.



Equipments

1. Batali

Hand-held tool primarily used for shaping and carving wood.



2. Knives

Kathi- A long knife used to carve and shape the shola pith into various designs and forms.



3. Kanchi

Different types of scissors called 'kanchi' help in making intricate designs.





Process of Making

1. Extraction

The stems are first immersed in water, then dried until their outer layer turns brown. Artisans carefully peel off this dark skin to extract the soft, white core used as the main material in crafting. The extracted cores are re-dried and prepared for use. The brown outer layer isn't discarded it's creatively used to add texture and contrast.

2. Building Blocks

Once dried, the soft inner core is sliced into thin sheets and assembled into blocks. These blocks are ideal for carving due to their lightness and pliability. Artisans carve individual pieces from these slices with precision. The carved parts are then assembled into full decorative components, laying the foundation for the final product.

1. Designing the Product

Shola blocks are designed by a combination of traditional techniques like engraving and painting with the help of various tools like knives and brushes. The designs are often inspired from nature and cultural motifs. After carving, products are decorated using traditional materials such as marbled paper and natural dyes. This final step reflects the artisan's aesthetic sensibility and cultural heritage.

2. Packaging

Once the items are engraved, painted, and fully dried, they are carefully packed for shipping. Each product is wrapped and boxed using sturdy materials to prevent damage in transit. Packaging is handled with utmost care to ensure that every item reaches the customer in perfect condition exactly as envisioned by the artisan.

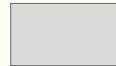






Colour Palette

Traditional
Colour Scheme



Contemporary
Colour Scheme





 **The Products**



Topor
Wedding Headgear



Daak-Saj
Idol Decor



Flower Pieces
Used for decoration



Pith Helmet
Worn by British









Shola art has expanded from traditional ceremonial use to modern markets. However, in recent years, the market for shola crafts has become increasingly seasonal, with most of the demand concentrated around major religious festivals and wedding seasons. Artisans often earn very little due to middlemen and lack of direct market access. In the era of globalization, modern market includes many imported products against the traditional market. Imported products are the big threat to the cottages industries. While platforms like government fairs, NGOs, and online sites are creating new opportunities, challenges like poor visibility and low pricing remain. With growing demand for sustainable crafts, better promotion and fair trade can help the Shola art industry thrive.



Challenges

Shola products are exported globally to countries like the USA, UK, Japan, and Australia, yet artisans see little profit, with middlemen and export companies taking the majority share. Despite its cultural significance and growing international demand, the sholapith craft faces serious challenges: artisan poverty, poor village infrastructure, and the loss of wetland habitats crucial for the shola plant's growth. The rise of thermocol, a synthetic alternative, adds further pressure. Without urgent support and conservation efforts, this rich craft heritage of Bengal risks fading into obscurity.



In the Malakar community, the entire lineage is hereditary and the young craftsmen acquire their training by helping the elderly artisans. To train the novice artisan with the technicalities is mostly done orally, sometimes with the help of songs as well. Singing folk songs while at work makes the process less hectic and provides a sense of togetherness. Without urgent support and conservation efforts, this rich craft heritage of Bengal risks fading into obscurity.





 **Meet the Artisan**



Shombhunath Malakar, now in his sixties, belongs to the very first community that brought the sholapith craft into existence. This is not just his profession it is his heritage. The knowledge and skills were passed down to him by his father, as they had been passed down through generations before. From a young age, he grew up surrounded by the tools, materials, and stories of the craft, learning through observation and patient practice.

I sincerely thank the artisan for his generous support and guidance throughout my research on sholapith craft. His stories, experiences, and knowledge helped me understand the cultural depth behind every creation. Without his patience and willingness to share, this project would not have been possible. I am grateful for the insights he shared about his life and craft journey. His dedication and passion continue to inspire the preservation of this heritage for future generations.



*“ Many people have left doing shola now, but for me its not
just a craft- its a tradition, its in my blood ”*

- Artisan