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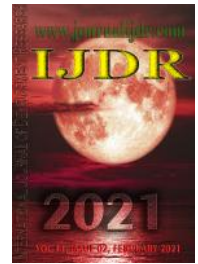
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MATERIAL CULTURE OF SITAL PATI: A DYING HANDICRAFT OF BENGAL

*Subhajit Sen

Junior Research Fellow, Anthropological Survey of India, Eastern Regional Center, Kolkata

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*Corresponding author: Subhajit Sen

ABSTRACT

Sital Pati is one of the finest handicrafts of Rural Bengal. This handicraft is mainly produced in the Eastern part of India and Bangladesh. It is one of the durable and important craft among other domestic article and hand bag, hat, purse, table mat and many other things which are made of Sital Pati, witnessing the beauty of craftsmanship. The present study has made an attempt to examine how a specific craft is attached with the livelihood of the craftsmen. The study also tried to find out how this handicraft struggling right now and how other associated factors likes production, distribution etc are related with market and impacted upon the weavers.

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INTRODUCTION

Material culture as a term is one of the essential conceptual contradiction in anthropology. Material culture includes all the physical things which are created and meanings are attached by human beings, e.g., foods, clothing, tool, architecture and so on. Actually, we are surrounded by objects in our everyday lives which enhance the material, spiritual, personal welfare of us. Many scholars think that 'cultural anthropology, semiotics, international marketing, consumer behavior, human geography probably function to reflect individual as well as the social images. This term was gone out of its usage since this term was introduced by E.B Tylor in 1871, which indicates the importance of material culture for understanding cultures and societies. After the end of eighteen century, the term material culture gain interest among the scholars and associated with the things which are made by human or used by them, are highly relevant part of everyday life and an essential articulation of cultural particularities. Besides, as an area of research material culture remains a domain. Though there is no such discipline named as "material cultural studies", yet the relevance of material objects to understand the essence of culture is still very important.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization/Information Technology Community (UNESCO/ITC) define handicrafts as follows:

"Products that are produced by artisans, either completely by hand or with the help of hand-tools or even mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of the finished product... the special nature of the artisan products derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant." (UNESCO and International Trade Center (ITC), Final report of the International Symposium on the Crafts and the International Market trades and customs Codification, 1997). Material culture has a great impact on a society. Every society suffered due to cultural stagnation which is the output of the difference between material and non-material cultures. Societies are introduced various materials in their everyday life which they have to compensate. Basically, that stagnation of culture results from a fast development of material aspects of a culture. This stagnation of culture is lead by the identity and individuality of all existing societies.

West Bengal is one of the core areas of many talented artisan of India. The crafts of Bengal are always admired by the art-lovers of the world. This state has a unique specialization in various forms of craft. The traditional crafts of West Bengal are still very much in demand in present day. Sital Pati is a common commodity and utilitarian product of rural Bengal. This is so commodious mainly in summer season. It is basically used for sleeping and sitting purposes. Besides, they also make hats, table mats, bags, folder, and other home decorative items. The craftsmen are so dependent of these mats from generations and there are numbers of families and villages in West Bengal who are so dedicated to this small scale business. To understand the present situation of this handicraft, the present study was undertaken in a village of Habra, where people from various economic and cultural background live together and make the beautiful handicraft from many years.

METHODOLOGY

During the fieldwork, observation, which is an important technique, was mostly used. Besides, questionnaire was used to collect the data on the livelihood of the craftsmen. The craftsmen of various age groups were interviewed based on their skills, type and pattern of production and experience. The villagers who are not involved in this handicraft making also interviewed to know about their perception about this craft. Photography was also used to document the processing and other aspects of the phenomenon.

Study Area: The present study was conducted in a village named Natun Gram, which is situated in the core of Habra town, North 24 Parganas. The post office of this village is Prafulla Nagar and Police Station of this village is Habra. The village is located just 10 minutes from the Habra Railway Station and it takes approx 50 minutes from Naihati Railway Station by bus.

Population: The village is uni-ethnic in nature. There are members of approx 10 clan groups are found i.e., Alimban, Kashyap, Bharadwaj, Madhukulya and so on. More than 200 people of the village are involved with this handicraft. The craftsmen are mostly the clan members of Alimban and Kashyap.

Table No. 1. Distribution of male and female based on their clan who engaged in Shital Pati making

Clan Name	Female	Male
Alimban	66	88
Bhadreswar	1	2
Bharwadaj	5	7
Goutam	1	3
Kashyap	20	24
Madhukulya	1	8
Mudhumullor	3	3
Others	9	11
Total	105	146

The present chart of population shows the distribution of male and female craftsmen of different clan. The chart indicates one interesting fact about Sital Pati makers. Here we can see that male craftsmen are more in numbers than females. But generally the reverse fact is also expected because the nature of female hand (much softer than male) can make the weaving of the mat more perfect and now-a-days female participation is increasing gradually after understanding this fact.

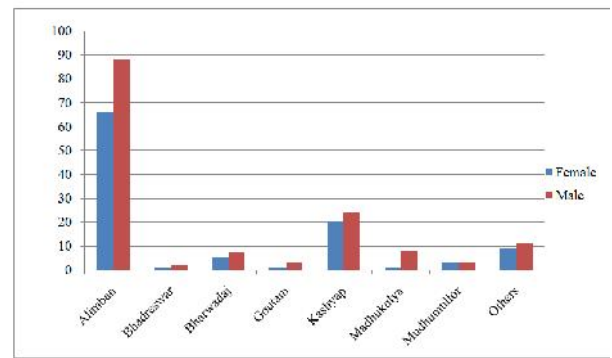


Diagram No. 2. Bar diagram illustrates the distribution of male and female based on their clan who engaged in Shital Pati making

Most of the craftsmen came from Bangladesh where this craft was first introduced. The male members learn this from their family, in other words it is their cultural capital. But in case of many females, it is not their cultural capital. Most of them (females) learnt the processing and other technical issues of Shital Pati from their husband. Most of the craftsmen become married when he settled here after coming from Bangladesh. This is one of the main reason which was depicted in diagram 2 (male craftsmen are more than females), but the scenario can be reverse in upcoming decade because the young boys of next generations are not as interested as their father is.

Variations in the types of Sital pati: Sital pati (cool mat) is one kind of mat which mostly use in the summer for its naturally cooling feature. It was first introduced in the different places of Bangladesh like Kumilla, Barisal, Tangail, Noakhali, etc and after few years this handicraft come to India like Coachbihar, North 24 Parganas in West Bengal and also different areas of Assam. The length of these mats was usually 165 cm and width was approx 152 cm.

Agricultural Description: The process of preparing seedling is interesting. The seed of Paita Tree (*Schumannianthus dichotomus*) (sital pati is prepared from the barks of this tree) is implanted in land and after 2-3 years the seed becomes seedling. If someone has huge space in his house, this tree can also grow up in that courtyard. But generally villagers prefer to implant the seed in their own agricultural land because that will be grown in a profitable amount at a time. The tree is born mainly beside ponds and small white flowers are found in that tree. Normal pesticides which are available in local markets and water are applied. The craftsmen told that, if there are insects in the soil the growth of the tree will be so good. After 5 years when the tree is matured, the villagers cut them for making the mat. The barks of the stem of the tree are peeled by the knife or sickle. This process is called 'holui'. The process is almost similar to the twigs separation from coconut tree leaves for making broom. Some villagers buy stem of Paita tree from market (Mahajan).

Categorizations: There are various types of Sital Pati(s) are made by the craftsmen of this place. These are Seddo Pati, Chotar Pati, Mota Pati, Shital Pati and so on. Quality, quantity, textures, weaving patterns etc are the reasons behind the differences among the Sital Pati. Among all types of pati, the most valuable is the Shital Pati and the cheapest is Buka Pati. Shital Pati is also has called 1 no. pati because of its supreme quality and the thickness of bark which is used to weave it. It is much flexible than its other variations.

It is very smooth and glossy comparative to other mats. Craftsmen believed that a snake can slipped if it tries to walk on its glossiness. Shital Pati is whitish in colour and thinnest among all. Mota pati is called 3 no. pati. It is also reddish in colour because it is the worst mat. This is much thicker than the other types of mat. The texture is not smooth in this type of mat. The texture of Chotar Pati is so rough comparative to others. Chotar Pati is mixed of reddish and whitish colour. The Beti-ati Pati is known as 2 no. pati. The numbering of pati indicates the thickness of beti¹.

Production: This phase is so important and craftsmen have to keep patience until they finished it perfectly. There are various steps for finishing a mat properly.

Preparation of Beti: First of all, they separated the 'beti' from the stems of Paita Tree. After separating, all those beti are fermented in a big plastic drum for 10-12 days. In earlier day, earthen pots were used. But now-a-days plastic drums are used for its easy availability and low risk factor. After fermentation, those beti are boiled and salt, colour, starch, water extracted from rice are added for 2-3 hours. Previously, the colour which are used, were natural. But today's craftsmen used artificial colours which are available in local markets. So the colours of the mats are harmful and last lesser days than earlier mats. The craftsmen generally use three colours i.e., pink, blue, green. When the beti are boiled, those are cleaned with water and removed a bad smell which is similar to country liquor. Finally, it dried up in sunlight.

Weaving: After the beti become dried, the craftsmen started their weaving process. They take three 'beti' together and tie a knot. Then they take two beti and the third one passed between those two beties. This is the first point from where the weaving of a mat is started. This point is known as 'Goj' (a knot). If the point is tied so strongly, the entire mat will be finished very well. After that, they started to frame and weave the mat by column. The weaving of Shital Pati is so dense and there is no gap remains between each column and row. Generally women of the villages weave it with their hands and they take approximately five days to complete a mat.

Designing: There are various designs are found in Sital Pati. A craftsman has to keep in mind before weaving a mat whether he want to design it or not. According to that they have to weave and use as well as add colours. The design cannot be done after the end of weaving. It is done at the time of weaving because the design is made by the beti. The design can be made with colours and also without colours. Most importantly, a craftsman should be very conscious in every moment about his weaving. If any mistakes occurred, he has to start from the beginning.

Distribution: This is the phase where probably every craftsman's labour gets its expected value. After finishing the mats, those are sold to local markets as well as door to door of the customers. They also distributed their products to the particular shops of whole sell markets like Sealdah, Maldah, Coachbihar and so on. This kind of distribution is increased in summer. There are some middle men (all of them are Hindu) who come to the craftsmen and the products have brought to the whole sellers.

This process has both advantages and disadvantages. One of the disadvantages is the craftsmen are presence of middle men. For this reason, a craftsman may not get the proper value for his product. The middle men can pay them according to their wish. So, the craftsmen are exploited almost regularly. The advantage is the craftsmen no need to go anywhere to sell his product. The craftsman earns his money without going anywhere. It reduces a huge labour of the craftsmen. It is so helpful to the aged craftsmen. Their products are also found in the various trade fairs and handicraft markets in all over Bengal.

Economic profile of the craftsmen: The economic profile of the craftsmen indicates the amount of success as weavers to some extent. It also depicts that the earning of the weavers really justify their labour and craftsmanship or not. The variation of monthly income based on the primary occupation of the most of the villagers is presented in the table.

Table No. 2. Distribution of male and female based on their monthly income

Sex	<1000	1000-2999	3000-4999	5000-10000	>10000	DNF
Male	18	45	35	20	24	4
Female	22	35	12	18	15	3

*DNF= Data Not Found

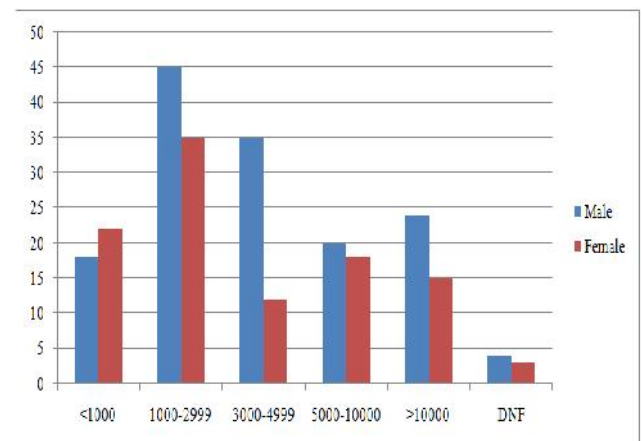


Diagram No. 2. Bar diagram illustrates the distribution of male and female based on their monthly income

This chart shows the monthly income of the Sital Pati weavers of the village. The table shows that the earning of most of the craftsmen ranges between 1000 to 5000 rupees per month. So, now-a-days it is quite tough for them to maintain his family within these earnings. The current situation of these weavers is getting worst because they do not get proper remuneration for various reasons. This chart also depicts the present scenario of market of the Sital Pati.

Significance of Sital Pati Making: The village is located in the town area of Habra, West Bengal. So, it is quite natural that people is interested to do different kinds of jobs for earning money. This village is not exceptional from that aspect. Here, a question naturally occurs that why a huge number of villagers invest their time to making Sital Pati in spite of having the other options of occupations. The craft Sital Pati was first introduced in different places like Kumilla, Barisal, Tangail and so on. The craftsmen who lived here, most of them were come from Bangladesh and mostly from those above mentioned areas.

¹ Beti- local term of mat weaving barks

They learn that craft making from in early ages from their family. So, it is comparatively easy to do from the other works. Most of the craftsmen are not so educated and not so young. For this reason they cannot do the heavy work. The young bloods of the villages are reluctant to make this craft because it needs huge patience. Educated young villagers are interested to do government jobs or any other institutional jobs which can suitable to his educational qualification as well as earn more money than Sital Pati making. The Sital Pati making now turns into one of the habits of those craftsmen and also the only way of earning. They cannot shift their occupation at least in this age of their life. Whatever, at the end of the day, they keep this handicraft alive.

Conclusion

From the discussions of the above pages, it is clearly understandable that making Sital Pati perfectly so tough for a craftsman. When we see a beautifully designed Sital Pati displayed to sell in a market, we become amazed to see those products but rarely know how much dedication, hard works of the craftsman involved there. Now-a-days, in the era of globalization, it becomes tougher to compete with other substitute and comparatively cheap products. The choices of the customers are changing rapidly, but the craftsmen still tried to supply products as per the demands of the customers. We should feel happy that the generation of us witnessing one of the finest craftsmanship of Bengal. We should use less the other substitute products of Sital Pati, which is not good for our health too. Otherwise who may assure that few decades later the Bengal will not lose its one of the beautiful handicraft in course of time. So, by considering the above facts it may be assumed that the craft is downed now. But the good old days is not so far, till that this handicraft will continue its journey silently by these craftsmen.

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