



Rural Craft & Cultural Hubs of West Bengal



Department of MSME&T
Government of West Bengal

SHOLA



**“The artist is the lover of nature;
therefore he is her slave and her
master.**

- Rabindranath Tagore

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West Bengal is a treasure trove of natural and cultural heritage. The intangible cultural heritage of Bengal is an exemplary instance of the aesthetic lineage of Bengal. Utilitarian lifestyle items like basketry made with date palm leaves and Sabai grass, hand spun and hand woven jute rugs (Dhokra), mats made with cane slips (Sitalpati) or Madurkathi (Madur), pottery, Kantha-spreads, decorative and ritualistic items made out of Shola and others, reflect a curious fusion of indigenous craftsmanship and utility. Bengal's art and craft reflect cultural history, ethnic roots, and lifestyle in-tune with nature. Variety of masks, Dokra and metal work, range of indigenous weaves and embroideries, dolls, masks and figurines curved out of wood are examples of Bengal's artistry. Culture of Bengal is enriched by the mellifluous tunes of the Baul, Bhawaiya, Bhatiyali singers, rapturous dances of Chau, Raibenshe and Jhumur, storytelling traditions like puppetry and Patachitra, and folk theatres like Gambhira, Banbibir Pala among other folk forms.

The Rural Craft and Cultural Hub (RCCH) Project is an initiative of the Department of Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises and Textiles (MSME&T) and UNESCO aiming to rejuvenate the rich cultural heritage of West Bengal and strengthen rural creative enterprise. The journey started in 2013 and the RCCH project currently covers 50,000 handicraft and folk artists across the state. It has strengthened the ecosystem supporting the transmission of traditional skills in art and craft, fostered direct market linkage, engaged youth in pursuing their traditions, and promoted cultural tourism to the villages of the artists. The project is indeed a testimonial to the contribution of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) to sustainable development, social inclusion and also to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).





SHOLA

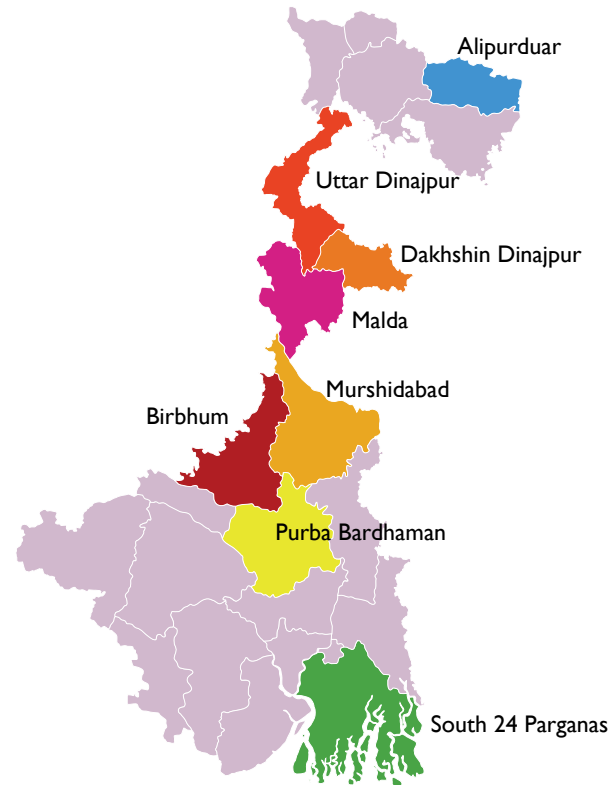
The Wonder wood

Sholapith, also referred as Indian cork, is a milky-white spongy plant botanically known as *Aeschynomene Aspera*. Shola grows in wild, water logged and marshy areas of Bengal and has unique properties of being pure white and delicate. Shola is an eco-friendly, biodegradable, durable and renewable resource, which is more than just a plant in Bengal and is partner to Bengal's cultural journey. A range of intricate, ritualistic, and decorative objects are made from the soft, supple, porous and lightweight core of the Shola stem.



CRAFT HUBS

Shola is a signature craft of various districts across the state of West Bengal. With the RCCH project support, the following destinations have evolved to be major craft hubs, which include Mathurapur in South 24 Parganas, Bon Kapashi in Purba Bardhaman, Bhatibari in Alipurduar, Atghara in Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dehat in Kushmandi and Surul in Birbhum.



THE MALAKARS

Community of Shola Artists

The community of garland makers known as Malakars, have given Shola plant the recognition it has today. There are different views about the origin of Malakar community. Some believe that the present day Malakars belong to Nabhashakha group of artisans, which includes nine communities ie., Kumbhakar, Karmakar, Malakar, Kagsakar, Samkhakar, Swanakar, Sutradhar, Chitrakar and Tantubaya. Others believe Malakars to be progenies of God Vishwakarma and Ghritachi, a cursed Gopi girl. According to another opinion, Malakars are descendants of Brahmin. Most of the Malakars worship Lord Shiva and consider themselves as his descendants.

At present there are around 500 Shola artists across Bengal who have been practicing this craft for generations. Traditionally women were not involved in the craft but today their number is on the rise across the districts. Artisans from each location are involved in creating different kinds of Shola products such as Shola flowers, figurines of gods, elephants, peacock boats, garlands, toys, fruits, vegetables, *topor* (head crown worn by the grooms and brides) etc. Most of their products are sold in the Kumartuli region of Kolkata for decorating the idols of Gods and Goddesses during religious festivals.





PROCESS

The Shola artists create exquisite, intricate work by cutting and curving the reed to make ritualistic and decorative items of various kinds. Shola pith are first uprooted, and then dried until the stems turn brown. The stems are then peeled off to use the inner white soft core. The soft white core is used to make blocks and slices, both of which are used for designing the different Shola products. The intricate curvings are done on the blocks to give birth to a range of ritualistic and decorative items. The thin slices are pasted to adorn the curved items and finishing of the products is taken up. The Shola artists use cotton, jute, beads and other small ornaments to decorate the products. The artists also paint to design some of the Shola products.

TOOLS

The artists use knives of different sizes to cut and curve the Shola items. These knives are locally known as *Kaath*.





SHOLA IN TRADITION

Items carved out of Shola are indispensable elements in Bengal's tradition and celebration. Shola is considered to be auspicious and a sign of serenity and are often used to make traditional adornments. In Bengali Hindu marriage, special headgears for bride and groom are made out of Shola. Kadam flowers- an emblematic of happiness and joy, are made out of Shola and hung outside Bengali households during religious festivals.



Goddess Durga, a Hindu deity, is adorned with decorations and ornaments made out of Shola. Shola is also used in making other decorations for religious festivals like *Chandmala*.



Manasar Chali, a type of idol of the serpent goddess, Manasa, is made out of Shola and serves to be a totem of worship during the monsoons in Bengal. Shola is also used to make other items of ritualistic value, like *Saitol*, dedicated to *Saitori*, the folk goddess of the indigenous community of North Bengal.



Idols of *Mashan*, a spirit worshipped by the Rajbangshi community of Coochbehar and Alipurduar, are also curved out of Shola, and reflect indigenous cultural tradition and craftsmanship.

IVORY LEGACY

The district of Murshidabad has a grand legacy of indigenous craftsmanship. The artists curve the Shola into products with intricate designs. The fine workmanship creates products of high decorative value. Howdah Hati, Mayurpankhi Nouka (peacock boat) being the most common of the lot.



STORY OF REVIVAL

The Shola craft of West Bengal, inspite of being intrinsic to the state's cultural heritage, was subject to the threat of extinction. Very few surviving expert artists, lack of interest of younger generation, stagnant and seasonal market for Shola products, can be identified as major reasons behind the tradition of Shola craft getting lost.

The RCCH project has acted as a catalytic force in rejuvenating and revitalizing the Shola craft tradition. New possibilities of production, marketing has been explored, where artists are now reaching out to national and global markets with diverse range of innovative products. Awareness regarding the traditional craft practice has also been enhanced and significantly contributed in safeguarding the cultural heritage.



PRODUCTS

Apart from curving items of ritualistic significance, Shola artists are now making a range of home decors such as flower vase, wall hanging, decorative work on terracotta items, small three-dimensional chariots, idols of gods and goddesses, miniature Shola craft work in a glass bottle and souvenirs of popular sites such as Taj Mahal and Hazarduari Palace of Murshidabad. Other products include Shola mask, *Rash Phool*, *Jhara*. Murshidabad is famous for producing different Shola figurines such as elephants, peacock boats, garlands, toys, fruits, vegetables, jewellery, hairclips with flowers, different kinds of flower sticks and others. To upgrade their products, the artists are making figurines such as Jesus, boats etc. out of Shola.













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