



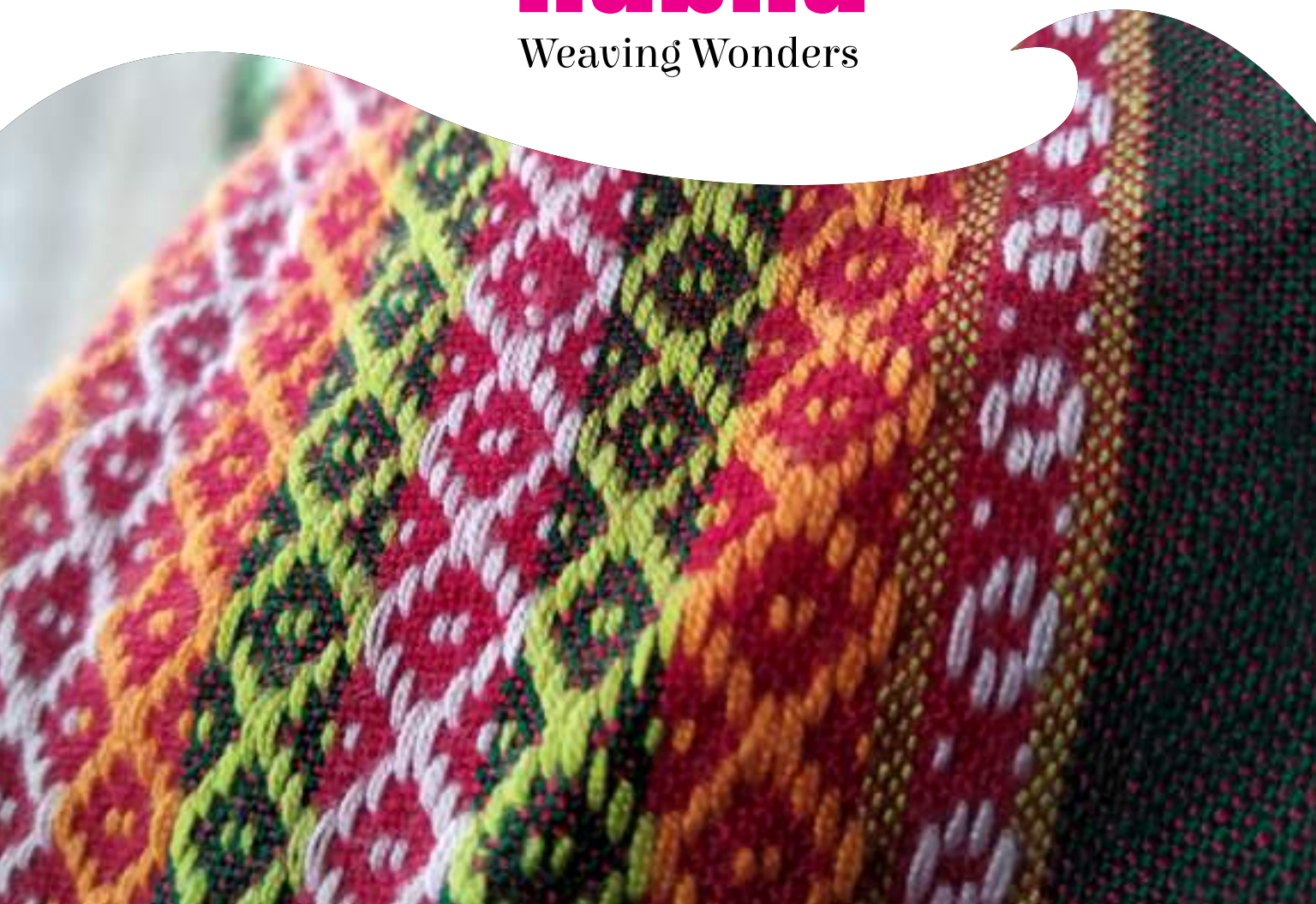
Rural Craft & Cultural Hubs of West Bengal



Department of MSME&T
Government of West Bengal

Rabha

Weaving Wonders





Life is a loom, weaving illusion.

Vachel Lindsay
(American Poet)

Rural Craft & Cultural Hubs of West Bengal



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).





Rabha

Rabha is a minor ethnic community residing in parts of the Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal. The Rabhas believe in different deities and spirits. Some of them have embraced Christianity. Their occupation and livelihood depend on agriculture, fishing, forest department jobs and daily labour. They also grow rice, jute, vegetables, and corn. They have their unique tradition of folk song and dance.

The weaving tradition of the Rabha community is coming down from generations. They weave for their own needs and sell the products in their surrounding villages and in local markets. The threads used for weaving are brought from Alipurduar, Assam and Coochbehar.

Previously, the Rabhas used to weave with backstrap looms but with the gradual advancement in technology, they have shifted into pit looms. All threads are coloured, and they make clothing with various motifs and designs. Dress worn by the Rabha women are divided into two parts – the lower part is called “kemlet” which is wrapped around their waist like a saree, and the upper part is covered with a stole known as “Kambang.” The size of the Kemlet, which they weave is 5.5ft X 3.5ft, and the Kambang size is 4ft X 1ft.

Process

The Rabha community primarily uses local yarns in acrylic and cotton fibres. The acrylic yarns are available in both 40 and 60 counts, whereas cotton yarns are available in only 40/2 count. This results in thicker, coarser weaves with strong surface tension. They have also been trained to weave with cotton yarns of 60 and 60/2, resulting in fine, soft textiles that drape wonderfully on the wearer.

Originally, the community would cater only to buyers in the local region or make fabrics for their use. Current interventions are focussing on expanding their market reach. It is important that the cluster bears qualitative measures that allow for improved and better sales and positive market placement. To ensure that the dye is properly fastened, the weavers first wash the yarn hanks with dye fixers and let them dry naturally under sunlight. The cluster works at a great speed and hence finer yarns such as 40, 40/2, 60 and 60/2 are stiffened with rice starch before use on the looms. This gives the yarns a stiffer texture and allows to withstand the physical forces of loom setting processes and stronger weaves.

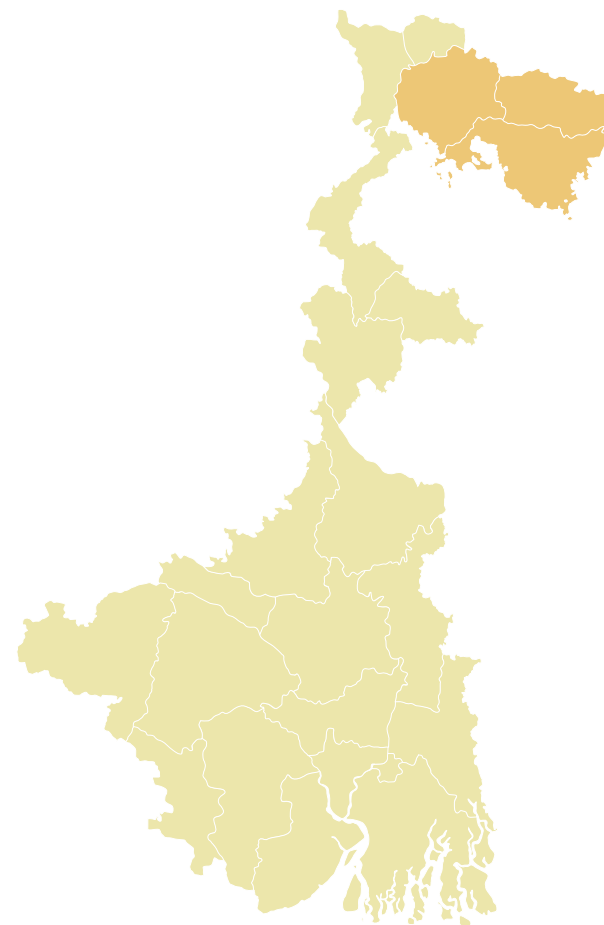
Just like any handloom process, the yarns are divided into various smaller bunches that go onto bobbin winding and warp setup. These are all preparatory processes necessary for the weaving to begin. The looms in the Rabha community are capable of weaving a maximum width of 56" and a length of 40 mts. They make dress material for local sales as well as sarees, stoles and dupattas for the larger market.



They use small needles made with local resources for the extra weft motifs that they create. The motifs are geometric and mostly symmetrical. The weavers calculate the area of the motif and pick the warp yarns in such a manner that the motif surfaces in a specific area of the weave space. Traditional motifs use more yarn in the motif space, but in contemporary designs the motifs are made with a single ply of yarn.

The Rabhas are a dedicated community and a group of weavers who have shown highly dexterous skills when it comes to their weaving practices. They create numerous patterns and designs using extra weft pattern on a two-frame treadle loom. They also have an interesting use of colour in their traditional design language but they quickly adapt to the market needs of a macro target base.





Craft hubs

Mendabari in Alipurduar, is one of the vibrant hubs, where around 20 families are involved in weaving. Bakshirhat in Coochbehar, Rabha Basti, Nimati Forest Basti in Kalchini Block, Dhumuchi in Madarihat Block, villages like Garobasti, Khairbari of Kumargram Block of Alipurduar district and in Khukulung Basti in Dhupguri of Jalpaiguri district are locations where Rabha communities are present. The settlements in the Dooars region along the slopes of Alipurduar are not well connected. The villages are within the forest zones and have a pleasant environment. Apart from the monsoon, the locations are good for a visit. One can travel from Alipurduar railway station to these villages.

Artists

The tradition of weaving is transmitted from one generation to the other among the Rabha community. Previously, they used to weave using back strap looms for their own use. The backstrap looms are locally called 'Kamtong.' Presently, they use step looms. Mendabari is the most vibrant hub, making different handloom products. There are around 20 artists in the village. The intricate details of their work and vibrant colours are eye catching. There are some weavers in Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri region, but presently, they do not work due to absence of looms. The weavers of Uttar Mendabari sell their products in Assam and Bhutan borders. They get orders during the Christmas period. Some weavers also have received 'Weaver's Card' and 'Pehchaan Card,'. Urmila Rabha is one of the enterprising women from the community. With the RCCH intervention, artists of Mendabari, Alipurduar has diversified their products and are reaching out to new markets.

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Products

The Rabha community weaves material for their own use. The cotton yarns are dyed and the clothes are developed using their own patterns and motifs. The Rabhas mostly make two types of products – Kemlet and Kambang and also make Gamchas for their use. Some of the leading artists also diversified products like handbags, and jackets. The local markets in Alipurduar serve as a marketplace for them. They also sell their products in the surrounding villages. Some weavers have also participated in fairs and festivals with DIC's support within the district and in surrounding villages.



**traditional
rabha
products**



**traditional
rabha
products**



cushion cover





dupatta



stole





saree




saree





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