

Divinely white: The age-old craft of shola



The task baffled even the god of creativity, Vishwakarma. Lord Shiva wanted a white crown to wear at his holy matrimony with goddess Parvati. But where would Vishwakarma find a material to make such a thing?

Lord Shiva eventually came to the rescue. He threw a lock of his own hair into a pond, and from there sprung a plant — shola (generic name, Indian cork).

But the heavenly artist was again clueless: how could he work with a material as soft as shola? And again, upon the lord's wish, there emerged a man from the water.

Now, this young man had the skill of working with this curious plant, the soft and delicate shola. And hence, he made the white crown as lord

Shiva had desired for his wedding, along with garlands and ornaments.

Lord Shiva named this young man Malakar, and with him, the shola craft was born.

The mythology associated with the emergence of this craft lends divine inspiration to the artisanship.

From divine inspiration to fine craftsmanship to the splendid finished works of art, the Bengali craft of shola is a cultural heritage that lives on.

Malakars exist till today, continuing the age-old craft of shola. Malakar is a common surname among shola artisans!

To illustrate, Nayan Chandra Malakar from Naogaon says that it a tradition of artistry his forefathers were involved in. He now

continues it, making items like tiger masks, elephants, and a variety of flowers.

One amazing aspect of the items made from shola is the lightness of it. The plant grows wild on marshy, waterlogged areas.

From there, the final product becomes a reflection of fine craftsmanship. It can be a variety of things, from toys to the topor (headgear) worn by Hindu grooms at weddings.

The usage of shola is thus deeply rooted in our culture. The Hindu groom looks

majestic in the customary topor, an accessory which amalgamates tradition and elegance.

There is an air of splendour in the natural white colour of shola, a material which is sometimes referred to as 'herbal ivory.'

Badol Chandra Malakar, a craftsman from Jhenaidah opines, "In Dhaka, the preference for the natural white colour in shola items is more. But outside Dhaka, there is also a preference for coloured items."

Arguably, keeping the natural hue helps in keeping the authenticity and loveliness of shola crafts intact.

And the intricacy itself is mind-boggling.

Gopendranath Chakraborty from Jhenaidah is a revered craftsman who makes highly detailed items with shola. His fine works has earned him a lot of respect in Bangladesh and abroad. He informs that he makes a plethora of items, from Taj Mahal to palanquin to different kinds of birds.

"I use various sharp tools, depending on the various requirements, keeping the final product in mind," the award-winning craftsperson explains.

His regal moyurpankhi boat reflects the intricacy of his craft. His crocodile that makes simple movements shows the smartness of his design.

For the layman, shola is just a wild plant that grows in the marshlands. But in the hands of skilled craftsmen like Gopendranath, it is a blessed material with immense potential.

But alas, as is the case with many crafts, shola struggles to survive.

Nayan, who comes from a long lineage of shola craftspeople, is uncertain what the future holds.

"I am doubtful whether my next generation will want to continue with this profession," he says.

There are many threats which surround heritage crafts in general, from loss of designs to changing landscapes.

"Deforestation and environmental changes have in many cases made raw materials for certain crafts more and more difficult to obtain. The shola or pith craftspeople are faced with this difficulty as the reed which is the raw material for their products becomes rarer with disappearing water bodies where the reeds grow," says a publication based on the 'National Workshop on Implementation of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Bangladesh.'

Yet, another threat — a new one — is the pandemic.

Artisans could not fully utilise this Bengali New Year due to the lockdown. With lack of orders for items and no Baishakhi fairs and events being held, it has been a missed opportunity (as expressed by the craftspeople in the interviews taken on 4 April, 2020, thus reflecting their experiences up to that date).

Indeed, the whole world is suffering and striving to adjust to the 'new normal' and craftspeople are no different.

In the spirit of welcoming the New Year, let's adjust and adapt for now, whilst looking forward to better times, when it will be business as usual again — but perhaps, with a new appreciation and patronage of all things we had taken for granted or had overlooked, like the shola craft that is an age-old legacy!

By M H Haider
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