



A touch of Shantiniketan

The Shantiniketan region in West Bengal is famous for its beautifully handcrafted leather handbags and other accessories. Available in a wide range of colours, patterns and sizes with traditional motifs, a Shantiniketan bag displays the rich cultural heritage of India gracefully. It is a perfect example of superior workmanship of the local artisans. The leather is obtained from sheepskin and goatskin and is tanned before touch dyeing the artwork.

This particular craft employs cutting, polishing and embossing of leather by hand painting and was introduced in West Bengal in the 1940s. Rabindra Nath Tagore tried to revive leather bag making in an innovative manner. Shantiniketan leather craft uses embossed batik work and traditional patterns and is very different from usual leather bags.





After the final leather piece is made, it is then stitched into the desired product coated with a lacquer finish for shine and durability.

The Sil family of Sodepur, North 24 Parganas witnessed hard times as the only bread earning member of the family lost his job when the small factory he used to work in announced lockout. Abhijit, the son had to take work in a leather factory at a tender age. However, after working in the factory for more than half a decade, he had to quit to look after his ailing mother. The only son in the family had four sisters. All the sisters got married one by one. Abhijit then learnt the art of crafting Shantiketan style bags from one of their neighbours. He started making various products using leather - bags, jewellery boxes, piggy banks for children, lipstick cases, keyrings, spectacle cases and the like.

When he married, his wife Tumpa was also initiated in the craft. Business grew and they now have ten workers on monthly wages. For the last four years or so, the family has been attending different fairs. They have set up their stall at the State Sabala Mela for the third time by now. Sales are impressive. However, sales in the current year leaves much to be desired.

Their enterprise needs further support from the government. They have applied for SVSKP support in 2017, though no loan could be availed as yet. Abhijit is now considering shoe-making by using this special category of leather along with increased varieties of jewellery.

Among all the accomplishments, Abhijit is always apprehensive about his mother's health. His monthly expenses for her treatment is close to fifteen thousand rupees. Managing such huge expenses for the self-employed is a difficult task, although he is scraping through.

