

The matadors of Baishnabchak

Baishnabchak village in Kolaghat Block, Purba Medinipur is known for its horn-crafts for ages. From the ancient times of the Indian civilisation, combs made of horns adorned the tresses of women. Combs made of horn were trusted to be good for the hair and scalp. The village of Baishnabchak did flourishing business in this particular handicraft. However, with time, cheap plastic combs replaced expensive horn products and its market share diminished. In order to survive, the artisans learnt to diversify and started producing a wider range of horn products like walking sticks, pen stands, napkin rings, spoons, knobs and handles etc. The products were made using buffalo horns. The artisans faced a problem in procuring the raw materials as well and the people mostly changed to other forms of productions and businesses.

Shankari Hazra of Baishnabchak learnt the art of using buffalo horns to produce artefacts from her husband. Thereafter came support from NABARD in 2007 when they provided training to sharpen the skills of 18 women in



the neighbourhood already exposed to horn craft. Post training, with NABARD support the women organised themselves into a self-help group, 'Sarbashanti Samabaya Samity'. By 2009, the NABARD promoted SHG disintegrated and Shankari took membership of a District Rural Development Agency mobilised SHG going by the name of 'Sanghamitra SHG'. The new group had 12 members. The members were engaged in different economic activities like rice husking, rearing of animals, tailoring. Only three of the members pursued the traditional craft of making products out of buffalo horns. Obviously, Shankari was one of the three.

The SHG took loans in several instalments. The initial baby steps in procuring loans of rupees 25000 only gradually matured and the loan volumes increased in several doses to raise the cash credit limit to rupees four lakh.

Her husband is a renowned craftsman and won several district and state level awards. He trains the locals in horn craft. Their production unit in the village employs four people in addition to the two of them. Machines are used for cutting and polishing, which the husband got from the Department of Industries. With widening export market for horns, cost of procurement of the raw material has shot up considerably. Each horn now costs somewhere between 250 to 400 rupees, whereas the retail prices of the end products have not increased that way. With little option, people have shifted from horns. Some took up assignments as labourers in construction work, some started working as Mahatma Gandhi NREGA job seekers. Those



who still continued as artisans, diversified in wood polishing, which is somewhat similar to the work that they are adept at.

Shankari was at the State Sabala Mela for the fourth time. She participated in the Saras Melas at Mumbai and Hyderabad. She was at the State Saras Mela in Kolkata for the sixth time in a row and once at Siliguri Saras. Now fairs are the only sales opportunities that they have. Some years back, the export window opened up. But for some reason unknown to her, export opportunities have ceased to exist. She feels it is imperative that the export window opens up. She wants to go to international locations, but lack of formal education and documents pose problems.

