

Mats go places



Swapan Kumar Singha of Hati Bandh village of Patashpur, Purba Medinipur with his wife Haimanti participated in the State Sabala Mela 2019. They brought with them a product which is, on the one hand, a household name in Bengal, and on the other had to be revived through product diversification. The product is nothing but quintessential 'Madur', popularity of which dates back to the Muslim period when 'Masland' mats of superfine variety with fine cotton as weft were produced under royal patronage. Mats were collected as revenue of the Jagirdari system. In 1744, Nawab Alibardi Khan issued a charter to the Jagirdars in this regard and as a result, it was obligatory to supply 'Masland' mats for use in the collectorate.

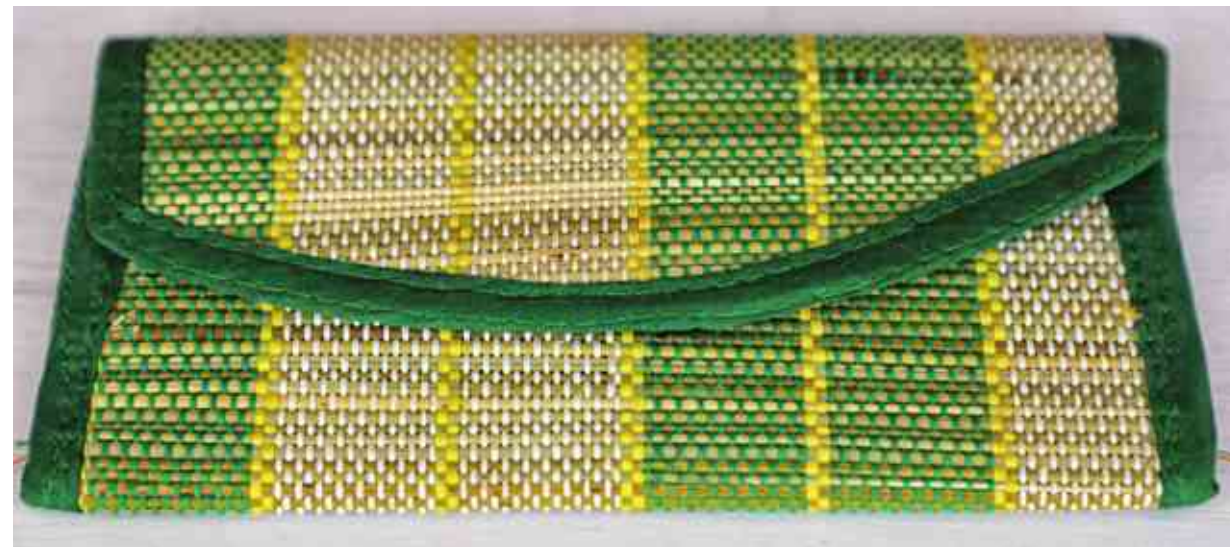
'Madurkathi', the plant used for weaving, is found in abundance in the alluvial tracts of Purba and Paschim Medinipur. Once the rhizomes are swon, the sticks can be reaped for three to four years, two times a year. Sabang of Paschim Medinipur is the wholesale market for the raw Madur sticks. It is also the main hub for the craftspeople. Other raw materials for weaving come from another wholesale market, Radhamoni in Panskura, Purba Medinipur.

Haimanti got training on mat weaving from the Child & Social Welfare Society, Markandachak, Sabang, the craft-centre for this artefact when she was only a child of thirteen. Swapan was keen to bag a government job, but could not. After marriage



he started learning the skill of weaving Madur from his wife. Their efforts got recognized and support came from the Industry Development Officer (IDO) of the Block. That time it was only a family enterprise and whatever they could produce with their own labour was sold to the wholesalers. Swapan applied for the artisan card from the Development Commissioner for Handicrafts and got it after a long wait of one year and a half. Their first exposure to fairs was the Siliguri Handicrafts Fair in 2012. Thereafter opportunities opened up and they went places with their products. While participating in the Handicrafts Fair at the Milan Mela ground in 2015, Swapan met one visitor at the stall. Mr. Saugata Saha took his contact. Thereafter in one fine morning while working in the village he got a call for participation in a festival in Shilparamam crafts village, Madhurawada, Andhra Pradesh. Sales were handsome. He got another invitation there itself to participate in Pongal festival in Visakhapatnam. Opportunities came in bounties. Guntur fair, Nellore fair, Anantapur fair, fair at Tirupati where he was in a haat for 3-4 months. Lepakshi fair, the lead crafts fair of Andhra Pradesh was a big break.

He could not get SVSKP support when the need was most pressing. However, in mid-2018 he was convinced by the officials of WBSCL to take a loan under the project. With the loan amount of Rs.2.48 lakh, there was a subsidy element close to Rs.75000. That certainly helped. He is a regular at the State Sabala Mela since 2014 and registers impressive sale figures every year. In fact Sabala Mela 2014 was the turning point for his enterprise. He has travelled to all the metro cities and many more with his products. He also sells to exporters in Delhi and Mumbai at attractive rates.



Their family enterprise has by now grown, employing sixteen workers - all of whom have been given weaving machines and training. Haimanti has also formed a self-help group, Hati Bandh Nayantara SHG last year.

Swapan no longer laments about not getting a job in the government. They are happy with the pacca house that they could build and the land purchased. Both of them are well recognised trainers in the district and are happy with the recognition that the craft has brought for them.