

# Reviving a decaying industry

Lac production, processing and making various products out of processed lac is native to Purulia district for several centuries. Initially the district was famous for lac cultivation. The terrain and the weather pattern were conducive; the abundant Ber, Kusum and Palas trees played host to brood-lac. Once tied to the branches of the host trees, the insects multiplied in hundreds of thousands (lacs) wherefrom came the name 'lac'.

Although Purulia contributed more than ninety percent of the lac produced in West Bengal and a substantial portion of the countrywide produce, the lac factories were concentrated at Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh. It was only in 1897 the first lac factory was established at Jhalda in Purulia. Later on, several factories were established to process sticklac into shellac. Over the next few decades industries were established at Balarampur and Tulin as well. Bengal District Gazetteer of Manbhum district by H. Coupland published in 1911 indicates that lac industry was the second largest industry of the district, second only to the coal industry and fetched considerable revenue. With time, chemical dyes took the market away from lac. Lesser use of postal facilities for sending parcels also resulted in decreased demand for lac in this sector. Due to fall in market demand and also gradual revival of agriculture and horticulture in the traditionally dry lands of Purulia, lac production declined. The processing units, however, somewhat survived with increasing diversity. Babli Pramanik of Balarampur Kalitala came to State Sabala Mela with her lac bangles. It was a







riot of colours and an abundance of designs that attracted women, especially the teenage girls to the stall where Babli displayed her products.

Babli learnt the art from her in-laws. She joined as an organising member of the local self-help group, Jaymatadi SHG. However, other members of the group are engaged in animal husbandry and she was the only group member working with lac. She participated in the District Sabala Mela of Purulia district, in Jangalmahal Utsav at Jhargram and other locations. She could get a permanent stall on rent at the district Karmatirtha. She has been attending the State Sabala Mela since 2016 and this was her third time at the Central Park mela ground. Sales are not that impressive and she believes that government support is required to revive the decaying craft. Babli is committed to supporting the spread of skill in lac processing and expresses her desire to train up other women in the trade. She was married at a young age and could not pursue her studies. A school dropout, Babli is eager to give full opportunity to her three children to study before being engaged in any remunerative work.

