



# Cool indeed!

**G**auri Chandra of 'Saurav Mahila Swanirbhar Goshthi' (SHG) is from the famous Ghughumari village of Coochbehar. It is famous for popularising the art of using Murta cane, a typical cane variety growing in abundance in the marshy land of the district to make 'Sitalpati', a kind of cool mat.

Originally practised in several districts of present Bangladesh, the art of weaving this cool mat came with the people seeking refuge in this part of the country after the partition of Bengal. This is the reason that the craft also spread to the adjoining districts of Assam and Tripura. In Coochbehar district of West Bengal alone, nearly 14000 families weave Sitalpati to earn their livelihood. The hub is Ghughumari and the villages of Barokodali and Nakkati-Pushnadanga, both in the same district also excel in weaving this product. The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises & Textiles (MSME&T) Department, Government of West Bengal in collaboration



with UNESCO has developed a rural crafts hub at Ghughumari, only twenty minutes drive from Coochbehar town. Ghughumari has taken Sitalpati across the world and the traditional art of weaving Sitalpati has won UNESCO recognition as an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity'.

Gauri was talking about her experience. She learnt the craft from her ancestors and started weaving when she was only twelve years old. Her parents, grandparents and their ancestors were skilled in weaving Sitalpati. Initially working as an individual entrepreneur, Gauri saw the benefits of forming groups of craftswomen and formed the SHG. The group took loans twice so far and also availed the support from the West Bengal Minorities Development & Financial Corporation.

Popularity of Sitalpati as cold mats took a plunge with the introduction of plastic mats in the market. Cheap plastic was also considered handy by the rural households. However, the property of Sitalpati to provide relief in dry summer days is unmatched. The more exquisite products are made of the finest strips of Murta cane. On those 'patils', it is often said, even the snakes cannot slither. These expensive products have good market among the urban elites. To match the market preferences, Ghughumari diversified its offerings from Sitalpati to purses, handbags, wall hangings and several decorative items where different shades of colour are used to add to the beauty of the products.

Gauri received training for diversification in production of 'pati' from the Government of India and topped a district-level competition when she made an amazing product in the form of a purse. She won a State level Award as well for a beautiful bag crafted.

With the UNESCO Heritage tag, their products went several places across the country and abroad. They were sold at fairs in Hyderabad, Surajkund, Agra, Delhi, Kullu-Manali, Goa, Mumbai, Bareilly, Jhansi. Her daughter Jayashree Chandra received a State Award for the same craft and got opportunities to represent it in international fairs organised in Dhaka, China and several European countries.

Gauri was eloquent about the empowerment brought about by joining Self-help Group. She was lamenting, "there are still many women who have not joined any group and are confined within the four walls of their home."