

Original Research Article

Historical Tradition and Socio-cultural Transformation of the Malakar Community in Rural Bengal, India

Abstract: Handicraft plays a very important role in representing the culture and traditions of any community. The Indian handicrafts are highly eco-friendly, labour intensive, unorganized household sector, with huge potential of employment generation and foreign exchange earnings and practised extensively in the rural areas. Based on this background and field observations, this study aims to investigate the historical tradition, society, and livelihood transformation of the Malakar community in rural Bengal. This study made use of data gathered through field interviews and phone calls in rural Bengal. And data were calculated in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Key findings show that sholapith is a culturally significant eco-friendly craft that is part of the Hindu Community's historical heritage. And it will be the future scopes of huge uses of any ceremony's decoration and it fulfils the lives, livelihood, and societal identity of the 'Malakar' community. Socio-economically, the maker of the craft was not suitably developed in the aspects of income and other social things. According to this study, the Malakar community's cultural identity has been transformed and will decline in the future due to the transformation of traditional livelihoods. So, the historical cultural community of Malakar and their inherited cultural works need to be developed and brought to more people's attention.

Keywords: Eco-friendly traditional craft, Historical identity, Cultural Tradition, Livelihood transformation, Society and Culture, Rural Poverty

1. Introduction:

The Indian traditional handicraft activities represent the rich Indian culture, traditions and heritage along with the modern and trendy touches (Prolay and Manisa, 2018; Mohi-ud-din et al. 2014; Jadhav, 2013). Indian handicrafts are a highly eco-friendly, labour-intensive, unorganised household sector with enormous potential for job creation and foreign exchange earnings, and are widely practised in rural areas (Dey, 2018; Dutta, 2013; Vijayagopalan 1993). Anthropologists refer to the manufacturing process and material culture of craft artefacts as technology (Hosfield, 2009; Sills, 1968). Traditional crafts are manual arts, skills, and the creator's expression, feelings, and meaningful emotion, according to some scholars, and an integral part of regulating economic performance, social functions, and religious performance. (Jain and Sharma, 2015; Punja et. al., 2011; Hasan, 2010).

Various communities have played a role in handicraft activities and the preservation of Indian historical heritage. This study focuses specifically on the Malakar community and their traditional handicraft activities, future sholapith crafts, lives and livelihood system, the decline in craft-making interest, and social value (Ghosh, 2016; Dhamija, 1977). They are the progenitor of Lord Shiva, the Bengali Hindu upper-caste community, and they used eco-friendly craft-making raw materials sholapith (Chatterjee, 2018; Ghosh, 2015). Sholapith is a milky-white sponge plant matter that has dried. It can be shaped into various art objects. Traditionally, sholapith products are used to decorate Hindu idols as well as a traditional Bengali wedding. In recent years, sholapith handicrafts such as Hindu gods and artistic objects have found a wider application in home decor (Ghosh, 2015; Mandal et al., 2014).

This craft is mostly practised in a few districts of West Bengal. Malakar is a Sholapith craftsman who made shola garlands for idols and the noble class. This craft is practised by over 5,500 artisans. Craftsmen work on each piece for months. Shola products are exported

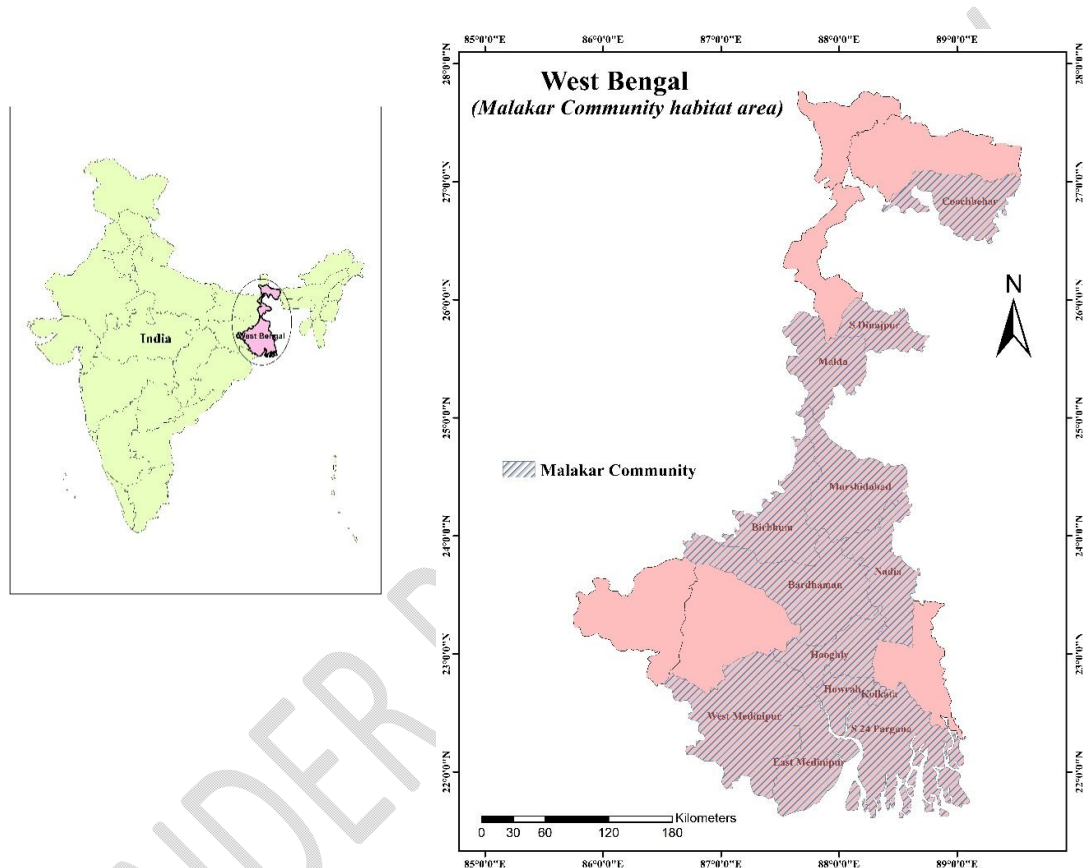
worldwide, but in very small quantities, and are mostly purchased for Indian community puja organisers abroad. Kolkata's puja pandals are exquisitely decorated with shola (ToI, 2008). Several researchers identified their socioeconomic conditions, such as societal status, economic situation, cultural identity, craft-making process, and importance, among others, and highlighted the problems, such as declining the future sholapith crafts, lives and livelihood system, declining the interest of craft making, social value, mode of marketing, lack of interest, less income, declining the traditional interest of future sholapith crafts making, and others (Ganai, 2018; Ghosh, 2015). According to Malakar (2020a), Ganai (2018), handicraft men maintain their livelihood and traditional history, while the majority of the young population is involved in non-traditional work. And gradually change the traditional handicrafts management system, and the tendency of future generations to other jobs such as government and non-government jobs, and other activities because they face various problems with traditional handicraft activities.

Few studies have been conducted in the Malakar Community to understand better their lives and livelihoods, sociocultural conditions, social values, and other factors. Based on this background and field observations, this study aims to investigate the historical tradition, society, and livelihood transformation of the Malakar community in rural Bengal.

2. Study Area, Materials and Methods:

The study area is rural West Bengal. West Bengal, located in eastern India, is the only state that stretches from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. It shares borders with the states of Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, Sikkim, and Assam, as well as Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Socio-culturally, the state of West Bengal are much more diversified and sound intelligent. The culture of West Bengal is rooted in the Bengali arts, music, literature, drama and cinema (Chaudhuri, 2001). There are various ethnic groups and communities here, and the Bengalis,

with the Bengali Hindus forming the demographic majority (Dey, 2018). According to the study, the Malakar community is one of the Bengali Hindu communities that is culturally motivated and led by sholapith craft makers. The majority of the Malakar community peoples in the state live in rural areas, and the major habited districts are marked on the study area map (Figure 1). All of the artisans used culturally similar traditional items (Ganai, 2018).



This study used quantitative and qualitative methods to collect primary data from the Malakar community. Their traditional craft working knowledge, perception, and socioeconomic conditions were collected using a random sampling survey method. This study focused on the 13 districts of rural Bengal, which are home to a sizable Malakar community. Malakar community is been sparsely located, with only 3 to 5 households (HHs) and a maximum of 10 HHs in a place called '*Malakar Para*' / '*Mali Para*' (Malakar neighbourhood). As a result,

gathering the data was a difficult task. However, in this study, different schedules and questionnaire collection methods were used, such as in-person and by phone. And finished 200 HHs in rural Bengal. Finally, data were measured quantitatively and qualitatively, and plotted using cartographic techniques.

3. Historical Identity and Cultural Tradition of the Malakar Community:

Historical culture includes both physical and intangible forms of culture, as well as academic and popular interpretations of a group's history and cultural identity based on things like nationality, religion, ethnicity, gender, and race (Carretero et al. 2017). In terms of history, culture, and tradition, the Malakar community is a group of Bengali hindu upper caste people who are the ancestors of Lord Shiva. In the past, they were skilled shola craftsmen. In Sanskrit literature, the words '*mala*' and '*akar*' mean '*maker of garlands*' or '*person who shapes malas with the shola.*' This community descended from the Nabasakha group of the artisan class, and the mythology of this community states that when Lord Shiva was about to marry Parvati, he desired to wear a light white crown. The master craftsman, Viswakarma, tried and failed. Shiva then tore a lock of his own hair and threw it in the water. Following that, a shola plant appeared. Then he plucked a strand of hair from his hand and threw it in water, giving rise to the Malakars' ancestor, the crown maker of shola (Malakar, 2020b).

Using the qualitative data gathered, Malakars are primarily 'Vaishnava' in creed, though 'Shaivism' and 'Saktism' are also found among Malakars. Despite the fact that the Government of India classified many surnames, including 'Malakar,' as belonging to the other backward classes, OBC (in order to preserve their historical working identity), the majority of them still belong to the general caste of the modern day classification. Traditionally, they are 'Nabasakhas,' with 'Kulin Brahmans' performing family rituals. This community's people came from the Indian states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, as well as the

country of Bangladesh. In this study, the focus is on the state of West Bengal. This craft is mostly done in the districts of Cooch Behar, Dakshin Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Bardhaman, Nadia, Birbhum, Howrah, Hooghly, Kolkata, South 24 Parganas, Paschim and Purba Midnapore, and some other parts of the state.

As part of their traditional way of making a living, Malakars are hired to make garlands and flowers for the village gods and for religious and social events. The Malakar community uses '*sholapith*,' one of Bengal's oldest eco-friendly crafts. Sholapith handicrafts of West Bengal are known for their beauty, elegance, and skill. And it has its origin in the ritual and religious requirements of the old days. In the past, these craftspeople had a good place in society and made '*Daker Saaj*' for the local Hindu gods on Bengali Hindu occasions. The use of '*sholapith*' items is an integral part of West Bengal's main religious rituals, with the best example being the *Durga Puja* celebrations. Their Sholapith handicrafts services are indispensable during Bengali Hindu marriages, as they prepare the crowns known as '*Topor*' worn by the bridal couple. Rural people believe that any puja or marriage ceremony is incomplete without the use of floral decorations and '*Topor*.'

According to respondents, their forebears' hereditary work is sholapith craft making, also known as 'Sholar Kaj,' which is one of the finest examples of exquisite beauty, elegance, and finest craftsmanship. The majority of people live in rural areas, and their handmade items are an integral part of the major religious rituals, such as Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Rathajatra, marriage, and other celebrations. Based on the qualitative data gathered, shola pith or shola items have environmental and socio-cultural values. This craft evolved and is still practised primarily because Shola is eco-friendly due to its biodegradable nature, which does not cause pollution wherever it is used. Its white colour is a symbol of purity and sacredness, and this plant is thin, light, soft, and widely available. Every product has some sort of sacred value.

During rituals, common people use sholapith items as a symbol of sanctity and sacredness. These craft items can be divided into several categories based on their intended use (Table 1).

Table 1. Various Craft products

Purpose / activities	Using craft products
<i>Marriage rituals</i>	Sholar mala (Sholapith garlands), and Topor (used for Wedding and naming ceremony), and Sithi mukut (worn by the bride).
<i>Religious activities</i>	Kadam flower; Sholar mala (Sholapith garlands); Chandmala (used sholapith made a round garland with filigree discs) and Laxmi jhara.
<i>Death rituals</i>	Rathghor; Sholar mala (Sholapith garlands); and Phulghor.
<i>Decoration</i>	Sholapith toys and dolls (during rash jyatra); ornaments of sholapith (deity / idol decoration); Sholapith flowers (home decoration); Sholar mala (Sholapith garlands); and mask of sholapith (Gamira dance and Malpaharia dance).
<i>Utilitarian/ others</i>	Clock repairing; packaging purpose; and Sholapith haat.

Source: Field Survey by the author (2022).

According to the respondents' traditional knowledge, the crafts making processes are very beautiful and interesting, from raw material collection to hereditary tradition implementation in their lives and livelihoods as well as the society. As a result, the following discussion represents the socio-cultural characteristics and significance of the Malakar community's crafts making identity:

They identified the nature of raw material for craft making based on the qualitative data gathered. There are two major aspects to raw materials, namely raw materials required for craft production and crafting craft items. The Shola plant is the mainstay of the craft. The Sholapith plant is a member of the Aeschynomene and Leguminosae families. Sholapith is a milky white sponge-wood that can be carved into a delicate art. It grows in paddy field trenches, lakes, marshy waterlogged areas, flooded low acreage, and ponds. Most of the time, the shola plant grows in wet areas of Eastern India, like Assam, Odisha, and West Bengal. There are two kinds of shola plants, called Bhat and Kath. Kath shola is very hard, while Bhat shola is soft and light. The shola stem is the part that does most of the work. The inside of the stem is white and the outside is grey. The stem is 100 centimetres to 250 centimetres tall and 4 centimetres to 9 centimetres in diameter. The plant's leaves float 60 to 220 cm deep in marshy water. Best quality shola pith is smooth, pure white, has soft bark, and doesn't have any nodes. Usually, the seeds of shola start to grow when the pre-monsoon season starts. It takes three months for the plant to be fully grown. In September and October, it finally blooms and bears fruit. With the demand for shola pith growing, there are now seasonal markets in November every year where villagers bring their mature shola stems and craft makers pick up what they need. One bundle of shola pith has between 25 and 30 shola plants and costs between Rs.380 and Rs.400 at most.

In recent years, some people have grown shola plants on their own waterlogged land as a way to make a living. According to the respondents' traditional knowledge, they used traditional tools like different kinds of knives, kath, cutting scissors, batali, needle, measuring tape, scale, cutter, and geometry box for their work. They also use different kinds of natural and man-made materials, such as coloured paper, gum, feviquick, chemical colours, aluminium wire, rubber bands, coconut sticks, bamboo sticks, ribbon, water colours, glitter, etc., to show how attractive something is. Using only natural Shola Plant, they make beautiful things like

Sholar mala, Sitol, Sholar flower, Mashan, Mukut, Topor, Bisohori pot, Mandus, God's jewellery, dress, Shola pith idol, and other unique shapes. This craft takes a lot of time, patience, and persistence to make. And the collected photo plates (1-32) depict their craft-making cycle. This demonstrates how their creativity and cultural contributions to society evolved over time and how they maintain their historical identity through cultural traditions. So, according to rural people's beliefs and honorius cultural rituals, the cultural significance of the Malakar community is unique, glory, attractive, eco-friendly, natural plant-based craft making, which is very important for our upcoming generation. It is, in essence, a creative art and cultural activity for the rural economy, particularly for the Malakar community's lives, livelihood, and socio-cultural identity.

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Photo plates: 1 to 3: To collect the raw materials (plant shola). 4 to 5: Instruments of the craft processing. 6 to 8: Storage the 1st stage sholapith. 10, 11, 12, 23, 25, 28: Working periods of the handicrafts. 9, 13-16, 18-22, 24, 26, 27, 29-32: Output beautiful handicrafts. 17: Topor and Mukut, which is famous for Bengali Hindu marriage ceremony.

4. Societal Status and Livelihood Transformation:

This section of the study highlighted some major socioeconomic conditions and the transformation of traditional livelihood in the community (Table 2. And figure 2 to 8).

Table 2. Status of Socio-economic and Livelihood Transformation

Age composition of Workers		Importance of Sholapith work	
Age groups	Status (%)	Importance of Sholapith work	Status (%)
Below 20	15	Direct Source of income	72
20-40	33	Supplementary Source of Income	28
40-60	24.5	Family Size	
60+	27.5	Family Size	Status (%)
Educational Status		Below 4 member	18.66
Educational Status	Status (%)	4-6 member	57.22
Graduate	12	Above 6 member	24.12
Secondary/H.S	17.92	Mode of marketing system	
Primary Passed	43	Direct to Market	36.54
Primary Dropouts	19	Through middleman	58.47
Illiterate	8.08	NGO	4.99
Income		To the Govt.	0
Income (Monthly)	Status (%)	Livelihood transformation	
Less than 3000	28.29	Young generation	Status (%)
3000 to 5000	32.3	Interested	25.32

5000 to 10,000	26.19	Not interested	67.56
More than 10,000	13.22	Decide later	7.12

All data represented in %.

(2022)

Source: Field Survey by the author

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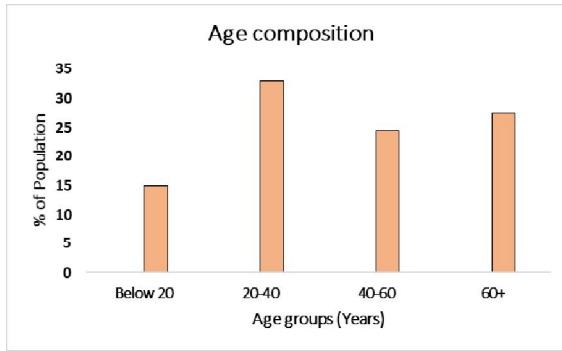


Figure 2

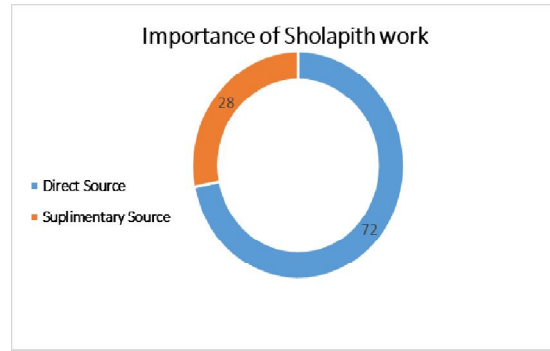


Figure 5

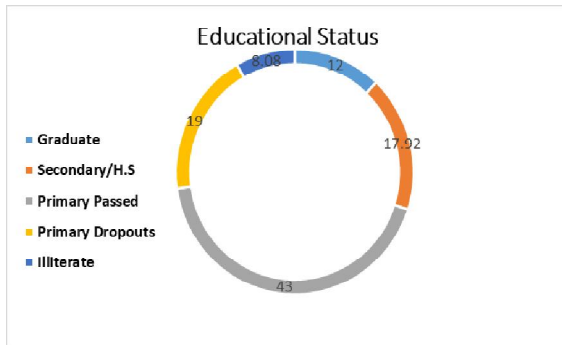


Figure 3



Figure 4

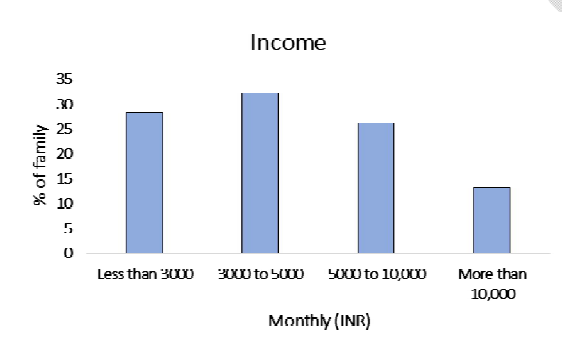


Figure 6

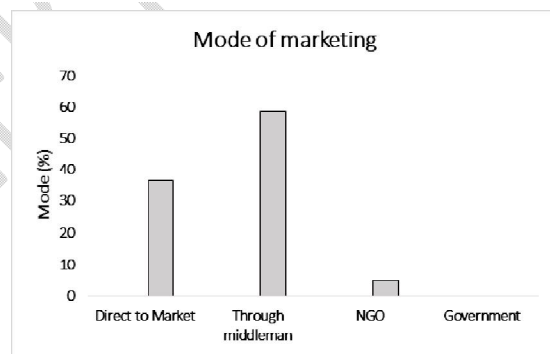


Figure 7

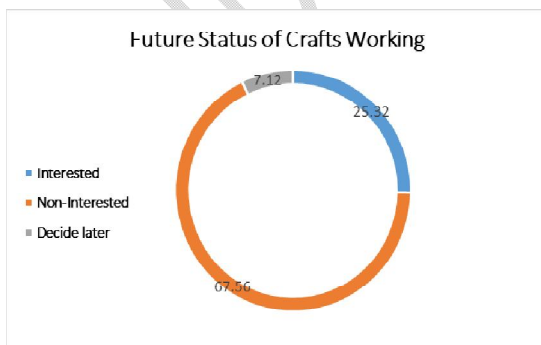


Figure 8

According to the analysis, figure 2 depicting the age composition of craft workers, 27.5 percent of the population is over 60 years old, 24.5 percent is between 40 and 60 years old, 33 percent is between 20 and 40 years old, and only 15 percent is under 20 years old. Craft workers aged 20 to 40 had the highest proportion. As stated by the members of this community, people under the age of 20 used to participate more than other age groups. However, the results of this study show that this is no longer the case. When asked why, many young people said that they aren't interested in making crafts, don't have enough time, or don't have enough money, among other things.

Figure 3 shows the educational status of this community, merely saying that 43 percent of workers are primary school grads, 8.08 percent are illiterates, 19 percent drop out of primary school, and only 12 percent are going to higher education graduate or above, which is the current generation. As a result, it is possible that the current generation's young age population is not limited to craft making work and is attempting to explore other sectors.

Figure 4 illustrates family size; most craft working families were joint, but this has recently changed due to various socioeconomic factors. The Malakar community had the highest family size share of 57.22 percent of working households with 4 to 6 members. Because of the large number of family members, 24.12% of households participated in craft making more than any other family size category, and the majority of nuclear families were engaged in non-craft making work.

In the analysis (figure 5), 72 percent of craft workers agreed that sholapith craft making is their primary source of income and livelihood opportunity, with the remaining 28 percent earning money from various supplementary sources such as small scale agriculture, aquaculture, small business, private tutor, government job, and so on. As a result, making crafts is critical to their lives, livelihood, income, and socio-cultural identity.

Figure 6 depicts a graphical representation of their monthly income category: 32.3 percent of families earn between 3000 and 5000 INR, 28.29 percent earn less than 3000 INR, and 13.22 percent earn more than 10,000 INR. As a result, the income category is not suitable for the current time, and another interesting finding (figure 7) regarding lower income is that, due to their crafts marketing system, 58.22 percent of craft products are handled through the middleman, while 36.54 percent and 4.99 percent of products are supplied directly and by non-governmental organisations, respectively. Any government agency is not responsible for supplying or representing their craft's product. However, they continue to make crafts because of the Malakar family's hereditary tradition, as well as the society and their cultural identity.

As a sociocultural researcher, this study demonstrates the future of cultural identity and community crisis in terms of traditionalism. This is because 67.56 percent of the young generation stated that they are not interested in making sholapith crafts because they have other opportunities, jobs, and a higher standard of living, and they try to get involved in other activities due to a lack of income. According to the survey, 25.32 percent of young people want to work as craft makers. They also claimed that they are unqualified for higher-paying jobs because they lack a good education. So, they will keep making crafts, growing crops, and doing other jobs. But the problem is that poverty, illiteracy, and other social and economic problems will continue to affect the next generation of this 25.32 percent of the population. And 7.12% of young people said they hadn't decided what they would do in the future about this (figure 8).

As a sociocultural researcher, this study demonstrates the future of cultural identity and community crisis in terms of traditionality. This is due to the fact that 67.56 percent of the young generation stated that they are not interested in making sholapith crafts because they have other opportunities, jobs, and a higher standard of living, as well as because they try to

get involved in other activities due to a lack of income. 25.32 percent of young people who responded to the survey said they wanted to work as craft makers. They also claimed that because they lack a good education, they are unqualified for higher-paying jobs.

The main important findings are *poverty* and a *crisis of historical culture* in the Malakar community's future generations as a result of the transformation of traditional livelihoods. This socio-cultural study predicts that the Malakar community's cultural identity has been transformed and will be changed in the future.

5. Cultural Significance and Future of the Malakar Community:

The Malakar community's cultural significance is a unique traditional culture in rural Bengal. They use environmentally friendly raw materials to represent skills and traditional knowledge. These crafts are still important for rural areas' socio-cultural activities today, but local peoples are more attractive in coloured, plastic paper, and flowers than sholapith materials. As a result, it is one of the other causes of the future decline in sholapith craft production. According to the findings of the study, the workers' socioeconomic conditions were not ideal. Essentially, educational and employment goals were not adequately developed. In addition to their marketing system, their income was low. According to the analysis, a number of people will be trapped in a cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment. Meanwhile, future generations decide to abandon traditional work and enter other commercial sectors. However, there is concern that the Malakar community's cultural identity will be lost in society.

The traditional techniques of the Malakar community still exist in their societal culture, which is interesting given the modern technological influence in society. In most cases, are filthy, damp, clumsy, and unhealthy, and they are usually located next to the balcony, living room, or courtyard. The high price of raw materials, not having their own farmland for

harvesting shola plants, a lack of training centres, proper marketing, and a banking loan system are the major problems for the society at the moment. The majority of workers are unaware of the 'Handicraft Mela' organised by the West Bengal government.

This study suggests that the local government implement a proper marketing system, connect to a nearby Textile Technology College for technological development of the craft, and organise awareness programmes, festivals, seminars, and conferences to engage young talent to be a part of the sholapith craft in various capacities. To tap the international market and connect directly with buyers and customers, a common facility centre must be developed. It is also beneficial to be aware of the various government handicraft programmes. For exporting products, a packaging system that eliminates the middleman effect must be developed. It is notable that the artisans lack a co-operative society, which is common in some of West Bengal's other artisan communities. If the government is interested in purchasing and creating artworks, it contributes to the long-term development of Malakar communities' shoalpath artworks.

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