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# LIVING TRADITIONS

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ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BANGLADESH

# 18

## MAT WEAVING

"In Bangladesh, the need for studies of local excellence, of the ways that local values unfold through local materials, is particularly intense."

Henry Glassie

Mat weaving is the art of weaving mats. Served by an abundant source of materials, needing almost no tools, and quite without arcane technical skills, mat weaving shares with basketry and pottery the distinction of being one of the earliest human crafts. Mats are an indispensable part of daily life in Bangladesh, especially in the villages. Throughout the country one encounters a variety of mat weaving traditions using indigenously grown materials and embellishing the creations with highly imaginative designs.

Modern life is so complicated that we do not care to understand the difference between a rug and a carpet. Nor do we care to understand the difference between a rug and a mat. The words 'rug' and 'carpet' are sometimes used interchangeably, but they refer to different types of floor coverings. A rug covers only part of the floor of a room and is not tacked. A carpet covers the entire floor of a room and is nailed or tacked. This difference between a rug and a carpet is, however, not rigid. A carpet is at least 12 feet wide. Rugs are produced in standard sizes, the largest rug being 9 feet by 15 feet.

A mat is different from a rug and a carpet both in terms of manufacture and in composition. A rug and a carpet have two main parts, the pile and the backing. The pile is the top surface, and the backing is the undersurface. The materials used in rugs and carpets are various manufactured or natural fibers. The chief manufactured fibers are nylon, polyester, acrylic, olefin, and rayon. The chief natural fibers are wool, jute, cotton, and linen. While rugs and carpets are made by different methods, namely, tufting, weaving, knitting, needle-punching, braiding, embroidering, and hooking, mats are made by weaving only.<sup>1</sup> The pile of a woven rug or carpet is formed from one set of yarns, and the backing is made from two sets. A mat is a simple piece of flat substance with some pattern of weave; it is not composed of the pile and the backing. Unlike a carpet, it is not nailed or tacked on the floor. Like a rug, it is easily moveable but not washable liberally. Many people think the *satranji* is a mat. Technically the *satranji* is a rug, not a mat. Traditionally woven from the fibers of cotton and jute, sometimes mixed with wool, and splendidly decorated, the *satranji* is a beautiful rug.

According to *Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia, "a mat is a generic term for a piece of or flat material, generally placed on a or other flat surface, and serving a range of purposes." *The World Book Dictionary* defines the mat as "a piece of coarse fabric made of woven grass, straw, rope, or fiber, used for floor covering or for wiping mud from shoes. This dictionary also refers to the mat as "a smaller piece of material, often ornamental, to put under a dish, vase, lamp, or the like," as "a large, thick pad covering part of a floor, used to protect wrestlers or gymnasts," and as "anything growing thickly packed or tangled together."<sup>2</sup> *Wikipedia* and *The World Book Dictionary* do not specify the hallmarks of the mat. The mat is mostly woven by hand; it exhibits some pattern of weave; and it is not composed of the pile and the backing. It is true that the mat is generally placed on the floor or other flat surface to serve a wide range of purposes. It may also be used for packing, covering, screening, or hanging. The mat varies in size and thickness, and it also varies in quality, depending on the material used. A mat may be plain or decorated. It may be of one color only, or it may be of several colors and in different designs.

Prehistoric people may have used animal skins as floor coverings in their caves. When people learned to weave, they made floor mats from grasses and other plants. Although the modern world offers much in the way of alternative choices, the craft of weaving mats from a wide range of plant materials has survived in many parts of the world. These mats feature in all aspects of the everyday life of ordinary people. The materials from which they weave mats—cane, reeds, grasses, rushes, straw, palms, bamboo, leaf fibers, and other vegetal fibers—are readily available to hand. These mats endow their users with an intrinsic beauty and provide them with a link to the natural world and a more natural lifestyle. These are traditional mats embodying a rich and lively form of traditional art and representing a living tradition, whereas mats made of manufactured fibers or synthetic materials as well as rugs and carpets are industrial products exemplifying industrial art and representing a popular culture.

Mats have been in use in Bangladesh since antiquity. Before the introduction of modern furniture in the 1950s, mats were abundantly used. Life without mats is still unthinkable in rural Bangladesh, and the variety is astonishing. Villagers need mats for many purposes: for sitting and sleeping, for praying, for reading, for dining, for gathering and gossiping, for placing household goods, for drying crops, for covering, for protection against the damp that seeps from the earthen floor of rural homes during the rainy season, for decoration, and for ceremonial use. While mats are still given as bridal gifts in the villages, in the villages, towns and cities the mat is common for the *gaye halud* ritual of a wedding ceremony. The *nakshi pati* or the *shitalpati* is often spread on the floor on ceremonial occasions and displayed on the walls in homes and offices. Although mats are no longer in significant use in the domestic arena in the cities, urban life demands vast quantities of coarse matting for use at doorsteps, for spreading on the ground at warehouses or construction sites, for masonry work, for packing furniture, heavy and rough goods, plants, etc., and for wrapping up heavy merchandise.



### Generic Term in Bangla for the English Word 'Mat'

The *Bangla Academy English-Bengali Dictionary* refers to the *madur* as the Bangla synonym for the English word 'mat.' There is no explanation as to why the word *madur* has been chosen in preference to the word *pati*. On the other hand, *Samsad Bangla Abhidhan* refers to the *pati* as a kind of *madur*.<sup>4</sup> Taking it for granted that the *pati* is the same as the *madur*, the compiler of this dictionary has shown his utter ignorance when he says that the *pati* is made of the same aquatic grass that the *madur* is woven from. Curiously enough, he thinks that the *pati* is a *deshi* word of the *madur*. Thus *Samsad Bangla Abhidhan* has not only assumed the *madur* to be the sole generic term in Bangla for any piece of flat substance used as a mat but has also relegated the word *pati* to the status of a colloquial term. The word *pati* is not a colloquial term: it is a word by its own right as a product of human creation, as a mat by itself, and as an object absolutely different from the *madur*. *Samsad Bangla Abhidhan* was compiled by Sailendra Biswas and revised by Shashibhushan Dasgupta and Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya. All three are scholars of West Bengal.

Ashis Basu, another scholar of West Bengal, has contributed an article on mat weaving to *Bangya Lokesamskritikosh*. The title of his article is "*Madur Shilpa*," even though he refers to "*madur/pati shilpa*" in one sentence of his article. He writes mainly on the *madur* woven in Midnapore district of West Bengal, and he writes that the *shitalpati* is also woven in Midnapore. He further writes that Cooch Bihar district of West Bengal is another center where the *shitalpati* is woven. He has totally excluded Tripura, Assam, and Bangladesh.

Khogeshkiron Talukdar, a Bangladeshi scholar, has written an impressive book published by the Bangla Academy. The title of his book is *Bangladesher Lokayata Shilpakala* (Folk Art of Bangladesh). He has repeatedly said: "*pati or madur shilpa*," "*pati or madur*," or "*madur or pati*." While he has repeatedly mentioned that *mutta* or *muttara* is the material that the *pati* or the *shitalpati* is made of, he has made no mention of the material that the *madur* is made of. In one sentence he says that "*madur shilpa*" has attained a high level of excellence in West Bengal due to the scarcity of *mutta*. This shows he understands that the *madur* is made of another material. Nevertheless he refers to *pati* or *shitalpati* weaving as "*madur shilpa*" in Bengal. He writes:

"The *pati* is used more or less throughout Bengal in different names, such as the *pati* made of *mutta*, the *darma* made of *nalkhagda*, the *pati* made of *malua*, the outsized *chatai* made of *hogla* strips and bamboo slips and, in some cases, of palmyra-leaves. And all this accounts for the development of *madur shilpa* in Bengal. In *madur shilpa*, the *pati*, especially the *shitalpati*, is well-known."<sup>5</sup>

Made of *madur kathi*, the *madur* is one kind of mat, and as such it cannot be a generic term for any piece of flat substance used as a mat. Nor can the *pati* or the *shitalpati* be a kind of *madur*, for the *pati* or the *shitalpati*, unlike the *madur*, is made of *murta*. *Murta* is also known as *patipata*. Strictly speaking, in Bangla there is no word that can be used as a generic term like the English word 'mat' for a piece of flat substance made of any plant material.



We, however, need a generic term in Bangla. The scholars of West Bengal adopted the word *madur* as the Bangla synonym for the English word 'mat' long ago. In the context of Bangladesh the word *madur* is not appropriate at all, since the *pati* dominates over the *madur* in the economic, social and cultural life of the people.

Recently I conducted a survey, asking the informants a simple question: What is the Bangla synonym for the English word 'mat?' I asked them to choose only one word. All my informants are educated city-dwellers. Almost all have chosen the word *madur*. Only four informants have chosen the word *pati*. Then I asked some of the informants why they have chosen the word *madur* or *pati*. I am quoting below the statements of five:

Informant 1 says:

"I chose *madur* because that's what I call it most of the time. I also use the word *pati* sometimes, but mostly *madur*. Thanks for all the details about your project. Thanks for including us in this survey. Interestingly, I don't differentiate between *madur*, *pati*, and *chatai*. I didn't even know about what's made of what materials. To me, they are all the same. But, I just call them *madur* most of the time."

Informant 2 says:

"We usually call it *madur*, but it depends on how you use it. Some people call it *madur*, when made of plant material. I don't know how should we call it when made of cloth or any synthetic material, but *madur* is commonly said."

Informant 3 says:

"I have chosen *madur* because this is the word I find in the English-Bengali dictionaries and in many books in Bangla."

Informant 4 says:

I was taught in school to call it *madur*. I found my mother and grandmother calling it *pati*. I don't know the difference between the two.

Informant 5, after choosing the word *madur*, had the opportunity to discuss with me at length. He says:

"The word *madur* came to my mind instantly, and that is why I chose *madur* in answer to your question. I am quite aware of the *pati* and the *shitalpati*. I know that the *pati* is used at the *gaye halud* ritual for a wedding ceremony. Before my discussion with you today I did not know that the *madur* is so different from the *pati*. I was under the impression that "the word *madur* carries the same force as does the English word 'mat' to identify even the *pati*."

One of the four informants, who have chosen the word *pati*, says:

"You made me laugh. I almost forgot the Bengali word for 'mat.' In just one word? I would choose '*pati*.' I hope it helps."

It appears that the *madur* has become a set-word in the minds of the educated city-dwellers of Bangladesh for three reasons: (1) this word has been chosen in the English-Bengali dictionaries as the Bangla synonym for the English word 'mat'; (2) this word has been made popular in the literature (excluding the books and articles written by the folklorists and ethnographers of Bangladesh other than Khogeshkiron Talukdar); and (3) this word has come into common use in the colloquial tongue of the educated people. Dinesh Chandra Sen, Achyutcharan Chowdhury, Tofail Ahmad, Wakil Ahmed, Md. Syedur, Md. Abdul Hafiz, Mohiuddin Shiru, Zinat Mahrukh Banu,

and Kazi Khalilur Rahman wrote in Bangla on different kinds of *pati* or *patishilpa*, but their admirable writings, even Poet Jasim Uddin's reference to a *shitalpati* and a *kamranga pati* (a mat used on the occasion of a Muslim wedding) in *Nakshi Kanthar Math* (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt), have so far made no impact on the educated city-dwellers, who use the word *madur* rather indiscriminately, making no distinction between the *pati* and the *madur*.

We have a serious problem in accommodating the word *madur* in our study of mat weaving as a living tradition of Bangladesh. The *madur* is an insignificant mat in Bangladesh, and in Bangladesh, among its producers, it is not known as the *madur* but as the *melepati* (see Magura below). The word *pati* has come into common use in rural Bangladesh. Even though the villagers are acquainted with different materials that mats are made of, they tend to call different mats with the word *pati* as a suffix, namely, the *shitalpati*, *motapati*, *bukapati*, *sadapati*, *phulpati*, *jalapati*, *khejurpati*, *chataipati*, *hoglapati* and *melepati*. The *boni*, which is peculiar to Noakhali and Feni, is also a kind of *pati* (see Classification of Mats in Bangladesh), and the villagers in Noakhali and Feni often refer to the *boni* as the *boni pati*. The villagers in Kishoreganj district refer to a ceremonial mat as the *kamranga pati*. The widespread use of the word *pati* by the villagers proves our theory that the *pati* dominates over the *madur* in Bangladesh. It is really strange that the educated city-dwellers are completely isolated from the villagers in respect of the use of a term in Bangla for a mat.

Materially, technologically, artistically, and even culturally the *pati* and the *madur* stand wide apart from each other (see Comparison between the Pati and the Madur), and as such these two words cannot be used interchangeably.

The *madur* is the most popular of all the mats made in West Bengal where its production is massive. This explains why the scholars of West Bengal have chosen the word *madur* as a generic term to connote any mat and why they are inclined to refer to mat weaving as "*madur snupa*" in the literature. The compilers of the *Bangla Academy English-Bengali Dictionary* have simply borrowed the widely used term *madur* without understanding the geographical distribution of the *madur* between Bangladesh and West Bengal and the cultural standing of the *pati* in Bangladesh. On the other hand, Khogeshkiron Talukdar has correctly understood the geographical distribution of *murta* and the *madur* between Bangladesh and West Bengal, but he has failed to comprehend the cultural significance of the *pati* or the *shitalpati* in Bangladesh *vis-à-vis* the *madur* in West Bengal.

As our extensive fieldwork suggests, the *pati* is the predominant mat and the *shitalpati* is the mat par excellence in Bangladesh. The *pati* is varied in weave, color and design, and its production is massive in Bangladesh. Apart from its use for a wide range of purposes, the *pati* is intimately related to the cultural life of the people in Bangladesh (see Comparison between the Pati and the Madur). The *madur*, by its name as the *melepati*, is woven mainly in the south-west coastal region of Bangladesh where its production has sharply decreased due to the spread of shrimp cultivation; as a result,



it is no longer a dominant mat in Bangladesh. Though the *madur* is a familiar mat throughout Bangladesh, both city-dwellers and villagers generally use the *pati* on ceremonial occasions. As is known from a wedding song, in Kishoreganj district a *pati*, known as the *kamranga pati*, is spread for the bridegroom to sit on.<sup>99</sup> Wakil Ahmed, *Banglar Loka-Sanskriti*. (Dhaka 1974), 56.

This song runs as follows:

“O Mother of the Bride, how can you sit doing nothing?  
In flowered turban a husband for your daughter is coming.”  
“Let the husband of my daughter come, O let him come:  
There is no need to worry,  
Over my door I have kept the roll of a *kamranga pati*;  
In the room I have kept ready a thousand lights,  
And in the courtyard the elephant is tied.”<sup>100</sup>

Thousands of families in rural Bangladesh live on *patishilpa*, and the weavers of the *pati*, as explained by S M Mahfuzur Rahman in *Banglapedia*, are known as the *patials*. According to Khogeshkiron Talukdar, mat weaving has been the trade of a group of people known as the *paitaras*.<sup>101</sup> We would like to refer to them as the *patishilpis*. Because of the creativity and artistic talent of the outstanding *patishilpis*, the *shitalpati* became a legendary product of Bengal long ago (see *The Shitalpati: The Legendary Mat of Bengal*). The *shitalpati* goes to the international fairs from Bangladesh, and it is of utmost importance for us to maintain the status of the *shitalpati* as a renowned product in the international market. We need to highlight the *pati* more prominently in academic research, in the museums, and in exhibitions on contemporary traditional art. To express our deep admiration for the *patishilpis* who produce the *pati* in its astonishing variety and demonstrate their high sense of beauty in its creation and to show our respect to the overwhelming majority of the population—the villagers—who have made the *pati* an indispensable part of their daily life, we propose that the word *pati* be adopted as the generic term in Bangla for the English word ‘mat’ and that we use the term *patishilpa* for an in-depth study of mat weaving in Bangla. The Bangla Academy should revise its English-Bengali dictionary in respect of the Bangla synonym for the English word ‘mat’ at the earliest opportunity.

#### Materials for Mat Weaving

*Murta* is the principal material for weaving mats in Bangladesh. It is a rhizomatous shrub with an erect and glossy green stem attaining a height of 3-5 meters and a diameter of 2.0 cm. The stems are leafy and dichotomously branched. *Clinogyne dichotoma* is the scientific name of the tree. Swampy and marshy lands are suitable for *murta* cultivation. Traditionally it is propagated through rhizomes, but it can also be propagated through branch cuttings or through seeds. The propagules are planted during the months of May-June. After planting, it takes two to three years to reach the harvestable size. February-March is the harvesting period. It grows well in partial shade. It needs no special management other than weeding.



In Bangladesh, *murta* occurs naturally in the swamp forests of the Sylhet region, and it is cultivated mostly in the districts of Sylhet, Maulvi Bazar, Sunamganj, Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Noakhali, Lakshmipur, Feni, Barisal, Jhalakathi, Patuakhali, Comilla, Dhaka, Tangail, Kishoreganj, Netrokona, and Faridpur. The *patishilpis* make strips from the outer portion of the stem including the epidermal part. These split strips are subjected to successive phases of shoving, soaking, cleaning and drying before they can be woven into mats. *Murta* strands are also used for making baskets, bags, novelty items, etc. The pith that fills the center of the stem can be removed. The strips from the pith portion are used for binding.

*Murta* has several local names: *mutta* in Chittagong district, *jhang* in Cox's Bazar district, *mochhtak* in Noakhali and Lakshmipur districts, *patipata* in Feni district, *patra* in Barisal, Jhalakathi and Patuakhali districts, *muttara* in Tangail, Kishoreganj and Netrokona districts, and *murtabet* in the Sylhet region. In West Bengal, *murta* is called *mothra*.<sup>12</sup>

Another material extensively used for mat weaving is *hogla* (*Typha elephantina* Roxb), which grows naturally in marshy low-lying ground in Bangladesh (see Chapter 22). It is used for various purposes (see Chapter 22). Its leaves are woven into coarse mats called *chatais* or *hoglapatis*.

*Cyperus*, a species of mangrove marsh grass, is another material used for mat weaving in Bangladesh. *Cyperus* grows in many varieties across the globe. *Cyperus Tagetiformis* (Roxy) is found in Bangladesh. Its reeds, called *madur kathi*, are not of the finer variety. *Cyperus Tegetum* and *Cyperus Pangorie* provide *madur kathi* of the finer variety, and these are found in Midnapore district of West Bengal. *Cyperus Tagetiformis* (Roxy) is locally called *meley*. *Meley* grows naturally in the south-west coastal region comprising the districts of Bagerhat, Khulna and Satkhira, together with the southern portion of Jessore district and the Sundarbans. This mangrove marsh grass used to grow very profusely in the brackish as well as fresh water wetlands in this coastal region, but in most places it has become locally extinct due to the spread of shrimp cultivation (see The South-West Coastal Region). Because of local extinction of this grass in the inhabited areas, this material for weaving the *melepati* is under excessive pressure in the Sundarbans.

*Nalkhagda* (*Phragmites karka*) is one tough grass, able to survive in some of the most nutrient-poor soils. It occurs in swamps and beside streams all over Bangladesh. It grows in abundance in the Sundarbans. This grass is over 5 meters tall and remains firmly rooted to the ground. Its reed is extensively used for making mats, coverings for boats, and fences for walls of rural houses.

Bamboo plays a crucial role in the rural and urban economy of Bangladesh. At least thirty-three species of bamboo grow in Bangladesh's natural forests and village homesteads. Bamboo is used for hundreds of purposes, and it is an essential material for mat weaving in Bangladesh. Two kinds of mat are produced from bamboo strips: the *talai* or *talui* and the *darma*.

Leaves of the (*Phoenix sylvestris*) are used more extensively in basketry than in mat weaving in Bangladesh. Nevertheless date-palm leaves, called *khejurpata* in Bangla, provide a good source for the production of a kind of mat called *khejurpati*.

Coconut coir is the long fiber (15-35 cm) from the husk of the mature coconut. The average husk weighs 400 grams. Coconut coir is a fiber source for many cottage industries and is usually woven into mats for both domestic and export markets.

#### Mat Weaving Techniques in Bangladesh

Mats in Bangladesh are hand-woven. Three techniques of weaving are generally followed: plaiting, twilling, and twining.

Plaiting, or oblique interlacing, is the simplest method of interweaving strips of equal thickness and flexibility, and is widely used in mat weaving in Bangladesh. Plaiting involves laying out two sets of strips, one at right angles to the other, and interlacing them so that each strip passes over one, under one, over one, under one to produce a pattern of squares. An experienced *patishilpi* knows that by laying out each set of strips with a carefully chosen interlacing pattern, a variety of designs can be produced. The simplest patterns are stripes and checks, but elaborate grids, zigzags, stripes and dots are all possible without any further manipulation. Although sometimes worked on horizontal looms, plaiting is also done on vertical looms. In Bangladesh, however, the process of plaiting variations have been developed in plaiting. Although plaiting is conventionally constructed on two axes, it is possible to use three or more axes in a process known as multi-axial or multi-directional plaiting or interlacing. When worked tightly on three axes, a distinctive pattern of hexagons or triangles is produced.

In twilling, one strip passes over two or more strips, creating a stronger and more pervious surface. It also makes possible to create an even greater diversity of pattern, both abstract and figurative.

In twining, two sets of strips, one passive and one active, are required. Normally both are of the same material. The passive strips, or warps, are laid out with the warp threads radiating from the center. The active strips, or wefts, are worked in pairs in and out of the warps. One passes over the passive warp and the other passes under and then they are twisted so that they swap over, the first passing under and the other over the warp. This process is repeated, twisting the pair in the same direction between each warp. Twining produces a dense weave, slightly ribbed and with a distinctive diagonal twist to the wefts. The warps are normally completely concealed.

#### Classification of Mats

I was a child in the early 1950s. I remember that we had at our residence in Dhaka several *patis*, one *madur*, and one *chatai*. The *patis* were used as bedspreads underneath the thin mattresses. The *madur* was used as a *jainamaz*, and the *chatai* was occasionally used for drying homemade vermicelli. My mother taught me how to differentiate these three kinds of mat by their different names, but I did not know how they were materially different from one another. In those days the elders used different

names for different mats. Nowadays most of the educated city-dwellers are no longer able to distinguish different kinds of mat: in fact, by using the sole word *madur* many of them are not even aware of the astonishing variety of mats in Bangladesh.

There is a lot of confusion in the literature concerning the identification of materials for mat weaving. While describing the *pati* as a kind of *madur*, *Samsad Bangla Abhidhan* (1967) lists the *shitalpati* as if the *shitalpati* is also the same as the *madur*. We know that the *shitalpati* is a popular mat in northern Cooch Bihar, Tripura, and Assam. We wonder how the compiler of *Samsad Bangla Abhidhan* has failed to

identify the material used. *Samsad Bangla Abhidhan* (1967) refers to the *pati* as "a finely woven mat of a kind of aquatic grass." While it is true that the *pati* is a finely woven mat, the material used is not a kind of aquatic grass but a kind of tree from a rhizomatous shrub called *murta*. Mamun Siddiqi, writing on Comilla district in *Bangladesh* (1967) says that "Shital Pati" and "madur" are among the "cottage industries" of the district. Then he says that "madur" is "made of murta tree." Curiously enough, he makes no mention of the material the *shitalpati* is made of. A similar mistake is made in *Banglapedia* (1974). Siddiqi has provided in *Banglapedia* is misleading.

Based on the materials used, the mat in Bangladesh falls into eight classes: the *pati*, *maluarpati*, *maluar*, *maluar*, *maluar*, *maluar*, *maluar*, *maluar* and *paposh* or *darposh*. Made of *murta*, the *pati* is a fine mat. Made of *nalkhagda*, the *taktipati* is a mat used in the Feni and Panna region. Made of late leaves, the *khejarpati* is a coarse mat. Made of *hogla*-leaves, the *chata* is also a coarse mat. Made of *maluar kathi*, the *melapati* is better than a coarse mat. Made of bamboo slips, the *talai* or *talui* is a coarse mat. Woven from bamboo strips, the *darwa* is also a coarse mat. Generally made of coconut-coir, the *paposh* or *darposh* is used at the doorstep.

The *pati* is produced throughout Bangladesh and divides into seven kinds: the *shitalpati*, *bukapati*, *maluarpati*, *sadapati*, *phulpati*, *dolna pati*, *kamranga pati*, and *botni pati*. The *maluarpati* is called *maluarpati* in Noakhali. Knogesenkrion Isakdar refers to the *maluar pati*, but he has neither described it nor explained its material. As we are also unable to identify it, we have excluded it from our list.

When the stems of *murta* are split into halves and split again into quarters, the pulpi-er interior becomes separated from the woodier exterior. The woodier exterior is the harder strip, and the pulpier interior is the softer strip. Woven from the thin harder strips, the *shitalpati* is the finest *pati*. Woven from the thin softer strips, the *bukapati* is a rough *pati*. Woven from the broad softer strips, the *maluarpati* is even rougher than the *bukapati*. Woven from the broad harder strips, the *sadapati* is a fine *pati*, and the *phulpati*, also woven from the broad harder strips, is a *nakshi pati*. The *dolna pati* is used for a rocking cradle (see Noakhali below). The *kamranga pati* is a ceremonial *pati*. Smaller than the *pati*, the *botni pati* is peculiar to Noakhali and Feni. Its weaving techniques are different. The *botni pati* is woven from the bottom left corner ending at the right top corner with a plait.



A plain *pati* is a *sadapati*. Similarly a plain *shitalpati*, a plain *bukapati*, and a plain *motapati* are a *sada shitalpati*, a *sada bukapati*, and a *sada motapati* respectively. A *pati* with attractive designs is a *nakshi pati*. When decorated, a *shitalpati* and a *bukapati* become a *nakshi shitalpati* and a *nakshi bukapati* respectively. The *motapati* always remains plain. Like the *nakshi kantha*, these three decorated *patis*—the *phulpati*, the *nakshi shitalpati*, and the *nakshi bukapati*—are also decorated with various geometric patterns and figural motifs. The most common motifs on these decorated *patis* are trees, creepers and leaves, flowers, birds, animals, palanquins, boats, combs, houses, temples, and domes or mihrabs of the mosque. The birds include the duck, dove and peacock. The animals include the elephant, horse, deer and tiger. Like the *nakshi kantha*, the *nakshi shitalpati* exhibits a central design within a large circle enclosing either a *kadam* tree with its branches and leaves spreading or a multi-petaled lotus. Around the central design occur vines and creepers, of which *shankalata*, *kalshilata*, *shishlata* and *kalmilata* are eye-catching.

As already stated, the *kamranga pati* is peculiar to Kishoreganj district where it is used as a sitting mat for the bridegroom.

As already stated, the *bomi* is a special *pati* woven in Noakhali and Feni districts. The *bomi* is subdivided both in terms of use and decoration. The *sada bomi*, which is plain, is used to serve all practical needs: for sitting, sleeping, dining, and drying. Adults sit on a *sada bomi* to gossip. Children sit on a *sada bomi* to read and write. All members of a household sit on a *sada bomi* for dining. At night *sada bomis* are used for sleeping. *Sada bomis* are also used as agricultural implements, beds on which rice is dried. The *phul bomi*, which is decorative, is used for a variety of purposes: as a prayer mat, for beautifying a room by hanging the mat on a wall, as a seat for the bride and the bridegroom, to sit on, and for dining on a ceremonial occasion.

The *talaipati* is both plain and decorated. When plain, it is a *sada talaipati*; when decorated, it is a *nakshi talaipati*.

The *khejurpati* is both plain and decorated. When plain, it is a *sada khejurpati*; when decorated, it is a *nakshi khejurpati*. Strips of date-palm leaves are used more artistically in West Bengal than in Bangladesh. In some villages of Birbhum district of West Bengal, girls dye strips of date-palm leaves in magenta, green and blue to weave colorful mats.

The *chatai*, though a rough mat, is extensively used in Bangladesh (see Noakhali and Patuakhali below).

The *melepati*, which is one kind of *madur*, is woven in the south-west coastal region of Bangladesh and Magura.

The *talai* and the *talui* are identical. As reported by Abdul Haque Chowdhury, the *talai* is produced in Chittagong (see Chittagong below). As reported by Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury, this mat is called *talui* in Cox's Bazar (see Cox's Bazar below).

The *darma*, which is found all over Bangladesh, always remain plain. The curved roofs of boats and bullock carts are made of *darmas*. *Darmas* are also used for fencing, for roofing, and for burring dead bodies in the graveyard.

The *paposh* or *darposh* is usually a rectangular mat placed immediately outside or inside the entrance to a house or other , to allow people to scrub or wipe the soles of their before entering. The *paposh* or *darposh* is also known as a welcome mat, since its location at an entrance constitutes a welcome to visitors; it may bear some word, message or sign of greetings.

#### Comparison between the Pati and the Madur

It is extremely important that we understand the differences between the *pati* and the *madur*, since we need to know Bangladesh's uniqueness and artistic accomplishments in *patishilpa* in contrast with West Bengal's uniqueness and artistic accomplishments in *madurshilpa*.

Midnapore district of West Bengal is the prolific center of *madur* weaving. *Madur kathi* is cultivated extensively in southern Midnapore along the whole coastal area west of the Ganga River. *Madur kathi* is called *khanchi* in Midnapore. The *madur* is woven at many villages in Midnapore, of which Talda, Kholabeda, Khabid, Haldia, Kanora, Purusottampur, Raghunathbadi, Dashagram and Egra are famous.

There are three kinds of *madur* in Midnapore: the *ekrokha*, the *dorokha*, and the *masland*. The *dorokha*, with a double *madur kathi* weft, is thicker than the simple *ekrokha* and is more comfortable to sit or lie on. The *ekrokha* is used for general purposes. The *masland* is a very fine-textured mat made with carefully selected reeds. It has two borders of beautiful geometrical designs, sometimes in a deep magenta, but most often in self-color; the designs show up through the texture of the patterns only.

Ashis Basu reports that there are four kinds of *madur* in Midnapore: the *ekhara*, the *dohara*, the *kele*, and the *mele*.<sup>14</sup> But he has not explained these four kinds of *madur*. We understand that the *ekhara* is the same as the *ekrokha* and that the *dohara* is the same as the *dorokha*. The *mele* is known as the *melepati* in Bangladesh.

*The difference between the pati and the madur materially:* While the *pati* is woven from the strands of *murta*, the *madur* is woven wholly or principally from *madur kathi*, a kind of reed that comes from the flower stalks of *Cyperus*, a species of mangrove marsh grass. Although the *madur* is also a fine mat, in Bangladesh the *melepati* is not of the finer variety. The finer variety of the *madur* is found in Midnapore alone.

*The difference between the pati and the madur technologically:* While the *pati* is woven on the floor without a loom, the *madur* is woven on a simple bamboo frame-loom. The jute/cotton fibers generally form the warp of the *madur*, and its weft is the thin, soft reed known as *madur kathi*. In weaving, the weft is the term for the crosswise or horizontal threads that are passed over and under the warp threads, and the warp is the term for the lengthwise or vertical threads over and under which the weft threads are passed. The warp and weft threads of the *pati* are the strands of the same material known as *murta*.



*The difference between the pati and the madur artistically:* As already stated, the harder strips are used for weaving a finer *pati*, and the softer strips are used for weaving a rough *pati*. The *shitalpati* is an admirable example of the harder strips. It is of elegant design, and the colors in which it is sometimes woven are rich, harmonious and effective in the highest degree. Using the natural color variations in the *madur kathi* which forms the weft, the *madurshilpi* can create subtle patterns in a *madur*. Again, using the colored threads in the warp, the *madurshilpi* can produce a range of decorated *madurs*. Because of the composite and glossy texture of the *pati*, especially the *shitalpati*, the *patishilpi* can create a lot of geometric patterns and figural motifs (listed above) on the surface by employing the weaving techniques (discussed above). The *madurshilpi* does not have this advantage, though he/she can embellish the *madur* by external means.

*The difference between the pati and the madur culturally:* The use of mats is a dominant aspect of culture. While the *pati* is by far the most popular mat in Bangladesh, the *madur* is the predominant mat in West Bengal. It is obvious that two patterns of culture will result from the overwhelming use of the *pati* in Bangladesh and of the *madur* in West Bengal.

In the past, the wealthy—the zamindars and the rich merchants—used to decorate the walls and interior ceilings of their mansions with *nakshi shitalpatis* on festive occasions. And when there was no electric fan the hanging *madur*, manually moved back and forth by a servant, served the purpose of a fan in the mansions of the wealthy and in the public buildings. In those days the usefulness of both the *pati* and the *madur* was equally felt at least in urban life throughout Bengal. The cultural context is now different in Bangladesh and West Bengal.

The *pati* is generally used for the *gaye halud* ritual in Bangladesh. In West Bengal, the *satranji*, not the *madur*, is generally used for this ritual. It is the *pati* upon which *alpana* is sometimes drawn. Because of its texture the *madur* is not suited for *alpana* drawing. The *pati* is a regular bridal gift in rural Bangladesh. The *shitalpati*, which is a heat-resistant mat and widely used in rural Bangladesh for sleeping during the months of summer, is also an attractive item for decoration in the context of urban life in Bangladesh. A finely woven *shitalpati* used as a wallhanging adds a decorative touch to a home or office. For example, a *shitalpati* decorates the office-room of the Director General of the Bangladesh National Museum. Like the *nakshi kantha*, the *pati* is woven for loved ones. In West Bengal, the highly skilled *madurshilpis* receive awards and their products are promoted for export. In Bangladesh, the highly skilled *patishilpis* receive awards and their products are exhibited in the national and international fairs. The *shitalpati*, not the *madur*, was the legendary mat of Bengal.

#### **Major Districts/Regions of Mat Weaving**

Mat weaving is a leading cottage industry in Bangladesh. In Dhaka City, at New Market, at Chouk Bazar, at Sadar Ghat, and at Kaptan Bazar, one finds large mats rolled up for sale. The finest come from Sylhet, others from Chittagong, but the



majority are from the districts of Noakhali and Feni. While Sylhet, Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Noakhali and Feni are the most prolific centers of mat weaving, mats are made and found all over the country. During our fieldwork in 2006, we found another flourishing center of mat weaving in Jhalakathi district. For this study we have chosen eight districts and two regions: Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Noakhali, Feni, Faridpur, Jhalakathi, Barisal, and Moulvibazar, the Sylhet region, and the south-west coastal region.

### Chittagong

In the markets of Chittagong, we found mats woven of strips of split cane. These were all *patis*. Most were plain, unornamented, but their vendors divided them scrupulously by the quality of the weave. As we were interested in regional studies of mats in Bangladesh, we were looking for only those *patis* that were made in Chittagong. We had already seen *patis* in Dhaka. Relying on our preliminary knowledge, we were able to distinguish the *patis* made in Chittagong. The vendors confirmed our identification and were surprised at our accuracy. The rougher and simpler in weave were made in Chittagong, while the finer in weave and more complex in design came from Sylhet.

The *patis* made in Chittagong, whether found in the markets of Dhaka City or Chittagong city, are mostly plain; the few decorated ones exhibit the overall design of Islamic order, the common image being the mihrab. Whatever pattern the *patis* from Chittagong bear, they are meant to be used in prayer. Each *pati* has the right size to provide the necessary space for one person to offer *namaz*, and the *pati* is called *jainama*. These *patis* are in great demand in Chittagong.

Abdul Haque Chowdhury reports that Narayan Hat of Fatikchhadi upazila in Chittagong district is famous for *patis* made of *murta* (called *mutta* in the local tongue). As he has not given any description of these *patis*, we do not know their classification. Our fieldwork in Chittagong district was limited to the *patis* that we found in the markets of Chittagong city. As already stated, these *patis* were all prayer mats. Abdul Haque Chowdhury also reports that Chittagong district is also well known for mats called *chatai* and *talai*. The *talai*, a rough mat, is woven from bamboo strips. Chittagong district produces nineteen species of bamboo (see Chapter 22). Bibir Hat of Fatikchhadi upazila, Hazari Hat of Hathazari upazila, and the bazaars of central Chittagong are the marketplaces where *patis*, *chatais* and *talais* are found in enormous quantities for sale.

### Cox's Bazar

Nathpada and Putibila are two villages at Lonagada thana in Cox's Bazar district. As observed by Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury, Hindu women at Nathpada and Putibila weave the *pati* of six varieties: the *shitalpati*, the *bukkarpati*, the *machhla*, the *dolna pati*, the *sadapati*, and the *phulpati*. The material used for weaving is *murta*, and it is called *jhang* in the local tongue. *Jhang* is cultivated in the marshes near the homesteads. The local inhabitants have an awareness of the ecological value of the marshes that support the growth of *jhang*.

After harvesting, the stems of *jhang* are split into strips. A strip is called *phoyair* in the local idiom. The strips are dried in the sun. To test whether the strips have dried sufficiently, one strip is bent; if it returns to its original position when the pressure is removed, the strips will not be considered fully dry. Once dried, the *patishilpi* shoves each strip, separating the pulpier interior from the woodier exterior. The strips are again dried in the sun, but before weaving the strips are moistened to make them supple.

Weaving starts from one corner and gradually spreads out to cover the whole area. Weaving ends when the border is done all around. The border is called *kara* in the local idiom.

The popular motifs that are woven for decoration include *bichhaina phul*, *tara phul*, *pukurga phul*, *latapata*, and *kap-pirij*. While these motifs occur frequently, the *patishilpis* always create new ones.

The *shitalpati*, which is of the finer variety, is used extensively in summer, since sleeping on this *pati* is very comfortable when it is hot. The *bukkarpati*, which is of the rougher variety, is meant for use in winter. The *shitalpati* and the *bukkarpati* are basically sleeping mats and plain. The *machhla* is a prayer mat. It is interesting that Hindu women weave prayer mats for Muslims, unifying the two communities not only at Nathpada and Putibila but beyond these two villages in Cox's Bazar. The *dolna pati* is a small *pati* that is placed on a small bed for a baby, or on a small wooden frame to which an infant is strapped. The *sadapati* and the *phulpati* are both inferior to the *shitalpati* but superior to the *bukkarpati* in weave. While the *sadapati* is a plain *pati*, the *phulpati* is a *nakshi pati*. These two *patis* are basically floor mats. The *sadapati* is commonly used, and the *phulpati* is used occasionally, especially when guests are at home or when there is a special event. It has been a living tradition among both Hindus and Muslims in Cox's Bazar to give *patis* as gifts to children, brides and bridegrooms. Sabita Nath, Basana Nath, Pushpa Nath, Sarasvati Nath, and Sumana Nath are leading *patishilpis* of Nathpada and Putibila. The art of weaving *patis* has been handed down from generation to generation in these two villages. "All my daughters have learned this art from me," said Sabita Nath. She showed with pride several *patis* woven by her daughters. Sabita Nath then said:

"*Patis* are made mostly during the months of Magh, Phalgun, Baishakh and Jaishtha. It takes me one week to weave one large *pati*. Marketing our products is the task of men, who take the *patis* to Darbesh Hat twice a week. On each market day they sell 50 to 70 *patis*. A *phulpati* is sold at Taka 400-500, a *shitalpati* at Taka 300-500, a *machhla* at Taka 100-150, a *bukkarpati* or a *sadapati* at Taka 100, and a *dolna pati* at Taka 30-50. Most of the buyers are *paikars*, and they take the *patis* to different bazaars for sale at higher prices."

Zakaria Pada, another village at Lohagada thana in Cox's Bazar district, and Putibila are known for a kind of coarse mat called *talui* in the local idiom. The *talui* is woven from bamboo slips. Bamboo grows abundantly in these two villages. Three types of



bamboo—*muli bansh*, *mita bansh*, and *kali bansh*—are used in making the *talui*. 100 bamboos of any type are sold at Taka 350-400.

The process followed to weave the *talui* starts with the collection of the bamboo that is approximately 22 inches in length and green in color. Then the bamboo is split into thin strips with a *da*. The act of splitting the bamboo is known as *koyair kara* in the local idiom, and each strip is called *koyair*. The next step is known as *bet uthano* (scrapping the strips with a sharp knife to smoothen the edges). Each scrapped strip is called *bet*. The *bets* are spread out on the ground for drying in the sun for one day. The dried *bets* can be preserved at home for a long time.

The *talui* is made in standard sizes, such as 12 feet by 6 feet, 10 feet by 6 feet, and 8 feet by 8 feet. From 100 bamboos 12 *taluis*, each 8 feet by 8 feet, can be made. A *talui* of this size is sold at Taka 80, a *talui*, 12 feet by 6 feet, is sold at Taka 150. The *talui* is in great demand, used mainly for drying paddy and for construction work, especially for roof-centering (for spreading underneath the structural frame of mild steel before roof-casting).

#### Noakhali

Dadigokata, a village at Senbagh thana in Noakhali district, as observed by Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury, is well-known for two kinds of mat: the *botni* and the *pati*. The *botni* and the *pati* are woven from the strands of a plant called *mochhtak* in the local tongue. It is a local variety of *murta*—a kind of dark green plant. It grows in abundance in wetland around the homesteads. Each stem of *mochhtak* yields 7 or 8 thin strands. After harvesting, the stems of *mochhtak* are tied into bundles. One bundle, containing 80 stems, is called one *pan*, and it is customary to sell *mochhtak* in units of *pan* in the *hat* (the bazaar of the village). Each *pan* is sold at Taka 100-150, depending on the quality and thickness of the stems.

The *patishilpi*s are all women, old and young, married and unmarried. It is they who process the stems for weaving. The dark green bark is first peeled off from the stem with the curved edge of a *da*. The stems are then smeared with a variety of colors, which are available in small containers from the market of the nearest town. Black, green, purple and red are generally preferred. The smeared stems are dried in the sun. Finally the weaver, using a *da* again, splits the dried stems into strips, which are kept in piles for use. Splitting is known as *beta uthano* in the weaver's term, and each strip is called *beta*. The process for preparing the strips from the stems of *mochhtak*, as observed by Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury, is different from the process that Henry Glassie and I observed in Feni (described below).

When the *patishilpi* makes a *botni*, she starts weaving from the center and gradually spreads out to finish the mat. And when she makes a *pati*, she starts from one corner and finishes the mat in the opposite corner. The weaving techniques for the *botni* and the *pati* are different because of the differences in size. The *botni* is smaller, about 5 feet long and 4 feet wide, intended to be used as a prayer mat. The *pati* is larger, about 9 feet long and about 7 wide, intended to be used as a mat for sleeping, sitting, dining, or any other domestic purpose.



The *botmi*, when decorated, is pleasing to the eye. It is decorated in the process of weaving, and the usual motifs are trees, creepers and leaves, flowers, and birds. Sometimes verses from a poem, a popular message, or the map of Bangladesh and the name of the district are worked out. The weaver first draws the desired motif/motifs on a piece of white paper or on the clay floor to make sure how patterns will look. She then weaves the motif/motifs.

Describing her experience, Nurjahan said: "I learned to weave the *botmi* and the *pati* before my marriage in my parental home. My mother and my two aunts were my instructors." Once the techniques of weaving are mastered, it is for the weaver to demonstrate her creativity through visualization of motifs for artistic expression. "While the body endures the painstaking effort to weave a mat, the mind bears the strenuous exercise of comprehending patterns," said Nurjahan.

The price of a *botmi* varies from Taka 100 to 250. It is an established tradition at Dadigokata to present two *botmis* and one *pati* to the daughter at the time of her wedding. It is also the practice here to give the daughter a *botmi* after she is blessed with a child.

Dadigokata is famous for large *nakshi patis*, which usually exhibit flower-vases and birds. It takes six months to weave a large *nakshi pati*. The price of a *nakshi pati* varies from Taka 2,000 to 2,500.

Four villages of Noakhali district—Ramhori Taluk, Rauldia, Utar Chagla, and Gauripur—are well-known for the massive production of a kind of mat called *chatai* in the local tongue, and the material for its weaving is *hogla*. No crops are cultivable in the marshy low-lying fields of these four villages from Ashvin to Paush, from the middle of September to the middle of January. During this period, *hogla* grows naturally in the marshes. Even though the marshy low-lying fields allow a single crop throughout the year, there is no seasonal unemployment in these four villages. *Hogla* is a boon to the villagers. Men harvest mature *hogla*, which reaches a length of six to ten feet. They collect and bring home *hogla*-leaves, which they dry in the sun for 7-8 days. After drying, the *hogla*-leaves are tied into bundles. Each bundle is called *honza* in the local tongue. The *honzas* are stocked at home for weaving the *chatai* on a regular basis. In the local idiom, the act stocking is known as *khamal kara*. Some *honzas* are brought to the local market for sale. Depending on the quality of the *hogla*-leaves and the circumstance of supply and demand, the price ranges from Taka 300 to 500 per *honza*. From one *honza* 28 *chatais* can be produced, and each *chatai* is sold at Taka 70 at the local market.

While men are exclusively responsible for gathering, transporting, drying, binding, stocking, and marketing *hogla*-leaves, women alone weave *chatais* whenever their daily chores permit. Men again bring the finished products to the local market for sale. The *chatais* are used as pallets for sleeping, as mats for prayer in mosques, as spreads for drying crops, lentils and peppers, as covers for goods, and for construction work, especially for roof-centering. There was a time when very large *chatais*, 30-35 feet

long and 8-10 feet wide, were made to accommodate 200-300 people at religious or social gatherings in the villages. These *chatais* featured geometric patterns.

### Feni

The district of Feni is a great center of mat weaving. Many villages of this district are known for the production of beautiful *patis* and *botnis*. Henry Glassie, Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury, Zinat Mahrukh Banu and I conducted fieldwork extensively in Feni. This account of Feni's admirable and innovative enterprise in mat weaving is based on Henry Glassie's keen observation and description.

Senua and Madhya Chandpur are two villages in Feni district. The mats made at Senua and Madhya Chandpur are identical. *Murta* or green cane, called *patipata* in Feni, grows in many places in the district. The cane is cut into strips, called *da*, the mainstay of the blacksmith's trade: a stable, upturned knife of the kind used to silver vegetables for cooking. Afia Begum shoves the cane through the knife's curved edge, splitting it, then splitting it again into quarters. She snaps the end, peels off the green bark, and shaves flat splints, separating the pulpier interior from the woodier exterior. The softer strips will be used in rough work, the harder in finer. All the strips are dried in the sun, and then moistened to make them supple for weaving. There is no loom; the process is like a basketmaker's. Afia arranges twenty strips neatly one above the other on the ground, holds them down with her foot, and then weaving begins when she crosses new strips through the first ones into a twill pattern. One woman can weave a large mat alone, adding strips vertically and horizontally as she shifts atop the mat, but a team of three is ideal, and Afia works with her neighbors Laila Begum and Parul Begum.

From soft cane splints, they weave rough mats that are agricultural implements, beds on which rice is dried. From harder splints, they weave tighter mats that provide smooth, cool covers for the clay floors of village homes, beds on which people sleep comfortably in the heat. Both are sold in the market at nearby Lemua Bazar, along with cattle, vegetables, dried fish, and raw cane to be split and woven. Some of them will go then to urban markets as far away as Dhaka.

Fine hard splints are also used to weave prayer mats, here called *botnis*. The pattern is shaped against the natural tones of the ground with splints in one or two colors. They tint the splints by boiling them with synthetic dyes bought in Lemua Bazar. The dyed splints lie in the warp. The weft is undyed, and the problem of the *patishilpi* is to hold the whole design in her mind, and to maintain the strength of the web, while bringing color to the surface at the right junctures.

If you ask a man in the market who made them, he will say he did. Ask again, and he will say his wife weaves them, that all women can. But when you get to the village, the women say that weaving prayer mats is very difficult and only a few can do it. In Madhya Chandpur, those few are two: Parul Begum and Roshna Begum. All the women in a weaving village can make plain cane mats. The rare master makes *botnis*, and she works alone on commission. Between commissions, she does the work



everyone does, but Parul and Roshna agree that commissions are frequent. Their fame has spread far beyond their village, so usually they are doing interesting work for good pay, making mats for prayer.

Roshna Begum, in honest confidence, told Henry Glassie that she so commands her métier that she can weave any design, and she sent her son, Mohammad Anwar Hossain, to fetch the *jainamaz* she made for him. The center is dominated by the word *ma*, mother. He will remember her when he prays. She will continue to enwrap him in love during his devotion.

Words in Bangla are not rare on prayer mats, but they are usually minor parts of the design. Some designs cover the surface with a geometrical pattern, like a checkerboard. Parul Begum showed us a beautiful mat of embedded purple squares she had woven. More often the design is bilaterally symmetrical and directional: the sides mirror from the middle, but the top and bottom halves differ to imply an orientation. The mat will point, as the one at prayer points, through the mihrab, toward Mecca. The forms that build to symmetry on the surface are representational: flowers, flowers on trees and vines and in vases, flowers scattered among birds or beasts or artifacts—farm tools, *kalshis*, even airplanes—but the most common image is a mosque.

Two *botmis* woven in Senua, Feni, and bought by Henry Glassie in Dhaka in 1995 are worth describing. One shows a mihrab, and the other exhibits a vase of flowers. On the vase is the name of the favorite wife of the Prophet, Aysha, an evocation of the feminine and sacred in Islam. This *botmi* is comparable with a *botmi* in purple by Parul Begum of Madhya Chandpur. Parul's *botmi* represents the centered design of Islamic order: boxes expand radially from the midpoint into an image of unity.

One cause for the design is its specific source. Prayer rugs woven in Turkish factories and sold at mosques in Bangladesh tend to be detailed in their architecture. Repeating courtly formats from the past, in which columns flank the mihrab, they are more conspicuously representational than the prayer rugs woven in Turkish villages. Other causes lie in the local culture. Even among Muslims, ornament in Bangladesh drifts toward the pictorial. Whether painted on *kalshis*, engraved in brass, or woven in cane, the inherently geometric design avoids the human figure, but it pushes past the abstract relations of shape and color that would satisfy the Turkish artist and moves on to the portrayal of flowers or animals or human creations, like the mosque. And the mosque has gained such significance as a religious emblem, balancing for the Muslim the *murti* of the Hindu, that it is, in the guise of the Taj Mahal, the signal ornament for rickshaws. The rickshaw painted in Feni, even more often than the one decorated in Dhaka, displays the Taj Mahal, and the woman of the countryside weave their mats with deftly abstracted mosques.

The parallel is clear. The pair of the large, plain mat and the decorated prayer mat is like that of the *kalshi* and the *murti*. Cane and clay are common, local substances, shaped into objects for use. One object is part of workday life. The other is an element



in a sacred ritual through which people communicate with God. The object for daily use is plain in style: it is crafted handsomely, and it is what it is: a sleeping mat, a water jar. The ritual object is representational. The *botni* is a picture, the *murti* is a statue, but in both of them representation is enhanced by selectively applied color, and the forms are at once abstract and referential.

The parallels that are clear in function and style persist in the social and economic spheres. Materials are processed by everyone: men and women split the cane and tread the clay. Everyone in the trade can make the object for daily use, and they work cooperatively for the open market. But ritual objects are made by talented individuals of one gender. Women make *botnis*, men make *murtis*, and they work alone on commission, filling slack time with the work everyone does, but concentrating on the specialties that bring them cash and status.

Unified by utility, divided by secular and sacred purpose, the central creations of workers in cane and clay echo the contrast in village architecture. In Madhya Chandpur, the daily routine circles the *badi*, composed of buildings walled with bamboo and roofed with thatch. Their colors are nature's. Their style is plain: there is no applied ornament. The new and elegant house fills the gap with its cladding of tin and touches of paint, but the contrast remains between the house and the mosque. The building used for prayer sparkles in white, smooth and bright, to divide from its surround of mottled greens and browns. It is ornamented internally with painted floral vines that climb the columns and rise beside the deep mihrab, complementing the symmetry of the *qibla* wall facing west to Mecca.

As Henry Glavin has come to understand it, the system of Bangladesh is centered in need, by the useful things, some secular, some sacred, with which a hard life is made possible.

### Faridpur

Faridpur district is mainly known for three kinds of mat: the *shitalpati*, the *talaipati*, and the *khejarpati*. As in Jhalakathi and the Sylhet region, the *shitalpati* is the mat par excellence in Faridpur. The *talaipati* is produced extensively in this district. Faridpur is a major center of the *khejarpati* in Bangladesh.

Boalmari, Shatbir and Salair are the major sites for *patishilpa* in Faridpur. *Khelaghar* (the playground), *asmān tara* (the star in the sky), *jamin tara* (the star on the earth), and Taj Mahal are the motifs that figure prominent in the *nakshi shitalpati* in Faridpur.

### Jhalakathi

Jhalakathi is a prolific center of *pati* weaving, and its best product is the *shitalpati*. This account of Jhalakathi's admirable and innovative enterprise in *patishilpa* is based on Kazi Khalilur Raman's keen observation and description."

If a visitor to Jhalakathi asks a local resident, "which product is the trademark of your district," the person would reply proudly: "*shitalpati*." And if you do not care to ask this question during your brief stay in Jhalakathi, someone is likely to excite your admiration

for Jhalakathi's *shitalpati* by propagating its artistic quality in glowing words—so deep is the obsession of the people of Jhalakathi for the *shitalpati*. By now the fame of Jhalakathi's *shitalpati* has spread across and even beyond Bangladesh. A person, visiting Jhalakathi for the first time, hardly forgets to buy a *shitalpati* as a souvenir before leaving. It has been a time-honored tradition to greet a guest or a newcomer to Jhalakathi with a *shitalpati* or to give a *shitalpati* as a farewell gift to a departing high-ranking officer or a celebrated person. The *shitalpati* thus symbolizes an expression of good wishes from the people of Jhalakathi, whether you are welcome or departing. Poet Shamsur Rahman, Nirmalendu Gun, Asad Chowdhury, Justice Habibur Rahman, the head of a former caretaker government, and Syed Shamsul Haque came to Jhalakathi. The people of Jhalakathi greeted each one of them with a *shitalpati*. "I feel like sleeping undressed on the clay floor of my mother when I lie down on a *shitalpati* after spreading it on a mattress during the summer time," says Sikandar Kabir, a famous poet and cultural personality of Jhalakathi. Mukul Rani, a *patishilpi* of Hailakathi village, says: "Sleep on a *shitalpati* after spreading it on the bare floor or on a mattress. You will then feel cool. That is why it is called *shitalpati*."

As already stated, the material for weaving the *shitalpati* is *murta*. It is called *paitra* in Jhalakathi. It grows naturally in a variety of habitats—in bushes and marshes, on low upland meadows along the riverside, on the banks of shallow ponds and canals, and on wetlands along the low-lying roadside. To boost the production of the *shitalpati*, *paitra* is now cultivated in a planned way at eleven villages: Bahadurpur, Daharshankar, Hailakathi, Heloncha, Kajalkathi, Kifait Nagar, Nilganj, Ramnagar, Sachilapur, Sangar, and Sarai. There are about 1,000 *paitra* gardens covering nearly 200 acres of land in these villages. While around 600 families of Jhalakathi are directly involved in *patishilpa*, several thousand families are dependent for their livelihood on the commerce of *patishilpa*. Several *patishilpis* of Hailakathi and Daharshankar said: "Reaping from *paitra* cultivation is absolutely sure. With little care we can harvest *paitra* year after year. Once cultivated, the plants survive for years together and yield the stems that we need for weaving the *shitalpati*. *Paitra* grows better on the low upland meadows along the riverside and on the wetlands adjacent to the ponds and canals." Many *patishilpis* have their own *paitra* gardens. There are also people who own *paitra* gardens but do not weave *patis*; they simply sell *paitra* to those *patishilpis* who do not have their own *paitra* gardens. These *patishilpis* said: "We buy *paitra* in units of *kuḍi*. 80 stems of *paitra* make one *pan*, and 20 *pans* make one *kuḍi*. According to this calculation, one *kuḍi* consists of 1,600 stems of *paitra*. One *kuḍi* of high-quality *paitra* is sold at Taka 2,000-3,000, and one *kuḍi* of small-sized *paitra* is sold at Taka 1,000-1,200." Thus *patishilpa* has become a lucrative trade in Jhalakathi.

*Paitra* cultivation in Jhalakathi began about one hundred fifty years ago, and it spread rapidly. Since then *patishilpa* has flourished in this district. There was a time when skilled *patishilpis* among women were held in high esteem. The more skilled *patishilpi* was an unmarried girl, the higher was her demand in terms of the dowry as a prospective bride. The *patishilpis* of Jhalakathi still remember with pride one



incident. Fifty-five years ago, Arbuthnot, an American citizen and the Regional Director of the World Health Organization, came to Jhalakathi. He was given a *shitalpati*. Appreciating its weaving patterns, he praised the *patishilpi* eloquently and rewarded her with Rs. 200. It was then a fabulous amount for one *shitalpati*.

We will now focus on one village for a more detailed study of *patishilpa* in Jhalakathi. Located 15 kilometers southwest of Jhalakathi town, Hailakathi is a village at Matbađia union of Rajapur upazila. To reach Hailakathi, you need to come from Jhalakathi town by road until you arrive at Banshtala near the entrance of Rajapur town. From Banshtala you need to go straight on a brick-surfaced road beyond Indrapasha Hat, then on a tarred road leading into Hailakathi. At the entrance of this village lies a sprawling forest where *paira* grows profusely. This forest, called *patiban*, covers almost 40 bighas of land. Its thickness and depth clearly indicate the presence of foxes in the *patiban*. The older people will tell you that the *patiban* was once the abode of tigers. Hailakathi leads Jhalakathi in the production of *patis*, especially the *shitalpati*. Almost every family of the village is involved in *patishilpa*. 50 to 100 *patis* are made daily at Hailakathi. The price of a *pati* ranges from Taka 200 to 500, depending on its size and quality. One *patishilpi* said: "Our profit is meager. However, as all the members of the family work together, we can maintain a good living." Another *patishilpi* said: "Although our combined efforts enable us to earn a good living, our women have to make great sacrifices. They can hardly enjoy a day off. When a woman gets sick or becomes pregnant, our production suffers and the income goes down. This is a common peril of a home-based and family-oriented enterprise."

There was a time when nature's bounty was at the command of the *patishilpis*. Their eyes shine when they recall the old days. A *patishilpi* then collected *paira* from the *patiban* at no cost. To determine the price of a *shitalpati*, the *patishilpi* would simply take into account the time and labor that went into its production. Even though the price of a *shitalpati* was then much cheaper, the *patishilpi* was still happier with the profit. The situation has now changed because of the current nature of commerce. The *patiban* is no longer at the disposal of the *patishilpis*. It has been leased out by the government to the highest bidder. The *patishilpis* are now required to buy *paira* from the *mahajan*, and this has increased the cost of production. The *mahajan* says that he has to pay taxes, and he has to employ some people to look after the *patiban* and keep the books of account. All this contributes to the rise in the prices of *paira*. The *patishilpis*, on the other hand, complain with much discontent that they are at the mercy of the *mahajan*. Surely things were better when the *patiban* was their common property. Some of them said: "Only the government can improve our economic condition and enhance the quality of *patishilpa* to a level of technical and creative excellence. We are capable of meeting the needs of a thriving international market for *shitalpatis*. The government needs to formulate a plan for the expansion of *patishilpa* and the export of *shitalpatis* made to the highest standards so that we can get recognition for our creative endeavor."



The *patishilpis* of Hailakathi are famous for their fine work, which is in demand throughout the district and around the country. The *shitalpati* is densely woven from the finely split strands. The stems of *patra* are first peeled off and then split lengthwise into three parts. Each part is a strip. Peeling off is done with a *da*, and splitting is done with a *bati*. They call each strip *beti*. The *betis* are actually the finely split strands. The *betis* are stiffened with rice starch. Then the *betis* are boiled in a mix of water and rice starch. The boiled *betis*, after being soaked in clean water, are dried in the sun. Weaving begins when the *betis* become dry. The *betis* from the exterior portion of a stem are used to weave the glossy *shitalpati*, and the *betis* from the interior portion of a stem are used to weave the *motapati* and the *bukapati*, which are inferior in quality and cheaper. The *betis* from the pith portion (the central, spongy tissue in a stem) are used in lieu of cotton threads by grocery stores for wrapping cartons containing goods.

Men and women of all ages and children are collectively engaged in mat weaving at Hailakathi. Child labor is so intense and unavoidable in this craft at this village that children hardly go to school, and the few who attend school are forced to drop out even before completing primary education. "How do you feel that your children are deprived of education?" Faced with this question, the parents justify their children's participation in their work on the ground of cost reduction. One *patishilpi* said: "Most people cannot afford to buy a *shitalpati* at a price higher than Taka 200. A *shitalpati* sold at Taka 200 gives us a small profit. Even then the buyer complains that it is very expensive and starts haggling with us. If we employ workers instead of engaging our children in mat weaving, the price of even an ordinary *shitalpati* will go up substantially. How are we then going to convince the buyer that our profit is minimal? We will not be able to feed our children unless we engage them in our work and sell *shitalpatis* at affordable prices."

There is no separate *hat* for marketing *patis* in Jhalakathi. The *patishilpis* sell *patis* mainly from their homes. The *paikars* (wholesale buyers) come to them frequently to buy *patis*. Some merchants from Bakshibazar in Dhaka often come to Hailakathi to buy *patis* in wholesale. Some *patishilpis* travel to Jhalakathi town on Monday and Thursday to sell *patis* to wholesalers at Kansaripatti, which has now become a typical market for *patishilpa* in Jhalakathi. There are four shops which sell and make *patis*. The *patishilpis* working at these four shops collect their raw material from Hailakathi and other places.

The *patishilpis* of Sarai and Baraikaran villages in Nalchhiti upazila sell *patis* mainly from their homes to the *paikars*, and they often become peddlers selling *patis* at ferries, at steamers and launches bound for Dhaka, and at towns and marketplaces in Jhalakathi.

The *shitalpati* from Jhalakathi has a good market in Kolkata, West Bengal. Some merchants export *shitalpatis* to West Bengal, transporting them from Jhalakathi through Benapol to Kolkata.

### Patuakhali

Patuakhali district is very rich in *hogla*. As many as 30,000 people cultivate *hogla* at different upazilas of this district. Cultivation of *hogla* needs little investment and little labor. It spreads to the surrounding land once the roots are implanted in the rainy season. According to local farmers, *hogla* cultivation is more profitable than paddy and other crops. A farmer can earn Taka 25,000 to 35,000 a year by cultivating *hogla* on one acre of land whereas cultivation of paddy on the same land gives a return of Taka 10,000 to 15,000, according to them.

Thousands of women in Patuakhali district are involved in weaving mats from *hogla*-leaves to supplement the income of their poor families. These are coarse mats that are generally identified as *chatais*. In Patuakhali these mats are called *hoglapatis*. *Hoglapatis* are widely used for packing ice and fish and for storing rice in the Barisal division. Many poor families in Patuakhali district use these mats underneath their beds. Khasher Hat, about 11 kilometers away from the Patuakhali district town, is famous for selling mats woven from *hogla*-leaves. A large number of traders come to this market from different parts of the country for buying them. From Khasher Hat, *hoglapatis* are transported to Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Sylhet, Rangpur and other districts.

Delicious *bhapa pitha*, a kind of steamed rice cake, is made with the powder of *hogla*-flowers. Local people relish this *bhapa pitha* very much.

Swarupkathi of Patuakhali district is well-known for the *shitalpati*. But it is particularly famous for the production of the *papam* or *tarposh* made of coconut coir.

### Magura

A housewife's enterprise has changed the life of eighty poor families at Kechhuadubi, a village in Magura Sadar upazila of Magura district. Her name is Kajal Rekha.

Seventeen years ago, after being married, Kajal Rekha came to Kechhuadubi as a housewife. Gour Adhikari, her husband, was then a day laborer. As they were landless, they were in abject poverty, living from hand to mouth. Their sufferings increased with the birth of a daughter. Her husband failed to feed the family of three members. As time went by, she became the mother of two daughters. Her elder daughter had to work as a maid at a house in Magura town to support the family. "But it was hard for a minor girl to work as a maid," Kajal said.

Nine years ago, fortune smiled on them when Kajal's father told her to cultivate *meley* and to weave the *melepati* with its reeds called *madur kathi* to earn some money. *Meley* is a plant that grows in marshy land. Kajal brought some seeds from her father's house and sowed those on the bank of the nearby Fatki River. When the seeds sprouted, she, with the help of her husband, planted the seedlings on the same land. Since then they have been cultivating *meley* annually. They plant *meley* in Agradhayan and harvest it in Phalgun. "*Meley* can be harvested twice after sowing the seeds once," they said.

As already stated, a mat woven from the reeds (called *madur kathi*) of *meley* is a *madur* of one kind. As reported by Ashis Basu, it is called *mele* in West Bengal.



*Melepati* weaving from *madur kathi* is a simple process. Only a tool locally made is needed. It is called *shan*-machine. The *shan*-machine serves the purpose of a loom on which the *madur* has to be woven. It costs Taka 300. The *melepati* that is being produced at Kechhuadubi has both the warp and weft composed of *madur kathi*.

A large *melepati* costs Taka 35 to 40, and it is sold at Taka 85 to 90. A smaller *melepati* costs Taka 20 to 25 and is sold at Taka 55 to 60. Every Saturday, Kajal supplies *melepatis* to wholesalers who come to their house from Jhenidah, Kushtia, Rajbadi, Faridpur and Dhaka. Now they are earning enough to make their both ends meet. "My two daughters go to school," Kajal said. They have already built a tin-shed house with the profit.

Kajal's success inspired other families in the village, and they also started *meley* cultivation and weaving *melepatis*. Now eighty families are involved in the business. Both men and women participate in cultivation and weaving. Namita, Nirapada, Tapan, Nisikanta, Ashit, Nikhil, and Gurudash are among the more successful entrepreneurs.

Gurudash, a father of one son and three daughters, says he is well off by following Kajal's advice. He has been involved in the enterprise for about four years.

A few years ago, landless poor inhabitants of this village used to live in extreme poverty. Their bad days are over now, thanks to the efforts made by Kajal Rekha. Every year thousands of *melepatis*, woven from *madur kathi*, find their way into the adjoining districts of Jhenidah, Kushtia, Razbadi and Faridpur, sometimes as far as Dhaka. Thus the villagers are benefiting from Kajal's enterprise.

Eighty poor families of this village are now well off from *meley* cultivation and by weaving the *melepati* from its reeds.

#### The Sylhet Region

As already stated, *murta* occurs naturally in the swamp forests of the Sylhet region, and it grows naturally and is cultivated in this region more abundantly than anywhere in the country. In Bangladesh, the Sylhet region leads in the production of the *shitalpati* both in quantity and quality. Balaganj and Fenchuganj upazilas of Sylhet district and Rajnagar and Barlekha upazilas of Maulvi Bazar district are famous for the *shitalpati*. Balaganj upazila has 14 unions and 467 villages; Fenchuganj upazila has 3 unions and 88 villages; Rajnagar upazila has 8 unions and 255 villages; and Barlekha upazila has 12 unions and 320 villages. *Patishilpa* will be found almost throughout the Sylhet region, especially at the villages in the above-mentioned four upazilas. Balaganj upazila is, however, most famous for the production of *shitalpatis* of the finest quality.

The *shitalpati* is basically a sleeping mat, and it is used for this purpose throughout the Sylhet region. It remains cool in the heat of the day, is smooth to touch, and permits exposure to air.

Although *shitalpati* weaving is a long-standing tradition in the Sylhet region, its history is barely known. The *shitalpati zarbaf* was the most delicate and intricate kind



of *pati* from the sylhet region during the Mughal period. It was interwoven with silver wires. Some *shitalpatis* of the *zarbaf* brand were sent to Emperor Aurangzeb as gifts by Murshid Quli Khan.<sup>16</sup>

No sample of this amazing *shitalpati* has survived. During the period of the Nawabs, *patishilpa* continued to thrive in the Sylhet region and retained its glory during the British period. An ivory mat in imitation of the *shitalpati* was made in Sylhet in the nineteenth century, and this was purchased by the then Nawab of Dhaka. This ivory mat was used by the Dhaka Nawab family as a wedding mat. This fabulous specimen is a tribute to the highest level of craftsmanship in *patishilpa* in Sylhet. Acquired by the Dhaka Museum in 1970, this ivory mat is now preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum.

Dinesh Chandra Sen reports that Chapghat, Jafargar, Jagannathpur, Jalsukha, and Pratapgar were famous for the *shitalpati*.<sup>17</sup>

Zinat Mahrukh Banu, who conducted fieldwork at Bilbadi village in Balaganj upazila in February 1999, reports that Atashan, Chanpur, Gauripur, Khashipur, Khujkipur, Kuar Gao, Lohamuḍa, Mohisasi, Shrinathpur, and Tilak Chanpur were famous for the *shitalpati*. According to her, the main center for the production of the *shitalpati* was Teghoria village of Gauripur union where *murta* grows naturally in abundance.

Md. Abdul Aziz reports that 5,305 persons of 1,087 families were engaged in *patishilpa* in the Sylhet region in 1981 and that they produced 99,200 *shitalpatis* in the same year.<sup>18</sup>

"A sharp *da*, a *chip*, and a *jaf* are the tools with which the *patishilpi* makes the fine *shitalpati*," says Zinat Mahrukh Banu.

For the purpose of using *murta* in mat weaving, the *patishilpis* first make fine strips from the stems of *murta*. The strips are then seasoned and cured by soaking them in water usually for twenty-four hours, where they are sliced into thin strips for making the *shitalpati*. This process will eventually reflect in the quality of the *shitalpati*, the time taken for its weaving, and the softness, pliability and durability of the *shitalpati* while in use. The natural golden shade of the warp is interwoven with maroon slips in the weft to create a timeless pattern of color and design. Bordered with two or three lines of a geometric pattern, the *shitalpati* is divided into four or six sections with stylized birds, animals or flowers woven into each to complete the arrangement. The strips are woven in a diagonal crisscross to produce geometric patterns with lines, diamonds, chevrons and quadrangles. Maroon strands are alternated with natural ones to weave stylized designs of the deer, birds, tigers, a mosque, or a star motif.

Most commonly, except in the case of a very fine natural color *shitalpati*, there are geometric patterns and motifs of flora and fauna. The dyes used for the production of *nakshi shitalpatis* are chemical dyes. The colors used are green, orange, red, violet, blue, and yellow. After dyeing, the strips are placed in shade to dry and gently beaten to further soften the material. This preparation usually takes about a week, while the weaving can take from two to five weeks.

Shri Kanailal Ashram at Bilbadi village is the principal market where *shitalpatis* from different villages of Balaganj upazila are brought for sale once a week, on Monday, from 11:00 am to 2:00 pm. The sellers are the *patishilpis*, and the buyers are the *paikars*. There is another market at Dasherbazar in Barlekha upazila of Maulvi Bazar district. During her fieldwork at Bilbadi village Zinat Mahrukh Banu had the opportunity to survey a large assortment of *shitalpatis* at Shri Kanailal Ashram on 15 February 1999. She writes:

"I am amazed at the style and patterns of *shitalpatis* that were on sale at this market. Many brought here *shitalpatis* as sleeping mats, as floor mats, and as prayer mats. Each *patishilpi* has made extremely attractive *shitalpatis* in patterns of design reflecting his/her own skills. The motifs that figure prominent include buildings, *sinduki naksha*, *asman tara*, *jamin tara*, *kamalkos naksha*, *nakshi pati*, Taj Mahal, *masjid* (mosque), trees, flowers, and so on. What is really striking is the plain *shitalpati* even though there is no application of color. In it the patterns have been created in the process of weaving the strands in various styles. The plain *shitalpati* exhibits buildings, *sinduki naksha*, and *chela naksha*. In the *shitalpatis* intended for sleeping, sitting, and for prayer the plain strands are interwoven with maroon slips in various patterns of design. The *nakshi shitalpati*, like the *nakshi kantha*, encloses the *padma* and trees within borders woven in several tiers around. I have noticed that the *shitalpati* meant for sitting contains the *padma*, trees and Taj Mahal. The *jainamaz pati* is decorated with a mosque. Sometimes 'Allah-Akbar' is written on the *jainamaz pati* in the process of weaving."

Many great *patishilpis* emerged in the Sylhet region in the past. Jadu Ram Das of Dulijoda village won a gold medal for his superb *shitalpati* at the Agriculture Exhibition held in Kolkata in 1906. A *patishilpi* of Teghoria village made a fabulous *shitalpati* on commission, and it was sent to Queen Victoria.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately his name is not known. There are today several reputed *patishilpis* in the Sylhet region. Paban Joy Das and Phulan Joy Das of Bilbadi village are two reputed *patishilpis*. Paban Joy Das has attained fame throughout the Sylhet region for his outstanding dexterity in *shitalpati* weaving. He received the Best Craftsman National Award of the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) for his outstanding talent in *patishilpa* in 1982. Manindra Kumar Das of Rajnagar upazila is another famous *patishilpi*. He represented Bangladesh at the International Handicrafts Exhibition held in Rome in 1990; his superb *shitalpatis* were exhibited and highly appreciated there.

Barindra Chandra Das and Pramodini Das of Bilbadi village, Renuka Ranjan Das of Tulapur village, Benubhusan Das, Dharendra Kumar Das and Umacharan Das of Dulijoda village, Kipes Chandra Das of Yogigona village, and Sanjib Das and Shatish Chandra Das of Balaganj are among the many skilled *patishilpis* in the Sylhet region.

It is worth noticing that the *patishilpis* in the Sylhet region are all Hindus with the surname of Das. Dinesh Chandra Sen was the first to notice this. An artisan caste, known as the Patgara Das, emerged in the Sylhet region long ago. *Patishilpa* is being handed down from generation to generation through this artisan caste. That the Sylhet region has attained the highest level of excellence in *patishilpa* in Bengal may be attributed to the preservation of the skills and ingenuity that have been passed on year after year within this artisan caste.



Zinat Mahrukh Banu reports that in 1999 a *shitalpati* meant to be used as a *jainamac* was being sold at Taka 150 to 200, a *sada shitalpati* meant for sleeping at Taka 500 to 600, and a *nakshi shitalpati* at Taka 800 to 2,000. It takes ten to fifteen days for two *patishilpis* to weave a *sada shitalpati*, and it takes fourteen to twenty-one days for two *patishilpis* to weave a *nakshi shitalpati*. In 1999 Paban Joy Das told Zinat Mahrukh Banu that it would take five to six months for two *patishilpis* to produce a *sada shitalpati* of the finest weave and that its price would range from Taka 7,000 to 8,000. According to Paban Joy Das, in the middle of the nineteenth century the *sada shitalpati* of the finest weave from Balaganj was a highly alluring and admired product not only throughout Bengal but elsewhere in the world.

Zinat Mahrukh Banu further reports that Paban Joy Das has his own garden around his homestead for *murta* cultivation. He pursues six methods to weave the *shitalpati*, but Banu has not described them. In 1999 his family—an extended family that included his two younger married brothers—was not engaged in *patishilpa* on a regular basis because of the slump in demand for the *shitalpati*. At one time 150 families were involved in *patishilpa* at Bilbadi village, but in 1999 this number dropped to 7 households.

To my utter surprise, while Jhalakathi has still remained a flourishing center of the *shitalpati*, Balaganj is declining. It appears that Balaganj is on the decline because there are not many patrons to support the high quality of the *shitalpati* in which the *patishilpis* of this site excel. Gone are those days when the *patishilpis* in the Sylhet region were mostly women, when the money value of a marriageable patial girl was considerable, and when her father was expecting a high price from the bridegroom's family at the time of her wedding.

#### The South-West Coastal Region

As already stated, the south-west coastal region embraces the districts of Bagerhat, Khulna and Satkhira, together with the southern portion of Jessore district and the Sundarbans. Traditionally this coastal region of Bangladesh was famous for mat weaving from *meley*, a variety of mangrove marsh grass. There was a time when thousands of women of this region were engaged in weaving the *melepati* from the flower stalks of this non-wood mangrove plant. As already stated, the reeds that come from the said flower stalks are popularly known as *madur kathi*.

This marsh grass used to grow very profusely in the brackish as well as fresh water wetlands in the south-west coastal region, but shrimp cultivation on a massive scale in the region destroyed the ecology conducive to the natural growth of *meley* so vital for *melepati* weaving.

At present *madur kathi* has to be collected from the Sundarbans; procurement of this essential raw material for *melepati* weaving involves permits and royalties. This has caused a rise in the price of the raw material. As a result, the *melepati*, so long known as the 'poor man's bedding,' has become a luxury item. Many other articles woven out of the split reeds used to have an export market, but due to the shortage of the essential



raw material this source of export earnings no more exists. The shortage of *madur kathi* has thrown thousands of *patishilpis* into unemployment. They are all women.

The Bangladesh Crop Diversification Program (CDP) conducted a two-year survey on the prospects of *meley* cultivation with the cooperation of the Grameen Trust, and on conclusion of this survey it has published a report containing the findings. According to this report, *meley* grows in 30–50 cm deep water. The cultivation of *meley* has proved to be more profitable than rice cultivation in this predominantly brackish water region. Fish and *meley* are complementary to each other. As fish can also thrive in *meley* farms, the cultivator's profit can be doubled or trebled. *Meley* cultivation, in addition to conserving the environment, will enable thousands of local people, especially women, to be productively employed, thus reducing poverty in the south-west coastal region.

The CDP has proposed to provide capital infusion in the shape of large-scale micro-credit to transform some of the abandoned shrimp farms for the cultivation of *meley*. Recently some NGOs have succeeded in cultivating *meley* experimentally in the south-west coastal low land. Uttaran, an NGO, has succeeded in cultivating this marsh grass in the Khuina area. But *metapati* weaving is far from recovering from the enormous loss it suffered due to the extinction of the natural habitat for the growth of *meley*.

#### The Shitalpati: The Legendary Mat of Bengal

The *shitalpati* is popular, aesthetic in design, luxurious in its feel, and more expansive than any other mat in Bangladesh. Its use is ubiquitous—from sleeping to sitting on, as a prayer mat, as a floor mat, and as a wall hanging.

Jasim Uddin, who is said to be “the poet of the spirit and essence of Bangladesh,” refers to the *shitalpati* in *Nakshi Kanthar Math*:

“His aunt spread a *shitalpati* for him to sit upon,  
And placed before him a pot of water and a pair of wooden sandals.  
Rupa washed his feet and sat leaning comfortably on his left arm.”

Exceptionally well suited to the warm humid climate of Bangladesh, the *shitalpati* is prized for its comfort and exceptional beauty. A closer look at a *shitalpati* of the finest quality attests to the artistry and the superb skills employed to accomplish the intricacy evident in this woven work of art. It is said that the finest *shitalpati* is so silky that a snake cannot move across it, as its smoothness allows no friction to the wriggling body of the reptile, without which it can make no progress. The *shitalpati* is so soft and pliable that a large piece, 6 feet long and 4 feet wide, can easily be squeezed into a closed palm or folded into a small roll of six inches.

A relatively new design development is the use of cuttings from the *shitalpati* for embellishing bags of all varieties, pen-stands, and tabletops.

#### Regional Variations and Styles in the Shitalpati of Bangladesh

While the *shitalpati* is found almost throughout Bangladesh, the Sylhet region, Boalmari and Shatoir in Faridpur district, Jainpur of Mohanganj upazila in Netrokona

district, and Jhalakathi district are most famous for its production. Regional Variations and styles exist in the weaving of the *shitalpati* in Bangladesh. In the case of the Sylhet *shitalpati*, the weaving starts from the middle of the strips and ends by bending at the right upper most corner. In the case of the Boalmari and Jhalakathi *shitalpati*, one side of the *pati* is closed by stitching it with a red cloth. Sylhet produces the best *shitalpati* in terms of softness and finesse, closely followed by the open ended fine *shitalpati* of Boalmari and Jhalakathi.

Balaganj in Sylhet, Shatoir in Faridpur, and Tinnour of Mohanganj upazila in Netrokona are famous for the smoothest and best designed *shitalpatis*, and these *shitalpatis* are renowned for their cooling effect. The figured *shitalpatis*, made in the sylhet region and Faridpur district, are particularly famous for their superb workmanship and excellence of design. In the Sylhet region, *shitalpatis* are also decorated with beads and stripes of ivory.

#### Concluding Remark

Our appreciation of the *pati* as the predominant mat in Bangladesh and of the *shitalpati* as the regenerating mat of Bengal should begin with our adoption of the word *pati* as the synonym for the English word 'mat' and as the generic term for any kind of mat made of *murta*, *hogla*, *meley*, *nalkhagda*, or date-palm leaves. Our proposal is consistent with the general trend that the villagers in Bangladesh have already established: they refer to various kinds of mat with the word *pati* as a suffix (listed above).

Born Zinat Mahrukh Banu and Kazi Khalilur Rahman report that the *shitalpati* is on the decline because of the high cost of the stems of *murta*. They have strongly felt the utmost need for the expansion of *murta* cultivation and for the promotion of *patishilpa*. The government must take the necessary steps to enhance *murta* cultivation. But it is the responsibility of the city-dwellers to patronize *patishilpa* through greater use of *naxmi patis* and *shitalpatis* in urban life.

Bangladesh has a long, rich heritage of *patishilpa*, and its unique *patis* and weaving techniques have survived despite the introduction of modern artificial fibers. Now, with increased consumer interest in natural fibers and handcrafted products, Bangladesh's hand-woven *patis* and coconut coir mats should be promoted on a massive scale and increased demand in international markets.

Zinat Mahrukh Banu reports that the Bangladesh National Museum has collected several *shitalpatis*—one from Phulan Joy Das, one from Barindra Chandra Das, and one from Renuka Ranjan Das—from Balaganj upazila in Sylhet district. We appreciate this as a positive attitude toward this living tradition of *patishilpa*. But this museum needs to collect *shitalpatis* from Jhalakathi, Faridpur and Netrokona districts, the three other great centers of *shitalpati* weaving, for a comparative study of the regional variations and styles. The museums of Bangladesh must play a wider role in support of this living tradition. In Chapter 30 we have given concrete proposals in this regard.

Our survey, though extensive, is far from being complete. It is worth compiling a book

on *patishilpa* in Bangladesh. We propose that a survey covering all the sixty-four districts of Bangladesh be conducted. As the proposed survey requires time, money and manpower, the Bangladesh National Museum may not be able to conduct it because of its other priorities. Either a national museum of contemporary traditional art or a national institute of folklore, none of which now exists, will be appropriate to undertake a project of this kind (see Chapter 30).

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End Notes:

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6. Khogeshkiron Talukdar, *Bangladesher Lokayata Shilpakala* (Folk Art of Bangladesh), (Dhaka 1987).
7. *Ibid.*, 29.
8. *Ibid.*, 27.
9. Wakil Ahmed, *Banglar Loka-Sanskriti*, (Dhaka 1974), 56.
10. Quoted in Jasim Uddin, *Nakshi Kanthar Math*, (Kolkata Year Not Mentioned), 26.
11. Khogeshkiron Talukdar, 'Lokayata Shilpakala,' in Shamsuzzaman Khan (ed.), *Bangladesher Lokoithya* (Folklore in Bangladesh), (Dhaka 1985), 331.
12. Ashis Basu, *op. cit.*, 333.
13. Sailendra Biswas, *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary*, Bangladesh Edition (Dhaka 1992), 556.
14. Ashis Basu, *op. cit.*, 332.
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16. Mohiuddin Shiru, 'Cottage Industries of Sylhet: Bamboo and Cane,' in Sharif Uddin Ahmed (ed.), *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, (Dhaka 1999), 428-429.
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19. Zinat Mahrukh Banu, "Lokashilpa Nidarshan" Sangraha Safar: Sylhet." *Jadugahr Samachar* (News Letter), Bangladesh National Museum, Vol. 1: 2 (April-June 1999), 12.
20. Abdul Moyeed Chowdhury, *Sylheter Shitalpati*, an unpublished essay, broadcast from Sylhet Betar, 9 January 1980.
21. Jasim Uddin, *op. cit.*, 14.