

## Empowering Women Through Craft: The Impact of Madur Mat Production in Sabang, West Bengal: A Case Study

Sibnath Sarkar\*

Department of Geography, Rammohan College, Kolkata, India

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\*Corresponding Author

Sibnath Sarkar

E-mail: [sibnathsarkar@gmail.com](mailto:sibnathsarkar@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

To diagnose the socio-cultural circumstances of women establishing craft businesses, the paper aims to highlight their necessity. When it comes to empowering women business owners, local culinary traditions, handicrafts, and other forms of traditional art may be a rich source of inspiration. Even though women in emerging countries have seen tremendous gains in employment, political influence, and economic independence because of ongoing social and political-cultural changes, they still face substantial obstacles in workforce participation both in the household and outside the household. There has been little change to their conventional roles, despite ongoing progress towards gender equality in the workplace and classroom. A growing body of research also demonstrates the complex ways in which gender impacts entrepreneurial behaviour. After having a child, many women would rather start their own business than go back to a 9 to 5 job. They think that being their boss would allow them to have a better work-life balance. So, even if women have less experience with entrepreneurship and intrapreneurial activities, they nonetheless pick entrepreneurial platforms with different sets of expectations. Given this background, the present study will share the story of women entrepreneurs of Sabang, which is the main hub of the production of award-winning madur (floor mat) and received the GI tag for the same. The success of these women entrepreneurs not only increases the socio-economic conditions but also attracts other women members of society. Thus, creating a significant economic impact in the locality and surroundings.

**Keywords:** Women entrepreneurship; Madur; workforce participation; socio-economic development; GI Tag.

### 1. Introduction

Rural entrepreneurship can be seen as the new age growth potential due to its available resources and manpower at the village level (Stathopoulou et al., 2004; Jyoti et al., 2011; Ramya et al., 2024). People used to move out from their place of origin due to a lack of income-generation opportunities, but the COVID-19 pandemic showed the bitter side of this kind of migratory movement (Adhikari et al., 2023). In most of this migratory movement, the women group either stayed back at their place of origin or moved with the main earning members

of the family. In both cases, the women group hardly take part in any income generation activities. This indicates, that the gender gap always remains a matter of concern in most of the emerging countries like India (Chatterjee, 2018). Over the years, the women members' workforce participation is on the higher side and that is due to the factors of various government and local-level initiatives that help to build the confidence of the group (Agarwal and Lenka, 2018). Any kind of entrepreneurial orientation has three dimensions, viz. innovation dimension, proactive dimension, and risk-taking ability of the prospective entrepreneurs (Kyal et al., 2021). The role of

these dimensions is more relevant from the perspective of entrepreneurial orientation towards local handicraft products. Each local handicraft product has its local image which carries the brand's legacy and cultural aspects. This makes the product unique and creates a demand in the market. The women participants are taking an active role in producing and selling the products in the local market and trade fairs where they are getting the opportunity to showcase their art and culture. The risk-taking dimension can also be seen in handicraft products as they do not have free access to market and finance, which makes them vulnerable under different market conditions. As most of the time they depend on local markets and trade fairs to sell their products, these local artisans faced significant difficulties during the pandemic time (Guha et al., 2021; Guha et al., 2024). Thus, A sustainable livelihood approach to poverty reduction has emerged as a major global concern, especially in emerging and third-world nations where conventional farming is the main source of income. However, the handicraft industry has a long history of making a significant impact on people's livelihoods. Preserving the expertise and knowledge of ancient crafts is becoming an increasingly difficult task. Traditional arts and crafts made from locally sourced materials are unique expressions of a people's identity and way of life. On the other hand, as the globe becomes more interconnected, more and more products become commodities, and craftspeople face more competition on a global scale. Providing a stable income for the craftspeople who practice this age-old art form is equally crucial (Guha et al., 2022).

In India, the evolution of a craft is a direct result of the community's reaction to it. Like a frozen snapshot in time, it tells tales in tangible form, reflecting the culture of the civilization that gives rise to them. Artistic patterns and exterior ornamentations reveal religious and social behaviours. Being the birthplace of several civilizations, a few of which are found across the country, has resulted in a wide range of aesthetic preferences in the depicted art. Through the ages, patterns have changed and been passed down. People have always looked to crafts as a means of self-improvement and as a starting point for long-term job creation. We need to take a hard look at traditional crafts since they are sustainable activities (Ranjan & Ranjan, 2014). Possibilities for generating revenue within the town or one's own home using local resources are presented. As a result, the artisan's family gets more involved in the process, which grows into a communal tradition and is passed down through generations. There would be less demand for job creation in industries and other fields if craftspeople returned to their original occupations.

This article would like to initiate the work of local self-help groups of Sabang, a village situated at Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal. The group specializes in producing 'Madur' which is known as 'Mat' and award-winning artists are there who are carrying forward the legacy of this artform and involving women members of the society. The group can engage a significant number of women members and help to increase their socio-economic conditions over the period.

#### *Role of local handicrafts on women empowerment*

Rural communities rely on entrepreneurship to boost local economies, create jobs for those who want to work for themselves, and generally improve the quality of life for people living in rural areas. Women in rural and urban regions alike are considering starting their businesses to escape poverty, provide for their families, and improve their standard of living (Agarwal and Lenka, 2018). Regardless of social or other constraints, women are actively engaging in agriculture, commerce, and business. Women in rural areas face several cultural and societal constraints in India. As a result, rural India's social and economic development is hindered by the low participation of women in entrepreneurial activity. Paradoxically, women's standing in India has persisted for quite some time. In addition to having the legal ability to own property, they have also had access to professions like education, politics, and medicine. There are societal strata where women have a disproportionate influence. In recent years, women's involvement in the workforce, whether through traditional 9-to-5 jobs or more contemporary forms of self-employment, has grown. All types of women, in both urban and rural settings, experience this (Rajani, 2008). There has been a recent uptick in the number of women working in both traditionally female-dominated and more modern, non-traditional fields (Jyoti et al., 2011). Women business owners have unique challenges in starting and growing their businesses due to psychological, social, religious, cultural, and economic issues (Habib et al., 2005). There is a vast array of causes and motives for rural women to start businesses or engage in economic activities. Among the most important reasons to take out a loan are the following: the desire to improve one's standard of living, the availability of loans, positive government policies, the impact of success stories, the desire to put one's skills and abilities to use, the desire to escape one's current work environment, the certainty of one's career and family's financial future, the satisfaction of one's creative urges stemming from one's background in the family business, one's self-confidence, the inability to locate

an appropriate job, the support and guidance of family members, the need to alleviate financial hardship, and so on (Afrin et al., 2008). Thus, involvement in handicraft production activities at the household level may empower the women members as they are in a better position to make financial and household decisions. The exposure to the market also makes them understand the prospects lie with the business of handicraft sectors and its future growth trend. Proper direction and handholding are needed to make these women successful in their entrepreneurial ventures.

## 2. Methodology

Qualitative research based on the case study method is applied by the author. The author identified the study area with the help of the reports published by the Department of MSME and UNSECO jointly. The report discussed the potential market and the methods of developing 'Madur' using the raw materials available in the local market. The study area Sabang is in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal and it is one of the areas where a significant number of women members of the society are engaged in the production of 'Madur.' Most of them learnt the skills from master trainers and these trainers are well-established and award winners in this field. The participating members are all part of a self-help group and they are fulfilling the orders as received by the group. Hence, collaborative production activities are carried out by the women members of the group. The author visited the place and talked to master trainers and 5 to 6 women members engaged in the production of 'madur'. The discussion with the members helps to identify the production process of the 'madur' and its marketing activities and future growth potential.

### *Case Study: The Case of Women Empowerment through artisanal products at Sabang*

The state of West Bengal is rich in history and beautiful landscapes. An excellent example of Bengal's artistic legacy is the intangible cultural heritage of Bengal. There is an interesting combination of indigenous skill and practicality in the creation of utilitarian lifestyle goods such as date palm leaf and Sabai grass basketry, jute carpets (Dhokra), mats (Sitalpati) or Madurkathi) made of cane slips, ceramics, Kantha-spreads, and many more. The arts and crafts of Bengal provide a window into the region's rich cultural heritage, ancestral beliefs, and eco-conscious way of life. Bengali craftsmanship includes a wide variety of masks, as well as Dokra and metalwork.

Historically, Madurkathi mats used as both seating and sleeping, and mats generally played an important role in Bengali society. In the hot and humid atmosphere of West Bengal, these mats are a must-have since they absorb sweat and do not transmit electricity. Additionally, these carpets find extensive use in religious contexts. Once upon a time, when visitors came, it was customary to bring out and unfold beautiful, new Madurkathi mats. Even in urban areas, these mats were commonplace. In rural Bengal, mats are still widely used as a traditional floor covering. Although it refers to mats made from a particular kind of reed, the Bengali word madur is used interchangeably with floor mats in general. The reed known as madurkottir, or Madurkathi, is a member of the family and is used to weave madur mats, madur, or madur. An integral aspect of the rural economy, madur mat-making is a long-standing custom that revolves around the Midnapore area. Weavers from the Mahishya caste, especially women, are responsible for making the mats. A large portion of the revenue in the hamlet comes from this small sector. However, there is a crisis looming over the hand-woven mat sector right now.

Indus Valley civilization artefacts attest to the long history of mat-weaving in India. Madurkathi carpets were extensively used for a variety of reasons in classical texts such as the Atharva Veda, the Shatapatha Brahmana, and the Mahabharata. Because of the widespread belief that madurkathi mats are pure, local households would welcome visiting hermits and squatters with these mats as a place to rest their weary feet. The earliest mention of mat-weaving in the Bengal area appears in mediaeval documents. The highest quality mats were called "Masland mats," a term that came from the Persian word "masnad," meaning "throne." There were many categories of mats. Under the sponsorship of the Muslim rulers of Midnapore, the superfine kind of mats with silk weft were manufactured, giving rise to the Masland mats as we know them today.<sup>1</sup> Weavers often create ekh-rokha, do-rokha, and masland mats. Light and thin, the ekh-rokha madur is the easiest mat to weave. The weaving process begins with a straightforward bamboo-frame loom that uses cotton thread for the warp and individual reeds for the weft. The du-rokha is more difficult to make and calls for more expertise because to its double-reed weave. When compared to ekhrokha, this more substantial and thicker mat is far more convenient and comfortable. Luxury and price tag come together in Masland, a textured mat with intricate patterns. Precision and expertise are needed for weaving these mats.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.getbengal.com/details/madur-mat-art-of-bengal-a-story-of-skill-creativity-and-empowerment>

### Handicraft Cluster of Sabang

Sabang situated at Paschim Medinipur is the main hub of madur production. Around 15 blocks of West and East Medinipur are identified by the West Bengal Khadi and Village Industry Board where artisans involved in the production of madhurkhathi products are located. The government helped them by providing adequate training and market linkage so that they could maintain the product quality and able to reach a wider audience to sell their products. A Geographical Indication (GI) Tag for Madurkathi was issued to the Government of West Bengal by the Indian Patent Office on March 28, 2018, with the application number. 567, which pertains to handicrafts. This tag surely boosts the morale of the artisans involved in this production.

### Story of Women Artisans

This is a case study about two women from Sabang Village, West Midnapur, West Bengal (Sewli Das and

Mamoni Jana), the two artisans of Madur (mat). Both are housewives. They have successfully worked in this indigenous crafting for four to five years and doing well to meet their need. Before that, they were completely engaged in their home and household responsibilities, but always wanted to do something for their own. At that time, they got hands-on training from Tapas Kumar Jana, (the renowned National award winner in handicrafts), which opened a new opportunity for them. They started working and creating wonderful pieces of art. This handicraft sector is very suitable for these women because they can easily be involved in this crafting process after accomplishing their domestic liabilities and responsibilities, they can work from their homes and need not go outside. They can work whenever they want. According to them as they are earning some money, they not only support their family economically, but also empower themselves. Now they can spend money on their children's better education, their desires, etc.



Source: Author



Source: Author



### 3. Conclusion

Although there is tough competition from Madur products made of plastic, still this product has its market value and acceptance. Today, the artisans involved in the production of Madur in Sabang block are exporting their products to different parts of the World. Once, a dying art of West Bengal, now brought together around 4500 weavers who are working in this field. The initiative also helped them increase the daily wage which was once Rs.100 per day to Rs.3000 per day based on the skill level. Today, master artisans like Ashoke Jana, Gouri Jana, Sewli Das Mamoni Jana, and many more artisans transforming the lives of rural women by providing them with training as master trainers and producing products to meet local as well as international demand. They are getting support from the Khadi Board, which is providing logistic and transportation support so that they can fulfill the demand of the consumers on time.

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## Biographical Statement of Author

**Sibnath Sarkar** is currently working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography at Rammohan College.

He has over 14 years of work experience in the field of Social Studies and started his career as an academician in 2010.



**Mr. Sibnath Sarkar**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Geography  
Rammohan College  
Kolkata  
India

**E-mail:** [sibnathsarkar@gmail.com](mailto:sibnathsarkar@gmail.com)