





SHOLA

THE WONDER WOOD

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Consulate General
of the Federal Republic of Germany
Kolkata





It is my pleasure to present to you this 2nd edition of “Shola – The Wonder Wood”.

The book documents the tradition of exquisite Shola craft of Bengal as it manifested itself in a project of the German Consulate General in Kolkata in 2019. Still under the leadership of my predecessor, Dr. Michael Feiner, our goal was to contribute to the revival, restoration and revitalization of this distinguished art form.

With the climate crisis looming, it is ever so important to increase the use of natural renewable resources in a sustainable manner. Shola, seen as a substitute for ivory, can contribute to protecting the environment, this time as a material for decorations that are too often made from plastic and other artificial materials.

My thanks go to the German Federal Foreign Office for financing the project under its Cultural Preservation Programme, our project partner Contact Base (banglanatak dot com) and, last but not least, our own Susmita Mandal, without whom the project would not have been possible.

Manfred Auster
Consul General

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Contents

- Shola - The Bengal's Craft1
- Shola - The confluence of myth and reality.....10
- Malakar - The Community.....16
- Art in Motion - Tools and Processes...24
- Shola in Bengali Tradition36
- Exquisite Shola Crafts of Bengal60
- Shola - The Revival Story74



Shola

The Bengal's Craft

Shola, just the sound of the name resonates with energy and romance. Intrinsically woven into the tradition of craft, Shola is a leitmotif of culture, rituals and traditions, especially of Bengal.

The craft is an age old tradition of Bengal. It is the art of making delicate, intricate, decorative objects from the soft, supple, porous and lightweight core of the Shola stem.



Shola is an annual aquatic herb which grows in the wild, in marshy, waterlogged areas. The biological name of the Shola plant is *Aeschynomene aspera*. Shola is an eco-friendly, biodegradable, durable and renewable resource. In Bengal it is more than just a plant; it is a partner in Bengal's cultural journey.

Shola used to grow in abundance but nowadays, due to lack of marshy areas, cultivation has largely been restricted to the districts of South 24 Parganas and Cooch Behar. Shola is cultivated as a cash crop under 4 - 5 feet of water during the months of June - July. Harvesting takes place during the months of September - October. Artisans collect the raw materials from the local markets. High quality Shola from Bangladesh is also available in some of these districts.



Ultadanga Haat of Kolkata, Munshirhaat of Howrah and Pukuria Haat of South 24 Parganas districts are the markets for raw materials of Shola craft.



Shola is used for making ornate head-gears for brides and grooms. Garlands, animal and bird figurines, dolls, images of gods and goddesses, elephant-howdahs, peacock-boats, palanquins, flowers and various kinds of crowns are also made.



Bengal possesses extraordinary diversity of Shola craft. From the utilitarian and decorative to the artistic and aesthetic, the Shola craft is both a benign and a divine presence in the lives of those in Bengal.





Shola

The confluence of myth and reality

From the realms of the real to the depths of the surreal, seldom has a plant traversed the universe of the gods and the mere mortals with such ease, weaving itself, leaving its presence in mythology, craft, art and most importantly, in the magnificence of creations curated by mankind.



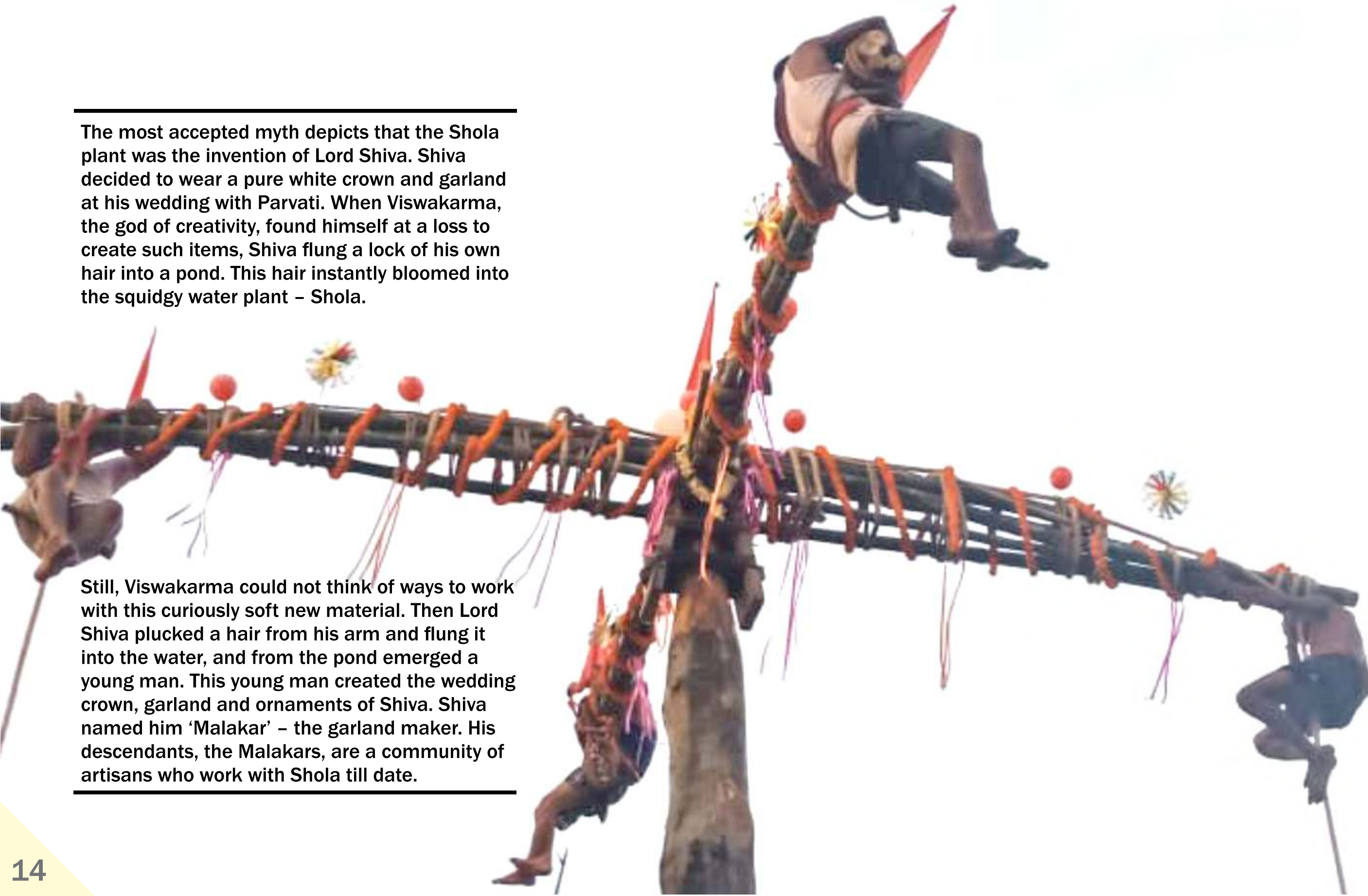


The origin of Shola steeped in mythology, dates back to history often forgotten. One of the earliest stories has its origin in a folk song on Manasa, the serpent goddess where Shola was referred to as Kuhila. The story goes that when Kuhila, a dancer in the court of Lord Indra, fell in love with Banasur, a thousand-armed Asura king, Indra cursed her and converted her into a plant. She was told that only with the touch of the Malakars, a community, the curse would be lifted and she would regain her purity and be worshipped forever.



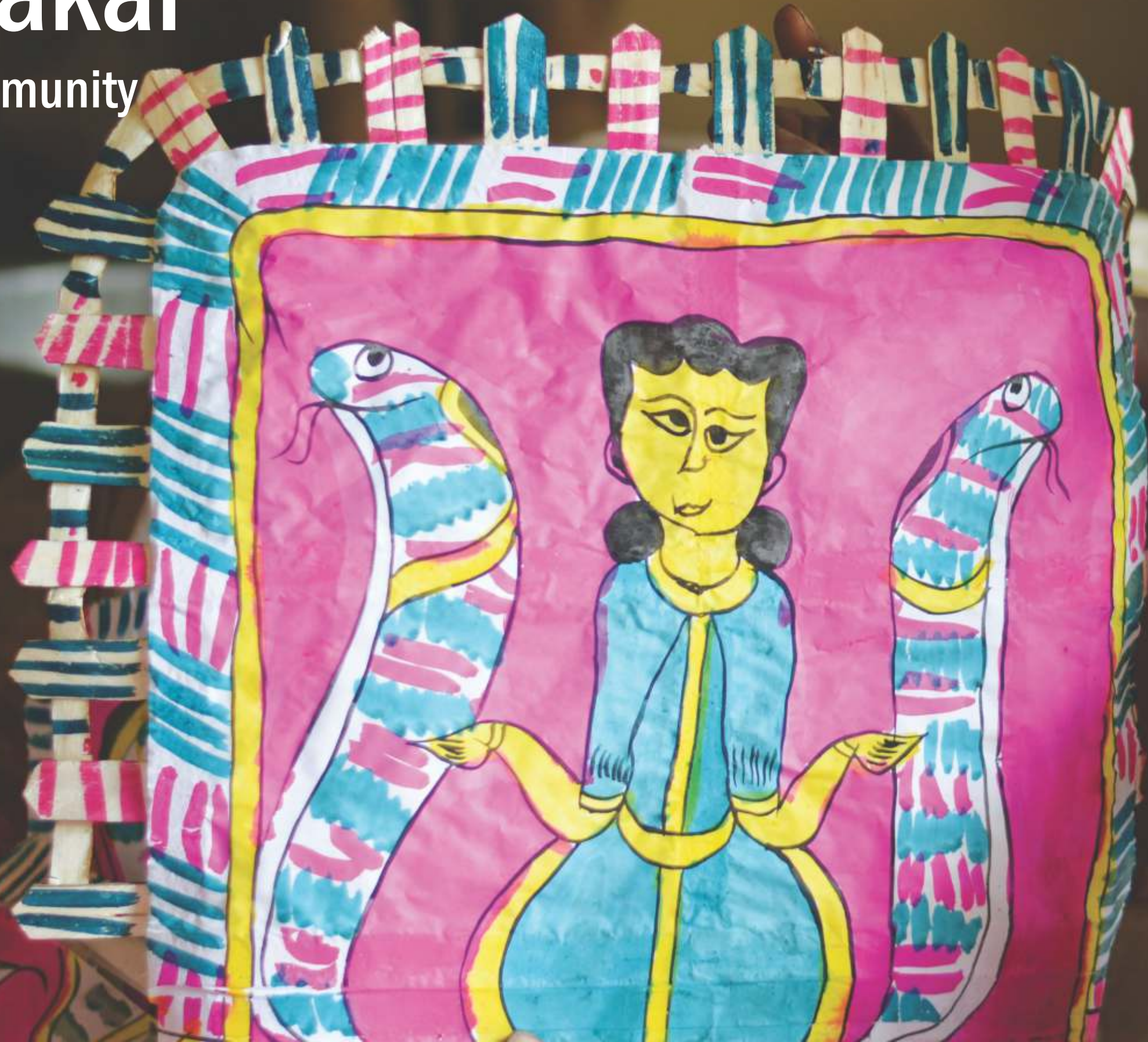
The most accepted myth depicts that the Shola plant was the invention of Lord Shiva. Shiva decided to wear a pure white crown and garland at his wedding with Parvati. When Viswakarma, the god of creativity, found himself at a loss to create such items, Shiva flung a lock of his own hair into a pond. This hair instantly bloomed into the squidgy water plant – Shola.

Still, Viswakarma could not think of ways to work with this curiously soft new material. Then Lord Shiva plucked a hair from his arm and flung it into the water, and from the pond emerged a young man. This young man created the wedding crown, garland and ornaments of Shiva. Shiva named him 'Malakar' – the garland maker. His descendants, the Malakars, are a community of artisans who work with Shola till date.



Malakar

The Community





The community of garland makers has given the Shola plant the recognition that it has today.

There are different views about the community. One view is that the present-day Malakars belong to the Nabhashakha group of artisans, which includes nine communities i.e. Kumbhakar, Karmakar, Malakar, Kagsakar, Samkhakar, Swarnakar, Sutradhar, Chhitrakar and Tantubaya.





According to Brahma Vaivarta Purana, the first Malakar was the progeny of God Viswakarma and Ghrithachi, a cursed Gopi girl.

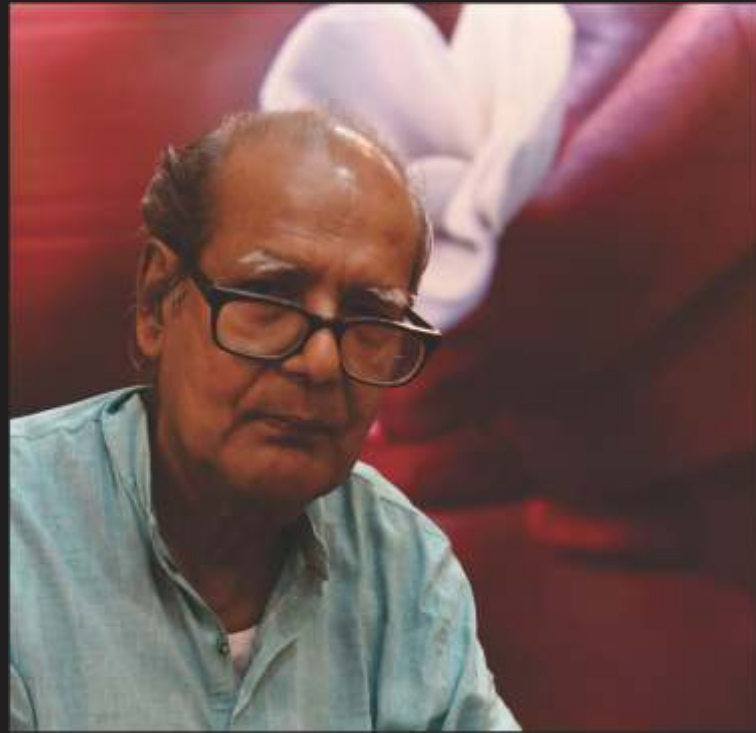
In the Brihad Dharma Purana, the Malakars are referred to as the descendants of a Brahmin man and a Vaishya woman.



Another story says that some Brahmins, who later became known as Malakars, made a garland of Shola and gave it to Lord Krishna. Most of the Malakars worship Lord Shiva and consider themselves as his descendants.

Truly, there would have been no Shola art without the Malakars. They are synonymous with each other. Malakars are the makers and the maestros.

Maestros



Ananta Malakar

Ananta Malakar of Kirnahar is one of the senior most Shola artists and a stalwart among all. Inducted into the art by his family, he came to Kolkata in the 1960s, where he learnt from the artists of Kumartuli and Kalighat. He received the Presidential Award in 1966 for his outstanding creation of a Shola Saraswati idol. In 1970, he got the National Award for his commendable work in Shola. In 1970s the Shilpaguru awardee Ananta Malakar went to the USA and Russia to showcase his work.

Kamal Malakar

Kamal Malakar is a renowned Shola craft artist from Surul village of Birbhum. After his education in Design from Kala Bhavana of Visva-Bharati he started to work on the traditional Shola craft. At present he has a Shola craft unit and regularly conducts training workshops for the younger craftspeople. Apart from cities in India his craft has been showcased and appreciated in Germany, Italy, Norway, Oman and the USA.



Samir Kumar Saha

Samir Kumar Saha, a Presidential Award winner, is working with Shola for over 45 years. He has his unit at Jiaganj in Murshidabad district. He has showcased his work across the country and also in Brazil and China. He started at a very young age with the help of his elder brother.



Sandip Biswas

Sandip Biswas is a National Award winner who has been involved with this craft for the past 30 years. He makes models with intricate carvings which carry on the ivory legacy of Murshidabad.

Ashish Malakar, Pradip Malakar, Prasad Kumar Ghosh, Sujay Kanti Pal, Ujjal Ghosh, Prabir Malakar, Bhuban Mahar Gorai and Kumkum Malakar are some of the other distinguished Shola craft artists of Bengal.

These artists are maestros. Their village may be their universe, but the universe is also their village, as they and their works of art touch distant shores, taking a piece of Bengal and India with them.

Art in Motion

Tools and Processes





In a work of art, the tools and the user meet and their confluence produces exquisite creations. The tools used are sharp edged knives of different sizes and shapes, locally called Kath. With the Kath the Shola craft artist can create a visual delight.



Boro Chowra Kath is used to peel the brownish skin of a Shola stick. This knife is also used to make Shola rolls by moving a Shola stick in a circular motion.



Boro Lomba Kath is used to make Kadam. With this knife fine drizzled cuts are made on a Shola stick.





Chhoto Majhari Kath is used for sculpting a Shola stick into different shapes and figures.



Soru Chhoto Kath looks like a scalpel and is used to make intricate designs. This is mostly used by the artists of Birbhum and Murshidabad districts.

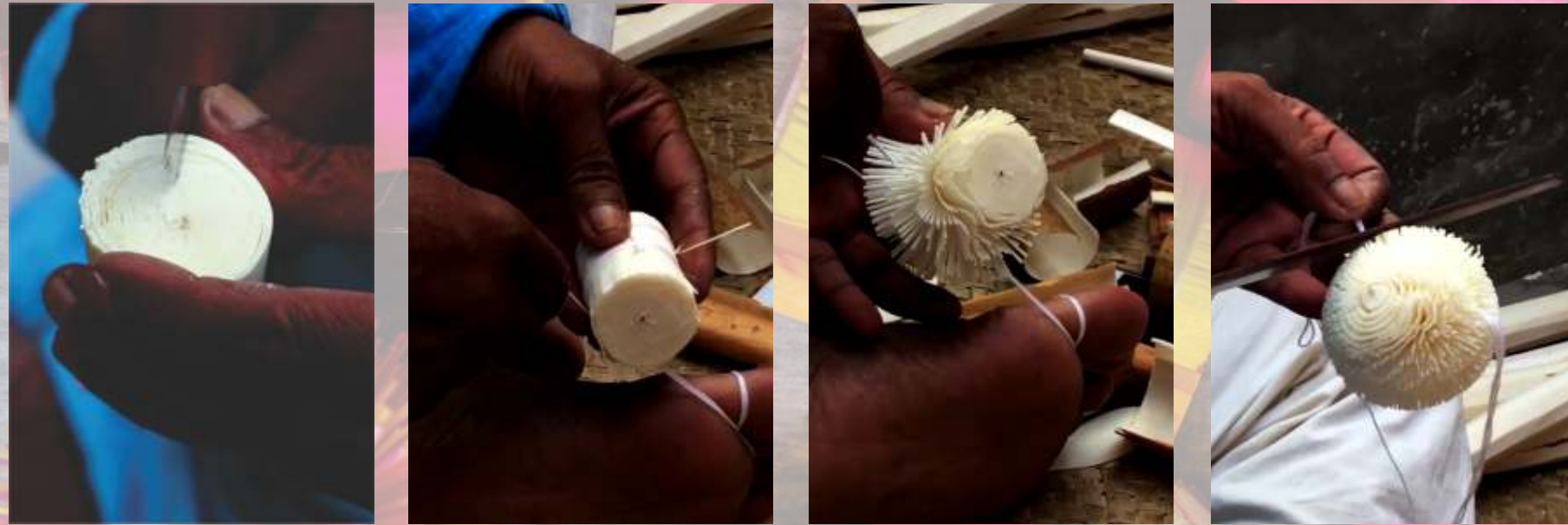




The processing starts with the peeling off the brownish bark of a dried Shola stem.



The white inner layers are gently peeled away while moving the stick in a circular motion. The length of a Shola sheet depends on the width of the stick.



Some flowers like Kadam are made out of a single piece of Shola stick. The stick is cut into half and then is finely drilled. Thereafter a thin string is tied between the slits and pulled to form a Kadam.



Shola sticks are used to make the structures of models and figurines. Sticks are shaped and carved as per the design. Like in clay modeling, both the processes of addition and subtraction are used while carving a Shola model. In most cases the decorations and detailing are added on the carved structure. Shola leaves are often used to have a smoother finish.

Shola in Bengali Tradition





Topor and Sithimukut

In a Bengali Hindu marriage Topor and Sithimukut, special headgears made of Shola, are worn by the groom and the bride. The pure white nature of Shola is regarded auspicious and a sign of serenity.



Kadam

The Kadam flower is traditionally believed to bring happiness and joy. Kadam flowers made of Shola are hung in many Bengali households, especially during religious rituals.

Sholar Saaj

Adorning and decorating the gods and goddesses are synonymous with Sholar Saaj – the traditional ornaments made of Shola.







Chandmala

Chandmala is a special type of Shola decoration that is mainly used for religious ritual like worshipping Goddess Durga and others. During the festival of Durgapuja, each day a different type of Chandmala is used with particular colors and decorations, relating to the myth of Durga and her visit to earth.

During the Durga Puja, on Saptami the goddess is offered with a colourful Chandmala. In Astami there must be pinch of red in it and during Sandhi Puja the Chandmala is always red, which symbolizes Rudra Rasa. After the great battle with Mahisasura to signify the calmness and solidarity in the form of Siddhidhatri - the wealth giver, a pure white Chandmala is offered on Navami.





Manasar Chali

Manasar Chali or Manjush made of Shola is used to worship the serpent goddess Manasa during the season of monsoon. The indigenous communities, who have their origins at Rangpur in Bangladesh and are presently settled in the North Bengal, are making this particular craft from Shola for the folklore based rituals.





Saitol

In North Bengal the indigenous community turns to folk goddess Saitori during life changing moments like a marriage or birth of a child. This worship is done with Saitol, a ritualistic product made of Shola.





Mashan

Mashan is a spirit worshipped by the Rajbanshi community in the districts of Cooch Behar and Alipurduar. The community believes that the Mashan is the protector of the region. Some assumptions say that Mashan is a form of Lord Shiva and it has similarities with Bhairava.



Mashan has different forms and it is a protector both on land and in water.

Joluya Mashan is related with water, it has a sole fish at its mound. Bhera Mashan is kept beside the road to protect those on the road.

Sur Mashan is headless and has eyes on the chest and when angry he brings devastation.

As Mashan, made of Shola is not supposed to remain inside a house, the Shola artists make the models only by order. Mashan is also said to be associated with Totemism.





Shola Mask

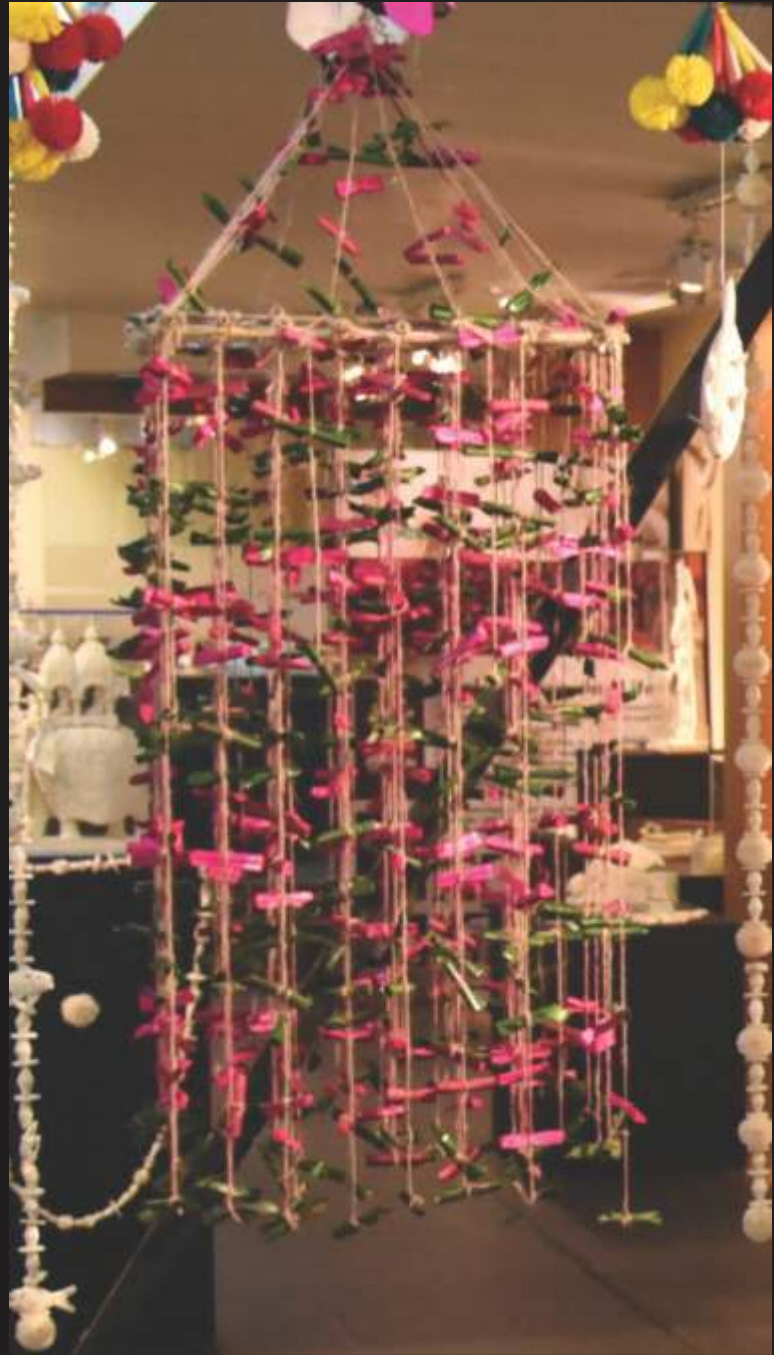
In the villages of Dinajpur district the folklores and local beliefs are quite prominent even today. The masks made of Shola are used as a symbol of human head and are offered to Goddess Kali in the local temples to appease her and bring in good fortune.



Raash Phool

Followers of Lord Krishna celebrate Raash Purnima, on a special full moon day.

Special Shola decorations like flowers, trees and birds made for this occasion are called Raash Phool, Raash Gachh and Raash Pakhi respectively.



64 Jhara

According to mythology Yoginis are deities of Tantrism and there are 64 Yoginis who are worshipped by the Shakta sect. During this worship, 64 Jhara is used. This ritualistic product is made of coloured Shola pieces tied in strings and all the strings are hung together.

Exquisite Shola Crafts of Bengal



Ivory Legacy

Murshidabad has a grand legacy of ivory craftsmanship. After the restriction on usage of ivory, the artists replaced the material with Shola. Their fine workmanship brings out Shola products with intricate designs and of high decorative value. Howdah Hati, Mayurpankhi Nouka being the most common of the lot. Initially the models are carved out from the Shola sticks and then by the process of subtraction, details are crafted to make an intricate piece of art.



Architectural Marvels



The decorative architectural replicas are generally made by the Shola artists of Malda district.

Shola Flowers

Delicate Shola flowers, both white and coloured, are made in abundance in South 24 Parganas district.



Making Flowers

The flower makers use Shola leaves. They make rolls by adding two or three leaves and then by diagonally holding the knife cut in drizzles for giving the effect of the flower petals. The flower petals are also cut and tied together to make flower in another process.



Puppetry

The tradition of puppetry has been imbibed in the culture of Bengal. At present most of the puppeteers, who use puppets made of Shola, are located in different villages in Nadia district, especially in village Muragachha. Here the puppeteers themselves make the puppets. Shola sticks are stuck together in a bundle and left to dry under the sunlight. The face and the body of a puppet are carved from two separate Shola bundles. Hands are separately made and attached later to the body to make these movable.



Shola Toys of Bengal



The artists of Alipurduar district make attractive and uncommon toys from Shola.

Shola

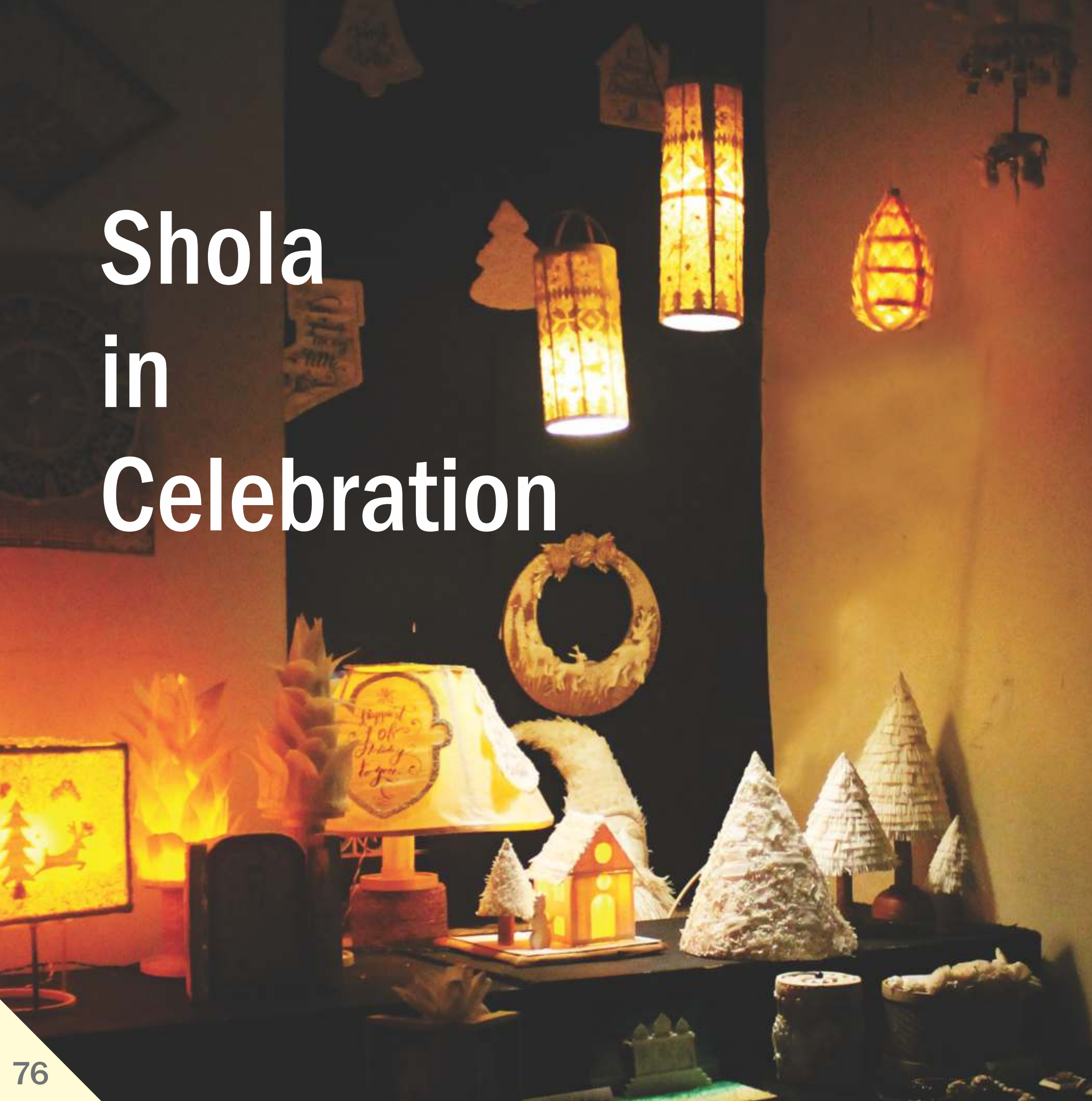
The revival story

The exquisite tradition of Shola craft of Bengal faces the threat of extinction. Very few surviving expert artisans, lack of interest of younger generation in fine craftsmanship, stagnant and seasonal market for typical Shola craft decorations, low value products are the main reasons behind the near extinction of this fine craft tradition of Bengal.

The revival of Shola craft engages in the process of exploring new possibilities, while reaching out to the unexplored world of innovation and generating awareness about the beauty of the craft form that has been a legacy of Bengal.



Shola in Celebration



Shola has a strong association with celebration and festivities. Wall décor, Christmas tree and decorations, wreath made of Shola are some of the new avenues of expression.





Shola in Fashion and Lifestyle

Being pure white Shola reflects a combined flavor of ethnic tradition and modern fashion. Fashion accessories made of Shola are both stylish and attractive.



The Sholapith Helmet is a light weight sun helmet covered with a particular type of fabric. Later this particular style of hat became associated with the colonial oppression as the British wore the 'Shola Topi' (hat) to beat the tropical weather, but it was slowly abandoned. Newly designed and developed Shola hats and fascinators are fast becoming fashion statements.



Sleek and smart hair accessories are made with Shola – barrettes, side combs, ribbons, hair brooches and bride veils.





The influence of Shola, wraps itself around the lives of Bengalis. The crafts of Shola has been given new forms as decorative lifestyle items.





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