

स्वर्ण तृण

The story of golden grass- sikki

Craft Documentation by
Muskaan

Guide
Swasti Singh Ghai



राष्ट्रीय डिजाइन संस्थान
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF DESIGN





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Sponsored by
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I would like to pay my sincere gratitude to NID for giving me this opportunity, Ms Setika, executive director of Parivartan for sponsoring this project and introducing me to this wealthy adobe of knowledge.

I am very thankful to villagers and craftpersons who cooperated and were gracious to include me in their otherwise busy schedule and willingly support me in field work with enthusiasm.

The project couldn't be completed without the effort and co-operation from Parivartan members, Mr. Sanjiv, Ms Setika, Mr. Satish, Mr. Ravi, Mr Avinash, Mrs Rupa and also the crafts people Mrs Rajwati, Mrs Pashpati Devi, Mrs Kushmita devi.

Mrs Swasti Singh Ghai, my guide has played a crucial role in step- by- step guidance right from the pre field study to the commencement of this document. This project of craft documentation has given me a platform to broaden my horizon and enhance my subtle sagacity not only in the field of traditional craft but also the immense knowledge of the lifestyle catering to the people involved in doing this rich tradition, to understand the creative genius of craft processes, dignity of human labour and dedicated yet simple life of the maers.





Preface

While we are surrounded by craft in some form or the other, we sometimes fail to see the potential for artistry in seemingly “mundane” materials. This stems from being conditioned to expect craft to only be made from “good materials”. When it was time to pick a topic of research for the Craft Documentation course as part of the B.Des. programme in Textile Design at the National Institute of Design (NID), chose Sikki (grass basketry from Bihar’s Siwan district precisely to shatter the myth of these “good materials”. Over the past century, all kinds of basket making traditions have declined and reduced to merely decorative items, symbolic of “handmade” and “natural”. What was once a local solution for fulfilling various storage and containing needs— a need that stands core to daily life and long-duration storage, has changed to become a mere alternative. This has happened for various reasons, some of the prominent ones being the introduction of mass production and other alternative materials such as steel and plastic. Despite this, it is important to understand the making

and practice of traditions, held collectively by a group of people to understand creativity at a collective level, appreciate the ingenious solutions arrived at through centuries of working with local materials and to also gain insights on how cultures manifest through people’s creations.



Stone age Egyptian basket- 5000 BC





Parivartan Campus, Siwan

It is interesting to notice the resilience of the sikki tradition, which has withstood the challenge of times and still continues to be practiced by women in rural parts of Bihar. In addition to NID, I had support from Parivartan, the Bihar-based NGO that commissioned this documentation of Sikki basketry in Siwan district. Parivartan has been working towards rural development in sectors such as craft, livelihood, education, women's empowerment, agriculture, community theatre and sports in Siwan district since 2011. It operates in 36 villages across eight Panchayats of Siwan to foster "organic and sustainable" socioeconomic and cultural growth in the region. The field research is conducted in the summer break after the fourth semester. In order to plan for the fieldwork, a proposal for the study


was prepared, based on secondary research at NID, by referring to the published sources, unpublished craft documents and government and other reliable websites. I conducted a field visit in the Siwan district of Bihar. There I visited five prominent centres of Sikki basketry—Santhu, Narayanpur, Sikiya, Banthu, Miya Ke Bhatkan—over a period of 20 days. Of these, Santhu and Narayanpur displayed the highest occurrence of the craft. Hence, this document focuses on these two villages. In the field, I used a range of research methods in order to acquire information and understanding at the level of processes and people's impressions of their own work. For the daily schedule, used fly-on-the-wall technique. I also conducted structured informal interviews of the women practitioners.




Women Discussing issues of village



 Agriculture

 Education

 Women Empowerment

 Community Theatre

 Community Sports

 Livelihoods

 Crafts



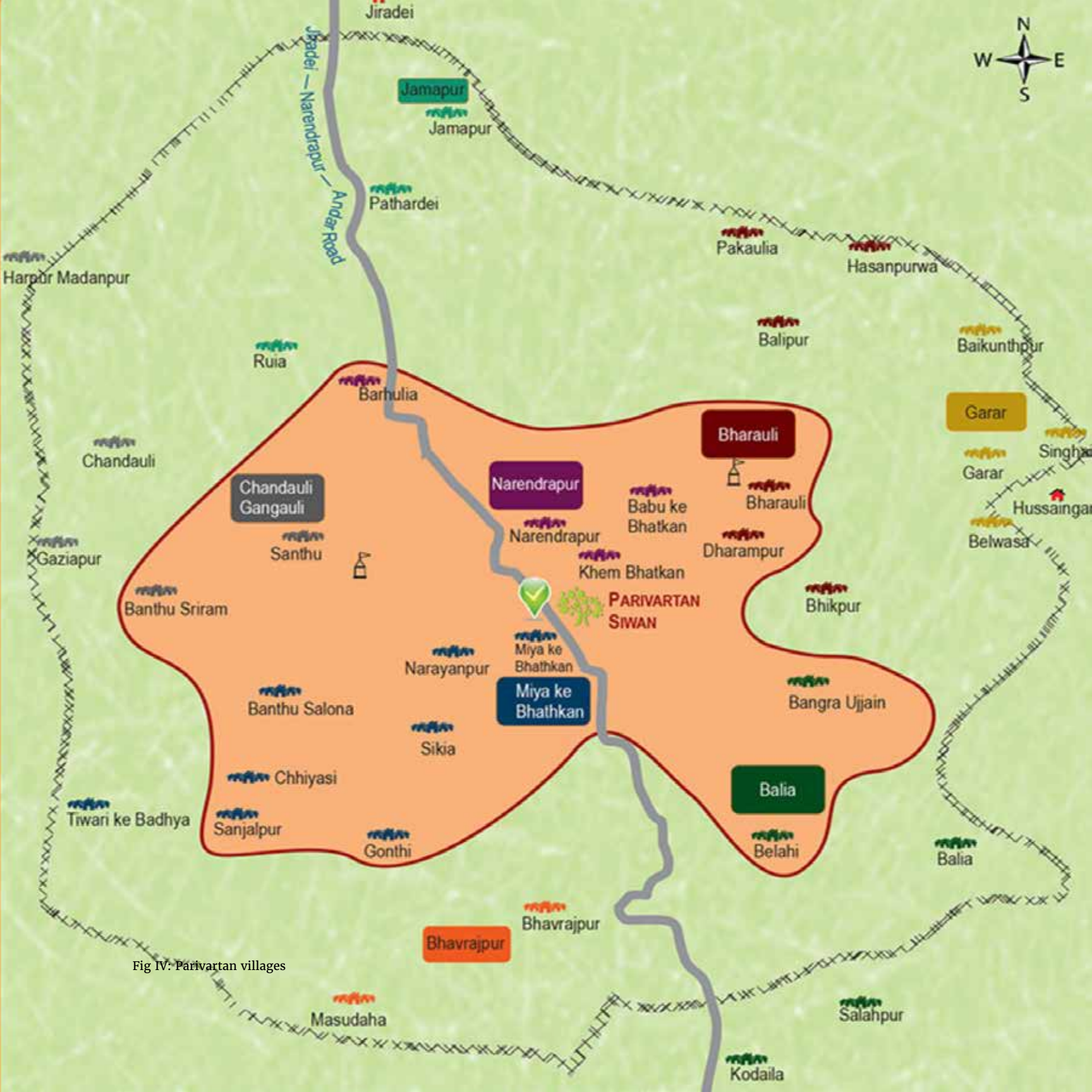


Fig IV: Parivartan villages

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Fig 1.1 : A *Moonj* basket made by Tharus which is very reminiscent in the form of the baskets prepared by Mexicans.

Introduction

Nature has taught man the beautiful art of integrating materials to create objects which provide him with comfort in his daily existence. The weaving of nests by birds, the crisscross textures formed by branches, leaves and twigs, the intermingling of marshy grasses and reeds, surely brought to the mind of man the immense possibilities within the reach of his fingers.

Historically, people's basic needs were found to be fulfilled, often with ingenious use of locally available materials. With regards to the need for storing items for long duration and to contain a variety of things, to differentiate items, baskets of all shapes and sizes were made by people across the world, with the use of a wide variety of locally available linear materials, often with techniques which have been as old as the Neolithic times. Basketry, like pottery, was among the earliest of man's creation.

Nature's own materials needed no alchemy, chemistry or the fashioning of tools and trappings to produce them. These linear materials have been leaves, grasses, creepers, leather strips etc.



Native American coiled pots



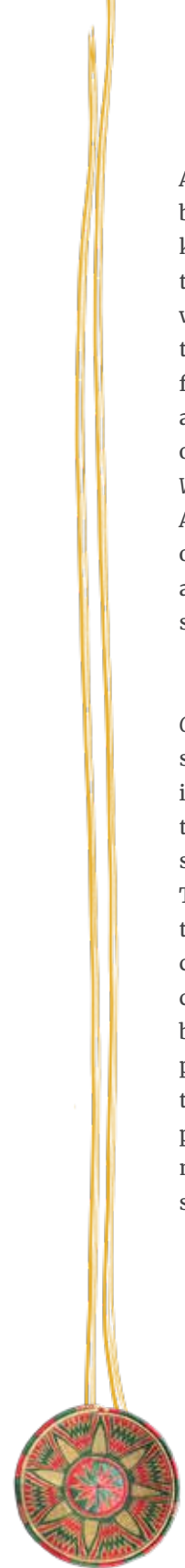
And these container/baskets were given a volume by using many techniques such as coiling, braiding, knotting, weft twining etc. In India, one finds most of the tribal communities have inherited such traditions where the raw materials are mostly forest based. Among the agricultural communities, the by-products of the farming process and reeds around the fields have served as the raw materials for making such containers. Some of the items created appear bare and functional, like the *Waggu* woven mats of Kashmir or the cane backpacks in Arunachal. On other occasions, when ritual or festive occasions demanded it, these items received more time and attention through detailed patterning and finish, such as seen in *madur* mats of Bengal.

Wheat stalks used to make baskets called *Changeri* in Haryana; Punjab is famous for its sturdy spirally built baskets; a wide variety of willow basketry is carried out in Srinagar the more functional types. And the multicoloured baskets of Uttrakhand qualify for the second type of creations- expressive with patterning. These craft items reflect the craft persons' ingenuity in the handling of simple humble raw materials and their creativity in the aesthetic and purposeful shaping of the craft objects, uniquely combining utilitarian aspects with beauty. It is this intimacy with materials and the crafts-person's perseverance with processes that mark these traditions with a uniqueness that many of the industrial processes have not been able to replicate, yet the basket maker is one of the few artisans who, because of the very simplicity of material has remained fairly low in status.

Craft, by definition, used to mean handmade, in the pre-industrial times. It often includes both the utilitarian and the artistic. Today, craft is created both by hand and using machines. However, what has not changed is the skill-set required to be a crafts-person.

Similarly, craft has also remained a reservoir of collective knowledge—the way in which knowledge is distributed and shared among members of a community—and tacit skills—which can be learnt, but not taught verbally.

Growing up in Bihar, I often saw women sitting outside their homes in the sun on winter mornings, making beautiful baskets out of reeds. These baskets and their makers fascinated me then. They continue to fascinate me. Made using what were essentially weeds that grow alongside rice, these epitomize the saying that “good materials are a myth” (Pye, David. *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*: David Pye, Cambridge: U, 1968. Print). The reeds transcend their muddy origins and individual fragility to become sturdy yet elegant containers of people's rituals, customs, emotions and other more tangible items.





Waggu woven mats of Kashmir



Spiral basket Punjab



Madur mats, West Bengal



Willow basket- Kashmir





Women using Sikki baskets for storing grains

In Siwan, as in many parts of rural India, local grasses, leaves and even twigs are painstakingly collected by both men and women who recognize the usefulness of what nature around them offers. A variety of utility-based household products are made by women with a natural instinct for eco-friendly alternatives to synthesize items that are massproduced in factories. These articles become part of their lives at no cost to themselves or the environment. Unlettered women easily slip into their traditional roles as preservers of the environment and creators of beautiful things by using raw material that is biodegradable, natural, organic and light, to make utility items and baskets for everyday needs.



Traditional Sikki Basket






Different types of grasses growing in village



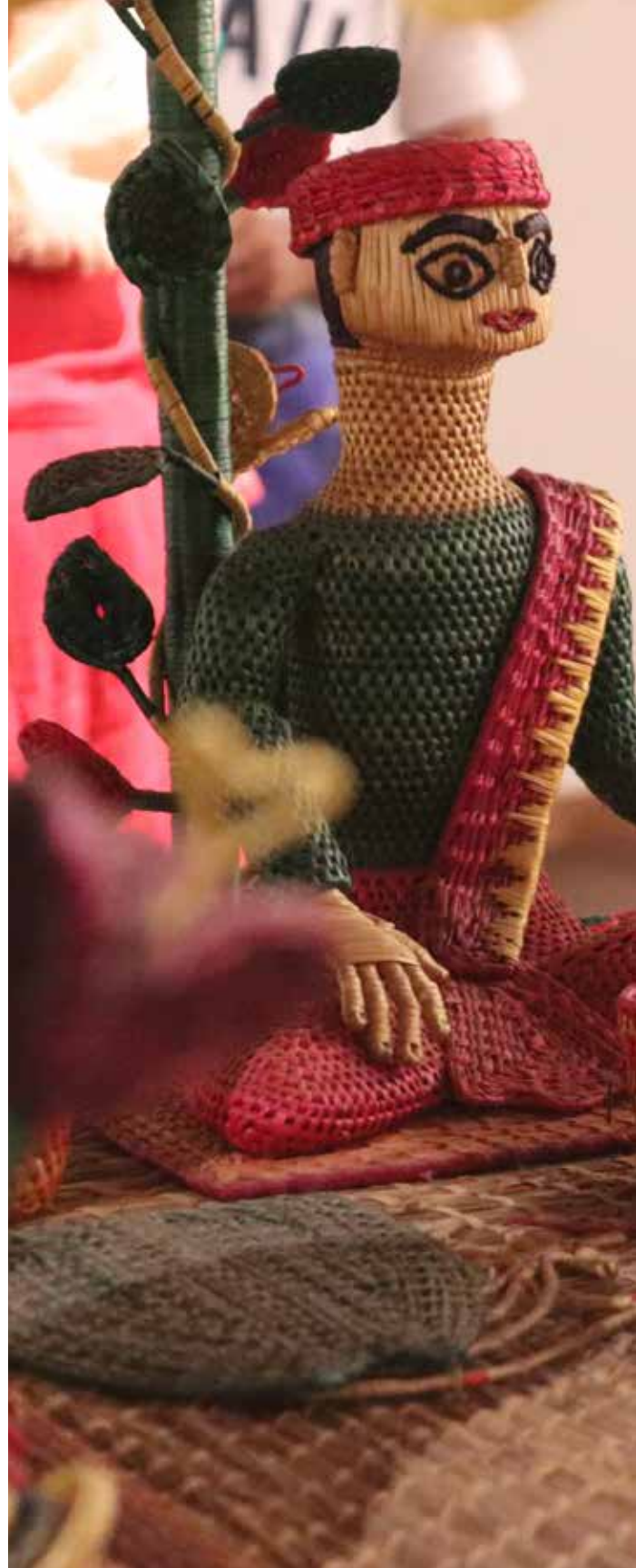
The women of Santhu and Narayanpur village in northern Bihar make intricately coiled baskets using grass which have come to be known as Sikki baskets. *Sikki* basketry gets its name from the golden inner part (*sikki*) of the *khar* and *munj* grass. *Khar* (known as golden grass) and *munj* grow wild in the marshy wasteland during the monsoon and is harvested in October. The grass is split with the teeth, soaked and dyed in different colours and coiled into baskets that are used as containers for storing flour, food grains and other dry food items. The tight coils make them waterproof and long-lasting. Striking designs such as stylized flowers, geometric motifs and famous quotes serve to identify individual baskets.

These largely circular sikki baskets, with large mouths and convex bottoms, are variously known as *Daliya*, *Dalawa*, *Dehri* and *Mauni*.





These baskets were so ingrained to daily life in old times that they formed a significant part of a girl's dowry. Village women still continue to make these baskets for their daughter's wedding, though today, they serve more of a ritualistic function rather than only based on us. According to local tradition, the bride takes some with her, laden with grain, sweets and other gifts to her marital home. It is likely that peasants, wishing to imitate the *zamindars'* dowries, which included elephants and horses, got some satisfaction out of this custom. The peasant women lovingly created these forms in the grass, seeking to compensate for their daughters' otherwise limited dowry. A young bride is judged for her imagination and skill by the various sikki articles she carries with her to her groom's house.





Three Dimensional Forms made from sikki grass to depict wedding scene



Idol of Radha and Krishna made from Sikki

While *sikki* basketry has thrived in Siwan, Madhubani remains the most famous centre for this craft. With government encouragement, Madhubani women have developed *sikki* craft further, and now make exquisite sculpturesque forms based on the *Geeta Govinda*. Apart from trays and caskets for storing grains, clothes, spices, trinkets or nuts, two-dimensional figures of deities, elephants, snakes, fish, birds, and flowering trees with figures standing below, all are rendered in the folk image with a wonderful sense of expression which is unique among the *sikki* makers. Even while this tradition has continued over centuries, each piece has an appearance which is both highly individualistic and original, indicating the vitality of the tradition as it practised.

The objective of this study was to uplift the craft community and its position in society through understanding the social and economic dimension of rural society in general and crafts community in particular. Understand the relevance of an NGO as a catalyst in social welfare and inclusive growth. Owing to the same, an opportunity to work for the community was my main motivation behind choosing this particular cluster and field assessment.





bihar
बिहार museum
संग्रहालय

Methodology

Secondary sources such as books, websites and existing craft documents provided limited information on the basket-making clusters in Bihar, and the techniques and raw materials used there. I made a proposal based on these secondary sources at NID.

I began the primary research with informal, unstructured interviews with women working with Parivartan who knew how to make the baskets. As I progressed, I also used descriptive, qualitative and empirical methods of research. A structured interview with museum curators at the Bihar Museum provided a bigger picture of the craft practice in the state.

However, unstructured interviews remained at the core of my research. Such interviews with many women and their families in two basket-making villages—Santhu and Naranpur—helped me understand about the tradition and its sociocultural value.



Unstructured interview



Only women weave baskets in this region. I observed their daily schedule and the time spent in basketry and mapped the caste distribution in the villages to better understand the socioeconomic condition of the women involved in the craft. Qualitative and quantitative analyses helped to study the productivity and skill of the crafts-person, track the growth cycle of the reed, and map the origin of other resources like tool and dyes.

I documented my research and findings using photos, videos, audio recordings, illustrations of different techniques, and case studies. While the fly-on-the-wall technique allowed me to observe the rituals and their importance, practising the craft gave me a better understanding of the techniques.



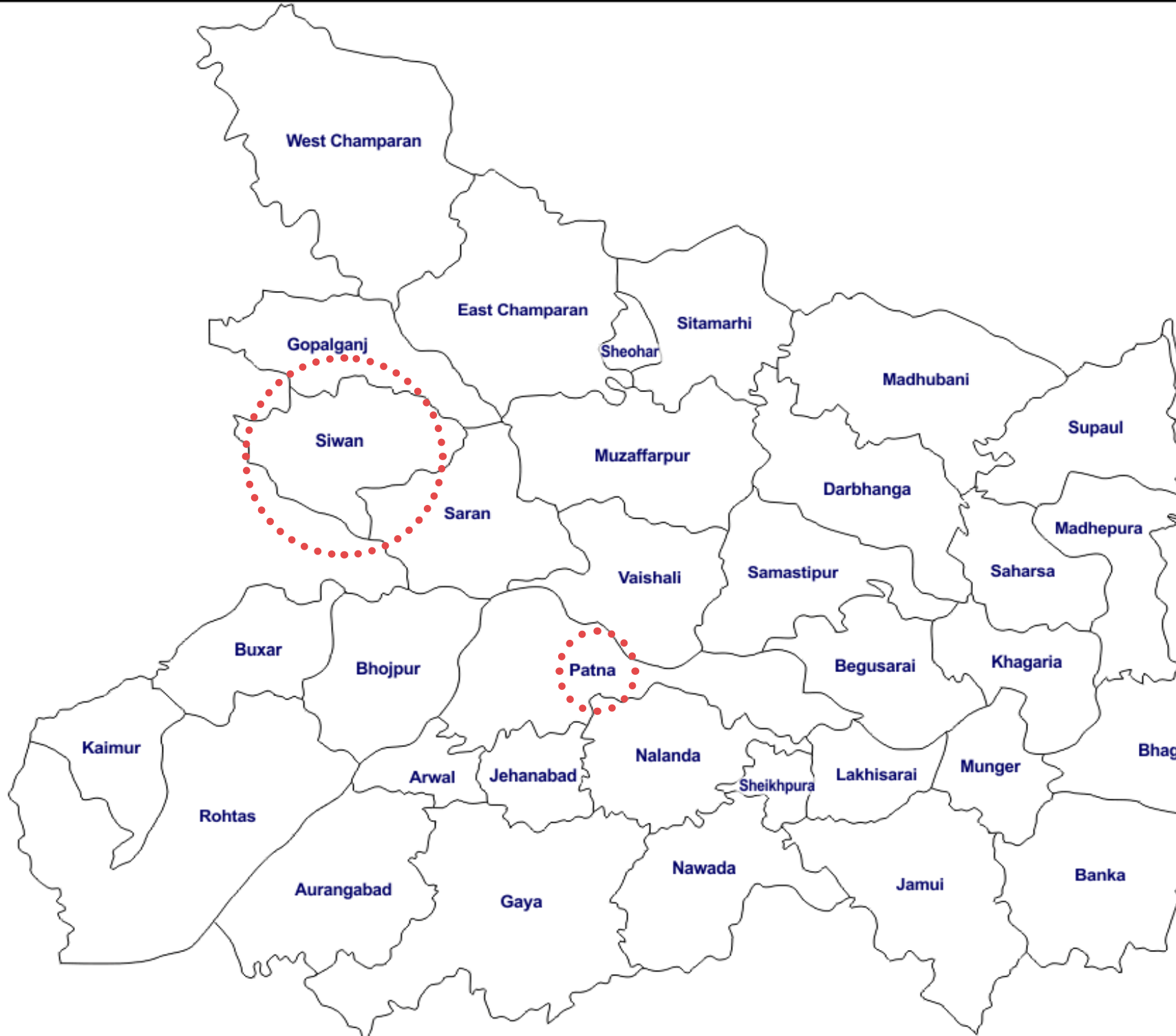


The Place





Fig 2.1 : Village Narayanpur



Map of Bihar



2.1 Bihar

2.1.1 History

Bihar is a state in eastern India. It is contiguous with Uttar Pradesh to its west, Nepal to the North, West Bengal to the East, with Jharkhand to the South. The name Bihar is believed to be derived from the word 'Vihara' which means the Buddhist Monastery.

Bihar is known to have a rich history. Patliputra, once the great ancient capital of Magadha Empire, holds the uninterrupted glory of 1000 years from 500 B.C.. Many great rulers have lived here. Bihar is the "Karmbhumi" of Buddha and Mahaveer.



Bodh Gaya



2.1.2 Typography, Climate, Rainfall

Bihar has a diverse climate. Its temperature is subtropical in general, with hot summers and cold winters. The average temperature of Bihar in summer is 34°C and in winter it is 10°C. Monsoon starts around late June which continues till the end of September. The maximum rainfall in the district comes from the southwest monsoon.

The Bihar plain is unequally split by the river Ganges, which flows from west to east. Bihar is a vast stretch of a fertile plain. It is drained by the Ganga River, including its northern tributaries Gandak and Koshi, the,

originating in the Nepal Himalayas and the Bagmati originating in the Kamdhenu Valley that regularly flood parts of the Bihar plains. Common trees in Bihar include *Sal, Bahera, Arjun, Asan, Mahua, Salai, Paisar* etc.

Bihar has high agriculture production as 80% of the states' population is employed in agriculture. The maximum production of lychee in India occurs in Bihar. Rice, wheat, and maize are the major cereal crops and sugar cane and jute are two other major cash crops of Bihar.



Pond in village Narendrapur



Nilgai

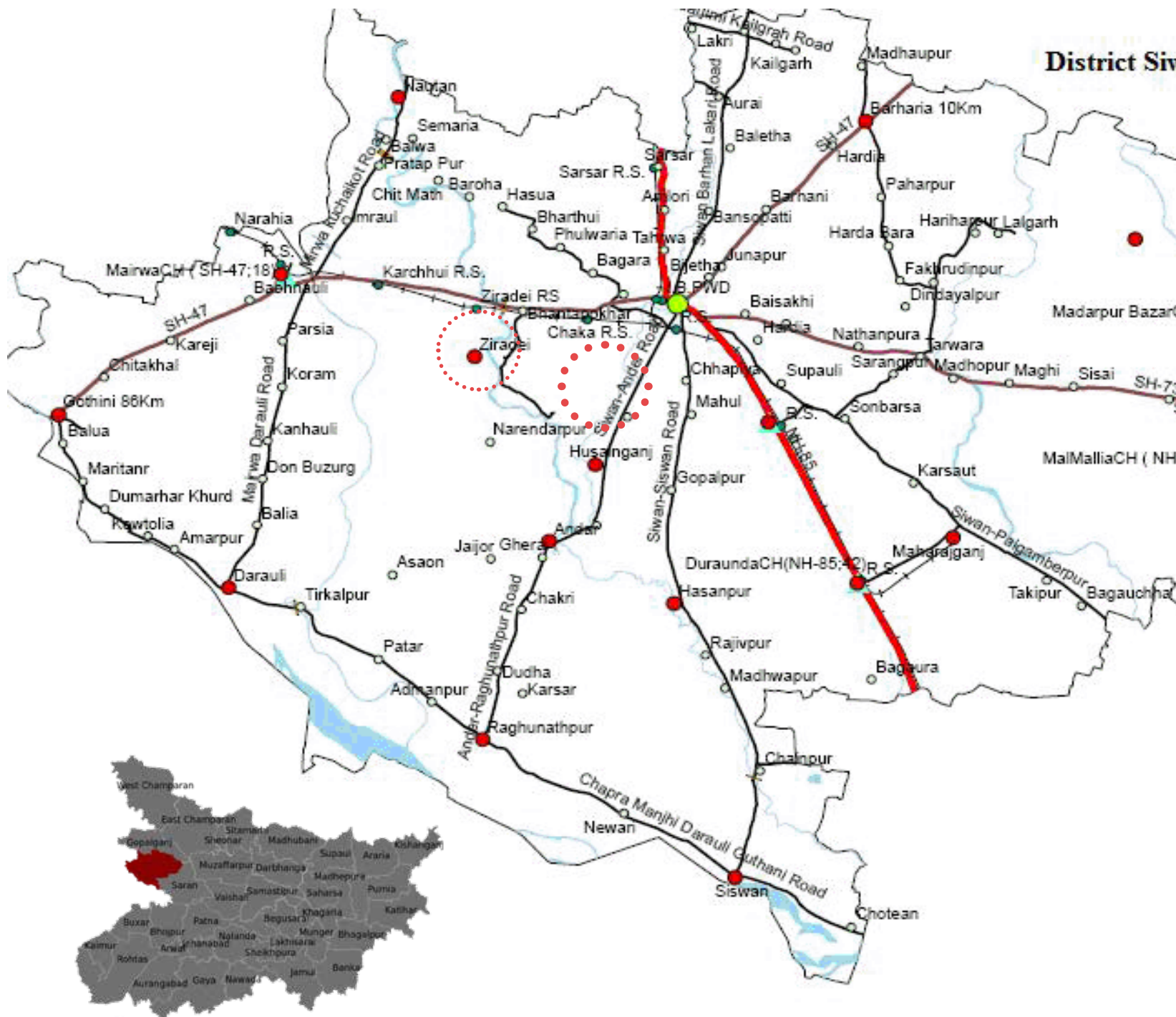


Variation in rainfall and annual precipitation contributes to biodiversity by, resulting in wetter and drier regions. Annual temperatures and number of frost free days determine which species can grow in the region. These geographical factors combine to form the conditions that produce regional flora and fauna. Rainfall may exceed 1600 millimetres per year. Common trees include *Shorea robusta* (sal), *Toona ciliata*, *Boswellia serrata* (salai), *Terminalia tomentosa* (asan), *Diospyros melanoxylon* (kendu), *Terminalia bellirica* (bahera), *Terminalia arjuna* (arjun), *Pterocarpus marsupium* (paisar), *Madhuca indica* (mahua).



Farmers working on agricultural land







Map of Siwan

Legend

- District_HQ
- Sub_DivisionH
- Block_HQ
-

Settlements

- Settlement
- ▲ Chainage
-  Bridge
- NH
- SH
- MOR
- + + Railway

2.2 Siwan District

Siwan district of Bihar which lies in the Saran Division since 1972. The district occupies an area of 2,219 sq. km. The district is in the western part of the state, sharing a border with Uttar Pradesh. As per 2011 census, Siwan district has a population of 3,318,176 and literacy rate of 71.59%. The climate of the district is sub-tropical to sub-humid in nature and falls in the Indo Gangetic plain. Besides the river Ghaghra there are many ephemeral streams Gandak, Nikri, Jharhi, Daha and Dhamhi.

Siwan was previously named Aliganj Siwan after the name of Raja Ali Bux Khan. The name Siwan might have come from the name of a Bandh king

Shivan Man whose successors ruled the region for a long time, hence Siwan. Majority of people in Siwan speak Hindi while some population communicate in Urdu.

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House of Dr Rajendra Prasad



House of Dr Rajendra Prasad



Dr Rajendra Prasad's House gate

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Siwan was a part of the Banaras Kingdom during the 8th century. Muslims came here in the 13th century. In the 15th century Sikandar Lodi brought Siwan under his kingdom. Babar crossed Ghaghra river near Siwan in his return journey. In the 17th century, the Dutch came; followed by the English. It became a part of Bengal after the battle of Buxar in 1765.

Siwan also has a lot of mythological stories. Don is a village located in Darauli region has the ruins of a fort which is believed to have belonged to the great guru in Mahabharata, who taught Kauravas and Pandavas. His son Ashwadharma is still believed to be wandering the earth because of a curse by Lord Krishna for killing the sons of the Pandavas.

Siwan played an important role in the independence movement in 1857. Some notable social movements happened, one of which was the anti-purdah movement initiated by the social activist and freedom fighter Braj Kishore Prasad. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the renowned freedom fighter who became the first President of Independent India belonged to Jiradei, a village in Siwan district.



2.3 Santhu

Santhu is a village in Andar block in Siwan district of Bihar. The approximate distance of the village from 'Parivartan' would be 2.3 km. Narendrapur, Barhulia, Ruia, Gaziapur, Bedauliya, Banthu and Sikia are the surrounding villages to the Santhu. According to the census, 2011 the population of the village was 1486. Women in the village initiate in women empowerment programs as they are involved with Parivartan. The road which connects Narendrapur to Santhu has two brick manufacturing plants on either side. These plants started around ten years ago. Before which the land was used for farming. School, medical centres are in the nearby village. There are tar as well as brick-paved roads.

Santhu consists of only Hindu population. There are *Jhas* (leatherwork), *Badhai* (carpenters), *Brahmins*, *Lohars* (blacksmiths), *Kushwaha* (farmers), *Goand* (Bhunjas), *Kumhar* (potters) and *Nae* (barbers). The village is divided into several parts according to the castes and their respective occupations. For example, *Brahmins* live near the temple, potters live on the outskirts near farms, etc. The village comes under a panchayat consisting of a total of 9 villages.



Map of Santhu



There is an ancient Shiv Temple in the village and adjacent to it there is a pond (*pokhar*) where villagers perform their religious activities. Every year on the day of Maha Shivratri a fair takes place on the open ground at the entrance of the temple. Various communal activities take place around the pond such as Chhath Pooja in Chaitra and Ashwin months. There is an open space around the temple. It has various trees such as banyan, mango, banana, taad, etc. With a big banyan tree and a seating around it, makes it a “hangout place” for the young kids. As no Muslims or Pathans are living in the village (they live in a nearby village called ‘Behdoliya’) people celebrate all the Hindu festivals like Dussera, Diwali, Maha Shivratri, Holi, Ram Navmi etc. Apart from the old Shiva temple, there are four other small temples. Kaali Maa, Geehibaba, Brahma and Ramkali are the temples spread across the village.

Almost every family in the village grows its vegetables. They work on their farms. After storing food for the family, the surplus are sold in the market or locally bartered for other goods. Major crops grown are wheat, mustard, rice, corn.



House hold in Santhu



Women's meeting in Santhu



Agricultural land in Santhu



Village Santhu





Cattle rearing



Bamboo and grass huts for storing grains



Mode of Transportation



Tea stalls

2.4 Narayanpur

Narayanpur is a village adjacent to Narendrapur which comes under the Panchayat of Miya Ke Bhatkan. The distance from Parivartan to Narayanpur is around 500m. The village has three ponds around it which are shared among other nearby villages. It has brick roads built throughout it which connects it with Sikiya. The houses are built with bricks and RCC. The village receives water and electric supply adequately. However, some houses have built their pumps and tube wells. All the castes engage in farming. Apart from farming, cattle breeding becomes an important occupation of the villagers. Other facilities such as hospitals, schools, stores/shops etc. are available to the nearby villages.



Village scene



Houses in Narayanpur



Sikki craftperson



Cultural context of the practice





Majority of the people in Bihar reside in rural regions, with only 11.29% inhabiting urban areas. Of those in rural areas, the majority are engaged in agriculture-related activities. The weaving tradition of Bawan Buti, Bhagalpur silk and craft practice of Sujani, Madhubani and katab kam are well known traditions nurtured in the rural parts of Bihar. Sujani embroidery and Madhubani basket making —both activities tied to dowry creation and undertaken during leisure hours have emerged as livelihoods for some of the clusters in Bihar.



3. Culture



Dahi chura and Tilkut



Bhojpuri thali



Khaja



Laai



Litti Chokha



Thekua

Hindi is the official language of the state. Urdu, Bhojpuri, Angika, Maithli and Magahi are the other languages that are widely spoken. The historically rich land of Bihar is equally famous for the plethora of delicacies that feature in its cuisine. Bhojpuri thali contains rice, roti, achar, chutney, dals, sattu paratha and vegetable curries. Sweets like khaja, Laai, laung latta, balushahi, mal pua are famous. Thekua is given as prasad in Chatth Puja. Litti Chokha is cooked on special occasions. Bihari cuisine includes Bhojpuri cuisine, Magahi cuisine, and Maithili cuisine. Rice, roti, achar, chatni, dals and milk products, with some variations, make their everyday meal. Apart from it, chana ghugni, khaja, mutton kababs etc. are very popular.



Due to the hot weather and humidity, people wear light-coloured clothes. Men wear white pyjamas or pants with shirt or kurtas. Gamcha is an important part of their attire. Women, on the other hand, wear colourful sarees. Women have traditional tattoos on their arms and hands inspired by flora called Godna.







3.1 Occupation & Livelihood



Sikki work is a regional practice and women across different caste, especially those in rural areas are aware of this craft. This practice is situated in a sedentary life revolving around the practice of agriculture. It is pursued in the leisure hours and in Siwan, it continues to be a practice meant for household consumption, mainly for dowry.

All these are stored in sikki baskets. These baskets have a diameter of 7 inches and a height of five-inch. They also cultivate seasonal vegetables in summer such as ladyfinger, gourd, pumpkin and seasonal greens like nenua, kundri, bitter gourd, beans, brinjal and lobhiya and in winter, cauliflower, cabbage, methi, potato, tomato, onion, garlic and chilli.



3.1.1 Agriculture

The main occupation of the villagers in Siwan district, is agriculture and almost everyone is involved in it. Men and women both work on farms. Men do more physical work like ploughing while less skilled jobs, such as sowing, transplanting, weeding and harvesting are done by women as it often fit well within the framework of domestic life and child-rearing.



They mainly cultivate wheat, rice, gram, corn, sugarcane, mustard and pulses (tur, urad, moong, lentils and peas). In October—November they start sowing wheat. After sowing they irrigate the field every 15 days, this continues till the crops become yellow and they open up. They harvest in March- April. Gram, mustard, moong, lentils and urad are also cultivated in the same season, sowing in the month of November and harvesting in April. They do paddy sowing in May—June. After one month, in July, paddy grows, and they start plantation during the monsoon which is good for paddy. Paddy harvesting happens in October, before Diwali. Sowing of tur pulse starts in July during the monsoon and is harvested in April.





3.1.2 Other Occupations

Some villagers sell goods on their bicycle in nearby villages. For example, a sari seller does all the trading on his bicycle as well as showcases them in a planned manner. Services like hair cutting/shaving also is a door to door service. The barber visits the village weekly. In the case of family member's death, the male members have to get bald.





3.2 Way of life

3.2.1 Fairs

Many local fairs and weekly haats mark the culture of Siwan. Locally made items of bamboo and other grasses used traditionally as toys or ritual objects for worship and festivals are sold in fairs. For every festival different objects are made. Lamps, baskets, sofa, bed, small chauki and peedha (stool for worshipping) are made by bamboo while toys, lamps, containers and baskets are made from sikki. There is a special type of mask, made from Bamboo and taar leaves to stop kids from eating inedible things.

3.2.2 Festival

The people of Siwan celebrate all north Indian festival such as Diwali, Holi, Makar Sankranti, Maha Shivaratri, Kartik Purnima, Mahavir Jayanti, Buddha Purnima, Navaratri, Vasant Panchami, Ganga Mohatsava, Ravidas Jayanti, Dussehra, Ram Navami, Eid, Salmi Eid, Moharram and Christmas. Some festivals such as Diwali, Holi and nine days of fasting during the period of Navaratri (Durga puja) are regarded as the more special than others. Most of these festivals have some object made of sikki as part of the celebration.



Diwali

Diwali is one the most important festival of Hindus It is celebrated with great enthusiasm throughout the length and breadth of India. It is the festival of lights. It is a major festival for the people of Siwan and its villages. It falls on the Amavasya of the month of Kartik every year by Hindu calendar and in the last week of October or in the starting days of November by English calendar. Many legends are associated with this festival. Lawa, bundiya, phari are considered auspicious are served in newly made baskets. Rings made of sikki are worn by people as people believe it purifies body and soul. Prasad of Laxmi-Ganesh puja on Diwali is served in small sikki baskets.



Jitya

Jitya or Jivitputrika Vrat is a significant fasting day in which mothers do nirjala fasting throughout the day and night for well-being of their children. Jivitputrika Vrat is observed on Krishna Paksha Ashtami in the month of Ashwin as per Hindu lunar calendar. Luv and Kush God are made with sikki grass.

Holi

Holi is celebrated on the very first day of the Hindu calendar, that is on the first day of the month Chaitra. A day before firewood is burnt which is symbolic of the pyre of Holika.



Vasant Panchami

As `Diwali' — the festival of light — is celebrated to worship Laxmi, the Goddess of wealth and prosperity, Vasant Panchami is celebrated to worship Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge and arts. This festival is celebrated every year on the 5th day or Panchami of the bright fortnight of the lunar month of Magha, which falls during January-February. Vasant comes from the word spring as this festival heralds the beginning of the spring season.





Chhath

The Chhath Puja is dedicated to the Sun and his sister Chhathi Maiyya to thank them for bestowing the bounties of life on earth and to request the granting of certain wishes. Women arrange fruits and items of puja in a winnowing tray- soop and stand in water preferably in rivers and offer prasad and arghya (community offering) to the rising and setting sun. Soop, available in actual size and sometimes in smaller size (for the ritual) are made of bamboo. Sikki baskets are also used for worship. In these baskets, five types of fruits are kept.



3.2.3 Clothing



Today in Siwan district, the culture reflects a mixture of both urban and rural with some cosmopolitan elements. The majority of the population is from the middle class and lower-middle-class families. Locals wear both Indian style and Western-style clothing. The common clothing for women is a sari, salwar-kamees and for men, it is dhoti-kurta and shirt, trousers.

Women dress up traditionally in vibrant coloured sari in piche palu style (border drops at back). A knot in sari pallu is a reminder for something later or used for keeping some money.

“Laj hi aurat ka sabse bada gahana hai”- Modesty is the biggest ornament so married women have to cover their face with a veil. While working with hands, they hold the veil by their teeth. They are not allowed to unveil in front of an elder, especially male. Male members are not allowed to enter women’s private space without informing them.

Jewellery is a very significant part of women's life, they are gifted in different phases of life birth, marriage and on becoming a mother. Certain ornaments such as Mangalsutra, Nath (nose ring) and Bichia (toe rings) are quite essential for married women. Jewellery gifted to women at the time of her marriage is called 'stridhan' i.e. wealth of women which is the symbol of wealth power and femininity. Jewellery is not only considered for adoration but also act as security in times of contingency. Women have sindoor in their mang to show dedication and love for their husbands. Sindoor is one of the 16 adornments (solah shringar) in Hinduism stated for married women.

Body modification such as Godna (tattooing) and piercing is a deliberate alteration of the body for rites of passage and religious reason and a local saying says it all "Gold may be lost or stolen but tattoo is forever". The motifs of Godna are inspired by nature and images of God. It is believed it brings good luck and blessing. However, it is also used as a method of visual segregation.







Dhoti the traditional clothing of men is usually worn on special occasions only. Gamcha or shoulder cloth is also a part of male attire. Gamcha has served as a multi-purpose accessory- protection from the sun when tied around the head, wiping towel, holding or carrying things, covering body and tying it to make Beeda. Beeda is the round coiled Gamcha used to keep overhead (to protect) while carrying heavy items on head.

Frugality in local material is very evident as villagers reuse textile material as Bandage, Filter net, stuffing of cushions, mattress etc.



3.2 Social Setup

3.3.1 Marriage

In most of the rural areas, the weddings continue to be planned by the family members of the bride and the groom. The expenses of the wedding are generally borne by the bride's parents. The system of joint family is still prevalent so the arrangements for the wedding are conducted. It is this combined effort of the family members, relatives and close friends. All the people involved in the preparations for the wedding ensure that everything is conducted smoothly, before, during and after the ceremony.

The bridegroom's family, relatives and friends reach the bride's house in a procession, accompanied by a band, with the groom in a car or riding a mare, dressed like a prince, wearing a garland of rupees. A horse race is conducted for the entertainment of the people invited for the wedding.





Containers, baskets, vanity boxes are made from sikki by household women. Sikki is closely connected with marriage ceremonies is perhaps the reason why so many different patterns and designs have been worked into it. It was essential that the young bride should learn the art of making objects out of sikki from her departure for her new home, she could carry a good collection with her. It was a custom that, along with the dowry, these objects would also be displayed, and the villagers would assess the ability of the young bride, from the imagination she had shown in creating new designs.





3.3.2 Understanding the Makers

Women start making baskets from the age of fifteen and continue making it till the time they can see the thin khar strips properly. Women get up early, at 4 am and their day ends late, around 10 pm. They take care of the house, do agricultural work, look after their children and in their spare time and create items for the household likewise sikki baskets being one of them. Their role in society is defined by social structure and familial ties.

Women make up about one-third of cultivators and half of agricultural labours. They are majorly engaged in the cultivation of cereals and pulses but they are also involved in the production of seasonal vegetables and fruits. Women of families which don't own agricultural land work as agricultural labours in other fields whereas women whose family own land, work on their own land and have more flexibility in time schedule to make sikki baskets. They harvest paddy in October along with which they cut Khar and Munj for making baskets. In the period of between October—December, when no major agricultural work is there, they get free time to make baskets. The making is undertaken in the morning or afternoon, after completion of household chores. On average, they spend 3-4 hours in a day to make baskets and complete making a basket in 2—3 weeks depending on the complexity of the basket.

The work of the female agricultural labour is limited to less skilled jobs such as sowing, transplanting, weeding and harvesting that often fit well within the framework of domestic life and child-rearing. Most of their work on the field and home unacknowledged. However they do this as a sense of responsibility and in the spirit of nurturing the entire family.

However in the process of engaging with plants and weeds, they acquire certain abilities of visual and tactile judgement, such as, knowing of the readiness of the crop to be sown or harvested etc. through the colour and height of the crop; tactile sense to access the right amount of stiffness of grass required for basketry etc.

Sensibilities of discerning colours, texture, stiffness etc, acquired through cooking and agriculture inform their creativity in terms of shape, structure and motif when making household use objects, especially the sikki baskets.

Mostly women in the village are known by their husband's or in-law's name but women who are expert in making these baskets are known by their name because of their creativity and skill.



Sikki Basketry

The craft practice:





Sikki, the golden grass of Bihar, is found growing in the wet and marshy area of Siwan District. Traditionally and still today sikki grass products are made by the women of the household, especially to-be-brides and are taken along with them after marriage. Some are gifted to them by their mother as part of the dowry. The baskets are made for giving as gifts in dowry, carrying things for worshipping and household works like keeping grains, clothes. It is used for carrying chatth puja samagri (items required for worshipping and religious offering) and prasad. These baskets are used so extensively that they act as a unit of measurement to assess the amount of grain.

Munj is found in abundant so it is also used for making panels to divide spaces or boundary, thatched roofs or huts for storing grains, broom, fans and toys etc.





The vanity box given to the bride is variously known as pan-batti and pasahanik pauti. Elders of the family gifts covered baskets as a symbol of blessing (called chumaon) to young people on the occasion of marriage and sacred thread ceremony. This basket—chumaon-ka-dala— has a central piece along with four attached pieces. Small wooden lacquerware box with a cover which appears to be in the form of a rounded hut is connected to the marriage ceremony. The nose-ring (Nath) which is sign of the marriage, is presented in this box. The colour of the box is red with interesting motif such as peacock and fish signifying longevity and fertility are engraved on it. Similar sindoor containers are also made. Every girl is presented this at the time of marriage and retained by her throughout her married life.

An odd number of sikki baskets, usually 11, is given to the bride as it is considered auspicious. In sikki baskets, five types of fruits and sweets are given to bride. At time of bidiai, bride throws lava (a type of grain) which is kept in small and thin sikki basket and usually big circular baskets are given as good omen to the bride. Dowry includes five types of clothes, grooming kit, gamcha, gold chain etc. for groom which are carefully packed in sikki baskets.

Mandap (place where the wedding is done) is made and decorated by small animal and flowers made of bamboo. Kavachi, a structure made of bamboo which has small animals and flower decoration, it is used on the day of marva to worship Satya Narayan God.

In marriage, on occasion of Marwa puja, all the things required for preparation is kept in it. The women make small trays for serving fruit, dry fruits and dry objects to their guests. They also make small baskets for their personal use and organic designs are worked in different colours.



Ability to create elaborate Three dimensional forms:

The most startling forms, however, are the sculptures and figures of elephants, birds, horses with riders, human figures, peacocks, pigeons etc . The simple untutored minds of women take their motifs from the scenes around them. An elephant with mahout seated on it, carrying an umbrella in his hands, has romantic associations for them and is expressed exquisitely in sikki forms.



Raw Material:

Khar (as sikki is officially called) and munj grow wild in rice fields. Harvested alongside paddy immediately after the monsoon season, they are used as raw materials to make baskets. However, due to the large-scale clearing of these lands for industrial purposes, this craft is hardly noticed by city dwellers or even those engaged in rural development works.

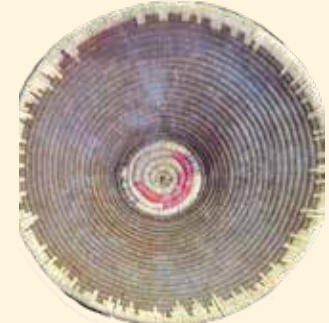
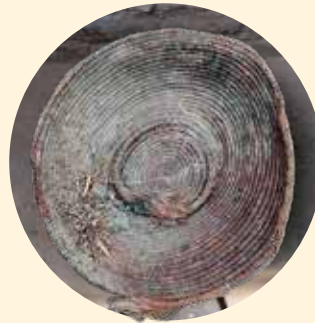
Large sikki baskets usually of height one foot were made to keep clothes worn on special occasions and pieces of jewellery. Similar large Munj baskets, as shown in the book “Bihar Handicrafts”, were made by the Tharus- tribal group inhabiting north Bihar, for keeping their clothes.



Life of Baskets:

Baskets usually last for three to four years depending on the purpose for which it was used. When new, they are used for carrying things for worshipping, later as they start getting old, it is used for household purposes. Old baskets are used to serve food to cattle. After a lot of wear and tear, the fibres of the grass start coming out and its base falls apart. Sometimes rodents eat it, or fungus grows on them due to humidity and ruin the baskets.

Some craftswomen are now experimenting with making products without using the traditional munj as a base or reusing plastic and Khar for coiling. These baskets last longer but they can't be used for carrying hot things because reused plastic cannot sustain heat.



4.2 Process & Technique

Coiling is a pre weaving technique and was popular in many old civilisations. It is a procedure to combine the wrapping of the core material and a sewing process. A coiled basket begins with a material that is wrapped around (the core) and then sewn together in an orderly manner. The basket needs a base, a shape and a rim.

The following criteria are

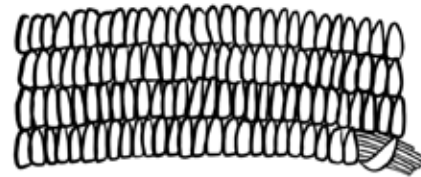
- Difficulty or ease in starting depends upon the core material used.
- Controlling the shape of the basket.
- Properly using the sewing stitches.
- An inconspicuous tapered rim is necessary for satisfactorily ending the basket.
- Purpose of the basket



4.3 Process

Activities Involved

- 1. cutting of sikki grass by women, using hasua
- 2. cleaning
- 3. drying
- 4. Dipping in water
- 5. splitting
- 6. cutting
- 7. slicing length of dry grass
- 8. tying and dyeing
- 9. making grass ribbons
- 10. making a base structure with mung
- 11. Khar dipped in water and coiled around munj
- 12. coiling in-coiling out-base of basket making convex structure then borders
- 13. making the base and joining both of them.





Gathering Grass:

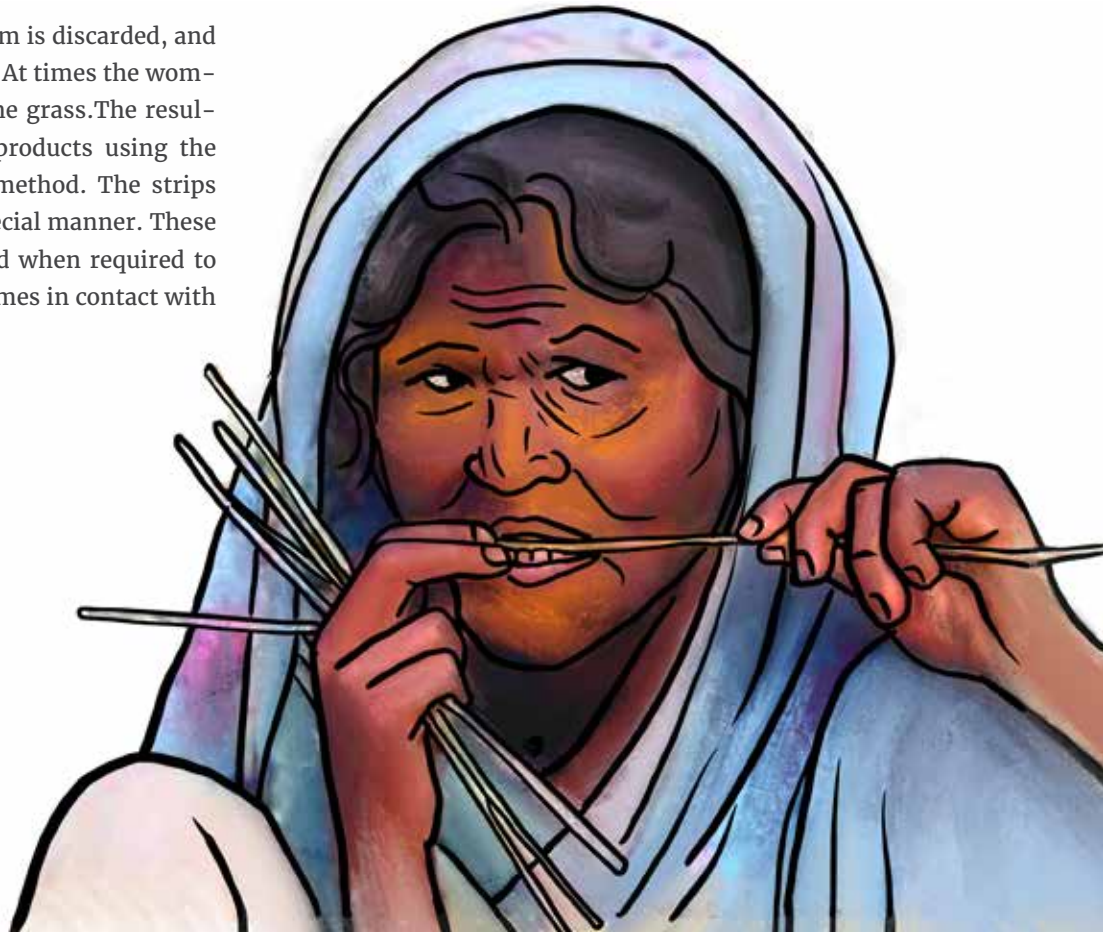
The grass is first cut from near its base using hasua and then dried. Since the flowering part of the stem of sikki is not used for crafts making, it is discarded and the remaining portion of the sikki is sliced and shaved with the help of a knife or by teeth. Usually, the length of the grass is five feet. They make bundles of grass and keep it outside their homes to let it dry under the sun. It is dyed and tied in a particular manner and left to dry for a day. It is then carefully stored in sacks for next year.

Basket Making:

Munj sikki provides the basic structure and strength to the product. It is completely covered by coiling and then khar, which has been soaked in water to make it very flexible is wound around it. The munj sikki is not visible through the Khar encasing. The Khar is lightly dabbed with water as it is coiled around the munj to make it more pliable and less breakable. As each khar strip gets shorter, the women simply insert the next strip and continue coiling.

Splitting (Pharna) :

The outer portion of the flowering stem is discarded, and the inner is split into two using a sua. At times the women also use their teeth for splitting the grass. The resultant strips are used to make sikki products using the ancient and time-honoured coiling method. The strips kept together in a bunch, tied in a special manner. These are kept for one year and used as and when required to make baskets. They get spoiled if it comes in contact with moisture for along time.



Coiling Process:

The making of finely coiled baskets is the most laborious method of all the other type of basketry. Variations of shape are generally of subtle curves since most such baskets are round. Design is generally geometric, and it is endlessly variable and often most striking and beautiful. The makers generally worked by eye, with no drawings in front of them, but they mentally divide a circular base into equal sections to visualize. The beginning of each new round is carefully marked across the bottom and up the side, and show as little as possible at the end.



The basic principle of making coiled sikki baskets is simple.

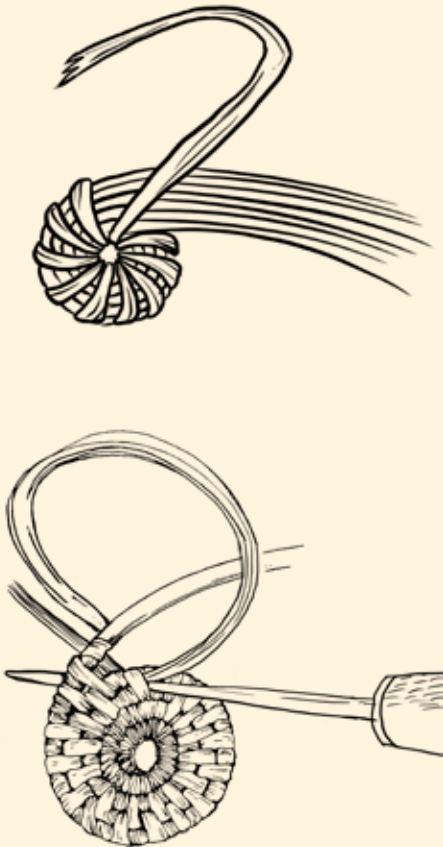
It is, in fact, the same as coiled pottery: A bundle of material called the core is coiled round and round. Each coil is sewn to the one beneath. The core is completely covered by the Khar sikki.

Beginning with a core of Munj, curve it between finger and thumb. Khar sikki is laid along with the core towards the end and wound over it, going away, until the point is reached. The bound point on itself is rolled as tightly and then sewn over the join, into the hole, away from the maker, three times to secure it. This is the beginning of nearly all coil patterns.



Figure of Eight

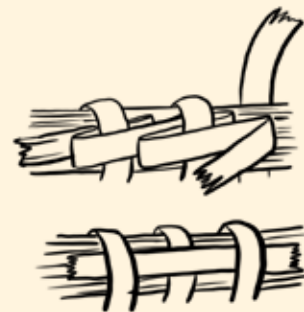
Figure-of-Eight stitch begins by over sewing the first round; in other words, continuing the three stitches all around the first coil. The stitch follows by taking the Khar sikki over and under the free end of the core and the last coil, passing between them. It goes over the top to the back, comes forward between, over the lower coil and through below it to the back, forward between and up and over to the back again, making a figure-of-eight.



Dazy Squaw

In Dazy Squaw the first coil is over sewn plain. For the second round: Khar sikki is wrapped once a Basket making: Munj sikki provides the basic structure and strength to the product. It is completely covered by coiling and then khar, which has been soaked in water to make it very flexible is wound around it. The munj sikki is not visible through the Khar encasing. The Khar is lightly dabbed with water as it is coiled around the munj to make it more pliable and less breakable. As each khar strip gets shorter, the women simply insert the next strip and continue coiling.

Khar sikki is wrapped once round the free end of the core towards the maker, and then over and down, stitching between the last two coils and then back, up and round the free end again. The stitches of further rounds goes into the wrapped spaces of those below. To increase the diameter it is necessary to stitch twice into the same space at intervals, and as one becomes more expert these will be spaced out evenly, helped out by more than one wrap round. By using these stiches, round and oval baskets are made; though it is not easy to make an oval basket by coiling techniques.



To Make an Oval Mat or Base

The end of the core is not tapered but wrapped several inches away from the tip, according to the length of the desired oval shape to be made. Core is bent along the wrapped end, free end is wrapped several times and then both are wrapped together once. It wound and wrapped until both are covered. Then coiling is continued using stitch of choice in the clockwise direction. The stitches of further rounds goes into the wrapped spaces of those below. To increase the diameter it is necessary to stitch twice into the same space at intervals, and as one becomes more expert these will be spaced out evenly, helped out by more than one wrap round.

By using these stitches, round and oval baskets are made; though it is not easy to make an oval basket by coiling techniques. Shaping the sides comes with a lot of practice.



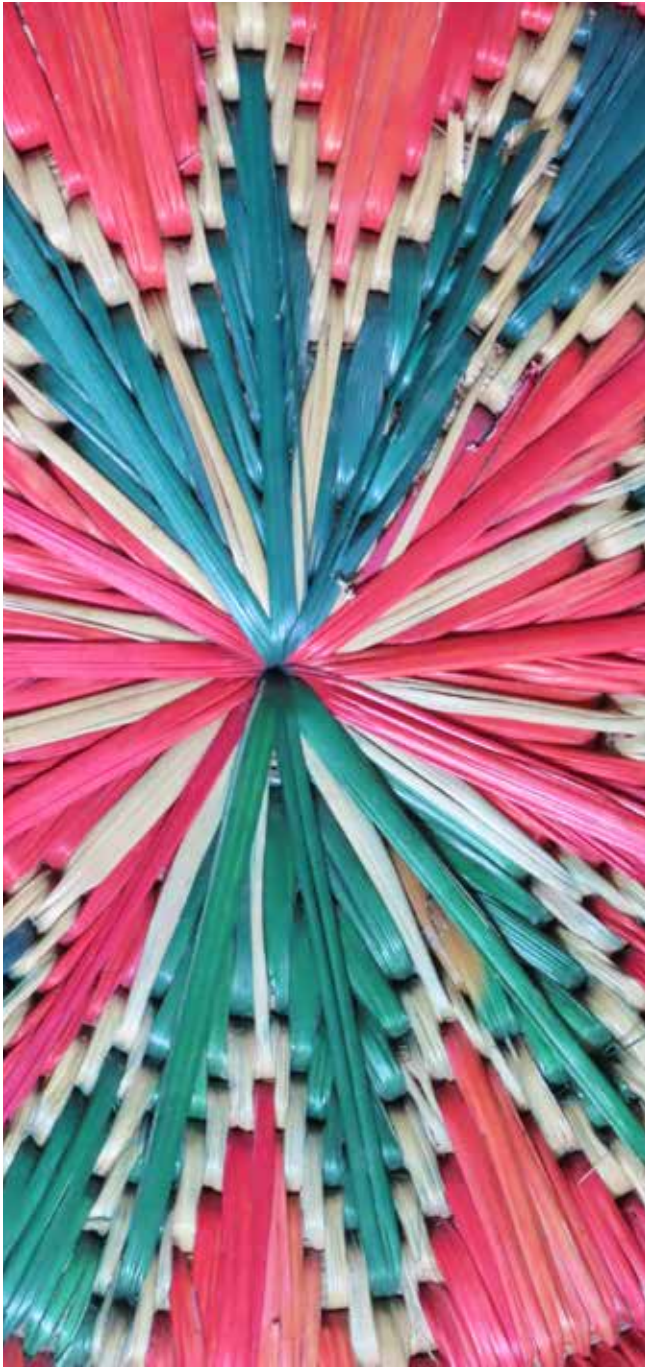
Finishing:

This is done by tapering the end of the core, and sewing it to the last coil, ending at the end of a round. The last coil is both sewn and wrapped. A good finish basket is made by wrapping the last coil second time with different patterns and techniques to make it strong and aesthetic.

These coiled baskets are built in a continuous spiral from bottom to mouth. The spiral progress clockwise from a small round base into a wide mouthed basket.

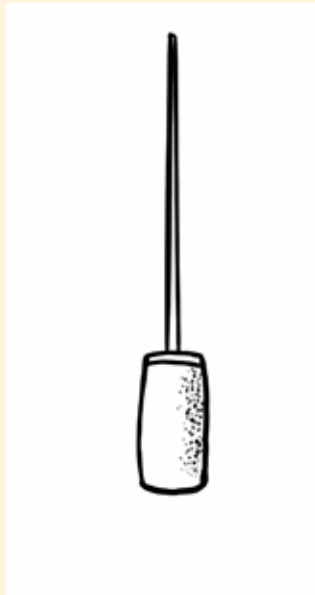
The convex part of the basket and the base are made separately and joined at the end by coiling. A basket requires approx. 90 hrs. man hours to be made. In winter, after their daily morning routine, women make these baskets for 3 to 4 hours. At this rate, it takes usually three to four weeks for completing one basket. Women make these only in winter season as the grass gets hard in summer and cut their fingers.





4.4 Tool

The only tool used by the women in the whole process is called the sua. It is a six-inch-long iron needle with a round head and a wooden grip. The object being made is held firmly with the left hand, while the sua is held in the right hand. No threads, cords or any other materials are used for making the basket. Women buy sua from mela or they get it made from the village ironsmith.



4.5 Dying

Naturally, khar is golden in colour, but can be dyed in a variety of colours. Colours (pakka rang) traditionally used during Holi are bought at the local market and used as dyes. Purple, green, red, magenta and pink are popular choices. These colours, combined with the natural golden hue of khar, result in a complete orchestra of colours.

It is boiled for an hour in dye to achieve the desired shade. In 10 litres of water, 5 packets of dye (holi colour), 1kg Khar grass is dyed. In this process, the temperature of the water is measured from 60 to 80 degrees. The colour is been mixed according to the quality of Khar. After mixing the colour, Khar is dipped in the mixture and then rotated. After the grass is boiled, it is kept in shade for drying. Once it has dried. it is kept in sunlight and checked time to time whether it has started to fade or still in the process



4.6 Coiling Techniques

1) In the first technique, there is only one layer of Khar coiled over munj and the motifs could be seen as group pixels. Change in colours takes place as per the requirement of motifs. Different colour dyed Khar is used and when a change of coloured is required, a new coloured Khar strip is added for coiling without cutting the old one as it is used further where the same colour is required.

2) In the second technique, two layers of sewing over one layer of coiling take place with Khar. First and basic layer of coiling is done to make the structure. The second layer of sewing is done to make motifs and patterns using diagonals, e.g. the chevron effect. Some baskets are made combining both the techniques.





4.7 Characteristics

4.7.1 Surface Treatment

Chutidhare
Ektippa
Du Thuriya
Churiya
harhara and jhutki with churiya
kharaua
kumre badhe

4.7.3 Colour Palette

fuchsia pink- gulabi
red, maroon- laal
brown, purple - baigani
dark green- hara
orange- narangi
yellow (golden)- peela



4.7.2 Motifs and Pattern

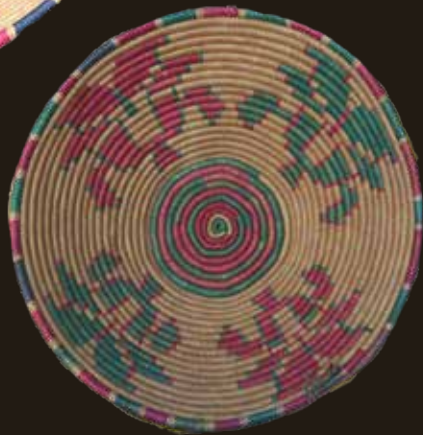
The symbols represent concepts and beliefs personified in floral, human, animal forms, and geometric shapes. Enjoyed as aesthetically appealing artworks, the motifs as well echo some philosophies and wise sayings and sources of religious and social lessons to the people. The interpretation of these motifs may be discovered from sources that have nothing to do directly with textiles but the development of a particular motif is undoubtedly is the result of religion, customs, natural surroundings and social beliefs of that particular area to which its creator belongs.

Bel buti:

Creeping vine motif was originated in Persia, Mughals adopted it as motif in ornamentation of textiles. Its thin leafy curvy stems laden with flowers, buds and fruits has inspired the textile weavers and embroiderers to create marvellous patterns. Purly artistic by nature, Buti is a floral motifs found in saris. There may be a small buti and large buta, which are depicted as flowers, sprigs or bushes. The arisans are influenced by the flowers around and the motifs they see in the saris which they try to inculcate in their sikki creations.

These motifs can be found because they are grown in abundance locally and holds cultural importance.

- banana flower
- hibiscus
- rose
- creeper
- lotus



Lotus Motif:

Symbolizing purity, peace and cosmic harmony, the lotus represents the very core of mandala with its multi-petal depiction indicating the multiplicity of universe.

In Hindu religion eight petalled lotus is depicted springing from the naval of Lord Vishnu, the protector, upon which Brahma the creator sits. Here universe is represented by lotus (where each petal represents, earth, fire, air, ether, mind, intellect and ego) which is growing out of central sun with Brahma as giving rise to concepts of fertility and richness. banana flower.



Parrot motif:

Parrots are love birds considered as vehicle of Kamadeva, God of love and sex in Hindu mythology. It symbolizes sensual desires, courtship and passion seen in Indian art mostly in company of Krishna and Radha, Hinduism's eternal lovers.

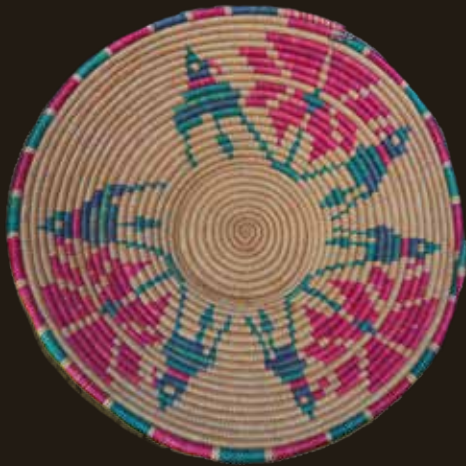


Peacock motif:

Considered as a pious bird by the Hindus, peacock is one of the most important motif. Rasleelas of Lord Krishna or dances too are associated with peacock.

A vehicle of goddess Saraswati, it finds mention in Rig-veda and Atharva-veda. It signifies love and beauty, immortality, courtship, fertility, celestial regalia, divine forces and virtuous strength . The image of peacock is also used in the Vedi or the marriage podium as a defensive charm to save the bride and groom from the evil eyes. The motif can also be seen as a decorative motif on the walls in bright colours.





The Sun motif:

Sun is considered as source of life and has been worshipped by people of varied cultures and religions. Depicted as the only divine form visible to human eye sun plays a vital role in Hindu rituals. According to Hinduism, sun rides a chariot drawn by seven horses that represent the seven colours of light. Chronicled in the Rig Veda Gayatri Mantra , the foremost mantra in hinduism and hindu beliefs, is also a prayer to the “giver of light and life” – the sun.

In Hindu mythology, the sun god is worshipped as a symbol of health and immortal life. Rig Veda declares that “Surya is the Soul, both of the moving and unmoving beings”. An obeisance to the Sun God yogis and munis devised the Sun Salutation which is a comprehensive exercise, which contributes to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. The Chhath Puja is dedicated to the Sun and his sister Chhathi Maiyya to thank them for bestowing the bounties of life on earth and to request the granting of certain wishes.



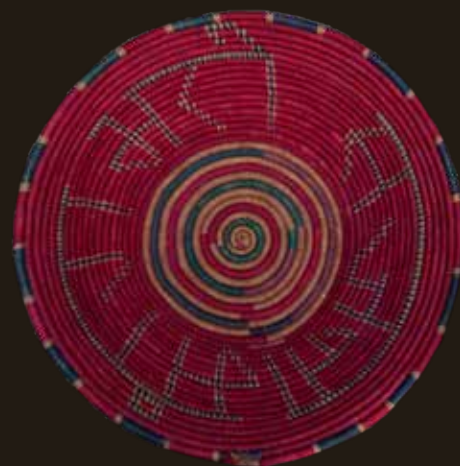


Kalasha Motif:

Amongst all auspicious symbols used in Indian art throughout history, Kalasha—the holy ceremonial water jar hold a special place. It is an important part of ceremonial occasions and wedding in Hindu culture. It is a symbol of the universal mother goddess, abundance, fertility, good fortune and success in life. The kalasha or Purna Kumbha as one of the auspicious (mangala) symbols are found in the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain sanct, represents the womb and the fertilizing waters of life. Seed–grain is planted in the pot as a symbol of fertility. The kalash is decorated with the auspicious signs like Swastika and filled with water and on its mouth are placed leaves of mango tree and a bowl of rice with a coconut on top . The water in Kalasha is considered as amrit – the inexhaustible elixir. It was a ritual to sprinkle Kalash water accompanied by mantras over the head of devotees to ensure plenty, purity, prosperity an enriched and fulfilled life.

Apart from these, famous traditional sayings and mantra are also written on these baskets.





4.8 Products

4.8.1 Traditional products

As mentioned earlier, the women make a wide range of products, right from fine bangles to huge and elaborate baskets and containers, for their household purpose. These baskets size varies as per their use. The most common sizes are 10 inches, 12 inches and 8 inches of diameter approximately.

1. Jhappa- Big containers with caps to store food grains, spices, sweets, etc. size- 10-inch diameter.
2. Mauni- Trays for fresh fruits, betel leaf and nuts, flowers, etc. size- length- 8-inch, breadth- 10 inch
3. Pauti- Beautiful small boxes with caps to keep jewellery, dry fruits, and other costly items. Size- 3-inch diameter
4. Gumla- Bowl like containers for various uses. Size- 12 inch diameter
5. Saji- Flower Baskets. Size- 5-inch diameter.



4.8.2 Contemporary products

These days artisan of sikki craft artisans are making a variety of decorative products also to get a good place in the national as well as the international market, e.g.

1. Sikki grass coasters
2. Mobile cases
3. Masks
4. Mirror frames
5. Tablemats
6. Pencil boxes
7. Hand-held fans
8. Colourful bowls
9. Jewellery Boxes
10. Bangles
11. Toys
12. Pen stands
13. Paper Weights
14. 3-D figures
15. Containers of all types and sizes



5. Craftspeople



In Santhu and Naranpur village Paspati Devi and Kismati Devi were identified as persons who excel at the sikki work.

5.1 Case study 1

Paspati Devi is 42 years old and a housewife in Santhu. She is very fond of making sikki baskets and is known as a 'sikki master' by villagers. She makes intricate baskets by using single sewing coiling method. She starts making motifs directly with grass, without any planning on graph sheets. She feels any basket made with love and patience comes out to be beautiful. For her, making motifs is the same as doing embroidery, as she uses a needle to put coloured Khar on the structure. She gifted 32 baskets to daughters of a family during their weddings and makes baskets only for this purpose.

She makes the baskets in her spare time, keeps some for her family's use, and gifts some to brides during their weddings. Most of the families in the village have this mindset.

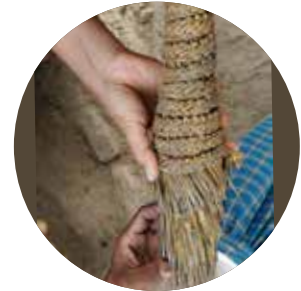
She is a proud crafts-person. She says "Jaise aap log ghar ke engineer hain, waise humlog dauri ke engineer hain" ("As you are the engineers of houses, we are the engineers of these baskets). Her motifs are inspired by motifs on saris and flowers which grow around her. She also uses popular quotes and sayings in her basketry.

All the women in her family know how to make baskets but their skill levels differ. This sikki basketry making is passed on by mother to daughter or mother-in-law to daughter-in-law.



5.2 Case study 2

Thirty-year-old Kismati Devi lives in Narayanpur. She is a homemaker but also makes and sells sikki baskets to supplement the family income. In addition to housework, she also helps in farming, but still finds time for her creative artwork. Her fineness and dedication in work makes the basket very intricate and beautiful. She also likes to make crochet lids for the baskets. The whole family is skilled in basketry and makes them for sale on demand. Their clients include both outsiders and villagers who do not practise sikki basketry. Every woman in her family practises some kind of craft like painting, mat making, fan making and crochet.





5.3 Creative Ability

Artisans' innate ability to use the coiling technique and fibre allows them to give shape to a several forms—all created with great attention to detail—that depict moments from their social life. Their innate knowledge and understanding of geometry are evident in their ability to visualize complex forms and choose the right manoeuvres to create them using the seemingly simple technique of coiling.

Here, the process is short: the idea is reproduced directly as the final product. What informs this familiarity with complex geometry and their ability to fashion out a wide variety of forms is a possible area of future research.

Equally interesting is their ability to ensure symmetry and perfect alignment of the edges of the various geometric patterns during joining, especially since they work without a grid.

It is quite likely that this is simply the result of basketry being an example of embodied knowledge. These women perform the same task over and over again, within the same cultural context, until it becomes part of their muscle memory. Therefore, they can make baskets even while chatting or doing other tasks, which also speaks to sikki basketry's characteristic of being an unselfconscious mode of creation.

We designers first sketch and draw our imagined concepts and ideas, and then go through various iterations with sample materials, before arriving at a prototype. With Siwan's women artisans, there is no shyness involved. The women are confident in what they do, and this shows. One has to wonder at this confidence that allows these artisans to jump into the making process without any provision to represent their imagined form.





Similar Crafts



6.1 Similar Crafts (basketry)

Basketry in India is ancient as pottery, nomadic food-gathering cultures wove reeds together to prepare baskets. Later as different materials and cultures developed a variety of basketry for domestic use, as well as for ritual purposes developed along with them so they had special patterns based on local traditions and techniques.

India has a rich and ancient culture of resource optimisation, sustainable material usage and waste management. Here's looking at some craftwork laced with grass, fibre and other waste, originating from diverse Indian landscapes.

Every region of the country makes its own unique products—whether mats or screens, stools or baskets—made from natural fibre. “All basketry is adaptable beyond just baskets because the products made with natural fibre which is very versatile as a material.

Classified into types

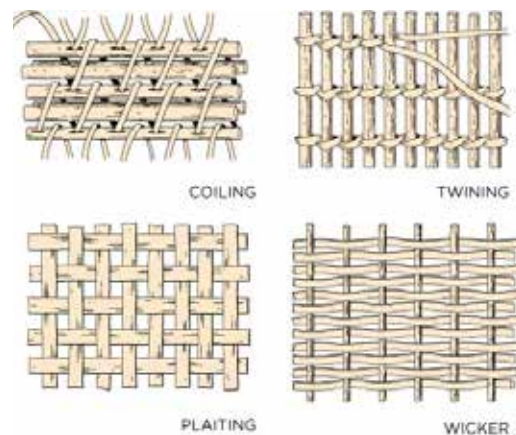
Classified into four types

"Coiled" basketry- Done using grasses, rushes and pine needles

"Plaiting" basketry - Done using materials that are wide and braidlike: palms, Flax

"Twining" basketry - Done using materials from roots and tree bark. Twining is a weaving technique where two or more flexible weaving elements ("weavers") cross each other as they weave through the stiffer radial spokes.

"Wicker" and "Splint" basketry- Done using reed, cane, willow, oak and ash.





Spiral Baskets: Punjab

Punjab is famous for its sturdy spirally built baskets. Sarkanda, a tall golden-white wild grass which grows in swamps, is used for the basic form. This is stitched together with date-palm leaves and worked in intricate geometric patterns, similar to the phulkari pattern. These baskets were predominantly used for household purposes. However, with the passage of time, they came to be considered as a work of art and were used in homes as showpieces.



Willow Baskets: Kashmir

The Kashmir's willow baskets are known for their intricate designs. Young twigs of the willow tree are woven into intricate designs to make a variety of baskets that are used in the home and sold to tourists as picnic baskets and large presentation hampers. One of the finest objects made there is the covering made for the kangri—an earthen pot in which burning coal is kept on a bed of ashes. However, this is restricted to local use. The pliable twigs of willows are dyed with indigenous dyes. A coloured foil is pasted to the outer side of the clay bowl and an intricate lace pattern is worked with the twigs, which allows the shining foil to be seen through. The famous kangri is carried as an auspicious object by a bride going to her husband's home, and is presented to priests on winter festival of Shishir to commemorate ancestors.



Uttar Pradesh- Dalawa Basket

This basketry technique is used by rural women in the Eastern region of Uttar Pradesh. Like the women of Bihar, they use munj to create tightly coiled baskets for everyday use and as part of a bride's dowry. Baharaich, Gorakhpur, Azamgarh, Allahabad (now Prayagraj) and the surrounding villages are famous for these baskets.



Odisha- Sabai Grass

Sabai grass grows in the forests of Mayurbhanja district in Orissa. Local tribes refer to it as Bobei Dauda or Bobei Ghasa. The fibre length of Sabai grass is more than that of bamboo but fibre diameter is lower than bamboo. It is mainly used in the paper industry. However, rural women also dry it and use it to create rope-based craft and utility items such as baskets. Synthetic dyes are used to colour Sabai at the rope stage.



Bamboo Baskets- Bihar

These artisans also are engaged in creating decorative things, but the traditional use of Bamboos is to create a household piece of baskets and furniture items. These baskets are user-friendly and eco-friendly as it's also the ecological property of raw material which can offset the exploitation of our forests.



Tamil Nadu- Traditional Baskets

Tamil Nadu is famous for Chettinad baskets. They have intricate patterns made of date-palm leaves. These patterns are as fine as embroidery and are the specialty of the Chettiar community of the area.



North East

Standout pieces include the nesting storage baskets, reed mats and coiled cane products of Assam; the bamzis (lidded boxes) and storage baskets of Arunachal Pradesh; the kophi (cane) baskets of Nagaland; the phingaruks (baskets with dome-shaped lids) of Manipur; the thuls (bamboo dowry baskets) of Mizoram; and the traditional bamboo baskets of Tripura. Most of Mizo baskets are broad at the mouth and narrow at bottom and have air-tight lids. North eastern baskets can come in various colours, shapes and sizes; and it's very light. The true potential of basketry and natural fibre can be seen as entire houses are made from natural fibre along with variations of basketry are found here.

While it is only the fine and decorative baskets that are noticed and displayed, it is the weavers who make simple baskets who have woven themselves into the pattern of agrarian society and perform a service which is both basic and one with nature. Scarcely recognised or acknowledged, they still provide the bulk of the containers required to transport the produce that emerges from the farmlands, mines and forest of India. It is on this widespread base that is woven the finer lacy textures of some of the best baskets of the world.



Other crafts of the village



Hand Fan - Bena

The women of Naranpur make beautiful hand fans locally known as bena. Bena is only substance in summer and it also has other uses, Bena used for the blowing air to the natural fuel or wooden, it is used to ignites the chulha very quickly. It's a hand weaved implement for creating a current of air, especially one in the form of the flat surface, made of light material like munj, discarded fabric pieces, bamboo sticks. Munj is coloured, split and made into different patterns to make a flat surface of a fan.





Doormat- Paidaan

Apart from the ability to make containers and baskets from weeds, the women in the village are required to know other practices of converting easily available materials into utility products. Paidaan is one such item- a knitted piece used as a door mat. This utility piece of art is the most commonly used product in day to day life. Villagers use paidaan for many purposes. They use paidaan to rub their feet, for sitting and if elaborate and colourful, then also as a decorative piece. This utilitarian craft has been made from generation to generation to fulfil their needs and give comfort. It is a good example of upcycling old fabrics—old saris of cotton, georgette chiffon, satin and old cloth as kurta, pyjama etc. The fabric chosen for knitting are a big piece of cloth and small pieces- katraan which are split by scissors and knitted together.





Crochet

Crochet as a technique is to make utilitarian things like the lid of sikki baskets, used as using acrylic yarn which is locally sold as synthetxaic wool. The colours they use are very bright. Different patterns are used as per the use of the product.



Embroidery- Cross Stitch

Women of the village also do embroidery. This skill is taught by mothers to their daughters. 'All the women in the family know how to embroider. They make chaddar (thin blanket) for marriages, special occasion and welcoming the guest. They also make embroidered seatings. Vibrant colours like pink, green, orange, white, purple, maroon etc. Motifs are inspired by Flora and fauna. Cross stitch is done woven chaddar which has basket weave. The basket weave acts as graph for the women to make motifs. They paint similar motifs on their walls as a welcoming sign.

Conclusion



Sikki basketry has not just endured, it has thrived in Siwan. However, it has remained a household craft. While there are NGOs and other organizations that work towards promoting various crafts, they have not been able to take Siwan's sikki baskets out of the region. There is no real market for these products since they are largely used by those who make them—and almost all women here create them. Moreover, their strong ritualistic and utilitarian status means many local artisans are not even aware that these are saleable products.

Like sikki, locally available grasses have been used for utilitarian products in various cultures around the world since the Neolithic Age. Sikki is extremely flexible and, when bundled together, very strong. Therefore, it can be used to build any temporary structure—potentially, even after all other resources have been exhausted.

Sikki basket making tradition can become a sustainable livelihood option for women in poverty-ridden villages. The following reason clarify this:



1. Sikki grows wild and requires no specific resources for its cultivation; sikki basketry requires no power or technology (environmental sustainability)
2. It is a vehicle through which indigenous cultural knowledge, in terms of rituals, customs and behaviours, is passed on to the next generation. (Brings women together in support of each other cultural sustainability)
3. It encourages economic growth and at the same time boost savings. (economic sustainability)
4. It empowers them and uplifts the identity of the artisans and gives them employment ensuring the right to livelihood and social enterprise. It encourages them and their creativity. Therefore, further helping in the formation of community irrespective of caste (social sustainability)
5. Technically, the process of sikki basketry has remained unchanged since the women here mainly use their hands to weave, with assistance from just one or two simple tools. However, sikki and basketry are no longer an exclusive pairing. Artisans in villages such as Madhubani, Darbhanga and Sitamarhi, have begun to use sikki to create showpieces and sculpture. Sold at trade fairs and exhibitions, these products have become a lucrative source income. Similarly, women in Siwan have also begun to reuse waste plastic bags and packets to create baskets are more durable than those made from munj.

However, the women who create these baskets vary in skill level, attitude, and design sensibility. But with training, their ability can be enhanced. They can be encouraged to be inspired by their Madhubani counterparts to explore the expressive aspects of this technique and explore possibilities of creating products relevant to the current lifestyle of users.



8.1 Further observations:

Learning and skill level: Not all artisans share the same level of skill; also, some are quick learners while others need extra time to improve.

Craft as practice / Attitude of artisans:

Some artisans enjoy practising the technique and the tradition; others do it just to make containers to keep things and don't see it as a piece of craft.

Time:

The time taken to complete different baskets depends on the size of the basket, and the efficiency and skill of the artisan.

Material:

Sikki is very versatile. It is long, flexible and when used as coils, it has great strength. However, except for the soft middle portion, the grass tends to break when creating edges or sharp products. Artisans in Siwan are also trying to use different materials for making the lid or the coverings of the basket. They constantly try to minimize the use of plastics and reuse existing products to create new ones.





Form creation:

Hand-built objects supports a wide variety of forms wherein the hand is the main tool to manipulate. Such works allow makers to become individual artist.

Basket making is grounded in a tradition of collective knowledge and tacit skill.

Structural strength:

The radial coiling yields a certain amount of structural strength. This depends heavily on the tightness of the stitching that is done along with the thickness of the coil. However, the base of these baskets come of easily and cannot tolerate excessive wear and tear.

Cost:

The sikki is free and wildly available locally, making the actual baskets a labour of love.

Aesthetic:

Currently sikki baskets mostly follow a basic aesthetic language. There is no planned design on paper. The women build the design and motif layer by layer. This opens up a different opportunity to introduce asymmetric aesthetic values. New motifs are inspired by godna style of tattoo, sari borders and famous quotes.



8.2.1 Strengths

- It is a symbol of craft heritage.
 - It has survived because it has ritualistic, religious and sentimental value, since it is made to be given to daughters in dowry and used in various religious ceremonies.
 - It continues to hold its traditional form despite experimentation.
 - It showcases traditional design, style and motifs.
- The raw material is biodegradable, natural, organic, light and available at no cost, so it is an eco-friendly and sustainable solution.
- It showcases the effective use of grasses available in the local ecosystem (huts, brooms, etc.) and how simple reeds can be used to make intricate designs.
- Any 3D structure can be easily made
 - Showcases man's inherent quality to create
 - No specialized tools required
 - NGOs are willing to help
 - It allows creators to express their feelings by incorporating words and images of their choosing.
 - Women unite and discuss their ideas with each other while making baskets. It further helps to discuss serious issues which can be resolved by the support of all women.

8.2.3 Threats

- Younger generation not interested in taking this craft forward as they want to spend more time in studies and job
- With modernization people are forgetting their culture and traditions
- Lack of motivation to sell baskets and other products
- Urbanisation





8.2.2 Weakness

- It is a time-consuming process.
- In the past it was a leisure activity but in present, people have other sources of entertainment, so they don't practice basketry regularly
- A shift towards plastic storage
- Lack of demand of containers as people have started using plastic and metal containers
- Lack of marketing
- Fail to find the right market to sell and a person who can help them sell
- Fail to find the right price of handicraft
- Women can't work in summer as the grass is not flexible and cuts their fingers
- Sikki grass is only available in the winter season
- Difficult for women to give time regularly because of another household work
- The fragility of the product makes it difficult to transport
- Baskets have to be protected from rats

8.2.4 Opportunity

- Reduce the use of plastic containers
- More scope in handicraft export market
- Encouraging and empowering women
- Promotion of cultural heritage
- Intervention in terms of design and techniques could help artisans expand their range of products.
- Awareness programmes should be held to make common people aware.
- A training program can be organized for the new generation who is losing interest.
- Market plan can be designed for households who want to sell products. This will have a system-level effect as it will create awareness in people as well as economically stabilize the lives of makers.



8.3 The Way Forward

India has a rich and ancient culture of resource optimisation, waste management and sustainable material usage. Sustained efforts need to be undertaken to promote entrepreneurship among women. But to inculcate deeper friendship with ecology and to preserve these jewels from nature, there is an emergent need to introduce a pedagogy around ecological art and craft. Much akin to Mahatma Gandhi's and Rabindranath Tagore's idea of creative education amidst nature.

In fact, Gandhi's idea of Swadeshi and Hind Swaraj created the concept of a village indigenous craft economy, focused on spinning khadi – that promoted not only ecological harmony and self-reliance but also provided important lessons in sustainability for posterity.

In the present scenario, these women seem to be doing good all they need is awareness and interest so that future generation continues the practice as well people in the urban area look at it as a sustainable option.

- Youth group can be formed to create awareness and curiosity about the craft amongst the future generation, especially in urban areas.
- Crafts like sikki have high chances of being in trend in the developed area as it's a sign of heritage and sustainability.
- Children can be made aware by design students every semester, so they at least know about these indigenous craft practices.
- Children can also be demonstrated about the ability of women to calculate while making motifs even though they don't have any formal education. They have the inherent ability of understanding structure, aesthetics, symmetry and computing which can be shared to all.
- Parivartan practices community theatre, therefore, props can be made from it.
- Sikki craft has a variable price range depending on the intricacy and the size of the product. If they participate in any craft fair or exhibition, they get a fair amount of orders for the products they are making.



