LIVING TRADITIONS

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

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

A mat is different from a rug and a carpet both in terms of manufacture and in composition. A rug and a carpet have two main parts, the pile and the backing. The pile is the top surface, and the backing is the undersurface. The materials used in rugs and carpets are various manufactured or natural fibers. The chief manufactured fibers are nylon, polyester, acrylic, olefin, and rayon. The chief natural fibers are wool, jute, cotton, and linen. While rugs and carpets are made by different methods, namely, tufting, weaving, knitting, needle-punching, braiding, embroidering, and hooking, mats are made by weaving only. The pile of a woven rug or carpet is formed from one set of yarns, and the backing is made from two sets. A mat is a simple piece of flat substance with some pattern of weave; it is not composed of the pile and the backing. Unlike a carpet, it is not nailed or tucked and is not rigid. Like a rug, it is easily moveable but not washable liberally. Many people think the sarranji is a mat. Technically the sarranji is a rug, not a mat. Traditionally woven from the fibers of cotton and jute, sometimes mixed with wool, and splendidly decorated, the sarranji is a beautiful rug.
According to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, “a mat is a generic term for a piece of or flat material, generally placed on a or other flat surface, and serving a range of purposes.” The World Book Dictionary defines the mat as “a piece of coarse fabric made of woven grass, straw, rope, or fiber, used for floor covering or for wiping mud from shoes. This dictionary also refers to the mat as “a smaller piece of material, often ornamental, to put under a dish, vase, lamp, or the like.” as “a large, thick pad covering part of a floor, used to protect wrestlers or gymnasts,” and as “anything growing thickly packed or tangled together.” Wikipedia and The World Book Dictionary do not specify the hallmarks of the mat. The mat is mostly woven by hand; it exhibits some pattern of weave; and it is not composed of the pile and the backing. It is true that the mat is generally placed on the floor or other flat surface to serve a wide range of purposes. It may also be used for packing, covering, screening, or hanging. The mat varies in size and thickness, and it also varies in quality, depending on the material used. A mat may be plain or decorated. It may be of one color only, or it may be of several colors and in different designs.

Prehistoric people may have used animal skins as floor coverings in their caves. When people learned to weave, they made floor mats from grasses and other plants. Although the modern world offers much in the way of alternative choices, the craft of weaving mats from a wide range of plant materials has survived in many parts of the world. These mats feature in all aspects of the everyday life of ordinary people. The materials from which they weave mats—cane, reeds, grasses, rushes, straw, palms, bamboo, leaf fibers, and other vegetal fibers—are readily available to hand. These mats endow their users with an intrinsic beauty and provide them with a link to the natural world and a more natural lifestyle. These are traditional mats embodying a rich and lively form of traditional art and representing a living tradition, whereas mats made of manufactured fibers or synthetic materials as well as rugs and carpets are industrial products exemplifying industrial art and representing a popular culture. Mats have been in use in Bangladesh since antiquity. Before the introduction of modern furniture in the 1950s, mats were abundantly used. Life without mats is still unthinkable in rural Bangladesh, and the variety is astonishing. Villagers need mats for many purposes: for sitting and sleeping, for praying, for reading, for dining, for gathering and gossiping, for placing household goods, for drying crops, for covering, for protection against the damp that seeps from the earthen floor of rural homes during the rainy season, for decoration, and for ceremonial use. While mats are still given as bridal gifts in the villages, in the villages, towns and cities the mat is common for the gaye halud ritual of a wedding ceremony. The nakshi pati or the shitalpati is often spread on the floor on ceremonial occasions and displayed on the walls in homes and offices. Although mats are no longer in significant use in the domestic arena in the cities, urban life demands vast quantities of coarse matting for use at doorsteps, for spreading on the ground at warehouses or construction sites, for masonry work, for packing furniture, heavy and rough goods, plants, etc., and for wrapping up heavy merchandise.
Generic Term in Bangla for the English Word 'Mat'

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

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

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

“The pati is used more or less throughout Bengal in different names, such as the pati made of mutta, the dharma made of nakhagde, the pati made of mula, the outsized chaisi made of hoga strips and bamboo strips and, in some cases, of palm-leaf. And all this accounts for the development of madur shilpa in Bengal. In madur shilpa, the pati, especially the shitalpati, is well-known.”

Made of madur kathi, the madur is one kind of mat, and as such it cannot be a generic term for any piece of flat substance used as a mat. Nor can the pati or the shitalpati be a kind of madur, for the pati is the ‘pati,’ unlike the madur, is made of mutta. Muttra is also known as patipata. Strictly speaking, in Bangla there is no word that can be used as a generic term like the English word ‘mat’ for a piece of flat substance made of any plant material.
We, however, need a generic term in Bangla. The scholars of West Bengal adopted the word *modur* as the Bangla synonym for the English word ‘mat’ long ago. In the context of Bangladesh the word *modur* is not appropriate at all, since the *pati* dominates over the *modur* in the economic, social and cultural life of the people.

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

**Informant 1** says:

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

**Informant 2** says:

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

**Informant 3** says:

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

**Informant 4** says:

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

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

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

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

“You made me laugh. I almost forgot the Bengali word for ‘mat.’ In just one word? I would choose ‘pati’. I hope it helps.”

It appears that the *modur* has become a set-word in the minds of the educated city-dwellers of Bangladesh for three reasons: (1) this word has been chosen in the English-Bengali dictionaries as the Bangla synonym for the English word ‘mat’; (2) this word has been made popular in the literature (excluding the books and articles written by the folklorists and ethnographers of Bangladesh other than Khogeshkiron Talukdar); and (3) this word has come into common use in the colloquial tongue of the educated people. Dinesh Chandra Sen, Achyutcharan Chowdhury, Tofail Ahmad, Wakil Ahmed, Md. Syedur, Md. Abdul Hafiz, Mohiuddin Shiru, Zinat Mahrulk Banu,
and Kazi Khalilur Rahman wrote in Bangla on different kinds of pati or patishilpa, but their admirable writings, even Poet Jasim Uddin’s reference to a shitalpati and a kamranga pati (a mat used on the occasion of a Muslim wedding) in Nakshil Kandhar Math (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt), have so far made no impact on the educated city-dwellers, who use the word madur rather indiscriminately, making no distinction between the pati and the madur.

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

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

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

As our extensive fieldwork suggests, the pati is the predominant mat and the shitalpati is the mat par excellence in Bangladesh. The pati is varied in weave, color and design, and its production is massive in Bangladesh. Apart from its use for a wide range of purposes, the pati is intimately related to the cultural life of the people in Bangladesh (see Comparison between the Pati and the Madur). The madur, by its name as the melepati, is woven mainly in the south-west coastal region of Bangladesh where its production has sharply decreased due to the spread of shrimp cultivation; as a result,
it is no longer a dominant mat in Bangladesh. Though the *madur* is a familiar mat throughout Bangladesh, both city-dwellers and villagers generally use the *pari* on ceremonial occasions. As is known from a wedding song, in Kishoreganj district a *pari*, known as the *kamranga pari*, is spread for the bridegroom to sit on.99 Wakiil Ahmed, *Banglar Loka-Sanskriti*. (Dhaka 1974), 56.

This song runs as follows:

"O Mother of the Bride, how can you sit doing nothing?
In flowered turban a husband for your daughter is coming_"

"Let the husband of my daughter come, O let him come:
There is no need to worry.
Over my door I have kept the roll of a *kamranga pari*;
In the room I have kept ready a thousand lights.
And in the courtyard the elephant is tied."

Thousands of families in rural Bangladesh live on *patishilpa*, and the weavers of the *pari*, as explained by S M Mahfuzur Rahman in *Banglapedia*, are known as the patials. According to Khogeshkiron Talukdar, mat weaving has been the trade of a group of people known as the *patitaras*.10 We would like to refer to them as the *patishilpis*. Because of the creativity and artistic talent of the outstanding *patishilpis*, the *shitalpari* became a legendary product of Bengal long ago (see The *Shitalpari*: The Legendary Mat of Bengal). The *shitalpari* goes to the international fairs from Bangladesh, and it is of utmost importance for us to maintain the status of the *shitalpari* as a renowned product in the international market. We need to highlight the *pari* more prominently in academic research, in the museums, and in exhibitions on contemporary traditional art. To express our deep admiration for the *patishilpis* who produce the *pari* in its astonishing variety and demonstrate their high sense of beauty in its creation and to show our respect to the overwhelming majority of the population—the villagers—who have made the *pari* an indispensable part of their daily life, we propose that the word *pari* be adopted as the generic term in Bangla for the English word ‘mat’ and that we use the term *patishilpa* for an in-depth study of mat weaving in Bangla. The Bangla Academy should revise its English-Bengali dictionary in respect of the Bangla synonym for the English word ‘mat’ at the earliest opportunity.

**Materials for Mat Weaving**

*Murta* is the principal material for weaving mats in Bangladesh. It is a rhizomatous shrub with an erect and glossy green stem attaining a height of 3-5 meters and a diameter of 2.0 cm. The stems are leafy and dichotomously branched. *Clinogynne dichotoima* is the scientific name of the tree. Swampy and marshy lands are suitable for *murta* cultivation. Traditionally it is propagated through rhizomes, but it can also be propagated through branch cuttings or through seeds. The propagules are planted during the months of May-June. After planting, it takes two to three years to reach the harvestable size. February-March is the harvesting period. It grows well in partial shade. It needs no special management other than weeding.
In Bangladesh, *murtua* occurs naturally in the swamp forests of the Sylhet region, and it is cultivated mostly in the districts of Sylhet. Murti Bazar, Sunamganj, Chittagong, Cox’s Bazar, Noakhali, Lakshmipur, Feni, Barisal, Jhalakathi, Patuakhali, Comilla, Dhaka, Tangail, Kishoreganj, Netrokona, and Faridpur. The *patishilpis* make strips from the outer portion of the stem including the epidermal part. These split strips are subjected to successive phases of shaving, soaking, cleaning and drying before they can be woven into mats. *Murtua* strands are also used for making baskets, bags, novelty items, etc. The pith that fills the center of the stem can be removed. The strips from the pith portion are used for binding.

*Murtua* has several local names: *muita* in Chittagong district, *jhang* in Cox’s Bazar district, *nochhitak* in Noakhali and Lakshmipur districts, *patipata* in Feni district, *patira* in Barisal, Jhalakathi and Patuakhali districts, *mutaara* in Tangail, Kishoreganj and Netrokona districts, and *murtabet* in the Sylhet region. In West Bengal, *murtua* is called *mothra*.12

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

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

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

Bamboo plays a crucial role in the rural and urban economy of Bangladesh. At least thirty-three species of bamboo grow in Bangladesh’s natural forests and village homesteads. Bamboo is used for hundreds of purposes, and it is an essential material for mat weaving in Bangladesh. Two kinds of mat are produced from bamboo strips: the *talai* or *talui* and the *darma*. 
Leaves of the *Phoenix sylvestris* are used more extensively in basketry than in mat weaving in Bangladesh. Nevertheless date-palm leaves, called *khejurpati* in Bangla, provide a good source for the production of a kind of mat called *khejurpati*.

Coconut coir is the long fiber (15-35 cm) from the husk of the mature coconut. The average husk weighs 400 grams. Coconut coir is a fiber source for many cottage industries in the coastal regions of Bangladesh.

Mat Weaving Techniques in Bangladesh

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

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

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

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

Classification of Mats

I was a child in the early 1950s. I remember that we had at our residence in Dhaka several *patis*, one *khatir*, and one *chatai*. The *patis* were used as bedspreads underneath the thin mattresses. The *madur* was used as a *jainumaz*, and the *chatai* was occasionally used for drying homemade vermicelli. My mother taught me how to differentiate these three kinds of mat by their different names, but I did not know how they were materially different from one another. In those days the elders used different
names for different mats. Nowadays most of the educated city-dwellers are no longer able to distinguish different kinds of mat; in fact, by using the sole word madur many of them are not even aware of the astonishing variety of mats in Bangladesh.

There is a lot of confusion in the literature concerning the identification of materials for mat weaving. While describing the pari as a kind of madur, Samasad Bangladesh Abhidhan pretty much implies that shitalpari is also the same as the madur. We know that the shitalpari is a popular mat in northern Cooch Bihar, Tripura, and Assam. We wonder how the compiler of Samasad Bangladesh Abhidhan has failed to refer to the pari as "a finely woven mat of a kind of aquatic grass." While it is true that the pari is a finely woven mat, the material used is not a kind of aquatic grass but kind of raffia from a climatologically shrub called mura. Maman Siddiqui, writing on Comilla district in Bangladesh, says that "shital pari" and "madur" are among the "cottage industries" of the district. Then he says that "madur" is "made of mura tree." Curiously enough, he makes no mention of the material the shitalpari is made of. A whole chapter has provided in Bangladesh is misleading.

Based on the materials used, the mat in Bangladesh falls into eight classes: the pari, madur, sadapari, dukapari, pokharpari, nakshi, phulpatri, and babni pari. The madur or mura mat is produced throughout Bangladesh and divides into seven kinds: the shitalpari, jupati, dukapari, pokharpari, nakhri, babni pari, kompar, and sadapari. The mura or mura mat is produced in Noakhali, Kishoreganj, and Tipperah. It is difficult to separate the mura mat from the babni pari. Most probably, the babni pari refers to the mura pari, but he has neither described it nor explained its material. As we are also unable to identify it, we have excluded it from our list.

When the stems of mura are split into halves and split again into quarters, the pulpier interior becomes separated from the woodier exterior. The woodier exterior is the harder strip, and the pulpier interior is the softer strip. Woven from the thin harder strips, the shitalpari is the finest pari. Woven from the thin softer strips, the dukapari is a rough pari. Woven from the broad softer strips, the pokharpari is even rougher than the dukapari. Woven from the broad harder strips, the sadapari is a fine pari, and the phulpatri, also woven from the broad harder strips, is a nakhri pari. The dolna pari is used for a rocking cradle (see Noakhali below). The kamranga pari is a ceremonial pari. Smaller than the pari, the homi pari is peculiar to Noakhali and Feni. Its weaving techniques are different. The botni pari is woven from the bottom left corner ending at the right top corner with a plait.
A plain pari is a sada pari. Similarly, a plain shitalpati, a plain bupatari, and a plain motapati are a sada shitalpati, a sada bupatari, and a sada motapati respectively. A pari with attractive designs is a nakshi pari. When decorated, a shitalpati and a bupatari become a nakshi shitalpati and a nakshi bupatari respectively. The motapati always remains plain. Like the nakshi kantha, these three decorated paris—the phulpati, the nakshi shitalpati, and the nakshi bupatari—are also decorated with various geometric patterns and figural motifs. The most common motifs on these decorated paris are trees, creepers and leaves, flowers, birds, animals, palanquins, boats, combs, houses, temples, and domes or mihrabs of the mosque. The birds include the duck, dove and peacock. The animals include the elephant, horse, deer and tiger. Like the nakshi kantha, the nakshi shitalpati exhibits a central design within a large circle enclosing either a kadam tree with its branches and leaves spreading or a multi-petaled lotus. Around the central design occur vines and creepers, of which shankalata, kalshilata, shislma and kalmilata are eye-catching.

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

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

The talai pari is both plain and decorated. When plain, it is a sada talai pari; when decorated, it is a nakshi talai pari.

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

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

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

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

The darma, which is found all over Bangladesh, always remain plain. The curved roofs of boats and bullock carts are made of damas. Damas are also used for fencing, for roofing, and for burring dead bodies in the graveyard.
The *paposh* or *darposh* is usually a rectangular mat placed immediately outside or inside the entrance to a house or other, to allow people to scrub or wipe the soles of their before entering. The *paposh* or *darposh* is also known as a welcome mat, since its location at an entrance constitutes a welcome to visitors; it may bear some word, message or sign of greetings.

**Comparison between the Pati and the Madur**

It is extremely important that we understand the differences between the *pati* and the *madur*, since we need to know Bangladesh’s uniqueness and artistic accomplishments in *pattisilpa* in contrast with west Bengal’s uniqueness and artistic accomplishments in *madurshîpa*.

Midnapore district of West Bengal is the prolific center of *madur* weaving. *Madur kathi* is cultivated extensively in southern Midnapore along the whole coastal area west of the Ganga River. *Madur kathi* is called *khamchi* in Midnapore. The *madur* is woven at many villages in Midnapore, of which Bahra, Kholabedi, Khabra, Haldia, Kanora, Pursottampur, Raghunathbadi, Dhashgram and Egra are famous.

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

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

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

**The difference between the *pati* and the *madur* technologically:** While the *pati* is woven on the floor without a loom, the *madur* is woven on a simple bamboo frame-loom. The jute/cotton fibers generally form the warp of the *madur*, and its weft is the thin, soft reed known as *madur kathi*. In weaving, the weft is the term for the crosswise or horizontal threads that are passed over and under the warp threads, and the warp is the term for the lengthwise or vertical threads over and under which the weft threads are passed. The warp and weft threads of the *pati* are the strands of the same material known as *murta*. 
The difference between the pati and the madur artistically: As already stated, the harder strips are used for weaving a finer pati, and the softer strips are used for weaving a rough pati. The shitalpati is an admirable example of the harder strips. It is of elegant design, and the colors in which it is sometimes woven are rich, harmonious and effective in the highest degree. Using the natural color variations in the madur kathi which forms the weft, the madurshilpi can create subtle patterns in a madur. Again, using the colored threads in the warp, the madurshilpi can produce a range of decorated madurs. Because of the composite and glossy texture of the pati, especially the shitalpati, the patishilpi can create a lot of geometric patterns and figural motifs (listed above) on the surface by employing the weaving techniques (discussed above). The madurshilpi does not have this advantage, though he/she can embellish the madur by external means.

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

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

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

Major Districts/Regions of Mat Weaving
Mat weaving is a leading cottage industry in Bangladesh. In Dhaka City, at New Market, at Chouk Bazar, at Sadar Ghat, and at Kaptan Bazar, one finds large mats rolled up for sale. The finest come from Sylhet, others from Chittagong, but the
majority are from the districts of Noakhali and Feni. While Sylhet, Chittagong, Cox’s Bazar, Noakhali and Feni are the most prolific centers of mat weaving, mats are made and found all over the country. During our fieldwork in 2006, we found another flourishing center of mat weaving in Jhalakathi district. For this study we have chosen eight districts and two regions: Chittagong, Cox’s Bazar, Noakhali, Feni, Faridpur, Hatia, Natore, Mymensingh, the Sylhet region, and the north-west coastal region.

Chittagong

In the markets of Chittagong, we found mats woven of strips of split cane. These were all paitis. Most were plain, undecorated, but their vendors divided them spectacularly by the quality of the weave. As we were interested in regional studies of mats in Bangladesh, we were looking for only those paitis that were made in Chittagong. We had already given any description of these paitis, we do not know their classification. Our fieldwork in Chittagong district was limited to the paitis that we found in the markets of Chittagong city. As already stated, these paitis were all prayer mats. Abdul Haque Chowdhury also reports that Chittagong district is also well known for mats called chatai and talai. The talai, a rough mat, is woven from bamboo strips. Chittagong district produces nineteen species of bamboo (see Chapter 22). Bibir Hat of Fatikchhadi upazila, Hazari Hat of Hathazari upazila, and the bazaars of central Chittagong are the marketplaces where paitis, chatais and talais are found in enormous quantities for sale.

Cox’s Bazar

Nathpara and Nathpara are two villages at Nathpara Union in Cox’s Bazar district. As observed by Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury, Hindu women at Nathpara and Putlibela weave the pati of six varieties: the shitalpati, the bukarpati, the machhla, the dolna pati, the sadapati, and the phulpati. The material used for weaving is murta, and it is called jhang in the local tongue. Jhang is cultivated in the marshes near the homesteads. The local inhabitants have an awareness of the ecological value of the marshes that support the growth of jhang.
After harvesting, the stems of jhang are split into strips. A strip is called phoyair in the local idiom. The strips are dried in the sun. To test whether the strips have dried sufficiently, one strip is bent; if it returns to its original position when the pressure is removed, the strips will not be considered fully dry. Once dried, the patishilpi shoves each strip, separating the pulpier interior from the woodier exterior. The strips are again dried in the sun, but before weaving the strips are moistened to make them supple.

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

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

The shitalpati, which is of the finer variety, is used extensively in summer, since sleeping on this pati is very comfortable when it is hot. The bukkarpati, which is of the rougher variety, is meant for use in winter. The shitalpati and the bukkarpati are basically sleeping mats and plain. The machhla is a prayer mat. It is interesting that Hindu women weave prayer mats for Muslims, unifying the two communities not only at Nathpada and Putibila but beyond these two villages in Cox’s Bazar. The dolna pati is a small pati that is placed on a small bed for a baby, or on a small wooden frame to which an infant is strapped. The sadapati and the phulpati are both inferior to the shitalpati but superior to the bukkarpati in weave. While the sadapati is a plain pati, the phulpati is a nakshi pati. These two patis are basically floor mats. The sadapati is commonly used, and the phulpati is used occasionally, especially when guests are at home or when there is a special event. It has been a living tradition among both Hindus and Muslims in Cox’s Bazar to give patis as gifts to children, brides and bridegrooms.

Sabita Nath, Basana Nath, Pushpa Nath, Sarasvati Nath, and Sumana Nath are leading patishilpis of Nathpada and Putibila. The art of weaving patis has been handed down from generation to generation in these two villages. “All my daughters have learned this art from me,” said Sabita Nath. She showed with pride several patis woven by her daughters. Sabita Nath then said:

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

Zakaria Paşa, another village at Lohagaţa thana in Cox’s Bazar district, and Putibila are known for a kind of coarse mat called talui in the local idiom. The talui is woven from bamboo slips. Bamboo grows abundantly in these two villages. Three types of
or any 9 feet long and about 7 wide. intended to be used as a mat for sleeping, sitting, dining. the feet long and 4 feet wide, intended to be used and finishes the mat in the opposite corner. The weaving techniques for the ~preads Glassie observed by When the pile:-. Green, purple and red which are available. Finally the,

The process followed to prepare the strips from the stems of bamboo—_muli bansh, mita bansh, and kali bansh_—are used in making the _talui_. 100 bamboos of any type are sold at Taka 350-450.

The process followed to weave the _talui_ starts with the collection of the bamboo that is approximately 22 inches in length and green in color. Then the bamboo is split into thin strips with a _da_. The act of splitting the bamboo is known as _koyair kara_ in the local idiom, and each strip is called _koyair_. The next step is known as _bet uthano_ (scraping the strips with a sharp knife to smoothen the edges). Each scraped strip is called _bet_. The _bets_ are spread out on the ground for drying in the sun for one day. The dried _bets_ can be preserved at home for a long time.

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

Noakhali

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

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

When the _patishilpi_ makes a _boni_, she starts weaving from the center and gradually spreads out to finish the mat. And when she makes a _patri_, she starts from one corner and finishes the mat in the opposite corner. The weaving techniques for the _boni_ and the _patri_ are different because of the differences in size. The _boni_ is smaller, about 5 feet long and 4 feet wide, intended to be used as a prayer mat. The _patri_ is larger, about 9 feet long and about 7 wide, intended to be used as a mat for sleeping, sitting, dining, or any other domestic purpose.
The *bomi*, when decorated, is pleasing to the eye. It is decorated in the process of weaving, and the usual motifs are trees, creepers and leaves, flowers, and birds. Sometimes verses from a poem, a popular message, or the map of Bangladesh and the name of the district are worked out. The weaver first draws the desired motif/motifs on a piece of white paper or on the clay floor to make sure how patterns will look. She then weaves the motif/motifs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If you ask a man in the market who made them, he will say he did. Ask again, and he will say his wife weaves them, that all women can. But when you get to the village, the women say that weaving prayer mats is very difficult and only a few can do it. In Madhya Chandpur, those few are two: Parul Begum and Roshna Begum. All the women in a weaving village can make plain cane mats. The rare master makes botris, and she works alone on commission. Between commissions, she does the work...
everyone does, but Parul and Roshna agree that commissions are frequent. Their fame has spread far beyond their village, so usually they are doing interesting work for good pay, making mats for prayer.

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

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

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

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

The parallel is clear. The pair of the large, plain mat and the decorated prayer mat is like that of the kalshi and the murti. Cane and clay are common, local substances, shaped into objects for use. One object is part of workday life. The other is an element
in a sacred ritual through which people communicate with God. The object for daily use is plain in style; it is crafted handsomely, and it is what it is: a sleeping mat, a water jar. The ritual object is representational. The bonis is a picture, the marri is a statue, but in both of them representation is enhanced by selectively applied color, and the forms are at once abstract and referential.

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

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

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

Faridpur

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

Boalmari, Shalgarh and Salair are the major sites for patishilpa in Faridpur. Khela Sharif (the playground), asmin tara (the star in the sky), jamin tara (the star on the earth), and Taj Mahal are the motifs that figure prominent in the nakshi shitalpati in Faridpur.

Jhalakathi

Jhalakathi is a prolific center of pati weaving, and its best product is the shitalpati. This account of Jhalakathi’s admirable and innovative enterprise in patishilpa is based on Kazi Khalifur Raman’s keen observation and description. If a visitor to Jhalakathi asks a local resident, “which product is the trademark of your district,” the person would reply proudly: “shitalpati.” And if you do not care to ask this question during your brief stay in Jhalakathi, someone is likely to excite your admiration.
for Jhalakathi’s shitalpati by propagating its artistic quality in glowing words—so deep is the obsession of the people of Jhalakathi for the shitalpati. By now the fame of Jhalakathi’s shitalpati has spread across and even beyond Bangladesh. A person, visiting Jhalakathi for the first time, hardly forgets to buy a shitalpati as a souvenir before leaving. It has been a time-honored tradition to greet a guest or a newcomer to Jhalakathi with a shitalpati or to give a shitalpati as a farewell gift to a departing high-ranking officer or a celebrated person. The shitalpati thus symbolizes an expression of good wishes from the people of Jhalakathi, whether you are welcome or departing. Poet Shamsur Rahman, Nirmalendu Gun, Asad Chowdhury, Justice Habibur Rahman, the head of a former caretaker government, and Syed Shamsul Haque came to Jhalakathi. The people of Jhalakathi greeted each one of them with a shitalpati. “I feel like sleeping undressed on the clay floor of my mother when I lie down on a shitalpati after spreading it on a mattress during the summer time,” says Sikandar Kabir, a famous poet and cultural personality of Jhalakathi. Mukul Rani, a patishilpi of Hailakathi village, says: “Sleep on a shitalpati after spreading it on the bare floor or on a mattress. You will then feel cool. That is why it is called shitalpati.”

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

Paitra cultivation in Jhalakathi began about one hundred fifty years ago, and it spread rapidly. Since then patishilpa has flourished in this district. There was a time when skilled patishilpis among women were held in high esteem. The more skilled patishilpi was an unmarried girl, the higher was her demand in terms of the dowry as a prospective bride. The patishilpis of Jhalakathi still remember with pride one
incident. Fifty-five years ago, Arbuthnot, an American citizen and the Regional Director of the World Health Organization, came to Jhalakathi. He was given a shitalpati. Appreciating its weaving patterns, he praised the patishilpi eloquently and rewarded her with Rs. 200. It was then a fabulous amount for one shitalpati.

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

There was a time when nature's bounty was at the command of the patishilpis. Their eyes shine when they recall the old days. A patishilpi then collected pairra from the patiban at no cost. To determine the price of a shitalpati, the patishilpi would simply take into account the time and labor that went into its production. Even though the price of a shitalpati was then much cheaper, the patishilpi was still happier with the profit. The situation has now changed because of the current nature of commerce. The patiban is no longer at the disposal of the patishilpis. It has been leased out by the government to the highest bidder. The patishilpis are now required to buy pairra from the mahajan, and this has increased the cost of production. The mahajan says that he has to pay taxes, and he has to employ some people to look after the patiban and keep the books of account. All this contributes to the rise in the prices of pairra. The patishilpis, on the other hand, complain with much discontent that they are at the mercy of the mahajan. Surely things were better when the patiban was their common property. Some of them said: “Only the government can improve our economic condition and enhance the quality of patishilpa to a level of technical and creative excellence. We are capable of meeting the needs of a thriving international market for shitalpati. The government needs to formulate a plan for the expansion of patishilpa and the export of shitalpati made to the highest standards so that we can get recognition for our creative endeavor.”
The patishilpis of Hailakathi are famous for their fine work, which is in demand throughout the district and around the country. The shitalpati is densely woven from the finely split strands. The stems of paitra are first peeled off and then split lengthwise into three parts. Each part is a strip. Peeling off is done with a da., and splitting is done with a bat. They call each strip beti. The betis are actually the finely split strands. The stems of paitra are first peeled off and then split lengthwise into three parts. Each part is a strip. Peeling off is done with a da., and splitting is done with a bat. They call each strip beti. The betis are actually the finely split strands. The betis are stiffened with rice starch. Then the betis are boiled in a mix of water and rice starch. The boiled betis, after being soaked in clean water, are dried in the sun. Weaving begins when the betis become dry. The betis from the exterior portion of a stem are used to weave the glossy shitalpati, and the betis from the interior portion of a stem are used to weave the motapati and the bukapati, which are inferior in quality and cheaper. The betis from the pith portion (the central, spongy tissue in a stem) are used in lieu of cotton threads by grocery stores for wrapping cartons containing goods.

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

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

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

The shitalpati from Jhalakathi has a good market in Kolkata, West Bengal. Some merchants export shitalpatis to West Bengal, transporting them from Jhalakathi through Benopol to Kolkata.
Patuakhali
district is very rich in hogla. As many as 30,000 people cultivate hogla at different upazilas of this district. Cultivation of hogla needs little investment and little labor. It spreads to the surrounding land once the roots are implanted in the rainy season. According to local farmers, hogla cultivation is more profitable than paddy and other crops. A farmer can earn Taka 25,000 to 35,000 a year by cultivating hogla on one acre of land whereas cultivation of paddy on the same land gives a return of Taka 10,000 to 15,000, according to them.

Thousands of women in Patuakhali district are involved in weaving mats from hogla-leaves to supplement the income of their poor families. These are coarse mats that are generally identified as chatais. In Patuakhali these mats are called hoglapatis. Hoglapatis are widely used for packing ice and fish and for storing rice in the Barisal division. Many poor families in Patuakhali district use these mats underneath their beds.

Khasher Hat, about 11 kilometers away from the Patuakhali district town, is famous for selling mats woven from hogla-leaves. A large number of traders come to this market from different parts of the country for buying them. From Khasher Hat, hoglapatis are transported to Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Sylhet, Rangpur and other districts.

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

Swarupkathi of Patuakhali district is well-known for the shitalpati. But it is particularly famous for the production of the pappo: or karpos or coconut coir.

Magura

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

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

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

As already stated, a mat woven from the reeds (called madur kathi) of meley is a madur of one kind. As reported by Ashis Basu, it is called mele in West Bengal.
Melepati weaving from madur kathi is a simple process. Only a tool locally made is needed. It is called shan-machine. The shan-machine serves the purpose of a loom on which the madur has to be woven. It costs Taka 300. The melepati that is being produced at Kechuadaubi has both the warp and weft composed of madur kathi.

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

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

Gurudash, a father of one son and three daughters, says he is well off by following Kajal’s advice. He has been involved in the enterprise for about four years. A few years ago, landless poor inhabitants of this village used to live in extreme poverty. Their bad days are over now, thanks to the efforts made by Kajal. Every year thousands of melepatis, woven from madur kathi, find their way into the adjoining districts of Jhenidah, Kushthia, Rajbadi and Faridpur, sometimes as far as Dhaka. Thus the villagers are benefiting from Kajal’s enterprise.

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

The Sylhet Region

As already stated, murra occurs naturally in the swamp forests of the Sylhet region, and it grows naturally and is cultivated in this region more abundantly than anywhere in the country. In Bangladesh, the Sylhet region leads in the production of the shitalpati both in quantity and quality. Balaganj and Fenchuganj upazilas of Sylhet district and Rajnagar and Barlekhia upazilas of Murlvi Bazar district are famous for the shitalpati. Balaganj upazila has 14 unions and 316 villages; Fenchuganj upazila has 3 unions and 88 villages; Rajnagar upazila has 8 unions and 255 villages; and Barlekhia upazila has 12 unions and 320 villages. Patishilpa will be found almost throughout the Sylhet region, especially at the villages in the above-mentioned four upazilas. Balaganj upazila is, however, most famous for the production of shitalpati of the finest quality.

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

Although shitalpati weaving is a long-standing tradition in the Sylhet region, its history is barely known. The shitalpati zarbaf was the most delicate and intricate kind
of pati from the sylhet region during the Mughal period. It was interwoven with silver wires. Some shitalpati of the zarbat brand were sent to Emperor Aurangzeb as gifts by Murshid Quli Khan.¹⁸

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

Dinesh Chandra Sen reports that Chapghat, Jaiargar, Jagannathpur, Jalsukha, and Pratapgar were famous for the shitalpati.⁹

Zinat Mahrukh Banu, who conducted fieldwork at Bilbahi village in Balaganj upazila in February 1999, reports that Atashan, Chanpur, Gauripur, Kashipur, Khujipur, Kuar Gao, Lohamuda, Mohisari, Shrinathpur, and Tilak Chanpur were famous for the shitalpati. According to her, the main center for the production of the shitalpati was Teghoria village of Gauripur union where mura grows naturally in abundance.

Md. Abdul Aziz reports that 5,305 persons of 1,087 families were engaged in patishilpa in the Sylhet region in 1981 and that they produced 99,200 shitalpatis in the same year.¹⁰

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

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

Most commonly, except in the case of a very fine natural color shitalpati, there are geometric patterns and motifs of flora and fauna. The dyes used for the production of nakshi shitalpati are chemical dyes. The colors used are green, orange, red, violet, blue, and yellow. After dyeing, the strips are placed in shade to dry and gently beaten to further soften the material. This preparation usually takes about a week, while the weaving can take from two to five weeks.
Shri Kanailal Ashram at Bilbadi village is the principal market where shitalpati from different villages of Balaganj upazila are brought for sale once a week, on Monday, from 11:00 am to 2:00 pm. The sellers are the patishilpis, and the buyers are the paikars. There is another market at Dasherbazar in Barleka upazila of Maulvi Bazar district. During her fieldwork at Bilbadi village Zinat Mahrukh Banu had the opportunity to survey a large assortment of shitalpati at Shri Kanailal Ashram on 15 February 1999. She writes:

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

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

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

It is worth noticing that the patishilpis in the Sylhet region are all Hindus with the surname of Das. Dinesh Chandra Sen was the first to notice this. An artisan caste, known as the Patiara Das, emerged in the Sylhet region long ago. Patishilpa is being handed down from generation to generation through this artisan caste. That the Sylhet region has attained the highest level of excellence in patishilpa in Bengal may be attributed to the preservation of the skills and ingenuity that have been passed on year after year within this artisan caste.
Zinat Mahrukh Banu reports that in 1999 a _shitalpati_ meant to be used as a _jainamaz_ was being sold at Taka 150 to 200, a _sada shitalpati_ meant for sleeping at Taka 500 to 600, and a _nakshi shitalpati_ at Taka 800 to 2,000. It takes from ten to fifteen days for two _patishilpis_ to weave a _sada shitalpati_, and it takes fourteen to twenty-one days for two _patishilpis_ to weave a _nakshi shitalpati_. In 1999 Paban Joy Das told Zinat Mahrukh Banu that it would take five to six months for two _patishilpis_ to produce a _sada shitalpati_ of the finest weave and that its price would range from Taka 7,000 to 8,000. According to Paban Joy Das, in the middle of the nineteenth century the _sada shitalpati_ of the finest weave from Balaganj was a highly alluring and admired product not only throughout Bengal but elsewhere in the world. Zinat Mahrukh Banu further reports that Paban Joy Das has his own garden around his homestead for _murta_ cultivation. He pursues six methods to weave the _shitalpati_, but Banu has not described them. In 1999 his family—an extended family that included his two younger married brothers—was not engaged in _patishilpa_ on a regular basis because of the slump in demand for the _shitalpati_. At one time 150 families were involved in _patishilpa_ at Bilbadi village, but in 1999 this number dropped to 7 households.

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

The South-West Coastal Region

As already stated, the south-west coastal region embraces the districts of Bagerhat, Khulna and Satkhira, together with the southern portion of Jessore district and the Sundarbans. Traditionally this coastal region of Bangladesh was famous for mat weaving from _meley_, a variety of mangrove marsh grass. There was a time when thousands of women of this region were engaged in weaving the _melepati_ from the flower stalks of this non-wood mangrove plant. As already stated, the reeds that come from the said flower stalks are popularly known as _madur kathi_. This marsh grass used to grow very profusely in the brackish as well as fresh water wetlands in the south-west coastal region, but shrimp cultivation on a massive scale in the region destroyed the ecology conducive to the natural growth of _meley_ so vital for _melepati_ weaving. At present _madur kathi_ has to be collected from the Sundarbans; procurement of this essential raw material for _melepati_ weaving involves permits and royalties. This has caused a rise in the price of the raw material. As a result, the _melepati_, so long known as the "poor man's bedding," has become a luxury item. Many other articles woven out of the split reeds used to have an export market, but due to the shortage of the essential
raw material this source of export earnings no more exists. The shortage of madur kathi has thrown thousands of patishilpis into unemployment. They are all women.

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

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

The Shitalpati: The Legendary Mat of Bengal

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

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

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

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

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

Regional Variations and Styles in the Shitalpati of Bangladesh

While the shitalpati is found almost throughout Bangladesh, the Sylhet region, Boalmari and Shatoir in Faridpur district, Jainpur of Mohanganj upazila in Netrokona
district, and Jhalakathi district are most famous for its production. Regional Variations and styles exist in the weaving of the *shitalpatti* in Bangladesh. In the case of the Sylhet *shitalpatti*, the weaving starts from the middle of the strip and ends by bending at the right upper most corner. In the case of the Boalmari and Jhalakathi *shitalpatti*, one side of the *patti* is closed by stitching it with a red cloth. Sylhet produces the best *shitalpatti* in terms of smoothness and finesse, closely followed by the open ended fine *shitalpatti* of Boalmari and Jhalakathi.

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

**Concluding Remark**

Our appreciation of the *patti* as the predominant mat in Bangladesh and of the *shitalpatti* as one region, we begin with our adoption of the word *patti* as the synonym for the English word ‘mat’ and as the generic term for any kind of mat made of *murti*, *hugla, melox, nakhalpata*, or date-palm leaves. Our proposal is consistent with the general trend that the villagers in Bangladesh have already established; they refer to various kinds of mat with the word *patti* as a suffix (discussed above).

Zinat Mahrukh Banu and Kazi Khaliul Rahman report that the *shitalpatti* is on the decline because of the high cost of the stems of *murti*. They have strongly felt the utmost need for the expansion of *murti* cultivation and for the promotion of *patishilapa*. The government must take the necessary steps to enhance *murti* cultivation. It is the responsibility of the city-dwellers to patronize *patishilpa* through greater use of *pam* *pattis* and *shitalpattis* in urban life.

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

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

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

**End Notes:**

7. Ibid., 29.
8. Ibid., 27.
15. Kazi Khalilur Rahman made an excellent survey of *patishilpa* in Jalalpur. The present author is indebted to him for using information from his survey.