

Mothi (*Cyperus rotundus* Linn.) as a basis of livelihood- A case study of Godhanpur village in Lakhanaur block of Madhubani district of north Bihar

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ABSTRACT

The paper takes into account the process of weaving of mats from the culms of Mothi (*Cyperus rotundus*) in Godhanpur village in Lakhanaur C.D. block of Madhubani district in north Bihar, India. This business forms a basis of livelihood to the Ansari community in the area. They collect the raw material from the adjoining villages that form part of the Mithila floodplains. The culms are now procured by paying a price for the same. The harvested culms are dried for about ten days and then woven over a wooden template. The plant is a repository of drugs as inscribed in the indigenous systems of medicine. *C. rotundus* mats are finer and are held comfortable as compared with the coarse mats derived from other emergent aquaphytes like *Typha* spp. *Cyperus procerus*, *Scirpus grossus*, *Chrysopogon zizanioides* etc. Mothi mats are held effective in controlling skin diseases. Increasing stress on utilizing waterbodies as reservoirs for integrated aquaculture has made wild *Cyperus rotundus* plants rather scarce. Local craftspersons colour mats by fixing the dyes in juice procured from banana pseudostem. While Hindus in Mithila region gift these mats to their daughters on their marriage, the Muslims use them for offering *namaj* and for covering corpses during burial in graveyards. This further indicates that even in the age of mass production of synthetic alternatives, those carved from natural plant sources are preferred for use.

Keywords: Mithila, North Bihar, Floodplains, Mat, Mothi (*Cyperus rotundus*)

INTRODUCTION

A civilization is based on the best use of naturally available plant and animal resources in a particular area. Rivers flowing through the saucer shaped physiography of north Bihar contribute to the formation of thousands of water bodies that provide a habitat to the growth of a large no. of aquatic plants that are variously utilized as food, fodder, drug, housing material etc. Quite a good no. of them are utilized for carving of fine and coarse mats that are woven and used by the local people. This provides them a basis of livelihood. They make earnings by selling them to the needy people. The years visited by high floods provide them ample of raw materials. This situation has been there during the year 2017 that witnessed a high spate almost after a decade. This paper takes into account the cottage practice of Mothi mat weaving that is deeply associated with livelihood of rural populace in the area under survey.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Trips were made to Godhanpur village of Lakhnaur block of Madhubani district in Mithila area of north Bihar that is considered to be a hub of **Mothi** mat making. Enumerations were made regarding the section of populace involved with this business and their level of sustenance with this vocation. Details of the weaving process including the procurement of raw materials, templates used, quantum of labour involved etc. were procured. Information collected have been presented in the form of a table and two plates containing 12 photographs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mithila region in north Bihar is known for its wetlands and bioaquatic wealth (Jha 2012 and Jha *et al.*, 2015 and 2016) Amongst aquatic plants *Scirpus grossus*, *Cyperus procerus*, *Cyperus rotundus* and *Typha* spp. are used for mat making in this area (Kumari and Jha, 2017a; Anuradha, 2016; Kumar, 2012 and Shalini, 2016). Plants of the monocot family Cyperaceae are known to produce culms/fibres and as such the family is known as mat sedge family (Benazir *et al.*, 2010).

Table 1

Details of Weaving of *C. rotundus* Mat

Stages/Parameters	
1. Local Name	Mothi
2. Time of collection of raw materials	Twice a year (June to July and Oct to Nov.)
3. Average size of mat	1.80m to 2.10 (length) 1.20m to 1.50m (breadth)
4. Time taken for weaving a mat	6 to 8 hrs.
5. Template used	Partaan made of the wood of Shisham/Jamun/mango <i>etc.</i>
6. Days required for drying the raw materials (culms)	10-12 days.
7. Main population category involved in the business	Ansari (Muslim)
8. Market price	Rs. 500-1000/ per piece
9. Investment made	Rs. 300-600/per piece
10. Profit earned	Rs. 300-400/per piece
11. Durability of the mat	8-10 years

The culms of *C. rotundus* are collected twice a year from the water body that is a source of Mothi plant having a perennial habit. The freshly harvested culms purchased by the weavers are dried under the sun for about 10-12 days. Generally two persons (wife-husband, mother-son) perform the process of weaving a mat. They use a template (locally called partaan) made up of the wood of Shisham/Jamun/mango. The culms are woven over the fine ropes (sutari) made up of the fibre of patsan (*Corchorus* sp.). Generally an average sized mat (1.20m-1.80m) takes 6-8 hrs. for complete weaving and is sold @Rs. 500-1000/ per piece. Investments are made on purchase of the culms, rope used, labour involved and colour applied. The partaan made of hard wood is a permanent item on which the investment is made only once. A craftsperson earns a profit of approx. Rs.400/ per piece. A Mothi mat lasts over 8-10 years, if used carefully (Table 1). This is as against the mat made from *Typha* spp. or *Cyperus procerus* (Shalini, 2016 and Kumari and Jha, 2017a).

The Mothi mats are procured by the Muslim community for use during burial of their dead bodies. They first cover the dead body with Mothi mat over which soil is laid during burial. Other mats are also used during the process including one made of khajur (*Phoenix dactylifera*). Mothi mat is also used by them for offering their prayers in mosque during *namaz*.

There is a practice of applying colour to the dried culms, more particularly to the mats that are used for gifting to a daughter on her marriage. Generally red, yellow, green, pink and yellowish orange colours are used in this process. Dried culms are put under the hot water after mixing of colour in the same. In order to make the colour fast and lasting, the juice of banana pseudostem is applied. This juice is known to be rich in tannin that is helpful in fixing the colour (Barhanpurkar *et al.*, 2015). Fig 11 shows a Mothi mat with coloured stripes.

Altogether 12 figures in cited in the two plates (Plate 1 and 2) depict the different stages of **Mothi** mat enterprise as prevalent in Godhanpur village of Madhubani district.



Fig.1: *C. rotundus* plants-natural habitat



Fig.2: Dried culms purchased by the weavers



Fig.3: Stacks of dried Mothi culms stored in a house



Fig.4: An Ansari man weaving a Mothi mat inside his house



Fig.5: Ansari men and women working in a group for weaving Mothi mats in Godhanpur village of Madhubani district



Fig.6: An Ansari woman in the process of weaving a Mothi mat in an orchard

Plate 1



Fig.7: A mother and son jointly weaving a Mothi mat over a template, figure shows dried culms alongside the



Fig.8: A weaver cutting the unwanted parts of the woven mat to give it a symmetrical shape



Fig.9: Mothi mats being dried before giving them a final touch



Fig.10: Marginal portion of the mat being strengthened by tying the rope used as template



Fig.11: Finished Mothi mats ready for sale



Fig.12: An Ansari boy with stacked Moth mats going to market for sale

Plate 2

Traditionally the *C. rotundus* mats are called “**sheetalpati**” *i.e.* one that has soothing and curative effect on skin. *C. rotundus* plants are known to be a store house of a no. of phyto-chemicals. Reports available speak of the plant being used for control of several diseases including skin infection like eczema, ringworm *etc.*(www.planetayurveda.com).

Its tuberous root called “*must*” is a component of “*saptaushadhi*” (the seven drug plants) used during auspicious Hindu rituals. The traders put it in their chests on the occasion of Deepawali. The plant has a significant place in the indigenous systems of medicine (Kamraj *et al.*, 2015).

The craftsperson first ensure the quality of the culms with reference to their strength by pressing them with their palm fingers over the same. This is with a view to drive out the air trapped inside the culms. The culms are sold as ‘*muthia*’ (handfuls). One ‘*muthia*’ contains around 130-150 culms. To make the mat more compact the woven culms in a mat are tightened by pulling the rope template and also by rubbing out the woven culms to make them smoother.

People belonging to the Ansari community of Godhanpur village harvest the culms from the adjoining villages like Lakhanaur, Nirmalli, Kharaira, Gunakarpur, Gangapur, Madhepur, Karhara, Marauna, Khushiyali, Bhaluaai, Ghaghodia, Kishanpatti *etc.* A pond in

Sudai village of the same Lakhaur block at a distance of approx. 22km east of Godhanpur village is a site of dense growth of *C. rotundus* plants. The pond is approximately 10ft deep having a thick layer of floating and emergent macrophytes on which one can move freely from one end to the other.

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