

Vetiver and 'Sikki Art' in the Folk Life of Rural India in the Mithila Region, Bihar*

Vetiver (locally known as *katara* grass) grows abundantly in the floodplains of Mithila (north Bihar, India). It holds an esteemed place in Indian mythology. Vetiver is used in the centuries old *Sama-Chakeba* festival observed for welcoming the migratory birds in Mithila wetlands during the onset of winter season. The plant is formally worshipped by the women while observing the *Ravi-vrata* as obeisance to the Sun God.

The plant provides raw material to the 'sikki' handicraft industry that has facilitated the economic emancipation of rural women in Mithila area. Antiquity of this folk art in *Mithila* goes back to six centuries since the days of poet Vidyapati, who mentioned the plight of women stalk collectors in his *Maithili* poems.

Rural women collect mature inflorescence stalks of vetiver from the wild mostly during September - October when the rains are over. Exquisite domestic items of both conventional and modern hues are carved out from inflorescence stalks of vetiver after their softening by pretreatment with warm water. The circular stalks with 2 to 3.5 mm diameter are cleaved into two, four, eight or even sixteen pieces depending upon the artist's capacity to use the fineness. The partitioned strands are intricately woven around a grassy base made of other poaceous grasses with the help of a specific needle. Using over two-dozen designs various types of containers, fans, wall hangings etc are carved. Social scientists are of the view that some of these designs resemble those found in the clay potteries and coins obtained in Harappa excavations. Some plant-based designs include those of the leaves of *Ipomoea aquatica*, flower of *Benincasa hispida*, fruit of *Trapa natans* etc. Fast colors are applied to the *sikki* items through hot water treatment with common salts also dissolved in it. Earlier a dye obtained from the bark of *Artocarpus lakoocha* was used to color the *sikki* gadgets.

Sikki items are almost immune to pest attacks, which could be ascribed to the presence of pesticidal principles in the plant. Investigations are required to decipher the genetic diversity in its populations with a view to ascertaining the quantum of inherent pesticides as well as those of fragrant oils. Certain new initiatives in fashion designing have witnessed blending of *sikki* with jute items. Madhubani based voluntary agencies like *Sewa Mithila*, *Adithi*, *Gramin Vikas Samiti*, etc. are promoting this essentially rural craft through cooperative endeavors. Exquisite wall hangings carved by the *Rachana Sikki Hasta Kala Kendra* near Sarisabpahi in this district are selling at the price of one to two thousand rupees (ca. US \$ 20 - 40) for a single item. *Sikkiware* are getting popular through exhibitions at national and international levels. *Sikki* art has removed the penury of a good number of women artists. Nuna Khatoon and Gulesha Khatoon are some worth quoting women artists who after initiating from a level of abject poverty have now earned prosperity for their families. *Sikki* artists like Kumudini Devi of Sursand (Sitamadhi district) and Sudama Devi of Raima (Madhubani district) have won national awards. The latter was conferred 'Padmashri' – a national Civilian Honor from the Government of India in recognition of her excellence in this art. This intricate art requires more time and patience. The artists often achieve perfection and excellence when they are in an advanced age. Needle work often leads to impairment of their vision.

Vetiver is a source of perfumed oil and is widely used as a cold beverage. *Ayurveda* holds it as a remedy for skin infections including that of leprosy. It provides an antidote to snake bite and also helps check the tendency of abortion. The slender leaves emerging after decapitating the older portions of the plant are fed to the cattle in combination with other fodders. There is a need to investigate whether the mention of *khus* seeds as the lowest unit of measurement in the ancient Indian text of Economics - the '*arthashastra*' by Kautilya bears a reference to the minute vetiver seeds. Vetiver as a potential agent of phytoremediation could also provide a solution to the recently discovered arsenic contamination in the drinking water of West Champaran and Bhojpur districts in the State of Bihar.

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