



biswa banola  
where the world meets bengal

# THE BEAUTY OF THE HANDCRAFTED

Bengal's handicrafts and handloom: perfectly imperfect, beautifully  
crafted, all steeped in history, meaning and memory







*We thought it's time for a new conversation on Bengal and to tell its story – a story of how we connect to our heritage with our ambitions for the future, to re-interpret the best of our cultural traditions and combine it with what's now and what's to come.*

*So, we brought in a range of experiences that shaped Bengal and would stay with us in the years to come. We brought together its handloom and handicrafts, its sweets and sauces, its varieties of rice and honey, its cheeses and cakes, its music and books, its painters and film makers...*

*The Biswa Bangla showrooms are like windows to the world of Bengal. We have left the drapes open so that a viewer can gaze into the soul of our land and its people and feel the love and hard work that has gone into the making of our handicrafts, our hand-woven fabrics, our food, and our distinct personality.*





## For the people behind the stories

*The British Museum website has a document from 1730 listing the range of textiles or the “piece goods” purchased in Bengal by the East India Company. During the 18th Century, Indian textiles comprised 60 per cent of the total value of the Company’s sales in London. Purchases included fine muslins, printed chintz, cotton and silk gingham and embroidered quilts.*

Bengal’s folk art defies easy categorization. The designs are often particular to a specific region; some pieces carry the imprint of outside influences, ancient and modern. Sometimes an entire village will specialize in a particular craft tradition, with artistic styles and techniques passed from one generation to the next.

It was this rich tradition, its Intangible Cultural Heritage, that Biswa Bangla (BB) is working to revive, preserve and promote. BB, which was set up in 2014, is a social enterprise by the Department of MSME & Textiles, Government of West Bengal, India. On the larger scale, it is an initiative to raise the level of development among Bengal’s artisans and weavers so that they can operate autonomously and flourish.

It harnesses strategic market linkages to facilitate their big leap from drudgery, poverty and daily wages to the dignity of an artist. A series of interventions at the back-end supports the artisans grow into entrepreneurs. Biswa Bangla ploughs its profits back to these people at the bottom of pyramid whose skills and expression are pivotal to the initiative’s success.





## Quality first, customer first

BB reaches out to hundreds of craftsmen and weavers in the state to develop handicrafts and textiles that stand out in quality and uniqueness. The products are tested by world-leading, third-party certifiers for assurance of quality and benignity to health and environment. While the products retain the deep-rooted elements of Bengal's heritage, they are shaped in contemporary design to suit the needs and preferences of 21st-century global citizens.

Biswa Bangla's 'social business' runs parallel to a number of collaborative initiatives aimed at skilling people in the niche art and crafts of Bengal. This has not only helped to revive

almost-lost art and conserve heritage but also improve the standard of life of artisans. BB employs business-as-usual social and environmental safeguards in sourcing and production, and raises the bar constantly to align its operations to global standards.

One of the initiatives that needs special mention here is the Rural Craft Hub, a collaboration between the Government of West Bengal and UNESCO. Ten Rural Craft Hubs, comprising nine traditional crafts spread across West Bengal, are being built as model cases of culture-based rural development. The hubs integrate culture and artistic skills into an entrepreneurship development strategy and is helping 3,000 craft families directly and 7,500 indirectly.



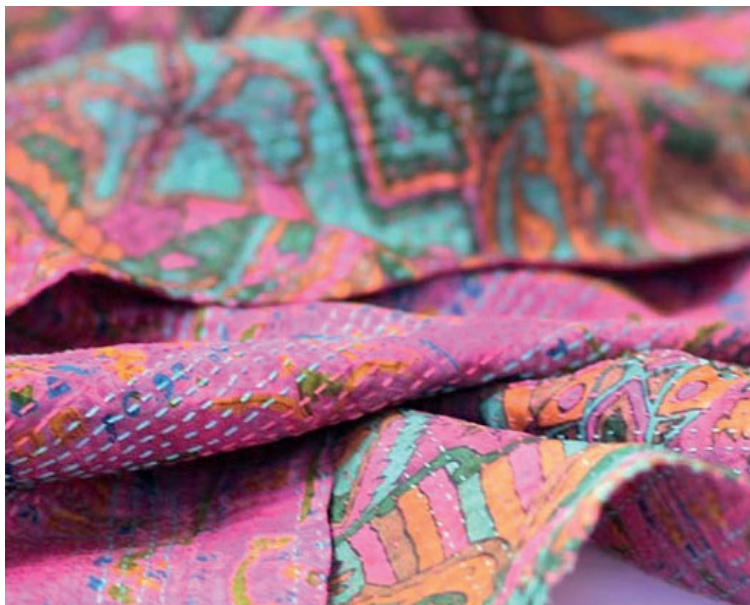


## Kantha

Kantha is an indigenous household craft of the rural women of West Bengal, India. The craft form originated as embroidered quilts not less than a thousand years ago, often to keep babies warm. This has with time developed into a full-fledged art form, making way for the embroidery on diverse textiles such as traditional women's wear (sarees) among several other products. It remains the most creative of all embroidery styles, characterized by simple running stitch securing layers of cloth together. The Kantha stitch not only reinforces the fabric but creates lines, fields of colour and motifs at the same time. Nothing embodies women's creativity better than the legendary Nakshi Kantha, a Geographical Indication (GI) product of West Bengal. Biswa Bangla presents the exquisite Kantha stitch of West Bengal on silk and cotton in a wide range of textiles and home furnishing products.

The Rural Craft Hub (RCH) of Kantha supports 3000 rural craftswomen, poor but enterprising, in sustainable production of this unique craft. Interventions such as skill building for design improvement, product diversification, market exposure in fairs and festivals have helped raise the women's income from a monthly average of US\$12 to US\$100 - 650 per month according to their skill levels. Improved incomes have enabled the families invest in education and improved nutrition for their children.

*Products: Layered stoles, Table mats and runners, Blankets, Scarves, Sarees, Shawls*





## Jamdani

Jamdani is a vividly patterned sheer cotton fabric, traditionally woven on a hand loom by craftswomen in West Bengal. Its vibrant colours and the richness of its motifs make Jamdani stand out from among other handloom products. Jamdani textiles were exported to Kabul, Baluchistan, Iran, Arabia, Persia and Greece for a premium in the 17th century.

Handweaving Jamdani is time-consuming and labour-intensive because the motifs are created directly on the loom using the discontinuous weft technique. A highly skilled weaver takes almost a year to weave an exquisite Jamdani saree. BB has revived Jamdani by securing the livelihoods of poor craftswomen in rural West Bengal and increasing their market access. More than 650 weavers and another 1,000 artisans in preparatory work are engaged in this art for their livelihood. BB's market-linked interventions on design improvement, revival of ancient designs and product diversification have helped increase the average income of these weavers from US\$100 to US\$200 per month. The brand has introduced Jamdani on silk, linen and cotton-silk blend fabrics and in products like scarves, pocket squares, sarees and shawls.

*Products: Fabric, Scarves, Sarees, Shawls, Pocket squares*





## Baluchari

Baluchari, the widely admired silk saree, is a Geographical Indication (GI) product of West Bengal and has a history of over 200 years. It is characterised by its intricate designs that often depict scenes from India's ancient epics and mythology. The sophisticated hand-weave and colour harmony make Baluchari an object of desire.

Today, this labour-intensive art is handwoven in jacquard loom where two weavers are required to weave a saree. The younger generation of weavers are opting out of this craft because the Baluchari weave is technically difficult and not proportionately remunerative. BB has stepped in to conserve this heritage craft. It supports 120 Baluchari weavers and another 360 artisans engaged in preparatory work with better returns and improved market access while diversifying product offering to cater to the demand of contemporary buyers. The interventions that include design improvement, product diversification and strategic marketing have helped raise their average income from US\$70 to US\$90 per month.

*Products: Fabric, Scarves, Sarees, Shawls, Home Furnishing products*



## Indo-Portuguese Shawl

The Indo-Portuguese quilts mark a period in history when Indian textiles had reached the peak of their sophistication. The designs show strong influence of Christian imagery and the Italian renaissance. This represents some of the oldest surviving textile wonders of the country that were predominantly made for European export between 1550 and 1650 CE. In its revived form, this beautiful quilted fabric can be used as a bed cover, wall hanging, tablecloth or floor covering.

BB has supported an all-women self-help group to revive this heritage craft with its unique craft work on the best of cotton fabric and Tussar silk threads. A new generation has been trained in this craft form and their talent showcased in international fora. BB's interventions have helped increase the women's average income from US\$40 to US\$100 per month.





## Balaposh

The faintly fragrant silk 'Balaposh' quilt is an example of fine craftsmanship in West Bengal. What sets it apart is its characteristic softness and sublime fragrance that wafts through its quilted layers when it is unfolded. A thin layer of cotton perfumed with *attar* (traditional Indian perfume) snuggles between two blankets of silk in this three-layer quilt.

Today, the art of Balaposh making is a closely guarded secret of the family that used to handcraft this premium quilt for Bengal's royalty in historic times. BB has revived this almost-forgotten wonder of Bengal's heritage and produces 3-4 pieces in a month.

The man behind the Balaposh was Atir Khan, who made them for the Nawab of Murshidabad in Bengal. Today, the art of Balaposh making is a closely guarded secret and the legacy is carried forward by the family of Shekhawat Hussain Khan, the great grandson of Atir Khan.



## Muslin

The origins of Bengal muslin are more than a thousand years old. Hand woven from uncommonly delicate hand-spun yarn, muslin was produced from a cotton plant that grew exclusively along the banks of a certain stretch of the Brahmaputra river. In historic times, Bengal's Muslin was exported to far off Rome under the name *textalis-ventalis* meaning woven air. It was also referred to as 'evening dew' and 'morning mist'. The best quality Muslin of unparalleled fineness was valued at such extraordinarily high premium that only the very rich could afford it.

Spinning and weaving Muslin needs immense skill and patience. Thus this premium fabric with up to 500 threads per inch is produced at a very small scale at present. BB supports about 2,000 underprivileged weavers of Muslin with improved working conditions, use of better tools and looms, skill development, product diversification and access to markets.

*Products: Fabric, Apparel, Scarves, Sarees, Home Furnishing products, Bags and Accessories*





## Dokra

Dokra is a 4000-year old art of sculpting brass, nickel and zinc with the ancient technique of lost wax metal casting (*cire perdue*). It is named after the Dhokra Damar tribes, the traditional metalsmiths of West Bengal. The craft is characterized by its primitive simplicity, charming folk motifs, rustic beauty and imaginative design.

Traditionally, craftspersons used to make objects of use like brass vessels to measure rice, bells, anklets, lamp holders and figures of local mythical characters. BB has helped diversify the Dokra craft into a range of artefacts from eclectic jewellery, home décor items such as candle stands, book holders, decorative tabletops to cutlery, hooks, key hangers and other stationery that appeal to various kinds of customers.

Various BB interventions such as design and entrepreneurial capacity building, product diversification, adoption of modern technology for furnace and strategic market linkages at the Rural Craft Hub of Dokra have helped about 250 artisans to increase incomes from below US\$100 to US\$300-500 per month. This has in turn helped improve their housing, water, sanitation and hygiene standards, and the school attendance of their children.

*Products: Statuettes, Hooks, Door handles, Soap trays, Book holders, Photo frames, Pin holders, Candle holders, Bells, Bowls, Cutlery sets, Bottle openers, Napkin holders.*



## Patachitra

*Pat* means a piece of cloth scroll and *chitra* means painting. The Patuas, a community of itinerant scroll painters and singers in West Bengal, used a unique form of story-telling while travelling from village to village. The patachitra (painting) would be unrolled in front of audiences and the patua would sing about the mythological stories that the paintings contained. The most famous school of *pata* art is the Kalighat School in Kolkata of the 19th century. The themes and the style of the Kalighat patachitra were what made them unique: the prime focus of the patachitra was a satirical discourse of the Bengali landlord culture that was in vogue then and other urban issues and events.

BB presents this product of the Rural Craft Hub of Patachitra as a unique heritage art on apparel, stationery items and home décor products to harness contemporary markets for the conservation of this art. BB's interventions for entrepreneurship development, design skills improvement, product diversification, and market linkage have helped raise the income of about 250 indigenous artist entrepreneurs at the hub from US\$200 per month to US\$500 and above in the last two years. Improved sanitation, literacy, and school attendance of children have been some of the positive spin-offs of BB's intervention.

*Products: Paintings, Patachitra on Bags, Scarves, Stoles, Sarees, Crockery and Home Furnishing products.*





## Terracotta

Terracotta craft originated in West Bengal under the Malla dynasty towards the end of the 7th century AD. Historically, the artefacts were used for ritualistic purposes associated with local village gods and worship of tribal, semi-tribal and folk deities. Traditional terracotta artists used to inscribe temple walls with this beautiful artwork. To scale up this internationally appreciated art form, BB set up the Rural Craft Hub of Terracotta in 2014. Design and entrepreneurial capacity building, product diversification and other market-linked interventions have helped increase the monthly income of about 250 terracotta artists from below US\$100 to US\$200-500, helping them continue the art as a viable livelihood option.

In this craft form, a blend of different types of clay found in river beds and pits is shaped into beautiful designs, and baked at high temperatures to give the material stiffness and stability. BB has diversified into home décor items, jewellery, and other utility products like lamps, tubs, crockery, tiles, etc.

*Products: Statuettes, Wall hangings, Key holders, Coffee mugs, Tea sets, Crockery, Masks, Dolls*





## Sheetalpaati

*Sheetal* means cool while *paati* means mat in Bengali. These unique all-season mats are made from the soft green cane slips of *Maranta dichotoma* plant, split lengthwise into fine strands. There are about 14,000 families who weave these mats for their livelihood. BB set up the Rural Craft Hub of Sheetalpaati for development of both the craft and the artisans.

The interventions helped them diversify the handicraft from mat weaving to making products like multi-use baskets, wall hangings, bags, folders, hats, shoes, mobile phone covers, coasters, panels and various other home décor and lifestyle products. They have also learnt to dye the cane strands which has added value to the products. The Rural Craft Hub of Sheetalpaati has helped to substantially improve the artisans' skills and access to markets and their average monthly income has gone up from below US\$80 to US\$100-300.

*Products: Floor mats, Bags, Baskets and Shoes*

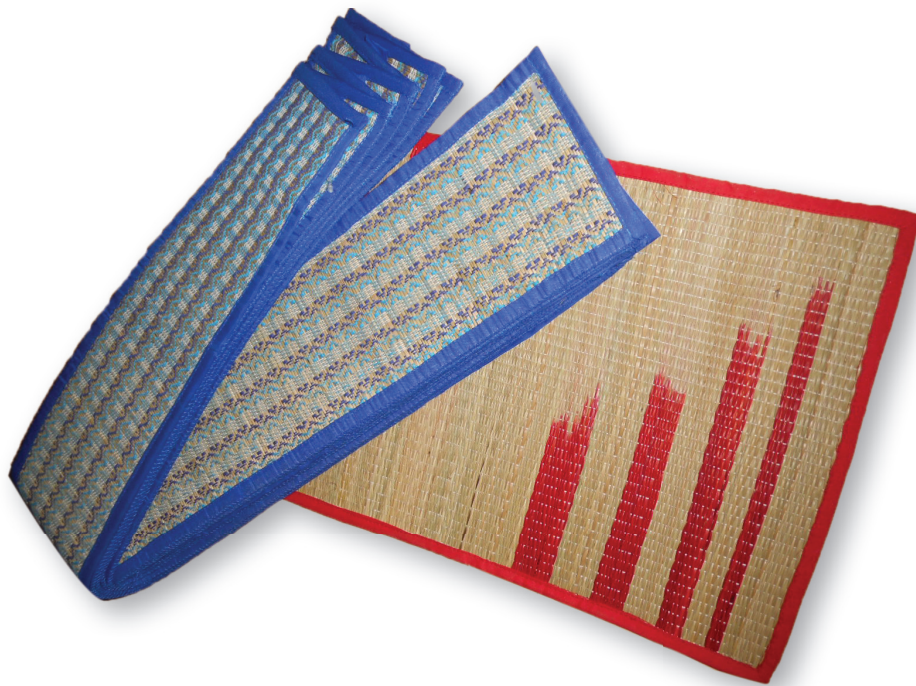


## Madurkathi

Madurkathi is a grass weed (*Cyperus corymbosus*) used for making mats. The art of Madur (mat) weaving is an age-old cottage industry of West Bengal with about 4000 families involved in it for livelihood. The history of mat weaving dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization. These mats are traditionally handwoven on a simple bamboo frame. Warp is of cotton thread and weft is the thin soft reed of Madurkathi.

BB set up the Rural Craft Hub of Madurkathi to enhance the skills of these artisans for design improvement, dyeing, product diversification, and entrepreneurship. Artisans now make various diversified products with Madurkathi including table runners, curtains, hats, purses and sun-guards. The interventions have encouraged younger generation to come back to this profession. The artisans' monthly income has increased from about US\$20 to US\$50 per month due to this market-linked initiative. This has helped the families to invest in sanitation, hygiene, children's education, nutrition etc.

*Products: Pencil boxes, Coasters, Table mats, Runners, Floor mats, Curtains*









## Biswa Bangla: working for a million-plus artisans and weavers

### ***Rural Craft Hub (Rs30 crore, US\$4.5 million) – a new paradigm of development in handicrafts***

A project taken up in 2014 in collaboration with UNESCO to develop the age-old traditional crafts of West Bengal through 10 rural craft hubs. It aims at graduating wage-earning craftspeople into artisan-entrepreneurs and thus giving them dignity and social recognition. The project has been expanded in 2016 to cover 20,000 artisans.

### ***Project Muslin (Rs20 crore, US\$3 million) – reviving the jewel of fabrics***

The revival of muslin, the finest of cotton fabrics that first introduced Bengal to the world over a century ago, is being addressed comprehensively to uplift the economic and social status of the weavers, develop enterprise and thus create a steady growth of the muslin industry in the State. Starting with 680 families in 2014, the project now covers 2000 families of muslin artisans.

### ***Project Baluchari (Rs10 crore, US\$1.5 million) – reviving an exquisite silk-based art form***

The project attempts to rejuvenate Baluchari, a GI product of West Bengal and known for its unique motifs, colours, textures. It covers 300 weavers.

### ***Integrated Handloom Cluster Development (Rs200 crore, US\$30 million)***

101 handloom clusters have been developed all over the State during the last three years covering about 400 weavers in each cluster. The target is to reach 100,000 weavers and allied workers through planned interventions.

### ***Karma Tirthas (Rs75 crore, US\$11 million) – rural marketing outlets***

The project facilitates marketing support to weavers and artisans. A Karma Tirtha supports about 1000 artisans directly and indirectly by providing them with marketing outlets in a rural shopping complex. Each complex has open space for exhibitions, fairs, buyer-seller meets, etc.

#### **These interventions:**

- Build capacity of weavers and artisans
- Help product diversification and provides design support
- Bring in modern technologies for production
- Reduce toxins and replaces the raw materials with organic products
- Provide Common Production Centres
- Provide common facilities for new technology and modern machines
- Provide common dyeing facilities
- Provide looms and improved tool kits
- Provide domestic and international market linkages
- Provide support for fair trade practices









Department of MSME & T, Government of West Bengal  
12, BBD Bag (East), Hemanta Bhawan, Kolkata 700001, India  
email: [msme@wb.gov.in](mailto:msme@wb.gov.in)

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