

Flowers and other articles made with Pith

Shola grows wild in marshy waterlogged areas. The biological name of shola is *Aeschynomene aspera* of the bean family. It is an herbaceous plant, which grows particularly in the marshy areas of Bengal, Assam, Orissa and the Deccan. The sholapith is the cortex or core of the plant and is about 1.5 inches across.

Crafts

Traditionally sholapith products were used in decorating Hindu idols and in creating the headgears of brides and grooms for a traditional Bengali wedding. In more recent times, sholapith handicrafts have found a wider application in home décor, as artistic objects, and garlands.

M.Govindaraj and his family make finely detailed handicrafts using the foamy pith of the *sola* plant. Also known by its Tamil name *netti*, *sola* (*Aeschynomene indica* or *Aeschynomene aspera*) is a reed that grows in waterlogged areas. Its spongy inner core (obtained after a light woody covering is skinned off), is 1.5 inch in diameter. Skilled artisans cut along the circumference to produce small sheets of white paper-like quality that are then cut and used to create models of local landmarks, photo frames, deities, wedding ornaments, decorative headgear, and figurines used in temple rituals.

Mr. Govindaraj is the third generation exponent of *sola* pith carving in Madurai. *Sola* pith carving is popular in West Bengal, where religious artifacts made out of the plant-based material are used during the Durga puja celebrations. "Everything is joined with glue (cooked refined flour starch or chemical epoxy), but the real workmanship lies in not showing the joints

Using just one knife and a steady hand, Mr. Govindaraj makes different flowers like jasmine, roses, mullai, marigold and many more flowers. He can also color them to make these flowers look like real flowers. Garlands with different designs are made with these flowers. He learnt the art from his father Mr. Moorthy Naidu. With the wetlands disappearing, the *sola* pith is becoming harder to find. "Each stalk of the reed costs Rs. 10, of which not all may be usable," said Mr.Govindaraj."Most of our material comes from Andhra Pradesh or Thanjavur's paddy fields."

He is assisted by his sisters but is unsure about the survival of the craft. “The Government is not interested in helping us. The workmanship of the older generation is also vanishing,” he said.

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Honorarium per visit	: Rs.1500/-

(Needs at least 3 days advance information for him to prepare and demonstrate)