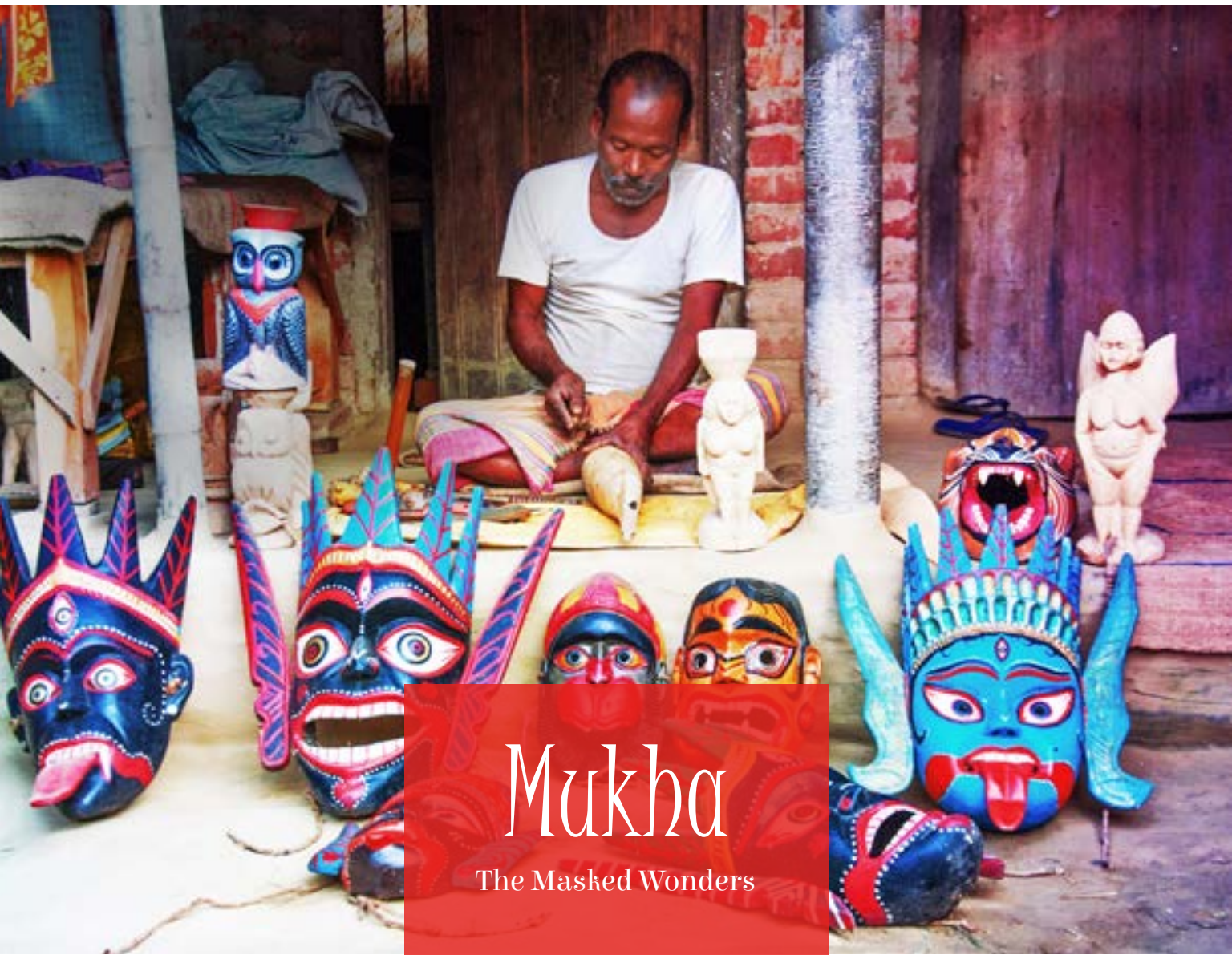


Rural Craft & Cultural Hubs of West Bengal



Mukha
The Masked Wonders

“

Art is not just a handicraft. It is the transmission of feeling the artist has experienced

Leo Tolstoy

Rural Craft & Cultural Hubs of West Bengal



West Bengal is a treasure trove of natural and cultural heritage. The intangible cultural heritage of Bengal is an exemplary instance of the aesthetic lineage of Bengal. Utilitarian lifestyle items like basketry made with date palm leaves and Sabai grass, hand spun and hand woven jute rugs (Dhokra), mats made with cane slips (Sitalpati) or Madurkathi (Madur), pottery, Kantha-spreads, decorative and ritualistic items made out of Shola and others, reflect a curious fusion of indigenous craftsmanship and utility. Bengal's art and craft reflect cultural history, ethnic roots, and lifestyle in-tune with nature. Variety of masks, Dokra and metal work, range of indigenous weaves and embroideries, dolls, masks and figurines curved out of wood are examples of Bengal's artistry. Culture of Bengal is enriched by the mellifluous tunes of the Baul, Bhawaiya, Bhatiyali singers, rapturous dances of Chau, Raibenshe and Jhumur, storytelling traditions like puppetry and Patachitra, and folk theatres like Gambhira, Banbibir Pala among other folk forms.

The Rural Craft and Cultural Hub (RCCH) Project is an initiative of the Department of Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises and Textiles (MSME&T) and UNESCO aiming to rejuvenate the rich cultural heritage of West Bengal and strengthen rural creative enterprise. The journey started in 2013 and the RCCH project currently covers 50,000 handicraft and folk artists across the state. It has strengthened the ecosystem supporting the transmission of traditional skills in art and craft, fostered direct market linkage, engaged youth in pursuing their traditions, and promoted cultural tourism to the villages of the artists. The project is indeed a testimonial to the contribution of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) to sustainable development, social inclusion and also to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



Gomira dance

The story behind the masks

The Gomira mask dance of Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur districts has ensued from the animistic practices of the Desi and Pali communities of the Rajbangshis. The Gomira dance or Mukha dance are organised to propitiate the deity to usher in the good forces and drive out the evil force during the harvesting season. The Gomira dancers are all male and portray one or many characters, male, female or animal. All the characters are larger than life, and the masks add grandeur and transform the dance performance into a spectacle. The Gomira dance starts with the entry of two characters – Bura-Buri, who are actually the human forms of Shiva and Parvati. The frenzied dancers are subjects of awe and veneration to the audience, who believe supernatural spirits enter the dancers' bodies during the performance.

Apart from the ritualistic purpose, this dance performance is also a source of joy and gaiety for the villagers. During 1970s, the villagers planned to perform the masked dance based on the story of Ramayana which can be performed at any time of the year. Ramer Banobas was written and character masks of Ram, Lakshman, Sita, Ravana, Surpanakha, Marich, Jatayu were made.

Apart from serving as indispensable props to the Gomira dance, the masks, with time, have secured a market of their own and have become delectable pieces of decoration for any public or private space.





The Masks

The masks are carved out of wood and bamboo. Traditionally, the masks were objects of worship and devotion. Thus, the craft of Gomira mask making, in its pristine form, catered to the needs of the dancers and any villager wishing to give a mask as an offering to the village deity. The wood crafted Gomira masks represent the characters of two distinct dance forms: the Gomira and Ramer Bonobas. The uniqueness of the masks rests in portraying the characters with intricate detailing.

Wooden Mask has received the Geographical Indication Status in 2018.

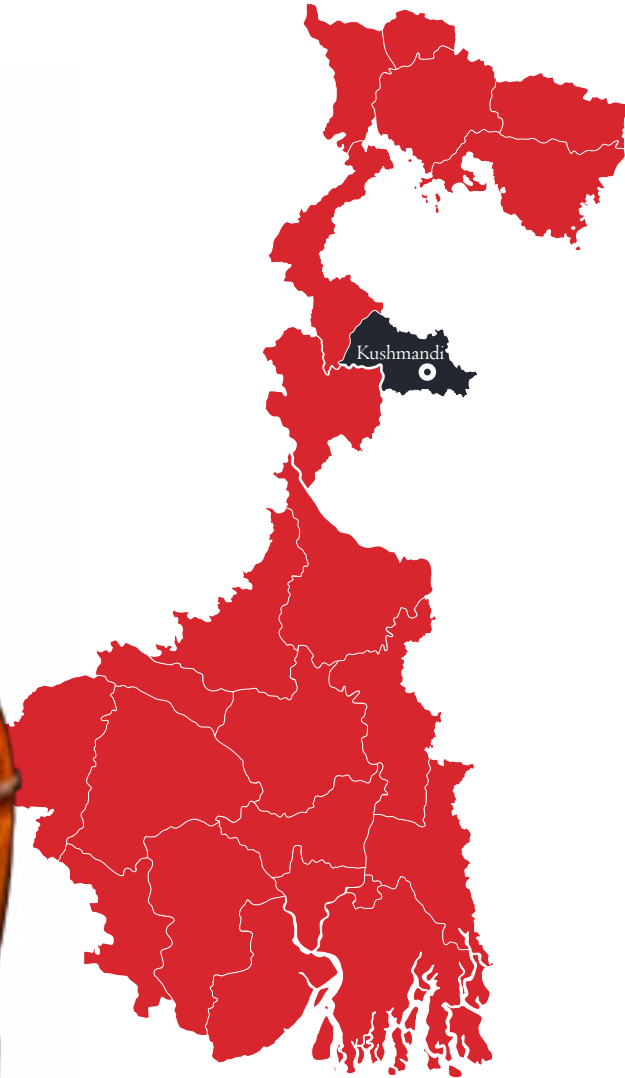


Craft Hubs

District:
Dakshin Dinajpur



Village: Kushmandi



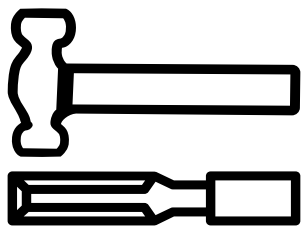
Kushmandi

Kushmandi in Dakshin Dinajpur is known for the craft tradition of wooden mask making. A registered society named of Mahishbathan Gramin Hasta Shilpa Samabay Samity Limited is located in Khuniadangi. This society operates as a cooperative of crafts persons who live in the nearby villages and are devoted to the craft of wooden mask making. Wooden Mask makers reside in the villages of Mahishbathan, Mangaldaha, Madhupur, Ruanagar, Sabdalpur, Sindurmuchi, and other villages. Kushmandi is the largest hub of Gomira mask making. The Nearby village of Ushaharan, Baishyapara, is also a major hub of mask makers. Sankar Das has travelled to international countries like UK, France to present the craft form of wooden masks.

168 artists of Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur are involved in the craft tradition.

Sankar Das, Ananta Sarkar, Gopal Baishya, Tulu Sarkar, Sanjulal Sarkar, Jaga Baishya, Gostho Baishya are leading craftsperson of the region.

A folk-art centre along with community museum has been developed by the West Bengal Khadi & Village Industries Board at Kushmandi.



Kushmandi Artist

Men - 164 | Women - 04

• Siten Sarkar :	8145269262
• Paresh Chadra Sarkar :	9733462109
• Sankar Das :	9593358360
• Tulu Sarkar :	9609937877
• Nandi Sarkar :	8158932313
• Ananta Sarkar :	8145157712
• Kalyan Sarkar :	9593601647
• Dipak Sarkar :	9732894053
• Sanjulal Sarkar :	9734958839
• Shib Soren :	8967967318
• Gostho Baishya :	7407149148
• Goutam Baishya :	9733362566
• Paltu Baishya :	7098201104
• Shanti Baishya :	9593078835





Process

The process of making wooden masks involves cross-sectional cutting of wood/bamboo, drawing the design on the block and finally carving the details. Masks are then painted, polished or burnt with a gas lamp for finishing. Hammers, chisels, and hand drills are some of the tools used for making wooden masks.

Gomira masks are made of wood and are available locally. Light-weighted wood, especially Gamhar, is preferred. The masks are also made with Shegun, Mahogany and Mango wood.

The wood undergoes a process of seasoning and chemical treatment before the masks are carved. The natural process of treatment includes soaking and drying of the wood block alternatively over a considerable period of time. This makes the wood crack resistant and reduces the chances of infestation.

The chemical process to achieve similar results is by soaking the wood block in a solution of Boric acid, Borax and Copper Sulphate, mixed in 1 litre of water in the proportion of 3:4:5. This treatment provides for protection against termite and other forms of bug infestation and makes the wood resistant.



Drawing of design on the block

Cross sectional cutting of wood/bamboo

Carving out the details

Masks are then painted, polished or burnt with gas lamp for finishing



Tools

Products

Masks of mythical characters such as Bhadra Kali, Narasimha, Bibhishan, Ravana, Hanuman and others are made with intricate detailing. Apart from that, the artists also make masks of animals such as tiger, lion, deer etc. With time, the wooden mask makers have diversified their produce and they are also making a range of show-pieces such as mermaid, boat, smaller masks and other innovative items. They are also making utility products like lamp shades, pen stands, baskets, bamboo furniture etc.



Traditional Masks







Innovations



Fridge Magnets





Folk-Art Centre

A folk-art centre has been made at Kushmandi with the support of the West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board. The folk-art centre serves as the collective workshop space, where the mask makers daily come to make a range of products. The folk-art centre houses a gallery showcasing different types of masks and exhibits the traditional processes adhered for making the wooden masks.



Festival

Every year, the mask makers of Kushmandi organize festivals to celebrate their local cultural heritage. The festivals attract huge tourist footfall and adds value to the rural space as a cultural tourism destination.





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Department of MSMEAT
Government of West Bengal