

# Women Empowerment through Golden Grass Craft in Rural Odisha

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The scientific name of golden grass is *Vetiveria zizanioides* (L.) Nash., commonly known as “Vetiver” or “Bena”, a perennial grass of the Poaceae family, native to India. It is common and gregarious in open swampy ground, low lands, rice fields, canals, margins of pond, and in other unattended water bodies of Pakistan, India, Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and other south Asian countries (Anonymous, 1999). In western and northern India, it is known as “Khus”. In Odisha, it grows spontaneously in many river side villages of Puri, Jagatsinghpur, Kendrapara, Bhadrak, Balasore and Jajpur districts which is locally known as “Kaincha” or “Kainsa”.

The plant grows up to 1.5m high and form wide clumps. The stems are tall and leaves are long, thin and rather rigid, the flowers are brownish purple. Vetiver or Bena has multipurpose uses in India from the dawn of civilization (Jha, 2004). The roots of the plant are used as flavoring agent and the source of an essential oil used in perfume making. But commonly the roots are woven in to



mats called ‘Khas-khas’, used as door and window curtain. It is also used in traditional medicine. But, in Odisha, the plant has an unique use of making craft materials and particularly its inflorescent stock, appearing after the monsoon is the basic raw material for craft making (Tripathy et al., 2014).

## Craft Making

The primary step of this craft making process is the collection of raw materials. It remains the repository of women, who actually set in groups, often having to wade through the water to collect sufficient material by cutting with a sickle. Once collected, the grass split in to two even standards. Normally, women use their teeth to split each stem along its length. Once split, the grass is made to dry under the Sun at least for five days. As the grass dries, it changes its colour from pale green to mild yellow and finally to golden yellow. This is

where; it derives its name as “Golden Grass”. It is the basic raw material for craft making which is stored in a dry room as protection against moisture and decay.

The women folk of the village are the artisans those who gather in their spare time particularly in the afternoon and are engaged in making craft material. The senior artisans are the team leaders who teach and guide others the intricate design of making different articles. The origin of this craft is centuries old and the technique of making craft materials has been handed down from generation to generation. This age old craft requires very little capital but a labour intensive and time consuming process.

### Type of Craft Items

Around 200 types of artifact items are prepared by the lady artisans that can be broadly put in to two broad categories i.e, traditional and modern. Items like “Kuanra pasara” (a container used in Kumari Purnima festival), “Brata Pedi” (a small box for storing holy thread), “Puja Gua Pedi” (box for storing holy *Areca* nut) or “Bhalukuni Bhoga Pasara” (a medium size container used in goddess Bhalukuni worship) etc. are prepared as traditional items for use in some socio-religious



rituals. Modern life style accessories now prepared from golden grass are wall hangings, dining table and bed-room articles, ladies hand bag, ornamental box, hat, tray, pot and glass covers, mobile and land phone stand, pen stand, flower vase etc. which instantly attracts the attention and appreciation of viewers due to their intricate design and glazing golden yellow colour. Often they use different vegetable colours to make these items more attractive. This craft has become so popular that, it is being exported to foreign countries like America, Japan, and Germany.

### Modern Training and Sponsorship

Previously the women folk of some selective villages were making this golden grass craft materials for use in some specific rituals and functions with little or no economic benefit. But in course of time they organized groups in the name of “Mahila Samiti” or Ladies self help group (SHG), expanded their activities and participated in craft exhibitions (Pallishree Mela) as well as in festivals in and outside the states. At present, some Government organizations like District Industries Centre (DIC) and Odisha Rural Development and Marketing Society (ORMAS) as well as some NGOs are providing them training to make them in its marketing. After the skill enhancement training programme, the artisans are able to

produce better quality products as per the modern taste and choice of the urban residents. They also provide suitable platforms to sell their products in different exhibitions and festivals in and outside the state. These materials are also merchandised as handicraft emporiums and different show-rooms across the country.

Another interesting and encouraging news (as published on 19th November 2020) regarding this unique craft is that, The Handlooms, Textiles and Handicraft Department in association with its Skill Development and Entrepreneurship counterpart at the centre will spend Rs. 12.31 crore to provide training and marketing facilities to around 3000 women golden grass craft practitioners from 12 villages in Kendrapara district of Odisha. The initiative would be carried out under the Union Government's World Bank sponsored Skill Acquisition and Knowledge Awareness for Livelihood Promotion (SANKALP) scheme. Accordingly, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed recently between Skill Development and Entrepreneurship and the State Institute for Development of Art and Craft and District Skill Committee for skill and entrepreneurship development of women engaged in golden grass craft in Kendrapara. But, another important aspect which threatens the existence of the craft is the non-availability of raw materials. Because the wetlands are shrinking due to extension of agriculture and fishing activities. As a result, the "Bena" or "Kaincha" plants are becoming scarce and costly affecting this craft and craftsmen equally.

## Recommendations

Protection of some selective water bodies suitable for the growth of Vetiver grass is warranted where this species can grow undisturbed, and can be easily available. Moreover, some advanced training with modern technology to the artisans, financial assistance to develop their infrastructure as well as proper marketing of their products can save this unique plant based craft from oblivion. It can also add to the women empowerment by making them financially sound, as it is basically a ladies hand work in rural Odisha.

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