



## Turning Banana Fibre into a Future: Papiya Ghosh's Story of Change



In the village of Chatra, under the Indus Post Office in Labpur Block of Birbhum district, life moves to the rhythm of agriculture. Most families here depend on small and marginal farming. Water is uncertain, the climate even more so, and income rises and falls with the seasons. Healthcare is a block-level journey. Education beyond secondary school means travelling out. For women, work often remains invisible, unpaid, or informal.

This is where Papiya Ghosh's story begins.

She lives with her husband and son in a modest, Below Poverty Line household. Farming was the family's primary source of income, but it was never enough to feel secure. Papiya had studied till Class 8. Financial constraints ended her formal education early, but not her ambition. She wanted to earn, to contribute, and to stand on her own feet. She was drawn to creative work, yet in her village, there was no clear path to turn that interest into a livelihood.

Like many women around her, Papiya's days were shaped by domestic responsibilities and farm-related work. Paid opportunities were scarce. Dignified, skill-based livelihoods for women were even rarer. The barriers were not just about income or skills, but also about social norms, limited market access, and the absence of structured support.

The shift came with the regeneration of a traditional industry that had long existed in fragments.

Through the **Labpur Banana Fibre Craft Cluster**, developed under the **SFURTI (Scheme for Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries)** framework, a new possibility opened up. Banana pseudostems, usually discarded after harvest, were reimagined as a valuable raw material. What was once agricultural waste became the foundation for green livelihoods.

The cluster was anchored by the **Indian Micro Enterprises Development Foundation (IMEDF)**, the Nodal Agency under the Ministry of MSME and a special purpose vehicle of the Development Alternatives Group. IMEDF's role went far beyond funding. It brought structure where there was informality and vision where there was fragmentation. From strategic planning and cluster governance to capacity building

and enterprise formalisation, IMEDF worked at the ecosystem level to revive banana fibre crafts as a sustainable, market-linked industry.

At the ground level, this vision translated into action through **Tarasankar Panchagram Seva Samity**, the Implementing Agency. The organisation mobilised women from vulnerable households, including Papiya, and provided hands-on training in banana fibre extraction, processing, and product development. Quality control, design improvement, production planning, and exposure visits were part of the journey, not add-ons.

For Papiya, this was her first encounter with structured skill training. She joined the programme hesitantly, unsure where it would lead. Over time, through continuous mentoring and practice, she mastered the craft. What began as learning a technique slowly became the foundation of her own micro-enterprise.

Today, Papiya makes eco-friendly products such as handcrafted bags and home décor items from banana fibre. Each product carries a sustainability story. The fibre comes from banana pseudostems that would otherwise be wasted. The process reduces biomass waste, supports circular economy practices, and creates income without extracting new resources.

Market access was initially a challenge. Like most first-generation entrepreneurs, Papiya's sales were limited to nearby markets. Through the cluster, she began participating in exhibitions, fairs, and buyer-seller meets. Collective branding efforts gave her products visibility beyond the village. Gradually, she also started exploring social media and digital platforms to reach wider markets.

The impact at home was immediate and tangible.

From irregular, agriculture-dependent earnings, Papiya now earns an additional ₹3,000 to ₹4,000 per month. This income has improved food security, supported her son's education, and given her a stronger voice in household decisions. Financial contribution translated into confidence, both within her family and in the community.

But the change did not stop at her doorstep.

Papiya's journey became a reference point for other women in Chatra. Seeing her success, more women came forward to learn the craft. She now trains fellow artisans, expanding the local skill base. Participation in self-help groups and community forums has increased, with women engaging more actively in conversations around livelihoods and income.

At a broader level, the Labpur Banana Fibre Craft Cluster has helped revive a traditional industry, create green livelihoods rooted in waste utilisation, and strengthen local artisan institutions and market linkages. What was once a discarded by-product of farming now supports an entire micro-enterprise ecosystem.

The path was not without challenges. Market access was limited in the beginning. There was social resistance to women stepping into enterprise roles. Balancing domestic responsibilities with production work required constant negotiation. These challenges were addressed through exposure to markets, steady handholding by the cluster institutions, growing family support as income stabilised, and collective production models that shared the load.

Looking ahead, Papiya wants to scale what she has built. She hopes to train more women, increase production, and connect with urban and institutional buyers. To do this sustainably, she will need working capital, advanced design and enterprise management support, and stronger branding and marketing assistance.

Her belief is simple, and it comes from lived experience.

Financial independence gives women the power to change their lives. Traditional skills can become sustainable businesses when the right support is provided.