ishkhapatnam Coffee Cluster is one of the clusters which employs more than 500 coffee producers from 127 villages with tribal communities of over 46,000 members and links them with traders who procure coffee in bulk at fair prices. On most days, the residents of Chintapalle village in Visakhapatnam can be found in their coffee fields: patches of red surrounded by forests. The fields give off a fairy tale like energy where people humming and picking fruits. But during the lockdown period, there is of course silence in the fields. As the traders no longer procuring, the coffee producers forced to sell their beans at cheap prices at the local market. Without enough scope of income and insufficient supply of ration by the government, the families were finding it hard to make both ends meet.

V.C Aliveni leads a civil society organisation in the area working to strengthen the coffee cluster. Since the lockdown, she has been distributing food kits to the tribal communities as the government has not been able to reach. She shares, “with every passing day the misery of the tribal communities was increasing, and they were finding it hard to even manage a single day’s meal. With a team of 30 members, we decided to distribute food kits.” Each kit includes 10 kgs of rice, 2 kgs of daal, 500 gm of chilli powder, 250 gm turmeric powder, 1 kg sugar, oil, and 4 soaps. Her team has distributed more than hundred kits and they are planning to extend their reach to more communities. Tribal communities and daily wage labourers are the worst affected by the pandemic. Changemakers like Aliveni are the rays of hope in this tough time, but such efforts are few. Those that exist unable to reach everyone.

Sanatan Maity: A supporter of the Laban Satyagraha Movement

In the historical city of Paschim Midnapore, West Bengal lives Sanatan Maity. He was born in 1931 in Katina village of the undivided Midnapore. Maity ji is a 91-year-old master trainer of Taant and Charkha at the Mat and Babui Grass Craft Cluster. He got inspired by the visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Noakhali in 1944, which is in present-day Bangladesh, and underwent training in Gujarat to operate Taant (handloom) and came back to promote self-reliance through art amongst the village youth. Over the years, he has trained over 600+ artisans in the Mat craft.

The Mat and Babui Grass Craft Cluster is one of the Indian Micro Enterprises Development Foundation-Scheme of Funds for Regeneration of Traditional Industries clusters (IMEDF-SFURTI), wherein artisans are engaged in promoting rural handicraft through the production of home-office-fashion accessories and various utility items from a locally grown natural fibre known as Babui or Mat Grass and cotton yarn. Madhurkathi grass, which is abundantly available in West Bengal such as in the Paschim Medinipur area, is used in weaving traditional mats. The strips of woven mat are joined together by stitching with cotton fabric, which forms folds and gives a particular colour to various products.

Maity Ji’s journey is a pledge towards 75 years of Atmanirbharta (self-reliance) of upholding craft and economic independence for not only his family but also the hundreds of families in his village. He preaches Gandhian philosophy and has composed poems and songs on the art form of Mat weaving, which are fondly sung by other Mat weavers.

Natural dyeing is practised in the Mat and Babui Grass Craft Cluster, where diversified mat-weaving loom sets and sewing machines are introduced. They produce fairtrade products that are natural, eco-friendly, bio-degradable, and handmade. Each hand-crafted product tells a saga of rich cultural heritage and legacy of primitive craftwork.