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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### KANTHA EMBROIDERY-A WOMAN-CENTRIC PATH TOWARDS EMPOWERMENT FOR ARTISANS IN WEST BENGAL

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#### ABSTRACT

Niaz Zaman describes the needlecraft of Kantha as "women's art". Traditionally the Kantha embroidery of Bengal has been the forte of women, unlike Zardosi and Ari work which is predominated by men folk. The craft has a history of being a revered recycled product. A Kantha is considered to be layers of old sarees or dhotis quilted together to form a blanket, used by the poor as a protection against cold. Later the 'nakshi' form of it was born in the household of undivided Bengal as a portrait of women's aspiration and dream. The paper discusses how Kantha has been dominated by women and has eventually helped to empower hundreds of them. The various factors that made it woman-centric have been explored through primary research conducted among 50 artisans from Naoor, Birbhum District, and Kadambagachi, Barashat District of West Bengal. The study presents a comparative study of both the clusters. The paper also explores how this needle-craft of Bengal underwent modifications from being a personal gift to a commercial product, thus empowering women and encompassing more beneficiaries under its umbrella, hand held by NGOs, Design Institutions, craft revivalists, and designers.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Niaz Zaman describes the needlecraft of *Kantha* as "women's art", (Zaman, 2012). The main stitch used for *Kantha* is the 'running stitch'. It is the fundamental form of sewing used by the tailor bird to weave its nest using twigs, leaves and other raw materials. Traditionally the *Kantha* embroidery of Bengal has been the forte of women, unlike Zardosi and Ari work which is predominated by men folk. According to the Craft Revival Trust, "Pushing the boundaries of this historic craft are approximately 50,000 women embroiderers who describe their work as "ghorebosakaaj" or home-based work" (Craft Revival Trust). The craft has a history of being a revered recycled product. The word 'Kantha' literally means 'rags'. A *Kantha* is considered to be layers of old sarees or dhotis quilted together to form a blanket, used by the poor as a protection against cold. Later the 'nakshi' (decorative) form of it was born in the households of undivided Bengal as a portrait of women's aspiration and dream. It was a visual record of her untold story which she passed on as heirloom legacy. We find an echo of it in Jassimuddin's famous *Nakshi Kanthar Math*: "If only she had wings, today she would fly to her love.

The quilt is embroidered with many patterns,  
She has drawn a picture of their wedding;  
She has drawn the home of Rupa".

(Jasimuddin [MILFORD, 1958]). The word *Kantha* originates from the Sanskrit word *kontha*, which means rags (Bissel, 2013). Monier Williams describes it as a patched garment especially worn by the ascetics. It has also been referred to the throat of Lord Shiva or *kontha* (History of the Craft). We find reference to it in World Textiles as "quilted and embroidered cloths made from recycled fabric in Bihar, West Bengal, and Bangladesh"(Gillow & Sentance, 1999).

#### Objectives

The objective of the study is to understand how *Kantha* became and remained a woman-centric craft and eventually moved towards commercialization, thus empowering thousands of women in Bengal. A comparative study of the role of women, in two different *Kantha* Clusters is included in the study.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research methodology involves a visit to Naoor, Birbhum District, and Kadambagachi, Barasat District of West Bengal

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where 50 *Kantha* artisans were interviewed through questionnaire method. The study allowed us to undergo a critical understanding of mass methods practiced currently vis-à-vis the traditional craft practices. Insight was gained regarding the role of women and its change over the years of practice. A visit to Alcha, in Rajdanga also gave insight into niche explorations made by Keya Sarkar, a *Kantha* enthusiast. Works of various NGOs like Banglanatok.com, AIIM and SHE by *Kantha* revivalist Shamlu Deduja was studied and interviews were conducted with their representatives to understand their roles in empowering the women of *Kantha* clusters. Kana Mandal and Lavali Biwi were interviewed to understand their prominent role as entrepreneurs along with Afloonna Begum and Tajqira Begum. Insights were also gained through various journals, articles, and books.

## Literature Review

### *The process of making a traditional Kantha*

*Kantha* is described as several layers of white or light colored cotton cloth, such as sarees, sewn or quilted together with predominantly white thread using successive rows of running stitches (Paine and Paine, 2010). The poor man's *Kantha* seldom had designs but later the trend of decorative *Kantha*, called *Nakshi Kantha* came into being. The name *Nakshi Kantha* became particularly popular among literate people after the publication of Jasimuddin's poem *Nakshi Kanthar Math* (Jasimuddin [MILFORD, 1958]). Patterns and special motifs were outlined with black, blue or red thread in backstitch. Motifs included flowers, animals, scenes from rural life and sometimes even historical figures. The creation of the cloth was usually considered a ritual as it was used for ceremonial purposes.

These recycled quilts were made from layers of old dhoti or soft, used cotton sarees held in place by minute running stitches. The sides of these quilts were edged with the colourful borders of old sarees. Sometimes yarns were drawn out of these borders and used to create a contrast on the ground of a *Kantha*. To make a traditional full-size *Kantha*, which was generally 5' x 6', at least 5 to 7 sarees were needed (Zaman, 2012). It was used by the poor man as a protective layer for winter and made by the womenfolk of their household. The process began with stitching together old sarees to give adequate width. Then the layers of cloth were spread on the ground, by several women together. The cloth was evened out to ensure there were no folds or creases. During this time, the *Kantha* was kept flat on the ground and then the four edges were stitched. Weights were used on each corner to ensure the same. To keep the fabrics together, two to three rows of large stitches were done along the length. These lengths of stitches acted like a guideline to develop the placement for motifs, which were done to embellish the *Kantha* once the ground has been quilted. Sometimes they were left simply quilted, without any design.

Traditionally motifs were not drawn on the cloth however in contemporary *Kantha* it is drawn as shown in Figure 2. Traditional quilts had geometric motifs (Refer Fig. 1), while the *Kantha* made for the newborn had motifs related to animals, dolls, verses of Bengali rhymes etc. The artisans found a central point and developed the motive around it.



Source: Photography by Sreenanda Palit

**Figure 1. A traditional *Kantha* with geometric motifs**

The space between two designs was decided arbitrarily and filled with running stitch. The design started with the central pattern first, which would radiate out from the middle of the cloth. After the central design, the corner or border designs were done. The remaining spaces were filled with other designs. This would give *Kantha* its unique haphazard patterns yet have an order or harmony about it. The embroidery stitches used would interlace with the background stitches in such a way, that the motive would stand out like a relief. Older *Kanthas* had a rippled effect as the background stitch used to pierce through all the layers however it is rarely noticeable in contemporary quilts.



Source: Photography by SreenandaPalit

**Figure 2. Motifs are drawn on the fabric, the outline done in black and then inside is filled**

Original *Kantha* makers did not draw the motif but they embroidered the outline with needle and thread. After being satisfied with the design they would fill in with colourful stitches to complete a design. A design was usually outlined first and stitches were made from outside slowly narrowing into the middle of a design. This ensured that the fabric remained even and did not get crumpled inside the design.

### *Stitches Used*

The main stitches used were running stitch which was used to form the ground and hold the layers of cloth together. In

modern *Kantha* the all over running stitch texture is often avoided and only motifs are done. Stella Kramrisch in her article named '*Kantha*', published in the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, made the first reference of *Kantha* as a 'darning' stitch (Kramrisch, 1939). Following her many other writers referred to this running stitch technique as darning stitch. However, there is a distinct difference between darning and the running stitch used for *Kantha*. While darning is a technique where the stitches are interwoven with the fabric and the stitches alternate in each line but in the case of *Kantha* this does not occur and therefore we get the characteristics rippling effect. Later, therefore, she corrects herself and states that "the stitches are of the simplest kind, the running stitch being not only the main but also the most ingeniously employed" (Kramrisch, 1968).

predominantly by the later. While in Bangladesh it is dominated by the Muslim community, in West Bengal the Barasat Cluster has a concentration of Hindu women practicing *Kantha* besides Muslim women. During the primary research, it was found that historically a Muslim *Kantha* that was made as a cover for the tomb never had any secured knot. It meant that the soul was being set free and therefore the tomb-cloth remained knot-free. Initially, *Kantha* was made for the newborn and as a blanket or quilt. It was made by one single maker. Later the larger quilts, some of which were commissioned to the poor by the Zamindars had multiple-makers. Another interesting fact surfaced when artisans of Barasat intimated that initially Hindu and Muslim women sat together and worked on the same *Kantha* in undivided Bengal.



Source: 3.A. Zaman, N. (2012) 3.B. Photography by SreenandaPalit

Figure 3. (A. and B.) Various types of Stitches used in *Kantha*

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Factors that made *Kantha* a Woman-Centric craft

A report by the DRDC, Birbhum mentions *Kantha* as a lady's self-expression. A real piece narrates a story, the emotions and the life of the artist. Traditionally *Kantha* was made by women of all classes during their leisure time. While the rich landlord's wife made her exquisite *Kantha* as a gift or to be passed down as dowry using her expensive but old silk muslins, the farmer's wife made her humble *Kantha* to protect her family from the cold using old sarees and dhotis. It was practiced and made mostly by Muslim women in undivided Bengal. However reference of it is found in Sri Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita by Krishnadas Kaviraj which was written some five hundred years back, where Sachi Mata sends a *Kantha* she made for her son to Puri through pilgrims. The *Kantha* is still preserved in Gambhira, at Puri. Following the political division of Bengal in 1905, most Muslims moved to Bangladesh, thus a substantial amount of *Kantha* makers migrated to the East. Those who remained on the western side evolved their craft differently. The craft has been woman-centric embroidery, unlike *Ari* or *Zardosi* which is dominated by Muslim men. Historical references suggest it was practiced by both Hindus and Muslims though taken up as a profession

These stories have been passed on to them from their grandmothers. Further, there were some local customs that guide the making of *Kantha* by women. Traditionally, pregnant women were not allowed to make quilts and a single girl child was also forbidden from making a *Kantha*. When a pregnant woman dreamed of making a *Kantha* during her pregnancy, it was believed that she would give birth to a girl. *Kantha* makers never worked at night as it was considered to bring illfate to the family. The master artisans informed us that now commercial artisans work overnight to meet deadlines. Traditionally, Muslim women began their *Kantha* on Fridays and Hindu women avoided Saturdays. Conventionally it was done mostly in Monsoon when women had to stay indoors due to the rains. It also allowed them to finish it before forthcoming coming winters (Tripathi, 2013).

Based on the primary research at both the clusters in Barasat and Birbhum, the following surfaced as factors that made *Kantha* a woman-centric craft:

- While the crops in the fields would stand as an outcome of the labor of the men folk, *Kantha* was a vehicle to channelize the skill of women, which would otherwise go unrecognized. For women, it gave them a sense of pride.

- Women passed on the skill to their daughters and through generations, the art remained as an acquired skill among women.
- The craft did not require the purchase of any raw materials. It was made from old available discarded sarees and dhotis. In the past *Bhel-kanta* or thorns were used to sew the *Kantha*, later it was replaced with the needle. The craft traditionally required no machines or tool apart from a needle. Thus women could easily make one at home.
- It could be practiced even in the smallest corner of a poor man's house, unlike *Ari* and *Zardosi* which required an *adda*- which is a frame as big as a single cot.
- *Kantha* was made by women in their leisure and also later evolved as a community craft where a number of women belonging to the same neighborhood would sit together and make a single *Kantha*. It helped women to create social bonds.
- The time-consuming work of pointillism was not a forte of men. The craft required intricacy and patience, both know to be natural qualities of a woman. It was a reflection of their dreams and aspiration which otherwise they were restricted from communicating to others.
- They used it to disclose many untold stories and mark important milestones of their life. The renowned *Kantha* of Manodasundari kept at the Gurusaday Museum, Joka, 24 Parganas (South) depicts the social life of that period and is a historical visual portrait of the time. It is interesting to note that the *Kantha* maker never made the women figures wear a red bindi which is symbolic of married women, she being a young widow herself. This certainly echoes her unsaid anguish of not being able to wear one herself.
- *Kantha* allowed women to leave a mark of their existence in the memories of the generation to come. Many *Kantha* makers, therefore, stitched their names on their *Kantha*. It also stands as a blessing from them being passed on to the next generation.

The characteristics of the craft, the raw material, the purpose and most importantly the skill set required for *Kantha* are woman-centric. Therefore when the craft became a profession, it still remained in the dominance of women. The role of men in the trade presently is related to marketing, financial management and in some clusters as designers who trace the *Kantha* for the women to work upon.

### **Commercialization of Kantha and Women Empowerment**

The skill and traditional value of making a *Kantha* have been passed down from one generation to another from the mother to the daughter. To improve the economic condition of the widows of the Independence War, many NGOs actively participated in commercializing the craft. Thus Surayia Rahman, a Bangladesi designer mentions, "Kantha made with newly produced designs and materials are called Nakshi Kantha (Nakshi means 'with artistic designs') and are widely sold around the country" (Bengal-In-Colonial-Period-Tapestry). We find Ian Smillie supporting her views as well (Smillie, 2009). However, in West Bengal, it dates back to 1920s holding the hand of the visionary Shri. Sushen Mukherjee, founder of 'Amar Kutir Society for Rural

Development' in Birbhum. The society was formed to sustain the livelihood of traditional arts and crafts of the district. It was not until the 1940s that *Kantha* got its global recognition. Viswa-Bharti University set up by Rabindranath Tagore has a remarkable contribution in diversifying this craft into various products like stoles, sarees, blouse pieces, bags etc. The Kala Bhavan wing gave training to several traditional *Kantha* makers in the direction of modern market requirements, thus enabling them to take it up as a profession. The contribution of *Kantha* Revivalist Shamlu Dudeja, in the 1980s, who founded the Self Help Enterprise (SHE) to sustain and empower the women artisans, is another milestone in the development of the craft. Ever since Shantiniketan became a favorite weekend getaway for tourists, who in particular target the *Sanibarar Haat* (Saturday local market) at Sonajhuri, *Kantha* underwent immense changes. As mass market demand increased for *Kantha* owing to mushrooming of artisans in the local market including Bhubandanga in Bolpur, focus shifted from quality to quantity. However, with the intervention of the government, artisans were encouraged to form self-help groups. Training was imparted to the women through design institutes like NIFT and NID. DCHC facilitated artisans in getting registered with them and providing them with artisan cards, while institutions like NABARD gave them micro loans to encourage entrepreneurship.

Eventually, the craft developed holding hands of some master artisans who became entrepreneurs. It is evident that "Women's entrepreneurship makes a significant contribution to the economic and social development and is a major force for innovation and job creation" (Bhattacharjee, 2013). A paradigm shift was noticed in the *Kantha* clusters of West Bengal in early 2000. Therefore this exquisite needle craft was no longer restricted to its traditional personalized glory of storytelling but became commercialised. Presently the most popular products found in *Kantha* are sarees, kurtis, tops, skirts, kurtas, bags, blouse pieces, files and folders, coasters, table linen, notebooks etc. The development is in two folds. While there is a mass market for the craft, a niche path has been chalked by designers and connoisseurs of traditional *Kantha* who are trying to revive it from the present dilution. Today Nanoor alone boasts of 2000 artisans and Kadambagachi around 800. On an average the women earn 2000 to 3000 rupees a month while a master artisan under whom they work can earn up to 15,000/-. Tajqira Begum revealed she earned even up to 50,000/- a month before Durga Puja, even 5 years back. However, the deteriorating health of her mother made her concentrate more on the family and give up her profitable business. The average working hour is 3 to 4 hours per day on weekdays. They prefer devoting their attention to their family on weekends. Despite their male members depending on their income, some women face oppositions and restrictions of work hours. They have to balance between work and family. The younger, unmarried girls devote about 6 to 8 hours for work.

### **A Comparative Study of Two Clusters: Role of Women**

The primary research was conducted at two places: Barasat and Birbhum districts of West Bengal. 25 artisans from each cluster were interviewed along with a few master artisans. A distinctive difference was noted in terms of work quality and the role of women in making of *Kantha* in these clusters. Nanoor, located between two rivers Ajay and Mayurakshi is 18 km away from Bolpur. It is the hub of *Kantha* and around

2,000 women from this block are engaged in the craft which has provided them an important opportunity for income. It has helped them overcome poverty and support the education of their children. Despite going to school most of the young girls are keen on taking up *Kantha* stitching as a livelihood. Afroonessa Begum, Lavali Biwi and Tajqira Begum (National Prize Award winner) are a few who are prominent entrepreneurs. Almost 200 women work under each of them. They generate orders from local market besides Kolkata, Delhi, Bangalore and other metro cities. They also attend fairs and are associated with Biswa Bangla and NGOs like [banglanatak.com](http://banglanatak.com). The women here are not dependent on men, who generally practice agriculture. The *Kantha* artisans of Nanoor know how to trace a design. They also create their own design and colour combination. The women here have full control over the trade and money.

On the contrary despite being closer to the city, about 30 kms from Kolkata, the trade is male dominated in Barasat. A prominent figure among all men who stands on firm ground is National Prize Awardee, Kana Mondal. She runs training schools for her *Kantha* artisans taking aid from the government. She has trained women from 200 Panchayats across 22 Blocks. Women in Kadambagachi work on piece rate system and are very poorly paid. Men here make the design, trace it on the fabric, decide the colours (which sometimes are as per client's choice) and ask the women to do the embroidery. From order generation to supply of the products to Burrabazar, Kolkata mass market and some niche stores in Park Street, men have full control and women get weekly payments. Work wise, we found Birbhum caters to a finer quality of *Kantha*, while Barasat produces cheaper mass market products. There is also a distinct dilution of the craft in Barasat where Kutch Embroidery along French knot and Kashmiri work has entered the *Kantha* domain. Mix-media is the trend here. We found that dilution in the craft has taken place in Birbhum as well but it is not so alarming. The artisans from Nanoor are also producing work under Lavali Biwi in the lines of Lambani, for a local boutique names Tanzil. However, we also have Keya Sarkar who ensures she keeps the traditional form alive through the exquisite *Kantha* bags with leather trims available at her local boutique named Alcha in Shantiniketan. The women in Nanoor charge higher rates for work compared to Barasat. Since they can trace the designs on their own they make more profit. There is more volume of work in Barasat and quality is fiercely compromised. Here the *ostagars* or middleman and the design-tracers make maximum profit. One common string that attaches all the four women entrepreneurs is either poverty or misfortune in their family that stopped the male member from supporting the family financially. This forced the women to take up the lead as bread earners and then there was no looking back for any of them.

### Role of Ngos and Craft Revivalists

To further the developments, NGOs played a vital role. They reached to the crafts person and trained them to produce products based on market demand. Design and technological advancement through training programmes were constantly the endeavor of NGOs, who contributed in the development of products which could be marketed to the middle class, particularly upper middle class. However, it was felt that to hold crafty products at the global platform, it had to move from a mass requirement to high-end product offering. Thus

influencing some of the NGOs and later designers to rethink and reroute toward a niche market of trendy products, as per international standards. Presently, a number of such NGOs in the state are working with the *Kantha* artisans to provide economic empowerment through training and formation of self-help groups. Some of them have also developed a niche market for these artisans by forming a brand of their own like Sasha set by Late Subhashini Kohli, Keya Sarkar with her unique, standalone boutique Alcha, at Rajdanga in Shantiniketan and AIIM with its brand Deshaj. *Kantha* revivalist Shamlu Dedeja's contribution in trickling up *Kantha* from rags to riches through her NGO named SHE Foundation, is a narrative on its own. Shamlu Dedeja recently celebrated her 30 years of association in reviving *Kantha*. Her organization focuses on women's welfare in rural India, providing women with the training and support to produce wonderful *Kantha* pieces that they market globally. All proceeds from the sale are directed towards the welfare of the artisan's and their families, through education and health care programmes.

### Conclusion

We can conclude that the modifications have taken place as *Kantha* became commercialized and several transformations took place. The adaptations helped it remain and cater to various market segments. The adaptability of the craft to suit various price points and aesthetic segments of the market makes it sustain stiff competition. Women in both clusters work alongside their household work. The average working hours for the artisans is 3 to 4 hours daily. Work is done as long as there is natural light. Sometimes when there is a close deadline they stay up all night and finish the same as mentioned by Lavali's daughter Lutfu Sultana, who wishes to follow the steps of her mother. The work has earned the women their due recognition and a position in their social environment, which otherwise is orthodox and fails to recognize the success of a woman. Almost everyone in the village knew them by their name and could direct us to their home. They are proud to have been able to improve the lives of many other women who work under them. It allows them to earn with dignity without many inhibitions as the trade is woman-centric. The community feeling and happiness shared by all on Saturdays, when they collect their weekly payment is worth watching. *Kantha* has indeed empowered these women to stitch their success story in each of the commercial pieces they produce presently for their satisfied clients.

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