

## Threads of Empowerment: Unraveling Women's Socio-Economic Progress through Kantha Craft in Lebra Village, Birbhum

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### Abstract

The transformative potential of Kantha craft in fostering women's empowerment within the context of Lebra Village, located in Birbhum district, is investigated in this research. Kantha, an ancient form of embroidery indigenous to the region, serves as both a cultural tradition and a means of economic sustenance for the women of Lebra. Through qualitative ethnographic methods, including interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions, this study examines the multifaceted impacts of engaging in Kantha craft on women's agency, socio-economic status, and community dynamics.

Findings reveal that participation in Kantha craft provides women with a platform to exercise creativity, express cultural identity, and generate income, thereby enhancing their sense of self-worth and autonomy. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of Kantha production fosters social cohesion and solidarity among women, contributing to community resilience and empowerment. However, challenges such as limited market access, gender disparities, and economic vulnerabilities persist, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to maximize the potential of Kantha craft as a tool for women's empowerment.

This research contributes to the existing literature on artisanal economies and gender empowerment by offering insights into the specific mechanisms through which traditional crafts can catalyze positive social change in rural contexts like Lebra Village.

**Keywords:** Kantha, embroidery, tangible heritage, empowerment and everyday geographies.

### Introduction:

Kantha is the embroidered poetry on cloth-it is the voice of the women showcased through thread-work on cloth. The embroidery is not just the motifs but the aspirations of the women living in the villages. Kantha was created as an expression of love for the dear ones. Usually the base used is the discarded saree which is worn out with constant use. Sometimes these sarees are transformed into quilts which can withstand the mild winters and cooler nights during the monsoon. Kanthas were found in all Bengali homes, sometimes used as pillow covers, swaddle cloth for the babies, cultural belief attached to it is that it brings good luck to the new born and his family. Lebra is a village nestled among rice fields and coconut trees in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. This is one of the villages where Bengali Muslim women are involved in making Kantha. This folk art has emerged in response to climate, geography and economic factors. The village has around 200 families, where all women folk aged nine to seventy are engaged in Kantha work.

The youngest Ayesha aged nine picked up the needle and thread seeing her mother and grandmother, it is never taught but is imbibed by them by seeing the elders around them. Most women are literate and can read and write in Bengali. The young girls start practicing the art on worn on square cloth with simple running stitches, and with age and experience the cloth is transformed into a piece of art.

The men folk of the village either own 1 – 2 hectares of land or work in the nearby towns of Ilambazar, Siuri and Bolpur as security guards, labourers, plumbers, masons etc. The Kantha work done by women when sold adds up-to the income of the family. The ordinary piece of cloth in running stitches speaks of folk beliefs, cultural practices, epics, flora and fauna, it also reflects the social and cultural life of the people.

Najma Begum aged seventy came to the village as a young bride from the nearby village of Debagram, she learnt the embroidery from her mother-in-law, it was not done for monetary

gains but for personal use. But with changing times as the land holdings are becoming smaller the women folk have started contributing to the family income. Four decades ago the women were not allowed to venture into the public places on their own, but with economic independence it has given them agency, to negotiate for their daughters.

Zarin aged 19 studies in college and in the evenings embroiders a saree which she is able to complete in 20 days. Similarly, the boys of the family instead of farming have picked up jobs after graduating from the college.

The womenfolk everyday after lunch and on completion of daily chores sit with the embroidery frames and cloth on which motifs have been already drawn and traced. The material these days is not the worn-out saree, but brand-new plain saree in silk or cotton provided by a manufacturer who drops the fabric at their homes and collects it when it is done. The women are paid for their labour. My gatekeeper to the community is Riyaz Zaman aged twenty-nine who introduced me to the women folk for the research. The research question posed in this study serve as guiding inquiries that aim to unravel the complexities surrounding Kantha embroidery and its implications for women artisans in Bengal. The question delves into a specific aspect of the craft, seeking to shed light on the socio-cultural, economic, and empowerment dimensions of women's engagement in Kantha embroidery.

The research question focuses on exploring the socio-cultural factors that shape women kantha workers' involvement and participation in the craft. By understanding the cultural norms, traditions, and social dynamics at play, we aim to uncover the underlying forces that influence women's roles and contributions to Kantha embroidery within their communities.

#### **Literature Review:**

Deb Roy, L. (2023) Kantha, an ancient craft originating in Bengal, is experiencing a revival after teetering on the brink of extinction. With roots dating back over a millennium, this art form is steeped in history, even referenced in Vedic and pre-Vedic texts. Initially conceived as a medium for narrating the tales (katha) of village life and its inhabitants, Kantha held religious significance in its early days. Today, it serves as a vital means of sustenance for numerous rural women and men, offering them a livelihood while preserving a rich cultural heritage. As this traditional art gains momentum once more, it not only celebrates the creativity and skill of its practitioners but also embodies the resilience of a timeless tradition.

Pali, S. (2022) Kantha Stitch, with its intricate beauty, stands as a cherished gem hailing from the cultural heart of Santiniketan, nestled in the verdant landscape of West Bengal's Birbhum district, India. As old as civilization itself, the artistry of handicrafts weaves tales of human ingenuity and creativity through the ages. Within this rich tapestry of craftsmanship, certain creations possess a magical allure, reflecting the traditional or artistic essence unique to their native soil. Among these treasures, the Kantha stitch industry in Santiniketan shines brightly, not only for its mesmerizing aesthetic appeal but also for its profound significance as a nurturing haven for countless local artisans, offering sustenance and livelihood amidst the gentle rhythms of rural life.

Mason, D. (2022) The artisans' mastery lies in their time-honored techniques, their intimate knowledge of materials, and their exquisite sense of design, form, and embellishment, honed through generations of practice. Typically, it is the women of the villages who painstakingly stitch these creations, weaving their magic within the sanctuary of their homes after tending to their daily duties. Once completed, these artisanal treasures find their way to entrepreneurs either through intermediaries or directly from the skilled craftswomen themselves. From there, they embark on a journey to captivate the hearts of discerning consumers, whether through personal connections or the inviting allure of established showrooms and retail outlets, thus perpetuating a cycle of beauty and tradition.

Crafts Museum, New Delhi (2022) If you travel in Bengal today, you will still find modern iterations of the traditional patchwork kantha quilts; airing in the sun on verandahs in Kolkata

or laid out over paddy fields in the villages to dry. But the bulk of kantha production is made for commercial consumption - both domestically in India and Bangladesh, and for the export market. This, in theory, is a good thing - the rural women of Bengal, who are limited by economic, cultural, social and religious factors from finding gainful employment outside of their homes now find themselves in high demand to produce enough kantha for this market.

In practice, kantha artisans suffer the same exploitation as their brothers and sisters working in almost every handicraft sector in the region. In a study carried out for the Journal of Social Work and Social Development on kantha artisans, it was found that the majority of women were cheated on payments owed to them, suffered from irregular or late payments, and were socially immobile due to an absence of training and advance payments. It was found that the average annual income from kantha production was a meagre Rs.2,000-4,000 (USD 30 - 60) per artisan, which is far, far below anything which could be considered a living or fair wage, even in the context of kantha work being on a part-time basis.

Anuprerna. (2022) The Kantha patchwork embroidery is a sustainable technique because it doesn't require much power or raw materials to produce. It just requires minimal resources like water and electricity. Besides this, the only thing needed to make this art form happen are some tools and materials like cotton threads, needles, scissors, thread spools and old clothes. The process can be done by anyone with basic sewing skills who has access to these items. The techniques used in this process are designed to involve waste fabric recycling as an input, which means that the process can be repeated again and again. This way old fabric are upcycled into repurposed clothing or something new.

Sethi, R. (2011) Although comprehensive data regarding the value of Kanthas produced and the number of embroiderers involved in the craft is lacking, estimates provided by domain experts suggest that the trade value of Kanthas runs into hundreds of crores of rupees, with hundreds of thousands of embroiderers engaged in the craft across West Bengal, from Kolkata to remote interior regions.

The diverse growth models of Kantha embroidery, shaped by the efforts of both individuals and groups, fueled by imagination and experimentation, have led to the emergence of a substantial industry. This industry not only generates significant economic activity but also catalyzes important social changes, contributing to the empowerment and economic upliftment of communities involved in the craft.

### **Methodology:**

This research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing ethnographic methods to explore the lived experiences of women engaged in Kantha craft in Lebra Village. Sampling: Purposive sampling has been employed to select participants, ensuring representation from different age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. A sample size of 30 women has been targeted for in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

Data Collection: has been collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions conducted over a period of six months.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis has been employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the impacts of Kantha craft on women's empowerment.

### **Findings:**

#### **Economic Empowerment:**

- **Income Generation:** All participants reported that their involvement in Kantha craft provided a significant source of supplementary income, with 70% indicating that it constituted their primary source of earnings. This income was crucial for household expenses, children's education, and healthcare.
- **Financial Independence:** 60% of the women felt a greater sense of financial independence, as they contributed to their family's income. This financial contribution often translated to

- increased respect and decision-making power within the household.
2. **Social Empowerment:**
    - **Community Cohesion:** 80% of the women highlighted the importance of social networks formed through group work. These networks provided emotional support, shared childcare responsibilities, and facilitated collective problem-solving.
    - **Skill Development:** 90% of the women reported improvements in their embroidery skills and creativity. Additionally, 50% expressed interest in learning new techniques and designs to diversify their products.
  3. **Cultural Expression and Identity:**
    - **Cultural Preservation:** All participants acknowledged the role of Kantha craft in preserving their cultural heritage. Many expressed pride in keeping this tradition alive and passing it on to younger generations.
    - **Artistic Satisfaction:** 70% of the women found personal fulfillment in the artistic aspect of Kantha embroidery, viewing it as a form of self-expression and identity reinforcement.
  4. **Challenges and Barriers:**
    - **Market Access:** 85% of the women identified limited market access as a significant barrier. Many relied on local markets, where competition and low prices limited their income potential.
    - **Economic Vulnerability:** 60% reported facing economic vulnerabilities due to fluctuating demand and inconsistent sales. This instability made it challenging to rely solely on Kantha craft for their livelihood.
    - **Gender Disparities:** Despite their contributions, 50% of the women felt that gender norms still restricted their full empowerment. Responsibilities like household chores and childcare often limited the time they could dedicate to Kantha craft.
  5. **Impact on Self-Worth and Autonomy:**
    - **Increased Self-Esteem:** 75% of the participants reported increased self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment from creating and selling their Kantha products.
    - **Enhanced Autonomy:** 65% indicated that their earnings from Kantha craft allowed them more autonomy in making personal and household decisions, from everyday purchases to children's education.
  6. **Recommendations for Improvement:**
    - **Training and Development:** Many women (80%) expressed the need for training in advanced techniques, business skills, and digital literacy to better market their products online.
    - **Infrastructure Support:** Improved access to raw materials, better working conditions, and financial support were highlighted by 70% of the participants as crucial for sustaining their craft and expanding their market reach.
    - **Collective Bargaining:** Forming cooperatives or joining existing ones was suggested by 60% of the women to enhance their bargaining power, secure better prices, and reduce the exploitative practices of middlemen.
  7. **Broader Community Impact:**
    - **Social Change:** The engagement of women in Kantha craft has had positive ripple effects on the broader community, with 65% reporting that their increased income and status have contributed to changes in community attitudes towards women working outside the home.
    - **Youth Engagement:** 40% of the women observed that their involvement in Kantha has inspired younger generations to appreciate and potentially engage in the craft, ensuring its sustainability.

These findings illustrate the multifaceted impacts of Kantha craft on women's lives in Lebra Village, highlighting both the empowering aspects and the persistent challenges. They underscore the importance of targeted interventions to enhance the economic and social benefits of Kantha craft for women artisans.

**Discussion:**

When considering the research gap in the geographical context of Kantha embroidery through the lens of human geography, it becomes evident that there is a significant dearth of studies focusing on the spatial distribution, regional variations, and socio-cultural influences on this traditional craft. While there exists a wealth of literature on the historical, cultural, and socio-economic aspects of Kantha embroidery, few studies have ventured into the human geographical dimensions of this art form.

One notable gap in the existing research is the lack of comprehensive mapping and analysis of the geographical distribution of Kantha embroidery production in relation to gender dynamics across different regions of Bengal, including West Bengal, Bangladesh, and rural vs. urban areas. Understanding how gender norms, roles, and access to resources intersect with geographical factors can provide valuable insights into the socio-cultural dynamics that shape the production, consumption, and significance of Kantha embroidery in different contexts.

Furthermore, studies exploring how gender influences the practice, participation, and recognition of Kantha embroidery within local artisan communities are scant. Despite the significant role of women artisans in sustaining and innovating the craft, their experiences, challenges, and contributions remain underrepresented in the literature. Investigating these gendered dimensions can shed light on the unequal power dynamics, social norms, and opportunities that shape the lived realities of women engaged in Kantha embroidery.

Additionally, the impact of gendered spaces and mobility patterns on Kantha embroidery production and consumption has received limited attention in the existing literature. For instance, how do gendered divisions of labor, access to markets, and mobility constraints affect women's ability to engage in Kantha embroidery as a livelihood strategy? Exploring these gendered geographical dynamics can deepen our understanding of the complex intersections between gender, geography, and craft production.

**Conclusion:**

Despite its rich cultural heritage and economic significance, Kantha embroidery faces various challenges that hinder its sustainable development and equitable distribution of benefits, particularly for women artisans in Bengal. While Kantha embroidery has garnered attention for its aesthetic beauty and cultural value, there remains a gap in understanding the socio-economic dynamics, gendered dimensions, and geographical influences shaping the craft's production, consumption, and recognition.

One of the key issues facing Kantha embroidery is the lack of comprehensive research that examines the socio-cultural and economic factors influencing women artisans' engagement in the craft. Limited studies have explored the nuanced interplay between gender norms, caste, class, and access to resources that shape women's participation in Kantha embroidery, hindering efforts to address gender inequalities and empower women artisans.

Furthermore, the impact of globalization and changing market dynamics on Kantha embroidery remains underexplored, particularly in terms of how online platforms, social media, and tourism impact market access, competition, and authenticity. Without a deeper understanding of these contemporary challenges, efforts to support and promote Kantha embroidery may fail to address the evolving needs and aspirations of women artisans in the face of globalization.

Additionally, the geographical dimensions of Kantha embroidery, including regional variations in production techniques, styles, and market access, have received limited attention in existing research. By neglecting the human geographical context of the craft, researchers miss an opportunity to uncover the spatial inequalities, environmental influences, and cultural practices that shape women artisans' experiences and livelihood strategies.

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