The image features a close-up of Kantha embroidery. The top half shows a dark fabric with teal-colored stitches forming a repeating pattern. A horizontal teal band is positioned below this section. The bottom half of the image shows a red fabric with the same teal-colored stitches, creating a similar pattern. The overall composition is a detailed view of the traditional Indian embroidery technique.

Embroidering Futures

Repurposing the Kantha

Edited by Ritu Sethi

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Support from the Infosys Foundation underwrote the research and printing of this book.

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Cover: Kantha from Stri Shakti, Photograph by Enakshi Ghosh

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CONTENTS

A Letter from Sudha Murty	5
Foreword	6
<i>Nakshi Kanthar Math</i>	8
Chapter 1: The Moorings of the Kantha	13
Chapter 2: The Changing Kantha	41
Chapter 3: Shaping the Form	73
Chapter 4: Repurposing the Kantha	123
Chapter 5: In Addition	135
References and Select Bibliography	183



▴ Detail from a kantha from C.L. Bharany's Collection

A Letter from Sudha Murty

Dear friends,

During the course of my philanthropic work with the Infosys Foundation, I have travelled across India to many states and met many great artists. I am convinced that ours is one of those rare countries where one can find an abundance of art in every form and we should feel proud and fortunate to be born here. It therefore saddens me to say that some of the arts that flourished in these states have already disappeared and some are in the process of disappearing due, in large part, to socioeconomic reasons. I feel very strongly that it is important to revive and rejuvenate such arts, and if that is not possible, at least document them for the sake of future generations.

The kantha is a special and beautiful art form that was developed mainly by the women of Bengal, where it has flourished for centuries. Due to its intricate nature, the making of a kantha requires a tremendous amount of time and patience. As with all living art forms, the kantha too has undergone many modifications over the years but has still managed to retain much of its original beauty. It is with this in mind that the Infosys Foundation took up the task of documenting the evolution of the kantha and explore what needs to be done to ensure its continued survival.

In this context, I want to thank the Craft Revival Trust. Without the research they undertook for this project, this book would not have been possible. I want to especially thank Ms Arundhati Ghosh of the India Foundation for the Arts, whose infectious enthusiasm for the project gave me the courage to take it on.

Sudha Murty
Bangalore



Foreword

I must have been 15 years old when, going through my mother's cupboard full of books handed down to her by her father, I came across a tattered copy of *Nakshi Kanthar Math* (The Field of Embroidered Kantha), a ballad written as early as 1928 by Jasimuddin Mollah, an eminent poet and lyricist from undivided Bengal. Till then I had never paid much attention to the kantha, the colourfully embroidered covers and duvets made at home from recycled cloth and used across Bengal. It was so much a part of the everyday at home that one never spent too much time dwelling on its beauty. However, the book opened up for me a whole new understanding of the kantha. The kantha became, in the lives of the lovers in the ballad, an embodiment of both the magic of romance and mystery and the rootedness of love and belonging. The kantha became their words, their songs, their dreams. Since then kanthas have become an unending source of fascination for me. I realised over time that women in Bengal have a deep emotional attachment to the kantha, which is a repository of the memories of their lives and relationships, real or imagined. The kanthas hold stories of loss and separation, celebration and jubilation, wishes and aspirations. They are the archives of women's lives, which for the most part remain undocumented.

However, living in Bengal one could not miss seeing the tumultuous journey the kantha had made from homes to boutiques, from the patient hands of grandmothers to those of efficient daily-wage workers, from wedding trousseaus to the silver screen. Over the next several years I saw the kantha shift and transform to become one of the most expensive haute couture of Indian origin used by designers to adorn just about anything. I would wonder how this transformation affected the kantha as a form of art and as a chronicler of women's stories. So, when Mrs Sudha Murty (affectionately called Sudhaji), Chairperson, Infosys Foundation spoke to me about her love for the kantha, I jumped at the opportunity to work on a book that would trace its history and document the work that the NGOs for women's empowerment in West Bengal are doing to keep this art form alive and thriving.

This book is a product of the love and perseverance of the many people involved in the project. I thank Ritu Sethi, and the team at the Craft Revival Trust – Sisel Peter, Anuradha Nambiar, Chaiti Mitra, Enakshi Ghosh, Upal Sengupta and others for the research, writing and photography that formed the backbone of the book. I am also grateful to Gulshan Nanda for her enduring support.

Thanks also to the Director, National Museum, New Delhi, and Anamika Pathak, Curator of the museum's Decorative Arts and Textiles Department, for allowing us access to the museum's kantha collection.

We also thank C.L. Bharany for access to his kantha collection, and Indranath Majumdar, Suresh Neotia, Anik Palchoudhuri, Pranati Roy, and Ramal Bhai Parmar and his wife Geeta for generously sharing their private collections with us.

Without the interviews with such experts as Ruby Palchoudhuri, Neelanjana Ghose, Mahamaya Shikdar, Ranjana Sarcar, Sharabari Datta and Shamlu Dudeja, this book would have been incomplete.

Interviews and discussions with organisations, communities and individuals who work with the kantha – Alcha, Amar Kutir, Crafts Council of West Bengal, Kamarpara Training Centre, SASHA, Shibon Udyog, Stri Shakti Prakalpa, Karu Sangha; Bandana Lohar, Bani Biswas, Biswajit Mukhopadhyay, Meera Saha, Rita Dutta, Salma Bibi, Alima Khatun and others; embroiderers and traders at Amader Haat, Ballavpur Haat, Dokkhin Nobogram, Ballavpur Haat, Soantaal Para, Mollapara, Dilli Haat, and other clusters and markets – have enriched this book tremendously.

The book has been further enhanced by the additional research undertaken by Anuradha Nambiar, Chaiti Mitra and Enakshi Ghosh and the photographs by Upal Sengupta, Enakshi Ghosh, Ritu Sethi, Sonali Bhasin, and the National Museum, Delhi. I would also like to thank Ushri Mukherjee for the poem *Nakshi Kanthar Math* by Jassimuddin Mollah handwritten in Bangla.

I thank Neelima Prasanna Aryan for designing the book, and Menaka Rodriguez and the team at IFA for helping put it together. But without the impetus and support given by Sudhaji we would not have embarked on a project like this – thank you, Sudhajil

I do hope that *Embroidering Futures: Repurposing the Kantha* will spark off renewed interest in art forms such as the kantha and in its journey over time, and raise questions about its role in the lives of women today, the position it occupies in society and the meaning it holds for those engaged in its making.

Arundhati Ghosh

Deputy Director

India Foundation for the Arts

Nakshi Kanthar Math

(The Field of the Embroidered Quilt)

*Spreading the embroidered quilt
She works the livelong night,
As if the quilt her poet were
Of her bereaved plight.
Many a joy and many a sorrow
Is written on its breast;
The story of Rupa's life is there
Line by line expressed.*

*She is a daughter beloved at home
When the embroidery begins,
Later a husband sits at her side,
Her red lips hum as she sings.
The self-same quilt she opens
But those days ne'er return.
Those golden dreams of joy have vanished,
To ashes grey they burn.*

*Stitch by stitch she carefully draws
The last scene of pain,
The farewell of Rupa, slowly going,
Then turning a little again.
Turning again to the cottage home,
At the door his peasant wife
Standing dishevelled, gazing at him
Who is going to leave her for life.*

*She wept upon the careful stitches,
That last scene shown so well.
Her face turned pale as ashes
Down in the quilt she fell.
In this way many days have passed,
Carrying unbearable pain;
At last came the tempest that smote the trees;
Her body broke with strain.
Wipe your eyes and listen to me mother,*



*On the floor my quilt spread,
Propped on pillows, let me hold once more
The needle and the thread.
The pale hand takes the needle,
And stitch by stitch she works;
Contemplating the design completed,
Wiping the tear that lurks.*

*She has drawn her tomb upon the quilt,
A shepherd stands beside.
Dark night there sits like one bereaved
From the grave a little aside,
Playing a flute, while the ceaseless tears,
Are falling from his eyes.
She draws according to her fancy,
She looks and looking cries.*

*Weary and calling her mother, she says,
This quilt on my grave shall be spread;
The morning dew will weep on its breast
When I am dead.*

*And here if he ever returns again
His tears may break the sleep of death,
I may rise at night from the ground.
How will he bear this pain, mother,
On this quilt lies all of mine;
All my pain and all my grief,
Embroidered line by line.
So lay it on my grave, mother,
This picture of my grief,
That his and mine upon its breast,
May mingling find relief.*

— Jasimuddin Mollah.
Translated by E.M. Milford in 1986.



নক্সী কাঁথার মাঠ

নক্সী কাঁথারি বিদ্যাহীন সাজু সারারাত অঁকে ছবি,
 ও মেন তাহার চোপন ব্যাথার বিরহিয়া এক কবি,
 অনেক সুখের দুঃখের স্মৃতি উরি বুকো আছে লেখা,
 তার জীবনের ইতিহাসখানি ফহিছে বেখন্দ বেখা,
 সেই কাঁথা মবে আরম্ভ করে শুধন মে একদিন,
 কুমারীর ঘরে আদরিনী মেয়ে সারা সায়ে সুখ-চিন,
 স্বামী বনে তার বাঁকী বাজায়ছে, মিলনই কয়েছে সে যে;
 পুনপুন করে গান কতু রাত্তি কঁতে উঠেছে বেখে।

আজো সেই কাঁথা স্নেলিয়াছে সাজু যদিও সৈদিন নাই,
 সোনার স্বপন আজিকে তাহার স্মৃতিয়া হয়েছে ছাই।

খুব ইয়ে ইয়ে অঁকিন মে সাজু রূপার বিদায় ছবি,
 আনিক মাইয়া ফিরে ফিরে আসো, অঁকিন মে তার সবি,
 অঁকিন কাঁথায় — আনুমান্য যেনে চাহিয়া কখন নারী,
 দেখিছে — তাহার স্বামী তারে মায় জনমের স্নত ছাড়ি।

অঁকিতে অঁকিতে চোখে জন আসে, চাহনি মে মায় ইয়ে,
 বুকো কর হানি, কাঁথার উপরে পড়িল মে সাজু স্মৃতি,
 অমানি ফরিয়া বর্শদিন মায়, স্নানুসে মত না সহে,
 তার চেয়ে সাজু অপর্য ব্যথা আপনার বুকো বহে।
 তারপর শেষে অমানি হইল, বেদনার ঘোরে ঘোরে,
 অমন সোনার স্মৃতিখানি তার স্মৃতিল স্মৃতিয়া বাসে।

“সোনা মা আবার! ছে স্মৃতিয়া কথা সোন, যাও স্মাথা,
 ঘেবের মেয়ে সনে ইর দেখি আবার নক্সী কাঁথা!
 অকুঁ আবারে ইর দেখি সায়ো, স্মুঁচ স্মুঁচ দাত হাতো,



শোম ছবিখানা আঁকে দেখি যদি কোন মুখ হয় তাহে
পান্ডুর হাতে সূঁচ নিয়ে সাজু আঁকে খুব ধীরে ধীরে,
আঁকিয়া আঁকিয়া আঁখিজল মুখে দেখে কত মিলে ফিরে।

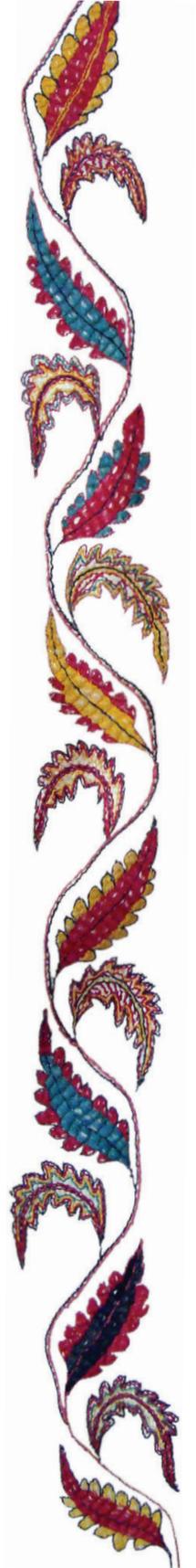
কাঁথার উপর আঁকিল মে সাজু তাহার ব্যবধানি,
তারি ফাছে এক চোঁমো রাখালের ছবিখানি দিল চানি;
রাত আন্ধার, কবরের পাশে বসি পরিহার বেঙ্গে,
অকোরে রাজায় বাঁকের বাঁকাঁচি, বুক যায় জ্বলে ভেঙ্গে,

পনের স্তম্ভ আঁকি এই ছবি দেখে বারবার করি,
ছাঁচি পোড়া চোখ বারবার স্মরি অশ্রুতে -মাথ ভরি।

দেখিয়া দেখিয়া ক্লান্ত হইয়া বসিল পায়েরে ডাকি,
"সোনা মা আমায়! মজিই যদি তোরে দিলে মাই ফাঁকি;
এই কাঁথাখানি বিছাইয়া দিও আমার কবর পরে,
ডোবের মিলির কাঁদিয়া কাঁদিয়া তরি বুকো মাঝে করে!
সে যদি গো তার ফিরে আসে কহু, তার নয়নের জ্বল,
জ্বলি জ্বলি মোর কবরের স্মারি ভিছাইবে অবিলম্ব।
হয়তো আমার কবরের দুখ ভেঙে মাঝে মাঝে আসে,
হয়তো তাহারে কাঁদাইতে আমি জমসিব অনেক রাতে।

মোর মত ব্যথা, মোর মত কাঁদা এরি বুকো লিখে মাই,
আমি গলে মোর কবরের গায়ে এবে মনে দিও তাই।
মোর ব্যথাপানে তার ব্যথাখানি দেখে মেন মিলি বসে,
জ্বলনের মত সব কাঁদা আমি লিখে গেলু কাঁথা ভরে।"

জসীমউদ্দীন মোল্লাহ



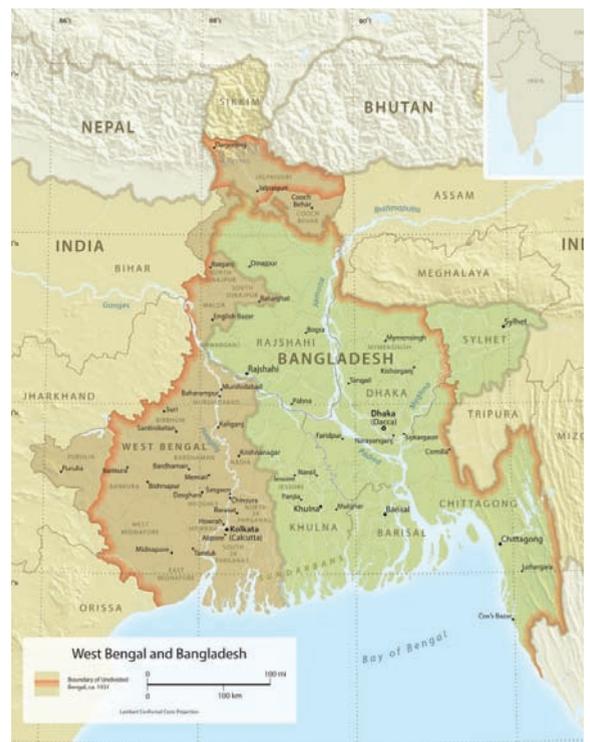
1

THE MOORINGS OF THE KANTHA

Functional, yet a highly personalised form of expression, kanthas are located in the fertile terrain of the cultural continuum of Bengali ethos, creativity and thrift. Kanthas are thus objects that bespeak a contradictory impulse: at once objects of utility “created in an endeavour at thrift by transforming worn-out textiles that would normally be thrown away” and “objects of beauty” (Chattopadhyay 1977: 55).



▲ *Current West Bengal.*



▲ *Undivided Bengal.*

Created by Anandaroop Roy for the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Never has this been more marked than today. The kantha was historically a domestic textile tradition indigenous to the once undivided region of Bengal in the Indian subcontinent. Over the last six decades since Independence, the kantha has evolved from its original form as a personal and creative feminine activity into a cultural and economic phenomenon on both sides of the border that split this region into the Indian state of West Bengal and the neighbouring country of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

The tradition of patching and quilting textiles in the Indian subcontinent has a long history. The domestic repurposed embroidered quilts, made primarily for personal use or for gifting to known people and loved ones, thus allow one to examine the roots of the feminine impulse, culture, domestic economics, history and religion. The repurposing of worn-out textiles is a tradition that has extended from the Bengal kantha to the *gudri* and *ralli* of central India and Rajasthan, the *sujni* of Bihar and the *katab* of western India.

Anamika Pathak (Curator, Decorative Arts and Textiles, National Museum, New Delhi) has traced the antiquity of patched textiles in India through a study of literary sources, paintings and sculptural evidence. The earliest mention of these textiles in literary texts occurs in the Buddhist *Vinaya Pitak* compiled circa 350 BCE. The text, which lays down the rules to be followed by Sangha monasteries and Buddhist monks and nuns, includes a detailed dress code for them and alludes to the patched garments worn by *bhikkus* or monks. Further, the *Markandya Purana*, the writing of which is dated from the fourth century to the tenth century AD, mentions King Harish Chandra in the guise of a *candela*, a professional performer of death rites, clothed in a patchwork of old rags. A second-century Kushan period sculpture of a seated Lord Buddha, housed in the Archaeological Museum in Mathura, depicts him wearing a patched garment, while an eighteenth-century Pahari School miniature, part of the National Museum collection, depicts Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva, assiduously embroidering a quilt with the kantha running stitch while Lord Shiva is absorbed in meditation.

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1889–1947), the renowned Indic scholar, posited that the folk arts that have survived in Bengal are directly descended from the pre-Harappan–Indus–Saraswati civilisation, which is at least 5,000 years old. The earliest direct reference to the Bengal kantha is found in Krishnadas Kaviraj’s *Sri Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita*, authored some 500 years ago, in which he mentions a kantha sent to him by his mother (Mohanty, cited in Zaman 2006: 99).¹

Other early references in folk songs and verses indicate that the kantha’s reworking of old fabrics into a ‘new’ object was viewed as a symbolic enactment of the cycle

of life and its affirmation of rebirth and revival (Rahman 1988: 23). Replete with such spiritual undertones, the kantha was naturally seen as a symbol of an ascetic's surrender of material ties:

*Sanaih kantha
Sanaih pantha
Sanaih parvata langhanam* ²

Slowly one stitches rags
Slowly one traverses the path
And slowly one climbs to the top of the mountain.

The visionary thinker, philosopher and poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote movingly about Lord Buddha's renunciation in his poem *Ebar Phirao Morey*. The young Prince Siddhartha, donning only a '*chhinna kantha*' or tattered kantha, leaves his kingly home in search of the ultimate truth, shorn of all his princely garments and material possessions.

Among the Muslims too, Sufi saints and *dorbaish* (dervishes), including the Baul singer Lalan Fakir — so revered in undivided Bengal — were known to use layered and quilted kanthas as an attire. The Baul singers referred to kanthas in their mystical music as a metaphor for their spiritual wanderings, free from material ties. In one of his Baul *gaan* or songs, Lalan Fakir says, "*Lalan saier chhera kantha, Gaye dile ki sit mane*" (Can Lalan's tattered kantha keep this cold away?).

*Aasman jora fakire bhai
Jami jora ketha
Eshob fakir morlay paray
kabar hobey kotha rey* (Basak 2007).

The song of the fakirs
Reverberates across the skies
The earth is covered with kantha
When the fakirs die
Who knows where their graves will lie?³

The kantha often figures in Bengali fables as an article of daily use. In the story of the 'Foolish Brother and the Clever Brother', for instance, the two brothers share a single kantha. The Clever Brother commandeers it for his use during the night and enjoys its warmth. The Foolish Brother, on the other hand, claims the kantha during the day when it is least needed, and so ends up having to wash and air it. It is only when a wise man makes the Foolish Brother realise he is on the losing end of the bargain that he is able to negotiate a fairer arrangement (Zaman 1981/1992: 15).

It is noteworthy that in oral traditions as well as in early literature, the kantha is celebrated in its humblest domestic form as *jeerna kantha*, a quilt composed of threadbare pieces of cloth, held together with the kantha stitch. The kantha legacy is one of an extraordinary means of recycling old and frayed fragments of cloth through quilting, “of frugality, of saving and sewing together every little bit, big or small, worn, torn or stained to create a stronger, warmer whole that lasts for generations” (Padmaja 2009: 61).

Unfortunately, the earliest material evidence of this domestic tradition’s historical roots can be dated back only to the early nineteenth century, which is when kanthas began to be acquired and collected by private individuals and institutions. They can be found in the collections pieced together by Gurusaday Dutt, a civil servant with a deep interest in rural art forms, and Stella Kamrisch, the famed Indologist,

▲ *A sujni kantha embroidered for Anik Palchoudhuri over seven decades ago by his grandmother. The motif, a protective talisman, is a chakra, representing the bountiful sun, radiating energy and a life-giving force. This kantha has been in regular use for more than 70 years.*



Photo: Ritu Sethi.

as also in other private collections and museums in India and across the globe. The curators at the National Museum in New Delhi commenced their kantha collection in 1956 with three unusual pieces that have since been supplemented to create a noteworthy and representative selection.

The worn-out nature of the fabrics used in the making of such kanthas and their frequent use must have already made the kanthas fragile. The tropical climate of Bengal would have accelerated their disintegration, making it impossible to determine the embroidery techniques, stitches, threads and fabrics that were used to make them. But based on the provenance of the collected pieces and interviews with ‘experts’ and other people, it can be said with some certainty that the kantha tradition was widespread in undivided Bengal, cutting across social, economic and religious divides, and that the technique, process and aesthetics of this ‘utilitarian’ textile have ancient roots.

There does exist, however, evidence of an entirely different type of quilt — one that was lavishly embroidered and used as a bedspread or canopy — made on commission for wealthy patrons. The first reference to such a luxury textile is attributed to Vasco da Gama who stated that when he visited the East African state of Melinde in 1502, during his second voyage to India, the ruler of that state gave him “a white-embroidered bed-canopy/*hum sobreceo de cama lavrado branco*” (Correa 1858, cited in Irwin and Hall 1973: 35),⁴ said to have been made in Bengal, which he regarded as the finest bed-canopy he had ever seen. There are subsequent references to this famous ‘white embroidery’ of Bengal which clearly show that the patterns were worked in twisted silk. For instance, when the youthful Portuguese King Sebastian was killed during the battle of Al Kasr in Morocco in 1578, the enemy was rewarded for handing over his dead body with rich gifts which included “a white Indian bedspread (*colcha*) of Bengal quilted all over and worked with very fine white silk thread, fringed with yellow silk thread and with tassels” (de Mendonca 1951, cited in *ibid.*: 34).⁵

The earliest surviving examples of such embroidered quilts are, however, not worked in white thread as described in these sixteenth-century sources but in yellow tussar silk on a ground of cotton or jute. Also dateable to the sixteenth century, these extant samples are known as ‘Bengalla’ or ‘Sutgonge’ quilts. They were made at Satgaon (located in Hughli district, 23 miles north of modern Kolkata) on commission by the Portuguese who exported them (*ibid.*: 35). The designs are usually pictorial, often incorporating hunting scenes with European figures, marine scenes with ships, fishes and mermaids, as well as Hindu subject matters. The embroideries of this school are mostly found on large bedspreads (at least 270 cm x 240 cm), but occasionally also on wall hangings and items of clothing such

as gowns, shawls and mantles. The scenes are outlined in chain stitch and usually filled in with back stitch. Sometimes details of the design are first embroidered on separate pieces of cloth and then appliquéd to the ground, the latter being either quilted cotton or jute (*ibid.*).

Although associated with and perhaps initiated by the Portuguese, these quilts also found favour with the East India Company as indicated by the Company's Court Minutes dated 25 February 1618: "Then was put to sale [in London] a Bengalla quilt of $3\frac{3}{4}$ yards long and 3 yards broad to be paid for in ready money, embroidered all over with pictures of men and crafts in yellow silk, Mr. Henry Garway bidding £20 for it" (Patna Factory Records, quoted in *ibid.*).⁶ The popularity of the Satgaon quilt as an export product is attested by the Company's instruction in the following year to its Agra factor to supply more quilts "stitched with birds, beasts or work very thick such as used by the Moors instead of carpets. Of this sort there comes, it seems, from Bengalla" (Egerton ms 2122, quoted in *ibid.*: 36).⁷

Up to this period the Company had not established any trading station in Bengal itself; but in 1620 two factors were sent to Patna, evidently to effect the sourcing of more quilts. Within a few months of their arrival, Hughes, the senior factor, wrote to the Council at Surat: "I shall here provide some quilts of Sutgonge [Satgaon] wrought with yellow silk, at reasonable rates; and have already half a score in possession, and am promised more daily as they come to town" (Patna Factory Records, quoted in *ibid.*).⁸ Later, in the same year, he wrote: "Of Sutgonge quilts ... They are not made here but brought from the bottom of Bengala and therefore cannot endeavour in their making on purpose but shall the provision of only such as may give content both for their length and breadth. Other sorts of quilts are not made here to be gotten of any kind and therefore you may not expect them from this place" (*ibid.*).⁹

Satgaon was the old mercantile capital of Bengal, located on the Saraswati tributary of the River Hughli. It declined in importance in the early sixteenth century owing to the silting of the river, and from 1537 onward its trade was gradually diverted to the port of Hughli which was founded by the Portuguese. Inspired by the tradition, the West Bengal chapter of the Crafts Council, under the leadership of its General Secretary Ruby Palchoudhuri, has revived the art of the lost Satgaon quilt. After studying museum collections, analysing the technique, sourcing materials and threads, embroiderers have been painstakingly trained to execute the fine, minute stitches.

While this historic variety of quilted embroidery and the vast trade revolving around it appear to have been greatly diminished with the demise of Portuguese power in the Bengal region, the kantha tradition did by no means come to a similar



▸ Revival work on Satgaon embroideries being carried out at the Kamladevi Centre.

grinding halt. It can be hypothesised that the Satgaon embroidery tradition both enriched and influenced the kantha and led to the making of the elaborately figurative *nakshi* kanthas. These comprised dramatic pictorial depictions that can be seen in a number of outstanding nineteenth-century kantha samples found in the districts of Hooghly (now Hughli), Bhirbhum, 24 Parganas, Jessore, Khulna, Barisal, Faridpur and other areas of undivided Bengal.

Like the Satgaon quilts, the *nakshi* kanthas did not form part of the humble kantha of the fakir and folklore, but were highly ornamented with embroidered motifs executed with multicoloured threads. Made by Hindu and Muslim women of all classes in Bengal for their own personal use and as gifts — for a son, a daughter, a bridegroom, a husband, a father, a grandchild — these kanthas encompass a wide variety of items of daily use: wraps, quilts, coverlets, ritual seats, pillowcases and bags. The *jeerna*¹⁰ or threadbare material — usually worn-out saris or dhotis — used for quilting and as a base for embroidery was usually obtained from a known and well-regarded source, most often loved and respected family members. In keeping with the dictates of ritual cleanliness, auspiciousness and what was considered



▲ The bags used by these snake charmers are kanthas.

‘good use’, not just any fabric would do. It was thus the use of these worn-out fabrics that made the kantha so much a product of love. The repurposing into a new life of the very clothes that had been worn by a loved one seemed to bestow a dual-talismanic protection on the recipient and user. And even when the quilting was done with a heavy stitch, the kantha remained soft and pliable, conveying a sense of warmth that went beyond the actual physical warmth it imparted. No wonder it was the preferred choice of gift for newborns!

The kantha was not viewed as an object of trade or source of income; rather, it was considered to physically embody the affection of the woman who had painstakingly embroidered it for the intended recipient. In fact, some of the women literally inscribed the kanthas with their blessings and good wishes, as in the case of a kantha embroidered by a *thakuma* or grandmother for her grandson Bhimu. Dated 21 July 1942 and titled *Thakumar Gopon Katha*, the message was meant only for Bhimu’s eyes. Thakuma embroidered her message on the quilt with the greatest love and affection. In it, she exhorts Bhimu to live up to the expectations of his illustrious family and to always strive to do ‘good’. Encouraging him to build a strong character and have a large heart, she wishes him world fame and knowledge. ‘Even if you fail,’ she says, ‘don’t be ashamed as God is with you.’ She ends with:

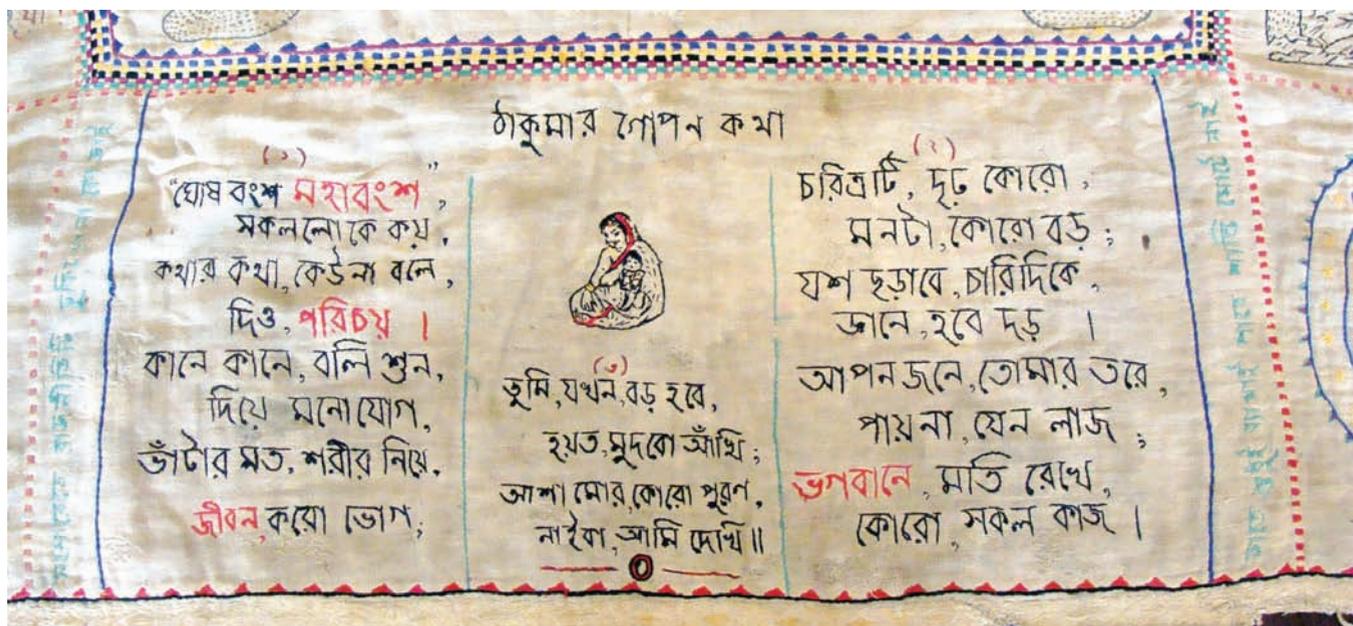
*Tumi Tokhon Bodo Hobe
Hoyeto, Mudbo Aankhi;
Aasha Mor Koro Puron
NayeeBa, Aami Dekhi.*

When you grow up may be I will not be there
My deepest hope is that you fulfil my wishes
Even though I may not be there to see it.

As the kantha-maker was often consciously seeking to express herself and create something unique for a loved one, she dipped into the vast vocabulary of familiar symbols she had at her disposal — symbols that explained without words the feelings, desires and blessings that she wished to convey. These auspicious motifs were also expressed in forms other than embroidery. In Hindu households, during the many ritual *vratas* and *pujas* performed on auspicious days, *alpanas* were drawn freehand by the women on floors and walls. Using powdered rice, the women invoked the gods, inviting blessings on the home and on loved ones. The symbols used were similar to those that were translated more permanently into embroideries. The *Vaishnavite* kanthas that invoke the names of Lord Rama and Krishna, incarnations of the God Vishnu, were painstakingly embroidered in minute stitches, repeating the holy mantras in an act of piety.



► From Suresh Neotia's collection.



Courtesy: C.L. Bharany.

► From Suresh Neotia's collection.

Secret words of a Grandmother (1)

The dynasty of the Ghosh is a
great one
And everyone knows it.
If people don't believe you,
Tell them your history.
Listen to me carefully
As I give you this advice
With a body like the sea,
Enjoy this life.

When you are older
I might close my eyes.
Please fulfill my desires
Even if I don't get to see
them.

Strengthen your character,
And make your heart large.
Fame will spread everywhere,
Your knowledge will be priceless.
Your relatives should not feel
Embarrassed by you.
Believe in God
And all your work will be done.

The person for whom the embroidered kantha was meant and its intended use played an important part in determining not only the size, shape and number of layers that would make up the kantha, but also, and most importantly, the choice of symbols and motifs and their placement. Though samples of kanthas using calligraphy are rare and difficult to find, they afford us a glimpse into the lives of women in late nineteenth-century India, when the seeds of emancipation, education and literacy were bearing fruit and being manifest in several ways, including on the kantha.





From C.L. Bharany's collection.

▶ Though combined with an auspicious central motif of the lotus, the images embroidered on this cover are full of menace: sepoys, guard-houses, elephants, horses and a mounted soldier.

From C.L. Bharany's collection.



▶ Kantha with a central lotus motif.



© Ranu 2008

▶ Alpana, floral designs made on the floor with white rice flour, with a central lotus motif.

▶ Previous page: Perhaps embroidered as a wish-fulfillment exercise or as an offering, this kantha repeats the mantra 'Hari Om Sri Ram Hore Hore', invoking the Hindu God Rama, one of Lord Vishnu's incarnations. The calligraphy is in black and red, with the dense kantha stitch covering the textile piece in a tone-on-tone off-white.

From Ranu Chakraborty Bhaduri's blog
<http://mypinkcloud-ranu.blogspot.in/2012/02/rangoli.html>.



From C.L. Bharany's collection.

► This kantha is minutely embroidered with auspicious mantras addressed to the Lords Krishna and Rama, incarnations of the God Vishnu. The calligraphy is enhanced with embroidered symbols associated with propitiating the gods.

Shrimati Pranati Roy of the Lalgola zamindar family of Murshidabad reminisces about the days when her husband, Sri Birendra Narayan Roy, now in his 80s, was elected a Member of the Legislative Assembly for five consecutive terms and Muslim villagers from remote areas like Jangipur, Nabagram, Jiyaganj and Panchgram visited their home, bringing hand-embroidered kanthas as tokens of loyalty, love and respect. These kanthas were often quilted using frayed lungis and faded printed saris, testifying to the closeness and informal relationship that existed between the giver and receiver of these gifts. The family continues to use these kanthas even today. Now in her late 70s, Shrimati Roy plans to present her grandson with a family heirloom, an intricately embroidered red kantha presented almost 60 years ago to her six-month-old son on his *annaprashan*, the rice-eating ceremony which marks the first time a child is introduced to cooked food or solids.

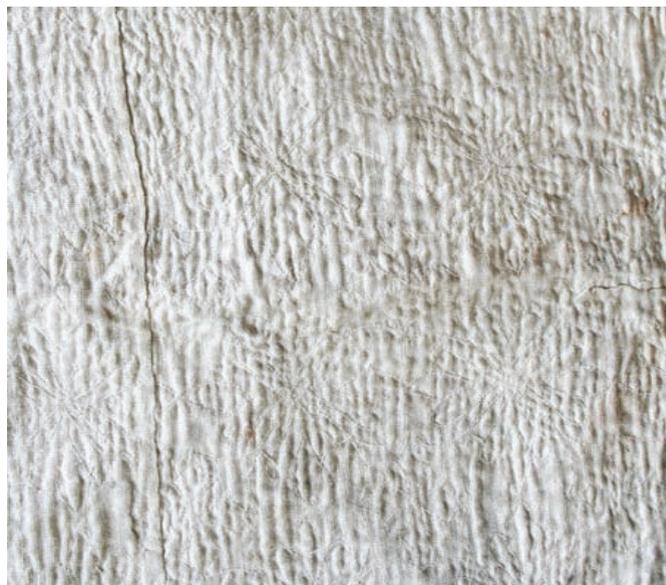
Photo: Upal Sengupta.



► A kantha with fine back-stitch embroidery in white on the traditional red shalu with a white border. Smt Pranati Roy, 76, remembers how 57 years ago, Muslim subjects from their zamindari at Lalgola in Murshidabad had presented the intricately embroidered red kantha to her six-month-old son at his 'rice eating ceremony' or 'annaprashan'. She has carefully preserved this priceless gift of love and respect as a family heirloom and plans to hand it over to her only grandson on his return from the USA.



► Close-up of the kantha above.



► Reverse side of the kantha above.

Photos: Upal Sengupta.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▴ This worn-out kantha is made of four layers of white used dhoti or sari with only running stitch, called 'ekrokha' or single-sided stitch. Three coloured yarns (black, red and blue) are drawn from an old sari border and then four borders of two different designs are made with a single continuous thread knotted only at the corner.

In Indranath Majumdar's collection there are two beautiful pieces: one, an *arshilata* kantha and the other a 4/6 ft torn quilt, whose borders had been separated from the body through over-use. Both kanthas were made by his mother Gyanadasundari Devi, who worked on them when she was in Shilet in undivided Bengal (now in Bangladesh) at least 60 to 70 years ago. Majumdar recalls a story associated with what he terms as "the best kantha my mother made": "One winter night my youngest brother, who was involved with the Naxal movement, had to leave the house. As he was leaving, my mother wrapped around him the best kantha she had made. I never ever got to see that brother or that kantha again."

While the quilting and motifs are configured differently in each kantha, many of the kanthas from the nineteenth century juxtapose indigenous motifs with ones that are either of foreign origin or depict the inroads made by the British administration in Bengal. Kanthas styled like the Kalighat *pats*, with bright colours, firm strokes, strong characterisation and the same ironic look at everyday mores, indicate an awareness of the world outside and the influence it had on the women who embroidered.



Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

▶ This rectangular single-layered kantha is divided into 15 equal squares, each containing a distinct composition. Acquired in 1962, this late nineteenth-century spread features in its central square an elegantly shod Bengali gent, seated on a chair, enjoying a smoke with his hunkah.

▶ This charming kantha spread borrows from the Kalighat pat tradition. Though sparsely embroidered, its clean strokes display a keen artistic sensibility.



From C.L. Bharany's collection. 29

Thus, a kantha may depict the palanquin that carries the bride to her new home, a *rath* carrying the gods, as well as a train chugging its way through the verdant countryside. Goddesses share space with dhoti-clad but anglicised Bengali babus sporting European jackets and boots, as well as dapper English soldiers on the march. The embroideries that relate to and reflect on the changes perceived in the world outside the home reveal a developing consciousness of a cultural renaissance expressed through motifs of economic and political development and progress, intermingling effortlessly with traditional auspicious symbols.

Given the injunction against the use of figures, the Islamic embroideries were clearly different from the Hindu ones, though their kanthas served similar purposes. The Islamic influence is discernable in the use of calligraphy and arabesques, geometric patterns including the *lehr* or wave motif, and undulating

▸ Detail of a kantha depicting scenes from a battle.





Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

▲ This remarkable multilayered kantha from the nineteenth century was acquired by the National Museum in 1958 and features one of the seven wonders of the world, the Taj Mahal. With its embroidered minarets, the rectangular piece has objects of desire surrounding the central architectural feature – from a clock, a book and an airplane, to a bus, a boat, a house and a sankha (conch) to an umbrella, flowers, fruits and vegetables and a betel nut-cutter among others.

floral and vine forms reminiscent of Islamic art. Kanthas inspired by the expensive shawls imported from Kashmir, decorated with the paisley pattern, perhaps to be draped by men on cold evenings, were also embroidered as gifts. The stitched and embroidered kanthas were thus as varied and different as the impulse that ruled their making.

Variations in the kantha abounded, with the British influence visible in the *chhapai* kanthas sold in the bazaars of Dacca (now Dhaka) by traders hawking their wares in bamboo *tokris* or baskets. A heavy cross-stitch was worked on a red *shalu* cotton fabric. The quilting principle followed was similar to that used for kantha embroidery, except that there were only two layers of fabric used – the red *shalu* backed with green cotton fabric. Also, there was only one type of stitch used, the cross-stitch, the size of which was varied to suit the design. The motifs were patterned using threads of pale yellow, light and dark blue, green and white, while red in a shade similar to the base red of the *shalu* was used for the quilting,



- ▶ *This multilayered dorokha (double-sided) kantha shawl has been painstakingly embroidered to replicate the look of the expensive pashmina shawls of Kashmir. Paisleys form the main motif, though birds, flowers, trees and the auspicious fish have crept in too.*





► From Ruby Palchoudhuri's collection, this chhapai kantha in cross-stitch has a red cotton (shalu) base with green cotton backing, a fringe on all four sides and calligraphy.

strengthening the piece by stitching in small crosses alongside and between the embroidered motifs leaving no space unstitched. The embroidered counterpanes were charming to look at, symmetrically patterned with parrots, paisleys and foliage and neatly finished with a white cotton-thread fringe on all four sides. Though borrowing from its technique and sold under the kantha brand, the use of newly bought red and green fabric made the end-product completely different from the traditional kantha.

Arun Nag's collection has three heirloom pieces. The first, which is 120 years old, was made in Maymansingha in undivided Bengal (now in Bangladesh), probably for a newborn, and was called ashon kantha. The design is that of a *kadam phool* kantha, or a kantha depicting the *kadam* flower. The four sides are decorated with Bengal's well-known red *tangail* border or the *angurlata* (grape vine) *paar*, and *kadam* flowers made with a circular running stitch using thread of the same colour and quality as the *angurlata*.

The second heirloom kantha in Nag's collection is a *dhakni* kantha that was made to cover a household object. The patterns are made with the zig-zag stitch using red and blue thread drawn from old sari borders. This kantha, too, is claimed



▾ From Arun Nag's collection: the kadam phool ashon kantha, with angurlata paar.

to be 120 years old and made in Maymarsingha. The third heirloom kantha in the collection, claimed to be 150 years old, was inherited by Arun Nag from his maternal grandmother's grandmother Kiranbala Das, who hailed from Madripur in Palong (now in Bangladesh). This kantha is a proper quilt with embellishments that use only black thread with just a touch of red here and there. These are embroidered with the running and darning stitch. The quilt is bordered on all four sides, with a simple paisley embroidered in each of the four corners. Nag is surprised by the Muslim influence evident in this kantha. "My great-grandmother was a Hindu lady and her use of only black thread and eschewal of the figurative motif contravened the common practice of that era." Was she an early widow bound by custom to wear only colourless black-bordered saris throughout her life? The question remains unanswered.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

► *The dhakni kantha from Arun Nag's heirloom kanthas.*

The kantha embroiderers of Bengal were not averse to outside influence, as is evident from their ready assimilation of motifs, stitches, techniques and images associated with the British. It was not uncommon for the embroiderers to depict, for instance, the newer forms of transportation introduced by the British — from trains to airplanes — circus performers, dancing ladies and embroidered narrations of what they saw, imagined or wished for, although adapting them to their own formats to create products that were nevertheless flavoured by an indigenous aesthetic. Thus, as with all true living traditions, the tradition of quilting and embroidering kanthas was by no means static; it was, rather, an evolving practice that diversified according to the needs of different clients, assimilated novel motifs into its repertoire, and grew increasingly more complex in the process.

Credit must also be given to the wandering Gujarati *pheriyas* — men and women who travelled throughout Bengal, speaking the language, knocking on doors, and bartering goods unavailable in the far-flung places they visited in exchange for old textiles, kanthas and all manner of handcrafted goods and jewellery that would have a market in the big cities of Bengal. Their modus operandi was to set up a temporary base in a small, nearby hamlet and make daily forays into



▲ From Arun Nag's collection, this quilt kantha belonged to his grandmother's grandmother Kiranbala Das.

the interiors on bullock-carts. This mode of transport suited them perfectly as it could take the weight and bulk of the range of products that they were carrying to entice all variety and class of women. It could also serve as a temporary shelter to pass the night and made for a perfect 'shop' when required. They travelled into small villages, building trading relationships and carrying products coveted by the womenfolk — *alta*, *sankha* and *pala*, the auspicious wedding bangles worn by all Hindu women in Bengal as a sign of their marital status; metal cooking and serving utensils; needles, threads and spices. One of the young embroiderers interviewed at Shibon Udyog spoke of how her family had exchanged their kanthas for stainless steel utensils; only a few now remained with the family.

Sometimes, if the *pheriyas* coveted a particular piece of textile, they would even consider 'special requests'. The bartered goods were then sorted out and grouped together. With their mercantile astuteness, the *pheriyas* were well aware of the market prices and savvy about what goods would appeal to which customer. Back in the cities the textiles were cleaned, darned, spruced up and then sold,

► Displaying a nakshi kantha available for sale. Photograph taken at Raimal Bhai Parmar's residence.



a tidy profit being made in the process. It was only a matter of time before the *pheriyas* realised the value of the kanthas to connoisseurs and began scouring the interiors for them, controlling the market and often selling special pieces directly to museums. The *pheriyas* thus played a critical role in bringing the kanthas into the marketplace.¹¹

However, it was only in the early twentieth century that this wealth of material culture attracted scholarly interest and the kantha began to be systematically collected, documented and written about. Stella Kramrisch, for instance, collected over 60 kanthas (now housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art), as well as published various essays exploring the motifs and the meanings embedded in them. Gurusaday Dutt established a significant collection of Bengal arts and crafts, in which the kanthas enjoy a prominent place (the collection is now on display at the Gurusaday Museum at Thakurpukur in Kolkata). As part of his unified vision of Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore instituted the learning and practice of decorative arts and crafts, including the kantha, as a part of his unique educational experiment in Shantiniketan. In his seminal 1935 publication *Brihat Banga*, noted critic, historian and folk art collector Dinesh Chandra Sen wrote in detail about the kantha and the symbolism of its motifs. The poet Jasimuddin's interaction with and exposure to kanthas, kantha-making and usage inspired him to write his now famous 'Nakshi Kanthar Math', a poem about a young girl expressing her feelings while embroidering her kantha 'stitch by stitch' as she waits for her beloved: "... those golden dreams of joy have vanished, To ashes grey they burned." The poem ends poignantly with a deeply moving verse:

*E byatha she mago kyamone shohibe,
Mor jawto byatha, mor jawto kanda eri buke likhe jai
Ami gele mor kawborer ere mele diyo tai
Mor byatha shathe tar byathakhani dekhe jyano mil kore
Jonomer moto shob kanda ami likhe genu kantha bhore*

How will he bear this pain, mother,
On this quilt lies all of mine;
All my pain and all my grief
Embroidered line by line.
So lay it on my grave, mother,
This picture of my grief,
That his and mine upon its breast,
May mingling find relief.¹²

While the kantha represents an almost unique instance where a domestic embroidery art form received such concerted scholarly attention, this surge of ethnographic study and sample collection was rather short-lived, having been subsumed by the larger phenomena of the Indian freedom struggle and the partition of Bengal into West Bengal and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). In the early 1970s, when the political upheaval in the erstwhile East Pakistan and the surge of refugees from the newly formed state of Bangladesh had settled somewhat, interest in the kantha again experienced a resurgence, becoming part of the search for an indigenous, 'authentic' culture and a means of generating livelihoods in rural and urban areas through available skills. On both sides of the border, it was the *nakshi* kantha that became the basis of the data collated by scholars during the 1930s and 1940s, and formed the bulk of private collections, museum artefacts and family heirlooms, and it is the *nakshi* kantha which now served as the springboard for the kantha's revival.

It is not surprising, then, that in the decades that followed, the *nakshi* kantha eclipsed the other simpler kantha forms in the popular imagination and scholarly documentation. Thus, although the kantha is associated with thrift, domestic resourcefulness, asceticism and personal use in Bengali folk literature and oral traditions, it is its luxuriant imagery and feminine expression that are the celebrated subjects of textile history and contemporary knowledge of the technique, design vocabulary, products and usage of this ancestral embroidered quilting practice.



Endnotes

1. Manjary Mohanty, *Quilt (Kantha: Art of Bengal)* <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/southasia/Manjari.hotmail> (accessed 12 Decemeber 2002). As cited in Zaman (2006: 99).
2. Sanskrit verse quoted by Professor Gouriswar Bhattacharya as cited by Zaman 2006: 99.
3. Translated by Chaiti Mitra.
4. Correa, Gaspar. *Lendas da India*, 1858: Vol. 1, p. 287, fn 9, Lisbon. As cited in Irwin and Hall 1973: 34.
5. The Portuguese reads: "Huma Colxa da India de Benguella toda pespontada, e lavrada de lavores de retros branco muito fina franjada de retros amarelo com suas macentas". Several other embroidered quilts are included, but with the exception of one which was "decorated with birds, hunting scenes and vegetation" (lavrada de aves, e montaria, e boscaagem), they are less specifically described. Provas de Historia Genealogica, tomo III, p. 415, quoted by Maria Jose de Mendonca, "Alguns tipos de colchas Indo-Portuguesas," Boletim do Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, 1951: Vol. II, No. 2: p. 6, fn 10. As cited in Irwin and Hall 1973: 34.
6. India Office Archives, Patna factory Records, Vol. 1, folio 3. As quoted in fn 13, Irwin and Hall 1973: 35.
7. British Museum, Egerton ms. 2122, folio 64. As quoted in fn 14, Irwin and Hall 1973: 36.
8. India Office Archives, Patna factory Records, Vol. 1, folio 3. As quoted in FN 15, Irwin and Hall 1973: 36.
9. FN 16. Ibid, folio 15, as quoted in Irwin and Hall 1973: 36.
10. An unstitched length of cloth used as a garment for men, draped over the lower body and tied at the waist.
11. Ritu Sethi and Gulshan Nanda in conversation with Shri Raimal Bhai Parmar.
12. Translated by E.M. Milford (1986). The complete poem is reproduced at the beginning of the book.

2

THE CHANGING KANTHA

While the kantha has evolved consistently through its history, its most drastic transformation is linked with the subcontinent's struggle for freedom and its subsequent search for national identity. In this environment of political uncertainty and economic hardship, the kantha of Bengal came to be invested with new significance on both sides of the border, becoming a symbol of cultural continuity and authenticity.

In as early as the 1900s in Bengal, the visionary Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore had initiated a search into the indigenous roots of Bengali culture and with it a revitalisation of various traditional skills. As part of this ambitious project, in 1919 he established Kala Bhavana, the House of Art, at his school in Shantiniketan, where the curricula emphasised the cultivation of artisan skills as much as it did personal creativity. Teachers and students alike learnt and practised various decorative arts as well as crafts familiar to every Bengali household. Under the guidance of Tagore's daughter-in-law Pratima Devi, the French artist Madame Andre Karpele and Smt Sukumari Devi, the kantha, *alpana*, mat-making, dyeing, printing and batik were introduced to the budding 'fine artists' at the college (Subramanyam 1982: 37-41).

Tagore also launched Shilpa Bhavana in 1922 at Sriniketan, where education programmes were planned with the objective of training rural people in various industries and crafts and organising them into professional groups as the need arose. In the throes of fervent nationalism, the educated upper and middle classes, who once patronised imported products, took to the indigenous goods produced at Sriniketan with enthusiasm. By the end of the 1930s, Shilpa Bhavana was selling its products through approximately 150 retail outlets across India and had to extend its output by decentralising its production to households in rural Bengal.



Photo: Upal Sengupta.

▲ Close-up of a man's shawl/dupatta. Traditional bird motif, with an unconventional colour scheme.

Textiles formed a major component of the handcrafted products sold, especially saris, bedcovers, table-covers, tray-cloths, embroidered blouses and scarves that were printed, resist-dyed or embroidered (ibid.).

The pedagogy espoused at Kala Bhavana under the leadership of the artist Asit Kumar Halder, its first director, was continued through the next three decades when Nandalal Bose was the principal. Bose's ideology was inspired by his interaction with Ananda Coomaraswamy and Okakura Kakouzo, the Japanese artist who taught at Vishwabharati. Both Coomaraswamy and Kakouzo believed that any art movement, especially in India, should take into consideration the whole spectrum of creative activity comprising household and non-professional arts, crafts and functional arts, and fine and creative arts. However, Bose's well-intentioned effort to re-establish traditional roots appears to have focused on the graphic potential of the *alpana* and gradually its linear motifs influenced all spheres of arts practice in Shantiniketan, including textiles. The predominance of this ritual floor decoration is apparent in the early direction of the Karu Sangha, an artist-craftsmen's settlement established by Bose (ibid.) in Shantiniketan, which produced handcrafted *biyer-piri* (wedding trays), saris, *angavastrams* and home furnishings such as cases for bolsters and pillows, that were embellished with batik-resisted or embroidered *alpana* motifs.

Within the Swadeshi framework of regeneration of handicrafts, the kantha had thus already mutated into a marketable commodity and also, in the process, into a non-quilted, embroidered, single-layered textile or stitched product. Although dramatically altered in form and format alike, local crafts skills were not only fostered but were flourishing in the patriotic economy of the pre-Independence era.

However, the deep-seated sectarian conflicts that came to the fore before Swaraj could be attained, forever destroyed the idea of a unified Indian federation that spanned the entire subcontinent. From this turmoil arose the two-nation theory — a Hindu Indian State and a Muslim federation encompassing the various regions of the subcontinent where the majority of the population was Islamic. The boundaries of these nations were drawn and antagonistic communities constructed and justified by exclusionist interpretations of Hinduism and Islam — all within a short span of seven weeks. Bengal, dissected into the ‘Hindu’ Indian state of West Bengal and the ‘Muslim’ Pakistani East Bengal (renamed East Pakistan in 1956) by the Partition of 1947, was one of the areas most affected. Bengalis on either side of the border were suddenly forced to choose a nationality, resulting in a massive exodus of refugees in both directions and great economic dislocation.

But alongside the seismic transformations that were wrought in the newly formed state of West Bengal due to the huge displacement of populations and the accompanying social and economic changes, the decades after Independence also saw a developing revival of arts and crafts — built upon the Shantiniketan legacy. During the late 1960s, freedom fighter Dr Phulrenu Guha, inspired by Rabindranath Tagore’s daughter-in-law Pratima Devi and her students in Shantiniketan, began to consciously adapt this craft of quilted embroidery to contemporary urban needs by using it as a colourful embellishment on sari borders and shawls (Padmaja 2009: 67).

Led by Guha, who was also an eminent social activist, legislator and philanthropist, Karma Kutir was founded in 1961 in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and was awarded the status of a registered voluntary social welfare organisation in the following year. Initially, its aim was to rehabilitate the waves of refugees — the economically marginalised women and children in particular — who had been arriving intermittently in West Bengal, especially Calcutta and the neighbouring districts, ever since the Partition. To this end, self-support programmes were formulated for underprivileged women and girls. The strategy was twofold: to provide training in economically viable skills, and while doing so to revive the traditional handicrafts of Bengal, with special emphasis on the kantha.

Under the instructions of the All India Handicrafts Board, then chaired by the visionary Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, the Regional Handicrafts Training Institute for India's eastern and north-eastern states was launched under the directorship of Prabhas Sen, a freedom fighter and student of Nandlal Bose. The Institute's performance — the quality of its training and production — attracted not only trainees from these states but also exchange students from Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Mauritius. As the handicrafts movement gathered momentum in various states, each of the north-eastern states formed its own handicrafts institution.

Similar rehabilitation efforts led to a number of young refugee women being brought from the Chotanagpur tribal belt to Andul Road, Howrah, by Father Laborde. In 1976, a piece of vacant land adjoining the church property was converted by him into Howrah South Point, a home for the displaced, and eventually registered under the West Bengal's Society's Registration Act in 1980.¹ Pranati Bose, who had been trained at Karma Kutir, took leadership of the vocational education facilities set up for the women at Howrah South Point and trained them in skills associated with batik, embroidery and the kantha (Majumdar 1986b: 32).

Sreelata Sarkar, a graduate of Kala Bhavana, Shantiniketan, had begun experimenting with kanthas as a means of personal expression. She was inspired by the development projects launched by Pratima Devi, who had also initiated her into the art of the kantha, as well as the artistic vision of her other teachers, Nandlal Bose and Ramkinker Baij, at Shantiniketan. In 1979, she started training a group of underprivileged women in the skills of kantha-making.² Though based on studies of the *nakshi* kantha specimens in the Ashutosh Museum (Kohli 1986: 29), Sarkar's designs were contemporary. The intention was to not merely replicate the kantha of old but to make it fashionable and commercially viable, as she felt that this would ensure its longevity.³ The innovations she introduced included adapting the kantha to garments and household linen, using coloured silk (especially tussar) as the base material and brightly coloured threads for embroidery. She also incorporated various floral and folk motifs into the kantha vocabulary. By 1987, Sreelata Sarkar's group of trainees numbered 150. In the same year, she held a successful exhibition of their work at the Information Centre in Kolkata. And in 1994, she was honoured with the National Award for Handicrafts in recognition of her contribution to the regeneration of this textile tradition.⁴

Ruby Palchoudhuri of the Crafts Council of West Bengal started working with the kantha tradition in 1977 with the objective of reviving the layered kantha that had been ignored in the contemporary revival effort. The Kamla Devi Kantha Centre, which was set up with 20 interns, produced museum-quality quilted kanthas. These layered kanthas were inspired by the heirloom pieces displayed at the



Photo: Upal Sengupta.

► Close-up of a kantha.

Gurusaday Museum, as well as the collection housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The kanthas produced at the centre found an appreciative and large market not only in urban India but also overseas, and in 1986 were showcased as part of the larger Mahamaya Exhibition at the Port of History Museum, as well as at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Meanwhile, Meera Mukherjee, a Bengali sculptor, was working with young girls in Norgoraghat village to create what she termed 'stitch-paintings'. Her work, comprising large, narrative wall hangings which used the kantha as an artistic medium (Kohli 1986: 29), was not driven by nostalgia for the kantha as an



▲ *Batuas designed by Ranjana Sarcar.*

idealised past practice; rather, it probed into the inherent dynamism of the form as a medium of expression (Majumdar 1986a: 24). “Her style and its potential for storytelling inspired the embroideries that emerged from Dhanket Vidyalaya that she had set up. Characterised by vivid colours and a strong sense of movement, these embroideries depicted topical social issues such as dowry deaths and child labour” (Ghose 1986: 15).

SASHA (Sarba Shanti Ayog and the SASHA Association of Crafts Producers), a not-for-profit organisation that works to develop craft communities,⁵ initially looked at the kantha, as at other crafts, as an income-generating source with a promising domestic as well as international market. After several field visits, it was evident that the kantha was one of the numerous indigenous dying arts that needed immediate intervention. Though there were still women in rural Bengal who made kanthas, the practice was slowly dying out. SASHA recognised the urgency and importance of starting an organised support system for the revival and sustenance of this traditional folk art of Bengal.

In 1978 SASHA identified a group of highly skilled kantha embroiderers from Panchannagram Jiljala Mahila Samiti, a shelter for flood victims founded by Mother Teresa. These women were, however, working in an utterly unorganised manner, sustained only by sporadic and limited orders from individual buyers. SASHA started its first kantha unit with this group, renaming it the Panchannagram Mahila Samiti, and later extended it to include another women's group from Barasat. Their products were marketed from Howrah South Point.

SASHA thus launched its 'kantha project', researching traditional specimens available at museums as well as the contemporary products that were being made by an increasing number of producer groups (including in Bangladesh). Design development workshops with local kantha embroiderers followed and gradually the various stitches used in the kantha were recalled and experimented with. Emphasis on quality and finish translated into stitching and unstitching areas of the fabric until the desired appearance was achieved. Various colour combinations — traditional as well as some startling new palettes — were tested and vegetable-dyed yarn introduced.

The kantha project culminated in an exhibition in Delhi and at the Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay in the mid-1980s. The exhibits included expensive wall hangings and a range of more saleable products of everyday use, such as wraps, jackets, bags and covers for books, jewellery boxes and cushions, as also old family heirloom kanthas sourced from friends and relatives. Photographs and textual information about the stitches and traditional motifs featured in the products were also included to increase awareness about the product and to serve as future reference material for the embroiderers themselves (Kohli 1986: 28).

The success of the exhibition drew producer groups, hitherto not working with the kantha, to learn its basic running-stitch style and adapt it to their own range of products. "Although such interventions in design development proceeded apace in West Bengal, drawing inspiration from the *nakshi* kanthas of undivided Bengal, layers of old cloth stitched together to serve as wraps and spreads, with linear or graphic embroidered patterning, continued to be embroidered domestically for personal use" (Mehta 1986: 7).

In fact, some organisations like Self Help chose to focus on the design vocabulary of the basic kantha rather than that of the *nakshi* kantha. The intricate detailing of the latter made it more time-consuming to produce, which in turn made the end-product costlier. Self Help was initiated in the 1960s by the Mennonite Central Committee, a philanthropic organisation based in the USA, as part of its income-generation programmes for women. Originally, the handcrafted products

were made by the women who comprised the workforce, while the marketing, production and financial aspects of the enterprise were handled by men. In 1979, however, this structure was dismantled and in 1980 the women established themselves as an autonomous society. Product development and sales within the domestic market were handled by Self Help while export was routed through SASHA (Majumdar 1986b: 32). But perhaps due to its roots, Self Help's production was largely export-driven. At that time, textile buyers from other countries were sourcing embroidered products from various parts of the country. Self Help thus had to distinguish its products from the vibrant embroideries of Kutch and Gujarat as well as the *phulkari* of Punjab. With this in mind, Self Help sampled cushion covers that used both kantha stitches and *jamdani* patterns. As the covers were designed such that the entire surface did not require to be quilted, the pricing was reasonable and the product was well received by buyers. Export production was routed through Panchannagram village and a range of linen evolved on the same lines was retailed through SASHA. The kantha was then extended to garments such as men's kurtas, peasant-style skirts, dresses and children's clothes (Ghose 1986: 15).

While the kantha was evolving into its current avatar in West Bengal, a similar resurgence of the craft was underfoot in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The roots of the kantha revival in this region can be traced to the rebellion against the 'Pakistani identity' being enforced on the people from more than 1,000 miles away. It soon became apparent that religion alone was not enough to generate a sense of unified identity. Large-scale protests broke out in the region (most notably, first in 1948 and then again in 1952) against the proclamation of Urdu as the sole national language of the Pakistani federation. The 'Language Movement', as it came to be called, argued instead for the inclusion of Bangla as an official language of the Pakistani State. Centred on this movement was a growing cultural awareness that consciously opposed the domination of West Pakistan and actively used indigenous art forms as an assertion of local linguistic, cultural and ethnic distinctiveness (Zaman 1981/1992: 2).

While *alpanas* were defiantly used in commemorations of the Language Movement, the traditional kanthas that were eulogised by Jasimuddin and which were collected and documented by Stella Kramrisch and Gurusaday Dutt had disappeared entirely from public view in East Pakistan, dwelling in the safety of locked trunks and private collections. The kanthas being made by village women had barely enough stitches to hold the layers of fabric together (Chen 1984: 50) and those that were being sold in handicraft shops were hybrid 'carpet kanthas' being produced at the East Pakistan Small and Cottage Industries Project at Chapai Nawabganj (Zaman 1981/1992: 3).



Photo: Upal Sengupta.

► Close-up of a tussar dupatta.

The kantha revival had but a few advocates at the time: Zainul Abedin, who established the Art Institute and personally collected fine specimens of Jessore kanthas for a folk art museum he hoped to found; and Qamrul Hasan, who attempted to set up a Design Centre that practised and promoted the kantha as well as other local arts (ibid.). In a landmark break with custom, in 1966 the Dhaka Museum, precursor to the Bangladesh National Museum, began its own collection of kanthas – a collection that today comprises over 1,000 pieces (Zaman 2006: 105).

However, it was only after 1971, when East Pakistan achieved independence and became Bangladesh, that a kantha revival truly materialised. A number of factors contributed to this phenomenon. A sense of national identity created a demand for indigenous products to replace the exogenous culture that was being discarded. The War of Independence had left many women widowed or separated from their families; they needed to be rehabilitated and given a livelihood through



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▸ *Wide blue-red border from Mahamaya's heirloom collection; made by her grandmother Tarubala Bhattacharya.*

traditional skills. Districts such as Jessore, Kushtia, Faridpur and Rajshahi that had a strong kantha tradition were at the forefront of these development projects, setting up cottage industries through which kanthas began to be marketed (Zaman 1981/1992: 3).

Chief amongst these was the Bangladesh Handicraft Cooperative Federation (BHCF) and its outlet Karika, set up in 1972. Although closely associated with the East Pakistan Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (now known as the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation or the BSCIC), the BHCF, under the leadership of Hameeda Hossain, Perveen Ahmad, Ruby Ghaznavi and Lila Amirul Islam, succeeded in renewing interest in the traditional *nakshi* kantha through exhibitions at Karika (ibid.: 5). Karika was followed by Aarong, a retail outlet set up by the Mennonite Church Council and later taken over by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, and Kumudini. In 1985, Skill

Development for Underprivileged Women (also known as Nakshi Kantha Kendra) was established, as subsequently were Arshi and Aranya — all three being wholly devoted to embroidery, though not strictly to the kantha alone (ibid.).

Contextualised as they were within the post-liberation agenda of fashioning a uniquely Bangladeshi identity, these organisations were focused on reviving and developing traditional crafts. However, they were also commercial organisations and as such it was inevitable that market linkages and demands would inform their products. Thus, the kantha product range they evolved included both direct derivatives of the older kanthas as well as adaptations of these to the tastes of foreign visitors as well as wealthy urban Bangladeshis.

Thus, in both West Bengal and Bangladesh, the 1970s and the 1980s witnessed concerted attempts to both revive the kantha as a practice as well as infuse it with a modern sensibility that would allow it to become a sustainable source of livelihood. Unlike the Bangladeshi kantha projects, however, those of West Bengal were not all revivalist in a strict sense. Their underpinnings were more varied in that they drew on the vocabulary of not only the *nakshi* kantha and its humbler cousin the *jeerna* kantha, but also a myriad other folk traditions and contemporary artistic sensibilities. Positioned as a catalyst for the economic and social rehabilitation of refugees and underprivileged women in both rural and urban areas, the kantha's evolution in West Bengal has been one of radical change. In the decades since the state came into being, the kantha has become a ubiquitous element in the Indian handicraft sector — transformed so as to make it both appealing and accessible to an increasing demographic of potential consumers.

In both its homelands, the kantha has evolved from being a traditional embroidery form drawing on a large repertoire of symbols and motifs and the spontaneous introduction of singular contemporary elements, into a marketable object of consumption. Embroidered now on single-layered cloth that is purchased (as opposed to already used fabric), with threads, colours and motifs laid out and designed — often by someone other than the embroiderer — the kantha in its current form boasts a product repertoire that extends far beyond its original range. This transition has altered dramatically not just the materials, forms and techniques that comprise the vocabulary of the kantha, but also the manner in which it is practised. While the practice of kantha in its purist form(s) is now rare, restricted to kanthas made for private use or to niche products, the efforts of these organisations have benefited thousands of women who otherwise might not have been gainfully employed. By generating and sustaining a market for the kantha, these organisations have also called attention to the value of the hitherto unpaid work that the women of this region performed in their leisure hours. Now

equipped with a price tag that accords a specific monetary value to what was once unpaid, unrecognised labour, the current avatar of the kantha honours the thrift and patience of the Bengali housewife and her contribution to a regional cultural identity and value system.





Ruby Palchoudhuri
Hon. Gen. Secretary and Executive Director
Crafts Council of West Bengal⁶



Photo: Upal Sengupta.

▲ Close view of Satgaon embroidery.

The kantha is made everywhere today. The kantha revival, although aimed at reclaiming a fading tradition, has generated employment for thousands of women and, in the process, solved a number of economic problems in the villages of Bengal.

Whether as quilted fabric decorated with embroidery, or simply as a layered fabric stitched together with embroidery, the making of the traditional kantha was always an act of love and affection, an exercise in imagination. Made for family members and for use in the home, kantha-making was never practised in the organised manner required by commercial production. Since its inception in 1966, the Crafts Council has worked towards reviving the kantha systematically, focusing on the traditional use of layered fabrics and quilting instead of opting for a single layer of textile which yields a faster output.

I had been interested in the kantha as an art form for a long time and so when Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay asked me to help revive this lost tradition, I did not think twice before taking it on as a project. At the Crafts Council of West Bengal (CCWB), we planned an organised income-generation programme aimed at infusing new life into the craft. With the aid of a grant from the Government of India, we were able to establish a training programme for a small number of women, and eventually opened production centres with these trained embroiderers. Over the years, many of these women have continued to work at the centres that were established. Some got married and moved away but there have always been a number of others eager to take their place, to learn and to work at the centres. Now, the CCWB works with embroiderers in several production centres in the suburbs of Kolkata as well as in the interior villages of Bengal, like Bagha Jatin, Gangulybagan, Sonarpur and Canning. The goal is to spread its reach to the interiors of Bengal and assist the skilled but economically marginalised women there.

When we launched the project, we selected women who had a preliminary knowledge of the art of the kantha and then went on to train them further. We deliberately opted to open CCWB production centres not in the heart of the city, but in places close to the homes of these women, who were essentially from the lower-income group. This meant that they could look after their families and work in their free hours. Since they did not have to commute, they saved both time and money.

Those who were able to were welcome to keep more regular hours at the Kamala Devi Kantha Centre. We encouraged them to complete their household chores and then come to work at the centres rather than work from their homes. This was because we hoped to create a suitable work atmosphere that would enable the women to interact with one another, relax, and at the same time concentrate on the work at hand without being distracted. The women were also encouraged to take frequent breaks to give their eyes some rest.

▾ *Detail from a kantha.*



Photo: Upal Sengupta.

The CCWB does not believe in intervening too much in the craft's vocabulary and technique. The members of the Council as well as the designers who work with us focus on providing basic guidance regarding motifs and colour combinations. The embroiderers are given a great deal of artistic freedom: we try to nurture their individual artistic sensibilities and encourage them to express their creativity. For example, one of our groups is currently working on a kantha commissioned by a Canadian designer. The embroiderers are following the client's design, which they see as rather novel, but they also suggest specific design elements based on their traditional sensibility. This, I feel, is the future of the kantha – following the tradition and at the same time contemporising it. Preetikona, another CCWB embroiderer, is now working on a collaborative project with a Japanese designer. All she needs is a scanned picture of the design; the rest she figures out as she goes along. To know that we have contributed to the lives of women with such refined artistic sensibilities by helping them develop their innate talents, creating a space for them to practise their skills, training them to create and sell their own products and to stand on their own feet – that is our reward. Our ambition was to create a cadre of self-reliant and confident kantha-makers, who in turn would nurture and continue the tradition.

Because of our thrust on the revival of tradition, we have concentrated our design development efforts on the historic layered and quilted form of the kantha and not on marketing merely the kantha stitch, as many contemporary experiments with kantha seem to do. I remember that when we started the programme, we would take the girls we were working with to the Gurusaday Museum to study the kanthas, the colours used, the designs, the stitches – everything. The girls would examine these samples closely and then try to reproduce them. In their attempt to replicate and build on the aesthetics of these samples, they retained, on our insistence, the quilting technique as well. Today, this has become their USP.

In June 1985, during the Festival of India I visited the USA to explore the possibility of presenting an exhibition on the arts and crafts of Bengal. I called Stella Kramrisch and when I introduced myself she asked me to meet her at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where she was the curator of the Indian Art section. She promptly connected me with the Port of History Museum; subsequently, in February 1986, we presented the exhibition Mahamaya. Curated by the late Shri Probhas Sen, the exhibition showcased the best of Bengal. As CCWB was involved in reviving authentic, quilted kanthas, we exhibited these at Mahamaya. Stella was highly pleased and organised a sale at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I was also able to visit the Museum's store to see her collection of kanthas from undivided Bengal. She sent me photographs of her entire collection. This was one of the seeds that helped our embroiderers and the revival effort.

At an exhibition-cum-craft display held in 2010 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, women trained by the CCWB demonstrated how the original quilted kantha has been translated in their work. As quilting is quite common in America, although without this degree of intricate embroidery, the work of the CCWB embroiderers struck a chord with the visitors: several American women were intrigued by the kanthas and suggested that a school be established to teach kantha techniques to Western practitioners.

The CCWB is very particular about the quality of the embroiderers' output. Even though the women who work with us are skilled and adequately trained, we nevertheless enforce very strict

standards of workmanship, even making the women undo their stitches if the embroidery does not pass muster. With the immense popularity of and demand for the kantha both within and outside the country, quality is bound to suffer if the embroiderers give in to market demands. Very often buyers place orders that are lucrative but impossible for embroiderers to complete within the short time stipulated. In such cases it is especially tempting for them to compromise on quality. However, it must be remembered that the kantha was never meant to be a mass product, especially after it was revived and recognised as an art form by women from the renowned Tagore family, such as Rabindranath's daughter-in-law Pratima Devi. Today it is appreciated not as a cover or quilt meant for daily use, but as a special artefact intended for display, even when it takes the form of a bedcover or wall hanging or runner. It is imperative, therefore, that the embroiderers continue to take pride in their work and not succumb to time-saving but ultimately damaging short-cut measures.

▸ *Two artisans working on a single kantha.*



Photo: Upal Sengupta.



Neelanjana Ghose Designer and proprietor Sundar, Kolkata⁷

I have worked as a costume designer for films and theatre for more than 28 years and have taught 'costume design and planning' at various film institutes. But before this, as well as alongside this, I was trained in the craft of the kantha by my mother Sreelata Sarkar.

My mother was born on 21 June 1932 into the respected Sinha family of Raipur, Birbhum. She grew up to study in Kala Bhavana, Shantiniketan, under the tutelage of Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij. She also learnt the art of the kantha from Pratima Devi, Rabindranath Tagore's daughter-in-law. After moving to Kolkata with her husband Radhabinode Sarkar, she started reviving and modernising the kantha. Her dream was to make the kantha fashionable and commercially viable, as she thought that this would ensure its longevity. In 1979, she started training a group of underprivileged women and by 1987 no less than 150 women were being trained directly by her. This was also the year she held her first exhibition at the Information Centre in Kolkata. She was the first to incorporate the kantha stitch into the making of garments and household linen, thereby making the kantha immensely popular in India and subsequently all over the world. Her contribution to the revival of the craft was officially recognised in 1994, when she was awarded the National Award for Handicrafts by the Government of India.

I started helping my mother with her kantha project in 1989 and after her demise in 1998 took over her organisation. I have been independently designing kantha products for almost 12 years and during this time I have extensively exhibited kantha embroideries in India, Italy, Sweden, North America and Bangladesh. The kanthas made under my guidance now retail from my store Sundar at Dover Terrace, Kolkata.

My mother substituted the worn-out white saris used as the base fabric in traditional kanthas with coloured silks and tussar. Likewise, instead of the red, green, yellow, blue and black palette of the traditional kanthas, she chose to use brighter ethnic colours. She also experimented with different products such as saris, kurtas, dupattas and bags, which she felt were more suited to the lifestyle of the contemporary consumer. In addition to the repertoire of traditional motifs familiar to kantha embroiderers, she initiated the use of various floral and folk motifs. Following in her very large footsteps, I too use silk and tussar but I also work with crepe, georgette and handloom cottons. I also



► *Kantha-embroidered silk batua.*

Photo: Upal Sengupta.

try to keep the current colour trends in mind when I select a palette for my kantha pieces. I have consciously tried to make the kanthas we produce both contemporary and diverse. My designs reflect a global ethos in that they derive from an exposure to world cultures, an awareness of India's rich cultural heritage, and my mother's designs. Thus you will find Western textile designs, traditional carpet patterns and traditional kantha concepts intermingled in my work.

I have tried to follow my mother's vision of popularising and diversifying this art form in which women, especially those with economic constraints, find suitable employment and, in turn, gain a sense of confidence and self-sufficiency. Speaking entirely subjectively, the kantha for me represents a combination of creativity and a means of empowering the numerous women who work with me. It is a preferred occupation for women in lower-income families as it does not require formal education and allows them to work either from their homes during their free time or at centres near their homes. The basic kantha or running stitch, moreover, is simple and easy to learn.

Over the last two decades, the kantha has come into its own. Its client base is wider than ever before, as is the variation in the type and quality of kanthas made. The danger is that artisans, catering to this huge demand, often find kantha-making becoming increasingly repetitive and impersonal and as a result lose all pleasure in their work. This is something against which we must all guard. It is important that one continues to feel joy in what one does or the tradition itself will be under threat.



▲ *Kantha-embroidered cushion cover in silk.*



Mahamaya Shikdar
Entrepreneur
Kolkata⁸

The kantha for me was initially purely an income-generating option that I could pursue from home in Kolkata. This was some 20 years ago, when I had just given up my career in banking to devote more time to my family, especially my children. Though I was born and raised in Shillong, my father's family was originally from Shilet, now in Bangladesh. The seeds for my venture were probably planted in childhood itself, during the afternoons spent in the company of my mother Nilima Bhattacharya and my grandmother Tarubala Bhattacharya, when I used to watch with awe an outline on a kantha metamorphosing into a full-bodied elephant. Srilata Sarkar's work has also been an inspiration, showing us a way to use the kantha to generate income.

When I started out, I worked with 10 local girls, making intricately worked kanthas. Today, this humble beginning has grown into an NGO, the Shibon Udyog, which works with 122 women living in and around the suburbs of Kolkata. Shibon Udyog's three main workshops are located in Narendrapur, Shantipur and Bolpur respectively and I have tried to retain and build on the distinct skills and styles of these three areas in the kanthas we make.

For example, the most beautiful kantha borders are made by the women of Shantipur, while women from Bolpur specialise in background textures and intricate embroidery. The Narendrapur women, on the other hand, are particularly gifted translators of conceptual ideas, figures and patterns. The workshop at Narendrapur was the first to be launched; I taught the craftswomen there myself and so, even so many years later, I feel a special closeness to them and have confidence in their work. In each of the three workshops, an expert kantha-maker has been appointed as the supervisor. She manages the day-to-day operations at the centre, distributes the work and encourages fresh talent. I provide the base materials and the design drawings, as well as guide the choice of colours and stitches to be used. The rest I leave to the craftswomen.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

► A punkah or hand-fan inherited from mother Nilima Bhattacharya.

Over the years I have carefully developed a niche clientele that values fine embroidery and the aesthetic of the kantha. My points of reference have always been the old pieces made by my mother and grandmother and I am lucky to have in my possession a 70-year-old kantha sample which I inherited from my grandmother and a beautiful punkah or hand-fan made by my mother. It is because of this regard for the historic kantha that my work (the *rumal* kantha) has found a place in the Gurusaday Museum. However, it is the ability to innovate within the vocabulary of the craft and adapt to specific requirements that has attracted such clients as the American Embassy, and private collectors like Mrs Sudha Murty and Mrs Sarala Birla.

To give an example of innovation, in figurative kanthas I usually avoid outlining the form. Also, the figures are worked on a single layer of natural-coloured tussar or fine white cotton, as I feel the craftswomen who do the actual embroidery are able to achieve greater accuracy when working with a single layer of fabric than the more cumbersome quilted fabric. After completing the embroidery

▶ Shawls embroidered with a single continuous thread and multicoloured borders of different widths on single-layer tussar.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

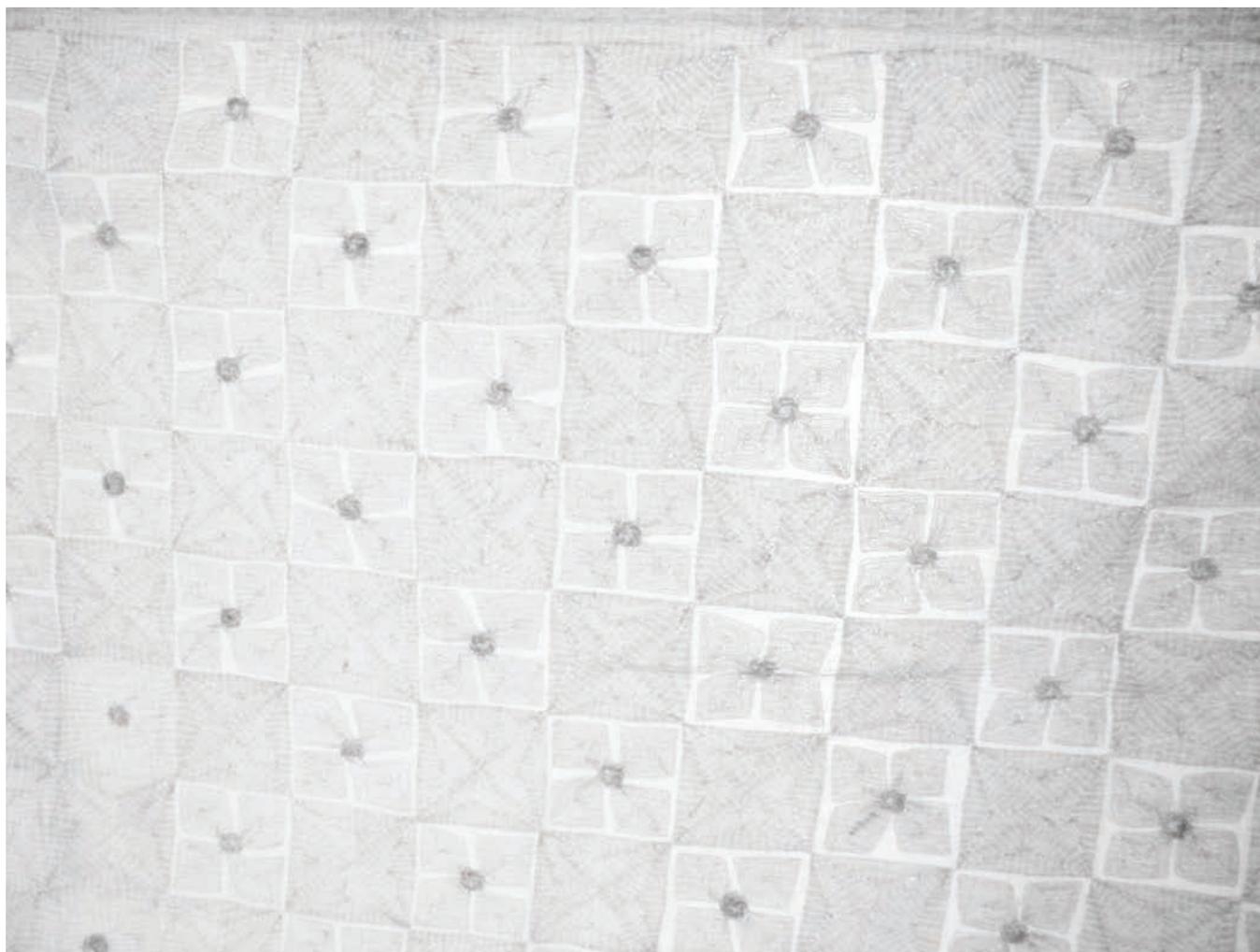


Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▶ Sample of a kantha embroidered with running stitch that radiates in different directions. The use of white thread on a white background creates an interesting surface against light.

of the figurative elements, however, another layer of fabric is added and the background stitching is done on this double-layered fabric. As a result, the background retains the quilted texture of the traditional kantha. The stories depicted on the kanthas are derived from myriad sources, ranging from the mythological figures of Indian epics to contemporary electronic gadget-users, and from the Taj Mahal to the *alpanas* made by rural women in Bengal. The figurative drawings are often created by specially commissioned artists and I hope one day to be able to translate into kantha the work of such eminent artists as Ramananda Bandyopadhyay and Anoop Ray. The NGO also produces single-layered kanthas on tussar embellished with bold, continuous borders. These are meant to be used as shawls, stoles and scarves and are sized and designed accordingly. We also design single-layered saris on special request. Today I don't mind working with a professional fashion or textile designer to take the kantha into still newer directions. I feel such inputs are necessary to popularise the kantha. Though now, in my 50s, my professional commitments seem to be unnecessary burdens, I can still be lured by the possibility of learning something new that can enrich our heritage.



▶ A beautiful kantha on display.



Shamlu Dudeja
Founder, Self Help Enterprise
Proprietor, Mallika's Kantha, Kolkata⁹

My foray into the world of the kantha was rather accidental. I spent my childhood in Delhi, where my family had moved from Karachi during Partition. While at school, I was introduced to both the kantha stitch and the kantha *kalka* or paisley by my embroidery teacher Miss Lahiri, who was a Bengali. I also learnt other forms of embroidery both at school and from my mother.

I next came across the kantha stitch many years later at an exhibition in Kolkata. There I met three kantha embroiderers from a village on the outskirts of the city. I had just quit my job as a mathematics teacher, undergone a major surgery, and was looking for an alternative occupation that was less demanding and less exhausting than teaching. This chance meeting with the women marked a new beginning for both them and me. I asked them to make saris worked with the kantha stitch, an idea which they promptly dismissed as impossible. After much reasoning and cajoling they finally agreed to try, and after a few months, came back with kantha-embroidered saris!

At that time, the only artist in the city working with the kantha was Smt Sreelata Sarkar, who was a great support and source of inspiration for me. Emboldened, I established a working unit comprising women from nearby villages who had some basic knowledge of the kantha. After training them, I asked them to do kantha embroidery on articles of clothing. Initially, I focused my energies on making kantha saris, but my then college-going daughter Mallika convinced me to try to extend the kantha embroidery to kurtas and tops as well.

As my unit grew in size and number, and I began working with women in the remote interiors of rural Bengal, I appointed some of the older, more experienced artisans I had been working with for years as 'team leaders' to supervise and manage the work of smaller units. These team leaders now form the link between the actual producers and the organisation that markets their work. However, I would like to underscore that they are in no way middlemen or touts who make money by exploiting the artisans. Their position is necessary in an organisation such as the Self Help Enterprise (SHE), as without them it would be impossible to oversee the work of the over 800 village women who work mostly in their free time from their homes. It is the team leaders who interact with these artisans, get the materials and threads, show them the designs and closely monitor the progress of their work. It is also they who bring the finished products to Kolkata to be sold.

For me, the kantha signifies two things. It is first and foremost an exquisitely beautiful form of embroidery that had to be revived in the interiors of Bengal and presented as a form suitable for adorning clothing and home furnishings. Second, it represents a means of livelihood for numerous rural and semi-urban women: I have witnessed its immense potential to improve the quality of their life.

Although the kantha has gained much appreciation both within the country and globally and is much in demand, I feel the market for it is yet to be saturated, especially since there is an increasing demand for kantha-embroidered scarves and wall hangings in the West. I sincerely hope that the kantha

movement involving the weakest section of society – poor rural women – will one day make the craft as powerful a symbol of traditional Indian craftsmanship and empowerment as khadi.



Photo: Upal Sengupta.

► This nakshi kantha from Bangladesh, shows a football field, a theme combining the contemporary with the traditional. The 'tree of life' motif is in the corner. From Sarbari Datta's personal collection.



Sharbari Datta
 Entrepreneur
 Kolkata¹⁰

My father was a renowned poet and university professor. As a result, I was exposed rather early to the arts and literature, especially of Bengal. While I had an appreciation of Bengali culture, it was only in my 40s that I began experimenting with kantha embroidery. I was, I suppose, a typical housewife busy raising my son, and at that time the kantha for me was essentially a hobby, an outlet for my creativity rather than a profession. I had no formal training in fashion or textile design. My inspiration came from the designs and motifs I remembered having seen on the kanthas made by aunts and grandmothers for newborns in my family.

While drawing on tradition, I did take liberties with the motifs. Although the flowers, leaves and folk imagery of heirloom kanthas provided a starting point, I eventually went beyond them. I feel very much like the village artisan drawing patterns on her mud walls in that, like her, I too am untrained and have no design education per se. I therefore don't feel bound by any rules of composition or style. For example, I may choose to place an elephant on top of a tree or make butterflies that are larger than the human figures near them – the laws of nature don't matter as I don't have to stick to representing what is around me. I still draw my own designs directly on the cloth instead of tracing them or paying a commercial artist to create them. Because of this, I can only create a limited number of products at a time. On the positive side, these products cannot be copied easily; each is unique. Initially, I hired local women who could embroider the designs I created. Over the years, I have gradually built a team of my own and today 15 to 20 artisans work with me on a regular basis



▲ Close-up of a man's shawl with a traditional bird motif. Also used as a dupatta.



▲ Reverse side of the shawl.

Photo: Upal Sengupta.



▾ Unisex tussar silk scarves.

while three of four supervise the work of the others. I give the artisans who work with me a free rein – I draw the designs and decide on the colour scheme but it is they who choose which colour to use where.

When I began working, the kantha in Bengal was greatly influenced by the Sriniketan-Shantiniketan gharana and existed as a form of embroidery on women's blouses, shawls, *batuas* (purses) or bags, handkerchiefs, etc. I decided to try using the kantha embroidery on men's garments such as dhotis and kurtas instead.

By 1991, I had put together enough of a collection to hold an exhibition in Kolkata, showcasing exclusive kantha-embroidered men's wear. The first of its kind, the entire collection was sold. This enthusiastic response gave me the confidence and impetus to plan another exhibition for the very next year. The entire collection in the 1992 exhibition, too, was sold. These exhibitions succeeded probably because Kolkata then didn't have any stores which dealt in traditional Indian men's wear and there were only a few well-known tailors who made such garments on special order, customised for their clientele. As a designer who specialised in traditional menswear, I stood out. Today, there are numerous stores catering exclusively to a male clientele, selling what is curiously termed Indian 'ethnic wear'.

My work focused on reviving age-old traditions – that of the Bengal kantha as also that of indigenous garments such as the coloured dhotis worn by bauls and fakirs. 'Ethnic' clothes for men seemed to concentrate on kurtas and chudidars; the white dhoti was still worn in Bengali households but the coloured dhoti was no longer even remotely fashionable – it had become a costume in epic performances such as the Ramayana. I was aware of the rigidity of men's taste, their inhibitions about colour and convention. To me this was a challenge and I took it up – hoping to expose people to new designs and slowly bring about a change in existing ideas about fashionable men's wear. To reinterpret both the kantha and the dhoti for the urban consumer, I introduced the kantha stitch to colourful, ready-to-wear dhotis and showcased them in exhibitions. At the time, though, they were perceived as somewhat shocking and many sneeringly called them 'saris for men' – not a single piece was sold. Much to my delight, they are now seen as a fashion statement and are in great demand, even spawning a number of cheap imitations.

To broaden the appeal for such clothes, it was important to make them contemporary. I do not depend wholly on the traditional kantha motifs – the trees, flowers, lotus, *palki* or *doli*, fish, elephants, tigers and huts with which the village artisan was familiar. Instead, I draw on my exposure to other cultures – African, Mexican, Aztec, Chinese and Egyptian art in particular – and incorporate elements from these into my designs. I have also taken inspiration from contemporary Indian art such as the horses painted by M.F. Husain. I feel it is the inclusion of these many sources that makes my products more global, more current and more popular. I have buyers in Europe and the USA as well as in other parts of the world – most of them are Asian and place their orders online. The nature of the market for my work has made me more conscious of the need to make my products global in design.

My products are bought by a niche clientele of film stars, sportspersons, artists, painters and industrialists. So I usually focus on garments for special occasions and not on daily wear. I believe that the kantha will never go out of fashion as it has the potential to evolve further. However, it does run the danger of repetitiveness. I myself do not limit my work only to the kantha today,

choosing instead to incorporate other forms of embroidery such as the *zardosi*, *ari zari* and crystal work into the kanthas, fully exploring the artistic liberty to mix and match. I have also begun experimenting with asymmetrical designs, which at present continue to hold some novelty for both artisans and buyers.



▾ Kantha with a third layer of striped fabric at the back, complemented with ikkat and block printing with coordinated cushion covers.



▾ Kantha inspired by a Persian rug, with coordinated cushion covers using bright but harmonious acrylic threads.

Photos: Enakshi Ghosh.



Ranjana Sarcar
Entrepreneur
Shimantopalli, Shantiniketan¹¹

A student of Sangeetbhavan (the Faculty of Music) at Shantiniketan, I began my career as a teacher at the Pathabhavan School in Kolkata. It was in around 1985, while I was visiting Shantiniketan, that I was requested to look at the work of Karusangha, the organisation set up by Nandlal Bose, and suggest how to improve their sales, especially of their kantha-stitch products. I immediately realised the tremendous potential of the craft as also the need for a subtle change in the existing designs, particularly the colour palettes, the stitches, and the types of material used as the base.

In 1986, I quit my job at the school and started my own kantha production unit. The unit now has a number of team leaders who deal with the actual day-to-day management of the artisans. I feel this system is beneficial as it affords me a certain distance to judge the work of the craftswomen objectively. The unit is structured along the lines of a fair trade organisation: the artisans are always paid on time and superior workmanship is consistently rewarded, creating an incentive for them to learn and produce better quality work and thereby increase their earnings.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▸ Chiffon added with stitches has achieved a new look.

I draw the designs myself, as well as decide on the colour palette for each piece. I derive my inspiration from all manner of art forms, whether they be Persian rugs or the south Indian kalamkari. My signature, if there is one, lies in the way I use colour – the kanthas we make are not always subdued but they are always harmoniously balanced.

I make both the quilted layered kantha as well as single-layered apparel fabric embellished with the kantha stitch. For the former, I am now using acrylic stitching thread with which the Muslim women from the villages of Birbhum, who comprise the bulk of the artisans working with me, are familiar. I have also introduced an unstitched woven striped fabric as a third layer of backing in the kanthas; this complements the complexity of the textures, patterns and colours of the facing surface. Other experiments include incorporating the bright Birbhum *gamcha* (a typical Bengal towel woven with vivid checks) as a border with the colours of the checks distributed in the base through kantha embroidery, and making cushion covers to match the kantha bedspreads and quilts. More recently, I have begun using hand-block-printed and *ikat* textiles as a base for kantha embroidery – I am hoping this will complement the embroidery as well as reduce the overall cost while maintaining the aesthetic sophistication of the kantha.



▲ Corner of a tie-and-dye chiffon scarf.

I feel one cannot ignore the variety of inspiring base materials with which we are surrounded today. My collection of clothing now fuses traditional, time-consuming techniques with fine machine-made, high-quality contemporary fabrics. Adding embroidered textures to different qualities of chiffon and georgette has created a distinct product range.

The basic quilted kantha is sold at ₹ 4,500 to 6,500 while the saris range in price from ₹ 2,000 to 20,000 and the dupattas from ₹ 600 to 5,000, depending on the design and the intricacy of the embroidery. However, I have seen my products selling at certain cosmopolitan boutiques at twice the price, which while surprising, assures me that today's buyers are willing to pay for superior design and workmanship. I often see the designs and textures I have developed being imitated, that too shoddily, and sold at lower prices. I used to get very annoyed at this sort of unprofessional conduct but over the years I have become resigned to this too.

I would like to start a block-printing studio so I can have blocks made specifically for my designs – most of the blocks available in the market do not complement the kantha embroidery and I feel that the combination of the two techniques has not yet been adequately explored. However, I do not have any plans to expand the business further; at 62, I am quite happy to continue with my



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

► A georgette scarf.

experiments with the kantha. My daughter Suhasini has offered to help me with my projects and is already working on marketing the products more systematically, both offline and online.



Endnotes

1. <http://howrahsouthpoint.free.fr/history.html>, accessed on 1/12/2010.
2. Correspondence with Neelanjana Ghose, 21/10/2010.
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*
5. Interview with Swagata Ghosh, Senior Design Coordinator, SASHA, conducted by Chaiti Mitra, 5/10/2010.
6. Based on an interview with Ruby Palchoudhuri and Teertha Roy conducted by Chaiti Mitra and Enakshi Ghosh on 10/09/2010.
7. Based on an interview with Neelanjana Ghose conducted by Chaiti Mitra on 6/9/2010.
8. Based on an interview with Mahamaya Shikdar conducted by Enakshi Ghosh on 3/ 09/ 2010.
9. Based on an interview with Shamlu Dudeja conducted by Enakshi Ghosh and Chaiti Mitra on 15/09/ 2010.
10. Based on an interview with Sharbari Datta conducted by Chaiti Mitra on 31/08/2010.
11. Based on an interview with Ranjana Sarcar conducted by Enakshi Ghosh.

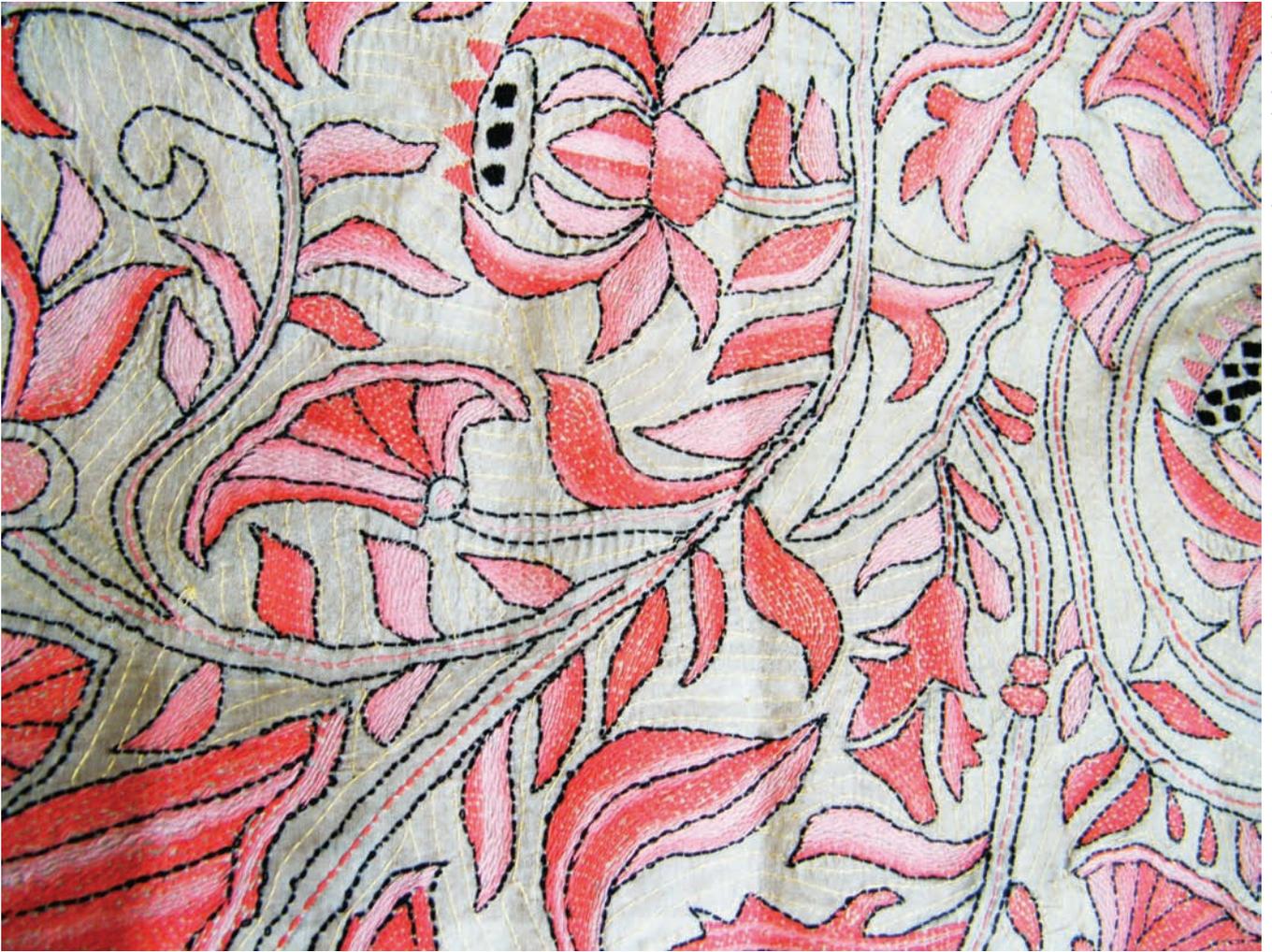
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SHAPING THE FORM

The kantha has not one but many avatars in Bengal today. Pushing the boundaries of the historic craft, the kantha has seen, and continues to see, many modifications, not only in terms of its form and the materials it uses, but also in the vocabulary of motifs it employs. The kantha is thus on what appears to be an endless journey of dynamic change and innovation.

How did this come about? In the 70-odd years since Indian Independence, a number of self-help groups, craft training programmes and NGOs have been launched in Bengal specifically to create home-based employment using skills such as the kantha. In the districts of Birbhum, 24 Parganas and Murshidabad, most women have at some time or the other earned money doing kantha work. It has become the means of livelihood for innumerable women in these areas, so much so that they themselves describe it as *ghore bosa kaaj* or work which can be done sitting at home. While one can endlessly debate issues of sustainability, growth and benefits, it cannot be denied that these initiatives *have* changed lives and altered the economic and social circumstances of many of the intended beneficiaries, and at the same time also shaped the form the kantha has taken.

An analysis of the kantha as practised today reveals a bewildering profusion of formats and contexts. The multilayered kantha quilt, for instance, continues to be made for self-consumption or as a gift for family members and friends, but it is also produced for commercial sale. The size of the finished kantha, the materials used and the patterning vary according to the requirements of the intended end-use. Among the products of this nature that are still in use are small kanthas made for infants and children as substitutes for the swaddling blanket, with coverlets being the most ubiquitous type of kantha in households. Kanthas of a larger size that adults can use as a covering also continue to be made (as seen during field



▴ *The use of fluorescent colours on a shawl.*

visits to the villages of Mollapara, Dokhkhin Nobogram, Murshidabad and Katna) and retain their significance in the rituals of everyday life from birth onwards.

Most women who are still making kanthas for domestic use and as gifts are well aware of their commercial value and the sort of innovations that are afoot in terms of using only single layers, new fabrics, etc. However, they continue to make and use the kantha in its traditional *jeerna* form primarily because of its cultural resonance and also because they appreciate the pragmatism of thrift and recycling.

Rita, a housewife in Murshidabad, for instance, makes kanthas for her children because she cannot afford to purchase a readymade *rajai* or quilt to keep her

family warm during the cold winter months. Others like Meera Saha, a housewife in Kolkata, still makes intricately embroidered kanthas as gifts. Likewise, Salma Bibi and Alima Khatun Bibi of Birbhum, both recipients of the National Award for Kantha Embroidery as well as successful entrepreneurs dealing in the kantha, continue to make kanthas for their own households as is customary in their families.

The figurative narrative form of the kantha is also extant, albeit only in the tribal villages around Bolpur in Birbhum District. In the village of Parooingram in Hedodanga, the Saontal *adivasis*, who earn their livelihood from agriculture and rearing cattle, continue to embroider kanthas made out of recycled old cloth to ward off the cold. Raimuni Soreng's kanthas are almost bibliographical, containing, as they do, multiple references to her surrounding world. The motifs are drawn from natural life — the flora and fauna amidst which they live — the stitches are big and



▾ *Kantha cushion covers — a product in demand.*



► A kantha jacket designed by Biswajit.

bold and the colour of the base textile is usually white. The rarity of such examples, however, tells of the immense social changes that have impacted even the rural interiors of Bengal — most women no longer have the time to make kanthas for themselves; instead, their energies are focused on earning a livelihood.

In fact, many women in West Bengal have begun undertaking kantha work for commercial ends, with NGOs and independent entrepreneurs marketing their products both within and outside West Bengal. For example, at Alcha,



▲ A kantha by Musammat Nazmunnisa Bibi, Dokhkhin Nobogram.

a Shantiniketan-based entrepreneur named Keya Sarkar is still able to sell the common household kantha in its traditional form, i.e., using recycled fabric. She experiments with bright acrylic threads as well as with the patterning, and prices her products in the range of ₹ 3,000 to 45,000. In SASHA's experience, however, the use of recycled fabrics from an unknown provenance draws an adverse reaction from the locals who are well aware of the custom of using materials only from known or familiar sources. This issue does not affect the Western export market, though.

Ranjana Sarcar's successful line of kantha products is based on her Shantiniketan-style experimentation with sources of inspiration, materials and techniques (for example, incorporating block prints, *ikat* or her signature hand-painted imagery into her work). Though she prices her products between ₹ 4,500 and 6,500 and does not operate through an agent, buyer or retail store, she is still able to generate enough sales from her own home.

At the higher end of this spectrum, SASHA is renowned for its *nakshi* kanthas embroidered with intricate floral and figurative motifs. It has also launched a range of kanthas that are more contemporary in style, deconstructing the traditional kantha designs in a minimal manner. It is such design inputs visible in their products, together with the quality of the workmanship that allows SASHA to price its products between ₹ 8,000 and 22,000. Katna's Kantha, a Murshidabad-based enterprise set up by activist and social reformer Shabnam Ramaswamy, is currently targeting the Delhi market from a retail outlet in Hauz Khas. It also accepts orders from domestic and international buyers. Priced between ₹ 3,000 and 12,000, the products at Katna's Kantha are designed specifically to suit the contemporary urban lifestyle. They are not heavily quilted as they are not intended as protection from the extreme cold of Delhi winters. Instead, they are made to serve as a comfortable wrap sufficient for use in an air-conditioned room and can

► *Kanthas made by Selina Khatun, Mollapara.*



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

therefore be used throughout the year. Thematic product ranges are launched each year, but the brightly coloured, patched, geometrically-patterned *fakiri* kantha remains the cornerstone of their signature graphic aesthetic. Shabnam is also now trying to find convincing new ways to recycle old fabric and encourages her buyers to contribute unused saris and dupattas in exchange for discounts on their purchases.

As is apparent, the market for the kantha is determined by its quality, design, finish and price, with products available for all income segments. Given the deep emotional and cultural significance the kantha holds for all classes and communities in West Bengal, the concept of a ready-made kantha found immediate acceptance as more and more women began going out to work and therefore had less free time on their hands. While the incorporation of changes such as the use of new fabric and innovations in design have helped to gradually shift public taste within the traditional consumer base by providing easy access to kantha products, the thirst for novelty is simultaneously opening up fresh market opportunities. The sale of commercially produced kanthas is not restricted to only urban and suburban outlets like Katna's Kantha, SASHA and Alcha; kanthas are available in most textile shops and are also produced for sale in weekly village bazaars like the Amader Haat held at Shantiniketan.

However, even with the availability of this enormous variety of kantha patterns, materials and products, there still exists a niche segment of upper-class Bengalis as well as collectors elsewhere in the country and abroad, whose preference for kanthas that are more revivalist fuels the economy connected with the intricate, far more laborious and consequently more expensive *nakshi* kantha. Salma Bibi and Alima Bibi from Birbhum, for instance, prepare a collection each year specifically for auction at the Taj Hotel in Mumbai. The base price for their works is fixed by them at ₹ 80,000 to 100,000, with any premium earned on the base price being retained by the Taj group. Similarly, Mridula Banerjee, Bani Biswas and a few others from Shantiniketan also cater exclusively to this market, customising their kanthas to the client's taste.

The market for kanthas simulating heirloom samples appears to be growing both within and outside the country. It is not merely connoisseurs and collectors who comprise this market but also an increasingly informed consumer base. The perceived value of the kantha for this segment of consumers is often based on a notion of contributing to the preservation of the kantha as a living tradition, of encouraging a fair trade enterprise that accords sustainable livelihoods to disenfranchised women, or of consciously purchasing an eco-friendly product. For instance, the marketing strategy adopted by the Crafts Council of West Bengal's



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▲ *Raimuni's kantha for everyday use made of five layers of old sari fabric.*

(CCWB) Kolkata outlet Artisana is influenced by these notions. Kanthas based on older pieces (such as those in the collections of the Gurusaday Museum in Kolkata and the Calico Museum in Ahmedabad) but embroidered on new fabrics, retail anywhere in the range of ₹ 3,000 (usually 16" x 16") to ₹ 30,000 (usually 4' x 5.5'). The CCWB has also attempted to revive the famed Satgaon quilt, retaining the intricacy of workmanship and the use of silk thread for embroidery as seen in sixteenth-century samples.

Kolkata-based Saffron Designs is another example of this type of production and marketing. Focusing on the conservation and development of traditional craft and textile skills, their range of kantha products display new motifs, compositions and colour palettes but are constructed as layered, reversible quilts, bedspreads and wraps. They support eco-friendly dyes and the recycling of fabrics, thereby encouraging environmentally conscious consumerism.

Despite such thoughtful design interventions, the kantha has for the most part merely become synonymous with the simplest form of running stitch. As a form of embroidery on a single layer of fabric, it is used to embellish all manner of apparels and home furnishings. Among the more successful experiments with the kantha

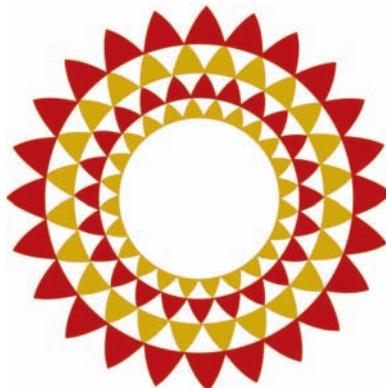
stitch is the work of the Kolkata-based designer Sharbari Datta, who uses the embroidery technique to embellish high-end men's wear. The CCWB store Artisana retails a few non-quilted kanthas — mostly well-finished, intricately embroidered shawls and scarves in sombre colours — targeting foreign buyers and the 'global Indian'. Similarly, Katna's Kantha has also introduced a range of kantha products as well as yardage fabrics that are non-quilted. Using Murshidabad silk or plain Bengal saris as a base, they are embroidered with the kantha's running stitch. Their graphic sensibility ensures their appeal to the urban market. The kantha has also been effectively adapted to home furnishings, especially to products like bedspreads, cushion covers, curtains and decorative wall hangings. CCWB, for instance, produces jute screens and table mats while kantha-embroidered cushion covers retail at all FabIndia outlets. Unfortunately, while many of these products amalgamate the kantha stitch successfully into their design, the stitch often loses its identity when transposed in this fashion.

This is particularly true of products made for the mass market. These products, which consist primarily of imitations, often with less attention to detail, use cheap fabrics without any layering. Such measures allow for faster production as well as lower costs, and it is this form of kantha that has become the most prevalent today. Thus, whether at weekly *haats* at Shantiniketan or roadside stores at Bolpur, at any private or government craft exhibition or fair in and around Kolkata, at government-promoted shopping complexes such as Dakshinpan, or at the stalls of hawkers that line the footpaths of the famed Gariahaat and Shyambazaar, a 'kantha' bag or blouse-piece can be purchased for as little as ₹ 100. Unlike the craftswomen whose products are made for the elite market, the craftswoman engaged in supplying the mass market does not earn more than ₹ 20 to 25 per item.

While one may celebrate the fact that abundance of skill and, by extension, market competition has made the kantha more easily and widely accessible, it has also resulted in saturating the market. Many believe that the current stagnation in design, loss of identity, and the absence of individual creativity have rung the death knell for the kantha, pitting it against the cheaper machine embroidery. However, the impetus behind the initiatives launched in the 1960s to create income from hand skills is still valid today — the economic situation of many of the women embroiderers is far from stable; without literacy and job opportunities, the kantha continues to be a potent tool for development. Likewise, with its legacy of recycling fabrics that were considered waste, and of working with limited resources to create objects of beauty, the kantha may be ideally positioned within a market informed by an increasing awareness of the scarcity of natural resources and the need for responsible consumerism.



▀ *Work in progress.*





Amar Kutir
Cooperative
Bolpur, Birbhum¹

In conversation with Chakrabahadur Ray, Salesman

The first cooperative society to be established in Bolpur in 1923, Amar Kutir's roots are embedded in the Swadeshi movement. Although it doesn't work exclusively with the kantha, kantha-embroidered saris (both on cotton and silk), dupattas, blouse-pieces, ready-made apparel for men, women and children, as well as accessories like bags, purses and folders constitute a significant proportion of its products. Curiously, the cooperative has never attempted to sell quilted kanthas. Their most popular kantha product is the embroidered sari, with those made on a tussar base selling at ₹ 2,500 and those made on Bangalore silk being priced between ₹ 3,500 and 3,700. The prices are fixed and are consistent through the year; a discount of 10 per cent is marked on all products to stimulate sales, especially to tourists and traders.

The cooperative provides the designs, base material and threads to the artisans. Payments are disbursed to the embroiderers when the completed sample is submitted. Artisans working at the cooperative earn between ₹ 1,200 and 1,800, with pay structures being based on the quality of craftsmanship. According to Chakrabahadur Ray, there are at present 2,500 women affiliated



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▾ Chakrabahadur Ray displaying an Amar Kutir kantha sari.

with Amar Kutir who work exclusively with the kantha. While many of the embroiderers work independently from home, the cooperative owns a workshop where six trainers oversee and instruct newcomers in the craft and supervise production. Unlike other NGOs visited during fieldwork, Amar Kutir also engages male kantha embroiderers, although at present there are only 9 or 10 of them.

According to the cooperative, given the number of people working with the kantha as compared to the other crafts it deals with, the kantha has clearly been the most successful in reducing unemployment in the village.

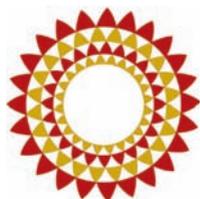


Photos: Enakshi Ghosh.

▲ Top: Kantha-stitched simple sari on tussar base, price ₹ 2,500.

▲ Middle: Kantha stitch combined with batik.

▲ Bottom: Stitched sari on Bangalore silk base, price ₹ 3,700.



Karu Sangha Women's Association Shantiniketan, Birbhum¹

In conversation with Manashi Lahiri, Kalyani Ganguly, Rita Bagchi, Kumkum Dasgupta and Sushmita Dey

The Karu Sangha women's association was launched some 60 years ago by Nandalal Bose, then principal of Shantiniketan. At the time, it provided 20 Kala Bhavana graduates with the opportunity to work at their own pace, producing designs and products that catered to small work orders. The mainstay of the association's work was and still is batik – *alpna* patterns are applied in wax-resist on saris, *angavastrams*, home furnishings (such as the *takia* or bolster covers and *balish* covers or pillowcases). Kantha embroidery usually serves as an additional embellishment on such products, but is also practised as a surface ornamentation technique in its own right.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▲ The heritage building of Karu Sangha and the fresco done by Nandalal and his team.

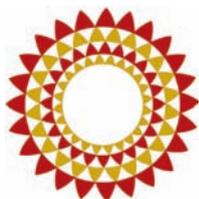
Today, the members of Karu Sangha are essentially a few elderly ladies who meet in the heritage building of the association to practise batik every Monday and Friday. The 80-year-old Manashi Lahiri has been a member of the organisation for 60 years; Kalyani Ganguly (70) for 30 years; Rita Bagchi (50) for 12 years; and Kumkum Dasgupta (46) and Sushmita Dey (45) for 10 years.

When asked about the kantha's revival, they said: "We do not remember exactly when or how our embroidery began to be called the 'kantha stitch'. Some 50 or 60 years ago, Ila Ghosh (Shri Shantideb Ghosh's wife), Jamuna Sen (Nandalal Bose's daughter) and Sujata Mitra (Kalimohan Ghosh's daughter) together visited the villages around Shantiniketan in search of a means of income generation for underprivileged women. It was not as easy to do this then as it seems today. They found that many of the village women, most of whom are Muslim, knew how to make kanthas and could do this work without having to come out of their home. They tried to help these women earn some money by making and selling kanthas. The group also used to visit Karu Sangha, where the development of embroidery on single-layered fabric in typical Shantiniketan style was already creating its own identity. We never worked with these village women but it is possible that people linked our work with theirs, and so people thought we were also doing kantha."



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▲ Five members of the Karu Sangha.



Kamarpara Training Centre Bolpur



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▲ A group working on a single kantha.

Established by the Swayambhar Nari Sanstha with sponsorship from the government's National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development (NABARD) at Birbhum, Kamarpara serves as a training centre for kantha well as other regional craft skills. Among the various organisations working with the kantha in Bolpur, Kamarpara is unique in that its training programmes focus not on the 'kantha stitch' but on the making of the kantha as a product. At the time of fieldwork, a kantha training programme was underway. The teachers vary with each kantha workshop – this one was being led by Hena Gupta; the one before that had been conducted by a graduate of the National Institute of Fashion Design. The training sessions are conducted over a span of 15 days and the Centre tries to ensure that the sessions are attended by at least 25 to 30 students. Persuading craftspeople to participate is a challenging business and the Centre often offers them incentives like free meals, as in the workshop we witnessed, or provides them with a basic embroidery kit (needles, threads, fabric and cutting scissors), as in the previous workshop.



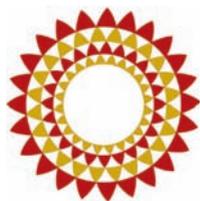
▸ *Individuals in training.*



▸ *The type of thread used for kantha.*

All the participants at the kantha training workshop make kanthas for their own domestic use – usually diapers and swaddling blankets for newborns – but acknowledge that they do not usually attempt embroidering patterns. They come to the training programme to learn the ‘kantha stitch’ in order to earn money, which they hope will eventually be possible. For them, the kantha work they do in the training programme is different from what they usually make because “it has to be pretty to attract buyers”. The kanthas they make for themselves are purely functional – most women do not have the luxury of time to pattern their kanthas or the funds to use silk or new fabrics as a base. They see the marriage between the functional kantha and the decorative kantha as old-fashioned, as something that only their grandmothers’ generation practised.

The making of kantha quilts is new to them and they feel they should be able to sell such kanthas at a reasonably high price as it is more difficult to stitch three layers together than to simply apply the stitch on a single layer of fabric. Although a number of women at the workshop were working collectively on a large quilt, they feel it is simpler to work individually as that would make it easier to calculate costs.



Shibon Udyog Mahamaya Shikdar's Workshop Narendrapur

In conversation with Kashmiran Taher, Mashura Bibi, Rosina Sardar, Maya Naskar, Supriya Modol, Alekhjan Khatun, Nachma Mondol and Rukhiya Bibi

Mahamaya Shikdar launched her kantha project in 1990; by 2000 her business had grown considerably and she was trying to expand her operation by hiring skilled kantha embroiderers who could execute her designs. In 2002, her search brought her to Narendrapur, a place she was familiar with as it was where her father lived. It was at this time that she heard about an artisan named Kashmiran Taher who, she was told, made single-layered saris, dupattas and blouse-pieces using the kantha stitch (in popular parlance this included the running stitch as well as the one-sided satin stitch) for sale in the local market.

She began working with Kashmiran Taher, teaching her more stitches and introducing her to new designs. Kashmiran, then 30, took the initiative to organise a group of housewives whom she thought would be interested in learning the craft and earning a livelihood through their embroidery. While most of the women were familiar with the traditional kantha and made kanthas for their family members, especially newborn children, their exposure to commercial kantha work was limited to the basic running stitch. After seeing Mahamaya Shikdar's work, they realised they would need to be trained if they were to deliver the sort of embroidery required of them. Over the following months, Mahamaya Shikdar herself taught the artisans new stitches, showed them new motifs and patterns and introduced them to new concepts such as adding another layer of fabric with the *guri* run to create the background texture. Thus began the Narendrapur workshop.

Most of the initial group of trainees have continued to be associated with the workshop. A few of the younger members have got married over the last decade, but even so they continue working for Mahamaya – instead of coming to the workshop daily, they come once a week or a fortnight to show their work and take fresh orders from either Kashmiran or Mahamaya. All new designs are first drawn by Mahamaya and these, along with the fabric to be used as the base, are sent to Kashmiran. On set days, Mahamaya herself comes to the workshop to explain fresh work orders and the specific colours and stitches to be used. She

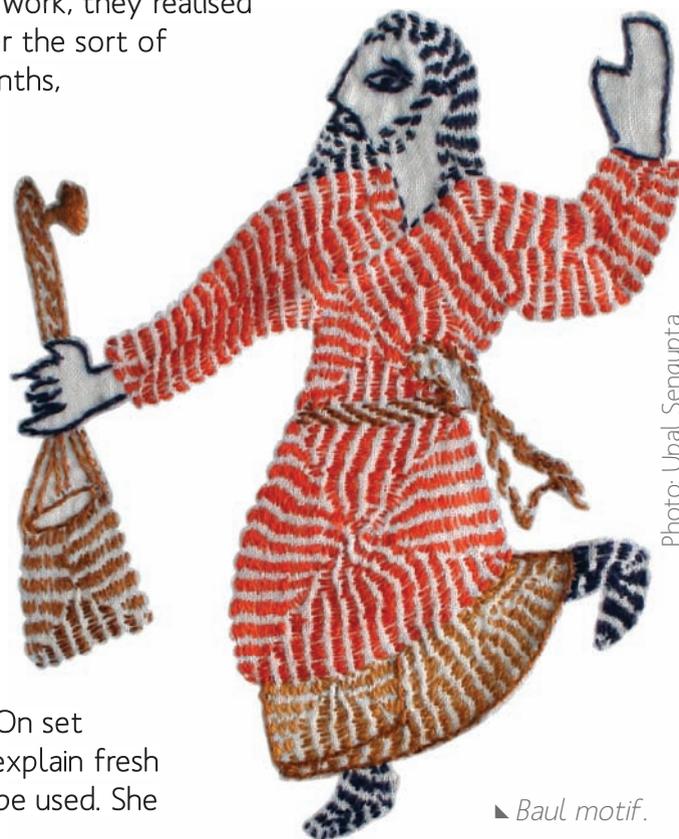


Photo: Upal Sengupta.

► *Baul motif.*

often also provides the artisans with a self-embroidered sample which they can use as a reference. Once a new design is prototyped by a member of the workshop, it is used as a reference by the entire group. The women at the workshop claim that their loyalty is partly inspired by the fact that Mahamaya and Kashmiran do not expect them to report to work at fixed times; they usually come to the workshop only after they have completed their daily domestic chores. As a result of this flexible approach, their families are generally supportive of their work. The 20-year-old Supriya Mondol, for example, admits that not only does her family encourage her efforts, her 48-year-old mother-in-law Sabera Mondol has learnt the craft from her and often helps her with the kantha work in her free time.

Each of them began their careers at the workshop with *guri run*, the basic background stitch, and gradually moved to embroidering motifs. In the process, they learned to analyse and grade their workmanship as well as appreciate issues such as quality control. Most of the women earn ₹ 500 to 600 a month, devoting about two to three hours daily to their work. The system of payment is directly proportionate to the number of *lachchis* (hanks of embroidery thread) consumed for a particular piece of work. Kashmiran Tehar, in her role as supervisor, earns ₹ 1,000 to 1,500 per month.

In 2008, Mahamaya established Shibon Udyog, giving it the shape and structure of an NGO. This has changed little for the artisans themselves, except that every year they are offered an exhibition space at the Birla Academy free of cost.



Photo: Upal Sengupta.

▲ A kantha made by Mahamaya Shikdar.



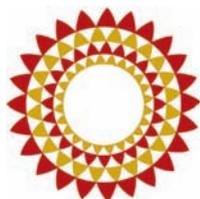
▲ A close-up of Shikdar's kantha shows the effortless juxtaposition of contemporary and traditional motifs.



▶ Front and back of a kantha made by Mahamaya's grandmother.



▶ A kantha made by Mahamaya's maternal grandmother.



Alcha Retail Outlet Bolpur, Birbhum

In conversation with Keya Sarkar (Proprietor) and Maya Das (Embroiderer)

Alcha is a rather popular outlet in Birbhum which sells various contemporary craft products made in the Shantiniketan area under the label 'Abakash'. The design approach is pointedly simple – the focus is on creating a range of products that are both meaningful and sustainable in their functionality. The initiative is spearheaded by Keya Sarkar, who abandoned her successful profession in media and finance in Mumbai five years ago to set up Alcha with the vision of promoting textiles and crafts as well as a lifestyle that is environmentally sensitive.

The kantha-worked products in the store are not designed to consciously promote the craft per se. Instead, the kantha is incorporated into products in imaginative ways, such as in the range of leather bags designed specifically for Alcha. Keya has also experimented with extending the kantha to surfaces treated with batik or tie-and-dye as well as to formats such as cushion covers. The designs are developed by two in-house designers, both of whom are graduates of Kala Bhavana. Keya has also worked with students at the National Institute of Design to generate new product lines.

None of the artisans working with Alcha are trained specifically in the kantha. There are, however, a few skilled embroiderers who undertake patterns requiring 'kantha stitching', i.e., the application of running stitch wherever required as a value addition to the product. Much of the style and design vocabulary used in the products developed at the Alcha studio are based on the region's existing traditions. The store also stocks locally-made, brightly coloured Muslim kanthas.

Perhaps because they work with a large spectrum of embroidery techniques, the embroiderers associated with Alcha earn more than their contemporaries who make kanthas for sale. They also have the option of working only half a day, allowing them flexibility with their routines at home. As Keya Sarkar says, "I'd like to think we are a fair trade enterprise, in that none of our suppliers or artisans is ever made to wait for the payments due to them,



► Bag combining leather and kantha-stitched silk.

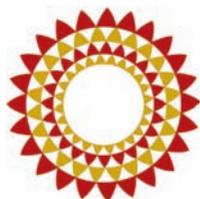
and none of the artisans is ever made to work as though they were production machines churning out product after product."

Maya Das has been working with Alcha for just about a year or so now. There are four other embroiderers, all of whom have been with Alcha longer than she has. She comes to the workshop six days a week, walking for at least 45 minutes to and from her village Uttarnarayanpur. Speaking about her work and income, she says, "I know kantha – it is only running stitch after all. But I am learning to follow different designs and to work on all sorts of products – kurtas, scarves, wallets, mobile cases. Before I begin a new piece, the designer explains the plan of the embroidery (what colours to use where, how to place the stitches). With the other embroiderers who are more experienced, the designer does not have to get so detailed. I earn ₹ 1,800 per month, more than some of the kantha embroiderers I know who are working with other organisations! But I am hoping that once I become better at the work, I will be able to earn more."



▴ Kantha-stitched cushion covers displayed in Alcha.

Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.



Alima Khatun and Salma Bibi
National Award winning kantha embroiderer
Jamboni, Bolpur, Birbhum

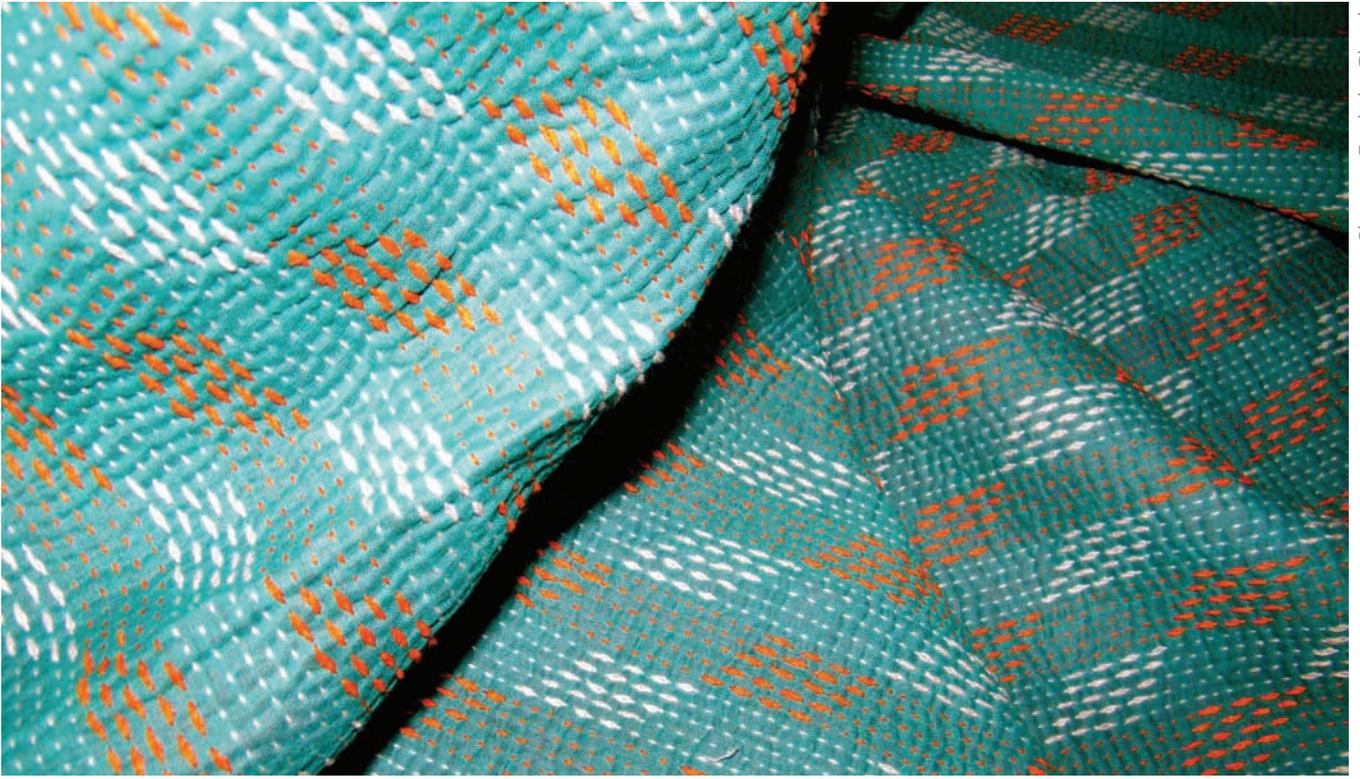
Alima Khatun is 53 years old and her association with the kantha is almost as old as she is. As a child, she grew up believing that the only leisure activity women could enjoy was kantha-making. Even before she started making kanthas at the age of seven or eight, she recalls helping others draw threads from the borders of old saris, which they then used for embroidery. She herself made kanthas with such sari warp threads as recently as 30 years ago but her daughter Salma Bibi (now 35) has only heard of this, never having seen it in practice.

Alima Khatun not only received a national award for her kantha work in 1988, she is also the recipient of quite a few state- and district-level awards. She thinks this recognition has helped her build contacts for her business. She participates in the Surajkund fair every year, where she has a tie-up



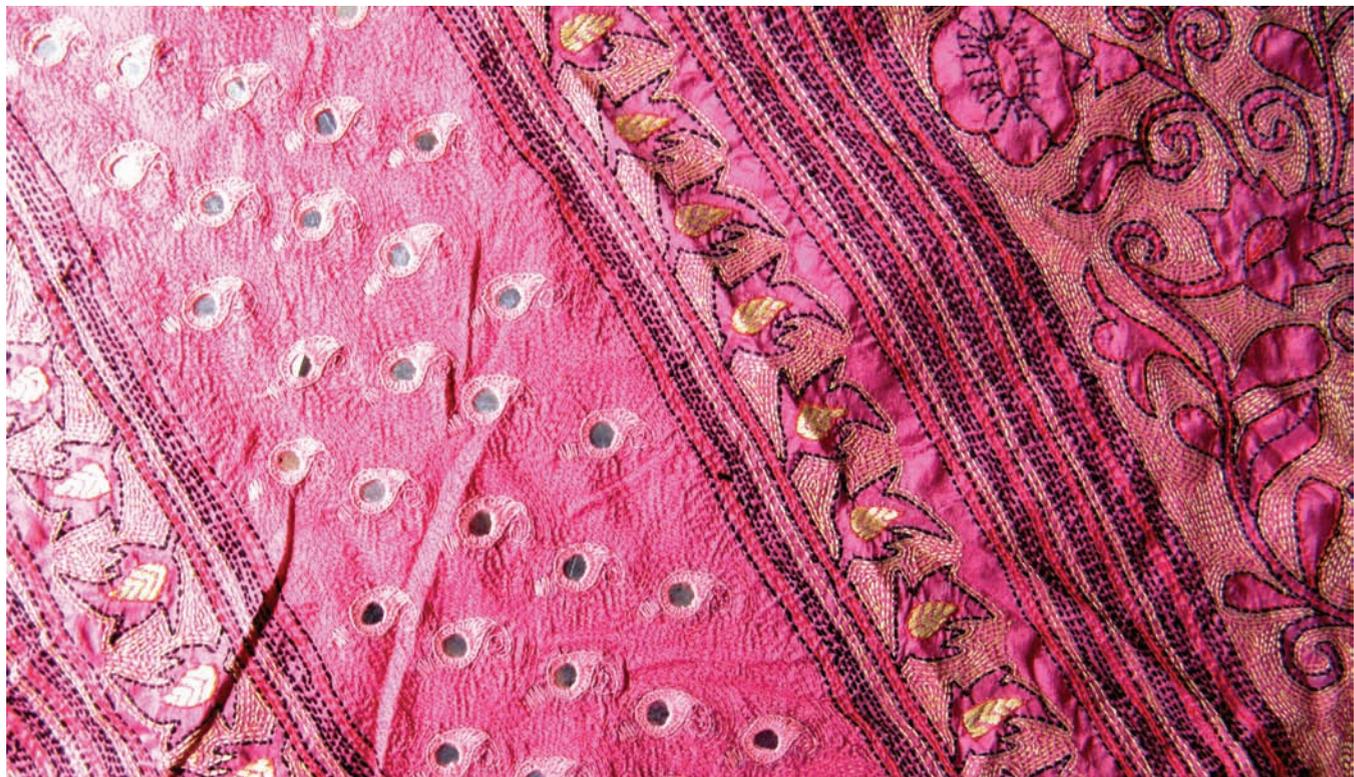
Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▶ Alima Khatun showing an old kantha made by her aunt. The pattern is usually known as roti-halwa.



▾ Top and bottom: Salma's household kanthas.





▸ Kantha sari with mirror-work by Salma.

▸ A kantha Salma is still working on.



with the Taj corporate group which arranges to auction her work. Alima and her daughter Salma lead the business – it is they who make the designs and deal directly with local craftswomen who come and collect fabrics on which the desired pattern is marked from her residence, returning with the completed embroideries. The business has grown over the years, so much so that, except for design development, all the male members of the family are also engaged in various aspects of it.

Alima and Salma are both quite particular about the raw materials they use. For instance, after experimenting with many suppliers of stitching yarn, Alima decided to source all her yarn from a dyer who prepares the yarn for Dhaneekhali saris because she finds him more reliable in terms of the cost, colour and quality of thread he supplies. For the fabric base, she sources tussar from suppliers in Tantipara (Bankura district) as well as from Bhagalpur and Bishnupur. She insists that the base fabric be of a certain quality and as a result spends as much as ₹ 1,500 per sari. While they do make kantha quilts, Salma claims that they prefer to focus on single-layered saris and dress materials given the tremendous market demand for them.

Today they earn enough from their work to allow them to pay for the construction of and for the day-to-day running of their homes. Despite having successfully established a commercial presence, both Alima Khatun and Salma Bibi continue to make kanthas for their families. Salma's 8-year-old daughter Shabnam, now a student of Class III at a local school, has already begun making a small kantha decorated with geometric patterns for a family member's newborn child. Other family members, such as Salma's aunts, also still make kanthas, although not for sale or awards. Alima accepts that these kanthas are a far cry from the ones she sells. She herself no longer enjoys making kanthas – having made a business of it, the craft has become a necessity instead of a leisure activity as it was for her mother and grandmother.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▴ The village women who come to Alima and Salma to collect their work.



Meera Saha
Housewife
Kolkata

Meera Saha is one of those rare kantha-makers in today's Bengal whose work is not vitiated by commercial incentives. Her simple kanthas are created for her loved ones in the privacy of her home. Born and raised in Noushindi, a village near Dhaka in undivided India, Meera witnessed the partitioning of Bengal. Uprooted from her birthplace shortly after her marriage at the age of 20, she migrated to the north-eastern regions of India in search of a new home, moving from place to place till she eventually settled in West Bengal in 2001. Sadly, she recounts how she had packed away all the kanthas she had made in trunks and left them at home, believing naively that she would soon return.

Although she lost all the kanthas she had made for her marriage, she once again resumed the craft and even though she is now well into her 60s and dependent on spectacles, she continues to work at a kantha every single day. "How can one welcome a son-in-law into the family without a kantha for his bed?" she asks. However, it is not only for such momentous occasions that she labours. Each year she creates two or three kanthas for various family members.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▲ Sample of Meera's simple dorokha kanthas.

Her kanthas are usually patterned with simple renditions of flowers, with the *jaba* (hibiscus), *bakul* (bulletwood tree) and the *padma* (lotus) featuring prominently. In keeping with the traditional kantha, her *phool* kanthas are embroidered on three layers of used white dhoti. She also chooses to use threads in the characteristic blue and red or black and red colour combinations. While she uses two different colours for two parallel series of the running stitch, herringbone stitch, chain stitch as well as the two-sided satin stitch in her embroidery, her kanthas are devoid of background textures and all are *dorokha* or double-sided.

According to Meera, her daughters, daughters-in-law and granddaughters appreciate her engagement with the kantha and the various things she has made them over the years, but none of them has taken the initiative to learn the craft from her. She herself does not see the kantha as an art or a craft, but simply as something she loves.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

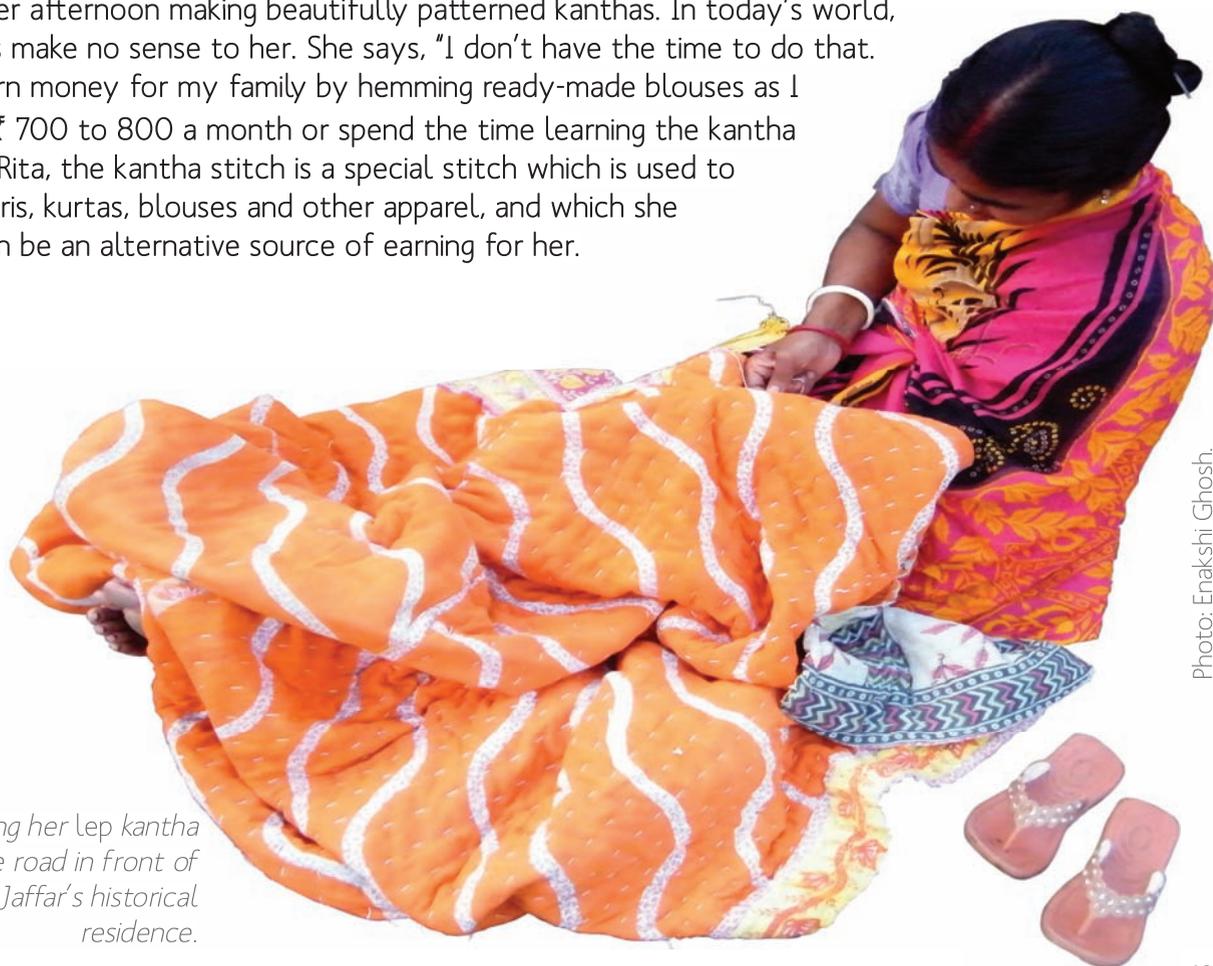
▲ A kantha made of three layers of a worn-out printed sari for everyday use.



Rita Dutta
Kantha Embroiderer
Murshidabad

Living in a slum near Mir Jaffar's historical residence in Murshidabad city, Rita spends her free time in the evening making *lep* kanthas, sitting by the side of the road where there is some natural light to see what she is doing, while her three children play near her. The *lep* kantha she was working on when we met her, comprised three layers of old cotton mosquito-net sandwiched between two layers of old printed *mulmul* (muslin) saris, held together with large running stitches (each about a centimetre in length). She had already spent seven evenings on this particular piece, the first two of which had been taken up with simply laying the various layers of the kantha with the help of her neighbours. It would be another four to five days before the *lep* kantha would be ready for use in the coming winter. In Rita's own words, "To overcome the winter of Murshidabad, there is nothing like the *masharir* kantha (kantha made of mosquito-net). It is as good as a thick *tulor lep* (quilted blanket filled with cotton wool) which I cannot afford."

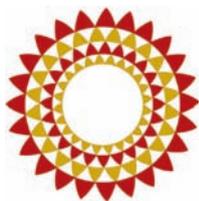
During her childhood, Rita Dutta had seen her grandmother sitting with other female relatives on many a winter afternoon making beautifully patterned kanthas. In today's world, such pursuits make no sense to her. She says, "I don't have the time to do that. I'd rather earn money for my family by hemming ready-made blouses as I now do for ₹ 700 to 800 a month or spend the time learning the kantha stitch." For Rita, the kantha stitch is a special stitch which is used to embroider saris, kurtas, blouses and other apparel, and which she has heard can be an alternative source of earning for her.



► Rita making her *lep* kantha sitting on the road in front of Mir Jaffar's historical residence.



▶ Bani Biswas showing her kantha.



Bani Biswas Artisan Shimantopalli, Shantiniketan, Birbhum⁹

Bani Biswas once worked as a teacher at the Ananda Pathshala, a private school in Shantiniketan. Her foray into the crafts began when she met Pravas Sen, the Director of Shilpa Sadan, who encouraged her to pursue her interest in the *alpana*, a ritual floor decoration practised throughout Bengal. The *alpana* was a craft with which she was familiar, but she enriched the craft's repertoire by incorporating into it Bengali folk characters, signs and symbols. Her work won her much acclaim, even taking her to Birmingham as a participant at the BBC East Asian Mela and to Atlanta, where she participated in the Bangla Sammelan (Bengali conference) as a representative of the living traditions of Bengal.

At the same time she began to apply her creative sensibility to the kantha and gradually cultivated a distinctive style of her own. In 2002 she was again invited to attend the Bangla Sammelan at Atlanta, this time for a kantha demonstration. Over a period of time, she developed a range of products such as bags, cushion covers and jackets using the layered kantha, as well as shawls and stoles made of



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▶ A kantha made by Bani Biswas.

single-layered fabric. Both sets of products found a niche market, largely among connoisseurs such as Ruby Palchoudhuri in Kolkata.

She also began teaching the craft to local artisans – several artisans now working at Shantiniketan mention that they had first learnt the kantha stitch (and about its commercial value) from ‘Baniidi’. When asked about her method of instruction, Bani Biswas replied, “I taught them the stitch and how to maintain the Bengali folk motifs but I also felt that they should develop their own style.”

Now 54, her children are adults and she finds she has far more time to devote to making kanthas; but she no longer wants to worry about what the market wants or requires. “I am still excited by the idea of experimenting with the stitch, but I now make kanthas only for myself, simply because I enjoy it.”



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▲ Left: The bag Bani developed and for which she received a large number of orders.
Right: The kantha jacket she developed.



Bandana Lohar Artisan Goalpara, Birbhum

Bandana's interest in kantha embroidery led her to join a creative producer group known as Kristi some 20 years ago. At the time the renowned sculptor Meera Mukherjee was learning metal casting techniques from rural *adivasis* or tribals and as her work often intersected with the lives of rural women and their daily activities, she continued to visit the area, building a rapport with the local communities over a period of time. It was Mukherjee who encouraged some of the women here to experiment with the technique of textile collages and applying the kantha running stitch to the surfaces. Fondly reminiscing about the days she spent with 'Meera-di' and the sculptor's burning desire to constantly innovate, Bandana Lohar speaks of Meera Mukherjee's exhibition 'The Stitch Painters of Dhankhet' and her sculpture 'Kantha' (a bronze casting depicting a woman in her world of kantha).

Today, it is only Bandana who continues to draw inspiration from her interaction with the sculptor. Combining patchwork and running stitch to create a distinctive style of her own, Bandana Lohar's kanthas are peopled with bright animals, figures and trees depicting her surroundings. The forms are cut freehand from textile scraps sourced from local tailors. A drop of glue is then used to fix these forms onto the base fabric (usually a brightly coloured, single layer of cotton), thus creating the basic composition. Buttonhole or stem stitch is used to firmly sew the forms onto the fabric and finally, running stitches in myriad colours are used to fill in the background, creating a rippled effect around the patchwork forms. When making products such



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▴ *Bag developed by Bandana Lohar.*

as bedspreads and quilts, an additional layer of fabric is used as lining to conceal the reverse of the embroidery.

Apart from bedspreads and quilts, Bandana also produces a range of smaller products such as cushion covers, wall hangings, lampshades and bags. She regularly attends the weekly *haats* as well as all the fairs that are held in Shantiniketan to sell her creations. As her enterprise has grown, Bandana has begun to outsource work to other embroiderers in the village. She prefers to affix the patches herself and only has the background textures in running stitch done by others. In addition to the women embroiderers she employs, a few schoolgoing girls in the village such as Mitul Lohar (a student of Class VI) and Tumpa (a student in Class IV) often take small piece-work from her, doing the embroidery during their tiffin break or in the evenings, so as to earn ₹ 100 every week.

Working in this way, her outlay on a 60" x 90" bedspread is usually ₹ 2,000 or so, including materials and payments to embroiderers. The most she can sell the work for is ₹ 3,000. She thus earns up to ₹ 1,000, which includes her own workmanship as well as profit. Her cumulative monthly income is approximately ₹ 2,500.

For Bandana Lohar, the kantha is not just a meaningful way of earning money, but also a source of joy and a means of expression. While she feels her design and colour sensibility has not altered much since the time she worked with Meera-di, she is confident about her creative skills. However, she believes that the lack of marketing inputs is the key factor depriving her of commercial success.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

► A bedspread.



Amader Haat Weekly Market Ballavpurdanga, Birbhum

In conversation with Lila Bhakat, Anna Singh and Madhumita Das

Every year the few village fairs held at Shantiniketan (such as the Poush Mela and the Nandan Mela) lure in a huge number of tourists, providing a significant impetus to the trade in local crafts and artefacts. In order to cater to tourists visiting the region in other seasons, and to create a permanent marketing avenue for local crafts, the Mahila Sa-nirvor Samiti, the Tourism Department, and the Goalpara District Rural Development office together initiated the concept of a weekly bazaar. Held on Sundays, it is known as Amader Haat. Another similar, more popular bazaar, the Khoyai-bon-er Haat, is organised by the local youth and held every Saturday.

Lila Bhakat, Anna Singh and Madhumita Das have been participating in both bazaars for the last four to five years. They are all entrepreneurs who commission groups of women in nearby villages to do the embroidery and sell the finished products at these bazaars. Each of these women comes from a



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▲ Fabric for a top/kurta: the variation is achieved by using shaded threads.

different background. The 40-year-old Lila migrated to this area from Bihar 50 or so years ago. Over the years, she and her son have learnt fluent Bengali. Anna, 45 years old and married to a truck driver, is a Bengali; her two younger sisters, Manjari Das and Archana Das, work with her, making and selling kanthas. At 30, Madhumita is the youngest; her involvement in the kantha trade began nine years ago when this stitch started showing commercial success. She has developed her business and now also occasionally supplies to a boutique in Kolkata.

Each of them earns about ₹ 2,000 a month through sales at the bazaars. Participation in fairs provides a higher income, they say, because the total volume of direct sales is much larger. In addition, wholesalers also buy a reasonable quantity of their products, albeit at a price far lower than the retail rate. However, as Anna and her sisters say, "If it weren't for Amader Haat, we would still have been totally dependent on fairs and boutique owners; at least now we have some regular income from our sales at the *haat*."

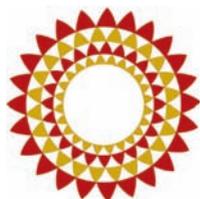
Explaining how she prices her products, Madhumita gives the example of the kantha-worked kurta fabrics. "The base fabric costs ₹ 60; another ₹ 10 goes towards transferring the design onto the fabric; the thread used for embroidery costs ₹ 25 and the four to five days of labour involved in the embroidery itself costs around ₹ 80. De-gumming and ironing add ₹ 10 to my costs, bringing the total cost of production for a kurta fabric to ₹ 185. I try and sell the finished product at ₹ 300 to boutiques, at ₹ 250 in the bazaar and at ₹ 200 to wholesale buyers. So depending on the customer, I make anywhere between ₹ 15 and 150 per piece."

For more intricately worked scarves, the price points are rather different. The cost of the fabric and the threads is ₹ 120 and ₹ 100 respectively; the drawing of the design costs ₹ 40; the embroiderers require 30 to 40 days to complete their work and are accordingly paid ₹ 600; and de-gumming and ironing costs ₹ 20. The total cost of production amounts to ₹ 880. These scarves are sold to boutiques at ₹ 1,500, to tourists at ₹ 1,200 and to wholesalers at ₹ 1,000. Madhumita thus earns anywhere between ₹ 20 and 520 per piece. While the margins are higher on 'fancy' items, she continues to make and sell smaller, cheaper products as they require less investment in terms of capital; and since they take less time to finish, she recovers her money sooner.

The women are also trying to ride market trends by varying their product range and designs. Lila, for example, sells patterned kanthas made for newborn babies and block-printed fabrics over which the kantha stitch is worked, both of which she believes are 'fashionable' today.

► *Kurta fabric: detail.*





Stri Shakti Prakalpa
NGO
Katna Village

In conversation with Mihidana Bibi, Merina Bibi and Nagori Bibi

Though most of the women in Katna village are aware of the Stri Shakti Prakalpa, an NGO established by Shabnam Ramaswamy for women artisans, only about 50 per cent of them are actually involved with the NGO's kantha project. Mihidana Bibi has been working with the NGO for eight years but she was already familiar with the craft, having made kanthas for her own marriage. In her community, it is mandatory for every bride to take four to six kanthas to her in-laws home after the wedding. Despite her prior knowledge of the skill, she insists that she has learnt much since joining the NGO. "I would never have dreamt of such beautiful combinations of colours and fabrics as I now work with had it not been for Shabnam didi." Now in her 50s, Mihidana Bibi is happy to be a part of the organisation and still earns an income, which in her own words "is completely proportionate with the time I devote; how much work I choose to do is up to me to decide".



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▾ Nagori Bibi embroidering a kantha, placing it on her knee for convenience.



► Nagori Bibi, Baharun Bibi, Sonarkali Bibi and Mahamada Bibi busy with their afternoon work.

Her daughters Batabi Bibi (25) and Papiya Bibi (22) also made kanthas for their weddings, as well as worked with the Stri Shakti Prakalpa. Now mothers with their own families, they continue to work with the NGO; however, they only come to the centre once a week or fortnight to collect the fabrics to be embroidered. Being better skilled than their mother, they usually undertake the more complex designs.

Thirty-year-old Merina Bibi has been working with the NGO for the last three or four years. Her training in kantha work began when she was just a child and as is customary in her community, she made several kanthas for her marriage. She is considered to be a skilled embroiderer and claims that "Shabnam didi knows my ability and so unlike many of the women in the village who make the *sujani* kantha, she issues me *chikan kaaj* (finer embroidery work, often used for single-layered saris and shawls, where intricacy and accuracy is crucial)." To demonstrate her point, she displays a woollen shawl on which she is embroidering a geometric pattern built on a mathematical matrix – the number of running stitches and chain stitches used have to be counted and the gaps between them have to be maintained during the embroidery. She waves aside the complexity of this task, saying, "I know these geometric patterns as I know the back of my palm." Acknowledging the difference working with Shabnam Ramaswamy and her NGO has made to her life, Merina Bibi says that the ₹ 500 to 600 she earns monthly has allowed her, an illiterate mother, to send her children to school. Her husband is a farmer who works on others' land and if it weren't for her kantha work, they would not be able to afford educating their children or tide over the months when farming work is scarce.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

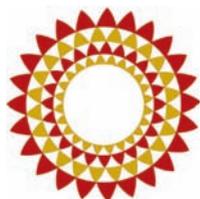
▲ Nagori's household kanthas.

Although a member of the NGO for only the last five years, 40-year-old Nagori Bibi, having grown up in Katna village, has known Shabnam Ramaswamy for a long time. Nagori's husband is a van-driver and she has three children; her eldest daughter, Rumela, is married while her younger son and daughter are still studying in school. She proudly displays the *phool* kantha her elder daughter had made for her marriage: covered with bright flowers arranged in a playful combination, this piece must have taken a long while to make. Because of the time factor, such kanthas are not made for commercial purposes. The other kanthas made for domestic use, however, are almost identical to those made for sale. These can be completed in two months, provided the embroiderer works four to five hours daily, as Nagori does, and gives the embroiderer an income of ₹ 1,000 per month. Contemplating her future, Nagori feels she will be able to devote more time to her work and therefore increase her earnings. Even with the limited time she can currently devote to her kantha work, she believes that she and the other women in the village could earn more if it weren't for the power shortage which on most evenings plunges them into darkness.



▲ Mihidan's daughter Batabi Bibi and Papiya Bibi busy making a kantha.

Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.



Mollapara Kantha Cluster Mohidapur, Birbhum

Although Mohidapur was once a village dominated by Hindus, today, except for 30 or 35 Hindu families, the population is largely Muslim. The prevalence of surnames like Mondol and Mollick suggests that many of the families have converted to Islam. Consequently, the kantha work practised here is not based solely on geometric patterns such as that of Murshidabad, but includes a number of floral motifs.

All the women in the village are accomplished kantha-makers, as in their community a woman's skill in making kanthas is critical to her marriage prospects. So culturally ingrained is this notion that almost as soon as a girl child is born, the mother not only makes the small kanthas used locally as washable



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▲ Women from Mollapara showing their treasures.

nappies but also starts on the preparations for her marriage. Girls learn the skills required for kantha-making under their mother's tutelage and soon begin embroidering kanthas so as to gradually collect at least 15 to 16 fine kanthas that are considered to be the minimum required for the marriage ceremony. And so from their very birth to the time of their death, when the grave is covered with a kantha that portrays the social background of the family of the deceased, the kantha is an integral part of their lives.

They see a clear distinction between the making of kanthas and the job work they do – embroidering single layers of apparel fabric with the kantha stitch – to supplement the family income. Though they regard the traditional kantha as being more difficult to produce since three to four layers need to be embroidered together, they enjoy having the creative freedom to select their own *naksha* (pattern) instead of worrying about saleability and the market.

Two types of quilted kanthas are made in the village. The first is a textile, usually ranging in size from 45" x 70" to 60" x 75" and made from a single sari or dhoti. It is ornamented with borders taken from



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▲ Kantha made by Noornehar Begum as a preparation for her daughter's marriage (5-year-old daughter Parvin Khatun) using acrylic for patterns and cotton thread for background stitching.

other saris and used as a bedspread or a wrap. The other is usually intended for babies and children and is sized according to requirement. The *balisher oar* or pillowcase is another article widely produced here, but this is always made on a single layer of fabric. According to the women, 35 or 40 years ago the threads used for stitching the quilted kantha were drawn from sari borders. With the easy availability of vividly coloured cotton threads in the local markets, this practice has died out. And seven or eight years ago, cotton embroidery thread was abandoned in favour of acrylic (although they call it 'wool') thread as its fluffy nature allows them to cover the areas of the fabric to be embroidered more quickly. They also admit to having sporadically experimented with rayon but feel that this thread is not suitable for the background texture and can only be used for large motifs. For their commercial work, however, they stick to the embroidery threads available in the market.

Their vocabulary of stitches is quite extensive, consisting of the basic running stitch and its variations (created by changing the size and/or direction of the stitches and by incorporating interlacing stitches in different ways), double running stitch, darning stitch, chain stitch, herringbone stitch, closed herringbone stitch, stem stitch, back stitch, feather stitch, straight stitch and the Cretan stitch.

However, they feel it was necessary for them to "learn the 'kantha stitch'" as this is the only means they have of earning money while working from home. Given their skill levels, it wasn't hard for them to acquire the technique; they merely needed to be guided regarding the colours and patterns to be used. They could have then worked independently and sold their finished products in the market but lack of funds crippled their entrepreneurial ambitions. Thus, when seven years ago they were approached by organisations that assured them a supply of raw materials (base materials and threads) and regular remuneration as well as additional design guidance, many of the women accepted. Today they are all members of a self-help group and are glad of it because it qualifies them to obtain bank loans and to hold Mediclaim policies (health insurance schemes) of ₹ 15,000 against an annual payment of ₹ 200.



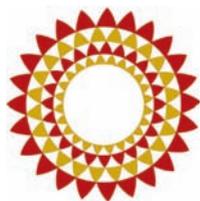
▲ Jhar kantha made of three layers of blue saris.



▸ Fans made by Nahara Begum.

▸ The three-layered kantha Noornehar made for her marriage using a blue sari and a dhonekhali sari border.





Dokkhin Nobogram
Kantha Cluster
P.O. Digha, Birbhum

Conversations with Musammat Nazmunnisa Bibi, Taslima Bibi, Sahanara Bibi, Rupali Bibi, Asema Bibi

Dokkhin Nobogram was initially a Hindu-dominated village but today most of its inhabitants have converted to Islam. As a result the kanthas made here are embroidered with flowers and geometric patterns and not with animal or human forms.

The women of the village stated that they were required to bring with them to their marital home not only kanthas but also the *talai* (a patterned mat made of *tal-pata* or palm leaf). The making of a *talai* demands both clarity in geometry as well as an understanding of colour and weave along diagonals. The application of geometry in the kantha closely resembles the patterning characteristic of the kanthas of Murshidabad. This is not surprising given that Murshidabad was the maiden home of most of the women in the village.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▲ A child's kantha coordinated with pillowcase.

While the women still make kanthas for personal use and for their families, in the last 15 years the kantha has also become the only avenue for them to earn from home. According to them, their work is influenced by market demand. "Today, everybody wants a single layer of fabric with kantha stitching on it, so that is what we make. But tomorrow, if the three-layered, quilted kantha comes into demand, we will make that instead."

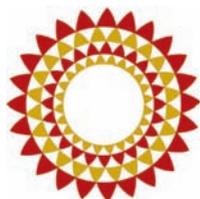
Most of the kanthas they make are embroidered with geometric patterns, though they also use floral motifs – roses are especially popular as is the *chichinge phool* or the flower of the snake gourd plant. The embroidery is usually done in bright shades of yellow, green and pink using acrylic thread as this does not bleed and is available easily. The women also do kantha work on locally available printed sari material. Most of the kanthas made for sale are large rectangular pieces meant to be used as wraps. For gifts to relatives (especially children) or neighbours, however, it is customary to also make a pillowcase or *oar* kantha with similar embroidery on it. This is always done on a single layer of fabric and is not quilted.

Curiously, when requested by fieldworkers to show them samples of their kantha work, all the women chose to display the pieces they had made for their household rather than the ones for sale.



Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

▴ Sahanara's kantha talai.



Biswajit Mukhopadhyay
Artist
Shimantopalli, Shantiniketan, Birbhum

Well known in Shantiniketan as a kantha artist, Biswajit Mukhopadhyay frequently exhibits his somewhat controversial works in Kolkata. Having learnt the technique from the women in the villages near Bolpur during his youth, he consciously selected the kantha as the pictorial medium for his artistic statements.

Mukhopadhyay has been engaged in systematically incorporating visual elements and styles from the various folk arts of Bengal and Bihar into his work – tribal masks, fantastic bird forms, tribal toys and dolls, ethnic jewellery, wall paintings and heads of wild boar. Unusual forms, brilliant colours and diverse stitches characterise his bold, abstract compositions.

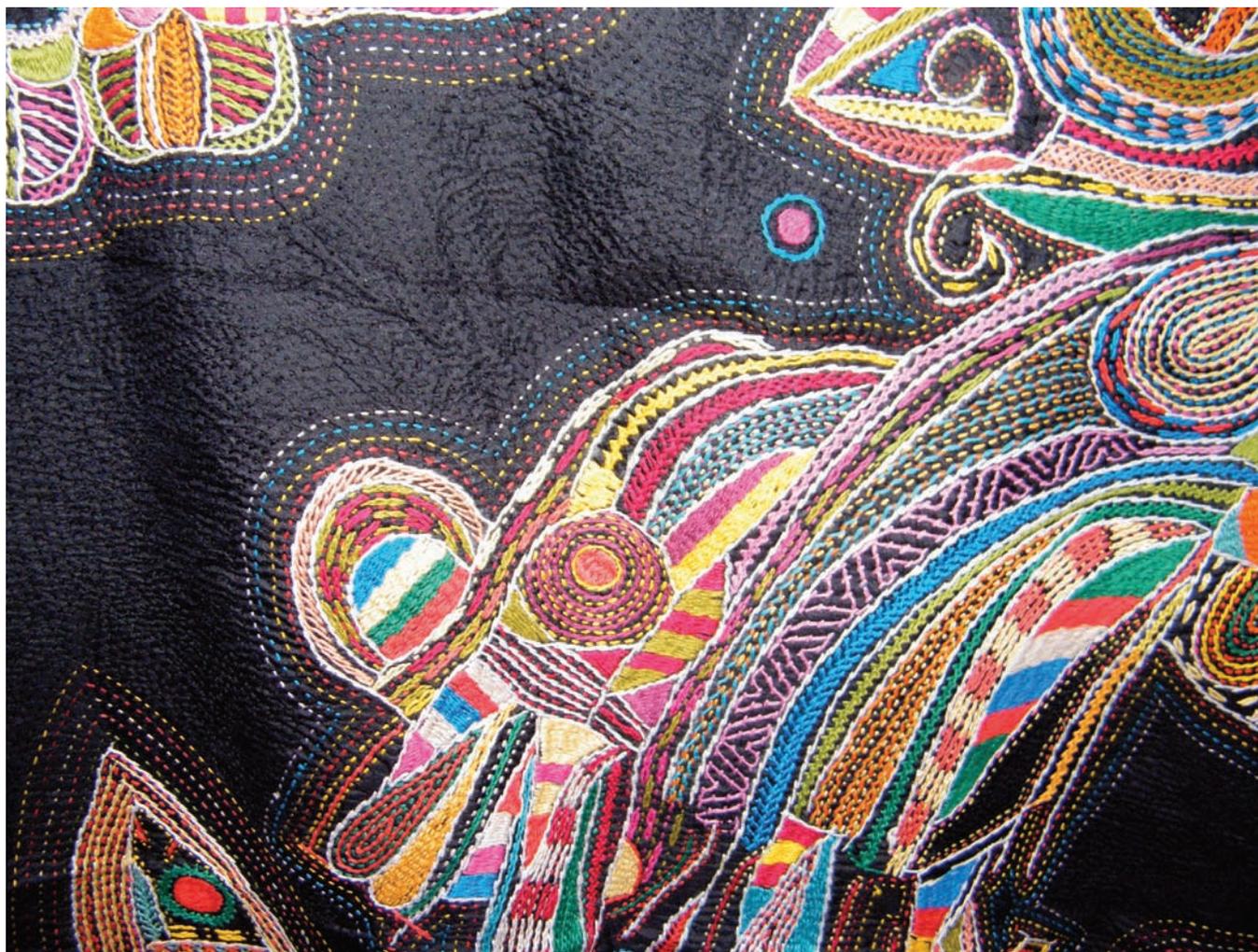


Photo: Enakshi Ghosh.

► Close view of his semi-abstract forms and the various types of stitches Mukhopadhyay uses.

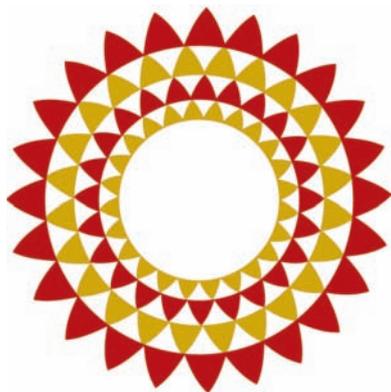


▴ Detail of a kantha made by Mukhopadhyay.

He engages a group of rural women he has trained to assist him in the creation of his artworks. He provides them with clear specifications for the embroidery for each artwork and pays them according to the workmanship required — with the number of hanks of thread used serving as a benchmark for the amount of labour involved. He is particular about the detailing of the embroidery, often making the artisans undo the stitches and rework the piece until it meets his specifications.

Most of the works have a tussar base, though occasionally he uses vibrantly coloured silks and synthetic fabrics. The primary motifs are executed on a single layer of fabric and a second layer is later affixed to serve as a base for the textured background embroidery as well as to strengthen the finished piece. His artworks are generally intended for display as wall hangings; he chooses not to frame them as this would make the pieces cumbersome and hard for the clients to transport. He also occasionally makes pieces that can be used as shawls as well as experiments with transposing his artworks onto garments like jackets.

The wall hangings are priced at ₹ 25,000 to 30,000, but he says that the actual sale price often falls short of this amount, which he considers to be symptomatic of the lack of appreciation for arts and crafts in India.



Endnotes

1. Based on an interview with members of the cooperative conducted by Enakshi Ghose.
2. Based on an interview conducted by Enakshi Ghosh.
3. Based on interviews conducted at the Centre by Enakshi Ghosh.
4. Based on an interview conducted with the respondents by Enakshi Ghosh on 1/09/2010.
5. Based on an interview conducted with Keya Sarkar and Maya Das by Enakshi Ghosh.
6. Based on an interview with Alima Khatun and Salma Bibi conducted by Enakshi Ghosh.
7. Based on an interview with Meera Saha conducted by Enakshi Ghosh on 1/09/2010.
8. Based on an interview with Rita Dutta conducted by Enakshi Ghosh on 16/09/2010.
9. Based on an interview conducted with Bani Biswas by Enakshi Ghosh.
10. Based on an interview with Bandana Lohar conducted by Enakshi Ghosh.
11. Based on an interview conducted by Enakshi Ghosh.
12. Based on an interview conducted at the village by Enakshi Ghosh on 17/09/2010.
13. Interview with Enakshi Ghosh.
14. Based on an interview with Biswajit Mukhopadhyay conducted by Enakshi Ghosh.

4

REPURPOSING THE KANTHA

Ritu Sethi

In the decades since the seismic partitioning of Bengal, kantha embroideries, previously done for domestic and personal reasons, have moved very markedly into the domains of economics, livelihood and business, with a monetary exchange value attached to the end-product. This gradual repurposing of the kantha over the years has led to two perceptible changes that are apparent to even the most casual observer. The first is manifest in the shift in the demographic profile of the embroiderers. Earlier, the kantas were embroidered across class and social divides in Bengal; this is now more the exception than the rule, with most embroiderers being economically deprived women, embroidering for their livelihood. Second, the embroidery, rarely thought of in commercial terms, is now produced for distant markets, with the embroiderers themselves no longer the end-users. This is not to say that women don't make kantas for personal use any more, but our concern here is with the majority, the several lakh women who embroider to earn a livelihood.

So, what are the challenges that confront kantha embroiderers, and what is the future of the kantha itself as an embroidery form? During field research with kantha-makers, their families and communities in West Bengal, and interviews across India with activists, NGOs, government agencies, designers, collectors, and others who have shaped the evolution of the kantha, the findings that emerged very clearly show that the kantha has mutated and moved a long way from its original avatar. This simple functional wrap for everyday use, and its more elaborate cousin, the richly-embroidered and figurative *nakshi* kantha, is now a powerful force in empowering women. In a world increasingly defined by economics, commerce and financial exchange, a very different mode of assessment

is becoming relevant to women's lives as a marker of progress and change. Where it was once an expression of women's hopes, fears, propitiations, aspirations and joys, the wielding of the needle now symbolises independence, financial security, income-earning capacity and self-fulfilment — all aspirations of the twenty-first-century women.

In the development landscape, this shift can be seen in terms of the changing status and socio-economic standing of kantha-makers. The introduction of commercial kantha embroidery to women as a livelihood option has brought with it an economic independence that allows them a greater voice within their families and communities. It has also allowed them to take on a new role as provider: supplementing family income to ensure better health care and education for their children, sustaining their families during bleak periods when income from farming or other activities is low, or attaining a better standard of living.



Photo: Ritu Sethi.

▲ On display in stores.

Those who have taken on an entrepreneurial role, connecting with markets and buyers, enjoy even greater economic prosperity and self-gratification, and a more marked improvement in social status within their communities. They are seen as inspirational role models by other women in the society they live in.

There has also been a progressive shift in the way these 'new' wage-earning women talk about their lives, which are now governed by the language of timetables, deliverables, purchase orders and schedules. Quality control, deadlines and price points have become familiar terms. The imperative to accommodate household chores into their professional work-day has made many of these women efficient at time-management and multitasking. Family events, festivals and rituals are now adjusted and shortened to suit the exigencies of the embroiderer's professional life. Though this new mode of operation is being increasingly characterised by context-free embroidery for distant markets that make few demands on their



Photo: Ritu Sethi.

▲ The tanka stitch of Rajasthan being sold as kantha.

expression and creativity, the women we spoke to value their work and take pride in their skill and ability to earn a livelihood.

While there are no comprehensive figures available either about the value of the kanthas being produced or the number of embroiderers engaged in the craft, approximations by domain experts were in hundreds of crores of rupees in trade and in lakhs of embroiderers spread from Kolkata to the remote interiors of West Bengal. The multiplicity of its growth models defined by individual and group energies, imagination and experimentation, has spawned a huge industry as well as hastened much-needed social changes.

The work of numerous NGOs and individuals has contributed to this phenomenon through sensitively-devised design development, research and training programmes where women are encouraged and empowered to become designers



Photos: Ritu Sethi.

▶ On display in stores.

and entrepreneurs and thereby move up the value chain, with personal growth being linked to social change and economic progress. But, while constantly widening their reach and working with growing numbers of women, there is only so much that civil society can do. As a result there is still a huge segment of women which is not within the ambit of such development initiatives.

Although it has not yet succeeded in bringing about widespread systemic changes and economic parity, wage-earning embroidery has given a large number of women in West Bengal an opportunity to enter the economic sphere, assert their rights and develop a voice within the social and contractual spheres of their lives. However, access to markets, credit and government schemes and programmes remains elusive for many civil society organisations as well as individual embroiderers. Sustained and more focused efforts are needed to close the gap between well-intentioned government policy and uneven ground-level implementation and enforcement which thwarts the sustainability of recent advances in the movement towards employment and equity.

Despite this transition, what has remained unchanged is the kantha's continuing grip on our collective imagination, with references in song, poetry, literature and popular culture evoking memories and associations with the cultural landscape of West Bengal. In Bengali popular cinema, the kantha has become an important component in the creation of the film's setting and atmosphere. In his cult film 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne', the iconic director Satyajit Ray depicts the zamindar sleeping soundly, covered with an intricately embroidered kantha, till he is woken up by the discordant notes of Goopy's song. Director Tarun Majumdar's popular movie 'Alo' has the heroine helping the village women improve their lives through an exhibition of kanthas. And in 'Bariwali', filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh continues the tradition, evoking mood and authentic recreation of the shot with his use of kanthas.

In the past few decades heirloom kanthas have come to be considered precious by the cognoscenti and coveted by textile collectors and museums across the world. No reputed exhibition of South Asian textiles is considered complete without the presence of a kantha.¹ With the environmental movement to recycle, reuse and repurpose gaining momentum, the quilted kantha has once again surfaced in the popular imagination. Special quilt exhibitions, with kanthas at their core, are being held the world over and have met with great acclaim.²

It is also now common to see local bazaars, boutiques and stores retailing textiles offering kantha-embroidered products for sale. What is even more heartening is that customers, not only in West Bengal but also in the urban markets of Delhi,

Bangalore, Chennai and Mumbai, ask for the kantha by name. This in itself is a big plus for a regional embroidery form that is being marketed pan-India — an unambiguous, clear and strong brand identity is the first principle of success in the marketplace.

The kantha practice of converting, through patience, creativity and hard work, used material into something new is now being applied to the production of a multitude of objects that fit into contemporary lifestyles. The skills employed are exciting the imagination of designers across the world. We see the kantha everywhere — in graphics, on wall hangings, cushion covers, place mats, spectacle cases, saris,



Photos: Ritu Sethi.

▾ On display in stores.



▾ *On display in stores.*

stoles, shawls, textile lengths and home furnishings. But this spectacular growth has come at a price: the kantha that is so widely available now in urban markets is a far cry from the original. As the embroidery distances itself from its original impulse, consumers become increasingly desensitised to its unique aesthetic and vocabulary, and the embroiderer becomes vulnerable to the exigencies of changing fashions and trends and the economics that rule markets. In the quest for modernity and the push of commerce, the kantha is being modified at an alarming speed, so much so that cultural purists are wondering whether the term 'kantha' can even be applied to the new cross-over form of embroidery currently being popularised.

The immensity of this problem became apparent during a survey of embroidery stalls from across India at Dilli Haat, a permanent crafts bazaar established by the government in Delhi, where craftspeople are allotted stalls on a rotating basis so that they can market their products without being dependent on middlemen. Embroiderers from states like Chattisgarh were selling embroideries by branding



▀ *On display in stores.*

them as kantha. Similarly, national-award-winning kantha embroiderers, in an effort to maximise returns, were selling embroideries that were a pastiche of other regional embroideries and touting them as a bona fide kantha. The *tanka* stitch of Rajasthan (a running stitch outlining a print that highlights patterns to give it a three-dimensional ‘kantha-type’ look) was being used on myriad products ranging from bed linen to saris and fabric lengths and being passed off as kantha.

This dubious influence of low-value, running-stitch outlines on printed fabrics makes a parody of the kantha. Worse, it undercuts the price of genuine kanthas and further dilutes the identity of the embroidery form. In an environment dominated by quick consumption and rapid replacement, catering to the vast demand for ethnic chic, the de-linking from the source leaves the seller at the mercy of fickle changes in taste. A short-term view of rising sales graphs inevitably leads to a rapid fall in future demand.

A visit to several stores in bustling middle-class markets also revealed machine-replicated, embroidered and printed saris and stoles being sold as original kantha. This multiplication in factory/machine production is only the tip of the iceberg



▲ Close-up of kantha on display in stores.

where infringements are concerned, all of which serve to corrode the livelihood base of the kantha embroiderers.

Amid all the jostling for business in the marketplace and the weakening of references that reflected a collective vitality rich in symbolism, the overall impression is that of an indistinguishable sameness, a copying and replication of embroidery being offered across all stores and markets. Commercially reinterpreted, much of contemporary kantha embroidery has become a commodity with similar, predictable motifs, a limited repertoire of stitches, identical base materials and brash colours. It has become a handmade product that is, ironically, parodying mass production and machine replication. This unfortunate development, unless it is stemmed, could lead to a loss of the kantha's exclusivity, regional identity and individuality.

With fierce competition and an undifferentiated commodified product, the only variable being offered to the customer is the 'price'. The growing commodification and increased competitiveness among kantha traders are reflected in the overall decline in the piece-rates offered to the embroiderers for the same quality of work.

This spiral of undercutting rates in the bid to compete in an undifferentiating market affects mainly the embroiderers, who are located at the bottom of the value chain and often have no direct access to the market. Thus, the trade in kantha has begun to move inexorably towards exploiting this huge, home-based, unorganised workforce.

Without being accused of nostalgia for a romanticised golden age or a bygone way of life, one can assert unhesitatingly that the commercialisation of the kantha has come at a steep price. Replicated as they are in multiples, the kanthas are no longer the unique, individual pieces they were in the past. The etymology of the kantha has altered from being a layered, rippled and textured embroidery form, strong in symbolism, to a single layer that lacks visual and cultural identity. Nor have the present embroideries been able to retain the spontaneity and imagination of the earlier pieces. But despite this negative transformation of the kantha, we cannot



Photos: Ritu Sethi.

▲ Tanka stitch from Rajasthan.

go into the pros and cons of cultural conservation without taking into account the costs and benefits of the economic and social changes taking place in the lives of the women embroiderers.

Embroidery for them is now very clearly related to livelihood, a certain level of material comfort and status. Though in the past the kantha was made of worn-out material with a limited range of threads, it could not be accused of repetitiveness or a lack of originality or creativity – in fact, quite the contrary. Yet, in the headlong rush towards modernity and commercialisation, the first casualty has been the very identity of the embroidery form. Though there are pockets of excellence where design development and aesthetic rejuvenation are hallmarks, the bulk of the work is indifferent and undifferentiated.

The *nakshi* kantha has now been registered under the Geographic Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999, which is intended to protect community-owned intellectual property from unscrupulous misuse and infringement.³ It is anticipated that enforcement of this Act to protect the *nakshi* kantha will be fraught with problems, not only because of the legislation required for combating infringements, but also because the only geographic area demarcated for the *nakshi* kantha is confined to the district of Birbhum. Of the 12 National Awards for Excellence presented to *nakshi* kantha embroiderers by the Government of India since their institution, eight live in areas outside Birbhum while two are residents of the state of Chattisgarh. Apart from these well-known figures, the lakhs of embroiderers who do not live in Birbhum district fall outside the jurisdiction of the Act and therefore no longer have the right to call their embroidery *nakshi* kantha.

A calibrated response is necessary if we are to meet these challenges head-on. While there can be gains with sporadic programmes and interventions, a long-term view is imperative. We need to move along two simultaneous paths, both requiring sustained and continuous effort. The first is to focus on the lives of the women embroiderers from a variety of perspectives, addressing issues that are central to livelihood security and empowerment while also examining the means of ensuring professional augmentation and expansion of such development initiatives. The specific challenges would be to secure fair wages, develop women's access to markets and credit, and upgrade skills not only in the craft of embroidery but also in other areas relevant to the embroiderers' professional development and personal growth.

The second would be to simultaneously shore up the kantha embroidery form as it is this mother lode that fuels and sustains lakhs of women embroiderers. This

would mean recreating a contemporary, authentic voice and rebuilding links to the tradition, taking care that in the rush to commercialise the clearly delineated identity and authenticity of the original kantha is not jettisoned.

The truth is that the kantha matters. It matters because it is a potent tool of empowerment, offering several lakh women across West Bengal the opportunity to earn their livelihood and socially enhance their lives. It matters equally to those who buy the kantha and by that very act uphold the tradition. The kantha is not merely a stitch or a technique; with its shared histories and memories, and its own unique identity, it contributes to and is a vital part of the cultural ethos of West Bengal and of India.



Endnotes

1. 'Power Cloths of the Commonwealth'. RMIT Gallery in Melbourne, Australia, 2006 and at the National Handicrafts and Handloom Museum, New Delhi, September 2010.
2. The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., USA; Quilts 1700-2010, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, July 2010; 'Kantha: The embroidered quilt of Bengal', Philadelphia Museum of Art, December 2009.
3. Application no. 52, registered in 2007-08.

5

IN ADDITION

On the types of kantha made

While the term ‘kantha’ usually denotes quilted wraps, the women of the Bengal region used its technique to make a number of different articles for use in everyday life, each sized, designed and quilted in accordance to its intended function. In general, the objects made for everyday, hardy use tended to be rather functional, with the kantha stitch or *phor* used to hold the layers of worn fabrics together and ornamentation, if any, limited to geometrics, borders or florals.

Functionality was the predominant factor in the design of the kantha, determining its shape, size, thickness, layering and finishing. It was also key to its nomenclature and categorisation. Distinctions were figured in the embroidered motifs and elaborate patterning and not in the form of the product itself. For instance, the *satadal padma*, the image of the hundred-petaled lotus — the seat of the goddess Lakshmi, harbinger of good fortune, fulfilment and prosperity — may be found on ceremonial kanthas made in Hindu households.

Alongside this tradition of the everyday domestic kantha, there coexisted the decorative, intricately embroidered counterpart, the now celebrated *nakshi* kanthas which were usually made for a wide variety of purposes, such as for gifting to family members, as coverings for treasured personal items, or for ceremonial or ritual use. “As a child I saw my grandmother make beautiful kanthas from old saris, where she used the borders ingenuously to create patterns, holding the layers together with several rows of running stitches. She did not embroider them, however. There was never any time. In a large joint family with many children, kanthas of various sizes were always in demand” (Swagata Ghose 1986: 13).

The nomenclature used for the kantha reflected the functionality of the product, often suffixed on to describe its use, while its size, patterning and embroidery were individuated to the person who conceived and embroidered the piece. For instance, the *jainamaz* kantha referred to kanthas that were used by Muslims for *namaz* or prayer. The designs embroidered on such kanthas often included borders and floral or geometric patterns, and where the forehead touched the rug in the *sidja* gesture of prayer, perhaps a mosque or some other allegory that the embroiderer chose to depict.

The *Vaishnav* kanthas, so called for their embroidered invocations to the Lords Rama and Krishna, avatars of the God Vishnu, were embroidered such that the very words of the invocations looked like patterns laid out on a quilted field.

The unusual and outstanding Kalighat *pat* kanthas drew their inspiration from the Kalighat paintings, a popular genre of art in nineteenth-century Kolkata which satirised the emerging Anglicised elite ‘babu’ culture of Bengal.



From C.L. Bharany's collection.

▲ A Vaishnav kantha invoking the avatars of the Hindu God Vishnu through the repetition of the names of the Lords Krishna and Rama.

The more prosaic, small-sized *bashon dhakna* kanthas were literally kanthas used as food warmers and/or as a cover for vessels containing food items. *Sujni* kanthas were intended for use as spreads and covers and were therefore appropriately large, usually three-layered and rectangular. Ranging in size from approximately 5' to 6' in length and 3' to 4.5' in width, these kanthas could be used by adults to cover themselves or as a spread over a bed or on the floor for seating or sleeping. Those made for daily use were usually quite simple, though always firmly quilted



► Square format Kalighat pat kantha.



▾ Detail of a Kalighat pat kantha.



▾ Detail of a Kalighat pat kantha.



▲ A *sujni* kantha spread in the home of Mili Bairagi.

to lend strength for regular wear and tear. Others, made for ceremonial use or as gifts for a beloved son or daughter leaving home perhaps, often bear a densely patterned profusion of embroidered motifs and narratives.

The *paar* kanthas, often serving the same functions as the *sujni*, were quilted and embroidered using borders or *paar* as a linear design element, very similar to the *dhaniakhali* and other traditional sari border patterns. The embroidered borders, running parallel along the length of the kantha, were often repeated in



Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

▸ A bashon dhakna kantha (to cover food) from late nineteenth-century Bengal.

a mirror image, with the space between the border patterns providing relief and allowing for the dense kantha quilting. These elegant and formal-looking *paar* kanthas displayed technical skills without revealing much information about the embroiderers.

The smaller embroidered *ashon* kanthas, usually square or rectangular in shape, were used as a base for seating, spread out like a rug for puja ceremonies, or offered as a seat to honoured guests at home or at ceremonies and weddings. Similarly,



▲ A traditional dhaniakhali sari, an inspiration for the paar kanthas.

its cousin, the *palki ashon* kantha, served as a spread for seating in the *palki* or palanquin. These types of kantha were relatively thinly layered and therefore easier to embroider. This factor, combined with their use, made them the chosen canvas of the kantha embroiderer's most elaborate efforts, ingenuity and skill. For instance, the artist Kalo Bala Devi embroidered an *ashon* kantha which affectionately welcomed her honoured brother-in-law, asking him to be seated.

*Aashun boshun jamai babu aashum
Chitrokor Kalo Bala Devi*

Leph kanthas refer to the thick quilted coverlets made for use in winter. While three to four layers were sufficient to make a *sujni* or *ashon*, as many as seven were required to create the thickness characteristic of the *leph*. Large enough to cover



Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

► A portion of a pair of kantha from late nineteenth-century Bengal.



▲ Intricately embroidered ashon kantha from late nineteenth-century Bengal.

the user comfortably, the heavily padded *leph* required far more effort to quilt and embroider and were therefore more sparingly embellished than the coverlets and spreads.

The *bachcha* or children's kanthas, used as spreads for the young, comprise some of the most charmingly embroidered pieces, evocative of a time long gone by. They often served multiple purposes, with the embroidered motifs including symbols



Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

► *An ashon kantha embroidered and quilted for an honoured brother-in-law.*

to ward off the evil eye or invoke blessings. Sometimes they were also used as a teaching primer.

The *boyton* kantha, usually square in shape, also had multiple functions. For instance, it was used as a wrap for books and other valuables, as a cover for trunks, or as a tablecloth. Its size and shape varied depending on its intended function.



► A corner of a large nakshi kantha embroidered with figures of animals, birds and humans. Perhaps for use by a young child.

The urge to adorn extended to kanthas used for encasing toilet articles such as mirrors or *arshi* and combs: thus the *arshilata* kantha. The *durjani* kantha, also known as the *gilaf* and *batu* kantha, were square-shaped pieces of quilted cloth with three of its corners folded inwards as in an envelope, to create a pouch in which small articles required by women such as betel nuts, a rosary, money or needlework accessories could be kept. The *oar* or pillow kantha, also known as the *balish*, *balisher oshar* or *balisher chapa*, literally pillowcase, was either a square or rectangular pillow covering, while the *dastarkhan*, a long, narrow kantha, was meant to be spread under dishes served to guests, its size depending on the number of people it was intended to accommodate (Zaman 1981/1992: 62). *Rumal* kanthas referred to small, square kerchief kanthas that had a wide variety of uses, including the covering of plates and other articles.



Photo: Sonali Bhasin

► Part of a border of an embroidered kantha from late nineteenth-century Bengal that could have served the additional purpose of being a nursery primer for young children. From the National Museum Collection.



▀ Top and Bottom: Close-up of the kantha from the previous page.



▸ Top and Bottom: Close-up of the kantha from p. 147.



Photo Pradeep Dasgupta.

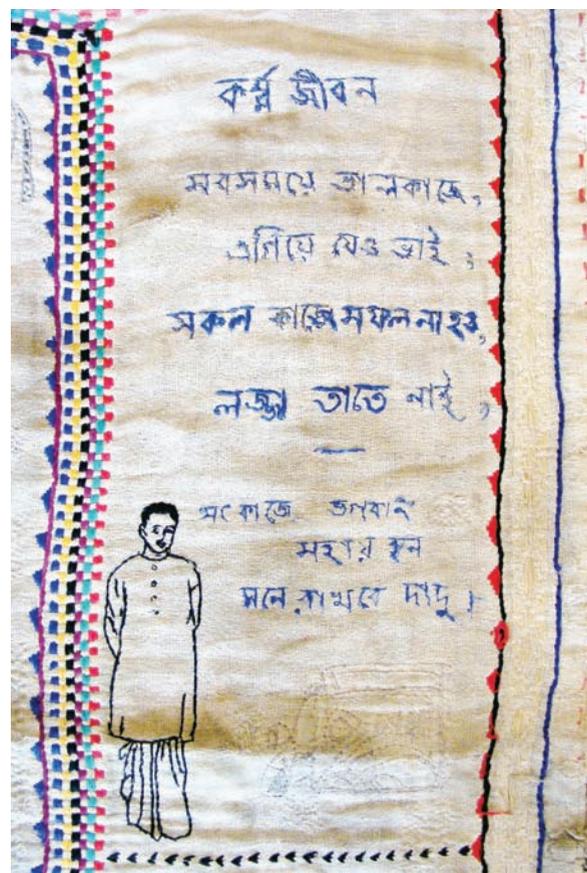
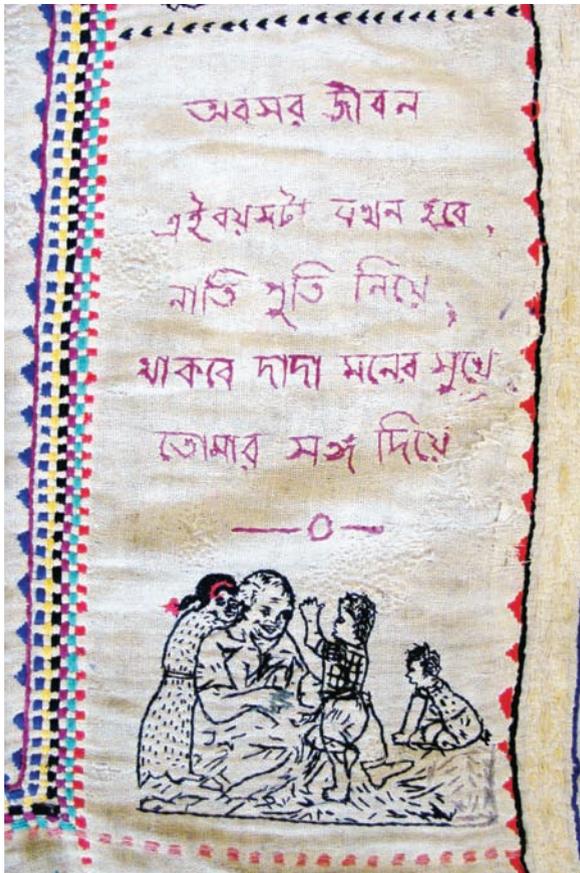
▸ *Indrani Dasgupta embroidering and quilting a kantha for her yet to be born baby.*

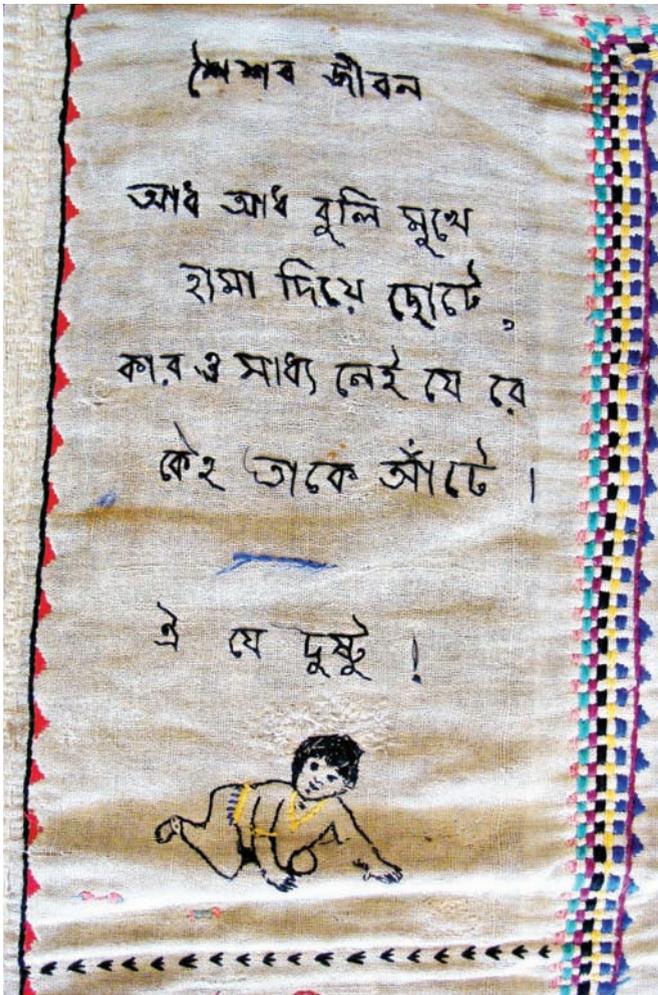
In addition, kanthas were also made for newborns and toddlers. The padded old fabrics, sourced from those who had lived long and honourable lives, provided the child with dual protection — as swaddling to shield the infant from the elements, and the protection intrinsic in the auspiciously sourced fabrics and the embroidered images symbolising protection and hope.

With functionality as the cornerstone, the types of kanthas made were thus varied as the motifs and borders embroidered and the ends they could serve, the variations depending on the needs of the householder.



► This and next page: Close-ups of an unusual bachcha kantha embroidered by a grandmother. A message of hope, good wishes and blessings, with an anticipation that her grandson will live up to the expectations of his family.





From C. L. Bharary's collection.

The making of a *nakshi kantha*

The traditional process of making the layered and embroidered *nakshi kantha* can be segregated into three stages, each requiring much forethought and careful preparation. The first comprises the building up of the layering, the second the creative ornamentation through embroidery, and the third is the actual process of quilting.

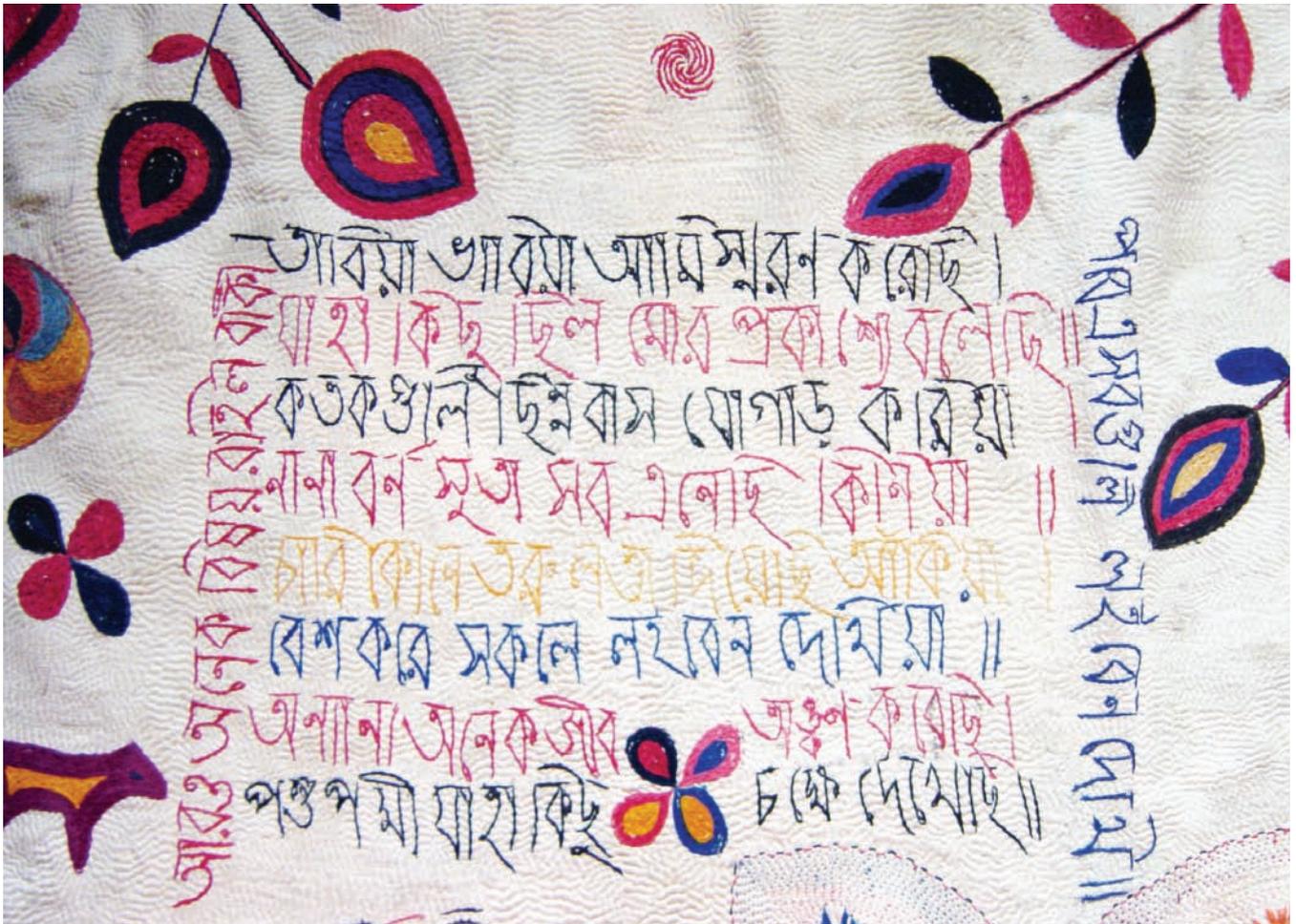
Historically, kanthas were made using layers of old saris, dhotis and other everyday garments, worn thin with frequent use, as a base. The paraphernalia required to make a kantha was minimal and continues to be so even with the commercial production of the kantha today. The embroidery needles used were not in any way specialised but of the regular domestic variety. Earlier obtained in the interiors of Bengal from the itinerant *pheriyas*, they are now readily available locally.

The threads used were painstakingly drawn from worn saris and dhotis that were being repurposed into kanthas. Accordingly, the colours seen in a number of



Photo: Sonali Bhasin.

▲ Section of a quilted kantha edged by a sari border of matching colours from twentieth-century Bengal. From the National Museum collection.



► In the message embroidered on this heirloom kantha, the maker specifies that while she has used worn-out fabrics, her threads are new and colourful.

heirloom kantha embroideries were usually limited to the red, black, blue and white which could be extracted from the borders of the garments. Red and black threads predominate, because these were the colours most used on sari borders – widows wore black-bordered saris, while married women wore saris that had red borders. Thus, in a number of kanthas, availability rather than a predefined colour palette appears to have determined the selection of threads for embroidery. Because of this, one can sometimes find motifs that have been filled in with an odd-coloured thread. Oral interviews with aged kantha-makers revealed that these worn threads were often waxed to give them additional strength and to join one strand with another.

However, many of the *nakshi* kanthas studied reveal the use of a considerable amount of thread. It is not possible that sari borders would always have been sufficient



► Back of a kantha embroidered at the kantha centre.



► Front of the kantha above.

and it is very likely that new yarn must have been used to either supplement or substitute the old. In some intricately embroidered *nakshi* kantha samples, for instance, the threads used in the patterning of the background betray no sign of fraying or fading. Consistent in quality and colour, they appear to be new threads employed especially for the purpose of embroidery. This is borne out by a kantha addressed by the embroiderer to her beloved, in which she writes:

*Jaha kichhu chilo mor prokashye bolechhi
Katakguli chinnobash jogar koriya
Nana borno shuta hsob enechhi kiniya
Charikoney torulata diyechhi aankiya*

What is in my heart I speak here
Collecting some pieces of torn cloth
Buying threads of different colours
I have drawn vines on all four sides

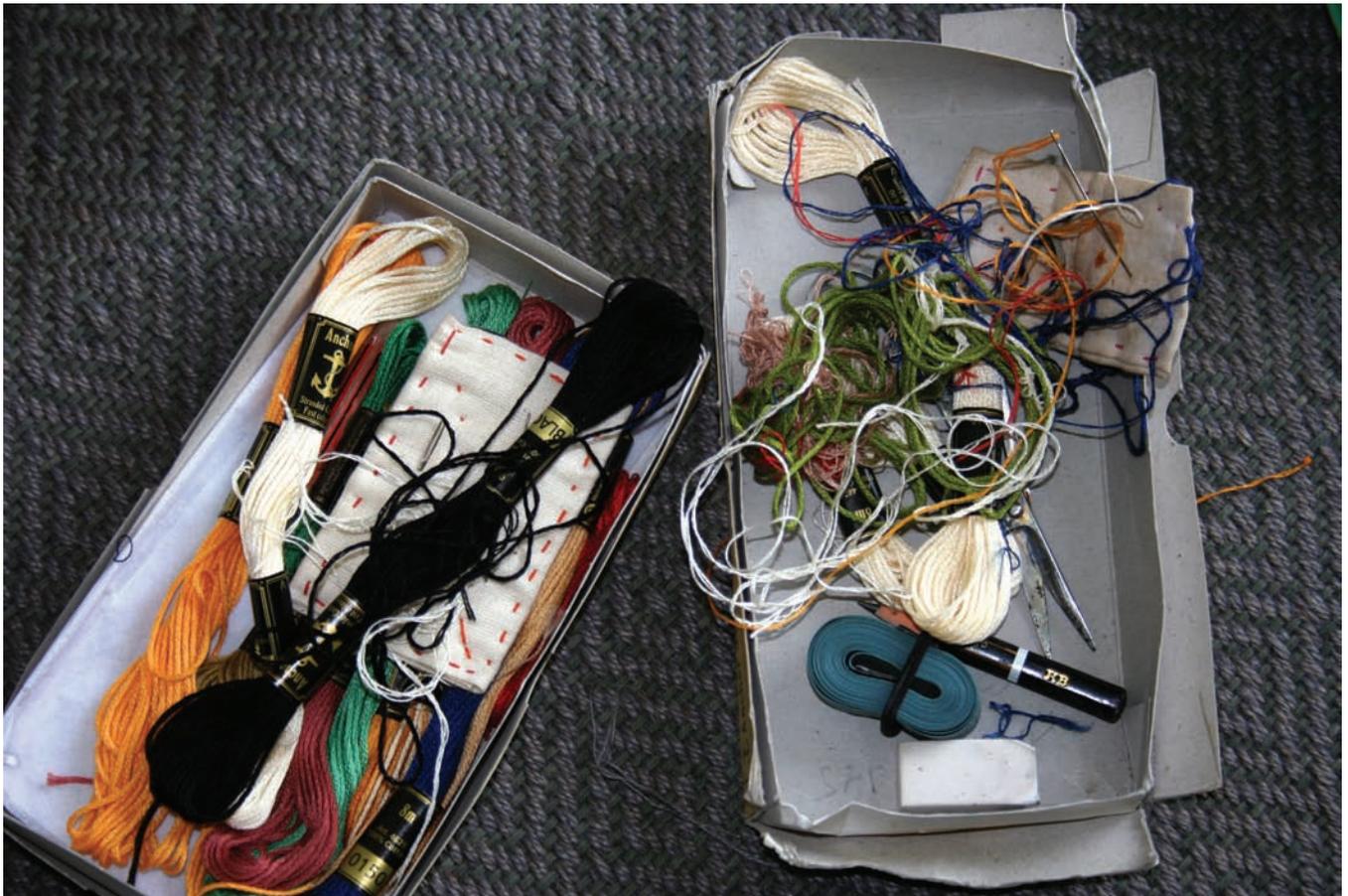


Photo: Upal Sengupta.

▲ The sewing kit.



► Material stored at the kantha centre.

For the most part, however, the embroidery was done using single-ply thread for the basic kantha *phor* stitch of a colour akin to the base fabric, usually cream or white, creating textures that are indistinguishable from the base material, and creating the kantha's unmistakable rippled, three-dimensional look and feel. Two-ply threads in a variety of colours were used for the embroidered patterns with variations in stitches and their deployment and forms. As our research shows, this continues to be the case even today, with the embroiderers using Anchor-brand threads in a range of shades.

As mentioned earlier, the first stage in the making of the kantha consisted of the piecing together of sections of still usable though worn and patched cloth to create a number of panels of the desired length and width. These were then piled together to create the thickness suitable for the intended use the kantha. A layer of cloth would be laid flat on the ground. Another would be laid atop it and then another, and so on, with the best piece of fabric reserved for placement on the top, until the desired thickness was achieved. This process, termed *kantha pata* or laying down of the kantha, was usually a group activity, several hands being necessary to ensure the precise overlap of the layers which were then smoothed out so that there would be no unsightly folds or creases either on the surface or



▸ A half-finished piece, with the layout and base drawing visible.



▸ Detail of the kantha shown above.

lower layers. Metal pots or *ghotis* filled with boiling water were used as improvised steam irons to press out the creases.

Once layered, the edges of the fabrics would be carefully folded in and stitched. Two or three rows of largish running stitches would then be made down the length of the kantha to tack the layers of cloths together. If necessary, to further strengthen the base fabric, the layers would be worked again with large-size running stitches, using thread of the same colour as the fabric, covering the entire surface to hold and bind the layers together.

Though earlier publications have claimed that originally, kantha-makers did not draw the motifs or scenes to be embroidered on the quilt, the densely patterned kanthas seen in collections have complex and detailed compositions, planned spacing, colour schema and pictorial depictions that would have been hard to



Photo: Ritu Sethi.

▴ The embroidery starts after the design has been visualised, then drawn or stencilled on to the fabric with fugitive colours.



► The motifs outlined with embroidery.



► Outline and filling in of a kantha in progress.

render without a base drawing before starting embroidery. While it may be true that for kanthas made for everyday use, proficient kantha-makers probably did not need to make a drawing before starting embroidery, and that they outlined the pattern directly on the quilted fabric with needle and thread, it is conjectured here that a base pattern, with fugitive colours using turmeric or charcoal was made on the kantha before the start of embroidery. As Ruby Palchoudhuri explained, “Unfinished kanthas show that a base drawing was often made as a template for the embroiderer to follow and thereby achieve a cohesive presentation. The drawing was a part of the embroiderer’s skill and creativity.”

We observed the second and third stages of making a traditional *nakshi* kantha at the Kamladevi Kantha Centre in Kolkata. The layout of the piece is first planned through creative brainstorming and discussions with colleagues at the Centre. Inspired either by their own imagination or after consulting books and other folk art forms like the *alpana* or *pata chitra*, motifs are drawn on the top layer of fabric

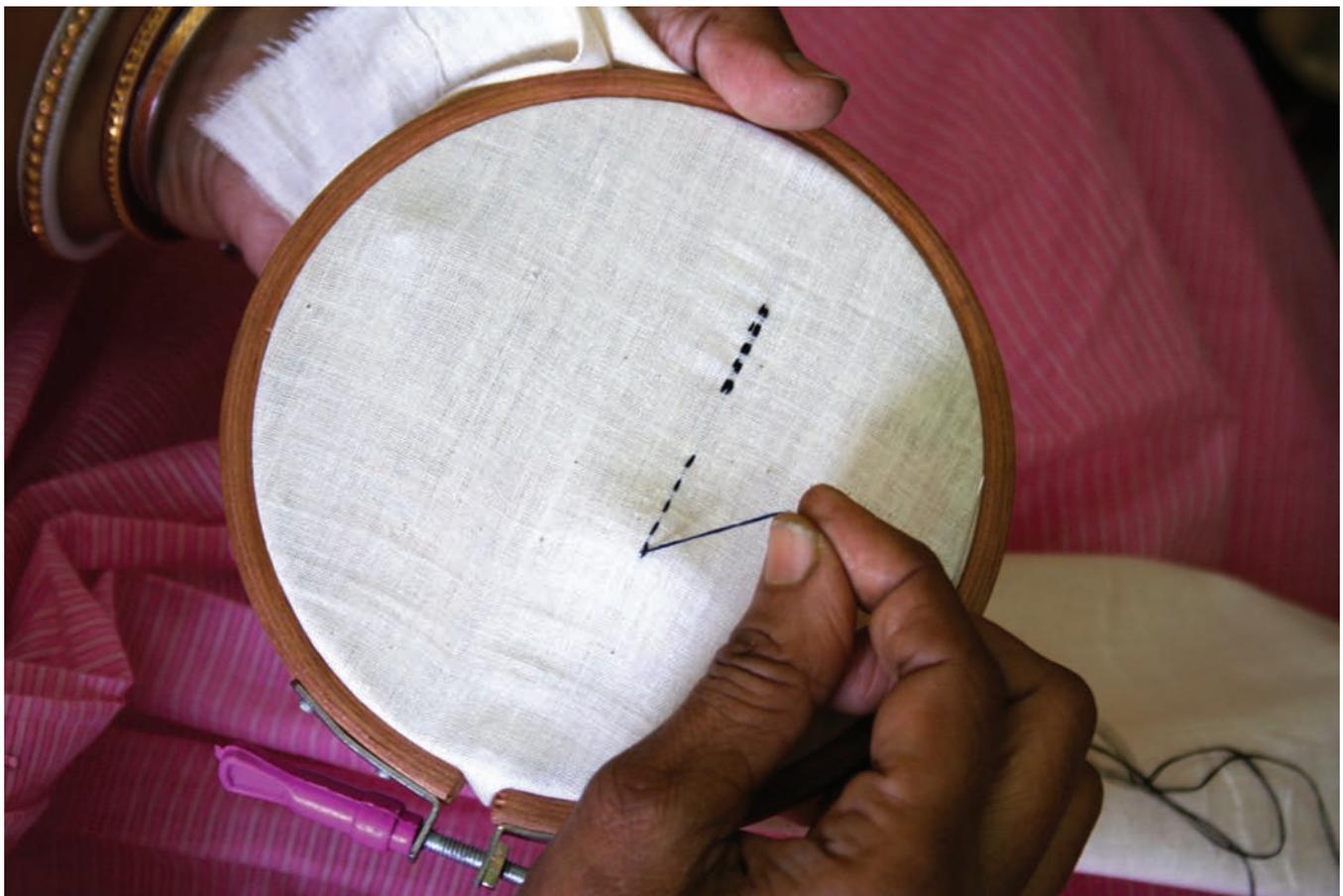


Photo: Upal Sengupta.

▲ Demonstrating the basic kantha phor stitch.

in fugitive colours. The embroidery commences only after the colour scheme has been worked out and fixed. The stitches employed are from the kantha repertoire, instinctively used by the embroiderer to suit the motif and the movement required.

In an heirloom *nakshi*, the motifs were generally embroidered first; it is only after their completion that the quilting was done. To retain the distinctive *nakshi* look, this procedure continues to be followed without any variation at the Kantha Centre. The focal points or predominant motifs of the *nakshi* are marked first, followed by other subsidiary, though equally important filler motifs that are created around these focal points to complete the story.

The fundamental vocabulary of the *nakshi* is built on the basic kantha *phor*, the running stitch that lends itself to innumerable variations. These are created by altering the length of the stitches as well as with placements and bends, wherein placing each row such that it is either perfectly parallel or alternates with the other,



Photo: Upal Sengupta

▲ An embroiderer demonstrates the fabric stretch and ease resulting from the use of a bamboo embroidery frame.



▸ Brainstorming: a creative session with colleagues at the Kamaladevi Centre.

▸ Sign at the entrance of the Centre.





▶ A ready reckoner of stitches, with their names at the Kantha Centre.



▲ A close-up of the ready reckoner shown on the previous page.

or even leaning the rows slightly forward, makes all the difference. Variations within a stitch are thus created by introducing or removing spaces, lengthening and shortening stitches, adding a stitch and other creative approaches. Embroidering the motifs first also serves to hold together the fabric layers, leaving the field open for the tone-on-tone densely embroidered quilting that is to follow.

It is believed that, traditionally, no frame was used to stretch the fabric during the embroidery process. We discussed this with the embroiderers we met, who, while following traditional processes and techniques, have adopted the bamboo or plastic frame to aid the embroidery.

They felt that it must have been far more difficult and time-consuming to embroider the intricate stitches while simultaneously stretching the layered fabric by hand. The frame is thus an indispensable part of their kantha tool kit. In addition, as observed in the pieces we saw at the Centre, several other embroidery stitches were used to supplement the basic kantha stitch. This, too, is in keeping with the pattern followed by the older kanthas, wherein the stitches used to fill the motifs

were usually variations of the *kantha phor*, though a range of other stitches were also used to complement or supplement it.

As in the naming of the *kanthas*, the nomenclature used for stitches is also self-explanatory. Added as a prefix, it was, and is even today, descriptive of the stitch unit. For instance, the *baksho*, is literally the box stitch; frequently used to make patterns or in borders or to make outlines, the *soman tola* or level measure, describes a stitch unit where the size of the stitch and the gaps between levels are equal.

The embroidery vocabulary thus developed was constantly expanded with words that referred to everyday objects. The *chatai phor* was so named because of its resemblance to the ubiquitous grass mats of West Bengal. The *benki*, meaning turn or bend, also called zig-zag, is a running stitch with the next, closely placed stitch minutely edged forward or backward to create the optical illusion of a curved movement. The *dhaner chori* or paddy sheath stitch is a variation of the *benki*, with an additional stitch to give it a curve that replicates the head of paddy.

► Below and next page: Close-up of a small squarish *kantha*, with the *bhui phor* or base *kantha* quilting stitch adding to the vibrancy and movement of the elephant and the horses. Late nineteenth-century Bengal. From the National Museum Collection,



Photo: Sonali Bhasin.

Additionally, the *arhe tola*, which literally means ‘slightly bent’, is a stitch which, like its name, appears to slope and is a delicate variation of the *benki* and *dhaner chori* stitch. The *arhe tola* employs closely parallel rows of running stitch in which the stitches in each successive row are placed slightly forward in relation to those in the preceding one. The entire surface embroidered with the *arhe tola* seems to bend and flow, displaying a strong sense of movement. The technique is usually used for motifs such as the depiction of the sun shaped as a swirling pinwheel – the *shoshtir chinho* – with the overall effect being rather Op Art-like, as the pattern leads the eye in multiple directions, giving the surface a dynamic appearance.

The reckoner illustrates two variations of the *kashida*. One variation is also popular in the making of Bihari *sujnis*. This variation fills spaces closely, giving the borders and motifs a 3-D effect. The second variation has a tighter placement of stitches, with each stitch beginning from the middle of the previous stitch, resulting in a dense, high-relief, velvet-like appearance.



Photo: Sonali Bhasin.



▸ Quilting with the bhui phor.

▸ Close-up of a nakshi kantha, with the bhui phor or base kantha quilting stitch. Late nineteenth-century Bengal. From the National Museum Collection.





▸ Close-up of a nakshi kantha, with the bhui phor adding vibrancy and movement to the chariot. Late nineteenth-century Bengal. From the National Museum Collection.

▸ The back of a nakshi kantha, demonstrating the painstaking neatness of the work and the fine kantha bhui phor. Late nineteenth-century Bengal. From the National Museum Collection.



The *bokhya* or back stitch is utilised very effectively to outline curvilinear forms and motifs. In this stitch, the needle is brought out of the cloth a stitch-length ahead of the completed stitch. It is then taken back along the line and brought out of the fabric a stitch-length ahead. This technique creates a continuous line not unlike contemporary machine stitching.

The *daal* or stem stitch, like its name, is usually used to create vines and outline motifs. There is also the *bhui phor*, which literally means earth stitch. The chain stitch, illustrated in the reckoner, is rarely used by the embroiderers at the Kantha Centre.

The variations in the basic kantha *phor* include *pipre sar*, literally row of ants, a round pea-like stitch appropriately called *motor dana* or pea, the *barfi paar* or rectangular sweetmeat stitch, *chokk phor* or eye stitch and numerous others. The strength of the basic kantha *phor* running stitch thus lies in its adaptability and versatility, lending itself to variations that create and build patterns, motifs and borders of different levels of complexity.

It is in the third stage of kantha-making that all the processes are drawn together. The fluidity and movement of the quilting is based on the indispensable *bhui phor*. This earth stitch, minutely executed with thread that is of the same colour as the base material, creates the new 'earth', hard to distinguish with the naked eye and now inseparable from the textile itself. It is this that makes the kantha whole and unique.

In the finished kanthas, it may be observed that each motif is usually surrounded by the most minute *bhui phors*. The stitches are so fine that the spacing between them could be no bigger than the miniscule nano stitch, giving the textile its characteristic undulating look and feel. Closely fitted around the motifs, the stitch gradually radiates outwards, encompassing all the available space to eventually result in a recreated textile background surface.

The embroiderers' ability to take what is really a basic and simple running stitch and to transform it through a thorough understanding of the mechanics of the stitch into what appears to be an ebb-and-flow of movement on a textile field is what has made the kantha stand out from all other embroideries. The more minute or invisible the stitch, the more it lends itself to an undulating movement. The flow and movement of the needle and stitch is varied to suit the space available between the motifs, moulding and shaping, emphasising and creating a backdrop to the embroidered motif. When examined closely it will be noticed that though the shapes formed by these tiny stitches look similar at first glance, they are shaped

in a variety of ways, resembling a roundel, a flower, a leaf, a square, a rectangle, a triangle and other shapes, including a *rudraksha*.

Occasionally, the field of the kantha would be worked more regularly. In these instances, the embroiderer would work on a single shape — it could be circular or square or any other that took her fancy — repeating the pattern a section at a time. She would slowly and steadily proceed to fill in the spaces, gradually covering the entire surface in this manner. This way of spacing the stitches creates the rippled wavy ridges so characteristic of kanthas.

Whether the patterns are drawn, transferred, or intuitively stitched directly onto the fabric, each piece is unusual, vibrating with an energy all of its own. And however similar the patterns or the symbolic iconography used, the colour schema and presentation bear a palpable stamp of the embroiderer's presence, making every *nakshi* unique.

Endnotes

1. Interview with Sharbari Datta conducted by Chaiti Mitra on 31/8/2011.
2. Translated as 'The Field of the Embroidered Quilt' by EM Milford.
See Jasimuddin, Transl. Milford (1986) (1986)

The transformation of the kantha from asceticism to fashion

Anamika Pathak

The word kantha (in Sanskrit), or *kathari*, *kath* and *gudari* (in Hindi), refers to a patched garment, a bag or a hold-all, traditionally worn or carried by ascetics. The word appears in most Sanskrit dictionaries, such as Gode's *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1957) or Apte's *Sanskrit-Hindi Kosh* (1966: 529) and was used by European scholars like Monier-Williams (1966: 244). In addition, the kantha and its various aspects – its making, ethos and symbolism among others – have been discussed and written about by experts (Sen 1935; Mookerjee 1939: 11–14; Kramrisch 1939: 141–67; Chattopadhyay (1975); Dhamija 1971: 69–74; Zaman 2002: 237–46, 2004).

In the early plastic arts, dated to the second century AD, there are similarities in the literary definition and description of the kantha and the representation of such attire. According to Gurusaday Dutt,¹ the kantha originally comprised appliqué work done on quilts, which was later replaced by embroidery work (Chattopadhyay 1971: 76). However, most museum collections do not include specimens of either the patched garment or the appliquéd kantha. The most widely known kantha specimens to be found in museums in India and abroad are mainly coverlets,² bed-spreads, floor rugs, shawls, wraps, and covers for boxes and mirrors. This article traces the origins and development of kantha embroidery, examines its significance, and describes some of the kanthas in the collection of the National Museum, New Delhi.

Early history of the patched garment: The earliest reference to the making of the 'patched garment' used by bhikkus is found in the Buddhist text *Vinaya Pitak*. The *Vinaya Pitak*, which is one of the *tripitak*,³ lays down the rules to be followed by the samghas (monasteries), the *bhikkus* (monks) and the *bhikkunis* (nuns). The *Vinaya Pitak* has many texts, of which *Mahavagga khandhaka* is the most important as it describes the elaborate dress code for *bhikkus*. It includes information on the *kathina* ceremony,⁴ including a description of the six types of fabric that could be used for making the *civara* (garments), the colours permissible, and the type of dye and method of dyeing to be used.

Kathina (literally meaning 'hard' or 'difficult') refers to the stock of cotton cloth provided by the faithful to be made into robes for the use of the *samgha* during the coming year. The entire stock would be dyed, sewn together, made into robes, and then formally declared to be available for distribution to all *bhikkus* on the

same day (Rhys David and Oldenberg 1882: 149). Lord Buddha had suggested that the *bhikku* should be allowed to use a set of three *civara*, that is, the *dohari samghati* (double-layered waist cloth), the *itahra* (single-layered) *uttarasangha* and the *antaravasaka* (single-layered upper robe and undergarment) (ibid.: 212). The text gives a full account of the Buddha's desire, which he expressed to his disciple Ananda, to provide the *bhikku* with *civara* that resembled the rice fields of Magadha. Ananda sewed together all the torn pieces of cotton cloth so skilfully that the Lord was impressed and gave permission to make *civara* by stitching small pieces of cloth together so that they looked like cultivated fields (ibid.: 209; Kern 1896). The number of patches used varied from sect to sect (Wassilief 1860). According to the rules that governed the monastic life of the *samgha*, monks were allowed only two sets of *civara* a year, so needles were included in the list of items that they were allowed to carry in case the *civara* needed mending. The text further says that the Buddha allowed the *bhikku* to have slips of cloth inserted bolt-like to hold a torn robe together with patches, darning and small pieces of cloth sewn to mark or strengthen the robe (ibid.: VIII, 15, 1: 215–16).

Artistic depictions of the patched garment: Besides literary descriptions, many examples of the patched garments worn by the Buddha, the Bodhisattva and the Kshitgarbha can be found in Buddhist art from the second to the nineteenth century A.D. The earliest example of the Buddha wearing the patched *civara* is from the Kushan Period in the second century. Here the Buddha is shown in a seated posture, wearing a chequered *samghati* (*pansukula civara* with *palibandha* and *maryadabandha*).⁵ Another sculpture of the Kushan period is that of a railing pillar displayed in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, which also shows the Buddha in a patched *samghati*.⁶

The Buddha in a patched *civara* is also found in wall paintings, silk paintings and cotton paintings from the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. A mural painting in Ajanta near Aurangabad in Maharashtra illustrates the images of a 'thousand Buddhas' in a single panel. The mural covers an entire wall (Ghosh and Aall 1987: pl. XLIX) and reminds one of a hanging fragment made up of small pieces of silk stitched together, with each piece embroidered in chain stitch and depicting a seated Buddha. This hanging was found in Tun-huang in China, and has been dated to the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. (Haesner 1985: 198, pl. 302). A fragment of a mural from a cave in Kuntura, China, dated to the eighth century A.D., depicts Buddha Sakyamuni wearing a patched *samghati* in orange and red (Pal and Brown 1984: 115, pl. 56). Patched *samghatis* are also worn by the Bodhisattva and the Kshitgarbha, as depicted in the silk paintings found at Dunhung in China and dated to the seventh and tenth centuries A.D.⁷ In addition, a number of mural paintings in the Likri and



► *The seated Buddha shown in the lotus position wearing a patched samghati
Kushan Period, second century A.D. Red sandstone.*



Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

▶ *Bodhisattva wearing patched samghati, Dunhung, China, seventh century A.D.
Painting on silk.*





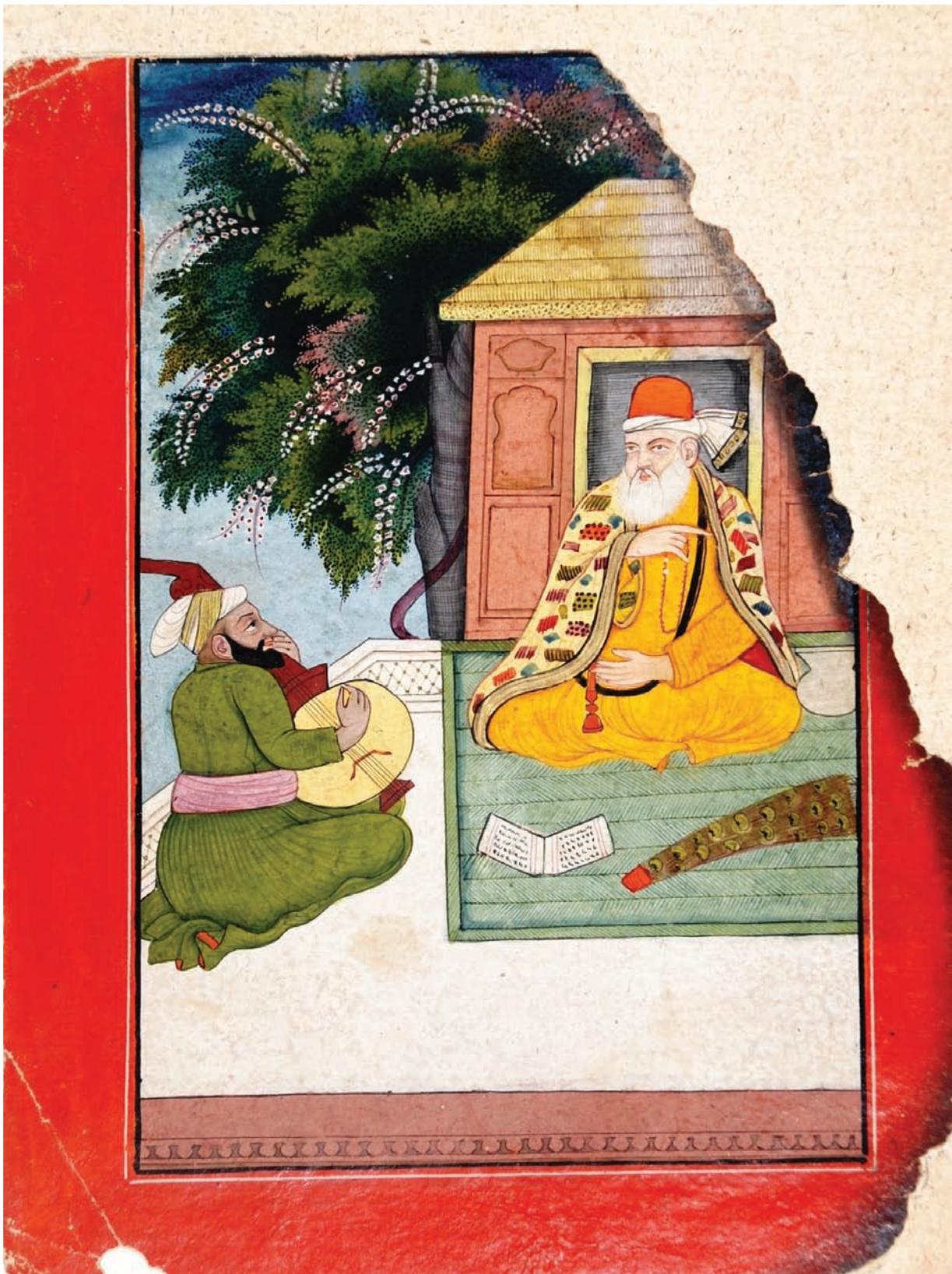
Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

► The clothes worn by Guru Gobind Singh and the other saints appear to be stitched with kantha embroidery. Mandi, Pahari, early eighteenth century. Painting on paper.



Courtesy: State Museum, Lucknow.

▸ Parvati embroidering a quilt using the minute running stitch with Lord Shiva sitting beside her. Pahari, eighteenth century. Painting on paper.



Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

▾ Guru Nanak Deva is shown in patched clothing or chaddar which he drapes around himself like a wrap. Kangra, Pahari, late nineteenth century. Painting on paper.

Alchi monasteries in Leh, dated to ninth century A.D. (Goepper and Lutterbeck 1984: 72, pl. 13; Pal 1988: 71, pl. 70), and the Tibetan *thankas* of fifteenth century A.D. (Pal and Brown 1984: 67, pl. 13) also depict the Buddha in patched *samghatis*.

It appears that the long association of the patched *civara* with Buddhist *bhikkus* and *bhikkunis* led to the garment becoming synonymous with an ascetic life. Perhaps inspired by the Buddhist tradition, later artists also began depicting Sufi saints and other Hindu gods and goddesses wearing patched garments. The kantha is mentioned in the Hindu literature of the medieval period and nineteenth-century Sanskrit dictionaries also cite a patched garment, which they refer to as the kantha.

The Markandya Purana describes King Harishcandra disguised as a *candela*⁸ wearing patched clothing made of old rags (*jirnakar-patasugranti-krtakantha parigraha*). In the text Harshacharita the scholar V.S. Agrawala, too, has interpreted the word *karpala* to denote a patched or ragged garment (Agrawala 1963: 133). An eighteenth-century miniature painting of the Pahari School depicts Siva wearing a patched wrap.⁹ The State Museum, Lucknow, has a very interesting Pahari miniature painting depicting Parvati sitting with her husband Lord Siva, absorbed in her embroidery. A closer look reveals that Parvati is embroidering a quilt using the minute running stitch.

In the Sikh School (of the Punjab region), miniature paintings dating back to the last quarter of the nineteenth-century depict Guru Nanak (Goswamy 2000)¹⁰ wearing patched clothing or the *chaddar* as a wrap. In one such painting, housed in the Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh, Guru Nanak is shown wearing an inscribed robe, a patched shoulder wrap and tight-fitting *pajamas*. The shoulder wrap comprises several small triangular pieces stitched together artistically, with each piece depicting a *trefoil buti* (herb) (Goswamy and Smith 2007: 102, pl. 2.1 and 120, pl. 3.2). In another painting, which has been dated to the second quarter of the eighteenth century, Guru Nanak is depicted more like a fakir. He is shown wearing a knee-length cloak and a skull cap and sitting on a white floor rug (*ibid.*: 122, pl. 3.3). Both the garments and floor rug are decorated with kantha-style stitches (*ibid.*: 130, pl. 3.7).

Over time, the patched garments described in Buddhist and Hindu literature, depicted in sculptures, murals and other paintings, and associated with ascetics and holy men, came to be adopted more commonly. When this practice was taken up by women in households, for whom needlecraft was an essential skill that they had to learn in their childhood,¹¹ kantha embroidery became an artistic canvas that allowed them to express their hopes and aspirations, their joys and sorrows.

The use of basic running and darning stitches lent the women flexibility to design and redesign things according to their needs. While making objects for themselves and their families, these women introduced motifs, patterns and designs that were closest to their heart and which they could see in their daily lives.

Indeed, the kantha is the best example of recycled old or discarded fabrics, employing great creativity and imagination to make a variety of objects, including coverlets, mats and covers for boxes and mirrors. It is generally believed that kantha embroidery is executed free-hand, without tracing the motifs. Examples of good design and well-developed composition, such as the depiction of a medallion in the centre and of a *kalka* or paisley in the corner surrounded by a variety of flora and fauna, clearly show that the kantha embroiderers are skilful, creative and innovative, with a fine eye for balance, beauty, composition and colour.

The kantha style of embroidery is not confined to Bengal. Similar styles are also prevalent in Bangladesh (formerly East Bengal), Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan (Dhamija 1971: 70). But it is true that Bengali women took the lead in re-introducing the kantha in a more vibrant and market-friendly form in the mid-twentieth century. This new form can be seen in artistically embroidered garments (sari, *salwar-kameez*, *odhani*, stole, jacket), accessories and other items (bag, purse, file folder, pen case, etc.) that have replaced patched garments and spreads or coverlets in popularity. The kantha is now a fashionable textile embraced by style-conscious urban women. Kantha embroiderers have introduced new fabrics (silk, wool and cotton), silk threads and an array of floral, geometric and figurative patterns and designs in response to the tastes and demands of new patrons. One of the earliest forms of embroidery in India, the kantha has been transformed from an ascetic's patched garment employing the simple darning stitch into a modern and fashionable attire for urban Indians.

Endnotes

1. An ICS officer and a scholar on kantha embroideries had collected many kantha objects, studied them, and set up a museum of folk art called the Gurusadaya Museum of Folk Art in Kolkata.
2. Popularly known as the kantha spread or coverlet, it is known for its multilayered quilting of old discarded white cotton dhotis or lungis, which were embroidered with threads taken from old sari borders.
3. The other two are *Sutta Pitak* and *Abhidhamma Pitak*. Most scholars believe that *Vinaya Pitak* and *Abhidhamma Pitak* were compiled during the first Buddhist council in Rajgrah, which was held a month after the *mahaparinirman* of the Lord Buddha.
4. The *kathina* ceremony is held during the four months of the rainy season, during which lay people gift cloth to the samgha. This gifted cloth is awarded to one of their members who, with the help of the others, makes it into robes.

5. This sculpture was found in Maholi, Mathura and is housed in the Government Museum, Mathura. A photograph of it is included N. P. Joshi's *Mathura Sculptures* (1966: 83, pl. 15.514).
6. This sculpture is displayed in the Kushana Gallery of the Indian Museum, Kolkata (accession number M.15.a/A-24945).
7. These are displayed in the Central Asian Gallery of the National Museum, New Delhi (accession numbers Ch. XVII.001 99.17/5 and Ch.00355 99/17/6).
8. A *candela* is one who collected taxes from the family members of a dead person when they were performing the last rites.
9. Holy family, Guler, Pahari, late eighteenth century, painting on paper. National Museum Collection, New Delhi (accession number 56.133/2).
10. Guru Nanak is the founder of the Sikh religion.
11. Traditionally, every girl child had to learn the art of embroidery from her mother and grandmother from her childhood. This tradition was alive in both rural and urban areas in India until the mid-twentieth century.

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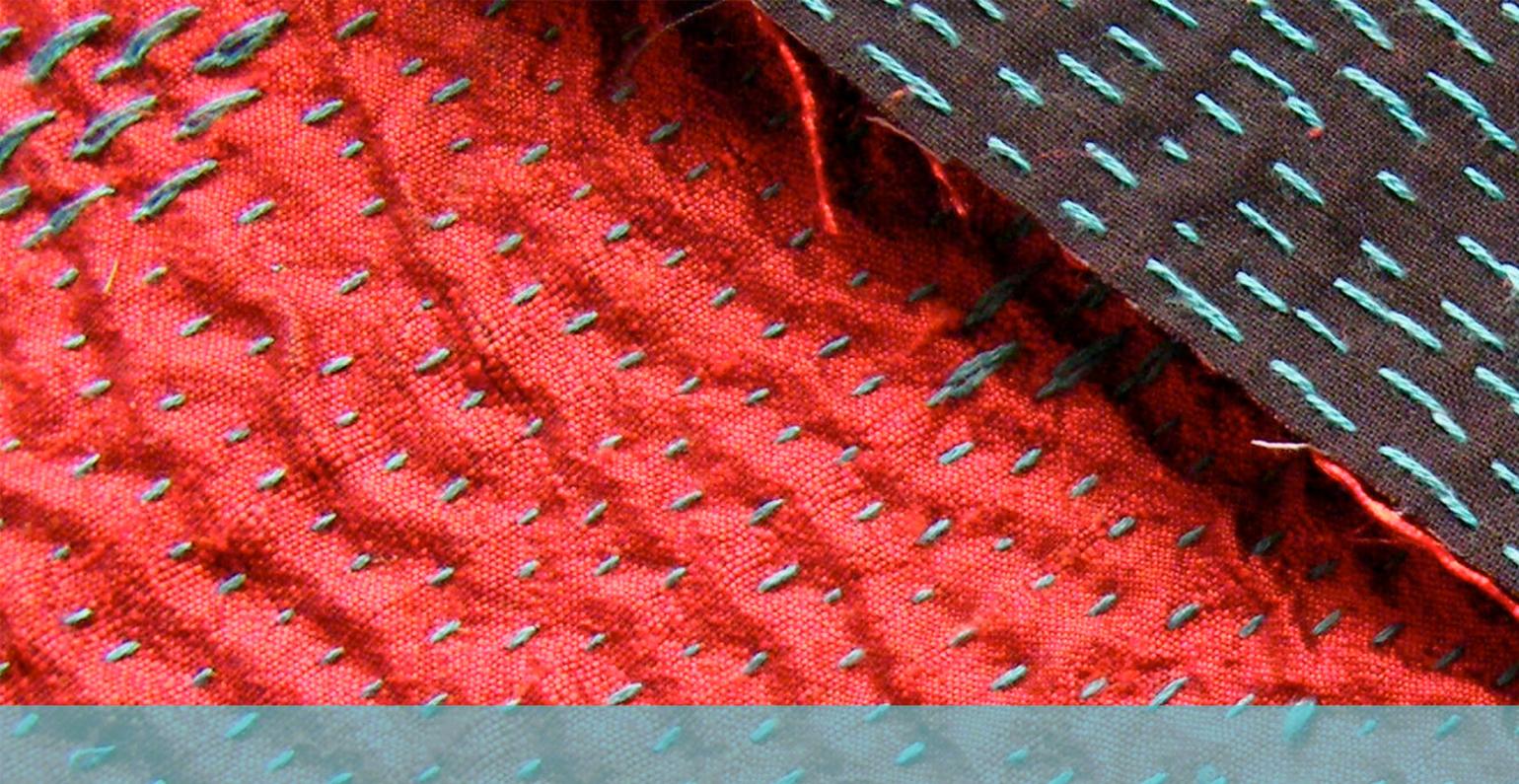
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Centuries before the world worried about recycling resources, women in Bengal gathered old and worn out fabrics, tattered saris and stitched them together with coloured threads into usable duvets, bed linen and dust covers for furniture - the Kantha. On these kanthas, women embroidered tales and ballads, memories and wishes, loss and hope. There were simple kanthas that would be used everyday at home and elaborate ones made as gifts for special occasions like birth and marriage. It embodied the stories of generations of women chronicling their lives and aspirations. Over the years, the kantha has traveled from these homes to shops and boutiques where today they are sold as expensive works of art. This book traces this journey of the kantha from its origins to its current avatar, through the narrations and recollections of collectors, inheritors, designers and producers of this unique piece of embroidered cloth.



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