

THE STATUS ELEVATION OF KANTHA EMBROIDERY FROM RUGS TO RICHEST

Ms. Rinku Agrawal¹, Dr Madhu Sharan²

¹Teaching Assistant, Department of Textiles and Apparel Design, Institute of Fashion technology, India

²Associate Director, Department of Textiles and Apparel Design, Institute of Fashion Technology, India

Abstract

Kantha is an embroidery of West Bengal which has its origin in the reuse of old saris and dhotis worn by women and men of West Bengal [6]. The art originated as a household craft mainly practiced by rural Bengali housewives. This embroidery was done using colored threads taken out from the borders of old saris. The base fabric was made by using layers of old saris and dhotis. At that time rural women produced furnishing items like bed spread, wallet, cloth wrappers, mirror cover, floor covering etc with Kantha embroidery. It was also used as a medium of cultural and religious significance [1]. The Kantha embroidered products were mandatory for ceremonies like marriages birth, and religious rituals. In Kantha the stitches used were very simple but the compositions were done very creatively. The motifs embroidered were derived from ancient art and these symbols were reflection of nature such as sun, the tree of life and the universe [9]. They also were inspired from the surrounding and day to day life of human being. The embroidery which began as a household work has been taken up by the designers and they have brought it to the niche market along with giving jobs to many women. This paper discusses how designers have elevated the status of Kantha embroidery and empowered women to be an entrepreneur.

Key Words

Kantha, Innovation, Diversity, Entrepreneurship.

Introduction

Kantha embroidery is one of the oldest forms of recycling clothes to make rugs and other household articles with the use of embroidery on it, such as quilts and plate covers. One of the oldest and most popular forms of Indian embroidery, Kantha is predominantly practiced amongst rural women in the Indian states of West Bengal and Orissa [7]. The Techniques used in Kantha embroidery are passed down from mother to daughter and are popular dowry traditions [1]. In fact, rural housewives from West Bengal practiced the craft of Kantha embroidery throughout history, allowing the household craft to flourish into a well-known trend in Indian clothes and home furnishings. **The best thing about Kantha work** is that it can be an accessory in itself, and does not need any additional embellishment to make it look better. This is because it can be used in different forms and for different purposes.[10]



Kantha embroidered quilt depicting humans, animals, birds and floral motifs

Origin

Kantha is the oldest forms of Indian embroidery as it can be traced back to the first and second century A.D. Folk art emerges from the combination of material circumstances and daily need. However, the form that quilting has taken in Bengal is unique, with the indigenous quilt or Kantha reflecting the blend of several factors that form the culture identity of this land. Apart from being a functional article, the Kantha is also an example of folk art, particularly women's art [10]. Lord Buddha and his disciplines used old rugs with different kinds of patch work to cover themselves, and this gave the Kantha embroidery its origin. Day to day life was the biggest source of inspiration behind this craft. The fairly mild weather like winter, there was a need for some sort of coverings. The Kantha developed mainly out of this need for the covering, and the long rainy days gave the women of Bengal the much needed leisure to stitch together the several layers of cloth that make up the Kantha [1]. The material used for Kantha was old saris, lungis or dhotis that has been through many washes and become too frail for wear. For decades Kantha embroidery had been the source of income for the rural women living in West Bengal [4]. This needlework, therefore, was in some ways their voice across centuries. Besides their inner world, the passage of history in the wider world too finds echoes in the women's art — including the partition of Bengal, the transit through East Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh.

Method

Women of Bengal carefully put away worn-out saris, dhotis and lungis until enough material had been collected to, make a Kantha. Then, layering those old pieces of worn-out cloth, the women of Bengal stitched them together with loving care to produce coverlets and warp. But they also made other objects of functional or devotional use. Other uses of Kantha are as follow. [13]

1. Ashons: Putting together smaller scraps of material they made ashons for seating honoured guests or for performing Puja.
2. Dastarkhanas: They made dastarkhanas to spread on the floor for a dining cloth
3. Arshilotas: women of Bengal made this to cover mirrors and combs
4. Balisher Oshars: They made it cover pillows to prevent perspiration and hair oil soaking the pillow.
5. Galicha : Floor covering.
6. Bostani: A square wrapped for books and other valuable material.
7. Batwa thoiley : Small envelope-shaped bag for keeping money, betel leaves.







The women of Bengal did not just utilize worn out material to make articles of daily use; they also used intricate variation of the simple running stitch to embellish those articles with motifs drawn from their rich culture life to create fine works of art.

Innovation is linked with diversity in thought and execution. Traditionally 5-7 saris were needed to make a full – length Kantha. The colored borders are cut off and the threads are moved from that border. Then the cloth is joined to sufficient width, the layers of cloth spread on the ground, one on top of other [1]. This process is the work of several women. The cloth must be smoothed out so that there are no folds or crease either on the surface layers or the lower ones. The colored thread which had been removed from the used saris was used to created life stories on the quilt, with simple running stitch. The motifs used in Kantha have a signification like the lotus motif is the most common motif found in Kanthas.



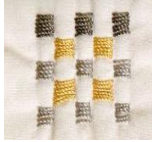

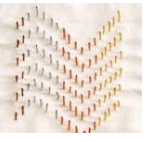



This motif is associated with Hindu Iconography and thus was very popular in the Kantha. The lotus is the divine seat. It is also symbolic of cosmic harmony and essential womanhood. It is also symbol of eternal order and of the union of earth, water and sky. It is also the symbol of the recreating power of life. [9].

Steps for making traditional Kantha.

	
Step 1: Collection of old saris and dhotis.	Step2: Making motifs and designs on paper.
	
Step 3: Tracing those designs on fabric with powdered chalk.	Step 4: Stacking all the saris and dhotis on one top of other, according to the thickness desired.
	
Step 5: Taking running stitch by passing needle from top to lower of all the fabric.	Step 6: Final product simple quilt is ready to use.

Running stitch is mainly used in alternate or parallel repeats as per the design requirement [4]. Beautiful patterns of flowers, animals, birds and geometrical shapes, as well as themes from everyday activities are embroidered mainly on silk and cotton, however, these days this embroidery is done on various other fabrics too. The running stitch on the cloth gives it a slight wrinkled and wavy effect which gives any fabric a different texture unlike other types of embroideries. The colors used are generally warm like red, orange, mustard, gold, however other colors look beautiful too [6].

					
Parallel Darning	Alternate darning	Chattai	Tirchi	Vanaspati	Vjara

Sustainability may be defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs. The traditional form of Kantha had replaced its role in Contemporary style. Here the designers and manufacturers does not used old saris and dhotis for making only quilts. They have started using other fresh materials like silk and voile fabrics and designing apparels like saris, stoles, blouse dupatta and many more. According to Ganesamurthy, V. S. (2007) in his book “Economic Empowerment of Women” defines women entrepreneur as “a confident, innovative and creative women capable of achieving self-economic independence individually or in collaboration, generates employment opportunities for others though initiating, establishing and running the enterprise by keeping pace with her personal family and social life”. [2]

The national awarded Mahamaya Sikdar [12]



She got trained in Kantha embroidery under the shadow of her grandmother and mother who were equally talented masters of Kantha embroidery. Today 300 artisans get trained under her. Kantha, when Mahamaya made a special

piece for Sudha Murthy (wife of Narayan Murthy), she looked at the Ramayan and said “Though most of the Crafts depict the ramayan from the birth of Lord Ram till death of Ravana (good vs. evil), when don’t you bring the happy ending by the unity of Lord Ram and Sita Ji, rather than ending Ramayan just at the vadh (killing) of Ravana”, it changed the way Mahamaya’s narrative so far of Ramayan as a mythology and the story to another Happy Ending or to feel good factor. Such perspective develops the craft to another level making it holistic and adds intellectual value. Kantha in true sense is beyond just running stitches (a popular misnomer) but a complex embroidery form dedicated to lives of Craftswomen of East & West Bengal, in a true sense “Couture without Borders”. She was awarded by the government of india in the year 2011 for the master piece.



Kantha recognition by the known designer Tarun Tahiliani [11]



Kantha embroidery is today often used in other garments such as dupattas and shirts, and in modern ranges of bedding and house furnishings. The traditional designs and techniques of Kantha embroidery gained greater global recognition when they were employed in renowned designer Tarun Tahiliani's summer/resort 2013 collection.



A piece from Taun Tahiliani's Summer collection at LFW in 2013

Kantha revivalist Shamlu Dudej [13]



Kantha revivalist Shamlu Dudeja was set to give the traditional art of West Bengal a different touch by portraying Durga in her kantha works. "I have tried to bring together two intangible cultures of the state, Durga and kantha," said Shamlu. The result is exquisitely-crafted panels of kantha depicting Durga in various forms in which she is worshipped. So think Shiv-Shakti or Durga with her children, just like she's worshipped during the Pujas. "We even have a panel with all 31 forms of Durga stitched on it and one representing the concept of Mahamaya,"



Shamlu Dudeja is a member of SHE (Self Help Enterprise). For decades Kantha embroidery has been the source of income for the rural women living in West Bengal.

It is perhaps the most famous "Embroidery Form" after Zardozi to be used by any couture and designers all over the world, designers like Rohit Bal, Sabyasachi, Anita Dongre, Raghavendra Rathore and other celebrity designers have been using Kantha since ages for luxury and couture products. "Kantha is an example of a strange contradiction, for here is an object created at an Endeavour at thrift by transforming worn-out textile, that would normally be thrown away, into objects of rare beauty and which have in course of time become legendary," said none other than the redoubtable Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. [10]

Looking at the success story of the above entrepreneur who had elevated the status of Kantha embroidery to such heights it is an inspiration for the upcoming entrepreneurs. Many suggestions have been given by people for developing entrepreneurship amongst women. Some of them are given below.

Suggestion to Develop Women Entrepreneurs [8]

1. Consider women as specific target group for all developmental programmers.
2. Better educational facilities and schemes should be extended to women folk from government part.
3. Adequate training program on management skills to be provided to women community.
4. Encourage women's participation in decision-making.
5. Vocational training to be extended to women community that enables them to understand the production process and production management.

The above suggestions were given for developing entrepreneurship among women. Keeping in line with this the Kantha embroidery can be one of the instruments in helping women to be entrepreneur and self sustained them. In the words of president APJ Abdul Kalam "empowering women is a prerequisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women is essential as their thoughts and their value systems lead to the development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation." [8]

Conclusion

India is one of the youngest nations in the world, where the women's literacy rate is very less as compared to other developing country of the world. Our youth are our strength [3]. Traditional hand embroidery of India enjoys a dominant place in the cultural heritage of India. Kantha embroidery was used as a quilt which was the necessity of the rural women to cover their child during winter season. With the increased standard of living of the people of India, many designers had given a contemporary look to Kantha embroidery. Earlier the products were only limited to household items like mirror cover and coverlets, which was very low priced. After this many craft innovators and designers worked on Kantha, but they used rich fabrics like silk and with a new dimensions, to reach a niche market by creating products like saris and stoles for the consumer. By creating a vast market for different class of people, Kantha embroidery had given employment to the women. Women entrepreneurs are an important part of the global quest for sustainable economic development and social progress. Women today are more willing to take up activities that were once considered the preserve of men, and have proved that they are second to no one with respect to contribution to the growth of the economy. Entrepreneurship refers to the act of setting up a new business or reviving an existing business so as to take advantages from new opportunities. Women can not only create a well sustained life in a family but also a well organized carrier in craft industry. They can be recognized as equal as men. Promoting women and diversity should lead to "Us + them" not "Us vs. them" [2].

If Kantha, folk embroidery of West Bengal is used to set up an industry, where women are trained for the embroidery done. Then, this can be a boosting factor to raise the economic growth and standard of living of a woman. Even with the working environment, Women can build their confidence and have an individual identity in the society.

References

1. Chakarbarti, A. (1996). *Kantha - the traditonal Art of women in Bengal*. Calcutta: Aets India Publication.
2. Hemant Kumar P Bulsara, J. C. (2014). Women enterpreneurship and Innovation in India- An exploratory study. *International Journal of Innovation* , 32-44.
3. India, g. o. (2016). *Surface ornamentation techniques*.
4. Pandit, S. (1976). Indian Embroidery. 6-10.
5. Agrawal.R., Sharan M. (2016). Textile Waste- Resource for social and economic upliftment of women. *Indian journal of Technical Education* , 48-54.
6. Agrawal R., Sharan M. (2018-19). Vegan fashion- issues and innovation in sustainability. *International journal of Home science* .

7. Agrawal R. (2018). Kantha embroidery- the intricate needle work. *International journal of Clothing Science and technology* .IJCST-04-2018-0052
8. Sharma, P. (2013). Women Entrepreneurship Development in India. *Global Journal of Management and Business Studies* , 371 - 376.
9. Zaman, N. (1993). *The Art of Kantha*. Bangladesh.
10. <https://strandofsilk.com>
11. <https://www.telegraphindia.com>
12. <https://www.craftandartisans.com>
13. www.indianetzone.com
14. www.Fiber2Fashion.com

