

## KANTHA STITCH AND ITS IMPACT ON RURAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: AN INDIAN CASE STUDY

DR. PIYAL BASU ROY, GOBINDA RAJBANSHI

**Abstract:** India, being the abode of indigenous art and craft has been bearing different sort of folk arts and cultures. There are a number of artistries, the proper utilization of which can easily strengthen the rural economic plinth and women empowerment of the country. One of the most beautiful traditional arts as well as crafts is the Kantha or indigenous thin quilt, particularly of few villages of West Bengal, India. In the changing socio-economic sphere of rural Indian women, 'Kantha Stitch' has provided them a way of opportunity to empower themselves by developing their socio-economic status. This age old tradition does not only maintain the rural socio-economic standard of an area but also insist to pay attention to the indigenous traditional arts, crafts and cultures as a source of innovative income generation. The paper tries to evaluate the role of stitching the Kantha as an opportunity to the womenfolk of the area and simultaneously recommend its preservation and publicity to refresh women empowerment.

**Introduction:** The quilted embroidery of Bengal was known as Kantha (2004). Kantha embroidery has been considered as inextricable part of the life of West Bengal, India, even when it was undivided and known only as Bengal. Kantha embroidery involves stitching the layers of old cloth together with needle and coloured thread. The kantha of decorative types was a later development (1992). But changing taste and modernization has made this traditional art dim and gradually this form of activity has been losing its identity. On the economic side of the "Kantha - Stitch", individual creativity is commercially coloured up. Kantha has now become identified with a new look and variety (2013). As it was done by women of poorer classes, its production develops economic well being of womenfolk. This kind of economic development affects the women, their families and society. Thus, economic development of society also helps to improve their socio-economic status.

The original Kantha is double faced where the design appeared identical on either sides of the quilt (1996). In the work of Kantha Stitch, the entrepreneurs plan the idea, motifs and select the colour combination of this work. The middlemen take this work from entrepreneurs and distribute among the females of different villages. For this work, they get commission from the entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs provide finished products to the market for sale and earn profit. This profit is distributed among the middlemen and the female workers according to their skills.

Thus, there is a chain system in work. The artisans of Kantha stitch are mainly found in Birbhum district of West Bengal. Bolpur is the main business centre of it because of the presence of Tagore's Santiniketan. Initially this art was taught in Santiniketan. From there onwards, this art got recognition and spread outside. In the nearby villages of Bolpur this art is very much popular and even practiced by many women.

**The Kantha Stitch Village:** Debagram is one of these villages adjacent to Bolpur. The women of this village are very much involved and are directly or indirectly linked with this work. The distance between Bolpur and Debagram is 14 km. It is a part of Bolpur-Santiniketan

block. The total area of the village is 146.91 hectares. The village Debagram is a developing village. Most of the people of the village are related to agricultural activities. The main agricultural crop is paddy. Canal irrigation is the main source of irrigation here.

As per 2011 Census, the total population of Debagram is 1155, out of which 594 are males and 561 are females. There are 126 people living in the age group of 0-6, out of which 61 are males and 65 are females. The literate persons of the village is 675, out of 422 are males and 253 are females. The total workers of the village are 466. Out of which 361 are males and 105 are females. The total main workers are 253 out of which 228 are males and 25 are females. The total number of Non workers is 689 out of which 233 are males and 456 are females. The total households of the village are 266. In Debagram the activities like mining, quarrying, manufacturing, processing are not noticeable. In this village, the Muslims and Hindus live together peacefully. The social structure of the village is also very good. General, scheduled caste, scheduled tribe population all are found here. The major scheduled tribe is the Santhals.

**Stitching of Kantha: An alternative Opportunity to the Women of Debagram:** Kantha embroidery is practiced in Bengal where it initially developed as a form of making quilt of recycled cloth (2013). The indication of this case study is to evaluate the socio-economic status of the women, whether the art of 'Kantha' gives them a strong economic support or not. With this purpose, a primary purposive sample survey of 50 households has been taken into consideration. So, from various angles and perspectives, individual female members and their respective families have been interviewed through a set of questionnaires to evaluate their social, cultural and economic identity.

Most of the artisans learnt this art by themselves. The number of respondents who have undergone any formal training is negligible. Among the respondents, only a few have learnt this art since their childhood from their mothers and grandmothers. Most of the females are influenced by their neighborhoods. Some of them go outside of the village and bring the jobs for more females of the village. One can learn this art just by

imitating others. Survey reveals that 72 % of them have taught this art themselves, 19% know this art since childhood, and 9 % have acquired this knowledge of art by formal training. Out of 72 % of self-taught, 60 % are

Hindu and 12 % are Muslim. It should be mentioned here that during interview, it has come into notice that most of the females have very lower educational level and a few are also illiterate.

Average monthly Income in INR	% of Respondents
Less than Rs. 100	40
Rs. 100 to Rs. 250	29
Rs. 250 to Rs.500	10
More Than Rs. 500	21

Source: Field Survey

Table 1 shows the average monthly income of the female respondents exclusively from Kantha Stitch. 40% of the respondents have faced the problem of spur payments. Their monthly income is below Rs. 100. The average monthly income of 29% of the respondents is between Rs.100 - Rs.250, it is because of their lower wage level, that makes them dissatisfied very much. The earning of 10% and 21% of the respondents is between Rs. 250-500 and more than Rs. 500 respectively.

While identifying the religious classification of the female respondents on the basis of average monthly income, it is found that the average monthly income of 59 % of the Hindu female respondents varies from Rs. 250 to Rs. 500. About 14 % of the Muslim respondents earn more than Rs. 500 per month that signifies their more efficiency in this craft than the Hindus. Actually, they have a tradition of this craft. But most of the Hindu artisans are working at lower wage levels. In some cases, they are being exploited.

Spending heads	% of Respondents
Only for Children	15
For Family as a whole	38
For own	47

Source: Field Survey

The table 2 shows that 47% of the female respondents spend their income to fulfill their own demands. It is a very good sign of empowerment. In the past the females were not able to express their own needs. But today they are able to fulfill their own demand by themselves with the help of this craft. 15% of them spend their earning for their children. They want to give all of these to their child, which they are not able to give always. 38% of the female artisans contribute their earnings to their common family fund. Most of the females belong to a lower middle caste family; agriculture is the main source of their income. For this reason, the females of the family often help their husbands or families. In this case, the artisans are generally supported by the other family members. It reflects a changing attitude towards the females.

Satisfaction Level	No. of Respondents	% proportion
Fully Satisfied	3	10
Satisfied	6	20
Neither Satisfied nor dissatisfied	10	33
Dissatisfied	11	37
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey

From the table 3, it is very clear that maximum portion of them are dissatisfied, or neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Only 10% of them are fully satisfied and 20% are just satisfied. 33% of them are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. 37% female artisans are dissatisfied about their wage. Spurpayment by the entrepreneurs or the middlemen deprived them. For example, if a finished product of this craft is sold in market at Rs. 3000, the artisans get Rs. 300 to Rs. 400 as their wage.

<b>Level of Support</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>% proportion</b>
Strongly Supporting	07	23
Supporting	11	37
Neither Supporting nor Opposing	08	27
Opposing	04	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey

The table 4 highlights that 23% of the female respondents are strongly supported by their families. In some cases, husbands of the married women help them. They bring the raw materials from the entrepreneurs or middlemen and also deliver the finished products. 37% of the artisans are also supported by their family members. 27% of the female artisans are neither supported nor opposed. But it becomes a problem to remain engaged themselves in this craft for 13% of the artisans. The family members, mainly the male members, oppose them to collect the works from outside.

When asking about the intention of the females to engage the next generation in this craft, about 50% of the respondents are agreed to engage their next generation in this craft because they think this may lead to empower their children particularly female children. 17% of the female respondents have not any future planning for their children. They will not be the decision makers of their child. 33% of the female respondents have not any intention to engage their children in this craft. They expect better economic opportunities.

**Problems:** Although this art provides jobs to the village people, especially the females, there are some problems regarding this craft that have been highlighted here.

1. Low wage rate, which cannot satisfy their financial needs. Hence their skill is being exploited.
2. In some cases, the middlemen who bring the work from the entrepreneurs and distribute among the females, do not give the actual wage to them. The middlemen try to get a large profit from this craft.
3. Some of the females are not supported by their family members. In some cases, the male members are neither supporting nor opposing. But some males are opposing also. Therefore, the females have to face some major constraints. Even, they cannot ignore any of the family responsibilities. They give priority to the domestic works. They want to keep the balance between these works. Sometimes it becomes difficult for them to manage the time also.

**Suggestions:** It has been pointed out that there are a few problems associated with this art but it cannot be denied that this traditional craft have brought remarkable changes in the income generation followed by women empowerment of the study area. Some

suggestions which may overcome the problems are-

1. The relationship between the entrepreneurs and artisans should be improved. If it is possible to avoid middlemen it will be beneficial for both of them. It will also indirectly help to increase the wage level of the workers.
2. Wage level of the artisans should be increased. But it will also affect the cost of finished products, which also should be a matter of concern. So, steps should be taken carefully.
3. It is the responsibility of the families to support females and encourage them in this craft.

Some institutions of this art should be established to develop their skills.

The government should provide financial assistance to the females to start small household industry relating to the Kantha craft in their village.

Some exhibitions should be arranged which will help to make a direct contact between the artisans and the buyers.

**Conclusion:** This case study of the rural area, named Debagram shows the socio economic status of the women. In the changing socio economic scenario of India, women are entering into a new vista. But in most of the rural areas of India, they are still overburdened. In these rural areas, most of the females are treated as non-workers. It has been seen from the census that household industry in Debagram is still absent; but why? When Craft like Kantha Stitch has been prevailing here since long time and that art has got special recognition from the Great Nobel laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore's 'Santiniketan'. This 'Santiniketan' art has become famous in the whole world. Many families in various villages have taken this art as means of their livelihood. This art gives an economic freedom to the female folk. Empowerment of women's situation is a recent approach. There is a greater need to accept their role in the society and economy. Females of this village have gladly accepted this work as a parallel economy to earn money, without hampering their family responsibilities. Most of them do not go outside of the village. However, the remarkable thing is that the attitude towards women is changing. The females are also aware of their self-respect and their position in the society and community. Apart from their traditional role

of a housewife, many of them have now taken this art as a profession.

It is indeed a duty of everybody –social scientists, researchers, economists, sociologists, and geographers

to look over it, so that this rural art form gets its proper place and acts as a tool of women empowerment.

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Head, Department of Geography, Alipurduar College,  
Assistant Professor, Department of Bengali, Vivekananda College,  
West Bengal, India