



# Kantha Stitch: Uncovering The Origins, Types And Development

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes how Kantha is a heritage of Bengal and how it is predominant mainly in the Bengali houses. It is an ongoing practice followed from centuries and still unknown to many. Like other a few Bengal-made stitches, Kantha with its unique and easy style of stitching has leveled up Bengal's identity. It has become one of the luxurious sarees of Bengal because of its running stitch embroideries and the intricate and heavy details made by the crafters. There are different types of Kanthas as given in this paper which shows the non-repetitive designs made on fabrics. Kantha is not only just a piece of embroidered cloth but it is also a symbolization of lifestyle, household of many houses. It depicted the lives of farmers, laborers and the pastimes of the makers or women crafters. Thus it becomes significant to the Eastern parts of India and even today the new generations are learning the process from their mothers to their grandmothers.

**Keywords :** Kantha, stitches, household, embroidery, women, patchworks

## Introduction:

*Kantha* is a style of running stitch as well as it refers to the finished clothes. One of the oldest traditions of stitching originating from India was observed back to the pre- Vedic age. This stitch was worked upon the patchworks of the thrifts like rags, old dhotis, clothes that was practiced by rural women of eastern India states

of West Bengal, Orissa and Bangladesh.

Kantha derived from Bengali women's pastimes when they mended their clothes with waving stitches and to stitch the edges of their sarees with colorful threads which are called as *SujniKantha* or *LepKantha*. To get into more detail about these two styles of kantha, SujniKantha stitches are straight lines practiced mostly in Bihar. Kantha stitches contain many colors of stitches whereas in SujniKantha three to four coloured threads are used. LepKantha, where Lep stands for quilts are heavily padded or blankets in Bengali where the embroidery is executed.

It's invention was through rural women who crafted their torn clothes and made their own elaborate clothes in their spare time for the rich landlord's wife. The rural classes would make these in order to repair as well as to enhance the old cloth beautified with colorful threads and new designs. The kantha making process was passed down from their mother to their daughters. These thrifted clothes were first used for newly borned babies to cover them as they are soft to lie and to massage mustard oil over them as well as warm which made them comfy. Similarly, adults used the expanded quilts to wrap during breezy days in winters. Kantha has given economic growth for Bengal's development by producing it massively to the various countries according to their taste, color and designs. Today, if we see any specific embroidery presenting Bengal with its pride, it is the authentic Kantha stitch; which was once created by the housewives to just spend their time after spending their whole day for the family. It has acclaimed it's desired position out of the Bengal women's hard work and passion for the craft.

Kantha has another meaning 'throat' associated with ancient India. Throat is pertinent to Lord Shiva, a demigod of Hindu deity because it is said that Shiva saved the humanity of this earth by drinking the poison originated from churning of the sea. When Shiva drank it His throat turned into blue in color which is why he is also known as 'Nila Kantha' (blue throat).

Ancient kanthas had the symbols of Gods and demigods embroidered on the quilts which made it more attractive to look at. Also, they used these kanthas to celebrate any festival or household occasions.



**Fig. 1** - The duly presence of Lotus flower on which simple running kantha stitch is done. The leaves are followed by a geometric Nakshi Kantha pattern and apparently followed by chain stitch in the creepers of the stem.

## History

The name of the embroidery Kantha has etymological origin, as it is derived from a Sanskrit word kontha, meaning rags. As it is mentioned it is the oldest practiced embroidery of India as it is practiced from the pre-Vedic age and it is evident in earliest texts. A text like Sri Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita by Krishnadas Kaviraj mentions how the mother of Chaitanya Prabhu sent a work of kantha stitch to her another son in Puri through some traveling pilgrims. This same kantha is kept like a treasure and displayed to the visitors at Gambhira in



Puri.

But then around in the early nineteenth century it somehow disappeared but was again revived in the 1940s by the daughter in law of the renowned Bengali poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

Kantha could not reign in Bengali houses because of the India - Bangladesh (was Eastern Pakistan) conflict. Finally, after the Bangladesh Liberation Act in 1971 Kantha was once again revived and has taken rebirth in all of its forms and creative patterns and designs. Textile industry of India is known worldwide. The traditional and authentic textiles are dependent upon external factors such as material availability as well as affordability, climatic and geopolitical factors, financial and economic access, and labor cost production. But kantha among all these, is a handiwork made of promiscuous threads to create something from leftover clothes or rags. Even the torn fabrics would not go in vain as they were recycled by the creative hands of Bengali housewives to decorate and redecorate their households. By just cutting, changing its shape from circle to square or in various forms and most importantly stitching in a certain way they changed the whole look of it and made it reusable again.

Kantha, as it is used as a form of quilt, are made combining five to seven lighter coloured fabrics that would be layered together simultaneously and stitched with a dark color to make it discernible and to secure the fabrics. Thus, the stitch would act as to provide strength to the whole quilt. Women would spend their spare time on making single kantha, to even make a single kantha they would need months and years to complete it. By watching the process their daughters and daughter in laws also started to follow up. This is how the learning is passed from generation to generation.

### **The evolution of kantha stitch**

Over a period of time everything changes including the kantha designs; when in earlier periods it was a simple running stitch used in sarees, scarfs, dupattas but now various forms of stitches are used along with the primary running stitch like satin stitch, loop stitch, darning stitch, French knots etcetera.

## Nakshi kantha

*Nakshi kantha* is another type of stitching which represents Bengal's culture and tradition. Nakshi came from the word Naksha (in Bangla) inferred as something decorative, some patterns or designs. It is mostly seen and produced in the places like Bakshiganj, Dewanganj, Madarganj, Islampur, Melandah and upazila of Jamalpur. Among all these origins of kantha producers Jamalpur became the hub of this industry, so it was established in Jamalpur Sadar Upazila. This is the reason Jamalpur district is known by many people as 'City of Handicrafts' and 'Nakshi Kantha' as Jamalpur District Branding. *Nakshi* is the signifiatory stitch or art form of Bengalis. The images on the kantha depicts the lives of farmers, laborers embroidered or painted with vibrant colors like red, yellow, blue. The designs are so fascinating that the whole Bengal is portrayed on a single cloth in the seams of sewing.

The beauty of nakshi kantha is the shape of whatever the design has been traced on the cloth. The thread would follow the marked design making a net or a loop like complex geometric pattern; while on the reverse it would look like a simple straight running kantha stitch.

The tradition of creating the kantha works by sitting with neighbor women, gossiping, chit chats with tea has vanished in the modern times. The women would scratch the needles on the nakshi kantha to commemorate their husbands, family members, relatives who are in exile. To revive and relive their spent moment they would express the joy through stitches.

A piece of cloth gave a free reign to the new imaginations of the women on the spot. The kanthas are made with the folk beliefs, their regular household practices, their religious and festive ideas, the mythology, epics, history and social and personal life of the makers or the artisans. The work is based on their daily household chores, their dreams, hopes and everyday village life.

Alike normal kantha stitch Nakshi kantha is performed on saree, Kamiz, kurti, bed cover, cushion cover, Punjabi, T-shirt, tops, skirt, kurti, yoke, purse, pillow cover, TV cover, saree pier, shawl sheet etc. Jamalpur, a district in Bangladesh is known for producing nakshi kantha. About 300 organizations have been established in Jamalpur. The city kept the smell of kantha alive as the growing numbers of showroom and boutiques started up in Jamalpur.

But there is a lack of government patronage, funds and capital for being consistent to bloom this. The real crafters' women workers are deprived of their daily wages as well as the fair price for their labor. They do not get what they paid off through their hard work.

On the other side the sellers or business man would sell the product for around 1200-1600 taka (Bangladesh currency). The wholesalers would buy it around 2000 and would be sold in the malls from 4 to 5000. As a result women are unaware of the value that they are paying on the piece and entrepreneurs earning most of the profit.

Nakshi kantha takes a whole year or two to interwoven big projects like saree, bedcover. It takes a lot of time to complete these as it has influence on diversity, history, traditions, emotions, feelings, cultures, and their cultural spaces, time they have utilised to create or the pastimes, economy, nature and environment.

Not only Jamalpur, its demand is increasing around the world; which will benefit the hard working poor women laborers to earn for them as well as their family. Its sale will also improve the country's economy and will aid in developing rural places.

### **Sujni Kantha**

*Sujni*, the word said to have originated from a Persian word 'sozni,' which means needle.

Although, like kantha it is embroidered on old sarees, dhotis to vicissitude the look and make into quilts. By layering the well made embroidered fabrics and sewing it to make an edge of the quilts. It is more common in Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and parts of Uttar Pradesh.

It is pursued as more domestic craft by women households rather than making a trade business out of it. The makers were more concerned with using it for their household chores unlike Nakshi kantha. So it did not become a business for the traders as they are bulkier than usual kantha works because of multiple layers.

There is still a thin line between Kantha stitch and SujniKantha that Kantha stitch has various stitches but Sujni has three or four types of straight stitches. Kantha's base stitch is circular whereas Sujni's is straight. As it was not popular and the lack of crafters it was never considered as collected items. That is why, it is rare to find such works now.

Sujni was made for embroidering quilts using geometrical patterns, but soon when it came under Bihar's influence, the art practiced on the cloth was Madhubani embroidery. The making of a Sujni quilt is simple by layering one or two quilts. Women practiced this with a system to create, they doubled it up with one old cloth and a new one to create a new, beautifully embroidered. They are mostly gifted during the weddings.

As in the book, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, a celebrated craft revivalist says in the book

### **Handicrafts of India**

Chattopadhyay states, 'Sometimes the embroidery is worked right through with cotton yarn, the ornamentation being in chain stitch while the background is filled with running stitch in scale pattern. The patterns are scenes from everyday life, from a bride in a palanquin, boys flying kites to peacocks dancing. These scenes lend a local flavor.'

(Chattopadhyay,1975)

Madhubani is also called Mithila, where Mata Sita was born, so it depicted the various stories of Ramayana. Along with the motifs and symbols were crafted to infer the meaning as fish represents fertility, lotuses marked for their auspiciousness, the images of RadhaKrishna designed with natural beings: birds and flowers signify love and purity. The breathtaking embroidery over the entire fabric is covered with running stitch and the outline of the predesigned figures are created with chain stitch.

Women or the creators find Sujni as painstaking and time consuming to do the needlework. In order to keep the Sujni culture, crafters have turned the embroidery into paintings and art forms. Also, layered Sujnis are made into wall hangings as well as embroidered on articles.

Like Kantha, Sujni can gain its popularity but what it needs is some crafter persons and helpers to collect new designs and the consistency in the upcoming generations is what keeps this craft alive. Otherwise one of the precious craft heritages will be lost



**Fig. 2**

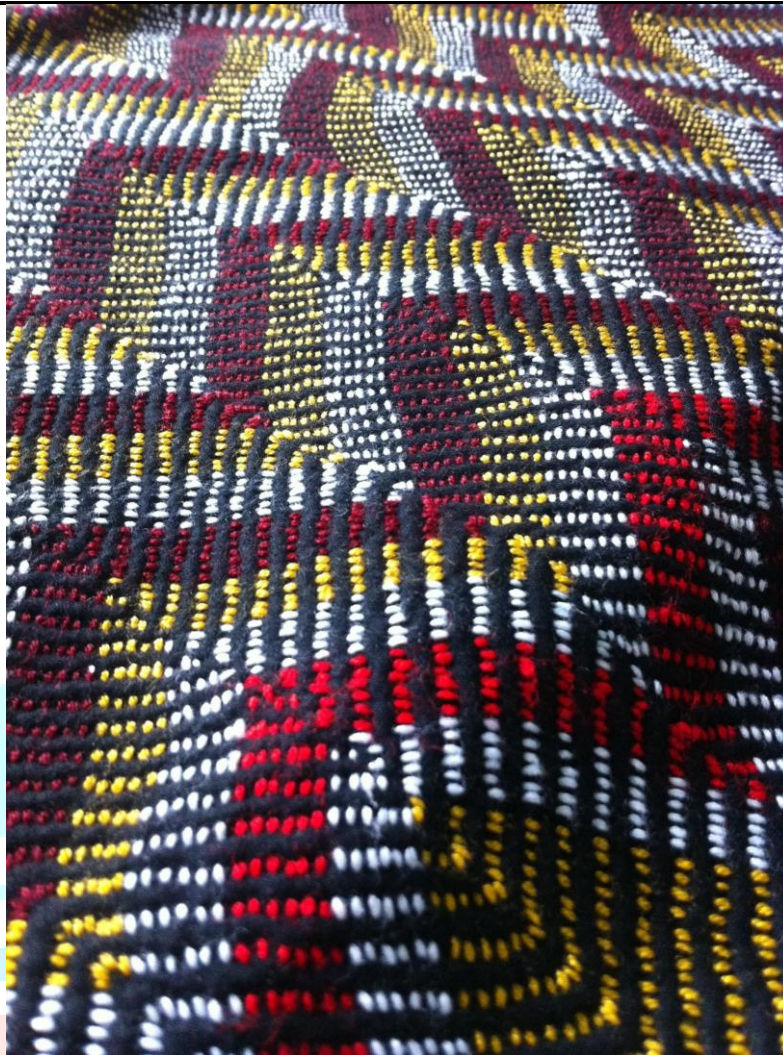
### **Lik or Anarasi (Pineapple) kantha**

The Lik or Anarasi type of Kantha derived from Bengali word Anaras which means pineapple. It is found in the Chapainawabganj and Jessore areas. The variations are lik tan, lik tile, lik jhumka, and lik lohari.

### **Lohori kantha or ‘wave’ kantha**

As the name suggests lohari It has three primary forms of stitching: the simple straight stitch, the “kautar khupi”, meaning ‘pigeon coop’, or triangle stitch, and the “borfi” or diamond stitch. It was formed from a wave-like structure on the cloth and it is mainly done on scarfs and blankets to give a 3D look on the piece.



**Fig.3**

### **Cross-stitch or carpet kantha**

It was introduced by the English during British rule in India. Cross stitch is done over kantha where it will make cross stitches; a stitch from left then again from right and vice versa. The cloth used for this specific type of stitch will have square boxed fabric so that the thread could be easily pulled out. This stitch is also similar to button stitches.

Altogether cross stitch is done on carpets or any heavy fabrics to stand out the variety of dark coloured threads of satin. Apart from cross stitches there are other stitches like satin, loop etc.

### **Arshilata**

They are narrow embroidered clothes mainly used for the purpose of covering furnishes mirrors, kajal, sindoor, sandal paste and other toiletries or to roll away and store combs into it. Generally, they can be seen in

rectangular shapes and have dimensions of 6' X 12' and use motifs such as lotuses, trees, creepers, spirals, inverted triangles, zig-zag lines, scrolls symbolizes something and it is seen that most of the works are inspired from natural things. As natural things have colors in it Arshilata Kantha employs the use of bright colors and floral and animal motifs. It is embellished with a decorative border. One can see different and countless numbers of birds and flowers sewn into the textile.



**Fig.4**

### **Durjani**

There would be a central thing in this type of kantha that is the presence of Lotus at the focal point and the rectangular shapes around the Lotus guarding it. The lotus's presence symbolizes many things at a time regarding Indian culture and history; it is India's national flower, it is a symbol of purity and godliness. The fabric is chosen as rectangular shaped where the three corners of the rectangle are folded inward to form a wallet.



**Fig.5**

### **Kantha Rumal**

As the name says 'rumal', which means handkerchief; the stitches are done on such handkerchiefs neatly. Rumal kanthas are mainly used as wipes or for plates or dish coverings. Like Durjani, rumal kantha also has a Lotus flower in the middle which will give a minimalistic as well as royal look because of sew on the edges and ornamented borders.

### **Lep Kantha**

Lep came from the Bengali word which means quilts or blankets used for winters. The making of is also simple as multiple layers of three to four blankets are padded simultaneously and the kantha embroidery is executed over it. In a way, it's purpose is to reuse or recycle the old torn fabrics and made into some use of it by beautifying with threads and embroidery.



**Fig.6**

### **Bayton or Baiton kantha**

It is also referred to as bostani or bastani kanthas. These kanthas are square in shape of about 36 inches wide, used to wrap books, clothes and other valuable items. They have elaborately decorated borders with bright red colors and when used as book covers are often embroidered with swans as swans are the *baahans* of Maa Sarswati. They are also donated as gifts.

### **Oar kantha**

Oar or oar kantha which means cover. This is mainly used for the purpose of covering pillow covers, blanket covers or bed covers. It is a rectangular piece whose size is mostly about 2' by 1'. Usually simple designs like trees, foliage, creepers, birds, flowers or a liner design with longitudinal border as well circular base center constitutes the ground base and decorative border is stitched around its four sides.

### **Conclusion :**

Kantha has acclaimed its position not only in Bengal, but across the world. Like Jamdani sarees which are immensely popular in Bengal, Bandhani of Gujarat, Kanjeevaram sarees of Tamil Nadu, the Banarasi sarees of Uttar Pradesh, the Patola sarees of Gujarat, and the Chanderi sarees of Madhya Pradesh, Bomkai sarees of Odisha, Mysore silk sarees of Karnataka. These sarees have their own identity even if the state was not mentioned.



Bengal has been popularly famous for the sarees such as- Tant, Jamdani and Kantha sarees. Since 100 years the stitches have been created and changed its motifs differently but the authenticity remains the same. Now, it is done not only on sarees but also on different materials including scarfs, dupattas. bed sheets etc; leaving Bengal's authenticity at its prime.

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