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Title

**CONTRIBUTION OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN
TRADE AND COMMERCE: A STUDY OF
KANTHA WORKERS IN RURAL BENGAL**

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Abstract:

In the traditional sense, it has become a part of family ideology that women's place is at home while the men's task is to go out to work to earn money and to render support for his wife and children. The male and the female social functions were differentiated accordingly, while the female functions are said to be reproductive and sustenance oriented, the male functions are productive and procurement oriented.

The scholarship dominating 1950's era (Bielby, 1992)¹ agreed that male and female functions at home and workplace were necessary to be differentiated to minimize competition between sexes to sustain family cohesion and minimize imbalance in traditional locus of family power. Concentrating on working of women outside the home, scholars are of the opinion that the artificial environment and natural environment have come into close conflict to some degree, and have not only affected the sound economic and social development but also have endangered physical, social, aesthetic and even the spiritual wellbeing of people mainly those who stay at home. In case of working, women are given a label of being unskilled and are denied proper wages and working conditions. It is assumed that given women economic independence would enable women to come out from the domestic drudgery and access to the available modern facilities to improve their quality of life.

Introduction:

Kantha Stitching is an age-old traditional craft which has its origin in rural Bengal where it has developed over the decades as a Cottage Industry. The possibilities of Value addition in seamed and seamless apparel via utilization of Kantha Stitch is very high. The rich and exquisite hand embroidery Kantha work has a high appreciation in the international market which needs to be further harnessed for Value additions. The raw materials and tools used for this crafts are cloth, thread, beads, tracing paper, stitching machine, needle, scissors, press iron etc. The current popularity of kantha across the country, and now abroad too, as a fashion statement has a very humble beginning, like many Bengali crafts. Kantha, in Bengali, literally means a quilt. Bengali

¹ Bielby, Ann. 1992 Feminism and Social Anthropology, Oxford University press, London.

women made quilts from old saris, folding them into layers and using itinerant running stitches with threads picked from the sari borders. It is warm as a wrap and soft for babies too. In past, women made kantha quilts by recycling old saris and dhotis (men's wraparounds) and stitching several layers of cloth together with a running stitch to make a simple throw or quilt. Even the threads used for the embroidery were recycled and pulled from end of the same saris. At least five to seven saris or dhotis are needed to finish a standard size kantha piece². Nowadays, kantha embroidery is done mostly on new pieces of cotton and silk cloth and threads. Rural women gave free rein to their imagination in colourful designs or flowers they saw, the pond they went to bathe in, or the conch shell they blew in the evening. From an ordinary stitch it morphed into the beautiful nakshi kantha, a connoisseur's delight. The most famous folk craft form is Nakshi Kantha or embroidered quilt. Traditionally, village women used to stitch layers of old sari together with folk designs in red blue, yellow and green. These followed a particular form and style. Around these motifs fine white stitching created ripple effects to bind the separate layers. There is a variety of stitches and design but there is a unity in the traditional arrangement of a padma lotus in the centre or mandap, a tree of life in each corner, kalkas, mythical figures, animals, birds, geometrical objects, symbols of the sun and moon, the swastika, each representing a part of the village women's cultural conscience and the whole relating story. Kantha designs range from simple straight lines to intricate floral, geometric or animal motifs. The most complex kantha are embroidered with scenes depicting of daily activities, mythological narratives or personal family histories. Although, these textiles were made for daily use, kantha's with intricate designs were sometimes passed down from generation to generation³. This embroidery is used to decorate different textiles that serve various purposes including quilts, pillow cases, prayer mats, wallets, book covers, trunk covers, ceremonial spreads, shawls and handkerchiefs etc. The art of kantha embroidery is often a social activity where two or more women work together on a single piece of kantha.

². Chakrabarti, A .K Kantha : The Traditional Art of the Women of Bengal, Arts India, 2000, vi, 211 p, ISBN : 81-7207-001-

³ Mason, D Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection and the Stella Kramrisch Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Tower books publishers, 2009

Research Methodology:

A literature review from secondary data sources was undertaken as relevant to the stated objectives of the study. This study has been an exploratory, qualitative study and therefore the conclusions are derived at using inductive logic rather than statistical analyses. Researcher was a participant observer. Techniques such as semi-structured and unstructured interviews were used. Human Experiences in the structure and description of experiences of the women workers are taken in account.

Results and Findings:

This paper attempts to stress on the Kantha stitch work performed by women as workers in Rural Birbhum, West Bengal. The hamlets under study consist of endogamous groups such as Sayed, Sheik, Mughal and Phathan. The people of these hamlets are exposed to wider culture and there is a close kin network in the villagers. The hamlets are surrounded with the market, primary school and the Hindu hamlet on the metal road. The samples taken for the study are women who are particularly engaged in Kantha work.

Rural Muslim women worked during hours of leisure time or in the rainy season when it is too hot and humid to perform other laborious activities, thus its normal to finish a kantha in several months or even a year. The popularity of kantha has meant economic independence and empowerment to hundreds of poor Bengali women. The Muslim women, in Bengal however, take a considerable economic initiative for the maintenance of their households. They finish their chores in the private domain and contribute to the family income. Quite a good number of women do the needle (kantha) work. They work on piece rates. The materials, clothes and colour threads, and even designs are provided to them by the proprietors. The women perform the necessary needlework in their houses, and do not normally need to go outside for such work. It may be noted here that the artistic needlework of the Muslim women of the locality is considered better in quality, and has a demand in the market.

Muslim women are found to their work within the four walls. These women have learned the job from their neighbours or in-laws. To get the work from women or men in business, these women

either take it from the same village in which they live or neighbouring villages. These women go to the proprietor's house to get the work. The items to be prepared are designed by the proprietor and colour of thread to be filled is explained by them. The proprietor gives them thread for stitching. The cost of the thread is deducted from the wages. After the work is done, if it is not up to satisfaction, the stitches are destroyed by the proprietor and money is deducted from the wages. Then, the same work is done by somebody else and the cost of labour is given to her. If it is a joint family, in-laws sit together to perform the job and the money is distributed within them. Women say that this is not a permanent job as they are hardly able to make two saris a year or three beds cover a year. This work gets generally delayed due to the work being done in leisure time. The women do not stitch only in Kantha method, they also do other stitches such as Gujrati and Kathiawari in order to make the items attractive. Money is given to the worker after deducting the cost of thread, which stands to be very meager, for instance, for a full sari with blouse Rs. 1,200/- is paid which costs at least Rs. 3,000/- in the market. This splitting of work does not allow the employee to have complete command over the work. The doing of needle (kantha) work in the border of a sari gives them Rs. 1,000/-. For woolen shawl Rs. 150/- jacket Rs. 50/-, blouse Rs. 30/-, table cloth Rs. 150/- if big and Rs. 50/- if small, small bag Rs. 150/- is given. For the items which are being made, the cost of labour is as follows: Dupatta – Rs. 100/-, Bed cover – Rs. 200/-, Sari (whole) – Rs. 500/-, Sari (Achal par) – Rs. 350/-, Suit – Rs. 150/- If the cost of the item made is Rs. 400/- then Rs. 25 is being deducted from it and then the amount paid to the labour is Rs. 375/-. The amount paid depends on the item made and thread being used.

Income Level of women in KANTHA Work

| Income | Females |
|----------------|------------|
| 0-500 | 19 |
| 500-1000 | 20 |
| 1000-1500 | 30 |
| 1500-2000 | 60 |
| 2000-2500 | 16 |
| 2500-3000 | 5 |
| 3000-3500 | 10 |
| 3500-4000 | 5 |
| 4000-4500 | 10 |
| 4500-5000 | 5 |
| 5000 and above | 20 |
| Total | 200 |

Some Muslim women are found to work in the cottage industry i.e., the Amar Kutir Institute of Rural Development Needle (kantha) working women form teams which have been formed by the managers of the institution. The workers can change their teams if conflict arises between teammates. This team is secondary in nature. It has been formed for meeting the needs of the institution. There are five groups in needle work. The group consisting only of, women these females do all the work which is needed to complete a kantha product. The design and the use of the colour threads are suggested by the institution. The work structure of Amar Kutir is described as follows: There are two types of training given to them to absorb them in the institution. The first one is the training arranged by the government, organized one and half years ago for 10 months for 15-20 members but these are not employed. The other training is given by Amar Kutir to the villagers. This training is given to workers for six months and Rs. 35/- per month is given as pocket money. The work in the institute is done on a contract basis of Rs. 2.50 for attendance, 34% of the production is given to the workers according to the bill, 25% is given from profit made in exhibitions and the profit of the institution. In case of needle (kantha) work, piece rate is determined according to the work done. Workers have a holiday of 52 days in a year and no money is deducted; 12% is given for family provident fund and Rs. 240/- per year for contributory provident fund.

Division of production is:

| A | B | C | D | E | |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----------------|
| 28% | 22% | 20% | 20% | 10% | (100% is made) |

Percentage is determined according to the skill of the workers, 10% of the rejected production is given to them. There is no pension facility. In case of leave, in the first month full income is paid, 2nd month ½ income is paid and 3rd month no income is given. No maternity benefits are given to workers. If medical certificate is shown, a part of the amount can be withdrawn. At the time of Bengali New Year and Durga Puja an amount of Rs. 500/- and Rs. 1000/- respectively are paid to the workers. There is a deep sense of familial relation between the workers on the one hand but on the other, there is a conflict among workers in terms of wages, village problems, working conditions. There is a close relation between the work and domestic life of the working women. It has largely been found that financial well-being improves economic security. On the other hand, however it often restricts and curtails opportunities for family activities and relationship among family members.

For rural women, “Kantha” is a blessing. Earlier they made” Kantha” during their free hours in the afternoons, but now, they are getting paid money for their work. “By doing this work, they become self-dependent. They can provide good education to children. This enhances the quality of life of the family as a whole by contributing to the family income there is, however, a perceptible trend among the women of the locality to mobilize and empower themselves.

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