

Tapestry of Stories

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Abstract

One of the oldest and commonest embroideries is the run stitch which was used to make Kanthas or hand-made quilts. Indigenous to Bangladesh, it gradually spread to India and then attained worldwide popularity.

This art of weaving Kantha is deeply rooted in socio-cultural and religious beliefs. Weaved by women, these pieces of art have a story told by the women, a story of the women and a story for the women.

The article tries to encapsulate these nuances and describe how the traditional craft has been modernized to suit international standards.

Prologue

It was midnight when the little boy was nudged awake. It was time to flee. He rushed back to pack the 'kantha' his grandmother had stitched for him when he was born. Hugging it tight, he boarded the boat which would ferry him to a new chapter in India.

Bibi sat cuddling the quilted 'Kantha'. It was a wedding gift, beautifully crafted by her mother-in-law. If one looked at it closely, they would notice the intricate patterns nursing a story - the story of the matriarch.

Nafisa's fingers moved furiously across the cloth, as she brought the needle in and out of it. She was trying to weave a story. The story of her heritage. The story of her country from where she had escaped. She knew she would not live forever to tell them. But her 'Kantha' would.

The word 'Kantha' is common to all these women. It means 'rags' in Sanskrit. Old, worn-out cloth is taken and sewn together to create a piece of art, known as Kantha. Its origin can be traced to the pre-Vedic era. The earliest written record mentioning Kantha is found in Krishna Das Kaviraj's book, Chaitanya Charitamrita which describes how Sri Chaitanya's mother sent handmade Kanthas for her son in Puri, Orissa.

A centuries-old art, Kantha has its origin in undivided Bengal or what is today's Bangladesh. Mymensingh, Rajshahi, Faridpur, and Jessore were and are still famous for the craft. The art came to India through the influx of refugees from Bangladesh during Partition. Thereafter, it was popularized by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. Shantiniketan, Sriniketan along with a cluster of villages in West Bengal, India accounts for the major production of Kantha.

It all started when women in undivided Bengal, to save money, decided to make Kanthas out of old clothes. Heaps of clothes, completely worn-out and tattered would be taken out and dumped while the women of the household would sit around it thinking of ways to put them to better use.

It was from their brainstorming that the idea of making Kanthas arose. The perfect example of recycling and creating the best out of waste is a Kantha.

The need for making a Kantha is multifarious.

The Bengalis have always believed that old clothes, no matter how frayed they are, should not be thrown away. They are a keeper of memories. Carefully preserved with dried leaves to keep the pests away, these clothes last through generations. They are also synonymous with familiarity and warmth. No wonder new-born babies have always been kept warm and cozy in old, worn-out clothes.

Kantha is associated with the need to maximize the utilization of resources. Old pieces of cloth were given a makeover by stitching them together. Highly utilitarian, it gradually evolved further when women started adding colors and textures to make them appealing. Soon the use of colorful threads came in and with it the art evolved to the next stage.

It was mostly during leisure time that the women concentrated on the making of a Kantha. They would often join each other in their respective houses and work in groups. The perfect stress buster, these informal groups later paved the way for the concept of self-help groups (SHG's) in rural areas.

The older women made Kanthas leave a legacy behind. The hand-made quilt was a testimony to the times they had lived in. The news of pregnancy marked the beginning of a new Kantha meant for the new entrant. In fact, if a young married woman was found sewing a Kantha, it was deduced that she was either in the family way or yearning to be one. Unmarried, younger women made Kanthas to impress potential candidates. It has always been customary to present the would-be bride's skills to the prospective groom. A tray comprising the handiwork would be displayed every time the groom and his family visited a girl. Brides also received them as gifts from the elderly women in the family they were married into. Handmade Kanthas were spread on the nuptial bed wishing the newly-weds love and luck. A token of love, a token of cherished memory, and a token of gratitude - the intricately embroidered Kanthas became perfect gift options.

These Kanthas also left behind a rich heritage. If you look at it minutely, you will observe a story in motion. A variety of motifs are embroidered depicting life in those times. The importance of nature and the need to respect and preserve its various elements is a popular theme across Kanthas of all periods. Geometrical shapes are also predominant. Religion occupies an important place. The festivals, symbols, and beliefs are depicted to give the onlooker a perspective of those times. Some even have folk stories neatly embroidered on them.

The skills and designs of Kantha embroidery are mostly hereditary. Every family is unique in terms of their design and creativity. A particular Kantha can be thoroughly examined and concluded as to which family and period it belongs to.

Kantha, Today

Today's Kantha is a far cry from the original form.

Kantha which was mainly utilitarian gradually gave rise to 'Nakshi Kantha'. Nakshi implies artistic patterns.

The run stitch, which is the commonest of all stitches and is used to hold the clothes together, is no longer predominant. Rather it's a combination of one or many stitches which execute the design.

Kantha is no longer a simple, utilitarian piece of cloth. Artistically stitched, colored, and available in various textures, it serves to act as a bedspread, a quilt, or even a blanket. Women wear stoles and saris, richly embroidered with Kantha work. Men wear embroidered kurtas. Wearing an elaborate Kantha-worked garment is a matter of great pride and a fashion statement.



Image 1: A Kantha Stole

Earlier saris, lungi, dhoti, bedsheets were commonly used to make a Kantha. Today new clothes have replaced the old worn-out ones. Silk, brocade is commonly used to replace cotton giving rise to exquisite rich pieces.



Image 2: Silk Kantha quilts

A Kantha can take months to wrap up because of the complexities involved today. A single-bed Kantha requires three saris while a double-bed requires six-seven saris. The thread to sew the Kanthas was never bought in earlier times. Rather they were taken out from the clothes. Today, new, colorful threads are used.

Even the women who operated on an individual basis have formed self-help groups focusing only on Kantha. These groups get loans from the State Government and are also allowed to showcase their creativity in state emporiums, state-level fairs, and exhibitions. The best ones get an opportunity to participate in the International Trade Fair. Well-known designers have started working with them, thus opening up markets for export. There is a huge demand for Kantha today.



Image 3: Floral motifs and elements of nature find a special place

Kantha has always played a significant role in giving a voice to underprivileged women and still continues to pave their path towards empowerment. We can only hope that this popular form of art retains its essence and translates into reality what Rabeya and Nafisa dreamt of.

References

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