
STITCHED BY HER, SOLD WITHOUT HER: WOMEN KANTHA WORKERS AND THE ECONOMY OF INVISIBILITY IN WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

The Kantha embroidery tradition of Bengal, one of the oldest surviving needlecrafts in South Asia, has historically been the creative domain of women. What began as a domestic practice of recycling old cloth into quilted textiles has, over the past few decades, transformed into a commercially valuable craft feeding both domestic and international markets. Yet the women who sit behind this craft stitching for hours in poorly lit rooms across Birbhum, Murshidabad, and North 24 Parganas remain conspicuously absent from the profits, recognition, and legal protections that their labour generates. This article examines the socio-economic and legal dimensions of the invisibility faced by women Kantha artisans in West Bengal. It critically analyses the inadequacy of existing labour frameworks, the exploitative role of middlemen, the hollow promise of Geographical Indication tags, and the gendered erasure built into the craft economy. The article argues that without targeted legislative intervention, enforceable wage standards, and meaningful inclusion of women artisans in policy-making, the Kantha economy will continue to thrive on the backs of women it refuses to see.

The article further critically analyses the inadequacy of existing labour frameworks, including the Factories Act, 1948, the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, and the more recent Code on Wages, 2019 and Code on Social Security, 2020, in reaching home-based women artisans. It further interrogates the exploitative role of middlemen who control market access and pricing, the hollow promise of Geographical Indication tags that protect product names but not the makers behind them, and the gendered erasure built into a craft economy that celebrates tradition while systematically devaluing the traditional craftswomen themselves.

Keywords: Kantha, women artisans, West Bengal, labour rights, handicraft economy, Geographical Indication.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

There is a peculiar irony in the life of a Kantha artisan. Her hands create something the world admires, the intricate running stitches that transform discarded cloth into art and yet, she is often the last person to benefit from her own creation. The word “Kantha” itself comes from a Bengali root meaning “rags,” and while the craft has long outgrown its humble origins, the women who practise it have not been afforded the same upward trajectory.²

India is home to roughly seven million artisans, and over fifty-six per cent of them are women.³ The handicraft sector is the country’s second-largest employer after agriculture, and yet it remains one of the most legally neglected.⁴ Within this broader crisis, the story of women Kantha embroiderers in West Bengal offers a particularly telling case study where cultural celebration coexists with economic deprivation, and where the law's silence has become a form of complicity.

This article does not aim to romanticise the craft. Enough coffee-table books and fashion editorials have done that. Instead, it seeks to examine what happens to the woman after the photograph is taken and the product is shipped when the cameras leave and the middleman pays her a fraction of what her work eventually sells for.

2. KANTHA: A BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kantha embroidery has its roots in the deltaic regions of undivided Bengal, with its earliest documented forms dating back several centuries.⁵ Traditionally, women would layer old saris and dhotis, stitching them together with simple running stitches to create quilts, wraps, and coverings for domestic use. The craft was deeply personal. Mothers stitched kanthas for newborns as blessings, brides carried them as part of their trousseau, and elderly women created them as meditative practice.⁶

The art form was never commercial by design. It was born in the domestic sphere, practised during moments of rest, and passed from mother to daughter as inherited knowledge rather than formal training. The motifs — lotuses, fish, peacocks, trees of life were not decorative choices

² Niaz Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* (Univ. Press Ltd. 2001).

³ Ministry of Textiles, Gov't of India, *Annual Report 2022-23* (2023).

⁴ U.N. Dev. Programme, *Human Development Report: The Artisanal Economy in South Asia* (2018).

⁵ Stella Kramrisch, *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (Phila. Museum of Art 1986).

⁶ Id.

but personal narratives, each quilt functioning as a visual diary of the maker's inner world.⁷

This changed significantly after the Partition of Bengal in 1947, which displaced large populations and disrupted craft ecosystems.⁸ Many artisans who migrated to West Bengal carried their skills but lost their patronage networks. The subsequent decades saw Kantha's gradual commercialisation, aided in no small part by Rabindranath Tagore's cultural interventions in Shantiniketan and the later involvement of non-governmental organisations in craft revival during the 1980s.⁹ By the early 2000s, Kantha had become a commercially significant export product. What had once been an intimate household art was now being stitched to order for fashion labels and interior design firms across the world. The trouble is this: the craft scaled up, but the artisan did not.

3. THE ECONOMY OF INVISIBILITY: HOW WOMEN KANTHA WORKERS ARE EXPLOITED

The contemporary Kantha supply chain in West Bengal is structured in a way that systematically disadvantages the artisan. The chain typically runs as follows: a designer or buyer places an order with a trader or cooperative; the trader distributes raw materials to a network of rural women through local middlemen or agents; the women stitch the product at home; and the finished goods travel back up the chain to reach urban showrooms or export markets.¹⁰

At every stage, value is added, except at the stage of the woman who does the actual stitching. Studies have found that Kantha artisans in Birbhum and Murshidabad earn as little as one hundred rupees for a piece that eventually retails for over a thousand.¹¹ Some artisans have reported that they were not paid at all for weeks, and when they were, the amounts bore no relation to the hours invested.¹² A single Kantha scarf can take fifteen to thirty days of labour; a full shawl may take one to two months.¹³ When divided by hours, the effective hourly wage

⁷ Jasleen Dhamija, *Living Traditions of India: Crafts of Bengal* (Lustre Press 2004).

⁸ Pika Ghosh, *Kantha and Quilts of Bengal: From Recycled Rags to Art*, in *Textile Soc'y of Am. Symp. Proc.* (2008).

⁹ Ritu Sethi ed., *Embroidering Futures: Repurposing the Kantha* (India Found. for the Arts 2012).

¹⁰ All India Artisans & Craftworkers Welfare Ass'n (AIACA), *Crafting the Way Forward for Women Artisans: A Policy Brief* (2021).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² House of Wandering Silk, *Kantha: History and Meaning* (2019), <https://www.wanderingsilk.org/kanthahistory-and-meaning>.

¹³ House of Wandering Silk, *Recycled Sari Kantha: Artisans and Process* (2025), <https://www.wanderingsilk.org/recycled-sari-kantha-women-artisans>.

often falls below any reasonable standard of minimum compensation.

The middleman known locally as the “Mahajan” or agent occupies a position of enormous power in this chain. He controls access to raw materials, sets the price, and decides which artisan receives work. In conservative rural communities where women's mobility is restricted, the middleman is often the only link between the artisan and the market. This creates a dependency that is ripe for exploitation. Women cannot negotiate, cannot compare rates, and frequently cannot even identify the final buyer of their product.¹⁴

There is also the question of recognition. In most commercial transactions involving Kantha, the artisan's name never appears. The label on the product will carry the brand, the designer, or the cooperative's name but almost never the name of the woman who spent weeks stitching it. This anonymity is not incidental; it is structural. As one scholar has noted, the power dynamic between the designer and the artisan is inherently unequal, the artisan remains anonymous while only her craftsmanship gets highlighted.¹⁵

This is the economy of invisibility: a system that needs the woman's hands but not her name, her skill but not her agency, her tradition but not her consent.

4. LEGAL GAPS: WHERE THE LAW FAILS THE ARTISAN

The Indian legal framework, despite its vastness, offers remarkably little to the home-based woman artisan. The primary reason is classification. Kantha workers are overwhelmingly home-based, self-employed, or piece-rate workers. They do not work in factories. They do not have employers in the conventional sense. They do not clock in or clock out. As a result, they fall outside the protective ambit of most mainstream labour legislation.

The Factories Act, 1948, which regulates working conditions, applies only to establishments employing ten or more workers with power, or twenty without.¹⁶ A woman stitching alone in her home in a village in Birbhum is, by definition, excluded. The Minimum Wages Act, 1948 now subsumed into the Code on Wages, 2019 covers only “scheduled employments” notified

¹⁴ Sreya Mozumdar, *Crafting the Way Forward for Women Artisans*, LinkedIn (Feb. 5, 2021).

¹⁵ *Invisibilising the Visible: The Making of the Art of Kantha in Bengal*, MAP Acad. (Feb. 1, 2023), <https://mapindia.org/invisibilising-the-visible-the-making-of-the-art-of-kantha-in-bengal/>.

¹⁶ The Factories Act, 1948, § 2(m), No. 63, Acts of Parliament, 1948 (India).

by the appropriate government.¹⁷ In West Bengal, there is no separate scheduled employment category for textile artisans or embroidery workers, which means the fixation of minimum wages for Kantha workers is left entirely to the employer's or more accurately, the middleman's discretion.¹⁸

The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008 was intended to address precisely this gap. It defined “unorganised workers” as home-based, self-employed, or daily-wage workers and mandated social security benefits including life and disability cover, health and maternity benefits, and old-age protection.¹⁹ However, the Act was largely toothless. It placed the responsibility for formulating welfare schemes on state governments through a National Social Security Board, but provided neither adequate funding mechanisms nor enforcement machinery.²⁰ The Act was subsequently repealed and replaced by the Code on Social Security, 2020, which again promises inclusion of home-based and self-employed workers but whose rules and implementation remain incomplete in most states, including West Bengal.²¹

The Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999 offers another form of notional protection. The idea is that by tagging a product to its geographical origin, artisans benefit from enhanced market value, authenticity, and legal protection against counterfeits.²² On paper, this sounds promising. In practice, the GI tag protects the name of the product, not the process and certainly not the maker. A GI for “Bengal Kantha” prevents someone in Gujarat from calling their machine-made embroidery “Bengal Kantha,” but it does nothing to ensure the woman in Nanoor who stitches the genuine article is paid fairly, credited properly, or protected from exploitation.²³ As critics have pointed out, a GI protects only the geographical name and cannot prevent the misappropriation of traditional knowledge that underlies the craft.²⁴

What emerges from this legal landscape is a pattern of structural neglect. The woman Kantha

¹⁷ The Minimum Wages Act, 1948, § 3, No. 11, Acts of Parliament, 1948 (India); see also The Code on Wages, 2019, § 9, No. 29, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).

¹⁸ *Supra* note 14.

¹⁹ The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008, § 2(m), No. 33, Acts of Parliament, 2008 (India).

²⁰ *Id.* §§ 5–6.

²¹ The Code on Social Security, 2020, § 114, No. 36, Acts of Parliament, 2020 (India).

²² The Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999, § 1(3), No. 48, Acts of Parliament, 1999 (India).

²³ How Effective is GI in Safeguarding Traditional Art?, Fashion L.J. (2023), <https://fashionlawjournal.com/how-effective-is-gi-in-safeguarding-traditional-art/>.

²⁴ *Id.* (noting that a GI only protects the name of the product and fails to grant protection in cases where the traditional knowledge lies in the process of production).

artisan exists in a grey zone that's too informal for factory law, too dispersed for union formation, too invisible for minimum wage schedules, and too anonymous for intellectual property frameworks to protect.

5. GENDER, CRAFT, AND THE POLITICS OF DOMESTIC LABOUR

The invisibility of women Kantha workers is not merely an economic or legal failure. It is deeply gendered. The reason Kantha has historically been dismissed as “women's work” is the same reason it struggles for recognition today — it happens inside the home, it requires patience rather than machinery, and it does not fit neatly into industrial categories of production.²⁵

Feminist scholars have long observed that the devaluation of textile work runs parallel to the devaluation of women's labour generally. Rozika Parker, in her influential work on embroidery, argued that needlework was historically dismissed as “mindless, decorative, and delicate” precisely because of its association with femininity and domesticity.²⁶ This hierarchy was not accidental; it was cemented by art academies that excluded embroidery from the “fine arts” and by economic systems that refused to count home-based production as legitimate work.²⁷

In the specific context of Bengal, the gendered nature of Kantha carries additional weight. Rural women in districts like Murshidabad and Birbhum face severe restrictions on mobility, education, and independent economic participation.²⁸ For many, Kantha stitching is the only income-generating activity available precisely because it can be done at home, alongside domestic responsibilities, without requiring women to step outside the socially prescribed boundaries of the household.²⁹ This convenience, however, becomes a trap. Because the work happens at home, it is treated as supplementary rather than primary income. Because it is done alongside childcare and cooking, it is treated as something done in “spare time” rather than as skilled labour deserving fair compensation.

The NGO interventions that have shaped Kantha's commercial revival, while well-intentioned, have sometimes reinforced these dynamics. Scholars have noted that while NGOs enabled market access for artisans, they also structured the creative and narrative choices of the work,

²⁵ Zaman, *supra* note 1.

²⁶ Rozika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (Women's Press 1984).

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ House of Wandering Silk, *supra* note 12.

²⁹ *Id.*

with artisans stitching themes chosen by designers rather than drawing from their own imagination.³⁰ The artisan's role was reduced from that of a creative individual to a skilled executor — her hands valued, her voice sidelined.

6. TOWARDS VISIBILITY: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

The first and most urgent reform is the notification of Kantha embroidery and handicraft embroidery more broadly as a scheduled employment under the applicable wage legislation in West Bengal. Without this step, any talk of fair wages remains aspirational. The state government must create a distinct wage category for textile and embroidery artisans, with rates that reflect the skill, time, and physical toll involved in hand-stitching.³¹

Second, the registration and social security coverage of home-based women artisans must move from policy rhetoric to ground-level implementation. The Code on Social Security, 2020 provides the framework, but without state-level rules, dedicated registration drives in craft clusters, and accessible grievance mechanisms, the Code will remain another well-meaning document gathering dust.³²

Third, the GI framework must be reformed to go beyond name protection. A meaningful GI regime for crafts should include provisions for artisan identification, mandatory attribution on products carrying the GI tag, and a share of the premium pricing that GI status generates to flow back to registered artisans. The current system enriches brands and exporters while the artisan remains a footnote.³³

Fourth, women artisans must be included in policy-making bodies. Craft boards, export councils, and GI registration committees are overwhelmingly composed of bureaucrats, designers, and industry representatives. The absence of artisan voices particularly women from these bodies ensures that policy continues to be made about them, rather than with them.³⁴

Finally, there must be a cultural shift in how the law and the market perceive craft labour. As long as Kantha is treated as a charming cultural artefact rather than the product of skilled, timeintensive, physically demanding labour, its makers will continue to be undervalued. Legal

³⁰ *Supra* note 14.

³¹ See The Code on Wages, 2019, § 9, No. 29, Acts of Parliament, 2019 (India).

³² See The Code on Social Security, 2020, §§ 109–114, No. 36, Acts of Parliament, 2020 (India).

³³ *Supra* note 22.

³⁴ AIACA, *supra* note 9.

recognition must be accompanied by a broader acknowledgment that a woman who spends thirty days stitching a textile by hand is not engaging in a “hobby” but, she is performing work that deserves dignity, fair payment, and legal protection.

7. CONCLUSION

The story of women Kantha artisans in West Bengal is not a story about craft alone. It is a story about what happens when law, market, and society collude sometimes actively, often through sheer indifference to render skilled women invisible. The Kantha tradition has survived centuries of upheaval, partition, displacement, and commercialisation. The women who keep it alive deserve more than survival. They deserve recognition, fair compensation, legal protection, and most fundamentally the simple dignity of being named.

A Kantha quilt, after all, was never meant to be anonymous. Every traditional quilt bore the name of its maker, stitched into the fabric itself.³⁵ It is perhaps time we returned to that practice, not just on cloth but in law, in policy, and in the marketplaces that profit from these women's labour.

³⁵ Kramrisch, *supra* note 4.

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