



# Kantha

Embroidered  
Stories and Traditions



*Cultures are not museum pieces to be preserved at all costs, they are living things that effect real people.*

**Martha Nussbaum**

## Rural Craft & Cultural Hubs of West Bengal



West Bengal is a treasure trove of natural and cultural heritage. The intangible cultural heritage of Bengal is an exemplary instance of the aesthetic lineage of Bengal. Utilitarian lifestyle items like basketry made with date palm leaves and Sabai grass, hand spun and hand woven jute rugs (Dhokra), mats made with cane slips (Sitalpati) or Madurkathi (Madur), pottery, Kantha-spreads, decorative and ritualistic items made out of Shola and others, reflect a curious fusion of indigenous craftsmanship and utility. Bengal's art and craft reflect cultural history, ethnic roots, and lifestyle in-tune with nature. Variety of masks, Dokra and metal work, range of indigenous weaves and embroideries, dolls, masks and figurines curved out of wood are examples of Bengal's artistry. Culture of Bengal is enriched by the mellifluous tunes of the Baul, Bhawaiya, Bhatiyali singers, rapturous dances of Chau, Raibenshe and Jhumur, storytelling traditions like puppetry and Patachitra, and folk theatres like Gambhira, Banbibir Pala among other folk forms.

The Rural Craft and Cultural Hub (RCCH) Project is an initiative of the Department of Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises and Textiles (MSME&T) and UNESCO aiming to rejuvenate the rich cultural heritage of West Bengal and strengthen rural creative enterprise. The journey started in 2013 and the RCCH project currently covers 50,000 handicraft and folk artists across the state. It has strengthened the ecosystem supporting the transmission of traditional skills in art and craft, fostered direct market linkage, engaged youth in pursuing their traditions, and promoted cultural tourism to the villages of the artists. The project is indeed a testimonial to the contribution of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) to sustainable development, social inclusion and also to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).







Traditional Kantha Product



## Kantha is a traditional form of embroidery practiced by the women of rural Bengal.

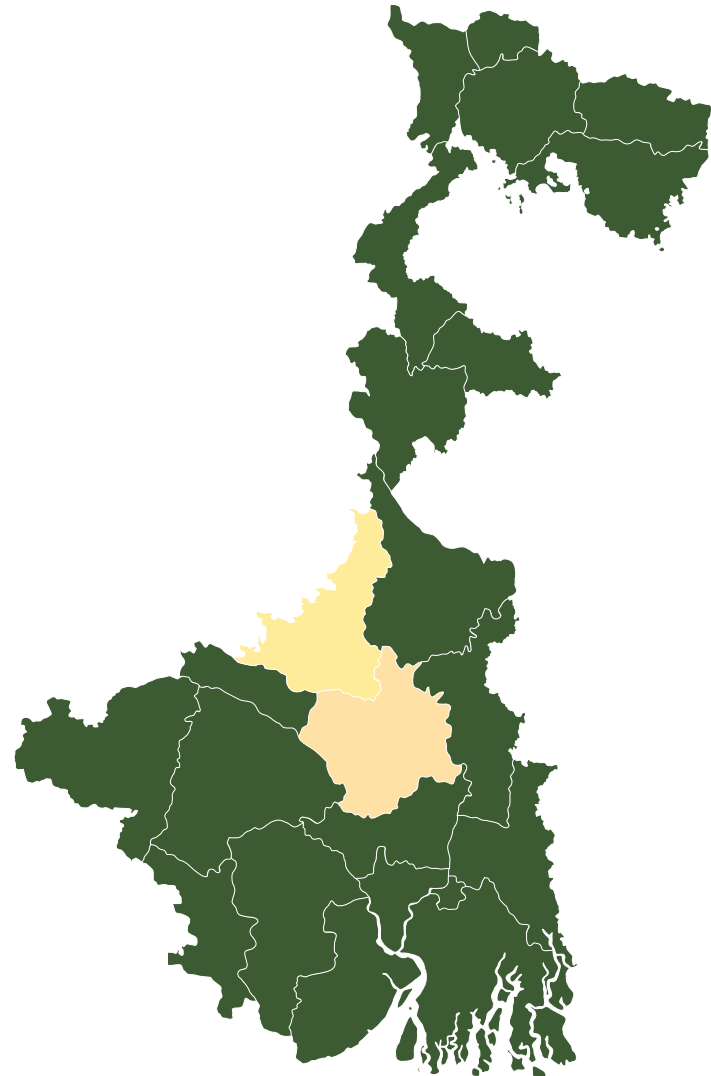
In this embroidery tradition, rural women reuse old worn out clothes and create something new and extraordinary. Kantha epitomizes recycling and sustainable fashion in today's day and age. More than recycling or reusing clothes, the value of keeping something that has travelled through generations and signifies family heritage becomes important. The women embroider beautiful motifs that speak stories of the family, the community, and the dreams and aspirations of the women on the clothes using Kantha. While traditionally it was a leisurely pursuit, at present Kantha weaving has reached new heights, where the practicing artists have transformed Kantha weaving into a profession from passion and are transcending boundaries to present their art form to varied range of national and global audience. Under the purview of the RCCH project, at present over 3600 women from rural Bengal are actively pursuing kantha weaving and redefining the art form through their aesthetic imagination. A pattern of Bengal's Kantha, known as 'Nakshi Kantha' has been accredited with the tag of Geographical Indication (GI) 2008.





# Location

Nanoor in Birbhum and Ausgram in Purba Bardhaman are major Kantha hubs in West Bengal. There are around 3600 women artists, who are involved with the weaving tradition of kantha. Kantha weaving is the backbone of their socio-economic existence and these artists are willing to collaborate and co-create handicraft products and participate in different fairs and exhibitions.





# Nanoor

Nanoor, located between two rivers Ajay and Mayurakshi, is known for the old terracotta temples of the Pala and Sena Dynasty and features to be a prominent hub of kantha artists. Around 1500 women from this block are engaged in doing Kantha stitch embroidery, which has provided them an important income option. Several of women acknowledge that they have been able to overcome poverty and girls can pursue education. Young girls are very interested in learning and pursuing Kantha stitching as livelihood. A number of women have their own micro-enterprises and have become change-makers in the society. The women making Kantha embroidery products at Nanoor are largely from poor Muslim families. Nanoor is conveniently located, where the nearest railway station is Bolpur (Santiniketan) from where Nanoor is 18 km away and Bolpur is well connected by train from Howrah (2.5 hours journey). One can also reach the place from Kolkata in 4 hours by car.



Artist at Nanoor  
Men - 7 | Women - 1567

•	Tajkira Begum	6296761698
•	Afroza Khatun	6294807939
•	Lovely Bibi Shekh	8372994373
•	Najma Sultana	6294827514
•	Amina Yasmin	7407737627
•	Mili Bibi	8509779403
•	Sunehera Khatun	8509621644
•	Santana Bibi Shekh	8389908029
•	Anjila Khatun	8108461587



# Ausgram

Ausgram, located in Purba Bardhaman is the hub of Kantha artists. There are more than 2000 artists living in and around Ausgram. Initially, these women saw kantha weaving as a leisurely pursuit and mostly wove to meet self-consumption needs. Some also acted as art labour and catered to fixed orders given by middlemen. The activities undertaken in this block was mostly dedicated to transform art labour into art-based entrepreneurial ventures. Upskilling of artists, developing a new and innovative product range and getting them directly connected to the market have enabled the kantha weavers of Ausgram to initiate independent craft-based ventures and actively contribute in enriching, safeguarding and promoting their weaving tradition. Villages like Warispur, Alefnagar, Bhuyera, Bishnupur, Pubar have grown to be active Kantha hubs in Ausgram block. Women are working in groups, and collectives are getting formed to take the tradition of kantha weaving to a new height. The kantha weavers of Ausgram are now producing a range of innovative products of high market value like cushion covers, stoles, runners, sarees and other lifestyle items and also participating at the state and national level.



Artist at Ausgram  
Women - 2036

•	Bulti Bibi	6297017402
•	Fatema Shekh	9641998925
•	Yasmin Begum	8926771793
•	Tahamina Bibi	8327375738





“Kantha weaving has the power to transform lives. Many women holding the hand of the artistic tradition are now transcending boundaries and living life in their own terms.”

*Tajkira Begum*

Tajkira Begum is not just an artist and art entrepreneur but an influencer who has helped many women out of poverty and shown them a path to prosper premised on their creative skills. Now, a woman in her early fifties, Tajkira has been involved with kantha weaving for the past four decades. Belonging from a poor family, Tajkira has worked relentlessly to overcome fate and establish herself by virtue of her flawless weaving skill. Apart from pronouncing her own prospects, Tajkira has actively worked to alleviate poverty in her locality, where she has influenced hundreds of women to be art entrepreneurs. She has inspired local women, following whose guidance they have now established a voice of their own and run micro craft enterprises independently. Tajkira’s inclusive vision has been recognized by the Indian Institute of Management’s initiative under National Rural Economic Transformation Programme, where she has been awarded with a token of respect for her contribution at the grass-root level.



*Kantha weavers of Ausgram  
The story of empowerment*

Ausgram, in Purba Bardhaman, is the abode to 2000 Kantha weavers. Since time immemorial, these women have been weaving *Nakshi Kantha*, whose motifs and patterns are inspired from nature. These embroidered Kanthas were part of the bridal trousseau. The RCCH initiative has inspired these women to produce range of diversified products. The story of Ausgram’s Kantha weavers bespeaks a journey of empowerment, where at present many of them are transcending boundaries and visiting various national & international places to present their creative offerings.





## Process



Traditionally, Kantha was made by arranging piles of old worn out clothes together and then sewing them on the edges by the women. The process of kantha weaving is multi-tiered. The traditional bearers first develop a basic structure, then conceive the design consisting of different motifs, stitches and colour schemes and then create that design on paper. The process involves conceiving the design, printing the design on fabric, embroidering the process on clothes and washing the final products.

Sujni Kantha, the original form of this craft, has certain images stitched together, in a way that tells a story. Pieces of cloth from old and rejected sarees are stacked and sewn to create this Kantha. Another form of Kantha is the complex embroidery called Nakshi Kantha. The word 'nakshi' means intricate designs or artistic patterns. While it is exclusive in its aesthetics and traditional appeal, it also is unique in its contemporary allure. This plain, purposeful wrap for everyday use and the richly-embroidered nakshi kantha is now a potent force in empowering women. Kantha has been an indicator of change and progress for families, bespeaking the journey of women empowerment.





S - Phaash



Run Stitch



Baw Phaash



Jeere Borat



Cheli



Cross Stitch



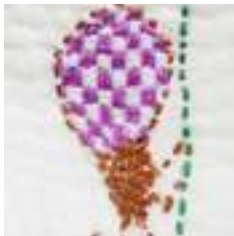
Maach Kata Chain



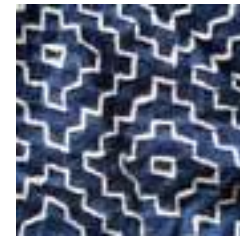
Agophor



Bona Paar



Dorma



Golok dhanda



Korela Phaans



Traditional  
*Kantha*







Kantha Sarees





Diversified  
*Kantha*  
Products

Kanthas are household textiles. Embroidered Kantha quilts were often used as gifts for family members on different occasions. Old clothes were recycled to make rugs and other household articles with the use of embroidery on it, such as quilts, bed covers, sarees etc. The Kantha artists today make a diverse range of Kantha stitched products which include sarees, shawls, stoles, bed covers, cushion covers, bags etc. The artists of both Birbhum and Purba Bardhaman cater to the local market at Santiniketan, Birbhum and also across the state of West Bengal. Many artists also participate in the local and national fairs and are also selling their products to other retail units.



Table Napkin



Wall Hanging





Apparel



Bags







Cushion Cover



Baby Quilt





Serving Tray



Picture Frame



Kantha  
*Innovations*













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## Rural Craft & Cultural Hubs of West Bengal



Department of MSME&T  
Government of West Bengal