



Gendered Spaces of Craft: Knowledge, Identity, and Livelihood in Kantha Embroidery of Rural Bengal

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Abstract

This paper examines Kantha embroidery as a gendered, spatial, and knowledge-based practice embedded within the rural landscapes of Birbhum district, West Bengal. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the villages of Nanoor, Beluti, Avinashpur, and Lebra, the study explores how women artisans negotiate identity, livelihood, and cultural expression within the constraints of socio-cultural norms and informal economic structures.

Situated within the framework of human geography and feminist theory, the research highlights the role of domestic spaces—such as courtyards and verandahs—as sites of both production and agency. Using qualitative methods including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participatory mapping, and transect walks, the study captures the lived experiences of women artisans and their engagement with intergenerational knowledge systems.

The findings reveal that while Kantha embroidery provides economic support and a sense of autonomy, women's participation remains shaped by limited mobility, dependence on middlemen, and unequal access to markets and institutional networks. At the same time, the craft serves as a medium for preserving cultural memory, fostering collective learning, and negotiating identity in a rapidly changing socio-economic context.

By situating Kantha within broader discussions on informal labour, gendered spaces, and cultural sustainability, the paper contributes to understanding how traditional crafts can address contemporary global challenges related to livelihoods, identity, and inclusive development.

Keywords: Kantha Embroidery; Gendered Spaces; Informal Economy; Cultural Knowledge; Rural Livelihoods

1. Introduction

Traditional crafts in India occupy a significant position within the cultural and economic fabric of rural life. They are not merely aesthetic practices but serve as important sources of livelihood, identity formation, and knowledge transmission. Kantha embroidery, a distinctive textile tradition from Bengal, exemplifies this intersection by embodying everyday experiences, memory, and labour within its stitched surfaces. Historically, Kantha developed as a domestic craft, where women reused layers of old cloth to create quilts and garments for household use. Over time, the craft evolved beyond functionality into an expressive medium, incorporating motifs inspired by nature, mythology, and personal narratives. Despite its growing visibility in urban and global markets, Kantha production continues to be deeply embedded within informal and gendered labour systems.

This paper examines Kantha through the lens of **gendered spatiality of labour**, focusing on how women artisans negotiate their roles within domestic and economic spaces. While existing literature has explored craft traditions and rural livelihoods, limited attention has been given to the spatial dimensions of production and the ways in which domestic environments shape labour practices. By situating Kantha within the lived geographies of Birbhum district, this study addresses this gap and contributes to broader discussions on gender, development, and cultural sustainability.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis is grounded in feminist geography, informal economy theory, and the concept of cultural sustainability. Feminist geography provides a critical framework for understanding how space is socially constructed and influenced by gendered power relations (Massey, 1994). In rural contexts, domestic spaces are often perceived as private and restrictive; however, they also function as sites of economic production and social interaction. Kantha embroidery takes place within such spaces, revealing how labour is spatially organised within the household. The courtyard, verandah, and shared domestic environments become sites where productive and

reproductive roles intersect. The informal economy further shapes the conditions under which Kantha artisans operate. Characterised by the absence of formal contracts, limited wage security, and dependence on intermediaries, this system influences access to markets and resources (Chen, 2012). While informality allows women to integrate income-generating activities with household responsibilities, it also reinforces economic vulnerability. Cultural sustainability adds another dimension by framing Kantha as an element of intangible heritage (UNESCO, 2003). The craft is sustained through intergenerational transmission of knowledge, where skills are learned through observation and practice rather than formal training. This process ensures continuity while allowing for adaptation to changing socio-economic conditions.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative ethnographic research design** to examine Kantha embroidery as a lived, spatially embedded practice. Ethnography was considered most appropriate as it enables an in-depth understanding of everyday life, particularly the subtle ways in which gender, space, and labour intersect within rural contexts. Rather than treating Kantha as merely an economic activity, the methodology situates it within the **social and spatial fabric of village life**, capturing both observable practices and lived meanings.

3.1 Study Area and Field Context

The research was conducted in four villages—**Nanoor, Beluti, Avinashpur, and Lebra**—located in Birbhum district, West Bengal. These villages were selected purposively due to their strong engagement with Kantha embroidery as a home-based livelihood activity.

Birbhum represents a region where traditional craft practices coexist with agrarian livelihoods. The spatial organisation of these villages reflects typical rural settlement patterns, with clustered households, shared courtyards, and limited formal workspaces. Such environments provide a suitable setting to examine how **domestic spaces function simultaneously as sites of production, interaction, and cultural transmission**. The selection of multiple villages allowed for comparative insights into variations in craft practices, access to markets, and forms of social organisation.

3.2 Sampling Strategy and Respondent Profile

A **purposive sampling technique** was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants who were actively engaged in Kantha embroidery. The sample was designed to capture diversity across:

- Age groups (young artisans to elderly practitioners)
- Marital status
- Levels of experience in Kantha work
- Nature of engagement (full-time, part-time, supplementary income)

Approximately **50 women artisans** were engaged across each of the four villages, ensuring both depth and variation in responses. In addition to primary respondents, interactions were conducted with:

- Local intermediaries (middlemen)
- Members of self-help groups
- NGO representatives (where applicable)

This multi-layered sampling helped situate individual experiences within broader socio-economic networks.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

a. In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with women artisans to capture personal narratives related to:

- Entry into Kantha work
- Daily routines and work patterns
- Income contribution and economic decision-making
- Experiences of mobility, restriction, and autonomy



The conversational nature of interviews allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms, often revealing **emotional and symbolic dimensions** of craft that structured questionnaires might overlook.

b. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus group discussions were organised in each village to understand **collective practices and shared perceptions**. These discussions provided insights into:

- Community-level organisation of work
- Knowledge sharing among women
- Negotiation with contractors or intermediaries
- Perceptions of change in craft practices

FGDs also helped capture **interactions among participants**, revealing dynamics of agreement, disagreement, and collective identity.

c. Participant Observation

Participant observation formed a central component of the research. The researcher spent extended time within domestic spaces—courtyards, verandahs, and shared work areas—observing:

- Stitching techniques and work processes
- Social interactions during work
- Spatial arrangements of tools and materials
- Integration of craft with household responsibilities

This method enabled an understanding of Kantha as a **rhythmic and embodied practice**, deeply embedded in daily life rather than a separate economic activity.

d. Transect Walks and Spatial Mapping

Transect walks were conducted across the villages to examine the **spatial layout of settlements and movement patterns**. These walks helped identify:

- Location of households engaged in Kantha work
- Shared spaces used for production
- Access to markets, roads, and public infrastructure

Participatory mapping exercises were also undertaken with selected respondents to visualise how women perceive and navigate their spatial environments. This was particularly useful in understanding **restricted mobility and gendered access to space**.

e. Informal Conversations and Field Notes

In addition to structured methods, informal conversations played a crucial role in building rapport and capturing nuanced insights. These interactions often occurred during routine activities such as stitching, cooking, or resting, allowing participants to share experiences more openly.

Detailed field notes were maintained to document observations, reflections, and contextual details, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in lived realities.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data was analysed using a **thematic coding approach**, combining both inductive and deductive methods. Initial coding identified recurring themes such as:

- Spatial organisation of work
- Intergenerational knowledge transfer
- Economic dependency and market access
- Identity and cultural expression

These themes were further refined into broader analytical categories, allowing for the interpretation of patterns across different case studies. Particular attention was given to identifying **relationships between space, gender, and labour**, enabling the development of the concept of **gendered spatiality of labour** as a central analytical framework.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained prior to interviews and discussions. Anonymity has been maintained where requested, particularly in cases involving sensitive



economic or social information. The research also sought to ensure respectful engagement with participants, recognising them not merely as respondents but as **knowledge holders and contributors to the study.**

3.6 Limitations of the Study

While the ethnographic approach provides depth, the findings are context-specific and may not be generalisable across all regions practising Kantha embroidery. Additionally, reliance on qualitative methods means that economic data is based on self-reporting rather than quantitative measurement. However, these limitations are balanced by the richness of insights gained through sustained field engagement.

4. Case-Based Ethnographic Analysis

4.1 Intergenerational Knowledge and Spatial Continuity: Ruksana Bibi

Ruksana Bibi's experience illustrates how Kantha knowledge is transmitted through embodied practice. Learning occurs not through formal teaching but through observation and repetition within the domestic sphere. Her courtyard functions as a shared workspace where women gather, stitch, and exchange stories. This space becomes both a site of production and a locus of cultural continuity. Her motifs—often inspired by seasonal changes, festivals, and personal memories—transform fabric into a narrative medium. Through her work, Kantha becomes a repository of lived experience, where identity is expressed materially rather than textually.

4.2 Migration and Adaptive Practices: Rehana Khatun

Rehana Khatun's migration to Lebra village following marriage highlights the dynamic nature of craft traditions. Initially unfamiliar with local styles, she gradually adapted by learning from other women. Her work reflects a blending of motifs from her natal and marital regions, demonstrating how craft evolves through movement.

Her experience underscores that tradition is not static but continuously reconfigured through spatial transitions. At the same time, her mobility remains socially mediated, reinforcing the idea that while craft practices travel, women's physical mobility is often constrained.

4.3 Institutional Mediation and Unequal Access: Farzana Begum

Farzana Begum's association with a local NGO provides insight into the role of institutional networks in shaping opportunities. Through training workshops and exposure to exhibitions, she has gained improved skills and confidence. However, such access is not uniformly available. Her experience reveals the uneven distribution of institutional support, where some artisans benefit from external interventions while others remain dependent on traditional intermediaries. This disparity highlights the layered inequalities within the craft economy.

4.4 Collective Agency and Negotiation: Mumtaz Sultana

Mumtaz Sultana's involvement in a self-help group in Beluti village reflects the emergence of collective agency. By organising production and negotiating with contractors as a group, women are able to assert greater control over their labour conditions. These collective practices represent subtle forms of resistance, where women challenge exploitative arrangements through collaboration rather than confrontation. Agency, in this context, is not absolute but negotiated within existing constraints.

4.5 Invisible Labour and Market Disconnection

In contrast, several artisans in Nanoor remain embedded within highly unequal value chains. Their work is mediated by middlemen who control access to raw materials and markets. As a result, artisans often lack awareness of the final value of their products. This disconnection produces a form of economic invisibility, where labour is essential but undervalued. It highlights the need to situate Kantha within broader political-economic structures rather than viewing it solely as a cultural practice.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Kantha embroidery operates as a multi-layered socio-spatial system. At the household level, domestic spaces function as sites of production and interaction. At the community level, networks of artisans facilitate knowledge exchange and collective practices. At the market level, global demand intersects with local labour, often in unequal ways. Women artisans navigate these overlapping scales through adaptive strategies. Their

agency is expressed through everyday negotiations—balancing domestic responsibilities with economic participation, preserving tradition while responding to market demands.

The concept of **gendered spatiality of labour** is central to understanding these dynamics. It reveals how space structures opportunities and constraints, shaping both the possibilities and limitations of women's participation in craft economies.

6. Policy Implications

To sustain Kantha as both a livelihood and a cultural practice, policy interventions must address structural inequalities. This includes:

- Strengthening direct market linkages to reduce dependence on intermediaries
- Supporting women-led collectives and self-help groups
- Recognising artisans as knowledge producers rather than informal labour
- Integrating craft into broader sustainable development frameworks

Such measures can enhance both economic security and cultural sustainability.

7. Conclusion

Kantha embroidery represents a convergence of gender, space, and livelihood within rural Bengal. It is not merely a craft but a lived practice through which women negotiate identity, resilience, and belonging. By foregrounding the voices of artisans, this study highlights the need to move beyond symbolic appreciation of craft towards structural recognition and support. Recognising women artisans as custodians of knowledge and culture is essential for building equitable and sustainable craft economies.

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