## Through the eye of a







#### Through the Eye of a Needle - A Tribute to SHE

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Compiled and Edited by Gouri Basu Indira Mital

Co-ordinated by: Saumya Varma

Photographs by : Piera Artesani Rajesh Gupta Gautam Prashad Md Iqbal

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Through the Eye of a



#### M. K. Narayanan GOVERNOR OF WEST BENGAL



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Kantha is perhaps the most creative of all embroidery styles in Eastern India, and is an indigenous household craft practised by rural women in Bengal. The origin of Kantha can be traced back to more than 1000 years, and some of its images go back to the pre and post Vedic periods. Some motifs such as the 'tree of life', the 'swirling cosmos', and the 'sun' are taken from primitive art. Kantha is used for religious ceremonies and pujas and this has invested Kantha with additional significance.

Kantha patterns are simple, but can be very intricate as well. The real value of Kantha embroidery, however, lies in its fine craftsmanship. Over the years, Kantha lost much of its sheen and almost became a dying art. It is only towards the end of the 20th Century that an attempt at revival of Kantha art was seen. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to the Kantha revivalists, many of whom devoted their entire life to keeping it alive.

A great deal of the credit for breathing life into this signature craft goes to SHE (Self Help Enterprise) – a Non-Profit Foundation launched by the most dynamic and indefatigable patron of Kantha art, Smit. Shamlu Dudeja. SHE has been in existence for more than 25 years, but within this short period has succeeded in giving a tremendous impetus to this craft form. The result of its efforts has been to make many rural Kantha craftswomen worthy successors of an ancient tradition.

SHE has succeeded in not only helping to revive the glory of this ancient craft, but has in the process empowered many women in rural areas of Bengal by providing them with succor of every kind. SHE has worked with many rural artisans, trained them, encouraged them to develop their creativity, and provided them with a new dimension so as to make their products more attractive, thus leading to much wider clientele. SHE has also enabled many Kantha artists to visit different parts of the country, as also other countries, thus widening their horizons as also popularizing Kantha.

Smt. Shamlu Dudeja's efforts have come in for a great deal of praise from several quarters, including former President of India, Smt. Pratibha Patil, and former US Secretary of State, Mrs. Hillary Clinton. Successive Governors of West Bengal have admired and commended Shamlu Dudeja's creativity and dynamism. The Kolkata Raj Bhavan is privileged to have several priceless Kantha pieces adorn its walls, which has enhanced the historic ambience of the 210-year-old Raj Bhavan.

I compliment EZCC for bringing out this volume "Through The Eye of A Needle". Gouri Basu has rendered great service to the Kantha cause by documenting facts and figures in a simple narrative form.

My sincere appeal to the readers of the volume is to make Kantha their preferred textile. I urge them to spread this message far and wide, for Kantha is an important vehicle for the empowerment of impoverished rural women in Bengal. The unique skill and creativity displayed by Kantha crafts persons, actively fostered by SHE, deserves our whole-hearted support and admiration.

M. K. Narayanan

Sanaih kantha Sanaih pantha Sanaih parvata langhanam 🥼 शनैः पर्वत लंघनम

शनैः कांथा शनैः पंथ

Slowly one stitches together the layers of frayed fabric Slowly, step by step, does one tread the path Slowly and steadily one scales the mountain

-Sanskrit shloka; oral tradition

### Kantha: The Birth and Rebirth of a Native Art

The ability to create something brilliant and new from something ragged and old transcends the specifics of culture and place. Necessity is a powerful force. It drives humankind to see possibility in otherwise overlooked materials. Love, too, is a powerful force. It drives a maker to instill beauty in the humble items that will envelope and protect the ones she loves. Herein lies the heart and soul of Kantha, the centuries old embroidered quilts of Bengal.

Although the origins of Kantha are not chronicled, it is an ancient art dating as far back as the sixteenth century. The word Kantha finds its origin in the Sanskrit word for rags, but has come to reference more comprehensively the works of handcrafted art made from the remnant fabrics of worn saris and dhotis-first quilts, wraps, and small mats, and later garments and other kinds of coverings. Bengali tradition holds that old cloth is spiritually protective; babies swaddled in worn soft cloth were thought to be shielded from the evil eye. It also holds that joined rags symbolize the creating of a unifying whole. Kanthas were traditionally made as auspicious gifts to celebrate family milestones including births and marriages; fashioned literally to protect a family member from the cold, a stitched Kantha is also a vehicle of richly layered meaning.

In addition to their spiritual components, Kantha was driven into being by a union of thrift and practicality, and, much like Japanese Boro or African American improvisational guilts, the early Kanthas were necessarily spontaneous in design, unbound by pattern or symmetry and always unique. An integral part of the art was for the quilter to work in harmony with the scraps at hand. Akin to Hmong story cloths, they often functioned as family or community repositories, telling stories or charting memories in the universal language of images. The traditional role of Kantha shifted however,

as the folk textiles became enmeshed an overarching battle for India's political and cultural identity.

As British presence in India increased in the 1800s, racism and rapidly increasing modernization effectively oppressed traditional modes and goods, casting native arts as shabby and outmoded even as the best native hand milled goods remained precious. As Western culture increasingly oppressed village ways in the early twentieth-century, the Bengali writer and poet Rabindranath Tagore recognized the inestimable gravity of potentially concomitant mortalities and initiated a cultural renaissance to preserve India's native identity. Mohandas K. Gandhi saw cloth itself as central to India's political identity and native wealth and he vociferously promoted traditional textile modes as his country's most powerful weapon against industrialization and foreign rule. While Gandhi spoke specifically about handspun and hand woven cloth, his ideologies had much broader implications. The violent and dislocating 1947 Partition seemed a death knell for the remainder of rural life and ways--a dual blow of industrialization and social upheaval. Yet Kantha became increasingly reclaimed as a symbol of native Bengal, and as Pakistan crafted its own identity, India and today's Bangladesh proudly resurrected the art and added to Kantha's list of symbolic meanings that of national pride.

Since Tagore's death in 1941, his family and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) such as Self Help Enterprises (S.H.E.) have valiantly carried the torch he lit into the present day. Through The Eye of a Needle charts the revival of Bengali Kantha and positions its post-Partition identity as valid and sustaining. Reflecting the essential ability of folk arts to transform and regenerate according to the realities and demands of new eras, Kantha changed in nature but eluded extinction.

Today, the revived practice extends beyond the object itself and functions an encompassing vehicle of cultural change and social empowerment. In sharp contrast to the deplorable, dangerous, and unfair working conditions of industrial sweatshops, marketable Kanthas can be made safely, enjoyably, and at the convenience of the maker at home; critically, the practice restores cultural and personal pride to individuals, families, and entire villages. The NGO framework ensures far reaching sociopolitical and socioeconomic uplift and the rural women involved become equipped once again to practice and hand down a cherished cultural art as well as a viable trade.

Shamlu Dudeja made a vital connection to something she learned as a girl, and through determination and resilience she has used the tools of creativity and empowerment to provide her country with a priceless heirloom. Central to Gouri Basu's narrative is the theme of connectivity. She has skillfully etched the history of Kantha and its transition from old to new, rural to urbane. In tandem with similar revivals in music, dance, and other handmade goods across India, the revival of traditional textile arts will play a lasting role in shaping Bengali regional culture and Indian national identity into the future.

Leslie Umberger

**LESLIE UMBERGER** is a curator who has specialized in folk, self-taught, and vernacular art since 1998. While serving as Senior Curator of Exhibitions and Collections at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Wisconsin, she made Bengali Kantha a part of that institution's significant holding of international folk textiles. Umberger is currently Curator of Folk and Self-taught Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C

### Foreword

As if by magic, Shamlu Dudeja and her friend Indira Mital appeared one day carrying heavy, battered black suitcases out of which appeared incredibly lovely and exquisitely hand-crafted textiles, each covered in wonderful embroidery. This was my introduction to Kantha embroidery.

My colleagues and I, a group consisting of a museum director, curator, museum shop manager, preservation expert, and foundation director, stood in awe as the delicate and beautiful saris, table covers, canopies, scarves, and other garments emerged from their tattered travel bags. With each piece we became increasingly mesmerized by the intricate stitches and colors, the drape of the fabric, and the artful beauty of what was laid before us. To our surprise, we were actually invited to touch, to try on, to experience these precious pieces and to be introduced to Kantha at its best. To us, the embroidered works were art, not to be touched, so we were cautious and careful, but we couldn't resist and we gingerly held the gorgeous pieces that were so clearly crafted by skilled hands. We were utterly delighted by the experience!

Shamlu, vivacious, bright, and an impassioned advocate for Kantha, wove a tale for us, sharing the history of Kantha to help us understand why this important craft needs to be preserved, to be taught to new generations, and carried into the future. She told us the stories of the women and girls who are revitalizing this age old craft; in the process, they are being empowered, driving cultural change, and establishing themselves as respected artisans. Today, these stories appear in *Through The Eye Of A Needle*. The writer Gouri Basu's word pictures are as evocative as the stunning visuals in the book. She has highlighted the impact of a vintage craft on the lives of its artisans and its supporters.

We thank Shamlu for her sacrifice and hard work. Without her advocacy, Kantha may have become a forgotten art and the women who work with needle and thread may have never had the opportunities that are now in both their present and their future. We at Kohler Foundation are honored to have played a part in bringing Kantha embroidery to Wisconsin where it can be seen, enjoyed, and treated with the respect great art deserves.

As respect and regard for Kantha has grown and evolved, it has moved from a humble home craft to an art form displayed in museums and studied by scholars. At the same time, it has taken its place in popular culture where it has made a fashion statement among women in the U.K., Australia, Japan, and the U.S. But Kantha is *more* than fashion, *more* than a piece of art, it is at the center of a social cause: the empowerment of women. And, it is making a difference!

Away from my foundation work, I had the opportunity to purchase a beautiful jacket of pinks and greens, completely covered in Kantha embroidery. It is worn with love and appreciation for the passion that went into every stitch. With each wearing, I am reminded of great friendship and the magical day that I was introduced to Shamlu and the art of Kantha. It is a day and a memory to be cherished.

Terri Yoho

TERRI YOHO is the executive director of Kohler Foundation, Inc., a non-profit organization that supports the arts and education. Much of the work of Kohler Foundation involves the preservation of important art and collections, primarily focusing on the work of self-taught artists and art environments. After preservation work is completed, the art is gifted to museums and other non-profits throughout the U.S. Kohler Foundation was responsible for preserving a large body of work by Padam Sri Nek Chand, an internationally respected artist and creator of the Rock Garden in Chandigarh, India. That work is now in the collection of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.







The Kantha work routine of its rural artisans was more or less the same centuries ago. The rural panorama has not changed much either. Surrounded by the twittering of birds, the constant chatter of their children frolicking in the late afternoon sun and fanned occasionally by a cool breeze, these women would deftly add one stitch after another on a framework of three stretched layers of old cotton fabric.

Actually, the only change today could be that the culture of *Kantha* is no longer frozen in time. Today's artisans have no inhibitions about handling a single layer of new fabric and embellishing it with exquisite needlework, mostly traditional but also with a certain newness incorporated into old patterns.

Stitching, actually, has been around for generations, from the time when the stone-age man learnt to join pieces of animal hide to cover himself.

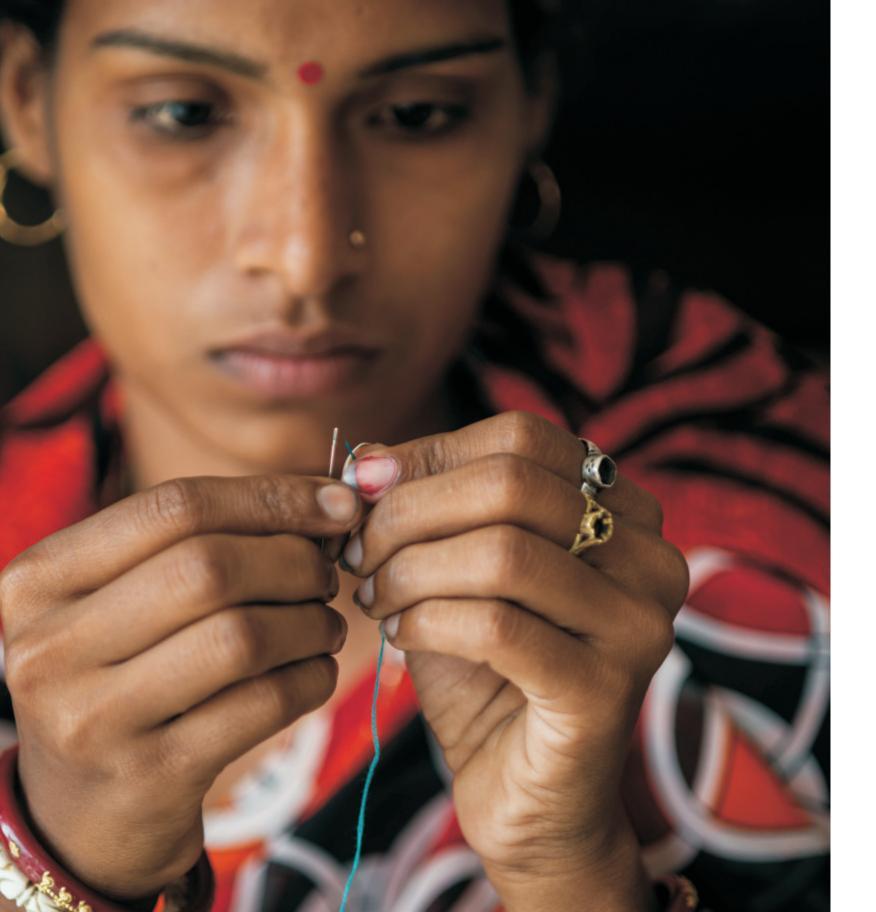
The *Kantha* stitch, interestingly, is the fundamental form of sewing used by the tailor bird to put together its nest of leaves and twigs.

Necessity being the mother of invention, the poor man's quilt, *Kantha*, is one such. The original word used to be *Kontha*, meaning 'rags'. It evolved out of the need to drape or protect oneself against the cold. Somewhere down the line, the word became *Kantha*, which, in its simplest form, was invented more out of the basic necessity of thrift than for money.



In keeping with the dictates of Buddhism, the *Bhikshus* drew sustenance from the charity of householders who sometimes gave them old, frayed garments and fabrics as well. Drawing inspiration from the frugal village women adept in making a little go far and beyond, the *Bhikshus* layered the frayed fabrics and tacked them together with the simplest of all stitches, the humble running stitch. The *Kantha* quilt, thus fashioned, shielded them from harsh elements.

The oldest reference to *Kantha* is in Krishnadas Kaviraj's *Sri Sri Chaitanya Charanamrita*, written five hundred years ago. The earliest extant *Kanthas*, were embroidered with black, red and blue threads. Old saris, frayed and soft after several washes, their colours all faded, were used to make *Kantha* quilts.



Threads drawn from the colourful borders of those saris, black, red and blue, were reused to tack the layers.

The perpetuators of *Kantha* craft, the humble village women, often embellished their *Kantha* quilts with embroidery, the *Kanthar kaaj*. The art of making the *Kantha* quilt has evolved over many centuries and it is, today, rural Bengal's prized vintage hand craft.

In the early twentieth century, when India began awakening to the spirit of Swadeshi, there was a renewed interest and pride in the country's handicrafts and handlooms. In undivided Bengal there were several attempts to revive the age-old tradition of Kantha. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's family played a major role in its revival in the mid-twentieth century. Tagore strongly believed in rural reconstruction as the basis for our country's betterment. To improve the village scenario, it was vital that the lives of the rural women be improved as well. He felt that revival of the nearly moribund but useful and creative art of Kantha could be a powerful tool in the country's rural upliftment and reconstruction. At Sriniketan, situated close to Santiniketan, attention was focussed on breathing new life into traditional handicrafts and rural skills.

The women of the Tagore family stepped in to help *Gurudev* realize his dream of rural upliftment by making *Kantha* craft their creative ideal. They collected heirloom *Kanthas* and involved its craftswomen in the revival process by uniting them at the grassroot level. The entire endeavour helped the women to earn some money and contribute towards the family income to improve their standard of living.



Tagore's daughter-in-law Pratima Devi headed *Kala Bhavan*, the Fine Arts Department at Santiniketan in the 1940s and worked with the tribal *Santhali* women in the area. She taught them the art of *Kantha* in an effort to revive *the art* and give an impetus to *Gurudev's* rural reconstruction programme. The *Santhali* women utilized their spare time to make multi-layered *Kantha* shawls and panels (often incorporating one layer of an old woollen shawl) to generate additional income for their families.

Pratima Devi's highly talented student and a gifted artist in her own right, Sreelata Sarkar, not only supported the project but also conscientiously promoted *Kanthar kaaj* in Kolkata. Sreelata is credited for being the first *Kantha* revivalist to initiate *Kantha* work on a single layer of *tussar* silk, in the late '50s and early '60s.

Quite independent of Sreelata-di, another enterprising revivalist, a Sindhi by birth but a devout Bengali at heart, Shamlu Dudeja blazed her own trail in the modern day revival of Bengal's heritage craft Kantha. Shamlu had dabbled in Kantha during her school years in 1948-49. She picked up the gauntlet of popularising Kanthar kaaj as decorative embroidery on single layered untailored luxury fabrics for saris, dupattas and scarves. Retaining the spontaneity, the ethnicity and the magic of the earlier 'quilt', Shamlu used her mathematical expertise for embellishing single layers of Bangalore silk with geometric designs.

Her rural artisans have successfully recast Jamini Roy's paintings and *Warli* patterns in the ubiquitous running stitch on silk textiles. The poor man's quilting stitch in the *Kanthar kaaj* commissioned by Shamlu's non-profit

venture SHE (Self Help Enterprise) travels right across the socio-economic spectrum from idyllic rural settings to the ramps of glamorous fashion shows and finds its way into the drawing rooms or work spaces of the rich and famous. It often goes even beyond and adorns the walls of famous museums and prestigious art galleries of the world as Stitch Art.

The marvel is that in its long journey, the essential innocence and beauty of the craft remains commendably untouched. *Kanthar kaaj* has been in the lives of its village folk for centuries and has its own language for telling their stories. Each piece of *Kanthar kaaj* weaves a yarn about its creators, about the group of women who live in mud dwellings but create exquisite stitch paintings.

Poring over pieces of fabric that already bear the beginnings of an intricate design, the rural artisans of SHE bring about the synthesis of a tradition of which they are an integral part and which gives them a distinct identity. They are the perpetuators of Bengal's signature craft which languished during foreign domination and could very well have died were it not for the vision and endeavour of revivalists who have breathed new life into it.

The running stitch used by the Bengali housewives in mending and reinforcing old clothes with strands of thread drawn from the colourful borders of old *saris* continues to be the mainstay of *Kanthar kaaj*. The different ways in which the mundane running stitch is used - its size, its alignment, its direction - make up the complex vocabulary of *Kantha* and add to its extraordinary rhythmic vitality.

Kanthas were crafted by rural women of varying economic status. The rich landlord's wife would use her leisure time to make an elaborately embroidered quilt out of not-so-old cotton saris. The poor farmer's wife would sew together tattered old *dhotis* to make a wrap. The craft is a priceless legacy, an intangible cultural heritage that has been handed down from generation to generation, and needs to be preserved and promoted.

Each *Kantha* panel was its crafter's self-expression telling a different story. There have been instances where an elaborate piece of work started by a woman has been continued by her daughter and completed by her granddaughter. Some samples of this kind of century old *Kanthas* can be seen in the Gurusaday Dutt Museum and Indian Museum in Kolkata, *The Museu de Arte Antigua* in Lisbon, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and, most recently, in the Philadelphia Museum in the USA.

All *Kanthas* were homemade for use by the family and, quite often, had parallel lines in simple running stitch, long before the word 'parallel' had found its way into the English language from the Greek word "parallelos".

The more creative among the rural women would embroider motifs drawn from the surrounding village vignettes as well as household deities, all done in the simple running stitch. Themes from day-to-day life were also common subjects for the embroidery. They were intensely personal, crafted with love and care by the rural women, and reflected the world around them.

Originally the primary use of *Kantha* was as a mat for the deity of the house, a quilt for a baby or a wrap for a

new son-in law, made lovingly by the older women of the family. They were also made as guilts to be used on cold wintry nights. A daughter would make one for her father or a wife for her husband. In areas with a predominantly Hindu population, the motifs would have the Hindu deities, human figures, animals, scenes from everyday life and festivals like Ratha Yatra (Lord Jagannath's journey on his chariot), Raas Leela (Lord Krishna's celestial dance with the gopinis), Durga Puja (the worship of Goddess Durga) and other festivals. Scenes from the Ramayana, particularly Ramabhishek (the coronation of King Rama); episodes from the Mahabharata and Geetopadesh with Krishna as the main character (such as the lifting of the Govardhan Parbat, Nauka Vihar, Raas Leela, the Jagannath Yatra) are perennial favourites of the Kantha artists. Many Kantha mats had vahanas for the gods and goddesses, such as the mooshak or rat for Ganesha or the hansa or swan for Goddess Saraswati. Abstract or geometric patterns were more predominant in the work of Muslim artisans. The western influence of colonialism is also seen in *Kanthas* showing a *sahib* in a *palki* (palanguin) or a memsahib sitting with a parasol and a teapoy before her.

There are seven different types of *Kanthas*:

Lep Kantha is a rectangular wrap used as a quilt. Five to six layers of cloth are stitched together in wavy, rippled designs over which simple embroidery is done. The outer layers of the cloth are white or light-coloured on which the embroidery can stand out. When Bengalis speak about Kantha, they usually refer to a Lep Kantha, often with fewer layers.





*Sujani Kantha* is a decorated quilt used as a blanket or spread during religious rituals or on ceremonial occasions.

Baiton Kantha is a square wrap used for covering books and other valuables. It has a colourful border and an elaborate design.

Oaar Kantha is a rectangular pillow cover with simple designs and a decorative border sewn around the edges.

Archilata Kantha is a small rectangular cover for mirrors and toileteries. It has a wide colourful border with assorted motifs.

Durjani or Thalia Kantha is a small rectangular quilted Kantha piece with a central lotus design and an embroidered border. Three corners of the rectangle are folded inwards to form a wallet.

Rumal Kantha is used as an absorbent wipe or a plate covering. The design is similar to the *Durjani Kantha* with a lotus at the centre and a heavily-designed border.

Kantha embroidery always began at the centre, most often with the traditional mondal, and then was worked outwards with surrounding motifs. As the work progressed, it fortified the quilt. After completing the embroidery of the motifs, the intervening areas of the cloth were quilted with running stitch. The border of the quilt was finished with very fine stitches to give it a firm edge.

Modern-day *Kantha* is no longer a multi-layered utility covering. It has been unshackled from its traditional confines of strictly utilitarian domestic products and transformed into a meaningful part of the crafts and textiles tradition of India lauded all over the world and prized by connoisseurs.

Behind the popularity of *Kantha* are the unknown faces of the ordinary women who once used *Kantha* stitchery for blankets, quilts, shawls and other items of everyday use. The craft has emerged as a new trend in *haute couture* and *haute dècor*, even entering the domain of portraiture.

The rural woman's tradition of recycling and reusing old worn out fabrics to make utility products and embellishing them with embroidery for their loved ones, is today a tool for their empowerment. It enables them to take better care of their homes and hearths. To keep the tradition of using an old fabric, the central layer of the SitchArt panel is always an old, used cotton cloth.



The making of a *Kantha* may be compared to a symphony. Skilled orchestration produces enchanting music because the musicians play in harmony. This is true in the case of *Kantha* artisans as well. They work at different tasks such as dyeing, drawing, sewing stitches over the outlines and filling in the designs with various colours. It may all be in different phases but is totally harmonious.

Kantha art comes naturally to women. They are born to multi-task. From morning until afternoon they sweep and swab, clean and cook, feed the poultry and the cattle and perform numerous other tasks in the fulfilment of their duties as homemakers. Finding a couple of hours to spare in the afternoons, they get together for a *chaa adda* and a chit-chat during which they work on their *Kantha* projects. Village vignettes or images of deities are recreated on fabric, be it a wrap, a pillow cover or a mat for the household deity.

The *Stree Shakti* manifest in the execution of their pieces merges with the three dimensions of the *Kantha* panels and produces a fourth dimensional power in the textiles which draws the viewer into its fold.

Kantha is now recognized as a top fashion statement with a social cause: the empowerment of women. They are imbued with Stree Shakti to battle the many obstacles in their lives. The 'green' ideology has long been gathering momentum and Kantha is the clarion call for rejuvenation of the old. Similar to the ideal of Khadi, Kantha is a kind of satyagraha for the emancipation of women and against the assembly line mass production of machine made items that fill the showrooms in upscale shopping malls. The ideology of Kantha may even be a silent condemnation of the sweat-shop labour practices that are rampant in many parts of the world.



## Shamlu Kripalani Dudeja

Originally from Karachi, Shamlu Kripalani Dudeja's family moved to Delhi soon after the Partition of India in August, 1947. She joined Lady Irwin School after her arrival in Delhi.

Shamlu inherited her love for needlework from her mother Sushila who was very talented in the art of embroidery. Miss Lahiri, Shamlu's Bengali craft teacher in Lady Irwin School, taught her the basic Kantha stitch, though the class was not given the background of Kantha. Totally on her own, Shamlu used the stitch to decorate the sleeves of her mother's blouses with small paisleys and embroidered flowers on tea cosies under her mother's supervision. Young Shamlu did not realise then that this running stitch would one day run her life, enrich it and become her tool for giving the rural artisans a raison d'etre.

Simultaneously, Shamlu inherited her father's gene for academic pursuits and graduated with a degree in Mathematics from Delhi University in 1957 before her family moved to Bombay.

The attractive, young Shamlu Kripalani did a fair amount of modelling in the city of fashion, both on the ramp and for the print media. She came to Kolkata three days after she got married to Vijay Dudeja in

Mumbai in October, 1962. Kolkata was the destination for their honeymoon as well as work for Vijay, a young corporate trainee. He had taken a seven-day break to get married!

Life went on, as it does for young newlyweds and their son Kabir arrived to join his parents for their first wedding anniversary.

Soon thereafter Vijay changed jobs, and joined J. Thomas and Company, a tea broking firm. The young family shifted residence to a multi-storeyed building on Lord Sinha Road. Shamlu started teaching in Miss Higgins' School, an elite private school in Kolkata.

In answer to their prayers for a girl child, Malika was born in 1968 and Shamlu took a break from her teaching career. She returned to teaching but had to give up the highly demanding career in 1985 when she was diagnosed with a seven pound tumour in her abdomen.

A chance encounter at a local handicrafts fair with a group of women from the villages around Santiniketan proved to be a significant turning point in Shamlu's life. Impressed with their workmanship, Shamlu asked a few questions and learnt about the significance of *Kantha* in Bengali culture.

She was fired up and went back to pick up the threads of the craft she had learnt under Miss Lahiri's guidance.

Shamlu invited the group of women to her home and coaxed them to use the stitch on silk saris. For starters, the women were given paisley patterns from her childhood and some borrowed from her printed saris. Initially, the craftswomen were very reluctant to do something so different from what they were used to: working on a single layer of new silk fabric, instead of multiple layers of old handloom cottons. Shamlu succeeded in convincing them to at least give it a try. In case it did not work out as imagined, Shamlu was ready to take all responsibility.

The women returned after four months, smiling from cheek to cheek, ready for more work! The name of her NGO, Self Help Enterprise (SHE) was coined!

In 1987, before the girls came back with the second lot of saris, another dark cloud came over Shamlu's life. She was diagnosed with breast cancer.

At that juncture, Malika was about to graduate from school and go to Cambridge for college studies. Giving up her dream, Malika stayed back to take care of her



mother. She even launched a range of *Kantha salwar-kurta* ensembles and started marketing them to her friends in college.

With the support of her family and friends, Shamlu was soon back on her feet, a little unsure but optimistic.

During this extremely difficult period in her life, *Kantha* became Shamlu's *shakti*, a sanity saving device (SSD, as her father would say). It enabled her to emerge from her state of despair. She gradually learnt about the significance of *Kantha* in the rural women's lives. She soon realised that *Kantha* was the harbinger of resurgence of *shakti* and empowerment in their lives, and embarked on a mission to promote it and support the women behind it.

Malika's Kantha Collection was established as a company to market *Kantha* textiles crafted by the rural artisans associated with SHE.

Malika got married in 1991 and continues to live in Kolkata, not very far from Shamlu's home.

The untimely death of her son in 1997 shattered Shamlu. During the last few years of his life, Kabir had been a passionate supporter of the Calcutta Foundation Orchestra as its manager and Shamlu did not want the Orchestra to fold up after Kabir's death. Determined to keep her son's memory alive in a constructive manner, Shamlu started investing a lot of time and effort into the Orchestra to keep it afloat.

Fifteen months later, her husband, Vijay, passed away. That could have knocked her out completely but God had His own plans for Shamlu. He inspired her to spearhead the construction of a home for a hundred girls, the daughters of leprosy patients. With grit and

determination during that most traumatic period of her life, Shamlu made the famous cricketer Steve Waugh a patron of The Calcutta Foundation and, with his help, the Nivedita Bhavan for girls came into being in the year 2000.

Shamlu is a warrior and turns tragedies into strength. Friends and family, in Kolkata and outside, were a source of great strength but her *Kantha* friends from the villages became her bedrock. They helped her to tide over the darkest period of her life. She has always

empathized with the void in their lives, their anguish and anxieties and has dedicated herself to improving their lot by giving their homespun craft an edge in the competitive market.

She formalised SHE Foundation, as an NGO in 1999 to help the *Kantha* artisans and to spread greater awareness about *Kantha* both within and outside the country.

Shamlu owes her optimism and determination to her exceptional parents. She remembers with gratitude the manner in which both of them brought up Shamlu, her sister, Indu, and her brother, Gul, during the trying days in Delhi, after the Partition.

Shamlu Dudeja knows that she is working towards keeping alive a priceless legacy and it helps her to deal with the many challenges that come her way. Even at the age of seventy-five, she works with the energy and enthusiasm of a twenty-five year old and the dedication of a tireless missionary. She hopes to continue with her projects till her last breath, and give back to society as much as she has received from it.

Distribution of shawls to SHE members







for kantha



empowerment of women

# Self Help Enterprise

Self Help Enterprise was formalised in 1998 as an NGO under the chairmanship of Shamlu Dudeja to give shape to the scattered Kantha community. It was formally registered under the Societies Act of the Government of West Bengal in 2004 to work towards the uplift of the Kantha artisans. Most of the women artisans, already working with Shamlu, became members of SHE. As their numbers grew, a more formalized system of Team Leaders and Junior Team Leaders evolved. The girls with leadership qualities, access to public transport and permission from the families to commute between their homes and Kolkata, between their homes and the villages (carrying fabrics, designs and skeins, to and fro) were promoted to the position of Team Leaders. Two or three Junior Team Leaders, picked in each group, supported the Team Leaders. The latter also had the responsibility of finding and recruiting new artisans and training them.

The SHE office was working informally from Shamlu's residence for several years, with just one junior assistant. Now, with the demand for

Kantha growing in India and abroad, there are four administrators who help her in the office management. They have been able to handle the growing demand for Kantha, very efficiently.

Today seven Team Leaders are scattered in semi-urban areas around the city, with an average of one artist in each region. Many working artisans live further in the interiors of the villages. The total number of artisans has been growing over the years and SHE currently has access to about a thousand artisans, though only about three hundred are members of SHE. All these girls work about two to three hours a day, and an average of twenty to twenty-five days a month, due to family commitments.

The day's routine of the artisans follows that of their grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. After finishing their housework they sit in groups for an afternoon chat session near a pond with ducks floating around, or in a shady area surrounded by yellow Ashoka trees, a *kathal* tree with the fruit hanging down the trunk or a mango tree. Simultaneously, they use







their skills to do their *Kanthar kaaj* for generating additional income.

Creativity is salubrious and *Kanthar kaaj* is conducive to social interaction, while the pleasing colours induce calm and relaxation. The women forget the drudgery of their household chores, differences in religion, status, caste and creed. Their common goal is crafting *Kantha* panels which will be appreciated by *Didi* or *Boro Ma*, as some call Shamlu. The completed textiles are brought to the SHE office and the artisans or group leaders are paid on the spot. The stocks in the office are fully paid for, and belong to SHE.

SHE sells *Kantha* textiles produced by the artisans not only in India but also in several cities across the globe like London, Paris, Tokyo, Yokohama, Melbourne, Washington and Santa Fe. In fact, SHE France, is just being set up in Paris to facilitate exports from India to France. Dominique and Hubert Boukris in Paris have been instrumental in setting up SHE France.

The women are extremely happy to receive a fair price for their work. In the mid-80's there were barely a hundred women throughout rural Bengal who were getting reimbursed for their

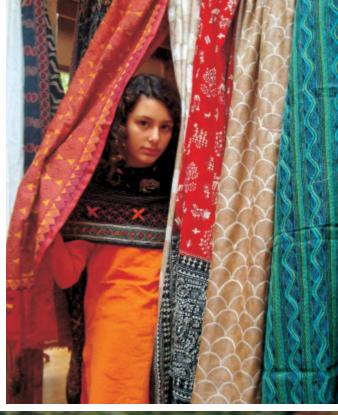
efforts. Today, thousands of women are involved in art of stitching *Kanthas*. The reason for this surge in the numbers of women employed in this rural craft is SHE's teambuilding initiative.

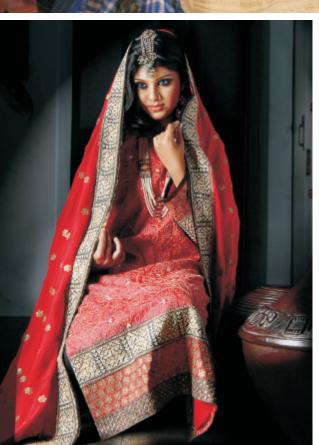
SHE provides its gifted Kantha artisans dwar pe rozi (work opportunity right at their own doorstep) and the luxury of flexi-time so as not to inconvenience them or their families. Each artisan is free to stay in her own home, but, more often than not, she joins a group and makes her embroidery her socialising time as well. Tirelessly and immaculately the women's nimble fingers fill in the tiny stitches, one after another, to sketch captivating visuals that range from the mythological to the contemporary. The craft may have graduated successfully from embroidery on humble old cottons to the more sophisticated new crèpes and chiffons but it remains rooted in tradition just as it is with the crafter herself.

The rural artisans of SHE are paid on the spot and loans are advanced to them as well. Health care is made accessible to them along with educational and recreational facilities. In keeping with the ideology, SHE gives the humble artisan a semblance of dignity, a sense of self worth and hope for equality in life.













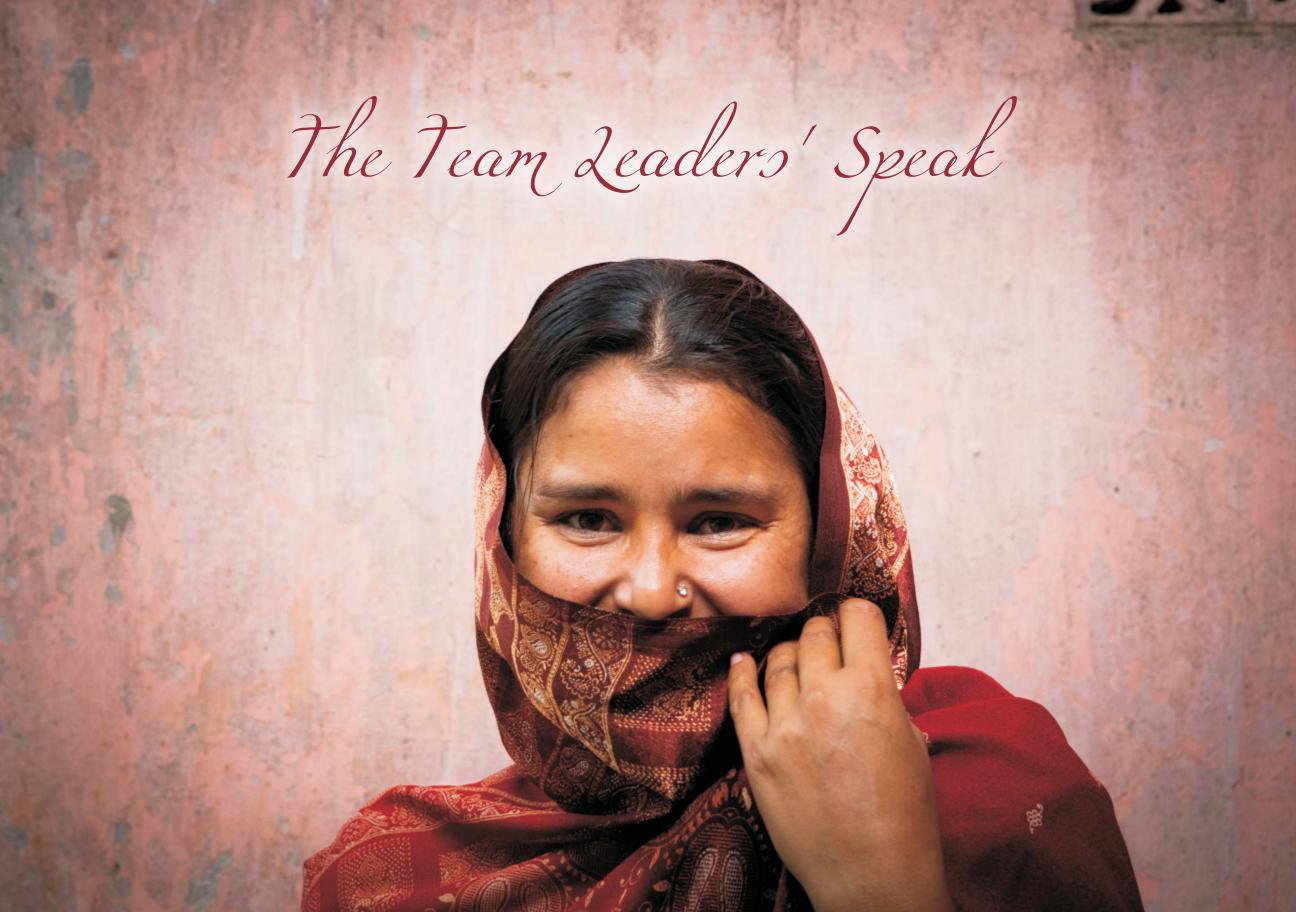
SHE has undertaken a large number of activities for the benefit of the artisans, such as use of natural dyes, loans for extension of Team Leaders' homes, support for setting up printing units in the nearby areas, health and hygiene camps, loans for education, addition of toilets in the homes and holding camps to bring about awareness of health, hygiene and self-defence during unwanted sexual advances.

Travel out of Kolkata, economic independence and interaction with ladies in the SHE office, has led to a sense of pride amongst the artisans. Their achievements help them walk with their heads held high. They know that they can expect a fair deal at home and in many walks of life. They can ensure that their children get proper education. Often, husbands lend a helping hand in transporting textiles and cooking a fish curry, when there are visitors at home.

In fact, SHE believes that empowerment of women is investment in the future of the villages, and of India. And SHE hopes to continue with this project for the years to come, forever evolving newer methods of reaching out to the public to popularize *Kantha*.







### **Anima Sarkar**



Very shy and insecure because of her past, a former freelance *Kantha* worker Anima Sarkar speaks at length about how her life has brightened since she joined the SHE group of artisans. It took a little bit of prodding to get her to speak her mind. Once started, she was chattering away happily.

"My family comes from a small village in erstwhile East Bengal and, like all other girls of rural Bengal, I too have grown up watching my mother and aunts spending all their leisure time making Kanthas. Their work was very laborious as they would do the embroidery using the thread painstakingly taken out from old sari borders. After the Partition of Bengal my family moved to West Bengal. We had to spend a long time in the government refugee camp for displaced persons before we could set up home again in our new environment. At the camp my mother and the other women, who had all left their familiar surroundings for an uncertain future, would remain very depressed. Gradually they learnt to help themselves as well as the others to recover and

accept their new situation by getting involved in the art of Kantha. Spending long hours sitting together and doing something creative and useful played an important role in the healing process. We young girls would also join in, and I learnt quite a bit while at the camp. When we moved out, it was difficult for my father to maintain our large family of six children on his meagre salary. One of my older sisters would go out and procure orders for Kantha which our family would execute together. Unfortunately, my sister lost her vision and the onus of continuing her efforts fell on me. I took on my sister's role and, within a very short time, increased the volume of work procured. We naturally had to employ girls to work with us to meet deadlines. As we lived near the Bangladesh border we were a happy group of Hindu and Muslim girls working together who shared skills and ideas and evolved together as Kantha exponents.

After I got married and moved closer to Kolkata, I continued working. My life changed after I met Didi who gave my work a new



dimension by introducing me to new ideas. Earlier I would always be very tense about payments. I was now happy to see that payment for our work was made on the spot. I could concentrate totally on my creativity. I gradually expanded my group of workers. The women working with me also received their payments regularly which gave them the impetus to put in more effort.

Also, we are now a part of an NGO that would stand by us in times of need. This has given us a great sense of security. This shift from being insecure workers to the security of being supported by a not-for-profit organization has helped us increase our productivity and improve our standard of work.

I live in a large joint family and my husband and his family have been most supportive of my endeavours. In addition to my Kantha work I have also opened a block-printing unit, where we also employ some men. My greatest joy is that with SHE's help, I have been able to give the farmers' wives who work with me some financial security and they can now afford to dream. I was able to help my husband financially when his business suffered a loss. All of us are sending our children to good schools and paying the fees ourselves.

The other team leaders have been working with Didi much longer than I have and they have helped me a great deal in learning the sophisticated colour combinations and the high standard of work expected of us. We all work together as one family and I love this sense of belonging."





### Chandana Bangal

I met Chandana Bangal at the exposition of her creations (sponsored by SHE), at the ITC Sonar, Kolkata. She was dressed in a white sari with a bright red and gold border. Long gold earrings dangled from her ears and swayed back and forth as she nodded her head. With a big red teeka shimmering on her forehead, she could have been an actor from a Bengali film.

"My mother worked with Sreelata Sarkar and from around the age of eleven I too started working with Dida, as I fondly called her. I worked hard and by the age of fifteen I had helped my mother increase the scope of our work to the extent that we had to bring in a few more girls to work with us. When my mother was busy with orders, I would go to Dida's house to bring in new work and take the finished products back. My mother was very happy with this, because she did not waste her time commuting.

When I got married and moved to my new home in Amtala, my sister started helping my mother and I started working independently. I taught the craft to a few girls in the neighbourhood and they joined me. Soon I expanded my base

and included girls from other villages in the vicinity. Over the years we have spread even further and have tribal women from the Sunderbans region also working with us. My husband and his family have been most supportive. My husband looks into the commercial side of the enterprise and I am free to look into the creative aspects. Twice every month he has to go to the interior forests of Purulia to buy good quality tussar silk directly from the farmers who rear the silkworms. Purchasing of other consumables, such as skeins of thread and needles, is also done by him.

As most of the women workers are working from their homes and have restrictions about going out, I employ a courier boy who delivers and fetches the work from their homes. Sometimes, my sons help me.

A large number of the artisans working with me are housewives. Some of the younger girls are students or working as beauticians, shop assistants or telephone booth assistants but all of them are keen to keep the tradition of Kantha alive.

Baroma (Shamlu Dudeja) has had a profound influence on my life. With her guidance I have been able to move from the making of saris and bedcovers to making Kantha StitchArt. I now concentrate on making decorative panels depicting scenes from rural Bengal as well as several social and religious themes. Last year, when India and the world were celebrating Tagore's sesquicentennial Birth Anniversary, I translated several poems, songs and dance dramas of the great bard into the language of Kantha. The panels were sent by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations to several countries as a part of their worldwide celebrations. This year we celebrate the 150th Birth Anniversary of India's first spiritual ambassador, Swami Vivekananda. My panels on this great son of India, chosen by Baroma, are a part of the exhibition being put up by the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, and the India International Centre in Delhi. I saw the film of the exhibition in Delhi, and the Prime Minister's wife seemed to be impressed with our work. All invitees were looking admiringly at the panels.

I and all the women who work with me are now more respected by our families. Our husbands help us with the housework so that we can devote more time to Kantha. When Baro Ma and her friends visit us, my husband very proudly cooks 'kosha mangsho' and rice for them.

I have been able to build an extension to my small house for my family and provide for my children's education and help them to stand on their own feet with the money that I have earned from Kantha and some loan from SHE. Besides the basic necessities, I



am also able to indulge my sons occasionally and take them to the Sunderbans for a holiday, where I have a group of girls working for me - something that we could not even dream of earlier. Most importantly, I am getting to be financially independent. Today my extended family, including my sisters, sisters-in-law and even a young niece, is involved with Kantha. My niece's parents could not afford her college fees and were forced to discontinue her education. Now she is paying her own fees and is a confident young woman ready to face all the challenges in life. My sister, who lives in Odisha, has taken the work there and now has a group of Odiya housewives helping her. Though the Kantha artisans are all women, there are some men working with us as artists and for marketing our products.

Working on Kantha is also a great learning experience for us. While working on different themes we are learning so much: about our country, the epics and mythology, and about great men like Tagore and Vivekananda.

All the ladies at the SHE studio treat us with respect and ensure that we are treated with respect by others. We have lunch and tea with them, chit chat freely with them like friends. SHE has helped our humble art and the rural women artisans of Bengal along with it, to reach great heights. We pray that our art survives and people like Baro Ma live forever and help us to take our craft to even greater heights."

### Sikha Kunda



Smart and eloquent, Sikha Kunda has a postgraduate degree in Bengali. Sikha was dressed in a crepe sari which she has embroidered herself. Sikha did not need much prodding to open up.

"My association with Kantha began about twenty-five years back when, as a young bride, I went through a phase of deep depression after two consecutive miscarriages. In order to divert my mind I wanted to learn something new and I went to the late Sreelata Sarkar who was working on the revitalization of Kantha. I learnt the art very quickly and started executing orders under her guidance. While working with Sreelata-di, I came in contact with Shamlu Dudeja and started working with her too. By then the volume of my work had increased considerably. I already had many young girls working with me. Didi helped us to improve the designs of the traditional motifs by introducing innovations and variations in the traditional work practiced by us so far. For the first time, my creativity was challenged and I learnt to transpose paintings of Jamini



Roy and other Bengali masters to Kantha. Hitherto I had only worked on saris, but, under Didi's tutelage, I started making shawls, salwar kurta sets, wall hangings, table linen and many other products of contemporary use. Till then I was working on just pure silk and tussar, but now we started working on cotton, linen, georgette and many other kinds of soft fabric. Didi also taught us the use of tie-and-dye with vegetable dyes (a visiting French woman, a friend of Didi's taught us this art) very effectively. To bring in more innovation into my work I engaged four male artists trained at the Government College of Art and

Craft, Kolkata, to draw the outlines of different pictures on the fabrics, which we would decorate with our Kantha stitch.

Initially, my husband did not approve of my work, more so after our son was born, when he wanted me to devote all my time to the child. I had dreams for my son and wanted to send him to a good school and college but knew that we could not afford to do so on just my husband's earnings as he had the responsibility of a large family. I continued with my Kantha work despite all opposition and used the money I earned from it to pay my son's fees in one of

the best schools in the city. Today he is a computer engineer, earning well and can afford luxuries for the family. He is now seeing a very nice young girl, and I hope they will get married. Perhaps my daughter-in-law will join our Kantha project.

As of today, I have three hundred girls working for me coming from the areas of Joynagar, Narendrapur, Dhankhet, Boral and Panagarh in rural Bengal, doing batik, brush painting and other related work, in addition to Kantha. They too have dreams and aspirations for their children and hope to fulfil them using the money they earn by pursuing this craft. The rural housewives, who are often confined to their homes due to various reasons, can work from their homes and enjoy the luxury of flexi-time. Most of the young housewives use the money they earn to pay for their childrens' education and to improve their standard of living. Often, when they wish to buy something expensive, they save the money with me and take it all together and not in small lots. Younger girls, who are mostly school and college students, use their earnings to pay their tuition fees, examination fees and to have some fun.

I consider myself very fortunate to have come in contact with Didi who has not only helped me to improve my skills, but has also taught me manners and etiquette. Today, when I accompany her to exhibitions in the U.S. or Europe, or share a hotel room with her, I know how to carry myself. I am even comfortable at formal sit-down dinners. I could never imagine a lifestyle like this, let alone experience it. Didi has given me an opportunity to grow not only as a Kantha exponent but also as a person."

### **Mohammad Shamsul Alam**



Mohammad Shamsul Alam leads a group of two hundred and fifty women in the small village of Joykrishnapur in Bardhaman district of West Bengal. He does the commuting between his village and the SHE studio because most of the women in his group follow Islam and do not often leave their homes alone. When asked how he got interested in *Kantha*, he had quite a story to tell.

"I come from the small village of Joykrishnapur in Bardhaman district of West Bengal. I have been attracted to Kantha from my childhood, more so after reading poet Jasimuddin's famous poem, "Nakshi Kanthar Math". My mother, like all women of rural Bengal, practised the art, not commercially, but to re-use and recycle all old fabrics in our home to give them a new lease of life and realize their maximum potential. My elder sister would draw different motifs on the fabrics and my mother would decorate them with her simple Kantha stitch. I have grown up with Kantha and it is a part of me. After my graduation I started taking a greater interest in the art form and wanted to market the



products made by my mother and sister. We started buying new fabrics and worked on them. We sold the products at fairs and exhibitions. It was on a very small scale as resources were limited and we had very little knowledge of marketing. At one such exhibition I met Didi and we got talking about how I could diversify my products so that they could be sold in the national and international markets. She invited me to the SHE studio and introduced me to new designs and colours that would be more popular with the urban clientele in India and abroad. SHE also offered to buy all the products we made as per their specifications and took the responsibility of marketing them. The offer came to me like a stroke of good luck. An art form I was struggling to keep alive would get a new lease of life. I am working with SHE for over fifteen years. Didi is like a guardian angel to us who has not only helped us to save our art but also to improve on it and make it more contemporary. My unit now has over two hundred and fifty girls from both the Hindu and Muslim communities working together to

better their skills and their lives. The unit also has some men who do the drawings and tracings, cutting of the threads and taking the work to the girls' homes and bringing the finished work back to us, thus giving the women (from more conservative backgrounds) the comfort and security of working from their homes. My wife, who is also involved in the business, is our greatest critic, pointing out our mistakes, which helps us to improve on our quality.

With the money I earn I am able to send my three young children to good schools, which I would not have been able to do otherwise. My greatest joy is that the women who are working with me are also able to afford a better education for their children. It is only through education that we can hope for a better quality of life for our children. Didi has not only helped me but has indirectly helped another two hundred and fifty families. We are all deeply indebted to her and wish her a very long and healthy life so that she can carry our cause forward."

### Sadhana Mondal



Sadhana Mondal's life is a true story of *sadhana*. It will be difficult to find a parallel to the dedication with which she has lived her life, from the age of twelve, when she lost her right arm in a fall from the balcony of a house.

"All women of rural Bengal have an inherent talent for stitching and I am no exception. The Kantha embroidery is an expression of the innermost thoughts of the rural women and we have inherited this intangible heritage from our mothers and grandmothers. As a child, I remember that whenever there would be news of a wedding or a pregnancy in the family, all the women would get into a flurry of activity making Kanthas for the new son-in-law or baby. This is the environment I have grown up in which is a part of me.

At the age of about twelve, my life turned upside down. A fall from the first floor of our house resulted in a bad fracture of my right hand which eventually had to be amputated. Before this I would often join the women of the family in the afternoons while they sat chatting in the courtyard, their nimble fingers working on the multiple layers of old cotton fabric. After this accident I went through a period of deep depression, but in spite of being a mere child, I realized that I could not live my life wallowing in self-pity. I restarted my Kantha work using my left hand. It was very difficult and frustrating initially but I did not give up. I struggled, and eventually learnt to use my left hand along with

my feet, to transfer designs from oil paper (with perforations) to fabric and to hold the thread quite effectively.

I married my childhood friend when I was in Class 11. I have the greatest regard for my husband because he accepted me in spite of my shortcoming and against the wishes of his family. My younger sister's wedding was fixed; my family was not even thinking of my marriage, as they knew it was a very difficult call. It was at that time that my husband came forward and said that he would like us to be married before my younger sibling's wedding. It was only after my elder son was born that my husband's family accepted me. When my sons were small I had to give up Kanthar kaaj.

I began again after they started school. Many of my neighbours came to learn Kantha work from me and soon we were a group of women who would spend our afternoons together on our individual Kantha creations.

I started my business with a loan from my husband to buy fabric, thread and other





necessities and to pay the women for their work. I then took our work to the local fairs and set up a stall. It was a very uncertain business because very often we were unable to sell anything. It was at that time that I read about Shamlu Dudeja in a magazine and approached her. Initially Didi's daughter, Malika-di, would oversee the work (because Didi had a tumour and a cancer surgery), and it was from her that I first learnt about colour co-ordination and how we could expand our product range. Gradually, news about our work spread and women from neighbouring villages joined our group.

I had never thought that Kantha would be my livelihood one day. My earnings from Kantha helped

my family go through a financially difficult period and this has helped them respect me and my art. I have paid for my children's education and today both my sons are well established. My elder son is in the property business and my younger son, who has just completed his MBA, is working for an NGO in Bhopal. Though my sons were initially not very encouraging, they are now proud of my achievements and take a keen interest in my work. When Didi's office sends me a new design, my sons help me access it on the internet.

My elder son and I accompanied Didi to an exhibition in the U.S., where everyone treated us like Didi's friends. The inconvenience of the trip was that British Airways lost our bags, and did not pay us anything. But Didi took care of all our expenses and we were very comfortable. Didi even shared her clothes with me. On the final day, my son was able to show off his dancing skills(a dance he normally performs during the Pujas in Kolkata) to the guests at the farewell party.

I am grateful to God for having brought me in contact with a person like Didi who has held my hand and led me forward. She has helped me to enhance my status in my family and within my community. By marketing my products she has allayed all insecurities in me and my entire group is able to concentrate more on our work."



## Ujjala Nag (Soma)

With waist length wavy black hair and a charming smile, beautiful Ujjala Nag, better known as Soma, has a strong mind and is a picture of confidence. Looking at her work one can make out that her artistic sensibilities are more developed than those of the other Team Leaders and she is very conscious about quality control. She is one of the first Team Leaders to be appointed by Shamlu Dudeja, and Soma is very attached to her *Didi*. While talking about her involvement with *Kantha* she gets up several times to give Shamlu a hug.

"I come from a small village near Raidighi. I was one of the very few girl students of my village school and always stood first in my class. Besides academics, I was also interested in art and needlework and excelled in them too. As I was reasonably good-looking, several marriage proposals would come for me and my parents have been trying to get me married since I was in Class 6. In 1985, after completing

Class 8 in my village primary school, my parents refused to allow me to continue with my studies. I went on a hunger strike till I was allowed to come to my sister's house in Rajpur on the outskirts of Kolkata. I did not have any definite idea about what I wanted to do with my life, but I knew that I would not agree to be married off while in my teens and spend the rest of my life in the village I was born in or, at best, in a neighbouring village. I was admitted to a school in Kolkata and adjusted to my new surroundings. Family pressure on me to return to my home in the village was mounting and one day my brother-in-law told me that I would have to pay my boarding expenses. That very evening I moved into a hostel and started working as an artist for different organizations like Lions Club, which had set up embroidery units for women artisans. I earned enough money to pay for my own expenses and this made me fiercely independent. While working as an artist I also learnt hand printing and

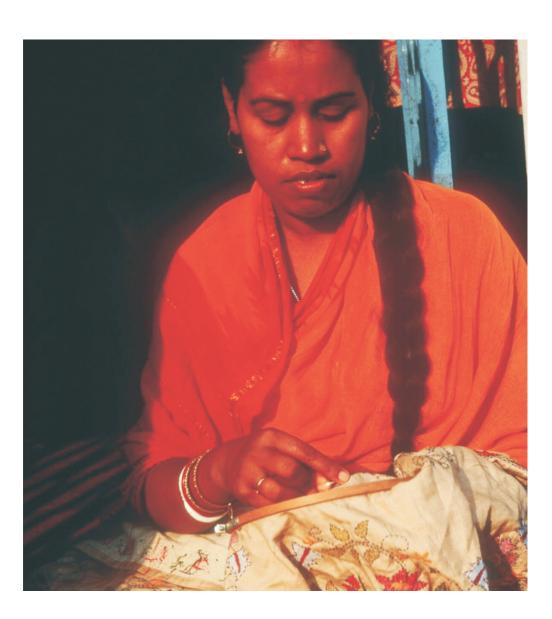
Kantha embroidery. It was at one of my casual employments that I met my husband Bipul who introduced me to SHE and I have never looked back. With SHE, I started working on single-layer tussar silk or crepe for making saris, dupattas and scarves.

Didi has always been very protective about me as I tend to be impulsive with my decisions. My husband had an enlarged heart, a congenital defect, which had remained undiagnosed. He passed away about three years ago, but was unwell for several years before that. During those years Didi was my greatest strength and support, arranging for Bipul's consultations with specialists and organizing for all his diagnostic tests. Kantha is my only source of income and with the money I had saved and Didi's help I could give Bipul the best of treatment. Bipul had been a great support to me when he was well, doing all the running around, like taking the work to and from the artisans who work with me, buying the fabrics and threads and liaisoning

with the SHE office. About fifteen days before Bipul died, an old friend of mine from the village, Sunil, suddenly got in touch with me after about twenty-five years. He was by my side when Bipul died and was a source of quiet strength. Gradually he started helping me with my work, while at the same time looking after his cold storage business in the village. Didi, who was my greatest comfort during this time, did not initially approve of my friendship with Sunil. I would spend long afternoons with Didi, my head on her lap, looking for solace. While stroking my head she would gently warn me not to part with my savings and be wary about giving loans to anyone under any circumstances or making the small house I have built with my hard earned money into a joint property. Like all mothers she worried about me and I will remain eternally grateful for her unconditional love and concern."



Receiving the "SHE Award for Excellence" from His Excellency, Shri M.K. Narayanan at the Raj Bhavan



### Dipti Haldar Poddar

Dipti is a picture of marital bliss, someone who gave up her passion of *Kantha* and devoted herself full-time to raising a family, a decision she is proud of. Now, with grown-up children, and more time on her hands, she hopes to resume working. The only deterring factor is her failing eyesight. The SHE office has always been her second home and she was delighted to be back.

"I am one of the first Team Leaders appointed by Didi and it is a matter of great pride for me. After my Madhyamik (School Leaving) examinations, we had a three month break during which I would accompany my mother and aunts to the Uttar Panchanan Gram Samiti, a local body in our village, involved in teaching and reviving the art of Kantha. Being young, I learnt the stitch quickly and soon became quite proficient in it. My first encounter with Didi was when she came on a visit to the Samiti. She was impressed by my skills in Kantha embroidery and asked me to work with her too.

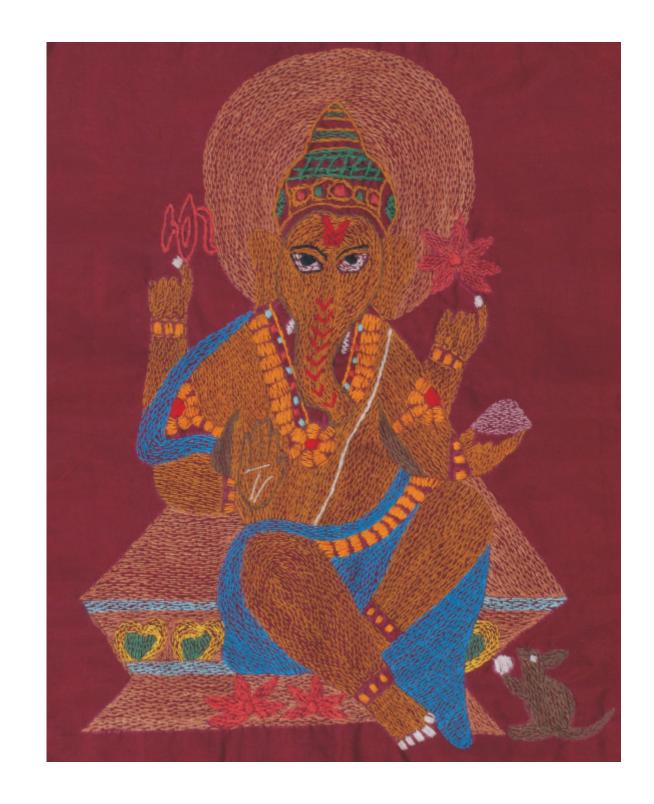
I was excited as Didi was going to start a line of ready-made garments, a new concept at that time. When I came to Didi's house, she introduced me to her daughter Malika, who was the same age as me. Malika and I started working together for this new range. Together we would design kurta-pyjamas for men and ethnic and trendy fashion apparel for women. We also did a range of designer bed-covers and women's shawls. Malika organized exhibitions and our products sold like hot cakes. We were deluged with orders. Malika and I became good friends - though there was much difference in our upbringing, social status and education. We were two young girls trying to do something new together. We spent long hours in each other's company and a strong bond developed between us. I value this friendship greatly. Didi had gone through a lot of illness and had to undergo a couple of surgeries but she was always around, like a mother, encouraging our efforts and giving her suggestions whenever

she felt we were going overboard. As the volume of work increased, I was unable to cope on my own, and my sisters Kanchan, Tripti and Tapati joined me. Some girls from the village also came to me to learn Kantha work and stayed on as a part of my group of artisans. Unlike now when professional artists help the Kantha artisans with the drawing of outlines, we had to do everything on our own. We used haldi (turmeric), sindoor (vermillion) and kerosene oil to draw the designs and were always careful so that the fabric we were working on did not get dirty. We took great pride in our work and this helped us to evolve as artisans. I stopped working when I got married and started a family. Didi not only attended my wedding but also the weddings of all my sisters, always coming with an elaborate Tatwa (trays filled with gifts and sweets). Didi helped my husband to get a permanent job with the BSF and we were financially stable, so I did not have the need to supplement the family income.

When I was working with SHE, there were very few Team Leaders and we were always rushing to meet deadlines. This was possible for us then as we were unmarried and did not have any household responsibilities. Now the organization has several Team Leaders and many women working for each of them—no one is rushed, everyone can work at their own pace - this is very important for us rural women. Most of the girls who worked in my team have got married and moved away. Some of them are working with the other Team Leaders. The girls were careful with the money they earned and mostly invested in jewellery which came in good use during their weddings.

My children are grown-up now. My older son is twenty-one and the younger twins are sixteen. As I am now relatively free, I would like to get back to work, but am unable to do intricate designs due to my failing eyesight. I would like to resume making panels which was my niche area. For several years I have been unable to work, but I have never ceased to be a part of the SHE family. I am sure SHE will help me with treatment for my eyes. SHE helped me to buy a computer for my children.

Didi has never differentiated between Malika and us. When necessary she has been firm, but most of the time she has been indulgent. She has always been our anchor and support and we are all very fond of her.





Episodes from the Ramayan



Anand Ashram





"Problems and troubles don't break you", she says. "They only make you stronger".

This has been the anthem of her life. Nothing could ever break her never say die spirit. Everything life has thrown her way has made her bounce back with renewed vigour. Her first big jolt, the loss of her first born, came to her after years of love, care and commitment to her children. As a parent, one can imagine no bigger loss than this. The excruciating pain and the agony of losing Kabir could have crushed her, but she carried on smiling — heartbroken yet brave. Nine days after Kabir died, she had to attend a fund-raising dinner for three hundred and fifty guests which Kabir had organised before his sudden death. She was there, wearing a black and white sari and her strings of pearls, auctioning Kantha and being an anchor for the event.

Fate did not leave her to mourn in peace and slapped her with yet another life shattering misfortune a year later — the loss of her husband. As someone once said: God took from her these two people only to give her to the rest of the world; for her to be shared by many others who would experience her magical touch in their lives. So it has been.















Her worthy life shines with many neon signs. Her efforts towards the Udayan project, where she worked tirelessly to uplift the condition of the underprivileged children of leprosy patients has been commendable. She resolved to make a difference when she saw the indignity faced by them and the social stigma attached to their lives. Even Steve Waugh could not resist her charm and her simple yet determined cry for help. He joined hands with her in this mission and helped her realize her dream.

In addition, to raise funds for survivors of Tsunami on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Steve auctioned various Kantha textiles at a fund-raiser at the Oberoi Grand.

Similarly, in another project very close to her heart, she has helped empower women in rural India by giving them commercial freedom and financial independence through Kantha. By creating SHE (Self Help Enterprise), Mom has reached out to thousands of women and made a difference in their lives. All this speaks of her forbearance and ability to dull the pain by having a purpose and passion - a passion that has helped thousands.

If one were to peek into her cupboards, one would be astonished to see the number of *saris* she has. What would surprise one most is how low on her priority list are the non-Kantha saris. They seem to lie timidly in the back, waiting in vain for a chance to adorn her statuesque figure. Each time a choice has to be made, her true love Kantha emerges as the winner. These saris seem to nudge each other, smile cunningly and sit smug and condescending in their pile knowing the others will seldom get a chance. Not that Ma dislikes the others or thinks they are less beautiful. Her passion to promote this running stitch done by 'her girls' compels her to wear, showcase, get noticed and finally pen down an order! A Kantha worn is a *Kantha* sold, indeed!

And the torch bearer marches on! Could it be a result of the loss and pain suffered at the time of Partition that forced her family to leave everything they ever had in Karachi and move to India? She seems driven by a deep seated urge to go on and excel, never resting on past laurels. She has taken *Kantha* from its humble origins to the lofty portals of stitch portraiture. This is her tribute to Bengal, her home, her land, her love. A place she never has to flee from, a place that has given her solace when she was devastated.

Each *piece de resistance* speaks in hushed tones of the pride with which nimble fingers have created it. Exquisitely embroidered pictorial panels of *Durga*, *Krishna*, *Kabi Guru* Rabindranath Tagore, paintings of Jamini Roy and stories by our Nobel Laureate poet retold in *Kantha* adorn her home. The panels based on Tagore's works, exhibited in various places around the world to commemorate his 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary, have brought fame and glory to the ladies who spent months creating them.

A simple but ambitious mind runs the body of this seventy-five year old. Ravaged by the most evil forms of physical illness in the past, she has rallied forth, bag in hand overcoming the hurdles of escalators, taxis, tubes and the not so comfortable travel with stoic determination. Her mission is a fervent, almost religious quest to promote *Kantha* all over the world. The accolades she reaps are brought home in the form of pictures and testimonials for the women who produce the art to revel.

A careful observation of this phenomenon called Mom unveils a fascinating personality. This lady can light up a grand ballroom with her constant humour and has the ability to crack jokes on herself, making the stiff and well-heeled choke on their cocktails. She can be seen totally at ease in a remote window-less classroom, making snotty-nosed children roll on the floor in absolute mirth. It is the same mind that made the Mathematics wizard Shakuntala Devi fumble on a question, think for a minute and eventually answer incorrectly — thereby endearing her as a lifelong friend! The Mathematics textbooks which she has written are her pride, her tribute to her father and to his native place of birth. She is the first Indian author of Mathematics text books published in Pakistan!

All said and done, hers is a life-long endeavour of setting high goals, achieving them, setting new ones

and forging ahead with fervour to vanquish all odds. Her deep religiosity has a single mantra - help others and spread smiles. With no regrets for the losses suffered and only gratitude for all that has been destined for her, she strives to bring happiness in as many lives as she can.

Rupchand, her father, did always say: Shamlu would shine bright like the sun.

As her children we borrow from Floyd: Shine on you Crazy Diamond!

Malika and Sharad Varma





# Shamlu-di says

Nearly three decades ago, I was recovering from hysterectomy. The horizontal incision, eight inches long, was still oozing and had to be kept well padded. In my loose *kaftan*, I felt ugly, and was very depressed.

One evening I was at the Calcutta Club taking a breather, while Malika was playing tennis. I noticed a banner at the entrance of the Calcutta Information Centre, an exhibition gallery run by the Government of West Bengal situated right opposite the Club. It said: "Santiniketan Handicrafts Mela".

The traffic on that road was something one could contend with, thirty years ago. My driver, Jamil, escorted me across the road to the exhibition.

There were not too many people at the exhibition venue. May is the hottest month in Kolkata with temperatures soaring to 40°C in the mid-afternoon. At the first counter there were bags made from colourful leather, typical of Santiniketan. Right behind the counter was a group of young matrons selling exquisitely-embroidered place mats and baby wraps. I recognized the stitch which had been taught to me in 1947 by my craft teacher, Miss Lahiri, at Lady Irwin School in Delhi. The wraps were made from the same soft, comfortable cotton textiles that we used in Miss Lahiri's class and were decorated with the same paisley and fish designs which I had learnt over four decades ago!

"Eta ki kaaj?"

(What is this embroidery known as?),

I asked the ladies at the counter.

"Tumi satti er naam jano na"?

(You actually don't know what it is called?), they had asked, a little puzzled.

"Na, aami ei kaaj shikhechhi, kintu naam jaani na."

(No, I have learnt this kind of embroidery but don't know what it is called).

"Didi, eta kantharkaaj; amra Santiniketaner kachhe Sewri gram theke esechi."

(This is *Kantha* work. We have come from Sewri, near Santiniketan).



Office co. prolingtore

"Khoob sundar kaaj. Cholo amar baari, aami sari debo, amar jonyo kantharkaaj karo!"

(The work you have done is beautiful. Come to my place, I will give you my *saris* to work on). "Ki bolchho Didi, sareer upor ei kaaj hoy na", they had said in unison.

(*Kantha work* cannot be done on *saris*, it is done only on three to four layers of fabrics; not on a single layer of a *sari*).

After some persuasion, they came to my house. Together we dyed four white silks in different shades of tea. The women paired up and held the *saris*, swinging them up and down to air dry them quickly.

Next, we needed designs and colours but I was neither an artist nor a designer.

Suddenly there was a "flash upon that inward eye". Snippets of a conversation between myself and my mother came back to me:

"Remember, the paisleys Miss Lahiri taught you?"
"Of course."

I had embroidered the pair on the sleeves of my mother's blouse, red and black, with the peaks away from each other.

Mother had said,

"Can't these hyphens be same on the underside as they are on the outside?"

 $\hbox{``Why, Mummy? Who will see the underside?''}$ 

"You will!" she had said, pointing towards me.

Mother could be so difficult.

"And, make sure there are no knots. No one can see them, but they irk the skin!"





"You are so difficult to please."

Silently I had thumped the floor. I was only ten.

I rushed to Vijay's desk and picked up two pencils - a black and a red one - and a sheet of paper. Sitting down quickly, I drew the paisleys to show the young girls what I meant.

They looked good. A printed silk sari provided the basic layout for a floral design and a printed bedcover provided the basis for a paan-kalka, as Sumita named it, a paisley in the shape of a paan leaf. Madhulika said that she would design the fourth sari herself. After a cup of tea, they went away beaming because they thought they were on to something novel.

They were back in a fairly short time, with the *saris* exquisitely worked upon, each completely different from the other and each an original piece of artwork. My mother would have been happy to see this work as all the hyphen-like stitches were almost of the same size, both on the obverse side as well as the reverse side of the fabric. So unlike the thread of their lives which does not run so uniformly!

My lifelong journey with *Kantha* had begun. My *Kantha* family started growing and, as I entered their lives, my own problems appeared insignificant in comparison to theirs.

In 1987, I was recovering from a radical mastectomy of the left breast. I had undergone four cycles of chemotherapy. (It makes me shudder when I think about the horrid jangling of nerves which I

experienced each time the chemical was injected intravenously into my body).

I was teaching at that time and went to the school authorities to tell them that my chemotherapy treatment would take another few months and that I would not be able to get back to work. It broke my heart to do that but my *Kantha* friends rallied around me. It was difficult to bear the pain of the surgery and the chemotherapy difficult but not impossible. The worse pain, really unbearable, was in giving up my teaching career. A feeling of total incompetence started sinking in.

Set back but not defeated, yet, I felt an unseen, undefinable energy pull me up by the bootstraps. Where did I get the strength to bear the pain, and the jabs of chemotherapy injections, yet crack jokes and laugh? What was that invisible power that gave me the will to live?

I, a former fashion model, had become disfigured with just one breast and ugly scars. My loving family and friends surrounded me doing everything to make my life comfortable. Never to be forgotten also are those members of my dedicated domestic staff who had been with me for several years. My sincerest *salaams* to all of them, and specially to my daughter, Malika, who gave up so much to be with me, holding my hand at every step.

But life had to go on ... and so it did.

The demise of my son and my husband has left a huge void in my life. The house seems

shna Leela - Vastraharan

to jeer at my loneliness, even now. So does the bed, tossing and turning, sitting up, *pranayam...* nothing works when the grief is so deep.

On one of those early days of abysmal despair came an invitation from the First Couple of West Bengal, to take some *Kantha* panels for adorning the walls of the Raj Bhavan. Shocked, amazed and filled with gratitude for the exclusive opportunity to promote the *Kantha* textiles by the artisans of SHE, I set forth with jelly in my knees and my heart in my mouth.

His Excellency, late Shri Viren J. Shah, former Governor of West Bengal, and his gracious wife, Anjanaben, were waiting for me. When we displayed the panels for selection, the effect was magical.

Virenbhai immediately picked up the black panel with the dancing peacocks for the main wall in his office. Anjanabehn wanted a similar one for their home in Mumbai. Two junior officers of the Raj Bhavan held the panel against the main wall, as he sat in front of it. The peacocks in the tapestry seemed to smile and shake their tail feathers just a little!!

Two more panels were picked up for the Prince of Wales Suite. Breathless with excitement, I could hardly utter a proper "Thank you".

This was just the beginning. The next Governor, His Excellency Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi and Smt Tara Gandhi, selected six panels for the Ballroom, each panel exclusive, each telling a different story.

And, then, His Excellency, Shri M. K. Narayanan, and his gracious wife, Smt Padmini Narayanan, went a step further. They hosted an evening "Kantha: Manavi Gantha" on the lawns of the Raj Bhavan, as a tribute to Bengal's Poet Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, on the occasion of his 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary.

Silk panels portraying scenes from Tagore's writings mounted on easels, were displayed against the backdrop of the spectacular dome of the Raj Bhavan bathed in the glow of the setting sun. On the other side, was a mud hut ingeniously crafted for the evening. There was a cow tethered to a pole, a *tulsi mancha* in the centre of the courtyard and a rooster crowing on the roof - a true to life replication of the country living of *Kantha* artisans.

Gifted *Kantha* artisans, members of SHE, were invited to step on to a brightly lit stage for receiving the SHE Awards for Excellence from the Governor, amidst thunderous applause.

The grand finale was the Natya-Nritya-Gaan, the Drama-Dance-Song, which totally mesmerised Kolkata's elite audience in attendance and is a much talked about spectacle till today!

Over two decades ago, I picked up the gauntlet and started working with the rural women more to drown my sorrow of losing an opportunity to teach Mathematics, than to revitalise Kantha for making it a vehicle for social uplift.

I did not imagine then that the SHE team would break new ground one day with stitch portraiture: "Tagore In Kantha", "Maha Durga in Kantha" festival and "Vivekananda In Kantha"! Kantha having scaled new heights, NOW, I can dare to dream....

I dream for the spontaneity and uniqueness of *Kantha* textile to be as

prized as StitchArt. I dream of *Kantha* as a designer label, as a fashion statement. I dream that the young generation embraces *Kantha* enthusiastically. I dream of *Kantha* to be the symbol of *asmita*, self esteem, for its artisans.

The First Couple of West Bengal His Excellency Shri M. K. Narayanan and Mrs. P. Narayanan at the Kantha: Maha Durga Utsav at Hotel ITC Sonar

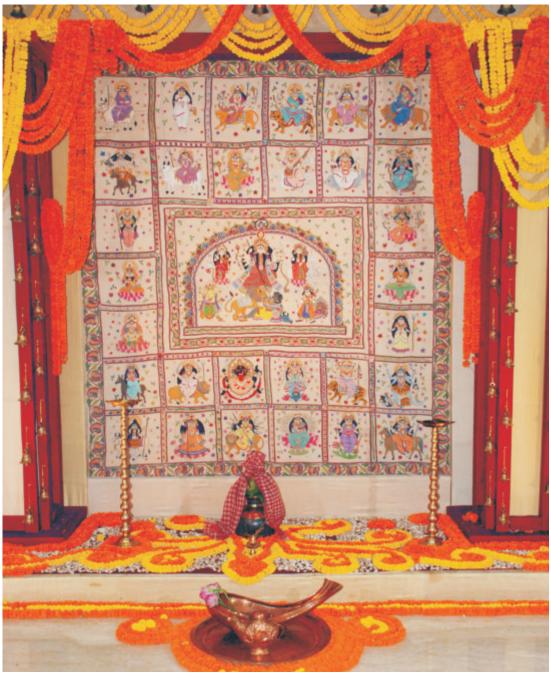


# Kantha as StitchArt



Jurga Mandap





Story of Durga Thirty-one forms of Durga



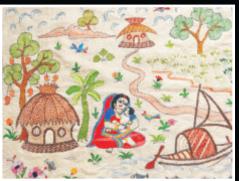


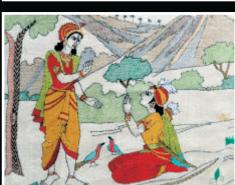


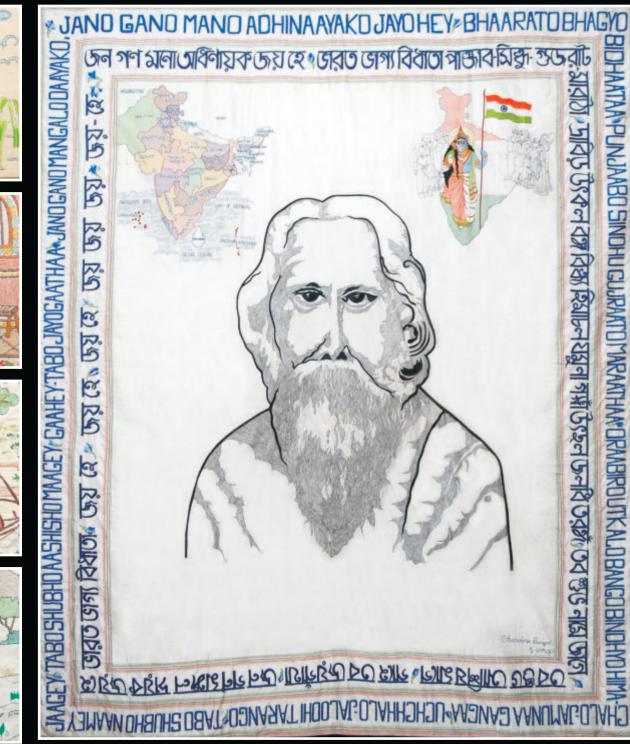
Krishna Leela with Asthsakhiya Musicians







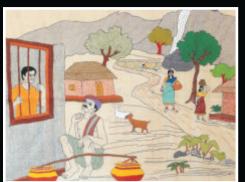




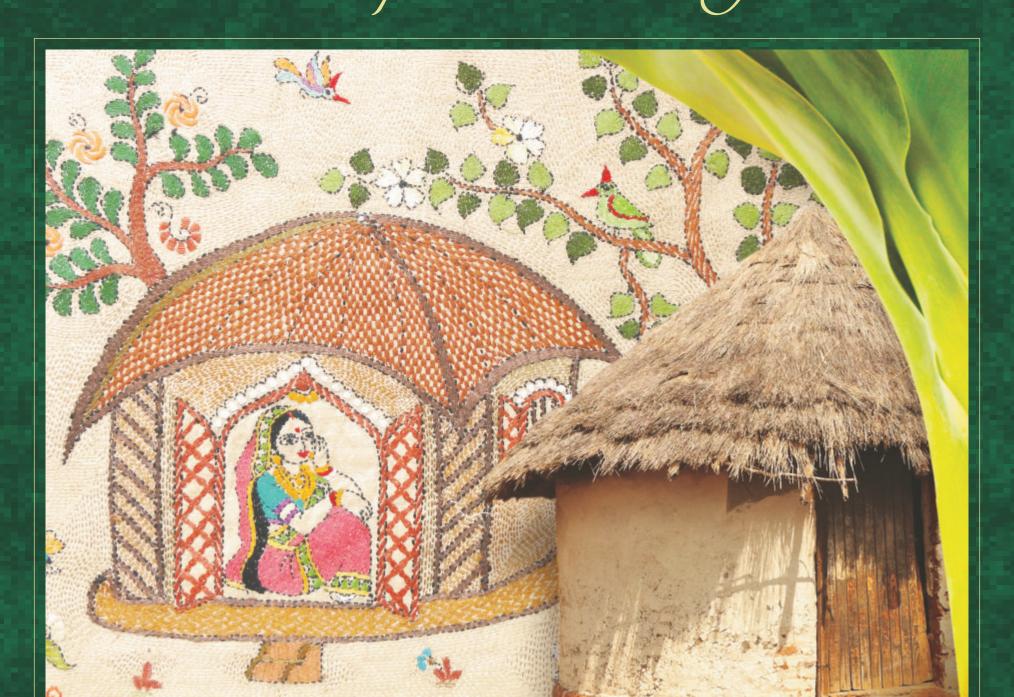






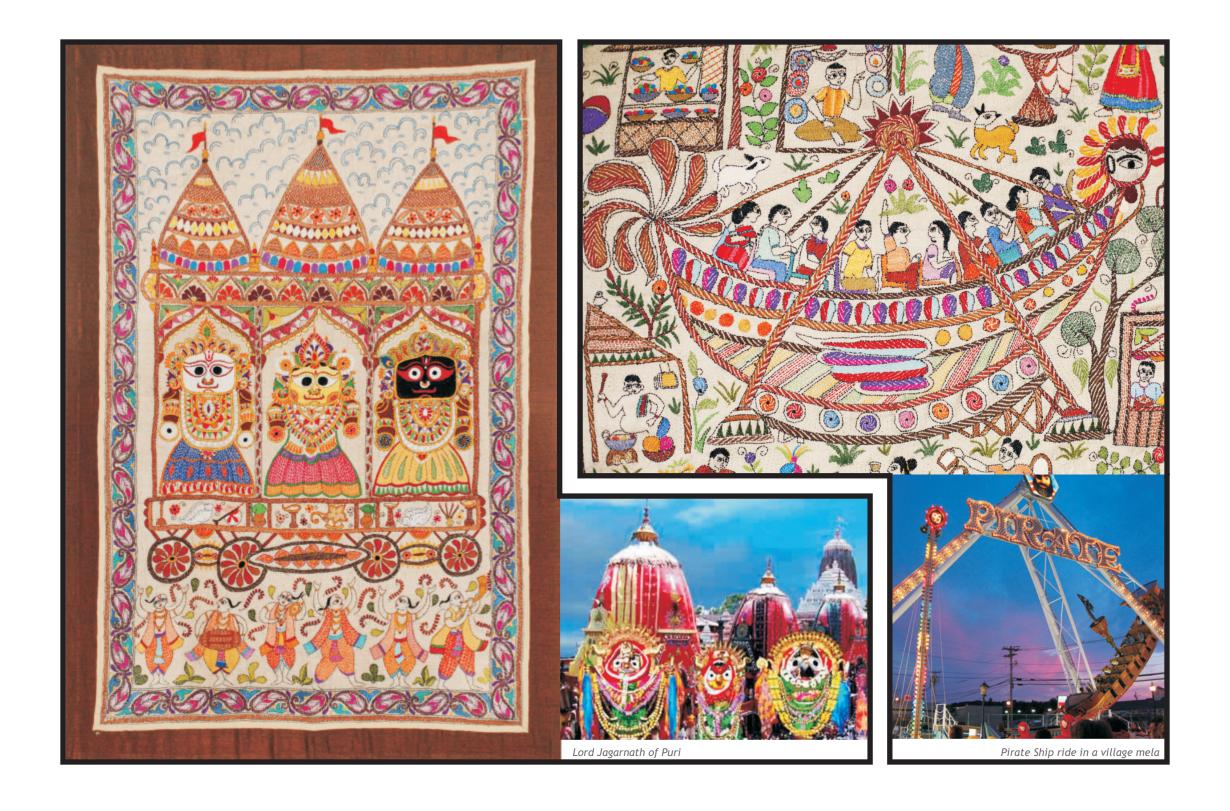


# Rural India depicted Through Kantha





Lije in rural Bengal



# Exhibitions



Soon after SHE was informally incorporated, Shamlu and Malika designed a collection of exquisite modernday *Kantha* apparel, which included *salwar kurta* ensembles, *dupattas*, *saris*, bedcovers, cushion covers and table linen. Its first exhibition was held at the Park Hotel in Kolkata. The strict quality control that has always been the hallmark of SHE textiles from the very beginning ensured that every item on display was unique. A total sell-out, SHE received enough orders to keep its artisans busy for the following year. Several exhibitions followed in Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Bengaluru.

In 1990, Shamlu's friend Robyn Beeche invited SHE to hold its first overseas exhibition in her studio apartment across the road from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Colourful Kantha saris and other Kantha textiles, imaginatively displayed, were prominently visible through the seventeen-feet-high windows of the apartment and drew passersby in large numbers to the display. People found it hard to believe that all the embroidery was done by hand and not on machines. One thing led to another — Shamlu and Malika were soon back at the Commonwealth Institute in London, with an exposition similar to the one held earlier in Robyn's apartment. A smaller but hugely successful exhibition was organised by Shamlu's sister, Indu Gidwani, at her residence in Cambridge. Several more exhibitions organised over the years, in

eam Leader Sadhana Mondal at the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe









Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe

collaboration with Annie Macdonald, Charlotte Fraser and Christianne d'Serra showed *Kantha* wall hangings enhancing the magnificence of well appointed drawing rooms, and *Kantha* bedcovers adorning the intricately-carved four-poster beds in stately mansions. And, *Kantha* scarves became the English woman's fashion statement. SHE's entry into *haute couture* and *haute décor* in the U.S. was initiated by Maya-di, wife of the then Indian Ambassador to the U.S., late Sri Siddhartha Shankar Ray. Shamlu was invited to exhibit high quality *Kantha* textiles at the Gandhi Centre in the U.S. capital.

Afriend, Manjula Bansal, organised an exhibition in her beautiful home in New York. More friends in San Francisco opened their homes for *Kantha exhibitions*. Jacqueline Lundquist, wife of Richard Celeste, President of the University of Colorado, invited Shamlu to exhibit *Kantha* in Colorado Springs. Visitors to each of these exhibitions were awestruck by the exquisite craftsmanship on view.

Annette Alvarez and Srirupa Sen in Santa Fe, New Mexico, have been teaming up with Shamlu since 2005, to display and sell SHE's *Kantha* creations at the Annual Market organised there by the Museum of International Folk Art. Some SHE artisans have accompanied Shamlu there and have interacted with international tourists (holidaying in Albuquerque and Santa Fe) flocking to the market to see the handicrafts displayed there from many countries around the world. *Kantha* continues to get wide exposure and appreciation at this annual attraction, year after year.

Kantha was comparatively less-known in mid-west America. A chance encounter with an acquaintance, Indira Mital, of Wisconsin, filled this void too. Herself an ardent admirer of Kantha, she arranged for a viewing of Kantha at the John Michael Kohler Arts

Center in Kohler, in the summer of 2010.

Leslie Umberger, the Senior Curator, and Terri Yoho, the Executive Director of the Kohler Foundation, were so impressed by the exquisite craftsmanship of the *Kantha* apparel worked in intricate detail by the rural artisans of SHE, that the entire lot was bought on the spot. Many pieces of apparel in *Kantha* embroidery were ordered for the JMKAC Gift Shop, as well. Shamlu's trips to Milwaukee and Chicago were also very fruitful for SHE.

A heightened awareness of *Kantha* had been created in the U.K. and the U.S., by now.

Besides the exhibitions in the U.K. and the U.S., SHE Kantha has gone to Japan for three exhibitions, with the help of a friend, Geeta Mehta, of the Asiatic Society of Japan. The most significant was the one organised by the World Quilters' Magazine in Yokohama. At this highly sought-after exhibition, there were quilters from America, Australia, New Zealand, England, Korea and Japan. All quilts, other than the Kanthas from India, were created from computerised designs, with machine-stitched patches of fabric. Kantha has the unique distinction of being the only hand-embroidered quilting tradition in the world today. This is a matter of great pride for India.

A couple of smaller exhibitions in Australia have led to long-term friendships with Valerie Wilson and Sue McFall. The work of SHE artisans is exhibited there, frequently.

Dominique and Hubert Boukris have been instrumental in organising exhibitions every year at private venues in Montmorency, Paris, Gordes in the south of France and Marseilles, since 2005. French *aficionados* have been known to comment that they can actually feel the fourth dimension of *Kantha...* the *stree shakti* of











the women of rural Bengal.

In 2011, Shamlu Dudeja conceptualised an ingenious way to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of the Bard of Bengal, *Gurudev* Rabindranath Tagore. Under her guidance, the rural artisans of Self Help Enterprise translated scenes from Tagore classics into "Kantha as StitchArt". Panels of *tussar* silk lined with old cotton muslin became their canvases, their needles were their brushes and the skeins of thread became the colour palette. Their stitch portraitures of Tagore's classics were reinforced with a cotton layer for added strength.

The first exhibition, *Kantha: Manavi Gantha*, at the Raj Bhavan, Kolkata, was hosted by His Excellency, Shri M. K. Narayanan. This was sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. This exposition was also shown for a month at the Rabindranath Tagore Centre, in Kolkata, at the invitation of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Later, for a year, it travelled to various cities across the globe such as Dhaka, Cairo, The Hague, Berlin and London (sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations).

The panels of "Tagore in *Kantha*" blazed a new trail and took pride of place in the highest echelons of StitchArt, wherever they travelled.

One of the most memorable exhibitions put up by SHE was at the invitation from the U.S. Consul General in Kolkata, Mr. Dean Thompson, in 2012. A *Kantha* stall was specially organised for the U.S. Secretary of State, Mrs. Hillary Clinton and her team at Hotel Taj Bengal, Kolkata, during the dignitary's one day visit to the city.

Secretary Clinton was escorted to the SHE stall by Ms. Nancy Powell, the U.S. Ambassador to India. Mrs Clinton told Shamlu that she still had the *Kantha* panel which had been gifted to her years earlier, when she was the First Lady of the United States. She bought a *Kantha* panel depicting Tagore at the stall for gifting to the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Ms Mamata Banerjee.

The women of Bengal have always worshiped *Ma Durga* as their revered goddess, and have drawn *stree shakti* from her. The *Kantha* artisans of SHE, celebrated *Kantha Maha Durga Utsav* in the most elegant manner, at the Art Gallery of Hotel ITC Sonar, Kolkata, during October 2012. The goddess, in her various incarnations, was portrayed through exquisite *Kanthar kaaj*.

During the 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary celebrations of *Swami* Vivekananda in 2013, SHE artisans crafted panels with Swamiji's life as the theme. *Kantha* portraiture of Vivekananda, the journey of his life from Narendranath to Vivekananda, his pilgrimages and his interactions with *Thakur* Ramakrishna have been skilfully executed in *Kantha* stitch. A brilliant stitch portrait of Kanyakumari and a double bedcover-sized panel with scenes from Vivekananda's life with *Kanthar kaaj* have heirloom quality.

In SHE's most recent exhibition in Delhi 2013,















"Kantha as StitchArt" exhibition at India International Centre, New Delhi. Inauguration by Smt. Gursharan Singh, Dr. (Smt) Isher Ahluwalia and Smt Sharmila Tagore.

Shamlu Dudeja displayed "Kantha as StitchArt" at the Art Gallery of the Indian International Centre Annexe, New Delhi. The Chief Guest, Smt Gursharan Kaur, wife of the Indian Prime Minister, inaugurated the exhibition and congratulated Shamlu Dudeja for encouraging SHE artisans to produce such wonderful work. Special Guests Dr. (Smt) Isher Ahluwalia and Smt Sharmila Tagore applauded the efforts of the rural artisans in crafting these unique pieces of art.

The themes of the StitchArt Panels were varied and included the following:

- Village scenes such as *Biye Bari* (a Bengali wedding), *Adivasi* dance, and a village *Mela*
- Jungle scenes showing different animals
- Raas Leela, Nauka Vihar, Ram Abhishekh, and other scenes from the epics Mahabharata and the Ramayana
- Different manifestations of Ma Durga
- Lord Ganesh, Lord Jagannath, Lord Shreenath, Guru Nanak Dev and Lord Buddha
- Busts of Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda, crafted to celebrate 150 years of their Birth Anniversaries
- Several depictions of Jamini Roy's paintings on the pallus of saris.

*Kantha* is priceless today as much for its ethnicity and traditional appeal as for its contemporary allure. Wherever in the world *Kantha* has gone, the admiration for the StitchArt has been overwhelming and unanimous.











#### **SHE France**

In the past couple of years, Dominique and Hubert Boukris have been deeply involved in marketing Kantha in France, in homes of their elitist friends in Paris or in an Old Castle, Gordes, in South of France.

With the support of SHE France, SHE Foundation has been able to increase its welfare activities for the rural artisans. These have included:

- Health and eye camps Nutritional drinks, vitamins and medicines Spectacles and crutches Surgeries such as hernia and hysterectomy
- Simple computers for children Distribution of articles of everyday use, such as: clothes, blankets, steel utensils, pressure cookers and solar lights.
  - Loans for extension and repair to their homes Water purifiers

#### An exhibition of "Tagore in Kantha" at Vichitra Hall, Visva Bharati, Santiniketan

On the occasion of the centenary celebrations of the historical day when Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore received the telegram about his Nobel Prize, Professor Sushanta Dattagupta, Vice Chancellor of Visva Bharati, invited SHE Foundation to hold an exhibition of "Tagore in Kantha" at the Vichira Hall, on 14 November, 2013.

Kantha revival started in villages near Santiniketan, under the patronage of the women from Tagore's family. It is a matter of great honour for SHE Foundation to have brought "Tagore in Kantha" to rest in Santiniketan.

## Objectives of SHE Foundation EACH ONE, REACH ONE

The tireless efforts of SHE Foundation to promote Kantha in different parts of the world are manifold:

- To revive this magnificent cultural heritage of rural Bengal To revise Kantha so that Kantha is considered to be a fashion statement with a social cause
  - As a sequel, there is an increase income generating opportunities for the artisans To give them a sense of self-esteem
    - To uplift the lifestyle of the entire village, as more and more country women are empowered







Gouri Basu graduated from Presidency College, Kolkata with Honours in Chemistry. She did her post graduation in Bio-Chemistry from the Calcutta University College of Science. She has taught at St Xaviers College, Kolkata, and is presently the Vice-Principal of Loreto House, Kolkata. Gouri Basu is one of Kolkata's best known show anchors and is seen regularly on stage and on television. She has written a very well researched book on the dance forms of Eastern India, Rhythmic Rhapsodies, published by the Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre, Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Her translation of Bengal's hundred year old book of Fairy Tales (Thakurmar Jhuli) has also been very well received. Her most recently published book on the dance forms from North East India has also been published by the Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre. A highly talented individual, Gouri Basu strikes an excellent balance between her many activities.

