

Stitching the Social Transformation Through Women: Socio-Political Empowerment of Nakshi Kantha Artisans in Birbhum, West Bengal

Dr. Antara Das

Assistant Professor,

Department of Bengali, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

Email: antaradasbhu@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper investigates the transformative role of Nakshi Kantha embroidery to find out the present scenario of empowering rural women in Birbhum district, West Bengal. On the basis of an ICSSR project, preliminary fieldwork (September 2025) was conducted across two villages in Bolpur and Nanoor blocks, combining quantitative and qualitative data from 61 women artisans. The study reveals a 127% rise in average income, a 52% growth in personal banking, and a 29% rise in political participation. Using Amartya Sen's Development as Freedom and feminist economic perspectives, this study views Nakshi Kantha not just as cultural heritage but as a meaningful avenue for women's empowerment. The artisans' cooperative model functions as a tool to redistribute social influence, enabling marginalized women to emerge as active participants in rural democratic processes. Informed by global perspectives such as those outlined in Gender, Rights and Development: A Global Sourcebook, this study repositions Nakshi Kantha within the larger discourse of rights-based development. Through embroidery, women attain empowerment, showing that traditional crafts serve both as a source of livelihood and a medium of expression, where creativity allows them to negotiate social and economic power. Drawing on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage brief, Nakshi Kantha is viewed as a living heritage that sustains community identity while adapting to socio-economic shifts. Yet, field evidence also uncovers continuing inequalities in income distribution, digital inclusion, and design exposure that mirror the wider developmental divide between urban and rural women. The analysis contributes to understanding craft-based economies not simply as cultural continuities but as evolving political spaces where women's agency is redefined through collective practice. By merging Sen's ideas of "capability expansion" with Kabeer's theory of transforming "choice into voice," the study situates the Nakshi Kantha movement as both a feminist economic strategy and a subtle social revolution. Ultimately, it concludes that creative labour in rural Bengal acts as a quiet yet radical force, a process through which women stitch their selfhood, dignity, and participation into the democratic fabric of the state and the country.

Key Words: Nakshi Kantha, women artisans, gender equity, cooperative economy, empowerment, Birbhum, rural development

1. INTRODUCTION:

Nakshi Kantha, the traditional hand-embroidered art of Bengal, once represented women's domestic artistry confined to private spaces. Over the past two decades, it has evolved as a significant economic and social movement. In Birbhum, approximately 8,000 women artisans now sustain livelihoods based on this tradition, generating an estimated ₹24 crore annual turnover for the local economy (1). Once confined to domestic storytelling, the practice of Nakshi Kantha has evolved into a structured occupation, reshaping women's social and economic roles in their communities. According to Kantha Forms and Transformations (2), the contemporary Nakshi Kantha movement symbolizes the transition of embroidery from memory work to market work, transforming what was once an intimate art into a collective form of livelihood. In this transformation, women's craft acquires new political meaning. Motifs that previously conveyed personal tales of love, loss, and endurance now symbolize collective solidarity, labor rights, and communal resilience.

UNESCO's brief on Intangible Cultural Heritage (3) describes Nakshi Kantha as a craft that binds generations of women in a shared narrative of identity and expression. This ongoing tradition is evident in Birbhum's cooperative

clusters, where women collectively oversee production, financial management, and marketing activities. The process aligns with Sen's (4) argument that true development lies not only in economic growth but in expanding individual capabilities, the freedom to choose, act, and transform one's circumstances.

Empirical evidence from the present study reinforces these theoretical claims. Women's engagement in embroidery cooperatives under Anandadhara and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) has created new possibilities for social mobility. Through shared labour, artisans negotiate space within both household and public life. This process resonates with Kabeer's (5) framework of empowerment, in which access to material resources leads to greater participation in decision-making and recognition within social institutions.

The Nakshi Kantha initiative also embodies the principle identified in the Gender, Rights and Development report (6) as "empowerment through creative economies." It redefines traditional gender divisions of labour and demonstrates how localized skills can become instruments of rural democracy. In this sense, Nakshi Kantha is not only a product but a social text—a woven document of transformation.

Participation in Nakshi Kantha cooperatives is not simply an income-generating activity but an assertion of socio-political identity. Within the broader discourse of gender and development, it situates the Nakshi Kantha movement as a reflection of feminist empowerment in eastern India, where each thread becomes a symbolic act of reclaiming dignity, voice, and freedom.

2. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF BIRBHUM:

Birbhum remains economically vulnerable with an HDI of 0.55, below West Bengal's state average (7). Female literacy stands at 64.1%, and most women belong to marginalized Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, or OBC communities. Because women have historically been excluded from education, markets, and political participation, the rise of Nakshi Kantha collectives represents a distinctive socio-cultural development (8).

Nakshi Kantha has transformed women's domestic art into a source of economic resilience and collective strength. The artisans now function as self-managed spaces where they negotiate with the market, local government, and patriarchy simultaneously, converting embroidery into both economic capital and symbolic power.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The research employs a mixed-method design:

Quantitative survey of 61 women artisans across two villages (Bolpur and Nanoor block).

Qualitative methods: focus group discussions, life-history narratives, and participant observation.

Respondents were associated with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under Anandadhara and NRLM.

The analytical framework draws upon:

Sen's Development as Freedom (9), emphasizing freedom as development.

ICRW (10) empowerment indicators: access to resources, decision-making, income control, and social participation.

This combination allowed correlation of economic gain with self-perceived confidence and civic participation.

4. FINDINGS:

4.1 Economic Empowerment:

Before joining cooperatives, average monthly income of women artisans was around ₹3,200. By 2024, it rose to ₹7,270 (127% increase). Personal bank-account ownership increased from 36% to 88%, while access to institutional credit jumped from 22% to 80%. These data affirm Sida's (11) premise that economic empowerment enhances strategic life choices. Almost 89% of artisans reported higher self-esteem, and 62% participated in household decision-making. Yet, empowerment remains uneven, as most artisans continue to rely on local intermediaries for marketing and pricing decisions (12).

4.2 Education and Skill Enhancement:

Within artisan families, literacy improved from 61% to 77%, though higher education remains low. Around 61% of artisans received design and entrepreneurship training through MSME programmes, while 37% acquired only basic digital literacy. These developments echo Sen's (13) capability approach. However, many noted that short-term training rarely translated into market advantage.

4.3 Political Participation:

Economic autonomy has positively influenced civic engagement: 42% attend Gram Sabha meetings, 16% participate in local election campaigns, and 11% hold SHG or panchayat leadership positions. This aligns with Kabeer's (14) concept of transformation from "choice to voice."

5. CHALLENGES IN THE PRESENT CONTEXT:

1. Market Dependence: 63% depend on middlemen for raw materials and sales.
2. Income Instability: Seasonal fluctuations cause 18–25% variation.
3. Workload Burden: 74% balance embroidery with unpaid domestic duties.
4. Limited Welfare Coverage: Only 20% registered under government schemes.
5. Innovation Gap: 68% lack exposure to contemporary designs or digital platforms.
6. Inter-Generational Continuity: Young women often migrate, reducing skill transmission.
7. These issues confirm that while cooperative participation enhances autonomy, empowerment remains incomplete without structural policy interventions.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Digital Market Linkages: Create an online ‘Birbhum Kantha Portal’ connecting artisans with buyers.
- Design Collaborations: Partner with Kala Bhavana (Visva-Bharati) and NIFT Kolkata for continuous mentorship.
- Comprehensive Welfare Coverage: Register all artisans under social insurance and pension schemes.
- Institutional Representation: Mandate SHG representation in Gram Sansad committees.
- Annual Gender Audits: Evaluate cooperatives on parity in income, participation, and leadership.

7. CONCLUSION:

The Nakshi Kantha movement in Birbhum exemplifies how creative labour can be a site of silent revolution. Through stitching, women reconstruct both material lives and symbolic identities. Their journey from private domestic spheres to public cooperative spaces illustrates a profound redefinition of gender roles. As Sen (15) argues, development must be understood as freedom—the expansion of people’s real capabilities. Yet, freedom for these artisans remains fragile, conditioned by structural inequalities and policy gaps. The ongoing challenge is transforming symbolic empowerment into sustained institutional strength. Nakshi Kantha embroidery transcends cultural heritage to become a vibrant expression of women’s resistance. Through their stitching, rural women in Bengal assert their quest for equality and slowly establish a role in the democratic fabric of society.

REFERENCES:

1. Department of MSME & Textiles, Government of West Bengal. Annual Report on Handicrafts and Cottage Industries of West Bengal. 2023, pp. 22, 25, 27.
2. International Institute for Asian Studies. “Kantha Forms and Transformations.” IIAS Newsletter, no. 89, 2021, pp. 5–8.
3. UNESCO. Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity: Traditional Art of Nakshi Kantha Embroidery. UNESCO, 2021, pp. 5–12.
4. Sen, Amartya. Development as Freedom. Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, pp. 36–45.
5. Kabeer, Naila. “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment.” Development and Change, vol. 30, no. 3, 1999, pp. 435–464.
6. Mukhopadhyay, Manisha, and Shireen Meer, editors. Gender, Rights and Development: A Global Sourcebook. KIT Publishers, 2008, pp. 112–115.
7. Department of Planning, Statistics & Programme Monitoring, Government of West Bengal. West Bengal Human Development Report (WBHDR) 2022. 2022, pp. 45–62.
8. Basu Thakur, Pratima, and Sarmistha De. “Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Kantha Artisans: A Case Study of Birbhum District of West Bengal.” Global Media Journal (Indian Edition), vol. 14, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1–15.
9. Sen, Amartya. Development as Freedom. Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, pp. 36–45.
10. International Centre for Research on Women. Measuring Women’s Empowerment: Key Indicators. 2011, pp. 10–25.
11. Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Gender Equality: The Key to Economic Growth. 2010, pp. 18–33.
12. Basu Thakur, Pratima, and Sarmistha De. “Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Kantha Artisans: A Case Study of Birbhum District of West Bengal.” Global Media Journal (Indian Edition), vol. 14, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1–15.
13. Sen, Amartya. Development as Freedom. Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, pp. 36–45.
14. Kabeer, Naila. “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment.” Development and Change, vol. 30, no. 3, 1999, pp. 435–464.
15. Sen, Amartya. Development as Freedom. Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, pp. 36–45.