



High Commission of India will be unveiling an exhibition entitled "Rise of Digital India" in Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH) in February 2016, which will showcase the phenomenal rise of computing sector in India, and the use of computing and application of digital technologies in India since independence, which has touched the lives of millions of Indians in areas such as agriculture, power generation, weather forecasting, e-commerce, atomic energy, space, communication and e-governance.



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## Cultural Calendar - February 2016

**3**  
Wednesday  
9.30am - 12.30 pm

**Workshop on Indian Textile Designing**  
By Mrs. Priti Nartiang ( Asst. Lecturer and Professional Textile Designer, Vishwa Bharati, Santiniketan) in association with Santiniketan Friends  
Contact: Anusha Wijesinghe on tel # 0777256595  
Venue: ICC Auditorium

**Lecture - Success and Peace through Vedanta**  
by Ms.Umayal Venugopal  
Disciple of Swami Parthasarathy, Vedanta Academy , India  
Venue: ICC Auditorium

**12**  
Friday  
6.00 pm

**19**  
Friday  
6.00 pm

**Sri Thyagaraja Aaradhana - Festival of Carnatic Music**  
Venue: Saraswathie Hall, No.74, Lorensz Raod, Bambalapitiya, Colombo 04  
All musicians are welcome to participate  
Rehersals will be held on 17th & 18th February 2016 at 4.00p.m)

**Quawali**  
By Heshan Gamage, MA(Music) & Group  
Indira Kala Sangeet Vishvavidyalaya, India  
Venue: ICC Auditorium

**24**  
Wednesday  
6.00 pm

Programmes subject to change  
Admission to all programmes are on first come first served basis  
**All are cordially invited**



# Sanskarika

Newsletter of the Indian Cultural Centre, Colombo February 2016



UNIE ARTS, 2330195

Kantha - A Stitch Art of India

## Kantha - A Stitch in Time



Visualize a mild winter afternoon in the rural outskirts of Kolkata, the humble turf of Bangabhoomi's signature craft **Kantha**: a few birds are moving around happily in a bush; a 'koel's' solo refrain 'koo-koo-koo' beckons its elusive partner. Sparrows are chirping in the background and a few seven-sisters are tweeting in unison. Timid pigeons are hobbling on the ground, pecking for worms and jerking their tiny heads right and left to catch the sound of any approaching footsteps.

Four or five women are sitting in the backyard of a mud hut, under a **Krishnachura** tree, chatting and working on a group project. Their chatter is idle but their fingers are not as they hold tiny tools, simple sewing needles, which dart backwards and forwards on the fabric they hold, picking tiny stitches so fine and so precise that the reverse of their **Kanthal kaaj** is as neat as is the obverse.

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 **Kanthalas**, belonging to the early 1800s, were embroidered with black, red and blue threads. Old **saris** or **dhotis**, frayed and soft after several washes, their colours all faded, were used to make **Kantha** quilts. Thread drawn from the colourful borders of those saris was reused to tack the layers.

The perpetrators of **Kantha** craft, the humble village women, often embellished their **Kantha** quilts with embroidery, the **Kanthal 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 **Kanthalas** and involved its craftswomen in the revival process by uniting them at the grass root 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 **Kanthal 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

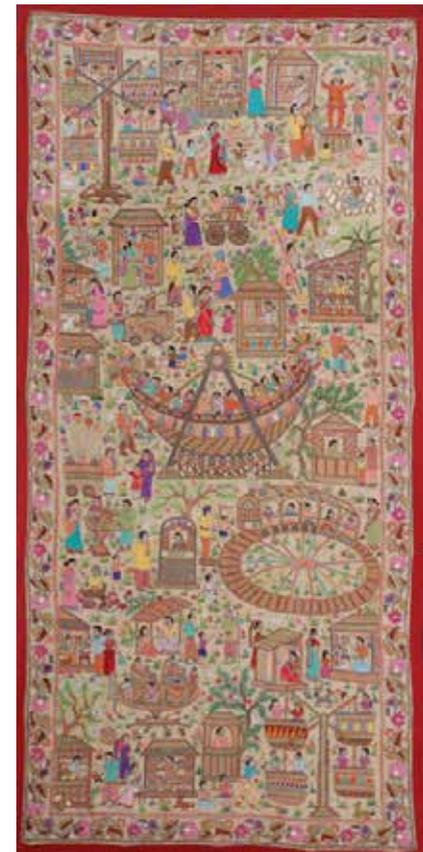
popularising **Kanthal kaaj** as decorative embroidery on single layered untailored luxury fabrics for **saris**, **dupattas** and scarves. Retaining the spontaneity, the ethnicity and the magic of the earlier 'quilt', Shamlu used her Mathematical expertise for embellishing single layers of Bangalore 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 **Kanthal kaaj** commissioned by Shamlu's non-profit venture S.H.E. (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. **Kanthal kaaj** has been in the lives of its village folk for centuries and has its own language for telling their stories. Each piece of **Kanthal kaaj** weaves a yarn about its creators, about the group of women who live in mud dwellings but create exquisite stitch paintings.

Pouring over pieces of fabric that already bear the beginnings of an intricate design, the rural artisans of S.H.E. bring about the synthesis of a tradition of which they are an integral part and which gives them a distinct identity. They are the perpetrators 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 **Kanthal**



**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.

**Kanthalas** 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.

to be continued.....

Source: **Through the eye of a needle** published by Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre, Ministry of Culture, Government of India