Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Series-11

LIVING TRADITIONS

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ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BANGLADESH
**NAKSHI KANTHA**

*Kantha* is the Bangla name for the English word “quilt,” which is derived from the Latin *culcita*—a stuffed sack, mattress, or cushion. The word *kantha* has no satisfactory etymological root. The *kantha* is widely understood throughout Bengal as a cotton wrap or spread, which has been stitched with minute needlework by women on layers of discarded saris, lungis, or dhotis to obtain a thickness that reinforces the finished work. Being simply stitched to keep the layers together and stable, the *kantha* is primarily based on a single craft called quilting. At present the *kantha* is a generic term used to denote all articles made by quilting for a variety of uses. These articles include blankets and bedcovers, cloths used as seating and prayer mats and as spreads and hangings, and smaller objects used to wrap precious items.

The *nakshi kantha* is a *kantha* with elaborate pictorial embroidery, rather than a simple stitched non-representational *kantha*. More precisely, a *kantha* is a stitched item, whereas a *nakshi kantha* is both quilted and embroidered. The phrase *phul kantha* is occasionally used to refer to the *nakshi kantha*. In the *nakshi kantha*, two crafts—quilting and embroidering—are involved. Even then both Gurusaday Dutt and Stella Kramrisch, the two pioneers, were content with the term *kantha* in their study of the *nakshi kantha*. “The art of the *kantha* furnishes an illustration of the wonderful patience, craftsmanship and resourcefulness of the village women,” says Dutt. Kramrisch wrote on the *nakshi kantha* under the title of “Kantha” in the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* in 1939, and she adhered to this term in *Unknown India: Ritual Art in the Tribe and Village*, which was published in 1968. Niaz Zaman also used the term *kantha* when she produced her excellent work titled *The Art of Kantha Embroidery* in 1981 and revised it in 1993. She informs us that in West Bengal all *kanthas*, whether plain or embroidered, are called “*kantha*.” In Nawabganj district of Bangladesh, the term *kantha* refers to embroidered quilts, and for roughly stitched quilts the term *gailla* is used. Because of the popularity of Jasim Uddin’s famous poem *Nakshi Kanthar Math* (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt) the term *nakshi kantha* has come into use increasingly in Bangladesh and has now become synonymous with the embroidered quilt. Recognizing the distinction between the *nakshi kantha* and the *kantha* both technically and artistically, I prefer to use the term *nakshi kantha* to study all aspects of the embroidered quilt.
The benefits of insulation from layered fabrics were known to the ancients in many parts of the world. The Egyptians, the Chinese, and the Turks are said to have used quilted materials for warmth as well as for cushioning in their armour.

The quilting tradition in Bengal began in remote antiquity, as women sought ways to keep their families warm in winter.

Stella Kramrisch has described a mythical story to indicate the origin of the kantha. According to this story, there was a guru by the name of Kanthalipu (plastering guru). By caste he was a sweeper. While sweeping he used to collect old rags and torn cloths. One day a needle pricked his finger; it hurt so much that he started crying. Hearing his wailing, a dakini (witch or spirit) appeared before him. Reproaching him, she said: "If you cry at such little pain, how will you be able to bear the pathos of rebirth over and over again?" Kanthalipu answered her: "That is true, but I do not know what I should do." The dakini then advised him: "The sky is nothing but a great void in endless space. Between the earth and the sky is also a vast emptiness. By sewing the pieces of rags you should achieve a unity of spirit and purpose with all living creatures in the world. The sewing of rags symbolizes the use of all discarded things. To do this you need to consolidate your deep feelings and knowledge. Sitting in the void you will have to combine your thoughts and knowledge with the help of the needle of kindness. The pieces of rags thus sewn together will turn into a complete piece. Similarly all the universe's living things will be able to create their own entities." As Kanthalipu acted accordingly, the kantha made its first appearance.

While this myth is interesting, it does not really give us any authentic information or clue as to the origin of the kantha. It only serves to emphasize the usefulness of all discarded things and the need for patience, thoughtfulness and kindness in quilting a kantha. The myth has a philosophical meaning as well. Reassembling cloth, the quilter reassembles the universe. Her art parallels the mythological acts of reconstruction that follow destruction to mark a cyclical sense of time within an enfolding oneness. Ganesa’s head is cut off and replaced with that of an elephant. A patched new unity arises. Things roll on. Making new units out of fragments of old units, the quilters of the kantha participate in the cyclical reconstruction of the universe. Moreover, there is a belief that old cloth wards off the evil eye. The naksha kantha, made of old cloth, is thus supposed to protect its user from harm. This belief, however, stands shattered with the increasing use of redymade yarn and new cloth for quilting and embroidering new nakshi kanthas for the open market.

Both Mohammad Syedur and Naz Zaman think that the earliest reference to the kantha occurs in a popular ballad that appears under different names: Govichandra Gan, Gopichandra Gan, Mainamati Gan, etc. According to the ballad, a legendary king named Govichandra or Gopichandra, on the advice of Mainamati, his mother, became an ascetic. A barber, who shaved the king’s head, wrapped his neck with a kantha as is evident from a verse of the ballad. According to Mohammad Syedur, Gopichandra was a king in the twelfth century. Scholars, of whom Nalini Kanta Bhattasali is the foremost, have tried to identify this legendary king with Govindachandra (c.1020-
NAKSHI KANTHA 363

1045) of the Chandra dynasty. Although it is difficult to fix the date of the ballad, it is certain that it was compiled not earlier than the seventeenth century. As the genealogy of Govindachandra of the ballad is quite different from what we know about the Chandra king of the same name, the antiquity of the ballad does not stand proved beyond any reasonable doubt; therefore, the reference to the kantha in the ballad cannot be dated earlier than the seventeenth century.

Gaji Pir, Monai Pir, Khizr Pir, Bhola Pir, Chandi Pir, and many others, all of whom were sufis and still revered in Bangladesh, are known to have worn layers of old cloth stitched. The Bauls often refer to kanthas in their mystical songs.

Strictly speaking, the earliest reference to the kantha in the Bangla literature is found in the Chattana Charitamrita by Krishnadasa Kaviraj Goswami. This work documents the life and precepts of the Vaishnava saint Chattana Mahaprabhu (1486-1533). There the poet tells us that Suchi Devi, the mother of Chattana, sent a homemade kantha to her son at Puri, Orissa, through some pilgrims. Chattana is said to have draped himself often with a kantha.

The nakshi kantha or the embroidered quilt, which has evolved through the centuries into a highly personal folk art form entailing craft as well as creativity, has long been recognized as one of the foremost examples of the living traditions, characterized by ingenuity, originality, colour, texture, and loveliness. It was the casual combination of patches of fabric out of a practical need and a spontaneous creativity that resulted in this unique living tradition. Undoubtedly, of the many forms of traditional art in Bangladesh, one of the most imaginative and colorful is the nakshi kantha. Each nakshi kantha is a painting in fabric, pattern and color.

In Bangladesh, nakshi kanthas are made exclusively by women, who take pleasure and comfort in elaborate pictorial embroidery as one of the few creative outlets reserved for them. Even in the hands of a female member of an impoverished Bengali family, nakshi kanthas reflect a spirit and energy that makes them outstanding examples of a national and international folk art.

In the past, nakshi kanthas were enjoyed mostly within the bounds of family life in villages. Women with little or no knowledge of mathematics were capable of planning and stitching the most intricate patterns, transforming them into breathtaking harmonies of color and design. Stitching cloth together, they stitched their families together. The nakshi kanthas they made out of their old worn saris they made into gifts. They gave them to daughters when they left home in marriage. They gave them to sons and husbands so that when they were off and alone, they could roll themselves up in cloth worn soft from touching the skin of the beloved woman. Embraced by the nakshi kantha, the man was comforted, connected, and protected. Women would teach their daughters and granddaughters how to stitch. Traditionally, girls had to complete at least one nakshi kantha by the time they became marriageable. Most families then owned at least one nakshi kantha that was handed down from grandmother/mother to granddaughter/daughter. To a person, sleeping under a nakshi kantha made by his/her mother or grandmother, especially if it was in one of the old familiar patterns, conveyed subtle warmth involved with appreciation of continuity of his/her heritage.
This homegrown artistic pleasure and admiration, while still alive, began to diffuse in the twentieth century. From 1915 Rabindranath Tagore collected naskhi kantuhas among other items of folk art in apprehension of the decline of handicraft because of industrial production (see Chapter 27). Gurusaday Dutt, pioneer for the preservation of folk art in Bengal, began collecting naskhi kantuhas among numerous other items in the 1930s and organized, in March 1932, an exhibition of folk art in Kolkata, the first of its kind in India, under the auspices of the Indian Society of Oriental Art. The folk art exhibition that Gurusaday organized in Kolkata, the lectures that he delivered in Kolkata and London, and the articles that he published created among educationists and art critics at home and abroad a lively interest in the folk art of Bengal and eventually led to the establishment, by the Calcutta University, of the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art in 1937, and in this Museum a place of special importance was given to naskhi kantuhas, most of which were collected from Bangladesh. The great folklorist Dinesh Chandra Sen also collected naskhi kantuhas about the same time. Gurusaday was the first to visualize a museum that would be devoted exclusively to the arts and crafts of rural Bengal, and with this end in view he was assembling a collection that included, among other objects, a large number of naskhi kantuhas from different parts of Bengal, and he wrote articles on naskhi kantuhas. Dinesh Chandra Sen also discussed naskhi kantuhas in his writings. Complimenting Gurusaday, Dinesh Chandra wrote a letter to him with these words: "You have an eye to see and a heart to feel where lies the glory of Bengal. It is this that is sadly wanting in our so-called educated men. In you, I find the divine will to resuscitate a fallen country, personifying itself for immense work, which will be appreciated by our people in no distant future."

Before his death Gurusaday presented his entire collection to the Bengal Bratacharjya Society to establish a museum at Bratacharjyagram in the district of 24-Parganas, West Bengal. This museum became known as the Bratachari Janashiksha Pratishthan (now the Gurusaday Museum of Bengal Folk Art). In January 1941, the collection was shifted to Gurusaday's newly built house at Store Road, now Gurusaday Dutt Road.

Beginning in the 1960s, the Dhaka Museum was the first to collect naskhi kantuhas in Bangladesh, and in this country only during the last thirty years have naskhi kantuhas been valued by museums as works of art and by promoters of traditional art as major investments for sale at home and abroad. As a result, the naskhi kantha, instead of being confined to a rural home for exclusive use and enjoyment by the person(s) for whom it was so painstakingly created, has moved beyond the place of its origin to become an exhibit in a museum, to decorate a connoisseur's house, or to embellish a corporate boardroom.

While it may interest an art historian or an ethnographer to know if a specific naskhi kanta is from a certain period or region, or if a design depicts an event, a social celebration, or an episode from an epic or family history, it is just as fascinating to approach a naskhi kantha as a work of art isolated from emotion or intention. An appreciation of naskhi kantuhas can develop from at least two distinct angles: they can be regarded as significant reflections of the artist's interaction with what they see and enjoy, their materials, patterns, and subject matter indicating changes in artistic idioms and technical skills; or they can be enjoyed on their aesthetic merits with no knowledge of their historical or technological context.
Construction of the Nakshi Kantha

The *nakshi kantha*, as the manner of its making shows, is essentially a patched cloth. When saris or other non-tailored garments become frayed, they are reused in the making of *nakshi kanthas*. Lengths of unbroken cotton cloth are cut, wrapped and folded to bring the *nakshi kantha* into form. It is composed of several layers of worn cloth, stitched together and embroidered. According to the thickness of the *nakshi kantha* and its size, it is spread, used as a wrap to be worn, used simply as a wrap, or folded as a bag.

A sense of lively movement fits the *nakshi kantha*, and it is embroidered with nearly equal perfection on both sides. The design is drawn by the embroiderer herself or by another woman. No two *nakshi kanthas* are ever alike; each is an original creation, although the *nakshi kantha* from one region follow certain types and have more in common than those from another region. The *nakshi kantha* is either square or rectangular. The design relies in principle on a central circle occupied usually by a lotus flower. Four trees often mark the four corners. The central, wide-open, many-petaled lotus is an ancient symbol of universal manifestation. The four trees are symbols of the four directions. The entire ground of the quilted cloth between the lotus and the directional trees is filled with figures of human beings, animals and birds, a variety of symbolic objects, stylized plant forms, ornamental devices, and such other scenes, whose shapes and combinations are dictated by the imagination of the embroiderer herself. Indeed the *nakshi kantha* is infused with the vitality and spontaneity of folk art.

While the *nakshi kantha*, with all its dominant regional and cultural features, is a highly individual creation, it is also the manifestation of a creative process of integration that takes place within each woman who makes it. In others words, it is a statement of the heart of its maker.

**Stitches of the Nakshi Kantha**

A stitch is one complete movement of a threaded needle through a piece of cloth in sewing or embroidery. A stitch in the context of *nakshi kantha* embroidery is the movement of the from one side to the other repeatedly. The needle is inserted into the *kantha* at a 90 degree angle; then the thread is pulled through. The needle is again inserted, this time from the underside; then the thread is again pulled through. A stitch is the smallest unit in *nakshi kantha* embroidery. A pattern is formed by executing many stitches, either following a design painted on the *kantha* beforehand or just working freehand. *Nakshi kantha* embroidery uses various combinations of stitches. Each stitch has a special name to help identify it.

There are different methods of making stitches. An embroiderer ornaments a quilt with stitches of one or several kinds. The style of a *nakshi kantha* relies entirely upon the kind or kinds of stitch that the embroiderer chooses. The stitches of the *nakshi kantha* in Bangladesh fall into thirteen types: (1) back stitch, (2) bending stitch, (3) buttonhole stitch, (4) chain stitch, (5) cross stitch, (6) darns, (7) Holbein stitch (8) herringbone stitch, (9) pattern running stitch, (10) running stitch, (11) satin stitch, (12) stem stitch, and (13) weave running stitch.
The back stitch is an old and very adaptable stitch which can be used as a delicate outline or as a foundation in composite stitches. The back stitch passes through the fabric ground in an encircling motion. The needle in the simplest back stitch comes up from the back of the fabric, makes a stitch to the right and goes back to the back of the fabric, then passes behind the first stitch and comes up to the front of the fabric to the left of the first stitch. The needle then goes back to the back of the fabric through the same hole the stitch first came up from. The needle then repeats the movement to the left of the stitches and continues. The back stitch is most often used to outline an area of a design. Each back stitch is worked along one side of a square or diagonally across the square. This stitch follows intricate curves well if the stitches are worked in small and in an even manner in order to follow the flow of the curve. The front of the work is similar in appearance to the Holbein stitch; however, where the Holbein stitch is quite flat, the back stitch is slightly raised. When using the back stitch in a design, it is usually worked last and with a finer thread. For example, if two strands of thread have been used to work a cross stitch pattern, the back stitch will be worked with one thread.

Niaz Zaman has referred to the back stitch as the buktya. This stitch is widely popular and recognized because of its likeness to machine stitching and its constant use by hand in stitching garments. "It is a very appropriate stitch for embroidering the curving outlines of the sensitively drawn floral and leaf motifs," says Niaz Zaman. "The back stitch is occasionally used to outline motifs in Faridpur and Mymensingh naksh kamaitha, but its use is common in sujuk of the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region."

The bending stitch, referred to as the kuirya in Bangla, is a variation of the running stitch, in which the stitches are taken in closely parallel rows. Each stitch, however, moves slightly forwards. The whole line seems to bend, the name of the stitch being derived from this effect. "This stitch is ideal for rapid production. The bending stitch is used for working nakshi kamaitha borders such as pipre sari and bichha pad. It is also used for working the curvilinear swastika motif. The effectiveness of the bending stitch lies in its application in a short space of time, and yet the borders and the motif that are created by using this stitch are lovely. According to Niaz Zaman, when the bending stitch is used to embroider the swastika motif, it creates an effect similar to an optical illusion. "The motif seems to move before our eyes, giving rise to the feeling that it represents a moving wheel.""

The buttonhole stitch, like the chain stitch, catches a loop of the thread on the surface of the fabric, but the principal difference is that the needle does not return to the original hole to pass back to the back of the fabric. In the classic buttonhole stitch the needle is returned to the back of the fabric at a right angle to the previous stitch of the thread. The finished stitch in some way resembles the letter 'F,' depending on the spacing of the stitches. For buttonholes the stitches are tightly packed together, and for blanket edges they are more spaced out.

In nakshi kamaitha of Bangladesh, the buttonhole stitch is rare. It is occasionally found in smaller nakshi kamaitha where it forms the edge, and it is often used ingeniously to embroider kadamoti motifs."
The chain stitch catches a loop of the thread on the surface of the fabric. It is the simplest of the looped stitches. In this stitch, the needle comes up from the back of the fabric and then goes back into the same hole it came out of, pulling the loop of the thread almost completely to the back; but before the loop disappears, the needle comes back up (a certain distance from the beginning stitch—the distance deciding the length of the stitch); passes through the loop, and prevents it from being pulled completely to the back of the fabric. The needle then passes back to the back of the fabric through the second hole and begins the stitch again.

The cross stitch is done by creating a line of diagonal stitches going in one direction, usually using the end of the fabric as a guide, then, on the return journey, crossing the diagonal in the other direction, creating an ‘X’. The cross stitch has come to represent an entire industry of pattern production. It is the latest stitch in the nakshi kantha repertoire in Bangladesh. The cross stitch is very popular in the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region. It is known as the tin phor in Nawabganj district, since three movements of the needle are required to complete the stitch.

The darnng stitch, known as the bhorat phor in Bangladesh, is a variation of the running stitch, but the stitches and spaces are not even in length. Here the surface stitches are longer and only a tiny amount of fabric is picked up by the needle. Many different patterns can be created by varying the arrangement of rows of stitches. The darnng stitch is not common for the field of the nakshi kantha; it is more often used for embroidering motifs. One variation of the darnng stitch is the Jessore stitch. Named after Jessore where embroidery is done exclusively with this stitch on saris, the Jessore stitch is longer than the space between one stitch and the next. This stitch was dominant in the old nakshi kanthas of Jessore. A solid area of color is the special feature that results from this stitch. The Jessore stitch is also used in Faridpur. Nowadays the Jessore stitch is being replaced by the Kashmiri stitch in the Jessore-Faridpur-Khulna-Kushtia region, since the latter can be worked more rapidly. The Kashmiri stitch, as the name implies, is used in Kashmiri shawls. It produces the effect of three stitches, though it is a combination of two—a large stitch and a small one. During my fieldwork in Nawabganj in 1992, I found women using the bhorat phor, the Jessore stitch, and the Kashmiri stitch in embroidering motifs on nakshi kanthas. “We prefer the Kashmiri stitch to embroider a large area, and for a smaller area we use either the bhorat phor or the Jessore stitch, depending on the motif to be worked,” they told me.

The herringbone stitch creates a regular crossed zigzag line. It has many variations. In the fourteenth century the Italian painter Giotto illustrated the herringbone stitch, which was then worked with great precision on the borders of garments. This versatile stitch can be used to couch ribbon, cord and heavier threads or can be laced with contrasting threads. Herringbone is also used as a foundation row for many composite stitches. The herringbone stitch is rarely found in the Rajshahi-Nawabganj and Jessore-Faridpur-Khulna-Kushtia regions, but it is very common in Rangpur and Jamalpur districts. Together with other stitches, it is used to create delicate borders.

The Holbein stitch is the double-running stitch. It may also be referred to as a spaced running stitch. This stitch is reversible, since it looks the same on the back and the
The Holbein stitch is found in the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region, especially in Nawabganj district, where it is known as the lik phor. The lik phor is also known as the anoroi phor and the ghar basta phor.

The pattern darning stitch looks like woven grass matting. Because of this resemblance the pattern darning stitch is referred to as the chatai or pati phor. In the chatai or pati phor, the embroiderer makes closely parallel rows of running stitches. The outcome is pleasing, since the rows and the stitches are parallel to each other. Apparently it may look like the satin stitch, but it is different from the latter.

The pattern darning stitch, unlike the satin stitch, is productive on two accounts: it takes a minimum of thread and the work proceeds at a faster rate than in the satin stitch (described below).

The running stitch produces a straight line of stitches as an outline or the foundation for a more complex stitch. It is the easiest embroidery stitch to master. "The earliest and most basic of the numerous embroidery stitches" to be found in nakshi kanthas is the running stitch, which Naz Zaman prefers to call the kantha phor or kantha stitch. By manipulating the running stitch the embroiderer can create ripples, expanses of color, and even textures that appear woven than stitched.

The satin stitch is worked from one side of the shape to the other, generally slanted at an angle. The needle takes an equally long stitch on the underside; as a result, this stitch eats up a large amount of thread. The satin stitch is one of the oldest embroidery stitches to be found. This stitch is worked in close parallel lines to give a solid satin-like finish. It is formed by working straight stitches close together. The satin stitch is worked on traditional embroideries practically every country. The traditional embroiderers of China and Japan excel in the use of this stitch. This stitch is practically suitable for small areas. If one needs to cover a larger area, the shape has to be divided into more workable areas. The satin stitch is used in Bangladesh to embroider foreign motifs rather than indigenous ones. The foreign motifs include automobiles, ships, and airplanes.

The stem stitch, known as the dal phor in Bangladesh, is one of the most popular outlining stitches. In this stitch the thread always emerges on the left side of the previous stitch. The stem stitch is most often chosen for working stems of flowers. It can also be used as a filling stitch if worked closely together within a shape until it is completely filled. In Bangladesh, the stem stitch is a quick way of filling motifs which need not be either heavily embroidered or left out without embroidery. It is increasingly used in the nakshi kanthas intended for quick sale. The stem stitch can be used lucratively to produce an effect of solid color.

The weave running stitch is another variation of the running stitch. This stitch is used in a way more characteristic of weaving than embroidery. The weave running stitch is most often chosen for working fairly intricate borders in the nakshi kantha, since such borders can be made very quickly by this stitch. It varies according to the length of the design to be created. When the weave running stitch is worked in a nakshi kantha, embroidery becomes indistinguishable from ornamental weaving and leaves one wondering which comes first.
Classification of the Nakshi Kantha from the Standpoint of Use

Although the nakshi kantha is rightly viewed as a work of art, it is essentially utilitarian. Gurusaday Dutt has admirably highlighted this utilitarian aspect of the nakshi kantha by this remarkable statement:

"Although embroidered kanthas are as a rule highly decorative and spectacular, their chief motive is not display but thrift and economy, the idea being to utilize torn clothes and rags by sewing them together with close stitches and embroidering them purely for household use, so that not a single piece of cloth may be wasted."

From the standpoint of use the nakshi kantha falls into the following categories, each with its specific name:

The lep, about 6½ feet by 5½ feet in size, is a rectangular wrap used as a blanket during sleep in winter. The term lep is a mutation of the word leilaf, which means the cotton padded quilt. It is heavily padded to make it adequately warm. As many as seven saris may be used to make a lep. It varies in thickness, depending on the severity of the cold in the district where it will be used. As it affords protection against the cold, it is one of the most desired household items. The entire wrap is stitched in wavy and rippled designs over which simple embroidery is executed with colored threads in various patterns. "Often kaftans are worked in the four corners and occasionally a central lotus is also added." Being a blanket the lep is less ornate than the nakshi kantha used either as a coverlet or as a spread. In the past every household possessed this essential nakshi kantha. Since its replacement by the commercially produced quilt stuffed with cotton, its use has declined. Unlike the commercially produced quilt which requires a cover, the embroidered lep kantha goes without it.

Derived from the Persian word sujni, the sujni refers to the kantha in Bihar and Murshidabad district of West Bengal. There is no doubt that the term is associated with the Persian heritage of the Muslims, whose forefathers came from Persia and settled in Bihar and Murshidabad. In the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region of Bangladesh, especially in Nawabganj district, the sujni, instead of being used as a generic term for the kantha, means a distinct type of nakshi kantha—a rectangular piece of cloth used either as a coverlet or as a spread for seating honored guests on ceremonial occasions such as weddings. Its average size is 6 feet by 5 feet. Unlike the lep which varies in thickness and pattern, the sujni is generally of the uniform thickness and worked basically in the same pattern.

The ason is a square or rectangular nakshi kantha used by Hindus as a spread for the prayer ceremony in a temple, or for feeding special guests or a bridegroom. One of the most exquisite of all the nakshi kathanas, the ason contains a wealth of motifs and pictorial representation.

The jainamaz, the Muslim prayer rug, is also made in the form of a nakshi kantha. In most cases it is fairly simple, but occasionally it is embroidered in imitation of the traditional designs of a prayer carpet with a floral border and a mosque. The latter occupies the spot where the person offering prayer is expected to touch his forehead in sijda.
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Motifs of the Nakshi Kantha

A motif evolves over generations of experiences largely shared, and it reflects the continued unity of a community in its perfect replication in each woman's embroidered art.

As stated above, the lotus is the predominant motif of the nakshi kantha. Hindu women consider it auspicious. The lotus is the symbol of Lakshmi, goddess of beauty and bounty, daughter of the great goddess Durga, prime deity of Bengal. The lotus is also the divine seat, the place on earth awaiting the visit of the holy guest. It is the spot in the breast of the faithful upon which the deity lights. Being her symbol and the sign of her coming into the breast of the devotee, the lotus completes the goddess, providing a conduit for communication between the deity and the quilter. Muslim women admire the beauty of the lotus and embroider it with zeal. In the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region, however, the lotus is conspicuous by its absence on a Muslim nakshi kantha.

Wide is the scope for depicting the lotus. Not only the circle that encloses the lotus varies in size, but the lotus itself is represented with petals varying in number and shape. Most intricate is the multi-petalled lotus called $\text{shuddal padma}$. As the beauty of the nakshi kantha relies more on the central motif, the embroiderer pays keen attention to the scheme of color.

Whenever the central motif is the lotus, the field around it has certain common features that combine to form a symmetrical pattern. Henry Glassie refers to it as an image of cosmic order. Here is one description that he has delineated remarkably:

"At each corner of the $\text{kantha}$, stretching from the edge toward the lotus at the center, rises a tree of life, often reduced to a line-like, flame-like kala, familiar to us from the $\text{shaps}$ of Bengali. Both symbolize the growth of life out of moisture, and in the blended Hindu and Muslim culture of Bangladesh, the tree of life is a symbol for the growth of the soul toward God. Tree or leaf also marks the four directions that point toward the center, making the $\text{kantha}$ out of fragments, into an image of cosmic order."

"Inside the symmetrical pattern established by the lotus and the trees of life, inside this diagram of a universe ordered by exchanges between faith and power, the quilter ranges free. She stitches pictures of the common artifacts of her life, the jewelry, kitchen utensils, and toilet articles necessary to happy existence within the universal structure shaped by her orientation to the lotus within. She stitches religious images, Hindu temple cars and Muslim amulets. Often she portrays two grand animals, the elephant and the horse. The elephant symbolizes water. Moving on the earth like a great gray cloud of rain, the elephant is like water, beneficial and destructive, tame and wild. The horse is rare in normal life; bullocks and buffalo work in traction. The horse is an emblem of nobility and mortality: it carries the militant hero and the secular master; it bears the rider over the land as the body bears the soul through life."

The other motifs that embody the nakshi kantha are drawn from a variety of sources; old stories, scenes from myths or from contemporary life, birds, animals, agricultural implements, vehicles, and so on. In fact, anything can be adapted through the embroiderer's eye onto her work. Niaz Zaman, who has studied many nakshi kantalas,
As many motifs are common to both, to many Hindu women the palace kantha has a magical purpose, reflecting their desire for marriage, fertility, happiness, prosperity, and other kinds of wish-fulfillment. Some nakshi kanthas represent a mixture of religious symbols. For example, a Hindu ratha is embroidered in conjunction with a Muslim taza—a remarkable expression of religious affinity. Sometimes mythological scenes juxtapose with secular scenes of dancing, hunting, and boating. The ratha motif sometimes represents the chariot of Jagannatha.
While most of the motifs, having been transmitted from generation to generation, are traditional, nakshi kantha embroiderers enjoy freedom in depicting scenes of contemporary life. In old nakshi khanthas, British soldiers mounted on horses, zamindars smoking from hookahs, and a wedding procession were embroidered. On the other hand, in modern nakshi khanthas, trains and airplanes are found.

Many nakshi khanthas contain proverbs, blessings, and even captions of the motifs in Bangla alphabets. In one nakshi kantha the embroiderer makes a proverbial statement, which translates: "Gayat, Kashf, Brindaban are nothing to me. A woman's existence is at her husband's feet." In another nakshi kantha the mother blesses her son: Sukhe Thaho (Be Happy). A nakshi kantha from Faridpur, containing some scenes of the Krishna legend, bears the caption Bastrabharan (stealing the garments). In this example the most interesting scene is of some nude women sitting on a tree, since their garments have been stolen by Krishna.

Some nakshi khanthas are autographed and dated in the Bengali year. For example, a nakshi kantha embroidered by Pratul records the Bengali year 1359, which corresponds to 1952 CE. A few nakshi khanthas note for whom they were made. For example, a nakshi kantha, now preserved in the Gurusaday Museum at Thakurpukur in West Bengal, says that it was made by Manadasundar for her father with her own hands.

Many hours of stitching that go into the making of a nakshi kantha are relieved by the apparent spontaneity of the embroiderer's enjoyment associated with her creation of the motifs, both old and new.

Border Patterns of the Nakshi Kantha

Another artistic aspect of the nakshi kantha is the border patterns. Nazr Zaman has identified twenty-four nakshi kantha border patterns: pipre sari, dhurer shish, kejur vilhoji, heki, motor doha, barfi, anaj taga, bish taga, chok taga, geri taga, gut taga, jhop taga, mala taga, roli taga, nolok taga, panch taga or panchn matla taga, rens taga, shamuk taga or sugar taga, bichhe pad, chok pad, phul pad, mash pad, and ut abiz pad. Some nakshi khanthas have no motifs other than the specific border patterns all over. In some nakshi khanthas the border patterns are so intricately worked that they seem to be woven rather than embroidered.

Regional Variations in Nakshi Kanhthas

All the districts of Bangladesh make khanthas. In this study, by nakshi khanthas we mean embroidered quilts. Nakshi khanthas are mainly found in the districts west of the Meghna. The districts east of the Meghna are associated with decorated khanthas that are woven rather than embroidered. The nakshi khanthas-making districts may be divided into five major regions: the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region, the Jessore-Faridpur-Kulna-Kushin region, the Pabna-Bogra-Rangpur region, the Mymensingh-Jamilpur-Kishoreganj region, and the Barisal region.

The Rajshahi-Nawabganj Region

The Rajshahi-Nawabganj region produces a completely different kind of nakshi khantha; these have a wide variety of geometric designs without any human figure.
whatever, though birds may be present. This region is known for four distinct types of nakshi kanthas: the lehori, the cross stitch kantha, the lik kantha, and the sujni. The lehori is a thick, stiff nakshi kantha meant to be used as a bedcover. It is the oldest nakshi kantha in the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region. Its colors are predominantly white, red, black, and blue. The stitch used in embroidering the lehori is the running stitch, which is similar to the chatai or pati phad. Its motifs are limited to the lehori or wave motif, the diamond motif with its variations of the charchala, aatchala and barnchala, and the pati motif. The cross stitch kantha, also known as the carpet kantha, is bright. It is quicker to produce because of the cross stitch. The lik kantha uses the Holbein stitch or the lik phad. The sujni, already discussed above, is made in the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region to give a girl as part of her dowry. Both the lik kantha and the sujni use red safa for the surface material.

The Jessore-Faridpur-Khulna-Kushtia Region

The best nakshi kanthas of Bangladesh come from Jessore and Faridpur. Jessore and Faridpur nakshi kanthas are noted for a wealth of motifs. Of the motifs, the central lotus, the sun, the tree-of-life, the kalika, the betel leaf, the swastika, the wheel, the ratha, the palanquin, peacocks, parrots, elephants, horses, tigers, mythological scenes, men, women, flowers, farm implements, domestic articles, and toilet accessories are more common. Of the toilet accessories, the comb, a mirror, a barmalani, and earrings are very popular since these are symbols of marriage. Nakshi kanthas from Jessore fall into two types: the nakshi kantha with fine border patterns all over the surface and the nakshi kantha with a wide range of motifs. The former is referred to as the pad tol or sari border nakshi kantha, and the latter is simply known as the nakshi kantha. Some of the finest border patterns are found in pad tol nakshi kanthas from Jessore. Pad tol nakshi kanthas are also found in Faridpur. The stitch used in Jessore and Faridpur nakshi kanthas is the running stitch in its many variations, which include the weave running stitch, the Jessore stitch, the kaitya, the chatai or pati phad, and the Kashmiri stitch. As stated above, the back stitch is found in Faridpur, where it is occasionally used to outline motifs. The buttonhole stitch, the chain stitch, the darning stitch, and the herringbone stitch are also found in Jessore and Faridpur nakshi kanthas, but these are mostly new nakshi kanthas. The colors employed in Jessore nakshi kanthas are red, black, blue, green, yellow and occasionally pink. In addition to these colors, Faridpur employs orange.
While Jessore and Faridpur nakshi kanthas are similar, a few differences need to be mentioned. The back stitch, which is occasionally used in Faridpur, is absent in Jessore. Fewer strands of thread are used in Jessore nakshi kanthas, and these strands remain separate and are not twisted into one as in the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region. Jessore nakshi kanthas are more muted in color than Faridpur nakshi kanthas. Bright colors, whenever used in Jessore nakshi kanthas, cover small areas, which contrast piercingly with larger areas of bright colors found in Faridpur nakshi kanthas. Another feature of Jessore nakshi kanthas is the delicate look of the stitches, which are small and fine. Faridpur seems to have a fondness for orange. While Faridpur nakshi kanthas are more colorful than Jessore nakshi kanthas, orange adds a greater vibrancy of color to Faridpur nakshi kanthas. Niaz Zaman points out that some bostanis collected by the Bangladesh National Museum from Faridpur are far more colorful than Jessore “bordered kanthas.” The borders are worked so densely around a central lotus or the sun in these bostanis that there are no spaces left between them, and as such the overall impression that these bostanis give is the effect of weaving though they were actually embroidered. Why are Faridpur nakshi kanthas more colorful and vibrant even though they are similar to Jessore nakshi kanthas in respect of motifs and in the variety of stitches? The answer lies in the living tradition. In the past—we do not know when—the embroiderers of Faridpur, for whatever reasons, developed a fondness for bright colors, and since then their successors have carried on this tradition.

Khulna nakshi kanthas, which are also colorful, are similar to Faridpur nakshi kanthas. Khulna employs the kantha phool to cover the background and large filling stitches for motifs. The variety of stitches used in Jessore and Faridpur is absent in Khulna. Although Khulna has produced some very fine pad tol nakshi kanthas, it lacks the artistic excellence of Jessore and Faridpur nakshi kanthas.

Kushita, being situated between Rajshahi and Jessore, produces nakshi kanthas similar to the lohori and Jessore nakshi kanthas. Its lohori-type nakshi kanthas, like Rajshahi-Nawabganj lohori kanthas, are thick; as many as seven saris are used to make such nakshi kanthas. However, there is a difference. In the lohori the stitch is smaller than the space between the stitches, but in the lohori-type nakshi kantha from Kushita the space between the stitches depends on the motifs to be embroidered. Other Kushita nakshi kanthas have border patterns worked in the chatori, the kantha, the kantha phool and the weave running stitch. These nakshi kanthas, though produced in the Jessore tradition, are not as fine as Jessore examples. Nor are they as colorful as Faridpur and Khulna nakshi kanthas. The motifs used are fewer. The motifs generally found in Kushita nakshi kanthas are floral and leaf motifs, the kola, the wheel, the fish, and the boat. One motif is, however, unique to Kushita: the outstretched palm, symbolizing the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, his son-in-law Ali, and his two grandsons, Hasan and Husain.

The Pabna-Bogra-Rangpur Region

Nakshi kanthas of the Pabna-Bogra-Rangpur region have characteristics common to both Rajshahi-Nawabganj and Jessore nakshi kanthas, but these are inferior in design and fineness.
The Mymensingh-Jamalpur-Kishoreganj Region

Nakshi kanthas of the Mymensingh-Jamalpur-Kishoreganj region are quite distinct from those of the other regions. Like Faridpur and Khulna nakshi kanthas, Mymensingh-Jamalpur-Kishoreganj nakshi kanthas are colorful and attractive. There is, however, a difference. While red, blue, yellow and green are the predominant colors used in embroidery, occasionally black and pink are found. Like Jessore and Faridpur nakshi kanthas, nakshi kanthas of the Mymensingh-Jamalpur-Kishoreganj region are rich in motifs. The central lotus, the sun, the kalka, vines, the wheel, the fish, and birds are frequent motifs. Since Mymensingh-Jamalpur-Kishoreganj nakshi kanthas are not as fine or delicate as Jessore and Faridpur nakshi kanthas in respect of embroidery, they are easily distinguishable from the latter. Often there is no background stitching, and even the motifs are embroidered in outline. Large areas of color, so characteristic of Faridpur nakshi kanthas, are absent in Mymensingh-Jamalpur-Kishoreganj nakshi kanthas. Unlike Jessore and Faridpur nakshi kanthas which attain a high degree of artistic excellence and sophistication, Mymensingh-Jamalpur-Kishoreganj nakshi kanthas are generally crude. Large birds perch on diminutive elephants, and unrecognizable horses prance around spindly legs.

The borders embroidered in Mymensingh-Jamalpur-Kishoreganj nakshi kanthas are generally simple. Elaborate pañj tola nakshi kanthas are conspicuous by their absence in the Mymensingh-Jamalpur-Kishoreganj region. Although some fine border patterns worked in the threaded running stitch are found, they are not used to embroider stems as in Jessore or even Kushtia nakshi kanthas.

The Barisal Region

Embroidered with a minimum of stitching, Barisal nakshi kanthas are comparable with Mymensingh-Jamalpur-Kishoreganj nakshi kanthas. The background is rarely stitched. The motifs are sparingly embroidered, the large ones being merely outlined. Even the borders are simple. Some exceptionally fine nakshi kanthas are, however, found in the Barisal region.

Commercialization of the Nakshi Kantha

In the 1980s, some nakshi kanthas were made on commission and purchased directly from their makers. The patrons were then the Design Center of the East Pakistan Small
and Cottage Industries Corporation (the present BSCIC), Zainul Abedin, the Dhaka Museum (now the Bangladesh National Museum), the Bangla Academy, and a few connoisseurs. Strictly speaking, commercialization of the nakshi kantha, like any other commodity, means investment, employment, production on a regular basis, availability of products in the open market, and sale of products to unknown customers. From this standpoint, commercialization of the nakshi kantha began in 1972 with the need to provide for women left destitute as a result of the destruction and genocide perpetrated by the Pakistan army in 1971. Efforts were made to organize women’s employment through production of nakshi kanthas in some centers of rehabilitation. It was only the first step toward commercialization. The open market, which is an essential prerequisite for commercialization, was still not there for nakshi kanthas. At the initiative of Zainul Abedin a National Handicrafts Exhibition was held in 1974 (see Chapter 27). This Exhibition came as an eye-opener to many Bangladeshis, who now became more conscious of their cultural heritage and sought to patronize indigenous arts and crafts. This led to the establishment of the Bangladesh Hastashilpa Samabaya Federation with its outlet Karika. Karika was the first organization to sponsor the production of nakshi kanthas on a commercial scale. The market for nakshi kanthas became competitive with the emergence of similar organizations.35

One destructive consequence of commercialization was the beginning of a process of standardization. The regional variations, which we have discussed above, are in danger of dying out. Nakshi kantha embroiderers were previously taught by their grandmothers, mothers or sisters at home. Now many of them are being trained as employees by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Kumudini. Designs are now based on what the promoters want to sell. According to Niaz Zaman, although commercialization will lead to the elimination of the regional variations in nakshi kanthas, there will still be differences associated with different organizations rather than with different regions.44 In support of her statement she gives several examples. While both Aarong and Kumudini use the Kashmiri stitch, Kumudini goes a little heavier on this stitch. Kumudini nakshi kanthas tend to differ from Aarong nakshi kanthas in their use of vegetable dyes and muted colors.

The design of this nakshi kantha was adapted from several old nakshi kanthas. It consists of three panels. The middle panel depicts a court scene with musicians and dancing girls. The left panel depicts a fanciful peacock-shaped boat with ten people on board, and the right panel shows a hunting scene with six hunters, five of whom are mounted on two elephants. The border motifs include lotus medallions, stylized mangoes, trees, leaves and birds.

Bengal Crafts

There are many entities involved in the development and promotion of the nakshi kantha for marketing at home and abroad and for employment of women. It is beyond the scope of this work to discuss their activities. Bengal Crafts is a new venture founded by professionals living in Bangladesh and the United States. They collaborate to support
the work of Bangladeshi artisans by promoting this unique cultural art form, the nakshi kantha. They are committed to empowering Bangladeshi craftspeople, mostly women working from their homes, by patronizing them in their efforts to attain a higher standard of living for their families. They seek to educate consumers about the nakshi kantha while allowing them the opportunity to support skilled artisans in our global community. Through the promotion and sale of nakshi kanthas in the United States, Bengal Crafts helps Bangladeshi artisans improve their options for a better life.

There are numerous references to the nakshi kantha in folk poema. But it was Jasim Uddin, the great poet of rural Bengal, who made the nakshi kantha immortal and a national symbol in his Nakshi Kanthar Mat (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt). The poet describes the nakshi kantha as the sad narrative of one woman's life. So dense are the meanings in the nakshi kantha, so rich is its evocative energy, that every nakshi kantha tells the story of one woman alone with her imagination, her songs and needle, and it tells of the art and hope and sorrow of the women of Bengal, and it tells the epic of cosmic power."

End Notes:
6. ibid.
9. Naz Zaman, op. cit., 56
10. ibid.
11. ibid., op. cit., 49-50.
12. ibid., 50.
13. ibid., 56.
14. ibid., 57.
15. Naz Zaman, op. cit., 44.
18. Gurusaday Dutt, op. cit., 104.
22. For all these motifs, see Naz Zaman, op. cit., 64-93.
23. For all the nakshi kantha borders, see Naz Zaman, op. cit., 94-107.
25. For a detailed study, see Naz Zaman, op. cit., 134-137.