

Traditional Art of

*Nakshi  
Kantha  
Embroidery*

An Element of the Intangible  
Cultural Heritage of Bangladesh



Ministry of Cultural Affairs  
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

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**An Element of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bangladesh**

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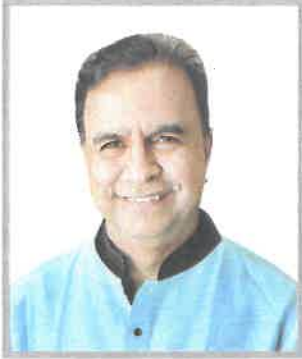
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**State Minister**  
*Ministry of Cultural Affairs*  
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## Message

Bangladesh is committed to safeguarding its intangible cultural heritage in order to foster the creativity of the bearers and practitioners of each element. We feel proud that UNESCO has so far inscribed four elements from Bangladesh on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. More importantly, UNESCO included the Historic 7th March Speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the International Memory of the World Register on 30 October, 2017.

I am extremely happy to know that the Bangladesh National Museum has published an exclusive inventory on Traditional Art of Nakshi Kantha Embroidery: An Element of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bangladesh as part of the nomination process for inscription of the element on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. I wish the success of this endeavour.

Joy Bangla, Joy Bangabandhu  
Long Live Bangladesh.

K. M. Khalid MP



A large nākshi kantha (bedsheet) from Jamalpur (Part-1)



**Secretary in Charge**  
*Ministry of Cultural Affairs*  
*Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*


## Foreword

Bangladesh has been a Member State of UNESCO since 1972, that is, soon after independence. Bangladesh ratified UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage on 11 June 2009 and is currently engaged in the implementation of this Convention.

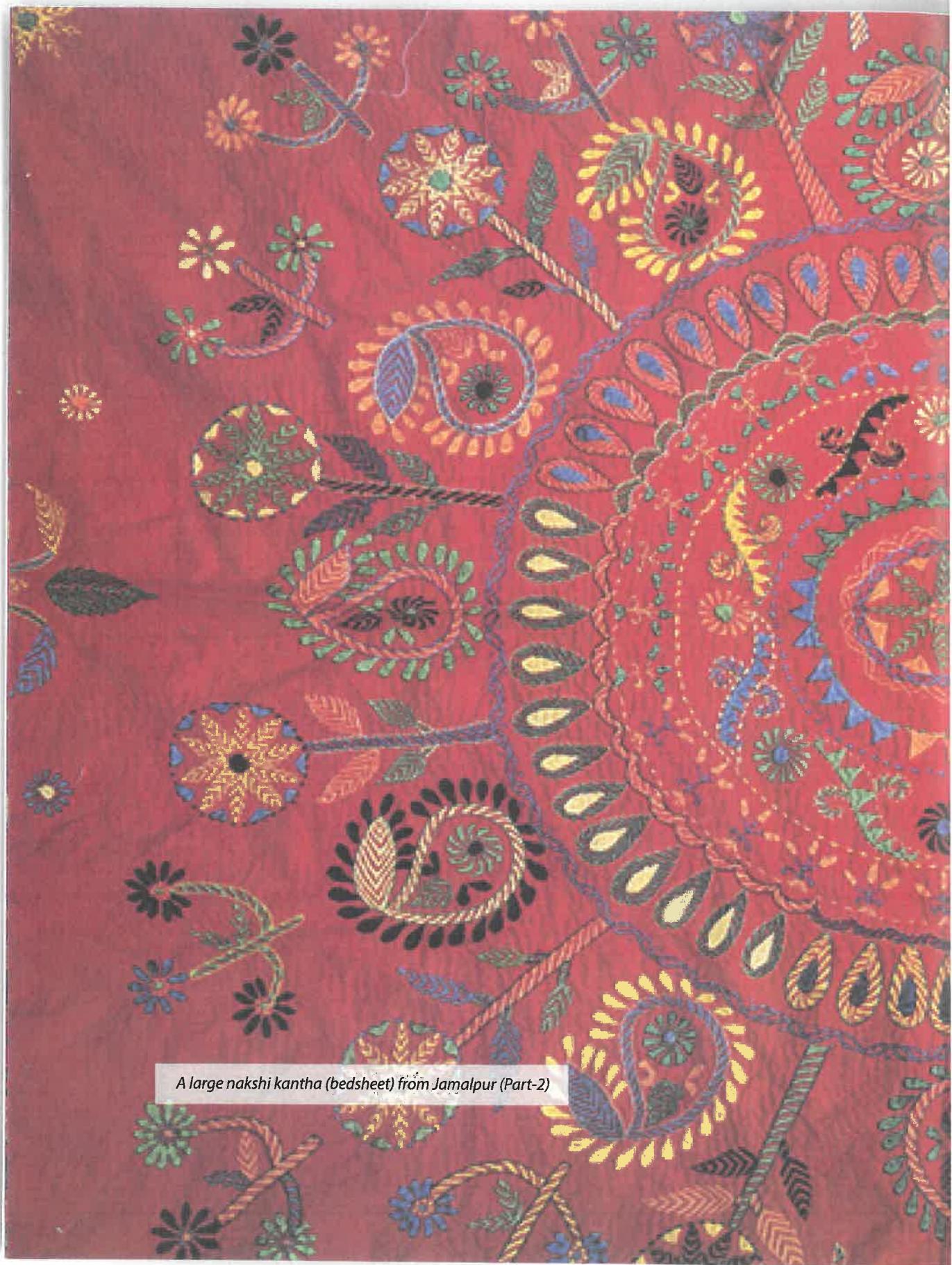
The Bangladesh National Cultural Policy 2006 recognizes dance, music and other forms of cultural practice as a part of Bangladesh's cultural heritage. The main objectives of The Bangladesh National Cultural Policy are as follow:

1. To protect and promote all cultural expressions in Bangladesh in order to celebrate the distinctiveness of Bangladeshi culture and foster positive national awareness;
2. To develop cultural activities ensuring integration with economic development;
3. To protect, preserve and develop cultural elements of Bangladeshi life, including indigenous Bangalee culture that had been suppressed in the past; and
4. To promote positive outcomes from international exchange among artists.

Bangladesh has launched a program on the country's intangible cultural heritage in 2012. It needs to be based solely on the concept of empirical research so that the bearers and practitioners of the different elements can participate more actively in the process of compiling a national inventory as well as in the process of nominating any element for inscription on the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding or for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

  
24.03.2019

**Dr. Md. Abu Hena Mostofa Kamal, ndc**



*A large nakshi kantha (bedsheet) from Jamalpur (Part-2)*



## Bangladesh National Museum

### Preface

It is my great pleasure to write this preface to Traditional Art of Nakshi Kantha Embroidery: An Element of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bangladesh. It has been nominated by the State Party for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Earlier a national inventory containing this element was published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh in 2007 as part of a cultural survey funded by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. I note with satisfaction that the inventory relating to the element has been updated in accordance with the requirement of Article 12 of the 2003 Convention.

This book is now an exclusive inventory of the nominated element. I acknowledge the contribution of Mr. Mahbubur Rahman, Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to the preparation of this inventory. Ms. Noor-E-Nasreen, Ms. Asma Ferdousi and Mr. Md. Serajul Islam, the competent professionals of the Department of Ethnography and Decorative Art, and Mr. Obaidullah, Exploration Officer, have studied the current status of the element in four districts and have collected all the necessary information for preparing the nomination file. They have also ensured the widest possible participation of the communities concerned in the nomination process. I thank them wholeheartedly for their hard work. My sincere thanks go to Dr. Firoz Mahmud who prepared the nomination file and authored the updated inventory.

**Md. Reaz Ahmed**  
Director General



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**K**antha 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.



*A large nakshi kantha (lep) being embroidered by a team of eight young women led by Shirina Khatun (fourth from the left), Jamalpur*

The nakshi kantha is a kantha with elaborate pictorial embroidery, rather than a simple stitched non-representational kantha. More precisely, a kantha is a quilted item, whereas a nakshi kantha is both quilted and embroidered. The phrase phul kantha is occasionally used to refer to the nakshi kantha.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 gadla is used.<sup>3</sup> 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 kant/ia to study all aspects of the embroidered quilt.



*Three women embroidering a single kantha to make it elaborately decorative*

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.<sup>4</sup>

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 Kanthalipa (plastering guru). By caste he was a sweeper. While sweeping he used to collect old rags and torn cloths. One



*Maya, Rashida and Firoza with their grandmother in their yard, getting ready to embroider, Kushtia*

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?" Kanthalipa 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



*A nakshi kantha from Kushtia*

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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 Kanthalipa 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. Gaiesha's head is cut off and replaced with that of an elephant. A patched new unity arises. Things roll on. Making new unities out of fragments of old unities, 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 nakshi kantha, made of old cloth, is thus supposed



*Sajeda drawing a design by hand in pencil to embroider, Kushtia*

to protect its user from harm. This belief, however, stands shattered with the increasing use of readymade yarn and new cloth for quilting and embroidering new nakshi kanthas for the open market.

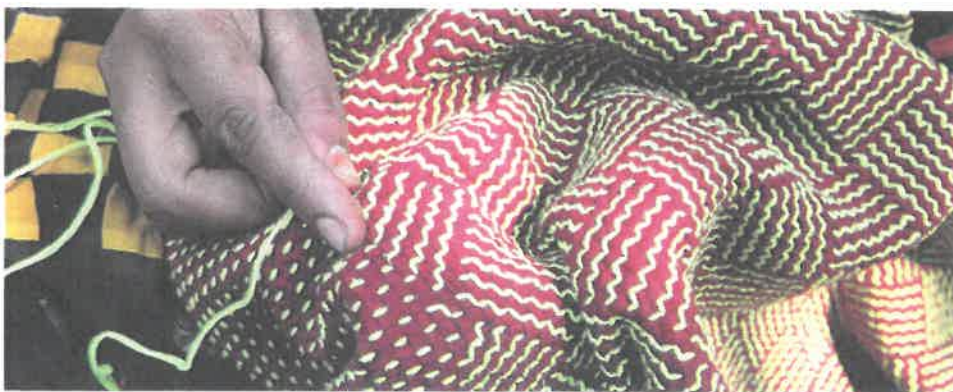
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Both Mohammad Syedur and Niaz Zaman think that the earliest reference to the kantha occurs in a popular ballad that appears under different names: Govichandr Gan,

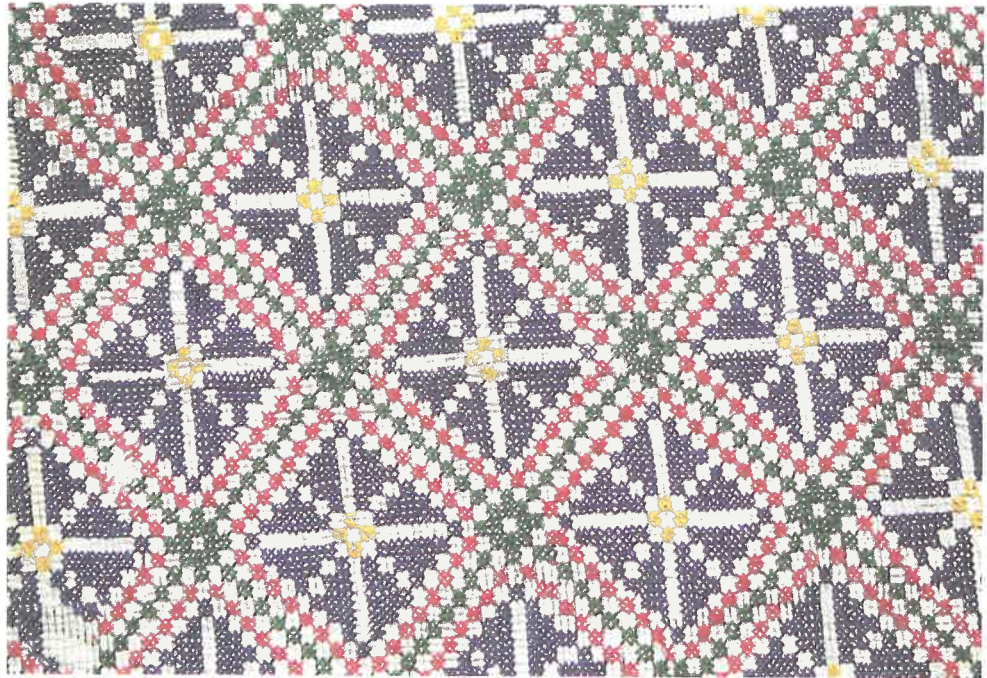


*Hena khatun holding a nakshi kantha embroidered by her, Jamalpur*

Gopichandr Gan, Mainamatir 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



*Dulali Begum sewing a nakshi kantha in the lohari pattern typical of Chapai Nawabganj*



*A nakshi kantha from Chapai Nawabganj*

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. 1020-1045) of the Chandra dynasty.<sup>5</sup> Although it is difficult to fix the date of the ballad, it is certain that it was compiled not earlier than the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> 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, Bholā Pir, Chindi 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 Chaitanya Charitamrita by Krishnadasa Kaviraja Gosvami. This work documents the life and precepts of the Vaisnava saint Chaitanya Mahāprabhu (1486- 1533). There the poet tells us that Sachi Devi, the mother of Chaitanya, sent a homemade kantha to her son at Pun, Orissa, through some pilgrims. Chaitanya is said to have draped himself often with a kantha.



*Shirina Parveen with her grandmother Horbala Begum, Jamalpur*



*Runa Begum holding her granddaughter above a nakshi kantha specially made for this baby, Chapai Nawabganj*

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.

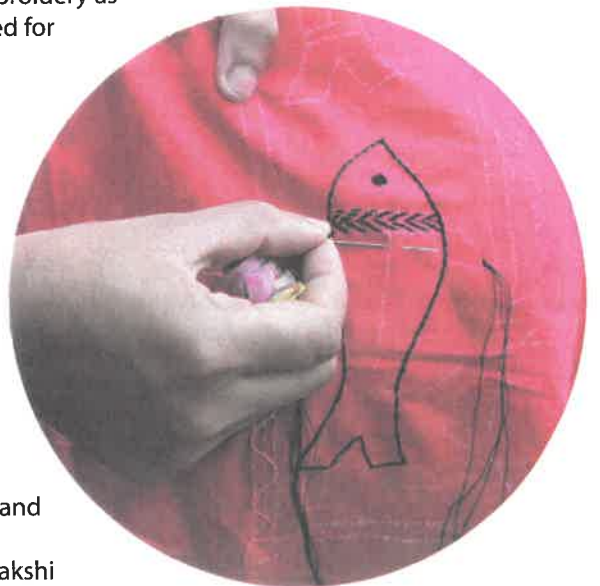
In Bangladesh, nakshi kanthas are made exclusively by women, who take pleasure



*Young women seated on mats, each embroidering, while Shirina Parveen and her grandmother walking slowly to witness, Jamalpur*

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



*A motif being embroidered, Kushtia*



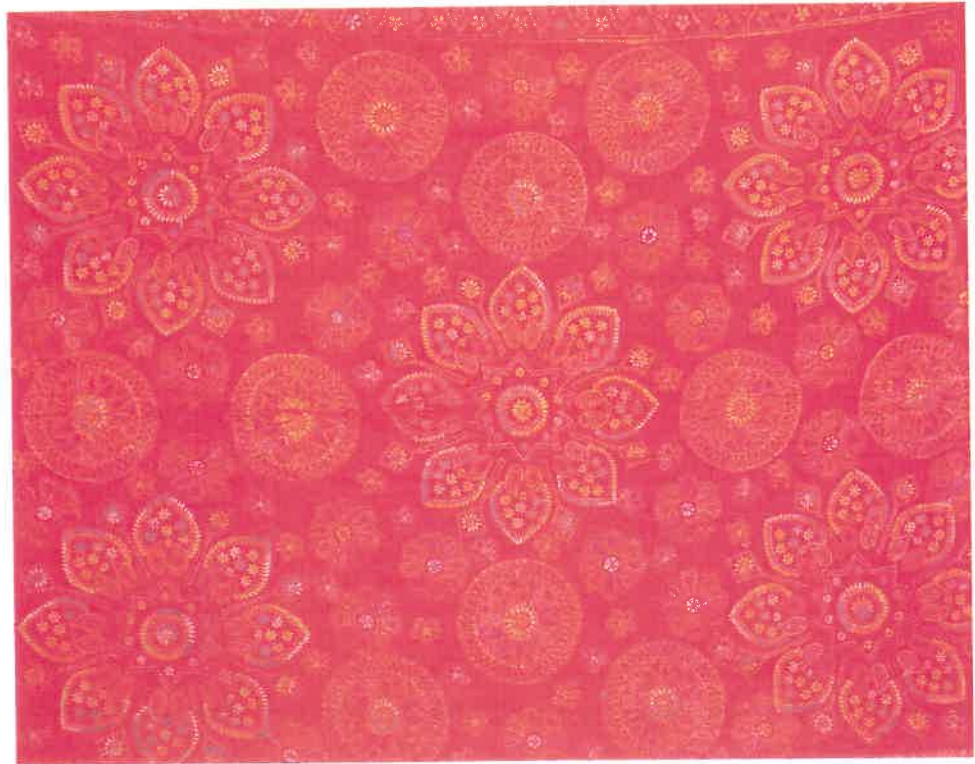
kanthas they made out of their old worn saris they made into gifts. They gave them to daughters when they left home in marriage. They gave them to sons and husbands so that when they were off and alone, they could roll themselves up in cloth worn soft from touching the skin of the beloved woman. Embraced 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.



*A nakshi kantha from Kushtia*

This homegrown artistic pleasure and admiration, while still alive, began to diffuse in the twentieth century. From 1915 Rabindranath Tagore collected nakshi kanthas among other items of folk art in apprehension of the decline of handicraft because of industrial production. Gurusaday Dutt, pioneer for the preservation of folk art in Bengal, began collecting nakshi kanthas 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 nakshi kanthas, most of which were collected from Bangladesh. The great folklorist Dinesh Chandra Sen also collected nakshi kanthas 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 nakshi kanthas from different parts of Bengal, and he wrote articles on nakshi kanthas. Dinesh Chandra Sen also discussed nakshi kanthas in his writings.



*A nakshi kantha from Kushtia*

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, personating itself for immense work, which will be appreciated by our people in no distant future."<sup>8</sup> Before his death Gurusaday presented his entire collection

to the Bengal Bratachari Society to establish a museum at Bratacharigram in the district of 24-Parganas, West Bengal. This museum became known as the Bratachari Janashiksha Pratisthan (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 nakshi kanthas in Bangladesh, and in this country only during the last thirty years have nakshi kanthas 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 nakshi kantha, instead of being confined to a rural home for exclusive use and enjoyment by the person(s) for whom it



*Dulali Begum, Chapai Nawabganj*

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 nakshi kantha 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 nakshi kantha as a work of art isolated from emotion or intention. An appreciation of nakshi kanthas can develop from at least two distinct angles: they can

be regarded as significant reflections of the artists' 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.



*Accessories and instruments used in nakshi kantha embroidery*

A sense of lively movement flits 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 kanthas 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 other words, it is a statement of the heart of its maker.



*Different stitches, Jessore*

### **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



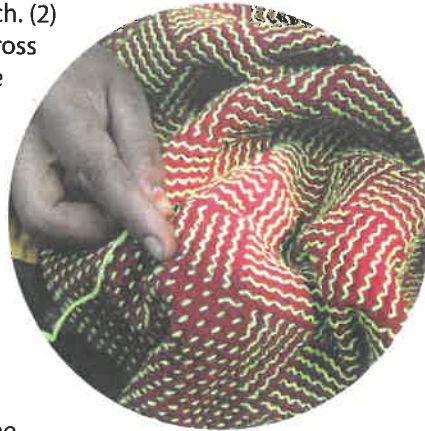
*Babita in the act of sewing, Jessore*



*Nurjahan, Riya, Babita and Runa embroidering a long nakshi kantha, Jessore*

kantha in Bangladesh fall into thirteen types: (1) back stitch, (2) bending stitch, (3) buttonhole stitch, (4) chain stitch, (5) cross stitch, (6) darning stitch, (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.



*Close views of nakshi kantha embroidering, Chapai Nawabganj*



Niaz Zaman has referred to the back stitch as the bahkya. 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.<sup>9</sup> The back stitch is occasionally used to outline motifs in Faridpur and Mymensingh nakshi kanthas, but its use is common in sujnis of the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region.<sup>10</sup> The bending stitch, referred to as the kaitya 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



*A large nakshi kantha in the lahari pattern, Chapai Nawabganj*



from this effect."<sup>11</sup> This stitch is ideal for rapid production. The bending stitch is used for working nakshi kantha borders such as pipre sari and bichhe paçl. 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."<sup>12</sup>

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 original start of the thread. The finished stitch in some way resembles the letter 'L', 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 kanthas of Bangladesh, the buttonhole stitch is rare. It is occasionally found in smaller nakshi kanthas where it forms the edge, and it is often used ingeniously to embroider kadamba motifs.<sup>13</sup>

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 repertory 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 darning stitch, known as the bhorat phod 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 darning stitch is not common for the field of the nakshi kantha; it is more often used for

embroidering motifs. One variation of the darning 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



*Runa Begum, Chapai Nawabganj*

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 bho rat phod, 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 bho rat phod 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 front.



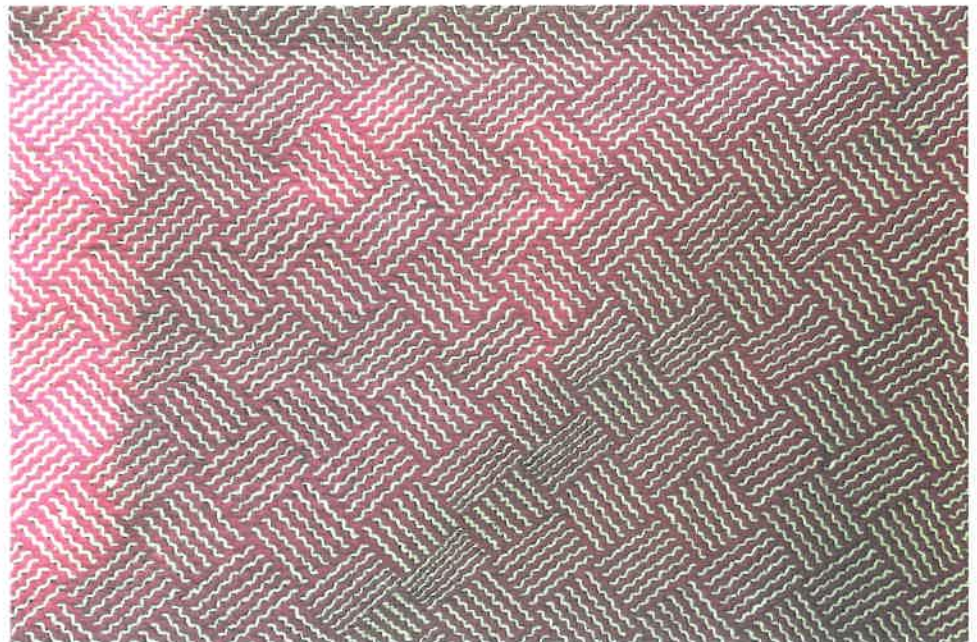
*A nakshi kantha with a central lotus and elaborately decorated, Jessore*

The Holbein stitch is found in the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region, especially in Nawabganj district, where it is known as the uk phor. The uk phor is also known as the anarasi phod and the ghar hashia phod.

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 phod)<sup>14</sup> In the chatai or pati phod, 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).

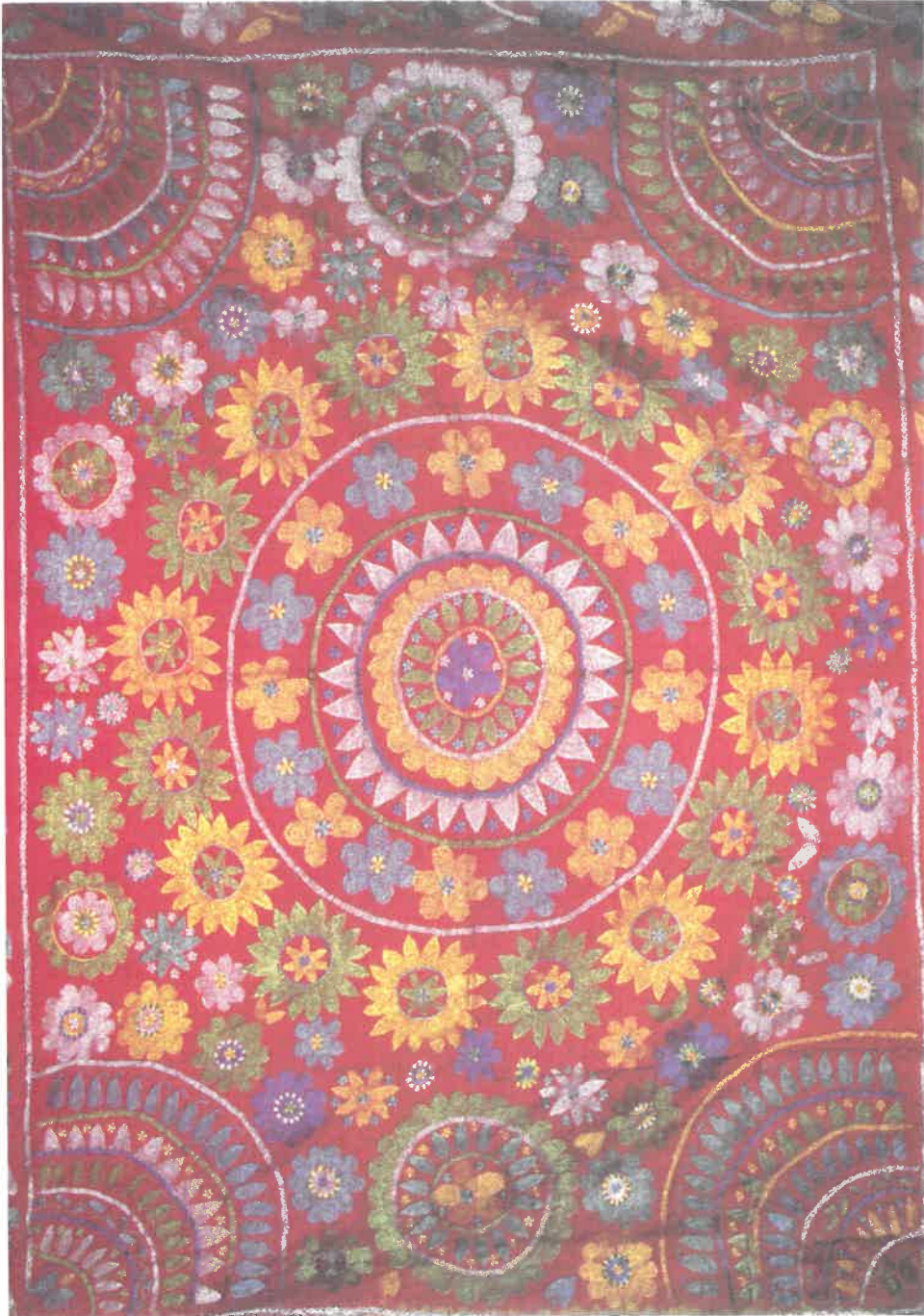
The running stitch produces a straight line of stitches as an outline or the foundation for a more complex stitch. It is the easiest embroidery stitch to master. "The earliest and



*A nakshi kantha in the lik pattern, Chapai Nawabganj*

most basic of the numerous embroidery stitches" to be found in nakshi kanthas is the running stitch, which Niaz Zaman prefers to call the kantha phoçl or kantha stitch.<sup>15</sup> By manipulating the running stitch the embroiderer can create ripples, expanses of color, and even textures that appear woven than stitched.

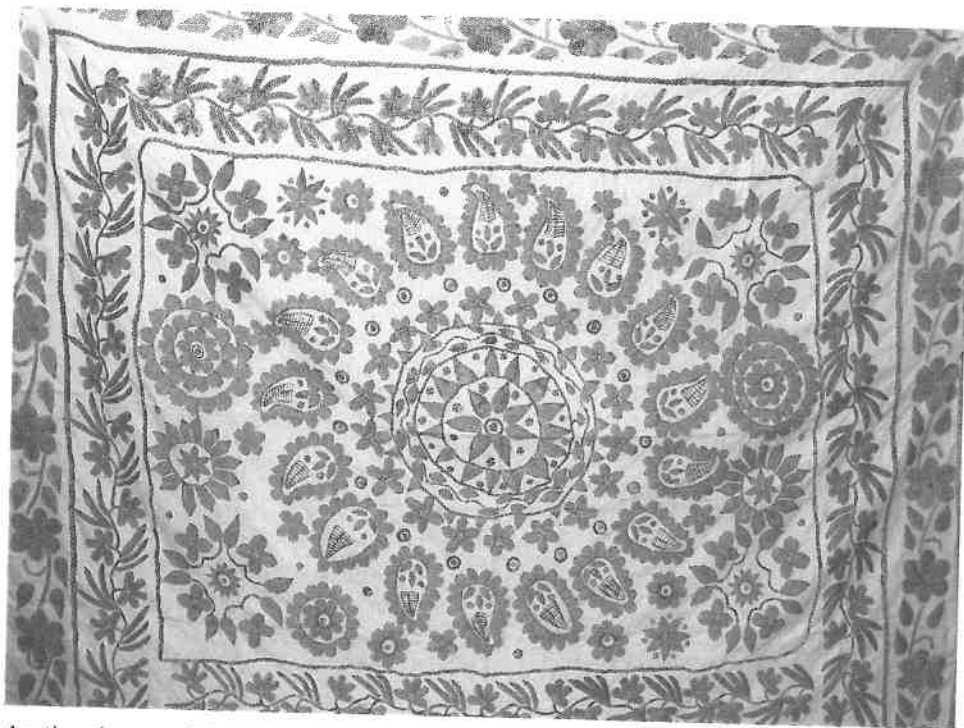
The satin "stitch is worked from one side of the shape to the other, generally slanted at an angle. The needle takes an equally long stitch on the underside; as a result, this stitch eats up a large amount of thread."<sup>16</sup> The satin stitch is one of the oldest embroidery stitches to be found. 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 in practically every country. The traditional embroiderers of China and Japan excel in the use of this stitch. This stitch is practically suitable for small



*A nakshi kantha elaborately and intricately decorated, Jessore*

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 phod 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



*Another elegant nakshi kantha from Jessore*

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.<sup>17</sup>

### **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."<sup>18</sup>

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

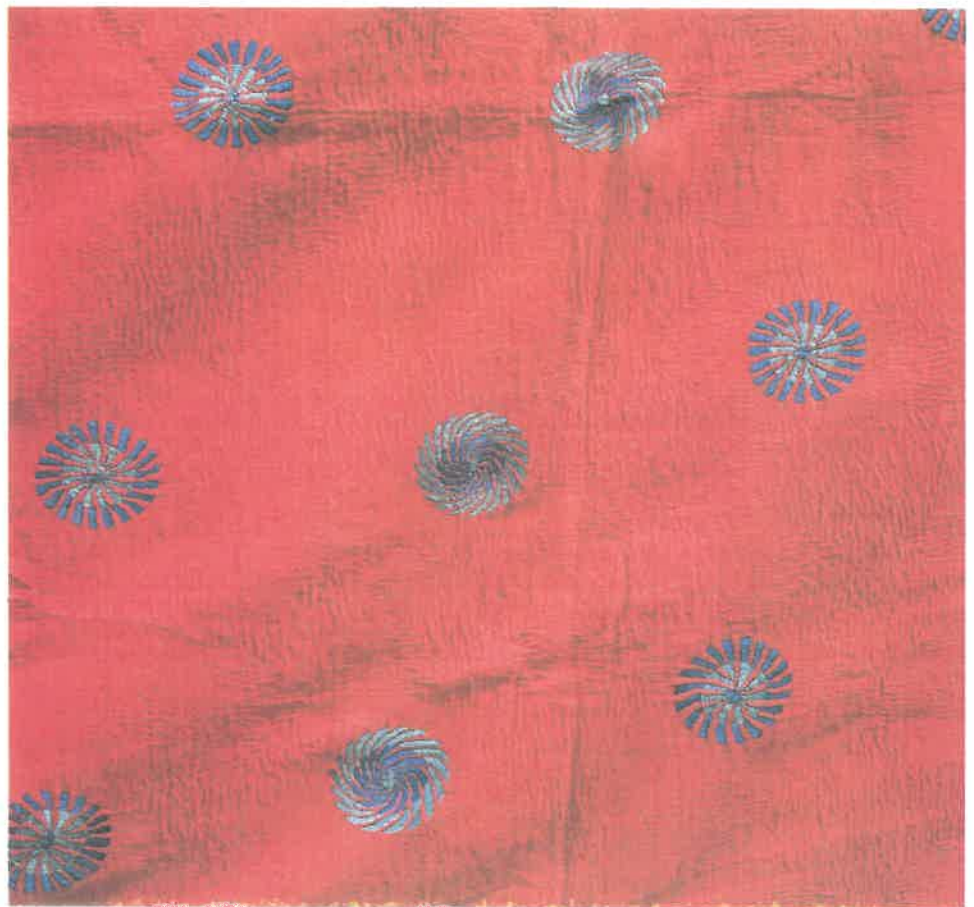
The lep, about 6½ feet by 5½ feet in size, is a rectangular wrap used as a blanket during sleep in winter. The term lep is a mutation of the word lehaf, which means the cotton padded quilt. It is heavily padded to make it adequately warm. As many as seven saris may be used to make a lep. It varies in thickness, depending on the severity of the cold



*Dulali Begum, Chapai Nawabganj*

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 kalkas are worked in the four corners and occasionally a central lotus is also added."<sup>19</sup> 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 *sozni*, the *sujni* refers to the kantha in Bihar and Murshidabad district of West Bengal. There is no doubt that the term is associated with



*nakshi kantha, Chapai Nawabganj*



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.



*Abul Hossain in prayer on a jainamaz (prayer mat) embroidered by his daughter Shima Khatun, Jessore*

The asan 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 kanthas, the asan 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.

The baytan or bostani is a square wrap used for covering a book. It is elaborately patterned with borders of several rows of colorful designs.

The arshilata is a small, rectangular cover for a mirror or toilet accessories with wide, colorful borders in assorted motifs. It has a tassel at one end so that the toilet articles can be rolled up and tied.

The batua, durjani or thalia is a small rectangle with a central lotus design and embroidered borders. Three corners of this nakshi kantha are folded inward to form a wallet or to wrap betel leaves.

The rumal is used as a plate covering rather than, as the word suggests, as an absorbent wipe. It also features a central lotus with ornamented borders. To avoid confusion, it should be called basan dhakar rumal. According to Mohammad Syedur, rumals are



*A nakshi kantha from Jessore*



*A nakshi kantha from Jessore*

presented to the bride and the bridegroom during the wedding ceremony.<sup>20</sup>

The dastarkhan is a spread laid out on the floor for placing plates and serving food. Rectangular in shape, it is fairly long and about 10 to 18 inches wide. The length varies, depending on the number of persons to be fed. Intended for use on special occasions, the dastarkhan holds a place of reverence in every Muslim household. Like the jainama and the gilaf, the dastarkhan is indicative of Muslim influence on the nakshi kantha.

The palkir topar and the khat kantha are two small nakshi kanthas associated with the palanquin. While the palkir topar is placed on top of the palanquin, the khat kantha is laid where the passenger sits.

The gilaf is an envelope-shaped nakshi kantha used for covering the Quran. While its three corners are stitched together, to the fourth is added a tassel so that the Holy Book, when wrapped, can be tied.

Today the nakshi kantha's use has been proliferated with a whole new range of products. Among the popular new products of the nakshi kantha are bedspreads, wall-hangings, cushion covers, ladies' purses, spectacle cases, place mats, jewelry boxes, dress fronts, skirt borders, and shawls. Some of these products are meant for traditional uses in a modern concept. For example, the cushion cover is a secular version of the asan. To cite another example, the place mat is a modernized version of the dastarkhan. Some products, however, signify new uses in accord with the modern lifestyle. The wall-hanging represents the most innovative use of the nakshi kantha. While the other uses are more or less utilitarian, the wall-hanging is purely decorative. The new products are indicative of the extensive commercialization of the nakshi kantha.



*An assortment of nakshi kanchas from Chapai Nawabganj*

## 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-petaled lotus called shatadal 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 kantha, stretching from the edge toward the lotus at the center, rises a tree of life, often reduced to a leaflike, flamelike kalka, familiar to us from the shawls of Kashmir. 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



*Tuktuki Rani, Chapai Nawabganj*

the soul toward God. Tree or leaf also marks the four directions that point toward the center, making the kantha, a unit 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 morality: it carries the militant hero and the secular master; it bears the rider over the land as the body bears the soul through life.<sup>21</sup>

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.



*A nakshi kantha from Jessore*

## Various Indigenous Motifs

A profusely embroidered nakshi kantha has divided the indigenous motifs into twenty-one categories: the lotus motif, the solar motif, the moon motif, the chakra or wheel motif, the swastika motif, the tree-of-life motif, the kalka motif, the water motif, the mountain motif, the fish motif, the boat motif, the footprint motif, the ratha motif, the mosque motif, the panja or open palm motif, agricultural implements, animal motifs, toilet articles, kitchen implements, the kantha motif, and the palanquin motif.

As many motifs are common to alpana, to many Hindu women the nakshi 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 tazia—a remarkable expression of



*Nargis and Ghini, Chapai Nawabganj*

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 kanthas, British soldiers mounted on horses, zamindars smoking from hookahs, and a wedding procession were embroidered. On the other hand, in modern nakshi kanthas, trains and airplanes are found.

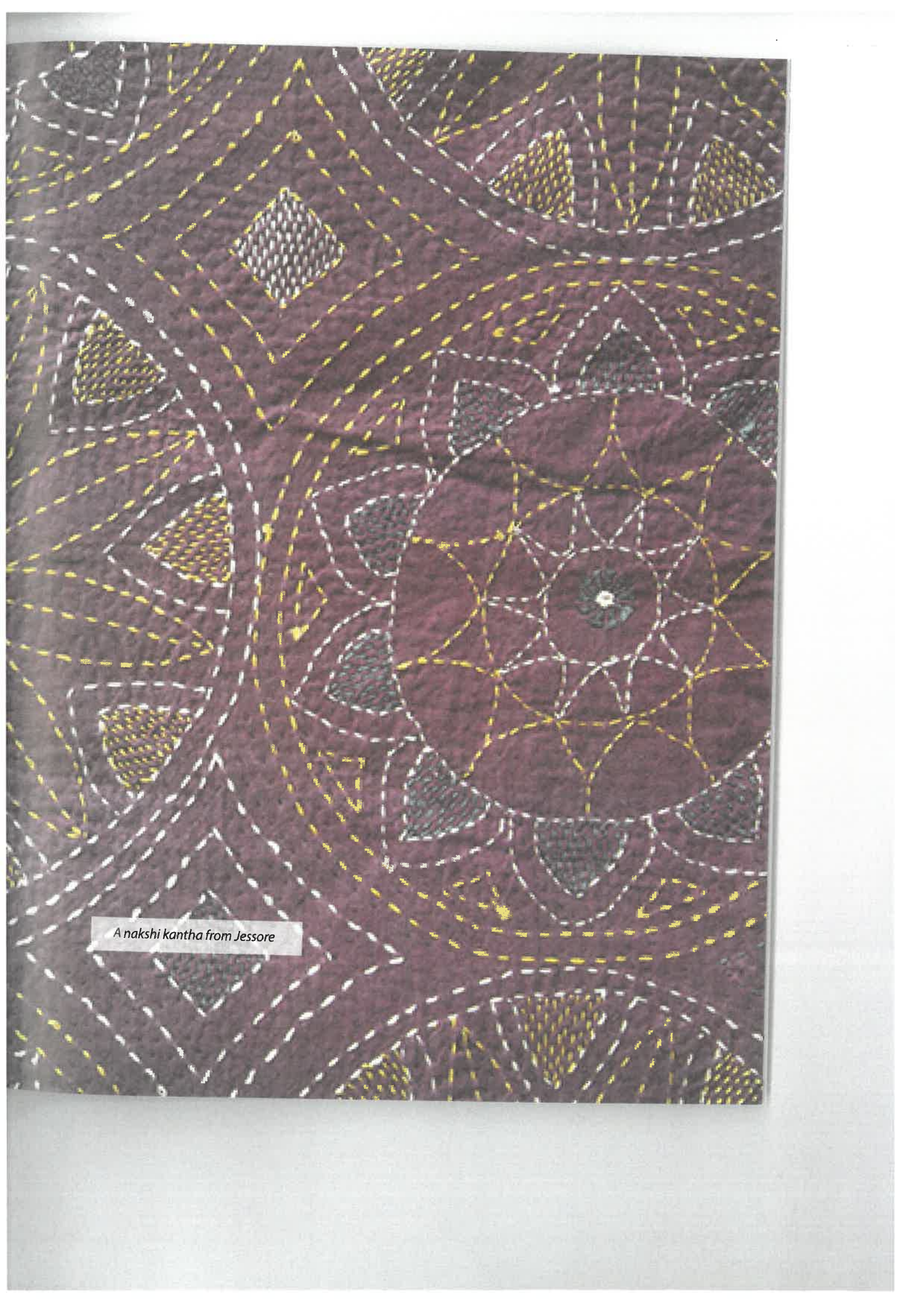


*A nakshi kantha used as a bedsheet, Jessore*

Many nakshi kanthas contain proverbs, blessings, and even captions of the motifs in Bangla alphabets. In one nakshi kantha the embroiderer makes a proverbial statement, which translates: "Gaya, Kashi, 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 Thako (Be Happy). A nakshi kantha from Faridpur, containing some scenes of the Kna legend, bears the caption Bastraharan (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 Krsia.

Some nakshi kanthas are autographed and dated in the Bengali year. For example, a nakshi kantha, embroidered by Parul, records the Bengali year 1359, which corresponds to 1952 CE. A few nakshi kanthas 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 Manadasundari for her father with her own hands. Many hours of



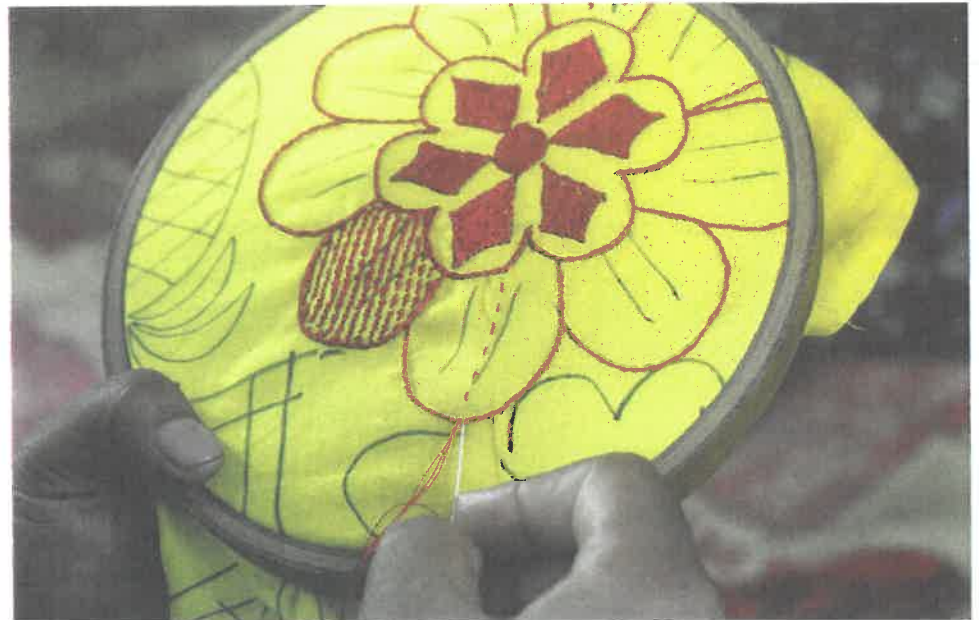


*A nakshi kantha from Jessore*

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. Niaz Zaman has identified twenty-four nakshi kantha border patterns: pipe sari, dhaner shish, khejur chhodi, beki, motor dana, barfi, anaj taga, bisa taga, chik taga, chok taga, graft taga, gut taga, jhop taga, ma/a taga, moi taga, mala taga, panch taga or panch mala taga, rens taga, shamuk taga or sagar taga, bichhe pad, chok pad, phul pad, mach pad, and ta'abiz pad.<sup>23</sup> Some nakshi kanthas have no motifs other than the specific border patterns all over. In some nakshi kanthas the border patterns are so intricately worked that they seem to be woven rather than embroidered.



*A central lotus being embroidered, Jessore*

### **Regional Variations in Nakshi Kanthas**

All the districts of Bangladesh make kanthas. In this study, by nakshi kanthas we mean embroidered quilts. Nakshi kanthas are mainly found in the districts west of the Meghna. The districts east of the Meghna are associated with decorated kanthas that are woven



*A woman extracting yarn from an old sari, Jessore*

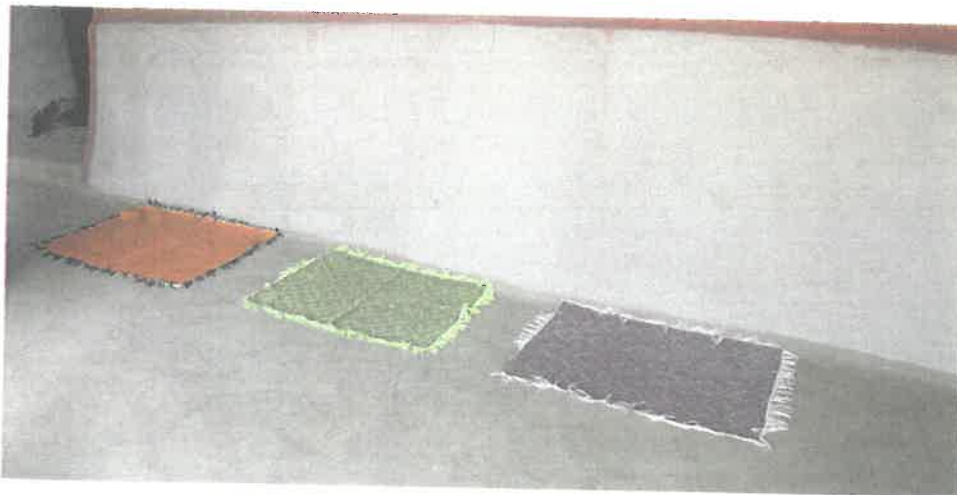
rather than embroidered. The nakshi kant/ia—making districts may be divided into five major regions: the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region, the Jessore-FaridpurKhulna-Kushtia region, the Pabna-Bogra-Rangpur region, the Mymensingh-JamalpurKishoreganj region, and the Barisal region.

### **The Rajshahi-Nawabganj Region**

The Rajshahi - Nawabganj region produces a completely different kind of nakshi kanthas; these have a wide variety of geometric designs without any human figure.

This nakshi kantha was made in Jessore in the late nineteenth century. Photographed by Joss Reiver Bany whatsoever, though birds may be present. This region is known for four

distinct types of nczkshj kanthas: the lohori, the cross stitch kantha, the uk kantha, and the sujni. The lohori is a thick, stiff nakshi kantha meant to be used as a bedcover. It is the



*Asan nakshi kanthas, Chapai Nawabganj*

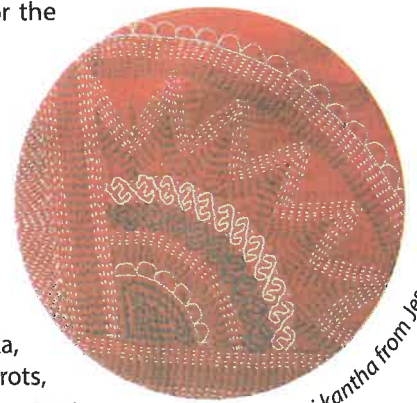


*A nakshi kantha from Jessore*

oldest nakshi kantha in the Rajshahi-Nawabganj region. Its colors are predominantly white, red, black, and blue. The stitch used in embroidering the lohori is the running stitch, which is similar to the chatai or pati phod. Its motifs are limited to the lohori or wave motif, the diamond motif with its variations of the charchala, aatchala and barochala, and the pan motif. The cross stitch kantha, also known as the carpet kantha, is bright. It is quicker to produce because of the cross stitch. The uk kantha uses the Holbein stitch or the uk phod. The sujni, already discussed above, is made in the RajshahiNawabganj region to give a girl as part of her dowry. Both the uk kantha and the sujni use red salu for the surface material.

### **The Jessore-Faridpur-Khulna-Kushtia Region**

The best nakshi kantas of Bangladesh come from Jessore and Faridpur. Jessore and Faridpur nakshi kantas are noted for a wealth of motifs. Of the motifs, the central lotus, the sun, the tree-of-life, the kalka, 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



*A nakshi kantha from Jessore*

accessories are more common. Of the toilet accessories, the comb, a mirror, a surmadani, 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 tola 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 tola nakshi kanthas from Jessore. Pad tola 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 phod, 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.



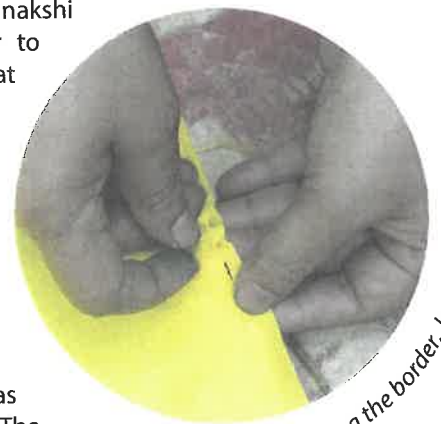
*A nakshi kantha from Jessore*

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,



*A nakshi kantha from Jessore*

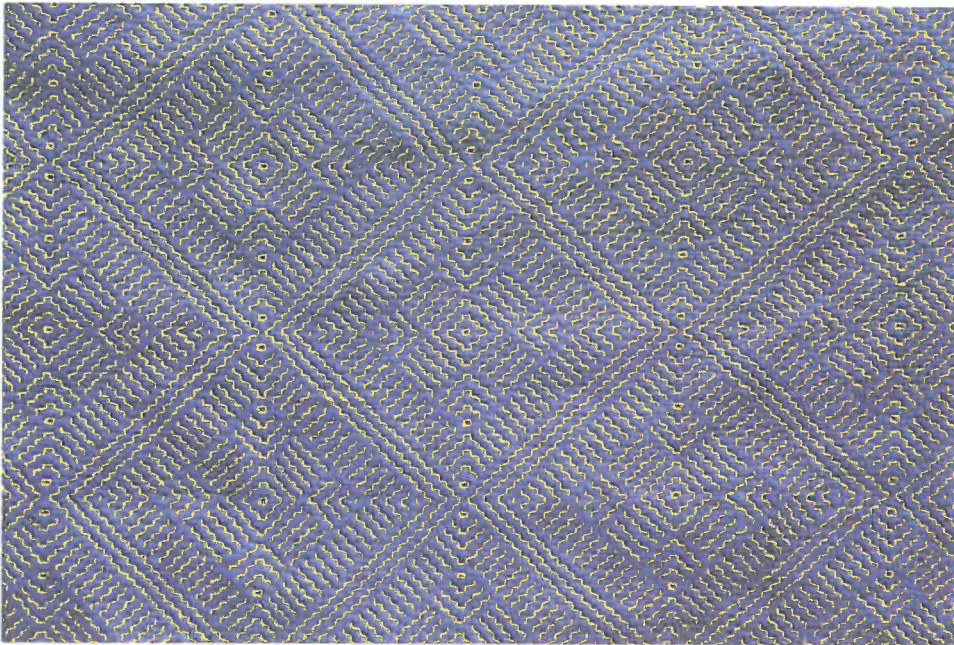
whenever used in Jessore nakshi kanthas, cover small areas, which contrast piercingly with larger areas of bright colors found in Faridpur nakshi kanthas. Another feature of Jessore nakshi kanthas is the delicate look of the stitches, which are small and fine. Faridpur seems to have a fondness for orange. 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."<sup>24</sup> 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



*A women reinforcing the border, Jessore*

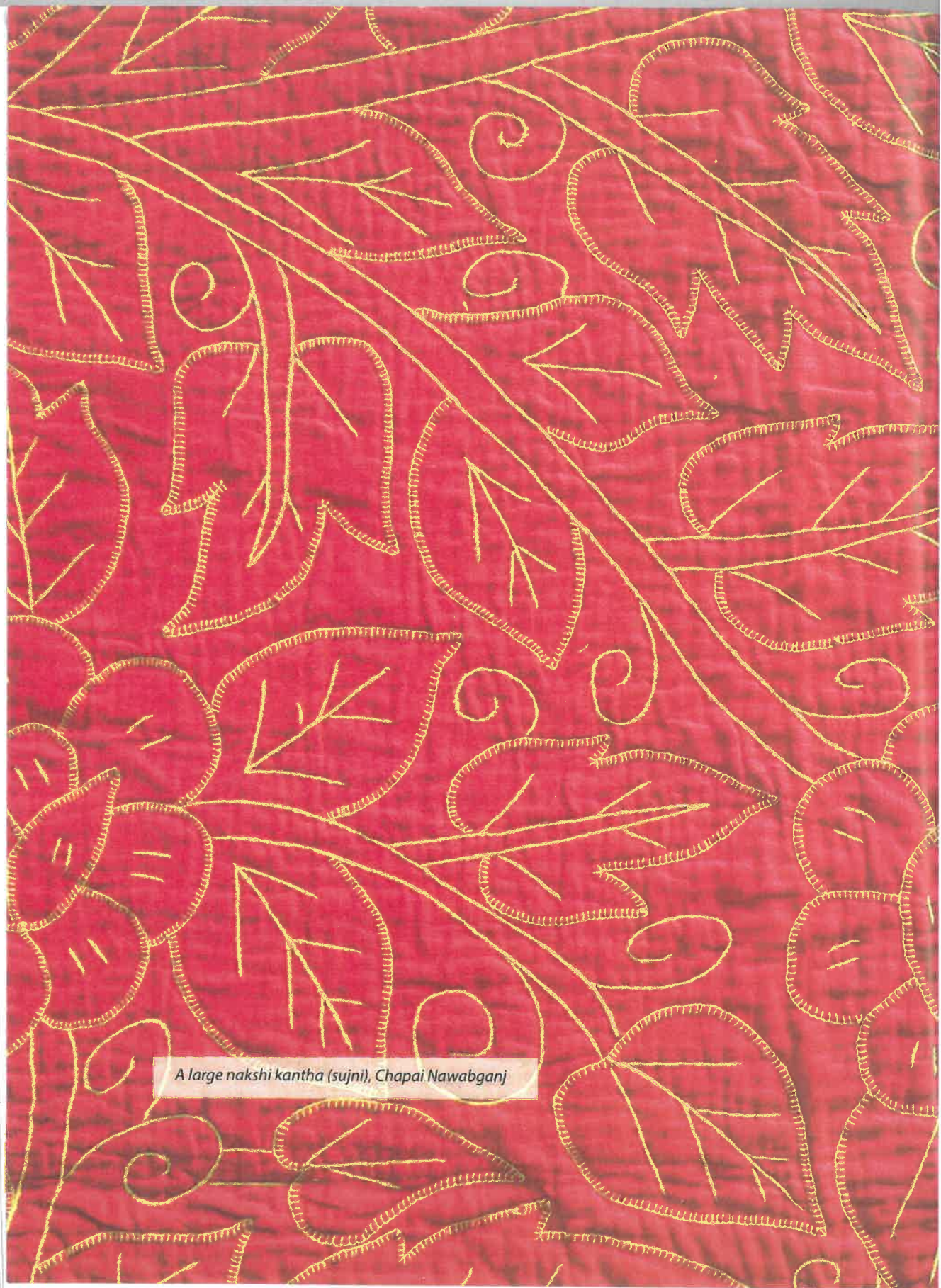
know when— the embroiderers of Faridpur, for whatever reasons, developed a fondness for bright colors, and since then their successors have carried on this tradition.

Khulna nakshi kanthas, which are also colorful, are similar to Faridpur nakshi kanthas. Khulna employs the kantha phod 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 tola nakshi kanthas, it lacks the artistic excellence of Jessore and Faridpur nakshi kanthas.



*A nakshi kantha from Chapai Nawabganj*

Kushtia, being situated between Rajshahi and Jessore, produces nakshi kanthas similar to the lohari and Jessore nakshi kanthas. Its lohari-type nakshi kanthas, like Rajshahi-Nawabganj lohari kanthas, are thick; as many as seven saris are used to make such nakshi kanthas. However, there is a difference. In the lohari the stitch is smaller than the space between the stitches, but in the lohari -type nakshi kantha from Kushtia the space between the stitches depends on the motifs to be embroidered. Other Kushtia nakshi kanthas have border patterns worked in the chatai, the kaitya, the kantha phod 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



*A large nakshi kantha (sujni), Chapai Nawabganj*



Kushtia nakshi kanthas are floral and leaf motifs, the ku/a, the wheel, the fish, and the boat. One motif is, however, unique to Kushtia: 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 pad 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.



*A nakshi kantha from Jessore*

### **Social and cultural meanings of the element**

In one long narrative poem, Jasim Uddin made the nakshi kantha into the most famed of the traditional arts of Bangladesh. The poet tells of the love and marriage of a man and a woman. When the man is forced to leave his home, the woman sorrows, stitching her sad life into an embroidered quilt that will cover her grave at death. Suffused with the soft melancholy of village life, the poem won acclaim for its author, but no matter how fine his verse, the nakshi kantha would not have so risen in significance were it not, in itself, a thing rich with beauty and meaning.

One meaning of the nakshi kantha lies in the silent, private associations that a woman develops in her work, creating traditional motifs that hold memories for her alone. Each stitch traps time. Her work becomes a text of recall and remembrance.

Another dimension of meaning lies in her craft. The sari in which a woman wraps her body is a single, seamless piece of cloth. Woven into unity, uncut, her cloth is an emblem of wholeness and oneness. After it is frayed and torn beyond use, her sari is not



*Runa Begum carrying an assortment of nakshi kanthas to a fair, Chapai Nawabganj*

discarded. It is pieced and stitched into a quilt. Cloth decays into rags that are reunited in a new entity, much as the clay of the *murti* decays into the silt out of which new statues are shaped. The quilter's act of reassembly locates her in the cyclical patterns of the cosmos that turn through birth and death and rebirth.

The embroidered quilt, the *nakshi kantha*, exemplifies the Bangladeshi pattern of recycling in which useless fragments are combined into useful wholes. Men take broken bits of china and glass, fitting them together in intricate *chinitikri* mosaics that cover the walls of the mosques with bright floral patterns. Comparably, women piece rags into patchwork quilts. Patchwork is common in Bangladesh, but Bangladeshi women do not carry patchwork to the heights achieved by rural women in the United States. Instead, they pile up layers of old sari cloth and baste them together, creating a wide white field that they embroider with colored thread raveled from the borders of old saris. They finish the work by filling the white background with white stitchery that surrounds the colored motifs and quilts the whole into unity. The great art of the women of Bengal is embroidery, not patchwork.

In the past, embroidered quilts exhibited distinct regional styles in the north, south, and west of the nation, forming a rough complementary distribution with the fine cane mats of the east. The great exemplary work was the *nakshi kantha* of Jessore. At the

center expands a radially symmetrical lotus. The lotus rides upon the water as a symbol of the power that abides in dampness, the power of God in nature. Power upon power: the lotus blooms upon the water to provide the seat of the deity, of Laksjmi, the goddess of wealth, of Sarasvati, the goddess of wisdom, of Ganesha, the Lord of Beginnings, who is, like the quilt itself, an embodiment of rebirth, of life despite death. Toward the colorful lotus at the center, linear forms point from each corner. They might



*Five women at work, each embroidering separately*

be trees of life, signs of the soul in ascent, or they might be flame-like, leaf-like kalkas, familiar from the shawls of Kashmir. Then the whole is bordered, protected by a running arcade of mihrabs, each enclosing flowers that stand like the pious at prayer. Framed by its Muslim borders, centered by its Hindu lotus, the field of the nakshi kantha is filled, packed with the images we have come to expect in Bangladesh. There are depictions of nature's beauty and power: flowers and birds, butterflies and fish, horses and elephants. There are the artifacts of common life: agricultural tools, household implements, and village houses. There are the objects of a woman's desire: jewelry, mirrors, and a glorious wedding procession. And there are images that evoke religion: Muslim amulets and Hindu temple cars.

With its run of floral mihrabs and its rolling temple cars, the masterpiece of the nakshi kantha artist, like the mystical song of the Baul, seeks a synthesis of the land's spiritual traditions, but other quilted and embroidered works are rigorously Islamic. Women make bags to protect the Holy Koran, stitched in abstract geometric designs, and they



*Momtaz Begum sketching prior to embroidering, Jessore*

embroider prayer mats with stylized mosques. The recent nakshi kantha of Rajshahi, cross-stitched on a red ground, made for prayer, carries a domed mosque like the ones woven in cane on the eastern side of the country.

Significant in its technology of recycling, significant in its decorative display, the classical nakshi kantha was also significant in its social purpose. It was given away to maintain familial bonds of duty and affection. Made as a gift to a daughter, the nakshi kantha was taken by the bride to her new home, where it obliterated distance in memory. Every stitch reminded a daughter of her mother's love. Made for a son or husband, the nakshi kantha was a transportable piece of the home. It gave him comfort when he was gone. Out on the road, rolling himself for sleep in a warm kantha, the man wrapped himself in cloth worn soft by the body of a beloved woman. Touching the rippled, densely worked surface, he felt the care she had lavished on her gift to him. A soft sheath of comfort and protection, the nakshi kantha incarnates affection, a mother's embrace, and it is fitting that when the new nation of Bangladesh was born, its fresh constitution was wrapped tenderly in an old nakshi kantha.

Meticulous in its execution, demanding in its craft, the nakshi kantha belongs to the intimate circle of the family. It becomes the story of one woman, a symbol of her life and an apt topic for the poet, when she gives it the fullness of her devotion, loving her work as a child is loved—without thought of repayment. Art made of love, the nakshi kantha is unfit to commercial production, in which time must be repaid in cash. Yet, since the 1980s, the craft has become a part of a commercial revival designed to get money to



*Nurjahan Begum sewing to decorate a kantha, Jessore*

poor women and attractive, evocative commodities to prosperous consumers. Now there are nakshi kantha pillow covers and purses, bedspreads and pictorial wall hangings, that recycle traditional imagery for financial gain.

The nakshi kantha is now also made of new cloth. Careful stitching can continue to exhibit the quality of a woman's hand. Embroidered motifs can continue to carry deep meanings. But when a woman is pressed to labor for wages and when she is supplied designs to copy, then it is difficult for her to maintain the integrity of her craft or to invest her imagery with personal significance. It is difficult but not impossible, because there are numerous artists who still work alone, stitching with seriousness and creating their own designs, and there are artists like Aleya Khanam who have upheld their personal standards while adjusting their work to meet the demands of the market.

### **Aleya Khanam: A leading promoter of the Element**

Aleya Khanam was born in Kushtia. Her father died when she was a schoolgirl, and she was forced to work to support her family. At first, she worked as a tailor, then in 1984 she decided to reproduce a small nakshi kantha made by her grandmother. She took her new creation to Dhaka and showed it to the managers of an export agency. They were impressed and gave her an order for four hundred and fifty copies of her piece. Returning home, she assembled a team of thirty-five women to help her fill the order. Those first small works were cut up to make elegant purses, but soon she began to

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enlarge her repertory. She expanded her formats, invented new designs, and tried new colors. The classical nakshi kantha is embroidered on a white ground. She now uses red and black as well as white. Today Aleya Khanam is the manager of an atelier in her home in Kushtia that employs as many as one hundred and fifty needy women. Like Rashida Musharraf in Dhamrai and Tapati Rani Dey in Old Dhaka, she has found a way to stay home and practice her art while finding success in the commercial world dominated by men. Through wit, talent, and enterprise, Aleya Khanam has converted a domestic women's art into a profitable commodity.

Her husband, Mohammad Ali Khan, said that he was concerned at first that her commercial venture might disrupt their home life, but seeing the good she did by providing employment to poor women, he gave Aleya Khanam his full support, and she graciously credits her success to him. He manages the business. She designs each piece, working through the nights to prepare things for the women who come each dawn.

Complex designs she works out on paper with a pencil. Then pricking the paper to make a stencil, she pounces the design to the cloth. Simpler designs she draws freehand on the cloth with incredible speed and facility.

The hardest part of her job, Aleya Khanam says, is teaching the stitches to her workers, for nakshi kantha demands many types of stitch, and each one must be performed with precision. The women in her atelier quilt and embroider large bedspreads with a geometrical interlace of fanciful motifs. They quilt and embroider small mats for prayer. Like the cane mats of eastern Bangladesh, the embroidered mats of western Bangladesh make space sacred, and they become, like the murti of the potter, a tool used in ritual, an aid to communication with God. Significance endures as the fine old tradition, so precious to Bangladesh, shifts out of the intimate, familial realm to meet the challenges of a new age.

## **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 artists 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.

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### End Notes:

1. Niaz Zaman, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, Second Revised Edition (Dhaka 1993), 61.
2. Gurusaday Dutt, *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers*, (Calcutta 1990), 104.
3. Niaz Zaman, *op. cit.*, 61.
4. Laura Fisher, 'An American Tradition,' in Dennis Duke and Deborah Harding (eds.), *America's Glorious Quilts*, (New York 1987), 15.
5. Abdul Momin Chowdhury, *Dynastic History of Bengal*, (Dacca 1967), 187.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Firoz Mahmud, 'Gurusaday Dutt: Pioneer for Preservation of Folk Art,' in Sharif Uddin Ahmed (ed), *Sylhet: History and Heritage*, (Dhaka 1999), 845.
8. Gurusaday Dutt, Preface by Aroti Dutt, *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers*, (Calcutta 1965), xi.
9. Niaz Zaman, *op. cit.*, 58.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Niaz Zaman, *op. cit.*, 49-50.
12. *Ibid.*, 50.
13. *Ibid.*, 58.
14. *Ibid.*, 47.
15. Niaz Zaman, *op. cit.*, 44.
16. Alison Liley, *The Craft of Embroidery*, (London 1961), 53.
17. Surovi Bhattacharjee, 'The Weaver's Art of Bengal,' in J. B. Bhusan (ed), *The Costumes and Textiles of India*, (Bombay 1958), 54.
18. Gurusaday Dutt, *op. cit.*, 104.
19. Niaz Zaman, *op. cit.*, 61.
20. Mohammad Syedur, "Nakshi Kantha Art," *Bangla Academy Journal*, January-June, (Dhaka 1992) 6,
21. Henry Glassie, *The Spirit of Folk Art: The Girard Collection at the Museum of International Folk Art*, (New York 1989), 85.
22. For all the nakshi kantha borders, see Niaz Zaman, *op. cit.*, 94-107.
23. Niaz Zaman, *op. cit.*, 134.
24. For a detailed study, see Niaz Zaman, *op. cit.*, 139-157.
25. Niaz Zaman, *op. cit.*, 138.
26. Henry Glassie, *op. cit.*, 85.