

Threads of Memory: The Living Art of Nakshi Kantha

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In the villages, life moves at a gentle pace where traditions are valued and passed down through generations. One of these traditions is a beautiful hand-stitched quilt known as Nakshi Kantha. These quilts aren't just warm covers—they tell stories, hold memories, and represent the lives of the women who make them. What started as a household item has now become a symbol of culture, pride, and opportunity for many women. Nakshi Kantha has been around for hundreds of years. The name comes from the Bengali words "naksha" (design) and "kantha" (quilt). Long ago, women used old sarees and cloths to make these quilts, decorating them with pictures of daily life, dreams, and emotions. While no one knows exactly when it started, historians believe the tradition goes back to the 16th century in the Bengal region.

This special art became famous thanks to a poem written in 1929 by Jasimuddin called *Nakshi Kanthar Math* (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt). It tells a sad love story of a woman who sews her pain and memories into a quilt. This poem showed the world that Nakshi Kantha is more than a simple craft—it's a way to express deep feelings, preserve traditions, and keep memories alive in a meaningful, lasting way. Each Nakshi Kantha is like a picture book, carefully stitched by hand. Women usually sew these quilts while sitting in groups, chatting, laughing, and sharing stories.

Some of the most common designs found on Nakshi Kantha are lotus flowers, birds, peacocks, fish, water elements, and scenes from rural life like farming, festivals, or weddings. Lotus flowers are often used in the designs to symbolize beauty, purity, and the graceful nature of women. Birds and peacocks, with their vibrant feathers, are stitched to show love, joy, and happiness. Fish and water represent life and fertility, as water is essential for crops, families, and survival. Many quilts also feature scenes from the everyday lives of village people—plowing fields, celebrating weddings, or preparing for religious festivals—capturing moments that would otherwise be forgotten.

These designs aren't random. They reflect what the maker has seen, experienced, or imagined. Quilts are often given as gifts for important life events like weddings, childbirth, or festivals. They are passed down from one generation to another and treasured as a part of family history. In times when women didn't have many chances to speak out or share their stories, Nakshi Kantha was their quiet voice. They used thread and needle to share their thoughts, emotions, and lives. Some quilts are filled with joyful memories, while others quietly hold sorrow and longing. Each one is unique and full of personal meaning.

Making Nakshi Kantha is rarely a lonely task. In many villages, women gather together to sew, sing, and talk. These group sewing sessions, known as 'Adda,' create a feeling of togetherness. They become safe spaces where women can share laughter, worries, advice, and dreams. These moments are more than just work—they are about friendship and emotional support. Stitch by stitch, bonds are strengthened. In difficult times like floods, crop failures, or family struggles, the sewing circle becomes a source of strength and comfort. Women lift each other up, share resources, and inspire hope.

This tradition is still alive today. Mothers teach their daughters how to make Nakshi Kantha, passing down both skills and stories. Some organizations also offer workshops so that the younger generation can learn. NGOs are helping to spread this knowledge even further, ensuring the tradition does not fade with time.

Jamalpur, a district in Bangladesh, is known as a center for Nakshi Kantha-making. In 2021, Jamalpur's unique style of quilt received Geographical Indication (GI) status. This means

that only quilts made in Jamalpur using specific traditional methods can be officially called “Nakshi Kantha of Jamalpur.” It is known that the elegant royal officers of the Mughal era used Nakshi Kantha (embroidered quilts) from Jamalpur. Over time, Jamalpur’s traditional kantha has taken on a modern form. Now, Nakshi Kantha is being produced commercially with new designs and styles.

Today, rural women of Jamalpur skillfully embroider scenes of nature, animals, birds, fish, boats, baskets, elephants, horses, bride and groom, palanquins, drums, dolls, and both village and city life into the kantha. The types of threads used in Jamalpur’s Nakshi Kantha have different names, such as Mautaga, Gutu Taga, Chik Taga, Nolak Taga, Pan Taga, and Shamuk Taga.

The GI status is not just an honor—it helps protect the local artists. It prevents others from copying their work unfairly and helps keep the tradition alive by tying it to its rightful place. It also gives artisans more respect and opens doors to bigger markets, both within Bangladesh and around the world.

For a long time, Nakshi Kantha was something women made only for their homes. But now, it has become a way for many women to earn money and become financially independent. In places like Jamalpur, women are forming groups, working with NGOs, and selling their quilts in local stores, at craft fairs, and even online. A beautifully made Nakshi Kantha can sell for anywhere between BDT 1,500 and BDT 10,000 or more. The price depends on the size, the amount of detail, and the story it tells. NGOs and other organizations are helping women learn new skills, understand fair pricing, and connect with buyers.

This income is life-changing. It helps women support their families, pay for their children’s education, and even start small businesses. It builds confidence and respect in their communities. Nakshi Kantha is not just a piece of art—it’s a path to a better life. Nakshi Kantha is no longer just a village craft. People around the world are discovering its beauty and meaning. It is now exported in many forms—like bedspreads, cushion covers, wall hangings, scarves, handbags, and even clothing. These items are loved not only for how they look, but for the stories and culture they carry.

Countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan are some of the biggest markets. Many buyers today prefer handmade, sustainable, and fair-trade products. Nakshi Kantha matches these values perfectly. It’s environmentally friendly, culturally rich, and made with care by skilled hands. Some international designers are even working directly with Bangladeshi artisans to create new products that mix traditional and modern styles. With better marketing, storytelling, and online selling platforms, Nakshi Kantha can become one of the most valuable craft exports from Bangladesh.

Even though Nakshi Kantha is gaining popularity both at home and abroad, there are still several important challenges that must be addressed to ensure its continued growth. One key issue is the need for broader recognition. While Jamalpur has rightly received Geographical Indication (GI) status for its unique Nakshi Kantha, similar high-quality embroidery is also being produced in other districts such as Rajshahi, Jessore, and Kushtia. These regions deserve recognition too. By extending GI status to other areas, more artisans across the country can gain visibility and economic benefits, helping to preserve the diversity of this traditional art.

Another significant challenge lies in market access. Many rural artisans, especially women, lack the training, tools, and networks needed to connect directly with buyers or larger markets. This often forces them to depend on middlemen, who take a substantial share of the profit. As a result, the true creators of Nakshi Kantha—the women who put in hours of detailed handwork—earn only a small fraction of what their products are worth.

There is also a growing need for improved quality control. Without a standard system to check the craftsmanship and finishing of each piece, some products exported abroad may fail to meet expectations. When even a few substandard items reach international markets, it can affect the reputation of Nakshi Kantha as a whole and reduce trust in its quality.

To overcome these challenges, a coordinated effort is essential. The government, NGOs, private sector, and artisan communities must work together to create lasting solutions. This includes recognizing more regional variations of Nakshi Kantha under GI status, establishing permanent display and sales centers in major cities to promote visibility, and building online platforms where artisans can sell directly to customers without the interference of middlemen. Equally important is the support for women-led cooperatives and the development of a reliable quality control system that maintains high standards across all products.

Nakshi Kantha is not just a warm quilt—it is memory, art, history, and hope all stitched into one. From quiet village homes to stylish shops in big cities, it carries the voices of women who have poured their lives into every stitch. As the world begins to care more about handmade and meaningful things, Nakshi Kantha stands out as a shining example. We must protect this tradition, support the women behind it, and tell its story with pride. Because in every quilt, there is a story—and in every stitch, there is a soul.

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