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**TRANSFORMATION OF A TRADITIONAL TEXTILE CRAFT: A CASE STUDY OF  
NAKSHI KANTHA  
Master's Thesis**

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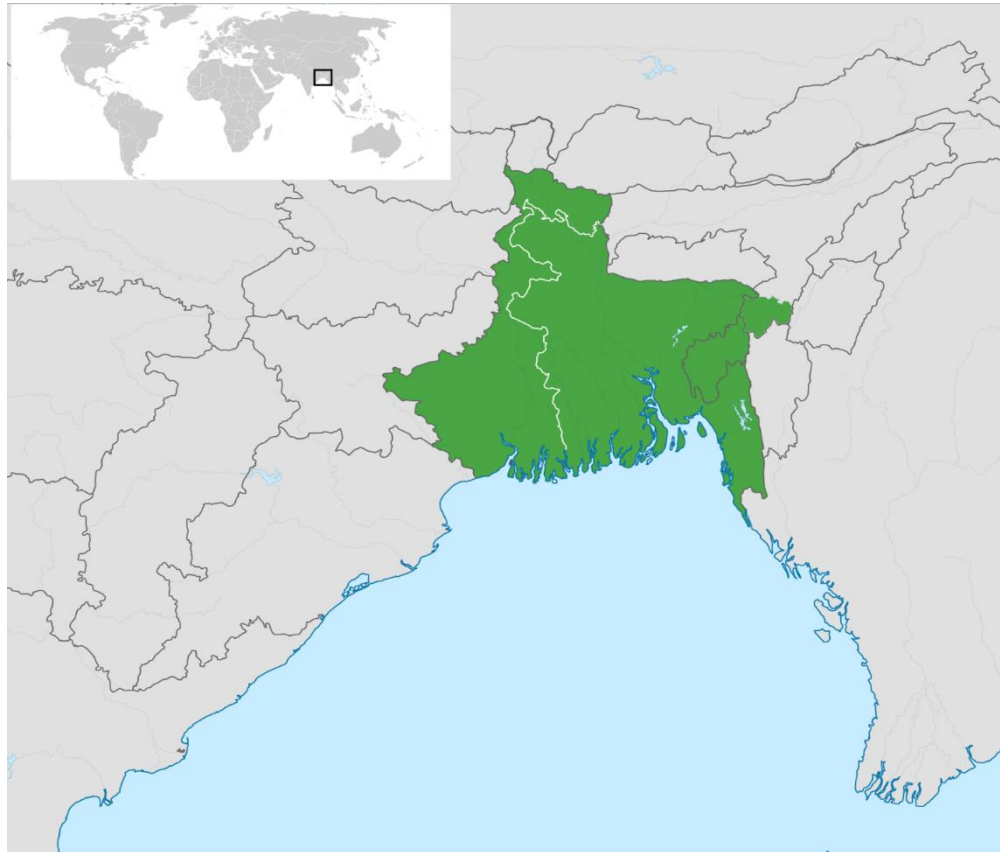
# Introduction

In the rural houses of Bengal, women create lushly embroidered quilts that have until recently gone unnoticed and unrecognized outside of the region. By sewing together rags of sarees (regular Bengali women's clothing) that are embellished with innumerable running stitches to form motifs and patterns, they produce highly decorative surfaces using cotton and silk threads. Using a unique embroidery skill and the dynamic detail orientation of the motifs, ordinary rural women with their inherited adroitness make extraordinarily beautiful objects. These embroidered quilts are locally known as "Nakshi Kantha," meaning "decorative quilts," and have become an identity maker of the rural women, as they have given them a platform to show their skill and creativity and an opportunity to express desires, aspirations, sentiments, and identity through creative surface embroidery. Previously used to represent love and care for dear ones, in its present form it has assisted the artisans to empower themselves by using their traditional skills for commercial manufacturing of Nakshi Kantha. The multiple functions and meanings of these handcrafted textiles have not only allowed them to contribute to household use but also have furnished their place in history and now in the contemporary world, as they have moved into public spaces like art galleries, museums, exhibitions, and craft shops, as well as gaining a new role in personal use and even in works of literature. Due to its change from a domestic craft to an extremely valued fashion object, it is possible to study the status of Nakshi Kantha from different levels of material culture.

Bengal, the geographical and historical setting in which Nakshi Kantha are made, has privileged different ethnic groups (Hindus and Muslims) living together side by side in harmony while maintaining individuals' own cultural and religious practices. Bengal is a cultural and historical region in South Asia that is currently divided between Bangladesh and India (Figure 1). The people living there mostly depend on farming and speak Bengali, and the name of the area is derived from the local language spoken. The material culture of rural inhabitants from these two groups can be aesthetically and materially similar while being functionally different. Hence, the utilization of Nakshi Kantha can be multifunctional – it can serve as a blanket, coverlet, jewelry box, baby quilt, or prayer mat, as well as many other purposes, both religious and secular.

Nakshi Kantha and ordinary Kantha (without embroidered motifs and designs but with the running stitch) has an essential utility in the Bengali family and their everyday material practice.

Traditional Nakshi Kantha was made mostly for non-economic purposes, usually for personal use or as a personal gift. The purpose of a Kantha is to wrap something or someone to protect from



*Figure 1. Map of Bengal (retrived from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengal>)*

cold or as a protection layer for something valuable. The emotions and desires of the women artisan's manifest in different motifs, centering the Nakshi Kantha in women's experiences of rural everyday life. I call this woman-centric craft a form of folklore according to Skjelbred's definition of folklore,

Folklore is collective, traditional knowledge formed by human creativity and fantasy. This knowledge is in certain cases manifest through expressive cultural forms and it is through these cultural forms that folklore is transmitted. Folklore is continually created anew through performance situations marked by individual traits. Folklore is mainly

communicated through words and actions, but even in artefacts such as food, clothes, art, and buildings one can find ideas and symbols which are folklore. (Skjelbred, 1986, p.21)

Nakshi Kantha has remained a women-centric craft throughout its journey, and women's life patterns, skills, and creativity show in its aesthetic value and the patience needed to make this highly decorative embroidered artifact. The practice of making Nakshi Kantha remains women-centric today because of its domesticity and its role in beliefs and practices associated with childbirth, worship practices, and religious beliefs that are held prominently by rural women. The crafting skill involved is basically collective, as there is a comprehensive process that needs to be followed to make a Nakshi Kantha. It requires traditional knowledge, as the skill is transferred from generation to generation without receiving any institutional training. Occasionally, the artisans adopt it subconsciously through following their female family members as a part of their regular household activity. In the South Asian communities where most of the Kantha artisans live, exurban women have a low rate of literacy and do not have access to any type of institutional education, and this creates limitations on how they express themselves. The decorative surface of Kantha can be evaluated as an artistic means of self-expression in which women communicate certain identities and aspirations through their embroidery work.

The embroidered surface of a Nakshi Kantha contains a variety of folk motifs taken from the artisan's locality. As the artisans are mostly from rural areas, the motifs are taken from nature, artisans' everyday lives, or something that they desire. Most of the motifs are selected mindfully and have their own meanings that carry semiotic importance as they represent an artisan's self. Besides the multifarious motifs, the color, shape, texture, and size play important roles to convey the meaning and purpose of the craft. The creation and circulation of Nakshi Kantha remain highly gendered processes linked to women's labor, domesticity, fertility, and the private sphere.

The status of the quilts is now quite different than it was previously. Now they have gained a contemporary form as the practice of this domestic craft has been shifted from the yard of the peasant to commercial production accompanied by ethnic entrepreneurship. Previously, the sentiment of the artisans was the key component to guide the process of making a Nakshi Kantha. The artisan's religious belief used to be reflected in a traditional Kantha as well, depending on its

intended use. Discarded clothes used to be the primary material for making Nakshi Kantha, as they were believed to remove the evil eye from newborn babies who were wrapped in them. Still, contemporary commercial Kantha retain their role in gift-giving and daily life. Husbands, sons, sons-in-law, and other beloved family members usually receive quilts as mementos of care and affection from their wives, mothers, or in-laws. Grandmothers also sew them to show their love for their grandchildren. A Nakshi Kantha is very popular as a memento, and it is a medium through which recipients can stay attached to their origins. Many people with Bengali roots who live in different parts of the world have at least one Nakshi Kantha in their collection.

In this paper, I explore the Nakshi Kantha in the larger culture of the region and how it has changed from the 19th century to today in Bengal and Bengali culture. After a revival in the 1980s, Nakshi Kantha popularity expanded in Bengali culture notably, and it became a fashion trend of the Bengali upper class living both in and outside of Bengal. Through fieldwork in a Bengali diaspora community living in the United Kingdom, I focus on how community members connect through Nakshi Kantha, their sentiments as users of Nakshi Kantha and stories linked with them, the utilization of this craft as a commercial product, the sources through which they obtained their Nakshi Kantha collections, and their reasons for owning them. At the same time, my line of inquiry also focuses on the changes that occurred in Nakshi Kantha culture and the impact of those changes on socio-economic connections of the Nakshi Kantha artisans. To achieve my goal, I visited museums and conducted interviews to assess users' and makers' experiences by asking semi-structured and structured questions. All in all, this thesis endeavors the answer of the questions- (a) how meaning of Nakshi Kantha motifs have transformed? (b) is the survival of Nakshi Kantha compromising its traditional aesthetic value and the sentiment of the artisans.

I develop my views on Nakshi Kantha through five main concepts: traditional women's craft, self-expression, modification, fashion, and economy. Through these keywords, I explore aspects of continuity and change in Nakshi Kantha as a cultural and commercial phenomenon: how this rural women-made artifact has transformed into a high-fashion element in Bengali communities and how tradition became a commodity and brought economic success to rural women artisans through employing ethnic skills. In Nakshi Kantha tradition, "creation, communication, and consumption" (Glassie, *Material Culture*, 1999, p. 48), which Henry Glassie defines as the three contexts of the

life history of material culture, provide a framework for my analysis. These dynamics are related to each other – when consumption takes a particular form, as when Nakshi Kantha is intended for personal use or for a gift to someone close to the maker, its creation is different or may communicate specific meanings. Communicating through a Nakshi Kantha often depends on the artisans and its receivers or on the relationship between a buyer and a receiver. Furthermore, it depends on the social association of the people – people from a similar community know the value of their own tradition better than anyone else and may be more sensitive to meanings communicated by the makers. The tradition is also cherished by other people (who can be from the outer communities or neighboring communities) who know the about the tradition and also can communicate well through the artifact.

This paper has been divided into four chapters. Chapter One introduces the fundamental concerns related to Nakshi Katha, academic methods to study material culture, and the relationship between tradition and modification. Chapter Two includes research methodology in which I elaborate my fieldwork, including the interview process and participant observation. In Chapter Three, I broadly discuss meanings, materials, and kinds of Nakshin Kantha by relating them with my field data and existing literature. I encapsulate a comparative analysis between traditional Nakshi Kantha and contemporary Nakshi Kantha, making connections with my research findings. Chapter Four includes critical analysis based on field data and other research with the discussion of ethnic entrepreneurship and manufacturization of Nakshi Kantha I conclude the chapter by showing how contemporary Nakshi Kantha is surviving at expense of its traditional value.



# Chapter One: Conceptualizing tradition and material culture

## 1.1 Nakshi Kantha: A short overview



*Figure 2: Nakshi Kantha, 2009*

The origin of the word “Kantha” is not precise; it originated from the Sanskrit word “Kontha,” which means rags, as Kantha is made of old clothes (Zaman, 1993, p.36), but it is assumed that there is a connection with the word “Kheta” which means "field" in Bengali language (Ahmad, 1997). The word “Naksha” refers to artistic patterns (Chowdhury, 2016). As a phrase, “Nakshi Kantha” represents artistic needlework on discarded cloth which started its journey as a rural women’s craft for everyday living. In English, the word “quilt” refers to “a warm bed covering made of padding enclosed between layers of fabric and kept in place by lines of stitching, typically applied in a decorative design” (Lixico Dictionary, 2019). In Nakshi Kantha, the basic concerns of the artisans are an artful presentation that has usefulness, and it should carry specific physical attributes. In asceticism, it is believed that these quilts are sacred, and monks used them as warm coverings. For Lord Buddha, Mahavira or Chaitanya, Jain saints or Sufi poets, the warm Kantha blanket is said to have been the garb of ascetics through the ages. (Das, 2012, p. 7).

The earliest mention of the quilt can be found in the book “*Sri Sri Chaitanya-Charitamrita*” by Krishnadas Kaviraj, written approximately five hundred years ago (Chowdhury, 2012, p. 8). Niaz Zaman (1993) states in her book, *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, that Nakshi Kantha practice using folk motifs started in Bengal in the medieval period. The folk chronicle *Nakshi Kanthar Math* (The field of Embroidered Quilt) was written by the famous Bengali poet, Jasimuddin (Chakraborty, 1987, p. 1805) It is a dramatized verse narrative, and the drama centers on a Nakshi Kantha made by the heroine to tell the story of her sad life. It is found by the hero, who had departed from her, and on his return, he uses it to learn what she has gone through in her lifetime. Besides literature, many folk songs also tell the story of Kantha. Painters have created several artworks inspired by the beauty of Nakshi Kantha.

Nakshi Kantha are featured in many museums. In Bangladesh National Museum there are Nakshi Kantha in the display. There is a Kantha museum in Kolkata, India; established in 2015, it is the home of several ethnic Kantha, and some of them are more than a hundred years old (Museums dedicated to ‘kantha’).<sup>1</sup> During my visit in London, I visited the Victoria and Albert museum, where I examined Nakshi Kantha made in Bengal between 1900 and 1950. The Nakshi Kantha displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum are classified in three different categories – Coverlet, Mat, and Wrapper, which are ornamented with iconic and non-iconic embroidery motifs. The South Asian Decorative Arts and Crafts Collection (SADAAC) in London also has a collection of Nakshi Kantha with traditional motifs, and most of them were collected from Bangladesh.

According to Das (2012), historically “Nakshi Kantha was practiced by women of all classes amongst Hindus and Muslims in rural Bengal,” leaving extraordinary Kanthas in both contemporary West Bengal and Bangladesh, and “Hindus and Muslims have contributed significantly to the motifs and forms used in the craft” throughout the region (Das, 2012, p. 8). The geographical location and its religious diversity make this craft practice more remarkable. After the partition of 1947, Bengal was divided between two different countries: India, and Bangladesh. This location carries different cultural influences from its history of Portuguese and

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<sup>1</sup> Museums dedicated to ‘kantha’, puppets launched in Bengal 2015. India Today 29.09.2015. Retrieved 16.08.2019 from <https://www.indiatoday.in/lifestyle/culture/story/museums-dedicated-to-kantha-puppets-launched-in-bengal-265404-2015-09-29>

British colonization. Besides colonization, the partition of Bengal has also influenced the practice of making Nakshi Kantha. Bangladesh is dominated by Muslim artisans, and West Bengal of India is dominated by Hindu artisans (Palit, 2017). A common factor for both religious practices is the use of rags, which is considered to be pure and auspicious, although there is variability in selecting motifs, colors, techniques, and other factors to convey the visual and vernacular meaning of the Kantha. There are differences in form and use according to religion; for example, some Muslim Kantha were made as tomb covers, in which case they “never had any secured knot to signify that the soul was being set free” (Palit, 2017, p. 6086).

In undivided Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kantha making was also practiced by the two religious’ groups at the same time and in the same place, and that has also served to socialize Kantha artisans apart from their religious beliefs and divergent identities.

There are also precise restrictions and regulations that are obeyed by some groups in Nakshi Kantha making. Sreenanda Palit sums up some of the norms and beliefs related to the craft:

“Traditionally, Pregnant women and single girls are prohibited from being Kantha artisans. When a pregnant woman dreamed of making a Kantha during her pregnancy, it was believed that she would give birth to a girl. Kantha artisans never worked at night as it was considered to bring ill fate to the family [...] Traditionally, Muslim women began their Kantha on Fridays and Hindu women avoided Saturdays.” (Palit, 2017, p. 6086).

Starting Kantha making on a Friday by Muslim women perhaps can be attributed to their religious perspective. As Friday is a propitious day in Muslim religion, starting a Nakshi Kantha on a Friday is more promising than any other day. In contrast, Saturdays are not good enough to start working on a Nakshi Kantha for Hindu women. In Hindu religion, it is also inauspicious to cut nails and hair on Saturdays. Nevertheless, some of the norms have seem to be broken by the artisans of the groups. For instance, in Muslim society, it is considered inappropriate to present iconic motifs (i.e. human and animal motifs) in their cultural practice. Nonetheless, Muslim artisans broke the taboo in earlier times of Nakshi Kantha practice, which we can see from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Nakshi Kantha.

The traditional forms of crafts are usually influenced by factors based on the fundamental needs, geographical location, climate, availability of materials, social life and, of course, economic factors. Historically, this quilt was produced for the personal use of an individual or for the family. In the past, craftworkers decorated it with motifs influenced by their family and social life. Making Kantha has mostly been a women's craft; some men also practice making it, but the number of the male crafters is significantly lower than of women. The technique of making Kantha has been passed down through generations, and older women give lessons to teenage girls of the family or to future daughters-in-law on how to make Kantha. It has become a way of crafting the script of self-expression and a projection of the artisans' possessions. In a rural society, women live a multi-functional life; they might have to do farming and household chores, depending on their social and economic status. Life is hard, and desires are unfulfilled for many artisans who have found the platform to express themselves utilizing their craft skill. The subjects embroidered on Kantha visualize the perception of the artisans and become their autobiographies.

In the European market, cotton- and silk-based textiles from Bengal always had a reputation for quality (Haque 2019). Similarly, Nakshi Kantha has been able to find a place in the European market and among South Asian diaspora communities. The striking pieces speak to customers in the USA, the UK, Germany, and other European countries. Nakshi Kantha garnered an international appreciation that led to pieces from Living Blue, a well-known Nakshi Kantha exporter, being showcased in Berlin and Paris Fashion Weeks and at the prestigious Santa Fe International Folk-Art Market. According to Mishael Aziz Ahmad, the director of Living Blue, "We took the idea of a traditional Nakshi Kantha and tried to contemporize it to master products that are ultra-modern and chic" (Haque 2019).

## 1.2 Academic methods of studying women's crafts of Bengal and relevant research

South Asia is famous for textile clothing and for its history of decorative crafts. The quality of the textiles of this area, particularly those made of cotton and silk, is considered one of the best, which has influenced the artisans of the area to take textile trends to another level. Even geographically,

this place is ideal for making certain textiles, such as Jamdani and Muslin, which already have world recognition because of their exclusive quality.<sup>2</sup> Nakshi Kantha is yet another textile craft that is famous for its extraordinary beauty. In this section, I will mention some of the scholars who have contributed to quilt/Kantha studies. Their work helps me in framing conceptual aspects of my research.

Research on material culture in Bangladesh started in the very recent past. Art historian Stella Kramrisch contributed significantly to providing academic interest. Her personal collection of Kantha designs and motifs are valuable for academic study. In fact, the photographs she collected were replicated by artisans during the revival time of Nakshi Kantha in the 1980s. She has photographed and collected Nakshi Kantha from Bengal and arranged an exhibition in the Philadelphia Museum. She saved Kantha tradition by giving it worldwide recognition. Kramrisch (1983) states, Kantha is still the most honorable and valued gift that is exchanged at marriage, birth or death.

Folkloristics' approach of studying material culture has been introduced in Bangladesh by Niaz Zaman (1981). Her book *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, published in 1981, is a valuable addition to academic scholarship. Her book introduces the reader to Nakshi Kantha as unnoticed and folkloric artifacts and invites the reader to consider the art object as a religious identity marker of the Bengal area. She broadly explains the revival and journey of the Nakshi Kantha from being an extremely personal domestic artifact to a commercial object utilizing the same rural women's workforce with the help of NGOs, and she explains how the initiatives of the NGOs have given a new life to the almost forgotten or unrecognized artifacts. She (2009) also elaborated the ethnical

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<sup>2</sup> **Muslin**, plain-woven cotton fabric made in various weights. The better qualities of muslin are fine and smooth in texture and are woven from evenly spun warps and wefts, or fillings. They are given a soft finish, bleached or piece-dyed, and are sometimes patterned in the loom or printed. Grades of muslin are known by such names as book, mull, swiss, and sheeting. The material was first made in the city of Mosul (now in Iraq), from which it derived its name. Early Indian muslins were handwoven of extremely fine handspan yarns. They were imported into Europe from India in the 17th century and were later manufactured in Scotland and England. (Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/muslin>)

significance of Kantha, its struggle into social position, commercialization, NGO intervention, and conventional artifacts.

Pika Ghosh writes in the book, “From Rags to Riches” published in 2009, how new initiatives and the contemporization process of Nakshi Kantha has given the artifact recognition in a way that it has become a high fashion element of modern society.

Karen Smith (2011) states in her essay “Framing quilts/framing culture” that a quilt has dimensionality and tactility, and it has similarities with pottery. They are both frequently held, caressed, and used by the body. However, the South Asian Nakshi Kantha has more in common with the *Patachitra*, which is a cloth-based scroll painting. The illustration (motifs, subjects, stories) through which these two crafts are practiced have similarities, both in the craftwork, which inscribes narratives and folktales, and the skills that artisans pass on from generation to generation. Nakshi Kantha also has some features in common with *Alpana*, which is another traditional painting method that mirrors the motifs and designs in use in Nakshi Kantha.

Teri Klassen (2017) writes that “quilt making could tend to emphasize gender-based solidarity over race-related social boundaries” (Klassen, 2017, p. 11). She also discusses how quilt making can be racially classified (by white and black artisans). Further she adds that social and personal responsibility drives artisans to make quilts for the family or for society to ensure textile production. She outlines three qualities that make a Tennessee Delta quilter – the quilter’s identity should be from a small-farm economic group, female, and adult (Klassen, 2017, p.16). Later she discusses how a new era came up with new offerings, new changes, new needs, new thoughts, and new expressions that made the quilt maker into a consumer of the object. Similarly, in the Nakshi Kantha tradition, the making of the artifact is going through modification to meet the challenges of the modern era. The artisan of the Nakshi Kantha came up from the personal sphere to meet the necessity of commercialization. The personal need has shared its space with de-personalization.

On the subject of the role of change in tradition, Dorothy Noyes (2009) shows how colonization impacts and influences local culture, and through its influence, local tradition can be mobilized and create “alternative modernities”:

“The paradoxes of heritage are: it recuperates a dead tradition of the lifeworld (or even kills off a living one) in order to bring it to a second life in print, in the museum, or onstage. There the tradition no longer serves ordinary social purposes but is an object of veneration in its own right, a monument of cultural identity; its form, “protected” from decay or corruption, becomes frozen in time.” (Noyes, 2009, p. 246-247).

Nakshi Kantha is a traditional artifact which was unnoticed for a long time, and after getting recognition, it has adopted its contemporary journey. Although it has adopted contemporary form, it is still connected with the semiotic meaning from the materiality and emotionally. Kristi Joeste states it is useful to look from the semiotic approach to understand how people communicate through textile (Joeste, 2012). approach that is useful for understanding how people communicate through textile. After exploring the above-mentioned works, it would be possible to encompass the modification that is happening in studying Nakshi Kantha, as the process of commodification has been comprehensively studied quite long ago. In between, there are many evolutions that might have already happened. Besides that, globalization has impacted that part of the world notably; therefore, people are getting more access to the internet, and girls’ education is also increasing. Private entrepreneurship is also spreading and enjoying success in many cases. The commercialization of Nakshi Kantha significantly integrates folk culture, economy, identity, socio-cultural life and fashion. Previously, it served the purpose of making personal connections in the yards of the artisans. On top of that, institutionalization (i.e. collaborating with NGOs and personal entrepreneurship) has also shaped Nakshi Kantha, which has previously roamed in a specific boundary.

To study Nakshi Kantha from a sociocultural viewpoint, Henry Glassie’s framework for studying the contexts of material culture (1999) provides a basic structure.

“One way to schematize the contextual variety, to arrange the categories of information of information within which artifacts absorb significance, is to envision context as a series of occasions belonging to three master classes – creation, communication and consumption – that cumulatively recapitulate the life history of the artifact.” (Glassie, 1999, p. 48)

From personal use to de-personalization of Nakshi Kantha, the artifact is going through modification maintaining the co-relation with the dynamics. Glassie (1999) states how the context of creation let us know about the creators of the artifact, the context of consumption gives us knowledge about the consumers and how communication in material culture shows us the differences and similarities of the artifact.

To analyze the modification and changes that transpired with this craft and the interrelation between the craft and its artisans, I focus on commercialization and how the commercialization process made the artisans compromise their sentiment, which used to be the key element of making personal Nakshi Kantha, and I consider the reflections of the artisans towards the change

### 1.3 The relationship between tradition and its modification in material culture

Tradition is a set of knowledge and practices that is followed by a certain group of people and which develops with time. In material culture, objects contribute significantly to form culture. They are intertwined in the same stream. When culture changes material objects also change.

Dan Ben-Amos (1984) states:

“As a transmission process, tradition has clearly been associated with the past. Folklorists, however, have extended the tradition process from temporal to social and spatial dimensions [...] In folklore scholarship both were essential in the examination of the social dynamics of transmission, and in the analysis of the geographical diffusion of tales and songs.” (Ben-Amos, 1984, p. 117)

Ben-Amos states that there is a direct and mutual relationship between a group and its tradition, “Through experience, interaction, language, and history, a society builds up a tradition which, in turn, functions as its complex identity mark” (Ben-Amos, 1984: 121). Each generation follows the practice, which becomes representative of the group. Henry Glassie states that “tradition is the creation of the future out of the past” (Glassie, 1995, p.395). While tradition continues, it goes



through changes, as it is quite impossible to copy or follow certain knowledge or practices without any changes. Without modification and remaining protected from any changes, culture can get frozen (Noyes 2009). Even industrial production also goes through changes, and, given that every human being is different in characteristics, it is very difficult to follow a tradition without any changes. Barre Toelken (1996) explains:

“Folklorists are generally agreed that these everyday expressions tend to become viable over a period of time or across a geographical area mostly among people who share some basis for everyday communal contacts, some factor in common that makes it possible, or rewarding or meaningful, for them to exchange vernacular materials in a culturally significant way. Such human clusters have been called *folk groups* by many folklorists, but we should bear in mind that the grouping envisioned here is not static (as that term might imply) but is as dynamic as the materials it produces, for most people belong to several such groupings, and some (such as occupational) are subject to constant change.” (Toelken, 1996, p. 37-38).

In this globalization period, there are significant similarities that can be noticed in practices among different cultural groups. One group can adopt practices or materials from another cultural group that are more suitable, influential, or interesting for them. These facts can make the first group’s culture change a little by introducing new elements from the other culture. In the contemporary world, there are also many things that have been discovered with the advancement of technology that might not be entirely suitable for human beings and still needs to relate to the conventional methods. For example, the overuse of toiletries like antibacterial soap in the modern world certainly has some bad impact on human life. In that case, conventional materials (eco, bio or organic products) can be introduced with a more developed concept. This is how the terms “tradition,” “modernity,” and “transformation” work all together to ensure the cultures survival. In fact, tradition is modern as it is connected to present and present will turn into tradition at some point within the time frame. Hence Noyes (2009) argues, “traditional is modern, so modern is traditional” (Noyes, 2009, p. 244). The culture can keep itself growing, developing, and moving forward, turning into something contemporary.

In cultural transformation, much of the traditional knowledge that people carry is silent, which is sometimes called tacit knowledge. Michael Polanyi explains this concept in his book, *The Tacit Dimension*,

Tacit knowing of a coherent entity relies on our awareness of the particulars of the entity for attending to it; and if we switch our attention to the particulars, this function of the particulars is canceled and we lose sight of the entity to which we had attended (Polanyi, 1966, p. 55).

Reconstruction and reformation of the knowledge becomes important at this point; otherwise, there is a possibility of losing it. Specifically, when tacit knowledge is vital to a cultural practice, removing the tacit part and only maintaining the parts that can be put into words might destroy the knowledge entirely. Tradition might function fundamentally or aesthetically, depending on the needs of the culture.

When it goes through different levels of changes to fulfill a need, the major part of the responsibility goes to the members of the culture, as they understand what the culture needs in order to maintain continuity. Also, the members of the culture are more eligible to understand why the culture needs to go through changes. They know what should be developed more, what does not fit in the contemporary concept, and how to avoid eliminating something crucial that represents the identity of the group. According to Randal S. Allison, “tradition is important in linking the past to the present as a form of identity making” (Allison, 1997, p. 799-801). If something works as a representative or an identity making material, then it is essential to ensure its cultural vitality, otherwise there is a possibility that it will turn into a commodity and, when new demand arises, the tradition will not be able to adapt. A material object also can represent a cultural group if it has the power to portray itself as a valuable symbol of a particular identity compared to the other materials of the culture and also to represent some sort of uniqueness functionally or aesthetically. In this regards Adhi Nugraha argues,

“Without cultural identity, all culture and society would have no soul...an art effect or an object (whether it is a craft or design) that lacks identity might serve its practical use but

belongs nowhere and suffers from not having a close relationship with the owner or the user.” (Nugraha, 2012, p. 63).

When an artifact establishes itself as an identity maker of a certain group, it comes to be focused on and valued differently compared to other contemporary elements. Then a vernacular culture becomes a contemporary culture cherished by the representative society, although, of course with some changes. Survival can be complicated without going through modification. Culture survives by dealing with new challenges and through new adoptions. It is often seen that revival evolves with numerous possibilities for a practice – the possibility of being replicated, the possibility of being practiced again, the possibility of making connection to it functionally or non-functionally. In such re-rooting, the conventional practice does not stay the same, but the essence of tradition still remains. Lauri Honko (2013) describes such an act of recycling as the “second life of folklore.”

“The second life of folklore concerns the recycling of material in an environment that differs from its original cultural context. The recycling mechanism is furthermore different from the mechanism of the original culture. [...] Recycling virtually never involves the integration of material into the original folklore process even if it does continue in some form or another. Instead it involves the opening up of new fields of influence, the introduction of larger groups of people than normal to the lore in question. [...] People have developed a deprecating and over-critical attitude to the second life of folklore, failing to realize that there is always an element of change even in the most exact reproductions, and not only in free adaptations of folklore.” (Honko, 2013, p. 48).

In the first life or in the second life, the important notion of it, the culture is surviving. Dorothy Noyes (2009) also cites Honko in her article Tradition: Three Tradition agreeing that tradition is multifunctional. In the case of craft, it is more important to go through transformation, as many types of craft work are made manually, requiring lots of time and labor (i.e. woodworking, knitting, weaving etc.) and skill. If the craft grows through continuous development, then new techniques will be introduced. That may make the process faster or easier, which might support the continuity of the craft work. Furthermore, introducing new technology or changes in a craft tradition not only affects the objects that are made by hand, but also the use of traditional tools and materials. Adhi

Nugraha argues that production and attitude are rather more valuable than the process: “The implementation of new tools, new technical processing, and new material in craft, does not break its engagement with tradition; indeed, it often gives tradition a fresh look and vitality” (Nugraha, 2012, p. 107). The integration of traditional and contemporary methods and materials gives a new identity to craft work that may also result in greater sustainability and that appreciably contributes to different human cultures. Many traditional crafts survive with the utilization of technological advancement. Moreover, many craft technologies are ancient, and our ancestors utilized them differently than we do today. We have different versions of them because they have gone through modification. The transformation process generates new prospects for the craft. Nakshi Kantha worked as an identity maker (by expressing the sentiment of the artisans in the surface of Nakshi Kantha in a private sphere), and, by the influence of commercialization, it has given the artisans the identity of Nakshi Kantha artisans not just house-wives. Being Nakshi Kantha artisans in the contemporary era, they have been able to build a community inside the community, which is another version of their identity. I explore it more in my following chapters.

# Chapter Two: Research methodology

This section describes the approaches used in the research process, the methods of data collection, and the analysis of fieldwork data. I have conducted ethnographic research while focusing on observational data collection for this paper. This chapter ends with a description of the data processing, analysis and the reflection.

## 2.1 Phenomenological ethnography

Phenomenology is a discipline in which the line of inquiry is based on philosophical approaches and relies on “phenomena” of human culture. The method of phenomenology was developed by the German philosophers Heidegger and Husserl. Phenomenology is the study of experience. Heidegger (1962) said that “the expression 'phenomenology' signifies primarily a methodological conception. This expression does not characterize the what of the objects of philosophical research as subject-matter, but rather the how of that research” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 50). In the same vein, anthropologist Michael D. Jackson (1996) describes it as a way to “revalidate the everyday life of ordinary people, to tell their stories in their own words” (Jackson, 1996, p. 36). There is no certain direct way to understand individual experience, as it depends on the way that people live their own lives. According to Jackson:

“in anthropology and ethnology, the approach of phenomenology is vital because the utilization of phenomenology brings us into direct dialogue with others, allowing us to explore knowledge not as a way to grasp inherent and hidden truths but as an intersubjective process of sharing experience, comparing notes, exchanging ideas and finding common ground.” (Jackson, 1996, p. 8).

Phenomenological research reduces the chances of generalizing the idea of lived experiences, and it also creates an opportunity to explore different layers of the culture and enriches information about human activities. In material culture studies of living cultures, it is important to conduct

phenomenological research, as material evidence alone might not provide the message entirely. Moreover, material cannot speak for itself straightway, and, in material culture, the change is also closely related to the correspondent of the material. This is how the material tradition functions when it has an intensive relationship with its users, producers and maintainers. Scholar Lauri Honko says,

“In shifting from the nation to the member group folkloristics has taken a step nearer to the study of functioning traditional systems. This means the items of interest are not traditional products as such but the system by which they are used and controlled, because unless this is familiar, it is impossible to speak of the life of tradition. And the system is to be found not in folklore itself but among the people producing, using and maintaining it.” (Honko, 2013, p.32).

Hence, to acquire actual knowledge about a specific cultural tradition, about a specific material, and about a particular group, it is important to know the culture, watching it from the culture's own settings, knowing it from its producers, and observing it from the maintainers' and users' points of view and combining that knowledge with scholarly knowledge – prioritizing an emic perspective to see where cultural distinction is meaningful within groups. It can be explained as an insider's perspective, and the information and research done from an emic perspective is more comprehensive and detail-oriented compared to an etic (outsiders') perspective (Adams 1997). Hence, phenomenology is more deeply associated with the emic perspective, as it also refers to the users' experiences for research method. In addition to that, Henry Glassie suggests to also to emphasize on the regular experience to conduct academic research. Glassie states,

“We should seek disorienting experience in the world, setting our provinciality in relation to the provinciality of others [...] We will learn to engage in collegial exchange with nonacademic intellectuals [...] I am certain that many of the answers to academic questions - in history and beyond - lie ready in the wisdom of people unconfirmed by academic convention.” (Glassie, 1999, p. 9)

My research deals with an ethnic textile craft and the interrelation between the object and its maker-user-buyer, so I utilize intersubjective processes of sharing experiences, sharing knowledge, exchanging ideas and looking for common ground with the guidance of phenomenology.

## 2.2 Fieldwork site

For the data collection, I conducted the first part of my fieldwork from 17<sup>th</sup> February 2019 to 22<sup>th</sup> February 2019. I decided to select a fieldwork site where Nakshi Kantha has been broadly produced, but, at the same time, the popularity of Nakshi Kantha was also on my mind. That means that I had to select a fieldwork site by considering consumption patterns. I initially considered only Bangladesh, although, from my background research, I came to know about the popularity of Nakshi Kantha across the world, and specifically in Bengali diaspora communities. As entrepreneurs from Bangladesh were exporting Nakshi Kantha, it was quite clear to me that there is certainly a market of Nakshi Kantha outside of Bengal. I was also realizing that it will be worthy make the fieldwork two-folded. Hence, I have decided to conduct the first phase of my fieldwork in the Bengali diaspora community in London and the second part in Bangladesh with the artisans. The part of my fieldwork in Bangladesh was conducted from 11<sup>th</sup> January 2019 to 30<sup>th</sup> March 2019. However, to reach Nakshi Kantha artisans and entrepreneurs, I started making contact with them from September 2018. Accordingly, my research interest also focuses on diaspora communities in Nakshi Kantha culture. After my arrival in Europe, I have tried to look for the status of Nakshi Kantha culture. By doing so, I started with my friends and family living in those diaspora communities, and most families and individuals have at least one Nakshi Kantha in their personal collections.

One such community is the British Bengali diaspora community. After the British occupation of India and since Calcutta (now Kolkata) became an important terminus of India in 1842, Bengali Lascars started migrating to London. More than a century later, a major famine occurred in Bengal in 1943, which encouraged many Bengali men to emigrate, and the demand for workers in the British merchant Navy during the Second World War was a good option for them. After population losses in the Second World War, the British government encouraged immigrants to come and work for the reconstruction of their country. Besides that, the partition of the Indian subcontinent took

place in 1947, and India divided into two countries – India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (now Pakistan). Hence, a large portion of the working class immigrated from Southern Asia in the middle and late 20th century, although some immigrants also came to London to study in fields like medicine and law. Additionally, some Bengali aristocracy also relocated in London for different purposes. In 1971, the civil war between East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and West Pakistan, which forced many immigrants to join their friends and family who were already settled in London, contributed to the vast Bengali population in Britain. Later, these early settlers continued to live in London, and the second and third generations of British Bengali diaspora communities also spread into different cities in Britain.

Britain is home to the largest Bangladeshi population concentration in Europe. According to the most recent British national statistics in 2011, the number of Bangladeshis was 282,811, which was 0.5% of the total population.<sup>3</sup> In general, members of this Bengali diasporic community share close bonds with their relatives and maintain good communication with those who are living in their homeland. They are well-connected with their country via internet, phone, mail, TV channels, and newspapers that also influence their daily life in the diasporic community. Almost all Bengali diasporic houses in London have access to Bengali TV channels through satellite or from other sources. Regardless of living in Britain, many of them actively follow the culture and traditions of Bangladesh. Living in a higher concentration has created an opportunity to feel and act like they are home. Every year, most of them celebrate the Bengali new year, International Mother Language Day, Pohela Falgun (Arrival of spring), the Childbirth ritual, “Satosa” (Baby Shower), as well as religious festivals like Eid and Puja etc. and exchange goods as gift. According to David Garbin: “in material terms these ties are supported by the sending of remittances back to relatives in ancestral villages across Bangladesh” (Garbin, 2005: 2)

Being socially and culturally closely attached, the Bengali people still engage in the practice of sharing goods. Hence, not only remittances but also sharing numerous material items between the diaspora and the homeland is quite popular. Being from a Bengali community, I have personally seen my mother and my relatives sharing goods to and from Bengal. While my sister-in-law was

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See: [https://web.archive.org/web/20100703020930/http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_compendia/foer2006/FoER\\_Main.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20100703020930/http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compendia/foer2006/FoER_Main.pdf)



expecting, I saw how my family members packed and sent materials as gifts, which is also a way of wishing well-being for the mother and the baby. Among those items, Nakshi Kantha was quite valued and a must-send item as it is linked to childbirth.

To understand the user experience, London was a convenient setting. Its location in Europe made communication easier in two main ways – there is a high concentration of Bengali people in London, and there were less of a language barrier. Besides that, geographically London is more accessible, and I had more contacts living there who are good sources in terms of collecting data and conducting fieldwork. Furthermore, there are many organizations in London connected to the Bengali diaspora community that could provide information.

For the fieldwork in Bangladesh, I selected Jessore, a district in Bangladesh, to get the artisans' and entrepreneurs' reflections. One of my old friends is a magistrate of that District and has given me the privilege to access to one of the most highly reputed NGOs for Nakshi Kantha production, the Ayesha-Abed Foundation. Together with its sister concern BRAC, the Ayesha-Abed Foundation revived the Nakshi Kantha tradition in Bangladesh in the 1980s. Another small organization, Nokshi, which is based in Jhenaidah (a border district to Jessore), has given their consent to share thoughts based on my semi-structured questions. I also had the opportunity to conduct an interview with an independent Nakshi Kantha entrepreneur named Dilara Begum. She has run her organization for more than two decades. She supplies Nakshi Kantha and other fineries inspired from Nakshi Kantha for several boutique shops based in Dhaka.

As London is a multicultural city, and, at the same time, the South Asian population is larger than in any other city, I have found London to be the best fieldwork site for this project. Because of the highest concentration of Bengali diaspora community, visiting the areas of Ponders Street, Enfield, Whitechapel, Brick Lane, and Edgware conducting interviews with the Nakshi Kantha entrepreneurs and their buyers/users would be worthwhile. Moreover, different museums in London have collections of South Asian textiles, so doing fieldwork in London allowed me to study embroidered 19th century Kantha at the Victoria and Albert Museum and contemporary Kantha from the SADAAC museum.

## 2.3 Interviews and informants' profiles

Most of the interviews were taken from Bangladesh from January 2019 to March of 2019. I asked open-ended questions and gave space to the informants to speak freely. The total number of respondents was 14. Table 1 shows the profile of respondents. My respondents were artisans, buyers and sellers of Nakshi Kantha. In most cases, I conducted the interviews individually.

The Haq and Ali families preferred to be interviewed together. The director of the Enfield EBWA called some of the employees of his organization to give him support and give their opinions in responding to my questions.

The semi-structured questions were based on the users' experiences; i.e. do they have a Nakshi Kantha, where did they get it from, how long they have they had the Kantha, what color they prefer, what was the purpose of the Kantha, do they use them, why they use them, was it was a gift or a personal collection, have they ever tried making a Nakshi Kantha, is there any difference between the personal and commercial Kantha they have noticed so far, etc.

Some of them were willing to answer by themselves comprehensively on the reflection part, but for some of them, for example, Nusrat and Mr. Anwar Hossain, I had to ask each of the questions, and they answered straight to the point. Nusrat also preferred filling up the questionnaire form rather than being recorded. I interviewed them in the office of the Enfield Bangladesh Welfare Association. The Haq and Ali families preferred to be interviewed in their home. Feroza Begum, who has lived in the UK for more than forty years, has a good collection of Kantha. Some she collected from West Bengal, some she got as a gift and some she brought from fairs that took place in different parts of London. She is fond of traditional Bengali clothing and has a good collection of sarees, shawls, Chador (bed spread), and different types of Kantha. Unfortunately, she was sick and was unable to stay steady until the conclusion of the interview.

To know about the biography of Nakshi Kantha of my respondents, I depended on a questionnaire that I have confirmed with my supervisor. The section asks the measurement (dimension), materials, technique, stitches used, motifs used, the color used for the background, the color used

for the threads, artisan's name (if the owners know), and the source of collection. I have given my Respondents the choice to fill out this section of the questionnaire. I received nine questionnaires which I have used for my analyses.

My first challenge in planning my fieldwork was to look for access to the Nakshi Kantha artisans' community. I came to know about several organizations that are manufacturing Nakshi Kantha. From a social media source, I learned about a small organization, Nokshi, based in the Jhenaidah district of Bangladesh. As they do not have any website or email address, I tried to communicate with them over phone call. I also tried to communicate with another organization in the village Pantapara in the Jessore district. This village is already popular for the communal Nakshi Kantha practice. At first, they agreed to cooperate, although later they were unresponsive, and I had to give up. Salma Khatun, the owner of Nokshi, has given her consent to conduct interviews and take photos and videos of her organization. In the Ayesha-Abed Foundation, it was prohibited to take photos and videos, although there was no restriction on taking interviews of their workers. A branch of the Ayesha-Abed Foundation operates in Jhenaidah at a smaller scale compared to its other branches. The administrator of the organization informed the same procedures are followed in making Nakshi Kantha by their organization as in larger branches. Most of the artisans I interviewed live in nearby villages and in the outskirts of the Jhenaidah city, excluding Rina Akter. I met her while I was visiting West Bengal, and I came to know she takes orders for making Nakshi Kantha from her personal sphere. As she is a neighbor of one of my relatives, I still have a way to communicate with her.

To conduct interviews in London, my first attempt was to communicate with Bengali diasporic people (friends and relatives) who I already know. Some of them referred me to more people for my research. For fieldwork, I had to find a host institute, and, after approaching several organizations, the Enfield Bangladesh Welfare Association (EBWA), a non-profit charity organization that organizes different cultural activities and Bangladeshi community welfare in Enfield, a borough of London, agreed to host me. The director of the association, Mr. MD Anwar Hossain, has lived in London for more than three decades, and his children and grandchildren have been brought up in the diasporic community as second and third generation. I interviewed him, and he also referred me to some other individuals (Rebecca Sultana, Nusrat and Sathi Hossain).

The second-generation family of Mehzabin Sultana and Sami Sarwar Haq were my acquaintances, and Rima Ali were referred by a friend. Feroza Begum is who has lived in London for many decades and is an enthusiast of textile-based handicrafts of South Asia.

**Table 1: Nakshi Kantha artisans' (my respondents') profiles**

Name	Age	Gender	Place/Area/Organization	Occupation	Solo/Group Worker	Years of Practice
Dolly Biswas	40	Female	Bangladesh/Jhenaidah/Nokshi	Kantha artisan	Solo, Group	Since childhood
Salma Khatun	35	Female	Bangladesh/Jhenaidah/Nokshi	Kantha artisan	Solo, Group	Since childhood
Reshma	30	Female	Bangladesh/Arappur/A yesha-Abed foundation	Kantha artisan	Solo, two or more, Group	Last 6-7 years
Rasheda Begum	43	Female	Bangladesh/Jessore	Kantha artisan	Solo or Group	Can't remember exactly
Mahfuza Khatun	57	Female	West Bengal/Kusumgram	Amateur Kantha artisan	Solo, two or more	From the age of 9/10
Rina Akter	51	Female	West Bengal/Vabta	Amateur Kantha artisan	Solo, two or more	Since childhood
Dilara Begum	60	Female	Bangladesh/Dhaka	Kantha artisan	Solo, Group	Since childhood

**Table 2: Nakshi Kantha users' profiles (Bengali Diaspora community in Britain)**

Name	Age	Gender	Place/Area	Occupation	Type of Interview
Mahjabeen Sultana; Sami Sarwar Haq	40; 42	Female, Male	United Kingdom/London	Housewife, Service	Family
MD Anwar Hossain	70	Male	United Kingdom/Enfield	Director of EBWA	Solo
Rima Ali; Liakat Ali	25; 32	Female, Male	United Kingdom/East London	Service	Family
Rebecca Sultana	30	Female	United Kingdom/Eagles cliff	Beautician	Solo
Sathi Hossain	38	Female	United Kingdom/White chapel	Housewife	Solo
Nusrat	34	Female	United Kingdom/Enfield	Social worker	Solo
Feroza Begum	75	Female	United Kingdom/London	Pensioner	Solo

## 2.5 Participant observation

In anthropology, one of the key methods in fieldwork is participant observation. For me, it was comparatively less complicated to understand how to communicate in a Bengali diasporic community and to observe and enquire about cultural practices, as the people in the community and I are from a similar cultural background. On the other hand, it was complicated, as often it is possible to overlook important facts by considering them to be regular or unimportant. Moreover, as I selected observation as one of my research tools, I kept in mind that rapport is needed to get a proper response. It often happens in the field that people do not express themselves entirely. Perhaps because they are not ready to expose themselves to a person they know for a short time. In addition, the formal setting with a camera or a recorder might also influence the respondents not to express themselves fully. According to Marita Eastmond (2007), this is called “life as told,” which consists of “how experience is framed and articulated in a particular context and to a particular audience” (Eastmond, 2007, p. 249). The author describes different categories of people and their life experiences: life as lived; life as experienced; life as told and life as text. During my fieldwork (the part I did in London which has taken place from 17th February 2019 to 22th February 2019), I had little time to conduct the interviews, and, all through the fieldwork days, I was either travelling or working. Building personal connections became harder for me because of the shortage of time. This is sometimes more difficult in intensive observation as it takes time to make personal connection with the respondents. During my field visit, my host organization, the EBWA, was preparing to observe International Mother Language Day (21st February). They invited me to conduct interviews during their rehearsal time. I took part in the rehearsal as a participant observer, which created an opportunity to make closer contact with the people. It also helped me to find respondents in London.

I used my DSLR camera mostly to record audio and videos, and I kept a diary for field notes. Besides that, to be ready for all types of situations, I used a notebook and my mobile phone as a voice recorder.

## 2.6 Museum Visit

During my fieldwork in London, I visited three different museums in search of South Asian quilt collections. I visited the British Museum, SADACC (The South Asian Decorative Arts and Crafts Collection Museum), and the Victoria and Albert Museum to look at their textile collections. I was aware beforehand that the Victoria and Albert Museum has something valuable in their display that is directly connected to my research. They have an incredible collection that includes 10,000 textile-based objects from the Indian. The collection from Bengal is largely based on quilted and embroidered textiles and dresses. The South Asian gallery is in room 41 where Nakshi Kantha are displayed. I found those collection of Kanthas important for doing my research.

I also visited the clothing section of Victoria and Albert Museum and investigated the primary materials, especially rags of rural women's regular clothing, used for making traditional Nakshi Kantha.

## 2.7 Emic-etic concern

In conducting this research, I found it important to create a balance between the utilization of both emic and etic approaches. “Emic” refers to human behavior from an inside point of view of a specific group or culture, and “etic” is rooted in scholarly and analytical practice in which the researcher works from an external perspective. Linda Kinsey Adams describes the inter-subjective relationship between emic and etic approaches,

The etic/emic distinction has burgeoned into several brands of ethnosience, ethnosemantics, new ethnography, and ethnography of speaking that emphasize not just rigid descriptions but also analyses of cultural dynamics. The diversity of culture is acknowledged, and native categories for sorting out the world are eagerly sought. The new ethnographers emphasize developing good emic descriptions now in order to develop good etic frameworks in the future. (Adams, 1997, p. 216)

Scholar Eastmond (2007) states about the human experience, we can only know something about other people's experiences from the expressions they give them. The responsibility becomes double at the same time as a listener or viewer, and, on the other side, as a reflector and analyzer of the fragments coming out from the observation. I am from a similar cultural background as my informants, or at least we know and can speak the same language. In some places, we have shared our common cultural ground by listening to Bengali music and by sharing thoughts in Bangla about Bangladesh that marked me as an insider. On the other side, as a researcher, I had to be cautious to look for valuable data from different layers of the interviews and conversations. To avoid assumptions, I have tried to be reflexive during each of the interviews. Sometimes while taking interviews, the informants made eye contact with me, which in a way was asking for support or pointing out that, being from the Bengali culture, I would agree with their comments. I have tried to make a balance between being an insider and as an outsider for the research. In my personal notes, I have also tried to reflect my thoughts and experiences that I felt were special or noteworthy after most of the interviews.

I have also tried to think from my personal perspective, as I had some background reading and a personal relationship with traditional crafts from Bengal. In my personal collection, I also have a Nakshi Kantha that I have received as a gift. I have carried it along with me in Europe even before I have decided to conduct research based on Nakshi Kantha. In addition to that, during my bachelor's program, I attended a workshop on traditional craft making that included making Nakshi Kantha, and this previous experience helped me greatly during my research

## Chapter 3: Motifs in Kantha: Kantha as Personal Expression

### 3.1 Materials and techniques in Nakshi Kantha

As I have already mentioned, the primary material for making Nakshi Kantha was discarded saree fabric, which had two main purposes in use. First was the belief that it would keep the evil eye off from newborn babies if they are wrapped in it. Second, a saree becomes very soft after being used for a long time as regular cloth and being washed several times during its use. When it is considered to only be suitable for rags, still it can offer extreme softness. Besides these two main reasons, there is another reason that might have worked to make it the primary material, which is the length of the saree. It is 6-7 meters long and throwing it out is a waste for rural women, considering their limited financial resources. Moreover, in many rural families, the women still get new clothes during religious festivals once or twice a year (for Hindus, Durga Puja, for Muslims, Eid celebration). That makes a saree even more valuable for them. On top of that, the elderly women of both religious groups (Hindus and Muslims) wear (being widowed or for being old) white, whitish or light-colored sarees, which has created the opportunity to turn the saree into a canvas for embroidery. Therefore, it was very logical to recycle a saree for a new purpose.

The second primary material is the thread that is used for stitching the ripple effect, embroidering the motifs, quilting and making the borders that close the four sides of a Kantha. Like cotton fabrics, cotton threads are very inexpensive in Bengal. One roll of cotton thread can be bought by spending some cents. Besides cotton thread, silk thread has also been used in many cases, although the dominant use of cotton thread for typical Nakshi Kantha is noticeable.

Besides the two above-mentioned primary materials (thread and textile), other materials include a needle, circle frame, tracing paper, marker/liquid color/pen, and design templates (which is optional, as free hand drawing was prioritized in traditional Nakshi Kantha).



Kantha-making is an inherited skill, and traditionally it is the kind of learning and teaching process which is closely related to everyday living. When a Nakshi Kantha is made, first the sarees are joined together to attain the required size, and then layers are spread out on the ground. Normally, to make a traditional full-size Lep Kantha, which was generally 5' x 6' (160 x 180 cm), at least 5 to 7 sarees were needed (Zaman, 2012). The cloths are then smoothed, and no folds or creases are left in between. At beginning of the process, the rags are kept even on the ground by making sure to make the rags corners straight, then by putting weight to ensure the rags are not moving. Then a basic darning stitch is applied to the rags to put them together. After that, it is time to sew the Nakshi Kantha with a running stitch. Usually the entire cloth is covered by countless small running stitches, and it gives a very tiny wavy effect to the entire Kantha, which is quite interesting to look on.



*Figure 3: Running stitches in Traditional Nakshi kantha*

On traditional Kantha, designs and motifs are first outlined with indicators (generally a pencil, a pen or a fiber pen), and then needle and thread are used to decorate it. For running stitch, the techniques are quite simple: the needle goes up and down through the rags and moves forward. Stella Kramrisch states that “The stitches are of the simplest kind, the running stitch being not only the main but also the most ingeniously employed.” (Kramrisch, 1968). Running stitches are the

most common for Nakshi Kantha, although there are also cross stitches, chain stitches, back stitches, blanket stitches, and Jessore stitches (darning stitch). In modern-day Kantha Kashmiri stitches, arrowhead stitches are quite popular because of their prominent visibility. The ripple effect on Kantha can only be made by using this indigenous running stitch in its background, which also ensures the longevity of the Nakshi Kantha.

This composition is followed by a golden point, which usually uses a lotus or any other flower motif, and then the filling of the motifs is done using the thread. The four corners of the Nakshi kantha often follow a balanced composition by featuring four similar looking motifs. Then it further can be filled with other motifs. Commercialization has introduced several techniques for beautification of Nakshi Kantha. At the present time, wooden blocks are used to print the outline of the motifs, which has two primary advantages – it creates the border of the motifs (and hand stitching can then be followed inside the border) and using color to print the motifs makes them more prominent. Besides the use of block printing, there are popular uses of tracing papers and the plastic papers with holes that create different motifs to help the artisans to lay out the design on the surface of Nakshi Kantha. The template papers with numerous holes has a unique use. A liquid color brusher on the surface of the paper goes through the holes and creates the shapes of the motifs. This is later followed by embroidered stitches to give the motifs a complete look. However, some artisans prefer to draw the designs and motifs in freehand, although they do not always choose the designs in the commercial Nakshi Kantha.

In contemporary Nakshi Kantha making, we can see various textiles replacing old sarees as a primary material. At the present time, the primary textile materials are basically various kinds of fabrics that are available in stores. Prices are calculated based on the metre, and it takes 5-7 metres of cloth to make a standard size Nakshi Kantha. Also, for the layers, sometimes extra fabric or thinner quality cloth is used. In conventional Kantha, several layers are used. Cotton is still prioritized, although there are varieties of cottons fabrics. Besides plain cotton, other fabrics like poplin, voile, organdy, silk, and khadi are popularly used by the artisans. The availability of different types of textiles has given the opportunity to utilize different textiles to make a Nakshi Kantha. Moreover, price is always a crucial matter for a primary material in manufacturing an item. The voile fabric costs around 60-100 BDT per meter, which is apparently quite affordable

for the artisans /entrepreneurs. The voile cloth is quite soft in quality, which gives a similar softness to an old saree in a traditional Nakshi Kantha. Different types of threads are used in contemporary Nakshi Kantha, such as bright silk, shade silk, cotton rope thread roll, soft wool crochet roll yarn, and woolen yarn, sometimes with extremely garish colors, can be seen in modern Nakshi Kantha.

In both traditional and contemporary Nakshi Kantha, various kinds of stitching techniques are applied by the artisans depending on their skill, desire and need. Stitches like running stitch, cross stitch, buttonhole stitch, stem stitch, and double running stitch are popularly used for Nakshi Kantha. Occasionally modern examples are also seen to be done using darning stitch or rough running stitches although the price range also fluctuate depending on the effort given to make a Nakshi Kantha.



*Figure 4: Picture of Kantha (Simple Running Stitch, Contemporary Kantha), 2019*

The use of darning or rough running stitches and the use of simple designs, which makes the production easier, is common on children's Nakshi Kantha, which are quite popular as gifts for newborn babies. Also, several compositions (diamond shape, square boxes, wave, etc. using several techniques) can be easily done using darning stitch. Additionally, the use of fancy items like tassels, trims, and laces can be seen in modern Nakshi Kantha. Moreover, painting, block printing, batik and dye techniques are used in contemporary Nakshi Kantha. The utilization of those fancy items and techniques makes the Kantha beautiful with less effort.

### 3.2 Meaning by colors and motifs

In the region of Bengal, people with different religious views live harmoniously, and they follow their individual local norms to make Nakshi Kantha. The narratives depicted on traditional Nakshi Kantha used to depend on the religious views of the artisans. Although the artisans share similar skills and characteristics of Kantha, the metaphors are used differently depending on an artisan's purpose. Kantha artisans turn the quilts into wonderfully designed canvases as they stitch the motifs and make Kantha using their sentiment, beliefs, and aspirations. The motifs used on Kantha are full of vocabulary that make this domestic craft more than a mere decorative surface. Skills and knowledge for crafting Kanthas are hereditary, passed from one generation to the next. In older Kantha-making, the designs and subject of a Nakshi Kantha used to be selected by the artisans independently. This freedom of subject selection gave them the opportunity to tell their own narratives. At times, the Kantha used to be accomplished for a religious purpose (to make God happy), to show social status, to express sentiment, to give a message to the artisan's dear ones, or even to make a sitting arrangement for a guest who could not afford fancy couches.

Relying on artisans' beliefs and intentions, the motifs of Nakshi Kantha can serve multifarious purposes. To hear the artisans' voices, one needs to dig deeper into the motifs used on quilts and their background. For example, the "Kalka motif," "Tree of Life," "Solar motif," "Moon motif," "Swastika motif," "Floral motif," "Human motif," "Lotus or Satadal" and other motifs are basically taken from the artisans' surroundings to convey heterogeneous meanings and are consciously chosen by the artisans to convey their interests.

According to Niaz Zaman (1993), the Lotus motif has importance, particularly from the religious perspective. It is found with 100 petals, and, in some of the Kantha, it has 108 petals. Zaman says the 108 petals are for the lotus in which Hindu Lord Brahma sits, which has a similar number of petals, and Sati (Hindu deity) has 108 avatars. Moreover, the financial capability of the artisans was mostly not stable, and the desire for solvency used to be an important part of their aspiration. They believed that if they decorated their Kanthas with different lotuses, they would work as an offering for the Goddess Laxmi, who has the power to give economic prosperity to her devotees.

The tree of life means that life should go on. Basically, the tree resembles a Pipal tree (banyan tree), and it is said that under the Pipal tree Lord Buddha found enlightenment. This tree is also the symbol of fertility.

The moon (mainly a crescent) motif is extremely valuable for Muslims and Muslim communities. They follow the lunar calendar, and most of their festivals and occasions depend on the appearance of a crescent in the sky. In the Muslim Prayer Kantha, the presence of a crescent along with stars is quite notable.

Fish are very valuable in rural Bengal societies. Fish are important in the main diet, and they are found plentifully in the rivers, canals, and ponds of rural Bengal. Fish have also served as a symbol of fertility. At a certain time of the year, the fisherman stops catching fish to ensure the production of more fish. Also, a fish lays and hatches many eggs at the same time, and this is possibly a reason that the fish is an icon of fertility. Depending on the type, it can be identified whether it has embroidered with the aspiration of a baby boy or a girl. If the Kantha artisan desires for a boy, then she might be creating a carp or other big fish, and if she wants a girl, the fish would be smaller. Compositions using motifs taken from the surrounding nature of the artisans takes the viewers back into the stories of religious festivals, a village fair, being in the yard of a farmer, women's lives in rural society, or in a wedding ceremony.

Nakshi Kantha artisans are basically from peasant families, and most of the men of those families are involved in farming. During the rainy season when there is nothing much to do, the women of peasant families utilized their time making Nakshi Kantha, drawing and composing motifs related to their personal and lived reality. Teri Klassen argues about how the living condition influence impacts on quilts, “the historical and living condition influence quilt styles more than ethnic- or racial identity, although the two are inseparable to the extent that some racial or ethnic groups experience certain living condition more than others” (Klassen, 2017, p. 65). For example, a solar motif reflects good harvesting, a lotus reflects the desire for economic solvency, and a tree of life shows productivity, which a wife values the most. On the other hand, depending on the artisan's choice the representation of the motifs can abstract in such a way that it can mean differently. Identifying the expression of the artisans through the composition on those events are more

complicated, as different narratives and motifs have been utilized in abstract forms. However, in the older Nakshi Kantha, the motifs used to function for certain purposes depending on the artisans' wish and will, which was also attached to the life status of the artisans.

The background color of the Nakshi Kantha used to be white. The source of the color is related to the totality and integrity of the rural women's everyday living. Mostly the torn and old sarees were the main source of making Nakshi Kantha. Among both Hindus and Muslims, white signifies purity. In Hinduism, Yantras holds that white color resembles the men's and women's power in the world. Different deities have associations with the Yantras (a diagram of meditation that represents the deity), so as with the colors. In traditional Yantras, three prominent colors are used that express three different natures – white, red and black. Moreover, in rural Furthermore, on a white background, the multicolor threads on a whitish surface, the embroidery look vibrant and contrasting, which might be another promising reason for the Nakshi Kantha color to mostly rely on white. Occasionally, other colors and printed cotton saree rags are used.

Modern Nakshi Kantha are found in a variety of colors, and red is one of the main ones. At least seven of my correspondents have commented that they have a red or reddish Nakshi Kantha in their collection. In explanation, they have mentioned that the vibrant red color background of the Kantha gives a vibe of their Bengali ethnicity. Moreover, multicolor embroidery looks very vibrant on the red background. Other colors like black, orange, yellow, white, and green are used to make contemporary Kantha. One of my correspondents, Nusrat, recently moved to the United Kingdom. She is an expecting mother, and she carried a bunch of Nakshi Kantha to wrap her new-born baby. Those Kantha are made with different colors, and, on the surface, most of them have embroidery in 2-5 colors. The motifs of horses, elephants, fish, and flower resemble motifs used in older Kantha, but, in the contemporary ones, they are given new meanings.

### 3.3 Classification of Kantha through motifs, uses, and types

The classification of Nakshi Kantha basically relies on three primary dynamics – motifs, uses, and types – which are applicable to both traditional and the contemporary Nakshi Kantha. Among

them, there is a primary classification we can make - religious Nakshi Kantha, traditional Kantha for personal use, and commercial/contemporary Nakshi Kantha. Among them, the most contrast is visible in the religious Nakshi Kantha made by the two main religious groups -- Hindus and Muslims. Although there are numerous Nakshi Kantha which are religiously neutral, the motifs are mystic and basically communicate from different points of view rather than only from a religious perspective. Like other artifacts, Nakshi Kantha can also communicate with distinct effectiveness with different individuals based on the person's social order, belief, and way of looking at it. As an artifact, it can also give a universal idea and can speak to its viewers without keeping a strict boundary between the aesthetics and function of the artifact.

During my fieldwork I have noticed the change in the background color of Kantha, which mostly employs black, red and roseate colors and was previously used mostly on white and pale colors. Due to commercialization, the background has been popularized into a large variety of colors, including vibrant colors like red, yellow, black, green, and maroon. If I think from a fine arts perspective, all the colors reflect well on a white background, but, in the case of this quilted craft, which needs millions of stitches made by artisans manually, it is neither easy nor efficient to use a light-colored background filled up with motifs and designs by stitching all over. Many of my respondents have Nakshi Kantha with a red or reddish background. Probably this is because vibrant colors are more appreciated by buyers. The patterns and motifs I have found in various Nakshi Kantha have a common trend of using similar motifs and design orientation (using vertical lines from different directions that intersect each other to create diamond shapes is a common style in making Nakshi Kantha). I have seen such a style in at least three different places during my fieldwork. I have found some similar Nakshi Kantha during my fieldwork and have categorized them based on design, motifs, color, utilization.

### 3.3.1 Kantha with religious aspects

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the subject of the motifs represents the possessions and practices of the artisans; hence, the type of Kantha can generally be recognized through the motifs. For example, a Hindu ritual kantha can be expected to contain the Lotus, Tree of Life, Conch Shell

motif, and Kalka motif, as those motifs are highly religious and are often illustrated in Hinduism and Hindu Mythology. On the other hand, a Muslim religious kantha (prayer kantha) often comes with a moon motif, star motif, Muslim architectural structures motif with the tomb on the top of it, flower motif, geometric shapes, etc., as the Islamic interpretations are directly connected with the motifs. Also, in the rural areas of Bengal, there are taboos against using some specific motifs; i.e. animal motifs for Muslim believers can bring misfortune and can be counted as sin, but, on the other hand, using some motifs can bring luck, prosperity and good things in the artisan's and user's lives. For example, the crescent with a star is usually almost impossible to find on a Hindu ritual Kantha as the motifs are recognized as a form of representing Islamic identity. Similarly, an animal motif or a conch shell is almost invisible in Muslim religious kantha, as in some Muslim oral theology (Hadith), the use of icons is prohibited. While there are many debates about the ban of icons in Islam, rural Muslim society generally does not prefer animal images in their prayer materials, although there is a significant presence of animal motifs in both types of religious Kantha. For the prayer Kantha, the tradition of not using animal motifs is understandingly maintained, as in other Muslim other religious material culture. For example, in clothing, Muslim architecture, etc., animal motifs are rarely used. Also, depending on the intended use of the Nakshi Kantha, the color varies greatly. A Hindu prayer mat or the seat for a deity often is white, red, yellow, or saffron colored. In contrast, for those connected to Islamic religious belief, green, black, brown, and white come first. The meanings of the colors will be discussed later in this chapter.

In pastoral Bengali society, both groups of believers (Muslims and Hindus) live side by side and may have influenced each other's lives and cultures. Nature is intensively connected with the peasant societies' everyday life. The yearning to achieve their dreams has given the artisans motivation to leave their religious taboos behind and to tell their own narratives. Pika Ghosh (2009) writes that "Kantha expresses the beliefs and the practices shared among the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal" (Ghosh, 2009, p. 81). That is why we can see the presence of natural elements and religious elements simultaneously used in traditional Kantha. Their attachment to the surroundings and their beliefs make Nakshi Kantha as a pure and innocent that avoids the religious and racial tension and living as a folk element of rural Bengal.



### 3.3.2 Traditional Kantha for personal use

Different kinds of personal Kantha are given below:

(a) *Shishur Kantha*: The process of making a child's Kantha may start just right after the news of the baby's arrival, allowing the artisan to communicate through the material to the unborn baby. The belief behind using rags reflects the meaning of removing the evil eye from the innocent baby by wrapping the baby with the Kantha. Children's Kantha come with assorted motifs, including flower, stem, leaf, fish, animal, bird, fruits, plants, and many others. Among them, many possessions and desires are hidden that relate to the childbirth. In instance, the use of a rice paddy can show the desire of the mother or the relatives that the child should get enough food and rice, which is the staple food of the society, so there is nothing that can be better than rice. Other motifs are also seen used on the small sized Nakshi Kantha often. There is a trend of massaging the new born babies with coconut or mustard oil and wrapping them with Nakshi Kantha to give them infants comfort. Families and would be mothers were identified with the making of Children Nakshi Kantha in the yards of Bengal. The use besides giving the infant warmth was the utilization of it as diaper.

(b) *Durjani Kantha*: Those artisans who live in poverty are often seen to make lotuses in the Durjani Kantha (jewelry or money keeping bag) to satisfy Laxmi, who is the Hindu goddess of wealth. Laxmi also performs the duty of a nourisher, provider, and preserver of her followers. To achieve material abundance, her rural follower artisans offer her lotuses to please the deity and in return to gain economic prosperity. In such a way, this Durjani Nakshi Kantha acts as an intermediary between the deity and the devotee. They often make Kantha with motifs like the lotus, the solar motif, mandala, tree of life, Hansa, conch shell and many other Hindu mythological motifs to make their god and goddess happy. Sometimes the ceremonial Kantha, which are often the sitting mats of the gods, are ornamented with those motifs and with Hindu folk tales like Ramayana or Mahabharata. Some of the Durjani Kantha have a unique shape with three ends; this gives a triangle shape, and the edges bent in the middle and the upper part, which is shorter than the other two sides, give it a secure chamber to carry necessary things like money, betel leaves etc. Older people used to keep prayer beads and keys in the Durjani Kantha.

(c)*Arshilata Kantha*: This kantha comes in a smaller size, as it is used to keep toiletries or for a mirror cover. The size is not more than 8"×12", and mostly rectangular and square shapes are followed. The word "Arshi" means "mirror," and in Sanskrit, it means "the first ray of sun"; both meanings are associated with the sight of something, which in a way also directs towards something beautiful. The basic motif used for the Kantha is associated with aesthetic beauty. For example, flower, stem, bud, leaf are the common elements for Arshilata Kantha. Other motifs are also used for Arshilata, and their beauty is quite prominent through the use of various colors and motifs. Noticeable use of a wide border, design, and the ornamentation of the Kantha represents the traditional form of a beauty wallet or a beauty box. The relationship between flowers and femininity is widely known. Flowers are frail, soft and ornamental. Women are also considered to have similar idiosyncrasies, although this might not only be the only reason what makes women keep connected to the flowers. Many other dynamics like commercialization, stereotyping the concept of femininity by making a connection with softness, the colorfulness and the productivity of the flowers also have contributed in this regard. Nonetheless, as Arshilata Nakshi Kantha is interconnected with beauty and women, the ornamentation of the Kantha with floral motifs and design is consistent and widely accepted.

(d)*Lep Kantha*: With the word "Kantha," the first image in someone's mind is usually a Lep Kantha, which is often simply called a Kantha. Artisans use their own sarees and rags to make Lep Kantha, which is used to get warmth. Being in a tropical area, using Kantha is quite comfortable because of the material and thickness, which can vary depending on the season for which it is made. For wintertime, Lep Kantha can be layered with up to 7-8 layers of rags to make it thick enough so that the user of the Kantha might get enough warmth by wrapping up in it. For the rainy season and autumn, Lep Kantha comes with fewer rags padded in it to make the Kantha neither too cold nor too hot for its user. In contemporary Kantha, fewer layers are used as the rags are replaced by cotton and silk fabrics. The quality of the new cotton fabric is thick enough to use only 2-3 layers, instead of 7-8 layers with rags, as rags are thinner than new cotton fabrics. As mentioned above, the rags are basically the old sarees and lungis, which are the national clothes of women and men of Bengal. One of my informants, Rasheda, mentioned that she and her friends prefer to use lungi (men's wear for the lower part of the body) either for smaller Kantha or to use it as a layer in the bigger Kantha, as it is quite handy to use for smaller Kantha because of its size. Lungi

has more similarity to a petticoat, which hangs from the waist and is generally 1.7-2 meters long. Also, the use of printed lungi is more popular than plain color lungi in rural areas of Bengal, and this is probably another reason that they are used in the inside layers of Nakshi Kantha instead of on the surface.

Lep Kantha is one of the most popular among all types of Nakshi Kantha, because of several qualities. The size of a traditional Lep Kantha is normally 5'×6', almost the size of a queen-size bed, and it accommodates at least two people sleeping under it comfortably. The spacious size is a wider canvas for the artisans, which gives them considerable latitude to express themselves – the bigger the space, the better the opportunity to illustrate an artisan's stories using different motifs. The use of multicolor threads and motifs gives Lep Kantha a unique quality and turns the material into a piece of artwork. Hence, we can see most of the stories are illustrated in the traditional Lep Kantha, and each of them has one or more unique stories. Consequently, the Kantha becomes full of vocabulary, enormously beautiful, and each of them turns into a masterpiece that is dissimilar to any other Kantha, except the replicas made in the 1980s after the Kantha revival. In Sujni and Lep Kantha, we can find the presence of a variety of motifs because of the space they have to accommodate them. Traditional Lep Kantha in this way has successfully established its importance as a memoir, as a part of bridal bribe, as a gift for near and dear ones, or as a piece used as a commodity.

*(e) Sujni Kantha:* Sujni Kantha is another larger size Nakshi Kantha used as a bedspread or for sitting. In Bangladesh, the Rajshahi district is famous for making Sujni Kantha. In West Bengal it is also popular, and Sujni Kantha tradition is well known in Bihar. However, in the Bengal area, Sujni Nakshi Kantha come with borders on all four corners. The border is also made with the saree paar (thick designed border), which gives the Kantha an impressive look. The common use of upright floral motif and foliage motifs gives this Kantha a separate identity from the other types of Nakshi Kantha, although other motifs can be found in different places depending on the artisans' aspirations. In Bihar, Sujni Kantha is a very popular material craft, although these share few similarities with the Bengali ones. The word Sujni consists of two different words, "su" and "jani," which means "appreciating birth." The Sujni Kantha in Bihar appears with either a black or a brown border adjoining the motifs. The type of borders distinguishes Bengal Sujni Kantha from

Bihar Sujni Kantha. Also, in Bengal Sujni, there is significant use of multicolor threads and filling up the motifs with straight running stitches. The density of the stitches, multicolored stitches make makes it very unique and popular.

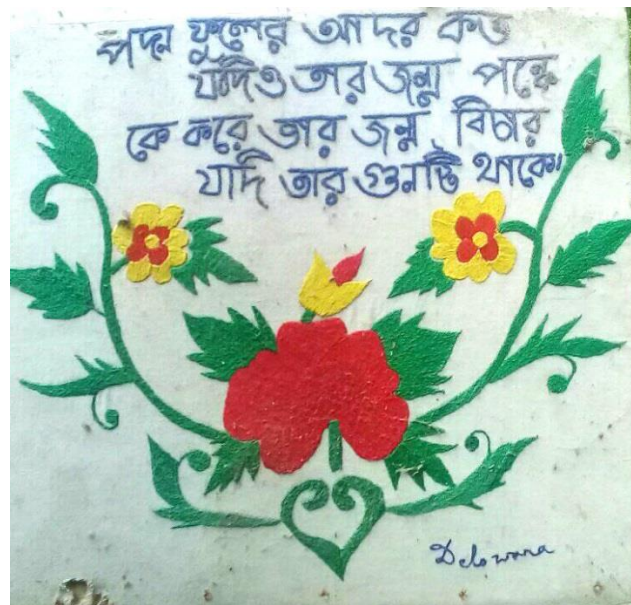
(f) *Lohori Kantha*: Sujni Kantha also has some similarity with the Lohori Kantha. Lohor means “wave” in Bangla. Lohori Nakshi Kantha, like Sujni Kantha, is used as a sitting matt or as a bedspread. The quilting of Lohori Kantha is also special compared to other styles of Kantha quilting. In other types of Kantha, quilting running stitches follows either the shape of motifs or follows vertical or horizontal lines. In Lohori Nakshi Kantha, the quilting follows three dominant styles – Soja/straight style, Kautor Khupi/Pigeons coop, and borfi/diamond shape. The quilting style gives a nice wavy effect to the Kantha that looks incredible and gives greater longevity in use. The border of this type of Nakshi Kantha is quilted and imitated with saree borders to create a square border on the Kantha, which also gives a different look to it. Besides the Rajshahi district, there are some other places in Bangladesh, including Mymensingh, Jessore, and Faridpur, in which we can see the making of Lohori Kantha following such distinctive styles.

(g) *Monogram Kantha*: In traditional Nakshi Kantha, the use of motifs is carefully chosen by the artisans. The motifs and the composition of the motifs can be seen as secular by one group of believers, and, to the others, it can be full of devotion. In many rural Nakshi Kantha, we can see the prominent presence of monograms, lines from poetry, religious icons, or even calligraphy, which can be for multiple purposes. Square or rectangle small Kanthas with short monograms or icons are basically meant for use as a handkerchief, as a book cover or to wrap something small. Nakshi Kantha with lines from poetry, monograms or iconography are also used as wall hangings.

For example, in my maternal grandparents’ house, I have seen a wall hanging Kantha featuring the statement “don’t forget me” and the artisan’s name in the bottom line: “Kohinoor.” Above the lines, there are embroidered roses, leaves and stems, reflecting the artisan’s aesthetic sense, desire, and skill. The Kantha was made between 1975-1978, and the artisan died in 1980. The children and grandchildren of the late Kohinoor Begum still value the Kantha as a memento and a medium to connect with their beloved mother and grandmother. This Kantha is exceptionally valuable for the artisan’s relatives, as they do not have any photographs of her. During her lifetime, she was

very enthusiastic about making Nakshi Kantha and was often praised by her female neighbours. Her grandchildren feel her existence and can make a sketchy portrayal of her through the Nakshi Kantha she made. In Kohinoor Begum's Nakshi Kantha, the desire of the artisan is directly visible in the lines of text, showing that the artisan wanted to stay alive or unforgotten to her dear ones.

Another monogrammed Kantha made by my maternal aunt, the late Delowara Begum, contains an embroidered four-line proverb using the Bangla alphabet, which is surrounded on three sides with a central red lotus with its stem and leaves upholding the lines like hands from the right and left.



*Figure 5: Nakshi Kantha with embroidered lines made in the 70's*

The meaning of the lines is: “The lotus is loved by us gracefully, and although the birth of a lotus is in a pond, who justifies the root of its birth when it is so precious?” Delowara Begum signed her name in English, which has caught my attention as predominantly the Nakshi Kantha artisans used to write the initial letter of their name using the English alphabet. Writing the name in English letters and trying to make it cursive makes it special. Delowara was a high school dropout and the daughter of a schoolteacher, which gave her enough ability and awareness to create a Nakshi Kantha with such a specific message. She made the Nakshi Kantha before 1971, although no one has been able to give me the exact year that it was made. As Bangladesh went through a civil war in 1971, many people recall their memories placing the year as a marker. Delowara's Nakshi Kantha looks like a handkerchief/wall hanging Kantha that comes with a proverb stitched on it. I

am connecting it with a handkerchief due to the size, although it has been preserved by my mother's family as a wall hanging with a wooden frame. Perhaps it has been made for hanging on the wall for beautification, or the artisan might have had some other plan with it which has ended up being her memory. The family of the deceased still can connect with her through the Nakshi Kantha she made. They also get the impression what was her personality, way of belief, her creativity and some more information. It would have been difficult for the makers descendants to connect with her without the Nakshi Kantha, as in rural women are illiterate and they generally do not have any photos (less technological advancement in the rural areas) that can left her impression to her family members. In such a way this artifact is working as the makers voice which is very essential to record the traces of the exurban women in the history.

### 3.4 Contemporary Nakshi Kantha: comparative analysis

Traditional Nakshi Kantha shifted from its indigenous roots to modernity to ensure its continuity through commercialization. Commercialization has introduced changes in economic, social and cultural aspects of Nakshi Kantha. Human culture runs on the fluidity of changes, and cultural studies shows this as an intrinsic part of a changing world. The change happens not only to the people, it also happens to objects related to the people and their culture. The materials vary, but the obsession with things works in a similar direction, and, when several cultures come together in a global space, the cultural tradition forms new identities and gives different forms to the objects. When traditional cultures are modified, they interact with contemporary cultures and take a new form, "indigenous modern culture." (Hoshagrahar, 2005, p. 8) refers to this situation as "indigenous modernity" in which the material is going through continuous development and people live their daily life. Hoshagrahar describes how the modernization process is best carried out by the local society, as they are the ones who know their culture and cultural needs. The traditional Kantha quilt of Bengal has followed a similar path and has undergone a shift from a personal cultural object to a consumer item, affecting its popularity, use, aesthetic quality, skill, and other dynamics.



*Figure 6: Traditional Nakshi Kantha (V&A)*



*Figure 7: Contemporary Nakshi Kantha, Field, 2019*

The traditional Kantha I found in museums are imbued with different importance. The collection of Nakshi Kantha I saw in Victoria and Albert Museum were classified as two coverlets, a mat, and a wrapper. Mostly they were made between 1900-1950 in Bengal. One Nakshi Kantha (V&A IS.16-2008) is tagged with the origin as Bangladesh, even though Bangladesh was not established until 1971. However, from my point of view, the Nakshi Kantha in the collection can be divided into two different categories based on the motifs used on them – iconic (with motifs like fish, bird, lotus, human figure, paddy, tree of life, animals, leaves, steams etc.) and non-iconic (with different patterns and shapes). Iconic motifs like lotus, tree of life, mandala, swastika, and shatadal are basically inspired from Hindu mythology, and often their representation on Nakshi Kantha can separate it from other types of Kantha. For instance, one Nakshi Kantha (V&A IS.16-2008) with



iconic motifs in which Devi Chandni stands on a lion fighting against the demons Chanda and Munda is categorized by the museum as Hinduism Embroidery. Although Nakshi Kantha can be seen with some motifs that also serve as secular Nakshi Kantha in the present time, which was not so usual in the traditional quilts. One of Nakshi Kantha with iconic motifs that is displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum is basically an “Ashon Kantha.” An Ashon Kantha is used for a sitting arrangement as an alternative of sofa. The third Kantha in the display is also an iconic Kantha, and there it is interesting to see the use of running stitches in the white background with yellow threads. Traditionally, Nakshi Kantha running stitches are usually the same color as the background. Additionally, the motifs (flower, bird, steam, fish, star, lotus etc.) are created by following detail-oriented embroidery work, and the running stitches that fill up the motifs’ different parts give the Nakshi Kantha contrast and a bold, trendy appearance. All of the principal materials are cotton, including the threads used for embroidery. Nakshi Kantha are displayed in the Victoria and Albert museum to give viewers an image of how artisans using a needle as a primary tool of embroidery used to decorate an ordinary surface of rags into a beautiful artifact full of visual vocabulary. The hard work of the artisans can be imagined through a closer look at them. The ripple effect is clearly visible, which gives Nakshi Kantha an extra dimension. The motifs are embroidered with care, and it can be imagined how much skillfulness and patience is needed to make such artifacts using materials and creativity.

Previously, the purpose of making these embroidered quilts was usually for personal use, and this material culture had nothing to do with profit. The artisans used their creativity to represent what the artisans preserves, their social life, and their aspirations; in short, their sentiment was generating millions of stitches comprising the various motifs in the surface of the Nakshi Kantha. The quilts turned into a canvas for the illiterate artisans of rural Bengal. In the 1980s, the revival of Nakshi Kantha saw economic success through commercialization. A worthwhile synthesis occurred through this craft’s journey in history. The intangible part of the craft has also shifted. The voice surrounding Nakshi Kantha is now narrating stories of the economic success of this rural creative art rather than narrative self-expression of the artisans. The use of motifs, composition, design, materials and techniques have changed to meet profit-oriented success.



Motifs are important, as they are the crucial elements of design. Designing a Kantha and stitching motifs for a queen-sized bedspread can take quite a long time. For one Nakshi Kantha, it can take more than three months for two artisans, depending on the design. For commercial Kantha production, artisans developed new methods to make them less time-consuming. The designs and motifs have been generalized significantly, and, along with that, the technique of stitching them has been changed to save time. Most of the time in contemporary Kantha, we can see the dominance of running stitches, leaving behind many other stitching styles (i.e. cross, buttonhole, stem, embroidery etc) that used to be intermixed in traditional Nakshi Kantha. Running stitches are essentially the base of other stitches. They work forward, going in and out of the fabric and following the artisan's direction. Compared to other stitching styles, running stitches work much faster, which is essential for commercial production. In present Nakshi Kantha, the use of "basting style stitches" is gaining popularity. Basting style stitch is the long running stitch style also known as "tailor's tack," although the basting stitch used in Kantha is not as long like as that used by tailors.

During my fieldwork, I have seen small Nakshi Kantha with basting stitches. Following those long running stitches, the artisans also make flowers, leaves, Kalka, fish, animals, folk musical instruments, and different patterns. I have noticed that, to meet the production deadline, the integrated part of the craft has drastically changed. The technique and the forms have been generalized to generate business success, according to my interviewees. Although the motifs used in contemporary Nakshi Kantha are taken from the folk forms of Bengali culture, the vocabulary shifted and remained only with the commercial aesthetic value of the craft. The artisans usually do not have any clue for whom they are making the Nakshi Kantha. Consequently, it is quite difficult to convey or interact through motifs that comprise narratives. The procedure of commercialization has also changed the role of artisans who used to make Kantha for their own needs. Now the most significant part, the artisans' sentiment, is missing from the commercial kantha, which has given them the role of a Kantha worker rather than an artisan.

Contemporary Kantha are often seen ornamented with folk forms taken from traditional Kantha. Besides the typical elements (birds, fishes, flowers, animals, leaves, plants, human figures, sun, moon, kalka etc), folk musical instruments, different household tools like Kula/winnowing fan,

Polo net for fishing, Hand fan/Hat Pakha, umbrella, palki/traditional bride carrier, and many other motifs are used. During my fieldwork, I have seen the representation of an animal and a motor car are sharing their place in a contemporary Nakshi Kantha (See Figure no 7). The use of the sun and moon, or any other religiously meaningful motif, no longer directs its users to any specific belief or a precise racial or ethnic group. Buyers now come to showrooms and pick whatever looks attractive to them. In this way, commercial Nakshi Kantha are meant for more universal use and are getting free from any kind of segregation.

Contemporary Nakshi Kantha, however, do not deprive the Kantha culture of religiously meaningful or traditionally narrated Nakshi Kantha. Many boutique shops like Aarong, Bibiana, Mayasir, and Joyita (based in Dhaka, Bangladesh) sometimes offer special editions of Kantha hailing different festivals like Eid, Puja, Noboborsho (the Bengali new year celebration), and Nobanno (harvest festival). The design concept is also associated with festivals. For example, Noboborsho festival Kantha mostly come with the folk motifs of traditional Bengali culture. For religious festivals like Puja, the Nakshi Kantha those organizations offer contain Hindu religious motifs like footprints of a deity or a monogram with “Om,” which is the mantra of the Hindu supreme god, Brahman, and the most sacred syllable symbol of Hindu Mythology. Icons of the deity, their offerings, and their seats, which are basically different animals, are also seen in contemporary Kantha.

I have discussed in the first chapter that the Kantha revival that occurred in the 1980s has brought many replicated and semi-replicated Nakshi Kantha full of narratives. During the revival of Kantha, one NGO organization, BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) and one of its workers, Martha Alter Chen, contributed a lot to make that happen. When Chen saw a Kantha embroidery that was displayed as a wall hanging in a five-star hotel named Pan-Pacific Sonargaon, based in Dhaka, it grabbed her attention immediately. The work was done by famous Kantha artisan and entrepreneur Suraiya Rahman. Suraiya Rahman is a self-taught artist and has a unique individual style of applying different techniques in tapestry work. She is the first in Bangladesh who used brush strokes and painting integrated with running stitch in Nakshi Kantha. Chen contacted Suraiya and showed her a personal collection of photographs of Nakshi Kantha taken by Stella Kramrisch in the 20th century. Suraiya Rahman produced a sketch out of those photographs, and then Chen contacted BRAC. Eventually, BRAC commissioned Kantha production in the Jamalpur district of Bangladesh (Zaman, 2014, p. 2). The Nakshi Kantha designed by Suraiya Rahman inspired from the Nakshi Kantha photographs of Stella Kramrisch was basically a semi-replica of the photographs, as she used her own artistic skill to formulate the design.

Since then, the Nakshi Kantha tradition has entered a new era with lots of possibility and freedom for its artisans. The freedom has not only occurred in their artwork but also in the different layers of the Nakshi Kantha making process they are using. This integration has opened many opportunities to transform Nakshi Kantha from a little-known rural domestic craft to be a representative of Bengali Culture. At the same time, the role of the artisans started to be inhibited to meet the expectations of commercialization. The role of designing Nakshi Kantha has been shifted to professional designers in the long run. For the artisans, whose responsibility is now to follow the design and composition provided by the designers or by entrepreneurs (in smaller levels where they cannot or they do not want to afford designers), work on the stitching process has limited their roles. One of my informants, Salma Khatun, the entrepreneur of Nokshi, states:

I do the designs of the Nakshi Kantha by myself, mostly I draw designs on paper and then my Kantha workers follows the design by tracing it on Kantha. After tracing, they start working on the stitching part of it. In this way I do not need to draw the same designs, and the workers also do not need to think about the designs again and again. That saves a lot of

time [...] We do not make so many Nakshi Kantha identically. Mostly they are not the mirror copy of each other. They are almost always different either by colors, by motifs, or by composition, except we receive order for the identical ones. Also, they don't go to the same places, my buyers are from different places that also ensures the separateness.

(Salma Khatun, Personal Interview, January 13, 2019, Jhenaidah, Bangladesh)

During my research I have seen some traditional Nakshi Kantha pictures from the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as contemporary ones on Alamy and Pinterest, web platforms that give opportunity to stock and share photos. In those Kanthas, the preference of red and white for the background is consciously followed. For the motifs, yellow, green, parrot green (florescent green), white, blue, black, red, and orange threads are customarily used. Sometimes the use of woolen threads besides cotton and silk threads is also seen, as the woolen threads are more visible, thicker, and way easier to contrast from the background compared to the regular threads. Besides the threads, there is an interesting mixed media technique that can be noticed in contemporary Nakshi Kantha; in fact, it is an updated version of Suraiya Rahman's attempt in the 80s. Printing the borders using wooden blocks can be seen quite often. Besides that, hand painting, screen printing, applique, and batik (tie dye) techniques are also quite popular in modern Nakshi Kantha. This has given contemporary Kantha a unique look and has minimized the work of Nakshi Kantha workers. Dolly Biswas who is a commercial Nakshi Kantha artisan describes:

It is quite easy to stitch following the lines that are already printed, also guide us the way of going further with the needle. It also looks nice when there is a combination of color and threads works together. Basically, the borders are often coming up with a contrasting or a vibrant color compared to the background of Kantha. Suppose you are working on a Kantha with red background and the border is printed might be in black, yellow or white color. The threads color can come with a variety makes the Nakshi Kantha look nice.

(Dolly Biswas, January 30, 2019, Jhenaidah, Bangladesh)

Not only with the materials also with the motifs, many influences can be noticed in contemporary Kantha. Basically, in contemporary Nakshi Kantha, I have noticed two different types of motifs –

iconic and non-iconic. There is still significant dominance of folk motifs in the Nakshi Kantha. Nakshi Kantha user Mahjabeen Sultana, who lives in London, describes:

The motifs used in Nakshi Kantha reminds us home, its nature, culture and also it is regular commodity of Bengali culture's everyday life. I am personally very attached to Nakshi Kantha, as they feel like they are the representatives of home. In fact, for my daughter (3yrs old) I have always preferred to use Nakshi Kantha besides diapers and blankets. Me and my husband, we are living abroad for a long time, which has deprived us from many cultural interactions connected to Bengali culture. Using a Kantha in some way connects us with our home. Both of us have personal collection of Nakshi Kantha received as a gift from our families (mother and mother-in-law). They are memoirs of our mothers and a part of our everyday life being their blessing.

(Mahjabeen Sultana, February 19, 2019, London, United Kingdom)

She described to me her Nakshi Kantha collection, and when I visited her place, she showed me the Nakshi Kantha folded on her bed in her bedroom. Her collection of Kantha for her daughter was also interesting to look at. On the baby cot, there was a Nakshi Kantha laid out as a bedspread.



*Figure 8: Nakshi Kantha for childrens use*

Mahjabeen states, she got those Nakshi Kantha for her daughter from her home (Bangladesh). Her family member sent them to her via courier service after I gave birth to my child. The pattern of the Nakshi Kantha above is widely spread in Bangladesh as well in the Bengali community because of its easy making (stitching) process. In the above picture, four roses can be seen on the four sides of a rectangular Kantha made with running stitches (basically darning stitch), which might not have taken so much time to embroider, although it offers the flavor of traditional Nakshi Kantha.

In Mahjabeen's collection, there were some iconic Nakshi Kantha. I looked at the motifs of the Kantha carefully and was able to see the harmonious existence of modern and traditional motifs side by side. There are motifs of Bengal tigers, lions, elephants, plants, flowers, but at the same time, it has motor cars as well. This coexistence of different motifs is an excellent example of dwelling between traditionality and contemporality.



*Figure 9: Contemporary Nakshi Kantha (with traditional and modern motifs)*

Iconographic motifs seem to be useful to the entrepreneurs because they influence viewers, which is one of the reasons that they are an all-time favorite. The love of iconographic motifs has created fields for other motifs from various sources. Stick figures (old), Egyptian figures, landscape painting with different stories, and folk story illustrations are commonly used in different Nakshi Kantha. For example, the fashionable use of the Kashmiri shawl's paisley motifs, which is known

as “Kalka motif,” is well accepted in contemporary and traditional Kantha work. The motif is quite similar to the shape of the fruit motif, “mango,” which is also quite popular as a Bengali folk motif, but the ornamentation has the influence of Kashmiri Paisley.

One of my respondents, Salma Khatun, states:

There are trends for Nakshi Kantha, and we have to design Nakshi Kantha keeping it mind. For example, Lohori Kantha are not that much popular as much Lep or Sujni Kanthas are. As we use a variety of motifs on those Kantha makes it more popular. Iconic Nakshi Kantha are trendy now, hence we also have to make iconic Nakshi Kantha more than the other Nakshi Kantha considering the market.

(Salma Khatun, Personal Interview, January 13, 2019, Jhenaidah, Bangladesh)

Visiting different boutique shops both in London and Bangla, I have noticed the significant presence of iconic Nakshi Kantha. For example, in the boutique Aarong, there is a huge collection of Nakshi Kantha ranging from wall hangings to prayer kantha, from purses to jewelry boxes, bedspreads to regular Kantha, and also clothing fineries like saree, dupatta, and scarves. Many of them are full of folk or folkloric motifs that keep the Nakshi Kantha connected to the vernacular culture of Bengal.

Another respondent, Rima Ali (Nakshi Kantha user), says:

In present time Nakshi Kantha designs are simpler. The motifs are common, they do not look like the older ones anymore. As you can see (showing Nakshi Kantha from her collection) this Kantha stitches (ripple effect) are quite wide. Also, the detail work on the motifs are missing that means the artisans probably was in a hurry to make the Nakshi Kantha done. In my personal collection I have three Nakshi Kantha and all of them I have received from my mother. My mother-in-law also sent us one Nakshi Kantha recently although the designs are very simple again. Despite the use of common designs, I still like them a lot as they are handcrafted from my home country.

(Rima Ali, Personal Interview, February 20, 2019, London, United Kingdom)

It can be assumed from the above statement that the user of Nakshi Kantha is also well-aware of the generalization of Nakshi Kantha design that occurred because of commercialization. Additionally, they understand the time-saving approach that motivated the generalization.

Tradition changes because of the changing nature of circumstances (Shils 1981: 258). The Nakshi Kantha trend has also adopted the changes. Previously, it was mostly a domestic practice that did not refer to expectations from a commercial perspective. But for now, Nakshi Kantha making has turned into an occupation which is associated with commercialization and the fashion business. This does not mean that all the Nakshi Kantha currently being made are generalized. There are also Nakshi Kantha made using various motifs, colors, materials, and techniques that carry ethnic values. However, users have to spend a lot of money to own them, considering the comprehensive process to make an intensive work like Kantha. This factor also seems quite familiar to the Nakshi Kantha users, as two of my respondents said that the price is too high for Nakshi Kantha. Compromising between price and ethnic value, the social status of the consumer is also reflected through the Nakshi Kantha. My correspondent from London, Anwar Hossain says,

This precise choice to buy Nakshi Kantha for my newborn grandchild is also associated with the quality, price, and the brand. Aarong is a well-known brand based in Bangladesh and popular for selling ethnic products. Many people know the brand well and buy products from them. You will not find such a huge variety of ethnic products as Aarong have.  
(Anwar Hossain, Personal Interview, February 20, 2019, London, United Kingdom)

Anwar Hossain ordered Nakshi Kantha from Bangladesh for his first grandchildren from the boutique mentioned above, which is one of the posh boutique shops that sells Bengali ethnic wear and handicrafts. In conversation with him, I realized how a traditional artifact, Nakshi Kantha, has reflected the class of its users depending on its function, aesthetics, economic value and branding. Also, Nakshi Kantha is appreciated as a gift that is given to preserve a memory. The social status also signifies through the different quality and branding of this ethnic artifact. The memory of the giver remains with the receiver and helps them to stay connected to each other. A fine quality Nakshi Kantha makes in Anwar Hossain's case makes the buyer proud and the receiver glad.



It is a tradition to receive Nakshi Kantha from the well-wishers during pregnancy. Usually they are received from older women of the families, although they can be from a friend, from a colleague, or any other acquaintance who has good thoughts for the unborn. A Nakshi Kantha intended as a gift can be obtained from multiple sources (i.e. by buying from the shop, ordering from entrepreneurs, or from an independent Nakshi Kantha artisan). In some cases, mothers and mothers-in-law make Nakshi Kantha with their own hands for their newborn and unborn grandchildren. This is an excellent opportunity to show their love and care for the baby. The contemporary Nakshi Kantha partially functions in a similar manner but at expense of ethnic value. Many prefer buying them from the shops. Commercialization makes them more available but generalizes them in different colors and designs. The love and care that was expressed through the dedication of making Nakshi Kantha has been replaced by buying or collecting it from other sources. This does not mean that there is no sentiment worked for the consumers, and this is basically a commercial way to show love and care which is being adopted in so-called modern times.

# Chapter 4: Revival of Kantha and positioning in contemporary aesthetics

## 4.1 Ethnic entrepreneurship through Kantha

Ethnic entrepreneurship is as a set of connections with a small group of people who share [the] same attitude, creativity, organization and utilize their knowledge for a specialty product for a commercial purpose (Waldinger, Aldrich & Ward, 1990). The economy plays a crucial role in the continuation of an artifact and its further development. The rural women who are the primary artisans of Nakshi Kantha used to be deprived of any earning source of their own, but the manufacturing of Nakshi Kantha for commercial purpose has opened the opportunity to earn by and for themselves. As aforementioned, many artisans used to embroider motifs in their Nakshi Kantha that are associated with economic solvency. Their desire is to have a prosperous life. It is quite logical to have a yearning for financial solvency, considering their economic status. Moreover, they are from a developing country where much of the population lives under poverty and the percentage of girls' education is also not high. According to UNICEF (Borgen project 2018), only 28 percent of the girls of Bangladesh complete high school, but some are unable to find a job.<sup>4</sup> According to the report, the percentage of girls' literacy was significantly lower in the 20th century and earlier. This is why earning for oneself was harder for the artisans. The inability to find a job might have led them to do something different that would bring money based on the skills they already have.

Nakshi Kantha practice in the domestic environment started to become a means of economic solvency, but it was unnoticed at first. The pace of development remained unrushed for a long time and then picked up speed after being noticed.

The price of Nakshi Kantha produced commercially varies depending upon the materials, type and technique and the profit purpose. The price range, based on my experience in field, generally varies

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<sup>4</sup> The Borgen Project 2018: <https://borgenproject.org/girls-education-in-bangladesh/>

from 300-30000 BDT (3-300EUR) in the different shops (such as Aarong, Mayasir, Bibiyana, Jatra, Banglar Mela, etc., based in Bangladesh). Families with different socio-economic status buy Nakshi Kantha according to their ability and willingness. Hence, buying from a reputed brand boosts the consumer's social status, as the price and quality of Nakshi Kantha are comparatively high, yet this compromises ethnic value. In many traditional handicraft fairs, businessmen promote their campaign with the title “made by hand” to inspire handicrafts business and to increase their own profit.



*Figure 10: Nakshi Kantha artisans working in the factory*

As I have already discussed, traditional artifacts go through changes, but the value of the artifacts' production and attention to the meaning they carry should be expressed properly. This traditional artifact used to be a source of pride for rural artisans, and in modern days, it still can be a source of pride for the artisans even it is commercially produced. I can be convinced of its value when I think about how it has brought success in artisans' social lives by offering economic liberty, which is a rare opportunity for them. In a country like Bangladesh, where more than half of the population lives in rural areas and the literacy of women is still dependent on good fortune, ethnic entrepreneurship, especially making Nakshi Kantha, allows women to form their own economic

identity in society. While interviewing artisans from Bangladesh, most of them said that it has brought success in their lives by providing economic prosperity. However, through the process of growth, they started to become workers rather than being artisans.

Although Nakshi Kantha manufacturing has given rural women a source of income, there is no fixed wage for it from the government or from any privatized sector. The artisans fix a deal with their employer, which differs from place to place. While conducting interviews with Kantha workers, I enquired about their salary. They receive 600-700 BDT for producing one Nakshi Kantha, which is equivalent to 6-7 EUR. It takes 5 to 7 days to complete a Nakshi Kantha with a group of 4-6 workers. One owner of a Kantha manufacturing firm, Salma Khatun, says that she sells a Nakshi Kantha to the buyers for, on average, between 4500-7000 BDT (35-70 EUR). Earning 600-700 BDT in one week is a very low, considering a person's expenditure. However, men are usually the main earning source for families, especially in Bengal culture. The earning of the women is considered to be supplemental. Some Nakshi Kantha artisans' earnings go toward their children's education. Many of them have taken it as extra work for income in addition to their household chores. Additionally, many Kantha artisans consider this to be a regular job. One of my correspondents, Rasheda, who works in an NGO, has taken Kantha making as regular work. Rasheda says:

This is like a home for us, almost all of us from the same village or at least nearby places and known to each other for a long time. Here we share our thoughts, our sorrows, our happiness with our friends and they also do the same thing. Sometimes we ask for suggestions or help if we face any trouble in our walkway. Also, the work gives us money and the final result of our work is a beautiful object that gives us continuous inspiration to continue the work.

(Rasheda, Personal Interview, January 19, 2019, Arrapur, Bangladesh)

In many NGOs (non-governmental organizations), the artisans go to work on a daily basis and receive a monthly salary depending on their job contract. Also, there are brokers who work as middlemen between job seekers and factory owner. Those brokers give jobs to rural job seekers,

bring them to the big cities and towns. For rural artisans who have less mobility and less connection to the business world, they end up being Nakshi Kantha artisans.

In contrast, in some cases, women's entrepreneurship is quite successful. My respondent from Dhaka city, Dilara Begum, was able to make a good connection with some boutique shops. Later, she promoted herself from Nakshi Kantha artisan to Nakshi Kantha supplier and became a successful microentrepreneur. In the beginning, her company used to make only commercial Nakshi Kantha, but they started making Nakshi Kantha inspired fineries later after noticing the demand in the market. Under Dilara's supervision, many women from the neighborhood and her own village started working as Kantha artisans. Dilara Begum is now unable to move a lot because of health issues. Now she runs her organization from home, including arranging deliveries and taking orders. She says:

I am getting older that makes me unable to go out regularly. I am running my business now from home. I am receiving orders from home and my workers come here to take them to work from their home. Once they are done, they return the artifacts to me and the buyers collect it from me [...] I have many design templates in my collection, some of them I did by myself, some I have collected from different sources and some I got straight from the buyers as a part of the order. I am continuing with the designs and welcome new designs for the order. Some of my workers are quite creative to make their own design. In the case of materials, most of our order comes for cotton and some of them are silk. We also do make Nakshi Katha on Khadi, voile, and cotton and sometimes on printed or dyed textiles. Besides Nakshi Kantha we are also getting order for Saree and dupatta (traditional scarf) to be done using Nakshi kantha stitches. These days I have received an order to make Nakshi Kantha designed Yoke that will be used in ladies Kurta. Per Yoke my workers will be getting around 150-200 BDT, and for a Nakshi Kantha I pay them 2000-10000 BDT depending on the order. My workers are happy and many of them are working with me for years[...] My workers are quite expert, and they know how to make different styles of Kantha. Hence, we are taking almost all types of Nakshi Kantha making order. Besides that, we also make free style Nakshi Kantha by not maintaining any strict boundaries.

(Dilara Begum, Personal Interview, March 26, 2019, Dhaka, Bangladesh)

For entrepreneurs like Salma and Dilara, Nakshi Kantha making not only brought economic success, they are also the carriers of a tradition that thrives through their efforts, and they support the artifacts being incorporated into contemporary life while maintaining their traditional essence. Moreover, not only companies but also individual makers take orders and make Nakshi Kantha occasionally or professionally. There are hawkers who sell only Nakshi Kantha in some fixed places as well as door to door in the big cities. In one case, one of my friends, Lutfun, was visiting the district Jamalpur in Bangladesh and witnessed men stitching Nakshi Kantha for sale. This is an example of how Nakshi Kantha culture has spread.

Considering the rapid growth of Nakshi Kantha's popularity and keeping its demand in mind, Kantha tradition has already got attention from the government. Bangladesh's government, along with the Bangladesh Handloom Board, has sanctioned a 21.13 Billion BDT fund to make a craft hub in the Jamalpur district to cover 300 acres of land, and 1200 entrepreneurs will be working across the area. This project is expected to triple the amount of textile embroidery production in Bangladesh (Bahadur, 2018). This means that there is a tremendous amount of opportunity based on this traditional embroidered craft.

## 4.2 Negotiation and recollection of sentiment in Nakshi Kantha practice

Nakshi Kantha and its artisans maintain an in-depth relationship. In the process of cultural changes, the relationship between the artisan and the object may change yet still deliver meaning, although perhaps from a different perspective. To understand the meaning, we have to go beyond widely held thoughts. Compared to traditional Nakshi Kantha, contemporary ones communicate with their materiality rather than from the background meaning carried through the motifs. However, the material aspect is just half of it, and communication still includes their background or foundation context, otherwise a significant portion of the interpretation can remain unfulfilled. As the artifact is considered as an identity marker, it is important to nurture it or at least consider it with care. By "care" I mean that commercial production can be justified if ethnic values are well preserved.

In the case of Nakshi Kantha, the artifact has seen many major cultural changes throughout history, including different periods of foreign occupation, colonial cultural exchanges, and division of the countries, and at present, it is facing the contemporary era. Now the intangible part of the artifact has changed along with the tangible part to see economic success through commercialization. The artisans' voices are now narrating stories of economic success of this rural craft rather than narrating personal self-expression. There are some initiatives to care for the artifacts by storing them in museums nationally and internationally and by writing and publishing about them from academic and non-academic perspectives. However, it is necessary to hear the voice hidden beyond display, restoration, reformation, preservation or commercialization. After all, "This heritage provides communities with a sense of identity and is continuously recreated in response to their environment. It is called intangible because its existence and recognition depend mainly on the human will, which is immaterial, and it is transmitted by imitation and living experience".<sup>5</sup>

To survive in the globalized contemporary world, retaining recognition is important for the objects. In Nakshi Kantha, we can observe the existence of recognition through its practice, imitation, and by the living experience. However, the intangible part of it shall be reconsidered based on significant changes in Nakshi Kantha. The consumer of Nakshi Kantha should not be biased by considering it only as a contemporary, profit-oriented object. This is a shift that it has taken to ensure its survival in the present and continue its journey for the future. Also, the sentiment of the artisans contributed significantly to give this artifact recognition and to allow it to become an ethnic object for commercialization. The narratives are no longer reflective personal stories of the artisans, but narrate stories taken from history and literature. Some contemporary Nakshi Kantha are compositions of folk motifs that tell the general stories of Bengal, allowing the quilts to work as a cultural symbol that still has associations as a narrative-telling platform, although from a depersonalized standpoint. For sustainability, Nakshi Kantha has adopted several forms (i.e. Kantha-inspired fineries) and a huge network of associations (social, personal, and commercial) in the artifacts' journey. From micro-level entrepreneurship to posh boutiques, Nakshi Kantha is offered to customers from every possible level from a variety of sources.

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<sup>5</sup> Follow on: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>

Despite its continuous journey, there is a remarkable gap creating limitations on its way. The silent voice of the rural artisan is lagging behind while the modern manifestation of Kantha continues. However, it is quite understandable that the predominant style of Nakshi Kantha composition that tells the narratives of the artisans cannot be entirely replicated in commercial intensity. Hence, the responsibility comes to the society to bring to light the engagement and contribution of the artisans. As the artifacts spread widely through commercialization, the responsibility goes more to the agents who are involved in the process of manufacturing. For example, citing the artisans' names and other additional details of the artifact in the tagging system can give the artifact and its artisans a voice. Besides that, museums can also offer more interactive exhibition rather only depending on the objectification of the art form. Moreover, first-person narrative is a convincing strategy that is getting lots of appreciation in different cultural institutions across the world. This method of engagement should also be implemented for living heritage. Through these approaches, Nakshi Kantha and its artisans will regain their means of communicating sentiment, thoughts, and stories, paving the way for Nakshi Kantha to go further towards modernity and ensuring its journey.



## Conclusion:

In the rural houses of Bengal, women have for centuries created beautiful embroidered quilts locally known as “Nakshi Kantha,” using rags and their skill and creativity to express themselves by means of folk motifs taken from their surroundings and from their religious beliefs. The making and use of Nakshi Kantha used to represent artisans’ love and care for relatives, whereas in recent decades this domesticized craftwork has entered the public sphere: shops, museums, exhibitions, art galleries and fancy boutiques. At the same time, artisans have now come to see the making of Nakshi Kantha as a way of achieving economic independency.

In my thesis, I have aimed to trace the journey of Nakshi Kantha from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day in the Bengali socio-culture. After undergoing a revival in the 1980’s, the popularity of Nakshi Kantha as a cultural and fashion object has expanded significantly, especially among the Bengali aristocracy living both in and outside of Bengal. I endeavour to explore how the meaning of Nakshi Kantha motifs has changed as a result of this and whether the survival of Nakshi Kantha is compromising its traditional aesthetic value and the sentiment of the artisans. I have conducted semi-structured interviews to assess users’ and makers’ experiences and views. While conducting fieldwork and analysing the results, I have found it to be important to create a balance between the utilization of an emic and etic approach where emic refers to human experience from an insiders’ point of view and etic is the scholarly approach that works from an external perspective.

My fieldwork was two-folded aimed at (a) conducting interviews to understand the users’ and buyers’ experience and (b) understanding the artisan’s or makers’ point of view. Part of the fieldwork was conducted in the Bengali diaspora community residing in London. Being socially and culturally closely attached, the Bengali people engage and practice their ethnic goods by sharing, caring, and using them. In the Bengali diaspora community in London, I have found a popular and vibrant practice of Nakshi Kantha culture. My semi-structured questions for my respondents were based on their user experiences. I was thus interested in whether they have a Nakshi Kantha, how they have got it, (gift vs purchased), the utilization of the Nakhi Kantha, whether they have any personal stories related to their Nakshi Kantha, can they connect themselves

with their ethnic background through Nakshi Kantha, etc. In addition to that I have used a structured questionnaire to collect details about the dimensions, color, year of collection, motifs used in the Kantha, purpose of the collection, artisans' name and other information that helps to understand the biography of the Nakshi Kantha they have in their collection. In Bangladesh, I have asked the artisans about their experience related to Nakshi Kantha practice, such as how long they are practicing Nakshi Kantha making, who taught them, how long does it take to complete one Nakshi Kantha, how to judge a good-quality Nakshi Kantha, what are the differences they can see between the Nakshi Kantha that they make for personal use and the ones they make for sale, can they connect themselves with the Nakshi Kantha they make commercially, do they think Nakshi Kantha should be practiced further, how they see themselves as a Nakshi Kantha worker.

From the users' perspective, my respondent talked about how they feel their connection through Nakshi Kantha. Their dear ones who are miles apart living in the home country can connect with them, show love and care by sending them a Nakshi Kantha or something else they can call ethnic. Many women in the Bengali diaspora community relocated to London after their marriage which has separated them from their families. Considered as fashion objects, handmade objects are valued more highly than in the past. My respondents in London considered Nakshi Kantha to be valuable as they are "handmade" and from "home". This is indicating that the users of these quilts are aware of "their own" traditions and comparing them to those of "others". On the other hand, in the rural areas of Bangladesh, where the Nakshi Kantha was circulating in the domestic sphere, it has now become a source of economic self-empowerment. Utilizing traditional skills for commercial manufacturing purposes has brought economic success and recognition for the artisans.

At the same time, in contemporary Nakshi Kantha, the technique and motifs have been changed significantly in comparison to the traditional Nakshi Kantha in an effort to boost economic success. The primary material for traditional Nakshi Kantha making was rags, which has now been replaced by new cotton and some other textiles.

The ripple effect created by the running stitches has also become general, not least because it requires less effort and time. The motifs and its composition have changed significantly, too.

Previously the motifs and their composition on the surface of Nakshi Kantha reflected the artisan's sentiment, religious beliefs, desire and aspiration. For the contemporary Kantha, the artisans still use folk motifs, combining them with modern motifs (i.e. folk motifs like tigers, lions, paddy, plats sharing surface of the Nakshi Kantha with motor cars, aeroplane etc.). Many forms have been modernised (i.e. Kalka motif) and there are also new techniques being introduced, such as block printing, tie-dye, use of tussle, use of silk and woollen threads also introduced in the Nakshi kantha practice. Traditional Nakshi Kantha makers did not face the pressure of time, but making quilts was rather a choice that could also be considered as a hobby. Working on commercial Nakshi Kantha, however, is a responsibility that comes with deadlines and other obligations. As Nakshi Kantha workers, women have to follow a routine and most of the artisans among my respondents work for 6-10 hours daily. In addition to that, the motifs are often not selected by the artisans but by designers, which creates limitations for artisans to express their creativity entirely. The Kantha artisans I interviewed stated that they produce more iconic Nakshi Kantha in comparison to non-iconic one as the demand of iconic Nakshi Kantha is higher in the market.

Economic shift has not impacted the rural women individually, but also communally. For instance, working at the same organization provides neighbors with a new sphere for socialization. Many women are now capable of maintaining their kids' educational expenses. I see it another way of expressing their aspirations. In the past, it was quite difficult to image that would could utilise and earn money by means of a domestic skill and in this way take on a responsibility such as child education. While traditional Nakshi Kantha served as a canvas that was used by artisans to reflect the desires, aspirations, and sentiments, by utilizing their ethnic skill women are now carving out an independent identity for themselves.

Without the transformation of Nakshi Kantha practice, perhaps it would have been difficult for this object to survive. The survival also has given the diaspora Bengal community a means to express their identity: many of my respondents in London responded that they have a Nakshi Kantha because "it is from home". In such a way the artifact connects the users/buyer to their ethnicity. In comparison to the traditional Nakshi Kantha the contemporary and commercialized Kantha communicates more with its materiality than by meanings carried through the motifs. However, the motifs used in contemporary Nakshi Kantha are nevertheless significantly

influenced by traditional motifs that still gives the essence of Nakshi Kantha's traditionality. All in all, I see the generalization of Nakshi Kantha as part of a transition from traditional modernity towards contemporary modernity. The growth of commodification with the purpose of profit eventually reduces artisans into workers, evoking a choice between ethnic value and monetary value. To the extent that Nakshi Kantha can be considered as an identity maker, both of a Bengali identity and that of an economically independent artisan, its survival shall not compromise its connection with tradition. Ethnic value shall be justified carefully before making it an excuse for Business innovation.

Nakshi Kantha is a huge field that can be studied from multiple perspectives. At present, it is dwelling between ethnic value and commercialization. Culture is fluid and changes in culture are very obvious. However, the bridge between traditional modernity and contemporary modernity should be maintained to preserve the ethnic value alive in its contemporary version. The ethnic value depends not only on the motifs chosen to illustrate a Kantha; there are many other aspects that can be studied. A more detailed comparative study between the traditional and contemporary Nakshi Kantha might bring more inquiries and more information that will assist this extremely beautiful artifact's survival. The scholarly research on this artifact is not plentiful, which creates more opportunity and more options to comprehensively explore the object from folkloric and cultural perspectives.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Questionnaire used for interview

This questions written below is to collect data for my master's thesis where I am going to identify the transformation of traditional quilts which is locally known as Nakshi Kantha in Bangladesh and West Bengal. This questionnaire is divided into three parts one for the artisans, another one for the entrepreneurs and the last one for the users. The questionnaire is designed with Fact-based questions. Besides this fact-based questions, Open-ended and Follow-up question will be asked to the informants to get proper information. The empirical data source will remain anonymize.

### Questions for the Kantha Artisans

Name of the Artisan\_\_\_\_\_

Gender\_\_\_\_\_

Age\_\_\_\_\_

Places of birth\_\_\_\_\_

Places of residence\_\_\_\_\_

☐ Written Release? ☐ Oral Permission?

1. When did you start learning Kantha making?
2. Who taught you the skill?
3. How long have you been actively involved with Kantha making?
4. What material do you use for making Kantha?
5. Is their any change on the materials between the past and now ? How they have changed?
6. What tools do you use to make Nakshi Kantha?
7. Do you preplan before starting the embroidery?
8. What technique do you use to the design on Kantha?
9. What are the basic steps to make a Kantha?
10. What type of stitches are mostly used on embroidered Kantha?
11. How long does it take to complete an embroidered Kantha?
13. Do you think the style of making Kantha is different than past? If so, why and how?



14. Is your work similar like the work of others? What are the things you have in common? And what makes your work special?
15. What type of Kantha you make and sell mostly in the market?
16. Do you make Kantha only for selling? Which Kanthas are not for selling? What is the difference between them? Who are the buyers? On what occasions? Do customers have an influence on the design, materials, etc?
17. Do you enjoy making Kantha?
18. What do you think why the women Kantha makers number are bigger than men?
19. Have you ever passed on the skills to anyone? If yes, to whom, how and where? Why or why not?
20. What things you like most about embroidered Kantha?
21. What is your favourite style in making Kantha?
22. What color do you prefer as the background of Kantha? Why?
23. Do you think it is important to continue this traditional art?
24. Is there anything you don't like about Kantha?
25. What makes a Kantha beautiful? How you will define a beautiful and stylish Kantha?
26. How many people works together to make one heavy embroidered Kantha? How long it takes to complete it?
27. Are you satisfied with the wage you get by making Kantha?
28. Have you tried to know what happens to your Kanthas after you sold them?
29. Do you have anything you would like to add?

## Questions for the Kantha Entrepreneures

Name of the Entrepreneur \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Organization name \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Written Release? ☐ Oral Permission?

1. How you evaluate a Kantha?
2. How popular the Kanthas are?
3. On the basis of what the price of Kantha is decided?
4. What type of Kantha are popular now? Among what type of clients Nakshi Kanthas are popular? Why?
5. Why Kantha inspired fineries are trendy?
6. What is the difference between modern and old Kantha?
7. Why Kanthas are exported? Do you export Kanthas? If yes, where? How did you make contact their? Who are the buyers in the foreign settings? Why they buy it?
8. What are the popular patterns or designs? Why?
10. Do you copy the old Kantha pattern to make new Kantha? Why? Why not?
11. What is an original Kantha? How you can identify the originals? Why you call them original?
12. Do you consider Kantha as an Art form? Why? Why not?
13. Why the number of women Kantha makers are bigger than men?
14. Do you mention the maker's name on the Kantha tag? Why? Why not?
15. What others things you sell that are inspired by Kantha style?
16. What do you think about this traditional art form?

**Biography and Material details of Nakshi Kantha:**

1. Size of the Material: L-            W-

2. Materials used:

3. Technique of making:

4. Motif used:

5. Colors used:

6. Source of collection:

7. Collectors name:

8. Collectors age:

9. Collectors place of residence:

10. Makers and Making place:

11. Year of collection:

12. Purpose of the collection:

13. Utilization:

14. Impression:

## Appendix 2: Photos of Nakshi Kantha collected during fieldwork

















# Résumé

## Ühe käsitöötraditsiooni muutumisest Bengali *Nakshi Kantha* näitel

Ruraalses Bengalis loovad naised kaltsudest kauneid tikitud tekke, mida tuntakse *Nakshi Kantha* nime all. Tagasihoidlikku päritolu ja vähese kooliharidusega käsitöölise jaoks on tegemist ka oma soovide, püüdluste ja tunnete väljendandamise viisi ja vahendiga. Naised väljendavad end oskuslikult ja loovalt, tikkides lugudeks nende endi argi- ja usuelust võetud motiive. Kui varem oli tegemist kodutööga, milles avaldus ka armastus lähedaste vastu ja nende eest hoolitsemine, siis traditsiooni kommertsialiseerimist mööda on selle funktsioonid muutunud ning tekkide valmistamisest on saanud sissetulekuallikas. *Nakshi Kantha* on jõudnud käsitööpoodidesse, muuseumidesse, näitustele ja butiikidesse ning pakub inspiratsiooni (kõrg)moele.

Magistritöös käsitletakse *Nakshi Kantha* traditsiooni muutumist 19. sajandist lõpust tänase päevani, keskendudes tekkidel kasutatud motiividele ja nende muutumisele ning *Nakshi Kantha*'de kasutusele Bengali diasporaa hulgas. Varem esmajoones talupoegade seostatud traditsioon tegi 1980. aastatel läbi uue tõusu ning muutus moeasjaks Bengali kõrgklassi seas nii kodumaal kui ka välismaal. Magistritöö uurib sellega kaasnenud muutusi *Nakshi Kantha* motiivides ning kompromisse traditsiooniliste esteetiliste väärtuste, käsitöömeistrite eneseväljenduse ning kommertsialiseerimisega kaasnevate tingimuste ja nõudmiste vahel. Kui *Nakshi Kantha*'de kohta on viimaste aastakümnete jooksul ilmunud mitmeid teaduslikke käsitlusi, siis nende kujunemine diasporaa identiteedimarkeriks ja kommertsialiseerimise mõjud on pigem vähe tähelepanu pälvinud.

Neljaks peatükiks jagatud uurimistöö aluseks on Suurbritannias Londonis Bengali diasporaa ning Bangladeshis käsitöömeistrite ja *Nakshi Kantha*'dega tegelevate ettevõtjate seas läbi viidud poolstruktureeritud ja struktureeritud intervjuud (14) ja küsitlused ning vaatlused, samuti üksikute näidiste kirjeldused ja analüüs. Töö on oma põhisuunitluselt fenomenoloogiline. Henry Glassie tüginedes lähtutakse materiaalse kultuuri eluloo käsitlemisel loomise, kommunikatsiooni ja tarbimise märksõnadest. Motiivide kõrval käsitleb töö võrdlevalt ka traditsiooniliselt ja tänapäeval

*Nakshi Kantha* valmistamiseks kasutatavaid materjale ja tehnikaid ning pakub välja klassifitseerimisvõimalusi.

Analüüsist selgub, et *Nakshi Kantha* motiivide muutumise ja muutmise taga on eluolu ja tootmisprotsessi ning esteetiliste väärtuste teisenemine. Kui varem võis öelda, et artefakt ja käsitöömeister olid omavahel tihedalt seotud ning see kandus üle ka tikandi kompositsiooni ja motiivide valikusse. Nüüdseks on see suhe muutunud ning toonud kaasa uue kommunikatsiooni: tänapäevaste *Nakshi Kantha*'de puhul on tähenduslik pigem materjal kui illustratsioonid ehk motiivid. Esemest on saanud identiteedimarker ja innovatsiooni tõukab tagant ettevõtjate ärilised ambitsioonid. Käsitöömeistritest on saanud *käsitöölised*, kel tuleb teha kompromisse traditsiooni ja kasumi teenimise vahel.

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