

Original Article

## NAKSHI KANTHA AS A MEDIUM OF WOMEN'S EXPRESSION IN RURAL BENGAL

Deepika Sharma <sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Anu Ukande <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Master of Fine Arts, Department of Fine Arts, Shri Vaishnav Vidyapeeth Vishwavidyalaya, Indore, India

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, S.V.I.F.A., Shri Vaishnav Vidyapeeth Vishwavidyalaya, Indore, India



### ABSTRACT

Nakshi Kantha is a traditional embroidered textile of the state of Bengal. Nakshi Kantha works as a utilitarian household object. It is a means of women's expression. This method is practiced by women basically from rural area. This type of embroidery includes layering worn cotton fabrics and embellishing them with running stitches. This helps in creating visually rich narrative surfaces. The objective of present study is to examine Nakshi Kantha as a cultural and emotional language through which women expressed personal experiences. It also helps in expressing social roles, memories, beliefs, and aspirations within a largely patriarchal rural context. The paper used a qualitative and descriptive research approach. The paper used secondary sources. These sources include scholarly books, journal articles. The study analyzes recurring themes including domestic life, nature, spirituality, folklore, and emotional symbolism, highlighting how these visual elements function as autobiographical narratives. The findings indicate that Nakshi Kantha is a way of self-representation. This helps in allowing women to transform domestic labor into creative agency. The conclusion is that Nakshi Kantha should be recognized as folk embroidery. It is an important cultural document that preserves voices, identities, and lived experiences of women in the state of Bengal.

**Keywords:** Nakshi Kantha, Women's Expression, Folk Art of Bengal, Textile Embroidery, Cultural Identity

### INTRODUCTION

Nakshi Kantha is one of the most beautiful and traditional forms of embroidery from Bengal, practiced mainly in West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh. The word "Nakshi" comes from the Bengali word "Naksha", which means design or pattern, and "Kantha" means quilt or cloth covering. Thus, Nakshi Kantha refers to a "decorative stitched quilt."

Traditionally, rural women created Nakshi Kantha by layering together old sarees, dhotis, or cloth pieces and stitching them with colourful threads to form artistic patterns and motifs. These designs often depict scenes from daily life, nature, folk tales, and mythology, turning simple pieces of fabric into storytelling masterpieces. Kanthas can be traced back to the pre-vedic age earlier than 1500 B.C.E. a written record can be found in 'krishnabad kaviraj' book shri Chaitanya charitamrita, in which he wrote about how chaitanyas mother sent a homemade kantha to her son residing in puri in india.<sup>1</sup> The artistic side of Nakshi Kantha lies in its designs, patterns, and storytelling quality.

Each Kantha is like a painted canvas, but instead of brushes and colors, it uses needles and threads to narrate stories. The art and craft of Nakshi Kantha beautifully demonstrate how creativity, culture, and craftsmanship can merge into one timeless tradition. It is not just embroidery, it is a woven story of Bengal's women, their thoughts, beliefs, and artistic vision. With each stitch, they

#### \*Corresponding Author:

Email address: Deepika Sharma ([deepikaasharma0402@gmail.com](mailto:deepikaasharma0402@gmail.com)), Dr. Anu Ukande ([dr.anuukande@gmail.com](mailto:dr.anuukande@gmail.com))

Received: 15 December 2025; Accepted: 20 January 2026; Published 28 February 2026

DOI: [10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2SCE.2026.6790](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2SCE.2026.6790)

Page Number: 441-445

Journal Title: International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH

Journal Abbreviation: Int. J. Res. Granthaalayah

Online ISSN: 2350-0530, Print ISSN: 2394-3629

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

transform simple threads into tales of life, love, and heritage. Preserving and promoting Nakshi Kantha is essential to sustain this living art form that continues to inspire both traditional artisans and modern designers.

These early forms were simple quilted cloths called Kantha, mainly used for practical purposes like baby blankets, wraps, or covers.<sup>2</sup>

### **EARLY 20TH CENTURY: PRESERVATION AND CHALLENGES OF NAKSHI KANTHA**

Early 1900s:

- Urbanization reduced the practice in many households
- Mass-produced textiles replaced handmade quilts
- Traditional Kantha making declined

However, cultural revival movements led by:

- Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan school
- Local craft societies helped reintroduce and preserve the tradition.

### **MID-LATE 20TH CENTURY: REVIVAL AND DOCUMENTATION**

During the 1970s-1990s, NGOs, researchers, and museums in India and Bangladesh started:

- Documenting old Kanthas
- Training rural women
- Introducing the craft into the global handicraft market

Scholars like Ruby Ghuznavi, Niaz Zaman, and Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote extensively on the craft's cultural and historical value.

Nakshi Kantha now became:

- A recognized folk art
- A symbol of Bengali identity
- A livelihood option for rural women.

### **21ST CENTURY: MODERN ADAPTATION**

Today, Nakshi Kantha has evolved into:

- Sarees, dupattas, stoles
- Wall hangings, cushion covers
- Bags, table covers, home décor
- Fashion and textile design project

Modern designers blend:

- Traditional motifs
- Contemporary colours and styles

This fusion ensures that the centuries-old tradition continues in a globalized world while keeping its historical essence alive. <sup>2</sup>

### **EVOLUTION INTO "NAKSHI KANTHA" (DECORATIVE KANTHA)**

Over time, these simple Kanthas evolved into embroidered and artistically decorated quilts.

The word "Nakshi" is derived from Naksha, meaning design, pattern, or artistic motif.

This transformation occurred when:

- Women began adding ornamental stitches.
- They stitched motifs reflecting their surroundings, beliefs, and daily life.
- The quilt became a medium of personal expression rather than just household utility.

This period marked the beginning of Nakshi Kantha as an art form, not just a craft.

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

In traditional Bengali society, women were responsible for :

- Managing household textiles
- Preserving old garments
- Creating quilts for family use

Because they stayed at home and had limited mobility, Kantha embroidery became:

- A form of creative outlet
- A way to express emotions (joy, sorrow, hope, memories)
- A social activity done collectively by women

Thus, the development of Nakshi Kantha is considered a women-led artistic tradition passed from one generation to the next.

## OBJECTIVE

The main objectives of this research paper are- to study ' Nakshi kantha as a form of womens expression' to analyze culture, tradition of Bengal embroidery and analyze themes and motifs reflecting women's expression. To understand the symbolic meanings embedded in nakshi kantha. To highlight Nakshi kantha as a visual record of women's lived experiences in rural Bengal.

## METHODOLOGY

This study Research methodology follows a qualitative and descriptive research methodology. This research is based on secondary data such as books, journal articles, research paper, documented visual data of Nakshi kantha. Visual analyze of motifs, patterns, and compositions has been employed to interpret symbolic meanings and thematic expressions. The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach. To study define womens expression of Nakshi kantha embroidery. This study tracks developments from history to the present.

Nakshi kantha is no longer just a means of employment, but has transformed into a modern fashion trend; this art is now being done in a wide variety of ways. Bengali women express through symbolic forms of self-representation, like kanthas and alpna, rural women assert their identities. Nakshi kantha depiction of visual diary reflecting personal stories thry is often unseen.<sup>3</sup>

Women would embroider motifs inspired by their surroundings. Lotus bloom for purity , peacock for beauty, tree for fertility and fish for prosperity. Over time kantha evolved from being domestic craft work to an art from celebrated worldwide.



Nakshi kantha is a hand embroidery often by women artisans who infuse their experiences, belief and hopes into everyday design. This art is a profound of personal and artistic expression for rural Bengali women.

## NAKSHI KANTHA IN CULTURE

**Role of Women:** Nakshi kantha art traditionally, rural women created these quilts during leisure time to preserve memories or express personal narratives. Bengali womens

- Beyond being functional blankets, they Cultural Significance and Symbolism: Nakshi Kantha is more than a decorative item; it is a medium for storytelling, reflecting folklore, mythology, and social life. Common, deeply symbolic motifs include the lotus (representing the universe), the Tree of Life, fish, birds, and intricate geometric patterns.
- A Symbol of Women's Artistry: Historically, this art has been the exclusive domain of women, passed down through generations from mothers to daughters. It allows rural women to express feelings of love, joy, hope, and sorrow.
- Functional and Traditional Use: Traditionally used as blankets, quilts, or wraps, they are also used for, or as, gifts for special occasions, such as weddings and the birth of a child.
- Regional Identity: It is a vital part of the Bengali cultural heritage, particularly in districts like Jessore, Kushtia, and Jamalpur.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1



Figure 1 Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal<sup>5</sup>

## LITERATURE REVIEW

From the ancient time the women of the villages produce embroidered quilts from recycling worn-out materials such as sarees, lungis, and dhotis with hand embroidered artistic pattern. They stitched quilts for their family use known as "Nakshi Kantha". Through their artwork they represented culture, their stories, nature, festivals etc. The quilts in Bengal represent cultural identity and folk art. The art of reflection in life, aspirations, and culture of the village women shown in the artistic pattern of the needle work.<sup>6</sup>

Perveen Ahmad: Explored the, "Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha," highlighting its, "spontaneous expression".

Niaz Zaman and Jasim Uddin: Known for early, in-depth documentation of the, "Art of Kantha Embroidery" and the, "Nakshi Kanthar Math" respectively.<sup>7</sup>

Academic Journals: Articles in publications like Global InCH and Romanticism on the Net analyze the semiotics of the motifs and the, "narratives of social transformations" within the quilts.

## CONCLUSION

Nakshi Kantha is a women's creativity, resilience, and emotional depth within the rural cultural landscape of Bengal. women transformed everyday domestic labor into a powerful medium of expression through simple running stitches and symbolic motifs. The embroidery encapsulates personal memories, social roles, spiritual beliefs, and aspirations, making each Kantha a unique visual narrative. The story of Nakshi Kantha Embroidery is the story of emotions, expression of artistic legacy. It reminds us that true beauty lies not in perfection but in passions, in the countless stitches that join traditions with emotions. Every thread carry heart beats of Bengol woman dreams. Nakshi Kantha as an important cultural document that preserves women's lived experiences and identities often absent from written histories. Recognizing Nakshi Kantha as a medium of women's expression broadens the understanding of folk art beyond aesthetics, highlighting its role in cultural memory and gendered creativity. In the contemporary context, the revival and reinterpretation of Nakshi Kantha also raise important questions regarding commercialization, authenticity, and cultural

preservation. Future research may further examine these dimensions, as well as explore comparative studies of women's textile traditions across cultures.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

#### **REFERENCES**

- Bhattacharya, S. (n.d.). Contribution of Muslim Women in Trade and Commerce: A Study of Kantha Workers in Rural Bengal.
- Das, S. (1992). Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal. Seagull Books.
- Hasan, F. (2023). A Platform for Nakshi Art and Artisans.
- Reinders, S. (2025). Naksha Kantha Embroidery: Tales of heritage and Revival.
- Shaad, S. (2025). Kantha.
- Zaman, N. (1993). The Art of Kantha Embroidery. The University Press Limited.
- Zaman, N. (2012). Asiatic Society of Bangladesh.