

## THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR IN THE NAKSHI KANTHA

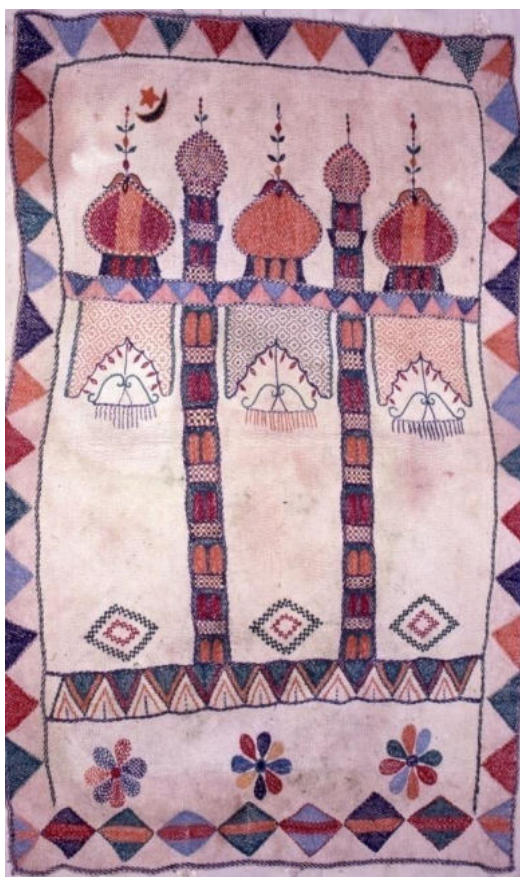
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Traditionally made of discarded *saris*, *dhotis* or *lungis*, the very material of the *kantha* has a magical function. The Sanskrit word *kantha* (pr. *konthā*) literally means rags. Anyone who has visited South-Asian shrines would have seen rags tied to the fretted doorways of the shrines of *pirs* or popular saints, or to the branches of trees. Torn from their garment, it is perhaps both a symbol of the prayer or boon asked by the person who tied the string as well as of the persons himself or herself. When the boon is granted, the seeker is supposed to return and untie any string. But rags also have another purpose: to ward off the evil eye. When infant mortality-rates were high, mothers or grandmothers did not stitch new clothes for the expected child till after birth. The child would be wrapped in rags or in a hurriedly stitched garment from old cloth. Though the *kantha* is different from the American patchwork quilt, it too consists of several pieces of old cloth put together. Kramrisch links the *kantha* to the “rags” offered to the gods and suggests the importance of the *kantha* in offering protection: “The patchwork quilt, a collection of tatters, guarantees immunity from black magic, protection and security, as do even the rags themselves when offered to the gods”.<sup>1</sup>



Plate 51.1: Dastarkhan.

However, the traditional *kantha* is made not just from rags but from the rags of a woman’s old *sari*. The *kantha* thus becomes the symbol of one’s wife or mother. In traditional



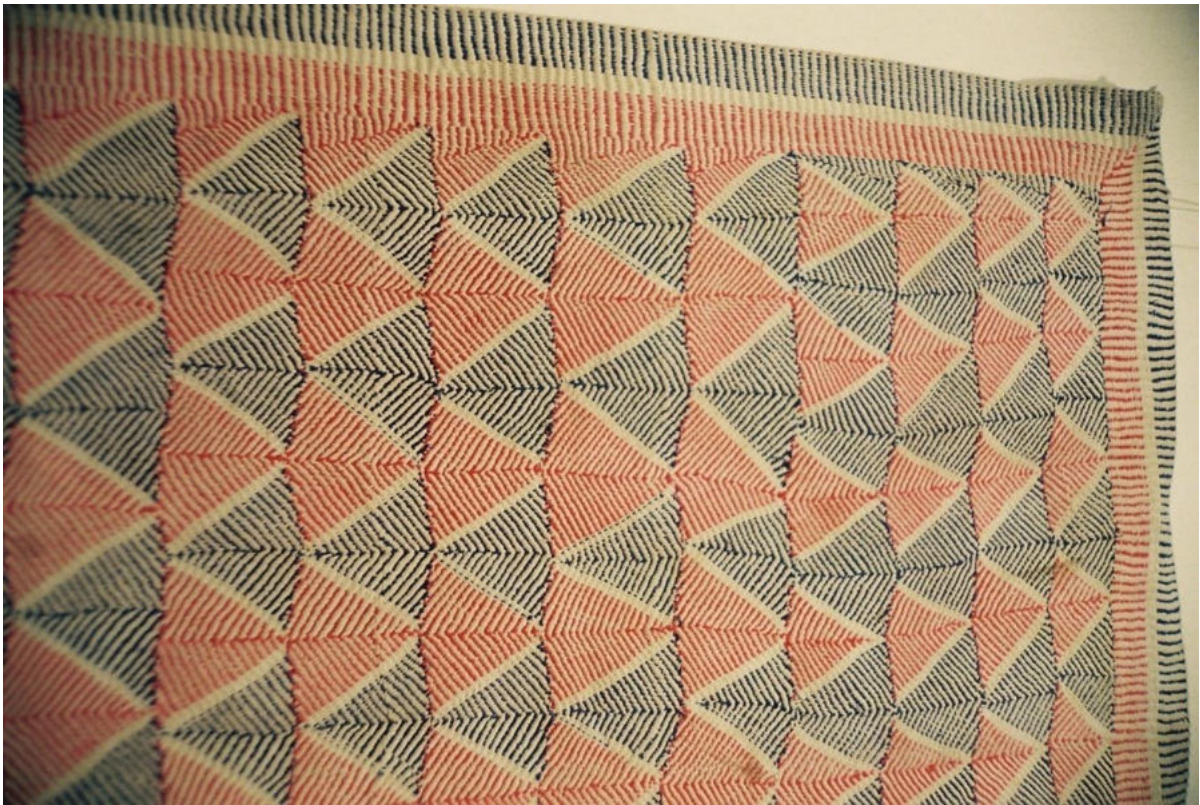
**Plate 51.2:** *Jainamaz*.

Bengali culture, pregnant woman returns to her natal home, especially for the first child. Apart from grandparents, a *mama* or maternal uncle – traditionally seen as the affectionate guardian of the child might be present there. The first swaddling cloth of the newborn is often torn from the *mama*'s old *lungi* or *dhoti*. The *kantha* is also made for a son or a husband leaving home to work. Here too the *kantha* symbolically represents the mother or wife who stitched the *kantha*. Jasimuddin's poem, *Nakshi Kanthar Maath*, suggests this association when he depicts Rupayi wrapping the quilt his wife has made around himself before dying.

The influence of religion created different traditions of *kantha* art, Hindu and Muslim, iconographic and non-iconographic, as well as different *kantha* objects owing to the different lifestyles of the two religions. Thus, Gurusday Dutta when he described the different *kantha* articles, depending on size and purpose, omitted "Muslim" articles. Among the seven categories of *kantha* objects he lists are *lep*, *sujni*, *bostani*, *durjani*, *arshilata*, *wad*, and *rumal*. However, the Muslim lifestyle requires two different *kantha* articles related to ritual prayer and Quranic recitation: the *jainamaz*, the Muslim

prayer rug, and the *gilaf*, to cover the Quran (**Plate 51.2**). The *kantha jainamaz* replicates the traditional woven *jainamaz* with a *mihrab* – mosque-arch – and occasionally a pictorial representation of a mosque. Similarly, the need to cover the precious holy book gave rise to the *gilaf* – the envelope-like *kantha*. The Muslim tradition for communal eating also produced the *dastarkhan* – the long spread for an eating place (**Plate 51.1**).

Traditionally *kanthas* from areas where the dominant culture was Muslim have developed differently from those where the dominant culture was Hindu. The *lohori kantha* from Rajshahi uses small running stitches in thickly twisted yarn to embroider columns or triangles (**Plate 51.3**). Another form of quilt from Rajshahi, called the *sujni* uses the back stitch to embroider geometrical or floral motifs on *lal salu*. In addition to the *sujni* is the *lik kantha*, using a stitch that has been termed "an Islamic stitch" and in Europe went by the name Holbein. The strictures against iconographic art – plus the lack of exposure to representational art – must have also caused Muslim women to favour *par* or border designs. Gurusaday Dutt believed that some of the finest *par* designs embroidered in *kanthas* were embroidered by



**Plate 51.3:** *Lohori Kantha.*



**Plate 51.4:** *Par Tola Bostani.*



**Plate 51.5:** Pillow cover with Krishna.



**Plate 51.6:** *Sujni* with the Goddess Lakshmi and *raths*.



**Plate 51.7:** *Ashon Kantha* with deities.



**Plate 51.8:** Depictions of deities juxtaposing human activities.



**Plate 51.9:** Pillow cover with Radha-Krishna and other deities.



**Plate 51.10:** Goddess Durga with family.



**Plate 51.11:** Rath depicted in a Jessore *sujni*.



**Plate 51.12:** Jessore *kantha* with a palanquin and a variety of motifs including a *shostir chinho*.

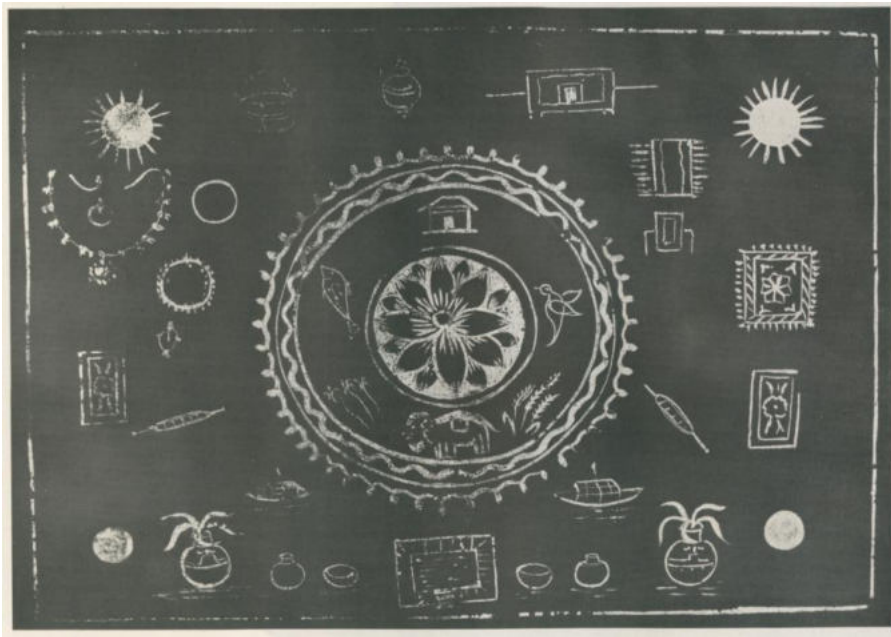


Plate 51.13: *Kantha* with Islamic inscriptions.



Plate 51.14: *Ashon* with mosque and *rath* including trees-of-life and *muchri* motifs.





**Plate 51.15:** *Sejuti brata alpna.*



**Plate 51.16:** Purnoshashi Saha drawing her lotus.



**Plate 51.17:** Purnoshashi Saha drawing her lotus.

Muslim women. In what is known as the *par tola kantha*, rows of borders replicate the borders of saris (**Plate 51.4**). The needle, taking short or long stitches depending on the design of the *par* replicated the work of the shuttle.

Unlike non-iconographic *kanthas*, *kanthas* embroidered by Hindu women reveal both Hindu symbols and representations of Hindu deities (**Plates 51.5-51.11**). The Hindu woman is surrounded by depictions of different deities – as well as the human form – which the Muslim woman is not. In her daily rituals, in her visits to the temples, the Hindu woman is overwhelmed by these depictions. The crude forms of the Hindu deities made by the village artisans juxtapose the exquisite stone and metal statues of the temples. The terracotta iconography at Kantajee Temple or at Puthia depicts scenes, many of which seem replicated in old *kanthas*. The Hindu devotee cannot avoid being influenced by these forms. *Kanthas* embroidered by Hindu woman who have been exposed to temple art thus reflect this influence. Popular deities depicted in *kanthas* include Radha-Krishna, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati. While depictions of Radha and Krishna together are popular, also popular is Krishna on a treetop with the *gopis* below pleading for their clothes. There were no strictures against nudity in temple art. Thus a *kantha*-maker from Faridpur has embroidered nude *gopis* pleading with Krishna on the tree top to return their clothes. In another *kantha* from Jessore, bare-breasted maidens encircle a bare-breasted goddess Lakshmi. Durga is popular, with Mahishashur at her feet or riding a lion/tiger.

In an *ashon kantha* from Narail at the BNM (01-02-068-1983-01645), four Hindu deities have been depicted. At the centre is an eight-petalled lotus in a circular frame with a *shostir chinho* in the middle. Surrounding the lotus are *gops* and *gopinis*, male and female dancers, holding hands. Around them are figures of deities on their mounts: Chaturbhuj (four-armed) Durga on a lion, Shiva on his bull Nandi, Kalki on his horse, Indra on his elephant. Underneath Nandi is a recumbent figure. Between Shiva and Kalki are a group of figures in different postures – perhaps followers of Shiva. There are some missing elements in the depiction of the deities. For example, Kalki should have a sword and Shiva a *trishul*, both of which are missing here. Durga has none of the weapons associated with her. The breasts of Durga and the dancing *gopis* have been embroidered to create a sculpted effect.

Another unusual *ashon kantha* from the BNM (01-02-068-1977-01527) juxtaposes human figures with depictions of deities. Thus, there are images of people engaged in various activities: milking a cow, fishing with a spear, cutting a fish with a *boti*, quarrelling or simply gossiping, partaking in a boat race. One of the panels shows the goddess Kali, her red tongue hanging, with a trident in one of her four hands and a head in another. Next to her is the goddess Saraswati, mounted on a swan. A multi-headed figure, perhaps the Brahmanical triad of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, stands next to her. Next to this figure is the goddess Lakshmi, with two sheaves of paddy in her hands and accompanied by an owl. On the extreme left of this panel is the blue god Krishna on a tree with naked *gopis* below, pleading with him to return their clothes. A panel depicts people on horseback, including a saheb with a hat, a musician playing a *dhol* and another

playing a violin, peacocks and fish. Above them is the god Kartik on a peacock. In the left-hand corner of the top-most panel is a *rath* with flags fluttering and Hanuman next to it. The central section of this panel appears to show Rama with a bow. On the extreme right seems to be Sita.

A pillow cover in the BNM (01-02-068-1977-01533) made by a woman for her husband – Kalabati Rani for her husband Hiralal Balay, noted in an inscription embroidered on the piece – evidences the love of the wife for her husband as well as spiritual devotion. On top is an inscription giving a date and an address: 1363, 24 *yashar* [*ashar*] *robibar bathayan gram jogania jilla joshohor thana* (Sunday 8 July, 1956, Village: Bathayan, District: Jogania, Police Station: Jessore. Under this inscription is an incantation to the deity: *hare krishna hare krishna, krishna krishna hare hare//hare ram hare ram, ram ram// hare hare*. Under these inscriptions, images of Shiva and Kali – her red tongue hanging – have been embroidered with Radha and Krishna embroidered within a circle on the right. Above their image is written *radha krishnar jugalmilon* (The union of Radha and Krishna). Below the images of the deities are village scenes: date palms, one with a *gachhi*, a banana tree, a palmyra palm, a coconut tree and a mango tree, huts, one with a woman cooking, a horse with a rider, two cows – one tethered to the banana tree and another in the process of being tethered. Below these scenes are boats with single boatmen and two boats with several rowers taking part in a race (Plate 51.9).

One of the most popular of legends portrayed on *kanthas* is that of Radha and Krishna: the *naukabilas*, the *bastraharan*, Krishna playing the flute his arms crossed, Krishna pleading with Radha for favours. Despite these romantic scenes of Radha and Krishna, however, many early *kanthas* also reveal a world where women led private lives in homes where men were accepted as lord and master. A cross-stitch *kantha* by Parul in the Bangladesh National Museum collection depicts a four-armed goddess Saraswati. The inscription in this *kantha* reflects a woman's status vis-à-vis her husband's: *gayā kāshi brindāban //sakali ashār//ramani jibane //shudhu swāmi| //padasār|//1359// pārul*. (The lines translate as: Gaya, Kashi, Brindaban [Hindu holy places] are nothing to me. A woman's existence is at her husband's feet 1359 [1952/1953] Parul).

Though the woman embroidering the *kantha* seemed content to portray the world as it was, it seems likely that there were subtle ways in which she made the female presence felt. I would suggest that she did so by portraying female *shakti* in the form of the goddess Durga. Shri Hiralal Bandhapadhyay's *kantha* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, for example, depicts the goddess Durga overcoming the evil demon Mahishasur. Next to the triumphant Durga, however, are her children (Plate 51.10). Thus the goddess Durga combines both female power destroying evil and the nurturing mother. The Hindu woman embroidering this piece lived in a patriarchal world that was heavily discriminatory against women. She could voice her feelings only through the "wordless" medium of embroidery.

Apart from images of deities, *kanthas* also display auspicious symbols. The *rath*, the chariot of Vishnu or Jagannath, was a popular motif in Hindu *kanthas*. While occasionally the Hindu swastika is embroidered, most often the depiction is of a multilinear swastika, called the *shostir*

*chinnho* (Plate 51.12). The peacock, a symbol of prosperity, might also be a symbol of the god Kartik whose mount is the peacock. The tree-of-life is a popular symbol as well as the lotus, in a variety of forms (Plate 51.14). Kramrisch notes how some motifs in the *kantha* may be found in other traditions. “The symbols stored in the *kantha* belong to the primeval images in which man beholds the universe”.<sup>2</sup> While the lotus is a ubiquitous motif, ranging from China to Iran motif, in Indian iconography it is the seat of the gods. It is also particularly associated with the goddess Lakshmi. “All of Indian’s back country is the dominion of Lakshmi, the goddess of the lotus”.<sup>3</sup>

While organized religion is orthodox, there is often a crossing over of religious boundaries as anyone who has visited Siva temples or Muslim shrines knows. Thus, Hindus and Sikhs visit the shrine of Hazrat Khwaja Muinuddin Chisty at Ajmer – as Hindus and Buddhists visit the dargah of Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet – and childless Muslim women climb up the steep steps to the Chandranath temple at Sitakundu, 37 kilometres from Chittagong. It is not surprising therefore to find Hindu and Muslim motifs juxtaposed in some *kanthas*. Thus, a number of *kanthas* at the Bangladesh National Museum as well as in the private Mohammad Sayeedur collection have depictions of both a stylized *rath* and a mosque.

Other Hindu motifs too have become so associated with *kanthas* that they have lost all association with Hinduism and were embroidered by Hindu and Muslim alike. Apart from the lotus, for example, the *shostir chinho*, the swastika motif, is another case in point. With many more arms than the original swastika, more curvilinear as well, the *shostir chinho* becomes an “auspicious” symbol. When I asked women who embroidered it what it meant, they only said it was “auspicious”. Its religious origins are also obscured by the different names it is known by. Thus some women said it represented a *golok dhanda* (maze) or *muchri* (the twisted). Someone said it was a sign of the co-wife.

Islamic symbols are of course much fewer. A crescent moon, for example, as in a *kantha* in the Gurusaday Museum, embroidered by three generations of Muslim women, which prominently displays a crescent-star motif. The moon motif with a star is popular in *jainamaz kanthas* or a Quranic line or phrase or the Bangla equivalent. *Jainamaz kanthas* often replicate a mosque. In addition, there are representations of the *tazia*, the tomb of Hazrat Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him), carried in mourning processions during Mohurram. Like the *rath*, it too has flags flying.

More than formal religion, however, the *kantha* reveals the presence of a folk religion in its motifs – some of them common to the *alpana*. Mohammad Sayeedur points out in “*Loukik Chitrakalar Alpana*” that *alpanas* are closely related to nature worship; they appease the cruel gods and pray for plenty. Tapan Mohan Chatterjee also points out the association of *alpanas* to nature. Whether we call the *bratas* magico-religious ceremonies or semi-religious ceremonies, they are mainly concerned with appeasement of the forces of nature and a celebration of its bounties. They pray for the well being of father, husband and son.

The *alpanas* drawn for *bratas*, as well as for birth and marriage ceremonies, often have magical import.<sup>4</sup> The traditional motifs drawn in *alpanas* include lotuses, creepers, animals, anthropomorphic figures, trees, heavenly bodies, footprints, and material objects desired by devotees. *Alpanas* for the well-being of male members of the family include motifs of rivers, tigers and boats, suggesting that, by enclosing these within the magic circle, the devotee was ensuring the safety of her loved men. Many of these motifs may be seen as common to both *kanthas* and *alpanas*. In addition, the traditional configuration of the *kantha* also resembles that of *alpanas*. In *Naksha*, Sayyada R. Ghuznavi has an illustration of a *Sejuti Brata Alpana* depicting a central lotus inscribed within a *mandala* or circle (**Plate 51.15**). Boats, ornaments, the sun and moon, a palanquin, all figure prominently in this *alpana*.<sup>5</sup> It is not therefore wrong to assume that the same motives that inspired the *bratas* and the *alpanas* also inspired the *kanthas*. Kramrisch, for example, points out that thematically the art of the *kantha* is an enriched textile version of the *alpana*, with its magic purpose being enhanced by the textile symbolism of its material.<sup>6</sup> In both the *alpana* and the *kantha*, the women of Bengal propitiated the gods and goddesses of nature, and prayed to them for the things close to their hearts: the safety of hearth and home, the well-being of their husbands and sons, harvests of plenty, fertility.

The *kantha* was stitched for a new-born child, for one's husband, for a grown-up son, for one's daughter to take when she got married and left her home for the home of her in-laws. It was also made, as Manadasundari's *kantha* in the Gurusaday Collection reveals, for an honoured father. Colour, motifs, over-all designs were not only ornamental but also symbolic. The mother or grandmother embroidering a *kantha* for a girl to take with her to her new home would embroider lotuses, fishes, leaves, a winnowing fan, symbols of plenty and fertility. But she would also draw with needle and thread combs and mirrors, a vermilion pot, a *kajal-lata*, or container for lamp-black with which women line their eyelids. These would be symbols of a married woman. At the same time she would add horses and elephants, symbols of material wealth. Like the primitive artist hunter, she would be "capturing" these objects for the loved one for whom she was making the *kantha*. And much later, when this child was a mother or grandmother, she too would portray the very same objects for another girl-child.

It may also be conjectured that the importance of the lotus which appears as the focal point in many *kanthas* has a lot to do with its centrality in the *alpana*. In 2006, I accompanied Mohammed Sayeedur to Kishoreganj where he took us to see ritual *alpanas* being drawn by Purnoshashi Saha, a Hindu woman of about eighty (**Plates 51.16-51.17**). When she sat down to draw the *alpana*, her steady hands first drew a straight line, then another across it at a right angle. A third and a fourth line gave the structure of the lotus. It became very clear at that moment why the most common lotus form in many *kanthas* was the *astadal padma* or eight-petalled lotus.

The *brata alpanas* have given way to decorative *alpanas*; Hindu and Muslim girls alike draw *alpanas*. At marriage ceremonies as well as at commemorations of Ekushey February, *alpanas* are drawn on the ground or on the streets leading to and from the Shaheed Minar.

Similarly, Hindu and Muslim women embroider *kanthas* without a thought that these traditional motifs were not meaningless decorations.

**Notes and References:**

1. *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968), p. 67.
2. Kramrisch, Stella, "Kantha" *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, Vol. 7 (1939), p. 53.
3. Curt Maury, *Folk Origins of Indian Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 101.
4. Tapan Mohan Chatterjee, *Alpona* (Calcutta, 1965), p. 1.
5. *Naksha: A Collection of Designs of Bangladesh* (Dhaka Design Centre, Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), 1981), p. 572.
6. *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968).