

9-2014

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Zaman, Niaz and Stevulak, Cathy, "The Refining of a Domestic Art: Surayia Rahman" (2014). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 886.

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## The Refining of a Domestic Art: Surayia Rahman

Niaz Zaman and Cathy Stevulak

The kantha or, as it is increasingly referred to now, the *nakshi kantha*, is an important women's domestic art of Bengal. It is made all over Bangladesh except in the south-eastern Chittagong Hill Tracts region. Layers of old garments such as saris, lungis and dhotis are put together and reconstituted into objects of functional, ritual, or ceremonial use. Borders and motifs are embroidered in variations of the running stitch with coloured thread, traditionally drawn from the borders of old saris. The empty spaces are stitched with white yarn to create an effect of ripples. In most Bengali families, small kanthas made of soft, old cloth, are used to wrap babies. [Figure 1] Husbands or sons who leave home to work on land or water almost always carry with them a kantha made by their mothers or wives. The kantha symbolizes the affection of the maker for the recipient and, being made of rags, is also believed to grant protection from the evil eye. Kanthas form part of the dowry of brides in certain parts of Bangladesh.



Figure 1. Newborn sleeping on a quilt. Image by Shaiful Islam.

However, this traditional craft was not in the public eye until the mid-1980s. Though a chance remark had interested me in the kantha and I had gone on to study it in museums and in areas associated with the craft, it was more or less a necessary domestic skill to make objects of personal use. [Figure 2] The Liberation War in 1971 had left many women destitute. After the independence of Bangladesh, there were attempts to provide work for such women by drawing upon their traditional needlework skills. This encouraged the revival of the kantha. Karika, a newly set-up handicrafts cooperative, offered some kantha items for sale: "carpet" kanthas, pieces worked with cross stitches on red material, and a few dress items embellished by *anarasi*, a spaced running stitch resembling the Holbein stitch. Aarong, run at that time by the Mennonite Central Committee, also had a few pieces with light kantha embroidery. But that was all. Jasim Uddin's poem had become better known than the article itself, so that when the average Bengali spoke of the *nakshi kantha* or heard the term, it was the poem that was referred to or understood, not the quilt so lovingly and painstakingly put together by the women of Bengal. In this

presentation, Cathy and I will talk about how a private, domestic craft turned into a representative Bangladeshi art form and the role of a few women in making this change.



***Figure 2. Kantha-makers of Banchte Shekha with kanthas sunning. Image by Niaz Zaman.***

In “Organising Women’s Employment through Kantha Production,” Hameeda Hossain describes how kantha making was set up soon after Bangladesh became independent. Attempts to rehabilitate women in 1972 led, particularly in districts with a strong kantha tradition such as Jessore, Kushtia, Faridpur, and Rajshahi, to setting up cottage industries and attempting to market kanthas as commercial products.<sup>1</sup> This attempt to revive kanthas was, however, not immediately successful. Hameeda Hossain, Perveen Ahmad, Ruby Ghuznavi, Lila Amirul Islam, who were closely associated with Karika in its initial stages, pulled out the kantha, so to speak, from the closed trunks in which it had so long lain and displayed it at the outlet. Karika was followed by Aarong – the outlet for the Mennonite Church Council and then for Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) – and Kumudini.

However, the catalyst for the kantha revival was the setting up of the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel. In “Kantha and Jamdani Revival in Bangladesh,” Martha Alter Chen, who worked with BRAC from 1975 to 1980, describes in detail the role of BRAC in helping to revive the kantha at Jamalpur. She notes how BRAC attempted to develop the women’s traditional skill and how most of the women did not stitch anything more than “the most rudimentary quilts” (51). However, further discussion led to the women bringing out quilts that their mothers had made. Chen goes on to note how once they “knew the women possessed the skill and shared the tradition, although the link with the more designed kanthas had been

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<sup>1</sup> It should be pointed out that these were not the first kanthas to be made for the market. Earlier kanthas too had often been made against payment. The difference between these earlier kanthas and the later ones was that in the earlier ones an individual maker would be commissioned to make a kantha. The later products were made by women’s organizations for sale in handicraft outlets.

broken” (51), they started work on reviving the kantha. They realized that at Jamalpur a certain type of kantha was being made which differed from the more heavily worked kanthas in museums. As Chen points out, “This Jamalpur variety, presumably a more recent Muslim expression, is lightly worked in narrow borders of patterned – or threaded – running stitches derived from and named after agricultural products (paddy stalk, date branch), insects or animals (ant, scorpion, fish), or nature (waves)” (52).

Though in this piece Chen provides a detailed account of the role of BRAC in developing the kantha, she does not describe the role of Pan Pacific Sonargaon in popularizing this women’s craft or of Surayia Rahman in developing a form of kantha. However, subsequently, in a discussion with Cathy, Chen described the role of Surayia Rahman in the kantha revival. One of the pieces on display at the five-star hotel was designed by Surayia. Chen describes how she knew Surayia Rahman as an artist and how she showed Surayia some photographs of kanthas from the Kramrisch collection. Together, they chose elements to include in a nakshi kantha wall hanging for Sonargaon. Surayia produced a sketch based on these elements.<sup>2</sup> The sketch was stenciled and enlarged. The women at Jamalpur then embroidered a sample (approximately 2 feet by 4 feet). The hotel approached BRAC to commission it to produce a large decorative nakshi kantha, based on the sample. However, the work was finally done by Kumudini.<sup>3</sup>

Working at the time with Kumudini was Sister Michael Francis,<sup>4</sup> an American nun of the order of the Holy Cross who had initially taught at Holy Cross School and College in Dhaka, but had left it to work for Jagaroni, a jute crafts organization located next to Holy Cross College in Tejgaon, and then with Aarong. She offered to teach Kumudini workers the needlework skills that they would need in order to complete the work.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, at Kumudini, Sister Mike helped needlewomen hone their traditional needlework skills. The true kantha *phor* or stitch is not a darning stitch. The stitches, which have to penetrate all the layers of the cloth, have to fall slightly ahead or behind the previous rows. It is only thus that the characteristic ripples of the kantha can be produced.<sup>6</sup> The women were also taught to use the weave running stitch to create

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<sup>2</sup>Elements from the Kramrisch collection kantha that appear in Surayia’s design at the Sonargaon: a hunt with riders on elephants; a boat with an elaborate peacock prow – called *mayurpankhi*; a nobleman smoking a hookah and watching a musical performance. Surrounding these vignettes are popular kantha motifs such as the paisley and tree-of-life and other border designs. [Figure 9]

<sup>3</sup>A discussion with Razia Quadir, the other designer involved with the kantha revival, suggested that BRAC felt that the Jamalpur women had not yet mastered the necessary expertise to make the enlarged kantha – three times the size of the sample. As a result the work was given to Kumudini, where the infrastructure was favourable and where craftswomen were also working on reviving the kantha. However, Chen states that “BRAC did not say that the Jamalpur women had not yet mastered the necessary expertise. We never hesitated to complete the large-scale nakshi kantha. In fact, we were fully expecting to receive the order from the hotel and its designers and were puzzled when we did not get the order. Then we heard that the order had been given to Kumudini. But we never expected that Kumudini would use the design we had developed with Surayia. We were stunned, therefore, to see the large-scale version of the sample design we had worked out with Surayia had been done by Kumudini. We thought they would have used a different design.”

<sup>4</sup>All attempts to reach Sister Mike when I was preparing the second edition of my book failed. From Bangladesh, it is understood that she went to Germany but it has not been possible to contact her.

<sup>5</sup>Much of this has been documented in the second edition of *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*.

<sup>6</sup>In working the *kantha phor*, the quilter takes small running stitches through the several folds of cloth. The spaces between the stitches are larger than the stitches themselves. When the second row is taken, it is parallel to the previous row, but the stitches fall slightly behind or move slightly forward instead of alternating with the stitches in the preceding or succeeding rows – as they would in the darning stitch. It is this manner of working that produces the rippled effect, the wavy ridges between the stitches. At Banchte Shekha Hasta Shilpa in Jessore, the embroiderers referred to the kantha stitch as *kuchki* because of the rippled effect it produces.

border patterns replicating the *par* patterns of sari borders. But, apart from acquiring traditional kantha skills, it appears that Sister Mike also taught them a filling stitch to fill in large expanses of colour. While workers at Kumudini when I talked to them when I was revising my kantha book spoke of this stitch as the Kashmiri stitch or *bhorat* – which simply means filling – I learned later that it is what is known as the Romanian stitch.<sup>7</sup> In traditional kanthas, large expanses of colour are filled in by typical kantha stitches: the kantha stitch, darning stitches, either minute pin-dot stitches or an interwoven darning stitch, *kaitya* – the bent stitch – or *chatai* or *pati phor* – the mat stitch.<sup>8</sup> Workers also learned a fourth stitch: the stem or *dal*, to outline motifs. In older kanthas either the back stitch – used to stitch garments by hand – or a double row of close running stitches is worked. The result of Sister Mike’s intervention helped make possible the large Sonargaon pieces but also reduced the endless variety of stitches used in kanthas to these four – five, if we include the Jamalpur *par* or border patterns. Surayia Rahman’s piece was embroidered using the *bhorat*. Instead of using the kantha stitch for the background, the background was embroidered in the darning stitch that eliminates the ripple effect of traditional kanthas.

Cathy will speak more about Surayia Rahman, but I would like to talk briefly about Razia Quadir whose work also hangs at the hotel. In fact, it is these three types of kanthas – the Jamalpur variety, Surayia Rahman’s *nakshi* tapestry, and Razia Quadir’s rural designs – that dominate the kantha scene today in Bangladesh. While Jamalpur work, as Chen has pointed out, is lightly worked, Surayia Rahman’s *nakshi* tapestry makes use of very close embroidery alternating with lightly worked areas. The piece designed by Razia was planned with the idea that it would make use of a variety of stitches found in kanthas. Things, however, did not turn out exactly as Razia had planned.

Sister Mike also intervened in Razia Quadir’s design. Razia Quadir had briefly taken up fine arts at Santiniketan and then practiced for another six months at the Fine Arts Academy run by Lady Ranu Mukherjee in Kolkata. However, for personal reasons Razia was unable to continue. Moving with her family to Dhaka, she joined Aarong as a designer. At this time, Aarong was still being run by the Mennonite Central Committee, but would soon be transferred to BRAC. Among other things, Razia designed small kantha pieces for Aarong.<sup>9</sup> She was also commissioned to work on two designs for Sonargaon: a triptych using lotus motifs and a piece with a rural scene, both of which are displayed in the Sonargaon lobby.

Razia did not supervise the embroidery of the pieces she had designed that was done by Sister Mike. As a result, both the completed pieces have been considerably changed from Razia’s initial design. There

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<sup>7</sup>The Kashmiri *bhorat* or Romanian stitch is one of the most popular stitches today, particularly in the Kumudini, Arshi-Salesian, and St. Paul Sewing Centre kanthas. The stitch is often simply called *bhorat phor* or filling stitch. It produces the effect of three stitches, but is really a combination of two. A large stitch is taken and then a second small one is taken in the middle to hold the stitch down. If the area to be covered is large, large stitches are taken and then held down by two or three stitches. In another – and perhaps more usual form of the Kashmiri stitch – the stitches are separate and produce a delicate effect. In this form of embroidery, a petal is finished in two or three large stitches and then outlined with two large stitches in a contrasting colour. In a number of kanthas, *kalkas* or paisleys have been embroidered in a manner very similar to *kalkas* in Kashmiri shawls.

<sup>8</sup>The names of these stitches were given to me when I interviewed kantha-makers at Jamalpur in 1979. At Kushtia the women I interviewed used other names. At the Crafts Exhibition organized by the Bangladesh National Museum from December 1 – 7, 2013, Kohinoor Begum from Jamalpur used the term *pati taga* for *pati phor* and *shir pata* for *kaitya*.

<sup>9</sup>Many of these designs – including the piece she designed for Pan Pacific Sonargaon – are reproduced in Ruby Ghuznavi’s *Naksha*. However, Razia Quadir is not mentioned as the artist; she is only given credit for the line drawings she has made for the book.



are a total of nine lotus motifs in the “lotus” tapestry with a lower row depicting fish and peacocks. According to Razia, she designed three lotuses that were to be replicated in the panels. However, while the lotuses in the top row are unchanged as is the central motif of the middle row, the lotus motifs of the lower row have been changed. Razia had also designed fishes for the lower panels. However, peacocks were added and Razia’s fish motifs re-drawn. According to Razia, Sister Mike brought in an American nun, who was also working at Holy Cross College in Dhaka at the time, to design the lower panels. As with Surayia Rahman’s design, samples were embroidered before the actual work was started. Razia still possesses a cushion cover – albeit much frayed (after 32 years) –that was originally made in preparation of the actual panel. The entire piece is worked in the *bhorat*. [Figures 3 and 4]



Figure 3. Cushion with lotus motif. Image by Zarre Omar.

Figure 4. Lotus panel. Image by Zarre Omar.

The most significant change, however, that Sister Mike effected was in the rural wedding kantha designed by Razia. Kanthas are traditionally associated with marriages and for this piece Razia planned a central wedding motif with a palanquin, a bride and groom seated side by side as well as the happy couple holding hands, along with other rural motifs. On both sides of the piece she also designed two mosques, with the Bangladeshi Islamic culture in as mind. Mosques are also a very common sight all over Bangladesh. When she designed the piece, Razia also planned that it would be worked in traditional kantha stitches, and designed feathery and light stitches to suggest the type of stitch to be used. This piece, as well as motifs drawn from other kanthas that she did for Aarong, is included in Sayyada R.Ghuznavi’s *Naksha*. Razia signed her drawing “Ritu,” the name she used for her creative work. [Figure 5] However, Sister Mike had the mosques drawn by the American nun and also had some of the other motifs changed. She also suggested perhaps the use of the *pati phor* for embroidering the piece. The piece as embroidered thus lacks the delicate look of the design Razia had originally designed. [Figure 6]

In 1981, Aarong was taken over by BRAC. During the changeover, earlier employees had to retake their interviews. A disagreement over salary led to Razia Quadir’s leaving Aarong. However, her designs continue to be replicated – but with the use of the *pati phor* that was employed exclusively for the piece.



*Figure 5. Kantha sketch by Razia.*



*Figure 6. Wedding scene kantha. Image by Zarre Omar.*

Banchte Shekha and Banchte Shekha Hasta Shilpa kanthas also replicate this stitch in their piece. Thus both Surayia Rahman's design – copied several times, in different variations – and Razia Quadir's – omitting the central lotus and focusing on rural Bengal – have influenced the designs of subsequent kanthas as have the stitches used for these pieces. The largest organization, however, engaged in promoting Bangladeshi crafts is Aarong. With its several outlets in Bangladesh, it is not surprising that it is the Jamalpur type of kantha that predominates today in Bangladesh.

In 1982, these organizations were followed by Skill Development for Underprivileged Women – or Nakshi Kantha Kendra – and then Arshi.<sup>10</sup> SDUW<sup>11</sup> and Arshi, unlike the other organizations, were

<sup>10</sup>SDUW no longer exists as it was originally planned – though some of the employees continue to produce work with the SDUW label and with Surayia Rahman's original designs. In the summer of 1994, SDUW closed. Professor Kayano of Japan undertook to re-establish SDUW in cooperation with Mr. Anisar Rahman, who had formerly looked after the accounting for SDUW. From 1996-2005, Professor Kayano collected orders from Japan, then subsequently from the Japanese community in Bangladesh as well. As of 2005, the Ekmattara organization in Bangladesh is the umbrella group for SDUW.



wholly devoted to embroidery, which, though not strictly kantha embroidery, had been influenced by it. These organizations were subsequently joined by Aranya and Ubinig, with its outlet Prabartana. Ubinig, unlike the other organizations, has mainly focused on the *lochori*, a thick kantha embroidered with close patterned running stitches.

Surayia's role in refining domestic kantha embroidery came to public light with the kantha that she designed for Pan Pacific Sonargaon. Prior to this textile art piece in the hotel, Surayia had imagined kantha as an art form for the wall as one can see in her paintings of kantha that pre-date her work with threads.



*Figure 7. Detail of Kantha painting by Surayia Rahman. Image by M. Chen.*

Since 2007, Surayia retired from Arshi and transferred her designs and goodwill to the Salesian Sisters, who run an embroidery center. The Salesian Sisters continue to do the embroidery that they had been trained to under Sister Genevieve, who sent one sister and two young women to Bangalore to learn the long and short embroidery stitch. Arshi embroidery, however, relies heavily on the bhorat for filling large motifs. The two different types of embroidery are kept separate—except when an article has some long and short stitch embroidery and then is given to the Arshi group to complete using the kantha stitch. The work by artisans of Arshi using Surayia's designs and modeled on her work is marketed as Arshi-Salesian. One of the artisans trained by Surayia coordinates the production and quality control of the Arshi-Salesian work, much of which is done in the artisans' homes. The work of the artisans trained by the Sisters is produced in their facilities.

<sup>11</sup> Like other organizations involved in handicrafts, SDUW was also devoted to women's development. The women received health care and family planning advice. Their children, if under three, were provided day care on the premises, if older were educated. Meals were provided to the children who accompanied their mothers. However, to encourage family planning, care for more than two children was not given. Meals were not provided, but women could contribute to a common pool for lunch. Women were taught hygiene and social skills.



What had inspired Surayia to think of kantha in a new direction – as fine art to look up at rather than for household use?

As a child in Calcutta, Surayia's mother taught her embroidery, but not kantha stitching. Surayia had little formal schooling because of the tuberculosis epidemic, and she taught herself to draw and paint in every spare moment. Statues of figures that adorned the parks and roads inspired her, and she drew the life of the people who she observed on her travels with her father and her meanderings about Calcutta with her bearer. A professor noticed Surayia's artistic talent and invited her to enroll in Calcutta School of Art, but Surayia could not attend due to communal riots. Surayia's parents married her at 17 years of age and she moved with her husband to Dhaka, then in East Pakistan, in 1950.

To support her growing family and for 18 years, Surayia sold various forms of her art at the Women's Voluntary Association shop in Dhaka: dolls, stationery, and scrolls with folk designs.<sup>12</sup> Following the War of Independence and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, Surayia continued with her art, focusing on oil painting. She also experimented by painting *alponas* with mud on cloth,<sup>13</sup> and rural scenes that simulated the running stitch of kantha with paint and brush strokes. [Figure 7] She wondered what her folk designs and stories would look like on cloth, and why kantha could not be considered in the public's mind as an art form. In her mind, if kantha could go on the wall and be seen like a painting, perhaps it would be given more value. She envisioned kantha as some of the finest tapestries in the world, stories on cloth to look like a painting. Her style became known as "kantha tapestry."

Surayia's chance to design kantha for stitches to be displayed on a wall came when Martha Chen of BRAC invited Surayia to design an artwork for Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel in 1979. Martha brought photographs of old kanthas from the Philadelphia Museum of Art [Figure 8] and Surayia designed a sample for the wall of the hotel. One can see the similarity of the images between the two works, yet Surayia's brought her own artistic ideas to the piece as well. When Niaz asked Surayia why one of the gentlemen in the piece was rising from his chair, Surayia replied, "He is rising from his chair in ecstasy of the dancers." For 35 years, the final work, embroidered by women working with Kumudini, has been in its original location on the mezzanine of the hotel [Figure 9], across from the elevators where countless people move quickly past it every day. This artwork's significance in the history of kantha revival is little known, as is Surayia and others' role in its creation.

Following the Sonargaon commission, Surayia and a Canadian expatriate living in Dhaka, Maureen Berlin, discussed possibilities for creating "kantha tapestry" to provide livelihoods for impoverished women. Many women were losing jobs in the jute industry as exports were declining. Maureen worked at Corr - The Jute Works organization and had become friends with Surayia through her art. She invited Surayia to teach two young women to embroider a design at her office. Surayia used one of the figures

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<sup>12</sup>With the help of a patron of her scrolls in Dhaka, Surayia also found a market for her scrolls in the gift shop of the Des Moines Art Museum in Iowa, USA. These sales were instrumental in helping Surayia to build a small home that would, over two decades later, become a workshop for Surayia's "kantha tapestry" enterprise, Arshi. During the 1970s, Surayia sold her dolls and scrolls through Champak, a shop at Hotel Intercontinental in Dhaka.

<sup>13</sup>To produce her *alpona* paintings, Surayia spread mud as a background and then painted the *alpona* on with a little white powder mixed with water, or with acrylic. In this way, Surayia's style of *alpona* for the wall replicated the earthen ground on which *alponas* were originally drawn.



*Figure 8. Kantha, Faridpur District, Undivided Bengal, from the Kramrisch Collection (late nineteenth century). Philadelphia Museum of Art.*



*Figure 9. Kantha wall hanging designed by Surayia Rahman and stitched by artisans of Kumudini, at the mezzanine of Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel, Dhaka. Image by R. Ghuznavi.*

on the design she had made for BRAC and embroidered it herself to show the women. She then trained the women to stitch the complete piece. There was great interest in this piece from potential buyers, and this market potential seeded the idea for to start a project that could offer young women a possibility for a sustainable livelihood. The concept was to produce high quality wall hangings and charge a market price significantly higher than the price for traditional kantha, and where the sale of the works would provide enough income for self-sufficiency of the women – mostly single mothers – and their children.

In March 1982, Surayia and Maureen started the Skill Development for Underprivileged Women (SDUW) project on a limited scale, initially with four women. The Canadian High Commission (Mission Administered Funds) provided a grant of CAD 15,000 for a pilot project for 6 months to expand the project for 50 women.<sup>14</sup> Maureen was the donor's representative and Project Director; Surayia was the Project Designer.

Surayia provided the designs, selected color combinations, and supervised embroidery and quality control. She developed a process for transferring her designs to cloth, and washing and stretching the embroidered pieces for final sale. Oversight by an artist for the entire process of a “team” artwork had not been done before. In her earliest pieces, Surayia used cotton cloth as a background but soon moved to the use of silk background to reinforce the image of kantha as art. She used local materials: several layers of cloth, the upper layer being silk woven in Rajshahi, and thread made from bamboo, processed and spun at the Karnaphuli Rayon and Chemicals Ltd. factory at Chandragona, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The running stitch and filling stitch (introduced by Sister Mike) were prevalent in her pieces.

Surayia had a taste of kantha embroidery from her BRAC commission for Pan Pacific Sonargaon. With the help of the embroiderers of SDUW, she now had the possibility to expand her repertoire of art to “kantha tapestry.” Her paintings of kantha were now evolving to the next level – this time drawings on cloth to be “painted” in stitches.

Just as Surayia's early work for Women's Voluntary Association focused on folk motifs, so did Bengali traditions and village life form the basis for her first textile creations. The Boat Race, one of her earliest works, brings together Surayia's observations of this popular water sport with folk motifs and vignettes of peoples' lives. [Figure 10]

The frames of Surayia's works appear similar to the wide frames of some of the older kanthas that Surayia may have seen in museums.<sup>15</sup> However, frames had a particularly significance to Surayia as, before she had seen kantha, she had been exposed to framed calligraphy in her older sister's home. As a young girl, she had often elaborated frames around her drawings.

Upon her arrival in Dhaka, Surayia met Jasim Uddin, the Bengali poet who had written *Nakshi Kanthar Math*, or “Field of the Embroidered Quilt.” Jasim Uddin became a family friend, and his poetry

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<sup>14</sup>The initial project objectives were to train underprivileged women in skills for income-generation and long term self-sufficiency; develop products with design expertise and high quality control; develop market outlets and provide marketing assistance; provide basic education for the women in nutrition, health care, family planning, family budgeting, basic literacy, establishment of co-operatives. In 1982, the project started with 4 (some say 10) women. In 1985-86, there were over 200 women with the SDUW project.

<sup>15</sup>For the development of the SDUW project, Surayia and Maureen traveled to Calcutta to study kanthas in museums.



influenced Surayia's initial interest in kantha as well as the designs and stories of her "kantha tapestry" work. [Figure 11]



*Figure 10. Boat Race, nakshi kantha tapestry design by Surayia Rahman, early 1980s. Image by G. Redmond.*

Surayia also brought her fascination with regional history into the stories of her kantha artworks. A German expatriate living in Dhaka in the 1980s, Andreas Falk, showed Surayia old photographs of scenes of the British Raj and encouraged her to draw stories of her memories as one of the last witnesses of British rule in Bengal. Her pre-colonial designs are influenced by the stories that her parents told her of their Moghul ancestry.

Surayia's designs and the fine embroidery of the woman of SDUW quickly became very popular. The Government of Bangladesh presented the works as State gifts, in Bangladesh and abroad. The project received many visitors, mainly foreigners, and thus the work started to spread around the world. Surayia's "kantha tapestry" style became available in many local shops as well.

For reasons that are yet unclear, Surayia was terminated from the SDUW project four years after its founding.<sup>16</sup> A publication<sup>17</sup> produced shortly after Surayia's termination and featuring primarily her designs makes no mention of Surayia or her role in the founding of the organization.

Surayia's designs were retained by SDUW; the project applied to the Copyright Board to have designs registered by the SDUW project. Surayia's appeal to the Board was decided in favor of SDUW, and she

<sup>16</sup>Maureen Berlin, as Project Director of SDUW, terminated Surayia from the project in January 1986, before her own departure from the project. Various writings and interviews leave an unclear picture of why this transition happened. Mrs. Perveen Ahmad took over as Project Advisor of SDUW in 1986.

<sup>17</sup>SDUW. *Embroidered Tapestries from Bangladesh: Nakshi Kantha* (Dhaka: SDUW, 1986).





**Figure 11. “Field of the Embroidered Quilt” nakshi kantha tapestry, design by Surayia Rahman and embroidered by artisans of Arshi. C. Shaffer. Image Kantha Productions LLC and Anil Advani.**

then appealed to the High Court. The decision of the High Court was to register copyright in favor of Surayia for only one of her designs and in favor of SDUW for nineteen designs.<sup>18</sup>

Surayia’s designs evolved again in the post-SDUW period. Surayia formed her own small enterprise, Arshi, at the request of some of the artisans of the SDUW project who wanted to continue working with her. She used some designs that she still had at home and made new designs. With the advice of a lawyer to change her designs slightly, she added elements to some original designs, and changed the typically horizontal, later in Arshi days it is vertical.

<sup>18</sup>Mrs. Suraiya Rahman Vs. Skill Development for Underprivileged Women, 49 DLR (HC) (1997) 222, December 9, 1996.

Surayia's eldest daughter, Annie, had helped with Arshi until she died in a tragic accident in 1994. She was a vital advocate for Surayia with regard to the copyright case.

During the Arshi period, the artisans embroidered in their homes rather than in a central workshop, as had been the case in the SDUW project. From within Dhaka and from villages at long distance such as Khulna, the women traveled to and from Surayia's home for guidance, to receive artwork and supplies, and to bring their finished pieces for sale.

Much of the marketing of the finished pieces was with the assistance of volunteers, primarily expatriates of the United States and Canada living in Bangladesh. These volunteers acted as focal points for orders and held sales in their homes. Mrs. Ses Purvis established this system in the late 1980s, and this sales outreach carried on from volunteer to volunteer until Surayia retired from her work.<sup>19</sup>

Surayia also received special commissions for unique pieces, such as for the opening of the US Embassy in Dhaka in 1989. [Figure 12] The US Embassy piece portrays President H. M. Ershad of Bangladesh and Ambassador Willard Ames De Pree of the United States flanking Teresita C. Schaffer, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East and South Asia cutting the ribbon.<sup>20</sup> Above them, is a picture of the embassy and below this, on the right and left, are pictures of a village fair (Poush Mela) in Bangladesh, where Muslims and Hindus enjoy a day together. On the upper right-hand corner is a picture of Ahsan Manzil, the palace of the Dhaka nawabs. At the very top are flags of the US and Bangladesh signifying the friendship of the two nations, and in the centre an insignia of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In keeping with other pieces designed by Surayia, there is an attractive floral border all around. In the lower left and right hand corners are *kadamba* flowers – common to traditional kanthas and associated with Krishna, the god of love. In addition, there are other floral motifs – reminiscent of the central lotus motif in traditional kanthas.

In 2007, over 25 years since the Sonargaon commission and replicating over 100 of her designs on thousands of wall hangings, Surayia found it painful to hold a pencil and draw. She transferred her goodwill and designs to the Salesian Sisters of Bangladesh, who continue to oversee the work and sales for the artisans of Arshi-Salesian. Over the years, Surayia had also trained women in other projects to embroider her designs, and the SDUW project also continues to make and market some of her designs.<sup>21</sup> Rather than continuing to repeat her designs, Surayia now wants other artists to step forward and work with kantha, creating their own stories and stitches on cloth and bringing kantha to yet another level.

Surayia did not have an artist protégé working with her, and many artisans have left for jobs in industries including garments, banking and shrimp farming. The sustainability of “kantha tapestry” is at a crossroads, despite its current ubiquity.

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<sup>19</sup>Though volunteers of Arshi were primarily of American and Canadian nationality, other expatriates and Bangladeshis were also critical to the sales efforts. For example, Japanese buyers would order directly through Surayia and purchase at home sales, as well as through SDUW.

<sup>20</sup>Hussain Muhammad Ershad was president of Bangladesh from 1983 to 1990; Willard Ames De Pree served as US ambassador to Bangladesh from 1987 to 1990; Teresita C. Schaffer was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East and South Asia from 1989 to 1992

<sup>21</sup> Over 200 artisans worked with SDUW and over 300 with ARSHI. Surayia provided her designs and trained women in The Widow's Friend (Tongi) and in the Sewing Center (Shelabunia).



***Figure 12. Nakshi kantha tapestry by Surayia Rahman, commissioned by the United States Embassy in Bangladesh for the opening of its new Embassy in 1989, stitched by artisans of Arshi. Image by Anil Advani.***

In conclusion, the refining of the domestic art of kantha took place as a result of various influences: the resurgence of national pride and a quest to revive traditional crafts, the support of governments, corporations and non-governmental organizations for preservation of culture and women's work, and the intervention of Bangladeshi and foreign individuals who saw opportunity to bring a chance for a brighter economic future for underprivileged women and their communities.

This refinement of kantha was also made possible because women from the highest to the lowest economic strata of society joined hands to create beauty, and an artist who, despite obstacles, dared to keep experimenting with art and to share her creative gifts with others.

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