

Joined Afresh-Passages from Sacred Myth and Elite-lore

Dr. Anjan Chakraverty*

Ornamental quilts or *nakshī kānthā* of Bengal (to be precise, undivided Bengal) represent an age-old tradition of domestic needlecraft, kept alive mostly by the country women. Plain and ornamental quilts were made for use within family circle, invariably passed on as a token of love or respect. Semi-professional Muslim embroiderers, both male and female, prepared intricately quilted spreads, non-figurative in terms of design, for votive offering to *dargāh* of *Sufī* saints or a *pīr* shrine in fulfillment of a vow or at annual festivals (*urs.*) Enlivening quilts with coloured embroidery entailed resourcefulness, immense patience and swift dexterity of women artists, who were themselves initiated into by the preceding and in turn imparted to the forthcoming generation, the secrets of needlework along with elucidation of myths and folkloric roots of the seasonal festivities and observance (*vrata*). Although *kānthā* from a common district or from a common family circle do show several distinctive re-interpretation of the same motif or may be a preference regarding a particular colour ensemble as also stitch-device. However, no two pieces would ever be identical in every respect. None of the surviving specimens may be dated earlier than nineteenth century. Erosion of traditional life-style towards the early twentieth century caused this domestic craft to disappear slowly, losing its very relevance in life. At the same time mill-made fabrics, aniline-dyed cotton threads and images derived from European printed textiles and illustrated children's books changed the character of the *nakshī kānthā*.

As a rule, the *kānthā*-maker begins by layering several disused white *sarī* or *dhotī*, fragile enough to withstand further use. Cleaner or the firm pieces were used for the top covering whereas the worn and threadbare formed inner sheets. Tacked together with white thread using numberless disciplined stitches, tatters were given "a new wholeness". The designs were drawn by women themselves adept in *vrata*, *alponā*, floor decoration with liquefied rice paste (*pituli*) for domestic rituals. Invariably, at the centre of the field was drawn a wide-open many-petalled lotus (*padma*), symbolizing the cosmic manifestation. Starting from the

* Dr. Anjan Chakraverty, Reader, History of Art, Faculty of Visual Arts, B. H. U., Varanasi

centre the embroiderers would slowly proceed towards the peripheral units. Compared to *alponā* the *kānthā* designs attain a freer character, intense in terms of imagery and balladic in composition. In late-nineteenth century *nakshī kānthā* myth-derived images and folkloric episodes jostle with snatches of contemporary life and metaphors deep-seated in popular culture. The artists became responsive to ephemeral artefacts of the general populace namely, *paṭa* painting and wood-cut prints, terracotta panels set on the temple exteriors and certainly, to the elaborate brocaded end-panels of Bāluchar *sārī* and paisley corner motifs of Kashmir loom-woven or embroidered shawls. European figures, locomotives and pleasure steamers were included into pictorial pattern schemes primarily for their immense appeal, representing an alternative realm of fantasy beyond the sacred allegory.

As early as 1939, Gurusaday Dutt classified *nakshī kānthā* into seven categories, their dimensions and designing determined in accordance to their usage.¹ This particular example (fig.1) from Jñāna-Pravāha Collection, in accordance with Dutt's classification, is to be referred to as *bayton kānthā* or "wrap for tying up books or valuables of all kinds". He described the salient features of the *bayton* group as follows: "These are generally square in shape, the size being approximately 91 x 91 cms. In this type there is wide border consisting of several rows of different patterns of human or animal figures or traditional decorative motifs. The centre consists of a very elaborate workmanship with a lotus of concentric design round which is grouped a multiplicity of animal and human figures as well as of other familiar objects... The corners are occupied by forms of Kalkas (decorative leaf patterns) or abstract forms of trees or foliage".² Belonging to the early twentieth century, the Jñāna-Pravāha *bayton*³ matches with the above mentioned standardized ornamental iconography and simultaneously, manifest the embroiderer's extended vocabulary of images drawn from *paṭa* painting, Bāluchar *sārī* and Kashmir shawl beyond *alponā* and ornamental temple terracottastet. Defined with running stitch the central many-petalled lotus has several zones, the peripheral being that of a blossom-interspersed meander. In the four corners and the surrounding space were assembled peacocks with snake, fish, turtles, rooster and antelopes along with plantlets and two "bent-tip paisleys" quoted from Kashmir shawls. In contrast to this inner field with freely composed motifs, the outer frame displays certain compactness, the iconic units counterbalancing the synoptic episodes of the mythic narration. In one corner of the frame appears the depiction of Kālī in her very popular iconography whereas on the diagonally opposite slot the triumphant spirit rider or equestrian figure of Gāzī, a Muslim saint closely connected with the first expansion by the Muslim settlers into the Sunderban forest. He is venerated by both Hindus and Muslims. His popularity rooted in his superhuman

power to subjugate the predatory animals, especially the tiger, plentiful in the thick of the swampy woods of Bengal. Here we notice a group of worshippers adoring Gāzī in the adjoining side panel accompanied by a pair of wolfs and a tiger. One entire side panel (fig. 2) has a row of human figures, holding probably fans and fish, marching behind an elephant, placed on one of the corners. For another corner-unit (fig. 3) the embroiderer selected an episode from the foliage fifteenth-century Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* by poet Krittibāsa Ojha. It is a concise representation of the Nikumbhila *yajña* of Indrajit, the beloved son of Rāvaṇa and Mandodarī. Hanumāna, presented in gigantic proportions, as in Kalighata 'square paṭa' and narrative scrolls of Birbhum, was shown sacrificing Indrajit as an offering to Devī while Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, made captive for the ritual immolation, witness the gruesome event. One would detect "a dazzling summary of situations" and an eye for specific details to conglomerate many shades of mythical realism. The painted scroll (*jarāno paṭa*) used in travelling picture shows seen to have greatly influenced the representational idiom of the embroiderer-designer who preferred a certain standardized compositional structure for an instant identification. Apart from this *paṭa*-derived repertoire, the embroiderer deftly combined into the layout two motifs from the end - panels of Baluchar *sārī*.

A longish frieze has a depiction of a European couple in a steam boat with an attendant (fig. 4). Marked by distinct naivety the re-interpretation matches well with the remainder. A group of four oversize fish, each of them having the shell defined with a special stitch mode, evoke a suitable aquatic expanse one would miss in the Baluchar archetype.⁴ Seated formally on English-style chair with *huqqā* balanced on candle-stand are the six "bibis" or courtesans filling the horizontal unit of the frame opposite the previous one. Represented emblematically they are essentially linear, exuding an expressionistic vigour beyond the restrained contours notable in the woven models of the Baluchar circle.⁵ Like several other surviving specimens this *bayton* is a key to the pictorial vocabulary of a *nakshi kānthā* embroiderer who unhesitantly blended the worldly into the sacred, modifying in turn the established design notions of a usage-specified art form.

References

1. Gurusaday Dutt, *Kānthā*, 24-Parganas, 1995, p. 4.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Acc. No. 2003.43; L. 89 cms; base fabric : cotton, white, plain, weave, multiple strand Z twist; edges finished with buttonhole stitch, two grading bands of close-set satin stitch; running stitch, stem stitch, surface darning and double darning stitch; faded red, yellow and blue embroidery threads procured from used *sārī*.

- 1. For a relatable Baluchar archetype cf. Eva Maria Rakob, "Bāluchari Textiles - Pictorial Brocades", *The Woven Silks of India* (Ed. J Dhamija), Mumbai, 1995, fig. 10, p. 71.
- 2. One of the several Baluchar models has been published by Sukla Das, *Fabric Art Heritage of India*, New Delhi, 1992, fig. 10B. An electrotype (c. 1870) after a woodcut portraying Rasamañjarī, a contemporary prostitute, by Madhab Chandra Das of Shovabazar is useful in tracing the range of popular visual aesthetics of the era. Pub. S. C. Welch, *Room for Wonder*, New York, 1978, Cat. No. 26, p. 74.



Fig. 1 Bayton Kanthā Acc. No.2003.43, Jñāna-Pravāha Collection, Varanasi.

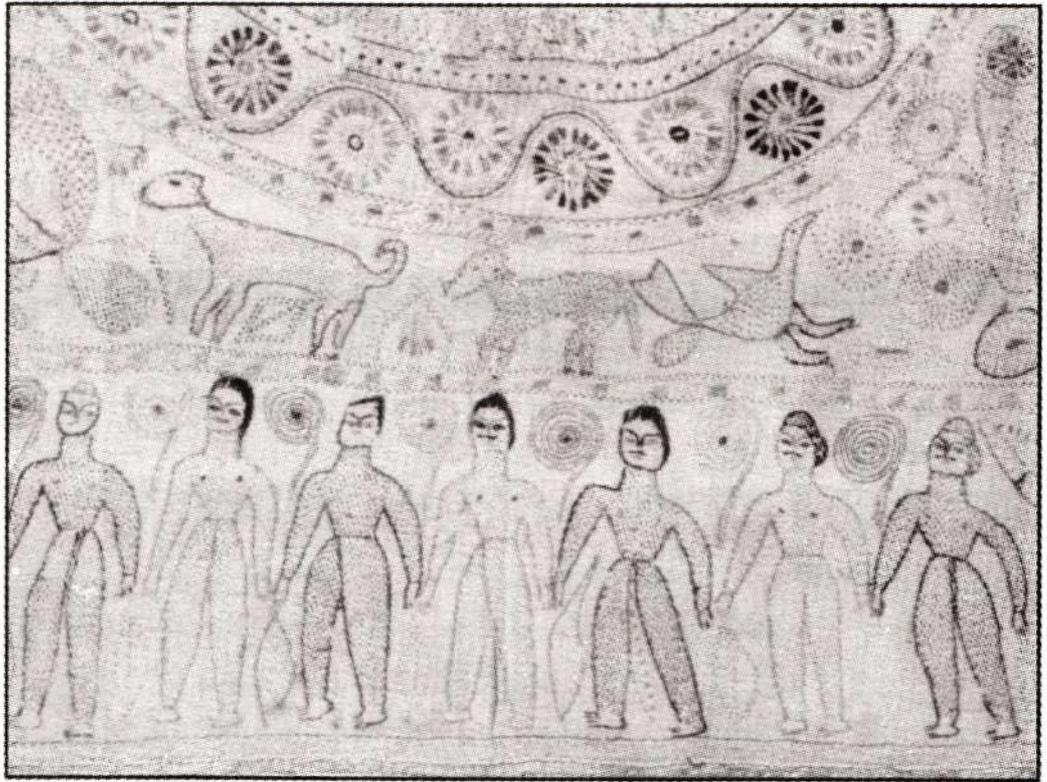


Fig. 2, Detail of fig. 1, Offering bearers.

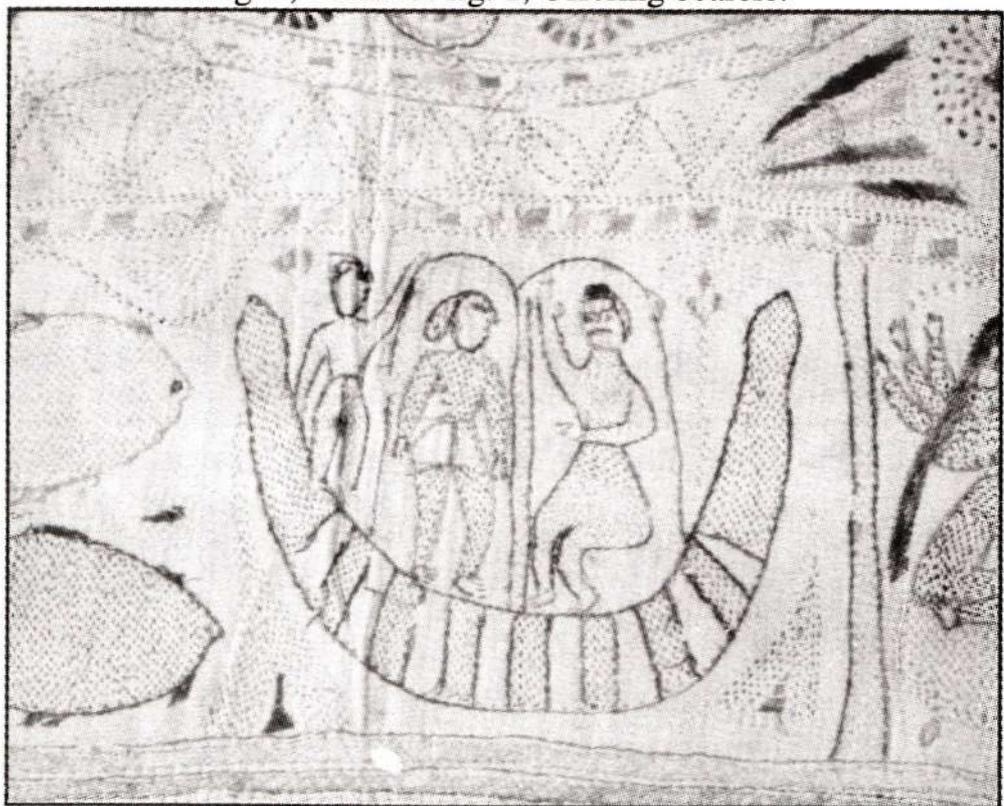


Fig. 4, Detail of fig. 1, European couple in a steam boat.



Fig. 3, Detail of fig. 1, Hanumāna sacrificing Indrajit during the Nikumbhila yajña