



Exploring the rich history of Bangladeshi textile motifs

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its aesthetic appeal; it holds deep cultural and spiritual meaning in our culture, symbolising purity and resilience, as the lotus flower thrives in muddy waters despite adversaries.

Likewise, a recurring theme in both Jamdani and Nakshi Kantha — the fish — mirrors the agrarian and riverine lifestyle of the region's people. Numerous geometric shapes have also found their way into the artistic lexicon, often inspired by the symmetry and patterns seen in temples, mosques, or even honeycombs.

On elaborating on the process of creating designs, Shaha details, "A dot moving in different directions and style, returning to the point of origin, completes a journey. In the process, a motif is created."

But they are much more than a dot — these simple forms, when repeated

Bangladeshi textiles are a living canvas and motifs have been used as a vivid storytelling medium to depict history, culture, and artistry.

Yet, they are equally global, and books like *4000 Flower & Plant Motifs: A Sourcebook* by Graham Leslie McCallum offer invaluable insights into the global influence of local patterns. As highlighted by McCallum, the universal appeal of plant and floral designs, which transcend cultures and eras, has inspired designers and artists alike. Therefore, while deeply rooted in local traditions, Bangladeshi motifs have not existed in isolation.

Today, Bangladeshi designers are reimagining traditional motifs to cater to modern sensibilities — one of them being Sharmin Rahman, a prominent designer. Rahman is working with Islamic symbols, characterised by geometric and symmetrical patterns.

have been able to protect the authenticity of Jamdani only because we stayed true to the design. Artisans know the designs by heart — patterns inherited from previous generations — but they never try to change. Nor should we."

Further illustrating his point with a striking analogy, Shaha explains, "When you speak only Bangla, you are staying loyal to the Bengali language. However, if you try to mix it with other languages, the by-product will be disastrous for the language. At one point, you won't be able to find the original language. The same principle applies to motifs. If we try to blend them without understanding their essence, they risk losing their identity entirely."

Jamdani and Nakshi Kantha motifs have endured the test of time, while many others have been lost, as highlighted by Shaha. The remaining traditional motifs we have now need documentation and preservation.

"Many motifs were lost because we couldn't preserve them. We need to be mindful that this does not happen in the future," laments Rahman.

WEAVING STORIES INTO THE FABRIC OF TIME

With progress, we are embracing modernity, and so does our fashion industry. But no matter how modern we become, the designs — passed down to us from our ancestors — will never fade away, which has been showcased by our contemporary designers. Whether paisleys adorn the Jamdani sarees or jackets, they remain as beautiful as the day they were created. However, the main challenge lies in balancing innovation with authenticity.

While working with motifs, we need to tread with care as they are not just designs, but cultural treasures that demand respect and understanding. To experiment without comprehension risks losing the very essence that makes them meaningful.

Let us hope that with dedicated artisans, thoughtful designers, and a renewed appreciation for heritage, Bangladeshi motifs may find new voices in a globalised world.

By Ayman Anika
Photo: Adnan Rahman
Model: Surjo
Styling: Sonia Yeasmin Isha
Wardrobe: Sharmin Rahman Designs
"Mahal" - A collection of arabesque inspired Mirpur katan by sharminrahmandesigns x nobo
Coordination: Tasfia & Sushmita
Jewellery: Zevar
Makeup: Piash
Location: Eskay Decor by Saimul Karim (Bashundhara Outlet)



and interwoven, became complex compositions and thus, originate designs that can convey ideas and emotions.

With time, shapes evolved, which involved the continuous layering of cultural influences, as traders and rulers from other parts of the world brought new ideas to the region.

The Mughals, for instance, introduced the paisley, or *kalka*, which quickly gained popularity in textile design. Over time, the teardrop shape of *kalka* — often adorned with floral elements — was blended by artisans with local patterns, creating variations that were distinctly Bangladeshi. This organic blending of nature and culture has been called "motif family" by Shaha.

Thus, they were birthed in nature and subsequently nurtured by artisans of the region. Whether it is the design of a lotus flower, hilsa or a sandesh, they encapsulate the harmony between humanity and its environment. They became a cultural symbol with time — a way to express identity and creativity.

THE MANY FACES

We can all unanimously agree that

She says, "I was inspired by the play of light and shadow in Islamic motifs at The British Museum in London. It reminded me of the *zari* work in Mirpur Benarasi sarees. Collaborating with design masters, we developed sarees featuring designs on satin katan, creating a blend of tradition and modernity."

This fusion approach ensures that motifs remain relevant and resonate with diverse audiences, bridging the gap between tradition and innovation.

Recently, people have been inclined more towards minimalist designs. Rahman notes, "We can adapt motifs on varieties of clothes, it doesn't necessarily have to be a traditional wear. You can have paisley embroidered on the corner of a jacket and it looks elegant."

So, with changing times, traditional shapes and designs have now found their place in contemporary fashion. Many fashion designers are now reviving the age-old patterns by including them in various clothing styles — for example, kurtas, scarves, and even jeans.

However, Shaha cautions against mindless experimentation, stating, "We