

## JAMDANI AND NAKSHI KANTHA enter global conversations through design

At first glance, you may feel like looking at a thrifted jacket or a misfit patchwork dress. Once you look closely, you will see the stitches do not repeat. Instead, the embroidery breaks the pattern. Although the threads are uneven and frayed, they all hold together. This is Nakshi Kantha, but reimagined! On the other end of the spectrum, you might find a crisp, translucent kurta made of fabric so light it almost blends into the air. If the motifs look like tiny flowers or water droplets, you are most probably looking at Jamdani, worn as an everyday casual outfit.

These are not merely nostalgic revivals, but active reinterpretations of Bangladesh's textile heritage. They are not only making their way into contemporary wardrobes but also global conversations.

### A past that refuses to stay in the past

Traditionally, a form of hand-embroidered quilt made from old sarees and sometimes lungis, Nakshi Kantha was once a quiet craft mindfully employed by rural women. The art of kantha stitching was and is still deeply personal — embellished with birds, vines, boats, and scenes of everyday life.

Samaha Subah, founder of the experimental label SIZ, is bringing the kantha out of the homes and into the wardrobes and for her, Nakshi Kantha functions as a canvas.

"For me, it's like painting. Through this craft, you can explore your own imagination. You can choose what you want to illustrate — florals, patterns, or even something like a dragon," she says.

For generations, Nakshi Kantha has been a domestic, traditional textile, stitched from old clothes, made into a quilt, and embroidered with intricate motifs. However, today, the same stitchwork is being translated into streetwear, handbags, and even jackets. And it is being done by none other than our very own Bangladeshi designers like Samaha Subah.

In slight contrast, Jamdani, woven in and around Dhaka for centuries, has become internationally prized. The weaving of Jamdani is a very laborious job, with supplementary threads added by hand to create motifs that float within the cloth. And for a long time, it has been considered too exquisite for everyday use.

This, however, is no longer the case.

Presently, many young and conscious designers are attempting to redesign it, not for the sake of modernisation but to make it in vogue again. One of them is Farhana Munmun, founder of Bene Bou. Growing up in Demra, the heartland of Jamdani weaving, she remembers looms as a phenomenon that was a part of everyday life.

"While I was working, my colleagues would ask me to bring



Bangladeshi textiles like Nakshi Kantha and Jamdani are being actively reimagined by young designers, transforming traditional embroidery and weaving into contemporary fashion, lifestyle items, and wearable art.

Jamdani for them. That's how it started," she recalls. At first, Munmun worked only with sarees, sourcing directly from weavers she met by visiting haats at dawn. She soon realised that Jamdani's biggest obstacle was not design, but wearability.

Her customers abroad could not wear sarees in cold climates. Many wanted Jamdani clothing that was washable and practical. This is how she started to diversify, and now, Munmun is designing jackets, coatees, kurtis and long vests.

She argues, "If we want to save Jamdani, we must diversify it. People should be able to wear it in their everyday lives."

Due to rapid industrialisation, both crafts are facing decline and mostly remain reserved for festivities. Therefore, reinvention has become a necessity, as it addresses an urgent question: how to survive in a world that has a faster consumption rate and cheaper alternatives.

### Reworking the loom

For decades, Nakshi Kantha and Jamdani have been labelled as "heritage," a word that often traps these textiles in museum-like reverence. It is high time they should be pulled firmly back into the present by being reconfigured as contemporary fashion, lifestyle objects, and cultural statements.

Subah is capturing this reconfiguration boldly. Her latest collection features a dragon motif, stitched entirely by hand, that crawls across the back of a jacket — a design familiar yet unexpected and unmistakably contemporary.

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