BOK BOK BOOKS



STORIES FROM BENGAL

AN EXPLORATION OF MYTHS, LEGENDS, AND FOLK TALES



WRITTEN BY
RUMANA YASMIN

ILLUSTRATED BY
FARAH KHANDAKER









TO RABEYAH AND ALI, WHO INSPIRE
ME TO TELL STORIES – R.Y.

TO EREN, ERHAN, AND
MY GRANDMOTHER BEGUM
AYESHA SIDDIKA – F.K.



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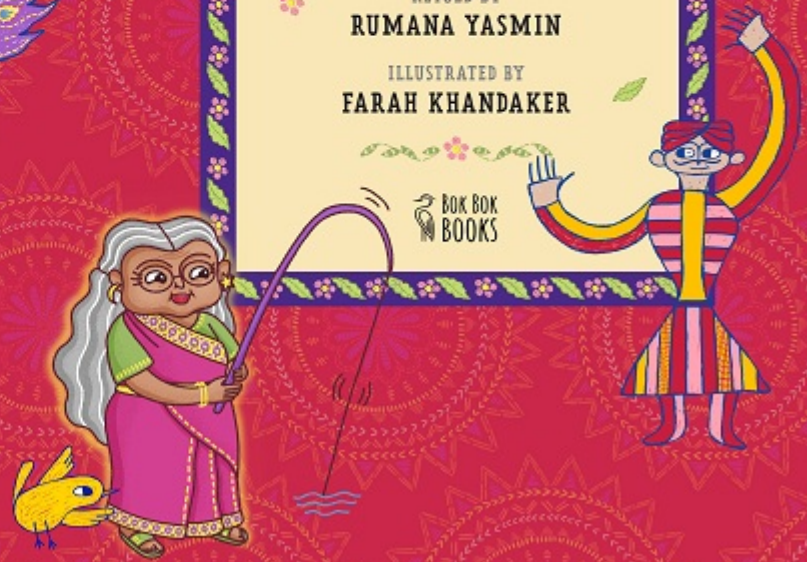

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INTRODUCTION

Bengal: The Land of Stories and Storytellers

I am Chaader Buri, the magical grandmother who lives on the Moon. Every night, I sit at my spinning wheel twisting moonlight into silver threads of tales that shimmer down to the land of Bengal.

And there, with sleepy, dreamy eyes, children look up at the glow of the Moon to catch my stories — of clever tricksters and wise heroes, of enchanted creatures and impossible journeys. But I am not the only one with stories. Bengal is a land of many storytellers.

Stretching across Bangladesh and parts of India, Bengal is a place where ancient empires once thrived and busy trade routes brought travellers from distant lands. Within its lively bustle, stories always found a place — with grandmothers telling tales by lamplight, boatmen singing myths in their songs, *potuas* travelling with painted scrolls, and embroiderers crafting stories with their stitches.

Tonight, I invite you to join me. Together, we will follow the story-threads. Let's find where they lead...

NAKSHI KANTHA
STORIES IN EVERY STITCH

There is a very special group of storytellers who inspired the illustrations in this book: the women who make *nakshi kantha*.

Nakshi kantha is a type of embroidery that women in Bengal have been using for hundreds of years to decorate quilts, bags, and mats. With their stitches, lotus flowers bloom in the centre of the fabric, fish swim across it as boats sail along rivers of thread, and protective symbols guard the edges. Each pattern holds a meaning and each embroidered cloth carries a tale.

The embroiderers' art has shaped every illustration in this book — and in each chapter, you'll find a small note uncovering a little more of the *nakshi kantha* storytelling tradition.



BEHULA AND THE SNAKE GODDESS

A Story That Lives in Prayer and Song

"I am Monsha, Serpent Goddess. Worship me, and I will heal and protect you! Defy me and..."



Stories have been around long before there were printed books and libraries. You may wonder how people passed them on for many hundreds of years without writing them down. They did so through storytellers, who kept tales alive in their memories and voices.

For centuries, in the villages of Bengal, stories were passed on through poems, prayers, and songs. They may have been sung by boatmen journeying across vast rivers, or recited by wandering poets, or even performed as plays under starlit skies.

Often, these stories were about powerful gods and goddesses, and brave people. This story of Behula, a young woman who had the courage to face Monsha, the mighty Serpent Goddess, is one such tale that has been preserved through rhyme and ritual.

"No beast nor storm can stop me. I WILL save Lokkhindor."



BEHULA'S STRENGTH

"Why should I pray to YOU, Monsha," Chand shouted to the heavens, "when I pray to a god as great as Lord Shiva?"

Chand was a proud and powerful merchant, and in his world, power belonged to men — even among the gods. But Monsha, the goddess of serpents, wasn't one to be defied. She placed a terrible curse on Chand!

When Chand's youngest son, Lokkhindor, married the kind and loving Behula, Monsha sent one of her snakes to join the festivities. On the young couple's wedding night, the snake bit Lokkhindor, killing him instantly.

Something stirred within Behula. A death by snakebite was not final — those taken by snakes were set adrift on a raft, for they might yet be brought back to life. Behula would not wait on the shore. She climbed on beside Lokkhindor's lifeless body and set out across the river. "I will reach the heavens," she vowed, "and I will bring him back."

For six long months Behula travelled, stopping at seven places to pray, sing, and offer food to the Monsha. And the foul fortunes she faced! She rode through raging storms, tamed wild waves, fought loathsome beasts, and kept away from wicked men.

She finally arrived at Monsha's abode, where she sang and danced to captivate the gods and goddesses. Monsha was impressed by the strength of Behula's care for Lokkhindor. She agreed to bring him back to life but on one condition – that Chand bow his head in prayer to her.

By this time, even Chand was moved by Behula's courage, and he finally offered a prayer to the Serpent Goddess. Peace was restored, and Behula and Lokkhindor were reunited.

SHAONE DALA

Every year in Bangladesh, Hindus and Muslims come together for Shaone Dala — a festival where performers on boats act out the story of Behula. They sing and dance to honour Monsha and keep everyone safe from snakebites!

MONGOL-KABBO

This story is usually sung or recited in the form of a long verse called mongol-kabbo, which means 'poem of blessing'. Anyone listening to a mongol-kabbo is said to be blessed with good luck.

SHAKTI IN EVERY STITCH

Every stitch brings strength! Nakshi *kantha* makers put *shakti* (women's strength) into each tiny stitch, protecting and blessing their loved ones. Gradually, hundreds and thousands of stitches add up. Like Behula, they turn patience into something powerful.

TWO NAMES AND MANY MIRACLES

Potochitro — Bengal's First Picture Books?

An eager crowd awaits the arrival of the *potua*, a storyteller who travels from village to village carrying a special scroll. Hand-painted by the *potuas* themselves, these scrolls are called *potochitro*, meaning 'paintings on cloth'. Each *potochitro* shows scenes from a story, which the storyteller brings to life by singing as the pictures are revealed. To thank the *potua* for their entertainment, the villagers bring rice, vegetables, and even a few coins.

When the *potua* arrives, all eyes follow the colourful scroll — the villagers are captivated by the scenes and songs. Frame by frame, the story is told and excitement builds. It's like turning the pages of your favourite picture book!

A SONG FOR SHOTYO

With these words, and their scrolls held up for all to see, the *potua* starts singing one of the many legendary tales of Shotyo.

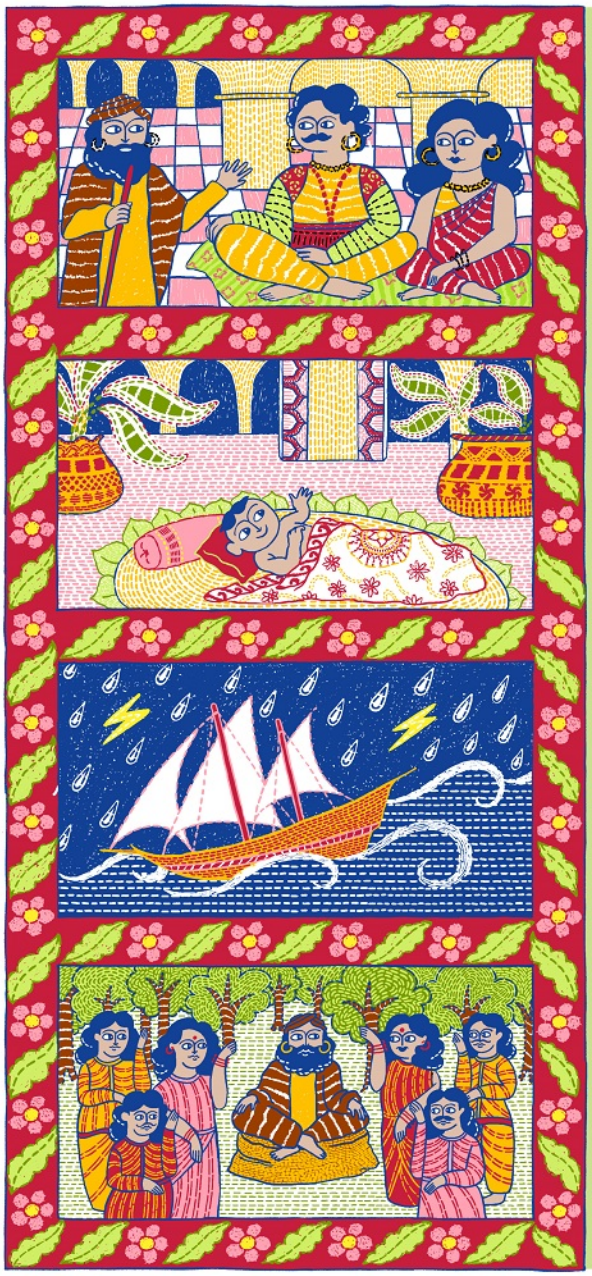
"Rise, Oh rise, Shotyo, for your heart is kind and true
Guide us with peace and wisdom in everything we do.

Some may call you Norayon, Pir is your other name
But your stories of many miracles remain ever the same."



SHOTYO NORAYON OR SHOTYO PIR ?

Shotyo has two last names — Norayon, like the Hindu God, and Pir, the title of a Muslim saint. Over centuries of change, Hindus and Muslims in Bengal found ways to share what they knew. Shotyo became a shared figure — a god and a saint at once, belonging to everyone.



SHOTYO APPEARED one day, out of nowhere, in a land ruled by a generous royal couple. He was dressed in a simple robe fit for a *fakir*, a wandering holy man. Even then, he was welcomed to the palace as if he were royalty, with plenty of food and a place to rest.

"I will bless you with a child," Shotyo said to the queen, and to the king he said, "but only if you promise that when the child is born, you offer a sweet treat to every *fakir* in the land."

THE ROYAL COUPLE who had been praying for a child for a long time, happily agreed. True to Shotyo's word, they were soon blessed with a baby! Yet in their happiness, the queen and king soon forgot their side of the deal.

YEARS PASSED, and the king set out to trade across the great ocean. But a fierce storm struck! Just as the waves were about to swallow his ship, the king remembered his promise to Shotyo. He went on his knees and prayed with a song.

"Rise, Oh rise, Shotyo, return me home," he wept.

"Every beggar will be fed, my promise shall be kept!"

HEARING HIS PRAYERS, Shotyo, who was kind, and also kind of magical, turned the storm into a light shower. And the king — he made sure everyone in his land was fed well. The wise *fakir* had taught him the importance of keeping his word — after all, his name, Shotyo, means 'truth'.



POTOCHITRO

As the potuas finish singing from one part of the scroll, they carefully roll it out of view so the audience can see the picture below and listen to the next part of the story.

A SHARED TRADITION

In *nakshi kantha*, you might see a Hindu chariot (*rath*) stitched right next to a mosque. Two traditions share the same cloth — exactly as Shotyo shares his name.



Rath (Hindu chariot)



Mosque (Muslim place of worship)

THE FOX WHO LOST HIS NOSE

A Tale That Grows and Grows



You may wonder how storytellers remember all the words, scenes, and twists of a story without having it written down. Surely, they have incredible memories, but they must also have tricks to help them!

There is a special type of storytelling called *shikli golpo* in Bengali, which means chain tales, or stories that grow and grow, adding a new character or conundrum at every step. With each turn, the rhyme and repetition build up, until the whole tale tumbles into chaos.

It may sound wild, but that's the magic behind making the story easy to tell, and impossible to forget. Listen closely though, because hidden in all the chaos, there's always a lesson to be learned!



FOX AND THE BARBER



In a bamboo grove,
there lived Fox.

One day, while foraging for food in the grove, thorns got lodged in Fox's nose. Howling, Fox ran to the barber's house.

"Oh barber, dear barber, are you at home?"

"Who calls me in this pitch-dark night?" replied the Barber.

"It's me, Fox — please get up! There are thorns stuck in my nose. Pull them out, I beg you!"

But just as the barber tried to remove the thorn, he accidentally cut off Fox's nose!

Fuming with rage, Fox shouted:

"Either give me back my nose, or give me your barber's blade!"

What could the poor barber do?

He had no choice but to hand over his precious barber's blade.

"Lost my nose, got a barber's blade
Tak dooma doom doom!"

Fox sang.



On the road, Fox saw a potter digging clay with his fingers.

"Why use your hand? Take my blade instead."

The farmer happily took it. But as soon as he started digging, the blade broke.

"Either give me back my blade, or give me your clay pot!" shouted Fox.

Left with no choice, the farmer gave him a beautiful handmade clay pot.

Fox took the pot and moved on.

"Lost my nose, got a barber's blade
Tak dooma doom doom!

Traded the blade for a pot well-made
Tak dooma doom doom!"





Next, Fox met a milkmaid giving water to her cow with her bare hands.

"Why feed your cow by hand? Use my pot for the water."

The milkmaid agreed. But just as she was about to fetch water, the pot slipped from her hands and broke.

"Either return my pot, or give me your cow!" shouted Fox.

The milkmaid could do nothing but helplessly watch Fox take the cow and go on his merry way.

"Lost my nose,
got a barber's blade
Tak dooma doom doom!

Traded the blade for a pot well-made
Tak dooma doom doom!

Pot went smash,
so I took a cow
Tak dooma doom doom!"



Fox then came across a wedding celebration ahead. Drums were playing, but there were no wedding sweets being served.

"My cow can give you milk to make your wedding sweets!"

The wedding party was delighted.

But as soon as they tried to milk the cow, it got scared and escaped!

"Either return my cow, or give me your drum!" said Fox.



So Fox took off with the drum, climbed up a tree, and happily sang while beating the drum:

"Lost my nose,
got a barber's blade
Tak dooma doom doom!

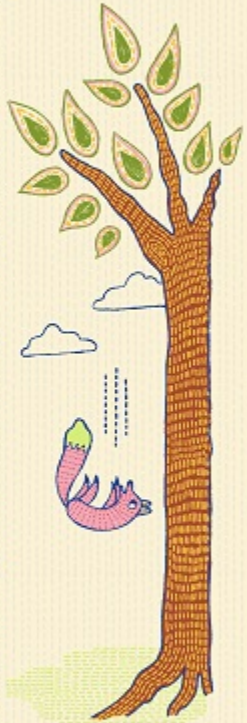
Traded the blade for a pot well-made.
Tak dooma doom doom!

Pot went smash, so I took a cow
Tak dooma doom doom!

Cow ran off, I've got a drum now
Tak dooma doom doom,
doo-doom doom!"



Until Fox slipped and fell, broke the drum, and limped back to the bamboo grove, with nothing but wounded pride!



A STITCH IN RHYME

Just as Fox's rhyme keeps adding a new line with every deal, *nakshi kantha* stitches repeat and build patterns across the cloth, growing and growing, until a whole story is told.