

Motifs, Stitches and uses of Nakshi Kantha: A Study on a Traditional Artefact of Bangladesh.

Tanjena Mahbub, Dr.Masud Al Noor

*Assistant Professor, Department of Fashion Design & Technology
Associate Professor, Department of Business Administration
Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology. Dhaka, Bangladesh*

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ABSTRACT:

Nakshi kantha is a significant part of our tradition and it is an embroidery folk art of Bangladesh. Nakshi kantha is a type of embroidered colorful quilt and it is a part of heritage of Bengali Culture. Recently this particular artefact has gained its popularity again. The motifs, design and stitches of Nakshi Kantha are also being used in different household and fashion products. The study has summarized the historical development of Nakshi Kantha; its variety has been explained; and motifs, stitches and assembly of the overall design have been analyzed. The study has also made an effort to reveal the trend of using motifs of Nakshi Kantha in various household and fashion product by surveying the markets. It has also made an attempt to assess the design value and popularity of the products inspired by and based on Nakshi Kantha.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The term 'Nakshi' was derived from 'Naksha', meaning, an array of colourful patterns and designs, which were embroidered onto a piece of cloth. Nakshi Kantha, is the popular hand embroidery art form of Bangladesh and West Bengal. It is one type of embroidered colorful quilt. The word 'nakshi' originated from Bengali word 'noksha'. "Noksha" means design or pattern. The name "Kantha" is the needle embroidery practices in the districts of West Bengal and Bangladesh. Like any other folk art, kantha making is influenced by factors such as materials available, daily needs, climate, geography, and economic factors. Nakshi katha main materials are needle, cotton fabrics and colorful threads. Kantha is an example of a strange contradiction, because this is an object which is created in an effort for saving by transforming old clothes into art of rare beauty.

Kantha upgraded itself from an item of daily use, soon enough it started claiming the status for artistic embroidery. Certain Nakshi Kantha is getting produced for export and was pieces of art in itself. They were minutely embroidered and the selection of motifs and placement, choice of colors spoke the language of art. Nakshi Kantha also became a part of folk Music. Bengal Kantha is so popular that some five hundred years ago a book named Sri Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita was written by Krishnadas Kaviraj. Several other folk songs from unknown poets and singers are still being sung at local festivals also praised nakishi katha and other crafts.

Tradition of a few thousand years this is another noteworthy part of Bangladeshi culture. Nakshi kantha is generally made in villages. Every stitches of Nakshi Kantha are the language of the villagers. Greater Mymensingh, Rajshahi, Chapainababgonj, Faridpur, Jessore areas are most famous for this craft. The term Nakshi Kantha, popularly used in Bangladesh, is found even in medieval literature. The name Nakshi Kantha became particularly popular among literate people after the publication of Jasimuddin's poem Nakshi Kanthar Math (1929).

Kanthas as pieces of old cloth are put together to make something new. However, old cloth also has a magical purpose, as it is believed to ward off the evil eye. The Kantha made of old cloth is thus supposed to keep its user safe from harm. Kantha motifs, many of them common to the Alpana, also have a magical purpose and reflect both the desire of the needlewoman for happiness, prosperity, marriage, and fertility as well as wish-fulfilment. Some 19th-century Kanthas, for

example, have vivid scenes drawn from contemporary life or myths and legends.

This paper is mainly based on secondary data in relation to Nakshi Kantha. Various journals, magazines, websites and Books have been consulted. Already collected and published data have been analyzed and interpreted.

Understanding Nakshi Kantha: in Bengal Context

Most literature on kantha has not been able illustrate or describe luminously about the craft. Kantha is a quilt of the poor rural people of Bengal and did not get proper recognition as a craft. The most poetic reference of Kantha has been found in poet Jasimuddin's poem "Nakshi Kanthar Math". But nearly five hundred years back, description of Bengal Kantha is found in the book, "Sri Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita" by Krishnadas Kaviraj which was the earliest literature about kantha. The second earliest reference is in Zaman's book about the famous artist Abanindranath Tagore, who seemed to have encountered a woman in a village in a district of Srihatta of Bangladesh, who recorded her life story in her Kantha spanning a period starting from her marriage to old age (Zaman, 1993)

It is originally made of used old saris, lungis or dhotis, the quilts or kanthas of Bengal in the hands of an able needlewoman turned into exquisite art. Every poor woman in the villages and towns of Bangladesh even today stitches kanthas – as women had in the past – putting together old saris and lungis. (Zaman, 2011)

The colorful patterns and designs that are embroidered resulted in the name "Nakshi Kantha", which was derived from the Bengali word "naksha", which refers to artistic patterns. (Ali, 2014).

Scholars believe the word Kantha originated from the word Ketha (Aziz, 2005), which describes quilts. Eventually, artists began to add Nakshi (embroidered designs) to the Ketha as a form of both individual and cultural expression. Nakshi Kantha quilts are lightweight to compliment the tropical climate of Bangladesh.

Traditionally old sarees, lungis and dhotis were used to make Kanthas (Ali, 2014). Today the old materials are replaced by new cotton cloths. Traditionally the thread was collected from the old Sarees. That is rarely done today. In recent years

the interest in ethnic arts and crafts has encouraged a kantha revival in both Bangladesh and West Bengal. (Zaman, 1995)

The selection of motifs, patterns and the placement of these patterns display their aspiration, perceptions and connections with the immediate social environment In the midst of juggling between so many roles, the desire for self expression found the craft of Kantha as a medium. The women of rural Bengal have never been so well off compared to their counterparts in other parts of the country. The Craft of Kantha, originated during the dire need of the women to protect her child, family from cold and severe weather. The desires and expressions for the well being of the family found a canvas on the surface of Kantha. This was the origin of the "Art of Kantha" (Naik, 1996).

Paulo Coelho, in his book "Alchemist" has advocated the concept of soul of the world. It says that when somebody wants something with all their heart, that is when they are closest to the soul of the world. Women while embroidering these symbols of happiness and prosperity on the Nakshi Kantha and repeatedly thinking about their manifestations brought them closer to the soul of the world, and stitched the manifestations forever in their universe (Nag, 1982).

The embroidered designs of Nakshi Kantha originated in the traditional art of Alpanas, ritualistic floor drawings made for worship and celebration. These motifs blend symbols derived from past and present Bangladesh religions and scenes from everyday life, such as fishing boats, rivers, flowers, trees and people. Some Nakshi kantha artist tell a personal story. (Zaman, 1993)

In Bangladesh, kantha was revived as a commercial activity to provide work for women left destitute after the 1971 war. In the mid-1980's, it was further developed as a public art. (Surayia, 2014)

Modern fashion designers also tried to copy the Nakshi Kantha design in other traditional dress and it is being observed that customers" likes this type of cloths and trading is satisfactory. Although this attitude of the fashion designers have increased their business but on the other hand it is demised the traditional value of the product itself, (Ahmadi, 2014)

Nakshi Kantha and the manufacturer of this product are being mostly patronized by NGOs widely. The Bangladesh Government, through its various public trading organizations also tries to patronize Nakshi Kantha. Marketing of the original product is mostly done by them. However there are some self-motivated entrepreneurs who also in the process of making profit carry out trading of Nakshi Kantha. Due to heavy commercialization of the product, the traditional value is eliminated could not gain much of publicity in international market. Efforts are taken by some individual businessman to introduce the Nakshi Kantha around the globe did not saw significant light. Although Bangladesh Commerce and Industries Organization often organize and also participate in international trade fare to promote the product but not much market is made, (Palit, 2017) Today's modern fashion industries have started using Nakshi Kantha design in generalized clothing. Although traditional values are not given much important but customers at all ages are have cordially accepted the idea. Nakshi Kantha designs are symbolized and used as a token of to bring variety in dress design (Kadnikova et al., 2017).

Nakshi Kantha & its Fabrics

The domain of Nakshi Kantha is mainly feminine. Men very rarely participate in it. To choose cloth, decide on the types of thread to use, set designs charcoal and pencil, and then stitching, everything usually carried out by the women themselves.

To make Nakshi Katha, the women in Bengal used a whole and one half old sari or dhoti. The whole fabric is folded four times and the other two times. The ends are then tied together with pins or tuck them with uneven run stitches. Then the fabric is smoothed so that there are no wrinkles. Then the ends of the cloth are stitched together and the pins removed.

Rural women worked at leisure time or during the lazy days of the rainy season to make kantha. Taking months or years to finish a kantha was normal. At least five to seven sarees were needed to make a standard size kantha. Original designs and motifs were not drawn on the cloths. The design was first out lined with needle and thread, followed by focal points and then the feelings motifs were done. Sometimes wooden blocks were used to print the outline.

Threads & color of Nakshi Kantha

The threads used for the preparation of the designs were secured from old saris. But these days

threads also buy from market. After the ends are secured, charcoal or pencils are used to draw the design outline. Then the Nakshi-Kantha hand embroidery is started. A lotus or some alpona design is embroidered at the center of the Nakshi-Kantha fabric. Once the center design is ready, remaining vacant areas are hand-embroidered. Although the designs have apparently no connection with others, they ensured that the symmetry is not altered.

The early kantha had a white background accented with red, blue, and black embroidery; later various colors were also used or included.

Motifs used in Nakshi Kantha

The folk needle craft of Nakshi Kantha displays a strong mythological symbolism. Some of these symbols are versatile in nature and find background in several cultures. These are sometimes combined with stories, allegories or composite iconographies. The symbolic nature of the motifs and the connotations that they have are deeply rooted in religion.

With creativity of an artist, they would sew scenes from rural life, animal's, birds, village, butterfly, elephants, peacock, huts with children, water pumps, fisher women selling their wares, even frogs and snakes! Apart from patchwork quilts, they also made bridal garments for their young ones and warm rugs for their newborn babies. For more than 2000 years, the patchwork Kantha held pride of place in rural Bengal.

Motifs of the nakshi kantha are deeply influenced by religious belief and culture. Even though no specific strict symmetry is followed, a finely embroidered naksi kantha will always have a focal point. Most kanthas will have a lotus as focal point, and around the lotus there are often undulating vines or floral motifs, or a sari border motif. The motifs may include images of flower and leaves, birds and fish, animals, kitchen forms even toilet articles. While most kanthas have some initial pattern, every naksi kantha motif is different and unique and not match with another one. While traditional motifs are repeated, the individual touch is used in the variety of stitches, colures and shapes. The notable motifs found in naksi kantha are as follows:

- **Lotus motif**

The lotus motif is the most common motif found in kanthas. This motif is associated with Hindu iconography and thus is also very popular in the kantha. The lotus is the divine seat. It is also symbolic of cosmic harmony and essential

womenhood. The lotus is also the symbol of eternal order and of the union of earth, water and, sky. It represents the life-giving power of water, and is also associated with the sun for the opening and closing of the petals. It is also the symbol of the recreating power of life.

- **Solar motif**

The solar motifs closely associated with the lotus motif. Often, the lotus and the solar motifs are found together at the centre of a nakshi kantha. The solar motif symbolizes the life giving power of the sun. The sun associated with the fire which plays a significant part in Hindu rites, both Religious and matrimonial.

- **Moon motif**

The moon motif has a religious influence, and is popular amongst the Muslims. Mostly it is in the form of a crescent moon accompanied by a star. This motif is particularly found in Jainamaz kanthas.

- **Wheel motif**

The wheel is a common symbol in Indian art, both Hindu and Buddhist. It is the symbol of order. The wheel also represents the world. The wheel is a popular motif in kanthas even when the maker has forgotten the significance of the symbol. The motif is relatively easy to make with chatai phor.

- **Swastika motif**

Suasti in Sanskrit means it is well. As a motif in Indian art, it dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization. It is symbol of good fortune. It is also known as muchri or golok dhanda. With the passage of time, the design is more curvilinear than the four armed swastika of the Mohenjodaro seal. The symbolic design has significant influence in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

- **Tree of life motif**

Contemporary Nakshi Kantha (used as a wall hanging) with animal, fish, butterfly, tree and human figure motif The influence of this motif in Indian art and culture (as with kantha) may be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization.

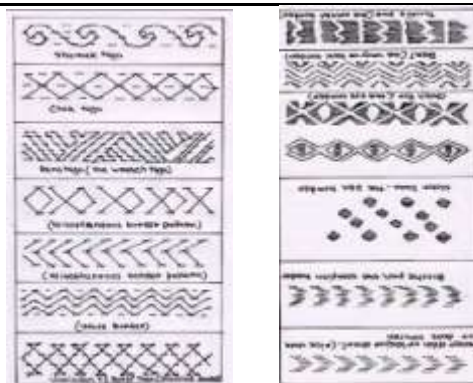
It is likely that the Indus people conceived the pipal as the “Tree of Life” with the devata inside embodying the power of fecundity.

- **Kalka motif**

This is a latter-day motif, dating from Mughal times. The kalka or paisley Motif originated in Persia and Kashmir and has become an integral image of the sub continental decorative motif.

- **Borders**

Most nakshi kanthas ornamented with border. Either a sari border is stitched on or a border pattern is embroidered around the kantha.



Motifs of Nakshi kantha

Stitches of Nakshi Kantha

In style, form, fabric or technique, through sheer skill and patience the Bengali women have been able to create stunning patterns by employing the most simple and frugal methods. The Kantha is really a play of the ordinary running stitch used in its many variations. Through variation in its length and spacing, a surface composed of multitudes of squares and triangles is created that has a wonderful texture. These closely placed stitches gave a quality of swiftness and rhythm to the ground. The chief stitches used were the darning stitch, the satin stitch, the loop stitch, the stem stitch and the split stitch. Sometimes the darning stitch is used to create an effect similar to that of weaving.

Women while embroidering these symbols of happiness and prosperity on the Nakshi Kantha and repeatedly thinking about their manifestations brought them closer to the soul of the world, and stitched the manifestations forever in their universe.

The process of making the Nakshi Kantha is very labour intensive and time consuming; often it might take 10 to 15 days to make a standard size quilt with intricate patterns.

Most Nakshi Kanthas have some kind of border. Either a sari border is stitched on or a border pattern is embroidered around the Kantha. The common border found in Kanthas are as follows

- The Paddy stalk or date branch (Dhaner shish or Khejur Chari)
- The Scorpion border (Biche par in Bengali)
- The Wavy or bent Border (Beki in Bengali)
- The Diamond border (Barfi)
- The Eye border (Chok Par in Bengali)
- The Amulet border (Taabiz Par in Bengali)
- The Necklace border (Mala Par in Bengali)
- The Ladder Border (Moi Taga)
- The Gut Taga
- The Chick Taga
- The Nolak Taga
- The Fish border (Maach par in Bengali)
- The Pen border (Kalam Par in Bengali)
- The Panch taga
- The Bisa taga
- The Anaj taga
- The Shamuk taga
- The Wrench border
- The Anchor (grafi par in Bengali)



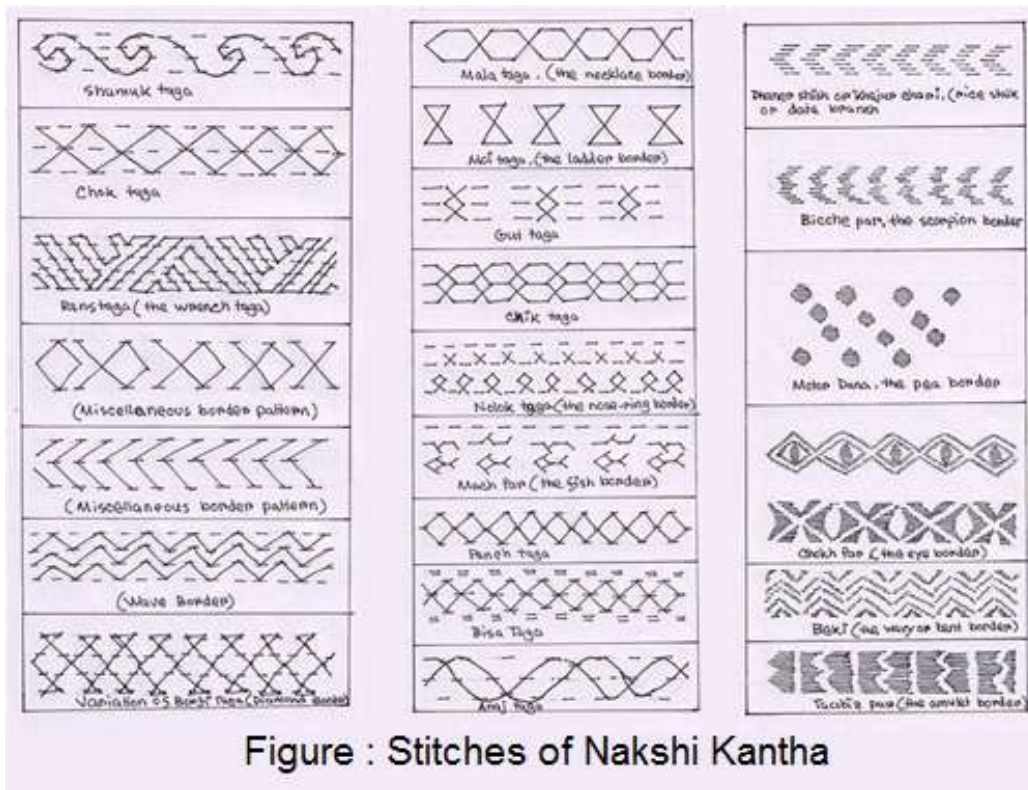


Figure : Stitches of Nakshi Kantha

Category of Nakshi Kanthas

Nakshi Kanthas found in various forms in Bengal. Kanthas are categorized, according to the stitch type. Primarily these have been found as bed pallets and as light wraps in different varieties.

- (1) Running stitch kantha: It is truly the indigenous kantha. They are subdivided into Nakshi (figured) and Par Tola (patterned). Nakshi (figured) kanthas are further divided into motif or scenic kanthas.
- (2) Lohori kantha: Lohori kantha name was derived from Persian word 'Lehr' which means wave. This type of kantha is particularly popular in Rajshahi. These kanthas are further divided into Soja (straight or simple), Kautar Khupi (pigeon coop or triangle), Borfi or diamond (Charchala, Atchala or Barachala).
- (3) Anarasi kantha: The Lik or Anarasi (pineapple) type of Kantha is found in the Chapainawabgonj and Jessore areas. The variations are Lik Tan, Lik Tile, Lik Jhumka, and Lik Lohori.

- (4) Cross stitch or carpet kantha: Cross stitch or carpet type of kantha was introduced by the British people during the colonial period in India. The stitch employed in these Kanthas is the cross stitch.
- (5) Sujni Kantha: These types of kantha are found only in Rajshahi area. The popular motif used is the undulating floral and vine motif





Categories of Nakshi kantha & its stitch

Overall Design of the Kantha

In the four corners of the Kantha, or in the four corners of the central square, tree-of-life motifs or Kalka are embroidered pointing towards the central lotus motif. The empty spaces between the central and corner motifs are filled with motifs drawn from nature and the homestead or with scenes from real life or legends.

Apart from floral motifs, recurrent motifs are the curvilinear swastika, kitchen utensils, ornaments, elephants, tigers, horses, peacocks, boats, palanquins, and the Rath, the chariot of Jagannath. Scenes from Hindu mythology juxtapose secular scenes of dancing, hunting, and boating. The areas left without motifs or scenes are quilted with the rippling Kantha stitch. Other types of Kanthas include the Pad Tola Kantha, which is embroidered entirely with sari border patterns, and the Lohori or Lohira Kantha, in which thick yarn is used for close pattern darning. In the most intricate of Pad Tola Kanthas, there is no space between the concentric border patterns so that the entire Kantha seems a piece of woven cloth.

While most Kanthas are the work of illiterate women, many contain proverbs, blessings, and even captions of motifs and scenes in Bangla lettering. Thus, in one Kantha, the Kantha maker blesses her son-in-law: Sukhe thako (Be happy). Some Kanthas are autographed, either with the names of the women who made them or indicating the relationship the Kantha maker bore to the person for whom the Kantha was intended. A few Kanthas are inscribed with the names of the persons for whom they were made. A Kantha in the

Gurusaday Museum, Thakurpukur, West Bengal, for example, notes that it was made by Manadasundari for her father with her own hands. Another Faridpur Kantha, which contains scenes of the Krishna legend, has the caption Bastraharan (the garment theft) under a scene of nude women sitting on a tree.

Nakshi Kantha in Muslim and Hindu Culture

Both the Muslim and Hindu women of rural area are skilful to make kantha. Traditionally these Nakshi kanthas are made during their leisure time, particularly during the rainy days and completed before winter. In Muslim culture there are few Kantha like Dastarkhan (a spread laid out on the floor for placing food items and plates for dining purposes), Gilaf (an envelope-shaped kantha to cover the Quran) and Jainamaz (prayer rug). Muslim women's especially concentrate on geometric and floral motifs, the crescent, star, domes, minarets, Arabic alphabet, verses of the Holy Quran etc. Pregnant mothers or their elderly relatives spend leisure time in making Nakshi Kantha for the new born baby, with a believe that wrapping the new born baby in Nakshi Kantha with symbols of good fortune for the family and protect the baby from diseases.

During the post 12th century came under the influence of Vaisnavism and Sufis making rapid changes in all folk-art expressions. It was through the teaching of sufis that islam found entrance to Hindu hearts. They learned to respect each other's faith and life. The motif of the Nakshi Kantha show Hindu festivals, folk festivals, marriage ceremonies, the lotus, lord Buddha's footprint,

fishes, snakes, boats, horses, carts flowers, elephants, umbrella, Rathajatra (Procession of Chariots), Jhulanjatra (Swing festival of Krisna and Radha), Swastika (Symbolizing the early indus valeey civilization), trees, wheels, etc.

Nakshi Kantha: Type & Size Matters

Nakshi Kantha also used in different purpose in other formats. Small size means delicate and stylish design particularly for well-off people. Different size and forms of Nakshi Kantha and its uses are stated below:

Large Size & its Uses	Small Size & its Uses
Lep kanthas: Uses as winter quilts. Mainly uses all over Bangladesh	Swaddling Clothes for Babies: Small kanthas mainly for infants
Sujni kanthas (spreads and coverlets): Quilt found in Rajshahi area made of popular floral and vine motif.	Asan: Uses as a spread for sitting. Jaynamaz: Uses as mattress for prayers of Muslim.
Dastarkhan: a spread laid out on the floor for placing food items and plates for dining purposes.	Bastani or Gatri: A wrapper for clothes and other valuables.
Gilaf: an envelope-shaped kantha to cover the holy Quran.	Arshilata: a wrap for mirrors or toilet articles.

Usages of Nakshi Kantha: Kantha has been part of lives of people from birth to death in the light of culture. Kantha was made for a new born baby to wrap him in rags to ward off any evil eye. At the beginning, the sole purpose of the Nakshi Kantha was to be used only as a quilts. However, later the stitch became so popular that it was incorporated into many things including every day wear such as the sari, kurtis, even table cloths and decorative wall hangings. Kantha’s were exported to abroad and used as gowns, wall hangings, bed covers etc. Depending on the size and purpose, kanthas may be divided into various articles, each with its specific names. The various types of kantha and its uses as quilt, wallet, cover for holy Quran, Prayers mats, floor spreads, cloth wrappers, pillow cover, handkerchief etc.

At Hindu or Muslim home in rural Bangladesh or West Bengal, Kantha is still the most honorable and valued gift that is exchanged at marriage, birth or death.

Modern Products inspired by Naksha Kantha

Nakshi Kantha are now using as bedspreads, wall hangings, and pillow shams made by artists in rural Bangladesh. Nakshi Kantha is a folk art that has been passed down through generations of Bangladeshi families. Once upon a time it was just used as Kantha a lot of Products made inspired by Nakshi Kantha. However in recent days Bed cover, Cushion cover, Vanity bag, Coin Box, Wall Mat, Baby Shoes, Table mat, Floor mat, Pencil case are made from it, as well as Kantha stitches are used dress like Sharee, Fotua, Panjabi , baby wear. Kantha inspired products are available in Market as well as Craft shop, boutique and fashion houses.





Few motifs and design of Nakshi Kantha

II. CONCLUSION

Nakshi Kantha is an inherent part of rich culture of Bengal and essential part of lifestyle. The Nakshi Kantha was deeply associated with Bengali lives, and it can be understood through a keen knowledge on Islamic, Hindu, Sanskrit and Bengali literature. The Nakshi Kantha did not remain in itself, its motifs and design spread out in various fashion products like Sharees, Fatua, Panjabi, Kurta, Bags, Jewelry box, shoes, pillow-covers, wall-hangings, floor-mats, table mats etc. The recent trend making it an inspiration of various fashion and house hold products that may lead to numerous successful entrepreneurs.

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