



AND interestingly, it had been like that, in some way, in our history too. Bengal had held superiority in textile goods since olden times. The legacy of our textile industry is something to be proud of. In the book *A Sketch of the Topography & Statistics of Dacca*, published in 1840, surgeon James Taylor wrote about the history of the then already declining muslin trade. "Dacca has long been celebrated for its muslins. These fabrics were known in Europe in the first century of the Christian era," he said. Muslins were "highly prized by the ladies of Imperial Rome," he added.

Given the level of fame Muslin saw, it can be argued that if the textile industry of Bengal was a cherished crown, then the gem of that crown was Muslin. But before we talk of Muslin, let's not forget its crucial backward linkage: cotton. The history of Bengal's (and particularly East Bengal's) cotton production goes back to time immemorial.

Bengal produced excellent quality raw cotton -- one of the oldest commercial crops of this land. A certain type, called 'karpass' in Sanskrit and 'kapas' in Bengali, was famed for its Dhaka variety.

The success story of kapas cultivation could not be replicated elsewhere; only certain regions, such as the banks of Meghna and Shitalakhya Rivers, provided for the perfect climate and geography. Kapasia, a sub-district in Gazipur, still holds the memory through its name.

Superb quality cotton made way for the fine and fabulous Muslin.

History is dotted with examples and anecdotes of the great reputation Muslin -- and the textile industry in general -- had enjoyed. The renowned 14th century Moroccan traveller, Ibn Battuta, had praised the cotton-based products of Sonargaon. Chinese accounts of the 15th century mentions some cotton fabrics found in Bengal --

the fine and glossy Pi-po was of several colours, Man-che-ti was ginger yellow. Shawl was among the royal presents sent to the Emperor of China by the Bengal Sultan in 1438. Daurte Barbosa, a Portuguese traveller, had described the textiles in Bengal: "In it are woven many kinds of very fine and coloured clothes for their own attire and white sorts for sale in various countries."

All these refer to the fine cotton fabrics of Bengal, and probably the finest cotton fabric we know of was Muslin.

Wool Manufacturers (in 1876), Jamdani was described as "a figured muslin of Dacca, of exquisite delicacy; and, by reason of the complicated design of such fabrics, they are considered the greatest work of weaver, and are the most expensive production...".

The weaving establishments lied in Greater Dhaka; Sonargaon and the banks of River Shitalakhya can be specially named. It cannot be loomed just anywhere. Geography and climate play an important role, without which Jamdani would not have

Historically, East Bengal, which is now Bangladesh, had a world famous textile industry. Of course, our textile legacy is not all about cotton, Muslin and Jamdani. There were (and are) many other textile arts too.

Khadi is an invaluable asset, and the produce of Comilla is being regarded as invaluable. Rajshahi's silk and Tangail's saris are also favourites. Jute is known as the golden fibre of Bangladesh. And what more unique (and at the same time, functional) medium of story-telling can there be, than the naksi kantha, where women stitch their tales of mythology, nature, etc.

Be it the current RMG sector or the textile art of Muslin, Bangladesh has always shown its strength and competitiveness in the global arena when it comes to fabrics, garments, et al.

While we bear a rich and glorious history, the heritage must be protected, the legacy to be carried on -- from seeking diversified use of Jamdani (i.e. not keeping it limited to sari) to attaining patents to simply patronising the 'deshi' fabrics as a general customer by purchasing them.

Our unique land and its artistic ancestors have given a lot to us. It is our job to cherish it.

By M H Haider

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One of the many varieties of Muslin, which survives till date, is the highly esteemed Jamdani. The traditional art of Jamdani weaving has made it to UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Jamdani has always been a thing of fascination. It made its mark in many international exhibitions. Enlisted on number 318 of a catalogue of the National Association of

the charm and uniqueness it possesses.

Water is required for processing cotton, out of which Jamdani is made, and there is something in the content of Shitalakhya River that helps in bringing the supreme quality of Jamdani. People have indeed tried to manufacture elsewhere, but quality is not the same. Moreover, climatic conditions also need to be friendly: the right level of moisture is important.

PHOTO: **SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL**
MODEL: **RIBA, ZAMSAD, MASHIAT & SUNEHRA**
WARDROBE: **CHONDON**
MAKE-UP: **FARZANA SHAKIL**
STYLING: **AZRA MAHMOOD**

