

Weaving the thread of winds

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Curious and magnificently sweet names - like 'ab-i-rawan' (running water) and 'shabnam' (morning dew) - denoted the different varieties of a special cloth. Surely, this cannot fail to spark the interest of anyone. Why in the world would pieces of cloth have such fancy names?

The answer is because the cloth was muslin - unique, light and ethereal and the world was fascinated by it, royalty craved it and nobility had their portraits painted wearing it. So fine and exquisite was the cotton fabric, that it was romanticised to be spun 'by fairies with the thread of winds'.

MUSLIN: A GLOBAL BRAND

The world was in love muslin. And the love story is an age-old one. Surgeon James Taylor, in his book *A Sketch of the Topography & Statistics of Dacca* (published in 1840), said that Muslins were 'highly prized by the ladies of Imperial Rome'. Pliny (who lived in the first century AD) 'in enumerating the imports from Egypt and Arabia mentions the Bengal muslins', James Taylor wrote.

"The weaving industry of Dhaka may be traced back to the early centuries of the Christian era," said Abdul Karim in the book, *Dhaka: The Mughal Capital*, "but in the Mughal period, particularly in the 18th century the industry expanded by leaps and bounds mainly owing to the increased export of the European companies."

From the Dutch to the French to the English, they all set up companies in Dhaka; in allure of fortune, and one of their chief exports was muslin. For example, as quoted by Karim, French Company for Europe, in the year 1747, exported cotton goods worth of Rs 2,50,000. "In 1800, John Taylor, the Commercial Resident of Dhaka reported that the capacity of the manufactures of Dhaka was to produce cotton goods worth about Rs 26 lakh," Karim further mentioned.

THE THREAD FOR FAIRIES

Much of this prosperity of muslin is owed to its special cotton, from which were spun the thread of the winds. Saiful Islam, CEO of Drik, who, along with his team, has been researching about muslin, gathering information to build public awareness and working towards its revival, says that cotton is one of the four fibres with which human beings started to dress themselves, with the other three being linen, wool and silk.

"We see two vegetable sources and two animal sources," Saiful points out. "Some societies had barriers about wearing clothes that come from animal sources. Cotton is from plants, and had general acceptability. This comfortable-to-wear fabric was also adaptable: if you wove it thick you would get warmer cloth and if you wove it finely you would have a lighter one."

Cotton started to grow in multiple geographical regions of the world. "There are generally four species of cotton. *Gossypium Arboreum* is native to South Asia, particularly in the Indian subcontinent," informed Saiful.

Each species of cotton, including *Arboreum*, has hundreds of varieties. One particular variety of *Arboreum* was *Neglecta*, which is now extinct. This was the magic, the muslin cotton. In Bengali, *Neglecta* was known as 'phuti karpash'. "The main area where the phuti would grow was very small: in some selective places along the high banks of the rivers *Shitalakshya* and *Meghna*," Saiful said.

This cotton made for extremely fine threads - like cobwebs, often thinner than human hair. To appreciate how fine muslin threads were, a measurement called thread count comes

handy. Simply put, thread count is the number of threads in a fixed area of cloth (say, one square inch of fabric). So, finer thread allows the weaver to make finer cloth, if he wishes to.

What was the thread count of Muslin then, which was renowned for its fineness? "The count of normal thread is usually somewhere around thirty to seventy. When you go above 250 or so, you are weaving muslin," Saiful explained. "The story goes that the weaves of Bengal could go up to 1200!"

And muslin weavers made the cloths not just fine, but uniformly fine all throughout.

"The Mughals would not want anything below 250 count. And they also didn't want it go above 450, because you just wouldn't be able to handle it!" Saiful added.

MUSLIN TODAY

Is Jamdani a type of muslin? "The count of today's premium Jamdani could go up to around 84, and nothing above 100 is ever made," Saiful said. "Moreover, the thread used nowadays is imported." Nevertheless, Saiful assures that Jamdani is a surviving variety (the only one out of almost a hundred types), given the antiquity of patterns (Jamdani is 'flowered' muslin).

Broadly, there were 5 types of Muslin: plain, striped, chequered, dyed and flowered. There were numerous varieties of muslins; and narratives about muslin are dotted with many names.

Today, many fashion houses offer attires supposedly made of 'muslin' fabric, so they say. Here, they are referring to muslin more as a common noun indicating a fine cloth. Muslin was incredibly fine cloth; not all fine cloths are muslin. It would also be completely cotton, no silk would be used in it.

Unfortunately muslin is a lost heritage.

Water was an essential ingredient in processing cotton to make muslin, and the water of *Shitalakshya* had a unique chemical composition that contributed to this process. Over the years, the river has lost that distinct composition. The climatic and geographic condition required for Muslin is lost to a large extent.

REVIVING THE LEGEND

Is it possible somehow to revive this lost treasure? Call Saiful Islam an optimist, but after tonnes of research he believes that it is achievable. "We can definitely revive the weaving process and make it replicate the fine weave, using traditional motifs. It will be difficult but it's part of our DNA. The technique of spinning can be brought back to a vast extent, though we may need to use semi-mechanised forms of spinning as they do in India. And bringing back the cotton plant to life may take longer, perhaps a 10 year journey with some concerted effort by the government and other researchers. Since we know a lot about the necessary conditions for it to grow and its possible locations, it is likely to happen," he concludes.

Today, the weaving has been brought back by Drik, and imagine the day when news arrives that muslin's cotton has been revived! Or when muslin reappears in its full glory in the art world or the premium fashion world? How enormously will the revival add to our identity!

We look forward to that day.

By M H Haider

Photo: Drik

Special thanks to Saiful Islam, CEO, Drik for sharing valuable information for the write-up. Other major sources include *A Sketch of the Topography & Statistics of Dacca* by Surgeon James Taylor, and *Dhaka: The Mughal Capital* by Abdul Karim.



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