

Highlighting our HERITAGE

M H HAIDER



Bengal throughout the ages has been famed for creating superior fabrics and weaves. In the world map of textiles, our land had held - and arguably continues to hold - a dominant position in terms of quality and uniqueness. And therefore it is of no surprise that history is dotted with accounts and anecdotes which reflect this glorious past.

These accounts and anecdotes speak highly of Jamdani and Muslin. Our Khadi and the brilliant Rajshahi silk had enjoyed great reputation. Our canvas of art and storytelling even include quilts. Our land - with its geography, environment, and skilled people - had endowed us with textiles unparalleled in quality.

What we have today is a glorious legacy. It is therefore the responsibility of this generation (as it has been for every generation) to carry this legacy forward - towards better times, whilst keeping the heritage intact and well preserved.

the current and ongoing initiatives, too, need to be scrutinised, as some of them have the potential to bring more harm than good!

Above all, the objective is simple: taking heritage textiles forward.

Building an information bank

Chandra Shekhar Shaha, President of National Crafts Council of Bangladesh (NCCB), is a veteran researcher and an expert on textiles, motifs, crafts, and culture at large. NCCB had conducted an elaborate study on 'Preservation of the Jamdani motifs and designs'. Shaha, who was one of the team members of the project, says that when he was conducting the research, he was acutely aware of the lack of previous study done on the subject. Indeed, he did find a book which had a list of names of motifs, but there were no pictures or diagrams corresponding to the names. Nevertheless, the book came to at least of some help for his study.

This is just one case of the lack of



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Are we doing so? Yes - a positive answer we would instinctively give. Indeed, from research work to awareness campaigns, many endeavours are taking place. However, there are challenges yet to be met, looming threats to be dealt with, untapped opportunities to reap, and more awareness to be created. And perhaps most importantly,

research. 'If an extensive study was conducted fifty years ago, imagine how easy it would be for a contemporary researcher to build on the previous work and take it to the next level,' Shaha said.

To preserve, promote and carry heritage textiles forward, we must accumulate a body of knowledge - from studying the attires and fabrics in the collection of museums, antiquarians, and households to reading up historical accounts.

It is crucial to identify what we call to be 'authentic' and what we consider to be our legacy. 'If you take a so-called Jamdani sari with distorted motifs and deem it as a true reflection of heritage, it would be disastrous,' Shaha said while explaining how cautious research work should be.

A case of excellent research involves Bengal Muslin's (an initiative of Dril) efforts on reviving Muslin. The organisation has conducted and extensive study about Muslin, and continues to research, with the aim of bringing Muslin quite literally back from the dead: the cotton plant responsible for producing the fine thread is extinct, and the team is working towards identifying 'close cousins' which might be worked with. Their book, 'Muslin: Our Story', has earned raving positive reviews, reflecting the intensive study they had conducted.

'We must have a detailed and comprehensive information bank,' Shaha suggests. 'Let's create that, and then

give us ten years; the progress will be astounding.'

When designers distort

Ruby Ghuznavi, a former President of NCCB, is one of the pioneers in the revival of natural dyes. Her work heavily involves studying Bangladesh's crafts and working with designers and weavers. She believes that fashion designers have a crucial role to play in not just promoting heritage weaves, but preserving them too.

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There are some designers who impose new designs upon artisans which are not reflective of the tradition of that craft. Perhaps, they do it because

they think that the market 'demands' it. But this has deadly consequences. And the chain does not stop there. When that same weaver will be assigned to work independently again, the influence of the designer is likely to play into his creative process, and the artisan may, then, create designs which do not adhere to the original theme and concept.

In his presentation on preservation of Jamdani motifs (which was held last year at Bangladesh National Museum), Shaha had pointed out how traditional motifs are losing their identity. In one of the slides, he showed an original motif, and then showed how it could transform into something completely different. He did this by extrapolating the diagram to the future, portraying that if distortion continues, we will get designs which are in no way related to our heritage.

Back at his office for our interview, he further added, 'And even at that time the sellers will label these as

Jamdani!'

The designer should appreciate history, have reverence for the craft of the weaver, and ought not to dabble with motifs to the extent that an unwanted metamorphosis may take place.

Keeping up with changing times: Diversification is key

When we are dealing with heritage products, we are essentially dealing with crafts numerous centuries-old. Times have changed. Should we not innovate and play with new rules, then? Yes! But, we must understand when to push the brakes just as much as we need to know when to press the accelerator. We must find relevance in today's world. Otherwise, bluntly said, we will simply go out of business. Our design, production, and marketing should be geared in such a way that the basic characteristics do not suffer.