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If even a quarter of one percent of our population sought to buy Jamdani, that's almost 4.5 lakh Jamdani pieces. So, what we need is awareness—through media campaigns, a handful of fashion shows per year, donning the fabric and presenting it as gifts when travelling abroad—to preserve this legacy."

Yet he highlights other challenges. "The weaving of the weft in Jamdani requires immense mental focus. It's all mathematical; the slightest miscalculation can distort the entire make-up of the fabric. But many power looms have moved into the regions where Jamdani is weaved, and the noise pollution from these machines disrupts the Jamdani weavers' concentration when they orate their designs."

In an effort to address these issues, the NCCB plans to provide weavers with quality tools and materials, such as by setting up yarn banks, share executive members Ruby Ghuznavi and Chandra Shekhar Shaha. Through



It takes hours to thread each warp yarn through a fine, bamboo reed comb, which affects the fineness of what will eventually become the fabric.

PHOTO: SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL

dialogues with the government, they're aiming to establish pension plans for aged weavers, and set up schools both to educate weavers' children and to help reduce child labour at the looms. There are other plans to collect, document, and publish wider collections of ancient Jamdanis from around the world to nurture further research. Having recently helped Sonargaon win the title of a World Craft City as the birthplace of Jamdani, they are hopeful that the region will now attract more funding, exposure, and flurry of creative activity.

These efforts highlight the value of Jamdani as a heritage fabric for Bengal. Having researched on the fabric for decades, Ruby Ghuznavi draws the distinction, "With every other fabric, the designs were either



Contemporary Jamdani motifs at Jamdani Festival 2019.

PHOTO: BENGAL FOUNDATION

printed or embroidered on top. Jamdani was unique because the designs were woven into the fabric."

Shaha, who curated the Jamdani exhibition as part of the festival, points out other unique characteristics as we take a stroll through the display at Bengal Shilpalay in Dhanmondi.

He steps behind a white Jamdani sari hung a little distance from a white wall on the upper storey of the gallery. As sunlight wafts its way through the fabric, its designs cast a shadow of geometric patterns on the wall, mesmerising in their intricacy. "Jamdani motifs always have breathing spaces within them," he highlights.

"The other element is the 'float'," he says of the fine lines jutting out of the larger floral patterns, before pointing out small *meena butis* sprinkled over flowers and leaves, each pierced with countless tiny holes.

"Transparency of the sari's body and density of the threads making up the motifs, each ornamentation placed at a proportional distance from

each other, these components strike a beautiful balance in the Jamdani," explains Shaha.

These designs have been passed down verbally through generations of weavers, but their origins lie in reflecting the local flora and fauna where they were first weaved, as well as the architecture surrounding their first wearers. *Butis*—individual floral motifs—dot the length of the fabric. The *par*—the border—contains another different set of patterns. The *terchi* winds diagonally through the fabric and the *jaal*—a net-like design—often blankets the entire length. Among the more intricate motifs are the *bagnoli*, symbolising a tiger's paw, and the *kalka*, which came to be known as the paisley, christening a town with its name in Scotland. An image of the jasmine, apparently a favourite from the time, reappears often among the older designs.

Walking to an old Jamdani scarf on display, Shaha points out the reflection of Mughal ornamentation

and architecture in the designs—the marble throne, the archways. Other samples depict *angur lota*—grapevines—and the corinthian leaf. On the other side of the room, a plain white Jamdani with a thin red border reveals, potentially, the identity of its wearer—the plain design indicating that she was a rather aged woman, but the red border implying that she was most likely not a widow.

Over time, these ancient motifs have become simplified, losing touch with the time in which the fabric first flourished. But even today, around 2,000 Jamdani pieces get produced each week in the Narayanganj region. Around 15,000 people from 3,000 families were employed in the trade as of 2013, as per figures provided by Farida Noireet. These pieces mark Jamdani as more than just a relic of the Mughal age. In each individual thread and motif of today's Jamdanis are bottled the artistry of countless weavers and their tired, paining limbs, and ancestral memories of designs passed from father to son, uncle to nephew and now sisters and wives. The fabric symbolises a craft that weaves history—personal, national, political, cross-continental—and the present into a translucent, kaleidoscopic whole. Yet it retains its humility.

"From trying to revive the original Jamdani we realised," shares master weaver Jamal, "that we can help people rediscover what courtiers wore 200-300 years ago and bring back that craft, only if we are given some financial assistance and access to quality materials. At the end of the day, we want to help make Jamdani a world famous symbol of Bengali Muslim heritage. But we also want to afford basic sustenance."

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Historically a male profession, Jamdani weaving has started employing more and more women.

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