

REAL

# On the trail of JAMDANI



The day begins with chanting of a prayer — one that combines the spirit of both Hinduism and Islam only in the hope of creating a flawless weave that is beyond comprehension of our conventional, urban mind. That is how an average day starts at the households that still continue the legacy of producing Jamdani saris.



*"Paach khew jora hoise, teen khew barse"* — the master weaver utters the 'buli', an oral tradition that has been handed down from one master to his apprentice for centuries. And this oral instruction is all that there is in creating the mesmerising intricacies that we see in a Jamdani sari.

Omar Faruk, who has been in the trade for the last 38 years, knows nothing better than his craft. He grew up watching his father and elder brother work, and that was the foundation for Faruk in becoming a weaver.

He also observed his mother and sisters prepare the yarn, process the bobbin, make the reed, and ready the warp for as long as he could remember. Today, his wife and sisters-in-law help in holding to the traditions of the forefathers of this weaver family.

Omar Faruk takes pride in the progression of life; how he started as a 'shagred' — an apprentice. As years passed, he honed his skills and with increased dexterity eventually became 'ustad' — the master craftsman.

Faruk is aware that families like his and others around him are creating one of the

most well recognised weaves of the country; they have learned to value their creation, and recognise Jamdani as a 'heritage weave.'

It was clear that he feels a sense of pride, accountability, and a strange bond — a feeling that can best be described as magical.

"I work every day from dawn till dusk, that too on a single piece of Jamdani, dedicating all my energy to create a masterpiece that reflects my sweat and devotion. Of course, I know this is unique! Otherwise what is the benefit of all this labour?" said Omar Faruk with conviction.

## BHARGAON, SONARGAON UPAZILA, 2019

The mesmerising beauty of Bhargaon, a picturesque village in Sonargaon, is obvious to the naked eye. Everywhere you turn around, there's the unblemished beauty of nature; the fresh-water ponds; canals making way to the Shitalakkhya River.



Children run around flying hand-made kites, bright against the glaring sun. With a backdrop of stunning beels, dinghies, and the rhythmic sound of the foot pedals — it almost seems like time had stood still at the quaint village to pay homage to the 'exclusive weave' taking place.

## THE BUSINESS OF THE WEAVE

Omar Faruk shifts a little, as if back to the natural world. He squints a bit, noticing us still hovering around expecting a scoop from him. He flinched, "This process will go on for a very long time. You will have to wait months before you get to see it completed, madam," he said.

We realised at that very moment that it was time to meet the next artisan weaver. We left, bidding adieu to Faruk and his trusted apprentice Noyon Miah, marvelling at the

beauty of slow fashion, its intricacies, and uniqueness.

A minute later, the 'Mohajon' (trader) Mohammad Abu Salam stepped in the workshop with a warm smile, and we were quick to thank the lucky stars as he opened up and shared the financial aspects of this craft.

"The process of creating a Jamdani is very complex, it might seem like the artisans are doing the same the emotions are

thing for an eternity, but slightly different for us. When an 'ustad' gets working on a new Jamdani, he cannot think about anything else.

He wakes up early in the morning with the designs going through his head; he begins his day by getting into a meditative state and at the end of the day, when he cannot work anymore, he gets up with throbbing fingers and a fatigued body. Yet, the course of the design stays inside his head.

The entire day, he takes only few breaks, and that too only for essentials. The bond that he has with his 'shagred', is of paramount importance. They have

to understand each other very well, otherwise the magic would not materialise.

Abu Salam took us to another tin shed, where few other craftsmen are sitting on a simple dug out pit — 'the ustad' on the right and 'shagred' on the left, weaving beautiful Jamdanis in shades of lilac, indigo and in brilliant shades of orchid.

"These yarns are exclusive, around 150-200 count," said Abu Salam. "We are working for a renowned fashion house and their patronage is what keeps us motivated," he added.

We inquired about the wage structure and Abu Salam replied on a positive note — "For these exclusive pieces we are getting around Tk 400 a day, which is somewhat good for the moment, but it would have been better if we earned at least Tk 600 to Tk 700 every day for the 'ustad' and an average of Tk 400 to Tk 500 for the shagred."

The wage, the weaver confirmed, was sufficient for their livelihood.

"We live in our own village, our own house and don't have to commute anywhere for this profession. This bit of money will assure our children's future and that's all we want," Abu Salam reassured.

This revelation was certainly an eye-opener for us. The marvel that is Jamdani is produced by artisans who want nothing but a slight patronage of their craft, and slight increase in their wages, for their immense dedication, and inexplicable hard work.

## THE BATTLE AGAINST POWER LOOMS

Abu Salam, who was once a master weaver is now also a 'Mohajon', major trader, and cleared for us the apparent clash between handloom and power loom.

"A single piece of sari, no matter how plain the motifs, takes at least a week to more than six months to generate. So, when people insert the same motifs on powered loom taants, sell at one-tenth of our price, terming their product as the real textile, our trade gets hurt," informed the master weaver.

However, Abu Salam did not paint a completely grim picture. "Thanks to stalwarts like Ruby Ghuznavi apa and the Bangladesh Jatiya Karushilpa Parishad, National Crafts Council of Bangladesh (NCCB), people are acknowledging the value of the real Jamdani. They realise the difference between an heirloom piece, and a cheap copy. Thanks to all the talk about reviving Jamdani, purists now want to collect original pieces worked-on a traditional pit loom by expert craftsmen," conveyed Abu Salam.

## MODERN TECHNOLOGY VS THE ANCIENT SET-UP

Back at the metropolis, we discussed the dilemma between modern technology and heritage weaves with experts on Jamdani at a public seminar arranged by the NCCB and the Bengal Foundation.

Prof Ashoke Chatterjee, honorary adviser, Crafts Council India, clarified the situation, "We do not want modern technology, or the likes of power loom to ruin the authenticity of a handloom Jamdani weave.

Modern technology can play a major part in the prosperity of the trade, by administering a better work condition, so that the back-breaking task becomes slightly easier and most important of all by providing a link to sophisticated markets at the tip of their index finger via the Internet," explained the Jamdani expert.

## THE DEBATE OF CULTURAL MISAPPROPRIATION

Nawshin Khair, managing director, Aranya shared her insights.

"For Jamdani to regain its past glory, it must be introduced to the international market, but we must also take into account that a brand house would want to use Jamdani at many different levels, like using it as upholstery, pillow covers, lamp shades, and that maybe termed as cultural misappropriation.

The debate still remains, whether we should only use the Jamdani weave on saris and dresses or on everything else," professed the expert designer.

Luva Nahid Chowdhury, director general, Bengal Foundation elaborated further. "Access to the international markets is a must for the heritage weave to survive in the long run. An authentic handloom weave like Jamdani is often out of reach of the middle class, because of the expensive nature of the weave.

"Only collectors can truly patronise and purchase the item. Therefore, sticking to the Bangladeshi supporters will not help in making the trade sustainable for the future — so we definitely need to open it to a broader audience for their appreciation of the craft and its end-products," Chowdhury said.

## THE FUTURE

"As long as people wear the sari, the demand for the heritage weave will remain," affirmed Ashoke Chatterjee.

Abu Salam from Bhargaon spoke in a similar tone. "Madam, if you know the history of the Jamdani you'd definitely want a piece, it's the same as owning a diamond, gold jewellery, or anything that is extremely valuable."

So, the future is for us to determine — whether we want to take pride in the heritage weave that defines the resilience, hard work, and craftsmanship of our countrymen, or let it fade away in the course of time.

For whatever the decision we make — the craftspeople will continue to produce magical weaves till we completely run them out of business.

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*Reference: Jamdani Seminar, Organised by NCCB & Bengal Foundation, 2019*  
*Visit to Bhargaon, Sonargaon – Organised by NCCB & Bengal Foundation, 2019*