



# Jamdani treasure hunt ACROSS THREE CONTINENTS

Picture provided by Aarong



Jamdani is a national treasure in Bangladesh.

Women of all ages wear it with pride, and people from across the world come to Bangladesh to see it being woven and purchase a Dhakai sari of their own. A wedding ceremony is not complete without a Jamdani, and the streets on any public holiday are adorned with women wearing Jamdani in all colours and designs.

But all of this might not have happened if, one day in 1970, a young man had not made some enquiries and decided to dig into an art form going extinct, and start on a treasure hunt as rich as the fabric itself...

The earliest mention of the origin of Jamdani, and its development as an industry can be found in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (Book of Economics, published around 300 AD). Jamdani is also mentioned in the book of the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, and in the accounts of Arab, Chinese, and Italian travellers. Alexander the Great, in 327 BC, mentioned "beautiful printed cottons," and in the 14th century, Ibn Batuta praised the quality of cotton textiles of Sonargaon.

The golden age for Muslin and Jamdani was during Mughal rule, when Jamdani, produced by weavers in Dhaka, was exported to all corners of the world. Legend has it that the monarchs of Europe were not considered monarchs without Dhaka Muslin in their wardrobe.

Yet, for all its glory, Jamdani exports started to shrink in the early 19th century, and stopped entirely in the mid-19th century. Cheaper yarn from Europe was available, and Mughal power was in decline. Jamdani designs and motifs, venerated throughout the world, were now found in museums around the world, but almost extinct in their birthplace.

In 1978, shortly after Aarong was established, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed and his team carried out a survey and found approximately 700 families in areas around Demra who had been involved in the production of Jamdani. They were mostly discontinuing production and many were switching professions, ready to leave the artform forever.

Sir Abed went on a treasure hunt to revive the fading Jamdani.

He set off on the trail of Jamdani, across India, America, and Europe, photographing hundreds of Jamdani motifs and woven pieces on display in museums from Ahmedabad to Chicago. Upon returning, a team of artists recreated the designs on paper, and master craftspeople created 300 new Jamdani saris. A catalogue was made of the motifs and designs,

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