



JAMDANI

A fabric of then and now

SARAH ANJUM BARI

Along the banks of the Sitalakhya river in Narayanganj, some 20 villages in Sonargaon, Rupganj, and Siddhirganj in particular, women villagers starch yarn in lime and toasted rice to make warp yarn—the vertical, lengthwise weaves that make up a fabric. The weft yarn—the horizontal snake-like components of a weave—is likewise starched in cooked rice, dried, and wound around a spindle. The yarn that will make up the motif is left unstarched, three strands of which are spun on the spindle.

The starched warp dries and spins on a cylindrical bamboo frame. It finds itself on a metal grid, grouped into individual rolls, and is threaded through blind-like wooden frames. Then it goes on a walk, as two women attach the yarn to bamboo sticks stationed at intervals on the ground. It takes them hours to thread each warp yarn through a fine, bamboo reed comb, which affects the fineness of what will eventually become the fabric. Placed side-by-side to be pulled by a lever (a wooden pole) and formed into a sheet, the yarns are then threaded through wooden shafts (heddles). In time, the wefts will snake their way through the spaces left behind by these heddles across the warp. Finally, wrapped around that wooden pole, the warp finds

itself on the weaver's pit loom.

Thus begins the journey of the Jamdani—one of ancient Bengal's finest cotton muslins, a remnant of the region's Mughal rule. "The indigenous weavers of India and weavers brought in from Persia—created a new fabric called Jamdani," explains Ruby Ghuznavi, executive member of the National Crafts Council of Bangladesh (NCCB), and a member of the research, documentation, production, and exhibition committee of the recently held Jamdani Festival 2019, jointly organised by the NCCB and the Bengal Foundation.

The weavers were brought in by Muhammad bin Tughluq, the Sultan of Delhi in the 14th century, writer and editor Farida Noireet writes in her paper "Sonargaon, the birthplace of Jamdani". The temperature and humidity of the climate, the soil ecology, and the minerals contained in the Sitalakhya's waters made Sonargaon uniquely suited for the production of cotton, particularly Jamdani. By the 16th century, the patronage of the Mughal emperors had cultivated the art into a thriving fashion trend for both men and women in the Mughal Empire. Positioned as it was at the junction between Bengal and the Far and the Middle East, and the rivers of Sitalakhya,

Meghna, and Brahmaputra, Sonargaon (then capital of Mughal Bengal) flourished as a hub of commercial activity until the 17th century; and so Jamdani travelled and became popular also among the courtiers across Britain and Europe.

The trade's decline began from the 18th century, writes human rights activist Dr Hameeda Hossain, author of *Company Weavers of Bengal: Textile Production for the East India Company 1750-1813* and *Working Conditions of the Company Weavers in Dhaka Arangs*. Dr Hossain explains how the East India Company began exercising more and more control over textile production in the region as it grew into a monopsony, particularly from 1753, pushed by increasing competition from other European companies and private merchants. They exerted operational control—*gumashtas* (agents employed by the buyers) replaced *dalals* to monitor production; financial control—higher advances indebted weavers to the Company; and legal and bureaucratic control—regulations for weavers curbed their interaction with other weavers. The artisans, as a result, grew increasingly discouraged from taking orders for the fabric.

Meanwhile, floods and famine in 1770

SPOTLIGHT

destroyed the region's ability to produce cotton as more and more land turned to producing rice. Around the same time, England cut down on its imports and began exporting more of its industrially manufactured goods to colonies. Yet the Jamdani trade survived through private merchants as the East India Company closed its Dhaka factory after being subsumed by the Crown in 1833. Jamdani saris became a favourite among middle and upper-class Bengali women, and became also a symbol of protest, as a hand-spun fabric, following Mahatma Gandhi's rejection of industrially manufactured fabric in his Satyagraha movement. The wars of Bengal brought forth a fresh wave of threats to the trade—the Partition of 1947 saw a loss of rich Hindu clients when they left West Bengal, and both the Partition and the Liberation War of 1971 destroyed raw materials and weavers' homes and looms.

Back on the loom—a primitive apparatus fashioned out of wood and

across the warp, carrying with it the weft. The whole time, the master weaver will control a foot pedal to move the double reeds on the loom up and down as needed. They repeat the act on each row, sprinkling and rubbing starch on every nine inches of the yarn, until a finished fabric emerges.

It was here that Md Jamal Hossain, a master weaver from Sonargaon, began learning the process from his uncle 23 years ago at the age of 14. It was either this or studying in a classroom, which he hated. He sat at the loom from 6 am in the morning to 10pm at night. The joints in his fingers, arms, knees, and feet throbbled. For the first few years there was no electricity, and so working in the dark with a lantern hurt his eyes. "As the *shagrid* (apprentice) I had to be the first one to set up at work. I'd wake up at dawn, take a quick plunge in the *khaal* for a bath, and come to the workstation with soap suds still clinging to my hair," he recalls.

Today, Jamal Hossain is the proprietor of the Phakhi Jamdani weaving factory in Sonargaon, where he works with 50 other weavers on 25 looms. They used to weave around 25 saris per week, with a thread count of 200 to 300. The fabric was coarse, the designs less intricate. Yet the work still requires him, and other weavers in his area, to work from early morning until late into the night. "I hardly have any idea how my family are doing back at home," Hossain confesses, although more and more women are now becoming weavers of the fabric.

Working with the Jamdani festival



PHOTO: BENGAL FOUNDATION

The quality of Jamdani is determined by the fineness of its thread.

samples for weeks and threw each away. 20, 25 weavers rejected one particularly difficult design called the 'Mehraab' once presented to a Mughal princess. They said it couldn't be Jamdani, it was so difficult to make. We worked at the loom, got up and walked away in frustration, came back to try again until we succeeded." The finesse achieved from the practice now

parents, my wife and children. At the end of the month, I don't even have enough money left to repair the broken *chowki* on which I sleep at home," shares Hossain.

This begs the question: How many people can afford saris at such prices? How can the artform and its artists be sustained?

Textile and crafts design giant Chandra



Jamdani is distributed across South Asia, Europe, Middle East and North America in addition to local markets.

PHOTO: SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL

bamboo—two weavers sit and work in tandem, the master weaver on the right, on the left, the apprentice awaiting his instructions, his *buli*. Together, they place eight to 18 inches of yarn into the warp to create a motif. This motif yarn will be thicker than the warp and weft in order to stand out.

With each row of the weave completed, a metal spindle will travel

required around 50 of such weavers to attempt to replicate the original Mughal fabrics. They managed to reach 2,400 thread counts over the past two years—a near-miraculous task for craftsmen who had never seen the products before. Each inch weaved took them almost eight hours to complete; it was excruciating for the limbs and the eyes. Hossain recalls, "We weaved

allows them to charge much higher prices for their products.

Weaving these saris, however, takes them six to eight months. But the weavers need to get paid on a weekly basis. "A fine Jamdani sari costs around Tk 100,000 today. If I pay each of my weavers Tk 2,000 per month, I have to pay Tk 50,000 in wages. Then I have travel expenses, expenditures for my

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.

Shekhar Shaha explains: "Suppose these saris cost between Tk 10,000 to 150,000, and another separate range costs up to Tk 1,000,000. This automatically creates a classification of patrons at each range. Even the Tk 10,000-25,000 range can secure years' worth of earnings for a weaver if each client has just one Jamdani in their wardrobe.

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