

COVER STORY

# WOVEN IN HISTORY

Saiful Islam, MD of Majority World and Bengal Muslin, is the creator of 'Legend of the Loom', a film that illustrates the rich history of the legendary muslin cloth. In this interview with Rafi Hossain, he talks about the history of muslin, what he and his team of researchers and craftsmen have done to revive it, and what we can do to preserve it.

**Rafi Hossain:** Welcome to Uncensored with Rafi Hossain. Today, we are here with Saiful Islam, MD of Majority World and Bengal. Thank you so much for being here today.

**Saiful Islam:** Thank you for having me here. **Rafi Hossain:** We have heard how the muslin of the past was so soft that it could fit inside a ring. However, the new fabrics is not as soft. Can you give a brief history of muslin?

**Saiful Islam:** If we look at muslin, we might think it is an ordinary fabric because it is white, light and thin fabric. So, why was it so famed? To understand that we have to realise that when it was discovered, cotton clothes were very heavy and thick. Muslin was made from a very specific cotton plant cultivated on the bank of Meghna River, called Phuti Karpas. Muslin was so famed, that it travelled from the borders of China to Indonesia, and through India to the Far East. From the 10th century to the 18th century, such a fabric was unique. Unfortunately, there aren't many samples left in Bangladesh, compared to the museums of many foreign countries. With the absence of the Phuti Karpas plant, people are mixing different materials to achieve the softness, but all this is doing is making a bad name for muslin. When I visited China, I found 128 variants of 'muslin'. Even in other countries, including Bangladesh, many mixed fabrics are being sold as muslin, but when we touch those, you can tell the difference.

**Rafi Hossain:** You have had an illustrious career. Can you tell us how you developed an interest towards muslin?

**Saiful Islam:** I worked for around thirty-five years in different companies, and have been abroad for eighteen years, but when I retired, for a while, I was associated with DrikPicture Library in Bangladesh. In 2013, an East London-based cultural organisation approached me for my help in taking an exhibition they made about muslin to Bangladesh. I felt that they needed more information about the fabric for that exhibition. Then I started this project with Drik, Bengal Muslin in early 2014. I talked to many researchers and craftsmen, and realised that there hasn't been much research done on this famed piece of fabric. This isn't just a fabric for us, it is our culture and history, and the knowledge about it is at the risk of becoming obsolete. If people don't think of muslin as a tangible idea, they might not even believe such a thing existed. So, we worked with weavers in an attempt to revive the famed muslin. As a country, we truly failed to keep the history alive of muslin. We tried to establish muslin's historical and cultural significance, along with its part in the colonial rule. That's why we tried to propagate its history with support from Aarong, BNM and the Ministry of Culture in the form of an exhibition, a book, a children's comic, fashion design, and even a film, Legend of the loom.

**Rafi Hossain:** How successful, do you think, were you in fulfilling what you intended by your methods mentioned above?

**Saiful Islam:** Our initial goal was to educate the people on the history of muslin accurately, but we then had another goal: to bring back its production, not in the sense of commer-



cially producing it, but at least, bringing it to a place where we can say that it exists and it's here. I think we were quite successful in achieving the first goal.

We tried searching for Phuti Karpas from Barisal to Mymensingh, and even Assam. I went to Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in London and Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Indian Botanic Garden in Kolkata to look at samples of the plant. We found a plant that we regarded as the closest possible plant to Phuti Karpas. We arranged a DNA testing for the samples in London, and matched it with the plants we found to get a 70% match. Weavers weave clothes in counts of threads. Muslin starts from 250 counts and goes up to a thousand. We arranged a Muslin Festival where we introduced the new muslin with 300 counts. There was a lot of trial and error involved. Our first saree took seven months to make. All in all, I think that we managed to do a lot with the financial constraint that we had. We are still working on taking the weaving and the production of the cotton to a higher level of count and complexity of design. This has been our journey for the past five or so years.

**Rafi Hossain:** Did you sell the clothes that were made of the new muslin?

**Saiful Islam:** Our first motive was to make it for the exhibition, for research, and to bring back the confidence of the weavers to weave higher counts. There are many factors making the weavers unwilling to weave higher counts than what they are used to. We tried our best to facilitate their needs by acquiring the appropriate materials and technology required. Some of the materials required for making muslin were not available anywhere in the country, but we did our best to work with what we have and make new materials when possible. I think that my engineering knowledge helped a lot in this. We made the sarees to show people a part of Bangladesh that was at risk of extinction, and to encourage other weavers to employ more counts of thread when weaving their fabrics. I think that we were able to do that. In the Jamdani Festival, there were all sarees of 200 count, which shows a major improvement. After making muslin with 300 counts, we went on to make it with 400 counts. That saree was exhibited in a museum in Manchester for a year. Now our goal is to reach 500 counts. If we are able to

do that, I would think that we have achieved our goal. When I talk about 500 counts, I don't mean 500 counts of plain fabric, which is relatively easy and is done at some extent in India. I'm talking about fabric with intricate designs which is only taking place in Bangladesh.

**Rafi Hossain:** To further propagate the sales of muslin items, I think that establishing a brand is necessary. Can you share your thoughts on that?

**Saiful Islam:** I think that it is very necessary to establish a branding for muslin products. There are many products in the market now, making it difficult to distinguish between what's real and what's not. If we look back at our history, muslin was, perhaps, the biggest brand in the world. In undivided India, muslin was known as mul-mul. Marco Polo coined the term muslin in the 15th century, but people from Europe and Asia knew about muslin. We have to realise what a powerful brand it was based on how it spread in a world without mass communication. Our work in developing a brand for this would be to let it be known that muslin is from Bangladesh. The way to do is by research and using the information we find from that to be integrated in our brand image. It is true that muslin has never been a fabric for the poor because the time, effort and skills required to make muslin made it quite expensive. But, I see people wearing very expensive clothes in different events and ceremonies, so it is possible to purchase a muslin saree at equivalent price.

**Rafi Hossain:** If somebody would want to acquire your book on muslin or the children's comic, how would they go about that?

**Saiful Islam:** We're selling the book for around three thousand to three thousand and five hundred taka. As for the comic, we even sold it sometimes for ten taka because it wasn't about profits. I see many children reading English comics, but our history of muslin is just as interesting, if not more. It is available in both English and Bangla, and can be bought from Drik Gallery, as well as twelve other stores in Dhaka and Chittagong, like Aarong for example. However, almost all copies are sold-out as of now. We were in the talks of reprinting, but the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and production was put to a halt. However, we have arranged for reprinting now, and I hope that the new copies will be available within a few months. As for the film, I'm not too enthusiastic on uploading

it to YouTube. The film is forty-two minutes long, and is available in both English and Bangla. It has been showed in many festivals, cultural events, discussions, and even on Zoom because of the lockdown. This creates a scope for discussion because there may be latent questions even after watching the film. I want to show the film in such a way that there is space for discussion. I'm also very glad that the government has issued a GIs for muslin. GIs is a geographical indicator that is issued by the World Trade Organisation to countries that want to claim a products as their own. However, when issuing a GIs, the government needs to have accurate information on why the product requires such. Our journey began at the end of 2013, and we have travelled very far with the revival. I feel that we must give credit to the weavers who worked relentlessly to make this a possibility. When we did our firsts muslin exhibition, we recruited designers from Bangladesh, India and England and gave them the fabric to design clothes from. Some designed sarees, some designed dresses, but one renowned Indian designer beautiful-

establish its brand, and now, we're at a place where we're losing it. Jamdani, a sub-category of muslin, is, perhaps, the only surviving form of muslin in Bangladesh. We showcased a 100-150 year-old jamdani saree at our exhibition. It was battered and worn-out, but it was devastatingly beautiful. If we compare it to jamdani sarees of today, the newer ones pale in comparison. I feel that our quality is deteriorating, and we must put a stop to it. To do this, we have to show the weavers that they're capable of weaving fabrics that are just as high in quality as of the past.

**Rafi Hossain:** Can you talk about your association with Novera?

**Saiful Islam:** When I was working with muslin, Novera's husband came to Bangladesh to attend an event at Dhaka Art Summit. I was asked to take an interview of him, and we got along quite well after that. He was fascinated that I was working with muslin. There was a film screening about the history of muslin at Shilpakala, and he came to watch it. He asked me to visit him if I happened to be in France. A month after that, my film was selected at a film festival in Nice, and I went to France to attend it. We met up, and that is the first time I saw Novera's house. This took place in at the end of 2017, two years after her death. We talked a lot about Novera in the few days that followed. I realised that even though we wrote a lot about Novera, some people might have misconceptions about her, and she wasn't being talked about internationally. If we don't talk to a global audience now, our culture will not be able to be dispersed further. I tried taking pictures of her art, along with a photographer later, in hopes that something would make of it. I hope that, in the near future, something will come out about Novera, so that she gains recognition worldwide. I want to showcase the talents and stories of Bangladesh to an international audience.

**Rafi Hossain:** Have you taken your amazing work to our Prime Minister?

**Saiful Islam:** When we started this project, we started in association with the government. However, we haven't been able to present our work to the Prime Minister yet, but I hope we can do it soon.

**Rafi Hossain:** Would you like to add something more to the discussion?

**Saiful Islam:** I don't have much to say because this is something that can be talked about for hours on end. We have a duty of preserving what we have been given, and make sure we do our utmost to prevent it from becoming obsolete. Japan is an example of a highly developed society, but it still holds craftsmen to the highest regard. However, if we think about jamdani weavers of our country, we can't name a single one. We need to give them the recognition that they deserve. Another challenge is, if we don't teach the younger generation about our history of muslin, they won't develop the understanding that we have a history with muslin that spans for thousands of years. We must remember that.

**Rafi Hossain:** Thank you again for being with us today and having this discussion. Good luck on all your endeavours. Stay safe, stay well.

**Saiful Islam:** I would like to thank you, the Daily Star and the readers for letting me be a part of this discussion. I hope that this has helped in further projecting the importance of our work.

Amina Hossain

PHOTO COURTESY: SAIFUL ISLAM



ly amalgamated the two, creating a modern dress with traditional muslin elements. The fusion creates something unique.

**Rafi Hossain:** How do we go about putting a price tag on an item that is a part of our heritage?

**Saiful Islam:** We have to see it in two ways: price and value. They are vastly different. Similarly, the market for muslin can't be understood by the price of the fabric. The effort, craftsmanship, history, and heritage also have to be taken into account. If I go back to what you said about branding, it takes a considerable amount of time to develop a brand. It took a hundred years for muslin to

## Pori Moni Coming this March



The Tauquir Ahmed directed film *Sphulingo*, starring Pori Moni, is set to be released in theatres on the 17th of March. The film also features Shamol Mawla, Zakia Bari Mamo and Rownaq Hasan, among several others. The cast appeared on a teaser for the film and also the video for a song from the movie, which is called *Tomar Name*. It garnered a lot of praise from audience. The film's story is based around the band culture of the youth. The film was made to commemorate the birth anniversary of Bangabandhu, and the songs on the film were directed by Pintu Ghosh.

Ridwan Intisaar Mahbub



## PUJA CHERRY AS SOHANA

Qazi Anwar Hussain's thriller series, *Masud Rana*, is coming to the silver screens. The movie for the series was announced a few years ago by JAAZ Multimedia. The work on the film was delayed a few times, but now finally it is in process. While JAAZ is producing the film, it will be directed by Saikat Nasir, and we will also get to see Puja Cherry as Sohana. The budget for the film is around three crore fifty lakh taka. The action sequences for the film will be coordinated by experts from Bangladesh, Chennai and Indonesia.

Ridwan Intisaar Mahbub

## DOYEL RIGHT NOW

Actor Dilruba Doyel gathered a lot of attention from audiences for her performance in Nasiruddin Yousuff's film *Alpha*. Last year, she also finished working on the Nurul Alam Atique movie, *Lal Moroger Jhuti*, which received government grant. Doyel plays a very important character in the movie which is currently awaiting release. Recently, Doyel was also seen on the drama made from the Hasan Azizul Huq written story, *Uttor Bashante*. Doyel received a lot of praise for the drama, which was directed by Akram Khan and produced by Mahafuza Aktar.

Ridwan Intisaar Mahbub

