



#FASHION &amp; BEAUTY

## The embellished world of DESIGNER SAFIYA SATHI

With a unique sense of style and fascination for zardozi ornamentation, Safiya Sathi is currently one of the most trusted bespoke designers in the country. From superstars scrambling for her latest gowns to brides anticipating her magician's touch in their upcoming weddings, Safiya has managed to become a household name when it comes to ravishing designs.

In an exclusive interview with The Daily Star, we learn about her humble beginnings, fight for her passion, and hopes for the future of fashion in Bangladesh.

### TDS: When and how did it all begin?

SS: As a school student, I started painting T-shirts, kameezes, and kurtis and would design block prints myself. Growing up in a small town, we did not have the same facilities as in Dhaka. However, life in Tangail taught me to value artisans and their skills. I was mesmerised by them, their work, and the fabrics — the texture, the smell, the colour.

In college, everyone said I should study fashion design because they noticed my knack for it. My journey as a designer began with a Facebook page in 2013 where products like sarees, kurtis, and kameezes focused on celebratory occasions like Eid or Pahela Baishakh were on display. I used whatever money was saved from my commute as a student and there were no significant investments involved.

Within a few days of starting the Facebook page, all my authentic designs



were getting copied! Every time a new design appeared, someone would steal the photo and offer it as their own. To stop them from copying, I started focusing on intricate designs and started studying for it on my own. It was also a way to make the work memorable as a bride always remembers her wedding dress.

Even in 2016, no one was making wide-tail gowns, but I ventured forward and created an engagement dress with heavy zardozi work for a client. Pleased with the

result, she hired me to make a lehenga for the next wedding event as well. And with that, in 2017, Safiya Sathi took off.

### TDS: What do you think are the biggest drawbacks of the industry?

SS: One of the major obstacles that designers face is the confusion of the customers about what they want. Often, they will ask us to copy something that an Indian or Pakistani designer has made. If we keep copying, who will ever see our *deshi* work? However, we have to keep the business running, so we oblige.

We need to be trusted by the same people who trust Sabyasachi but to earn that respect, we need more promotion. I

guess it will take time.

When it comes to problems, the biggest is -- copying. After I began designing wedding dresses, a thousand more popped up like mushrooms! It gets tiring to fight for our own identities and hard work. What we do, especially with zardozi, requires a lot of patience, perseverance, and time. To see cheap knockoffs of the fruits of our labour is truly hurtful and is heavily affecting the industry.

### TDS: What is your work process and what makes Safiya Sathi, the brand, different? And what does Safia Sathi, the person, hope for the future?

SS: We specialise in bespoke attires, which require pre-ordering. We start with a conversation with the client and learn all about their preferences — pattern, cutting, colour, fabric, and everything else needed. If they are ever confused, we show them some old designs for inspiration. After the final sketching is approved, we move to the factory where I am constantly present to make sure everything goes just the way my client wants it.

Safiya Sathi, as a brand, is always more focused on ornamentation; we do a lot of zardozi work, and we give most of our time and priority to that. However, we sometimes face challenges when we want to do traditional folk ornamentation, which involves human or animal motifs. Many brides do not want that because of religious reservations. It is mainly ornamentation, embellishment techniques, and the variety of patterns that set us apart.

About hopes for the future, I want existing designers to keep moving forward with proper and big teams and new designers to join and strengthen the industry.

**By Naziba Basher**  
**Photo: Courtesy**