



Soon, however, the cumbersome chemise was divided into a blouse and a petticoat; the blouse got a lot of attention, being decorated with lace, patchwork, and applique.

Jnanadanandini reversed the Parsi straight style and drew the anchal across the bosom, to loop over the left shoulder and then bring it back under the right.

The front pleats of the modern-day saree were introduced by the Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar, who was quite a fashion icon in her time. According to some historians, the idea came from Ancient Greek sculptures, where goddesses are shown in flowing and pleated skirts. This addition allowed women to stride more freely than before.



In the 1920s, chiffon and silk saree with gold jewellery became popular. Indira Devi, another Maharani of Cooch Behar, set quite a trend with white chiffon.

Sarees became fashionable and more adaptable for middle-class women of Bengal when Suchitra-Uttam movies became popular.

Suchitra Sen was undoubtedly the most glamorous actress of her time. Women copied not only her high-neck blouse and the Nivi style of draping saree, but also the way she spoke and carried herself. Apart from Suchitra, Supriya Choudhury also drew attention with her chiffon saree and sleeveless blouse with dramatic kohl eyes. She became the iconic fashionable Bengali woman.

There is much to say about the saree and its accompanying accessories, but if we talk only about the different draping styles, and the people who invented and adapted the styles, the story would remain incomplete.

Along with the fantastic progression of the saree, there is also the sad tale of the weavers of Bengal.

During the Sultanate and Mughal periods, Bengal was renowned for its textile — the most famous being the 'muslin' and 'jamdani'. But that rich culture was destroyed when the British took over. The industrial revolution of Europe introduced mass factory production and the hand-operated looms in the Indian sub-continent failed to compete. Even after its independence, Bangladesh continued to face a crisis in the textile industry.

Sometime in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a renewed interest from various quarters started to revive the weaving industry. Even though the attention was sporadic, there have been a few dedicated fashion designers and houses that have been able to take Bangladeshi handloom and materials to international platforms.

One such name is Bibi Russel, the

'Dream Weaver.' Under the label of "Bibi Productions," she brought out her line of clothing. The rural 'gamcha' gained international fame when she organised her first international fashion show in 1996. Since then, the gamcha saree has been quite trendy.

Rina Latif is another acclaimed fashion designer who has taken Bangladesh to new heights. A conceiver of high-end clotheslines, she has made a name for herself through the khadi, muslin, and jamdani. Her work has been displayed in prestigious shows in Europe, India, and Pakistan and her brand is an internationally coveted one to have emerged out of Bangladesh.

In recent years, the saree has garnered much attention in the Western world as well. Many fashion shows have introduced saree-gowns, saree-pants, T-shirt sarees, and other styles. Blouses have evolved as well with daring cuts, with various kinds of sleeves, fronts, and backs. The attire seems far from being called outdated. On the contrary, it is gaining new looks, audience, and popularity, while also being able to find more people interested in donning it.

By Sohana Manzoor

Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel

Model: Shanila Mehjabin

Wardrobe: NOBO Dhaka

Styling: Saki Kazi and Shezami Khalil

Collection: Bangladeshi Heshel, both hand-painted and digitally printed 100 count Egyptian cotton kota

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