



Trends come and go, often changing so quickly that it's hard to keep up. However, a shift in the mindset of people in the past couple of years has led to fast fashion losing its allure, making way for a more thoughtful and sustainable approach to style. In the context of Bangladesh, this opens up the possibility of traditional weaves gaining renewed attention, not just as relics of the past, but as treasures that align perfectly with the global push toward slow, ethical fashion. From the intricacy of Jamdani and Benarasi to the earthy charm of Khadi, Bangladeshi fabrics offer incomparable variation. These handwoven textiles are not only sustainable but also incredibly adaptable. However, the idea that they can be transformed into an array of modern silhouettes, from clothing to accessories and even decor items, remains somewhat unexplored.



A LEGACY

Bangladesh has long been acknowledged as the heart of artistic textile production. The Jamdani — an outstanding example of handwoven art that has been recognised by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage — is one of its crown jewels. Renowned around the world for its unmatched softness and transparency, Muslin became a weave of wonder. With elaborate patterns in silk and gold threads, the luxurious Katan and Benarasi weaves became mainstays for weddings and festivities.

Equally significant is Khadi, a fabric deeply rooted in the rural handloom tradition. Its coarse yet durable texture made it the fabric of the masses, embodying a spirit of self-reliance.

Designer Chandana Dewan, renowned for her patchwork on bold and vibrant colours, explains, "Traditionally and historically, these motifs and designs were developed for sarees because they were the most widely chosen outfits by women of the time."

Worn in various draping styles depending on the region and occasion, sarees allowed for flexibility and creativity, while showcasing the beauty of traditional weaves and motifs. The patterns on these sarees were not chosen randomly. Each had meaning: floral designs represented prosperity, geometric shapes signified balance, and intricate paisleys symbolised fertility.

The 6 to 9 yards of fabric were more a form of self-expression than just a garment. Sharmin Rahman, another noted designer, adds, "Saree became the epitome of feminine grace. Instead of small, cut-to-tailor outfits, our artisans became habituated to crafting long yards of fabric which, again, presents an opportunity to diversify and adapt."

The saree's prevalence ensured that these motifs thrived. However, as societal norms and fashion preferences began to shift, so did the use of these fabrics and patterns.

Dewan, who works closely with sustainable fashion, emphasises, "An evolution is underway, with creative and varied use of traditional motifs and weaves already. This movement needs to continue."

A CHANGING FASHION LANDSCAPE

The 20th century brought significant changes to the way Bangladeshi women dressed. The introduction of the shalwar kameez, jeans and shirts, offered a more practical alternative to the saree, especially for younger women and working professionals. This shift was further amplified by the increasing influence of Indian or Pakistani fashion into mainstream wardrobes. However, this challenge also presented an opportunity to rethink how these heritage textiles could be adapted to suit modern tastes.

Designer Tenzing Chakma believes that the shift in rethinking and redesigning traditional weaves stems from necessity and creative evolution. "To keep our heritage alive, we must adapt it to modern lifestyles," he explains. "A new design is costly — it takes time, labour, and precision. But for this shift to succeed, we must prioritise accessibility over immediate profit."

For instance, by weaving Jamdani motifs into cotton fabrics, designers can make them budget-friendly and practical. Incorporating these textiles into kameezes, short kurtis, even shirts allow them to transition seamlessly into everyday wardrobes.

"If we want these fabrics to thrive, they must be wearable and usable," he emphasises. "Luxury pieces will always exist, but for our weavers to truly sustain themselves, their craft needs a place in everyday fashion."

Sharmin Rahman, on the other hand, explains how each of our traditional fabrics can be transformed into fashion statements for any occasion — "Think of a skirt made of Khadi, or a shirt made of Katan? How would a Jamdani wedding gown look and feel? The answer is: Absolutely regal!"

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MODERN STYLES WITH TRADITIONAL FABRICS A sustainable approach

