

The Jamdani Sari: An Exquisite Female Costume of Bangladesh

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Abstract

The Jamdani sari is an exquisite female costume of Bangladesh. The distinguishing hallmark of the Jamdani sari is that its designs are neither embroidered nor printed but created directly on the loom in the process of weaving. Its exquisiteness and splendour lie in its woven designs of an infinite variety. Bengali women feel extremely delighted to buy a wide variety of Jamdani saris and are deeply proud of the heritage associated with the adornment and novelty of this fabric as an exquisite female costume. They wear more charming or elaborately designed Jamdani saris during festivities and on formal occasions. The Jamdani sari represents Bangladesh's rich textile heritage and contains significant historic value. This paper has established that the Jamdani sari has become an exquisite female costume of Bangladesh due to the technical marvel of Jamdani weaving with creativity and ingenuity.

The sari is the common dress as well as the principal costume of the Bengali women of Bangladesh. It is a long flowing piece of cloth. Part of it is wrapped around the waist and the remaining climbs and flows over the left shoulder. A typical sari is about five to seven yards long in order to wrap around the body.



Figure 1: A Jamdani Sari

The Bengali women of Bangladesh wear a variety of saris, of which the Jamdani sari (**Fig. 1**), the Tangail sari, the Banarasi sari, and the Katan sari are most outstanding. Of all the saris in use the Jamdani sari is the most popular one.

The distinguishing hallmark of the Jamdani sari (**Fig. 2a**) is that its designs are neither embroidered nor printed but created directly on the loom in the process of weaving. Jamdani weaving is a time-consuming and labour-intensive

form of fabric production by hand on a traditional loom built with wood and bamboo and with little use of metal. Jamdani weaving is based on the traditional knowledge and skills dating back to the fourth century BCE. As the Jamdani is fabulously rich in motifs, it has been spoken of as the most artistic fabric of the Bangladeshi weaver. At present the Jamdani sari is woven (**Figs. 3a and b**) in and around Dhaka. By Dhaka is meant the original Dacca district, which now consists of four districts. The region that has been renowned for Jamdani weaving is now located in Narayanganj district.



Figure 2a: Colourful Jamdani Saris on Display



Figure 2b: Jamdani Designs



Figures 3a and b: Weaving Jamdani Saris

The origin of the Jamdani is shrouded in obscurity. Megasthenes, Greek ambassador in Chandragupta's court, speaking of the costumes of the people of India, writes: "their robes are worked in gold, and ornamented with various stones, and they wear also flowered garments of the finest muslin" (Birdwood, 1988: 235). "No conventional ornament is probably more ancient than the coloured stripes and patterns we find on Indian cotton cloths," says G.C.M. Birdwood (1988: 235). Birdwood (1988: 235) also holds that the "dominant feature of those art fabrics is unquestionably designs that are commonly accepted as Persian in origin." On the testimony of Megasthenes we may conclude that the flowered garments of the finest muslin, which came to be known as the Jamdani in the Mughal period, can be traced far back to the ancient period. Since the early fourth century BCE the figured or flowered cotton fabric (originally the figured or flowered muslin and later called the Jamdani) has been in existence through vicissitudes of history. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, composed between the early fourth century BCE and the second century CE, refers to *karpasika*, a cotton fabric of Vanga (Majumdar 2006: 654-5). The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, which is supposed to have been written by an Egyptian Greek in the middle of the first century CE, includes muslins of the finest sorts among the exports of Bengal (Majumdar 2006: 655). In this work, mention is made of several kinds of muslins, which are distinguished by commercial names. "Dacca has long been celebrated for its muslins," says James Taylor (2010: 121). These fabrics were known in Europe in the first century, and according to some writers they constituted the 'serioe vestes' which were highly prized by the ladies of Imperial Rome in the days of its luxury and refinement (Taylor 2010: 121). Pliny, in enumerating the imports from Egypt and Arabia, mentions the Bengal muslins, and the author of The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea bears testimony to their extreme fineness and transparency. The word 'Carpessus' which is employed to designate the fine Bengal muslins, is obviously derived from the Sanskrit word *Kurpass* (Taylor 2010: 121).

In the accounts of India and China by two Mohomeddan travellers in the 9th century, mention is also made of the fine cotton cloths, and from the notice of certain circumstances connected with the country in which they were manufactured, it is very evident that the Dacca muslins are the fabrics that are alluded to. (Taylor 2010: 121)

During the reign of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir (1605-27 CE), if not earlier, the plain muslin, being decorated with a wide range of floral designs, came to be known as Jamdani. Long before Jahangir's reign, as Arrian and the Egyptian traders confirmed, the seat of figured or flowered muslin (Jamdani) weaving was Capassia (Kapasias) in the Dhaka region of Bangladesh, the country from where "these muslins" were exported (Taylor 2010: 121). Sonargaon became the principal seat of muslin and Jamdani weaving in the fourteenth century. Ibn Battuta (1304-1368 CE or 1369 CE), a Moroccan explorer, profusely praised the high quality of cotton fabrics produced in Sonargaon (Dani 2009: 228). Toward the end of the sixteenth century the English traveller Ralph Fitch and the great historian Abul Fazl Allami also abundantly admired the superiority of Sonargaon's cotton fabrics (Dani 2009: 228). Our knowledge of the muslin and the Jamdani becomes much clearer and more extensive after the establishment of Dhaka as the capital of the Mughal province of Bengal in 1608. Ibrahim Khan, who was the brother of Queen Nur Jahan, was the governor of Bengal from November 1617 to November 1623. The period of his governorship was marked by peace and tranquility unknown before. Sir Jadunath Sarkar writes:

For the first time since the Mughal conquest, Bengal now settled down to enjoy the blessings of the Mughal peace. Agriculture and commerce were encouraged, and the manufactures were carried to a degree of perfection they had never attained before. The delicate muslins of Dacca and the silks of Maldah constituted the chief part of the dress of the imperial court, and these industries received an impetus unknown before. (2006:299)

Throughout the Mughal period merchants came from Persia, Iraq, Turkey and Arabia to Dhaka to buy fine and delicate muslins and exquisite Jamdanis. As a result, Dhakai muslins and Jamdanis were carried across the world through commerce. According to Manrique, who came to Dhaka in 1640 CE "Most of the cloth is made of cotton and manufactured with a delicacy and propriety not met with elsewhere" (1927: 56-57).

Forbes Watson in his most valuable work entitled *Textile Manufactures and Costumes of the People of India* holds that the figured muslins, because of their complicated designs, were always considered the most expensive productions of the Dhaka looms. Watson writes:

Those manufactured for the Emperor Aurangzeb are stated to have cost £31 whilst some manufactured in 1776 reached the extravagant price of £56 per piece. The manufacture of the finer *Jamdani*s was long retained a monopoly of the Government, the weavers, as stated by Raynal, being forbidden, under pecuniary and corporal penalties, to sell to any person a piece exceeding the value of 72 livres, or about three guineas. (Quoted in Watt 1903: 283)

It admits, with no doubt that Dhaka became the greatest centre of the Jamdani. Jamdani production, after reaching its peak during the Mughal period (1608-1764) in Dhaka, began declining because of the loss of patronage resulting from the fall of the Mughal Empire and on account of the British colonial policy favouring the import of England's machine-made cloth into Bengal. Bishop Heber, who paid a visit to Dhaka in 1824, wrote:

The cotton produced in this district is mostly sent to England raw, and the manufactures of England are preferred by the people of Dacca for their cheapness. (Quoted in Dani 2009: 91)

The truth is that the Bengalis were forced to become suppliers of raw cotton and consumers of imported cloth. The English textile mills could not weave a fabric as fine as the Dhakai muslin or as exquisite as the Jamdani. While the Dhakai muslin was on the verge of collapse, the weaving of the Jamdani, beyond the reach of British mercantilism, continued, though its production was sharply on the decline. Eventually Jamdani weaving survived as the weavers, instead of producing sashes, turbans, handkerchiefs, bedcovers and pillow-covers, concentrated on weaving saris for women. As the Jamdani sari is the common dress of women in Bengal, a steady market was available to support the continuity of jamdani weaving (**Figs. 3a and b**) with the knowledge and skills of the past.

What we have discussed above suggests that the jamdani sari is a highly designed cotton fabric which owes its origin to the Dhakai muslin, the finest and most transparent cotton cloth ever woven by human hand. Actually the flowered muslin is known as the Jamdani. While the plain muslin became extinct, the Jamdani has survived because of the increasing use of this fabric as a sari by all classes of Bengali women.

Of classic beauty, the Jamdani sari effectively combines intricacy of design with muted or vibrant colours. Its exquisiteness and splendour lie in its woven designs of an infinite variety. The weavers need not use any drawing. They weave

designs smoothly out of the patterns stored in their minds. There are numerous designs which they have imitated from nature. Any design that the weavers want to replicate fuses readily into the fabric as their hands move gracefully upon the loom. They concentrate on the task of the moment, blending the knowledge of the past with their hopes for the future. As women feel extremely delighted to buy a wide variety of Jamdani saris and are deeply proud of the heritage associated with the adornment and novelty of this fabric as an exquisite female costume, the Jamdani weavers have remained in the weaving profession from generation to generation as a mode of livelihood.

The Jamdani sari is also a highly breathable cotton cloth which brings relief to its users in the hot and humid climatic condition of Bangladesh. Women wear more charming or elaborately designed Jamdani saris during festivities and on formal occasions. The jamdani sari represents Bangladesh's rich textile heritage, contains significant historic value and has been designated as a unique element of the intangible cultural heritage of the country. Keeping in view the long history of Jamdani weaving and the use of this skillfully woven fabric as the sari with a variety of patterns and designs in a wide range of colours, scholars, fashion-lovers and connoisseurs hold that this female attire is an exquisite female costume of Bangladesh and that it deserves to rank among the most decorative hand-woven attires of the world.

During the Mughal period the patterns/ motifs for Jamdani weaving were borrowed from the traditional carpets of Persia, Iraq and Turkistan. Most of the designs were of Persian origin. According to scholars, the external patterns/ motifs often became blended with the designs that the local weavers could best imagine or replicate from the natural and animal world of their habitat. Some of the Persian motifs, which survived till 1971 and beyond, are *golab buti*, *chameli buti*, *gul daudi buti*, *buti jhardar*, *toradar*, *butidar*, *tercha*, *jalar*, *phuldar*, *turanj*, *jamewar-buti*, and *panna hazar*. However, after the emergence of Bangladesh the weavers became almost completely independent of external influence. Since the 1970s the weavers have been weaving Jamdani saris in a wide variety of indigenous designs. The characteristic feature of Jamdani weaving today is a wide variety of patterns woven on its ground, expanse and border in cotton threads of different colours. Jamdani patterns are mostly of geometric, plant, and floral designs. At present the weavers think that the jamdani motifs belong exclusively to them. They have derived their motifs from the environment. Each motif has its

name. During the Mughal period the most popular Jamdani was the one which was woven on a white ground with motifs in white threads. This kind of Jamdani is preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Nowadays the ground of a Jamdani is usually grey, blackish blue, *tasar*, red, deep blue, rose-coloured, sky blue, blue, violet, green, deep green, deep violet, light violet, peacock-blue, white, yellow, light yellow, light purple, black, ash, kohl, turquoise, mustard or sweet rose-hued.

A Jamdani sari is named on the basis of the designs (**Fig. 2b**) that embellish its ground, expanse and border. Now the popular trees, flowers, fruits, creepers, foliage, herbs, vegetables, birds, and animals appear on the ground, expanse and border of the fabric in an explicit manner. That the weavers are capable of depicting these motifs in the process of weaving speaks of their profound insight and a high degree of skill. The designs meant for the ground fall into three principal categories: *buti*, *jal* and *tesri*. Within these three basic patterns the weavers insert a wide variety of designs based on trees, flowers, fruits, creepers, foliage, herbs, vegetables, birds, and animals. A Jamdani sari that has a design woven in threads of a single colour lacks brightness. An example is a Jamdani sari with *dalim naksha* (the pomegranate design). When the pomegranate design is woven in threads of three colours, it becomes more ornamental. Similarly *baghnali naksha* may be woven in threads of either a single colour or three/ four colours. Two popular designs for a Jamdani sari are *karalla* and *puilata*. These two designs are so popular that a Jamdani sari with either of these two motifs is easily identifiable. Comparably it is less time-consuming and less expensive to weave either of these two designs; therefore, the weavers prefer to produce more Jamdani saris with these motifs. They make Jamdani saris exquisitely beautiful and varied by using threads of a wide range of colours. Sometimes the weavers set the *buti* pattern or any other pattern on the blackish blue ground after weaving the border in red, green and yellow threads. The weavers often set a different tone by weaving the *sandesh phul* and *pona* designs on the ground. The weavers have named various designs or motifs in their local dialects. Here are the names of some designs or motifs that the weavers fancifully or minutely create on the ground, expanse or border: *angurlata*, *kalka*, *kach*, *karalla*, *dalim*, *hapai*, *maḍuli*, *dooring*, *batpata*, *sandesh*, *chand*, *kachulata*, *inchi*, *hazar moti*, ring, *baghnali*, *panpata*, *kajallata*, *pona*, *mayur*, *pachh*, *dokla*, *anaras*, *panphul*, and so on.

Some ateliers regularly fill orders from whole-sellers in Bangladesh. Jamdani saris are also exported to foreign countries. But most of the Jamdani saris woven weekly until Thursday go to market at Demra near Dhaka City on Friday. Both retailers and whole-sellers throng there to buy the Jamdani saris directly from the weavers, who abstain from working on Friday.

Conclusion

The Jamdani sari reflects its own charm and regal beauty, thus becoming the most favourite outfit of every Bengali woman. It has proved to be the iconic wear as well as an asset to cherish in the wardrobe. Bengali women love to buy at least one Jamdani sari annually and enhance their collection. Be it a wedding ceremony, a festival, a party or a special occasion, women consider the Jamdani sari to be the only costume that has the enigma to stand apart from any other kind of attire. The enigma lies in the very process of Jamdani weaving.

Glossary

<i>Anaras</i>	The pineapple
<i>Angurlata</i>	The vine of grape
<i>Baghnali</i>	The tiger's nail
<i>Baghnali naksha</i>	A design similar to the tiger's nail
<i>Batpata</i>	A banyan leaf
<i>Buti</i>	Flowered pattern
<i>Butidar</i>	The blossom of flowered patterns
<i>Buti jhardar</i>	The blossom of bunches of flowered patterns
<i>Chameli buti</i>	Blossomed jasmine
<i>Chand</i>	Moon
<i>Dalim</i>	The pomegranate
<i>Dalim naksha</i>	A design resembling the pomegranate
<i>Dokla</i>	Two

<i>Dooring</i>	An oil lamp
<i>Golab buti</i>	Blossomed rose
<i>Gul daudi buti</i>	Blossomed chrysanthemum
<i>Hazar moti</i>	Thousand pearls
<i>Hapai</i>	A zigzag design
<i>Jal</i>	Network
<i>Jalar</i>	An ornamental fringe
<i>Jamewar-but</i>	Exquisite floral designs characteristic of the Kashmiri <i>jamewar</i>
<i>Kach</i>	A transparent design similar to a vessel of glass
<i>Kajallata</i>	Vine as black as kohl
<i>Kachulata</i>	Vine of the esculent root
<i>Kalka</i>	Cone-shaped design
<i>Karalla</i>	A kind of vegetable
<i>Maḍuli</i>	An amulet
<i>Mayur</i>	The peacock
<i>Pachh</i>	Back part
<i>Panpata</i>	Betel-leaf
<i>Panphul</i>	An aquatic flower
<i>Panna hazar</i>	Emeralds in thousands
<i>Phuldar</i>	Full of flowers
<i>Pona</i>	A fish of the species of rui
<i>Puilata</i>	A creeper used as pot-herb
<i>Sandesh</i>	Delicious sweetmeat made of posset
<i>Sandesh phul</i>	A flower akin to <i>sandesh</i>

<i>Tasar</i>	Fawn-coloured
<i>Tercha</i>	An oblique or crooked line
<i>Tesri</i>	Having three strands or folds
<i>Toradar</i>	The string in a bunch
<i>Turani</i>	Anything of Tehran

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