

4 SPECTRUM

**Were the Mughals the main patrons of muslin?**

● The demand was more during the reign of the Mughals. However, the Nawabs of Murshidabad and Dhaka were instrumental in patronising it. Muslin was worn by kings and queens and traded from Rome to Indonesia. It was crudely annihilated by the British colonialists in the mid-19th Century to support their machine-made clothes. History tells us that the British cut off the thumbs of weavers.

Revisiting lost heritage

(Clockwise from left) A muslin sari, a copy of *Muslin. Our Story*, Saiful Islam and a weaver on loom

■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

thought it was made there. However, it was always made in Bengal as *phuti karpas*, a special cotton plant, grew along the banks of the Meghna and Shitalakshya rivers. We hope its silken threads and traditional weaving process will return; I am hopeful that my work on this painstaking process will soon bring good results.

How do you seek to preserve it for the next generation?

● I showed the film to weavers in my homeland. While the rest faltered, only Al Amin succeeded in producing muslin in its pure form. I am only interested in preserving the classics; then, we want to see how the market accepts it. Personally, I have revived 15 to 20 Jamdani saris. People don't know the connection. In India, there are other forms of Jamdani, but they are diluted.

Where do muslin makers work?

● Muslin makers are at Narayanaganj and Roopganj. They mainly work around the coarse, thick version. Muslin was used during the Second World War as bandages, during photo lighting. Some people used them as undergarments for themselves and for babies.

How is it that jamdani survived but muslin didn't?

● Jamdani survived in the coarse form; it is not in its original refined version. Some weavers took the counts from 400 to 1,000. The maximum count that we have heard of is 1,200. But the maximum I have seen is 650. Jamdani is a form of muslin; in fact it is the main form. When we weave it with flowered or figured motifs, it becomes Jamdani. Muslin is also in plain, striped and chequered versions. Muslin thread was soft and delicate and spun in a humid environment, from dawn to dusk on river banks.

Which designers have worked with the fabric?

● Aneeth Arora of Pero, has done excellent work. We gave her muslin and it was used in the show we featured in our film. In Bangladesh, we have Bibi Russell and there are other designers who draw inspiration from their own culture and traditions.

Do weavers in Bangladesh work with real zari or have they substituted it with copper?

● Most cases are substitutes because they cannot get hold of pure zari. There is a demand for cheap variations as people want cost-effective polyester or rayon. I have stayed away from zari, because it did not have wide usage, but I will use it in its pure silver form later on (in the revival effort).

Muslin man

Saiful Islam, a textile revivalist from Bangladesh, tells us how he is working to bring the fine fabric into the mainstream world of fashion

■ MADHUR TANKHA

In an irony of the sort that makes us laugh, the British destroyed the muslin trade in Bengal, leaving nothing for the next generation of weavers to resuscitate. Yet, when it comes to its preservation, the West is miles ahead: muslin forms a large part of museums there. Saiful Islam, a textile revivalist who shuttles between the UK and Bangladesh, discovered this, and is now on a mission to revive muslin in its original avatar.

Saiful has made a well-researched film, *The Legend of the Loom* that takes viewers on a 2,000-year-old journey from the pages of the *Mahabharata* to the rivers of Bengal, where the cotton plant grew. He has written a book titled *Muslin. Our Story* and has been reviving this diaphanous material in his homeland from 2014.

He talked about his passion for muslin at the fifth edition of Threads of Tradition, a platform for conversations with experts in textiles, in Delhi recently. Excerpts from an interview.

Take us through the work you have done so far.

● The story of my film is largely based upon the work I have



done. T9fx (a production house) directed it but needed the input as the topic was unknown to it. We wanted to revive muslin, the world's first global brand, but we wanted to do it in multiple ways. We wanted to tell the story from the way we perceive it should be told: our geography, craft, people, history and portraying the role the West played in its demise. Previously, muslin was never shown from these angles. It was seen as a pretty item. It is important to understand it from the sociological and political angles.

How would you describe muslin and its importance from a historical perspective?

● Muslin is the most wonderful textile ever woven, for its simplicity and demand it generated world-wide. Machilipatnam down South and Mosul in Iraq were the trading places. It was collected there. But when people saw it there, they

CELEBRATE THE CLOTH

In February 2016, a month-long muslin festival was held at the Bangladesh National Museum.

