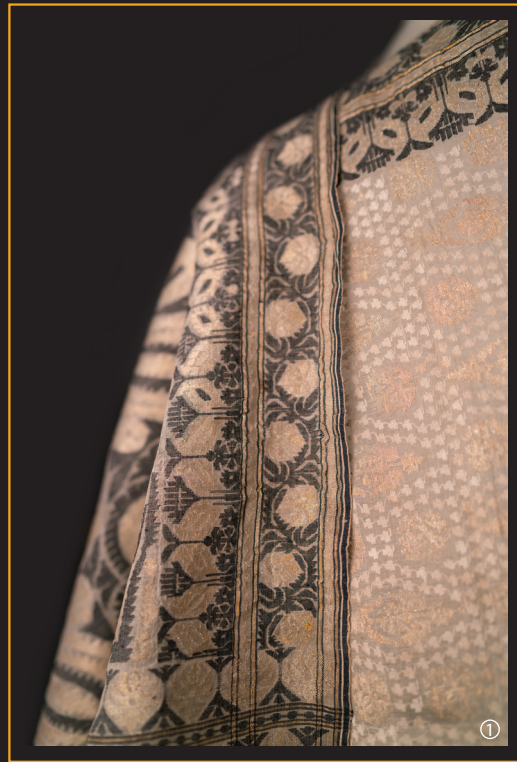




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MUSLIN

DEFINING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF JAMDANI PRIMARY AND SECONDARY CRITERIA



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Jamdani is a uniquely patterned, hand-woven cotton fabric that is part of the heritage of Bangladesh (East Bengal). Ancient Greek and Roman texts record it as being over a thousand years old. There are differing interpretations of the word with one being flowers (*jam*) in a container (*dani*), alluding to a female body draped in flowers, a veritable walking bouquet swathed in the famous 'flowered and figured' textile. While the technique of weaving jamdani existed much earlier, its unique, iconic designs originated and reached their peak during the Mughal rule (15th-17th century) in India, who introduced Persian geometric designs symbolizing the flora and fauna of Bengal. Jamdani was considered to be one of the five varieties (and the most expensive) of the legendary muslin that was known as 'woven air' (*'baft e hawa' in Persian*), meant exclusively for royal wear. Each of these varieties included many different types of cloth, such as the storied 'baft e hawa', 'tarandum', 'shabnam' and many more.

The cloth was woven in villages around present-day Dhaka on handlooms with yarn counts that reached from 200 upwards to 1200. It was prized in places like Rome, Istanbul and China, earning significant revenue for Bengal. The Mughal period saw the finest jamdanis being woven, especially during that of Emperor Akbar, a chief patron. Later, during the colonial rule of the East India Company (EIC), muslin was replaced with machine-made cloth manufactured in English mills, which, combined with famine and the extractive policies of the EIC, led to the extinction of muslin from Bengal. The phuti karpas (the cotton plant from which muslin's yarn was made) vanished, and with it disappeared its whole eco-system of farmers, spinners and weavers.

In post-independent (1971) Bangladesh, jamdani was revived in the villages around Rugganj in Narayanganj, with demand for it slowly increasing both nationally and internationally. However, this rise in demand has meant multiple forms of jamdani being produced; ranging from full cotton saris made from yarn of low count (30-80) to those that include synthetics and are often adorned in a wide variety of non-traditional motifs and colours. Jamdani is also being 'manufactured' in India, such as Murshidabad, Uppada and Assam, to meet the country's internal demand, often by spinners and weavers who migrated from Bangladesh over the years.

Such a multiplicity of products and sources has often led to confusion regarding *jamdani's* authenticity, with questions raised about **'What is a true jamdani?'**

This note is an attempt to briefly answer that query.

While some may disagree with the following criteria about what constitutes an authentic *jamdani*, this definition at the least represents a start at providing clarity to both the consumer and artisan, to emphasize its artistic characteristics, as well as attempt to preserve its unique heritage.

Firstly, jamdani is defined by the following two **Primary** criteria;

Motifs: Jamdani has a range of unique motifs, both individually and also in combination, especially in the case of saris. The total range of individual motifs are yet to be fully archived, though publications such as "Jamdani Design" (March 2018) and institutional collections by Aarong's and Drik-BM have collected a large number of them. These give a sound idea of the geometrical representation of many common Bengali objects as well as its flora and fauna. These have served as a major inspirational source for jamdani's motifs. While the combination of these motifs differs, and some additional ones have evolved, one must ensure that the traditional motifs of jamdani and their unique style are adhered to.

Supplementary weft: A supplementary weft thread (normally of a lower count) is woven on the loom between the weft and warp yarn to form the motifs of jamdani. Lately, cloth printed with similar motifs are sometimes sold as 'jamdani', which in no way constitutes a true jamdani. It should be noted that while the supplementary weft is a key indicator, it is not the only one to define a jamdani. This confusion has been especially exacerbated in India where any design or motif woven by using a supplementary weft is labeled as jamdani. Thus Indian designers and weavers are often emphasizing the technique and not the motifs, which is a misleading characterisation.

The unique jamdani motifs woven into the body of the cloth by using a supplementary weft thread forms the two primary indicators.

Which leads to other three **Secondary Criteria** for consideration:

Material: Traditionally jamdani is the most expensive and decorative variety of muslin. It was made exclusively from cotton – in fact, from a rare and unique cotton known as 'phuti karpas', which was also used for manufacturing other varieties of muslin. With the extinction of this cotton plant, jamdani yarn was spun from American cotton varieties that are the ones commonly available in the market. Silk, polyester and other types of non-cotton yarn were later incorporated into jamdani to make the fabric lighter, attractive and also keep costs low. Though such 'mixed yarns' are acceptable, a true jamdani should be made only from fine cotton yarn.

Count: To measure count, one needs to weigh a thousand-meter length of yarn in grams. The lower the weight the higher is the count, so two grams denote 500-count yarn. Historically, muslin began from a baseline count of 250, and up (reaching the giddy heights of 1200-count), and so did most jamdanis. Cost pressures, non-availability of fine yarn and lower skill levels amongst the weavers have reduced the counts in present times. However, a good jamdani sari should be at least of 100- count and preferably 250 and above.



Source: Jamdani manufacture originated and reached high levels of perfection in the old East Bengal (present day Bangladesh). Over time, post-1947 Partition its weavers dispersed to various other locations within India and jamdani was manufactured in Murshidabad, Uppada, Benares, and today even Pakistan and Sri Lanka claim to have their own variety of 'jamdani'. In aesthetic terms, the jamdani from Bangladesh is visibly superior to other versions in its originality, complexity and most importantly, in the inlay of its original motifs in the high-count (above 200) saris, which are generally unachievable in West Bengal. Bangladesh's claim to true jamdani was recognised by UNESCO in 2013 as an 'Intangible Heritage of Mankind'. Thus, the source of jamdani (i.e. country of origin) remains an important criterion in terms of authenticity.

Summary:

Of the five criteria mentioned above, the first two are denoted as being of **'Primary'** importance, and the remaining three are considered **'Secondary'**.

In summary, a sari having traditional *jamdani* motifs, woven by using a supplementary weft thread, and preferably made of pure cotton while using a high count yarn is the perfect example of the legendary *jamdani* of East Bengal.

Since the cotton variety, count and sourcing are secondary criteria, the authentic jamdani can be defined by the use of its classical motifs and supplementary weft technique alone.

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