

The Muslin Festival
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Comments by Hameeda Hossain
on a presentation by Rosemary Crill

The Muslin Festival held in Dhaka celebrates Bengal's importance in the global trade in textiles. It opens the pages of history to reveal a rich material heritage which we discover today mainly in museums or read about in travelers' accounts.

Its cultural heritage, by which, I mean the pre-industrial process and organization of manufacture tells us of Bangladesh's village economy and the lives of the artisans -- weavers, spinners, warp layers, dyers and embroiderers. In celebrating the intangible heritage and assessing the future of handwoven textiles, we need to understand both these aspects, of the intricacy of designs and its workmanship, as well as the mode of production and system of trade. We are fortunate that several foreign scholars have joined the search for Bangladesh' lost heritage.

Rosemary Crill has given us a very fascinating overview of the handwoven textiles that made Bengal so famous in medieval trade and upto the nineteenth century. The visual evidence she draws upon from the Victoria and Albert Museum and archival illustrations reveals the material heritage of textile trade.

The knowledge of this legacy has been preserved in many places around the world. Besides the V & A Museum, textile collections from Bangladesh can also be viewed in museums in Europe and in Asia -- in the Musee Guimet in Paris, in the Calico Museum in Ahmedabad, in collections in New Delhi and in the Ashutosh Museum in Kolkota. It is a pity that we have done little to preserve this heritage in Bangladesh. We have neither a textile museum nor even a gallery of textiles, which could have been a source of education.

This legacy dates back to a medieval period, if not earlier, as we hear of the export of these fabrics to Rome and China. The history of how the manufacture of muslin and other fine textiles responded to a demand from the courts of the Sultans, or the Mughals is documented in archival sources such as the *Akbarnameh* and travellers' accounts. More systematic records of how Bengal's textiles reached much wider markets in the global trade to Europe, America and Africa are to be found in the correspondence maintained by the European East India Companies.

The names of a few assortments given by Rosemary Crill indicate a Persian influence. Muslins known as abrawan, nainsukh or jamdani were part of the trade to Isfahan, but these names continued to be used by the European companies as well. While they were common in trading vocabularies, Bangla names were used in the weaving villages of Bangladesh. So we find names for floral motifs in both Bangla and Persian, showing an adaptability of the producer to the market.

In describing the manufactures we often refer to fine muslins, or to transparent cotton fabrics. In particular the story of Aurangzeb's admonishment to his daughter is often quoted to describe the sheerness of the fabric. But there were different qualities of textiles - ranging from the coarse *bafta* which was purchased by the East India Company for the slave market in America to finer qualities worn by royalty. The Company orders show a list of more than twenty varieties which were shipped to different places.

For example, muslin and other textiles were part of a triangular trade being exchanged for spices in the Far East, which were in demand in Europe. This world demand thus expanded weaving to many areas of which Dhaka was a major production centre. Rosemary Crill has mentioned how some varieties were simulated in other parts of India, such as in Tanda and Arni. But within the Soubah of Bengal, while the finest muslins were woven in arangs around Dhaka, other varieties were produced in distant places such as Santipur in West Bengal, and in Pabna and Tangail in Bangladesh.

This led to a considerable specialization of production. In the eight *arangs* of Dhaka mentioned by Rosemary Crill there was a concentration of weavers who specialized in specific designs and products. So that the coarser varieties were made in Teetabari and the finer jamdani in Sonargaon and Junglebari.

We have heard from Rosemary Crill of the collections in the V & A, and how these are made available through exhibitions and publications to the public. This festival aims to draw attention to Bangladesh' material culture.

What can we do to popularize this knowledge? We need to plan several initiatives for the public as well as for the weaving community. First on my list of doables would be a textile museum, to house collections which may be available with individuals in the country. We could add to this with photographs of collections in other museums or even with samples of ancient weaves. These could be a source of knowledge for students as well as for weavers. At this stage when Bangladesh is going through rapid changes it is important to document the jamdani designs, to prevent an adulteration or even a corruption of historical designs. Currently the National Craft Council of Bangladesh is engaged in a project to document jamdani designs and the process of weaving. This is a small initiative and much more needs to be done.

The festival organisers have told us that their aim is also to revive the manufacture of muslin. The revival of a cultural or industrial heritage is much more challenging. We need to recognize the changes that have taken place over the centuries in response to the trade and to identify the reasons for its decline.

The specialized fabrics of *Mulboos Khas* made for the Mughal emperor, as mentioned by Rosemary Crill, were woven in *karkhanas*, where master weavers worked under strict supervision. The Company's trade led to an expansion of weaving to *arangs* and weaving centres, where *gumashtas* and *dalals* procured goods at competitive prices. But as the Company gained administrative control after Plassey, it was able to impose financial and legal controls on the weavers

which became exploitative. While the story of cutting of thumbs may be a myth, what we do know is that the Company's Regulations for Weavers led to their indebtedness and alienation from their traditional work. Additional causes of the decline in the manufacture of fine cloths was that serious famines in the eighteenth century led to a change in cropping from cotton to rice, and to weavers turning back to their agricultural activities.

Weaving however did not die, and we can find even today many weavers engaged in their family tradition, but with vital changes. For example, the children of jamdani weavers are now studying in schools and colleges. To replace them young assistants are recruited from poorer neighbourhoods. Master weavers today contract the labour of weavers to make saris which are ordered by shops or sold in *haats*. There has been little support by way of credit or yarn supplies for weavers, nor have we set up weavers' centres to provide training or technical help to the community.

Initiatives to support the organization of weaving as well as to disseminate knowledge of the history of weaving in Bangladesh require major intervention and support from the public sector. It is not merely to revive a tradition or historical legacy but because weaving continues to be important to the village economy. The use and appropriation of land for industrial investment at the cost of the livelihoods of villagers may not lead to prosperity for the many. It may cause an exodus rather than a revival of the economy.

If we are to promote the manufacture of muslins or other rare textiles let us do so to protect the livelihood of artisans and not for the profit of investors and middle men. Let the government set up a task force which would identify all tasks in planning for such a revival, and coordinate and monitor the implementation of plans by different government and non government agencies.

