‘FRUIT OF THE LOOM’

Cotton and Muslin in South Asia

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Muslin, the supremely fine cotton fabric in honour of which this festival and this gathering are being held, has been one of the sub-continent’s most prized materials not just for centuries but for millennia. Its position as the finest and most desirable form of woven cotton has long been established. It has been prized as far afield as classical Rome and imperial China, as well as by Mughal emperors - and their wives - closer to home. Earlier than this, muslins from Eastern and southern India were even mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. But it is important to remember that muslin is part of a much wider story, that of cotton itself. In this short talk, I would like to locate muslin within the Indian Subcontinent’s wider textile history, and also to discuss its role as a key fabric in India’s court culture.

The early history of cotton

Cotton has been the backbone of India’s textile production for about 8,000 years. Evolving from wild cotton plants, seeds and fibres of domesticated cotton have been excavated from as early as 6000BC at the site of Mehrgarh in today’s Baluchistan. Evidence of textile technology, especially finds of spindle whorls, the small circular weights used in spinning, is scattered throughout the Indus Valley sites from around the same period. The earliest known cotton thread to have been found on the subcontinent itself was excavated at the Indus Valley city of Mohenjo Daro, dating to around 2,500 BC. That tiny fragment of thread was dyed red, providing evidence of not only the cultivation and spinning of cotton, but also of the use of dyes, another crucial aspect of India’s supremacy in textiles.

Because of its monsoon climate, textiles do not survive in South Asia in archaeological situations, so we must look outside the subcontinent for evidence of any kind of Indian fabric from the pre-modern age. Astonishingly, it appears likely that India’s woven cotton cloth was being exported, almost certainly from the Indus Valley region, as early as around 4000 BC. Fragments of woven cotton textiles of that date have been found at archaeological sites in the Middle East and the Caucasus which are almost certainly Indian, as no other civilisation was producing cotton at such an early date.

Later on, by the Roman period, the dry climate of Egypt has provided several humble but historically important fragments of Indian cotton cloth. Their existence supports Roman written texts on the flourishing trade between India and the Mediterranean region, in which silk and cotton were traded, ranging in quality from ‘ordinary cloth’ to ‘thin clothing of the finest weaves’, perhaps a reference to the muslins that we know the Romans were so fond of, giving them the famous nick-name of ‘woven winds’ or ‘woven air’ because of their lightness and transparency. Already at this stage these muslins are associated in the texts with eastern India, the Ganges and Bengal.

As with the Roman classical writers in the early centuries AD, the arrival of Europeans into the spice trade in the 16th century provides us with more evidence for India's production and trade in textiles, both cotton and silk. While the written documentation only starts with the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century, surviving actual textiles like these two tell us that the trade in cotton textiles made specifically for different export markets, such as Indonesia, was thriving by the 14th century.

Few textiles of any kind survive that were used in India itself, rather than being exported, in the pre-Mughal period. Survivors like the V&A's talismanic shirt, inscribed with the entire Qur'an and dating to about 1450-1500, and a Jain embroidery in silk thread on a cotton ground, are rare museum pieces. As well as ordinary cotton cloth, pre-Mughal kingdoms like that of the Delhi sultanate certainly used muslin and prized its fineness. The 14th -century Sufi poet Amir Khusrow compared it to the skin of the moon or a drop of water, and at about the same period the Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta, who almost accidentally found himself employed at the Tughluq court, also specifically praises cotton textiles from Bengal.

Muslin at the Mughal and regional courts

But it is with the Mughals that we start to find more evidence for the use of a multitude of textile types, including muslin. The Emperor Akbar (ruled 1555-1605) took a great personal interest in textiles and garments, inventing new ways of wearing clothes and giving existing styles new names. We are very fortunate that we have both visual and written evidence for the use of cloth of all kinds at his court. The visual evidence is dominated by the *Akbarnama*, the illustrated account in several volumes - and several versions - of Akbar's reign. The page-sized illustrations are extremely detailed and give every indication that they are, in many cases, a true record of what the artist was depicting.

The incredibly fine cotton muslins that we often see Akbar and the later Mughals wearing in miniature paintings came to the Mughal court as tribute from Bengal after its defeat by Akbar in 1576. Plain white cotton might seem to us a rather austere choice for courtly dress, but both lightness of colour and fineness of weave had been associated with the ruling elite in India since very early times, with darker and heavier fabrics associated with lower classes of society, and fine white muslin was obviously eminently suitable for rulers in both these respects - even when teamed with huge jewels or ropes of pearls. In a painting from the V&A's *Akbarnama*, we see the surrender of the Bengali ruler Daud Khan, wearing an extremely fine muslin robe. The Mughal general also seems to be wearing the same, but while this may be artistic licence, it is true that muslin fine enough to 'sit as lightly on the body as moonlight on a tulip' was made in the Deccan in pre-Mughal times and would have continued to be produced there even after Bengali muslin became available to the Mughals. After the conquest of Bengal, muslins were required to be sent annually to the Mughal court as tribute, and these included the finest, reserved for the emperor, called *malmal khass* - special muslin, or *malbus khass* – special clothing. Second to these in fineness came muslin called *ab-rawan* or flowing water. Other categories such as *tanzeb* or 'body adornment' or *nainsukh* 'pleasing to the eye' may have been less poetic but still clearly allude to their high

quality. Royal workshops were set up in Dhaka, Sonargaon and other centres to produce muslins exclusively for the Mughal court.

In another page from the *Akbarnama,* we see Akbar emerging from an inner chamber after being alerted to an attempt on his life. He is in informal dress, having been disturbed in the zenana, and is shown wrapped in a very diaphanous shawl which must surely be of muslin, very likely from Bengal. Its fineness is in stark contrast to the plain dyed cotton robes of the attendants in the rest of the scene. His would-be assassin, the traitorous Adham Khan, is shown at the bottom of the page, having been hurled to his death from the terrace.
There are literally hundreds of 17th-century Mughal paintings that show how important a fabric muslin was for courtly dress. The emperors Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan all wore diaphanous muslin robes, often over colourful patterned trousers. Their courtiers followed the trend, as we see in typical album pages from their consecutive reigns. Some courtiers also wear plain but finely woven pashmina shawls, which like muslin is another example of a textile of which the fineness of the material and weaving is more highly esteemed than an elaborate pattern.

Both men and women in Mughal society chose muslin as their favourite fabric. There are inevitably far fewer images of Mughal women than there are of men – partly because they were much less visible at court, and partly because male painters would not usually be allowed into female quarters to paint them. The result is that, with a few exceptions, paintings of women tend to be highly stylised and depict an ideal woman rather than a real person. Where real people are depicted, and this is more likely to happen in the smaller regional courts of Rajasthan or the Punjab Hills, they are likely to be servants, musicians or other attendants who are more accessible to the artists.

Two Mughal paintings in the V&A, from an album of 17th century paintings, show a Hindu and a Muslim woman, distinguishable by their styles of dress. Both Hindus and Muslims of both sexes would of course have been present at the Mughal court – the Mughal emperors after all had Hindu Rajput mothers, and conquered Hindu rulers and their families would also have attended the court. Both the women wear large, transparent muslin veils or head-covers that cover much of their bodies. The Hindu lady, identifiable by the horizontal marks on her forehead as well as by her Rajput-style dress, wears a skirt and choli, while the Muslim wears patterned trousers or *paijama*.

Late 17th-century paintings like these bring to mind the famous story of the emperor Aurangzeb (ruled 1658-1707) who supposedly became angry with one of his daughters for being inadequately covered up, only for her to protest that she was wearing 7 layers of clothing – but of course it was the finest muslin, and so almost transparent. The fineness of the muslin worn at the Mughal court is commented on by the Italian doctor Niccolo Manucci at the same period, who adds that the women of the court sleep in their muslin clothes and renew them every 24 hours.

Although painted about 100 years after Aurangzeb's dismay at his daughter's clothing supposedly took place, paintings of Muslim ladies (or perhaps the same lady) in Calcutta, probably a European's Indian *bibi*, by the Italian artist Francesco Renaldi, give a somewhat

romanticised but perhaps not wholly inaccurate idea of the transparency of layers of muslin garments.

After these courtly or elite images of muslin in use, it is surprising to see a humble Jain pilgrim shown with an extremely fine muslin shawl around his shoulders in a 17th-century painting in the Cleveland Museum of Art. Perhaps the muslin was a gift from a patron. Similarly, two rather austere Gujarati land-owners in a Jahangir-period double portrait are also shown wrapped in fine muslin shawls. Clearly in both cases the fabric has been chosen to imply humility and to emphasise a disdain for ostentation.

Slightly less fine cotton was also produced in Rajasthan and the Deccan and was the usual material for the many plain white or single-coloured robes that we see in Mughal and Rajput paintings, worn by less exalted members of the court, and by servants and attendants. Although no cotton clothing survives from the early Mughal period, we do have later garments like a splendid 19th-century Rajasthani *jama* now in the V&A, which was given to the India Museum (whose textile collections entered the V&A) by the Raja of Bharatpur in 1855. It corresponds in style to the side-fastening plain cotton jama with its decorative ties worn by the 17th-century Mughal artist in a painting in a private collection. The jama also reflects the convention instituted by Akbar that Muslims should tie their robes on the right side, as the (presumably Muslim) artist has done, and Hindus on the left, which is the case in the jama, which is associated with the Hindu Raja of Bharatpur.

Fine cotton was often block-printed for dress fabric for both men and women, usually with the repeating floral designs that were so popular at the courts of the Mughal emperors from the mid-17th century onwards. This floral taste was also adopted by subject rulers like the Rajputs, who adopted many of the outward trappings of Mughal court life, including styles of dress and ornamental patterns for textiles and architecture. Here, an 18th-century Maharaja of Jodhpur wears a floral-printed cotton jama and turban, very likely locally made to a design like the 18th-century length of printed fabric on the left.

Muslin could also be printed, sometimes with gold, for wealthy patrons like the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah, or much less important, but still status-conscious, regional rulers like Thakur Padam Singh of Ghanerao in Rajasthan in a painting dated 1721 in the V&A.

Jamdani weaving

Mughal paintings of the 17th or 18th centuries do not seem to provide evidence for the use of either white-on-white embroidered muslin (the so-called ‘chikan’ work) or the famous woven jamdani technique. For these textiles, our visual evidence comes from a slightly later period, and of course by the 19th century we have surviving pieces to refer to as well. Jamdani weaving uses additional weft threads introduced by hand during the weaving process to create individual designs in the cloth, often in white against a white background, as in the piece on the right. Some scholars believe the technique was introduced from Iran, and its name certainly seems to be of Persian origin. Jamdani-patterned muslins were traditionally woven by Muslim weavers, while plain muslin lengths were produced by Hindus, another hint that the jamdani technique may have come from Iran. As well as its

primary association with Dhaka, the technique was probably also practiced in Murshidabad which became the capital of Bengal in 1704. Although Seth Manekchand, an elegantly dressed merchant in a 19th-century portrait, wearing what seems to be a jamdani-woven angarkha, is from Rajasthan, his trading activities may well have given him access to fine fabrics from Bengal. Indeed, there are records of a trader named Manekchand based in Bengal in the 18th century, so perhaps the portrait is a posthumous image of him or another member of the same merchant family.
Some surviving 19th-century jamdani pieces show the use of contrasting colours, with dark indigo-dyed blue and black – a so-called Nilambari, , or red, orange and black. Both types retain the more traditional white-on-white extra-weft designs in the field. George Watt remarks in his catalogue to the 1903 Indian Art exhibition in Delhi that 'occasionally and more especially with the cheaper jamdanis, brilliant colours are used'.

Jamdani weaving also spread to other parts of northern India, especially to Awadh in what is today Uttar Pradesh in north India, with Lucknow, Jais and Tanda being named centres of jamdani production. Avadh, with its capitals at Lucknow and Faizabad, had emerged as a dynamic regional court during the disintegration of the Mughal Empire. It has been suggested that weaver families from Dhaka were given grants enabling them to settle at Tanda and Jais near Faizabad in Awadh under the Lucknow Nawab Shuja ad-Daula in the 18th century in order to weave fine muslins for the Avadhi court. It was certainly being produced at Tanda by the 1770s, when Antoine Polier records ordering lengths of it from there, and these paintings of the period also confirm the preference for fine muslin on the part of the ruling elite. Shuja ud-Daula's son and successor Asaf ud-Daula is also often depicted wearing fine muslin garments.

Two 19th-century pieces in the V&A, one a handkerchief with a woven inscription stating that it was made in Jais, and the other a cap acquired in Lucknow, confirm that muslin- and jamdani-weaving endured for at least another 100 years in the Lucknow region.
Perhaps surprisingly, we find that the jamdani technique also travelled to Hyderabad in South India, albeit apparently in a somewhat simplified form, with none of the boteh or cone patterns that we associate so strongly with Bengali jamdani. Whether these fabrics were intended, as in Lucknow, for the court of the Nizam, or for local western residents isn't clear.

Chikan embroidery

Bengali textile makers are also very likely to have brought the fine art of chikan embroidery on fine cotton or muslin to Lucknow, the city with which it became most strongly associated. It seems likely that the art originated in Bengal, with its abundance of available muslin as the ground fabric for this exquisite embroidery. Although often incredibly skilled and detailed work, it may have developed as an alternative and somewhat easier method of decorating cloth than the woven jamdani technique, in much the same way that embroidered Kashmir shawls were a cheaper alternative to the more time-consuming woven ones.

Chikan work continued to prosper in Lucknow after it had declined in Bengal. The Lucknow magistrate William Hoey, writing in 1880, notes that chikan embroidery is one of the few industries in that city still to be thriving at that date, and states that it is in great demand in Calcutta, Patna, Bombay, Hyderabad and other cities. As with the regional jamdani production, it's not clear whether the main consumers of chikan work in these places were local or western, or both.

Chikan work on muslin was not just exported to other cities, it was also carried out at several other less well-known centres than Lucknow, for example Gwalior in Central India, and Madras, today Chennai, in the south. The quality of both the embroidery and the muslin may not have been as fine as those of Bengal, but a similar effect of lightness and delicacy is achieved.

Other regional cotton weaves and muslins

While the specific techniques of chikan and jamdani seem to have travelled widely from Bengal to centres all over India, countless other locations were of course also growing and weaving their own types of cotton cloth, and even muslin. The range of weaves and types of cotton fibre once found throughout the subcontinent is astonishing – we are lucky at the V&A Museum to have several hundred pieces of everyday cotton textiles which remind us of the many places where cotton is no longer grown and textures that are no longer woven. A group of humble bath-towels from a range of places is just a sampling of what was available to ordinary people in their local bazaars in the middle of the 19th century, but which are no longer made. They may not be as fine as muslin, but they have their own undeniable beauty. It is impossible not to be amazed at the quality of the finer cottons which were once made not just in Bengal, but in a surprising number of other places. Chanderi in central India, for example, is still an important weaving centre for reasonably fine cottons, but who today has heard of the muslins of Arni in Tamil Nadu, where extremely fine muslins were woven in the 19th century?

A slightly closer look at the case of Arni might be relevant to our discussions today. Arni muslins were evidently still in production in 1903, when the Indian Art exhibition was held at Delhi and written up so usefully by George Watt. In the catalogue, Watt discusses plain muslins from Dhaka (of course) but also mentions plain, flowered and striped muslins from several other places, including Tanda, Jais and Lucknow (as already mentioned) and also Benares. Regarding Arni in what was then North Arcot district, he writes that it is 'well known for its fine muslins' but he reports that 'the demand for these goods has in recent years declined very seriously.' Unfortunately he does not suggest a cause for this decline. He does note however, that even the finest Arni muslins are about 2 or 3 times coarser than the best Dhaka examples. It is no surprise that all the prizes for both plain and patterned muslins at the 1903 exhibition went to weavers from Dhaka rather than any of the other centres mentioned. As Watt mentions in his catalogue, quoting Meadows Taylor's account of Dacca muslins in 1851, 'each skein had a proportion of upwards of 250 miles to the pound of cotton' and it is hard to see how this fineness could be bettered. Also following Meadows Taylor, he remarks on the exceptional skill of the spinners and weavers of Bengal, which is unmatched in any other region.

Conclusion

We are here today to try to ensure that the unique fabric of Dhaka, praised across the world for thousands of years, does not suffer the same fate as the muslins of Arni, which have disappeared from India’s textile landscape. Like the pashmina shawl of Kashmir or the golden silks of Assam, Dhaka muslin is a unique local product, impossible to replicate anywhere else in the subcontinent, or the world. All of us here today are aware of its heritage as one of Asia’s most prized fabrics, and it would be a tragedy indeed if this unique treasure were to survive only in our collective memory.

But the preservation and revitalisation of the muslin-weaving tradition will not happen on its own. The project will require support from institutions such as museums and teaching colleges as well as, crucially, financial backing and commitment on the part of government and official bodies. Today marks the next stage of an ambitious undertaking. I am confident that all of us here today will do whatever we can to make it succeed.