



53 | 'What If' scenarios as history lessons



56 | Learning from Zheng He



106 | The Muslin Jamdani Weavers' Yarn



**The Deputy General Manager of Marketing of Commercial Bank prides himself on being focused, hardworking and resilient, albeit not in the gym**

116 | HASRATH MUNASINGHE

## Out of the deep

● NEXT

**26** Fisheries exports make a strong recovery after EU lifts export ban

## The task ahead for the Government

● GOVERN

**45** Respond to public frustration, but work for the long term

## Softlogic shares gain 104%

● NEXT

**73** Underperforming since debuting on the stock exchange six years ago, investors – led by foreign funds – have found new faith in the stock

**BENGALI WEAVERS, JYOTISH AND RAJIB  
DEBNATH OF KALNA, INDIA, TEAM UP TO KEEP THE  
MUSLIN-JAMDANI MARKET ALIVE**

---

THE  
MUSLIN  
**JAMDANI**  
**WEAVERS'**  
YARN

**Text &  
Photographs By**  
Sravasti Ghosh  
Dastidar

■ **PURITANICAL MUGHAL** emperor Aurangzeb (17th century A.D.) upbraided his daughter for apparently wearing nothing, when actually she was wearing seven layers of clothing made of soft, light and sheer muslin. The world's finest textile, muslin, was created in Bengal for the emperors of India. 6 yards of this material could pass through a ring. And, when inlaid with delicate Jamdani motifs, the effect is mesmerising. Muslin was originally made in Dhaka, the capital of undivided Bengal and parts of West Bengal, now in India. It is a hand-spun handwoven cloth made from

delicate high-count yarn. Count is the thickness of yarn. Higher count makes finer fabric. Between 1717-1727, 1000m muslin of 1000 count would weigh 1 gm only and cost INR 400 when a mid-level courtier lived comfortably on INR 1 per month. The oppressive British colonists systematically decimated muslin-weaving to promote British made cheap mill-made cloth, woven from Indian cotton. The muslin weavers' thumbs were cut off to stop them weaving. Many of the threatened weavers escaped present Bangladesh and settled in the eastern districts



Typical Persian-influenced Jamdani motifs and patterns, woven with gold thread, on a muslin-jamdani saree

of West Bengal which are famous for Bengal cotton sarees like Tangail, Dhonekhali and Baluchari silks. The muslin weavers started weaving coarse cotton towels and sarongs to hide their identity. Muslin-weaving slowly became extinct.

In the 1970s, the Union Textiles Ministry, Crafts Council of India and Khadi & Village Industries Commission started reviving the art of muslin weaving in West Bengal. With their assistance, a 13th generation master weaver, Rabindranath Saha from Bardhaman district, successfully innovated a charkha (spinning wheel) able to produce fine yarn consistently and wove 500-count muslin. However, the process was arduous, expensive and unviable. A viable model emerged in the hands of a skillful and entrepreneurial, 5th generation master weaver Jyotish Debnath of Kalna, in Bardhaman. Kalna is a 3-hour drive along a route lined with yellow and green mustard fields from Kolkata. The sleepy municipality is known for its muslin-jamdani weavers and many historical monuments like Rajbari and 108 Shiva temples.

Sitting amidst stacked muslin yarn, raw fabric and elegant sarees, in his office-cum-sampling and research unit, Jyotish humbly recounts that he quit school to learn the language of the yarn from his forefathers. Jyotish's father Krishna Mohun Debnath, who came to India in 1939, converted the resident betel-leaf growers, of Kalna, into weavers. His antique portable charkha is Jyotish's prized heirloom. However, the demand for handloom was inconsistent. Those converted to weavers, returned to their original work. The Debnaths continued weaving even while becoming poorer. Kalna weavers dwindled from 25,000 to 1300.

For years, the dearth of weavers and a market for handloom continued. Jyotish rues that expert artisans of yesteryears were no more; the following generations became more commercial and worked at the power looms and jacquard looms where sarees were produced in bulk. The muslin-jamdani





Jyotish and Rajib display an intricately woven muslin-jamdani saree

sarees take from a month to over a year to finish. It is difficult for handloom to survive without an in-depth technical knowhow. In 1995, Jyotish realized his products had value only with the right customer. Assisted by his mentor Nandita Palchoudhuri and his enterprising son, Rajib, he used demand for his work to motivate many weavers to resume their art.

Rajib, a fashion graduate who worked in south India returned to his village a decade ago aiming to revamp the flagging family business and market muslin professionally. A skilled weavers shortage, laziness and government's short-term employment policies had affected production. As it was difficult to obtain government help, Rajib started an NGO and apart from weaving, also made spinning wheels, looms and spin and dye yarns, to support the industry.

Jyotish used to weave plain muslin and jamdani, separately. He fused the two, now 'Muslin-Jamdani' by inventing the muslin-jamdani loom. The muslin and the jamdani looms are functionally and dimensionally different. A muslin loom is narrower than a jamdani loom as thread has to be joined repeatedly. The mill-made cotton, used for jamdani, snaps less frequently unlike muslin yarn. Jamdani muslins are distinctive. The word 'jam-dar' means flowered or embossed. The motifs are Persian influenced floral and geometric shapes. The weavers immerse their emotions into Jamdani patterns. Missing a loop means redoing most of one's work.

Since it requires nimble fingers, many women are weavers. Less-skilled ones weave raw fabric or lightly-designed stoles. Jyotish says that muslin yarn is temperamental and needs one to work with it and not around it. The fine yarn is spun on Amber charkhas, from hand-picked Kerala and Maharashtra cotton by women with good eye-sight. It takes 15 workers to complete one saree. Weaving is limited to the early morning and late evening or between 4 to 10 am and 5 to 7 because



**Jyotish** passionately spins a thin yarn on his antique charkha, within minutes



Colorful yarns waiting to be woven into masterpieces

mid day humidity can break the yarn. Weavers take a break during the day. Weaving units are set up in mud floor rooms under three-layer insulated roofs and many fans. The business has prospered. Designs are changed periodically while in constant communication with exclusive clients, via emails. Deadlines are met unflinchingly. Saree prices ranges from INR 25,000 to over 100,000. A muslin handkerchief costs around INR 500. It is difficult to lower prices due to high cost of weaving.

Rajib has started mixing premium linen with soft muslin to now create fine linen sarees. The two yarns are naturally different and the count needs careful planning. Defective weaving or poor planning leaves gaps in linen. Yarn quality distinguishes Indian Jamdani from the Bangladeshi Dhakai.



**Mahatma Gandhi** looks on at the stacked bobbins and Amber Charkhas



A traditional charkha to spin the muslin yarn

Weaving techniques are similar. Bangladeshi weavers often mix nylon with cotton, which makes fabric coarse and flimsy. The 4-ply thread used in Bangladesh will not pass through Jyotish's dense reeds.

Jyotish and Rajib prioritize workforce retention. They have raised weavers' monthly income considerably and extend benefits like medical reimbursements, insurance and pension; sponsor education of 2 children per family and provide advanced training for weavers.

Jyotish is indebted to Nandita Palchoudhuri, Consultant Curator of Indian Folk Art, Craft and Performance, for mentoring him. Nandita attempts to revive traditional and connects them to markets. She guides artisans to self-sufficiency. Jyotish first met her in 1994 and later travelled to Spain and Italy to see how fabric is used in fashion. Jyotish proved to be responsive and delivered the clients' demands. He carried his portable muslin-jamdani

loom, everywhere, to replicate designs. Nandita exposed him to contemporary style requiring nuanced colors and encouraged him to produce for the market. For instance, she got him orders to make tablecloths and napkins for Fabindia, a private company selling traditional weave. Jyotish made the tablecloths but could not fathom what napkins were. Nandita set the table and demonstrated the use of napkins. The practice of using a cloth to clean one's mouth and hands was a revelation to Jyotish. Similarly, Nandita elucidated the need for texturing.

The priceless 200-count svetambari (white on off-white) muslin saree, with gold thread motifs, that Jyotish has recently woven for his archive, is an ancient design. A century ago, the elite might have been instructing weavers to create such refined designs and combinations. Nandita believes traditional suppliers, need to be aligned with market demands. Expensive muslin needs a niche market. Production and skills are manageable issues. Connecting that skill to the appropriate market is challenging. Textile fares better as renowned designers form the conduits. The designer adds value by attaching his name and style to the traditional weave. However, designer input is seasonal. Demand changes from one regional weave to another. It is imperative that weavers deal directly and have the wherewithal to sell. Nandita has connected the Debnaths to selling points from where they go directly to the clients, like the Crafts Council of India.

To train weavers in entrepreneurship Nandita has proposed FICCI establish an Artisans' Chamber of Commerce. It can also organise the supply-chain including raw material procurement and train weavers to transact in English and through emails. Currently, traders control the market. They source buyers and fund weaver. Jyotish and Rajib are self-sufficient after much hand-holding. Jyotish's artistry that impresses the urban market and Rajib will have to learn the

nitty-gritty of traditional weaving techniques to sustain his father's success.

Rajib feels equally grateful to Bhutanese connoisseur-cum-weaver Thingley Delma Rhodes and Amrita Mukherjee of Sutra, an NGO working on India's textile heritage. They helped streamline the Debnaths' organization and give shape to their vision of rehabilitating the weaving community. Students, trainees and researchers visit the organization regularly. Rajib has invested in land for cotton and indigo farming.

Clients from overseas are willing to fund their training school and museum where Rajib stores the archival creations. In the future changing weather patterns may limit cotton farming, essential for muslin.

Jyotish and Rajib want to leave behind a legacy and focus on creating opportunities for the magic fingers of the children of the muslin-jamdani loom. ●

\*Contact Rajib Debnath: [rajibdebnath82@gmail.com](mailto:rajibdebnath82@gmail.com)

**Nandita Palchoudhuri,**  
often called the Czarina  
of Indian Crafts

