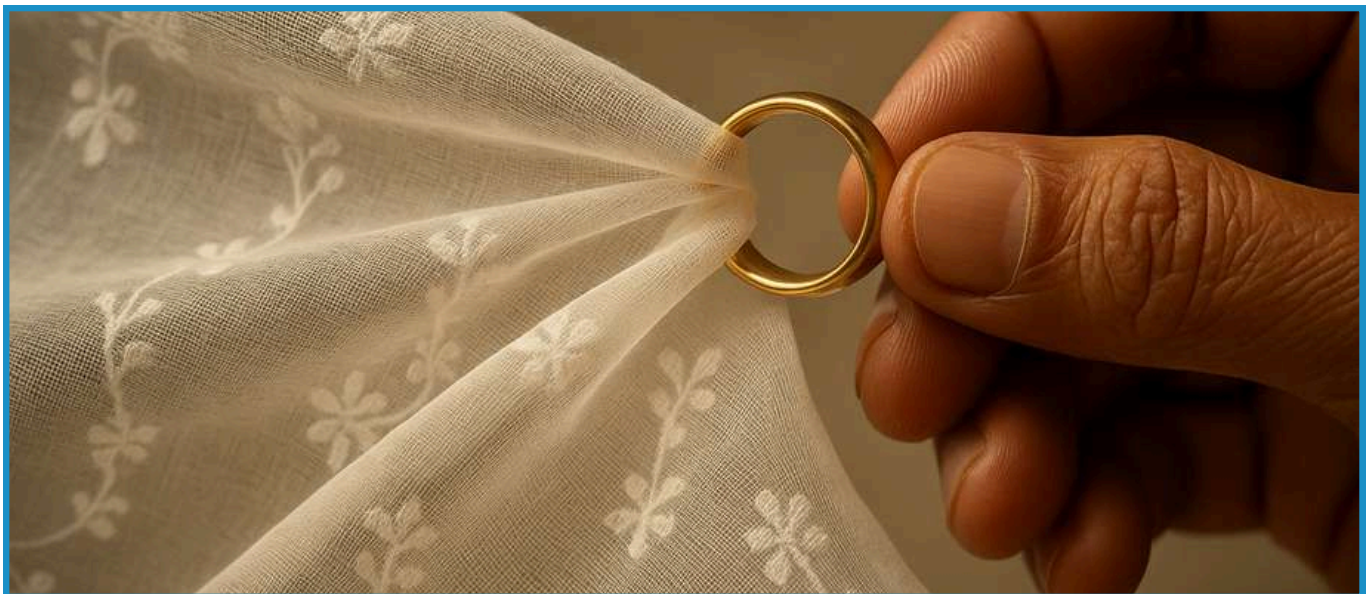


The Lost Art, Reclaimed: The Fascinating Story of Dhaka Muslin

By Annik Meulemans

I magine a fabric so fine, so exquisitely delicate, that a whole sari could reportedly

pass through a wedding ring. This was the legendary Dhaka Muslin, a textile that captivated royalty and aristocracy across continents for centuries. Its story is one of unparalleled craftsmanship, a tragic decline, and a remarkable modern-day revival.



A History Woven with Gold (and Cotton):

The origins of Dhaka Muslin, also known as Dhakai Muslin, stretch back to ancient times, with mentions as

early as the 3rd century BCE. It reached its zenith during the Mughal period (16th-18th centuries), when Dhaka, now the capital of Bangladesh, became the undisputed center of its

production. Mughal emperors, renowned for their lavish tastes, highly prized this "woven air" for their court garments. Its transparency and incredible softness were symbols of immense luxury and sophistication.

What made Dhaka Muslin so extraordinary? It was the unique combination of:

Phuti Karpas Cotton: A rare, short-staple cotton variety that grew exclusively in the Ganges Delta, near Dhaka. Its fibers were incredibly fine, yet notoriously difficult to spin.

Unparalleled Spinning and Weaving Skills: Master artisans, often young women, would spin threads so fine they were almost invisible. This meticulous process often took place in humid conditions, sometimes even on boats, to prevent the delicate fibers from snapping. Weavers would then transform these threads into fabric with astounding thread counts, sometimes reaching over 800-1,800 threads in the warp.

Intricate Weaving Techniques: Varieties like the famous Jamdani, a form of figured muslin, showcased complex patterns directly woven into the fabric.



Dhaka Muslin wasn't just a local wonder; it was a global sensation. European merchants—British, Dutch, and Portuguese—exported it widely, captivating the fashion elite from Queen Marie Antoinette in France to the English aristocracy.

The Tragic Decline:

The golden age of Dhaka Muslin was brutally cut short by the British colonial era. The East India Company, eager to promote its own machine-spun textiles, systematically suppressed the production of Dhaka Muslin. This included:

Exploitation of Weavers: Forcing weavers to produce at unsustainable rates and imposing restrictions.

Destruction of Raw Materials: The unique Phuti Karpas cotton plant eventually became extinct in the wild.

Industrial Revolution: The advent of machine-spun cotton in Britain made handloom production seem inefficient, despite its superior quality.

By the early 20th century, the intricate knowledge and the specific cotton plant required to produce true Dhaka Muslin were largely lost, fading into legend.

For nearly two centuries, Dhaka Muslin was a ghost of its former self, a testament to a lost art. However, a dedicated and passionate effort, primarily led by the Muslin Revival Project in Bangladesh, has brought this legendary fabric back from the brink of extinction.



This multi-phase project involved:

Rediscovery of Phuti Karpas: Researchers painstakingly identified and cultivated wild cotton plants believed to be a relative of the original Phuti Karpas, bringing the vital raw material back to life.

Retraining Artisans: Expert weavers, often from families with a generational history in Jamdani

(a coarser form of muslin), were trained to refine their techniques to handle the incredibly delicate Phuti Karpas fibers and achieve the fabled fineness.

Government Support: The Bangladeshi government has actively supported the project, providing funding and establishing a dedicated "Muslin House" to promote production and set standards.

Geographical Indication (GI) Certificate: Dhaka Muslin has received a GI certificate, protecting its authenticity and origin.

While still a boutique industry due to the labor-intensive and highly skilled process (a single sari can take months, even years, to weave), the ambition is to reintroduce Dhaka Muslin to the global luxury market. Scarves and other high-end garments are being explored for commercialization.

The revival of Dhaka Muslin is more than just bringing back a fabric; it's a reclamation of cultural heritage, a triumph of human ingenuity, and a beautiful testament to the resilience of tradition in the face of immense adversity. It's a story of "woven air" that once again breathes life into the hands of its creators.

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