



# MUSLIN IN GLOBAL TRADE: EMPIRE TO EMPOWERMENT

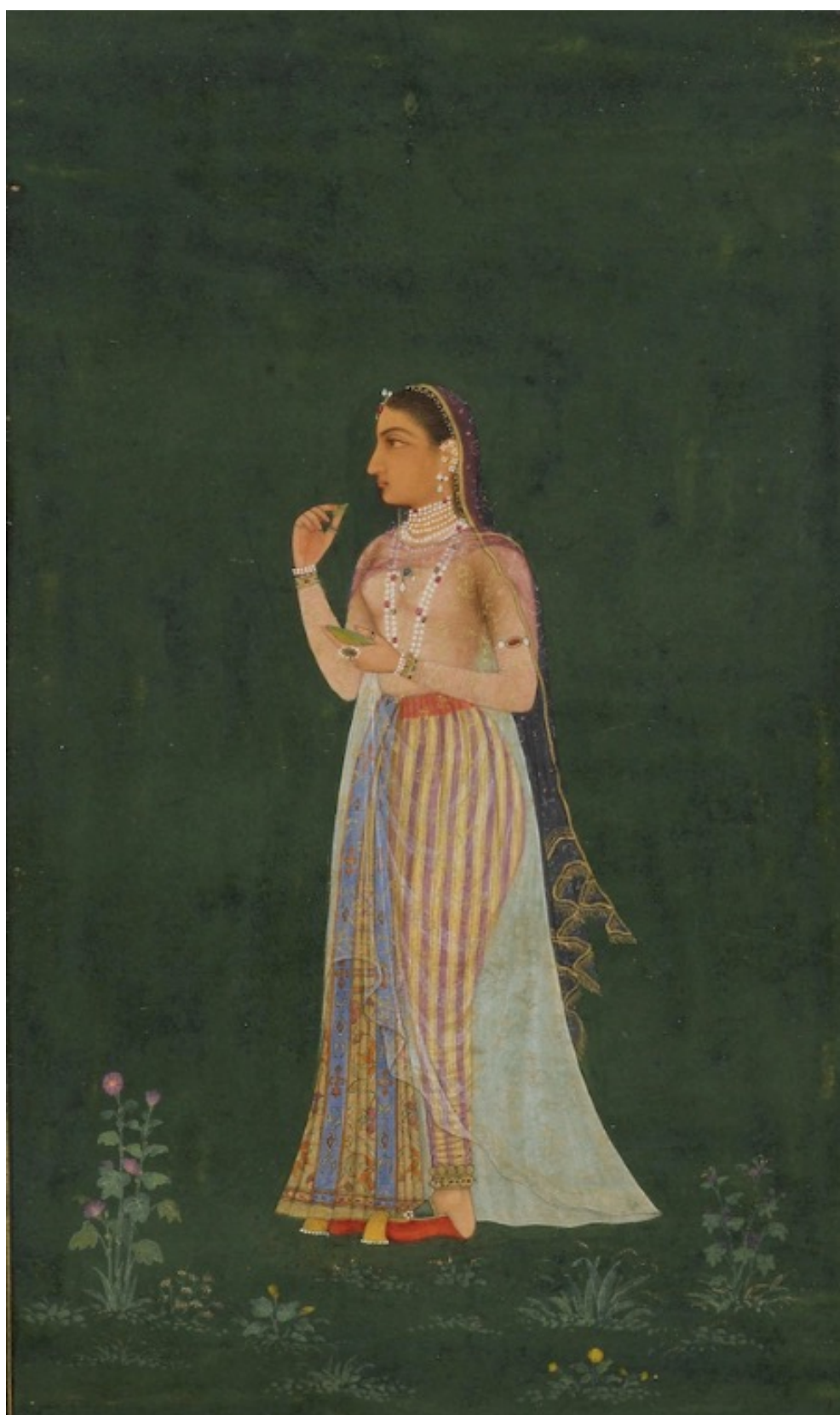
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## INTRODUCTION TO MUSLIN CLOTH

Muslin is an exquisitely lightweight, sheer, and finely woven cotton. Literature from ancient to recent early colonial history shows that this textile was produced exclusively by hand in the Dhaka region of Bengal (previously known as Dacca). Only spinners and weavers of the Sonargaon region of Dhaka, which is in current-day Bangladesh, knew how to handle the fine muslin fibers. Even the cotton used to produce it (*phuti karpas* – *Gossypium Arboreum Var. Neglecta*) was locally grown and is now extinct (some *phuti karpas* plant samples have been found by the Bengal Muslin Project established in 2014).

By examining muslin from pre-modern India to the revival efforts of the weaving techniques and source cotton in current-day Bangladesh, I aim to analyze histories of colonialism and the global textile trade.



A 1632 portrait of Jahanara Begum (1614-81), daughter of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. Diaphanous tunics of Dacca muslin were prized by the Mughal emperors. (British Library, London)

## GENDER IN CURRENT-DAY JAMDANI MUSLIN WEAVING

Currently, women's participation in the workforce is limited to low-paying sectors, with 3 million working in Bangladesh's garment industry. An increasing number of women are part of smaller enterprise workplaces, yet a stark pay gap remains despite government initiatives. Bangladesh still retains its position as the best performing South Asian country in the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2021). Historically, women were part of the muslin-making process but were engaged in more preparatory work, even as assistants, but not as master weavers.

*How is the revival of Jamdāni weaving empowering women today?*

An example of some efforts being made to renew and preserve Jamdāni is the work done by Sheva's Sustainable Jamdāni – the Sustainable Enterprise Project (SEP). The SEP is a project to train newer Jamdāni weavers, including women, and enable women micro-entrepreneurs to earn above-average wages selling eco-friendly Jamdāni products. Jamdāni boutique 'Tanaporen,' promoted by Sheva's Sustainable Enterprise Project (SEP) in partnership with the World Bank, aims to advance the weaving industry under the patronage of weavers.

Next summer, I will be putting my research into action by working with organizations like the SEP. I hope to explore how the preservation of traditional weaving craft is significant for Bangladesh's economy, efforts in sustainability, and women's empowerment. I would like to use my findings to bring more awareness to the efforts being made to renew Muslin and preserve Jamdāni and about Bangladesh's progress in gender parity and sustainability.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## MUSLIN & MARITIME TRADE

Muslins of varying quality were both locally used and exported to the Roman and Ottoman Empires. Maritime trade can be traced back to pre-modern times, reaching areas such as Venice, Portugal, and China. This quote illustrates how far-back scholars have traced the trading of Indian cotton:

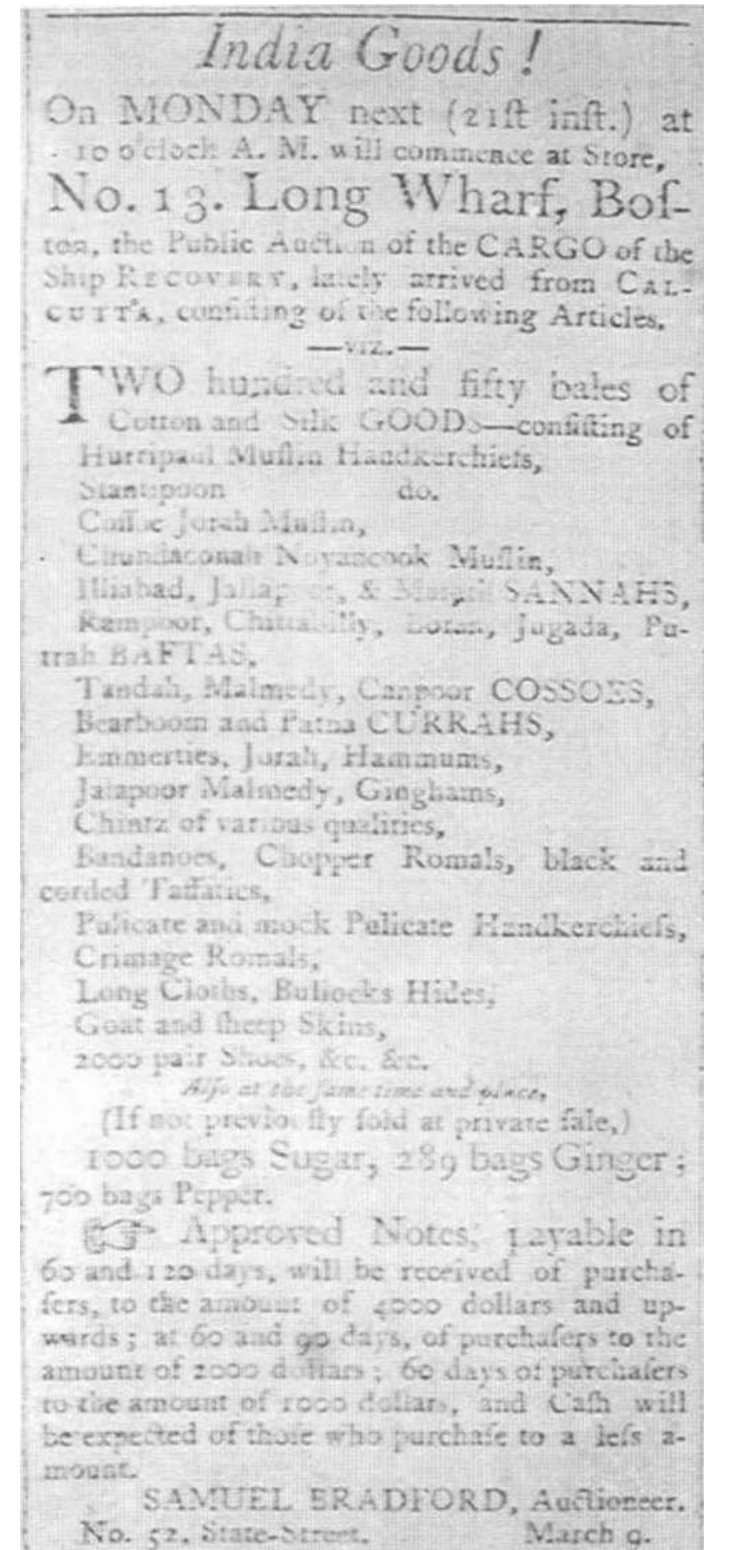
'Identifiable by its fibres and spinning method, Indian cotton dating back 6,000 years has been excavated in Jordan, and pieces of plain cotton fabric from the first century AD have been found on Egypt's Red Sea coast' ('Indian Textiles', Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

## THE STYLE REVOLUTION OF THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Muslin was first imported to Europe in the early 1600s by the English and Dutch East India Companies. By the seventeenth century, the very finest muslin from Bengal (mulmul khas) began to be worn exclusively by the Mughal court. By the late eighteenth century, muslin was worn by influential and fashionable women in Europe, such as Marie Antoinette (1755-93) and Empress Joséphine (1763-1814).

'every young lady in the British isles who aspired to be a Bride was equally anxious to be led to the alter in a cloud of Dacca Muslin.'

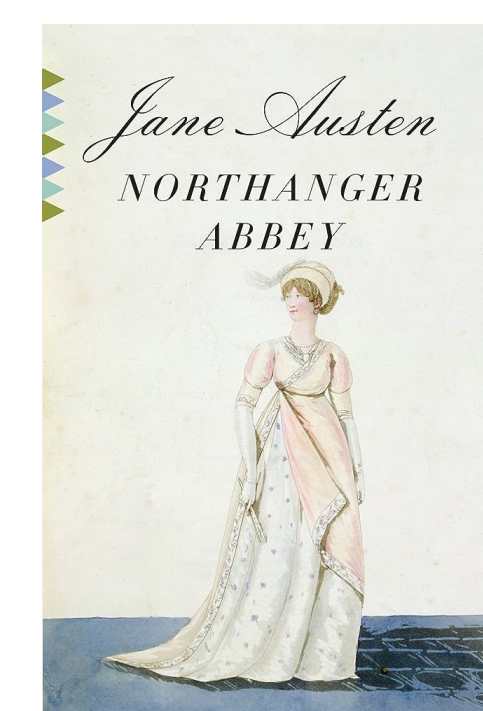
- J. Talboys Wheeler, *India Under British Rule* (1886).



Newspaper attachment from an issue of the Salem Gazette in the years around 1800 showing a variety of Indian textiles, including muslin (muslin handkerchiefs, nainsook muslin) Photo: Peabody Museum of Salem

## CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION OF MUSLIN IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY NOVEL

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (1877): Anna Karenina's sister-in-law, Dolly, while staying with Anna in her opulent and luxurious summer home, was ill at ease before Anna's fashionably-dressed maid unpacking her patched chemise. "She was ashamed of those very patches and mending which she had been so proud of at home. At home it was clear that for six chemises she needed seventeen yards of nainsook at ninety kopecks a yard, which would come to over fifteen roubles... and these were fifteen roubles gained." The price of muslin (nainsook is a type of muslin, which translates to 'pleasing to the eye') was so high that even a relatively well-off woman would mend her muslin chemise to save money. This care of money immediately reminds us of Jane Austen's world of genteel poverty.



Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1817): Conspicuous consumption of luxury items was becoming a sign of a cultivated gentleman in eighteenth-century England. Muslin stood for both refinement and luxury. In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney prides himself in being able to identify "true Indian muslin." Henry boasts that he "gave but five shillings a yard for... [a] true Indian muslin [gown]," indicating his snobbery regarding the quality of muslin and his superior bargaining power compared to women. Henry's stance is informed by gender and imperial politics.

## JOURNEY FROM HISTORICAL MUSLIN TO PRESENT-DAY REVIVAL

*How have colonial import policies that moved towards industrially manufactured textiles affected muslin production in Bengal?*

The competitive desire to own the finest possible qualities of muslin has now been replaced by a desire to revive the hand weaving of muslin, regardless of its quality. The recently constructed 6.5 km long Padma Bridge incorporated a mural featuring muslins, specifically the geometric and intricate designs of Jamdāni, a surviving variety of muslin. Jamdāni, a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, is important to the identity of Bangladesh. Jamdāni and Dhaka muslin recently received Geographical Identification (GI) — a sign used on products with a specific geographical origin and possess qualities or a reputation due to that origin.



At Dakhsin Ruposhi, Tarabo, Narayanganj. Photo credit: Sustainable Enterprise Project



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