

The magic of muslin has come back! Really?

Muslin, once the coveted fabric of kings and queens or social elites, Muslin that fiddled with the imagination of poets and travelers has come back with a bang. Bangladesh has been able to resurrect the misty Muslin yet through a long chain of trials and errors, human labor, ingenuity, fine craftsmanship, and finally planning and perseverance of a good many people. But, yes, it paid off.

It all started off with finding a specific plant variety, a landrace of cotton, known as ‘*Phootee*’ or ‘*Phootee Kapas*’ (*kapas* means cotton in Bengali) that was ‘the premium cotton variety’ from



which the finest quality Bengal cotton or *Dacca Muslin* was produced. Once, it was grown profusely around the river banks of *Brahmaputra* and *Meghna* rivers, in Dacca and Mymensingh districts. It was later identified and grouped into *G. herbaceum* species by Roxburgh (1874). Bengal Muslin Industry ceased to exist almost two hundred years back, and so was the cultivation of premium ‘*Phootee Kapas*’. Thus, the first challenge in the resurrection was to discover, identify, validate, and grow the specific variety that has probably gone extinct. Or was it so? Could there be any chance of any wild population that survived, still proliferated in the vicinity of the anthropogenic landscapes, or became feral? With that big hope, the journey flagged off. Many specimens from different parts of the putative region poured in but are they ‘*Phootee Kapas*’? So, the next hurdle was to validate which one of them is ‘*Phootee*’? Well, molecular biologists stepped in then, they strove to match DNA sequences of the collected specimens and the fragments of Muslin collected from Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

And finally Bingo! They succeeded in finding ‘*Phootee Kapas*’ plant in the wild that has growing happily in someone’s courtyard.

But, wait! That is just the first part of the epic, the challenge still remained high. Hand-weave such fine clothing has not been an easy task. Even history tells that very specialized groups of weavers can only perform the task with excellence, and also it required specific weather conditions, timing, and skills of a master-craftsperson. So, the next step was to find out whether any of the recent generations of weavers will be willing to take this challenge and weave clothing of the highest count. Candidates were ‘discovered’ from the villages around Dhaka and who are accustomed to weaving *Jamdani*, another gem of handwoven sari. But, eventually, Muslin is far finer than *Jamdani* and deserved unfettered attention to weave relentlessly. Any mistake would scrap a day’s work. But, Bingo again! They were finally able in producing flawless Muslin, after almost two centuries. And, so the magic of muslin has come back at last.



Everything sounds nice and positive up to this end however, the fate of Bengal Muslin is still uncertain! The intense back-breaking labor for days and weeks, superfine artisanal skills, specially grown varieties of cotton, etc mean a hefty sum to be paid to own one piece, and that should be far beyond the reach of the general consumers. So, is it intended to lure foreign customers using the USP of the world-famous Muslin, and strengthen ties with global corporate chains in the country? Or as the manufacturing will progress the price is bound to go down, but to what magnitude? Will it be accessible to a broad section of consumers? We do not know that yet! But, let us celebrate the rebirth of Bengal Muslin, an example of fine rural artistry, elegance and extravagance, and the hard work and innovation of our master-weavers.

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