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# Mapping Muslin

**Bindu Gopal Rao** shines the spotlight on muslin, whose soothing nature makes it a fabric of choice.

A few months back, I had the opportunity to watch a well-researched film called *Legend of the Loom*, which traces the journey of a 2,000-year-old fabric known as muslin—from the Mahabharata to the rivers of Bengal, where the cotton plant grew.

Directed by Saiful Islam, a Bangladeshi textile revivalist who shuttles between the United Kingdom and Bangladesh, the film takes the viewer through muslin’s long-standing history, its favourable qualities, as well as its production processes.

The fabric itself is so fine that there have been tales of an entire muslin sari that was able to pass through a ring alone. In fact, so exquisite it is in its make that the 14th-century Sufi poet and scholar



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Amir Khusrau is said to have described the fabric in the following words, "A hundred yards of it can pass through the eye of the needle, so fine is its texture, and yet the point of the steel needle can't pierce through it easily. It is so transparent and light that it looks as if one is in no dress at all but has only smeared the body with pure water."

**THE SPECIFICS**

Muslin is a woven cotton fabric that is made in a wide range of counts, resulting in both fine, delicate weaves and coarse ones. The uniqueness of the fabric lies in its make, which gives rise to an ethereal texture. It is said that muslin was originally produced in Bengal using *phuti karpas*, a special cotton plant that grew along the banks of the Meghna and Shitalakshya rivers; it would then be traded in Machilipatnam, Andhra Pradesh, and other places around the world. The demand for the fabric was high during the time of the Mughals but it was the Nawabs of Murshidabad and Dhaka in particular, who patronised it to the fullest. Muslin can be largely seen adorned with *jamdani* motifs, and it comes in variants such as plain, striped, and chequered.

THE FACT THAT MUSLIN IS USED THE WORLD OVER TO CREATE NUMEROUS TEXTILE VARIATIONS IS PROOF OF HOW CRUCIAL THE FABRIC IS TO THE INDUSTRY.

Spinning is the backbone of this industry. Muslin yarn is strengthened by being dipped in water, after which it is taken up for spinning. The strength and delicacy of the yarn is what makes the fabric so special. The fact that muslin is used the world over to create numerous textile variations is proof of how crucial the fabric is to the industry. It is versatile, sturdy when required, and can be moulded and sculpted as desired. Of all fabrics, muslin may be a bit underrated but with the right handling, it can change the face of any piece it is used to stitch.

A regular muslin cloth can have a width that is anywhere from 45" to 120", and is an ideal choice to prepare toiles due to its relatively low costs.





## FABRIC SPEAK

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### REVIVAL NOTES

Muslin, as a fabric, is increasingly being used in designer collections today. Aditya Jain, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), YAJY by Aditya Jain, says, “Muslin is an innovative tool for artisans since it is used in combination with other raw fabrics for manufacturing an outfit, hence making a unique statement. Garments such as kurtas, dupattas, and saris are, today, preferably made of muslin or have the fabric incorporated in them. Muslin can be upcycled and restructured, which

also makes it a flexible choice.” The problem, however, is that the plants, which were the source of muslin fibre, are getting scarcer by the day. Saiful Islam says, “As it is difficult to recreate the plant’s DNA, reviving the fabric is difficult.” Muslin can be woven with many techniques, one of which is *jamdani*. In order to restore the trust and confidence in weavers, we chose to work with *jamdani*, whose motifs are extremely intricate and difficult to master; this pushes them to innovate. Having a sound sense of past techniques is a good way to make new designs; and a strong foundation always helps you move to forward. Similarly, altering designs with a specific purpose is always welcome.”

“The activity of weaving muslin has lately been on the decline but at the same time, there have also been pockets of resurgence. Nevertheless, it needs to be supported at the policy-level, and taxes levied on yarn need to be pulled back. The fabric has to be given its right value, and if weavers operate at a level of artistry rather than compete with mill-made products, they will benefit largely,” he adds.







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**NOW TRENDING**

In keeping with the collective need to move—albeit slowly—towards slow fashion, lesser consumption, and reducing waste, it is hoped that muslin can be brought onto fashion and apparel platforms more ardently by designers and brands alike, what with its wearability being another plus. Jewellyn Alvares, Head of Department, School of Fashion, Whistling Woods International, says, “Dresses, tunics, shirts, kurtas, and trousers are just a few silhouettes that are made with muslin and its variants. Muslin is definitely in the process of being revived as the fabric is being introduced to constant innovations.

IT IS HOPED THAT MUSLIN CAN BE BROUGHT ONTO FASHION AND APPAREL PLATFORMS MORE ARDENTLY BY DESIGNERS AND BRANDS ALIKE.

It can be used to make garments without linings, or as light layers to be thrown over or worn under, making it ideal for any and all climates.”

**OVERCOMING OBSTACLES**

A key challenge with muslin is that it requires to be combined with another material to lend it wholeness. “Another challenge when it comes to using muslin is that after it has been cut up as toiles, whether at an atelier or in a fashion school’s patterning lab, the remaining fabric goes to waste. There have to be ways to transform even these toiles into utility garments of some kind. Upcycling these pieces is imperative. There was once a student whose toiles looked way better than the final line-up. She was thus advised to showcase those toiles after dyeing them in the original colour palette,” adds Alvares.

Considering that muslin is a raw fabric, much like denim, it needs a considerable amount of processing and looking-after and effective measures have to be taken to ensure that these processes are eco-sensitive. Having said that, this gentle, dreamy fabric is here to stay. ■