

Bringing Jamdani to England

Photo Journal

Migration stories and textile heritage
of Bangladeshi women in the London
Borough of Merton

Muslin
Trust

Bringing Jamdani to England

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Supported by:



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Photographs were taken at Morden Hall Park and Bell House, Morden
Thanks to Dr Lipi Begum, Anwara Ali and Sarah Gould (Merton Heritage)



Foreword

Bringing Jamdani to England captures two stories: one story of leaving your homeland to start a new life in a new country and another of bringing an object from your homeland that will always remind you of your identity.

In 2020-2021, Muslin Trust, with the support of the National Heritage Lottery Fund, recorded the clothing memories of women who came to Britain in the 1950s, '60s and '70s and now form part of the Bangladeshi community in Merton and surrounding areas of south west London. They left Bangladesh as young women to start a new life in England and the object they brought with them was the Jamdani sari. It has made a parallel journey with the women in terms of settling into this country.

The illuminating and heartfelt stories of these women are told here. The interviews show that the Jamdani was and still is worn when Bangladeshi women gather together to celebrate important events such as Eid, Boishaki Mela and Independence Day, as well as on social occasions such as parties, weddings and other functions. These events create a social cohesion where the wearing of the Jamdani sari re-enforces the women's "Bangladeshiness".

The Jamdani sari creates a sense of identity and pride and several of the women interviewed spoke of going one step further by consciously choosing to wear the Jamdani sari in gatherings attended by non-Bangladeshi people. Wearing them to social functions created curiosity and admiration which led to the women being able to explain to fellow guests how the Jamdani is made and the unique skills of the Bangladeshi weavers. The interviews show the Jamdani sari being inextricably linked to the interviewees' core identity and pride as Bangladeshi women.

The women interviewed arrived in their early twenties and their ages now range from 60s to 80 plus. Over time, many have given their beautiful saris away to their daughters and nieces so that they can continue to wear the Jamdani. The interviews reveal a collective memory of how, over several decades, Bangladeshi women chose to wear Jamdanis to celebrate their identity. We should not underestimate how challenging this would have been as during these decades life was hard for most Bangladeshis, and it would have been too easy to drop their sense of identity and opt instead for assimilation.

As economic circumstances improved, there were more return visits to Bangladesh and women returned with Jamdani saris for themselves, their families and friends. As these testimonies show, textiles can be important cultural symbols and repositories of memory among dispersed peoples. The enduring popularity and appeal of the Jamdani sari among women of all ages is evident within Bangladesh, in the Bengal region of India, and among the Bangladeshi Diaspora around the world.

I arrived in England in 1964 as an eight year old girl. I still have vivid memories of attending Bangladeshi events with my family and the wonder and awe I felt when I gazed at the beauty and composure of the Bangladeshi women wearing gorgeous Jamdanis who had travelled on the tube, taken some hard disapproving looks, walked through the snow and rain, walked through busy London streets to join these events. To those Bangladeshi women who braved all the difficulties but still chose to wear Jamdani, I pay my homage.

Rifat Wahhab
Founding Chair
Muslin Trust

About the project

What is Jamdani?

Jamdani is a fine figured cotton muslin fabric woven in simple pit looms in the delta lands around Dhaka, Bangladesh. The quality of the traditional fabric, sometimes as delicate as a shadow, depended on a particular type of locally grown cotton. Weavers evolved a specific repertoire of geometric motifs representing fruit, flowers, leaves and creepers worked in by hand in white, coloured or metallic thread as a discontinuous supplementary weft. One of the supreme achievements of muslin weaving, Jamdani was historically a luxury fabric, requiring intense concentration on the part of the weavers in counting threads to reproduce sometimes tiny regular patterns. Outstanding pieces could take two people six months to weave; recent attempts to reproduce historic Jamdani have taken even longer.

Jamdani muslin was a major commodity exported by the British East India Company more than 300 years before Bangladeshi women brought their own Jamdani saris to Britain. Shiploads of muslin and Jamdani fabrics, once exclusive to the royal courts of India, were imported into Britain from Bengal for fashionable ladies' dress. As the muslin industry declined, skills were lost through natural and man-made disasters, rice replaced cotton cultivation, synthetic fabrics replaced natural fibres and Bangladesh's handloom sector was almost terminally devastated by the 1971 War of Liberation. The Jacquard loom has coarsened the traditional motifs and synthetic dyes vulgarised a subtle palette which traditionally used vegetable dyes. Yet the fragile weaving communities and their inherited skills have somehow survived. Today Jamdani is the national fabric of Bangladesh and the cultural significance of this fabric was internationally recognised when it was included in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013.

Muslin Trust

Muslin Trust is a non-profit charitable organization established in 2013 for the protection, preservation and promotion of Bangladeshi heritage fabrics. It is managed by a group of volunteer trustees. Following its successful Jamdani Project in 2015, which provided an opportunity for young people to learn about the skills involved in historical sewing techniques and work with Jamdani, the Trust has again been funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund to manage Bringing Jamdani to England. This project has investigated the clothing practices of older Bangladeshi women who came to the UK in the 1960s and '70s and now live in Merton and surrounding areas. The project has focussed on their relationship with the Jamdani sari, a garment instrumental in maintaining their identities as Bangladeshis in Britain.

Bringing Jamdani to England

Textiles can be important cultural symbols and repositories of memory among dispersed peoples. Muslin Trust, with the support of the National Heritage Lottery Fund, has recorded the clothing memories of women who came to Britain in the 1950s, '60s and '70s and now form part of the Bangladeshi community in Merton, south west London. Arriving in the UK as students, professionals and young wives to join their husbands, many women brought Jamdani saris with them. Some still have these saris in their possession today. They recall how wearing this special sari was an important part of maintaining their cultural identity. At first the UK Bangladeshi population was small and scattered, but as more Bangladeshi women arrived in London, they describe how there were increasing opportunities for cultural and community events where they might wear their Jamdani saris, causing great admiration. As economic circumstances improved, there were more return visits to Bangladesh and women returned with Jamdani saris for themselves, their families and friends. The enduring popularity and appeal of the Jamdani sari among women of all ages is evident within Bangladesh, in the Bengal region of India, and among the Bangladeshi Diaspora around the world.

Jamdani Stories

'When you wear it, you can feel that you are a Bengali woman, a Bengali lady. It just makes you feel that you are from Bangladesh, and this is yours.'

There has been migration from Bengal to Britain for more than 200 years. Bengali men, especially from the region of Sylhet, now in Bangladesh, had long arrived as ships' crews, or 'lascars'. In the twentieth century, migration was accelerated by the partition of India in 1947, which absorbed Bengal into East Pakistan and in the 1950s and '60s a shortage of labour encouraged Bengali workers to come to Britain. The brutal 1971 war from which Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation also caused many to leave their country. Britain became home to part of a worldwide Bangladeshi diaspora.

It was during these later times that women started to accompany, or join their husbands in England. It is hard to imagine the problems of the women in assimilating to English life and the cold climate. They were often very young, newly married and far from the close family units in which they had grown up. Many were well educated and some found jobs soon after arriving, enabling them to mix with non-Bangladeshis. Retaining their Bangladeshi identity was inevitably of fundamental importance. Thus the Jamdani sari has had a culturally important role for migrants from Bangladesh.

While the majority of Bangladeshis settled in East London, a number moved to Merton, in the south west of the city, besides establishing themselves in other parts of the UK. Muslin Trust's interviews with members of the Merton community of Bangladeshi women have revealed how the Jamdani sari has been integral to their sense of identity and national pride. As one of the interviewees says, 'When I wear a Jamdani, I know the history from our place. Jamdani is part of our life. Jamdani is my culture, my heritage. It's social cohesion in a big way.' In mixed social occasions it turned out to be a way of displaying an exceptional cultural artefact more or less unknown in the West. Furthermore, the Bangladeshi women recognise the skills that go into making Jamdani and the need to support the hand

weavers so that Jamdani and its makers have a future. As one of the women says, 'Everyone should feel proud about it especially those weavers that made them. They are the people who are keeping alive that skill, not only yesterday but generation by generation. And we should not forget about them.' Muslin Trust's aim is a modest attempt to support this goal.

Interviews

Textile heritage, migration and belonging



Zareen Ahmad

Zareen Ahmad came to Britain in 1977 aged 23 to join her husband. 'When I was in Bangladesh I mainly had saris and salwar suits so brought those things and some warm clothes. I got married that year, so I had all my wedding saris. I also got some of my favourite saris.' One Jamdani was 'white and unusual. It had red and green flower designs, so that sari was my favourite. It was my lucky sari, was very good to me. I did very well in my exams on that and regard it as my lucky sari as I had appeared in all my exams. I did my HSC and university entrance, honours and masters. I always wore that sari during my exams. So I obviously bought with me.'

'My mother died just before I came. She gave me a red half silk Jamdani with golden embroidery. That was her last present to me. I still have that sari, I don't wear it very much as I want to preserve that.' As a Civil Servant, Zareen wore this sari 'as it was red, at Christmas parties; sometimes we used to go to big restaurants. My colleagues appreciated it and loved it. I used to wear it very neatly and nicely. When I used to wear Jamdani sari to work I used to feel dignified and people appreciate so much. I was singled out as an elegant kind of person.'

'Even though I have been living here over 40 years, in my mind I am still a Bengali girl ... I am still a very Bangladeshi person. Jamdani is part of our life. Jamdani is my culture, my heritage. It's social cohesion in a big way, as in the wedding of my sister's son. Can you imagine at least 60 – 70 ladies wearing Jamdani and roaming around the big place? Singing, dancing, joyful!'

'It's very sad that we don't appreciate Jamdani as we should. I think we don't look after the people who weave the sari, it is so skilful. It takes months to create one. It is our art. We should look after our weavers as they cannot sustain their lives with this trade and are leaving.'



Zareen Ahmad



Farida Ahmed

Farida Ahmed came to England aged 23 in 1997 to join her husband, bringing 'saris, salwar kameez and four Jamdani saris, my favourite.'

She wore Jamdani to 'all kind of Bengali occasions, especially New Year's festival, weddings' but also at non-Bangladeshi events. 'They always say it's really, really beautiful. We went on a holiday in Scotland, and I decided to wear sari, me and my friends and my sister. My sister wore white Jamdani. Everyone was asking about the sari and admiring ... I felt good, fantastic.'

'When heard of this project from my aunty, I was so excited! Inside we all feel the same thing about Jamdani sari, we want it to reach everyone in this world. I remember my sister's husband once said I like to bring Jamdanis and Punjabis as it will do any occasions from birthday parties to anything.'

'I feel like it's different, no one has it. Nowhere in the world has the same. Only in Bangladesh I would like Jamdani to be more modernised in design so we can compete with the rest.'



Farida Ahmed



Firoza Ahmed

Firoza Ahmed came to England in 1967 aged 22 to join her husband. In her luggage were 'saris, cotton and synthetic and two Jamdani saris ... cotton as comfortable to wear, synthetic easy care and Jamdani as traditional.'

'In a party after one month, the person was Bengali and the wife was English. And she invited some other people, mixed crowd. I thought Jamdani would be good as traditional. [People] were amazed, it's such a beautiful thing. The work and the achal (end of sari). I went to Bangladesh and I bought my boss's wife a sari and I told him the history of Jamdani. She doesn't wear saris but was amazed. She made a long dress out of that, party dress and she sent to the office to show. It was really beautiful. She appreciated it so much.'

'Still I prefer now to wear Bangladeshi products to non-Bangladeshi parties to show our tradition. Some of the parties I explained the history of Jamdani.'

'When I go to Bangladesh the first thing I buy is Jamdani saris, for my three Indian friends, always I gift them Jamdani. When they wear it I feel very proud, it is our own product, our culture our history.'



Firoza Ahmed



Mamata Ahmed

Mamata Ahmed came to England in 1970s as a teenager. She came with saris and some trousers but soon wore only saris as ‘all the Bengal ladies’ wore them. ‘My first sari I bought with my saved pocket money was Jamdani. That was very special for me and I still have it. It was not very nice colour or quality, was a cotton one, brown kind of colour.’

Mamata Ahmed wears Jamdani mainly for special occasions, ‘(It) makes me feel Bengali, all saris do but wearing Jamdani is a different kind of feeling, also It connects me to my mum.’



Chhaya Biswas

Chhaya Biswas came to England in 1964 aged about 18 to join her husband who was studying here.

‘I bought cotton saris, two Jamdani. No western clothes, just overcoat. Both the Jamdani were presents, ‘one was black with white with gold work, other was pastel blue, Actually I was very young and hardly wore saris; I got married, got given as gift. I remember in school were all the teachers used to wear Jamdani. We used to think, gosh what posh saris. We used to want them too. Jamdani was very prestigious with pride.’

Jamdani was worn on special occasions. ‘We wore mostly in our community. But we also wore it in mixed crowd.’

‘Jamdani saris were hard to wear and maintain so we used to buy synthetic material from John Lewis, by yard the material. Another shop in Kensington. There was not many Indian shops. We used to add lace and make borders on the material to make it into sari.’

Jamdani ‘is very comfortable, the material itself. I feel dressed, it would be noticed that you are wearing something nice. It is beautiful art, Jamdani everybody recognises that. Some of them can’t believe how long it takes to make and the amount of work in it. Jamdani is only made in Bangladesh, it is unique.’



Chhaya Biswas



Kawsar Bhuiyan

Kawsar Bhuiyan came to England in the late 1970s at the age of 18. Newly married, she and her husband were both students. She arrived with ‘trousers and tops, I didn’t wear salwar kameez and used to wear saris for parties and invitations ... I didn’t have any [Jamdani] but when I went back my sister gave me a muslin one and I still have.’

‘I have a silk Jamdani sari from 1980, real silk muslin and heavy handwork. All colours, black white, multi colours, Bangladesh national flag colour which I wore on Independence Day. You have to wear the sari to represent Bangladesh ... In those days I used to sing, I used to go to the High Commission and wear Jamdani sari.’ Singing has ‘been in my family, very long time’. My father was Member of Parliament. My mum educated all of us. My father came to this country 1951, he did his education here.’

‘I had a quite a few Calcutta friends that go crazy for Jamdani saris. One Pakistani lady said “is this sari handmade?” I explained it to her every single Jamdani is individual, even in a 100 saris no two are same. They are all one piece only. The weaver make from their mind, their own creation, different designs.’

‘Jamdani sari is very easy to wear, it has heavy handwork. Very elegant. Now saris have blouse pieces, 40 years ago there was no blouse pieces.’ Kawsar Bhuiyan still wears Jamdani ‘very occasionally, mostly for programmes and musical gatherings. I have kept my collection very nice.’



Kawsar Bhuiyan



Kawsar Bhuiyan

Begum Rokeya Chowdhury

Begum Rokeya Chowdhury came to England in 1967 aged 21 to join her husband, then a student. She brought with her a 'few saris and one Jamdani. At the time it was fashionable. Other saris were silk. We only used to wear sari, not salwar kameez. And trousers.'

'Jamdani is a special sari, worn for Bangladeshi occasions, when there was a big gathering'.

At the time, 'No sari shops, Tooting was all English shops, no Asian shops when I arrived.' Fabric from John Lewis was made into saris. Her husband was 'very fashionable, he used want me to wear stylish clothes and heels'. He would bring Jamdani from Bangladesh and also buy fabric at John Lewis.'

'Now I don't wear Jamdani, I wear soft type of silk as I cannot carry heavy sari.' But the Jamdani sari gave her a sense of cultural identity. 'We are Bengali so we used to enjoy wearing that.'



Begum Rokeya Chowdhury



Hosnara Hussain

Hosnara Hussain was born in Barisal, Bangladesh and came to England in 1973, aged 29, with her husband. She brought with her 'two Jamdanis, a gift, but can't remember all the rest, all saris.'

'I never wore anything except saris in UK.' She wore Jamdanis to weddings and parties. 'When I was a medical student, we used to wear Jamdani in college in Bangladesh. But in England only for occasions, mainly with Bangladeshi parties, but there are English people in weddings and parties. One or two said it looked very nice.'

Wearing Jamdani 'isn't different from wearing silk, but obviously it looks good and when I see other people wear it I like it too. I say it is cultural identity, only in Bangladesh you can get it.'

Tarana Huq

Tarana Huq came to England aged 17 in 1975 with her husband, just married. She brought a few Jamdani saris with her; they were comfortable to wear but also made her 'feel like a proud Bangladeshi' wearing them. If we don't wear them how will people know? I am sure every Bangladeshi woman feels that way.' She found that non-Bangladeshis admired them. 'We should have more multi-cultural shows and promote Jamdani. Other people may want to buy and wear it'.



Tarana Huq



Momtaz Hoq

Momtaz Hoq came to England in 2006 aged about 39. 'I brought all sorts of saris because saris are one of my favourite things to wear. I have all sorts of Bengali-speaking friends and functions, so I often wear Jamdani. It is one of my favourite sari and I have got some Bangladeshi silk saris as well.'

'I studied in Russia, (so) I did not have much chance to wear saris. It is a cold weather country. On my graduation day it was summertime; I wore a nice Jamdani sari in a combination of red and green which resembles our Bangladeshi flag. Because they used to show, in the cinema hall, Hindi films, so they thought I am from India and that Jamdani is from India. Then, one of my friends from Nepal came to me and asked, 'Momtaz, you look so beautiful. Such a beautiful sari.' She was wearing a silk sari. I said, 'This is Jamdani. It is from my country, and it is hand-made.' And then in the evening at the dinner time, my Dean came to me and he also admired my sari. He said that he had never seen someone wearing Jamdani before as a Bengali woman, as a student. So, I have a picture of me with my Dean and the teachers, taken because of the saris, not for me.'

'I love Jamdani, and when I came to England, I did not have much friend in Russia to give them away as a present. Actually, I did give one sari to my friend in Lucknow, but my Marathi friend was more interested in my Bengali Dhaka cotton sari or Rajshahi silk. At that time I had four (Jamdani) saris and I brought all of them with me. Among those, three saris were given by my Father 20 or 25 years ago. Of course, I won't give those saris away while I am alive, perhaps my daughter.'

'When I go home, I buy Jamdani and I wear them. I love them. It is unique. I haven't seen actually any sari I can compare with Jamdani, the pattern, the design. I remember, in 2013, one of my friend's daughters got married and my friend gave all her close friends Jamdani as a present to wear in her daughter's mehndi and holud evening before wedding. You know, henna, turmeric paste. It is a big function. I think she has given away more than twenty different colours of Jamdani. So, we all wore Jamdani on that occasion. It was a really beautiful evening.'





Anowara Khan

Anowara Khan came to England in 1973 aged about 28 with her husband, a student. She brought with her three or four cotton saris and two favourite Jamdani saris.

She wore skirts but also saris on special occasions. She wore Jamdani at college and on occasions such as wedding parties and Bangladeshi New Year. 'I love to wear it, always had people saying "it's lovely and looking gorgeous Anowara". (It is) 'part of my identity, when I wear it I look elegant. People love to wear Jamdani, it has got high value.' English people 'loved it! They always touch my sari and say what beautiful embroidery.'

'Recently I realised how special it is ... I know the background of the weavers, the hard work and the time it takes. I sometimes feel sorry that I used to wear the Jamdani but yet that the weavers did not have enough money to survive. I really want to do something for them. Jamdani takes special techniques and skills to make. We are carrying that value when we wear it. It has got history. We are wearing automatically the connection made between the weaver, wearer and the beautiful work on the sari. The colours and design reflects our country ... deeper feelings of our life, satisfaction, heart that we left in Bangladesh as I am in foreign country. The feelings I get seeing children wearing Jamdani on stage reflects my country and where I come from and where I am living now. Country to country makes a beautiful connection.'

'Even in lockdown I look at my Jamdani saris and think when will I wear it next? I think of the people who send it to me with love. Even we go out with friends we ask each other are we going to wear Jamdani sari? '

Rezina Khaleque

Rezina Khaleque came to England in 1972 aged 29 to join her husband.

‘We had an idea that in London you couldn’t buy traditional or party saris so my mother added quite a few nice saris in my suitcase. There were three or four Jamdani saris, which we used to call Dhakai Jamdani. I bought salwar kameez also, but mostly saris because I thought we will be visiting Bangladeshi houses, and there will be national functions. In Bangladesh we used to wear Jamdani all the time to our national functions. So my mother said, “take this sari to wear on Independence Day, Mother’s Day and more.”’

‘The first time Rezina wore Jamdani in England, ‘It was Independence Day, I had a beautiful light blue Jamdani with deep blue embroidery. Everybody appreciated it.’ She also recalls wearing Jamdani at the Commonwealth Institute. ‘People were looking, the cameraman focused on me. Took so many photos and asked, where was my sari from? I then proudly said it is from Bangladesh.’

‘This is our tradition, our heritage. I am proud wearing Jamdani sari. We should all continue wearing Jamdani. It will bring revenue to our country. It looks good. It is our identity.’



Rezina Khaleque



Nilufar Khondkar

Nilufar Khondkar came to England 1975 aged 19 to join her husband. 'That time I used to wear sari, usually now I wear all types of clothes. Saris are my main (one).' She brought 'silk and cotton and Jamdani saris. Jamdani, it's our tradition and it's handmade. I went to the Jamdani village and I saw how it is made. It's usually one sari per loom. It's unique type of sari.

'I wore (Jamdani) for Bangladeshi occasions but also for work. I worked for the Home Office. When there was Christmas parties or get togethers I wore my traditional Jamdani sari. People really liked it, even some of my Indian colleagues ordered Jamdani from me to bring from Bangladesh. In India they don't have Jamdani, may look like Jamdani but not real Jamdani sari.'

'I feel proud that only Bangladesh can make these type of sari and no other place in the world. Only Bangladesh can weave that type of material.'



Nilufar Khondkar



Jahan Ara Sajeda Malek

Jahan Ara Sajeda Malek came to England to join her husband aged 21 with two young children. She brought only cotton saris with her. 'I don't think I had Jamdani then because of two young children so bought cotton saris and quick ones to wear going out. But I got Jamdani the next time I went Bangladesh. When I went back I was obviously thinking what I wanted wear outside. I was thinking that I wanted to go out and do things.'

'I think around 1965, I did my A levels and did my degree. We had university functions and I wore Jamdani. It was so special and everybody really, really appreciated it as at that time there was no Bengali women in university. At evening parties, professor's house, special Christmas parties. They could not believe how beautiful it looked... they were saying that long hair and Bangladeshi dress was beautiful. And Jamdani is so special, in the evening when the parties mostly were the light lit up some of the thread it was beautiful. I also used to have matching flowers in my hair. The colours and the thread work was really special.

'With Jamdani, we feel cohesion where everybody is looking beautiful and each one is different, which is another uniqueness of Jamdani. The people that make them, they have acquired the experience over centuries and that cohesion of giving that dignity to people who are working. That also needs to be remembered, how the whole society relies on each other. I think we need to recognise that.'



Jahan Ara Sajeda Malek



Rina Mosharraf

Rina Mosharraf came to England as a teenager in early 1970s to join her husband. She bought with her 'a lot of Jamdani and other Bengali saris and salwar kameez.'

'I was very young at the time, I was a teenager. I saw my mother and sisters wear Jamdani saris whenever they go out. I love Jamdani sari, really appreciate them - there's a lot of history. I've got 17 (Jamdani) saris, whenever I go out with my husband, or to parties with friends I wear one. Sometimes I go to TV shows, when I attended the Queen's garden party and go to official parties I love to wear Jamdani.'

'Whenever I wear (Jamdani) a lot of people ask me where did I get it from? No one asks me when I wear silk sari. I feel proud. It is for important occasions but also want to show Bangladeshi things. Lot of people ask me where do you buy Jamdani, especially English people and Indian people. Even Nepali people. I say I got it from Bangladesh, they ask if possible to get from here. I say I have not seen but if you want I can bring for you from Bangladesh.'

'Everyone asks me where I get it from. English people, Indian people everyone and I feel proud.'



Rina Mosharraf



Azadi Rahman

Azadi Rahman was born in Hugli (Bengal) India. She came to England 1970 aged 17 with her husband, bringing 'a few nice saris, few cotton saris and salwar kameez. My mother packed it. I was only married two weeks before.' She brought one Jamdani. 'It was purple colour and gold. I had it many, many years but when I went home I took it back and gave somebody.' She later bought other Jamdanis and was also given them as presents.

Wearing Jamdani, she felt 'very good, very nice. And you take notice how the design is slightly changing from years before, the colour and designs.' In England, her Jamdani saris were greatly admired, especially when she explained the handloom process. Usually she wore them 'only with other Bangladeshi people. When I went to party to at work I didn't wear sari. The main reason was that I would go by public transport so not convenient. Also trying to change in the toilets that were not very clean, was too difficult. I took one Jamdani and made salwar kameez out of it and wore that sometime. Even for Christmas parties.'

For Azadi Rahman, Jamdani 'is a cultural identity on all levels. It's very traditional and reflects mainly Bangladeshi culture. I would like to say that if it can be imported and introduced to the wider markets, UK and others it would be nice. Nice for the Bangladeshis and nice for the weavers. What I found with my sister is that they need guidance how to market these things. If made into tunics people would like to wear it, modified a bit, not too much work. Just a little bit, small borders.'



Azadi Rahman



Mahbuba Rahman

Mahbuba Rahim came to England in 1970 aged 19 to join her husband. She brought 'different types' of sari with her including Jamdani, for special occasions, 'because it was very nice and beautiful design. It is art of Bangladesh. It is unique.' Mahbuba no longer wears Jamdani here anymore. Last time I went to Bangladesh I gave to my sisters who wear it. I cannot wear it here. It is very difficult to wear in this country.'

Nonetheless Jamdani gives her a sense of pride as it is 'something from our heritage, culture and art. It is uncommon, the way they do it. It is not the same as any other.'

Ferdous Rahman

Ferdous Rahman came to England aged 23 or 24. 'I bought few saris and also some salwar kameez (also) Jamdani and Banarasi sari, produced in Dhaka. A few other saris for wearing on occasions. ... Especially in cultural or national events related to our country we used to wear saris. As you know when you wear saris it looks beautiful and elegant. In those times we used to wear more saris than these days.'

'Not just Jamdani, but any sari produced in Bangladesh is our pride. Everything is woven and the people who do this kind of thing have wonderful skills that they are passing to generations.'

'Any national garments produced in your country, everyone should feel proud about it especially those weavers who made them. They are the people who keeping alive that skill, not only yesterday but by generation by generations. And we should not forget about them. All this is done within the families as they do not have money to employ others, we should do something to support. And they should feel proud that they are these wonderful artists that make such beautiful products. Also we feel proud to wear them. Unfortunately it's dying down and especially India took all the design and put in computer and producing cheaper way. But they never realise that one sari took several weeks, months to complete it. And these things are in their head, not computer. It's our national production and it's produced in Bangladesh. It does not come from any other country. Also I feel that, we should promote to sell these saris and support our weavers more. There should be international organisation who keep these kind of art alive. If they are not in good condition financially obviously this art will die soon.'



Ferdous Rahman

Taleya Rehman

Taleya Rehman came to England aged 24 in February 1958 to join her husband who was studying accountancy. 'We got married in 1957. We had great difficulty obtaining the right kind of saris.' In Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, clothing was in short supply. 'It was a very lean time. There wasn't much in the market. I only bought saris, because we only used to wear saris at that time. I bought silk saris as how would you wash cotton ones? They advised me that don't take cotton saris because you won't be able to wash them, and iron; the cotton saris had to be washed and ironed. I had one Jamdani which was given to me by my mother, very old fashioned.'

'I had to work, there wasn't any money at that time. I had MA in economics, good grade. My husband was a student, used to get very meagre scholarship and I had to start working within two weeks of my arrival actually, with a book distribution company.' Later, as a teacher, Taleya Rehman wore saris 'but couldn't wear saris on sports day. I wore trousers then for PE etc., but mainly wore saris in my first stay here. Nylon and silk saris for going out. Once or twice for dinner parties I wore that Jamdani. My parents sent a few more with some people.'

'On my first visit I found I can't manage saris, hems were getting frayed so I bought a few nylon saris. There wasn't any sari shops at that time, only fabrics and it had to be at least 46 inches wide; it was a difficult task. Usual fabric was 36 inches, 48 or 56 inches were very rare. The first two fabric was from John Lewis, it used to be fabulous fabric shop at that time. I bought my first two nylon saris from there. One was magenta, one green. 46 inches. I think 1958, towards middle or end. Later on I found that another shop near Russell square station. The shop was owned by an Asian, they had stock of fabric with that width. Also, other Bengali girls bought from here, some from outside London. Very small shop but heavily stocked with this kind of fabrics. I remember taking two of my friends to that shop, I first bought printed fabric that time. Sari shops actually became very popular after the Ugandan Asians came here. They sold fabrics but saris also. I think it was late 70's.'

Jamdani was always worn for special occasions. 'The most important

event I remember, high level, Indira Gandhi the prime minister of India at that time. I was at BBC at that time and was invited to attend the dinner with all the important people. I wore a silk Jamdani, black and white.'

'In 1971 there was the Bangladesh war. We were persecuted as my husband and I worked for BBC. We had a letter to report to radio Pakistan or Bangladesh. They wanted us to work for them which we didn't want to. There was programme saying how good they were at squashing the rebellion. They wanted us to be a part of that. That's actually when we came out of the country in a disguise by acting as tourists from Thailand.'

'During '71-'95 the aviation industry flourished. Every year we used to go [to Bangladesh] and I bought Jamdanis and my friends used to get it from me. Nowadays, I find small entrepreneurs for exhibitions and celebration they have indigenous goods, including Jamdani. That's how people buy it here. But majority were buy from Dhaka, everyone used to go once or twice a year. It's never sold in shops here.'

'Jamdani was never popular saris, but exquisite sari. When I wear it here I feel proud because it's my traditional sari. Its creative, its motif very unique. I used to collect the different ones all the time. It was a special thing. I felt special and it gave me a sense of pride.'

Suraya Rahman

Suraya Rahman was born in Calcutta. She came to England in December 1968 aged 23 or 24, accompanying her husband, an accountant working for the East Pakistan, later Bangladesh, High Commission. She came with 'Bangladeshi saris, salwar kameez but mostly saris. At that time I used to wear saris a lot.' Also Jamdani 'because I like Jamdani very much. And my parents used to send me from Bangladesh. Altogether I used have five or six. I was very keen to wear the Jamdani saris. I loved it.'

Suraya wore Jamdani saris for 'weddings, birthday parties, get togethers. I used to wear saris all the time. After four or five years I started wearing salwar kameez for winter times only because I used to work in architect office in Victoria. Couple of times I wore Jamdani saris to work. And Christmas parties. They loved it and said don't wear anything else just wear your saris! The receptionist asked to borrow couple of saris for a party. Then I gave her three saris, not Jamdani. This was in the 80's.'

'It's difficult wear in winter but summer time I wear it and feel very happy and proud. I used to have a lot of Jamdani, now have two or three; rest I gave to my relatives, young girls. I love it.'

'I wanted to show people that I like my Jamdani sari. Because it's made in Bangladesh, makes me feel good. I feel Bangladeshi when I wear it. It's very difficult to wear saris due to my health but I do wear at parties. And feel good wearing one. ... A lot of foreigners know more about Jamdani now, they are making dresses with it. I am very proud to have my Jamdani, the quality I like very much. I feel free with Jamdani sari.'



Suraya Rahman

Yasmeen Rahman

Yasmeen Rahman came to England in 1977, after getting married. 'Just before getting married I used to wear salwar kameez. I sometimes used to try on a sari to see how it looked, but wore salwar kameez. But some of my wedding gifts were saris and my mum gave me saris. Also I bought some saris in London. I didn't bring any Jamdani with me, as I said I didn't practise wearing saris much. But I was always aware of Jamdani as I saw ladies wearing it in Bangladesh. Especially around celebration time. I was aware of Jamdani and admired it. Later on when I came here, my eldest gifted me couple of Jamdani. I have about four Jamdani which are all gifts from my family.'

Yasmeen wore her Jamdani to 'Bangladeshi celebrations, especially when I performed on the stage and still do. I feel wearing it I am not only presenting the country but the poets like Tagore and Nazrul Islam as well. I felt Jamdani would be suitable for not only presenting my country but also the literature from my country. I did wear Jamdani most of time, out of ten times I would wear Jamdani five or six times. There was this one time that Nadia presented this show, showing Bangladeshi films to mixed crowd. Around that time, I remember wearing green Jamdani with red blouse. Some years ago, my daughter and I went to photo studio to get our photos together to celebrate our birthdays. I wore a blue Jamdani, dark blue with light blue thread.'

Yasmeen says that wearing Jamdani, 'I feel good, not only Jamdani but other materials as well from Bangladesh. We are proud of it. Whenever I wear a sari I feel good, especially Jamdani as it has history attached to it. It goes back long way. It also represents our country's heritage. Also, other saris our country produces. Ladies from Calcutta they would always admire the Jamdani. They always talk about Jamdani and ask me to bring Jamdani. As a nation you want to belong to something and identify with something that is valued by people in general in that country and nation.'



Yasmeen Rahman



Yasmeen Rahman

Rowshon Rahman

Rowshon Rahman Came to England in 1974 aged 24 to join her husband. 'In the beginning I wore trousers and shirts, but after few years I wore salwar kameez and saris all the time. Still I wear our country clothes as not used to wearing western clothes.'

'I loved Jamdani sari when I was in Bangladesh. I always liked to wear Jamdani saris and when I got here, I also gave Jamdani saris as presents. Jamdani saris are one of the Bangladesh's famous sari. Everybody liked that. Still now if I go to Bangladesh, if I bring something then it is Jamdani sari. I have lots of variety in my wardrobe. Cotton, mix, silk variety designs. Lots of them. My daughter, born here, she also wears Jamdani. Any functions going on here, any cultural functions, I liked to wear and my daughter also. She likes also Jamdani sari. All our Bangladeshi people like Jamdani sari. My husband's brother's wife, she is English, also likes wearing it.'

'Our victory day there is a party in High Street Kensington Town Hall every year. So they invite us, and I always wear a Jamdani sari. I feel that it is our most important thing that I wear Jamdani sari there. Lots of people wear Jamdani saris there. They are appreciated by both Bangladeshi and non-Bangladeshi. Everyone says beautiful, you look nice. Where did you buy? Because of the Jamdani design, you can't see anywhere else. It is really special design.'

'[It] looks very, very elegant when you wear Jamdani sari. And when you wear it, dignity and you feel better. I feel good, I like to wear Jamdani sari when it's cultural and even non cultural functions. I sometimes wear Jamdani when I go to my English friends' house because they appreciate it.'



Rowshon Rahman



Begum Helena Samad

Begum Helena Samad was about 22 when she came to England in 1969 with her husband. She came with 'saris, some salwar kameez but mostly saris that I used to use.'

At university in Bangladesh, I wore saris. I started wearing salwar kameez 25 years later. I used to wear saris all the time before'

In England, 'I used to also go work with saris, no problem as I felt more comfortable. When going out for ordinary stuff like shopping we wore saris, everything in sari. But that time it was not Jamdani saris as I cannot use it roughly because we love it and try to keep it very nice and not spoil it. When I go visit or go anywhere, not shopping, then I wear Jamdani. I had so many Jamdani saris.'

'Here where ever I went I used to wear it, doesn't matter if Bengali or non-Bengali. Now I am older, we are senior citizen, retired I don't go out all the time, but if I go parties or occasions I wear it. Before I used to wear it very often, seeing friends or if friends came to see me. I was so familiar with wearing saris.'

'Jamdani sari is very nice and handling easy, better quality. I can wear a sari very beautifully and help my daughter and niece wear it. Nowadays in Bangladesh, Dhaka people go to the parlour, but I know how to wear it. When I go America or concerts anywhere. I love it, even young girls say "Aunty, so nice, where did you get it?"

'Because here we do not get it, even some friends ask me can you get me Jamdani when I go Bangladesh, who are not from Bangladesh. Sometimes some people from India, Bengali friends ask me to bring it, so I used to bring it and my daughter also used to bring it. I used to give them as gifts, because they love that one, instead of other saris. Quality very, very nice, that's why I say you have to know how to handle it.'



Begum Helena Samad



Rifat Wahhab

‘My father first came as he had scholarship for his PHD, in 1963. My mother, I and my brothers followed 1964. I was 8 years old.’

‘Because I was still a girl, we wore frocks gathered at the waistline. Quite plain but easy to wear. The expectation was, as we grew older we would wear salwar kameez or equivalent, and go on to saris afterwards.’

‘I grew up with full family of women wearing saris and the whole society wore saris. I used to love all the variety, it was part of being a woman I think in my eyes as a little girl, I used to look at them all think they were lovely. They were all types of saris, Jamdani, cotton and silk. I was fortunate that my mother had friends with good taste in saris, they were all so lovely. My mother wore Jamdani sometimes, she also liked cotton saris and silk ones. Her friends were all really into Jamdani, I would see it more at special occasions rather than every day. They captivated me, they were so beautiful I couldn’t keep not looking at them.’

‘Even these days it is to be worn on special occasions.’

‘I wanted to wear [Jamdani saris] from age 13; my first experience was quite overwhelming as there was so much starch in them that it ballooned out! As young girl, we all wanted to look slim so I went to my mum and said I wanted to wear it but it makes me look fat! The advice I got from an aunt was start wearing at home and practising. I remember some of my aunts offering to wear the saris to break it down and then give it back once soft. There was quite a lot of starch in those days. My early Jamdani was a lovely natural off white with pink work, perfect for a young girl. It was sent over from Bangladesh. Once in a while enterprising women come with suitcase of Jamdani here to sell.’

‘Jamdani means the world to me, it’s not like any other saris. I like indigenous saris, this is my indigenous because I am a Bangladeshi ... Pride, self-recognition and identity; it’s strange how one garment can make you feel that way, but it is the Jamdani that does.’



Rifat Wahhab





View the full exhibition, *Bringing Jamdani to England* by visiting the following website:

www.muslintrust.wordpress.com

Project summary

Textiles can be important cultural symbols and repositories of memory among dispersed peoples. Muslin Trust, with the support of the National Heritage Lottery Fund, has recorded the clothing memories of women who came to Britain in the 1950s, '60s and '70s and now form part of the Bangladeshi community in Merton, south west London. Arriving in the UK as students, professionals and young wives to join their husbands, many women brought Jamdani saris with them. Some still have these saris in their possession today. They recall how wearing this special sari was an important part of maintaining their cultural identity.

At first the UK Bangladeshi population was small and scattered, but as more Bangladeshi women arrived in London, they describe how there were increasing opportunities for cultural and community events where they might wear their Jamdani saris, causing great admiration. As economic circumstances improved, there were more return visits to Bangladesh and women returned with Jamdani saris for themselves, their families and friends. The enduring popularity and appeal of the Jamdani sari among women of all ages is evident within Bangladesh, in the Bengal region of India, and among the Bangladeshi Diaspora around the world.