“Dhakai Muslin,” the Quintessential Fabric of Bengali Identity:

Colonial Erasure and Postcolonial Revival

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: "Dhakai Muslin," the Quintessential Fabric of Bengali Identity: Colonial Erasure and Postcolonial Revival

Dhakai muslin was once considered one of the finest handwoven cotton textiles in the world and held a central place in Bengal's economic and cultural history. Artisans produced it from locally grown *phuti karpas* cotton through highly specialized spinning and weaving techniques. During the Mughal period, muslin gained international fame and circulated widely through global trade networks, but its production later declined because of several interconnected factors such as British colonialism, industrialization, occupational displacement, the disappearance of phuti karpas, and the gradual loss of specialized knowledge.

This thesis examines the historical disappearance and contemporary state-sponsored revival of Dhakai muslin through the frameworks of colonialism, nationalism, folklore, collective memory and heritage. It combines historical and theoretical research with qualitative interviews involving government officials, scientists, journalists, students, and participants in Bangladesh from different social and geographical backgrounds. The study examines how Dhakai muslin remained culturally significant even after its material production declined, kept alive in Bengali collective memory through stories about its legendary fineness and intentional colonial destruction.

It explores how the contemporary state-supported revival represents more than the recovery of a lost textile technology. Researchers and artisans recovered phuti karpas and reconstructed specialized knowledge. The Bangladeshi state used Geographical Indication recognition and

heritage initiatives to position Dhakai muslin as national heritage. Interviews show that people understand the revival differently based on education, class, gender, geography, and economic accessibility. These differences show that national heritage does not create a uniform relationship with the past.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the revival of Dhakai muslin involves both material recovery and cultural reconstruction. The revival transforms memories of colonial loss into narratives of cultural recovery and national pride. At the same time, it creates new debates about cultural ownership, authenticity, commercialization, and artisan sustainability. Its long-term success depends not only on preserving the textile but also on providing fair compensation, stable livelihoods, and opportunities for artisans to transmit their specialized knowledge to future generations.

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INTRODUCTION

Dhakai muslin occupies a distinctive place in the history and cultural memory of Bengal. People once celebrated it as one of the finest handwoven cotton textiles in the world. Its extraordinary lightness and transparency made it famous. Artisans primarily produced Dhakai muslin in and around Dhaka from locally grown *phuti karpas* cotton (*Gossypium arboreum* var. *neglecta*). Producing the finest varieties required highly specialized knowledge of cotton cultivation, spinning and weaving. Women spun the exceptionally delicate yarn. Skilled male weavers transformed the yarn into cloth through techniques passed down across generations (Karim 1965; Crill 2016). During the Mughal period (1526–1857), Mughal emperors and court elites actively patronized this highly specialized industry (Karim 1965; Crill 2016). Mughal emperors, members of the imperial household and court elites wore the finest Bengal muslins as part of their courtly dress (Houghteling 2017, 91–116; Crill 2016). European royalty and elites also embraced fine muslin as a fashionable luxury fabric. French queen Marie Antoinette and Empress Joséphine Bonaparte became prominent admirers of muslin during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Gorvett 2021; Roychowdhury 2022). Extensive trade networks carried Bengal's textiles across Asia, the Middle East and Europe (Karim 1965; Crill 2016). Muslin therefore served as more than a luxury commodity. Local environments, skilled labor, inherited knowledge and specialized communities sustained its production and strengthened Bengal's textile economy.

The expansion of British colonial power fundamentally transformed this textile economy. The English East India Company gradually moved from participating in Bengal's existing commercial networks to controlling them politically and economically. Colonial monopolies and

British protectionist policies weakened Bengal's handloom industries. The Industrial Revolution and the expansion of machine-made textile production placed these industries within an increasingly unequal global economic system. Changing occupations and environmental conditions further weakened muslin production. Artisans also lost specialized knowledge while farmers gradually stopped cultivating phuti karpas. No single historical event therefore caused the disappearance of Dhakai muslin. Instead, interconnected political, economic, technological and social transformations gradually undermined the production system that had sustained the textile for centuries.

Yet Dhakai muslin did not disappear from Bengali cultural memory when its production declined. People continued to tell stories about the extraordinary fineness of the fabric. Generations heard accounts of muslin so delicate that an entire piece could pass through a ring. Other stories described muslin as nearly invisible when spread over grass or small enough to fit inside a tiny container. People also connected its disappearance to memories of British colonial exploitation. One widely circulated story claims that British authorities cut off the thumbs of Bengali weavers. Although scholars contest the historical accuracy of this story, it remains significant within Bengali popular memory. These narratives preserve two interconnected images of muslin. One celebrates the extraordinary accomplishments of Bengali artisans. The other remembers how colonial domination destroyed that accomplishment. Dhakai muslin consequently survives not only as a historical textile but also as a powerful cultural narrative about craftsmanship, loss, colonialism and identity.

The relationship between material culture and collective memory became particularly significant in the twenty-first century when the Bangladeshi government initiated efforts to revive

Dhakai muslin. The government began supporting research in 2014. Researchers, scientists, officials, spinners and weavers then worked to recover the cotton variety and the knowledge needed to reproduce the textile. Researchers located and identified phuti karpas. They reconstructed methods for hand-spinning extremely fine yarn and trained artisans to reproduce historical weaving techniques. By the early 2020s, the project had successfully produced new pieces of Dhakai muslin after nearly two centuries of disappearance. The project has not yet achieved mass production or commercialization. Producing the textile still requires extensive labor, specialized skills and considerable expense.

The revival raises questions that extend beyond the technical reproduction of a lost textile. What does it mean to "revive" a cultural tradition after its original social, political and economic world has fundamentally changed? Why has Dhakai muslin become important to the Bangladeshi state and contemporary Bangladeshis? How do state institutions reconstruct a textile historically associated with the wider region of Bengal as the national heritage of modern Bangladesh? How do people from different educational, occupational, geographical, gender and socioeconomic backgrounds understand the significance of this revival? The revival also raises questions about authenticity, commercialization and the future of the artisans whose labor sustains the craft.

This thesis approaches these questions by treating Dhakai muslin not simply as a textile but as a form of material culture. Through muslin, histories of colonialism, nationalism, collective memory, heritage and economic change intersect. I argue that the contemporary revival of Dhakai muslin represents both material recovery and cultural reconstruction. Scientists and artisans have materially recovered the cotton and specialized knowledge necessary to reproduce the fabric. At the same time, Bangladeshi institutions and communities reconstruct the meanings attached to

muslin in the present. The revival connects muslin to cultural recovery, national heritage and memories of colonial loss. It also creates new debates over cultural ownership, authenticity, commercialization and artisan sustainability.

The thesis also argues that this transformation is selective rather than neutral. The historical region of Bengal does not correspond neatly to the borders of the contemporary nation-state. Bengal today extends primarily across Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. Its textile traditions developed through communities, trade networks, migration and political systems that existed before contemporary national boundaries. Dhakai muslin therefore emerged from a regional history rather than from the modern nation-state of Bangladesh. Although both nation-states of India and Bangladesh have made efforts to claim Dhakai muslin as their singular cultural property, its contemporary revival increasingly positions Bangladesh as its principal cultural and legal inheritor. Government-sponsored research, Geographical Indication recognition, heritage discourse and plans for commercialization all contribute to this transformation. Through the revival, Bangladesh connects itself to a prestigious past while redefining that past through contemporary national boundaries.

We cannot understand this process without considering the complicated relationship between Bengali and Bangladeshi identity. Bengali cultural identity has a history that precedes the establishment of Bangladesh. It remains connected to a broader linguistic and cultural region that extends across political borders. In contrast, Bangladeshi national identity developed through particular political experiences. British colonialism, the Partition of 1947, the Language Movement of 1952, political and economic inequalities between East and West Pakistan and the Liberation War of 1971 all contributed to its development. Bengali and Bangladeshi identities

therefore do not function simply as opposing categories. People continuously negotiate and overlap these identities through language, religion, politics, culture, folklore and everyday practice. Dhakai muslin occupies a particularly revealing position within this relationship because it can evoke a broader Bengali cultural history while also functioning as a symbol of contemporary Bangladeshi national heritage.

Folklore and collective memory play an important role in this transformation. Memories of Dhakai muslin do not simply preserve an objective record of the past. Stories about its almost supernatural fineness, the suffering of weavers and its disappearance under colonial rule allow people to interpret the textile through narratives of cultural achievement and historical loss. The contemporary revival gives these older narratives new relevance. Many Bangladeshis once knew the textile primarily through stories. They can now encounter it again as a material object. The revival therefore creates an unusual relationship between memory and material culture. Collective memories preserved the cultural significance of muslin when the textile itself had nearly disappeared. Its material revival now reinforces and reshapes those memories.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

This thesis centers on the relationship between the historical disappearance and contemporary revival of Dhakai muslin and the construction of cultural and national identity in Bangladesh. It asks several interconnected questions:

1. What factors contributed to the decline and disappearance of Dhakai muslin?
2. How did stories and collective memory keep the memory of Dhakai muslin alive after its production declined?

3. How does the revival transform a historically shared Bengali textile tradition into a symbol of Bangladeshi national heritage?
4. How do Bengali and Bangladeshi identities shape the way people understand Dhakai muslin as heritage today?
5. How has the Bangladeshi government revived Dhakai muslin?
6. How do people from different social, educational and geographical backgrounds understand the revival of Dhakai muslin?
7. What does the revival tell us about cultural ownership, authenticity and Bangladesh's efforts to establish Dhakai muslin as national heritage while developing it as an economically sustainable craft?

Through these questions, I examine Dhakai muslin across several historical conditions. I trace its transformation from a locally produced handwoven textile into a globally traded luxury commodity. I then examine its decline under colonial and industrial transformation and its continued presence in collective memory. Finally, I examine how Bangladesh has transformed a nearly lost regional tradition into a state-supported heritage project.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis draws on theories of nationalism, folklore, collective memory and heritage to examine the historical decline and contemporary revival of Dhakai muslin. Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of the nation as an "imagined community" explains how shared language, history and cultural practices create a sense of national belonging. Partha Chatterjee (1991) critiques Anderson from a postcolonial perspective and shows how cultural traditions can become important sites for expressing national identity. I draw on Andreas Wimmer (2012), Maya Tudor (2013) and

Adria Lawrence (2013) to consider how political and institutional processes shape nations and nation-states.

Folklore and memory theories provide a framework for examining how Dhakai muslin continued to carry cultural meaning after its material production had largely disappeared. Johann Gottfried Herder (2024) and Roger D. Abrahams (1993) offer perspectives on the relationship between folklore, culture and nationalism. Maurice Halbwachs's (1992) concept of collective memory and Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* explain how communities reconstruct the past and maintain connections to it. Riki Saltzman's (2012) work on the relationship between history, folklore and cultural memory further informs my analysis of how narratives surrounding Dhakai muslin transform historical experiences into meaningful stories about cultural achievement, colonial loss and identity.

In order to understand heritage as an active process of cultural production rather than something people simply inherit from the past, I draw on Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998). Valdimar Hafstein (2009) and Pablo Alonso González (2013) help me examine how states and institutions recognize and define heritage. Leah Lowthorp's (2025) work further demonstrates how institutional heritage processes make certain cultural traditions more visible and authoritative while leaving others at the margins. Regina Bendix (1997) supports my questioning of the idea of authenticity as a fixed quality. Joseph C. Nunes, Andrea Ordanini and Gaia Giambastiani (2021) provide a framework for examining competing judgments of authenticity, while Renate Lachmann's (1989) discussion of Bakhtinian hybridization offers a way to understand how revived traditions can change and create new meanings. These perspectives support my examination of

how Bangladesh has reconstructed Dhakai muslin as both national heritage and a living cultural tradition.

Together, these theories provide a framework for examining Dhakai muslin as material culture, collective memory and national heritage. They also inform my analysis of how people negotiate cultural ownership and authenticity as the revived textile enters new cultural and economic conditions.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis combines historical research, theoretical analysis and qualitative interviews. I conducted these interviews remotely rather than through in-person fieldwork, due to fluctuating U.S. governmental immigration policies. In the historical sections, I draw on scholarly literature, historical accounts, archival and museum materials, government sources, newspaper reports and other published materials. I use these sources to reconstruct the development of Bengal's textile industry and the production and global circulation of Dhakai muslin, as well as to explore the multiple processes that contributed to its decline. Rather than explaining the disappearance of muslin through a single narrative, I consider colonial economic intervention alongside industrialization and technological transformation. I likewise examine changing trade relationships, occupational displacement, environmental change, the decline of phuti karpas and the gradual loss of specialized artisanal knowledge.

For the contemporary case study, I conducted qualitative interviews with fifteen participants who represented different relationships to Dhakai muslin. These participants included key individuals involved in the revival of Dhakai muslin from a variety of different backgrounds.

Md. Ayyub Ali of the Bangladesh Handloom Board provided an institutional perspective on the state-led revival project. Dr. Monjur Hossain, a geneticist and retired professor of Botany at the University of Rajshahi, discussed the scientific search for phuti karpas. Journalist Sheikh Saifur Rahman provided insight into media narratives, public representation and questions of cultural ownership.

I also interviewed participants from different age groups, educational backgrounds, occupations and geographical settings. Through these interviews, I sought to understand how knowledge and perceptions of muslin vary across Bangladeshi society. The participants included university students, urban teenagers, rural teenagers, a working woman and a domestic worker. I do not treat "the public" as a homogeneous category. Instead, these interviews allow me to consider how education, class, gender, geography, cultural exposure and economic accessibility influence people's relationships with heritage.

The contemporary revival also requires us to consider Bangladesh's continuing relationship with textile production and capitalism. Bangladesh now occupies a major position in the global ready-made garment industry. Contemporary industrial garment production differs fundamentally from the specialized handloom production of precolonial Bengal. Yet textiles have remained central to the region's economy across dramatically different historical systems. This continuity allows me to consider Bangladesh as a "textile nation" while recognizing the profound transformation of labor under global capitalism. It also raises an important question for the muslin revival: can commercialization create a sustainable market without reproducing inequalities that harm the artisans whose labor and knowledge sustain the craft?

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

My original research plan included traveling to Bangladesh to conduct in-person fieldwork and visit sites connected to the Dhakai muslin revival. However, uncertainty surrounding changing U.S. government policies created concerns about international travel and re-entry as an international student. I therefore decided not to travel to Bangladesh for fieldwork and conducted my interviews remotely. This change required me to adapt my research process and shaped the kinds of materials and experiences I could access during the study.

When I first began the background research for this thesis, I assumed that phuti karpas, the cotton variety historically associated with Dhakai muslin, had become completely extinct. In fact, almost every source I reviewed described the plant as extinct. As I conducted my fieldwork and interviews, my understanding gradually changed. Ayyub Ali, the Director of the Muslin Revival Project, explained that the complete extinction of a plant species generally takes a long period of time—around three hundred years, according to his understanding. From this perspective, phuti karpas had not disappeared entirely; rather, it had remained hidden among other cotton varieties in household gardens and rural landscapes. Since most cotton plants look quite similar, local people no longer recognized it as a distinct variety connected to Dhakai muslin and simply treated it as an ordinary cotton plant. Through this research, I learned that its decline was the result of a multifaceted process that I explore in this thesis.

Another assumption that this research helped me reconsider concerns the often-repeated claim that historical Dhakai muslin reached yarn counts of 1,000 to 1,500. Yarn count measures the fineness or thickness of yarn through the relationship between its length and weight. It does not refer to the number of threads in a finished fabric, as the term “thread count” commonly does

for modern bedsheets. In the English Cotton Count (Ne) system, specialists determine the count by calculating how many 840-yard lengths, or hanks, of yarn weigh one pound. A higher count indicates a finer and lighter yarn because the spinner stretches the same weight of cotton across a greater length.

Historical sources generally place fine muslin yarn at approximately 200 to 500 count, although some popular accounts claim much higher figures. As we will see in the following pages, I learned that researchers continue to debate the historical evidence for claims of 800, 1,000, or even 1,500 count. The contemporary revival therefore makes yarn count an important measure for evaluating how closely artisans can reproduce the exceptional fineness associated with historical Dhakai muslin.

Overall, this research changed several assumptions I initially held about Dhakai muslin. It taught me to question commonly repeated narratives and examine them alongside historical and scientific evidence. My interviews also helped me understand the complexity behind the disappearance and revival of this textile. Most importantly, this research showed me that Dhakai muslin carries a history shaped by people, changing technologies and cultural memory.

ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS

This thesis consists of four chapters. They trace the historical development of Dhakai muslin, examine the construction of national identity and explore the contemporary revival of the textile. The final chapter examines the relationship between colonial extraction, heritage and contemporary economic structures.

Chapter One, “The Historical Development of Dhakai Muslin,” establishes the historical foundation of the study. It traces the long history of handloom weaving in Bengal and examines the conditions that allowed Dhakai muslin to achieve international fame. The chapter discusses phuti karpas and the specialized processes of cotton preparation, spinning and weaving. It also examines the gendered organization of labor and different varieties of muslin. I then discuss Mughal patronage and international trade. The chapter examines how the British East India Company transformed Bengal’s textile economy. I argue that no single cause explains the disappearance of Dhakai muslin. Instead, several historical and economic forces combined to undermine muslin production. These included colonial exploitation, industrialization, technological change, unequal competition and occupational displacement. Environmental changes and the decline of phuti karpas also contributed to this process. The gradual loss of specialized knowledge further accelerated the decline.

Chapter Two, “Bengali Identity, Bangladeshi Nationalism, and the Making of Textile Heritage,” provides the historical and theoretical framework for understanding why the revival of muslin carries such strong contemporary meanings. It traces the formation of Bengali cultural identity and Bangladeshi national identity through Bengal’s layered history. British colonialism and Partition shaped these identities in different ways. The Language Movement and the Liberation War further strengthened the relationship between culture and national belonging. The chapter draws on theories of nationalism, folklore, collective memory and heritage. I argue that people continuously negotiate identity rather than inherit it as something fixed. I also examine how folklore and collective memory transform historical experiences into narratives of belonging. The chapter then considers how the state selects particular cultural practices and promotes them as national heritage. Dhakai muslin becomes particularly important in this process because it connects

indigenous craftsmanship with memories of colonial exploitation and cultural loss. Its revival now adds a narrative of cultural recovery.

Chapter Three, “Contemporary Revival and Public Perceptions of Dhakai Muslin: A Case Study,” examines the revival itself. It places the project within Bangladesh’s longer history as a textile-producing region. The chapter also considers the relationship between historical handloom production and the contemporary garment economy. I draw on interviews with people involved in the revival and members of the Bangladeshi public. These interviews help me reconstruct the institutional and scientific processes behind the project. Researchers recovered phuti karpas and reconstructed specialized spinning and weaving knowledge to reproduce muslin. The chapter also examines Jamdani, Dhakai muslin and Tangail saree within broader debates over GI recognition and UNESCO heritage. These cases raise questions about cultural ownership and modern national borders. Finally, I analyze differences in public perceptions of the revival. These differences demonstrate how education, class, gender, geography, etc. influence the ways Bangladeshis relate to muslin as heritage.

Chapter Four, “From Colonial Extraction to Heritage Economy,” examines how colonial capitalism shaped Bengal’s textile economy and connects this history to the contemporary heritage economy. It explores how the revival transforms Dhakai muslin into cultural capital and an economic asset. The chapter also considers commercialization and its effects on artisan livelihoods and the sustainability of the craft.

Taken together, these chapters trace Dhakai muslin through three interconnected processes: production, disappearance and revival. Yet the revival does not return the textile to an earlier historical condition. Political and economic changes have transformed the world

surrounding muslin. Technologies and institutions have also changed. Contemporary Bangladesh therefore does not recover an untouched past. Instead, Bengalis reconstruct that past according to the possibilities and concerns of the present.

Dhakai muslin provides a particularly revealing case for understanding how postcolonial societies engage with cultural loss. Its revival transforms memories of colonial disruption into narratives of recovery and reconnects contemporary Bangladesh with Bengal's celebrated textile history. At the same time, the revival raises questions about ownership of a shared cultural past. It also raises questions about whose memories become national heritage and who can access revived heritage. These debates show how modern nation-states can redraw the boundaries of traditions that existed long before them.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the significance of revived Dhakai muslin lies not only in the successful reproduction of an exceptionally fine fabric. Its importance also lies in how people have remembered and reconstructed a nearly lost textile. The revival shows how material culture connects colonial history with postcolonial nation-building. It also shows how heritage can function as cultural memory and a national symbol while creating new economic possibilities. Dhakai muslin therefore offers a window into how contemporary Bangladesh negotiates its relationship with Bengal's past and constructs meanings of heritage and belonging in the present.

CHAPTER 1: THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF DHAKAI MUSLIN

INTRODUCTION

Dhakai muslin stands at the center of Bengal's economic and cultural history. For centuries, Bengal produced one of the world's finest textiles and Dhakai muslin earned a reputation for its extraordinary transparency and craftsmanship. The then Mughal emperors (1526-1857) of India valued it, merchants carried it across continents, and foreign travelers wrote about its remarkable qualities. More than a luxury fabric, muslin reflected the skills and traditional knowledge of the weavers who made it.

This chapter traces the historical foundations of Dhakai muslin and examines the conditions that allowed the craft to flourish in Bengal. It begins with the early history of handloom weaving and explores how travelers, merchants, and chroniclers described Bengal's textile industry long before European colonial rule. The chapter then discusses the unique qualities that distinguished Dhakai muslin from other cotton fabrics. It pays particular attention to phuti karpas cotton (*Gossypium arboreum var. neglecta*), the specialized techniques that weavers used, and the traditional knowledge that communities passed down through generations. It also highlights the gendered division of labor in muslin production, where women spun the delicate yarn, and men carried on hereditary weaving traditions.

The chapter further examines the many varieties of muslin and the cultural meanings attached to them during the Mughal period. Mughal patronage encouraged the growth of the industry and connected Bengal to wider trade networks that stretched across Asia, the Middle East,

and Europe. These commercial connections helped transform muslin into both a symbol of refinement and an important export commodity.

This chapter also investigates the factors that led to the decline of muslin production. It explores the arrival of the British East India Company, the establishment of trading privileges and factories, and the Company's gradual shift from commerce to political control. The discussion also considers the effects of colonial monopolies, British protectionist policies, industrialization, recurring famines, environmental changes, and the disappearance of phuti karpas cotton. Rather than treating these developments as separate events, the chapter shows how they worked together to weaken Bengal's handloom industry.

Overall, this chapter provides the historical background for the rest of the thesis. It shows that Dhakai muslin was more than an exceptional textile. It formed an important part of Bengal's economic life and cultural identity. This history explains why contemporary efforts to revive muslin carry such powerful meanings in postcolonial Bengal.

THE EARLY HISTORY OF HANDLOOM WEAVING IN BENGAL

Handloom weaving has thrived for thousands of years. Archaeologists discovered spindles in the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 7000–c. 600 BCE) in India, showing that people actively practiced weaving in ancient times (Habib 2002, 28). Successive dynasties shaped the craft by introducing distinctive styles and techniques, which helped it evolve over the centuries. Bengal, a historic and culturally rich region in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent (encompassing present-day West Bengal in India and Bangladesh) developed a particularly illustrious textile tradition. Bounded by the Himalayas and the Assam hills to the north, the Bay of Bengal to the

south, and neighboring Indian states to the east and west, Bengal's fertile and abundant cotton-producing lands fostered skilled weavers who perfected the art.



Zakuragi. *Bangladesh-en.png* [Map of Bangladesh]. June 14, 2007. Wikimedia Commons. Bangladesh-en.png. Accessed August 9, 2026.

Even earlier, in the ninth century, the Arab geographer Solaiman mentioned fine fabric produced in a region called Rumy, which some scholars identify with the territory of present-day Bangladesh ("Jamdani" n.d.). In the fourteenth century, Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta visited Bengal and praised the quality and affordability of its fine cotton textiles. He described a piece of fine cotton cloth that measured thirty cubits in length and sold for only two dinars (Ibn Battuta 1953, 267). Chinese diplomats who visited Bengal between 1415 and 1432 also documented the region's textile production. They described fine cotton cloths or muslins, rugs, colored veils, gauzes, turban materials, embroidered silk, and brocaded taffetas (Eaton 1993, 96). Together, these accounts demonstrate that Bengal had developed an international reputation for fine textile production long before European colonial rule.

The region gained global renown for its exquisite silk and muslin, which became synonymous with the highest quality textiles. During the Mughal era, Bengal's weavers perfected their artistry and produced fabrics of unmatched delicacy and finesse. The Mughals came to India from Afghanistan and ruled the subcontinent for nearly 400 years. In July 1576, during Emperor Akbar's reign, Man Singh led the Mughal forces to conquer Bengal for the second time at Rajmahal. The Mughals then ruled Bengal until 1757. They valued muslin: they were its connoisseurs, wore it themselves, and actively patronized the art of muslin weaving, which encouraged the tradition to flourish. This is why the Mughal era is considered the golden age of muslin in Bengal. The fourth Mughal emperor Jahangir's wife, Empress Nur Jahan, had a deep fascination for Dhakai muslin and the silk from the Malda region. It is only natural to wonder: what distinctive qualities made muslin so coveted among royalty and the aristocracy?

DHAKAI MUSLIN: MATERIAL EXCELLENCE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

Dhakai muslin was an extremely lightweight and translucent cotton fabric of plain weave. The muslin weaving industry once thrived in Dhaka (present-day Bangladesh), especially in areas such as Sonargaon, Dhamrai, Titbari, Jangalbari, and Bajitpur, as well as in West Bengal, India, notably in Malda, Chandannagar, and Hooghly. During the eighteenth century, Dhaka muslin became renowned throughout Europe for its extraordinary delicacy. Among Indian cotton textiles, it stood unmatched. It was celebrated for its softness, transparency and sheer elegance. Dhakai muslin's exceptional quality lay largely in its thread count—while most cotton fabrics today contain only 80–100 threads per inch, Dhakai muslin achieved an astonishing 1,000 to 2,500 threads per inch. This high density of fine threads made the fabric incredibly light and smooth, ten times finer than ordinary cotton.

The cotton used to make muslin was different from that used in ordinary fabrics. Weavers spun it from a cotton plant called 'phuti karpas' (Gossypium arboreum var. neglecta). Historically, this plant grew abundantly in the Brahmaputra-Meghna river basin near what is now Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. In Bengali, "kapas" means cotton. There is a place near Dhaka called "Kapasia," which got its name because people cultivated large quantities of phuti karpas cotton there (Akanda 2018, 54). This cotton thread was so fine that its diameter measured 1/1,000 millimeters (Akanda 2018, 60).

Cotton fabric's transparency increases with higher thread counts and usually involves much finer threads. For Dhakai muslin; artisans spun cotton that was so extremely fine that the finished woven fabric allowed light to pass through easily. Skilled weavers interlaced these threads tightly without adding bulk, creating a smooth, continuous surface with tiny gaps that enhanced the

fabric's sheer quality. The threads were so fine that each individual yarn barely added opacity, so even a dense weave remained incredibly lightweight, amplifying its translucence.

Some eighteenth-century Dhaka muslins contained between 1,000 and 1,800 yarns in the warp. A ten-yard length, approximately 9.14 meters long and 0.91 meters wide, could weigh only 3.8 ounces (110 grams) (Islam 2016). J. C. Sinha provides further evidence of the extraordinary fineness of Dhaka yarn. He reports that a skein measured in the presence of Taylor in 1846 contained more than 250 miles of yarn per pound of cotton, which placed the yarn above 520 count. Sinha also notes that Dhaka yarn could be twenty to twenty-five times finer than the yarn used in ordinary mill-produced cotton cloth of his time (Sinha 1925). This exceptionally fine yarn gave Dhakai muslin its delicate, transparent, and almost weightless quality. Skilled spinners and weavers devoted considerable time and expertise to each piece of muslin. Their craftsmanship increased the fabric's value and exclusivity. By the eighteenth century, royal and aristocratic patrons had established Dhakai muslin as a prestigious luxury textile (Islam 2016).

In Bengali, weaving is called *tānt,* and weavers are *tānti* or *tantubāy*, meaning those who weave on a loom (Akanda 2018, 61). In medieval Bengal, there was fierce competition among weavers to sell the textiles they produced and demand for those goods was enormous. Weaving was one of Bengal's major export industries. While many Hindu men were traditionally weavers, the growth of the weaving industry also led many people from the Muslim community to take up the craft. A workshop known as "*Aarong*" (similar to a modern-day factory) employed some of the most skilled weavers of the Bengal region; they produced muslin for the Mughal emperors, the women of their harem, and the Nawabs of Bengal (Akanda 67).

THE TRADITIONAL PROCESS OF MUSLIN PRODUCTION

The Meghna is Bangladesh's widest river, and the areas along its banks provided ideal conditions for growing phuti karpas. The soil along the banks of the Brahmaputra was also highly suitable for its cultivation, and villages such as Bikrampur, Kederapur, Sreerampur, and Rajnagar became important centers. In Gazipur, Kapashia (noted earlier) earned special recognition for producing high-quality phuti karpas (Kareem 1990, 26).

Cultivating phuti karpas was itself a labor-intensive process that required specific environmental conditions, particularly the humid climate and fertile alluvial soils along the banks of the Meghna River. The cotton plants had to be carefully tended throughout their growing season to produce the delicate fibers needed for muslin. Once the cotton bolls were harvested, artisans thoroughly prepared the fibers before weaving could begin. This preparation involved several steps and typically took approximately two and a half to three months before the cotton could be spun into the exceptionally fine yarn required for Dhaka muslin (Kareem 1990, 27).

The entire process for producing muslin is known as *tula dhuna*, a method of carding the fiber. Rural Bengali weavers employed their indigenous knowledge for these tasks. One fascinating example comes from Bangladesh's rivers, home to a local catfish called *Boal* (*boalee*). This fish is notable for its unique jaw and teeth, which workers dried and ingeniously repurposed to carefully remove unwanted particles from the cotton fiber (Kareem 1990, 27).

Once most of the seeds were separated from the cotton, workers placed the fibers on a wooden plank and pressed them with an iron rod that they rolled back and forth until the cotton was fully freed from the seeds. Afterward, the cotton was "fluffed" through a traditional method

known as *dhuna*. In rural Bengali society (especially among weaving or yarn-spinning families) *dhuna* was an essential process to transform raw cotton into a soft and airy state. This involved the *dhununi*, a tool that resembles a bow-like instrument. When its string was plucked, it struck the cotton with a sharp vibration, producing a twanging sound and loosening and expanding the fibers to prepare them for spinning into fine threads (Kareem 1990, 27).

After the cleaning process, the delicate task of yarn-making could finally begin. The cotton used for muslin was extraordinarily sensitive, softer and more fragile than ordinary cotton. This meant that spinning required not only special skills but also immense patience. Proper climatic conditions were crucial: temperate weather prevented brittleness and allowed the fibers to be drawn out into thinner threads. Winter was considered the ideal season for yarn-making; the hot summer months, with their low humidity, often caused the fragile muslin fibers to rupture repeatedly (Kareem 1990, 28).

Women were the primary artisans in this process. To protect the finesse of their work, they cared meticulously for their fingers, sometimes even avoiding certain household tasks that could cause cuts, roughness, or other damage. For muslin spinning, the ideal temperature was said to be around 82°F. Thus, early mornings and late afternoons were regarded as the best times for spinning. Yet early morning light was dim before sunrise, and by late afternoon visibility began to fade—still, the weavers continued their work in low light to safeguard the delicate yarn from breakage. Only women with exceptionally sharp eyesight could perform this labor (Kareem 1990, 28).

Winter was generally considered the ideal season for spinning because the cool, moist air helped prevent the delicate fibers from breaking. During the hotter months (mid-April to mid-

June), however, spinners often worked at night on or near the Meghna River, where the cooler temperatures and higher humidity created more favorable conditions for producing the exceptionally fine muslin yarn (Kareem 1990, 28-30).

Historical accounts suggest that some women sailed to the middle of the Meghna River in search of suitable conditions for spinning. Spinners generally preferred the cool and humid air of the early morning and evening because moisture helped prevent the delicate fibers from breaking. They considered winter the ideal season for spinning because the cool, moist air provided favorable conditions for producing exceptionally fine muslin yarn. During the hotter months, spinners often worked at night on or near the Meghna River, where the cooler temperatures and higher humidity provided better conditions for their work (Kareem 1990, 28–30). These nighttime practices also inspired local stories about the extraordinary nature of muslin production.

The women often sang as they spun on boats along the Meghna River. On foggy mornings and evenings, passing fishermen and travelers could hear their voices through the mist but could not always clearly see the women or their boats. Some fishermen and travelers mistook these voices for those of mermaids and returned with stories of mermaids who sang in the mist and produced muslin on the river (Kareem 1990, 28–30). In *Fairy Lore: A Handbook*, folklorist D. L. Ashliman uses “fairies” as a broad category for many types of supernatural beings, including mermaids, and notes that stories about such beings appear in traditional cultures around the world (Ashliman 2006, 1). The extraordinary fineness of the finished cloth strengthened these stories because the fabric itself appeared almost unreal. Over time, these stories associated muslin production with mermaids and fairies and transformed the remarkable skills of Bengali women spinners into a supernatural image of textile production (Islam 2016; MAP Academy 2024).

Men, not women, wove muslin (Kareem 1990, 34). The demand for unique designs and colors constantly pushed them to their limits, and no one could predict how long it would take to finish a single piece. On average, a team of three skilled men spent two to six months weaving a 10-yard length of fine muslin.

Weaving was not just a profession but a heritage. Boys in weaver families started learning the craft from early childhood. Their fathers trained them with small tasks, shaping their patience, precision, and sense of design. By the time they reached maturity, weaving felt natural, though mastering fine muslin still demanded years of practice (Kareem 1990, 40).

Weavers always worked in teams. Each group of three followed the chief weaver, the most experienced man who carried the knowledge of generations. He judged the quality of fabric by touch, spotted the smallest flaw with sharp eyes, and guided the work to perfection. His strong sense of design and color also set the standard for the piece.

The second member, a journeyman, not a master, followed the chief's instructions step by step. The third, usually a boy of ten to twelve, was an apprentice. He worked almost without pay, helped with simple tasks, and absorbed the craft by watching and assisting. Through this system, fathers and masters passed the art of muslin weaving from one generation to the next (Kareem1990, 45).

CLASSIFICATION AND VARIETIES OF MUSLIN

During the Mughal period (1526–1857), weavers produced many varieties of Dhakai muslin, each with its own quality, price, use, and social meaning. These varieties belonged to the broader tradition of fine cotton textiles produced in and around Dhaka rather than representing

textiles separate from Dhakai muslin. Weavers produced some varieties as exceptionally fine plain cloth and decorated others with woven designs. Kareem explains that Persian language and literary traditions influenced the names of many muslin varieties and reflected the strong influence of Persian culture at the Mughal court (Kareem 1990, 42).

The earliest forms of Dhakai muslin differed from what people commonly recognize as Jamdani today. Historical weavers primarily produced muslin as exceptionally fine cotton cloth, although they also produced different varieties for specific uses and patrons. Jamdani developed as a decorated form of fine muslin in which weavers added motifs to the fabric. The contemporary Dhakai muslin revival project primarily seeks to recover the exceptionally fine yarn and the traditional spinning and weaving techniques associated with historical Dhakai muslin. This distinction becomes important because the revival project has also incorporated decorative Jamdani-style motifs into some newly produced muslin, which raises questions about how people define the authenticity of revived Dhakai muslin. To understand this distinction, it is useful to examine the different varieties of muslin that weavers produced during the Mughal period (1526–1857).

Mulmul Khas: During the sixteenth century, a unique variety of muslin was invented. In India, khas meant "special" or "pure," and the finest cotton came to be called Mulmul Khas. This muslin was reserved exclusively for royalty. Only the emperor, his family, and members of the court could wear it. Many believed the elegance of Mulmul Khas perfectly reflected the glory of the Mughal throne (Kareem 1990, 47).

One piece of Mulmul measured ten yards in length and one yard in width, yet weighed only six to seven tolas (60–70 grams). Its delicacy amazed everyone — it is widely said that a full piece

could pass through a lady's ring. While the Mughal court reserved the finest Mulmul Khas for the emperor and the imperial household, Indian merchants and later European trading companies exported other high-quality varieties of this muslin to satisfy the demand of aristocratic consumers in West Asia and Europe (Kareem 1990, 47).

Mulbul Khas: Slightly lower in quality than Mulmul Khas but still exquisite, Mulbul Khas was also woven for royal use. So fine that people compared it to a spider's web, a piece of 100 to 160 cubits weighed only 6 to 10 tolas. The Nawabs of Bengal especially favored this variety (Kareem 1990, 47).

Sarkar-e-Ala: This variety took its name from the place in Bengal where artisans produced it with government funding. Its lightweight and airy texture made Sarkar-e-Ala especially popular among the Nawabs and Subahdars during the hot summer months. A typical piece measured 10 yards (approximately 9.14 meters) in length and 1 yard (approximately 0.91 meters) in width (Kareem 1990, 48).

Jhuna: According to John Taylor, the name Jhuna means "fine" — an apt description. Made from delicate threads with reduced yarn to increase transparency, Jhuna was popular among Mughal princes as summer wear. Women of the royal harem and court dancers also wore Jhuna dresses, which enhanced their beauty with subtle allure. A 20-yard length weighed only 20 tolas.

Shabnam: Shabnam, meaning "morning dew," earned its name for being so light and smooth that people compared it to dew drops on grass. Kareem recounts that people said Shabnam became almost invisible when someone spread it on wet grass to dry (Kareem 1990, 49).

Abb-e-Rawan: Meaning "flowing water," Abb-e-Rawan embodied the sheer delicacy of muslin. A 20-yard length weighed only 20 tolas. A famous story tells of a weaver presenting Abb-e-Rawan to Subahdar Ali Bardi Khan. After washing the cloth, he spread it on the grass to dry. When he returned, the cloth had disappeared. Kareem also recounts a story about Abb-e-Rawan in which a weaver spread the cloth on grass to dry. According to the story, a cow ate the cloth along with the grass because it did not notice the fabric (Kareem 1990, 49). Whether true or not, the tale captures the extraordinary lightness associated with Abb-e-Rawan.

Khassa: Khassa, another Persian-inspired name, had a denser weave than other varieties. During the seventeenth century, weavers in Sonargaon gained recognition for producing Khassa. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, weavers in villages such as Jangalbari near Dhaka produced so much of this variety that people began calling it Jangal Khassa. Later, the British called it kussa (Kareem 1990, 50).

Nayan Sukh: Among all muslin types, Nayan Sukh carried a Bengali name, meaning "comfort of the eye." Also called *Tan Sukh* ("comfort of the body"), it was valued for its softness and ease. People used it as napkins, scarves, or mufflers to display wealth and refinement (Kareem 1990, 52).

Tanjeb: Tanjeb was versatile, used for both men's and women's clothing. Its distinctive texture gave garments an elegant and attractive appearance (Kareem 1990, 53).

Sarbanda: Sarbanda was prized for its charm and delicacy. Women especially loved Sarbanda scarves, which added grace to their attire (Kareem 1990, 54).

Charkona: Charkona, known for its square pattern, had both domestic and decorative uses. Europeans turned Charkona muslin into tablecloths, mats, and household decorations for occasions such as weddings and Christmas (Kareem 1990, 55).

Duria or Doria: Weavers produced Duria or Doria from special cotton varieties such as *Bhoga* or *Siroch*. Its thicker texture made some varieties affordable to common people, who also considered the fabric suitable for children's clothing. In 1771, Caroline Powys, a friend of Jane Austen's mother, attended a family gathering where she admired children dressed in Doria muslin and later recorded the experience in her diary (Kareem 1990, 57).[1]

Jamdani: Perhaps the most famous of all, Jamdani in its original form referred to muslin decorated with glittering threads. Unlike today's Jamdani, these were highly ornate, often worn at weddings, festivals, and religious celebrations. No grand occasion seemed complete without the shimmer of Jamdani (Weave in India 2025). Until the revival of Dhakai muslin, Jamdani was considered its closest-related textile.

MUGHAL TRADE AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF GLOBAL TEXTILE NETWORKS

The Mughal Empire developed a sophisticated and multifaceted system of trade and commerce that supported extensive economic activity. Highly organized and professional trading classes specialized in long-distance, inter-regional, local, and retail trade. These traders contributed significantly to the expansion of commerce that India experienced during the Mughal era and helped strengthen the empire's economic prosperity (Saha 2024, 183).

[1] Caroline Lybbe Powys's diaries were later published in edited form as *Passages from the Diaries of Mrs. Philip Lybbe Powys*, edited by Emily J. Climenson (1899). Her journal covering 1771 survives in the British Library as *Annual Journal*, vol. 1 (1757–1794), Add MS 42160.

According to Thirupathi (2018), by the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, during the Mughal Empire, the manufacture of cotton goods had assumed such extensive proportions that, in addition to satisfying domestic demand, India exported cloth to almost half the world, including the east coast of Africa, Arabia, Egypt, Southeast Asia, and Europe. The textile industry, already well established during the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556–1605), continued to flourish under his successors. From the early seventeenth century onward, the operations of Dutch and English traders brought India into direct touch with Western markets. This resulted in Europe's great demand for Indian cotton goods, which naturally increased production at home. Even the silk industry, especially in Bengal, flourished. The French physician and traveler François Bernier (1625–1688), who spent several years at the Mughal court during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb, observed Bengal's flourishing textile industry and remarked: "There is in Bengale such a quantity of cotton and silks, that the kingdom may be called the common storehouse for those two kinds of merchandise, not of Hindoustan or the Empire of the Great Mogol only, but of all the neighboring kingdoms, and even of Europe" (Bernier 1891, 439).

Long before muslin emerged as one of the world's most celebrated luxury textiles, the Indian subcontinent had established itself as an important center of long-distance commerce. Archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2600–1900 BCE) demonstrates that its inhabitants maintained commercial relations with Mesopotamia, the Persian Gulf, and Central Asia through both maritime and overland routes, which included trade in metals, gemstones, beads, shells, pottery, and other manufactured goods (Fortune IAS Circle 2025). Over the following centuries, successive kingdoms and empires expanded these commercial networks, linking the subcontinent with West Asia, East Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Mediterranean (Fortune IAS Circle 2025). During the Mughal Empire (1526–1858), these trade networks reached

an unprecedented level of organization and prosperity. The empire unified much of the subcontinent under a centralized administrative system that standardized customs duties and taxation, which facilitated the movement of goods across vast territories. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Mughal Empire accounted for nearly one-quarter of the world's economic output, making it one of the largest economies of the early modern world (Fortune IAS Circle 2025). This prosperity rested on a strong agricultural base, flourishing artisanal industries, and an extensive network of domestic and international trade. Among the empire's most valuable manufactured goods were cotton and silk textiles, which enjoyed high demand in markets across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Within this broader commercial landscape, Bengal, particularly in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, emerged as one of the foremost textile-producing regions. Its fertile environment, abundant waterways, and highly skilled weaving communities created the conditions for the production of exceptionally fine fabrics, laying the foundation for the global reputation of Dhakai muslin, which would become one of the most prized luxury textiles in the early modern world (Fortune IAS Circle 2025).

English merchant and traveler Ralph Fitch traveled through South and Southeast Asia in the late sixteenth century and visited Sonargaon in 1586. He described Sonargaon as a town where people produced “the best and finest cloth made of cotton” in India (Fitch 1921, 25). Dutch merchant and traveler Jan Huyghen van Linschoten also traveled through Asia in the late sixteenth century and documented its trade and commodities. He described Bengal’s cotton textiles as exceptionally fine and highly valued. Linschoten noted that merchants carried these textiles throughout India and other parts of Asia and exported them as far as Portugal (Linschoten 1598, 95–96).

European maritime expansion from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, often described as the Age of Exploration, brought several European powers into direct contact with the Indian subcontinent as they searched for maritime routes to Asian markets and valuable commodities. Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama reached India by sea in 1498. The Portuguese subsequently established trading posts along the Indian coast, and Dutch, English, and French merchants later established their own commercial settlements. As American historical geographer Joseph E. Schwartzberg (1992) observes, two events fundamentally transformed the Indian subcontinent's relationship with the wider world: Vasco da Gama's arrival at Calicut in 1498 and the establishment of Mughal rule in Delhi in 1526. "The years 1498 and 1526 brought to the stage of South Asian history two events of profound significance... Together these events may be thought of as precursors of the modern age. In their aftermath, Indian history increasingly became a part of world history" (Schwartzberg 1992, 204). The opening of a direct maritime route between Europe and South Asia, together with the political consolidation achieved under the Mughal Empire, greatly expanded commercial exchange and created favorable conditions for the growth of international trade, including the export of Bengal's renowned muslin.

THE FATEFUL ARRIVAL OF THE ENGLISH EAST INDIA COMPANY

The year 1608 paved the way for 200 years of exploitation, deprivation, and colonialism. On August 24 of that year, a ship belonging to the English East India Company arrived at the port of Surat in Gujarat. At that time, Emperor Akbar was ruling India, and the English presented themselves as mere traders seeking commercial opportunities. The corporation was first mostly concerned with trade, but it eventually got involved in Indian politics (Marshall 2026). Although the East India Company’s first aim was to secure spices, they soon expanded their business to trade in cotton, silk, indigo, tea, and saltpeter (Marshall 2026).

The East India Company gradually established trading posts, gained political influence, and took advantage of internal conflicts within India. What began as trade slowly transformed into control over territories, leading to the establishment of the "British Raj" (British rule) and eventually the colonial rule that reshaped the subcontinent for the next two centuries. Even before the British Crown formally established its rule in India, the British had already begun strategic planning on how to eliminate all other European merchants and establish a monopoly over trade in India (Marshall 2026).

The British East India Company established a network of trade posts, known as factories, in major Indian port cities during the 17th and 18th centuries. During the reign of the second Mughal emperor, Jahangir, in 1612, they established a trading post at Surat. But they did not stop there. During the reign of Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal emperor, the English secured permission to establish factories and conduct duty-free trade in Bengal by exploiting the emperor's vulnerability. The historian Charles Stewart (1813) describes how the English obtained these commercial privileges.

In 1633, a young daughter in Emperor Shah Jahan's southern camp accidentally burnt herself. Following the advice of the Mughal courtier Asad Khan, the imperial court contacted the East India Company's factory in Surat. The Company's senior officials immediately seized the opportunity. They sent Dr. Gabriel Boughton, the surgeon aboard the ship *Hopewell*, to treat the ailing princess. Dr. Boughton successfully restored her health (Ghosh 2002, 20).

Grateful for the treatment, the emperor wished to reward the doctor. Boughton cleverly requested, on behalf of the Company, that instead of personal gifts or payment, the Company receive duty-free trade privileges in Bengal and permission to establish a factory. The emperor

could not refuse (Ghosh 2002, 20). On 2 February 1633, Shah Jahan issued a royal decree granting the English East India Company these privileges. Although the Company welcomed this concession, its officials themselves did not anticipate that it would eventually secure duty-free trading rights across much of India. Taking advantage of these privileges, the Company established its first factory at Balasore in Orissa and later another at Hooghly in present-day West Bengal (Ghosh 2002, 26).

The Company further strengthened its position in Bengal when Dr. Gabriel Boughton successfully treated another woman, this time in the household of Shah Shuja, the Mughal Subedar of Bengal. In recognition of this service, the Mughal authorities reaffirmed the English East India Company's commercial privileges, allowing the Company to expand its trading activities in the province. Contemporary Company correspondence suggests that English officials regarded these privileges as essential to securing a reliable supply of Bengal's valuable textiles.

A letter written by President Methwold in 1634 illustrates how carefully Company officials managed their textile trade.[2] Rather than entrusting the procurement of valuable muslins to newly hired local employees, the Company preferred to rely on trusted English agents to supervise the purchase of khassa cloth (Ghosh 2002, 21). The letter also expresses concern over the return of the

[2] "Your opinion of sending a man to SUGERMAt Etsetra Places, there to produce cloth would very well become our implyment had we but on home we might truste in that business but you well know that falsity and dedayfulness of our new implied servents in such that we dwest not depose confidence in them to the vallew of 10 roopees, I also therefore myself intend so far as I can get musters of cussayes (Khassa, a kind of muslin) which are now a macing to leave the over sight of this place into William Burton and the broker, and A dressn my sealfe for the geat pogodo, ther soposing likewise to put of part such MArchandise as heere lyeth ded on our hands. The market od Saylls in HARRAPORE seimes at present as if there were no merchantsin the contry. These Portigals whilome exspeeled from HUGLY huth found GREATE favor with SHAWJAHAN and rentered that place to the number of 20 persones how cavidall for their commensing a new investment is the third part of the goods, formerly cessed on which with large priveilges and tasharests with honor the king hath bestowed on them so that our expectation of HUGLY is furstrayt…. " (Page CLXXVII, Letter of President Methwold announcing a Pirman Conceding trade in Bengala, 1634 A. D)

Portuguese to Hooghly under Mughal patronage, fearing that renewed Portuguese competition would weaken English commercial interests. These concerns reveal that the Company closely monitored local markets and regarded control over Bengal's textile trade as a strategic priority.

A second letter, written by Walter Clavell in 1676, explains why Balasore developed into one of the Company's principal trading stations (Ghosh 2002, 22).[3] Following the decline of Portuguese influence in nearby ports, the English and the Danes selected Balasore because its river and road connections made it easier to transport textiles from inland weaving centers (Ghosh 2002, 22). The letter demonstrates that the location of Company factories was determined not only by political opportunities but also by practical considerations of transport, security, and access to textile-producing regions.

The Company also sought to secure commercial privileges that did not depend solely on personal relationships. Sir William Hedges (1632–1701), the East India Company's first Agent in Bengal, recorded that Mughal authorities continued to honor the concessions they had granted during Dr. Boughton's lifetime even after his death.[4] This continuity shows that the Company had begun to establish a more institutionalized position in Bengal rather than rely solely on personal favor (Ghosh 2002, 23).

[3] , "BALLASORE begun to be a noted place when the PORTUGUEZ were beaten out of ANGENIN (Mod : HIJILI) begun to decay at PIPELY and to have a diminution in other places o f these parts, and the Barr opening and the River appearing better than was imagined, the ENGLISH and DANES endeavoured to setle here, lo be out of troubles PORTUGUEZE gave to the other nation and had themselves, the rather because the cloth of HARRAPORE, where our first factorye was settled was with our much difficultyes to be brought hither by land, and the River where our vessells usually had laine at being stop up it was noe easy mater to bring the cloth by Sea, nor soe safe have vessels ride before that place, as here in the Roads. BALLASORE."

[4] "Sometimes after this event, MR. BOUGHTON died, but the prince shall continued his liberality to the English (Early history of Company's Settlement in Bengal" - Hedges'Diary).

This series of events demonstrates how the English seized strategic opportunities and leveraged personal influence to build a strong trading presence in Bengal, ultimately laying the foundation for their growing political power in India. These contemporary documents reveal that the English East India Company expanded its influence in Bengal through a combination of diplomatic relationships, careful commercial planning, and strategic control over the procurement and transportation of textiles. At the same time, Company officials actively sought to limit competition from rival European powers, particularly the Portuguese, thereby strengthening their position in Bengal's lucrative muslin trade.

COMMERCIAL CONTROL AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF MUSLIN PRODUCTION

As discussed in the previous section, the medical services provided by the English physician Dr. Gabriel Boughton to members of the Mughal royal household strengthened the Company's relationship with Mughal officials (Ghosh 2002, 20). In return for these services, the Company obtained important commercial privileges that enabled it to expand its trade in Bengal.

At the time, the Mughal Empire faced numerous political and military challenges, including succession disputes within the imperial family and conflicts with regional powers such as the Marathas and Rajputs. In response, the English East India Company provided military and logistical assistance to Mughal authorities on several occasions, further strengthening its relationship with the imperial administration. These diplomatic ties contributed to the Mughal rulers' willingness to grant the Company additional trading privileges, including concessions such as duty-free trade in Bengal. Although these agreements initially served the interests of both the Mughal administration and the Company, they later provided the institutional foundation from

which the Company gradually expanded its commercial and political influence in India (Ghosh 2002, 23).

After securing these privileges, the English East India Company established a network of trading factories across the Indian subcontinent during the seventeenth century. Beginning at Surat and gradually extending to southern and eastern India, these factories served as commercial centers where Company officials purchased, inspected, stored, and exported textiles and other goods produced by local artisans. As this network expanded, the Company assumed an increasingly important role in the procurement and overseas trade of Bengal's muslin textiles.

The English East India Company established factories and sought duty-free trading privileges in Dhaka (then commonly known as Decca), Bengal, for two principal reasons. First, it imported manufactured goods from England for sale in Bengal. Second, it procured the world-renowned Dhakai muslin for export to overseas markets. When the English established a factory at Hooghly in 1632, the Portuguese, who had previously dominated trade, clashed with the Mughals and were expelled from the region. This allowed the English to seize exclusive control over the muslin trade (Ghosh 2002, 35).

During the Mughal era in Bengal (1576–1757), Dhakai muslin was exported from the Mughal royal court to Persia, the Middle East, and other regions. The Mughals operated their own factories, known as *"karkhanas" in Decca*, to produce Dhakai muslin. In these workshops, the weavers were not subjected to harsh coercion or oppression, and Mughal authorities paid their wages on time. There is no substantial evidence that weavers were unfairly oppressed or financially exploited during this period (Ghosh 2002, 41).

Inspired by this model, the English also built their own factories, known as *"Aarongs."* In contrast, they exercised strict control over the weavers. They appointed *mukims* and *darogas* as inspectors and closely monitored production to ensure the highest quality of muslin. Any negligence was met with severe punishment (Ghosh 2002, 41).

To collect muslin, the English appointed "commercial agents," locally called *gomastas*. These gomastas, who were local residents, earned higher commissions for procuring larger quantities of muslin. They advanced weavers between half and three-quarters of the total value of the cloth in advance. This system was known as the *dadni* system (Ghosh 2002, 43).

If weavers failed to deliver the required amount, they were severely punished by "gomastas" and English overseers. Gomastas competed fiercely with one another to collect muslin, and Murshid Quli Khan's decree ensured that nothing could obstruct the English. As a result, local merchants could no longer compete. Armed, funded, and well-organized, the English East India Company quickly monopolized Bengal's muslin trade. In this way, the Company gradually came to dominate the production and export of all kinds of Indian textiles, including Dhakai muslin. This is perhaps what the Latin proverb refers to as: "Veni, vidi, vici" or "We came, we saw, we conquered" (Ghosh 2002, 46).

FROM COMMERCIAL INFLUENCE TO TERRITORIAL EMPIRE

Although the British initially came to India for trade, they gradually realized that deep political divisions and intense rivalries existed among regional rulers, which they could exploit for their own advantage. By the mid-eighteenth century, Mughal authority in Bengal had significantly weakened, and British colonizers did not miss this opportunity to expand their power. In 1757,

they defeated Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah at the Battle of Plassey (Clive 1998) gaining political control over Bengal, and later, in 1764, they defeated the combined forces of the Mughal Emperor, the Nawab of Awadh, and the Nawab of Bengal at the Battle of Buxar, which firmly established their dominance in the region. Robert Clive claimed that the victory at Plassey secured the Company's position in Bengal ("Battle of Buxar" 2026). As early as the seventeenth century, the British East India Company had already obtained permission from Mughal authorities to establish trading posts and gradually built fortified factories while securing duty-free trading privileges. Over time, these commercial centers became military and administrative bases. Control over Bengal, the wealthiest province in India, provided the Company with vast financial resources, enabling it to expand its army and influence (Clive 1998).

In 1798, Governor-General Lord Wellesley introduced the Subsidiary Alliance System, which the East India Company, along with other policies, used to strengthen its political and military influence; they formed alliances with Indian rulers while countering French influence in the subcontinent (Sen 1949, 343–45). Indian rulers who entered these alliances accepted the presence of British forces and increasingly depended on the Company for military protection, allowing the Company to expand its influence over Indian states (Sen 1949, 344–45). The Company also skillfully exploited rivalries among regional powers, particularly among the Nizam, the Marathas, and Tipu Sultan, to weaken resistance and strengthen its own position (Sen 1949, 343–48).

Between 1848 and 1856, Governor-General Lord Dalhousie used the Doctrine of Lapse to annex several princely states that lacked a direct male heir and bring them under British control ("Doctrine of Lapse" n.d.). By combining trade, military conquest, political manipulation, and

administrative control, the East India Company transformed itself from a commercial enterprise into a dominant imperial power. By 1857 it controlled nearly three-fifths of India through both direct rule and indirect supervision of princely states.

COLONIAL EXPLOITATION OF THE CRAFT

After the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the Battle of Buxar in 1764, the British East India Company gradually gained control over Bengal (Clive 1998; "Battle of Buxar" 2026). In 1765, Mughal emperor Shah Alam II granted the Company the *Diwani*, or the right to collect revenue in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa (Marshall 2026). The Company continued to expand its power throughout the late eighteenth century. As Mughal patronage declined, muslin weavers lost an important source of support and became more vulnerable to the Company's economic control.

Although the English provided advance (dadni) to Dhaka weaver, it must be remembered that agricultural conditions at that time were not as developed as they are today. As a result, weavers were often unable to supply Dhakai muslin in the quantities demanded. When this happened, the British East India Company imposed severe penalties. The historian William Bolts described this situation in one of his writings:

> "The Indian weavers upon their inability to perform such agreements as have been forced upon them by Company's Agents universally know in Bengal by the name of Mutchulekha's have had their goods seized and sold on the spot to make goods the deficiency; the winders of raw silk called NAGoads, have been treated also such injustice, that instances have been known of their cutting off their thumbs to prevent their being forced to wind silk" (Bolts 1772, 191).

The East India Company also forced unfair contracts on Indian weavers. When the weavers failed to meet these demands, Company agents punished them by seizing and selling their goods. Silk workers were treated just as harshly. Some were treated so cruelly that, in extreme cases, they even cut off their own thumbs to avoid being forced to work under such conditions (Bolts 1772, 191). These are just a few examples of the Company's inhumane treatment of artisans.

The East India Company's oppressive methods enabled them to purchase Dhakai muslin from local weavers at extremely low prices and later sell it at much higher prices in England and other parts of Europe. According to customs records, until 1813, even if Indian muslin were sold in European markets at prices fifty to sixty percent lower than usual, this practice still generated significant profits (Ghosh 2002, 60).

In sum, the weavers of Dhaka were no longer treated as free laborers but as wage slaves. None of the colonizers' profits were used to improve local living conditions or economic prospects. Ironically, because control over muslin exports and sales had passed into colonial hands, Dhakai muslin began to gain widespread recognition and fame in European markets.

THE GLOBAL RISE AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF COTTON MUSLIN AND PRINTED COTTONS

Cotton textiles, originally perfected in India, became some of the most influential materials in global fashion between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition to muslin, two other significant cotton fabrics were calico and chintz. Unlike muslin, which was prized for its exceptionally fine and lightweight weave, calico was a plain-woven cotton cloth, while chintz was a glazed or printed cotton fabric decorated with colorful floral and other decorative patterns.

Together, muslin, calico, and chintz transformed European tastes and played a major role in the expansion of the global cotton trade. Their spread reflects changing aesthetic tastes as well as the dynamics of colonial commerce, technological innovation, and social transformation (Toland 2023, 90–91). From South Asian workshops to European royal courts and working-class wardrobes, cotton textiles reshaped fashion and everyday life.

By the seventeenth century, Indian cottons were entering Europe in growing quantities through international trade, particularly via the English East India Company. These fabrics included both plain and printed varieties. In Britain and America, imported cotton cloth was generally called calico, while printed versions were known as chintz. In France, similar fabrics were referred to as Indiennes. Long before their arrival in Europe, Indian artisans had developed sophisticated printing techniques, especially block printing, which involved using carved wooden blocks and natural dyes to stamp patterns onto fabric. These methods produced bold, color-fast designs unmatched by contemporary European textiles (Toland 2023, 90).

European consumers were quickly drawn to these vibrantly colored cottons. In port cities such as Marseille and London, working-class communities adopted printed cottons for everyday clothing as early as the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. This early popularity demonstrates that Indian cottons were embraced from the bottom up, long before they became fashionable among the elite. By the latter half of the eighteenth century, imported and locally printed cottons had also become popular among middle- and upper-class women, often replacing silk for daytime wear because of their comfort and striking patterns (Toland 2023, 90, 103–4).

As demand increased, European manufacturers began imitating Indian designs and production methods. Textile producers adopted traditional block printing alongside newer

technologies such as copper-plate and roller printing. These innovations lowered costs and increased output, making printed cottons more affordable and accessible. By the early nineteenth century, patterned cotton fabrics were common across all social classes in England, France, and beyond. Their widespread use is reflected today in museum collections and historical costume dramas, where printed cottons frequently appear as markers of Georgian and Regency-era dress (Wilson 2020).

Plain white muslin also gained prominence in elite fashion during the late eighteenth century. Marie Antoinette and Vigée Le Brun were both known for their love of light, flowing fabrics and were some of the most prominent figures to popularize the use of Dhaka muslin in France. The fabric was often used for dresses and accessories, such as veils and scarves; fashionable women throughout Europe clamored for it. A controversial 1783 portrait of Marie Antoinette by Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun represents an interesting moment for this trend. The painting depicted the queen wearing a *robe en chemise*, a simple white muslin dress tied with a sash and paired with a straw hat (Haffey 2019). Unlike traditional French silk court gowns, the cotton muslin dress resembled informal undergarments. This unconventional portrayal shocked viewers and led to the portrait's removal from the Salon of 1783.

The extreme lightness and transparency of muslin also generated criticism and satire. One of the best-known examples is the satirical print "Parisian Ladies in their Winter Dress for 1800 (1799)", attributed to John Cawse and published by S. W. Fores. The print depicts a group of women wearing transparent muslin gowns that reveal the contours of their bodies beneath the fabric. The accompanying caption, "Parisian Ladies in their Winter Dress for 1800," mocks the perceived impracticality and immodesty of these fashionable garments, particularly for winter

wear. The satire reflects broader British anxieties about female visibility, bodily display, and the influence of French fashion during the late eighteenth century (Cawse 1799).

Similarly, misogynistic commentary appeared in contemporary print culture. One satirical dialogue describes a woman asking how she might appear fashionable. The tailor instructs her to remove successive layers of clothing until little remains, concluding, "Tis an easy matter, you see—to be dressed in the fashion, you have only to undress" (Lynn 2010, 192). I interpret this satire as a criticism of contemporary dress trends that reduced women to objects of display and stripped away the structural garments that had long symbolized modesty and social order. In my reading, the commentary shows how critics viewed muslin's lightness and simplicity both as liberation from restrictive clothing and as evidence of moral decline.

The controversy surrounding the portrait reflected broader tensions between fashion, politics, and national identity in late eighteenth-century France. French silk manufacturers opposed the growing popularity of imported cotton because consumers increasingly chose Indian cotton over silk produced in (Englander 2020). Critics also objected to Marie Antoinette's informal appearance and her preference for foreign-inspired fashion (Englander 2020). At the same time, the portrait reflected changing ideas about femininity, comfort, and natural beauty. Despite the controversy, the *chemise à la reine* became a dominant fashion by the end of the eighteenth century and influenced the simpler, neoclassical styles that followed (Notine 2020).

During the early nineteenth century, especially in Regency-era Britain, muslin reached the height of its popularity (Wilson 2020). Inspired by classical aesthetics and ideals of simplicity, women wore light cotton dresses even in winter. These garments emphasized natural silhouettes and bodily freedom, contrasting sharply with earlier structured fashions. The international prestige

of Bengal muslin was demonstrated in 1803, when Jérôme Bonaparte married Elizabeth Patterson in a Dhaka muslin gown, and later in 1875 (Legro 2014), when the Prince of Wales was gifted ultra-fine muslin during his visit to Bengal.

By the mid-Victorian period, however, attitudes toward cotton fabrics shifted. White muslin, valued for its breathability in warm weather, became associated mainly with summer wear. For other occasions, fabricators increasingly created dyed or patterned cotton for dresses. Meanwhile, heavier fabrics and more elaborate silhouettes began to dominate fashionable dress. Nevertheless, cotton textiles continued to symbolize skilled craftsmanship, as demonstrated by their display at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London (Auerbach 1999, 145).

HOW BRITAIN REPLACED INDIA AS THE WORLD'S LEADING TEXTILE PRODUCER

From the late seventeenth century, the East India Company imported large quantities of Indian light, durable, and high quality cotton textiles such as calicoes, muslins, and printed fabrics into Europe. European consumers preferred them, and local manufacturers admired their craftsmanship. And European producers could not compete with Indian goods in either price or quality (Parthasarathi 2001, 89).

Starting in the 1690s and continuing through the early eighteenth century, English merchants and textile producers increasingly protested the British East India Company's importation of colorful and affordable Indian calicoes, chintzes, and muslins. These imports attracted growing numbers of British consumers and posed a serious challenge to the domestic wool and silk industries. Although Parliament attempted to protect local manufacturers through

the Calico Acts of 1700 and 1721, Indian cotton textiles remained highly desirable. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, muslin had reached the height of its popularity in Europe and had become the defining fabric for fashionable dress. As a result, wool traders began to experience serious financial losses. British textile manufacturers increasingly viewed imported Indian cotton textiles as a threat to domestic production and pressured Parliament to protect Britain's textile industry. Parliament responded by restricting the import and use of Indian cotton textiles through legislation in 1700 and 1720. During the 1780s, British cotton manufacturers continued to lobby Parliament and successfully secured high tariffs on imported Indian muslins. These measures strengthened British manufacturers against Indian competition and marked a significant stage in Britain's organized resistance to Indian textiles (Lord Keynes 2016).

During the eighteenth century, India was the center of global cotton textile production. By the mid-nineteenth century, this position had shifted to Europe, especially to Britain (Parthasarathi 2001, 89). This raises an important question: how did this major shift happen?

According to Parthasarathi, European manufacturers first learned cotton-dyeing and printing techniques from India and the Middle East (Parthasarathi 2001, 90–93). They copied and adapted this knowledge to their own industries. However, even after gaining these skills, European textiles remained inferior and more expensive than Indian products (Parthasarathi 2001, 89, 96).

Because British producers could not compete fairly, the government introduced strong protectionist policies. These policies limited Indian imports and protected local manufacturers.

According to Ghosh (2002): Important measures included:

- 1685: 10% import tariff

- 1690: Tariff increased to 20%
- 1701: First Calico Act banning printed fabrics. The first Calico Act, passed by the Parliament of England in 1700 (11 Will. 3. c. 10), prohibited the importation of most printed or dyed calico textiles from India, Persia, China, and the East Indies into England, Wales, and Berwick-upon-Tweed
- 1707: Further tariffs up to 80%
- 1721: Second Calico Act banning more Indian textiles:

The second Calico Act, which was passed in 1720, mentions several of these national economic issues as justifications for its creation and passage. The Act forbid the importation, selling, and wearing, of most cotton textiles. It justified itself by saying that the importation of calicoes would cause "excessive Increase to the Poor, and, if not effectually prevented, may be the utter Ruin and Destruction…of many Thousands of your Majesty's Subjects and their Families" (Fisher 2012, 8).

While such laws were originally meant to protect wool, silk, and linen industries, they also helped British cotton producers, who were making fustian cloth (cotton-linen blends) (Parthasarathi 2001, 93). Thus, protectionist legislation made Indian fabrics expensive and difficult to obtain in England. Ordinary people could no longer afford them, and muslin and fine cotton became luxury items worn mainly by royalty and aristocrats.

The Industrial Revolution, which began around 1760 in Britain, also contributed to the decline of India's textile industry. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British manufacturers adopted new technologies that increased textile production and reduced costs. British textiles gradually replaced Indian textiles in many international markets and later entered the Indian domestic market in large quantities. Indian handloom weavers struggled to compete

with the lower prices of British machine-made cloth. This competition reduced demand for Indian handwoven textiles and weakened the livelihoods of many traditional weavers (Clingingsmith and Williamson 2008, 209–34).

Colonial trade policies and market structures made British machine-spun cotton yarn cheaper and more readily available than indigenous hand-spun yarn, a process that forced many Indian weavers to abandon locally spun cotton. As a result, the traditional spinning industry declined, disrupting the long-established, self-sufficient production system in which farmers, spinners, and weavers worked together within local communities.

The competition between the handloom and power loom industries was fundamentally unequal. British textile factories operated with steam-powered machinery, large-scale production, modern infrastructure, and substantial financial backing (Allen 2009). They also benefited from government protection, subsidies, and favorable trade policies. Although industrialization also displaced many handloom weavers in Britain, Indian weavers faced the additional pressures of colonial trade policies, high taxation, unstable access to raw materials, and limited state support. These conditions placed Indian handloom producers at a significant disadvantage in competing with British manufactured textiles.

Moreover, colonial authorities often prioritized British industrial interests over local crafts (Alavi 1982). Policies allowed British textiles to enter India with low or no tariffs, while Indian products faced barriers abroad. This one-sided trade system further weakened handloom production and forced many skilled weavers to abandon their profession and take up low-paid agricultural or manual labor.

Thus, the unequal competition between handloom and power loom industries, combined with dependence on machine-made yarn and the flood of cheap imports, led to the systematic decline of India's traditional textile economy. The destruction of muslin and other handwoven fabrics was not merely a result of technological progress but a consequence of colonial economic policies that favored industrial Britain at the expense of Indian artisans.

As Parasarathi (2001) outlines, as they were protected from competition, British manufacturers invested in new technologies such as Hargreaves's spinning jenny (1764; patented 1770), Arkwright's water frame (1769), and Crompton's mule (1779). These machines increased production and reduced costs. Arkwright's water frame allowed the production of strong all-cotton cloth. Crompton's mule made it possible to spin very fine yarn similar to Indian muslin (Parthasarathi 2001, 98). Parthasarathi argues that yarn shortages were not the cause of these inventions. Instead, they were driven by Britain's desire to match the quality of Indian textiles (Parthasarathi 2001, 109).

Despite these innovations, British textiles were still more expensive than Indian ones. In the 1780s, manufacturers demanded more protection (Parthasarathi 2001, 112). By 1813, import duties on Indian cotton reached eighty-five percent (Alavi 1982, 56). As Alavi explains: "It was the wall of protection that made possible the survival and growth of the British cotton textile industry…" (Alavi 1982, 56).

Between 1797 and 1819, British producers repeatedly asked for higher tariffs. Even in 1815, Indian imports were still strong. Even in 1815, Indian imports remained highly competitive. Evidence presented before the British Parliament in 1813 indicated that Indian cotton and silk

goods could be sold in Britain at prices fifty to sixty percent lower than comparable British products (Dutt 1902, 27).

It was only after the widespread adoption of steam power between 1815 and 1830 that British textiles became globally competitive (Marks 2020, 100). Steam-powered factories and power looms dramatically increased productivity, allowing British manufacturers to reduce production costs and expand output (Allen 2009, 182–216). By the 1820s, Britain was able to compete successfully in international textile markets, and, by 1820, cotton textiles accounted for approximately fifty-three percent of British exports (Baines 1835, 85). These exports gradually displaced Indian cotton textiles in many global markets.

Classical economic theory suggests that India had a natural advantage in textile production. Even in 1810, India could produce better and cheaper cloth. Under true free trade, British industry would have failed. Yet Britain ignored free trade principles and used protectionism until its industry became strong to the detriment of India's economy. As British goods flooded world markets, India's textile industry collapsed. Bengal and other weaving centers declined. Many skilled weavers lost their livelihoods in this process of de-industrialization. The result was the decimation of India's production of Dhakai muslin and other fine fabrics. As Clingingsmith and Williamson argue, the influx of inexpensive British machine-made textiles and the expansion of British industrial production contributed significantly to the de-industrialization of India's textile industry, leading to the decline of major weaving centers such as Bengal and the loss of livelihoods for many skilled artisans (Clingingsmith and Williamson 2008, 209–234).

Historical evidence shows that imperial Britain used several methods to weaken India's handloom industry. The English East India Company fixed very low prices for textiles, forcing

many weavers to sell their cloth for less than it cost to produce (Hossain 2018, 93). Company officials and *gomastas* also forced many weavers to sell only to the Company, and some who refused or failed to meet their contracts were imprisoned or punished (Hossain 2018, 100). At the same time, heavy taxes and unfair trade policies reduced the profits of Indian weavers and made it harder for them to continue their work (Roy 82–90). Meanwhile, British factories used new machines that produced cotton cloth more quickly and cheaply than Indian handloom weavers could (Allen 2009, 181–216). British manufacturers also copied Indian textile designs and changed them to suit European tastes. As Irwin explains, they replaced the dark backgrounds of Indian patterns with lighter ones preferred by European customers (Irwin 1955, 109–10). Together, these policies and practices helped Britain take control of the global cotton trade and weakened India's traditional handloom industry. Free competition alone did not shift textile dominance from India to Britain. Government protection, technological development, colonial power, and economic control also drove this transformation. British policies protected domestic textile manufacturers until they could compete more effectively with Indian textiles. At the same time, monopolies, unfair prices, taxes, and colonial control weakened Indian producers. Britain built much of its textile industry through these advantages and made textile production a foundation of its Industrial Revolution. This industrial growth, in turn, contributed to the decline of India's traditional textile economy.

OTHER POTENTIAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE DECLINE OF MUSLIN PRODUCTION IN BENGAL

There were two major famines in the Bengal Presidency during the British colonial period that also contributed to the destruction of muslin production. The Great Bengal Famine of 1770

was one of the deadliest in history, resulting in the deaths of approximately ten million people, or nearly one-third of Bengal's population. While drought and failed monsoons triggered the crisis, Kendra Bell (2020) argues that the policies of the East India Company greatly intensified the famine by prioritizing revenue collection and commercial interests over famine relief (74–76).

Before British control, Bengal had systems under Mughal rule that taxed peasants, which partly helped to create reserve funds and food security mechanisms during natural disasters. After the British gained revenue rights in 1765, the East India Company redirected taxation away from famine preparedness and toward corporate profit, dismantling those protective systems. As drought conditions worsened in 1769, Company officials were fully aware of the impending famine, as shown in internal correspondence describing "dreadful calamity" and mass suffering. Despite this knowledge, the Company refused to reduce taxes, halt exports, or redirect resources to relief efforts. Instead, it intensified the extraction of cash crops such as indigo, silk, and textiles, forcing peasants to abandon food cultivation at the very moment food security was most critical. During the famine, the East India Company continued exporting grain and textiles; they deliberately prioritized revenue, foreign trade, and remittances to Britain over local survival. Even as starvation, displacement, and social collapse spread, Company policy focused on maintaining profits and supporting other British settlements such as Bombay and Madras, which depended financially on Bengal (Bell 2020, 76–79).

The famine officially lasted until 1773, but its effects were long-lasting. Bengal's agricultural system was severely damaged, recovery was slow, and the region suffered repeated famines under British rule in subsequent decades. Bell concludes that although natural factors initiated the famine, British economic exploitation and the East India Company's failure to provide

effective relief greatly increased the famine's severity, prompting debate over whether the disaster should be understood not only as a natural catastrophe but also as a consequence of colonial policy and, potentially, a crime against humanity (Bell 2020, 79–81).

Unlike the late nineteenth-century famine, the Bengal Famine of 1943 was not caused by a single event but by a convergence of wartime disruptions, natural disasters, and deliberate colonial economic policies, resulting in the deaths of over three million people. First, World War II placed enormous pressure on India's food system. As a British colony, India was required to export large quantities of rice to feed British and Allied troops, particularly those stationed in the Middle East and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). To secure these supplies, the colonial government purchased crops immediately after harvest, leaving reduced food availability for local populations, especially in Bengal, where rice was the staple food. Second, Japan's entry into the war in December 1941 dramatically altered regional food flows. When Japan captured Burma (Myanmar)—a major rice exporter—Bengal lost access to more than 20 percent of its rice imports. To compensate, rice was redirected from India to Ceylon, further tightening supplies in Bengal and intensifying shortages. Third, in October 1942, a devastating cyclone and flooding struck Bengal and Orissa, destroying homes, flooding rice fields, and wiping out the autumn rice harvest. This event forced many farmers to consume their seed stock to survive. By mid-1943, no new rice had been planted, pushing rural communities into extreme vulnerability. Food prices soared, placing basic subsistence beyond the reach of millions. A fourth contributing factor to the famine was the outbreak of brown spot disease *(helminthosporium oryzae),* which severely damaged rice crops. In some regions, as little as ten percent of the harvest survived. While historians debate the relative importance of the disease, it compounded an already catastrophic food shortage.

These shocks occurred within a longer history of colonial extraction and nutritional decline**.** By the late 1930s, India's per capita food-grain consumption had already fallen sharply due to British economic policies, leaving the population with little resilience when crisis struck. Deliberate wartime financial policy greatly worsened the famine**.** Under the guidance of economist John Maynard Keynes, a special adviser to the British government, the colonial state financed military operations through intentional inflation rather than direct taxation. Massive money printing created inflation, which drove rice prices up by around 300 percent**,** while wages stagnated. This policy was explicitly designed to "reduce the consumption of the poor," forcing a transfer of resources from the Indian population to the military. British wartime policies intensified the impoverishment and food shortages that contributed to the Bengal Famine of 1943. Churchill's wartime cabinet received repeated warnings about the deteriorating food situation but continued to prioritize wartime demands on Indian resources. The British government also denied urgent requests from India for more than one million tons of emergency wheat while food continued to leave India for other parts of the British Empire (Safi 2019).

British colonial policies transformed traditional systems of land ownership and agriculture in India, weakened subsistence-based village economies, and increased rural communities' vulnerability to famine (Sourabh and Myllyntaus 2015). Under pre-colonial systems, many peasants held land through customary and collective rights that supported subsistence farming and community food security. The British introduced the *zamindari* system, under which *zamindars* (landlords) received legal ownership of large estates and became responsible for collecting land revenue on behalf of the colonial government. Because these landlords had to deliver fixed tax payments to the British regardless of harvest conditions, many increased rents or evicted cultivators who could not pay. As a result, many peasants lost secure access to land, land ownership

became concentrated in the hands of a few landlords, and agriculture shifted toward the production of cash crops for export. These changes weakened local food security, made rural communities more dependent on unstable markets, and increased their vulnerability to crop failures and famine (Sourabh and Myllyntaus 2015).

British colonial policies reshaped the Indian economy, intensified the effects of famines, and altered people's livelihoods (Biswas). British authorities changed traditional agrarian systems through colonial land and economic policies and pushed many Indians away from subsistence farming toward wage labor and market-oriented employment. As colonial land and taxation policies were imposed, peasants increasingly lost secure access to land and were compelled to sell their labor for wages or move to towns and plantations. This shift away from traditional farming and local food production toward labor in plantations, factories, and colonial infrastructure projects changed the occupational and social structure of rural society. The loss of land and autonomy meant that many people depended on cash income rather than producing their own food, which made them far more vulnerable when harvests failed or food prices rose. British colonial policies also forced many Bengali farmers, weavers, and artisans out of their traditional occupations (Biswas 2019).

The First World War brought further economic and social changes to the Indian subcontinent. Many Indians enlisted in the British Indian Army for social, economic, and political reasons (Kant 2014). British authorities actively recruited soldiers across the empire, while regular wages, food, uniforms, and the possibility of greater social status attracted many men from economically disadvantaged communities. The army paid soldiers approximately eleven rupees per month and allowed many recruits to maintain their religious practices and dietary customs.

Military service also offered some marginalized men opportunities for status and social mobility that remained difficult to achieve within existing social hierarchies. Some Indian political leaders supported the British war effort in the hope that Britain would grant India greater political recognition or autonomy after the war. Britain's failure to meet these expectations contributed to growing nationalist sentiment. During both the First and Second World Wars, Indian soldiers served in the British armed forces, while farmers and other workers supplied food, raw materials, and other resources for Britain's war effort.

In summary, British colonial economic policies also transformed rural livelihoods and increased communities' vulnerability to famine. Before colonial rule, many peasants relied on customary and collective land rights that supported subsistence farming and local food security. Through the Permanent Settlement of 1793, British colonial authorities granted zamindars landownership rights and made them responsible for collecting taxes from peasants. This system concentrated control over land in the hands of large landlords and deprived many peasants of secure access to land. Colonial land and taxation policies also encouraged market-oriented agriculture and the production of cash crops for domestic and international markets. These changes weakened subsistence-based village economies and pushed many landless or impoverished peasants toward wage labor, towns, and plantations (Sourabh and Myllyntaus 2015; Biswas 2019). As rural communities became more dependent on markets, they struggled to cope with crop failures, food shortages, and rising prices during periods of drought and famine (Sourabh and Myllyntaus 2015).

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF PHUTI KARPAS

Besides colonial policies, wars, and famines, environmental changes also contributed to the decline of Bengal's muslin industry. Climate-related disasters damaged phuti karpas cultivation. At the same time, famines forced many people to leave their traditional occupations. Few historical sources directly explain why phuti karpas disappeared. Therefore, I use several available sources to examine how environmental and occupational changes contributed to its disappearance. Several articles suggest that phuti karpas, the indigenous cotton historically used to produce Dhaka muslin, disappeared due to climate-related disasters and changes in occupation caused by famines that were directly or indirectly linked to British colonial policies discussed above. However, there is limited concrete evidence on this topic, and most available sources provide only general or indirect observations. I have therefore relied on a few representative quotations from different articles.

Suntonu Bhadra's article, "A Historical Journey of Muslin Pride" (2020), which shares stories of Bengal's muslin heritage that once adorned Roman, French, and English aristocrats in different eras, suggests,

> Along with that, there were several feminine around the Bengal part of that period, which made it difficult to emphasize the cotton industry. People started to engage in more agricultural farming to cover up the food-gaps, which caused many of the handloom-experts and weavers to move to the agriculture profession. 'Phuti karpas,' the main element of Muslin, became extinct, which were only produced around the bank of the rivers, Meghna and Brahmaputra (in the current day Bangladesh) because of the dire agricultural production need around that time (Bhadra 2020).

Another article, "Scientists Revive Phuti Karpas in Sreepur" (2026) by Raihanul Islam Akand, published in the Dhaka Tribune, identifies several environmental and agricultural factors that may have contributed to the disappearance of phuti karpas. According to the article, climate change, the shrinking availability of agricultural land, the spread of high-yield modern cotton varieties, lower fiber yields, higher cultivation costs, changing farming practices etc. gradually displaced phuti karpas from cultivation, causing it to fade from both agricultural production and public memory. The article also notes that researchers believe the conservation and revival of phuti karpas is essential for preserving Bangladesh's cotton biodiversity and supporting the long-term revival of authentic muslin production.

The BBC Future article "The Ancient Fabric That No One Knows How to Make" (2021) by Zaria Gorvett also highlights the loss of the traditional knowledge required to produce authentic Dhakai muslin. As Gorvett writes, "As the generations passed, the knowledge of how to make Dhaka muslin was forgotten. And with no one to spin its silky threads, the phuti karpas plant, which had always been hard to tame – no one had been able to grow it away from the Meghna river – retreated into wild obscurity. The legend of the loom was no more" (Gorvett 2021). This account suggests that the decline of Dhakai muslin was not solely the result of colonial economic policies. The gradual disappearance of phuti karpas from cultivation, combined with the loss of the specialized spinning and weaving techniques that had been transmitted across generations, made it increasingly difficult to sustain the tradition. Consequently, both the raw material and the artisanal knowledge essential for producing authentic Dhaka muslin nearly vanished.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen here, the history of Dhakai muslin is inseparable from the broader history of Bengal's economic prosperity and colonial transformation. The evidence presented shows that Bengal developed a sophisticated handloom tradition over centuries, supported by favorable environmental conditions, skilled craftsmanship and royal patronage. Dhakai muslin achieved global reknown because of its exceptional material qualities, the unique properties of phuti karpas

cotton, and the highly specialized labor practices maintained by generations of spinners and weavers.

Muslin production was embedded within extensive international trade networks long before European colonial domination. While Mughal rule fostered the growth and prestige of the industry, the arrival of the British East India Company fundamentally altered existing commercial relationships. Through monopolistic practices the Company gradually transformed Bengal's textile economy to serve imperial interests.

Yet no single cause explains the decline of muslin. Instead, colonial exploitation and British protectionist legislation contributed to its decline. The Industrial Revolution and technological advancements further weakened the industry. Unequal global competition and occupational displacement intensified this process. The eventual disappearance of the phuti karpas plant created another major challenge. Together, these interconnected processes weakened the social and economic foundations that had sustained muslin weaving for centuries. The story of Dhakai muslin extends beyond the history of a luxury fabric. It reveals complex connections between traditional weaving knowledge and global commerce. It also shows how colonial power shaped cultural memory. Understanding these historical processes helps us appreciate

contemporary efforts to revive muslin as a symbol of Bengali cultural identity and postcolonial resilience.

CHAPTER 2: BENGALI IDENTITY, BANGLADESHI NATIONALISM, AND THE MAKING OF TEXTILE HERITAGE

Nationalism in Bangladesh has developed through shared history, culture, politics and economic structures. This chapter focuses on the relationship between Bengali cultural identity and Bangladeshi national identity. It also explores how folklore and heritage actively shape a shared sense of belonging.

Identity in Bangladesh is not fixed or singular but rather an ongoing negotiation between culture and state power. Nationalism develops alongside the politicization of culture and heritage. Thanks to capitalism and the legacy of colonialism, Bangladesh's textile heritage has transformed into a commodity. That process continues to shape the country's economy and cultural production in the present.

The chapter draws on a wide range of theoretical frameworks and perspectives, namely nationalism, folklore and memory, and the politicization of culture and heritage. Regarding theories of nationalism, I draw from Benedict Anderson (1983) to explain how nations are imagined through shared language and cultural practices, Partha Chatterjee (1991) to show how postcolonial societies reshape nationalism through cultural domains, and Andreas Wimmer (2012) to analyze the political conditions of nation-state formation. I also consider postcolonial perspectives from Maya Tudor (2013) and Adria Lawrence (2013) to highlight the role of elite agency. In the area of folklore and memory, I consider the work of Roger D. Abrahams (1993) to analyze the political use of folklore and draw on Maurice Halbwachs (1992) and Pierre Nora (1989) to show how memory shapes identity.

Finally, I examine the politicization of culture and heritage in Bangladesh through Pahela Baishakh and Dhakai muslin, showing how the state selects, promotes, and institutionalizes particular cultural traditions as symbols of national identity.

LAYERED HISTORIES AND THE FORMATION OF BANGLADESHI NATIONAL IDENTITY

A long and complex history of cultural diversity, religious change, and political shifts has shaped the formation of nationalism in Bangladesh. Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim traditions influenced Bangladesh and created a layered and sometimes contested identity. Over time, these different influences blended rather than replaced one another, especially in Bengal, where Islamic identity developed alongside existing cultural practices. The colonial period under British rule introduced a new system of governance and education, which further transformed the region and helped shape modern political awareness.

After nearly two centuries of British colonial rule, the British government partitioned British India in August 1947 into two independent states: India and Pakistan. The territory that is now Bangladesh, formerly part of the British Indian province of Bengal, became East Pakistan because of its Muslim-majority population, despite being geographically separated from West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) by more than a thousand miles of Indian territory. Although the two regions shared a Muslim-majority religious identity, they differed considerably in language, culture, and historical experience: Bengali was the predominant language in East Pakistan, while the central government promoted Urdu as the principal language of the new state. Political and economic power was also concentrated in West Pakistan, and successive Pakistani governments disproportionately favored the western wing in political representation, state resources, economic

investment, and military power. These linguistic, cultural, political, and economic inequalities generated growing resentment in East Pakistan and contributed to the emergence of a Bengali nationalist movement (Hoque). After decades of political conflict—including the Bengali Language Movement and increasing demands for regional autonomy—the crisis culminated in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 (Hoque), through which East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh.

The historical region of Bengal therefore does not correspond to a single contemporary nation-state. Today, its territory lies primarily across Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. Throughout this thesis, I use "Bengal" to refer to this broader historical and cultural region, while "Bangladesh" and "West Bengal" refer to the present-day political territories.

A keyway to understand this process is through the distinction between a nation and a nation-state. While a nation is built on shared culture, language, and memory, a nation-state is a political structure with defined borders and governance. In Bengal, the cultural idea of the nation extends beyond Bangladesh's borders, connecting Bengali-speaking communities across regions. Benedict Anderson's (1983) idea of the nation as an "imagined community" helps explain how people develop a sense of belonging through shared language and cultural practices. This was especially evident during the Language Movement of 1952, when people protested against the imposition of Urdu and defended Bengali as a core part of their identity. The movement showed how language can become a powerful symbol of unity and resistance that helps people imagine themselves as part of a larger national community.

Anderson's (1983) concept of the nation as an "imagined community" helps explain how shared cultural practices foster a sense of belonging beyond direct social interaction. Wimmer's

(2012) macropolitical approach complements this by emphasizing the political and institutional conditions through which nation-states emerge. Chatterjee's (1991) critique of modular nationalism highlights how postcolonial societies actively negotiate and reshape nationalist ideas by constructing a distinct cultural domain. Alongside Chatterjee's (1991) argument, Lawrence (2013) and Tudor (2013) draw attention to the role of elite and class interests in shaping nationalist movements and ideologies within colonial contexts (Lawrence 2013, 91–131; Tudor 2013, 5). Lawrence emphasizes that colonial elites did not inevitably embrace nationalism; rather, they increasingly turned toward nationalist demands when colonial governments failed to satisfy demands for political equality and reform (Lawrence 2013, 91–131). Tudor, focusing on British India, argues that historically conditioned class interests shaped nationalist organizations and ideologies, which in turn influenced the political trajectories of India and Pakistan after independence (Tudor 2013, 5). Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding how Bengali cultural identity and Bangladeshi national identity are historically produced, politically shaped, and continuously negotiated.

According to Anderson, nations are emotional and cultural phenomena, not concrete ones. Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign (Anderson 1983, 6). Like any group larger than a small village, a nation is "imagined" because most citizens will never meet one another face-to-face; yet they see themselves as being part of a "political community" with shared origins, mutual interests, and "a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1983, 6–7). Citizens regard the nation's borders as definite, or limited, and the nation as the only legitimate authority within those borders, or sovereign. This framework helps explain how the state constructed Bangladeshi identity following Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in the 1971 Liberation War, as the state promoted

narratives that allowed people to imagine themselves as part of a unified national community, even while drawing from an older Bengali cultural foundation.

As I have established, a nation is a cultural and imagined community, bound by shared language, traditions, and collective memory. A nation-state, in contrast, is a political entity characterized by territorial sovereignty and institutional governance, such as Bangladesh or India. In the region of Bengal, the cultural nation extends beyond the borders of Bangladesh, encompassing Bengali-speaking populations in India and elsewhere. Bangladesh, therefore, represents a specific political realization of a broader Bengali identity. Anderson's (1983) theory is particularly useful in explaining how a nation is "an imagined political community," whose members perceive a deep sense of connection, whether or not they ever meet. Shared cultural practices, language, and media sustain this imagined bond. Yet Anderson's cultural framework alone does not fully explain the emergence of nation-states, particularly in postcolonial contexts.

In contrast, Andreas Wimmer's (2012) macropolitical theory puts the focus on the political and institutional conditions under which nation-states arise. Wimmer describes a global transformation from "multiethnic empires, dynastic kingdoms, tribal confederacies, and city-states to a world of states each ruled in the name of a nation" (Wimmer 2012, 3). He argues that nation-states emerged when elites and masses developed a shared sense of belonging and entered into a social contract involving political participation and the distribution of public goods. Wimmer emphasizes that this transformation was not universal. The conditions that facilitated nation-state formation in Western Europe (such as state centralization, economic development, and dense networks of voluntary organizations) did not exist in other regions. As a result, nationalism in postcolonial societies followed different trajectories. This insight is particularly relevant for

understanding Bangladesh, where nationalism did not emerge from a gradual alignment between state and society but from conflict and resistance.

Postcolonial scholarship further develops this argument by highlighting the role of elite agency in constructing nationalism. Tudor (2013), Lawrence (2013), and others show that nationalism in Asia and Africa often emerged when educated elites adopted it as a strategic tool to challenge colonial rule.

Anderson (1983) argues that colonialism can work against itself and spread nationalism. He notes that many early nationalist movements emerged in the Americas, where colonial elites began to imagine themselves as distinct from European metropoles. These "creole pioneers" developed new forms of identity that were later adapted and adopted in other parts of the world. In this sense, nationalism became what Anderson calls a "modular"[5] form**,** capable of being adapted across different historical and geographical contexts, including Asia and Africa (4)**.**

Partha Chatterjee (1991) has critiqued this theory and argues that Anderson's (1983) model risks portraying colonial societies as passive recipients of Western nationalist ideas. Chatterjee asks a crucial question: if nationalism is simply a modular form that spreads from the West, then "what do the colonized people have left to imagine" (Chatterjee 1991, 216). According to Chatterjee, nationalism in colonial societies develops through a distinction between an "outer" and an "inner" domain. The outer domain consists of political institutions, state structures, and economic systems—areas for which colonized elites often adopt Western models. In contrast, the inner domain represents culture, language, religion, and tradition, which are preserved as the

[5] Anderson uses the term "modular" to describe how historically developed forms of nationalism became available for adaptation in different social, political, and ideological contexts (Anderson 4)

authentic core of the nation. Chatterjee's critique complicates Anderson's notion of modular nationalism and shows how the adoption of nationalist forms is not simply a process of imitation but one of negotiation and resistance.

Bengali and Bangladeshi identity is as an ongoing negotiation. Today, that relationship is best understood not as a fixed distinction but as a process that history, politics and culture continue to shape. Rather than existing in opposition, these identities overlap, intersect, and at times compete, reflecting the complex realities of a nation that emerged from both a shared cultural past and a distinct political struggle. The duality between "Bengali" and "Bangladeshi" identity reveals how people navigate belonging across linguistic, cultural, national, and religious dimensions. There are cultural foundations to Bengali identity, which is rooted in a long historical tradition that predates the formation of modern nation-states. It is tied to the Bengali culture, language, literary heritage, music, folklore, and regional customs that developed across the Bengal region, encompassing present-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. This cultural identity is inclusive and historically plural. Contributions from diverse religious and social groups, including Hindus, Muslims, and others shaped it. The Bengali identity gained political significance during movements such as the Language Movement of 1952, where linguistic rights became a symbol of resistance against a hegemonic nation (Pakistan). In this sense, Bengali identity is deeply cultural, grounded in linguistic and shared practices.

In contrast, Bangladeshi identity emerges as a more explicitly political and national identity following the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. It reflects the formation of a sovereign state and ties closely to territorial boundaries and national ideology. While it includes elements of Bengali culture, this identity also incorporates religious and political dimensions, particularly the

role of Islam in public life and national discourse. Over time, state actors have actively emphasized a distinct Bangladeshi identity to differentiate the nation from its Indian counterpart, even while acknowledging a shared Bengali cultural heritage. This identity, therefore, reflects not only cultural influences but also the priorities of nation-building, state legitimacy, and international positioning.

Historical forces played a crucial role in shaping this negotiation. Colonial rule, the partition of India in 1947, and the Liberation War of 1971 all actively influence how people understood and articulated identity. These events created both connections and divisions, reinforcing cultural unity while also establishing political separation. At the same time, they reshaped how communities imagined themselves, shifting from a broader Bengali cultural identity toward a more territorially defined Bangladeshi nation.

People in Bangladesh actively negotiate multiple identities in their everyday lives, particularly “Bengali” and “Bangladeshi.” These identities often overlap. Bengali identity emphasizes shared language, culture, and history, while Bangladeshi identity emphasizes belonging to the sovereign state of Bangladesh. Rather than choosing one over the other, people embrace both and shift between them depending on context. In cultural settings, such as literature, music, and festivals, people often foreground their Bengali identity and celebrate a shared language and heritage that connects them across borders. In political or international contexts, they emphasize their Bangladeshi identity and highlight their connection to Bangladesh as a sovereign state and its political history. This fluid movement shows that people do not experience identity as fixed; their experiences and situations continuously shape how they express it.

At the same time, many people in Bangladesh take pride in their Muslim identity and incorporate it into this broader sense of self. They do not view religion and culture as opposites. Instead, they describe themselves as both proud Muslims and proud Bengalis. People practice Bengali culture through language, food, and festivals while also observing Islamic rituals such as Ramadan and Eid. These practices coexist, creating a layered and inclusive identity rather than a divided one.

This balance reflects an ongoing negotiation. As Anya Peterson Royce (1982) argues, individuals may strategically emphasize different aspects of ethnic identity according to particular social situations, although social and cultural constraints limit these choices (Royce 1982, 202–8). In Bangladesh, this framework helps explain how Bengali cultural identity and Islamic religious identity may become more or less prominent in different contexts. Rather than treating these identities as mutually exclusive, individuals may negotiate between multiple forms of belonging. This everyday negotiation challenges the idea that identity must always be singular or fixed and demonstrates how multiple dimensions of identity can coexist and acquire different significance depending on the social context.

In this complex landscape, heritage serves as a crucial bridge between Bengali and Bangladeshi identities. Cultural heritage—whether in the form of language, traditional crafts, music, or festivals—actively connects the regional past with the national present. It allows Bangladesh to draw upon a deep historical and cultural legacy while framing it within the narrative of a modern nation-state. For example, the revival of traditional crafts like muslin or the celebration of Bengali festivals demonstrates how people use heritage to affirm cultural continuity while also supporting national identity. Heritage thus becomes a space where individuals and institutions

negotiate and reconcile tensions between regional and national identities, even if they do not fully resolve them.

In conclusion, Bengali and Bangladeshi identity exist together rather than in conflict. People in Bangladesh do not choose one over the other. They carry both and use them in different contexts. Cultural heritage connects these identities by linking the past with the present. It helps people maintain their traditions while also shaping a modern national identity. Through everyday practices and shared experiences, people continue to shape who they are. Identity in Bangladesh is not fixed. It keeps changing over time and reflects both continuity and change.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF BENGAL: FROM EARLY CIVILIZATIONS TO NATIONHOOD

The history of Bengal stretches back thousands of years, far beyond the political formation of the modern nation-state. Bengal is a cultural region with shared linguistic and cultural identity that exists across present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal (India). Although Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971, the historical roots of the region extend deep into antiquity, connecting it to the wider Indian subcontinent. To understand Bengal historically, one must move beyond recent political boundaries. Rather than emerging as a homogeneous civilization, Bengal's society developed through the interaction of diverse ethnic groups, gradual Aryanization, and the adaptation of local customs within broader Indic frameworks.

Situated within one of the world's largest delta systems, the confluence of major rivers such as the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna shaped the region. Those rivers have not only deposited fertile alluvial soil but have also continuously reshaped the land through flooding,

sedimentation, and shifting courses. The environment, therefore, is not a static backdrop but an active force in the making of Bengal's history (Sen 1949, 1-7). Human settlements, agricultural practices, trade networks all emerged in close relationship with this dynamic landscape. Seasonal rhythms dictated patterns of cultivation, while riverine routes facilitated communication and exchange. The abundance of water and fertile land enabled the development of dense populations and sustained agricultural productivity, laying the groundwork for social complexity (Sen 1949, 10-18).

At the foundation of Bengal's society lies its ethnological diversity. Early Bengal was inhabited by various indigenous groups, including the Kols, Sabaras, Pulindas, and Chandals. Sen describes these communities as "primitive" groups that formed the substratum of Bengal's population (Sen 1949, 35). Over time, these groups gradually assimilated or were subordinated within emerging social hierarchies.

The prehistoric phase of Bengal challenges earlier assumptions that the region lacked early cultural development due to the scarcity of stone tools. In fact, archaeological discoveries have revealed that prehistoric communities adapted ingeniously to local conditions. In the absence of stone, early inhabitants used fossilized wood and other available materials to craft tools. Sites such as Lalmai-Mainamati and Chaklapunji provide evidence of these early technological practices, suggesting that Bengal's prehistoric culture was not absent but simply different from regions where stone resources were abundant. This adaptation underscores a broader theme in Bengal's history: the capacity of its inhabitants to negotiate environmental constraints and develop distinctive cultural forms (Sen 1949, 40-56).

As communities expanded and became more organized, the region witnessed the emergence of *janapadas* (early territorial polities). This transition from loosely organized groups to structured political entities was facilitated by technological advancements, particularly the introduction of metal tools. Iron implements revolutionized agriculture by making it more efficient, thereby increasing productivity and generating surplus. This surplus, in turn, supported population growth, specialization of labor, and the expansion of trade. Economic prosperity fostered the development of administrative systems and social hierarchies, marking a significant step toward state formation. Although the precise boundaries of these early janapadas remain uncertain due to limited written records, regions such as Vanga, Pundra, Samatata, and Harikela are frequently mentioned in historical and archaeological sources (Sen 1949, 50-65).

The incorporation of parts of Bengal into the Mauryan Empire represents another critical phase in the region's history. Founded by Chandragupta Maurya in the late fourth century BCE, the Mauryan Empire expanded across much of the Indian subcontinent and incorporated parts of Bengal into a larger imperial political structure. Under Ashoka, the empire reached its greatest territorial extent, encompassing most of the Indian subcontinent (Hirst 2025). Evidence of Mauryan authority in northern Bengal comes particularly from Mahasthangarh, identified with the ancient city of Pundranagara. The Mahasthan Brahmi inscription, dated to approximately the third century BCE, records an administrative order directed to a *Mahamatra* stationed at Pundranagara, providing important evidence of Mauryan-period administration in the region (Bhandarkar 1933, 83–91). As the earliest known epigraphic record from Bengal, the inscription also provides evidence of the political and administrative significance of Pundranagara as an early urban center.

Following the decline of the Mauryan Empire, the Shunga dynasty emerged, although their influence in Bengal is less clearly documented. Evidence from terracotta artifacts and inscriptions suggests some level of cultural and political interaction. More significant, perhaps, is the impact of the Kushan Empire, which, while not directly ruling Bengal, influenced the region through trade. The discovery of Kushan coins in Bengal indicates active participation in transregional commercial networks. These connections highlight Bengal's role as an important node in broader economic systems, linking it to Central Asia and beyond (Ahmed and Al Hasan 2014, 113–22).

Gopala I founded the Pala dynasty (c. 750–1161 CE), the most significant Buddhist power, which ruled over Bengal and Bihar for four centuries. They were known as great patrons of Mahayana Buddhism and established famous centers like Nalanda and Vikramashila. Bengal, prior to the Palas, experienced a period of instability often described as *matsyanyaya*—a condition of anarchy where stronger forces dominated weaker ones. In response to this disorder, local chiefs and influential groups elected Gopala as ruler, marking a unique moment in South Asian history where kingship was established through a form of collective decision-making. This suggests that political legitimacy in Bengal was not solely based on heredity but could also emerge from consensus during times of crisis (Majumdar 1971, 96–104).

Under Gopala (c. 750–770 CE) and his successors, particularly Dharmapala (c. 770–810 CE) and Devapala (c. 810–850 CE), the Pala Empire expanded significantly, becoming one of the most powerful political entities in northern India. Dharmapala, in particular, is portrayed as a capable and ambitious ruler who extended his authority across large parts of the subcontinent. His reign symbolizes the height of Pala political power, marked by military campaigns, administrative

organization, and diplomatic relations. Devapala continued this expansion and maintained the empire's dominance, ensuring its prominence in regional politics (Majumdar 1971, 104-16).

The Palas are also noted for their strong patronage of Buddhism, especially Mahayana and later Vajrayana traditions. This religious affiliation played a crucial role in shaping Bengal's cultural landscape. Major monastic institutions such as Somapura Mahavihara became important centers of learning and attracted scholars from across Asia. These institutions were not merely religious sites but also hubs of intellectual exchange, contributing to the spread of Buddhist philosophy, art, and education. The architectural achievements of the Pala period, particularly in the construction of monasteries and temples, reflect a high level of artistic sophistication and technical skill. Pala rulers were relatively tolerant in their religious outlook. Although they were strong supporters of Buddhism, they also patronized Brahmanical traditions, allowing Hinduism to flourish alongside Buddhism. This coexistence of religious traditions illustrates the pluralistic nature of Bengal's society during this period. The interaction between different religious communities contributed to a dynamic cultural environment, where ideas and practices were exchanged and adapted (Majumdar 1971, 125-36).

Over time, internal conflicts, succession disputes, and external invasions gradually weakened their authority. As central control diminished, regional powers began to assert independence, leading to the fragmentation of the empire. This decline set the stage for the rise of the Sena dynasty, which represents a significant shift in Bengal's political and cultural history.

According to Majumdar (1971), the Sena rulers, who followed the Palas, are described as champions of Brahmanical Hinduism. Unlike the Palas, whose identity was closely tied to Buddhism, the Senas actively promoted Hindu orthodoxy and sought to reorganize society along

stricter caste lines. This marks a transformation in the ideological foundations of kingship and governance. The Sena rulers emphasized social hierarchy and the authority of Brahmins, which had a lasting impact on Bengal's social structure (Majumdar 1971, 205-25).

Under rulers such as Vijayasena (c. 1095–1158 CE), Ballalasena (c. 1158–1179 CE), and Lakshmanasena (c. 1179–1206 CE), the Sena dynasty consolidated power and established a relatively stable political order. Vijayasena is credited with strengthening the kingdom and expanding its territories, while Ballalasena is associated with the codification of social norms and the reinforcement of caste distinctions. Lakshmanasena, the last major ruler of the dynasty, presided over a period of cultural activity but was ultimately unable to prevent the decline of Sena power (Majumdar 1971, 205-25).

The Sena period is also notable for its contributions to literature and culture. Sanskrit learning flourished, and court patronage supported poets and scholars. At the same time, regional languages, including early forms of Bengali, began to develop, reflecting broader cultural changes. It is widely recognized that the interaction between Sanskritic and local traditions contributed to the emergence of a distinct Bengali cultural identity (Majumdar 1971, 205-25).

Socially, the transition from Pala to Sena rule brought significant changes. As R. C. Majumdar explains in *The History of Bengal, Volume I: Hindu Period* (1971), the transition from Pala to Sena rule brought significant changes to Bengal's social structure. While the Pala period (c. 750–1161 CE) was characterized by relative flexibility and diversity, the subsequent Sena period (c. 1070–1230 CE) saw a tightening of social structures. The emphasis on caste hierarchy and Brahmanical authority led to increased stratification within society. Land ownership patterns also shifted, with Brahmins and elite groups gaining greater control over resources. This

restructuring of society had long-term consequences for Bengal's social and economic development.

Religious life during the Sena period became more closely aligned with orthodox Hindu practices. Temples, rituals, and Brahmanical institutions gained prominence, while Buddhism began to decline in influence. Because this decline was gradual rather than abrupt, and elements of Buddhist culture continued to persist in various forms. The coexistence and eventual transformation of religious traditions highlight the complex and layered nature of Bengal's cultural history (Majumdar 1971, 205–25).

The beginning of Islamic rule in Bengal is often simplistically described as the "arrival of Islam," but historically, it is more accurate to understand this transformation as the establishment of Sultani political authority. Rather than a sudden religious shift, the early phase of Islamic presence in Bengal emerged through military conquest, administrative expansion, and regional power struggles, particularly under Turkish generals who later laid the foundations for independent Sultanate rule.

The origins of this transformation can be traced to the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, during a period of political fragmentation in northern India. According to Prabhas Chandra Sen in *Banglar Itihas* (*History of Bengal*) (1949), the decisive moment came with the campaigns of the Turkish general Bakhtiyar Khilji (c. 1204 to 1206 CE) who operated under the broader influence of the Ghurid political network. Around 1199–1204, Bakhtiyar launched a series of rapid military expeditions into eastern India, first targeting Bihar and then Bengal. His attack on major Buddhist centers such as Odantapuri and Vikramashila resulted in widespread

destruction, including the burning of manuscripts and the collapse of important institutions of learnings (Sen 1949, 242–46).

Bakhtiyar's most significant achievement in Bengal was his defeat of Lakshman Sena, the ruler of the Sena dynasty, at Nadia (Nabadwip). This victory marked the symbolic end of large-scale Hindu dynastic dominance in western Bengal. It is crucial to note that this conquest did not immediately translate into complete control over the entire region. Even after establishing authority in Lakhnauti (Gaur), large parts of eastern and southern Bengal remained outside Muslim control for decades, with Sena descendants continuing to rule in areas like Vikramapura. Thus, the early phase of Islamic rule in Bengal was not a unified or centralized system but rather a fragmented and evolving political landscape. Bakhtiyar Khilji's administration relied on appointing Turkish and Khalji governors in different regions. These governors often acted autonomously, reflecting the weak integration of Bengal into the larger Delhi-based power structure. In fact, after Bakhtiyar's death around 1205–1206, internal conflicts among his successors further destabilized the region (Sen 1949, 242-46).

Thus, the early phase of Islamic rule in Bengal was not a unified or centralized system but rather a fragmented and evolving political landscape. Bakhtiyar Khilji's administration relied on appointing Turkish and Khalji governors in different regions. These governors often acted autonomously, reflecting the weak integration of Bengal into the larger Delhi-based power structure. In fact, after Bakhtiyar's death around 1205–1206, internal conflicts among his successors further destabilized the region (Sen 1949, 242-46).

During the early thirteenth century, Bengal remained loosely connected to the Delhi Sultanate, particularly under rulers like Qutb al-Din Aibak (r. 1206–1210 CE) and later Iltutmish

(r. 1211–1236 CE). Local governors frequently challenged Delhi's authority by declaring independence and assuming the title of Sultan. For example, Ali Mardan proclaimed himself Sultan Ala-ud-din in Bengal shortly after Aibak's death, marking one of the earliest assertions of independent Sultani rule in the region (Sen 1949, 250-57).

This pattern of semi-independence continued throughout the thirteenth century. Governors such as Ghiyas-ud-din Iwaz (r. c. 1212–1227 CE) and Tughril Khan (r. c. 1236–1245 CE) exercised considerable autonomy, often minting their own coins and conducting military campaigns. Although the Delhi Sultanate periodically reasserted control, its authority in Bengal remained unstable and largely symbolic. The repeated cycles of rebellion, reconquest, and decentralization demonstrate that Bengal's political structure was distinct from the more centralized systems of North India (Sen 1949, 260-63).

By the later thirteenth century, the groundwork had been laid for a more stable and distinctly Bengali Sultanate. The expansion of Muslim political authority into eastern Bengal, along with the establishment of administrative centers like Lakhnauti, signaled the gradual consolidation of Sultani power. Importantly, this process was not purely military; it also involved the spread of Islamic institutions such as mosques and madrasas, as well as interactions with local populations through trade, migration, and cultural exchange (Sen 1949, 269).

The beginning of Islamic rule in Bengal should be understood not as an immediate religious transformation but as the emergence of Sultani rule through conquest and political reorganization. From Bakhtiyar Khilji's initial campaigns (c. 1204–1206 CE) to the rise of semi-independent governors during the early to mid-thirteenth century, Bengal's transition into a Muslim-ruled region was complex and deeply rooted in regional conditions. This distinction between religious

presence and political authority is essential for a nuanced understanding of Bengal's medieval history.

Following the Sultani period, the Mughal conquest of Bengal in the late sixteenth century marked a major expansion of imperial authority in the region. Although both the Bengal Sultans and the Mughals were Muslim rulers, they differed in origin and political structure. The Sultans were largely of Turkish descent, while the Mughals traced their lineage to Central Asian and Afghan regions (Sen 1949, 308-13). After the death of Sulaiman Khan Karrani in 1573, his son Daud Khan Karrani assumed power, bringing him into conflict with Akbar, who sought to consolidate Mughal rule over eastern India. Initial attempts at diplomacy, led by Mughal governor Munim Khan, resulted in a temporary peace, but hostilities soon resumed (Ahmed n.d.).

In 1575, Mughal forces defeated Daud Khan at the Battle of Tukaroi, leading to the Treaty of Katak, through which Bengal and Bihar were ceded to the Mughals. Despite this agreement, resistance continued until Daud Khan's final defeat and execution in 1576 (Ahmed n.d.). This victory firmly established Mughal control over Bengal, allowing it to be integrated into the imperial administrative system. Bengal's immense agricultural wealth and strategic importance made it a vital province of the Mughal Empire, while its incorporation also laid the foundation for later economic and political developments, including its role in global trade and eventual British colonial expansion (Piotter 2022).

The rise of British political power in India began with the Battle of Plassey in 1757, when the English East India Company defeated Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah of Bengal. The conflict emerged from growing tensions between the Company and the Nawab over trade privileges, misuse of tax exemptions (dastaks), and the Company's defiance of local authority. Siraj-ud-Daulah attempted

to assert his sovereignty by attacking British settlements, including Fort William in Calcutta. In response, the Company, led by Robert Clive, formed alliances with discontented Bengali elites, including Mir Jafar, and defeated the Nawab at Plassey. This victory was less a military triumph and more the result of betrayal within the Nawab's ranks (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2026).

After the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the British East India Company installed Mir Jafar as the nawab of Bengal and used its growing political influence to secure substantial economic advantages and financial rewards (New World Encyclopedia n.d.; Ciotola 2014). The Company subsequently exploited Bengal's wealth and expanded its economic control over the region (Ciotola 2014). Mir Qasim later attempted to strengthen his authority and challenge the Company's growing influence, bringing him into conflict with the British. The conflict eventually contributed to the Battle of Buxar in 1764, in which the Company defeated an alliance of Mir Qasim, Shuja-ud-Daula of Awadh, and the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II (Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.). The Company's victory at Buxar strengthened its political position in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. After obtaining the Diwani, or revenue-collection rights, in 1765, the Company increasingly exercised both economic and political authority, laying an important foundation for British colonial rule in the (Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.).

As Willem van Schendel (2020) demonstrates, throughout these historical developments, certain underlying patterns remain consistent. The influence of geography continues to shape economic and social life, with agriculture and trade serving as the primary drivers of development. Cultural continuity is evident in the persistence of local traditions, even as external influences are incorporated and adapted. The reliance on archaeological evidence underscores the challenges of reconstructing Bengal's early history, given the scarcity of written records. Yet, these material

remains provide a rich source of information, allowing historians to piece together a nuanced understanding of the past.

Based on the historical discussion above, I observe that in writing the history of Bengal, it is essential to recognize the interplay between local and global forces. The region was never isolated; rather, it was deeply embedded in broader networks of exchange and interaction. From its participation in ancient trade routes to its incorporation into large empires, Bengal has long been connected to the wider world. At the same time, its unique environmental conditions and cultural practices have given it a distinct identity. This duality—of connectedness and distinctiveness—lies at the heart of Bengal's historical experience.

Ultimately, the history of Bengal is a story of adaptation, resilience, and transformation. From its prehistoric beginnings to the emergence of complex political systems, the region has undergone continuous change while maintaining a sense of continuity. Its rivers have shifted, its kingdoms have risen and fallen, and its cultures have evolved, yet the fundamental relationship between people and environment has remained central. By engaging with this history, we not only gain insight into a specific region but also contribute to a broader understanding of how human societies develop in response to both local conditions and global influences.

The 1947 Partition of British India, the rise of Bengali nationalism, and the political crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s shaped the creation of Bangladesh. The colonial history of Bengal provides important context for these developments. By the late eighteenth century, the British East India Company had established substantial political control over Bengal and began a prolonged period of British colonial rule. In 1858, the British Crown took direct control from the East India Company and continued to rule Bengal until 1947. That year, the Partition of British India divided

Bengal and incorporated its eastern portion into Pakistan as East Bengal. This political reorganization reshaped Bengal's political geography and created conditions that later fueled Bengali nationalism and contributed to the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation in 1971 (Hoque 2022).

Political inequality, cultural suppression, and economic exploitation within Pakistan contributed to Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Drawing on records from The National Archives, Dr. Aminul Hoque analyzes the key causes, developments, and outcomes of the Bangladesh Liberation War, which I outline here (Hoque 2022).

The conflict began with the Partition of British India in 1947, which fundamentally reshaped the political landscape of South Asia. Leaders such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948) of the Muslim League demanded a separate Muslim nation, arguing that Hindus and Muslims could not coexist peacefully within a single state. This idea, known as the "two-nation theory," became an ideological foundation for the creation of Pakistan. Following the creation of Pakistan in 1947, Jinnah became its first governor-general and came to be known in Pakistan as *Quaid-i-Azam*, or "Great Leader."

Several prominent Indian leaders strongly opposed the idea of partition. Figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan argued that India should remain a unified, pluralistic society where people of different religions could coexist. Despite their opposition, British authorities proceeded with partition under the terms of the Indian Independence Act 1947 (Hoque 2022).

On 3 June 1947, Lord Mountbatten announced the plan to divide British India into two independent states, India and Pakistan. The plan split the provinces of Punjab and Bengal along religious lines, creating massive disruption. Between twelve and twenty million people migrated across newly drawn borders in one of the largest forced migrations in history. This displacement triggered widespread communal violence, resulting in hundreds of thousands, and possibly over a million, deaths. The partition not only created two nations but also left deep social, political, and emotional scars that shaped future conflicts, including tensions between East and West Pakistan (Hoque 2022).

Pakistan consisted of two geographically separated regions: West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), divided by more than 1,000 miles of Indian territory. This structure created immediate political and administrative challenges. The two regions differed in language, culture, and identity, yet leaders in West Pakistan controlled political and economic power. As a result, people in East Pakistan experienced marginalization and exclusion from national decision-making (Hoque 2022).

As noted earlier, the Bengali Language Movement marked one of the earliest and most powerful expressions of resistance in East Pakistan. In 1948, the Pakistani government attempted to impose Urdu as the sole state language, even though the majority of the population spoke Bengali. On 21 March 1948, Muhammad Ali Jinnah addressed a large public gathering at the Racecourse Ground in Dhaka and declared that “Urdu and Urdu alone would be the state language of Pakistan” (Ahsan 2020). By making this statement on Bengali soil, he directly challenged Bengali linguistic identity and disregarded the sentiments of the local population (Hoque 2022).

Students from the University of Dhaka immediately organized protests against this declaration. Their resistance quickly spread across East Pakistan and grew into a broader movement demanding recognition of Bengali as a state language. As protests intensified, police forces opened fire on demonstrators. According to Lal Khan in Pakistan: Another Story—The 1968–69 Revolution (2008), police firing killed 26 people and injured around 400 others (Khan 2008). This violent repression transformed the language movement into a defining political struggle. It strengthened Bengali nationalism and laid the groundwork for future demands for autonomy and independence (Hoque 2022).

The divide between East and West Pakistan deepened further after the Second Indo-Pakistani War. In 1965 Pakistan launched Operation Gibraltar to provoke an uprising in Jammu and Kashmir, which led to a 17-day war with India. The conflict ended with a Soviet-backed ceasefire and the Tashkent Declaration, forcing both countries to return to their original positions. After the war, West Pakistani authorities intensified efforts to create a unified national identity. They increasingly labeled Bengali language and culture, shared with the region of Bengal in India, as "un-Islamic" or influenced by Hindu traditions (Hoque 2022).

As part of this effort, Pakistani authorities attempted to suppress Bengali cultural expressions, including literature, music, and poetry. They particularly criticized the works of Rabindranath Tagore because of his association with India and his Hindu background. This characterization, however, overlooked Tagore's broader significance within Bengali culture. As a Nobel Prize-winning Bengali poet, Tagore profoundly influenced Bengali literature, music, and cultural identity. By marginalizing cultural expressions important to Bengalis in East Pakistan,

Pakistani authorities widened the cultural divide between the eastern and western regions (Hasan 2021).

The government's attempt to impose a "one nation, one language" policy further alienated the people of East Pakistan (Deb 2021, 60). Instead of creating unity, these policies intensified resentment and strengthened Bengali resistance. Political and economic inequalities continued to grow throughout the 1950s and 1960s. East Pakistan contributed significantly to the national economy but received fewer resources and development opportunities. The situation worsened after the Bhola Cyclone of 1970, which killed hundreds of thousands of people (Hoque 2022). The West Pakistani government failed to respond effectively, which increased public anger and distrust.

The crisis reached its peak during the 1970 general elections, when the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a Bengali political leader from East Pakistan, won a clear majority in Pakistan's National Assembly. This victory gave the Awami League the constitutional right to form the national government of Pakistan, encompassing both East and West Pakistan (Hoque 2022). However, West Pakistani political and military leaders refused to transfer power because Mujib's victory threatened their political control and would shift national authority to the Bengali-majority eastern wing. Their refusal triggered mass protests and widespread civil disobedience across East Pakistan. On March 7, 1971, Mujibur Rahman called on the people to resist West Pakistani rule and prepare for a struggle for independence (Hoque 2022).

In March 1971, the Pakistani military launched a violent crackdown on civilians in East Pakistan. This action began the Bangladesh Liberation War, which lasted for nine months. During the conflict, the military committed widespread atrocities, and millions of people fled to India.

Bengali resistance fighters, known as the *Mukti Bahini*, organized guerrilla warfare and fought against the Pakistani army with support from India (Hoque 2022). The war ended on 16 December 1971, when Pakistani forces surrendered. Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation. This victory represented not only political independence but also the triumph of linguistic and cultural identity over imposed authority (Hoque 2022).

Bangladesh achieved independence through decades of resistance against political domination, cultural suppression, and economic inequality. The imposition of Urdu, the suppression of Bengali culture, and the denial of democratic rights all contributed to the demand for independence. The events of 1971 demonstrate how language, identity, and collective resistance can shape the course of history and lead to the creation of a new nation.

FOLKLORE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A UNIFIED BENGALI CULTURAL IDENTITY

Folklore has played an important role in shaping nationalism across many parts of the world, beginning in Europe. A key example is the *Kalevala* in Finland, a nineteenth-century compilation of oral poetry that helped construct a shared national identity. As W. R. Mead (1962) demonstrates in "Kalevala and the Rise of Finnish Nationality," the collection, study, and reinterpretation of folklore in Finland played an important role in the emergence of Finnish nationhood (Mead 1962, 217). Mead emphasizes the close relationship between nation, language, and folklore in this process. Early scholars documented oral traditions and promoted the Finnish language, laying the foundation for national awareness, while Elias Lönnrot (1802–1884) later compiled oral poetry largely collected from eastern Karelia into the *Kalevala* (Mead 1962, 218–20). By organizing oral poetry into a unified epic, Lönnrot gave Finnish language and folklore

wider public currency and contributed to the development of national consciousness (Mead 1962, 221–22). As Mead explains, while the *Kalevala* supplied the "romance" in the making of the Finnish nation, extensive field research into the antiquity and individuality of the Finnish people supplied the "reality" (Mead 1962, 223). Over time, folklore extended beyond scholarship into art and public life and became increasingly associated with Finland's national image (Mead 1962, 225, 228–29). Similar connections between folklore and nationalism appeared elsewhere in Europe. In Germany, the Brothers Grimm published the first volume of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children's and Household Tales*) in 1812 and the second volume in 1815. Their collection contributed to ideas of common cultural unity. These efforts reflected broader intellectual traditions, particularly the work of Johann Gottfried Herder (2024), who developed influential ideas about the relationship between folklore, language, and national identity during the late eighteenth century. Herder argued that folklore expressed the "soul" (*Volksgeist*) of a nation.

Building on this global context, this section examines how folklore functions as a central tool in constructing a unified Bengali cultural identity in Bangladesh. It argues that folklore actively produces a sense of collective belonging that transcends religious and social divisions, while communities also mobilize folklore to resist colonial and neo-colonial influences. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of the nation as an imagined community, Johann Gottfried Herder's (1791) theory of romantic nationalism and the idea of Volksgeist, Roger D. Abrahams' (1962) critique of folklore's entanglement with Romantic nationalism, and postcolonial theory, this section examines how folklore is actively constructed and mobilized in the formation of national identity. It further engages the work of Maurice Halbwachs (1992) and Pierre Nora (1989) to show how collective memory or "lieux de mémoire" continuously shape and reinforce cultural belonging in the present. Together, these theoretical frameworks demonstrate that folklore is not a

passive inheritance but a dynamic cultural-political process through which nations imagine and sustain themselves.

As I have previously mentioned, nationalism as Benedict Anderson (1983) conceptualizes, is an "imagined community" that depends on shared narratives and cultural practices to create a sense of unity among people who may never meet. This unity does not emerge naturally; it is actively constructed through political and cultural processes. One of the most powerful tools for this construction is heritage, which draws from folklore, memory, and tradition to create a coherent national identity. The theories of Johann Gottfried Herder and the postcolonial scholarship noted above lead one to the realization that folklore is not merely a reflection of the past but a dynamic force used to construct a unified cultural identity. In Bangladesh, this process is particularly evident in the emphasis on Bengali regional culture, which transcends religious divisions while simultaneously resisting both colonial legacies and contemporary neo-colonial pressures.

Abrahams (1993) argues that folklore played a central role in legitimizing nation-states. By linking culture to territory and shared traditions, nationalist movements used folklore to create the illusion of a unified community. Abrahams asserts that nations are not organic entities but "powerful fictions" created for political purposes. Folklore, in this context, becomes part of a broader "politics of culture," for which nations select and present traditions in ways that support coherent narratives. This framework is particularly useful for understanding the formation of Bangladeshi nationalism. The emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 was itself rooted in a rejection of Pakistan's attempt to impose a singular "Islamic" national identity that marginalized Bengali language and culture. Through movements such as the Language Movement of 1952 and later the Liberation War, cultural practices became central to articulating a distinct national identity. In

Abrahams's terms, these cultural forms did not simply reflect an already unified people; rather, they actively produced the sense of unity that made the nation imaginable.

Abrahams (1962) also provides an explanation as to how this process continues in the present. Contemporary Bangladeshi nationalism often foregrounds Bengali festivals and folk traditions such as Pahela Baishakh and Nabanna as markers of national identity that cut across religious divisions. This emphasis works as a strategic cultural position against homogenizing transnational Islamic ideologies that do not align with local traditions. In this sense, folklore functions both as a unifying force and as a boundary-making tool. It distinguishes a specifically "Bangladeshi" cultural identity from broader religious or global identities. As Abrahams warns, these uses of folklore are never neutral. They involve selective remembering and privilege certain traditions over others. This process shapes who is included within the nation and who is pushed to its margins.

Herder's (1791) romantic nationalism advances the notion that every nation possesses a unique "national soul" (Volksgeist), expressed most authentically through its folklore, language and traditions. Folklore, therefore, functions as the cultural archive of a nation, embodying its collective memory and emotions. Postcolonial theory complicates this idea by demonstrating that what is often perceived as "tradition" is itself shaped by colonial knowledge production. Colonial rule in South Asia, for example, systematically constructed and redefined cultural categories like religion and caste through frameworks that portrayed local societies as inferior or static, thereby legitimizing imperial domination. As a result, postcolonial nations must not only reclaim their traditions but also critically reinterpret them in order to construct autonomous identities.

In Bangladesh, this reinterpretation takes the form of prioritizing Bengali regional culture as the basis of national identity. Rather than relying solely on religious identity, which can be exclusionary and externally influenced, Bangladeshi nationalism emphasizes cultural practices that are shared across communities. This is particularly important for a place in which rigid, transnational religious ideologies attempt to override local traditions. By foregrounding regional folklore, Bangladesh constructs a distinct cultural identity that resists both colonial and neo-colonial forms of cultural domination. In this sense, folklore becomes a tool not only of preservation but also of cultural resistance and nation-building.

A crucial dimension of this process involves collective memory, as theorized by scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs (1992). Halbwachs argues that communities do not preserve collective memory as a fixed record of the past; instead, they continuously construct and reinterpret their histories in relation to present needs. Rachelle Hope Saltzman (2012) further demonstrates how communities reproduce and reinterpret historical events and connect them to national identity. In her analysis of the 1926 British General Strike, Saltzman observes that immediately after the strike, "the forces of historical reproduction went into action," as reporters, playwrights, diarists, legal authorities, historians, and others began recording their own versions of the event (Saltzman 2012, 170). These different actors did not simply preserve an unchanged account of the past. Instead, they selected, interpreted, and circulated particular narratives and images of the strike. Through repetition, certain anecdotes and representations gained prominence in public memory and, as Saltzman argues, came to "symbolize the uniqueness of British character" (Saltzman 2012, 171).

Saltzman (2012) shows that people continued this process long after the historical event itself. Through repeated "retelling and reshaping," different groups emphasized particular features

of the strike and attached broader symbolic meanings to them. Over time, these processes transformed the strike into "a cultural symbol and eventually part of the national mythology" (Saltzman 2012, 173). The cultural memory of the strike also shaped how people understood subsequent political and social events. As Saltzman explains, the strike became "available to lend new meanings to later events" (Saltzman 2012, 173). Saltzman's analysis therefore demonstrates that collective memory involves more than remembering a historical event. Through selection and reinterpretation, communities transform versions of the past into cultural symbols. These symbols then express and reinforce collective and national identities.

This process also demonstrates that communities do not simply inherit folklore and festivals; they continually produce, reproduce, and reinterpret these traditions to create a sense of continuity and belonging. Events such as Pahela Baishakh, Nabanna, Poush Parvan, Pohela Falgun, and Chaitra Sankranti function as what Pierre Nora (1989) calls lieux de mémoire, or "sites of memory" (1989), where communities perform and reinforce collective identity.

These festivals play a central role in constructing a unified cultural identity by bringing together people from diverse religious and social backgrounds. For example, Pahela Baishakh and its iconic Mangal Shovajatra parade create a shared cultural space where Hindus, Muslims, and individuals from other communities participate collectively. Despite ongoing threats from extremist groups, the continued mass participation in these events demonstrates how folklore-based practices can resist divisive ideologies and reinforce unity. Similarly, Nabanna, the harvest festival, is celebrated by farmers regardless of religion, because it emphasizes agrarian cycles rather than religious doctrine. Through such practices, folklore transforms into a living mechanism of unity, embodying Anderson's imagined community in everyday life.

Folklore also enables the incorporation of diverse cultural groups into the national framework. The celebration of the Chakma community's Biju festival, for instance, illustrates how indigenous traditions can be integrated into a broader national identity. When Bengalis from various backgrounds participate in such events, folklore acts as a bridge across ethnic and cultural differences, fostering inclusivity. This aligns with Herder's idea that a nation must cultivate its own cultural foundations, while also reflecting postcolonial efforts to resist homogenization by embracing plurality within unity.

Folk narratives are also often drawn upon to construct a unified cultural identity by shaping collective memory and historical consciousness. The narratives surrounding Dhakai muslin provide a compelling example in the Bangladeshi context. During British colonial rule, colonial economic policies contributed to the decline of the muslin industry in Bengal, symbolizing broader patterns of economic exploitation. Folk narratives about this decline include legends about the suffering of weavers, forced labor, and the mutilation of weavers' thumbs. Khademul Islam describes this story as "largely apocryphal" but notes that generations of Bengali children have grown up hearing the legend, which shows its enduring place in Bengali cultural memory (Islam 2016).

While scholars have contested the historical accuracy of some of these accounts, these narratives reveal collective memories and shared understandings of colonial oppression. Alessandro Portelli's (1991) approach to oral history helps explain why historical accuracy does not constitute the only source of meaning in such narratives. Portelli argues that discrepancies between historical facts and collective memories can reveal how communities actively interpret and give meaning to past events (Portelli 1991, 25–26). Luisa Passerini (1987) similarly

demonstrates that people construct memory and identity through oral traditions and collective representations rather than simply reproducing past events (Passerini 1987, 55–60). In this sense, the stories surrounding the suffering of muslin weavers function as contested narratives through which memories of colonial exploitation continue to shape understandings of Bengal's past, rather than simply as factual accounts whose significance depends entirely on their historical accuracy.

At the same time, other folk narratives celebrate the extraordinary qualities of Dhakai muslin, portraying it with almost magical qualities—so fine that it could pass through a ring or be mistaken for invisible. These narratives are resources drawn upon to elevate muslin to a symbol of national pride and cultural excellence. Together, the stories of loss and excellence create a powerful, unified narrative that both critiques colonial exploitation and celebrates indigenous achievement. In this way, folklore constructs a shared emotional and cultural framework through which individuals can identify with the nation.

Importantly, the construction of a unified cultural identity through folklore also involves processes of selection, remembering, and forgetting. As memory scholars note, states and communities do not preserve all traditions equally; they emphasize some while marginalizing others, depending on contemporary political and cultural priorities. Such processes can also marginalize particular communities when dominant narratives of national identity exclude their cultural traditions. National heritage construction is therefore not a neutral process, as groups with greater political and cultural power often have greater influence over which traditions come to represent the nation.

In this respect, Bangladesh can be compared with India's familiar principle of "unity in diversity." India's constitutional framework is explicitly pluralistic: it accommodates multiple

religious, linguistic, and cultural communities within a single Indian national identity. For example, Articles 29 and 30 of the Indian Constitution protect the cultural and educational rights of minorities, while the Constitution also recognizes numerous scheduled languages (Constitution of India, arts. 29–30, Eighth sched.). Bangladesh is somewhat different because its nationalism historically developed more centrallyly around a shared Bengali linguistic and cultural identity, particularly through the Language Movement and the Liberation War. This emphasis is explicit in Article 9 of the Constitution of Bangladesh, which states that the unity of the "Bangalee nation," deriving its identity from its language and culture, forms the basis of Bangalee nationalism (Constitution of Bangladesh, art. 9). At the same time, Bangladesh is not constitutionally indifferent to cultural diversity. Article 23 states that people from all sections of society should have opportunities to contribute to national culture, while Article 23A requires the state to protect and develop the distinctive cultures and traditions of "tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities" (Constitution of Bangladesh, arts. 23–23A). Thus, although Bengali language and culture occupy a particularly important position in the construction of Bangladeshi national identity, the constitutional framework also recognizes the cultural diversity that exists within the nation.

This tension between constructing a shared Bengali national identity and recognizing cultural diversity is particularly relevant to the case of Dhakai muslin. The state can incorporate muslin into national heritage as a powerful symbol because its history is closely connected to Bengal craftsmanship, memories of colonial exploitation, and contemporary efforts at cultural revival. Its transformation from a regional textile tradition into a symbol of Bangladeshi national heritage therefore demonstrates how the state selects and elevates particular elements of the past to represent a broader national identity. At the same time, examining muslin as national heritage

raises the larger question of which cultural traditions receive national recognition and which communities or traditions remain less visible within dominant narratives of the nation. A detailed analysis of Bangladeshi national heritage construction on a wider scale is beyond the scope of this thesis; instead, I examine these broader processes through the specific case study of Dhakai muslin.

In Bangladesh, the prominence of "Bengali festivals" in national discourse reflects a deliberate effort to privilege regional cultural identity over other forms of identity that the state might view as divisive. This selective process is central to nation-building, as it allows the state and society to craft a coherent narrative that aligns with their vision of national unity.

Furthermore, folklore continues to play a crucial role in addressing neo-colonial challenges in the contemporary world. Globalization, media, and transnational ideologies constantly reshape cultural identities, often leading to homogenization. In this context, folklore serves as a means of asserting cultural autonomy, grounding identity in local traditions and practices. The revival of Dhakai muslin, for example, is not only an economic initiative but also a symbolic act of reclaiming cultural heritage. Similarly, the continued celebration of traditional festivals reinforces a sense of belonging that resists external cultural domination.

Folklore is central to the construction of a unified cultural identity in Bangladesh. Folklore operates as both a repository of the past and a tool for shaping the present and future. It can be harnessed to create a sense of unity that transcends religious, ethnic, and social divisions. At the same time, communities can mobilize folklore to resist colonial and neo-colonial influences by reclaiming indigenous narratives and asserting cultural sovereignty. Ultimately, folklore is not merely a reflection of tradition but a dynamic process through which nations construct and sustain themselves.

POLITICIZATION OF CULTURE AND HERITAGE IN BANGLADESH

The relationship between heritage and politics in Bangladesh shows how heritage can become part of the way a nation tells its story. Heritage does not simply preserve something from the past. People or the governments decide what they want to preserve, how they want to represent it, and what meaning it should carry in the present. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) and Peckham (2003) connect this process to the "politicization of culture," while Smith (2006) shows how heritage can shape ideas about identity and authority. These choices also determine which traditions become visible within national narratives and which remain less visible. Lowthorp (2025) makes a similar argument through her study of Kutiyattam. She shows how a regional cultural tradition gained new meanings as different groups and institutions placed it within regional, national and global heritage contexts. Her work reminds us that traditions do not simply move unchanged from the past into the present. People continually reinterpret them as social and political circumstances change. This perspective helps explain how Bangladesh now presents Dhakai muslin as an important symbol of Bangladeshi national heritage.

The idea of heritage as cultural production also helps explain the contemporary revival of Dhakai muslin. Yúdice (2004) examines how people and institutions use culture for political and economic purposes. Heritage-making therefore involves conscious selection, interpretation, and curation rather than simply preserving the past exactly as it existed. The revival of Dhakai muslin demonstrates this process clearly. The Bangladeshi state has worked with scientists and researchers to recover the cotton and historical knowledge associated with muslin. Artisans have revived its spinning and weaving techniques. Together, these groups have positioned the revived textile as a symbol of Bangladesh's cultural achievement and historical continuity. They also present its

revival as a source of national pride. The revival therefore does more than bring back a lost textile tradition. It shows how people can draw on the past to create heritage in the present. It also raises an important question for this thesis: who has the authority to decide which parts of a historically shared Bengali tradition become recognized and represented as Bangladeshi national heritage?

The Bangladeshi state strategically mobilizes cultural heritage to construct and reinforce national identity. Pahela Baishakh (Bengali New Year) and the revival of Dhakai muslin show how the state uses cultural heritage to strengthen national identity and position Bangladesh within broader cultural and economic frameworks. The revival of Dhakai muslin holds particular importance for this thesis. The Bangladeshi government has supported a project to revive Dhakai muslin production since 2014. I briefly introduce this revival here to demonstrate how the state uses heritage as a strategy. In the next chapter I examine the history and development of the revival project and explore its contemporary implications in greater depth.

The revival of Dhakai muslin illustrates how the state can transform a historical cultural tradition into a national heritage project. The decline of the muslin industry during British colonial rule now symbolizes broader histories of economic exploitation and cultural loss. Through the contemporary revival project, the Bangladeshi government has repositioned muslin as a symbol of a celebrated pre-colonial past as well as cultural resilience and continuity. The project therefore provides an example of how the state can actively select and promote elements of the past as representative of national heritage.

A similar process of politicization and heritage reproduction appears in the transformation of Pahela Baishakh, the Bengali New Year celebration (Rudro). Following the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, the state sought to construct a unified national identity that could distinguish itself

from Pakistan and resist increasing Islamic or Middle Eastern cultural influence, particularly from the 1980s onward. In this context, the state expanded Pahela Baishakh from a primarily agrarian festival into a large-scale national celebration. Before the 1970s, the festival was localized and did not include large public spectacles such as parades (Rudro). The introduction of the Mangal Shovajatra, a colorful procession held as part of the Bengali New Year (Pahela Baishakh) celebrations, in 1987 transformed the celebration into a performative expression of national unity, with vibrant masks and motifs drawn from Bengali folklore (UNESCO). UNESCO recognized this parade as Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2016, further illustrating how cultural institutions can elevate local traditions into national and global symbols.

The Bangladeshi state also curates elements of Pahela Baishakh celebrations in ways that reinforce a shared Bengali cultural identity. Rabindra Sangeet has become an important part of these celebrations. Chhayanaut's annual program at Ramna Batamul prominently features songs by Rabindranath Tagore and connects the festival to Bengali cultural expression (Siam 2026). Pahela Baishakh also developed particular visual markers of cultural identity. Women commonly wear white sarees with red borders while men wear *panjabi*-pajama or other forms of traditional Bengali clothing (Aktar 2025). The red-and-white combination has become especially recognizable as a symbol of Pahela Baishakh and Bengali cultural belonging (Fidai 2024). Through music and clothing, participants publicly perform a shared cultural identity. These practices also transform the festival into a site of collective memory. This connection between heritage and collective memory also links Pahela Baishakh to the contemporary revival of Dhakai muslin. Both cases show how heritage functions not as a passive inheritance but as an active process of nation-building. They function as sites of remembering through which cultural traditions acquire public meaning and contribute to collective identity (Santino 364–65; González-

Martin 142–49). In both cases, the state plays a central role in shaping these narratives, selecting which aspects of culture to highlight (Bengali New Year) and which to downplay (Arabic New Year celebration).

The revival endeavors of Dhakai muslin serve multiple purposes. First, the revival helps build a cohesive national identity rooted in a shared cultural heritage. By presenting muslin as the pinnacle of Bengali craftsmanship, the state reinforces a sense of pride and historical depth. Second, it creates political legitimacy by aligning the government with the preservation and promotion of national culture. In this sense, heritage becomes a tool of governance, demonstrating the state's role as both protector and producer of culture. Finally, the revival contributes to economic development by transforming muslin into a valuable commodity within both domestic and global markets.

These processes demonstrate the broader relationship between nationalism, collective memory, and the politicization of heritage discussed throughout this chapter. Dhakai muslin provides a particularly revealing case through which these processes can be examined in practice. In the next chapter, I therefore turn specifically to the Bangladeshi government's efforts to revive Dhakai muslin from 2014 to the present day, examining the development of the revival project in greater detail and considering how a textile associated with Bengal's pre-colonial past has been reconstructed as a form of national heritage in contemporary Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated how historical, political, and cultural processes have continuously shaped Bangladeshi national identity. The layered history of Bengal, colonial rule,

the Partition of 1947, the Language Movement, and the Liberation War of 1971 all contributed to the development of a distinct Bangladeshi national identity. At the same time, Bangladesh continues to draw heavily from a broader Bengali cultural identity rooted in language, folklore, traditions, and shared historical memory. People therefore do not necessarily treat Bengali and Bangladeshi identities as opposing categories; instead, they continuously negotiate these identities according to different social, cultural, and political contexts.

Folklore and collective memory also actively connect historical experience with contemporary understandings of national belonging. The examples discussed in this chapter show how people use folklore not simply to preserve the past but also to interpret and give meaning to it in the present. Narratives surrounding Dhakai muslin, for example, preserve memories of extraordinary craftsmanship as well as colonial exploitation, allowing muslin to represent both cultural achievement and historical loss. At the same time, states and communities select which traditions and memories they emphasize and which they leave less visible. This process raises important questions about whose culture comes to represent the nation and whose remains at its margins.

The examples of Pahela Baishakh and Dhakai muslin further demonstrate how the Bangladeshi state actively shapes national heritage. Through cultural promotion, institutional recognition, and revival initiatives, the state transforms selected traditions into visible symbols of national identity. The state promotes Pahela Baishakh as a public celebration through which people perform and reinforce Bengali cultural identity, while the revival of Dhakai muslin connects contemporary Bangladesh with Bengal's pre-colonial textile history and memories of colonial loss. In both cases, the state uses heritage as more than an inheritance from the past; it mobilizes heritage

as a cultural, political, and economic resource to construct national narratives and strengthen collective belonging.

Dhakai muslin brings together the central themes of this chapter: nationalism, folklore, collective memory, colonial history, and state heritage-making. Through the contemporary revival, Bangladesh has transformed a textile associated with Bengal's historical past into a symbol of cultural recovery, national pride, and potential economic value.

In the next chapter, I turn specifically to the revival of Dhakai muslin from 2014 to the present. Drawing on ethnographic interviews and evidence from the revival project, I examine how government officials, researchers, cultural actors, and members of the public have participated in recovering, interpreting, and redefining Dhakai muslin as national heritage in contemporary Bangladesh.

CHAPTER 3: CONTEMPORARY REVIVAL AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF DHAKAI MUSLIN: A CASE STUDY

This chapter explores contemporary efforts to revive Dhakai muslin and examines the meanings that different groups in Bangladesh attach to this heritage textile. Drawing on interviews with government officials, scientists, journalists, and Bangladeshis from different age groups, genders, educational backgrounds, occupations and social settings, I examine how people understand Dhakai muslin as a symbol of cultural identity and national pride as well as a source of economic potential. I focus particularly on state institutions, the scientific recovery of the phuti karpas *plant*, media representations, and public perceptions of muslin. Together, these perspectives show how the revival has developed beyond the reconstruction of a traditional craft into a broader cultural project that connects Bangladesh's past with its contemporary national identity.

I also place the revival within Bangladesh's longer history of textile production. From the handwoven muslin of precolonial Bengal to the contemporary ready-made garment industry, textiles have remained central to the region's economy and cultural identity, although systems of production, labor, and global trade have changed considerably. Drawing on Fauzia Erfan Ahmed (2004) and Lamia Karim (2022), I examine how global capitalism, state policy, low-cost labor, and international production networks contributed to the growth of Bangladesh's garment industry. This history provides a broader context for understanding the contemporary revival of Dhakai muslin and Bangladesh's continuing relationship with textile production.

I then examine how state institutions, scientists, artisans, and local communities reconstructed Dhakai muslin materially and culturally. My interviews with Md. Ayyub Ali and Dr. Monjur Hossain provide institutional and scientific perspectives on the recovery of phuti

karpas plant, the reconstruction of spinning and weaving techniques, and the challenges of commercialization. My interview with journalist Sheikh Saifur Rahman addresses media representation and cultural ownership. These accounts show that the revival required people not only to recover a lost textile but also to reconstruct the knowledge, technologies and meanings associated with it.

To analyze this process, I draw particularly on Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998) understanding of heritage as cultural production. Halbwachs (1992) helps explain how people reconstruct memories of Dhakai muslin in relation to present-day Bangladeshi identity, while Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) shows how institutions transform elements of the past into heritage through documentation, recognition, preservation, and presentation. I also draw on Johann Gottfried Herder's (1791) concept of *Volksgeist* to consider how the revival connects muslin to ideas of a distinctive national culture, and on Valdimar Hafstein (2009), Alonso González (2013), and Leah Lowthorp (2025) to examine how UNESCO and other institutional heritage mechanisms reinforce nation-centered understandings of cultural traditions. Finally, I consider the examples of Jamdani, Dhakai muslin, and Tangail saree to show how the state increasingly recognizes, protects, and claims textile traditions associated with the historically shared region of Bengal.

Bangladesh's identity as a global textile hub is not a recent phenomenon but rather the continuation of a long and deeply rooted history of textile production. Long before the rise of modern industrial capitalism, Dhaka (historically known as Dacca) was famous for producing the finest textiles in the world. The legendary Dhakai muslin, woven entirely by hand, was so delicate that it was often described as "woven air." Produced without the aid of machines, this fabric

represented an extraordinary level of artisanal skill. Today, Bangladesh's position as one of the world's largest garment exporters reflects a transformation of this historical legacy into a modern, globalized industry. This continuity allows Bangladesh to be understood as a textile nation across time, linking precolonial craftsmanship with contemporary industrial production.

In the precolonial period, muslin weaving was a highly specialized regional craft. Skilled weavers used locally grown phuti karpas cotton and intricate hand-spinning and weaving techniques to create Dhakai muslin that was exported across Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and many other regions. This textile tradition was not only an economic activity but also a cultural practice embedded in local communities. The reputation of Dhakai muslin was global, making Bengal a key node in early international trade networks. However, colonial intervention, particularly under British rule, led to the decline of this industry through policies that favored machine-made textiles from Britain and disrupted local production systems.

Despite this historical rupture, the idea of Bangladesh as a textile-producing region did not disappear; rather, it evolved. Before the Industrial Revolution, textile production in Bengal was entirely based on handloom weaving. Skilled artisans produced world-renowned Dhakai muslin using intricate manual techniques that required years of training. This system of production was closely tied to social structures, including the Hindu caste system, where specific communities such as the Basak (Vaishya caste) were traditionally associated with weaving. Over time, Muslim weavers also became deeply involved in muslin production, contributing to a shared, regionally rooted textile culture that transcended religious boundaries while still being embedded in social hierarchies.

In the modern era, this artisanal tradition has not vanished but has been transformed. What was once the work of specialized weaving communities is now carried out by millions of skilled laborers, primarily garment workers, who contribute directly to Bangladesh's national economy. In this sense, the weavers of the past have not disappeared; rather, they have been reconstituted as modern industrial workers.

This transformation does not seem entirely planned, but neither does it appear entirely accidental. Bangladesh may not produce advanced aircraft or host massive technology companies like the United States, China, or India, yet it has become one of the largest garment producers in the world. Part of this success is clearly tied to the availability of low-cost labor and favorable global market conditions. But there is also a deeper historical continuity at play. From the handwoven muslin of Dacca to today's ready-made garments, textile production has remained central to the region's identity. What once depended on caste-based artisanship has now transformed into a skill-based industrial workforce, yet the core connection to textiles persists. In that sense, this development can be understood less as a coincidence and more as a long-evolving trajectory—one that continues to link Bangladesh's past with its present.

Bangladesh's emergence as one of the world's largest garment producers reflects both favorable global market conditions and the availability of low-cost labor. At the same time, the region's historical relationship with textile production provides a longer context for understanding this development. What once depended on caste-based artisanship has transformed into a skill-based industrial workforce, while textiles have remained central to the region's economy and identity.

The rise of the garment industry in Bangladesh stands as one of the most striking examples of export-led industrialization in the Global South. Over the past four decades, Bangladesh has transformed from a war-torn, aid-dependent country into the world's second-largest apparel exporter. Scholars such as Fauzia Erfan Ahmed (2004) and Lamia Karim (2022), along with recent research from the NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, show that this transformation is deeply embedded in global capitalism and state policy, as well as labor structures. While the garment sector has driven economic growth and integrated Bangladesh into global markets, it has also relied on low wages, labor exploitation and weak regulation. The industry's rise, therefore, must be understood not only as a success story but also as a complex process shaped by globalization.

The early development of Bangladesh's garment sector was closely tied to both domestic political shifts and global trade structures. According to Ahmed (2004), the foundations of the industry were laid in the aftermath of the 1971 Liberation War, which created a new class of "proto-capitalists" who later benefited from pro-market economic policies introduced by the post-1975 military regime. The transition from state-led socialism to privatization and export-oriented policies under military rule encouraged foreign investment and industrial growth. Government initiatives such as tax holidays, export processing zones (EPZs), and trade liberalization made Bangladesh an attractive site for global manufacturing. These domestic changes coincided with global restructuring in the textile industry, particularly the Multifibre Arrangement (MFA), which restricted exports from established producers like South Korea and redirected production to least developed countries such as Bangladesh.

As Lamia Karim (2022) explains, the industry's growth accelerated through strategic international partnerships, most notably the 1978 collaboration between Desh Company and South Korea's Daewoo, which provided technical training, machinery, and access to global markets. This partnership helped establish Bangladesh's export-oriented garment model and facilitated knowledge transfer to local entrepreneurs. By the late 1980s and 1990s, the sector expanded rapidly, benefiting from global demand for low-cost labor and favorable trade conditions. Ahmed notes that between 1977 and 1991, the industry grew at a compound annual rate of 125%, and by 1991 Bangladesh had become the eighth-largest garment exporter to the United States, exporting to more than 50 countries.

In the decades that followed, the industry became the backbone of Bangladesh's economy. By the early 2000s, Bangladesh emerged as a major global supplier of ready-made garments, and by 2018, exports had exceeded $30 billion. The sector now accounts for approximately 80% of the country's export earnings and employs over 4 to 5 million workers, the majority of whom are women. This rapid expansion has contributed significantly to economic growth and poverty reduction. Karim notes that Bangladesh's per capita income increased from $100 to $1,500, while poverty levels declined dramatically, signaling the transformative economic impact of the garment sector.

Low wages have been a central feature of the garment industry's competitiveness. Ahmed reports that Bangladeshi garment workers earned as little as $0.25 per hour, compared to $7.53 per hour in the United States. Karim further traces the evolution of wages, showing that the minimum monthly wage was only $11 until 2006, rising to $22 after worker protests, then to $67 in 2013, and approximately $90 by 2018. Even with these increases, wages remain among the lowest in the

global garment industry. Moreover, wage structures are designed in ways that limit real gains, with increases calculated only on basic pay rather than total compensation.

Recent research from the NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights adds another critical dimension to understanding the garment sector: its true size and hidden structure (Baumann-Pauly 2017). Official estimates long suggested that Bangladesh had around 4,000 to 5,000 garment factories. The Stern report reveals that the actual number is significantly higher, with more than 7,000 to 8,000 factories, many of which operate as subcontracting units outside formal regulatory frameworks. These "invisible" factories play a crucial role in meeting global demand but often lack oversight, making them more prone to labor exploitation and unsafe working conditions.

The existence of subcontracting factories highlights the complexity of global supply chains. While large export-oriented factories are subject to international audits and safety standards, subcontracting units often operate informally, beyond the reach of regulators and global brands. This fragmentation allows multinational corporations to benefit from low production costs while distancing themselves from labor violations. As Karim notes, global buyers exert significant control over pricing and production without taking responsibility for working conditions, creating a system where profits are concentrated at the top of the supply chain while risks are borne by workers.

The rise of the garment industry in Bangladesh is a story of both remarkable economic transformation and persistent inequality. As Ahmed and Karim demonstrate, historical events, state policies, and global economic structures have shaped the industry's growth. It has generated employment for millions, particularly women, and contributed to national development and

poverty reduction. This growth has come with costs such as low wages, weak labor rights, and unsafe working conditions. The findings of the NYU Stern report further reveal that much of the industry remains hidden and unregulated, complicating efforts to improve labor standards (Baumann-Pauly 2017). Ultimately, the garment sector exemplifies the contradictions of globalization: it creates opportunities while simultaneously reproducing inequality. For Bangladesh, the challenge moving forward is not only to sustain economic growth but also to make that growth fair and just for the workers who drive it.

This long-standing relationship between textiles and Bangladeshi identity provides an important backdrop for understanding contemporary efforts to reclaim older textile traditions. Before the current revival of Dhakai muslin, UNESCO's 2013 recognition of the traditional art of Jamdani weaving as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO 2013) provides an important example of how Bangladesh began to institutionalize its textile heritage through national and international heritage mechanisms. Jamdani, widely considered the closest surviving descendant of Dhakai muslin, therefore represents an important link between the country's historical textile tradition and the contemporary revival of muslin.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Interview Participants

Participant Category	Number	Age Range	Location	Purpose
Bangladesh Handloom Board Official (Md. Ayyub Ali)	1	Adult	Dhaka	To understand the state-led Dhakai muslin revival project and institutional perspectives

Scientist/Professor (Dr. Monjur Hossain)	1	Adult	Rajshahi	To examine the scientific reconstruction and rediscovery of phuti karpas
Journalist (Sheikh Saifur Rahman)	1	Adult	Dhaka	To explore media narratives and public representations of Dhakai muslin
University Students (5 female, 2 male)	7	18–25	University of Rajshahi	To understand educated young people's perceptions of Dhakai muslin and national identity
High School Students (Urban, female)	2	16–17	Rajshahi	To examine teenagers' knowledge and attitudes toward Dhakai muslin
Rural Teenagers (1 female, 1 male)	2	15–19	Hamkuria Village, Sirajganj	To explore awareness of Dhakai muslin outside metropolitan and educational settings
Working Woman (Urban)	1	45	Dhaka	To understand urban perceptions and cultural memories of Dhakai muslin for a middle-aged woman

Domestic Workers (Urban, 2 female)	1	38	Dhaka	To examine working-class knowledge and oral memories of Dhakai muslin
Total	**15**	—	—	—

The Bangladeshi state and its institutions have played a central role in reviving Dhakai muslin and redefining it as national heritage. My interviews with three individuals connected to or knowledgeable about the revival provide further insight into how this process developed and how those involved understand its significance.

Interviewee: Md. Ayyub Ali

Position: Head (Planning and Implementation) and Acting Project Director, *Revival of the Technology of Producing Yarn and Fabric of Bangladesh's Golden Heritage "Muslin" (Phases I and II)*, Bangladesh Handloom Board

Interview Date: March 5, 2026

Platform: Zoom

My first interview was with Md. Ayyub Ali, the Acting Project Director of the Bangladesh Handloom Board's muslin revival project. I was particularly interested in learning whether phuti karpas (*Gossypium arboreum* var. *neglecta*), the cotton variety historically associated with Dhakai muslin, had been successfully rediscovered and revived. Ali confirmed that the plant had indeed been revived and provided his understanding of its historical significance.

Ali argued that the decline of Dhakai muslin was closely linked to the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the subsequent influx of machine-made textiles into Indian markets. In his view, muslin gradually became an exclusive luxury item worn primarily by elite classes, while ordinary people shifted to cheaper, mass-produced cotton fabrics. As demand for traditional muslin diminished, the cultivation of phuti karpas also declined.

Ali also referred to the popular narrative that British colonial authorities cut off the thumbs of muslin weavers, although he acknowledged that he was uncertain about the historical accuracy of this claim. Nevertheless, he maintained that the decline in muslin production led to the abandonment of phuti karpas cultivation, with farmers increasingly turning to other varieties of *Gossypium* cotton.

Throughout the interview, Ali repeatedly emphasized the importance of the specific cotton species used in muslin production. According to Ali, the term *phuti* derives from the Bengali expression *fut-fute*, which connotes softness or beauty. He explained that although *Gossypium arboreum* represents the broader species, only the variety *neglecta* possesses the characteristics necessary for producing authentic Dhakai muslin. He stressed that muslin yarn must be hand-spun, as machine-spun thread cannot replicate the qualities of traditional muslin. Ali further noted that authentic Dhakai muslin could be woven only on a pit loom, a traditional weaving technology in which the weaver sits in a two-to-three-foot-deep pit beneath the loom while operating it. According to him, the combination of hand-spun yarn, phuti karpas's distinctive properties, and the use of pit looms constitutes the essential technological foundation of muslin production.

After his summary of the historical decline of Dhakai muslin, which he primarily attributed to reduced demand and the disappearance of skilled practitioners, Ali proceeded to discuss the

contemporary muslin revival project undertaken by the Bangladesh Handloom Board. Work on the muslin revival project began in 2013. On October 12, 2014, ex-prime minister Shekh Hasina appointed a formal research team to start the revival of Dhakai muslin. The team included officials from the Bangladesh Handloom Board, scholars from the Bangladesh University of Textiles (BUTEX) and the University of Rajshahi, and representatives from the Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation (BTMC).

According to Ali, the researchers hypothesized that a species generally requires at least three hundred years to become completely extinct. Since British machine-made cotton textiles began flooding Indian markets in the 1830s and, by the 1880s, approximately two-thirds of the cotton cloth worn in India was imported from Britain, the researchers reasoned that only 190 to 200 years had passed since the decline of traditional muslin production. Based on this assumption, they believed that remnants of the phuti karpas plant might still exist somewhere in Bangladesh, albeit in an unrecognized or altered form.

The team consulted numerous historical texts, examined records in the Bangladesh National Archives, and conducted additional research in Kolkata, India, to gather information about the characteristics of the plant. Drawing on these sources, they produced a morphological sketch of phuti karpas, which was prepared by two students from the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Rajshahi. Using this sketch as a reference, the researchers began searching for similar landrace cotton varieties throughout Bangladesh.

Ali explained that they identified several comparable cotton plants in different regions of the country, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Kapasia in Gazipur, Dimla Upazila in Nilphamari, Mughalhat Upazila in Lalmonirhat, Kapasia Upazila in Rajshahi, Manda Upazila in

Naogaon, and Bagerhat Sadar Upazila. The research team subsequently conducted DNA analyses on these specimens. The findings revealed six distinct cotton varieties, which Ali claimed corresponded to the types of cotton historically used in muslin production during the colonial period. He emphasized that the team had successfully recovered all six of these varieties.

Among them, the researchers ultimately identified *Gossypium arboreum* var. *neglecta*, which they located in Kapasia, Gazipur. Ali recalled that when cotton was first extracted from this plant, members of the research team described it as "*fut-fute"*—an expression denoting exceptional softness, lightness, and delicacy. Upon examining the cotton, the then Vice-Chancellor of the Bangladesh University of Textiles, Abul Kashem, reportedly remarked that he had never encountered such a variety in his lifetime, describing the discovery as miraculous. The cotton also achieved a perfect score in what Ali referred to as a "maturity test," a standard that no other cotton sample had met. Researchers obtained a small sample of Dhakai muslin from the Bangladesh National Museum and compared its DNA with that of the newly discovered cotton. The initial results reportedly identified one sample as *Gossypium arboreum* var. *neglecta* and the other as *Homo sapiens*. Ali attributed this outcome to possible human contamination of the historical textile through prolonged handling or other forms of biological contact. According to his account, the researchers subsequently removed the human genetic material and isolated the plant components from the museum sample before conducting a sequencing analysis with the cotton collected from Kapasia, Gazipur. The results demonstrated a 96 percent genetic match, enabling scientists involved in the project to conclude that the plant they had rediscovered was the legendary phuti karpas*,* or *Gossypium arboreum* var. *neglecta*, historically associated with the production of Dhakai muslin.

Upon confirming the identification of phuti karpas, the research team, with the support of the Bangladesh Handloom Board, began collecting seeds and cultivating the plant in different regions of Bangladesh. According to Ali, this initiative aimed to determine whether contemporary environmental conditions and the ecological changes of the twenty-first century had affected the quality of the plant's cotton. While scientists carried out experimental cultivation in several locations, including Dinajpur, Narsingdi, Mymensingh, Rajshahi, Chuadanga, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Ali emphasized that the cotton grown in the botanical garden of the University of Rajshahi exhibited the highest quality. This finding was especially significant because, historically, Kapasia in Gazipur was renowned for producing the finest phuti karpas. Ali noted that the name "Kapasia" itself is derived from *karpas*, indicating a place associated with cotton cultivation. Surprisingly, he claimed that the cotton grown in present-day Kapasia produced the poorest results, while Narsingdi yielded the second-best quality. The researchers, he explained, continue to investigate the reasons behind these differences, considering factors such as environmental change, soil conditions, and other ecological variables. Ali suggested that industrial pollution may be one possible explanation, as Gazipur has become a major industrial center, whereas Rajshahi remains comparatively less industrialized. Nevertheless, he firmly maintained that, regardless of regional variations in cotton quality, the research team had successfully rediscovered the original phuti karpas plant.

Ali further explained that the current production capacity of the plant remains relatively low. One of the primary challenges is that the cotton bolls produce a greater proportion of seeds than usable fiber. Researchers are thus now focusing on methods to increase fiber yield while reducing seed production. He described the first phase of the project as the successful rediscovery of the plant itself, while the second phase aims to improve the variety through scientific and genetic

interventions so that Dhakai muslin yarn and textiles can eventually be produced on a larger scale. He added that scientists from Gazipur Agricultural University have joined the research team during this second phase of the project.

Our discussion then shifted to the origins of the revival initiative and the question of state funding. Ali expressed deep respect for former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (2009–2024), whom he credited with initiating the project. According to him, on October 12, 2014, Sheikh Hasina instructed the Bangladesh Handloom Board to revive Dhakai muslin. She described muslin as a lost cultural heritage and an integral component of Bangladeshi identity. He recalled the moment when the Board received her instructions directly:

> We had been hearing for quite some time that the then Prime Minister was planning to revive traditional Dhakai muslin. Then the Prime Minister's Office informed us that she wanted to speak with us about the matter. On October 12, at around 11:00 a.m., the Prime Minister's Office called us. The Chairman and several other senior officials of the Bangladesh Handloom Board were also in the room with me. The then Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, spoke with us directly over the telephone. She said, "Dhakai muslin is an integral part of Bengali identity. The British (British colonizers) destroyed this industry and no one has attempted to revive it until now. But I want to bring this Bengali heritage back. I believe we can revive this industry. We must restore this glorious chapter of Bengali heritage. I want to give you this responsibility. Form a team, submit a proposal to me, and begin the work as soon as possible. The plant (phuti karpas - *Gossypium arboreum* var. *neglecta*) that produced the cotton used for Dhakai muslin has become extinct. Make every

effort to recover it. Then try to produce Dhakai muslin entirely by hand, just as artisans produced it in the past. Do not use machines or power looms."

Hasina's initial assumption that phuti karpas (*Gossypium arboreum* var. *neglecta*) had become extinct was not entirely accurate. As the revival project later established, related cotton plants still survived in Bangladesh, although researchers first had to identify the variety that most closely matched the historical phuti karpas used for producing Dhakai muslin. He recalled that Hasina specifically instructed the team to recover phuti karpas and reproduce the traditional processes of cotton preparation, hand-spinning, and weaving. The government subsequently funded the initiative.

When I asked him about the challenges encountered during the revival process, Ali explained that the first major obstacle after the successful rediscovery of the cotton plant was training skilled spinners. Nearly two centuries had passed since the decline of traditional muslin production, and many descendants of muslin-producing communities had either changed occupations or adopted other forms of weaving that did not require the specialized skills associated with Dhakai muslin. The Bangladesh Handloom Board first selected one hundred women spinners from the Comilla district and subsequently chose eight weavers to participate in the project. At first, the spinners could not produce the exceptionally high-count yarn required for authentic muslin, which prevented the weavers from reproducing the fabric at its historical fineness.

Ali recounted that five members of the research team visited London's Victoria and Albert Museum to examine historical muslin samples, which they estimated to range between 300 and 350 thread counts. In contrast, the spinners in Comilla were initially capable of producing only 100-count yarn. Dr. Monjurul Hossain, a retired professor from the University of Rajshahi,

identified the underlying problem in the design of the spinning wheel itself. As a result, the second major challenge involved reconstructing the traditional spinning wheel used in historical muslin production. Following further research, the team succeeded in replicating the original design, enabling the spinners to produce yarn with counts of approximately 300.

The third challenge involved recreating the environmental conditions necessary for spinning ultra-fine muslin thread. Ali explained that, historically, women did their spinning on boats along the Meghna and Shitalakkhya rivers during the early morning or evening hours, when humidity levels during the monsoon season ranged between 70 and 80 percent. To replicate these conditions, the Bangladesh Handloom Board established a controlled environment with similar humidity levels. According to Ali, this innovation allowed the spinners to produce yarn with counts as high as 700.

Ali emphasized the extraordinary skill required for this work, noting that muslin threads are nearly invisible to the naked eye. He expressed admiration for the young Bangladeshi women who mastered these techniques and made the revival possible. There are currently 314 active spinners and 34 weavers in Bangladesh engaged in the production of Dhakai muslin.

After the completion of the first phase of Dhakai muslin revival in June 2023, the Bangladesh Handloom Board began preparing for the second. According to Ali, resistance from certain high-ranking officials within the government secretariat hindered progress. He explained, "Some members of the secretariat, particularly within the Ministry of Textiles and Jute, do not want Bangladesh to revive Dhakai muslin and begin selling either the fabric or the yarn." Ali neither elaborated on the reasons behind this opposition, nor did he speculate on whether personal interests or external influences were involved.

After the first phase of the Dhakai muslin revival project ended in June 2023, the Bangladesh Handloom Board began preparing for the second phase. Ali explained that the Board initially requested a budget of 48 crore taka (approximately US$3.9 million), but the government allocated only 18 crore taka (approximately US$1.48 million). The Board intended this phase to commercialize muslin production, increase output, and transfer the relevant technologies and skills to private entrepreneurs and companies within Bangladesh. Although former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina strongly supported the initiative, bureaucratic obstacles at the secretariat level slowed its implementation.

Following the political upheavals of 2024[6] and the removal of Sheikh Hasina's government, the Bangladesh Handloom Board submitted a revised proposal to the Planning Commission, again requesting approximately US$3.9 million for the project's continuation. The new administration has approved the proposal, and the second phase of the revival project is expected to commence shortly. Ali emphasized that neither the Government of Bangladesh nor the Bangladesh Handloom Board intends to retain exclusive control over the Dhakai muslin industry. Rather, they envision the state acting as a facilitator by providing training and technical knowledge to entrepreneurs and private brands so that they can independently produce muslin in the future. In this model, the Bangladesh Handloom Board would serve primarily a regulatory function by monitoring market prices and preventing arbitrary pricing practices.

I also asked whether the government intended to cultivate phuti karpas on a large scale and supply the cotton directly to manufacturers. Ali clarified that this was not the proposed approach.

[6] In July and August 2024, widespread student-led protests against the government intensified across Bangladesh and developed into a broader anti-government movement. On August 5, 2024, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and left the country, bringing an end to her government. Following this political transition, the Bangladesh Handloom Board submitted a revised proposal to the Planning Commission.

Instead, he maintained that any individual or enterprise would be free to cultivate the plant, process the cotton, and employ their own spinners and weavers to produce muslin independently. Finally, I asked for his opinion on the frequently cited claim that historical Dhakai muslin reached thread counts of 1,000 to 1,500. Ali unequivocally rejected this possibility. According to him, yarn finer than 350 count is already nearly invisible to the naked eye, making substantially higher counts impractical. Nevertheless, he affirmed the authenticity of two well-known legends associated with Dhakai muslin.

The first concerns the claim that a twelve-*haat* sari (a traditional twelve-haat sari measures approximately 18 feet or 5.5 meters in length, assuming the conventional Bengali measurement of one haat as roughly 18 inches or 45.7 cm) could pass through a finger ring. Ali noted that the researchers themselves tested this assertion with one of the first pieces of revived muslin and found the claim to be accurate. The second relates to the well-known snuff-box test. Historical accounts suggest that a twelve-*haat* muslin sari could be folded and placed inside a small snuff box measuring approximately 12 × 11 × 3 inches. The contemporary muslin produced through the revival project is sufficiently fine that three pieces of cloth of similar dimensions can fit within a container of that size.

Ali emphasized that the future growth and sustainability of the muslin industry ultimately depend upon the people of Bangladesh.

> He explained, “We certainly want to mass-produce Dhakai muslin and bring it to the market, but that will take more time. I want to emphasize one thing: Bengalis first need to take greater interest in locally produced goods. I have seen that Bangladeshi consumers want good-quality products, but they often do not want to

pay the appropriate price for them. This practice also prevents weavers from receiving fair compensation for their labor and makes it difficult for our local industries to develop a market. When we buy cheap, machine-made cloth instead, we contribute to the destruction of our own local industries."

Ali therefore argued that citizens must prioritize national interests and support the preservation and commercialization of this heritage craft, particularly given its potential to become a significant economic sector capable of generating substantial employment opportunities.

The revival of Dhakai muslin required researchers to identify the cotton plant historically associated with the textile, in addition to recovering traditional spinning and weaving techniques. phuti karpas (*Gossypium arboreum* var. *neglecta*) became central to this effort because historical accounts associated its cotton with the exceptionally fine yarn used to weave Dhakai muslin. Botanical research therefore played an important role in the broader revival project.

Interviewee: Dr. Monjur Hossain

Position: Geneticist and Retired Professor of Botany, University of Rajshahi

Interview Date: May 22, 2026

Platform: Zoom

My interview with Dr. Monjur Hossain provides insight into the scientific search for and identification of phuti karpas. The following account draws from his recollections and perspectives unless otherwise noted.

Hossain became involved in the revival of Dhakai muslin well before the Bangladesh Handloom Board officially launched the Muslin Revival Project in 2014. Professor Hossain told

me about his “friend Tanaka,” a Japanese colleague who served as the Chairman of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) at the time. Tanaka first approached Hossain about the possibility of reviving Dhakai muslin. Tanaka had learned about the historical significance of the fabric and understood that the industry had largely disappeared as a consequence of colonialism. Dr. Hossain explained that Japan had increasingly emphasized sustainability and environmentally friendly production practices, leading to a growing interest in handwoven textiles. Tanaka believed that reviving Dhakai muslin could have both cultural and economic significance.

As a result, they established a non-governmental organization called the Dhakai Muslin Foundation. The Japanese side also provided initial financial support for the initiative. In addition to Tanaka and Dr. Hossain, the organization included Professor Bulbul Osman from the Department of History of Art at the University of Dhaka. One of their earliest objectives was to obtain a small sample of historical Dhakai muslin for scientific analysis. To this end, the team visited the Bangladesh National Museum in Dhaka. Because they were operating as a private organization without formal governmental authorization, the museum did not permit them to examine the museum's muslin collections or allowed them to collect any samples.

Toward the end of 2014, the group began planning a research visit to the National Museum in Kolkata, India, in the hope of accessing historical muslin artifacts. At that point, however, an unexpected development occurred. A senior official from the Ministry of Textiles and Jute of Bangladesh contacted Dr. Hossain and invited him to join the research team for the official *Muslin Revival Project (2014)*. Reflecting on this moment, Dr. Hossain stated, "I immediately accepted the proposal because I believed that it was going to be a historic project. I was deeply interested in the initiative, and as a Bengali, I felt proud to have the opportunity to become a part of it."

Following his acceptance, Dr. Hossain joined the government-sponsored research team. His account of many subsequent developments closely parallels that of Md. Ayyub Ali, Head of Planning and Implementation at the Bangladesh Handloom Board and Acting Project Director of the Dhakai Muslin Revival Project, since both individuals worked on the same project. Their descriptions are largely consistent regarding the search for the original muslin cotton plant, the identification of phuti karpas (*Gossypium arboreum* var. *neglecta*), the DNA sequencing conducted on historical samples, and the experimental cultivation of the plant in different regions of Bangladesh to assess the quality of the resulting cotton and yarn.

Dr. Hossain further noted that members of the Muslin Revival Project also visited the Victoria and Albert Museum in London to study historical muslin textiles and collect samples for scientific analysis. The researchers examined approximately forty pieces of muslin, gaining access only after passing through five separate layers of security. While many aspects of his account mirrored Ali's, one point that Hossain particularly emphasized was the difficulty of rediscovering the original phuti karpas plant. He described this process as "finding a needle in a haystack," underscoring both the scientific and historical challenges involved in identifying a cotton variety that had long been considered lost.

After conducting an extensive review of the literature on Dhakai muslin, Dr. Hossain learned that the cotton historically used for muslin production had been cultivated in Kapasia Upazila of Gazipur District, Bangladesh. In 2016, when Dr. Hossain began searching for the historical muslin cotton plant, researchers had little knowledge of its physical appearance or botanical characteristics. To address this gap, Dr. Hossain consulted the works of several prominent authors, including Taylor and the renowned botanist William Roxburgh, often regarded

as the father of Indian botany. He also examined herbarium collections preserved in the archives of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, which contained dried specimens of plants and plant parts maintained for scientific study. Drawing upon these textual and botanical sources, two students from the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Rajshahi prepared a taxonomic sketch of the plant. Subsequently, three students from Dr. Hossain's department, all of whom were originally from Kapasia, Gazipur, requested copies of the sketch. Dr. Hossain provided them with the illustration, and the students reproduced and distributed multiple copies to elementary schools, madrasas, secondary schools, colleges, and other educational institutions throughout Kapasia. Local residents were encouraged to contact the researchers if they encountered a cotton plant resembling the image.

After approximately three months, one of the students received a phone call informing him that a similar plant was growing on a local household's garden. The student immediately contacted Dr. Hossain, who, together with several other researchers, visited the site in Kapasia and collected samples from the tree. At the same time, the team gathered cotton samples from numerous other locations across Bangladesh. According to Dr. Hossain, the Kapasia specimen exhibited the closest resemblance to the taxonomic sketch reconstructed from historical and botanical records. Subsequent chlorophyll analysis comparing the contemporary plant with historical Dhakai muslin samples reportedly confirmed that the Kapasia tree was the original cotton variety used in muslin production. Dr. Hossain emphasized that ordinary local residents also contributed to the rediscovery and revival of this important cultural heritage.

This account suggests that the plant had not become entirely extinct; rather, its cultivation had gradually diminished to the point that it was no longer recognized as a distinct variety.

Neglected and uncultivated, it survived in household gardens among other cotton species. Cotton harvested from these plants may even have been mixed with other varieties and used in ordinary textile production, although people were unaware that it originated from the historically significant muslin cotton plant.

After discussing the recent rediscovery of phuti karpas, I asked Dr. Hossain why, in his view, the cultivation of this plant declined and the Dhakai muslin industry ultimately disappeared. He argued that the Industrial Revolution in Britain transformed the social structure of consumption by weakening the economic dominance of traditional elites and fostering the emergence of a larger middle class. Since muslin was an exceptionally expensive fabric, which also required delicate care and was unsuitable for frequent washing, it became impractical for regular use among middle-class consumers. At the same time, the purchasing power and influence of elite patrons gradually declined, reducing demand for luxury textiles.

Dr. Hossain further noted that inexpensive machine-made cotton fabrics rapidly filled colonial markets. These textiles could be produced using ordinary cotton varieties and did not require the specialized knowledge, labor, or meticulous care associated with muslin production. Moreover, mechanized manufacturing enabled yarn and cloth to be produced far more efficiently than traditional hand-spinning and weaving methods. As a result, demand shifted toward high-yield cotton varieties that were cheaper and easier to cultivate. This observation corresponds with Ali's account that phuti karpas produces relatively more seeds and fewer usable fiber than other cotton plants, making it economically less attractive for large-scale cultivation. According to Dr. Hossain, these economic transformations, combined with British colonial monopolistic policies,

ultimately contributed to the decline of Dhakai muslin and the reduction in the cultivation of its associated cotton variety.

Dr. Hossain also expressed some disappointment regarding the level of funding allocated to scientific research and innovation in Bangladesh. In his view, the government should demonstrate greater commitment to supporting scientific initiatives and invest more substantially in this sector. As he stated, "The Government of Bangladesh should be more supportive of science and innovation, and greater investment should be directed toward this field."

Interviewee: Sheikh Saifur Rahman, Senior Journalist, *Prothom Alo,* a Bangladeshi national daily newspaper

Interview Date: May 22, 2026

Platform: Zoom

The media has also played an important role in introducing the revival of Dhakai muslin to the Bangladeshi public and shaping public awareness of the project. I therefore interviewed Sheikh Saifur Rahman, a senior journalist at *Prothom Alo*, to understand how the Bangladeshi media has represented the revival. I began by asking Rahman whether Bangladeshi media outlets had given the project sufficient coverage. He explained that both Bangla and English-language newspapers had covered the revival extensively, but the topic had failed to gain similar attention on contemporary social media platforms. According to Rahman, nearly every major newspaper in Bangladesh reported the event when the Bangladesh Handloom Board's revival project produced its first sari from the rediscovered muslin cotton. Rahman attributed the limited public engagement on social media to the lack of Dhakai muslin products in the market. In his view, the limited

availability of contemporary muslin garments has prevented the public from engaging more actively with the revival project.

Rahman also criticized the Bangladesh Handloom Board's approach to commercialization. He argued that muslin yarn itself should be introduced to the market as quickly as possible, since both textiles and yarn possess commercial value within the global apparel and fashion industries. According to him, the Bangladesh Handloom Board currently focuses on producing plain cloth and a limited number of saris from muslin yarn and intends to commercialize only these finished products.

Drawing on his visit to the Dhakai muslin handloom center operated by the Bangladesh Handloom Board on the banks of the Shitalakkhya River in Narayanganj, Rahman observed that contemporary muslin saris are being produced with Jamdani-inspired motifs and designs, though historical Dhakai muslin was traditionally plain, white, and unembellished. He argued that incorporating Jamdani patterns into contemporary muslin garments compromises their historical authenticity. In his assessment, the resulting product is neither authentic Dhakai muslin nor traditional Jamdani; rather, he characterized it as a "hybrid" textile that combines elements of both traditions.

Rahman also offered a strong critique of India's acquisition of a Geographical Indication (GI)[7] tag for "Bengal Muslin" in March 2024. He regarded the designation as ethically problematic, arguing that "Bengal" no longer exists as an official administrative region. Instead, he noted, India

[7] A Geographical Indication (GI) is an intellectual property designation that identifies a product with a particular geographical origin when its quality, reputation, or other characteristics are linked to that origin. The WTO's TRIPS Agreement recognizes GIs internationally, while national or regional authorities grant and protect them under their respective legal systems (World Intellectual Property Organization).

contains the state of West Bengal, while Bangladesh is formally recognized as the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Rahman therefore identified Bangladesh as the primary inheritor of the Dhakai muslin tradition. He grounded this claim in the historical concentration of Dhakai muslin production in areas that now lie within Bangladesh, particularly Dhaka and its surrounding weaving centers. He argued that India's use of the broader term "Bengal Muslin" could obscure this geographical and historical connection and complicate Bangladesh's claim to Dhakai muslin as its cultural heritage.

The interview findings also place the contemporary revival of Dhakai muslin within a broader process through which Bangladesh has institutionalized textile traditions as national heritage. This long-standing relationship between textiles and Bangladeshi identity provides an important backdrop for understanding contemporary efforts to reclaim older textile traditions. Before the current revival of Dhakai muslin, the recognition of Jamdani provides an important example of how Bangladesh began to institutionalize its textile heritage through national and international heritage mechanisms. Jamdani, widely considered the closest surviving descendant of Dhakai muslin, therefore represents an important link between the country's historical textile tradition and the contemporary revival of muslin.

The role of global institutions further complicates this process. Recognition by UNESCO as either world heritage or intangible cultural heritage is often regarded as one of the highest forms of international recognition of cultural heritage, providing international visibility and prestige. In Bangladesh, UNESCO recognition has played a significant role in strengthening national pride and institutionalizing heritage practices. The inscription of the traditional art of Jamdani weaving

as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013 exemplifies this dynamic (UNESCO 2013a).

The Bangladeshi government played a direct role in this process by formally nominating the "Traditional art of Jamdani weaving" for inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Bangladesh submitted the nomination form along with evidence of community consent and documentation showing Jamdani's inclusion in the country's inventory of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2013a). UNESCO's records also show that tradition bearers participated in the nomination process and provided their free, prior, and informed consent (UNESCO 2013b). The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage approved the nomination during its eighth session in Baku in 2013 and inscribed the traditional art of Jamdani weaving on the Representative List (UNESCO 2013b).

This state-led effort to secure international recognition for Jamdani established an important precedent for the later revival of Dhakai muslin. Because Jamdani represents a surviving continuation of the historical textile tradition associated with muslin, its recognition as Bangladeshi intangible cultural heritage helped create an institutional and cultural framework for reclaiming the older Dhakai muslin tradition.

Scholars such as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) argue that UNESCO does not simply preserve culture but actively produces heritage by reframing cultural practices as valuable and worthy of protection. Through processes of documentation, safeguarding, and recognition, traditions are transformed into heritage and acquire new significance. In the case of Jamdani, UNESCO recognition enhanced its cultural prestige and formally positioned the weaving tradition within both Bangladeshi and global heritage frameworks.

The Jamdani inscription therefore provides an important backdrop to the contemporary revival of Dhakai muslin. The government's earlier efforts to gain international recognition for a surviving textile tradition demonstrated how Bangladesh could use institutional heritage mechanisms to reclaim and promote its textile past. The current revival of Dhakai muslin can be understood as developing from this earlier process, extending the state's heritage-making efforts from the preservation of Jamdani toward the recovery of a textile tradition that had largely disappeared.

In its current revival, however, Dhakai muslin is increasingly presented as a distinctly Bangladeshi heritage. This shift reflects a process of selective cultural ownership, in which a complex and shared history is reframed through the boundaries and identity of the modern nation-state. A similar issue appears in UNESCO's 2021 inscription of "Ceebu Jën, a culinary art of Senegal" as Senegalese intangible cultural heritage, despite the dish's broader cultural connections across West Africa (UNESCO 2021). By positioning Bangladesh as the primary inheritor of Dhakai muslin, the revival foregrounds the textile's connection to present-day Bangladesh while giving less attention to its broader regional and multireligious history. The revival can therefore be understood not only as an effort to recover a lost textile but also as a process through which the state connects the historical prestige of Bengal's textile production to contemporary Bangladeshi national identity.

Johann Gottfried Herder (2024) proposed the idea that culture is tied to the spirit of a people, or *Volksgeist*. By framing Dhakai muslin as part of Bangladesh's distinctive textile heritage, the revival reinforces the idea of a national culture rooted in a shared historical past. However, this approach also raises questions about the boundaries created through national

heritage narratives. When a historically shared cultural tradition becomes a symbol of a modern nation-state, the process inevitably involves decisions about which histories are foregrounded, who is represented as the inheritor of that tradition, and which connections receive less attention.

The earlier recognition of Jamdani also demonstrates how global heritage mechanisms can reinforce these national processes. In the case of Bangladesh, global recognition can strengthen the state's claim over textile traditions as national heritage. While muslin historically belonged to a shared cultural region, the institutional recognition of closely related textile traditions such as Jamdani contributes to a broader process through which Bengal's textile past is increasingly associated with the modern Bangladeshi nation-state. This demonstrates how global frameworks of recognition can align with and amplify national agendas, creating a feedback loop between local identity formation and international validation.

However, this process is not without its critiques. Valdimar Hafstein (2009) highlights how heritage discourse operates as a mechanism of power, shaping how culture is represented and understood. UNESCO frameworks, while providing opportunities for recognition, also impose certain structures and criteria that privilege specific narratives. As a result, not all aspects of a cultural tradition are equally represented.

Similarly, Alonso González (2013) notes that UNESCO heritage programs remain deeply nation-centered, despite their global scope. Cultural practices must be nominated and managed by nation-states, meaning that global recognition often reinforces national narratives rather than transcending them. This perspective is further supported in Leah Lowthorp's (2025) *Deep Cosmopolitanism: Kutiyattam, Dynamic Tradition, and Globalizing Heritage in Kerala, India,* which describes UNESCO recognition as the "pinnacle of national heritage recognition." Rather

than dissolving national boundaries, UNESCO inscriptions often strengthen them by presenting cultural practices as representatives of specific nations.

This process of selecting particular traditions for institutional recognition also raises questions about which forms of cultural heritage receive national visibility. Women's everyday cultural practices—such as lullabies, *alpana* (ritual floor art), and *biyer gaan* (wedding songs)—along with regional, labor-based, and lower-class cultural expressions, such as the traditions of fishermen, boatmen, and agricultural workers, are often excluded from official heritage discourse. Similarly, syncretic and religiously hybrid practices, such as Bengali *qawwali*, are frequently simplified or ignored. At the same time, the traditions of Indigenous and ethnic communities, including Chakma, Marma, Khumi, and Manipuri cultures, are also largely absent from Bangladeshi national heritage narratives. Notably, among the GI products and UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage elements of Bangladesh, ethnic community crafts and cultural practices remain underrepresented, even though traditions such as Manipuri saree weaving remain popular within Bangladesh.

Dhakai muslin has already been revived after nearly two centuries of disappearance, although its revival should be distinguished from its mass production and commercialization. By 2021, as I described above, a government-supported research team had successfully reproduced Dhakai muslin using recovered knowledge of its cotton, spinning, and weaving techniques. However, production remained highly labor-intensive and expensive, and researchers emphasized that a process for mass production still needed to be developed before the textile could enter the market on a commercial scale (Habib 2021).

Importantly, the Bangladeshi government had already begun establishing legal recognition of Dhakai muslin even before the revival process was successfully completed. The Bangladesh Handloom Board submitted an application for Geographical Indication (GI) recognition of Dhakai muslin on January 2, 2018, while the government-supported research project was still working to recover the lost production technology (Tania 2023). The revived product subsequently received GI recognition, with a gazette notification concerning the GI certificate issued on December 28, 2020 (Likhon 2021). This chronology is particularly significant because it demonstrates that the legal construction of muslin as Bangladeshi heritage was developing alongside—and in some respects ahead of—the successful material recovery of the textile itself.

The state's role in constructing Dhakai muslin as national heritage is therefore visible throughout the revival process. Rather than emerging spontaneously, the revival developed through a deliberate government-supported initiative. As we saw above, in October 2014, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina instructed the Ministry of Textiles and Jute to take steps to revive the lost tradition of Dhakai muslin, after which researchers began working to recover the cotton variety, spinning techniques, and weaving knowledge necessary to reproduce the fabric (Habib 2021). The Bangladesh Handloom Board later implemented the formal revival project, bringing together researchers from several institutions. The government's involvement therefore extended from initiating research and reconstructing production techniques to establishing legal recognition and planning for eventual commercialization (Habib 2021).

Seen together, these developments suggest that the revival of Dhakai muslin was not a spontaneous rediscovery of a lost textile tradition but part of a sustained and institutionally organized heritage project. The chronology itself is revealing: government instructions to revive

muslin began in 2014; the Bangladesh Handloom Board applied for GI recognition in 2018 (Tania 2023) while the revival research was still underway; the production technology was subsequently recovered; and commercialization became the next stated objective. When considered alongside the government's earlier effort to secure UNESCO recognition for Jamdani, this sequence reveals a broader pattern in which Bangladesh has used research, legal recognition, international heritage mechanisms, and economic planning to reclaim and institutionalize its textile heritage.

The case of the Tangail saree further illustrates the importance of legal and international recognition within this broader heritage strategy. The traditional art of Jamdani weaving was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013 (UNESCO 2013), and Jamdani was later registered as Bangladesh's first Geographical Indication (GI) product in 2016 ("Jamdani Finally Gets Recognition" 2016). Tangail weaving developed within the historically shared cultural region of Bengal, and the migration of weavers to India contributed to the continuation of the tradition on both sides of the modern national border. The controversy surrounding India's registration of "Tangail Saree of Bengal" as a GI product in 2024 (Chakraborty 2026) demonstrates how such shared textile traditions can become contested once they are interpreted through modern nation-state boundaries. Bangladesh's own efforts to establish legal and international recognition for the Tangail saree therefore parallel, in important ways, its treatment of Jamdani and Dhakai muslin. In all three cases, textile traditions connected to the broader historical region of Bengal have increasingly become subjects of state recognition, legal protection, and national cultural claims.

Viewed together, Jamdani, Dhakai muslin, and Tangail saree reveal that the contemporary revival of muslin is part of a larger process of textile heritage-making in Bangladesh. Jamdani's

UNESCO inscription provided international recognition for a surviving textile tradition closely associated with muslin; the government-supported muslin project recovered a nearly lost textile while simultaneously pursuing its legal recognition; and the Tangail controversy demonstrates why questions of geographical origin and cultural ownership have become increasingly important within the modern nation-state system.

Halbwachs's (1980) concept of collective memory is particularly useful for understanding this process. He argues that memory is socially constructed and shaped by present contexts, meaning that certain aspects of the past are highlighted while others are marginalized. In the case of Dhakai muslin, the contemporary revival foregrounds the memory of a prestigious textile tradition that had been lost and has now been recovered by Bangladesh, while its broader transregional history receives less attention. Historically, muslin belonged to a wider Bengali cultural region and involved diverse religious, social, and occupational communities. In its current revival, however, Dhakai muslin is increasingly presented as a distinctly Bangladeshi heritage. This shift reflects a process of selective cultural ownership, in which a complex and shared history is reframed through the boundaries and identity of the modern nation-state. By positioning Bangladesh as the primary inheritor of Dhakai muslin, the revival connects the historical prestige of Bengal's textile production to contemporary Bangladeshi national identity.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998) understanding of heritage as an active process of cultural production further helps explain this transformation**.** Heritage does not simply preserve cultural traditions that already exist; rather, processes of documentation, safeguarding, institutional recognition, and presentation give selected elements of the past new significance in the present. The cases of Jamdani and Dhakai muslin demonstrate this process particularly clearly. Jamdani

was positioned within both Bangladeshi and global heritage frameworks through UNESCO recognition, while the government-supported revival and GI recognition of Dhakai muslin transformed a nearly lost textile tradition into a legally and culturally recognized element of Bangladesh's heritage. The state therefore does not simply recover the textile past but actively participates in determining how that past is remembered, valued, and connected to the modern nation.

The findings suggest significant differences in knowledge and perceptions of Dhakai muslin across educational, occupational, and geographical backgrounds. All of the university students, both male and female, as well as the two college students and the working woman, demonstrated a strong awareness of the history of Dhakai muslin and regarded its recent revival as a "national victory." They viewed muslin as an important component of Bengali cultural heritage and expressed considerable pride in the revival**.** Mim, an Anthropology student at the University of Rajshahi (2024–25 session), expressed this pride directly: "I had only heard about muslin in stories; I had never seen it in real life because it had not existed for so long. I feel very proud that the Bangladesh government and our scientists have been able to bring it back**.** I want to buy a muslin saree. Of course, a saree will probably be very expensive, but I would be happy even if I could afford a handkerchief." Similarly, Akash Roy, also an Anthropology student at the University of Rajshahi (2024–25 session), connected the revival to Bengali identity and support for local industries: "The return of Dhakai muslin is truly a matter of great pride for the Bengali nation. We should never forget our own history and heritage and blindly follow another nation's culture. Dhakai muslin was part of the identity of the Bengali nation. I am very happy that this craft has returned. I believe that proper marketing will also help develop our local industries. I am happy about that as well, because I want everyone to use locally produced goods."

At the same time, concerns emerged regarding the anticipated price of contemporary Dhakai muslin garments, particularly saris. Participants expected saris to cost between US$8,000 and US$10,000 during the initial stages of production, although they believed that mass production might eventually reduce prices. This concern was especially significant because the sari occupies a central place in Bengali cultural identity. Most of the female participants emphasized that, after language and culture, the sari represents one of the most important expressions of *Bangaliyana*, or Bengali identity. Farjana Rahman, who works at Bangladesh Development Bank Limited, explained this connection directly: "Can you imagine Goddess Durga[8] (during Durga Puja) wearing anything other than a sari? Whether it is a Hindu or Muslim Bengali wedding, a Bengali wedding does not feel complete without the sari. The sari is part of Bengali culture. Regardless of a Bengali woman's religion, when she wears a sari, she feels connected to the broader Bengali community and to our ancestors. This is why we do not simply give away our grandmother's or mother's favorite sari after they pass away. We carefully preserve it and occasionally wear it. Culture is, after all, part of the soul; otherwise, every nation would not have developed its own culture. For us, the sari is not simply a piece of clothing like jeans or a T-shirt; it represents who we are as Bengalis. It is part of our *Bangaliyana*."

Women wear saris during virtually all major Bengali festivals and social occasions. Traditional weddings favor saris over Western-style gowns, while women also commonly wear saris at university functions, graduation ceremonies, professional interviews, and in many workplaces. Several respondents further noted that saris often carry emotional significance within romantic relationships, frequently serving as meaningful gifts and, in some cases, becoming part

[8] Durga is a major Hindu goddess associated with divine power and the defeat of evil. Durga Puja is an annual Hindu festival celebrating the goddess, particularly prominent in Bengali culture and widely observed in Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal.

of wedding traditions. Participants viewed the prospect of wearing a sari made from Dhakai muslin as a means of carrying forward Bengali heritage and expressing collective cultural pride. Farjana further explained, “When Dhakai muslin saris become available in the market, I will definitely buy and wear one. By doing so, I will support our local industry and I will also feel that I am carrying a proud part of Bengali history with me. That would undoubtedly make me proud.”

Male participants also expressed interest in the revival project, but they focused more on its economic and commercial potential. They viewed Dhakai muslin as a valuable cultural product that could strengthen Bangladesh's position within global textile and fashion markets. I also observed comparatively lower levels of awareness and enthusiasm among participants from rural communities. These respondents often expressed uncertainty about the historical background of muslin and showed less personal interest in the revival initiative, partly because they expected revived muslin products to cost considerably more than ordinary textiles.

This pattern is particularly significant because the more educated, urban participants showed greater investment in Dhakai muslin as a symbol of Bangladeshi cultural and national identity. One might expect rural communities to maintain stronger connections to traditional cultural practices, yet my interviews suggest that education and urban exposure may shape contemporary awareness of muslin heritage more strongly. At the same time, muslin's historical association with elite social groups helps explain this difference. Wealthy and elite consumers historically purchased and wore the finest varieties of Dhakai muslin, and the high price of revived muslin may similarly distance many contemporary rural participants from the textile. Educated urban groups may therefore connect more strongly with the revival because they encounter muslin

not through everyday use but as a symbol of Bangladesh's history, cultural heritage, and national identity.

Among the rural and working-class participants, only the forty-five-year-old domestic worker from Dhaka recalled hearing about Dhakai muslin during her childhood. She stated that she remembered stories about "a cloth so fine that it could pass through a ring." Interestingly, neither of the two rural teenage participants from Sirajganj was able to provide a clear answer when asked about Dhakai muslin, suggesting that public knowledge of this heritage craft may vary considerably according to educational background, geographical location, and socioeconomic status.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary revival of Dhakai muslin demonstrates that recovering a lost textile involves more than reproducing the fabric itself. Scientists, artisans, state institutions, and local communities worked together to recover phuti karpas, reconstruct traditional skills, and revive knowledge that had largely disappeared. At the same time, the Bangladeshi state has used research, GI recognition, and plans for commercialization to position Dhakai muslin as national heritage. The cases of Jamdani and Tangail saree show that this revival forms part of a broader process through which Bangladesh claims and protects its textile heritage.

The interviews also show that all Bangladeshis do not relate to Dhakai muslin in the same way. Educated and urban participants expressed greater knowledge and national pride, while rural participants showed less familiarity and greater concern about its accessibility. These differences demonstrate how education, class, geography, gender, and economic accessibility shape

relationships with heritage. Ultimately, the revival of Dhakai muslin brings together collective memory, national identity, cultural ownership, and economic potential, showing how people and institutions actively recover and reinterpret the past to give it new meaning in contemporary Bangladesh.

CHAPTER 4: FROM COLONIAL EXTRACTION TO HERITAGE ECONOMY

This chapter examines the revival of Dhakai muslin through the relationship between cultural heritage and capitalism. I explore how the revival transforms muslin from a symbol of cultural loss into national heritage and an economic resource. I also examine how colonial economic structures continue to shape modern systems of production and labor. The chapter then considers how commercialization creates new questions about authenticity and tradition as artisans adapt muslin to contemporary markets. Finally, I shift attention to the spinners and weavers who sustain this craft through their knowledge and labor. I argue that the future of Dhakai muslin depends not only on cultural preservation but also on fair economic opportunities for the artisans who keep this tradition alive.

Economic historian Guido Guerzoni defines cultural heritage as "a heterogeneous set of goods that, in the course of time and in a process of historicization, comes to be recognized as the conveyor of specific cultural traditions" (107). Examples of cultural heritage that spring readily to mind include tangible items such as buildings, monuments, sites, artworks, artefacts, etc. and also intangible phenomena such as traditions, customs, crafts, languages, and beliefs. While this final chapter deals with all of these, most of my discussion focuses on heritage in its tangible form.

The revival of Dhakai muslin by the Bangladeshi government offers a powerful contemporary example of how cultural heritage operates within economic and political frameworks. Drawing inspiration from the work of Ilde Rizzo and David Throsby (2006), here I connect their theoretical model of cultural heritage as "cultural capital" with the ongoing effort to re-establish muslin as both a symbol of national identity and a viable economic asset. Their

framework helps illuminate how heritage is not simply preserved but actively constructed, politicized, and mobilized for both cultural and economic goals.

At the core of Rizzo and Throsby's (2006) argument is the idea that heritage should be understood as a capital asset—a resource inherited from the past that generates both economic and cultural value over time (Rizzo and Throsby 2006: 986–88). The case of Dhakai muslin fits this model remarkably well. Historically renowned for its extraordinary fineness, muslin was once a globally coveted luxury textile produced in Bengal. As I have demonstrated in this thesis, its decline is deeply tied to colonial intervention, particularly British colonial policies and the industrial transformations that disrupted indigenous production. In Bengali collective memory, this loss is not just economic but deeply emotional, often expressed through folk narratives and oral histories describing the brutality inflicted on weavers. These stories—whether fully factual or partly mythologized—form a crucial part of muslin's intangible cultural value, reinforcing its symbolic importance.

This emotional dimension is critical. As Rizzo and Throsby (2006) note, heritage generates non-market benefits such as identity, pride, and social cohesion. As I discussed in Chapter Two, stories of British brutality circulated through oral traditions and became part of the collective memory surrounding the decline of Dhakai muslin. These narratives create a powerful affective connection, making consumers and citizens more invested in its revival. Thus, the success of the muslin project depends not only on production and market demand but also on the cultural meanings attached to it.

The Bangladeshi government's efforts to revive Dhakai muslin, which I examined in Chapter Three, operate at the intersection of economic strategy and cultural reclamation. From an

economic perspective, muslin represents a high-value niche product with strong potential in global luxury markets. From a cultural standpoint, it embodies national pride. This dual function aligns directly with Rizzo and Throsby's (2006) claim that cultural capital produces both market and non-market benefits. The revival project is not simply about reintroducing a textile; it is about restoring a lost heritage and reasserting ownership over a narrative that colonial exploitation shaped.

Rizzo and Throsby (2006) emphasize that heritage listing and government intervention actively shape cultural heritage. Governments influence heritage through public funding, regulation and institutional decision-making (Rizzo and Throsby 2006, 999–1002). In Bangladesh, the government connects the revival of muslin to state-led narratives of national identity. By promoting muslin and pursuing Geographical Indication (GI) or UNESCO recognition, the state strategically mobilizes the textile as heritage. This process transforms muslin into an officially recognized symbol of the nation. The emphasis on colonial exploitation resonates strongly with Bengali sentiment and reinforces a shared sense of both historical injustice and cultural resilience.

While formal colonial rule may have ended in many parts of the world, the structures it produced continue to shape political systems, economic relations, and cultural practices. In his "Introduction: Coloniality's Persistence," Greg Thomas (2003) challenges the common belief that colonialism is a closed historical chapter. Instead, he argues that coloniality—the enduring patterns of power, domination, and knowledge established during colonial rule—remains deeply embedded in the modern world. Through a critical and politically charged analysis, Thomas reframes colonialism not as a finished event but as an ongoing system that operates through global capitalism, imperial power, and cultural production (1–4).

Thomas (2003) begins by critiquing the very term "postcoloniality," arguing that it falsely suggests that colonial structures have disappeared. The prefix "post" implies a temporal break, as if colonialism has been fully overcome. Thomas insists that colonial structures persist in new forms. Political independence did not dismantle the hierarchies of power, knowledge, and economy established during colonial rule. Instead, these hierarchies were reconfigured and incorporated into modern global systems. Central to his argument is the concept of the "coloniality of power," which Aníbal Quijano (2000) originally developed (533–580). This concept explains how colonial domination extended beyond territorial control to shape social classifications, epistemologies, and systems of knowledge. Coloniality operates not only through economic exploitation but also through the control of identity, race, and ways of knowing. As Thomas emphasizes, coloniality continues to define how people understand modernity, nationhood, and development, and links colonial history directly to contemporary global inequities (533–580).

This argument becomes especially relevant for countries like Bangladesh. The modern state structure, democratic institutions, and capitalist economy in Bangladesh are not purely indigenous developments; colonial history deeply shaped them. The British colonial administration introduced bureaucratic governance, legal systems, and economic policies that reorganized society around extraction and profit. Even after independence, these structures remained largely intact. Capitalism in Bangladesh today—whether in garment industries, export markets, or global trade—is part of a system historically rooted in colonial economic relations. Thus, coloniality persists not as a visible empire but as an underlying framework that organizes political and economic life.

To understand how colonial capitalism transformed Bengal, it is first necessary to consider the economic system that preceded British rule. Mughal India already supported extensive trade

and monetary exchange, but these activities operated within a predominantly pre-capitalist economy. Before British colonial capitalism transformed the Indian economy, the Mughal Empire (1526–1857) had already developed a prosperous and highly commercialized economic system. Babur established the Mughal Empire after defeating Ibrahim Lodi at the Battle of Panipat in 1526, and British colonial forces formally ended Mughal rule in 1857. Nguyen Phuong Lan and her co-authors characterize the Mughal period, particularly the reigns of Akbar (1556–1605), Jahangir (1605–1627), and Shah Jahan (1628–1658), as a "golden peak" of India's pre-capitalist economy. They describe that the Mughal economy was an advanced agrarian feudal system heavily driven by centralized land revenue and a highly monetized commercial network (Lan et al. 298–99). Agriculture formed the foundation of this economy. Akbar strengthened revenue administration by standardizing land measurement and taxation and gradually converting taxes from payments in kind to monetary assessments. These reforms increased currency circulation and encouraged cultivators to participate more actively in markets.

Artisanal production also played a central role in Mughal economic life. Strong domestic demand, imperial patronage, and international trade expanded textile production. Bengali artisans produced muslin, silk, and cotton textiles for markets that extended from Japan to the Ottoman Empire, making Bengal one of Asia's major textile-producing regions (Lan et al. 304–05). Artisan communities specialized in spinning, weaving, dyeing, and other crafts and transmitted their technical knowledge across generations. Merchants also connected Mughal India with Central Asia, Persia, the Ottoman Empire, Southeast Asia, and European trading companies through extensive commercial networks.

The Mughal economy therefore shows that commerce and profit-seeking existed before colonial capitalism. Jürgen Kocka's "Capitalism and Its Critics: A Long-Term View" (2018)

clarifies this distinction by showing that capitalist practices could exist as "islands" within predominantly non-capitalist societies (72–75). Those actors used credit, invested capital, accumulated wealth, and took risks in pursuit of profit. Such practices demonstrate that capitalism is not a fixed system but a dynamic and evolving structure shaped by historical conditions (72–75).

Kocka (2018) also emphasizes that capitalism's expansion was deeply intertwined with colonialism. The transition from merchant capitalism to global capitalism was driven by imperial expansion, resource extraction, and the exploitation of colonized labor. This connection becomes particularly clear in the case of the English East India Company. Following the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the Company's acquisition of the Diwani in 1765, the British East India Company transformed from a commercial trading organization into a territorial and near-sovereign power that exercised political and military authority over Bengal (Bowen 5–15). As a stand in for the Crown, it governed an empire of millions, extracted enormous wealth, and maintained a massive military force to sustain its rule. The company exemplifies how capitalism, colonialism, and mercantilism were inseparable: economic profit depended on political control and coercion.

The exploitation of India under the East India Company illustrates this relationship vividly. The company systematically extracted resources and wealth, often at the expense of local industries and labor. One striking example is the trade in Dhakai muslin. The British purchased this fabric at low prices from Indian weavers and sold it in European markets at much higher rates, generating significant profits. At the same time, colonial policies undermined local production, leading to the decline of indigenous industries. This process reflects what can be understood as colonial capitalism: a system in which economic growth for the colonizer depended on the exploitation and impoverishment of the colonized.

Gyan Prakash's analysis in "Colonialism, Capitalism and the Discourse of Freedom" (1996) further deepens this critique by examining how capitalism constructs the idea of "free labor." Prakash argues that modern capitalist ideology presents free labor as the natural condition of human beings and associates economic modernization with a movement from servitude toward freedom (9–10). Prakash develops this argument through Karl Marx's critique of capitalist labor in *Capital, Volume I* (1867). Marx argues that capitalism creates the conditions for "free" labor by separating workers from the means of production. Workers can legally sell their labor-power, but their lack of independent access to the means of subsistence compels them to sell that labor to survive. Prakash applies this contradiction to colonial India and argues that colonial capitalism did not simply replace unfree labor with genuinely free labor. Instead, British colonial institutions reorganized existing relations of dependence and bondage while presenting capitalism as a system of freedom (Prakash 1996: 9-10). The discourse of "free labor" therefore allowed colonial capitalism to represent coercion and bondage as conditions outside capitalism even while capitalism continued to profit from them.

This insight is crucial for understanding contemporary labor conditions. Even today, global capitalism operates through unequal power relations that echo colonial structures. Workers in developing countries, including Bangladesh, often labor under conditions that limit their agency, despite being formally "free." Low wages, precarious employment, and dependency on global markets reproduce patterns of exploitation that can be traced back to colonial economic systems. In this sense, coloniality continues to shape the organization of labor and production in the modern world.

The persistence of coloniality also appears in cultural practices, particularly in the contemporary revival of heritage industries such as Dhakai muslin. As we saw earlier in this thesis,

the Bangladeshi government has actively worked to revive muslin as a symbol of national pride and cultural heritage since 2014, and formally developed the initiative into a Bangladesh Handloom Board project in 2018. The government presents the revival as an effort to recover a textile tradition that colonial exploitation helped destroy. However, economic and political interests also shape the heritagization of muslin and connect the revival to contemporary forms of capitalism.

The process of heritagization involves transforming cultural practices into marketable commodities. As scholars like Rizzo and Throsby (2006) suggest, heritage revival often depends on the interaction between state support and private sector investment. In the case of muslin, the Bangladeshi government plays a key role in promoting its revival, but long-term sustainability requires integration into global markets. Luxury branding and collaborations with international designers position muslin as a high-value product for global consumers. While this creates economic opportunities, it also raises concerns about commodification.

When cultural heritage enters a commercial market, economic demands can reshape the tradition itself. Producers may change traditional practices or products to attract consumers. Institutions may also focus more on branding and profitability. The contemporary revival of Dhakai muslin therefore reveals a paradox. The Bangladeshi government seeks to reclaim a textile tradition whose decline occurred under British colonial economic domination, yet the revival must operate within contemporary capitalist markets if producers hope to sustain large-scale production. This situation does not make the revival inherently exploitative, but it demonstrates how cultural reclamation and capitalist production can operate simultaneously.

This tension also connects the revival to the broader persistence of coloniality. Thomas (2003) argues that coloniality continues through structures of power, knowledge, and economy even after formal colonial rule ends (1–4). Kocka's (2018) historical analysis similarly demonstrates the long relationship between capitalism, colonial expansion, and global systems of exchange (72–75). The East India Company provides a particularly important historical example in Bengal: the Company combined commercial interests with political and military power and used that authority to extract economic value from the region. As we saw above, Prakash (1996), drawing on Marx's critique of capitalist labor, further demonstrates how capitalist systems can represent workers as "free" while economic structures continue to constrain their choices (9–10). Together, these perspectives show that political independence does not automatically eliminate economic structures and inequalities with roots in colonial history.

The Dhakai muslin revival brings these questions into the field of cultural heritage. The revival that I have described in this thesis represents an act of cultural reclamation, but its future also depends on production, consumers, markets, and economic sustainability. As producers transform muslin from a recovered historical textile into a product that contemporary consumers can buy and wear, they must negotiate between historical tradition and contemporary market demands.

These changes inevitably raise questions about what elements of a revived tradition must remain unchanged for people to consider it authentic. Folklorist Regina Bendix, in *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (1997), demonstrates that folklorists have historically searched for supposedly authentic cultural forms in response to perceptions of cultural loss and modernization. She argues that this search often depends on the assumption that a pristine cultural essence exists and requires preservation. Bendix therefore cautions against treating

authenticity as an objective quality through which scholars can simply separate the genuine from the altered or "inauthentic." She emphasizes, however, that it is still important to consider how people define and use the term in relation to their own traditions. Bendix likewise significantly shows that the politics of authenticity increasingly intersect with market forces.

The revived Dhakai muslin makes this tension between preservation and transformation particularly visible. Historical Dhakai muslin from the Mughal period (1526–1857) was a transparent, lightweight fabric, often described as being as delicate as "woven air." After the Bangladesh Handloom Board successfully revived muslin yarn and produced the first revived muslin sari in 2021, weavers began to move beyond the reproduction of plain cloth. At the Handloom Board's muslin center in Narayanganj, weavers have incorporated Jamdani-inspired floral motifs into some newly produced muslin saris. The addition of these motifs therefore connects the larger question of commercialization to another complicated question: must revived Dhakai muslin reproduce its historical form exactly to remain authentic, or can artisans transform the tradition while maintaining its connection to the past?

This question emerged strongly during my interview with Sheikh Saifur Rahman, a senior journalist at *Prothom Alo*, on May 22, 2026. Rahman had visited the Bangladesh Handloom Board's Dhakai muslin handloom center on the banks of the Shitalakkhya River in Narayanganj. He observed that contemporary muslin saris incorporated Jamdani-inspired motifs even though historical Dhakai muslin had traditionally remained plain, white, and unembellished. Rahman therefore questioned whether people should describe these textiles as Dhakai muslin at all. He

argued that the addition of Jamdani motifs[9] creates neither historical muslin nor traditional Jamdani but instead produces a "hybrid" textile that combines elements of both traditions (Rahman).

Rahman's criticism raises a larger theoretical question about who has the authority to define authenticity. His position treats historical continuity as the primary standard: because earlier Dhakai muslin was plain, he believes that an authentic revival should reproduce that plain form. Yet authenticity does not necessarily depend on historical sameness alone. In their 2021 study, Joseph C. Nunes, Andrea Ordanini, and Gaia Giambastiani define authenticity through six interconnected judgments: accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency (Nunes et al. 2–3). They define legitimacy as adherence to established norms, standards, rules, and traditions, while proficiency concerns craftsmanship and expertise (Nunes et al. 3).

Rahman's objection relies mainly on what Nunes et al. call legitimacy. He assumes that revived muslin must conform closely to the historical category of Dhakai muslin. Yet the same framework allows another interpretation. Contemporary muslin may retain authenticity through proficiency if artisans reproduce the extremely fine yarn, hand-spinning, weaving skills, and technical knowledge associated with the historical textile. Nunes et al. note that skill and artisanship can contribute strongly to authenticity even without complete conformity to tradition or genre (16). Authenticity, from this perspective, does not depend on one characteristic alone.

[9] Jamdani motifs are decorative patterns created through supplementary-weft weaving, in which weavers insert additional threads by hand to form floral, geometric, and other ornamental designs across the fabric. Jamdani therefore differs visually from the plain, unembellished form historically associated with much Dhakai muslin, even though the two textile traditions remain closely connected within the broader weaving history of Bengal.

The revived muslin therefore exposes a tension within authenticity itself. Nunes et al. point out that legitimacy requires conformity, while originality requires difference (2, 16). A completely faithful reconstruction of plain Mughal-era muslin might strengthen historical legitimacy, while the incorporation of Jamdani motifs introduces originality and responds to contemporary Bangladeshi textile aesthetics. These two possibilities create competing forms of authenticity rather than a simple opposition between authentic and inauthentic. Henry Glassie's understanding of tradition as "the creation of the future out of the past" further supports this argument (Glassie 1995, 409). From this perspective artisans can incorporate Jamdani motifs into revived muslin while maintaining its connection to the past. Rather than making the textile inauthentic these changes demonstrate how people actively adapt tradition to contemporary cultural contexts.

Renate Lachmann's 1989 discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin offers another way to understand this transformation. In "Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture," Lachmann describes Bakhtin's cultural model as a struggle between centripetal forces, which seek closure, standardization, and a single authoritative meaning, and centrifugal forces, which promote openness, ambivalence, and transgression (116). A demand that contemporary Dhakai muslin conform to one fixed historical model reflects this centripetal tendency because it attempts to establish a clear boundary around what counts as "real" muslin.

The introduction of Jamdani motifs, by contrast, brings the revived textile into what Lachmann (1989) describes as hybridization. She emphasizes "openness, hybridization, and dehierarchization" and discusses cultural meaning through the intercrossing of cultures, texts, languages, and genres (117). Lachmann later describes hybridization as a dialogic process in which different styles and systems of meaning come into contact and generate new meanings (144).

Rahman and Lachmann therefore give the idea of hybridity very different meanings. Rahman treats hybridity as a loss of authenticity: once Jamdani motifs enter muslin, the textile no longer fits either historical category. A Bakhtinian interpretation, however, allows hybridity to represent cultural transformation. The revived textile brings two historically related Bengali textile traditions—Dhakai muslin and Jamdani—into dialogue by combining the fineness associated with muslin with the supplementary-weft motifs associated with Jamdani.

Lachmann (1989) also describes Bakhtinian culture as operating at the interface between "old and new" and between imposed stability and a desire for change (117). Contemporary Dhakai muslin occupies this same tension. The revival looks backward by recovering phuti karpas, fine hand-spun yarn, hand-weaving techniques, and the historical reputation of muslin. At the same time, artisans and institutions determine what the textile should look like and how they might market and use it in twenty-first-century Bangladesh.

Rather than determining whether these transformations make revived Dhakai muslin authentic or inauthentic, I examine how Rahman's criticism raises questions about classification and representation. Among my interlocutors, Rahman was the only participant who explicitly framed the revived textile in terms of authenticity. His position therefore represents one perspective on the revival rather than a shared understanding among all participants. Nunes et al.'s category of accuracy becomes useful here because it concerns transparency and reliability in how producers represent what they offer (3). Their framework shifts attention from deciding whether the textile is authentic to examining how institutions and producers identify and represent the revived textile. If artisans use revived muslin yarn to create saris with Jamdani-inspired motifs, institutions could identify them more clearly as contemporary adaptations made with revived

Dhakai muslin yarn. Such a distinction would acknowledge transformation without erasing historical difference.

I therefore approach authenticity as a contested category rather than a standard that I can impose on the revived textile. Rahman's criticism presents one position in this debate while theories of hybridity and tradition offer different ways to understand continuity and transformation. Bendix's (1997) critique of authenticity further questions the usefulness of separating cultural forms into authentic and inauthentic categories. Tradition and traditionality offer a more flexible approach because they recognize both continuity and change. From this perspective the revived textile can maintain a meaningful connection to the past without remaining unchanged. Artisans can reconstruct elements of the historical textile while also introducing innovation.

This shift from authenticity to tradition also directs attention toward the people who sustain the textile tradition. Rather than asking only whether contemporary Dhakai muslin is authentic we can ask who benefits from its revival. Spinners and weavers sustain Dhakai muslin through their specialized knowledge and labor. The discussion must therefore move beyond the form of the textile and examine whether commercialization provides these artisans with sustainable and equitable livelihoods.

From this perspective the question of whether contemporary Dhakai muslin remains "authentic" becomes less important than whether the revival supports the artisans who sustain the tradition. Government recognition, museum exhibitions, scientific reconstruction and national pride alone cannot sustain a textile tradition. Artisans sustain every living craft tradition through practice and transmission. In the case of Dhakai muslin researchers may recover phuti karpas and scientists may reconstruct lost knowledge. The state may promote the textile as national heritage.

However spinners and weavers ultimately transform these efforts into material practice. The long-term success of the revival therefore depends on whether the project can provide these artisans with sustainable livelihoods and enable them to transmit their specialized knowledge to future generations.

Research on other South Asian textile traditions supports this argument. In their 2024 study of Kalamkari, Venkata Murali Kesaboyina, Vishweshwari Tiwar, and Adiseshaiah Sade directly connect cultural preservation with artisan empowerment. They argue that sustainable craft practices can improve artisans' socioeconomic conditions, develop their skills, and support the transmission of craft knowledge to future generations. Their findings associate artisan empowerment with higher income, greater financial stability, skill development, and increased social recognition (Kesaboyina et al. 563). The Dhakai muslin revival should therefore measure its success not only through thread count, historical accuracy, or the number of saris that artisans produce. It should also ask whether muslin production provides spinners and weavers with secure and dignified livelihoods.

This question becomes particularly important as the revival moves toward commercial production. Capitalism can create the market that a craft needs to survive, but it can also produce unequal relationships between artisans and those who profit from their labor. Kesaboyina et al. identify this tension in Kalamkari production: traditional methods require intensive labor and time, while global markets often demand speed, consistency, and commercial viability. Dhakai muslin faces a similar problem because its exceptional fineness requires highly specialized and time-consuming manual labor. Commercialization can sustain the craft only if the growing market value of muslin also improves the lives of the people who spin and weave it.

Otherwise, the revival risks creating what I describe as a neo-colonizing economic relationship. I use this term cautiously and do not equate contemporary institutions with British colonial rule. Instead, I use it to identify the possibility that new economic structures may reproduce older patterns of extraction. During the colonial period, powerful commercial interests extracted enormous value from Bengal's textiles while Bengali artisans were given little control over the economic systems that governed their labor. A contemporary heritage economy could reproduce a similar imbalance if state institutions, private businesses, designers, exporters, or wealthy consumers capture most of the cultural and economic value of Dhakai muslin while artisans remain poorly paid, economically insecure, or publicly invisible. Bangladesh could then reclaim muslin symbolically from its colonial past while allowing another unequal system to profit from artisanal labor.

For this reason, the revival must prioritize social and economic sustainability alongside cultural preservation. Kesaboyina et al. argue that sustainable craft production requires an ecosystem that values artisans, their craft, and their environment. They recommend government funding, artisan training, market development, consumer awareness, community participation, and stronger connections between artisans and consumers. Similar measures could help Dhakai muslin artisans retain a meaningful share of the economic value that their specialized knowledge creates.

Ultimately, the Dhakai muslin revival should measure its greatest success not by whether contemporary muslin perfectly reproduces a Mughal textile, but by whether the revival creates a sustainable future for the people who make it. Questions of authenticity remain important, but artisan well-being gives that authenticity social meaning. If the revival provides fair compensation, stable employment, recognition, bargaining power, skill transmission, and opportunities for

younger generations, it can sustain muslin as a living tradition. A revival that celebrates the textile while neglecting its artisans would recover the object while reproducing inequality. A revival that empowers its artisans can restore both the craft and the community of knowledge that gives Dhakai muslin life.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that the revival of Dhakai muslin brings cultural reclamation and economic transformation together. The Bangladeshi state has repositioned a textile associated with colonial loss as national heritage and a potential economic resource. Yet this process also places muslin within contemporary capitalist markets. The revival therefore creates an important tension. It seeks to recover a tradition whose decline resulted partly from colonial economic exploitation while relying on commercialization to sustain its future. This tension shows how colonial histories continue to shape heritage economies even after formal colonial rule has ended.

The revival also raises questions about authenticity and change. Contemporary artisans do not simply reproduce the past. They recover historical materials and techniques while adapting muslin to new cultural and economic conditions. The incorporation of Jamdani-inspired motifs demonstrates how a revived tradition can maintain continuity while embracing innovation. Rather than treating authenticity as a fixed standard, this chapter approaches tradition as a process through which people continually negotiate the relationship between the past and the present.

Ultimately, the future of Dhakai muslin depends on the people who sustain it. Government recognition and cultural pride cannot preserve the tradition without the specialized knowledge and labor of spinners and weavers. Commercial success alone cannot preserve it either. A sustainable

revival must provide artisans with fair compensation and stable livelihoods. It must also give them recognition and opportunities to transmit their knowledge to future generations. If the revival combines cultural recovery with artisan empowerment, Dhakai muslin can remain more than a recovered object from the past. It can continue as a living tradition that connects historical memory with cultural identity and economic possibility in contemporary Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with a textile that had almost disappeared materially but had never fully vanished from Bengali cultural memory. Dhakai muslin once occupied an important place in Bengal's economic and cultural life. Its extraordinary fineness, locally grown phuti karpas cotton cultivated in the region of Bengal that now forms part of Bangladesh, highly specialized spinning and weaving techniques mastered by Bengali artisans, Mughal patronage, and extensive international trade networks made Dhakai muslin one of Bengal's most distinctive cultural products. Its worldwide reputation also made it more than a luxury textile; Dhakai muslin became closely associated with Bengal itself and formed an important part of the cultural identity and collective pride of the Bengali people. Yet no single event caused its disappearance. British colonial intervention played a major role by restructuring Bengal's textile economy, but industrialization, technological change, unequal competition, occupational displacement, environmental changes, the disappearance of phuti karpas, and the gradual loss of specialized knowledge also contributed to its decline. This complexity challenges simplified narratives that attribute the disappearance of muslin to one moment of colonial destruction while still recognizing the profound effects of British colonial economic power.

Although material production declined, stories kept Dhakai muslin culturally alive. Narratives about cloth passing through a ring, becoming nearly invisible when spread over grass, fitting inside a tiny container, and British authorities cutting off weavers' thumbs transformed muslin into more than a lost textile. These stories preserved memories of extraordinary Bengali craftsmanship alongside memories of colonial exploitation and cultural loss. Even when historical evidence complicates some of these narratives, their continued circulation shows how

communities use collective memory to give meaning to the past. Folklore therefore bridged the long period between disappearance and revival. People remembered muslin through stories long before scientists and artisans reproduced the textile.

This relationship between memory and material culture also explains why the revival carries such powerful national meanings. Bengali cultural identity predates the modern state of Bangladesh and extends across the historical region of Bengal. Bangladeshi national identity developed through a different historical process. Colonial rule and the Partition of 1947 shaped this identity, while the Language Movement of 1952 and the inequalities between East and West Pakistan strengthened it further. The Liberation War of 1971 ultimately led to the creation of independent Bangladesh. Bengali and Bangladeshi identities therefore overlap rather than oppose one another. Dhakai muslin occupies a particularly revealing position between these identities. The textile belongs to a broader Bengali cultural history, but the contemporary revival increasingly connects it to Bangladesh as a modern nation-state. The Bangladeshi state has actively strengthened this connection through research, GI recognition, heritage initiatives, commercialization plans, etc.

The Dhakai muslin revival therefore demonstrates that people and institutions do not simply inherit heritage from the past; they actively reconstruct it according to present concerns. As we have seen in this thesis, Bangladeshi government institutions, along with researchers, scientists, spinners, and weavers have worked together since 2014 to recover phuti karpas, reconstruct spinning and weaving techniques, and reproduce Dhakai muslin after nearly two centuries of disappearance. The government also pursued legal recognition while researchers continued to reconstruct the textile. The Bangladesh Handloom Board applied for GI recognition

in 2018, and the revived product later received GI recognition. The cases of Jamdani and Tangail saree outlined here place this process within a broader politics of textile heritage. As I have demonstrated, all three traditions developed within the historically shared cultural region of Bengal, yet modern states increasingly define, protect, and claim them through national and international heritage mechanisms. The revival of Dhakai muslin therefore involves both cultural recovery and selective cultural ownership.

My interviews further demonstrate that Bangladeshis do not relate to Dhakai muslin in the same way. Educated and urban participants generally showed greater knowledge of Dhakai muslin and expressed stronger feelings of national pride, while rural and working-class participants showed less familiarity and expressed greater concern about economic accessibility. Gender also influenced how participants discussed the revival. Several women connected muslin to the sari, Bengali cultural identity, family memory, and *Bangaliyana*, while male participants more often emphasized its commercial potential and Bangladesh's position in global textile markets. These differences challenge the assumption that national heritage automatically creates a shared or uniform relationship with the past. Education, class, gender, geography, etc. influence how people encounter and interpret heritage.

The revival also complicates questions of authenticity. Recovering historical materials and techniques does not automatically determine what contemporary Dhakai muslin should look like. Sheikh Saifur Rahman questioned the incorporation of Jamdani-inspired motifs into revived muslin because historical Dhakai muslin traditionally remained plain. He consequently described the contemporary textile as a "hybrid" rather than a straightforward reproduction of historical muslin. Yet this disagreement reveals something more important than whether one version

deserves the label “authentic.” Revival does not simply recover authenticity; it creates a new negotiation over authenticity. Bengalis now negotiate which aspects of Dhakai muslin should remain stable and which may change. The revived textile therefore stands between reconstruction and reinvention, continuity and innovation, and the old and the new.

These negotiations significantly connect heritage to capitalism. The Bangladeshi state seeks to reclaim a textile whose decline occurred partly through colonial economic domination, but the contemporary project also seeks to transform muslin into an economically sustainable product. Cultural reclamation and commercialization therefore operate together rather than as completely separate processes. Commercialization does not necessarily harm the tradition. Without consumers and a viable market, artisans cannot sustain the revived craft. Yet commercialization also raises questions about who controls the cultural and economic value that heritage produces. Bangladesh’s contemporary garment industry already demonstrates how global textile markets can generate enormous economic opportunities while also producing low wages, labor exploitation, and unequal relationships between workers and those who control production and profit. The muslin revival should learn from these inequalities rather than reproduce them.

For this reason, the future of Dhakai muslin ultimately depends less on debates over historical authenticity than on the people who sustain the craft. Researchers can recover phuti karpas, scientists can reconstruct lost knowledge, governments can secure legal recognition, consumers can celebrate muslin as national heritage, but spinners and weavers must transform all these efforts into material practice. My interview with Md. Ayyub Ali highlights this challenge. He connected the future commercialization of muslin directly to fair compensation for weavers and argued that consumers must recognize the value of their labor. The revival should therefore

measure success not only through thread count or GI recognition or international prestige or market value. It should also measure whether the project provides artisans with fair compensation, stable employment and the ability to transmit specialized knowledge to future generations. As I argued in my discussion of artisan sustainability, a revival that celebrates the textile while leaving its makers economically vulnerable risks reproducing older patterns of extraction.

This thesis therefore understands the revival of Dhakai muslin as neither a simple return to the past nor the recovery of an unchanged tradition. The revival represents material recovery, cultural reconstruction, and an ongoing negotiation over memory, identity, ownership, authenticity, and economic value. Bangladesh has recovered an extraordinary textile technology, but this process has also transformed the meanings people attach to the textile. The revival turns memories of colonial loss into narratives of cultural recovery and national pride while simultaneously raising new questions about shared Bengali heritage, modern national borders, artisan rights, etc.

Dhakai muslin consequently demonstrates what happens when a cultural object disappears materially, survives through memory, and later returns under radically different historical conditions. Contemporary Bangladesh cannot return the textile to the Mughal or colonial worlds in which historical muslin once existed. Revival therefore cannot return an unchanged tradition to the present. Instead, the Bengali community today and future generations must decide what they will carry forward, what they will transform, and what meanings they will attach to the recovered textile. Contemporary Bangladesh has therefore not simply recovered Dhakai muslin; Bengali people have reconstructed and reimagined what Dhakai muslin means in the present.

The future of the revival will depend on how successfully Bangladesh balances these different demands. The project must preserve specialized knowledge while allowing a living tradition to evolve. It must recognize Bangladesh's central role in reviving the textile while acknowledging muslin's broader Bengali history. It must also develop sustainable markets without allowing commercial interests to overshadow cultural meaning. Most importantly, the project must protect and support the artisans whose labor and knowledge sustain the tradition. If the revival achieves this balance, Dhakai muslin can become more than a recovered relic of Bengal's past. Bangladesh can sustain it as a living heritage through which people remember historical loss, express cultural identity, preserve artisanal knowledge, and create a more sustainable future for the people who continue the tradition.

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