

Tracking the Ancient Technique of *Jamdani* from South-Uppada in East Godavari District

Chitra Balasubramaniam

Abstract

Jamdani textiles usually bring to mind the painstaking work from Bengal and of course Dacca. However one can see *jamdani* done across the country. One place where it is thriving with gusto but lesser known is *uppada*, in the East Godavari District. *Uppada jamdani* has received a GI tag. What sets this tradition from others is the sheer experimentation, which happens here. The weaving is done using the *ada* or traditional *jalasystem*. The sheer colour combination of colours, designs especially *jalas*, cutwork, which adorned the sarees is a delight. A *jamdani* tradition from South, which has an interesting past, is thriving in the present and hopefully will do well in the future.

Introduction

One of the most delicate and beautiful of weaves done on fine muslin is the *jamdani*. If silk, *zari* and *pashmina* was what the royalty wore in winters, it was exquisite *chikan* and *jamdani* in summers. The fine cotton was delicately worked upon using extra weft technique in *zari* or cotton itself. This gave the cloth its own beauty. The technique of weaving using extra weft shuttles such that every motif was made separately was called *jamdani*. So beautiful that one saree could easily have more than eighty to hundred shuttles making the ornamentation. What is really well known is the *jamdani* from West Bengal and Bangladesh, (Dacca to be precise). Painstakingly made though lesser known is that from Tanda and Benaras. *Jamdani* is also done in Manipur and Assam. Not really sung is the beautiful *jamdani* from *uppada*. The *uppada jamdani* is well known in the South though not known beyond like the Dacca *jamdani*. *Uppada* is a small place tucked in the East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh and is about 20 km or so from the Kakinada port. It is very popular as a production hub with the designer fraternity, as the weavers are open to much experimentation.

Origins

For the layman though, this comes as a surprise as the *jamdani* technique is usually associated with Bengal (Dacca in particular). How did this form of weaving come to Andhra Pradesh? Theories abound, the origins of this weaving style in Andhra Pradesh is traced to the seventeenth century. However, it is not very well documented by historians so far. But digging deep into information one does come out with little bits of information, which point to the fact that weaving of *jamdani* in this area must have been a very old industry. In the book, Handcrafted Indian Textiles, which delves into some fantastic textiles recreated during the Vishwakarma series of exhibition, there is a mention of a swatch of *jamdani* weaving obtained from Thanjavur. Thanjavur or Thanjavur is not in any way connected to *jamdani*. Did it find a place there following the conquering by King Shivaji in the seventeenth century? Did the Maratha rule in Thanjavur bring this weaving technique to Thanjavur? The book also refers to *paithani* as a form of *jamdani*. If one were to extrapolate the inference, an abundance of linkages flow. The ancient name for Paithan (located on the banks of the river Godavari) was Pratisthan. It was a well-known trading centre frequented by rich merchants from all over the world. It was from here that woven silk

fabrics were exported. Paintings of the Ajanta Caves depict women weaving cotton. They are also shown wearing woven garments – silken or cotton. Several historians link the ancientness of *paithani* with the garments depicted in the paintings. Did the trade route result in the skill of weaving being transported to the Deccan and Uppada, which is near Kakinada port? The fact that Uppada falls in the same route, it is possible that the art of weaving flourished along the trade route, thus *jamdani* may have been woven much before the seventeenth century. History is peppered with accounts of fine muslin woven in the Deccan area. *Manasollasa* (Abhilashitartha Chintamani) written around 1130 AD by King Someshvara III of Kalyana in Central India documents the apparel worn by people. Fine cotton muslin is described as the wear for summers. Thus, the patterning on muslin is referred to as well. Muslin weaving was prevalent. As one proceeds down the ages, the versatility of the weavers in Deccan is brought out, how they adapted themselves to learning new techniques. In the thesis by Saidulu Bhukya, *Trade Transport and Communities in the Late Medieval Deccan A Study of the Banjaras* says, "The establishment of new independent kingdoms of Deccan and south India after the collapse of Mughals gave a moral and economical boost to this Vancharas or Banjaras who too were looking eagerly searching to seek livelihood after the decline of Mughal Empire who were their main patrons both during wars and peace when they entered Deccan and thereby to coastal areas, they found other traders and merchants of different communities and castes." It is possible that these merchant communities were instrumental in getting *jamdani* weavers from Varanasi or Bengal and settling them there. The fact that *jamdani* was worn by Mughal Royalty, they may have got the weavers to weave rich clothing for them. It may not have been all weavers but just a few to train the already present weavers in the area. Given the emphasis on trade from the Deccan, the weaver community was intrinsic to trade and commerce. These are conjectures, probably as we go further, we may be able to bring out more information for possible movement of *jamdani* technique across the country.

There are evidences to suggest that the Kings of Pithampuram, Venkatagiri and Bobili patronized it. The weavers wove fine *jamdani* sarees and garments for the queens. Since it was a royal art, the weavers were not allowed to weave or showcase it to the common man. The GI application record traces a beautiful story of a very fine *jamdani* with extra weft ornamentation in *zari* was made on muslin. So fine was it that it was folded into a matchbox and presented to the King of Pithapuram. There is not much research or documentation done on the historical reference to this technique. Ghanashyam Sarode, a specialist in Uppada whom I met seven odd years ago and is seen in most fairs displaying his Uppada Jamdani says, "earlier these were woven with gusto in Venkatagiri also; now with a decline there, it is only in Uppada where this technique is prevalent."

Technique

The hallmark of *jamdani* weaving was the use of fine muslin. The sheerness of the cloth was further accentuated by fine weaving akin to tapestry in gold, silver or muslin cotton threads highlighting the design. The ornamentation was brought about by using extra weft. Even today, the weaving is carried out in the same manner. The design emphasizes the sheerness of the weave. Depending on the colour scheme in the fabric, coloured yarn or *zari* are attached to the needles. The number of such shuttles depends on the complexity of the design. The warp yarn is separated with fingers and the extra thread in the shuttle is passed through to complete the design. The shuttles work above, below the warp to complete the motif. The bamboo needle is wrapped with rags so that it does not cut into the fine woven cloth. The ornamentation is akin to embroidery with a needle, only this is on the loom. In many cases, this is referred to as loom embroidery also. The weaving at Uppada is done by two weavers who work simultaneously at the two ends of the border. This provides for ease of working and the piece is finished faster. Skilled weavers weave following designs drawn on paper or graph paper. The paper with the pattern is kept by him alongside the loom and he counts the threads to transform the drawing on to the loom. The time taken to weave a *jamdani* varies. An all-over *jamdani* takes about forty-five days to weave, with the *pallav* alone taking fifteen days.

Designs and the market

The authentic or original *jamdani* was done on cotton, today this technique of weaving on fine cotton has been adapted in *uppada* to include silk. As most weavers put it, "silk was introduced as it has the right sheen and drape-ability. The combination of cotton silk maintains the sheer fragile look and at the same time ensures its fall on the body. It is also easier to maintain than pure cotton." The cotton used now is fine cotton of 100 counts cotton and the silk comes from Bangalore.

Today, there is no dearth for experimentation so jute, *tussar*, *muga* have also been introduced together with the usual cotton and silk. This results in a definitive play with texture and colours. Earlier craftsmen were making repetitive designs; new designs have added life to the trade. There is so much one can do with it. Designer Gaurang Shah has used everything from jute, *tussar*, *muga* and silver *zari* instead of gold *zari* to create some beautiful pieces.

Innovation in design and yarn has opened a world for the Uppada weavers. There are no exact estimates as to the volumes but most of what is produced are sold like hot cakes in Hyderabad itself. Gaurang Shah is amongst the innovator who has been tirelessly working to incorporate newer and fresher perspectives into the design. Many designers place orders and procure it from the production centres itself, which is why one does not see too many of it in commonplace markets. Given its high prices, it is only a select clientele, which can afford it and most of it is sold through high-end boutiques.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Chitra Balasubramaniam writes, collects and experiments with textiles, following her passion with writing on food, travel and heritage. She dabbles with stock investment analysis and research. She also runs a small travel-log – www.visitors2delhi.com .Instagram - @visitors2delhi.