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Cultural Fabric's Thread Count

Spanning four centuries of Bengal's textile mastery, an exhibition brings together the region's rich and unified weaving traditions

By TANISHA SAXENA

Suspended threads catch the light, their weaves so fine they seem to hover in midair. Archival records flicker across the walls—faded shipping manifests, royal decrees, letters from traders desperate to acquire Bengal's legendary textiles. These exhibits steeped in history are part of the landmark exhibition at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity (KCC) whose mission is to reclaim Bengal's textile legacy. The space is a riot of colours—*jamdani* saris, their intricate patterns unfolding like poetry; *kantha* embroideries, each stitch telling a story of resilience. The textures beg to be touched, to be understood not just with the eyes but with the hands, the heart.

Presented by the Weavers Studio Resource Centre and led by its visionary founder, Darshan Shah, *Textiles from Bengal: A Shared Legacy* is more than a retrospective. It is an assertion; a challenge to the notion that Bengal's finest weaves belong only to history books and distant museum vaults. "Bengal's textiles once shaped global fashion, trade, and identity, yet they've remained largely overshadowed. This exhibition aims to correct that," says Shah.

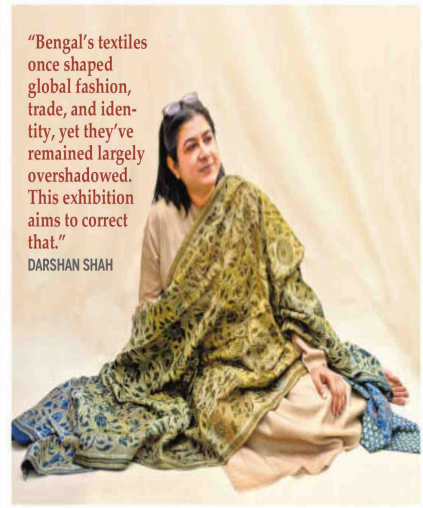


Textiles displayed at the exhibition

The exhibit has been curated in collaboration with Mayank Mansingh Kaul, who reflects, "In shaping this narrative, I sought to present a broader overview of the region's handwoven and hand-patterned textiles, moving beyond the well-documented *jamdani* and *kantha*. The inclusion of exceptional Indo-Portuguese embroideries and Haji *rumals*—

kerchiefs and headdresses once exported to Southeast Asia—has been particularly exciting."

For centuries, Bengal's textiles were the envy of the world. European traders, drawn by the allure of its gossamer muslins, whisper-soft *jamdanis*, and exquisitely embroidered *kanthas*, flocked to its markets. Yet, somewhere between the upheav-



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thas—once modest quilts stitched by women for personal use—that evolved into sought-after trade commodities.

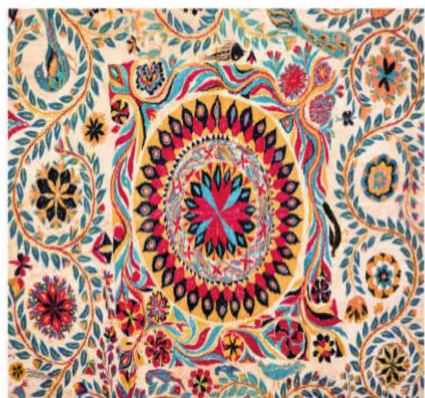
Bengal's legendary fine cotton, spun from fibres harvested in the fertile delta, also takes center-stage, a reminder of the extraordinary natural conditions that made this region a textile powerhouse. "Western museums have a culture of meticulous preservation, whereas in India, particularly in Bengal, many textiles have simply not survived due to poor storage

conditions and lack of institutional support," Shah explains.

The exhibition also showcases how Bengal's textile traditions are evolving in the 21st century. "We're seeing textiles integrated into new sectors—carpets, home furnishings, interior design, even high-tech sustainable fibres made from pineapple, jute, banana, and lotus stems," says Shah, adding, "Social media and digital platforms are connecting master weavers with global markets in ways that were unimaginable a decade ago."

Collaborations between contemporary artists and embroidery ateliers are producing textiles that transcend fashion, becoming statement pieces. Richa Agarwal, Chairperson, KCC, and CEO, Emami Art, explains, "The inclusion of the Batik Sari from Santiniketan and the works by Bappaditya Biswas and Chanakya Ateliers, Mumbai, along with the precious historical textiles from the 18th and 19th centuries in this show, allow us to understand the continuity between the past and the present."

Bringing the past alive into the present is the first stitch in time.



(Left) *Kantha*; (below) Indigo *pacha paar*



als of colonial history and the relentless march of industrialisation, Bengal's storied textile legacy slipped into near obscurity. "In some cases, entire weaving traditions vanished. The *jala* loom, once essential for intricate *jamdani* designs, became a relic," says Shah.

Among the rare textiles on display is a collection of *kan-*