

Bengal Textiles in Britain

By Muhammad Ahmedullah for AlalODulal.org

The English East India Company first visited Bengal in the early 1660s to purchase textiles. At that time Bengal was already a famed manufacturing centre of the finest cotton textiles in the world. The textiles that the East India Company imported into England from the Indian subcontinent had a significant impact quite early on, initiating major changes in fashion. According to Defoe, in his book *Everybody's Business is Nobody's Business*, anyone could be transformed by wearing Indian textiles: 'Plain country Joan was turned into a fine London madam'.

Earlier Gujarat and Madras were the main sources of the Company's textile procurement, some of which were utilised to purchase spices from the Indonesian islands. Although Bengal was the last major centre for British textile exports within the Indian subcontinent, it soon emerged as the biggest, and this continued throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries.

John Blanch, a pamphleteer, wrote in 1696 that, 'thanks to the efforts of the East India Company, Indian muslin and silk are becoming the general wear in England.' Muslin textiles were utilised in a variety of ways. According to one account 'Indian Muslin, a lightweight cotton, was used for ruffles, cravats and handkerchiefs but also gowns and ladies dresses.' Furguson states that 'In 1664 over a quarter of a million pieces of calico were imported into England. There was almost as big a demand for Bengal silk, silk cloth tafetta and plain white cotton muslin'. Defoe recalled in the *Weekly Review* of 31 January 1708: 'It crept into our houses, our closers, our bedchambers; curtains, cushion, chairs, and at last beds themselves were nothing but Calicoes or Indian stuffs.' (*Empires: How Britain made the modern world*, Niall Furguson).

In an article by *The Guardian* in 1821, called *Novel And Tasteful Fashion* For August several usages of muslins were identified. For example, one type consisted of an 'English Dinner Party Dress where plain Indian muslin was placed over pink satin; 'Three rows of clear muslin round the border; between which rows are broad spaces, richly embroidered in raised spots, or filled up by letting in broad lacy spotted muslin or lace sleeves to correspond, wreathed round with puffings of muslin'.

The Import and Export of Muslin

When in the 1790s the English imitation muslin was being produced in greater and greater numbers and available more cheaply in the UK the manufacturers of this fabric still faced stiff competition due to the existence of high levels of demand for genuine Indian textiles. In order to compete with Indian muslins, which were regarded more highly, the English manufacturers often added spice scents and sometimes even sent imitation muslin items to India to be repackaged and returned to England as products of India, authenticated by adding fragrance similar to what was found on genuine Indian textiles.

From records kept by the East India Company, in terms of orders sent, what came back to England and then how they were sold to buyers, it is possible to develop an overall picture of trends over several centuries. KN Chaudhuri's work is quite helpful in this regard (*The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company: 1660-1760*). On an annual basis,

covering 1665-1760, he produced a list of the total value of imports by the East India Company from Asia, broken down into five regions (Bombay, Madras, Bengal, SE Asia and China). His research showed that Bengal was the main source of Indian textiles imported to England, some of which were re-exported to other parts of the world.

Total East India Company Imports from Asia in value (£) (1665-1760)						
	Bombay	Madras	Bengal	SE Asia	China	
1665	63130	53100	23867	17903	0	158755
1670	74181	70182	25358	47206	0	216927
1675	35471	58568	29732	43845	807	169172
1680	97416	131532	77951	30932	13899	356465
1685	183469	171240	211900	1650	4869	584019
1690	65034	19376	3970	9124	13646	120971
1695	228	0	28212	158	351	28949
1700	192341	53932	237121	634	5511	501501
1705	5562	73489	65893	6571	51150	204010
1710	94168	81840	173819	6789	0	370547
1715	15860	85475	163859	5034	0	282837
1720	59302	94544	332792	10026	37005	580510
1725	109192	80803	191117	0	20885	450665
1730	18753	37205	431581	0	124807	612346
1735	97287	164372	400988	6290	377777	751541
1740	11346	54257	401163	0	90444	578861
1745	80691	155626	449152	6960	60036	786869
1750	53549	165433	511177	5857	239199	1013641
1755	93923	70257	411505	12788	310029	933158
1760	20369	0	366872	0	324099	711340
Total	1371272	1621231	4538029	211767	1674514	9413084

Another list produced by KN Chaudhuri contains the number and anglicised names of the most frequently ordered textiles from western India; southern India; and Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. He provided details of the various types of textiles purchased in each of the three regions and in the sub locations from where they were procured. For example, some of the finest Muslin varieties came from the Dhaka region within Bengal while coarser items were sourced at Malda and Kasimbazar. In the following table I have only reproduced the Bengal element of the list.

No	Textile name	Bengal / Bihar / Orissa	Type and usage	Size (Yards)	Time period
1	Addaties - plain white muslin	Bengal - Dacca district	Medium to fine quality. Fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th

2	Allibannies - mixed cotton and silk, probably striped	Bengal - Malda-Kasimbazar area	Medium to superior quality - fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th
3	Atchabannies - plain white	Bengal	Course quality - domestic and general use		18th
4	Bandannoes - silk handkerchief, dyed in the thread	Bengal - Kasimbazar	Superior to fine quality - fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th
5	Bafta - plain white	Bengal and Bihar - Dacca, Jugdea, Patna	Medium to superior quality - clothing and block printing in England	13-18 yards * 1 yard	18th
6	Carridarries - mixed cotton and silk striped	Bengal	Medium to superior quality - clothing and re-export trade		18th
7	Cherconnaes - mixed cotton and silk, striped and checks	Bengal	Fine quality - Fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th
8	Chillaes - striped cotton in blue and white	Bengal	Medium quality - clothing and re-export trade		18th
9	Chintz, block printed	Bengal and Bihar - Kasimbazar, Patna and Calcutta	Medium to superior quality - Domestic and general use, re-export and colonial trade		17th-18th
10	Chowtars - plain white	Bengal and Bihar	Medium to superior quality - clothing and re-export trade	13 yards * 1 yards	17th-18th
11	Coopees - plain white	Bengal	Medium to superior quality - clothing and re-export trade		18th
12	Cushtaes - striped blue and white	Bengal - Nadia district	Medium to superior quality - clothing and re-export trade		18th
13	Chucklaes - mixed cotton and silk, striped	Bengal	Fine quality - fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th
14	Cuttanees - plain white and striped	Bengal	Superior to fine quality - fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th
15	Cossaes - plain white muslin	Bengal - Santipur and Dacca district	Fine quality - Fashionwear and re-export trade	20 yards * 1-1.5 yards	17th-18th
16	Dysooksies - plain white muslin	Bengal	Fine quality - fashionwear and re-export trade		18th
17	Doreas - mixed cotton and silk	Bengal, Malda-Kasimbazar area	Fine to superfine - fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th
18	Dimitties - plain white muslin	Bengal and Orissa - Dacca and	Fine quality - fashionwear and re-		17th-18th

		Balasore	export trade		
19	Dosooties - plain white muslin	Bengal	Medium, fine and superfine quality - fashionwear and re-export		18th
20	Elatches - mixed cotton and silk, striped	Bengal - Malda, Bihar - Patna	Fine quality - fashionwear and re-export trade		18th
21	Emerties - plain white,	Bihar - Patna	Medium quality - general use and block printing in England and re-export trade	13-18 yards * 0.75 yards	17th-18th
22	Ginghams - mixed cotton and silk, striped	Bengal - Kasimbazar	Medium quality - fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th
23	Gurrahs, plain white	Bengal - Kasimbazar-Malda area	Medium quality - Domestic and general use, block printing in England and re-export trade	15-33 yards * 1 yard	17th-18th
24	Handkerchief - cotton and silk mixed	Bengal	Medium to fine quality - clothing		17th-18th
25	Hummums - plain white muslin	Bengal	Superior to fine quality - clothing and re-export trade		17th-18th
26	Jamdanees - brocaded white or coloured silk	Bengal - Dacca district	Luxury quality - fashionwear		17th-18th
27	Jamwars - silk brocade	Bengal - Kasimbazar	Luxury quality - fashionwear	10-18 yards * 0.75 yards	17th-18th
28	Lacowries - plain white	Bihar - Patna and Lakhwar	Course to medium quality - Domestic and general use, re-export trade		17th-18th
29	Mulmuls - white plain, base cloth for fine embroidery or flowering on the loom	Bengal - Santipur and Dacca district	Fine to superfine quality - fashionwear and re-export	20 yards * 1 yard	17th-18th
30	Nainsooks - plain white muslin	Bengal - Dacca district	Superfine to luxury quality - fashionwear		18th
31	Nillaes - mixed cotton and silk, striped	Bengal	Medium to superior quality - clothing and re-export trade		17th-18th
32	Photaes - dyed calico	Bengal	Coarse to medium quality - domestic and general use, re-export trade		17th-18th
33	Peniascoes - mixed cotton and silk, striped	Bengal	Medium quality - clothing and re-export trade		17th-18th
34	Romalls,	Bengal	Medium quality -		17th-18th

	handkerchief		clothing		
35	Silk lungees - silk handkerchief used in India as a sarong	Bengal - Kasimbazar	Clothing		17th-18th
36	Sannoos - plain white	Orissa - Balasore	Medium quality - domestic and general use, re-export trade		17th-18th
37	Shalbafts - plain white muslin	Bengal	Fine quality - fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th
38	Seerhaudconnaes - plain white muslin	Bengal - Dacca district	Luxury quality - fashionwear		18th
39	Seerbettes - plain white muslin	Bengal - Dacca district	Fine to superfine quality - fashionwear and re-export		18th
40	Seerbands - plain white muslin	Bengal - Dacca district	Medium to fine quality - clothing and re-export trade		17th-18th
41	Seersuckers - mixed cotton and silk, striped	Bengal - Kasimbazar	Medium to superior quality - clothing and re-export		18th
42	Sooseys - mixed cotton and silk, striped	Bengal - Kasimbazar	Fine quality - fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th
43	Taffetas - silk piece goods	Bengal - Kasimbazar	Fine quality - fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th
44	Tanjeebs - plain white muslin	Bengal - Dacca district	Fine quality - fashionwear and re-export trade		17th-18th
45	Terrindams - plain white muslin	Bengal - Dacca district	Fine to superfine quality - fasionwear and re-export		17th-18th
46	Tepoy - mixed cotton and silk	Bengal	Fine quality - clothing and re-export trade		18th

This work is complimented by Bhishnupriya Gupta's study (*Competition and control in the market for textiles: The weavers and the East India Company*) which produced several lists, based on a number of sources, of the total number of textile items imported by the East India company from the three different regions within India, covering the period 1665–1849. Together they provide valuable details of the variety, quality and value of textiles imported into Britain from India and Bengal's share of the total.

British imports of Indian textiles, 1665-1849 (1000 pieces per year)

	Bombay	Madras	Bengal	Total India
1665-69	96	37	7	140
1670-74	295	169	47	511

1675-79	310	193	67	570
1680-84	452	408	108	968
1685-89	201	244	169	614
1690-94	90	23	59	172
1695-99	149	108	131	388
1700-04	296	105	197	598
1705-09	34	99	71	204
1710-14	165	150	260	575
1715-19	82	200	252	534
1720-24	185	269	342	796
1725-29	120	142	559	821
1730-34	57	87	584	728
1735-39	67	137	581	785
1740-44	95	98	619	812
1745-49	60	144	480	684
1750-54	55	170	407	632
1755-59	56	106	308	470
	2865	2889	5248	11002

	Surat	Madras	Bengal	Total India
1771-74	93	182	652	927
1775-79	48	197	584	829
1780-84	40	79	435	554
1785-89	38	67	697	802
1790-92	38	170	727	935
	257	695	3095	4047

			Bengal	Total India
1790-99			787	2200
1800-09			1331	1824
1810-19			0	1358
1820-29			0	431
1830-39			6	271
1840-49			0	304
			2124	6388

From these two studies it is clear that the Bengal element represented the majority of Indian textiles imported by the East India Company, some for home consumption while others were re-exported. Various other sources provide additional and complementary information on the variety of Indian textiles that entered the UK fashion scene and how that caused important changes in society. A section of local merchants in England were very hostile towards the importation of foreign textiles by the East India Company.

Although textiles imported from Bengal have certainly played a significant role in British fashion trends for several centuries, there are very few garments / dresses that have been found preserved from the 17th and 18th centuries. In general, therefore, very little is known about the usages of such historical textiles in the UK. Further painstaking research on the subject matter and wider dissemination of findings would, no doubt, help improve the situation. However, some garments and dresses that were made from Bengal muslin textiles, during the last quarter of the 18th and first quarter of the 19th century, have survived. Many such items have been stored at various museums and in private collections around the world, including London.

The imports of Bengal textiles into the UK virtually came to an end by around mid 1800s. Although nearly all the muslin textiles imported from India by the English East India Company originated in Bengal, by the late 18 century British imitation muslin started to compete for a slice of the cake, with respect to both the home market and export trade. Many surviving muslin dresses from the late 18th and early 19th centuries were also made from machine made imitation fabrics. At first the amount of British imitation was relatively small but they grew and grew and eventually replaced muslin textiles that were previously imported from the Indian subcontinent.

East India Company's purchase and distribution of Bengal textiles

The East India Company kept meticulous records of its orders of textiles sent to India, where to purchase them from - western coast (primarily Gujarat), Metchlepatam (near Madras) and The Bay(Bengal) - fabrics name, quantity, quality, designs, sizes, etc. Below are some examples.

Dispatches from England, 1680-82

List of Goods to be provided at Yr Coast + Bay / Att Forte St George
(Reproduced from British Library records)

ATT THE BAY.

Ginghams coulored of y ^e finest Sort and not too Stiff.	15000
Cossaes	13000
Mullmulls	10000
Silk Romalls 5000 of which are to be provided at	
Decca	20000
Nillaes	18000
Hummums fine of Decca	8000
Taffaties 1/2 Sad Cloth coulors & 1/2 Light Coulours	47000
where 1/3 french yellows	47000
Ditto Raw	2000
Sannoos	25000
Arund Cloth Blew 1 ^{1/8} yard broad & 16: y ^d . Long	1000
Ditto Brown of Y ^e same Length and Breadth	3000
Arund yarn tonns	10
Raw Silk head and Belly Bales	900

Ditto Ordinary D.N ^o 4	...	...	...	...	...	600
White Silk G.H.I.	...	...	...	...	...	360
Ditto No. 2:3	...	...	...	...	...	100
Floretta yarn	...	...	...	...	...	150
Cotton yarn not hard Spun or Crosse reeled	...	...	...	...	...	100
Salt Petre (what more can be got)	...	...	...	tons	...	1000
Turmerick	...	...	...	...	...	250
Sticklack	...	...	...	...	...	50
Cowrees	...	...	...	...	...	100

CASSAMBUZAR MUSTERS.

farrendine Black	...	...	...	...	...	600
Sattins -- 150: Pinck	...	...	...	...	...
150: french yellow	...	...	...	...	...
150: Skies	...	...	...	...	...
150: Crimson	...	...	...	...	...
						600
Taffaties Black	...	...	...	...	...	7500
Ditto Green	...	...	...	...	...	750
Ditto Skies	...	...	...	...	...	750
Adathaes of each sort	...	...	...	...	...	300

HUGHLY MUSTERS.

Mahmood Bannies	...	...	...	...	...	1500
Alabanes	...	...	...	...	...	300
Photaes	...	...	...	...	...	300
Chareannees fine	...	...	...	...	...	600
Ditto ordinary	...	...	...	...	...	900
Elatches of each sort	...	...	...	...	...	300
Amarees	...	...	...	...	...	300
White silk No. 1 what quantity they can.						
Ditto No. 2				Bales	...	50
Ditto No. 3	...	...	...	...	...	50
Ditto No. 4:5:6: what quantity they can.						

More to be provided at ye Bay according to patters now sent

No. 1 Peniascoes	...	...	...	...	...	1000
2 Phoolganies flowered 1 ^{yd} wide: 10: ^{yds} Long and of severall Collours as reds green Purple and Philamot Skie	...	...	...	...	...	3000
3 Cherklies double peices each 10 ^{yds} & one ^y ^d wide & variety of coulors	...	...	...	...	...	3000
4 Silk and Cotton Striped Stuffs Mundille of Malda 18 ^{yds} Long and 1 yard wide to be of variety of mixtures 100 ps. of each work & colour	...	...	...	...	...	1000
5 Striped Chain Taffaties 10: ^{yds} Long 1 ^{yd} : wide and to be of severall Coulors green Purpole Cornation						

Black Philamot yellow and Skie, the ground & Chain to be of different Coulours	...	...	...	3000
6 Sousaes of severall Coulors 10 y ^{ds} Long 1 yd wide..				2000
7 Strip'd Taffaties or Rastees of 10 y ^{ds} Long & 1 y ^d Broad of severall Coulors 1/2 to be Cloth : & y ^e other Light coulor to be done on plain wi th out curling	...			6000
8 Strip'd Muzlings fine (Doreas) 21 y ^{ds} Long 1 1/8 y ^d or ell wide better made at Hughly Santapore and Maulda some to be y ^e Strype a Little broader and Some y ^e Stripe a little narrower than ye Pattern	...			2000
Atlasses according to ye Inclosed Samples for Coulors and Stripes to be made 8 1/2 yds Long and full 1/2 ell wide, ye yard Broad and ye Large Stripe are not desirable here this being a fit Length and Bread, also ye fuller of Silk & Stronger the Better they will turn to account though they cost somewhat more	...	...		4000
Ditto flowerd white of y ^e same Length and Breadth	...			500
Silk Neckcloths 10 in a piece and 1/2 yd wide	...	...		200
Girdles 2 1/2 yards Long and 3/8 wide	...	...	Gird	500
Mullmulls with fine needle work flowers wrought with white ye flowers to be about 3 or 4 Inches asunder and neate ye peices to be 1/18 wide at least and Better if ell, and 21 yards Long	...	...	...	500
Taffities either white or Light ash to be died here into Blacks to be 1/2 ell & naille wide and little better and if they can be died into Black there, send non but blacks to be double pieces or 20 yards	...	...		500

Often not all the items requested by the East India Company from India were sent back and sometimes items not requested were also sent because agents in India made their own judgments, based on delegation, experience and availability of different types of items. Frequently, there were also disparities between volumes and quality of items requested and what came back to England. Below is an example in this regard.

Wee have viewed the Patterns of the Maulda Musters you sent us from the Bay, and we would have you provide f them the Severall Sorts & quantities following , but take care they be exact according to Pattern

			rup	ann	
Mullmulls - No	G. cost	4	.	8-two thousand	- 2000 peeces.
Ditto	F. cost	7	.	9-two thousand	- 2000
Ditto	E. cost	16	.	11-two thousand	- 2000
Cossaes	D. cost	4	.	12-two thousand	- 2000
Ditto	No C. cost	9	.	5-one thousand	- 1000
Ditto	B. cost	9	.	0-five hundred	- 500
Ditto	A. cost	14	.	5-five hundred	- 500
all ye Cossaes to be thinner & cleerer yn. Ye Samples					

As for the Elatches and other Stuffs, we shall write by our shipping, & returne Samples of them back, and then advise what quantities wee would have of each Sort.

Upon Opening and viewing our Callicoes (in order to their sale) which were brought home by these Ships, we find as follows.

That the Brown Cloth is thin and worse than formerly and therefore would have no Brownes sent but such as are thick and well made.

The Sallampores No: 18.19.20 are much too dear as formerly advised.
The Parcallaes No 13.14.15 are very much too dear
Ginghams No 33..36.37 are very much too dear.

(Company Generall to the Agent and Councill at Fort St George, 7th September 1677 / Received 7th March 1678 / 9.

(Reproduced from British Library records, and followed the same style in which they were written)

It was not always possible to supply exactly according to orders due to a variety of reasons, one of which was the length of time that it took for the whole process to be completed. Sometimes orders took longer time to return from India than anticipated. Company servants in India were also on the lookout for opportunities and, based on judgements and circumstances, they were allowed to purchase additional or different items. Sometimes local competition that the East India Company faced from other European companies (for example, the Dutch and the French) and Asian merchants in procuring Indian textiles meant that it was not always possible to respond to the exact request from the East India Company's headquarters in London.

When the ordered textiles items came back to England the East India Company sold their stocks primarily through regular auctions. Many merchants and buyers had accounts with the East India Company and through an agreed payment system goods brought back from India were sold. The merchants then sold Indian textiles through a variety of channels. There are in the British Library Archives actual handwritten *General Court of Sales* of East India Company, detailing the names of the people who bought items, newspapers advertisements and merchants engaged in the buying and selling of muslin textiles.

The process of ordering was a very complex and risky matter as it sometimes took several years for the ordered items to come back to England. Often the demand and fashion trend anticipated when orders were sent were no longer relevant when the items came back. However, due to a long period of East India Company's trading experience with India and Asia, good methods were develop about what and how much to order, flexibility and delegation to its agents on the ground, etc. There were regular correspondence and the time taken for communication, although still large, got smaller and smaller with new technological developments in shipping and navigation. Some of the difficulties involved in procuring exactly the items ordered were dealt with through more regular communications and explanations coming back from India about the causes of differences in prices, designs, etc. of the textiles purchased and shipped to England.

Regency Fashion Trends

The marketing of Indian textiles by the East India Company was a clear factor in generating demands for the eastern fabrics, causing major changes in English fashion. Although a variety of muslins were among the many Indian and Bengal textiles imported by the East India during the late 18th century, white muslin the fine high quality products of Dhaka region in Bengal became the most popular, especially in ladies fashion. Despite a large quantity of Bengal muslins being imported into England not much is known about what happened to them as hardly anything surviving can be found. The earliest items seen during this project are stored at Worthing Museum (UK), consisting of several muslin hats and fichus from early

1760s. Most other items held by the Museum of London and the V&A date back to late 18th and early to mid 19th centuries.

"There is a good collection of what is believed to be Bengal / Indian muslin costume made for the European market in the Worthing Museum's collection dating back to the 1760s."

"The Museum of London's collection contains a small number of muslin objects from between 1780 and 1850 such as dresses, fichus, collars and an unusual muslin pelisse lined in sky blue silk. Most of the objects are embroidered in white linen, polychrome silk or wool, metal thread and spangles. A number of pieces of exquisitely embroidered transparent muslin might have been form parts of dresses from Princess Charlotte's (1796-1817) trousseau. An unpicked gown of white muslin embroidered in silk floss and straw was worn by the Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind in 1850."

"The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has an outstanding and wide-ranging collection of South Asian textiles, from 'peasant' cloth to court dress. The core of the collection came from the East India Company's Museum. The collection illustrates a stunning range of textile techniques: dyeing and printing, painted and printed chintzes, embroidery, and a dazzling variety of weaving – from silks heavy with gold and silver wrapped thread to superb Kashmir shawls and the finest, almost weightless Bengali muslins and exceptionally fine nineteenth century jamdani. Besides a large range of muslins, the museum collection also contains examples of silks from Murshidabad, capital of Bengal for most of the eighteenth century, including some 'Baluchari' silks in distinctive deep colours figured with floral and pictorial motifs - one example depicts Europeans riding on a paddle steamer."

The majority of the surviving fashionable dresses seen in the above institutions and elsewhere belonged to the Regency Period, immortalised by Jane Austen in her novels, where there exists many references to Indian muslins. The beautiful white dresses that ladies in her novels wear represent the quintessential regency fashion.

The Regency period in fashion is said to have been preceded and influence by the Empire Style in ladies fashion, which originated in the aftermath of the French revolution and was popularised by Mary Antoinette. Regency itself was named after Britain's Prince Regent who ran the country when his father, King George III, became mentally ill and unable to perform his duties. Prince Regent became king in 1830. The Regency period is also known as the Romantic era which influenced writers such as Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott.

Jane Austen's novels are a good source of information about how people used muslin, the status of the fabric and how much people using the fabrics knew about it. There are many references to muslin in Austen's novels. In some of the films that have been made, based on her novels, one can clearly see, from the recreated dresses, how Regency fashion looked on ladies.



Illustrations from *Pride and Prejudice* by Hugh Thomson

The following references to muslin in *Northanger Abbey* provide an insight into the historical influence of muslin:

They were interrupted by Mrs. Allen: -- "My dear Catherine," said she, "do take this pin out of my sleeve; I am afraid it has torn a hole already; I shall be quite sorry if it has, for this is a favorite gown, though it cost but nine shillings a yard."

"That is exactly what I should have guessed it, madam," said Mr. Tilney, looking at the muslin.

"Do you understand muslins, sir?"

"Particularly well; I always buy my own cravats, and am allowed to be an excellent judge; and my sister has often trusted me in the choice of a gown. I bought one for her the other day, and it was pronounced to be a prodigious bargain by every lady who saw it. I gave but five shillings a yard for it, and a true Indian muslin."

In the *Novel And Tasteful Fashion For August* (1821) article cited above, in addition to providing details of the role played by Indian muslin in dinner party dresses, it also mentions scarves and walking dresses. Although more and more inroads were made by English imitation muslins during that time, Indian muslins were still very popular and used for a variety of purposes. It is said that the 'basic seaside dress in Jane Austen's time was 'a white muslin dress comfortable for a breach stroll... or dress up with accessories for a promenade'. There are many paintings and sketches of ladies wearing white muslin strolling on British seaside resorts. In Austen's novels she mentioned several such resorts, including Brighton, Scarborough, Cromer, Lyme and Sandy Ton, which she created as a fictional seaside resort.

The Muslin Disease and other disadvantages

There were also a number of disadvantages in wearing muslin fabrics during the Regency period. One was the British weather. As the fabric was very fine and translucent it meant that in many situations when the temperature was rather low there was very little protection for fashionable ladies. Modesty was also an issue. These were addressed by putting on Kashmir shawls and coats. Nevertheless, the fashionable wearing of white muslin caused many young ladies to catch influenza and pneumonia which came to be known among certain circles as 'muslin disease'. In addition, many in society identified other disadvantages associated with the wearing muslin, often expressed in cartoon like caricatures. Two examples are provided below.



"The Graces in a High Wind", a satirical engraving (1810) by James Gillray



In Advantages of wearing Muslin Dresses ! — dedicated to the serious attention of the Fashionable Ladies of Great Britain (1802) by James Gillray.

The shawls that were introduced as a source of protection from the British weather were made from a variety of materials, particularly wool that came from the Himalayan Mountains. Muslin shawls with elaborate embroidery designs were also popular. As the Regency period

progressed the white muslin dress was complemented with shawls that became larger and larger.

European influences

The popularity of wearing white muslin dress increased with the discovery of the ruins of Pompeii and Lord Elgin's transfer of the Parthenon sculpture in the first decade of 1800 from Greece to London. The white marble sculptures, where white fabrics draped well, giving a naked look, made people in the Regency era of fashion experience a little bit of ancient Greece. The trend toward Regency fashion and the use of white muslin with such popularity can be traced back to the development of love admiration for classical Greece and Rome.



© Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 'Empire style' unstructured muslin gown embroidered with cotton thread, made from Bengal muslin around 1800, stored at Victoria and Albert Museum. 'Inspired in part by the statuary of ancient Greece and Rome, the new fashion was epitomised by light cotton gowns falling around the body in an unstructured way, held around the high waist with a simple sash and accompanied by a soft shawl draped around exposed shoulders. This style was ideal for the Indian imports like Kashmiri shawls and Bengali muslin, as used in this embroidered gown.'

The French Revolution led to the discarding of the elaborate dresses that men and women traditionally wore. They were replaced by more simple garments. Mary Antoinette scandalised the French court by wearing muslin dresses, as they were so sheer they looked like underwear. The high society of France did not consider muslin to be appropriate for a French queen. Individuals in England began to imitate French Empire style, which culminated in the

English Regency style ladies fashion era. This consisted of high waistline dresses called chemises, which again looked like undergarments.



Marie Antoinette en chemise, portrait of the queen in a "muslin" dress, by Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1783). This controversial portrait was viewed by her critics to be improper for a queen because of her choice of clothing.

Many visitors from England started to visit Italy and Greece from the middle of the 18th century and came back with items and painted images of Greek statues, buildings and architecture. The statues of Greek ladies from the classical times wearing white dresses that draped their bodies well became examples of purity and perfection. Bengal muslin was the choice fabric that allowed English ladies aspiring to attain the purity of the looks seen in Greek statues. The soft white muslin draped well around women's bodies, showing their figures and making them look like pure and unspoilt.



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There is a possibility that some of the fabrics worn by Greek ladies on which some of the classical statues were based might have come from Bengal, if Campus was right that Bengal textiles reached ancient Rome.

'There were times when the muslins of Dacca shipped from Satgaon clad Roman ladies and when spices and other goods of Bengal that used to find their way to Rome through Egypt were very much appreciated there and fetched fabulous prices.'*(History of the Portuguese in Bengal, by JJA Campus)*.

Bengal textiles in Britain declined and eventually ended with the East India Company's capture of Bengal in 1757. The takeover resulted in the Company restricting and squeezing out Bengal's trade with the outside world. The British Industrial revolution, the production of cheaper imitation muslins and flooding the Bengal and India's captive market by the British colonizer's with machine manufactured textiles was the final death nail of the legendary richest province in India and paradise on earth.

This article is based on a recent project in London called 'How villages and towns in Bengal dressed London ladies in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries'. I managed the project on behalf of Stepney Community Trust, a London based third sector organisation / NGO. What we discovered and recreated were just incredible. A project video has been posted on youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59_uxc0YTpk. More details of the project can be found at www.stepney.org.uk.

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