

Katan Shari in the Bridal Culture of Bangladesh

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Abstract

The article examines the significance of Mirpur benarasi katan shari as wedding attire in the bridal culture of women in Bangladesh. It explores the emergence and transformation of the zone of Mirpur Benarasi Polli, in Bangladesh's capital city of Dhaka as a centre for both the weaving and the trading industries of the katan shari. The article examines the emergence of Mirpur benarasi katan shari as a garment of distinction in its own right instead of an "imitation" of the benarasi katan shari, a garment associated with the city of Benares (currently known as Varanasi). It inspects whether katan shari's shift from an item of distinction to an item of mass-produced commodity, changes its use from a "festive" to an "everyday" garment. To what extent does this shift change the special designation characteristics of the Mirpur benarasi shari? Also to what extent does this shift influence customers' preference for Mirpur benarasi katan shari for weddings and other festive occasions?

Keywords

Shari, Wedding Culture, Mirpur, Benarasi Katan

1. Introduction

This article examines the significance of Mirpur benarasi katan shari as wedding attire in the Bridal culture of women in Bangladesh and explores the emergence and transformation of the zone of Mirpur Benarasi Polli, in Bangladesh's capital city of Dhaka as a centre for both the weaving and the trading industries of the katan Shari. The article is based on an ethnographic research project conducted in 2021/2022 in the Mirpur Benarasi Polli area which became a hub of benarasi katan shari after the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent following the migration of Muslim weavers from Benares (currently known as Varanasi), a city located in the Northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Mirpur Benarasi Polli is located in the northern outskirts of the sprawling city of Dhaka in Bangladesh.

The research methodology included literature review, interviews and conversations with a total of 65 respondents who are sellers, weavers directly involved in the selling and weaving of benarasi katan shari and customers in the Mirpur Benarasi Polli market.

This article explores the emergence of Mirpur benarasi katan shari as a garment of distinction in its own right instead of an “imitation” of the benarasi katan shari, a garment associated with the city of Benares. The author then examines whether katan shari’s shift from an item of distinction to an item of mass-produced commodity, changes its use from a “festive” to a “everyday” garment. To what extent does this shift change the special designation characteristics of the Mirpur benarasi shari? Also to what extent does this shift influence customers’ preference for Mirpur benarasi katan shari for weddings and other festive occasions?

A shari, sari or saree (here in this document referred as “shari” as pronounced in Bangladesh), is a traditional article of clothing worn mostly by women in Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Nepal¹. It is a rectangle piece of unstitched garment five to nine yards (4.5 metres to 8 metres) in length and two to four yards (60 cm to 1.20 metres) in width and typically wrapped around the waist with one end draped over the shoulder². Flynn (1986) describes shari as the most feminine garment in the world.³ She discusses the art of shari draping: “The art, so subtle and delicate, is manifest in the pleats and folds, and in the magic of conceals the shortcomings of the figure, but emphasises the strong points⁴.” Silk is considered to be a symbol of royalty and historically, is viewed as the garment for the upper class⁵. While shari can be made from different types of fabric, for example cotton, synthetics and silk; silk shari is usually more expensive and is often worn at festive and special occasions.

Twisted silk yarns are named katan and this technique of twisted yarns is used in the making of benarasi shari⁶. The katan shari weaving requires use of traditional pit loom or throw shuttle loom which is a type of handloom and a jacquard mechanism may be used for creating the brocade patterns⁷. Benarasi katan shari is a type of pure silk shari with detailed and intricate brocade work woven into the fabric traditionally incorporating silk, silver and gold metal threads⁸. While this weaving technique did not originate in Benares, the use of this weaving and brocade technique in Benares goes back at least a few centuries⁹. The word “benarasi” in benarasi katan shari literally means “from Benares”. Though Benares is currently known as Varansi, in this article I will continue to refer to

¹<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/sari> accessed on 05/12/2022.

²<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/sari> accessed on 10/10/2022.

³Flynn, Dorris. (1986). *Costume of India*. Calcutta. Tricolour Books. Pp.09.

⁴Ibid Pp. 12.

⁵Chakraborty, Barun (ed). (2011). *Lokoj Shilpo*. Kolkata. Parul Prokashoni. Pp. 274.

⁶Ahmad, Tofael. (1993). *Dhakar Katan In Dhakar Banijeek Karukola pitok: chamra: katan*. Dhaka. Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. Pp 41.

⁷Selim, Lala Rukh. (2007). *Charu O karu kola*. Dhaka. Bangladesh Asiatic Society. Pp. 519.

⁸Karmakar, Srikanto. (2021). *Benarasher Lokoshilpo: Benerasi Shari In Dey, Gadadhar (ed), Oitijhye Itihashe Amader Poshak*. Pp. 130. Tuhina Prokashon.

⁹Ibid Pp. 129.

“Varanasi” as “Benares” which is closer to how it is pronounced in Bangladesh. The word “benarasi” also denotes the garment itself. There are other types of silk benarasi shari in Benares, however, benarasi katan is what is colloquially understood as “benarasi”.

Benarasi katan shari plays an important role in the festive occasions such as weddings in Bangladesh. As this is considered a luxury garment, it is often worn at special occasions. In the 19th century it was quite common for men and women to wear silk clothing for special occasions, as we find examples from books that were published at that time. In Rabindranath Tagore’s novel “Chokher Bali” Mahendra, the male protagonist of the book, wants to wear his silk shirt to attend an event for selection of his future bride¹⁰. Mahendra expressed his desire to wear the best of his clothes for this event as it is considered an important task and Silk symbolises the auspiciousness of the occasion. In the 19th century, the Hindu brides wore silk shari at their wedding which shows that silk was considered a bridal attire in that period¹¹. A customer, named Salma in a retail shop at the Mirpur Benarasi Polli said, “without a benarasi shari, a bridal trousseau is incomplete. I have come here to buy a benarasi shari for my daughter’s wedding”. When asked why they think benarasi is significant for brides and weddings, some customers point to the heritage of this garment stating it has a long history and tradition attached to it, as Shahina expressed, “Everyone in the Indian subcontinent knows about this famous shari”. Most spoke of the shine and the quality of the katan silk, the gold or silver brocade and the intricate brocade patterns featuring it. A customer named Marina commented, “it is prestigious to wear it as it is luxurious and shiny” and another (Rupali Begum) suggested opulence “it is an expensive item of clothing and therefore most appropriate for a bride for its shiny texture with silver and golden work of zari”. If benarasi katan is from Benares, what is then Mirpur benarasi katan? We will examine next how benarasi “from Benares” became “benarasi from Mirpur” signifying the emergence of this new distinction as a place and also as the garment itself.

2. From Benares to Mirpur

Scholars suggest that katan silk originated in Persia and was brought to India as a result of longstanding trade between those regions¹². During the Mughal period women in the royal families in India wore this special Persian silk¹³. In 16th century silk brocade weaving started in Benares following the migration of silk brocade weavers from Gujarat to Benares due to the famine in Gujarat¹⁴. Among

¹⁰Tagore, Rabindranath. (Original 1903, UPL edition 2010). *Chokher Bali*. Dhaka. The University Press Limited. Pp. 05.

¹¹Parveen, Shayla. (2018). *Unish-Bish Shotoke Purano Dhakar Somaj O Somkriti*. Dhaka. Bangla Academy. Pp. 118.

¹²<https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/28th-anniversary-supplements/deshi-first/news/reviving-the-katan-1704703> accessed on 17/06/2022.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Karmakar, Srikanto. (2021). *Benarasher Lokoshilpo: Benerasi Shari* In Dey, Gadadhar (ed), *Oitijhye Itihashe Amader Poshak*. Pp. 130. Tuhina Prokashon. Pp 129.

all the Mughal rulers, emperor Akbar patronised the weaving industry the most including the benarasi katan silk which is elaborate woven work of *zari* brocade showing the artistry of silver and gold thread¹⁵. Around that time, weaving of brocades using intricate designs of gold and silver threads or *zari* became the specialty of Benares and this was when Muslim weavers got involved in this craft¹⁶. Ralph Fitch (1583-91) describes Benares as a flourishing sector of the textile industry¹⁷.

In the seventeenth century Bangladesh was already known as the “Store house of Silk”¹⁸. There was a technique of silk weaving known for its artistry with gold and silver thread which known as “Golboton”¹⁹. Chaudhury (2014) states that this specific tradition of weaving continued in the twentieth century in Baliati, Dhamrai and Abdullahpur near the city of Dhaka in Bangladesh.²⁰ However, benarasi katan in its current form was not an established weaving tradition in Bangladesh until Bihari Muslim refugees brought this tradition with them around the time of the partition of British India. Before the 1940s katan was not woven in Bangladesh and the shari was brought from Benares to Dhaka²¹. The Bihari Muslim refugees mainly from present day Bihar and Uttar Pradesh started migrating to Bangladesh in larger numbers in 1942 and continued to settle in different parts of Bangladesh after the partition of British India in 1947.²² Some of the weavers from Benares established their home in Dhaka and began a new history of benarasi weaving. Apart from Mirpur, katan weaving communities are found in Gangachora at Rangpur, Gutia village near Tongi, Tangail, Pabna, Narshindi and also at Kachpur.²³ The Bihari refugee camp situated in Mirpur slowly became a cottage weaving industry and overtime became Mirpur Benarasi Polli. The history of benarasi katan is ultimately intertwined with the violent history of the partition of British India and the forced displacement of Hindus, Muslims and other communities from different parts of the subcontinent. While this research will not look into that history, it is important to note that the weaving tradition of the benarasi katan in Bangladesh is a tradition established by minority ethnic Bihari refugees in Bangladesh. Karim Mia, a weaver in the Mirpur benarasi Polli explained “the history of katan shari is not similar to the other textiles of Bangladesh. The weavers were not living here for generations. Compared to other textile traditions, benarasi katan is a fairly new weaving tradition and goes back two to three generations only.” He also stated that, “after

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Karmakar, Srikanta (2021). Benarasher Lokoshilpo: Benerasi Shari In Dey, Gadadhar (ed), Oitijhye Itihashe Amader Poshak. Pp. 130. Tuhina Prokashon. Pp 129.

¹⁷https://archive.org/stream/ralphfitchenglan00rylerich/ralphfitchenglan00rylerich_djvu.txt accessed on 10/06/2022.

¹⁸Chaudhury, Sushil. (2014). Prithibir Tantghor: Bangalir Bastrasilpa O Banijya. Calcutta. Ananda Publishers Private Limited. Pp.09.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Shawon, Akand. (2018). Benarasi Sari In Folk Art in the Bangladesh National Museum: a descriptive catalogue of the folk art in the bangladesh national museum. Dhaka. Journeyman. Pp. 222.

²²Selim, Lala Rukh. (2007). Charu O karu kola. Dhaka. Bangladesh Asiatic Society. Pp. 519.

²³Ibid.

Mirpur area in Dhaka city became a centre of benarasi shari, to distinguish it from benarasi shari from Benares, people started to identify this as dhakai katan and as time passed it is known as only katan". At present both Bengali and the Bihari ethnicities (refugees who migrated mainly from Bihar region) are involved in this occupation. One of the respondent and proprietor of a shop named Salim Ali informs that the Benarasi Polli start in 1905 but they did not have this many permanent buildings or weaved at that time. In 1950 they first started weaving at Mohammadpur, and then Mirpur areas of Dhaka²⁴. In the next section, we will examine the emergence of Mirpur benarasi katan shari both as a place of provenance and a garment of distinction in its own right.

3. Mirpur as a Place of Provenance of the Benarasi Katan Shari

Mirpur weaving industry did not experience a seamless advancement as a trading and weaving centre. Before the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 when Bangladesh was still part of Pakistan, cheap quality katan shari from Korachi, Pakistan were imported which impacted the weaving industry in Mirpur.²⁵ This cheap quality katan over time took over the market of dhakai katan and the country's katan industry was greatly affected at that time²⁶. One of the weavers Motaleb Mia explained, "after the Independence of Bangladesh the supply of katan from Pakistan stopped and the local weaving industry of katan started to thrive". As the export of katan stopped many other people started to reside in Mirpur from various regions of Bangladesh to live in this area and learn to become a weaver²⁷.

In 1990, a survey estimated that about 41,600 people are in benarasi katan weaving occupation²⁸. At the time of the fieldwork for this research there were over 108 outlets at the Mirpur Benarasi Polli. However, in a recent paper (March, 2020) it was stated that there are 140 fashion house in this area²⁹. The refugee camps where the Bihari refugees live is referred to as "Bihari colony" or "Bihari camp". The weavers' cottages situated in those camps were where the benarasi katan weaving, selling and buying used to take place initially. The handlooms would be inside the weavers' cottages and customers would meet the weavers and inspect weaving designs and patterns. Over time the dwelling places moved to give way for the shops with handlooms installed inside the premises. After 1990 permanent structures for the market were built and shops took the

²⁴Ahmad, Tofael. (1993). Dhakar Katan in "Dhakar Banijeeek Karukola pitol: chamra: katan". Dhaka. Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. Pp 35.

²⁵Akand, Shawon. (2013). Bangladesher Lokshilper Ruprekha (An Outline of Bangladesh Folk Art). Journeyman-Jolrong Publication. Dhaka. Pp 68.

²⁶Ahmad, Tofael. (1993). Dhakar Katan in Dhakar Banijeeek Karukola pitol: chamra: katan. Dhaka. Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. Pp 35.

²⁷Akand, Shawon. (2013). Bangladesher Lokshilper Ruprekha (An Outline of Bangladesh Folk Art). Journeyman-Jolrong Publication. Dhaka. Pp 68.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹<https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/covid-19-bangladesh/tk35cr-benarasi-eid-sales-lost-pan-demic-83542> accessed on 22/09/2022.

centre-stage. Most handlooms are now removed from the shop area and are situated in the Bihari camp areas. Some shops still have handlooms adjacent to their shop, but this is less common. There are two or three power looms in Mirpur Benarasi Polli but most production is still done on handlooms. One respondent, Motaleb Mia observed that while traditionally handlooms were used for weaving, however, in the coming future power looms will become more common.

One of the proprietors of a shop Salim Shaheb said, “katan shari is in demand all the time of the year but in the months of November and December we sell the most compared to any other month as majority of weddings in Bangladesh take place at that time of the year”. He was speaking while supervising his employees in his busy shop in Mirpur. He also states that the cooler season in November and December is also appropriate for heavy brocade silk shari. So the winter in Bangladesh also influences why many weddings take place during these times.

Respondent Nur Muhammad explains that “to finish weaving one katan shari it can take seven days to six months. Any pure and good quality katan price range is 25,000 taka to 200,000 taka or more”. One shop employee Shamim explains “bridal or Benarasi katan is the most expensive and highly decorated shari that is used traditionally in wedding ceremonies”. He further adds, “these sharis will have heavy gold or silver brocade work in the borders and sometimes embroidered with beads, golden and silver *zari* and jewellery materials to give a more opulent look”.

A shopkeeper named Sharif explains that there are mainly six types of katan in Bangladesh and these are soft katan, jongla katan, cotton katan, linen katan, silk katan (which is again two types: one is pure and another one is artificial), and Benarasi katan. These categories are created based on the type of yarn used during weaving. Other categorisations are based on different types of design and motifs, such as jangla or jongla, tanchoi or tonchoi, vaskat, cutwork, tissue and butidar. Except for pure silk katan and Benarasi katan shopkeeper named them for selling. One of the respondents, Motaleb Mia, a weaver from Mirpur Benarasi Polli explains that the difference between these types of katan depends on their difference in design, use of yarn and technique of weaving.

Traditional brocade motifs used to weave Mirpur katan shari goes back a few centuries. Motifs are deeply influenced by religious beliefs, culture, architecture, history, politics, and day to day activities and so on. For creating motifs the weavers and designers take inspiration from their surroundings. Artisans created varied motifs which are exclusive in shape and colour, such as, the vines and floral patterns reminded us of Mughal and Islamic interaction. Peacock first found in Indus Valley depiction and also in Buddhist sculpture³⁰. In earlier katan shari the embroidered parrot can be seen³¹. Also jasmine, lotus, parrot and

³⁰<https://www.fibre2fashion.com/industry-article/4354/magic-of-natural-motif> accessed on 22/09/2022.

³¹<https://www.fibre2fashion.com/industry-article/4354/magic-of-natural-motif> accessed on 22/09/2022.

sometimes elephants are seen as a motif which symbolizes immortality, courtship, wealth and fertility. Fertility is important as majority of inhabitants used to be dependent on crop cultivation and needed more children to farm the land, so most of these traditional motifs are related with fertility, wealth, power, prosperity and religion. The life of commoners and their practices were weaved into the motifs.

Initially, benarasi katan shari woven in Mirpur was referred as “dhakai katan” or katan from Dhaka to distinguish it from benarasi katan³². Several respondents including proprietors, weavers, and salesperson observed that the design of katan in Bangladesh has its distinctive features and quality is much better than Indian varieties. Others disagreed about quality suggesting that it depends on the quality and types of materials used and the craftsmanship. As weaver Hares Uddin pointed out that “you need to compare like for like. You cannot compare pure silk Mirpur benarasi woven in a handloom by a skilled weaver with pure silk benarasi woven in an Indian power loom” and “You can get very good quality benarasi from India as well”. What is then different about Mirpur benarasi? Proprietor Salim states, “the traditional designs brought by the Biharis are distinct and represent a different time. Designs have moved on in India. You will not find these designs in Benares”. Weaver Motaleb Mia states, “even people from India come to Mirpur to buy benarasi and they like those old traditional designs”. One of the weavers observed that the design in Mirpur katan mirrors the early “original” designs as the weavers are still following Mughal and Persian traditional patterns. One distinction of Mirpur benarasi then is the perception that it is authentic and has stayed in a time capsule passed down by the generations of weavers.

Some of these observations made by proprietors and weavers in Mirpur signifies Mirpur as a place of provenance distinct from benarasi from Benares. Customers asked this question seem to have an understanding of the significance of Mirpur as the place where “benarasi katan” is made. “It is benarasi made in Mirpur” observes one customer, thereby clearly distinguishing the identity of benarasi as a garment tied to Mirpur. Benarasi katan then is the product itself, not the place Benares. Its value is independent of Benares and it has become a garment of distinction in its own right instead of an “imitation” from Benares. Yet, its value by association with “Benares” is also undeniable as identified by one customer, “benarasi means tradition, it’s a tradition for the whole subcontinent. We all share this tradition, though it may have started in another place”. Mirpur and Benares are then both places of special designation connected by that shared knowledge of tradition and material culture of the subcontinent. Benarasi katan as a product itself is also connected to that shared tradition and knowledge, yet distinct in their separate development and evolution over time in Benares and Mirpur. As we will see in the next section, this dual relationship between the place and product continues to influence the market of katan shari in Bangla-

³²Akand, Shawon. (2013). *Bangladesher Lokshilper Ruprekha (An Outline of Bangladesh Folk Art)*. Journeyman-Jolrong Publication. Dhaka.

desh with the re-emergence of Indian katan shari.

4. The Re-Emergence of Indian Katan Shari

In Bangladesh, weaving of katan shari is not restricted to Mirpur and other areas include Tongi, Tangail, Pabna, Kishoregoan, Narsingdi, Kaligang, Rupganj, Sirajganj and Pabna. Both in Bangladesh and India use of artificial yarn and introduction of power looms brought down the production cost of katan shari significantly. Pure silk katan shari is out of reach for the middle-income people but with the introduction of synthetic fibre this shari has become more affordable for customers from low income background. Countries like China and India have huge production facilities and can produce synthetic and mixed fibre textiles in mechanised power looms more cheaply.

Conversations with shop owners and weavers revealed that this handloom industry is suffering because of the higher import cost of raw materials in Bangladesh and cheap shari from neighbouring countries flooding the Bangladesh market. One shop proprietor named Kashem said, “we have to depend on other countries for raw materials. Silk yarn, brocade materials and power looms come from Vietnam, China, Pakistan and India. Once upon a time these raw materials used to be produced in our own country”. The weaver Nasim informs “only 25% to 30% of demand of katan shari can be fulfilled by local weaver in Bangladesh and the rest comes from India”. He informed that the consumers are more interested in Indian soft katan which came from Bangalore, Hyderabad regions of India. One of the proprietor Russel Shaheb states that he has been in this business for more than 12 years and have seen more than 100 types of katan but in Bangladesh only six or seven types are woven.

A shop proprietor Shaheb Ali who has a weaving industry behind his shop said that the Indian katan made in power looms is silky and smooth in texture, whereas Mirpur katan lacks these qualities because majority is produced in handlooms. Two of weavers identified that Indian katan also meets the need of a distinct customer group. The motifs in Indian katan have many features of gods and goddesses which are preferred by Hindus in Bangladesh during their religious festival but the motifs adopted in Mirpur are more geometric and floral.

Some respondents observed that the people who are working in this sector have little or no education that is why they cannot utilise the full digital facilities to make new and exclusive designs. Weavers also have to compromise with quality and produce low cost katan which is not made from pure silk. Others pointed out that this industry needs significant government investment, training and loan facilities which are not available. The market policy to support and sustain katan shari is not forward looking. The comparatively small size of the domestic market in Bangladesh, makes it difficult to compete with the huge Indian market. There is also little incentive for weavers and investors to maintain a standard of competitiveness.

Many weavers also expressed their dissatisfaction related to the trade condi-

tions, and their explicit desire to change professions, if they have the choice. The wages in this industry is very low, that's why many weavers or other workers move towards new occupations. With this many artisans are forced to switch careers. A pure katan silk shari takes time and resources to create, and comes with a significant price tag. Customers are most often unwilling to pay the price of the labour and they ultimately settle on the cheaper power loom versions.

Most of the design in Mirpur now is done in computer, however, these designers do not have any professional training and most of them do not have vision to create new designs so they copy the design. There are also very few fashion designers who are experimenting with katan shari. Additionally Power looms are replacing the hand-loom, which is cutting down on labour and production time. But as one of the weavers says, the final machine-made product lacks the exclusiveness and distinctiveness of the handmade shari. Power looms are still not common in Mirpur Benarasi Polli except for a few. Proprietor Salim states "people prefer the Indian katan than the Bangladeshi one". When asked why customers prefer Indian katan shari most commented comparatively lower price, good quality and more options with modern, innovative patterns and variety. Salim further observes, "customers get more variety in colour, texture and style in Indian katan. It's not the same old style. They want newer designs". It seems what made Mirpur benarasi distinctive due to keeping to its traditional designs is also seen as a disadvantage in the face of new Indian-influenced innovative designs.

According to shop proprietors and weavers nowadays most people don't order katan shari from the weavers in Mirpur. Most businesses go to India and purchase cheap katan in bulk from India which is not made from original silk but from mixed or synthetic fibre. Often these enter the market via irregular means and import tax is not paid, therefore, these can be sold with high profit margins. Also production cost of katan in Bangladesh is higher than India. So, Bangladeshi original Benarasi katan and other katan lost a huge number of buyers which affected the weaving industry.

The weaving industries of katan not only face obstacles from the Indian market but also from other arenas. The weavers and proprietors stated that, in 2013 a fire was formed and many shops were burned. At that time people suffered and the government said that they will compensate the people. But weavers and owners waited and some moved to different occupations but even after a decade they did not get the promised compensation. At that time many weavers changed their occupation and became labourers, transport workers, etc.

Again, in the year 2020 because of the pandemic it is said that they will lose 35 to 40 crore taka. There are 140 fashion outlets and about 15000 people who are employed all are facing uncertainty. The payment of loans and surviving this post-pandemic down market is their main worry at present. If measures are not taken then they may face dire conditions and it also becomes an extinct industry like many other cottage industries in Bangladesh. At present weavers fill the or-

ders from business people from various boutiques and also from different clothing shops, though orders and commissions are becoming rare.

This section looked at how the supply of cheap synthetic katan produced in India impacted on the market for pure silk handloom katan shari in Mirpur. We have seen what was once understood by Katan shari has changed overtime as katan shari shifted from an item of distinction to an item of mass-produced cheap commodity. Did this influence how consumers view katan shari? In the next section we will explore whether this shift changed the special designation characteristics of the Mirpur benarasi shari and influenced customers preference for Mirpur benarasi katan shari for weddings and other festive occasions.

5. Katan's Designation as "Festive" or "Everyday"

The history of Mirpur katan shari and the traditional brocade motifs weaved into the yarns goes back a few centuries. Observations made by respondents about the relevance and attraction of katan shari still points to a timeless appeal of this shari in our material culture. One of the proprietors, Halim Uddin observed "in the 1990s advent of the satellite television programmes increased the popularity of Indian dramas and films and Indian fashion and textiles. However, even then both bride and bridegroom's family members chose to wear katan shari at least in one or two wedding events." He further commented "the texture, colour and motifs of katan reflects a festive familiarity which no other materials can portray". It is this familiarity with the Katan shari's history and its symbolic motifs that continues to represent opulence and festivities.

The motifs of this garment are symbols of festive occasions and celebrations. Clifford Geertz, in his "The Interpretation of Cultures" (1973) asserted that culture is essentially symbolic³³. Cultures have deep meaning and to realise it we need to understand the symbol that is deeply rooted in culture³⁴. He argued that to perform or even to mimic any cultural activity the person have to know the meaning that lies within the culture³⁵. To understand the symbolic significance of katan shari in festive occasions, Geertz's analysis of culture can be helpful to a certain degree as culture can be symbolised through colour, textures, motifs and materials. In this research, I found that katan shari symbolises the celebration of special occasions through the motif and the material. Once it was only worn by the elite but these days women from all income backgrounds wear them during festive and special occasions. These days synthetic silk, polyester, cotton or even linen has replaced the pure silk katan and intricate gold and silver brocade designs that were once seen only in pure katan silk are woven into these yarns. Yet, the motifs are familiar and therefore, represents luxury while still being affordable.

To understand the katan special designation characteristics, it is not enough

³³Geertz, Clifford. (1973). Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York. Basic Books. Pp. 05.

³⁴Ibid Pp. 12.

³⁵Ibid Pp. 12.

to understand it only through influence of motifs, we need to understand katan shari's connection to the place of the migrated ethnic group who have been forced to resettle into a new place and create their own identity and cultivating their own source of livelihood for survival. Once people from all over British India bought "benarasi katan" from Benares but after the partition of British India it become difficult to acquire "benarasi katan". When the weavers from Benares settled in Dhaka, they started making "benarasi katan" which for a while were known as "dhakai katan". Both the names represent a place and an ethnicity. By "ethnicity" we mean those who have a collective identity and culture, but ethnicity is changeable. Comaroff and Comaroff observed that "ethnicity is also becoming more corporate, more commodified, more implicated than ever before in the economics of everyday life."³⁶ Ethnicity or ethnic identity is a vehicle to commodify materials as we see in the name and identity of benarasi katan shari. Katan shari is not only a piece of cloth but a symbol that is representative of festive events but within it lies the history of partition, forced displacement and the ethnic identity of the Bihari community.

Comaroff and Comaroff discussed identity economy citing an example from Kenya and observed that "In Kenya, ethnic federations are becoming commercial enterprises, sole stakeholders in identity-based businesses. At times, contrary to the universal rationality of market ideology, these companies trade on claims to distinctive, 'culturally rich' forms of 'entrepreneurial skill.'"³⁷ Through the material culture we create brands and also commodified traditions, such as creation of katan shari as a commodity that has a distinct ethnic identity. Phillip Felfan Xie argued (as cited in Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009), "1) Commodification does not necessarily destroy cultural products, and 2) culture and tourism can become inseparable, 3) the commodification of culture is often a positive mechanism in the pursuit of authenticity, a means in the quest for 'the true self', individual and collective 'through the appropriation of pastness'."³⁸ We see katan shari's presence in literature, history and in the cultural conversation in Bangladesh and the subcontinent as a brand. After the partition of British India this garment of cultural symbolism or this brand became difficult to obtain. When refugees from Benares migrated to Dhaka and started this weaving craft, people associated it with benarasi katan and named it as dhakai katan to distinguish between these two place-based products. Mirpur katan became a distinct product and acquired a new brand identity. As Martin Chanock argued (as cited in Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009) branding creates "an affective attachment to a named product" and this relates to both the product and an association with its ethnic, national identity.³⁹ Chanock also expressed (as cited in Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009), "(c)ultures, like brands, must essentialise...successful and sus-

³⁶John, L. Comaroff and Jean, Comaroff (2009). *Ethnicity, Inc.* Chicago. University of Chicago Press. Pp. 01.

³⁷Ibid Pp. 04.

³⁸Ibid 09.

³⁹Ibid 18.

tainable cultures are those which brand best.”⁴⁰ Here, the place where the katan is produced has changed but the technique of weaving remained almost the same and that is how the people who are involved in this industry made a different “branding” for katan from Mirpur as opposed to katan from Benares. Now-a-days cheap synthetic shari production with the same motif is sold as katan. This fake article is produced and bought all over the country with the understanding that it is not genuine but perhaps it is familiar and as close as possible to the genuine article. As the cost of pure silk katan shari is much higher, more consumers buy the affordable versions, thereby increasing both the range of consumers and supply of cheaper versions. In some ways mass production decreased the brand value of the genuine katan shari and in other ways the brand value of the genuine article is what now drives the increased market for cheap and fake katan shari.

Did katan shari lose its brand value in the eyes of consumers following its shift from an item of distinction to an item of mass-produced cheap commodity? Has it become a “everyday” garment for women? Consumers in Mirpur Benarasi Polli seemed to agree that katan shari denotes festivities and most observed that it is for special occasions. As one of the respondents, Samina Alam said, “When I see any woman wearing a katan shari, I immediately smile and think that they must be going to a happy occasion such as a wedding or special occasion. I always associate katan shari with festivities”. Elora Halim Chowdhury (2013) described her personal experience in *The Red and White Sari*⁴¹, where she opened the steel wardrobe revealing two vertical columns of stacked sharis. The heavier silk, benarasi, gold and silver embroidered and sequined sharis are hung in individual coat hanger bags. The everyday garments such as cottons were neatly folded and arranged in two horizontal shelves in the bottom. The organisation of these sharis reveal how women distinguish exclusive shari from everyday ones. These are sorted, organised and stored following a different method based on the value women attach to them.

Katan shari still means exclusivity and symbolises festivity. Once worn only by the rich, katan shari at present is affordable for all classes. While original pure silk katan is expensive and still considered a luxury item for the wealthy, the synthetic fake versions cater to customers from low income backgrounds. The name commands a type of branding that is still “festive” and not “everyday”.

6. Conclusion

The history of katan shari in Bangladesh is a history of its ever-changing identity, starting from its origin story located in Persia to becoming a luxury weaving tradition in India during the Mughal period. The establishment of Benares as a place of special designation for benarasi katan gave katan a distinct new identity signifying “Benares” as the place and “benarasi” as the product. Migration and

⁴⁰Tbid 18.

⁴¹Chowdhury, Elora Halim. (2013). “The Red And White Sari”, *Women’s Studies*, 42:314–336, Taylor & Francis Group.

settlement of refugees from Benares to Mirpur started a new weaving tradition of “benerasi” thus creating another distinct brand identity of Mirpur benarasi katan. Without mentioning the partition of the Indian subcontinent and the forced migration of weavers we will not understand how the value of the brand identity that is Mirpur katan shari in Bangladesh has been created over time. The product, place and ethnic identity are integral to that new brand.

The value of katan still remains despite the availability of cheap synthetic versions. Its value is derived from both the product and place which created a distinct brand identity of katan shari. The katan motifs breathe life into the woven clothes which represent the cultural interaction of trade and migration of people from one place. Culture is not isolated, it is a continuous interaction with other cultures. Katan continues to be the symbol of festivals and the artistry of motifs reflects the symbolism and socio-cultural, political and religious history of South Asia. Through katan shari we can portray our heritage and also other cultural interaction and the geo-politics of South Asia. With its distinct way of depiction in 2009 weaver associations in Uttar Pradesh, secured Geographical Indication (GI) rights for the “Banaras Brocades and Sarees” (Basole, 2015). Though the katan shari of Mirpur has its own distinct identity and attributes, which attracts the buyers for various occasions such as wedding and festivals, Mirpur katan officially is not awarded a distinguishable identity similar to the Geographical Indication rights. Despite the lack of recognition, this piece of garment is a reflection of our tradition, culture and history and represents a new ethnic brand, named Mirpur benarasi katan.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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