

Chapter 12: Clothing and Textiles

Summary

South Asia has been growing, spinning and weaving fiber for thousands of years, and its cloth has traveled the world. This chapter starts with three fibers (cotton, silk and pashmina wool), then looks at famous ways of weaving and dyeing them, such as Jamdani from Bangladesh, ikat from India and ajrak from Pakistan. Next it sorts everyday clothes into draped garments (the saree, dhoti and lungi) and stitched garments (the kurta, shalwar kameez and dupatta), and visits national dress in Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. It ends with the turban, the bindi and bangles, and the many meanings people give them.

Concepts Covered

1. Cotton in South Asia
2. Silk Weaving
3. Jamdani
4. Ikat
5. Pashmina
6. Khadi
7. Saree
8. Dhoti
9. Lungi

10. Kurta
11. Shalwar Kameez
12. Dupatta
13. Gho and Kira
14. Turban (Dastar)
15. Bindi
16. Bangles

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 1: What Is South Asia?** for the eight countries, the rivers and the monsoon climate.
- **Chapter 4: Colonialism, Independence, and Partition** helps with the khadi story in Section 12.5.
- **Chapter 5: Faiths of South Asia** helps with the turban and bindi in Section 12.9.
- **Chapter 11: Art, Architecture, and Craft** introduces motifs and craft traditions that show up again on cloth.

Clothes that carry stories



Hi, it's Mora! Maybe you have a kurta you only wear to weddings, or an aunt's saree folded in a closet that nobody explains. Clothes are one of the first ways people read your background, sometimes wrongly. By the end of this chapter you'll be able to tell the story behind what's in that closet, and answer the questions your friends ask about it.

12.1 Culture Day Guessing Game

The South Asian Student Association at Prairie Ridge High School is holding its first culture day, and everyone has been asked to wear something from home. Zara Hossain comes in a cream-and-gray cotton saree her Nanu brought from Bangladesh, covered in tiny woven flowers. Ayesha Qureshi, whose family is from Lahore, wears a green shalwar kameez with a long scarf. Simran Kaur Gill wears a shalwar kameez too, with a bright embroidered scarf from her grandmother in Ludhiana. Dilan Perera wears a white shirt and a checked cloth wrapped around his waist, and Nima Sherpa has brought a small brimmed cloth cap with a busy pattern.

Ms. Okafor turns it into a game. Ben Lindqvist has to guess which country each outfit comes from. "Saree, so India," he says, pointing at Zara. Wrong: Bangladesh. "Shalwar kameez is Pakistani," he says. Right for Ayesha, but Simran's family is from India. He guesses Dilan's wrap is "a Bangladeshi lungi," which is close but not quite: Dilan's family is from Sri Lanka, where a similar wrap is called a sarama. He gets Nima's cap right only because she gives him a hint. Ben scores two out of five and groans. "How is anyone supposed to know? Half of these are worn in, like, four countries." He has stumbled onto the big question of this chapter: if the same clothes cross so many borders, what can a garment tell you about where someone is from?

12.2 Clothes Speak a Language

Ben already knows the answer from his own family. His grandmother in Minnesota has a Norwegian **bunad**, a folk costume with embroidery and silver jewelry. Norway has hundreds of kinds of bunad (counts run from about 200 to more than 400, depending on what is counted), and each is tied to a region. People usually choose the one from the place their family comes from, then wear it for weddings, confirmations and especially Norway's

National Day on 17 May. A bunad doesn't tell you "Norwegian" so much as "my grandmother's people came from this valley."

South Asian clothing works in a similar way, with one big difference: the region is far bigger and its borders are much newer than its clothes. The saree, the kurta and the turban are much older than the countries of India, Pakistan or Bangladesh, which became independent in 1947 and 1971. So a garment usually tells you less about a passport and more about these things:

- **Where the cloth was made.** A Jamdani weave points to Dhaka. An ajrak print points to Sindh.
- **What the occasion is.** Many families keep everyday cotton for home and heavy silk for weddings.
- **Sometimes, faith or community.** A Sikh man's dastar, a married Bengali Hindu woman's white and red bangles, or a Bhutanese man's white ceremonial scarf each carry a specific meaning.
- **Personal taste.** Plenty of teens wear a kurta with jeans simply because they like it.

To read clothes well, it helps to start one layer down, with the fibers themselves.

12.3 Three Fibers: Cotton, Silk and Pashmina

Cotton

Cotton in South Asia is the long history of growing, spinning and weaving the cotton plant's soft seed fibers in the region, a history that goes back more than 7,000 years. The oldest known cotton fibers in the world come from Mehrgarh, an early farming village in Balochistan, Pakistan. Archaeologists

found a set of eight copper beads next to the wrist of a skeleton buried there in the first half of the sixth millennium BCE, roughly 7,500 to 8,000 years ago. (Some news stories round this up to 8,500 years.) When the copper corroded, its salts soaked into the thread that once strung the beads and preserved it. Under a microscope, French researchers identified the fibers as cotton.

Cotton suited South Asia well. It grows in warm places, and cotton cloth is light and breathable in the heat and humidity of the monsoon. Later, cotton cloth from the region became one of the most traded goods in the world. Merchants carried fine Indian cotton to the Roman Empire, to Baghdad and Basra, and east toward China.

The finest of all was **muslin** from Bengal, especially around Dhaka and Sonargaon in present-day Bangladesh. Weavers there used a local cotton called phuti karpas, which grew along the banks of the Meghna River, and spun it into thread so thin that travelers wrote that a whole length of muslin could be pulled through a ring. Mughal emperors prized it, and so did European nobles in the 1700s. Under British colonial rule the trade collapsed as cheap machine-made cloth from British factories flooded the market and weavers lost their livelihoods. The special cotton plant was eventually lost. In recent years, researchers and artisans in Bangladesh have been working to revive Dhaka muslin.

Count the cotton



Check the labels on three things in your closet right now. How many say "cotton," and how many say "Made in" Bangladesh, India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka? The cloth trade I'm describing never really stopped. It just moved into factories.

Silk

Silk comes from the cocoons of silkworms, the caterpillars of certain moths. **Silk Weaving** in South Asia means raising silkworms, unwinding or spinning their cocoon thread, and weaving it into cloth, usually for festive and wedding clothes. India's government recognizes four main kinds of silk:

Kind of silk	What the silkworms eat	Where it is mostly made	What it is known for
Mulberry	Mulberry leaves	Karnataka, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir	By far the most common; smooth and shiny
Tasar	Oak, asan and arjuna tree leaves	Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Bihar and nearby states	A rougher, textured silk
Eri	Castor leaves	Assam and the northeast	Spun rather than reeled; warm, with a copper tint
Muga	Som and soalu leaves	Almost entirely in Assam	A natural golden color

Some of the most famous silk sarees are named after the towns that weave them:

- **Banarasi** sarees come from Varanasi (also called Banaras or Benares), on the Ganga. They are known for **zari**, thread wrapped in gold or silver

color, woven into flowers, vines and net-like patterns. A complex Banarasi saree can take from about two weeks to several months to finish. In 2009, weavers' groups in Uttar Pradesh won Geographical Indication (GI) status for Banaras brocades and sarees. A GI is a legal label, like the one that protects the name "Champagne," which says a product's quality comes from a particular place.

- **Kanjivaram** (or Kanchipuram) sarees come from the town of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu. They are woven from mulberry silk with wide borders in a contrasting color, often with a classic "temple" border design. In a traditional Kanjivaram saree the border and the body are woven separately and then interlocked so firmly that the border stays attached even if the saree tears. The Government of India recognized Kanchipuram sarees as a GI in 2005–06.
- **Rajshahi silk** comes from Rajshahi in northwestern Bangladesh, where people trace silk production back to the 13th century. Bangladesh gave it GI status in 2021.

Pashmina

Pashmina is the very fine wool from the soft undercoat of goats that live high in the Himalaya, and also the name for the shawls made from it. The word comes from *pashm*, the Persian word for wool. In Hindi it is written पश्मीना (*push-MEE-nah*).

The classic source is the Changthangi goat, raised by nomadic Changpa herders on the high, cold Changthang plateau of Ladakh. Winter temperatures there can fall below $-30\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ ($-22\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$), so the goats grow a thick, fine undercoat. Each spring, when the goats shed, herders comb the undercoat out by hand rather than shearing it. Weavers in Kashmir turned this wool into the famous Kashmir shawl. Mughal emperors gave pashmina

shawls as "robes of honor" to reward nobles, and in the 1800s the shawls became high fashion in Britain and France.

One pashmina design traveled farther than the wool itself. The teardrop-shaped **buta** motif on Kashmir shawls was copied by factories in the town of Paisley, Scotland, in the early 1800s. That's why English speakers today call the shape "paisley," even though it began on South Asian looms.

Nepal has its own pashmina tradition. There the high-mountain goat is called the chyangra, and Nepal's pashmina makers, working with the International Trade Centre, created a "Chyangra Pashmina" brand to mark genuine Nepali products.

A disputed region



Kashmir, where the famous shawls are woven, is a region whose control is disputed among India, Pakistan and China, and people from all sides claim its crafts with pride. When I say "Kashmir shawl," I mean the craft of the region, not a statement about whose territory it is.

12.4 Weaving and Dyeing: Making Pattern

Once you have thread, there are two main ways to put a pattern on cloth. You can **weave** the pattern in, by choosing which colored threads go over and under each other. Or you can **dye or print** the pattern on, by blocking color from some parts of the thread or cloth. South Asia has famous examples of both.

A quick piece of vocabulary helps here. On a loom, the **warp** threads run the long way and are stretched tight. The **weft** thread is passed back and forth

across them.

Jamdani

Jamdani (জামদানী, *JAHM-dah-nee*) is a fine, sheer cotton cloth from the Dhaka region of Bangladesh, with patterns woven directly into it on a hand loom. Its name comes from Persian. The weaver adds each little flower, leaf or diamond by hand, using extra weft threads that go back and forth only across that one small motif instead of the full width of the cloth. This is called a **discontinuous weft** technique. It is slow, careful work, so a single saree can take weeks or months, and the result is light and breathable.

In 2013, UNESCO added the traditional art of Jamdani weaving to its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. UNESCO notes that the skills pass mostly from parents to children in home workshops around Dhaka, and that many Bengali women wear Jamdani sarees as a symbol of identity, both in Bangladesh and abroad. In 2016, Bangladesh also gave the Jamdani saree GI status. Zara's culture-day saree, with its woven flowers, is a Jamdani.

Ikat

Ikat (*EE-kaht*) is a way of patterning cloth in which the threads are tied and dyed before they are ever woven. The word comes from Indonesia, where it means "to bind," and similar techniques grew up independently in many parts of the world. It works in four steps:

1. The weaver wraps tight bindings around small sections of a bundle of threads, following a planned pattern.
2. The threads are dyed. The tied sections resist the dye and stay their original color.

3. The bindings are moved or added, and the threads are dyed again in a new color. This can repeat many times.
4. Finally the bindings are removed, and the patterned threads are set up on the loom and woven.

Because the pattern is in the threads, the edges of each shape come out slightly feathery and blurred, which is ikat's signature look. In **double ikat**, both the warp and the weft are tie-dyed, and the weaver has to line them up exactly. It's so hard that it is woven in only a few places in the world.

India has several famous ikat centers:

- **Pochampally**, in Telangana, known for bold geometric ikat sarees in cotton and silk.
- **Sambalpur** and nearby districts in Odisha, where ikat is called *bandha* and often uses motifs such as the conch, the wheel and the flower.
- **Patan**, in Gujarat, home of **patola**, a silk double ikat. Dutch traders once used patola as prized trade cloth in the spice trade with Indonesia.

Ajrak

Ajrak is a cloth printed by hand with carved wooden blocks, made mostly in the Sindh region of Pakistan, and also by families in Kutch, in the Indian state of Gujarat, who trace their craft to Sindh. The printers use natural dyes, especially deep indigo blue and crimson red, and "resist" techniques that keep some areas from taking the dye, skills passed down through generations of the same families. Its dense patterns of stars, circles and lattices are easy to recognize.

For many people in Sindh, ajrak is a badge of identity. Families give an ajrak shawl to honor a guest, and it appears at weddings and cultural events. Some writers even point out that the famous stone bust of a "priest-king"

from Mohenjo-daro, more than 4,000 years old, wears a robe with a trefoil (three-lobed) pattern that looks a little like ajrak. That link can't be proven, but it shows how strongly people feel the cloth belongs to the Indus region.

Whose Story?

Cloth often crosses borders that were drawn long after the craft began, so different groups tell its story differently. In Pakistan, ajrak is celebrated as a symbol of Sindhi culture, and in 2025 the Government of Sindh even put an ajrak-inspired design on new vehicle license plates. Across the border, block printers in Kutch in India make ajrak too, and they tell it as the story of their own families, who brought the craft from Sindh. In Bhutan, the government describes the gho and kira as national dress that protects a distinct Bhutanese identity, but when the dress code became mandatory in 1989, some Lhotshampa (Nepali-speaking Bhutanese in the south) resented being required to wear clothes from another community's tradition. Asking "whose cloth is this?" usually has more than one true answer.

12.5 Khadi: Cloth as Protest

Khadi (खादी, *KHAH-dee*) is cloth that is both hand-spun and hand-woven, made from cotton, silk or wool. Its importance comes from the role it played in India's freedom movement.

Under British rule, raw cotton was often shipped from India to mills in Britain, woven there by machine, and sold back to Indians as finished cloth. Mohandas K. Gandhi, the leader of the Indian independence movement, argued that buying that cloth kept India poor and dependent. He called on people to boycott foreign cloth and to spin their own thread on a **charkha**, a hand-turned spinning wheel. This was part of **swadeshi**, a movement whose name means "of one's own country."

The first piece of hand-woven cloth at Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram, in Gujarat, was made in 1917-18. He began spinning himself in 1919 and asked members of the Indian National Congress to spin and even pay their dues in yarn. In 1921, he began wearing only a simple dhoti, often without a shirt, to show his solidarity with India's rural poor. That same year he visited the Comilla region, now in Bangladesh, to encourage local weavers, and weaving centers grew up there.

After independence, India's government set up the Khadi and Village Industries Commission in April 1957, under a 1956 law, to support khadi and other village crafts. Khadi is still sold across India today. In Bangladesh, a khadi tradition continued in the Comilla area too, and in 2025 Bangladesh gave Comilla khadi Geographical Indication status.

Khadi is also a symbol of self-reliance, and many politicians in India still wear it for that reason.

12.6 Draped Garments: Saree, Dhoti and Lungi

Many South Asian clothes are not cut and sewn at all. They are long, unstitched rectangles of cloth that are wrapped, pleated and tucked around the body. This makes them easy to weave on a hand loom and easy to adjust to any body size.

The saree

The **Saree** (also spelled sari; Hindi साड़ी, Bangla শাড়ি, *SAH-ree*) is a long, unstitched length of cloth that a woman wraps around her waist and drapes over one shoulder. A saree is usually between 4.5 and 9 yards (about 4 to 8 meters) long. It is worn over a petticoat (a long underskirt) and a fitted blouse, which is called a choli in northern India and a cholo in Nepal. The

loose end that hangs over the shoulder is the **pallu**, and it is often richly decorated.

The saree is worn in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and parts of Pakistan. It is the national attire for women in Bangladesh, which is why Zara's Jamdani makes perfect sense there. Sri Lanka has its own famous style, the **osariya** or Kandyan saree, which comes from the old Kandyan kingdom in the hill country. It has a frill at the waist and is worn with a full blouse that covers the midriff, and many women in Sri Lankan public life wear it.

There isn't one right way to drape a saree. The most common style today is the **Nivi** drape, with pleats tucked in at the front and the pallu over the shoulder. But there are many regional drapes. In the Deccan region of western and central India, for example, the Nauvari style passes the pleats between the legs and tucks them in at the back, which makes it easy to move in. Some Newar women in Nepal traditionally fold the saree to knee length and wrap a shawl across the chest instead of the pallu.

Ask for a draping lesson



If someone in your family wears sarees, ask them to show you their drape slowly, step by step. Many people learned their style from their own mother or grandmother, so the way they pleat and tuck is a little piece of family history.

The dhoti

The **Dhoti** (धोती, *DHOH-tee*) is a man's unstitched lower garment, a rectangle of cloth about 4 yards (3.7 meters) long that is wrapped around the waist and then passed between the legs and tucked in, so it looks a bit like loose trousers. It is often white or cream cotton, and silk dhotis are worn for weddings and religious occasions. It has local names too. In parts of South

India, the formal style is called *panchakacham*. The dhoti is common in India and in Nepal, and it is the garment Gandhi made famous worldwide in the 1920s.

The lungi

The **Lungi** (লুঙ্গি, *LOONG-gee*) is a length of cloth worn by men around the waist like a skirt, without passing between the legs. It is usually cotton, often in checks or stripes, and it is loved for staying cool in hot, humid weather. In Bangladesh, the lungi is the most commonly seen everyday clothing for men, usually sewn into a tube, though it is not worn for formal occasions. Elaborate silk lungis are often given to a Bangladeshi groom as a wedding gift.

Wrapped garments like this have different names in different places. In Kerala, a white or cream wrap with a decorative border is called a **mundu**. In Sri Lanka, it is a **sarama**, which is what Dilan wore to culture day. Across the Bay of Bengal in Myanmar, it is a longyi. They are cousins, not copies.

12.7 Stitched Garments: Kurta, Shalwar Kameez and Dupatta

Other South Asian clothes are cut and sewn. Many of these styles came to South Asia from Central Asia and Persia over centuries, then took on local forms.

The kurta

The **Kurta** (कुरता, *KOOR-tah*) is a loose tunic, traditionally collarless, with straight sleeves and side seams left open at the bottom. It can be short or long, plain or embroidered, cotton for every day or silk for festivals. Both men and women wear kurtas, over loose trousers, fitted trousers or, increasingly,

jeans. Lucknow in India is famous for **chikankari**, a delicate embroidery traditionally done in white thread on light cotton or muslin, often seen on kurtas.

Two close relatives show how widely the idea spread. In Nepal, men's national dress is the **daura-suruwal**: the daura is a kurta-like shirt that closes with ties, and the suruwal is a pair of trousers that is loose at the hips and narrow at the ankles. It is often worn with a patterned cloth cap, the **Dhaka topi**, the cap Nima brought to culture day. Under King Mahendra, who ruled from 1955 to 1972, men were required to wear the Dhaka topi in official photos for passports and documents. In Afghanistan, many men wear the **perahan tunban**, a long, loose shirt over very full trousers. The style from Kandahar is known for fine geometric embroidery on the chest.

The shalwar kameez

The **Shalwar Kameez** (Urdu شلوار قمیض, *SHUL-war ka-MEEZ*) is a two-piece outfit of loose trousers and a long tunic, worn by both men and women. The **shalwar** is wide at the waist, held up by a drawstring, and narrows to the ankle. The **kameez** is a long shirt with slits up both sides, which makes it easy to walk, sit and move in.

The shalwar kameez spread across northern South Asia over many centuries, especially in the Punjab region. Today it is Pakistan's national dress, and it is worn every day by millions of men and women there. It is also very common in India, especially in Punjab, where many people call the women's version a "Punjabi suit," and in Bangladesh and Afghanistan. So Ben was half right: Ayesha's outfit is Pakistani national dress, and Simran's matching outfit is just as much a part of her family's Punjabi Sikh tradition in India.

The dupatta

The **Dupatta** (Hindi दुपट्टा, Urdu دوپٹہ, *doo-PUT-tah*) is a long scarf or shawl, usually worn by women with a shalwar kameez or with a long skirt and blouse. Its name roughly means "a doubled strip of cloth." A dupatta can be draped over one or both shoulders, wrapped across the chest, or worn over the head, for example in a place of worship or in front of elders. Families and communities have different customs about when and how to wear it.

Dupattas are often where the most beautiful handwork goes. In Punjab, on both sides of the India-Pakistan border, women have long made **phulkari**, which means "flower work," a bright darned embroidery in silk thread on coarse cotton. Simran's culture-day scarf is a phulkari dupatta.

Garment	Draped or stitched	Mainly worn by	Countries where you'll often see it
Saree	Draped	Women	India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, parts of Pakistan
Dhoti	Draped	Men	India, Nepal
Lungi (and mundu, sarama)	Draped	Men	Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka
Kurta	Stitched	Men and women	India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, the diaspora
Shalwar kameez	Stitched	Men and women	Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan

Garment	Draped or stitched	Mainly worn by	Countries where you'll often see it
Dupatta	Draped over stitched clothes	Mostly women	Pakistan, India, Bangladesh

12.8 National Dress: Bhutan and Its Neighbors

Some countries in South Asia have an official or widely accepted national dress. The clearest example is Bhutan.

Gho and kira

Gho and Kira are the national dress of Bhutan: the gho (ཇོ་, *GOH*) for men and the kira (*KEE-rah*) for women.

- The **gho** is a heavy, knee-length robe that is folded and tied at the waist with a woven belt called a **kera**. The fold creates a large pouch above the belt that people use like a pocket. Under it, men wear a white jacket called a **tego**, whose long white cuffs are folded back over the gho's sleeves.
- The **kira** is an ankle-length dress made from one large rectangle of woven cloth. It is wrapped around the body, pinned at both shoulders with brooches called **koma**, and belted at the waist. Women wear a long-sleeved blouse called a **wonju** underneath and often a short jacket called a **toego** on top.

Everyday gho and kira are usually cotton or wool in simple checks and stripes. For festivals, many people wear richly patterned silk kira woven by

hand. Weaving, called *thagzo*, is one of Bhutan's traditional arts, and the Royal Textile Academy of Bhutan, founded in 2005 in Thimphu, runs a weaving school and a textile museum to keep it alive.

Bhutan's national dress is connected to the **driglam namzha**, Bhutan's official code of etiquette and dress. Its roots go back to the 17th century, when Ngawang Namgyal, the first Zhabdrung, worked to unify Bhutan and give it a distinct identity.

In 1989, the government made the dress code mandatory in public during business hours. Today men who work in government offices or schools are required to wear the gho, and both gho and kira are worn for formal occasions. When visiting a dzong (a fortress-monastery) or meeting officials, men add a ceremonial scarf called a **kabney**. Ordinary citizens wear a white one, while other colors are reserved for officials and monks. Women wear a narrow embroidered cloth called a **rachu** over the shoulder.

Other national dress in the region

Country	Often-named national dress	Notes
Bhutan	Gho (men), kira (women)	Required in government offices and schools and for formal occasions
Nepal	Daura-suruwal with Dhaka topi (men); saree with cholo blouse (women)	Many communities in Nepal also have their own dress
Pakistan	Shalwar kameez (men and women)	Worn every day across the country

Country	Often-named national dress	Notes
Bangladesh	Saree (women)	Jamdani is the best-known weave
Sri Lanka	Osariya, the Kandyan saree (women)	Widely treated as national dress for women
Afghanistan	Perahan tunban (men)	Regional styles, such as Kandahari embroidery

"National dress" is always a simplification. Each of these countries has many communities with their own clothing, and a single official outfit can leave some of them out, as the Whose Story? box showed.

12.9 Head, Forehead and Wrist: Turbans, Bindis and Bangles

Some of the most noticeable things people wear are small, and they often carry the deepest meanings.

The turban and the dastar

A turban is a long cloth wound around the head. Turbans are worn in many parts of the world and by people of many faiths. In South Asia, you can see turbans on Sikh men and some Sikh women, on many Pashtun men in Afghanistan and Pakistan, on village elders in Rajasthan, where it's often called a **pagri** (पगड़ी), on some Hindu monks, and on some Muslim religious

scholars. Its style, color and way of tying can show region, occasion or community.

The **Turban (Dastar)** is, for Sikhs, an article of faith. The dastar (ਦਸਤਾਰ, *dus-TAAR*) is the Sikh turban, and the word comes from Persian through Punjabi. In Sikh tradition, the Gurus adopted the turban, which in South Asia was once worn mainly by royalty, as a way of declaring the sovereignty and equality of all people. Sikhs who have formally committed to the faith keep their hair uncut (*kesh*), one of the five articles of faith, and the dastar covers it. According to the Sikh Coalition, a US Sikh civil rights group, both men and women may wear a turban, and wearing one is a public commitment to values such as service, compassion and honesty. Tying a dastar neatly every day, turn by turn, is a skill many Sikh children learn from a parent.

A good question to ask



If you're curious about a friend's turban, it's fine to ask a respectful question like "What does your dastar mean to you?" Just never touch someone's turban or ask them to take it off. For many Sikhs it's as personal and sacred as anything they own.

The bindi

The **Bindi** (बिंदी, *BIN-dee*) is a dot, traditionally red or maroon, worn in the center of the forehead, often between the eyebrows. The word comes from the Sanskrit *bindu*, meaning "point" or "drop." Traditional bindis are made with powders such as kumkum. Today many people wear small stick-on bindis in every color and shape.

The bindi is worn mainly by Hindu women, and also by some Jains and Buddhists, in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and in Hindu communities in

Pakistan and Bhutan. In Hindu tradition, many people link the spot between the eyebrows with spiritual focus. For some women, a red bindi has also been a sign of being married, though customs vary a lot by region and family, and many unmarried girls wear decorative bindis too. In Nepal, a related forehead mark, the tika, is placed on people's foreheads by elders as a blessing during festivals such as Dashain.

Bangles

Bangles are rigid bracelets, usually worn in sets, made from glass, metal, shell, lac, plastic or other materials. They have a very long history in the region. The famous "Dancing Girl," a small bronze figure from Mohenjo-daro in what is now Pakistan, made sometime between about 2300 and 1750 BCE, wears a stack of bangles on her left arm. Hindi speakers call a bangle a चूड़ी (*CHOO-ree*), and Urdu speakers call it a چوڑی, the same word in a different script.

Bangles can carry very specific meanings:

- **Weddings:** many brides across South Asia wear sets of glass or gold bangles, and the sound of bangles is part of wedding celebrations. Many Punjabi Hindu and Sikh brides wear a **chooda**, a set of red and white bangles, on their wedding day.
- **Marriage in Bengal:** many married Bengali Hindu women, in both Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal, wear a white conch-shell bangle called a **shankha** (শাঁখা, *SHAN-kha*) together with a red bangle called a **pola**. These are traditionally given to the bride at her wedding.
- **Faith:** many Sikhs wear a **kara**, a single plain steel or iron bangle, which is one of the five articles of faith in Sikh tradition. It is worn by men and women.

- **Everyday style:** gold bangles are often given to babies and little girls, and plenty of people wear bangles just because they like them.

The town of Firozabad in Uttar Pradesh, India, is famous as a center of glass bangle making.

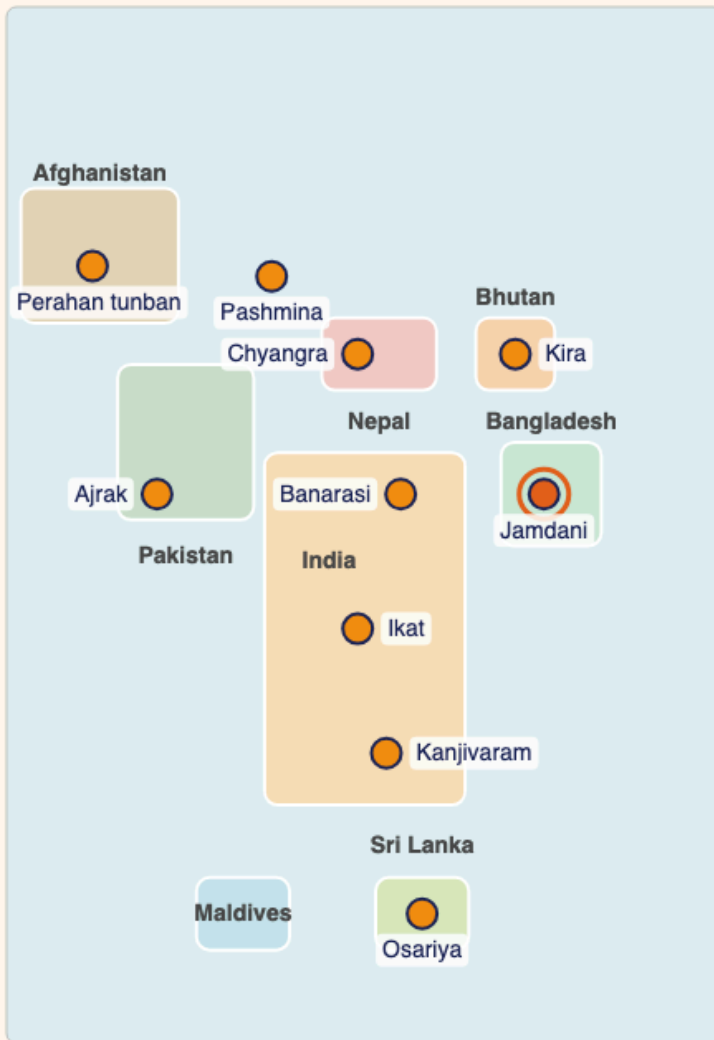
12.10 The Textile Map

Now that you know the fibers, techniques and garments, it's time to put them on the map. Look back at how many of these traditions are tied to a single town or region: Jamdani to Dhaka, ajrak to Sindh, Banarasi to Varanasi, Kanjivaram to Kanchipuram, kira weaving to Bhutan. That's the main idea of the sim below.

Diagram: Textile Map

Textile Map: Cloth of South Asia

Click a dot to see where a cloth is made, its fiber and its pattern.

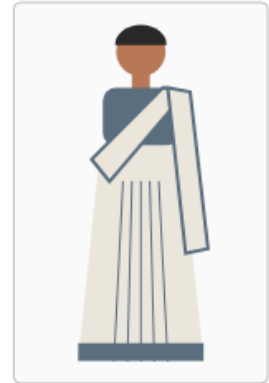


Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders.

Jamdani



Pattern



Garment

Place: Around Dhaka, Bangladesh

Fiber: Fine cotton

Technique: Pattern woven in by hand, motif by motif (discontinuous weft)

Worn as: Saree

UNESCO intangible cultural heritage since 2013.

Jamdani

Previous

Next

Quiz me

☒ Show place names

Press Quiz me to test yourself.

[Back to Textile Map Lesson Plan](#)

Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch12-textile-map/main.html>

[Open the Textile Map fullscreen](#)

MicroSim specification: Textile Map

sim-id: ch12-textile-map

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Remember / Understand

Bloom Verb: identify, explain

Learning Objective: The learner will connect ten South Asian garments and textiles to the regions where they are made and to their fiber and technique.

Canvas: responsive width; 740 px drawing area plus 100 px control area.

Controls: textile menu, Previous and Next buttons, Quiz me / Show answer button, "Show place names" checkbox; click or tap any dot.

Behavior: A schematic tile map shows the eight countries (no borders) with ten labeled dots. Selecting a dot shows the textile's place, fiber, technique and the garment it is often used for, a simple drawing of that garment in the textile's colors, and a procedurally drawn pattern swatch (for example scattered woven flowers for Jamdani, feathery diamonds for ikat, buta shapes for pashmina, indigo and crimson stars for ajrak). In quiz mode the name is hidden and the learner clicks the dot they think matches the swatch. The caption "Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders." is drawn inside the drawing area.

Start by clicking every dot and reading the panel. For each one, notice three things: the fiber (cotton, silk or wool), whether the pattern is woven in, dyed into the thread first, or printed on, and which garment it usually becomes. Then press **Quiz me**. The sim will show you only a pattern swatch and a garment, and you have to find the right dot.

As you play, look for the pattern behind the details. The cotton traditions cluster in hot, humid places like the Bengal delta and Sindh. The pashmina dots sit high in the mountains, where goats need warm undercoats. The silk

dots are in places with long weaving traditions and wealthy patrons, such as the old temple town of Kanchipuram and the holy city of Varanasi. The map is simplified, but the link between land, fiber and cloth is real.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about the clothes they wore growing up, the clothes they wear for special days, and any garment in the family that has a story. If you don't have a South Asian elder to ask, interview a club advisor, a local temple, mosque, gurdwara or cultural center volunteer, or a classmate's family (with permission). Ten minutes is enough.

Before you start: Ask if they have one special garment, like a wedding saree, a shawl, a turban or a set of bangles, that they would be willing to show you. Ask permission before you take a photo of it.

Questions to ask

1. What did you wear on an ordinary school day when you were my age?
What did you wear for festivals or weddings?
2. Is there one piece of clothing in our family that has a story? Who made it, wore it or gave it?
3. How is a saree, turban, dupatta, gho or other garment tied or worn in our family? Who taught you?
4. Where did your family buy cloth or clothes? Did a tailor make them, or did anyone weave, embroider or block-print at home?

5. How have the clothes you wear changed since you were young, or since you moved to a new country?
6. Is there a garment, a weave or a way of dressing you hope I'll keep wearing or pass on?

Listen for: names of weaves or fibers (Jamdani, Ikat, Pashmina, silk, Khadi, Cotton in South Asia), which garments are draped and which are stitched (Saree, Dhoti, Lungi, Kurta, Shalwar Kameez, Dupatta), and the meaning of anything worn for faith or marriage, such as a Turban (Dastar), a Bindi or Bangles.

Save it: Write down one quote or story in their words, with their permission. If they agree, you can share it with the [Roots & Rivers Story Archive](#).

? Your turn: compare two answers

Compare your elder's description of everyday clothes with a friend's interview. Did one family wear mostly draped clothes and the other mostly stitched ones? Did either garment cross a border, like a saree in Bangladesh or a shalwar kameez in India? Write two sentences about what surprised you.

"Every family does it a little differently, and there is no wrong answer here."

Common Misconceptions

Myth: The saree is only Indian.

Reality: The saree is worn in India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, and in parts of Pakistan. It is the national attire for women in Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka has its own Kandyan style, the osariya.

Myth: The shalwar kameez is only Pakistani.

Reality: It is Pakistan's national dress, but it is also widely worn in India

(especially Punjab), Bangladesh and Afghanistan, by people of many faiths.

Myth: A turban means a person belongs to one particular religion.

Reality: Turbans are worn by Sikhs, by many Pashtun men, by elders in Rajasthan, by some Hindu monks and by some Muslim scholars, among others. For Sikhs, the dastar has a specific religious meaning, but the turban itself belongs to many traditions.

Myth: Khadi is just another word for cotton.

Reality: Khadi means cloth that is both hand-spun and hand-woven. It can be cotton, silk or wool, and it became a symbol of self-reliance in India's freedom movement.

Myth: "Paisley" is a Scottish design.

Reality: The shape began as the buta motif on Kashmir shawls. Factories in Paisley, Scotland, copied it in the 1800s, and the town's name stuck to the pattern.

Check Yourself

? 1. Where were the oldest known cotton fibers found, and about how old are they? ✓

At Mehrgarh, an early village in Balochistan, Pakistan. They were preserved inside copper beads buried roughly 7,500 to 8,000 years ago, in the first half of the sixth millennium BCE.

? 2. What is the difference between Jamdani and ikat? ✓

In Jamdani, the pattern is woven in on the loom, with extra weft threads added motif by motif. In ikat, the threads are tied and dyed in a pattern before weaving, which gives the shapes blurred edges.

? 3. Name one draped garment and one stitched garment, and say who usually wears each. ✓

Draped: the saree (women), the dhoti or lungi (men). Stitched: the kurta (men and women) or the shalwar kameez (men and women).

? 4. What are the gho and kira, and when are they required? ✓

They are Bhutan's national dress: the gho is a knee-length belted robe for men, and the kira is an ankle-length wrapped dress for women. Under Bhutan's dress code, men in government offices and schools must wear the gho, and both are worn for formal occasions.

? 5. Why did Gandhi promote khadi? ✓

He wanted Indians to stop buying British machine-made cloth, which kept India dependent, and to spin and weave their own. Khadi became a symbol of self-reliance and the freedom movement.

Exercises

Remember

1. List the four kinds of silk that India's government recognizes, and name the one that is made almost entirely in Assam.

Answer ✓

Mulberry, tasar, eri and muga. Muga, a natural golden silk, is made almost entirely in Assam.

2. In what year did UNESCO recognize Jamdani weaving, and in which country is it centered?

 Answer

a. It is centered around Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Understand

1. Explain why ikat patterns have blurry, feathered edges.

 Answer

The pattern is tied and dyed into the threads before weaving. When the threads are stretched on the loom and woven, they never line up perfectly, so the edges of each shape come out slightly soft.

2. Explain in your own words why the "paisley" pattern is named after a Scottish town.

 Answer

The teardrop buta motif came from Kashmir shawls. When factories in Paisley, Scotland, made cheaper copies in the 1800s, English speakers started calling any shawl with that motif a Paisley shawl, and the name stuck to the shape.

Apply

1. Use the Textile Map. Find every dot whose main fiber is silk. What do the places have in common, and how are they different? *Hint: look at where each dot sits and what garment each makes.*
2. A friend shows you a white conch-shell bangle and a red bangle her mother wears every day. Using the chapter, explain what they might mean and which region the custom comes from. *Hint: look at Section 12.9.*

Analyze

1. Compare draped garments (saree, dhoti, lungi) with stitched garments (kurta, shalwar kameez). Give two practical reasons a family might choose one over the other. *Hint: think about weather, weaving, fit and occasion.*
2. Ben scored two out of five at culture day. Analyze why guessing someone's country from their clothes is so hard in South Asia, using at least three garments from the chapter as evidence. *Hint: compare when the countries were formed with how old the clothes are.*

Evaluate

1. Bhutan requires the gho and kira in certain settings to protect its national identity. Some Bhutanese in the south resented the rule. Evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of a required national dress. *Hint: the Whose Story? box gives two viewpoints.*
2. A clothing company sells a cheap machine-printed scarf labeled "pashmina." Evaluate whether that label is fair, using what you learned about pashmina and Geographical Indication tags. *Hint: what makes pashmina pashmina?*

Create

1. Design a label card for one garment or textile from your own family or from this chapter, as if it were in a museum. Include its name in English and its original script (if you can verify it), the fiber, the technique, where it comes from and one sentence of family or community meaning. *Hint: museum labels are short, so choose your details carefully.*
2. Plan a culture day for your own club where people bring clothes from home. Write a one-paragraph guide that helps guests ask good questions instead of guessing countries. *Hint: use the "Clothes Speak a Language" list in Section 12.2.*

Key Takeaways

- South Asia has spun and woven cotton for more than 7,000 years. The oldest known cotton fibers come from Mehrgarh in Pakistan, and Bengal's muslin was once famous worldwide.
- Silk (mulberry, tasar, eri and muga) and pashmina wool from Himalayan goats are the region's other great fibers, behind Banarasi, Kanjivaram and Rajshahi silks and Kashmir and Nepali shawls.
- Patterns can be woven in (Jamdani, recognized by UNESCO in 2013), dyed into the thread first (ikat) or printed on (ajrak from Sindh).
- Khadi, hand-spun and hand-woven cloth, became a symbol of self-reliance in India's freedom movement.
- Draped garments (saree, dhoti, lungi) and stitched ones (kurta, shalwar kameez, dupatta) cross national borders. Bhutan's gho and kira are a clear example of official national dress.
- Turbans, bindis and bangles can carry religious or marriage meanings, like the Sikh dastar and kara or the Bengali shankha, but meanings vary

by family, region and faith.

You can read the cloth now!



You can now look at a saree, a kurta or a gho and ask where its thread came from and how its pattern was made. Next, in Chapter 13, we meet the people who wear these clothes at life's biggest moments: families, names and weddings.

Quiz: Clothing and Textiles

Test your understanding of Chapter 12. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

Where were the oldest known cotton fibers in the world found?

- A. In a tomb near Varanasi, India
- B. Inside copper beads at Mehrgarh, Pakistan
- C. In a weaver's workshop near Dhaka, Bangladesh
- D. In a monastery in Bhutan

 **Show Answer**



The correct answer is **B**. Cotton fibers preserved inside copper beads in a burial at Mehrgarh, in Balochistan, Pakistan, date to the first half of the sixth millennium BCE, roughly 7,500 to 8,000 years ago. Dhaka became famous for fine cotton muslin much later, so it is a tempting but wrong choice.

Concept Tested: Cotton in South Asia **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

Which of these best defines khadi?

- A. Any cloth made of cotton

- B. A silk saree woven in Varanasi
- C. Cloth printed with wooden blocks in Sindh
- D. Cloth that is both hand-spun and hand-woven

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **D**. Khadi is hand-spun and hand-woven cloth, and it can be cotton, silk or wool. Option A is a common misconception: khadi is defined by how it is made, not by the fiber.

Concept Tested: Khadi **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

What are the gho and kira?

- A. The national dress of Bhutan for men and women
- B. Two styles of saree draping from Nepal
- C. Turbans worn by Pashtun men in Afghanistan
- D. Silk weaves from Assam

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. The gho is the knee-length belted robe worn by men in Bhutan, and the kira is the ankle-length wrapped dress worn by women. Nepal's national dress for men is the daura-suruwal, not the gho.

Concept Tested: Gho and Kira **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 4

Why do ikat patterns usually have soft, feathery edges?

- A. The pattern is painted on with a brush after weaving.
- B. The cloth is washed many times to fade the colors.
- C. The threads are tie-dyed before weaving and never line up perfectly on the loom.
- D. Weavers add extra weft threads one motif at a time.

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. In ikat, bundles of thread are tied and dyed in a pattern before they are woven, and small shifts on the loom blur the edges. Option D describes Jamdani, where the pattern is woven in with extra weft threads.

Concept Tested: Ikat **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 5

Why did Gandhi ask Indians to spin and wear khadi?

- A. Because khadi was cheaper than any other cloth
- B. To make India less dependent on British machine-made cloth and show self-reliance
- C. Because British law banned Indians from wearing silk
- D. To start a new fashion trend for weddings

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. Under colonial rule, Indian cotton was often shipped to British mills and sold back as cloth. Gandhi's swadeshi movement urged people to boycott foreign cloth and spin their own. Option A is wrong: hand-spun yarn was often more expensive than mill yarn.

Concept Tested: Khadi **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

What makes the saree and the dhoti "draped" garments rather than "stitched" garments?

- A. They are long unstitched lengths of cloth wrapped and tucked around the body.
- B. They are always made of silk.
- C. They are only worn at weddings.
- D. They are sewn into a tube before being worn.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. Both are rectangles of cloth that are wrapped, pleated and tucked rather than cut and sewn. Option D describes the Bangladeshi lungi, which is often sewn into a tube, and even that is wrapped rather than tailored.

Concept Tested: Saree **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 7

At a community event, you see a man wearing a turban. Based on the chapter, what is the best conclusion?

- A. He must be Sikh.
- B. He must be Muslim.
- C. He must be from Rajasthan.
- D. You can't tell his religion or region from the turban alone; it's best to ask respectfully if you want to know.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. Turbans are worn by Sikhs, many Pashtun men, elders in Rajasthan, some Hindu monks and some Muslim scholars, among others. Option A is the most common mistake: the Sikh dastar has a specific meaning, but not every turban is a dastar.

Concept Tested: Turban (Dastar) **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 8

Your friend's mother, who is from Bangladesh, wears a white conch-shell bangle and a red bangle every day. What do they most likely signify?

- A. She has completed a pilgrimage.
- B. She is a member of a weavers' guild.
- C. She is a married Bengali Hindu woman wearing shankha and pola.
- D. She is a Sikh wearing a kara.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. Many married Bengali Hindu women in Bangladesh and West Bengal wear the white shankha and the red pola, traditionally given at the wedding. Option D is wrong because the Sikh kara is a single plain steel or iron bangle.

Concept Tested: Bangles **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

The shalwar kameez is Pakistan's national dress, yet Simran's family from Ludhiana, India, wears it too. What does this best show?

- A. Many South Asian garments are older than today's borders and are shared across countries.
- B. Simran's family must have moved from Pakistan recently.
- C. The shalwar kameez was invented in India and later copied by Pakistan.
- D. National dress laws in Pakistan also apply in India.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. The shalwar kameez spread across the Punjab region over centuries, long before the 1947 border, so it is worn on both sides. Option C wrongly turns a shared tradition into a contest over who invented it.

Concept Tested: Shalwar Kameez **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

Jamdani, ajrak and Banarasi brocade are all patterned cloth. Which comparison is correct?

- A. All three are printed with wooden blocks.
- B. Jamdani and Banarasi patterns are woven in on the loom, while ajrak is block-printed.
- C. Jamdani is silk, ajrak is wool and Banarasi is cotton.
- D. All three are tie-dyed before weaving.

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. Jamdani motifs are woven in with extra weft threads, Banarasi brocade weaves in zari, and ajrak is printed with carved blocks and natural dyes. Option D describes ikat, and none of these three is ikat.

Concept Tested: Jamdani **Bloom's Level:** Analyze