



Are the dress codes governed by the Social Norms ?

By [Suvajit Chatterjee](#)

Every country has its own cultural drifts, some are indigenous and some are emulated. What many Indians today think as home grown ideas of decorum and modesty are in fact foreign imports. Clothing occupies a complex and important position in the construction of national identity. It gives form to a society's ideas about the sacred and secular, about exclusion and inclusion, about beauty, age, sexuality and status. The notions regarding fashion developed in India chiefly with the growth of different foreign influences.

If one travels backward, one will witness how regional variations and variant religions decorated the corpus of Fashion in India. In South India even in colonial times some women did not cover the upper part their body. And throughout Indian's history of contact with different cultures like Greek, Roman, Arabic, Chinese fashion and ideas began to change. With regard to dress many religious groups have developed cultural norms. Members of religious groups actively construct their own lives and use dress symbolically to express religious beliefs, adaptation to social change, and the conformity to social norms and religious authority. Dress and adornment in Hindu society does show a person's caste, level of piety, or the specific god to which the individual is devoted. The Qur'an requires women to dress modestly, but does not specifically state that they must wear veils. Dress codes regarding veiling vary among Islamic families and cultures. In the 15th Century we see Muslim and Hindu

women wearing different outfits, and the influence of the Mughal Empire was decisive. Whereas in Hinduism the focus was on the inner self, dress, an expression of the external self, was less important, the Muslims (women primly) covered themselves and wore divided garments, as they focused on the separation of sexes through both physical and visual means. These outfits gave birth to garments like 'Salwar Kameez' – virtually seen as a national dress in India today.

Again, in Bengal in the Victorian era, some women did not wear blouses under their sarees – they went 'bare breasted'. This did not suit the Victorian Society, which had its own ideas of propriety, and blouses increasingly became the norm. It was Jnanadanandini Devi, the wife of Satyendranath Tagore, who popularised the blouses, jackets, chemises and the modern style of the saree today; after she was reportedly refused entry to clubs under the Raj for wearing the saree fabric over her bare breasts. Tagore is believed to have actively encouraged his wife to adapt Western ideas. The term 'blouse' and 'petticoat' – both English – made their places into Indian vocabulary in the Victorian era. Shirts also came to be worn under the sarees as part of high fashion and these rather British innovations are considered traditional garments.

This was the discourse dealing with the 'trend-breakings' of 19th Century. Bengalis became used to with foreign attires from that period. Muslims brought the use of various colourful fabrics. During the Mughal Empire in India, the 'Muslins' from Dhaka received royal patronage and clothes made of the fabric were a sign of royalty and nobility. The earliest known reference to the Muslin fabric is in Chanakya's Arthashastra from the 4th Century B.C. Over the centuries many travellers from the Roman Empire, Greece, Egypt and England have referred to this superior cotton from Bengal in their memoirs. 'Mulmul Khas' (King's Muslin) is the finest variety of fabric, of which an entire dress or saree can pass through a ring. 'Attar' (perfume), Surma (eyeliner), and 'Alta' (a bright red liquid used to adorn palms and feet in simple pattern, mainly by married women during religious festivals and weddings) all came from the Mid-East. A taboo still survives in villages where it is considered sacred to redden a dead man's feet with Alta and of taking the foot prints as remembrance – this was adopted from the Egyptian customs. In India Brahmins shave their heads and kept 'locks of tuft of hair' which were considered the conveyer of their

self-respect and knowledge. But it is striking that the 'Vedas' do not include any information about such customs. The tradition might have come from the Buddhists. In Karate and Judo (mainly in South-East Asia) a method of self-defense with the long locks of hair is still performed.

It is crucial to note that 'Fashion' has no specific geographical plat. It treads from one corner to another of the earth with human habitation and civilization. In last two decades the journey has become so rapid that the subtle changes are easily deceiving our attentions mischievously. Despite the absence of well-conditioned livelihood our previous generations had nurtured a spirit of permanence in their views. But the crowd of 21st century have a very little leisure for stable thoughts - some facts aptly promote this notion. Women of today chiefly favour well-clad men. Trimmed beard, essence of deodorants, smell of Nicotine all are their prime preferences. Studies have proven that the outer charms of Male physique enhance the possibilities and pleasure of co-existence. 'Fashion annihilates the Old and gives way to the New' - the idea is but a cliché at the present situation.

If one goes through the history of fashion consciously, one will perceive, how significant reasons always peep through the transparent surface of what is popularly called 'Trend' and how some revolts have always been trendsetters. In Italy a Fashion Show continued at the blooming stage of 18th Century. In that fashion parade of Milan a famous model was proposed for several times by many contemporary mafias but all of them got blunt refusals from her. 'Enslaved bullets' did not pardon her - stubbornness summoned death. As a protest against the murder, her colleagues, the other models ripped out their clothes and walked all the way for justice. The incident heralded not a new form of protest only, but it passed the baton to the present emerging trend of 'Ripped Clothing'.

Here mention must be made of another incident which afterwards gave birth to the popular trend of 'Friendship-band'. With the advent of 90-s people witnessed the uprising of a brand new form of fashion where a simple wrist band became the conveyer of fraternity. These bands were first seen in United States in 1970-s. A not dissimilar type of trend gave its introduction in the early 20th Century in Bengal as a protest against the 'Partition of Bengal'. It was 'Raksha Bandhan', which is now struggling

for existence. 'Friendship Band' can be defined as the post-modern interpretation of what Bengal brought in near about a century ago. To maintain birth-rate and sweep out 'unprotected-sexual-intercourse' condoms, as remedy, came to American markets. The sex-workers consented but the ordinary customers felt uneasy to keep faith on this unknown product. Their suspicions carried in unavoidable consequences. Women clamoured against this nightmare and wore bands to associate others. It connected the rebels, and later became an 'emblem of protest'.

Are the dress codes governed by the social norms? The question remains thirsty still in the 21st century. Because it actually has no relevant or pacifying answer. In India there is no written codes of conduct or sumptuary laws about what should be worn. So, today's guardians of the hemline – who no doubt believe they are safe guarding women by prescribing what women should wear – are following the footsteps of older political overloads. Indian women are now much freer to do what they want, at least in the cities, yet we see the dress codes being set and women condemned for what they wear. Some people make association between clothing and rape. These people are unable to understand that ideas of decency are constantly changing and rape is not a consequence of what women wear but how certain men think. Isn't it ?

Variant perspectives conclude that the word 'Fashion' has become fragile and inapt today. Not does the word and the apparent concept also need the touch of change, as it(fashion) is inevitable in order maintaining the equilibrium with the rapidly developing footsteps of Time ?

_The image is one of Ramkinkar Baij's famous paintings - 'Binodini'.

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