

Dress and Diversity: Costumes of the Indian Subcontinent

The rich textile practices in the Indian Subcontinent have given rise to diverse forms of clothing that have evolved over thousands of years. These have served a number of functions such as providing comfort and protection to wearers, enabling individuals to identify with their communities and sometimes even allowing them to project a sense of status.

The historicity of India's costume traditions is captured in artworks that span ancient murals, early sculptures, narrative paintings and portraits. Depicting a variety of materials, textures and designs, these reveal to us how clothing has always reflected the range of traditions across the country. Traditional costumes in the region are either worn as unstitched fabrics that are draped and wrapped around the body, or as tailored garments.

Off the Loom

The earliest forms of clothing worn on the Indian Subcontinent have taken advantage of the natural fluidity and drapability of cloth directly as it came off the loom. Worn without alterations or a need for stitching, these textiles lend themselves to a range of uses.

Sari

The sari is one such garment that has been worn by women in South Asia for centuries. Traditionally composed of a single piece of fabric, saris are wrapped and pleated around the waist, and draped around the torso, with an end piece known as a pallu or pallav that cascades down the shoulder. Covering the entire body, this textile can measure all the way up to 9 yards, or 8.2 metres. It is only since the nineteenth century that saris have been worn with inner garments such as blouses and petticoats, a practice that developed under the influence of colonial-era ideas of modesty.

There are more than a hundred ways in which saris can be draped, with every region and community in the country developing their own style. The garment's versatility is reflected in the way a simple unstitched fabric can lend itself to so many elegant silhouettes.

Dhoti

Like the sari, the dhoti is an unstitched cloth that covers the lower body, draped around the legs and tied either in the front or at the back. Made out of a variety of fabrics, it's typically worn by men, and also known as lungi, veshti or mundu.

The dhoti dates back thousands of years and is commonly featured in religious and mythological representations of male figures. In this Gandharan depiction of a Bodhisattva, for instance, we can see how the garment moulds itself to the figure's legs. The distinct folds of the fabric are suggestive of the lightness of the material.

Shawls, Odhanis and Turbans

Unstitched fabrics are also worn as accessories such as shawls and odhanis, which typically complement other forms of clothing. Shawls for instance, are draped over the upper body and worn by men and women, especially in colder climates. They vary in design and can be meticulously embroidered like the delicate pashmina shawls from Kashmir, or the rich phulkari shawls from Punjab.

Fabrics made of lighter materials are used more exclusively by women as veils, headcovers and shoulder mantles in the form of odhanis, dupattas or chunaris. As you can see, the figures in these images are wrapped in odhanis embellished with delicate motifs. The sumptuous appearance of the cloth adds to the richness of their attire.

Unstitched textiles are also used as customary headdresses or turbans popularly known as pagris. Typically formed out of long pieces of fabric, these are styled in a number of ways by men across different regions of the country. Pagris symbolise honour and respect, and are often associated with many spiritual and religious practices.

Made to Measure

Over time, advances in sewing technologies have led to significant developments in garment construction. This has given rise to many styles of clothing that are typically stitched for the wearer's body, and continue to be worn across the subcontinent even today.

Ghagra Choli

Ghagras or lehengas are long flared skirts that are fastened around the waist. They are worn by women, with cropped bodices known as cholis or blouses. As you can see here, the ensemble is completed with an odhani or a dupatta which can be loosely draped around the shoulder or even tucked into the skirt to resemble a sari.

While ghagras are most popular in northern India, we can see variations of the garments across the country

Jama

Tailored garments influenced by Central Asian attire, were highly favoured by Indian nobility in the 16th and 17th centuries.

One of the most iconic examples from this time is a type of robe called the jama, which means "garment" in Persian. Worn by men, the jama features a fitted bodice, and flares out below the waist. It could be fastened on either side of the body with strings, and was usually held in place by an embellished sash known as a cummerband or patka. Emperors often tucked jewelled daggers in these patkas to display their wealth and power. As you can see in these miniature paintings, jamas could be made of brocaded silks as well as sheer muslins.

Over the centuries, the jama was adapted to fit various occasions and activities. Other upper body costumes such as chogas, anrakhas, achkans and even contemporary kurtas and sherwanis bear resemblances to it.

All of these garments were often worn with trousers widely known as pajamas derived from the Persian words “pai," meaning leg, and “jama.”

Peshwaz and Salwar Kameez

Women in northern Indian courts wore a similar upper body garment, known as the peshwaz, made of sheer material, which was often richly decorated. In this 18th century painting, we see a young woman wearing a translucent muslin peshwaz, complemented by a rose-coloured dupatta. The delicate fabric of her dress adds a touch of opulence to the reclining figure.

The peshwaz has also evolved into contemporary ensembles which include garments worn over pajamas such as the salwar kameez and the anarkali. These are popular among women in South Asia even today.

Costume traditions in the Indian Subcontinent are ever evolving, and continue to reflect individual and cultural identities. Not only do they inspire boundless creativity and self expression, but they also remain among the most prominent ways in which people engage with the centuries of textile traditions that exist in the region.

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