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**The Evolution of Indian Attire: Tracing the Origins of the Frock**

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**Abstract**

In apparel choices and in appearance women of India were more indebted and more influenced towards European modernity. The origin of frock in the Indian vicinity dates back to the colonial era. As compare to the Mughal garments the adoption of European styles was more popular because of their comfort and ease in designs. Their garments were more functional and practical due to their unique styles. During the British Raj the release of “Purda” system from the Indian society was the first step towards modesty. The Western education for the females in India brings many changes particularly in sartorial choices. At the mid of the nineteenth century many American as well as British ladies from different Christian missionaries visited India. Female members of the British officials also made frequent visits to India. In this way a direct contact was established between the Indian women and the foreign ladies hence new and distinctive garments were originated from this relationship such as western frock. With the course of time the Western frock underwent various changes to suit the Indian preferences and tastes. This article is intended to highlight the evolution of Indian attire during British Raj and traces the origin of frock.

**Key Words:** Modernity, Colonial era, European style, British Raj, Modesty, American, Christian missionaries and Western frock.

**Introduction**

English sartorial choices were definitely adopted by very small section of Indian population. In almost every province, mostly Indians were living in the villages and they preferred their own traditional dresses which were completely undisturbed by their masters. Initially Indian women refused to adopt any western contribution towards their wardrobes, because below the skirts hem, bare legs and wearing stockings did not accept by them. Simply they did not take for granted their sartorial heritage. Some young girls of enlightened families were started to wear English frocks. The women from Anglo-Indian families were also preferred skirts and English blouses. Overall the traditional Indian dresses like Ghaghara, choli and salwar kameez were considered more comfortable and classy as compare to any foreign garment. The rule of Delhi was completely tossed from one dynastic period to another during 1000 to 1500 A.D. In this disturbed succession of Gaznavids, Ghorids, the Khiljis and Lodhis it became very necessary to protect the women. The Sufi saint of sultanate period, Ameer Khusro told his elder daughter “Hold yourself in the haven

of safety; turn your face to the wall, your back to the door."<sup>1</sup> To protect the women from the outside of their family orbit it was the only way. It was the time when the new fortification within women garments had to be produced. The conquerors or the outsiders wore long coat of full sleeves up to the knee length and tight fitting trousers. The women dresses were just like the Persian princesses. Although this foreign costume was not suitable for the Indian hot climate but it provides full dignity and covers the body. Just because of the lack of social communication between the conquerors and the commoners the conservative Indians were not prepared to adopt their ruler's styles.

### **The origin of Choli**

Although Hindus wanted to cover the upper parts of their women, that was the real need of the time. So a half sleeves dress with tight fitting was evolved which is known as Choli. As compare to Persian costume, it was different in fabric and length. The length of this choli was short and it just covered the breast of the women. There were two side edges and tied at the back side with the strings which remained naked. The picture below shows the distinctive design of choli from the old manuscript of Gujarat. It was the first introduction of Choli in India. In the Costume history of India, it was also the first appearance of sewn garment. With the course of time, the more cloth added to the back to cover the back side.<sup>2</sup> The indigenous culture and aesthetic taste of India was not allowed to wear stitching clothes. The Females were accustomed for the gathered shoulder scarf during the initial centuries.<sup>3</sup> So, during the Sultanate period the need of the protection of head, shoulders and breast was genuinely arise. The orhni was the piece of cloth which literally means the covering. The lower garment was already covered the lower part of body down to the waist. It was the loose garment and it would be flutter by the wind and makes the calves denude. As a result of this they tighten up the wraps of the dress close to legs. The lower garment fabric was quite translucent which was later replaced by the opaque fabric. So the Orhni, thick tight opaque fabric and tight bodice was becoming the sentinel over the modesty.

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<sup>1</sup> Biswas, Arabinda. *Indian costumes*. Publications Division Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Biswas, Arabinda. *Indian costumes*. Publications Division Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*



**Fig: 1** Drawing of Choli design from old manuscript of Gujarat, dated A.D 1127.

In the above figure the female is wearing a choli, it is short in length cloth and it wrapped round to the waist line. Through the above picture it is clear that ghagra was not produced till 1127 and definitely there was no concept of frock till the Mughal period. The modification of lower garment was later created into two vertical ends.<sup>4</sup> So the ghagra or the lehnga became developed. When the stitching of the original length garment was started into the narrow roll than the comfortable movement and easiness disappeared. The inconvenience of garment was overcome by adding of the more cloth in its length.<sup>5</sup> The circumference of waist was overcome with the help of folding and plates which increased the elegance of the garment. This new garment was very innovative for the Rajput's because they were the first Indians who strongly opposed the foreign rule in India. This unique fashion was flourished within the Rajput territories. The regions which were far away from the Sultanate in the South and east remained unaware by the foreign influence. On the other hand, the Indian dresses were undergoing the drastic change within the North. First time in the history of India the difference between the dresses of South and North was quite obvious during the twelfth century.<sup>6</sup> Neither the ghagra style nor the rococo and fashion of tight bodice were reached to the South. The lower garment was just like the trouser because it was tightly wrapped and it became the aesthetic exercise in South. The naked body above the waist as well as the clinging garment around the limbs differentiated South from the North, however the

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<sup>4</sup> Bajwa, Ramanjit Kaur. *Traditional Costumes of India*. Abhishek Publications, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Raghavan, Mohan, and R. K. Maigur. "Indian Costumes through the Ages: Insights into Sartorial Choices Using Mathematical Biology." *Archaeometry* 63, no. 6 (2021): 1421-1437.

<sup>6</sup> Dubois, Abbe JA. *Hindu manners, customs and ceremonies*. Routledge, 2013.

hairstyle in both regions were same. At the end of the eighteenth century, in the Punjab and Rajastani territories particular women costumes were prominent as compare to the Pahari and Rajastani paintings. This style clearly indicated the Rajput influence, Muslim influence and also predicted the new trends in the future. The most pertinent is the long frock like costume with the front opening which tied by the two clasps. The bottom edge of the frock moved up and gives the bodice like feel to upper part of this dress. It also comprised the veil and a shirt was also worn under the dress. This was the first appearance of frock in the costume history of India.



**Fig: 2** Sketch of Long Frock during the start of 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Christian Missionaries**

Christian missions came to India during the time period of sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. They brought their cultural values, architectural designs as well as clothing styles with them. The worth mentioning here is the frock style, which became very popular in the post-colonial era. Being a comfortable and practical costume, frock was easily accepted by the women, mostly in the urban areas of India. Mission schools which were established by the Christian missionaries during the colonial era played a very important role to popularizing the western frock among the children of India. It became the symbol of modernity as well as the westernization. By the American Board of

Commissioners, Rev.R.G Wilder with his family went to India for Foreign missions.<sup>7</sup> This mission was extended with the addition of other missionaries to the surrounding towns and villages such as in the Sangli, Miraj, and Ratnagiri. Ratnagiri was in the Kolhapur. In this station there were very less missionaries as compare to other regions of India until 1892. Mrs.Hannum, Minor and Jefferson were posted in this station. It was the time of “golden age of missionary expansion” that started in the 1880 and lasted at the outbreak of WWI. Sunday schools, church and many other schools for the local children were established by Jefferson in this station. They were also making random visits with the children and women of surrounding areas. The main purpose of their mission was the “women’s work for the women” as well as to educate the local Indians (especially children’s and women) about the Christianity religion and the Western civilization. In this particular way they brought western culture and western values with them. The most important thing is, Jefferson produced an album book contains various photographs which depicted the different angles of people of Kolhapur station in India. The last photograph of this album is worth mentioning here because it contains two Hindu girls (Muktie and Savitni) in the western frocks. These two young Hindu girls were adopted by these two ladies Miss Jefferson and Miss Minor. Both these little girls are wearing western frocks, standing closely together with barefoot but neatly tied hair. Their dresses patterned differently, Savitni’s frock color is plaid and Muktie’s pale. This was not only the religious conversion but also a cultural conversion within the Indian masses during the missionaries.

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<sup>7</sup> Murray, Sharon. "Frocks and Bangles: The Photographic Conversion of Two Indian Girls." *Depicting Canada's Children* (2009): 233-57.



**Fig: 3** Mukti and Savitni, dated 1898.

“Little Hindu Girls adopted by Miss Minor & Miss Jefferson.”

**Courtesy:** Miss Amanda Jefferson’s photograph album, 1892–1898, private collection.



**Fig: 4** British females with children in Shalamar Garden, Lahore dated, 1920.

In the above picture, all the children including female are wearing frocks of same color and sizes with other accessories. The length of these frocks is above the knees and the designs are quite simple. This photograph was taken in the Shalamar Garden, Lahore during the Raj in 1920. It demonstrates the clear picture of British living style and fashion in India.

### **The Peacock Dress**

The peacock dress of Lady Curzon (the wife of Lord Curzon) is the best example of Western dress produced in India and indicated the hype of British fashion. At the start of twentieth century British fashion was at its peak because British took control most of the part of Indian subcontinent. Lady Curzon was considered as fashion icon of the Raj. The dress was made for an event in Delhi Durbar in 1903, for the celebration of new emperor of British India (Edward VII).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Textile Research Centre, "Lady Curzon's Peacock Dress." TRC Leiden, 2017.



**Fig: 5** Mary Curzon wearing the Peacock Dress.

**Courtesy:** Textile Research Centre (2017).

This picture is the oil painting created by William Logsdail in 1909. This whole dress completely embroidered with the figures of peacock feathers on the western style. It also consisted of green beetle shells which shimmer like the emeralds. The peacock dress of Lady Curzon was beautiful. It is an artifact of colonial imperialism with its unrepresented and dark history and also indicated that colonialism lives in the aura of aesthetic sense.<sup>9</sup> She wore this dress with the gesture of oppression as well as appropriation. At that time, she was definitely representing the Indian textile industry. The dress contains the glittering designs with long tail frock of different western cuts. So basically it is a unique combination of eastern and western object because it holds the western style with Eastern embroidery. The weavers of this dress who produced it and the zardozi embroidery remain unnamed. This costume style with its unique patterns still existed in India and Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

The transformation of Indian costumes most particularly within the female attires during the British rule could predict the change of whole of the Indian society. However, women continued to wore traditional garments, the British rule brought Western styles with them and transform the

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<sup>9</sup> Nicola J. Thomas, "Embodying Imperial Spectacle: Dressing Lady Curzon, Vicereine of India 1899-1905." *Cultural Geographies* 14, no. 3 (2007), 369-400: 391-2.



dressing sensibilities throughout India. It is clearly evident that the frock was introduced in India during the British Raj through the Christian Missionaries, with the direct contact of Western females with the females of India. However, the frock style was there during the Mughal period but its style was quite different from the Western patterns. The construction of Mughal frock was altogether different which was commonly known as Angrakha style, and it was also used by the men of their society. In Indian society frock is the adaptation of Ghagra and Skirt. Long frock was first time introduced during the British Raj by the Western ladies as a comfortable and a functional garment with various cuts as well as ornate patterns. Over the period of time, it was evolved and adapted to the tastes of Indian society and became the integral part of the women fashion. It is liked and widely used by the females of India as it has become the part of formal occasions.

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