

9th Standard Social Science

Clothing: A Social History

History Of Clothing Style

The emergence of the modern world is marked by dramatic changes in clothing. Before the age of democratic revolutions and the development of capitalist markets in 18th century Europe, most people dressed according to their regional codes. This was limited by the types of clothes and cost of materials that were available in that region. Clothing styles were strictly regulated by class, gender or status in the social hierarchy.

After 18th century, the colonisation of most of the world was done by Europe. The growth of democratic ideals and industrial society changed the thinking and meaning of clothes for people. The people started using styles and materials from other countries. The Western dress style for men was adopted worldwide.

Sumptuary Laws And Social Hierarchy

In medieval Europe, detailed laws regarding the dress code were sometimes imposed upon members of different sections of societies. From about 1294 to the time of the French Revolution in 1789, the people of France were expected to strictly follow the Sumptuary Laws. The laws tried to control the behaviour

of social inferiors, preventing them from wearing certain clothes, consuming certain foods and beverages and hunting game in certain areas.

In medieval France, the materials to be used for clothing were legally prescribed. Only royalty could wear expensive materials like ermine, fur, silk, velvet and brocade. Other classes were not allowed to clothe themselves with materials that were used by the aristocratic class.

Not all Sumptuary Laws were meant to emphasise social hierarchy; some laws were passed to protect home production against imports.

For example, a law passed in 16th century England compelled all persons over six years of age except those of high position to wear woollen caps made in England. This law lasted for 26 years and was very useful in building up to English woollen industry.

End of Sumptuary Laws

The French Revolution ended the dress distinctions between the rich and the poor, as it completely removed the Sumptuary Laws. Members of Jacobin clubs called themselves as 'sans-culottes (without knee breeches)'. The fashionable 'knee breeches' were used by the aristocracy. Both men and women began wearing clothing that was loose and comfortable.

Blue, white and red became popular colours of France, as they were a sign of the patriotic citizen. Other political symbols too became a part of dress like the red cap of liberty, long trousers and the revolutionary cockade which was

pinned on to a hat. The simplicity of clothing was meant to express the idea of equality.

Clothing And Notion Of Beauty

The end of Sumptuary Laws did not mean that everyone in European societies could now dress in the same way. Some social differences were still there, as the poor could not dress or eat like the rich people. But laws no longer stopped people's right to dress in the way they wished. Different classes developed their own culture of dress according to their earnings.

Clothing Styles in Victorian England

Styles of clothing also emphasised differences between men and women. In Victorian England, dutiful and obedient women were considered ideal ones. They were expected to bear pain and sufferings. On the other hand, a man symbolised strength, depth, seriousness and responsibility. Norms or ideas of clothing reflected these ideals.

From childhood, girls were tightly laced up and dressed in stays. The effort was to restrict the growth to their bodies. When slightly older, girls had to wear tight fitting corsets having a busk. Tightly laced, small-waisted women were admired as attractive, elegant and graceful. Thus, clothing played a key role in creating humble and obedient Victorian women.

The reaction of Women to the Norms of Clothing

The ideals of womanhood were believed by many women.

They got the ideals from society, literature and educational institutions. From childhood, they grew up to believe that having a small waist was a womanly duty. Being a woman, it was essential to suffer pain. They had to wear the corset to be seen as attractive and to be womanly. But not everyone accepted these ideals.

Agitation in England

Over the 19th century, ideas of women changed. By the 1830s, women in England began agitating for democratic rights. As the suffrage movement developed, many women began agitating for democratic rights and campaigning for dress reform.

Women's magazines described that tight dresses and corsets caused deformities and illness among young girls. Such clothing restricted body growth and affected blood circulation.

Their muscles remain underdeveloped and spines got bent. Doctors reported that many women were regularly complaining of acute weakness and fainted frequently. Thus, corset became necessary to hold up their weakened spine.

Agitation in America

In America, a similar movement developed amongst the white settlers on the East coast. Traditional feminine clothes were criticised for various reasons.

Long skirts swept the grounds and collected dirt which caused illness. They were large in volume and difficult to handle.

In the 1870s, Mrs Stanton of the National Woman Suffrage Association and Lucy Stone of the American Woman ' Suffrage Association campaigned for dress reform. Everywhere conservatives opposed change.

Thus, women reformers did not immediately succeed in changing social values. But by the end of the 19th century, changes started with the new times and new values came. People began accepting the ideas of reformers.

New Times

Many changes were made possible in Britain due to the introduction of new materials and technologies. Other changes came" about because of the two World Wars and the new working conditions for women.

Introduction of New Materials

Before the 17 th century, most of the ordinary women in Britain possessed very few clothes made of flax, linen or wool, which were difficult to clean. After 1600, trade with India brought cheap, beautiful, easy to maintain Indian chintzes within the reach of Europeans.

During the Industrial Revolution, cotton clothes, became more accessible to a wider section of people. By the early 20th century, artificial fibers appeared. They were clothes made of cheaper and easier to wash and maintain. Of the

late 1870s, heavy, restrictive underclothes were no longer in use. Clothes got lighter, shorter and simpler.

Effect of the War on Clothing

Major changes happened in women's clothing due to the two world wars. Many European ladies stopped wearing jewellery and luxurious clothes. Social barriers were removed as upper class women mixed with other classes. All classes of women began to dress in similar ways.

During the First World War (1914-1918), clothes of women got shorter due to practical necessity. By 1917, over 7 lakh, women in Britain were employed in ammunition factories. They wore a working uniform. Khaki overalls, caps, short skirts and trousers became the dresses of new professional women. Use of bright colours in clothes was replaced by sober colours. Thus, clothes became plainer and simpler.

Effect of Professionalism and Games

For convenience women took to cutting their hair short. By the 20th century, a plain and simple style came to reflect seriousness and professionalism.

Gymnastics and games entered the school curriculum for women. They had to wear clothes that did not affect movement. They needed clothes that were comfortable and convenient.

Clothing Transformation In Colonial India

During the colonial period, there were significant changes in male and female clothing in India. There was a consequence of the influence of Western dress forms and missionary activity. It was also due to the effort by Indians to fashion clothing styles that included an indigenous tradition and culture. Cloth and clothing became very important symbols of national movement.

In 19th century, Indians reacted to Western style clothing in following three different ways

Many people began incorporating some elements of Western style clothing in their dress. The wealthy Parsis of Western India were among the first to adopt Western style clothing. Baggy trousers and the phenta (hat) were added to long collarless coats, with boots and a walking stick.

Western-style clothing was accepted by dalits, who were converted to Christianity. At that time, it was men rather than women who accepted the new dress styles first.

There were others who were convinced 'that Western culture would lead to a loss of traditional cultural identity. The use of the Western style of clothes was taken as a sign of the world turning upside down.

Some men started wearing Western clothes without giving up their Indian clothes. In the late 19th century, many Bengali bureaucrats began stocking Western-style clothes for working outside the home and used the more comfortable Indian clothes at home.

Caste Conflict and Dress Change

Though there were no formal Sumptuary Laws in India, still it had its own strict social codes of food and dress. The caste system clearly defined what subordinate and dominant caste Hindus should wear, eat, etc., and these codes had the force of law.

An Example of Caste Conflict: Shanars of Kerala

The Shanars were a community of toddy tappers who migrates to Southern Travancore to work under Nair landlords. They were not allowed to use umbrellas, shoes or gold ornaments. Even men and women of Shanar community were not allowed to cover their upper bodies before the upper caste.

In 1820s, Shanar women under the influence of Christian missionaries began to wear tailored blouses like upper castes. But complaints were filed against them for dress change. Specially when shanars also refused to give free service to the upper castes. Hindu reformer like Ayya Vaikunder supported this dress reform.

In 1855, slavery was abolished in Travancore and caste conflict emerged among upper castes and the Shanars.

Finally by a proclamation of government, Shanar women were allowed to wear a jacket to cover their upper bodies, but not like women of upper castes.

British Rule and Dress Codes

In different cultures, specific items of clothing often convey contrary meanings. This leads to misunderstanding and conflict. Styles of clothing in British India changed through such conflicts.

The turban in India was not just for protection from the heat but was a sign of respectability and could not be removed at will. But in the Western tradition, the hat to be removed before social superiors as a sign of respect. This cultural difference sometimes created misunderstanding.

The British were often offended if Indians did not take off their turban when they met colonial officials.

Another such conflict related to the wearing of shoes. Earlier, British officials had to follow Indian etiquette and remove their footwear in the courts of ruling kings or chiefs.

Some British officials also wore Indian clothes. But in 1830, Europeans were forbidden from wearing Indian clothes at official functions, so that the cultural identity of the white masters was not destroyed. At the same time, Indians were expected to wear Indian clothes to office and follow Indian dress codes.

Controversy Over Taking Off Shoes

In 1824-1828, Governor General Amherst ordered that Indians should take off their shoes as a sign of respect when they appeared before him. But this order was not strictly followed. Lord Dalhousie, made it mandatory that Indians

were made to take off their shoes when entering any government institution. Only those who wore European clothes were exempted from this rule.

In 1862, Manockjee Cowasjee Entee, an assessor in the Surat Fouzdaree Adawlut, refused to take off his shoes in the court of sessions judge. He was restricted to enter into the courtroom and he sent a letter of protest to the Governor of Bombay. This incident led many controversies.

Indians urged that taking off shoes in sacred places and at homes was linked with following two reasons There was the problem of dirt. Shoes collected the dirt on the road. This dirt could not be allowed into spaces that were clean, particularly when people in Indian homes sat on the ground.

Leather shoes and the dirt that stuck under it were seen as polluting. But public buildings like the courtrooms were different from home. It took many years for Indians to enter courtroom wearing shoes.

Designing the National Dress

As nationalist feelings swept across India by the late 19th century, Indians began developing cultural symbols that would express the unity of the nation. Artists looked for a National Style of art, poets wrote National Songs, a debate began over the design of National Flag, an experiment started in search of a National Dress. This move was to define the cultural identity of the nation in a symbolic way.

Chapkan: Combination of Hindu-Muslim Dresses

In the 1870s, the Tagore family of Bengal experimented with designs for a National Dress for both men and women in India. Rabindranath Tagore suggested that instead of combining Indian and European dresses, India's National Dress should combine elements of Hindu and Muslim dresses.

So, the chapkan (a long buttoned coat) was considered the most suitable dress for men. There were also attempts to develop a dress style that would draw on the tradition of different regions.

Pan-Indian Style of Sari

In the late 1870s, Jnanadanandini Devi, wife of Satyendranath Tagore adopted the Parsi style of wearing the sari. This was adopted by women of Brahmo Samaj and came to be known as Brahmika sari.

This style gained acceptance among Maharashtrian and Uttar Pradesh Brahmos, as well as non-Brahmos. However, these attempts at devising a pan-Indian style did not fully succeed. Women of Gujarat, Kodagu, Kerala and Assam continue to wear different types of sari.

The Swadeshi Movement

The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal in the first decade of 20th century was centrally linked to the politics of clothing. The British first came to trade in Indian textiles that were in great demand all over the world. The Industrial Revolution in Britain which mechanised spinning and weaving and greatly

increased the demand for raw materials' such as cotton and indigo changed India's status in the world economy.

Political control of India helped the British in two ways. Indian peasants were forced to grow crops like indigo and cheap British manufacture easily replaced coarser Indian products.

Large number of Indian weavers and spinners were left without work. Important textile weaving centres, like Murshidabad, Machilipatnam and Surat declined as demand fell.

Effect of Partition of Bengal on Swadeshi Movement

In 1905, Lord Curzon decided to partition Bengal to control the growing opposition to British rule. The Swadeshi Movement developed in reaction to this measure.

People were urged to boycott British goods of all kinds and started their own industries for the manufacture of goods, such as match boxes and cigarettes. The use of khadi had become the patriotic symbol. Women were urged to throw away their silk saris, glass bangles and wear simple shell bangles.

Rough homespun was glorified by the patriotic poems and songs. The change of dress appealed largely to the upper class, rather than the poor.

Actually, it was impossible to compete with the cheap machine made products of Britain by 'Swadeshi' products. Despite its limitations, the experiment with

Swadeshi gave Mahatma Gandhi important ideas about using cloth as a symbolic weapon against British rule.

Mahatma Gandhi's Experiments with Clothing

Mahatma Gandhi's experiments with clothing summed up the changing attitude to dress in the Indian sub-continent. It is stated in the points below

- When he went to London to study Law as a boy of 19 in 1888, he cut off the tuft on his head and dressed in a Western suit. On his return, he continued to wear Western suits topped with a turban.
- As a lawyer in Johannesburg, South Africa in the 1890s, he still wore Western clothes.
- In Durban, in 1913, Gandhiji first appeared in an Itmgi and kurta with his head shaved as a sign of mourning to protest against the shooting of Indian coal miners.
- On his return to India in 1915, Gandhiji decided to dress like a Kathiawadi peasant.
- In 1921, he adopted the short dhoti, the form which he wore until his death. He adopted this dress of the poorest Indian to identify himself as a common man.
- Khadi is a white and coarse dress material. It was a sign of purity, simplicity and poverty for Gandhiji. Wearing khadi also became a symbol of nationalism and a rejection of Western milPtnade cloth.
- Gandhiji even wore the short dhoti without a shirt when he went to England for the Round Table Conference in 1931.

Responses for Gandhiji's Call for Wearing Khadi

Mahatma Gandhi's dream was to clothe the whole nation in khadi. He felt khadi would be a means of erasing difference between different religions, classes, etc.

Some examples of other responses to Mahatma Gandhi's call are as follows

- Nationalists such as Motilal Nehru, a successful barrister from Allahabad, gave up his expensive Western-style suits and adopted the Indian dhoti and kurta. But these were not made of coarse cloth.
- Those who had been deprived by caste norms rules for centuries were attracted to Western dress styles. Therefore, unlike Mahatma' Gandhi, other nationalists such as Babasaheb Ambedkar never gave up the Western-style suit.
- Many Dalits in the early 1910s began to wear three-piece suits and shoes and socks on all public occasions, as a political statement of self-respect.
- A woman from Maharashtra in 1928 wrote to Mahatma Gandhi in response of his call. She said, 'A year ago, I heard you speaking on the extreme necessity of everyone of us wearing khadi and thereupon decided to adopt it. But we are poor people, my husband says khadi is costly. Belonging as I do to Maharashtra, I wear a sari nine yards long (and) elders will not hear of a reduction (to six yards)'.
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- Other women, like Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Nehru, wore coloured saris with designs, instead of coarse, white homespun.

Conclusion

Changes in styles of clothing are thus linked up with shifts in cultural tastes and notions or ideas of beauty. Style also enhances due to the changes in the economy and changes in society due to social and political conflict.

Societies observe rules, some of them are strict about the ways in which men, women and children should dress.

Societies are transformed as times change and modifications in clothing reflect these changes.

After the 18th century, most of the world was colonised by Europe. The growth of democratic ideals and industrial society changed the thinking and meaning of clothes for people.

From 1294-1789, Sumptuary Laws tried to control the socially inferior classes, from wearing certain clothes and consuming certain foods in France.

French Revolution ended the dress distinctions between the rich and the poor, as it completely removed the Sumptuary laws.

Law no longer barred people's right to dress in the way they wished. Different classes developed their own culture of dress according to their earnings.

Styles of articles of clothing emphasized differences between men and women in Victorian England. Women were groomed to be docile, dutiful, submissive whereas, man symbolised strength, depth, seriousness and responsibility.

By the 1830s women in England began agitating for democratic rights. As the suffrage movement developed, many women started campaigning for dress reform.

During the Industrial Revolution, cotton clothes, which were easy to wash and maintain, become more accessible to a wider section of people. Thus clothes got lighter, shorter and simpler.

Radical changes happened in women's clothing due to the two World Wars. European ladies stopped wearing jewellery and luxurious clothes.

Women started to wear uniform in their work place. Thus clothes became plainer, simpler and convenient.

During the colonial period, there were significant changes in male and female clothing in India.

This change was consequence of the influence of western . dress forms and missionary activities.

In 19th century western style clothing was accepted by dalits, who were converted to Christianity. It was men rather than women who accepted the new dress styles first.

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The Turban in India could not be removed at will as it was a sign of respectability not just for protection from heat. But in western tradition the hat to be removed before social superiors as a sign of respect.

By the late 19th century, as nationalist feelings emerged, India began preparing cultural symbol that would express the unity of the nation. Experiment started over National Songs, National Flag, and National Dress.

Rabindranath Tagore suggested the Chapkan as the most suitable dress for men and Brahmika Sari was adopted for women by Jananadanandini Devi.

The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal was linked to the politics of clothing.

Political control of India helped the British in two ways. Indian peasants were forced to grow crops like Indigo and cheap British manufacture easily replaced coarser Indian products.

In 1905 partition of Bengal started Swadeshi Movement. People started boycott of British goods of all kinds. The use of Khadi had become the patriotic symbol.

Mahatma Gandhi's experiments with clothing summed up the changing attitude to dress in the Indian sub-continent. Wearing Khadi become a symbol of Nationalism.

Not all Indian could wear khadi as it was coarse and costly rather than mill-made cloth.

Gandhi cap became a symbol of defiance and a part of the nationalist uniform.

Changes in style of clothing arise due to economic, social and political changes in the society.