

[Fashionable Youth](#)

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India's teens devise ways express themselves with trendy clothes while keeping parents and grandparents from having a fit

Palak Malik, New Delhi

When I was some 13-years old, around 2001, Music Television ("MTV") came as a huge cultural shock to the Indian society. The music videos and programs on MTV projected the Britney Spears look--low rise pants, midriff tops and skimpy dresses revealing thigh flesh, cleavage and belly buttons. Giving in to peer pressure, I also longed to wear what was then the latest trend, but in a sensible and sophisticated version of Western clothing, rather than Britney Spears fantasies. Still, I had disagreements with my father on the issue of dressing up. He would not let me wear sleeveless shirts or even knee length skirts, for that matter. And this holds true even today, at 18. What pinched me was the fact that not only my friends, but my cousins, too, could wear such clothes.

If you are a regular reader of Hinduism Today, you know my father, Rajiv Malik. He is the magazine's senior India correspondent. In the course of his reporting, he attended all four Kumbha Melas and interviewed a good number of India's religious leaders. Always a snappy dresser, he was a fashion journalist before working for Hinduism Today. I found it, therefore, a bit ironic when he expressed reservations about my attempts to adopt the latest trends. He said, "Fashion is about dressing and not about undressing. It is important to be clear about what message our clothes give, not only in general, but in particular settings, too." But at that time none of his persuasive techniques could convince me. My grandparents who live with us also had their objections. They rarely spoke their disapproval, but it was evident in their eyes. I often felt like a rebel wanting to go beyond all such cultural restrictions. I never wanted to disregard my elders, but at the same time I wanted to exercise my freedom. This was my ongoing internal conflict.

Finally, my father took me to Fabindia, one of Delhi's outstanding stores specializing in Indian clothing. Here I was exposed to a large variety of well-crafted and smartly designed short kurtas and salwar suits. I was amazed to see well-off youth thronging to this outlet with its wide variety of ready-made outfits. At first, I wore Fabindia's kurtas reluctantly, and only for special occasions. But, to my surprise, people started complimenting me for my distinctiveness. Gradually, kurtas with jeans became my all-time favorite. It is one variation on a mix of styles called "fusion " that has for many young people solved the generational differences.

"Fusion wear " in the Indian setting means stylish, contemporary treatment given to traditional attire. It is a look generated with creative usage of materials, cuts and styles that add spunk and modernity to ethnic clothes. At the request of Hinduism Today, I set out to explore this trend as it manifests among my fellow Delhites.

Mrs. Pushpa Madan is the manager of Khadi Gramodyog Showroom at Connaught Place. Like Fabindia, it is a store that features Indian clothing but with an added speciality in khadi, the hand-spun cotton cloth advocated by Mahatma Gandhi and a symbol of India's independence movement.

With regard to the fusion trend, she said, "Fashion-conscious youth pay attention to minute details such as color and design while buying clothes. Ready-made designer kurtas are popular. Some young people prefer buying khadi cloth by the meter and getting it stitched according to their taste (a still-economical option in India). Long skirts that have gained popularity these days are a modified version of lehngas, a long flowing skirt worn by people of our older generations." She added, "Khadi stays in fashion. It is not class specific. Instead, it is worn by all the classes of society. Not only it is an eco-friendly fabric, it also provides a unique feel that cannot be experienced in any other garment, because it is handspun. Khadi is blending itself in an Indo-Western way to face the challenges of today." She added that, along with khadi, linen is becoming more popular. This soft and durable fabric is made of flax fibers. The fabric itself symbolizes style, elegance and comfort.

Following the visit to the Khadi Gramodyog Showroom, I stopped at the Hanuman temple. Just by coincidence I encountered Rajat Sharma, a popular disk jockey who goes by the name of Max Terry. His mother is a Hindu and his father a Canadian. He said, "I am into spirituality because of my mother. It is unusual being a DJ and going to a temple." On fusion wear he observed, "Bead malas are definitely popular, as are shirts with Om prints. I think fusion wear is better than Indian alone or Western

alone because, by wearing it, we are modern and traditional at the same time."

I next spoke to Sacchi Choudhary, a first-year philosophy student at Delhi University's Indra Prastha College. She concurred, "Fusion wear is a positive influence on youth as we are not forgetting our own culture and at the same time we are smartly taking good things from other people's culture. I dress up in a way that is not vulgar, so my parents are supportive of my dressing style. I prefer comfort over anything else, which is why I love cotton clothes."

There was a time when khadi was considered a poor man's garment due to its texture. But times have changed and khadi tradition has been revived, so much so that rural weavers and craftsmen are enjoying a welcome boost in income. One weaver at a hand loom can produce two meters of cloth per day. It's slow, but a million weavers produce 700 million meters of khadi a year in India. Still, that is just one percent of India's total cotton textile production. Khadi means different things to different people. For the politician, it is a patriotic statement; for the elite class, it is a distinct identity; for youth, it is a bold fashion statement, not to mention being eco-friendly and comfortable. Khadi is even being picked up by designers of Europe, such as Versace, specifically for the kurta-and-jeans look.

While a few years ago designer kurtas were only available at specialized outlets such as Fabindia, now a dozen such showrooms have mushroomed in the city. Lower-cost versions are also readily available in local markets such as Karol Bagh and Janpath, bringing the latest styles to everyone.

An important aspect of fusion dressing is accessories. For these too, traditional styles are drawn upon. Silver jewelry in the form of big danglers, kadas (wide bangles), necklaces and anklets are popular. Wooden and jute earrings, available at any local market, are a favorite of young girls. Sacchi says, "For my personal collection of jewelry, I often visit the silver market in Chandini Chowk or Janpath. I love wearing Lucknow's Kolhapuri chappals (handmade leather sandals) because they are really comfortable and look very elegant when paired with toe rings or anklets. The newly launched colored Kolhapuris are becoming popular among the college set."

Devika Srivastav, a third-year journalism student at Delhi College of Arts and

Commerce, finds silver jewelry to be too common and has opted for bangles or large danglers with finished kundan work. Kundan is the Rajastani art of decorating jewelry with inlaid stones and gold.

Another vital accessory is a bead mala of rudraksha seeds, tulsi wood, crystal beads or other materials. Previously associated mainly with sadhus, these are now a must for every fashion-conscious youth. And as DJ Max Terry observed, religious symbols and motifs are common.

Fusion wear is evolving. I'm seeing that flared skirts with traditional prints, designer kurtas and patiala salwar with short shirts are all hot favorites today. This is a surprising change in a conservative direction from miniskirts, spaghetti and halter tops.

In conclusion, I believe Hindu youth today are desperate to discover their own culture and consequently give meaning to their lives. The move toward fusion wear, drawing upon the vast Indian traditions of clothing and jewelry, has much to do with this trend of rediscovery. It is also a process in which they are trying to tap their inner energy. Fusion wear is becoming a well-integrated part of life for Hindu youth. And conservative sections of society--parents and grandparents--are overcoming their initial discontent.

Palak Malik, 18, is a journalism student at the Delhi College of Arts and Commerce of Delhi University. she enjoys reading, has a keen interest in youth psychology and culture and is learning bharat natyam dance. e-mail: palak_malik1@yahoo.com