

[Fabric Begets Fashion](#)

Category : [June 1998](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jun. 02, 1998

INSIGHT

Fabric Begets Fashion

The Indian sari remains the pinnacle of weaving skill and designer dressing

With tucks and pleats, flowing folds and knotted ties, Indians have for tens of centuries fashioned impeccable apparel from unstitched lengths of cloth. Ranging from simple body coverings to masterfully embroidered works of weaving and wearing, the sari is without question the reigning queen of the world's traditional dresses. No attire elicits images of India more strongly than the sari, and no other nation's costume has remained in vogue longer--over 3,500 years. While the sari soars in social circles, the time-worn garbs of other world cultures, such as Japanese Kimonos, have largely faded from public view--usurped by Western suits and scuttled to museum displays or restricted to ceremonial occasions. In striking contrast, the sari is now the rave in big-city clothing cliques found around the globe. It commands the respect and admiration of chic designers who revere the silken swath-of-cloth as a fashion stalwart, an icon of an attire which has transcended time's trendiness.

Author and folk-art historian Jasleen Dhamija describes in her book, *Handwoven Fabrics of India*, how "The most intimate element in a person's external being is the cloth with which

one wraps oneself or one's loved ones. It is also closely associated with inner life and the stages through which a person passes. Though the rituals are similar, their enactment and the fabrics used in them are quite distinctive. Saris were bought during the Deepavali festival, and the whole family participated in the yearly visit of the family weaver to the house, for saris traditionally were never bought off a shelf. Weavers came from the weaving centers of Thanjavur, Kumbhakonam, Kanchipuram and Dharamavaram, bringing samples of new designs, colors and different qualities of silk. Families of weavers worked over generations with large joint families. Every village or center had a distinct style which a connoisseur could distinguish."

The sanctity of the sari begins with its weaving. Sanskrit Vedic texts, including the Yajur Veda, contain detailed descriptions of methods of weaving, yarn spinning and even shepherding. A well-known verse from the Rig Veda Samhita, 10.130.1, correlates weaving with the performance of the havana ritual. It proclaims, "Sacrifice resembles a loom with threads extended this way and that, composed of innumerable rituals. Behold now the fathers weaving the fabric; seated on the outstretched loom. 'Lengthwise! Crosswise! They cry.'" Dhamija stresses that "Textile terminology is closely linked with philosophical thought. It is not by chance that technical terms play a basic role in early philosophy. For example, grantha, sutra, tantra and nibandha originate from textile techniques. The whole of ancient Indian scholarship is reflected in the simple but skilled manipulation of the warp and weft of a loom."

What has saved the sari from extinction is its exceptional

quality of being ever open to the creative inspiration of its wearer. Whereas tailored clothes are strictly one-way-forward, up or down, either casual or formal, the sari stretches far beyond such limitations. A single unstitched weave can become an entire wardrobe, all depending upon the chosen method of draping. No other garb has such a range of possibilities. Remarkably, however, the sophisticated styles and techniques for wrapping saris that have been developed by India's ethnic groups over the centuries have been virtually ignored by scholars. While there are many detailed studies of India's textile and sari making industries, some of which delve into the religious usage of the fabrics, only one recent study has focused primarily upon the diverse ways saris are worn. In 1997, French anthropologist Chantal Boulanger [see page 23] published her landmark work, *Saris: An Illustrated Guide to the Indian Art of Draping*. She describes the subject as a "totally unexplored world whose meaning had never been considered." Her efforts are a significant step towards categorizing and preserving sari draping styles, which are known only by a few elderly ladies in each region. The following overview is drawn from her work.

By Chantal Boulanger, France

The most ancient recorded indian drape, excluding those of the Harappa civilization, is a dhoti [see definitions below]. Buddha's lay followers, such as Ashoka and the men and women represented on the stupa of Bharhut (Madhya Pradesh, 2nd century bce), wore elaborately pleated dhotis. Nowadays, dhotis are still worn by men all over India. They require a piece of cloth which seems longer and larger than what was worn in the past, but their pleating is often simpler, and they are no longer adorned with belts. There are several styles which reflect personal taste and/or occupation, such as the classic,

priest, Andhra, Marwari and the Chettiyar dhotis.

In the past, women wore dhotis just as men did. But from the 14th century onwards, women's clothes started to develop in a very different way from those of men. The number of yards required increased and the shawl that sometimes covered the shoulders was transformed into the upper part of the sari--the mundanai. By the 19th century, the colonial attitudes imported from Victorian Britain considered dhotis to be indecent for women, and women in some castes modified the drape so that it covered their chest.

Dravidian saris, which are the basis of the modern sari, are basically draped in two parts. The veshti (from the Sanskrit verb vesh, meaning "to cover, to wrap around, to roll") covers the lower part of the body. It is supplemented by a separate mundanai or mundu. The draping of the veshti is simple and virtually universal. Most people all over the world use this drape to wrap a bath towel around themselves. Various forms of veshtis were worn in India, and are represented on many sculptures and paintings from numerous places as early as the 2nd century bce. Veshtis are commonly worn by men in the two southernmost states of India, and also by women in Kerala. It is a common drape in many countries of South-East Asia.

It was probably not earlier than the 19th century when women joined both pieces of cloth, thus creating many elaborate new drapes. The draping of Tamil saris did not change much from that of the veshti-mundanai, except that this new fashion had one big inconvenience. When walking, the sari was pulled

upwards by the mundanai, revealing the legs. Women in each region of Tamil Nadu found their own solutions, and adapted their draping in order to remain "decent," thus spawning a great variety of styles.

Most saris fit into "families," which means that they follow certain basic ways of being draped. There are four main families, with sub-families and a few smaller families. The dhoti family includes men's dhotis, women's dhotis, South Indian Brahmin saris; Dravidian saris include veshtis, Tamil saris, Eastern saris and Santal saris. The nivi saris are modern saris, kaccha saris and upper kaccha saris (the Sanskrit word kaccha means "pleats" or "pleats tucked between the legs"). The tribal family consists of high veshti tribal saris and right-shoulder tribal saris. The smaller families are the Gond-related saris; Lodhi saris; drapes with nivi and Dravidian influences and unique saris. Some drapes could fit within two families, such as the Gauda sari which is at the same time tribal and kaccha. On the other hand, several drapes do not fit anywhere.

The drape which is now considered to be the Indian sari, called nivi, has never been represented on any ancient painting or sculpture. Whereas dhotis and veshtis were commonplace in the past, nivi saris seem to have been nonexistent.

The nivi family is by far the most widespread. These saris are now worn all over India, as well as in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan, not to speak of the Indian communities living abroad. In Rajasthan, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, where stitched clothes are traditionally worn, nivis are becoming increasingly popular. In Sri Lanka, it has become the

compulsory sari of government employees, rather than the more typical Ceylonese sari. It has influenced Western stylists and evokes for most European women a vision of flowing beauty and elegance.

Every drape requires a piece of cloth of a specific length and width. For instance, it is impossible to make a Marwari sari with six yards, since nine yards are needed. Each region of India has developed textiles woven in the dimensions fitting the local drapes. But apart from the size of the cloth, almost all saris can be tied with any kind of textile.

When at home or working, women wear cotton or synthetic fabrics. When going to a function or an event, they often dress up with a silk sari. Most of the time, the draping is the same whatever the textile. While there are festive and daily drapes, a festive drape can be worn with a beautiful silk, polyester or cotton sari, and one might wear an old silk sari with a daily drape.

Both textile and drape are independently influenced by fashion. Stylists are mostly concerned with the fabric and the form of the choli, but sometimes they try to introduce new drapes, too. Saris are always best draped with cotton. Once folded and tucked, cotton stays in place, and doesn't require anything to hold. For weighty or slick cloths, such as silk, a pin or a clip might be used to hold the pleats and to keep from having to readjust the drape all the time.

Saris are fun to wear. They can be tried by anyone, and more

styles can be created. They are the expression of women's creativity, and there is for each woman one drape that fits her perfectly. Often it is not the modern sari. Just as in painting or playing a musical instrument, it takes training and practice to wear a sari perfectly.

Recommended Resources: Saris: An Illustrated Guide To The Indian Art of Draping, by Chantal Boulanger, Shakti Press International, Post Office Box 267, New York, NY 10276-0267 USA; The Sari: Styles, Patterns History, Techniques, By Linda Lynton, Harry Abrams Publishers, 100 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011-6903; Ikat Textiles of India, By Chelna Desai, Chronicle Books, 275 Fifth Avenue, San Francisco, California 94118-2307 USA; Clothing Matters: Dress And Identity In India, By Emma Tarlo, University Of Chicago Press, 5801 South Ellis Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60637 USA.

Definitions

Choli: a usually tight-fitting blouse

Dhoti: usually white, a five-yard long, four-foot high weave, normally made of light cotton, having little or no borders and pallavs. These are worn by men all over India, except in Tamil Nadu and Kerala where only Brahmins drape them.

Lower border: the edge touching the feet when the sari is first tied.

Mundanai: the part of the sari, starting from the pallav but significantly longer, which is thrown over the upper body. Mundanai is a Tamil word designating a separate piece of cloth used as an upper-body drape. By extension, Tamil women often use this word for the part of the sari which is draped over

the upper body, including the pallav.

Mundi: a Tamil word meaning pallav, or border; another pallav at the other end of the sari, less elaborate, where the colors of the body and the borders usually mix. Draping often begins with this pallav.

Mundu: a smaller piece of cloth often used to cover the head or thrown over the shoulder. This South Indian word usually translates as towel.

Pallav: the most decorated end-part which is thrown over the shoulder.

Upper border: the highest border when the sari is first tied, generally used for the knot in closings.

A sari's two dimensions are length, which may vary from 2 to 9 yards, and height, varying from 2 to 4 feet.

***Note:** please see Magazine hard copy for draping the Gond-family Sari with illustrations.