

Changing face of indian fashion



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“ Language disguises the thought, so that from the external form of the clothes one cannot infer the form of the thought they clothe, because the external form of the clothes is constructed with quite another object than to let the form of the body be recognized” (Calefato 2004. p 13).

The western culture is cultivating a grand love affair with the distinctive fashion style in India. Along with Indian music and spirituality, Indian clothing is seeing a huge impact on main stream identities of western style and culture. The main intention of this essay is to demonstrate how this emerging trend relates to the changing face of Indian fashion.

Fashion is the style and custom prevalent at a given time. To some it's an art form, to others it's like a part of their culture and religion but to most it is a method of utilizing cloth to show or hide something about themselves.

Fashion can be used to serve as an extension of one's own personality or to disguise one's own true self. One of the major points here is, how does art, culture and industry, the three aspects of life, relate to fashion? The English dictionary states that, art is a human skill opposed to nature. There are various for and against argument on whether fashion is an art form. One view that favors the argument is, art is a visual medium whose creators respond to the same stimuli as painters and sculptors and like art, it involves immense creativity as well as mastery of technique and materials. The view against it is, artists supposedly are not concerned with selling, they are consumed with creating works of art, not producing a collection for regularly scheduled showings (Rhodes, 2003). Culture on the other hand is basically an ' intellectual development' at a certain time and a certain place and

refers to certain human behavior and activities that conclude to significance and importance whereas; industry is a segment of economy, concerned with the production of goods and service. It is an essential component of most societies and fashion is a huge contributor to it. The major fashion cities have continuous competition between each other and due to their different strategies become known as the ' cultural industries'. The history of costume, Barthes (1983) says, has a general epistemological value. By ' history of costume', he means a socio-semiotic reading of the phenomenon of clothing as an articulate language through which it is possible to analyse a culture, as system and process, institution and individual act, expressive reserve and significant order. The nature of fashion, however, constantly changes and focuses on newness, or the illusion of something new which means that signs and symbols are transient. According to Woodruffe-Burton " fashion is a visual commentary on the excess of a postmodern culture, the perfect foil for a world of fragmented and commensurate identities and personage, offering a dynamic procession of free floating signs and symbolic exchanges" (Woodruffe-Burton 1998, page 302).

Choices made in relation to new clothes are usually controlled by the current fashion ' look' as defined within the fashion system and realized by the availability of fresh goods (Alexandra, 2004). According to Barthes (1983), the concept of new lifestyle and fashion styles is " signified" while the fashion commodities become " signifiers". He also points out that the present form of fashion commodities decrease in value and are subsequently relinquished when the new signifier readily provides a replacement for the previous signifier. In addition, Baudrillard (1981) referred to fashion as a "

compulsion to innovate signs...apparently arbitrary and perpetual production of meaning – a kind of meaning drive”. The meanings drive individuals, to seek out those new commodities that could signify them. According to Vinken, “ The discourse on fashion is constructed by the articulations of three major conceptual articulations: the division of being and mere appearance; the division of the sexes; and – inseparably linked to the latter – the division of the classes”. In modern times, there has been a marked tendency for the first of these conceptualities – whether it appears in its philosophical form or in its ethical application – to be incorporated into the sociological variations of the divisions of gender and class. This phenomenon of compression has been compounded by the fact that the paradigm of the division of the sexes has allowed itself to be grafted onto the discourse on class, dominant until the eighteenth century, with the same ease that, in traditional thought, the moral condemnation of vanity let itself be combined with the philosophical suspicion of mere appearance”(Vinken, p4) India during its earlier days to be clothed in fashion was seen as a mark of privilege enjoyed exclusively by upper class. The lower end of the society didn't have the access to it due to the dominance of traditional clothing which followed intensively during that time. But now it has changed for the better and is being enjoyed by almost everyone at every social level because of the democratization of fashion which has helped in mass production during the Industrial Revolution. The appearance of avant-garde designers from Japan in the early 1980s was believed to be the beginning of the postmodern phenomenon in the field of fashion. It allows openness to a great variety of styles and genres and the acceptance of Asian designers which was considered as the breakdown of the racial boundaries among designers

who were largely white. Post modernity allows ethnic minorities, from women, lesbians and gay men to state find or retrieve an identity (Wilson 1994). The definition of what is fashionable was gradually decreasing in its nature with the beginning of postmodernism which eliminated differences and with the end of the autonomous sphere of fine art. What was usually worn as underwear now could be worn as outerwear. What used to be a hole for the neck could be worn as an armhole. Contents of fashions have become diverse and have redefined themselves implying the breakdown of the clothing system, itself that is, of sartorial conventions. The emergence of the new modern India seems to be the buss word for the new younger generation exposed to the vision of the new millennium as India opened up its doors to the west, there came a need to create a new identity. Thus was the idea of taking Indian traditional fabrics and styles and combining them with western cuts and lines, to appeal to larger segments and masses. Due to these developments, fashion gained in acceptance out of selected cities into the most conservative households. The new emerging trend catered way to the concept of Indian fashion boutiques, due to which women started moving out of the house and those typical tailor master were out of fashion. When more and more women started doing job, the online boutiques proved to be of great help as they can find everything under one roof, from fabric, designing, stitching and accessories (Chawla, 2006). Earlier to have a desired design, effort was needed to be put on to run from shop to shop to buy the fabric. Once the fabric is bought, the matching colour of laces and buttons need to bought and all these need to be given to the tailor for completing the stitching of the garment. Now, all these headaches are been taken care by the boutiques which keep a complete range of stitched and

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unstitched garments from casuals to party wear. The mall culture and family stores has dominated and is steadily growing in India. These are the places which are starting to become a favorite fashion hub for upper and middle class people. These stores sell fashion garments of all age groups and sexes and are considered as shopping destination.

Most Indians express a great deal through their clothing. Their quench for the ultimate perfection plays a great deal in their choice of beautifully colored dramatic and sensuous garments. Highly lively colors woven in to signify the ornate designs can be found resonating through the whole of India. Lot of western influences has created modern designs which has been included into the basic structure of Indian outfit and that are the dresses that we find these days. So that makes us wonder, what was Indian fashion actually like when there were no designers displaying their haute couture to pamper a luxurious line of clientele? Well the answer to it is, India had its own kind of customs and traditions followed from generation to generations, the presence of it are even felt today. A surprising fact about ancient Indian fashion was that the clothes were not stitched together at all because most of the clothing was ready-to-wear, as soon as they left the loom. The ancient Indian fashion did not really have garments that were sewed together. The examples of these are the dhoti, the sari, the turban and the scarf. The practice of wearing dhoti by men and women were seen as a familiar site since India always go through hot and humid climatic conditions and these were made with cotton which suits the condition. The traditional Indian Dhoti, the Scarf or Uttariya and the popular Turban are still seen visible in India as people continue to wear them and hence remains as an integral part

of Indian culture. Indian dressing styles are marked by many variations, both religious and regional with a wide choice of textures and styles (Tirthankar, 1999). One of the most commonly worn traditional dresses, the sari, is essentially a rectangular cloth measuring about 6 yards long. It passes through the legs around the body and tucked in at the back. It's worn in varied styles and is made from materials like pure silk or other fabric woven in different textures with different patterns. It is worn by women as the lower garment combined with a Stanapatta (a thin band that wraps horizontally around torso) which forms the basic wear. This consists of garments that do not have to be stitched, the stanapatta being simply fastened in a knot at the back (Osella, 2000).

Although the saris and the dhotis have never gone out of fashion, with the Persian influences in Indian fashion, women started wearing long tunics that went down to the knees with trousers that were known as churidars. It also includes the very popular, versatile, comfortable and stylish salwar-kameez. The salwar is a loose pajama like trouser whose legs are wide at the top and narrow at the ankle whereas kameez is a long tunic that goes down till the knees, the sides of which are left open below the waist-line, giving the wearer great freedom of movement. The basic design of this has been modified in various ways since ancient days (Jessica Pudussery, 2009). Apart from clothes, Gold plays a major role in Indian fashion and the use of it has been a tradition, long enjoyed by Indian women since early ages. Ornaments made of gold, combined with precious and semi-precious gems and beads, are the most popular ones. As the story goes on, it is said that traditionally Indian ornaments had an economic value for women. The ornaments given

to her at her wedding constituted a daughter's inheritance from her father (which was earlier referred to as "Dowry"). Though this no longer holds true, a bride's ornaments is considered as a financial security for her throughout life.

In India the appearance of dressing styles is more towards a cosmopolitan way rather than region specific; the cause of this change can be reflected back to the early days of Indian Independence. Later on globalization brought about huge changes and this can be considered as one of the major factors witnessed in Indian fashion industry, were significance noticeable changes in styles have happened in connection with Indian dressing. India's rapidly expanding economy has provided the basis for a fundamental change, the emergence of what is called a "new vanguard" increasingly dictating India's political and economic direction (India child, 2000). There can be seen an increasingly popularity towards western mode of dressing styles among the urban youth of both sexes. Some young women are trying to incorporate the latest fashion trends within their wardrobe while still following some of the traditional Indian dressing customs. The women youth market is significant not only because of its sheer size and the spending power but since they are the trend setters for rest of the population. Young women generally pay more emphasis on their appearance than older people and thus clothing occupies a more central position. They are more likely to be fashion conscious and hence are frequent buyers and they usually prefer wearing casuals (Gowswamy Roy, 2007). Although traditional dress is still worn in India, according to V. P. Sharma, an Indian worker working as a weaver in the traditional handloom sari industry in Bihar since 1988, blames the trend in

women's changing tastes for handloom saris, a simple cotton sari that many Indian women wear daily. The plain designs and less appealing colors, plays no significant role for a new modern woman like Rashmi Raniwal who is a 22 year old sales assistant. " Sari?" she says giggling, " I never wear it casually, only for formal occasions". She further adds that " women in India welcomes change as it is seen as a mark of progress". There is a common view that people would consider, a woman clothed in western formal wear is more empowered than her traditional counter parts. (Time Magazine 2009).

In globalized modern India men's fashion hasn't changed significantly from season to season whereas business clothing has undergone few changes but it's more of being professional than being fashionable. Personal hygiene is part of the success equation, freshly scrubbed wins out over heavily fragranced. The finishing touch for Indian business professionals is his choice of accessories like briefcase, portfolio and pen but when it comes to sealing the deal, a top of the line suit, a silk tie and a good pair of leather shoes would make things perfect and professional. It's all about presenting themselves in a way that makes the business clients feel comfortable and confident on them. Dressing for success is still the rule that is being followed. It was during the late 1970's and 80's the importance of women in work place began to have a prominent role than ever before. They gradually moved into positions that had been traditionally held by men. Many of them even thought that they need to imitate male's business clothing to look appropriate for the position; the outcome was, women seen dressed in skirted suits and jackets with tailored blouses. While the business women now wear trousers to work, she does it with the intention to look

professional. (Doris, 2005). Like the men the same overall rules apply to women's work atmosphere as well, business clothing is not a reflection of the latest fashion trend but it is to notice herself as a professional. They think that they should be noticed for who they are and their professional skills rather than the fashionable clothes they wear. The business wear should be appropriate for the industry and the position they hold within the industry.

In the 1960s and '70s, this whole bit of buildup of wealth in India was still suffering from a Gandhian hangover. Even though there were a whole lot of families who were wealthy all over India from North to South, all their lifestyles were very low key. They were not exhibitionist or were not into the whole consumer culture. The trend has now changed completely and we can see a complete lifestyle transformation on spending habits from cell phone, holiday destination to latest fashion, which earlier would have triggered a sense of guilt that in a nation like India a kind of vulgar exhibition of wealth is contradictory to its own values. Consumerism has now become an Indian value and the new Indian middle class is making its voice heard everywhere. The middle class is hard to define precisely, is bracketed on either side by the upper and lower echelons. It is not a single stratum of society but straddles town and countryside. It encompasses prosperous farmers, white-collar workers, business people, military personnel and myriad others, all actively working towards a prosperous life (Fernandes, 2006). Members of the upper class which is around 1 percent of the population, are owners of large properties, members of exclusive clubs and vacationers in foreign lands, and include industrialists, former maharajas, movie stars and top executives. Below the middle class is perhaps a third of the population who

are ordinary farmers, trades people, artisans and professional workers (Britannica 2009).

In today's fashion conscious society, with numeral number of designers, it would be a difficult to note down some of the top fashion designers all over the world. The superiority of designer clothing gives one the satisfaction of owning a designer piece that is unique in every way. The emergence of western concepts of displaying fashion shows has now become a common event in India. The so called catwalk models started displaying collections of designers on ramp. It was in 1932, the first fashion catwalk was organized in India by Catherine Courney. Now it can be seen as a common every day event with many conceptual and theme based shows. Indians have started exploring new avenues with their modern hybrid fashion trends which is a blend of the old traditional and the new modern and is gearing up to International exposure. This fact can be proved by the existence of eighty plus fashion schools in India where young vibrant designers are trained to face the international arena. Recently, some of the world's famous fashion designers like Armani, Fendi and Myiake all have been fascinated and drawn by the elements of the exotic Indian culture and traditions (Mark 2008). India, which perfectly mixes the spirit of adventure, the sense of mystery and majesty with the principles of elegance, sophistication and modernity, has long been a wonderful source of inspiration for many internationally acclaimed fashion designers. In Paris, Dries Van Naton, (The Telegraph, 2009) one of the new fashion leaders and the member of the so-called "Belgain Four" presented a collection of layered chiffon raps dresses saris and kurtha looks – alike. The color palettes of these modern western designers

are drawing from the colors of vibrant Indian Rajasthan Desert at sundown using rich gold's red and green. Fashion designers are credited for their mastery in embedding their creations with works of art that embellish the beauty of a woman. It's a fact that all of us are different from each other and seldom have the perfect figure and elegant personality that should be flaunted. It's also a truth that nobody is perfect, we all vary in height, color and characteristics. It's the magical hands of the fashion designers that transform one through intelligent smart dressing. They shape up the body in the most modest manner and make people look stunning and sensuous. There is something unique about every designer, one might focus on ethnic styling while the other on hottest western collections. The Indian movie industry has contributed and provided inspiration for the gloriously rich Technicolor summer fashion. Asia had a huge influence on the spring/summer 2002 designer catwalks and this resulted in the high street awash with bright turquoise, fuchsia, brocade and emerald tops, skirts and trousers (Colin 2004).

With the changing time's the Indian fashion designers have brought about a storm in this glamour world with their commendably fabulous variety both internationally and locally. A huge chunk of latest fashion is made out of expensive designer clothing. These range from expensive saris to other traditional outfits which are stitched with semi-precious stones. These are exclusively made to cater the taste and preference of particular individuals to be worn during special occasions. Some even focus on modern expensive western fashion brands to make their presence felt. All these trends can be seen in India's growing class of the super-rich which constitutes the

maharajas and other like leading movie stars and industrialists. According to CapGemini Merrill Lynch Asia Pacific Wealth Report 2008, the number of Indians with more than \$1 million in assets has grown since last year by 22%, to 167, 000, more than in any other Asian country. Finally, Indian fashion beauties on the world stage cannot be ignored or left out of fashion since it's the women beauties of India who brought about major changes in outlook of fashion, though they were left behind in the early days. Lara Dutta (Miss Universe 2000) and Priyanka Chopra (Miss World 2000) are the few to name as the world renowned Indian beauty's who contributed to these changes. Indian fashion got International exposure and acclamation through the medium of such beauty contests. Unlike uniforms, the way we dress of our own accord involves a number of subconscious decisions. There is a concept in fashion that nothing is new, in a sense everything has been done before. This is coming closer to obvious reality, although the direction is not yet decided, it is almost certain that women will use fashion as an extension of their freedom and being no longer limited by the boundaries of class. Now people like to dress in style which is accepted globally and has become an aspect of one's identity and personality.