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Shifting Sands: Costume in Rajasthan

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India has a diverse culture, which has remained rooted in its history and heritage. Underneath this diversity runs the continuity of Indian thought and system of values, which have been reflected in its social structure from the earliest times till today. This is especially true of most of the country's border states, but nowhere do these influences come together more splendidly than in Rajasthan, "the abode of princes."

For centuries, Rajasthan, on India's North- Western borders has warded off marauders, and watched the caravans that plied the ancient trade routes across its vast sandy deserts. The region has also absorbed some of the traditions, culture, costume and style of these visitors. The travelers in turn, sustained and enriched the area, endowing it with a colorful and romantic heritage.

Rajasthan is an ancient land; the cradle of what may perhaps be one of the earliest human civilizations. The discovery of sites such as, Kalibangan are evidence of an organized social order dating as far back as the fourth millennium. Excavations here have yielded ceramics, paintings, and a host of textiles, firmly establishing the presence of a sophisticated and skilled people who had an appreciation and understanding of both the fabrication and use of handicrafts.

Every community and tribe in Rajasthan has its own distinctive costume. The models, which have been fashioned over time, have an integral logic, influenced by geography, climate and socio-cultural factors.

Today however, as change sweeps over the face of the Subcontinent, no section of Indian society has remained unaffected, and the traditional costume is in a state of transition.

Women's Dress

The women of Rajasthan, much like the region itself, are swathed in color and tradition. This is reflected in their vibrant dress and ornamentation. For centuries, the dress most widely worn by the women in Rajasthan has been a combination of an upper garment (the *puthi*, or *kanchli* and *kurti*), a lower garment (the *ghaghra* or skirt), and the *odhna* (veil) draped to flow across the upper and lower parts of the body. There are numerous variations and additions to the ensemble across and within communities, depending on the social position of the wearer. However, these three items of dress are the basic traditional garments worn by women in Rajasthan even today.

The *puthi* is a double-breasted upper garment and is akin to the *angarkha* and its shorter version, the *angarkhi*. The antiquity and Indian origin of these garments can be gauged from the fact that the term *angarkha* is derived from Sanskrit roots: *anga* – body and *raksha* – protection.



Figure 1. Village women at the Ger festival, Kanana. Their cotton garments include the kanchli and red odhna, appliquéd with gota. A katari bhat block printed kalidar ghaghra edged with yellow and red magari is worn as the lower garment. The chuda and nose ring proclaim their marital status and are worn along with other ornaments.

Sculpture, paintings and early Sanskrit literature abound with references to a length of cloth, of different descriptions and widths that was simply or artfully tied around the chest since the earliest times. In Hindu tradition, a stitched garment was considered impure and even today especially, in rural areas, the practice of draping unstitched cloth is used as covering for the upper body at marriage ceremonies and religious occasions.

The *kanchli* is an upper garment, worn by married women in most communities in Rajasthan. The fascinating *choli* or *kanchli* sits snugly on the curve of the breasts, and is the finest example of the technical understanding of molding a flat two dimensional form, the fabric, on a three dimensional body. The *kurti* is an upper garment that is worn in conjunction with a *kanchli*. However, it is not seen in early paintings or sculptures and seems to be a recent trend, perhaps only about 200 years old. The *kurti* is usually a sleeveless garment with a deep, horseshoe neckline.

The skirt in India is known by many different names, depending on the regional style, the most popular by far being the *ghaghra*. The *ghaghra* is really a long skirt, which has the construction of a simple gathered skirt or a flared gored skirt.

It covers the legs fully or partially, depending on the norms of propriety among different ethnic groups, although a long *ghaghra* usually relates to a more puritanical modesty.

The *odhna* or *odhni* is a veil and represents the continuation of an unbroken tradition of wearing unstitched lengths of fabric that was adopted as the most preferred style of clothing by the ancient people of India.

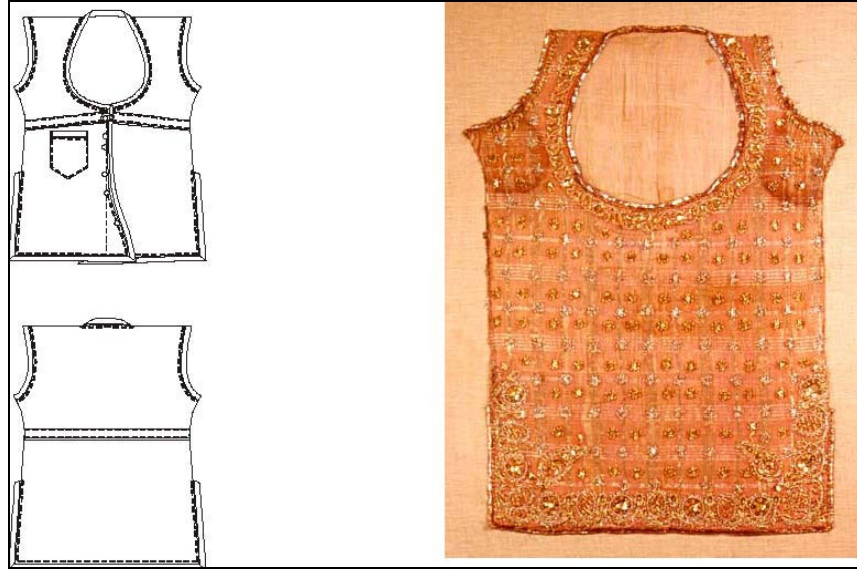


Figure 2. Rajput woman's kurti, Bikaner (c. 1930). Zardozi embroidery on gossamer-fine silk.

Men's Costume

Rajasthan is a frontier state, whose people have been exposed to sustained interaction with outsiders who entered India in successive migratory waves. Consequently the men's clothing is an assimilation of numerous historical and foreign influences and is now a combination of stitched as well as unstitched garments. While most items are of indigenous origin, elements of a definite foreign influence are also apparent. The Rajasthani man's dress, if somewhat more restrained than the women's clothes, is still very colorful and diverse in form and texture.

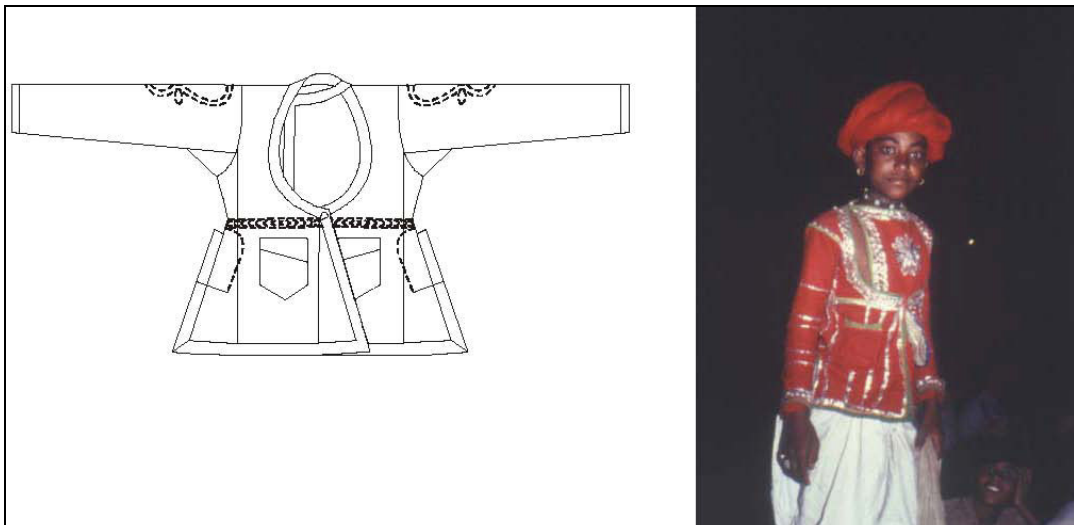


Figure 3. Puthia, Jodhpur, Rabari boy in a ceremonial red garment appliquéd with silver gota.

The upper garment can include a *bandi* and a *kurta* or tunic that is commonly worn across the different communities. Formal occasions see men dressed in the *angarkha* and sometimes a garment called the *achkan* or *shervani*. Two other upper garments the *jama* and the *choga* were an important part of the male ensemble in the Mughal era.



Figure 4. Unstitched lower garment- dhoti.

Although superbly tailored, the jama and choga are now seen mostly in museums. Traditionally the lower garment for men can be the unstitched *dhoti*, the truly native Indian costume, or a stitched garment such as the *pyjama*, which is a type of trouser. The turban and a draped piece of fabric around the shoulders complete the ensemble. Shawls and blankets, usually made of camel and sheep wool, are seasonal additions, useful for warding off the biting cold of Rajasthan's desert winters. The attire of the gentleman was incomplete without a long stole, which depending on the section of society could be either an *angocha* or a *dupatta*.

Over the last few centuries however, transformations in social, political and economic structures have added impetus to a change in the dress codes.

Mughal Rule

The Mughals ruled over India between the 16th and the early 19th century. Babar, the founder of the empire, and his son Humayun, continued to wear clothing, which was mainly of Mongol and central Asian origin. Among his successors was Akbar who brought about a fusion of Mughal, Persian and Indian cultures. Many of the kingdoms of Rajasthan survived almost intact because the rulers made historic alliances with the Mughal emperors. Raja Bharwal of Amer in 1562 married his daughter Jodha Bai, to Akbar. Jahangir, the next Mughal emperor was the son of Akbar and Jodha Bai. Akbar thus succeeded in integrating the Hindu and Muslim identity, and bringing about a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim styles. Garments like the *jama*, *choga*, and stitched lower garments gained popularity.

New silhouettes started to emerge as a result of this fusion. According to Watson, "this partial assimilation of the costumes of the two great races of India has been brought about in various ways. For instance, under the old Mohammedans' rule, Hindu men of rank, in the employment of the Government, were obliged on state occasions, to present themselves dressed in the same fashion as their conquerors. The element of compulsion in this was at first distasteful. The innovation was accordingly resisted, and on their return to their homes they discarded the costume they had been forced to assume, reverting to that to which they were accustomed, and which they regarded as belonging to their race."



Figure 5. The Birth of a Prince, from a page of the Jahagirnama. Jodha Bai, Akbar's wife is shown with the newborn son, Prince Salim, who became Emperor Jahangir. The harem women are wearing stitched clothing of Central Asian style. The Hindu women can be recognized by their indigenous dress of ghaghras, kanchlis and odhnis.

This assimilation was more commonly seen in Muslim courts, Hindu courts with less contact with Muslims continued with their indigenous textiles. An 18th century painting of the Hindu court of Bundi in Rajasthan, shows a strong regional identity, with no trace of Central Asian influence. The king, dressed in a white muslin *angarkha*, is on a terrace and with his wife, looks on, as other ladies of the court frolic in the gardens. The ladies are all dressed in traditional *ghaghra*, *choli* and *odhni*. Indeed, in the majority of the Hindu courts of Rajasthan, women preferred their own traditional patterns and draped, unstitched clothing.

British Rule

As Mughal glory began to fade, British and European influences made their entry. A weak and divided land soon yielded to British might and they came to rule India as its new masters. The British East India Company was set up in 1601 primarily for trade and a process of Anglicization was set in motion, which was effected over the next four centuries. The vast majority of Rajputana's princely rulers remained loyal to Britain through the great uprisings over the partition of Bengal, and during the First World War.

British imperial presence in India had introduced not only new forms of government, language, education and social etiquette, but also a new set of criteria of civilization with a new set of clothes to go with it. Tarlo states —Clothes were among the many manifestations of British culture, which were carefully assessed and partly assimilated by a small but influential Indian elite.”

Although the British brought some westernization of dress, particularly to the princely courts and the workspace of the middle classes, most Indians resisted any change in their regular attire, which was, and is, closely related to identity and culture.



Figure 6.

Ganga Singh (King of Bikaner) with Price Sadul Singh and his daughter princess Chand Kanwar.

I quote Tarlo again, “Since clothing had always been an important sign of affiliation to different social and religious groups in India, few people were prepared to abandon their raiment’s of identity overnight. Indeed, a vast proportion of the rural population and almost all the female population continued to dress in predominantly Indian styles throughout the period of British rule.”

People’s attitudes to European styles varied to some extent according to the closeness of their contact with Europeans. In many rural areas the inhabitants had little contact with either Europeans or their dress. Where such contact was minimal, European clothes were seldom adopted, although European manufactured cloth was often worn in Indian styles.

Furthermore, western clothes did not fit into the existing classifications of appropriate caste, regional or religious styles. A number of Hindus felt that dressing in European clothes, like eating foreign food or traveling abroad, was a violation of caste.

This was particularly clear with rituals surrounding headgear and footwear. Whereas Indians normally removed their shoes on entering a building, the British kept theirs on. They thought naked feet disgusting while Indians thoughts shoes inside the house polluting. Similarly, the Indian idea that the head should be covered as a sign of respect conflicted with the British notion that a man should uncover his head for the same reason. The adoption of European dress was not therefore merely a sartorial concern, but involved changes in lifestyle and values.

The decision to adopt European dress was therefore a risky one, implying a change of identity and lifestyle. Yet the emergence of Western clothes in India could not be ignored by educated Indians any more than that of the British themselves, since British dress represented all the values of which the British boasted: superiority, progress, decency, refinement, masculinity and civilization œ these values came to be shared by some men of the Indian elite, particularly those educated in the Western manner. If they wanted to be modern and participate in ‘civilized society’, wearing the correct clothes was surely one means of doing so.

Independence Movement

Gandhi led the Swadeshi campaign; a boycott of British goods, in 1905 and his adoption of the loincloth became a symbol of the times. The independence movement came to be identified with a reversion to traditional clothing and to indigenous Indian textiles, thus making *khaadi* the symbol of the struggle for freedom from British imperialism and economic exploitation. Independence bestowed on India a new national identity and political structure.



Figure 7. Gandhi wearing a plain khadi dhoti working on a charkha.

The people of the Rajput states also started to agitate, not only for freedom from British rule, but also against the feudal order of their princes.

In 1947 India became an independent nation; it gained Independence from British rule and also emerged from the laws dictated by royalty, which had prevailed for centuries. The modern state of Rajasthan came into being in the aftermath of Indian independence. It was created by the merging of over twenty-two princely states in a region still referred to by some as Rajputana, land of the Rajput or “sons of kings.”

Sumptuary laws that had been laid down regarding clothing habits started to break down. Different ethnic groups had strict norms for clothing, which defined their identity. However, changes now started to appear in society. Democracy gave people a freedom to choose their dress. However these norms had deep roots and the passage of change has been slow for most people.

Change and Current Status

The traditional costume of Rajasthani women is in a state of transition. The women are opting for new fabrics, designs and accessories. This transition becomes more apparent among the affluent, the educated and those, who through their work or otherwise have had exposure to a range of other influences.

Similarly men’s costume has also seen a significant change. The Rajasthani man is often seen clad in the urban garb of trousers and a shirt, or sometimes in an interesting combination of both urban and traditional garments, teamed together, providing comfort and utility, while simultaneously preserving a cultural identity.

Synthetic fabrics, which are easily available, durable and need little maintenance, have

been slowly replacing cotton as the favored choice of the consumer. Also mechanization in the manufacture of textiles, jewelry, dyes and sewing techniques have accelerated this metamorphosis.

Education has played a key role in persuading people to discard aspects of dress that have lost their relevance and also to accept the newer, more pragmatic aspects of urban attire. The spread of education has also transformed traditional occupations, making work-specific costume redundant. This change is also dependent on the size of the region or village and its proximity to urban or industrial centers.

Popular culture is another important influence, which produces significant alterations in dress. A major source of inspiration is television and cinema.

For Indians in remote villages, these are often their only exposure to glamour, fashion and trends. Similarly magazines and newspapers are instrumental in changing mindsets and the way that people dress. There is also a rising aspiration to upward social mobility. (Western garb is often associated with becoming a *sahib*). Migration and urbanization are other forces at play, which contribute to modifications in traditional costume.

Reverting to the Roots

Clothing has always been an important index of cultural affiliations. Traditional costume as we have seen has been subjected to a large number of forces over the centuries. However, it continues to be in use, especially for ceremonial occasions, probably because of fear of reprisal from unknown forces. Thus birth, death and marriages are occasions where greater conformity is observed in dress. Today, when a woman gives birth to a boy, her mother will give the gift of a *pila* and it would be donned on a special ceremony or *suraj puja*.

Again, on a father's death, the oldest male member of the family dons a white turban.

In addition, no man or women however modern, chooses to marry in western dress. For some it may be a once-in-a-lifetime costume, but for many it is the initiation into wearing the Rajasthani dress. Men will wear the traditional *shervani/achkan* in combination with a *churidar* and the bride will dress up in a blouse, *ghaghra* and *odhna*.



Figure 8. Priest in an unstitched ensemble, Marwar Junction. He wears a turban. His chadar and dhoti are draped around the body. Unstitched clothing is a mark of high status, considered pure among Hindus.

Fairs and Festivals are celebrated with great gusto in Rajasthan. These usually mark religious occasions. Pushkar Fair, Ramdeora Fair, Teej most famously celebrated in Jaipur and the Gangaur festivities also in Jaipur are some examples. At these times, we see a great resurgence of the traditional dress.

The costume used among the various groups today comprises elements from styles of earlier times, and new features adapted by them. A combination of both the new and old give the costume a unique style, which is now a tradition in itself.

Costume is a part of the socio-cultural traditions of the people. This has helped it withstand the forces of change. However, costume has not remained static, but has evolved with time. This adaptability to change has helped traditional costume to maintain its distinctive and unbroken identity. Change and tradition are not in conflict in this region, they merge and evolve with each other, creating new dimensions in costume.

So long as social reconstruction is founded on the ideals of an open society, whatever is valuable to tradition will in fact survive and grow; what has ceased to be viable in a modern context will then be abandoned. In this way there is no danger of India losing its identity. On the contrary, it will become more itself. However, this is no panacea, for a society remade will ever remain a society to be remade æ in tireless experiment.

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