

# The Effect of British Raj on Indian Costume



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*(Views expressed in this article are the personal opinion of the author)*

## Abstract:

The British entered India as traders, but they stayed back as rulers and ruled the country for almost 200 years. They came with their own cultural values and identity, very British clothing and fashion statements, leaving the Indians admiring the GORA SAHIBS and the MEMSAHIBS. The average Indian wanted to look special and thus wanted to copy their styles.

This research focuses on how the British Raj brought about a change in the costumes of contemporary India. How were the British costumes Indianised? Were they accepted by the Indians, or was the change of costume thrust upon them? How did the words “Petticoat” and “blouse” become a part of the Indian languages and of the Indian costume, the “Sari”? How did the Dhoti-Kurta clad common man change to a Shirt – Trouser sporting one? Just as the “babus” became a part of Indian culture, so did their dress and dressing sensibility.

“English was not the first foreign tongue to be imposed on India as the language of the government.” (Watson 1979). Similarly English Costumes were not the first foreign costumes to be imposed and adopted by Indians. Before the British it was the Persian influence in Fashion and Persian was the official language.

Fashion is a representation of cultural identity. The changes in the socio political scenario of the country brought about a marked change in their costumes. A look at the paintings of the early years of the Raj show that the Indian kings loved to adorn the western attire, where as the commoners and Brahmins considered it outrageous to begin with.

“Fashion is architecture. It is a matter of proportions”, said Coco Chanel, (Sieve Wright, 2007). So in keeping with the zeitgeist once the buildings of the city were being constructed in the imperial style, so were the garbs of men and women. It was fashionable to “talk English and walk English”.

“From Victorian times, as transport was fast, papers, periodicals and novels from England were available in India and they dominated the life of womenfolk. Fashions of London and Paris were also reaching fast.” (Dr. Murthy K.L., 2001).

The textiles being manufactured in India were also anglicized, this can be seen by the drastic change in the motifs from Lotuses to Tulips, and the style of depiction very Victorian. “By the beginning of the Eighteenth Century most of the flowering trees are displaying exuberant Baroque Curves.” (Irwin J and Brett K.B., 1970).

## Introduction:

Clothing is one of the three primary needs of a human being and like the other two, namely food and shelter; it started off as a basic necessity but graduated to be one of the most important forms of cultural identity. How this identity changes as various cultures amalgamate has been a constant source of study of Costume historians.

There are many aspects of ancient clothing and bodily adornment that make its study interesting and rewarding, possibly the most important being its use (a) as an expression of identity and ethnicity; (b) as a statement of social values associated with gendered behavior; and (c) as a signal of social standing and wealth. – Dr. Carroll, 2011 (University of Sheffield website). In this study I want to see how the effect of British Raj, brought about the changes in Indian costume forever.

The known history of the Indian subcontinent dates back to about 5000 years. The first civilization known as the Indus Valley civilization, has archaeological evidence of draped garments. Excavations at Harrapa, Mohenjo-Daro, and many other sites in present day Pakistan and India have brought to light an urban settlement known as Indus valley civilization. Ever since then the Indian Subcontinent has been subjected to various invasions throughout history. Each invader has left his mark on the subcontinent. It is interesting to note that how the Huns, Greeks, Mughals and the British came and stayed in this country and influenced the living style of the inhabitants, each taking some and giving some and thus creating a complex cultural identity.

During the early Twentieth Century, British had colonized a major part of the Indian Subcontinent, uniting it to form “India”. India was a cultural mix of a variety of princely states that existed. Each had its own castes, culture, religion and way of dressing, which was actually more local and suited to the climate and culture then existing. Chronologically speaking the time period in Indian history can be broadly classified as:

1. Indus Valley Civilization 2600-1800 BCE
2. Vedic and Post Vedic Period 1700 – 600 BCE
3. Maurya and Sunga Period 320 BCE- 100 BCE
4. Kushan Kings (in the northern part of the Indian sub-continent) first Century AD
5. Satvahanas in the south (1st Century AD)
6. Gupta period in the north and Cholas, Chalukyas and Pandyas in the south. Golden Period of Indian History (4th to 8th Century CE)
7. Mohhamad Bin Qasim, the first Arab General to conquer the North West part of the Indian subcontinent, the first Islamic ruler 8th Century CE.
8. Mughal Rule firmly established – 16th Century AD, Marathas, Rajputs and Ahom Republic were independent states which could not be conquered by the Mughals and were in constant state of war. South India had its own rulers.
9. Various European nationals – Portuguese, French, British, Spanish, Danes, etc. enter the country as traders and / or missionaries. - 16th, 17th centuries. Nawabs of Bengal, Oudh (Lucknow) and Hyderabad being prominent figures.
10. Trade relations strengthen between East India Company and various Indian states.
11. Due to anarchy, British take control of the situation, Indian economy falls and British Raj Established – 19th Century AD

Studies show that the people of Indus Valley civilization wore draped garments. The first written evidence that we have regarding costumes is from the post-Vedic period. This can be found in the Vedas, which are ancient Hindu Scriptures. Here again we come across draped garments. The costume historians have found that the three draped garments common to both the sexes were- Antariya (the lower garment), Uttariya (the upper garment) and kayabandh (which were like a belt to keep antariya in place). We do not have pictorial evidence of the

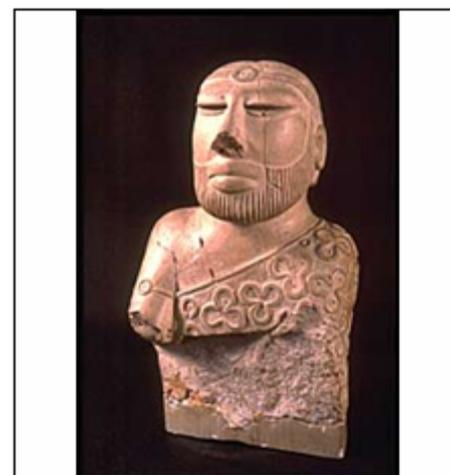


Fig 1: Excavated bust of Priest – King, Indus Valley Civilization  
Source: harappa.com

same. But there is enough written evidence to show that men and women dressed in these rectangular pieces of garments carefully draped around them.

The Uttariya and Antariya could be draped in a variety of ways. The fabrics used were mainly cotton and silk. Wool was also used but it was considered impure. Cotton fabrics could be very fine or coarse, depending on the status of the wearer. For many centuries the antariya and uttariya continued to be worn, with little changes.

Coming to the Mauryan period we see the continuation of the Uttariya and Antariya, along with various headgears. Since Chandragupta married a Greek princess from the Greek Macedonian Court, we see some influence of Greek costumes, but majorly the traditional costumes continued to be worn. We also see major influence of Buddhism and Jainism around this time period and the costumes of the religious people in India continued to center around these basic rectangular pieces of fabric. This sketch has been made from sculpted figures of the Mauryan period, (Roshan Alkazi)



Fig -2: the Maurya Sunga Period 371 BCE to 72 BCE

It shows the traditional Antariya and uttariya along with fancy headdress characteristic of that era. Men and women dressed alike, with minor variations.

In the first Century AD, Kanishka the famous Kushan king became the ruler of the northern part of the country. His headless statue discovered in Bactria near Afghanistan shows him dressed in trousers, and boots, tunic and overcoat. Since he belonged to a warring tribe, he also introduced chain-mail armors and tunics for soldiers. These were added on to the already indigenous garments that existed, and thus brought about the introduction of fusion garments. In spite of a lot of cut and stitched garments making their foray on Indian ground, the general public still preferred the fabric straight from the loom without cutting and stitching, as it suited the climatic needs of the people.

Owing to climatic conditions people took frequent bath in summers, rectangular pieces of cotton fabric were easy to maintain, breathable, comfortable and in all ways multipurpose. Though beautiful Silk fabrics were made, they were not for everyday use of the common man.



Fig 3: Gupta period 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Century AD

During the Gupta period that followed which is known as the Golden Age of Indian History, we see that these flat pieces of textiles were exquisitely worked upon, they became richer, we also see coming in of stitched garments like the Choli (which is a garment for women to be worn on the upper torso) and Ghagra (which is like a skirt), but we do see the uttariya and antariya still being used by majority of people.

With the coming in of Islamic rule from 8th Century AD, Medieval India saw a lot of change in costume and culture. This change can be seen in the characteristic architecture and painting depicting contemporary costumes. With the establishment of Mughal rule, a blend of Persian and ancient Indian artistic sensibilities can be seen in art, architecture and clothing. With the Persian influence, the majority of stitched garments entered India, the antariya was replaced by the Pyjamas or costumes for the legs, which were of a various

types, ranging from very loose to very tight; there were different types of Pyjamas for men and women, the cut, style and ornamentation also varied. The *uttariya* still remained though various tunics like *Kurtas* and *anrakhas* were added. The Persian men and women covered themselves from Head to Toe in various layers of stitched garments. It is interesting to note that in spite of such major influences, the majority of Indians continued to wear their traditional unstitched garments. A lot of fusion wear came in, like wearing *kurta* with *Dhoti* (which is considered traditional Indian wear today), *kurta* with various types of *pyjamas*.

The Maratha and Rajput men took to wearing the costumes influenced highly by the Mughal rulers, whereas the women continued to wear their traditional garments. A major change in the women's costume that came was the veil. Never before do we see women of the Indian subcontinent, covering their faces in veils. Only after the coming in of Islam, and its influence woman started covering their face, although they continue to wear their traditional *ghagra-choli*, *antariya-uttariya* blend – the *Sari*. Mughal women wore layers of clothing and also covered their faces with veils. It may be noted that based on the climate the clothing was cotton, loose and breathable.

Parsis, Marathas, Gujaratis, Rajputs, Sikhs, Mughals, Deccan, various nawabs, and a plethora of tribes were all a part of the Indian subcontinent with varying dressing sensibilities, they were known by their regions, religions, and caste, tribe and not as Indians. In the same way as all Europeans were foreigners to them, all these people were Indians, belonging to *Indoostan* (*Hindustan*) to the foreigners.



Fig 4: A young prince and his courtiers 1880 AD  
Source: [oldindianphotos.in](http://oldindianphotos.in)

In this picture we can see a variety of Indian costumes that existed in the 19th Century AD in India.

When the Europeans came to India around the sixteenth century in search of spices and textiles, they seemed to be a little overdressed for the Indian Climate, initially they were treated as foreigners and friends, and as business partners in the new world economy. Indians did not much distinguish between the various European nationalities, for them each was a trader. The Indians would buy an item or two from them, but never thought of dressing up in layers of clothing. Slowly the tables turned. The East India Company

under the leadership of Robert Clive started showing more interest in governing the country rather than merely trading. This resulted in heavy economic losses, and eventually Indian Governance was taken over by the British Imperial court and came directly under the rule of Queen Victoria. It was then that the terminology of Raj (the word for Rule in Hindi) came to be associated with the British.



Fig 5: Portrait of East India Company official 1760 to 1763 CE  
Source: [collections.vam.ac.uk](http://collections.vam.ac.uk)

## The Impact of the British Raj

The British as tradesmen imported lots of textiles from India, calico, chintz, cashmere to name but a few. India was one of the richest countries and had maximum textile export in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Indian Fabrics were treated as exotic and the British fell in love with cotton and indigo. These Indian textiles influenced British tastes before the Raj. But once the British started ruling, everything changed, a new culture emerged and so did a new cultural identity.

There was a stark difference in the dressing sensibilities of the British and Indians. For example, headgear was important to men of both the origins. The British men removed their hat in front of a king or a person of higher social rank, it was their way of showing respect, whereas the Indian men, belonging to any region or religion considered it insulting to remove their headgear (turbans or phetas) in public, it was akin to being stripped off. In

fact the Indian men took off their shoes as a mark of respect, which was not a case with the British. The British men who came before the Raj were quick to acclimatize. They took to wearing loose turbans and loose costumes, and learnt to work and relax in Indian ways. But after the Raj, this was not the case; Indians were now looked down upon as natives, who did not know how to dress, as a result, the Indians started looking down upon themselves, they thought that their customs and costumes reflected illiteracy. Most of them hated the very fact that they were brown skinned. They refused to speak in their native tongue and refused to wear their native clothes.

The whole generation that grew up in India under the awe of the white man, came to regard them as their superiors. In the beginning of twentieth century when the world was becoming a smaller place, photography could capture the world alive; the younger generation of India changed its dressing habits in order to ape the mightier West. The British fashions were aped in order to reflect modernity and reject the traditional, rural

past. Madhav Das Nalapat, in his essay, India and the Anglo sphere writes beautifully about the impact which British Raj has left on India.

As more and more British men came and settled in India, a lot of British women followed in search of grooms. The fear that the men may end up marrying the native girls was very strong and thus we see the entry of Memsahibs. These were women who came as wives or sisters, nieces or cousins. They



Fig 6: A British Family in India in front of their house 1875  
Source: [19cphoto.com](http://19cphoto.com)

came to India to see for themselves the strange and exotic country whose tales were now abundant. The Indian women died to see a glimpse of these foreign beauties and tried to emulate them. They were awed and impressed by the privileges given to a memsahib; they were wonderstruck by their laces and gowns. Since these women were well read, spoke in English (which was natural to them), were of a fairer complexion, they appeared as role models. Some English women seriously occupied themselves in teaching the locals the arts and crafts they knew like knitting and crochet.

So according to the new role models in the society, the men wanted to be bold, smart, confident and strong as the English men in their western attire and women wanted to be demure, fair, dainty, beautifully dressed up in flowing fabric. They wanted to follow art and poetry, be well read and not be confined to the daily chores as they saw their mothers and grandmothers doiii.

### **Sources of Study - Study of Films and Literature**

I have drawn inference from various memoirs of the time period as well as a lot of period films based on that era. Indian cinema has been very helpful in researching and laying open before us a vast pictorial evidence in terms of costumes. A lot of study has been done on British Influence on our culture, but not much specifically in terms of clothing. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the way we Indians dress today is largely a reflection of the British Raj.

This is clearly reflected in Indian Cinema. Indian Cinema is major source of the study of Indian Fashion in the early twentieth century; it mirrored the sentiments of a modern society, trying to gain independence and self-governance in a manner set up by the British.

“The process of imitation and adaptation are central to our understanding of creativity. Human cultures evolve through a continuous exchange of ideas, beliefs, habits and forms. Dressing habits in particular constitute a fertile plain in which this exchange takes place.” (Artemis Yagou: 2009). The rise of a “westernized” society in India was a result of the mighty British taking over the reins of the country. A Hindi film “Sagina”, released in 1947, has a song sung by the legendry Kishore Kumar, picturised on the super Hero- Dilip Kumar. The Lyrics of which are: “Saala main to Sahib ban gaya.....” the lyrics of the song mean that “Oh! I have become a sahib, look at my suit and look at my boot, as if I am a white man from London.” A common man that makes fun of him saying that “Here comes a crow trying to be a peacock by attaching a peacock feather.” to which the protagonist replies, “ a low standard man like you will not understand the high standard of leaders, you cannot understand the scheme in my mind. I have become like a sahib. You people wearing the loin cloth will not be able to change your destiny. I will change your destiny for you. Now I am like a sahib, a white man from London.” This song clearly shows the clothing choice of the modern Indian Man as opposed to that of the uneducated mass. Films like Gandhi, Parineeta, Chokher Bali, which reflect the India of the early twentieth Century, clearly show the influence of British Raj on Indian Fashions.

In “Chokher Bali”, (this film is based on a book by Rabindranath Tagore, of the same name), Ashalata who is married to the main protagonist, dresses up in traditional Bengali saree, without a blouse, so does everybody else. Wearing a blouse is not considered good, though the men dress up in western clothes. The Protagonist, (which is played by Aishwarya Rai), teaches her how to wear a blouse (which she calls jacket) with a saree, after donning the blouse she feels like a European woman. The reason is that in

India initially saree was worn without a blouse or a petticoat. There was only a breast band called “Pratidhi” or “Paridhi”, which too was worn by only the upper class women. The culture of wearing blouses came from the British women, where the torso of the gown was copied and blouses made. The Muslim influence was in terms of Farsi Pyjamas, which were loose, gathered trousers. It was the arrival of the Islamic rule that led to the wearing of Kurtas. “However all these garments were eventually superseded one by one by British style jackets and blouses?” (Bahl Vinay, Springer 2005)

### **Analysis and Conclusion:**

Fashion is a representation of cultural identity. This cultural identity was changing. The modern Indian was convent educated, secular, patriotic, wanted to belong to INDIA and not to a particular religion, state or culture. This cultural change brought India together as a country; they spoke in English, and wore trousers. Women curled their hair, wore Indian sarees, but with foreign blouses and petticoats. Today these words – blouse and petticoat are a part of every Indian Language thanks to the British influence. These words as we know are English in their origin, but today no Indian feels that they are foreign, they have become a part of the traditional Indian costume. No one wears a saree without these accompaniments.

The impact that British Raj had on Indian clothing and how it was altered forever can be summarized as follows:

1. It was a fashion statement among the elites, to dress up in a more contemporary British Fashion
2. It blurred caste differences, anybody dressed up in western clothing was a forward looking, educated Indian and not from an x, y, z caste or religion.
3. Women felt more comfortable and modern.
4. It was thrust upon servants or bearers, to don the upper garment at least like shirts and coats and to keep Indian turbans.
5. It was the uniform for the army

It is very clear from the study that the British Raj had major impact upon the costumes of India. It can be said that the change was brought about in a manner which was both voluntary and thrust upon.

### **Voluntary Change:**

The change as we see started voluntarily with the Aristocrats. The Royal Men and women of India were the first to adopt the “western Fashion Statements”, but curiously always shifted to their traditional garb, during celebrations and ceremonies like birth, marriage and death. They felt that they were modern and had to have tastes like the British to reflect that. It was in fashion to dress up like the modern British, read English literature, smoke the pipe, and wear a hat and shoes emulating the English. Eating with fork and knife was considered classic, and people who ate with their fingers were labelled barbarians.

Another voluntary change was when the Hindu women (especially from Bengal and south India) under the western influence felt uncomfortable to wear only sarees, thus they took to wearing jackets or blouses even jumpers, along with



Fig 7: Maharaja of Baroda, Shri Sayaji Rao Gaekwad in 1910 CE  
Source: oldindianphotos.in

petticoats under the sarees like their western counterparts. The petticoats gave a graceful fall to the sarees, and made the women look more formal. In West as we know women wore layers of Petticoats to give the desired shape and fall to their skirts or gowns.



Fig 8: Indians emulating the dressing style of the British 1930 CE  
Source: oldindianphotos.in

In India as we know the people of lower caste were not treated well by the Hindu society as per the caste system. A lot of these people converted to Christianity as this religion they felt, did not distinguish between the rich and the poor. The missionaries rendered great selfless service to the people and thus converting many lower caste people to Christianity in India especially in the South and Eastern regions of the subcontinent. It was a chance that the Dalits, or lower caste people or new converts to Christianity got to dress up like the

westerners, to eradicate any class differences. Thus they voluntarily gave up the loin cloth for trousers. It may be noted that while Gandhi gave up his western attire during the struggle of independence to drive his point home, Baba Sahib Ambedkar (who shaped India's constitution, but was from the lower caste), is always seen in the Western Suit, as it gave him the feeling of power.

### **Change that was thrust upon:**

When the British were ruling India they employed a lot of local labour force. The people in the Army, the bearers, the servants who presented themselves in front of the British men and their wives were supposed to be dressed properly. In order to do that they were asked to wear what their masters ordered them to wear. Uniforms for various services were prescribed with precision. The workers found that it made them more appealing to work under the British. Whatever they wore during leisure was not a concern of their masters but at work they would dress up as brown representatives of the English men.

The Indian cotton was exported to Britain and manufactured garments from Britain were imported in India. These were mass produced, mill made garments and were much cheaper than anything that Indians had seen before. The result was as expected. Indians started buying these cheaper garments and rejected their traditional garments completely. The economy was at a decline. It was at this time that mahatma Gandhi introduced home spun khadi and encouraged people to make and wear their own clothing, boycotting the foreign products.

Slowly and steadily even after the Indian independence the majority of Indian men and women changed their dressing habits at least in public, to the modern western styles in order to appear forward thinking and forward moving.

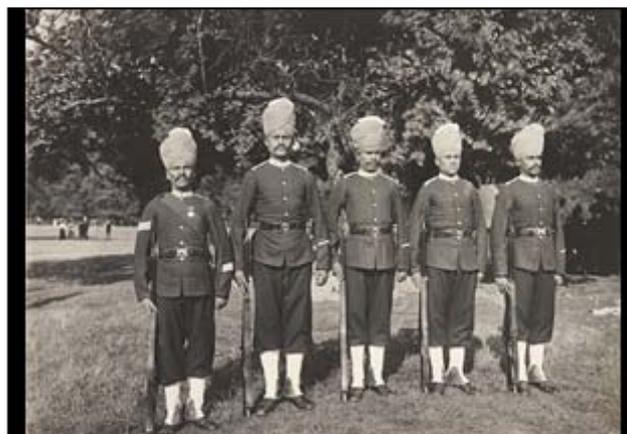


Fig 9: Photograph showing the Indian Army (Indian coronation troops – Aug 1902)

“Clothes have been used to assert power, challenge authority, and instigate social change throughout Indian society. During the struggle for independence, members of the Indian elite incorporated elements of Western style into their clothes, while Gandhi's adoption of the loincloth symbolized the rejection of European power and the contrast between Indian poverty and British wealth.”, Tarlo 1996.

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End Notes:

<sup>i</sup> Like other *banians* (tradesmen) of his era Nobkissen (what the British called a man named Nabakrishna Deb) worked closely with the English but in no way seems to have envied or copied their lifestyle. It would certainly have never even crossed his mind to dress in the absurd manner of the European. Page 68, Baron Archie, "An Indian Affair".

<sup>ii</sup> Irwin John, Brett K.B., 1970, Origin of Chintz, Victoria and Albert Museum

<sup>iii</sup> Though the European men outnumbered European women, eight to one, enough British girls now began to arrive hunting husbands, armed with trunks full of latest London Fashions, to encourage sumptuous balls and an endless round of more tediously genteel visits. Page 61, Baron Archie, "An Indian Affair".