

Clothing: A Social History

Explain the reason for the changes in clothing pattern in the eighteenth century?

After the eighteenth century, the colonization of most of the world (especially the third World Countries) of Europe, the spread of democratic ideals and the growth of an industrial society, completely changed the ways in which people thought about dress and its meanings. People would use style (fashions) and materials that were drawn from other cultures and locations and western dress styles for men were adopted worldwide. These changes were possible due to the following reasons:

- Trade with India brought cheap, beautiful and easy-to-maintain Indian chintzes within the reach of many Europeans.
- Mass production of cotton textiles began in Britain.
- Social attitude about clothing, specially about clothing of women, were dramatically changing.
- Nation of beauty and appearances were undergoing a change.

What were the sumptuary laws in France?

Sumptuary laws tried to control the behavior of those who were considered socially inferior. These laws prevented them from wearing certain clothes consuming certain foods and beverages (like alcohol) and hunting game in certain areas.

Sumptuary laws were applicable in France from 1294 till the outbreak of the France Revolution in 1789.

Give any two examples of the ways in which European dress codes were different from Indian codes:

Consider the case of the turban and the hat. When European traders first began frequenting India, they were distinguished from the Indian 'turban wears' as the 'hat wears.' These two headgears not only looked different, but also signified different things. The turban in India was not just for protection from the heat but was a sign of respectability, and could not be removed at will. In the Western traders, the hat had to be removed before social superiors as a sign of respect. This cultural difference created a misunderstanding. The British were often offended if Indian did not take off their turban when they met colonial officials. Many Indians, on the other hand, wore the turban to consciously assert their regional or national identity.

Another such conflict was related to the wearing of shoes. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was customary for the British officials to follow Indians etiquette and remove their footwear in the courts of ruling kings or chiefs. In 1824-1828, Governor General Amherst insisted that Indians take their shoes off as a sign of respect when they appeared before him, but this was not strictly followed. By the mid-nineteenth century, when Lord Dalhousie was Governor General, the 'shoe respect' was made stricter, and Indians were made to take off their shoes when entering any government institution; only those who wore European clothes were exempted from this rule.

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In 1805, a British official, Benjamin Heyne, listed the manufactures of Bangalore which included the following:

- Women's cloth of different musters and names
- Coarse chintz
- Muslins
- Silk clothes

Of this list, which kind of cloth would have definitely fallen put of use in the early 1900s and why?

Women's cloth of different musters and names: - Before the seventeenth century, most ordinary women in British, possessed very few cloths made of flax, linen or wool, which were difficult to clean.

Coarse chintz: - After 1600, trade with India brought cheap beautiful and easy-to-maintain Indian Chintzes within the reach of many European who could now increase the size of their wardrobes.

Muslins: - During the Industrial Revolution, in the nineteenth century. Britain began the mass manufacture of cotton textile (Muslins). Cotton cloths became more accessible to a wider section of people in Europe. By the early twentieth century artificial fibers made cloths cheaper still and easier to wash and maintain.

Silk cloths: - In 1800s the silk cloths became more popular. Silk was imported from China. In several parts of India its clothes were made and exported to other countries as well as to several areas of the Indian sub-continent. Silk became a symbol of aristocracy among rich and upper classes of all countries.

In the late 1870s heavy, restrictive underclothes, which had created such a storm in the pages of women magazines were gradually discarded. Clothes got lighter, shorter and simpler.

Winton Churchill described Mahatma Gandhi as a 'Seditious Middle Temple Lawyers' now "posing as a half naked fakir'. What provoked such a comment and what does it tell you about the symbolic strength of Mahatma Gandhi's dress?

Mahatma Gandhi used to wear western style cloths in the earlier part of his career. As a lawyer in Johannesburg, this was the mode of his dress.

Later, he decided that dressing 'unsuitably' was more powerful political statement. He seemed to have succeeded in his mission, in as much as he could provoke Churchill to make a remark like this.

Why did Mahatma Gandhi's dream of clothing the nation in khadi appeal only to some sections of Indians?

To Gandhi, khadi, white and coarse, was a sign of purity, simplicity and humility. Wearing khadi became a symbol of nationalism, a rejection of western mill-made cloth.

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Gandhi's dream was to clothe the whole nation in khadi as a means of erasing differences between religions and classes.

- The aristocratic Indians adopted Indian dhoti and kurta as their dresses; but these were made of fine fibers rather than the coarse khadi.
- Those who had been deprived by caste norms for centuries were attracted to western dress styles. For them, these were the symbols of liberation.
- Many poor women, simply, were not allowed to purchase khadi, which was relatively more expensive than the mill-made saris.
- Many women wore coloured saris with designs. White was seen as a symbol of renunciation.

How did the Second World War bring the changes in clothing:

Changes in women's clothing came about as a result of the two World wars. Many European women stopped wearing jewellery and luxurious clothes. As upper-class women mixed with other classes, social barriers were eroded and women began to dress in similar ways.

A plain and austere style came to reflect seriousness and professionalism. New schools for children emphasized the importance of plain dressing, and discouraged ornamentation. Gymnastics and games entered the school curriculum for women. As women took to sports, they had to wear clothes that did not hamper movement. When they went out to work they needed clothes that were comfortable and convenient.

Explain why could not Swadeshi movement succeed in popularizing khadi?

By the middle of the 20th century large number of people began boycotting British or mill-made cloth and adapting khadi. But gradually the usage of khadi appealed largely to the upper castes and classes rather than to those who had to make do with less and could not afford it. It was almost impossible for khadi to compete with cheap British cloths that had flooded the market.

Discuss the reaction of Indians to introduction of western dress style?

With the arrival of the Britishers, western-style clothing came to be introduced in India. However, different sections of the Indian society responded in different ways to this event.

- There was the section of society to whom western cloths were a sign of modernity and progress. They adopted these dresses.
There was another section of the society that found western-style clothing a symbol of liberation. Among these, the important ones were the dalits who had converted to Christianity.
- Another group of people was convinced that western culture would lead to a loss of traditional cultural identity. These people kept away from western cloths.

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- Another group of people began to wear western cloths without giving up their Indian ones. They would wear western-style clothes when on work, and would be back to more comfortable Indian clothes while relaxing at home.

Explain the reason why Indian women in 19th century continued to wear traditional dress though men adopted the western style. What does this tell us about the position of women in society?

It is doubtful if men changed over to western dresses out of reasons of convenience. They changed over to western dresses for different reasons. And these reasons were not applicable to women.

One, men had to go out to work and interact with their western bosses and native subordinates. These men would wear western clothes

- To please their western bosses and curry favour with them, and
- To show off their borrowed authority to their subordinates.

The women did not have to go out to work. Hence, there was no need for them to change a new dress.

Two, social interactions of women were limited to closed family gatherings. They were more comfortable in their own traditional dresses.

Three, western dresses were not easily available, and these were costly. It is obvious that women were expected to stay at home, had little to say in non-domestic affairs, and were conservative and little responsive to change.

