



# Fabric Begets Fashion

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



DINODIA

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**W**ITH TUCKS AND PLEATS, flowing folds and knotted ties, Hindus have for fifty centuries fashioned impeccable apparel from lengths of unstitched 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 culture's costume has remained in vogue longer—over 5,000 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 garb and scuttled to museum displays or limited to ceremonial occasions. In contrast, the sari, still the daily dress of most village Indians and the preferred attire of millions of urbanites, is now the rave in big-city clothing cliques 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 that has transcended time's trendiness. What has saved the sari from extinction is its exceptional quality of being ever open to the creative inspiration of its wearer. While tailored clothes are strictly one-way-forward, up or down, and either casual or formal, the sari stretches beyond such limitations. A single unstitched weave can become an entire wardrobe, all depending upon the chosen



SHUTTERSTOCK

methods of draping. No other garb has such a range of possibilities. In this educational Insight, we explore the global popularity of this timeless attire and present some excellent resources about the sari and the fine art of draping.

EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

# Fabric Begets Fashion

## Traditional and modern, *the* garment of India tours the world in flying colors

BY LAVINA MELWANI, NEW YORK

**A**T A BIG SOCIETY WEDDING IN DELHI, EVERYONE WAS dressed in the latest budget-busting designer outfits, yet all eyes were on a young girl dressed in a rich, bluish-pink Varanasi sari with intricate floral motifs. This one-of-a-kind cloth had cost her nothing, for it had been part of her mother's trousseau thirty years ago. Instead of having gone stale and out of style with age, it was the cynosure of all eyes, a treasure which had grown more valuable with time.

Who would have thought that six yards of fabric could be a synonym for elegance, beauty and style? The sari is the world's longest-running fashion story, as relevant today as it was hundreds of years

ago. While the sari shares space in a modern woman's wardrobe with the popular salwar kameez (also known as the Punjabi suit, consisting of trousers and a long top) and Western pants, it is still the garment of choice for many, be it a washerwoman, an urban working woman or a high-society socialite.

While Western dress has made inroads into almost every Asian culture, with traditional garments like the Japanese kimonos and Chinese cheongsams being reserved for ceremonial wear, the sari is a living garment, a part of the daily lives of women in the Indian subcontinent, from Nepal to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Practical and always in style, it is a forgiving garment that conceals a woman's imperfections and enhances her special qualities.

Even for a young, 21st century girl, draping a sari for the first time is the ultimate coming-of-age experience.

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 Dipavali 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."

While the sari lives on in villages and cities, young innovative designers in India now give it fresh life and a new twist for the new generation. In India there are about 15 established labels, such as

Rohit Bal, J.J. Valaya, Rina Dhaka, Suneet Varma, Tarun Tahiliani, Sandip Khosla and Ritu Kumar. These designers have revitalized the sari, adding heavily embroidered blouses to plain cloth, or restyling the *pallav* (the portion of the sari which covers the bodice and falls over the shoulder) to give a new look to the sari. There's even been the zip-on sari for girls who may have trouble handling all those pleats! At fancy weddings many women drape the sari in Gujarati style or *seeda* (straight) *pallav* (the *pallav* is taken from the back to front instead of being taken from front to back)—considered high style by the fashion-conscious.

India's designers, adroit in Western styles and fashion, still take great pride in ethnic traditions, and their offerings often echo embroideries and designs of earlier craftsmen, celebrating India's cultural heritage. There are designer saris with scenes from the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana* embroidered on the *pallav* (the ending border of the sari), or entire village portrayals in Bengali *kantha* work (running stitch embroidery used on decorated quilts). There is a kind of visual poetry in these saris, which are often woven by Muslim artisans for Hindu brides. Some of the best embroiderers in



# The Sari, Always in Vogue



Weaving apprentices stretch six-yard lengths of newly made saris to dry on the steps along the river Ganga in Varanasi. Inset, at a wedding in Mumbai, seven women from India, Asia and the US show off their treasured attire outside the Jhole Lal temple. Each wears a distinctive design and draping style.



HENK JACOBS

India are Muslim, who can even reproduce the intricate *pieta dura* work found on the Taj Mahal. Saris tell stories—of the *Ramayana*, of folk lore and mythical heroes and carry verses from the *Vedas*. Ganesha—the auspicious one—is popular on sari *pallavs*.

As Indians have spread around the world, they have taken the sari with them. Saris are a common sight in London, Johannesburg, Trinidad, Toronto, San Francisco, Hong Kong and Singapore. In places as far flung as Mauritius and Nigeria, saris are a part of the landscape. In fact, saris are big business in countries like Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan, countries that produce bolts of synthetics like chiffon, satin and nylon which are bought in six-yard lengths by Indians to use as saris. These are also exported to many countries and find their way to the Little Indias of the US, UK and Dubai.

**Saris in America:** Sari shops thrive in many Indian enclaves in America. Among the largest is India Sari Palace in New York, with a vast inventory from India as well as Japan. Many Indian communities here, such as the Gujarati, wear mostly saris, so there is a constant demand. Just looking at the stores in Little Indias across the nation indicates the sari is thriving. In the 60s, many women were reluctant to wear saris in the US, afraid they would stand out. But in today's multicultural America, there seems to be a growing pride in one's ethnic roots. While some Indian women working in corporate society may still prefer to wear Western dress to fit in, others in less structured jobs—film editors, writers, travel agents—often wear salwar kameez or sari to work.

Many especially wear sari to evening events. After all, there is nothing quite as graceful as the sari, especially for evening wear. While styles and lengths of the salwar kameez fluctuate with alarming regularity, a sari is always in style. Traditional saris from different regions have a beauty all their own and are timeless.

Kavita Lund, a wife, mother and accountant living in New York, has a sizable collection of saris and enjoys the grace it imparts. She, like most of her friends, wears the more practical pants and salwar kameez during the day and saves the saris for special occasions and evening events. Her 19-year-old daughter, Monisha, born and brought up in the US, is just as fascinated by saris, though she wears only the trendy designer styles. These modern incarnations of the sari would probably make any great-grandmother faint—the stomach is completely exposed and the *pallav* is wrapped nonchalantly around the neck, leaving the bodice bare. Dr. Manjula Bansal, a pathologist at the Hospital for Special Surgery and the Cornell University Medical Center in New York, has a large collection of saris from every part of India and wears them with great pride. Even when she was a medical resident, she wore a bindi on her forehead and sari to her workplace, riding on the subway. Now she wears the more practical salwar kameez to work, but always dresses in saris for social events, be it an Indian or a mainstream gathering.

Bansal, who was involved with funding of the India Chair at Columbia University and with other mainstream cultural organizations, finds her sari a great ice-breaker at international gatherings. Her treasured saris are always great for conversation. She says, “Not only is a sari beautiful, but it is a story in fabric, depicting religious and social beliefs, and it shows good omens for a good life. Every craftsman puts his identity into it. You don't have to be beautiful to feel beautiful in a sari. It

**Luminous elegance:** It's 7am in the Madurai Meenakshi Temple. A local pilgrim basks in the early sunlight's mellow glow. A perfect example of the modern nivi drape, which has become a universal style for Indian women.

brings out your inner beauty and grace.”

**So many styles:** In all countries, dress usually indicates religion, social position, ethnicity, wealth and regional origin. While this is still mostly true in India, some urban Indian women and those living abroad do wear a cross-section of saris from different regions, and are certainly more Indian than regional in their perspectives.

Women have a rich array of saris to choose from, including handloom saris from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, silk brocades from Varanasi and Kanchipuram, *jamdani* (fine, transparent cotton muslin) from West Bengal, cotton saris from Kota in

Rajasthan, *patolas* (elaborate, five-color design) and *ikat* (special dye process) from Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. For those living abroad, a trip to India means a new wardrobe, since the variety of fabrics in Indian cities is so vast.

Interestingly enough, just as there are fakes in art and jewelry, there are fakes in saris. Today it's easy to be taken for a ride because technology has improved so much. For example, saris with artificial gold look identical to those with real gold threads, the difference in price being a hefty Rs. 10,000 at least.

Advances in India's textile technology have made saris more

## India's Ten Top-Selling Saris

India remains the best place in the world to shop for saris. Rajiv Malik of Delhi, our HINDUISM TODAY correspondent and an expert in fabrics, composed this list of ten most popular saris after consulting with Mr. Vishnu Manglani, a leader in India's national sari business. Prices are in US dollars.

- Gadwals:** Cotton with separately woven and attached silk borders and *pallavs*. Made in Andhra Pradesh. \$25–130.
- Tancois:** Pure silk with intricately woven *pallavs* and borders. Variety of designs used. Made in Varanasi. \$130–400.
- Bumkais:** Silk yarn, made in Orissa. Yarn is dyed so that, when woven, patterns appear in various colors. \$20–125.
- South Handlooms:** Like Kanjivarams, but they cost less. Bangalore made. Jari and silk borders and *pallavs*. \$90–300.
- Printed:** Silk, hand printed on three materials: silk, crepe and chiffon. Comfortable for party or home wear \$65–130.
- Tangails:** Fine cotton, hand-woven in Calcutta. Traditional Bengali designs. It gets softer with each washing. \$10–100.
- Cotton Handlooms:** Hand-woven in Coimbatore. Elegant for summer wear. Rich and crisp. Need much care. \$20–50.
- Valkalams:** Pure silk, woven in Varanasi to depict folk art scenes. Special handlooms can weave 25 colors. \$90–400.
- Kanjivarams:** Finest handloom silk, specialty of Tamil Nadu. Also called heirlooms. Pure jari-woven borders. \$130–1500.
- Chanderis:** Made with silk and cotton yarn in Madhya Pradesh. Saris are lightweight, ideal for summer. \$20–125.



DEV KUMAR

**Let's shop:** Astute shoppers travel to stores like this one in India for all-natural saris

affordable and easy to maintain for working women. Synthetic saris made in powerful industrial mills are attractively priced and don't need heavy ironing or care. The flip side is that this has endangered the livelihood of village craftspeople who can take many months on a loom to produce a single sari. As one old weaver told Bansal when she visited his dilapidated, almost shut-down workshop, "People are impatient nowadays, and they can get ten machine-made saris for the price of one hand-woven sari. They don't want to wait or spend the money."

**Fads and experiments:** Recently the New York Fashion Institute of Technology showed the 1940s saris of Princess Niloufer, an Ottoman princess who married the son of the Nizam of Hyderabad. She made the traditional sari her own by giving it a Western touch through decoration and the placement of motifs. Her saris were ornamented with sequins, beads and metallic embroidery on chiffon, crepe and net, with the floral designs falling in the front or over the left shoulder. Many of these saris were designed by a Frenchman, Fernande Cecire,



**Manly drape :** Young men performing Ganga Puja at Dasaswamedh Ghat on the banks of India's holy Ganga River in Varanasi

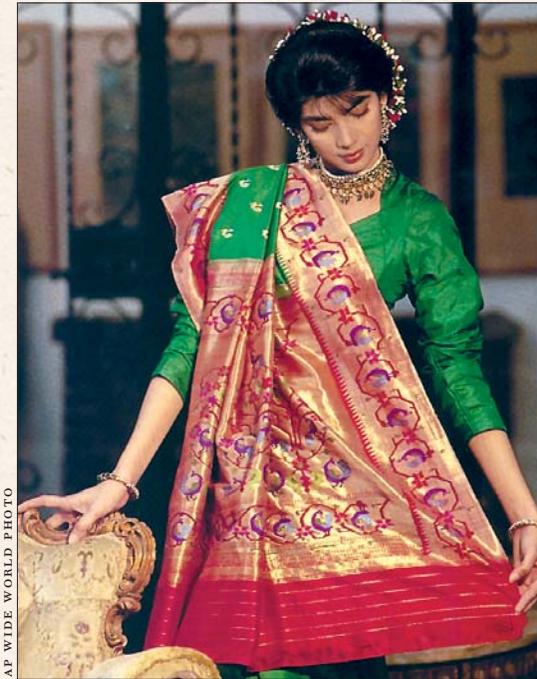
and embroidered in India. This is reminiscent of the days of the British Raj, when Indian princesses traveled to Paris and had saris designed by French couturiers.

Saris, with their golden threads, intricate embroidery and innate romance, have always attracted Westerners. Glimmerings of Indian inspiration appeared in the West in the 1920s when Madame Gres, a renowned Paris designer, showed sari-inspired styles in her collection. Western passion for Indian fashions can be traced to the British Raj, when socialites in London, New York and Paris were smitten by Indian fabrics and embroidery. Famous Western designers were deeply influenced. Those who have used saris and Indian fabrics in their collections include Mary McFadden, Oscar de la Renta, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Norma Kamali and Anna Sui.

Recently, British designer Paul Smith did an entire collection based on India, including men's shirts created out of saris. When Indian designer

Rohit Bal's mother saw this collection, she said plaintively to her son, "What's all this nonsense about? I used to make shirts like this for you when you were young, and you never wore them!" To which Bal retorted, "I'm sorry, mom, but that was you. This is Paul Smith!"

While some Westerners fashion saris into everything from pillow covers to tablecloths to evening dresses, others actually wear them, a memento of their Indian adventure. Some designers use it to outrageous effect. John Galiano was once spotted at a society gala in New York wearing a silk sari with a short tuxedo jacket and dress shoes. Supermodel Naomi Campbell wore a sari at the MTV Music Awards, and Goldie Hawn, a great fan of India, often wears saris to social events. The Duchess of York was presented with a green Varanasi silk sari by Prince Andrew. Legendary ceramist Beatrice Wood, who died at 105, wore nothing but saris and Indian jewelry for the last several decades of her life. And pop icon Madonna is very much into



**High fashion:** A Varanasi fabric model displays the opulent refinement of the maker's elegant weaves

Indian saris, *mehndi* and meditation in her CD, "Ray of Light."

For mainstream Americans, the sari is still an exotic garment, a costume to transport them to another world. In fact, Magic Markers Costumes, a Halloween costume supply house in Huntington, West Virginia, offers a sari for rental, along with blouse and petticoat, for US\$45. Their website: [www.magicmakers.com](http://www.magicmakers.com), shows an American woman draped in a sari.

Fads come and go, but the sari survives them all. As Bansal points out, "One wants to be noticed, especially in a crowd, but why ape the West? The sari creates an instant identity for you, and I think that's what most people are looking for, whether you are a CEO or a physician or you're trying to make a mark. The sari says a lot about you."

## The Remarkable Indian Art of Draping

While there are many detailed studies of India's textile and sari-making industries, only one recent study has focused primarily upon the diverse ways saris are worn. In 1997, French anthropologist Chantal Boulanger [see her story on page 64] published a landmark work, *Saris: An Illustrated Guide to the Indian Art of Draping*. Her efforts are a significant step towards categorizing and preserving sari draping styles, some of which may be known only by a few elderly ladies in each region. The following overview is drawn from her work. See page 62 for definitions.

BY CHANTAL BOULANGER, FRANCE

THE MOST ANCIENT RECORDED INDIAN DRAPE, EXCLUDING those of the Harappa civilization, is a dhoti. 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 draped in two parts. The *veshti* (from the Sanskrit verb *vesh*, meaning "to cover," "wrap around" or "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 India's two southernmost states, and also by women in Kerala. It is a common drape in many countries of Southeast 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 they follow certain basic ways of being draped. There are four main families: the dhoti family, the Dravidian sari, *nivi* saris and tribal saris. There are also sub-families and a few smaller families. The *dhoti* family includes men's *dhotis*, women's *dhotis* and 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

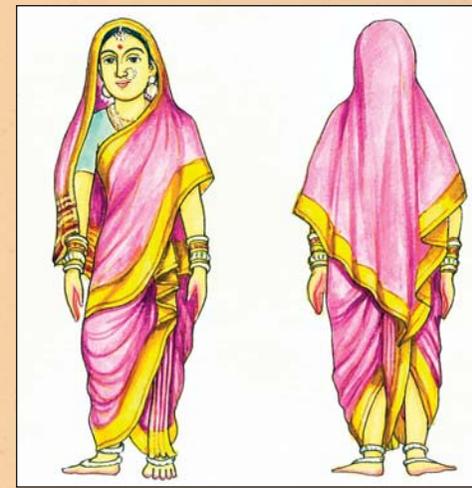
The four main families of sari drape: (clockwise from upper left) Marvari, Dravidian, Nivi and Tribal.

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; 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.

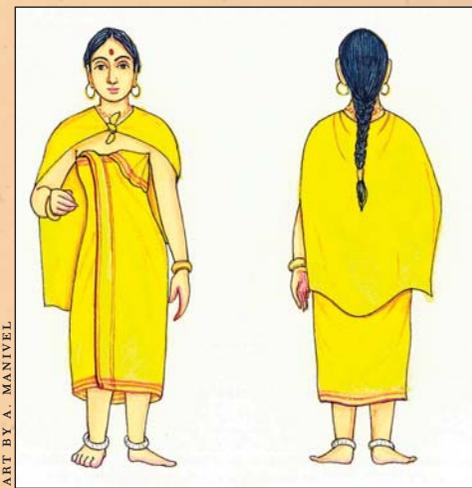
When at home or working, women wear cotton or synthetic fabrics. When going to a function or an event, they often dress up with a silk sari. Most of the time, the draping is the same whatever the textile. While there are festive and daily drapes, a festive drape can be worn with a beautiful



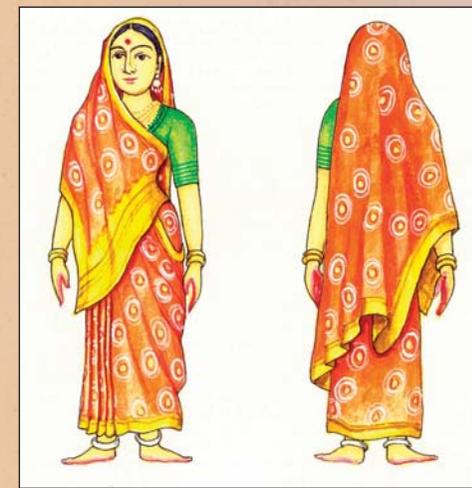
The Marvari Draping Style



The Dravidian Style



A Tribal Style



The Nivi Style

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*, or blouse, but sometimes the adventurous introduce new drapes, too. Cotton always provides the best sari drape. Once folded and tucked, cotton stays in place, and doesn't require anything to hold it. 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. Just as in painting or playing a musical instrument, it takes training and practice to wear a sari perfectly.

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 suits her perfectly. Often it is not the modern sari.

**Stylish leaders:** (Left) Dressed in a red, silk sari, Indra Nooyi, C.E.O of Pepsi, presents awards at the India Abroad Publisher's Event in 2007. Indra was ranked by *Forbes* magazine as the fourth most powerful woman in the world and the number one most powerful woman in business. Recipient of the Special Award for Excellence, dressed in a yellow sari, was Renu Khator, president and chancellor of the University of Houston and its 56,000 students.



PHOTOS BY PARESH GANDHI

## Definitions

**Choli:** a usually tight-fitting blouse often worn with a sari.

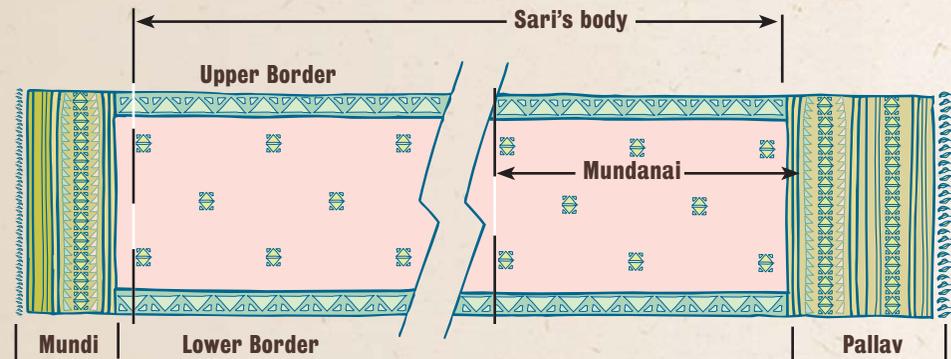
**Dhoti:** usually white, a five-yard long, four-foot high weave, normally made of light cotton, having little or no borders and *pallavs*. These are worn by men all over India, except in Tamil Nadu and Kerala where only Brahmins drape them.

**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, that is thrown over the upper body.

**Mundi:** a Tamil word meaning *pallav*, or border; the *mundi* is the *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 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 range from two to nine yards, and **height**, which may range from two to four feet.

**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; *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; *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*, By Emma Tarlo, University of Chicago Press, 5801 South Ellis Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60637.

## Draping a Sari

Of the more than eighty styles of sari drapes documented by Chantal Boulanger, the *nivi* sari is the most widely used style in the world. The following instructions are from her book, *Saris: An Illustrated Guide to the Indian Art of Draping*. For newcomers to draping saris, here is a word of advice from Sheela Venkatakrishnan of Chennai.

“When you hold a sari out to wear the first time, you feel a mix of shock and surprise! How does so much go around and how does it stay in place? Then, someone who knows how it is done steps in, asks you to just hold your arms out, goes around you a couple of times, puts a pin here and a pin there and a few short minutes later, it is done. Now you want to learn to do this on your own. While it does help to have a person assist you, illustrations and instructions also work, mixed with a little imagination and a vivid recall of women in saris... and there you have it! A new look for a new you!”



**1** This sari is draped counter-clockwise. Start by making a knot on the right side of the abdomen with the upper corner of the *mundi* and the upper border, after passing it around the waist.

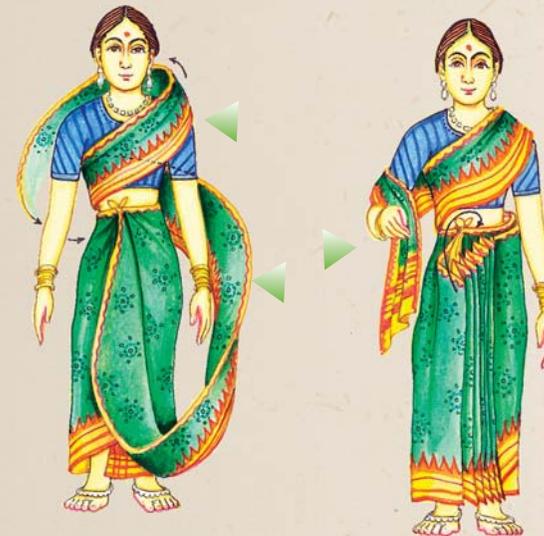
All *nivi* saris start from the same basis, with little differences when tucking the pleats. All modern saris require six yards of cloth. If a petticoat is worn, an alternative to tying a knot for the closing is to tuck the upper corner of the *mundi* in the petticoat on the right side of the abdomen.



**2** Take the upper border, pass it and tuck it around the waistline counter-clockwise, making a small pleat first on the left hip, and then on the right hip. Finally tuck the upper border over the middle or the left side of the abdomen (depending on whether you want the front pleats to fall straight or in a fanlike shape).

Most women tuck the pleats over the right side of the abdomen, so that they fall in the middle, but others tuck them in the middle, their fall being over the left side. If the pleats are to fall really straight, the first and last ones should be larger, and a small pleat should be made on the right hip before the main pleats, toward the right.

**3** Pass the sari around the body once, let it fall and take the *pallav* to drape the *mundanai*. It is essential not to follow our instinct to drape the sari from one end to the other, since the front pleats—the most characteristic part of *nivi* saris—are made with the cloth left between the drape of the sari's closing and its *mundanai*.



**4** Take the *pallav*, either pleated in height or by its upper corner, pass it (at the waistline level), across the back and just under the right arm (in the armpit). Throw it from under the right arm to over the left shoulder, pulling it long enough to be able to come again across the back, under the right arm and to the left side of the abdomen.

**5** Once the *mundanai* is draped around the upper part of the body, a length of sari should be falling in front, between the closing (or the tucking) and the drape of the *mundanai* at its tightest. Take the upper border of this part and pleat it towards the inside, starting from that which is closest to the closing. Once the whole length is pleated, tuck it over the abdomen, pleats towards the left.

The length of the *mundanai* is determined by the way each woman likes to drape it. Some let the *pallav* fall from the shoulder only to the waistline in the back. Others leave it down to their feet. What I have described here is the way most ordinary women wear it on usual days, when they tuck the *pallav* back in the closing over the left side of the abdomen. There is no absolute rule for the drape of the *pallav*; it is only a question of personal taste. Two common styles are shown below.



ART BY A. MANIVEL

# Sari's Unlikely Savior

How a French anthropologist, happening upon an unusual sari, rescued dozens of Indian drapes from extinction

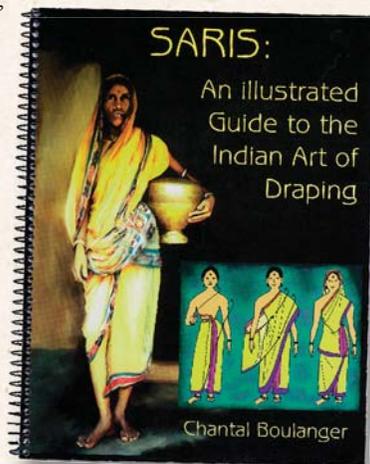


**Job well done:** The exhibition team poses at the end of opening day. Guest curator Chantal Boulanger is in center. Student curator Susheela Hoeffler stands third from left, exhibit designer Jean Ross second from left and Hazel Lutz is second from right.

BY SHIKHA MALAVIYA, MINNESOTA

IT IS A BLUSTERY, COLD AFTERNOON AS I MAKE MY WAY TO the Goldstein Gallery and the University of Minnesota's School of Apparel and Design. Opening the auditorium door, I make out the silhouettes of roughly 200 people focused on a slide of a Tamil woman whose sari wraps around her knees and divides in the middle, a common style among rural working women. The lights turn on, and in the front of the auditorium a petite, blond-haired woman dressed in a navy blue silk sari deftly demonstrates that very style from the slide on a volunteer while explaining its method in a lilting French accent. The audience stares in awe as anthropologist Chantal Boulanger proceeds to unravel the mysteries of sari draping.

The sari, a versatile female garment of ancient Indian origin, has enthralled and mystified many in its variety of texture, design, size and draping style. While numerous scholars document the intricacies of the sari's myriad colors, fabrics and patterns, few, if any, have closely examined draping styles. Chantal Boulanger hopes to change that. Boulanger is the author of *Saris: An Illustrated Guide to the Indian Art of Draping*. In her book, Chantal documents and lucidly illustrates more than 100 sari drapes, which she divides loosely into families and sub-families where possible, based on certain basic draping techniques. By doing so, Boulanger is the first scholar to define the art of sari draping and give its study a legitimacy that goes beyond mere fashion.



Boulanger's book came to life in an exhibition presented by the University of Minnesota's Goldstein Gallery January 25–March 1, 1998, aptly called "The Indian Sari: Draping Bodies, Revealing Lives." It was the first sari exhibition to accentuate draping techniques rather than fabric texture or design aspects.

For Chantal, it all began in 1992 when a unique sari drape at a wedding in South India sparked her interest. "I saw a drape with pleats on the side and its border in the back. I asked how to do it, but no one knew." Having studied Tamil temple priests for the past fifteen years, Chantal encountered various sari drapes in her field work, but never imagined they would one day become the object of her study. A trip to a research center in Pondicherry turned up little information on the "wedding sari" drape, and her inquiries to Tamil women followed suit. Finally, an old woman identified the mystery sari as a drape worn by peasant women from the region of Tondaimandalam, in Tamil Nadu. Many young women no longer wore such styles because they didn't want to be identified as a peasant or a lower caste. Chantal realized that many of these drapes—at times intricate, functional, and in most cases symbolic of religion and social status—carried a certain part of Indian women's history, and that it would vanish without a trace if not recorded soon.

Zigzagging across the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal from 1990 to 1997, Chantal visited big cities and remote villages. Taking notes and photos of diverse sari drapes was a constant ritual, even if it meant stopping women on the street. But this wasn't enough to cognize intricacies of the wrapping art. "I realized the only way to remember these saris was to try them again and again," Chantal shared with HINDUISM TODAY in 1998. She practiced until she got them right, and wore saris under every possible circumstance to personally experience how saris work in daily life. "Whenever Indian women taught me how to wear a sari, they missed essential steps I had to discover on my own." Secrets such as knotting a sari instead of just tucking it into a petticoat came with trial and error. Now a bona fide expert in more than eighty drapes, Boulanger is an inspiration to most of us Hindu women who barely know a handful.

**Dissection:** As Chantal organized her information, she realized that most sari drapes could be categorized into families. On grouping various drapes, she found the necessity of a glossary to identify each part of a sari. "Every sari starts with tying it tightly, whether on the waist or chest. So I decided to call it the closing." Boulanger enlisted words from Sanskrit and Tamil because "I couldn't just write, 'tie this end to that end.'" As a result, she terms the part of the sari from which the drape begins, *mundi*, and the part thrown over the shoulder, *pallav*. The main part of the sari is the body. The edges are the upper and lower borders.

A "how-to" book on draping: All the studies on Indian clothing, Chantal points out, have ignored "the extraordinary precision and care that have been devoted to draping in its many forms." Her book, self-illustrated, shows step-by-step instructions on how to master over 80 drapes.

While Chantal created a working glossary of the sari, she feels most successful in having arranged the sari into families. Studies that preceded her work grouped drapes according to region or state, so she initially followed suit. But as her research progressed, she realized that draping styles cross regions. By focusing on method instead, she found that most sari drapes could fit into four main families [see page 29]. Many drapes overlapped families, indicating migration of a group from one region to another—and some saris were unique and did not fit within any family—but the grouping of saris revealed many things. "I saw dhoti styles worn mainly by the brahmins," shares Boulanger, "while *veshti*-style drapes appeared on other classes." In this context, Boulanger applauds the modern nivi drape, with its pleats in front and *pallav* over the left shoulder, calling it the egalitarian sari because, she enthuses, "It crosses boundaries of class and caste, making all women equal in the eyes of others."

Charmed by the sari's visual appeal and social context, Chantal dreamed of a sari exhibition. But as she pitched the idea to friends and colleagues, they urged her to write a book to supplement it. Accepting the suggestion, Chantal labored five years and finished the project in 1997. Her biggest challenge was creating more than 700 illustrations which she personally drew and redrew until satisfied they were clear and accurate. The exhibition of Boulanger's work would marry the aesthetic importance of drapes with related cultural implications.

**Drape display:** The Goldstein exhibit rendered sari draping with

such authenticity that it provoked visitors to feel transported to India. Call it coincidence or kismet that student curators Hazel Lutz and Susheela Hoeffler had both sojourned in India, and Jean Ross, responsible for exhibit design, had visited India and Pakistan. Lutz and Hoeffler primarily focused on drape families and technique, but also featured saris in various contexts, such as photographs, a wall of artwork (including a sketch by world-renowned artist Jamini Roy), a display of blouse styles, Indian dolls dressed in saris, and hanging saris as well, because as Hoeffler observed, "It's hard to visualize the mass of a sari as a flat piece of cloth when it is draped on the body."

Lutz (who co-authored *The Visible Self: Global Perspectives on Dress, Culture, and Society*), saw the exhibition as a way to "fully appreciate the complexity of drapes, and drop stereotypes. We are showing that there is innovation within the confines of a sari, and tradition is fashionable as well as practical." Ross added a rural touch to the exhibition by painting the walls saffron and the top with a red, stenciled border, reminiscent of villages in India and Pakistan. With Boulanger's work as their focus, and their individual experiences in India to draw from, Lutz, Hoeffler and Ross turned an intimate gallery into a colorful Indian oasis of art and savoir-faire.

The exhibition drew over 200 on opening day, some out of curiosity, others to learn. Regardless of motives, visitors left the exhibit with fresh knowledge. As Mani Subramaniam, native of India and business professor at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management commented, "On my next visit to India, I'll definitely be looking at saris more carefully, even though I have seen them all my life." A fitting compliment for Chantal Boulanger and her work, and for women worldwide who make the sari an integral part of their lives.

Chantal Boulanger Publishing website: [www.devi.net](http://www.devi.net)

## The Full Six Yards

Feminine, graceful, elegant are a few words that come to mind when you hear the word sari. The modern sari has stepped beyond tradition to become a fashion statement. Designer saris, and blouses too, have made their mark beyond India's borders, draped in ways that seem very fashionable but are actually like how they were worn very long ago in India. The six yards has come a full circle, it appears. For many women, their very first attempt to wear a sari would have been when they were five or six years old. You guessed it! They want to be like their mother. Imagine wrapping a full length sari around that tiny body! As she grows, the little girl gets other inputs, and these days more often than not, the sari is looked down



upon as "not in." College is the time when the sari regains its stature on special occasions, especially weddings. Grandparents fawning over their "little big lady" is a sweet moment to witness. Many city girls grow up never having worn a sari. So much material going around (God knows how!) in hot weather. The pallu slipping off, the waist being visible, stepping on the pleats and having the sari come off are but a few mini-nightmares she would have to overcome before gaining the courage to make the first attempt. Once bitten, totally smitten is usually what happens. Rarely does someone say, "Not for me." The magic of the sari begins to work! The way one feels in a sari can only be experienced. It cannot be described. Try it. You will like it!

Sheela Venkatakrisnan, Chennai

# Heralding the Drapes of India

Excerpts from Chantal's book, one woman's fashion odyssey

BY CHANTAL BOULANGER

**F** ALL THE ARTS THAT HAVE FLOURISHED IN INDIA, one of the least known and studied is that of draping. This is all the more extraordinary because it is a unique art and craft which offers special insights into the ethnology of Indian and Southeast Asian peoples and the archaeology of the periods in which it developed. At its heart is Hinduism, whose preference for unstitched clothing, for both religious and social reasons, fostered the growth and development of the sari. Although knowledge of sewn garments has existed since prehistoric times, these were mostly reserved for warriors and kings, and never achieved the popularity of drapes. Therefore, the Indian culture developed the art of wrapping a piece of cloth around the body to a degree that far surpassed that of any other people. Unfortunately, this art has never been fully studied. Books on saris usually show a maximum of 10 or 15 drapes, and too few explain how to drape them. Most of these studies have been done by men who have never experimented with the drapes themselves.

When I was studying Tamil temple priests, I learned that the women draped their saris in a special way, using a piece of cloth nine yards long. It is a well-known fact that Tamil brahmins, such as the Coorg, Bengali or Marwari women, have their own peculiar way of wearing saris. Yet, nobody had noticed the way Tamil peasant or Kannadiga laborers draped theirs—and neither had I.

Having discovered that sari draping had never been properly researched, I decided to record as many drapes as I could find. As I traveled throughout South, Central and Eastern India, I realized that the whole subject was far too big for my own researches to be exhaustive. I hope, however, that this work will lead others to carry on this research all over India. Apart from the few famous saris recorded in the past, I found a large number of drapes, most often typical of a caste or a small region. Only worn by old women, the majority of them will be forgotten in a few decades.

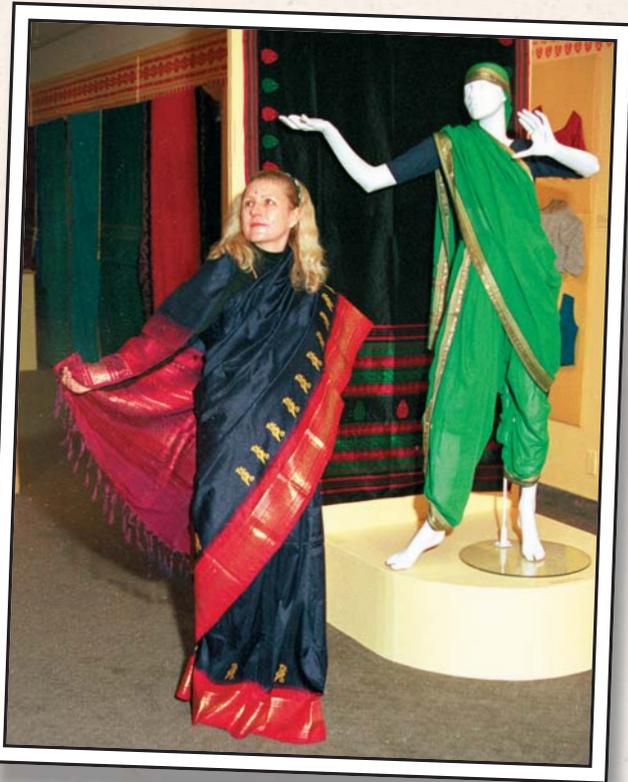
The modern drape, often called *nivi* sari, is now worn by most Indian women. Few even bother to learn from their grandmothers how to attire themselves traditionally. This is especially true with the lower castes, where girls refuse to dress in a way that clearly displays their humble origins.

"Show me how you drape, and I will tell you who you are" could be the motto for this book. Drapes are closely linked with the ethnic origin of the wearer, and in Chapter Seven I detail the conclusions that I reached from this study.

I started this research totally unaware of its wide implications (not to mention the time and effort!). Thinking that I would save a few drapes from fast-approaching oblivion, I discovered a totally unexplored world whose meaning had never been considered.

Researching drapes requires travelling through as many villages and regions as possible, looking at everybody to identify precisely what they wear, and asking everyone if they know or have seen different ways of draping. Once I found an unknown drape, I not only saw how it was produced from the person who usually wore it, but I also learned how to do it myself. It was very important for me to be able to wear it. Since this might seem a little extreme, here is an anecdote which will illustrate the necessity.

I always thought I knew how to wear a *kaccha* sari, such as



ELIZABETH PATRICK

Anthropological modeling: Chantal wore them all

worn in North Karnataka and Maharashtra. All I had to do was to drape a modern sari with nine yards, so as to have many pleats in front. Then I had to take the lower border of the middle pleat and tuck it in the back. When I went to the region where these saris were worn, I did not bother at first to learn how to drape them. Problems started when I decided to go out wearing a *kaccha* sari. It was in Goa and I went to a Hindu temple, where I was clearly conspicuous. Most people appreciated my efforts, but at one point, a woman, seeing me, shouted something in Konkani and everybody laughed. My assistant was reluctant to translate, but eventually he explained that the woman had said: "The way she wears her sari, all the boys are going to fall in love with her!"

I understood that something was wrong with my draping and immediately I sent my assistant to find someone who could teach me how to wear it properly. A few minutes later, a woman showed me many of the finer details which prevent this kind of drape from crumpling up and backwards, revealing the thighs.

I have travelled quite extensively through Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. I have also visited Goa, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal, although not as thoroughly. A short trip in Assam convinced me that there is much to learn in this area. Exhaustive research

would have meant visiting almost every village and caste in India, a task far too difficult for me. This may again sound a little extreme, but many drapes are worn by small castes, and may only be found in a village or two. For instance, the Kappulu sari, one of the most interesting and elegant drapes I have found, is worn only by old women of the Kappulu caste.

I have asked many women to teach me how to drape their saris. Most of them were unknown to me, and I had simply met them in the street. None refused and every one of them, from the educated Brahmin to the illiterate tribeswoman, understood what I was doing and why. They were all pleased with my work and entrusted to me their knowledge with pride.

The woman who taught me the *pullaiyar* sari was about four feet tall, and so old that no one in the village knew her age. She was illiterate and spoke a dialect of Tamil I hardly understood. But I could see she was happy to give me what she clearly perceived as part of her culture and identity. When I left she took my hand and said, "Go and tell others who we are." From her village, I walked several miles through the jungle to the nearest road and eventually came back to France, keeping the photograph I had taken of her as a treasure.

**Sources:** To help complete my field research, I used information provided by other scholars in books or orally. For antique drapes, the work of Anne-Marie Loth, *La vie publique et privée dans l'Inde ancienne, fascicule VII, les costumes* (1979), is the

most detailed and complete book available on draping. For Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Nepal, I relied on information from Linda Lynton-Singh [see her book below], who is a textile specialist and who had learned several drapes from Northeast India (her husband is from Bihar). Thambal Yaima showed me the two styles draped in Manipur. Mrs. Ruklanthi Jayatissa helped me with the saris worn in Sri Lanka. For Madhya Pradesh, I also studied very closely the book *Saris of India: Madhya Pradesh*, by Chishti and Samyal (1989). I tried all the drapes myself. For tribal saris, I relied on the book *The Tribals of India through the Lens of Sunil Janah* (1993).

I don't believe that these drapes should simply be recorded and then confined to dusty libraries in the future. Drapes have many advantages over stitched clothes, especially when beauty is an important value. Saris are much more practical than we think, especially since they can be so easily modified. I made this work for anybody who wants, at least once, to wear a drape, any kind of drape. Draping is an art. I hope this book will help it take its place as a heritage of mankind.

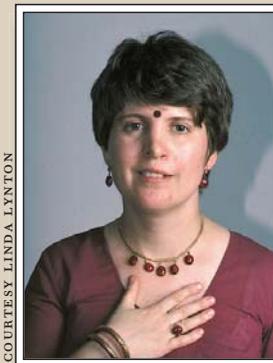
.....  
Chantal died suddenly in Africa of a brain aneurism on December 27, 2004, the day after the Asian Tsunami. She was cremated in London, and her ashes were spread by her husband Peter Maloney on the shore at Mahabalipuram in Tamil Nadu, India.

## Styles, Patterns, History & Techniques

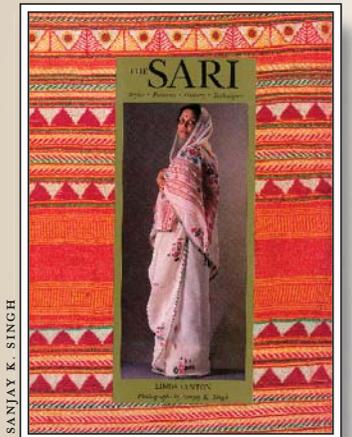
Linda Lynton brings us a lavish sourcebook

**L**INDA LYNTON-SINGH, A PROFESSIONAL WRITER, BECAME CURIOUS ABOUT SARIS when, upon marrying Sanjay Singh, a native of India, she was welcomed by his extended family with gifts of saris. "I heard stories about local saris and hoped to find more stories about saris from other regions of India, so I looked for books, but didn't find many," Linda recalls. That lack of information on saris inspired five years of research and an expansive tome—*The Sari: Styles, Patterns, History, Techniques*. By concentrating on region, Linda captures the sari's beauty and complexity in vivid detail through ethnic art, historical facts, motifs and patterns, all which integrate and represent their geographical surroundings. "Most of the world uses tailored clothing, and here is a culture that doesn't," explains Linda. "The whole emphasis is on the cloth itself, how it's woven, how it's decorated, how it's colored, and that alone makes it interesting."

Particularly notable in the book are textiles from groups, such as Gujarati indigo-dyed saris that heretofore were never illustrated and documented. While Chantal Boulanger's book is a practical manual on draping techniques, Linda surveys the sari as a prized fabric, focusing on its design. From this perspective, Linda documents forty types of saris with photographs and diagrams to illustrate complexity in patterns, weaves and colors. She also includes a comprehensive glossary of textile terms, in English and Indian languages. An exhaustive and scholarly work, 208 pages, with photographs by her husband, Sanjay K. Singh.

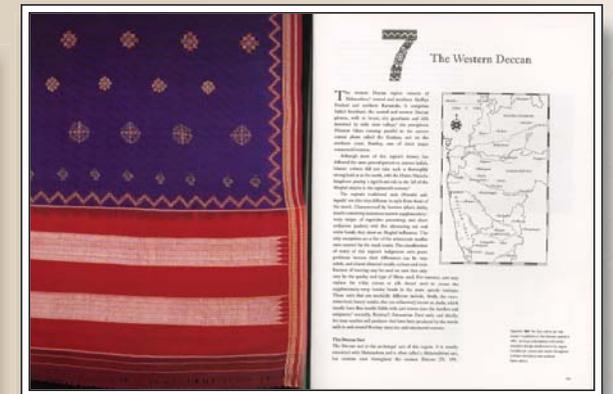


COURTESY LINDA LYNTON



SANJAY K. SINGH

(from above) The cover of the book; a sample spread, focusing on the Western Deccan; the author, Linda Lynton



# A Tribute to Indian Dress

Fashion that has survived over 5,000 years

BY THE EDITOR

FASHION IN CLOTHING IS A KIND OF LIVING ARCHEOLOGY, a wash-and-wear history. It tells us much about who we are and where we came from, and maybe not a little about where we're going. Modern clothes tell a story of simple pragmatism. Throughout the world, clothing has become more spartan, more practically polyesterish, less elaborate. Men, especially, have made some dismally utilitarian decisions about their wardrobe. Around 1666 the present-day suit was first stitched in France and England, and by 1872 it was widespread enough in India to be fiercely satirized. Somewhere in that era, men from all cultures made the not-so-natty decision to abandon other attire in favor of the egalitarian grey suit, white shirt and necktie.

Men around the world lost their national and personal character when they adopted the Western business suit. Japanese men, who once looked so very Nipponese in their graceful robes, now look like Europeans. South Americans, once so distinctive in their hand-woven costumes, now look like the Japanese who look like the Europeans. Indian men, who 200 years ago had regional raiment that was earthy and elaborately colored, now look like the South Americans, who look like the Japanese, who look like the Europeans. Look at the marriage photo to the right. She's elegant, and he is—there's a word in the world of fashion—boring!

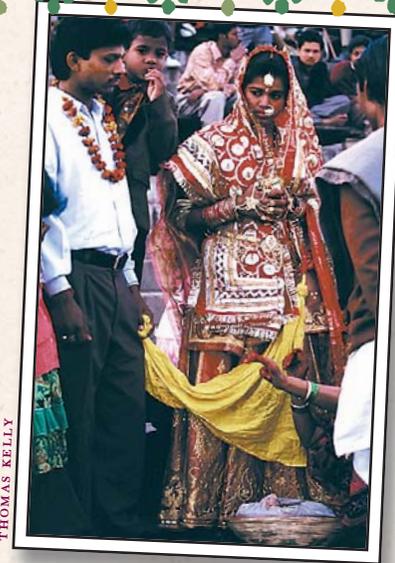
I know of what I speak. Visitors to our Hawaiian editorial offices

know our monastic staff is not sitting at their MacBook Pros in jeans and T-shirts. We are swathed in saffron and ochre cotton—hand-spun, hand-woven and unsewn—draped in the old South Indian style. I can never forget the first time, three decades ago, that a Jaffna, Sri Lanka, elder helped me wrap a veshti, and then took us to the bustling main market-place. Every step was terrorizing, the unwieldy garment threatening to fall, with me cinching up the subversive sarong several times a minute, both hands never more than a few swift inches from my waist. How awkward I felt, and certainly looked. As time passed and the fabric was tamed, I learned how refined one feels in such attire.

**A single stretch of fabric that comes in a range of textures and patterns—the sari is creativity at its best.**

It was like floating, living in your spirit more than in your body. To this day, I only feel comfortable and soulful in these traditional robes. Jaffna is, in fact, one of the few sanctuaries where Western pants and shirt are disdained, and most men, including politicians, go around in their *veshtis*.

Indian women who wear saris know the sad truth of all this. They have watched their sisters go the way of men, wearing dresses that look like the dresses that every dressmaker dresses her customers in. Okay, women at least have wide options in type and



THOMAS KELLY

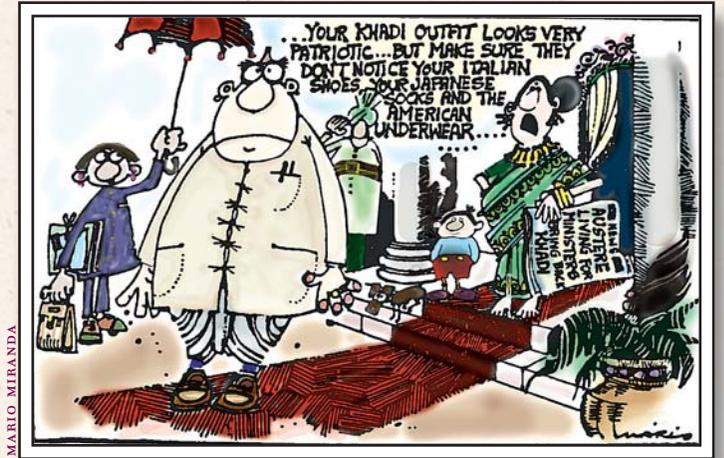
fabric and color. And that is good. But still, women in Japan look like women in Australia, who look like women in China, who all look like women in Europe. There are few *kimonos* left to announce the passing of a Japanese lady and few *ao dai* to tell us that the woman shopping over there is Vietnamese.

So, we pay tribute to India's women and Hindu women abroad who have not relinquished their elegant dress. They alone have preserved traditional attire, for the sari is the only major apparel to have survived the last 500 years and to remain elegant and voguish daily wear in the 21st century. That's quite an accomplishment. No wonder the Western world has been smitten by the sari, and every woman with a smidgen of sartorial savvy wants one.

Exploring the web on saris, I found this gem, written by Shantipriya Kurada in 1994: "The beauty of the sari never ceases to amaze me. There is something strikingly feminine about it. Flowing like sheer poetry, graceful in every contour and fold, it's a fascinating mixture of tradition and style. A single stretch of fabric that comes in a range of textures and patterns, the sari is creativity at its best. A cotton sari, charmingly simple, starched and perfectly in place, has such a natural feel. Chiffons and crepes add a glamorous touch. Fragile, utterly soft and delicate, they create an aura of fine elegance. Weddings come alive with the grandeur of silk saris. Painstakingly handwoven to the last detail, the brocade created to perfection by skilled hands, each silk sari is a work of art. A sari has such a special place in every girl's life. It all starts with wrapping around mother's sari, playfully and clumsily tripping on its edges. Then there is the first sari you wear, perhaps to a college function, looking self-conscious and achingly innocent. And, of course, the precious wedding sari that's fondly preserved and cherished for a lifetime. In a world of changing fashions, the sari has stood the test of time. There is something almost magical about it, for it continues to symbolize the romantic image of the Indian woman—vulnerable, elusive and tantalizingly beautiful."

Historians say the sari can be traced back more than 5,000 years! Sanskrit literature from the Vedic period insists that pleats

be part of every woman's dress. The pleats, say the texts, must be tucked in at the waist, the front or back, so that the presiding deity, Vayu, the God of wind, can whisk away any evil influence that may strike the woman. Colors, too, are ruled by tradition. Yellow, green and red are festive and auspicious, standing for fertility. Red, evoking passion, is a bridal color and part of rituals associated with pregnancy. Blue evokes the life-giving force of



MARIO MIRANDA

the monsoon. Pale cream is soothing and represents bridal purity. A married Hindu woman will not wear a completely white sari, which is reserved for brahmacharinis and widows.

The sari culturally links the women of India. Whether they are wealthy or poor, svelte or plump, the sari gives them a shared experience, a way in which they are all sisters, forging a link that binds them across all borders, even geographical ones. Women wearing saris in Durban, Delhi or Detroit are part of a social oneness that is nearly eternal and which may, it seems, last yet another thousand years. Jai Hindu women!

## How I Came to Be the "Lady in the Sari"

My personal path of fashion self-discovery took me back to our unbeatable Indian dress

BY KAVITA DASWANI

LAST YEAR, I HAD TO MAKE A WORK RELATED TRIP TO the Italian city of Vicenza. There I was introduced to an elderly gentleman. "Ah," he said, clasping my hand. "You have been described to me as the lady in the sari. Why are you not wearing one?" In my functional beige pantsuit, I suddenly felt slightly ashamed. I had gotten off a plane to come straight to the meeting. I didn't think a sari would be appropriate. This man's perception was not misplaced. Over the past few years, I have made numerous trips to Europe and the US in my capacity as a fashion writer. When I was much younger, I thought the way to shine was to wear a little black designer dress, like all fashionable women. Then I realized that I had adopted an urban uniform that wasn't really mine.

So I learned how to drape a sari. As a Hindu Sindhi girl brought

up in the bosom of a semi-traditional trading family in Hong Kong, this sari business should have come naturally. But it didn't. I was cajoled into wearing one during family weddings after relatives insisted it would "look nice." But I would stand, frustrated and impatient, while someone would tie and pleat and fold the fabric on me. Then, I carried the sari like a burden.



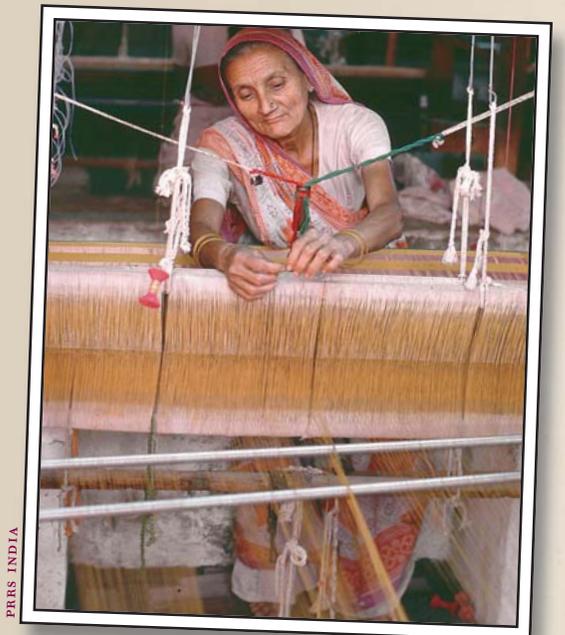
possibly rival the elegance of a Kanchipuram sari, all handwoven silken threads and flecks of gold?

So now, whenever I travel, I pack a tiny bag filled with a

few saris, some glass bangles, bindis and a shimmering *kundan* set. At formal dinners in glamorous Western capitals, where low-cut dresses and fanciful frocks are the norm, the effects of me and my sari are fascinating. There is an immediate sense of respect. I am often greeted by a halting "Namaste" instead of a two-cheek Euro-style kiss. People suddenly, surprisingly, become rather tender.

At an outdoor cafe in Florence once, in a chiffon sari with a colorful tie-dye pattern, I walked past French fashion designer Christian Lacroix. He stopped his conversation to stare at every fold in the fabric and thread. Wanda Ferragamo, owner of the Italian fashion empire that bears her name, made her way across two gilded salons to tell me that I was "the most elegant woman in the room." At another party in Paris, actress Tracy Ulman peered at my bindi, cast her eyes over my rich ivory silk and gold sari and asked, "Are you someone rich and famous I should know about?" And, most memorably, at a charity benefit in Los Angeles last summer, where Hollywood celebrities competed with one another in their sexy, revealing dresses, I stood apart in a pink and green silk brocade sari. A young American man approached me, looked at the bikini-clad dancers on high platforms around him, pointed at my sari and said, "Now that is how all women should be dressed. I think the sari is God's gift to womanhood."

So the next time I saw the man in Vicenza, I did not disappoint him and arrived in a dark-hued cotton sari. The look of appreciation on his face was worth more than all the designer dresses in the world.



PERS INDIA

A timeless art: The contemplative craft of weaving