

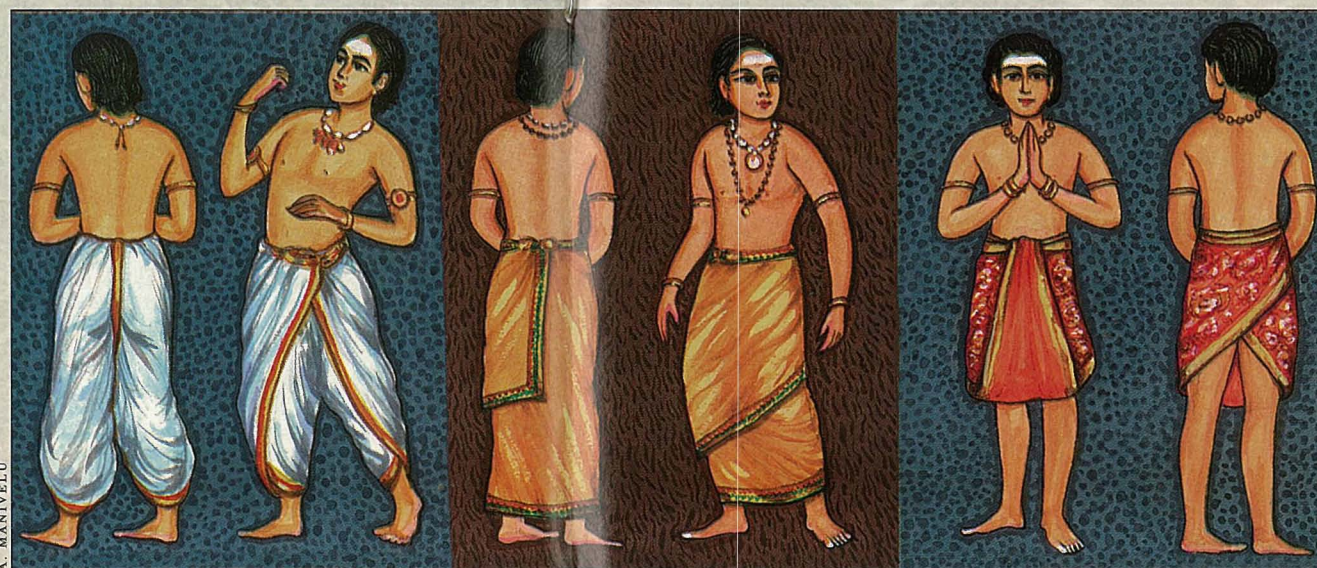
Fabric Begets Fashion

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

WITH TUCKS AND PLEATS, FLOWING FOLDS AND KNOTTED ties, Indians have for tens of centuries fashioned impeccable apparel from unstitched lengths of 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 nation's costume has remained in vogue longer—over 3,500 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 suits and scuttled to museum displays or restricted to ceremonial occasions. In striking contrast, the sari is now the rave in big-city clothing cliques found 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 of an attire which has transcended time's trendiness.

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 Deepavali 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.”

The sanctity of the sari begins with its weaving. Sanskrit Vedic texts, including the *Yajur Veda*, contain detailed descriptions of methods of weaving, yarn spinning and even shepherding. A well-known verse from the *Rig Veda Samhita*, 10.130.1, correlates weaving with the performance of the *havana* ritual. It proclaims, “Sacrifice resembles a loom with threads extended this way and that, composed of innumerable rituals. Behold now the fathers weaving the fabric; seated on the outstretched loom. ‘Lengthwise! Crosswise! They cry.’”



Androgynous attire: (clockwise from top left) Three distinctive women's sari styles: the “Tamil Telegu Brahmin” sari, the rare Kappulu and the most famous sari in the kaccha style, the Marwari. Men have a variety of draping styles as well, including the unique short Koli drape, the Toda tribe's veshti and the Chettiyar dhoti

Dhamija stresses that “Textile terminology is closely linked with philosophical thought. It is not by chance that technical terms play a basic role in early philosophy. For example, *grantha*, *sutra*, *tantra* and *nibandha* originate from textile techniques. The whole of ancient Indian scholarship is reflected in the simple but skilled manipulation of the warp and weft of a loom.”

What has saved the sari from extinction is its exceptional quality of being ever open to the creative inspiration of its wearer. Whereas tailored clothes are strictly one-way-forward, up or down, either casual or formal, the sari stretches far beyond such limitations. A single unstitched weave can become an entire wardrobe, all depending upon the chosen method of draping. No other garb has such

thropologist Chantal Boulanger [see page 23] published her landmark work, *Saris: An Illustrated Guide to the Indian Art of Draping*. She describes the subject as a “totally unexplored world whose meaning had never been considered.” Her efforts are a significant step towards categorizing and preserving sari draping styles, which are known only by a few elderly ladies in each region. The following overview is drawn from her work.

BY CHANTAL BOULANGER, FRANCE

THE MOST ANCIENT RECORDED INDIAN DRAPE, EXCLUDING those of the Harappa civilization, is a *dhoti* [see page 30 for definitions]. 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 basically draped in two parts. The *veshti* (from the Sanskrit verb *vesh*, meaning “to cover, to wrap around, 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 the two southernmost states of India, and also by women in Kerala. It is a common drape in many countries of South-East Asia.

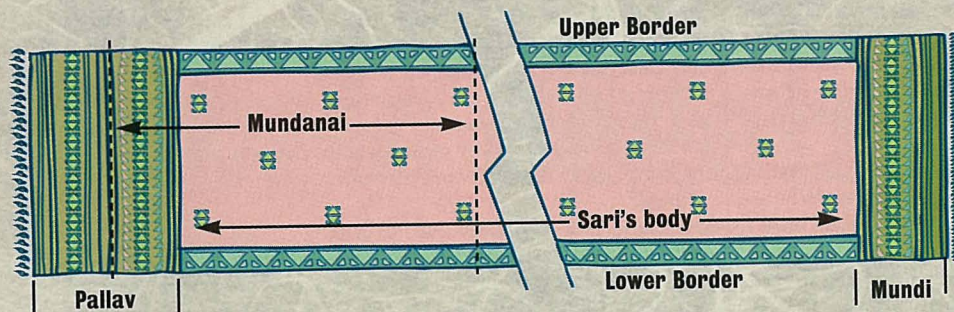
It was probably not earlier than the 19th century when women joined both pieces of cloth, thus creating many elaborate new drapes. The draping of Tamil saris did not change much from that of the *veshti-mundanai*, except that this new fashion had one big inconvenience. When walking, the sari was pulled 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 that they follow certain basic ways of being draped. There are four main families, with sub-families and a few smaller families. The *dhoti* family includes men's *dhotis*, women's *dhotis*, 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 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 Pak-

a range of possibilities. Remarkably, however, the sophisticated styles and techniques for wrapping saris that have been developed by India's ethnic groups over the centuries have been virtually ignored by scholars. While there are many detailed studies of India's textile and sari making industries, some of which delve into the religious usage of the fabrics, only one recent study has focused primarily upon the diverse ways saris are worn. In 1997, French an-



istan, not to speak of the Indian communities living abroad. In Rajasthan, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, where stitched clothes are traditionally worn, *nis* 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, since 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 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*, but sometimes they try to introduce new drapes, too. Saris are always best draped with cotton. Once folded and tucked, cotton stays in place, and doesn't require anything to hold. 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.

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 fits her perfectly. Often it is not the modern sari. Just as in painting or playing a musical instrument, it takes training and practice to wear a sari perfectly.

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 USA; *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 USA; *Clothing Matters: Dress And Identity In India*, by Emma Tarlo, University Of Chicago Press, 5801 South Ellis Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60637 USA.

Draping devotees: (left to right) Youth at a Rajasthan fair rejoice; a Vama fabrics fashion model displays the opulent refinement of their elegant weaves; Kodava women of Coorg district wear a distinctive and unique drape; a Delhi newlywed wears red

Definitions

Choli: a usually tight-fitting blouse
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, which is thrown over the upper body. *Mundanai* is a Tamil word designating a separate piece of cloth used as an upper-body drape. By extension, Tamil women often use this word for the part of the sari which is draped over the upper body, including the *pallav*.

Mundi: a Tamil word meaning *pallav*, or border; another *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 South Indian 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 vary from 2 to 9 yards, and **height**, varying from 2 to 4 feet.

The Gond-family Sari

Of the more than eighty styles of sari drapes documented by Chantal Boulanger, the Gond sari was chosen to present here due to its simplicity, its relative uniqueness in not requiring a choli, and to offer a drape which is perhaps unknown to most of our readers.

BY CHANTAL BOULANGER

Usually a family of saris coincides with a definable group of ethnic or local communities. For instance, Tamil saris are worn by non-Brahmin Tamil castes. With tribal drapes, however, it is hard to relate the styles of a family to a specific set of tribes. The Coorgs, the Pullaiyars and the Hallaki Gaudas wear similar saris, but they differ in culture, physical appearance and social status and dwell in climates ranging from a hot seacoast to a cold mountain top, although they all live in Southwestern India.

This disparity is also true of the Gond family of saris. The Gonds are a tribe living mostly in Eastern Maharashtra and Southern Madhya Pradesh. Their women wear a sari of coarse, thick cotton with sometimes heavily embroidered *pallavs*. Its length is about five yards. It is usually worn without *choli* or petticoat. Some communities wearing these saris are very far apart from each other. They do not speak the same language or share anything in common. One of them is not even Indian. Yet their drapes are clearly related to the Gond sari, of which many variations are found on women of all castes living in what was the Gond kingdom.

Gond saris are also distinct because they require two elaborate *pallavs*, or, as with the Koli sari, no marked *pallav* at all. Since one *pallav* is draped over the left shoulder and the other makes the

closing on top of the sari, both ends of the cloth have an equal importance.

The guide to draping a Gond sari: The cloth of these styles is first arranged on the left shoulder, falling across the front upper part of the body. It is then draped clockwise from the shoulder to around the hips. The closing in most of these saris is typical of this family—a knot is simply tucked in the upper border as it passes under the right arm, coming from the left shoulder and going around the waistline. For this style, you can easily manage with a four-yard sari.

- 1) Throw the *pallav* and the long *mundanai* to the back, over the left shoulder. Leave just enough cloth in front to make the closing: pass the upper border (towards the *mundi*) across the chest from the left shoulder to under the right arm. Pass it around the waistline clockwise (in the back, under the left arm, across the abdomen).
- 2) Make a knot with the upper corner of the *mundi* and tuck it in the upper border that already passes under the right arm (coming from the shoulder and going to the back). Pull the lower border so that it falls in front from the left shoulder to the right foot (under the *mundi*). The *mundi* should be in front of the legs, its edge falling vertically along the right leg. Most of the sari is gathered and drops in the back from the left shoulder.
- 3) Gather the sari on the left shoulder, making informal pleats. Pass the sari across the back from the left shoulder to under the right arm. Notice that the *mundi* is draped clockwise, while the *pallav* goes counter-clockwise.
- 4) Bring the upper border of the *mundanai* under the right arm and draw it across the chest.
- 5) Pass the remaining cloth under the left arm and across the back, bringing the end-corner up and over the right shoulder.
- 6) Make a knot with the upper corner of the *pallav* and the part of the upper border pulled in front of the right shoulder. Since the cloth is coarse, it makes a big knot.
- 7) Look beautiful!

