INDIAN WOMEN FROM VILLAGE AND CITY 1850-1960

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I HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

India's remarkable history and culture developed in a vast sub-continent enclosed on its northern boundaries by the impressive chain of the Himalaya mountains. Within this area are regions of great geographical diversity — the fertile plains of the Punjab watered by the Indus river, the barren deserts of Sind and Rajasthan, the dry plateau of the Deccan encircled by hill ranges, and the Tamil plain of the south. There are corresponding variations in climate — bitterly freezing winters in the Himalayas, extremes of hot and cold in the northern plains and constant heat in the Tamil plain.

Equally diverse historical and cultural traditions have been preserved without breaking the continuity which makes India one of the oldest existing civilisations. Evidence of a sophisticated urban life can be traced back to the 3rd millennium B.C. in the extensive city sites excavated at Harappa and Mohenjo Daro with regularly planned streets of spacious brick houses grouped around a fortified citadel. The inhabitants used copper and bronze implements, attractive painted pottery, liked realistically modelled figurines of clay and metal, and, from the evidence of seals inscribed in pictographic script, were literate. The second millennium B.C. saw the establishment of the basic organisation of Hindu society and the composition of the Rig Vedas — one of the most sacred of Hindu texts which are still chanted at religious ceremonies today.

While Hinduism was to remain firmly rooted in Indian society, following centuries saw the rise of powerful kingdoms and the introduction of new religions notably Buddhism and Islam. The philosophical teachings of Gautama Buddha were adopted by the rulers of the north Indian kingdom of Magadha in the 5th century B.C. and flourished until the 3rd century A.D. Typical of the Buddhist monuments of this period are the stupas — stone constructions based on the hemispherical form of earthen burial mounds, to which monastic and teaching complexes were annexed. The great stupa of Amaravati (c. 200 A.D.) was decorated with panels of relief carvings narrating the story of the Buddha.
Hinduism and Buddhism, however, co-existed, and the next great power was that of the Hindu Guptas who ruled from the mid-4th to mid-7th century A.D. gradually extending their domains to include all of the north and large areas of south India. During this period some of the finest Indian sculptures — of both Hindu and Buddhist deities — were produced carved in a serene graceful style. After the decline of the Guptas Indian history became increasingly complex as dynasties followed each other in rapid and often confusing succession in different parts of the country. During the medieval period, for example Hindu culture flourished in the Deccan and south India while it declined in the north. Another religious influence, that of Islam, came into north India with the conquest in 712 of Sind by the Arabs who continued to attack their eastern neighbours for more than a century. From the 8th to 12th centuries the Pala kings ruled in Bengal and Bihar and were remarkable for their patronage of an esoteric form of Buddhism which spread into Nepal and Tibet where it became the dominant religion. Pala ideas of Buddhism are seen in the distinctive sculptures of elaborately dressed deities precisely carved in hard shining black stone. In the 13th century, however, with the invasion of the Moslem rulers of Ghor, Turkish speaking Afghans, who initiated the period of the Delhi Sultanates (13th-16th centuries), the Hindu and Buddhist powers of north India came to an end. Moslem domination continued with the Mughal empire, whose first ruler Babur defeated the Lodi sultan Ibrahim II in 1526. At the height of their power the Mughals eventually controlled north and central India and much of the south which they ruled from their capital Delhi whose splendid buildings still reflect the brilliance of their culture. By the late 18th century, however, the Mughal empire had declined and its rulers survived as puppet figures, pensioners of the British until the formal establishment of the Raj in 1858 witnessed the abdication of the last emperor.

This long and varied history of India which can only be summarised here was also distinguished by the vitality of its art and culture expressed in magnificent religious and secular architecture and sculpture, varied forms of painting such as Buddhist fresco and sophisticated Mughal court miniatures, intricately fashioned metalwork and jewellery, and a brilliant range of textiles and costume employing all fabrics — cotton, silk, wool — and techniques of decoration — dyeing, printing, painting and embroidery. Knowledge of costume traditions are provided by surviving garments and supplemented by evidence derived from sculpture and painting. The examples on exhibition date from the very last period of Mughal rule through the British Raj until independence.
British interest in India began in the 17th century when the merchants of the newly formed East India Company negotiated trade contacts with the Mughal emperors and only developed seriously as a result of meeting challenges as they arose rather than as a calculated strategy of conquest. The East India Company established its headquarters at Calcutta where its authority was challenged in 1756 by the Nawab of Bengal who wanted to dispossess the British of their holdings. The British retaliated and defeated the Nawab in 1757 at the battle of Plassey which marked a turning point in their policy towards India. From Bengal during the years 1757 to 1850 they gradually extended their control over India by diplomacy and military campaign. By 1805 they had taken all territories south of Delhi and east of Bombay to Bengal, while in 1843 and 1849 respectively they conquered Sind and the Punjab. During this period the last three Mughal emperors — Shah Alam II, Akbar II and Bahadur Shah II — were confined to Delhi ineffective to influence events. The Indian Mutiny of 1857 saw the deposition and exile of Bahadur Shah II and a complete change of administration, as the government of India was transferred by Act of Parliament from the East India Company to the British Crown signifying the beginnings of the Raj. Under the control of a Governor General India was divided into (a) British India under direct rule which encompassed Bengal, Bombay, Madras, the Punjab and the United Provinces extending across the Ganges Plain from Delhi to Bengal and (b) the Native States numbering about six hundred principalities which were governed indirectly by the British through local rulers. British rule formally ended in 1947 with the establishment of the Republics of India and Pakistan.

II HISTORICAL COSTUME

Various sources are available for the study of historical costume. Surviving examples, perishable by definition, date at the earliest from the Mughal period and usually consist of individual garments — coats, dresses, accessories — rather than complete costumes. They may be supplemented by the evidence provided by India’s lively representational arts. Contemporary costumes are worn by the sculptured figures of Hindu and Buddhist deities, while the miniature paintings of Mughal princely courts depict clothes in meticulous detail. In using these secondary sources, however, it is important to understand both stylistic conventions and limitations of the media; for example miniatures are informative about textile patterns and motifs and shapes of garments, while sculpture offers less scope for such detail but can indicate in a systematic manner methods of folding and draping fabric. Literary sources, notably the accounts of European travellers in India, give both descriptions of costume, especially observing detail that was unfamiliar to them, and of the environment in which they were worn. Finally the introduction of photography in the 1840’s through the officers of the Indian Army provided an accurate technique for recording
and studying costume. Following soon after the establishment of topographical and military photography, commercial studios were set up in such cities as Calcutta and Bombay. Photography became extremely popular among Indians especially the princes, with the result that studio portraits of them provide much information on their taste and style in clothes. Using these sources it is possible to trace the complex influences which make Indian historical costume so interesting and diverse. Those which have contributed to the costumes on display have developed from garments introduced by the Moslem Mughals which consist of trousers, long loose robes, full-skirted overdresses and headcoverings varying from caps to all-enveloping veils.
CATALOGUE

1. WOMAN’S COURT COSTUME
   CENTRAL INDIA, MADHYA PRADESH, BHOPAL  c. 1856.

   "The Begum is a woman of about fifty years of age. Her thin face, lighted up by a pair of
   intelligent eyes, expresses with a singular amount of energy that one must be aware of it beforehand
   in order to realise the fact that a woman is before you. The costume itself aids the illusion;
   tight-fitting pantaloons, an embroidered jacket, and a poniard at the belt have as a whole anything
   but a feminine appearance. Her gestures and manners still less remind one of her sex; on the
   contrary they reveal the sovereign and the autocrat accustomed to find everything yield to
   his all powerful will; but I must add at once that this majestic haughtiness lasted only for a few
   moments, and soon gave way to a gracious and winning affability." Louis Rousselet, *India and its
   native princes. Travels in Central India and in the presidencies of Bombay and Bengal*. London
   1876.

   One of the highlights of Louis Rousselet’s leisurely tour of India between 1863 and 1868 was his
   reception on 15th May 1867 by Sikander Begum, the female ruler of Bhopal an important
   Moslem state which had been founded in 1709 by an Afghan adventurer Dost Muhammed Khan
   as a result of the decline of the central power of the Mughal Empire. His association of his wife
   Fatah Bibi in his efforts to establish his kingdom initiated a tradition of active feminine involve-
   ment in politics which culminated in the rule of four women — Qudsia, Sikander, Shah Jahan
   and Sultan Jahan — who controlled Bhopal as independent sovereigns from 1819 to 1926.
   Remarkable in a traditional Moslem environment and certainly unique in India, they based their
   right to rule on a careful interpretation of Koranic doctrine, the absence of suitably qualified
   male candidates, and an ability to maintain good relations with the British who since 1818 had
   established themselves as the dominant power over Bhopal which they classified as a Native State.

   Sikander Begum, who ruled for sixteen years as Regent and for eight years from 1860 to 1868
   as a ruler in her own right, is an interesting example of female emancipation. Carefully educated
   from childhood to assume a ruler’s responsibilities, she proved to be an able and energetic
   administrator who reformed Bhopal’s tax and land tenure systems. She never observed any
   traditions of female seclusion and veiling. Rousselet was received openly by her and further
   recorded that she enjoyed evenings spent among her male courtiers in conversation and musical
   entertainment. Her emancipation and assumption of a man’s authority was expressed visibly in
   her costume which on the evidence of surviving photographs and descriptions was a blend of
   feminine and masculine garments. Her daughter Shah Jahan followed her example, as in August
   1867, she ended the period of court mourning for her husband’s death by riding through the
   streets of Bhopal unveiled and in men’s clothes.

   The costume shown here, acquired in Bhopal during the 1850’s, is a curious mixture of expensive
   fabrics, cheap tinsel decoration, male and female garments which does however recall how
   Sikander and Shah Jahan might have dressed. Close fitting trousers (churidar) of purple striped
   silk are covered by layers of garments beginning with a long-sleeved loose white muslin shirt
   (kurti). Over this is worn long full-skirted coat (angharkha) of embroidered white muslin
   swathed at the waist with a green wool sash (kamarband) which are both features of traditional
   masculine costume. A short neat jacket (nimastin) of striped red and white silk completes the
   dress. A final bizarre touch is provided by the silk cap (kulah) ornamented with tinsel and
   spangled pendant which dangle over the wearer’s ears. Surviving photographs of Sikander Begum
   show her seated in crowded Victorian interiors, wearing variations of this type of cap including
   a version with a cascade of feathers. Comparative evidence shows that the cap was again an item

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of male attire adopted by the female rulers of Bhopal to emphasise their authority. Photographs of contemporary male rulers such as Maharaja Raghuraj Singh of Mewar portray them wearing rakishly tilted caps ornamented with pendant streamers and gems, often adapted to look like a version of the British Crown.

1905.6 & 6B-F.

2. WOMAN’S COURT COSTUME
CENTRAL INDIA, MADHYA PRADESH, BHOPAL c. 1856.
Another version of the type of costume worn by the female rulers of Bhopal showing the combination of feminine and masculine garments. Over close fitting purple striped silk trousers (churidar) are worn two female garments — a sleeveless version of the undershirt (kurta) covered by a tight brassière-like bodice (angya-kurta) both in white muslin with silver tinsel borders. Then a man’s full-skirted coat (anharkha) of plain white muslin and a short blue silk jacket (nimastin) are worn. The costume is completed by a plain white shawl (dopatta) and a pink silk spangled version of the masculine cap (kulah).

1905.6A, 1905.7 and A-E.

3. WOMAN’S COSTUME
WEST INDIA, KUTCH, BANNI DISTRICT
SEYYID MOSLEM CASTE, c. 1875-1900
The women of the wealthy Seyyid Moslem caste traditionally observed rigorous seclusion rarely leaving their homes except to visit relatives. Such seclusion and the desire to maintain their prestige through sartorial display provided both leisure and motivation to make fine silk garments superbly embroidered in intricate time-consuming stitches. The most characteristic designs are based on a repertoire of floral sprays and medallions worked in buttonhole, double back, chain and stem stitches inset with small mirror inlays. The three garments here show both style of dress and typical ornament. They are all made of imported Chinese silk as the Moslem merchants of Kutch had extensive trading contacts with Kutch.

Loose voluminous trousers (ejar) of black silk are embroidered at the legs with rows of floral sprays and at the ankles with a deep border of geometrical motifs. On the orange silk robe (aba) the embroidery is concentrated into a deep triangular yoke (gagga) worked in a repeated lozenge pattern. Finally the deep blue silk headshawl (abocchani) which originally served as a wedding garment is embroidered with a design of elaborate medallions against a continuous background of floral sprays.


4. CHILD’S COSTUME
PAKISTAN, LAHORE c. 1849
Children’s clothes could be as elaborately and lavishly decorated as those of adults which is demonstrated by this Moslem costume collected by Sir John Login, Master of Lahore Citadel, in 1849. The costume was planned as a complete outfit in harmonising colours of rich deep reds, silver and gold. The flaring bell-shaped trousers (pajama) of red silk are embroidered with oblique stripes of floral scroll couched in silver and gold threads dotted with sequins. A loose kneelength shirt (kurta) of deep rose silk is decorated along seams and all borders with bands of silver and gold ribbon. A closefitting cap (kulah) and slippers (kafsh) with exaggeratedly curling toes complete the outfit.

1980.1001 & A-D.
III VILLAG COOSTUME

Together with the historical material a group of village costumes are displayed. These come from one of the most desolate regions of India, Kutch, which is a small district of Gujerat State in the north-west. A dry region of bleak plains and rocks it is inhabited by people whose costumes are notable for the splendour of their textiles. The population is mixed Hindu and Moslem grouped into castes broadly based on occupation — farmers, craftsmen, merchants. Within families girls are valued for their domestic skills and are given lavish dowries which naturally include clothing and jewellery. Customs vary between different castes, but all women feel that clothing is very important both for demonstrating their artistic abilities and for indicating their status in society. Mothers and daughters begin work on decorating and collecting together garments and textiles years before a marriage is arranged. Common to all are the basic items of full gathered skirt (gagrah), tight blouse (kapdah or kumkoh) and shawl (odhni) all decorated with expertly embroidered designs in flamboyant motifs and colours. Certain features of cut and design, however, enable the differences of caste and status to be identified. Women of the Bansali Mahajan Hindu merchant caste, for example, wear garments of sober colours decorated with intricately embroidered designs including bird and flower motifs, whereas Patel Hindu women prefer brilliant colours in both dress and ornament. The Kanebi Hindu farmer women wear a block-printed shawl after the first year of marriage. Moslem women wear costumes similar to those of Hindu women but here the Meghwar bride has a long hiplength blouse over her full skirt and an embroidered marriage mask to conceal her face. Independent of specific religious traditions, however, it is customary for women to conceal their brilliantly decorated clothes with their shawl when out-of-doors and to behave according to strict principles of modesty. The costumes as shown here depict the more informal life of women within the home environment.

All the village costumes on display date from c. 1950-1960. After this period they began to be replaced by clothes made in machine-produced fabrics. In the exhibition the costumes are supplemented by other textile items — a marriage procession cloth, a cradle, a talismanic door hanging — to give some idea of a traditional environment.
CATALOGUE

COSTUMES

1. MARRIED WOMAN’S COSTUME
WEST INDIA, KUTCH,
KANEBI HINDU FARMER CASTE  c. 1960.

Women of this caste wear full skirts and tight blouses, but a distinction is made between unmarried and married status in the type of shawl worn. The full skirt (gagrah) is made of two widths of purple cotton joined horizontally and then gathered into a narrow waistband. It is embroidered in a wide range of coloured cotton threads using double back, chain and interlaces stitches, with a design of rows of lozenge motifs bordered by large circles. The blouse (kapdah) reaches to the midriff and had long tight sleeves and a “V” neck. At the front is an elaborate brassiere construction embroidered with circle motifs. The shawl (saddo) worn here is given to a woman at the end of her first year of marriage. It is of deep crimson cotton block-printed with repeated spot and lozenge motifs in red and embroidered along the short borders with flowers and birds.

2. GIRL’S WEDDING COSTUME
WEST INDIA, THARPARKAR
MEGHWAR MOSLEM CASTE  c. 1959-60

The basic elements of Moslem village women’s dress are similar to those of the Hindus with certain local variations. Here the type of blouse worn over the full skirt is a long hipline length garment with short sleeves (gudge) of red cotton embroidered in a wide range of silks using double running, chain, buttonhole and satin stitches, with a disciplined and formal design of panels and borders of circles and rosettes. At her wedding, the girl’s face is covered by a marriage mask (abknees) — a square of lavishly embroidered red cotton with circular apertures at eye-level. An embroidered closefitting hood completes the headdress.

The full skirt and shawl are reconstructions.
1982.845-847.

3. MARRIED WOMAN’S COSTUME
WEST INDIA, GUJERAT
PATEL HINDU FARMER CASTE  c. 1960

This costume is distinctive for the brilliant colours of its fabrics and embroidery which are further enhanced by glittering mirrorwork inlay. The skirt (gagrah) is a single length of red cotton joined at one side and gathered into a narrow waistband. It is elaborately embroidered in silks using double back, chain and buttonhole stitches, with bands of trefoil floral sprays and borders of rosette and saltire motifs. The tight blouse (kumkoh) is a combination of violet and pink silks lavishiy embroidered with motifs worked into stripes and circles. The long shawl (odhni) of block-printed blue cotton is embroidered with a deep border of flowering tree and spiral motifs in double back, chain, herringbone, feather and buttonhole stitches.
1983.481 & A-B.
4. BOY’S COSTUME
WEST INDIA, KUTCH
BANSALI HINDU FARMER CASTE c. 1960
Children also wear elaborate costumes. Here the boy is dressed in crimson cotton trousers embroidered with a design of cockerels and flowers and a scarlet cotton fullskirted coat with a lavish design of circle, floral and interlaced motifs. The small cap is also embroidered with a design of circles and triangles.
1983.480 & A-B.

5. MARRIED WOMAN’S COSTUME
WEST INDIA, GUJERAT, KATHIAWAR
BANSALI MAHAJAN HINDU MERCHANT AND RICH FARMER CASTE c. 1960
In this region the basic garments of skirt, blouse and shawl are made of sober fabrics enlivened by multicoloured embroidery worked in intricate stitches. The skirt (gagrah) is made of three pieces of black twill weave cotton seamed together vertically and gathered into a waistband. Here the designs of rows of lozenges and stylised bird border are worked in chain, feather, herringbone, double back and interlaced stitches. The blouse (kumkoh) is a tight waistlength garment with gathered front, "V" neck and deep decolletè back. Made of red and black cottons it is lavishly embroidered with brassiere rosettes and repeated floral motifs. The shawl (odhni) of black wool combines borders woven in white cotton with designs of small geometric motifs and stylised animals with rosettes framed in floral sprays and birds embroidered in double back, chain, feather and fly stitches.
1982.832-834.

6. MARRIED WOMAN’S COSTUME
WEST INDIA, KUTCH
BANSALI HINDU FARMER CASTE c. 1960
Woman of this caste wore boldly embroidered garments woven in brightly coloured cotton. Here the full length skirt (gagrah) is made of a single piece of red cotton gathered into a narrow waistband and seamed at one side. The design of repeated floral motifs is worked with thick cotton threads in double back and chain stitches. A tightfitting blouse (khanjuri) is worn over the skirt. The deep pink cotton shawl (odhni) also embroidered with thick cotton threads using double back and chain stitches, in a design of a bold medallion reserved against repeated floral motifs, is of a weight used for summer wear.

TEXTILES
1. HINDU MARRIAGE PROCESSION CLOTH
NORTH-WEST INDIA, RAJASTHAN c. 1930
This cloth was made by the Chundrigar caste for the Raban caste to be carried by four people in a marriage procession. It is of purple cotton decorated in tie-dyeing technique with a continuous processional scene showing the bride carried in a litter escorted by camels and riders on horses and elephants.
1978.626
DOOR HANGING

2. WEST INDIA, KUTCH
AHIR HINDU FARMER CASTE  c. 1950

This consists of two parts — a horizontal pelmet (toran) which is hung above the entrance of a house as a protection and a blessing, and a pair of vertical surrounds (sakhyo) which are added on special occasions. Both parts are of red cotton embroidered in chain stitch with a design of birds and floral scroll. The scalloped border represents mango leaves which are also hung across doorways at festivals.
1982.7, 8 & A.

3. CRADLE
WEST INDIA, GUJERAT, SAURASHTRA, LATE 19TH CENTURY

This is an elaborate construction mounted on a wooden frame. The cradle itself is a rectangular piece of red silk brocaded in silver which is slung from the frame at each corner. A tent-like cover of mixed silk and cotton fabric (mashru) protects the baby from the sun.
1982.715,716,717 & A-F.

4. CHILD’S MOBILE - ZUMMAR
WEST INDIA, GUJERAT, LATE 19TH CENTURY

A hanging toy made of padded cushions and birds from scraps of tie-dyed and printed silks.
1981.252

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