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Indian Saree: A paradigm of global fashion influence

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Abstract

Indian *Saree*, the symbol of Indian tradition is one of the oldest form of clothing and has a long story behind it. This paper examines the history of *saree*, its drapes and patterns, the influencing factors and its evolution to the present form. This article also explores the relationship between traditional Indian *saree* drapes, studied across centuries, with the creations of various contemporary International fashion designers. The inspiration many a times may not be clearly visible but is seen through subtle observations. Western designs have been juxtaposed with drapes and patterns seen in traditional *sarees*. Lastly, a path in the future, influenced by the rapid economic growth in India and the effects of technology on the evolving design and popularity of the *saree* among the international fashion designers is described.

Keywords: *Saree*, drapes, traditional, contemporary, juxtaposed

Introduction

“Fashion will last forever. It will exist always. It will exist in its own way in each era. I live in the moment. It’s interesting to know the old methods. But you have to live in the present moment”

Azzedine Alaia

Over the past few decades, Eastern and Western cultures have fused together to create new designs and provide fresh meaning to the fashion industry. With the occurrence of industrial globalization, the cultural boundaries have melted and have dispersed ^[1]. Fashion has become borderless and is no longer constrained to ideas of a particular nationality and culture. The global fashion industry is increasing and changing at a very astonishing rate. Culture and traditional dress have always been an incredible part and source of inspiration for the fashion industry.

India’s rich culture and tradition has always been stimulation for the fashion industry. Designers see Indian textile and clothing style, as archetypes of immemorial vestimentary practices. A sharp contrast, though, can be detected in the uses they make of the chosen mode ^[2]. Since past few decades the international designers have created beautiful interpretations from India’s rich culture, bright colors, exotic hand crafted techniques of embroideries and weaves. Indian aesthetics have found a fresh popularity in the area of global design culture. International designers like John Galliano for Christian Dior, Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel, Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton, Alexander McQueen, Jean Paul Gautier have used Indian designs and themes to create new fashion collections ^[3]. Indian culture and art provides both a market and an inspiration to these brands ^[4]. One such Indian aesthetics, which has inspired a number of designers, is *Saree*.

Saree is one of the world’s oldest and perhaps the only surviving unstitched garment from the past ^[5]. The saree forms the core of history and legacy. Few Indian designers have realised the impact of this powerful drape and are making efforts to re-establish and reinvent the saree in their collections ^[6]. Over the eras, it has become a sensuous, glamorous all-time-wear for women. It is a fashion trend that has stood the test of time and is still worn by millions of women worldwide. One cannot underestimate the importance of fashion in shaping the styles around the *saree*. There have been several considerations while exploring the origin and influence of *saree*.

Firstly, the term *saree* was used to describe a type of drape, which was later used for varied styles of draping a fabric.

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The second consideration relates to the *saree* aesthetics and the contemporary style of draping and requires the reader to understand the importance of each style and recognize its stylish components. The third point is the importance of social context to understand the *saree*. The social class determined a women’s choice of draping style. Women belonging to higher social class experimented with different drapes of *saree* and fabric materials, which varied, from expensive silks to good quality cottons. Women of middle or lower social class wore basic *saree* of cotton fabric. And last, is the rise in foreign influence in earlier centuries (5th – 20th) also has concealed the importance of this garment, which brings to the final point of consideration.

Limited research has been conducted on the folklore of the *saree* and the factors that have helped to keep it in fashion for centuries. Keeping in mind these considerations, this paper investigates the evolution of *saree* and argues its existence as an accepted format for global platform. This paper has explored the historical context in which *saree* emerged in the world of high fashion and its place in women’s social practices and rituals. The significance of the study is to make the designers around the world aware about the evolution of Indian *saree*. The information in this paper will benefit the designers across the globe to create fusion in their fashion collections. It will also help the researchers to get the background knowledge of the drape of the *saree*.

History and Origin of Saree

The word ‘saree’ is derived from Sanskrit word 'sati', which means “a strip of cloth”. The origin of this word is from the Prakrit (a language spoken in the Buddhist era) word ‘sattika’. This progressed into the Prakrit 'sadi' and was later anglicised into 'saree' (pronounced as sa-ri) [7]. The word “sattika” is mentioned in Buddhist literature, meaning women’s attire. *Saree* is an unstitched long piece of cloth, which is draped in various styles, and its length varies from 4 yard to 9 yard. The history of this famous Indian ethnic piece of clothing is quite interesting and shows the fruition over thousands of year [8]. The first mention of *Saree* was found in Mahabharata in 400

BC, when Lord Krishna protected “Draupadi” by blessing her with a *saree* that did not end (Figure 1) [9]. The 1st century AD saw the Sari in its earliest form and the records are found in the sculptures from that period. It was a drapes garment with a veil. History too articulates that *saree* was worn by during famous battles fought by the heroines like Queen Jhansi Laxmibai and Belawadi Mallamma (around 1850 AD). Neatly and tightly tucked away between the legs, the *Saree* enabled them to battle enemy troops on horseback. These *saries* were longer in length than the regular ones and worn like *dhoti**, wrapped around in total grace and elegance [10].

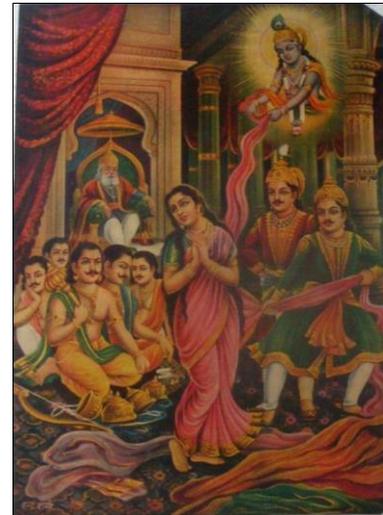


Fig 1: “Draupadi” blessed with a *saree* that did not end as mentioned in Mahabharata

Evolution of Saree drapes

Although *saree* has become a fashion statement today but it is interesting to know how it has evolved through various silhouettes and styles and the factors influencing those changes.

Figure 2 [11 -19] shows the evolution of *saree* [1].

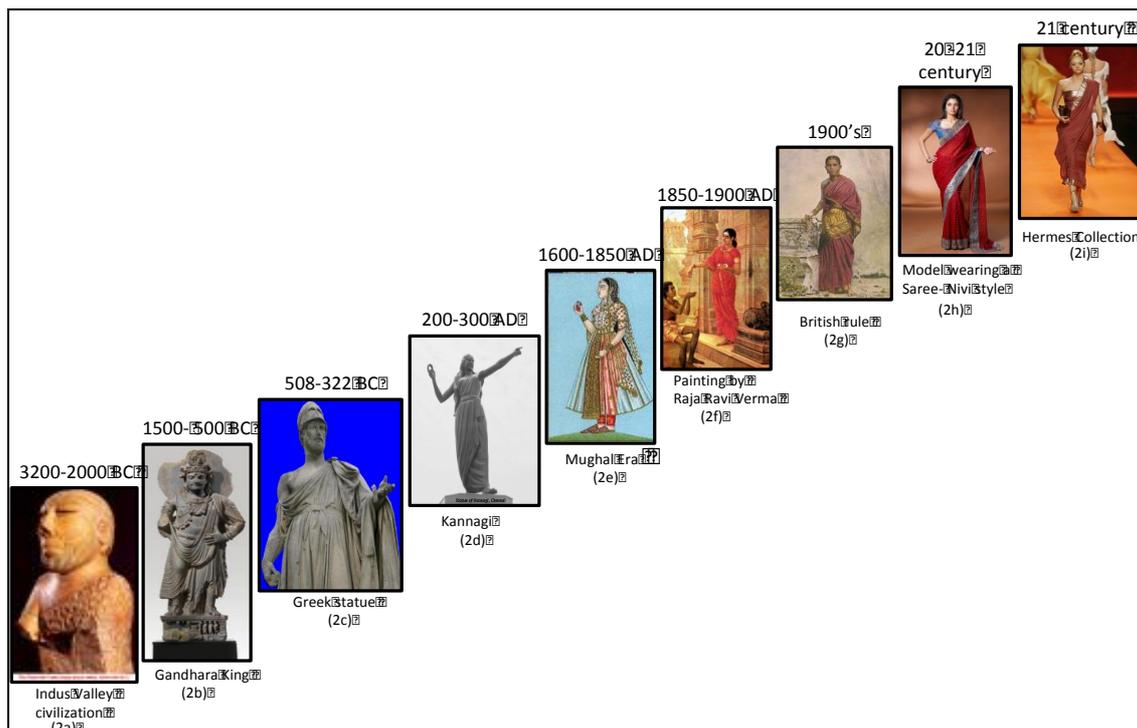


Fig 2: Evolution of the saree drapes (image self created)

The first real life evidence of a garment similar to the *saree* came from the Indus Valley civilization around 3200 BC to 2000 BC. People in Indus Valley civilization used to cover themselves with a long piece of cloth, found mainly around the Western part of the Indian subcontinent. The first portrayal of the draped shawl resembling the Indian *saree* was from statue of a male described as the “priest king” from Mohenjodaro. He is shown wearing a richly patterned cloak covering the left shoulder, with the right shoulder left bare. This style establishes with the style discovered from the period as depicted in Figure 2a^[11]. Sculptures from the Gandhara as shown in Figure 2b^[12], of Mathura and Gupta period (100 to 600 AD) showed goddesses and dancers wearing a *dhoti* wrapped as a lower garment. The *saree* was worn in a way that divided the legs in a trouser like form to enable the temple dancers to be free in their movements while covering their modesty. The *saree* was draped in a sensuous manner, like a fishtail, where the material was tied at the waist and covered the front of the legs. The top half of the body was left bare or partially covered as it was a common practice during that era. Ajanta cave murals (around 500 AD) showed women wearing *sarees* that cover the entire body. In early 1500’s, a Portuguese traveller described women wearing a long 5 yard garment made of cotton or silk of bright colors. One end of this garment is secured around the waist (below navel) and the other end of the garment is draped across the breast, over the shoulder in such a way that the arm and the other shoulder remains uncovered. The next stage in the drape of the *saree* came with the influence of the Greeks and the

Persians post the arrival of Alexander through invasion of northern parts of India during the Mauryan era. During this period, the cultures of India and Greece mingled through intermarriages and exchange of traditions and cultures. The Greeks used a belt to clinch their long flowing robes at the waist as shown in Figure 2c^[13]. The Persians were already wearing length of cloth gathered and belted at the waist and held together at the shoulder. Indian women, particularly of the affluent classes, adopted this new feature of wearing the same garment. They used the gathered and waisted look and adapted the same to suit their lighter silk and cotton fabrics. Figure 2d^[14], shows the *saree* worn by a mythical woman, Kannagi (part of the Tamil folklore of around 200 AD). It is clearly seen from the images that how the drape got modified and took the shape inspired from the Greek drapes.

The *saree* was the predominant garment worn by women till the advent of the Muslim rulers. They introduced the stitched clothes in the form of the *petticoat* (skirt), the *ghagra* (a full length gathered skirt) and the blouse (Figure 2e)^[15] and (Figure 3)^[21]. A major change in the women’s costume came during this time as the Muslims, in keeping with their traditions, introduced the veil, covering the women’s face and head^[22]. The Muslims also introduced advancements in *saree* materials such as intricate hand embroidery and embellishments. During the era, the changes in the *saree* were well documented through use of miniature paintings and hand-illustrated manuscript, showing the evolution of the basic garment into the gracefully draped intricate range of *saree*^[23].



Fig 3: Mughal Costumes

The advent of British rule (mid 18th Century) brought changes in the Indian costume especially in the manner of wearing a *saree*. The final drape as is seen today, came about only during this period when women's garments went through major revolution as seen in Figure 2h^[18] and 2i^[19]. Since then, till present date, this aspect of wearing a *saree* has remained constant through time. The drape of the *saree* differs from region to region and is further accentuated by diverse culture, tradition, patterns, weaves, structure and embroidery. The "Nivi" is the most popular style of draping the *saree*. Jayanada Nandini Devi identified “Nivi” style of *saree* in 1866. She got inspiration from the colonialism and wanted to try something modest^[24].

The woman would first wrap the *saree* around her waist and tuck one end of it into the top of her petticoat. She then makes

the pleats in the form of fan folding and tucks them in the center on the navel. And in the end she would drape the loose end (called the *pallu***^[2] or *pallav*) diagonally across her front and let it drop over her shoulder to the back. The long end of the *saree* usually hangs freely from the back of her shoulder is often adorned with intricate designs and beautiful ornaments^[25]. Today the Nivi style is prominent and is popular across India worn by modern women and is perceived by outsiders to be the traditional form of Indian dress^[24].

Symbolism and Traditional Meaning of Saree

The *saree* has become a fashion statement in today’s world, however, the symbolism and traditional meaning is still important. The *saree* has many traditions attached to it, which have evolved over centuries. In ancient times, the stitched

cloth was considered impure. The one-piece *saree* was considered auspicious and was (and still continues to be) worn during important Hindu occasions such as religious ceremonies, weddings, festivals, rituals related to birth of a child, etc. The particular style of draping the *saree* originated from the belief that the navel and the midriff should be left bare as they were considered the life source (as they connect to the umbilical cord). This is chronicled in the *Natya Shastra*, an ancient South Indian text from around 200 AD. The primeval perception of the beauty of the ideal Indian women (small waist, large bust and flaring hips) as is depicted in various sculptures, was most aptly portrayed in a *saree*. The costume emphasized the waist, accentuated the bust and outlined the hips through the pleated fabric flattering the female.

Juxtaposition of Saree Designs

The foreign designers are connecting to Indian culture and its elegant traditions through creation of fusion designs. It is important for foreign designers to understand the Indian fashion elements, personality, culture, history and traditions in order to "Indianize" products which is essential for their growth and acceptability in the local market.

India was always a luxury appreciating country from the time of Maharajas to the middle affluent consumer today [26]. According to a report released by ASSOCHAM, the luxury market in India is growing significantly and it reached 18 billion US dollar in 2017 and to expand fivefold in the next three years [27]. According to IMBR (Information Management and Business Review) 2016 report there has been a 25 per cent growth in the Indian luxury market from 2015-2016. Over the last decade, since the liberalization of Indian trade and the opening up of the economy, a lot of

fashion designers and luxury brands have evinced an interest in the Indian fashion market. There has also been a substantial interest in creations of the Indian designers by the global buying houses [28]. Trade has increased into and out of India. In this backdrop, the influence of Indian drapes (*saree* silhouette) and the design origin is discussed and compared with creations of selected global fashion designers. This is supported by a famous quote by author Bonnie English "Fashion makes the world go round", which is true in both commercial and cultural context [28].

International Designer Collections Inspired By Saree Drape

Alexander McQueen Fall 2008 Collection

Alexander McQueen ready to wear collection (Figure 4 a) [3] was showcased in Paris in 2008. It was inspired by designer's trip to India and was an amalgamation of the Indian and British couture. The designer described this collection as a fashion fairy tale and was one of his most romantic collections. He used empire length chiffons and silk *sarees* draped creatively in a contemporary manner. A lot of emphasis was on embellishments like embroidery using Indian peacock motifs complemented with heavy Maharaja style jewellery and embroidered slippers. The draping style was inspired from a traditional style popular in South India, known as *madisarpu pudavi* (Figure 4b) [29] and (Figure 4c) [30]. The *saree* was 9 yards in length which is longer than the normal 5 yards *saree*. This style is still worn by married Brahmin women from Gurukkal, Iyer and Iyyenar communities of Tamil Nadu (South India) during important occasions like marriage, religious ceremonies and death ceremonies. It is worn without the *petticoat* (skirt worn underneath).



Fig 4 (a): Alexander McQueen collection Fall 2008; Fig 4(b): Women from 1850's; Fig 4 (c): Women of 2014.

Hermès Spring Summer Collection 2008

The French fashion house Hermès launched its "Hermès *saree*" collection, just before the Diwali festive season in 2008. Mr. Bertrand Michaud President of the company said

"This is part of our effort to connect to India's culture and to the tradition of elegance of Indian women," and "We've put all our skills into making them to pay homage to the Indian tradition." Modernized drapes of *saree* were seen in this

collection. Fabric used was cashmere and silk twill. Bright colours, geometric patterns, traditional motifs were used accompanied by the head gears. All the three pictures in Figure 5 portrays very similar style of draping the *saree* but all have been documented from different eras. Hermes collection (Figure 5a) [3] displayed a model with *saree* worn without a blouse and one shoulder left bare. This can be seen truly inspired from *saree* drapes popular in east Bengal in

early 20th century (Figure 5b) [31]. This was recorded in Rabindra Nath Tagore's (Nobel Prize winning Indian author) famous novel 'Chokher Bali'. The white cotton *saree* without blouse was worn by Bengali's widows as a sign of mourning. This figurative styles have also been used by painter Raja Ravi Verma (Figure 5c) [32] in humanizing mythological figures especially the Hindu Goddesses and regional women of that era.



Fig 5(a): Hermes collection 2008; **Fig 5(b):** Bengali women 20th Century; **Fig 5(c):** Painting of Raja Ravi Verma 1800's.

Dries Van Noten's Spring –Summer 2010 Collection

The spring summer 2010 collection showcased by Dries Van Noten at Paris Fashion week witnessed a lot of energy and colour. There was a mix of gilded *saree* wraps with slim fitted trousers. Fine Indian ethnic fabrics like ikat print, Indian batik, tie and dye were used. Indian jewellery like pearl chokers, pendants and semiprecious stones and crystals accompanied the dresses. The inspiration of the silhouettes

was observed from a *saree* of short length, showing a casual look to it as it ruffles at the waist (Figure 6a) [33]. This type of drape of the *saree* is traditional Maharashtrian style (West India). It is worn as a knee length *saree* by Koli tribe. It is commonly worn as a *saree* style mainly by fisherwomen (Figure 6b) [34] and (Figure 6c) [35]. The feature of the Van Noten collection was the use of the Indian Ikat print and tie and dye, the traditional Indian textiles.



Fig 6(a): Dries Van Noten Collection Spring Summer 2010; **Fig 6(b):** Maharashtrian style; **Fig 6(c):** Koli Tribe Women.

Coco Chanel Pre Fall 2012 Collection

The creative director of Chanel, Karl Lagerfeld showcased his India inspired collection – “Paris Bombay” for Pre Fall 2012 at Grand Palais Paris. It was a fusion of Indian and European fashion with draping silhouettes inspired from the *saree* and rich silk materials from India. Maharaja (Royal) jewellery, used as hair embellishments, complimented the garments. A lot of attention was paid to the detailing with crystal and pearl embroidery. Accessories included stone studded purses and sandals. Figure 7a³⁶ clearly shows that the inspiration is from *saree* of short length from 1920s. During the late 1800s and

early 1900s, the Christian moral influence on the Indian attire led to the introduction of the full-length blouse accompanied by the *saree*. The *saree* during this era was more in the form of a skirt. A short *saree* worn with boots accompanied with add-ons like brooches, to pin up the *saree* became a trend during that era. Figure 7b³⁷ shows a photograph of 2 missionary women, Isabelle Dux and E.N. Thillayampalam, who participated in the missionary meeting at Washington in 1922 attired in the local costume of that time, thus emphasizing the draping style.



Fig 7(a): Coco Chanel Collection 2012; **Fig 7(b):** Missionary women, 1922

Marchesca Spring 2013 Collection

The Marchesca NYFW Spring 2013 collection of Keren Craig & Georgina Chapman (Figure 8a) [38] was inspired by India. Their lace and sheers were emulated from Indian sculptural shapes and drapes with a view to create a fusion of Eastern (Manipur) & Western (Maharashtra) India fashion. The feature of the collection was its use of the *saree* folding in the silhouette, creating elegant fabric drapes for western dresses such as knee-length skirts, cocktail dresses etc. The pleat-less

Manipuri *saree*'s length varies from full length to knee length and is frequently worn on traditional functions, folk dance performances and in rural areas (Figure 8b) [39] and (Figure 8c)⁴⁰. Dublas women, a tribe found in Western Indian states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, also wear the knee length saree. A peculiar recognition of the style is through the practice of women, sometimes using one end of the *saree* to cover their head and face.



Fig 8 (a): Marchesca collection 2013; **Fig 8(b):** Manipur Dancer; **Fig 8(c):** Dublas Women.

Although various International designers have created fusion collections inspired by the traditional *saree*, the Indian touch is evident in their collections which has on one hand facilitated in broadening and widening boundaries and on the other hand helped in strengthening and firming existing boundaries of self, identity, and culture.

Conclusion

India has diverse culture, which varies from state to state and region to region. Every 200 to 300 kilometres culture of the place, language, costume, food etc. change which also depend on the climatic conditions of that region/ state.

There are more than 108 different ways to drape a *saree*. This characterizes the *saree* as the most exceptional and versatile unstitched garment, which has survived since eternity and has gained popularity. These were just few examples of draping a *saree*, which are discussed in this paper.

The influence of *saree* drape will keep on increasing in the years to come with the growth of Indian economy. The in-depth knowledge about Indian drapes will help fashion designers to create innovative collections. The advancements in technology will make the global differences in fashion lesser and lesser in times to come. Increasing trend of Indian drapes, materials, motifs, embroideries, symbols etc. will get noticed with the acceptance / inspiration in global fashion. The brand awareness has increased with frequent foreign travels by Indians for work, tourism and study and also the continuous increase in number of foreigners residing in India for work, education and other projects. Further, the rapidly expanding Indian middle class is also showing increasing affinity to "Indianised" designs by International fashion designers.

It can be clearly seen that the influence of Indian drapes especially *saree* silhouette is being recognized worldwide by many International designers. Designers are using the *saree* silhouette in various forms and are creating a fashion fusion. With the involvement of foreign designers *saree* silhouette/ drape will evolve further in the times to come and will also gain popularity worldwide.

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