

■ Indian Clothing

A historical record of Indian clothing is difficult to trace. While there is an abundance of sculpture and literature dating from the earliest periods of civilization in the Indus Valley (which flourished along the Indus River in modern-day Pakistan) around 2500 B.C.E., scholars have had difficulty dating the changes in clothing styles and naming the variations on certain styles over time. Another problem in identifying trends in Indian clothing is the abundance of different ethnic and cultural groups that have lived and are living in the country; each of which has its own distinctive style. These circumstances make it possible to make generalizations about Indian clothing, but not to make concrete statements about each and every style worn in the country.

The oldest type of Indian clothing was fashioned out of yards of unsewn fabric that were then wound around the body in a variety of ways to create different, distinct garments. This clothing was woven most commonly out of cotton but could also be made of goat hair, linen, silk, or wool. Some of the most popular garments are a wrapped dress called a sari, a pair of pants called a dhoti, a hat called a turban, and a variety of scarves. These styles of garments have been popular in India since the beginning of its civilization and continue to be worn in the twenty-first century.

Changes in the styles worn by Indians reflected their contact with other peoples. As different tribes of people invaded or entered



An Indian women often has to keep almost her entire body covered in clothing. *Reproduced by permission of © Michael Maslan Historic Photographs/CORBIS.*

India to trade or to live, they brought with them distinctive clothing styles. Throughout the different regions of India, the changes in clothing styles can be linked to some contact with other cultures. For example, Indians knew how to sew long before the sixteenth century when the Moguls, or Muslims, invaded, and they had long adorned their wrapped garments with elaborate embroidery stitches. But when the Moguls took power over the region, the Moguls' style of sewn clothing became popular among Indians. Sewn jackets and trousers were among the styles popularized by the Mogul leaders, although traditional wrapped clothing remained common.

Trade contacts also spread Indian clothing styles and cloth to other parts of the world. The Dutch and the English established trade routes with India in the late 1400s, and by the 1600s Indian cotton was exported to regions throughout Europe and the American colonies, where shawls made of Indian cloth became especially popular. In the twenty-first century India continues to be a major source of finely woven fabrics for garment manufacturers worldwide.

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■ ■ ■ Burka

A long, flowing garment that covers the whole body from head to feet, the burka, also known as burqa or abaya, is an important part of the dress of Muslim women in many different countries. Some burkas leave the face uncovered, but most have a cloth or metal grid that hides the face from view while allowing the wearer to see. The exact origin of the burka is unknown, but similar forms of veil-

ing have been worn by women in countries such as India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan since the beginning of the Muslim religion in 622 C.E.

The Koran, the holy book of Islam, directs believers to cover themselves and be humble before God. Different societies and religious leaders have interpreted this command of the Koran in many different ways, often requiring both men and women to cover their heads as a sign of religious respect. Some Muslim societies have required women to cover themselves more modestly than men, covering not only their heads but also most of their bodies and even their faces. The burka is one example of very modest clothing worn by Muslim women.

The burka has mainly been worn in very conservative Muslim cultures, which often restrict the movement and power of women. Young girls are not required to cover themselves with a burka, but at puberty or marriage they begin to wear it. While women do not wear the burka while they are home with their families, they are required to wear it when they are in public or in the presence of men who are not family members. In many places the burka was first worn as a sign of wealth and leisure, because a woman could not easily work while wearing the long garment.

Though the burka often appears confining and limiting to Western eyes, many devout Muslim women choose to wear the long veil. Some say that the coverage of the burka gives them a privacy that actually makes them feel freer to move about in society. However, others say that even though the burka protects women from the staring eyes of strange men, it does not prevent the wearer from being touched or pinched by passing men. Also, many Muslim women who live in very conservative societies are forced to wear the burka whether they want to or not, and many have been punished harshly for refusing to cover themselves as their authorities demand.



Two women wear white burkas, traditional women's dress in cultures of the Middle East. *Reproduced by permission of © Bettmann/CORBIS.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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[See also Volume 1, Mesopotamia: Veils]

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■ Chadar

This man wears a heavy brown wool chadar over his shoulders and arms, most likely for warmth.
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The chadar, also spelled chador or chadoor, is a multipurpose garment worn by many people in India since before the third century C.E. Indians and others living in countries of the Middle East continue to wear the chadar to this day. Though the size, shape, and color of the chadar vary somewhat in different cultures, it is basically a large scarf, about three yards long and one yard wide, or larger. Both men and women use the chadar as a shawl or wrap for protection from the weather, for modesty, and for religious purposes. Some chadars have decorative or fringed edges.

The chadar is a common accessory in desert countries like Afghanistan, where it is often wrapped around the body, head, and face for protection from sand and dust storms. In less harsh weather, men usually wear the chadar around the shoulders, like a shawl. Women in Muslim societies are often required to cover themselves more modestly than men, and they wear the chadar over their heads as well, holding an end between their teeth when they wish to cover their faces. Some women wrap the chadar tightly around their neck and head to form a sort of headdress that may cover all or part of the face. The abundant fabric of the

chadar is useful for many purposes. A mother may wrap her baby in one end of the scarf and use it to cover them both while she breastfeeds. Ends of the chadar may also be used to tie small bundles to make them easy to carry. Some women's chadars are large enough to cover the wearer from head to toe, similar to the long burka also worn by Muslim women.

The chadar also has religious and ceremonial purposes. The color and designs used in the fabric often have religious significance. Many Muslim men use the chadar to wrap themselves or kneel upon it for prayer, and a large version is often used to wrap around the dead before burial.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

El Guindi, Fadwa. *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance*. New York: Berg, 1999.

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■ ■ ■ Choli

At the dawn of Indian civilization in 2500 B.C.E., women left their breasts bare. It was under Muslim rule, which lasted from 1500 to 1700 C.E., that women began to dress more modestly. The choli, a sewn garment that covered women's breasts, became popular as the Muslims rose in power. The choli is worn with a skirt or under a sari, a draped dress.

Although Indian women wore unstitched garments from the beginning of Indian civilization, from the first invasion of the Muslims in about the tenth century some Indians began to wear stitched garments. The choli is such a garment. The first choli only covered a woman's breasts, leaving her back bare. The garment evolved into many different variations, the most common being a tight-fitting bodice with short or long sleeves that ended just below the breasts or just above the waist. Many other variations of the choli are worn throughout India today and include styles fastened with ties, versions with rounded necklines, and some that shape or flatten the breasts.

■■■ DHOTI AND LUNGI



Two young girls wear several items of traditional Indian dress, including brightly colored cholis. Reproduced by permission of © Howard Davies/CORBIS.

Worn mostly in the north and west of India, the choli is distinguished in different regions by various decorations. The fabric can be dyed bright colors, embroidered, or appliquéd with mirrors. Cholis are made of cotton or silk but can also be made of organza and brocade for special occasions.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Goswamy, B. N., and Kalyan Krishna. *Indian Costume in the Collection of the Calico Museum of Textiles*. Ahmedabad, India: D. S. Mehta, 1993.

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■ Dhoti and Lungi

Two styles of clothing have been most popular with Indian men and boys from ancient times to the present day: the dhoti and