

symbolic changes regarding education, age of marriage, maintenance of purdah, mobility, as well as the penetration of the media, consumerism and global markets, are truly significant for these rural women.

## NOTES

1. These are highly debated and contested terms. Here I consider them interchangeable.
2. See Wadley 1994 for fuller details on the relationships between the seasons, births, and deaths.
3. For a discussion of a woman of Maya's generation who challenged the rules more forcefully, see Wadley 1993b.
4. I am grateful to Priti Ramamurthy for some of these insights regarding synthetics.
5. The Delhi style of sari, I am told, became popular in Delhi after Independence with the rise of an immigrant population from Pakistan: this group not only became the trendsetters in Delhi by the 1960s, but had brought this style of sari with them.
6. Sonograms for sex selection are technically illegal, but sonograms for birth defects and other purposes are legal. Hence the advertising of sonograms by obstetricians is common. Such signs are a frequent sight all down the Grand Trunk Road in Uttar Pradesh.
7. Datt, Gaurav. 1998. "Poverty in India and Indian States: An Update." Food Consumption and Nutrition Division, International Food Policy Research Institute Washington, D.C.: FCND Discussion Paper No. 47.

## Clothing the Female Body: Education, Social Change and Fashion in Rural North India

During the past four decades, women's clothing styles in rural India have changed rather dramatically, in particular those of females in their teenage years. Emma Tarlo (1996) takes note of this in the title of her book *Clothing Matters: clothing and its implications for the female body* are central to the creation of a gendered self. As the meaning of being a woman in her teens in rural north India has changed from "married" to "in school," the female body has been re-clothed to mark its unmarried and unmarriedable status. In claiming new clothing styles for their teenagers, residents in Karimpur draw upon ideas from the global cultural supermarket (Mathews 2000) to find acceptable clothing for their daughters, options made available in part through the restructuring of India's economy in the 1990s leading to new fabric choices as well as the explosion of a fashion industry. As such, through fashion and fabric, Karimpur's residents participate in the global arena while at the same time marking social change relevant to their local situations on the bodies of their teenage girls.

Feminists have focused their attention on clothing as it marks gender and social status. Most critically, the female body can be read as a text that marks both gender and power relationships. Building on Judith Butler's ideas of the performance of gender, the anthropologist Anna Aalten writes, "Gender reality is created through a continuation of performances in which the body is stylized to fit existing gender directives and/or produce new ones" (1997:47). In examining the transformations of the teenage female body in rural north India, I see the female body as symbolizing changes in the social order, in particular the rise of female education and the concomitant rise in the age of marriage.

This cultured body, marked by the social status to which it belongs, is at the same time increasingly shifting to a body as a carrier of self-identity (Giddens 1991), a means of self-expression. Given the power relationships and family dynamics of rural India, this shift to an "identity project" also marks a shift in consumption patterns and control over clothing and its buying that is beginning to allow the individual female to use the body as a marker of self-identity. Hence changes in clothing mark more than a change in female status per se: they are also indicative of shifts in how clothing marks identity, and the meaning of identity itself in rural India. Hence this examination of clothing. The female teenager in Karimpur demands that we look at the confluence of social, political, and cultural processes that shape changing clothing styles. As Dorinne Kondo (1990: 45) has noted, identities are multiple, continually emergent, and formed in particular political and ideological moments. This essay links newly emergent identities, linked to changing educational and marriage patterns, with concepts of "fashion" and new consumption patterns tied to globalization.

#### IS IT FASHIONABLE?

Clothing, as the primary adornment of the body, is a fundamental part of everyday experience and practice. Clothing is also conceptually allied with the idea of "fashion." Some authors claim that fashion does not exist in smaller scale societies, that it is fundamentally about the representation of social roles, and is the result of "the assertion of self-identity and social competition" (Cannon 1998:24). Western scholars have tended to view fashion as something belonging only to the West, and to "higher civilization" (Simmel 1973:176). Simmel's argument is in fact quite disturbing:

The savage is afraid of strange appearances; the difficulties and dangers that best his career cause him to scent danger in anything new which he does not understand and which he cannot consign to a familiar category. Civilization, however, transforms this affection into its very opposite . . . The removal of the feeling of insecurity with reference to all things new was accomplished by the progress of civilization. [1973:176]

Thus because the "savage" is afraid of the strange, he/she does not follow fashion, does not use stylistic systems to mark his/her body with

signs of status, and does not change those systems over time. But as Jennifer Craik (1994:4) argues, non-European societies did have changing clothing codes and stylistic registers. She asserts that

fashion is a technology of *civility*, that is, sanctioned codes of conduct in the practices of self-formation and self-presentation. The body is trained to perform in socially acceptable ways by harnessing movement, gesture and demeanour until they become "second nature" . . . A fashion system embodies the denotation of acceptable codes and conventions, sets limits to clothing behavior, prescribes acceptable—and proscribes unacceptable—modes of clothing the body, and constantly revises the rules of the fashion game . . . fashioning the body is a feature of all cultures. [Craik: 1994:5, emphasis in original]

Craik's argument is based on the notion of *habitus*: "The body is not a given, but actively constructed through how it is used and projected" (1994:10) and clothes and bodily adornment connect the body and its relations with the social *habitus*. As Joseph Alter notes in his book on Gandhi, "people experience the world through their senses, and the body as a whole is, at once, the subject, object, and medium of experience" (2002:xv). Thus clothing is used to project a sense of self. In India, fashion has been used as social comparison for centuries, but the search for "fashion" has been propelled in the last half century by the growth of an industry that encourages and enables fashion consumption, especially institutions such as *Femina*, the Indian-based women's magazine that was founded in 1959 and, importantly, was published in Hindi through the 1980s (Susan Dewey, personal communication).

While not challenging Craik, others see fashion as more closely tied to modernization. Cannon defines fashion as the "manipulation of appearance to enhance or maintain a positive self-image" (1998: 25). Here the ability to mark some positive value from comparisons in appearance is emphasized. Increasingly, these new styles are from the global supermarket and reflect not only status, but "modernization," development, and progress.

There is no such thing as a "natural body"; and the body in India has been used to define how an individual fits into the social order, whether it is the perceived "naturalness" of the red eye of the male born a warrior or the polluted body of the untouchable. Further marking this "natural" body in both Hindu and Muslim India, clothing has been used to distinguish status: caste membership was often marked by one's

clothing, whether by the way a sari was wrapped for women, or the wearing of a shirt or blouse, or the color of a man's turban. In India, as elsewhere, the clash between different styles of clothing is symbolic of wider conflicts of cultural and social norms and values (Cohn 1989). N. Chaudhuri notes that "like language or other features of life which distinguish one human group from another, it [clothes] is part of the natural personality, it is one expression among others of a distinctive culture. Therefore no one can change his clothes until there has been, in part or whole, a transfer of cultural allegiance" (1976: 73).

Indian women's clothing is also intimately connected to sexuality, to marking different kinds of femininity, and to social status. Girls in south India were required to don the half sari at puberty, as a sign of the containment of the female body. Hindu women in northern India covered their faces to indicate modesty, and folk stories are replete with stories of low caste women who were immodest and did not follow these proscriptions and hence brought shame to their families. In an oral epic dating to the eighteenth century, the heroine transforms herself from proper wife in purdah into a dancing girl in order to gain entrance to the king's court: her husband frets as he sees her beautifying herself and prays that "some of the [sexual] energy will go to my kingdom" (Wadley 2004). Folk stories from Karimpur tell of men who fall in love with their wives who, because they have been rejected by their husbands, transform themselves into "courtesans" in the garden (Wadley 1994:47). In altered clothing and space, the husband does not recognize the sexualized courtesan as the wife who sits bundled in a sari, head covered, cooking at the family hearth. Wives, in their shawls and saris, are to be non-sexual, but adult beings.

Emma Tarlo (1996:155) notes that young girls in Gujarat in the 1980s wore asexual clothing until about age 10, when their clothing becomes marked as female. As she also notes, women's clothing was "read" as an expression of wealth and social status, and that one must examine caste cultures and other social factors in order to begin to comprehend why people would buy or wear a certain kind of dress. Here we look specifically at the teenaged female body in rural north India as it becomes increasingly inscribed as "unmarried" instead of "married".

In localities like Karimpur, cultural allegiance is increasingly shifting to the middle class world of urban relatives, heavily influenced by fashion

trends found on television and in advertising. The urban middle class world is one of educated daughters, who marry only in their twenties; of increasing consumption of products like shampoos and soaps and toothpaste; of new patterns of household cleanliness, marked most clearly by the shift from purification with cow dung to "cleaning" with Dettol, as well as "birthday" parties and other phenomena imported from the West, though radically transformed in the Indian setting (Wadley 2000a). This urbanizing lower middle class, and its rural relatives, are strongly affected by what Appadurai calls the "transnational imagery" which "is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (1996: 31).

#### THE VILLAGE OF KARIMPUR

With a population of 2581 in 1998 (the ethnographic present for this paper), Karimpur is a village dominated by the Brahman caste. Nowadays, most Brahman families live in brick houses, often with two stories. A third of the Brahman households now own a television set, although the erratic electricity makes viewing TV problematic and cable TV is unavailable. The sons and daughters of Brahman families are increasingly well-educated, and the first female from the village to receive an MA graduated in 1999. Brahman families are likely to have access to modern forms of transport—a tractor, a motor scooter, and, in one case, a car. Joint families predominate in the Brahman community: there are advantages in terms of labor distribution to having a group of adult men able to work together, whether in the fields, managing politics for the family, or contributing from a service job in the nearby district town of Mainpuri or elsewhere. Brahman families also consider it honorable to maintain joint family arrangements, and are reluctant to separate.

In addition to the Brahmans, in 1998 Karimpur was home to another 20 caste groups, ranging in size from one member (a Thakur woman) to 532 individuals (Farmers). Like the Brahmans, some caste groups have seen significant out-migration to labor jobs in cities across India. And while Brahman farmers/landowners continue to contract with the land-poor for labor, either on a daily basis or as sharecroppers for a quarter or half of the crop, it is clear that the connectedness

amongst families throughout the caste/class hierarchy that existed through the 1970s is fast disappearing. Nevertheless, "caste cultures" remain strong, that is, there are particular patterns of marriage rules (including marriage ages), education, performance of rituals, styles of singing, etc. that are caste-specific. These caste cultures have a major impact on patterns of education and marriage, and ultimately on clothing.

#### *Education in Karimpur*

Literacy still remains low in Karimpur, with barely 50 percent of the males (over age 5) literate in 1998 while less than 40 percent of the females were literate. Equally important is the distribution of education by caste. Table 9.1 shows the number of caste groups participating in education at each level. It is obvious that female education ends quickly for the majority of Karimpur's girls, with only fourteen of 21 castes sending their girls to middle school, and only ten sending them to high school. Table 9.2 demonstrates the lack of equality in and the numbers of males and females receiving intercollege educations. Clearly, only the Brahmans are consistently sending their daughters out of the village for schooling past class eight, and in numbers that are significant.

Looking only at current levels of education for Brahman boys and girls shows that the only grade levels where males exceed females are BA and MA. For the other levels, through intercollege, attendance is

Table 9.1: Level of education by caste and gender, 1998

Level of education	No. of Castes <sup>a</sup> with children in school	No. of castes with female children in school
Primary	20	19
Middle	20	14
High School	20	10
Intercollege	14	5
BA	8	3
MA	2	1

<sup>a</sup> One caste has only an older adult woman in residence in Karimpur

Table 9.2: Numbers of males and females with intercollege education, by caste, 1998

Caste	Total	F	M
Banya (Shopkeeper)	3	1	2
Barthai (Carpenter)	4		4
Bhangi (Sweeper)	1		1
Bhurji (Grain parcher)	1		1
Brahman (Priest)	51	17	34
Chamar (Leatherworker)	4		4
Darji (Tailor)	1		1
Dhanuk (Midwife)	3	1	2
Garariya (Shepherd)	2		2
Kachi (Vegetable grower)	15	1	14
Kahar (Watercarrier)	3		3
Kaiyastha (Accountant)	5		5
Mali (Flower grower)	1	1	
Teli (Oil presser)	2		2
	96	21	75

comparable. For both sexes, there is a slight decline after high school, but six young men and seven young women are currently (1998) in intercollege. It is these Brahman youth whose ages of marriage have increased most dramatically and it is these Brahman females whose bodies must be marked as "not yet marriageable".

#### MARRIAGE AGES IN KARIMPUR

Karimpur has seen a steady rise in the age of marriage, especially for females, since the 1960s. As Table 9.3 demonstrates, in 1925, almost all Karimpur girls were married by age 12, with almost 50 percent married by age 10. In 1968, the majority were not married until age 15; while by 1984, the majority were married only at age 16, with only one girl married before age 13. By 1998, only one girl is married by age 14 and most girls are not married until they are 18, while one 23 year old remains unmarried. Given that the majority are also not in school past fifth grade, this increase in the age of marriage for all girls points to cultural factors other than education as propelling this change. This steady

Table 9.3: Marriage ages in Karimpur, 1925–1998

Age <sup>a</sup>	1925 No. married (total)	1968 No. married (total)	1984 No. married (total)	1998 No. married (total)
9	1 (11)			
10	6 (12)			
11	4 (9)		1 (17)	
12	11 (12)			
13	6 (7)	5 (11)	4 (15)	1 (28)
14	6 (8)	10 (22)	3 (11)	6 (32)
15	18 (20)	14 (18)	8 (23)	8 (25)
16	10 (10)	14 (14)	8 (14)	3 (17)
17	1 (1)	3 (3)	7 (8)	19 (26)
18	8 (8)	8 (8)	11 (12)	3 (10)
19	2 (2)	5 (5)	11 (13)	30 (35)
20	24 (25)	20 (20)	18 (19)	13 (16)
21				17 (18)
22				15 (16)
23				
24				

<sup>a</sup> Since ages were not regularly calculated in rural India in the 1920s (or 1990s for that matter), it is clear that in this first census by the Wisers, residents grouped individuals into those ages that “made sense,” i.e., 15, 16, 20, 25, etc. These groupings affect every census thereafter, as I used the Wisers’ ages as a baseline. The same irregularity is seen in 1998 when many new wives to the village are reported as “20”. Shaded areas represent the point at which all women were married.

increase in age of marriage varies drastically by caste, with the Oil pressers having the lowest average age of marriage in 1998 and the Brahmans the highest. One day in the late 80s, as I was talking to a group of upper caste women, a young (Oil presser) girl in a sari walked by: pointing to her disparagingly, the women commented: “Look at her, married so young.” Most in this group, though, were themselves married by 14. Before proceeding, I need to make a comment on the meaning of “marriage” in Karimpur. Marriage was a three stage ritual, with the “marriage” ceremony (*shadi*) being stage one. After a marriage ceremony in the girl’s house, the girl was brought to the boy’s home only for a few days after the ritual itself and the marriage was not consummated

(in fact, it was thought highly immoral for a girl to return from her husband’s house after this first visit pregnant). Only when the girl reached puberty, at age 14–16, was she sent back to her husband’s house for the consummation ceremony (*gaunā*): this was typically 3–4 years after the *shadi*, the event recorded in census and other records as marking marriage. This second visit was typically about a month in length. After she returned once again to her parents for up to six months or a year, the girl would then go a third time (*ronā*, literally “to cry”) which marked her more or less permanent residence in her husband’s household. So the vast majority of these young brides were not in fact in marital relationships. A few, whose husbands’ families lacked female labor, resided in their husbands’ households at an early age, though these relationships were almost never consummated until the girl reached puberty.

Nowadays, with girls marrying at or well past puberty, the ritual cycle is condensed. Most common is that the *shadi* and *gaunā* are combined. Not only are the girls older, and thought ready for sexual relations, but having a separate *gaunā* is very expensive. In 1994, the 14-year-old daughter of one of the village Washermen was getting married and whether to combine the ceremonies was a point of contention between mother and father. Her father argued strongly that they should do the two ceremonies as one, while her mother, arguing for the mental well-being of her daughter, wanted them separated by at least a few months. When the two rituals are combined, there is a longer first visit to the groom’s village, not the 4–7 days of earlier times. But a break, even as little as a month, between marriage/consummation and permanent living at the groom’s house is still advocated.

It is Karimpur’s Brahman community that is most affected by the high levels of education and the later ages of marriage. Only Brahman girls remain unmarried into their twenties, and only Brahman girls have ever received an MA degree. The Brahman community is very articulate about why their daughters should be in school and unmarried: for those who seek to upgrade their family status with urban connections, and to find non-farmers for their daughters, education of daughters is all important. Husbands who are not farmers and who will have some kind of paying job are going to be educated. Parents desire sons-in-law with at least a BA, and hence must educate their daughters

comparably. Therefore education for girls is not for the sake of education per se, but for the marriage market. Girls are not expected to seek employment; rather, they should be well-educated so that they can train the next generation. Here the expectations are even higher: daughters married into urban families are sending their children to English language schools from grade 1. These schools have standards and demands considerably higher than the village schools, and it is the woman's job to help the children study and prepare their lessons. The more education the mother brings, the greater are the chances that her offspring will succeed in the all important school race that so consumes many middle-class Indian families. Most Karimpur Brahman families are now marrying at least one daughter into an urban setting (though transference from urban to rural is almost impossible) and everyone is fully aware of the need for education. These families, looking to prosper in the twenty-first century, see education, salaried jobs, and urban living as all-important. Here we see the "transnational imagery," marked most especially by English language education, and an urban lifestyle as fundamental to these new emergent lifestyles.

What is most evident is that over time, and with a corresponding increase in education, Karimpur's daughters have married at later and later ages. But as marriage is put off, and as girls continue to attend school, the traditional garb of the married woman is no longer appropriate. New styles of clothing must be found for these new modern teenage bodies.

#### FROCKS, "SETS," "SUITS," AND SARIS: CLOTHING THE FEMALE BODY IN KARIMPUR

Fashion in the sense of clothing used to demarcate status has long been a part of Karimpur everyday practice, whether of men or women. A man might note status with starched pyjama-kurta (netaji, or "leader" clothes), while a woman might choose a silk or synthetic sari to announce her wealth. Nineteenth century British-illustrated travelogues of northern India demonstrate multiple styles of clothing on both men and women, clothing that marks status, whether that of the maharani or dancing girl, ruler or acrobat. When I went to north India in 1967, I quickly learned to "read the bodies" of Karimpur residents in order to identify basic status differences. Further, contrary to ideas of an

unchanging, "traditional" India, clothing in Karimpur has been undergoing change for at least a century. Women in the early part of the century wore a heavy gathered skirt and long-sleeved blouse and scarf, wearing a man's *dhofi* only for cooking. As late as the 1960s, some lower caste older women still wore this outfit. Gradually, women changed to wearing a *dhofi* (the term used for women's saris in Karimpur in the 1960s) of approximately five yards rather than the six yards of the urban sari. These *dhofis*, worn without a blouse or petticoat in the heat of the summer, were either hand-woven *khāñ* cloth or a plain light-colored mill cloth. The *dhofi* was draped clockwise around the woman's body, unlike the sari which is wrapped from right to left, and the excess material at the front was bunched together and either tucked into a petticoat or tied to itself to hold it on. Younger women would more self-consciously make pleats of the excess cloth, but their elders did not. When going out of the house, a plain shawl would be wrapped around the head and shoulders to fully cover the face of the woman.

Beside patterns of marriage age and educational rates, the most important factor affecting girls' clothing in Karimpur in the 1960s was the extreme poverty that almost all families lived under. Cloth was expensive, and men, women and children got at most two new outfits a year: one at the fall festival of Divāli and a second at the spring festival of Holi. For women, an outfit was a *dhofi* (identical but for color for all women in a family to alleviate arguments over cost and quality), blouse piece, and petticoat piece. For girls, it would be a frock or *kamiz* and *salvār*. For boys, it was a shirt and pants. Men might either get a *dhofi* and shirt or a pyjama suit or a shirt and trousers (the former being most traditional; the latter most modern). Clothing was bought by the male head of the household: often he would buy many yards of one fabric, from which he would have the village tailor make shirts for the boys, frocks for the young girls, and *kamizes* for the teenage girls who were still in school. With the village tailor given instructions to cut all waste and save cloth, frocks were short, as were *kamizes*.

Writing about Karimpur's farm incomes in the early 1970s, Bruce Derr (1979) was very pessimistic about the future of agriculture, and the potential for better lifestyles in Karimpur. But the 1970s ushered in the Green Revolution, with increased crop yields due to irrigation and fertilizers, as well as new seeds. The real fruits of these transformations

were not seen until the 1980s and even 1990s, when greater disposable incomes, among at least Karimpur's landowning (Brahman) families, became prevalent. Further, increased urban networks based on marriage and migration led to an expansion of views on what was a desirable lifestyle, whether a gas stove or new styles of clothing (see Wadley and Derr 1989b for a pessimistic view on the early influence of these urban networks). These new disposable incomes made shopping in the cultural supermarket of the globalizing marketplaces of nearby towns increasingly possible. But the shift to the global supermarket comes at a cost. Cloth for a *kamīz*, with everyone in the family sharing in a lengthy yardage, would now be about \$3 (in 1998 equivalents), ready-made Panjabi suits often cost \$6 or more, while ready-made skirt sets are usually over \$10. It is possible, however, to find very inexpensive polyester girls' frocks in the stalls and hand carts of the urban markets.

In the 1960s, when I first went to Karimpur, girls under ten or so would often wear cast-offs from older relatives saving their frocks for special occasions. Little attention was paid to daily hygiene, and only those girls who went to school were regularly clean and dressed neatly in a frock or belted skirt with a blouse. Since only a small minority of girls, all upper caste, attended school in the 1960s, the group of well-dressed girls was small. Girls would wear frocks, shifting to the *dhōṭī-cum-sari* by ages 10–12, sometimes even wearing a sari to school once education past class five reached the village. By age ten, most girls wore either a sari or *salvār-kamīz*. Young girls might wear underwear that was identical to that worn by men: “boxer” shorts held up by a drawstring. (Once a girl donned a sari, underpants were no longer thought necessary and were/are not worn.)

As education began to be delayed for the higher caste girls, they began to wear the Panjabi style *salvār-kamīz*, itself a mark of social change in this rural area of Uttar Pradesh, south of Panjab. (Upon my arrival to do fieldwork in 1967, I quickly learned that the *salvār-kamīz* that I had worn at Delhi University several years before was unacceptable on a woman in her 20s in Karimpur as the women forced me into saris. Only in 1998 did I dare to wear a *salvār-kamīz*, or “Panjabi suit” [or just “suit”] in the village. The northern “Panjabi” suit was identified with Panjabi migrants from Pakistan at the time of Independence and with Muslims. It was not acceptable clothing for Hindu adult women in

this region. (Muslim women in Karimpur wore saris through the 1970s and 1980s: only now, with an increase in religious identity, do they mark themselves as non-Hindu by wearing the *salvār-kamīz*.) But it had been adopted by teenage girls in the urban areas of the north, no doubt as part of the same trend of clothing the school-going female body that this paper tracks for a rural region several decades later.

Although Panjabi suits became the costume of choice for school girls in Karimpur through the 1980s, only rarely was a girl allowed to wear a suit past about age 15, and she was provided saris as soon as she withdrew from school. Young women in the 1980s who were in their twenties but unmarried were expected to wear saris.

It is important to note that as early as the 1960s, Karimpur's women were responding to ideas of “fashion,” of making a particular statement about family and self through clothing. While levels of personal hygiene, especially of children, were low, and women regularly ignored things like fixing their hair (and almost never wore *śindhur*, the red powder in the part line that marks a married woman), they did celebrate each festival, using bright pink dyes to decorate their feet and henna on their hands. Nail polish was highly valued, while lipsticks were likely to be used to make a *bindī*, a red dot on the forehead.

I must emphasize too that there was a strong sense of proper dress within the village, something that affected me when I would join a group of women going to visit caste mates for a wedding or birth and be told to go change into something better and pressed. On these occasions, women would dig into their tin boxes to retrieve their best sari, worn only on such occasions, and possibly even some jewelry, although everyone but widows always worn glass bangles.

Other new fashions entered Karimpur in the 1960s and 1970s. The “modern” fashion of wearing a sari “Delhi style” instead of the way *dhōṭīs* were worn became fashionable for some in the 1970s. I vividly remember an incident that could not take place in a Brahman household today. In 1975, a young Brahman girl about 12 or so years of age begged a sari from me to wear for the visiting that takes place at the festival of Holi. She also insisted that I teach her how to wear it in the urban style, and proudly posed with her mother and sister, both wearing their saris in the traditional wrap. When one of her older male relatives came into the courtyard to greet the women gathered there, he commented

on her sari, noting that she was now of a new "adult" status. Though this young woman went back to her *salvār-kamīzes* for several more years (and finished eighth grade), before donning a sari full time (and not marrying until she was 24), she had been able, at age 12, to be appropriately dressed in a sari. Her young nieces of 1998 would not think of wearing a sari at that age, and in fact have never worn a sari though they are now in their early 20s.

A few other outsiders (besides the anthropologist) brought styles to the village: the government appointed midwife from Kerala always wrapped her sari in the urban style, and a couple of young brides from urban areas did so on rare occasions. The key "fashion" of the time was the polyester see-through sari which was featured in magazines like *Femina*. These saris, popular with young women through the 1970s, brought on the wrath of their mothers-in-law who found the synthetic material to be too revealing.

These synthetic saris were seen by the older women as a sign of moral decay and of the loss of the modesty of women that rules of *purdah* mandated. Wives in Karimpur were expected to always maintain *purdah*, covering of their faces, before all males older than their husbands, and before older women on ritual occasions. In addition, higher caste women were kept within the confines of their courtyards, unable to go out except for the morning latrine visits to the fields. (Older women, unmarried girls, or hired help did any mandated outside chores such as making cow dung cakes.)

Women also mimicked pictures that they had seen in advertisements, especially those featuring loose hair and flowers. Posing with their oiled hair worn loose, these girls are challenging rules of proper female decorum, where loose hair marked the whore or widow or ferocious goddess. Anthropologists from the West were constantly reminded by their village friends to "tie their hair" (Ann Gold, personal communication). Washed maybe once a week with the same harsh yellow soap used for bodies and clothes, and often showing the yellowing caused by malnourishment, girls' hair was short and straggly and heavily oiled.

As India's economy slowly changed, several changes occurred in women's clothing that affected options for teenage girls. As noted above, the Green Revolution brought more disposable income into the village,

allowing some increase in expenditures on clothing. As more children attended school, appropriate clean clothing became important. Many families provided a school outfit separate from other clothing (many schools had a uniform). Another sign of increased prosperity was longer frocks and *kamīzes*. Whereas a *kamīz* in the 1960s and 1970s would barely reach mid-thigh, by the 1990s fashion dictated that it be mid-calf. For adult women, colorful milled cotton saris, slightly longer than the *dhoris* of their elders, became fashionable.

It was the economic shifts of the 1990s that brought the most options. The opening up of the Indian economy led to the growth of polyester cloth as the fabric of choice for women's saris, as well as for girls' frocks. As more families had relatives who lived at least part of the year in urban areas, urban fashions became more available. Increases in family incomes led to more buying of "fashionable" readymade clothes, rather than the mass production of family clothes by the village tailor. Even those families who continued to use the village tailor would have him add ruffles and other decorative items not found on earlier clothing. (It should be obvious that these embellishments raised costs due to both cloth and time.)

But there are other changes as well. As girls remained unmarried into their twenties, a new fashion emerged to mark the early teen body: the "set," or loose blouse worn over a matching calf length skirt. Not a frock, and retaining more modesty with its loose long blouse, these outfits are worn by girls aged 11-12 to late teens. In fact, the shift to a *salvār kamīz* may now only take place when the girl starts intercollegiate, and less rarely her BA. Meanwhile, the *salvār kamīz* is worn into the twenties, in fact, until the girl marries. I knew one 23-year-old woman due to be married a few weeks later who had still never worn a sari.

But clothing the female body has changed in other ways as well. Girls at all ages are wearing cotton underpants such as those worn by very conservative American girls. Girls through their mid-teens are not given bras however, but a very lightweight undershirt. The western brassiere as an undergarment appeared in Karimpur in the 1970s, first on the younger married women in their twenties. Either bought in the market or made at home (Susan Dewey once showed me a Bombay magazine that included a paper pattern for making your own bra),



this became an increasingly necessary item of clothing. Now women in their fifties are also demanding bras, though they do not use lower undergarments.

There were more subtle changes as well. Through the 1980s, women's clothing in Karimpur was almost never ironed, while men would take clothing for special occasions to the nearby town to be pressed (the village Washerman did not own an iron). Nowadays, you can get your clothes pressed at a roadside stall or, as in some families, press them yourself. Polyester cloth also makes ironing unnecessary.

While clothing changed, so did hair and personal hygiene. Schooling demanded that a girl wear clean clothes on a daily basis, as well as keep her hair combed. Some families invested in shampoos to rid their children of lice, an expense unheard of as late as the 1970s. Those with more disposable incomes demanded better soaps for both body and hair, while in some households detergents replaced the yellow soap used on clothes. Better nutrition for the whole family resulted also in fewer signs of malnutrition. One result of these changes for teenage girls is luxuriant, shiny, long hair. This visible sign of increased prosperity and differences in hygiene constantly startles me, used as I was to constant lice-picking and unkempt heads of hair.

#### THE MODERN IDENTITY PROJECT

There is another shift captured in the clothing of teenage girls that is vitally important to India and its future: the beginnings of a new attention to the body as a carrier of self-identity. Fundamental here is the possibility of making a statement through clothing, something not really an option for the teenagers of the 1960s and 1970s with their two sets of clothing a year. While all identities are marked through clothing, making a statement of self-identity versus familial/group identity is possible only when choice exists. I argue that India's poverty often prevents these choice statements.

But amongst Karimpur's urbanizing Brahman families, choice does now exist. Girls often have 5-6 outfits from which to choose, representing a range of styles and statements about age and status. In January 2002, a young woman of 18 years showed up wearing a ruffled frock made of polyester. Glancing at me, she immediately commented, "*Bua* (auntie)

thinks that I am too old for this style." Since I was the outsider, I had thought little about it, but clearly she felt challenged to wear a frock at that age, even though she really liked it and wanted to wear it.

As important as the choice of what to wear on a particular day is the option to buy one's own clothing. Increasingly, women and girls are allowed into the marketplace themselves, and increasingly families are allowing individual choice of color, cloth, and style of readymade clothing. But as one elderly male head of a large household told me in 1984, "Now I do all of this that the family wants—saris and clothes for the children." The patriarchal family firmly ruled by a male head was fundamental to the denial of choice in numerous realms of consumption—food, soaps, clothes, bedding, etc. Not only are females more aware of what is available through advertising, word of mouth and television, but they also have greater freedom of movement. Allowing one's daughter to ride a bicycle to school in town, or to take a bus, immediately gives her a freedom of movement denied to her elders. And it exposes her, through contacts with classmates and the urban marketplace, to new options for consumption. One father, whose family sometimes lives in town and sometimes in the village, complained about the expense of town living created just by his children's demands for small items from the market (that, like most small towns in India, exists on his doorstep in the form of small shops). These teenage girls are now demanding a say in what is bought for them. In doing so, they are claiming new forms of self-identity.

#### RURAL INDIAN IDENTITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

After completing the pages above, I came across this quote by Elaine Abelson regarding women in the late nineteenth century. I quote it here at length:

The problem of not wearing the correct attire became one with not knowing how to shop and not understanding how clothes had been transformed into a new symbol of middle-class life. . . . the profound change in consumption patterns was the direct consequence of technological development and market expansion. The links between production and consumption were clear. Needs multiplied because there was more to be had and an increasing standard of

living made more things feasible. Social identity was established through the new possibilities of consumption . . . notions of what constituted basic necessities gradually expanded on all population levels, of course, but this was particularly true of the growing middle group of white-collar workers and their families. [2002: 353]

This paper on dressing females in India deals directly with these issues, not for Victorian women of the nineteenth century, but for rural Indian women of the twenty-first century. Yet this contrast also points to the divergent interpretations demanded by cultural groups as they move into new patterns of consumption. In rural north India, the sari-clad female was marked as both marriageable (sexual) or married. And through the 1960s, this female was most often married before puberty, that is, before she was a fully sexual being. But in the twenty-first century, girls at puberty are regularly not married, and to have them marked as sexual beings through sari wearing would be highly inappropriate. As we know only too well, "the honor of men and their communities is located in women's bodies" (Menon 2002:60). In fact, the skirt and blouse "set" worn through the late teens can be read as clothing that denies the sexuality of the post-pubescent girl, linked as it is in style to the frocks of younger girls, but with the loose top literally concealing the sexual features of the late teen. The Panjabi suit too is marked as "not sexual" and as "school girls' clothing" in these areas, and hence can be used for the older unmarried women. Today, to have a daughter in her twenties who is unmarried and wearing a sari is in fact a stigma, a sign of the parents' inability to marry her off, whether due to character or finances.

This examination of changing dress styles as related to changing patterns of consumption and a global supermarket provides a clear example of the meaning of "localization," for the rural residents of western Uttar Pradesh have borrowed and adapted lifestyles and "fashion" from the global supermarket and have indeed fashioned it as their own as they define appropriate dress for their teenage girls. And for some of these teenagers, their families' increased prosperity allows them to claim forms of self-identity denied to their aunts and mothers, for whom choice did not exist and for whom clothing was bought, not chosen.

# Wife, Mother, Widow

## Exploring Women's Lives in Northern India

Susan Snow Wadley

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