

Traditional Clothing and my Indian Culture
By Arya A Shukla

The thudding of our feet as we run up the stairs booms throughout the house. My sister and I race each other to the double-doored closet jam-packed with rainbow overflow. We struggle to sift through the clothing. It becomes frustrating to remove a hanger from the closet. My sister and I have a ritual of seeing who can pick out their favorite Indian outfit first, and the plethora of options--lehengas, punjabis, anarkalis, sarees--beg to be chosen. We dress up a couple times a year for family weddings, Garba (an Indian folk dance that is performed for the holiday Navratri), and Diwali celebrations for the Indian New Year. There is no shortage of excitement when we put these clothes on, for we feel like princesses decked out in jewelry and many colors. Many of my friends always ask me to host Diwali parties so they can wear my clothing, emulating the feeling of pure joy these outfits evoke and understanding the outfits' association with my Indian identity.

I am much more familiar with the progression of Indian clothing for women than that for men; however, there is a very evident evolution of trends that has occurred for both sexes. The styles and colors that my mother, sister, and I wore in the early 2000s are drastically different from the styles I wear today, and whenever my grandmothers took trips to India, they replenished our wardrobe with the up-to-date trends, contributing to the growing mass of clothes in the closet. Some trends throughout my life were outfits with shorter tops and longer pants, longer tops and shorter pants, palazzo pants, and different patterns and embroidery. According to Charu Tyagi, "embroidery is a common point between Indian and western fashion and is also a trademark of Indian fashion which is vastly used on silhouettes like sarees, lehengas, suits and many other attires...[embroidery] started emerging on Western attires like shirts, skirts, dresses and more which made a good amalgamation of Indian and Western style" (Tyagi). Embroidery is

probably the most prevalent style seen at Indian events, especially in the United States. There are many places to order Indian clothing online, and these Westernized Indian websites typically use embroidery as a format for most of their clothing.

Different eras of fashion used various fabrics, and socioeconomic status historically contributed to the different materials used for these outfits. Indian clothing was often crafted from cotton, but more affluent areas would use silk (“History of Indian Fashion”). Personally, there is little discrepancy in the materials used for the Indian clothes I own, but there are noticeable differences in their outward appearances and styles, for “[India’s] beautiful sarees, designer dresses, [and] rich embroideries have turned Indian fashion platter into a gamut of rich diversity” (Tyagi). For instance, the dress code for Garba for women is typically lehengas. These outfits consist of feet-length skirts, a crop top, and a dupatta, or scarf, that drapes across the body and shoulders. For weddings, there is much more variety in the color schemes and styles that people wear; lehengas, punjabis, and anarkalis--pants with tops that are often knee length or longer--often make appearances.

Additionally, many factors have influenced the progression of Indian clothing styles throughout the decades. Bollywood films play an important role in the trends that become popularized in daily life and for celebrations (Tyagi). The Bollywood film industry is one of the largest Indian industries in terms of revenue, and it is characterized by its popular dance combinations and authentic music (“What is Bollywood?”). Bollywood has built momentum in countries other than India, for “‘Bollywood nights’ have gained popularity in dance clubs...and Western directors like Spike Lee and Baz Luhrman have used the songs in their films” (Redlich 65). Its extended influence to other regions has helped the international community learn more about Indian culture and appreciate its significance.

Bollywood films and Bollywood dancing have a large connection to traditional Indian clothing. My connection to Bollywood films stems from my love for dance and the desire to learn more about my own culture. Bollywood is thought to have emulated Hollywood, but in reality, Bollywood films are so ornate to differentiate themselves and draw attention from Indian audiences (Redlich 60). Since Bollywood is commonly known for its trademark dance sequences and colorful attire, it is evident that “the influence of Bollywood dressing on fashion is massive to date, and every decade presents a different Bollywood fashion which becomes a favorite amongst the masses” (Tyagi). When viewers see these styles worn by their favorite actors and actresses, they are more likely to follow the trends. The fashion industry for Bollywood and Hindi films pulls styles from other regions of the world and contributes to the overwhelming excitement of Indian seamstresses who make the clothing (Redlich 60). Additionally, India has eight classical dance styles, and two of which, Kathak and Bharatanatyam, are popular within Bollywood films (Redlich 65). These styles incorporate story-telling and deep emotions into the artform and make it a very entertaining and pertinent part of movie scenes (Redlich 65).

Although I have not personally been trained in Kathak and Bharatanatyam, I have danced for my whole life, and I decided to join a Bollywood fusion dance team in college. Most of the practices have become virtual, but I am still able to make South Asian friends, learn choreography, maintain ties with my culture despite the pandemic, and learn other Indian dance styles that may not have been presented to me. For the team performances, the dancers wear Indian clothes to make the dances more exciting and spirited. Additionally, the dance team is part of a larger association called the Desi Dance Network (DDN) in which we compete with other Indian dance teams from colleges across the country. My cousin is also on the dance team,

and my relationship with her continually grows. My family and my cultural identity are fundamental parts of my life, and both are emphasized through my involvement with dance.

Many of the movements of these Indian dance styles diffuse throughout other cultures. For instance, Flamenco, an artform originating in southern Spain, has some commonalities with Bharatanatyam as well as other Indian dance styles: “Hand gestures, footwork, rhythm and melodies were all intertwined so that the link between flamenco and [Bharatanatyam] would be clearly communicated to the audience” (Gulati). Both of these styles come from diverse backgrounds and have so much to offer. However, Indian dance styles also borrow techniques because many Indian dances have adapted many skills from other cultures as well: “In India, [people] have grown accustomed to Bollywood dance sequences that borrow widely from hip-hop, modern, salsa and other dance styles. For many Indian Americans, fusion performances are a [reflection] of their own hybrid cultural background where American, Indian and other cultures routinely mix” (Gulati). The fusion dance team I joined indeed has aspects of many American dance styles, such as Jazz and Hip-Hop, that are smoothly incorporated into our sets of Indian dance as well.

These styles were showcased at many of our events throughout the year, on and off the stage. At cultural events, my family and I entered the halls where the events were held and were greeted instantly with a minefield of shoes on the floor. We quickly flick ours off and make our way to the dance floor where our clothes are displayed. My cousins and I arranged dance productions to perform at weddings, and the vibrant waves of color flooded the floor. Wearing these clothes made everyone feel closely connected to Indian culture, and to each other. However, in the past year, people stopped dressing up due to the COVID-19 pandemic and hiatus of all cultural events. I am looking forward to the resumption of these events and dance

competitions so that I can form new cultural connections, wear Indian clothes, and dance like before COVID-19.

Traditional Indian clothing has many cultural ties to films, dance, and other cultures. Its reach is endless and allows people to maintain close connections to each other and their Indian culture. Every piece of clothing in my jumbled mess of a closet has a memory associated with it, and I can remember each event to which I wore a specific outfit. The beautiful clothing decorated with ornate accessories are a staple in my life, and I am so thankful that this aspect of my life has influence in other parts of my identity.

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