

## Defining and redefining the traditional in 'Indian Fashion'

Dress history or Fashion history is a relatively new field in academics. History has been studied for its wars and economics and not much emphasis has been given to material culture until the last three decades.

As a Phd Student in Dress History my area of research is 'The influence of British Rule on Indian Fashion.' Fashions change, they are not static or permanent. They change because of certain influences. These influences could be political, technological, geographical, religious and many more. Textiles are manufactured and fashion is created through clothing. The product that comes out is a dress that is fashionable at a given point in time. A study of fashion and dress history is a study of the tangible and the intangible; dress being tangible and fashion being intangible. Food clothing and shelter are the three basic necessities of life and each can be highly fashionable, however fashion is mostly displayed by dress or clothing. Every culture has some basic form of adornment, even if people do not wear clothes. As Rouse mentions in '*Understanding Fashion*', that fashion is not only about looking good, but also about looking 'right', socially correct and proper.<sup>1</sup> Clothing or what one wears forms the core and crux of this issue.

The word 'Traditional' signifies lack of change. So – Traditional Costume seems to be fossilized in time. The question is 'How traditional is traditional after all?' When do we call something traditional? Is it when we want it to become traditional, create an image or identity, or is it because it actually is? Traditional Indian Menswear as referred to in today's context is the 'Sherwani' or Achkan. Sherwani as a garment seems to have appeared in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. The miniature paintings of the Mughal era do not show this garment being worn (Mughal era lasted from 1526 to 1857 AD).



Figure 2 Jawahar Lal Nehru India's First Prime minister 1947



Figure 1 Nehru Jacket

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Rouse, *Understanding Fashion*(Oxford London: BSP Professional Books, 1989).

A study by Jane workman shows the difference in approach to fashion by men and women.<sup>2</sup> According to her men have a need based approach to fashion where as women have a want based approach. This holds true for my study as well.

After discussing the proposed methodology (which cannot all be written here as it is yet to be published), and applying it to this case study, we come to the following conclusions that -

- A thorough research of the Indian environment of the time period shows that by the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian men of upper classes (socio-economic) had completely adopted the Western attire – the three piece suit.
- This was a radical way of dressing in the Indian society, where men wore loose garments during the Mughal rule, just preceding the British Rule.
- They wanted nothing to do with Indian traditions, and then we notice that with the coming in of freedom movement, dressing habits change and we ‘create’ traditional garments.
- Thus there is reason to believe that the Traditional Indian menswear has its roots in British Rule (which lasted till 1947). As mentioned earlier – men have a need based approach to fashion, and politics plays a major role.
- The new Indian man wanted his own identity, it had to be new yet rooted in tradition. They did not want to look completely western, yet they did not want to go back to the days of Mughal rule, so they created a ‘NEW TRADITION’.

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