

Influence of television commercials on clothing in India

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In this article I aim to show that there are some major changes in India because of television regarding clothing. Whilst there is cultural fusion of Indian and western style clothing, this fusion is happening in different ways for different groups. Status in clothing (Campbell 49) is also reflecting other divides. The way that people respond to what they see on television commercials may depend on their gender, age, class or whether they live in a rural or urban context.

The research is based on a ten year project which began with in-depth ethnography conducted in India. Most of the research was conducted in the North East of India, though some was conducted in Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore. The ethnography included living with Indian families for long periods of time (ranging from six weeks to six months). Other research methods were also used including questionnaires, interviews and focus discussion groups.

Television commercials are having an influence in India and this is clearly seen and noted by those living amongst the changes. Clothing is one visual representation of this. For example, Chake from Malthi village noted that fashion had changed in his village, along with people's attitudes and he believed that this was mainly due to the influence of television commercials.

'Television commercials have a great influence on rural culture. Earlier people used to live in a different manner but seeing all these programmes and advertisements people have changed their attitudes. People have changed the way they dress, their hairstyles and attitudes.'

One way that these changes are occurring is by mixing Indian and western style of clothing. I use the term hybrid. Young argues that whilst the term hybrid was previously used in connection with colonial powers this is now a matter for debate (6). Organic hybridity implies mixing and fusion into a new language and worldview. Hirschkop and Shepherd define an organic hybridity which tends towards fusion but is in conflict with intentional hybridity (110). For Bhabha hybridity is the moment when the discourse of colonial authority loses its grip and finds itself open to the language of the other, hence reversing the structures of domination (1). Hybridity works in two ways simultaneously i.e. it involves both fusion or mixing and resistance or subversion, linking the past to contemporary culture. Hence, I apply the term to contemporary culture in India, pointing to the tensions and contradictions between the self and the other. The term hybrid does not describe a tendency to be passive, unchanging or static, but a tendency to be resistant, subversive and dynamic whilst at the same time mixing and fusing with elements of other cultures, often with a historical colonial connection.

In conjunction with the term hybrid I will also use the term traditional. This is used in connection with whatever people perceived to be their sense of cultural history i.e. whatever they termed as traditional. For example, Sunnie, a middle class Indian who lived in Ranchi town noted

'We are very traditional in this family. . . Because kids watch television they are not interested in religion as people here pray from a young age. They are only interested in the west these days and they are no longer interested in traditional things.'

He saw the west as being set in opposition to traditions, which he perceived as consisting of pre-existing cultural elements. The term tradition actually connected him to a sense of history (Warde 76) even though traditions themselves have never remained statically existing, unchanging entities in time or space.

Television in India

In the 1970s the Indian government began to speculate as to whether television could be used to improve education and literacy throughout the country. This led to rural areas being

exposed to satellite television for education purposes (Ninan 77, Mahajan and Luthra 5, Bhatt 20). This proved to be successful and the infrastructure was developed to support the expansions of television coverage (McDowell). Colour televisions were introduced in the 1980s (ibid) and ownership grew (Karnik 10) and has continued to rise. Satellite Television Asia Region owned by Rupert Murdoch began operating in 1993. Murdoch also bought the controlling interest in Zee television (a Hindi satellite channel) (Bhatt 63). These have proved strong competition for the state owned Doordarshan. Hence, to survive Doordarshan has become profit oriented and more concerned with advertising and entertainment rather than its initial remit of education (McDowell 168).

Wherever you go in India, whether it is a slum or village, someone will have a television. For example, Sunke Das who worked for the advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather in India noted

‘It is well known in Ranchi, that whenever a popular serial or film is being shown that not even an auto-rickshaw can be found. There is so much demand for television that employees even put pressure on management to install televisions. People want to watch their favourite films and series during the day and they actually stop work in order to do this.’

Vijay Kumar, an audience research officer at Doordarshan, commented that people would often watch television somewhere, even if they did not own a television set themselves.

‘Everyone in slums and villages has access to Doordarshan as they all go to watch television with friends or relatives. Doordarshan is widely available and cheaper than satellite or cable television. You will always find someone with a television. Doordarshan has a very large market.’

Hence, despite slums and villages being places where poverty is rampant, one is struck by the number of television aerials that protrude above their rooftops. On arriving in Delhi, a visitor finds that there are numerous television aerials and satellite dishes displayed from various apartments. In many villages watching television is also a part of everyday life. Saratri lived in Dighia village and grew fruit and crops in the enclosure surrounding their house. She maintained.

‘We watch about three to four hours of television in our house everyday. We like programmes like *Shanti*, *Chandrakanta* and *Alif Laila*. About 20 people come to our home to see the television. It depends on what programmes are being shown.’

Vivsavid lived in Dighia village and was a farmer although he taught informally in the village school. They had a black and white television for seven years. He has taught himself to read and write and noted that it became quite cramped when the television was on.

‘If there is a good movie on, about 50 outsiders come to watch the television. We usually watch television for a few hours in the evening, after work and studies. If there is a special programme on we may see it in the morning or the afternoon, but it is more usual for the television to be put on in the evenings for about 2 or 3 hours. ... When there is an important or interesting programme on, people come from the field, they come from the school and they come from their office to watch television.’

The importance of television commercials

Doordarshan now relies heavily on commercials for revenue. Commercial breaks occurred every ten or twelve minutes during broadcasting. Popular serials or programmes like *Chandrakanta* were heavily sponsored. For example, a few of the sponsors that would be shown at the start of the programme and during commercial breaks included products by Hindustan-Lever, Proctor and Gamble, Colgate-Palmolive and Cadburys. The names of products along with the sponsor flash up on the screen, before, during and after each episode. The hour long serial often had around five commercial breaks – mainly for the products of the sponsoring companies. McDowell (158) maintains that colour televisions were introduced into India because they were considered to have greater commercial appeal. It

was also surprising to see how many commercials used clothing styles and contexts that would be very familiar in Britain. Women were shown wearing short dresses or skirts and were depicted as having boyfriends. Western music is also often used, e.g. one advertisement for the soap Nirma (Hindustan-Lever) used a Roy Orbison song *Pretty woman*, though *Hinglish* is more commonly used – a mixture of Hindi and English. Another advertisement for Heineken portrays football fans who are transfixed watching football and drinking bottles of Heineken.

These commercials are often attractive and parents turned on the television before a programme started in order to watch commercials (Mahajan and Luthra 75-6). Many people we lived with liked the television commercials and avidly watched them. Some people thought they were better than the programmes. A schoolchild observed that

‘Television commercials are better made and of better quality than the state programmes. They are more innovative and interesting and give you food for thought. The standard of advertisements on television has improved a lot over the past few years.’

Ashok was from another village in the Gaya district, and noted that people in his village learned about products through watching television commercials. He suggested that everyone in the village at all different economic levels liked to watch commercials.

‘Everyone likes to watch the advertisements as they provide people with information, and television shows us what products are available. It makes us aware of things to buy. The poorer people in this village who are not literate enjoy watching television as they can understand it. They especially like to see advertisements but they cannot afford to buy many of the things that are shown.’

This was also true in towns. Sakila lived in Garha Toli slum with seven of her children. Her house consisted of three rooms, including a kitchen, a smaller room containing their bed and television and a large room with another bed. They took electricity illegally from overhead cables. Her husband was a chicken farmer and earned about 1,000 rupees (£20) per month. Sakila could not read or write but liked to watch television commercials so that she was informed about prices.

‘We watch television advertisements for all kinds of products, such as toothpaste and soap. Because of advertising I am aware of the prices of goods and I won’t be cheated by outsiders when I go to buy them. Television commercials give you the correct price for things and benefit us a lot.’

Dali was eighteen years old and lived in Dighia village. For her and her family watching television was their main leisure activity. She found out about products from television and wanted to use products that she saw advertised.

‘We like to see the advertisements on television. We find out about various goods from television and want to incorporate some of the things we see into our lives. We hardly ever go to the cinema so we only find out about various goods from the television.’

Prasheed was also from Dighia village. He had eight small rooms which surrounded an open courtyard. He lived here with his seven children. They watched television at another house in the village. He used television commercials to help him choose what products to buy and how to behave and act.

‘Everyone sees the advertisements on television and they can try to search out what is good from the advertisements. We can determine what can be used for our betterment from advertisements. You can learn how to behave and act from such things.’

Hence television commercials were used to decide not only what products to buy, but how to behave. People in even the remotest areas could see what was appropriate and acceptable. Hence, people were taking on board some aspects such as dressing in a similar manner to people in the commercials, whilst also maintaining some aspects of Indian culture.

Women and clothing

Clothing has seen a particularly dramatic change for many young middle and wealthier class women. Young, independent, unmarried career oriented women are frequently depicted on television and television commercials, wearing western style clothing such as short dresses, mini skirts and jeans. For example, the Perk chocolate commercial depicts a young woman at a bus stop in a queue. She is eating a Perk chocolate bar. The rest of the bus queue gaze longingly at the chocolate bar and rush off to buy a Perk. The woman is left on her own at the bus stop. She is wearing a short dress and DocMartin boots. She appears to be independent, successful and career oriented.

Mothers and slightly older women are usually pictured wearing slightly more traditional style clothing such as the *Salwar Kamish* or the *Sari*. For the first time in India, young women in Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore have begun to wear shorts and miniskirts (Vasudevan 1). I noticed many college students wearing miniskirts, shorts and jeans in Delhi. The western style clothing symbolises freedom and authority from control which may be the future for some Indian women when they marry – if they marry into a very traditional family. Hence, being a student is a liminal period where they are allowed to dress and behave differently from what is expected of them when they are married.

For example, Vickie used to wear jeans and short skirts when she was single in Bombay, but she no longer wore such clothing. She said it would be inappropriate for her role as a wife and mother. She rejected the *Sari* considering it to be old fashioned or only for special occasions. Instead she wore the *Salwar Kamish* which she perceived to be more modern and progressive. Hence, this was a compromise between western and traditional clothing, reflecting perhaps her compromise between western and traditional cultural values. Wearing the *Salwar Kamish* is also part of her resistance to the traditional male dominated lifestyle that she led. She differentiated herself from the rest of the household, since all the other women in that household wore *saris*. Thus the clothing is symbolic (Fiske 20, Featherstone 83, Miller 74) of her role and even slight modifications are important.

Vickie's sisters in Bombay not only wore short skirts but they were career oriented and had convinced their parents not to arrange marriages for them. Vickie talked about her sisters shortly before we went to visit them

'When you meet my sisters you will see they are very modern. They wear 'midis' (*miniskirts*) and jeans and they all have careers. When I was there I used to wear jeans as well. I still have them here but it wouldn't be right to wear them as I'm married. I usually wear a *Salwar* instead of a *sari*... I think the *Sari* is a bit old fashioned. I only wear it on formal occasions.'

Vickie liked the Cadburys Dairy Milk chocolate commercial. This depicts Indian cricketers playing cricket. A well known cricketer, Sachin Tendulkar, needs one more run to score a century. It looks as if Tendulkar is about to be caught out, when a woman wearing a short dress and eating Cadburys chocolate, dances onto the cricket pitch. The fielder is distracted and Tendulkar scores his century. The advertisement contains elements of fantasy as few women wear such clothing and certainly would not make public exhibitions of themselves by dancing onto a cricket pitch. The woman's behaviour is at variance to the accepted norms. The commercial depicts an inversion of norms as the woman had power over the fielder. It is because of her that Tendulkar made his century. This commercial was very popular with many middle and wealthier class women. For example, Sobita commented

'I like the dancing in the Cadbury's Dairy Milk chocolate commercial. It is a very nice advertisement. That particular commercial won an advertising prize last year because it was such a good commercial.'

As some middle class women are segregated from the public world (Jeffrey), so the woman in the Cadburys Dairy Milk chocolate advertisement symbolises freedom and rebellion. She had power over men and drew attention to herself. She symbolises many things that Sobita would like to be, but cannot be because she has to maintain her respectability in the position within the Household. The dancing in this advertisement uses Indian dancing, which people would associate with traditional Indian values and mixes these with non traditional behaviour, such as wearing a short dress.

Hence the woman in the commercial reflects the tensions that are occurring in Indian society. Even where women do not fully copy the attitudes and fashions that are shown in television commercials, they may imbibe some of the images and values (Kellner 5). For example, Rotna had a very traditional husband but still managed to persuade him to let her have her hair cut in a short style. This is her identification with the woman in the commercial, as well as being a protest against her husband's very traditional behaviour. Simply having a hair cut enabled Rotna to connect with the lifestyle and images in the Perk commercial. At the same time Rotna still identified with traditional Indian values, attitudes and behaviour. Having her hair cut was one of the few expressions her husband allowed. Like the woman in the commercial, Rotna reflected some aspects of the rapidly emerging and developing fusion of cultures that are emerging in India. She is modern and western, whilst also being Indian and traditional.

Lucy lived in Delhi. She was middle class and married and lived in an extended household with her daughter, mother, husband and unmarried brother. Despite being married with a child, she wore jeans at home as part of her Anglo-Indian identity. She watched British theatre productions, read British novels, watched only British programmes and ate non-Indian food. However, she had to wear a *sari* to work and would immediately change into jeans when she arrived home. She still wore jeans even in the heat of Delhi, when it was approximately 40 degrees centigrade in the shade. Hence, the clothing reflected the culture she identified with (Campbell 59). I also wore jeans to fit in when living with her family and found them extremely uncomfortable in the heat. I saw several students both male and female wearing jeans in this heat. Image is far more important than being uncomfortable and jeans symbolise associations with the occident, modernity and progressiveness (Fiske 2).

More affluent Indian men such as Namaida and Manik often wore tailor made suits to work and in public and whilst in the privacy of their home they wore the *Pyjama Khurta*. Hence, there is a different emphasis for middle class Indian men compared to middle class Indian women. Whilst middle class women often have to dress up in traditional clothing for work, middle class men tend to wear western style clothing for work. Manik was forty six years old and he liked to dress up in Indian clothing when at home because he identified with romanticised Indian values. He commented

'When you see things like broken homes and divorce on television their own values become eroded and you now find divorcees and elder people who are not being looked after by their families.'

Hence, he believed that he was not influenced by television but that it was the cause of 'traditional' Indian values becoming eroded. He associated traditional with a nostalgic India.

He associated television with the erosion of traditional values for other people. For Manik, the *Pyjama Khurta* was associated with such traditional values. Another middle class town dweller, Sunnie, wore van Heusen shirts which were above the means of the poorer classes. Hence he differentiated himself from the poorer classes through the expensive brand name clothing. He looked down on the clothing of the lower classes and saw them as a sign of bad taste, and saw himself as a bearer of good taste.

'I buy products which are reliable, like Phillips light bulbs. You cannot beat the quality of Phillips light bulbs, so I tend not to try other brands. Advertisements may get you

to try a product and once you've tried it, you can decide whether to buy it again or not. Uneducated people think everything shown on television must be excellent.'

Sunnie can purchase many of the products shown. Hence, his attitude towards the poorer classes are exemplified in the clothing he wore (Lury 16). Sunnie tended to wear western style clothing – shirts and trousers most of the time. He was traditional in some respects. For example, he refused to let his wife work, even though she had been head hunted to be a deputy head of a local school. Sunnie also liked the tradition of men eating their food before the women, even if he was home late. However, he liked western products and some western aspects of lifestyle. Hence, Sunnie exemplified the tension and contradictions in the developing hybrid culture in India.

This hybrid culture is not just restricted to the middle and wealthier classes in India. For example, Ragu was the twenty two year old son of Prasheed from Dighia village. He was resting when we visited him and was dressed in a *Lungi*. He refused to talk to us until he had changed into a trousers and shirt. This was appropriate public dress, although in private he wore more traditional attire. Whilst Johnson suggests that in the Philippines 'modern style predominates on an everyday basis outside home.' (66), I suggest this is true for men more than women. For Ragu we were connected with the west and he had to dress appropriately to receive us – despite the fact that I was wearing a *Salwar Kamish*. Ragu perceived trousers and t-shirts as publicly acceptable clothing. The *Lungi* was not to be worn in the presence of visitors. As clothing is said to be part of a person's identity (Featherstone 189), Ragu took off one identity and put on another, exemplifying the hybridity of western and traditional Indian cultures.

Sudah was a Brahmin priest who was fairly poor and lived in Tiko Amba village. His shirt was similar to those worn by actors on television commercials. He also wore the Indian style *Dhoti* which exemplified his traditional work as a Brahmin priest. The *Dhoti* was worn by Gandhi and still symbolises Gandhian values of leading a simple life, though these are now seen as old fashioned by some people in India (Unnikrishnan and Bajpai 305). Sudah reflects the mixing of western and traditional cultures in his mixing of the *Dhoti* and western style shirt. The *Dhoti* connects him to the past being the traditional attire of the priests. And the shirt connects him to the future, symbolising how he would like to live. Hence clothing situates these people in time and social space (Leiss et al. 88). The past and future are linked to the present through the clothing (Miller 126). The traditional linked to the west and modernity through attire.

As people in the poorer classes begin to wear similar attire to those in the wealthier and middle classes (ibid 136), so the wealthier and middle classes also have to adapt their style of clothing to ensure their differentiation. Hence Sunnie wore expensive brands that the poorer classes were unlikely to afford. What is considered to be the right brand is partly defined through television commercials. Peer pressure coexists in a symbiotic relationship with television commercials, exacerbating the need to wear particular brands. The values, lifestyles and images shown on television commercials all add to the prestige of brand names. Tanik liked to imagine that the poorer classes did not wear the same brands as himself.

The Levi jeans commercial was very popular with the middle and wealthier class schoolchildren in Delhi. The advertisement is in cartoon format, where a man rescues a woman from a fire by using his Levi jeans. The blonde woman then faints. The cartoon is full of vivid imagery. The man wearing the Levi jeans is depicted as brave and macho, whilst the woman is depicted as being in need of the man to save her. The cartoon has an upbeat dance track, Mr Boombastic, as its soundtrack. This was a number 1 hit in the British charts. Many of the children had also persuaded their parents to buy Levi jeans for them. A twelve year old boy noted

'I like the Levi jeans commercial. I like the bit where the man takes off his jeans and saves the girl. I saw this on television and now own a pair of Levi jeans. I am attracted to advertisements and because of this, we buy these things.

Hence socially relevant characteristics are being developed through television commercials. People can watch actors striking up boyfriend/girlfriend type relationships. Hence it is no

surprise that adolescents and college students now hang out in trendy cafés, chatting to people of the opposite sex, whilst watching the MTV music channel. They wear socially relevant clothing such as jeans and shorts, whilst *Salwars* and *Pyjama Khurtas* are definitely old fashioned. We visited such cafés in Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore. These were usually full of college students, both male and female, wearing brand name jeans and trainers, or dressed in mini skirts and shorts. I felt very unfashionable wearing my *Salwar Kamish*. They would watch MTV together and comment on the songs they liked best. Indian magazines are full of stories of teenagers who have fallen in love but are too afraid to tell their parents, or parents who cannot cope with their children having boyfriends or girlfriends.

Despite this, some traditional Indian values remained important. For example, whilst western music is extremely popular, Indian artists also sing western music and are popular. College students may chat with people of the opposite sex and wear jeans and short skirts, but for many people college is a time of inversion of norms. It is a taste of freedom before people have to submit to arranged marriages and parents' choice of careers. Some people may live quite differently in the public and private realms – hence highlighting the tension between western and more traditional Indian lifestyles. At home, they play the dutiful son or daughter whilst outside the home, they take on socially relevant attitudes, behaviour and clothing. Social context and environment are important for children and young people. Clothing therefore, becomes associated with self-expression (Campbell 59) and is associated with age and with various life experiences.

A teacher in Delhi commented about the changes in Indian culture

'There's a big generation gap that currently exists in India between kids and parents. Kids are rebelling and are being influenced by western ideas. They go out and don't tell their parents where they are going. . . children tend to leave home these days and don't always live with their in-laws as they used to.'

Despite rural people dressing in a similar manner to urban people, there were still prejudices that existed. For example, one schoolchild commented

'The rural people don't understand advertisements, though they might like to watch them. I don't think it's right that they should try and buy things from advertisements but they should keep to Indian culture.'

It was fine for himself to buy products advertised on television and to wear jeans, but rural people should not, in his opinion, indulge in such things. They should remain 'Indian'.

Conclusion

The influence of television commercials and the interaction between them and people in India is expressed in a very visual way - the changing nature of clothing. People are altering the way they look and dress. There has been a noticeable change in the clothing styles of young people in India – wearing jeans, shorts and miniskirts. Young men in slums and villages wore western style clothing including jeans, shorts and shirts. Older men in villages and slums tended to mix western style shirts with the Indian style *dhoti* or *Lungi*. Middle class men tended to wear western attire in public and more traditional attire in private. Middle class women tended to wear traditional attire in public and often moderated clothing (western, or a *Salwar* instead of a *sari*) when at home. Hence, I suggest that this hybridity of clothing reflects the cultural fusion that is currently happening in India.

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