

CONTROL AND RESISTANCE OVER CLOTHING OF WOMEN (URBAN HINDU MIDDLE CLASS): COLONIAL AND POST COLONIAL INDIA

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Abstract

The paper aims to examine the various ways by which the clothing of urban, Hindu, middle class Indian women has been subjected to social and political control, thereby controlling their bodies, sexuality and behavior; and the ways by which these women have shaped, re -shaped their sartorial identities vis-à-vis the process of homogenization and objectification. The focus is on such controls and resistances in colonial India, under the leadership of Gandhi and an account for the same in present day India; thereby trying to project the continuity and change in the process.

Key words: dress, sartorial, clothing, body, sexuality, gender, patriarchy, control, discipline, moralism, Khadi, Swadeshi, dress codes

Introduction

The theme of 'dress and undress' is central to this essay: the building up of and casting aside of different identities by means of clothes. The urban Hindu middle class women have responded to political norms by using clothes both as a means and an end. The focus of this paper is on the experiences and actions of the urban, Hindu middle class women because their bodies, sexualities and gender identities are sites where cultural notions of decency and social respectability are contested.

Khadi, Control and Resistance

The Swadeshi Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi is the entry point into the thesis as it marks the first systematized effort at controlling women's dress, largely those of Hindu middle class and upper caste. C.A. Bayly reveals the power of cloth during the period, where it was inscribed with new meanings by Gandhi and became a key visual symbol of the freedom struggle against British rule. [1]. Susan Bean refers to Khadi as the "fabric of Indian independence." [2]. Very interestingly, religious nationalism, embodied through the 'Khadi' and 'charkha' constructs women as entities to be worshipped from far, gazed upon by the sons of the soil. Feminist historians are of the opinion that attempts at redressing the women in Khadi had a distinct relationship to the idealized upper caste, middle class wife and mother, to a sartorial morality and most importantly, to a depreciation of sexuality. [3] For women, 'charkha' neatly fitted into patriarchal discourses around womanhood, self-denial, domestic labor and control over consumption. Women were particularly singled out with their clothing coming under special scrutiny. Weaving Swadeshi cloth prevented women from indulging in fashion, gossip, fun and fights, (assuming these to be the only activities women engage in) and enabled the productive use of time, solved the problem of unemployment and increased household savings. To woo middle class women away from their fashionable desires, organized attempts were made to tutor them in Swadeshi, thrift and philanthropy. Plain, unadorned and simple dress was claimed by the nationalists, to bring contentment of body, peace of heart, enhancement of natural beauty and a nationalist ethos. By means of controlling women's clothing, nationalist politics controlled their morality, private spaces and lives. Women's bodies became a metaphor for an inviolate chaste space and the last refuge of freedom. Women's clothing became representative of traditional culture and national identity. The reformers and nationalists attempted to organize the wardrobe of Hindu middle-class women, re-working on the right clothes, make-up and accessories, revealing their moral tones and anxieties. A number of songs and poems were composed during this period highlighting the symbiotic relationship

between women's bodies, clothes and nationalism. One of them runs, "*Mayer dewa mota kapor, mathaye tule ne re bhai; din dukhini maa je toder, er beshi aar shaddho nai.*"

Women's clothing was a cultural message and a weapon against the evils of the West. Hindu nationalists thus had to introduce changes and new norms of dress, by making them longer and thicker, leaving no part of the body, including the naval exposed. The hemlines of women's clothes started dropping with the growing vigor of the Swadeshi movement. These clothes were termed as "indigenous" and "traditional". [4] The message of moralism and nationalism advocated through the dresses of Hindu women was actually an attempt to abolish fashion itself.

Khadi did not remain just a cloth; it became a symbol of purity, chastity and idealism. The thick, plain, simple and durable Khadi became the new mantra of the nationalist movement, which had to be given a form through the bodies of Hindu middle-class women. Such clothes symbolized the control of patriarchy by "effacing rather than enhancing the body, and by implication, the self." [5]. Thus the bodies of women became sexless properties. Dressed simply, these women were expected to regenerate their homes, and by extension, the nation. A leading literary person of Central Provinces, in the 1930s, explained the relationship between beauty and good conduct, "I have a serious objection to uncontrolled power of beauty A woman's beauty is not in colors, not in jewellery, not in fashion, and not in make-up, but in good conduct, in Swadeshi, in simplicity. It is that which provides us with wholesome and pure joy.....Thus we rate Sita, Savitri, Ahilya and Mira above Rati, Rambha, Maneka and Urvashi." [6] At a meeting at Allahabad in November 1920, Mahatma Gandhi told women that in the days of Ravana's government, even Sita Devi had to wear for fourteen years a rough garment made from the bark of trees. [7].

The Swadeshi campaign progressed not only by emphasizing the need of self-discipline, but it also had a coercive element. Threats of social sanctions, ostracism, and public ridicule were the commonly used methods to make women accept Khadi as their cloth. Especially under attack were the Hindu middle-class and upper-class women as they were considered the largest users of foreign brands. They were condemned for being susceptible to new fashions and tight clothes leaving their bodies exposed. Women desirous of fashion were considered 'unethical' and 'improper' (the logic being that women draped in Khadi were devoid of all ethics and sexual desires). Khadi created a visible distinction between the opulent 'bad' wife and the Swadeshi 'good' mother. These efforts at creating new identities of 'nationalist women' marked an intricate relationship between nationalism, gender, and clothing.

The pertinent question at this juncture is, "Did the Hindu middle-class women become mere passive victims of Gandhiji's ambitious vision of a simplified, shared, sacred national costume?" Emma Tarlo in her book *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* provides the answer. She says, "Much of Gandhi's difficulty lay in the imperfect nature of his communication through clothes...While clothes, like language, communicate, they are, like language, capable of communicating anything from truth to lies, from the intelligible to the unintelligible. Their meaning, like meaning itself, is open to interpretation and debate." [8] This accounts for only the partial acceptance of the call for 'Khadi' among Hindu middle-class women. The latter were not just passive victims or unrestricted agents of the Khadi movement. They negotiated the meaning of Swadeshi fashion through their clothing practices. Even while advocating the Swadeshi message, they challenged the sartorial uniformity by making necessary changes and modifications to the clothing. Hindu women did not want to wear white (the color of Khadi) as it was associated with widowhood. Some chose to embroider, fix borders, dye or tailor their Khadis to beautify them. As there was an element of coercion practiced by the nationalist leaders to change the

clothing of the women, there was bound to be resistances, though subtle, from the latter. “Politically correct stances clashed with subterranean desires that pushed women in other directions.”[9]. The Hindu middle-class women adopted certain modes of clothing to suit their present needs of fashion, thus fighting against the attempts to police their dress. A large number of them remained immune to the campaign. Jyotirmai Thakur, writing on beauty and fashion, proposed an eclectic borrowing between east and west, and recommended the adoption of fashionable new clothes. The loose impact of Gandhiji’s call for use of Khadi by women (Hindus) can be perceived from the pictures of the Hindu middle-class women portraying a stronghold of fashion embodied through wearing of blouses, Manchester silk and cotton, and the Parsi style of draping saris. All the female members of the Jorasanko Thakur family are said to adopt all the then present styles of fashion and clothing. Use of Khadi was restricted to the women nationalists and female family members of the nationalists. Most of the women continued to pay attention to their bodily adornments, thus upholding their femininity through sartorial styles, standards of beauty, self-indulgence, appropriate expenditure and sexual assertion. The ideology of Khadi, was used as an instrument to enable the women to internalize the notion of sartorial respectability as a form of social control over their bodies and sexualities. Thus the complex interplay of nationalism, gender, social class, and clothing shaped the discourse of Hindu middle -class women on clothing.

The Swadeshi sartorial campaign exemplifies the dichotomies of empowerment vs. oppression and resistance vs. submission. It makes one feel that if women wear concealing outfits or are veiled, they are seen as icons of tradition. If they wear western dress, revealing their sexuality, they are seen as trapped in an image of powerlessness, acting only as passive receivers. In this regard, Michel Foucault’s notion of “how bodies and the ways they are dressed and managed through both self discipline and surveillance” i.e. a general panoptic lens - is relevant. [10]. The

disciplinary gaze of the panoptic may act in either of the two ways- it may be internalized by the woman and become a part of her self-appraisal, or it may be directed upon herself to gain a sense of self empowerment, or reveal an indifference to the power of the gaze.

Dress code, Control and Resistance

Since independence this process is very interestingly seen in the ways the Hindu middle-class women have responded to the sartorial dictates, that the society has imposed through laws, dress codes, unwritten dictates etc. Coded and encoded dress codes for women in various jobs and professions prove effective in controlling their conduct, behavior and sexuality. In this paper the analysis is limited to the dress codes imposed on the women school teachers (urban and semi-urban) on the plea of protecting and securing their bodies and by what means they have responded and reacted, if any, to such disciplinary efforts. School teaching is a profession that many women coming from Hindu middle-class opted for. Moreover, a quite common and popular logic was that the teacher is supposed to be a role model for the students of the imagined nation, and what she wears bears a direct impact on her students' conduct. The dominant cultural ethos is most importantly transmitted through educational institutions. So dress code in educational institutions is not only important, but becomes a moral force. The silence within the women's movement on this issue is also noteworthy. In this respect a few case studies are worth mentioning.

On 30th April 2012, a school teacher of the Aiho Balika Vidyalaya, in Malda, West Bengal, who had been teaching mathematics in the school over the previous 10 years, was issued a notice by the school managing committee, through the head mistress, that she could not wear 'salwarkameez' to the school because a section of the students' guardians had lodged a complaint. The head mistress denied issuing a notice and said that it was meant for the safety of the concerned teacher. [11] The teacher raised a hue and cry against the measure and lodged a complaint

in the local police station. There are no formal injunctions from the school authorities regarding the dresses of the women teachers, but informal attempts are always made to regulate the way they dress or 'are expected to dress' from time to time.

The institutionalization of a dress code achieves the disciplining of the women's bodies, leading to the potential reproduction of the 'desirable body'. The 'good' teacher dresses in a socially desired manner. The category 'good' puts women above sexual assault leading to a reproduction of women as self-regulating subjects. Institutions like the university, where critical discourses are circulated, do not question such oppressive discourses.

Women teachers, especially in West Bengal, have faced violence for what was considered "a violation of an unwritten code." They resisted the forceful implementation of a dress code by using multiple channels of protest. For example in September 2007, eight school teachers of the government aided Bakhrahat Girls' High School in Bishnupur were heckled, threatened and humiliated by students, parents and even the general public for having worn 'salwarkameez' to school.[12] Initially they approached the police, but the then President of the West Bengal Board of Primary Education intervened to clearly say that, "There is no dress code for teachers working in state aided schools.....As far as the government order goes, teachers are expected to come to school dressed in a decent manner."[13]. Again "decent manner" is a phrase with high political currents, subject to a broad variety of understandings and interpretations.

The law was used to reinstate women teachers in service in the case of the seven teachers of Singur Golap Mohini Mullick Girls' High School in Hooghly district. They had been given a notice from the school managing committee, denying them entry into the school unless they followed the 75 years old tradition of wearing white saris. The logic was

the same: that it is the sacred responsibility of the teacher to conceal her sexuality and thereby work on her own security. In this respect the Kolkata High Court delivered a landmark judgment barring any state funded or state run institution from imposing a dress code for teachers. The judge rightly pointed out “The teachers are educated enough to know about the decency of their dress. Attention should be paid to developing proper infrastructure and cultivating the right educational atmosphere rather than issuing ‘fatwas’ on what kind of attire a teacher should wear while attending school.”[14] The judgment drew cheers from teachers in schools and colleges, government and private institutions. A 38-year-old school teacher of north Kolkata commented, “We are surely mature enough to know how to dress when we go to school. A dress code reflects a dictatorial attitude at one level and a trust deficit at another. It is humiliating to tell my children there is an unwritten code that I cannot wear a sleeveless blouse to school.” [15]

All kinds of controls and regulations on the way women dress, are propagated and practiced on the plea of the need to protect the purity and sanctity of the woman’s body against sexual harassment and exploitation. Our power brokers constantly emphasize the importance of being feminine, of protecting our reputations and our chastity. Based on this logic, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat had said that rapes happen only in India, not Bharat (implying that women who embrace western clothes get raped).[16]. The Samajwadi Party leader, Abu Azmi spelt out the logic underlying dress codes, “...women are like gold.... if you don’t keep it locked up, it’ll be stolen.”[17] Other leaders across parties (Congress, BJP, even CPIM) have advocated dress codes for women as a means of self-protection.

Pink Chaddi Campaign

An incident of gender violence and protest is worthy enough to be cited here. On 24th January 2009, a group of forty activists of the Shri Ram Sene, a Hindu right wing group, barged into a pub in Mangalore,

dragged out a group of young people and beat them up, claiming that the women were violating traditional Indian values by wearing western clothes and drinking alcohol with their male friends. The video of the incident became fodder for national and international T.V. channels, newspapers and Internet. A non-violent protest was launched by a group of young women (Consortium of Pub Going, Loose and Forward Women), called the “Pink Chaddi” campaign, where they urged all Indian women to send pink underwear (chaddi) to the office of Pramod Muthalik, the chief of the Sena.[18] As the protest grew, underwear started pouring in from all over India. Over 500 pink chaddis were couriered. The campaign gives an important insight into how a component of women’s dress can be used to protest and fight against patriarchal, cultural and religious domination. Pants were chosen as the symbol of the campaign to counter the khakhee half pants of the RSS sevaks. Pink color was chosen as it represents femininity. The name of the movement and its symbol gave a cultural shock to the guardians of ‘Hindu womanhood’ and had better communicative power than oral or written words. Though the protest died down within a short period, it marks an extraordinary effort at ventilating resentment against efforts at controlling women’s dress and conduct.

Conclusion

The underlying question that stems from the tension is ‘What is the appropriate dress for the urban Hindu middle class women of modern India?’ There is the popular logic that the honour of the woman is the honour of the nation, which is particularly played out on the image of the woman’s body garbed by what she wears. One may draw from Foucault’s understanding of normalizing and discipline to understand how hegemonic codes within the post-colonial state mark, regulate and constrain the woman’s body, how social control is imposed (in this case it’s ‘dress’) through notions of normalcy and naturalness. This is

frequently and repeatedly witnessed in the ways 'good' and 'bad' women are made to dress in national and regional television serials, the strict dress codes in schools, hospitals, offices and definitely in the choice of dresses by women legislators and politicians (strictly in saris and long sleeved blouses).

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