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FASHION

Retailoring Tradition

The traditional garb of Hindu men, once disdained, is now making a splash in social circles and bringing in cash for trendy designers

Rajiv Malik, Delhi

While most of the nation still gropes for some thread of national identity, the majority of middle class males in India long ago donned a Western persona through their widespread adoption of business suits, blue jeans and t-shirts as the dress du jour. But current fashion trends indicate that men of means are changing. Traditional Hindu attire is gaining renewed support among fashion designers, retailers and image-conscious customers. The classic dhoti kurta, kurta pajama and churidar kurta are being retailored with increased functionality and a definite dash of panache. And men are beginning to wear them out of the home.

The surge in popularity of the kurta is confined mostly to the upper classes. At upscale family functions, parties, dinners and other social venues, Hindu clothing has become the rage. The designer kurta sets worn on these occasions are loud--boldly embroidered with new cuts and innovative styles. Gaurav Chhabra, a freelance fashion designer who worked for seven

years with the prestigious boutique Diwan Saheb claims, "You have to create a successful balance between tradition and modernity in order to take the present generation back to its roots. To revive the rich Indian culture, to preserve the age-old hand embroidery tradition and at the same time design acceptable evening wear, the old-style dresses have to be given a modern touch, but carefully. They have to be practical."

The focus has therefore turned to vogue kurta sets for occasional use. Upon probing, one finds that it is more out of fashion concerns than for love of Hindu culture and traditions. Designers promote the "newfound" kurta purely as a business proposition. They can make much more money in creating an embroidered traditional dress for a groom than they can in making a Western suit. And here also the media has played an important role. Popular Hindi movies and television serials have been depicting Hindu dress worn by men during functions and special occasions throughout the story lines. The excitement has worked even to charm youth into trying out the increasingly hip Hindu togs. "We get all kinds of age groups and all kinds of family backgrounds," says Charu Sharma, sales manager of Fab India. "They include young college students to people seventy or eighty years of age."

Fab India is a thirty-year-old retail chain based in New Delhi with four stores in Greater Kailash, one in Vasant Kunj and one each in Mumbai, Bangalore and Chennai. Sharma is keenly aware of the dramatic growth in garment sales. "We basically started as a home furnishing company, initially dealing in durries, bed linens and the like," she notes. "Our garment section began about fifteen years ago with maybe twenty

kurtas. Our idea was simply to promote handloom fabrics. But now that people are wearing them, they just keep coming, and we now have around 2,000 varieties of striped and checked kurtas. The whites are separate. There is so much to choose from, when a customer comes in, it is difficult for him to leave without buying." And brisk sales brings a booming business. Sharma told Hinduism Today, "We sell ^{us}\$450,000 to \$680,000 worth of kurta pajamas annually. This is only kurta pajamas for men, and the approximate figure of sales in Delhi alone." Bhim Mulchandani, a partner at the Royal Dress Emporium, describes similar growth for his company, "Previously our sales were just ten or twenty kurtas per day. But now we are daily selling four hundred to five hundred checkered kurta sets alone. Around one thousand people visit our counter every day."

The horsey suit: While kurta sightings are increasing at urban Indian social events, the wedding remains the perpetual cash cow for kurta traders. Gaurav Chhabra affirms, "It is only during marriages that people spend money. Otherwise, they do not. This is wedding season, and we are overbooked. We have to turn work away. I believe it is better to decline a commission than to do a shoddy job and ruin your name."

Chhabra committed himself to the advancement of ethnic wear after an experience at a friend's

wedding. He recalls, "The groom on horseback was wearing a suit and tie. The moment I saw him dressed like that, I felt ashamed. I started pondering, "What is happening to Indian culture?" And I decided to work to revive the Indian ethnic dress. When you are getting married in a traditional Indian or Hindu way, you should dress in the appropriate clothing."

Chhabra does not hesitate to make his case clear to one and all. "When I was at Diwan Saheb, my salesmen would never let me approach a customer," he says. "Because if a customer came to me and said, 'I want a suit for my wedding.' I would ask him, 'Why do you need a suit? Are you getting married in a Hindu way? Will there be a pundit? Will he recite slokas? Then why do you want a suit? I have never seen an Englishman sitting on a horse wearing a tie. Why do you want to ride a horse wearing one? If you are doing everything by Hindu tradition, the suit doesn't fit.' I see Indians come from abroad all the way here to have Hindu raiment made for their wedding. It is only in India that you see grooms on horses wearing tuxedos. I feel I must teach the customer what is right and wrong."

The third impulse in the traditional market comes from overseas sales. Hindus abroad seem more willing to don national garb than those in India. Mulchandani remarks, "We don't just sell to Delhi customers. Clients from all over the world buy from us through local relatives who are regular clients. When these relatives come to India, they shop with us. They typically buy eight to ten sets." Chhabra adds, "There are instances when a client comes all the way from London to have a sherwani stitched for his wedding."

The fact that the successful Fab India was founded by an American, Mr. John Bissell, is indicative of how Westerners appreciate and admire Indian dress. It was Bissell's love for handlooms that spurred him to start his company, and his son continues to guide the enterprise since Bissell's death. "When Bissell started," says Sharma, "Indians were not really wearing handlooms. They wore synthetics, polymix and mill-made fabrics. It was only the foreigners who had an eye for cottons. But now it seems to be the look, and it is rapidly growing."

Wardrobe wars: The sales reports are positive, but kurta-mania has not completely engulfed Delhi. The prevailing pattern is still to wear Western shirts, trousers and suits while at work or at school and to don a kurta, which is deemed more comfortable, only upon returning home. It is widely accepted in business circles that the churidar kurta and other such dresses are inappropriate for the work place. They are not considered "professional."

"Many offices have a dress code," Sharma explains. "These 'white collared jobs' demand a particular kind of dress. If you go to a certain job interview wearing a kurta, you may not be hired. Looking back, you can see that kurta was taken more as casual evening wear. When at home on a Sunday, you wear a kurta pajama. The moment you step out of the house, your dress is different. I think it is an individual preference. But I suppose it is the way an Indian has been brought up."

Thus, convenience and practicality are the leading excuses for wearing Western. Mulchandani himself wears a shirt and pants while convincing

others to buy kurtas. Though he says, "As soon as I reach my home, I put on a kurta pajama. I recognize that the kurta has not become our national dress or business dress as it should have by now. The reason probably is that in trousers and shirts you can move faster. Only those people who are sitting on cash counters or who just sit throughout the day would care to wear kurta pajamas as these are extremely convenient for such a lifestyle."

It is notable that traditional Hindu clothing is being patronized by wealthy, fashion conscious upper class Hindus, and it is also worn by the lower strata of Hindu society, who are driven more by comfort and economy than by the dictates of fashion. Ironically, the "lower" strata is deemed by the other to have zero dress sense. Between these two are the middle-class Hindus who have become extremely Westernized and are blindly aping the West. Chhabra explains, "The truth is that 80 percent of India is wearing traditional dress. But these people are in the villages and small cities. It is only the educated and elite--maybe 20 percent--who have taken to Western dress. In the villages of Rajasthan you

find people in kurta dhotis. Similarly, in the villages of Punjab you find men in lungi kurtas. Western clothes are worn by the majority of people who live in the metropolitan areas. The reason is that the life in these cities is very fast and the man on the street does not think it is practical to wear a dhoti kurta or kurta pajama. No doubt Hindu clothing is very comfortable, but it is being used for occasional wear only."

Another ironic impediment to the kurta is its association with Indian politicians, who are held in contempt by a vast majority of commoners and intellectuals. Someone upset with the state of the Indian nation may be heard to say, "These kurtawallas (those wearing kurtas, i.e., politicians) are responsible for the degeneration of society." The irony is that fifty years ago, the kurta dress was worn and promoted by our freedom fighters, who were then adored by millions for their nobility and the sacrifices they made.

From shirta to kurta: When I switched to Hindu clothing five years ago, a businessman friend of mine told me, "Rajiv, you look much better in

pants and a shirt. Nobody will take you seriously if you roam about in a kurta." Others told me that I look older than my age in the Hindu clothing.

Yet I have been accorded VIP status on many occasions due simply to my Hindu dress. People are impressed. They think I am a politician, social worker or philosopher and treat me with respect bordering on reverence. Because of my Hindu dress, I am assumed to be a highly spiritual and knowledgeable person. Dress gives identity, and Hindu dress gives me a distinct and positive identity. When I revealed my identity as a Hindu by dressing like one, it immensely improved the quality of my life. By Rajiv Malik, Delhi

Kurta: A simply woven or ornately embroidered, loose fitting coat-like garment of various lengths; also names a prominent family of Indian apparel.

Sherwani: Attire that maharajas used to wear. It is longer, extending below the knees, and is worn with a churidar.

Jodhpuri: A hip-length kurta worn with trousers.

Churidar: A tight-fitted garment worn by ladies and men in place of trousers. Extra cloth is used at the ankles to give the effect of bangles.

Dhoti: Two to three meters of woven cloth wrapped neatly around the legs.

Rajiv Malik, the author of this feature, has been with the fashion industry for over 15 years. He was a partner in a sari showroom from 1984 to 1997 and is now a partner in a women's fabrics design studio. He began writing as a fashion journalist with the Hindustan Times group of publications. Recently he was invited as a chief guest and judge to the fashion show at Delhi University's prestigious Hindu College. He regularly participates in seminars and exhibitions.

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