A Tribute to the Sari
Category : June 1998
Published by Anonymous on Jun. 01, 1998

EDITORIAL

A Tribute to the Sari

It's the only ancient dress to remain fashionable in the 21st century. Jai Hindu women!

the Editor

Fashion in clothing is a kind of living archeology, a wash-and-wear history. It tells us much about who we are and where we came from, and maybe not a little about where we're going. Modern clothes tell a story of simple pragmatism. Throughout the world clothing has become more spartan, more practically polyesterish, less elaborate. Men, especially, have made some dismally utilitarian decisions about their wardrobe. Around 1666 the present-day suit was first stitched in France and England, and by 1872 it was widespread enough in India to be fiercely satirized. Somewhere in that era men from all cultures made the very bad decision to abandon other attire in favor of the egalitarian grey suit, white shirt and necktie. What could they have been thinking?

Sadly, men around the world lost their national and personal character when they adopted the Western business suit as manhood's global garb. Japanese men, who once looked so very Nipponese in their graceful robes, now look like

Europeans. South Americans, once so distinctive in their hand-woven costumes, now look like the Japanese who look like the Europeans. Indian men, who 200 years ago had regional raiment that was earthy and full of elaborated colors, now look like the Brazilians, who look like the Japanese, who look like the Europeans. Grown men everywhere look like that. Check out the marriage photo to the right. She's elegant, he's--there's a word in the world of fashion--boring!

I know of what I speak. Visitors to our Hawaiian editorial offices know our staff is not sitting around their PowerMacs in jeans and T-shirts. We are all swathed in saffron and ochre cotton--hand-spun, hand-woven and unsewn--draped in the old South Indian style.

I can never forget the first time, three decades ago, that a Jaffna elder helped me wrap a veshti, and then took us to the bustling main marketplace. Every step was terrorizing, the unwieldy garment threatening to fall, with me cinching up the subversive sarong several times a minute, both hands never more than a few swift inches from my waist. How awkward I felt, and certainly looked. As time passed and the fabric was tamed, I learned how refined one feels in such attire. It was like floating, living in your spirit more than in your body. To this day, I only feel comfortable and soulful in these traditional robes. And to this day, Jaffna is one of the few sanctuaries where Western pants and shirt are disdained, and all men, including politicians, go around in their veshtis.

Indian women who wear saris know all this. They have watched their sisters go the way of men, wearing dresses that

look like the dresses that every dressmaker dresses her customers in. Okay, women at least have wide options in type and fabric and color. And that is good. But still, women in Japan look like women in Australia, who look like women in China, who all look like women in Europe. There are few kimonos left to announce the passing of a Japanese lady and few ao dai to tell us that the woman shopping over there is a Vietnamese.

So, we pay tribute to India's women and Hindu women abroad who have not relinquished their elegant dress. They alone have preserved traditional attire, for the sari is the only major apparel to have survived the last 500 years and to remain elegant and voguish daily wear in the 21st century. That's quite an accomplishment. No wonder the Western world has been smitten by the sari, and every woman with a smidgen of sartorial savvy wants one.

Exploring the Worldwide Web on saris, I found this gem, written by Shantipriya Kurada in 1994: "The beauty of the sari never ceases to amaze me. There is something strikingly feminine about it. Flowing like sheer poetry, graceful in every contour and fold, it's a fascinating mixture of tradition and style. A single stretch of fabric that comes in a range of textures and patterns, the sari is creativity at its best. A cotton sari, charmingly simple, starched and perfectly in place, has such a natural feel. Chiffons and crepes add a glamorous touch. Fragile, utterly soft and delicate, they create an aura of fine elegance. Weddings come alive with the grandeur of silk saris. Painstakingly handwoven to the last detail, the brocade created to perfection by skilled hands, each silk sari is a work of art. A sari has such a special place in every girl's life. It all

starts with wrapping around mother's sari, playfully and clumsily tripping on its edges. Then there is the first sari you wear, perhaps to a college function, looking self-conscious and achingly innocent. And, of course, the precious wedding sari that's fondly preserved and cherished for a lifetime. In a world of changing fashions, the sari has stood the test of time. There is something almost magical about it, for it continues to symbolize the romantic image of the Indian woman--vulnerable, elusive and tantalizingly beautiful."

Historians say the sari can be traced back more than 3,500 years! Sanskrit literature from the Vedic period insists that pleats be part of every woman's dress. The pleats, say the texts, must be tucked in at the waist, the front or back, so that the presiding deity, Vayu, the God of wind, can whisk away any evil influence that may strike the woman. Colors, too, are ruled by tradition. Yellow, green and red are festive and auspicious, standing for fertility. Red, evoking passions, is a bridal color and part of rituals associated with pregnancy. Blue evokes the life-giving force of the monsoon. Pale cream is soothing and represents bridal purity. A married Hindu woman will not wear a completely white sari, which is reserved for brahmacharinis and widows. Life without a husband, it is said, is a life without color.

The sari culturally links the women of India. Whether they are wealthy or poor, svelte or plump, the sari gives them a shared experience, a way in which they are all sisters, forging a link that binds them across all borders, even geographical ones. Women wearing saris in Durban, Delhi or Detroit are part of a social oneness that is nearly eternal and which may, it seems, last yet another thousand years. This month's feature article

and Insight section explore the fascinating world of the sari. Jai Hindu women!