

## [That's a Wrap!](#)

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### APPAREL

## That's a Wrap!

How a French anthropologist fell for an unusual sari and rescued dozens of Indian drapes from extinction

Shikha Malaviya, Minnesota

It is a blustery, cold afternoon as I make my way to the Goldstein Gallery and the University of Minnesota's School of Apparel and Design. Opening the auditorium door, I make out the silhouettes of roughly 200 people focused on a slide of a Tamil woman whose sari wraps around her knees and divides in the middle, a common style among rural working women. The lights turn on, and in the front of the auditorium a petite, blond-haired woman dressed in a navy blue silk sari deftly demonstrates that very style from the slide on a volunteer while explaining its method in a lilting French accent. The audience stares in awe as anthropologist Chantal Boulanger proceeds to unravel the mysteries of sari draping.

The sari, a versatile female garment of ancient Indian origin, has enthralled and mystified many in its variety of texture, design, size and draping style. While many scholars document the intricacies of the sari's myriad colors, fabrics and patterns, few, if any, have closely examined draping styles. French

anthropologist Chantal Boulanger hopes to change that. Boulanger is the author of *Saris: An Illustrated Guide to the Indian Art of Draping*. In her book, Boulanger documents and lucidly illustrates more than 100 sari drapes, divided loosely into families and sub-families where possible, based on certain basic draping techniques. By doing so, Boulanger is the first scholar to define the art of sari draping and give its study a legitimacy that goes beyond mere fashion.

Boulanger's book came to life in an exhibition presented by the University of Minnesota's Goldstein Gallery January 25-March 1, aptly called "The Indian Sari: Draping Bodies, Revealing Lives." It was the first sari exhibition to accentuate draping techniques rather than texture or design aspects. For Boulanger, it all began six years ago when a unique sari drape at a wedding in South India sparked her interest. "I saw a drape with pleats on the side and its border in the back. I asked how to do it, but no one knew."

Boulanger, having studied Tamil temple priests for the past fifteen years, encountered various sari drapes in her field work, but never imagined they would one day become the object of her study. A trip to a research center in Pondicherry turned up little information on the "wedding sari" drape, and her inquiries to Tamil women followed suit. Finally, an old woman identified the wedding sari as a dying drape worn by peasant women from the region of Tondaimandalam, in Tamil Nadu. Many young women no longer wore such styles because they didn't want to be identified as a peasant or a lower caste. Boulanger realized that many of these drapes--at times intricate, functional, and in most cases symbolic of religion and social status--carried a certain part of Indian

women's history, and that it would vanish without a trace if not recorded soon.

Zigzagging across the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal from 1990-1997, Boulanger visited big cities and remote villages. Taking notes and photos of diverse sari drapes was a constant ritual, even if it meant stopping women on the street. But this wasn't enough to cognize intricacies of the wrapping art. "I realized the only way to remember these saris was to try them again and again," Boulanger shared with Hinduism Today. She practiced until she got them right, and wore saris under every possible circumstance to personally experience how saris work in daily life. "Whenever Indian women taught me how to wear a sari, they missed essential steps I had to discover on my own." Secrets such as knotting a sari instead of just tucking it into a petticoat came with trial and error. Now a bonafide expert in more than eighty drapes, Boulanger is an inspiration to most of us Hindu women who barely know a handful.

Dissection: As Boulanger organized her information, she realized most sari drapes could be categorized into families. On grouping various drapes, Boulanger found the necessity of a glossary to identify each part of a sari. "Every sari starts with tying it tightly, whether on the waist or chest. So I decided to call it the closing." Boulanger enlisted words from Sanskrit and Tamil because "I couldn't just write, 'tie this end to that end.'" As a result, she terms the part of the sari from which the drape begins, *mundi*, and the part thrown over the shoulder, *pallav*. The main part of the sari is the body. The edges are the upper and lower borders.

While Boulanger created a working glossary of the sari, she feels most successful in arranging the sari into families. Studies preceding Boulanger's work grouped drapes according to region or state, so she initially followed suit. But as research progressed, she realized that draping styles crossed regions, and by focusing on method, found that most sari drapes could fit into four main families [see pg. 29]. Many drapes overlapped families, indicating migration of a group from one region to another--and some saris were too unique to fit within any family--but the grouping of saris revealed many things. "I saw dhoti styles worn mainly by the Brahmins," shares Boulanger, "while veshti- style drapes appeared on other classes." In this context, Boulanger applauds the modern Nivi drape, with its pleats in front and pallav over the left shoulder, calling it the egalitarian sari because, as she enthuses, "It crosses boundaries of class and caste, making all women equal in the eyes of others."

With their visual appeal and social context, Boulanger dreamed of a sari exhibition. But as she pitched this idea to friends and colleagues, they urged her to write a book to supplement it. Boulanger labored five years and finished in 1997, her biggest challenge being the 700 illustrations redrawn painstakingly until accurate. The exhibition of Boulanger's work, though not as extensive as her book, would marry the aesthetic importance of drapes with its cultural implications.

Drape display: The Goldstein exhibit rendered sari draping with an authenticity provoking visitors to feel transported to India. Call it coincidence or kismet that student curators Hazel Lutz and Susheela Hoeffler both sojourned in India, and Jean Ross,

responsible for exhibit design, visited India and Pakistan. Lutz and Hoeffler primarily focused on drape families and technique, but also included saris in various contexts, such as photographs, a wall of artwork (including a sketch by world-renowned artist Jamini Roy), a display of blouse styles, Indian dolls dressed in saris, and hanging saris as well, because as Hoeffler observed, "It's hard to visualize the mass of a sari as a flat piece of cloth when it is draped on the body."

Lutz, who is co-writing a book on dress and culture, saw the exhibition as a way to "fully appreciate the complexity of drapes, and drop stereotypes. We're showing that there is innovation within the confines of a sari, and tradition is fashionable as well as practical." Ross added a rural touch to the exhibition by painting the walls saffron and the top with a red, stenciled border, reminiscent of villages in India and Pakistan. Placement of drapes was important, too, and Ross drew inspiration from the small, winding streets of Indian villages. With Boulanger's work as their focus, and their individual experiences in India to draw from, Lutz, Hoeffler and Ross turned an intimate gallery into a colorful Indian oasis of art and savoir-faire.

The exhibition drew over 200 on opening day, some out of curiosity, others to learn. Regardless of motives, visitors left the exhibit with fresh knowledge. As Mani Subramaniam, native of India and business professor at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management states, "On my next visit to India, I'll definitely be looking at saris more carefully, even though I have seen them all my life." A fitting compliment for Chantal Boulanger and her work, and for women worldwide who make the sari an integral part of their

lives.

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## Her Hindu Ties

Chantal Boulanger: My magical life

Mystical visions: I was Hindu in my past life. I had memories when I was very young of being British, joining the Ramakrishna Mission, visiting Calcutta and meeting Swami Vivekananda. I could almost recall his words. As a young child, I also saw Ganesha but couldn't explain it. I called Him "the transparent elephant" because I realized nobody else saw Him. Growing up in a culture of fairies and goblins, everyone thought it was my imagination. But later, as a teenager, I recognized the "transparent elephant" as Ganesha because He was standing and had a human body.

Like a puzzle, I pieced together bits of my past life and connected it to Hinduism. One day, in my early twenties, I went to the Paris Ramakrishna Ashram for the celebration of his birthday, not knowing it was also Sivaratri. I had not eaten that day and reached the ashram to find everyone fasting because of Sivaratri. That night as I did puja, I heard in my head, "Siva Siva Siva." I was very tired and had a cold, so I asked Siva to forgive me for not staying up. Suddenly a voice interrupted my sleep, calling me by my Hindu name, Susheela. I looked around and switched the light off, when suddenly the room starting filling with light, and I saw Lord Siva. The next morning my cold was gone. I was filled with so much energy I cleaned the whole ashram! I have many stories like these,

things that happened to me. Little by little, I started concentrating on Siva and this led me to India.

Kanchipuram's lure: Somehow I knew I had to go to Kanchipuram. That's where I met my guru, Rajappa Gurrukul, one of the head priests of the main Siva temple in Kanchipuram. He answered questions and explained my vision of Siva as my diksha. I returned from India, looking for something to do, when my friend suggested anthropology as a way to bring my interests in travelling and other civilizations together.

So, I went to school to join a research project which just happened to be on Hindu temples. Since none of the members of the team were Hindu or vegetarian, none of the priests would talk to them. When they found I was vegetarian and close to a priest, they were happy to have me on their team. I spent six months of the year, for seven years, in Kanchipuram, studying the sub-caste of these priests. I would stay in temples to see how they worked, then go to my guru's house where he answered my questions, including personal ones such as how his marriage was arranged, which helped me in writing my novel, *The Goddess' Justice*.

Controlling sexuality: Women in India started covering their chests in the nineteenth century. I can even pinpoint the year in South India--around 1830. I know many will be upset with my findings, but clothing, like in Islam or in Christianity, is meant to control sexuality. There are two ways of doing this. One way is to hide the woman as much as possible, the other is to control the man. If you read any Hindu text, you see there

is a lot of emphasis on self-control. So before the British came, most Indian women revealed their bodies quite freely or covered themselves with jewels. Nowadays, because of Western influence, we associate nudity with being out of control, but that wasn't the case in ancient India. In the Hindu texts of that time, the needle was considered a weapon, so stitched clothing was banned and there was more emphasis on the ornamental, until the Muslim invasion, and afterward British rule.

Hazards on the job: In India when I wanted to wear the Brahmin sari, Brahmin Tamil women were reluctant to teach me, because they didn't want any non-Brahmins to wear that drape. One day I wore a Lingayat sari, which is similar to the Tamil Brahmin sari, and I had a person follow me around saying, "She is not wearing a Brahmin sari," otherwise I may have been attacked!

### Song of the Sari

Excerpts from a poem by Shikha Malaviya, depicting India as a motherly sari:

Six yards of cloth, a sari, cotton, chiffon, silk, woven with threads of history, wedding-red, festival-yellow, widow-white, sensual drape of humility, India wears epitome of Sita and Sati and every woman in-between. Clothes do make the woman beautiful, beholding the eye washed with holy water from the Ganges

Old is not an issue for you who holds the mystery of renewal.



You plait us in your riverlocks and pleat us in the folds of the ancient Sari hugging your body century after century. Even when we wash against foreign shores, still a thread of homespun cloth clings doggedly to our bodies, tying wandering children to your ever-pregnant belly.

## Demystifying the Sari

A lavishly illustrated coffee-table book tells it all

By Shikha Malaviya

Linda Lynton, a professional writer, became curious about saris when, on marrying Sanjay Singh, a native of India, his extended family welcomed her by giving her saris. "I heard stories about local saris and hoped to find more stories about saris from other regions of India, so I looked for books, but didn't find many," recalls Lynton. Lack of information on saris spurred five years of research and an expansive tome--*The Sari: Styles, Patterns, History, Techniques*. By concentrating on region, Lynton captures the sari's beauty and complexity in vivid detail through ethnic art, historical facts, motifs and patterns, all which integrate and represent their geographical surroundings. "Most of the world uses tailored clothing, and here is a culture that doesn't," explains Lynton. "The whole emphasis is on the cloth itself, how it's woven, how it's decorated, how it's colored, and that alone makes it interesting." Particularly notable in the book are textiles from groups such as Gujarati indigo-dyed saris that heretofore were never illustrated and documented. While Chantal Boulanger's book is a practical manual on draping techniques, Lynton surveys the sari as a prized fabric, focusing on its design. From this perspective, Lynton documents forty types of saris with photographs and diagrams to illustrate complexity in patterns,

weaves and colors. She also includes a comprehensive glossary of textile terms as well as Indian ones.

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