

[As Ye Sew, So Shall Ye Reap](#)

Category : [February 1992](#)

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As you see from the two op-ed pieces on these pages and the dress code sidebar on page 25, Hindus in communities outside of India are thinking seriously about their ethnic dress and how to preserve it, or more to the point whether it's worth preserving. This public discussion about so central a part of our heritage is encouraging, and complex.

If you travel internationally, you know that airports are the modern equivalent of old Tribal Councils. Only here, and at the United Nations, do so many ethnic backgrounds mingle, if ever so briefly. In airports you will see Japanese women in their elaborate and perfectly tailored kimonos. Here you may encounter a sheik in his flowing white caftan and hand-crafted headdress, an African priest in colorful native costume or a Tibetan monk in saffron robes. It is a diversion to the eye and a delight to the heart to see this rich rainment reflecting, like an ethnic rainbow, the unique climates, histories and social experiences that make up the human family.

Ah, but leave most airports and you enter another world, one that is teeming with insipid sameness, a grey-flannel globe in which every man (and an occasional woman) wears the same suit over the same shirt, choked by the same tie, walking in the same shoes. The astounding fact is that this is equally true in London, Lagos, Mexico City, New Delhi or Beijing. And it all happened in the last 150 years.

Why did the Japanese man abandon his classy kimono and adopt baggy pants and a one-color-suits-all suit? Why did the Russian male doff his multi-layered, climate controlling attire and fill his closets with those same suits (the first name of the European suit was ditto, a word that aptly portrays the present world of men's fashion). Ditto the Indians, Africans, Polynesians, Peruvians and most of the world.

True, a few have not surrendered to the Western onslaught, but they are on an endangered species list. Most men have submitted and willingly wear the official uniform of the conqueror.

To answer why this happened, we spoke with Rosalie Utterbach, professor and chair of the Department of Fashion Design at Woodbury University in Burbank, California. Rosalie traced for us the history of the man's suit, which evolved in its present form around the mid-nineteenth century in England, where it was sort of "an industrial era uniform." She feels that the suit essentially became the uniform which people associated with industrial wealth and success, and that other cultures "dropped their native traditions to be identified with power. There is a strong psychological aspect to this. People do judge others on first impressions, and so men wanted to be accepted into the fraternity of businessmen." And the fraternity grew with the spread of Western culture.

Rosalie laments the loss of native costumes. While traveling in Indonesia, she observed the children dressed in "typical Catholic school outfits." The creative regional dress had been abandoned, she heard, in order to "give the diverse nation a unified identity. One of the consequences is that all the weaving and dying skills, all the knowledge of making marvelous Indonesian attire, is going by the wayside." Women have lost the art. Even if someone desired a truly native costume, made from natural fiber, by hand, they would have great difficulty finding someone who could provide it.

Professor Utterbach, observing men in various cultures in suits, opines, "Look at the men in Japan who once wore custom-fitted kimonos. Now the Japanese men are all walking around in grey flannel suits. The proportions are all wrong, and all the dignity is gone."

Something else is wrong, too. It is the loss of the craftsmen's ability to make clothing and the satisfaction of wearing unique, one-of-a-kind attire. In olden days, clothing was very individualistic, exhibiting the skills of the village and representing a kind of sartorial art form. Each garment was a creative expression. Men's clothing is becoming horribly homogeneous, and women are no longer wanting to spend their days with a spinning wheel or loom.

There is also a mystical side to all this. Weaving together the warp and woof into fabric has been a source of human joy and wonderment from the very beginning. Again and again in Hindu writings we encounter esoteric concepts and abstractions that take their imagery from weaving. In the Upanishads, the universe is described as a fabric woven by the Gods. This example from the Rig Veda portrays the priests in ritual weaving their liturgical magic. "Worship resembles a loom with threads extending this way and that, composed of innumerable rituals. Behold now the fathers weaving the fabric; seated on the outstretched loom, 'Lengthwise! Crosswise!' they cry."

Though its primal purpose is protecting people from inclement weather, clothing also adorns them. Individualizes them and, in India at least, protects them from maleficent forces. (Did you know a cloak quilted from many old remnants keeps dark powers at bay?) There is in Hindu village lore the Lord of Tatters, who gives back a whole new cloth when a rag is offered to him. Shrines for these rags may be found in villages even today.

It is a little-known fact that cotton cultivation and its use in weaving originated in India. The structural properties of cotton fiber allowed for the development of highly refined techniques of spinning fine yarn from which superfine fabrics could be woven. The very word tantra comes from tanttu, a cotton thread, and so does the term sutra.

In the times of the Vedas garments were held in the highest esteem, often esteemed precious. They were used as barter and are the item most frequently mentioned as a priest's demand for performing ritual. Their care, including washing and mending, are mentioned. Vedic garments for men consisted of four pieces: lower garment, upper garment, shoulder cloth and turban. Garments for women consisted of two pieces, an under-skirt and an upper garment. In few human societies has fabric and the technologies for weaving and printing and dyeing it evolved so fully as in India.

Is there any hope that native costumes of all lands, including India, will survive? It is hard to be optimistic, but there are sanguine signs. For one, women in many cultures seem less inclined than men to abandon traditional ways. In Indian society the sari remains the height of elegance. And here and there the idea that clothes can be an artform is reviving, though the market is small, and only available to the rich. In the US men are choosing alternatives to the suit, which they reserve for

formal occasions. If the Yankee businessman sheds the suit, fashion might return to its regional roots.

For the first time in the US, Jewish men are wearing their yarmulkas to work, and Sikhs in California are demanding the right to wear turbans. We know a few Indian men in the West who have elected to wear traditional dress, even while conducting high-level business. But they are truly rare. What we can hope for is that men will wear their native attire at home, at the temple or to cultural events. But even that is perhaps too much to hope for. Perhaps the only force that is sufficient to change the universal business uniform is business itself. If fashion's chieftains rediscover the utility and variety of human apparel, and find a way to make money selling it to all those drably dressed denizens of industry who once bought their Italian haute couture, then we have a chance.

There is another possibility. Weaving and its kindred arts have always been time-consuming, arduous tasks. This week someone sent us notice of a Japanese-made embroidery machine, called POEM, which hooks up to the Macintosh computer. With it anyone can create designs on the Mac which are then output on fabrics as professional quality embroidery. Perhaps something akin to this will evolve for weaving, and we will enter an era of desktop textiles.

Because dress is, at heart, an interpreter of our intentions, another possible change lies in what men do with their lives. In the last fifty years it seems that virtually every man on earth wants to be a manager, a financier or an intellect. It may well happen in the years ahead that men will opt instead to be producers, craftsman, artists and creators of things. For artisans, Brooks Brothers suits just get in work's way.

Then there is the increasing return to the home as the center of professional life - a trend driven by potent computer and communications advancements. When he doesn't need to commute two hours a day into Tokyo or Madrid or Delhi to perform his business tasks, a man working in less formal environments may prefer not to wear that uncomfortable, arms-restraining jacket. He may desire more choices, more freedom in his dress. If either of these last two trends becomes as widespread as futurists predict, perhaps the need for the financier's fatigues will diminish. One can hope.

Remember when Mahatma Gandhi visited Buckingham Palace in 1931 to have tea with King George V. and Queen Mary? Gandhi was begged by diplomats to wear a suit, but insisted on his humble white cloth, a shawl and sandals. When someone inquired whether he had worn enough, Gandhi replied, "The king had enough on for both of us."

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