



## **Fashion as a Form of Cultural Expression**

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### **Abstract**

Fashion in India has always been more than just clothing it is a powerful form of self-expression that reflects our individuality, heritage, beliefs, and inspirations. Every garment or accessory worn carries deeper meaning be it religious, regional, or symbolic projecting our identity and empowering others to take pride in their own cultural expressions. In India, where tradition meets modernity, fashion becomes a living art form that blends history, architecture, craftsmanship, and identity. India's diverse cultural landscape allows fashion to play a significant role in preserving and showcasing cultural values. From the vibrant hues of a Banarasi saree to the intricate mirror work of a Kutch choli, traditional textiles and garments serve as visual representations of our regional pride and ancestral legacy. This article explores how fashion enables the expression of cultural identity in India, while also considering the growing influence of globalization and contemporary society on these expressions.

### **Introduction:**

In the Indian fashion landscape, the notion of “acceptability” holds considerable significance, often shaped by the mass production and marketing strategies of global and domestic fashion brands. International labels like Zara and H&M, along with prominent Indian brands such as Pantaloons, Westside, and FabIndia, influence consumer preferences by offering widespread accessibility and promoting a standardized fashion identity. These brands, by establishing certain trends as mainstream, subtly encourage consumers to adopt particular styles, frequently driven by perceived prestige, modernity, or aspirational value.

This influence becomes especially prominent in formal or urban professional settings, where



individuals often feel compelled to adjust their attire to meet workplace norms or societal expectations. As a result, personal style is frequently sidelined in favour of "socially acceptable" clothing, leading to a dilution of individual identity. This tendency toward involuntary conformity is often a response to social cues, where people mirror popular choices due to uncertainty or the desire for social validation.

In a culturally diverse country like India where traditional attire such as saris, salwar suits, dhotis, and kurta-pajamas coexist with Western fashion this shift is particularly complex. While metropolitan areas are witnessing increased homogenization of dress codes, particularly among the youth and working professionals, rural and regional communities continue to hold onto their distinctive clothing traditions.

The prevailing socio-economic framework promotes consumption based on volume and trend cycles rather than craftsmanship and cultural value. This consumerist approach often sidelines India's rich textile heritage and personal expression, favouring what is trending in malls and on social media. While aligning with popular fashion can create a sense of modernity and urban belonging, it also risks overshadowing fashion's potential as a means of self-expression and cultural pride.

This discussion invites reflection on the intricate relationship between fashion and identity in contemporary India, exploring how clothing choices serve not only as statements of personal taste but also as reflections of cultural norms, economic influences, and societal pressures. Through real-life examples and diverse perspectives, it underscores the need for a more balanced approach—one that honours both individuality and collective expression within the Indian fashion context.

## **Content**

### *Understanding Cultural Identity in the Indian Context:*

Cultural identity in India is rooted in a shared sense of belonging through factors like religion, caste, language, ethnicity, and regional traditions. These identities manifest visibly in everyday attire from turbans and tilaks to the draping styles of sarees and the use of handloom

fabrics. Fashion becomes a mirror of this collective cultural identity, allowing individuals to express their roots with pride, even as they adapt to modern lifestyles.

### **A Historical Glimpse into Indian Fashion and Culture:**

Throughout Indian history, fashion has served as a symbol of cultural and social identity. Garments like the saree, dhoti, salwar-kameez, and angarkha are steeped in tradition, each with unique regional significance. Motifs such as peacocks, paisleys, and temple borders, along with techniques like block printing, embroidery, and weaving, are embedded with meaning and are passed down through generations.

Take for instance, the traditional Banarasi saree, once reserved for royalty and now a cherished part of Indian weddings. Its intricate brocade work is not only a testament to centuries-old craftsmanship but also a celebration of cultural continuity. Similarly, tribal communities across India use specific patterns, dyes, and accessories that represent their heritage and belief systems, reinforcing fashion as a cultural language.

In contrast to the Japanese kimono, which symbolizes good fortune and longevity, Indian garments also carry profound cultural meaning. For example, the colour white in Kerala's kasavu saree signifies purity, while red is considered auspicious in many North Indian bridal outfits. Each weave, colour, and design has a story that ties the wearer to their roots.

### *Fashion in a Globalized India:*

As India modernizes and global fashion trends seep into daily wear, the challenge lies in preserving cultural identity while embracing change. Yet, Indian designers and consumers are increasingly blending traditional elements with contemporary styles, creating a unique fusion that honours heritage while staying relevant. Handloom revival movements, ethical fashion campaigns, and pride in indigenous craftsmanship are reaffirming fashion's role in sustaining cultural identity.

In essence, Indian fashion is a dynamic interplay of tradition and transformation. It empowers individuals not only to celebrate their heritage but also to project their evolving identities with confidence. Whether it's through a ghagra, a kurta with jeans, or a fusion sari



gown fashion continues to serve as a rich canvas for cultural storytelling in India.

### **Fashion as a Medium of Cultural Expression in India**

In India, fashion is far more than seasonal trends—it is a vibrant canvas of art, identity, and heritage. Like architecture, where every detail carries meaning, Indian fashion is deeply embedded in tradition and serves as a powerful tool for expressing cultural beliefs, social commentary, and even protest. Whether in everyday attire or ceremonial clothing, garments in India reflect regional pride, religious sentiment, gender expression, and family legacy.

#### *Fashion as a Cultural Language*

Clothing in India plays a pivotal role in defining and communicating one's cultural roots. From the intricate *Phulkari* of Punjab to the delicate *Chikankari* of Lucknow, every traditional outfit speaks volumes about the place and people it originates from. Fashion is used not only to celebrate festivals and rituals but also to challenge societal norms—be it through sustainable fashion movements, revival of handlooms, or gender-fluid clothing.

#### *The Saree: A Symbol of Identity and Elegance*

Perhaps the most iconic example of cultural expression in Indian fashion is the saree. Worn across religious and regional lines—by Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and others—the saree is a versatile, graceful garment that represents modesty, femininity, and social status. It is not merely a piece of clothing but a cherished heirloom, often passed down through generations and worn during milestones like weddings and festivals.

Each region adds its own identity to the saree—*Kanjeevaram* from Tamil Nadu, *Banarasi* from Uttar Pradesh, *Sambalpuri* from Odisha, *Pochampally* from Telangana, to name just a few. These variants differ in fabric, motif, draping style, and symbolism, reflecting the diversity and richness of Indian culture. The saree has also inspired global fashion designers, blending traditional artistry with contemporary silhouettes on international runways.

#### *Global Comparisons with Cultural Resonance*

Just as the saree symbolizes elegance and tradition in India, other cultures, such as the Yoruba of Nigeria, have garments like the *Agbada*, a ceremonial attire for men that represents



pride, status, and lineage. Though geographically distant, both garments share common threads cultural legacy, symbolic value, and family tradition.

In both cases, the clothing becomes a medium of cultural storytelling. Whether it's a grandmother's silk saree worn by a bride or an elaborately embroidered *Agbada* handed down through generations, these garments embody heritage, craftsmanship, and emotional significance.

### **Preservation and Evolution of Cultural Fashion in Modern India**

Today, Indian fashion continues to evolve, embracing new influences while staying grounded in heritage. The revival of traditional crafts through platforms like handloom expos and state-run schemes has brought indigenous artisans back into the limelight. Fashion designers are increasingly using their collections to raise awareness about sustainable practices, gender equity, and cultural pride.

From khadi-inspired streetwear to fusion outfits worn at global forums, fashion in India bridges past and present, the personal and the political. It reflects who we are as a people—diverse, expressive, and rooted in a rich legacy that continues to inspire.

#### *The Impact of Globalisation on Fashion and Culture: An Indian Perspective*

Globalisation has profoundly influenced the Indian fashion industry and reshaped the way cultural identities are expressed. As international boundaries blur, fashion has become a powerful medium for cross-cultural exchange. Global trends find their way into Indian wardrobes, and traditional Indian textiles and techniques are being embraced on global platforms. This fusion has opened up new avenues for innovation, representation, and cultural pride.

Indian fashion, once rooted primarily in regional traditions and rituals, has evolved to incorporate global silhouettes, fabrics, and styles. Today, we see *kurti*-jeans combinations, saree-gown hybrids, and Indo-western fusion wear dominate both everyday and occasion fashion. These styles highlight how globalisation has allowed Indian designers and consumers to merge tradition with modernity, making culture more accessible and relevant to younger generations.

### ***Opportunities and Challenges of Global Influence***

On the positive side, globalisation has enabled Indian textiles—like *khadi*, *chikankari*, *banarasi*, and *ikat*—to gain global appreciation. Indian craftsmanship is now celebrated in international fashion weeks, and global celebrities often don Indian attire during high-profile events, bringing visibility and value to our artisans and traditions.

However, the downside is the increasing risk of cultural appropriation, where traditional Indian garments and motifs are used without understanding or respecting their cultural significance. For example, Indian bridal wear, turbans, or bindis have occasionally appeared in international runway shows without appropriate context, raising questions about sensitivity and respect.

In response, the fashion world—both globally and within India—is becoming more conscious and inclusive. Indian designers are now leading the way in defining how traditional culture can be represented with authenticity. There's a growing movement to honour the origins of garments and techniques while collaborating respectfully with global fashion houses.

### **India's Influence on Global Fashion Trends**

Indian fashion has not just been on the receiving end of globalisation; it has also inspired global trends. The draping technique of the saree, for instance, has influenced the design of contemporary gowns, capes, and cocktail dresses across the world. International designers have adopted saree-like silhouettes, pleating, and layering styles into high-fashion garments, celebrating India's legacy of textile innovation and feminine elegance.

Notably, at the Met Gala 2023, supermodel Naomi Campbell donned a saree-inspired ensemble, showcasing how Indian cultural aesthetics are influencing mainstream global fashion narratives. This example underlines the power of cultural inclusion and shows how Indian heritage continues to impact global fashion with pride and purpose.

Similarly, the booming demand for Indian accessories like juttis, kohlapuris, ethnic jewellery, and mirror-work bags in international markets reflects the growing admiration for India's artisanal diversity. This global interest is encouraging more Indian brands to scale



internationally while staying true to their cultural roots.

### **Modern Fashion and Cultural Identity: An Indian Perspective**

In today's increasingly inclusive and interconnected world, contemporary fashion serves as a powerful medium for expressing cultural identity. With a growing focus on diversity and representation, Indian designers and fashion houses are embracing traditional crafts, textiles, and aesthetics to create modern collections that resonate with both local and global audiences. This shift is particularly significant for Gen-Z, who are seeking to connect with their roots while expressing individuality. Encouraging the youth to take pride in their cultural identity through fashion not only empowers them but also fosters a sense of collective cultural awareness and pride.

Indian fashion has seen a resurgence of interest in handloom weaves, indigenous dyeing techniques, and traditional silhouettes, reinvented with modern cuts and styling. Designers such as Sabyasachi Mukherjee, Anita Dongre, and Rahul Mishra have seamlessly blended Indian craftsmanship with global appeal. For instance, Sabyasachi's collections often draw from royal Indian heritage and folklore, presented in contemporary forms that attract young Indians as well as an international clientele.

One striking example is Rahul Mishra, whose Paris Fashion Week collections regularly feature Chikankari, zardozi, and hand embroidery, directly supporting Indian artisans while placing Indian heritage on the global fashion map. His designs are not only aesthetically rich but also narrate stories rooted in rural India, mythology, and the natural world — making fashion a vehicle for cultural storytelling.

These modern expressions of fashion celebrate India's plurality of cultures, encouraging the younger generation to wear their identity with pride — be it through a handwoven Banarasi dupatta, a draped linen saree, or a fusion Angrakha-style jacket paired with jeans. Brands like FabIndia, Okhai, and Raw Mango are also making traditional Indian attire more accessible to the masses by adapting heritage styles into everyday wear.

*Blending Tradition with Modernity*



Just as Japanese designer Issey Miyake combined East Asian tradition with Western aesthetics, Indian designers are creating a fashion language that is global yet deeply rooted in tradition. The free-flowing silhouettes, minimalist aesthetics, and handcrafted details found in Indian-inspired collections showcase how traditional garments like the kurta, lehenga, or dhoti can be adapted for contemporary, urban lifestyles.

This growing movement demonstrates that modern fashion need not erase tradition—instead, it can amplify it. Whether it's the incorporation of tribal motifs from Odisha, mirror work from Gujarat, or Kalamkari prints from Andhra Pradesh, each piece worn becomes a living narrative of culture, region, and identity.

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In India, fashion is deeply rooted in tradition while continuously evolving through the influence of modern trends. It serves as a powerful medium for individuals to express their cultural identity, values, and beliefs. With its vast diversity in religion, region, and customs, Indian fashion beautifully reflects the cultural ethos of its people. Many Indians today choose to integrate traditional garments with contemporary pieces, striking a balance between heritage and modernity. This blend is commonly seen in everyday wear such as pairing a kurta with jeans, or styling a saree with a modern blouse design which maintains cultural significance while embracing individual style. A pertinent example is seen among many Muslim women in India, who wear the hijab or dupatta along with modest contemporary outfits like long tunics and palazzos. The hijab, representing modesty and dignity, allows for fashion expression as long as it aligns with cultural values. Similarly, in regions like Punjab, women proudly wear salwar kameez while incorporating modern tailoring, prints, and accessories, blending tradition with evolving fashion sensibilities. This cultural adaptability is also evident in festive and formal wear. For instance, lehenga cholis and sherwanis continue to be popular, but are now designed with modern silhouettes, cuts, and fabrics to cater to younger generations seeking to express both tradition and personal style. Indian fashion is thus not just about appearance—it is a celebration of diversity, tradition, and identity. It provides a canvas for expressing one's cultural roots while





embracing the dynamism of a globalized world.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, fashion in India today exists at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, individuality and conformity, self-expression and social expectation. While global and domestic fashion brands have made stylish clothing more accessible, they have also contributed to a standardized notion of what is considered "acceptable" or "fashionable." This often results in individuals modifying their personal choices to align with broader societal trends, particularly in professional or urban contexts. However, India's deep-rooted textile heritage and cultural diversity offer immense potential for fashion to serve as a tool of identity and expression rather than mere conformity. To preserve the essence of fashion as a reflection of both personal and cultural values, there is a need to shift focus from mass-produced, trend-driven consumption to thoughtful, value-based fashion choices that celebrate individuality and local heritage. Embracing this balance can ensure that fashion continues to be a powerful medium of self-expression in India's ever-evolving socio-cultural landscape.

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