

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone in today's lecture we are going to talk about the sartorial changes that came over women's attire in colonial India. In this regard, we will explore the social history of sari which came to be considered an attire with a national identity across the country. We will trace this history primarily in the context of colonial Bengal where the discussions about women's dress code first started.

The primary material that I am using in this regard is Meredith Borthwick's book "The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905." The sari, especially *bhramika* sari, was designed primarily as an answer to the two allegations against Indian men and women from the European perspective. The first allegation was that Indian women's dress was provocative, bordering on obscenity and vulgarity. A typical upper class, upper caste women's traditional attire was a sari of fine transparent muslin. It was a single piece of cloth, draped around the body. The only extra component of her attire was her ornaments. This clothing in fact well suited the hot climate of Bengal. But such a revealing form of dress, even if only in front of male members in the family, was considered inappropriate by many who came under the influence of Victorian morality. Brothwick observes that "Compared with the thick gowns worn by English women, the type of sari worn by Bengali women appeared to leave them practically unclad."

Shib Chunder Bose in his famous *Hindoo As They Are*, published in 1881 also observed that wearing such a garment in public meant a breach of decency. According to him, "it would be a very desirable improvement in the way of decency to introduce among the Hindoo females of Bengal a stouter fabric for their garment in place of the present thin, flimsy, loose sari, without any other covering over it" (194).

The other extreme of this spectrum was the wearing of veil by women. In the nineteenth century and earlier, upper class women used to wear a veil. Although the veil completely covered the female body, it was also not considered an appropriate form of attire for native woman, precisely because veils was interpreted in the colonial discourse as a symbol of the native man's oppression of native woman. The veil and the transparent muslin cloth, though seemingly opposite in form, together reveal the contradictory ways in which women's sexuality was constructed and policed in the nineteenth century. On one end, the muslin cloth—light, sheer, and revealing—was criticized for inviting sexual indiscipline, portraying women as dangerously seductive and in need of regulation. On the other end, the veil, which entirely concealed the female body, was interpreted as a symbol of patriarchal oppression, seen as the native man's attempt to control and suppress female autonomy. This paradox reflects a deep ambivalence: women were simultaneously seen as fragile beings to be protected and as temptresses whose sexuality threatened social order.

This double way of seeing women—either as needing protection or as needing control—shaped how society judged their clothes. The veil was used to watch and control

women's behavior, while the muslin cloth, which was light and see-through, caused worry about women being too free or provocative. These were not just fashion choices, but signs of deeper fears in a society ruled by both colonial and patriarchal values. Women's bodies became a space where big ideas like modesty versus modernity, or tradition versus desire, were constantly debated. In both cases, women were closely watched, and they were rarely given the freedom to choose for themselves.

Now a crucial question may emerge, did the West which criticise the native men for being oppressive towards native woman give absolute freedom to their women. The answer is No. Brothwick's observation is valid in this context. She observes, "It could be argued that ideological systems controlling women's behaviour were equally powerful in the west, but they functioned in a more subtle form. Women were not physically confined, and sexual control was exerted as much through the mechanism of individually internalized 'guilt' as through that of 'shame' dependent on 'sanctions imposed by members of a group with whom there is frequent interaction" (246). What her observation shows is that although the West controlled women and expected them to act according to the patriarchal expectations, the control was not visible. The case was such that by the end of the nineteenth century, England made a transition from the explicit forms of control endorsed by the Victorian morality to more implicit forms of control. Victorian morality was always marked by explicit forms of control as far as women's body was concerned. Women were expected to embody sexual purity and modesty. Women's clothing was heavily regulated and controlled with corsets, long dress, high collars, transparent veils and so on. But with the arrival of modernity, there came into force a new form of patriarchy which implicitly controlled women's body and behaviour, while creating the illusion of freedom. A striking example is the rise of the educated, "respectable" middle-class woman in colonial India. She was encouraged to pursue education, but only to become a better wife and mother, not to seek independence. Her appearance was carefully curated: she could no longer wear the veil, which was seen as backward, nor the transparent muslin, which was viewed as immoral. Instead, she was expected to dress modestly but fashionably, speak softly, and stay within the domestic sphere, even as she was praised for being "modern." This created an illusion of progress and freedom—women were told they were being "liberated" from tradition, but in reality, their behavior was still tightly regulated. They were now judged not just by men but by the emerging ideals of nation, class, and respectability. So, while old forms of control faded, new ones quietly took their place. While the older forms of control were explicit, the newer forms of control were subtle. Instead of controlling women externally, women were expected to self-fashion themselves the way the patriarchal society desired. For example, no one will directly tell women not to speak loudly, instead they are taught that speaking softly is a defining trait of an ideal woman.

This was the time when colonial India was also transitioning to a phase of modernity. So, a similar transition from the explicit forms of control was necessary in the Indian patriarchal framework as well. While the overt forms of patriarchal control were increasingly seen as oppressive, there was a subtle shift towards more covert mechanisms of control. These more insidious forms were often promoted, as they were perceived as less confrontational and more aligned with the emerging ideals of modernity. So a native man who insisted that a woman should wear the veil was considered oppressive. The expectation was that the control of women should not happen explicitly, instead women should be taught to internalise the necessity of controlling her sexuality. In other words, the new expectation was that control should not be imposed in such an explicit manner. Instead, women were subtly conditioned to internalize the necessity of controlling their own sexuality. So, in the context of the sartorial

reformation, two things had to be addressed. First of all, the sartorial control should not be explicit like forcing women to wear a veil. Similarly, the dress of women should not be immodest like the transparent muslin cloth. The ideal was to encourage modesty, but without overt imposition.

By the end of the nineteenth century, there had been various attempts to reform the attire of Indian woman along this line. It was felt that the veil and the transparent muslin cloth which Indian women used to wear should be replaced by a more decent and modest form of attire. We should remember that this change is specifically happening in the context of women's entry into the public realm. By that time, the role of women also started changing from being a mother of the children, to a companion and friend to the husband. She was allowed to talk freely to her husband in front of others, travel in public in an open carriage, and to attend public theatrical performances. An integral part of women's public visibility was the appropriateness of their dress code. It was often thought that women's dress should not highlight their sexuality, and also should not involve any explicit form of control like a veil over women's body. Brothwick observes, "Reformers had managed to introduce change into their own circles without the ensuing social anarchy that had been predicted. . . . with new puritanical norms."

The obvious choice to solve this issue was to go for the attire that the West adopted, that is to use the western gown. But the primary problem associated with considering the gown as a suitable cloth for an Indian woman was that it did not have the nationalist imprint on it. Partha Chatterjee's observation in his famous essay "The Nationalist Resolution of Women's Question" merits special attention here. According to him, the new attire should show that "necessary differences were signified in terms of national identity, social emancipation and cultural refinement—differences, that is to say, with the *memsahab*, with women of earlier generations and with women of the lower classes (629). It is this enquiry for an attire that is different from the attire of a western woman, the traditional Indian woman, and the lower-class, lower-caste woman, that led to the invention of a native form of attire for women.

Many attempts were made in the 19th century to reform the sartorial codes of Indian woman. An advertisement about the sartorial reform of women which appeared in the magazine *New Dispensation* in 1881 is a case in point here. The advertisement which read 'Woman's Dress' sought the readers suggestion along this line. The advertisement read as follows: "Have you any idea as to what the reformed Hindu woman's dress ought to be? Put it upon paper; if possible, draw and paint the design and let us see it. Decent not costly" (*New Dispensation* 3 31 March 1881).

The first ones to actively look for a solution to this problem were the progressive bhadrakal especially the Brahmos. The Sangat Sabha, which was the young Brahmo men's group, met in 1865 to discuss a suitable form of attire for modern women. For them, it was a problem that needed to be addressed urgently because they wanted to bring their young wives to the public realm. But they could not arrive at a solution at that time. The real change was brought about by the Brahmo women's auxiliary group called Bama Hitaisini Sabha in 1871. Some of the important views presented by members of the group were published in the *Bamabodhini Patrika*, a monthly journal edited by Umeshchandra Dutta.

One member, Saudamini Khastagir, very much sympathized with the cause that the elite men in the upper-class, upper-caste vehemently championed. According to her, "If the kind of thin clothing customary here at present is worn, the whole body can be seen clearly. This kind of shameless dress cannot be worn in polite society. If a person was preaching or

lecturing in a place, it would be possible that if we wore this dress there we would not hear any of the fine talk. Considering this, the extent to which progressives object to this dress will be understood” (BP 1:2, 17, January 1865). But the alternative that she proposed was the English dress. But she herself dismissed her proposal later. She later favoured the costumes of Bombay and Northwest India. But this proposal to use the costumes of Bombay and Northwest India was also rejected on the ground that the direct adoption of their dress will leave the people confused about the regional identity.

Rajlaxmi Sen, another member of the Bama Hitaisini Sabha, was one of the first members to connect the idea of attire with the notion of national identity. She noted that women dressing in the reformed style had to avoid ‘denationalization.’ She also pointed out that the dress of *bhadramahila* should not resemble the attire of the sex-workers, some of whom wore chemises, jackets and shoes with their saris. She wanted to clearly distinguish *bhadramahila* from sex-workers, by giving the former an additional cadar, or wrap, covering her from head to foot. She is emphasizing two crucial aspects in her vision of sartorial reform for the *bhadramahila* (respectable woman). First, the reformed attire must carry the imprint of national identity—it should reflect indigenous values and aesthetics, distinguishing itself from both colonial impositions and excessive Westernization. Second, it must clearly distance itself from any resemblance to the dress code associated with sex workers. This concern with moral respectability was central to the reformist agenda, where clothing became a symbol not just of cultural authenticity, but also of sexual propriety. In this way, the woman’s body—and its presentation—became a site for negotiating both national and moral boundaries.

The final recommendations for the reformed dress code of *bhadramahila* came from the editor of *Bamabodini Patrika*. She suggested that women should wear *ijar* or short trousers, *piran* or a blouse, and a sari at home, or alternatively, a long *piran* with a sari. For outdoor attire, the recommendation included *ijar*, *piran*, and a sari, or a cadar with pyjama, along with optional shoes. Increasingly women adapted their clothing along the lines suggested, although the quest for a definitive style continued throughout the century. Two months later, a woman named *Jnanadannndini Debi* wrote to the editor of the *Bamabodhini Patrika*. She give the editor her detailed suggestions in this regard. *Jnanadannndini Debi* was one of the first Bengali women to act official hostess at the public functions hosted by her husband. Being a public figure, the question of the attire to be worn by a *bhadramahila* in public was a matter of immediate concern and priority for her.

Her suggestion was to improvise the current model by drawing inspiration from diverse groups including the English, Muslims and Bengalis. She also opined that it would take on a distinct Bengali identity, if all Bengali women started wearing it. She also brought to the editor’s attention the fact that many Calcutta women who were visiting each other had already adopted this new style which was very much similar to model proposed in the *Bamabodhini Patrika*. She herself wore shoes, stockings, bodice blouse and a short skirt with a sari over the top at home, and a cadar covering her head in addition, when she went out. She even took upon herself a pedagogical function, by way of sending interested women a picture of how the sari had to be worn. She even offered to make a set for those who were interested in wearing it. The style she invented became known as the ‘*Brahmika sari*.’ The reception of this new sari by the upper-class, upper-caste Bengali women was excellent. They modified their clothing in line with the style suggested by her. Brahmo women were the first to adopt the new style of clothing, so they stood out from the traditional Hindu women. However, most non-Brahmo women continued wearing their old style of dress, and major changes in women's clothing only started happening towards the end of the century.

The model for this reformed dress came from different parts of India, and was a product of the wide exposure through travel to many Indian regional cultures. While the Brahmika sari gained popularity, various regions had their own distinctive styles of draping the sari. Each region developed unique variations, reflecting cultural traditions, climate, and practicality. By 1865, it was noticed that women in Western India enjoyed greater mobility due to their practical clothing. In 1904, a lady writing from Bombay gave a detailed description of the various styles of dress she came across. Women wore their saris in different ways and put on a jacket called a celi underneath. In comparison to Bengali women, they wore brighter colors, while rich women particularly donned silk saris. Parsi women, in particular, wore trousers and a long shirt beneath their attire, layering a silk sari and jacket over them, paired with shoes. They also covered their heads with a white cloth or handkerchief.

The other contentious element of dress reform was footwear. Orthodox women did not wear shoes. Beyond the pragmatic argument that in a warm climate, it was unnecessary to wear shoes and stockings indoors, shoes were equated with loose women. Most dress reformers, though, with their Anglicized bias, believed women should learn to wear shoes and stockings. Jnanadanandini Debi, in the *Bambodhini Patrika*, wrote that from a hygiene point of view, shoes may be required, but stockings were not. The editor further opined that the wearing of shoes was not obligatory. He stated that if women did not need to walk much outside, then stockings with a strong 'preserver' covering would be enough to keep the feet clean. Another author pointed out that Hindu women outside Bengal had embraced the habit of evening strolls, for which shoes and stockings were a necessity for beauty and comfort. Others believed that shoes and stockings were not needed. In the nineteenth century, shoe-wearing was a characteristic feature of the Brahma bhadramahila. Her style and popularity cut across regional lines. It clearly created a feeling of national consciousness, when it became fashionable throughout the land.

There were also some fascinating debates regarding the wearing of jewellery as part of dress reform. It was the practice for many wealthy women to adorn themselves with six or seven pounds of gold jewelry, as a sign of prosperity and status. But the Brahmos, being thrifty and puritanical in their ways, habitually frowned upon this old custom of investing in jewellery and flaunting it as an open display of wealth. Bengali men pioneered dress reform, influenced by foreign ideas of modesty, but women themselves soon adopted it as they felt it was a preliminary to more independence from the constraints of purdah. While at first confined to a small circle, the new style of dress was eventually taken up by all middle-class women.

Reforms in the colonial period tended to place women's dress as an indication of a progressive nature, where indigenous dress was sometimes seen as a marker for backwardness, and dress reform was associated with modern, liberalizing tendencies. Reform messages promoted men to give women greater liberty, such as movement outside the home, and those against women's education or movement were categorized as orthodox and retrogressive. Nevertheless, although women's dress was meant to be indicative of progress, there was an equally strong intention to preserve cultural modesty and therefore a guarded equilibrium between modernity and tradition. While excessive Westernization or revealing dress was not encouraged, some accommodations were made to be compatible with the standards of today. Even in the absence of overt prohibitions such as veiling, social norms quietly regulated women's dress, and their garments became a location where tradition and colonial conceptions of modernity crossed.

Himani Banerjee's understanding of *lajja* (shame) which we saw in the last lecture is vital in

comprehending how sartorial reform for colonial women served as a shift between old patriarchy and new patriarchy. According to Banerjee, *lajja* was not just an individual feeling but a social mechanism that was inextricably linked to patriarchal domination, determining the manner in which women experienced their existence in both private and public realms. During colonial Bengal, when women started to venture beyond the home—be it for education or social change—their bodies turned into sites of anxiety and were controlled using clothing. Veiling or modest dress as markers of *lajja* were reconfigured instead of abandoned. While some constrictive clothing was shed in the name of modernity, new codes of respectability took their place to keep women tethered to ideals of chastity, honor, and decency. This reconfiguration of *lajja* enabled patriarchy to endure in the face of modernity, as the "new woman" was also required to hold a delicate equilibrium—educated yet not subversive, mobile yet not transgressive, modest yet not regressive. Banerjee's critique points out that sartorial reforms were never about emancipating women but about subjecting them to discipline in a manner that suited nationalist and colonial ends. While women took on new styles of clothes, the systems of shame, honor, and social surveillance lingered, so that their bodies and selves continued to be fashioned by patriarchal norms.