



An Oral History of Saris in Guyana: (Dis-)Patches from Berbice

by Sinah Kloß

When Indian indentured laborers were shipped to Guyana between 1838 and 1917 to work on sugar plantations after the abolition of slavery, sartorial practices were brought along with them, adapted, and (re-)invented, or else disappeared. While several Indian clothing styles—commonly referred to as “Indian Wear” in Guyana—have become popular, particularly since the clothing boom there in the 1990s, e.g. shalwars and ghararas—saris have long held a special status in the maintenance of Indian culture in the Caribbean. Although saris were not generally worn by female indentured laborers, over the course of the twentieth century they developed into what is now regarded as the dress of the “ideal Hindu/Indian woman,” a development similar to the history of the sari in India.

In Guyana, saris continued to have ritual value in Hindu ceremonies and were applied as purveyors and symbols of Indian culture, particularly from the 1950s, in the midst the Guyanese struggle for independence, processes of ethnopoliticization, and nation-building. While at first only a small number of Indo-Guyanese were able to purchase readymade saris produced in India, five yards of cotton cloth were refined and used for Hindu weddings or other styles of Indian Wear such as shalwars, and were stitched by a seamstress or self-made at home.



Vidya (31, housewife, Berbice/Guyana) explains, with regard to her personal memory of acquiring Indian Wear:

“Well, at that time [when I was young] it had not so much [readymade Indian Wear], like, I would say, only the rich people could have had. But then, eventually, as the years go by and by... I know, it was my sixteenth birthday, and I still didn't had a readymade ones [sic] [shalwar], where I did a hawan [religious celebration] for that birthday, and I could remember clearly I did stitch a pink one, with gold embroidery. (...) People never used to wear [Indian Wear] that much. Because from what I hear, you know, like other people saying now, that only when you getting married you wear a sari. And it's like couple years now that people wear all this Indian Wears to wedding and so forth, it wasn't that very much popular, at the age of sixteen that I knew.”

While saris are today more commonly worn during socio-religious events such as Diwali (festival of lights), jhandis (annual household ceremonies) or on the national holiday Indian Arrival Day, they remain the standard dress for brides at Hindu weddings. The wearing of a yellow sari is said to symbolize the Hinduness and Indianness of an event, the families and the ritual.

Janette (59, housewife, Berbice/Guyana) describes concerning her daughter's wedding:

“My daughter's mother-in-law went to India. They're in the [United] States and they went across to India. They bought the sari. This sari my daughter got married in [shows and hands the interviewer a garment]. It has the skirt underneath; it's rich, too. She get married with it and years pass (...). She left this [with me during one of her visits]. She say: ‘Oh Mommy, you could make something with it.’ And I made it into this skirt and top like a gharara. You see? Pretty sari when she wore it. So I took the sari and sew it into [this]... I don't give this away. That's the reason I'm having two yellow [ghararas]. But, you see this is really yellow. This is the yellow I am telling you when you get married and married women wears this.”

Discussions continued as to whether a “real” and “authentic” Indian bride should wear two saris on the consecutive wedding days (a yellow and a red sari), or whether one yellow sari and a white dress are acceptable as well.

Shanti's opinion (60, housewife, Berbice/Guyana) on this is as follows:

“The bride got married with the sari in Hindu wedding, and when them [the married couple] go home [to the groom's residence], them supposed to go home with the sari! Now dem ah just wear one white dress! White wedding dress! (...) You [should marry] according to your culture! In the Hindu rights. Come out and dress accordingly!”

Indeed it can be noticed that most recently the wearing of a red and a yellow sari is preferred among young brides, and lavish displays of Indian cultural elements are sought.

Transcultural exchange is common in Guyana as it is elsewhere, and is reflected both in dress and sartorial practices today. New fashionable styles from India are adapted to current modes of wearing a sari in Guyana, influenced, amongst other things, by Bollywood movies. Today, it is not considered “respectable” to wear (un-) refined cotton cloth, which is now considered to be a mere “substitute” for a sari. By any means a family has to be able to afford a readymade sari in order to not be labeled poor, and to maintain (or achieve) social status.

As readymade Indian clothes are not produced in Guyana, all kinds of Indian Wear have to be imported.

Sita (49, saleswoman in an “Indian store,” Berbice/Guyana) explains, indicating the role of Indian origin in the perception of authenticity and highlighting the role of mobility and transcultural exchange:

“These clothing really originate from India. But what you find is that from India they find a way to America—you know, America, this trade and so. Some might come from America, some might come from Trinidad, you know, Canada. They sell all over the world. But mostly America, Trinidad, England. So, you find, they will import or either business men go overseas, buy them and bring them in, to Guyana, to sell. (...) But they really originate from India.”

Different classes of people seek to purchase elaborate saris today, which are heavily adorned with sequins, beads or embroidery. For those who cannot afford the “rich” kinds of saris sold in stores, Sita suggests another option for getting hold of Indian Wear:

“Over there, and it easier to cross. To go across to Suriname. You have the big boat, and some people also go by fishing boat. That’s the backtrack route. And you have the big Indian stores in Suriname. People from India go to Suriname and open big-huge shopping malls there. With Indian clothes, with Indian accessories, Indian incense and all these things. I don’t know, I heard they sell it reasonable. I don’t know. I never went. Then these things come over on a huge scale from Suriname, some remain at Skeldon, some come to Port Mourant market.”

Most Indian Wear, including saris, is usually not purchased by Guyanese, as they are considered to be too expensive. Instead such clothing becomes available through gift exchange with family members, who have migrated to North America. Used and newly-purchased Indian Wear is among the items sent to Guyana on a regular basis, and these items thus create, visualize, and materialize social relationships. They are often sent in so-called “barrels,” which are 400-liter containers filled with items such as food or clothes, sent from North America to Guyana.



Vikram (37, salesman in an “Indian store” in Little Guyana, New York City/USA) elaborates:

“Some [send items] in the barrels, but some people, when they go to visit Guyana, then mainly their stuff. Because they feel satisfied when they go to Guyana and they visit and they take the stuff directly.”

This extends even to Guyanese Hindu temples in the diaspora, where ritual practitioners collect saris that have been offered to Hindu deities. These saris are blessed and sanctified, but only a few selected ones will be worn by the murti (statue, representation) of the respective deity.



The other offered saris may not be discarded, but neither may the giver take them back. Surpluses of offered saris are hence continuously created, which are often sent to associated temple communities in Guyana. There, they are redistributed among temple members, who receive them for free or for a small donation to the temple and who may wear them as temple clothing in the future. Some of the saris are used for decoration in the temple, either on the altars or along the temple’s ceiling.



Anand (42, ritual practitioner in a Hindu temple, Berbice/Guyana) explains:

“And then, to tell you about the stuff that we got from... like the saris and every puja sarjam [ritual paraphernalia] that we do the puja with, in Guyana here you will have some of them, but they are pretty expensive. And, from the time some of the devotees get help; from Guyana here they migrate to America, they will send down barrels or boxes, you know, things that what we will need to use. Like when we have this puja coming up, you will use a lot of these puja items. We would need new clothing for the murtis. We will need new decorations.”

As saris in Guyana are not exclusively worn by Hindu women, but also by female deities, these garments have a specific capacity not only to connect human beings across distances, but also to create immediacy, intimacy, and closeness to deities. Being handed on as blessed and used garments, saris continue to have a fundamental influence on creating, visualizing, and materializing social relations. They continue to be a major influence in the creation of Hindu- and Indianness in Guyana.

(The interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2012. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.)

References

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