

Contours of Change: British Colonial Impact on the Clothing of Elite Bengali Women (1864 - 1947)

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Abstract: *This research delves into the profound British influence experienced by Bengal during the last 83 years of British colonial rule, from 1864 to 1947, focusing on the transformative impact on the clothing of elite Bengali women. The study encompasses the Victorian and Edwardian periods, marked by distinct cultural shifts in Britain, reflecting in the evolving fashion sensibilities of this era. Through a meticulous examination of historical events, policies, and socio-cultural dynamics, the research explores the intricate interplay between British influences and Bengal's clothing tradition of elite women. This research seeks to unravel the multifaceted layers of colonial impact on Bengal's societal, economic, political, and cultural fabrics. The specific focus on elite Bengali women's attire unveils how their clothing choices became a tangible expression of the amalgamation of indigenous and British elements. By scrutinizing the Victorian and Edwardian fashion epochs, it is aimed to discern the nuanced changes that shaped the elite Bengali women's wardrobe, offering insights into the broader narrative of colonial influence on the region.*

Keywords: British colonialism, Bengal, Victorian era, Edwardian era, acculturation, elite Bengali women, fashion evolution, societal transformations.

The British colonial presence in India, spanning from the mid - 18th century until India's independence in 1947, exerted a profound influence on various facets of Indian society, culture, and traditions. This extensive period of colonial rule significantly shaped the intricate tapestry of Bengal, where the amalgamation of indigenous customs and British interventions resulted in a complex and multifaceted relationship that necessitates a thorough investigation. This research specifically delves into the impact of British colonialism on Bengal, with a focused lens on the realm of clothing of elite Hindu and Brahmo women (bhadramahila). This investigation seeks to unravel the intricate threads that wove together British interests and the rich cultural heritage of Bengal, exploring the nuanced dynamics that characterized this fusion. By scrutinizing the changes in clothing styles, materials etc. one aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the colonial legacy imprinted itself on the very fabric of Bengal's identity. In adopting a formal tone, this research endeavors to contribute to the scholarly discourse on the impact of colonialism, offering insights into the transformations that unfolded in bhadramahila's clothing practices.

This research investigates the influence of the British fashion on the clothing of the bhadramahila. The focus of the research pertains to the last phase of the Colonial rule i. e. the period spanning from 1864 to 1947, which encompasses eighty three years of British Colonial rule in Bengal. During this period, Great Britain was under the governance of Queen Victoria (1819 - 1901) often referred to as the Victorian period, Edward VII (1901 - 1910) known as the Edwardian period, George V (1910 - 1936), Edward VIII (1936) and George VI (1936 - 1952). Victorian and Edwardian periods are renowned for the significant transformations that took place in Britain during these periods, and as India held a crucial status as one of its important colonies, it inevitably experienced the influence of these changes. The Edwardian era, named after King Edward VII of England who reigned from 1901 to 1910, was a period of fashion and culture that lasted from roughly 1901 to 1914. This era followed the Victorian era and preceded

World War I, and it was characterized by significant changes in fashion and societal norms. So the research spanning over the years from 1864 to 1947, encapsulate two distinct epochs in English fashion history: the Victorian era and the Edwardian era.

Both these eras are characterized by a set of defining features that exemplify the prevailing fashion aesthetics of the time. These periods are known for many changes in Britain and since India was one of the important colonies of Britain, it was obviously influenced. "Two facts stand out in the 1868 - 1914 period. In the first place, the development of European - style costume was similar in the old and new worlds and in Africa and Asia it spread with the commercial and industrial expansion of Europe and the United States." (Boucher, 1987 pg 388) Victorian period is remarkable for the industrialization and the introduction of machines. Sewing machines and synthetic dyes were introduced, because of which one gets to see popularity of bright colours. From the research it is understood that fashion developed considerable during the Victorian and Edwardian period in England. Notably, high necklines were a prominent attribute of Victorian attire, emphasizing modesty and decorum. This was in keeping with the prevailing societal norms and values of the era, which stressed propriety and restraint in dress. It is also understood that during this period fashion became highly ornamental and included ruffles, laces, and draping. Study of the dresses available from this period show the use of laces, nets, frills and *broderie anglaise* (it was a technique of cutting and creating round and oval holes and then bound with button stitch. Most probably it originated in Europe in the 16th century but became popular in the 19th century). During the mid 19th century the flowing gowns worn by the English women required lots of embellishments and trimmings, which were produced by machines and supplied to the dress makers. Dresses of women had huge sleeves and skirts with heavy ornamentation. The ruffs for the neckline of the dresses were made of lacy fabric like tulle, a sheer silk or cotton, and were simply pulled into soft gathers. From the images and the available samples in the collection of museums like

Volume 13 Issue 1, January 2024

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

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Victoria and Albert museum it seems that in the 19th century women preferred clothes with simple lines and loose flow but with ruffled collars and ornamentation. The dresses were finished with these detailed decorations and trimmings and looked simple yet feminine and beautiful. The colours of the dresses became bright with newly invented dyes (bright pink, turquoise, and yellow). According to James Laver the dresses were worn by layers of petticoats. So the petticoats became very popular during this period. (Laver, 1969 p.176). 'During this half century, costume was more influenced by the decorative arts than by major arts such as painting. The abundance and aggressiveness of the new style of furniture were imitated by fashion between 1870 and 1895, while it was not until the twentieth century that clothing looked to the avant – garde art of Manet or Gauguin for new colours or harmonies.' (Boucher, 1987 pg – 389) So if the clothing of women of Victorian period are analysed then during 1900, puffed, frilly blouses that were often embellished with decorations like lace collars and broad ribbon ties became popular. Flowers, ribbons and feathers were used for the trimmings. Post Victorian and Edwardian period around 1920s and 1930s the decorations had more floral ornamentation.

The utilization of opulent and sumptuous fabrics, such as velvet, was another hallmark of this period. Velvet, with its luxurious texture and deep, rich colours, was favoured for its ability to convey a sense of opulence and refinement. It lent a regal and aristocratic air to the wearer, symbolizing affluence and social standing. Gigot sleeves, or sleeves with pronounced puffs at the shoulders, were another distinctive feature of Victorian fashion. These sleeves, which ballooned dramatically at the upper arm before tapering down, added a sense of drama and extravagance to women's clothing, reflecting the era's penchant for elaborate and ornate designs.

The Edwardian era, which followed the Victorian period and extended into the early 20th century, ushered in a transition in fashion. While it retained some elements of its predecessor, it introduced new characteristics. Edwardian fashion featured a move towards a more relaxed silhouette, with slimmer, more tailored lines and a departure from the extreme puffiness of Gigot sleeves. High necklines, albeit still present, gradually evolved into lower and more open necklines.

During the pre - mid 19th century period, elite Hindu and Brahmo women in India, notably confined within the andarmahal of their homes, experienced a transformative shift in their societal roles when their educated husbands wanted to get them out of their seclusion and get them educated. Satyendranath Tagore, the elder brother of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, qualified for the Indian Civil Service in 1863. Expressing a desire for his wife, Jnanadanandini, to join him in England, Satyendranath faced initial resistance from his father. Upon his return to India in 1864, after securing his posting, Satyendranath persisted in his efforts to persuade his father, ultimately succeeding. Jnanadanandini accompanied her husband to Bombay in 1865 for his posting. However, her existing attire was deemed unsuitable for public appearances, prompting the need to fashion a more appropriate dress. According to her

memoirs, Satyendranath crafted a dress reminiscent of Turkish attire for her journey, albeit challenging to wear. During their stay in Bombay with a Parsi family, Jnanadanandini adopted the Parsi dressing style. (Debi, 2017)

Upon her return, Jnanadanandini introduced a novel dressing style – wearing the sari with a distinct twist. This style, later known as Thakur barir sari due to its association with the Tagore family, also gained recognition as Bombai dostur, owing to its origin in Bombay. Additionally, it acquired the designation Brahmika sari, presumably due to its widespread adoption among Brahmo women compared to their Hindu counterparts. Characterized by a pallu draped on the left and complemented by a blouse, chemise and petticoat, this attire represented a modest and suitable option for Bhadramahila (respectable women) venturing out for educational pursuits.

This innovative sartorial evolution effectively addressed the challenge of finding appropriate clothing for women entering educational institutions or venturing out of the house for other purposes. Notably, this shift marked a pivotal moment in the social and cultural history of Bengal. While the focus of this narrative revolves around the sari and its distinctive drape, the details regarding the designs of the blouses remain a nuanced aspect that invites further exploration and examination.

Academicians and authors have also commented on this. 'The style of wearing the sari with a blouse often modelled on the Western dress, with a fine muslin sudreh (undershirt), was soon adopted by those from families involved in the social reform movement in Bengal as well as by emancipated families in other parts of the country. (Karlekar, 2011 p.67) Clothing historian Toolika Gupta remarks "Bengali women did not wear blouses / jackets before that time period. When they started wearing blouse, they were influenced by contemporary styles of what was worn by the women from Great Britain / America / France who were in India at that time. Thus they were influenced by Western Fashion – to put it simply, by Victorian gowns – Cut, construction and style." Fashion Designer Ajay Kumar echoes the same points.

After the introduction of blouses by Jnanadanandini into the attire of Bengali women, the designs of the sleeves and necklines of these blouses were notably influenced, presumably by Victorian fashion. The Victorian period, known for its influence on global fashion, brought forth distinctive sleeve and neckline designs that left a lasting impact on various clothing styles worldwide. Incorporating Victorian fashion elements into the design of blouses allowed Bengali women to embrace a blend of traditional attire and contemporary trends. The infusion of Victorian - inspired sleeves and necklines brought a sense of refinement, elegance, and modernity to the overall appearance of Bengali women's attire during that period. The incorporation of Victorian fashion elements in the design of blouses not only enhanced the aesthetic appeal but also exemplified the British influences that were prevalent during that time. The amalgamation of English fashion trends with traditional Bengali clothing showcased the evolving nature of fashion and its ability to adapt to diverse

cultural contexts. Through this historical research, it becomes apparent that the adoption of blouses in Bengali women's clothing, along with the subsequent influence of Victorian - inspired designs, played a pivotal role in shaping the sartorial choices of Bengali women during the period in question. This further highlights the complex interplay between cultural, societal, and global influences on fashion during the early 20th century, and the enduring impact of such trends on clothing and style of elite Hindu and Brahmo Bengali women.

The images of Indian women wearing blouses just post 1865, is not very easily available and the images available are not in very good condition. But from the clothing visible in these photographs one can make out the use of the laces. In the designs of the Bengali blouses one gets to see the English frills and lace adornments. The adoption of laces in the designs of Bengali blouses indicates a cross - cultural exchange between English and Indian fashion during this period. The use of English frills and lace adornments in Bengali blouses exemplifies the fusion of traditional Indian attire with Western influences. This further strengthens the connection between Bengali fashion and Victorian influences. The presence of lace in the neckline highlights how these embellishments were employed to add elegance and sophistication to women's attire in Bengal during this era. 'Blouses were elaborate, modelled on current styles prevalent in the West: thus high collars with ribbons, frills, jabots, and brooches were popular from the 1870s till the turn of the century and a few women also wore mutton - chop sleeves, peaked at the shoulder.' (Karlekar, 2011 p.67) The assimilation of lace, frills and satin ribbons into the design of blouses indicates the willingness of Indian women to embrace and adapt to changing fashion trends. The incorporation of net fabric in the neckline of the blouse serves as a conspicuous design feature. This choice of material, which offers a delicate and semi - transparent quality, was emblematic of the prevailing fashion trends in Europe during the turn of the 20th century. The use of net fabric in the neckline added an element of intricacy and femininity to the garment, allowing for a subtle display of skin while maintaining a sense of modesty. Likewise, the inclusion of puffed sleeves in this blouse design is indicative of the European fashion influence of the time. These sleeves, characterized by their voluminous and puffed appearance, were a distinctive hallmark of the early 20th - century European fashion. This particular sleeve style not only contributed to the overall aesthetic of the blouse but also reflected the broader trends and preferences of the period.

The combination of lightweight cotton, lace, and netting in the blouse results in a garment that is both comfortable and aesthetically appealing. The overall designs of the blouses reflect the desire for refinement and elegance in women's attire during the early 20th century. It represents the changing fashion sensibilities of the time, as women's clothing evolved to embrace both style and comfort.

Petticoats were very popular and were important part of the clothing of women in the Victorian era. Within the extensive selection of petticoats Victorian period demonstrate a harmonious combination of *broderie anglaise* and delicate lacework. These artefacts bear testament to the historical

evolution of undergarment fashion, encapsulating the elegance and craftsmanship of their respective eras.

The machine - made laces made a notable transition in the production techniques of decorative elements in fashion. This mechanization of lace production is indicative of the industrial advancements and changing dynamics within the realm of textile and garment manufacturing during the turn of the 20th century. The juxtaposition of machine - made lace with the timeless elegance of *broderie anglaise* serves as a striking example of the evolving trends and innovations in fashion design and production. It demonstrates the integration of traditional handcrafted techniques with emerging technologies, resulting in the creation of garments that not only reflect the evolving aesthetic sensibilities of the era but also bear witness to the ever - evolving landscape of fashion production methods.

However, these undergarments also played a crucial role in enhancing the overall aesthetic of the attire by imparting volume and structure to the gowns worn atop them. Despite their concealed position beneath the dress, meticulous attention to decorative detail was not overlooked in the construction of these petticoats. It is evident that the craftsmanship and ornamental aspects of these garments were executed with utmost care and precision, attesting to the significance placed on even the concealed elements of fashionable attire.

Along with blouses, petticoats were also adopted by the elite Bengali bhadramahila and these were inspired by Victorian fashion. However, due to the semi - sheer (translucent) nature of the saris, the petticoats became visible, necessitating a need to embellish and enhance their appearance. Jnanadanandini Devi had introduced the practice of blouse and petticoat amongst the Bengal Bhadramahilas. But the designs were influenced by Victorian styles. Given their visibility beneath transparent saris like organza in crimson or blue, it became essential for the petticoats to be finely decorated. It was noted that during the first decades of the 20th century, white petticoats were commonly worn under saris of any colour. Fashion choices and preference for white petticoats were noted for their elegance and sense of style.

To address this, petticoats were adorned with various decorative elements, such as laces, frills, and embroideries, drawing parallels to the intricate technique of *broderie anglaise*. Laces, with their delicate patterns and textures, were often used to trim the edges of the petticoats. The addition of laces imparted a sense of elegance and refinement, elevating the otherwise plain white fabric to a more sophisticated and visually appealing level. It seems that in Bengal the laces were made with crochet work, often made by the wearer herself.

Frills, on the other hand, introduced a touch of femininity and playfulness to the petticoats. They were strategically placed in layers, creating a dynamic and flowing effect that complemented the graceful drape of the saris. The combination of frills and laces added depth and intricacy to the petticoats, making them more visually captivating. Embroideries, inspired by the artistry of *broderie anglaise*,

further enhanced the aesthetic charm of the petticoats. Intricate designs were skilfully hand - stitched or machine - embroidered onto the fabric, showcasing craftsmanship and attention to detail. These embellishments not only beautified the plain white petticoats but also became a form of self - expression for women, allowing them to showcase their individual style and preferences. The practice of embellishing petticoats with laces, frills, and embroideries exemplifies the creativity and ingenuity of the fashion trends in the last eighty three years of the Colonial rule in Bengal. By combining functionality with artistry, women transformed simple undergarments into elements of beauty that complemented and enhanced their overall sari ensembles. The trend of embellished petticoats underscores the significance of intricate details and craftsmanship in fashion during that era. It also reflects the cultural and stylistic influence that occurred during the colonial period, as elements of European fashion, such as *broderie anglaise*, were adapted and integrated into traditional Bengali attire. Ultimately, these embellished petticoats became an essential part of the sartorial identity of Bengali women, combining practicality with artistic expression in the pursuit of fashion excellence. So it seems that once the blouse and the petticoat were adopted by Bengali women, the patterns of necklines and sleeves were adopted from the European designs. This scholarly examination provides valuable insights into the evolving fashion trends during the early 20th century in Bengal. The analysis of the blouses and petticoats showcases the dynamic interplay of fabric choices, embellishments, and silhouette preferences influenced by British fashion trends of the period, all of which contributed to the distinct and evolving sartorial identity of Bengali women during this period.

Acknowledgment

I express my gratitude to my doctoral research guide Dr. Banhi Jha (Retired Professor – National Institute of Fashion Technology) for her invaluable guidance and inputs during my research.

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