

---

## Rethinking the concept of modesty in Pre-colonial and postcolonial India

**Manasavisakai K**

MA English and Communication Studies,  
Christ University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

---

### ABSTRACT

This research tries to explore the clothing patterns and practices of ancient India and the influence of British with regard to nudity and obscenity. The research employs Edward Said's "Orientalism" to understand how the British view Indians and their attempts in changing the clothing patterns of Indians. It also traces media reports to show the impact of postcolonial practices in India in recent times and how shaming people for "showing too much skin" is similar to the Britisher's view of the orient and how it has become extremely gendered.

**Keywords:** *Fashion, Indian culture, Orientalism, British influence, Clothing patterns, Nudity and Eroticism.*

---

### INTRODUCTION

The British ruled India for almost 200 years, and they forever changed the native culture of the country. They were shocked to see the orient woman in minimal and sensual clothes and revealing too much skin. Moreover, they brought their ideas of modesty and sexual expression and codes of conduct that impacted the Indian culture vastly.

This research focuses on how fashion in India was constantly changing even before the Britishers came into India, but the idea of modesty and obscenity associated with the body was stressed and internalised during the British raj. It seeks to look into the linguistic and social origins of Blouse and Bras in India. A lot of evidence from the Kamasutra to the erotic literature and paintings in caves and temples in India point to the fact that Indians were openly sexual beings, and nudity and sexual expression was celebrated and not looked down upon. Of course, with invasions came different forms of clothing, and the privilege of clothing the body was sometimes based on caste in certain parts of India. Nevertheless, the female breasts or partial nudity was always a part of the Indian culture and never seen as titillating before the British Raj. And it was the colonisers that sexualised and thus objectified the orient women through literature and art.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Moving on to the present scenario, we often hear about women getting harassed by extreme right-wing supporters or 'nationalists' for dressing 'inappropriately' or deviating from 'Indian traditional clothes.' How is there a false sense of nationalism attached to modesty and clothes as inherently 'Indian' and the essence of the Indian culture? Furthermore, how this leads to nationalists morally policing the citizens, sometimes violently, in the name of protecting the integrity of and preserving 'Indian culture'? But again, is there any such thing as inherently 'Indian' in our clothes in this dynamic, post-industrialised world, and if so, to what extent? These are some questions this research seeks to answer.

I will be analysing based on patterns of moral policing observed in the society through two popular celebrity cases on social media in India during the course of three months from September to November 2020. The cases that will be analysed are:

Case 1- Congress Party Leader Kavitha Reddy moral policing Actress Samyuktha Hedge for wearing a sports bra in public.

Case 2- Actors Milind Soman and Poonam Pandey criticised for 'obscene' shooting.

#### Case 1

In Samyuktha Hedge's case, the actress and influencer had gone live on her Instagram account when Kavitha Reddy harassed her friends and her for wearing a sports bra in public. On September 5, the actor was practicing hula hoops with her friends at a park in HSR Layout, Bengaluru. And Reddy called her out for "nanga naach" (naked dance) and instigated more people present at the park to police the actor and her friends on their attire. The live video spread like wild-fire on social media and gained a massive response in support of the actor but with an equally hostile response as well. The problem was resolved when Reddy had apologised for her behavior to the actress over Twitter. But it is not the first time a woman is harassed for wearing a sports bra[1].

Speaking of bras, let us look into the origin of bras and how it came into India. The bra, otherwise called as brassiere, became a popular undergarment in the early 1900s. The word had its roots in the French language and was included in the English Oxford Dictionary in 1911 [1]. The bra was invented as a replacement for corsets in America, and initially, these were designed to make the working American woman feel 'feminine' again. With globalisation and media influences, bras have become an essential undergarment to be worn in India. Bra companies today market themselves by claiming to improve posture and not make breasts sag. However, the bra does not perform any of these functions (The Swaddle). It is not medically proven to improve posture nor make breasts firm. In fact, there have been reported cases of heat boils, rashes, and sores caused by bras.

In precolonial India, people wore what was comfortable in the tropical climate. The word 'gymnasts' is derived from the Greek word, 'Gymnosophists. During King Alexander's period, he was influenced by many naked ascetic sects in India, whom he called the 'gymnosophists.' And thus encouraged his army and men to take part in naked rituals and games. For several centuries thereafter, Greek athletes competing in India were occasionally reported as being both nude and in loincloth[2].

In the case of Samyuktha Hedge's harassment, the issue was that she was wearing a sports bra in public. "Sports has been long dominated by men, and thus, women's attempt at sports, and the patriarchal society has always scrutinised their sportswear choices. However, they have altered women's participation in sports by liberating millions of female athletes worldwide and has transcended into a prevailing symbol of female empowerment" [1].

## Case 2

The next incident was the arrest of actress Poonam Pandey for shooting a 'vulgar video' and appraisal for the model, Milind Soman posting a picture of him running naked on a beach in Goa. Police detained the actress for shooting 'obscene videos' on the beach. And two police officers were temporarily suspended for providing protection for the shoot. And the following week, in celebration of his birthday, Milind Soman posted a picture of him running naked on a beach in Goa. At first, the picture received a ton of praise for being so fit at the age of 55, but then some followers accused the hypocrisy and male privilege on the two incidents and thus became viral over social media[3].

Poonam Pandey's video contained partial nudity and was thus reported as 'indecent' and 'obscene.' The sexism and male privilege behind this gendered response is not new. During the British Raj, the men quickly adopted the trousers and shirts inspired by the British men, but they ensured that their women stay in their traditional clothes. Nevertheless, nudity in itself has very much been a part of Indian culture, from the naked holy men in the north to scantily clothed South Indian women. According to Toolika Gupta, in the Maurya period, both sexes usually wore unstitched clothes called Antariya (the lower garment) and Uttariya (the upper garment)("The Effect Of British Raj On Indian Costume"). The Sakas, a Hindu sect in India, have inscribed their nudity traditions through the many explicitly sexual, naked, and voluptuous sculptures in one joyous sexual union on the walls of Khajurako. "The beauty of the body was exalted, paraded even. And, since the sexual function is part of the body, that too was exalted" [2].

## DISCUSSION

### Nudity and eroticism as part of the Indian heritage

Touring India and Indian temples, we can note that there is not one but many pieces of evidence to show the freedom of sexual and bodily expression in India. Temples like the Konarak and Ellora also display highly erotic carvings and sculptures. "Their directness of statement and their placement at central public locations shows that they were an essential part of the living experience of the community, part of the fabric of their social, educational, and religious life"[2]. Evidences from the recent Keezhadi excavations in Tamil Nadu confirm that most characters in the Sangam literature like Kannagi and Madhavi, composed during the 1st millennium CE, only wore loin garments from the waist up to the ankles[4]. In Mysore, women covered themselves with ornaments from the throat to the loins as a type of attire[5]. The women from the Nair community in Kerala also were not allowed to wear the 'mundu,' an upper cloth. Goodson says that sex has been considered taboo in the West. Their modern attitudes of modesty do not permit freedom of expression, enjoyment, and open discussion on sex and the celebration of the body. Evidences from literature also include Bhakti poetry that was dedicated to god and thus spiritual in nature. One such poetry is the vachanas of a Kannada poet, Akka Mahadevi. Akka Mahadevi, in one of her vachanas, said:

People,

Male and female

Blush when a cloth covering their shame

Comes loose.

When the lord of lives

Lives without a face

In the world, how can you be modest? (116 - 112)

Just like in the poem, the poet did not clothe her body but only used her long tresses to cover a part of her body[6].

### Orientalism

Edward Said, in his most popular work, "Orientalism" explores how the British viewed the Orient nations when they first arrived. They saw through their lens, "savages", snake charmers, enchantresses, and people who were uncivilised. They documented this lens through which they saw in literature and history and this serves as a basis today for the civilised to judge and discriminate against the uncivilised. This, he explains can be seen in the Islamophobia in the United States and the US govt blaming and arresting Muslims based on judgemental notions[7].

This can be applied to India, where the British did not like the minimal closing and open and free sexual expression of the people in the Indian Sub-continent. When they started settling in and brought their families along they needed Indian servants to do their chores. The Indian servants were given uniforms and clothes that covered the body thus instilling a sense of modesty. They did not want the British women to see the fluidity of clothes and get spoiled, thus they instilled and shamed the naked body.

### **Early changes in Indian clothing with respect to covering the body**

India's clothing practices changed over time with the Mughal Empire and other invasions, but most common folk continued to be in partial nudity due to the tropical weather. After the East India Company came into India, there was a significant change in how Indians dressed. The British brought with them their concept of modesty and obscenity and saw the native Indians as savage and unintelligent, thus entirely changing the perception of India towards attire. Large exports of cotton and indigo were made from India to Europe, and factory-made cheap and modest clothes were imported to India. "The first notable person to wear a blouse and popularise it was Jnanadanandini Debi, the wife of Satyendranath Tagore"[8]. The words "blouse" and "petticoat" were loanwords from French to English and came into the Indian vocabulary during the Victorian era.

And most Indians belonging to the lower castes converted into Christianity to be able to dress like the British and, by doing so, eradicating caste-based clothing.

### **CONCLUSION**

The colonisers made attempts to erase the Indian past by giving us a half-view. They had popularised Hindu philosophical notions and rituals and ignored or degraded erotic temple carvings or the intimate Bhakti poetry as low and indecent. Some of the people who played a significant role in this were Horace Hayman Wilson and Roger Fry[9]. "And gradually, the idea of the nation in the 19th century rested on a particular image of the Indian woman. Tropes of degradation, demoralisation, and desire were all tied to bodies and how they performed"[10]. Thus the ideas of modesty and dignity of women's bodies originated in British law and were included in the Indian constitution.

So in today's post-industrialised world where the right-winged nationalists are desperately trying to protect 'Indian culture,' there is nothing that is authentically Indian in any way. Historically, with every invasion and influence, India's clothing and its idea were shaped accordingly. With the currently globalised world, it is impossible to trace back to any one original form of Indian attire. Thus there can never be any such thing as 'truly Indian' in our clothes.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. HR, Meghana(2020). "Samyuktha Hegde'S Moral Policing Case: Decoding The Gaze On Women'S Sports Bra". *Feminism In India*, <https://feminisminindia.com/2020/09/10/samyuktha-kavitha-sports-bra-moral-policing/>.
2. Goodson, A. (1991). *Therapy, Nudity & Joy: The Therapeutic Use of Nudity Through the Ages: from Ancient Ritual to Modern Psychology*. Elysium Growth Press.
3. Scroll.In, 2020, "As Poonam Pandey Is Arrested For 'Obscenity' In Goa, Twitter Asks Why Model Milind Soman Got Away". <https://scroll.in/latest/977776/as-poonam-pandey-is-arrested-for-obscenity-in-go-a-twitter-asks-why-model-milind-soman-got-away>.
4. Purushu Arie, 2020,"Costumes And Clothing Of Keezhadi's Vaigai Valley Civilisation - Purushu Arie".
5. Crooke, W. (1919). Nudity in India in Custom and Ritual. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 49, 237-251.
6. Shankar, Sucheta(2016). Daughters Of Kali: Women'S Bhakti Poetry In Southern India. *University Of Kerala*, pp. 12-14.
7. Said W Edward,1994. "Orientalism".
8. BBC News (2014). "Dressing The Indian Woman Through History". <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30330693>.
9. Gupta, Charu(2002). Sexuality, Obscenity And Community: Women, Muslims, And The Hindu Public In Colonial India. *Springer*, pp. 34-38.
10. Wieringa, Saskia, and Horacio Sívori(2013). The Sexual History Of The Global South: Sexual Politics In Africa, Asia, And Latin America. Zed Books Ltd, chap 9.