

# Cloth, clothes and colonialism in India



Textiles lay at the centre of Britain's involvement in India. In the 17th century, India's exquisitely embroidered shawls, dyed silks and printed calicoes were rare and coveted luxuries in Europe.

East India Company merchants negotiated with local artisans and traders to export these highly-valued materials to Europe, along with tea, saltpeter and spices. From the 19th century, when the British had the technology to produce these fabrics themselves, they exported their products based on Indian designs, using raw cotton and indigo from plantations in India.

Yet the significance of cloth and clothing goes far beyond the economics of imperialism. In Indian courts, upholstery fabrics, as well as the clothing and jewellery worn by the members and servants of the court, displayed a ruler's wealth. Cloths and carpets were among the many articles that the British seized from the palace upon the defeat of Tipu Sultan of Mysore in 1799.

Clothing provided a visual marker of identity, separating the rulers from the ruled. In the mid 19th century, British authorities stipulated dress codes, prohibiting British imperial servants from wearing 'native' dress at official occasions. This prohibition reflects changing ideas of masculinity in Britain, as well as a growing disdain towards Indian culture. Increasingly, the bright colours and

Women picking cotton in India. Cotton continued to play an important role in post-independence Indian economics. The textile industry as a whole, including cotton, is still second only to agriculture in the number of people employed. *A hundred years of Indian cotton*, ML Dantwala. Cotton Research Corporation Library SB251.I3.D2.



*Threads of Empire*

Rule and resistance in colonial India



Above: Engraving of the four Hindu castes.

William Westall, *The Hindoos*, 1834–1835. Charles Knight Collection AC4.L4.



Right: Photograph of Cotton Merchants in Bombay, 1870.

*A hundred years of Indian cotton*, ML Dantwala. Cotton Research Corporation Library SB251.I3.D2.

flowing fabrics of Indian dress appeared to the British to be 'unmanly.' Victorian attitudes to dress also affected women's clothing. In Bengal, British missionaries and Indian reformers encouraged women to wear a blouse (choli) and petticoat under their sari to protect their 'modesty' when in society.

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