

THE WHOLE NINE YARDS

Women reclaiming the sari

There is something so irresistibly cool about a sari draped over a shirt, or tied a few inches higher at the waist: worn without a blouse or knotted at the shoulder, falling across the body in diaphanous waves. It's all in the small gesture – belted, with a high neck blazer over broad shoulders, fabric layered down in smart, crisp folds. These small gestures pull the sari out from under the burden of heritage: they are clever updates, and so effortlessly fresh.

The sari has, over the last few decades, fallen into a deep, lazy lull: a single drape homogenises the garment's diversity over India and the diaspora, popularised through cinema and celebrity. The Nivi drape, seven pleats at the front, pulled diagonally over the body in a neatly pressed line, is considered to be a functional geometry. This iteration of the garment is often assumed to be the only one, or rather, the go-to; an infallible version of itself.

The Nivi carries with it certain qualities of aspiration, and was first devised by the upper class members of the infamous Tagore family, rather daringly infused with details of a colonial aesthetic: take the petticoat for instance, which would be lined with a ruffle, or even the blouse of puffed sleeves. Both features, now considered to be staples of the garment, were only adopted to hybridise the sari under a colonial lens.

But imagine, instead, a textile of unmasked potential. There are over 84 drapes of which we know, each an entirely different, regional style

found in 14 states across the country. The fabric changes with each drape: in its yardage, in its density, and in its decorative features – a specificity of weave, the width of a border, or in the placement of delicate embroidery. Arguably, this cloth is never static: animated by the movements of the bodies upon which it rests: take for instance the fisherwomen of the Konkan coast with loops of fabric across their waists, which keep their trouser-like drape in place as they pull up fishing nets from the sea. Neither is the garment as gendered as it is now so routinely seen: the drape is simply about forming one's language with the fabric. In fact, fluidity is its very premise.

The Sari Project is a community-supported series of how-to-drape documentaries, out later this year, led by fashion publication and agency Border & Fall. The project proposes that this language is not a complex one, in fact – that it is one of startling simplicity. The garment is, after all, a fabric of uncut yardage, necessarily designed to suit the needs, and movements, of its user.

The sari went through one of its most fundamental shifts in the hands of business tycoon Dhirubhai Ambani, who introduced polyester into the Indian market in the 1970s, during the time of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Ambani undercut Gandhi's strict licensing regulations that made it difficult to trade foreign materials by importing as well as producing the textile, delivering a cheap and fast alternative into a market that entirely dealt with the

handmade. Ambani would famously throw open his wife's cupboards and pull out her saris, scurrying them off to the factory to have them copied. If the Nivi drape is the most rampant silhouette, then the 200 Rupee polyester sari, often printed with bright colours and patterns, is the most prolific. Gandhi, herself, only wore the sari in khadi cotton to continue one of the founding tenets of the 'Quit India' Independence movement of the 1940s: that fabric should be hand-spun, and local. She wore the most exquisite handloom fabrics, perfectly pressed, all seven pleats of the Nivi moving gently as she walked the halls of Parliament, or out on a campaign trail. Textiles in India have always been deeply political.

Indian artist Bharti Kher first drapes a sari over an object, say, a plinth or a chair, allowing the fabric to effuse itself across her chosen plane. She then coats the material with resin, the drying of which gives it the texture of a chill, almost liquid glass. She offers it up as raw, and unspooled. As Kher so effortlessly presents, the sari is poised to be reintroduced into the contemporary imagination; not merely as a static silhouette but as one that is fundamentally dynamic. Border & Fall's new documentary series *The Sari Project*, thus, could not come at a better time – there is little information available of regional draping techniques, or of weaves and textiles that otherwise don't make it to the public stage. Each film is a short, with a special focus on design, directed by filmmakers Q, Pooja Kaul and Bon Duke. The project's ▶

Georgina McAvanland

The Enduring Appeal of the Sari

In the history of Indian clothing the sari can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilisation, which flourished during 2800-1800 BC in the western part of the Indian subcontinent. The earliest known depiction of the sari in India is the statue of an Indus Valley priest wearing a drape. Ancient Tamil poetry such as the Silappadhikaram and the Sanskrit work Kadambari by Banabhatta describes women in exquisite drapery or sari. Sculptures from the Gandhara, Mathura and Gupta schools (1st-6th century AD) show goddesses and dancers wearing a dhoti wrap; the 'fishtail' version which covers the legs loosely before flowing into a long, decorative drape in front. Everyday costume consisted of a dhoti or lungi (sarong), with a breast band and veil or wrap that could cover the upper body or head. The two-piece Kerala mundum neryathum (mundu; a dhoti or sarong, neryath; a shawl, in Malayalam) is a survival of ancient Indian style. The one-piece sari is a modern innovation combining the two pieces. The famous 'Indian Summers' tend to be sunny and sultry to which the sari is well-suited. Yards of cloth protect the body from the sun in summer and the cold in winter, while the cropped choli has a cooling effect. Over centuries, each region in the Indian subcontinent has developed its own unique sari style, weave and texture. The Ikkad and the Sambalpuri from Orissa, the Bengal cotton from West Bengal, the Tussar Silk from Bihar, the Pochampally from Andhra Pradesh and many, many more. *** **Amrita Dasgupta**
Edited extract of *The Sari: Nine Yards of Art*
as originally seen on www.culturetrip.com

founding tenet: 'The sari was designed to adapt.' That it adapts is perhaps its most engaging quality – because it prescribes that the sari may be continuously reimagined, thus suited to the quick-changing lifestyle of the urban everyday. This is best seen in how the sari changes function not only with each region or local material, but also with each festival. There are the age-old traditions that the first cotton sari of the year is bought or gifted at Holi, the festival that celebrates the arrival of spring, and the first silks bought at Diwali: marking the start not only of winter, but of what is usually a popular season for weddings.

The Sari Project has sourced regional textiles from families and homes across the country, during the insurance proceedings of which two documents came back to the organisation stating that the saris in question were in fact 'invaluable'. This is an interesting conceit, because how do you qualify the value of not only a fabric, but the richness of its history? The sari is thus inherently tied to narratives – personal narratives, ones that are entangled with those of their regions and of the entire subcontinent. It is hard to think of a comparison – what other garment still sits in the homes of over a billion people, tracing its origins back to the third century BCE? As with all narratives, it is not resistant to evolution: it is one that the contemporary imagination must now take on, so that it may continue for decades to come. *** **Skye Arundhati Thomas**

