SARI IN ITS ONGOING GLORY

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MANDIRA CHATTOPADHYAY

DR. ROBERT PHILLIPS - ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

At the outset of my thesis, I would like to focus on the word “culture.” As a student of cultural anthropology, I would like to place ‘material culture’ in the broad context of culture. We can regard culture as a conglomeration of man-made material items, patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors shared by members of a group who regularly interact with each other. Culture thus defines a broad range of phenomena, both material and non-material. Dress such as the sari constitutes one major example of material culture. It also communicates non-material culture in the way individuals are dressed and the symbolic values attached to their dress. This study is most likely the first one that treats the sari as a material culture, and how important it is in an Indian woman’s life.

This work focuses on sari as a garment for a woman which has been popular among women of all social classes and has survived to this day. Among the countries with ancient traditions, India is perhaps the one that has clung to her traditional costume, which has evolved through ages and perfected, while most other countries with similar tradition have switched over to tailored forms of dress necessitated, perhaps by climactic or political considerations.

The sari, a versatile female garment of ancient Indian origin, has enthralled and mystified many in its variety of texture, design, size and draping style. The sari is the garment of choice of Hindu women, constituting about 75% of the female population (of the total population over one billion), of India, due to its versatility. This unstitched piece of cloth, with the aid of manual
skill, can be worn like a gown, a skirt, trousers, and even shorts. If women have stolen many hearts wearing the sari like a regal gown, they have also fought many wars on horsebacks, and conquered their enemies, wearing it in a trouser like fashion!

The evolution of Indian saris can be traced to a complex physical, historical and cultural environment that is distinct from region to region and community to community. Figure 1 depicts modern India where traditional sari is used as apparel. To the north of the Indian subcontinent there is the Himalayan mountain range where arctic conditions exist at high elevations. In the plateau and valleys to the immediate south, the climate ranges from temperate to subtropical. The wide, fertile plains of the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers and their tributaries stretch west to east, making up most of northern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The plains are prone to heavy flooding with the exception of the Thar Desert and semi-arid parts of the Sind that lie to the west between India and Pakistan. The Deccan plateau juts against the Gangetic plain and covers most of peninsular India. Further south, there are mountain ranges and steep forested hills. At the southern coast the climate is tropical with heavy rainfall, rich soils and lush vegetation. In most of the country, about two-thirds of the year it is dry, with cool or warm winters, hot and dry summers, and monsoon rains between June and September (Lynton, 1995, 8) India’s regional cultures have very deep roots. Many of the cultural changes were instigated by new invaders and settlers descending from the Iranian plateau via the
northwest corridor. Figure 2 shows a map of ancient India. As early as 2000 BC, nomadic, horse rearing,
FIGURE 1 Map of Modern India

Figure 2 Map of Ancient India
Indo-Aryans passed through this corridor and spread south and east into India. Around the same period, tribes from southern China traveled through Tibet and Burma to enter India from the northeast. They did not have the same impact as the Indo-Aryans, but are believed to have pushed the native tribes to the remoter areas of the Deccan plateaus and the northeast, and the Dravidian-speaking peoples of the subcontinent to the south. It is to be noted that Dravidian languages are indigenous to South Asia. After the Indo-Aryans came the Greeks and then the Islamic groups from Afghanistan and further west. The early Islamic invasions resulted in various Muslim dynasties ruling in northern India culminating in the Mughal Empire (sixteenth through eighteenth centuries) whose court apparel influenced the attire worn by most north and central Indian aristocrats until the early twentieth century. One theory not fully substantiated is that the style was created by Noor Jahan, wife of the Mughal emperor Jehangir in the mid-17th century.

The British came in the late eighteenth century superseding the political and military power of the Mughals. They took over a piece of India’s then-enormous textile export industry. Weavers and other skilled textile craftsmen were impoverished by the establishment of cotton mills by the British (Allchin, 1988, 33-62). Lakshmibai, the queen of Jhansi (Jhansi ki Rani) State in North Central India fought as a cavalry leader in 1858. She is shown in Figure 3 dressed
in sari on horseback and carrying her little son in the back. She became a symbol of resistance to the British Raj (Bhaskaran, 2010).

Figure 3 Jhansi-ki-Rani
The *Swadeshi* (freedom) movement was founded in the late nineteenth century in rebellion against unfair British trade practices (which put high taxes on locally made textiles). Mahatma Gandhi expanded the movement in the early twentieth century by encouraging hand-spinning and weaving as a political symbol as well as giving the poor an income. Popularly known as *Khadi*, this handmade cloth has been an important symbol since the early nineteen-twenties and still worn by Indian politicians and intellectuals today. The production of the hand-oven fabric was by the use of the spinning wheel *charkha* which became a symbol of hope for the masses. Introduced as a way to boycott foreign goods, *khadi* became a national movement under Gandhi. Figure 3 shows Mahatma Gandhi spinning khadi using the *charkha*. (Sinha, 2016)

![Figure 3 Mahatma Gandhi spinning khadi on charkha](image)
Women revolutionaries would wear saris made out of khadi typically with a red border as shown in Figure 4. Women during the Indian National Movement would wear saffron colored khadi saris and march through the streets of Ahmedabad following Mahatma Gandhi (Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006).

Figure 4 Red-bordered khadi sari
One of my greatest heroes is Bina Das, whom I had the good fortune of having as a teacher in her later life. She earned the epithet of *Agni Kanya* (daughter of fire). As a young girl of twenty-one, with a revolver hidden in her sari, she attempted to assassinate the British Governor of Bengal in 1932. As the Governor presided over the convocation ceremony at Calcutta University, she fired five shots trying to shake the British empire (Ghosh, 1938)

**Figure 5 Bina Das**
However, Gandhi’s *khadi* movement failed to halt the flood of inexpensive factory-made textiles issuing from India’s mills unlike the hand-spun and woven cloth used in many fine aristocratic saris, which started disappearing in the early twentieth century.

Some costume historians believe that man’s dhoti (see Figure 3) which is the oldest drape garment, is the forerunner of sari. Till the 14th century the dhoti was worn by both men and women.

Indian civilization has placed a tremendous importance on unstitched fabric like the dhoti. The belief was that such a fabric was pure and not touched by any needle. Hence in the present day while attending pujas or all sacred Hindu ceremonies the men dress up in dhoti and women in sari.

The sari evolved from a three-piece attire: the *anatariya* the lower garment, the *uttariya*, the veil worn over the shoulder, and *stanapatta*, a chest-band. Ancient sari closely resembled dhoti wrap in the fishtail version which was passed through legs, covered the legs loosely and then flowed into a front decorative pleat in the front of the legs. It further evolved into *ghagra* (short skirt) and *lehenga* (long skirt). *Uttariya* evolved into *dupatta* (long multi-purpose scarf) and *ghoonghat* (veil or headscarf). *Stanapatta* evolved into *choli* (midriff-baring blouse). Between second century BC to first century AD, *antariya* and *uttariya* was merged to form a single garment known as sari in Pali literature. (Prasad Mahapatra, 1992)
There have been many stories regarding the origin of sari. Draupadi, the beautiful wife of the Pandavas (from the epic Mahabharata) was lost to the Kauravas in a gambling duel. The lecherous victors humiliated Draupadi by pulling and unraveling her sari. Draupadi prayed to Lord Krishna for help and by his divine power he expanded her sari so that it would never end. They could not reach the end and thus could not undrape her.
The sari, it is said, was born on the loom of the fanciful weaver. Indian myths often use weaving as a metaphor for the creation of the universe. The spun thread was the foundation, while the weaver was viewed as the architect or the creator of the universe. There are also several references to the fact that in south India, the sari has been for a long time one piece of material that served both as a skirt and veil, leaving the bosom bare. Even today in some rural areas it is common for a woman not to wear the *choli* (Kumar, 2001).

The sari’s origins are obscure in part because there are so few historical records that exist in India. We know, however, that Indians were wearing length of unsewn cloth draped around their bodies long before tailored clothes arrived. One of the earliest depiction of a sari-like drape covering the entire body dates back to the first century BC. North Indian terracotta (c. 200 – 50 BC) depicts a woman wearing a sari wrapped tightly around her. This elaborate hugging style may have evolved among India’s temple dancers in ancient times to allow them freedom of motion while at the same time maintaining their standards of modesty. Terracotta from eastern India (from the Gupta period, 300-500 AD) in Brooklyn Museum depicts a woman wearing a full-skirted sari draped around her entire body. Among the many gods, demigods and mortals depicted in the murals at the Ajanta caves (late fifth century AD) in Western India are two representations of wearing saris covering the entire body. Cave one shows a woman sitting with a man (who is wearing a tailored top) looking up at the courtly scene around her. She is wearing
a short sari with narrow wrap-wise borders and weft-wise stripes over her shoulder. Cave eight shows an old woman wrapped in a voluminous sari (Allchin, 1988, 62).

Anthropology is the discipline which tries to engage the materials of everyday life while retaining a commitment to understanding humanity as a whole. In this work, I will demonstrate how a woman can express her feelings by using this adornment.

Goffman (1959) developed the concept of “dramaturgy”, the idea that life is like a never-ending play in which people are actors. Interactions with others are viewed as performances shaped by environment and audience. Goffman also states: “All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify.” The woman wearing a sari presents herself much like an actor on a stage. This thesis also intends to convey how Indian women use the sari as a demonstration of their own identity.

Clothes like the sari have always been very much a part of Indian life providing different ways Indian women express their relationship with the sari and the continuity of their Hindu identity. Under the crafting of identity comes the emotional relationship with the sari. In most instances the identity shaped by one’s early development is the person’s first identity. This socializing has involved years of experience with one’s family, extended family, one’s neighborhood and community and one’s schools covering the periods of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. It is a tried and fully tested identity which serves the person in control by making lives predictable. The person’s identity filters incoming experience so that the information fits into his or her current understanding of him or herself and the world in which he or she lives. This is what the anthropologists call the mental maps of reality, and reflects a person’s point of view perception of their area of interaction. Human beings in every society on the globe dress themselves for many and varied reasons, including the protection of the body,
extension of the body’s abilities, beautification and non-verbal communication about the wearer. Dressing the body through a clothing like a sari is a total sensory system of communication that simultaneously connects an individual to some people and separates him or her from others. This system of communication through dress precedes our verbal face to face communication. Dress as a primary example of material culture relates this communication. Such traits are what the anthropologists call the ethnic boundary markers. These are overt characteristics used to denote ethnic group membership, such as food, clothing, language, skin color, etc.

Sari also is an index of fashion. This work demonstrates the fashion consciousness of an Indian woman in dressing up in a sari. In later sections, I describe the use of the sari in a broad sense--how Indian women show their identity through the sari and how its use has been diminished over the years with the changing role of women in contemporary society. I also report on how the Indian women who have migrated to the United States are still wearing the sari, especially the older women. In this context, some examples will be cited as to how some Westerners have been mesmerized by the beauty of a woman wearing the sari. I also examine how the Indian diaspora living in America are deciding when and where to wear the sari.

Miller asks, “Do the objects speak?” (Miller 2008, 2). Object like the sari really becomes a character. Though a substantial portion of this work deals with the issue of relationship of a woman with her sari, I also report customs and traditions of the sari and the significance of the *pallu*. This is the end of the sari that normally has by far more elaborate
decorations than the rest and in the commonest style of sari draping today, is also the part of the sari that appears to be “semi-detached” draped over the shoulder as a loose item of cloth.

This work does not use any ethnography, instead I have used a number of stories and incidents from my own observations. The way I am approaching the sari in this work is as an object that can signify relationships, things and emotions. I want to emphasize that for many women, the sari represents not just a thing to wear but also integral aspects of relationships with others that flow constantly between persons and things.

I address the communicative value of the sari in this context. The personality of the woman is revealed through her material possession, namely her sari. Each sari has a story to tell, and the sentimental association of the sari will be brought into light in this research.

The results of this research could be useful in analyzing the social forces instrumental in the way Indian women dress. The issue as to how the sari as dominant attire is being perceived by the modern Indian woman has also been addressed in this work. The communicative value of the sari has been addressed in this context. The personality of the woman is revealed through her material possession, namely the sari. Each sari has a story to tell, and the sentimental association of the sari will be brought into light in this research. In Chapter 2 I discuss methodology. Chapter 3 of the thesis describes the relationship expressed by the saris through gifts. Chapter 4 explores the fashion aspects of the sari. Chapter 5 delves into the identity expressed by the sari. Chapter 6 talks about other uses of the sari. The emotional aspect of the sari is detailed in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 describes the role the women of Tagore family play on the wearing of the sari.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Information on saris has been collected from many sources. I have observed the types and varieties visiting the stores specializing in saris in the Indian cities of Kolkata, Delhi, and Bangalore. I have observed the varieties of saris in a number of sari places in Jackson Heights, New York near New York City. I have also looked at the reviews and analyses of articles related to sari, addressing the issues of materiality and non-materiality. The communicative and symbolic values are highlighted. The techniques used for the research have been to critique relevant material available in the form of books, journal articles, and dissertations. These have been supplemented by my personal experience. A number of stories and tales have been used for this purpose. The analysis has been primarily qualitative in nature. Interpretative studies have been carried out, with a focus on certain themes, which are: (a) the cultural aspects unique to India and how the sari has survived to this time as the primary apparel for women in India, (b) tales and stories about saris, especially stories by my grandfather, (c) the role of saris in Indian weddings, (d) sari as a material culture, (e) the modern ways and uses of the sari, and a few others. With the development of ideas presented in this work, attempts have been made to tie the themes together. I have tried to pursue a grounded theory approach: this involves identifying categories and concepts associated with the saris, and linking the concepts into substantive and
formal theories. I have used the technique of field observation to produce qualitative data. The
results of the analysis are presented using exemplars. My approach is similar to that of the
“interpretive biography” of Denzin (1989), which he defines as “creating literary, narrative,
accounts and representations of lived experiences.”
CHAPTER THREE

RELATIONSHIPS EXPRESSED BY SARIS

Hindu women through numerous customs and rituals are adopted into the line of their husbands. Hindu marriage is a sacrament (*samskara*) and as such it requires sacred rituals. In these rituals saris play dominant roles. Hindu women establish a relationship with their husbands through the gifts of saris. Marriage is conceived as a journey to a new locality, status, role, position, code of conduct, a new set of relationship, where the main agent and witness is the sari.

The tradition of gift has been very important all over the world, Marcel Mauss discusses the importance of gift as forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies (Mauss 1990). The importance of the sari as a gift in Hindu weddings has been mentioned (Fruzzetti 1990 45) for different ritual occasions and situations. van Gennep (1960) has examined the rituals as a process of “separation, transition, and reincorporation.” Hindu marriage very strictly follows various rituals and the sari plays a very great role in it. The three saris given during the central marriage are *dans* symbolizing the bride’s change of status. The *rakta* sari is given by the bride's father and worn for auspiciousness during the rituals. The *lajja* (avoidance and shyness) sari is given by the bride’s in-laws. This sari is worn during the crucial moment of *sindur dan*, the high moment of the rituals when the groom puts vermilion into the parting of the bride’s hair. Finally, the *bhat kapar* (rice clothes – a sari) is given by the groom to the bride establishing the husband and the line’s relation to the wife. On the day of marriage, the relatives and friends come to the reception with presents and sari is one of the most important gifts. Various saris are given to the wife as signs of blessings. On the wedding day, a separate class of presents is formed by the various *tattvas*, gifts exchanged between the houses of the bride and the groom in the context of
certain rituals. In *tattva* (the basket of gifts) heaps and heaps of saris are placed. The *bostro* gift (clothes, saris) to the bride and the ritual context in which they are given express and establish a new relationship to a new set of relatives in addition to accomplishing significant changes in the bride’s status as the marriage ceremonies unfold. First the *rakta bastra* (blood sari) is given to the bride by her father. Red is an auspicious color associated with married women, who wear vermillion in the parting of their hair, *alta* on their feet, and red-bordered saris in everyday life. The *rakta bastra* is the father’s last gift to his unmarried daughter. The daughter thus attired represents the status, prestige, and purity of the father’s line in front of the assembled relatives and guests. This is the moment when the father finally relinquishes his responsibility for his daughter and transfers her to another family (Fruzzetti 1990 45). The *lajja bastra* (the sari of withdrawal and shyness) is given to the bride by the groom’s side just before the *sindur dan* (gift of vermillion), the rite that confirms the virgin’s married status. The *lajja bastra* is used to cover the bride during the *sindur dan*. This expresses the bride’s shyness at being married and facing all the relatives. As bride, she will always have to show respect to the in-laws and be humble in the presence of her father-in-law and her mother-in-law. The *lajja bastra* also represents the end part of the sari used to cover the head as a sign of withdrawal and humility. The practice of *ghomta* (the veil) is a feature of everyday life and as such signifies a kind of avoidance relationship between the bride and certain important members of the family of her in-laws. A young wife puts on the *ghomta* when she is in presence of her elders. With the *lajja bastra* over her head, the bride becomes part of the groom’s line; her husband is now responsible for her purity and respect (Fruzzetti 1990 46).

The *bhat kapar* (rice clothes) is given to the bride on the day when she serves cooked rice to her in-laws for the first time. This sari is a gift from husband to wife. By wearing it, the bride
accepts the duties and responsibilities of her new status in her new family. Her new responsibilities include the full care of household and its people as well as its animals. But most important of all, she cooks rice for her new family the nourishing food (Fruzzetti 1990 57). That is the special meaning of this sari. According to Bengali tradition, on the wedding day the bride and groom see each other sometime for the very first time, under a sari which is used as a canopy. Also during the wedding, the sari of the bride is tied the dhoti of the groom symbolizing a bond that will stay for the rest of their lives. (Figure 7)

Figure 7 Groom’s dhoti tied with the bride’s sari
In their book *The Sari* Banerjee and Miller describe how the color of the sari of the bride speaks itself. Tradition is marked by the exuberance of color. In the early years of marriage, the bride wears bright and vivid colors. With advancing maturity, she is expected to wear cooler and paler colors. Finally, if she were to become a widow, she is expected to wear white. Some women have a religious sensibility concerning the appropriate colors for particular occasions, or even days. ‘I usually wear saris according the day of the week; starting with Monday I wear white because that is Shiva’s day, Tuesday is red, because its Mahavir’s day and his color is red; Wednesday is blue, Thursday yellow, Friday Green, Saturday black, and Sunday any color goes.’ (Banerjee and Miller 2003 51).

*Gaye Holud* (Turmeric on Body) is a purification/beautification pre-wedding ceremony common in Bengali culture. The bride is dressed in yellow sari (Figure 8). The yellow color represents sanctity. (D’Costa 2009)

![Figure 8 Gaye Holud](image-url)
Indian women treat sari as comfort, a friend, part of her, but also a companion. Sometimes they believe in superstition; she has lucky saris that she wears when she thinks she needs extra support. In the book “Women of the Tagore Household” the author describes how in those days (the late nineteenth century) married ladies, irrespective of age dressed up like new brides before entering their bedrooms. (Deb 2010 259)

In Sita’s Daughters it is described how women have a number of shaktis (strengths) along with their talents. Of course, the primary one is that she reproduces and keeps the human life going. The other notable shakti is when a woman puts on a beautiful red or a yellow sari she almost looks like a goddess. (Mintrun 1993 209)

Unlike the traditional white usually worn by western brides, Indian dresses are often red, which is considered to symbolize fertility (Boroian 2010 89).

Marriage is the time for exchanging gift s of saris. (Fruzzetti 1990 54). Of course, Indians use the sari as a gift on other occasions, but during the marriage the exchange of saris is the most symbolic (Fruzzetti 1990 55). The gifts given and received in the ritual context also define and in turn are defined by the kinship relations between the persons involved. Often marriage is the only time when such encounters take place, and it here that the relationship is rendered meaningful.
CHAPTER FOUR

SARI AS FASHIONABLE ATTIRE

A noted psychologist Carl Jung has waxed lyrically about the elegance of the sari: "It would be a loss to the whole world if the Indian woman should cease to wear her native costume. India is practically the only civilized country where one can see on living models how woman can and should dress.” (Jung 1970 521) The concept of beauty in ancient India was all about the navel, small waist, large hips and busts: a fact clearly evident from ancient sculptures. Sari was a perfect dress considered to cover every body part and yet emphasized the beauty of women in every aspect. Style of wearing saris differs among Indian women. Sari is tied around the waist in all styles with about 5-10 pleats tucked inside the sari-skirt. The free-flowing end called pallu is clipped on to the left shoulder either from front to back (known as navi style) or reverse depending on convenience, style and professional look. The style and variety of sari collection in Indian shops can be stunning to everyone. Every Indian woman and every onlooker would have volumes to speak about sari. Indian sari has truly withstood the test of time!

During her time in India, French anthropologist Chantal Boulanger discovered 100 different styles of draping a sari, and according to her a lot of those styles face imminent extinction. In her book, *Sari’s: An Illustrated Guide to the art of Indian Draping* (1997 123) she says, “We cannot stop time and evolution. Education and progress are desirable, and also inevitable. But if we fight hard and spend millions to save endangered animal species, why not make a little effort to preserve human cultural heritage too? Drapes are an important part of India's culture, yet not much has been done to record and understand their variety.”

A few examples of draping saris are shown in figures 9, 10, 11, and 12, depicting the Bengali, the Gujarati, the Marathi, and the basic Nivi styles. (G3 Fashion, 2014)
Figure 9 Bengali Draping Style (courtesy G3 Fashion)
Figure 10 Gujarati Draping Style (courtesy G3 Fashion)
Figure 11 Marathi Draping Style (courtesy G3 Fashion)
Apart from highlighting the characteristic image of an Indian woman, the Indian dress sari also adds grace to a woman's personality. In my opinion, the fashion of wearing sari has and will always be in vogue. In fact, the glamor girls like air hostesses, models, and actresses have been increasingly endorsing and popularizing sari in India. India is a land of diversities, which is also reflected in its sari draping styles. In fact, today, almost every region has come up with
some distinctive style of sari draping. Thus, sari is one attire that offers such a fabulous variety in terms of style, design and fabric that women are bound to get confused pondering over which sari to go in for. Unbeatable in its antiquity, and yet unsurpassed as a fashion statement even today for the women of India, the sari is indeed an evolutionary triumph. India was invaded many a time, and conquered many a time, but the fabric-weaving tradition of India has remained alive and well through the centuries.

A large number of Indian women are into fashion as they blindly follow trends and wear what might not look good on them. While they may not be completely in tune with what to wear and how to wear, they know much more than they used to. It has more to do with exposure and the economy widening up and the average Indian becoming aware. On the whole, India’s dress sense is evolving, largely due to the fact that there is a lot happening in the cities, from parties to cultural events to family outings. This is also why international fashion and lifestyle magazines have made an entry there. But however much the fashionable woman in India experiments with dresses or pantsuits, there is one Indian garment that she will never throw out—the sari. While an earlier generation of women lived out lifetimes in it, younger women today are choosing to wear the sari as a statement. When it comes to a fancy night out or a special occasion, most women go back to the sari, albeit with an upgrade.

Within any given society the range of design for dress is limited but the artistic expression is entirely cultural in nature. It is also individualistic. Societies differ in which they encourage more conformity to rigid cultural norms and practices in art or individual innovations in expression. Designer sari is one such example. But I believe it is also intimidating to a woman who cannot afford the designer saris feels very self-conscious about her status. At times
when I go to any public gathering, I see the women who come in designer saris in order to show off their saris. I feel fortunate that I can afford a reasonably priced silk sari to go to public gatherings; I recall on one occasion my parents’ financial status was so dire that I could not make it to my friend’s wedding since did not have the right sari for the wedding reception. To Indian women it is very important to wear the right sari for the right occasion. Again, the designers are helping these affluent women to express themselves through the design of new prints.

I went to a Bengali conference in Toronto. North American Bengali Conference (NABC) takes place every year at different cities in the United States and Canada. The Conferences are typically held during the Independence Day weekend and last three days. This one in Toronto was in 2013. Fashion and music are the dominant themes at these conferences. The Bengalis like to attend the conferences, just to be with their friends and relatives whom they normally don’t meet otherwise. The ladies tend to hang around the booths set up at the conference that sell saris, jewelry, books, music CD’s and other items. A number of sari merchants come from India to display their merchandise. I noticed how women were spending thousands of dollars to buy these saris. These ladies were buying saris as a gift for the members of their families or their friends. As an observer, I particularity enjoyed the conversation between the ladies and the sari vendors. As the ladies try to bargain on the price of the saris, the vendor would say, “No Ma'am, I cannot lower the price anymore.” This would remind one of similar encounters happening routinely at the sari stores in Kolkata and other cities in India. At the NABC event in Toronto, I took a fancy with a particular sari a vendor from India was selling. What surprised me was that the vendor was quoting different prices for this item to different customers. Most of the merchandise was not marked for prices so they could sell them at any price. Another interesting
thing I noticed at a sari stall at the NABC event. Some of the sari fabric color would bleed under wash. I spotted a woman licking on a sari unbeknownst to the vendor just to make sure that the material would not bleed. There I was with my sister-in-law who came to the U.S, some years ago and settled here, but still retained her old ways as if she was still in India. She is an expert in bargaining prices on saris. She would instantly start a conversation with the vendor, asking where his shop was in Kolkata, and long behold, she would identify some distant family connection with the vendor; and then she would do the same thing with the vendor at the next booth! The vendors, of course, were clever enough to sort out the serious shoppers from the “window “shoppers. The last day of the conference marked a huge commotion at the sari stalls. The vendors would pack their stuff up and desperately trying to sell the saris; so, the customers could expect a big discount. My sister-in-law would not waste any time; she would rush to the booth locate the sari she had in mind from her earlier visit and start to bicker till she settle on the price on that sari!

These designer saris express the woman’s mentality, sense of luxury and identity. It is interesting to notice how the women show their empowerment through their saris. Some women sell designer saris from their homes in America and India or have their own boutiques.

The sari has enthralled and mystified many of us through its variety of texture, design, size and draping style. While many scholars document the intricacies of the sari's myriad colors, fabrics and patterns, few, if any, have closely examined draping styles.

Many Indian women conceive the sari as a mode of modesty (Roach & Eicher 1965 10). It is true that most of the peoples of the world use dress to conceal parts of the body in the interest of modesty but the authors remind us that there is, however no essential connection between clothing and modesty since every society has its own conception of modest dress and
behavior. They further state that Kolkata is where the sari still prevails, whereas in Mumbai the Bollywood style western clothes prevail (ibid. 42). This statement is not valid at this time; Kolkata now follows the same trend as Mumbai. Movie stars such as Nicole Kidman and Judi Dench have worn Indian creations. Indian designers sell their labels at high end boutiques in London. New York and Paris. These designers are now selling ready-to-wear Langa saris all across the world.

Fashions and films have always been intricately linked. Hairstyles, clothes and quirky creations that were meant to set off a character trait have caught the public imagination and have become national fashion statements. This trend was only helped by the success of Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai in 1994 in Miss Universe and Miss World contests respectively. Following their wearing of the sari, rock superstars like Gwen Stefani and Madonna sported the same attire to award ceremonies! The saris produced by this weaving tradition continue to adorn Indian women, and of late some models on Parisian ramps, including Madonna! A woman in sari appeared unexpectedly in the Obama White House on November 24, 2009 as an uninvited guest along with her husband at the state dinner with the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and was captured by a White House Photo shown in Figure 13.
With the new development of clothes as an art form has come to the attempt to rework sari as a new fashion. In recent years, it has become increasingly threatened in fashionable circles by the emergence of alternative clothes for the women including the ethnic outfit of salwar kameez, a long, silken shirt over silken pants of the same texture and decoration as sari.

Although sari as such is losing some of its appeal among the younger generation, the variety of blouses that have started appearing recently has revived some of their interests in sari. The new blouse designs seem to compliment the saris. They come in various styles – lace blouses, net blouses, embroidered, high neck, etc. (Fashionlady, 2016). One such design is shown in Figure 14.
When the former first lady Michelle Obama visited India during the March of 2015, she was photo morphed by an Indian newspaper wearing some of the saris along with the new blouse designs as shown in Figure 14. The newspaper rounded up a few sari looks that they loved to see her while she was visiting India. (Panwar, 2015)
Bourdieu’s concept of strategies of distinction has been a useful tool for understanding the emergence and resurgence of clothing trends in India. Bourdieu bases his study on surveys that took into account the multitude of social factors that play a part people’s choice of clothing, many other matters. The different aesthetic choices people make are all distinctions—that is, choices made in opposition to those made by other classes. The sari appears as an “ethnic boundary marker.” The sari was considered by many as standard, and almost sacred. Now, however, it is reemerging as an erotic wrap which can expose as much as it conceals. The blouse is being discarded and sari itself is changing its size, altering its form and tied in a variety of new ways. But it is not sufficient for comprehension of the full magnitude, indeed the full triviality of the problem of what to wear. For this is a personal problem that is integral to the particular lived experience of the individuals, groups and nation. It is not enough simply to locate a person’s position in a historical trend without attempting to comprehend how the person arrived
where he or she stands, and how he or she feels about clothing and other trends. For despite participating in strategies of distinction, people are not necessarily conscious of the implications of the choice of clothes or motivated by a desire to be distinctive.

The problem of what to wear is formulated within the framework of specific historical development of a culture. In India, this problem has for the past century been intrinsically linked to the colonial encounter and its after effect. Part of the problem is that the very idea of ‘looking Indian’ seems to have emerged only through the encounter of Indians with non-Indians. In his book, *We Indians*, Khushwant Singh describes the evolution of his own personal awareness of being Indian (Singh 1993). The same author has also commented on the sari as:

"The sari is both a very ornamental as well as a functional dress. Properly draped it can accentuate the contours of the female form giving a special roundness to buttocks. A well-cut blouse worn with the sari elevates the bosom and exposes the belly to below the navel. There is no other form of female attire which can both conceal physical shortcomings of the wearer as well as expose what deserves exposure...." (Singh 1997)

These same sari designers are now selling ready-to-wear *langa* saris all across the world. These sari dresses maintain much of the same functionality and design as the traditional saris, but hang more like flowing dresses with a shawl draped across like the front side of a sari. This is one of the most fundamental changes coming. Adolescents are continually experimenting with new styles of dress and grooming, especially with the *langa* sari, in effect trying this or that to see what response it will bring and, whether consciously or unconsciously, to merge Eastern dress with Western dress.
CHAPTER FIVE

SARI AND IDENTITY

In the book *Bengal Nights* (Eliade 1994) we see how the Westerners view the sari. The book describes how the European scholar was mesmerized to see Maitrayee Devi, an Indian lady, in her sari. Soon he fell in love with her, he describes, “On another occasion we discovered a ruined house… I had come back soaked to my knees and to dry myself, I sat on a wall of shack. The stars had not come out and the evening was warm filled with the scent of eucalyptus. Seated near me, Maitrayee, dressed in a sari of some soft diaphanous material was looking out at the forest on the other side of the field.”

Immigrants in America (Indian Americans) have kept their Indian identity on special occasions. The sari as an attire still goes strong, and Indians still wear them, though the first generation of Indians got a lot of rejections and oppositions from the next generation because of their identity crisis. The next generation is torn between the ideas and beliefs promulgated by their parents and those from the contemporary society. Nonetheless I believe the sari is going to survive.

Today we, the Indian Hindus are constantly disturbed by the thought of what kind of dress will be most suitable in our day-to-day life. We tend to select clothes that are easy to get in and out of. The young generation, though they wear Western clothes for convenience, still wear the sari on special occasions. Sari gives the Indian woman an empowerment; it becomes so much a part of their lives. They use it for different purposes.

Keya Ganguly in her book *States of Exception* states that, “Immigrant life occasions specific expressions of identity, tenuously inhabited and even more tenuously understood, given the internal and external contradictions of late capitalistic existence.” (Ganguly 2001 114)
The question of identity relates to speculating about a different, even extreme, moment in the hierarchy of the bourgeois culture. It has to do with the “tendency” latent in the experiences of the middle-class postcolonial immigrants consistently threatened by a lapse into proletarianization yet anxious to secure their “rightful” place in the mainstream of the US social life (Ganguly 2001 75-76).

Many Indian immigrants in America have taken trajectories of being American every day, but kept their Indian identity on special occasions. Even the young Indian American generation, though they wear Western clothes for convenience, still want to wear their saris on their weddings and special occasions for holism. Art wear is one of the latest strategies of distinction in Indian fashion. This consists of garments composed not merely by designers, but by a two-person team consisting of a designer and an artist. The man who organized the get-together of the artist-designer team in Bombay described what it meant to wear an art wear garment. When you wear art-wear you become part of a painting. Not everyone has the courage to be bold.

The nature of the Indian identity is significant of those who live in North America. They see no contradiction between being loyal citizens of the country in which they are settled and where they are socially and politically integrated, as is recently the case with emigrants (Britain or the United States) still retaining a sense of affiliation and companionship with India and Indians. As is frequently the case with emigrants in general, the Indian diaspora is also keen on taking pride and self-respect and dignity in the culture and tradition of original homeland. (Sen 2005 73)
The sari makes a woman most beautiful she could ever become in a society where power itself is generally thought of as a female aspect, in the form of Shakti (female strength). The sari simultaneously augments combines and totalizes the possibilities of aesthetic beauty, female mastery, sexuality and the cult of the maternal. Sari is being adapted by those from whom it was not traditional garb but who wish to show loyalty to India. The main visible example is Italian born Sonia Gandhi, who tried to display her commitment to adopted culture through her Indian clothes and her gradual mastery of the sari. Anglo Indians have started to wear sari in favor of greater individualization. Saris have become formal wear in some regions where it was not previously used. Thus, the sari in all its cultural, fashionable, allure-invoking, and modesty-bearing glory is a monumental embodiment of India.
CHAPTER SIX

OTHER USES OF SARI

Indian women both in India and America can still sell their saris from home. It is a good source of their income. They don’t like to dump saris like the Americans who dump their clothes to Goodwill. They make different items like bag and cushions because of intricate designs. Sometime these are exported in Salaula markets that have become so popular all over the world. Salaula (Hansen 2000) refers to the Zambian business of reviving used clothing and altering it for further use.

Saris can have multi-dimensional functionality. It can be used for wiping a chair, holding keys, protection from the sun, carrying babies on the back, or be tucked into the waist to make one look authoritative. Held over teeth to indicate modesty, it can also be used to flirt by pulling back and away from the smile. As it is pointed out (Banerjee and Miller 2003 5)—sari is a highly dynamic garment. Inheriting the sari also brings continuity; perhaps restoring the sari from a mother--a testimonial of her inheritance. These kinds of objects are in constant movement with each other, relationship of things and emotions. (Miller 2008 2) That they are inseparable parts of our material culture is evident in the content of one’s wardrobe. Almost all a woman’s clothes represent not just things to wear, but integral parts of relationships with others. Objects stored and possessed, taken and breathe out emotions with which they have been associated.

For women of India appearing beautiful and well ornamented can be a reflection of happiness. Through choosing saris, they show their creative energies.

I will concentrate on the saris used in Bengal, since I am Bengali. In this context, I would like to mention that things have changed in India now. Women are marching with men
for equal rights and to improve the standard of living--their lifestyles have changed. They like to wear something they can wear in the house as well as out. They have become westernized and have started wearing pants, tops and dresses. They have no time to pamper themselves with varied saris all the time. But on special occasions they still wear saris to exemplify their personality, identity and hierarchy. Indian women try to show off how classy they are by choosing the right sari.

In examining the sari, one is always drawn to what is called *pallu*. It is a part of the sari that stands at the ambiguous boundary simultaneously part and not part of the person. Investigated in its own right the *pallu* is seen to be in constant use as a functional third-hand, for doing a number of things as mentioned earlier. It is equally in constant use as a means of shifting the appearance of the wearer in relationship to those around her and thereby indicating both attitude and motion. It can be tucked into the waist to make one authoritative, held between teeth indicating modesty and veiling. It can be used to flirt or to demonstrate confidence as a power sari in an office. Finally, *pallu* turns out to be instrumental in examining relation between the mother and the infant. It can be played in a peek-a-boo game to create affection. It is what the infant may behold onto while sleeping with their mother or learning to walk. To have a clothing that has this dynamic built into it so that one can radically change one’s appearance several times an hour, if need be, has no equivalent in the relatively fixed, tailored clothes that dominates the West, which also none of the ambiguity central to the sari. This has an impact on how individuals relate to themselves, to others, and to wider issues such as the rationality or modernity.
In 2003, Rita Colwell of the University of Maryland, and a team of researchers showed that sari cloth if folded about four times, gave a very nice mesh filter, with small enough pore size to trap plankton. A three-year study was funded by the National Institutes of Health and Nursing Institute that involved about 50 villages and over 150,000 people in rural Bangladesh. By having women filter their water collected from the ponds and rivers every day, Rita Colwell and her team showed about a 50% decrease in cholera. A subsequent follow-up study shows that 31% of the women still filter their water, with 60% using their sari cloths. During this follow-up period, hospitalizations for cholera were down by 25%. (Murray 2013)

Sari as a symbol has been used by the Gulabi Gang, an extraordinary women’s movement formed in 2006 in northern India. They were named Gulabi or Pink Gang because they wear bright pink saris. This gang was intended to punish oppressive husbands, fathers, brothers and in-laws and combat domestic violence. (Fontella-Khan 2014). The complex protagonist of the Gulabi Gang, Sampat Pal noted in despair: “A girl’s life is cruel... A woman’s life is very cruel.” Like many others, she was married as a child into a family that made her work hard and beat her often. But she fought back, eventually becoming a famous champion for beleaguered women throughout the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. In an impoverished region where outlawed patriarchal traditions and the caste system still prevail, women bearing the brunt of abuse and discrimination reach out for their only hope: Sampat Pal and her Gulabi Gang, the women vigilantes in pink. (Figure 15)
Figure 16. The Gulabi Gang (Women Vigilantes in Pink Saris)

http://gulabugangofficial.in

Sari Guard is a form of prevention of wild animal pestilence. Farmers having lands adjoining employ this method to safeguard their crop. The farmers in Himalayan plains cover their fields with saris all along the border (Ramesha, Tomar, and Patil 2014)

In the villages when work on the rice fields they carry their babies in *pallus* like a cradle. As the fishermen catch the fish, the fisherwomen would carry the fish in their *pallus*.

In the village *Jatra* (old form of street play) the old saris are used to show sky or river as background.
CHAPTER SEVEN

SARIS AND EMOTIONS

In my play “Vermilion” (Chattopadhyay, 2006) recently staged at the prestigious Black Box Theatre of Georgia Southern University (April 2013), I showed how a woman was mistreated by her husband and, when she decided to leave him, she thought of how hard it would be to leave any of her gorgeous saris she accumulated over her years of marriage. She was the wife of a very rich doctor, so no wonder she had stored all the saris over the years. But we can see how she was trying to forget the emotional attachment to her saris. Since she was leaving her husband, she also left many of her expensive saris behind. Her daughter Khuki watched her mother’s keen relationship with her saris.

She goes towards the bedroom, ‘
Flings open the drawers of the bureau
And the door of the closet, filled with
Saris of every imaginable texture and shade
Brocaded with gold and silver threads
Mama looks at them all—
Hanging in the closet,
Folded in drawers,
Wound like thick scrolls,
Letting saris spill over the edges,
She mutters to herself,
“When will I wear this,
And this and this and this?
She tosses the saris one by one
From the drawers, then
Pries several from the hangers.
They land like a pile of
Tangled sheets on the bed.
The room fills with
the intense smell of camphor.
She walks from the room in disgust.

(Chattopadhyay, 2006, 185)

As the story of “Vermilion” unfolds, I describe how Indian women change the color of their saris with age; the older women would only wear white. During the festival Holi in India
Indian women wear eye-grabbing, multi-textured and multicolored saris while throwing colored water at the opposite sex. Here is a representation of purity and maturity in white saris and youth and charm in multicolored, vibrant saris.

As a child growing up in India, my grandfather’s infatuation for my deceased grandmother awed and worried me. So I made it a point to visit him now and then. Out of my curiosity, one afternoon I decided to creep into his room. It was dark, with thick yellow curtains blocking out the sunlight. Pictures and notepads were spilled everywhere over the comforter. A stack of saris sat neatly on the side table. On the dressing table were framed photos of grandma, posed in those saris, and I felt compelled to ask grandpa why he spent so much time in his room with grandma’s belongings, especially her saris.

I saw the welling up in his eyes of sadness that rose and tickled through his cheeks as he handled the saris, the perfection of feeling of relationship unblemished and immaculate, passed through the threads of grandma’s saris. I listened enthralled as Dadu (my grandfather) continued his stories. I positioned to hear his stories. As Dadu continued, we drew close to each other. I could hear Didima’s (grandmother’s) sari rustling in the wind. Minutes and hours crept by. Dadu’s body was crumpled as he told the stories, there was no pressing reason to get up, his words were so exotic, had survived like a fern suspended in amber, untouched by time, and unspoiled by the rigors of daily life. It became evident to me that Didima was a lady of leisure, Dadu never allowed her to work much. Her identity was beautiful wife in a sari.

Often I saw my grandpa spreading grandma’s saris on the bed and saying “I have to make them breathe, otherwise they will be damped. I always kept them away from sun.” I listened, enthralled, as he continued with his stories, and I could hear grandma’s sari rustling in the wind. He fiercely denied his grief for his dead wife, but his pervading mood was obsession to keep
grandma’s saris intact. I was fascinated by the collection of saris. I used to fold them with him and smell them. “I could touch them forever,” grandpa said, as if grandpa was dealing with a living character.

Again I go back to my story of grandpa. “Your grandma’s saris,” he said, “were woven with good memories and sad memories.” He was saddened to find grandma’s wedding sari was slowly shredding apart, so he put an ad in the paper to find someone who could repair it. An old man came claiming to be an expert on garment preservation and grandpa carefully handed the sari over to him. He made the man promise to take extra care. The old man promised that he respected the feelings of those who brought such items to him. He asked grandpa if he could sell the sari to him. Even if the sari was shredding apart, he could sell the border of the sari and grandpa can get some money out of it. “No” grandpa said, “The selling of the sari will be a sacrilege.”

My grandfather told me how he hired an expert to show grandma how to drape saris in a modern way. In grandma’s time, the sari was not worn so stylistically. This modern way of wearing sari had been introduced to the Bengali women by the fashionable ladies of the Tagore family. Grandpa told me how he used to peer through the door and watch as the expert draped the sari around grandma. He also recounted that on festivals shopkeepers used to come with long piles of materials for the ladies, with rubia voiles (fancy cotton), satin silk, and Benarasi brocade to measure and match the sari blouses. All the ladies used to smile appreciatively.

I am reminded of an incident when I asked my grandfather whether I could wear my grandma’s wedding sari in a wedding reception. With utmost care, he pulled out the old sari though a few mothballs lay inside. I was amazed to see how the real gold was glimmering in the sari (those days’ saris were actually woven with real gold fibers). Indian women try to sell their
old saris in exchange for stainless steel utensils. These vendors go house to house buying old saris. I remember how my mother opened up her trunk full of old saris and some shredded shots of gold came out of her saris. She argued with the vendor for a better deal for the gold the sari had. Now we do not find any gold in designer saris. When I saw designs of gold in grandma’s sari, I got excited. In India as a young girl I gave a number of theatrical performances. The consciousness of the performer was always in my mind. I wanted to be under the spot light. When grandpa handed me the sari with a lot of care he told me that was the sari grandma wore on their wedding night. I was amazed to see the intricate design of the sari.

When I wore the sari at the wedding reception, everyone admired the gold threads checked over the heavy material green silk. As I walked around, grandma’s sari glimmered under the bright light and the people commented that the solid gold work on the red border was so brilliant that it outshone all the jewelry that was worn by the other ladies. At times I felt the sari was too heavy for me, but somehow I endured the weight, as I noticed that people could not take their eyes off my grandma’s sari, which had gold shots all around it. Some of them commented that even though it was old, it did not age at all. When I returned the sari to grandpa, he stored it in a special soft silk bag gently scented with sandalwood.

I still remember how my mother sent me a telegram from India to attend my brother’s wedding. As I arrived I found the house filled with joy, but I missed my grandfather.

On the eve of wedding night, my mother pulled my deceased grandmother’s sari; she told me how Sonia Gandhi dressed up her daughter-in-law Priyanka with Indira Gandhi’s wedding sari, a handmade khadi sari made in charka (introduced by Mahatma Gandhi). Mother also told me how the movie director Satyajit Ray dressed up the film actress in a Dhakai sari that belonged to his mother.
At the wedding of my brother, the sight of the ladies was dazzling. All the ladies came in saris silk, chiffon and in designer saris and walked gracefully. One could see timeless beauty of saris. Some came in cathawork (embroidered) saris where the embroidery was done in running stitches. Some women came in Dhakai saris (from Dhaka) famous during the British Raj. One could tell the mood of the modern women from the saris they were wearing. Some of the saris had design themes.

As my new sister-in-law, the bride stepped into our house for her wedding, we all looked upon her like an archaeologist who had stumbled across a rare artifact and could not wait to examine it fully. Gleaming black hair parted down at the center in red sindoor was covered with red veil. The bride lowered her eyes and my aunts lead her towards my mother. My eyes opened up in astonishment; my mother beamed as she blessed my new sister-in-law wearing Didima’s wedding sari, a sign of good luck. As my mother came in a lot of people started whispering how gorgeous she looked in that sari. The same way the people started admiring her sari the day I wore them. The family house was lit up. The light was so dazzling. The ladies swept the shining floor with the touch of their saris; the light bulbs were dangling. I cried into my mother’s shoulder, cried for Dadu who told me happy stories – told me some day my brother would get married. Dadu had already given Didima’s sari to my mother and told her when my brother (his grandson) would bring the new daughter-in-law, my mother should wear Didima’s sari and welcome in our house.

As an example of how a sari can stir up strong emotions in us comes from the blood-smeared sari of Indira Gandhi, the late Prime Minister of India. Her blood-stained sari is
prominently displayed in Indira Gandhi Memorial Museum in New Delhi to remind people how she was brutally shot by her own bodyguards in 1984. So sari does speak, doesn’t she?

Figure 17  Indira Gandhi’s Blood-stained Sari in India Gandhi Memorial Museum, New Delhi (D’Souza, 2014)
This last summer I visited my aunt who recently became a widow. In the midst of the conversation, she very carefully unlocked her steel cupboard and started telling me the biography of every sari. Each sari was carefully folded in a muslin cloth. As she showed me her wedding sari that had aged as she had aged, I saw tears in her eyes, but she said how the memories hidden in the sari had helped her to come to terms with her loss. She also reminded me how she taught me first how to wear the sari and how to walk gracefully; she educated me that after a few strides the sari might slip down from the left waist and left arm needed to pull it back up in order to retain the fan shape of the pleats of the saris. As I looked at her, I felt how the clothes are our most personal possession. So my relationship and bonding with my aunt started with sari. She told me the tips on how to starch saris and then send it for ironing.

Even here in the US my closet is like a museum. Every night before I go to bed, I look at the yellow sari, the one I wore when I first met my husband. I also look at the gorgeous red sari that I wore on my wedding, the beautiful blue sari my mother-in-law sent me from India, and the sari I wore on my baby-shower. There are the saris my brother-in-law brought from India after my mother-in-law passed away. There is also the green-bordered sari that my brother brought from India after the death of my mother. As I look at the saris I am reminded of the good times I had with my mother and mother-in-law. As Miller (2008, p. 38) says: objects breathe in and breathe out with the emotions they are associated.
CHAPTER EIGHT
THE WOMEN OF THE TAGORE FAMILY

I have always been fascinated by Rabindranath Tagore, eminent poet and composer who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. I have training on how to sing the songs he composed. Tagore’s ancestral home later became a university and I studied there. So I feel a deep association with Tagore.

Women during the British Raj mainly stayed home and married very young. One of the female members of the Tagore family has drawn intimate pictures of the family life of the Tagores. These are informal and do not give any indication either of the winds of change blowing across the family or the steps that were being taken by the men and women to modernize their lives. Women had been very conscientious about the role of saris in their lives. Some of the best examples we can find in the women of the Tagore family. “During the Durga Puja (a religious festival in India) all of us dressed up to go to the dalan (courtyard) during Sandhya Arati (evening prayers). Decked in gold ornamented Dhakai sari worked with gold threads with garlands in our hair, anklets and alta (red paint) on our feet and perfumed with atar (scent) we will arrive” (Deb 2010 196).

A close study of the history of women’s liberation in India, particularly in Bengal would reveal that in most fields, the women of the Tagore family in Jorasanko, Calcutta, played the lead role. The most famous of the Tagore family was of course, Rabindranath Tagore, Women of the Tagore family, either individually or jointly, appeared to dispel the darkness that surrounded female society in the early nineteenth century India. These women did not remain as obscure shadows behind the confines of four walls. They participated wholeheartedly in laying the
foundations of the new era; some of them directly while others as able helpmates of their husbands.

Probably from the time of Dwarakanath Tagore (Rabindranath’s grandfather) this family began to develop a distinctive lifestyle of its own. His son Debendranath’s daughter-in-law Jnanadanandini (wife of Satyendranath) introduced the so-called ‘Bombay style’ mode of wearing sari. I learned from grandpa that the way the Bengali women wrap up the sari was introduced by the Tagore family. The question that arises is, why didn’t the Bengali women take to any other apparel all these years? Did they not wear anything except sari? Bengalis had been under Muslim rule for many years. The few paintings of Nawabi harems show women wearing aesthetic decent dresses. Why not adopted by Bengali women when the Muslim influence could be noted not only in the dress but in the general behavior of men? The peshoj was in vogue and even Debendranath thought of appropriate dresses for young girls as well as for older women.

But the problem started when Satyendranath (the poet’s elder brother) got permission from his father Debendranath to take his wife to Bombay and there was glorious chance to open the gates of woman liberation. Preparation for the journey began but problem arose over his wife’s dress. An order was placed with the French shop and an oriental dress was tailored for Jnanadanandini. The dress arrived, however, it was cumbersome and getting into it was a Herculean task. Jnanadanandini was unable to get into it by herself, and Satyendranath had to help her to get ready. It was this initial problem with dressing that made Jnanadanandini think seriously about women’s apparel. On her arrival in Bombay she discarded the cumbersome dress for the neat way Parsi women had wearing the sari though she made some minor alterations, she basically adhered to this mode of dressing. A younger girl from the family, her
mother and Jnanadanandini returned wearing sari in a new way, all the womenfolk of the family adopted (Deb 2010 164).

No one bothered about such matters, since aristocratic women were never seen in public and the sari was adequate. Jnanadanandini in her memoir described how in winter they wore a shawl over their saris. She also gave many other domestic details in her memoir. She mentioned Surendranath saying, “If you have to change your mode of dress, please don’t hesitate. The way a woman wears the sari is practically the same as not dressing at all. It is impossible to go out into civilized society with this attire.” She also began the practice of wearing petticoats, chemises, blouses, and jackets with saris (Deb 2010 39).

Indira Devi, one of the women of the Tagore family, described how after her marriage she went to her in-law’s place in Hridaypur. Hearing the palki (palanquin) bearers the village boys came running and shouting, “There go the bride and the groom.” Indira wrote, “They observed me from head to foot. Observing my red sari, one of them said, there goes the bride.” (Deb 2010 240).

One Tagore family bride Prakriti, only ten years old, was dressed up in all bridal finery, on her wedding day. She wore a red Benarasi sari, her hair coiled into a beautiful bun with golden zari ribbons. Her forehead and cheeks were decorated with motifs in sandalwood paste. She described in detail the textiles of the saris they wore - they were usually light, Benarasi or Dhakai Jamdani. The blouse matched the color of the sari (Deb 2010 291)

A son of the Tagore family, Aswinikumar, went to study law in the UK and met the ballerina Felicita Lodetti. They were attracted to one another and fell in love. Felicita decided to give up the glamorous life of a prima ballerina and spend her life as a Tagore housewife. She
captivated all her husband’s family members by her charm. She learned to wear the sari; always covering her head in traditional style with the *pallu* (end piece) pinned in place and spoke Bengali fluently.

Another bride of the Tagore family was Prafullamoyee. Having first arrived from village she had her head and face covered with the end of her sari, extending well below her chin. Her husband’s younger brother would peep to see how she could eat (Deb 2010 75).

Sushama, Rabindranath’s niece, a housewife and mother of seven, visited the USA on February 1927. To quote her, “I felt I had gone on pilgrimage to a new world.” Americans were amazed to see this woman. Endowed with beauty, purity, pride and courage, when she stood up on the dais effortlessly and cast her long luminous eyes on them the audiences were spellbound. The foreigners saw a sari of purple silk with sleeves of green, embroidered in gold. They commented, “Miss Tagore is charming bit of the Orient in Occidental setting, short of stature, quiet and demure with lazy dark eyes that can flash fire when occasion arises. It takes the native garb of India to do really justice to her Hindu beauty (Deb 2010 164).

In this context I would like to mention that the harbinger of the modern way of wearing sari were the women of the Tagore family. They could never be classed as ordinary women.

Even in Tagore’s time (early 20th century) there was a great uproar about stitched clothes. Just before the wedding one of the Tagore family member objected that the bride cannot wear stitched clothes when she is given away to the groom.
CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

Indian women always treasure their memories with the saris. Each sari has its story to tell. Sari as a material culture is so important to us Indian women that when I (a Bengali Indian-American) clean my cupboard, I cannot get rid of any of my saris; each sari is a character standing in front of me. I was fascinated how in the Indian epic tale Mahabharata, with Lord Krishna’s blessings, Draupadi’s cloth became endless and she could not be disrobed, I thought in awe as a child, how very majestic it would be to have an endless train of silk to turn me around and around and around in glee as well as modesty.

The intimate relationship with sari fills the lives of Indian women. I have seen the possessions of saris of Indian women and the attachment of saris to them. Even in my own collection of saris, each sari has a story to tell. My passion for collecting saris is shared by a lot of Indian women. The sentimental association of the saris cannot be forgotten. When we are young, probably we do not understand the depth of such objects as the sari. As we mature, we have deeper associations with these objects. Inheriting the sari brings continuity. Perhaps we restore the saris of our mother, our grandmother. This is the testimonial of inheritance. So these kinds of objects are in constant movement with each other, relationships of things and emotions (Miller 2008 20). That they are inseparable parts of our material culture is evident in the content of our wardrobe. Almost all clothes represent not just things to wear but integral parts of relationship with others. Objects store and possess and breathe out emotion with which they have been associated. Miller claims that objects surely don’t talk, or do they? This might seem rather an absurd thing to do, how can one question things that cannot speak for themselves?
In my difficult times, I enjoy folding and unfolding saris. Integrity is the interweaving of what can rarely be separated out in distinct material and social domains. But the sari is so much of an Indian woman, that sentiment, emotions, identity, symbolism are all embellished in this material culture.

This work is a culmination of my effort to understand the female garment sari from a number of viewpoints. Starting from its origins, the styles of draping, the aspect of fashion, the gifting, the use in weddings, the material culture, the modern usage, I have tried to explore the emotional aspects associated with sari through my observations and through a number of anecdotes. This study has tried to demonstrate how this garment has retained its glory for so long and continues to be glorious even to this date. I have used parts of my first novel “Vermilion” that dealt with the emotional attachment of saris to a wife that leaves her husband who mistreated her. This novel was later converted into play and staged in the campus of Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, GA. In addition, I have described my grandfather’s attachment to the saris of his deceased wife. I hope this work will help future researchers to investigate further the social forces that has helped sari to survive through the ages. The value of the relationships associated with the sari has can be explored further through numerous fieldwork, something that has not been attempted in this study. Instead efforts have been directed in this study through existing literary works and my observations.
APPENDIX

EXAMPLES OF SARI DESIGN
(all drawn from the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

URL http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O478479/sari/
Ahmedabad Silk Sari
Place of origin: Ahmedabad, India
Date: 19th century
This detail shows the long edge of a sari, perhaps the best known item of dress from Asia. Many women who live in the Indian subcontinent, or who have their roots there, continue to wear this draped garment and it is subject to frequent fashion changes and regional variations. This sari is an example of cross-cultural interchange. It was made in China for the Parsi community, today a much-dispersed group of people originating in present-day Iran. They settled first in Gujarat where they retained their distinctive culture and set of beliefs although Parsi women adopted the sari there. The black ground of this piece, together with the use of Chinese embroidery, elements that distinguish it specifically as a Parsi sari. Silk gauze, as here, was a favored material and purple as well as black, was a commonly occurring color. In many case, the edging on these Parsi pieces is applied separately, yards of satin ribbon being embroidered by Chinese artisans for this express purpose. Here however, the edging is embroidered straight onto the sari silk.

**Descriptive line**
Sari of embroidered silk, China, 1900-1950

**Physical description**
Women's sari of black silk gauze embroidered with white, magenta and yellow silk threads in satin and stem stitches. The center is covered with rows of floral rosettes and border, which runs down the two long sides, contains a densely worked design of birds and flowers. The piece has been cut from a length of fabric, the two cut ends are hemmed and the two long edges have also been turned in and hemmed.

Museum number T.24-1967

**URL**
[http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O486369/sari-unknown/]
This lavish textile is in the form of a sari, the draped garment worn by women in many parts of India. It was probably made specifically to be displayed at the Great Exhibition in London and was unlikely ever to be worn. The use of heavy gold-wrapped thread and silk is typical of the production of Varanasi (formerly Benares) which continues to the present day.

Materials & Making
The sari is woven using a combination of colored silk and a yarn made of a silk thread around which a thin layer of drawn gold (zari) has been wrapped. The exceptionally lavish use of this gold-wrapped thread makes the sari very heavy, a feature that still applies to modern saris from Varanasi, even though today most of the gold used is synthetic.

Historical Associations
This splendid textile was almost certainly made specifically for London's Great Exhibition of 1851. This was the first of several international exhibitions in which the manufactures of India were brought to the attention of the European public, and they were widely admired both for their craftsmanship and designs. The Paris International Exhibition of 1867 was also particularly rich in Indian artefacts, many of which are now in the V&A collection.

Museum number
er 769-1852

Exhibition History
A Grand Design - The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Victoria and Albert Museum 12/10/1999-16/01/2000)

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O77719/sari-unknown/
Known as the *veer bhet bhat*, or 'brother's gift pattern', this type of sari is traditionally given by men to their sisters at the summer festival of *raksha bandhan*. The presence of green in a textile often indicates that it is a gift. The design of the inner border, showing ladies seated in arches, is unusual.

**Descriptive line**
Gajji sari of tie-dyed silk, probably made in Jamnagar, 19th century-early 20th century

**Physical description**
Gajji sari of tie-dyed silk, known as the *veer bhet bhat* or 'brother's gift pattern'. The inner border consists of ladies seated in arches. The sari is made up of two pieces joined up the middle, each piece folded in half for tying. Red and white on green. Gold-brocaded border.

Museum number
IS.198-1960

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70662/sari-unknown
This tie-dyed *gajji* (satin-weave silk) sari from Saurashtra, Gujarat, has an unusual design, using rows of dancers as the field pattern alongside the more common design for the medallion, which represents the traditional Hindu *rasamandala*, or circle of dancers.

**Descriptive line**
Sari of tie-dyed Gajji silk, possibly made in Porbandar or Jamnagar, late 19th century-early 20th century

**Physical description**
Sari of tie-dyed Gajji silk. With a design of dancers in rows, and a rasamandala medallion placed off centre, so that when the sari is worn the motif can be seen draped over the wearer's back. Green, yellow and white on red.

Museum number
IS.205-1960

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70638/sari-unknown/
This cotton tie-dyed sari with gold brocade *pallav* (decorative edging) and borders was acquired for £1 14s by Purdon Clarke on his purchasing tour of India in 1881-1882. A very similar sari, with gold brocade but a spotted chevron design (Mus. no. IS 5662), was acquired by the V&A some 30 years earlier from Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

**Physical description**
Cotton tie-dyed sari with gold brocade pallav and borders

Museum number
IS.1780-1883

**URL**
[http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O71975/sari-unknown/](http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O71975/sari-unknown/)
This beautiful patola sari is made in the double ikat technique, in which both warp and weft threads are tie-dyed to conform to the desired pattern before weaving. Genuine patola are made only by the Salvi community in Gujarat, and today are produced exclusively in the town of Patan. Their extremely time-consuming and difficult method of manufacture makes them highly prized and much sought-after for weddings and other special occasions, and they are considered one of the most auspicious types of all Indian textiles. They were traditionally made in a number of different designs, and this one is particularly associated with the Vohra community of Ismaili Muslims.

**Descriptive line**
Wedding sari (patola) of double tie-dyed silk, Gujarat, late 19th century-early 20th century.

**Physical description**
Wedding sari (patola) of double tie-dyed silk ikat before weaving. With a geometric design of stylized leaves, stars and other motifs combined with multi-layered end patterns. In green, brown, red, orange, yellow and white.

**Museum number**
IS.190-1960

**URL**
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O67863/sari-unknown/
The unusual design of this sari shows a shepherd surrounded by animals, including elephants, alternating with huge leafy trees. The field is surrounded by a border of square compartments with elephants, flowers and what may be tigers. The pattern is mostly in white and yellow dots, with some localized areas of green applied separately.

**Descriptive line**

Sari of tie-dyed silk, Saurashtra, early 20th century

**Physical description**

Sari of tie-dyed silk with an unusual design showing a shepherd surrounded by animals, including elephants, alternating with huge leafy trees. The field is surrounded by a border of square compartments with elephants, possibly tigers, and flowers. The pattern is mostly of white and yellow dots with some localised areas of green applied separately.

Museum number

IS.202-1960

**URL**

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70655/sari-unknown/
Silk has long been the most prized fabric in India for both secular and ritual use; it continues to be a popular and widely used material. This sumptuous sari is from Benares (Varanasi), an important center of fine weaving from ancient times. Developed as a silk weaving center during the Mughal period, Varanasi is still one of the major silk weaving centers in India.

**Descriptive line**
Woven silk sari, Benares (Varanasi), ca.1850.

**Physical description**
Crimson silk woven with gold-wrapped thread. The patterned, loose end (pallu) of this sari incorporates flower motifs, a floral meander, chevron (khajuri) and floral designs.

Museum number
767-1852

**Object history note**
Purchased from the 1851 Exhibition for £22. Described as Pethumbur Kirmez in the 1852 Inventory. Historical context note. This textile was one of several illustrated in Owen Jones's book, The Grammar of Ornament, (London, 1856).

**URL**
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O164446/sari-unknown/
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