CHAPTER - V

GARMENTS

AND

ORNAMENTS
Nirad Chaudhuri’s *Culture in the Vanity Bag* published in 1976 is about the historical evolution of costumes. It also seeks to illustrate the relationship with the different cultures that have been seen in India. Sartorial vision, though a very important topic related to everyone, is an area which is left unattempted by many writers in the country. Perhaps, no Indian writer has thought so seriously about the Indian clothes and the philosophy underlying them as Chaudhuri has. He is a minute scholar and curious observer of life around him. He is amply qualified to relate his observations to his wide reading and historical scholarship and evolve a very interesting sartorial philosophy about Indians. Karnani Chetan calls the book as “an exercise in erotics.”¹

As a keen observer of Indian life, he is able to show the connection between the Indian clothing and the Indian history. Clothes are, obviously, the external manifestations of the innermost cultural habits of men adapting themselves to the peculiar geographical, social, religious and even political phenomena around them. That is the reason why in the introduction of the book Chaudhuri says that “the evolution of clothing in India has been only a part of the historical evolution of the peoples of India, possessing similar features, following similar lines, and producing similar results”. (p. IX)²

Clothing and adornment are as much important as any other human activity like politics, social and economic life, culture as embodied in literature or art could be. They have evolved in obedience to the historical evolution of the peoples of India. Man is as important as his dress. It is not only speech, erect posture but also dress that differentiates man from the rest of the creatures in nature. The epigram, ‘God made man, tailor made a gentle man’ shows the importance of dress in man’s life. As the language is the dress of thought, Chaudhuri uses this dress of thought very efficiently, effectively and elegantly on the dress and ornaments worn by the diverse peoples belonging to different regions, religions and races in the Indian sub-continent. He says that the study of the costumes of the culture of a people can be as legitimate a science as zoology or botany.

The book is not all new for as Chaudhuri himself says in the preface some portions of it “were published at various times in the Statesman, Times of India, Hindustan Standard in India and in the London Magazine in England”. (p. V) The rest of the book also seems to have been written quite some years ago and Chaudhuri himself admits that the section dealing with the contemporary situation will not be found to be quite up-to-date.

The book is primarily an expression of Chaudhuri’s interest in clothing as a form of art. In the introduction, he gives an intrinsic connection between life and

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¹ All reference in parentheses are from *Culture in the Vanity Bag*: Jaico Impression : 2009.
clothing. He says: “I believe implicitly that a man who has lost interest in clothing and adornment, has also lost interest in life.” (p. VI) This is a topic of great human interest and that is the reason why Chaudhuri has taken it for writing. Clothing and adornment exist and have evolved in obedience to the historical evolution of peoples of India. Chaudhuri sets out in three of the broadest:

1. All cultural moments come into India from outside making the country a museum or a warehouse of cultures.

2. These moments remain distinct, existing side by side, sometimes in unquiet and unbalanced autonomy, but oftener in conflict.

3. All cultures lose their original power and beauty in time, and continue as survivals which, as a rule, are weedy but indestructible.

They operate in the ethnic, social, political, economic and cultural evolution of India. The book is an excursion into the world of clothing which is only water rippling to passing breezes.


In the first and the second opening chapters of the book, *A Motley World* and *Natural Orders of Clothing* Chaudhuri offers a taxonomical break-up of the evolutionary history of clothing in India. It is a country of infinite variety without any fundamental complexity. Most foreigners are stuck by this immense variety of costumes and they try to exaggerate the diversity because of their incapacity to sort them out and they fail to distinguish the casual and irrelevant differences. They do not know that the beauty of India lies in its benevolence to absorb variance.
Chaudhuri, at first, gives the classification of the different costumes worn by the peoples of different races and religions and then he gives their affiliation in Indian society in the process of historical evolution. The natural orders of clothing according to Chaudhuri are: 1. Mongoloid costumes 2. Aboriginal costumes 3. Aryan costumes 4. Nomadic costumes 5. Muslim clothing and 6. European group. We don’t find such immense variety of clothing even in China, the United States and the multi-racial Soviet Union. Whatever maybe the rivalries between the American and the Russians, they wear the same kind of clothing. In spite of having national rivalries, a genuine European community is found in clothing all over Europe. But in India, particularly in big cities, within a few square miles, there are infinitely more confused and bewildering variations in costume. With regard clothing, the cities are the microcosms of the country.

The first historical evolution of costumes is the Mongoloid clothing which consists of two pieces of ‘loom-woven clothes’. “One of which is thrown around the shoulders and the other, the main piece wrapped round the waist”. (p. 16) This type of clothing is used mainly by the Mongoloid peoples in the Himalayan region. It is also worn as lungi or sarong by the Muslims of East Bengal and also by the Hindus to reduce the strain of keeping the dhoti in its place when worn in the Aryan manner.

The Aboriginals stand second in the historical revolution of costumes according to Chaudhuri. Their clothing consists of one piece of cotton cloth, anything between eight to fifteen feet in length and thirty to forty-five inches in width. With a slight difference in the design of borders, it is worn by both men and women. Men wrap its middle section round the waist, pass the left-half section between the legs and tuck it behind, while the right-hand portion is sometimes tied round the waist and sometimes folded and hung in front. (p. 18)

The women wear the same with a slight variation. This is the simplest and most basic costume worn by all the Aboriginal peoples of the Central India, and the Deccan Plataue who are outside the sphere of Hindu society. Even the Bengali women of highest castes and the wealthiest families wore the sari in this rudimentary fashion.

The third group of clothing is the Aryan costume which is an elaborate form of the Aboriginal costume of the Order II. It consists of a long piece of cloth worn as the
main garment by both men and women. It is known as ‘dothi’ when worn by men and as sari when used by women.

The dhoti, which etymologically means washable is worn roughly in the same fashion as the cloth of the aboriginal man, but it is longer and wider, and is worn with so many folds, gathers and tucks that it gives the impression of much fuller draping. More especially, the gathers and folds in front are heavier and hang lower. (p. 19)

The most perceivable difference between the Bengali and the Hindustani styles of wearing dothi is that the Bengalis wear it in a very free and flowing manner, letting it hang down to the ankles, while in upper India it is draped more closely and tightly, hardly growing lower than the middle point between the knees and the ankles. (p.19) Similarly, the sari is an elaboration of the aboriginal woman’s cloth and it is only the feminine counterpart of the dothi, has the same distribution, and is also distinguished from the aboriginal woman’s cloth by roughly the same kind of gathers and tucks...All over northern India women wrap it over the lower limbs like a skirt, but in South India Brahmin women tuck the left end at the back like their men-folk, though modern women are giving it up. (p. 20)

The simplified and degenerate forms of clothing of the Aboriginals and Aryans is found in rural India, particularly, among the rustic folk. Babur, the first Moghul emperor of India wrote in his memoirs: “Peasants and people of low standing, go about naked. They tie on a thing called ‘languta’ (it is still so-called) a decency clout which hangs two spans below the navel. From the tie of this pedant decency-clout, another clout is passed between the thighs and made fast behind” . (p. 20) It can be taken as female counterpart of swimming dress, ‘bikini’ worn mostly by Western women. Usually, the children of the peasants, fishermen, cattle-grazers and all types of labourers wear this thing.

The nomadic costume forms the fourth category of clothes. It is “the first and earlier of any sewn costumes worn by a particular ethnic group permanently settled in India”. (p. 21) Further, it is a harmonious whole from head to foot which is made up of a full skirt with deep and ample gathers. “The ensemble has a linear unity and rhythm of surprising beauty and dynamism” . (p. 22) And because of the addition of bright colours and bold designs gives an impression of a very strong individuality. This costume is worn mainly by the people of Rajaputana from Kathiawar to the west of Delhi to the east.
The Muslim clothing of the fifth group consists of sherwani or ackhan and kurta or kamiz for men and salwar-kamiz-duppata ensemble for women. They were the elaborate sewn costumes of the Muslim conquerors and rulers. The male costume is worn by the Muslims of India, and by the Hindus of the Punjab, the Sikhs and the Islamized Hindus of Hindustan. It is also worn by some Bengalis and south Indians who want to carry favour with the present north Indian ruling class. The female costume- salwar-kamiz-duppata ensemble is worn by Muslim women, and by the Sikh and Hindu women of and from the Punjab. Quite recently, some girls from Bengal and other parts of India have begun to wear it in flashy imitation and servile admiration of the physically dashing and alluring Punjabi women.

The European clothing which forms the sixth category, consists of the standard garment of men and women like suit (pants, shirt, coat, hat and tie) and skirt respectively. These clothes are adopted by a large number of Indians who, once use to it, never go back to the Indian costumes. Among the upper classes in India European children’s clothes are universally worn by both boys and girls up to adolescence.

The Muslim and the European clothing were brought in respectively by the Muslims and the British during the periods of their rule in India. The Aboriginal costumes have descended from the original clothing of the pre-Aryan aboriginals of India. Aryan costumes (order III) are the typical clothes of modern Hindus all over India.

After giving a taxonomical picture of Indian costumes in general, Chaudhuri enumerates the chief components of the typical Hindu costumes in the chapter, Affiliations and Adaptations prescribed as correct for religious purposes by the sacred texts. He says:

The correct Hindu dress must be un-sewn. Next, it must have two essential garments. A Hindu must be, whether male or female, a person of two garments. These are the dhoti or sari for the lower limbs, and a scarf or shawl for the upper part of the body. In Sanskrit the two pieces are called ‘Vastra’ and ‘Uttariya’ respectively. (p.27)

Chaudhuri also discusses the mode of wearing the vastra. He says that “being dvivastra, a man of two garments, a Hindu must also be trikachcha, a man of three tucks, and the places at which these are to be put are the back on the alignment of the spine, navel and the left side of the waist”. (p. 27)
Hindu dress conforms to the prescriptions in the sacred books. No Hindu can take part in any religious ceremony without being in two un-sewn pieces. Till recently even the bride and bridegroom were no exception to this injunction enforced by quasi-religious sanctions. Furthermore, a Hindu could not take part in religious rites without being with three tucks, because to be without them was to be impure and demonic. Chaudhuri quotes the Dharma Sastras: “To be without the tucks and without a scarf is equivalent to being naked, and no ritual prescribed in the Vedas or the Dharma Sastras can be performed by a naked person.” (p.28)

After showing the relation between the Hindu garments and the sacred prescriptions, Chaudhuri makes certain observations about the purpose of the Hindu’s wearing of certain types of garments in certain styles which testify to his sharpness of perception, boldness of judgment and freedom from inhibition. He takes up the traditional Hindu prescription that a man should take off the back-tuck while urinating. But Chaudhuri asks a simple, straightforward and uninhibited question as to why a Hindu should take off the back tuck when he can perform his nature-call without taking it off and that too when the back-tuck is the most unnecessary to take off. If he does not, he is threatened with drastic religious sanctions which are irrational and illogical. Chaudhuri quotes from the religious text: “A man who urinates without taking off his back-tuck sends the urine into the mouth of the departed ancestors if the flow is to the left, and into the mouth of the gods if the flow is to the right” (p. 30) Chaudhuri explains in his typical fashion that this habit or rather prescription is founded upon the usual Hindu habit of non-thinking or it may be out of fear which has sunk below the horizon of consciousness of the people.

With his historical perception, Chaudhuri establishes the unambiguous parallelism between the Hindu costume and the ancient Persian costume. He says: “because of all the Aryan peoples the Hindus were most closely related to the Iranians, and also because the Aryans must have come to India after living for some time in Persia”. (p. 31)

After offering a taxonomical picture of the basic Indian costumes in India in general, Chaudhuri examines the philosophy of clothing in Two Worlds of Adornment. Clothing in India, especially among Hindus has not only utilitarian role but an aesthetic role also to play. Clothing is used not merely to cover the body from the weather and climate, but as a means of self-assertion and self-protection. It is used in India to show off one’s superiority over the enemies. There is no doubt that in the true and honest Hindu tradition of display, women’s clothing is aposmatic. This explains the Hindu woman’s habit of over-dressing without feeling the slightest sense of embarrassment. In this respect, clothing has an asexual rather than inter-sexual significance.
The reason is that as the women are segregated, they do not have free and natural social intercourse with men. Chaudhuri says: “The sophisticated motive of being well-dressed for the sake of giving aesthetic or emotional satisfaction to men does not exist in the mind of women. (p.39) Even in matrimonial bonds, clothing plays a role subordinate to that of physical attraction. Chaudhuri, therefore, points out that ‘in wedlock’ the access to the body is so untramelled that artificial attractions are wholly superfluous. For Indian women, fine clothes and jewellery have been the means of asserting the worldly positions of themselves, their husbands, and their families, and it could hardly be otherwise. In short “these are to them what money, houses and property in general are to the men”. (p.39)

In feminine social life, the topic of clothes and ornaments always dominates the conversation. Even highly educated and westernized women do not hesitate to feel one another’s saris and ornaments and to ask their price. Chaudhuri says even the severe principals of women’s colleges take a very human interest in the clothes of the women lecturers who are young and still marriageable. For them, it is the only topic which makes common-rooms vivacious.

The urban and civilized (or cultured) people of India attached a lot of importance to the aesthetic role of clothing. The extra attention shown by women to clothes is more often than not motivated by the sexual desires to attract the male attention. Sophisticated habits of clothing are, therefore, associated with courtesans and brothels among Hindus. The extraordinary sexual importance attached by the urban Hindu to clothing sometimes leads him to draw wrong judgment about woman’s character. Chaudhuri, as usual supports his observations with illustrations from his personal experience. Once in Delhi Chaudhuri saw “two gorgeously dressed Punjabi young women who were described by a bypasser as ‘Randhi hogi—Must be whores”. (p.46) The sexual significance attached to clothes in India is intensified by the accompaniment of feminine coquetry. Thus gorgeous or sophisticated dressing earns the label of a demi-mondaine for a lady whether she wants it or not.

In **Jewellery and Clothes**, Chaudhuri rightly points out the close connection between jewellery and clothes. He points out how ostentation is not considered by the Hindu woman as morally wrong. That is the reason why there is a good deal of sartorial magnificence even in their routine life:

At cocktail parties in New Delhi, for instance, I often observe western women looking at the magnificent Indian ladies with a puzzled expression, as if they were wondering whether they were not seeing a mirage of the
rank of duchesses, marchionesses, and countesses at a
coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey. (p. 49)

The element of Hindu excess could be seen both in jewellery and in clothes. Chaudhuri exhibits his capacity for minute observation and intelligent connection of things and features of life when he says that gold is the most important metal used for ornaments by the Hindus and it is preferred by them because of a variety of reasons. First, the Hindu ornament is based on the gold standards i.e., economic status of the metal. Second, it has a sacred status. Third, it offers the best economic security for the people at the time of crisis in their life. It is because of the sancro-sanctity of gold that it is meant only for the upper parts of the body and is forbidden for the lower parts which deserve only silver ones. Because of its economic status it offers them an unfailing security. “So their ornaments were often their only source, a sort of marriage settlement, and never knowing what the next turn of the wheel of fortune might bring, they clung to their gold as if it was their life-belt.” (p. 51) It is also because of its intrinsic worth that gold could be the cause for creation of contradictory responses in the Hindu women.

Gold always raises the women to higher level of mental life. It does so in all their passions noble or base, as it is a nobler substance than cloth. Women can be as magnanimous as callous in the matters of gold. That is why these women when they are in generous mood they would give the gold to a husband, son, or even relative in trouble, to be sold or mortgaged and never say a word or take credit. (p. 52) On the contrary, they could be so possessive of gold that they could be totally callous to their near and dear ones. They become correspondingly sub-mundane, like those mythical creatures which guard treasures in subterranean caverns. “This love of gold would drive out the love of husband and child from their heart, make the mere idea of a lover a dirty smear, and turn them into chrysel enhantine statues with a demoniac soul”. (p. 53)

Chaudhuri says humorously the good old tradition of managing wives by beating has been replaced with the romantic love acquired by the Bengali young men from the English literature. The modern young man tries to get the love of his wife for love. If he fails in that, clothes and jewellery are the best complementary compensation in an unending stream.

Chaudhuri equates the Hindu woman’s attachment for gold to her madness for saris:

The motive of self-assertion and acquiring worldly importance explains the extraordinary craze our women now have for
Chaudhuri rightly observes that a woman’s happiness and contentment do not lie merely by wearing a sari or a jewellery but more she derives by exhibiting them to neighbours, friends and relatives.

Our *Dharma Sastras* enjoin unstinted liberality to women. Chaudhuri quotes the most authoritative and venerable from Manu Samhita:

> Women must be honoured and adored by their fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law for their own welfare. The houses on which female relations, not being duly honoured, pronounce a curse, perish completely as if destroyed by magic. Hence men who seek their own welfare should always honour women on holidays and festivals with ornaments, clothes and food. (pp. 56-57)

He glorifies the place of women by quoting from our Dharmasastras: “Where the woman is respected, honoured and adored, there the gods live”.

In the joint family squabbles are not uncommon among the women-folk. Sisters-in-law are particularly at loggerheads. As the psychological stability of these women is always precarious, a man has to be very cunning in distributing his gifts. Chaudhuri says “Woe betide the man who gives to a sister without first propitiating the wife, or for that matter to the wife without first propitiating the mother’s jealousy”. (p.57)

It is on account of this madness for saris that the Hindu women make it a point of reference and comparison in their familial and social life. “Relatives visiting one another go straight to bedrooms, open the wardrobes and trunks, and try to find out how many new saris have been acquired since the last examination, or how many there are in all. Chaudhuri says humorously: “It is somewhat like the system of inspection which modern nations are trying to introduce to control nuclear weapons”. (p. 57)

They also make it a means of endearment between friends and relatives; a test of husband’s preferential love and also a means of social estrangement and
matrimonial derangement. Basavaraj S. Naikar comments, “Jewellery and clothes, as aptly described by Chaudhuri provide the best chance of expression for the Hindu feminine moods which blow hot and cold alternatively if not simultaneously.”

Chaudhuri says it is very difficult to have an affirmative answer to the question whether we have an Indian dress in India. Chaudhuri says in his categorical fashion that “just as there is no Indian nation, there is no Indian dress” (p.62) He further states that “India became a museum of diverse cultures fairly early in its history, and it has been growing into a bigger and more varied museum from age to age”. (p.62)

In the chapters, The first Battle of Clothes: Muslim Period and The Second Battle of Clothes: British Period of the second part of the book, Chaudhuri discusses the rejection of the Muslim costume and acceptance of the British dress. Since India had been conquered by foreign races, there was bound to be a battle between the Hindu and the non-Hindu clothes as also other things of culture. The first battle was naturally to be between the Hindu clothes and the Muslim ones. Whereas the Hindu believed in non-sewn garments, the Muslims believed in sewn garments. Because of the exclusiveness of the Hindu culture, it never encourages either the proselytisation of Hindu clothes or the adaptation of Muslim clothes. The Muslim culture had created an open society to which everybody could gain admittance by simply accepting their faith and all that it stood for, and after that he was accepted as an equal. So they encourage the adaptation of their clothes by the Hindus. As a religious policy the Hindus did not like the use of Muslim clothes at all except by the way of self-denigration or contamination. Chaudhuri is perceptive enough to show the evolution of the sartorial battle between the Hindu and Muslim culture. He shows how in spite of the initial Hindu hatred for the Muslim clothes, the Hindus—some of them at least—adapted it for the purposes of pleasing the Muslim leaders and authorities in social life. Chaudhuri rightly relates this habit of the Hindus to their national character when he says that,

Hinduism forgives every transgression of Hindu standards out of opportunism, but no adherence to any non-Hindu value from conviction. So, if a Hindu showed signs, either through his opinions or his behaviour, that he was acquiring new loyalties or even remaining Hindu, widening his personal life by adding non-Hindu qualities, mental or external, he was without any compunction
thrown outside the pale, whoever might be, and no less a Hindu than Raja Ram Mohan Roy was excommunicated in this manner, though he is rightly looked upon as the creator of the modern Indian mind. (p. 69)

The religious conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims was reflected in their sartorial conflict also. The ambivalence in the former is repeated in the latter also. The Second Battle of Clothes: British Period provides the information about liberal attitude developed by Indians towards the British clothing. The civilization of the West with its secular outlook has promised to release Indians from the prison of their hide-bound and primitive existence. So the Hindu did not have pre-existing antipathy for the British as they had for the Muslims. On the contrary, they were grateful to their new rulers for having rescued them from Muslim oppression, and from political anarchy. So it was easier for them to adapt western clothing, among many other things from the west.

When the British invaded India, the sartorial battle between the Hindus and the British repeated the pattern of the older battle between Hindus and Muslims, with slight variations. They rejected the Muslim as seductress but they accepted the English as the lovers. The Hindus, in spite of their religious rigidities, jumped at the opportunity of imitating the British (or the Western) clothes for the purposes of fashionableness, snobbery and worldly success. But the British did not like Hindu imitation of their clothes, as they thought it to be tantamount of the contamination of the superior British culture by the inferior Hindu culture. The Hindus did not bother about the British superiority-complex at all as majority of Indians began to feel like Chaudhuri in the preface of his Autobiography: “To the memory of the British empire in India which conferred subjecthood on us but withheld citizenship; to which yet every one of us threw out the challenge: “Civvis Britannicus Sum” because all that was good and living within us was made, shaped, and quickened by the same British rule.”

Consequently, the Hindus went on adapting the British clothes like suit, tie and hat for their social life, if not for their private, religious or sectarian life. The impetus for wearing the new foreign costume was not convincing out of compulsion as in the case of Muslim clothing but it came from the Hindus themselves. The boldest of the Hindus were the Anglisized or ‘England-returnd’ ones who affected the British clothes and maintained costly wardrobes with real style and gusto. Thus imitation of British clothes was a virtue allied to other habits like “speaking and writing English, quoting Shakespeare and Milton; airing rationalism and contempt
for Hindu image worship; eating beef; and drinking until dead drunk”. (p.75) One might easily say that imitation of the British clothes was the strongest aspect of the Westernization of Hindus. 

Among many effects of the British clothes on Hindus was the growing Hindu tendency towards covering the body:

With the coming of the British rule, the practice of covering the body became more general: in fact to remain bare-bodied except when being comfortable in summer in private became more or less rare … In addition, the woman have made the petticoat an integral part of their dress (p. 78)

In The Causes of the Conflict Chaudhuri discovers the causes of sartorial conflicts. The dislike which the wearers of one kind of clothing feel towards another is not anything special to India. Whenever there is any quarrel over dress the first argument that the sides put forward is the moral one, and the second is generally climate. In India, there is no strict connection between clothes and morals. In other words, the moral connection is a secondary relationship, a matter of association of ideas. The Hindu costume in its original, pure form lent itself to be misjudged on the score of morals. The poets have given immodest, indecorous and voluptuous expressions about the female body: “They describe the female body so exhaustively and with such a profusion of detail that the reader is forced to conclude that these women wore nothing or else the poets had sari-piercing-eyes”. (p.85) Their erotic flights were always straight and strong cocktails designed to go to the head. Sanskrit and Bengali profane literature, the semi-sacred and heroic epics are full of stories of the temptations of the great sages by the jealous gods. 

Chaudhuri defends the criticism made by the Muslims and the Europeans who spared neither the Hindu gods nor their clothing: “When your (Hindu’s) greatest poets have exercised every ingenuity to wring the last drop of erotic juice from your clothing, you cannot turn upon the the Muslim or European critics to accuse them of unfairness”. (p. 88)

Chaudhuri shows how the pattern of clothes of a particular culture, though originally decided by the immediate climatic conditions, are not likely to be changed to the new climatic conditions into which the people concerned are thrown. Thus, for example, the British refused to change over from their suit to anything Indian in spite of the horrid climate of India: “Every English man had an
instinctive feeling that any adaptation to the climate would reduce the elegance of his original clothing”. (p. 92) In order to maintain his decency in duty, the English man used to wear his traditional dress even in the discomfort weather and hostile environment in a tropical jungle of the sub-continent. Similarly, the Muslims were unwilling to give up shalwar and kameez in spite of their being inconvenient in Indian climate. Thus each culture believing in the validity and sanctity of its own clothes, refuses to respect those of the other except for utilitarian purposes. Cultural conflicts between the different types of costume have not been in India solely due to moral notions or loyalties to rival ways of life. They have given rise to latent opposition rather than to open clashes. The cultural conflicts are abstract in character. There are aesthetic prepossessions which guide and control the creation and wearing of clothing as a form of artistic expression. Every fully evolved family of clothing whether Muslim, European or Hindu has implicit aesthetics which never relaxes its hold.

In the chapter, **Aesthetic Concepts and Their Expression** Chaudhuri illustrates this hostility by taking the two groups of costumes (in India) namely, the Hindu costume and the Muslim costume. He offers a contrastive picture of the Muslim clothes and the Hindu clothes. The Muslim clothes had a “combination of magnificence, purity and strength”, at least, until the time of Aurangzeb’s sons in India. But the Hindu approach to the clothes was governed by a dual idea that personal adornment through clothing ought to be combination of the highest and most refined beauty of the nude with that of clothing and ornaments. The dual aesthetics of the Hindu clothing, according to Chaudhuri, suffers from two handicaps: One, its effect depends as much on the body of the wearer as on the quality of raiment, and not all men and women could boast of perfect figures; two, it lends itself to misjudgments on moral counts, although at the other extreme it attains an unearthly purity.

Chaudhuri feels the Hindu concept of a beautiful body is static, where as that of the Muslim is dynamic. In all Hindu literature, Sanskrit or modern, the analogies and similes for the body and limbs are inert, solid objectives such as:

- Golden goblets for the breasts, plantain trees for the thighs, the round earth for the hips, the great Banyan for girth, and so on.
- In men the chest is likened to a great pair of doors, the figure to a tall Sal tree, the shoulders to the hump of a bull. (p. 95)

On contrary, the Muslim analogies are to objects in motion or in unstable equilibrium. It becomes obvious that all possible exposure is natural in those who
hold a static, tactile or plastic view of the body, and all possible covering in those who holds the dynamic view.

Hindu clothing in its original form suffered from two handicaps. Its effect depended as much on the body of the wearer as on the quality of the raiment, and not all men and women could boast of perfect figures. For this reason it is in sculpture and painting that Hindu clothing is seen at its most beautiful. Chaudhuri expresses the same idea in To Live or Not To Live. He says that the perfect formation of the feminine body with the alluring curves is possible only in art and sculpture: “In Indian sculpture the female body is highly stylized, and it exaggerates the curves so much that it becomes difficult to feel any parallelism between the work of art and life”.

The contrast between the static Hindu and the dynamic Muslim attitude is found even in their amorous behaviour. A Hindu coquette stands leaning against a door frame fixing her eyes on the vanishing point of horizon, whereas a Muslim girl with young men about will run, jump or frisk, casting sidelong glances like Parthian shafts.

Chaudhuri had an opportunity of observing women of different religions while he was in Delhi. He is very particular about the Punjabi women, with their dynamic Middle-Eastern figure and air, would look unbecoming and inartistic in anything except their own costume. Their swinging gait in long strides is perfectly matched to the salver. There is a close correlation between them and their proper clothes: “They have very generously distributed masses of flesh and adipose tissues which often have independent suspension”. (p. 97) Their growth is more horizontal than vertical. This appearance is heightened by the fact that even very young and unmarried Punjabi girls have surprisingly bulging abdomens. Chaudhuri relishes more while describing the Punjabi women: “The Punjabi feminine body is seen at its best from behind, and that is also how the Punjabi men love best to gape their women”. (p. 98)

In To Live or Not To Live Chaudhuri gives reason why the Punjabi women are so fleshy. It is not the man-about-town but the woman-about-town who sets the tone of urban life and gives to it its movement, colour and charm: “There is hardly any place or anytime where and when the women will not eat and hardly anything they will not”. It is this intermittent eating which enables the Punjabis to do with scrappy meals at home.

The third part of the book, The Contemporary Situation has lot of exciting titillation. In the first chapter of this part, Battle Becomes Squabbles Chaudhuri discusses the battle of clothes, which has been fought out from age to age in India. He says that the battle of clothes in India has not any dignity or elevation about it, though it has been fought perpetually all through the Indian history. It has, therefore become a mere squabble. Chaudhuri puts forth his views very frankly:
The battle of clothing in its current phase is of a low quality. Just as the governance of the country by the present Indian ruling order, which I call Brown Colonialism, is a caricature of British imperialism, the conflict of clothes is also nothing better than degenerate aping without any deal or principle behind it. (p. 111)

The Hindus had also been slavish in their imitation of the European clothes that they easily tolerated the public conveniences including interminable railway compartments being earmarked for ‘Europeans only’. Chaudhuri gives a very striking example of the highest paradox when he says that the government-owned Ashoka Hotel of Delhi, which was named after the great Buddhist Emperor, would not be able to admit the Buddha himself if he were to come now in his usual garments as represented in Gandhara art. That the Hindu piece of cloth i.e. dhoti should be forbidden in the hotel owned by the Hindu government is indeed beyond all sense and logic: “Some years ago two Indians were refused admission to the dining hall of the Ashoka Hotel in New Delhi because they were in dhoti”. (p. 112) The reason given for the exclusion was that, in the hotel no one wearing a dhoti was permitted to go into a room in which dancing was allowed, because this Hindu garment was lacking in that degree of decency which is called for by such high brow manifestations of western culture and even Rock- ‘n’ – Roll or Twist. The discrimination against Hindu clothes which our new rulers are practicing quietly and almost unconsciously, is one aspect among many of their imitations of British ways. The English in India never disguised their contempt for those Indians who wore English clothes. That made sensitive Indians unwilling to wear them. The climate and weather of the country are hostile to the effective adoption of European clothing by the Indian people. The impulse to wear the European clothes came not from taste, but from snobbery and it is easy to indulge in this. The wholesale imitation of British ways which characterizes the Indian ruling class today is a strange paradox—pride of possession without possession in any real sense.

Then Chaudhuri shows how even the great Indians like Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi had taken to the Muslim and European garments respectively. Chaudhuri recalls the sartorial history of the Nehru family and of Nehru. The Nehrus came originally from Kashmir, and down to recent times maintain their Kashmiri affiliations. Now in Kashmir the Hindus, including even
the Brahmins, adapted the Muslim male costume long ago. Jawaharlal Nehru, who was brought up in the Islamic garments, changed over to the European clothes when he was at Harrow and Cambridge for his education; took to dhoti for the utilitarian purpose of participating in the Indian Independence Movement and switched over to pajama and shirt which are still popular as ‘Nehru Pajama’ and ‘Nehru shirt’. Likewise, Mrs. Indira Gandhi had taken to frock and hat when in England for her education. Then she changed over to sari in India although she kept her head bare; but after her assumption of the status of Prime-Ministership of India, she began to cover her head with the end of her sari in the true Hindu fashion.

Pandit Mothilal, Jawaharlal’s father was a lawyer of eminence, and he had all the westernizing inclinations of the new Indian professional class. He cultivated British officials, and was on terms of friendship even with some of the provincial governors. So, European clothes became an alternative costume for him. Actually, he acquired the reputation of being a very fashionable and well-dressed person. Even a legend grew up that he sent his linen to be laundered in Paris. Thus the Nehrus had remained in private and professional life sharing the sartorial habits of the Muslim and the European world. Nehru’s political colleagues and administrative helpers began to imitate him because of his overwhelming political power. It is commonplace of human behaviour that the good opinion of a man in power can be secured more easily by copying his external habits than by any amount of agreement with his policies and principles. Therefore, the politicians who wanted to get on by making a show up their loyalty to Nehru also got quickly into Muslim clothes, even when they had no natural liking for them.

Like everything else in India, clothing has also been reduced to the ugly minimum. Chaudhuri never tires of stating and illustrating this very Indian truth. In Decline and Fall of Clothing Chaudhuri shows that the Gandhi-cap and the Jawahar waistcoat are no better than their old counterparts. The adoption of Gandhi-cap by the miserly congress party is an evidence of the extraordinary poverty of aesthetics exhibited by the Congress wallas. He feels that “Gandhi-cap is an eroded form of the Muslim fur cap.” (p.128) It can be supplanted to one of the most beautiful articles of Hindu clothing, the turban. Similarly, the adoption of Jawahar-coat which is an adaptation of a Muslim government makes it very difficult for the westerners to distinguish between Indian diplomats and butlers:

The buttoned-up coat had very mixed associations in British India. In the first place, it was worn by the butlers of the English homes and clubs, and therefore now a days when a high functionary enters the lounge of the
Gymkhana club in New Delhi, to name one important official centre, it becomes a nice point to decide whether he is a butler or a Secretary. (p. 136)

These incidences are a proof of the lack of any sound aesthetic basis for the sartorial habits of Indians. Even in their imitation of the western clothes, the Hindus are so poor that they easily make a farce of it. They neither use the standard material for their garments nor stick to the original shape of the western pattern, nor are able to maintain them properly. In spite of the Indian compromise with sartorial predicament, they continue to indulge in their arrogance and snobbery. In the chapter, Le Beau Monde Chaudhuri turns to feminine clothing and fashions in contemporary India. He describes them with a special taste, elegance, aesthetic beauty and erotics. He says that our women even in this age of ugliness can neither be nor are dowdy. They are becoming more and more resplendent from day to day. They dress elegantly making delightful for the eye. Even the countrywomen are expensively dressed. Chaudhuri is of the opinion, “a woman cannot be elegant externally without success in bringing about an internal transformation, an alchemy which gilds the personality with a gold that only the spirit can detect.” (p.139)

Women have not heard the saying that true art is concealment of art. Chaudhuri deplores at the absurd, extravagant and inartistic way of the dressing of Indian women. An extraordinary paradox confronts us. On the one side are the moralists of the both sexes sending up their lamentations to the skies, and on the other, the fashionable women aspiring to fashion, one arm akimbo, snapping their fingers at the preacher. The extravagance of the denouncers is only inciting their objects to be extravagant in a far more efficient way. Here in commendation Chaudhuri calls the Hindus prigs and in condemnation he calls them pigs in Circe. Chaudhuri feels sorry about moral preaching:

Down the ages we have been growing more and more didactic as we have become weaker and weaker in moral fiber, and after independence didacticism has become a real bane in every field, because it is completely divorced from action. Words no longer have any relation to conduct. (p. 143)
Western fashions are taken over from very inferior sources: The pictures of Miss Worlds and from the western and Indian films. Many modern Indian women are cutting off their hair. They are sacrificing their luxuriant tresses, not out of religious fervour or patriotic motive. It is due to the sheer imitation of the West. Chaudhuri laments: “this thoughtless imitation of the West is making them look, not like the Western women they want to be, but like half-castes” (p. 146) They look like the caricatures of Indian film stars.

Chaudhuri gives an epileptic blow to the Hindu woman’s love of erotic fashions. The woman in olden days got her blouse conveniently stitched in order to feed her baby. But the modern woman, quite contrary to the love of her umbilical chord, with their amorous fashions of aping the cine stars, get their blouses stitched exposing their luscious backs in ‘V’ shape or crescent shape to the lusty eyes of the onlookers. They forget the aphorism: ‘breast milk is the best milk’.

The beauty of clothes is to be supported by the beauty of human body. Chaudhuri shows how the Hindus have failed to achieve the necessary concordance between the body and the clothing. The linear beauty of woman when seen from a lateral angle depends a lot upon the poetic cascade of long hair. “If the women are like destroyers when seen from front, in their back view they are like great liners with throbbing sterns”. (p. 151)

But the Hindu woman, as Chaudhuri deplores, has begun to spoil it by cutting her hair thus playing the sedulous ape to the western woman. He also shows the folly of the Hindu woman who instead of achieving a ‘glossy finish’ for her hair by
oilng it, turns it into ‘horse hair’, thereby, spoiling the cranial beauty. Similarly, the Hindu woman’s habit of powdering her face takes away the ivory look from her and turns her skin in to a ‘suede leather.’ Chaudhuri says powdering the nose continually is not a natural practice with them, and its effect is certainly not felicitous: “it makes their elegance mouldy, dampens their anger and extinguishes the waves of light which otherwise ripple away from their smiles.”(p.148)

The habit of painting the lips with red does not always produce the happy effect. The contrast between the red colour on the lips and the dark face of the Indian woman is so sharp that it creates a meretricious look. The growing habit of ‘mammary and even mamillary ostentation’ and ‘the exhibition of the posterior’ by the Hindu lady is deplorably ridiculous, sensual, ugly, provocative and shameless. Obviously, all these recent habits of the Indian-Hindu woman are shown by Chaudhuri to be anachronistic and incongruous in the Indian context and produce a look of cheapness and vulgarity.

Most westerners find sari very alluring. Chaudhuri likes it because it emphasizes the curves in a woman’s body. Sari exemplifies the better parts and covers unaesthetic parts. “Few writers on love between man and woman seem to have noticed that the curves of woman’s body in their linear rhythms play a very large part in bringing about falling in love.” (p. 147)

In the last chapters of the books, A Rootless Fashion and A Voice crying in the Wilderness, Chaudhuri discusses how, the sartorial fashions become so unhealthy from the Indian point of view that they become matters necessitating police
control. Chaudhuri says: “The fashions have even become a police matter, because they are being connected with a scandal which is growing in all the big Indian cities.” (169) The dowdyism, eve-teasing and molestation of girls and women, which have been growing in the streets and on the university campuses in India are all directly or indirectly caused by the ‘provocative’ and ‘glamorous’ methods of feminine dressing or clothing, which have a touch of sensuality. Chaudhuri is very correct when he shows the connection between the cheapening of clothes and the vulgarity of the Indian film world. “Our cinema has reached a level whose degradation is not approached even by the lowest films from Hollywood.” (139) Then Chaudhuri shows how the Indian politician also has a large share in contributing to the sartorial ugliness of the people.

**Culture in the Vanity Bag** shows Chaudhuri’s serious approach to the sartorial habits of Indians. He analyzes the philosophy of clothing in a very sophisticated manner armed with the historical sense. He has shown how the Hindus are casual and mindless in their imitation of the Muslim or British clothes and how they are not bothered about contradictions in their sartorial habits. “The book is historical, analytical and satirical at the same time and holds a mirror to Chaudhuri’s microscopic intelligence and incisive analysis” says Basavaraj S. Naikar. □
REFERENCES


5. Ibid. p. 30