

Future of Indian salwar: resurgence of gender equality

Shalini Bisht

Pearl Academy, India

shalini.bisht@pearlacademy.com

Abstract

The history of Indian pants – the Salwar - is a story of diverse cultural identities. The paper charts out its historical existence in various cultures from Indian continent to far West in Iran and Arab countries. While tracking the origin of Salwar that had travelled from Central Asia, it is interesting to see its evolution marked with changes in shapes, sizes and forms over time while keeping the foundation of cutting same – that is zero waste of fabric due to its rectangular and trapeze panels – which are then gathered at waist to give ease in lower torso. For future sustainability of this heritage silhouette, author has experimented with form and detail innovations. A survey was conducted to understand the gaps in its current acceptance value with youngsters and what type of innovation is expected. Based upon the reviews of participants, two insights are revealed: menswear fabrics like checks and plaids eliminate the gender bias. Secondly, new cuts and style lines in a traditional women's wear pattern make it contemporary and unique.

In practical lab research, prototypes of “New Salwar” were designed by taking inspiration from the concept of “Ardhnarishwar” of Indian mythology which combines features of men and women characters in same personality. The sense of belongingness to the traditional outfit yet a contemporary look made it unique. Resurgence in sustenance is evident in this project conceptualised through gender equality and incorporating current trends for modern fashion buyer.

Keywords: Salwar, Silhouette, Zero waste, Gender Equality

ISBN: 978-989-54263-0-0

1. Introduction

“Humans engage in the act of dressing every day, with a wide range of supplements and modifications to the body. Dress is an assemblage of those supplements and modifications, and it is also an act or a behavior. How we dress and with what communicate a world of information about the individual—in relationship to others and in society at large” (Lee. S 2018) .This paper studies the origin of *salwar* in Indian sub-continent from existing literature on this garment. It was found to have a connection to various cultures like Persia, Turkey, Afghanistan and Armenia. The unique silhouette of Salwar has been brought to India specifically in the Mughal Era, as most of the garments were draped in ancient times. Its functionality and simplicity made it popular in North India (Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh) and certain Western part of India (Kutch, Gujarat). In current times, *salwar kameez* as an ensemble is in fashion across India as well as in neighbouring country like Pakistan which was a part of India before independence.

Yet, *salwar* has to fight a continuous battle with western cuts fashionable with young generation. Youth has many options available to them today due to presence of many western brands influencing ethnic Indian fashion too. The practical aspect of the research is to make *salwar* a modern, stylish and comfort-wear that can be easily accepted by both genders; creating innovative and funky contemporary variations.

The potential of popularizing the *salwar* to this age group is immense as was found by a primary research survey conducted by the author. The respondents (over fifty in number) participated enthusiastically in the survey and gave reasons for its decline in popularity, and shared ideas about how to make it popular. The biggest lacking point that emerged was its silhouette. If more cuts, style-line and detailing like pockets, zippers, variation of fabric and color are provided; it might become more acceptable and fashionable. The traders and retailers in this segment were interviewed to understand the question of making salwar popular.

Analysis of data (both quantitative and qualitative) led the author to explore on innovating the existing silhouettes of Salwar and experiment with its look, shape and details along with interaction of different fabrics to create individual piece of clothing to be worn by both Men and Women. The concept of Unisex garments was based upon Indian mythological character of Lord Shiva as both man and woman in the same body called as *Ardhnarishwar*. This concept was realized in the form of Unisex Salwar that crosses the gender barrier and gives freedom to express gender equality with youth of India. Sustainable silhouettes like these promise a future for more experimental *salwar* versions.

2. Research Methodology:

The *salwar* (pantaloon/drawers) is the lower component of the outfit *Salwar-Kameez*, a traditional outfit originating in the Indian sub -continent. It is a generic term to describe different styles of the dress. The *Salwar Kameez* can be worn by both men and women, but styles differ by gender. The research started with studying the existing literature on bifurcates in various cultures of Eastern society like Persia, Turkey and Kurdistan.

Literature review: As part of secondary research history of *salwar* and its connection to costumes of various neighbouring culture was studied from scholarly articles, conference proceedings, books on history of Indian costumes, and current silhouettes on internet.

Primary research: Study of *salwar's* functional and aesthetic role in the Indian society through visiting exhibitions, designer stores, Personal Interview and online Questionnaire with users and retailers to see if there is a need to innovate on silhouette and changes required to modernise it. The Age group covered was a broad range of 17 years to 50 years.

Practical research: After analysing the data of consumers, *salwar* with a new look; concept and thought process was explored in new silhouettes. The focus was on designing the unisex lower garments while experimenting with the cuts and fabric prevailing for men's wear and women's wear for all age groups.

3. Historical background of Salwar

The word *salwar* has been defined as a loose fitted trousers fastened by drawstrings at the waist in Turkey, Persia and Arab world. The silhouette is a form of baggy trousers. This silhouette has been a secondary garment in an ensemble called Salwar Kameez (Kumar and Walia, 2016). The ancient connection to *salwar* in various regions is discussed below:

Salwar in Persian culture – The *salwar* in Persian culture is described as a full length loose trouser worn by both men and women since antiquity. It was tied with cord at waist and had variations in fabric and prints. (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/clothing-xxvii>).



Fig.1-Salwar in Persian Miniature Painting culture

The images shown above was part of an exhibition of Persian miniature paintings organized in 2005 by the [Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art](#). Dating from as early as the 14th century to the 17th century, during the Timurid and Safavid eras.

Salwar in Ottoman Empire – Turkey and Armenia

Salwar was an essential part of traditional Turkish ensemble for both men and women. The adoption of loose fitting trousers called Šalvār in Turkish or Sirwāl in Arabic are evidences of such borrowings in Arab dress. (Oz T., 1950)

Salwar was originally worn by either the working class or is to be seen as used by Slave dynasty. Slowly, the rich fabrics were chosen by royalty and middle class. The pictures displayed in Figure 2 and 3 are of the garments worn by 16th century rulers of Turkey. Over the years these garments are housed in the Topkapi Sarayi Museum. An old woman in present day Turkey (Figure – 4) shows how prints and synthetic fabrics are being used for this garment.



Fig.2- A pair of striped Mamluk Salwar



Fig.3- Turkish Salwar worn by men



Fig.4- Seluck woman wearing Salwar with floral print in Turkey,

As a part of Ottoman Empire after fourteenth Century, there is visual evidence of the traditional *salwar* type loose pants worn by both men and women in Armenia. Figure 5 and 6 show woman from Erzurum in festive costume. Late-Ottoman era, urban style.



Fig.5- Armenian woman (on left) in check salwar



Fig.6- Loose balloon shape salwar

Salwar in Afghanistan

Indian empire was extending till Afghanistan in Buddha and Ashoka times. There was a lot of Indian influence on Afghani culture especially during Buddha and Ashoka times. Gandhara region has relics of Buddha and Hindu Kush is believed to be a Hindu state. The traditional costume of Indian woman was draped clothes which were never stitched in 3 D form. In Gupta period, ghaghra choli (skirt and fitted top) was worn by lower classes, whereas, royal people preferred draped garments. (Kumar M and Walia A, 2016, p – 754). Afghanistan has many tribes with their own traditional costumes. One of the regions of Afghanistan – Baluchistan (now in Pakistan) had loose salwar for men as shown in Figure – 7 with reference to 19th century (Olich, 2015). Young women used to wear narrow salwar called as “Suthan” and tight tunic on top called as “Cholo” as shown in Figure – 8 (Fowler&Fowler, 2016). *Salvar* of such tribes of Afghanistan and Pakistan has supposedly origin in Iraq culture in medieval era, before Mughal era (Elliot, 1848).



Fig.7-



Fig.8- -

Balochi-Sindhi man in Loose Salwar Muslim Sindhi Girl in Suthan, a narrower version of salwar (1870)

There is notion that pathans of Afghanistan area adopted Salwar Kameez after the invasion by Sikh commander Hari Singh Nalwa in their region in 1837 under the Sikh empire of Ranjit Singh (Singh G M, 2016). The king invaded Afghanistan and Pushtoon region and was a terror for them. The defeated Afghans discarded their traditional robes in favour of Shalwar Kameez so as to disguise as women at night. The author gives two evidences for this notion as mentioned in his article.

Thus originated the term *Pathani Suit* which is an adaptation of Salwar Kameez of Punjab, where kurta is a long shirt and a lower bifurcate like Shalwar but loose at bottom than a salwar hem and this suit is officially the dress of Pakistani men. Many Indian men still wear Pathani suit as a fashion statement. Figure – 9 shows contemporary version of Pathani suit by Indian celebrity.



Fig.9- Bollywood stars in modern Pathani suit, from left Salman Khan, Amir Khan and Ranbir Kapoor



Fig.10- Imran Khan, PM of Pakistan in *Pathani* suit as an official dress code

3. Salwar in Indian subcontinent

Indian *salvar* resembles a *pyjama* drawn tightly in at the waist with a string and is tailored in such a way that it tapers at the ankles. The Indian *Salvar* has seen a lot more style variations with many different names and variations found in different geographical areas.

The slave dynasty, during the 1100 AD, introduced bifurcated garments both for men and women in the Indian subcontinent. Following the Afghans and Mughal invasions, there were significant changes in the costumes for both men and women. With the establishment of Mughal rule (1526 – 1761), a blend of Persian and ancient Indian artistic sensibilities can be

seen in art, architecture, food and clothing. Earlier to that, The costume of the Muslim women- the trouser, kaftan and the head cover gradually became a part of the Indian costumes, which after many transitions, is now popularly known as Indian Salwar Kameez (Kumar M and Walia A, 2016). Mughal kings and Queens were shown as wearing a variation of salwar, under the loose robes and Kameez respectively, called as “*pyjama*” which was tapered and bereft of voluminous cowls. Empress Jahangir and his wife Noorjahan are shown as wearing striped and printed fabric *Pyjama* in Fig.11.



Fig.11- Contemporary Salwar worn by Emperor Jahangir and his wife.

The famous *Patiala Salwar* was designed by Nawab of Patiala which had a bias cutting for leg shape creating cowl type folds in side seam of the legs. The salwar of Himachal Pradesh and Punjab called as *Suthan* is loose on top but tapers in the bottom. Boys in Gujarat wear embroidered salwar in Kutch region as shown in Fig. – 12 and 13.



Fig.12- Ahir boy wearing a full *salvar* with hand embroidery; opening at bottom with buttons (Gujarat)



Fig.13- Punjabi *salvar* with *Patiala* look

Today, most of the *Salvars* are cut on straight grain with a belt on top and each leg has three portions stitched together to make a closed leg – central panel is rectangular and side panels are trapeze shape. The bottom is called as “Poncha” which is stitched with a facing inside and top-stitched to give structured finishing to it. Figure 13 show the pattern cutting and finished salwar samples made by author. The layout of these panels is such that zero wastage in fabric consumption is achieved.

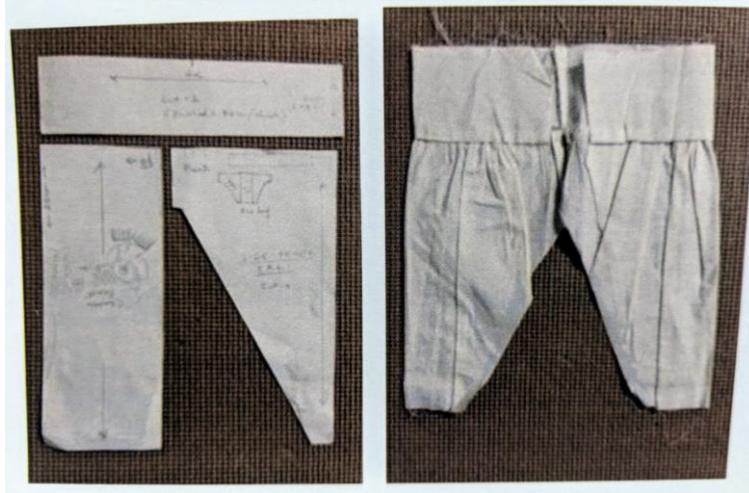
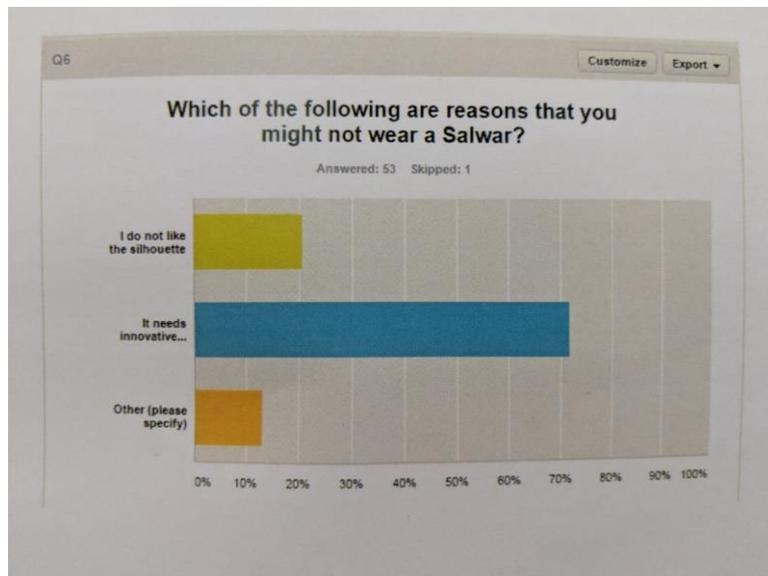


Fig.14- Pattern of *Salwar* – Belt, Rectangular Centre Panel and Trapeze Side panels. Joined panels with pleats under Belt

4. Identification of Gap

Despite these geographical style variations, there is still a gap in creating a modernized, funky and quirky looking *Salwar* as was evident in the Survey done with users, retailers and designer labels. Above 50 responded with online survey and ten interviews with retailers showed that few changes could revive the *salwar*. Fig.14and 15 are examples of two question’s results as charts.



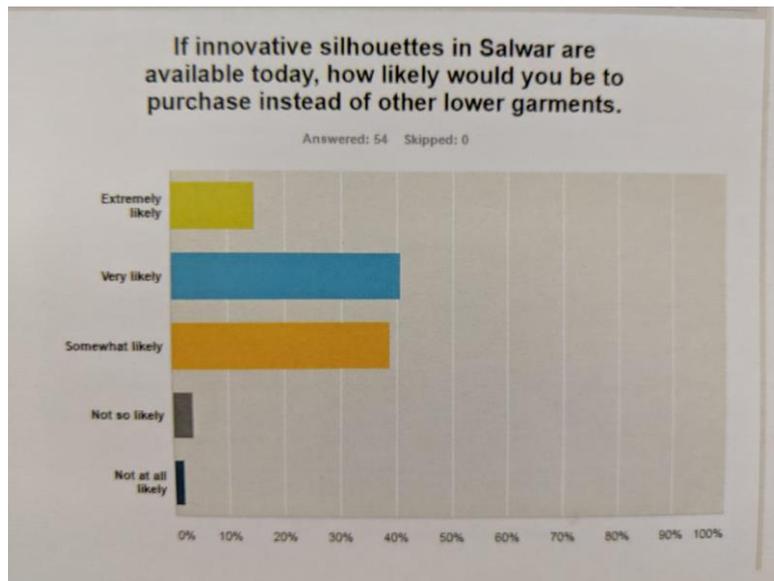


Fig.15 - Analysis of Survey and Interview results –

- Usually this silhouette has visibility during the cultural or religious ceremonies. The young consumers are completely dominated by other lower garments like jeans, trousers, palazzos, tights and there were very less usage of the silhouette prevalent in this age group.
- *Salvar* was either well accepted by older and mature age group or just one or two styles were spotted to be used by young generations. The mature generation was also keen to witness some innovation and new style experimentation.
- It is not accepted well by the young generation due to the reasons like lack in attractive styles, boring silhouette, less experimentation in fabric used. Functionality is also under the lens as other than comfort it doesn't have much to offer.

5. Creation of Unisex Salvar Pants

New variations of *Salvar* were made in different fabrics and experimented in different colors and innovation in cuts, unusual fabric combination to develop unisex *salvar* pants derived from concept of Lord Shiva as man and woman in same body - *Ardhnarishwar* (Figure –16).



Fig.16- Ardhnarishwar - Oil painted on canvas

Depiction of gender equality in modern time, innovations in forms and fabric combinations are shown in images below.



Fig.17- Shoot for Unisex *salwar* worn by girl and boys



Fig.18-Shoot for low crotch loose salwar with centre panel cut on bias on a girl

Fig.19- Shoot for low crotch loose *salvar* on a boy

The response of the users was positive and generated many queries on fb page Virgo No. 5.

Limitation of the research:

1. Data collected for survey was limited.
2. Four samples of Unisex salwar were made. Can be explored in more styles, colors and details.
3. Primary study of geographically unique qualities of *salvar* should be done in future.

6. Conclusion

To summarize, the following features were vital in making a modern version of *salvar* -

- Silhouette with panel, gussets, lower crotch in pattern making variations.
- Fabrics and colors of menswear were mixed with clear pastels
- Khadi plain color with block print of traditional type
- Recycling of export surplus fabric
- Cost friendly

REFERENCING

1. CLOTHING xxvii. Historical lexicon of Persian clothing, 2018
Available from: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/clothing-xxvii>
2. Eicher.J and Evenson.S. *The Visible Self. Global Perspectives on Dress, Culture, and Society*, 4th Edition, 2015
Available at: <https://www.bloomsburyfashioncentral.com/lesson-plans/dress-culture-and-society>
Accessed on 20 June 2018
3. Kumar M and Walia A, 2016. *Elucidation of the Indian Salwar Kameez*. IJASOS-International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences, Vol. II, Issue 6, December 2016
Available from: <http://ijasos.ocerintjournals.org/download/article-file/268503>
Accessed on June, 2018
4. Kumar, R. 2006. *Costumes and textiles of Royal India, 1st Ed.* New York: ACC Distribution.
5. Rath S K, 2013.*ASIA'S CHANGING HISTORY: INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN*. Asian and African Studies, Volume 22, Number 2, 2013
Available at: https://www.sav.sk/journals/uploads/112612076_Rath.pdf
Accessed on 22 October 2017
6. Singh G M, 2016. *How the Shalwar Kameez became the dress of the Pathans and the Afghan*.
Available at: https://travelandculture.expertscolumn.com/adoption-shalwar-kameez_pathans-and-afghans
Accessed on 22 September 2018
7. Oz T., 1950. *Ottoman's Costume Turkish Textiles and velvets, XIV_XVI Centuries* (German) hardcover, 1st Edition.
8. "The Earth Scything its way across the Persian Landscape" 2010
[Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art](http://www.tehranmuseumofcontemporaryart.com).
Available at: <https://pruned.blogspot.com/2010/10/earth-scything-its-way-across-persian.html>

9. Figure 1: Persian miniature painting. Photograph. viewed June,2017
Available at: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/22306960627800047/>
10. Figure 2:Mayer.LV,1952,Apair of striped mamluk Sirwal, Photograph, viewed July,2016
Available at: http://idlelion.blogspot.com/2011_09_01_archive.html
11. Figure 3: STOCK PHOTO:TWO YOUNG MEN IN TRADITIONAL TURKISH COSTUME,TURKEY,C. 1925,Photograph viewed in April,2017
Available at: <https://www.superstock.com/stock-photos-images/1539-249>
12. Figure 4: A Seluck woman in Salvar of Turkey
Available at:
https://wikivividly.com/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_picture_candidates/Portrait_of_a_Turkish_Woman
13. Figure 5 and 6: Web image on Pinterest., viewed June, 2017
Source:
<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/21/64/4d/21644d081749397ea07cb3b1fda0c00c.jpg>
14. Figure – 7
Olrich, L V, 2015, *Baloch man in Sindhi traditional pantaloons style*, Photograph, viewed May, 2017
Available at:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sindhi_clothing#/media/File:Baloch_Man_in_Sindhi_traditional_pantaloons_style_1845.jpg
15. Figure 8 – Fowler& Fowler, 2006, *Hindu Girl Karachi*, Photograph, viewed June, 2017
Available at:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sindhi_clothing#/media/File:Hindu_girl_karachi.jpg
16. Figure 9-Sharma K, 2015.*Bollywood handsome hunks show you how to pep up the Diwali look!*
Available at:
https://www.pinkvilla.com/entertainment/news/344620/bollywood-handsome_hunks-show-you-how-pep-diwali-look

Accessed on Jan, 2018
17. Figure – 10 – Staff reporter, 2018. *Pakistan Today* news
Available at: <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/03/11/sadiq-sanjrani-decided-senate-chairman-candidate-in-bizenjo-imran-meeting/>
Accessed on September, 2018
18. Figure – 11 Sotheby's New York, 1979. *Art of Imperial India*.
Available at: <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/art-imperial-india-114502/lot.256.html>

Accessed on September, 2018

19. Sindhi Clothing, 2018, *Bibliographic Index to the Historians of Muhammedan India, Vol. 1* by Elliot H M (1848).

Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sindhi_clothing#cite_note-11

Accessed on Jan, 2018

<https://pruned.blogspot.com/2010/10/earth-scything-its-way-across-persian.html>