

The Surviving Saree: Experiencing women's heritage through the transforming narrative of the sustainable drape

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Structured Abstract

'The Surviving Saree' is an artistic expression of the emotional journey of the saree, a 5-9 yards rectangular piece of fabric which speaks about heritage and identity. It is a garment that is known to be one of the oldest surviving drapes. The Saree can be traced back to one of the oldest Indian civilizations and has survived centuries of social, political and economic changes in India. Clothing and particularly, the saree has played a significant role in women's heritage. Saree has not just evolved but it stands as the most sustainable garment even today reflecting the renewal of fashion as it is draped completely with zero wastage of fabric as it doesn't involve garment cutting techniques. The project explores the saree, not just as a garment but ignites the emotional aspects, stories of women, their transformation with the transforming saree and the renewal of fashion in India.

Purpose: The purpose of this project is to see the evolution of the Saree through thousands of years and find answers to our research question: What makes the Saree, the oldest surviving garment we know of today? The project throws light on the past, present and future of the garment considering aspects like women's heritage, gender, sustainability, and identity, individuality from social, political and economic perspectives. The outcome of the project involves looking at the future with some exploratory images I have created that explores the Saree having its own voice beyond the existing stereotypes of gender and identity.

Design methodology: Observations, Secondary Data Analysis, Experiential Research, Primary Sources (This includes visits to the museums, The Kumbh Mela, Cities)

Along with secondary research, there has been primary research that involves my travel to different parts of India to explore the existing narrative, heritage and transformation of the sustainable drape. I have attached some reference images from my primary research. The Saree has existed, exists and will exist in different textiles, forms, symbolizing heritage and culture. It is connected to women's identity and life. It has also been mentioned in ancient Indian scriptures like the Mahabharata. A very important aspect of my research also includes visiting different museums, caves, seeing pieces of art, architectural spaces, and villages in India to understand the past, present and to find stories that express culture, legacy, heritage and identity. While exploring the past and present, I also got curious to explore the futuristic

scenario of a saree revolving around the concept of sustainability and story-telling. This involves designing a saree, reusing old sarees in different textiles collected from an old vendor, to develop half- sarees, hand painted with stories of women from ancient scriptures and Indian mythology. One of saree from this collection was then styled with a mask and trousers to represent a futuristic scenario. These are some explorations and I propose to further develop a series of primary photographs reflecting the past, present and future scenario of a saree and discussing the sustainable aspects of the oldest surviving garment. The photographs will also reflect the aspect of heritage narrating stories of women and their evolving lifestyles. Fashion is evolving but the evolution isn't just a physical transformation, the evolution is symbolic to the spiritual transformation. The methodology will include analyzing primary research sources like previous visits to museums, historical and architectural spaces, cities in India and The Kumbh Mela in 2013 (major pilgrimage and festival in India), collecting vintage family photographs, online surveys and interviews. Secondary sources include books, studying thesis on evolving history of women, clothing in India, and information through the internet. After the research, a series of photographs will be developed to visually depict the story of different women through the saree reflecting the past, present and future of the sustainable garment. It is absolutely brilliant to see one of the oldest drapes to make its way into the future, now mixed with technology and innovation. The project is an artistic expression, narrating the story of women's heritage, their life and sustainability through the oldest surviving and transforming drape, The Saree.

Primary research: I will be collecting and compiling all the photographs I've have from different museums, visits to historical sites (like the Ellora/ Ajanta caves) as a part of my primary research for the evolution of the saree. For in depth research, I am also planning to write an email to the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangralaya Museum (CSMVS) in Mumbai, the National Museum, Delhi and Calico museum of textiles to request for high resolution images of paintings (of women wearing sarees) and textiles used for sarees. This has helped in building a stronger visual presentation and narrating the story of the saree's evolution.

Secondary research: For secondary research, I will be going through multiple e-resources, online libraries, blogs, articles and E-books that will support the research and future possibilities of the saree. This will also cover understanding, observing and analyzing the role of influencers, designers, stylists, trends in the evolution of the existing saree.

Findings: The major findings of my research answer the research question.

The findings include social, cultural and scientific reasons for the Saree to be one of the oldest surviving drape we know of today. The findings also include many interesting observations on culture, identity and women's heritage which has helped in developing and creating some exploratory & experimental images challenging the existing stereotypes around The Saree.

Originality & Value: This project is not just limited to research. The value of research is when it is applied further in different ways or is taken ahead to develop original content blended with the author's perspective towards the subject. I would like to take my learning further. As a lecturer, artist, designer and stylist, every research and presentation is a brilliant way to observe, learn and analyze different perspectives on the same topic. We are always trying to apply our understanding in different ways like academic development, classroom teaching and also in design and styling. I definitely

plan to take my research on the saree and women's heritage further by transforming it into a very creative photo-series reflecting not only the evolution but also the emotional values and cultural stories that a saree narrates. This is a major part of my project as it strongly reflects upon the application of research in creativity. My design collection and images strongly represent my voice and thoughts on the drape. I am really looking forward to bring this photo series to life and will definitely take this further for publication as well.

Application of the research in academic development: I would like also to take my learning and experience ahead by organizing sessions for my students and sharing my experience. I would also like to apply my research in different ways in teaching. I think it will be great to understand sustainability in context to Indian heritage, culture and its relevance today in styling. As image designers, it is important for students to understand Indian culture and the future possibilities of the oldest surviving drapes we know today – Saree. As story-tellers, stylists, image designers and creative directors, it will be a good activity for students to understand this drape from different perspectives in modules like Cultural Studies, Evolution of Fashion, Fashion Cultural and Historical studies, editorial styling, costume styling and Fashion Futures. I will plan some sessions/ activities for students around this idea and will definitely include the research, learning in my teaching methodology.

Keywords: Saree, Surviving, India, Culture, Gender, Identity, Women's heritage, Sustainability, Science of Saree

Classification of the paper: Research, viewpoint and conceptual paper

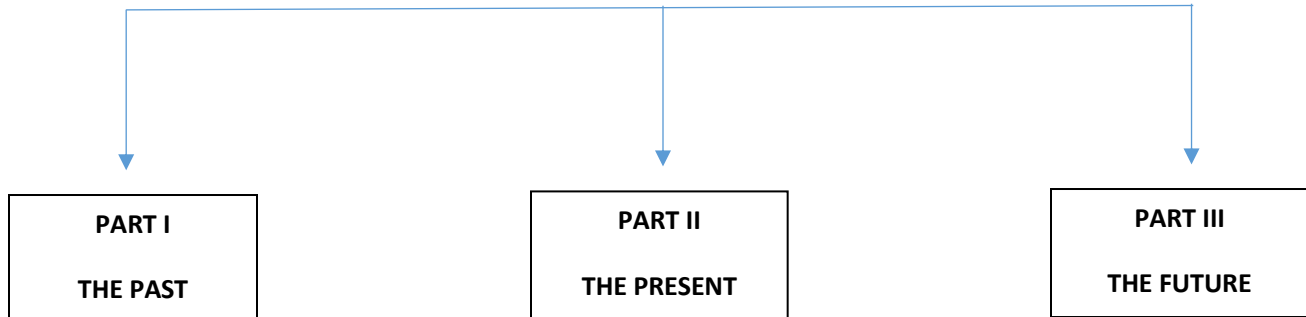
Acknowledgement

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Research and Conceptual Paper

THE SURVIVING SAREE



1. PART I will cover :

Introduction

Origin & Background of the Saree

Social, Political & Economic Influences

(Specifically in terms of culture, gender, identity

& women's heritage)

Transmission & Transformation

2. PART II will cover :

Current Scenarios : Social, Political & Economic Influences

(Specifically in terms of culture, gender, identity

& women's heritage)

Research question : Why and how did the saree survive for so long?

Understanding the science of the saree

3. PART III will cover :

Technological advancement & Innovation with the Saree

The Saree : Our Voice

Looking at the future

Conclusion & Referencing

PART I

Introduction

The word “SAREE” means “strip of cloth” in Sanskrit. (Suri, 2020). The word ‘Sattika’ is used to describe women’s ancient attire in many ancient Hindu and Buddhist scriptures. (Abdurahiman, 2018). The saree has been one of the oldest surviving garments known to mankind with over more than 5000 years of history. At more than 5,000 years of existence, the Indian saree is considered to be among the oldest form of garment in the world still in existence. The saree has been mentioned in one of the oldest literature from India – The Vedas and records from the Indus Valley Civilization (3300–1300 B.C.E.) also indicate its usage at the time. (Nambiar, 2016).

A saree as simply described as a 9 yards piece of fabric that is draped around the body in different techniques. The figure below is a very simple representation of a saree.

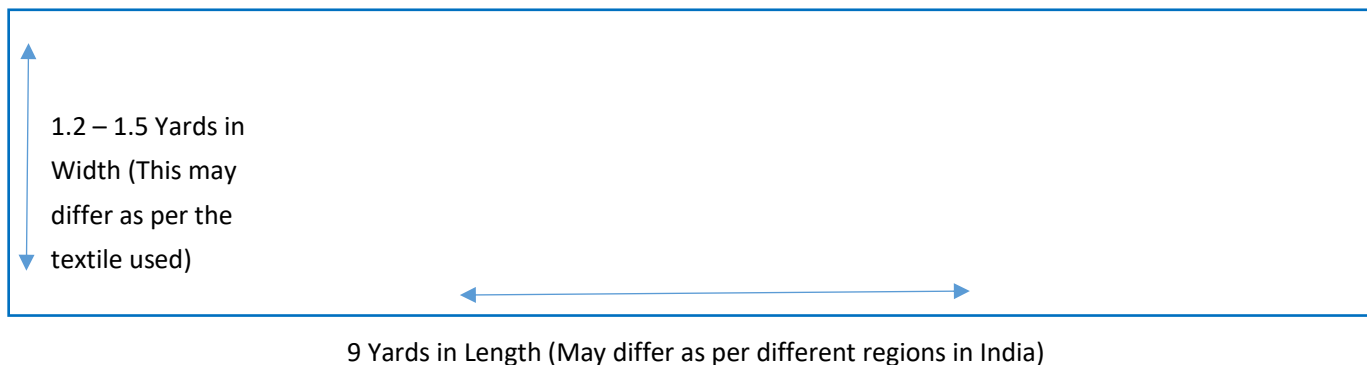


Figure 1: Created by the author Ms. Ishi Srivastava

Origin & Background of the Saree

The origin of the saree can be dated back to one of the oldest civilizations in history – The Indus Valley Civilization. There is limited evidence for the pre-historic time period but there is evidence for Indus Valley Civilization. Textiles like cotton, wool and silk fibers were used and most of the garments were unstitched as seen in the Indus valley figurines and sculptures. (Kenoyer, 2004) At the end of the Harappan period, around 1900-1500 BC, there is evidence for the emergence of new cultures and ideologies associated with Vedic traditions and the Sanskrit language. Sanskrit texts and later sculptures provide evidence for the use of many different types of textiles, many of which are still in use today. (Kenoyer, 2004) The saree didn’t seem like the saree we know of today but the concept of draping unstitched textiles around the body has been noticed. It was much later around the Mauryan Empire (322 -183 BC) where long distance trade networks were established with China, Iran, Egypt and the Mediterranean. (Kenoyer, 2004). During the Indus valley civilization, we do see the first signs of the saree, a cloth that were folded and draped in different ways. Such cloth could have been made

of linen, cotton, or wool/animal hair (Anon., 2009)(Good, Irene, J.M Kenoyer and R.H. Meadow (2009) "New evidence for early silk in the Indus Civilization". *Archaeometry* 51: 457-466.) (Good, et al., 2009)

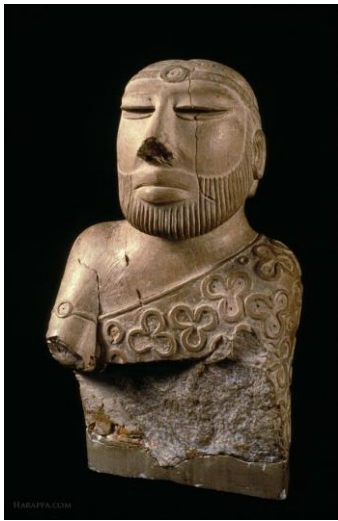


Image 1



Image 2

Image 1 : "Priest King," Mohenjo-daro

(Material: white, low fired steatite, Dimensions: 17.5 cm height, 11 cm width, Mohenjo-daro, DK 1909, National Museum, Karachi, 50.852)

Marshall 1931: 356-7, pl. XCVIII

As seen in the image above, the figurine from Harappan civilization indicates towards the earliest known forms of saree. The left shoulder is covered with a cloak decorated with trefoil, double circle and single circle designs that were originally filled with red pigment. (Marshall, 1995)

Image 2 : Female Figurine

Female figurine with three sets of chokers and necklaces. This is one of the largest female figurines found at Harappa and it has the common fan shaped headdress with cups on either side of the head. The early drape of saree seems to really simple like an unstitched fabric wrapped around the body. (Kenoyer, 1995)

(Material: terra cotta, Dimensions: 14 cm height, 7.8 cm width, 5.8 cm thickness, Harappa, Lot 01-13, Harappa Museum, H87-189, Dales and Kenoyer 1991)

Evolution of the Saree

Climatic conditions did determine the clothing style across the civilizations. The evolution of the saree started to happen towards the end of the Harappa civilization when there was a development in ideology and society. There is a mention of the traditional Indian costume in '*Bharata's Natyashashtra*'. The Ancient Tamil poetry '*Kadambari*', describes women in elegant drapery or. The word evolved from the word as mentioned in earliest Buddhist and Jain literature. (Mohapatra, 1992)

One of the classical text of 'Vishnudharmottara Purana' art mentioned sixty-four type of art. There is a section which is focused on the decoration of the body. The art of making and wearing of clothes, dressing the hair, making of perfumery etc are taken into special consideration. These all qualities are supposed to be the good manner of human life. (Anon., n.d.) Hence, through the Vedic period, we do see decoration of the body using draping techniques and evolution of the saree.

The garments were consisted of two pieces, which include a lower garment and an upper garment both for men and women. The lower garments looked like the *dhoti* (as seen in the above images), while the upper garment was similar to *shawl* (as seen in Image 1 & 2). (Anon., n.d.) The saree originally was two or three separate pieces of cloths that was draped by men and women around the body in different ways. The Vedic people (the Aryana and the indigenous people) used (linen), (wool),(cotton) and animal skin to make garments. Garments for men consisted of three pieces: the (lower garments), the (upper garment) and (outer garment, shoulder cloth), and the (turban). Garments for women consist of two pieces: (under skirt) and the (upper garment). (Anon., n.d.)

The representation of the saree in realistic manner can be found from the various large size sculptures of 2nd century B.C. The reference can be drawn from the (Image 3), this figurine depicts the emergence of an urban style of clothing in Mauryan court. She was dressed in stitched, a divided skirt and wide. Another example can be taken from the figure from (Image 4) now in Mathura museum, this figure is the earliest example of the sculpted nature divinities found across India. (Anon., n.d.)

Here, we see an important shift in the saree draping style and slowly the divided two garments namely – *antariya* (lower garment) and the *uttariya* (upper garment) eventually united to be one single piece of cloth which we know as the saree today. Covering the upper part of the body with a scarf, sometimes pleated length wise was the early Indian upper garment. *Antariya*, the lower Garment is a type of unstitched garment which was used by the people of earlier time. (Anon., n.d.)



Image 3



Image 4



Image 4.1

Image 3 : Teeracotta Figure; from Patliputra, Bihar, Mauryan Period, c. 200Bc (Anon., n.d.)

Image 4 : Sandstone, Late Mauryan period, 2nd Century BC (Anon., n.d.)

Image 4.1 : Yakshi from Dadarganj (ca 300 BC) (Anon., 2006)

The above sculptures depict the very early form of the single cloth saree we know today. The draping styles seem very interesting and along with the drapes, the significant aspect here is also the culture around women's bodies. Though this concept differed from class to class and different draping styles were seen in different communities across India. One of the major reasons could be the hot climate of India. This was responsible for several changes in women's attire and they did what they thought was convenient for them. Women not covering their breasts was accepted as a norm in many parts of India. (Chauhan, 2019)

Social, Political & Economic Influences (Specifically in terms of culture, gender, identity & women's heritage)



Image 5 : Painting by Mukul Chandra Dey, depicting "Dancing girls" 2nd century, Published in *My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh*, 1925 (Dey, 2013)

Image 6 : Amrapali, Roma Mukerji. (Mukherji, 2013)

This painting is from a 1950s series of paintings on the life of the Buddha and probably has to do with the episode of Amrapali serving food to the Buddha. Both she and her attendant wear an antariya, uttariya and cholaka (though the attendant has less finery and of course is a bit darker!). (Mukherji, 2013)

The Saree has been a symbol of identity since centuries. Costume has always been a very important form of non verbal communication and hence it is important to see the Saree beyond just a piece of fabric. The Saree stand for a woman's modesty, identity, community, social, economic and political status in society. The above two images visually depict the saree in two different social scenarios. The draping styles differ and communicate religious and cultural details. The indigenous people were not aware of the art of stitching. It was the foreigners who brought the art of stitching to Indians.

(Anon., n.d.) The Saree in itself still remains an unstitched fabric that was draped around though slowly stitching was seen in supporting garments like the *petticoat* (underskirt) and blouse.

The Saree through religion, mythology and ancient science : The Hindus believed in the purity of the unstitched garments and believed that the naval is the source of all energy, life and creativity. This is the reason why the drapping style of the saree doesn't cover the midriff as as per the religious belief, it shouldn't be covered. (Abdurahiman, 2018). In regards to the ancient Hindu manuscript – the Mahabharata narrates an interesting tale of Draupadi.

According to the ancient Hindu epic, *The Mahabharata*, Draupadi was the wife of the five *Pandavas* (they were 5 brothers & kings). She was also called Panchali. Once *Duryodhana* (their cousin brother and war enemy) challenged the Pandavas to a game of dice and they lost. Finally in a state of utter desperation, he pledged *Draupadi* and lost her as well. *Duryodhana* sent for Draupadi and summoned her to the court of the Kauravas and the haughty Dussasana began undressing her Saree despite her fervent pleas for mercy. Draupadi, in her helpless state implored upon the divine and a miracle occurred. (Foundation, n.d.) As the saree was being pulled, Lord Krishna rescued Draupadi's self respect by increasing the length of the fabric, that after trying for long, the Saree never actually came off. This story narrates the symbolism of the Saree associated with self-respect and identity.

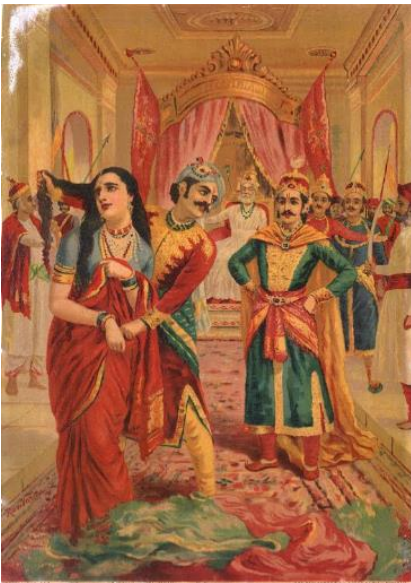


Image 7 : Title: *Draupadi Vastraharan*, Creator: Ravi Varma Press, Date Created: 1898, Physical Dimensions: 35x50 cms, Provenance: The Hemamalini and Ganesh Shivaswamy collection, Bengaluru., Subject Keywords: Raja Ravi Varma, Mahabharata, Raja Ravi Varma, Rights: The Ganesh Shivaswamy Foundation, Bengaluru (Varma, 1898)

This print by the Ravi Varma Press derived from a painting by Raja Ravi Varma depicts the shameful act of the Disrobing of Draupadi. Draupadi is seen in the foreground seeking mercy as the haughty Dussasana mercilessly disrobes her. (Foundation, n.d.)

Transmission & Transformation

Personal observation : Growing up in India, I have been observing and visiting many places across the country to study the paintings, sculptures at museums and historical sites like Ajanta and Ellora caves. My observations have helped me understand the evolution of the drape but also the evolution was not just related to draping styles. The physical transformation of the drape is linked to the social, cultural and ideological changes. We see a major difference in the ways women approached the drape in the ancient eras to medieval and this also connects to how the saree is such a significant part of women's heritage. The draping styles symbolized beauty and sense of freedom for women. The model of respect and identity has been transmitted and transferred from one generation to another. I have witnessed many folk tales around the saree and how it stands for a woman's modesty. In India, in many social rituals and ceremonies even today, sarees are gifted or the bride has specific colors for the saree that symbolize marriage and good fortune. We see a very interesting blend of rituals, application of colors and connectivity of the drape to spirituality. I have observed changes in the draping styles from the ancient culture to the medieval period. There is a major shift in the identity, ideology and draping styles during the Mughal and British rule in India.



Image 8 : *Mohini on Swing* by Raja Ravi Varma (Anon., 2018) (Varma, 2018)

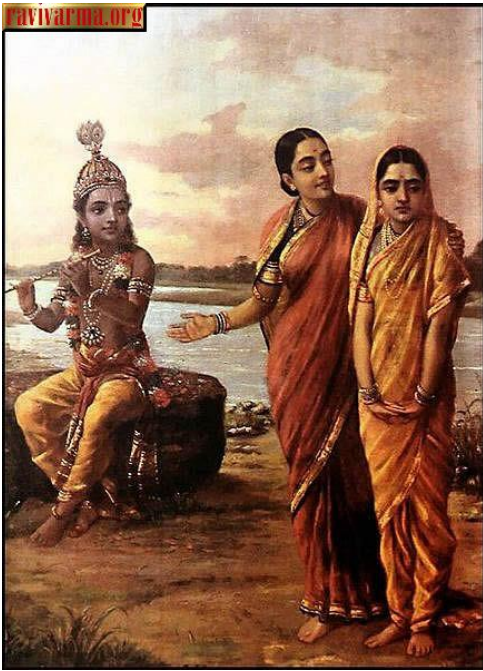


Image 9 : Introducing *Radha to Krishna* by Raja Ravi Varma (Anon., 2018) (Varma, 2018)



Image 10 : *Damyanti Vanavasa* by Raja Ravi Varma (Anon., 2018) (Varma, 2018)

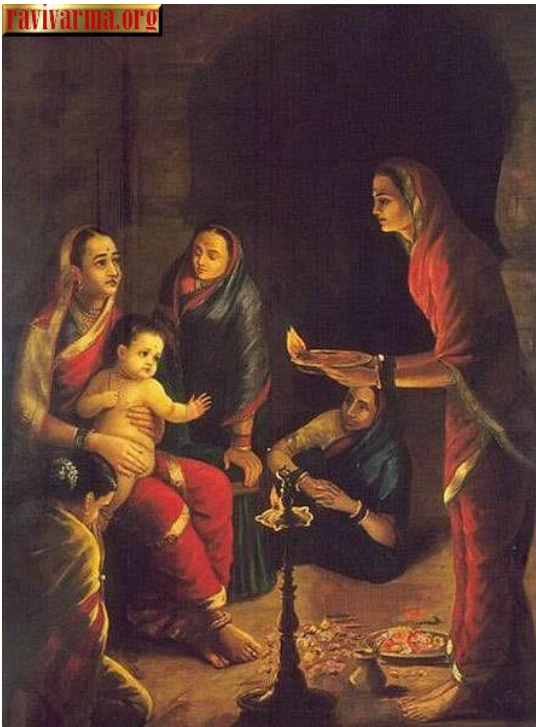


Image 11 : *Krishna Drishta* by Raja Ravi Varma (Anon., 2018) (Varma, 2018)

Raja Ravi Varma was an Indian painter and artist, considered as one of the greatest painters in the history of Indian art. (Anon., n.d.) The above paintings depict women draped in different styles of the saree. These paintings depict characters from ancient Hindu stories.



Images 12 & 13 : Some photographs from my primary research at Tata Gallery, CSMVS Museum, Mumbai, India depicting the influence of the British rule on the Saree

The draping styles of saree see a very drastic shift from the ancient Indian culture to medieval and then modern India. With the Mughal rule in India, we see the introduction to many other forms of clothing. The draping styles also a non-verbal form of communication in India. For example, the concept of wearing a breast cloth in Kerala, until the 19th century, was considered a mark of respect to the upper caste. 'The Guide to Religious Status and Duties of Women, is a Sanskrit

manual that speaks about the idea of married women of a high social status to wear a bodice, women from the middle strata to not wear a bodice, but cover their breasts with the loose end of their saree, and women of lower status to leave their breasts uncovered. (Rathi, 2018) The concept of shame and the freedom to cover for all was introduced to the women much later with Christian missionaries. (Rathi, 2018)



Image 14 : Different documented draping styles in the Malabar region (modern day Kerala) upto the early decades of twentieth century. Source: Wikimedia Commons (Rathi, 2018)

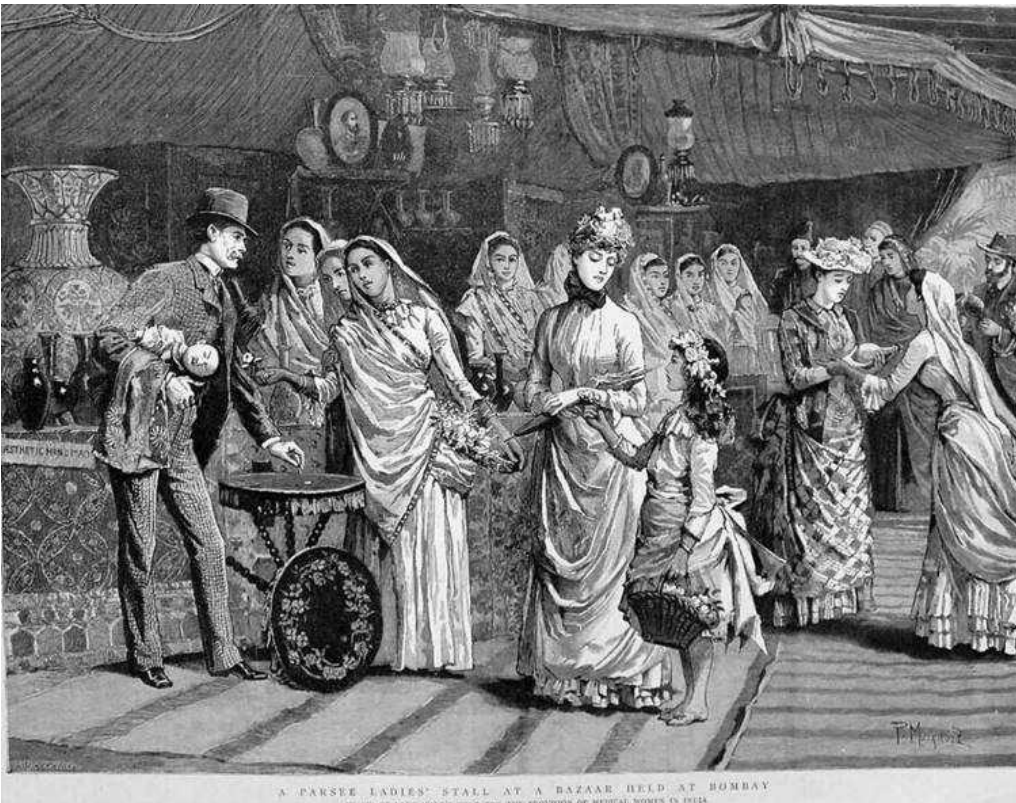


Image 15 : The similarities between English and Indian clothing at one point: A Parsee Ladies' stall at a bazaar held at Bombay, from *The Graphic*, 1889. Source: Columbia.edu (Columbia.edu, n.d.)

A massive change is seen in the saree draping styles during the British period in India. An interesting blend of culture is seen in the Saree. The above image is an interesting illustration depicting the society and women wearing sarees during the Victorian Era. During this period, the saree was blended with European styles like the blouse and the petticoat and today it is commonly used with the Saree. The cut of the modern blouse bore a strong resemblance to the torso of the gown and the petticoats gave the saree a graceful fall and a formal appearance. (Rathi, 2018)

Muslin was a very popular cloth used during this time period. The saree is still seen as symbol of culture, respect, modesty and identity and even during this era, women continued to cover their heads in certain communities as a sign of marriage or sometimes in order to hide their faces.



Image 16: Portrait of three women, probably a mother and her two daughters in Eastern Bengal in the 1860s.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. (Anon., n.d.) From the perspective of the colonizers, who saw 'exposure' or physicality as a marker of savagery? (Rathi, 2018)

"The problem of what to wear in 19th century [India] can best be defined as the problem of how much foreignness to allow into one's clothes," writes cultural anthropologist Emma Tarlo, author, 'Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India'. (Tarlo, 1996). The ideal Indian woman absorbed the Western (Victorian) morality, without embracing Western fashion. (Rathi, 2018)



Image 17: A Parsee Girls School, Bombay (c. 1880s). Source: Columbia.edu (Columbia.edu, n.d.)

The Victorian style blouses were popularized by Gyananda Nandini Debi, the wife of Satyendranath Tagore — brother of Rabindranath Tagore. Her style is a very interesting combination of indigenusness, decorum and modesty and was adopted by the *Brahmo Samaj* women, which came to be known as *Brahmika* saree. (Rathi, 2018) Since centuries, different Indian communities have been draping the saree in different ways and even in present day India, we do see unique draping styles that are the symbol of identity for many women.

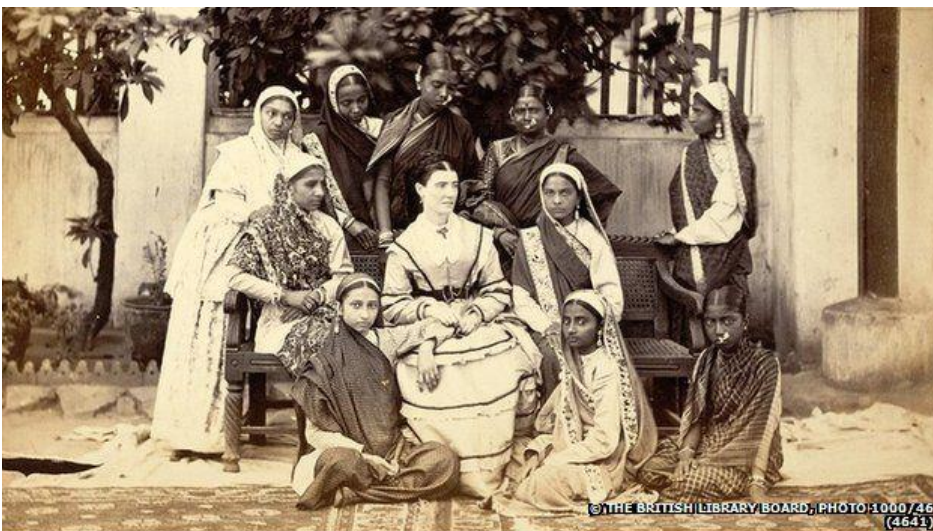


Image 18: A photograph from the colonial period in India. Source : The British Library Board

(Gupta, 2014)

Saree : The Swadeshi Movement (20th Century)



Image 19: Kasturba Gandhi , 11th April 1869 (masuk, n.d.)



Image 20: Kasturba and MK Gandhi (Mukherjee, 2020)

It was during the freedom struggle in India that MK Gandhi created a grass-roots organisation to encourage handloom weaving – this was called the ‘khaddar’ or ‘Khadi’ movement. A socio-cultural narrative was promoted and that called upon Indians to be self-reliant on cotton. Indians took to spinning with a Charkha for rural self-employment. (admin@nie, 2017) Over the years, Khadi is more than a fabric. Khadi is a philosophy and it symbolizes freedom. On 31 August, 1919 Gandhi addressed a meeting of women in Dohad, where he encouraged them to take up spinning: “If our poor sisters do a little spinning in their leisure hours, they can have a little income of their own, and give an impetus to a most essential indigenous handicraft. In order to spread widely the gospel of swadeshi, women’s earnestness is very essential,” (first published in *Young India*, 1919). (Gandhi, 1919) In his 2012 book *Khadi: Gandhi’s Mega Symbol of Subversion*, Peter Gonsalves defines the word *khadi*: “Explicitly, it means the homespun cloth, textile or woven fabric promoted by Gandhi during his swadeshi movement. It also means the way it was used: as clothing, attire, apparel, dress or costume. (Gonsalves, 2012) Implicitly, it covers the pre-fabric phase of cotton cultivation, cotton picking, ginning, carding, combing,

spinning and weaving.” Gonsalves elaborates upon the semiotic power that Gandhi invested in *khadi*. It represented “...eco-political independence, psycho-cultural dignity and socio-religious harmony. This was sartorial communication at its most creative, it is most daring.” (Gonsalves, 2012) The hand spun *Khadi* saree during this time period symbolized independence, freedom and self-reliance.

The Saree in Art and Politics



Image 21 : Amrita Sher-Gil (Anureet, 2020)

Amrita Sher-Gil is one of India’s most iconic painters and we see the legacy and portrayal of women’s identities through her paintings. She has captured her ideas about sexuality, femininity and liberation in canvases, through her varied subjects, most often women from backgrounds much different from her. (Anureet, 2020)



Image 22: Maharani Gayatri Devi (1919-2009), considered a fashion icon in both India and Europe, is known for her iconic chiffon sarees and styling. She was also voted into political office several times. (Anon., n.d.)



Image 23: Indira Gandhi (Left) and Mother Teresa (Right) (Oberoi, 2018)

The saree draping style by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the political leader and 3rd and only female prime minister from India has made an impact across the globe. After her assassination in 1984, the saffron saree with a black border lies within the glass display at the Indira Gandhi Memorial in Lutyens' Delhi. The blood-stained saree is a graphic historian; it tells of Indira Gandhi's campaigns and political rule. (Oberoi, 2018)



Image 24 : Indira Gandhi was described as a connoisseur of the handloom saree. Twitter/@sixteen47Ltd (Oberoi, 2018)
In image 23, we see Mother Teresa in the white and blue border saree which is a symbol of peace, harmony and service. The saree, draped around politicians, activists, and even missionaries is more than just a fabric. In the 2017 book *Indira: India's Most Powerful Prime Minister*, Sagarika Ghose dwells on how the late prime minister's sarees were more a

proclamation of intent than style: “The saree in all its varieties and colours was not just a personal statement of style but a garment of India’s history, both political symbol and aesthetic flourish. Since East and West coexisted in her persona with ease, she popularized the modern handloom-wearing look of the short-haired woman, with the elegant bouffant hairstyle, usually no jewelry or accessories except the man’s wristwatch and the occasional pair of high-heeled shoes.” (Ghose, 2017)



Image 25: Mother (now Saint) Teresa's blue-bordered saree represents the depths of the human heart. Reuters (Oberoi, 2018) The blue-bordered saree is perhaps the most powerful emblem of all, for it represents the incalculable depths of the human heart. (Oberoi, 2018)

The Saree: Influence of Cinema

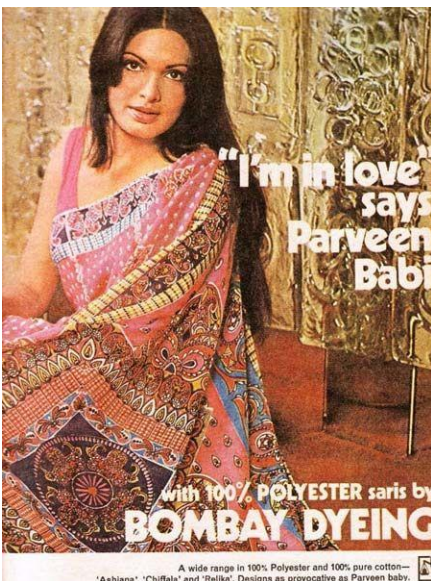


Image 25.1 : Bombay Dyeing advertisement 1960's with Ms. Parveen Babi (one of the most influential celebrities of Indian cinema) Influence of advertising and celebrity styles of saree draping (Vintageads, 2012)

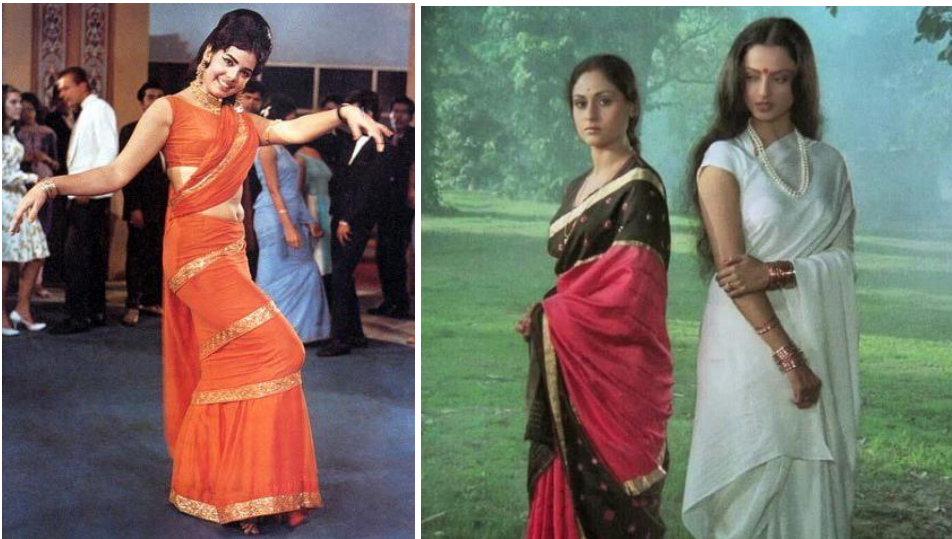


Image 25.2: Scenes of popular celebrities from films (Left: Actress Mumtaz from the film Brahmachari, 1968 (Brahmachari, 1968) ; Right : Actresses Rekha and Jaya Bachchan from the film Silsila, 1981 (Silsila, 1981)) Source: Picture credit - i.pining.com Films have always been very influential in setting role models and styling. In India, the different draping styles seen in films have played a major role in making certain saree drapes iconic and popular. We see a lot of experimentation with style. The 70s was the age of Women power and we see celebrities sporting a look of carefree dressing, confidence and novel styles of saree designs and draping. (Resha, 2020)

PART II

Current Scenarios : Social, Political & Economic Influences (Specifically in terms of culture, gender, identity & women's heritage)



Image 26 : Primary images captured at the 'Maha Kumbh Mela' in Allahabad, 2013, India (Photographer : Author, Ms. Ishi Srivastava) The drapes here represent the draping styles of women in North of India from rural spaces. Women do follow

the draping style of the saree that covers their head as covering the head is a symbol of respect, marriage and modesty in India.

Research question : Why and how did the saree survive for so long?

India has a rich cultural history and has seen the blend of many cultures. The most interesting finding from my research has been to see how the saree kept evolving and women saw themselves, their changing identity through the oldest surviving drape. It has evolved with women and their heritage. Changes in clothing throughout history have always been an adaptation to new styles. None of the earlier styles have been discarded, in fact they have been beautifully transformed. Women have adopted new ways as per the changing social, cultural and economic needs and then adapt to those needs as and when they find it necessary or useful to their daily existence. (Rathi, 2018). Today, the saree is a symbol of heritage, culture, identity but what we also see is our future in this drape. The fact that the saree is very sustainable, can be draped around every body type and is an evolving drape, makes an interesting suggestion towards the future as we are talking about sustainability.

Saree & Sustainability: Textiles of the Saree & Draping Styles

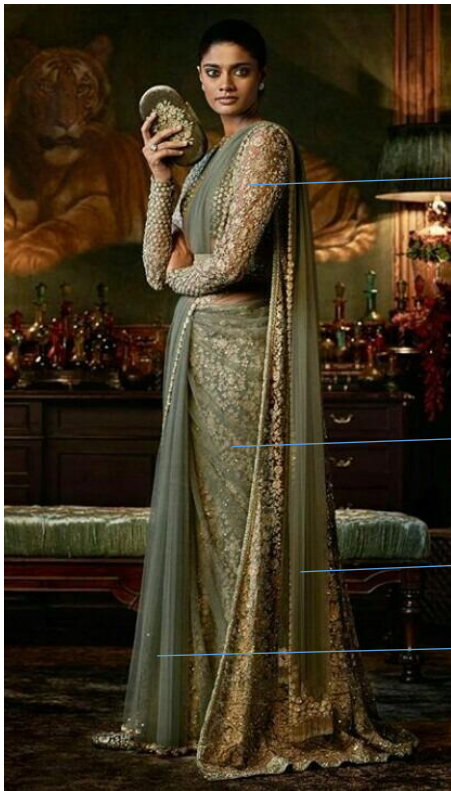
With no pattern cutting and textile wastage, the saree remains one of the most sustainable zero waste clothing styles we know of. Today the saree is made in every possible textile right from polyester to traditional Indian textiles but the 9 yards or 6 yards of fabric is eventually draped around in different ways. The saree can be looked at different aspects in relation to sustainability such as the fabric, weave and draping styles. Though to understand the reasons for the saree to survive so long, one has to definitely look at the science of a saree.

Understanding the science of the saree

The one-piece saree was considered auspicious and was (and still continues to be) worn during important Hindu occasions such as religious ceremonies, weddings, festivals, rituals related to birth of a child, etc. The particular style of draping the saree originated from the belief that the navel and the midriff should be left bare as they were considered the life source (as they connect to the umbilical cord). This is chronicled in the *Natya Shastra*, an ancient South Indian text from around 200 AD. The primeval perception of the beauty of the ideal Indian women (small waist, large bust and flaring hips) as is depicted in various sculptures, was most aptly portrayed in a saree. (Agrawal, 2019) The costume emphasized the waist, accentuated the bust and outlined the hips through the pleated fabric flattering the female. (Anon., n.d.)

It is conceived on the loom as a three-dimensional garment with variables in pattern, weave, and structure between its inner and outer end-pieces and its two borders, which provide drape, strength and weight, while the body enhances its drape. All these elements help to maintain the form of the saree when it is worn. (Chisti, 2010) (review, n.d.) A Riyadh-based researcher of Indian origin describes the science of the saree with the concept of insulation. Much like a thermos flask, the saree has the ability to keep its wearer warm or cool, depending on the weather around her. It's all in the *pallu*, the study shows. Depending on whether you pleat the pallu or drape it across your shoulders, you can alternate between the warmth of a sweater and trousers or the breeziness of a summer skirt and blouse. (Indraganti, 2014)

Indraganti explains in an interview, “Thermal comfort is the primordial reason behind human existence. If it wasn’t for thermal comfort, we wouldn’t be alive.”



The Saree Today

Blouse

Petticoat is usually worn under the saree, so the pleats can be tucked in

Pallu (The fabric that falls behind)

Pleats (The most popular way of draping, they fall in the front)

Image 27 : Saree designed by designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee (Mukherjee, n.d.)



Image 28 : Most popular Indian actress Ms. Deepika Padukone in a saree designed by designer Sabyasachi Mukherji (Mukherjee, n.d.)



Image 29 : Ms.Kim Kardashian draped in a saree by designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee (Fashgroupe, 2018) Image Courtesy : Vogue India

If we study the saree drapes and styling today, the saree is a global garment with its cultural roots in India. The saree has been embraced by many international and global celebrities and today it is more connected to the concept of individuality. The transformative and adaptive ability of the saree with changing times and its connectivity to individuality makes it unique and one of the oldest surviving drapes we know of today.

PART III

Technological advancement & Innovation with the Saree

Artificial Intelligence inspired saree was introduced by IBM in collaboration with Indian designer Gaurav Gupta.

It was designed by designer Gaurav Gupta and the saree made its debut at Vogue Women of the Year Awards in the year 2017. To uniquely celebrate the inspiring women achievers at this event, the saree was fitted with color changing LEDs. Using Watson's Personality Insights and a smart integration, the colors changed based on each winner's personality. (Digital, 2017)



Image 30: Designer Gaurav Gupta with the AI inspired saree design in 2017 (Digital, 2017)Photo / Video courtesy: IBM

Conclusion

The Surviving Saree is not just a project on the evolution of the saree, but looks at the future of Indian Clothing and Sustainability through draping. Saree, being one of the oldest surviving drapes has proved that the ability of a garment to respond to change is the ultimate. Flexibility in transformation, adaptability through multiple social, economic, political, geographic and cultural changes has in fact made the philosophy of the Saree much stronger. The Saree still stands as a symbol of culture, identity, and heritage and above everything today, individuality and sustainability. The Surviving Saree is not just a research project but a voice of the future. The sustainable future we dream of, the zero waste clothing the world is looking at today. Along with sustainability, the saree also answers questions of gender equality and acceptance. Where today the world is speaking of gender neutral clothing, it found way back in the Harappa civilization (Image 1) where we see men draped in fabrics. The Saree drape over the years has been associated with women but I believe the drape is gender free and stands for a sustainable and equal tomorrow. Taking my conclusion further into application of my research and explorations, the outcome of this project consists of series of images and a fashion film created with recycled old sarees styled on men and women wearing masks to express gender neutrality in the current scenario. My outcome is an artistic expression of my research and conceptualization.

Outcome

The Saree : Our Voice for Sustainability

As an artist, stylist and designer, the saree for me is my voice for a sustainable tomorrow. I have been working with zero waste draping styles and looking at recycling old sarees to transform them for artistic expression while preserving their identity. The following series was created in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic and is inter linked with the mask. The Mask and the Saree are genderless forms of self expression. The art of draping is our voice for tomorrow and the voice of gender neutral clothing. I am looking at the future through my Saree and here is a visual representation of my concept.



Images 31, 31.1, 31.2, 31.3, 31.4, 31.5; 31.6 : Saree designed from recycled old sarees and hand painted with abstract artwork inspired from the story of Draupadi In the Hindu epic Mahabharata by Author Ms.Ishi Srivastava

The Surviving Saree – Innovation in Future

(Photographs from my shoot : Our Masked Reality – An artistic expression of the saree)

Concept, direction, styling & saree – Ms. Ishi Srivastava; Photographer – Rahul KV; Model – Zenia B; Hair & Make- up – Fatema

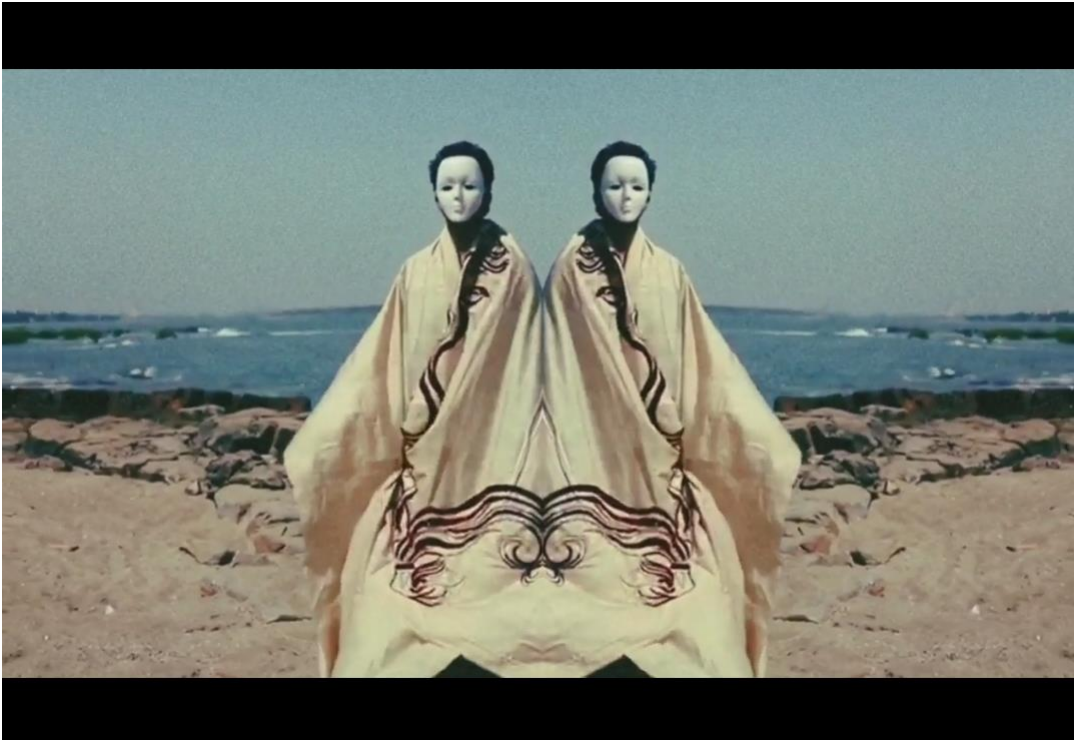


Image 32: Still from my fashion film (The Masked Reality) where I have draped the saree on a man exploring the reality of the pandemic, our existence and the Saree as a gender neutral concept. (Concept, styling, creative direction, saree design: Ms.Ishi Srivastava; Model: Kavi Kumar, Videography: Rahul KV)

Scope of the project

This project can be further taken ahead with applying technology and innovation. The documentary 'The Next Black: A film about the future of clothing' (The Next Black, 2014) explores development of fabric from algae and as a part of my exploration, the project can be further taken ahead to create the world's first saree without textile. The project also looks ahead at inviting artists and space designers to design, plan, and curate an exhibition or space that is an experiential in nature and speaks about the forgotten science of the saree. This can also involve artistic interpretation in forms of installations, poetries, paintings, sculptures that bring out the past, represent the today and look at the tomorrow of the Saree in aspects of gender, identity, sustainability and our voice.

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