

Splendor of Color

Indian Saris



The Sari is a symbol of India in a similar way as curry and the Taj Mahal.

As modern as India is today – the sari is still the preferred dress of women, even in the army as gala uniform for female personnel or in a modified version as uniform of some airlines' flight attendants or for female hotel staff.

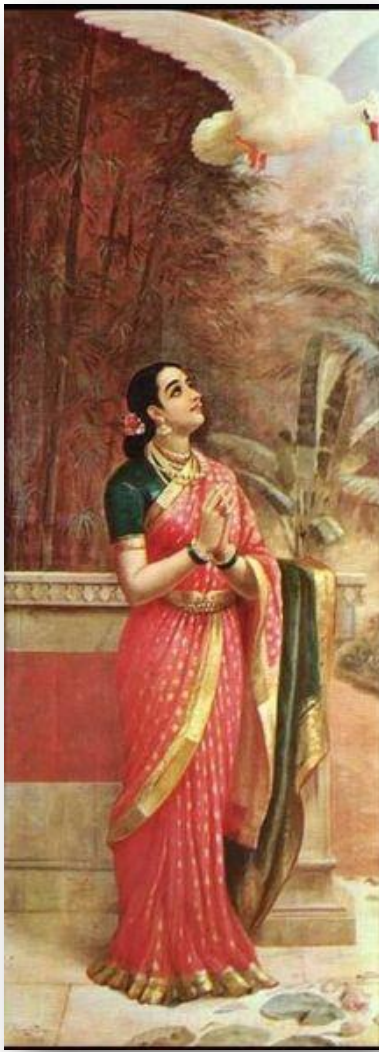
The term sari originates from the Sanskrit word *sati*, meaning *slip of cloth*: a sari consists of a length of cloth without seams, 4 to 9 meters long and traditionally woven from cotton or silk.

Before the invention of weaving machines, manufacturing saris involved considerable effort regarding materials and time – the longer the sari and the finer the yarn and the resulting fabric, the more working hours were required.

It is said that silk saris for women of wealth and high social standing used to be sheer – and so tenuous and fine that one could pull the whole length of it through a ring.

Even more elaborate became the manufacturing process when geometrical, floral or figural motives were woven into the cloth. Another method consisted in dyeing warp or weft (or both) in different colors by sections to obtain a multicolored fabric. A common adornment were patterns in contrasting colors at the lower border, at the loose end of the sari or as repetitive ornaments over the whole length of the cloth. For particularly precious saris, threads of silver or gold were used – and the highest art was to make the back side look as skillfully woven as the front.





But there was still more adornment: with colorful embroidery of silk threads, of silver or gold threads, with pearls, gemstones and mirror work a sari became a veritable treasure.

Women in the villages or in the poor quarters of the cities had to settle with simple cotton saris though, the more lacking financial means, the coarser the fabric. But since necessity is the mother of invention, even the simplest sari was adorned by weaving in contrasting squares or stripes. Also popular: printing the fabric with engraved wood blocks and plant dye or simple batik techniques.

Modern saris are produced on weaving machines and made of synthetic fibers such as polyester, nylon or rayon – easy to clean, crease-proof and no-iron. Also by machines, these fabrics are printed or in a simple process interwoven with patterns, adorned with synthetic metal threads, gemstone and pearl imitations and sometimes with Swarovski crystals.

The edge of the fabric hidden when wearing is without any adornment; a more or less elaborate trim runs along the upper and lower border, merging into an ornament of up to one meter breadth at the other edge, decorating the *pallaw*, the loose end of the sari.

The origins of the sari are unknown; the very first depicted sari was found on the statue of a priest wearing a draped sari-like dress, dating from the Indus Valley Civilisation between 2800 and 1800 BC. Ancient verses from what is Sri Lanka today describe women in luxurious lengths of fabric that resemble a sari.

Some costume historians believe that the sari developed from the *dhoti*, a piece of cloth wound around the hips, coming down to the calves or ankles and worn by men. Statues from the first to the sixth century depicting female dancers in overlong *dhotis* and veils covering their torsos support this hypothesis.

Whatever its origins may be: pieces of clothing resembling saris – lengths of fabric, scarves, veils – have been the traditional dress of Indian women for many centuries, and the current pattern of the sari has been in use for several centuries as well.

Neither is clear if the top, the *choli*, came to India with the arrival of the British, concerned about chastity, or if it developed over time out of a simple



scarf covering the chest. At any rate, there is evidence that until well into the twentieth century, women in southern India left their torsos partly or fully uncovered under the sari and that there are some rural areas where women still don't wear any *cholis* today.

Without a doubt, the thin petticoats worn under the sari today, giving also help with donning the length of cloth, are an invention of modern times – just like there are by now low-backed *cholis* and *cholis* after western fashion, e.g. with neckholder.

And while every region of India follows an individual pattern to drape a sari, one traditional way has been established as the most common: the inner end of the sari is tucked into the petticoat, wound once around the hips and gathered in folds at the front, also tucked into the petticoat. The sari is again wound around the waist and then draped diagonally over the torso. The *pallaw*, the loose end, may flow freely over the shoulder or the back, be tucked into the waistband or cover the head; according to another version, it may be put around the shoulders like a stole.

The hem of the sari should cover the feet but must not touch the floor – and show as many gathered folds at the front as possible.

Bollywood movies show how to flirt with the help of a sari: if the end of the sari falls from the shoulder, this means an invitation; if the *pallaw* is coyly drawn over the head, the wearer of the sari is definitely the one. And a sari dripping from rain is the Indian equivalent of the wet t-shirt.

The choice of the right sari though is not made by individual taste or fashion: caste, ethnic origin and religion determine colors and patterns. The lower the caste the wearer of the sari belongs to, the bolder the patterns. Light or mute colors and modest patterns emphasize a high social class.

Apart from that, two colors are reserved for special occasions resp. periods of life, regardless of social grouping: red is the color for wedding saris, and white saris are worn by widows.



To use saris not as dress, but for decoration purposes is not an invention of western interior designers: in India, discarded saris are also reused as curtains, throws, baby cradles and baby slings or blankets. Hardly surprising: saris, no matter what color, what style, are simply too beautiful to be thrown away.

And nothing compares to the abundance of colors and patterns displayed in a sari shop, be it in German cities like Munich or Frankfurt, in Singapore or San Francisco.

Here in Germany, these shops are somewhat hidden in the streets around the main train station, between Turkish grocers, secondhand dealers or adult shops; only a small sign outside gives a hint – and every time I go there, I am completely overwhelmed by this luxurious beauty, this splendor of color.

How to ...

To Drape A Saree



The two essentials

The sari is worn with a choli or blouse (with or without sleeves) in the same or contrasting colour.

1

To tuck the sari, you need an ankle-length petticoat of satin, taffeta or poplin in a matching colour. The petticoat is tied snugly with a draw-string beneath the navel.



2

To wear the sari
Begin at the right. Take the inner end of the sari, hold it straight $\frac{1}{4}$ " above the floor, then tuck the top edge at the waist, inside the petticoat.



3

Go on tucking till you reach the left, then continue at the back and up to the starting point, taking care that the bottom edge falls evenly all round.



4

Now, with your left hand measure the pallav i.e. the end piece which falls from the shoulder to the knee. Then, with your right hand pull forward the in-between part of the sari, measuring about 3 yards.



5

Tuck a portion of it tightly from the left to right of centre. This is to ensure the smooth fall of the pleats, and give your figure a trim look.



6

Let the pallav slide to the floor so that it doesn't get crushed or ceased. Then start making the "kullies" or pleats. Begin at the right, leaving about 6". Hold the sari taut and your right hand in position as shown in the photograph.



7

Now with your left hand bring the edge between your right hand's first and second fingers and back under your thumb. This measures the first pleat which should be about 4" wide.



Slip your forefinger out, and measure the second pleat. Go on pleating till you reach the tucked end at the left. You will have made 6 or 7 pleats as shown in the photograph below. It's quite easy after a little practice.



8

Hold the bunch of pleats in position facing left, adjust them at knee length one on top of the other and make sure they fall level at the bottom.



9

Now carefully tuck the kullies at the waist, slightly to left of centre. Secure them with a safety pin about 18" below the waist, to keep them in position



10

Neatly tuck the edge at the left, and take the remaining sari round the back.



11

Pass the top edge under your right arm, across the front, then drape the pallav over your left shoulder and arm. Hold it in position with a pin fastened inside the choli just beneath your shoulder.



Perhaps you prefer to drape the pallav in front as shown on the cover? All you do is - bring the pallav in front over your right shoulder (as you would drape a stole).

Image sources: p. 1 below, pp. 5-6: Author's collection. P. 1 above, p. 2 above Raja Ravi Varma, end of 19th century; p. 2 below Leiden University Library, KITLV, image 87971; p. 3 M. V. Dhurandhar, 1928: all via Wikimedia Commons.