
Clothing: A Social History

Question 1: Explain the reasons for the changes in clothing patterns and materials in the eighteenth century.

Answer: After the 18th century, the colonisation of most of the world by Europe, the spread of democratic ideals and the growth of an industrial society completely changed the ways in which people thought about dress. People could use styles and materials that were drawn from other cultures and locations. Western dress styles for men were adopted worldwide.

Question 2: What were the sumptuary laws in France?

Answer: From 1294 to the time of the French Revolution in 1789, the people of France were expected to strictly follow the sumptuary laws. These rules tried to regulate the lifestyles of the lower classes by regulating the amount and type of clothes they bought. The laws tried to control:

- the behaviour of those considered socially inferior
- preventing them from wearing certain clothes
- consuming certain foods and beverages
- hunting game in certain areas.

Question 3: Give any two examples of the ways in which European dress codes were different from Indian dress codes.

Answer: Two examples of the ways in which European dress codes were different from Indian dress codes:

- In Europe, dress codes were enacted on a socio-economic bias, while in India, these norms were along the lines of caste.
- While the lower classes in Europe were barred from wearing specific materials, the lower castes in India were barred from wearing particular clothes; for example, the Shanar women, who were disallowed from covering their upper bodies, like the higher caste women.

Question 4: In 1805, a British official, Benjamin Heyne, listed the manufactures of Bangalore which included the following:

- Women's cloth of different musters and names
- Coarse chintz
- Muslins
- Silk cloths

Of this list, which kind of cloth would have definitely fallen out of use in the early 1900s and why?

Answer: Muslin would have fallen out of use as machine cloth had flooded the Indian markets and was cheaper. Muslin was expensive and hence was not used. In fact, the Industrial Revolution brought about a complete change in which muslin cloth had no place.

Question 5: Suggest reasons why women in nineteenth century India were obliged to continue wearing traditional Indian dress even when men switched over to the more convenient Western clothing. What does this show about the position of women in society?

Answer: Women in the 19th century India were obliged to continue wearing traditional Indian dress even when men switched over to more convenient western clothes. This clearly shows that women during that time were accorded a lower status than men in society. They were not allowed to be aware of what was going on outside the house and were confined within the four walls of their homes. Modernity and change were not for them.

Question 6: Winston Churchill described Mahatma Gandhi as a ‘seditious Middle Temple Lawyer’ now ‘posing as a half naked fakir’.

What provoked such a comment and what does it tell you about the symbolic strength of Mahatma Gandhi’s dress?

Answer: Mahatma Gandhi went to the Viceroy’s house clad in a dhoti. This provoked such a comment. This signified the symbolic strength of his dress. It showed the pride he had for his nation and its people, especially the peasants. It also signified how he identified with his people and the strength he derived from them.

Question 7: Why did Mahatma Gandhi’s dream of clothing the nation in khadi appeal only to some sections of Indians?

Answer: Mahatma Gandhi’s dream of clothing the nation in khadi appealed only to some sections of Indians because of different reasons. For the socially deprived, emancipation opened new doors – they wanted to experiment with Western dress styles now that dress restrictions did not hamper with their wishes anymore. This adoption of Western clothing was symbolic of new-found self and public respect for them. Others found khadi expensive to buy, and women in south India complained that they could not afford nine yards of khadi (standard length of the sari in the south).