



Understanding clothing and defiance of dress codes

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(Mains GS 1 : Social Empowerment, Communalism, Regionalism & Secularism)

Context:

In the present world, history is aggressively being redefined as moral science thus citizens need to learn ways of thinking historically, from which there may emerge some understanding, some tolerance, and hopefully, new forms of civility.

Sustained and perpetuated:

- A history of clothing is of immense value as it will introduce students to thinking more about what 'dress codes', and opposition to them, have done in the past, and what they signify.
- Dress codes might symbolised and affirmed power structures – whether these were colonial, upper caste, religious or patriarchal power structures.
- By using their power and even violence, states, religious authorities, upper castes, or even male heads of families could insist that people conform to prescribed ways of dressing so that societal hierarchies were sustained and perpetuated.

Thinking historically:

- The last 200 years of the history equally reveals the numerous and continual attempts made to challenge these clothing hierarchies, and adopt new codes of clothing.

- From the history one can know that wearing the hijab has not always been the choice made by young Muslim women, who have spent a good part of the 20th century throwing it off, in a rejection of patriarchal community authority.
- Thinking historically allows us to see the subversiveness of both these kinds of actions, i.e, adopting the hijab and throwing it off, depending on the context within which the woman makes that choice.
- Thus, thinking historically also allows us to understand what is disturbed when women, who are supposed to be only the bearers of 'culture', tradition and honour, wear or shed clothes in defiance of those who wish to 'save' or 'protect' them.

Debates in the past:

- A history of clothing will allow us to understand how such debates arose in the past and how they were resolved.
- At the beginning of the 19th century, it was customary for British officials to follow the Indian etiquette and remove their footwear in the courts of ruling kings or chiefs.
- There were some British officials who were comfortable in Indian clothes but in 1830, Europeans were forbidden from wearing Indian clothes at official functions.
- Indians, meanwhile, were required to respect their own customs and take off their shoes when entering a government institution.
- This was seen as humiliating to the colonised elite and was challenged which took almost 20 years of petitioning for the strict 'shoe respect' rules to change.

Breast cloth disturbances:

- Dress reform debates had grown to a crescendo between Indians themselves in places like Travancore in southern Kerala, where women and men conventionally did not clothe their upper bodies, especially when they appeared before deities or upper castes.
- Partly as a result of missionary work, there was a clamour for dress reform and in 1822, women of the 'Shanar' (later called Nadar) caste were attacked by upper caste Nairs in public places for wearing a cloth across their breasts.
- These 'breast cloth disturbances' as referred to by historians ended successfully when in 1859 the Travancore government passed an order permitting the Nadar women to use the breast covering; thus, gained the self-respect that they had long been denied.

Uneven dress reform:

- Dress reforms were far from uniform as even in late 19th century Kerala, it remained customary for women, including upper caste women, to keep the upper body bare.
- However, in Bengal, there were anguished cries heard from as early as 1872 to reform the scandalously fine and transparent clothing of women, worn without petticoats and underwear, and to urgently produce a more moralised and decent attire.
- Credit goes to Gnanadanandini Devi Tagore for bringing the Parsi style of sari-wearing into widespread subcontinental use, adding layers to the draped sari, a blouse and a skirt as well as shoes and socks.

Various examples:

- There is strength in thinking historically and understanding the great deliberation that has gone into the production of styles of dress over the last two centuries alone.
- The symbolic strength of M.K. Gandhi's experiments with clothing and his adoption of the peasant costume after more than 20 years of dressing like his colonial masters needs to be understood.
- Many other Indians had also experimented with styles of self-representation, ranging from Ramakrishna (who adopted Mohomedan clothes to understand Islam better) to Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh and Rabindranath Tagore, who all chose very different but deliberate ways of communicating their spirituality or Indianness through their sartorial choices.
- B.R. Ambedkar's decided to adhere to the three-piece (western) suit as a sign of social mobility, of modernity, and in defiance of upper caste proscriptions on lower caste dress.

Conclusion:

The rich, varied, and contradictory past is our heritage, thus school and colleges must bring discussion, debate, greater civility and respect for difference for growth of students fully.