

The Costume Art of Bengal: Saree

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Abstract

The history of the saree in Bengal is intertwined with the evolution of its weaving industry, dating back to ancient times. As a symbol of Bengal's cultural heritage, the saree has evolved from simple cotton fabrics to complex, intricately woven garments crafted from a variety of materials like silk, cotton, and wild fibers. Bengali weavers are celebrated for their mastery of weaving techniques, often using threads and dyes to express their creativity. Despite challenges like the introduction of machine-powered looms, the traditional handloom saree endures as a unique representation of Bengal's artistic and cultural essence, captivating people worldwide with its beauty, craftsmanship, and rich history.

The history of the saree in Bengal is both ancient and aristocratic, intricately linked to the development of the region's weaving industry. The origins of weaving in Bengal and the history of the saree are deeply interconnected, with the saree serving as a symbol of Bengal's cultural pride since its earliest days. Even today, the saree remains a unique and incomparable representation of Bengal's culture, tradition, and heritage. The foundation of the weaving industry in Bengal dates back to the BC era, and the saree is regarded as the quintessential art canvas of Bengal's weavers. Instead of relying solely on color and cotton, these artisans use intricate thread designs to infuse the saree with the essence of their creativity and emotions. Bengali sarees are crafted from a variety of materials, including different fibers, cotton yarn, silk yarn, coarse cotton, soft cotton, and wild silk from hill forests. Regardless of the materials used, the saree's enchanting form is a testament to the weavers' unparalleled skill. Each saree tells a story, akin to a fairy tale or a poem. Although the saree is often viewed as a form of handicraft, textile experts regard it as a remarkable and creative work of art. Throughout the ages, Bengali weavers have honed their craft to capture regional cultural traits, variations, and folk-art traditions in their creations. The saree, with its rich yarns, vibrant colors, intricate weaves, and diverse designs, is a unique poem of colorful fabrics that embodies the regional essence of Bengal.¹ Since ancient times, Bengal's weavers have mastered the skills of

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1. Sven Beckard, *A World History of Cotton, Empire of Cotton, A Global History*, Translated by Bishendu Nanda, Kalavati Mudra, Calcutta, July 2021, p. 35

inventing new fibers, weaving techniques, and creating herbal dyes and color combinations. As time has progressed, so too has the saree, evolving alongside advancements in weaving techniques and styles. Despite facing numerous challenges and relocating over the centuries, weavers have continually incorporated new arts and crafts into their work. With the advent of machine-powered looms, the tradition of hand-woven looms has been challenged repeatedly, but skilled weavers have persevered and maintained their craft.

In the face of life's hardships, these artisans have demonstrated exceptional skill and creativity in saree weaving. The elegance of handloom weaving is distinct and cherished by fashion enthusiasts worldwide. Today, the saree continues to proudly showcase its remarkable artistry to people around the globe. The sarees of Bengal have captivated, fascinated, and astonished the world with their exquisite art, diverse features, beauty, vibrant colors, and intricate weaving techniques.

Bengali sarees are an integral part of the works of poets, lyricists, painters, sculptors, and artists across various fields. The emergence of the saree dates back to the dawn of civilization,² with the concept originating from the use of unstitched fabric. As humans began weaving, they utilized cloth as clothing, and the saree has been a staple of women's attire in the Indian subcontinent ever since. It can be said that since the Stone Age, the practice of using textiles began in the Indian subcontinent, with the prototype of the saree evolving over time into its current form.³ The history of the saree is intertwined with the land and culture of Bengal, a creation that has been passed down through generations and remains vibrant today.

The history of clothing in Bengal dates back to the BC era,⁴ when the region was a part of ancient India. Therefore, the history of Bengal's costume is deeply connected to that of ancient India. India's clothing history is rich and continuous, spanning approximately 5,000 years.⁵ The Indus Valley Civilization is credited as the first to develop textile production,⁶ suggesting that its people were pioneers in the art of weaving. Archaeological excavations at Mohenjo-Daro have uncovered statues with cloth draped around their waists,⁷ along with other textiles made from cotton. This indicates that the early inhabitants of the Indus Valley were among the first to utilize cotton, which played a crucial role in the development of weaving.⁸ In Sanskrit, cotton was known as *karpasa*, and in Greek, it was referred to as *carpus ores*. The original

2. Hosne Ara Shahed, *Saree*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, Feb. 1996, p. 10

3. *Ibid.*, p. 40

4. Shawon Akando, *Bangladesher Tantshilpa*, Deshal, Dhaka, February 2018, p. 25

6. Sven Beckard, *A World History of Cotton, Empire of Cotton, A Global History*, p. 34

7. Irfan Habib, *Indus Civilization*, National Book Agency Pvt. Ltd. (Translated by Kaveri Bose), Jan. 2019, p. 29

8. Sven Beckard, *A World History of Cotton, Empire of Cotton, A Global History*, p. 34

garments of this era were likely made from cotton, which is believed to be the precursor to the modern saree.⁹

The Greek historian Herodotus noted that Alexander the Great and his companions were astonished to see the people of India dressed in cotton garments. From their accounts, it is evident that they believed these garments came from a cloth-producing tree, similar to how primitive societies used bark for clothing.¹⁰ This suggests that the Greeks had not yet mastered the technique of weaving cotton yarn. India was likely the birthplace of weaving cotton textiles, a craft that later spread to Assyria, Egypt, and Southern Europe.¹¹ The origins of the saree can thus be traced back to the early development of cloth weaving.¹²

While there are no written records detailing the costumes of ancient Bengal, insights can be gleaned from various archaeological artifacts such as terracotta plaques and sculptures. Findings from sites like Chandraketugarh, Mahasthangarh, Paharpur, and Mainamati provide visual evidence of Bengal's ancient weaving industry.¹³ Additionally, the cloth draped on the statue (*Zakhsmi Murti*) from Didarganj in Bihar resembles the saree, suggesting the existence of similar garments.¹⁴ These fabrics were remarkably fine and transparent, highlighting the advanced techniques and skills of the textile artisans of that era.

Women wearing saree-like garments are mentioned in descriptions of clothing from the ancient Indus Valley Civilization. During the Sunga period (200-50 BC), terracotta figures depicted women in sarees. In the Gandhara civilization (300-550 AD), sculptures feature garments similar to the saree. Women of the Maurya era, around the third century BC, were known for their fine clothing. By the fifth century AD, during the Gupta period, ancient cave paintings at Ajanta and Ellora, along with various sculptures, depict figures wearing patterned silk garments resembling the modern saree.¹⁵

The discovery of bone needles at the Hastinapur excavations indicates that sewing was known during the Mahabharata era.¹⁶ Literary sources from ancient times provide further insights and information about the costumes of that period.

The history of the saree is deeply interwoven with the cultural and historical fabric of ancient and medieval India, particularly in Bengal. The saree is mentioned in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* during the Maurya era, highlighting its significance as a

9. Mala Dutta Roy, *History of Sari*, p. 8

10. Sven Beckard, *A World History of Cotton, Empire of Cotton, A Global History*, p. 34

11. *Ibid.*, p. 38

12. Mala Dutta Roy, *History of Sari*, p. 8

13. Shawon Akando, *Bangladesher Tantshilpa*, p. 33

14. *Ibid.*, p. 22

15. Nazly Laila Monjur, *Ajanta*, Prothama prakason, Dhaka, July 2016, p. 16

16. Mala Dutta Roy, *History of Sari*, p. 10

garment made from various materials such as *urna* (thread), *balk* (tree fiber), *carpus* (cotton), and *dukula* (fine cloth).¹⁷ This ancient text underscores the advanced textile weaving practices of the time, particularly in the production of sarees.

During the Gupta period (300-550 AD), terracotta figurines were depicted wearing saree-like garments. The renowned Gupta poet Kalidasa described embroidered cloth in his poetry, illustrating the cultural importance and artistic sophistication of textiles during this era. The saree is also prominently featured in ancient literature and poetry. Images of dancers wearing sarees are found in various texts, including the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Gita*, the Bible, Buddhist literature, Jain literature, and the ancient *Natyashastra* of India.¹⁸ In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's garment is believed to have been a saree, with its long and flowing design inspiring the term 'Draupadi's cloth'.

The 7th-century poet Banbhata also references patterned textiles in his writings,¹⁹ indicating the saree's continued presence and evolution throughout history. Sarees are mentioned in the fiction, epics, and lyrics of ancient and medieval poets.²⁰ In the literature of the Charyapada era, the saree is mentioned, describing the laughter of Kanchan-Varani wearing a blue saree. Sita Devi in *Ayodhya* is said to have worn a saree, and Radha is described as wearing a cloud-patterned saree during her visits to Krishna. Chandidas wrote of the charm of the blue saree, reflecting its enduring allure:

"The blue saree is charming; I look at the side in Uchli. What else do you do, surrender on feet, I am a servant, I hope."

In *Shakuntala Kavya*, Shakuntala is depicted wearing two coats of silk in conversations with her friends during her journey to Patigrah. The term *pattashati* (silk saree) appears in the biography of Sri Chaitanya, further attesting to the garment's historical significance. Thus in ancient and medieval times, *Shati* or *Saree* has been mentioned in various ways.²¹

The saree's origin and evolution can be traced back to ancient India, with its invention believed to have occurred thousands of years ago in Bengal. Historically, this garment was prevalent across the regions that are now Bangladesh, East, South, and West India. Today, the saree remains a prominent and cherished garment in Bengal, West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, and Sindh

17. Dr. Manabendu Bandopadhyay (Edited and Translated), *Kautiliyam Arthashastram*, Vol. I, Sanskrit Book Depository, Calcutta 2002, pp. 274, 275

18. Mala Dutta Roy, *History of Sari*, p. 10

19. Hosne Ara Shahed, *Saree*, pp. 18-19

20. Mala Dutta Roy, *History of Sari*, p. 21

21. Hosne Ara Shahed, *Saree*, p. 8

Pradesh. Bengali women, in particular, are often seen as the epitome of saree wearers, proudly representing this traditional attire.

The weavers of this region have contributed significantly to the history of textile art, particularly in terms of textile weaving, fiber innovation, dyeing processes, and diverse design techniques. Their skills and knowledge have played a crucial role in shaping the saree's development over time.

Before the birth of Christ, the ancient Aryan race migrated from Iran to India, bringing with them their Aryan language, which belongs to the Vedic and Sanskrit periods (1500 to 600 BC). Evidence suggests that the *satika* was in use until 600 BC,²² with the word saree deriving from the Sanskrit word *shati*.²³ However, many scholars believe *shati* to be a pre-Sanskrit term, as the Aryans adopted numerous words from the Austric language. The saree is variously referred to as *satka*, *satika*, or *sati* in different contexts, with the word *satka* appearing in Pali compilations of Aryan language.

According to the Vedas, the Aryans were skilled in weaving cloth from cotton thread, as evidenced by the mention of terms such as *tantum*, *tantra*, *suchi*, and *siban*.²⁴ In ancient East, South, and West India, there was no tradition of wearing stitched clothing. Both men and women wore a single garment, known as *dhoti* for men and *shati* or *saree* for women.²⁵ At the time, wearing sewn clothes was not in accordance with religious precepts. The arrival of the Aryans marked the beginning of the practice of wearing stitched garments.²⁶ Even today, Hindu monks, Buddhist monks, followers of the Vaishnava sect, and Muslims maintain the tradition of wearing unstitched garments, such as the shroud during Hajj.

In Sanskrit and Pali literature, this garment was referred to as *antariya*. Sculptures from the Gandhara, Mathura, and Gupta periods depict male and female figures wearing this inner garment. In the Rigveda, this garment was called *nibi*, which later evolved into the *dhoti*.²⁷ Both men and women wore this garment.

The evolution of clothing continued with the introduction of additional pieces such as the *uttariya*, an upper garment. Braces to cover the bosom of women have been mentioned since Vedic times,²⁸ eventually evolving into the modern blouse or choli. Over time, these separate pieces—*inner*, *uttariya*, and *bakshabandhani*—were combined into a single long cloth, six to nine yards in length, and layered alternately

22. *Ibid.*, p. 7

23. *Ibid.*

24. Dr. Manabendu Bandopadhyay, *Kautiliyam Arthashastram*, pp. 274- 275

25. Hosne Ara Shahed, *Saree*, p. 8

26. Mala Dutta Roy, *History of Sari*, p. 14

27. *Ibid.*, p. 12

28. *Ibid.*, p. 13

to form the saree as we know it today.²⁹ The saree has undergone numerous innovations and adaptations over the centuries, with variations in draping styles depending on the period and region.

Analyzing these historical developments, it is evident that the roots of the saree are deeply embedded in the ancient BC era. The saree has evolved through different stages over time, beginning with the combination of three distinct fabrics.³⁰ This journey of the saree continues to unfold, with evidence of its improvement and progress found in historical records, social narratives, poetry, sculptures, and artworks from various perspectives. These contexts highlight the antiquity and nobility of the saree.

The relationship between sarees and Bengali women is akin to two petals of the same flower. The saree embodies strength, calmness, and wonder, reflecting the eternal sense of beauty and personality of Bengali women. As an unstitched long cloth, the saree remains at the pinnacle of the global fashion world. While numerous types of stitched garments have emerged over the years, the saree retains its undisputed status. Even today, the saree continues to hold its status, importance, and appeal. Despite facing challenges throughout history, the saree has never faltered or strayed from its path. Overcoming all obstacles, the saree continues to capture the essence of beauty. No other garment in the world boasts a heritage as rich as that of the saree.

The saree has never lost its individuality in the face of acceptance and rejection; rather, it has evolved into new forms, becoming more diverse and colorful, all while maintaining its unique identity. No other garment in the world possesses such a captivating form of beauty and self-possession. Despite the prolonged exploitation and influence of foreign rule, the saree has managed to maintain its influence and prestige.

However, the traditional saree of West Bengal is currently facing challenges. The influx of foreign clothing culture, which does not align with our soil, water, climate, and traditions, is beginning to encroach upon our cultural heritage. No dignified nation in the world should lose or compromise its ethnic heritage and culture for anything else. It is through the preservation and celebration of ethnic identity and cultural independence that a nation's true values are upheld. This responsibility to maintain our heritage is a fundamental part of our identity and values.

Therefore, let us embrace our saree with love and public awareness, rather than witnessing its neglect or decline. By cherishing and promoting the saree, we can ensure that it continues to be a symbol of our rich cultural heritage and a testament to our enduring values.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, p. 15