



Dress, Identity, And Urban Change: A Study Of Clothing Practices Along Mahatma Gandhi Road Of Thiruvananthapuram

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Abstract

This article examines the historical transition of clothing practices and associated lifestyles along Mahatma Gandhi Road, one of the principal arterial corridors of Thiruvananthapuram. Situating dress within the intersecting frameworks of caste, gender, colonial intervention, and urban modernity, the study traces how clothing evolved from a socially regulated marker of hierarchy to a consumer-oriented expression of identity. Central to this transformation were socio-religious reform movements such as the Channar Lahala (Upper Cloth Mutiny), which challenged caste-based restrictions on bodily cover and catalysed wider social change in nineteenth-century Travancore. The introduction of tailoring units, sewing machines, missionary influence, and Western sartorial norms further reshaped clothing practices across communities.

Keywords: Arterial road; colonial modernity; city- making; upper cloth rebellion; caste hierarchy; consumer culture; body and identity

Article

The stretch of Mahatma Gandhi Road between the Overbridge and the Cantonment today accommodates a dense concentration of lifestyle establishments, including textile showrooms, footwear outlets, and bag shops. A historical reading of this arterial corridor reveals significant transformations in patterns of dress and everyday lifestyle, reflecting broader processes of social change in Thiruvananthapuram. In earlier periods, clothing practices were relatively simple, and garments were largely stitched by hand. The subsequent introduction of tailoring units marked a decisive shift. In their early phase, these units relied on manual techniques, but the arrival of sewing machines radically altered production processes, increasing speed and efficiency. The novelty of the machine attracted considerable public curiosity, and it came to be popularly known as *soothra thayyal*. Panar communities are remembered as pioneers of stitching practices in the city, and with mechanisation, tailoring shops multiplied—many clustering around the Cantonment area due to the presence of British families and the demand they generated.

The transformation of clothing practices in Travancore cannot be understood without reference to the larger socio-political struggles surrounding bodily regulation and caste. A landmark moment occurred on 26 July 1859, when Maharaja Aayilyam Thirunal issued a proclamation granting lower-caste women the right to cover their breasts. The success of the Channar Lahala—also known as the Upper Cloth Mutiny or *Maaru Marakkal Samaram*—after years of sustained struggle, is widely regarded as a catalytic event in Kerala's social renaissance. This movement inspired a series of reformist agitations, including protests against *oozhiyam vela* (unpaid labour), restrictions on temple entry, and limitations on the use of public roads. Importantly, the victory also influenced upper-caste communities, prompting shifts in their own clothing norms. While lower-caste women were historically prohibited from covering the upper body, upper-caste women too were subject to restrictive customs: Namboodiri women did not cover their chests within domestic spaces and were required to remove upper cloths in temples; Nair women were forbidden from covering their breasts in the presence of Brahmins. Ezhava women secured the right to cover their breasts in 1865, while similar changes among Nair women occurred much later. Eventually, even Brahmin communities relinquished the demeaning conditions imposed on their women.

Western influence, particularly through Christian missionaries such as Charles Mead and Malt in the early nineteenth century, played a crucial role in exposing the inequities of these practices. Migrant labourers returning from plantation economies in Sri Lanka brought with them European modes of dress and consumption, while converts adopted upper garments as markers of social advancement. Dress and bodily appearance functioned as clear indicators of caste and religious identity: the *kudumi* (tuft) signified Brahmin identity, close-cropped hair marked Christians, and skull caps or turbans identified Muslims. Over time, these visible distinctions diminished, giving way to greater uniformity in dress. Men across communities increasingly shared similar styles—wearing a white *mundu* at home, often leaving the upper body uncovered, with variations in fabric quality reflecting economic status. Upper-class men donned *jooba* or long shirts when outside, and on festive occasions wore finely textured upper cloths with *kasavu* borders. In urban settings, printed shirts and bush coats became common among white-collar workers and professionals. Poorer sections, particularly peasants and rural labourers, continued to rely on the *mundu* and *thorthu*, reserving shirts for special occasions.

Female attire, while sharing a general preference for white clothing across communities, displayed marked variations in style. Christian women adopted distinctive white garments with fan-shaped pleats at the back and long-sleeved blouses, while Muslim women preferred coloured attire in patterns that differentiated them from others. Despite the persistence of these traditional forms, the later decades witnessed substantial change. Educated and younger women across communities gradually abandoned customary styles, adopting new fashions that aligned more closely with pan-Indian trends. The use of fine silks became common among women of different classes, signalling both aesthetic preference and social mobility.

European influence further accelerated changes in clothing practices. Locals who adopted Western dress after education or exposure abroad were colloquially referred to as 'local sahibs'. British women and missionary wives exerted a particularly strong influence on female attire, challenging local norms that restricted the length and form of women's clothing. Missionary women commonly wore long skirts, gowns, and full-sleeved jackets paired with sarees—garments that extended to the ankle and sharply contrasted with prevailing local conventions. By the mid-twentieth century, tailoring establishments such as Ananda Tailors and Everest Tailors had become well known, alongside the presence of Usha Tailoring Machines showrooms from the 1950s. The emergence of specialised retail spaces, including Shoe Bazaar and Bag Bazaar, marked some of the earliest instances where footwear and bags were made accessible to local consumers at affordable prices.

Over time, locally owned stores gradually gave way to branded outlets, although the former continue to attract customers seeking reasonably priced goods. After Pulimoodu and the Ayurveda College junction, the Cantonment area remains one of the most prominent lifestyle retail zones in the city. Commercial complexes such as Saphalyam near Connemara Market consolidate a wide range of consumer needs—housing boutiques, fancy stores, eateries, and utility shops—reflecting a post-colonial urban social life shaped significantly by colonial encounters, particularly those involving European women. In contemporary Thiruvananthapuram, clothing no longer reliably signals caste or class identity. Administrative changes, expanded education, and evolving notions of public self-presentation have transformed social perceptions, even as new distinctions based on purchasing power and consumption patterns emerge. Thus, the transformation of clothing along Mahatma Gandhi Road illustrates a shift from caste-regulated bodily practices to market-driven expressions of identity, embedded within the broader history of colonial and post-colonial urban modernity.

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