

# ‘Virasat aur Vikas’ in clothes and food

The theme of this Republic Day, “Virasat aur Vikas”, heritage and progress, is an invitation to examine how our Indianness in everyday life has evolved since liberalisation and how far we have travelled from an earlier love for all things foreign to a comfort with our Indianness. Food and clothes are the most interesting lenses through which to examine this.

In the early 90s, global consultants advised Indian marketers to prepare for Indians significantly westernising in their choice of clothes and food, following the pattern of most markets that developed before us. The sari would go the kimono way and become ceremonial and as the ranks of working women swelled, Indian breakfasts would become cereal and cold milk. Things have, however, panned out a bit differently 25 years later.

Food and clothes, of course, have changed significantly. You cannot accuse India of ever remaining static. However, change has not been linear or along clearly defined vectors. It has been a constant swirl of the old, the new, and the remixed.

The sari is now worn a lot less frequently across all ages and social classes. But sari wearers are not so rare as to attract special notice in public spaces. Yes, nowadays at certain kinds of business and social events in a few big cities, sari wearers are rare and conspicuous, but young women in impeccable business suits do not dismiss them with the judgemental coding of “behind the curve”. In fact, they offer the observation of the sari wearer being “power dressed”.

Interestingly, the sari is finding its new modernity. It is now being worn with sneakers, t-shirts, and crop tops, escaping the tyranny of matching colours and the constricting styles of old-school blouses. There is a new energy of innovation in sari colours, designs, and fabrics across the price spectrum — especially at the middle to high end. And for the younger generation that is unwilling to struggle with draping 18 feet of

fabric, the pre-stitched “ready-to-wear” sari has arrived. Men in urban, upper social classes are not lagging behind either, embracing the so-called “ethnic clothes” for both formal and casual occasions, with apparel brands sprouting to serve them. Ready-to-wear dhotis are here to accompany the ready-to-wear sari!

At the same time, experimentation with and adoption of non-“ethnic” clothing has taken women by storm across the board, egged on by exciting, affordable e-commerce. The judgemental coding, even as recently as the 80s, of people who wore Western clothes is fast disappearing. Temples abound with young women clad in jeans even as women police constables wear sindoor and gajra with their uniforms during Navratri.

A young professional from a community known for traditional social norms said she was going with her parents to a community event, her “coming out” or “debut” onto the arranged marriage scene. Asked what the dress code was, she said (designer) jeans and a nice top, quite oblivious of the contradiction between such clothing modernity and the otherwise conservative milieu. A young mar-

keter from a similar milieu explained: “Because it’s only the outside trappings; nobody cares about that as long as you conform to the important stuff”. Modernity in India has often been described as a tight fist loosening slowly, and we are seeing a lot of that.

Today’s India has women ubiquitously embracing the new uniform of freedom wear, akin to the transition from dresses to pants in the rest of the world, but in the form of a new-age remix of the traditional north Indian salwar Kameez. Called “punjabi dress”, it is visible even in the most conservative parts of South India. This remixed garment has gained even more freedom by losing its dupatta, considered *de rigueur* for decency not long ago.

Dupattas are now worn symbolically for formal occasions, relegated to one shoulder, not serving

the purpose for which they were originally meant. The kurta or kurti “top” also now comes in a zillion new patterns and lengths and is teamed with an equal variety of bottom wear, including jeans, creating an array of looks from near-Western to fusion to indo-Western to traditionally “ethnic”.

At the same time, there are more Indian actresses wearing Western couture on the red carpets of the world and Indian designers making a splash in the world’s fashion capitals, blending Indian crafts with non-Indian wear.

The story on food is just as delightful. Indians of all hues have embraced the world’s cuisines and Indianised them unabashedly, burnishing our syncretic credentials. *Thela gaadis* and *udipis* serve Chinese, Italian, Burmese, Thai, Mexican, and upmarket patisseries proclaim “100 per cent genuine Belgian Waffles, no egg”. “Jain” is now a well-established variant in every haute cuisine around the world. While momos, noodles and pizza are standard fare in all regions of India, even more interesting is the new fusion of cuisines of different parts of India. A popular Mumbai restaurant, founded by young entrepreneurs, did just that and attracted customers from trendy bistros and delicatessens. The lesson? Interesting Indian food will always be cool. The Westernised, rich young Indian consumer now pays top dollar for high-end, unabashedly Indian brands of alcohol.

We now love being global, and love being *desi*, and love being global *desi*. We absorb, have fewer value judgements, and thankfully have dismantled hierarchies around Indian and Western. Except at premier Indian business schools, where Western clothes for women for the class photo and for placement interviews are still believed to promote a “global, professional image” of the college. It’s time for them, as leaders of tomorrow’s *atmanirbhar*, *atma vishwasi* India, to look around them.

---

*The author is a business advisor in the area of customer-based business strategy, and a researcher on India’s consumer economy*



RAMA BIJAPURKAR