

## **Nauvari a Nine Yard Dream: A Study of the Popularity of the Traditional Saree, A Symbol of Cultural Identity of Maharashtra, India**

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### **Abstract**

Traditional dress is a distinctive symbol of culture and tradition of any place. The native dress of the western Indian state of Maharashtra, was the nine yard saree or nauvari. With time, the nauvari was simplified to a five yard saree or pachvari which in turn gave way to the more practical salwar-kameez or shirts, trousers and skirts. With time, wearing of nauvari and pachvari sarees by urban women decreased significantly and was all but abandoned by 1980s. However today, women are observed wearing both pachvari and nauvari sarees for special occasions and festivals. This study uses an interpretative analytical approach to dissect the experiences of urban Maharashtrian women while wearing their nauvaris and the meanings and purposes they associate with wearing it. The sample was chosen through purposive non-probability sampling and data collected through in depth interviews. The study reveals that increasing numbers of women wear the nauvari saree for festive occasions. They are charmed by its graceful drape, the accompanying ornaments, make-up and hair styles. For an increasing number of women, the nauvari represents oneness with their culture. Its occurrence in popular Bollywood movies like Bajirao Mastani has only helped to increase its popularity.

**Keywords:** culture, saree, ethnic dress, identity, self-image.

### **Introduction**

Indigenous cultures possess a distinct identity of their own which is made up of various facets like language, literature, art, craft, festivals, clothing etc. Sometime in the past few years, the winds of globalization blew across the indigenous cultural landscapes of India and swept away everything that came in its path. Globalization has been widely associated with distortion of cultural identities (Tomlinson, 1999). In the Indian context, colonialization has been greatly responsible for propagating the attitude that anything ethnic is uncivilized and unsophisticated while Western or British ways of dress, an image of 'superiority, progress, decency and refinement' (Bhatia 2003). Fashion is therefore, an important manifestation of cultural identity and is affected by globalization in a very visible manner. Ethnic Indian garments have borne the brunt of globalization to an extent that they are brought out only for special occasions while Western clothing has been widely adopted for every day wear. One such garment which appeared to have faded from its glory is the *nauvari* saree.

The saree has been proclaimed as a garment that celebrates its Indian-ness (Lynton 2002). A *nauvari* is a kind of a saree measuring about 9 yards in length to about 4 feet in width. This is wound around the body often in the form of pleats to make a skirt like form; or pulled between the legs in a trouser like fashion. It is rightfully a symbol of Indian culture and identity.

### Review of Literature:

Eicher and Sumberg define ethnic dress as “items of dress such as clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics that are worn by members of one group to distinguish themselves from another by focusing on differentiation” (Eicher and Sumberg 1995). The saree, ethnic dress of Indian women, first developed as a length of uncut fabric, straight off the loom on to the body of the wearer draped in numerous styles as observed in different parts of the country. It is in itself a complete garment; an attire to cover a woman’s modesty, a means of protection against the elements, a means to bring out her voluptuous form, a display of an artisan’s craft, a bag to hold her precious valuables, and a representation of her heritage. Every state in India has a different style of wearing the saree with several variations being seen every few kilometers even within the states (Chishti, 2010). This is a result of intricate interweaving of cultural, physical and historical factors (Lynton 2002). The saree is worn in several different ways; the most common is the *nivi* and the *kachcha* style. The *nivi* style is similar to the way the south Indian *veshti* is worn – pleated and tucked at the navel while the *kachcha* style is similar to the way the north Indian dhoti is worn i.e. in the bifurcated or parted style; as seen in Figure 1. The *nivi* style was pioneered by Rani Jnanodanandini Devi in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and was accepted in mainstream fashion and was regarded as a symbol of urbanization and modernity (Joshi, 2017). This uncut drape was mindful of the Hindu concept of purity, did not conform to any region and was thus considered completely modern (Tu, 2009).



**Figure 1 Nivi (left) and Kachha (right) styles of saree draping.**

An Indian woman was traditionally expected to wear a saree once she was married. Women of the western Indian state of Maharashtra wore the sarees in two lengths; nine yards and five yards and in different draping styles. However, as women started stepping out for work, wearing a saree became cumbersome which led to the adoption of other more convenient options of dress. With the proliferation of the ‘Punjabi Suit’ (Figure 2) as a dress for urban women, the saree faced tough competition (Tarlo, 1997). It yet managed to retain its existence in many parts of the country but the urban woman was clearly moving towards adoption of more convenient clothing and Western influences presented her with a very viable option; the ‘pant suit’. Women ‘Indianised’ Western fashions into their day to day

garments like adaptation of the puffed sleeve into a choli, wearing of petticoats and chemises as seen in Figure 3. Some women also wore their *cholis* with collars, cuffed sleeves, fitted corset like *sadris* and pinned up their chiffon sarees using brooches. This exposure to Western ways of life gave rise to its adaptations in ethnic Indian culture (Tomlinson, 2003).



**Figure 2 Punjabi Suits of the 1940s.**



**Figure 3 Women Indianized western fashions**

One of the various indigenous saree styles of Maharashtra that faded with time was the *nauvari* or nine-yard saree of Maharashtra. The *nauvari* is draped in a *kachcha* or divided style with one part of the saree going between both legs making movement convenient. The *nauvari* was draped in various ways depending upon the geographical location, social strata that a woman belonged to and the work she was expected to do. In her book *Saris – Tradition and Beyond*, Rta Kapur Chishti details not less than 8 variations of the *nauvari* saree (Chishti 2010).



**Figure 4 Ladies wearing nauvari**

The *nauvari* saree is typically made of three parts, the inner end, the body and the outer end or the *padar*. Traditionally, the saree has borders along both long edges along with decorative *padars* on both inner and outer ends. This way, the saree can be used both ways.

Slade points out that in spite of having a suppressive effect on ethnic clothing, globalization or modernity actually stimulates tradition by constantly questioning and remodeling progress (Slade, 2009). Home economist Horn (1968) defines fashion as "...a manifestation of collective behavior, and as such represents the popular, accepted, prevailing style at any given time (Sproles, 1974). With time, the *nauvari* has given way to *pachwari* and *pachwari* to salwar suits and Western apparel (Tarlo, 1997). In her study on the effect of colonialization on dress of Indian women, Bhatia opines that adoption of Western clothing came to be regarded as a mark of modernity and progress; women are constantly having to struggle to maintain one's 'Indianness' under the threat of Westernization; balancing modernity and tradition (Bhatia, 2003). There could be many reasons for this steady decline of use of *nauvari* saree which may include complex draping process, cumbersome look, and difficulty of maintenance.

A person's identity is defined by their dress and other aspects of appearance along with what meaning the perceivers assign to it. These are to be viewed only in context of a social structure that they belong to where dress helps to assign a social position to the wearer. However, some types of dress become obsolete as communicators of social belonging due to changes in culture, technology, economic conditions, political situations, demographic shifts and religious significance among other factors (Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1992). According to Jonanne Eicher, ethnic dress is not static. It undergoes several changes but remains persistent owing to its deep and strong connections with the wearers for whom it is an important indicator of cultural heritage (J. Eicher, 1999). When Amy Hughes studied the tradition of ethnic dress worn in Black Forest area of Germany, she found that changes in dress traditions are inevitable and yet they facilitate persistence of tradition. For example, when certain material crucial to production of their ethnic dress was not available, suitable substitute materials were identified and used. Although wearers resorted to use of certain liberties in their dress like body piercings, tattoos, modern jewelry and make-up, they were still consistent with the overall look of the dress (Hughes, Torntore and Paff Ogle, 2014).

Meanings communicated by dress are subject to the observer's interpretations of them. These interpretations are based upon the observer's previous experiences within a cultural context (Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1992). There exists a very close association between wearer's dress and the perceiver's ability to make connections between the two and interpret these associations as social realities. These associations keep changing due to the various factors affecting social order like changing demographics, economics, globalization, etc. Thus, whatever private meaning a person's dress may hold, it also has a deep social significance.

Clothing is such a powerful entity that it affects the behavior of the wearer. The various features like fit, length, color, surface ornamentation etc. all affect the meaning that wearers and observers both associate with it. Symbolic meaning of a particular piece of dress has particular impact on the wearer's behavior. Through dress, one thinks about oneself as a unique and distinctive individual and alters one's behavior accordingly. The impact on the perception of an individual about another is impacted by clothing only when its meaning is clear to both the wearer as well as the observer (Johnson, Lennon and Rudd, 2014).

However, over the past few years, there has been a rising trend in the wearing of the *nauvari* for special occasions. Maharashtrian brides choose to wear it at their wedding, they are worn for festive occasions, public appearances, performances, etc. Draping the *nauvari* is a dying art and very few people actually know how to drape one. Keeping these factors in mind, some enterprising people have come up with an idea of pre-draped stitched *nauvari* sarees wherein the sarees are cut up and stitched to be worn like drawstring trousers with the *padar* to be thrown over the shoulder. These sarees are also available in different styles owing to subtle changes in their drape.

### **Purpose and Objectives:**

With the increasing use of the traditional *nauvari* observed over the past few years, the need was felt to investigate the reasons prompting *nauvari* wearers to do so. The objectives of this study were thus,

- To identify possible reasons prompting usage of *nauvari* sarees
- To understand what occasions users chose to wear *nauvari*
- To study the preference for draped or pre-stitched *nauvari* sarees

Carrying out such a study was expected to enable an understanding of changed social and cultural scenario in Maharashtra as reflected through the wearing of *nauvari* sarees and what prompted these changes.

### **Methodology:**

An interpretative qualitative approach was employed in this research design. Purposive, snowball sampling was used in this study to recruit participants. The respondents chosen for this study were those who have owned and/or worn a draped or stitched *nauvari* saree at least once in the past three years. Further contacts of more respondents were collected from the

initial respondents by the snowball sampling technique. In depth semi-structured interviews were administered to a group of 39 such women who have worn a draped or stitched *nauvari* in the past 5 years. The participants belonged to the age group from 18 to 65 years from Pune city which is considered to be the cultural heart of Maharashtra. The interview schedules consisted of a set of structured as well as open ended questions. Interviews typically lasted for 30 to 40 minutes and were conducted in person or over telephone in local languages (Marathi and Hindi) and in English. The interview data in local languages was translated to English for easier analysis. The data was strengthened by collecting images of all the women participants wearing their *nauvaris*. Sellers and makers of pre-stitched *nauvari* sarees were also conducted to understand the actuality of rising trends of *nauvari* usage. The data collected was analyzed using open coding.

### **Emergent Themes:**

The participants spoke extensively about several themes such as

1. Upholding Tradition
2. Looks and Image – complete look
3. Ease and Comfort
4. Social Appreciation
5. Novelty and Attention
6. Influence of AV media

**1. Upholding tradition:** The dominant theme verbalized by most participants when questioned about their motives of wearing a *nauvari* was the upholding of Maharashtrian culture. The participants believed that wearing a *nauvari* for a special occasion was a means of touching base with their roots. “It gives me a sense of belonging, of oneness with my heritage” (BN, 35 years). AD, aged 40 years opined that “most of us wear Western attire of trousers with tops and blouses on a regular basis. We have lost touch with our traditions; wearing the *nauvari* gives me a way to connect with my roots”. BN 35 years also said that she has lived in Maharashtra since childhood and has always loved Marathi culture. Wearing a *nauvari* gave her a way of paying respects to a culture she adores. As per SK, 43 years, wearing the *nauvari* bridged the gap between tradition and contemporary attire. “In our everyday life, we lose touch with our culture; it is only such occasions like festivals when we connect with our traditions by donning traditional apparel’ she says. As per VP, 37 years, when she wore the *nauvari* for the Ganesh festival, many people of the housing society in which she lives were exposed to this attire which also helped to extend the outreach of Maharashtrian culture further amongst people who were from outside Maharashtra. MT, 40 years has been wearing *nauvaris* for the past decade or so and own more than a dozen of them. She believes that *nauvari* is the true representative garment of Maharashtra culture and even wore it with élan at a recently concluded ‘Ms. Top of the World Plus Size’ pageant. She has even worn them during her time in the US and Germany. “It is a true representative garment of Maharashtra culture”, says AH, 59 years. According to *nauvari* seller SK, wives of political leaders of Maharashtra have also chosen to wear *nauvari* sarees for special occasions which she believes is a clear indication of the popularity of the garment.

**2. Looks and Image:** One's own look and image on wearing the *nauvari* was of utmost importance to most of the participants. They displayed great curiosity about their own looks in a *nauvari* as it was the first time they were wearing one for most of them. "It (wearing a *nauvari*) didn't feel weird at all, I am surprised!" (AD, 40 years). For women who are used to wearing western attire and other ethnic Indian wear like *salwar-kameez* on a regular basis, it was a unique experience to wear a nine-yard saree for most participants. VP, 37 years shared that "it was good seeing myself in a *nauvari*". SV, 52 years added that it made her stand out in a crowd in a unique positive way; one in which she garnered a lot of attention on her unique looks but also received a lot of positive praise. On observing other members of the community wear *nauvaris* for weddings, AG, 38 years convinced her cousins about wearing them together for a wedding and she is pleased that it added a unique dimension to the festivities. Indian figures are full and well-rounded around the bust and hips. Wearing a *nauvari* helps in accentuating the curves and bringing out the attractiveness of the wearer opines AK, 45 years. NM, 35 years feels that Indian women have typical facial features which compliment Indian ethnic attire like *nauvaris*. BN, 35 years had a unique observation "the skin show that a *nauvari* affords, actually makes the wearer feel sensuous and attractive". NM, 35 years adds that "Because the *nauvari* is worn with typical jewelry and hairstyles, it makes the total look unique and attractive". TL, 27 years says that "I love to wear *nauvari* with traditional jewelry from hair ornaments to toe rings". SJ, 19 years sums it up by saying "Wearing accessories gels together into a seamless look".

**3. Ease and Comfort:** Participants in this study were divided into two groups. Some of the women had worn the draped *nauvari* while a some had worn a pre-stitched one. When questioned about the levels of comfort experienced by both groups, the participants expressed comfort in wearing a pre-stitched *nauvari* as it is worn like a trouser and there is no risk of coming undone. However, the participants who wore a draped *nauvari* felt it was comfortable only as long as it was draped by an expert and made fast in all strategic points. PP, 35 years opined that for her, wearing a pre-stitched *nauvari* is as easy as wearing a *paijama*. GW, 28 years commented that even though the *nauvari* is a figure hugging garment, it is draped in such a way that only the back of the legs i.e. the calves actually showed. RM, 29 years commented that she felt confident wearing a *nauvari* as she believed she looked good in it. SS, 61 years recollected her grandmother wearing a draped *nauvari* and chose to wear one and felt it was as comfortable as a regular saree.

Stitched *nauvari* originally draped nine-yard long fabric is cut up and stitched to form a divided garment to be worn in a trouser like fashion. This method completely forgoes the complex draping process and makes the *nauvari* easy to wear and carry while retaining as authentic an appearance as a draped one.

**4. Social Appreciation:** "A person wearing a unique dress draws attention of people towards themselves" mused MA, 30 years. "*Nauvari* is certainly not ordinary everyday attire on the urban landscape of Maharashtra and anyone wearing it truly stand out in a crowd" observed AP, 49 years. Thus, the participants who wore a *nauvari* felt a sense of satisfaction when they saw the older members of their families appreciating them in this different look.

BN, 35 years was very pleased as she received a lot of compliments on her appearance in a *nauvari*. AD, 40 years felt that she redeemed herself in front of her family by wearing a *nauvari* as this traditional attire is not worn on a regular basis. MT, 40 years is convinced that her *nauvari* posts on a popular social media site garner more ‘likes’ than any other. VP, 37 years felt that wearing the *nauvari* on the occasion of a festival generated positive vibes among the family and also added to the ambience of the event.

**5. Novelty and Attention:** For many of the participants, it was the first time they were wearing a *nauvari*. Over the past few years, the *nauvari* had been considered an uncomfortable and cumbersome garment; something which is not feasible for women to wear especially when they are used to wearing other practical attire like trousers and blouses, skirts, tops, t-shirts and *salvar kameezes*. Thus, for these women who were trying a *nauvari* for the first time, it was a matter of great curiosity and intrigue about their ease and comfort while wearing one. One participant, MV, age 37 years mentioned that wearing the *nauvari* felt like a welcome change from daily routine. It also triggered fond memories of them wearing *nauvaris* in their childhood as costume for special performances in school as shared by AC, 33 years. Another participant commented “wearing *nauvaris* on this festive occasion created a lot of good memories. Also when I put my pictures up on social media, I am gratified by the compliments I receive on them” SR, 27 years. AG, 38 years mentioned that ‘it has become a collective family activity especially during weddings to wear a *nauvari*; creates a feeling of belongingness amongst everyone”.

**6. Role of AV media:** Almost all participants – *nauvari* users as well as *nauvari* makers felt that the 2015 Bollywood movie ‘Bajirao Mastani’ (Figure 5) was a great influencer in terms of inspiring women of Maharashtra and outside to experience wearing a *nauvari*. Participants attributed the graceful look of the characters of this movie as an influence for choosing to wear a *nauvari* for festive occasion. *Nauvari* making entrepreneurs also attributed the rising demand of *nauvari* sarees from women not belonging to Maharashtra to the movie. SW, a *nauvari* saree maker recalls orders she has got from customers based in New Delhi as well in the US who got several *nauvaris* made to be worn by all women of the family for an upcoming wedding. SK, another seller mentioned that *nauvaris* are also being ordered for stage performances in India and overseas. SV talks about 100 women belonging to different states participating in a colony function wearing *nauvaris*. Several *nauvari* sellers spoke about a spike in the number of *nauvaris* being ordered after the movie ‘Bajirao Mastani’ was released.



**Figure 5. Bollywood movie ‘Bajirao Mastani’ (2015) featured prominent actors Priyanka Chopra Jonas and Deepika Padukone wearing nauvaris.**

### **Conclusion**

Findings of the present study provide a fresh understanding of the changing perspectives of women towards ethnic dress. *Nauvari* as a traditional attire seem to have found a larger demand in terms of both young as well as older women both from within as well as outside Maharashtra. Thus, in spite of the decline in its regular usage, the *nauvari* seems to be looking at a revival through its use at special occasions like weddings and festivals. Wearers are charmed by the graceful drape of the *nauvari*, the accompanying ornaments, jewelry, make-up and hair styles thus creating on a complete look. Cultural markers are thus an integral element of the experience of wearing a *nauvari*.

Though most women prefer the pre-stitched *nauvari* over the draped version, its popularity is certainly on the rise. The pre-stitched *nauvari* offers women a chance to wear this complex draped garment without worrying about the excessive bulk, managing its many pleats and folds, worrying about whether it stays in place and generally being very convenient to wear again and again. This phenomenon underlines Eicher’s observation that ethnic dress undergoes several changes but does not die out completely owing to the deep rooted cultural connections with the wearers (J. Eicher 1999). For an increasing number of young women, the *nauvari* represented oneness with their culture. The wearing of *nauvari* saree on special occasions may be seen as a way of stimulating tradition and realization of the value of ethnic clothing. Its occurrence in popular Bollywood movies like *Bajirao Mastani* has only helped to increase its popularity. This phenomenon may be attributed to the Trickle Down theory of fashion adoption which realizes the role of influencers and role models in adoption of fashion trends by the masses. According to Von Busch and Bjereld, “individuals will seek difference when difference generates a positive identity and avoid it when it generates a negative identity” (Von Busch and Bjereld, 2016). Wearing a *nauvari* achieved just that for the participants. It was also seen as a ‘body technique’, a behavioral model where members of a social group get influenced by the other members (Craik, 1993).

Women are consciously making efforts to maintain their "Indianness" with the use of traditional garment like *nauvari* on special occasions. This corresponds to a rising feeling of Nationalism currently sweeping the country which goes to show how socio-cultural-political factors affect the way people dress. Women have found a way around the problem of draping a *nauvari* by adopting pre-draped stitched ones. This study is also useful to *nauvari* makers and sellers as it indicates a clear upward trend in preference of this ethnic garment on special occasions.

Thus, the amalgamation of several socio-cultural factors can thus be seen as a prompter for revival of the *nauvari* as well as its adaptation in a more commercially viable avatar.

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