

## **Chapter 8 Clothing A Social History**

**Question-1** Why are 19th and 20th centuries important in the history of clothing?

**Solution:**

*Before the age of democratic revolutions and the development of capitalist markets in eighteenth-century Europe, most people dressed according to their regional codes, and were limited by the types of clothes and the cost of materials that were available in their region. Clothing styles were also strictly regulated by class, gender or status in the social hierarchy.*

*After the eighteenth century, the colonisation of most of the world by Europe, the spread of democratic ideals and the growth of an industrial society, completely changed the ways in which people thought about dress and its meanings. People could use styles and materials that were drawn from other cultures and locations, and western dress styles for men were adopted worldwide. The French Revolution transformed many aspects of social and political life. The revolution also swept away existing dress codes, known as the sumptuary laws. Let us look briefly at what these laws were.*

**Question-2** What were sumptuary laws?

**Solution:**

*In medieval Europe, dress codes were sometimes imposed upon members of different layers of society through actual laws which were spelt out in some detail. From about 1294 to the time of the French Revolution in 1789, the people of France were expected to strictly follow what were known as 'sumptuary laws.' The laws tried to control the behaviour of those considered social inferiors, preventing them from wearing certain clothes, consuming certain foods and beverages (usually this referred to alcohol) and hunting game in certain areas.*

*In medieval France, the items of clothing a person could purchase per year was regulated, not only by income but also by social rank. The material to be used for clothing was also legally prescribed. Only royalty could wear expensive materials like ermine and fur, or silk, velvet, and brocade. Other classes were debarred from clothing themselves with materials that were associated with the aristocracy. The French Revolution ended these distinctions.*

*The members of the Jacobin clubs even called themselves the 'sans culottes' to distinguish themselves from the aristocracy who wore the fashionable 'knee breeches'.*

*Sans-culottes literally meant those 'without knee breeches'. From now on, both men and women began wearing clothing that was loose and comfortable. The colors of France – blue, white and red – became popular as they were a sign of the patriotic citizen. Other political symbols too became a part of dress: the red cap of liberty, long trousers and the revolutionary cockade pinned on to a hat. The simplicity of clothing was meant to express the idea of equality.*

**Question-3** How were sumptuary laws protect the home production against imports?

**Solution:**

*Some sumptuary laws were passed to protect home production against imports. For instance, in sixteenth-century England, velvet caps made with material imported from France and Italy were popular amongst men. England passed a law which compelled all persons over six years*

of age, except those of high position, to wear woollen caps made in England, on Sundays and all holy days. This law remained in effect for twenty-six years and was very useful in building up the English woollen industry.

**Question-4** What were the new materials used for clothing?

**Solution:**

Before the seventeenth century, most ordinary women in Britain possessed very few clothes made of flax, linen or wool, which were difficult to clean. After 1600, trade with India brought cheap, beautiful and easy-to-maintain Indian chintzes within the reach of many Europeans who could now increase the size of their wardrobes.

Then, during the Industrial Revolution, in the nineteenth century, Britain began the mass manufacture of cotton textiles which it exported to many parts of the world, including India.

Cotton clothes became more accessible to a wider section of people in Europe. By the early twentieth century, artificial fibers made clothes cheaper still and easier to wash and maintain. In the late 1870s, heavy, restrictive underclothes, which had created such a storm in the pages of women's magazines, were gradually discarded. Clothes got lighter, shorter and simpler. Yet until 1914, clothes were ankle length, as they had been since the thirteenth century. By 1915, however, the hemline of the skirt rose dramatically to mid-calf.

**Question-5** What were the impacts of the World War on clothing?

**Solution:**

Changes in women's clothing came about as a result of the two World wars. Many European women stopped wearing jewellery and luxurious clothes. As upper-class women mixed with other classes, social barriers were eroded and women began to look similar. Clothes got shorter during the First World War (1914-1918) out of practical necessity. By 1917, over 700,000 women in Britain were employed in ammunition factories.

They wore a working uniform of blouse and trousers with accessories such as scarves, which was later replaced by khaki overalls and caps. Bright colors faded from sight and only sober colours were worn as the war dragged on. Thus clothes became plainer and simpler. Skirts became shorter. Soon trousers became a vital part of Western women's clothing, giving them greater freedom of movement. Most important, women took to cutting their hair short for convenience.

By the twentieth century, a plain and austere style came to reflect seriousness and professionalism. New schools for children emphasised the importance of plain dressing, and discouraged ornamentation. Gymnastics and games entered the school curriculum for women. As women took to sports, they had to wear clothes that did not hamper movement. When they went out to work they needed clothes that were comfortable and convenient. So we see that the history of clothing is linked to the larger history of society.

**Question-6** What were the new clothing styles in India?

**Solution:**

During the colonial period there were significant changes in male and female clothing in India. On the one hand this was a consequence of the influence of Western dress forms and missionary activity; on the other it was due to the effort by Indians to fashion clothing styles that embodied

*an indigenous tradition and culture. Cloth and clothing in fact became very important symbols of the national movement.*

*A brief look at the nineteenth century changes will tell us a great deal about the transformations of the twentieth century. When western-style clothing came into India in the nineteenth century, Indians reacted in three different ways:*

*1. Many, especially men, began incorporating some elements of western-style clothing in their dress. The wealthy Parsis of western India were among the first to adapt Western-style clothing. Baggy trousers and the phenta (or hat) were added to long collarless coats, with boots and a walking stick to complete the look of the gentleman.*

*To some, Western clothes were a sign of modernity and progress. Western-style clothing was also especially attractive to groups of dalit converts to Christianity who now found it liberating. Here too, it was men rather than women who affected the new dress styles.*

*2. There were others who were convinced that western culture would lead to a loss of traditional cultural identity. The use of Western style clothes was taken as a sign of the world turning upside down. The cartoon of the Bengali Babu shown here, mocks him for wearing Western-style boots and hat and coat along with his dhoti.*

*3. Some men resolved this dilemma by wearing Western clothes without giving up their Indian ones.*

*Many Bengali bureaucrats in the late nineteenth century began stocking western-style clothes for work outside the home and changed into more comfortable Indian clothes at home. Early-twentieth-century anthropologist Verrier Elwin remembered that policemen in Poona who were going off duty would take their trousers off in the street and walk home in 'just tunic and undergarments'. This difference between outer and inner worlds is still observed by some men today.*

**Question-7** *How did the British react to Indian ways of dressing?*

**Solution:**

*In different cultures, specific items of clothing often convey contrary meanings. This frequently leads to misunderstanding and conflict. Styles of clothing in British India changed through such conflicts. Consider the case of the turban and the hat. When European traders first began frequenting India, they were distinguished from the Indian 'turban wearers' as the 'hat wearers.'*

*These two headgears not only looked different, they also signified different things. The turban in India was not just for protection from the heat but was a sign of respectability, and could not be removed at will. In the Western tradition, the hat had to be removed before social superiors as a sign of respect. This cultural difference created misunderstanding. The British were often offended if Indians did not take off their turban when they met colonial officials. Many Indians on the other hand wore the turban to consciously assert their regional or national identity. Another such conflict related to the wearing of shoes.*

*At the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was customary for British officials to follow Indian etiquette and remove their footwear in the courts of ruling kings or chiefs. Some British officials*

*also wore Indian clothes. But in 1830, Europeans were forbidden from wearing Indian clothes at official functions, so that the cultural identity of the white masters was not undermined.*

*The turban on the head The Mysore turban, called peta, was edged with gold lace, and adopted as part of the Durbar dress of the Mysore court in the mid-nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, a wide variety of officials, teachers and artists in Mysore began wearing the turban, sometimes*

*with the Western suit, as a sign of belonging to the princely state. Today, the Mysore turban is used largely on ceremonial occasions and to honour visiting dignitaries.*

**Question-8** *How did Indians react to British attitudes?*

**Solution:**

*At the same time, Indians were expected to wear Indian clothes to office and follow Indian dress codes. In 1824 – 1828, Governor- General Amherst insisted that Indians take their shoes off as a sign of respect when they appeared before him, but this was not strictly followed.*

*By the mid-nineteenth century, when Lord Dalhousie was Governor- General, 'shoe respect' was made stricter, and Indians were made to take off their shoes when entering any government institution; only those who wore European clothes were exempted from this rule. Many Indian government servants were increasingly uncomfortable with these rules.*

*In 1862, there was a famous case of defiance of the 'shoe respect' rule in a Surat courtroom. Manockjee Cowasjee Entee, an assessor in the Surat Fouzdaree Adawlut, refused to take off his shoes in the court of the sessions judge. The judge insisted that he take off his shoes as that was the Indian way of showing respect to superiors. But Manockjee remained adamant. He was barred entry into the courtroom and he sent a letter of protest to the governor of Bombay. The British insisted that since Indians took off their shoes when they entered a sacred place or home, they should do so when they entered the courtroom. In the controversy that followed, Indians urged that taking off shoes in sacred places and at home was linked to two different Questions.*

*One: there was the problem of dirt and filth. Shoes collected the dirt on the road. This dirt could not be allowed into spaces that were clean, particularly when people in Indian homes sat on the ground. Second, leather shoes and the filth that stuck under it were seen as polluting. But public buildings like the courtroom were different from home. But it took many years before shoes were permitted into the courtroom.*

**Question-9.** *Describe the Swadeshi movement in India.*

**Solution:**

*The British first came to trade in Indian textiles that were in great demand all over the world. India accounted for one-fourth of the world's manufactured goods in the seventeenth century.*

*There were a million weavers in Bengal alone in the middle of the eighteenth century. However, the Industrial Revolution in Britain, which mechanised spinning and weaving and greatly increased the demand for raw materials such as cotton and indigo, changed India's status in the world economy.*

*Political control of India helped the British in two ways: Indian peasants could be forced to*

grow crops such as indigo, and cheap British manufacture easily replaced coarser Indian one. Large numbers of Indian weavers and spinners were left without work, and important textile weaving centres such as Murshidabad, Machilipatnam and Surat declined as demand fell. Yet by the middle of the twentieth century, large numbers of people began boycotting British or mill-made cloth and adopting khadi, even though it was coarser, more expensive and difficult to obtain.

**Question-10.** How did this change come about?

**Solution:**

In 1905, Lord Curzon decided to partition Bengal to control the growing opposition to British rule. The Swadeshi movement developed in reaction to this measure. People were urged to boycott British goods of all kinds and start their own industries for the manufacture of goods such as matchboxes and cigarettes.

Mass protests followed, with people vowing to cleanse themselves of colonial rule. The use of khadi was made a patriotic duty. Women were urged to throw away their silks and glass bangles and wear simple shell bangles. Rough homespun was glorified in songs and poems to popularise it.

The change of dress appealed largely to the upper castes and classes rather than to those who had to make do with less and could not afford the new products. After 15 years, many among the upper classes also returned to wearing European dress. Though many people rallied to the cause of nationalism at this time, it was almost impossible to compete with cheap British goods that had flooded the market. Despite its limitations, the experiment with Swadeshi gave Mahatma Gandhi important ideas about using cloth as a symbolic weapon against British rule.

**Question-11** Comment on the experiments of Mahatma Gandhi with clothing.

**Solution:**

The most familiar image of Mahatma Gandhi is of him seated, bare chested and in a short dhoti, at the spinning wheel. He made spinning on the charkha and the daily use of khadi, or coarse cloth made from homespun yarn, very powerful symbols. These were not only symbols of self-reliance but also of resistance to the use of British mill-made cloth. Mahatma Gandhi's life and his experiments with clothing sum up the changing attitude to dress in the Indian subcontinent.

As a boy from a Gujarati Bania family, he usually wore a shirt with a dhoti or pyjama, and sometimes a coat. When he went to London to study law as a boy of 19 in 1888, he cut off the tuft on his head and dressed in a Western suit so that he would not be laughed at. On his return, he continued to wear Western suits, topped with a turban. As a lawyer in Johannesburg, South Africa in the 1890s, he still wore Western clothes. Soon he decided that dressing 'unsuitably' was a more powerful political statement. In Durban in 1913, Gandhi first appeared in a lungi and kurta with his head shaved as a sign of mourning to protest against the shooting of Indian coal miners. On his return to India in 1915, he decided to dress like a Kathiawadi peasant. Only in 1921 did he adopt the short dhoti, the form of dress he wore until his death.

At this time, he did not want to use this dress all his life and only wanted to 'experiment for a month or two'. But soon he saw this as his duty to the poor, and he never wore any other dress. He consciously rejected the well-known clothes of the Indian ascetic and adopted the dress of the poorest Indian.

*Khadi, white and coarse, was to him a sign of purity, of simplicity, and of poverty. Wearing it became also a symbol of nationalism, a rejection of Western mill-made cloth. He wore the short dhoti without a shirt when he went to England for the Round Table Conference in 1931. He refused to compromise and wore it even before King George V at Buckingham Palace. When he was asked by journalists whether he was wearing enough clothes to go before the King, he joked that that 'the King had enough on for both of us'!*

**Question-12** *What was the dream of Mahatma regarding the clothing of Indians? What was the response?*

**Solution:**

*Mahatma Gandhi's dream was to clothe the whole nation in khadi. He felt khadi would be a means of erasing difference between religions, classes, etc. Not many could take to the single peasant loincloth as he had. Nor did all want to. Some examples of other responses to Mahatma Gandhi's call:*

- 1. Nationalists such as Motilal Nehru, a successful barrister from Allahabad, gave up his expensive Western-style suits and adopted the Indian dhoti and kurta. But these were not made of coarse cloth.*
- 2. Those who had been deprived by caste norms for centuries were attracted to Western dress styles. Therefore, unlike Mahatma Gandhi, other nationalists such as Babasaheb Ambedkar never gave up the Western-style suit. Many Dalits began in the early 1910s to wear three piece suits, and shoes and socks on all public occasions, as a political statement of self-respect.*
- 3. A woman who wrote to Mahatma Gandhi from Maharashtra in 1928 said, 'A year ago, I heard you speaking on the extreme necessity of every one of us wearing khadi and thereupon decided to adopt it. But we are poor people, My husband says khadi is costly. Belonging as I do to Maharashtra, I wear a sari nine yards long ... (and) the elders will not hear of a reduction (to six yards).'*
- 4. Other women, like Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Nehru, wore coloured saris with designs, instead of coarse, white homespun.*

**Question-13** *What does the change in styles of clothing linked with?*

**Solution:**

*Changes in styles of clothing are thus linked up with shifts in cultural tastes and notions of beauty, with changes within the economy and society, and with issues of social and political conflict.*