

Dress Code of Indian Plantation Labourers in South Asia

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Abstract

Diasporic culture survives as a result of the spread of communities in the South Asian region that resulted in many economic and social mobilisations. Diasporas symbolise and preserve a culture different from their home countries and they often maintain strong ties with their mother country and its original culture.

Indian Tamil plantation labourers are a widespread diaspora that is present in many Asian countries, especially Sri Lanka. These labourers are considered as a minority group in the ethnic hierarchy of these countries. The social structure of the plantations resembles the South Indian rural social structure that is generally bound by the caste system. Especially they were identified as a subaltern group with subaltern cultural values and rituals in their own estates. This research attempts to find the uniqueness of the dress code of Indian Tamil plantation labourers and the cultural background that caused the emergence and evolution of that.

Dress and ornaments possess considerable value in society. Especially when comparing the dress code and ornament styles in the past and present, scholars attempt to recognise the uniqueness of dress codes which have social and cultural features. Especially in modern historiography there is a new trend to rewrite history by considering uncommon aspects of human history. In the social sciences, the themes of kinship, polity, economy, society and religion are more popular researches. But some valuable fields related to socio-cultural

themes such as clothes are usually ignored and rarely given any systematic consideration. However, these fields are now drawing attention and thus significant historical facts are being revealed. According to Cordwell and Schwarz:

Clothing and adornment are universal features of human behavior and an examination of what they reveal and attempt to conceal, contributes to our knowledge about the fabric of cultures and to our understanding of the threads of human nature. (1979: 1)

Therefore studying the dress code of an isolated community like the Indian plantation labourers in South Asia in terms of the evolution of their dress styles is also related to the study of subaltern communities. Wickramasinghe (2003: 5) notes:

Dress is the language of the non-literate, the mute and the lair. If people cannot or do not speak, their bodies always do. But their bodies can also lie or dissimulate ... Material culture is produced by human agency in the process of social interaction in many contexts.

It is, therefore, clear that dress helps to understand and recognise contextual limitations of some subaltern diasporic communities in Asian countries. Especially when popular historical sources were silent about these communities, dress was a significant source to identify the reality of their life. Some scholars have interpreted clothes as a symbol of inequality. According to Cordwell and Schwarz (1979: 13) “cloth and clothing constitute an illuminating lens through which to consider the historical inequality—that is social relations of unequal wealth, status and power.”

There are many interpretations about the importance of dress code as a source of cultural and social values. Dress shows creativity and limitations of these social values. From raw

material to production, from weaving to adornment, it touches a range of social facets. According to Barnes and Eicher (1993: 1):

Textiles or skins as dress may be fundamentally protective, but they also have social meaning. Decorative ornaments that are added to the body ... show a person's position within the society. A cultural identity is thus expressed and visual communication is established before verbal interaction even transmits whether such a verbal exchange is possible or desirable.

Several attributes of dress can be identified as ones with cultural value. It helps to define personal identity in terms of geography and history. It also stands for symbolic social positions like caste, class, age, political, spiritual and economic powers. Dress earns social and cultural power with time, space and structure. In some eras the society considered the fully clothed style as a privilege of the elite. Sometimes fully clothed pattern is considered a symbol of virtue. But during certain periods, less clothed and simple dress patterns stood as symbols of the elite. Sigiria frescos of Sri Lanka clearly show that the topless pattern was a symbol of elite during the Anuradhapura era. Such patterns were followed by elite women in contemporary harems. It could be assumed that the servants covered their busts. Therefore, dressing style was very important even in ancient societies to reflect the social position.

Dress patterns were primarily shaped by the climate. But after the evolution of socio-cultural norms, those patterns were established as reflections of social positions. Also it was required of a dress to establish convenience in daily activities and occupations. In some societies gender inequality was the most effective divider that defined the dress code. Women in

some communities were forced to wear fully covered and less stylish patterns due to patriarchal beliefs. Men manipulated religious beliefs and didactic literature to make women adopt these kinds of styles. The dress is, therefore, always combined with power and authority of the society.

Generally dress codes of tropical countries were different from those of the Western civilisations. The main differences were in material used and dressing styles. In many Asian countries the most popular material was cotton and the dressing style was wrapping the whole cloth around the body. Majority of Asians generally used less stylish designs. In European countries and America, perfect dressing meant sewing which involved a complex process of designing. Thus, the dress code involved a broad theme, including raw material, various clothing patterns, ornaments and jewellery, head dresses and body paintings.

This research mainly focuses on the Tamil diasporic community in Sri Lanka and, their dress code is analysed in the Sri Lankan context. The culture of estate Tamil communities in Sri Lanka is similar to other Tamil diasporic communities in Fiji, Mauritius, Malaysia and Trinidad. Estate Tamils constitute a distinct ethnic group different from indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils who live in the Northern and Eastern provinces. They live mainly in the Central province and are separated by caste, culture and occupation. Certain castes which existed in South India were important in their social organisation. Caste identity played a huge role in forming part of the ideology and values of labourers (Hollup 1994: xvi). The Sri Lankan community of Indian Tamil plantation labourers were recruited and organised by high caste South Indian Tamils called 'Head *Kanganis*.' These plantation units were isolated and therefore the labourers were forced to experience the same practices that prevailed in

South India. A few legal restrictions prevented them from moving and mobilising within the larger society. The lack of integration and the resultant isolation encouraged them to continue their traditional socio-cultural and religious institutes. As Hollup (1994: xvii) notes:

The plantation is both a territorial and socio-economic unit where the Tamil estate workers are born, breed and die, buried in the land (under the Tea bushes) ... The plantation provide rent free housing, free medicines from its dispensary, a maternity ward and midwife, estate school, nursery (crèche) for children, some food rations from its rice store, temples and church, kitchen gardens, washerman and barber, tools and transport.

Their dressing was also an isolated practice which was affected by South Indian memories. The dress code was a reflection of the cultural and social background of Tamil plantation labourers. Especially when considering the Sri Lankan community of Indian plantation labourers, their dress code obviously shows their poor living condition, low cost lifestyles and the impact of inner social hierarchies like the caste structure. Especially during the British period, they were a very much isolated community practicing their own agamic beliefs and rituals. They were neglected and inhumanly. They worked in tea or rubber factories and plantation fields. Contemporary evidence show their living conditions were similar to those of slaves and as wage labourers they provided their maximum working capacity to estate owners in exchange for minimum primary facilities and salary (Steuart 1905: 17). The dress code was thus suitable for their hard work in the fields. There are some impressive features of this dress code.

From the British period to modern day, estate women use a cloth to wrap the body. Clearly they use unsewn clothes instead of sewn ones. This is an easy and cheap style and it agrees with common traditional dressing patterns in South Asia. As per historical evidence, the wrapping style was a common pattern among contemporary South Indian ladies too (Wickramasinghe 2003: 57).

According to oral evidence, variety among their dress patterns was scarce. Normally dressing is a complex practice which involves many patterns and styles to reflect various social functions. There are symbolic social meanings to colour, elaboration and style of the dress code. But low caste labourers in plantation communities used a single dress pattern without variations for many occasions, such as daily in-door activities, work in the plantation fields, factories and other special activities in their community life. Even during major functions like ritual ceremonies, weddings and funerals, participants rarely considered elaborate patterns for their dress in early periods (Personal Communication: Viramma).

Since the British period, the major dressing pattern of plantation women in Sri Lanka has been the traditional Indian Saree or *Selei*. In order to show the social position of low caste women labourers, they wore sarees without jackets. Rough and raw material were commonly used and they were mostly hard cottons like Indian handlooms. The designs of these materials were simple. Embroideries or material with borders were used rarely. Women of low castes commonly used low quality material. Once or twice a month the administration provided them with dressing material and other daily necessities (Personal Communication: Muniyaiya). This measure prevented this community from adopting other cultures. The saree draping

style was simple and untidy. That was exactly the same as the Tamil Nadu style in South India. First it was wrapped around the waist and then draped around the jacketless top. They did not use pleats in the *pallu* or the rest of the saree. Finally they wrapped the *pallu* around the waist. The pattern was suitable for their field work which involved hard labour and the restless daily life.

Women of high castes like in *Kangani* families used to wear sarees with simple jackets of the back covering style. Photographic evidence clearly shows that in the British period sewing methods were practiced by some of these ladies. Industrial revolution in Britain and the transfer of cultural ideology popularised the sewing machine among Sri Lankans (Wickramasinghe 2003: 57). That jacket also helped to show social dignity of *Kangani* families in these isolated estates which were a great distance away from their motherland. Some *Kangani* women used elaborated sarees which were made by soft material with borders (**Fig. 1**).



Figure1: The dress pattern of Plantation women during the British period. Image Courtesy: Census of Ceylon, 1921 and Lankapura.com

Many Tamil plantation women wore dark colour sarees (**Fig. 2c**). Oral evidence shows that popular colours were red, green and blue. The rarest colour among ladies was white. Black was also less used. They did not have any symbolic colour for funerals like black or white as other Asians did (Personal Communication: Viramma). After their husband's death, however, the widows give up every ornament including the bridal necklace and wear white colour only. Also colours for jackets and under garments of sarees are different from each other. Even now, Indian Tamil plantation women do not pay attention to matching of colours. Another notable feature of their dress code was slippers. Most of the labourers never used slippers for any occasion.

Most of the brides had a simple dress pattern as their wedding attire. It is remarkable to note that brides always used heavy head dresses which were adorned with natural flowers like jasmynes. Similar to the practice of Indian Hindus, plantation Tamils too liked to select red, green or blue colours for wedding sarees. Today, some women use sarees made out of rich material called *Pattu Selei* as their bridal dress. They host their wedding ceremonies in Hindu shrines like Mari Amma Kovil (Pattini Kovil). As in all other Indian weddings they use heavy flower garlands for both the bride and bride groom. They normally use natural flowers to adorn their dress in agamic ceremonies.

Ornaments are a remarkable and essential feature in the dress code of women. Whether they are poor or rich, old or young they use only a few basic ornaments in their daily life. For ears they use earrings. *Thodu*, a popular simple earring and *Thandatti*, a common earring pattern worn on the edge of the ear lobe by old ladies, are two popular types of earrings used by

women in the plantation sector. *Koppu*, *Lolakki*, *Onappu thattu* are some uncommon patterns worn on the ears in modern days. *Walappu simiki* or *Thea karambu* was another notable feature in their dress code. According to oral evidence, the previous generation had used some external ornament to enlarge the hole of the ears and they were proud about that abnormal change in their physical body. But the young generation does not like to continue that style and thus it can only be seen among old women (Personal Communication: Arumudawalli). They continue to use an ornament called *Mukuththi* on the nose. It is a symbol of their Indian origin. There is another rare ornament for the nostrils called *Pellakki* (Personal Communication: Sundaram).

Using bangles is a popular style among many Asian women. Plantation women also like to use bangles. *Walayal* means normal bangles. *Kettikappu* is another type of bangles which is worn between the shoulders and elbows. Photographic evidence shows that whether poor or rich, using necklaces is a common pattern among women. Normally simple and cheap necklaces are used for every occasion. There is a heavy necklace called *Atiyal padakkam* which shows the amount of gold they had. *Thali* is the traditional bridal necklace which every married woman uses. *Thali* is a gold pendent which shows some agamic symbols of Hindu deities like Shiva. Normally they use a special cord to wear that. Many of them use anklets in normal daily life. Heavy anklets which are called *Kolusa* are very rarely used today. They also use normal rings for fingers and *Minji* for toes. *Minji* is used by married women and is a symbol of their marital status. In the British period it was made of metals like silver or gold. Now they use thin bangles which are made of either gold, cheap metals or plastic. Interestingly, even though, their salaries were less during the colonial period, they were able to purchase

more gold than now. This fact challenges the common discourse on the history of plantation labourers. On the contrary to the common view of scholars about the poor living conditions of these labourers, they were able to purchase enough gold jewellery to give as dowry for their daughters. They probably considered gold to be their wealth as they did not have any money invested in banks. Modern plantation women explain this phenomenon as a result of the low cost of living and low prices of gold during the British era (Personal Communication: Jagajodi). During the British period there were South Indian jewellery makers living close to large estates like Gikiyanakanda Estate in Kalutara. They made any jewellery pattern requested by Tamil labourers. Their children wore minimum clothes and some silver ornament around their waists. The chain hanged around boys' waist was called *Arunukodi* and that around girls' waists was called *Aramusi* (Personal Communication: Muniyaiya).

Dress patterns of men also showcased unique cultural values of the plantation sector. During the British period *Kanganis* used to wear the Western coat and the traditional Indian sarong called *Wetti* (**Fig. 2a & 2b**). They also used a walking stick to show their social and official position. That was a combined pattern of Western and Eastern cultural identities. Most of these *wettis* were white in colour. But in their daily life they used dark colour sarongs. For their weddings they used a special sarong called *Saraga weitti* which had a gold border and the same border was used on the handkerchief which was worn on the shoulder and was called *thundu*. For weddings and other occasions they used *Talappa* or turbans but it is being discontinued by young men. In funerals men used to stay topless. They played *thappu* or traditional drums at funerals. Both men and women used *Vibudi* or the holy ash mark on their

foreheads as a religious symbol (Personal Communication: Kanapathi).



Figure 2: Dress Patterns of Men used by Tamil Plantation Labourers and Modern Saree Pattern of Ladies. Image Courtesy: Census of Ceylon, 1921 and Lankapura.com

This dress code is similar to that worn by natives in the Sri Lankan society especially during the British period. Among many Sinhalese there was the topless dress pattern. That dress code showed the cultural uniqueness and the position of the individual in the social hierarchy. Robert Knox clearly stated in his book which was written in 1681 that Kandyan women practiced the topless simple dress pattern for indoor activities and used heavy attire for other functions in outdoor life (Knox 1911: 87). Also some low caste Kandyan people were not allowed to use jackets and thus they had topless dress patterns. Especially low castes like *Rodi* and *Kinnara* were compelled to stay topless (Pieris 1956: 181-90). The majority of Sinhalese were not in favour of using a lot of golden jewellery in their attire. The Ceylon Tamil community is very different from their Indian plantation counterparts. They did not include those migrants in their social group and also dressed differently to demonstrate some difference. Ceylon Tamils used heavily

designed material, dress patterns and heavy jewellery as South Indian Tamils did.

After decolonisation, many Asians experienced various phases of modernity. Sri Lankans also changed their dress codes. Dress is an obvious exhibit of cultural changes. When considering the Tamil plantation labourers in Sri Lanka their dress code is different from what they had during the British period. There are some remaining which are reflective of previous patterns. First remarkable change is that ladies now use jackets without any consideration about caste hierarchy. But the older generation still does not accord any importance to the matching of colours. Young people admire Western dress patterns. University students and other government employees in this community stick to their traditional dress to a minimum and dress similar to other Tamil communities in Sri Lanka. They wear elaborate wedding and ceremonial dresses as other Hindus. These differences occurred due to the expansion of the local market, spreading of towns and changing consumer behaviour in rural areas. Education, various forms of employment, mobilisation of population, the open economy, mass media and new concepts of ethics, globalisation and urbanisation all resulted in blending these isolated communities with other natives. Unfortunately many plantation labourers in Sri Lanka still live in poor economic conditions and that has limited them spending on elaborate dresses. Some ornaments like *Kaippatti*, *Thea Karambu* and *Pellakki* are slowly disappearing. The use of turbans is also vanishing. There are remarkable changes in their dress code compared to the colonial era due to a combination of social, religious and cultural factors.

Glossary

<i>Aramusi</i>	Ornament used on little girls' waist
<i>Arunukodi</i>	Ornament used on little boys' waist
<i>Atiyal padakkam</i>	Heavy necklace with a pendent
<i>Kangani</i>	Indian Tamil recruiter and supervisor of British plantation fields
<i>Kettikappu</i>	Type of bangles used between shoulders and elbows
<i>Kinnara</i>	Low caste among Kandyan Sinhalese
<i>Kolusa</i>	Anklet
<i>Koppu</i>	A unique style of earrings
<i>Lolakki</i>	A unique style of earrings
<i>Minji</i>	Ring for toes
<i>Mukuththi</i>	Ornament on top of the nose
<i>Onappu thattu</i>	Elaborated earring used from top to bottom of the ears
<i>Pattu Selei</i>	Wedding saree
<i>Pellakki</i>	Ornament for the nostril
<i>Rodi</i>	Low caste among Kandyan Sinhalese
<i>Selei</i>	Saree
<i>Thali</i>	Traditional bridal necklace
<i>Thandatti</i>	Earring pattern used on top of the ears
<i>Thea karambu</i>	External ornaments that enlarge the hole of ears
<i>Thodu</i>	Simple common earrings
<i>Thundu</i>	Handkerchief
<i>Walappu simiki</i>	External ornaments that enlarge the hole of ears
<i>Walayal</i>	Normal bangles

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