



DRESS AS A CONCEPT OF CASTE IN THE PAST TO DRESS AS A MODE OF FASHION AND CONFIDENCE IN THE PRESENT- A KERALA STUDY

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Abstract:

Kerala hails its own peculiar features and takes a different outlook on every matter, including fashion and allied concepts; the dress of the Malayalis is a matter of discussion from its earlier time as a symbol of caste to the present time as a trendy state who updates every fashion among the people. Fashion is not just a word to express the outfit; it has its depth and roots in the minds of the people. Fashion, personality and confidence are interconnected and one can elevate to extreme happiness and confidence through experimenting with fashion upon them. Fashion is not limited to dressing but affects attitude, style and appearance. All those elements can boost the level of fashion; everyone needs and is interested in change and being a better version, and fashion plays a vital role in those changes.

Studies prove that our wardrobe, the colours of the dress, fitness, style, and comfort can make us happy, and the imbalance of this fashion and comfort makes us sad. Dress and fashion can 'mark' us on different occasions; it helps to be a centre of attraction everywhere, fashion has a creative and live quality to elevate our inner strength; even the fashion and dressing of a person can determine the day of a person.

Keywords: *identity, political consciousness, trends, fashion.*

Introduction:

Dress is a cloth draping or wearing on our body, which is the least defined, while it has some more horizon to express, for proving that dressing is not just a process of cloth draping. Its complexity, cultural index, historical background, social acceptance, political consciousness, geographical distribution, religious circumstances, psychological impulse, etc., makes the term dressing beyond the conventional concept of mere cloth covering the body. Today, dress has different meanings to convey as a psychological emotion, commercial judgment, matter of choice, and final word to fashion and costume.

Come to the Kerala context, dress has a different and unbelievable

story to tell. Kerala, the southernmost part of India, hailing its own development model, maintains a good standard and index in all the fields. The state became unbeaten after passing crucial steps, probably because of the caste hierarchy, which was exactly higher and lower. This hierarchy based on *jati* or caste put a deep shadow on every ground of the lower castes; they were destined to be evicted from everywhere and denied all rights and freedom. The lower castes faced challenges and persecution from the higher castes, in which dress was a predominant medium used by the higher castes to indicate the caste hierarchy.

The *savarnas*, or the people who belonged to the higher status of

the varna system, enjoyed all powers and privileges, and the avarnas, or the people hailing from the lower castes, were treated as unprivileged and sometimes treated as beasts, suffered a lot in the form of exploitation, squeezing, persecution and slavery. The lower castes were denied freedom and education, and they were even restricted from using public paths and temples. There were different varieties of iron machinery to protect this pro-*savarna* attitude; even the rulers supported the system for a long time.

Comes to the controversial relationship between dressing and caste hierarchy, the lower castes had no right to wear proper dresses as in proper form, and most of the *avarnas* are half-naked, including women¹ and this system continued in all parts of the state for a long period. It was followed before the state formation; the state was fragmented into three principalities: Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Three of these Princely States followed different administrations under different rulers. Thus, the dress of a person in Kerala in its ancient stage was a matter of caste. Kerala was a centre of different varieties of castes and the majority of the population belonged to lower castes; each caste represented its own lifestyle, beliefs, marriage, and burial systems. But all those lower castes faced the same miseries due to Brahmanical hegemony. The influence of castes on the lives of the people is traced back several centuries; even ancient religious and literary works produced several instances of the influence of castes on society. *Dharmasutras* dated the emergence of castes in society to the 1st Millennium BCE, and it is the

first and earliest example of the interference of castes or *varna* in dressing. *Manusmriti* also describes the intensity of caste in Indian society; it produces information about the condition of the *Chandalas*, one of the lower castes; they were destined to live outside the village and wear the clothes of the dead and ornaments of black iron.

Caste was a black mark in the history and life of the lower castes of Kerala and they were evicted from even historical writings and mainstream society. But the system changed after the intervention of the Europeans, especially the British; their initiation of *Christian* Missionary and its activities, the emergence of Western education, conversion to *Christianity*, etc., reduced the evil practices among the Hindu society, gradually with the support of these western liberal thoughts and the continuous efforts of the socio-religious reformers, the lower castes belonged to different sub-castes began to absorb freedom and public space. They became the voice of the majority, which cut short the role of higher castes as mere spectators.

The women of lower castes began to be empowered, and the children of the lower castes went to school. It opened a new era in Kerala; the lower castes conducted different types of protest and agitation to wear dress properly. At first, the rulers allowed the right to cover the upper part of the body only to the converted Christian women, but gradually, due to immense protest, the rulers and *savarnas* were compelled to accept the demands of the lower castes. From there onwards, the concept of dressing of the *Malayalis* changed and it took so

many advantages and priorities to grow as an identity, obviously, the *Malayali* identity. The thinking capacity of the man was changed from time to time and this change is also visible in the dressing pattern of the people.²

Saree and *mundu* are the conventional dress heritage of Kerala and the *Malayalis* make their special festive occasion rich with their beautiful traditional dresses, the dressing passion of the *Malayalis* has no limits and they experience after experience different varieties of dresses and always follow the pulse of the world, especially always try to be fashionable and trendy in their looks. Their wardrobes are filled with dresses based on their aesthetic and comfort. Fashion is not a system of decorating oneself; it has some other importance, like boosting a person's confidence and inner strength; it is more than a cloth. It must enhance the powerful form of self-expression. Fashion is a tool for self-confidence, emotion, transformation, and happiness, making one a better version of oneself.

The studies prove that the best and most comfortable outfit with favourite colours can elevate the psychological pleasure and personality of a person.³ Psychology and fashion are interconnected⁴ and Psychologists say that some days, the outfit can make us successors in interviews and even that day completely. So, the *Malayalis* dive into the world of fashion and transform themselves and boost their confidence and allow themselves to showcase their beauty and unique personality through experimenting with fashion. Wearing a dress means wearing confidence, which is the policy of the *Malayalis*; they also try to

make fashion into a fusion of the experience of traditional dressing forms with the most modern trends. Clothing choices are also a premier factor in a person's mood and confidence.⁵ The colour, fitness, style, etc. of the dress that we wear would affect a person. In such a context, *Malayalis* and their dressing sense needed much attention because the Keralites always try to shop budget-friendly, but looking for elegant and simple-looking dresses and try to wear them fashionably by adding admiring accessories. The people of Kerala always try to enhance their appearance and beauty and try to maintain a fashionable look.

Now, not only caste but any factor, whether the society or individual, will not push back the *Malayalis* from selecting the dress they want. The Psychologist mentioned that the wardrobe can express the mindset of a person. Fashion and confidence are interconnected, and the selection of a dress is also important; some dresses can hold the emotions and feelings of a person. So many factors contributed to the drastic change of the *Malayalis* from a narrow-minded to a liberal and comfortable society. Globalization, government support, education, migration, foreign relations, the influence of media, etc., are the major factors that lead to the society of Kerala being a pro-fashion one. The mindset of the people changed due to the relentless struggles conducted by our forefathers.

Now, fashion is not just a word; it has its own academic definition; several professional courses are there in Kerala to study fashion and allied activities, and the immense launching

of textiles all over Kerala and its successful continuation prove the sense of fashion of the people. Now, dress is such a commercial product, and the cultural value and identity of the *Malayalis* are raised through the element of fashion. Psychological studies discuss the term “what you wear significantly impacts our mindset and character,” known as Enclothed Cognition. The role of cinema is the best factor as far as the *Malayalis* are concerned because film has the potential to influence the minds of people more than any other medium. There are demands from customers who need the same fashion dresses after a film is released in their contemporary times. Fashion has no limits and will equally treat the different age groups.

Today’s world is filled with stress, confusion, tension, ego, and lack of confidence. In such a situation, wearing a comfortable, fashionable, and elegant dress is blessed, and being confident throughout the day is important. At present, it is unbelievable that Kerala society had such a dark age in the past that their people had no right to wear dress properly, and from such a context to the contemporary period, the state of Kerala has now removed all caste barriers and to celebrate as a trendy state.

Conclusion:

Every society is different in its outlook, way of thinking, way of treatment and how people look for new things that come into their society. As such, ‘fashion’ is a new thing that has come to the society of Kerala, and people are looking for it from different perspectives, some accepted, someone rejected and some being followed by

sharp and staring eyes on the streets and talking about the unwritten and unlawful norms and unnecessary morals, this is commonly faced by the women in the society, as they are more expressive of their body, this is perhaps a bad memory and experience of every women who had followed the fashion in their outfit, bad comments and ridicule them in public are the most common thing that had followed by the so-called pro-morality followers. Here, the necessity of sharpening the laws of protection of women is significant, society followed some preconceived notions that dress and the crimes against women are interconnected; even infants are attacked in our society, so it is not a matter of dress. Kerala's main income is derived from its tourist attractions and the number of tourists reached here every year. In such a situation, it is necessary to fight against these kinds of narrow-minded prejudices.

The number of Migrants from Kerala to Europe has been huge in recent times, and the surveys conducted on this tendency resulted in the response that most of the time, they choose to migrate from Kerala, they are highly educated, have no employment, and are looking for a better life. So they preferred to settle in European countries, and one of the shocking responses was only because of the peering eyes of the streets⁶ and unnecessary interference of the persons among other’s lives. In this 21st century, man is free and they have their own space, selection, individuality, identity and perception of everything that is happening in his surroundings. Almost people are stressed due to different matters, in such a world they

prefer to be happy and peaceful and always be comfortable it is in the form of enjoying movies, watching art forms, making creative things, maintaining fitness and bodybuilding and even through making themselves fashionable. All wish to be stylists themselves. Such fashionable outlooks are even now misinterpreted in some

References:

¹ Kesavan C. Jeevithasamaram (Mal.). Kottayam: D.C. Books; 1968. P. 71.

² Bisvas A, Vasavan O. (trans.). Bharatheeya Chamayangal (Mal.). New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India; 2008. P. 1.

³ Goflyy. (2024). Fashion Psychology: How Clothing Choices Affect Mood and Confidence. <https://www.linkedin.com>.

⁴ Saloni Mehta. (2023). Fashion and Confidence: Unveiling Your inner Strength Through Style. <https://bschool.dpu.edu.in>.

⁵ Deccan Chronicle. (2023). How Fashion Choices can Impact Your Mood and Confidence. www.deccanchronicle.com.

⁶ Vajra Zayara. (2022). The Changing Perceptions on Fashion in Kerala. vajrazayara.medium.com.

categories of Kerala's society. So people want to spend the rest of their lives in other countries. So, fashion has so many peculiar characteristics, and the treatment of society also follows multiple approaches to fashion. However, fashion can awaken the people as well as their confidence.