

Fashion is a part and parcel of man's psyche. It has evolved through the ages with the development of man and has been influenced by his sociopolitical environment.

Zahra Hameed takes us on a journey of fashion through its various stages in the Indian Subcontinent

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The history of fashion is as old as the history of man himself. Yet despite its intrinsic function, fashion has always been a symbol of aristocracy. Even in the subcontinent, the courts determined the fashion trends of that day.

In order to advertise a certain style, tailors made use of fashion dolls (modern day mannequins). The dolls attired in the latest fashion offerings were exclusively presented to the royal family and were brought by wealthy society ladies. The dolls came with a change of outfits and were circulated at parties and meetings to exhibit what was in vogue. The select few who had either helped in its purchase or were friends of the royal family were allowed to see and possibly copy the doll's outfit. Thus in this way what was in fashion, was publicized and adopted by a certain class, and what they wore was copied by the masses.

There was no concept of ready to wear at that time. Tailors made use of fashion plates, which were hand-rendered fashion illustrations that were distributed among distinguished clients.

The Mughals were patrons of all forms of artistic expression. The royal family lay much emphasis on rich fabrics, contrasting and appealing colours and the use of intricate details and mediums on their attires. Gold threads, precious stones, sequences

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and a host of designs and draping techniques were created especially for the royals. Thus the royal tailors, weavers, dyers, embroiders and craftsmen catered solely to the needs of their needs and they were not allowed to reproduce the outfits made exclusively for the royal family.

It was through the courts, official functions and royal weddings that these fashions infiltrated through the various classes. The mughal miniatures to date allow us to study these fashions and to be inspired by the grandeur and majestic trends of that era.

The colonization of the Indian subcontinent by the British brought forth many indirect and direct influences on the fashions of the day. Lighter colours more suited to morning wear, embroidery like crochet, ribbons, laces, English styles of hats and drapery, hairstyles and foreign textiles pervaded the local market. These fashions slowly but surely became injected into the community. Furthermore, the British colouring had a deep impact on the local psyche.

The concept, 'fair is beautiful' took root at this time. The local population grudgingly admired the light coloring, coloured eyes, and golden hair of the British women. Local women took to powdering their faces and developing different cosmetics to lighten their naturally whatish complexions. Over the years, despite their inherent dislike for this fairer race the natives ironically came to regard their very fairness as a sign of superiority.

It was after the invention of the printing press and the coming in of the industrial age that

publications were allowed to play a significant role in fashion publicity. British magazines such as Vogue and Tatler and a host of foreign newspapers reached Indian soil and displayed the popular fashions of that time. Although these were limited in numbers and often six-to-eight months old they were consumed readily by the resident British community as well as some of their select native female companions. Women of that time often made their own clothes inspired by these select publications following patterns and instructing the local tailors.

The dandy fashions of the British officers inspired even the native men. In time, the social influence of the British race had an impact on the local styles as well as thought. The 'brow sahibs' of the community gladly traded their local dress such as the achkan, peshwas, kameez pajama and dhoti for the more tailored and structured British coats and pants.

As the independence movement gained momentum the local population shed the English attires, and once again there was a revival of roots and tradition. Fashion and politics became infused as a person's religion and his attire became a symbol of his identity and faith.

The natives turned towards locally made fabrics like lawn and khaddar. For once fashion was reduced to its basic function of covering bodies and the finery and details of attire were of no significance in the face of the impending storm that engulfed the people of the subcontinent.