



BEYOND THE SARI AND SHERWANI: FASHION AS SELF-DISCOVERY IN THE INDIAN QUEER COMMUNITY

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Abstract: The queer people are 'strange', at least that's what the name suggests. Their strangeness is ridiculed, ostracized and mocked on all societal and corporate fronts. Though the 'difference' was celebrated in pre-colonial India, the Criminal Tribes Act (1871) imposed by British India's Governor-General put the community under negative strands. The decriminalisation of Section 377 of the IPC in 2018 brought a breath of fresh air into their existence. Fashion has become their arena of self-expression and has given them the power of freedom, through which the very 'difference' is appreciated, identified, respected, and treasured. Very few research papers are published in the area of Indian queer fashion. "My language of rebellion is not asking people for acceptance, but about showing them that I am queer and so is my fashion," says Luna, a gay model (2023). The first part of the paper will discuss the queer history of India, including the spiritual connection. It will also discuss traditional genderless Indian costumes like dhoti, kurta, and angrakha. The second part of the paper will bring about an elaborate portrayal of many firsts in queer fashion in India. The details will include the first trans fashion designer, Saisha Shinde; the first talent management agency dedicated to the queer community, Current Management; the first LGBTQ Pride shop in Mumbai, TRIB Fashion; the first transgender model to feature in the India Fashion Show, -Anjali Lama; and the first LGBT fashion show in India, at Agra in 2016. The third part of the paper will highlight a few collaborative community projects that involve LGBTQ+ activists, artists, designers, and models who weave the web of unity through freedom and empowerment. Lakme Fashion Week 2018, Feronia Fashion Night (the event that encourages only queer people to be the participants); the exclusive brands for LGBTQ+ - BeUnic; queer-owned small businesses - Gagged and Sassage Stickers; Inclusive fashion brands available in India - H&M, Marc Jacobs, Levi's, Calvin Klein and Adidas; The last part of the paper will amplify the achievements of Indian queer designers who rule the roost in the fashion world - Rohit Bal, Param Sahib and others. It will also deal with Pranshu - a 16-year-old queer artist from Ujjain who ended his life owing to the hateful comments he received when posting his video on his Instagram handle (2023).

Index Terms - Queer fashion, transgender, genderless, LGBTQ+, Pride, inclusion, drag queen

INTRODUCTION

Fashion is ubiquitous: it is on television, in movies, and on social media. Though it might appear insignificant and is often elucidated as such, it cannot be ruled out totally. Fashion, especially for queer people, has always been a tool of self-expression and actualization. Queer people may be marginalised and invisible, but queer fashion is not. Fashion has always drawn inspiration from queer people, and queerness has always been inextricable from fashion, says Jose Criaes-Unzueta. But queer fashion is more than simply a business. It is also a cultural and societal phenomenon fueled by a need for novelty. It is all about being open to change, and as a complex phrase, it refers to a social movement against stigmatization and oppression.

Fashion: An Aesthetic Tool for Social Change

The term 'fashion' comes from the Latin word 'facere,' which means 'to make,' and refers to the creation, mixing, and wearing of outfits embellished with specific cultural aesthetics, patterns, motifs, shapes, and cuts, allowing people to showcase their group's belongings, values, meanings, beliefs, and ways of life ("Fashion"). Fashion has grown from a survival strategy to an expression of our personality, not only for the choice of clothing but also for what each outfit serves ornamentally, symbolically, and socially. The epidemic prompted a total shutdown in the fashion sector, which shook the establishment. It led to the belief that it is preferable to have a more mindful and less consumerist attitude towards fashion with clothing that lasts, and that there is a greater advantage in being less wasteful and evaluating the frantic pace of runways and fast fashion. (IMPIGLIA)

Queer Fashion

Queer is a common phrase for people who are not heterosexual or cisgender. Queer, which originally meant strange or 'peculiar,' started to be used derogatorily against persons with same-sex interests or relationships in the late nineteenth century. In the twenty-first century, the term queer came to refer to a wide range of non-normative sexual or gender identities and politics. Academic fields such as queer theory and queer studies, which are only loosely related to the LGBT movement, share a basic resistance to binarism, normativity, and a perceived lack of intersectionality. Modern manifestations of LGBT identities include queer artists, queer cultural groups, and queer political movements. ("Queer")

It is an undeniable fact that fashion theory has shifted the marginalised, like gays and homosexuals, to centre stage. Style-fashion dress, a framework that acknowledges the differences between the concepts of style, fashion, and dress and the inextricability of these processes in constructing one's appearance, communicates and negotiates aspects of our identities such as sexuality, race, and gender. (Kaiser 274-79) Queerness and queer identities have interacted in a variety of ways with the fashioned body and shaped conceptions of what it is to be queer and its relationship to queer-signifying fashion. (Cole 14-70). Queer fashion is fashion worn by queer and non-binary people that deviates from traditional fashion standards that identify particular colours and forms with one of two binary genders. Queer fashion aims to be regarded by customers as a fashion style that emphasises experimenting with clothes depending on people's diverse body shapes rather than adhering to the limits imposed by gendered clothing classification.

Not conforming to any social gender norms, queer fashion comprises a combination of clothing and accessories meant for men and women. Though it is a form of self-expression, it can be considered a political act, highlighting their stand in their community. Through the use of different structures, patterns, and designs, gender-specific costume designs gained popularity in the nineteenth century. The difference was drawn as men's clothing was functional and women's dresses served the quotient of aesthetics. Since there is an intricate link between self-actualization and self-realization, queer community considers expression through fashion as a form of self-expression. ("Queer Fashion: Most Up-to-Date Encyclopaedia, News & Reviews") When their existence was questioned, the queer community revealed their inner turmoil and the status of the existing stigma through fashion.

Queer Fashion in India

Non-binary and gender fluidity are not new to India, which has a rich cultural heritage. Indian epics, Vedas, Puranas, and scriptures never failed to reinstate the acceptance and approval of non-binary gender people. Hindu gods such as Ardanarisvara, Aravan, Bahuchara Mata, Hariharan, Chandi-Chamunda, Bhagavati Devi, and Mohini are connected with gender fluidity. The legends of Ayyappa, Bhagiratha, Kartikeya, Mitra, and Varuna serve as interpretations of gender variance. According to Hindu religious scriptures, Arjuna's transformation into Brihannala, Shikandini into Shikandi, Chudala into Kumbaka, and Ila into Sudyumna undoubtedly portray the existence of gender fluidity among Hindu texts and folklore.

Dhotis are worn by Indian men throughout the country, even in contemporary India. Dhotis resemble sarees and were traditionally worn by men in ancient India. This gender-neutral attire not only promotes Indian culture but also serves as a touchstone for the concept of gender empathy. "Masculinity, or machoness, is a social construct. It travelled across the globe and reached Indian men with the social change in modern India. It goes back to colonialism when we started adapting the Western ideology of differences in clothing" (Global). Irrespective of their gender, people walked bare-chested with some fabric swathed around their bodies in ancient India. Gender neutrality elements are found in traditional Indian attire like angrakha and

kurta. The concept of gender-specific dresses has become a socio and psychological concern and is deeply impacted by colonialism.

Drag aspects existed in India from time immemorial. Drag performers were common in Indian royal courts during the Middle Ages, and the tradition thrived in kothis. For decades, men have been acting as women in folk art forms such as jatra and lavani. Traditional performance art forms, such as the Lok Rang Noor of rural Punjab, have endured for many generations with remarkable tenacity. Kaniyan Koothu in Tamil Nadu and Launda Naach in Bihar are two popular art forms. Cross-dressing was an important component of Indian culture before it fell subject to stigmas and systematic disdain, particularly as a result of colonisation, Victorian morality, and the regressive legislation that accompanied it.

Cross-dressing is neither new to India nor Western propaganda. During the Chamayavilakku (Traditional Lamp) festival in Kerala, with lamps in their hands and dressed as women, men across the state take out the procession. Clad in grand sarees and jewellery, they take part in this notable festival as a mark of their piety for Goddess Sree Devi. Similar to Chamayavilakku, the Kottankulangara Devi Temple festival sees men dressing up as women and performing rituals for the deity. It emphasises the concept of Ardhanarishvara, the composite being of Shiva and Parvati, symbolising the balance between masculine and feminine energies. During the Lathmar Holi festival, women in the town of Barsana playfully beat men with sticks. In return, men dress like women and sing songs. In the Bonalu Festival, men, calling themselves 'Bonalu performers', dress up like the female goddess Mohankali and participate in processions to honour the deity.

Teejan Bai Puja is celebrated in Chhattisgarh to honour Teejan Bai. She was a courageous woman and, disguised as a man fought alongside her husband. During the celebration, women dress up as men, carry swords, and sing heroic songs, commemorating her bravery and challenging traditional gender roles. Kutch, Gujrat celebrates Maila's Dance wherein women perform a powerful dance donning men's clothing and wielding sticks. The festival is celebrated to commemorate a warrior woman named Maila and her undaunting spirit of questioning authority. There are countless other local festivals and customs across India that embrace gender expressions beyond the binary.

Queer Couture: India's Avant-Garde Fashion Revolution

The Indian fashion industry is the first to acknowledge the queer lifestyle. It is more of an acceptance than a revolution. Queer fashion is taking over the runway, but it is not known if the country is socially equipped for the change. The main focus of Lakme Fashion Week 2018 was queer fashion. Many prominent fashion businesses in India publicly had queer models and began producing queer clothing as a separate fashion department. The mainstream fashion industry is slowly embracing non-binary gender designs, from male-inspired apparel for women to gender-bending models on the catwalk. However, queer fashion should not be considered only for ramp walks. It should be upgraded to a social movement. Anita Dolce Vita stated that queer fashion is indefinable since it depends upon one's individuality and added that it is systemically rooted in gender non-conformity and is all about breaking gender binaries and redefining femininity, masculinity, and everything in between and outside of it. (Brekke)

The perceptible stigma surrounding LGBT relationships and manifestations in India has produced a variety of roadblocks for queer people across the country's job divisions. Most queer people spend a significant portion of their lives feeling out of place and unwelcome. While many queer people feel out of place in corporate jobs, fashion and other artistic endeavours have allowed them to completely accept and express themselves. Fashion, luckily, has been one of the community's few queer-friendly work arenas.

“As a queer person, fashion is more than a profession; it is a survival skill. My language of rebellion is not asking people for acceptance, but about showing them that I am queer and so is my fashion,” says Luna, a non-binary and gay model. She also adds that beauty gives her hope, and fashion is much more than an assemblage of clothes and accessories (Sengupta).

Fashion becoming almost a life skill for the queer community means that subcultures like a drag (men wearing women's clothing cross-dressing, generally for entertainment purposes) and kink (an unconventional sexual taste or behavior - Merriam Webster) that allow complete indulgence in their fantasies are thriving. The fashion industry appears to be one of the more accepting professional possibilities for the LGBTQ+ community. Though racism and prejudice frequently reduce trans and non-binary models to become props in an entourage, it also allows them the freedom of expression that is stigmatised in everyday life in addition to a realistic career alternative. Despite the limits and prejudices inherent in the fashion business, the queer community welcomes any opportunity to achieve recognition in this cutthroat environment.

Saisha Shinde

Saisha Shinde's journey as the first transgender fashion designer in India reflects a significant stride towards inclusivity and acceptance. She also created the winning gown for Miss Universe 2021, Harnaaz Kaur Sandhu. Despite her struggles and stigmatization, she stands tall as a symbol of empowerment, challenging societal norms, and contributing to a more diverse and representative fashion landscape in India. Her success story has not failed to inspire many queer individuals who wish to set foot in the fashion arena and create milestones.

Current Management - India's first talent management agency dedicated to the queer community

The website of the agency cites, "Of the queers, by the queers, for everybody." According to Luna, the queer model and one of the co-founders of the agency, the agency intended to "revoke the traditional requirements of mainstream talent agencies and connect inclusive brands with progressive individuals possessing stunning personalities" (Sengupta). The agency currently represents 15 queer talents from across the spheres of modelling and performance art. The impact of the agency is found in the words of Rudradaman, a queer model represented by The Current Management, when he says that the agency is the harbinger of change in a world that is only looking at them and not inviting them (Sengupta).

TRIB Fashion-India's first LGBTQ Pride shop in Mumbai

In Mumbai, India's first lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) pride store was opened in 2010. The iconic shop sells a variety of things, such as mugs, T-shirts, and ashtrays, to encourage lesbians and homosexuals to be proud of their identities and to identify heterosexual allies. Homosexuality and queer identities are more accepted by Indian teenagers than ever before, yet acceptance of their sexuality and freedom to freely express their gender choices remains a tough task for LGBT persons within the constraints of family, home, and school. Initiatives like TRIB make a difference in society and change stereotypical society.

Anjali Lama-the first Indian transgender model to walk the ramp during Lakme Fashion Week 2017

Anjali Lama is a trailblazer in the Indian fashion scene and a champion for LGBTQ+ rights. She is internationally known for becoming the first transgender model to walk the runway during India's Lakmé Fashion Week. The historic moment in 2017 opened the path for increasing exposure and inclusiveness in the fashion business for the LGBTQ+ community. She has dabbled in acting as well as modelling, starring in the Hollywood film "Tell It Like a Woman" and several local productions. She is a strong supporter of LGBTQ+ rights and uses her position to raise awareness about the issues that the community faces, notably in the fashion business.

The first LGBT fashion show in India

India's first-ever dedicated LGBT fashion show was held in Agra, the city of the Taj Mahal, on February 24, 2016, as part of the annual Taj Mahotsav festival. This groundbreaking event, a vibrant celebration of self-expression and inclusivity, paved the way for greater visibility and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in the Indian fashion landscape. Being the first of its kind in India, it featured 21 queer models. The event did not fail to challenge the societal stigma and discrimination faced by the LGBTQ+ community and promote acceptance and inclusivity. The show received widespread media coverage, sparking conversations about LGBTQ+ rights and representation in the fashion industry.

Mayyur Girotra - the first South Asian designer to open New York Pride

Mayyur Girotra's historic opening at New York Pride 2023 is a testament to his talent and commitment to celebrating inclusivity and individuality. His achievement holds immense significance not only for the fashion industry but also for the LGBTQ+ community and those looking for representation in the world. He broke barriers as the first South Asian designer to be chosen for such a prestigious platform, opening the door for more diverse representation in the world of fashion. His collection embraced the vibrant spectrum of identities and expressions within the community, promoting acceptance and individuality. "Aikya" (unity) his luxury pret collection, beautifully merged Western silhouettes with traditional Indian embroidery and techniques, creating a unique and impactful visual narrative.

Collaborative Community Projects

It is critical to recognise that, while substantial progress has been made, significant obstacles remain. Discrimination, gatekeeping, and cultural constraints continue to stymie diversity in the fashion industry. Through LGBTQ+ activists, queer community establishments serve to face these barriers and build a truly equal and diverse platform for everyone, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

Feronia Fashion Night

Feronia Fashion Night is a Redo Times Pvt. Ltd. project to promote awareness of gender equality and LGBTQ inclusion. It is India's first androgynous fashion show, bringing together models from the LGBTQ community to launch their modelling careers. Feronia is named after the Roman goddess of liberty, health, and abundance. The tale of Goddess Feronia, who offered slaves freedom and fundamental civil rights to the poorest members of society, is still part of Roman culture, with the Goddess being especially revered among plebeians and freedmen.

BeUnic

BeUnic is a community-driven, queer-owned platform for LGBTQ+ creators and businesses. It helps the LGBTQ community by providing training, counselling, and business opportunities. Founded by Ashish Chopra, Vishesh Chopra, and their mother Simmi Nanda, BeUnic curates lifestyle items developed by queer entrepreneurs to emphasise the concept of Being You and Being Unique. The team came to Shark Tank India to pitch their business. They take pride in collaborating with and contributing a portion of their revenues to non-organisations that work with queer people to address a variety of issues.

Queer-owned Small Businesses

'Gagged' is a gender-free and inclusive fashion brand founded in 2022. Having once been bullied for his "strange" style, Rudraksh decided to dedicate himself to corporate fashion marketing, changing the narrative surrounding gender in garments. Gagged is reorienting the fashion business today with its equality, affordability, and sustainability, built on the foundation of a "for anyone and everyone" attitude. Rudraksh has the opinion that Gagged is a dream for every little queer boy who finds solace in colours and patterns—someone who devours fashion because it feeds them better. (Kochhar)

Sassage Stickers by Laksha and Nakul, founded during the epidemic in the busy metropolis of Bangalore, is a tiny, queer-owned business that pushes for mental health awareness and self-care via its multitude of stickers, lapel pins, and keychains. A variety of brilliant and colourful goods define the heart and soul of this business, celebrating the interconnectedness of mental health and gay pride. (Kochhar)

Inclusive Fashion Brands (India)

Top fashion brands like H&M, Marc Jacobs, Levi's, Calvin Klein, and Adidas have shown their accord for the LGBTQIA+ community by hiring a transgender model, having gender-neutral clothing, and showcasing a collection of designs decorated with bold colours of rainbow flags. These brands have featured many LGBTQIA+ models throughout the years and are known for androgynous and gender-neutral clothing (Gitanjali)

Indian Queer Designers

The Indian fashion industry's newcomers are not the first to implement and interact with gender storylines. In 1990, India's top designer, Rohit Bal, admitted that he was gay and that he did not need to hide his sexuality. James Ferreira, the designer and founder of the James Ferreira Designer label, was one of the first Indian fashion designers in the media sector. These designers infused their work with a touch of queer fashion.

Param Sahib is known as the 'Maximalist Designer.' As a gender conformist, Param Sahib opines that his gender is none of others' concern. Apart from his vivid and energetic clothing line, his fashion style is colourful since, according to him, colours are a lifestyle, not a trend. There are other designers like Rahul Mishra, Rajneesh Kapoor, Siddharth Bindra and Priya Takanishi who are known for their intricate embroidery

and romantic silhouettes. They seamlessly blend their signature style with gender-fluid elements, challenging conventional notions of masculinity and femininity. They don't leave any stone unturned in celebrating a vibrant and modern India, blurring the lines between genders and expectations.

Conclusion

While celebrating the acceptance of queer aesthetics and their determined search for self-expression, one cannot deny the hard-hitting fact of the vicious reaction and perilous rejection of society. The incident of Pranshu's suicide is a wake-up call to the vulnerable status of the queer community. Pranshu was a 16-year-old boy in the 10th grade. During the pandemic situation, when everybody was exploring what they were good at, he was posting his reels in the traditional Indian outfit that went viral. He received nearly 4000 comments, mostly homophobic in nature. His mother grieved that there was not any attention being paid to the fact that a 16-year-old boy faced hate comments online for doing something he not only loved but was also good at. She also added that negativity needed to be checked and curtailed (HANDA). Fashion, as a powerful form of self-expression, has the potential to raise fundamental questions about patriarchy and prejudice. Though India was the torchbearer of gender fluidity and inclusion, colonialism rerouted them, and Indian culture fell prey to its alien thoughts. The revolution of queer fashion is seeded by indomitable spirited individuals and a congregation of like-minded activists and sentient social movements.

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