



## **Culture and Dress Style of Malabar Kerala Muslim Women**

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### **Abstract:**

This article presents ethnographic material from contemporary Kerala, where recent shifts in Muslim women's dress styles (shift from sari towards salwaar kameez; adoption of pardah; use of Arabic abaya) have come under critique. We show that commentators fail to take into account the degree to which all Indian women—not simply Muslims—are heavily constrained in dress by issues of modesty and "decency." Dress codes for all communities and both sexes have been continually reworked since the nineteenth century. Muslims' recent changes are prompted by a shift away from Hindu idioms and towards more Islamic. Idioms of modesty; changes index Indian Muslims' growing realization (also apparent in other spheres) that much of India's putatively common culture is actually rooted in Hindu practice. Kerala's Muslim community is more than averagely high spending and Muslims are especially interested in dressing well and participating in worlds of fashion, which may be vernacular style (Indian film driven) or global (brands).

**Keywords:** India, dress, Muslim, Gulf, pardah,

### **Introduction:**

In India it is Hindus who form the dominant majority community against whom Muslims are compared. Dress in India is produced, performed, and read through an opposition

between the putatively "Indian" and the "Western," but is at the same time powerfully shaped by the opposition between "Hindu" and "Muslim." In the southern state of Kerala discussed here, the picture is even more complex,



partly because of south Indians' pride in their social conservatism ("tradition") but also because Kerala contains a significant, wealthy, and powerful Christian minority.

Self-consciously oriented towards "the West" and to a "modern" aesthetic, Christians act as innovators in Kerala's public sphere, introducing styles of dress that would otherwise be less widespread. Issues of "decency" and "modesty," "fashion" and "backwardness" are openly debated and contested in Kerala's multi-community public sphere. Debates have become particularly heated since the 1990s, when many south Indian Muslim women (like their Sri Lankan neighbors) have taken to wearing what is locally known as *pardah* or "decent" dress, a form of contemporary veiling linked to pan-Islamic trends, which leaves only the hands, feet, and face uncovered. Discussions of dress—both popular and academic—commonly focus on Muslim women. However, issues of decency in dress also preoccupy Muslim men as well as south Indian women from non-Muslim

backgrounds. This article is based on two years' recent fieldwork in Kozhikode, a northern Kerala (Malabar) mixed but Muslim-dominated area. Our analysis is also informed by insights from earlier periods of fieldwork in a Hindu-dominated region of central Kerala (Travancore), which has a negligible Muslim population.

### **Kozhikode: A Cosmopolitan City**

With a population of roughly 500,000, Kozhikode is the third largest city in Kerala. It has a rich and complex history of maritime trade dating back to the tenth century, and by the twelfth century had become a commercial hub between West Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. It also has long-standing trading links with the Arab world, which continued right up to the 1970s. More recently, since the 1980s, Kozhikode's economy has become dependent upon revenues and remittances from Gulf migration. This diverse history contributes to the city's popular reputation for "cosmopolitanism." As a result, for local Muslims, dress objectifies the triple-strandedness of a highly specific self: south Indian



Malayali, pan-Islamic, and Arab-connected. At times these orientations are in tension, as when claims for a specifically south Indian aesthetic pull against recent reformist imperatives towards pardah for women. While it is often noted that women are the cultural and symbolic bearers of community identity, it should be pointed out that men's bodies are also, albeit more subtly, marked as Muslim, something widely overlooked in popular and academic literature alike.

### **Kerala Dress Styles:**

Kerala prides itself upon being a relatively secular state, not prone to the extremes of communal disturbance or religious chauvinism found in north India. In the Indian context, secularism is denned as the constitutional guarantee of equal respect for all religions, even if this is not always upheld. In Kerala, as elsewhere in India, dress codes increasingly mark out the religious identities of the different groups living within a plural state. To some extent it is possible to plot the geography of dress in Kerala according to the densities of

different religious groups in different areas. Kozhikode is considered a conservative town because of the strong Muslim presence in contrast to Ernakulum, a city with a Christian majority where dress codes are more permissive. There, fashion items such as jeans or sleeveless T-shirts (for women) and Bermuda shorts (for young men) are a common sight. Such items are rarely seen outside of this Christian-dominated city and are considered inappropriate dress by all Muslims and by many Hindus. In Thiruvananthapuram (formerly Trivandrum) city to the south, where the Hindu influence is strong, gold-bordered cream handloom cloth known as cassava is frequently spotted, worn both as a female sari or male mundu (waist-cloth). Women's Dress Known as Westerns across India, European-style skirts, trousers, Tshirts, and so on have made hardly any inroads into Kerala. Young unmarried women up to around the age of twenty who come from very progressive families may wear these items for college or socializing. Such girls are most likely to be urban,



middle-class, and from the Christian community or from the long-standing immigrant Gujarati Hindu community. But for any family, formal or even semi-formal occasions Westerns would not be considered appropriate. In line with wider south Indian currents, and in contrast to much of Southeast Asia or even neighboring Sri Lanka, Westerns carry the slight smack of license and immodesty. Over the twentieth century, the sari has gradually replaced various regional dresses to become a quintessential pan-south Asian female garment. Worn from about seventeen-years old onwards, it is in this area a six-meter piece of fabric draped over a floor-length underskirt and blouse. However, there are considerable divergences of style. Hindu and Christian women leave the sari end (pallu) draped over one shoulder. Some Muslim women still use the sari end to cover their heads, but more often nowadays women are matching the sari with a separately bought mafta—a headscarf of chiffon or polyester in a complementing shade and pattern. Underneath

the sari, Christian and Hindu women wear short blouses (leaving the midriff exposed) and short, tight sleeves—and often implore tailors to make the blouse sleeves as tight as possible. The tight sleeves relate both to ideals of attractiveness—one wants to show off plump and shapely upper arms—but also, to different idioms of modesty. Sleeveless tops are widely considered immodest in Kerala and not much used outside of very sophisticated urban upper-middle-class circles. For Hindu women, modesty is about wrapping, restraining, and binding: clothes are tight, wound around the body, and jewelry such as anklets and bangles contain the bodily extremities. There is an emphasis on binding, sealing, and restraining. Young Hindu girls and women wear a waist-chain, unlike boys, who need to wear these constraining, protecting, binding items only until toddlerhood is over; older married women wear bangles and necklaces. Bangles, waist-chains, anklets, and so on are specifically feminine adornments associated with ideas about female vulnerability, permeability, and



need for protection and containment of feminine power. While Muslim girls also use waist-chains, anklets, and so on, recently a different logic of modesty and protection has become visible. The idea of female vulnerability being best protected by binding and wrapping is being supplanted by more orthodox Islamic idioms of modesty and protection. Muslim women resort to non-matching blouses or to clever tailoring which adds sections in and keeps the “matching” part for a sleeve trim at the wrist . This simple ethnographic point exemplifies a wider issue: the degree to which things long heralded as “Indian” in fact turn out to be structured by the needs and values of dominant high-caste Hindu communities. Kerala’s famous cassava dressu is a prime example. Whenever one speaks of “Kerala dress,” when state institutions such as banks hold “national dress days,” when there is a cultural program, tourist brochure or indeed anything purporting to showcase Kerala’s regional specificity, women will be shown wearing short, tight red

sari blouses under the cream and gold-bordered handloom sari (the cassava), which is instantly recognizable throughout India as coming from Kerala. The bright red blouse (a color auspicious to Hindu women) is matched with a large red pottu or bindi (forehead spot), and jasmine garlands adorn loose hair. This “Kerala traditional dress” was actually invented and adopted in the nineteenth century by high-caste Hindu women. It is nowadays adopted by lower-caste and Christian women alike as emblematic of regional affiliation but is almost never worn by Muslims. Furthermore, using a pottu or bindi, which signifies feminine auspiciousness, is considered inappropriate for Muslim women, as is wearing hair loose and adorned with flowers. What is dubbed “Indian” or “Malayali” turns out to be high-caste Hindu and ultimately excludes Muslims . Difference is also evident in Hindu attitudes towards the salwaar kameez , the long tunic worn over loose pants and matched

**Figure:**

With a shawl, which has become the Kerala unmarried girl's dress since the 1990s. Hindu villagers were initially very hostile to replacing their half-sari or pavada-blouse (skirt-blouse plus breast-wrap) with the salwaar kameez, commonly (although incorrectly) known throughout Kerala as the churidar (a usage followed here). It is perhaps an index of these garments' perceived exotic foreignness that consumers and even shopkeepers in Kerala are unclear about terms. In north India and Pakistan, where the dress originates, the basic style of long tunic and loose pants is known as salwaar kameez (women) or kurta-pajama (men's version), or sometimes "Punjabi suit/suit." This terminology is not heard in Kerala. In north India, churidar refers specifically to a style in which the pants are very tight around the leg, showing the calf outline, but in Kerala, the term churidar has been adopted to refer to any form or design of women's salwaar kameez. The churidar is often scornfully referred to as "Muslim dress" or even "Pakistani dress" by older

Hindu men. Young Hindu and Christian women receive complaints from elders when they venture out in the churidar. The use of pants rather than a skirt was thought unseemly. "What are these legs?" one grandfather roared. Still now, the churidar among Hindus is thought of mostly as an unmarried woman's outfit, and only the most modern married women will use it. For formal wear, a sari is considered essential. By contrast, it was pleasure rather than hostility that greeted the churidar's arrival on the fashion scene among Muslims in the late 1980s. Here was a dress for teenage girls and young women that, unlike pavada and blouse, did not accentuate and reveal the body's shape, but was loose.

Moreover, while the blouse could ride up from pavada and reveal a strip of midriff, with the churidar, the body is decently covered from neck to ankle with no threat of exposure. The churidar is widely preferred in daily use and even at parties and pre-wedding functions. Saris are brought out by married women for weddings, but on no other occasions are they



considered compulsory. Specially elaborate churidars are considered suitable as formal wear by young Muslim married women and mothers, a group that among Hindus would clearly be expected to don saris. The churidar has then been enthusiastically adopted and holds a respectability among Muslim women that it does not have among Hindus. Styles of churidar vary by community (to the extent that one can often easily guess a woman's religion and ethnicity from her churidar alone). This is the main reason why Kerala women still vastly prefer fabric pieces for stitching over ready-made clothes. Hindus and Christians use short, tight sleeves and have the top tailored to a body-fitting shape. By contrast, Muslim churidars should be long, the tunic well down to the mid-calf, loose, with full or at least three-quarter sleeves, with baggy pants, lined to prevent any transparency or cling that might reveal a woman's body-shape or allow her brassiere strap to be discernable from behind. Even opaque fabrics like silk are lined to prevent cling.

Interestingly, bear arms are a greater source of anxiety and policing than bare heads. While all Muslim women keep well covered outside of the home, inside they often go with no head covering, although they never go sleeveless even in the bedroom. Another aspect of the Muslim churidar is that the neckline is always covered by the mafta headscarf. Even when women remove outer pardah dress in women's rooms at functions, they keep the mafta headscarf on. So while Hindu women often favor designs around the neckline of a churidar, Muslim women prefer designs on the bottom hem, where they can be admired. The preponderance of neckline designs in churidar piece shops is another example of how fashion is majority-driven and is another motivation for many Muslim women to learn to sew and embroider for themselves. Wholesalers and retailers all agreed in interviews that fashion in Kozhikode—as elsewhere in India—is heavily influenced by the movies. Each new film introduces a new style, color, and pattern, and this is then adopted two or



three months after the film's release.

While there are clear fashion seasons when new styles come in and when everyone buys new clothes such as the two Eids, the summer hot season and the rainy season, movie-related fashion trends appear all year-round, and businesses keep up with them. As Tarlo notes, since economic liberalization, fashion seems to have speeded up, with new styles appearing continually. At Eid 2003, Jamilla, a twenty-nine-year-old married woman with two children, and a migrant husband in Saudi, appeared wearing a salwaar with flared sleeves and loose parallel pants. She told us that the next fashion just coming in would be "jubba style"—loose, with very long and loose sleeves. "This will be comfortable," she remarked; "you'll still get the breeze to your arms, like this one I'm wearing now. But this flared sleeve is not good; when you pray, you need your arms covered totally, and this flared sleeve slips up. A long jubbah sleeve will be better." The fast and cheap churidar piece market enables women to

negotiate the demands of modesty with the desire for fashion.

**Specificity of Muslim Dress** It is often claimed that even fifteen years ago, pardah was not in use amongst Muslims in South India. It is said that Muslim women even wore their saris with tight, midriff-revealing short-sleeved blouses, like their Hindu counterparts. The post-1980s take up of pardah has been heavily criticized by non-Muslims as a foreign, not local (nadan) custom and an unwelcome innovation attributed to Arab influence via the Gulf. Post-reform changes in dress appear to provoke extreme anxiety, if not resentment, among non-Muslims. Hindu men complain that it is unfair that Muslim men can see Hindu women's bodies while non-Muslims are denied the pleasure of seeing Muslim women's bodies. However, in reality, a white pardah dress was in use up until the 1960s, while many older Muslim women can still be seen wearing the old-fashioned style

Indian burqa. Clearly, what has actually happened is that a lapse in veiling from the 1960s to 1980s has been followed by





reveiling or, as commentators have specified in other contexts, a new veiling . The “newness” has two aspects: first, the styles now in use are quite different from the old tent-like white pardah or black burqa, and secondly, contemporary veiling is indicative of a more developed consciousness towards Islam and is linked to global styles of Islamic “decent dress” in which only the face, hands, and feet are revealed . At the same time, what is interesting in Kozhikode is that, in contrast to what is often reported in other ethnographic locales, wearing pardah is neither a one-off move, nor necessarily E

indicative of the weighty ideological decision it appears to represent in Java , Egypt , Bangladesh and the UK . Many women who sometimes wear pardah (for example, if going to the bazaar) do not necessarily wear it at other times, for example when just going one street away from home to a ladies’ sewing class. This is similar to the situational veiling described by Stimpful and Shirazi among Singapore Malay and Iranian

migrant women, respectively. Kerala Islamic reformism, represented by organizations such as the Kerala Naduvathul Mujahideen , has combined calls for the adoption of an orthopraxy based on a textual adherence to the Koran with a commitment to an overall modernization of community practices. Critical commentators like to “blame” reformist organizations like Jamaat-i-Islamiya or KNM for promoting pardah. Such criticisms need to be put into context against arguments commonly made by Muslims themselves that an increased awareness of and adherence to the requirements of piety is a natural progression towards self-perfection, a trajectory that has speeded up in Kerala since the translation of the Koran into Araby-Malayalam (Malayalam language written in Arabic script) in 1853 and into the vernacular in 1961. From this perspective, the appearance of the KNM (mujahid) reform movement in 1952 is a result and not a cause of increased Islamic awareness . Critics also accuse the Muslim community of “turning in on itself.” Here, they fail to put



Islamic reform into perspective against the degree to which modernity and literacy in Kerala have prompted all communities, not only Muslims, into reflexive processes of reform. Non-Muslims also generally fail to appreciate the fact that the imagined secular public sphere in Kerala (as in India more widely) is actually—albeit sometimes quite subtly—nuanced as “Hindu,” a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “banal Hinduism” . Muslims attribute their use of pardah to two main currents: a heightened sense of what is right and moral, prompted by social reform movements such as KNM; and a growing sense of marginalization and insecurity as a minority community. India has, in the last two decades, witnessed an oppressive climate of Hindutva (Hindu chauvinistic nationalism), which has undoubtedly prompted greater attachment to an Islamic identity amongst Muslims. It is notable that Muslim women also talk of convenience: they often go out of the house, and sometimes into town, wearing only a maxi (house-dress) and pardah. This is much easier than putting on a sari

or churidar. “You put the pardah on top and—there! You are ready to go! No need to dress!” they said, a point conceded even by critics of pardah . While many working-class and lower-middle-class women buy black or dark cloth (most commonly green, blue, brown, maroon) and stitch their own pardah, since the early 1990s pardah has been industrially manufactured in Kerala.

### **Conclusion:**

Indian and Kerala public discourse, and private fears expressed among many Hindus and Christians, criticize Muslims’ recent new veiling as: alien; Arabic; due to Gulf migration; and unnecessary. Here, De Jong (2005) is certainly correct in arguing against making such a sharp division between Muslim dress codes and those of other Indians. Hindu women in Kerala also generally find sleeveless sari blouses and Western dress decadent and immoral. It is certainly not the case that only Muslim women are constrained in their choice of clothing or preoccupied by the issues of modesty and femininity. The issue then becomes that of defining



what counts as decent, and it is here that different idioms of modesty come into play. Pardah, contrary to what is often assumed, is not new to Muslims in Kerala but was widely in use in the past. Most of today's elderly (aged seventy plus) grandmothers have never gone out unveiled. What we are seeing is the rejection by women in their forties and fifties of the dress codes they followed in their youth, while younger women also search for increasingly "decent dress." It is also not the case that only women are preoccupied with balancing fashion and decency. With increased knowledge and the confidence engendered by the rise of reformist organizations like KNM, Koranic and pan-Islamic definitions of modesty for men and women alike are taking precedence over previously dominant local idioms, which as we have seen were never neutral. Overall, processes of reasoned debate about dress are guiding women towards better observance of pardah, at the same time as

they are leading to shifts in men's dress, which move them away from nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century customary "Muslim styles," such as skullcaps and beards.

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