

The *Sari* and Other Indian Textiles

In West and Central Asia, uncut cloth is considered holy or sacred, and gifts consisting of lengths of cloth have deep-rooted resonances in many Hindu and Muslim religious traditions. Uncut cloth is often used as a baby's first swaddling band, a circumcision wrap, coming-of-age veils for girls, ritual gifts for marriage, and the final enveloping shroud for burial (*kafan*). The end of a widow's formal period of mourning (*idath*) is symbolically marked by the presentation of a length of cloth, usually a *sari* or headshawl (*dupatta*). With this gift, she prepares to return to the routine chores of her life. In Tamil Nadu, it is mandatory for women to wear unsewn cloth as a prelude to worship, and in Bengal women make offerings of temple *saris* to appease the gods. At festivals or *urs* (the anniversaries of Sufi saints), devotees spread brightly colored lengths of cloth adorned with flowers, tinsel, or embroidered verses from the Quran on the graves of the saints.

Rituals involving gifts of uncut cloth for young girls and women are very important. As a girl reaches puberty, her first headshawl (*dupatta*) evolves from a length of simple cotton cloth draped over her shoulders and occasionally over her head, into an indispensable and decorated part of her daily attire. Several *dupattas* are skillfully embellished to make up her bridal trousseau (*jahez* or *dej*). The most elaborate version of these, the *doshalo*, will have one of its corners knotted to her groom's *doshalo* as they leave her parents' house.

The *sari* is the most commonly seen costume of uncut cloth worn by women across South Asia. Varying in style, size, pattern, color, and richness, it crosses all class and caste barriers. Each area of India has its own distinctive method of draping a *sari*. One end is generally worn tucked at the waist into a petticoat, then pleated and wound around the legs to make a long skirt reaching to the ankles. The remaining end may be thrown over a shoulder or over the head. A widow is frequently expected to wear a white *sari*, older women wear dark tones, while bright colors are reserved for younger women. Wedding *saris* are often red, as it is an auspicious color, although in Kerala they tend to be white. There are three parts to a *sari*: a field, an end-piece (*pallu*), and a border. The field may be plain, printed, or embroidered in small patterns. The width and decoration of the borders are dictated by regional variations and often help to distinguish between areas of origin. The *pallu* is usually the most heavily embellished and is worn draped over the shoulder.

Decorating *saris* with metallic threads (*zardozi*) is popular in urban areas and is often used for ceremonial or formal wear. This technique employs gold and silver threads or wires stitched to the surface of the cloth. *Kalabatun* is silk thread wrapped with gold wire, *naqshi* is a tightly-coiled fine gold wire, *salma* is a fine faceted wire, while beaten and flattened wire is called *kamdaani*. Bands, stripes, or small patterns woven in gold or silver thread are called *zari*.

The *kanchivani saris* of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu are well-known for their sumptuously woven *pallus* using thick *zari* threads in different warp and welt patterns. Vananarsi or Banaras is reknown for its distinctive finely-woven silk designs. The classical Buluchari *sari* is an intricately-woven silk brocade containing a *pallu* with a single paisley or mango motif surrounded by borders enclosing figures, animals, or floral motifs. The *jamdaani saris* of Bangladesh are usually woven patterns in fine cotton, often with a remarkable gauze-like appearance.

Shawls or *dupattas* can be made of cotton, silk, or wool. The most well-known of these are the fine *pashmina* and *shah tus* shawls of Kashmir, woven from the wool of the soft underbelly of the Tibetan goat found at high altitudes. They can be embroidered or woven with silk threads to produce the brightly-colored and glossy *amlis* shawls.