





[illegible]

**The iconic '*six yards*' of pure  
freedom, elegance, and grace.**

To the untrained eye, it is a mere piece of fabric – an unnecessarily and confusingly long one. But to over 650 million women, in one corner of the world - it is an integral part of their culture and identity.



The arrival of the British Raj back when, fundamentally altered not just the political landscape of the subcontinent, but the very fabric of how women could express themselves. Armed with Victorian sensibilities, they viewed the sari with suspicion and disdain. The bare midriff, the flowing fabric, non-structured tailoring, and more often than not, the absence or near absence of a 'proper' blouse— all of this challenged European norm.

Missionaries handed out petticoats. Colonial wives organised sewing classes. But here's the thing about the sari — it's survived everything history has thrown at it. The Bengali drape emerged in the late 1800s, with more coverage, sure — but still unmistakably ours. But colonialism doesn't just change laws and borders, it crawls into your head and rearranges your thoughts. Soon, upper-class Indian women started believing the British story about their own clothes. The blouse grew longer, tighter, more Victorian. New draping styles emerged that prioritized 'respectability' over the wisdom of centuries.

We're told the sari is tradition — but what it really is, is transformation.

Folded, pleated, pinned, or flung — it tells the world who we are, where we come from, and how tightly we're supposed to be held together. Some drapes are about freedom. Others are about control. This is a visual archive of how fabric becomes identity, and how identity is used — to adorn, to erase, to control.

The irony cuts deep: British women were fighting for the right to show their ankles while forcing Indian women to cover their waists. Liberation for some meant oppression for others. The sari became a site of negotiation — between tradition and modernity, between self and society, between the woman you are and the woman you're allowed to be.

In Kerala, the mundum neriyathum told sto-

ries of caste and class that could be read from across a courtyard. In Maharashtra, the nauvari spoke of warrior queens and working hands. In Tamil Nadu, the way you folded your border could announce your marital status, your village, your lineage. The sari was never just cloth — it was a language, complex and nuanced, that women spoke fluently across a subcontinent. But languages evolve under pressure. They borrow, adapt, survive.

The modern Indian woman navigates this inheritance daily. She wraps herself in six yards of contradiction — embracing tradition while questioning it, honoring her grandmother's memory while writing her own story. The sari becomes her armor and her vulnerability, her connection to the past and her statement about the future. In boardrooms and kitchen doorways, at weddings and funerals, at protests and celebrations, the sari transforms. Sometimes it's a power suit. Sometimes it's camouflage. Always, it's a choice — even when it feels like there's no choice at all.

This is what they don't tell you about cultural identity: it's not a museum piece, preserved in glass. It's a living thing, breathing and changing and adapting to survive. The sari carries the weight of colonialism and the lightness of liberation, the burden of expectation and the joy of self-expression. It holds space for all of these contradictions because that's what identity does, it holds space for the fullness of human experience.

The sari remembers everything: the hands that wove it, the woman who wore it, the stories it carried from one generation to the next. It remembers colonialism and resistance, tradition and transformation. Most importantly, it remembers that identity isn't fixed — it's fluid, like the fabric itself, able to be draped a thousand different ways.

In the end, that might be the sari's greatest rebellion: *its refusal to be just one thing.*





**Motherland is a Moodboard**





## **In between being Afghan, Indian, and being born and raised in the UK, what does ‘Motherland’ mean to you?**

Motherland, to me, I think is the feeling of going back home, that is, to India. The reason being I have never been to Afghanistan ever since, (I would call them terrorists) – the Taliban took over. It was all very conservative, still is, women cover themselves head to toe when leaving the house. They actually killed my great grandfather. After that, my great grandma was really terrified, and did not imagine a life for herself or her family in Afghanistan anymore. She fled to the UK, and gave birth to my grandmother. Since then, I am the second generation on my mother's side to be born here, and the second to have never seen one half of her identity up close. I don't think it affected my values at all, I was brought up very traditionally from both sides, being born and raised in the UK did not sever me from my roots. And so, yes, I identify as half Afghan, half Indian – with my Afghan heritage being kept alive through the family and generations here in the UK, and my Indian heritage being groomed from my motherland – India.

## **Tell me the story behind changing your name from Dilsheen to Diya.**

At the time that my mum was pregnant with me, we used to live in Yorkshire, because my dad used to work out of there. I was born in January, it was snowing heavily, and the street to the hospital was completely blocked off, so my dad couldn't make it in time for my birth. Luckily, a fair bit of my mum's family used to live in Yorkshire too at the time, so she wasn't alone. When it came down to filling out my birth certificate, my mum was unconscious due to complications, they had to perform a C-section, and a relative of my mum's looked up traditional Sikh names, to honour my dad's culture and heritage, and pretty much picked the first one she saw – Dilsheen. When my mum woke up, and my dad came about, they didn't connect with the name, it's not what they had pictured for me, at all. As I grew up, I adopted many nicknames, Sheena, Sheila, and then they eventually changed it to Diya when I was 8 or 9, so I could adapt to it. It's a name that has deep Afghan heritage, but is also a very popular name in North India – a culmination of both my identities.

## **If India were a moodboard, what's the first image you'd pin?**

I would say that the image that the typical Western movies, and vloggers get wrong, I'd put it right. I think people forget that cities in India, especially where I'm from – Delhi, are like any metro city in the world. Do we have cows on the road, and are we polluted, yes? But it's not all slums, it's not all trash, and poverty. That is the side that gets the views, because that's what the Western audience wants to believe or see. I would pin up the (quite posh) cafes, the speak-easies, the clubs, the (hygienic) street food stalls, night markets and day markets, Lutyens Delhi, the emporium lane at CP – it's a trip around India's art and culture, on a single street. I would pin up Blinkit and Instamart – everything (and I mean everything from an iphone to groceries) delivered to your house in under 8 minutes? The UK could NEVER, But yes, that's what I would pin – the fun, the real, the India of 2025.

## **Whose version of “Indian womanhood” did you grow up seeing, and how did that clash or align with yours?**

I grew up seeing two completely different versions. My mum's side: Afghan women who were raised to be composed, responsible, always graceful. The kind who lay fruit out on platters like centrepieces, who hosted like it was theatre. And then there was my dad's side: loud, witty Punjabi women who wore sunglasses indoors and spoke their minds. I think I ended up as a bit of both. I carry myself with quiet poise in rooms that require it, and completely unhinged laughter in rooms that don't.

## **What part of your identity is easiest to explain at a dinner party? What part never makes the cut?**

Afghan. I think it's because when it comes to my family – my mum's side is completely present in the UK, whereas my dad's side lives in India, it's just him who moved to London. Sure, I learnt about both cultures growing up, but I was fully immersed and experiencing only one, at an intimate level. Like of course I celebrate Sikh festivals but the festivals on my mum's side have always been a bigger affair – simply because of the proximity of the community. I think I just adopted more of that end of mannerisms, and culture generally. And my father was quite happy for it to happen, in fact, I believe I followed his lead here. He was so immersed in it himself, that most people don't believe he's Indian. My mum's side says he's an honorary Afghan now haha.

## **What's the most Afghan thing your Indian dad does?**

Oh weird coincidence actually, your question reminds me, I work at Levi's, the first shop my dad ever worked at was a Levi's at the Pacific mall in Delhi when he was 22. Call it a weird coincidence or a circle of life moment, I only got to know after I got the job! But yes, coming back to your question, my dad has adopted the language – Dari, fluently. Like I mentioned before, people have a hard time believing he's Indian, till he goes off in Punjabi. He switches between the two tongues, and of course, Hindi, and English, so fluidly, and it's a trait he passed down to me, I'm fluent in all 4 languages as well.



## **How is your dad's side different from your mom's? The space that lies between the two cultures, what does it look like?**

I would say, my dad's side is far more chill. I think with India having evolved, and especially for families that have had a global influence in terms of living abroad, the mindset is extremely progressive. My mum's side is definitely more conservative. I think it has a lot to do with the fact that when my great grandmother moved here, she was already very set in her ways, and that's what she passed down to my grandmother. They're very much of the thought process of 'oh what will people say?', you know. When I got my belly button pierced, my maternal grandmother was horrified, she was like "What the hell is that, it's not part of our culture at all", whereas my paternal grandmother sitting back home in India, loved it, she thought it was super cool. My dad's sister's kids, my cousins, they've all got tattoos. My mum's side definitely is not as laid back about these things. But at the end of the day, I see it as checks and balances, one side lets me let loose, and the other makes sure I have my head on straight. It's all love and care, just in different fonts and manifestations.

## **If your cultural identity was a thali, what would be on it?**

There's this Afghan dish called Aushak, it's basically dumplings, covered in sauces. It's got this achaar (pickle) on the side, and we add pomegranates to it. When you take a bite of a little bit of all the components, the pomegranate seeds burst and the spice hits at the same time – it's an explosion in your mouth. Fruit is a huge part of Afghan cuisine. Before and after any event or party, and even through a regular day, dishing up huge platters of fruit is the norm. So definitely a lot of those. And I'd add Pani Puri to it, and even Dahi Puri, where you add yoghurt and different sauces and fillings to the puri, and you eat it in the same way as Pani Puri, all in one go.

## **Delhi and London are two very well known cities of the world, what do they both look/feel like to you?**

London is second nature. It's muscle memory, knowing when to hop on the right bus without checking the app, which corner shop stays open the latest, and how to cross a street without making eye contact. It's a city that never really surprises me, and maybe that's why I love it. It fits like a lived-in jacket. Delhi, on the other hand, is full-body sensation. It changes the way I walk, the way I hold myself, the words I choose. It demands a different version of me, louder, faster, softer, all at once. It's overwhelming, but also deeply familiar, like a relative you don't see often but immediately fall into rhythm with.

## **Describe the taste of something Indian you had for the first time as an adult — what was that bite carrying?**

The first time I had real, street-side Rajma Chawal in Delhi, not the anglicised, oil-less version we get in the UK, I genuinely stopped speaking for a full minute. It was so deeply comforting, but also so unfamiliar in its intensity. It was like my mouth knew something my mind hadn't caught up to yet.



CALL IT

RAGE

CALL IT

आवाज



If there was ever a **voice**,  
Before I ever learnt to use it,  
Silent whispers:  
"Oh what a **burden** to bear,

it was mine  
I **was** a strain on my bloodline  
the second, and a daughter once more  
what a brunt to bore."

If there was  
Before I was turned  
Before I was blessing  
Before there was **less** of me,

ever a voice, it was mine  
into a **goddess** with her own shrine  
things I didn't understand **and** giants I didn't know  
and yet, still, somehow more

If there was ever a  
It **sounded** like  
It sounded **like** curiosity,  
Before I ever knew the words:

voice, **it** was mine  
innocence and wonder, intertwined  
wit, and a softness so sweet  
"Silence. Timid. Discreet."

If  
And she  
**To** understand  
To

there was ever a voice, **it** was mine  
**asked** questions, asked 'why', asked for a sign  
colours, how they can bleed, and so will I  
**understand** that I will have to kill my shame, or with it, die

If there was ever  
**Before**  
Before I learnt  
Before touches

a voice, it was **mine**  
it drowned, in gurgle of moans and whines  
my **pleasure** was a sin  
**burned** my skin

If there was ever a voice, it  
And it didn't realise how  
How **every** turn, every  
How **time** and again, she will have to get back up,

was mine  
much it had yet to **fight**  
gaze, was plotting against it  
wiping spit, and teeth gritted

There has always been a **voice**, and it will  
She  
Pressed **between** pages and

forever more be mine  
**resides** in the hardened anchor of my spine  
passed down the line

And I've started  
A **tune** that returns at

**humming** what they tried to erase  
own strange pace

It **echoes** in rooms where I take up  
It spills **when** I question  
It's stitched into  
And

space  
without having to brace  
silences I no longer keep  
rocks me to **rest** when this world serves up grief

The sound  
**Refuses** to follow suit,  
It chants over and over:  
So

of me, my **soul** in soundwaves  
follow into an early grave  
"persist, resist, fight." **another** day  
when she speaks, even the **silence** behaves.

*My*

*Sister's*

*Keeper*

Once, I wrapped my friend's phone in my scarf to muffle my voice, and **pretended to be her on a call with her dad** while she kissed her boyfriend goodbye. I said "yes papa" at least eight times and even threw in a "I'm just at Divya's house revising chemistry." We were in fact... in line for pani puri.

My **roommate FaceTimed my mom for 2 days** to show her my hostel bed, perfectly made, books stacked neatly. Meanwhile, I was six hours away on a weekend trip to Pondicherry, hungover, eating Maggi on the beach. She even used the quintessential "Aunty, she just went to brush her teeth, I'll tell her to call!"

We **told her parents we were working** on a school project together. We even made an actual PowerPoint with fake pie charts about 'urban waste segregation.' She was out at a Holi party, getting beer poured on her head by a boy named Tarun.

One time, **I lied to three different parents** on the same night to cover for all three of us girls. I told one aunty her daughter was with my cousin, told my cousin's mom she was with me, and told my mom I was with them. I've never felt more powerful. Or panicked.

Her dad called me when she didn't pick up, so **I pretended I was crying** about a fake fight with her. I said, "She's not with me anymore...she left angrily after I said something about her makeup." He sighed and said, "She gets too emotional." Meanwhile, she was out watching Rocky aur Raani ki Prem Kahani with her Hinge date.

We **baked an actual cake to justify a sleepover** plan. That night, she snuck out from my balcony in borrowed jeans to meet her girlfriend. When she came back, we sat eating chocolate cake at 3am and it honestly tasted pretty good for being made by two girls who had never baked in their lives.

I once got a call from a friend, who was on a date with her boyfriend, asking me to send her a picture of myself, in my room, and to **make it look like she took it**, so she could send it to her mom as proof. I had my sister take the picture – super casual, sitting in my pajamas on my bed, putting my hair up. It totally worked.

I got my period and didn't want to go for a family event, but my mom said I couldn't skip it unless I was really unwell. My sister **put on a full act**, said I was vomiting and fainted twice, and that she'd take care of me. She even rubbed Vicks under my eyes to make it look like I had been crying. Honestly, iconic.



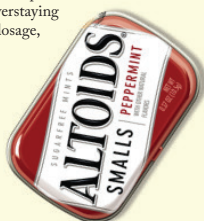
# THE TOTE-AL TRUTH

THEY SAY THE EYE IS THE WINDOW TO A PERSON'S SOUL: "the eyes chico, they never lie." But for a woman? Her truth lies in the bottom of her bag, and not the one she breaks out for a dinner with the girls, but the – 'stained from uncapped lipsticks, overspilling from all the necessities and must-haves and secrets, worn and torn' bag. The one that has seen far too much, and survived every version of the woman that stands before you, while she wears it.

Between bindis and earphones, an Indian woman's bag carries pure class and survival kits for weathering her everyday life.

## MEDS (LOOSE IN AN ALTOIDS TIN)

For migraines. For period cramps. For overstaying guests. Same dosage, different pain.



## AN OLD METRO CARD (with ₹3.50 balance)

She keeps it. Not for the money, but because it once got her home when her phone died. That makes it a relic.



## CLAW CLIP

One clipped onto the bag, one inside. Gotta put her hair up if she's going to catch an auto.



## IPILL

Tucked under receipts and sanitary pads (ironic). Taken in silence, chased with chai.



## PROTECTION

Taser. Pepper spray. That's it. Self explanatory.



## EARPHONES

A makeshift boundary. One bud in, one out, iykyk.



## NOTEBOOK

It's actually her journal, with sprinkles of to-do lists, and a talking point with her therapist.



## TIDE PEN

For erasing dal spills, chai spills, or traces of someone else's opinion.



## HALF-EATEN PERK

For when life feels like a Sabyasachi ad and a slap at the same time.



## SAFETY PIN

She doesn't trust the world to hold things together, but this little piece of steel? Never fails.



## BINDI PACKETS

Assorted sizes: one for the family function, one for the protest.



## HAJMOLA

Childhood, cravings, and digestive support, it's a three in one.



## PORTABLE FAN

Battery-operated breeze. For Delhi summers and overheating after one too many microaggressions.



## A PHONE CHARGER THAT ONLY WORKS AT A SPECIFIC ANGLE

Like most things in her life. Temperamental but essential.





### Heeng Ka Achaar (Asafoetida Pickle)

From my mother's hands to our table

#### Ingredients

1kg Raw Mangoes (ideally, Ramkela)  
125g Salt  
250g Red Chilli Powder (freshly ground — keeps better this way)  
15g Heeng (Asafoetida), also freshly ground

#### Method

- \* Wash, peel, and finely grate the mangoes.
- \* In a bowl, mix the salt, chilli powder, and asafoetida.
- \* Add this masala to the grated mangoes and mix thoroughly until well combined.
- \* Transfer the mixture into a clean glass jar.
- \* Place the jar in the sun for one week, bringing it indoors at night. Stir every other day to ensure even fermentation



हींग का अचार

*This is my mother's recipe — a simple ritual she passed down, wrapped in the scent of summer and the sound of her bangles clinking as she stirred. Even today, the pickle jar is the first thing to grace our table. The taste is a memory. The recipe, a legacy.*

### Fruit Toffee

Summer fruits, sealed in sugar and memory

#### Ingredients

1kg Fruit pulp (mango, plum, or guava)  
600g Sugar  
100g Butter  
3g Citric Acid  
3g Salt

#### Method

- \* Simmer sweet, ripe fruit pulp in a heavy-bottomed pan.
- \* Add sugar; stir until dissolved.
- \* Once the mixture thickens a little, add the citric acid and salt.
- \* Add the butter in intervals.
- \* When darkened and thick, spread onto a greased tray.
- \* Cool and let it set, then slice into soft sticky squares.



sweet fruit toffee!

*Wrap in wax paper, or eat straight from the tray — a treat from another time.*





*Soft, fragrant, and just a little sticky - this roti isn't just food. It's nani's hands, nani's kitchen, and a childhood wrapped in warmth.*

## Patyud

Earthy rolls from the Uttarakhand hills - spiced, steamed, and pan-kissed to perfection.

### Ingredients

A small brunch of fresh colocasia (arbi) leaves, washed and dried  
 ½ cup Besan (gram flour)  
 A pinch of Hing (asafoetida)  
 1 tsp Ajwain (carom seeds)  
 1 tsp Haldi (turmeric)  
 1 tsp Red chilli powder  
 1 tsp Amchoor (dry mango powder)  
 1 tsp Ginger-garlic paste  
 Salt to taste  
 Water as needed

### Method

- \* Choose tender colocasia leaves - large, flat, and free of tears. Pat them dry with care.
- \* Mix besan, all the spices, ginger-garlic paste, and salt with enough water to make a thick paste.
- \* Lay a leaf face-down, veins up, and spread the paste evenly. Then place another leaf on top, repeat.
- \* Layer 4-5 leaves, then roll tightly. Secure gently with thread. Steam for 15-20 minutes until firm.
- \* Once cooled, slice into thick rounds. Shallow-fry until crisp and golden on each side.

## Nani's Gur Roti

The kind of sweetness that lingers long after the last bite.

### Ingredients

1 cup Wheat flour  
 2 tbsp Grated jaggery (gur)  
 A pinch of cardamom  
 Ghee, for cooking

### Method

- \* Melt the jaggery in warm water until it turns golden and smooth.
- \* Use this sweetened water to knead your flour into a soft dough - no sugar, just memory.
- \* Roll into rotis, cook on a hot tawa, and brush with ghee till golden spots appear.



*Puffid is a snack, but also a story: one that travels from mountain kitchens to your plate.*







# LAUNDRY POLITICS

**WELCOME TO THE POLITICS OF LAUNDRY:** the secret economy of time, space, and patience that keeps dupattas crease-free and lehengas smelling like rosewater instead of mothballs.

**L**ook, we all love our Indian wear. The colours, the embroidery, the way a well-fitted lehenga makes you feel like you could start your own Bollywood production company. But can we talk about the admin involved? Because nobody warns you that buying a beautiful sari also means signing up for a part-time job as a textile conservator.

### THE GREAT DRY CLEANING CONSPIRACY

Every single label says 'dry clean only'. Every. Single. One. Our local dry cleaners know us by name now, which isn't the flex we were going for in life. Your Banarasi silk sari? Dry clean. Your hand-embroidered kurta? Dry clean. The dupatta you wore once but is now permanently infused with the scent of mutton biryani? Dry clean. Dry cleaning bills during the wedding season could power the Indian economy. It's that magical place where your favorite kurta goes to die a slow, chemical death while costing you thousands per visit. The dry cleaner looks at your embroidered anarkali like it personally offended his ancestors. "This will take three weeks," he announces, as if he's performing open-heart surgery rather than removing a small chutney stain.

### SARI FOLDING: A CONTACT SPORT

Folding saris is a two-person job, minimum. You need someone at each end, preferably with engineering degrees and the patience of saints. "Hold it higher. No, not that high. Tighter. Watch the border! THE BORDER!" This performance happens every time. It's like Poo from Kabhi Khushi, Kabhie Gham, but involves more silk and significantly more judgment. Twenty minutes later, we've created what can generously be called a fabric burrito. Is it technically folded? Yes. Will it stay that way in my cupboard? Absolutely not. But we tried, and that's what matters.

### THE LEHENGA AIRING DILEMMA

Every year, we stage a fashion show in our living room. Not for fun – for 'airing'. Apparently, lehengas need to breathe like they're training for a marathon. When mums say, "get some fresh air" to cough, treat your depression, cough, it applies to these beauties as well. So there it is, a skirt that costs more than your rent, spread across three chairs, rotating it every few hours like you're running a very expensive rotisserie service.





### THE IRONING INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

And the ironing – oh, the ironing. Not the casual ‘run an iron over it’ kind. We’re talking steam, starch, precision folds. Each pleat must be pressed individually. The dupatta requires seventeen different angles. The churidar needs ‘just a light touch’ which somehow takes forty-five minutes to achieve. Dad suggests we just buy a steamer. The silence that follows could power a small town. “Steam?” Mum looks personally affronted. “These clothes have history. They need proper pressing.”

### STORAGE WARS

Half our wardrobe space is dedicated to clothes we wear maybe twice a year. Everyday clothes are squeezed into whatever space is left, like refugees in their own closet. The lehengas live in individual garment bags like they’re in witness protection. The saris are rolled on specific hangers that cost more than the hangers for the rest of my wardrobe combined. The blouses have vanished into some parallel dimension where single socks also go to die. Meanwhile, we own fourteen kurtas that are ‘too nice for regular occasions’ but ‘not nice enough for weddings.’ They exist in outfit purgatory, taking up premium real estate while we wear the same two comfortable ones on repeat.

### THE HIDDEN EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Here’s the thing nobody mentions: ethnic wear comes with its own emotional baggage. Not just the literal weight of heavily embroidered clothes, but the invisible weight of carrying cultural expectations in your wardrobe. You can’t just throw on a kurta and leave the house. There’s a whole mental checklist: Is this too fancy for a temple? Not fancy enough for the birth of my second cousin twice removed? Is there an overlap in the guestlist, because I’m rewearing this to another wedding? Did I remember to put the moth repellent sachets back



in the cupboard? Your jeans don't come with layers, but that sari your mum gave you? It carries the weight of "this was expensive" and "you need to take care of it properly" and "when will you pass this down to your daughter?" Meanwhile, you're just trying to figure out if you can get away with the same blouse for the third wedding this month.

#### THE IDENTITY CRISIS

And then there's the guilt. The special-occasion guilt that kicks in when you realize you've spent more on dry cleaning this year than some people spend on their entire wardrobe. The storage guilt when you see how much space these clothes take up compared to how often you actually wear them. But the worst guilt? When you catch yourself thinking, "Maybe I should just stick to Western wear for everything." Because that feels like giving up on something important, even if you can't quite articulate what. It's not really about the clothes, is it? It's about staying connected to something bigger while living a life that doesn't always have space for the ritual and ceremony these outfits demand.

#### THE STOCKHOLM SYNDROME

The maddest part? We keep buying more. We see a gorgeous chikankari suit online and think, "Yes, I definitely need another high-maintenance relationship in my life." We know it'll need special storage. We know it'll require professional cleaning. We know it'll take up precious closet space and cause us mild anxiety every time we wear it. But it's so pretty. And when you finally wear it, when you've survived the prep work and managed to keep it stain-free for an entire event, there's this moment where you catch yourself in a mirror and think, "Yeah, okay. Worth it." Until the next morning when you're googling 'how to remove haldi stains' at 7 AM and questioning all your life choices. But we do it anyway. Because sometimes the most beautiful things in life come with the most ridiculous instruction manuals. And because maybe, the point isn't efficiency. Maybe the point is that some things are supposed to be complicated and time-consuming. That's what makes them special. And honestly? That's very on-brand for being desi.

**Now chop chop, it's almost wedding season,  
you need to go rotate a lehenga.**









# My Face is

# a *Forgery*

**I**NDIA IS A COUNTRY INHERENTLY rich in colour. Our streets, clothes, food, even our language at times can be quite colourful. And we make absolutely no apologies for it either.

But colour doesn't just live in fabric or festivals, it lives in skin. And the colour of your skin, in India, often decides how you're seen. Or not seen at all. For a nation so steeped in pigment, it has a long-standing obsession with fairness. Skin fairness, to be exact.

Tracing our history can pinpoint exactly how this mindset settled into everyday conversation. India has witnessed settlers, invaders, colonisers – you name it – and all of them brought their own beauty ideals with them. From the Dutch to French, Portuguese, Mughals, and of course, the British.

It seems odd, almost 80 years of independence, and for a country that rejected its colonisers, the beauty standard they left behind still rules the mirror.

The Indian beauty ideal was never indigenous, it was imported. Fairness became a metaphor for worth. The British, in particular, institutionalised colour as caste: lighter-skinned Indians were given proximity to power, while darker ones were labelled as 'black' and confined — quite literally — to 'Black Towns', while Europeans settled in the 'White Towns' of places like Fort St. George.

## On colour, colonial conditioning, and the *cost of being seen*.

Of course, this division only found soil because of the pre-existing caste system that was rampant and thrived in Indian society. With their origins in Hinduism, caste-based hierarchies had already sorted labour, access, and appearance into a system of purity. When one thinks about it, the colour of one's skin pre-dates scientific explanations and falls flat in the face of the intersectionality of class and caste.

As explained by *Kathy Russell Cole* in *'The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium'*, people from lower castes were subjected to long hours in the sun, performing manual labour. Skin tone became an accidental archive of status, caste, and occupation. Having, as they liked to say, a 'cleaner' complexion was a sign of power, money, education, and ultimately, status.

And so, the beauty ideal was never just cosmetic. It was structural.

Ironically, in the West, where paleness was once prized, the opposite shift is underway.

their complexions mentioned in shorthand: f = fair, vf = very fair, vvf = very very fair; almost as if not mentioning it in so many words will somehow hide their blatant colourism.

The entertainment industry is at the helm of this epidemic, with endorsements from the biggest names in the industry to the storylines. The fair girl plays the main lead, the 'bronze' skin achieved via makeup to represent poor/underprivileged characters, and not to mention the ads by fairness cream companies.

Their branding started changing in 2014, when the Advertising Standards Council of India issued guidelines stating "ads should not reinforce negative social stereotyping on the basis of skin color" or "portray people with darker skin [as]...inferior, or unsuccessful in any aspect of life particularly in relation to being attractive to the opposite sex."

So they graduated from using 'fair' to using 'bright' and 'glowing'. If only changing termi-

**"The truth is skin tone in India has never been about pigment alone.  
It is a marker of class, caste, history, access, and control, packaged  
and sold as personal preference."**

Tanning culture is now aspirational – it symbolises a different kind of status and money – the kind that buy you 'trips to somewhere tropical'. 'Brownness' is marketable, exotic, something to be bought in bottles, booths, and bronzers. South Asian women, meanwhile, remain caught in a dichotomy of voices and gazes: fetishised abroad, discriminated against at home.

It is not just a certain sect of Indian society either, age, generation and socio-economic standing have no grounding in the existence of this bias. In 2015, Neha Mishra published a report, interviewing 20-25 year olds, where 71% of those surveyed, used the word 'fair' when describing their ideal beauty standard. It also revealed that this pressure of appearing fair was far higher for women, as compared to men.

Even today, matrimonial ads describe women as 'wheatish' — a strange, edible euphemism for 'not too dark'. The arranged marriage market includes descriptions of women,

nology would erase the past or rewrite the mindset, or even change the fact that they know, and we know, it's the same product with the same purpose – and a quick google search for 'Indian fairness creams' still pulls these to the top.

As times have progressed, so have skin lightening measures. From applying gram flour and turmeric, to buying fairness creams, bleaches, to now the golden age of Glutathione treatments. Administered through injections or an IV drip, it is the new craze, because no matter what shade you are, two shades lighter is always better. As of 2018, Indians spend nearly \$450 million annually on fairness products.

Our faces continue to be forgeries. A forgery of a beauty standard we have spent centuries replicating – a standard that was never ours. One that was forced down our throats by the same hands that robbed us of much more – a post colonial hangover that we accepted and now propagate as social common sense.



MY MOTHER-IN-LAW HAS ALWAYS HAD A FLAIR FOR CRAFT, embroidery, handwork, design, but more than her creations, it's her stories that stitch everything together. She loves talking about where each piece came from: the inspiration, for what season, the materials and techniques used, and we love listening to her.

Professionally, I specialise in crafts and textiles, and she trusts me to preserve her creations and the tales they carry.

Among her many handmade treasures, one piece stands out: a tablecloth embroidered with impossibly fine black thread.

Only, it wasn't thread. "It's hair," she said one day, smiling as she handed it to me. "Nani's hair."

The tablecloth is achromatic – white satin cloth, black embroidery. Classic and sharp. The kind of textile that holds weight just by being looked at. But once I knew what it was made of, it became something else entirely.

She told me the story. It was 1958. She had just finished her bachelor's degree and was waiting to begin her masters. One afternoon, she

saw a friend embroidering

delicately, with a 'hair

like' thread. She was struck

with inspiration. Her

mother had long, shiny

black hair, just like she did,

and an idea sparked in

her mind. She purchased a

length of satin (fabric #892,

which she still remembers), a premium piece at ₹2.50 per

yard at a time when satin cost only ₹1.50. She began col-

lecting strands of her mother's hair as she combed it, sorting

out the longest, thickest, and finest ones. However, her shed-

ded hair wasn't always suitable, so, interestingly, she asked

her mother every day for a fresh strand of hair. And each

day, Nani smiled, plucked one strand out and gave it to her.

With spare hours between studies and household

work, she set to work embroidering. There were chal-

lenges. Since the hair was very fine, the stitches had

to be tiny. No knots could be tied, so the ends had to be

locked in with precision, over and over again in the same

spot. Her father, who ran a photo studio, gave her ul-

tra-fine needles usually reserved for retouching negatives.

It took nearly a year, but she was determined

to do something different. She edged the table-

cloth with complementary lace and used a recur-

ring motif she'd worked on for other handmade pieces.

**"It's hair,"  
she said one day,  
smiling as she  
handed it to me.  
"Nani's hair."**



# Cloth and *Hairlooms*



My mother-in-law,  
the maker, the muse,  
the memory-keeper.





**The artistic front  
and the intricate back of  
the embroidered motifs**



**My grandmother,  
the original donor of threads,  
unknowingly weaving herself  
into cloth.**





Most family members didn't notice the embroidery until one newly married cousin, curious and interested, asked her to create something for her. She was happy to do so, but thought it would be boring to use the same color scheme again. After thinking for a while, she suddenly remembered that her grandmother had golden-white hair.

So, for her next piece, she decided to make handkerchiefs using her grandmother's blonde hair on black crepe fabric, which she then gifted to her brother and sister. She found the idea of hair embroidery so interesting that she also began to think more deeply about the colour palette.

Whenever she tells the story of the hair-embroidered table cloth, her face lights up. Unfortunately, the table cloth that she carried with her trousseau wasn't noticed, not championed by her in-laws after her marriage. However, over time,

relatives and

to notice the

mired it with

It is very close

because it

mother's hair,

feel her love

Years lat-

design class I

student asked

could be used

fibre. I told

Dutch designer Zsafia Kollar, who creates garments using human hair—and then I pulled out my mother-in-law's tablecloth.

The room went silent. The students stared. Some stitches had worn away over time, scorched slightly by an old iron, but the work remained intact. So did the awe. This cloth is not just a story of technique. It's a relic of love, care, and innovation. Every thread, literally and figuratively, carries emotion, patience, and a quiet defiance to create something truly unique.

What's more, it became a conversation starter in my classrooms, creating a tangible link between generations, and an example of how materials and memories intertwine. Though time and use have faded parts of the cloth, its essence remains untouched with a story worth retelling, especially in today's world of fast fashion and fleeting trends.

**for her next  
piece, she decided  
to make hand-  
kerchiefs using  
her grandmother's  
blonde hair on  
black crepe fabric**

friends began

cover and ad-

great surprise.

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them about the

*Our Viraasat, I believe, is not just what we receive but also what we choose to preserve, celebrate, and pass forward with pride.*



## On fits, forms, and the space in *between*

The quiet scrutiny of the trial room, where you go to offer yourself up for judgement by your strongest critic - yourself. The yellow lights are soft and you bask in them when something fits just right; the same lights are harsh and abrasive when the outfit you thought you would shine in, makes you feel like disappearing in the pile of clothes on the floor. Trying on clothes is not just about size or silhouette. It's a soft kind of shapeshifting, a quiet rehearsal for who you might become. "Mirror mirror on the wall, who's the most \_\_\_\_\_ of them all?" One mirror reflects the curated casuals of the mall: bell jeans because the 80s/90s fashion is making a comeback, Zara tops because quiet luxury can be bought for cheap, a linen shirt that looks like that one pin saved on Pinterest and feels vaguely 'European'. The other? It's the mirror in your parents' room, reflecting how your mother pins dupattas to avoid slipping, the gentle knot of the dori at the back of your blouse, the length of your kurti, and the fine mirror work that reflects prisms when you walk in the sunlight. One foot in Adidas Sambas, the other still in Kolhapuris. One hand swiping through the Uniqlo app, the other ironing your mom's old Benarasi for a cousin's wedding. Every Indian woman lives in a split-screen reality: one that teaches her to master the art of shape-shifting.



The image shows a wooden crate filled with many folded pieces of fabric. The fabrics are vibrant and feature various traditional patterns, including floral, geometric, and abstract designs. The colors range from deep reds and oranges to blues, greens, and purples. The fabrics are neatly stacked, creating a sense of abundance and variety. The wooden crate is made of dark wood, and the lighting highlights the textures and colors of the fabrics.

# DYEING HISTORY



We don't just own clothes. We own categories. There are outfits for temple visits, family lunches, society functions, for Instagram posts, airport looks, pujas, work outfits that do not centre around 'office siren core' because let's be real, half of those outfits would never fly in real life.

We have been living a dual life since before Clark Kent made it cool.

One would think that the concept of identity, and everything it encompasses, must be hard for us to navigate – something we grapple with for days on end. But reconciling the many facets of our being, is a skill most of us are born with, an extension of our DNAs almost. But what happens when the world peers into our mirrors? When our reflections – so secure and sacred to us, are 'borrowed' and stripped of all identity, to be sold back for parts to the world? The West's obsession with India is cyclical, often extractive, and always filtered. The Prada Kolhapuri chappal is not an isolated incident. It's simply the latest in a long tradition of the West discovering what we've always known, sanding off its origin story, and selling it back to us at ten times the price. Take the Bleeding Madras for example, the checked cotton fabric from Chennai which was dyed using natural dyes like turmeric and indigo, famously ran colour with every wash due to the instability of the dyes. The governor of 'Madras', Elihu Yale, donated bales of the Bleeding Madras, to his namesake university - Yale. It was embraced by Ivy League America, a symbol of prep schools and frat boys. They were sold by Brooks Brothers as 'guaranteed to bleed' shirts, without much mention of the hands that wove them. Or indigo, the deep blue that turned denim into an icon, has been grown in India for over 5000 years. When the world reaches out to put on their favourite pair of jeans, they forget that stitched into every pair, is a deep violent and colonial history. Extracted from Indian fields for centuries under the brutal force of colonial rule, at the cost of farmers' livelihood, it led to the Indigo revolt 1859, and garnered international attention. Paisley, now a 'bohemian' staple in fast fashion racks, is a Persian motif perfected in Kashmir, painstakingly handwoven into shawls long before it was printed onto polyester festival wear. Henna, worn on hands and feet for weddings and celebrations, is paraded on runways as an 'exotic temporary tattoo.' The lungi becomes a 'wrap skirt' in a glossy editorial. Gingham, sold back to us as a retro picnic print, echoes the checks that have long lived in lungis and kitchen towels across South Asia. Kalamkari originated in Andhra Pradesh as a sacred storytelling form, artisans used tamarind pens and natural dyes to draw epic scenes on cloth – usually for temples and religious purposes. Due to global demand, Kalamkari gave rise to Chintz, derived from the Hindi word Chhint -

**The West's obsession  
with India is cyclical,  
often extractive, and  
*always filtered.***









**We are caught  
between pride and  
protest, unsure if  
seeing ourselves on a  
bigger stage is progress  
or just another  
*performance.***

which means to spray and speckle. Chintz became a luxury commodity in 17th century Europe, especially France and England, where it was used everywhere - from upholstery, clothes to even wallpapers. The craft became so popular that local industries felt threatened, and banned its import from India. Due to high demand, they tried and failed to replicate it. Eventually under colonial rule, Indian artisans were used as cheap labour, and while Chintz survived the ordeal as a craft, its heritage and roots were lost and forgotten. The pattern repeats itself, literally and figuratively. Now we have Scandinavian scarfs, and long tunics, which for us, have always been dupattas and kurtas. Something that is rooted in ritual, utility, and meaning is lifted from its context, renamed, and re-sold. What we call heritage, others call a trend. But unlike the trial room mirror, where the reflection is yours to keep, here the reflection is distorted. The image of India shown back to us is filtered for palatability - the spices without the labour, the colour without the politics, the textile without the weaver. And the strangest part? Sometimes, we participate in it. A certain section of us feels a flicker of validation when a global brand 'discovers' something ours, while others see nothing but erasure. We are caught between pride and protest, unsure if seeing ourselves on a bigger stage is progress or just another performance. Because when the world borrows from our wardrobe, it rarely returns the garment intact, and almost never with the tag that says Made in India. Somewhere between couture, runways and the blossoming of homegrown brands, Indian fashion has become a site of tension. For diasporic Indians, there's satisfaction in seeing the world love what you were once teased for. For others, it's a bitter pill: why is it cool when they do it, but too much when I do it? We crave representation but want it on our terms. We want to be seen, but not simplified. We want our culture to be celebrated, not sold. Still, something beautiful is happening. Gen Z Indian women are reclaiming what was taken, and remixing it with what they've chosen. Jhumkas with cargos. Juttis with tube tops. Bindis with winged eyeliner. They're not dressing for approval. They're dressing for expression. They don't need to choose between tradition and trend. They're creating a third thing entirely - a reflection that is theirs alone. Not borrowed, not diluted, not waiting for outside applause. The mirror no longer belongs to the West - or even to the past - stitched from what they've been given and what they've taken back. And maybe that's how it's always been. Our mothers passed down wardrobes; our grandmothers passed down ways of wearing them. Now, we pass down something else entirely: the confidence to stand before any mirror, anywhere in the world, and recognise yourself.



# T H E Q U I E T E S T R O O M

I t's fairly easy to romanticise an Indian kitchen. You walk in and there's almost a symphony of sounds – the pressure cooker whistle going off, the rolling pin moving against the rolling board, churning out perfectly round rotis, the sound of the masal daani, quick, calculated, measurements of spices going in, curry leaves sizzling, rice being washed for the 4th time, vegetables chopped, tomatoes grinding. It has never just been about food. It's choreography. It's control, a performance perfected through generations of 'adjustments.' A modern Indian kitchen still sounds the same, but there is something in the air, something beyond the smell of warm fresh food, something that has simmered for so long it has started rotting.







**This is the kitchen.**

The loudest room in the house.  
It hums of silent domestic labour.  
The unpaid work that the men in the house have  
conveniently ignored,  
because the women are 'empowered' to have jobs.  
It's etched onto the walls in the form of splatters -  
one for each time she cooked, and she washed.



**This is the kitchen.**

The safest place in the house.  
And the easiest one to hide in.  
You can disappear without a trace.  
You can cry here, and say it was the onions.





**This is the kitchen.**



The warmest room in the house.  
And the most demanding.  
It knows your mother's hands better than you do.  
It's where she sings. Where she snaps. Where she disappears.  
This is where love gets cooked, and so do expectations.



**This is the kitchen.**

The most nostalgic place in the house.  
With echoes of  
“This is how my grandmother used to make it”  
Food and memory often intertwine in ways beyond  
understanding here.



**This is the kitchen.**

Where nothing is ever measured,  
and yet, everything is weighed.  
Salt to taste. Guilt by default.  
The curry is judged. So is her character.





**This is the kitchen.**



Where mothers become magicians.  
She feeds five on a budget for two, hiding  
vegetables in recipes to hide their presence.  
What they don't know, won't hurt them, but will  
make them healthier.



The quietest room in the house.  
Where she grinds her spices, her rage,  
her restlessness.  
Where recipes become routines,  
and routines become shackles.  
Where every meal tastes like sacrifice.

**This is the kitchen.**





The Things  
We *Do* With

with  
Our *Hands*



**TRACING THE LINES DOWN ONE'S HANDS** – an astrologer can read a palm and tell one more about themselves, than their friends and family ever could. What shapes us, what Karma we've carried from a past life, why our planets won't let us have something we desperately want.

The things we hold on to, and more importantly the things we let go of, all our habits - the ones we picked up and the ones forced upon us – the shapes of them, forever indented into our hands.

In an apartment on the corner of a dimly lit street in Delhi, there lives a 28 year old woman. Much to her parents' dismay (and the source of their constant worries), she is (still) unmarried. Living at home with them, her younger sister, and her dog. Working her dream job in Marketing, she just got promoted, putting her double Master's and years of experience to use.

At 10 in the night, *she flexes and relaxes her hands*, now cramping from the hours spent typing away - edits, comments, suggestions, emails, the works. Her pain – a testament to her hard work and sheer defiance towards the aunts she meets at weddings who ask her when she's getting married. Every morning her and her mother paint a juxtaposing picture – *both their hands folded in prayer*, hers for success, her mother's for her (hopefully soon) wedded life.

In the evenings, when she returns from work, she watches her mother, in the kitchen, in the sweltering June heat, grinding cardamom and cinnamon in a pestle and mortar, for her father's evening tea. *Her hands moved in a quick pounding*. At times she wonders if her mother lays all her resentments of the life she could've had, bare, the spices bearing the brunt of it all. The tea always falls short, there's always something missing, almost like *her hands have lost the magic* that won her father over, many years ago.

The weekend sneaks up, and her mother tries to teach her how to cook, how to roll out rotis, rounder than the moon. Hers end up looking like the Australian map. "Your hands don't

know the rhythm yet," her mother says. "One day, it'll come from you. You won't need to force it." She puts the rolling pin down. Once is enough.

She walks into her room, and finds her sister, who's managed to creep into her mother's closet to pull a silk saree – one that she almost never wears. Her *tiny hands, working in quick expert movements, pleating the saree* as she has seen her mother do for so many years. She quietly watches for a minute, as she bears witness to six yards of pure elegance draped, its layers holding a silent weight. A weight of all that they've inherited.

She pulls her sister into an embrace, taking the saree from her, and telling her to sit on the floor.

She pulls out some hair oil, and begins massaging her tiny head of strong voluminous curly hair, *her fingers moving gently, sure to not hurt her*. And whispers to her: "After this, *I will paint your nails red*, and we will make some posters. There is a protest at Jantar Mantar, and we will go there, to fight for our rights. Our right to exist safely in a country we call home. We will hold the signs high, and keep our voice firm.

Something you must do for the rest of your life – *keep your voice firm, and hands unshakable*. When they tell you you were meant to be soft, I want you to show them the *calluses on your palm, and make them see how the same hands that can carry the intricate designs of henna, drape a saree, and carry the ones who came before her – can also fight dirty for herself, and the ones who will come after her. That is our burden, our responsibility, our inheritance. Our वरिसत.*"