# GENDER, COMMUNITY IDENTITY AND NORMS REGARDING WOMEN'S SARTORIAL CHOICES: RESPONDING TO DESIGNER SABYASACHI'S REMARKS ON THE SARI FROM AN ANGLO-INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*In this paper I draw on accounts of women teachers from the Anglo-Indian community to respond to a debate that occurred in the Indian media in 2018 regarding the representation of the sari as the 'national dress'. This debate occurred following the comments of celebrated fashion designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee at Harvard University, USA, where he stated that Indian women who do not know how to tie a sari should be ashamed of themselves. Mukherjee went on to equate the sari with national identity, thereby otherising the sartorial traditions and cultural identities of many linguistic, regional and religious minorities in India including Anglo-Indians. Mukherjee's position is not isolated. It is seen that women's bodies often become the sites on which national and community identities are inscribed. For instance, until a few years ago, some Anglo-Indian schools in Bangalore required women teachers from the community to wear Western dress. Based on women teachers' accounts I argue that popular and powerful figures like Mukherjee attempt to inscribe national or community identities on the bodies of women by prescribing their clothing choices. Although women themselves evoke different strategies to conform with or to challenge these prescriptions, this enactment of agency does not always protect their identities from being threatened by majoritarian tendencies and leaves them vulnerable to harassment and prejudicial behaviour.*

INTRODUCTION

Designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee's remarks in February 2018 shaming young Indian women for not wearing saris has drawn ire from many quarters. The remarks were made during audience interaction following a talk at Harvard University which was attended by an international audience including members of the Indian Diaspora. Discussing his recent successes in dressing Bollywood stars such as Anushka Sharma, Deepika Padukone and Vidya Balan in saris and lehengas (traditional Indian skirts) at international events, including the Cannes Film Festival, Mukherjee argued that young Indians need to reclaim their cultural identity by "wearing your Indian-ness on your sleeve" causing one audience member to preface her question to him with an apology for not being dressed in a sari.

The designer has since apologised for his comments arguing that he spoke from frustration that the sari is often viewed as frumpish and ageing and therefore (in his experience) less likely to be chosen by younger women. While one may appreciate the apology and retraction, it is useful to consider that Mukherjee's remarks set a dangerous tone in this period of India's history when jingoistic forms of nationalism and cultural majoritarianism (the ban on beef and related violence, for instance), 'otherise' minority communities.

This paper argues, based on accounts from Anglo-Indian women, that female bodies often become sites on which national and community identities are marked. As in many conversations about identity and identity markers to be embodied by women, powerful male leaders attempt to influence women's sartorial choices and while women often question and resist this influence, their resistance has mixed results. The accounts discussed here are taken from a larger qualitative study of the career narratives of Anglo-Indian women employed as school teachers in Bangalore, the major findings of which have been published in an earlier paper (Belliappa and de Souza, 2017).

Sixteen female Anglo-Indian teachers were interviewed using life-story techniques to understand the relationship between gender, community identity and professional

identity in the career narratives constructed by them. The project also included interviews with nine key informants (non-Anglo-Indian educators or prominent Anglo-Indians who were not employed in education) who shed light on the contribution of Anglo-Indian teachers to school education in Bangalore and on how they are perceived by their peers and students. Although our research question did not focus specifically on Anglo-Indian women's attire a number of teachers mentioned it in interviews. It was presented as a matter of disagreement between women teachers and management in some schools but was not addressed in the 2017 paper due to limitations of space.

Attire is discussed in this paper to extend the debate on the relationship between gender, clothing and community identity in India (which followed Mukherjee's remarks) from the point of view of the Anglo-Indian minority whose voice has limited representation in academic and popular discourse. An attempt is made to contextualise the accounts discussed in terms of other reports of dress codes prescribed for women teachers in different parts of India. While dress codes were not mentioned by all teachers, a few of the accounts are worth examining to understand women's experiences of trying to adhere to various sartorial regimes and explore the complex relationship between gender and community or national identity and suggest possibilities for further research.

Methodologically the study employed the life-story technique common to oral history. This technique involves a free-flowing conversation between interviewer and interviewee which is informed by a loosely structured interview guide but allows the interviewees' response to influence the direction that the conversation takes. It often results in a narrative i.e. the account that emerges has a temporal nature; for instance an interviewee may recount that '"A" (event) happened followed by "B" which resulted in "C".' The role of the interviewer in life-story interviews is often to gently coax and prompt the narrative with broad, open-ended questions (Plummer, 2001).

Interviewees were interviewed in their homes for about one and a half to two and a half hours. All interviews were preceded with and followed up by phone calls or another visit during which additional questions were asked or interviewees

themselves volunteered further information. All interviewees were offered a transcript of the interview. For ethical reasons, names and identifiable details about the schools and interviewees have not been revealed. Instead pseudonyms have been used in all publications, that is, both the names and surnames of interviewees are fictitious. (For a deeper discussion of the methodology please see de Souza and Belliappa, 2018).

The main subject addressed by the research was the relationship between gender, professional identity and community identity. Although only a few teachers discussed dress in relation to community identity (most probably because interviewer questions did not explicitly explore sartorial choices), notably most interviewees wore Western style dresses, skirts and trousers during the interview and at subsequent meetings. Before discussing interviewees' accounts of the school dress codes, I examine how the contemporary sari became synonymous with an Indian identity. Recent examples of the consequences of imposing dress codes for women teachers from other communities are also briefly discussed.

## BROAD FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

The Anglo-Indian community which emerged from domestic relationships which occurred between the European colonisers and native Indians between the 16th and 19th centuries is currently almost universally Christian and the majority identify English as their mother tongue.The community's distinctive culture is deeply influenced by European standards in dress, cuisine and gender relations. Anglo-Indian women's Western style attire made them conspicuous during the colonial period and in independent India until the late 20th century when urban women across communities started wearing dresses, skirts and trousers more commonly. Today many Anglo-Indians also don saris and shalwar kameez. Since Anglo-Indians did not practice gender segregation (which was traditional amongst many Hindu and Muslim elites), for much of the 20th century women from the community entered professions such as nursing, teaching and secretarial work as well as sports and

performing arts, while men tended to join the railways, the army and school teaching depending on their level of education (Muthiah and Maclure, 2014).

The accounts presented here are taken from a qualitative study which explores how Anglo-Indian women draw on their gender and community identities (in addition to formal qualifications) to build their school teaching careers in Bangalore. The study discusses Anglo-Indian teachers' lives in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. In the 21st century as more lucrative career choices have emerged, fewer Anglo-Indians are in school teaching. Therefore, the research contributes towards a social history of the community and of English medium schooling in Bangalore and in India.

Interviews with Anglo-Indian teachers found that they drew on their somewhat limited but unique cultural and social capital to find and sustain their employment in the city's English medium schools. Through the second half of the 20th century these Anglo-Indian women trained as teachers by undertaking the church subsidised Teacher Training Certificate Courses offered in Chennai (Madras) and Bangalore. In addition to formal certification, other forms of cultural capital such as their diction and fluency in English and their knowledge of Western traditions in music and drama gave them an edge when seeking jobs in missionary schools and in secular schools established by the community (both types of schools are usually affiliated to the Council for Indian School Certificate Examinations).

Cultural capital was augmented with social capital: friends and relatives in the close-knit Anglo-Indian community, members of the clergy, former teachers and school principals (some teachers, for example, returned to teach in schools in which they themselves had studied). Given their dependence on community members for finding employment, Anglo-Indian teachers' ability to negotiate salaries and conditions of employment was limited (in some schools these conditions also include a dress code). That is, when they negotiated within the professional sphere they ran the risk of damaging their relationships with community members and fellow church members who were on the school's managing committee or were senior colleagues. In spite of these limitations, the teachers interviewed constructed their careers as emotionally satisfying and spiritually rewarding. Many drew on a personal sense of religiosity likening their careers to a religious calling and speaking of it as service to

the larger humanitarian cause or as a form of nation building (see Belliappa and de Souza, 2017 for more details).

Interviews with key informants suggest that Anglo-Indians (particularly women) are believed to embody the qualities that are valued by English medium schools, including professionalism, discipline, punctuality and attention to detail.These qualities are evidenced in the meticulousness with which they mark ('correct') students' work and the high standards demanded of students in maintaining their notebooks, in the aesthetics and orderliness of classrooms and the painstaking planning of events such as sports days and speech days. Non-Anglo-Indian educators frequently bemoaned the loss to Indian education from the migration of young Anglo-Indians or their choice of other, more lucrative professions. One Anglo-Indian interviewee, Sandra Hayes (aged about 55 at the time of the interview) who retired from full-time teaching to start a career as an educational consultant stated that she frequently gets requests from school principals to find them Anglo-Indian teachers, which she usually is unable to fulfil.

The phrase 'they were very particular' was used several times by educators (the key informants mentioned earlier) to describe Anglo-Indian teachers. For instance, one (non-Anglo-Indian) school principal, while expressing his disappointment in not being able to recruit more Anglo-Indian teachers, mentioned that from his own time as a school student, he recalls Anglo-Indian teachers who taught 'the little graces [of] how to say please and thank you and how to wear your school uniform [neatly and with pride].' Another experienced (non-Anglo-Indian) teacher training professional suggested that a sense of pride in one's work and attention to detail mark the pedagogy of Anglo-Indian teachers, a quality that she finds increasingly rare amongst other teachers.

A biography of one Anglo-Indian teacher, Rose Dickson, written by her daughter, Wendy Dickson (2010) and based on conversations with former students and obituaries read out at her funeral, supports these conclusions. Dickson quotes former students who described her mother's habit of sewing missing buttons onto her students' uniforms and seating children who were first generation English speakers near her desk so that she could give them closer attention. Like Dickson's

mother, many of the teachers interviewed also indicated a strong sense of professionalism. For instance, Laura De Mello (aged sixty eight, semi-retired) who tutored children after school, supervising their homework, expressed her strong disapproval of present-day teachers who fail to mark children's work carefully, leaving spelling and grammatical errors uncorrected. 'How can a teacher put her signature against such work?' she enquired. As argued later in this paper, Western dress plays a role in visually cueing the professionalism of Anglo-Indian teachers.

## CONTEXTUALISING HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SARI

As one response to Mukherjee, by Assamese Boro actress Rajni Basumatary argues, in championing the sari Sabyasachi failed to recognise the distinctive traditional clothing of many regional, religious and linguistic minorities who might not be skilled in tying a sari (Indian Express, 2018). Basumatary reiterates that the North Eastern states which tend to get short shrift in many discussions of 'Indian culture' are known for a variety of handwoven traditional costumes, mekhlas, gamchas and dokhnas as well as saris. The ways in which different communities drape the sari have evolved depending on climatic conditions, livelihoods and cultural influences. For instance, in the state of Karnataka alone one finds three distinct styles of draping the sari which are followed by different linguistic and regional communities.

Vijai Singh Katiyar (2009) argues that the sari has been subject to Western influences as early as the Mauryan period which began in the 3rd Century BCE, possibly through intermarriages between the Mauryans and Greeks. Sculptures of that period show women of both indigenous and foreign origin wearing a variety of stitched and unstitched garments including some with "classical Greek or Roman shirt of skirt-like garments and dupatta [short stole] or [a longer] sari, with one end pleated at the waist in nivi style and with the loose end thrown over the shoulder as a pallav" (Katiyar, 2009:23).[1]

More recently, in the colonial period, Parsi women in Bombay and Brahmo women in Bengal adapted certain European elements into their saris including long sleeve,

high neck jackets or blouses and petticoats which enabled them to conform to Victorian standards of modesty in women's clothing required for socialising with the Europeans and engaging in public life (Chishti, 2010; Chatterjee, 1989). Moreover, as Indian women began to actively participate in the nationalist cause, gender segregation became less stringent, requiring greater modesty in dress.

Thus the contemporary urbanised sari to which Mukherjee refers (the *nivi* drape), commonly worn with a blouse and petticoat, is a Europeanised costume created by Bengali bhadralok (upper class) women a little over a century ago and not an ancient costume. Gradually this pleated urbanised costume was adopted by women across the subcontinent. Some region-specific drapes have continued: In many regions such as Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, women often wear traditional saris which are different from the nivi style (even in Sri Lanka two distinct drapes, the *nivi* and the *kandyan*, co-exist). But only the *nivi* drape tends to dominate the national imagination as universally Indian (Chishti, 2010).

The Indian women whom Mukherjee evokes in his remarks is globalised and cosmopolitan, representing India on a world stage while being cloaked in a handwoven Indian sari. She evokes what sociologist Meenakshi Thapan (2004) in her reading of images in the women's magazine Femina refers to as 'respectable modernity enshrined in tradition' (2004: 416). In their examination of how Indian languages are represented in nationalist discourses, Reenu Punnoose and Muhammed Hanifa AP (2018) argue that not only is Hindi represented as the self and Urdu as the other but that Sanskritised Hindi is promoted over the diverse colloquial forms of the language. It could be argued that the urbanised *nivi* sari occupies a similar position to Sanskritised Hindi: it becomes representative of the imagined 'essence' of the nation.

In her discussion of the emergence of a specific form of Indian womanhood in the late 19th century, Uma Chakravarti (1989) argues that Indian nationalists selectively adopted symbolic elements of Aryan womanhood into their construction of the ideal woman for the emerging nation. One of the ways in which nationalists attempted to engage with the challenges of colonialism and the shameful existence of sati, enforced widowhood and child marriage was by constructing the Vedic period as a

golden age in which women enjoyed a high status and engaged on terms of equality with men without endangering their chastity. Chakravarti (1989) points out that the ideal Indian woman in the nationalist imagination is inspired by the Aryan (upper caste) woman rather than the Dasi (lower caste woman) and thus is an incomplete representation of the diversity in Indian society.

Partha Chatterjee (1989: 238) makes a related point in discussing the 'bhadramahila' (upper class woman) of the nationalist period whose 'essential "femininity" [needs to be] fixed in terms of certain culturally visible "spiritual" qualities' (such as modesty and decorum) after which she is free to participate in public life. It could be argued that Sabyasachi 's contemporary Indian woman who clothes her national identity in a sari when representing India at international venues is a descendant of the 'bhadramahila' of the 19th century who represents a modern and yet modest 'Indianess'. Unfortunately, both the 19th century nationalist construction of womanhood as well as that of 21st century, marginalise women from minority communities.

Positioning the sari as symbolic of a [pan] Indian identity strengthens problematic and reductionist constructions of nationhood and reinforces gendered notions of who is responsible for guarding and transmitting national culture. Women who are otherised for not conforming to majoritarian cultural standards become vulnerable to harassment and assault. As Nira Yuval- Davis argues, women are often positioned as 'symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour' which can be challenged by violating them through sexual exploitation or appropriating them via marriage. The anxiety about 'love jihad'[2] playing a role in the conversion and marriage of Doctor Hadiya which was scrutinised by the Supreme Court is a case in point (Economic and Political Weekly, 2017).[3]


## SARIS AND DRESS CODES IN INDIAN SCHOOLS

In her ethnographic account of Anglo-Indian women in present-day Kolkata, Sudarshana Sen (2014) cites the story of an interviewee, Linda, who faced this form of marginalisation during her school days. On one occasion she was asked to wear a

sari to receive important visitors to the convent school where she was studying. Since her mother didn't own one, her father requested the principal to overlook the matter on the grounds that not all Indian communities wear saris. A long argument ensued between parent and principal who finally offered the father a transfer certificate (an indication that his child was no longer welcome in the school).

Thus her family's refusal to identify with a majoritarian view of Indian womanhood caused Linda to be denied education at a Christian school which offers subsidised education to Anglo-Indian children. Since we hear the story only from the point of view of the Anglo-Indian student, we can only surmise about the school's motivations. Reading Sen's narration of this incident in the light of the recent 'sari controversy', several questions arise: Does an educational institution (which has been established as a religious minority institution) need regularly to prove its nationalist credentials via its rituals and the dress and behaviour of its students? Did the Christian mission that ran the school feel compelled to impress upon visiting dignitaries its commitment to inculcating Indian cultural practices and values (however those might be defined) in the minds of its students? Did this requirement motivate the school principal to treat the interviewee's inability to comply with the prescribed dress code for the occasion as a disciplinary matter requiring a strong response?

In her recent discussion of the consequences of the Gujarat state government's prescription of saris as the universal dress code for teachers, Nandini Manjrekar (2013) argues that Muslim teachers, many of whose families do not accept saris as traditional Islamic dress, face punitive action if they fail to conform to the dress code, and are therefore caught between community or family expectations on the one hand and professional demands on the other. As Manjrekar points out, the government's dress codes are a way of managing and controlling the sexuality of female teachers, particularly of younger teachers, who are employed in vulnerable contractual positions (while having the additional consequences of creating a catch twenty-two situation for Muslim women).

First-person accounts on news and opinion blogs on dress codes in private schools support Manjrekar's conclusions. In Haryana, for example, Jyoti Yadav, a young

female teacher was told to tie her hair because long hair left loose would distract male students (Naaz, 2016). In her response to the management and on social media Yadav argued that asking her to conform to the management's notions of appropriate self-presentation reinforces conditions for young male students to objectify women but she failed to change the management's view and resigned from her job. In another first-person post on the critical opinion blog Kafila, a school teacher cited the case of a male student who advised her to wear a dupatta; she argued that 'as a middle-aged teacher [she] couldn't escape the offensive, patriarchal gaze of a 17-year old boy' (Snehlata Gupta, 2013, np). Both these female teachers faced patriarchy within the classroom and outside, in relation to students and management.

## SOME TENSIONS IN ANGLO-INDIAN IDENTITY AND THEIR IMPACT ON SCHOOLS ESTABLISHED BY THE COMMUNITY

It has been argued that Anglo-Indians had a fluctuating relationship with the British who sought to distance the community to keep alive the myth of white superiority, but also strategically evoked racial ties with Britain when the community's service was required – during the World Wars for instance (Muthiah and MacLure, 2014). In the first decades of the twentieth century Anglo-Indian men's employment chances were affected by the Montague-Chelmsford reforms which opened up government posts to other Indian communities. This limitation of men's employment created conditions for Anglo-Indian women's entry into paid employment much earlier than women from other communities. Due to their public presence, distinctive Western costumes and lack of diffidence in interacting with men, Anglo-Indian women were often viewed as representing dangerous and unrestrained sexuality: a myth that was fuelled by 19th century European theories about bi-raciality (Caplan, 2001; Blunt, 2005). This perception marked them for derision in 20th century popular culture and public imagination and left them vulnerable to harassment as Geetanjali Gangoli (2005) suggests in her examination of 20th century Bollywood films. Gangoli (2005) argues that Anglo-Indian and Western (or Westernised) women characters in Bollywood films came to represent values that were not appropriately Indian and therefore either had to be eliminated or transformed within the narrative of the film.

In the years preceding and immediately following independence, leaders of the Anglo-Indian community sought to identify with the emerging nation, suggesting that the community's future lay in India. Through a close reading of issues of *The Anglo-Indian Review*, the monthly journal of The All India Anglo-Indian Association, published in the early 20th century, Alison Blunt (2005) notes the deep commitment of the bi-racial and bi-cultural community towards representing itself as unequivocally Indian. She further notes that the question of Anglo-Indian women's identities was a particularly delicate one in this project as their women's sexuality had been the subject of much discussion both in colonial discourse and within the community.

Anglo-Indian women's sexuality had long been viewed with suspicion by the colonial masters for fear of miscegenation, a view that was also adopted by many Indian communities. Blunt (2005) suggests that the community viewed the early emancipation of Anglo-Indian women and their presence in paid employment (particularly during the World Wars) with both pride and anxiety. It was proof of their modernity and commitment to public service but also brought them in contact with European (and American) men and laid them open to charges of promiscuity. With this in view many editorials in *The Anglo-Indian Review* charged women with preserving their reputation and character and remaining close to the dictates of parents and church. It could be argued that in contemporary India these tensions between assimilation and the need to preserve cultural distinctiveness is exacerbated by majoritarian views of national culture which overlook or seek to obliterate markers of minority identity in dress, cuisine and language.

ANGLO-INDIAN IDENTITY AND WOMEN TEACHERS' ATTIRE

Although Anthony's (1964/2007) chapter on education in *Britain's Betrayal* makes no reference to a dress code for teachers, the teachers interviewed claimed that many Anglo-Indian schools required their Anglo-Indian staff to wear Western outfits. In some schools teachers who failed to follow the dress code were publicly upbraided. Margery Webster, aged about 61 years, who retired from a senior position at an

Anglo-Indian school mentioned that two young teachers who hoped to 'get-away with' wearing shalwar kameez on sports day were loudly rebuked by the principal.

She recounted that as more young women in Bangalore started riding their own mopeds and scooters (in the early 1980s), many teachers expressed a preference for trousers or shalwar kameez.  In addition, while using public transport (autorickshaws and buses) to commute to work, women also believed (hoped?) that shalwar kameez would enable them to blend in and avoid harassment. (There is a strong possibility that they were aware of how their Western attire was sexualised by other communities.) Both these costumes were disallowed on the grounds that trousers are unladylike and shalwars are Indian (majoritarian), and consequently not representative enough of Anglo-Indian identity. Over the 1980s teachers repeatedly petitioned the management and finally won the right to wear shalwar kameez on one day of the week. Teachers were unable to recall exactly when the management changed their policy. While Ms Webster suggests that it occurred around the late 1980s, Ms. Hayes who worked in the same school, recalls that Anglo-Indian teachers were wearing dresses well into the mid-1990s. Irrespective of conflicting memories, it is evident that the matter was under discussion between teachers and management for about a decade.

However, not all teachers had similar views on identity and attire. Another teacher of a similar age to Ms. Hayes, who prefers to remain anonymous was interviewed her workplace while dressed in shalwar kameez. She laughingly remarked that had Mr. Anthony, who headed the Anglo-Indian Schools' Council until his death, seen her, he would have been very annoyed. She suggested that the right to wear shalwar kameez was as a pyrrhic victory, as some (non-Anglo-Indian) students remarked that their teachers now looked like their mothers, thereby fuelling fears of the loss of identity.

This relationship between Western dress (which is an important marker of Anglo-Indian women's identity) and professionalism was echoed by  Laura De Mello who, when she was retiring, was told by parents and colleagues that there would be no reason to send their children to English medium schools once 'all the skirts are

gone'. She recounted a more recent experience of being accosted on the road by a lady in a burka (presumably Muslim) who wanted to recruit her on the spot. The lady claimed to have a school where 'we want you, we want you people with skirts to come and teach.'

In the 1970s and 80s women from majoritarian Hindu and Muslim communities in Bangalore rarely wore Western clothes making Anglo-Indian women's attire conspicuous in public. As the remarks above indicate, interviewees' Western clothes cued not only their ability to teach English (a form of cultural capital coveted by other communities) and their alignment with Western standards in education but also a high degree of professionalism: the quality of being 'very particular' mentioned earlier. It is likely that school managements realised the relationship between the community's self-presentation as a Westernised English-speaking minority and the aspirational value of the education they offered, making them reluctant to incorporate Indian attire into the dress code. Their decision to relax the dress code for women teachers came after women from other Indian communities began to adopt Western clothes more widely thus eroding the uniqueness of Anglo-Indian clothing.

It is noteworthy that since Indian men across communities widely adopted Western attire in the 20th century, Anglo-Indian men's clothes have not been a matter of contention. Women tend to be seen as representing community identity on their person. As Chatterjee (1989), Yuval Davis (1987) and others have argued, women are often charged with preserving national and community identities and passing them on to the next generation through religious rituals, food, dress and traditional practices.


CONCLUSION

From the accounts above we see a tendency for both national and community identities to be ascribed on women's bodies. Minorities often resist majoritarian threats to their identities by charging their women to carry forward the community's identity through their behaviour and person. Women's bodies become the sites of contestation between the more nebulous 'national community' as well as the more

localised religious, linguistic, regional or ethnic community. Women's autonomy and agency regarding their bodies is limited by powerful male voices which speak both on behalf of and to (women of) the community with injunctions as to how their identity needs to be represented. Instances of such injunctions include instructions to carry on their person the markers of collective identity be it via Sabyasachi's 'gentle rebuke' or dress-codes dictated by religious teachers or community leaders. It would be valuable to research the sartorial choices that Anglo-Indian women and women from other minority communities make in the contemporary period, when women across communities are wearing a wider range of Indian and Western clothes, and to examine the extent to which notions of community and national identity influence their choices. Further research is required to understand the impact of current trends in majoritarianism and nationalism on women's attire.

However, it can be argued that by presenting women who fail to conform to the majoritarian view of ideal Indian womanhood as deviant or lacking respectability, we leave minority women vulnerable to harassment and to the possibility of assault. This vulnerability outside the community furthers their disempowerment within it before powerful male leaders who take a paternalistic role in dictating their behaviour. Moreover, taking a reductive view of 'national attire' strengthens narrow definitions of nationhood which are increasingly being identified with the Hindu majority and right-wing representations of Hinduism. In this context the seemingly innocuous utterances of public figures such as Sabyasachi Mukherjee at international events add further grist to the majoritarian mill, a mill in which minorities identities are increasingly vulnerable to erosion.

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[1] Nivi refers to the most common way of wearing the sari in contemporary India with pleats in the front and the pallu/pallav (loose end) draped over the left shoulder.

[2] Love Jihad, a term popularised in sections of the mainstream media, refers to the possibility that vulnerable young Hindu women might be 'lured' into converting to Islam (and occasionally to Christianity or other religions) through a romantic relationship and subsequent marriage with a Muslim man (or a representative of another minority). Although evidence of such occurrences is limited, the term encapsulates majoritarian tendencies for Islamophobia.

[3] Doctor Hadiya (born Akhila Ashokan) is a 25 year old medical student from Kerala who chose to convert to Islam, giving up her Hindu faith, name and identity whilst she was studying in Tamil Nadu, a decision that was strongly opposed by her family. A year later she married a Muslim man who she had met through a matrimonial website (once again against the wishes of her family). Her father repeatedly moved the police and courts to intervene in his daughter's conversion and subsequent marriage alleging that she was under the influence of radical Islamic organisations and that the marriage was a case of 'love jihad'. The Kerala High Court annulled the marriage arguing that such an important life decision cannot be taken by a young woman without her parents' participation. The marriage was later reinstated by the Supreme Court which argued against state intervention in the private decisions of an individual citizen. Hadiya's agency to choose her faith and life-partner has been a matter of public debate in spite of her constitutionally guaranteed right to do so.