

# Simply a sari?

The sari has become a global image. Worn by Indian women of diverse religious and cultural groups from the north of India to the island of Sri Lanka in the south. Women proudly wear saris in countries as far apart as Suriname, Britain, South Africa and Indonesia as a statement of their Indian origins.

THE ORIGINS OF THE SARI are believed to date back to the 2nd century BC. One reason for the continued popularity of this form of draped clothing is a long established belief by (elite) Hindus that cut and sewn cloth was impure. As a result, the cloth used for saris is neither stitched nor tailored. The various types of sari reflect India's diverse climate and geography, and its wide range of urban, village and nomadic life. The sari embodies India's multicultural society, its economic and trade contacts, religious groups, artistic traditions, and much more.

Renowned for their colour and beauty, saris are made in diverse ways, reflecting their region of origin, the person wearing them and the occasion. There are hundreds of different forms, including printed, painted, woven and embroidered versions, or indeed a combination of these techniques. Their beauty is further displayed by the many forms of draping that can be used; sometimes traditional, others regional and more recently there are the styles derived from the Indian film industry, Bollywood.

A sari is long length of material of between 4 to 8 metres in length, and 100 and 120 cm in width. A good quality example is usually longer and broader than a less expensive version. The basic layout of a sari consists of three areas: end piece, the field and the side or longitudinal borders.

Saris are one of the most elegant garments worn by women, but they do require experience to drape and wear them to their best advantage. Basically, a sari is worn by wrapping the material around the waist, then pleating the material at the front to create a wide, skirt section, then the remainder of the material is draped over the shoulders or head. In general, wealthier women, especially those in northern and central India, tend to wear silk saris, while poorer women or those in the south of the country opt for cotton versions.

Throughout the centuries a wide range of decorative techniques have been developed for saris. Some of these techniques are regionally linked, others can be found throughout the country. In the northwest of India, for example, painted and printed saris are common, while in the northeast woven forms are more widely available. In the last 50 years many of the regional variations have started to vanish as more and more mills have been set up to produce saris on a large scale.

Colour and motif symbolism plays an important role in Indian life and this is reflected in the motifs and styles of decoration found on many saris. Certain colours are associated with particular groups. The Brahmins (priestly caste),

for example, are associated with white, which is seen as a pure colour. Some groups regarded white as the colour of mourning and so white saris are worn by widows. Red is seen as the colour of fertility and emotions and as such it is often worn by brides and young married women. Green is associated with fertility and growth, and so a woman wishing a child might wear a green coloured sari. Yellow is seen as a religious colour and associated with religion and asceticism. It is often worn by women who wish to express their desire for a more spiritual way of life. Dark blue and black are regarded by many in India as negative colours and impure and so few traditional saris can be found in these colours.

An ancient floral motif that appears on saris is the lotus, which is regarded as symbolising spiritual power, good luck and fertility. Throughout much of India the tree is regarded as a symbol of both fertility and protection, and as a result

it is often included in some form on a sari. Another very popular motif is the kalga design, which is an elliptical, floral motif with a curved point at the top. This design has become known in the West as the Paisley motif after the motifs woven on 'Kashmir' shawls in the Scottish town of Paisley during the 19th century.

Saris from the southern parts of India often have a line of triangles of various sizes along the inner edges of the side borders.

**Collections: Textile Research Centre, Leiden ([www.trc-leiden.nl](http://www.trc-leiden.nl)) and Volkenkunde Museum, Leiden**

Far left: handwoven jamdani sari from West Bengal (green with red, stylised flowers).

Middle: handwoven jamdani sari from West Bengal (turquoise, geometric).

Right: brocade sari, Assam.

Inset from top to bottom: wedding sari from Kerala, Tamil Nadu. Silk *kadi* sari. Silk batik sari.

Photography: Joost Kolkman [www.joostkolkman.nl](http://www.joostkolkman.nl)

