

DE RERUM INDICARUM NATURA: EXEMPLA
VESTIUM ET ORNAMENTORUM

CULTURE IN THE VANITY BAG

Being an essay on clothing and adornment
in passing and abiding India by

NIRAD C. CHAUDHURI

“The apparel proclaims the man.”



1976
JAICO PUBLISHING HOUSE
BOMBAY

But in Bengal the sari as the sole garment for women was not ousted quickly or easily. The battle between it and the dress they habitually wear today lasted over seventy years. The history of this struggle is worth recalling in detail.

A very good starting point is furnished by a description of Bengali women in their old dress by Fanny Parkes, a charming English woman who came to India at the time of Lord Amherst (1823-28). She had been to a party at the house of a rich Bengali in Calcutta, talked with the women, and in her journal she wrote about them and their dress. Here is the description of their manner of wearing the sari:

“On beholding their attire I was no longer surprised that no other men than their husbands were permitted to enter the zenana. The dress consisted of one long strip of Benares gauze of thin texture, with a gold border, passing twice round the limbs, with the end thrown over the shoulder. The dress was rather transparent, almost useless as a veil.”

There was not the slightest exaggeration in this description. I have myself seen great ladies dressed like this. In Bengali society of olden days the higher the status of the man or woman the thinner was the dhoti or the sari. In our boyhood my brothers and I were always made to put on the semi-transparent Simlai dhoti for festivals or weddings. It was as positive a mark of our aristocratic bringing up and way of life as was our very fine rice.

This custom enabled the fashionable women of Calcutta, unfortunately not of East Bengal from where I come, to make up in a manner that would be quite pointless for the women of the West, for the method was to paint the behinds with the scarlet dye of lac. This produced the effect of a pink petticoat. From this fashion, again, the Bengali language got the proverb, “Scratching up a complexion,” which referred to the habit these women had of scratching themselves hard in order to work up a bloom and show-through if a visitor arrived when they had not made up.

But soon after Fanny Parkes saw the thin saris the puritanical outcry began. In 1835 the Bengali newspaper *Samachar Darpan*, edited by the missionaries of Serampore, published a