

# THE OFFBEAT SARI



Large Print guide

# THE OFFBEAT SARI

Woven from steel. Stitched from hand-distressed denim. Knotted, pleated or belted. Worn in protest, celebration, or simply on the daily commute. The offbeat sari is the sari radically reimagined by designers, wearers and makers for a diverse, contemporary world.

Conventionally a single piece of unstitched fabric, the sari's unfixed form is inherently fluid. Its many different shapes and textures, adapted over the course of millennia, reflect identity, social class, environment and function — and immense creativity. The sari is a language expressed through fabric, which has been intertwined with evolving cultural influences over time.

In the past decade, the sari has been re-energised. Designers catering to a new generation across India's burgeoning cities are experimenting with new drapes and innovative materials. Younger women, who previously associated the sari with dressing up, have transformed it into contemporary everyday fashion. Individuals are also embodying saris in ways that give voice to who they are, exploring plural and nonconforming identities, and challenging conventions of femininity.

This exhibition explores the creative, often unexpected ways in which the sari is a site for design innovation and an empowering vessel for self-expression in India today.

Room 1

# TRANSFORMATIONS

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# TRANSFORMATIONS

The sari is going through a period of intense dynamism. Contemporary Indian designers are pushing boundaries in astonishing ways, experimenting with surprising materials, forms and accessories to redefine both the sari's form and its function.

In earlier decades, innovation in sari design was most often seen in embroidery and embellishment, which signified status for many wearers. Today, this is still seen on red carpets and at weddings, but more pared-back designs — drawing on a range of local and global influences — have made the sari popular as everyday clothing in cities.

Yet beyond South Asia, there is limited awareness of the sari as more than a form of clothing worn on special occasions. This section reveals the sari as you've never seen it before: deconstructed and transformed.

## ROOTS OF THE OFFBEAT

From the 1960s to the early 2000s, the sari declined in popularity as a form of everyday wear. A new wave of young women — born into a period of significant social and political change in post-independence India — wanted to define themselves as different from previous generations. They saw many reasons to reject the sari, which had been conventionally associated with women in the domestic space or with unwieldy formal wear. In Bollywood, clinging saris fetishised the female body as the object of the male gaze.

Yet a parallel movement emerged from the seeds of an earlier generation: a lineage of powerful, intellectual and self-aware women who enabled the sari to be perceived as a symbol of female empowerment. The progressive legacy they established has inspired many of the designers whose work is shown in this room.

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## **Bollywood 'Item girl' sari**

One hallmark of a Bollywood film is a catchy song performed by the female lead, who is known as the 'item girl'. In this song from the 1980s film *Mr. India*, the protagonist Sridevi wears a blue sari and dances provocatively in the rain while actor Anil Kapoor stands in the background. The sari clings to her body as it gets soaked.

**'Kate Nahin Kat Te' from the film Mr. India**

Directed by Shekhar Kapur, 1987

Duration: 30 seconds

Courtesy of Boney Kapoor

## **Bollywood nostalgia today**

A nostalgia for classic Bollywood continues to capture the imagination of certain contemporary designers. The 'I Love Chandni' collection by contemporary brand Péro drew inspiration from Bollywood heroine Sridevi in the 1989 film *Chandni*, meaning 'moonlight'. Sridevi's bangles, her glittery *bindi* and the sparkle in her eyes are reflected in limited-edition saris adorned with subtle hand embroidery and sequins. The collection was accompanied by a series of Bollywood-themed posters.

### **White Lace Sequin Sari**

Péro, 2019

European lace with floral sequin embroidery

Worn with accompanying silk blouse

### **'I Love Chandni' poster**

Péro, 2019

Paper

Courtesy of Péro

**> Continue right**

## Sari heroines

Throughout history, influential women have worn the sari boldly and with purpose.

Early 20th-century cultural pioneer Jnanadanandini Devi Tagore was a reformer of sari style who popularised the *Nivi* drape, which has endured to this day. Maharani Gayatri Devi's chiffon pastel saris were fundamental to her persona as a woman of elegance, wealth and status, and became the de facto uniform for many royals. Indira Gandhi, the first female Prime Minister of India, wore saris not just as an expression of personal style but as a political statement, at a time when hand-spun cotton represented the struggle for India's independence.

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- 1. Rekha**  
Unknown artist, about 1980s  
Ink on paper  
Courtesy of The Design Museum
- 2. Indira Gandhi at a Congress session**  
Photograph by Raghu Rai, 1966  
Photographic reproduction  
Courtesy of © Raghu Rai / Magnum Photos
- 3. Amrita Sher-Gil wearing a zari sari, Simla, India**  
Photograph by Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, about 1937  
Silver gelatin print with selenium toning  
Courtesy of The Estate of Umrao Singh Sher-Gil  
and PHOTOINK
- 4. Woman**  
Alice Neel, 1966  
Photographic reproduction  
Private collection  
© The Estate of Alice Neel. Courtesy of The Estate of  
Alice Neel and David Zwirner. Photo by Dan Bradica
- 5. Portrait of a Lady**  
Raja Ravi Varma, 1893  
Photographic reproduction  
Courtesy of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi
- 6. Untitled**  
Unknown artist, early 20th century  
Photographic reproduction  
Courtesy of the private collection of Sunil Kant Munjal

- 7. Painted photograph of a woman in a blue sari**  
Unknown photographer and painter, about 1900  
Photographic reproduction  
Courtesy of ROM (Royal Ontario Museum), Toronto, Canada  
©ROM. Gift of Mr. Subash Kapoor
- 8. Maharani Gayatri Devi**  
Photograph by Cecil Beaton, about 1939–45  
Photographic reproduction  
Courtesy of Imperial War Museums,  
Ministry of Information Second World War  
Official Collection © IWM IB 698
- 9. Monsoon Rains, Bihar State**  
Photograph by Raghbir Singh, 1967  
Photographic reproduction  
Courtesy of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,  
Foto Forum purchase. Image reproduction by Don Ross  
Copyright © Succession of Raghbir Singh
- 10. Jnanadanandini Devi, Satyendranath Tagore,  
Kadambari Devi and Jyotirindranath Tagore**  
Unknown photographer, 1867  
Photographic reproduction
- 11. Rani Yashoda Devi**  
Vandyk Studios, London, about 1930  
Photographic reproduction  
Courtesy of the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP)
- 12. Maharaj Kumar Rani Sita Devi**  
Photograph by André Durst, 1934  
Photographic reproduction  
Courtesy of the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP)

**13. Bengali Woman**

Jamini Roy, about mid-20th century

Photographic reproduction

Courtesy of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

**14. Portraits of Rani Sethu Parvathi Bayi and  
Rani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi**

Unknown photographer and date

Photographic reproduction

Courtesy of the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP).

Gift of Mr Jayachandran

## **South Asian British diaspora**

In the 2002 British comedy drama film *Bend It Like Beckham*, protagonist Jesminder Bhamra (played by Parminder Nagra) continues playing football against her parents' wishes. In this sequence, she changes out of a sari and into her kit en route from her sister's wedding, shedding one form of clothing for another in a gesture that symbolises her double life. After playing the match, her team wrap her in the sari again so she can return to the wedding.

### **Extract from the film Bend It Like Beckham**

Directed by Gurinder Chadha, 2002

Duration: 5 minutes 30 seconds

*Bend It Like Beckham*. Courtesy of Lionsgate

**> Behind on circular plinth**

## THE CONTEMPORARY SARI

Contemporary fashion designers are reinventing the sari for today. In contrast to the earlier fashion for heavy embellishment, these updated saris are often less ornate, using shape, pattern and detailing to create distinctive, wearable designs for a younger market.

New Delhi-based designers, such as Raw Mango and AKAARO, have been at the forefront of this dynamic shift. Their saris are generally lightweight and hand-woven, demonstrating a unique interpretation of traditional textiles. Initially coveted by culturally engaged women, particularly writers and journalists in New Delhi, these saris now have widespread appeal across India.

**> Continue clockwise around circular plinth**

# Abraham & Thakore

The clean, crisp lines of the garments created by David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore can be traced back to the duo's modernist training at India's National Institute of Design. Their saris feature unusual motifs that are conventionally found in the context of tailored garments, such as herringbone prints and belts, often in striking black and white. The designers' recent experiments with inventive materials — such as X-ray film from hospital waste, cut into sequins — address the contemporary issue of sustainability through the sari.

## 1. **X-ray Sequinned Sari**

Abraham & Thakore, 2021

Waste X-ray sheets and recycled post-consumer PET bottles

Worn with accompanying hand block-printed blouse

## 2. **Herringbone Print Sari**

Abraham & Thakore, 2011

Hand block-printed silk georgette

Worn with accompanying hand block-printed shirt and belt

## 3. **Sketch for X-ray Sequinned Sari**

Abraham & Thakore, 2021

Ink and sequins on paper

## 4. **Sketch of Herringbone Print Sari**

Abraham & Thakore, 2011

Ink on paper

# The Saree Sneakers

In recent years, trainers have become the footwear of choice for many chic sari-wearers, in place of sandals. Initially seen in street styles in Delhi, the appearance of trainers with saris in Bollywood culture is a sure sign that this trend has reached the mainstream. Shruti Kasat designed embroidered trainers to be worn with saris, after she realised it was difficult to wear heels while looking after her toddler. Her growing brand The Saree Sneakers now offers dozens of vibrant styles.

## 5. Zardozi Sneakers

The Saree Sneakers, 2019

Faux leather with zardozi embroidery and organza gota

## 6. White Chikankari Zari Sneakers

The Saree Sneakers, 2019

Faux leather with chikankari embroidery and zari embroidered silk satin

Courtesy of The Saree Sneakers

# AKAARO

Shimmering and delicate, these otherworldly saris are made from copper and steel. The innovative materials created by designer Gaurav Jai Gupta have garnered him an international reputation. AKAARO's metallic saris are mainly hand-woven on a loom in the basement of Gupta's studio, from his own lightweight metallic yarns. His most popular sari, inspired by molten gold, is designed for 'strong women of the future'.

## 7. **Liquid Molten Metal Sari**

AKAARO, 2014

Hand-woven silk and zari

Worn with accompanying silk and zari blouse

## 8. **Temple Run Sari**

AKAARO, 2022

Hand-woven silk and zari

Worn with accompanying silk and zari blouse

Courtesy of AKAARO

> **Continue clockwise**



Colour palette selection for Temple Run Sari,  
inspired by the architecture of Kanchipuram, 2022.  
Photograph by Natalia Davidovich / Adobe Stock

# NorBlack NorWhite

The hip-hop and Y2K-infused aesthetic of NBNW embodies the energetic, playful remixing of a contemporary globalised perspective. Designers Mriga Kapadiya and Amrit Kumar moved from their home Toronto to Mumbai in 2010 to explore their Indian roots. The Shimma Sari, a maximalist reinterpretation of Bollywood glamour, has been worn by influencers and celebrities alike. It can be purchased with an accompanying mesh net blouse and fringed petticoat.

## 9. Shimma Sari

NorBlack NorWhite, 2017

Hand-dyed cotton lurex

Worn with accompanying net Lycra crop top, petticoat, sports bra and sneakers

Courtesy of NorBlack NorWhite

## 10. Tulip Sari

NorBlack NorWhite, 2020

Hand-painted viscose chiffon

Worn with accompanying netted mesh blouse and sneakers

Courtesy of NorBlack NorWhite

Air Force 1 sneakers

Nike, 2023

First released 1982

Courtesy of The Design Museum

**11. Shimma Sari hand-dyeing process**  
Photographs by Bhavya Ahuja, 2019  
Courtesy of NorBlack NorWhite

# Raw Mango

Raw Mango's flagship store is a converted farmhouse in Chhatarpur, outside Delhi. Inside, whitewashed rooms contain wardrobes filled with saris arranged by colour. They range from the silk-striped *mashru*, woven with a silk warp and a cotton weft in Gujarat, to gold and silver brocades from Benares and bright digital prints. Founded in 2008 by Sanjay Garg, who felt the sari was being regarded as an 'inferior' garment, the studio invested heavily in reinterpreting heritage textiles. Through a contemporary brand identity, Raw Mango has generated renewed excitement for hand-woven saris in bold colours.

## 12. Ekori Sari

Raw Mango, 2022

Hand-woven mashru silk

Worn with brass earrings

## 13. Guler Sari

Raw Mango, 2019

Hand-woven silk brocade with floral butahs

## 14. Folia Sari

Raw Mango, 2021

Silk twill with digitally printed flowers

Courtesy of Raw Mango



Raw Mango Chattarpur, New Delhi, 2016

Photograph by Fabien Charuau

**Continue left to the next plinth, to the right of  
'South Asian British diaspora' screen**

## EXPERIMENTATION

The adaptability of the sari has provided a rich canvas for experimentation by designers and artists. Designers using experimental materials, audacious textures and non-traditional forms, such as sari dresses, are expanding the definition of the sari. They draw on global influences but also express a new language for Indian design through distinctively individual approaches. Contemporary Indian artists are also finding inspiration in the sari's capacity for abstract representation, with the likes of Bharti Kher taking the sari beyond its function as clothing to convey poetic ideas.

# HUEMN

Critically engaged design practice HUEMN set out to explore social and political issues through fashion in 2012. Known for the provocative slogans and imagery that feature on their sweatshirts, dresses and T-shirts, the studio experiments with a handful of saris, too. The quilted texture of this sari was designed in parallel with the brand's street style puffer jackets. The quilting introduces a casual urban feel to the sari through texture, as well as adapting it for cooler weather.

## **Quilted Sari**

HUEMN, 2017

Embroidered parachute nylon fabric

Worn with long-sleeved crop top

Courtesy of HUEMN

**> Continue right**

# Amit Aggarwal

Aggarwal's fascination with contemporary materials and complex silhouettes emerged from his upbringing in a family of engineers. This pre-draped sari is made from synthetic polymers, with shapes inspired by amoebic forms. The *pallu* and ruffle were created by heat pleating the polymer fabric.

## The Metanoia Saree

Amit Aggarwal, 2021

Chiffon, tulle and organza with metallic plissé pallu and hand-embroidered bodice

Courtesy of Amit Aggarwal

## Diksha Khanna

This distressed denim sari applies a ubiquitous material to an unexpected context. It consists of a long denim skirt, with a heavily distressed lighter denim *pallu* — with lower thread count — attached. For this notable design from her debut collection, Khanna was inspired by French brand Marithé + François Girbaud, which first used lasers and light to distress denim.

### **Hand-distressed Denim Sari**

Diksha Khanna, 2018

Hand-distressed scrap denim

Worn with accompanying cotton blouse

Courtesy of Diksha Khanna

## Studio Medium

The **pallu** of a sari, which hangs across one shoulder and arm, is one of its defining features. This sari came from an experimental attempt to create a circle on the *pallu* using an intricate Japanese method of tie-dye called *shibori*. An opening was then made in the circle for the wearer's arm, creating a practical and enjoyable contemporary twist on the form of a traditional sari.

### Handsfree Sari

Studio Medium, 2022

Hand-dyed silk organza with engineered shibori-dyed sleeve

Worn with accompanying silk blouse and petticoat

Courtesy of Studio Medium

### The Metanoia Saree

Amit Aggarwal, 2021

Chiffon, tulle and organza with metallic plissé pallu and hand-embroidered bodice

Courtesy of Amit Aggarwal

## **Bharti Kher**

Heavily lacquered saris, draped on cast-concrete plinths, create portraits of absent bodies in this series of sculptures by Bharti Kher. The sari recalls the artist's childhood: her father worked in textiles and her mother was a dressmaker with a fabric shop. Here, the sari is abstracted to the point where it becomes a substance, 'almost like pigment, like paint'.

### **Portrait: Manju**

Bharti Kher, 2013

Sari, resin and cement

Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

# Rashmi Varma

Varma makes well-tailored sari dresses from light, hand-crafted fabrics. The complex yet fluid drape of the 2x1 Sari gives it the versatility of a conventional sari, but with a blouse built in. The design's conceptual take on what the sari can be playfully repurposes its structure without the extensive stitching of most sari dresses.

## 2x1 Sari

Rashmi Varma, 2017

Modal

Courtesy of Rashmi Varma

# **Bodice**

'A new language of modernity for women in India'. This was the bold ambition of founder Ruchika Sachdeva when she launched Bodice in 2011, drawing on her training at the London College of Fashion. Bodice incorporates sari pleats into tailored garments, such as trousers and shirts. This example cleverly works the pleats throughout the structure of the sari fabric to form architectural lines.

## **The Bodice Sari**

Bodice, 2019

Silk with hand-bound pleats

Worn with accompanying viscose blouse and silk petticoat

Courtesy of Ruchika Sachdeva for Bodice

**> Remaining in 'Transformations', continue right to the next plinth**

## GLAMOUR

Couture saris with lavish ornamentation have been a feature of Indian fashion since the 1990s, when a flurry of newly established brands responded to a surge of financial optimism in India after the economy was liberalised. Through voluminous silhouettes, rich textiles, embroidery and details such as ruffles, such saris are designed for opulent weddings or red-carpet events among South Asians and the global diaspora.

The work of these design houses presents an ambitious vision of Indian glamour that often draws on the legacy of the regal courts of northern India. Their sense of Indian fashion as the epitome of extravagance often finds expression in Bollywood films, which are a strong marker of Indian identity for a broad audience.

# Tarun Tahiliani

The phrase 'concept sari' has come to refer to a sari that is pre-stitched rather than draped by its wearer. The term was coined by Tarun Tahiliani, one of the first designers to introduce stitched pleats into saris in the 1990s. Concept saris initially grew in popularity among the Indian diaspora, but were then adopted by Bollywood stars. Here we see concept saris at their most glamorous: made from foil jersey or tulle, and bejewelled.

## **Concept Sari gown**

Tarun Tahiliani, 2013

Crinkle tulle

Worn with accompanying  
crinkle tulle blouse

## **Concept Sari, worn by Lady Gaga**

Tarun Tahiliani, 2022

replica of a 2010 design

Foil jersey, lamé georgette and Swarovski cup chains

Worn with accompanying  
satin bodysuit

Courtesy of Tarun Tahiliani

## **Manish Malhotra**

Taking inspiration from the extravagance of Bollywood, Manish Malhotra is an established luxury couturier. His team of craftspeople, designers and stylists have revolutionised the elite fashion industry of Mumbai – home of Bollywood – by contributing costumes to more than 500 films. Cherry red and encrusted in sequins, this sari uses colour and classic threadwork to embody the opulence and artistry of Bollywood design.

### **Taban Sari**

Manish Malhotra, 2021

Silk chiffon and sequins

Worn with accompanying chiffon blouse and spun-silk petticoat

Courtesy of Manish Malhotra

## Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla

Dramatically ruffled and adorned with pearls, this sari design attracted international attention when worn by Bollywood star Deepika Padukone at the 75th Cannes Film Festival in 2022, as a member of the jury. Design duo Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla have embraced the resurgence of skilled techniques, such as mirror work and traditional *chikankari* embroidery, which they combine with features from ballgowns, such as ruffles.

### **Off-white sari with pleated ruffles**

Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla, 2021

Silk organza and silk georgette

Worn with hand-embroidered pearl and stone bustier, pearl and crystal collar and petticoat

Courtesy of Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla

# **Sabyasachi x Schiaparelli**

This showstopping ensemble juxtaposes a flowing gold sari by Sabyasachi with the armour of a gold Schiaparelli bustier. Worn by Indian businesswoman and socialite Natasha Poonawalla at the 2022 Met Gala, it was the first time a sari had ever been worn at this celebrated New York event. The embroidered tulle sari with a dramatic train was paired with the bustier by stylist Anaita Shroff Adajania in a radical interpretation of the dress code, 'Gilded Glamour'.

## **Met Gala Sari**

Sabyasachi Mukherjee, 2022

Printed tulle, embroidered silk with floss thread, bevel beads, semi-precious stones, crystals, sequins and appliquéd printed velvet

Worn with accompanying blouse, petticoat and trail

## **Bustier encircled by rings of Saturn**

Daniel Roseberry for Maison Schiaparelli, 2022

Hand-forged metal

Courtesy of Natasha Poonawalla

# Sabyasachi

Bringing together grassroots craft with a contemporary bridal client-base has enabled Sabyasachi Mukherjee to establish one of the most influential Indian fashion businesses of recent decades. The Kolkata-based designer employs the Bengal tiger as his emblem, and was inspired by its thick orange and black stripes for his elaborately crafted 2022 collection. The brand's work with block-printed chintzes has been responsible for a significant resurgence in the popularity of floral saris today.

## **Bengal Tiger Couture Sari**

Sabyasachi Mukherjee, 2022

Silk with block-print and  
hand-embroidered stripes

Worn with accompanying strapless  
blouse and petticoat

## **Yellow Floral Sari**

Sabyasachi Mukherjee, 2018

Block-printed silk

Worn with accompanying blouse,  
petticoat and belt

Courtesy of Sabyasachi

## Anamika Khanna

The first female Indian designer to show at Paris Fashion Week, Khanna blends traditional Indian fabrics and techniques with Western-inspired tailoring. Her designs often combine elaborate gold *zari* needlework with silhouettes influenced by the three-piece suit. Khanna also reconstructs the sari to create her signature *dhoti*-style drape. Here we see traditional floral motifs updated with an ultra-fine organza cape, and a deconstructed frayed sari revamping richly embroidered trousers.

### **Distressed pre-stitched sari**

Anamika Khanna, 2018

Silk organza with patchwork embroidery

Worn with accompanying Lycra blouse and embroidered silk dupion trousers

### **Organza sari and cape**

Anamika Khanna, 2014

Silk organza

Worn with accompanying silk blouse, satin petticoat and organza cape

Courtesy of Anamika Khanna

**> Continue right to the next plinth**

## FORM

The sari is an incredibly versatile garment. It can be wrapped, knotted, pleated, tucked or divided in two, highlighting or concealing the natural curves of the body. In the late 19th century, during the British Raj, the *Nivi* drape — along with the standard pairing of a blouse and petticoat — became commonly perceived as the only way to drape a sari. It remains the most popular drape to this day.

However, more than 100 styles of drape are worn throughout India, using saris that typically range from three and a half yards to nine yards (3.2 metres to 8.2 metres) in length. Many more sari drapes probably remain undocumented. The adaptability of the sari, as shown here, makes it astonishingly rich, and there remains a wealth of undiscovered stories.

## **Please note, this text is located on the wall infographic**

This diagram shows the basic elements of a sari. As you will see, today there is a great deal of variation in the way the sari is designed but these elements are conventionally its backbone. The saris and accompanying garments in this exhibition are either represented by this structure or derived on some level from its basic components: spin-offs, hybrids, fusions, replicas and more.

### **1. Warp**

Lengthwise yarns of the cloth which are held stationary and in tension on the loom

### **2. Weft**

Widthwise yarns of the cloth which are woven under and over the warp when on the loom

### **3. Pallu**

Loose end of a sari, usually ornamental and worn over one shoulder or the head

**4. Inner-end**

The end of the sari that is wrapped around the body first

**5. Border**

The decorative edge which runs the length of a sari and maintains the pleated structure of the sari while giving it weight

**6. Body / Field**

The main section of the sari draped around the wearer

**7. Pleats**

A series of pleats several inches wide generally worn centre-front of waist (but can also be centre-back) that allows the wearer to move easily in the sari and adds stylistic detail

**8. Blouse or Top**

A visible crop top worn with the sari

**9. Petticoat or Leggings**

An undergarment, used to tuck the sari in around the waist

**> Continue right**

## **Boggili Possi Kattukodam drape**

**from Andhra Pradesh**

Kanjeevaram sari

8.2 metres

Nalli Silks, 2022

Hand-woven silk

Worn with accompanying blouse

## **Yakshagana Kase drape from Karnataka**

Kanjeevaram sari

8.2 metres

Nalli Silks, 2022

Silk

## **Kotapad drape from Odisha**

Kerala cotton sari

5.5 metres

Nalli Silks, 2022

Cotton

Courtesy of Nalli Silk Saris, est. 1928

## ***The Sari Series***

The Sari Series is an online anthology of more than 80 sari drapes from across India. Shifting the focus away from textile design, these short 'how to drape' films are intended to encourage experimentation with sari silhouettes. The drapes exhibited in the films shown here, such as the *Boggili Possi Kattukodam* or the *Mohiniattam*, are selected for their varying degrees of complexity and the range of times they take to complete. A selection of drapes are also displayed to the left here using saris in different lengths made by household textiles brand Nalli Silks.

### **The Sari Series**

Produced by Malika Verma, 2017

Directed by Bon Duke

Lead Patron: Good Earth

Duration: 4 minutes 30 second

Courtesy of Border&Fall. © The Sari Series

Drapes featured in film from left to right, top to bottom: Yakshagana Kase drape, Ranchi Saiko drape, Mohiniattam drape, Kotapad drape, Nivi drape, Boggili Possi Kattukodam drape

Room 2

IDENTITY  
&  
RESISTANCE

> Enter next room

# IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE

A glimpse into contemporary urban Mumbai, Delhi or Bangalore reveals a brilliant stream of diverse street styles: saris worn with T-shirts and trainers, or heels and tailored trousers, accessorised in countless different ways. The sari has become a vehicle for expressing individuality — and for resisting the status quo.

Saris can foreground marginalised identities, explore gender fluidity or celebrate body positivity. They may be worn in unexpected contexts, such as in sport, challenging their conventional associations with passivity and formality. They may be made in ways that resist the cycles of consumerism, or used during protest movements as a symbol of unity.

In the hands of its wearers, the sari has an endless capacity to embrace and champion progressive voices, personas and perspectives.

## PERSONAL IDENTITY

Styling a sari is an act of design. Wearers make personal, political or playful statements by pairing saris with distinctive accessories, experimenting with drapes or donning saris that reflect different cultural identities.

The creative possibilities of wearing a sari are amplified by its lack of rigid sizing. Saris are uniquely adaptable to all body types and shapes. Wearers who don't necessarily fit conventional standards of gender and beauty have styled their saris to express who they are. As the rich stream of images on social media reveals, wearing a sari has become a way to explore and celebrate individual identities across India and around the world.

**> Continue right to the next plinth**

## **How Much Sugar Would You Like?**

Photographs by Himanshu Verma and Parikhith Pal, 2016

Courtesy of Himanshu Verma

# Himanshu Verma

Himanshu Verma, the self-described 'OG [Original Gangster] Saree Man', unravels rigid notions of gender. Verma owns more than 300 saris, favouring contemporary, geometrically patterned styles such as the one displayed here. He has worn them daily since 2006. Verma's performative, highly stylised artworks explore sliding scales of femininity and masculinity.

## **Contemporary Block Print Sari**

Eachaneri Designs, about 2019

Block-printed silk

Worn with silk blouse

and cotton petticoat

Courtesy of Himanshu Verma



Himanshu Verma, 2019

Photograph by Cresinda D'Costa

Location courtesy of Ministry of New, Mumbai

# ALOK

Who can wear a sari? ALOK (they/them) — author, comedian and founder of the #DeGenderFashion movement — believes that the answer is everyone. ALOK describes the ‘acute sense of grief’ they felt as a child when seeing their grandmothers wearing saris because ALOK was not allowed to do so. For them, wearing a sari is a joyful act, but also a way of foregrounding queer and South Asian stories.

When fashion brand Papa Don’t Preach posted this photograph of ALOK on Instagram, it received many negative comments, but also stories of celebration and love. The brand has since removed the ‘womenswear’ wording from their messaging.

## **CHRISSY Sari and blouse**

Papa Don’t Preach by Shubhika, 2022

Georgette silk, embroidered with acrylics, sequins and crystals

Worn with accompanying silk blouse

Courtesy of ALOK



ALOK wearing the CHRISSEY Sari while recording a podcast with Papa Don't Preach, 2022  
Make-up by James Toribio  
Hair by Dee TrannyBear

# **Sobia Ameen**

Sobia Ameen is a Bangladeshi architect who has been showcasing her sari styles on social media since 2017. Her messages of body positivity and her distinctive, playful approach to the sari have gained her a large online following. She says that this look, worn by her in 2021, makes her feel wonderfully nostalgic, 'like Polly Pocket', because of the colours and curved shapes of the sari.

## **Arch Sari**

Advait, 2021

Digitally printed Bemberg crêpe

Courtesy of Advait

## **Padatika Express Shirt**

Doh Tak Keh, 2020

Biodegradable Lyocell-satin

Courtesy of Doh Tak Keh



Sobia Ameen, 2021

Photograph by Pranjal Gupta

Courtesy of Sobia Ameen

# Priya Ragu

From her music to her personal style, singer-songwriter Priya Ragu proudly celebrates her Tamil-Swiss heritage as 'a mixture of everything – of Western and South Asian culture'. In the video for her song 'Good Love 2.0', which launched her music career, she wears a striking red sari with sporty R&B accessories. The text தமிழ் on its border translates as 'Thamizh' or 'Tamil'.

## **Hand-woven red silk sari**

Ekaya x Masaba, 2018

Georgette silk with cutwork embroidery

Worn with high neck rib-knit long-sleeve shirt,  
sunglasses and adidas sneakers

Courtesy of Ekaya Banaras. Styled by Longchenti Longchar,  
who advised us on recreating the look

## **'Good Love 2.0' official music video**

Priya Ragu, 2020

Directed by Aneesh

Duration: 1 minute

Licensed courtesy of Warner Music UK Ltd



Still of Priya Ragu in 'Good Love 2.0' official music video, 2020

Licensed courtesy of Warner Music UK Ltd

**> Continue behind in vitrine**

## #IWearHandloom campaign

Hand-loom fabric has always been entwined with politics in India. In the past decade, it was been promoted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government as a part of their nationalist agenda. In a 2016 campaign led by Smriti Irani, Minister of Textiles for India, social media users were invited to post a picture of themselves wearing hand loom, using the hashtag #IWearHandloom. It generated 22 million impressions on Twitter in the first few months alone, and was dominated by images of sari-wearers.

The tweets shown here were posted by the following in order of appearance:

@agirlfromodisha, October 2022

@Akrati13, August 2022

@DrPyaricetamol, January 2022

@jagal\_ganti, June 2021

@GauribeelsBack, August 2021

@sunitha\_simon, October 2021

@Golty, July 2020

@Niharik46303906, August 2020

@aditiSBS, August 2020

@thebohobaalika, August 2019

@Deepali\_p, August 2018

@RajitaBagga, August 2018

@smitabarooah, August 2018

# Visual representation

From mainstream international magazines to independent journals, print media in India reveals the potential for the sari to be reimagined through the lens of high fashion. The striking images and eclectic ensembles shown here represent the combined visions of creative directors, stylists and photographers, and highlight the shifting image of the sari today.

**1. Motherland, 'Performance'**

Issue 8, 2012

Cover art by Pushpamala N

Courtesy of Motherland Joint Ventures Pvt. Ltd

**2. Harper's Bazaar Bride**

May, 2014

Sari by Rahul Mishra

Courtesy of India Today Group

**3. TAKE on Art**

Issue 23–24, 2019

Dharwad cotton sari

Courtesy of The Design Museum

**4. Vogue India**

March, 2022

Sari by Fabindia

Courtesy of Vogue India

5. **Platform Bookazine,**  
October 2019–March, 2020  
Sari by AKAARO  
Digital reproduction  
Courtesy of Platform Magazine India

**> Enter film room**

## **Sari Men**

This short film explores the role of men in the sari industry. Weavers, business owners, designers and shop assistants are celebrated for their skills. The film's narrator speculates: 'it feels like the men who spend their lives within the folds of the sari somehow intrinsically understand the nuances of gender. Maybe... the sari teaches them something.'

### **Sari Men**

Directed by Q, 2017

Produced by Malika Verma

Duration: 10 minutes 10 seconds

Courtesy of Border&Fall. © The Sari Series

**> Exit film room and continue right**

## The Raj Kilt

Half kilt, half sari, this outfit expresses the cross-cultural experiences of Shilpa Chavan, an Indian designer who studied in the United Kingdom and now works as Little Shilpa. It comprises a deconstructed vintage sari and military-inspired accessories. Little Shilpa describes her creative process in this playful verse:

*Tear it down with your fingers or a scissor.  
Toss it in a maximum power gender blender.  
Tell the English dandy to re-create his dapper.  
Text the Bombay local to lend his unique pepper.*

### The Raj Kilt

Little Shilpa, 2014

Vintage silk brocade

Worn with white cotton shirt, cotton drill cape, reclaimed military epaulette shoulder pieces, lace brocade gloves, a lace Plexiglass neckpiece and headpiece

Courtesy of littleshilpa

## **Cheena-Cheeni Parsi Gara Sari**

This intricate sari is the result of centuries of cross-cultural exchange between China and India. The sari's design revives a style called Parsi Gara, which was adopted by the Parsi community, who migrated to India from Persia. They were influenced by the embroidery they brought back from China during the opium trade under colonial rule. Designer Ashdeen Z Lilaowala adds contemporary twists, such as the deep aubergine colour. Scaled-up Chinese-Indian motifs demonstrate the surprising impact of globalisation on the sari's rich history.

### **Cheena-Cheeni Parsi Gara Sari**

ASHDEEN, 2017

Hand-embroidered silk crêpe

Courtesy of ASHDEEN



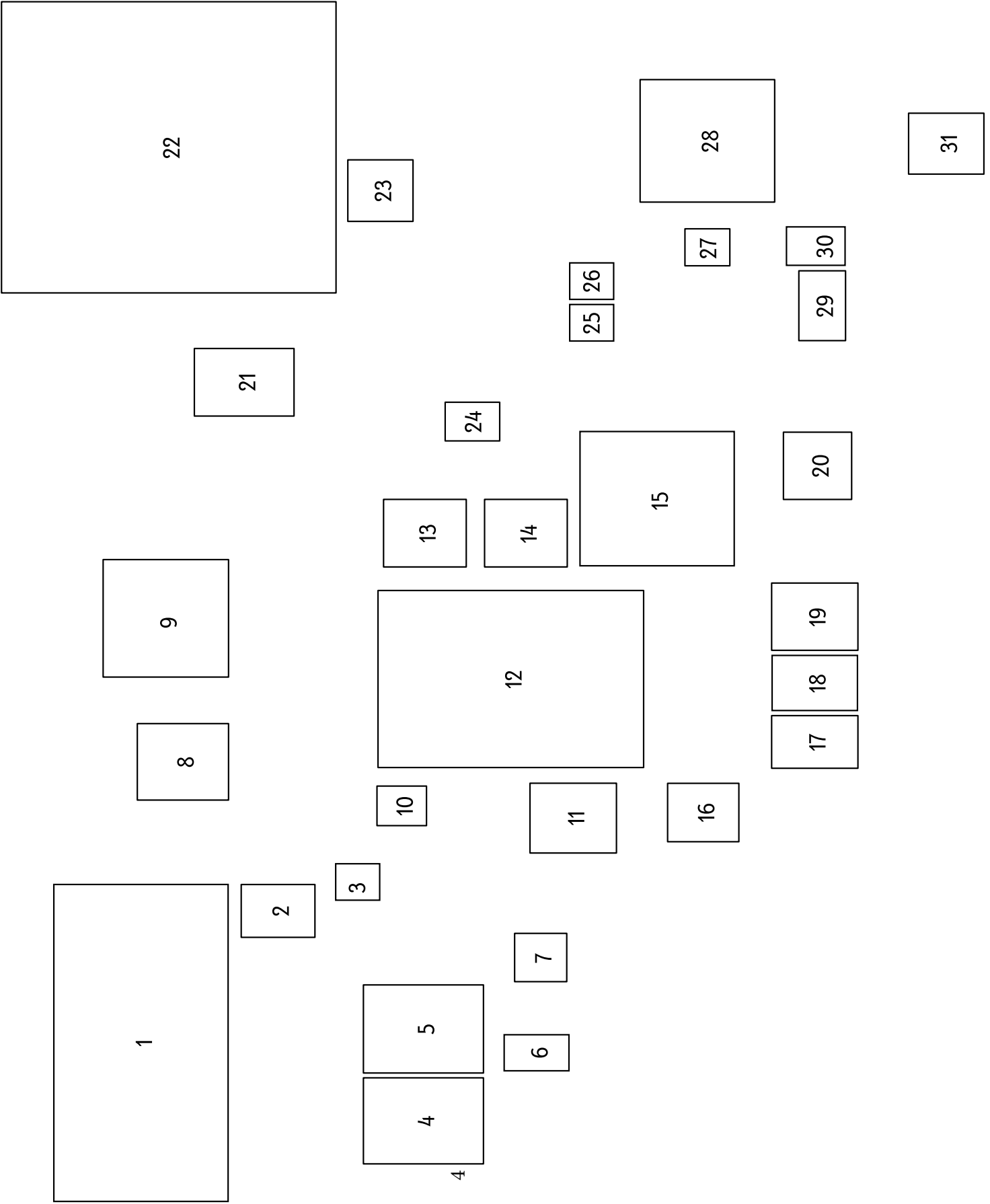
Historic Parsi women wearing Gara embroidered saris, about 1930s

## Sari Wearers

Endless creativity in styling saris — from everyday wearers through to fashion bloggers and influential public figures — is revealed through a range of platforms, including art photography and print media, showing that the future of the sari is bold, undaunted and defined by individual flair.

The imaginations of these wearers is both fuelled and documented by social media, where people of all ages across South Asia and beyond share their mix-and-match outfits. A vast online pool of images can be found by searching popular hashtags on platforms such as Instagram, including #sarilove, #sarifashion, #designersarees, #sareeindia, #sareedraping and #sareenotsorry.

Rotate page 90 degrees to read



1. **Meara Sharma**  
Photograph by India Hobson, 2019  
Courtesy of India Hobson / Vogue / Condé Nast
2. **Mithu Sen**  
Photograph by Abdullah Usman Khan, 2014  
Courtesy of Mithu Sen and Abdullah Usman Khan
3. **Kynat Salim**  
Photograph by Talat Huain, 2022  
Courtesy of The Saari Girl
4. **Rta Kapur Chishti**  
Photograph by Rema Chaudary, 2021  
Courtesy of Architectural Digest, Condé Nast, India
5. **Monika Correa**  
Photograph by Randhir Singh, 2022  
Courtesy of © Randhir Singh
6. **Ekta Rajani**  
Photograph by Rituparna Som, 2022  
Courtesy of Ekta Rajani
7. **Laila Tyabji**  
Photograph by Rema Chaudary, 2021  
Courtesy of Architectural Digest, Condé Nast, India
8. **Tazin Mashruba**  
Photograph by Navid Nowroz, 2021  
Courtesy of Tazin Mashruba
9. **Mina Malik**  
Photograph by Maliha Noorani, 2023  
Courtesy of Mina Malik
10. **Daniya Kanwal**  
Photograph by Belal Sadiq, 2022  
Courtesy of Daniya Kanwal

- 11. Arti Sandhu**  
Photograph by Arti Sandhu, 2022  
Courtesy of Arti Sandhu
- 12. Malika Verma**  
Photograph by Samir Rana, 2015  
Courtesy of @stylespy.in
- 13. Aparna Rao**  
Photograph by Sanjay Rohra, 2020  
Creative copyright © 2022 Aparna Rao
- 14. Koshy Brahmatmaj**  
Photograph by Abhinit Khanna, 2018  
Courtesy of Abhinit Khanna and Koshy Brahmatmaj
- 15. Diya Basu**  
Photograph by Priyanka Basu, 2021  
Courtesy of Diya Basu
- 16. Shimul Javeri Kadri**  
Photograph by Sana Javeri Kadri, 2018  
Courtesy of Sana Javeri Kadri
- 17. Naveli Choyal**  
Photograph by Manou, 2017  
Courtesy of Manou / Wearabout blog
- 18. Caroline Zeliang**  
Photograph by Manou, 2020  
Courtesy of Manou / Wearabout blog
- 19. Apurva Kulkarni**  
Photograph by Amruta Kulkarni, 2022  
Courtesy of Apurva Kulkarni
- 20. Shyama Sasidharan**  
Photograph by Pradeep Prabhakaran, 2020  
Courtesy of Shyama Sasidharan

- 20. Shyama Sasidharan**  
Photograph by Pradeep Prabhakaran, 2020  
Courtesy of Shyama Sasidharan
- 21. Nisha Seneviratne**  
Photograph by Asha Sen, 2021  
Sari by Tharshana  
Courtesy of Nisha Sceneviratne
- 22. Tanomi Yamamura**  
Photograph by Tanomi Yamamura, 2021  
Courtesy of Tanomi Yamamura
- 23. Tanaya Das**  
Photograph by Vincent Boyer, 2020  
Courtesy of @PleatsNPallu
- 24. Beenu Mishra**  
Photograph by Pulkit Mishra, 2020  
Courtesy of Pulkit Mishra
- 25. Sargam Sethi and Jasjot Kaur**  
Photograph by Rohini Lal, 2019  
Courtesy of Sargam Sethi
- 26. Ashwini Narayan**  
Photograph by Ms Ashwini Narayan, 2021  
Courtesy of @winnynarayan / Ms. Ashwini Narayan
- 27. Mamta Sharma Das**  
Photograph by Saurabh Dasgupta, 2019  
Courtesy of Mamta Sharma Das
- 28. Dhruv Dhody (they/them)**  
Photograph by Dhruv Dhody, 2022  
Courtesy of @CurryNGin. Sari from Suta
- 29. Sai Pimprakar**  
Photograph by Samiksha Agarwal  
Sari design by Lisa Hembram, 2022  
Courtesy of Samiksha Agarwal

- 30. Anima Raani Das**  
Photograph by Rishabh, 2020  
Courtesy of Rishabh
- 31. Archana Jain**  
Photograph by Samir Rana, 2015  
Courtesy of @stylespy.in

**> Continue left to the next plinth**

## PROTEST AND ACTIVISM

Saris can be powerful tools for protest and activism. In recent decades, the garment's association with female agency had waned, yet saris have a long history in female-led protest movements, which continues today. In the hands of these protesters, the sari becomes an important political symbol: a uniform that signifies a sense of collective purpose. Protest movements linked to the sari help draw attention to urgent issues, such as gender rights and ecological crises. The eye-catching saris worn by these protesters have created awareness in the mainstream media, helping to strengthen marginalised voices throughout India.

# The Gulabi Gang

Bright pink saris and bamboo sticks have become the symbols of the Gulabi Gang, a social justice group established in 2006 to oppose domestic violence in rural north India. Named after the Hindi word *gulabi*, meaning pink, the group now has hundreds of thousands of members. They take action against injustices affecting women, such as child marriage and sexual abuse, focusing particularly on those cases where there has been a lack of police response.

## **Pink sari owned by Sampat Pal Devi**

Designer unknown, 2006

Synthetic georgette

Worn with accompanying blouse, petticoat, and painted bamboo stick

Courtesy of Sampat Pal Devi



The Gulabi Gang, 2009

Photograph by Joerg Boethling / Alamy Stock Photo

# The Hargila Army

Can clothing help to save a bird from the brink of extinction? This striking sari is part of the remarkable conservation success story of the greater adjutant stork. By weaving stork motifs into saris, biologist Purnima Devi Barman and the Hargila Army activist group have transformed this threatened bird into a treasured local emblem.

The group's efforts have seen the population of storks in India increase eight-fold since the mid-2000s. Many group members now work as conservationists or are able to undertake fashion diplomas by gaining financial independence through making the stork saris.

## **Hargila Army's Assamese Mekhela Chador**

Sari belonging to Purnima Devi Barman

Woven by Sabita Das and Pranita Das, 2017

Assamese woven cotton

Worn with accompanying Assamese woven cotton blouse and newspaper-moulded headdress

Courtesy of Purnima Devi Barman



The Hargila Army, 2023

Photograph by Dipankar Das

## **Tamil Nadu farmer protests**

In 2017, farmers from Tamil Nadu in southern India began a long-lasting protest, calling for financial support after the worst drought in 140 years. One day during the protest, the farmers wore saris to represent the plight of women whose husbands had suffered or taken their own lives due to crop failures and financial stress. These symbolic saris highlighted the vital, often unrecognised role of women in the agricultural industry.

**Tamil Nadu farmers wear saris during protests in Jantar Mantar**

Photographs by Ravi Choudhary / Hindustan Times, 2017

Courtesy of © 2017 Hindustan Times

**> Continue behind on left hand wall**

## RECLAIMED

Fashion is one of the most polluting industries in the world. Driven by ever-changing trends and a constant desire for newness, the fashion industry produces around ten percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. It also creates significant waste: an estimated 92 million tonnes of clothing are thrown away every year.

Sari designers are responding to the urgent need for the fashion industry to rethink its systems. Their innovative approach is to reclaim, restore and re-weave used saris into new garments. Drawing on a philosophy inherent to Indian material culture, these designers show us that 'used' does not have to mean 'disposable', and that waste can be not only valuable but inspirational.

## Twice Loved Sari Dress

India has a huge ecosystem for trading second-hand saris. Working within this structure, designers Rashmi Varma and Malika Verma Kashyap launched Kumari in 2019 to transform used saris into 'tailored saris'. Techniques such as overdyeing and decorative embroidery are used for small repairs, before the sari is stitched into an easy-to-wear dress with an adaptable *pallu*.

### Twice Loved Sari Dress

Kumari, 2019

Repurposed silk with viscose lining

Courtesy of Kumari



Saroj Parmer, a second-hand sari dealer in New Delhi, who sold the pink sari displayed here to Kumari, 2019  
Photograph by Rashmi Varma

## **Upcycled Bandhani Sari**

Gather old saris. Sort, wash and iron them. Cut them into strips and hand-weave them together into new garments or upholstery fabric. This is the step-by-step textile recycling process created by Paiwand Studio designer Ashita Singhal. The closed-loop cycle eliminates the need to produce new fabric from virgin materials, while the range of colours inspires new designs, such as the striking orange and pink stripes of this sari.

### **Hand Woven Upcycled Bandhani Sari**

Paiwand Studio x Naina Jain, 2022

Bandhani silk georgette

Worn with accompanying silk hand-loom blouse and cotton poplin petticoat

### **Pile of textile scraps used to make the new textile**

Paiwand Studio, 2021

Silk

Courtesy of Paiwand Studio

## **Repurposed Patola sari**

This dress was once a rare type of sari called a Patola. Only a handful of master artisans in the Patan region of western India can make double ikat Patolas, a complex process involving tie-dyeing the yarns with the pattern prior to hand-weaving. Designer Amit Aggarwal sourced used Patolas, then employed intricate craft techniques and new materials to highlight the craftsmanship behind the original sari.

### **The Seamless Saree**

Amit Aggarwal, 2017

Upcycled Patola saris sourced from the Patan region of Gujarat and polymers

Courtesy of Amit Aggarwal

**> Continue right. Please note the subsection panel is on the wall to the right**

## MOVEMENT

Scaling a rugged rock face or sprinting across a cricket pitch: these may not be the typical activities you imagine someone carrying out while wearing a sari. Yet across India saris are worn while performing many activities, from farming and manual construction to complex dance moves and even riding a bicycle.

Drawing on these realities and the inherent strength of the sari textile, athletes today are donning saris for high-performance feats. Designers are playing with the aesthetics of leisure and streetwear, and brands are promoting their saris with active imagery and sports partnerships. In doing so, they are transporting the dynamism of the sari out of a high-fashion context to reframe it as something active and fun, able to be worn in casual ways.

## **Saris on the cricket pitch**

Designer Masaba Gupta and fashion brand Ekaya aimed to defy sari stereotypes when they playfully launched their new Benarasi collection with photographs of women playing cricket. Threaded with gold and silver, the opulent Benarasi style is often associated with formality. The designers deliberately overturned this by showing the sari in full movement. Humorous captions and hashtags such as **#PleatsOnThePitch** help to reshape popular preconceptions.

### **Hand-woven Mustard Silk Sari**

Ekaya x Masaba, 2018

Silk georgette and cherry blossom motifs

Worn with accompanying kadwa woven silk blouse

Courtesy of Ekaya Banaras



Ekaya x Masaba campaign image, 2019  
Photograph by Bikramjit Bose

## **Athleisure**

This sari takes its visual cues from the racer-stripe detailing often found on sportswear. The pared-back colour-blocked palette and casual styling of this sari point towards more relaxed, comfortable modes of wearing. Released in 2013, the design also illustrates how the sari has responded to the growing global trend for athleisure wear.

### **Racer Stripe Sari**

HUEMN, 2014

Satin silk

Worn with sleeveless crop top and PUMA sneakers

Courtesy of HUEMN

## **Skateboarding sari-wearer**

Skateboarding has always been seen as countercultural. Today, women and girls are building on this legacy by skateboarding in saris, expressing their freedom from outdated gender roles as well as their incredible skill. Oorbee Roy, known as 'Aunty Skates', learned to skateboard in her 40s. She wore this purple sari, chosen for its light fabric, in an inspiring video that went viral in 2021.

### **Sari worn by Oorbee Roy (aka Aunty Skates)**

Unknown designer, about 2015

Polyester chiffon

Worn with Vans shoes, lululemon yoga leggings, Old Navy camisole and Pro-Tec helmet

### **Skateboard**

Welcome skateboard with Darkroom grip tape, about 2019

Courtesy of Oorbee Roy



Oorbee Roy, 2021

Photograph by Chantal Garcia

Courtesy of Chantal Garcia

## **Between comfort and fear**

For International Women's Day 2021, fashion brand Satya Paul put a spotlight on four sportswomen wearing the sari. Their advertising campaign 'Break into the New' used athletes such as mountain climber Prerna Dangi to demonstrate that there are no rules – and no limits – to where and how the sari can be worn. Dangi explains, 'when I am in a state of flow, movement becomes effortless and the line between comfort and fear blurs'.

### **Plumage Sari**

Satya Paul, 2021

Printed silk

Courtesy of Satya Paul



Prerna Dangi climbing in a sari, campaign film stills, 2022  
Photographed by Irene Yee  
Courtesy of Irene Yee and Prerna Dangi  
Wardrobe by Satya Paul

**> Continue right to screens on wall**

## Hula hoop artist

In 2020, dancer and hula-hoop artist Eshna Kutty posted a video of herself wearing an orange sari, sports bra and jeans, hoop dancing to the Bollywood song 'Genda Phool'. The video went viral, starting an online #sareeflow movement that prompted sari designers to consider the millennial market for casual saris. The video here shows Kutty wearing brands such as Abraham & Thakore, Soham Dave, Urvashi Kaur and Rimzim Dadu.

### **Fashion x Dance — Eshna Kutty: Flow**

Tata CLiQ Luxury, 2021

Duration: 3 minutes 38 seconds

Courtesy of Tata CLiQ Luxury. Presented during

The Luxe Life: Edition 1 by Tata CLiQ Luxury

## **Self-empowered sari skaters**

The music video for the Wild Beasts' song 'Alpha Female' follows India's first pro-skater, Atita Verghese, and the skate collectives Girl Skate India and the Holystoked Skate Crew, as they glide through the streets of Mumbai in saris. Here, the self-empowering skate scene of the city fuses seamlessly with the dynamic movement of the sari.

### **'Alpha Female' music video by Wild Beasts**

Directed by Sasha Rainbow, 2017

Produced by Rosalind Croad and Felix Jude West

Featuring Atita Verghese, Girl Skate India, the Holystoked Skate Crew

Duration: 3 minutes 42 seconds

Courtesy of Domino Recording Co. Ltd

**> Enter next room**

Room 3

NEW MATERIALS  
SERIES

# NEW MATERIALITIES

Look closer at the sari. Beneath its structure, drape and styling, the sari is simply a textile. Yet within this simplicity lies a rich world of expression. The sari's weave, texture, colour and surface are a canvas for the incredible creativity of contemporary Indian designers, craftspeople and designer-artisans. Their work often draws on India's craft histories to inform new techniques.

Knowledge of textile-making passed down through generations can be seen in intricate processes, from silks hand-woven in Kanchipuram to stainless-steel sculpting in New Delhi. Natural materials, such as rain-fed organic cotton and indigo dye, are being revived and cultivated from seed to cloth.

These emergent methods of producing textiles in India are both innovative and more sustainable, reflecting an appreciation for fine craft that is also kinder to our planet.

**> Continue right and move clockwise around room**

## STRUCTURE

The weaving of saris begins with the warp and weft: the two fundamental elements of any woven fabric. The weft comprises yarns that are woven crosswise through the warp yarns, which are stretched across the loom.

Structural qualities derive from the choice of yarn, the weaving technique and applications to the textile once it has been woven. Ingrained textures give depth and density to the drape of the sari. Distinct regional weaving styles, such as Benarasi or Kanjeevaram, are also reimagined through subtle changes to the loom and aesthetic vocabulary.

# Taanbaan

*Khadi* is cloth crafted from hand-spun and hand-woven cotton. It was promoted by Mahatma Gandhi during India's independence movement, in opposition to the British monopoly on textile-production in India. Today, *khadi* continues to reflect ideals of self-reliance and national identity. This sari by Taanbaan employs rain-fed indigenous cotton. The entire process — seeding, carding, spinning, dyeing and weaving — is performed by hand.

## 1. Ganga Jamuna Sari

Taanbaan, 2022

Designed by Rta Kapur Chishti, created

by cotton cultivator D Laxminarayan,

yarn spinner D Laxmi, yarn dyer G Veerbhadra and master weaver G

Appa Rao

Organic hand-woven cotton and zari

Made in Andhra Pradesh

Courtesy of Design Museum Collection

## 2. Hand-spun cotton yarn used to weave khadi

Khamir, 2022

Cotton

Made in Kutch, Gujarat

Courtesy of The Design Museum

### 3. *Peti Charkha* (spinning wheel)

Manufactured by Gandhi Ashram, 2020

Plywood, Sheesham wood, metal

Made in Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Courtesy of The Design Museum



Hand-spun cotton on the loom, 2020

Photographs by Prarthna Singh

Courtesy of Prarthna Singh

# Abraham & Thakore

The minimal aesthetic of *khadi* is often romanticised for its purity and austerity. Abraham & Thakore subvert this idea through the glamour and playfulness of their designs. Their Gold Khadi Sari, made from coarse *khadi* cotton, is machine-laminated with gold foil, and later enzyme-washed to create an aged look, resembling oxidised metal. The sari embodies an important aspect of the design duo's work, which both upholds and reinvents India's textile traditions.

## 4. **Gold Khadi Sari**

Abraham & Thakore, 2016

Designed by David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore,  
created by Rajasthan Khadi and Village Industries Board,  
and JMD Textiles

Hand-woven cotton and foil

Made in Noida, Uttar Pradesh

## 5. **Gold foil laminated swatch**

Abraham & Thakore, 2016

Designed by David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore,  
created by Rajasthan Khadi and Village Industries Board,  
and JMD Textiles

Hand-woven cotton and foil

Made in Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Courtesy of Abraham & Thakore

## Weavers Studio Resource Centre

This unique sari is a woven collage with an elegant play of light and shadow. Inspired by their in-house 'waste to wealth' collections, Weavers Studio Resource Centre crafted the sari using a Korean patchwork technique called *pojagi*. The erratic patchwork design is rendered using an extra weft, with threads inserted by hand, line by line. This is testament to the technical finesse and patience of the weaver, who is more accustomed to weaving the repeat patterns of floral or geometric motifs that are common to this hand-woven *jamdani* sari style.

### 6. Pojagi Jamdani Sari

Weavers Studio Resource Centre, 2022

Designed by Darshan Shah,

created by master weaver Krishna Biswas

Hand-woven cotton khadi

Made in West Bengal

Courtesy of Weavers Studio Resource Centre

# Hemang Agrawal

Benares, in northern India, is one of India's historic textile centres. It is known for richly brocaded silk saris, patterned with floral and mango-shaped *butah* motifs. While many producers continue to maintain and revive these signature textiles, designer Hemang Agrawal embraces a philosophy of 'Un-Revive' (his own term) to untether Benarasi saris from their stylistic associations. The Shyam Chandra Sari is composed of waxing and waning moons, inspired by the twelve elements of the universe, capturing the idea of harmony and tranquillity in constant motion.

## 7. **Jacquard punch cards**

Hemang Agrawal, 2020  
Hand-punched cardboard

## 8. **Shyam Chandra Sari**

Hemang Agrawal, 2020  
Designed by Hemang Agrawal, created  
by weavers Lakshman and Rakesh  
Hand-woven rayon and zari  
Made in Benares, Uttar Pradesh

## 9. **Pattern draft for weaving**

Hemang Agrawal, 2020  
Paper

Courtesy of Hemang Agrawal

## Advaya, House of Angadi

Ornate and opulent, Kanjeevaram–style saris often form part of a bride’s trousseau. Considered heirloom pieces, they are woven in the Kanchipuram region of south India. This resplendent bridal sari was hand-woven with pure gold *zari* yarn and silk to create a drape that looks like molten metal. The brocade technique of adding in extra weft yarn allows for a more complex pattern, as seen in the auspicious deer motif here. The House of Angadi’s weaving legacy goes back 600 years, and delicately balances tradition with innovation.

### 10. Spotted Deer Sari

Advaya, House of Angadi, 2020

Designed by KR Radharaman,  
created by unknown craftsperson

Hand-woven silk and zari

Made in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu

### 11. Zari hanks

Advaya, House of Angadi, 2020

Gold-plated silver on cotton yarn

Made in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu

Courtesy of Advaya, House of Angadi

## Unknown Fields

The fast-fashion industry is a leading contributor to the current global environmental crisis and exploitative working conditions. The consequences of this industry continue to disrupt fragile artisanal practices. Design studio Unknown Fields uncovers industrial ecologies embedded in global systems. *Unraveled* features a textile worker exploring disparate garment-manufacturing sites throughout India and Bangladesh. The worker wears a long textile, in the style of a sari in silk and *zari*, hand-woven by a master weaver in Benares.

### 12. **Unraveled: A Procession Through the Hidden Landscapes of Fast Fashion**

Unknown Fields, 2017

Directed by Unknown Fields and Tushar Prakash

Produced by Unknown Fields, Amondo Films and CCCB

Duration: 7 minutes 41 seconds

Courtesy of Unknown Fields

> **Continue right**

## SURFACE

Tactile and visual, the surface of the sari is a fertile site for creativity. Hand-embroidery, hand-dyeing, hand-weaving and machine-sewing are all used to build up intricate surfaces that bring three-dimensionality to flat cloth. The interplay of different yarns, textures, colours, sheen, opacity and translucency provides the sari with exquisite details.

Stainless steel is found everywhere in India, yet it can be elevated to a gleaming sheen on the fabric of a sari. Tonal *chikankari* embroidery tells a story through texture. Layers of natural dyeing and different yarns hand-woven together create surfaces inspired by nature. As with weaving and colouring, the creation of textile surfaces in India is connected to artisanal practice, which is part of a continuum of change.

# Raw Mango

*Chikankari* embroidery involves delicate and minute hand-stitches in white thread. A repertoire of 36 stitches is used to create an evocative surface of pattern, light and shadow. In this dream-like sari, Raw Mango proposes a new visual language for *chikankari*, with angels and clouds floating across translucent hand-woven cotton. Many of the stitches seen here — including *hul*, *tepchi*, *hathkati*, *daraz* and *jali* — are now rare, due to fading patronage for such fine embroidery.

## 1. Mahejabi Chikankari Sari

Raw Mango, 2017

Designed by Sanjay Garg, created by Runa Banerjee and SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Organisation) Lucknow

Hand-woven cotton

Made in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, and Chanderi, Madhya Pradesh

Courtesy of Raw Mango

# Rimzim Dadu

Dadu, known as a 'progressive texturist', sculpts hair-thin stainless-steel wires into a fluid surface evoking molten gold. The wires are stitched together using a sewing machine, forming the *pallu* and bodice of her pre-stitched sari. The engineered drape is structured yet malleable, which comfortably takes shape on the body. In addition to steel, Dadu uses unlikely materials such as silicone, paper and acrylic throughout her collections, which often take years to develop.

## 2. Gold Sculpted Wave Steel Sari

**Rimzim Dadu, 2018**

Designed by Rimzim Dadu,  
created by Rajesh Bharadwaj, Vinod Kumar,  
Jamal Mohammad, Chandan and Jai Singh  
Silk and steel wire

Worn with accompanying steel earrings,  
embroidered with nylon, blouse, and satin petticoat

Made in New Delhi, Delhi

Courtesy of Rimzim Dadu

## 3. Fashion x Technology – Rimzim Dadu: Steel

Tata CLiQ Luxury, 2021

Duration: 10 minutes 10 seconds

Courtesy of Tata CLiQ Luxury

Presented during The Luxe Life:

Edition 1 by Tata CLiQ Luxury

# Anavila

Seaweed shimmering in the light comes to mind when looking at the luxurious surface of Anavila's sari. Designer Anavila Misra investigates multiple materials and techniques, working with craft communities across India to combine natural dyes with hand-woven linen and metallic yarns. Linen, a difficult yarn to hand-weave due to its tendency to break, lends itself to a structured yet organic surface, making it perfect for the Indian climate.

## 4. Seaweed Zari Sari

Anavila, 2019

Designed by Anavila Misra,  
created by master weaver Rakhal Sarkar,  
dyed by Hasam Sumar Khatri

Hand-woven linen and zari

Made in Phulia, West Bengal, and Bhuj, Gujarat

## 5. Zari spools

Anavila, 2019

Gold-plated silver and copper on cotton yarn,  
silver-plated copper on cotton yarn

Made in Benares, Uttar Pradesh, and Surat, Gujarat

Courtesy of Anavila

> **Continue right**

# COLOUR

Colour has always been central to Indian design. Behind this lies process, science, culture and history. The mastery of Indian craftspeople in extracting, producing and transforming colours has long been an art form — allowing endlessly creative uses of colour in textile design, from block-printed patterns to tie-dyeing. The contemporary expressions shown in this exhibition are rendered in an organic colour palette, rooted in an Indian aesthetic.

Producing colour increasingly reflects more sustainable and environmentally conscious ways of working. Indigo — a natural blue dye with a complex colonial history — is now witnessing a slow fashion revival. Atmospheric pollution in the form of carbon emissions has also been used for creating dyes.

# Sufiyan Ismail Khatri

*Ajrakh* is an ancient method of hand block-printing that traditionally comprises motifs based on Islamic geometry. Designer–artisan Sufiyan Ismail Khatri — a ninth-generation block-printer — reinterprets the language of *ajrakh* through contemporary design. The checked silk sari shown here has been designed using 15 hand-carved wood blocks. It then underwent a complex process of printing and dyeing using natural pigments and natural resists, which prevent colours from penetrating certain sections of the cloth.

## 1. **Ajrakh hand block-print sari**

Sufiyan Ismail Khatri, 2015

Designed by Sufiyan Ismail Khatri, created by printers Asraf Khatri, Rafiq Khatri and Husain Kaka

Silk, indigo dye, gum arabic, lime, clay, alum, fermented scrap-iron and alizarin pigment

Made in Ajrakhpur, Kutch, Gujarat

## 2. **Block-print process samples**

Sufiyan Ismail Khatri, 2022

Designed by Sufiyan Ismail Khatri, created by printers

Asraf Khatri, Rafiq Khatri and Husain Kaka

Silk, gum arabic, lime, clay and alum

Made in Ajrakhpur, Kutch, Gujarat

### **3. Wood printing blocks**

Sufiyan Ismail Khatri, 2015

Designed by Sufiyan Ismail Khatri,  
created by carver Mukesh Prajapati

Wood

Made in Petaphur, Gujarat

Courtesy of Sufiyan Ismail Khatri

# VegNonVeg

The Ajrakh Camo Sari by streetwear brand VegNonVeg was printed by Sufiyan Ismail Khatri. It combines camouflage patterns with traditional *ajrakh* motifs on a sporty jersey sari, to connect a global streetwear audience with craft. *Ajrakh* printing is generally found on woven cotton and silks, so this knit jersey — which stretches — required extensive experimentation, and was produced through an intensive 16-step process.

## 4. **Ajrakh Camo Sari**

VegNonVeg, 2022

Designed by Emilia Bergmans, created by block-printer Sufiyan Ismail Khatri

Viscose, Lycra, gum arabic, lime, alum,

Tamarix flower and fermented scrap-iron

Made in Ajrakhpur, Kutch, Gujarat

## 5. **The Making of the VegNonVeg Ajrakh Camo Sari**

Produced by VegNonVeg, 2022

Directed by Subham Bhakat

Duration: 2 minutes 25 seconds

Courtesy of VegNonVeg

# Abraham & Thakore

Ikat is a complex form of resist-dyeing, creating patterns by tying bundles of pre-woven yarn with a tight binding that 'resists' the dye. This leaf sari is a single ikat: the weft yarns are hand-tied and pre-dyed with the pattern. The sari's bold foliage motif, inspired by 19th-century British botanical etchings, was technically difficult due to its scale and irregular shape. The outcome reflects Abraham & Thakore's ongoing explorations in design and craft.

## 6. Ikat Sari

Abraham & Thakore, 2023

Designed by David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore, created by master weaver Ganjam Govardhan

Hand-woven silk with single ikat tie-dye from chemical dyes

Made in Puttapaka, Andhra Pradesh

## 7. Pre-dyed yarns for Ikat Sari

Abraham & Thakore, 2023

Designed by David Abraham, Rakesh Thakore, created by master weaver Ganjam Govardhan

Silk and chemical dyes

Made in Puttapaka, Andhra Pradesh

## **8. Pattern drawing for Ikat Sari**

Abraham & Thakore, 2023

Designed by David Abraham and Rakesh Thakore

Paper

Made in Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Courtesy of Abraham & Thakore

## SIDR Craft

One method of resist-dyeing, which blocks the dye from covering the entire cloth, is *bandhani* tie-dyeing. Pinching and tying the cloth before dyeing produces fine circular dots that form the desired motif. The Khatri brothers – descendants from a line of *bandhani* artisans in Gujarat – are known for propelling *bandhani* in new directions. This abstract floral pattern was made entirely by hand, and yet evokes a digital pixelation. The sari was intentionally left unironed after being untied.

### 9. **Bandhani Sari**

SIDR Craft, 2022

Designed by Jabbar Khatri and Abdullah Khatri,  
created by unknown craftsperson

Hand-woven mulberry silk, zari and chemical dyes

Made in Bhuj, Gujarat

### 10. **Bandhani process sample**

SIDR Craft, 2022

Designed by Jabbar Khatri and Abdullah Khatri,  
created by unknown craftsperson

Hand-woven mulberry silk, zari and chemical dyes

Made in Bhuj, Gujarat

Courtesy of SIDR Craft

# Nila House

Art and science — almost alchemy and magic — are used to create this extraordinary colour: indigo or *neel*. To extract the dye, the indigo plant is grown, harvested and fermented through a complex process. The yarn in this sari has been dyed three times to give its depth of colour. The dye and the sari were both commissioned by Nila House, a non-profit organisation reviving natural indigo and sustainable livelihoods by collaborating with farmers, craftspeople and designers.

## 11. I Heart Nila

Unknown designer, 2021

Hand-woven cotton and natural indigo dye

Made in Phulia, West Bengal

## 12. Indigo spools in three shades

Nila House, Lady Bamford Foundation, 2021

Indigo-dyed hand-spun cotton

Made in Phulia, West Bengal

## 13. Indigo dye cakes

Nila House, Lady Bamford Foundation, 2022

Natural indigo

Made in Phulia, West Bengal

Courtesy of Nila House



Indigo dye vat, 2020

Photograph by Prarthna Singh

Courtesy of Prarthna Singh

# AKAARO

Indian cities have the highest levels of air pollution in the world. New Delhi-based designer Gaurav J Gupta felt an urgent need to address this pervasive pollution in his engineered collections. Gupta collaborated with Graviky Labs, the creators of Air-Ink — a pen ink that is made from recycled airborne black carbon or soot, known as PM2.5 — to develop a textile dye. AKAARO's Pollution Sari, yarn-dyed and hand-woven, is literally imbued with the air of New Delhi.

## 14. **Pollution Sari**

AKAARO, 2017

Designed by Gaurav J Gupta, created by weaver and dyer Gopal Basak

Hand-woven cotton, stainless steel and distilled PM2.5

Made in New Delhi, Delhi

Courtesy of AKAARO

## 15. **Air-Ink**

Graviky Labs, 2016

Ink and plastic

Courtesy of Design Museum Collection

## 16. **National Air Quality Standards interactive map**

World Health Organization (WHO), 2023

Courtesy of Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute

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