

# Clothing : A social history



*"The emergence of the modern world is marked by dramatic changes in clothing. In this chapter, we will look at some of the histories of clothing in the modern period, that is in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."*

## 21.1 Introduction

After the eighteenth century, the colonisation of most of the world by Europe, the spread of democratic ideals and the growth of an industrial society, completely changed the ways in which people thought about dress and its meanings. People could use styles and materials that were drawn from other cultures and locations, and western dress styles for men were adopted worldwide

## 21.2 Sumptuary laws and social hierarchy

In medieval Europe, dress codes were sometimes imposed upon members of different layers of society through actual laws which were spelt out in some detail. From about 1294 to the time of the French Revolution in 1789, the people of France were expected to strictly follow what were known as 'sumptuary laws.' The laws tried to control the behaviour of those considered social inferiors, preventing them from wearing certain clothes, consuming certain foods and beverages (usually this referred to alcohol) and hunting game in certain areas. In medieval France, the items of clothing a person could purchase per year was regulated, not only by income but also by social rank. The material to be used for clothing was also legally prescribed. Only royalty could wear expensive materials like ermine and fur, or silk, velvet and brocade.

From now on, both men and women began wearing clothing that was loose and comfortable. The colours of France - blue, white and red - became popular as they were a sign of the patriotic citizen. Other political symbols too became a part of dress: the red cap of liberty, long trousers and the revolutionary cockade pinned on to a hat. The simplicity of clothing was meant to express the idea of equality.



Fig.1 An upper-class couple in eighteenth-century England. Painting by the English artist Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788)



Fig.2 An aristocratic couple on the eve of the French Revolution.



Notice the sumptuous clothing, the elaborate headgear, and the lace edgings on the dress the lady is wearing. She also has a corset inside the dress. This was meant to confine and shape her waist so that she appeared narrow waisted. The nobleman, as was the custom of the time, is wearing a long soldier's coat, knee breeches, silk stockings and high heeled shoes. Both of them have elaborate wigs and both have their faces painted a delicate shade of pink, for the display of natural skin was considered uncultured.



Fig.3 A sans-culottes family, 1793.

## 21.3 Clothing and notions of beauty

The end of sumptuary laws did not mean that everyone in European societies could now dress in the same way. The French Revolution had raised the question of equality and ended aristocratic privileges, as well as the laws that maintained those privileges. Styles of clothing also emphasised differences between men and women. Women in Victorian England were groomed from childhood to be docile and dutiful, submissive and obedient. The ideal woman was one who could bear pain and suffering. While men were expected to be serious, strong, independent and aggressive, women were seen as frivolous, delicate, passive and docile. Norms of clothing reflected these ideals. From childhood, girls were tightly laced up and dressed in stays. The effort was to restrict the growth of their bodies, contain them within small moulds. When slightly older, girls had to wear tight fitting corsets.

### (a) How did women react to these norms?

Many women believed in the ideals of womanhood. The ideals were in the air they breathed, the literature they read, the education they had received at school and at home. From childhood they grew up to believe that having a small waist was a womanly duty. Suffering pain was essential to being a woman. To be seen as attractive, to be womanly, they had to wear the corset. But not everyone accepted these values. As the suffrage movement developed, many began campaigning for dress reform. Women's magazines described how tight dresses and corsets caused deformities and illness among young girls. Such clothing restricted body growth and hampered blood circulation. Muscles remained underdeveloped and the spines got bent. Doctors reported that many women were regularly complaining of acute weakness, felt languid, and fainted frequently. Corsets then became necessary to hold up the weakened spine.

In America, Traditional feminine clothes were criticised on a variety of grounds. Long skirts, it was said, swept the grounds and collected filth and dirt. This caused illness. The skirts were voluminous and difficult to handle. They hampered movement and prevented women from working and earning.

In the 1870s, the National Woman Suffrage Association headed by Mrs Stanton, and the American Woman Suffrage Association dominated by Lucy Stone both campaigned for dress reform. The argument was: simplify dress, shorten skirts, and abandon corsets. On both sides of the Atlantic, there was now a movement for rational dress reform.

The reformers did not immediately succeed in changing social values. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, change was clearly in the air. Ideals of beauty and styles of clothing were both transformed under a variety of pressures. People began accepting the ideas of reformers they had earlier ridiculed.

## CHECK YOUR LEARNING 21.1

1. "The wealthy Parsis of Western India were among the first to adopt Western-style clothing. Baggy trousers and the phenta (or hat) were added to long collarless coats, with boots and a walking stick to complete the look of the gentleman. To some, Western clothes were a sign of modernity and progress. Western-style clothing was also especially attractive to groups of Dalit converts to Christianity who now found it liberating".

Read the above passage and answer the following questions

- (i) Who are first to adopt Western style of clothing in India ?
- (ii) Describe the costumes adopted by Indians by the Western impact.
- (iii) What lesson/values you have learnt from this passage ?

### 21.4 New times

#### (a) New materials

Before the seventeenth century, most ordinary women in Britain possessed very few clothes made of flax, linen or wool, which were difficult to clean. After 1600, trade with India brought cheap, beautiful and easy-to-maintain Indian chintzes within the reach of many Europeans who could now increase the size of their wardrobes.

Then, during the Industrial Revolution, in the nineteenth century, Britain began the mass manufacture of cotton textiles which it exported to many parts of the world, including India.

#### (b) The war

Changes in women's clothing came about as a result of the two World wars. Clothes got shorter during the First World War (1914-1918) out of practical necessity. By 1917, over 700,000 women in Britain were employed in ammunition factories. They wore a working uniform of blouse and trousers with accessories such as scarves, which was later replaced by khaki overalls and caps.

Thus clothes became plainer and simpler. Skirts became shorter. Soon trousers became a vital part of Western women's clothing, giving them greater freedom of movement. Most important, women took to cutting their hair short for convenience. By the twentieth century, Gymnastics and games entered the school curriculum for women. As women took to sports, they had to wear clothes that did not hamper movement. When they went out to work they needed clothes that were comfortable and convenient. So we see that the history of clothing is linked to the larger history of society.

### 21.5 Transformations in Colonial India

During the colonial period there were significant changes in male and female clothing in India. On the one hand this was a consequence of the influence of Western dress forms and missionary activity; on the other it was due to the effort by Indians to fashion clothing styles that embodied an indigenous tradition and culture.

When western-style clothing came into India in the nineteenth century, Indians reacted in three different ways:



Fig.4 Changes in clothing in the early twentieth century.

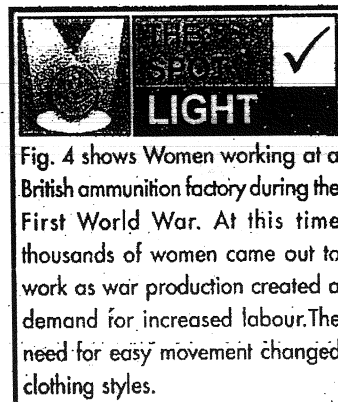


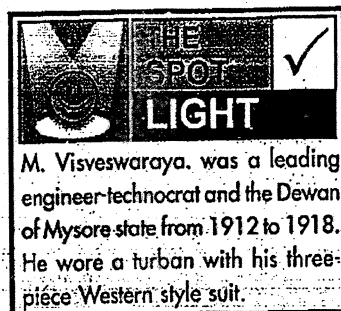
Fig. 4 shows Women working at a British ammunition factory during the First World War. At this time thousands of women came out to work as war production created a demand for increased labour. The need for easy movement changed clothing styles.



Fig.5 Parsis in Bombay, 1863.



Fig.6 Sir M. Visveswaraya.



(a) Many, especially men, began incorporating some elements of western-style clothing in their dress. The wealthy Parsis of western India were among the first to adapt Western-style clothing. Baggy trousers and the phenta (or hat) were added to long collarless coats, with boots and a walking stick to complete the look of the gentleman

(b) Some men resolved this dilemma by wearing Western clothes without giving up their Indian ones. Many Bengali bureaucrats in the late nineteenth century began stocking western-style clothes for work outside the home and changed into more comfortable Indian clothes at home.

Still others tried a slightly different solution to the same dilemma. They attempted to combine Western and Indian forms of dressing.

#### (a) Caste Conflict and Dress Change

In May 1822, women of the Shanar caste were attacked by Nairs in public places in the southern princely state of Travancore, for wearing a cloth across their upper bodies. The Shanars (later known as Nadars), many of whom were considered a 'subordinate caste' and so were generally prohibited from using umbrellas and wearing shoes or golden ornaments. Men and women were also expected to follow the local custom of never covering their upper bodies before the dominant castes. At first, the Government of Travancore issued a proclamation in 1829 ordering Shanar women 'to abstain in future from covering the upper parts of the body.' But this did not prevent Shanar Christian women, and even Shanar Hindus, from adopting the blouse and upper cloth. The abolition of slavery in Travancore in 1855 led to even more frustration among the dominant castes who felt they were losing control. In October 1859, riots broke out as Shanar women were attacked in the marketplace and stripped off their upper clothes. Houses were looted and chapels burned. Finally, the government issued another proclamation permitting Shanar women, whether Christian or Hindu, to wear a jacket, or cover their upper bodies 'in any manner whatever, but not like the women of high caste'.

#### (b) British Rule and Dress Codes

(i) Styles of clothing in British India changed through such conflicts. When European traders first began frequenting India, they were distinguished from the Indian 'turban wearers' as the 'hat wearers.' These two headgears not only looked different, they also signified different things. The turban in India was not just for protection from the heat but was a sign of respectability, and could not be removed at will. In the Western tradition, the hat had to be removed before social superiors as a sign of respect. This cultural difference created misunderstanding. The British were often offended if Indians did not take off their turban when they met colonial officials. Many Indians on the other hand wore the turban to consciously assert their regional or national identity.

(ii) Another such conflict related to the wearing of shoes. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was customary for British officials to follow Indian etiquette and remove their footwear in the courts of ruling kings or chiefs. Some British officials also wore Indian clothes. But in 1830,

Europeans were forbidden from wearing Indian clothes at official functions, so that the cultural identity of the white masters was not undermined.

- (iii) In 1862, there was a famous case of defiance of the 'shoe respect' rule in a Surat courtroom. Manockjee Cowasjee Entee, an assessor in the Surat Fouzdaree Adalat, refused to take off his shoes in the court of the sessions judge. The judge insisted that he take off his shoes as that was the Indian way of showing respect to superiors. But Manockjee remained adamant. He was barred entry into the courtroom and he sent a letter of protest to the governor of Bombay.
- (iv) The British insisted that since Indians took off their shoes when they entered a sacred place or home, they should do so when they entered the courtroom. In the controversy that followed, Indians urged that taking off shoes in sacred places and at home was linked to two different questions. One: there was the problem of dirt and filth. Shoes collected the dirt on the road. This dirt could not be allowed into spaces that were clean, particularly when people in Indian homes sat on the ground. Second, leather shoes and the filth that stuck under it were seen as polluting. But public buildings like the courtroom were different from home. But it took many years before shoes were permitted into the courtroom.

### CHECK YOUR ANSWERS 21.1

1. (i) Wealthy Parsis of Western India were among the first to adopt Western-style clothing.
- (ii) Baggy trousers and the phenta (or hat) were added to long collarless coats, with boots and a walking stick to complete the look of the gentlemen.
- (iii) Impact of westernisation on India dressing style is found here.

### 21.6 Designing the national dress

Self-conscious experiments with dress engaged men and women of the upper classes and castes in many parts of India. The Tagore family of Bengal experimented, beginning in the 1870s, with designs for a national dress for both men and women in India. Rabindranath Tagore suggested that instead of combining Indian and European dress, India's national dress should combine elements of Hindu and Muslim dress. Thus the chapkan (a long buttoned coat) was considered the most suitable dress for men. There were also attempts to develop a dress style that would draw on the tradition of different regions. In the late 1870s, Jnanadanandini Devi, wife of Satyendranath Tagore, the first Indian member of the ICS, returned from

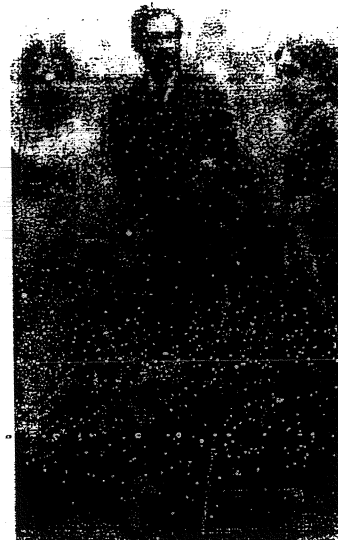


Fig. 7 Jnanadanandini Tagore (on the left) with her husband Satyendranath Tagore and other family members. She is wearing a Brahminika sari with a blouse modelled on a Western gown.



Fig.8 Sarala daughter of RC Dutt. Note the Parsi-bordered sari with the high collared and sleeved velvet blouse showing how clothing styles flowed across regions and cultures.



Fig.9 Mahatma Gandhi with Kasturba

Bombay to Calcutta. She adopted the Parsi style of wearing the sari pinned to the left shoulder with a brooch, and worn with a blouse and shoes. This was quickly adopted by Brahmo Samaji women and came to be known as the Brahmi sari. This style gained acceptance before long among Maharashtrian and Uttar Pradesh Brahmos, as well as non-Brahmos.

However, these attempts at devising a pan-Indian style did not fully succeed. Women of Gujarat, Kodagu, Kerala and Assam continue to wear different types of sari.

#### (a) The Swadeshi Movement

The Industrial Revolution in Britain, which mechanised spinning and weaving and greatly increased the demand for raw materials such as cotton and indigo, changed India's status in the world economy. Political control of India helped the British in two ways: Indian peasants could be forced to grow crops such as indigo, and cheap British manufacture easily replaced coarser Indian one. Large numbers of Indian weavers and spinners were left without work, and important textile weaving centres such as Murshidabad, Machilipatnam and Surat declined as demand fell. Yet by the middle of the twentieth century, large numbers of people began boycotting British or mill-made cloth and adopting khadi, even though it was coarser, more expensive and difficult to obtain. How did this change come about? In 1905, Lord Curzon decided to partition Bengal to control the growing opposition to British rule. The Swadeshi movement developed in reaction to this measure. People were urged to boycott British goods of all kinds and start their own industries for the manufacture of goods such as matchboxes and cigarettes. Mass protests followed, with people vowing to cleanse themselves of colonial rule. The use of khadi was made a patriotic duty. Women were urged to throw away their silks and glass bangles and wear simple shell bangles. After 15 years, many among the upper classes also returned to wearing European dress. Though many people rallied to the cause of nationalism at this time, it was almost impossible to compete with cheap British goods that had flooded the market. Despite its limitations, the experiment with Swadeshi gave Mahatma Gandhi important ideas about using cloth as a symbolic weapon against British rule.

#### (b) Mahatma Gandhi's experiments with clothing

Mahatma Gandhi's experiments with clothing sum up the changing attitude to dress in the Indian subcontinent. As a boy from a Gujarati Bania family, he usually wore a shirt with a dhoti or pyjama, and sometimes a coat. When he went to London to study law as a boy of 19 in 1888, he cut off the tuft on his head and dressed in a Western suit so that he would not be laughed at. On his return, he continued to wear Western suits, topped with a turban. As a lawyer in Johannesburg, South Africa in the 1890s, he still wore Western clothes. Soon he decided that dressing 'unsuitably' was a more powerful political statement. In Durban in 1913, Gandhi first appeared

in a lungi and kurta with his head shaved as a sign of mourning to protest against the shooting of Indian coal miners. On his return to India in 1915, he decided to dress like a Kathiawadi peasant. Only in 1921 did he adopt the short dhoti, the form of dress he wore until his death.

He wore the short dhoti without a shirt when he went to England for the Round Table Conference in 1931. He refused to compromise and wore it even before King George V at Buckingham Palace.

(c) **Not all could wear khadi**

- Nationalists such as Motilal Nehru, a successful barrister from Allahabad, gave up his expensive Western-style suits and adopted the Indian dhoti and kurta. But these were not made of coarse cloth.
- Those who had been deprived by caste norms for centuries were attracted to Western dress styles. Therefore, unlike Mahatma Gandhi, other nationalists such as Babasaheb Ambedkar never gave up the Western-style suit. Many Dalits began in the early 1910s to wear three-piece suits, and shoes and socks on all public occasions, as a political statement of self-respect.
- Many women, like Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Nehru, wore coloured saris with designs, instead of coarse, white homespun.

**Conclusion**

Changes in styles of clothing are thus linked up with shifts in cultural tastes and notions of beauty, with changes within the economy and society, and with issues of social and political conflict.



Fig. 9 shows

Mohatma Gandhi with Kasturba, shortly after his return from South Africa. Dressed simply, he later confessed to feeling awkward amongst the Westernised Bombay elite. He said that he was more at home among the labourers in South Africa.

## EXERCISE # 1

## FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

### Multiple choice questions

1. Why did dalits prefer western clothings?  
(1) they were under the impression of colonial masters  
(2) it gave them more liberating performances in the society  
(3) they were against the traditional dress  
(4) they did not like the hindu way of dressing
2. Which was the most important innovations in women's clothing during the first world war year in Europe?  
(1) trousers became famous  
(2) skirts became shorter  
(3) trousers became a vital part of clothing giving them more freedom of movement  
(4) Only (2) and (3)
3. Who used cloth as a symbolic weapon against the british rule?  
(1) Mahatama Gandhi (2) B.R. Ambedkar  
(3) Sarojini Naidu (4) Kamala Nehru
4. When did lord Curzon decide to partition Bengal?  
(1) 1947 (2). 1970 (3). 1909 (4) 1905
5. Why were the shanar women attacked by nairs in may 1822?  
(1) they refused to do work of nair families  
(2) they began to wear dress covering upper part of their bodies  
(3) they used bad languages for the nairs  
(4) they were attacked unnecessarily
6. Which one of the following dress was popularized in india by the swadeshi movement of 1905?  
(1) western style of clothing  
(2) home spun khadi  
(3) chintz clothes  
(4) silk clothes
7. From 1294 to 1789 people of france strictly followed which of the following  
(1) parliamentary laws (2) republican laws  
(3) sumptuary laws (4) revenue laws
8. Which one of the following was not taught to women in the Victorian England?  
(1) to wear tight clothing  
(2) to do dutiful and submissive  
(3) to be strong and aggressive in behavior  
(4) to bear pain and suffering
9. The national woman suffrage association and American woman suffrage association during 1870 campaigned for which reform?  
(1) suffrage reforms (2) dress reforms  
(3) political reforms (4) parliamentary reforms
10. What was the chapkan?  
(1) hat (2) three piece suit  
(3) a long buttoned coat (4) none of the above
11. What was the phenta?  
(1) coal (2) hat (3) gown (4) belt
12. What were the major demands of national woman suffrage association?  
(1) simplify dress (2) shorten skirts  
(3) discard corsets (4) all of the above
13. Why were girls from childhood dressed in stays and tightly laced up in Victorian England?  
(1) to compel them to stay at home  
(2) to make them fashionable  
(3) to prevent them from moving freely  
(4) to make them obedient
14. What was the Mysore turban called?  
(1) pugree (2) hat (3) cap (4) peta
15. Where did the brahmika saree become popular very much?  
(1) Kerala (2) Gujarat  
(3) Maharastra (4) West Bengal
16. Which nationalist never gave up the western style suit?  
(1) Motilal Nehru (2) B R ambedkar  
(3) Jawahar lal Nehru (4) Vallabhai Patel
17. Which clothes did gandhiji preferred to wear?  
(1) khadi (2) nylon (3) cotton (4) silk
18. Who defied the shoe respect rule?  
(1) Gandhiji (2) J L Nehru  
(3) Manockjee cowasjee (4) Sarojini Naidu

19. Jananandini is the wife of

- (1) Satyendranath (2) Rabindranath  
(3) Devendranath (4) Gajendranath

20. Which lord made shoe respect very strict?

- (1) Canning (2) Curzon  
(3) Dalhousie (4) Wellesley

#### True or false

- Cockade is a cap usually worn on one side.
- Sanscullores means those who were without knee breeches.
- The shanar women attacked by the nairs in may 1825.
- The chapkan is a hat.
- The mysore turban is called as pugree.
- B R ambedkar never gave up the western style suit.

#### Fill in the blanks

- The French revolution brought major changes in existing dress code, known as \_\_\_\_\_
- From childhood, girls were tightly laced up and dressed in \_\_\_\_\_
- The \_\_\_\_\_ were considered as subordinate caste.
- Jananandini devi wore \_\_\_\_\_ saree.
- During the swadeshi movement people boycotted british goods and used \_\_\_\_\_ as a cloth.
- The \_\_\_\_\_ society was started in England in 1881.

#### Match the column

1.

Column-I	Column-II
(1) sumptuary laws	(a) manockjee cowasjee entee
(2) Cockade	(b) changes in dress code
(3) shoe respect case	(c) cap usually worn on one side
(4) brahmika saree	(d) Lord Curzon, 1905
(5) partition of Bengal	(e) Jananandini Devi

### EXERCISE # 1

### ANSWER KEY

### FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

#### Multiple choice questions

Que.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Ans.	2	4	1	4	2	2	3	3	2	3	2	4	4	4	3	2	1	3	1	3

#### True or false

1. True 2. True 3. False 4. False 5. False 6. True

#### Fill in the blanks

1. Sumptuary laws 2. Stays 3. Shanar 4. Brahmika 5. Khadi 6. Rational dress

#### Match the column

1. (1) → b ; (2) → c ; (3) → a ; (4) → e ; (5) → d

## EXERCISE # 2

## SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

### Short answer type questions

1. What was cockade?
2. When did sumptuary laws come to an end in France?
3. What are the drawbacks of corsets?
4. What were the two demands made by the movement for rational dress reform?
5. What did khadi symbolize?
6. Why did Gandhi adopt short dhoti?
7. Who wore coloured sarees with designs in India?

### Long answer type questions

1. How did styles of clothing differ from men to women in Victorian England?

2. Explain the shortcomings of tight dresses and corsets?
3. Who were the shanars? What happened to them when they defied the local customs?
4. Why did the women reformers give up their effort to bring changes in dress?
5. Why did Mahatma Gandhi adopt a lion cloth as his dress?
6. What happened during the swadeshi movement? Why did people switch over to wear European dress again?
7. Explain in detail the shoe respect controversy during the British colonial period in India?

## NCERT QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

1. Explain the reasons for the changes in clothing patterns and materials in the eighteenth century.

**Ans.** After the 18th century, the colonisation of most of the world by Europe, the spread of democratic ideals and the growth of an industrial society completely changed the ways in which people thought about dress. People could use styles and materials that were drawn from other cultures and location. Western dress styles from men were adopted worldwide.

2. What were the sumptuary laws in France?

**Ans.** From 1294 to the time of the French Revolution in 1789, the people of France were expected to strictly follow the sumptuary laws. The laws tried to control the behaviour of those considered socially inferior, preventing them from wearing certain clothes, consuming certain foods and beverages, and hunting game in certain areas.

3. Give an example of any two examples of the ways in which European dress codes were different from Indian dress codes.

**Ans.** European dress codes were different from Indian dress codes. Let us take the example of the turban and the hat. The two headgears not only looked different but also signified different things. The turban in India was not just for protection from the heat but was a sign of respectability and could not be removed at will. In the western tradition, the hat had to be removed before social superiors as a sign of respect. The shoe is another example. The Indians took off their shoes when they entered a sacred place. The British did not do so.

4. In 1805, a British official, Benjamin Heyne, listed the manufactures of Bangalore which included the following:

- Women's cloth of different musters and names
- Coarse chintz
- Muslins
- Silk cloths.

Of the list, which kind of cloth would have definitely fallen out of use in the early 1800s and why?

**Ans.** Muslin would have fallen out of use as machine cloth had flooded the Indian markets and was cheaper. Muslin was expensive and hence was not used. In fact, the Industrial Revolution brought about a complete change in which muslin cloth had no place.

5. Suggest reasons why women in nineteenth century India were obliged to continue wearing traditional Indian dress even when men switched over to the more convenient western clothing. What does this show about the position of women in society?

**Ans.** Women in the 19th century India were obliged to continue wearing traditional Indian dress even when men switched over to more convenient western clothes. This clearly shows that women during that time were accorded a lower status than men in society. They were not allowed to be aware of what was going on outside the house and were confined within the four walls of their homes. Modernity and change were not for them.

6. Winston Churchill described Mahatma Gandhi as a 'Seditious Middle Temple Lawyer' not 'posing as a half naked fakir.'

**Ans.** Mahatma Gandhi went to the Viceroy's house clad in a dhoti. This signified the symbolic strength of his dress. It showed the pride he had for his nation and its people, especially the peasants. It also signified how he identified with his people and the strength he derived from them.

7. Why did Mahatma Gandhi's dream of clothing the nation in khadi appeal only to some sections of Indians?

**Ans.** Mahatma Gandhi's dream was to clothe the whole nation in khadi. But it was not easy for everyone to follow his footsteps. Not many could take to single peasant cloth as he had. Some could not afford khadi which was expensive and some preferred to be dressed in finer cloth of various colours and designs.

## This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.