

*Murali & Gupta, 2019*

*Volume 5 Issue 2, pp. 24 - 33*

*Date of Publication: 19<sup>th</sup> July 2019*

*DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2019.52.2433>*

*This paper can be cited as: Murali, A. S., & Gupta, V., (2019). Comparing Sartorial Indices: Costume and Courtly Culture in Ming China and Mughal India. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 5(2), 24 - 33.*

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## **COMPARING SARTORIAL INDICES: COSTUME AND COURTLY CULTURE IN MING CHINA AND MUGHAL INDIA**

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### **Abstract**

*Mughal India and Ming China, two of the greatest empires in medieval Asia, were successful in influencing the cultures of their respective territories and beyond. Although the two empires differed on many grounds like art, society, environment etc., there are nonetheless striking similarities between the two. These similarities are often overshadowed and neglected because of the differences. One such similarity is the clearly defined social hierarchy in the society, articulated explicitly in the functioning of the court, of both these empires. An individual's attire in Ming China clearly reflected his/her position in the courtly hierarchy. Building on this, we tried to look at the role played by attire in establishing social rank in an equally powerful and hierarchical empire of the Mughals in India. Utilizing both primary as well as secondary sources for the purpose of this study, we have tried to bring out parallels in both the empires on practices related to attire or material possessions that led to the nurturing or establishment of social hierarchy. We could observe that, although attire facilitated the establishment of hierarchy in*

*both the empires, the degree to which it affected the court varied. Our primary sources include contemporary political texts of the period such as “Ain-i-Akbari” and “Da Ming Hui Dian” along with the study of Mughal miniature paintings and classical portraits belonging to the Ming era. During the course of research, we also realized, little work has been done on the relation between attire and social hierarchy, especially in the context of these two empires. Existing scholarship on the subject is mostly by historians of art or fashion specifically. Thus, we believe our work will add to the emerging research on the topic, and takes into view a new perspective to clothing, which is not limited to certain streams of history.*

### **Keywords**

Ming China, Mughal India, Attire, Courtly Hierarchy

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## **1. Introduction**

The nomadic powers of Central Asia have in some way or another played a part in the histories of different regions of the continent. Their constant attempts at expansion have widened their histories from the geographical limitations of just Central Asia. The presence of these powers between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries linked two of the greatest empires of medieval Asia namely those of the Mings and the Mughals from China and India respectively. The importance and impact of both these empires on the cultural, political, and economic histories of their respective territories and beyond is undeniable. Despite the very visible differences amongst the two, right from their respective attitudes towards their Central Asian ancestors and neighbors to the prevalent art forms, environment, society etc., one can also trace similarities. Both the empires were hierarchical and clearly articulated this differentiation in rank with the practices of the court. In other words the structure of the court in both Ming China and Mughal India was concretely established, at the apex of this structure was the emperor followed by his nobility. The emperor enjoyed absolute authority in the empire. Any challenge to this structure was considered to be a direct challenge to the power of the emperor, and therefore was not acceptable and was immediately thwarted. These empires maintained the social hierarchies through numerous ways, from language to clothing, everything was utilized as an agency for legitimization and strengthening of the social hierarchy. Through the course of history, one can notice the impact clothing has had on the general minds of the people, and how it was utilized by the powerful sections of the society to draw attention to their superiority over the others. Building on these ideas, this paper tries to examine and evaluate the role played by clothing in defining and

sanctioning the social hierarchy during the Mughal and Ming period in India and China respectively. One needs to question where does clothing figure in a differentiated society; does it only mark the rich from the poor or is its impact more fluid? Taking into account not just secondary but also primary sources such as *Ain-i-Akbari*, *Jahangirnama*, Ming Classical Portraits, and Mughal Miniature paintings, the paper compares the manner in which sartorial habits figured into the political and social space of both these empires and tries to analyze the impact it had on these spaces. These sources helped us figure the role of clothing in maintaining the social hierarchy and to look at this issue in context of the medieval empires from their own perspective.

## **2. Ming China**

In Ming China, the clothing of a person represented not just their preferences but also to a great extent, their position in the society. There were clear sartorial laws in place laid out by Hongwu, the founder of Ming Dynasty, and subsequent rulers that indicated that certain materials, colours, motifs, and symbols were to be used exclusively by the royalty. Clothing, in fact, was considered one of the criteria for distinguishing people's societal status and rank (Ying & Long, 2014). For instance, the motif of the dragon and the colour yellow and its shades (gold yellow) were reserved for use only by the emperor.

### **2.1 Imperial Attire**

The imperial attire of the emperor involved the famous dragon robe. The dragon robe was typically embroidered with large dragons, on the chest and back with smaller dragons on the shoulders and on the skirt of the robe; the space around the dragons was then embroidered with other auspicious symbols ("China: History of Dress | Encyclopedia.com", 2014). Similarly, the phoenix motif was to be used only by the empress, hair ornaments with the phoenix motif made using precious metals like gold figure heavily as a part of her attire. Ming texts such as *Da Ming Huidian*, clearly laid out the ceremonial attire to be worn by the royalty, this might indicate the presence of regulations on the different attires expected to be worn by the royalty at different instances.

### **2.2 Differentiation in Motifs (Nobility)**

The sartorial laws also laid out the motifs and symbols to be used by the nobility representative of their position in the hierarchy. These motifs figured into the "mandarin

squares” or *pufang*, which were, embroidered squares of cloth that were worn as badges of office for civil and military officials. These embroidered squares were worn on the back and front of the official’s robes (“China: History of Dress | Encyclopedia.com”, 2019). As mentioned, there were clear markers on the symbols to be used by certain ranks of nobility, for instance, motifs of birds figured into the squares of civil officials while those of beasts in military officials. Out of the birds, crane occupied the foremost position followed by the golden pheasant, then the peacock, and the ninth and last one was the finch (Ying & Long, 2014). While the differentiation in the motifs that can be used certainly provided agency for the more powerful members of the society to assert their superiority, this process was also aided by the differentiation in the quality of fabrics used. Wool was disliked due to its association with the steppe herders. The best quality fabrics were reserved for the use of the ruling elites (Duancey, 2004).

### **2.3 Differentiation in Head Accessories**

Social rank was also visible through the accessories that were worn on the head. The *Mian* or the crown was worn by the emperor. The official headdress evolved from the *futou* turban of the Song and Tang period to a black gauze cap in the Ming period, it marked that the individual was a government official (Hua, Yu & Zhang, 2011). Classical portraits show scholars wearing scholar caps or casual square caps along with their attire of long robes accompanied by a “Buddha duster” (Hua, Yu & Zhang, 2011). A full set of scholar’s clothes was also unearthed from a Ming tomb in Yangzhou, which included a gown with dark rimmed round collar and broad sleeves along with felt boots.

The one head ornament that was an extremely clear cut definer of social hierarchy and the superiority of the owner was the famed Dragon Crown of the empress. It was quite literally the jewel of the empress’ attire, and was the symbolic representation of her power and position. Despite the numerous consorts of the emperor, there was only one empress, and the crown along with other indicators clearly marked her position of superiority over the other wives, wives of officials, women nobility, and ordinary women. These dome shaped ornaments were immensely decorated with pearls, gold, and other precious materials. The use of these precious metals and stones was again a marker of status as these were not locally available. The crown for the empress in itself seems to be a unique feature of the Ming dynasty as there is no reference to anything similar in the preceding rules. Although, the crown was an indicator of the empress’ superiority over the other women, it was not necessarily an indicator of her equal status with the emperor. However, it could be a means to appropriate symbols of masculine imperial authority

(Clunas, Harrison-Hall & Luk, 2016) and the ornament could have also been a clear representation and reinforcement of patriarchal norms and gender roles (Clunas, Harrison-Hall & Luk, 2016).

## **2.4 Women's Clothing**

Women's clothing during the Ming dynasty is known for its elegance and often considered epitome of Classical Chinese beauty. The clothing of this period was more elegant than the lavish styles of the Tang period or the rigid garments of the Song period. The women wore robes made of rough homespun cloths. The colours were limited to purple, green, and fuchsia; deep blue and bright red were especially forbidden as these were the royal colours. A typical garment of the Ming period would be the *bijia* which was a long sleeveless jacket that extended till below the knee or longer. This garment could have been especially common as it helped create an impression of slenderness which was preferred. The Ming *ruqun* worn by maidservants was similar to that of the previous periods except it had an added short waist skirt which could have functioned like an apron (Hua, Yu & Zhang, 2011).

Clothing was an important tool used by the Ming royalty to not just differentiate themselves from their own populace but also from the "barbarians" of the preceding Yuan dynasty (Welters, Lillethun & Eicher, 2018). This period saw a revival of the Han culture along the lines of the cultures prevalent in the preceding dynasties, especially in terms of the patterns and fabric used. Two centuries later the Mughal rulers of India were also discarding their Central Asian connections, despite being proud of it, visible through clothing though for entirely different reasons.

## **3. Mughal India**

When Babur came from Central Asia he brought with him the sartorial habits of the area, which were suitable to the colder climate. Humayun's reign saw the introduction of certain distinctly Persian influences. The major indicator of the presence of Persian influence seems to be the adoption of Persian language as the political language by Akbar. Eventually, the empire saw a change in the clothing that complimented the change in the court culture. Thus, the garments underwent a change to suit not just the Indian climate but also its socio-cultural atmosphere; majority of these changes took place under the reign of Akbar probably in an attempt to compliment his political reforms. With the help of culture and arts, Akbar tried to not

only legitimize and strengthen his own rule but also strengthen the support of subjects. One way he accomplished this was by changing the names of the garments to Sanskrit, for instance, the jama became the sarbgati, the izar became yar-pirahan, burqa changed to Chitragupta, the kulah to shishshobha, and so on. Another reform he also brought within clothing were a series of innovations in the garments themselves. The jama was evolved into the takauchiya by increasing the roundness of the skirt and shifting the knot from left to the right, which again could have been a subtle yet immensely political move. Phillip Wagoner's analysis of clothing as a means of acquiring political power in the Vijayanagara empire can also be applied to the Mughals. Wagoner points out how innovations in sartorial habits is not just a matter of choice but is a deliberate act on the part of the king and his nobility. Moreover, these innovations in attire are paralleled by appropriation of political language-as was the case with Persian.

### **3.1 Clothing in Akbar's Court**

The takauchiya was suitable for wearing in both summers and winters and was made of fabrics like silk, gold cloth, or wool. Akbar undertook measures to ensure that shawls of exquisite, sometimes even imported, materials were available to be made into garments. Embroidery of gold became very popular among the higher strata of society, especially the royalty. According to Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*, there was an entire department that was responsible for organizing, estimating the value, maintaining, and producing garments; estimating the value of garments, especially, was a task that was undertaken with great care (Abū'l-Fadl, Blochmann & Jarrett, 1873). Abul Fazl mentions a list of garments that were worn by the emperor, which included, qaba, takauchiya, shalwar, and so on (Abū'l-Fadl, Blochmann & Jarrett, 1873).

### **3.2 Khilat**

The garments worn by the emperor are of special interest, as they were also sometimes given as khilat, which was the practice of giving robes of honor as appreciation to someone. This practice was very common throughout Islamic empires, including the early Mughals. But, it too underwent changes under Akbar, the materials of the robes transitioned from the silks and furs of China and Central Asia to brocades, velvets, and gold thread silks. A change in the size of the sash or the chest opening, number of ties, or fabric could be noticed every few years. Khilat was awarded for satisfactory service, whether in war or in peace. The most valuable kind was the one worn personally by the emperor (*malbus-i-khas*). In presenting robes of honor, the emperor was symbolically making the recipient an extension of himself, and simultaneously accepting

them was an acknowledgement on the part of the recipient of subordination to the donor (emperor) and inevitably their superior status (Balakrishnan, 2005).

### **3.3 Women's Clothing**

Despite the noteworthiness of emperors' influence one cannot ignore the role women's clothing in Mughal India. The importance of women's attire is reflected in the fact that Abul Fazl mentions almost sixteen different ways in which women are adorned in his *Ain-i-Akbari*, which ranged from bathing and combing ones hair to adorning oneself with henna and jewelry made of precious materials. Almost thirty six types of ornaments are mentioned and emphasis is laid on perfumes, so much so that the empire had a separate department, the *kushbhukhana* for overseeing the production of perfumes (Abū'l-Fadl, Blochmann & Jarrett, 1873). Apart from the accessories, the attire of women of the harem, were not much different from those of the men, they were often made of fine materials like muslin and heavily decorated with gold threads. Some women, with the permission of the emperor, also wore highly ornamented turbans. Considering the heterogeneous nature of the harem, it also acted as a place for the fashions of women to evolve into an amalgamation of the indigenous attire of skirts and the newly emerging styles. Leading among these innovations were those of Nurjahan, who apart from politics had also made considerable contributions to the realms of arts and culture, especially fashion, such as the bringing in of *chikankari* embroidery. Women from outside the harem mostly wore either *lehengas* with *saris* or *shalwars/ghagras* with *qabas* (Misra, 1967).

### **3.4 Differentiation in Clothing of the Royal Family**

The Mughal women of the harem were the representatives of the smooth working of the empire in the social sphere, thereby their sartorial finery were expected to reflect the message (Kumar, 2006). Not just the women, but the elegance and extravagance in the clothing of the royalty in general acted almost like an assurance of their power. From Akbar's period onwards one can notice the attire of the emperors becoming more sophisticated. Thus, though virtually same clothes were available to all, the attire of the emperor showcased his importance subtly yet clearly. Sometimes, emperors also ordered certain garments for their exclusive use, unless granted permission, as in the case of Jahangir and Akbar. Jahangir, following the footsteps of Akbar, ordered that the *nadiri*, the *tusi shawl*, and a few types of *qaba* were to be worn exclusively by him (Jahangir & Thackston, 1999).

An extremely interesting line in the *Ain-i-Akbari* states, "His majesty also ordered that people of certain ranks should wear certain articles; and this was done to regulate the demand."

While, the explanation given by Abul Fazl about the differentiation of attire on the basis of rank being done to regulate the demand could be true, it could have also been to demarcate the social hierarchies, similar to what was done in Ming China. It could also be possible that this measure was taken to reinstate the social hierarchies but was not successful. Lack of sufficient explanation and sources make it unclear.

#### **4. Analysis**

At the first glance, the role of attire in establishing, strengthening, and reinstating social hierarchies especially with relation to the court would seem minimal in the case of the Mughals in comparison to the Mings. Yet, keeping in mind the contents of this paper, one can identify the impact sartorial habits had on the societies and courts of these empires. In the Ming dynasty correlation between clothing and social rank was clearly laid out through the sumptuary and sartorial laws. It were the norms and laws accompanying the clothes that helped establish social differentiation both within and outside the court. On the other hand, in Mughal India the role of clothing in strengthening social hierarchies was more subtle. This differentiation was not clearly stated, yet the minute differences in the attires of the royalty, nobility and the common masses, in themselves had conditioned the minds of the people. It was a subtle albeit extremely important role played by clothing in determining the social hierarchy. Needless to say, in both the cases it was not just the attire but a culmination of various policies and actions which when included with the sartorial norms that aided especially the court and other powerful entities to establish their superiority. Nevertheless there were instances of attempts at social mobility in both the empires. As put by sociologist Georg Simmel, the upper class people introduce changes in fashion, while the middle and lower class imitate them in an attempt to claim a higher status (Simmel, 1957). These attempts were condemned and even repressed in both Ming and Mughal empires.

#### **5. Conclusion**

History has shown how clothing acts as an important source for understanding the political, cultural, economic, hierarchical and even religious ideas of an empire. Even in the present day context, what one wears is not only a representation of how they wish to portray themselves but also a marker, either explicitly or implicitly, of their social status. Thus, in the



case of the of Ming and Mughal authorities, their sartorial habits acted as agencies to establish social hierarchical norms. As a source, the deeper meaning of clothing needs to be interpreted other than just what is on the surface. Careful understanding and evaluation of these meanings needs to be done, and not just by art and fashion historians. These meanings should be studied to get a deeper and more wholesome understanding of histories.

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