

The Sari: Wraparound Elegance

Posted on

Sari secrets revealed by Hiranthi Fernando



The sight of a woman gracefully attired in a sari enchants many a visitor. A shapeless length of fabric, beautifully draped, is transformed into an eye-catching, very feminine garment. With variations, in the way it is draped and its accessories, the sari has been in vogue for centuries.

The sari typical in Sri Lanka is the Osariya or Kandyan sari. In the days of the Sinhala kings the osariya was apparently the dress worn by high caste women. Ananda Coomaraswamy in *Medieval Sinhalese Art* says, "The dress of women of high caste consisted of a hettaya (blouse) with mante (frill-like collar) like that of a man and a cloth (helaya) round the loins arranged in various ways. Otherwise the end of the cloth, then called Ohoriya, is thrown over the shoulder in the Tamil fashion. The ohoriya (sari) is no doubt of Tamil origin."

The sari is usually made up of about five metres of fabric of 45 inches width. The choice of fabric varies with the occasion. The sari can be made to look cool and fresh for a morning function or rich and glamorous for an evening. At a Sri Lankan wedding, you will see a dazzling array of saris in silk, brocade, lace, organza or chiffon. They are often richly worked in threads of gold, silver or tasteful combinations of colours.

The osariya which was traditionally worn by Kandyan women in the hill country, is now worn by any woman who fancies the style. In draping the osariya one end of the fabric is folded lengthwise into approximately 15cm-20cm width, usually ending in a point. This is placed over the left shoulder, to hang down almost to the ankles. The rest of the fabric is taken twice round the waist. Holding the free end with one hand, the inner piece is gathered up in the other hand to form the frill. When it is firm round the waist, the free end is tucked in with the frill falling over it. The frill is then arranged neatly, to hang broad at one side of the waist and tapering as it reaches the other side. In the osariyij, the end that is worn down the centre front is the elaborately patterned headpiece or palu of the sari. The sari is kept in place by a tape round the waist as well as safety pins where necessary.



This sari is traditionally worn with a silver girdle or havadiya round the waist and hanging down the side. The sari is teamed with a matching close-fitting short blouse. The traditional sleeve worn with the osariya is a short puff sleeve.

Today, however, it is also worn with a close-fitting elbow length Indian sleeve or even with a sleeveless blouse. The 'made-up' Kandyan sari has also come into fashion by virtue of its convenience. This sari is sewn in two or three separate sections: the fall which comes over the shoulder, the frill at the waist and the main cloth that is wrapped round the waist. When worn together it takes the form of the complete osariya. This style requires only about four to four and a half metres of cloth. In the hill country areas, a lama sari or half sari was traditionally worn by young girls until they were old enough to wear a san. Comprising a length of fabric wrapped round the waist with a frill at the side, and a well-fitting blouse with a frill-like collar round the neck, the half sari can still be seen worn in the Kandyan areas. Even in Colombo, young girls clad in a lama sari are frequently seen at weddings and other festive occasions. The age of sari wearing varies. Girls usually wear sari when they are at least 15 – 16 years of age. On special occasions such as a family wedding, they get into sari at an even younger age. Generally the sari is considered the attire for an occasion, or for going out.

Even in villages, women dress up in a sari

Modern Sri Lankan women accustomed to wearing western dress, revert to the sari on special or formal occasions. Even in the villages, women who usually wear cloth and jacket in the house, dress up in a sari when they go out. The style of sari commonly seen in Colombo, is the Indian sari which, as its name indicates, originated in India. The draping of the Indian sari differs from the osariya. One end of the sari is tucked in or pinned at the right side of the waist. The fabric is then passed once round the waist in an anti-clockwise direction, being pleated into several pleats of about 10cm width. The pleats are neatly arranged and tucked in at the waist. The remaining fabric is again passed round the waist and flung over the left shoulder to make the 'fall' as it is called. In the Indian sari, the elaborate headpiece or palu of the sari forms the fall. The fall is pinned at the shoulder to fall over the left arm. It is sometimes pleated and pinned at the shoulder leaving the arm free. This style is currently in vogue. It is also more convenient for working in. A close fitting short blouse is worn with the Indian sari as with the osariya. It is worn either sleeveless or with fitting sleeves of varying length; some women even wear the sleeves up to the wrist. The Muslim community in Sri Lanka also adopt a Gujarati style of draping the sari. In this the fall of the sari is placed over the right shoulder instead of the left, and tucked in at the waist. Many Muslim women cover their heads with the fall of the sari. The rural Muslim women of the Eastern Province drape their saris in a style peculiarly their own using over seven metres of material woven thick in shades of brown or mustard. This sari has a frill as in the osariya and the fall is worn over the right shoulder and tucked in at the waist. It is worn with a loose blouse with a draw string neck. The fashion scene of Colombo has seen many variations of the sari. The Koog is a style worn without the customary blouse. The fall end is wrapped round to cover the breasts and pinned at the right shoulder to hang down the front. The 'hipster sari' is worn low on the hips leaving a wide midriff exposed.

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The girl on the left wears a lama sari while her two companions are dressed in cloth and jacket.



A long slim cut underskirt is worn under the sari. A tape is sometimes tied round the waist and the sari is tucked into the waist of the underskirt and secured by pins. With the osariya, it is traditional to wear a gem studded pin at the shoulder. Another pin or Koorra adorns the low hairdo or conde at the nape of the neck.

The shoes worn with a sari are usually open sandal type. Some women go in for high heels while others prefer flat slippers. During the days of the kings, however, neither man nor woman wore shoes or stockings, since these were deemed to be royal dress reserved only for the king. Anklets and toe rings were worn by the women when they went out. The choice available in sari material is vast. Sri Lankan pure silks can be purchased in a wide range of shades and colour combinations and batik printed saris in silk and voile are sold at most batik outlets. Japanese materials such as Nylex, Georgette and Chiffon are also widely used.

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The most popular saris among Sri Lankan women are the Indian silks. Some are printed in attractive designs while others are richly worked in thread. If you are interested in buying a sari to take home, it is best to select one which is easy to drape and does not slip. A simple cotton sari could be purchased for around Rs200. An elaborately worked silk sari on the other hand could go up to as much as Rs10,000. Before you attempt to wear a sari, watch it being draped. Once you have

seen it, you'll find it's not too difficult to do after all. •