

A CUT ABOVE THE REST: context, criticality and craft of creating a Saree blouse

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Abstract

The saree blouse or choli is a critical indigenous apparel in the closet of an Indian woman worn usually with a saree or a lehanga (traditional full length skirt). The range of fit and form options for this traditional, tailored and customized garment are wide and the “Creator” of the blouse is chosen with immense deliberation and trials. From a humble home based tailor to the Designer, Indian women have a wide range of options to decide and choose from to get a blouse custom-sewn.

The craft of creating a well-made blouse is a highly revered and complex skill learnt through an unstructured apprenticeship model and perfected over years as each creator develops their own tricks of the trade through trials and error. The research aims to seek insights into the diverse narrative of how the creators evolved their skills, the contexts of their practice, key attributes, fit and design preferences, challenges in the making of the blouse and myriad experiences through structured interviews.

Introduction

The Saree blouse is a traditional, tight-fitted and midriff baring upper garment often worn with a saree or a lehanga. The blouse is the garment worn over the bosom by the women of Indian subcontinent and has evolved through ages being called as the angia, cholaka, chola, choli, cholika, kacali, kanchalika, kuppasa, kanchuka, polka, ravikkai, ravikalu, samvyana, stanamshuka, stannottariya, tai, uttarasangha, udaramshuka, uttariyavas etc (Goswamy, 2000; Roy and Nilesh, 2013; Sood and Pant 2020). The blouse has evolved from a breast band, bustier, angia, choli to the modern day blouse imbibing the values of various cultural amalgamations by the indigenous Mauryas, Guptas, Cholas and Rajputs adapting to foreign influences of Kushans, Turks, Mughals and lastly the British in India. (Vasu, 2012)

The early 20th century design of blouse evolved from variations of regional costume to an urban loosely fitted blouse with longer sleeves and modest necklines, a symbol of the nationalist Indian woman. Post- Independence witnessed variations in blouse styles and influences of the western fashion images distilled and promulgated by Indian cinematic icons. The young modern woman of today is spoiled for choice in details and styles that are hugely influenced by the popular culture and designers of the 21st century. Despite the options and variations of fashion, the classic Indian blouse since the last century is identified as a midriff barring, fitted and contoured bodice with four darts in the front (waist, bust line, side seam and armhole) and one dart in the back (waistline), often fitted with a front yoke at empire line, set-in sleeves and round or U-shaped deep necklines (Alis, 2018; Pandya, 1991; Sood and Pant, 2020; Varghese, 2015; Vasu, 2012).

The Indian woman in her quest for sourcing styles, emulates her western counterpart as she browses through designer stores, popular culture references, malls and online fashion. However when it comes to sourcing a saree blouse, she seeks her reliable “darji” or “masterjee”- the Indian tailor to custom create her desired blouse with the style, details, fabric, embellishment and cost of her choice. The “Creator” of the saree blouse is most revered and trusted with the blouse as a professional with a special place in the daily fashion needs of the blouse/choli wearing women (Roy and Nilesh, 2013). Each blouse is custom- made diligently with a detailed explanation of the details, design, fit preference and measurements with the expectation to create the blouse at a cost and speed concurrent with ready-to-wear clothing. This dichotomy of a custom-made luxury at an affordable cost is something the blouse creator has perfected making them indispensable. The research seeks to look at the journey, experience and diversity of creating a blouse from the perspective of the people involved in the creation.

Methodology

The data collection for the research was done through a structured questionnaire created for an interview. The sample group for data collection included Forty Creators of blouses who were interviewed elaborately either in person or through a web based video. The tailors and pattern masters were selected through convenience sampling and twenty-seven respondents were interviewed in person in their workplace in Ahmedabad. Thirteen Designers were selected through purposive sampling and the interviews were conducted over a web based video link.

The designers were in various geographic locations across India. The structured questionnaire was replicated and shared over a google form for the designers and a hard copy of the questionnaire was shared as reference to tailors and pattern masters and the responses were recorded by the researcher in a response sheet.

Knowing the Creator

The ethnic wear segment in India dominates 83% of the market (Gugnani, 2014) and sarees have the largest share in this market with a 53% stake (Ranavade and Karolia, 2016). The irony however remains that despite the huge volume and scale of blouse, creating a blouse still remains predominantly a customized affair. The market of ready-to-wear blouses is on a gradual rise as women struggle to source a good sari blouse tailor, face inconvenience and find the process energy and time consuming (Kashyap, 2006; Ranavade, 2017; Sobti, 2017). Hazarika (2013) quotes the problems with ready to wear solutions as expensive (72.6%), absence of growth features (56.9%), improper fitting (50.3%) and inferior quality of fabric (25.4%). The Indian Blouse wearer is extremely particular about the fit and finishing of the blouse and hence the significance of the tailor continues to sustain (Kashyap, 2006; Sood, 2016; Wilkinson, 2005).

The Indian Blouse Creator could be the friendly home-based female dress-maker, a ‘darzi/masterjee’ who runs from a small shop in the vicinity, an entrepreneurial woman who has a team working for her or a professional designer who work from their fashion studios. Their role is to assist the identity conscious women to understand the demographics and psychographics of their consumers as they provide them options and suggestions for designing the blouse (Roy and Nilesh, 2013)

The Creators interviewed for the research included 15(37.5%) home-based female tailors, 12(30%) male pattern masters and 13(32.5%) designers with an equal distribution of female and male respondents at 50%. The median experience of the creators is in the range of 21 – 25 years and most respondents belonged to west India (70%), followed by north (17.5%), east (7.5%) and south (5%). The range of their highest qualification includes Graduates (22.5%), 8th grade (20%), 12th grade (20%), 10th grade (17.5%), post- graduate (10%), Diploma (7.5%) and 5th grade (2.5%) and none who was illiterate or a doctorate.

The Indian fashion system has evolved largely through an apprenticeship model where making of the blouse is a craft transferred from a master to apprentice. 55% of the respondents claim to have learnt informally and 45% learnt formally with awards ranging from certificate (12.5%) to master’s degree (2.5%) with most respondents having a Bachelor’s degree (27.5%). These blouse makers mirroring the traditional ethnic wear

segment work mostly in an unorganized set-up (Rakesh and Rajitha, 2014) with a staggering 85% creators being self-employed and 77.5% creators working in an organization with less than 10 employees.

The motives to be a creator were varied with most responding to interest (45 %) and tradition (22.5%) apart from recommendation from relatives, finding a guide, financial stability,

entrepreneurial opportunity. Only 32.5% respondents claimed to have learnt formally from an institute, with the rest stating to learn from family (30%), an expert mentor (22.5%) or experience over many places (15%). An interesting revelation by 12 of the 13 pattern makers from Ahmedabad was that they all belonged to the 'darzi' community where tailoring was a hereditary profession with most feeling pride and profited to continue the legacy.

Constructing the Blouse

The blouse traditionally is a constructed apparel with 3 pattern pieces namely front (cut 2), back (cut 1 on fold) and sleeve (cut 2) (Pandya, 1991). The art of precisely measuring, drafting, cutting fabric, sewing and finishing with frugal layout planning (Krishnakumar, 2014) renders the process as highly specialized and revered. All the tailors and pattern masters created only in Indian wear for consumers. Apart from Indian women's clothing only 37.5% have the children's wear expertise, 15% with proficiency of women's western clothing and 10% has know-how for Men's wear, thus making Indian wear with blouses an extremely niche category.

All female tailors interviewed worked from home with space ranging from an entire room to a small segment of the room. The pattern masters worked out of modest spaces in local market shops squeezed with machines, a drafting table, and a rack or two. The designer's in contrast had splurging multi-room studios in up-market locations. All the designer's and pattern masters possessed the single needle lockstitch machine, however amongst tailors working from homes, only 35% using the single needle lockstitch machine, the rest used domestic full throttle or half-throttle machines.

The stark contrast in equipment and location cascaded into the price charged by makers for creating a blouse. The maximum amount charged for a plain blouse by the tailors is lower than 120 Indian rupees, the pattern master's quote from 150 to 250 rupees and the designer charge in a range from 251 to 4000 rupees. The price for creating a bridal/special blouse by the tailor ranges between 200 to 500 rupees, 500 to 1500 rupees by the pattern master and anywhere between 1200 to 10000 rupees by the designer. This huge disparity for a similar product is highly dependent on the customer's experience, expertise and brand equity of each creator.

Blouse Design and Trends

The blouse has evolved through time immemorial and the conversation with respondents about the designs reveals certain shifts over the past few decades. The erstwhile angias and cholis were backless blouses with ties at the back, dropped shoulders, rectangular pieces with gathering in the breast section and gussets at underarms, thus fitting the body like second skin (Hollingworth, 2012, Jha and Narang, 2013). The Bollywood inspired blouses in the last century witnessed styles such as halter necks, tube tops, katori cut, elbow sleeves, raised necklines etc (Annappoorani, 2013; Khar and Ayachit, 2013; Sood and Pant, 2020). Sood (2016) considers the 21st century blouse to be experimental with variations in necklines, sleeve lengths, and bodice lengths.

The creators responded to an elaborate survey on preferences of blouses styles and details on a 5-point Likert scale. The detailed results of the survey with the aggregated score for options of blouse styles, bust shaping techniques, closures, details, blouse and sleeve lengths, sleeve and neckline styles are presented in the table

| Blouse Style | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------|--------|-----------|--------|--------|------------------|
| Name | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Mostly | Always | Weighted Average |
| Simple blouse with yoke in front | 0 | 12.5 | 7.5 | 42.5 | 37.5 | 4.05 |
| Backless blouse | 27.5 | 25 | 20 | 25 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| Kurti style blouse | 42.5 | 25 | 27.5 | 5 | 0 | 1.95 |
| Choli cut blouse till empire line | 4 0 | 32.5 | 22.5 | 5 | 0 | 1.925 |
| Peplum blouse | 5 0 | 15 | 30 | 5 | 0 | 1.9 |
| Empire line blouse | 62.5 | 10 | 12.5 | 15 | 0 | 1.8 |
| Kanchli style blouse | 5 0 | 30 | 15 | 5 | 0 | 1.75 |
| Jacket Style Blouse | 57.5 | 12.5 | 30 | 0 | 0 | 1.725 |
| Angarkha styled blouse | 52.5 | 35 | 10 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.625 |
| Cape styled blouse | 62.5 | 20 | 10 | 7.5 | 0 | 1.625 |
| Cropped blouse | 62.5 | 15 | 20 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.625 |
| Corset Blouse | 67.5 | 17.5 | 5 | 10 | 0 | 1.575 |
| Strapless Bustier blouse | 67.5 | 17.5 | 5 | 10 | 0 | 1.575 |
| Knotted blouse | 7 5 | 12.5 | 10 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.4 |
| Draped blouse | 7 5 | 12.5 | 10 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.4 |
| Bra Styled blouse | 82.5 | 7.5 | 7.5 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.3 |
| Bust Shaping Techniques | | | | | | |
| Name | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Mostly | Always | Weighted Average |
| 4 Dart fit with yoke | 2.5 | 12.5 | 37.5 | 37.5 | 10 | 3.4 |
| Princess fit blouse | 1 0 | 10 | 25 | 45 | 10 | 3.35 |
| 4 dart fit without yoke | 2.5 | 20 | 27.5 | 45 | 5 | 3.3 |
| Katori blouse | 1 0 | 12.5 | 7.5 | 42.5 | 2.5 | 2.4 |
| Single dart/French dart | 3 5 | 32.5 | 25 | 7.5 | 2.05 | 2.05 |
| Half Katori blouse | 5 0 | 27.5 | 17.5 | 5 | 0 | 1.775 |
| Choli cut | 62.5 | 27.5 | 7.5 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.5 |
| Gathering at center front | 82.5 | 10 | 5 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.275 |
| Closures | | | | | | |
| Name | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Mostly | Always | Weighted |

| | | | | | | Average |
|------------------------------|--------|--------|-----------|--------|--------|------------------|
| Hooks | 0 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 52.5 | 42.5 | 4.35 |
| Concealed Zipper | 22.5 | 27.5 | 30 | 10 | 10 | 2.575 |
| Doris | 27.5 | 37.5 | 17.5 | 15 | 2.5 | 2.275 |
| Basic Buttons | 1 0 | 67.5 | 20 | 2.5 | 0 | 2.15 |
| Potli Buttons | 3 5 | 42.5 | 2 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.9 |
| Fancy Buttons | 42.5 | 32.5 | 20 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 1.9 |
| Tie-knots/Bows | 67.5 | 10 | 20 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.575 |
| Exposed zipper | 62.5 | 30 | 5 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.475 |
| Snap Buttons | 7 0 | 17.5 | 10 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.45 |
| Slip on | 77.5 | 15 | 2.5 | 5 | 0 | 1.35 |
| Details | | | | | | |
| Name | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Mostly | Always | Weighted Average |
| Huge Margin | 0 | 0 | 7.5 | 7.5 | 85 | 4.775 |
| Bra Strap | 7.5 | 7.5 | 27.5 | 15 | 42.5 | 3.775 |
| Doris/Fabric piping cords | 2.5 | 15 | 27.5 | 52.5 | 2.5 | 3.375 |
| Tassels | 5 | 15 | 37.5 | 42.5 | 0 | 3.175 |
| Bust Cups | 22.5 | 17.5 | 27.5 | 32.5 | 0 | 2.7 |
| Frills and Ruffles | 12.5 | 57.5 | 27.5 | 2.5 | 0 | 2.2 |
| Bold/Creative motifs at back | 2 5 | 45 | 20 | 10 | 0 | 2.15 |
| Slits | 32.5 | 42.5 | 20 | 5 | 0 | 1.975 |
| Pockets | 62.5 | 27.5 | 2.5 | 5 | 2.5 | 1.575 |
| Gussets | 7 5 | 10 | 12.5 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.425 |
| Blouse Length | | | | | | |
| Name | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Mostly | Always | Weighted Average |
| 14" to 15" | 0 | 0 | 5 | 82.5 | 12.5 | 4.075 |
| 12" to 13" | 17.5 | 30 | 32.5 | 20 | 0 | 2.55 |
| 16" to 20" | 2 5 | 35 | 35 | 5 | 0 | 2.2 |
| Abdomen length | 5 5 | 27.5 | 17.5 | 0 | 0 | 1.625 |
| Hip Length | 77.5 | 15 | 5 | 0 | 2.5 | 1.35 |
| Beyond Hip length | 87.5 | 7.5 | 2.5 | 0 | 2.5 | 1.225 |
| Sleeve Length | | | | | | |
| Name | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Mostly | Always | Weighted Average |
| 10" to 11" | 2.5 | 0 | 22.5 | 70 | 5 | 3.75 |

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|---------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| 5" to 7" | 0 | 25 | 35 | 37.5 | 2.5 | 3.175 |
| 8" to 9" | 7.5 | 27.5 | 27.5 | 32.5 | 5 | 3 |
| 2" to 4" | 5 | 30 | 37.5 | 25 | 2.5 | 2.9 |
| Sleeveless | 12.5 | 55 | 22.5 | 10 | 0 | 2.3 |
| 12" to 16" | 27.5 | 40 | 20 | 10 | 2.5 | 2.2 |
| 17" to 19" | 42.5 | 35 | 12.5 | 7.5 | 2.5 | 1.925 |
| More than 23" | 7 0 | 22.5 | 5 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.4 |
| 20" to 23" | 4 5 | 30 | 2.5 | 5 | 0 | 1.325 |
| Sleeve Style | | | | | | |
| Name | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Mostly | Always | Weighted Average |
| Set-in Sleeve | 0 | 5 | 7.5 | 45 | 42.5 | 4.25 |
| See through Sleeve | 32.5 | 30 | 20 | 17.5 | 0 | 2.225 |
| Puff Sleeve | 22.5 | 42.5 | 32.5 | 2.5 | 0 | 2.15 |
| Cold Shoulder | 3 5 | 42.5 | 15 | 7.5 | 0 | 1.95 |
| Ruffle Sleeve | 5 0 | 17.5 | 25 | 7.5 | 0 | 1.9 |
| Peekaboo Sleeve | 3 0 | 55 | 10 | 5 | 0 | 1.9 |
| Fit and Flare Sleeve | 42.5 | 37.5 | 17.5 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.8 |
| Petal Sleeve | 5 0 | 35 | 10 | 5 | 0 | 1.7 |
| Churidaar sleeve | 62.5 | 15 | 17.5 | 5 | 0 | 1.65 |
| Bell Sleeve | 6 0 | 20 | 17.5 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.625 |
| Sleeve with cuff | 67.5 | 15 | 15 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.525 |
| Bishop Sleeve | 7 0 | 20 | 7.5 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.425 |
| Raglan Sleeve | 7 5 | 12.5 | 12.5 | 0 | 0 | 1.375 |
| Cowl Sleeve | 7 5 | 20 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 1.3 |
| Neckline Style | | | | | | |
| Name | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Mostly | Always | Weighted Average |
| Deep U Neckline | 2.5 | 2.5 | 15 | 67.5 | 12.5 | 3.85 |
| Medium U Neckline | 0 | 10 | 12.5 | 72.5 | 5 | 3.725 |
| Boat Neckline | 17.5 | 22.5 | 30 | 27.5 | 2.5 | 2.75 |
| Deep Square Neckline | 2 0 | 25 | 30 | 22.5 | 2.5 | 2.625 |
| Deep round neckline | 27.5 | 17.5 | 22.5 | 32.5 | 0 | 2.6 |
| Medium round neckline | 17.5 | 35 | 22.5 | 22.5 | 2.5 | 2.575 |
| V neckline | 12.5 | 37.5 | 40 | 7.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|--------|------|------|------|-----|-------|
| Sweetheart Neckline | 17.5 | 30 | 42.5 | 7.5 | 2.5 | 2.475 |
| Jewel/round neckline | 2 0 | 42.5 | 15 | 20 | 2.5 | 2.425 |
| Square neckline | 2 0 | 35 | 30 | 12.5 | 2.5 | 2.425 |
| Matka Neckline | 27.5 | 25 | 35 | 12.5 | 0 | 2.325 |
| Nehru Collar | 4 0 | 25 | 27.5 | 7.5 | 0 | 2.025 |
| Plunging V Neckline | 5 0 | 22.5 | 12.5 | 15 | 0 | 1.925 |
| Key hole Neckline | 4 5 | 32.5 | 20 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.8 |
| Raised Neckline | 72.5 | 10 | 10 | 7.5 | 0 | 1.525 |
| Shirt Collar | 7 0 | 15 | 10 | 5 | 0 | 1.5 |
| Scalloped Neckline | 7 0 | 15 | 10 | 5 | 0 | 1.5 |
| Halter Neckline | 72.5 | 12.5 | 12.5 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.45 |
| Spaghetti Straps | 77.5 | 5 | 15 | 2.5 | 0 | 1.425 |
| Peter Pan Collar | 72.5 | 17.5 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 1.375 |
| Strapless | 82.5 | 5 | 5 | 7.5 | 0 | 1.375 |
| One-shoulder Neckline | 77.5 | 15 | 7.5 | 0 | 0 | 1.3 |

The classic simple blouse (4.05) with 4 darts and yoke in front (3.3), front opening with hooks (4.35), huge margins at side seam (4.775), bodice length 14” to 15” (4.075) with a set- in sleeve (4.25) with sleeve length of 10” to 11” (3.75), deep U neckline at back (3.85) and medium U neckline in front (3.725) emerges as the most prominent and preferred style for blouse. The results reveal minimal variation of silhouette or style with backless blouse, kurta style blouse, choli cut empire blouse trailing the simple blouse significantly.

The predominant bust shaping technique following the 4 dart with yoke is the princess fit blouse, 4 dart blouse without yoke and the katori blouse. The creators reveal the presently waning katori blouse was most preferred in Gujarat few decades ago replaced now by the blouse with yoke. The princess cut is a western influence adapted and mastered by creators only in the recent years. Preferred closure apart from hooks explored in blouses are concealed zipper at side seam and doris or piped fabric extensions for tying to hold a backless or angarkha blouse. Elaborate tassels and bust cups which were negligible earlier are significantly on the rise as experienced by creators. Pockets are sewn in blouses for mostly elder women and are on the verge of extinction in the current Indian blouse.

A major shift remarked by creators is the recurrence of the sleeve length 10” to 11” and the gradual decline of the interim dominance of the short sleeve. Sleeve pattern is mostly unexplored with the rare occurrence of see-through sleeves or puff sleeve. Cold sleeve and peekaboo sleeve as a trend are on the decrease of popularity. The women continue to wear deep U and round necklines with the occasional variations with the V neck, square, sweetheart and

matka neck mostly to break the monotony. Boat neckline and jewel neckline are the only fuller necklines with reasonable prevalence.

Conclusion

The creation of the blouse and the relationship between the wearer and the creator is a bittersweet experience for both the stakeholders. Perceiving the blouse from the lens of the creator demonstrates immense passion, engagement and pride in the creators as they master the classics and experiment with the modern cuts and influences. The increasing rise of the internet image brought in by the consumer is the current challenge for the creators. Many creators themselves are seeking knowledge and inspiration from the internet as they surge ahead in their self-learning mode. The craftsmanship of sewing continues to be remarkably neat with great fitting and exactness (Gupta, 2016). If the creators continue to customize and adapt new patterns affordably, they are poised to continue their invincible position undeterred by the marginal rise of ready to wear blouses.

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