

## **Burn the Sari or Save the Sari? Dress as a Form of Action in Two Feminist Poems**

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**Abstract:** This essay analyzes two poems that examine the sari’s materialization of gender norms and the degree to which the dress may be used to subvert such norms. Jayaprabha’s Telugu poem “Burn the Sari” appeared in 1988 (with an English translation in 2002), and Dalit author Jupaka Subadra answered her with “Kongu, No Sentry on my Bosom” in 1997 (English translation in 2009). The works were penned amidst the strong wave of political and social activism that occurred over the last two decades, and each poem articulates an intensely emotional and energized feminist discourse. Together they illuminate an important turning point in the contemporary history of Telugu women’s activism in Andhra Pradesh, India.

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Over the past few years, one item of women’s clothing has received much international attention. After the United States entered into war with Afghanistan, and then Iraq, journalists and scholars have provided countless images of the Islamic veil. Islamic veiling traditions have received extensive discussion in a number of arenas, albeit of varying quality; by contrast, relatively little worldwide attention has been paid to the meanings of another highly visible garment that conveys national and gendered identity: the sari. Ancient references to the sari abound in Indian verse,<sup>1</sup> and in poetry the sari often appears in childhood memories, symbolizing a mother’s loving presence.<sup>2</sup> In recent decades, two poems have used the sari to consider the constrained experiences of women, using a familiar material item to articulate an emotionally charged discourse about social justice. Although the sari has generally been a lauded object, in 1988 a new feminist poem forcefully rejected the dress altogether and, in 1997, a powerful and memorable poetic reply was mounted.

This essay argues that Jayaprabha's "Burn the Sari" (1988) and Jupaka Subadra's "Kongu, No Sentry on my Bosom" (1997), poems written by Telugu women writers, deserve scholarly attention for several reasons. Each poem reported from an underrepresented (and thus rare) perspective, contributed to a turning point in the contemporary history of Telugu women's activism in Andhra Pradesh, and intervened in Brahmin-influenced discourse about purity, chastity, and dress. Furthermore, "Burn the Sari" positions the sari as a symbol of conformity and as inseparable from confining gender norms, and calls on listeners to abandon the garment in protest of these norms. In contrast and reply, "Kongu" reclaims the sari as a treasured possession of hard-working women and, in the process, achieves the activist goal of redefining women's bodies as not merely tough but unstoppable.

Geographic places often become marked through dress. Just as Scotland is known for the kilt and the Western U.S. for the cowboy hat, India and Indian women are commonly represented as a figure draped in a sari. Before looking closely at poetry about the sari, it is fitting to sketch in the history and cultural importance of this internationally recognized garment. Prominent among the many contributions of the Indus Valley civilization (3500–1700 BCE) is the domestication of cotton and the technology to dye it. Artisans, weavers and other skilled workers established India as a flourishing textile center, though waves of European traders, particularly the British East India Company, arriving in the eighteenth century, quickly damaged the export economy. Cotton mills in Bombay and Ahmedabad, which were built in the 1850s, as well as British taxes on locally made products, led to a drastic decrease in returns for local artisans. By the late nineteenth century Mohandas K. Gandhi and his followers chose to make the *swadeshi* (homegrown industry) movement central to the process of winning independence from British rule. Citizens, particularly women, were encouraged and expected to weave and wear their own cloth; soon, many women displayed their *khadi* saris as a symbol of national pride and autonomy from foreign intervention.<sup>3</sup> The "Quit India" movement of 1942, in which British cloth was boycotted, damaged the British export system and effectively demonstrated that unfair trading practices would no

longer be tolerated. Through all of these events, nationalist public discourse depicted female citizens as dignified paragons of Mother India, embodying the land and nation itself. As Partha Chatterjee's work demonstrates, the independence movement enlisted women as active agents in the nationalist project: women were to guard the inner life of the community and embody the superior Indian traditions of private life, which were associated with Hindu, upper-caste, and upper class practices. The daily wearing of the sari reinforced the garment as essential to an ideal woman's appearance and symbolized a traditional way of life that must be protected (Chatterjee 137, 146–48, and *passim*). As Priya Srinivasan notes, when India became a nation in 1947, its flag had a wheel at the center, one meaning of which makes the spinning wheel and homegrown clothing central to the nation's consciousness. Unquestionably, "the histories of cloth, saris, independence, women, [and] nation" are interlaced (Srinivasan 153).

India's regional clothing traditions are extraordinarily diverse and are too numerous to be summarized easily, although a popular educational poster for children makes an abbreviated attempt (see fig. 1<sup>4</sup>). Going far beyond a mere north-south divide, Indian clothing customs vary between different castes and professions in any given semi-rural or rural area and may shift in terms of fabric, ornamentation, color, or draping style. Despite this diversity of dress, the sari has pride of place. Tourists at Ramoji Film City in Hyderabad, for instance, are invited to pretend to be an Indian woman by posing for a photo behind a headless figure draped in sari cloth. This is just one instance among many that demonstrates the sari's iconicity; for instance, India's beloved and widely available Amar Chitra Katha comic books often feature sari-clad women on the cover, and Bollywood starlets are seen all over the world in costly high-fashion versions of the garment.<sup>5</sup> As a Hindi riddle asks, "Is the woman in the sari or is the sari in the woman? Sari is the woman and woman is the sari" (qtd. in Banerjee and Miller 145). The sari has become a virtual synonym for an Indian woman.

Contemporary Indian citizens may use a style of clothing to maintain group identity, display socio-economic, caste, and religious markers, and communicate ideas about the character of the wearer, and fieldwork

has caught up to this reality: fortunately, many ethnographic accounts now pay serious consideration to dress. For instance, Linda Lynton and Sanjay K. Singh's *The Sari* (1995), Emma Tarlo's *Clothing Matters* (1996), Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller's *The Sari* (2003), and Srinivasan's



Figure 1. Commercially sold chart of People (and Clothing Styles) of India

*Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (2012) analyze the varied cultural uses of the sari from different angles. Among many other conclusions, this body of work confirms that in such an internally variegated country as India, generalizations about the sari (or indeed any part of Indian material culture) often tell only a partial truth. As an example, consider Christopher Bayly's claim that the special spiritual status of cloth in pre-colonial India stems from the cloth's proximity to the body. While cloth and its closeness to the body were significantly interrelated in Indian society, the degree to which this belief was widespread and important amongst all groups is difficult to prove, as Tarlo convincingly argues (Tarlo 14). Nevertheless, generally speaking, fabric is a treasured material in India and the sari in particular receives special favor: it symbolizes auspicious marital status as the cloth has long been associated with Laxmi, the goddess of fertility and abundance.<sup>6</sup>

Jayaprabha's Telugu poem, "*Paitani Tagaleyyaali*" or "Burn the *Pallu*," sharply criticized the sari and presented this national dress in an unusually negative light. Translated into English as "Burn the Sari" (2002), the poem reflects an upper-caste feminist discourse on clothing and, as declared by the bold title, asks the audience to reject a clothing custom associated with conformity to patriarchal ideas. Nine years later in 1997, Dalit writer Jupaka Subadra's poem "Kongu, No Sentry on my Bosom" (1997; English translation 2009) specifically counters "Burn the Sari." (*Kongu* is a Telugu word for *pallu* or sari end piece.)<sup>7</sup> Though the speaker of each poem is aware of how the sari symbolizes feminine subservience and societal constraint of the female body, each protests these associations in markedly different ways. Jayaprabha's "Burn the Sari" exhorts women to create a new future by destroying the sari. The commands are clear. In contrast, Subadra's "Kongu" is much more subtle: it slowly draws the reader physically and spiritually to the speaker and describes the many contexts in which the sari is of use, thereby showing that discarding the dress would lead to hardship. In Subadra's conception, the earlier command to burn the sari has taken no account of how the cloth sustains women as they perform manual labor.

"Kongu" calls on listeners to re-envision the *pallu* or *kongu* as a field-working woman's tool of survival and the most reliable source of com-

fort she possesses. Though both poems defy traditional heteropatriarchal strictures, rules that are enforced in the name of a divinely ordained womanly chastity and obedience, “Kongu” not only defies such rules, but casts off an older mainstream feminist view of both sari and body as inherently confining.

### I. Clothing: Through a Classical Looking Glass

Before discussing the poems in detail, their rebellion against classical Indian tradition should be acknowledged. When classical Telugu poets describe the female body, they generally reinforce a Sanskrit masculinist aesthetic, making the woman into an object whose sexual desirability flatters the potential male “owner.” This description of the female body as viewed by the male gaze was common in the *Kavya* tradition. The women poets of the *Bhakti* movement are an exception; they use bodily images to express their devotion and attempt to transgress institutionalized patriarchal boundaries.<sup>8</sup>

Both “Burn the Sari” and “Kongu” rebel against Brahmin-influenced ideas of dress signifying the wearer’s purity, marital status, and disciplined sexuality. As is well known, Brahminical discourse mandates different practices for male and female devotees. A male worshipper’s unclothed body is regarded as pure, whereas a female worshipper’s body must be clothed as a sign of modesty and cleanliness. That is, a woman’s body is seen as leaky and unpredictable and therefore in need of concealment. The sari’s long association with sexual loyalty in marriage can be traced back to Draupadi’s story in the epic *Mahabharata*. Draupadi becomes a stake in her husband’s disastrous gambling game. On the verge of being publicly humiliated and raped by her enemies, the victorious and villainous Kaurava brothers, Draupadi is rescued because the divine Krishna replaces her ordinary sari with an infinitely long, never-ending sari, preventing her from ever being disrobed. The tale suggests that the forces of evil, as represented by the Kaurava brothers, are overcome by the forces of virtue and goodness. Jayaprabha’s “Burn the Sari” criticizes depictions such as these that represent the sari as a shield of purity; the text argues that idealized femininity ought not to be synonymous with sexual unavailability and constraint.

## II. The “Burning” Idea

Jayaprabha, who was born in 1957, is a well-known Telugu writer. The author of seven books of poetry and four volumes of literary criticism, her work has appeared in several Indian and international anthologies including *Women Writing in India Volume II*. When “Burn the Sari” was published in 1988, it became an immediate sensation for its controversial feminist message. The poem led to poems and stories by other female writers and spurred a heated discussion in the sphere of modern Telugu writing about how and why a poem might address women’s biological realities and daily concerns.

Along with “Burn the Sari,” poems such as “*Saundaryaatmaka Himsa*” [Beautiful Violence] by Vimala, “A Call Girl’s Monologue” by Ghantasala Nirmala, and “*Sarpa Parishangwam*” [A Serpentine Embrace] by Hymavati, reprinted in the 2007 anthology of women’s poetry *Neeli Meghaalu* [Blue Clouds] (2007), spoke bluntly about bodily processes and recontextualized ideas about chastity and beauty standards.<sup>9</sup> As the writer Olga explains:

Women now began to speak about their experiences, their position in the family, their sexuality, motherhood, and labour. For the first time they realized that it was possible to think freely and explore these issues independently, without the interference or guidance of men. This realization resulted in a tempestuous wave of women’s writing entering the hitherto calm waters of Telugu literature, bringing in its wake a turbulence and tension never experienced before. . . . The feminist movement made its appearance in poetry and anchored firmly in it, critically questioning the values and language of the dominant literary culture. . . . Labour rooms, birthing, menstruation, abortions, pots and pans, kitchens, spices, brooms and dusters marched proudly into the realm of literature. (*Neeli Meghaalu* 24–25)

“Burn the Sari” is usefully divided into three different stages. The poem begins by highlighting the sari’s conventional association with chastity and the way that a young girl is “taught shame” for wearing it and standing up too tall and proud:

Burn this sari.  
When I see this end  
Of the sari on my shoulder  
I think of chastity, a log  
Hung from my neck.

It does not let me stand up straight  
It presses my chest with its hands  
bows me down,  
teaches me shame  
and whirls around me  
a certain bird like confusion (199)

Jayaprabha's poem questions the cultural work the sari performs as a symbol of its wearer's femininity, an ideal that mandates slouching, hiding, and feeling shame about bodily desire rather than walking proudly. The poem presents chastity not as a desirable quality but as a deadweight or log on women's necks. As the poem goes on to exhort women to destroy the sari, an enveloping "quicksand" that prevents a woman from remembering that she is "human," the poet reclaims women as more than their marital and sexual status.

From a global human rights stance, freedom of movement and expression are indisputably important; thus the degree to which people in a given location, particularly women, may choose what to wear often becomes a symbol of their autonomy and liberty.<sup>10</sup> It is in this vein, then, that the speaker screams angrily at the entrapping symbolism of Indian women's traditional clothing in the poem's second stage. In protest over the sari's marking of the mature yet compulsorily monogamous and restrained body, the poem critiques the dress for making a woman a member of "the walking dead"; in Foucauldian terms, the insistence on post-pubescent women donning the sari and fully covering their legs, hips, and breasts trains a "docile body" for society's use. The poem's command to instead be an active body and throw the sari specifically into a fire draws on classical and modern associations of fire with both female innocence and female victimhood: burning provokes images of Sita's



purity (as displayed by her test by fire); of women who have committed *sati*; and of young wives murdered through kerosene stove “accidents.”

In the third and final stage of the poem, the speaker declares that the sari embodies “the blame / generations have laid upon me, / the unseen patriarchal hand” (200). Speaking of “the unseen patriarchal hand” was a relatively new idea in Telugu literary discourse at this point. The immediate response from male readers was to dismiss the women as “activists” rather than poets.<sup>11</sup> “Burn the Sari” ultimately rejects the dress in order to reject ironclad rules laid upon women’s bodies and women’s own internalization of those rules.

The medium of poetry communicates this rejection economically and unmistakably. Didactic poems, such as W. H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939,” Haki Madhubuti’s “Men and Birth,” and C.P. Cafavy’s “As Much as You Can” serve a purpose: they usually encapsulate a pertinent aspect of the historical moment in which they were composed and call on the listener to take action. The challenge? To address a listener directly without sounding so parental, patronizing, or pedantic that the listener recoils. Didactic poetry often awakens its listeners with a rap on their knuckles, but readers may not desire to reread the poem and re-experience that sting. While one can appreciate the need for bold exhortations in social protest movements, such poems may not be as enduring as more complex artistic creations. “Burn the Sari” conveys a compelling message but simultaneously reveals the limitations of didacticism in poetry.

A final weakness of “Burn the Sari” is that in order for the poem to make a needed but narrow political point, the sari’s versatility must be neglected.<sup>12</sup> As described in Banerjee and Miller’s *The Sari*, for instance, wearers may engage in an elaborate code of movement to signal inaccessibility or playful flirtatiousness: “Many women gradually become more confident and adept at exploiting the sexual potential of the sari for their own purposes and amusement,” whether through donning revealing chiffons or by selectively letting the *pallu* slip (85). As the sari can be draped in a variety of ways to minimize or maximize skin exposure, it seems fair to question how Jayaprabha can reduce the sari’s many variations into one message.

### III. My Clothing is My Companion: The “Different” Voice of a Dalit Woman

In due course as new Dalit and Muslim political identities began to take shape, the number of feminist voices grew, and their words gained prominence.<sup>13</sup> As Narayana Rao, writing in 2002, observed: “A woman’s body, her desires, the pleasure she enjoys as a woman and the pain she suffers, are now available themes for literary language. Menstruation, pregnancy, and abortion are now accepted as themes for poetry” (316). Women’s writing took an additional turn when Dalit women writers brought caste identity into the discussion. Their oral narratives had proliferated and Dalit women activists marked 2000 and onwards as the decade of Dalit women (Syamala 1). The strong words of “Burn the Sari” received an answer in Subadra’s “Kongu.” “Kongu” contributed to a new wave of activist Dalit poetry and supplied a new and distinctive perspective on the sari.<sup>14</sup>

Subadra, who was born in 1962, has a Master’s degree in Telugu Literature, works for the Secretariat of Andhra Pradesh, and in 1992 founded a Dalit women’s association. Subadra wrote when Telugu Dalit writing was in its infancy and helped create an audience for Dalit and working class perspectives; her poetry and stories have been published in serials such as *Bhoomika*, *Andhra Jyoti*, *Ekalavya*, and *Udyoga Kranti* (Bharati 167). Subadra came to prominence as a writer nine years after “Burn the Sari” appeared, owing to a number of works, including “Kongu.”

In “Kongu,” Subadra powerfully shows how, to borrow Gopal Guru’s phrase, “Dalit women talk differently” and must continue to do so in order to rightfully distinguish themselves from “non-dalit, middle-class, urbanized women activists” (81). It should not surprise us that a Dalit author is likely to connect the command to be chaste not solely with upholding family honor but with preserving one’s livelihood. For instance, coupling between a young woman and a landlord, often an instance of rape, will prevent a family from maintaining good ties with landowner’s wives and may result in the loss of the family’s site of labor. It is notable, for instance, that Subadra’s poem begins by alluding to the sari-end’s proximity to an emptiness or hunger and thus the wearer’s vulnerabil-

ity. Immediately following the word hunger, however, is the name of a popular and fierce village goddess: “Having clung to my hunger, / My kongu hangs on my belly / Like deity-Maisamma on the embankment.” Here the co-locality of hunger and cloth are ennobled by comparing their position to that of Maisamma, who is revered by lower-caste people as the daughter of Siva and is well-known for her ferocious anger and emotionality. The allusion gives the *kongu* or *pallu* a more aggressive association than would traditionally come to mind, adds gravitas to the poem, and imparts an aura of reverence as the poem turns from an empty belly to busy hands, describing the everyday and ill-compensated tasks performed by a laboring woman.

Both poems scrutinize the sari but concentrate on markedly different concerns. Each speaker arranges the sari differently (one, as indicated in the first stanza of “Burn the Sari”, with the *pallu* over her shoulder and the latter with the *pallu* hanging in front<sup>15</sup>), and each finds that the sari choreographs her movements differently. The speaker in “Kongu” finds the sari not a strait jacket but an easy extension of her body, the cloth moving loyally with her as a shadow might. The ability of unstitched clothing to move as one with the body and in particular the *pallu*’s ability to become a woman’s “third arm” (Banerjee and Miller 37) is memorably captured as the sari end blots sweat and tears.

Subadra’s poem answers back to “Burn the Sari” quite deliberately, as is made clear by her final question of why one would ever set the cloth on fire. In contrast to associating the sari with chastity, the poem foregrounds the cloth’s absorption of bodily toil and fatigue. The listener must register the sari’s participation in the relentless demands and physical motions of work:

When my sweat streams for wages,  
 My kongu blots sweat on my face as breeze.  
 When I stack star-like  
 Grains, tubers, granules in my kongu,  
 It twinkles on my head like a moon.  
 When wearied, working the fields and crops,  
 My kongu offers me relief as  
 A cloth for napping on bare floor.

When my sorrow drizzles  
From eye to sky,  
It's my soiled kongu  
That takes me into its bosom,  
Wiping my tears like a mother. (313)

Subadra's phrases de-mystify the sacredness attributed to the sari by focusing on the unglamorous ways a laborer uses it every day. As the poem unfolds, the wearer's different uses of the sari narrate the Dalit woman's work-dominated identity. While her life is labor-intensive it is not joyless:

If my kongu was a clarinet around my waist,  
Farm-songs would give it chorus.  
It's an inalienable part of my sweat and work  
Bed, pleasure and sorrow. (313)

Note that the sari has the potential to be a "clarinet," emanating music as it sways while producing what is necessary for life to continue. Daily chores can be seen as acts of creativity. The *kongu* is present in all arenas of a woman's life, sharing her "pleasure and sorrow." The phrase conveys a perhaps deliberately ambiguous meaning, with "pleasure and sorrow" both separated from "sweat and work," yet also interrelated by the repetition of the word "and" in both phrases.

Pleasure's appearance is momentary, however, for the poem as a whole makes no reference to the worker's entertainment or laughter. Material objects such as gifts or borrowed items often indicate the unfolding of social relations, but here the multi-purpose *kongu* appears to highlight the woman's social isolation.<sup>16</sup> She is not taken into the arms of a lover but only has her "soiled kongu" to take her into "its bosom"; furthermore, that which "fondles her cheeks," "fondles her child," and "licks" her skin is no human partner but instead only the ever-present, ever-faithful cloth. Avoiding an overly self-pitying tone, the speaker indicates that her constant motion rarely follows from play, asking, "When is it that" the *kongu* "hangs on my bosom?" (313). Truly, how can the sari-end ever stay still on a body that is constantly laboring?

Conversely, the choice of the words “fondle” and “lick” hint at the sensory self-pleasure that anyone, whether partnered or unpartnered, might experience, as the proximity of the cloth whispers to the skin. The cloth supplies a sensuousness to the wearer. This self-supplied stimulation, the poem subtly suggests, is not acknowledged by traditional heteropatriarchal commands to wear the sari as a sign of womanly discipline; similarly, however, if one followed the feminist call to burn the sari, this pleasurable touch would be lost.

Unlike “Burn the Sari,” “Kongu” brings us physically closer to the dress and we become aware that it changes material state when receiving and displaying the wearer’s bodily fluids: it catches monthly blood, absorbs tears, and blots sweat. Similarly, as Srinivasan notes in the context of Bharatnatyam dance, the garment can hardly stand in for “idealized Indian womanhood”; nor can draping it absolutely guarantee *anga suddha* (bodily perfection), as the cloth will always bear the marks of the labor performed in it (xi). It is significant that Subadra refers to blood and sweat as these references remind the reader that women—and low-caste women in particular—are stigmatized by the perception that their bodies uncontrollably leak fluid. Women’s monthly menstrual flow and the presence of fluids at childbirth reveal bodily boundaries as porous. Low-caste bodies, owing to their historical (and sometimes current) position in the labor system are further associated with toil in dirt (Lamb 222). Significantly, tears, blood from wounds, and cervical fluid are not seen as dirty in the same sense as menses and childbirth fluids. Thus an innate biological aversion to all fluid outflow cannot explain the phenomenon of singling out some fluids as unclean. Instead, as Elizabeth Grosz affirms, a specific anxiety about woman’s sexual availability and society’s inability to shut off her fertility creates the basis for stigmatizing women’s fluids and women themselves. To return to the poem, “Kongu” helps the reader see the body and its fluids as helplessly dialogic: every human body is permeable and motion-filled, and thus every garment also undergoes change and defies the notion that there is only one way of knowing that form of dress.

“Burn the Sari” defies the totalizing patriarchal gaze but appears to replace it with a return gaze that is ultimately no less fixed. In a sense,

“Burn the Sari” so firmly aligns the dress with imprisonment that any version of the drapery must be renounced. In the act of stressing confinement, the poem offers no alternative and ends with the body dangling—free of the sari, but also indeterminate (note that the poem is *not* entitled “Burn the Sari, Don the Salwar”). By contrast, “Kongu” offers a way of seeing that illuminates the sari and the body underneath as a site of polymorphous wishes and needs. The poem’s Dalit speaker contests the notion of the sari as an oppressive wrap; women lose too much if the sari is reduced to an anti-feminist symbol. Although the poet could have chosen an angry or sneering tone, we argue that the speaker’s detached tone is more powerful and allows the reader to question overly narrow images of the sari and its wearer. It also subtly opens up a space from which to question the persistent neglect of women’s non-waged work. As the poem concludes,

My kongu is at work ceaselessly.  
It’s not a sentry on my bosom.  
It’s not a burden on my heart.  
How do I blame it in public?  
How could I survive setting it aflame? (313)

Just as the speaker cannot reject her body, she cannot burn its second skin of cloth: the aid that the cloth renders her by the hour enables her survival.

As one of the oldest and most versatile forms of clothing known, the sari occupies a prominent place in the imagination. Whether showing the wearer’s closeness to divinity (as in the story of Draupadi), the wearer’s virtue and fidelity to tradition (as in so many scenes from Hindi cinema), or the wearer’s nurturing qualities (in the many poems that remember sari-clad mothers), a sari-draped figure is the globally-accepted image of an Indian woman. Jayaprabha’s “Burn the Sari” brings welcome attention to the sari’s operation as a kind of chastity belt and launches an important dialogue about how clothing traditions may suppress freedom of expression and constrain women’s behavior. Subadra’s response provides readers with a perspective from a low-caste daily laborer and forces us to recognize both the vulnerability and resilience of bodies sub-

jected to constant toil and impoverishment. Out of an array of images of the sari, what stands out is the originality of Subadra's poem. "Kongu" performs a vital intervention: the poem forces us to acknowledge the body as a vulnerable organism vulnerable to being smudged, smeared, and stained while simultaneously impressing the listener with a woman worker's strength and resourcefulness.

## Notes

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- 1 For instance, injunctions to wear context-specific clothing go back to the ancient *dharmasastra*, a category of Sanskrit texts that spell out the duties of righteousness. See Leslie's "The Significance of Dress for the Orthodox Hindu Woman."
- 2 For instance, in Vaidehi's Kannada poem "My Mother's Sari" the speaker envelops herself in the sari, "uttering with a long sigh / the word Amma — / a word that remains forever fresh, / however worn with use."
- 3 By contrast, many Indian men—in response to pressure from British administrators—adopted Western clothing in order to occupy public positions that were overseen by Britons.
- 4 Image is reprinted with permission from *An Ideal Boy: Charts from India*. Ed. Rao, Geeta, and Wolf. Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2001.
- 5 See, for example, the cover of *Chandrabasa* at <http://www.amarchitrakatha.com>.
- 6 We made this connection through DeNapoli's work on female *sadhus'* refusal to marry; male renunciants often harbor suspicions that female *sadhus* will be lured into sexual degeneracy as these women do not embody the female ideal, an ever-devoted and monogamous goddess Lakshmi always by the side of her Lord Vishnu.
- 7 Other Telugu words for the sari's endpiece are *painta*, *sengu*, *seeragu*, *pamita* and *vallevatu*. The word sari, from the Kannada word *sire*, has only come into common circulation in the twentieth century (Lynton 198). For a partial list of Indian language words associated with the sari see Lynton's *The Sari* (198).
- 8 For example, in many poems Akkamahadevi implicitly challenges the classical idea of overly dazzling clothing either on the body of ordinary women or goddesses. This is clearly a strategy to show the body as a vehicle for spirit. Akkamahadevi even deconstructs the entire idea of archetypal clothing by emphasizing disciples' naked presence in front of their deities and thus makes the case that renouncing material goods is a natural result of communion with the divine. See, for instance, the poems translated by Ramanujan in *Speaking of Siva*.

- 9 For a close reading of several feminist Telugu poems from this viewpoint, see Afsar's *Aadhunikata-Atyaadhunikata* [Modernity and Postmodernity].
- 10 The headscarf has recently become an intense point of focus in Western media; often, discussions of its use do not look closely at the varied meanings it has for those who wear it, and it is frequently associated with the repression of women. In deploying the overdetermined and highly politicized image of the Islamic veil as strait-jacket, commentators have neglected to examine clothing habits around the world. An enormous variety of groups prescribe clothing, particularly for women: in many Indian villages, for example, young women must wear a half-sari as the body shows signs of puberty and a sari for marriage rites and the rest of her life, even if some find it constraining. Yet this situation has not captured the public attention of the veil. While the sari does not cloak a woman as definitively from the gaze (or possibly prevent instant recognition when in a group) as the full hijab may, it is important to acknowledge the confluence of political and economic factors that lead to some items of clothing being singled out for scrutiny and criticism. For an essential essay on how the veil has functioned as a symbol of feminism and resistance to colonial power, see El Guindi's *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* and Abu-Lughod's compact and telling piece, "The Muslim Woman: the Power of Images and the Danger of Pity."
- 11 It should be noted that, at the time, a significant number of non-feminist Telugu women writers remained silent, neither speaking for or against these new feminist poets. Over time they moved from tolerating their feminist counterparts to accepting them as adding to poetic achievement. For more on this controversy, see Satyanarayana's *Streevaada vivaadaalu* [The Debates of Feminism].
- 12 Although clothing may be thought to communicate certain aspects of the wearer's character, the intended message can differ from that which is received. For more on this subject see Tarlo's *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* and Lurie's light-hearted *The Language of Clothes*.
- 13 For an introduction to the formation of the All-India Backward Muslim Morcha (AIBMM), see Sikand's "The 'Dalit Muslims' and the All-India Backward Muslim Morcha." Ansari's "Rethinking the Dalit Muslim Movement" analyzes choices made by the All India Pasmada Muslim Mahaz.
- 14 For a critique of upper-caste and middle class feminist writing in Telugu, see Narasayya's *Padunekkina Paata: Dalita Kavivram* [*Sharpened Song, A New Anthology of Dalit Poems*].
- 15 Swaralipi Nandi drew our attention to this detail.
- 16 For additional discussion of the connection between material cloth and social relations in an African context, see Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*.



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