



Indira Gandhi

DR BRAMBEDKAR SET THE TEMPLATE WHEN HE ADOPTED WESTERN WEAR OVER TRADITIONAL ATTIRE AS A DELIBERATE ACT OF BREAKING WITH TRADITION

MAYAWATI WEARS EVERY PALE COLOUR BUT FOR PURE WHITE, A COLOUR SHE ASSOCIATES WITH BRAHMINISM

MAMATA BANERJEE, A BRAHMIN, WEARS WHITE COTTON SAREES WITH THIN COLOURED BORDERS OF EVERY HUE EXCEPT RED OR CRIMSON, WHICH COULD ALLUDE TO THE COMMUNIST PARTY SHE OVERTHREW

JAYALITHAA'S SARIS AND CAPES WERE FASHIONED FROM METRES OF PRINTED SILKS AND SATINS TO MERELY COVER THE LEADER AND SERVE AS FUNCTIONAL CLOTHING

# POWER DRESSING

The sartorial preferences of India's political class have, until recently, almost always been dominated by references to Mahatma Gandhi and khadi. While this may have been reflective of the truth for the decades after independence, the scenario today is drastically different, with over 45 per cent of the population below the age of 24 and with no direct connect with either the freedom movement or the impassioned patriotism that khadi sought to invoke. While male politicians have largely stuck to the kurta pyjama with little consideration for style, the only significant change seems to be that khadi has given way to linen. However, much attention has been paid to the clothing choices of female politicians—albeit most of it derisive, and without any serious engagement.

Since independence, India has had a female president and a prime minister, besides over 16 women chief ministers and several others appointed as governors. Surprisingly, most conversations are still limited to the elegant choices of the Gandhi ladies, who continue to favour khadi and handloom textiles. However, there are three other ladies who have dominated the political space in contemporary

Their fashion choices are lampooned by those who do not understand them, but for India's foremost politicians, personal style is more than image—it is armour, says Pramod Kumar KG

India, and they have fashioned themselves in entirely different moulds. Their choice of garments, colours and silhouettes are all careful constructs that subliminally inform and help maintain curated auras. It is therefore astonishing that most commentary in popular culture seems to be centred around lampooning the handbag that Mayawati is always seen with, the Dhaniakhali cotton sari and rubber flip-flops that Mamata Banerjee prefers, or the cape-like fabric that the late Jayalithaa adopted.

Their constituencies, however, watch and adopt their every reference and representation.

Mayawati's handbags have been diligently incorporated into her statues and resonate with her followers, who consider the accessory a sign of a modern-day working professional, as well as a graduation from the menial jobs and servitude that Dalits were historically confined to. Much fascination for this accessory in English media is tempered by its almost complete absence in vernacular mediums. This is because the latter get it, and Mayawati herself makes no concession towards those outside of her voter base.


Similarly, while urban media had a field day dissecting Banerjee's choice of rubber flip-flops and a cotton sari at the Isha Ambani-Anand Piramal wedding last year, her vote bank saw the same image as that of a powerful leader striding into a gathering of high society on her own terms. Jayalithaa's cape, too, was a subject of much discussion, whereas to her followers it was an unspoken but explicit reminder

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of the 1989 episode in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly when a minister from the then ruling party tore her sari in an attempt to disrobe her. Mayawati was to face a similar harrowing experience in 1995, when legislators of the ruling party attacked her at the Lucknow State Guest House and she barricaded herself inside her chambers. By a series of deliberate fashion choices and a deep sense of agency, these leaders have safeguarded their dignity and created their own iconography in a tradition no less impressive than those adopted by Gandhi.

Urban isolation from realities in the hinterland means that we are unable to read images in the manner employed by the protagonist. Dr BR Ambedkar set the template when he adopted Western wear over traditional attire as a deliberate act of breaking with tradition and the stranglehold of caste inequalities that paralysed everyday Dalit life in India. Mayawati wears every pale colour but for pure white, a colour she associates with Brahminism. In contrast, Banerjee, a Brahmin, wears white cotton saris with thin coloured borders of every hue except red or crimson, which could allude to the Communist Party she overthrew. This places her firmly amongst her vote bank of women, who don't draw attention to themselves and get on with the task of doing what they do—just like their chief minister. In an alternative take, Jayalithaa's saris and capes were fashioned from metres of printed silks and satins to merely cover the leader and serve as functional clothing, quelling all connection to her past as a glamorous movie star.

A careful study of older images of these ladies in their early political years shows another reality, perhaps a reflection of political naivety that was quickly ironed out as convictions strengthened and personal style set in. One way of looking at their clothing choices is that of powerful single women in the humdrum of mainstream politics, deliberately shying away from any vestige of female vanity. The undercurrent reality of today's world means that fashion choices are influenced by everyday practicality, decorum and safety. However, political optics insidiously inform us that these ladies, like Gandhi before them, don't shy away from proclaiming themselves and their persona, wrapped in their chosen garb, as a manifestation of their message. 

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Sonia Gandhi



Jayalithaa



Priyanka Gandhi Vadra



Mamata Banerjee

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