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TAILORING EXPECTATIONS

How film costumes become the audience's clothes

'Bollywood' film costume has inspired clothing trends for many years. Female consumers have managed their relation to film costume through negotiations with their tailor as to how film outfits can be modified. These efforts have coincided with, and reinforced, a semiotic of female film costume where eroticized Indian clothing, and most forms of western clothing set the vamp apart from the heroine. Since the late 1980s, consumer capitalism in India has flourished, as have films that combine the display of material excess with conservative moral values. New film costume designers, well connected to the fashion industry, dress heroines in lavish Indian outfits and western clothes; what had previously symbolized the excessive and immoral expression of modernity has become an acceptable marker of global cosmopolitanism. Material scarcity made earlier excessive costume display difficult to achieve. The altered meaning of women's costume in film corresponds with the availability of ready-to-wear clothing, and the desire and ability of costume designers to intervene in fashion retailing. Most recently, as the volume and diversity of commoditised clothing increases, designers find that sartorial choices "on the street" can inspire them, as they in turn continue to shape consumer choice.

Introduction

Film's ability to stimulate consumption (responding to, and further stimulating certain kinds of commodity production) has been amply explored in the case of Hollywood (Eckert, 1990; Stacey, 1994). That the pleasures associated with film going have influenced consumption in India is also true; the impact of film on various fashion trends is recognized by scholars (Dwyer and Patel, 2002, pp. 96–7), in popular and virtual media (Kapadia, 2004), and by filmgoers as well. Affluent Indian men and women have drawn on film costume to inspire their own clothing choices for several decades.

Two connected themes run throughout this paper; the changing role of costume designers (known as dress designers in India) in mediating and interpreting fashion for women in the middle and upper classes, and a transformation in the semiotics of female costume, specifically the meanings of costume excess. These shifts, in turn, correspond to the rise of consumerism among wealthy Indians structured by, and responding to, the rapid increase in the availability of commodities for sale in retail

markets since the 1990s. Contemporary dress designers, through their film costuming, and their parallel careers as fashion entrepreneurs, seek to intervene more directly in the consumption choices of filmgoers, with implications for the working lives and social relations of the many people in India that produce apparel. Central to these interventions is a radically revised orientation, both inside and outside films, toward western clothing, material display and commodity acquisition, compared to what existed prior to the era of economic liberalisation in India (Mazzarella, 2003, p. 5; Viridi, 2003, p. 201).

My approach to consumption proceeds somewhat indirectly, relying upon interviews with designers, dressmakers and tailors in Mumbai¹ rather than with consumers. Intensive study of consumers is clearly warranted, yet the research I have done, focused primarily upon the production of film costume, yields critical insights into designers' integration into fashion markets, and their ideas of the proper relationship of film costume to clothes consumption.

'It became a trend'

The pleasures of film costume have enticed viewers into becoming consumers for many years. A tantalising reference in Barnouw and Krishnaswamy's (1980) book, *Indian Film*, points to the influence of film on personal appearance as early as 1939 (p. 81):

Who can deny that Kanan's novel way of hair-dressing in *Mukti* has been "the method of dressing for modern girls? ... that Barua's curious cap in the same picture has won Calcutta-wide recognition as the most "up to date" headwear? ... that Lila Desai's dancing sari in *Didi* is in vogue as "Lila sari"?

Hindi film has continued to spur fashion trends up to the present. Yet there is something puzzling here; Hindi film is considered to be a quintessentially fantastic and escapist phenomenon in which there are 'dialogues instead of speech, costumes rather than clothes, sets and exotic settings, and lavish song and dance routines, hardly everyday familiar surroundings' (Viridi, 2003, p. 2). In conversation, designers freely allude to their bold use of colour in film costume. Moreover, costumes for lead actresses are distinct from clothes worn by ordinary women in their basic form and structure. Tailors who make costumes for leading film actresses are especially skilled at producing snug, body enhancing outfits, using distinct cuts, darts and padding, in distinction from ordinary tailors who are under no such requirement (Wilkinson-Weber, 2004). (See figure 1.) How can Hindi film spur the consumerist desires of Indian viewers while displaying the outer reaches of costume fantasy?

In truth, the trends ignited by film have rarely come from the most extreme of costume expressions. A straightforward semiotic of female costume has informed the industry for much of its existence; traditional Indian garb communicates positive attributes of modesty and obedience while western, or overly revealing clothes belong to 'negative' female characters that lack virtue and restraint (Kabir, 2001, p. 95). The Hindi film vamp was for many years set apart from the film's heroine by her choice of western 'glamour' outfits. She, more than the heroine, embodied excess, and excess



FIGURE 1 A montage of costumes at a 'filmi' tailor's workshop. Most photographs are of actresses in revealing *ghaghara-colis* (skirt and bodice). These kinds of costumes are deliberately tailored to enhance characteristics like breasts and hips (photograph by the author).

was necessary to communicate an important set of moral strictures regarding materialism, westernisation, and sin. The vamp was one emblem of modernity; the girl who defies tradition and exists outside the bounds of decent society (Gahlot, 2001, p. 287). The vamp did not exhaust all possibilities of being modern, but she embodied the most dangerous extremes of modern life and modern sensibility. The vamp required modernity – often expressed in sartorial choices – as a necessary, though not sufficient condition of her existence. She was variously a ‘semi-clad vixen’ (Nayar, 1977, p. 73), in ‘gaudy, skin-tight outfits’ (p. 83) or ‘skimpy clothes’ (Kabir, 2001, pp. 62–3). However, it was her behaviour, her ‘uncontrolled shakti, or power’ (Nayar, 1977, p. 83), sexual aggressiveness and, as famed vamp Helen puts it, ‘a cigarette in one hand and glass of whisky in the other’ (quoted in Kabir, 2001, p. 98) which together with the outrageous wardrobe (simultaneously causing, and caused by, the aberrant behaviour, in film logic), put her beyond the pale. (See figure 2.) The vamp, as a specifically modern girl, was distinguished by her exercise of autonomy in the clothes she wore, an autonomy denied to both the virtuous *bahu* (daughter-in-law), and another film staple, the fallen courtesan, or *tawaif*. The vamp was a ‘loner’, (Kabir, 2001, p. 98), a deviant form of social individuation that was the premise as well as the price of her modernity.

The vamp was clearly an urban figure, steeped in the modern tastes of urban society. She thus personified the temptations and corruptions of anti-Indianness’, where being Indian meant identifying with, and committing to, constructions of tradition and virtue. The vamp’s indulgence in, and enjoyment of material excess was one of her trademarks. She was, above all, glamorous. While a source of pleasure for the (presumably male) viewer, she was not supposed to be a model for emulation by female filmgoers, even if they found her sympathetic (Kabir, 2001, p. 96). The heroine, the vamp’s counterpoint, could be copied, but even her costume might sometimes stray to the limit of what was considered appropriate wear for decent women. Women in India have largely remained far more committed to Indian clothing styles than their male counterparts have (Tarlo, 1996, p. 153). Only a small number – mostly young, unmarried, urban and well off – presently wear western-style casual clothing, like trousers, jeans, t-shirts and blouses; even fewer have worn evening gowns, or swimsuits like popular film heroines Nargis and Nutan. The padded bust-lines and hips of heroines in song sequences concede little to either the practical or moral requirements of clothing outside film settings. Initiating a clothing trend has always meant presenting to the audience an innovation in costume that ran the risk of overstepping explicit (or implicit) sartorial boundaries. Filmgoers have always had to decide how, and in what way, the innovations they observed and enjoyed could be safely assimilated into their own self-presentation.² It has thus been important that the heroine’s anchor point has been her evident comfort in the clothes of restrained, and specifically Indian, femininity – the ‘simple starched sari’ of Nargis in the 1955 film, *Shri 420*, for instance (Kazmi, 1998, p. 32).

Copying costumes prior to the 1990s had always involved modulations upon forms of Indian dress. Film interpretations of these outfits enabled middle and upper class women to expand the repertoire of colours, textures, styles and cuts in their clothing. In the process, film costume assisted in the visual construction of regional, as well as national identities. The copious documentation of folk costume by colonial and post-colonial writers is almost unknown outside select academic and social circles.



FIGURE 2 Actress Helen in a provocative pose typical of the vamp. Her loose hair, stocking-clad but exposed legs, and short skirt are explicitly 'western' and exemplify the look of the hedonistic vamp. She is scantily clad (certainly by the standards of the time when Helen's career was at its peak) and she 'shamelessly' directs her gaze toward the viewer.

The findings, as well as the faults of these records have filtered into the popular imagination through the work of dress designers who have drawn upon them to create a 'filmi' look that nevertheless carries with it an air of authenticity. Leena Daru, a designer active from the 1960s to the early 1990s, spoke of her work with a 'typical Calcutta *sari*'. '[S]o I had used all off-white georgette and I attached the borders, so on the screen she looked very slim and very fine, so then it became a trend'.

Film has contributed to contemporary understandings and uses of both the *sari* and the *salwar-kamiz* (trousers and long shirt) (see Dwyer and Patel, 2002, pp. 85–8). Embodying important notions of femininity and national identity, the *sari*

communicates the embeddedness in decent society of the character wearing it. In a slight, but telling sentence, journalist Bhawana Somaaya (1999, p. 72) remarks that ‘distributors got upset with filmmaker Hrishikesh Mukherjee for putting their favourite vamp Bindu in a saree’. The *salwar-kamiz* is conventionally a ‘Muslim’ or ‘Punjabi’ form of dress for women, but today is considered suitable wear for young women, and increasingly, older women of a variety of backgrounds and faiths. Innovations in the styling of *salwar-kamiz* in ‘social’ pictures of the 1960s and 1970s, tightening the *salwar* into *churidars* (tight-fitting trousers), for example, or accentuating the bust line with a body-hugging fit, or shortening the *kamiz* – as seen on 1960s heroines like Sadhana, Asha Parekh and Vyjanthimala, lent a fashionable cachet to *salwar-kamiz* that they had not previously enjoyed (Dwyer and Patel, 2002, p. 88). Later, Sridevi’s white *salwar-kamiz* in the 1989 film *Chandni* disrupted conventional discomfort with the colour white, usually associated with widowhood, permitting the production and wearing of white *salwar-kamiz*. (See figure 3.)

Although the costumes in song sequences and ‘item numbers’ – or stand-alone set pieces showcasing a scantily-clad ‘guest artist’ – are often the most resistant to copying because of their unsuitability for wear by respectable women, some have been appropriated and widely adopted. The most famous of recent years is probably

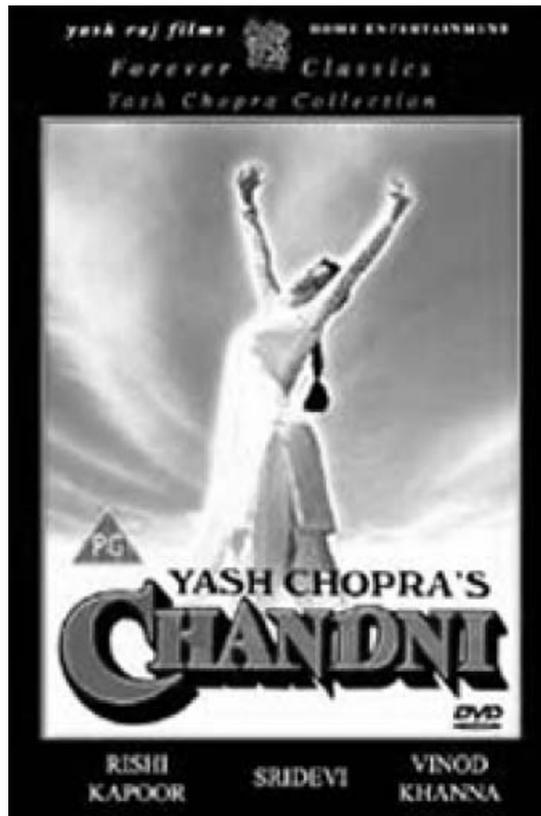


FIGURE 3 Publicity poster for *Chandni*; actress Sridevi appears in one of the film’s trademark white *salwar-kamiz*. (Yashraj Films)

Madhuri Dixit's purple *lehnga* (long skirt) from 1994's *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, which spawned a plethora of imitations. (See figure 4.) Devi S., a middle class resident of Mumbai and a friend of mine, told me about the impact the film had on her fellow students' dress habits:

I remember how my friend got red lace material, and stitched it the same way as Madhuri's dress (showing the pic. [sic] to the tailor). It was the talk of the college when she first wore it!



FIGURE 4 Actress Madhuri Dixit in her famous *lehnga* from *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*. Although the dress is stylistically Indian, it acquires a 'filmy' glamour from the exposure of the wearer's back. (Eros International).

The residual tension surrounding the heroine's costuming becomes apparent when we consider that audience appropriation of costume has often involved adaptations of the outfit that stripped it of its most dangerous 'filmy' connotations. The ideal for heroine's film costume is that it should fit tightly, in particular enhancing and exaggerating the breasts: all master tailors who stitch leading actress's clothes say as much.

In a *choli* (blouse), you've got to have a real underbust shape. It can't be loose from bustline to waist. So that's quite a difference, and the regular customers don't use it. It's got to be a good fit for a regular customer, but that's all... I must give the Indian film artist shape.

Just as the 'filmy' tailor adapts the cuts that are used in everyday clothing to produce film costume, so the ordinary tailor to whom the customer goes for her outfits adjusts the costumes back to a mainstream ideal. Clients may not seek an exact copy of what they see on screen, but with their tailor or dressmaker, select, adapt, and negotiate the outfit that they want. In these ways, middle and upper class women adeptly manage their engagement with film costume, and by extension their identities in relation to film referents. The competence required to see, remember and mentally appropriate what is seen on screen is considerable; these seemingly simple acts suggest that the intensity of the experience of watching actresses in films is as strong in India as elsewhere (see Stacey, 1994, p. 194).

I interviewed women's dressmakers in Amboli and Juhu (both localities in northern, suburban Mumbai) who had made costumes under contract for television serials but primarily catered to a private clientele. Many customers came to them asking for outfits like those worn by characters in films, or favourite television soap operas; yet they did not necessarily request a direct copy of what they had seen. Some asked to combine elements from several costumes in an idiosyncratic bricolage: a *kurta* (shirt) with a sleeve like 'the one that Sushmita wore in film x', with a neckline adapted from 'what Ash wore in film y'. Others asked to make a copy, but 'raise the neckline here', or 'lengthen the sleeve there' to produce a more modest outfit. Others requested modifications because they needed to stick to a fixed budget. Wealthy NRI (non-resident Indian) clients are something of an exception, since the aesthetic and moral constraints upon clothing exercised in much of India do not necessarily apply elsewhere. One story was of a woman living in Australia who wanted exact duplicates of all 18 outfits worn by actress Rani Mukherji in a film song sequence with price no obstacle.

Inevitably clients are disappointed when the outfits fail to live up to their expectations. Designers and dressmakers explain this as a failure of the client to acknowledge the idiosyncrasies of their own bodies; even stars have relied upon the 'filmy' tailors to craft their costumes so that unsightly features can be concealed. Moreover, most ordinary clients typically do not ask for the daring cuts and excessive padding that, in effect, sculpt the actress's body into its desired shape (one prominent film heroine allegedly wears *cholis* so stiffened and padded that they are more like upholstery than costume). Complained one designer:

After the film, they see something, they would say we want [you] to make an outfit like this, we want [you] to make an outfit like she has worn. [I say] "But

you don't have height, you don't look... On the contrary you tell me what will look nice on you I will prepare accordingly", but "no, we want that one".

The dressmaker and tailor act as interpreters of film costume for private clients, and their success in these endeavours depends upon the skill with which they can create outfits that imitate their film progenitors while yet accommodating the pragmatic, moral and aesthetic goals of the consumer. In these cases, film styles spread unevenly and idiosyncratically, with derivative outfits produced out of a set of negotiations between consumer and supplier. One may argue to what extent the finished garments reflect the vision and tastes of the original designer, or rather those of the dressmaker, or the client, or even the humble tailor, whose skill underwrites the entire business.

From vamp to college girl

Some intermediate film characters have straddled the boundary of vamp and heroine: Nadira's frigid heiress in *Aan* (Viridi, 2003, p. 46), or Saira Banu's spoiled NRI in *Purab aur Paschim* (Viridi, 2003, p. 68). Both start the film as women alienated from Indian ideals of womanhood, only to be reconciled with them by the end. In both cases, this is signalled, among other things, by a transformation in clothing from western to Indian styles. The commitment of the heroine to the family, her denial of her own autonomy, determines her identity as a heroine in these cases. The contemporary heroine is, in part, the descendent of these liminal characters. Zeenat Aman and Parveen Babi are two actresses whose appearances in the 1970s mark a watershed of sorts; the incorporation of the vamp into the heroine, or when 'western became Indian' (Kazmi, 1998, p. 41; Kabir, 2001, p. 93; Viridi, 2003, p. 170). That Aman and Babi incorporated fashion into their screen personas was not new; Sharmila Tagore, Sadhana and Babita had done the same in the preceding decade. It was Aman and Babi's embrace of western glamour (in the form of sequined evening gowns) that was new, and more importantly, their wearing of jeans and blouses, or what Shabana Azmi points out 'college girls were wearing' (quoted in Kabir, 2001, p. 71).

By the late 1980s, the heroine had consistently been allowed some of the vamp's prerogatives: she danced and she provocatively displayed her body. Western clothes for women began to feature more and more in films, segregated by scene from Indian clothes, but not segregated by character (see figure 5). Western clothing today is worn selectively by the heroine, communicating that she is 'modern and cosmopolitan', able to shift comfortably between different global contexts and settings (Dwyer and Patel, 2002, p. 88). The mainstream heroine of today, the 'college girl', is simply trying on a variety of costumes on her way to a socially mandated position as a respectable married woman. The change of costumes throughout the film for the present-day heroine is merely a protracted transition from affluent youth to equally affluent adulthood, and conservative values and social relations are aggressively promoted throughout (for example, in such films as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, or *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*).



FIGURE 5 Actress Antra Mali in a poster from the film *Gayab*. Mali's costume is entirely western: cropped tank top, skirt, boots, plus the droll inclusion of a man's tie. Her legs, like Helen's in figure 2, are largely exposed, and her stance is a playful one. Unlike Helen, she does not engage the viewer directly, conveying a more demure impression. Antra Mali is not considered a vamp, nor does she play negative roles. In this particular film, she is the heroine, the 'girl of his dreams' to the leading man. (Yashraj Films)

The partial absorption of the 'bad girl' by the 'good girl' has not invalidated certain expository rules of costume: the overall direction of wardrobe changes almost always tends toward a conservative, Indian ideal, while the most revealing outfits tend to be quarantined within item numbers. Now, however, western-style skirts can be

swapped for *saris* without introducing any startling dissonance in characterisation, or communicating a sea change in the attitudes and affiliations of the character wearing them.³ The richest cascade of costumes continues to appear in song sequences, where the heroine can assert herself in the sexually charged manner of the old-style vamp. Even *ghaghara-colis* are traded in for *saris* in the end; observe, for example, the shift from Aishwarya Rai's figure hugging, backless dance outfits as Nandini in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* to the dark and sombre *saris* of the same character as a married woman. There are other permutations. Kareena Kapoor as Pooja ('Poo') in *Kabhie Khushi Kabhie Gham* makes her first appearances wearing micro mini-skirts, bright red leather pants and clinging tops – a deliberate homage to Alicia Silverstone's character in the Hollywood film *Clueless*, according to designer Manish Malhotra. Poo is undoubtedly spoiled and vain, but she remains lovable and loyal to sister Kajol, and attracts the attentions of hero Hrithik Roshan. By the end of the film, her high spirits have been set aside as firmly as her pants and mini skirts, but she cannot be regarded as a reformed character so much as a mature one, ready to undertake the responsibilities of married life, quite untroubled by what she has done, or worn, previously.

In *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, actress Kajol changes 'from tomboy college-girl or mini-skirted flirt into a self-sacrificing Sita-esque ideal of domestic goddess/goodness' (Ciecko, 2001, p. 123).⁴ The college girl is certainly not a 'brazen hussy'; instead she is distinguished by her adherence to those requirements of tradition the vamp is most anxious to violate – protection of one's virginity and acquiescence to paternal authority. Far from compromising or contradicting these ideals, the heroine's choice of western clothing is now consistent with them.⁵

'My dresses used to be so popular'

The transformation of meaning effected for western wear, and the domestication of glamour, coincides with a shift in the kinds of designers employed to work on films. Popular Hindi films employ several dress designers. Typically, lead heroes and heroines have their own designer, as do leading character artists. Junior artists make do with either their own clothes or used outfits from previous productions.⁶ Major stars insist upon having their own designer work on their clothes, and indeed, it is largely true that the bigger the star, the bigger the designer they are associated with.

Dress designers cannot be termed – in Hollywood parlance – 'above the line' workers in popular Hindi film, since their names do not always appear in a film's opening credits. Yet media discussion of films – in newspapers, film and lifestyle magazines, and online sites – celebrates the collaboration of designer and star in ways that allows designers for film to enjoy a public celebrity that has few parallels in western cinema. Designer names remain attached to stars as they extend their public persona into fashion spreads and stage-managed public appearances (photo shoots in magazines like *Filmfare* typically list designer, hairdresser and make up artist next to the pictures; these are typically the same people the actress employs for her film work). This situation allows designers a degree of freedom to incorporate their own work, typically employing global fashion elements, into their costumes, although every single one insists that their costuming is done 'according to character'. Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that the designer's

first obligation is toward his or her star, not to a script, or even to a director. Stars, in turn, are assumed to be less interested in their character than in how good they look. Madhava Prasad (1998, p. 32) argues that commercial Hindi films are made in a 'heterogeneous production process', in which their various elements – music, narrative, costumes, for instance – are composed at the point of shooting from independently constructed parts (Prasad, 1998, p. 47). The proliferation of star designers, each often working in deliberate isolation from each other, seems entirely consistent with Prasad's model. Dwyer and Patel, 2002, p. 24) caution that some directors and producers – Yash Chopra in particular – preside over highly organised and hierarchical productions. In these instances, the director is a powerful figure, strongly engaged in all details of the film. If costumes are to be subjected to any overarching vision, which an abundance of designers typically tends to vitiate, this can only come if the director is himself influential enough – another 'star' if you like – to impose his vision upon the film, and his wishes upon the various designers. In recent years, directors like Yash Chopra (Dwyer and Patel, 2002, p. 130), Karan Johar and Sanjay Leela Bhansali have been well known for being particular about how their films look, and for playing prominent roles in the conceptualisation and execution of costume. Karan Johar, in fact, has dress designer credits on the 2000 film *Mohabbatein*, and has been listed as leading actor Shah Rukh Khan's designer on such films as *Dil to Pagal Hai*, and *Veer-Zaara*. These examples notwithstanding, many directors, even today, prefer to leave most costuming decisions to the stars and their designers to work out by themselves.

The first credited costume designer was Bhanu Athaiya (listed as Bhanu Mati) for Guru Dutt's 1957 film *Pyaasa*. Following in Athaiya's wake four or five female dress designers were active from the 1960s to the 1980s and early 1990s, each working for specific heroines. Designers of this era were drawn from what Dwyer (2002, p. 91) terms the 'older middle classes'. They had received extensive education in the arts (two had been classical dancers, others had university degrees in Fine Arts and Music), and were more obviously influenced by the folk arts of India, whose appeal and relevance in the heyday of these designers was facilitated by post-Independence studies of native handicraft and textiles. The mass appeal of some of their designs came up frequently in interviews with these now-retired dress designers. Mani Rabadi, who designed for Mala Sinha, Zeenat Aman, Parveen Babi, and Hema Malini, gave some clear indications of how directly her designs translated to business 'on the street':

My dresses used to be so popular, when I used to go to shops to buy material, the owners used to thank me, "Maniji, thank you very much, we sold so much of that dress".

Once for Hema Malini I made one *sari*. An embroidered *sari*. That *sari* sold so much that somebody from Lucknow once sent me a whole basket full of mangoes with a letter that, 'Madam, we sold so much Hema Malini *sari* that we are sending [these mangoes] as a token of our respect'.

Another designer, Leena Daru, known for her work with Asha Parekh, Rekha and Sridevi, understood the anticipation with which audiences awaited the latest

appearance of a favourite heroine and, by extension, the costumes with which she had clothed them: '[A] new film which is going to come, you know, it is going to be in the theatre, people go and see that what she [Rekha] has worn'. She knew very well that audiences acted on what they saw. For example, in the film *Vijeta*:

I have used all Maharashtrian fabric, I made all the *salwar-kamiz* like that. They became a rage. In college, people started wearing it.

None of the designers from this era ever talked of designing an outfit with the clear expectation that it would be widely copied. Instead, costume designs only 'accidentally' spurred consumer interest, in that the relationship of designer and star excluded all other interests on the part of the designer. Few, if any, developed simultaneous interests in designing specifically for a retail market. If certain designs attracted the attention of viewers and would-be consumers, this was played out at the level of face-to-face relations with the viewer's own tailor or dressmaker. In as much as consumers knew who the designer was and approached her, or knew the master who worked on these clothes, they would approach them, but otherwise there was no retail organisation into which to direct consumer acquisitiveness.

Designers since the late 1980s are far more likely to maintain a fashion career alongside their film design career, whether this is in couture, prêt lines, developing high street fashion chains, or simply having worked in fashion boutiques. Present day designers are on friendly terms with stars, sharing professional and personal life with them. The commercial interventions I am about to describe are arguably attributable to stars and directors, and not just designers. However, more than anyone else designers reap the benefits of the commercial consequences of what they create, and it is the connection between the growth of fashion retail and a particular visualisation in film that I am interested to chart. Screen life shades into everyday life when star costumes and personal wardrobes converge, primarily in the area of western casual wear and sportswear. Contemporary actors and actresses are defined less by a distinct look that can be developed around them and their personality (there is no present day equivalent of a 1960s 'Babita bouffant', or a 'Sadhana blouse'), than by a sustained presentation in the uniform of contemporary, global youth – sportswear, jeans and so on – and the selective, yet crucial, embodiment of 'Indianness' in *ghaghara-colis*, *salwar-kamiz* and *saris*. (See figure 6.)

'Everyone is wearing modern costumes or western costumes'

Today's dress designers are determinedly clothing their stars in Indian-style couture, brand name casual clothing, as well as high fashion items that are as recognisable and acceptable in the UK or US as they are in India. Fantasy is still an important component of Hindi pictures, erupting most obviously in song scene extravaganzas, where the local array of obviously Indian clothes is on display. Fantasy is also communicated through the sheer profusion of clothing forms that meets the eye, oscillating between global and local referents to betoken glamour, sophistication and wealth (Dwyer and Patel, 2002, p. 93).



FIGURE 6 Kareena Kapoor and Fardeen Khan wearing casual western clothes in *Khushi*. These are the items of choice for young, affluent consumers in the major Indian cities. (Eros International).

Increasingly, the costumes that appear in films are acknowledged by affluent Indian youth as fit for their consumption, no matter how fantastic or clichéd the narrative into which they are inserted; as a 23-year old woman, quoted in early 2004 in the weekly magazine, *India Today*, remarks, 'Indian films tend to go over the top, but the clothes in *Kal Ho [Naa Ho]* were wearable'. The connection between film and fashion changed fundamentally in the 1990s, corresponding to greater exposure to global fashion through cable and satellite TV, a proliferation of fashion and glamour magazines, the influence of an affluent NRI population, and a sharp rise in the availability of ready-to-wear garments in a changing retail scene.

The impact of so-called economic liberalisation in India on retailing and consumption is widely acknowledged by scholars: Jyotika Virdi (2003, p. 201) quotes the National Council of Applied Economics Research assessments that

the 'consuming class' grew from 12% in the 1980s to 18% in the 1990s (see also Mankekar, 1999, p. 75). Already, purchasing power had increased in the 1970s (Mazzarella, 2003, p. 72). The consolidation of a specific kind of film, the romance, as it replaced the revenge sagas of the previous decade and a half, was hardly coincidental; the 'wholesome' family film – dating back to *Maine Pyar Kiya* in 1989, but solidified with the enormous success of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* in 1994 – had a unique affinity to the burgeoning consumer economy of the 1990s (Viridi, 2003, pp. 15, 201; Ganti, 2000, p. 350; Dwyer, 2002b, pp. 52–3; Nayar, 1977; Kabir, 2001, pp. 215–6; Ciecko, 2001; Aftab, 2002). This is because the characters, typically enormously wealthy, surrounded by or wearing the markers of consumer culture, were still portrayed as morally upstanding, and critically, authentically Indian (Dwyer, 2002a, p. 167).

These romances owe a considerable aesthetic and conceptual debt to producer and director Yash Chopra, whose romantic films span a period that precedes and includes the one in question. The cinematic depiction of fantastically wealthy people, enjoying a lavish and westernised lifestyle based on foreign travel and enjoyment of consumer goods is, according to Dwyer, largely a Chopra invention. In the process, he constructed a new kind of Indian, and a new Indianness, one not based in stock sartorial appearances or place of residence, but something 'inherent' (Dwyer, 2002a, p. 181), a 'survival of values, a certain emotional structure' (Dwyer, 2002a, p. 161). Yash Chopra heroines were among the first to demonstrate that surface appearances did not compromise their Indian womanliness as 'the guardian of tradition and family values' (Dwyer, 2002a, p. 139).

Chopra may be the arch-exponent of this adjustment of Indian self-image in films, but the impetus behind these constructions is more broad-based. As Mazzarella (2003, p. 98) points out in his study of Indian advertising, the dilemma of how to capture and define locality simultaneously with making reference to global culture has been ingeniously solved by disarticulating an older connection between development, austerity, and Indian identity, and replacing it with a discourse that maps consumerism on to a reconstituted, commodified 'Indianness'. Just as in advertising, film visuals indulge the pleasures of viewing excess without this being experienced as 'unIndian'. On the contrary, it is the assertive avowal of Indian authenticity that is one of the 'stamps' of films like *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Viridi, 2003, p. 203; Ciecko, 2001, p. 123). Recently, the most obvious demonstration of the principles of visual pleasure comes in ever more breathtaking examples of Indian costume, like the heavily-embroidered outfits designed by Neeta Lulla, and Abu-Sandeep (Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla) for 2002's *Devdas*, and the stylistic and semiotic transformation of western wear for women. Specifically, what is important is the repositioning of western apparel from connotations of deviance and dangerous modernity, to conformity and reassuring cosmopolitanism.⁷

The new, young designers almost universally argue that they are striving to introduce a level of professionalism into design that was absent before. This claim seems to be based, at least implicitly, on the commitment of these designers to larger careers involving fashion retailing, couture and 'styling' of stars to create 'looks' that seamlessly combine elements of global fashion with localized cuts and colours. Since

the days of Aman and Babi, more actresses have been plucked from modelling and beauty pageant backgrounds (for instance, Aishwarya Rai, Sushmita Sen, Yukta Mookhey), shaping the heroine persona to the extent that veteran actress Jaya Bachchan has said that the heroine today is 'more of a model than an actress' (quoted in Kabir, 2001, p. 80).

Recalling that all major heroines have their own dress designer, those dress designers who are fashion entrepreneurs help these female stars maintain a connection to the fashion world, and the stars in turn keep the designers' names at the forefront of entertainment media. Continued participation in fashion shoots and ramp shows means that bodies must be rigorously maintained, maybe surgically altered, and other image enhancements that are now readily available, like coloured contact lenses, are used freely. The actress's body is parcelled into parts that can be enhanced and improved with commoditised goods and services. Says designer Anna Singh, '[E]arlier, dressing the stars meant coming up with clothes, which the public would or would not copy. Today it means being the consultant for everything the star wears... projected not just on the screen, but also on magazine covers and publicity stills' (quoted in Roy, 2002).

In general, while the 'filmi' cut and fit of clothes remains, there has been a conscious retreat among designers from the 'filmi' look. Says designer Rocky S:

It's not like just "I'm a star, I have to look shiny", which used to happen, which has changed completely. And I think designers like me, we're trying to explain to them it looks younger and much better to be fashionable because [otherwise] people laugh at you; "what are you wearing?"

Today's dress designers are anxious to repudiate the vulgar excesses of costuming that existed before they came on the scene. They dismiss the westernised clothing of older films – typically worn by the vamp – as singularly tasteless, and attribute these costume 'disasters' to the lack of sophistication, worldliness, and professionalism of older designers. In so doing, present-day designers seek to distinguish themselves from their predecessors and assert their superior value as fashion brokers.

In their counterarguments, older designers draw attention to a simultaneous loss of creativity in costuming and rise of consumerist greed:

Basically you [can't] talk to younger crowd about cuts and all that, they all mix and match; pick up this from here, pick up this from here, give it, finished.

You know what happens nowadays is all the stars are very well covered, because they all go abroad for shooting, so what the heroines do is, buy their own clothes there, from producer's money of course – they make them buy. Then they use them in the picture, so there is nothing like designing in there, isn't it? Everyone is wearing modern costumes or western costumes.

The self-publicising of designers is also a topic of criticism, 'All the young designers, they don't work, but publicity they will [do]. Before starting the film, next day in the paper they will [say] they are doing such and such film'.

The whole point of publicity, though, is to raise the profile of the designer in the fashion domain, not so much the film domain. The rapid growth of

satellite television, the exposure of affluent consumers to channels that rerun films, advertise, and otherwise display for viewing a cornucopia of goods, presents an opportunity, as well as a context, for the self-promotion of the fashion – not just dress – designer.⁸ The shift in the kind of designers working for film, (connected in itself to the changing productive conditions and semiotic functions of film costume since the early 1990s), has meant that the acquisitive desires of the affluent filmgoer can now be satisfied in more immediate and direct ways through the forging of a closer connection between film costume and commercial clothes retailing in India's metropolises.

'Costumes now are becoming more real...'

Now, more than ever before, film costume is obtainable by the wealthy as a readily available commodity. Films such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* set the stage in 1998, overtly displaying western brand name clothing even before these brands became available in India for purchase (Dwyer and Patel, 2002, p. 89; Kapadia, 2004). In Indian metropolises today, shopping malls are mushrooming. The domestic market for retail clothing is around Rs. 750 billion (Gahlaut, 2004b, p. 72).⁹ Creations that appear on screen crop up with stunning rapidity in shops, already stitched and ready-to-wear. Tailored Indian garments were available for purchase before, but now western wear, influenced by films, can be bought off the rack. Soon after actress Preity Zinta wore a long overcoat in *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, versions cropped up in North Indian stores during an unusually cold winter. 'Its sudden movement in India proves ... Bollywood is finally influencing the upmarket, trendy youth' (Gahlaut, 2004b, p. 72). Young men and women with disposable income buy tops, t-shirts and jeans like those worn by stars like Kareena Kapoor. Shops in up-market shopping areas like Khan Market and Greater Kailash in Delhi, or Lokhandwala, Bandra and Kemp's Corner in Mumbai sell the priciest versions; the cheaper versions can be picked up at Delhi's Janpath, or Bombay's Fashion Street, or any other street markets around the city.

Film designers have made deliberate forays into these burgeoning markets. Already some of them make special items like wedding trousseaux, or special event clothing for private clients. Now new opportunities are presenting themselves. In 2002, news outlets reported that Nita Lulla had forged a relationship with Biba Apparels, an ethnic wear brand for women distributed in shops throughout India. Her brief was to choose costumes from popular films, like *Taal*, *Pardes* and *Badhai ho Badhai*, making garments that will 'replicate the theme, colour and style of the films, but will be more wearable and affordable'. As part of the initial marketing campaign, actual costumes from *Devdas* were displayed in, among other places, the Crossroads mall in Mumbai. Against this background, Lulla herself commented that this was to be her signature prêt line, 'basic Indian ethnic wear for women with a contemporary touch. However, it will borrow colours and theme elements from Bollywood' (Menon, 2002).

The 'ethnic market' comprises clothes that co-opt – and thereby help construct – elements of folk and regional designs that appeal to the sense of distinction of buyers (Tarlo, 1996, pp. 296–304). Designers like Anita Dongre speak readily of the inspiration for design that Indian crafts yield. The popularity of 'fusion' clothes, where

Indian styles are adapted and to some extent westernized, assert the special place and identity of Indians in global fashion (see Mazzarella, 2003, p. 5). Even now, Indian clothes take on stylistic features more associated with western wear, like halters, slits and noodle straps' (Gahlaut, 2003, p. 54). An even newer tendency is to combine elements of western clothing with Indian dress; for example, jeans may be matched with *kurtas*, or a t-shirt and pants accessorized with *jholas* (bags) and *chappals* (sandals) (Gahlaut, 2004a, p. 60).

Other designers are looking beyond the most elite and affluent consumers towards a larger mass-market. Says Rocky S, who has dressed Hrithik Roshan, Bipasha Basu and Amisha Patel:

[F]ive and a half, six years back, I wanted to get a break from movies, so I opened a store. I wanted to start in something that is like a prêt, not couture at all. All the designers were doing only couture and expensive clothes. I wanted to do younger fashion; people could wear clothes and forget about it after two or three times, without feeling a pinch in the pocket. I want to get into fashion, high street fashion as a serious thing, create my stores all over.

In Mumbai, a television actor and sometime designer said to me:

You see, right now costumes are very realistic. They're very actual, they're very happening. Earlier you had heroes and heroines wearing leather jackets, and wearing trousers, and frills, something that was just not in vogue. Now you have *Dil Chhata Hai* that has been done by a new designer. You basically see three stars and they are wearing t-shirts and casual clothes, it looks like they just walked in from their homes, which is more real, which is more appealing. Costumes right now are becoming more real and more classy.

Arjun Bhasin, the dress designer for *Dil Chhata Hai* and more recently, *Lakshya*, is among several designers in recent years who are striving to achieve what journalist Kanika Gahlaut (2004a, p. 60) terms 'super-realism' in film costume. Designers like Malhotra, Singh and Lulla have mainly attempted to shape the perceptions and practices of the wealthiest consumers. However, the street sensibilities articulated by Rocky S and Arjun Bhasin are clearly in the ascendancy among the latest crop of designers, who are attempting to insert themselves into the choices of the middle classes – in particular, the college girl who shops not at the priciest stores in town, but at the cheaper bazaars. 'Stylists are paying attention to what ordinary people in pubs and colleges wear and are using these elements on screen' (Gahlaut, 2004a, p. 60) at the same time as they seek to influence them. The fashion 'street' is now both source and target of film costume, testament to the consolidation of the power of commodity consumption in major Indian cities.

'I feel there's a sensibility'

When contemporary journalists and critics hail the arrival of fashion in films that is 'wearable', with which audiences can 'identify', they pass over the productive

conditions for costume in pre-1990s India, when ‘seat of the pants’ solutions were used to solve problems and create ‘looks’ that were impossible to translate into commercial expressions. I argue that the transition from the cinematic vamp to heroine, marked in clothing as much, if not more than any other symbolic property, is intimately connected to changes in textile production and availability, in turn connected to adjustments in the moral evaluation of excess.

Film costume is a subset of the wider category of clothes; a selection as well as a construction. Its relation to a market in clothes is contingent but variable. Designers cannot make clothes out of non-existent or inaccessible components, although they can craft unique costumes out of scarce materials, if necessary. Whether filmgoers’ pleasure at the visual delights of cinema is refocused into commodity purchase depends as much upon their access to commodities as upon prevailing standards of taste; in other words, the existence of working relationships and conventions that allow film costume to be copied by many people, in many places, at roughly the same time.

Contemporary Hindi films are in the business of ‘maintaining, affirming, and/or resituating their Indianness, given the country’s rapid westernization’ (Nayar, 1977, p. 75). As film provides the showcase for clothes that well-off Indian consumers are more and more able and willing to buy, elite taste is being used to marry excess – the conspicuous and ceaseless consumption of a vast range of clothes – to virtue, when in the past, virtue was opposed to excess. Indeed, so intrinsic to film are the new sumptuary rules regarding commodities like clothes that they are no longer regarded as genuinely excessive by their creators, their wearers, or the target consumers. The turn towards ‘super-realism’ in some recent films is better understood less as a withdrawal from the freakishness of classic Bollywood than a recasting of conspicuous consumption using the rhetorical devices of improved taste and intelligence, in which fetishism is concealed, when before it was exposed.

The consumerism celebrated in contemporary films does not appear in discrete scenes, but constitutes a ceaseless replacement of consumer items by new ones, a system of material signs in which western and Indian clothes communicate, above all, about the appropriateness and visual beauty of wealth and limitless acquisition. Skirts, jeans, sports shorts and evening wear indeed give way to bridal outfits and *saris*, but they are all top quality, expertly fitted, sumptuously decorated – and all being enjoyed by bona-fide Indians (Nayar, 1977, p. 86).

When the vamp of the 1960s and 1970s dressed up, her costumes clearly violated norms of honour and decency in their style and form, but their transgressive quality did not end there. The lavishness of the vamp’s wardrobe, its unrepentant hedonism, ran counter to social ideals that emphasized restraint and self-denial. In the days of Helen or Bindu, the excess of the vamp was what set her apart; her enjoyment of lavish clothes, or even of carefully chosen western accessories, like cigarettes and shoulder bags, was consciously distinguished from the muted desires of ‘normal’ Indian women. Yet this appearance of excess on screen was only obtained with the greatest of difficulty. Says Mani Rabadi of her work for Helen:

I’ve never seen a cabaret in my life although I’ve made so many cabaret costumes for Helen. I used to produce out of imagination. They’ve got all these feathers, nobody used to have feathers here, so what we used to do, we used to go to Naal

Bazaar, and get chicken feathers, and then I used to put in the embroidery *karkhana* (workshop) and make them do a boa-like thing with feathers. Helen went abroad, she first got one big feather like that that they put there (indicates top of head). That feather we went on dyeing; first it was white, then we did light pink, then we did bright blue, then we made it another color, last was black. Till then they were not available here. You had to use your imagination; you had to be creative.

Other designers of the earlier era, Sulokshna and Leena Daru, echo these remarks:

[A]t our time nothing was available, so we used to create. Now everything is available. Jeans are available, tops are available, bras are available, you don't have to create anything, you just have to mix and match.

[F]ormerly when I started my career, there was only one laundry at Churchgate, so if I am supposed to give something with very special colours, from here I used to go to Churchgate to get delivery of the things. Now they have so many places. Those days there were only two or three shoes maker. So we used to go every day to town to place the order.

The splendour of the vamp, and even the heroine's, spectacle, was the product of an ingenious bricolage; indeed, the vamp's selfish excess becomes singularly meaningful against a productive background of material constraint. It is hardly coincidental that the blurring of the vamp's uniqueness comes at a time when consumer goods, and access to those goods, have never been greater for the affluent Indian. Rising middle and upper class incomes and intensified body-consciousness no doubt fuel the retail industry, but without the ability to produce greater amounts of manufactured goods, the construction of desire would not last long, or get very far.

For affluent Indians, who can now begin to wear *salwar-kamiz*, or even western business clothes to work, the older codes of self-presentation are undergoing modification. 'Wearability' is the shorthand term that describes the enduring difference between film costume and street fashion:

If they were to ask you to wear something like that, you won't wear it either, chest showing and you know, you won't wear it. A normal housewife or a normal girl who goes to college doesn't want to dress up like that (Sulokshna).

However, where the interventions used to be managed by customers in collaboration with dressmakers and tailors, now they are managed, at the source, by dress designers and – as often happens now – by manufacturers anxious to produce designer 'knock-offs'. Says Rocky S, 'It has to be wearable otherwise it won't sell. You have to keep in mind the various sizes and colours that people will be comfortable wearing. I have to keep this in mind for everything that I put in my stores' ('Bollywood's').

'Identification' – or the seamless translation of film costume into consumer goods without customised interventions – is a term as often encountered as 'wearability'. 'If [Ash's] designer Vikram Phadnis makes sure she – a student doing her Masters in Social

Work (in the film *Kyun! Ho Gaya Na*) – wears a t-shirt and jeans after a bath at home, and not a Juicy Couture jumpsuit, the audience identifies with it.’ (Bamzai, 2004, p. 62). Just as with Jackie Stacey’s (1994, p. 220) British filmgoers of the 1950s onward, a growing number of commodities, yoked to increasing purchasing power of the middle and upper classes has ‘offered the fantasy of realization of the endless possibilities of star-replication through consumption practices’. Immersed in the same commodity environment from which designers draw, and to which they increasingly contribute, these practices arguably produce new forms of identification for women consumers that avoid some of the dissatisfactions associated with having to adapt and mould costumes out of one’s own imagination. Clearly, this is an area for future research.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the assertive demands of the ‘classes’ and NRIs for high quality, fashionable clothes on a par with what can be bought in fashion centres around the world presents an opportunity for direct intervention by the designer that draws him (or her) into a global fashion domain. As opposed to the past, the potential audience for films may be more willing to experiment with clothing than film stars are. Reflecting upon the familiar contrast of ‘filmi’ and ordinary clothing, a retired designer commented:

Although now there is no difference, much difference. The girls want to wear, you know, very modern clothes, maybe even better than what film girls can wear.

Fabulously wealthy Indians or globetrotting NRIs need not even bother with having clothes made; they wear designer creations. This is quite unlike the situation where filmgoers make their own version of costume through collaboration with a dressmaker or tailor:

[A] lot of people proudly say – costume designers – but this outfit of mine was very popular, it was copied, but it was copied by the masses, who follow films blindly, who have no taste. But today we are talking about costumes being followed by the classes; the classes are people who have traveled, who are aware of fashion.

Yet the difference between an extremely wealthy NRI who can buy an elaborate trousseaux from a Manish Malhotra, and the college girl who picks up her clothes from Fashion Street is still less than what divides the latter from the vast majority of Indians. In the UK or the US, massive manufacturing industries and a rise in wages for a greater segment of the population propelled versions of film costumes into more hands from a range of social classes by the mid-twentieth century (Stacey, 1994, p. 222). In India, by contrast, the meaning of ‘identification’ remains restricted to a relatively small, elite group, who enjoy the kind of income that puts these goods within reach, and a degree of social freedom to wear them. In other words, film is structuring ‘mass’ consumption by only a fraction, and the commodities consumed are made by dispersed workforces, whose members are unlikely to enjoy the pleasures of film costume in comparable ways.

The tailor and dressmaker remain important for consumers who are not content with one of the most substantial downsides of ready to wear clothing – the lack of a good fit. Standardised sizes rarely concede much to individual variation, while a tailor

can skillfully accommodate and refine the idiosyncratic body of the customer. However, there is no doubt that more and more clothes are bought and sold that hardly touch, if at all, upon the world of the 'main street' tailor; clothes that are mass-produced, mass-marketed and mass consumed. The stars wear the top brand names for their films; their imitators make do with manufactured knock-offs, many of which they will not ask their tailor to make. Sometimes this is because the benefits of a better fit are outweighed by a desire for immediate gratification. Alternatively, as with jeans and clothes made out of stretch fabric, there is very little the tailor can do that the fully proletarianized garment-stitcher cannot. The acts that comprise emulation – purchase and wear – are processes into which designers increasingly wish to intervene in their capacity as fashion leaders and retailers. Ultimately, if not immediately, these actions may put an end to the creative adaptations of film costume upon which consumers have relied for so long. At the same time, the relatively autonomous tailor, the crypto-designer of film-inspired fashion, may find himself transformed into the mere executor of a vision ultimately shaped by a distant designer.

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Notes

- 1 Mumbai is the official name of the city, but the old name of Bombay prevails in the conversation and references of film personnel.
- 2 Emma Tarlo (1996, p. 46) points out that Indian women have for many years adapted western fabrics for use in Indian-style clothing.
- 3 Rachel Dwyer quotes director Yash Chopra on this very point, 'Previously only bad girls wore western clothes, now they all can. It's part of our life. What's the harm in western clothes? We have to show what's happening.' (Dwyer, 2002, p. 154.)
- 4 The sports leisurewear worn by Kajol as Anjali in the film's first half make her sexually invisible to Shah Rukh Khan's Rahul, who is attracted instead to Rani Mukherjee's Tina, who prefers more feminine styles of western dress. *Kuch Kuch*

Hota Hai marks a point in Hindi film where a degree of discrimination can be detected in western clothing: it is possible to be 'sporty' but not necessarily 'sexy'. Western clothing, in this case, is not so much a sign of 'badness' as femininity to some degree warped or thwarted. Neither option invalidates the heroine's implicit claim to be a decent woman, and acceptable love object.

- 5 Even those actresses like Bipasha Basu, Mallika Sherawat, or Amrita Arora, who have built their star personas around a glamorous and sexy image, have not been irretrievably or even exclusively steered into vamp roles, or 'negative' roles, because of these choices.
- 6 Costumes are usually stored somewhat chaotically in trunks after a shoot, meaning that costume re-use is haphazard at best.
- 7 While these statements are undoubtedly true of the A grade films made in Bombay, the many B and C pictures being made scarcely merit (or can pay for) the talents of a serious designer. My point here, though, is that increasingly, the A grade pictures project a plusher, richer form of excess, which is not necessarily kitschy.
- 8 'If you ask me to single out one factor that's responsible, to a great extent, for such a fashion-conscious film audience is the prominence given by the media to the technicians behind the scenes in filmmaking. The cinematographers, the costume designers etc are now being recognized.... All over the world, especially in India, there has been a flux of media and thanks to that, a Manish Malhotra gets recognized and known for his work.' (quoted in Malhotra, 2001).
- 9 This is approximately 17 billion American dollars, or nine and a half billion pounds sterling.
- 10 Closer study of the culture of clothes shopping among young, middle class women seems warranted here, as well as more research into how tailoring demands have been affected by the influx of ready-made clothing.

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