**Headline:** The Emperor’s New Clothes: Fashion, Politics, and Identity in Mughal South Asia

**Teaser:** The Mughal emperors in India faced a sartorial quandary: Should they continue wearing their traditional Central Asian attire or adopt the lighter cotton clothing of this warmer climate?

By Simran Agarwal

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When Babur, the great conqueror and founder of the Mughal Empire, first entered India with his armies in the 16th century, he was not impressed by how people dressed. The climate and landscape of the Indian subcontinent were very different to that of Samarqand (in present-day Uzbekistan), from which he hailed. “I had never seen a hot climate or any of Hindustan before,” he recorded in his [memoirs](https://www.amazon.com/Baburnama-Memoirs-Emperor-Library-Classics/dp/0375761373). “A new world came into view—different plants, different trees, different animals and birds, different tribes and people, different manners and customs. It was astonishing, truly astonishing.”

Describing the clothing he saw on this campaign, he wrote derisively, “Peasants and people of low standing go about naked. They tie on a thing called *lungūtā*, a decency-clout which hangs two spans below the navel.”

Babur was the product of a Mongol-descended Islamic dynasty in Central Asia. He grew more familiar with the Indian subcontinent’s climates and cultures (and their perceived fashion faux pas) as his forces subjugated increasingly large portions of these lands. His descendants—Mughal emperors such as Akbar and Jahangir—would have to reckon with what it meant, both politically and culturally, to rule this foreign population: What cultural practices would they adopt from their new subjects? How would they fashion themselves?

Central Asian dress in this period consisted of a heavy leather coat (the *postīn*) and a long coat made from wool, silk, and leather (the *chapān*)—clothes that lent themselves favorably to the colder climates of the Mughal’s original homeland. When Emperor Akbar (Babur’s grandson) adopted a white cotton *jāma*—a translucent garment with a tight bodice, arm-hugging sleeves, and a skirt that fell a little beyond the knees—into his wardrobe, it [signalled a significant cultural shift](https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691215785/the-art-of-cloth-in-mughal-india?srsltid=AfmBOooJ8UD6mvrBGQQQYeL-3N4GTKpkmLmilbxoZjahjgMctqrNOS34).

Akbar’s change of attire was more than a way of dressing for warmer weather. This adoption of local garments was part of a greater effort to marry the Mughal’s Islamic traditions with the Indic culture that they now found themselves immersed in.

Such changes were witnessed in other arenas of Mughal public life, such as architecture. (One only has to think of the beautifully carved [serpentine brackets at Fatehpur Sikri](https://www.loc.gov/resource/stereo.1s26832/), a remarkable Gujarati architectural idiom that gets imported to the Mughal capital under Akbar; or the stone inlay in the interior tomb chamber of Jahangir, which owes its brilliant intricacy to the great pre-Mughal heritage of stonework in India.)

But the king’s clothing represents a far more personal example of Mughal assimilation. The royal adoption of Indic garb was more than a deliberate campaign to cement control over Indic people and culture, it was a sign of a deeper form of change.

**Clothing the Body to Bare the Soul**

Appearances had an enormous role to play within the theater of court. The emphasis on dress, which was an inescapable reality of public life, posed a quandary for the Mughals, who found themselves in contact with two distinct sartorial cultures, which were characterized by what cultural historian Phillip Wagoner calls their “[sharply opposing attitudes to the body](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-asian-studies/article/abs/sultan-among-hindu-kings-dress-titles-and-the-islamicization-of-hindu-culture-at-vijayanagara/A8E10BC312D6EEA409F8F26CE93C6BA3).”

In the Indic system of dress, the body was seen as a defining feature of the person, something that reflected “[the inner states and qualities of the individual](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-asian-studies/article/abs/sultan-among-hindu-kings-dress-titles-and-the-islamicization-of-hindu-culture-at-vijayanagara/A8E10BC312D6EEA409F8F26CE93C6BA3).” The classical Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa, for instance, describes a heroic prince by saying “[his intellect matched (*sadṛśa*) his appearance](https://www.cambridge.org/us/universitypress/subjects/history/south-asian-history/courtly-culture-and-political-life-early-medieval-india?format=HB&isbn=9780521816274).”

Clothing functioned to frame, accentuate, and reveal the body’s contours. This is precisely why traditional depictions of Indian kings show the ruler bare-chested or dressed in sheer, untailored cloth hanging loosely over his shoulders. In sharp contrast, the Islamicate attitude to dress considered the unclothed body to be shameful and held that God provided clothing to cover the nakedness of man—a purpose well fulfilled by the varied robes and tunics that characterized [royal dress codes](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-asian-studies/article/abs/sultan-among-hindu-kings-dress-titles-and-the-islamicization-of-hindu-culture-at-vijayanagara/A8E10BC312D6EEA409F8F26CE93C6BA3).

The taboo against displaying the body was so great that these garments were worn loosely, to avoid revealing the shape of the figure underneath. Amid such contrasting cultural worlds, cotton—as scholar Sylvia Houghteling puts it—“[provided a fabric of compromise](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs/85/).” The thin, loose cotton *jāma* allowed the body of the king to be covered, while its translucence revealed his “inner state”—a quality that served the Mughal rulers in many ways.

For one, it allowed them to inherit and carry forward an ancient Indic tradition which held that inner virtue manifests itself on the exterior of the body. Buddhist monks, for example, listed beautiful and auspicious “marks” or characteristics that appeared on the body of the *māhāpuruṣa* (great being) who was “[destined to become a Buddha or world-ruling king](https://www.cambridge.org/us/universitypress/subjects/history/south-asian-history/courtly-culture-and-political-life-early-medieval-india?format=HB&isbn=9780521816274).”

The translucent *jāma* allowed the skin of its wearer to shine through, visibly revealing the king’s perfumed sweat as it permeated the fabric. By doing so, the dress adhered to the prescriptions of medieval courtly texts that underlined the significance “[of the king’s smooth skin and bodily regimens of perfuming](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs/85/).”

The donning of plain cotton clothes also had an ethical valence in Islamicate cultures. Sufi texts, much respected at the Mughal court, treated cotton as one of the [best fabrics for clothes of piety](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs/85/). Emperor Akbar chose to wear the cotton *jāma* in order to advance a very specific kind of royal propaganda: the mythology of divine light, which radiated from his body, as beneficence and wisdom [radiated outward from his rule](https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691215785/the-art-of-cloth-in-mughal-india?srsltid=AfmBOopTSZO3xVv_jsIQrXBxwiuqtVDrfMtZUI-ADt4YYkgAWYfT3WSY).

Akbar’s hagiographers and court historians wrote that the emperor’s wisdom and beneficence were so great that his body glowed with the power of kingship. His radiance also harked back to [the story of Alan Gua](https://collections.lacma.org/node/239286), the mythical ancestor of Genghis Khan and the Mongol people, who was impregnated by a beam of sacred light. In wearing the *jāma*, Akbar not only tied himself to the divinity of his Mongol forebears but also ensured that this divinity could be seen and perceived by all.

The cotton *jāma* served many purposes at once, as can be seen in a painting by Bichitr known as *Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaykh to Kings*. The emperor Jahangir sits on an hourglass throne with an Ottoman sultan, a Sufi shaykh, and the English king, James I, arrayed below him. Clad in his *jāma*, Jahangir appears “cool” and “marble-like” while his “warm,” “smooth skin” [shines through the fabric of his shirt](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs/85/).

The depiction furthers Jahangir’s polemical declaration in the painting: that he preferred the company of Sufi shaykhs to kings. In the South Asian cultural milieu, Jahangir’s translucent *jāma* would have allowed his subjects to see the smooth, contoured form of the emperor, considered to be the reflection of his inner disposition and virtues. And for the wider Islamicate world, his garment, rendered in white paint, would have implied that the robes were made from humbler cotton, and not sumptuous silks, aligning him with the piety of spiritual beings and not the materiality of earthly kings.

**Worldly Embodiment of a Cosmic Overlord**

We tend to think of historical fashion like ripples in a pond, spreading outward from the imperial center [toward the provinces and rural folk](https://www.cambridge.org/us/universitypress/subjects/history/south-asian-history/courtly-culture-and-political-life-early-medieval-india?format=HB&isbn=9780521816274). In Mughal India, we see a departure from this norm with the court’s incorporation of regional garments and textiles that had characterized the sartorial culture of South Asia long before Mughal rule. One of the garments that the court adopted was the gold-threaded, lavishly woven *patkā* sash from Gujarati looms. These *patkās*, which typically measured about 11 feet in length and about a half yard in width, were cinched around the waist to hold together the crossways panels of the *jāma*, or to serve as a convenient belt to hang little bags and daggers. The *patkā* was usually plain in the middle section, which went around the waist of the wearer, and sumptuously embellished at the edges. Its designs ranged from geometric styles with chevrons and diamond-shaped patterns to [more floral ones by the mid-17th century](https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691215785/the-art-of-cloth-in-mughal-india?srsltid=AfmBOoorIb3mcD88mlyBoUW0Fafzm_UzS3i6WtL3WHFcxfwP7QeobVVm).

Often, the appearance of the *patkā* in varied regional patterns in Mughal paintings indicated the efforts of the emperor to give a political dimension to their patronage: integrating the diverse regions of the empire through the metaphor of cloth. Writing of representations of the king in early medieval India, Daud Ali describes how “[his sovereignty was conceived of as adhering to his person like a vast array of ornaments](https://www.cambridge.org/us/universitypress/subjects/history/south-asian-history/courtly-culture-and-political-life-early-medieval-india?format=HB&isbn=9780521816274),” and we might say the same for later Mughal paintings, too. Textiles adorning the strong and fit body of the emperor symbolized the vastness and economic health of the empire, which burgeoned further through his participation in textile trade.

Abu’l Fazl, Akbar’s court historian, noted that the emperor devoted “much attention” to numerous textiles that were [regional specialties since pre-Mughal times](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs/85/). Indeed, Akbar heavily supported textile production in his empire. But given the importance of textile patronage in early modern South Asia—and how, according to C.A. Bayly, these “[these cloth transactions continued to underpin the commercial structure of the Mughal empire](https://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&lr=&id=6JqTcziwKTYC&oi=fnd&pg=PA285&dq=C.+A.+Bayly,+%E2%80%9CThe+Origins+of+Swadeshi+(Home+Industry):+Cloth+and+Indian+Society,+1700%E2%80%931930%E2%80%9D,+in+The+Social+Life+of+Things:+Commodities+in+Cultural+Perspective,+ed.+Arjun+Appadurai+(Cambridge:+Cambridge+University+Press,+1986),+299.&ots=Xo5_9nSYs0&sig=J0za8-8nB0t4NbGKfE-LKKlT8bc#v=onepage&q&f=false)”—it does not seem at all accidental that Akbar’s patronage frequently spotlighted regions that had been recently annexed to Mughal control.

Paintings depicting the emperor wearing local textiles cemented not only his visual but also his physical conquest over the far-reaching territories of the subcontinent. Houghteling points out several paintings of Akbar that celebrate his military victories by depicting him wearing the characteristic fabrics of the defeated regions.

One such painting shows Akbar receiving news of his army’s victory at Gogunda in Rajasthan. Here, the emperor is seated on his throne wearing a red-and-black *bandhanī patkā* over a gold-brocaded silk sash. Scholars such as Steven Cohen have previously argued that Akbar and his son Jahangir made prominent displays of *bandhanī*—a tie-dyed cotton fabric—in their dress and portrait paintings in order to symbolically allude to the marriage alliances that they had entered into with several Rajput lineages, signalling, in this instance, Akbar’s connection to the royal family of Kachhwaha.

At Gogunda, the battle was fought between the armies of the Rajput kingdom of Mewar and Akbar’s imperial forces led by Raja Man Singh I, the ruler of the Kachhwaha principality of Amber. Here, the inclusion of *bandhanī* reflects both Akbar’s familial ties as well as his military conquest.

In the Mughal Empire, notes historian C. A. Bayly, economic transactions related to cloth amounted to a “political discourse upholding the legitimacy of the ruler and pledging the attachment of subjects.” In addition to donning the fabrics of annexed regions, the Mughal emperors were also stitching together the vast peripheries of their empire with the intimate center of the imperial household. The picture that emerged was one of the realm, as embodied by the king, which was, at once, radiantly charming and perfectly ordered.

We can compare the fashion of the Mughal court to the clothing of the rulers of Vijayanagara, a kingdom that occupied the southern part of the Indian subcontinent. The Vijaynagara empire, which lasted from the 14th to 17th century, also stood at the crossroads of Islamicate and Indic culture: while traditionally Hindu, the empire maintained close ties to the Arab lands to its west. Philip Wagoner’s study of the sartorial culture of Vijaynagara in its first two centuries emphasizes the growing Islamization of the region’s elite culture as part of an effort to “expand the rhetoric of South Indian kingship” and “participate in the political discourse of Islamicate civilization.”

Referring to a well-known 17th-century dyed pictorial textile in the collection of the Association for the Study and Documentation of Asian Textiles (AEDTA) in Paris, he identifies a clear distinction between the public and private dress of Vijaynagara kings. The monarch’s dress is split between two cultural idioms: when in the public sphere, he wears a lavish Islamicate robe, while in the private, domestic domain, he remains bare-chested, wearing only a *lungī* (the “decency-clout” described by Babur above) around his waist. Wagoner suggests that the far-reaching process of Islamization did indeed replace select Indic cultural practices at the Vijaynagara court but only in “key public contexts.”

Though some have argued that the Mughals also observed this distinction (between the public and private dress/personas of the king), [the situation is more complex](https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O9740/adham-khan-painting-miskin). Two paintings from Jahangir’s period imply that the Mughal emperor’s relationship to dressing in public was far more complicated than the one we encounter in Vijaynagara. In the first painting, Jahangir appears bare-chested and seated in the *padmāsana*, or lotus position, in the company of, perhaps, one of the female “kin” members of his royal household.

Even though the clouds in the upper register of the painting suggest an “exterior” locale, such leisurely portrayals—Jahangir is seen drinking wine and may be enjoying an amorous encounter here—could be associated with the domestic domain of the emperor’s courtly life. The second painting depicts Jahangir (again topless) in what is one of the most performative of Mughal public domains: the *jharokhā*. Every morning, the Mughal emperor would appear in the *jharokhā*—a large window that allowed those outside the palace to see their ruler—to take in the rising sun and address his subjects.

In doing so, the Emperor was offering himself up as an object of worship, giving the people a *darśan* or “auspicious sight” of their sovereign, who is clad in three layers of pearl necklaces, earrings, turban, and a *lungī*: [the apparel of a Hindu deity](https://experts.umn.edu/en/publications/ray-from-the-sun-mughal-ideology-and-the-visual-construction-of-t).

**Becoming Another**

How do we understand the differences in the courtly cultures of Vijaynagara and Mughal South Asia? An explanation resides in the material realities of the two kingdoms. Islamization at Vijaynagara operated very much in the public sphere, where a symbolic reference to the norms of its Islamic neighbors was both expedient and natural, while the Indigenous (Indic) culture continued to operate in private.

The Mughals, on the other hand, went through a complete shift in their material circumstances: Babur’s conquest of the Indo-Gangetic plain signalled a sharp break from the cultural world of semi-pastoral Central Asia. Though Babur kept alive his native cultural practices—continuing to wear the *chapān* and the *postīn*, for example—his successors situated the Mughal state ever more deeply in the socio-religious culture, agrarian economy, and political life of India.

This is reflected in their choices of clothing, from their adoption of the translucent *jāma* all the way up to Jahangir’s magnificent bare-chested appearance at the *jharokhā* window. Such progressive fusion of two extremely disparate worlds led to thoroughgoing changes at the very level of Mughal identity: by the 16th and 17th centuries, they had shed most of the trappings of their former semi-nomadic and pastoral identity to become an essentially Indic agrarian polity.

By assimilating the various materials, meanings, and metaphors that cloth represented in South Asia, the Mughals were not only trying to gain legitimacy but were actually becoming Indic at a deeper level of identity. It is a telling example that Akbar had incorporated *mūga* and *tasar* silks from Assam and the northeastern peripheries of India into his wardrobe long before Assam came under Mughal control in the 17th century.

The emperor’s dress was guided by something beyond outward strategizing, politicking, or symbolic actions—it was about a sense of place and connection to the landscape that he had come to inhabit. As the Mughal emperor shed his *chapān* and *postīn* to don the cotton *jāma* and tied it securely with his new *bandhanī patkā*, he shed the trappings of a past identity and embraced a new world, becoming another in the process.