

Teaching Cultural Diversity through Clothes

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Man is the only species that wears clothes or needs to do so because evolution has made the human body physically sensitive and vulnerable to the elements. While hygiene is the primary purpose for clothing, the kind of clothes we wear is dictated by the environment, region, climate conditions, social status and the gender of the person. Early man protected himself with animal skin, bark and tree leaves when he began moving to colder places. There are evidences of weaving from the *Paleolithic Age*, and once the woven cloth was available, dressing up became more formal. The unstitched cloth was draped, tied or pinned in place, up to the time when tailoring came into practice in the thirteenth century. While clothing provides the first line of protection to the body, it also plays several other roles as well.

Clothes are closely linked to the identity of a person. Don't they say, "*Clothes maketh the man*"? The clothes define a person and give away their status and identity to those around them. This is one of the main reasons why India's rich cultural diversity is a big draw with the foreign tourists, who cannot seem to get enough of it.

Why appreciate diversity: The world is a very diverse place and there must be at least a million different ways of dressing. We have seen that differences often lead to conflict and disharmony. Appreciating diversity is important because the world is full of it and there might come a time in our lives, when we have to travel to different parts of the world. It then becomes important to blend in. A dhoti wearing man would certainly draw curious looks from onlookers in the West. Unless one wants all that attention, one would not want to do that.

To ensure peace and harmony in the world, there is a growing need to acknowledge the heterogeneity that exists in it and the vibrancy it brings to the society. People of all origins and backgrounds should be able to live with dignity in a fair and free manner with enough self-regulation so as not to offend any fellow being. The need to appreciate diversity in childhood is essential so that the child learns early enough that different people dress differently, but it is nothing unusual, and they can still be friends and have a relation of mutual respect.

For growing children, the idea of dressing up in a certain way forms an important part of their self-image. They are developing a sense of identity so they need to know clearly that this is who they are and this is the way they dress. It also gives them a sense of pride in their family origins and instils a sense of rootedness. It helps them forge social bonds based on their background. In the beginning, they may socially interact with people who dress like them, later as they become more trusting, they will broaden their social circle.



Controversies around clothing:

In the recent past, clothes have given reason for many a controversy. Ever since the rise of terror acts in the world, for reasons of security the wearing of turban and the head scarf is prohibited in various parts of the world.

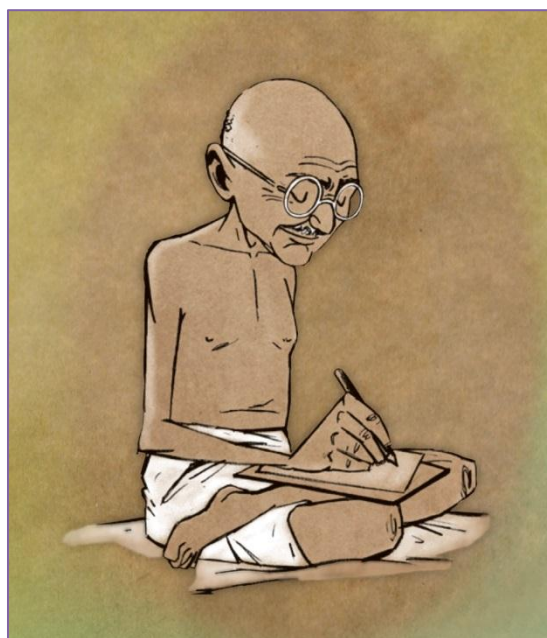
The French government passed a law in 2004 against the wearing of religious attire, which has created a problem for many. For the Sikhs, wearing the turban is a religious diktat. On the other hand, the French believe that any attire that is symbolic of anything religious is against the culture of France. But the Sikhs argue that this goes against the religious liberty of the minorities. This 2004 ban continues to draw the anger of the international community because it hurts the sentiments of the Jews, Christians, Muslims and others who wear distinctive clothing that set them apart.

There have been many cases of protests against the wearing of the veil by Muslim women living in Europe. In one case, a young lady refused to remove her veil while teaching young children. It's the other way round in Saudi Arabia, where all women must wear the hijab or head scarf, no matter to which country they belong. Other Muslim countries are more liberal and they let the immigrants or tourists wear clothes of their own choice. Many institutions across the world have rules about body exposure including legs, back, collarbones and shoulders.

Wardrobe wars: Teenagers often get into wardrobe wars with their parents. This happens because when it comes to dressing, there is almost always a modest way and an immodest way. '*Traditional clothes vs modern clothes*' is often at the core of such debates in homes. The parent would want the child to dress more conservatively and the youngster, invariably, would prefer modern attire. For most part in our country, the Indian way of dressing is seen as traditional or conservative, whereas the Western way is deemed modern and fashionable. Teenagers may want to splurge five to six thousand rupees on the latest *Levis* torn jeans to look cool, but are not ready to accept a clever mother's recycled torn jeans. A girl might want to wear shorts while her mother might want her to wear a long skirt.



Gandhi's makeover: It might be useful to narrate stories on dressing from Mahatma Gandhi's life while children are still formulating their own dress sense. For Gandhi, clothes were always used to convey a message. He hailed from a business family and studied law in England like all suited, booted rich '*babas*' of those days. But on his return to India, he had a complete makeover when he threw himself into the freedom struggle. He began by transforming himself first and dumped the formal coat-suit for the homespun Khadi dhoti and cap. It was his way of connecting with the diverse masses of India that came from many religious, races, castes and tribes. His new look was pan Indian and an expression of his solidarity with the common Indian man. He thus became the man of the masses.



In the course of the *Satyagraha* and *Non-Cooperation Movement*, he went to attend the *Round Table Conference* in Britain, wearing his loin cloth. The British called him the “*half naked fakir*” and when someone commented on the inappropriateness of his attire for the cold weather, Gandhi smartly replied that the Viceroy was wearing clothes enough for two people!

Gandhi also advocated frugal wardrobes, because freedom fighters did not have all day to decide what to wear. That logic applies equally well to our busy, technology-driven lives. Besides we do have the tendency to accumulate too many clothes, as we indulge our love for shopping. So, one should try to maintain a sense of practicality while choosing clothes right from one’s childhood itself.

Fabric of Politics: Gandhi integrated Khadi, the homespun cloth, into the freedom movement and used it as an instrument to give people a feel of independence. Dubbed as the ‘*freedom fabric*’, Khadi, is now used to make a style statement, but back then it was a symbol of self-reliance and freedom from the costly cloth that the British were selling to Indians. Gandhi sought to unite the rich and the poor through the common activity of spinning and advocated the use of Khadi extensively to promote the sense of *Swaraj* or self-governance.



Ethnic Day: Many multinational companies designate an *Ethnic Day* when the employees are encouraged to wear clothes of the native country/place in a bid to celebrate the diversity that exists in the world. It also removes any feelings of distrust and discrimination that may otherwise crop up due to a mix of cross-cultural work practices.



Garment for the Soul: There is a spiritual aspect of clothing that can be explained to older children. Many religious philosophies look at clothing from a higher plane. The *Bhagavad Gita* tells us that one's body is like a garment for the soul. We change our clothes every time we get a new life. Thus undue attachment with the body and the worldly matters is to be avoided by seekers. The *Torah* takes it further and says thought, speech and action are the three layers of clothing of the soul. Thoughts are the innerwear, speech comes next and action is the outer wear. Every time these garments get soiled and dirty, they need to be laundered because we all love fresh clothes! This association with clothes makes spiritual learning so simple, obvious and easy to practice.



Sujata C is a writer and editor with a portfolio of diversified writing categories like web content, articles, short stories for children, technical editing, etc. She has been a brand consultant and advisor for several companies and has worked with concerns like McCann Erickson, New Delhi; Foundations Advertising Services, New Delhi; Saatchi and Saatchi, Hyderabad, etc.

Lesson Plan on Teaching Cultural Diversity through Clothes

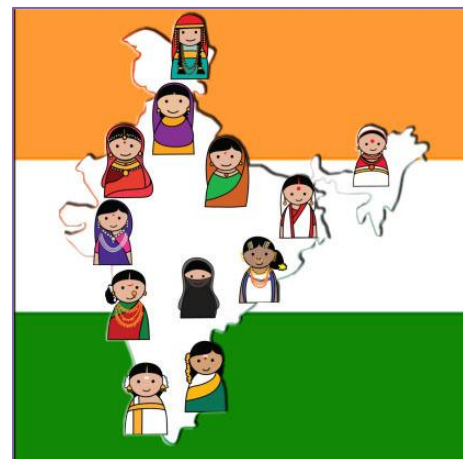
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The subject of cultural diversity is open ended and can lead to learning through dialogue, discussion and debate. Given below are a range of activities to help teachers plan an effective learning trajectory. One can choose the activities to suit the age and developmental level of their class and write out the learning outcomes for easy assessment.

Activities:

- **Let's dress up:** For very young children, books that show people from different lands can be introduced and the child can be asked to write down the different pieces of clothing being worn by the people. If possible, they can dress up in different ways.
- **People and places:** For slightly older children, the same exercise can be complemented with map work and the child can geographically locate the place and match it with the type of clothing that goes with it.



- **Discuss:** *Why must our attire be dictated by our age? How would you react if your grandmother dresses up like a teenager one fine day?*



- **Relate stories** from Gandhi's life to children and discuss the difficulties Gandhi might have faced during the course of his transformation.
- **Find out how** many ways there are to tie a turban or a tie, or even a scarf.
- **Debate the topic:** "Clothes maketh the man"
- **Discuss:** *Could Rama renounce the royal life without changing his clothes first?* Connect this question and the following discussion with topics of spirituality and materialism.
- **Getting to know:** Name the garments that people from the following communities wear when dressing up.

- ✓ Eskimo
- ✓ American
- ✓ European
- ✓ Russian
- ✓ North Indian
- ✓ South Indian
- ✓ Maharashtrian
- ✓ Gujarati
- ✓ Naga
- ✓ Bengali
- ✓ Punjabi
- ✓ Himachali
- ✓ Kashmiri



- **Based on religion:** *How do these people dress at a place of worship?*

- ✓ Muslim
- ✓ Hindu
- ✓ Christian
- ✓ Parsi
- ✓ Jew



- **Wedding finery:** The children can be asked to find out how different communities dress up for their wedding days. They can then prepare a slide show presentation for the class.
- **Tribal communities** are forest dwellers who have a distinct way of life. India has a mind boggling range of tribal communities. The way they live, eat and dress sets them apart culturally from the rest of the communities. The class can prepare a collection of pictures of various tribal costumes in the country and other parts of the world and put it up in an exhibition.



- **Dress code debate:** Of late many crimes against women have also been attributed to the type of clothes worn by them. The oft-uttered statement that “*Revealing clothes attract unnecessary attention*” can be taken up as a topic of debate. Children need to think deeply about whether they would rather be safe or look attractive.
Some people vociferously protest when they are asked to dress in traditional Indian clothes in certain places like temples and start asserting their freedom to dress as they please. The same people are perfectly happy to conform to a *black tie* dress code for a formal occasion. Why then, do they not fight for their right to wear *dhoti-kurta* at a social occasion? Does this not expose their double standards? Discuss.
- **Find out** how many types of handloom exist in the country. Ask each student to bring any handloom product from different states of India and display in an exhibition in the school.



- **Doll Play:** Children can pick essential developmental skills through simple activities like doll play. By dressing up their dolls in different clothes, girls and boys can develop a good sense of grooming, caring and nurturing. It makes them more dexterous with their hands and fingers, apart from giving them a sense of what looks good or funny or absurd on a doll, which they later learn to relate to people as well.



Doll play is typically seen as a girl activity, but nowadays *Ben* toys are also available with costume options to let the boys get a first-hand experience in dressing-up play. That's great for gender equalizing!

- **Paper dolls play:** Long before the world became a global village, one of the things children in cities and towns used to play with were paper dolls. They were inexpensive and a great source of fun. One can source paper doll templates from the internet, download, cut out and let the class play with them.



- **Costume play:** Costumes go a long way in helping children develop an open mind. By dressing up on festivals like their Muslim, Christian or Hindu friends, they grow up appreciating different religions and being accommodative. On all festivals, children should be encouraged to wear clothes of that particular festival. It can be a one simple item from the wardrobe like a simple skull cap/sherwani/scarf/burkha/hat. This will increase awareness about the way their friends dress and also help the children pay respect to the traditions of the other person.
- **A visit to a weaving centre** can be arranged as a school field trip.
- **Discuss:** When is **National Handloom Day** celebrated? Find out why it was constituted. Find out how many people are employed in the *Khadi Udyog*.

- **Read and enjoy the parable** *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Discuss the moral of the story – The child innocently speaks the truth even though it was humiliating for the King.
- **Write a short story:** Older children can be made to write a story where similarity of thought is matched with similarity of clothes to forge new bonds.
- **Weavers in distress:** High school children can find out why the handloom weaver society is in decline and distress. Why are their numbers dwindling and why are their children not willing to pursue the profession anymore? The students can research on this topic and then give a class presentation.
- **Recycling:** Old jeans can be recycled in many ways. Students can be asked to come up with innovative ways to extend the life of an old pair of jeans or dress.



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Words Section



Cambric (noun)

- A lightweight, closely woven white linen or cotton fabric. (*Oxforddictionaries.com*)

Origin (and additional information) ~ The term's first known use was sometime around 1520-30. It is a *Late Middle English* term which originated from *Kamerijk*, Flemish form of *Cambrai*, a town in northern France, where cambric was originally made.

Cambric or *batiste*, one of the finest and most dense kinds of cloth, is a lightweight plain-weave cloth, woven in greige, then bleached, piece-dyed and often glazed or calendered. Initially it was made of linen; later, the term came to be applied to cotton fabrics as well. Cambric is used as fabric for linens, shirts, handkerchieves, ruffs, lace and needlework.

The term *cambric* is a synonym of the French word *batiste*, which was attested since 1590. *Batiste* itself comes from the Picard term *batiche*, derived from the old French *battre* for bowing wool. The alleged invention of the cambric fabric, around 1300, by a weaver called **Baptiste** or **Jean-Baptiste Cambray** or **Chambray**, from the village of *Castaing* in the peerage of *Marcoing*, near *Cambrai*, has no historic ground, but is more of a popular belief.

Words Section

Cambric was of a finer quality and more expensive than *lawn* (from the French *laune*, initially a plain-weave linen fabric from the city of *Laon* in France). Cambric is also close to *chambray*, a term which appears in North American English in the early 19th century. White linen cambric or batiste from Cambrai, noted for its weight and lustre, was preferred for ecclesiastical wear, fine shirts, innerwear, shirt frills, cravats, collars and cuffs, handkerchiefs, and infant wear. Technical use sometime introduced a difference between cambric and batiste, the latter being of a lighter weight and a finer thread count. Chambray, though the same type of fabric, had a coloured warp and a white weft.

In the 18th century, after the prohibition of imports in England of French cambrics, with the development of the import of Indian cotton fabrics, similar cotton fabrics, such as *nainsook*, from the Hindi *nainsukh* (meaning "eyes' delight"), became popular. These fabrics, initially called 'Scotch cambrics' to distinguish them from the original 'French cambrics', came to be referred to as cotton cambrics or batistes. Some historians increased the confusion with the assumption that the word *batiste* could have come from the Indian fabric *bastas*.

In the 19th century, the terms *cambric* and *batiste* gradually lost their association with linen, implying only different kind of fine plain-weave fabrics with a glossy finish. At the same time, with development of an interest in coloured shirts, cambric was also woven in colours, such as the pink fabric used by **Charvet** for a corsage, reducing the difference between cambric and chambray.

In popular culture, the term has a few notable mentions. The English folk song ballad *Scarborough Fair* has the lyric in the second verse, "Tell her to make me a cambric shirt, / Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme / Sewn without seams or fine needlework, / If she would be a true love of mine." It also appears in the **David Bowie** song, *Come and Buy My Toys*—"You shall own a cambric shirt, you shall work your father's land."

Usage ~

- i. He wore a plain, cambric shirt and tan breeches that tucked into shiny, black boots.
- ii. The tent was made of reinforced cambric, fawn coloured, with sewn-in groundsheet, and at each end, a circular sleeve-door and ventilator.
- iii. His work that will be exhibited to mark the World Cup, is a graphic piece using cambric and wall paint as a medium.