Chapter-8 History
Clothing: A Social History

Before the democratic revolutions, most people dressed according to codes that were specified by their religion. Clothing styles were regulated by class, gender or status in the social hierarchy.

- **Sumptuary Laws:** Before the French Revolution people in France followed these laws. These laws restricted social behaviour of the lower strata of the society and imposed restrictions upon their clothing, food and entertainment. The French Revolution brought an end to these restrictions. Political symbols became part of dress. Clothing became simple which signified equality. Now the way a person dressed depended on the differences in earning rather than sumptuary laws.

- **Styles of Clothing:** Men and women dressed differently. Men were supposed to be strong, independent, aggressive while women were supposed to be weak, dependent and docile. Their clothes were designed accordingly. The women wore dresses which accentuated a slim waist. They had to wear a corset to show a small waist. Though it hurt, this pain and suffering was accepted as normal for a woman.

- **Change in Ideas:** 19th century brought about many changes. Women pressed for dress reform. The sufferage movement also developed during this time. There was agitation against women's clothes in Europe as well in America. Doctors explained the ill effects of tight clothes which affected the spine and long flowing gowns which were unhygienic. It was argued by these movements that if women wore loose and comfortable clothes, they could start working and become independent.

- **New Materials:** Before the 17th century clothes for British women were made of flax, wool, linen **which** were expensive and difficult to maintain. During the 17th century, with the onset of the Industrial Revolution cloth and clothes saw a change. The attractive, cheap 'chintzes' from India increased the volume of European women's wardrobes. Artificial fibres used in cloth made dresses even easier to maintain. Now with great demand for comfortable dresses, styles changed considerably.

- **The World Wars:** The two world wars also brought about great changes in women's clothing. Styles **reflected** seriousness and professionalism. Skirts became shorter and plainer. Women who worked in factories wore uniforms. Trousers became an accepted and vital part of women's dress.

- **Sports and Games:** The school curriculum also emphasised and included games and gymnastics as part of curriculum. This also changed the way women dressed.
  Colonial India: During this time India saw a great change in dress.
  - Many men began to incorporate western style clothing in their dress.
  - Many felt that western influence would lead to loss of traditional cultural identity.
  - Many wore western clothes without giving up Indian ones.

- **Caste and Dress:** Though India had no formal sumptuary laws it had its own strict food, dress and behaviour codes. It was the caste system that defined how or what the Hindus

should wear, eat and behave. If anyone deviated from the norms, they were severely punished. Even the government issued orders in some cases ordering low caste Hindus to observe a strict code of conduct.

- **British Reactions to Indian Way of Dressing:** As certain items of clothing signify specific things which could be contrary, this often leads to misunderstanding and conflict. An example was a turban and a hat. The two headgears signified different things. This difference created misunderstandings as the hat had to be removed before superiors while the turban had to be worn consciously. The same was the case with shoes.

- **The Indian Dress:** Indians wanted to create a dress which could express the unity of the nation. But this did not fully succeed.

- **The Swadeshi and Khadi:** British political control of India had two important effects - peasants grew cash crops and the British goods flooded the Indian markets, especially cotton. A lot of weavers and spinners were left without any work. Murshidabad, Machilipatnam and Surat which were important textile centres declined as demand decreased.

- **Partition of Bengal, Swadeshi and Khadi:** In 1905, Lord Curzon decided to partition Bengal on the pretext of better management. The Swadeshi movement was a reaction to the partition. People boycotted British goods and started patronising things made in India. Many Indian goods were patronised especially khadi. Cloth became a symbolic weapon against British rule.

- **Khadi:** Gandhiji made khadi a forceful weapon against the British. Mahatma Gandhi even experimented with various forms of clothing starting from the western form of dress to wearing it with a turban. He decided, by the beginning of the 20th century, to wear a lungi and kurta (in Durban). A few years later he adorned himself as a Kathiawadi peasant. The dhoti was adopted by him in 1921. But not all could wear khadi.
  Thus we can say that changes in clothing reflect the changes within the social, political and economic spheres of a society.