

The sisterhood of saris

INDIAN WOMEN TAKE PITY ON A WESTERNER TRYING TO MASTER THE ART OF WEARING ONE PROPERLY.

I sat in a hot, crowded second-class ladies-only car on the train into Mumbai. The open doors and unglazed windows let in some relief of moving air. With three stations to go, an elderly woman boarded the train. She was bent and thin, but elegant still in an emerald-green sari with dark red trim. Glass bracelets circled her wrists; her hair was

you're dressed to go out like *that*? Perhaps she had a point.

At the cloth market, saris were stacked on shelves, a kaleidoscope of green, pink, and blue. Shalwar kameez suits hung in doorways, with their glitter-trimmed long tunics and loose pajamalike pants with matching scarves. Red wedding saris stiff with gold embroidery swagged from ceilings. In the very back, I found Lalchand Brothers, a simple stall without too many sequins and a lady proprietor who looked nice.

Mrs. Lalchand helped me choose a sari, holding up a small mirror in which I strained to see myself loosely wrapped

my sari to the Jehangir Art Gallery. I did my best to remember the tucks and folds, but the result looked as if a present wrapped by a 7-year-old.

As I contemplated a modernist sculpture, a lady shyly approached me. "Your sari, it is not quite...."

"Can you please help me?" I asked in relief.

She whisked me into a private corner and pleated and pinned, clucking over me in Hinglish, "Western ladies' sari too short always!"

In moments, I was dressed correctly – the hem reaching my toes, the shoulder pleats perfectly offset, the *pallu* the right length for a tall, unmarried lady in Mumbai.

Back at the hotel, I took my sari off carefully, keeping the pins in. I painstakingly unpinned, unfolded, then repeated the shoulder folds, the waist pleats.

The next day, at the mobile phone shop, the lady clerk took me into the back room. "Sari is too short. But your shoulder pleats not too bad."

Each night, I took apart my sari, measuring with my hand the width of the *pallu*, the length of the wrap around my waist. Each morning, kind women strangers redid most of my work. (I always carry origami paper as an any-language icebreaker, and I made tiny cranes for my helpers in colors matching their saris.)

A week later, in Varanasi, three teenage girls giggled at me while I drank a creamy yogurt *lassi*. Then one boldly called out, "Your sari, it is very nice!"

That night, I went to a sunset poetry reading at a rooftop cafe overlooking the Ganges. Mid-poem, a troupe of monkeys joined us, hunting for the snacks on our little tables. The poet kept reading while the waiters scared away the monkeys with sticks – apparently, this happened all the time.

A white woman tourist, the first I'd seen in weeks, joined my table. She was also in a sari, the hem above her ankles, her pleats all different widths, the *pallu* tucked oddly into her waistband.

At intermission, we talked about where to get the best *lassi* and how to bargain with rickshaw drivers. Then I leaned in and said, "May I help you a little? Your sari, it is not quite...."

She said, "Oh, yes please!" and I whisked her into a corner to tuck and pin.

– Allison Williams



WOMEN ARRANGE THEIR SARIS AFTER TAKING A HOLY DIP IN THE GANGES RIVER NEAR PATNA, INDIA.

KEVIN FRAYER/AP/FILE

pulled back in a tight ballerina bun.

Getting up, I gestured to my place on the bench. She sat and nodded a thank-you, then looked me up and down disapprovingly. Was it because I was a white tourist? Did I not belong in this carriage? I don't think so. Her expression was somehow familiar.

It was the same as my mother's expression in 1989, looking at me trying to look like Madonna, bra straps hanging out, miniskirt, lace tights, a midriff blouse. My mother's look, which said, "Really? You think you're dressed to go out like *that*?"

Western India was more than 90 degrees F. and humid every day, but my T-shirt and capri pants weren't cutting it. Bare legs? Sloppy ponytail? You think

in each selection. The first few patterns, busy florals, made me look as if I'd been upholstered. We settled on a plain green sari with maroon and gold embroidery.

Saris are bought in one long piece. There's a two-foot end section that a tailor cuts off and sews into a blouse, and the rest is wrapped intricately around the woman's body, pleated and tucked to the right length. The other end, often a contrasting color or fancier pattern, is the *pallu*, which drapes over one shoulder. The *pallu* can be pleated narrow or left wide, and can hang short or long, depending on the region, the fashion, and the wearer's personal style.

The tailor near my hotel made up the blouse on his ancient black treadle-powered Singer. The next day, I wore

