

Dressing traditionally

The West has already lost its traditional costumes to "Western Clothes" and is thus understandably fascinated to arrive in Sikkim and find a colourful range of traditional dresses still visible in everyday wear. HELEN KÄMPF dwells on this uniqueness...

GUESTWRITING

In Sikkim the various traditional dresses – the Bakhu, the Gada, the Chaubandi-Cholo, the Salwar-kameez and the Saree – are still much in use and gracefully adorned by most ladies. They wear the traditional dress on a daily basis and use the same in a more accessorised manner during special occasions. This rich and diverse heritage even in daily wear, beautifully reflects Sikkim's cultural diversity. It seems to me that unlike 'western clothing', or what goes by such a term, the traditional dresses of Sikkim bring out the best in the women. In terms of appearance and grace, they definitely exude pride in being part of and able to show-off such a varied culture. Contrary to what some might think, I find any women, irrespective of her weight, looking sophisticated in the Bakhu, whereas I cannot say the same for a plump person in the common casual western clothing.

People in Europe also have their traditional dresses but they are hardly worn these days by anyone. In Switzerland, for example, I was once trying to find a traditional Swiss dress for my daughter and checked out almost every major mall in Zurich; I went to the Swiss Handicraft Shop and searched in tourist shops, but to my utter disappointment, I was unable to find a single Swiss traditional dress anywhere!! This shows how in Switzerland the traditional dress-culture has almost vanished.

Whereas in Sikkim, there are sometimes skilled tailors, even in the villages, who can make the different traditional dresses. In the towns, of course, it is easy to find ready-made traditional garments or even get them tailor made.

In Switzerland, tailor's can only be afforded by the very rich and ready-made traditional dresses are not even rarely available as I found out the hard way.



Though each region in Europe has its own particular traditional dress, most of us, including the Swiss, have no idea of what our traditional dress looks like and there are few who have ever worn it.

So, in a way, unlike the ladies of Sikkim, the Swiss have completely lost their own particular dressing tradition and replaced it completely with 'modern western convenient clothing'.

Not only do they not wear Swiss traditional dress in every-day-life anymore, what is shocking is that it is not worn even during special occasions. A vast majority of Swiss do not own even a single set of traditional dress nor do they know what it looks like. In fact, there are different dresses for the different regions of Switzerland, but now these have been confined to museums and cultural performances.

On the other hand, it is particularly interesting to note the great excitement Westerners often express upon seeing people wearing their traditional dresses elsewhere, such as in India where most women still proudly wear their traditional dress or even Bhutan, where even men do so.

It is as if they are rediscovering something that has long been lost in their own country.

Searching for their own lost cultural heritage, it seems to me, they wander off to foreign lands to find what they have long lost: Cultural heritage and agrarian societies. This, from the same people who have not only lost their way of dressing but are also embarrassed by the traditional way of singing, such as yodeling, their excitement and appreciation for cultures that have preserved their traditions is something I find

paradoxical, even double-standard.

Perhaps the grace of the women in her traditional dress in India should inspire the western world to revive their own lost traditional dress-culture at home. Just as in Sikkim Bakhu's and Saree colors - and textile - choice keep changing according to the sense of fashion and individual taste at any given time, traditional dresses of western countries too could be adjusted to make them popular again.

This would be a worthwhile compromise, much better than completely abandoning one's own dress culture in favor of what could be called cosmopolitan or monotonous modern western clothing.

Just imagine going to Gangtok to shop and wherever you go, only 'western style' clothing is found, not a single Saree, not any Bakhu far and near. Or even worse, that no matter which part of the world you visit, you find every one wearing similar casual western. That would be boring indeed. However, as in Switzerland so in Sikkim, it is not up to the government to foster such interest, it is up to the people themselves to decide to preserve or better even keep alive and evolve with their culture rather than replacing it with without a second thought.

It is to be hoped that what happened to the Swiss traditional dress won't happen to Sikkim and that the ladies of Sikkim will continue to wear their traditional dress with pride. Occasionally, if not daily. Sikkim is a beautiful example of how both traditional and western clothes can be worn alternatively with pride and grace without having to abandon one for the other.