

HINDU WOMEN AND VEILS

It is customary among women of the northern Indian states to wear veils (*odhni*) over their heads at the time of marriage. Some modern young brides would prefer not to wear a veil but are pressured into doing so by their mothers and older female relatives.

It is important to note that veils began to be worn by Hindu women only after the Muslim conquest — either through social influence or to avoid the prying eyes of Muslim men. Women at the courts also started wearing veils and submitting to various forms of seclusion (*purdah*). The common people followed suit and soon all Hindu women of social status began observing the same degree of seclusion followed by the Muslim women. The only exception were the poor who had to work in the fields or in the markets – but even they covered their heads and in Rajasthan took to covering their faces as well.

What is the real Hindu position on this matter?

Nowhere in any of the scriptures are there prescriptions for men or women's clothing. Both men and women can wear what they like in accordance with their regional customs and traditions. In the old pre-islamic painting and sculptures we note that both women and men wore almost the same attire — a single cloth around the waist, bare upper body and sometimes some form of turban on the head.

In South India the Muslim influence was considerably less and there we see that women have never been either secluded from daily social life or in any way covered. On the contrary _ since all women are the embodiments of Lakshmi it is considered highly offensive that any woman would cover her head — especially at the time of marriage where the bride is honoured as Lakshmi herself and the groom as Vishnu!

Even on the Hindu island of Bali – both men and women were bare-chested until the Dutch occupation in the early 1900's — the Dutch officials then demanded that the women cover their breasts in order not to disturb the minds and morals of the Dutch soldiers!

So living in the West, free from the constraints of family and village influences, we now have the perfect opportunity of divesting ourselves of this custom of Muslim origin and return to real Hindu values in which women are honoured as goddesses not veiled as chattels or a temptresses.





