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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Interweaving influences and adaptations: sartorial endeavors of Okakura Kakuzō and M. K. Gandhi

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**Abstract**

Universalism, as a historical category, played an important ideological role in forging political solidarities beyond national boundaries in the modern period. The paper traces this idea in modern Asia through the sartorial styles of two intellectuals, Okakura Kakuzō and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Clothing as a medium of inquiry offers a unique scholarly perspective to articulate the role of universalism vis-à-vis nationalism in colonial India and modern Japan. Since dress politics existed in Eastern and Western societies, it allows us to study lived experiences through a transregional dialog. Both men recognized clothing as an effective political lexicon to fashion the self and creatively include others within the ideological space. Due to their early exposure to various cultures, the clothing style adopted by Okakura and Gandhi was founded on notions of plurality and belonging to multiple places and people. Their positionality enabled them to establish a dialog with both national and imperial politics and dress in a style that was self-made and world-aware. The paper uses their photographs and writings from a period that engendered the practice of universalism and challenged the narratives of nationalism.

**Keywords:** modern India and Japan; nationalism; sartorial politics; universalism

This essay follows the lives of two men – Okakura Kakuzō (岡倉覚三, 1862–1913) and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) – and their journey of sartorial endeavors in the period of high imperialism. Both were influential in the prime of their careers and wrote extensively in the English language. Okakura was a major figure in the Japanese art world in the 1880s. His publications include *Ideals of the East with Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (1903), *The Awakening of Japan* (1904), and *The Book of Tea* (1906). M. K. Gandhi was critical in making the Indian independence struggle a mass movement. He was a prolific writer whose collected English writings are over ninety volumes. Some of his major writings are *Hind Swaraj* (Indian Home Rule) (1909) and his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth* (1927).

Okakura and Gandhi were intellectuals and contemporaries, and despite their geographical and ideological differences, they engaged with national politics through clothing. Their use of dress was powerful, but not an innovative approach to counter the imperialist-nationalist framework because their peers were also using it. Scholars have discussed the crucial role of clothing in creating, performing, and engaging with national culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in British India and Japan (Gupta 2012; Guth 2000; Iwasaki Masami 岩崎雅美 2005; Masuda Yoshiko 増田美子 2013; Osakabe Yoshinori 刑部芳則 2010, 2012; Tankha 2018; Tarlo 1996; Trivedi 2007).[1] This

[1]Brij Tankha, in his 2006 conference paper, discusses Okakura's intellectual ideas on Asianism and clothing styles by stating examples from the Indian Swadeshi movement and Gandhi. Tankha's 2018 article includes a revised portion of the

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paper, however, demonstrates that the dress choices of Okakura and Gandhi advocated inclusiveness, symbolizing a kind of universalism that contrasted with the dominant nationalism – whether Eastern or Western. As historian C. A. Bayly (2004) observed, national politics in societies over the world saw a trend of "global uniformities," including in clothing styles: when powerful men across regions dressed similarly in public.[2] Both Gandhi and Okakura, on the other hand, endeavored for a universal style that was not restricted by "…the power of tradition and conventionality" (Okakura 1906, p. 114) and appreciated cultural varieties (Okakura 1904b, p. 170; Gandhi 1966a, vol. 19, p. 85). This essay shows that the diverse cross-cultural experiences that made up Okakura and Gandhi's lives helped them develop ideas of inclusiveness and diversity, and offer solutions to nationalism that differed from those of their predecessors and contemporaries.

The argument is drawn from two observations. First, the East/West binaries were not stable and had fissures. Therefore, elements of cultural authenticity differed for Gandhi and Okakura compared to their predecessors. Second, in this period of power struggle, changes in ideas were taking place in both categories (East and West).

Another contribution of the paper is to initiate an intellectual dialog between the histories of modern India and Japan, which continues to be understudied in a period of Inter-Asia studies (Finnane 2016; Ghosh 2021; Harper and Amrith 2012; Stolte and Fisher-Tiné 2012) and make inquiries about the historical parallels and divergences.

To make visible how Okakura and Gandhi's ideas of universalism were informed and implemented, I have organized this essay into three sections, moving from their childhood to later years. The first section brings attention to the parallels between Okakura and Gandhi's intercultural local environment, which informed their choices later in life. The next section discusses their international connections that shaped their clothing and ways of reimagining new socio-political possibilities. Both factors made them challenge the trend of global uniformity in favor of a more universal model to address contested intellectual ideas. One such example is explored in the final section, which reflects on the ways both men articulated "civilization," a critical term scaffolding colonialism.

## Childhood: experiencing 'difference'

Okakura and Gandhi were both born in Asian port cities, which due to the engagement with maritime trade with different regions of the world, were cross-cultural. These cities had some characteristic features, such as an early emergence of urban modernity, Western styles of architecture, the inflow of foreigners, trade as a primary occupation, a strong economy due to foreign trade, and segregated districts within the city for locals and foreigners.[3] Due to these features, living with cultural varieties and differences was a norm in port cities. These early influences placed Okakura and Gandhi in a different space – which was shaped not just by Western cultures but by various Eastern cultures too – and it is by placing them in this context that one can better understand their sartorial choices later in life.

Okakura Kakuzō was born in the port city of Yokohama, Japan, on December 26, 1862, when it was becoming an important trading center. Yokohama was a new treaty port that was opened in 1859. At the time of his birth, Okakura's father ran a successful store called the *Okakura Silk Store* in Yokohama.

With the influx of Westerners, foreign clothes were not a rare sight. Figure 1 shows people in Western clothes, kimonos, Chinese clothes, and clothing combining elements of different dressing

conference paper. This paper focuses on Gandhi and Okakura to show how their early life experiences and connections beyond Asia shaped their lives and their ideas.

[2]For a discussion, see C. A. Bayly 2004, pp. 12–17.

[3]For discussions on port city culture, see Meera Kosambi and John E. Brush 1988, pp. 32–47; Om Prakash 1998; Paul C. Blum 1963. For an account of the crucial role of Gujarat (where Gandhi was growing up) in maritime trade in eighteenth and early nineteenth century, see Ghulam A. Nadri 2015, pp. 83–101. For a contemporary account of the connection between ports and imperialism, see Charles Capper 1862. It discusses the role of London Port in making England an empire. Similarly, a pamphlet titled *The Port and Harbour of Yokohama* had the opening statement: "The Port of Yokohama, with her mission as the gateway and entrance to empire…" (1927, p. 1).

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**Figure 1.** A busy street in Yokohama showing sartorial differences, 1860. *Source*: National Diet Library Digital Collection.

styles. Mixing various clothing styles was the response of ordinary people toward the change. They started including aspects of clothing from multiple cultures in their daily lives. At the same time, clothing was associated with identity, so it continued to be a marker of the "other." For instance, hats, shirts, and pants distinguished Westerners from Asians. The place's political, social, and cultural milieux familiarized young Okakura with diversity, and the local environment gave him a "comparative perspective" (Guth 2000, pp. 609–10).

It is likely that a person exposed to an environment with a large influx of foreigners will be more comfortable and familiar with the idea of 'difference' (Figs. 1–3). Since this idea played a preeminent role during the period of imperialism, it continued to be a matter of contestation. Homi Bhabha elucidates the crucial role of difference in relation to the concept of fixity as follows:

**Figure 2 and 3.** Different clothing styles of Okakura's two language teachers, English and Chinese. *Source*: Nakamura Sunao 中村愿 2013, p. 7.

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> An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy, and daemonic repetition. (Homi Bhabha 2015, p. 94)

Because this idea was crucial, people selectively chose or dismissed some sartorial markers according to their liking. In Yokohama, the Japanese and non-Japanese (other Asian and Western) cultures encountered each other. As Figure 1 shows, the result was that people selectively adopted elements of foreign sartorial cultures and used them simultaneously with Japanese clothing in their daily life. For instance, men could be seen barefoot or using a variety of footwear. Similarly, diversity could also be seen in hairstyles and headwear.

Additionally, to understand Okakura's later life choices, it should be noted that during Okakura's life, the nature of East/West binaries changed. By the time Okakura was a young adult, Japan had adopted many Western elements, changing its position and essence from when Japan was forced to sign unequal treaties. Thus, the Japan where he grew up was different from Japan his predecessors lived in, and the cultural varieties of Yokohama, where he was born and spent his boyhood, were foreign to many of his contemporaries.

## *Parallels between Okakura and Gandhi*

In comparing Gandhi and Okakura, we find parallels in their lives. M. K. Gandhi was born in Porbandar, a key port city in Kathiawad, on the western coast of British India. Like Yokohama, people on the Western coast were chiefly traders. The region had a long history of maritime trade with the Middle East and Africa. It was a princely state under British rule, where society was divided into various categories, such as religion, caste, and class.

Gandhi had the social and economic means for a good education. Interestingly, whereas Okakura's father was an ex-samurai and later became engaged in trade, Gandhi belonged to *baniya* (merchant) caste, and his father was employed as an administrator under the Prince of Kathiawad, earning a handsome salary. When Gandhi turned twelve, his family moved to Rajkot, from where the colonial government ruled Kathiawad. Rajkot was divided into two parts: the major portion was under the control of the British, and a minor part belonged to Indian princes. In the fourth standard, Gandhi began his education in English medium and also studied Sanskrit (Dinanath Gopal Tendulkar 1960, pp. 25–26). Like Gandhi, Okakura also started to learn the English language early, at the age of nine, in an American missionary school while continuing to learn the Chinese language. This style of education facilitated knowledge based on Western and traditional education styles (through Sanskrit or the Chinese language).

Early in life, Gandhi was exposed to social and political differences such as class, caste, and colonialism. For school, he dressed well. He wore a *dhoti* (unstitched cloth wrapped under the waist, see Fig. 4), a long coat, and a cap, which he later changed to a Kathiawadi turban. Even as a young boy of ten, he understood dress politics, and wanted to wear a sacred thread and tie keys in it like a high caste Brahmin (R. Gandhi 2007, p. 5). An incident from his schooldays showed his displeasure when a Hindu changed to English clothes after converting from Hinduism. Gandhi wrote: "…when he [the Hindu who converted to Christianity] was baptized… he also had to change his clothes, and that thenceforth he began to go about in European costume including a hat. These things got on my nerves… a religion that compelled one to… change one's own clothes did not deserve the name" (Gandhi 1958, pp. 24–25). This incident is fascinating because, as Tarlo has noted (1996, p. 65), though young Gandhi did not like what the man did, as we will see later, Gandhi changed to Western attire before his England trip. Experiences such as getting educated in the English medium and witnessing how ordinary people engaged with clothing gave him the experience of knowing the varied meanings of differences in clothing and how to articulate them.

The early years of Okakura and Gandhi exhibit some similarities. It should be noted that a particular feature of their experience was that, unlike the global sartorial uniformities observed by Bayly, both grew

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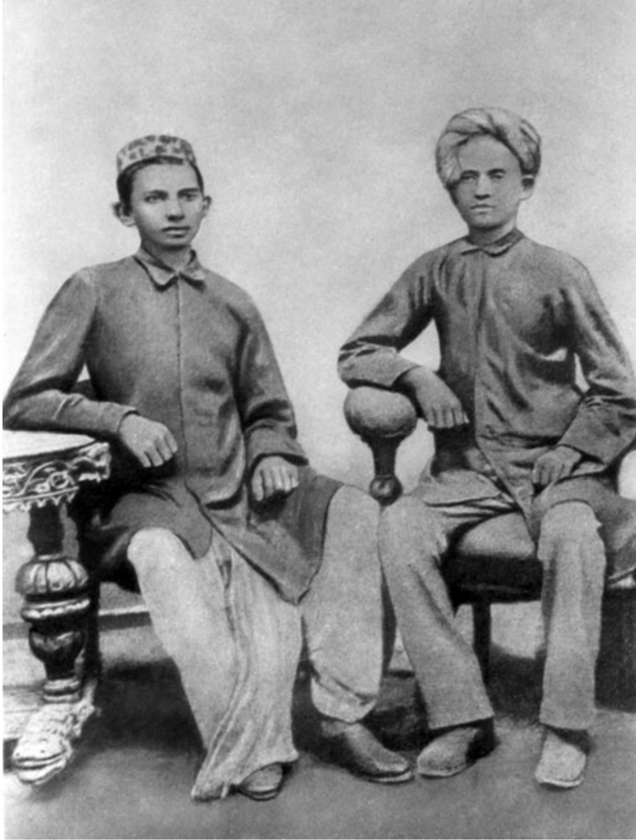

**Figure 4.** Gandhi (left) with a friend in Rajkot, 1883. *Source*: National Gandhi Museum, Delhi.

up in a region where differences in sartorial styles were part of their everyday lives. More importantly, their exposure to the ideology of difference was not always defined by the binary of East and West. In fact, it is likely that in such an inter-cultural environment, the sartorial elements adopted and adapted by the general population into their daily lives might have looked eccentric to a man from urban space, such as Tokyo or Calcutta, who was used to the global (uniformities in) sartorial styles.

## Youth: influence of international networks

Gandhi and Okakura were products of a time when Western styles and modes of knowledge were gaining importance in their countries. This section, however, discusses their international associations, which played an important role in shaping their clothing choices as adults against the national styles.

After a childhood in Yokohama, Okakura's life and education in Tokyo further developed and shaped his thinking. In 1873, Okakura joined Kaisei Gakkō (which later became Tokyo University). Okakura's English knowledge brought him in close contact with the foreign professors employed at the university. Okakura became acquainted with Ernest F. Fenollosa (1853–1908), his philosophy teacher, who would play a pivotal role in developing Okakura's ideas.[4]

If we juxtapose Figures 5 and 6, in the first photograph, a Japanese man is dressed in Western clothing in Japan, and in the second photograph, two Americans are dressed in Japanese clothes in Japan.

[4]Earnest Fenollosa was a Harvard University graduate who visited Japan in 1878 and joined the University of Tokyo on the recommendation of Edward S. Morse. He was critical of the Meiji government, which was giving up traditional art for Western art. Later Fenollosa was put in charge of the Imperial Museum in Tokyo and the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1887 and in 1890 was made the curator of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Okakura later succeeded him.

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Christine Guth described the dressing style of Okakura in Figure 5 as follows, "His self-confident, theatrical pose is that of a man who believes himself to be dressed for success" (2000, p. 610). If we shift the focus toward the three American men in the photograph, we find them dressed well. Their clothing, walking stick, and posture make them look dandy and perhaps equally "theatrical." It should be noted that Okakura's ease suggests that he had the same sociopolitical status as the others in the photograph, and his Western dress was not to be seen as an act of imitation. In Figure 6, two of Okakura's American acquaintances are wearing Japanese clothes. Is there any difference in the meaning of cross-cultural dressing styles for these Americans? This paper takes the view that there is not much difference.[5] Chan Kwok-Bun posits that in such situations, "…when groups share a neighborhood, a history and memory based on simply living together and solving the practical problems of living that require a certain transcendence of group identities… one culture sort of 'slips into' another culture, half forgetting itself and half changing the other" (2002, p. 206). Okakura in Western dress and the Americans in Japanese dress belonged to a space that encouraged this "transcendence of group identities."

To elaborate more, it would be worth engaging with Edward S. Morse (1838–1925) for two reasons. First, he was a crucial link in Okakura's transnational networks. Second, to understand how Morse interpreted the changes within Japan. He visited Japan in 1877 from The United States and maintained a detailed journal of his experiences. In one of his accounts, Morse commented on some Japanese who inappropriately wore Western-style clothes:

> The attempt that some of the Japanese make to appear in our costumes is often most ludicrous. I saw a fellow the other day in a dress-coat almost big enough to go round him twice, a tall hat which came down to his eyes, with a wad of paper crammed in to hold it on, and white cotton gloves many sizes too large. (Fig. 7, Edward S. Morse 1917, vol.1, p. 275)

One may inquire whether Morse's comment suggested that he wanted Japan to "remain a timeless, exotic refuge from modernity" (Guth 2000, p. 611). This essay suggests that his cosmopolitan mindset made Morse call what he saw "ludicrous." Regarding the person (Fig. 7), Morse noted that he "evidently did not belong to the higher classes" (Morse 1917, vol.1, p. 276). In this context, his comment was directed toward a section of Japanese society for unnecessarily adopting a foreign style without understanding it, rather than toward any Japanese wearing Western dress. Moreover, in the same context, Morse wrote about the time when he (an American) tried on Japanese clothing and, on pressing a local, found out, "it had the same appearance to him that a countryman in our country might have to us with his trousers three inches too short!" (Morse ibid., p. 277). Since arriving in Japan, in his own words, Morse was "incessantly watching everything" (Morse ibid., p. 275), and his observation of differences was not founded on unequal power equations.

Some other entries in Morse's diary show he was rather impressed with Japan. He found the Japanese to be more honest and gentler than Americans (Morse ibid., pp. 38–39). Public nudity in Japan intrigued Morse. He stated that "the only immodesty displayed is the behavior of foreigners in looking at nakedness, and this behavior the Japanese resent and turn away from" (Morse ibid., p. 100). This kind of account differs from the British in India, who criticized the culture of nakedness in Indian society and used it to justify the lower civilizational status of Indians.[6]

As mentioned before, politics of difference was in place, but Morse here employs the discourse in a subversive direction away from the imperial paradigm. Morse observed a higher degree of dress tolerance in Japan compared to the United States. He noted, "An illustration of the tolerance of the people…that

[5]An example from China that could be juxtaposed with the above example is stated in Elizabeth J. Perry 2012, p. 255, where she discusses an example of cross-cultural clothing styles in a photograph from 1898 from an Anyuan coal mine where all the Chinese men are dressed in Western suits and the German men are in mandarin gowns.

[6]For an account of public nudity in colonial context, see for example Tarlo 1996, pp. xvi–xx; Philippa Levine 2008, pp. 189–219.

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**Figure 5 and 6.** (left to right) Edward Morse, Okakura Kakuzō, William Bigelow and Ernest Fenollosa, 1882; Bigelow and Fenollosa in Japanese clothing at Nikko, year unknown. *Source* (both): Nakamura 2013, p. 33.

**Figure 7.** Sketch of an ill-dressed Japanese man. *Source*: Morse 1917, vol.1, p. 276.

no matter how grotesque or odd some people appear in dress, no one shouts at them, laughs at them…I saw a man wearing for a hat the carapace of the gigantic Japanese crab." (Fig. 8, Morse ibid, p. 128)

One could argue that Morse pointing out the clumsiness of wearing a Western dress by some Japanese individuals was a self-critique for being rigid in accepting diverse styles – which might not be so odd for a local resident of Yokohama, for example. Morse wrote, "A native may dress as he pleases…if he is markedly odd in his appearance he may excite a smile, but not a taunt…a strong contrast to the intolerant behavior of men and boys at home" (Morse ibid., pp. 274–75). These remarks by Morse contradict Guth's previous observation about Morse that he wanted Japan to remain an "exotic refuge from modernity" or Tankha's suggestion that Morse behaved like the British, who generally tried to maintain a sartorial difference with the colonized (Tankha 2018, p. 14). Morse did not endorse the idea that the Japanese are inferior. Toward the end of his second journal, he wrote, "I believe that we have much to learn from Japanese life and that we may to our advantage frankly recognize some of our weaknesses…" (Morse 1917, vol.2, p. 435). If anything, his journal entries show that he was critical of his nation after knowing Japanese society.

At Tokyo University, Okakura met these American men who appreciated Japanese society. These foreigners were influential because of their national identity and because the Japanese government invited them. A reflection of the influence could also be seen in his sartorial choices.

In 1886, when Okakura, accompanied by Fenollosa, went on his first tour to Europe and the United States, he took charge of his attire. Okakura countered the criticism of Japanese men adopting Western clothes by wearing, as Guth pointed out, *hakama* (袴) and *haori* (羽織) (Guth 2000, p. 622). However, it is intriguing that he boarded the ship at Yokohama in a three-piece suit (Fig. 9) and later changed to Japanese-style clothing.[7]

[7]This was the beginning of a style statement that he followed on his foreign trips. However, on his last trip from the United States, he returned to Japan wearing Western-style suits. Okakura apparently chose the style because of his ill health (Okakura Motoko 岡倉基子 1982, p. 14). Interestingly, according to one account, Okakura wore Western-style clothes only when he went fishing in Boston (Horioka Yasuko 堀岡弥寿子 1974, p. 11).

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**Figure 8.** A boy using a crab shell as a hat. *Source*: Morse 1917, vol.1, p. 128.

**Figure 9.** Okakura in a Western suit before departing for the West, 1886. *Source*: Nakamura 2013, p. 37[8].

When Okakura wore traditional clothes abroad, most of the other Japanese officials wore Western clothes on their official foreign trips. A widely known anecdote in this context is the advice he gave to his son:

[8]Nakamura, in the explanation of the photograph (included with the photograph above), expressed his doubt if Okakura is the one who is standing behind wearing a hat. I think he is the one reading a book. All men in the photo are dressed in Western-style suits.

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> Since my first journey to the West, I have mostly traveled in Japanese clothing (和服). If you all also have the confidence to speak in English without hesitation, I will say that it will be good to use Japanese clothing (日本服) for overseas travel. However, I cannot agree with walking in Japanese dress and using broken English. (Okakura Kazuo 岡倉一雄1971, p. 42. My translation)[9]

Okakura was deeply influenced by his American teachers and knew he could not dress like other Meiji representatives on his official international trips and make a political statement. Guth argues that his knowledge of English differentiated him from other Japanese, even though he wore a traditional outfit (Guth 2000, p. 623). While Tankha thinks, "… Okakura was caught in an environment where, despite coming from an independent country and speaking English, he was still in a situation of subordination" (Tankha 2018, p. 320). For sure, Okakura's knowledge of English gave him an edge, and he used it to craft an identity. But Surendranath Tagore felt, "Okakura spoke English with a halting accent, as though at a loss for the right word which, however, he always managed to find" (Tagore in Nakamura ed. 1984, p. 234). Okakura likely knew that adopting Western clothing may elicit criticism, but knowledge of English was seen as a strength across all audiences. Additionally, although he challenged the dominant sartorial styles of Meiji officials who went abroad, he had the support of his American teachers. Like the ordinary people in Yokohama, he designed his life and dress choices as cosmopolitan. A key element was the "… ability to stand outside of having one's life written and scripted by any one community… and to draw selectively on a variety of discursive meanings" (Stuart Hall 2002, p. 26). Furthermore, wearing *haori* and *hakama* (formal Japanese men's clothing) helped him show the ease of movement that traditional Japanese dress allows as an answer to the Western critiques, who found Japanese dress feminine and nonfunctional. With his trimmed mustache, short hair, English language ability, and close acquaintance with certain Western intellectuals, the outfit gave him a unique status to contest the Japanese identity.

## *Parallels between Okakura and Gandhi*

Juxtaposing Gandhi's travel experiences and his networks of foreign intellectuals with Okakura's life provides a unique perspective on how the two lives were shaped.

Gandhi, on his first trip to England to become a barrister in 1888 decided to wear a white flannel suit. About the experience, he wrote, "I had thought that white clothes would suit me better when I stepped ashore…And I found I was the only person wearing such clothes…the shame of being the only person in white clothes was already too much for me" (Gandhi 1958, p. 32). The embarrassment he felt on wearing a white-colored Western suit was caused by the visual difference it created. He did not explain the reason for choosing white flannels. One good reason could be that "distinctive white flannels" were a marker of British individuals in India (E. M. Collingham 2001, p. 2). Gandhi might have therefore seen it as a good style to follow. The choices show Gandhi and Okakura's divergent approaches regarding clothing on their first trip abroad. Gandhi, through his dress, hoped to conceal all visual differences from the British. Okakura, however, made the visible difference clear through his style.

Gandhi changed to Western clothes on his first trip abroad for two main reasons. First, he did not want to look like "a barbarian in the eyes of Englishmen" (Gandhi quoted by Tarlo 1996, p. 65). Second, his mother made him vow to avoid wine, women, and meat (Gandhi 1958, p. 28). He did not have any compelling intellectual justification for why the abstinences were important then. Still, he felt he could keep the vows in England by adopting Western attire. His confidence in clothes suggests he believed that his external appearance would allow him to maintain his inner difference from the English society.

Here, it may be interesting to note a striking similarity between the anxiety of a Hindu mother sending her son overseas and an emerging Asian nation sending young students to Europe and

[9]It is fascinating to note that in the Japanese quote, the English word "broken" (ブロークン) is used, as it is in Katakana, as a reading of 破調.

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America to gain a Western education. In its distress over losing the Japanese essence, the Meiji government strictly forbade young students from converting to Christianity. In 1871, the Meiji government issued "Rules for Overseas Study," asking the students to go to a Shinto shrine before leaving the country "to reassure the deities that they would conduct themselves properly while away" (Byron K. Marshall 1994, p. 37). However, no hard-sartorial guidelines were provided either by the Meiji government or Gandhi's mother. In such cases, clothes acted as an agent of entering and belonging to a foreign space without losing one's essential identity.

Gandhi's effort with clothes while in England becomes evident in the following sentences: "… to become polished and make up for my vegetarianism… I wasted ten pounds on an evening suit made in Bond Street, the centre of fashionable life in London" (Gandhi 1958, p. 36). According to a newspaper report in *The Washington Post*, he was popularly known as "Gandhi the Dandy" (February 21, 1932). Therefore, for the young Gandhi, dress became an effective mode of gaining access to and approval from English society.

Gandhi's life turned around when he met the New Agers of England in 1888. These were the group of nonconformists, such as homosexuals, vegetarians, and anti-imperialists (see Leela Gandhi 2006). Gandhi joined the London Vegetarian Society in 1890 and later became a member of their executive society. Coming from a British colony where Indians were discriminated against by the British, his acceptance as a member of an English club in England gave the young Gandhi a very different experience (see Fig. 10).[10]

At this stage, if we compare Figures 5 and 10, we will find similar styles: well-tailored Western clothes (no fusion clothing, such as those worn by the people in port cities). Okakura and Gandhi look confident and at ease within their American and European circles. The Westerners, too, look cordial. At some level, these Westerners were sympathetic toward non-Western societies. Gandhi and Okakura initially adopted Western dress, but both increasingly moved away from it in their later life under the influence of transnational encounters.

Gandhi's international networks played a crucial role in giving his ideologies an intellectual thrust. Thomas Weber observed that Gandhi would not be Gandhi if he had not been to London and South Africa (Thomas Weber 2005, p. 6). Under the influence of the Vegetarian Society in London, Gandhi found support for his vegetarianism. However, it is ironic that, unlike Gandhi, who followed the diet restrictions because of his religion, many of the members of the Vegetarian Society were atheists. One key objective of vegetarians in England was to have a more ethical and humane society (Jon Gregerson 1994, pp. 71–82). In England, Gandhi was introduced to the writings of people such as John Ruskin (1819–1900), Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), and Edward Carpenter (1844–1929, who was famously known for wearing sandals). Under their influence, he increasingly adopted a lifestyle of frugality and simple dress (Fig. 11).

As these examples show, Okakura and Gandhi found more confidence in their culture after receiving encouragement from a section of Western intellectuals. When they stepped out of their respective countries for the first time, their ideas on clothing were contradictory. Still, both deliberated on their choice of dress and recognized the power associated with it. Okakura's background, English language ability, close association with the American professors, and dressing in *haori* and *hakama* positioned him in an authoritative position that was not available to many of his contemporaries or predecessors. Gandhi, too, on the one hand, grew up knowing how Indians contested differences with local communities and the British and, on another, was acquainted with the attitude of his anti-imperialist network, which made him aware of the role of clothing in contesting the socio-political processes.

[10]Interestingly, George Barnard Shaw (1856–1950), the well-known writer and a vegetarian who was active in London during the period, wrote in 1896, "when people reproach me with the unfashionableness of my attire, they forget that to me it seems like the raiment of Solomon in all his glory by contrast with the indescribable seediness of those days, when I trimmed my cuffs to the quick with scissors, and wore a tall hat and *soi-disant* black coat, green with decay." During the time he had little money, but his example shows that even later in his life he did not comply with high-class sartorial norms. See Archibald Henderson 1911, pp. 40–41.

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**Figure 10.** Comparing Figure 5 with Figure 10: Gandhi (bottom row, extreme right) in England with members of the Vegetarian Society, 1890. *Source*: National Gandhi Museum, Delhi.

Gandhi differed from Okakura in two key aspects. First, Gandhi changed from traditional to Western clothes on his first trip abroad, unlike Okakura. Second, unlike Okakura, he did not have much guidance or friendship from Westerners until he set foot in England. His Indian acquaintances at home had helped him with money and clothes before the trip. At the same time, their experiences were similar because both gradually moved away from Western clothes, and all the Westerners (mentioned in this section) with whom they associated either admired Eastern cultures or severely critiqued Western imperialism. The multicultural life of their boyhood, followed by their Western acquaintances, further made them challenge the national styles along with Western intellectual ideas.

## Addressing civilization through dress

Once Okakura and Gandhi identified dress as a potent medium to counter the problem of gaze, they took it seriously and engaged with a critical intellectual idea of the period – civilization. Their backgrounds and strong affiliation with certain European and American intellectuals gave Okakura and Gandhi a unique position from which to challenge what Bayly called global uniformity. In doing so, they gave shape to an idea of universalism that, although driven by nationalism, envisioned an identity that was not espoused by the dominant style of nationalism. A key difference, however, was that whereas Okakura took refuge in history to address the problem, Gandhi found little help in that concept.

In comparing them, we find that both men experienced and interpreted the idea of civilization quite similarly through material clothing. On the question of viewing Western clothes as a marker of "civilization," Gandhi wrote:

> I believed, at the time of which I am writing, that in order to look civilized, our dress and manners had as far as possible to approximate to the European standard. Because, I thought, only thus could we have some influence, and without influence it would not be possible to serve the community. (Gandhi 1958, p. 135)

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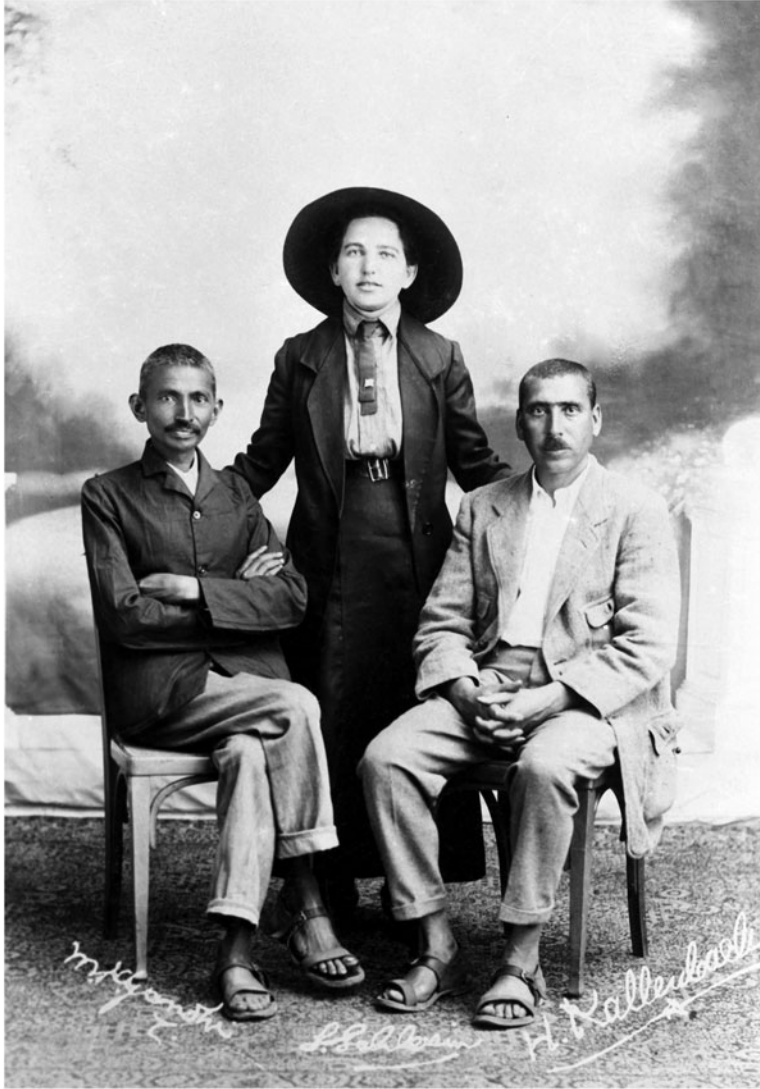


**Figure 11.** Gandhi (left) with his secretary (standing, Sonja Schlesin, 1888–1956) and friend (Hermann Kallenbach, 1871–1945) in South Africa, 1913. *Source*: National Gandhi Museum, Delhi.

As a young man, Gandhi saw England as the "center of civilization" (Gandhi quoted by Tarlo 1996, p. 65) and wanted to wear English clothes. However, a marked change was seen during his stay in South Africa, where his clothes became much simpler (Tarlo 1996, pp. 66–68). Gandhi acknowledged the change when he wrote, "I can see today that we feel all the freer and lighter for having cast off the tinsel of 'civilization'" (Gandhi 1958, p. 135). Parallels can be seen in the thoughts of Okakura, who, while discussing the case of Sakuma Shōzan 佐久間象山, whom he believed to be the first Japanese man to wear Western clothing, wrote:

> … this idiosyncrasy of dress was actuated by a love of symbolism. It was the expression of a desire on the part of the progressionist to cast off the shackles of the decadent East and identify himself with the advance of Western civilization. Our kimono meant leisure, while the European dress meant activity and became the uniform of the army of progress… (Okakura 1904a, p. 150)

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Like Gandhi, he criticized the necessity of adopting Western-style clothing to prove civilizational status. By doing so, he distanced himself from his predecessors, such as Sakuma Shōzan, and his contemporaries, such as Mori Arinori (森有礼, both were assassinated). It should be noted that the above text was originally written in English and employed terms such as "advance," "progress," and "progressive" to build the argument. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the usage of "progressive" as a noun date back only to 1844. The observation shows that his actions and arguments were located and constituted by contemporary intellectual discourse in the English language and shaped by global history developments. Similar to his intellectual ideas, his sartorial experiments were very much within the politics of the time.

In 1889, after becoming the head of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, Okakura designed a new school uniform inspired by the Nara period (710–794), and the style was an early reflection of Okakura's "universal language" (Okakura 1906, pp. 113–14). In an essay titled *Importance of Researching Nara Period's Art* (奈良美術研究の必要), Okakura reasoned that to study Japan's past, it was crucial to engage with the Nara period (Okakura 1979, pp. 320–22). He noted that Nara was a "golden period" with treasures whose roots could be traced to Korea, China, India, Central Asia, Rome, and Greece (Okakura ibid., p. 320). It is instructive to note that his attempt to engage with the past differed from the state or market-led mobilization of nostalgia.[11] In the Nara period, his search was not for a pure Japan, untouched by the influence of other cultures, but rather an acknowledgment of a past that attests to the influence of different cultures. He stated, "…the treasures of Nara are not just the treasures of Japan but, in the true sense, the treasures of the East. No, rather the treasures of the world" (Okakura ibid., p. 320. My translation). Okakura's writing shows that by bringing the elements of Nara into the present, he encouraged his local audience to acknowledge a particular, cosmopolitan past that constituted them.

Unlike his sartorial choice on his first official trip abroad, the school uniform experiment was undertaken for the people in Tokyo. The new uniform was "based on court dress of the Nara period" (Takashina Shūji 高階秀爾 1982, p. 238) and created stark visual differences from the everyday clothing styles.[12] Osakabe Yoshinori 刑部芳則 observes that the uniform was probably a "symbol of nationalism" (2010, p. 206) for Okakura but drew little enthusiasm from teachers or students. It is to be noted that his imagination of a nation and sartorial style did not match the dominant national styles – either the kimono or Western suits. The new school uniform was changed soon after his resignation in 1898.

Okakura's initiative may have looked odd to the locals, but it was in sync with the field of art history globally. Okakura's exposure to European and American art circles made him realize the importance of Asia as a field of research. He wanted Japan to pursue a similar method of studying aesthetics by going beyond the national borders (Okakura 1979, p. 320). Therefore, Iwasaki's concluding remarks that the short life of the uniform was due to the strong forces of westernization (2005, p. 17) does not shed light on the whole story. Since Okakura's initiative to look at the past of Japanese art was influenced by the style of doing art history in the Western nations. Furthermore, as Horioka Yasuko 堀岡弥寿子 observed, "the school had a clear ideal to recognize the potential of aesthetics of old Japan, while also learning the strengths of Western aesthetics …" (Horioka 1974, p. 13. My translation). It can be argued, like ordinary people in Yokohama choosing elements from various sartorial styles in the late nineteenth century, Okakura was picking the best of both worlds. Nara was a period that, like Okakura, was influenced by various cultures. Okakura wanted to convey these elements of the past through his clothing to his local audience.

Unlike Okakura, who consulted the past in deciding on a sartorial style, Gandhi did not search for a solution in history. As Partha Chatterjee noted, rejection of history was the critical element of Gandhian politics, which contradicted the style of earlier nationalist thought (Chatterjee 1986,

[11]For a general discussion on the topic, see Nakano Ryoko 中野涼子 2021, pp. 1–5.

[12]The radical shift is similar to the experience of 1870s, when European sartorial styles were adopted officially by the Meiji government.

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p. 95). Gandhi rejected the idea of searching for a glorious past to show India's higher civilizational status. For him, history was:

> a record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love… Two brothers quarrel: one of them repents and re-awakens the love that was lying dormant in him; the two again begin to live in peace: nobody takes note of this. But if the two brothers…take up arms or go to law… they would be the talk of their neighbors and would probably go down to history. And what is true of families and communities is true of nations…History, then, is a record of an interruption of the course of nature. (Gandhi 1922, pp. 86–87)

Whereas for Gandhi history was a record of "interruption," for Okakura, it was "a record of the steps that lead the West into an inevitable antagonism to ourselves" (Okakura 1940, p. 3). Gandhi, by using the lens of clothing, criticized the historical understanding of civilization as follows:

> …what state of things is described by the word "civilization" …Formerly, they [people of Europe] wore skins, and used as their weapons spears. Now, they wear long trousers, and for embellishing their bodies, they wear a variety of clothing, and, instead of spears, they carry with them revolvers…If people of a certain country, who have hitherto not been in the habit of wearing much clothing, boots etc., adopt European clothing, they are supposed to have become civilized out of savagery …Civilization is not an incurable disease, but it should never be forgotten that the English people are at present afflicted by it. (Gandhi 1922, pp. 31–35)

Gandhi here follows the arguments of the English intellectual Edward Carpenter, who referred to civilization as a disease in *Civilization: Its Causes and Cure* (Gandhi ibid., p. 30). Okakura, too in his writing, challenged the very definition of the term:

> He (the West) was wont to regard Japan as barbarous while she indulged in the gentle arts of peace: he calls her civilized since she began to commit wholesale slaughter on Manchurian battlefields. Much comment has been given lately to the Code of Samurai…but scarcely any attention has been drawn to Teaism, which represents so much of our Art of Life. (Okakura 1906, p. 7)

Further, it can be argued that their global exposure and life in a port city made them realize one crucial factor that was giving force to the pervasive ideology of civilization – the market. Bayly pointed toward the role of "Western European and American overseas trade" in "the diffusion of common styles" (Bayly 2004, p. 16). The writings of both Gandhi and Okakura acknowledged this nexus between clothing, the market, and political ideologies. Gandhi recognized a direct link between clothes and economic modernity, urging people to burn foreign clothes and spin daily. This was his solution to the economic drain and the problem of national dress. He stated:

> We wore Manchester cloth, and that is why Manchester wove it. I was delighted when I read about the bravery of Bengal. There are no cloth-mills in that Presidency. They were, therefore, able to restore the original hand-weaving occupation…If Bengal had proclaimed a boycott of all machine-made goods, it would have been much better. (Gandhi 1922, p. 105)[13]

Like Gandhi, who, by rejecting machine-made foreign clothing, dismissed the universal idea of growth, Okakura too challenged the global uniformity when he noted, "Steam and electricity in encircling the globe impose the London tailor and the Paris milliner in every continent, – symbolic of the single garment which their genius of combination weaves for all their race" (Okakura 1940, p. 6).

[13]For a detailed discussion on Khadi see Tarlo 1996, pp. 94–128.

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To fight the symbolism of this "single garment," Okakura continued to experiment with clothing inside and outside of Japan because he believed that "[Western] uniformity and competition stamp mankind with the cheap monotony of machine-made goods" (Okakura ibid., p. 38). Okakura wore Chinese, Japanese, and Indian clothes in India and entered temples barefoot wearing a *dhoti* to show "reverence" (Surendranath Tagore 1984, p. 241). Once when he was touring India, Okakura wore "as a traveling costume, a cloak and hood he had designed, with the help of a Chinese print and a Calcutta tailor, to represent the garb of a Taoist monk, and weird is not the word for its effect in his present surroundings!" (Tagore ibid., p. 238). Similar to the reactions Okakura received in Tokyo, the sartorial design did not attract favorable attention. When Surendranath Tagore, traveling with Okakura, was asked about the dress, he described Okakura as a "far-Easterner on a pleasure bent" (Tagore 1984, p. 238). To understand this response, we need to see Tagore's social positioning. He belonged to a wealthy family that was greatly influenced by European culture. He noted that when Okakura was there, they had "breakfast in Anglo-Jap style" (Tagore 1984, p. 235). Although Okakura's clothes did not belong to the everyday life of that place, it can be argued that Tagore's comments were possibly somewhat restricted by his elite class. His comments could also be seen as what Morse called the problem of limited imagination in clothing among Americans. However, in the same account, Tagore further wrote that Okakura in his clothes did not stand out when he visited a village in Bengal.

> … how smoothly Okakura glided into the landscape of the remote Bengal village… his Taoist robes striking no discordant note in the province of the *aul* and the *baul*… Okakura said little Bengali mannerisms and appliances revealed to him the meaning of many an obscure element in the Buddhist rites as practiced in Japan. (Tagore 1984, p. 241)

I suggest that Guth's interpretation of Okakura in India: "By donning this outlandish costume in India, Okakura was laying claim, indeed embodying, the outward symbols and prerogatives of the imperialist nation to collect and display the experiences of different people and places" (Guth 2000, p. 630) was not how Okakura's audience saw him in Calcutta. They believed he was visiting India to invite the Hindu monk Vivekananda (1863–1902) to Japan and learn about Indian art, and he was described as "completely one of us" (Tagore 1984, p. 242). People in Calcutta saw Okakura as a bridge to build a network with Japan.

Looking at the lived experiences of the two men through their clothing shows that, while they were challenging the global uniformity of clothing styles in public, in the period of high nationalism and the market, at a personal level, the journey was difficult. There were several occasions when Okakura had to face criticism for his clothing. For instance, during a formal event in Japan, Okakura was criticized for wearing the school uniform and not a court dress or military uniform (Iwasaki 2005, p. 13). On a similar occasion in the United States, despite being in the social circle of American art collectors, he was not allowed into a reception party because of his outfit (Takashina 1982, p. 244).

Gandhi's writings also give us a clear image of the individual battles he was fighting. When he left the country for England for the first time, he sought confidence in his Western-style clothes. Then, after encountering people like Tolstoy, he gave up fashionable Western style clothes. However, when he returned to India in rural Indian dress, he again lost confidence in his attire. He noted:

> At the party given in my honor at Mr. Jehangir Petit's place, I did not dare to speak in Gujarati. In those palatial surroundings of dazzling splendor I, who had lived my best life among indentured laborers, felt myself a complete rustic. With my Kathiawadi cloak, turban and dhoti, I looked somewhat more civilized than I do today, but the pomp and splendor of Mr. Petit's mansion made me feel absolutely out of my element. (Gandhi 1958, p. 275)

The extent of his mental tussle reached a new high when he started dabbling with the extreme decision to wear just a loin cloth in public in 1921. He wrote, "If India calls me a lunatic, what then?… Unless I went about with a loin-cloth, how might I advise others to do likewise? What should I do where

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millions have to go naked? At any rate why not try the experiment for a month and quarter?" (Gandhi, 1966c, Vol. 21, p. 226). He decided to convince Indians not to wear expensive machine-made clothes. During a speech earlier that same year, he said, "The volunteers… are dressed in English style coat-and-trousers…If you cannot afford to buy new khadi, I am ready to give you khadi… If you feel too embarrassed to accept khadi… I would advise you to do your work as volunteers wearing only a loin-cloth" (Gandhi, 1966b, Vol. 20, p. 3). In Gandhi's own words, his clothing choice was viewed with "bewilderment" (Gandhi, 1966c, Vol. 21, p. 226). The experiment was initially undertaken for a few months but lasted until his assassination in 1948. This turned out to be his last sartorial experiment, which he continued even after Indian independence, seeking to fulfill his dream of a society where everybody, regardless of their social or political status, could have clothes to wear.

The endeavors of the two men show that their solution to address the nation was crafted beyond the intellectual or spatial limits of any one region. Their action could be interpreted as universalist because their sartorial choices represented ideas and people who lay outside the scope of dominant nationalism.

## Conclusion

The paper followed the sartorial journeys of Okakura Kakuzō and M. K. Gandhi – two men who were contemporaries though strangers to each other – to bring out their active role in forging a new kind of universalism that was developing through transnational flows and influences in the period of high nationalism.

Okakura and Gandhi's association with certain Westerners and their works, in addition to their early life experiences in local culture, gave them a unique perception of the sensibilities against global uniformities in sartorial culture and nationalism. Their international circle familiarized them with the imperialist narrative and its critiques. In their company, Okakura and Gandhi developed their political ideas and challenged the dominant imagery of their nations – to both domestic and international audiences. A vital feature of these networks was that they endeavored to shape universalism, which superseded particularism and embraced differences in the period of global uniformity.

Both men were educated, powerful, influential, and had access to transnational networks, and yet, their clothing experiments mainly were undertaken at an individual level and enjoyed little institutional support. Had they conformed to the sartorial norms rather than diverged from them, their lived experiences would have been shaped very differently.

Gandhi and Okakura were aware of their audiences and used clothing to engage with them. Initially, for both, the audience was just the West. However, Okakura later recognized an Asian audience, while Gandhi became more engaged with local Indian masses. In this case, looking at the two different lives makes visible the continuous struggle to address the nation under imperialism by using clothing as a medium of correspondence. Despite some cultural confusion they might have caused, their strength lay in their continuous quest to represent their national identity and their ability to look for answers in other realms, even if they lay beyond their country's dominant style of fashioning nationalism.

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