

## **DRESS IN CULTURE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY IN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS OF NORTH 24 PARGANAS, WEST BENGAL**

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### **Abstract:**

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#### **Key Words:**

Culture;

Dress;

Institution;

Norms;

Values;

Modernization.

Clothing research under the purview of anthropology of dress and fashion attracted reward interest over the past two decades. Basically dress is an important component of our material culture. Through clothing as well as dress, individuals establish their sense and place in society and culture. The relationship between dress and both individual and culture identities in the different sphere of life and culture continue to be of interest to scholars in the world of dress and fashion. The pattern of dress in culture consists of a network of symbolic codes that enhance norms, values, beliefs, worldviews and ideologies within a society.

The present ethnographic study has been undertaken among the college –girls in the rural and urban contexts of west Bengal. The prime objective of the study was to throw light on the pattern of dress and its

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social cultural issues among the college-girls under modernization. The study was based on the primary data as collected through Participant Observation, Intensive Interview, Case Studies, along with analysis by some descriptive statistics. The secondary data have been collected from books, journals, internet sources etc.

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## **1. Introduction**

Dress is an important component of our daily lives. Through clothing, individuals establish their sense of self as well as their place in society. The connections between dress and both individual and collective identities continue to be of interest to scholars and practitioners in the world of fashion and dress. Interdisciplinary in approach, the conference establishes associations between culture and dress through a dialogue among scholars in the fields of sociology, psychology, art, history, anthropology, communication, journalism and business, as well as fashion experts.

Dress, along with cloth, textiles, and adornment, has been an important part of the study of material culture in anthropology since the early times of the discipline, when the focus was on cross-cultural variation and the relationships between different parts of culture and their changes. Some earlier studies aimed specifically to record the significance of material culture in the face of change in a manner that sometimes has been described as “salvage anthropology.” A later generation of anthropologists, whose research interests revolved around the functions of institutions such as economy, politics, and religion in integrating societies, paid attention to dress only in passing and few, perhaps with the exception of Alfred Kroeber in the 1950s, studied fashion in the West. Dress is an important component of our daily lives and one aspect of material culture too. Through clothing, individuals establish their sense of self as well as their place in society. The connections between dress and both individual and collective identities continue to be of interest to scholars and practitioners in the world of fashion and dress.

‘Dress’ is a constructive and inclusive term in preference to terms with specific reference such as ‘clothing,’ “attire,” “costume,” “garment,” and “apparel.” When defining dress, following dress scholars Joanne Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach Higgins, as an “assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements,” scholars recognize both the strategic functions that arise from the materiality of dress and their expressive abilities<sup>1</sup>.

Anthropologists have studied the significance of clothing in ritual, its symbolism, how designs express identity (as in subcultures), or how designs follow the dictates of fashion. The “exotic” dress of some cultures is a key indicator of their otherness in the western imagination, where it is usually shorn of precisely the meanings that give it resonance to its wearers. Choice of dress may be ethnically sensitive, as when a person operates between two cultures and is faced with deciding between the “uniform” of one or the other. In recent years issues

around Islamic dress have been notable in western social discourse. (Morris, 2012) Anthropologists have sought to understand processes of social, cultural and historical transformation through the study of changing dress forms and practices. Anthropologists have on the whole been less concerned with definitions of fashion than with understanding dress practices within a comparative cross-cultural and transnational framework. (Barnard & Spencer, 2010)

Clothing research, a general label for studies about dress and fashion, is not a distinct part of anthropology with its own theoretical toolkit and methods. Instead, it shares the general orientation of the discipline and incorporates many frameworks and ideas from other disciplines that also study the dressed body. Museum-based research on textiles and cloth overlaps anthropological studies of dress. Excellent overviews of the anthropology of cloth are provided by Schneider (1987) as well as by Weiner and Schneider (1989)<sup>2</sup>.

## **2. Objectives of the Present Study:**

As the dress and fashion are inseparable parts of present day modern human culture, so the present study bears the following three objectives:

- i) To understand the pattern of dress as found among the college girls of rural and urban area under the study.
- ii) To see the similarities and contrasts in dress between the girls of both contexts.
- iii) Finally, to access the impact of modernization as well as the globalization on the pattern of dress and its trends among the studied population.

## **3. Methodology of the Present Study:**

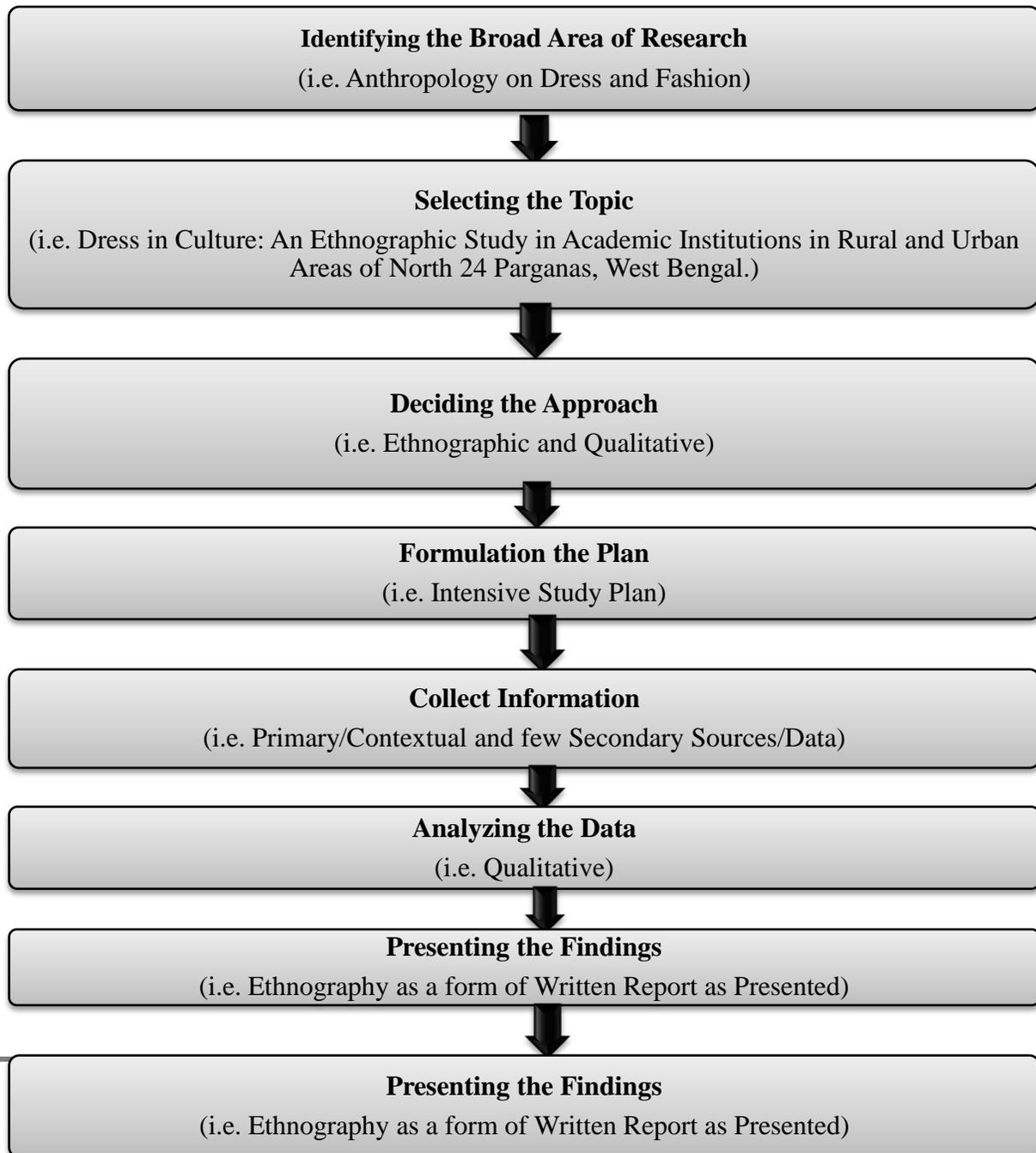
The contextual data has been collected through Participant Observation, Intensive Interview, Focussed Group Interview, Case Study and the secondary data have been collected from books, journals, internet sources etc.

#### 4. Areas of the Study:

In order to reach to the proposed objectives, four academic institutions, like colleges that are considered as two different contexts i.e. rural and urban in North 24 Parganas. For rural context the colleges namely *Chandraketugarh Sahidullah Smriti Mahavidyalaya*, *Berachampa* and *P. R. Thakurnagar Govt. College, Thakurnagar* and for the Urban perspective, the colleges namely *Barasat Govt. College, Barasat* and *Acharya Prafulla Chandra College, New Barrackpur* have been selected for the study.

#### 5. Research Design of the Present Study:

The research design/process as followed in the present study (Gill & Johnson, 1997)-



## 6. Discussions and Interpretations:

### 6.1 The Pattern of Dress: Rural and Urban Contexts

During investigation it has been observed that there are some differences and similarities in dress pattern between girls of both areas. Specially, in the time of collage going they choose different kind of dresses to express individuality and maintain norms of society and to adjust the circumstances. Maximum urban college going girls choose jeans and tops at the time of college going, where most of the rural college going girls chooses always the dopatta. Urban college going girls wear variety of dresses when they go to college. There are *kurti*-leggings, skirt-tops, top-palazzo, varieties of tops with ankle size jeans, parallel pant to *dhoti* pant all are used by urban college girls. Salwar is also frequently used by the urban college going girls. One girl may wear variety of dresses within a week and must of the girls are concern about dresses when they go to colleges. At the same time rural college going girls wear *salwar* with *dopatta* and few wear *kurti*-leggings and *kurti* jeans with *dopatta* in both dresses. Though there is very little variety of dresses among rural college going girls but all the time they try to wear *dopatta* with every dresses. Where urban college going girls show varieties at the same time rural college going girls show unity in dress pattern. There are terminological differences also-- same dress in urban college going girls known as '*salwar*' where rural college going girls are generally used the term '*churidar*'.

#### A. Dress Pattern: Regular Use

Maximum numbers of informants are private tutor. Girls of both areas try to wear three pieces when they go to their students' house, few of urban girls wear *Kurti*-Leggings also. But girls of both areas maintained a formal look with dresses when they go for giving tuitions because of their role is changed at that moment and they became a teacher instead of student. In contrast when students come to their home to take tuitions, at that time girls of both areas are less bothered about their clothing because they stay their home.

#### B. Dress Pattern: Seasonal and Occasional Variations

Now a day, all girls are aware of sun tan and maximum is health or beauty conscious. Many of girls in both areas try to wear cotton clothes in summer. Some of them try to cover as much body surface area as possible at least at the time of reveal in the sun with the help of scarf, *dopatta* or full sleeves.

Some of urban college going girls now use half hand mask and face mask also by which they can use short or sleeveless tops without getting tan and it can remove after reaching destination. Few of urban college going girls use socks, specially cotton and short ankle length to protect feet from sun burn. But maximum rural college going girls are not very much bother about sun tan but for comfort some of them use cotton clothes with full sleeves.

In winter, most of the urban college going girls not use any specific clothes as the reason of there is no such temperature fall in this area and there is near about two weeks holidays in the winter. If they feel needed then they use stool or few heavy clothes. Some of girls accepted that if they buy any new winter clothes they usually wear those to show their friends. But in rural college going girls use sweater, jacket, muffler. Sweater is the most useable winter cloth among rural college going girls.

In some occasion like Teachers' day, Seminar and festival like *Saraswatipuja*, *Ashtamee* of *Durgapuja*, girls of both areas prefer traditional dress specially *saree* in group. Some time it is the theme made by institute or department or by friends group. Girls of both areas have almost same emotions or feeling about *sarees*. Maximum girls of both areas believe that they looking most beautiful in the *sarees* but few of them believe that though *saree* is very beautiful but it do not suits on them and cannot match with their personality.

At the time of birth day party, urban college going girls show varieties in the dresses—jeans-top, gown, fancy top-skirt, *salwar* etc. But rural college going girls generally wear appropriate *salwar* with matching accessories. At the time of marriage ceremony, girls of both areas try to wear traditional dresses including *salwar* but it have to be gorgeous with color, design or style. Maximum girls accepted that they choose dresses on the basis of how they close to the couple. They wear *saree* if the married couples are very close relative of them and they try to wear *saree* in group because according to them it feels odd if they wear it alone. Other than *saree* girls of both areas choose to dress like long or full length *salwar*, *Anarkali* (a type of long rounded *salwar* which is famous by name of a famous character *Anarkali*) with dark color and stylish one. Few of the urban college going girls wear jeans with fancy top, gown (short or ground touch) which are unconventional among the college going girls. At the time of funeral, girls of

both areas try to wear *salwar* with light color or white as a symbol of piece. And it is also known from some informants that they are not interested to attend funeral occasion. Few among them belong to Muslim community and they wear black *salwar* with 'Hijab' (a piece of cloth by which faces can be hidden) to express sorrow.

It is seen that girls in the urban colleges generally prefer shopping malls than the normal shop. Because in the shopping malls there are lots of dresses are seen by buyer's own self. There are various options and in one place almost every sort of needs can be fulfilled. There is no need to bargain or sells-man's help. And shopping mall can display various brands and types of clothes at a time. It gives them lots of options to choose. Because girls in the urban colleges try to experiment with varieties of dresses so shopping malls satisfy their need more than normal shop. Big bazaar, Vishal Megamart, Relience Trend, Budget bazaar is few shopping malls where my informants generally go for buying clothes. There are lots of offers in specific days of weeks which attract them more to buy things than their need.

On the other hand girls in the rural colleges generally prefer normal shops than the shopping malls. Because they believe that in the normal shops, price of products are reasonable in compare to shopping malls. They can bargain with shop keepers where malls have fixed price. Most of my informants accepted that they generally prefer their known shops from unknown one only because of reliable issues.

### C. *Psycho-Social Similarities and Contrasts in the Choice of Dress:*

Choosing the dress to express individuality and personality there are differences between girls of both areas but at the same time there are few similarities also. Though all individuals have different psychology but there are some psychic unites in the girls of both areas. Noticeable major psychological difference between rural and urban college going girls is on 'Cause of Rape Depends on Girls Dresses'. Surprisingly all most everyone from rural college girls believes that girls' dress is a major factor of being raped. According to them girls wearing, attitude, over smartness, desperate behavior all are the vital reasons behind the rape. In response of being rape of child or mentally challenged girl, they said that there are some pervert who have distorted sexual needs. According to them if one girl does not wear socially approved dresses or vulgar

(according to given society), it can provoke a guy and this lead to rape. May be this thinking prevent them to adopt more western dress like urban ones and stay more traditional though this is fruitful or not is a big question. Though no one accepts that they have experience about roadside eve-teasing but their body language shows different thing. Psychology behind this may be they don't want to express their kind of problem to others in fear of society or other may be misunderstood them.

But on the other hand, every urban college going girls deny that rape depend on girls' dresses. They all believe that rape depends on psychopath people who have perverse mentality. Being rape of child or mentally challenged girl is the proof of dress of girls do not affect on the rape. Some of girls believe that rape culture (a society or environment whose prevailing social attitudes have the effect of normalizing or trivializing sexual assault and abuse) is mainly depends on showing some man's domination over woman, the mentality of woman owe man and man have the power to punish if he don't like the girls' attitude. May be this thinking lead them to experiment with their dresses. Ethnic to some fusion of western and traditional all are used by urban college going girls at some level. Some of my informants spoke about roadside teasing and they are expressive about it little or without hesitation because they believe that it was not their fault.

In the response of Opinions of Boyfriend about Girls' Dress shows also noticeable differences between the girls of both areas. Where rural college going girls generally prefer the boys who like the girls wear traditional dresses and *salwar* with *dopatta*. They believe that those boys are good in natures, who don't like the girls who wear western dresses. Because according to them girls who wear traditional dresses are more polite, decent, gentle, respectful and 'cultured' (maintained their traditional culture) than the girls who wear western dresses. Not only that they believe the girls who are more adaptive to western culture, are not good enough and to some extend characterless also. Behind this thinking there are actually the mindsets which cannot adjust with these differences.

On the other hand few of urban girls accepted that their boyfriend have some problem if they wear short skirt or shoulder less tops. Few of them face huge disturbances in their relationships

only because of dress. But most of the girls prefer those boys who never have negative opinion about girls' dress because they believe those boys know dress cannot define a girl's nature. They don't like boys who cannot accept girls with western dresses because they believe that it shows boys' narrow-minds. It is almost opposite mentality of girls of both areas.

In response to Dress Restrictions in Some Colleges there are also some differences between the girls of both areas. Where all rural college going girls believe that restrictions of academic institutions are good to maintain an academic ambience. If some girls wear different clothes from others or attractive dresses, it may distract boys from study. Boys may tease them or situations become nasty. So it is easy to avoid all those possibilities with those restrictions.

Half of urban college going girls believes that restrictions are good to maintain academic ambience because authority don't aware of the background of all girls and where they come from. And their logic is almost like rural college going girls and they believe it may reduce girls' over concern about dresses in the college campus. Some of them believe that restrictions are not needed because all college girls are adult and they know how to dress and how to carry them. If someone wears less clothes and more body surface area are shown that also not a big deal because they believe that one should wear whatever they want to and no one should have any problem with that.

Though all of four colleges of the studied areas have restrictions about dress but it defer from each other. *Barasat* Government College and *Acharya Prafulla Chandra* College are the urban colleges. There are not much dress restriction but backless or shoulder less tops are not allowed and skirt or jeans above the knees are not allowed. At the date of counseling representative of college union give a short lecture in that dress restrictions should make aware among the students and guardians both. *Thakurnagar* Govt. College and *Chandraketugarh, Sahidullah Smriti Mahavidyalaya*, are the rural colleges. Former one has less restriction which is almost like those urban colleges but later one has more restrictions—like jeans are not allowed in the college campus whatever they wear, they should carry *dopatta* always. Though maximum number of my informants of both areas accepted that they never feel any problem for those dress restrictions.

## 6.2 Demographic Background of the Study:

**Table 1: Distribution of Dress Patterns of Girls in the Both Contexts.**

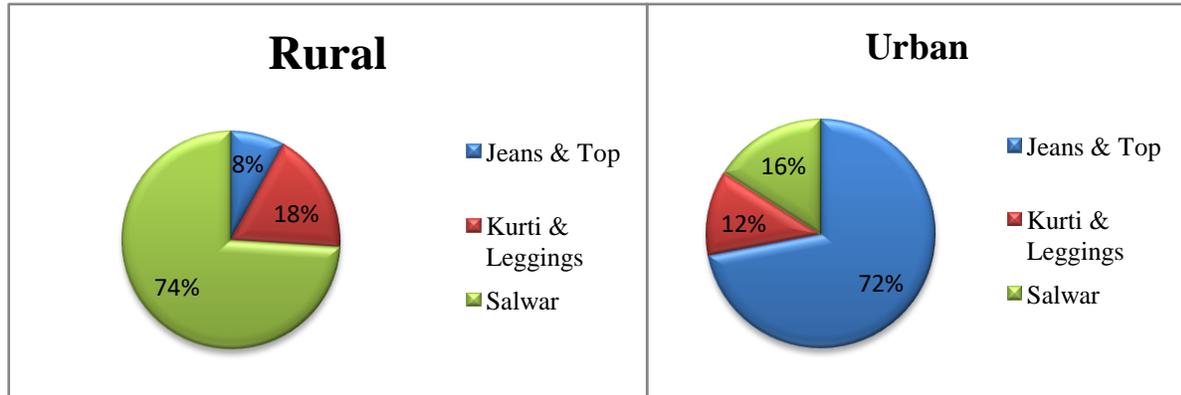
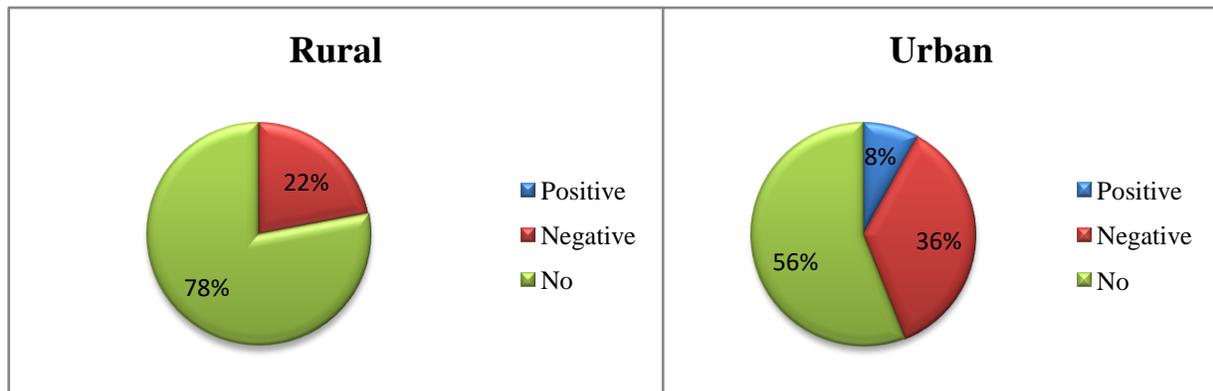


Table 1 reveals that in urban area, the percentage of wearing jeans, top is much higher in urban (72%) area than rural area (8%). In the studied population 100 individuals has been taken for sampling. Whereas, percentage of wearing *Salwar* higher in rural area (74%) than the urban area (16%).

**Table 2: Parents' Opinion towards their Daughters' Dress Pattern**



This table reveals that the urban girls are getting more negative comments for their dressing style than the rural girls. The percentage is 36 and 22 percent respectively. But very few one are giving positive comments on urban girls.

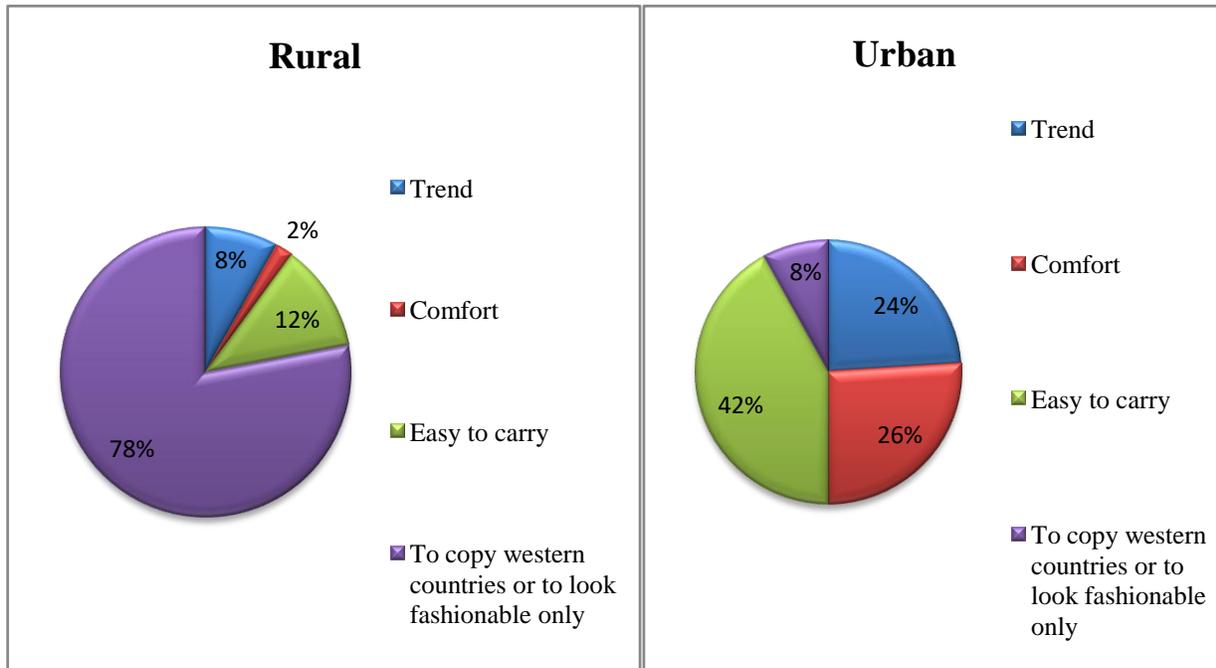
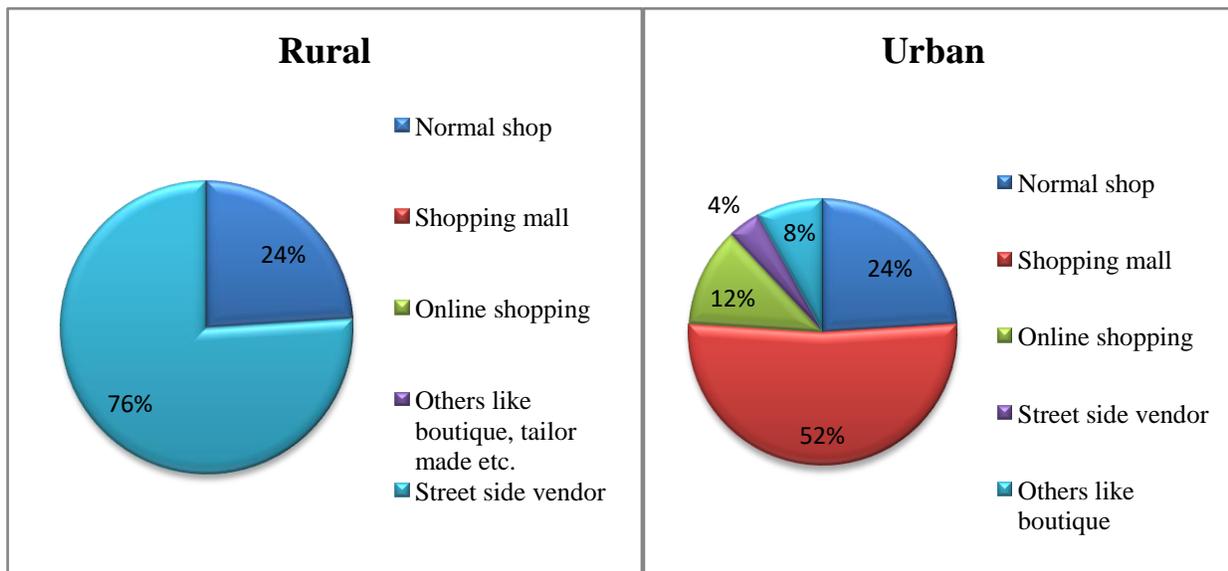
**Table 3: Cause of Choosing Western Dresses over Traditional One**

Table 3 reveals that, the trends are getting two third more responses in urban areas than my studied rural area. On the other hand, the comfort factor is almost none in rural area (2%) whereas it is very significant in urban area (26%). Similarly, the dresses those easier to carry are the more preferable for my studied urban girls. But the trend to copy the western dresses is clearly quite higher in rural (78%) area than the urban areas (8%).

**Table 4: Purchasing Area of Cloths**

This is a very important table in this study. This table showing that the trends of buying dress from normal shop in rural area is 76 percent with compare to urban area is 24 percent. On the other hand, none from the rural area of my studied population is buying dress from shopping mall. Whereas, almost half of the girls (52%) are buy dress from shopping mall. I have some other point show. No person does online marketing of rural area.

**Table 5: Information and Decision Making Sources**

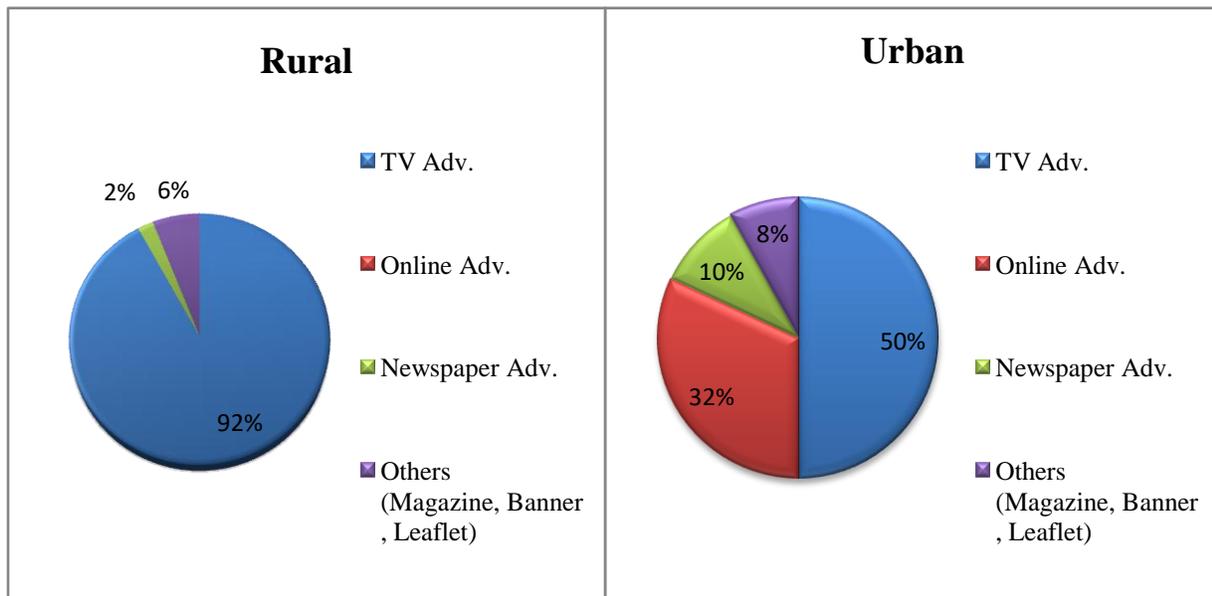


Table no. 5 showing that relevance of television advertisement is almost double in rural area than the urban area. Almost cent percent people follow television advertisement. But in case of online marketing, the rural people are neglecting the online marking sites. But urban people are very active in searching from online sites.

**Table 6: Purchasing Dress from Online Sites**

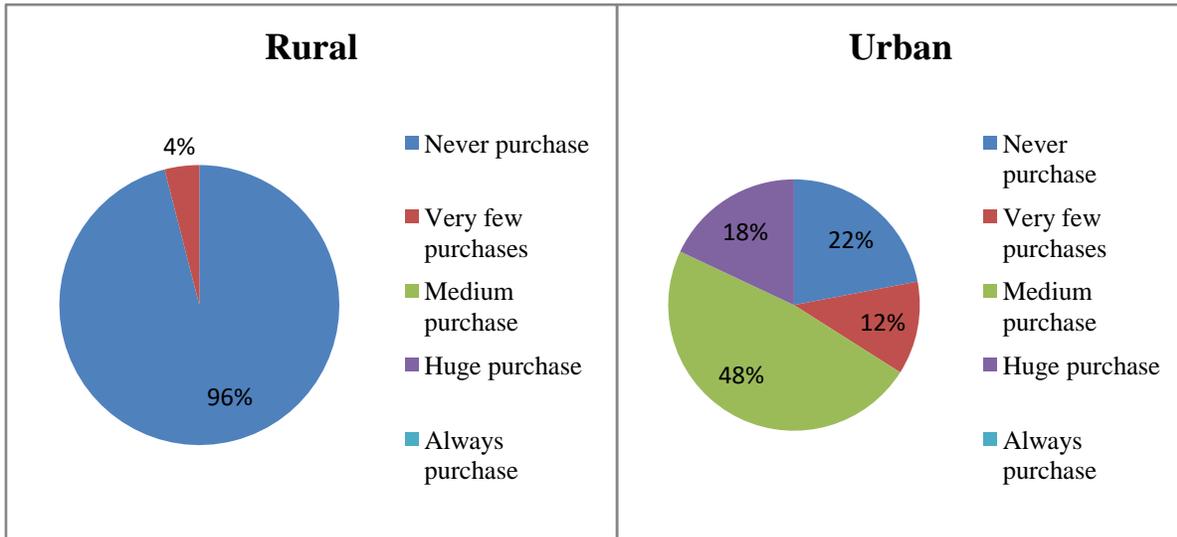
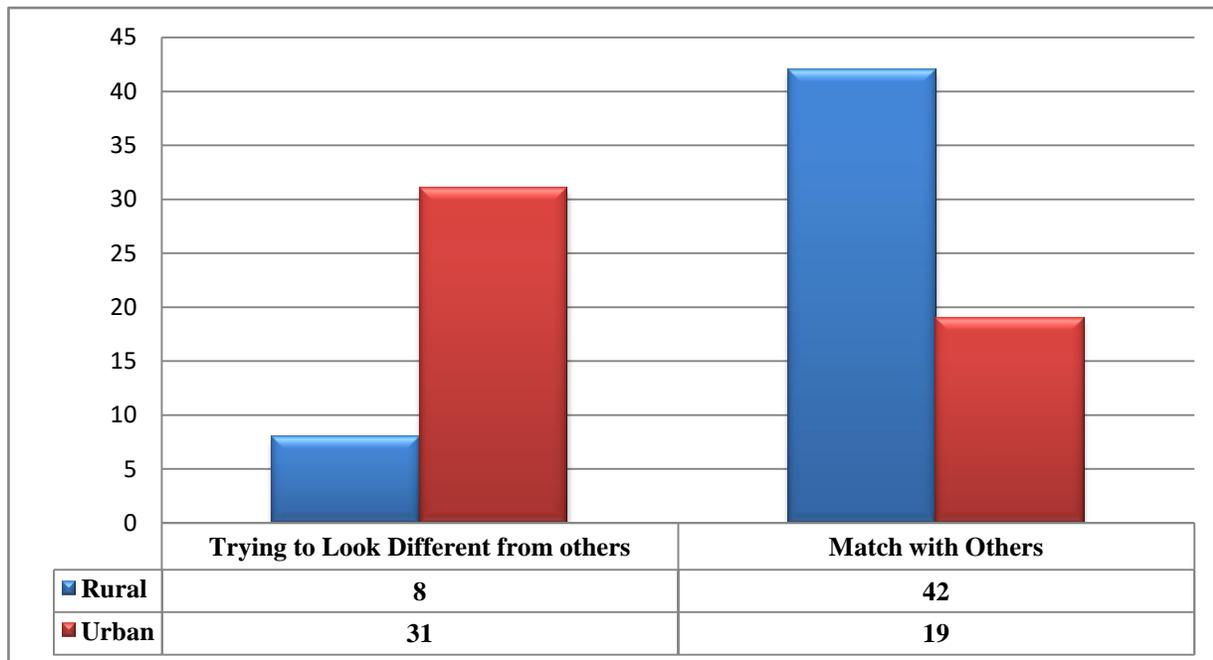


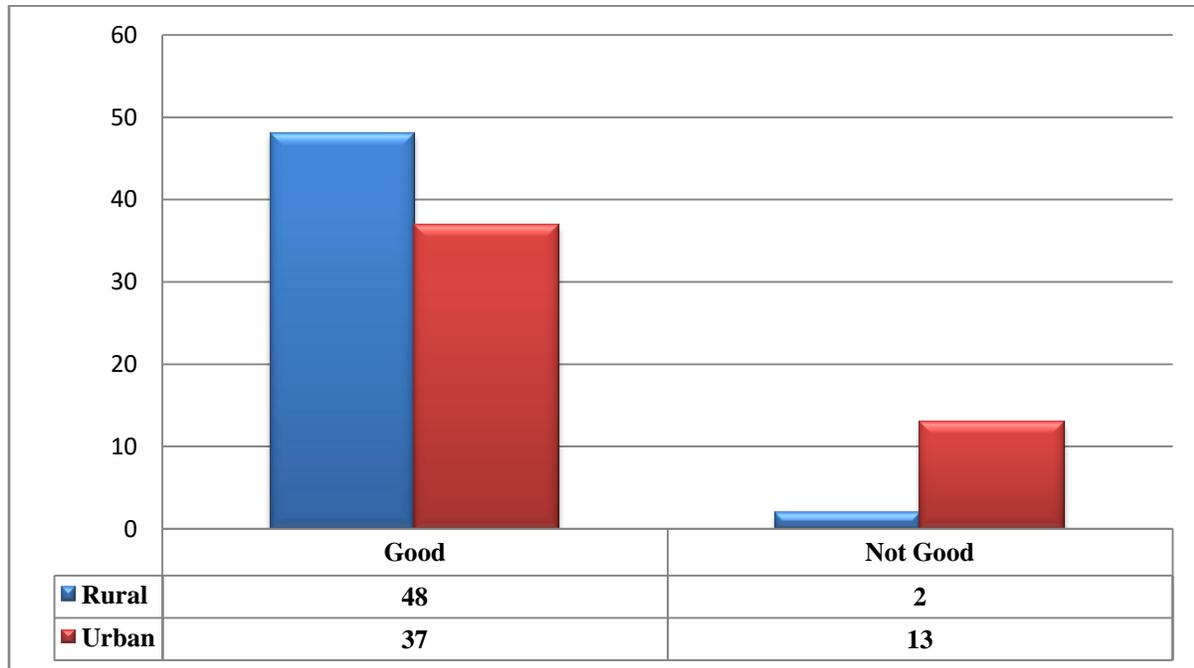
Table 6 showing almost cent percent people in rural area of my studied population are very least interested to purchasing dresses from online sites. Pie diagram showing that 96% of the rural population is never been purchasing from online sites. But in urban area, 48 percent peoples are frequent buyer of online markets.

**Table 7: Individuality in Choice and Unity with Other’s Dress Pattern.**



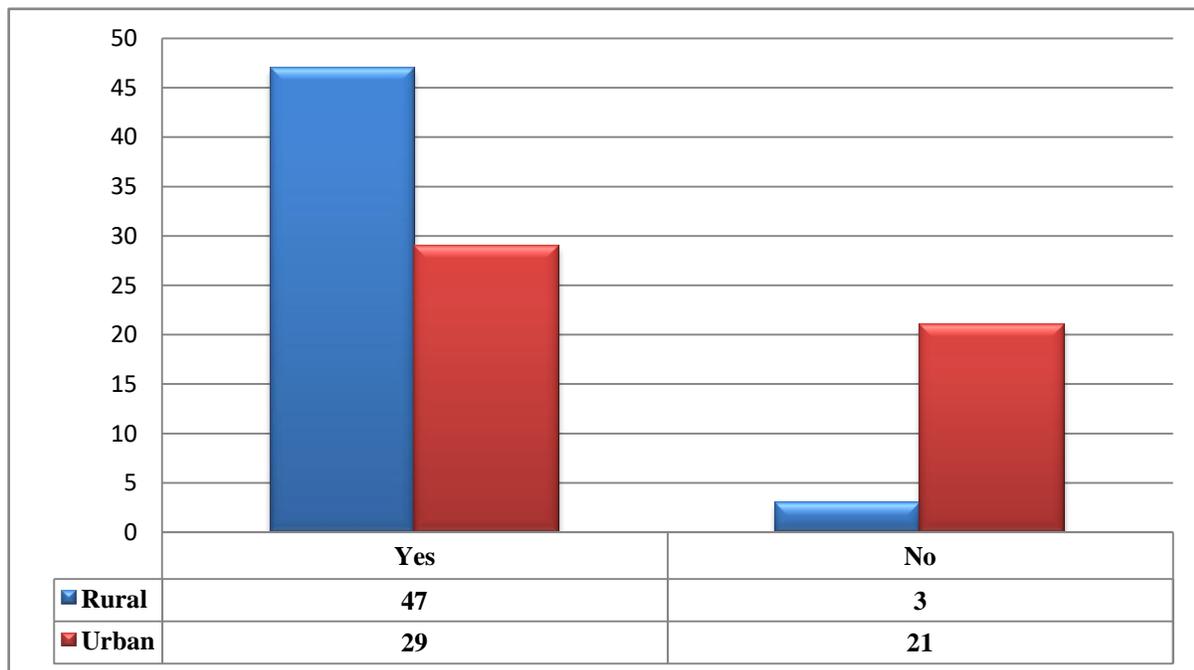
This table shows that, the urban girls have more individuality than the rural girls. The urban girls are trying to look different from others.

**Table 8: Opinions about the Logic of Dress Restriction in Colleges.**



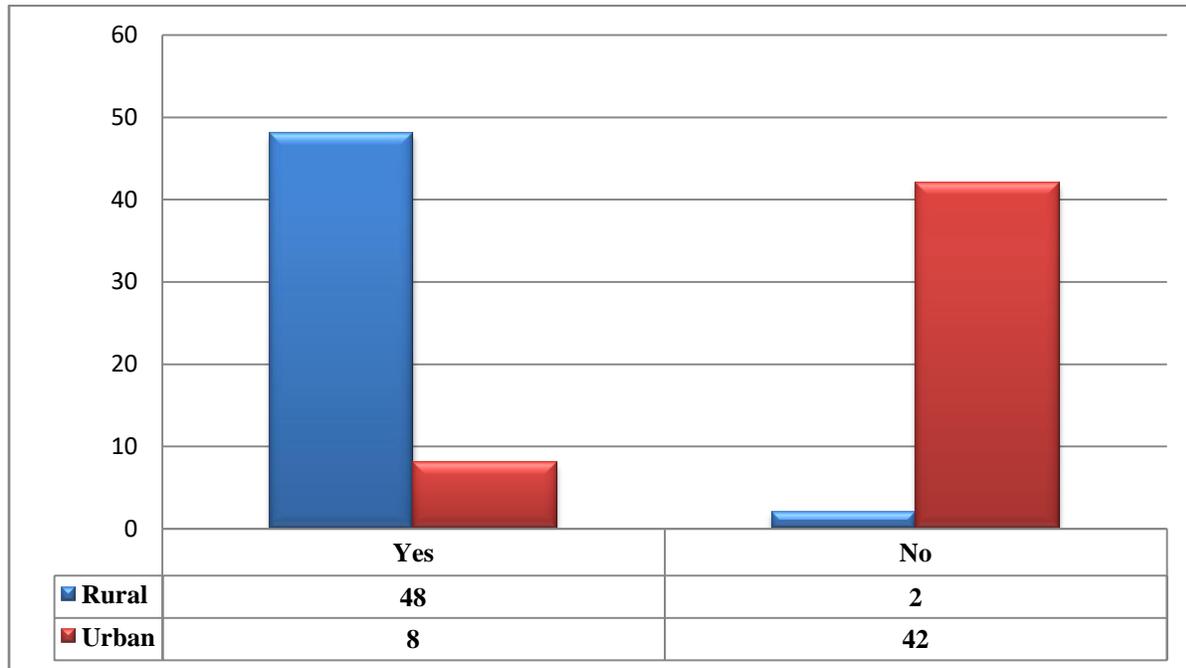
This table showing that almost cent percent girls of the rural area of my studied population think that colleges should have the dress restriction.

**Table 9: Dress Pattern can express a Person's Personality.**



It is showing that 47 out of 50 girls of rural area of my studied population think that dress reflects a person's personality. So dress is very important to present her to others.

**Table 10: One of the Causes of Rape depends on Girls' Dress**



It is shown that there are opposite mentality among the girls of both contexts about this. Maximum girls of the urban colleges deny the fact that girls' dress can be a cause of rape where as almost cent percent of the girls of rural colleges believed that girls' dress effect the cause of rape.

### 6.3 Impact of Modernization and Globalization: An Overview

Girls in urban colleges access online shopping in a huge level. Though their no. of shopping items are not more than the normal shop but maximum girls are attach with various shopping sites to update themselves with not only national but also international fashion trends. They registered themselves on those sites to get new updates of fashion arrival, offers etc. Therefore, from the above points one can easily follows the latest fashion trends as it improves her overall personality and gives a special place in the society. The latest accessories accompanying the outfit enhance the look of the dress as well as her too. As discussed earlier, internet plays an important role in introducing them to the latest fashion trends; therefore, they should make use of them too. Craftsvilla, Voonik is two most popular ladies wears online site. Amazon, flipcart is

also used by my informants for clothing purpose. There are various big shops also have their own online sites now. Just like *Saha* Textile have their own online sites where their new arrival of clothes, sale all are shows there. Anyone can see those sits in the home. They go for advertising their products in few channels like a TV show. All those are very famous in girls in urban colleges.

Whereas, girls in rural colleges access online shopping is very rare. Maximum of them never open those sites for a single time. Few of them try to buy from those sites but their guardians did not permit them saying that clothes should be bought by hands examine. It shows their conservative minds which do not permit them go out from their comfort zone of thinking level. It is accepted by girls in urban colleges if someone's economic background or their parents do not permit them to spend that much money to buy their choice able those dresses from malls or big shops, they look for those style or type of dresses from the street side vendors. They compromise the quality over style.

In contrast girls in rural colleges try to buy cheap dresses from street side vendor to save money. In rural area if someone is economically strong and their parents give them enough money to buy their favorite dresses than they prefer huge amount of dresses rather than few braded one with that money. But if someone is not that much economically sounded or their parents do not give them enough money to buy their favorite dresses then they try to buy clothes from street side vendors. Few of my informants accepted that most of the time they sacrifice their desire to buy clothes to make fulfill other basic need for financial problem.

Unanimously girls in both contexts accept that television advertising is the main sources to know and make a decision of purchasing clothes. This is observable that rural girls like television advertising more than their urban counterparts. TV advertising has enhanced their involvement in product selection and purchase, they prefer to buy TV advertised products and it is helpful in buying the new products, getting the best product and also supports collective decision making. Girls in the urban colleges also want TV advertised products even though they do not require them. They also like the advertisements of the products that they are using and believe that

products are as good as expected from TV advertisements. But there are few other things like newspaper, leaf let, magazines, online and radio advertising affects the buyers' choice.

Girls in rural colleges generally get the inspiration from family only but the girls in urban colleges get inspiration from friends, celebrities fashion level and especially from styles in stores are shown. Girls in rural colleges are not bother about any celebrates fashion levels because they thought that is beyond their level. But most of the girls in urban colleges try to follow celebrities fashion level. Maximum of them aware of T2 paper which gives with Telegraph, where celebrities fashion level are shown.

## **7. Concluding Remarks:**

The girls of both contexts wear their common dresses in the colleges or coaching classes but they maintain a formal look with dresses when they go for giving tuitions because of their role is changed at that moment and they became a teacher instead of student. At that time they all are try to maintain a formal look to make a teacher like appearance. It can prove that dress can express the identity.

At the time of different occasions dress may also changed as per the situation. When the girls of both areas, go for a marriage ceremony, birthday party or funeral, their roles are changed. At that time they become invitee instead of other acquaintances. Then at the time of marriage ceremony, they try to look good and wear bright and shiny dresses to match with the marital environment and cope up with couple also. At the birthday party, size of the party can affect the dresses and the dresses should less stylish than the former one. But at the time of funeral, all try to wear light colored sober dresses because at the funeral, all invitees come to console the family members of deceased person. With changing the situation, role of individual is also changed and dress is also changed to match with the situation.

Most of the girls in rural colleges buy which one suits on them because they don't like to experiment with dresses and try to attach with traditional values. But most of the urban college going girls preferred to buy what they like. On that note they try to explain if they don't buy those dresses then how it can be known that it will suit on them or not? So girls of the rural area

are generally following their tradition and to the girls of urban, are blindly following latest fashion.

Now it seems that fashion is going beyond the comfort zone day by day. Latest trendy dresses which do not suits with the environment of west Bengal also get their market in the west Bengal only because of their style sense. Internet and online advertisements become the catalyst of modernization and globalization in the girls of urban colleges. There are lots of social media sites accessed by girls of rural colleges; these can help them in urbanization.

Religion can affect the dress pattern. At the time of funeral where Hindu girls try to wear light color especially white colored dress as the symbol of peace, but Muslim girls should wear black to express sorrow. Few of my informants from Berachapa College wear *hijab*(dalles) to hide their head and face and wear *Borkha* (veiling) also.

In contrast girls in rural colleges try to buy cheap dresses from street side vendor to save money. In rural area if someone is economically strong and their parents give them enough money to buy their favorite dresses than they prefer to buy huge amount of dresses rather than few branded one with that money. But if someone is not that much economically sounded or their parents do not give them enough money to buy their favorite dresses then they try to buy clothes from street side vendors. They compromise the quality over the style. Few of my informants accepted that most of the time they sacrifice their desire to buy clothes to make fulfill other basic need for financial problem.

Girls are aware of sun tan and maximum are health or beauty conscious. Many of girls in both areas try to wear cotton clothes in summer. Some of them try to cover as much body surface area as possible at least at the time of reveal in the sun with the help of scarf, *dopatta* or full sleeves. Some of urban college going girls now use half hand mask and face mask also by which they can use short or sleeveless tops without getting tan and it can remove after reaching destination. In contrast maximum rural college going girls are not very much bother about san tan but for comfort some of them use cotton clothes with full sleeves.

Presently ethnic dress increases its popularity within the girls of urban colleges. Ethnic dress is the proof of revivalist movement. It is the traditional dresses in the modern form. Now a day tribal printed dress in form of modern trend is also frequently used by girls of urban colleges.

Here more focus is required along with practical approach towards urban and rural areas regarding the dress in culture among the college goers as well as the researcher who want to work on the fashion Studies. The present study, depicts that the following suggestive measures for the people of the North 24 Parganas as observed and interoperated by the present researchers-

- If any shopping mall or brand wants to catch rural market and open show rooms than they have to do social impact analysis.
- Social awareness or campaigning is very much needed among the rural people.
- At the same time, the study of fashionable clothing as a form of material culture can contribute to the cultural anthropology by providing empirical studies relating to a vast field of cultural goods, objects, and artifacts that are widely disseminated in contemporary societies.
- The traditional notion and westernization should be simultaneously followed and took forward.

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