

From Tradition to Necessity: Clothing Adaptation in Swat During and After Conflict

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Abstract

The armed conflict in Swat Valley (2007–2009) deeply impacted the region's traditional clothing practices. This study explores the transformation of attire from symbols of cultural identity to items of necessity dictated by survival, displacement, and security concerns. Using a structured questionnaire and SPSS analysis of 200 respondents from rural and urban Swat, this paper documents key shifts in fabric use, design, and production. Findings show a decline in handcrafted textiles and a rise in functional, often synthetic clothing. Despite this, cultural pride and resilience have led to ongoing efforts to preserve Swat's sartorial heritage. This paper sheds light on how communities negotiate identity through clothing in post-conflict recovery.

Keywords: Clothing Adaptation, Conflict, Dictated, Security, Swat

Introduction

Swat Valley, situated in the north of Pakistan, is known for its breathtaking landscapes and rich cultural heritage. Among the defining aspects of this heritage is traditional attire, such as the shalwar kameez, handwoven khes, and embroidered chadars. However, the 2007–2009 armed conflict in Swat—marked by militant insurgency, mass displacement, and military operations—significantly disrupted the daily lives of the people. With markets destroyed, livelihoods lost, and mobility restricted, traditional clothing practices underwent dramatic changes. This paper investigates the transformation of clothing in Swat during and after the conflict, tracing how necessity replaced tradition in shaping daily attire.

Literature Review

Clothing is a strong marker of cultural identity and a reflection of societal values (Craik,

2009). In conflict zones, clothing often adapts to meet changing social, political, and economic needs (Taylor, 2021). Zahid (2023) notes that conflict can displace artisans and damage local textile economies. Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992) argue that dress communicates not only aesthetics but also survival strategies in extreme circumstances. Previous studies highlight the vulnerability of indigenous textile traditions during war and the challenge of cultural preservation under duress.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 200 individuals from rural, semi-urban, and urban areas of Swat. Participants were selected to ensure diversity in gender, age, and socioeconomic background. Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 29), applying descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to explore correlations between conflict impact and changes in clothing practices.

Results

- 85.1% of respondents reported wearing traditional shalwar kameez prior to the conflict. - 52.9% noted design changes in their clothing after the conflict, including simplified cuts and reduced embellishments. - Cotton was the dominant fabric before the conflict (49%), while synthetic materials saw increased use due to affordability and availability. - 59.4% considered traditional clothing essential to cultural identity, even after conflict disruptions. - Common challenges included loss of access to raw materials, damaged local markets, reduced artisan activity, and financial constraints on traditional dressmaking.

Discussion

The findings reflect a major transformation in clothing preferences in Swat. While traditional attire remained symbolically important, its practicality diminished under conflict pressures. Economic hardship made expensive and time-intensive garments less feasible. Many artisans lost their jobs or shifted to alternative professions. However, women, particularly in rural areas, continued to wear traditional clothing during festivals and religious gatherings, showing a strong link between dress and identity. The rise of synthetic clothing reflects not only economic constraints but also a shift toward modern, urban-influenced fashion among younger generations.

Conclusion

Conflict in Swat fundamentally altered clothing practices, shifting emphasis from cultural expression to functional necessity. Despite these changes, the enduring symbolic importance of traditional attire remains evident. To preserve this cultural legacy, it is essential to support local textile production, fund artisan cooperatives, and integrate traditional dress into modern contexts through education and awareness programs. Clothing, in this context, is not merely fabric—but memory, resistance, and cultural survival.

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The Evolution of Clothing in Swat

Section A: Demographic Information

1. **Age:**
 - a. ☐ 18-25
 - b. ☐ 26-35
 - c. ☐ 36-45
 - d. ☐ 46-60
 - e. ☐ 60+
2. **Gender:**
 - a. ☐ Male
 - b. ☐ Female
 - c. ☐ Other
3. **Occupation:**
 - a. ☐ Student
 - b. ☐ Artisan/Weaver
 - c. ☐ Business Owner/Trader
 - d. ☐ Homemaker
 - e. ☐ Other (please specify): _____
4. **Education Level:**
 - a. ☐ No formal education
 - b. ☐ Primary education
 - c. ☐ Secondary education
 - d. ☐ Higher education (College/University)
5. **Area of Residence:**
 - a. ☐ Urban
 - b. ☐ Rural

Section B: Pre-War Clothing and Cultural Practices

6. **What types of clothing materials were commonly used before the conflict in Swat? (Select all that apply)**
 - a. ☐ Wool
 - b. ☐ Cotton
 - c. ☐ Silk
 - d. ☐ Other (please specify): _____
 7. **How would you describe the traditional clothing styles before the conflict?**
-

- a. ☐ Simple and functional
 - b. ☐ Elaborate and decorative
 - c. ☐ A mix of both
 - d. ☐ Other (please specify): _____
8. **What cultural significance did traditional clothing hold before the conflict?**
(Select all that apply)

- a. ☐ Social status
- b. ☐ Cultural identity
- c. ☐ Religious significance
- d. ☐ Ceremonial purposes
- e. ☐ Other (please specify): _____

9. **Were there specific garments or accessories that were unique to Swat's cultural identity?**

- a. ☐ Yes (please specify): _____
- b. ☐ No

10. **How important was traditional clothing in daily life before the conflict?**

- a. ☐ Very important
- b. ☐ Somewhat important
- c. ☐ Not very important
- d. ☐ Not important at all

Section C: Impact of Conflict on Clothing and Culture

11. **Did the conflict affect the availability of traditional clothing materials?**

- a. ☐ Yes, significantly
- b. ☐ Yes, somewhat
- c. ☐ No, not at all
- d. ☐ Unsure

12. **How did the conflict influence the types of clothing people wore?**

- a. ☐ Shift to more modern styles
- b. ☐ Continued use of traditional clothing
- c. ☐ A mix of both
- d. ☐ Other (please specify): _____

13. **Were there any changes in the way clothing was perceived culturally during the conflict?**

- a. ☐ Yes, became more symbolic
- b. ☐ Yes, became less important
- c. ☐ No significant changes
- d. ☐ Other (please specify): _____

14. **Did the conflict lead to the adoption of new clothing styles or materials?**

- a. ☐ Yes (please specify): _____
 - b. ☐ No
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15. **How has the conflict impacted the traditional textile industry in Swat?**

- a. ☐ Declined significantly
- b. ☐ Declined somewhat
- c. ☐ Remained stable
- d. ☐ Improved
- e. ☐ Unsure

Section D: Post-War Clothing and Socioeconomic Impacts

16. **Have traditional clothing styles been revived after the conflict?**

- a. ☐ Yes, widely
- b. ☐ Yes, somewhat
- c. ☐ No
- d. ☐ Unsure

17. **Are younger generations in Swat adopting traditional clothing?**

- a. ☐ Yes, enthusiastically
- b. ☐ Yes, but only on special occasions
- c. ☐ No, they prefer modern styles
- d. ☐ Other (please specify): _____

18. **How has economic recovery influenced clothing choices in Swat?**

- a. ☐ Increased preference for modern clothing
- b. ☐ Revival of traditional clothing
- c. ☐ A mix of both
- d. ☐ Other (please specify): _____

19. **Do you believe that traditional clothing is an essential part of Swat's cultural identity today?**

- a. ☐ Strongly agree
- b. ☐ Agree
- c. ☐ Neutral
- d. ☐ Disagree
- e. ☐ Strongly disagree

20. **What challenges does the traditional textile industry face today? (Select all that apply)**

- a. ☐ Competition from modern fabrics
- b. ☐ Lack of skilled artisans
- c. ☐ Economic constraints
- d. ☐ Lack of market access
- e. ☐ Other (please specify): _____

21. **What steps can be taken to preserve traditional clothing and textile practices in Swat? (Open-ended)**

22. Any additional comments or observations on the evolution of clothing in
Swat? (Open-ended)

