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Honouring Shared Heritage: Commonwealth Day

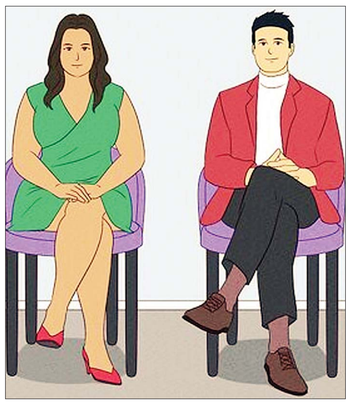
Commonwealth Day, observed annually on the second Monday of March, celebrates the unity, diversity, and shared values of the 54 member nations of the Commonwealth. The day highlights collaboration in areas like democracy, development, education, and human rights, while fostering a sense of global community. Originating from Empire Day in the early 20th century, Commonwealth Day has evolved into a platform for cultural exchange, dialogue, and mutual respect among nations spanning six continents. Through events, ceremonies, and educational initiatives, it reminds citizens of the importance of international cooperation, collective progress, and the enduring bonds that connect the Commonwealth family.

राष्ट्रदूत
MONDAY
09 March 2026
A-B

#DO-DON'T

Ladies Don't Walk Alone!

Social Etiquette from the Past That Would Shock You Today



Throughout history, social norms and etiquette have played a critical role in shaping the way societies function. While many of these customs were deeply rooted in culture and class distinctions, some would seem downright shocking and impractical to us today. In earlier centuries, rigid social rules governed nearly every aspect of life, what people wore, how they behaved, who they could speak to, and even how they walked! Here are some old social etiquette rules that would undoubtedly shock you if they were still in practice today.

1. Ladies Must Not Walk Alone

In past centuries, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, it was considered improper for women to walk alone in public. This was due to concerns about a woman's safety, reputation, and the preservation of her modesty. Women were expected to always be accompanied by a chaperone, usually a family member or an older woman, when they ventured outside, especially in public spaces like parks, streets, or even at social gatherings.

The reasoning behind this was twofold: first, it was believed that a woman walking alone was an easy target for unwanted attention or even assault, and second, it was feared that being seen alone would harm her reputation and suggest she was of questionable character.

2. Don't Speak to a Stranger Without Introduction

In earlier centuries, particularly in European aristocratic circles, speaking to a stranger without proper introduction was considered a breach of decorum. Social hierarchy and class divisions were rigidly enforced, and the idea of 'rank' was important. In formal settings, it was essential that an individual be introduced by a mutual acquaintance or someone of higher social standing before a conversation could commence.

This etiquette was meant to preserve the boundaries of social class and status. For example, a noblewoman would never speak to a commoner without prior introduction, and conversing with someone of a different social rank could be seen as overstepping one's position.

3. Cover Mirrors When Mourning

In Victorian England, it was customary for households in mourning to cover mirrors in the house. This bizarre practice was linked to superstition, grief, and the belief that mirrors could trap the soul. The Victorians held a deep fear of the afterlife and the possibility of souls becoming trapped in mirrors, so when someone passed away, it was believed that covering the mirrors would prevent the deceased's spirit from becoming confused or trapped.

4. Don't Cross Your Legs (Especially for Women)

In the past, crossing your legs, particularly for women, was considered a highly improper act. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the notion of 'ladylike' behaviour was tied to modesty, and one of the ways women were expected to demonstrate their refinement was by sitting with their feet flat on the floor or crossed at the ankles, never at the knees.

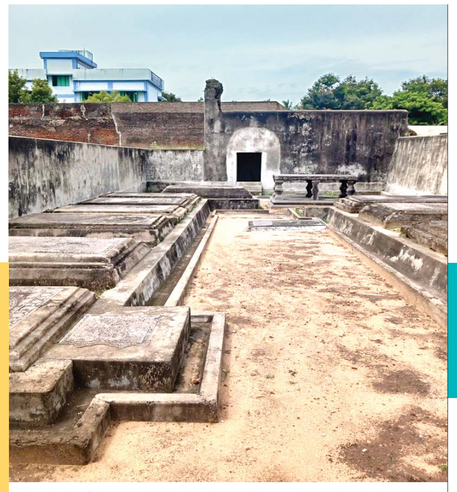
Crossing your legs at the knee was considered vulgar or indecorous because it exposed the legs in a way that was deemed inappropriate for women.

As society has evolved, so too have the norms and etiquette that govern how we interact with one another. While many of these past practices may seem outdated or overly restrictive, they were reflective of the times in which they were adopted.

Front gate at Sadras.

Life and Death in the Dutch Fort at Sadras

In 2003, the Archaeological Survey of India completed a detailed study of Fort Sadras and reconstructed some of its buildings. The compound includes a well, a kitchen, rooms with arched windows and floors made of square, rectangular and hexagonal bricks. The fort also had an underground drainage system. During the archeological digs, hundreds of fragments of artefacts were found. Earthenware and porcelain are often well preserved even in the most extreme environmental conditions. Archaeological findings show that the inhabitants of Sadras used beautiful delftware decorated with Dutchmen wearing hats, tents pitched in Holland, and coats of arms. Porcelain from China and pottery from England and Germany were also found, as well as Dutch clay pipes and glass jars with residues of white arrack.



The tomb of Ammarentia Blockhovius and her son Petrus Hemsinck.

● Kshema Jatuhkarna

Once a thriving Dutch colony, Sadras is an obscure town lost in the annals of history. Today, the echoes of its captivating past linger amidst the scattered ruins of Sadras Fort, where the legends of a ghostly Dutchman abound. Here is its story.

Everyone knows that Madras was the old name of Chennai, but have you ever heard of a place called 'Sadras?' Today, it is an obscure town, but 400 years ago, it was a very different place.

Sadras is midway between Madras and Pondicherry on the very same coast. In the 17th and 18th centuries, its claim to fame was precisely that, it was a Dutch colony, smack in the middle of a prosperous trade zone between British Madras and French Pondicherry.

Today, Sadras is a sleepy coastal village in Tamil Nadu, 40 miles south of Chennai. Tourists heading 10 miles north to visit the ancient temples of Mamallapuram might easily miss it. Just over a mile away is Kalpakkam, the site of the Madras Atomic Power Station. Between modern and ancient India, Sadras and its fort bear testimony to the role that this coast had in global trade, most especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Chennapattanam (Sadraspatnam or Sadras as it came to be known) was already a flourishing region of textile weaving and a port with international connections in the tenth to the sixteenth centuries. The area was well-known across the Indian Ocean for the production of fine textiles and for its trade in spices. This was one of the reasons that attracted European traders, first the Portuguese, and from the early seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Dates for the Dutch presence in Sadras vary: the VOC signed an agreement with the ruler of the Carnatic in 1612, and over the next couple of decades established a permanent presence. A fort was built, named Fort Sadras, whose ruins today are still standing. By the early years of the eighteenth century, the Dutch had not just secured firm control of the fort from which they conducted trade but also leased the nearby villages from the the Moghul Diwan of South Coromandel.

Sadras, unlike its homophone Madras, did not evolve to become a metropolis, not even a city. The ruins of Fort Sadras are imposing but are also the only reminder of its past: in 1754, Sadras was deemed a sufficiently strategic place where to hold an aborted peace conference between the French and the British. Yet, most of its buildings were destroyed after its capture by the British in 1781 with further damage inflicted in 1795, 1818 and 1825 when the fort changed hands.

Written sources are not of much help in charting the history of Sadras: most of its archives has been lost, making its history much less known than that of nearby Pondicherry or Madras. More useful in reconstructing the history of Sadras are archeological sources, first among which are the very remains of its fort. Set at just 100 yards from the beach, the fort has a rectangular shape with an eastern wall facing the sea (with a bastion and ramparts for defense) and a western wall with an entrance with mounted cannons and a watch tower. The surviving buildings internal to the fort show its commercial purpose: they include warehouses and storerooms, stables and living quarters for the VOC employees, their families and servants.

The built environment of Sadras, visited in July 2023 by members of the CAPASIA team, provides a unique insight into the life and death of a factory. It is also a reminder that what we see today is the result of a layering of time, of profound changes and extensive damage caused by war and time, and the more recent restoration started in the 1990s.

Sadras fort ruins.

#HISTORY

Cotton printed bedspread with the Goslinga coat of arms.

In 2003, the Archaeological Survey of India completed a detailed study of Fort Sadras and reconstructed some of its buildings. The compound includes a well, a kitchen, rooms with arched windows and floors made of square, rectangular and hexagonal bricks. The fort also had an underground drainage system. During the archeological digs, hundreds of fragments of artefacts were found. Earthenware and porcelain are often well preserved even in the most extreme environmental conditions. Archaeological findings show that the inhabitants of Sadras used beautiful delftware decorated with Dutchmen wearing hats, tents pitched in Holland, and coats of arms. Porcelain from China and pottery from England and Germany were also found, as well as Dutch clay pipes and glass jars with residues of white arrack.

A piece of archeological evidence tells us about the economic activities within and around Fort Sadras. It is a circular structure (a tank) for dyeing cotton cloth. During the Dutch period, Sadras became a centre of high-quality cloth manufacture. The area from Pondicherry to Pulicat was home to the best cotton textile painters of the Coromandel Coast. One historian has argued that they could accurately reproduce designs given to them including European coats of arms that the printers would faithfully reproduce. Pieter van Dam at the end of the seventeenth century wrote that "the best (textile) painters of the Coromandel Coast were to be found at Sadraspatnam, both because of the neat way they handle their painting, and because of the pure water there, which gives everything the best sheen and fastness that cannot be imitated in other places." (vol. 2.2, GS76, p. 205) By this date, Sadras was considered a hub for the production of the best Coromandel textiles, most especially large palampores were fashionable in the Netherlands.

Coat of arms at a grave, Sadras Fort.

European Coats of arms are also a motif across a different medium. From cloth to stone, they tell us about the challenging lives and the early deaths of some of Sadras' inhabitants. Best preserved within the fort complex is a cemetery that hosts around 20 graves of Dutchmen and women who lived and died in Sadras between the 1620s and the late eighteenth century. These tombstones might have been carved by local stone cutters, an occupation for which the Sadras area is still well known. The beautiful lettering and superbly-carved coats of arms of these tombs are tarnished by time and weather but they still allow us to decipher the lives and deaths of its occupants.

Most impressive is the gravestone of Ammarentia Blockhovius (1644-1670), wife of Lambert Hemsinck, who for twenty years between 1668 and 1688, was the chief (opperhoofd) and junior merchant at Sadras. As the gravestone tells us, Ammerentia died at the age of 25 years, 8 months and 21 days on the 1 February 1670 in childbirth and lay 'next to her daughter.' Another son had died in infancy at Palacole (Palakollu) in 1761. Another of her sons was to die age sixteen as the upper part of the gravestone tells us:

"Hier legt begraven PIETER HEMSINCK jongman geboren ten
desen contoire Zadrangapatnam den 3en Augusti 1665,
overleden den 24en February 1682. Out zynde 16 jaren,
6 maenden, 21 dagen."

"Here lays buried PIETER HEMSINCK young man born
at this factory Zadrangapatnam on the 3rd of August 1665,
died on the 24 February 1682. He was 16 years old
6 months, 21 days old."

We know little of Ammarentia apart from the fact that she came from a 'global' family, her father Petrus Dirksz Blockhovius (1610-1649) having died in Japan when Ammarentia was just 5 years old. More instead is known about her husband Lambert whose 20-year tenure at Sadras ended with a corruption enquiry. He is not buried locally: together with another son, he left in 1686 for Batavia to escape possible prosecution but also the anger of locals who had plundered his house in revenge for him having abused his concubine. Written sources reveal that Lambert Hemsinck had no less than 33 slaves, providing a small glimpse into the lives of the non-Dutch population who lived in Sadras.

Formed in 1602, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or the VOC, commonly known as the Dutch East India Company, was much more than just a trading company. It was a commercial-military conglomerate. Apart from carrying out trade, it was also empowered to negotiate treaties with Asian rulers, wage war, colonise, make laws, convict and execute prisoners, mint coins, and much more! It was the world's FIRST multinational mega corporation.

The VOC's first Indian trading station was at Masulipatnam in 1605, from where they traded extensively in textiles.

The story of Fort Sadras began about 111 km to its north, on the shores of Pulicat lake. Here, in 1606, a Dutch ship drifted in from the sea, and got stuck on the shores of Karimanal village. The sailors were tired and thirsty. A request for water advanced into a trade deal between the Dutch and the Vijayanagara Empire. But they were not the first foreigners on India's southeastern Coromandel Coast. The Portuguese had arrived here almost a 100 years earlier in 1502 and built a trading outpost. They were, understandably, not very happy about the new competition. Eventually, the Dutch managed to push them out of Pulicat and established a colony.

By 1612, the Dutch had expanded their territory to a town called Sadurangapattinam, and established weavers' colony, known for producing high-quality cotton. There was also a good deal of trade in pearls, edible oil and bricks. Seeing a business opportunity, the Dutch laid claim to it by building a fort. The name Sadurangapattinam was quite a mouthful for even the locals, who had shortened it to Sadirai. That too was tough on the Dutch tongue, so they called it Sadras.

By 1654, the fort enclosed a large muslin factory. But the elaborate fortifications were completed only in 1749, almost 100 years from when they began. The fort and the booming business inside it became the envy of other colonisers, including the British up north in Madras, and the French down south in Pondicherry. Things were heating up. War from continents away was riding towards India.

The American Revolutionary War, fought between 1775 and 1783, saw the British and the French on opposite sides. Since your enemy's friend is your enemy, the British declared war on the Dutch as well, because they refused to stop trading with the French. Using the same excuse, the British East India Company went on to capture French and Dutch outposts on the Coromandel Coast. The French navy was sent post haste to sort things out. As a result, on 17 February, 1782, the Battle of Sadras was fought. The British and French fleets met in the sea before Sadras Fort to fight a battle that lasted for three hours. No one won. But the British had taken the bigger beating and returned to Madras empty-handed. Sadras Fort, however, was not forgotten. Finally, in 1818, the British raided the fort and destroyed it.

What remains of Sadras Fort today are its ruins. Broken, chipped structures of elephant mounts, grand dining halls, cannons and granaries lie scattered in the compound, buried deeper everyday under the sand that blows in from the beach. The fort is an ASI (Archaeological Society of India) protected monument, but is not on the regular tourist map. What has survived best is the Dutch Cemetery with beautifully engraved Dutch graves of men and women buried here, far from home. Local legends talk ominously of the ghost of a noisy Dutchman lurking inside a fort well. Occasionally, it attracts Dutch visitors trying to understand their past.

Imagine the place as it must have been 400 years ago. A bustling, well-manned fort, overlooking a bay crisscrossed with ships traveling across the world, carrying muslin from Sadras. Today, Sadras is characterised by a tiny, obscure fishing community and a beach lined with brightly painted fishing boats. It is truly a piece of history hidden in plain sight.

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Sadras fort cannon.

#FIBER

Crude Oil Makes Fine Cloth

Polyester, acrylic, nylon, and lycra dominate the global fiber production market, making up nearly 70% of total fiber production

Crude oil, often associated with fuel and energy, also plays a crucial role in the creation of some of the most popular synthetic fibers used worldwide. These fibers, including polyester, acrylic, nylon, and lycra (also known as elastane), make up a staggering 70% of global fiber production. Derived from refined crude oil, these materials have transformed the textile industry, offering everything from comfortable clothing to durable industrial products.

The Process of Creating Synthetic Fibers from Crude Oil

The journey from crude oil to synthetic fibers begins with the refining process, where crude oil is broken down into various chemicals. Among these chemicals, acids and alcohols play a pivotal role. Once separated, these chemicals undergo a process called polymerization. In this process, acids and alcohols are mixed, resulting in the formation of long molecular chains, known as PET (Polyethylene Terephthalate). This polymer forms the base of many synthetic fibers, including polyester and nylon.

Once the PET polymer is produced, it can be further processed to create different fibers such as polyester, acrylic, nylon, and lycra. These fibers are then spun into threads, which are woven or knitted to create fabrics used in everything from fashion to sportswear to industrial applications.

The Four Major Fibers Derived from Crude Oil

1. Polyester: The World's Most Popular Synthetic Fiber

Polyester is the most widely used synthetic fiber globally. Made from PET, polyester is durable, wrinkle-resistant, and easy to care for. It is a favourite choice in fashion, as it retains its shape well and resists fading and shrinking. Additionally, polyester is moisture-wicking, making it ideal for athletic wear. Polyester is used in a variety of applications, from everyday clothing like shirts and dresses to home textiles like upholstery and curtains.

2. Acrylic: The Wool Alternative

Acrylic is often described as the synthetic version of wool. Known for its softness and lightweight nature, acrylic mimics many of the positive characteristics of wool, such as warmth and insulation, but at a more affordable price. Acrylic fibers are easy to dye and maintain their colour over time, making them a popular choice for knitted garments like sweaters, scarves, and blankets.

One key advantage of acrylic is that it is moth-resistant and durable, making it an excellent choice for outdoor clothing or items exposed to regular wear. Additionally, acrylic is resistant to chemicals, ensuring long-lasting colors and textures.

3. Nylon: The Strong and Flexible Fiber

Known for its strength and elasticity, nylon is one of the most widely used fibers for products requiring flexibility and durability. It is abrasion-resistant, meaning it withstands wear and tear better than many other fibers. Nylon is lightweight, smooth, and offers high tensile strength, which makes it ideal for products that require a balance of comfort and long-lasting performance. This fiber is commonly used in hosiery, sportswear, activewear, and outdoor gear such as tents, ropes, and parachutes.

4. Lycra (Elastane): The Stretchy Wonder

Lycra, also known as spandex or elastane, is one of the most flexible fibers available, known for its remarkable stretchability. Lycra can stretch up to five times its original length, which makes it a favorite for garments requiring comfort and flexibility. It is commonly blended with other fibers like cotton or polyester to provide added stretch to fabrics, making them more form-fitting and supportive.

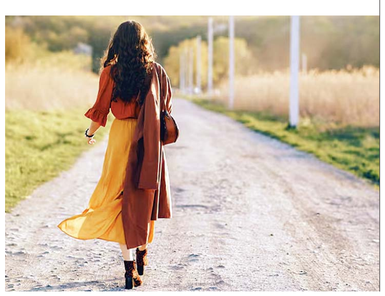
Lycra is predominantly used in sportswear, swimwear, and performance costumes because it offers freedom of movement and retains its shape. It is also found in underwear, leggings, and gym wear, providing excellent comfort and elasticity.

The Global Impact of Polyester, Acrylic, Nylon, and Lycra

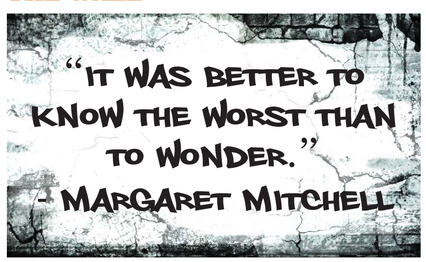
These four fibers, polyester, acrylic, nylon, and lycra, dominate the global fiber production market, making up nearly 70% of total fiber production. Their widespread use in fashion, sportswear, industrial products, and home furnishings underscores their versatility and importance in modern life.

Polyester is particularly favoured for mass-market clothing and home textiles, while acrylic has found a place in winter wear and knitted goods. Nylon remains essential for industrial uses, activewear, and products requiring durability, and lycra is central to the athleisure trend, offering unparalleled stretch and comfort.

These fibers provide a cost-effective alternative to natural materials, and their durability makes them suitable for a variety of applications. However, their environmental impact, particularly in terms of plastic pollution and recycling challenges, is an issue being increasingly addressed by the industry, with efforts to create more sustainable alternatives.



THE WALL



BABY BLUES

By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

ZITS

By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman