

# Sewing SALWAR & KAMEEZ

Michelle Rowley chatted with dressmaking tutor Raminder Viridi to discover the intricacies of Asian Dressmaking

Written by Michelle Rowley



**W**hen it comes to discovering the fascinating sewing skills behind a salwar and kameez, there's no better person to learn from than Raminder. Now in her sixties, Raminder has been sewing traditional Asian clothing since her childhood. She was ahead of her time as a Sikh woman running her own successful dressmaking business in the 1980s and 90s, for which she was recognised as the Sandwell Businesswoman of the Year runner-up. Having sewn countless garments for numerous clients, herself and family members, she has more recently turned to teaching others her skills and to share her love for these beautiful garments and their construction.

**How did you learn to sew?**

My mum had four daughters, and she wanted us all to learn from a young age how to sew and embroider. This started with embroidering the edges of bedsheets and pillowcases using lots of different techniques. Many women of my generation were also taught to sew clothing because it was such a necessary skill at the time, as you couldn't buy ready-made clothes. It was very unusual if you couldn't.

*"Many women of my generation were taught to sew because it was such a necessary skill then"*

**How would you define Asian clothing and dressmaking?**

When I use the term Asian Dressmaking for my teaching, I'm referring to the traditional clothing of India and Pakistan such as salwar and kameez, sarees and lenghas. Obviously, this region isn't the whole of Asia, so it's perhaps not the ideal term, but I use it because what I predominantly sew and wear is usually referred to as a traditional Asian suit, which is the salwar and kameez.

**What does the salwar kameez consist of?**

It starts with three pieces of fabric, each of which are 2.5 metres in width and length. They are sold together as a set. They are usually fabrics with plenty of drape, such as chiffon, silk and netting. Sometimes it will be something

more stable, such as cotton, for sewing a more everyday suit. The prices vary significantly, between £15-£500, depending on the amount of embroidery or bead work for example.

Usually, one of these pieces is embroidered and so you know it's the piece you need to sew the kameez with, which

Right **Every sequin on this garment was stitched on by Raminder!** Below **Raminder sews her everyday clothes too** Below right **Raminder's student, Harinder, in a salwar kameez**







Top left One of Raminder's students, Pam, made a kameez and palazzo trousers to attend a Palima Left A salwar kameez with sharara trousers, sewn and modelled by Raminder's student, Harinder



is a long tunic top. The side seams of the kameez are left open below the waistline to provide greater ease of movement. This opening often has embroidery around it and the embroidery continues along the hem of the tunic. There's often also embroidery around the neckline. The second piece of fabric is usually plain and it is used for sewing the trousers, of which there are various different styles. Traditionally these were salwars, a baggy trouser with an embroidered edge at the ankles. Today these tend to be worn more often by the older generation, with younger women preferring the wide palazzo trousers which don't have the cuff at the bottom. Trousers cut narrowly on the bias, called pyjama, are also very popular with younger women now. Two other popular trouser options are the dhoti, which are very loose and drapery at the top (think Mc Hammer!) and the sharara, which are very wide and are gathered just above the knee.

The final piece of fabric is embroidered all around the four edges and this is used for the dupatta, which is the large shawl worn with the tunic top and trousers to complete the three-piece suit.

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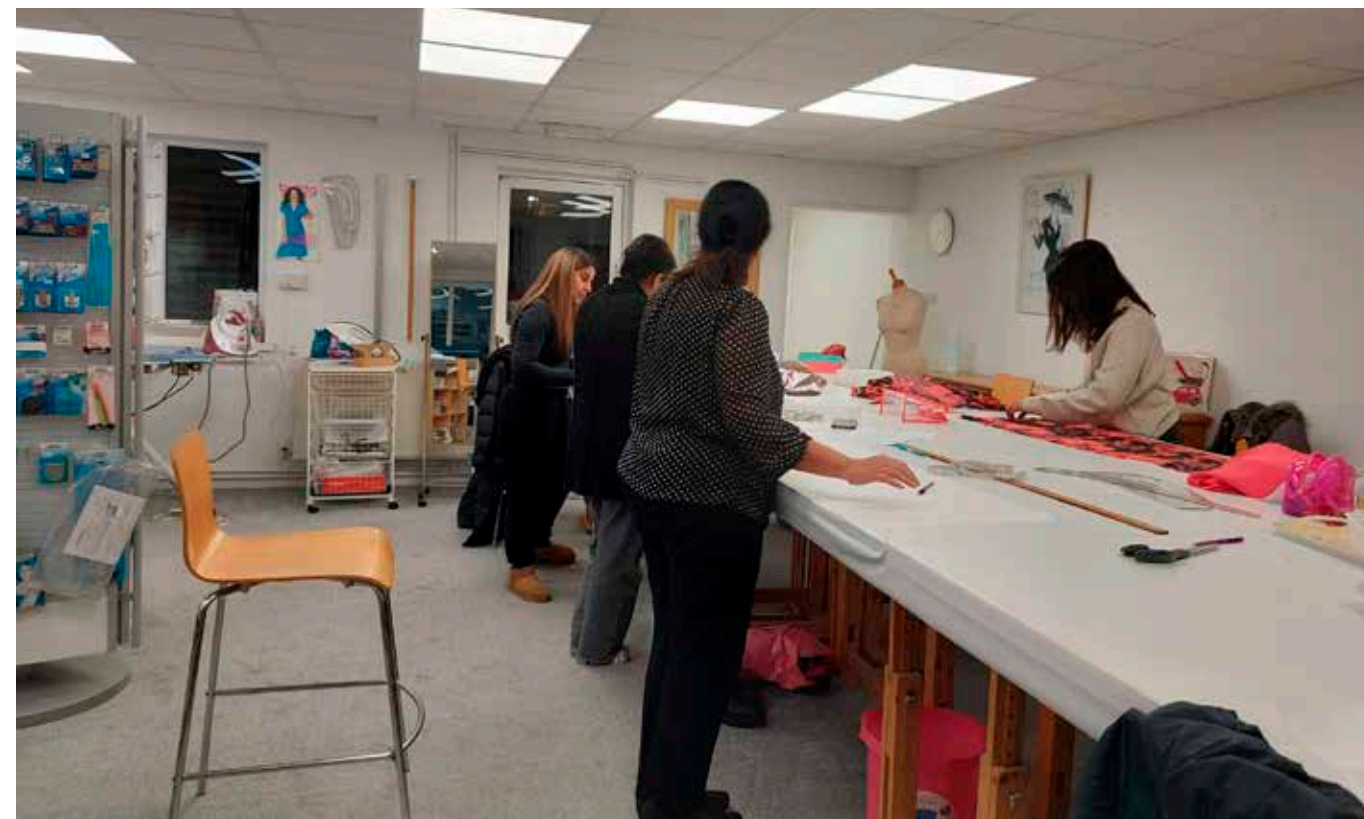
#### How does all the elaborate embroidery affect your decisions for pattern placement for the kameez?

It depends on how the fabric piece has been embroidered, but you always need to centralise the embroidery along the folded fabric. I was taught how to sew garments without using pattern pieces, so I would use an outfit that fit well as a template and just add seam allowances. I would put the outfit on the folded embroidered material. If the neckline was embroidered, you knew that it was going to be folded right in the middle of the embroidery. I cut this with the lining material folded too, so

all the layers are cut in one go. My mum would be quite surprised that I'm teaching young girls how to make a paper pattern. It never happened. No one used to sew with paper pattern pieces..

#### Why have you made the change to using paper patterns?

My students come as beginners, and I need to help them understand the measurements first. I thought whilst they're understanding the measurements and how to measure yourself, they might as well put that onto a piece of paper which they can use again and again. You use the same pattern piece for the front of the tunic as you do the back, but make the adjustments you require for the neckline, which



can be various different styles. I've created video tutorials of how to make these blocks as well because there was a real lack of online tutorials in English aimed at new beginners.

#### Do you have to line the kameez?

Generally, yes, because the main fabrics are usually very delicate. If you're working with an embroidered net or lace, you need to line it. Embroidered net is very popular nowadays and the shops have started to sell the lining together with the fabric so you know you will get a good colour match since they'll all be the exact same colour. In the past, we used to have to buy the lining fabric separately.

#### Demand for your classes continues to grow, why do you think that is?

It's expensive to have these garments tailored. It's completely understandable that tailors charge high prices to sew with heavily embroidered fabrics as it's skilled work and you break a lot of sewing and machine needles in the process!

If it's a fabric fully embroidered with sequins and stones, which is usually for weddings and big events, people will spend the money required on tailoring. On the other hand, if they've bought cheaper fabric for everyday wear, people are unsurprisingly less keen to spend more money for the tailoring than what the fabric cost originally.

Above Raminder teaches different sewing classes in person three times a week, and she also offers online teaching classes for new beginners to tailor salwar kameez to a high standard

My classes at the Guru Nanak Gurdwara Smethwick temple are popular because for Sikh women being able to sew is a more cost-effective way to sew your own wardrobe. We need lots of outfits for weddings and parties, of which there are many!

Wedding celebrations last around a week, so each family member needs five outfits. If you've got a son or daughter who's getting married for example, you'll need five outfits for yourself as

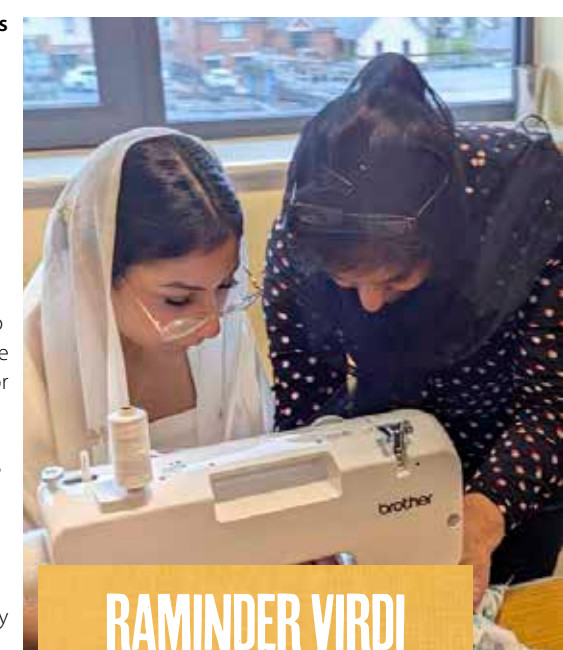
well as any other close women and girls in the family you might have, such as daughters and granddaughters. You can very easily find yourself needing to buy or sew over 20 outfits for just one wedding!

My sewing classes at

Deb Day Sewing Room and Sewability are multicultural, with students coming from a wide range of backgrounds and for various reasons. But the most important element of it is to socialise and have fun!



Michelle (she/her) is a content writer and dressmaking tutor with a love of fashion history. Follow her on socials @stitchywhitney



## RAMINDER VIRDI

Raminder teaches Asian Dressmaking classes with passion across three venues in Birmingham. She teaches beginner to intermediate level students of all backgrounds how to sew salwars, kameezes, saree blouses, anarkali, pyjamas, saharas and palazzos. You can also benefit from her extensive dressmaking experience remotely with her video tutorials on garment drafting and construction. Follow Raminder on Instagram @sewwithraminder to find out more about her classes.