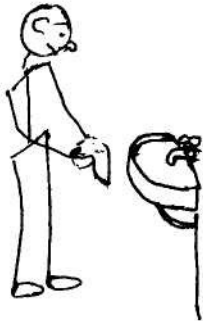


Handkerchief

Shashank V. Parulekar



Conventional uses of a handkerchief include drying hands after washing them, drying face after sweating or washing, drying (own/others') eyes after crying, preventing escape of infected droplets during sneezing or coughing, wiping mucus off the nose after sneezing or blowing the nose etc. Anyone with a few instructions in the childhood can learn these uses and then continue to apply them throughout life. They are simple and do not require too much intelligence or willpower to remember and carry out.



Handkerchiefs are usually carried in the pocket by males and sometimes by females whose dresses have pockets. Usually females carry tiny handkerchiefs in their closed fists, rolled into balls. Some of them put them in their purses. Some women tuck it into their waistband created by tying the saree. Some old fashioned women place it inside the front of their blouses, probably for want of a better place rather than for security or ease of access. Little children who cannot be trusted to bring their handkerchiefs home safely after a visit to some place like school have their handkerchiefs secured to the front of their shirts or blouses (as the case may be) by safety pins. In this position the handkerchief can reach the mouth and nose easily, and the schoolteacher is also aware of the existence of the handkerchiefs, should the need arise.



There are some uses of handkerchiefs which are not for an average user, but for an elite few. One such use is decoration of the breast pocket of the coat. It used to be a part of a three-piece suit. A starched and pressed white handkerchief used to be tucked into the said pocket, its end sticking out. It probably was reminiscent of the handkerchief pinned to the front of the shirt in childhood, making female members in the vicinity of the elite male aware of the existence of the handkerchief should the need arise. Some old fashioned people still use a handkerchief in this way.

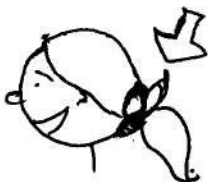


Another use by elite people is to use a handkerchief to protect the clothes from food morsels dropped while eating. The handkerchief is either spread over the lower tummy and thighs, or tucked into the front of the collar at the root of the throat, so that it covers the front of the chest. This is the usual practice while eating in a posh joint. We cannot see any reason why food morsels should drop while eating if there has been adequate training on eating methods in the childhood. Perhaps it happens when one has had a couple of drinks before eating.

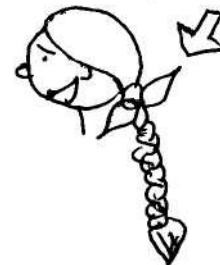
There are a large number of unconventional uses of handkerchiefs. In order to not miss any through oversight, we shall start at the top of the head and proceed systematically towards the toes. Hence the order seen will not represent the order of importance nor of frequency of use.



Handkerchiefs are tied over the heads of children like scarves when the mother either does not afford a scarf for her child, or does not wish to bother with the need to wash two separate garments when one can do the work of two. Since a scarf cannot be used like a handkerchief, most mothers prefer a handkerchief as a dual purpose object. Some persons remain in that stage of their psychological development forever, and continue to use a handkerchief for that purpose even in adult life. One can find such women riding on the back seats of two-wheelers, their hair kept in place with handkerchiefs tied over their heads, knots below their chins. It prevents the hair from getting disorganized, and also looks fashionable to some. Men with this sort of arrest of psychological development in the scarf-handkerchief confusion phase wear handkerchiefs like caps. Two adjacent ends of a handkerchief are tied together. When all four ends are tied in this manner, it becomes a makeshift cap. It fits over the head if the head is not too large or if the handkerchief is large enough. Others who do not possess such dexterity just place their handkerchiefs over their heads, hoping the handkerchiefs will not be blown away by the wind.



Some girls use rolled up handkerchiefs like hair bands. They tie it at the root of their ponytails or plaits of hair. It saves the cost of ribbon or hair band, and looks fashionable too.



There are some guys who fold a handkerchief into triangles by making a single fold across the diagonal of the handkerchief. Then it is tied around the head, the base of the triangle upwards, the apex over the neck, and the knot of two narrow ends over the forehead. We have not been able to fathom the purpose of this despite extensive efforts. One may think it is done as a home remedy for headache. It may be true in a few cases, but most of the guys who do it seem to be in perfect health and seem to be enjoying the handkerchiefs around their heads. It could be a form of attention seeking.

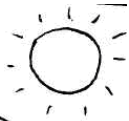


There are others who tie such folded handkerchiefs over the face, base just below the eye line, apex over the chest, and knot of the two narrow ends over the back of the neck. The handkerchief effectively covers the nose and the mouth. It is a very useful method of preventing inhalation of dust while traveling on a two-wheeler and preventing inhalation of toxic fumes of vehicular exhaust walking along the busy streets of a metro. It also serves to cover a major portion of the face while functioning

as a bank robber or dacoit, preventing identification by eyewitnesses in future.



A cowboy in a Western movie ties a colorful, similarly folded handkerchief around his neck, knot in front, bases upwards, and the apex over the back. It is a part of the costume, and does not seem to have any other purpose.



There are some males who roll their handkerchiefs into long, flat rolls, and then place them inside their shirt collars, separating the collars from their necks. The purpose is to absorb sweat and dirt, preventing soiling of the collars. It does not look good, but probably is better than facing the wrath of the spouses over having to scrub dirty collars.

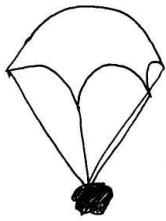


A very big, colorful handkerchief was worn by Indian fishermen traditionally in place of shorts. Some of them still do so. Since it is traditional dress, we will refrain from commenting on it further.



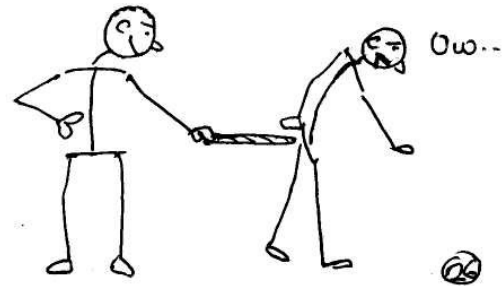
Handkerchiefs have medical uses. Some people use a handkerchief for fomentation of the eye. It is rolled into a ball, warmed by exhaling deeply into it for some time, and then pressed firmly over the eye to be fomented. It feels OK, but is not found in textbooks of ophthalmology.

Holding a handkerchief over the mouth and nose to protect other people from catching one's germs is good manners. However many people are not so well mannered. In such situations, one can cover one's mouth and nose to prevent inhalation of germs from others sneezing or coughing in one's vicinity. This is also useful to keep bad odors away while passing by garbage dumps and open gutters.



Children use a handkerchief to prepare a parachute for playing. Four pieces of string are tied to the four corners of a handkerchief. Then a small but reasonably heavy object (a piece of stone will do) is tied at the other ends of the strings. Then the parachute is ready. It is thrown high into the air by bunching up the handkerchief around the heavy object. It descends majestically like a parachute.

Some children use a handkerchief as a weapon. The technique is to fold it across its diagonal, then hold its one corner with the left hand and holding the other corner with the right hand, twist it into a ropelike thing by circular, clockwise motion of the hand. Once it is taut enough, it is flicked at the adversary and withdrawn in quick motion on making contact. It really hurts. It can cause serious injury should it hit the eye. We urge parents to educate their children so that they will not engage in such activity.



Another violent thing one can do (but should not) is to tie and gag someone. A handkerchief rolled into a ball is stuffed into the victim's mouth, and then another one is passed backwards over the cheeks and tied over the back of the neck. Care needs to be taken not to cause suffocation of the victim. The victim's wrists are tied to each other behind his/her back with another handkerchief. The ankles are tied to each other with one more handkerchief. We have included this use in this article in this article to educate our readers in recognizing violence, so that they will call the police when they see such a thing taking place anywhere.

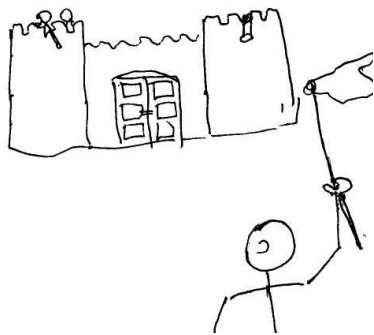
Another violent thing worth reporting to the police is finding someone pressing a folded handkerchief soaked with chloroform against the nose and mouth of someone. The purpose is to render the person unconscious for nefarious reasons. We do not know if it actually works, but have read about it often in crime fiction in our childhood.





There are people who turn a handkerchief into a bag for carrying fruit or vegetables home after an unscheduled visit to the market. The handkerchief is treated the same way as for making a cap out of it. It is held by the two knots and the purchases are kept in the center. The capacity of such a bag is quite small. But it better than having no bag.

Colorful handkerchiefs are used in some folk dances. They are either held in hands, or are tied to the wrists. Then they flutter and flash in the air as the hands are moved in various steps of the dance



A white handkerchief tied to the end of a long stick is used as a flag to show peaceful intentions or surrender while approaching the enemy camp in war. It is waved high above one's head so that the enemy does not miss it. The enemy is expected not to shoot the bearer of the flag.

We are quite sure that innovative people will find many more uses for handkerchiefs, if they actually have not done so. The purpose of this article is not to prepare an archive for an encyclopedia, but to stimulate creative minds to do more. If that is achieved, our efforts will have been worthwhile.