

Gandhi and His Dressing Codes: Reading Nationalist Symbols as Signs of Colonial Protest

Amrita Sharma

This paper aims at analysing Gandhi and his “dressing codes” and their role in creating, developing and popularising his persona as a leader of modern India. With his *dhori*, *aenak* and *lathi* becoming synonymous to his particular personality, Gandhi’s dressing codes remain extremely significant in the construction of a persona that resonates even across the international borders. The paper thus aims at presenting the role of such cultural symbols that formed a part of the Gandhian identity and their relevance in the colonial protest.

India, as a Sovereign Democratic Republic, shall forever remain indebted to the invaluable contributions made by the “Mahatma” who played a pivotal role in expelling the colonial powers from his motherland. As an extremely significant figure within the Modern Indian historical timeframe, Gandhi also remains one of the leading educators of the time whose educational, moral, spiritual and political philosophies continue to resonate throughout the national as well as the international ethos. While Gandhi as a national figure primarily remains popular as the propagator of a non-violent protest, what also remains crucial about Gandhi is his distinct personal appearance and the cultural associations of his dressing elements to his overarching nationalist ideology.

While the resonances of cultural ethos pervade across each realm of our social existence, the “dressing codes” as governed by communal, political and personal choices also remain a crucial aspect of the discourse concerning any particular area of study. Gandhian ideology, as a significant part of the

modern Indian constructional front, also remains inclusive of the influence as well as the genesis of a distinct dressing code that have become synonymous to Gandhi as the father of the Indian nation.

As a man who was born in a traditional family living in colonial India, Gandhi's journey towards the recognition of his present persona is one that may be analysed through different phases that remain dynamic even in terms of changing dressing codes adopted by him in each phase. As a young boy in India to a young man who travelled international grounds and ultimately to an Indian man always dressed in a particularly Indian attire, these dressing codes remain crucial in understanding Gandhi as a man who remain adaptive as well as distinctly amalgamated to his contemporary phases in life. What remains even more significant about his appearance are the dressing symbols that transformed to "cultural signs" of the protest against the colonial rule in India. As a leader of the nationalist struggle against the British imperialism, Gandhi's distinctly 'Indian' appearance remained powerful in conveying a strong visual of Indian nationalism on a larger public ground that he held at the time. The transition in his dressing and appearance adopted by Gandhi thus remain an important ground for analysing his nationalist ideology and the Gandhian ideology at large.

Jugatram Dave describes three major phases in Gandhi's life in "The History of Costume." The first phase was when he went to London and then to South Africa where he was practising as a barrister. In this phase he used to wear a coat-pant and a hat. This phase could be seen as a mark of the colonial impact on his personality where he dressed himself up like an English gentleman. In chapter 33 "On the Way to Pretoria" in his autobiography he describes the incident in which he is thrown out of railway compartment which instills in him a sense of *satyagraha* but at the same time he also realizes "to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English" (Bhabha 125-133). The mimicry becomes evident to Gandhi and he realizes that clothing is a part of this mimicry.



Image 1: Gandhi in South Africa

The second phase is marked by his traditional Gujarati attire which constituted “a *dhoti*, a long coat and a turban.” In this phase his attempt shifts at regaining his national, traditional and indigenous identity by resorting to his original cultural clothes.



Image 2: Gandhi in his traditional Gujarati Clothes

The third phase marks a change in his clothing style completely serving more as a symbol of national pride, his identification with common people, and also his revolt against the use of foreign goods. In this phase he resorted to *Khadi*. Initially he had “a *khadi* shirt, a *khadi* stole and a *khadi* cap (*topi*) but later he started wearing only a *khadi* wrap around” (Dave, 2012).



Image 3: Gandhi in Khadi

Gandhi in “Origin of His Loin Cloth” recounts the major incident that brought a radical change in his sense of dressing. It was in 1921 when Gandhi was travelling with Maulana Mahomed Ali and his wife on a tour in South India. On their journey Maulana Mahomed Ali was arrested at Waltair and was separated from his wife Begum Mahomed Ali. She became very sad because of the arrest of her husband, nevertheless she continued to attend meetings in Madras. So Gandhi left her in Madras and travelled to Madurai. It was during his journey from Madras to Madurai that Gandhi faced the truth and what can easily be seen as a difference between theory and practice. He was campaigning against the foreign rule, trying to attack the very reason for their stay in India by enervating their economic interests which had flooded the coffers of the British government but had completely plundered the Indian economy. To his utter surprise he found “compartment crowds” all clothed in “foreign fineries” completely oblivious of the fact about what has happened and what was going on the national front. There seemed no other way out for Gandhi to secure the release of Ali Brothers except for pleading people to wear *Khadi*. So he entered into conversation with his fellow passengers and tried to convince them to wear *khadi* but he was taken aback by the bare truth told by the people that they are poor people and it is too difficult for them to afford *Khadi*. This revelation of truth about the majority of people in India made Gandhi realize “the substratum of truth behind the remark” that:

I had my vest, cap and full Dhoti on. When these uttered only partial truth, the millions of compulsorily naked men, save for their langoti four inches wide and nearly as many feet long, gave through their limbs the naked truth. What effective answer could I give them, if it was not to divest myself of every inch of clothing I decently could and thus to a still greater extent bring myself in a line with ill-clad masses? And this I did the very next morning after the Madura meeting. (“Origin of His Loin Cloth,” 1954)

However, Gandhi himself had been clad in his traditional attire and felt inadequately equipped to answer the people around him on the subject of completely adopting *khadi*. He concludes this narrative describing this incident that he could not answer to the question of his people unless he himself “divest...every inch of clothing” to gain the support as well as support “ill-clad masses.”

The incident described above also remains important as it was soon followed by Gandhi’s presence in Madurai where he first appeared in the dress that remains synonymous to his identity today. Gandhi had been

staying in the upstairs portion of a follower's house (Door No. 251) on West Masi Street in Madurai. It had been his second visit to this city and the one that was to leave a mark on his public image for the rest of his life. Gandhi appeared in his new but a lasting image when he had to go to Ramand (Ramanathapuram) and further down to Tirunelveli. Madurai meeting marked a radical change in the public appearance of Gandhi and its impact on his distinct remembrance remains significantly contemporary.

Gandhi understood how clothing acted as a status symbol and prevented the nation from semiotic sharing. According to Catherine Richardson (2017), the rise of industrialization and urbanization in the seventeenth century resulted in the distinction between town life and rural life. One of the significant changes was the divide between the rich, capitalist, urban population and poor, working, rural population. Textile industry was one that thrived hugely on this paradox of production and consumption. So clothing became one of the primary basis of hierarchical and social divisions in medieval and early modern European society. Likewise, Daniel Roche in *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Régime* (1996) explains that clothing in culture "reveals or conceals social positions." While the clothes of the rural and poor people change very little, the urban people's clothes are known for adapting latest designs and fashions (Roche 4). Gandhi realized that clothing was "a part of total system of communication within cultures" (Roach and Eicher 7). Therefore, his attempt in favour of *khadi* and minimal clothing was an attempt to dehierarchize the clothing of the common people, bringing it at par with the sophisticated urban population. He himself became a fashion icon of the common people with whom they could identify themselves.

S. Balakrishnan (2016), in an article on the dressing style of Gandhi writes that "on 22nd September 1921, Gandhi made a momentous decision to change his attire. From the elaborate Gujarati attire, he decided on a simple *dhoti* and shawl." Gandhi took this decision when he was in Madurai and made up his mind to show his identification and solidarity with the common masses in the country who were largely poor and lived their life hand to mouth. The fact was clear that he could not be the part of this larger crowd without getting into the semiotics of appearance. Agitating for national integrity, use of indigenous products and wearing home-spun clothes, he himself could not stay in clothes different from the people around him. Therefore, his discarding of clothes may be seen as an individual and national sacrifice but at the same time it was also an

indication of his inner strength to choose what was best for the people of his country. It is thus not surprising that he stood by this decision until the last moment of his life. He acknowledges in “My Loin-Cloth” as follows:

All the alterations I have made in my course of life have been effected by momentous occasions; and they have been made after such a deep deliberation that I have hardly had to regret them. And I did them, as I could not help doing them. Such a radical alteration — in my dress, — I effected in Madurai. (225)

Madurai proved to be a real inspiration for Gandhi and gave him the courage of conviction to choose for himself the clothes that will help him in creating a national symbol weaved in the spirit of ingenuity and unity. This was not the first time that Gandhi had attempted to come up with an idea of indigenous clothing style but it was just that his experience in Madurai instilled in him the strength to take his decision. Thus, the place remains particularly significant as it was here that a crucial change occurred in Gandhi’s idea about clothing. His new avatar was a landmark and so the place in Madurai where he addressed the people came to be called as “Gandhi Portal.”

The change of clothing in Gandhi’s life was as metaphorical as it was spiritual and philosophical. Madurai incident in Gandhi’s life becomes reminiscent of Oscar Wilde’s short-story “The Happy Prince,” first published in 1888. The story begins with the description of the statue of the Happy Prince that stood high “above the city, on a tall column... gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt...” (4). This city was filled with poor and suffering people and then comes a swallow who meets the statue of the Happy Prince. The Happy Prince had never experienced sorrow in his real life as he lived in a place where sorrow had no place. When the Happy Prince witnesses various incidents of suffering from his position he says to the swallow: “I am covered with fine gold...you must take it off, leaf by leaf, and give it to my poor; the living always think that gold can make them happy” (17). So the swallow sets off to the task and picks off leaf “after leaf of the fine gold,” the ruby from his hilt, and the sapphires from his eyes, and gives them to the poor. After the removal of the golden leaves “the Happy Prince looked quite dull and grey” but “the poor, and the children’s faces grew rosier, and they laughed and played games in the street. “We have bread now!” they cried” (17). When the winters arrive the beauty and appeal of the

Happy Prince is all gone. He looks shabby and just a “little better than a beggar” (19). At last the leaden heart of the Happy Prince breaks down and the swallow dies of severe cold in her attempt of saving the poor. The statue of the Happy Prince is melted in the furnace and both “the leaden heart and the dead bird” are thrown in dust-heap as they were of no use now. However, when God asks the angel to bring the two most beautiful things in the city, the angel brings “the leaden heart and the dead bird.” What Gandhi did for his people concretizes the story of “The Happy Prince.” He was the agent and the agency. Selflessly he gave up his attire, his European sophistication and his traditional Gujrati appearance. One of the essential ascetic necessity in Indian philosophical understanding is the discarding of the clothes. From sages in ancient ages to Mahavir Jain, Buddha, Guru Nanak, and other saints, the idea of appearance remains more or less same. All of them abnegated the desire for clothing to create a sense of oneness, equality and fraternity among the common people. For Gandhi to run his *Khadi* campaign this was also one of the reasons.

The popular adoption of foreign products by his countrymen proved to be one of the causes for Gandhi to set a path for his country to break free from the ties of foreign market. His vision of an independent nation meant the liberation of both the mind and the body. Such an altered appearance of a national leader had been a celebrated event by the followers of Gandhi and thus served Gandhi the purpose of encouraging his fellow countrymen to adopt the indigenous forms over the foreign fineries. Appearing only in a *khadi* cloth, Gandhi simultaneously empowered himself as well as his followers as proud bearers of a dressing code that was solely born out of the Indian soil. Thus, adoption of *khadi* may be analysed as a strong symbol of cultural empowerment where popularising *Swadeshi* was one of the primary aims that was needed for the protest against the colonial rule. However, this change in attire was strongly described by Gandhi as a personal mode that was in no manner imposed publically upon his followers, as he wrote in *Navajivan*:

I do not want either my co-workers or readers to adopt the loincloth. But I do wish that they should thoroughly realise the meaning of the boycott of foreign cloth and put forth their best effort to get it boycotted, and to get *khadi* manufactured. I do wish that they may understand that *swadeshi* means everything. (*Collected Works* 226)

Thus, while the dressing code may be read as a means of giving a stronger impulse to the nationalist struggle, it also remains an important

aspect of the cultural heritage of Indian way of living. With weaving emerging as a symbol of colonial protest, the change from a formal attire to a simplistic Indian clothing style remains a notable choice made by Gandhi. This particular choice was also noted by Gandhi's contemporaries with critical perceptions and there remain a few significant comments regarding this. A popular incident in this regard remains the reluctant invite received by Gandhi to afternoon tea at Buckingham Palace by King George V. With Gandhi's dressing code at the time having completely altered to the adoption of the indigenous cloth, it remained in strict opposition to the British court etiquette. However, Gandhi refused to re-cloth himself in the British manner even to meet the King as his vision of freedom for the nation demanded a strong and complete rejection of the colonial codes. Gandhi's dressing code thus remained a symbol as well as means for displaying his idea of protest against the British rule and continued to remain a symbol of Indian life throughout the realm of modern Indian historical time frame.

In the concluding chapter of one of his writings titled *Third Class in Indian Railways*, Gandhi clearly and explicitly refers to his choice of dress. In a response to a critical article written on him by a reporter whom he refers to as Mr. Irwin, Gandhi writes:

I have hitherto successfully resisted to temptation of either answering your or Mr. Irwin's criticism of the humble work I am doing in Champaran. Nor am I going to succumb now except with regard to a matter which Mr. Irwin has thought fit to dwell upon and about which he has not even taken the trouble of being correctly informed. I refer to his remarks on my manner of dressing. (*Third Class* 40)

Giving a stern response to an article critiquing his style of dressing, Gandhi clearly notes the habitual relation between his work and his choice of dress during the different stations of his life. The fact that he had been familiar with the foreign forms of dressing had had no impact on his change of dress during his stay in his homeland, as Gandhi writes:

My "familiarity with the minor amenities of Western civilisation" has taught me to respect my national costume, and it may interest Mr. Irwin to know that the dress I wear in Champaran is the dress I have always worn in India except that for a very short period in India I fell an easy prey in common with the rest of my countrymen to the wearing of semi-European dress in the courts and elsewhere outside Kathiawar. I appeared before the Kathiawar courts now 21 years ago in precisely the dress I wear in Champaran. (*Third Class* 30)

These passages appear in the chapter that Gandhi titles as “National Dress” and he further clearly draws parallels between his choices of dress to his ideas of protest against the colonial rule. Though at the same time rejecting all allegations of deliberately taking upon a distinctly Indian dress, he further explains the relevance of such a choice. He vowed to use *swadeshi* goods and so he started weaving and doing agriculture. He had decided to wear only hand-woven and hand-sewn clothes.

Addressing the criticism around his clothing and accusations of having deliberately adopted such dressing codes during his nationalist movement to produce a visual effect, Gandhi justifies his action by stating that “I wear the national dress because it is the most natural and the most becoming for an Indian” (*Third Class* 30). He mentions that “copying of the European dress is a sign of our degradation, humiliation and our weakness...a national sin” as by doing so the sanctity of our own clothing and fabric is violated as *Khadi* suits best to the Indian climate for its simplicity, art and cheapness and “answers hygienic requirements.” Delving deeper into the notions of dressing codes, he points: “Had it not been for a false pride and equally false notions of prestige, Englishmen here would long ago have adopted the Indian costume” (*Third Class* 30). Not only clothes Gandhi also avoided shoes during his Champaran campaign as he explains that he avoid shoes not only for sacred reasons but also because “it is more natural and healthier to avoid them whenever possible” (*Collected Works* 450). Thus, dressing codes for Gandhi remained a completely personal choice that yet became symbols of national associations in the larger context.

Gandhi notes the false associations that have been drawn between the signs of colonial dressing and their projection in India. Giving an example of an acquaintance, he writes: “I am sorry to inform Mr. Irwin and your readers that my esteemed friend Babu Brijakishore Prasad, the “ex-Hon. Member of Council,” still remains unregenerate and retains the provincial cap and never walks barefoot and “kicks up” a terrible noise even in the house we are living in by wearing wooden sandals” (*Third Class* 31). He uses this example to demonstrate the general attitude of the majority of Indians who lacked the courage to discard their “semi-anglicised dress” that they adopt in order to showcase a modern lifestyle. He points out that such attitude does not easily change and giving the example of a friend who remained his admirable acquaintance, he notes the difficulty he faced in convincing his friend regarding the falsity of such foreign adoption: “I cannot induce him to believe that his clients

won't desert him and the courts won't punish him if he wore his more becoming and less expensive dhoti" (*Third Class* 31). Gandhi insists his readers "not to believe the "stories" that the latter hears about him and his friends, but to join him in the fight against educated Indians who gave up their manners, habits and customs which are not proved to be bad or harmful. Gandhi explains the importance of the cultural adoption of a dress that he designates as "national" and which remained a crucial part of his ideological projection among the masses. With Gandhi leading a nation-wide struggle towards the creation of an independent India, his appearance in such a dress remains a significant aspect of his persona.

Thus, these changes in the dressing styles adopted by Gandhi remain a frequent yet often unnoticed subject of study both in terms of their cultural as well as national significance. The following passage remains a part of one of Gandhi's message on adoption of *khadi* that he addressed to his countrymen during the struggle for an independent nation, and may thus be read as one depicting the significance of his attire:

I adopt the change because I have always hesitated to advise anything I may not myself be prepared to follow, also because am anxious by leading the way to make it easy for those who cannot afford to change on discarding their foreign garments. I consider the renunciation to be also necessary for me as a sign of mourning and a bare head and a bare body is such a sign in my part of the country. That we are in mourning is more and more being borne home to me as the end of the year is approaching and we are still without *Swaraj*. I wish to state clearly that I do not expect co-workers to renounce the use of vest and topi unless they find it necessary to do so for their own work. (Letters on Indian Affairs 88)

Peter Gonsalves in *Clothing for Liberation* (2012) thus illustrates that Gandhi attempted to change the stereotypical representations of civility and respectability as far as clothing was concerned. The three phases in Gandhi's sartorial journey from "coat-pant and a hat" to "a dhoti, a long coat and a turban" to "a *khadi* shirt, a *khadi* stole and a *khadi* cap (topi)" finally culminating in "only a *khadi* wrap around" shows his development as a national icon as well as a spiritual person (Dave, 2012). Gandhi thought of initiating a new economic vision with his "alternative clothing" by creating a possibility for a nationwide mass movement for social change that would shake and destabilize "the imperial stranglehold over India at its very base, that is, at the level of eco-political sartorial control" (Gonsalves, 2012). His simple dressing was thus a gesture of "non-violent defiance of the British Rule—a message that he wore on himself

for the rest of his life” (Barua, 2016). He shall always remain an extremely significant part of the history of the Indian subcontinent, as the chief patron of a culturally rooted Indian way of living. With his simplistic attire and adoption of *khadi* remaining a very prominent testimony to this fact, it is crucial to read and evaluate the cultural, political, national as well as personal significance of the dressing codes adopted by him and their transition during his journey as a national leader.

Image Sources

Image 1: <https://images.app.goo.gl/ZFQXRUGjUdpUK6zb9>

Image 2: <https://images.app.goo.gl/BXrkyYMo71x8n83g6>

Image 3: <https://images.app.goo.gl/Vr7CkgGSDrKQzsdC9>

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Talat. *Mohandas Gandhi: Experiments in Civil Disobedience*. Pluto Press, 2018.
- Balakrishnan, S. “What Made Gandhiji Wear Only Loincloth or Dhoti.” *Press Information Bureau*. September 16, 2016. pibindia.wordpress.com/2016/09/16/what-made-gandhiji-wear-only-loincloth-or-dhoti/.
- Barua, Ananya. “Becoming a Fakir: How Madurai Inspired Mahatma Gandhi’s Iconic Loincloth Attire.” *The Better India*, February 1, 2019. <https://www.thebetterindia.com/171267/madurai-gandhi-iconic-dress-loincloth-freedom-india/>
- Bhabha, Homi. “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, Spring, October, Vol. 28, 1984, pp. 125–133. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/778467.
- Bondurant, Joan Valérie. *Conquest of Violence: the Gandhian philosophy of conflict*. University of California Press, 1971.
- Chadha, Yogesh. *Gandhi: a life*. John Wiley, 1997.
- Dave, Jugatram. “The History of Costume.” *Gandhiji*, translated by Jyoti Verma, Bombay
- Sarvodaya Mandal-Gandhi Book Centre, 2012. <https://www.mkgandhi.org/gandhiji/gandhiji.htm>
- Easwaran, Eknath. *Gandhi the Man: How One Man Changed Himself to Change the World*. Nilgiri Press, 2011.
- Gandhi, M. K. *Third Class in Indian Railways*. *Project Gutenberg*, 31 January 2008. www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/24461/pg24461.txt.
- . “My Loin-Cloth.” *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1966.
- . “Origin of Loin His Cloth.” *This Was Bapu*, compiled by R. K. Prabhu, Navajivan

- Mudranalaya, 1954. <https://www.mkgandhi.org/students/thiswasbapu/91lioncloth.htm>
- . *Letters on Indian Affairs*. V. Narayanan & Co., 1923.
- Gonsalves, Peter. *Clothing for Liberation: A Communication Analysis of Gandhi's Swadeshi Revolution*. SAGE Publications, 2010.
- Richardson, Catherine, editor. *Clothing Culture, 1350-1650*. Taylor & Francis, 2017.
- Roach, Mary Ellen, and Joan Bubolz Eischer. "The Language of Personal Adornment." *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, edited by Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz, Moutan Publishers, 1979, pp. 7-22.
- Roche, Daniel. *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Régime*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. The Floating Press, 2008.