

Re-imagining the Ambivalent: The Political Trajectory of Lungi from Pre-Colonial East Bangla¹ to Post-Independent Bangladesh

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Abstract

Lungi, Bangladeshi men's most common informal clothing, occupies an ambivalent position in the country's sartorial culture because of its inherent status of being anti-modern and anti-formal. Bangladeshi postcolonial poet Kaiser Haq's (2007) groundbreaking poem, "Ode on the Lungi" and the growing body of academic papers focusing on the poem have already constructed lungi as a discursive symbol to challenge and decentralise the colonial construction of cultural hierarchies that underpinned such a postcolonial legacy of sartorial discrimination. Important as they are, these studies do not engage with lungi's actual historical trajectories of resistance and struggle where men in lungi participated as active agents to challenge authoritative power regimes. By investigating the key episodes of "politics of the people" (Guha, 1988, p. 40) from pre-colonial east Bangla to present-day Bangladesh, the paper reclaims lungi's active yet metaphorical performative at each stage of collective struggles that ultimately led to the 1971 War of Independence (Muktijuddho), where lungi was the main attire of the male freedom fighters (Muktijoddhas). This paper argues that the national/cultural ambivalence around lungi in Bangladesh is rooted in its simultaneous trope of being a clothing of people who are at the edges of political power, yet their collective resistance can be subversive. This is one of the reasons why a ban on lungi in contemporary Bangladesh, although more common than before, often becomes a topic of heated debates and discussions among the educated, middle-class communities.

Keywords: Lungi, politics of people, resistance, ambivalent, Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, lungi is the most omnipresent and seldom talked about male clothing². But lungi often becomes a topic of heated debates in social and electronic media if any authority imposes a discriminatory rule against lungi, or an individual is prohibited to enter a formal place simply for being lungi clad. Instantly, lungi's symbolic value of representing the rustic Bangla and its "খেটে খাওয়া সাধারণ মানুষ" [hardworking simple folks] comes to fore. A male body in a lungi is under an increasing administrative "disciplinary gaze" (O'Malley, 2009, p. 2) in different urban spaces. This "disciplinary gaze," as O'Malley (2009) explains, is not an isolated event, rather it is an integral part of contemporary complex societies where "discipline" and "sovereignty" (p. 2) rely on each other. This means lungi will not be disappearing, but a local disciplinary regime will control the permissibility of lungi in certain spaces. It is now common at many-gated residential areas in Dhaka to have signboards containing rules that men wearing lungi

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(also often sandals) are not allowed in the community park. Often such a ban creates a collective voice of dissent. As it happened most recently in 2021 when three university students were expelled by the exam invigilator for being lungi-clad in an online examination (“The students were expelled,” 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic when academic institutions in Bangladesh were closed and students continued their academic activities from home.

A full-blown protest took place in 2013, when the Association of Baridhara Homeowners put a ban on lungi-clad rickshaw pullers entering the posh neighbourhood, Baridhara, home to diplomats and members of the elite/expatriate classes. It caused instant virtual and real-life protests, generated media discussions against the rule, and finally the country’s High Court intervened challenging the legality of this ban (“HC seeks info,” 2013). The tipping point of this protest was the lungi parade staged largely by a group of youths, mostly the residents of Baridhara, heavily drawing their energy from Kaiser Haq’s (2007) poem, ‘Ode on the Lungi’³. Reflecting on the power of the poem in mobilising this spontaneous urban youth-led activism, the poet writes, “[I]ittle did I imagine when I wrote the poem, that a dramatic opportunity to translate words into action would suddenly present itself” (Haq, 2013, para. 1). While young people took part in the virtual and real parade, many rickshaw pullers instead of protesting against the ban started wearing trousers to enter the gated community. Thus, while the subalterns were the most affected and did not want to antagonise the authority, it was the urban youths—many might not even wear lungi—used the ban as a space to fight for justice and human dignity. For the authorities—whether the house owners or the university administration—lungi is the clothing worth banning while for the urbanite young men and women, lungi is worth fighting for. In both cases, lungi is a discursive space of conflict between authoritative control and spontaneous, unprecedented eruption of collective protest.

Neither the politics around lungi nor its power to resist is a new phenomenon. While the class and religious intersectionality of lungi being a clothing of poor Muslim men was systematically aggravated under the British colonial administration, the history of this conflict stretches beyond that, rooted in east Bangla’s own history of community formation. This paper traces the political trajectory of lungi using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework of cultural anthropology, the political history from east Bangla to Bangladesh mainly from a subaltern theoretical point of view to argue that the cultural ambivalence that shapes our imagination around lungi—a piece of clothing both to disregard and to fear—lies in its capacity to be unpredictably challenging to a particular body of authority. My understanding of the term “ambivalence” is certainly shaped by Bhabha’s (1984) significant essay where Bhabha discusses the unintentional mimicry of colonial subjects, “a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (p. 126), as the condition of double ambivalence for both the colonial master and the subject, both see each other in the mirror, but they “repeat” rather than “re-present” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 128) as their fractured other. I use the term from the opposite spectrum of Bhabha’s idea of mimicry/ambivalence for the discussion of lungi. Lungi fails to repeat or mimic even from a distance what constitutes a hierarchical socio-cultural order. In many ways, lungi flattens the order of social distinction – a lungi-clad may be unlettered, poor, village-based, or a man in lungi may be educated and cultured, Bhabha’s “mimic man” (1984, p. 128). The source of ambivalence around lungi is locatable in this hazy,

grey space of misrecognition and often mistrust. When lungi is worn in places where it is not typically permitted, it carries a historical anxiety for the authority to bend its rule at the face of public pressure. If banned, lungi acts as a collective memory of a nation built on the struggles and resistances of common people. Thus, any disciplinary action against lungi leads to an ideological and moral conflict between an authority and people taking an interest in such an issue. Before lungi turned into a clothing of political conflicts between an authority and the so-called subalterns, it became a marker of socio-economic distinction between rich and poor Muslims at its nascent stage of community formation in eastern part of Bangla province. The paper begins with tracing this social history of lungi.

Lungi and the Muslim communities in East Bangla

Eaton (1993) charts the Muslim establishment in 13th century east Bangla by developing the idea of “frontier” (p. x). The riverine eastern part of Bangla was fertile yet impenetrable which caused a natural barrier for the “Turko-Mongol conquest and migration” (1993, p. xxii). The eventual expansion of Muslim power in this zone meant creating “settled agricultural communities” where Islam was less of a political power and more a new “civilization building ideology”: “a religion of the plow” (Talbot, 1995, p. 714). While Muslim rule in Bangla commenced in the 13th century during the era of the Sultanate Dynasty in Delhi, as the Turko-Afghan military general Bakhtiyar Khalji took control of this region, the transition was not smooth. Rather, Islam was the religion of the rulers and foreigners such as “Turkish, Afghan, Ethiopian, and Arab” (Shehabuddin, 2022, p. 27). The Mughal era, which coincided with the arrival of the Europeans and a major natural shift of the river Ganges towards the river Padma, made Bangla an accessible and indeed business-wise viable space because of its fertile land and massive agricultural production (Eaton, 1993; Shehabuddin, 2022). As increasingly local Bangalees were drawn into this new religion, often disseminated by non-institutional holy men, the identity of local Muslim Bangalee emerged, who took Islam as an addition to their already existing indigenous identity, without being too deeply rooted to this new monotheistic religion. Shehabuddin (2022) describes the process through which Islam was merged into an already existing indigenous culture:

As this new generation of holy men cleared forests and marshes to cultivate rice, they introduced Islam to the local people who gathered around the small mosques and shrines they built. Although the inhabitants of the surrounding hills and forests were generally not drawn into this process and became neither Bengali nor Muslim, Bengalis on the delta happily absorbed the new stories into their existing understandings of the history of the world. (p. 27)

The rootedness of Bangalee identity further meant that the newly converted Muslims, classified as “lower-class Azlaf or Atraf/Atrap” (Khan, 2017, para. 1), did not blindly follow the cultural tastes and habits of the Ashraf, the caste identity for the Muslim aristocrats of Central Asia. The Asraf caste, Bhardwaj (2010) notes, held power and prestige of this newly formed Muslim social order. But this did not mean that sartorial transformation did not occur in Bangla; but because the new Muslim clothes were elaborate in style and were expensive compared to the “minimalist” (Murshid, 2018, p. 545) clothing that poor people of Bangla used to wear, rapid imitation was not possible. Murshid (2018) notes:

Significant changes in attire can be seen in the Indo-Muslim age, presumably owing to Muslim influence. Muslims had come from lands of extreme climatic conditions. Also, the kind of clothes they wore was linked to religious regulations. They therefore continued to wear those clothes even after they arrived in Bengal. There is usually a conservative reaction against accepting new styles of attire, so clothes in Bengal did not change immediately after the advent of the differently-clothed Muslim rulers. Over time, however, people in Bengal starting [*sic*] wearing the new kind of clothes introduced by Muslims [...]. Muslim attire in the Middle Ages were initially fashionable in the courts of the *badshahs* and in cities. Over a few centuries, however, it was slowly adopted in villages, too, especially among the rich. (pp. 546-47)

Economy and social class defined the clothing hierarchy in the Bangalee Muslim communities within the first few centuries. As “well-to-do” (Murshid, 2018, p. 549) Muslims, in the Mughal court or in business, started wearing pyjamas, the classification and hierarchisation of clothing started to be socially distinctive. In rural Bangla, Muslims and Hindus did not clothe significantly differently but converted Muslim men started to wear lungi in parallel to and as an alternative to dhuti, especially men absorbed in the service of this new religion, such as “a village mullah” (Murshid, 2018, p. 550) wore lungi. This association of lungi with Muslim men in rural Bangla became a figure of suspect and surveillance as the power was shifted from the aristocrat Muslims to the British East India Company in the 18th century.

Anti-East India Company movement from below: Lungi a symbol of resistance

Schendel (1985) rightly suggests that reimagining British colonisation in the subcontinent as it happened is impossible. Part of the impossibility is tied to the lost and unrecorded histories of people and their forms of resistance. The closer we get is to reimagine, as Spivak (1988) argues, the “moment(s) of change” to be “confrontational” (p. 1). Subaltern historians have painstakingly recreated this confrontational historiography by analysing the series of peasant protests soon after the Company was granted the “Dewani of Bengal” (Cohn, 1996, p. 59) in 1765 from the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II. But even before spontaneous yet highly organised peasant protests erupted resisting the Company’s taxation regime, there were certain bodies that fell through the cracks of its early survey regime, as Cohn (1996) points out:

There were, however, groups and categories of people whose practices threatened the prescribed sociological order. These were people who appeared by their nature to wander beyond the boundaries of settled civil society: sannyasis, sadhus, fakirs, dacoits, goondas, thugs, pastoralists, herders, and entertainers. The British constructed special instrumentalities to control those defined as beyond civil bounds, and carried out special investigations to provide the criteria by which whole groups would be stigmatized as criminals. (p. 10)

Cohn reimagines the practice of spatial surveillance that the officers of the East India Company routinely conducted to mark certain native bodies as criminals, even if some of them did not perform any crime. Deeply disturbed and often frightened by the wandering natives in bazaars and melas, the British officers dressed in formal uniforms constructed a motley collection of otherised male bodies, confining sadhus and thugs in one bracket. While the officers were less threatened by the “dress and demeanour” of the “royalty and

personal servants” (Cohn, 1996, p. 10), they were terrified by langoti⁴, lungi and dhuti-clad natives who were not particularly concerned with or frightened by the uniformed white men on horses.

The dominance of agriculture and peasantry meant that a series of fierce resistance took place in the eastern part of Bangla against the Company’s administrative mismanagement that led to a widespread famine in the 1770s. Coincided with the 1176 of Bangla calendar year, the famine of ’76 wiped out one third of the populations of Bangla and Bihar under the first phase of the Company rule (Shehabuddin, 2022, p. 29). Collective resistance against the powerful tax collectors erupted across many parts of the region. The *Sannyashi* and *Fakir Andolon* took place in the northern part of Bangla, in Rangpur and Dinajpur. They became quite militant after the 1770s famine (Karim, 2021). The Northern Mymensingh peasant revolt (1824-1833) was led by Tipu, his mother, Mashahiba, and the Pagolpanthi sect formed by Karam Shah (father of Tipu) (Schendel, 1985). The local multi-ethnic, multi-religious peasants sought the Pagolpanthi sect’s allegiance to revolt against the Hindu zamindars, the administrators, and, as Schendel (1985) notes, against the idea of a “modern state” (p. 142). Guha (1988) describes the historical process through which the communities involved in protests labelled as unruly:

[T]he protagonists emerge from it [the protests] not as peasants but as ‘Insurgents’, not as Musalman but as ‘fanatic’; their action not as resistance to the tyranny of the rural elite but as ‘*the most daring and wanton atrocities on the inhabitants*’; their project not as the revolt against zamindari but as ‘*defying the authority of the State*’, not as a search for an alternative order in which the peace of the countryside would not be violated by the officially condoned anarchy of semi-feudal landlordism but as, ‘*disturbing the public transqui[l]ity*’. (p. 57)

Guha’s analysis clarifies the destabilising power of peasant movements in the early decades of the Company rule. The British administration considered such collective action not as mere local eruptions that could be easily controlled, rather marked the episodes of “politics of people” (Guha, 1988, p. 40) as an alternative force to defy the western idea of state making in a colonised context. The reference to Muslims as fanatics further suggests that while protests took place across communities and religions, poor Muslims were particularly singled out. In rural east Bangla, a Muslim man could easily be identified by his physical marker such as having a beard, or through his clothing, with his lungi and tupi. The writings of the subaltern historians provide useful clues to reimagine how a poor man in lungi became a body to be feared and controlled simultaneously by the British colonial administration. Over time, lungi became a clothing of heavy sub-cultural negotiations, especially when a Muslim man wished to be aspirant and educated. This is discussed in the next part.

Early 20th Century: Aspirant Muslim men leaving lungi behind

Subaltern historian Chakrabarty (2005) notes that the colonial model of modernity that forces non-western communities to play “catching up with the West” (p. 4813) is internally unequal. Not all communities, even within a colonised territory, had an equal and simultaneous access to what constituted western modernity, for example, access to English education. The 19th century modernity in Bangla was by character unequal. In

the words of historian Razzaq (2022), “The history of the Renaissance in Bengal is the history of the application of modern ideas to Hindu society in Bengal” (p. 116)⁵. Muslims from East Bangla had to do a double ‘catching up’—to contextualise Chakrabarty’s quotation above—in the early 20th century, having been systematically denied access to the process of middle-class making in the 19th century. However, for Muslims the process was not a simple replication of what the Bangalee Hindus did previously. Rather, as Razzaq (2022) further notes, the English-educated Muslim middle-class of the late 19th century had to “convince a not particularly sympathetic audience” i.e., both the British administrators and the Hindu middle-class, that their awakening would not lead to movements that could be “dangerous to the maintenance of power by the East India Company” (p. 120).

Within an unequal social order and religious parallelism, the early 20th century saw a rapid influx of aspirant young Muslim men, from the hitherto largely unknown, peasant-dominated eastern part of Bangla, in Kolkata. Mukherjee (2009) envisions the journey of a young Muslim man from a remote village to Kolkata in the early 20th century:

People from the far-flung rural regions of Bengal journeyed to this distant centre of power, braving the terror of thugs and enduring the lack of proper inns along the way, the extremes of weather, the discomforts of transport. With a letter of recommendation from a distant relative or an influential friend, he trekked, hiked and rode his way to Calcutta. (p. 112)

While Mukherjee poignantly reimagines a young man’s perilous journey towards an aspiring future, she falls short in reflecting on the ranges of cultural baggage that this young man would have to leave behind. One such baggage was lungi. Lungi was not completely abandoned, rather it occupied the clothing of informality in private places or as it is said in Bangla, “ঘরের কাপড়” [casual clothing] for the new Muslim youths in metropolis like Kolkata. On the other hand, the transformation of dhuti from a bare basic langoti or *gamcha* (Murshid, 2018, p. 549) like single piece to the 19th century Bangalee Babu style dandy dress deserves much attention, which though is not the focus of the paper. One can argue while dhuti was morphed into a quintessential Bangalee Babu outfit of the world, lungi was pushed back to home. Remaining unchanged since its stitched form, lungi was not part of the acceptable cultured native clothing list of “dhoti, Punjabi and chador” (Murshid, 2018, p. 558). Murshid’s (2018) observation about the early 20th century Bangalee society, “[e]ducated Muslim also wore dhotis” (p. 558) circles back to the point that lungi was imagined as an antithesis of an educated Muslim man, at least in urban public spaces.

The expansion of the Bangalee Muslim educated community also coincided with the British administration’s increasing exasperation against the elite, educated Hindu intellectuals demanding more stake in the political decision making of India. In Chatterjee’s (1975) words, “the political structure of British India gave Calcutta a rather unique position in the political life of the province” that was not necessarily inclusive, but it exercised a “political leadership” in the “larger Indian national movement” (pp. 76-78) in the early 20th century. To balance out the power of the cultured Hindu middle-class, in the early 20th century the British for the first time wanted to ally with the underprivileged

Muslims by giving them opportunities that were previously enjoyed by the Hindus. McLane (1965) recognises that the “disproportionate share of economic, educational, administrative opportunities” (p. 221) enjoyed by the Hindus in Bangla made the partition inevitable (although annulled in 1911). However as mentioned earlier, the educated Muslim Bangalee identity was powerfully distinct from its Hindu predecessors from its formative stage; this distinction became even more pronounced in the early 20th century as the Muslim communities started to develop their own cultural capital. Bose (2011) identifies “changing views on Islam, anti-colonial critique and Bengali culture” (p. 233) as the main ideological forces that shaped the Bangalee Muslim society in Kolkata. The emphasis on the Bangalee culture meant a desire to return and reclaim the lives of rural people, who, it was imagined, were less dependent on the colonial “state, on institutions and other instruments of material modernity for their survival” (Bose, 2011, p. 238) compared to the urbanite educated class. Much of this reimagination took place by creating a niche cultural capital through the publication of literary journals such as *Samyabadi* (Egalitarian), edited by poet Kazi Nazrul Islam and Muzaffar Ahmed, the founder of the Communist Party of India (Bose, 2011). Within this context of blending an intellectually sensible Muslim consciousness with its Bangalee root, the decision what to wear to represent the mind and body of an educated Muslim man was not an easy one, neither it was a-political. Murshid observes:

Muslim-run newspapers and magazines criticised the practice [educated Muslim men wearing dhuti] in the early years of the 20th century. The language used in such criticism seems to suggest that most Muslims, particularly those in villages, wore lungis instead of dhotis. Educated Muslims were exhorted to wear pyjamas instead of dhotis. (2018, p. 558).

The use of the term “exhorted” alludes to divisions of opinions around pyjama. While it was not certain whether lungi was ever considered, one thing is clear that even if the Bangalee Muslims took up pyjama, the style was quite different from the churidar pyjama originated from North India, which ultimately became Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s “Muslim dress” from the mid-1930s as he transformed himself from an “upper-class English professional” with “200 hand-tailored suits” to the leader of the all India Muslim League, “reorganizing” the party with his 1937 Muslim League session in Lucknow (Ahmed, 1997, pp. 8-9). Writing about the meanings and metaphors of feminine beauty and clothing in Nazrul’s body of work, Zaman (2019) also points out Nazrul’s own (re)presentation of clothing as a statement of his characteristic versatility and diversity. Zaman (2019) writes,

He [Nazrul] made it a point to take studio portraits in Kolkata dressed in his havildar’s uniform. But there were occasions when he wore the dhoti, and other occasions when he wore “respectable” Muslim dress, a *chadar* across his shoulders and a cap. (para.13)

Zaman does not mention Nazrul’s pyjama as part of her reference to his Muslim dress, but he also took full-length portrait showing the distinctiveness of his pyjama. The loose and spacey pyjama (Appendix 1) is a complete contrast to the tight churidar mentioned before with reference to Jinnah. Once again, this kind of sartorial choice was not confined to the Muslim dress code only. Rather, it represents the wider regional distinct consciousness that reflected east Bangla’s own political establishment. Aiyar (2008) considers the short premiership of “Sher-E-Bangla” Fazlul Huq from 1940-43 as a

powerful local community-based alternative to the religion versus secular hegemony of the central Muslim League and the Congress that dominated different regions of the sub-continent before India and Pakistan became independent in 1947. Ali (2020) considers Huq and his political party, the Krishak Praja Party's entrance into the all-Indian national political scene through the 1937 election for the Bengal Legislative Assembly as a powerful representation of the interests of the Bangalee predominantly Muslim peasantry, "against the pro-landlord and pro-capitalist Muslim League" (para. 2). The recurrent image of Krishok, Shromik and Proja means that, while not explicitly articulated, the imagination of a lungi-clad typical Muslim Bangalee man in politics was a powerful subtext in the 20th century's anti-colonial politics. For this, we need to turn to "Majlum Jononeta" Maulana Bhashani.

Maulana Bhashani: The politician in lungi

Maksud (2014) terms Bhashani as one of the few righteous politicians of the subcontinent in his introduction to the book, *Bhashani Kahini*. In the first paragraph, the reason of this adjective is explained:

Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani is known for his strong personality. He always ignored material gain. This great leader used to put on a very simple dress like *Punjabi and a lungi*. Nobody has ever found him to wear a suit or any modern dress. (Maksud, 2014, p. 1)

In choosing to introduce Bhashani by drawing attention to his lungi and Punjabi, this veteran researcher summarises Bhashani's lifelong political activism against colonial oppression, class-based discrimination, and hierarchical elitism. But in the political history of Bangla and the sub-continent, Bhashani represents the ambivalent figure in lungi, needing to be controlled and feared simultaneously. After his death, S.D. Bell, the English ICS officer in the 1930s Bengal, who confronted Bhashani on many occasions in Mymensingh from where he was ultimately expelled (Hussain, 2021), wrote in his biography: "I saw an obituary note in *The London Times* on the death of Abdul Hamid Khan, maybe it is the same disturbing mullah whom I dealt with" (Bell, as cited in Maksud, 2014, pp. 15-16).

Bhashani's politics embodies the inherent complexity of rural peasantry: benign yet unpredictably organised in galvanising people's power. Uddin (2020) draws a parallel between the 2011 Wall Street Occupy Movement⁶ and the watershed moment of the *Kagmari Shommelton*⁷ (conference) that took place in 1957 in Tangail. Uddin notes that Bhashani did not want to organise another "run-of-the-mill' political gathering" (para. 3), through the *Shommelton*, Bhashani democratised the politics of the post-partition east Pakistan. Uddin (2020) writes:

Over the course of six days, conversations on Cold War in the Third World, military pacts, and anti-imperial and decolonial futures—usually confined to parliament chambers, university halls, debating clubs and mansions of Dhaka—migrated to the rural maidan (public space) of Kagmari, foregrounding the participation of those excluded from the formal spheres of politics. (para. 3)

Bhashani's mass base was both rural peasants, urban working-classes, and the people occupying the fringes of power (Hussain, 2021). Given his expansive and diverse

followers, it was unlikely that his lungi and panjabi would inspire the educated class to radically change their urbanite outfit, although some segments such as peasants and working classes might have felt empowered to follow a man who looked like one of them. By the time Bangladesh became an independent country, the historically ambivalent response towards lungi reflected a fractured national identity negotiating Bangalee-ness and Islam-ness. Akhtar (1998) sees the nation's failure to embrace Bhashani's dress code a reflection of its inability to move beyond its class-based religious status quo. She argues:

During the Pakistan era, the student body protested the declaration of Urdu as the state language; they sacrificed blood and life. As a result, Bangla language got recognition. But even after that, Bangalee men kept on wearing punjabi, pyjama, and tupi. Lungi was not taken up as the national dress code. The common people's leader Maulana Bhashani was not recognised as a cultural symbol. Bangla language was protected, but we could not protect our dress code. (Akhtar 1998, as cited in Akhtar and Bhowmik, 2021, pp. 55-56)

The simultaneous reference to Bangla language and lungi reflects the political nature of clothing and its (in)complete role in Bangladesh's post-colonial nation building. However, Akhtar misses the point that the Bangalee adaptation of pyjama, as mentioned above, was different from its more prevalent form in Pakistan that she alludes to. More at stake here is the nation's collective inability to reclaim lungi as the clothing of the most significant episode of east Bangla's [then east Pakistan] entire history: the War of Independence or Muktiyuddho, through which Bangladesh was born.

1971: Muktiyuddhas⁸ in lungi

Although peasant movements were rampant in colonial Bangla, one of the reasons why such movements did not translate into "a full-fledged struggle for national liberation," as Guha notes, (1988, pp. 42-43), was the absence of a strong leadership. When put in the historical trajectory of conflicts and movements, the 1971 War of Independence (Muktiyuddho) can be seen as a culmination of all the previous successful or less-successful confrontations against exploitative regimes. The Pakistani Army's initial crackdown on the key cities such as Dhaka and Chittagong meant that they miscalculated the power of the vast populations in the rural parts of riverine Bangla. Thus, just as millions of people from central cities started pouring down to its villages, it was the rural Bangla's men and women who could develop local resistance, duly supported by the groups of Muktiyuddha. Historian and Muktiyuddho researcher, Chowdhury (2021) critiques the metropolis-centric narratives of the war. Chowdhury notes 1971 was not one war but many wars, led and managed by the local peasants and other communities, both men and women, who, once the country became independent, went back to their usual livelihood, leaving the work of narrative writings in the hands of the educated elites. In this way, the war's narratives are not only incomplete but also it failed to fully recognise the substantial contributions that people of different regions and social strata made in the war.

Muktijuddho was the only time when the society's clothing hierarchy saw a rapid melt-down of boundaries, when countless men wearing lungi and carrying handguns or rifles became soldiers against the west Pakistan army. Mookherjee (2012) is one of the handful of researchers who investigated the episodes of male sexual violence alongside, and in parallel to, the rampant violence against women during the war. Citing a particular photo of a Pakistani military man ordering and watching over a poor Bangalee man's penis through his open lungi, Mookherjee underscores the powerlessness and vulnerability of a Bangalee man because regardless of being a Muslim and of other religions, he had to untie his lungi in front of an army personnel. She identifies the contradictory surveillance of a lungi-clad man during the war, as the Indian army personnel could also actively check lungi-clad men in search of weapons and to identify them as war collaborators or Rajakars. Mookherjee's reading is extremely insightful, but she identifies lungi through the lens of victimhood, a clothe of surrender to helmet and rifle. In her article there is no mention of muktijuddhos who fought the war in lungi. Lungi's downtrodden, poor men's clothing status was the most beneficial to countless men of different strata of the war-torn society to camouflage their original identities and to be part of the Mukti Bahini in whatever capacity they could. "অপরাজেয় বাঙলা" [Aporajeo Bangla] (Appendix 2), the mighty monument, at the heart of Dhaka University that symbolises the contributions of men and women in the war recognises the power of lungi, where one of the two men, as it would have been in the war, is in lungi.

Post-1975 Army-led State Politics: No place for lungi

Lungi's social status in the initial years after the birth of Bangladesh was uniquely flexible. The public/private space boundary was broken down when an eminent intellectual like Professor Abdur Razzaq or national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam or versatile poet like Jasimuddin⁹ would be photographed wearing punjabi and lungi. Lungi was even accepted in the political/private/public spaces for the Head of the State. Even if the Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would wear his pyjama, punjabi, and Mujib coat in formal places, it was not unusual to find him photographed wearing a lungi at home. The last image of the Father of the Nation is in lungi (Appendix 3), as he and his family members were killed at his Dhanmondi residence at the early dawn of 15 August 1975, unprotected and unprepared. With this brutal killing, the newly independent country entered an era of military-dominated civilian regime for the subsequent decades, first headed by President (Lieutenant General) Ziaur Rahman (1977-1981) and then President (Lieutenant General) Hussain Mohammad Ershad (1982-1990). In his extensive body of works about the military rule and the political Islamisation in Bangladesh, Riaz (2003) argues to contextualise the state's post-1975 Islamisation as a deliberate political strategy to legitimise the militarisation of state power. In Riaz's (2003) words, Ziaur Rahman had a "rule of military sabre and clerical cowl" (p. 310).

Riaz's identification of 'cowl' instead of lungi or tupi as the new marker of Muslims in Bangladesh significantly identifies that Islam as well as what it meant to be a powerful Muslim man in the 1980s' Bangladesh changed quite drastically than its previous eras. The process of Islamisation bears resemblance to Shaikh's (2008) observation about Pakistan: "Islamisation was a state-directed phenomenon" (p. 594)

manifested through a series of constitutional revisions. The most fundamental was the 5th amendment proclaimed in 1977 creating an unbridgeable point of departure for this newly independent country from its own historical trajectory of hybrid identity and collective resistance. In Riaz's (2005) words, "religion, territoriality of identity, and national security constituted the core of this new ideology" (p. 174). In this new amendment, secularism was substituted with absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah, Bangladeshis instead of Bangalee was proclaimed as the national identity, and the *muktijuddho* and the birth of the nation was rebranded in the military rhetoric of the historic war for national independence from its original description of the historic struggle for national liberation (pp. 174-75).

Although improving the village economy was one of the key strategies through which President Ziaur Rahman wanted to reach closer to people of the country, his method, as Franda (1981) notes, was "a military man's belief in organisational discipline" (p. 558). With his military *vis-à-vis* colonial attitude of disciplining people of villages, he put "people to work, in thousands of earth-moving operations, building embankments, excavating and re-excavating canals, and constructing or repairing roads" (Franda, 1981, p. 558). But unlike Bhashani, he was never seen in a lungi among the villagers, neither like the Father of the Nation, he was photographed wearing a lungi in his residence. By disciplining villagers and by creating the Gram Sarkar, a Village Defence Force, to "restructure Bangladeshi society" (Franda, p. 558), Zia utilised a "civil-military-bureaucrats" (Islam, 1984, p. 560) state apparatus where common villagers or the urban working class (common men in lungi) were deprived of "genuine political participation" (Islam, 1984, p. 567).

Like his predecessor, Hussain Muhammad Ershad's ideology of Islam and his ambition to be engaged with people of rural Bangla to stabilise power were implemented from the top, mimicking the model of the dictatorial regime of Pakistan (Sheikh & Ahmed, 2020). The dictatorial apparatus of these two states became so similar in the 1980s—only after a decade of Bangladesh's birth—that contemporary researchers develop comparative analysis between Bangladesh under Ershad and Pakistan under its military ruler, Zia-ul-Haq (1978-1988) as both relied on "maximizing the use of Islamic discourse at home and pan-Islamism globally to legitimize their rules" (Sheikh & Ahmed, 2020, p. 355). But as much as Ershad wished to be engaged with the poor of the land, his sartorial choice and lifestyle aligned him more with the richest of the world than the poorest of his own land. Brown (2019) notes:

Ershad, who lived in the grand presidential mansion and had his own golf course, always talked passionately about rooting out corruption. He also was genuinely distressed by the suffering of the poorest. [...] At each village the president would stride through the devastation, modestly trying to avoid the women trying to touch his leather boots in supplication. Behind him scuttled an aide with a satchel stuffed full of banknotes. Ershad would point to this woman and that, and each would have a small bundle of cash given to them. (para. 12)

Lungi, the clothe of commoners, had no place in the public representation of the presidents who projected themselves as old colonial strong men disciplining the uncontrollable mass of a newly independent nation requiring political and economic stability.

Lungi in contemporary lifestyle politics: A rapturous return

Globally and locally, the 21st century took many points of departure from its preceding 20th century. In particular, the neo-liberalisation of global/local economies, the consumption of goods and cultures, the expansion of the parallel worlds networked by the Internet, the interconnectedness of home and the diasporic Bangladesh are some of the key characteristics of the new world. The term people's politics has entered a new meaning emphasising individuals' practices. Individuals can practise a lifestyle underpinned by a political principle. While its usage in everyday life may be highly negotiated, lungi's subversive power to challenge routinised/disciplinary gaze is more visible. The concluding part of the essay returns to the first part with which it started: lungi's subversive power. As in urban locations and to some extent in semi-urban and villages, alternatives to lungi became available even to lower middle and working-class communities, thanks to the rapid expansion of the Ready-Made Garments sector that made urbanite outfit such as trousers and shorts viable and accessible. With alternatives in the marketplace, lungi's subversive status in society becomes conspicuous. Intellectuals and poets accept lungi as a lifestyle political statement against the imperial and colonial regulations that the country as a post-colonial nation state, consciously or otherwise, suffers from.

Maksud, often regarded as the "Gandhi of Bangladesh" (Samad, 2021, para. 1) abandoned western outfits and started wearing two parts of unstitched white pieces of cloth, as a protest to America's unjust and unethical intrusion to Iraq in 2003. In 2009 poet and radical thinker Farhad Mazhar could not enter a family event in the Dhaka Club because of wearing lungi, causing much furore between the poet and the authority (NTV News, 2009, March 10). The same "anti" prefix that once made lungi a clothing of the have-nots and the powerless has now a meaning of resistance. Bangladeshi cultural activist Rahee wears lungi in public places. In his blog (Rahee, 2013, April 13), he reflects on his choice:

Men in lungi appear in one way, men in trousers appear differently! . . .

Certainly men without any outfit are of another kind!

Clothless men at home inhabit a particular world! Outside of home is another!

Clothless men in public are called mad; they are called 'delirious', 'anti-cultured', 'uncultured' and many more.

I thought I might not go that far. But let me see how the 'outside world' reacts if I break the aisle of lungi-pants. (sec 2, para.5)

Rahee's choice to experiment with lungi is hinged on lungi's inherent power to challenge the definition of what a decent (post)colonial Bangladeshi man should look like in public. Since lungi has never been normalised to wear in formal places in the urban landscape, an educated and cultured person in lungi evokes a collective sense of ambiguous discomfort. While activists and poets might have taken a conscious choice to embrace a lifestyle politics around lungi, many people, for example the news about students at a university with which the paper began, might just have worn lungi simply for it being a clothe of comfort at home. Normalising wearing lungi as a preferred clothing is one keyway of

dealing with our collective discomfort. Lungi may soon be a preferred clothing given its expanding global market and its catchy presence in popular media.

The popular cultural representation of lungi in the subcontinent is also undergoing transformation—a fascinating topic to study further. The expanding regional market of Bangladeshi lungi means that economic and cultural shifts around lungi are simultaneous. Lungi’s local and export market can be calculated in thousand crores (“Traditional lungi business,” 2018). It is therefore of little wonder that Amanat Shah textile, the biggest manufacturer and importer of Bangladeshi lungi, is investing to rebrand lungi. The TV advertisement of Amanat Shah lungi where “Bangla ma-yeer damal chelera” [The brave sons of the mother of Bengal] win the trophy by making the parade in lungi is a sure sign of change in perception around lungi (Amanat Shah Group, 2022, January 25). The Company also has a digital campaign called “lungi amar shonskriti [Lungi is my culture]” with a tagline of “Amanat Shah lungi/ the companion of the new generation” (Amanat Shah Group, 2022, February 2). The South-Indianisation of Bollywood movies where superstar Shahrukh Khan performs a “lungi dance” in the fashion of South-Indian movie icon Rajnikanth further means that lungi’s cultural playfulness is now enjoyed and celebrated, rather than looked down upon. But to claim lungi as ours without being apologetic or embarrassed, or as a come-back global product of the ever-expanding neoliberal market, we need to actively engage with lungi’s enduring presence in east Bangla’s history of resistance and struggle through which the state is born. This paper is one intellectual attempt to trace lungi’s political trajectory to reclaim our own history of ambiguity, diversity, and endurance.

Note

I have translated certain excerpts from Bangla for the purpose of using them in this paper. The list is below:

The excerpt by Syed Abul Maksud about Bhashani in the part “Maulana Bhashani: The Politician in Lungi” (p. 13) is from Syed Abul Maksud’s *মওলানা আব্দুল হামিদ খান ভাসানী*. In the same part, the excerpt by Farida Aktar (p. 15) is translated from Shaheen Aktar and Moushumi Bhowmik, ed. *জানানা মহফিল: বাঙালি মুসলমান লেখিকাদের নির্বাচিত রচনা ১৯০৪-১৯৩৮*. The blog excerpt used in “Lungi in contemporary lifestyle politics: A Rapturous Return” (pp. 20-21) is translated from Arup Rahee’s blog post “লুঙ্গি কাহিনী / যাপন ও সম্পর্কশাস্ত্রের একটি ভূমিকা”

Endnotes

1. Throughout the essay, I have taken a conscious decision to spell certain words the way they are pronounced in Bangla, rather than how they have been spelt in English from the colonial period. These include Bangla instead of Bengal, Bangalee instead of Bengali, Kolkata instead of Calcutta, dhuti instead of dhoti, tupi instead of topi. But when referring to other writers, I have used the standard spellings as they used. I am aware that this may create discomfort in reading however since the paper is on lungi, I thought it justified to reclaim the spellings from their colonial legacy.
2. Lungi belongs to the ‘Sarong’ category of clothing, which is a large tube of clothing that covers most parts of the body. Depending on locations, ethnic communities, weather, history, lungi or lungi-like clothing can be worn by both men and women across many parts of the

world including Asia and Africa. The closest western version of lungi is probably kilt, worn by men in Scotland in traditional festivals such as weddings.

3. As mentioned in the abstract Kaiser Haq's poem single-handedly created the academic/cultural context to study lungi as a space of colonial class struggles. Numerous academic papers are written on the poem, since my focus is not to make an exclusive cultural critique of lungi, I have not used the scholarly papers in shaping my arguments.
4. Langoti or langot is a rudimentary form of clothing worn in poor and common people in ancient Bengal as well as other parts of the sub-continent. There is a view that the term lungi might have originated from the term langoti, but that view is not substantiated. But the early versions of short dhuti and lungi (above the knee) must have originated from langoti. Murshid (2018) notes that the oldest sample of clothing in Bengal can be drawn from the sculpture of ancient and medieval time, where in most cases men and women wore similar minimalist clothes covering the sex organs.
5. The first national census in 1871-72 in colonial India, as a result of the uprising of 1857, identified Bangla, in particular the eastern part, as an overwhelming Muslim majority province, causing a fresh worry for the Empire, given that Muslims were systematically marginalised and had conflicting relations with the British. For more, see Shehabuddin, 2022.
6. Occupy Wall Street is the movement that took place on 17 September 2011 in Manhattan in protest of income inequality and corporate corruption. For more, please check: "Occupy Wall Street Begins."
7. Syed Abul Maksud considers the Kagmari conference as the first planned resistance against the West Pakistan military-dictatorial regime. For more please check: *কাগমারী সম্মেলন, সৈয়দ আবুল মাকসুদ (২০১৭)*.
8. I am using Muktijuddho and Muktijoddha instead of War of Independence and freedom fighters to remain close to the original titles.
9. I am consciously choosing versatile instead of 'polli' (rustic) poet to define Jasimuddin because his poems are much richer than to be confined by one category.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Kazi Nazrul Islam in 1920



Source: By Bishnupuri (1919) - Agnibeena (1922), Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=99832905>

Appendix 2: Aparajeyo Bangla, Arts Faculty, Dhaka University



Source:https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aparajeyo_Bangla_-_1979_CE_-_Sculpture_by_Syed_Abdullah_Khalid_-_University_of_Dhaka_Campus_-_Dhaka_2015-05-31_2366.JPG

Appendix 3: The Father of the Nation's dead body



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sheikh_Mujibur_Rahman_after_he_had_been_killed_by_the_majors.jpg