

Hegemonic Cultural Attitude towards ‘Lungi’ in Deconstructing ‘Bangali Identity’: Postcolonial Perspectives

Md. Fakhrul Islam*
Borun Chandraaroy**
Md. Rifat-Ur-Rahman***

Abstract: Observably, different dress and manners prevail in various societies; nevertheless, the environmental influence on the dress cannot be ignored. Clothing culture has evolved over time. Archaeological perspectives suggest that human being started using clothing to cover nudity a long time ago, although there is disagreement among theorists about the precise timeline. One of the most significant basic human needs in today’s world is clothing; the concept of the clothing culture is also crucial in the context of Bengali culture. The question is-how the standard of textiles was determined contextualizing ‘Bangali identity’ deconstruction? In Bangla culture, a widely used garment is the Lungi, mainly worn by men. Apart from Bangali, Lungi is very popular in many parts of South Asia. The study analyses the effects of Lungi and its impact on the socio-cultural-political and religious context. In the general view, Lungi is looked down upon, regarded as the dress of the lower strata of society, and termed as the ‘Goriber Poshak’. If Lungi is so popular with Bangali, why is it referred to as hierarchical clothing? The attempt is to explore Bangali identity based on Lungi from a postcolonial perspective by following a descriptive qualitative approach.

Keywords: Bangali, Clothing, Culture, Hegemony, Lungi, Postcolonial Perspectives.

1. Introduction

When we talk about clothes, many remember the incident of Persian poet Sheikh Saadi; once on the way to the royal palace, the poet Sheikh Saadi took shelter in a person’s house. The owner of the house did not entertain

* Assistant Professor, Department of Bangla, Rabindra University, Shahjadpur, Sirajganj.

** Lecturer, Department of Economics, Rabindra University, Shahjadpur, Sirajganj.

*** Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Rabindra University, Shahjadpur, Sirajganj.
email: rifat218@gmail.com

him as he could not recognize the poet as he was in simple clothes. On his way back from the palace, after many gifts and expensive clothes, the poet appeared in the house again. This time the owner of the house recognized him and gave him extra hospitality. But without paying heed to the dignity provided with him this time for the nice dress, the poet gave importance to the clothes by filling the pockets of the nice shirt with food (Ehsan, 2021).

The name of this story of Sheikh Saadi is 'Poshaker Gun'. Undeniably, clothes have determined a person's identity and social status since ancient times. The value of garments started as soon as trade began in the agricultural age. Influential aristocrats used clothing as a means of expressing their dignity (Godley, 1997). Therefore, clothing can be used as an important instrument of exhibiting inequality across different socio-economic classes. There are also stories about the scientist Albert Einstein (Ehsan, 2021). It is not strange that the reader has such an experience in his personal life. That is about the cost of clothes being cheap (Wood, 1981). Lungi is closely associated with the people's clothing of at least five countries, but what is the present scenario in Bangladesh? There is a variety of clothing in Bangladesh, depending on the class and occupation, the type of work, etc. The position of this citizen in any hierarchy of society can be guessed by looking at the clothes (Wietmarschen, 2021; Wood, 1981).

Observably, most of the men in the country wear Lungi — almost everyday life. But Lungi is not limited to yarn, and it has a social status as a garment. The issue of dignity is associated with the usefulness of clothing, the country's history, culture, class, and clothing politics (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015; Wood, 1981). To understand Lungi, we need to intensely observe these issues. Looking at the history of apparel globally, human beings probably started using upper-body clothing first. Perhaps, the human body, which collects fruits and roots in the bushes, is protected from thorns and warmth in winter (Kabeer, 2003). It has a long-standing political-historical perspective, and the politics of clothing started when people were involved in rule and fashion (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015; Wietmarschen, 2021).

Lungi as clothing is the dress of the lower part of the human body due to the climatic region of the country. Besides, Lungi in many countries is warm or temperate. The ancient statues or terracotta carvings found in India have garments on the lower body of men and women but not on the upper part. This may indicate that the spread of the people in the area was not through hunters or fruit collectors in the forest but agricultural work. It can be

guessed that the use of Lungi is ancient (Ghurye, 1967). Maybe it did not take on a completely different form and diversity.

Studying the long-standing Bangali nationalism from a postcolonial perspective, i.e., language-art-literature-dress is significant in exploring the Bangali identity. Besides an anthropological perspective, in introspection of the Bangali entity, exposing the pre-independence colonial aggression period is necessary because the millennia-old rhetoric builds this Bangali entity, and the colonial ideology inspires the desire to be Bangali manifests in our outward behavior (Hajjaj, 2020). Attempts to become a Bangali by pursuing a nationalist ideology at a certain time of the year are also noteworthy. How does this process teach us to be nationalist, or is it a fashion to prove that 'we are genuine Bangali'? Rejecting indigenous knowledge as superstition based on modern or scientific criteria, why and in what process the imposed colonial knowledge was given more importance, and in what process was it practiced very strongly in the society (Shrimali, 1993)? This study explores the present context of 'Lungi culture' in deconstructing 'Bangali identity' from postcolonial perspectives by following a descriptive qualitative approach.

2. Theoretical Framework

A number of research has been conducted on the theoretical standpoint based on nationalism (Szporluk, 1993). In addition, culture and personality theorists have been debated over the past few decades in defining nationalism (Shweder, 1979). However, defining a particular nationality by a specific theory is undoubtedly challenging; moreover, for the time being, some views based on nationalism have been observed (Kecmanovic, 1996). At the same time, the Bangali nationalistic discourse has been studied through clothing, combining contemporary sociological, anthropological, and archaeological post-colonial theories (Childs & Williams, 1996; Hodder, 1987; Kecmanovic, 1996). Narratives have been studied as to why, how, and in what process a nation holds the values of nationalism and the criteria (Kecmanovic, 1996; Shweder, 1979; Szporluk, 1993).

3. Objective

This study aims to explore the dominant attitudes of society in Bangladesh. Being located in a subtropical monsoon region, known as the largest delta globally, it is a tropical country, and above all, agriculturally rural land. Even though a dress like a Lungi is associated with the country's weather, culture

and long-standing habits, why is it often referred to as the clothing of the socially poor class? In what context are the hegemonic attitudes behind it prevailing in society?

4. Methodology

Methodologically, this study has been conducted following a virtuously descriptive qualitative approach. However, the differences between the historical source data and the primary data have been compared to contextualize the perception of the men used to wearing Lungi. An unstructured questionnaire-based interview was conducted in 2022 at Shahjadpur upazila of Sirajganj district to receive perceptions about Lungi as a garment. Shahjadpur is a famous place for the loom; Lungi is a significant production of loom industry in this upazila. For this reason, a survey was conducted on 100 men of different ages and professions in Shahjadpur, and they were asked about their reasons for wearing Lungi. Also, why do they think of Lungi as a poor class dress, if they think so? At the same time, the respondents were asked whether they suffered any kind of humiliation for wearing Lungi.

5. Historical Context

Socio-political-religious reasons have led to the evolution of Bengali clothing at different times. *Charyapada* is the oldest specimen of Bangali literature, but not much is known about how men and women used to dress (Shahidullah, 2012). However, the Early and Medieval period's sculptures, terracotta plaques, and manuscripts give little idea of the costumes. Ideally, most of the clothing was meant to avoid embarrassment, and minimal clothing was needed to protect oneself from the harshness of different weather, including winter and summer, so perhaps there was not much difference between men's and women's clothing at that time. According to historians, sewing cloth was not in vogue in East-South and West India during the Early Historic period. Instead, textiles were thought to have been made from the bark of trees in the Indian subcontinent during the Aryan period, which may have been used as thin as cloth. Textiles made from this type of bark were known as '*Khoumo*'.

According to Chanakya's *Kautilya's Arthasāstra*, silk was cultivated in Banga and Magadha between 300 BCE and 400 BCE. Perhaps the technique of silk production came to the Indian subcontinent from China, or the locals

were aware of silk production. Silk was considered the most valuable yarn; the best jute cloth and silk cloth was considered the furthestmost valuable garment by the rulers or the aristocracy. In addition, techniques for making yarn from cotton were discovered in the Indian subcontinent. From another point of view of Chanakya, in Banga, Mathura, Kalinga, Kashi, etc., cotton yarn was made; Banga was the best region for cotton yarn (Baihui, 1986; Bhatnagar, 2004; Sandhu, 2015; Sastri, 1915).

In addition, the travelogues of the Chinese travelers Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsang contain details of the clothing worn by the people of that time. Besides, the terracotta plaques of the eighth to twelfth centuries in Dinajpur and Mainamati in Bangladesh reveal the identity of the socio-cultural life of the time. The garments described in Hiuen Tsang's description of the seventh century are not tailor-made garments but are thought to have been the only garment worn by men and women, Dhooti or Sharee. Speculatively, it is thought that elite women sometimes used veils at festivals. However, during the Sena period, elite women used various cosmetics, especially gold ornaments on the ears and waist.

The arrival of Muslims in Bengal significantly impacted the region's political, social, and cultural aspects. In the fifteenth century, Muslim influence spread in the clothing and culture of the subcontinent. Later revolutionary changes in Bangali dress began during the British colonial period, but the Bangali people were not immediately interested in adopting Muslim clothing. They were also reluctant to receive Western clothing spontaneously; however, it was changed due to continued British colonial aggression (Bhatnagar, 2004).

Even after the British hegemonic aggression, Bangali used to wear Dhooti irrespective of Hindu-Muslim religious status. However, tailoring was introduced during the Muslim rule due to the emergence of the tailoring profession. Moreover, despite the Hindu-Muslim dress code, women of the two religions had to adhere to strict veil rules, so although men's clothing changed, women's clothing did not change much (Bhatnagar, 2004). Apparently, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, men's and women's clothing styles changed dramatically, especially after World War II when men began to wear shirts, pants, and suit-ties in the Western-style. Since then, Lungi has come to be regarded as the clothing of the lower classes, although Lungi's popularity in the household has survived to this day (Ghurye, 1967).

6. The Reason behind Thinking Lungi is Poor Clothes

Like the Dhooti of the Hindus, the Lungi was also without sewing. The Islamic influence in the Indian subcontinent increased after the Abbasid dynasty came to power in Baghdad, Iraq. However, Syed Mujtaba Ali once told Sabitendranath Roy, a veteran publisher of College Street in Calcutta, that the introduction of Lungi in Arabia was based on the Buddhists of Burma. The Lungi entered India via Kandahar-Ghazni; however, there is no significant evidence of its authenticity. According to G S Ghurye's famous book 'Indian Costume', Lungi has been in vogue in this region since long before the advent of Islam in India. This dress was for both men and women. Numerous such patterns can be seen in the sculptures in the ancient temples (Ghurye, 1967).

The word 'Khami' in Burmese refers to the Lungi worn by Burmese (now Myanmar) women. Its exact use can be seen in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT). They call the Lungi worn by women of small ethnic group *yeast*, which may be due to the cultural similarities between the ethnic groups living in Myanmar and the CHT. As a result of trade, political and cultural relations with them, Lungi has become popular among the Muslims of East Bengal (Chowdhury et al., 2014).

Why is there a question in our 'colonial mindset' about the dignity of Lungi? The status of clothing is built on the number of users, identity, and nationality. At the same time, those who are wearing unique clothes can be judged on their dignity, considering their national contribution. It is easy to imagine the diversity of clothing in this country of many ethnic groups. A closer look reveals that there is no nationally prescribed national dress in Bangladesh. As a result, there may be differences of opinion. Even after that, many people consider Lungi and Sharee as national dresses.

People's clothing is most influenced by their geographical location and cultural exchanges. Religious feeling is more influential in this case. There may be another reason beyond these two conditions (Wulandari, 2019). Is that a colonial effect? The politics of clothing is being created around them. The Indian subcontinent has gone through a long period of colonial rule. The effect is also visible on the clothes (Wietmarschen, 2021).

News of the expulsion of three students for wearing Lungi and taking exams at a university in Bangladesh on 30 September 2021 caused a stir in the media. Notably, due to COVID-19, the test was being taken using the zoom app. While the students were sitting in their homes for exams, the teacher

saw them wearing Lungi, which led to disciplinary action against them (Prothom Alo, 2021).

In addition to such isolated incidents, the three authors of the present article, being male, have considerable experience in wearing Lungi and the tendency to be looked down socially, especially when they are out of the house wearing Lungi, which is not accepted socially.

Who constructed the society, and on what basis are the social restrictions imposed on clothing (Rao, 1964)? Bangladesh has not defined anything as a national dress; however, it has been assumed that the so-called formal dress of Western culture is official and traditional, while it is an independent sovereign country; the country has been steadily advancing for over fifty years.

Have we ever been able to get out of the trap of colonial mentality (Shastri & Wilson, 2001)? By spontaneously nurturing the colonial imposed ideology, we are shouting and shedding light on the issue of colonization, presenting the grand narratives of patriotism, consciousness, sense of nationalism, etc., to the public, and constantly adhering to the colonial imposed practice (Ray & Zachariah, 1995).

7. Survey Findings

An unstructured questionnaire-based survey was conducted among 100 men inhabiting Shahjadpur upazila of the Sirajganj District. They were asked as to why they wore Lungi. The respondents gave different answers to this question (Fig. 1-3).

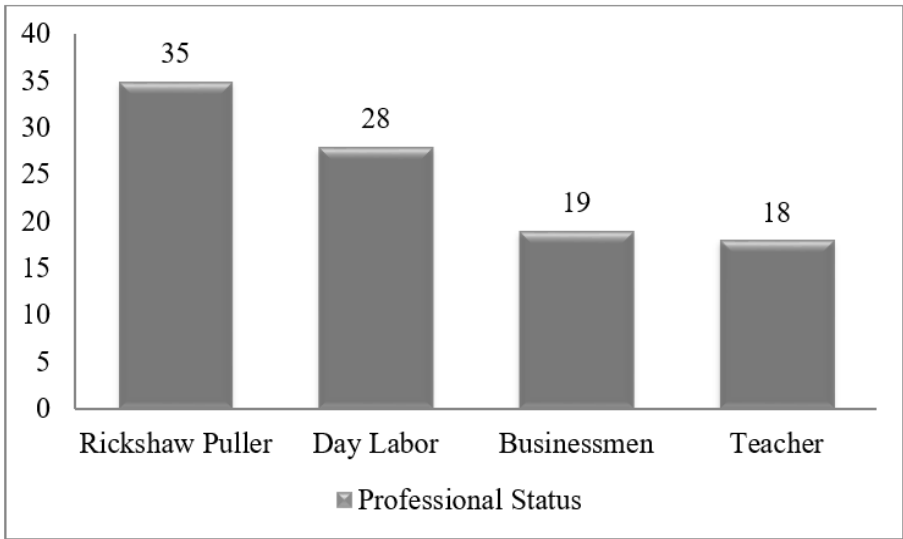


Figure 1: Professional Status of Respondents. Source: Field Survey.

Among the 100 participants who responded to the questionnaire-based survey, 35 were rickshaw pullers, 28 were day laborers, 19 were businessmen, and the remaining 18 were school, college, and university level teachers (Fig. 1).

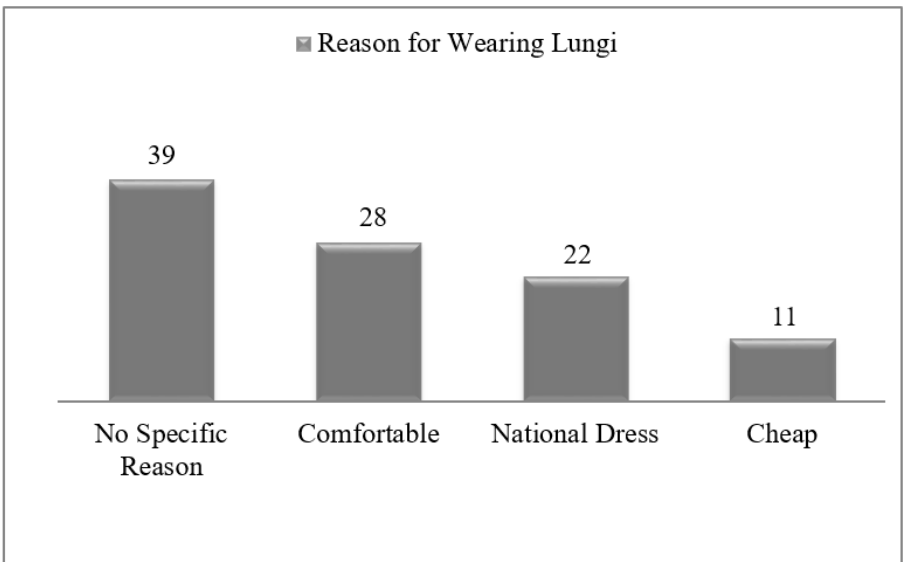


Figure 2: Reason for Wearing Lungi. Source: Field Survey.

Respondents were asked why they wear Lungi - 39 respondents answered that they wear it without any specific reason, 28 respondents said that Lungi is a very comfortable garment and they feel comfortable wearing it, 22 people answered that Lungi is a national costume. The other 11 participants responded that they wear Lungi because it is a very affordable and cheap garment (Fig. 2).

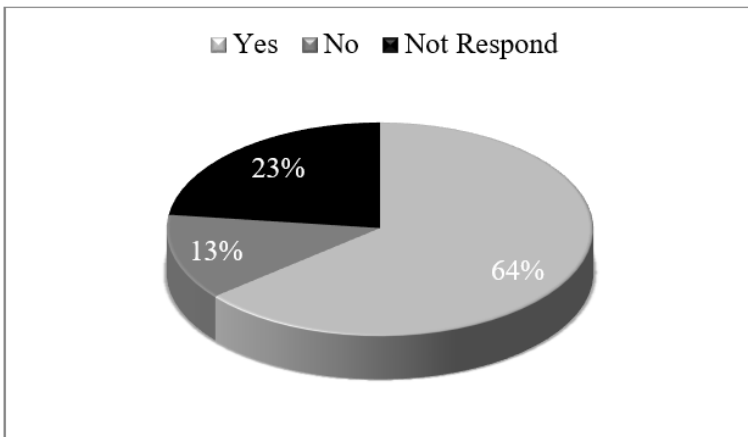


Figure 3: Humiliation for Wearing Lungi. Source: Field Survey.

The most important part of the unstructured questionnaire survey was - ‘have you been humiliated because of Lungi?’ –In response to this question, most respondents (64%) said that they had been humiliated more than once in different places due to wearing Lungi; 23% respondents did not comment on it; and the remaining 13% respondents said that they have never been humiliated because of Lungi (Fig. 3).

Lungi is a trendy garment for mass people, especially men in Bangladesh (Ahmed et al., 2000). Why and how did the social crisis come about (Bose, 2003; Jodhka & Shah, 2010)? Lungi is considered the national dress in the southern provinces of India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, etc. It is worn without any hindrance to conducting professional activities in these places. However, Lungi is unfortunately considered indecent clothing in Bangladesh.

It is a wonder that wearable play the most imperative role in determining the social status of this country, whereas the country is a rural based agricultural country (Akanda, 1988). Farmers, workers, laborers, expatriate workers are

contributing the most to the development of the socio-economic context of the country (Chowdhury, 2011). However, people of these professions are usually defined as '*Khayat*' (unsmart); '*Chasha-Bhusha*' (farmer), which indicates the disgraceful attitude shown towards them by other members in the society.

It is assumed that one must wear '*Shahebi*' (European) clothing in order to be civilized. Otherwise, they will be considered 'uncivilized' —why this authoritarian behavior of colonial hegemony still exists in society —it is essential to explore these answers through social science more rigorously (Bhimraj, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021; Wulandari, 2019).

The first day of the Bangla year calendar is called *Pohela Boishakh*. It is to be noted that the Bangali elite and middle class wear Lungi to celebrate the festival besides wearing *Gamcha* and eating *Panta* to express the Bangali national identity (Hassan & Sharma, 2018). Cultural hegemony is directly related to the tendency to be Bangali for just one day. The hegemonic cultural attitude towards food and clothing shows that 'we' have not yet been able to free ourselves from colonial aggression.

8. Conclusion

There is no denying that clothing can be used as an instrument of maintaining authoritarian behaviour and keeping a nation culturally colonised (Childs & Williams, 1996). For example, Bangladesh was colonized by the British for about two hundred years; then for the next twenty-four years, Pakistani aggression affected the culture, language, arts, clothing, etc. of this country. So, even though the colonial rule has come to an end, colonial behavior still exists in the culture of this country, which is evident in the current dress trend. Although the people of this country are Bangali in outward behavior, they may not have been able to get rid of colonial mindset in terms of thinking. The Cultural Revolution required after freedom from colonial rule has not yet occurred. Perhaps, for all these reasons, Bangali has not yet been able to determine the national dress or did not want to be. As a result, even in the present day, when university students wear Lungi in class or in exams, no one is ready to accept it customarily.

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