

VAIṢṆAVA DRESS - CULTURAL OR SPIRITUAL?



This is my 2 cents about the ongoing discussion about whether Vaiṣṇava dress is spiritual or cultural (and can be compromised or even totally abandoned).

This discussion took place during Kartik of 2010 -

Pūrva-pakṣa -

You mention in your interesting blog about Sankīrtan that "*dhoti* is a sacred garment". I have my doubt about this statement and would like to present a few points for discussion if you don't mind:

1. The terms "*dhoti*" or "*sari*" are not Sanskrit words and not mentioned in scripture. We don't know exactly what Kṛṣṇa was wearing (even though I tend to believe that it resembles what we call *dhoti*)
2. There is no evidence that Lord Caitanya asked any of his followers to change their regular dress when they went out on *harināma*.
3. "Vaiṣṇava dress" as mentioned in Caitanya Caritāmṛta could just mean the simple garment the followers of Lord Caitanya used to wear as opposed to royal clothes.

I certainly agree that clothing affects our consciousness and has certain connotations if we use it like a uniform. It can uplift (or degrade) us. However, in Indian villages some people wear dhoti and sārī without any religious sentiments. It is just village clothing

for them. In certain places in India suit is considered a Christian dress. For me the main principle, if we choose to go on Harinām, is to attract people to Kṛṣṇa through beautiful singing, dancing (and possibly also dress). If they get bewildered by weird foreign clothing (which they may at best connect to India, but not to spirituality) we may not reach our goal. Just my two cents ...

Advaita Das –

1. “The terms "dhoti" or "sari" are not Sanskrit words and not mentioned in scripture.”

अवगुण्ठन n. avaguNThana

1. The act of covering the head of women;
2. A veil (for the face) (fig. also);

(Apte Sanskrit Dictionary)

धटी f. dhaTI piece of cloth worn over the privities

(Spokensanskrit.org)

Dhoti is mentioned in Śrīla Rūpa Goswāmī's Bhakti Rasāmṛta Sindhu 2.1.351 -

*smerāsyah pariḥita-pāṭalāmbara-śrīś
channāṅgaḥ puraṭa-rucoru-kañcakena |
uṣṇīṣaṁ dadhad aruṇaṁ dhaṭīm ca citrāḥ
kaṁsārīr vahati mahotsave mudam naḥ*

Bhānu Swāmī's translation: The enemy of Kaṁsa, smiling in great joy, and wearing a pink dhoti, orange turban, an excellent vest of shining gold, and multi-color sash, creates joy in us.”

Bhānu Swami has the *dhoti*'s color wrong, but he does translate *dhaṭī* as *dhoti*.

Professor Habermann has it right in his Bhakti Rasāmṛta Sindhu translation -

“The Enemy of Kamsa, dressed in the following manner during the Great Celebration, is our delight. He has a smile on his face, a beautiful pink scarf placed over his shoulders, and a long shirt that glistens like gold covers his body; he wears a red turban on his head and a multi-colored cloth (dhoti) around his waist.”

Both translate *dhaṭī* as *dhoti*. Bengalis pronounce the short 'a' as 'oh'

Śrīla Rūpa Goswāmī's Bhakti Rasāmṛta Sindhu 3.4.31, describing Kṛṣṇa's *śeṣa-kumāra* age:

dhaṭī phaṇa-paḍī cātra kiñcid-vanya-vibhūṣaṇam |
laghu-vetraka-ratnādi maṇḍanam parikīrtitam

Bhānu Swāmī's translation: “A long narrow cloth wrapped around the waist, cloth folded to resemble a serpent's hood at the front, flower ornaments and a small stick in His hand are considered the ornaments of the last part of the *kaumāra* age.”

Śrī Jīva Goswāmī's ṭīkā: *dhaṭī svalpa-vistara-bahvāyamānaḥ paṭa-viśeṣaḥ. yaḥ khalu vicitra-parivṛtti-bāhulyenādharāṅge vicchittim labhate*

dhaṭī = dhoti; *svalpa* = little; *vistara* - wide; *bahu* = much; *āyamānaḥ* = stretching; *paṭa* = cloth; *viśeṣaḥ* = kind of; *yaḥ* = who; *khalu* = surely; *vicitra* = wonderful; *parivṛtti* = surrounding; *bāhulyena* = with an abundance; *adharāṅge* = on the lower body; *vicchitti* = cut; *labhate* = attains

Jīva Goswāmī's Commentary, Bhānu Swāmī's translation:

Dhaṭī is a long, narrow cloth. It looks attractive, wrapping the lower half of the body in various ways.

2. “There is no evidence that Lord Caitanya asked any of his followers to change their regular dress when they went out on *harināma*.”

Probably Vaiṣṇavas always wore *dhoti* and *sāri* so they did not need to change cloth.

3. "Vaiṣṇava dress" as mentioned in *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* could just mean the simple garment the followers of Lord Caitanya used to wear as opposed to royal clothes.

I certainly agree that clothing affects our consciousness and has certain connotations if we use it like a uniform. It can uplift (or degrade) us. However, in Indian villages some people wear *dhoti* and *sāri* without any religious sentiments. It is just village clothing for them.

Haribhakti Vilāsa speaks of wearing white garments as opposed to red/orange. That certainly applies to *dhoti*, not to pants.

4. Mahāprabhu is described as wearing *tri-kaccha* in *Caitanya Bhāgavata*, it means 'three-folded'. That certainly applies to *dhoti*. f.i *trikaccha vasan* (*Caitanya Bhāgavat* Adi 8.197)

5. Indian villages have a very pious regime, even if people do not practise any *sādhana*. Most Hindus are devotees in the heart. In contrast one never sees Muslims wear a *dhoti*. If it were purely cultural and regional, why South Asian Muslims do not wear *dhoti*?

6. A devotee would not dare watch peepshows on the street in *dhoti*, whereas he would be inclined to do so wearing pants, because not only the garment influences him, he would also look absurd wearing the dress of a priest while watching a peepshow.

Pūrva-pakṣa-

Thanks for your reply. Since the words *dhoti* and *sāri* are not found in the Sanskrit dictionary, how would they appear in any Sankrit text (unless it is interpolated)? What we do find in *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* is *dukūla-agrye*, which just means cloth. Certainly Mahāprabhu and his devotees wore *dhotis*, as was the custom back then. We just don't know how exactly the Vrajabāsīs and Kṛṣṇa wrapped their clothes around their bodies 5000 years ago. The *gopīs* are described as wearing belts in the 10th canto which indicated they were not wearing *sārīs*, but some kind of skirts. I don't doubt that it is uplifting for one's consciousness to wear *dhoti* / *sari* in that spirit, but I still hold that there is nothing INTRINSICALLY spiritual to it.

Advaita Das – “There is nothing intrinsically spiritual about being a teetotaler either – it is just healthy to be so. Does it mean we should jeopardize our *sādhana* by getting

loaded on drink and drugs then? It would make *sādhana* a lot more difficult, right? One can do *sādhana* in America but it is much better to do in Vraja. Similarly one can also do *sādhana* with baseball cap, T-shirt and Bermuda shorts but why would you make it more difficult upon yourself?

The Kṛṣṇa Bhāvanāmṛta (4.35) mentions the word *śāṭikā* (corrupted into 'shari' nowadays) - *kanaka bindumati nava śāṭikā*. 'She was dressed in a new *śāṭikā* with golden spots'. Why would a belt not fit with a *śārī*, by the way? Śrīmad Bhāgavata (9.9.7) mentions the word *śāṭī* too –

yasminn otam idam protam viśvam śāṭīva tantuṣu

“Śiva, the soul of all beings, in whom the universe exists like a *śārī* with vertical and horizontal threads, will sustain the force of your current.”

Haribhakti Vilāsa says that if you do not wear *uttariya* (chador) you are naked. Wearing a chador is as purifying as wearing *dhoti* – *'nuttariyaśca nagnas cāvastra eva ca* - (Haribhakti Vilāsa, 4.148) – “Not wearing *uttariya* (chador) is like being naked.”

Supporting Bhakta: The word 'Vaiṣṇava-dress' is in Śāstra: in Caitanya Caritāmṛta Madhya 14.5 –

sārvabhauma-upadeśe chādi' rāja-veśa
ekalā vaiṣṇava-veśe korilo praveśa

SYNONYMS

sārvabhauma — of Sārvabhauma Bhattācārya; *upadeśe* — under instructions; *chādi'* — giving up; *rāja-veśa* — the royal dress; *ekalā* — alone; *vaiṣṇava-veśe* — in the dress of a Vaiṣṇava; *korilo praveśa* — entered.

TRANSLATION

“Following Sārvabhauma Bhattācārya's instructions, the King had given up his royal dress. He now entered the garden in the dress of a Vaisnava.”

Look here: *vaiṣṇava-veśe*. If they don't accept Haribhakti Vilāsa they should not accept Caitanya Caritāmṛta either: so, what is *vaiṣṇava veśa*, blue jeans and t-shirt? They say Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism is not about the clothes. But why then Jagadānanda Paṇḍit wanted to beat Sanātan Goswāmī because of the clothes point and nothing else? (see Caitanya Caritāmṛta Antya līlā, chapter 13)? Even without considering the color of the clothes, the point was about the clothes - and if it doesn't matter then why *śāstra* speaks about clothes with so many *śloka*s?"

Advaita Das – Clothes matter. A transvestite feels feminine when he cross-dresses, a woman with pants feels more masculine than a woman in a dress. And those postmodern devotees who preach ‘the substance vs. the form’ are invited to show me this philosophy or attitude anywhere in Vaiṣṇava-*śāstra* or history. There is nothing external in bhakti – *sevā sādḥaka rūpena*. Mahāprabhu instructs Sanātan Goswāmī in Caitanya Caritāmṛta (Madhya 22.156): *bāhya antara ihār dui to sādḥana* - There are two types of *sādḥana* - external and internal." “The substance vs the form” is actually sheer *māyāvāda*, thinking that something in *bhakti sādḥana* is false. The bottom line is - it is very hard for western devotees to give up their western *saṁskāra*, even if they are in the top league and supposedly 'seniormost' devotees. *māyāvādīs* believe that Kṛṣṇa or Kṛṣṇa-bhakti are false, inferior or external aspects of the Absolute or just totally false. So thinking that Vaiṣṇava dress, which is an integral part of bhakti practise, is an inferior, dispensible, external matter, is similarly *māyāvāda*. Vaiṣṇava culture is not ‘the material side’ to it – Vaiṣṇava culture is also spiritual - '*sevā sādḥaka rūpena*' - one must serve with the external form as well as with the spiritual form. For men the dress code is two folded or 3-folded white *dhoti* for householders and non-folded white cotton for renunciates. The top of the body is covered with *uttariya* or long white scarf. For married ladies colored *śārī* and for widows or single ladies white *śārī*.



Supporting bhakta 2 - The instance of the Gosvāmī (Sanātan) dressing as a fakir, and Mahāprabhu asking him to change his clothes should be enough to silence all significant doubts that clothing is not inconsequential. Though it is not inconsequential, it is not all-important. Is that agreeable to you, Pandit Ji?

Advaita Das - The point of the fakir is well taken. In short, spirituality is absolute. There is no lower or higher issue, no external or internal. Dress is not to be played down nor to be overstressed. *sevā sādḥaka rūpena siddha rūpena cātra hi.*

Vaiṣṇava - Since Vilāpa Kusumāñjali was written only a few hundred years ago it may not satisfactorily address the argument that the concept of covering the head is of non-Indian or non-"Vedic" (historically speaking) origin.

Advaita Das- The Lord is non-different from his śakti, so the śakti is also eternal. The Lord is non-different from his dress, so is his śakti non different from her dress.

Vaiṣṇava - Another question: are you sure that Vilāpa Kusumāñjali describes a *saree* going over the head?

Advaitadas: I found the following evidence for the veil in the Goswāmīs books -

avaguṇṭhana bhū-lekhau tathādho mukhatādayaḥ

“Covering the head with a veil is a sign of shyness” (Bhakti Rasāmṛta Sindhu 2.4.113)

ākṛṣya mugdham avaguṇṭhanam uttamāṅgād

“The *sakhīs* pulled the veil from Her head to comb her hair”

(Kṛṣṇāhnikā Kaumudī 2.54)

*hari api parivr̥tya tan nitamba
dyuti nihitekṣaṇa paṅkajo'vatasthe
vara-tanu-tatir apy atītya tad go-puram
avaguṇṭhanam iṣad asyati sma*

“As Śrī Rādhikā and Her girlfriends passed by through the town gate, their veils slightly slipped off their heads and Hari cast His lotus-like eyes on their effulgent buttocks.”

(Kṛṣṇa Bhavanamṛta 5.45)

*ālibhiḥ saha puropakānana
prānta vartma nihitāṅghri pallavā
hrī kṣapā kṣaya-vaśād avaguṇṭhanon-
muktam āsya kamalaṁ dadhe sphuṭam*

“When Śrī Rādhikā and Her friends placed their lotus-feet on the roads of the sub-forests of Yāvāt, their lotus-like faces began to blossom. This made their night-like veils perish as they opened them, dispelling the darkness of their shame. “

(Kṛṣṇa Bhāvanāmṛta 8.41)

Adding a date to the Purāṇas according to composition would not be right. Regardless of the date of authorship, the contents are timeless. The fact that I translated the Goswāmī Granthas in the 1980s does not make them from the 1980s.

Caitanya Bhāgavat proves the presence of the *dhoti* in *śāstra* –

Caitanya Bhāgavat Adi 6.64

keha bole,— "āmāra na rahe sāji dhuti "

Another said, "He always takes my flower basket and **fresh dhoti.**"

Caitanya Bhāgavat Madhya 2.44

*ninḍaye vastra karo koriyā yatane ;
dhuti-vastra tuli' karo dena ta' āpane*

He carefully wrung out the water from someone's wet cloth and handed someone else his **dhoti.**

Caitanya Bhāgavat Madhya 2.57

*sāji bohe, dhuti bohe, lajjā nāhi kore';
sambhrame vaiṣṇava-gaṇa hāta āsi' dhare*

He did not feel shy as He carried their flower baskets and **dhotis.** The Vaiṣṇavas, however, respectfully caught hold of His hands in order to dissuade Him.

Caitanya Bhāgavat CB Madhya 2.286

*nānā māyā kori' tumi āmāre vañcila!;
sāji-dhuti-ādi kori' sakali bohila!*

"You have deceived me through various illusions. You have even carried my flower basket and dhotis."

Supporting bhakta: "They say that it's because of local customs Mahāprabhu wore local clothes, right? But He is Bhagavan himself, and He is Nitya. Why he chose Bengal and not California then? It is said in *śāstra* that the Lord is coming in His eternal form

and His dress and associates are not material - *kṛṣṇa varṇam tviṣākṛṣṇam sangopāṅgāstra pārṣadam*: He is coming in His eternal form: so, how does His eternal form looks like then?“

Advaitadas: “They argue Kṛṣṇa could wear blue jeans and mobile phone. There was a riot around Banke Bihāri Temple about this in 2006. In the 12th canto of the Bhagavat all clothes and ornaments of Kṛṣṇa symbolize something; the Kaustubha gem is all the *jivas*, f.i. How can you call this local and temporal custom then without being a complete *māyāvādī*?

The conclusion is that - **DHOTI IS FULLY SPIRITUAL** because Bhagavan Himself wears it. *rāgānugā* means following *rāgātmikā*: all *nitya siddha rāgātmikās* wore *dhōṭī*. Why should I challenge? It's so stupid.”

KṚṢṆA IS PLEASED WITH SĀDHU-DRESS –

In Śrīmad-bhāgavata (10.14.35) Lord Brahmā prays to Lord Kṛṣṇa – *sad-veṣād iva pūtanāpi sakulā tvām eva devāpitā* – “O Lord, although the witch Pūtanā came to kill You, she and her whole family were redeemed by You and attained You just because of her *sad-veṣa*, her dressing like a saint.”

Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī comments: *satām sad bhāva yuktānām vrajavāsiviśeṣānām dhātrī janānām veśāt lebhe gatim dhātryucitam* - “She wore the dress of the saints, those with true *bhāva*, the nurse of the specific Vrajavāsī style and thus attained the destination of the nurses (as an eternal, liberated associate of Kṛṣṇa).”

Śrīla Śrīdhara Swāmī comments: *sad-veṣād iva satām bhaktānām yo veṣas tad-anukaraṇa-mātreṇa pāpiṣṭhā pūtanāpi tvām evāpitā prāpitā* – “Simply by imitating the dress of the saints, of the devotees, even the sinful Pūtanā attained You (Kṛṣṇa).”

Then what to speak of those who dress like devotees to actually please Kṛṣṇa?