

Ode on the Lungi

(For Baby and Shawkat Osman)

Kaiser Haq¹
University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Grandpa Walt, allow me to share my thoughts
with you, if only because every time
I read "Passage to India" and come across
the phrase "passage to more than India"
I fancy, anachronistically, that you wanted
to overshoot the target
by a shadow line
and land in Bangladesh

Lately, I've been thinking a lot
about sartorial equality
How far we are from
this democratic ideal!
And how hypocritical!
"All clothes have equal rights" –
this nobody will deny
and yet, some obviously
are more equal than others
No, I'm not complaining about
the jacket and tie
required in certain places –
that, like fancy dress parties,
is in the spirit of a game

I'm talking of something more fundamental

¹ Kaiser Haq is professor of English at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. He studied for his Ph.D. at Warwick University, UK as a Commonwealth Scholar. He was a senior Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and held a Royal Literary Fund Fellowship at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. A poet, translator, essayist and editor, Haq has published more than ten books, including six volumes of poetry and an edited collection of contemporary Indian poetry.

Hundreds of millions
from East Africa to Indonesia
wear the lungi, also known variously
as the sarong, munda, htamain, saaram,
ma'awaiis, kitenge. kanga. kaiki
They wear it day in day out,
indoors and out
Just think –
at any one moment
there are more people in lungis
than the population of the USA
Now try wearing one
to a White House appointment –
not even you. Grandpa Walt,
laureate of democracy,
will make it in
You would if you
affected a kilt –
but a lungi? No way.
But why? – this is the question
I ask all to ponder

Is it a clash of civilisations?
The sheer illogicality of it –
the kilt is with “us”
but the lungi is with “them!”

Think too of neo-imperialism
and sartorial hegemony,
how brown and yellow sahibs
in natty suits crinkle their noses
at compatriots (even relations)
in modest lungis,
exceptions only proving the rule:
Sri Lanka, where designer lungis
are party wear, or Myanmar
where political honchos
queue up in lungis
to receive visiting dignitaries
But then, Myanmar dozes
behind a cane curtain,
a half pariah among nations

Wait till it's globalised:
Savile Row will acquire
a fresh crop of patrons

Hegemony invades private space
as well: my cousin in America
would get home from work
and lounge in a lungi –
till his son grew ashamed
of dad and started hiding
the “ridiculous ethnic attire”

It's all too depressing
But I won't leave it at that
The situation is desperate
Something needs to be done
I've decided not to
take it lying down
The next time someone insinuates
that I live in an Ivory Tower
I'll proudly proclaim
I AM A LUNGI ACTIVIST!
Friends and fellow lungi lovers,
let us organise lungi parties and lungi parades,
let us lobby Hallmark and Archies
to introduce an international Lungi Day
when the UN Chief will wear a lungi
and address the world

Grandpa Walt, I celebrate my lungi
and sing my lungi
and what I wear
you shall wear
It's time you finally made your passage
to more than India – to Bangladesh –
and lounging in a lungi
in a cottage on Cox's Bazar beach
(the longest in the world, we proudly claim)
watched 28 young men in lungis bathing in the sea

But what is this thing
(my learned friends,

I'm alluding to Beau Brummell)
I repeat, what is this thing
I'm going on about?
A rectangular cloth,
White, coloured, check or plaid,
roughly 45X80 inches,
halved lengthwise
and stitched
to make a tube
you can get into
and fasten in a slipknot
around the waist –
One size fits all
and should you pick up dirt
say on your seat
you can simply turn it inside out

When you are out of it
the lungi can be folded up
like a scarf

Worn out it has its uses –
as dish rag or floor wipe
or material for a *kantha* quilt

Or you can let your imagination
play with the textile tube
to illustrate the superstrings
of the “Theory of Everything”
(vide, the book of this title
by the venerable Stephen Hawking)

Coming back to basics,
the lungi is an elaborate fig-leaf,
the foundation of propriety
in ordinary mortals
Most of the year, when barebodied
is cool, you can lead a decent life
with only a couple of lungis,
dipping in pond or river
or swimming in a lungi
abbreviated into a G-string,

then changing into the other one
Under the hot sun
a lungi can become
Arab-style headgear
or Sikh-style turban
Come chilly weather
the spare lungi can be
an improvised poncho
The lungi as G-string
can be worn to wrestle
or play kabaddi
but on football or cricket field
or wading through the monsoon
it's folded vertically
and kilted at the knee

In short
the lungi is a complete wardrobe
for anyone interested:
an emblem of egalitarianism,
symbol of global left-outs
Raised and flapped amidst laughter
It's the subaltern speaking

And more:
when romance strikes, the lungi
is a sleeping bag for two:
a book of poems, a bottle of hooch
and your beloved inside your lungi –
there's paradise for you

If your luck runs out
and the monsoon turns into
a biblical deluge
just get in the water and hand-pump
air to balloon up your lungi –
now your humble ark

When you find shelter
on a treetop
take it off,
rinse it,

hold it aloft –

flag of your indisposition –

and wave it at the useless stars

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