

Dress in Buddhist and Sikh Traditions

Dhamma vs Dharm. Buddhism and Sikhism are two noteworthy traditions stemming from South Asia that acquired prominence in Vedic India. Typically in popular culture, Buddhism is connoted with an ethos of asceticism whereas Sikhism is associated with a culture of war. These sentiments can be rationalized by investigating the conventional dress attire for adherents of these religious groups.

Interestingly enough, dress attire origins can be elucidated by the time period in which these traditions arose. One could hypothesize that dress functions as an important role in how religions customs are observed as well as what message it relays to others. After much academic reading/reflection by the author, distinct themes of each tradition surfaced by solely examining dress.

Notably, dress in Buddhism fosters focus on meditation, makes ascetics visibly unique and upholds *sangha*. However, in Sikhism, dress behaves as a response to oppression and sustains spirituality/ethicality all while portraying soldierliness. This academic paper will commence by considering dress in Buddhism employing a section from Dr. Bradley Clough in the book, “Sacred Matters: Material Religion in South Asian Traditions”. After, the author will review sections related to dress in Sikh traditions from “Religions of India: An Introduction” by Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby. By incorporating evidence from these academic works with the author’s personal interpretation, the reader will be able to thoroughly comprehend the purpose of dress in these religions and their symbolization to non-adherents.

To begin, “[Buddhist] Monks’ robes are one of the most important symbols of religious life” (Clough, 2015, 174). They “also constitute half of the “eight monastic ‘requisites’” (*ata-*

pirikara)” (Clough, 2015, 174). Traditional ascetic robes were meant to be unadorned and humbling to monastics. Ideally, they were to be made from bits of cloth found in burying grounds and dump areas. After cleansing and sewing these bits of cloth to form a robe, monks were urged to remain content (Clough, 2015, 175).

Furthermore, the Buddha found it imperative that monks remained physically comfortable. Discomfort was regarded as an impediment to attaining inner spiritual advancement and therefore *nirvana*. The rudimentary comfort of protection from the senses and pests was permitted specifically in the Buddhist text, *Majjhima Nikaya* (Clough, 2015, 176). This allowance is emblematic of The Middle Way that Buddha espoused whereby moderation in method is essential for spiritual evolution, a rather unique approach.

As a matter of fact, in relation to other peoples in primitive South Asian civilization, Buddhists sought to utilize their robes to appear unique, visually. Recall that Buddhism originated during the 5th century BCE. At this point, Vedic Hindu and original Jain traditions were extant. To proliferate their dogma and uphold their integrity as a novel faith, Buddhists were impelled to be unique. Robes were one physical article through which this aspiration manifested. Confirmation of this notion is presented below:

There is no specific rule specifying certain colors, but the texts show that robes were to be saffron or yellow, apparently for the sake of distinction, simplicity, and uniformity.

The Buddha and his sangha were very concerned with conversion, especially in the early phases of the religion, and so they did not want any poor behavior exhibited by other samanas [aka. sramanas] to be mistaken for Buddhist monks’ ways (Clough, 2015, 175).

Imaginably, the monastic *sangha*, or community, was integral in initial Buddhism to safeguard the canons and doctrines. Laypeople that supported the Buddha revered him exceedingly and he made a revolutionary pronouncement. “Then, at a defining stage of evolution of the community (the twenty-year point) (Vinaya Atthakathā [hereafter VA], 1119), the Buddha permitted monks to wear robes given to them by laypersons (*gahapativācāra*)” (Clough, 2015, 175).

After the Buddha’s decree, a fascinating incident ensued whereby laypeople furnished robes to reap merit and within one day the *sangha* accumulated several thousand robes. The virtue gained for laypeople was supposedly equivalent to the great Mount Meru (Clough, 2015, 180).

However, the declaration’s influence masked into something else entirely. Monastics and the laity formed robust relations which ultimately culminated in robe bestowment ceremonies. The historicity for these relationships will be demonstrated in the subsequent paragraph.

To clarify, Buddhism originated in a tropical climate where seasons were either rainy (monsoon) or dry. During the rainy season, ascetics became nomadic. Therefore, interactions between laypeople and ascetics were challenging to foster. However, when the rainy season ceased, monks lingered in one place. This permitted monastics to offer sermons dependably to the laity who in return contributed food. As the rainy season approached, the laity would present robes to monks. As anticipated, laypeople obtained noble virtue by learning from and facilitating monasticism (Clough, 2015, 176-177).

By way of contrast, the author will examine dress in the Sikh *Khalsa* tradition. In elucidating the conception of *Khalsa*, the reader will ascertain information about the history of

Sikh traditions. How *Khalsa* attire invoked symbolism from a theological perspective and what can be gathered about their external relationships will be included in the brief history presented subsequently.

The *Khalsa* tradition within Sikhism developed from persecution by the Mughal Empire, leading to the decapitation of the ninth guru of Sikhism, Guru Tegh Bahadur. During the guru's life, Sikhism in rural regions bolstered, instigating the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb to bear notice. Guru Tegh Bahadur was summoned and executed when he refused to convert to Islam. His descendant, Guru Gobind Singh, "resolved to impose on his followers an outward form that would make them instantly recognizable (Mittal and Thursby, 2018, 144).

In this case, possessing followers with an outward form that are recognizable distinguished the *Khalsa* and made them intimidating. To accomplish uniformity, *Khalsa* Sikhs retain uncut hair (*kesh*), a comb for their topknot (*kangha*), a dagger/sword (*kirpan*), wrist ring (*kara*) and breeches (*kachh*). To conceal the uncut hair, male *Khalsa* Sikhs wore a turban, one of their most noticeable contemporary features. The amalgamation of all these required pieces of attire generates the *Khalsa* dress (Mittal and Thursby, 2018, 145).

Incidentally, one could envision that clutching a sword at all times may incite others. However, the impetus for sword-wielding is that adherents of the *Khalsa* ought to be equipped, keen and capable to preserve their tradition against an arduous foe in the Mughals in that period of religious turmoil. Unsurprisingly, the establishment of this martial *Khalsa* group triggered supplementary conflict with the Mughals (Mittal and Thursby, 2018, 145).

From the evidence presented, one can say that *Khalsa* Sikhs wish to protect themselves against foreign entities, which can occasionally exacerbate tensions. Importantly, Sikhs seem to

exist as an autonomous community that strikes only if they have been struck. This is to say they do not rely upon belligerency.

The dress of the *Khalsa* is intended unambiguously to be characteristic of spiritual and ethical cleanliness. The *kesh*, *kangha*, *kirpan*, *kara* and *kachh* represent spirituality, discipline, divine grace, allegiance to the Guru and moral restraint, respectively (Mittal and Thursby, 2018, 151).

This convention of dress conserving *Kalsa* Sikhs moral and spiritual inclinations is interesting. This is not a pattern necessarily out of place in other religions. Rather, it is the degree to which guidelines of garb are followed that is remarkable in the *Kalsa* Sikh faith. Subjectively, it seems that having tangible objects (articles of dress) to remind Sikhs of their ultimate goal assists adherents to maintain conformity while inculcating orthodox dogma.

At the end of the day, the causes for why Sikhs matured to prominence and their connotations with weapons offers an impression of the martial facet that belongs to the faith.

To conclude, dress functions imperatively in the practice of Sikh and Buddhist traditions while also imparting to outsiders what the religions perceive as the correct approach for coexisting with others. Specifically, dress in Buddhism fosters focus on meditation, makes ascetics visibly unique and upholds *sangha* whereas in Sikhism, dress behaves as a response to oppression and sustains spirituality/ethicality all while portraying soldierliness.

Bibliography

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