Cultural Intoxication?

SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

Dhaka is a happening city with slowed down mobility. This is not a contradiction in terms but a reality on the ground. One could almost say, considering the still-photo-like congestive traffic, that in a queer way, it's an exciting metropolis as well. The glimpses of horizontal cityscape are varied. Ranging from three to foursome passenger-loads on rickshaws through two-wheeler pedaled vans with the riders sticking out their feet precariously, to a motorbike whizzing past you brimming with a whole family riding it, you can expect to see almost anything. The riders' apparent hilarity disguises the sheer demand of life that keeps exacting every ounce of their energy.

The basic character of Dhaka is inclusive and accommodative to all classes of people so that the cityscape is a mixed spectacle. But lately coming as a side show to the mainstream is the prohibition of entry to Baridhara by lungi-wearing rickshaw-pullers. They were asked to put on trousers to be allowed in, and we saw many of them had but did that really significantly spruce up the scene in any way? Given the same skeletal malnourished bodies, barring exceptions here and there, they are a lot for whom imposition of a dress code can only be seen as a cruel joke. Besides, it hardly makes any marked difference to their demeanor.

The authority at Baridhara, or shall we say, the DCC basically announced the exclusivity of the area with an elitist overtone at that. The world has come a long way since the British days' exclusive zones, clubs and even certain streets forbidden to 'natives'. The discriminatory tale had been long enough including South African apartheid and segregation of black Americans which thankfully have been reversed to the benefit of mankind.

Of course, lungi is a symbol of our culture and as such forcing a particular section of people to discard it in a certain area is assailable. For all we know, foreigners love the rickshaw for its non-polluting quiet plying characteristics, a relief amidst a high decibel cacophony and toxic environment we are living with. Whether Baridhara inhabitants' preference for trousers to lungis was actually voiced by them, or it was a unilateral decision by the authority, your guess would be as good as mine. But one thing is for certain that the sensitive among them including particularly foreigners couldn't have demanded it since they don't believe in diktat as far as people's choice of dresses goes.

One could say why create a mountain out of a molehill? True, we would like all our service operators to be as smart and presentable as they can be. Trousers perhaps cost less than lungis -- thanks to a thriving second-hand clothes market. But the issue here is actually two-fold: One of freedom of choice and the other of uniformity.

If the lungi was inconvenient for peddling rickshaws so could be the trousers whose ends get stuck in the gear chains. Perhaps the ideal wear for them would be a three-quarter *patloon*.

Interestingly, the taboo on lungi was looked as a cultural aberration by a group of young educated protesters who all converged at a point clad in lungi and reveled in and celebrated the dress. They made a cultural, and one would have thought a fashion, statement. For all you know, "brightly coloured cloth (cotton or silk) as clothing (a skirt or loincloth or sash etc.)" has been a customary part of attire in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Myanmar.

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.



PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS