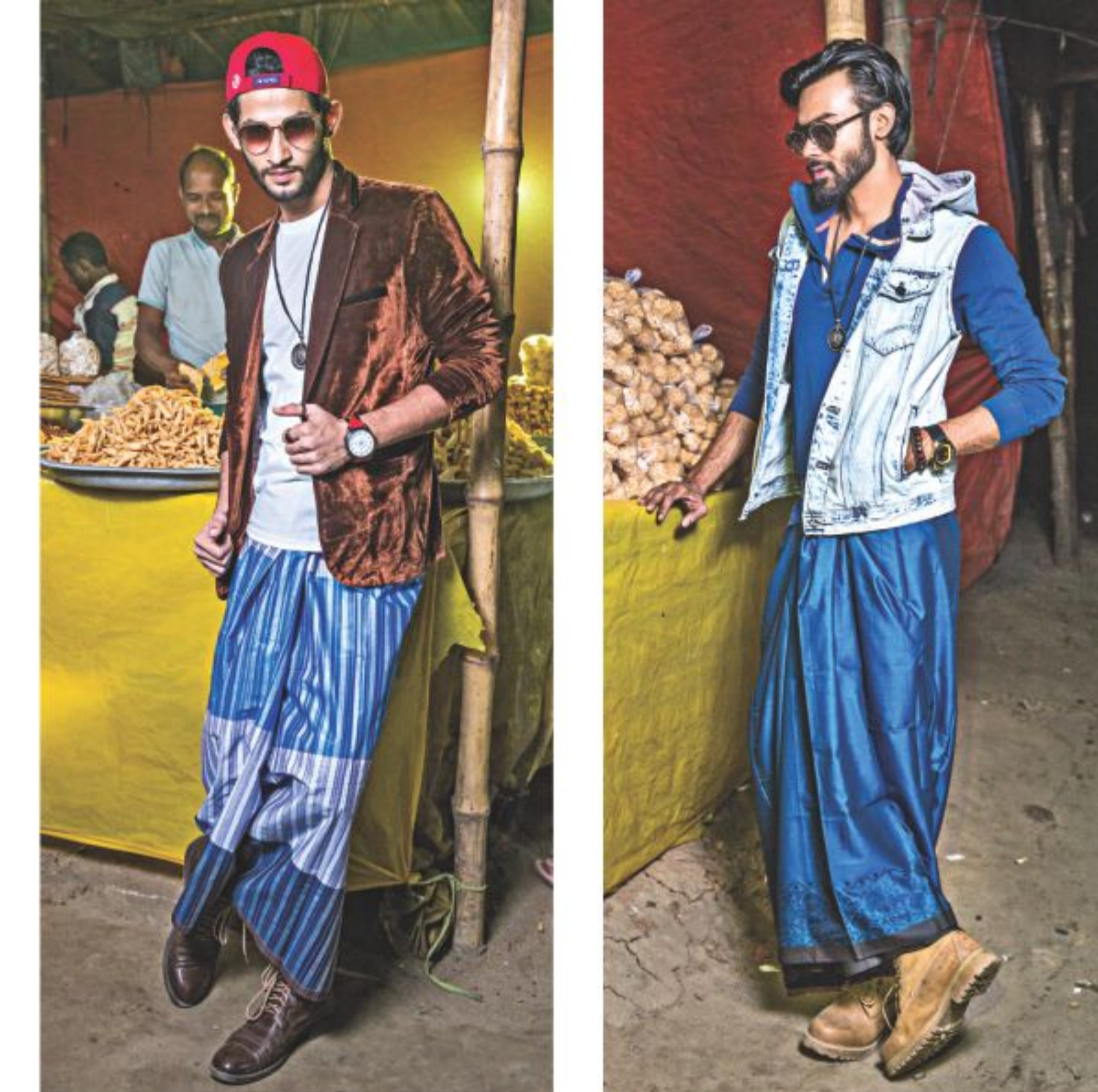


Lungi

A perk of working in the media is that once in a while you get the gem of a chance to witness (and enjoy to the fullest, if I may add) the giants of a field engage in a battle of words. If you thought pointless debates only air on primetime TV, think again. Let's not name the people concerned, as it may stir a controversy, but when 'lungi' is the topic of discussion one cannot avoid a little commotion.

LIFE STYLE



WACKY AND CHILL

So you have decided to don the lungi, or rather wrap yourself in it. Let the haters call it what they want, but you are one step ahead on your fashion game.

Hopefully you are now pretty sure of the right knot and the correct side of the wrap. You can take the stairs and tackle the dreaded gust of wind.

Now it's time to take to the streets. You read that right, the streets! Start with your friendly neighbourhood walkways. Visit the 'parar mudir dokan' for your hand-wash or your favourite tea-stall while wearing the lungi. Sure you will get a few looks, especially if you have that air of cool hovering over you, but they will get over it.

Once that's covered, try to go for an event or two. Wear those heavier ones with embroidered borders and you are bound to turn most heads!

Thinking that there is no space for self expression in that simple wrap and knot? You are so very wrong! Every lungi wearer's wrapping and knotting are as different as their fingerprints. Let your friends wear their designer jeans; make your own look with this comfy wrap.

I rested comfortably on the back of the chair at the auditorium, as a live streaming of 'epic rap battles of history' unfolded before me. And interestingly enough, it got me thinking. Hmmm...tradition; comfort; assimilation of culture; lungi!

Whether it was the guilty pleasure of opting for a comfy wrap after a hot shower, or a direct result of wayside 'chotpoti-fuchka' that took you in and out of the loo 20 times in 24 hours, every 'deshi' guy has donned this 'two-yard-of fabric' at some point in their lives.

As far as regular attires are concerned, I personally maintain a safe distance from the humble lungi. A childhood experience of waking up in the morning with a lungi covering the face was traumatic enough.

Yet, I too vouch for the versatility of the lungi. Whenever I travel, a lungi is the first thing that goes into my luggage, as I remain pragmatic and try to keep in my mind— In Case of Emergency!

Cotton fabric in a monochrome shade — this myth dissuades most Bangladeshi men (and women — think sarong, a close cousin) from treating lungi as a symbol of style. Fashion is passé but once you learn to embrace style, the possibilities becomes endless.

Having said that one must acknowledge, tackling lungi is no mean feat. Anyone visiting a traditional village may have seen any average Joe lift his tattered lungi, pass it between his legs, neatly tuck it into the back of his waist, and then using nothing but his bare hands and feet, effortlessly climb the tall palm tree to reap the fruit. It happens within a matter of minutes, and seems deceptively easy.



Frankly, for all Dhakaiites, such a life-hack might come in handy— stuck in a water-logged street? Just lift and wade through.

Simple!

Taking a different tangent, wearing a lungi is an art and the ways of wearing are seemingly endless...

YouTube is always there to come to the rescue. Yet, the safest bet is to lower that huge ego of yours, and surrender. No matter how fashion savvy you think you are, or your girlfriend says you are, your father simply has the upper hand with his years of experience.

A practical demonstration saves wasted hours sitting in front of the computer or in front of the mirror. For those not fortunate enough to have access to skilled lungi wearers, start with a cummerbund, or belt! Any belt. Wear the lungi and fasten that leather belt on top. Walk around and get the feel of it.

Once you can walk freely without additional support of a cummerbund/belt, you might try some more, 'advanced' techniques. Your old man's experience will come in handy once again.

Do not- I repeat, DO NOT, try to sleep wearing a lungi until and unless you have mastered the skill and feel comfortable wearing it when you are conscious, and wakeful!

As far as fashion is concerned, it seems lungis are back

with a vengeance. I wonder what did the trick — the catchy item song, the ode to the South Indian legend, or Shahrukh's and Deepika's charisma. Designers are now pondering over a possible revival of this garb. It took a while to find this quote on the culture of ancient civilisations of this region — "...men wrapped a length of cloth around their waist, and passed it under their armpits, returning it to drape the torso, hanging to the right."

Sounds familiar? I am sure it does.

From archaeological evidence spread across the sub-continent, it is quite clear that the concept of an attire resembling the lungi was always here. Lungi never really faded for the common man and no matter how much we undermine its potential in the 'deshi' context, this timeless garb has crossed oceans and reached almost every corner of Asia and beyond.

From a South Indian heritage piece, the lungi has now been revamped and reinvented, 'assimilated' in every culture it has reached. One may not be quick to understand the lineage, but it is there and has been so for millennia.

For most 'nouveau Bengalis' who remember their roots only on April 14 by wearing a lungi and a matched panjabi — it may seem like an ideal way to express your Bangaliana, but this is your reminder that it is as cheesy as a Michael Learns to Rock number! You cannot possibly

hide your inner being — if you are desperately trying to fake an image you are not comfortable in, be warned that the 'Bengali-for-a-day' is a vibe that can be picked from miles away.

Although a dying breed, you will find some millennials who wear the lungi with elan. This endangered line of homosapiens will vouch for the benefits of the lungi. This is downright flirting with being charged of committing fashion crime, but there are people who have tried it, and executed it in perfection.

Let me take you back to that evening at the auditorium after this sprawling thought process. It was quite astonishing to see a leading expert on the culture and the heritage of Bangladesh, and the subcontinent in general, being cornered by her peers for standing up for the lungi! If specialists and industry experts do not have an open mind regarding the lungi as a potential symbol of Bengali culture, one can easily fathom why it has not become part and parcel of mainstream Bangladeshi fashion.

So where do we stand?

While efforts are underway from all quarters to bring back the rich textile heritage of our region, for reasons unknown, the lungi remains a long-forgotten heritage. It lingers almost at the brink of extinction amidst neglect, distorted cultural values, and a desperate attempt to be

what we are not. Speaking from experience, I have been denied access to 'elite' establishments in Bangladesh for wearing the wrong footwear. I shudder at the thought of even trying to enter such places clad in a lungi!

Still the dress of choice for most Bengali men, lungi is somewhat alien in its own land. It was not long ago that authorities put an embargo on rickshaw-pullers wearing a lungi at a certain upscale locale north of downtown Dhaka. Although the reasons behind such a scheme was never clear, the ban was eventually lifted due to mass outcry.

How much of our mindset has changed since? If I may dare compare — and I shall not go beyond our borders — if the likes of Joya Ahsan can walk the red carpet at Cannes, head high wearing a sari and represent us, our nation, on a world stage, can we not do the same clad in a lungi?

At a time when every society is facing a confluence of culture, and 'going with the flow' seems like the only way to go, perhaps being ordinary is the greatest fear. But who defines what is ordinary?

That is a point to ponder.

By Mannan Mashhur Zarif

Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel

Models: Rabbi, Rupom, Maruf

Wardrobe: Amanat Shah Lungi/Personal

Styling: Sonia Yeasmin Isha