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Opinion of Indians on British Traditional Graduation Dress - A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Ceremonial Robes or the Academic dress is a traditional form of clothing for academic settings, mainly for some secondary education, worn mainly by those who have been admitted to a university degree or similar, or hold a status that entitles them to assume them e.g., undergraduate students at certain old universities. This research aims to perceive the evolution of ceremonial robes through review of literature, to study the acceptance level of the delegates in wearing ceremonial robes, to qualitatively analyze the preferences of the delegates on colors, feel, and comfort of robes and to suggest the findings of study to the management authorities of the universities and to the government of India. Qualitative research method is used for the study and 15 participants were involved for the in-depth interview. Judgmental sampling is used for the selection of samples. It is found that the feel of wearing a robe is a matter of achievement with immense pride. As the robe's main discomfort is loose-fitting, the participants would like to prefer personalized robe with standardized sizes. The existing black color of the robe is not preferred instead they like to have vibrant colors with new styles. Additional components for the functional use of the wearer, receives innovative response from the participants. As a token of reward for the rank holders, grades ribbons are suggested, and proper maintenances of the robe adds superior value to the wearer.

KEY WORDS: Ceremonial Robes, Qualitative research, Personalized Robes, Preferences.

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INTRODUCTION

Graduation robes are special attire worn by degree candidates to mark the graduation ceremony. Earlier the graduation robes were known as an Academic dress that contains gowns and hoods. The gowns were the cloak of medieval scholar and the hood was the head-cover. Literature reveals that scholars wore the long gowns to keep warm in un heated buildings “Since then its use on a daily basis has diminished. The robes are worn once a year, at graduation ceremonies often being referred to as ‘graduation robes, ‘implying they are not worn at other times”¹

The origin of robes dates back to 12th century when universities were taking form, even in this 21st Century the silhouette of robe remains Classic. The academic dress was first designed by Universities of Oxford and Cambridge by modifying the clerical dress of medieval period. Later an Academic Costume Code was established by various countries along with the specifications of pattern, color, material, trimmings for gown, hood and cap. As the wearing of robe became an important tradition, the graduates may possibly not have thought why these robes are worn. The query goes on, why do we wear a gown while completing this milestone?

In this context the Former President of India, “A P J Abdul Kalam preferred an "Indian" dress to replace the British era "heavy gowns"². In the year 2015 he once more urged the educational Institutes to quit the British gown and to have own dress code for convocations”³.

Following the “advice of the former president of India, Ambedkar University at Lucknow has done away with the colonial legacy of black gowns as convocation outfits. Instead, graduating students wore a "cream-coloured" gown without caps”⁴. The Uttar Pradesh Governor Ram Naik, has asked all the universities in the state to shun the “colonial era” ceremonial gowns during convocations, use “Indian attire” as “a real tribute” to former President Dr A P J Abdul Kalam⁵.

Some questions were raised by Ram Naik, Governor of Uttar Pradesh “Why the hooded academics and caps were a must wear during convocation ceremonies. What should be their colors and whether the time had come to re-design the graduation robe”⁶. “Reminiscing how the practice of using silk material in ceremonial robes started in Indian institutions, a former Vice-Chairman of TN State Council for Higher Education, A. Ramasamy, said when the British started universities in India they followed their model of functioning, including the convocation robes, after which all Indian universities

followed the same pattern”⁷. The traditional, heavy, velvet convocation gowns which are worn today by Chancellors and Vice chancellors were originally designed to keep the cold away in Western countries⁸. The black gowns are worn by graduates, as these gowns are woven with man-made fiber they “feel very hot without air-conditioned hall” said an alumnus of Banaras Hindu University⁹.

Hand spinning and handloom weaving was promoted by Mahatma Gandhi as part of the country’s independence movement against colonial British rule, as a protest against industry-made cloth imported from Britain, which almost ruined India’s vibrant textiles industry¹⁰. In conjunction with the Prime minister of India Narendra Modi considered to revive the handloom and to improve the earnings of the handloom weavers, the use of handloom fabrics for ceremonial robes would be a sense of pride of being Indian also be more comfortable in the hot and humid weather”. With this intention the University Grants Commission (UGC) has asked all Universities in the country to use handloom dresses for occasions such as convocation to revive the handloom industry¹¹.

Even before the UGC circular a number of Universities had started to add ethnic ‘embellishments’ to the Western convocation garb. Some students move forward for this change, whereas some oppose the compulsory *uttariya stole* known as *angavastram* in southern India where it is traditionally worn by Hindu priests said by a Christian student. The parents on the other side preferred western style¹².

Many Universities and Institutes are experimenting with colorful and vibrant Indian attire, handloom khadi fabrics, *chickankari* embroidery of Lucknow, and trying to incorporate institute Logo in *Pochampalli* weaves.

With these existing issues, the researcher proposed to investigate and develop grounded theory by qualitative study with the following objectives.

The research aims to perceive the evolution of ceremonial robes through review of literature, to study the acceptance level of the delegates in wearing ceremonial robes, to qualitatively analyze the preferences of the delegates on colors, feel, and comfort of robes and to suggest the findings of study to the management authorities of the universities and to the government of India.

METHODOLOGY

This research follows Qualitative Research, which is primary exploratory research and is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. Qualitative Research provides insights into the problem or helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research. As this type of study was being the foremost, a study was initiated with 15 participants for the in-depth interview.

A grounded theory study, interpretations are continually derived from raw data. The story emerges from the data. The researcher begins with a broad topic, and then used qualitative method to gather information that defines a research question. The researcher then followed the process of developing themes from reading the text by coding specific examples of where respondents mentioned common things. Resistance might be a common pattern emerging from the text, which may then become a topic for further analysis.

Selecting a sample based on your own judgment about which unit are most representative or useful is called purposive sampling. The researcher used his own judgment in selecting the sample members. It is sometimes called as judgmental sample¹³.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the Interview transcripts revealed the following main themes

Feel on wearing the robes on graduation day

All the participants expressed very positive attitudes toward the feel of wearing the robe on graduation day. Almost (67 %) of the participants expressed that it takes pride in wearing the robes.

A variety of other reasons were offered like it is a matter of sense of achievement of wearing the robe, it is mandatory to wear, the importance and protocols behind wearing the robes, there is definitely lot of discomfort making the wearer go restless as a student wearing the robe, it's not pleasant wearing the robe, it gives confidence, it's a sense of honor, it's a matter of pride however; expression of dislike of the robe due to the ill-fitting performance of the robe, it was happy, and it feels irritated as one part of the robe is tied to neck deeming it uncomfortable, yet there is happiness that comes with this as this is once in a life time opportunity wearing a robe.

Feel on comfort of the robe

Majority of the participants vented the discomfort in wearing the robe, the foremost being loose-fitting added with diverse reasons. As the fitting of the robe is loose-fitting, it is uneasy and uncomfortable. Fabric is very light weight and silky-smooth but produce heat and suffocating. Fundamentally there is something wrong with the design itself, the hood is not so much convenient, easy to be carried away with the breeze. The comfort depends on the length of the time for which they wear the robe and that means the robe is just fine given that it is only for a short time period. Few expressed their positive views that the robe is comfortable.

Desiring personalized robe

Out of total respondents 87 % responded “YES” to have personalized robe. The motivation to have such robes is good. They prefer the sizes to be par with their body dimensions or with standardized sizes. It definitely needs to be personalized since generalized style and size does no wonders, whereas appearance and comfort adds confidence to the wearer.

Preferring a new style

There have been few opinions, majority 80 % wished to change the existing style of the robe, among them 33.3 % reverts in need of changes with good fit, while 20% say it is not necessary to go for a new style. To have a style possibly with Indian Pattern emerged as a suggestion.

Opinions on changes in style & design and colors

Colors

Avoidance of bright colors is suggested and yellow is proposed to be replaced with some other color. The robes discriminating genders and the need for different colors other than black are opined.

Style and Design

Some find interest in simple designs. The length and width, in other words, the wearer dimensions need to be considered while designing the robes. Design like that of blazer are preferred by very few.

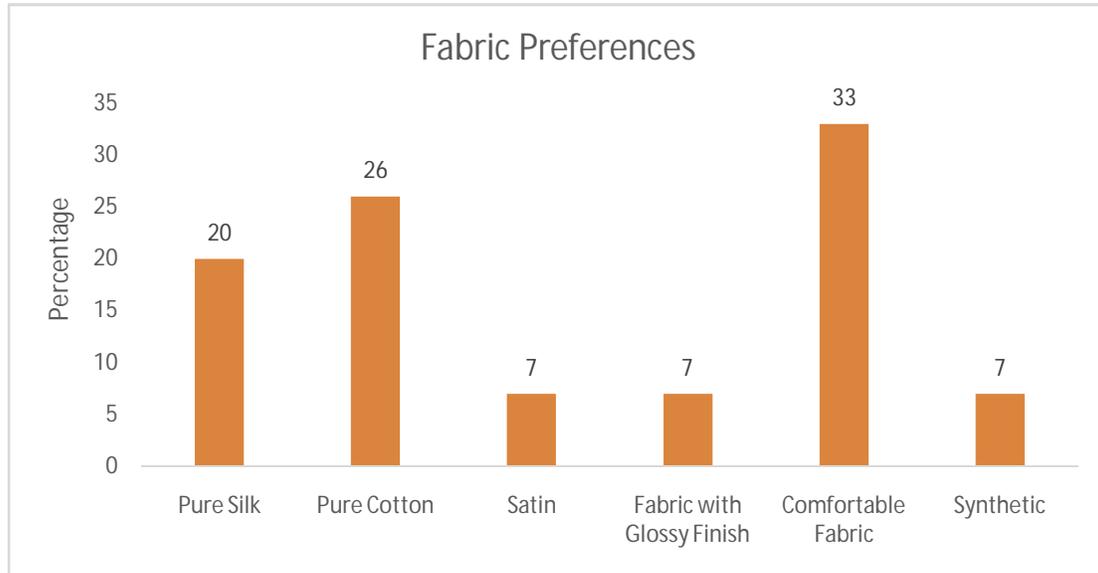


Figure 1 Fabric Preferences

Views on fabric

Among the respondents, 20% prefer pure silk, 26% prefer pure cotton, 7% Satin fabric, 7% any fabric with glossy finish, 33% prefer any comfortable fabric and 7% prefer synthetic fabrics.

Additional components in robe

The study reveals that 40% don't need any additional components, 6.5% Preferring Pen Holder, 20% Preferring Mobile holder, 27% preferring Inside Pocket and 6.5% preferring Cloth tape. Currently, mobile is a necessity more than being a luxury, interestingly based on the current trends, mobile holders and pen holders could be added to the robe. Participants feel that they miss the pocket, specifically an inside pocket in line to help carry few necessities, instead carrying in the hand all through the ceremony.

Logo/Name badge

It would be good to have an Indian touch to the robe by way of having an Indian logo such as Indian flags, Ashoka chakra, emblem which would mark as a sign of respect to our country. University logo or institution logo can also be attached to the robes which will act as sense of pride to the college and university. Having a name badge is also preferred that may gain some attraction to the wearer.

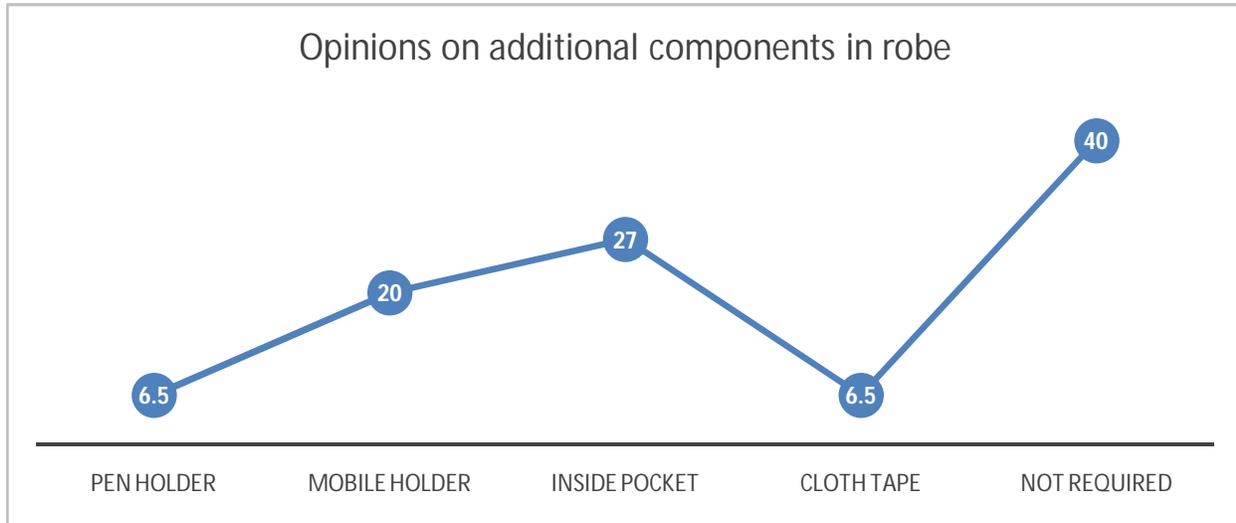


Figure 2 Opinions on additional components in robe

Grade ribbons

The rank holders deserve to stand out in the crowd given they have invested so much time and effort into going that extra mile and so having ribbons based on grades would be appreciable as they help recognize the extra efforts taken by various students. These ribbons come as self-explanatory elements that speak visually of the extra effort invested by these hard-working students and also will help us feed our sense of achievement and feels like we honored ourselves.

Maintenance /Finishes

Maintenance with the robe is of the biggest concern as with any other interviewees, hence anti-soil finish could be a great value addition. Maintenance of the robes to be focused with Sweat free finish, Wrinkle free finish, fast dry finish, Perfume finish and Maintenance free finish.

FINDINGS

It is from the analysis of the qualitative data we could find that the participant feel that it is a matter of pride, sense of achievement, mandatory to wear, protocols behind the robes and sense of honor on wearing a ceremonial robe. The participants vented the discomfort in wearing the robe, the foremost being loose-fitting added with diverse reasons such as uncomfortable, fabric is very light weight, it creates heat, suffocation and something wrong with the design itself. The motivation to have personalized robes is good only with the sizes to be par with wearer's body dimensions or with

standardized sizes as this adds confidence to the wearer. Majority of the participants wished to have new style of the robe with good fit and possibly with Indian Pattern. A change in style, colors and designs of the robe has been described. Avoidance of bright colors, especially black and the wearer dimensions need to be considered while designing the robes.

Fabric like Silk, Pure cotton and any other fabric with glossy finish which would be a comfortable fabric are preferred. Based on the current trends, the additional components like mobile holders and pen holders, inside pocket could be added to the robe in line to help carry few necessities, instead carrying in the hand all through the ceremony. Indian touch to the robe by way of having an Indian flags, Ashoka chakra, emblem which would mark as a sign of respect to our country or may be University logo or institution logs can also be attached which will act as sense of pride to the college and university or at least having a name badge is also preferred that may gain some attraction to the wearer. The rank holders deserve to stand out in the crowd and so having ribbons based on grades would be appreciable as self-explanatory elements that speak visually of the extra effort invested by various students. Maintenance of the robes to be focused with Sweat free finish, Wrinkle free finish, Fast dry finish, Perfume finish, Maintenance free finish that will add great value in addition.

CONCLUSION

It is to conclude that the feel of wearing a robe is a matter of achievement with immense pride. As the robe's main discomfort is loose-fitting, the participants would like to prefer personalized robe with standardized sizes. The existing black color of the robe is not preferred instead they like to have vibrant colors with new styles. As a sign of respect to our country, Indian flags, Ashoka chakra, emblem can be incorporated. Comfortable fabrics like silk and pure cotton may be used. Additional components for the functional use of the wearer, receives innovative response from the participants. As a token of reward for the rank holders, grades ribbons are suggested, and proper maintenances of the robe adds superior value to the wearer.

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