

The need to preserve Hindu tradition (originally written ~ 2009)

‘How much of the tradition should I follow?’ This seems to be a question confounding almost all Hindus of today. At one extreme, we have orthodox Hindus who view most traditions as necessary to maintain the character and identity of our people. At the other, there are the modern Hindus who consider issues such as dress habits to play a role far too perfunctory to be of any relevance to religion. In this article, I take up the case of a traditionalist and respond to four basic and related objections of modern Hindus with regard to the need to uphold Hindu tradition. My focus will be on dress like the sari and the veshti and sacred-symbols like the vibuthi and the pottu. These are the unmistakable identifiers of Hinduism that are fast going into disuse in young urban India. Underlying causes include employment in jobs that impose on workers to be “secular”; media that projects tradition as conservative and its absence as modern; and an education system that undermines the native viewpoints and glorifies the foreign. Whatever the reasons may be, the urban Hindu has thrown away his veshti for the jeans and arguably compromised his religious identity and that of his community. Among many who thus reject Hindu traditions, a self-righteous defense prevails in place of the acknowledgment of the need to correct oneself. The burden of such attitude is weakening traditional Hinduism.

The goal of this point-counterpoint article is not to establish the orthodox viewpoint beyond doubt but to make this a topic for serious discussion among Hindus. The trend of silent submission has become dominant among Hindus, as we are unsure of our own positions and of the relevance of these aspects for the well-being of our religion. Let me note that Sri Chandrasekharendra Sarasvathi Mahaswamikal of the Kamakoti Peetam, who was a beacon of light on Hindu dharma, was explicit that Hindus should abide by these traditions: “If we call ourselves Hindus, we must

bear certain external marks, outward symbols.” So we can be confident that these aspects of Hinduism have authoritative support from sages whose lives represented its highest ideals.

1. Let us start with a naïve utilitarian viewpoint: “Dress has little to do with deeper issues. The fundamental utility of a dress is to protect the body when necessary”.

a. The dress we wear is a statement of personal identity. Yes it protects us from the elements, but more, we are aware that people see us in the dress and hence project personality through it. The external dress- elements (including sacred marks, hairstyles, etc) of our religion are scientific in that they limit the projection of kama without compromising self-dignity. The wearer feels noble, pure, and the onlooker finds beauty in that nobility. (Of course, I am not referring to the modern fashion- designer’s versions.)

b. Our religious symbols have a “high purpose, that of purifying our inner life”. The ash-vibuthi represents the impermanence of the physical world and permanence of God. For women, the kumkum signifies Shakthi, marriage and motherhood. If we are culturally aware of the meaning and importance of such symbols, then they will play a great role subconsciously in stabilizing our personality and giving it spiritual foundation.

[Paramacharya says in a different context, "the Vaisnava namam(made of Tiruman or the sacred earth):it stands for truth that everything is of the earth and mingles with the earth, that all is Visnu. The ashes are the symbol of the Paramatman. When the body is cremated all that remains is the ashes which are the symbol of the eternal Brahman." <https://www.kamakoti.org/hindudharma/part20/chap16.htm>

The idea here is that when we burn this world with the fire of Knowledge, we realize the non-dual substratum Reality as Brahman; just like all objects burned by fire reduces to the non-dual Ash.]

2. The second objection undermines the relevance of traditions to spirituality. “Traditions are the function of times. They have little to do with real religion/spirituality. Life-styles and traditions can be altered as necessary.”

a. Religion is the vehicle of spirituality and tradition of religion. They are interconnected. Many of the Hindu traditions have grown out of the Vedic religion and reflect its essential spirit. Abiding by them aligns our lives with the higher aspirations of our religion. The personality of Hinduism is also glorified in these external features. When we think of a Hindu Goddess, we think of Her as wearing the sari and not pants. The sari is tradition and it is inseparable from Hinduism: when a Hindu woman wears the sari, she represents the entire religion and community.

b. The question “Why do we seek to alter?” is important. Typically, when such traditions are compromised by the younger generations, it is done for the fulfillment of kama (include lust, fear & shame) and artha (prosperity), with a mask of dharma (‘equality’/’freedom’) as motivation, and with absolutely no faith in moksha. This situation of our religion is parallel to giving the decision to go to school to five year old children and having to submit to their decision.

3. Even serious Hindu men will use the “bad-weather” excuse for not wearing the veshti. Therefore the third objection is along the

lines of “One needs to be practical and functional. It is no big courage to stick to an old tradition.”

a. Traditions are based on the injunctions of our sages and have deeper religious significance. Some like the dowry–custom may not be authentic, but others like wearing the vibuthi are. If our acharyas today endorse the latter, then we should abide by them as our Hindu dharma. Dharma is not about worldly practicality alone; it has a higher End in view that is looked askance at by the ‘functional’ world. Abiding by our dharma is also functionally essential to preserving the strength of our religion.

b. To the veshti–point, my answer is “wear two if it is cold, and put on your shoes!! ... By the way, are you wearing it then on clear summer days?” Following our dharma will involve struggle. We may not be perfect, but it is unadvisable to cover up our shortcomings with self–justifications! We no longer have such a cushion, nor are these excuses entirely sincere on our part: see 2b. A tradition when followed as fulfillment of Dharma or as an expression of Bhakthi becomes a spiritual workout. This is especially true when it is not “convenient” to do so.

4. The fourth objection: “What is more convenient and likable may be preferred without the loss of self or religious identity.”

a. These notions are usually impelled by the baser forces of human nature such as lust, fear and shame. Where our weaknesses find refuge, there is our convenience and stability of self. It is not convenience but fear and shame that has made us resolutely run away from many of our traditions and seek new

identity through those of others. The purpose of religion is to pull us out of such hypocritical and self-deluding life and direct us towards the Source of real stability – God or our inner Self. To achieve this Herculean task, the religion imposes discipline (dharma) upon the individual and society, abiding by which the individual cleanses the mind and ensures social stability. And discipline necessarily means inconvenience and hard work.

b. The other side, perhaps more relevant to the generations to come, is that Hindus in urban India are brought up from their very childhood revering the Western culture and ideology. Their likes and dislikes naturally align with those of foreigners. They ‘prefer’ from age 2 to have the hairstyle of their favorite western doll-character on TV, to not have the pottu, and to eat only with a spoon! Naturally, when they grow up, they tend to consider the millenniums-old traditional lifestyles as conservative and their own as free and progressive. This is of course a well-known problem behind this whole issue; its solution must be a *balanced* education that reinforces the Hindu’s cultural and religious identity with that of India’s *own* Hinduism.

Hinduism is addressing itself to the modern world and blending in with a global culture. This process should however happen without losing its inherent strength and character. To ensure that this is the case, we must recognize that the guiding centers of our religion have always been the sages and saints. A conscientious Hindu should therefore first ask the acharyas of today and find out which traditions are indeed important to ensure the stability of our religion and culture. If we decide on such issues as it appeals to us, we may end up hurting our religion in the long-run.