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MY TURN

I Dressed for Success

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When I landed in New York in the spring of 1959 by boat from Mumbai via Southampton, UK, I was dressed like an English sahib from head to toe. Proper suit and tie, crisp trousers and an English hat with wide rims. Now when I look at these photos of myself, I have a hearty laugh. I cannot believe how far I have come from those days. My classmates in the Engineering College at Michigan State University gently let me know that such formal attire was not necessary and also not very practical. Slowly I realized that America is a very informal country. I first started to wear my fancy Indian clothes at special parties and functions. The attention that I got was very flattering. Girls especially admired my comfortable silk kurta and churidar pajama with intricately handwoven tapestry-like designs around the buttons. At dance parties I wore my expensive sherwani and became the star attraction. I was the object of envy of other students, both Indians and Americans. In my second year in college, I started my own company to sell magazine subscriptions at educational discount rates to students and teachers. In time my business grew beyond the local college campus to encompass the entire country. I began to go to New York City to meet big magazine publishers to

negotiate good rates for my customers and, of course, the fattest commission for myself. My self-confidence grew partly because of my wearing of traditional Indian clothes. This gave me a special identity and set me apart from other magazine agents.

I followed Gandhian trusteeship principles in my business. I fought very hard for getting the best rates for my customers. Many times incentives were offered to me which went against my customer's interest. I resisted them fiercely. Eventually, virtually all 200 publishers came to accept my Gandhian principles and values as the best for everyone's interest. It was easier to make a convincing argument in favor of trusteeship to my own employees, suppliers and magazine publishers, in part because I wore traditional Indian clothes. Gandhian trusteeship principles, when practiced, offer a revolutionary way of transforming society and the whole world peacefully. Simply stated, they ask each one of us who is in possession of certain material and spiritual resources to use them for the benefit of all or, in other words, for God's work.

In my case, I do not recall a single incidence where I was discriminated against on account of my dress in more than forty years of residence in the United States. Often I am asked to bring with me from India loose-fitting kurtas by my American friends. My wife is always bringing with her saris and salwar kameez for our women friends. Whenever possible, we bring back khadi, handwoven and handspun cotton clothes. This gives an added satisfaction of helping millions of people who are employed in the khadi village industry in India.

In the last 20 years, I have started wearing almost 100 percent khadi cloth. Khadi material is cool in the summer and naturally warm in the winter and has a wonderful feel to your skin. Mill cloth, on the other hand, despite its smooth finish, does not feel good to touch. Wearing khadi has become fashionable in some circles in India, but khadi is more than fashion. Khadi is an ideal. Khadi is an ideal established by Mahatma Gandhi to give work to everyone.

Today, I heartily recommend to everyone from India and to children born here to Hindu parents to wear Indian dress. Assert your individuality and your independence. People will admire you and appreciate your assertion of your values through your dress. Even if you get some criticism from some, you will find that it does not matter. You will find it easier to practice your Hindu values and principles if your clothes clearly identify you as who you are!

Shrikumar Poddaris a social leader and businessman. He is international director of the "New Global Freedom Movement