

## Dressed for Success

"The Fabric of Independence" by Susan S. Bean, in *Parabola* (Fall 1994), 656 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012.

In the familiar photographs, Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948) is clad in only a loincloth and, sometimes, a *chaddar* (shawl). The clothes did not exactly make the man, but they certainly helped to make the man the Mahatma (great soul), writes Bean, chief curator of the Peabody Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.

Gandhi's choice of garb, she says, came only after much experience, some of it unpleasant, with the social and political meanings of clothing. Arriving in England in 1888 to study law, Gandhi wore white flannels—only to discover to his embarrassment that they were not worn in late September. Soon he jettisoned his Bombay-style clothing for an evening suit from Bond Street, patent leather shoes with spats, and a high silk hat.

In 1893 Gandhi moved to South Africa, where he "confronted his indelible Indianness," Bean writes. Advised that Hindus visiting the Durban court had to remove their turbans, Gandhi decided to keep his, but to balance it with a fashionable English suit. He was soon reminded that clothes could not make him a full citizen of the British Empire. Despite his sartorial splendor, he was thrown off a train to Pretoria a few days later for traveling first class.

When he arrived in India from England in 1915, Gandhi "was dressed as a Kathiawari (Gujarat) peasant, in *dhoti* [loincloth], *angarkha* (robe), upper cloth, and turban, the most thoroughly Indian of his costumes." His attire identified his region of origin, class, and religion. Precisely because it was so authentically Indian, however, it proved inadequate. Gandhi needed clothing that would symbolically transcend divisions among rich and poor, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim.

His final costume change took place in 1921, when he was the dominant figure on India's political stage. His program of non-violent noncooperation with the British included a boycott of British manufactures.



Gandhi, in his characteristic garb, arrives in England in 1931 for Round Table Conference with British.

*Khadi* (homespun) was scarce and expensive, so he urged Indians to follow his example and wear as little clothing as one decently could. As he later put it: "[Insofar] as the loincloth . . . spells simplicity let it represent Indian civilization." No longer the English gentleman, Gandhi was now the Indian ascetic and holy man, the Mahatma.

"Engaged in the simple labor of spinning, dressed as one of the poor in loincloth and *chaddar*," Bean writes, "this important and powerful man communicated the dignity of poverty, the dignity of labor, the equality of all Indians, and the greatness of Indian civilization, as well as his own saintliness." And when he visited the viceroy in 1921—and a decade later, attended the Round Table Conference in London and visited the king and queen in Buckingham Palace—his mahatma garb conveyed a new message of power.