

MORTAR BOARD AND GOWN

• By Dr. M.N. Buch

Early this month Jairam Ramesh, the Union Minister of Environment and Forest (independent charge), addressed the convocation of the Indian Institute of Forest Management (IIFM), Bhopal as the chief guest. During his address to the convocation he suddenly divested himself of his gown and mortar board with the remark that this dress was reminiscent of barbaric British rule and symbolises our slavery. In an act of immediate sycophancy Sant Ghasi Das University, Bilaspur, declared that in its convocation the graduating students would be dressed in kurta and pyjama in the case of gentlemen and sarees in the case of ladies.

Jairam Ramesh's action raises several questions. Was British rule barbaric? After sixty-three years of independence does wearing of a particular dress make us slaves? The French wear gowns at their convocations, as do the Americans. Is France a slave of Britain? Is America still a colony of Britain? Slavery does not come from one's dress. Slavery comes from a mentality where a university, in order to curry favour with minister, rejects a particular form of dress because the minister does not like it.

In India ceremonial robes are known as poshak, which is a term which I will use in this essay. The granting of a poshak by the ruler to a subject whom the Maharaja or Nawab wanted to honour in public durbar is an old Indian tradition. The Indian royal courts have always prescribed the dress to be worn when the ruler gave audience. Generally the prescribed dress would be chooridar pyjama or Jodhpur breeches, an angarkha or achkan, with the head draped in a safa or turban. Even today in Rajkumar College, Rajkot on Founder's Day the students assemble in chooridar pyjamas, achkan and turban. In the Padmanabhaswamy temple at Trivandrum worshipers have to wear an unstitched dhoti with bare torso. Temple priests throughout wear a silk pitambar and a short vest or a kurta. Catholic priests wear a cassock and Bishops wear a mitre. A prescribed ceremonial dress, therefore, is very much a part of our culture. To give another example, the British wear a dinner jacket at formal dinners, which has been modified by us to black closed colour coat and white gabardine trousers in the winter and a white cotton or silk closed colour coat and black light weight tropical material trousers in the summer. Both the western and the Indian dress are equally formal.

Immediately after the Bhopal convocation I had gone to Gwalior to address the Institute of Technology and Management and to spend some time with the Indian Institute of Information Technology and Management, of which I am Chairman, Board of Governors. I expressed my sympathy with Jairam Ramesh about the unsuitability of mortarboard and heavy gown under Indian climatic conditions. When the Rajiv Gandhi Technical University, Bhopal gave me a degree of Doctor of Science (Honoris Causa) I, too, had to wear a heavy velvet gown elaborately braided with gold frogging. I almost suffocated in my gown because it was a warm day. The students at both the institutions disagreed with me. They said that the gown that they wear at the convocation singled them out from other students who were not graduating and put them on a pedestal of honour and distinction. Their parents swelled with pride on seeing their wards in gown and mortarboard because to them this was a day of achievement by their children. Therefore, the students' body was unanimous in its view that a distinguishing robe or dress must be prescribed for the convocation because it lends the students pride. Seen through their eyes I could understand the students' viewpoint.

We can certainly redesign the prescribed academic dress. We can make it lighter, we can change its shape and colour, as also the manner of wearing it. However, we should not do away with the

ceremonial dress or poshak. Having accepted the invitation to be the chief guest at the convocation of IIFM Jairam Ramesh had no business to insult the gown, a robe of distinction, by casting it aside. He thus insulted academia, the solemn function of the convocation, the symbol of achievement and the students' body which had come forward to receive degrees and diplomas, dressed in an academic gown which symbolised their entry into the world of academic achievement. By throwing away the gown Jairam Ramesh insulted the entire community of educationists, the educated and the learners. This was a shame.
