

A little matter of lawyers and their black robes

Black may be chic, but many lawyers here don't like the black robe they have to wear as part of their profession, saying it is unsuitable for the Indian climate.

A group of lawyers led by rights activist Asim Sarode conducted a survey this month among advocates at the district court here to find out what they think of their black coat. Around 65.2 percent accepted the need for a change in the dress code.

'I would say the major reason for a change is the health hazard the black coat causes. In America and Europe, the weather conditions allow such a dress code. I would prefer a simple shirt with a black collar,' Sarode told IANS.

Around 55.6 percent felt the black coat was completely unsuitable for the tropical Indian climate. However, most appeared willing to go along with the current attire as 86 percent said yes when asked if the present dress code for lawyers was necessary.

Around 65.2 percent felt their dress code had merely become a status symbol.

R. Rajashree, a law intern, told IANS: 'Any colour but black would do. Regular formals with a black collar to distinguish lawyers from the public would do.'

Some lawyers voiced problems about wearing it in the rainy season. The coat is usually made of synthetic material and often leads to rashes.

Poorva Joshi, another lawyer doing her internship, said: 'We have had enough of the black coat, something more suitable to Indian conditions is the need of the hour.'

The history of the black coat dates back to 17th century England when robes adopted in 1685 were the symbolic of mourning for King Charles II. It was believed that gowns and wigs gave a degree of anonymity to judges and lawyers.

In India, the Advocate's Act 1961 makes it mandatory for advocates appearing in the Supreme Court, high courts, subordinate courts, tribunals or authorities to wear a dress that is sober and dignified.

For advocates, the prescribed dress code is a black buttoned-up coat, chapkan, achkan, sherwani and white bands with advocates' gowns, or a black open breast coat, white shirt and white collar, stiff or soft.

In either case, they have to wear long trousers (white, black, striped or grey) or dhoti. Jeans are excluded.

In courts other than the Supreme Court, high courts, district courts, sessions courts or city civil courts, a black tie may be worn instead of bands.

For women lawyers, the dress is a black full sleeve jacket or blouse, white collar, stiff or soft, with white bands, paired with sari, pants or salwar kameez, besides the advocates' gown.

The Pune district court has 300 lawyers.

However, the black coat does have its advantages. Neha Duhan, a lawyer in the making, said: 'The dress code is not merely a status symbol, but brings out discipline among lawyers and gives them the confidence to fight for justice. The dress code also differentiates the lawyers from other professionals.'

A young advocate pointed out that the black coat was of great use for carrying stationery.

(© IANS / India eNews)