

THE CHALLENGE OF DRESSING WITHOUT KNOWING WHERE TO GO

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A journalist at a war zone. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/ iStock

Back in the time when TV journalism had not invaded our drawing rooms, it was easy to recognise mediapersons, especially those on daily beat assignments, as they would mostly be underdressed. The popular, representative image of journalists, especially city reporters, includes the casual kurta-pajama and a cloth bag on the shoulder, meant to signify that reporters are not mindful of fashion while at work; they are only interested in what they are writing.

But a wrong attire can get embarrassing. How does a reporter decide what to wear to work? On any given day, a city reporter's preferred choice is easy and comfort wear for better mobility. However, not all assignments are pre-planned — a reporter could suddenly be asked to go to a crime scene, a slum area, or to speak to somebody high profile. And clothes are your armour: how you are addressed often depends on how you dress.

When I began my career as a reporter three decades ago, there were occasions when I regretted my day's attire, which I chose unknowingly. In the 1980s, there was a terrorist attack inside a Kali puja pandal at Chittaranjan Park in south Delhi. The next morning, which was the day of the festival, I went to office in a bright, new salwar-kameez. The chief reporter suggested I speak to one of the families who had lost most of their members in the shooting, as I speak fluent Bengali.

I distinctly remember the lane that led to the house. It was chock-a-block with mourners and I had to wade through the crowd. But I stopped midway. It was the colour of the moment that hit me hard. Everyone around me was dressed in white or in sober shades. I was like a fish out of water in my festive colours. It did not feel appropriate to go further. I did not want to draw attention, and moved away with the photographer. We couldn't afford to miss a story either, so we went to the hospital where two surviving members of the family had been admitted.

On another occasion, I walked into office for the night shift after attending a friend's engagement function. A reporter on night duty mostly has to keep a tab on crime incidents and file press releases. But as luck would have it, riots broke out just before midnight in old Delhi. I rushed to the spot. The police, the mob and curious onlookers had spilled onto the narrow lanes. Power supply had been cut off and the potholed streets were full of water from water cannons, a

standard practice to quell the mob. It was a chaotic scene in the dark and I cursed myself for wearing a sari to work.

In 1997, after the morning meeting, I was asked to meet a party member of Lalu Prasad's newly formed Rashtriya Janata Dal, following the fodder scam. I waited for him in a room in Bihar Bhawan. His gaze, when he walked into the room, made me instantly uncomfortable. I was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. He scanned me from head to toe and asked if I was married. Nervous, I retreated, but not before telling him to mind his manners and language. Thankfully, the bureau chief supported me in my decision to return.

To be dressed decently and comfortably is important for field reporters. A reporter can be pragmatic, empathetic or assertive in any outfit, but how they are dressed should not be the first thing that people notice about them. What reporters wear depends on their role. The newsroom style may have changed over the years, but versatility continues to be important. Reporters need to blend in on most occasions. And yet there are days, as I learned, when you are caught unawares.

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