

Khadi – A Sartorial Call for Mobilization

Menka

Assistant Professor, Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi, India

ABSTRACT: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had a knack for identifying the simplest of things which would have an impact on the masses. He knew that food and clothing mattered the most to the impoverished millions in India. The Dandi March was a clarion call to defy the salt laws. The Swadeshi enterprise with khadi as the dominant theme showed Gandhi's immense skill at effective mobilization. This paper would try to show how khadi was used by Gandhi to give a firmer shape to the Indian National Movement by involving all sections of the people especially women and children. Gandhi's attitude towards women comes out strongly in the course of this discussion. An attempt is also made to address the question of fashion.[1] It is important to note that Gandhi did not simply preach but also lived through example. Gandhi's life presents itself as a sartorial experience which he transmitted to the masses through khadi.

KEYWORDS: Cotton, Gandhi, Khadi, Mobilization, Swadeshi

I. INTRODUCTION

“India's freedom hangs solely by a cotton thread” – M. K. Gandhi

The 1920s saw khadi as one of the three most important goals of the Constructive Programme and the Non-Cooperation movement. The other two being removal of untouchability and Hindu-Muslim unity. Gandhi sought to right the Khilafat and Jalianwalabagh wrongs through the unique weapon of khadi. He believed khadi was the way to swaraj as it safeguarded both 'dharma' and 'arth'. [2] The natural question arises, Why Khadi? In an agricultural country, the main problems were food and raiment and cotton was easily available, so the natural choice for khadi. But more importantly, Gandhi used khadi as a medium to address a whole lot of issues-poverty, boycott of foreign goods, utilization of time, self-sufficiency, solidarity and compassion among people, involvement of women and children, a new aesthetic and fashion sense, and finally a non-violent challenge to the British government. Gandhi reasoned that 'swadeshim' would inflict losses on Lancashire and thus pressurize the government into a settlement of the Caliphate and Punjab questions.[3] The intention was to paralyse the government and compel justice from it.[4] Spinning in this sense was more of a duty and less of a livelihood.[5] The sartorial challenge was a non-violent weapon and yet a weapon which could be easily yielded by the teeming millions. The government had to be resisted collectively and no better force than khadi held the answer.

II. SUITABILITY OF KHADI

Gandhi felt that the gradual disappearance of the ancient art of spinning which was a supplement employment during the lean agricultural months for the poor peasants was the reason for India's poverty. The import of foreign yarn and clothes by the East India Company had killed this profession. Khadi which was easily made from thick yarn was but the obvious choice. The idea was to start the dual process of spinning-weaving and generate a demand for the new product to usher in an economic revival of this cottage industry. This revival would prevent sixty million rupees from being drained away annually and was thus a partial solution to India's poverty.[6] Khadi was to become the new national currency.[7] Gandhi's view on village industries is important as he sought to bring in self-sufficiency in each village through carding, spinning and weaving its own khadi. New mills were not a solution because it simply meant more dependence on foreign machinery, khadi was the only way. Besides mill made cloth was 'haram' for both Hindus and Muslims as it used 'manjhi' or a paste for glazing which had a little fat either from beef or pork.[8] Fat was also used in oiling all machinery. Khadi was the insurance against famine which was the biggest threat to a country like India.[9] Thus, Khadi met all the qualifications on economic, religious and moral grounds.

III. KHADI - AN EQUALIZER

Khadi served a greater purpose with the involvement of every Indian in this enterprise. The aim was to use it as an equalizer, a symbol of empathy and identification. The idea of trusteeship and seva or service was inherent in the call to spin, weave and buy khadi. While the poor spun for income, the rich spun to identify with the poor and to contribute their labour as service. People of all faiths, classes, castes and economic status were mobilized in the Swadeshi movement.

It is important to remember that this was also a platform to address the question of untouchability. The merchants were also called upon to stop dealings in foreign cloth and yarn. The movement began with the boycott and burning of all foreign goods or they being sent to Smyrna, Gandhi preferred the former. Congress Committees were given the charge for the organization of boycott of foreign goods, manufacture and distribution of khadi, inspecting and licensing the khadi shops and the popularization through personal example. But it was Gandhi whose charismatic appeal and sartorial sense led the masses to follow him in this unique experiment. The immediate aim was to secure a supplementary occupation to the starving millions and help them lead purer lives as each person contributed to the national cause. The final aim was to make the people fearless and self-respecting and bring about a moral regeneration. Gandhi glorified the innovator of the spinning wheel as more industrious and of a greater genius than Hargreaves who made the spinning jenny.[10] He called upon the weavers to return to their professions and use the hand spun yarn to weave. While spinning was easy to learn, weaving was an expert skill and so the responsibility of the weavers in the contribution for the swadeshi movement was all the more important. He also called upon the weavers of the untouchable caste to join in the movement and asked the people from other castes to work in tandem with them. The carpenters, blacksmiths, cobblers, farmers, and carder were all asked to contribute to the charkha and khadi.[11] Thus, different artisanal classes were brought in together. The Hindus, Muslims, and all other castes of weavers forgot their differences in the nationalist cause. No other activity could have secured the support of such diverse groups.

IV. WOMEN - STEROTYPING AND POLITICAL INITIATION

Women were the bulwark of the call for khadi production. Gandhi saw them as possessing greater soul-force than men and therefore better equipped to challenge the British might. Gandhi tried to restore the leisurely activity of spinning in each and every home. This would provide a sound basis of income for every household to fall back upon in case of a harvest failure or simply as a subsidiary occupation. Gandhi saw the 'honour of India's womanhood' [12] in this novel art. The women who had been hitherto exposed to the polluting atmosphere of the mills or the tenuous task of road repair would have an alternative safe source of employment. Gandhi invoked the analogy of Sita, Draupadi, and Damyanti[13] as idle women with incredible soul-force. Women were thus seen in the traditional ideal role mould as supportive wives and good mothers inculcating good virtues in their children. There is no denying that Gandhi brought the Indian women on the nationalist scene and gave them a voice even if it was from within the boundaries of the home. His appreciation for their constructive work was genuine. However, Gandhi's patronizing paternal outlook comes to the fore when he sees khadi as reclaiming the fallen women or the 'idle, quarrelling women'. [14] It is common knowledge that any woman in a traditional Indian household was almost always preoccupied with the domestic chores and especially the care of the children. Moreover, a majority of them took to prayer and meditation in their free time. So it is a little unfair to make a general statement on the character of women as 'idle' and 'quarrelsome'. At Rajahmundry Gandhi called upon the devdasis or the dancing girls to quit their current work and take to charkha to earn an honest and moral living.[15] He even went on to say that women who worked in the mills should not be married as very often they lose their chastity to the overseers.[16] This reeks of a sexist attitude as the onus to preserve one's honour is put on the women with absolutely no rebuke or condemnation for the overseers. At Barisal as well he asked the prostitutes to give up their 'unworthy profession' and take up the 'sacred work of spinning'. [17] But in this case he blames men for their role in driving these women to such a profession for the gratification of their desires. Thus, Gandhi has a paradoxical position on the honour of women. However, his move to mobilize women in this giant organizational enterprise gave them an active role as contributors to the freedom movement. It is thus clear that Gandhi provided the women with a platform in the Swadeshi movement and thus facilitated their political education.

Gandhi bemoaned women's inability to spin and weave without the active support from their male brethren in terms of the supply of carded cotton. He suggested that while the men, women and children should spin, the husband should hawk the goods. In the later stages he did appreciate the women going out to hawk the khadi products as it symbolized throwing off 'false modesty and false pride'; but served a caveat that they should be accompanied by 'ladies of position'. [18] He was thus concerned with the issue of morality and honour and Babu was thus showing genuine paternalistic concern. At Fyzabad he likened the use of foreign cloth to legs being fettered in slavery and 'women becoming naked'! [19] It is bewildering that only women should be imagined as naked when the foreign finery was adopted by both men and women equally. This shows a general tendency to judge any civilization or people by its women. Women or the position of women bears the brunt of upholding or degrading a civilization.

V. CHILDREN AND KHADI

Pure swadeshi meant the forsaking of all fineries as a common sacrifice by children, women and men alike. This could only be effective if the whole nation practised it and carried out a siege.

It thereby needed a reorganization, cooperation, and management to bring together the various processes and agents of manufacture and distribution. While the Congress was the leading organization in this process, Gandhi was at the helm of all affairs. His trips all over India to spread the 'music of khadi' were successful because he played it on his own body and thus there was a resonance of the chords of music from the masses. Gandhi's charisma attracted people from diverse backgrounds to this new experiment. Gandhi called upon the children to leave the government schools and ply the spinning wheel. He believed one year off from schools for this 'emergency duty' was a demand of the nation and also a kind of education. This one year of 'probation and purification' required them to spin for four hours and contribute two hours to literary education.[20] Self-sacrifice was also education and all the children were asked to spin and bring Swaraj within reach. The teachers were also asked to learn, teach and spin khadi and secure the 'same type of warp and wool (uchi and phunni) as in a foreign country'.[21] He laid down the age of sixteen for students leaving school without the permission of their parents.[22] The involvement of children who are the best examples of selfless, enthusiastic workers was an interesting mobilization tactic. Gandhi knew that this group full of zest could be the best contributors to his programme not only physically but also morally. Children were the models of purity and in this case a noble activity. But nowhere does he specify the minimum age for children who should take up the work. Also there is no differentiation made between the different age groups and their correspondent hours of work. Given the fact that spinning strains the eyes, this overlook on Gandhi's part seems egregious.

VI. FASHION FOR THE SOUL

Gandhi evolved a new fashion sense with khadi as a dress of culture, 'a mark of freedom and respectability'.[23] But this fashion was anchored in religion. He regarded khaddar as 'holy' and wearing it as 'a matter of dharma'.[24] He saw art, beauty and craftsmanship in khadi. There was a uniqueness in each length of hand-spun or hand woven khadi. Thus, it had a 'soul' and 'a personality of its own'.[25] It was therefore like a collector's item. He advised people to use their discretion and not to use a great variety of dresses. This was complicit with the demand-supply logic of economics. All through the Swadeshi movement Gandhi emphasized on this principle to regulate production and distribution. But this was also to usher in a new spirit of thrift. Clothing was for modesty and comfort. Pleasure to him was felt in the heart by doing a duty which gives the heart enough courage to put up with the coarsest cloth. On the other hand he also emphasized that the spinners should be educated to spin finer yarn. Gandhi promoted the love for simplicity amongst the Indians. He encouraged people to wear merely a loincloth or a langoti of khaddar if that was all they could afford. He asked the 'householder to revise his fashion sense', 'see art and beauty in spotlessly white khaddar' and 'appreciate its soft unevenness'.[26] He thus had a very pragmatic sense of fashion. His sense of aesthetics redefined the way people looked at and followed fashion. Gandhi's fashion was woven in a religious and accessible idiom which made the latest trend accessible to all and even gave moral gratification to the senses. Fashion was now not merely to please the eyes but to please the soul.

The drive for khadi production was a long term enterprise in sync with Gandhi's idea of village industries. He used the example of Scotch home woven and home spun tweed to indicate that hand spun and woven khadi could one day fetch a higher price than mill made cloth. Gandhi cited the examples of Aurangzeb who made his own caps and Kabir, a weaver who 'immortalized the art' in his couplets.[27] Foreign cloth was an anathema precisely because it 'denuded the people of their self-respect'.[28] But the people who wore foreign garments were not to be hated but seen as victims of a disease and the only way to cure them was through love and self-example. Gandhi converted every house into a boutique and every producer an expert in his own right.

Khaddar was to be an alternative to every other kind of cloth. Gandhi thus suggested using khadi for the manufacture of bedding, pillow covers, bed covers, towels, handkerchiefs, caps, shirts, school bags, hammocks, coverings of furniture, carpets, canopies, straining pieces and even under wears. The idea was to diversify into other goods as well so as to develop people's taste in hand spun and hand woven swadeshi goods. Gandhi even spoke against Indian clothes cut in European style. The Indianness in the product was of paramount significance as it was a personal hallmark of the Swadeshi movement. In the initial years Gandhi suggested the use of red dye for certain khadi products like carpets, upholstery and mattresses to make it more durable and less dirty. Even for gifts items and garlands the obvious choice was khadi and yarn. Khadi could also be used as padding for winter garments and blankets which could be removed during summers and the cotton changed thus proving to be more economical and hygienic. This shows that Gandhi had a keen eye for marketability; he could come up with multiple uses of khadi just as today we have the market doling out different and new goods. The crucial difference however is that he insisted on the bare minimum use of goods. Gandhi was highly appreciative of Sarladevi Chaudrani who revolutionized women's fashion by adopting khadi saris and blouses and Begum Mahomed Ali Sahiba.[29]

The problem of khadi weighing heavy was tackled by Sarladevi through the metaphor of a feather in acknowledgement of the toil of their poor brethren. Begum Sahiba wore a green khadi gown and led the khadi movement among the Muslim women. Gandhi suggested that people should bear the inconvenience of khaddar till the time finer cloth could be produced through practice. The volunteers had to be in khaddar uniform with badges. This was immensely helpful in the organization of the events by the Congress. It not only ensured discipline but also facilitated a smooth running of the programme. But even when not on duty they were expected to wear khadi which was a means of protest as they had taken the khadi pledge or vow. The peasants of Partabgarh were asked to wear only Garha cloth.[30] Most of the leaders wore khadi pyjamas, shirt and cap. The national school children also wore khadi uniforms. Gandhi thus brought in a mass-based fashion range which was cheap, durable and dignified. It is important to bear in mind that even today the khadi kurta, half-jacket and cap are worn by politicians or 'intellectuals' though it has come to signify very different meanings in the present context.

The school-goers were the models for making khaddar fashionable. Gandhi knew that parents would not refuse to wear cloth made out of the yarn spun by their children. He thus found the most effective mannequins possible. He also encouraged the government servants to don khaddar without becoming non-cooperationists. Likewise he asked the lawyers and their families to adopt khaddar despite continuing in their professions. He saw Lahore Municipality as an example where all the cab drivers and other such employees wore khadi cap and the department made utmost use of khadi. This is important because Gandhi-cap was seen on the likes of the tiffin-wallahs of Mumbai or the peons in most offices. This just goes on to show that this fashion did not die out. The Muslims willingly took to using khadi for the bier or shroud. Gandhi appealed to the Hindus to follow their Muslim brothers and use only khadi for adorning the idols. The adornment of Gods and Goddesses in all resplendent foreign finery was a major issue in his crusade for khadi and much to the chagrin of Gandhi was never quite successful.

VII. INNOVATIONS

New innovations were made in the charkha or the spinning wheel. The aim was to have both the warp and the woof hand-spun. For this purpose local carpenters were induced to make the revised designs. Competitions were also held to come up with better, efficient and at times aesthetically pleasing charkhas and thinner varieties of yarn. The dhangar weavers had taken to spinning wool and prepared blankets in colour. They also started following the Pandharpur and Dawangiri styles for which a new improved loom was required.[31] The spinning wheels at Hoshiarpur ranged from the painted variety to the ones with lathe handles, inlaid with ivory; mirrors; tinker-bells and some in exquisite craftsmanship. The exhibitions on khadi with the pandals made of khadi and the exhibits involving a whole range of khadi goods as also the process of making khadi was immensely popular. Spinning wheels varied in designs and sizes. While some were small enough to be carried in a box others were fitted with musical instruments. The picture of the charkha on the swaraj flag itself made of khadi was suggested to Gandhi and readily approved. While Gandhi maintained that the best form of charkha was the simple wooded one, it is strange how he never objected to the use of ivory in some of the looms. Yet it shows that utility and aesthetics went side by side and Gandhi was appreciative of both. The khadi bhandars or stores were organized to market the products. But people were also encouraged to go hawking in the absence of these stores. Gandhi insisted that there should be no pressure on the buyers and the sellers should be open to rejection as well. He also devised intelligent uses for khadi as in the case of khadi sacks for carrying one's shoes at the Ambedabad session of the Congress.[32] The sheer number of footwear which are lost in a public gathering made it a novel invention. Khadi had become so fashionable that a Parsi couple and almost all their guests wore khadi for their marriage ceremony.[33] The reason for adopting khadi could vary but the essential underlying factor remained that khadi was readily adopted by the masses and even today finds favour.

A Poona graduate suggested the popularization of khadi through theatres and Gandhi immediately took to it. He put the responsibility for the actors wearing khadi on the audience.[34] This would revolutionize public taste and usher in simplicity and natural beauty. This was an aesthetic challenge as the people were used to the gaudy attires of the actors. The beauty of the project lay in a new and actual appreciation of pure talent devoid of all embellishments.

VIII. CHALLENGE TO KHADI

The infiltration of spurious khadi in the market was a direct indication of the popularity of this new fashion trend. The abuse of khadi was the abuse of non-cooperation and was likely to surface. Gandhi called for a total boycott of shops which cheated in this manner. He asked the people to opt for unbleached khadi to ensure the authenticity of the cloth. He appealed to the mill owners not to sell cloth made from foreign yarn in the name of swadeshi. The people were warned against the swindlers and encouraged to use khadi made at the local level or look for a Congress stamp. He also suggested some basic precautions to test the spinning wheel. There were

also legislations passed in Gwalior against the wearing of what came to be called “Gandhi-cap”[35] and also in the prison at Fatehgarh.[36] This is a clear indication of the impact of a mere piece of raiment on the policy of the British. The British government felt threatened by this mobilization technique through which Gandhi led the masses behind him in unison. The regulations prove the might of khadi in the ‘shaking of the British manes’. The sale of caps in Bombay made of decaying foreign beige, foreign thread and foreign satin were decried as black caps by Gandhi. He suggested that a white khadi cap should be worn as this would be cleaner, lighter, comfortable and more dignified. He also spoke against the use of caps lined with leather which was not suitable for the Indian climate, and was against the Hindu notions of purity. The coarse variety of cloth could thus be utilized in making caps with the aid of local tailors or at home. Gandhi’s penchant for hygiene, purity and minimal wastage come out beautifully through this simple example. Rabindranath Tagore objected to the use of khadi as he felt that it would curb the intelligence of the pliers.[37] Gandhi justified his stance by citing the diversity of people including doctors, lawyers, philosophers, etc. who were plying charkha. He emphasized that it was an art form, a kind of body labour which purified the heart and the mind and the same message could also be traced to the Bhagwadgita. The Bihar government called for the boycott of Swadeshi and so did the European firms and railway companies. Gandhi argued that homemade goods were always cheaper than foreign products and that the non-co-operators should quit their jobs if they were not permitted the use of khadi. The palpable insecurity of the imperial regime was hooked on to Gandhi’s marshalling of the khadi regiment.

IX. CONCLUSION

Khadi meant spinning wheel to Gandhi which in turn meant a symbol of reviving prosperity, self-confidence, common bond between religions, chastity of womanhood, dignity of labour, the companion for the widow, honour for the ‘fallen women’, comfort for the untouchable and the platform to launch mass civil disobedience.[38] Thus khadi’s magic lay not in its name but in its virtues. Gandhi’s sartorial call for mobilization echoed through India. Just like the Pied Piper he played the khadi notes and men, women and especially children marched to his tune. He effectively wove a nation into a patchwork of khadi producers, supporters, and distributors. The beauty lay in the technique which saw absolutely no knots but only one firm singular thread running across. Swadeshi for Gandhi was not merely the means but also the ends.

REFERENCES

- [1] The word ‘fashion’ is used in a metaphorical sense to mean not just what was the dominant trend in the society but also a new aesthetic sense, a new definition of beauty and comfort.
- [2] Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, 1958-1982). (Hereafter, CWMG) Volume XVIII, p. 33
- [3] CWMG XVIII, p.87
- [4] CWMG XVIII, p.88
- [5] CWMG XIX, p. 242
- [6] CWMG XVIII, p.176
- [7] CWMG XXIII, p.77
- [8] Rekha Trivedi ed. *Gandhi Speaks on Non-Cooperation in U.P.* (Lucknow, 1998) Translation of a speech of Mr. Gandhi delivered on the 15th of August, 1921 at Aligarh
- [9] CWMG XIX, p.451, Gandhi worked out mathematically the proceeds from the sale of khadi manufactures from the affected areas to the rest of the country.
- [10] CWMG XIX, p.147
- [11] CWMG XIX, p.325
- [12] CWMG XVII, p. 331
- [13] CWMG XVIII, p. 320
- [14] CWMG XVII, p. 354
- [15] CWMG XIX, p. 509
- [16] CWMG XVIII, p.87
- [17] CWMG XXI, p. 94
- [18] CWMG XXII, p. 71
- [19] Rekha Trivedi ed. *Gandhi Speaks on Non-Cooperation in U.P.* (Lucknow, 1998) Translation of a speech delivered by Mr. Gandhi on the 10th of February, 1921 at Fyzabad
- [20] CWMG XIX, p. 317
- [21] Rekha Trivedi ed. *Gandhi Speaks on Non-Cooperation in U.P.* (Lucknow, 1998) Translation of a speech delivered by Mr. Gandhi on the 27th of February, 1921 at the National School, Lucknow
- [22] CWMG XIX, p. 352
- [23] CWMG XX, p. 491
- [24] CWMG XVII, p. 16
- [25] CWMG XVII, p. 340
- [26] CWMG XIX, p. 240
- [27] CWMG XVIII, p. 70
- [28] CWMG XVIII, p. 21
- [29] CWMG XVII, p. 339
- [30] Rekha Trivedi ed. *Gandhi Speaks on Non-Cooperation in U.P.* (Lucknow, 1998) Speech of Mahatma Gandhi on 29.11.1920, Partabgarh, garha is the local word for khadi
- [31] CWMG XX, p. 535-37

- [32] CWMG XXI, p. 144
- [33] CWMG XXI, p. 300
- [34] CWMG XXI, p. 448
- [35] CWMG XXIII, p. 35
- [36] CWMG XXII, p. 451
- [37] CWMG XXI, p. 308, 373
- [38] CWMG XXI, p. 123