



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

Khadi : Gandhiji's Experiment with Social Justice

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Gandhiji living and leading India through the colonial period, a decolonized mind, decolonized India. He moved the masses with political, social, economical, cultural movements grounded in spirituality. He was a karmayogi come up with the experiments that could put to practice the ideals he propagated for personal and public good. As against the violent means of the communist socialist view wherein there was no solution till taking over the political power, he advocated for social justice through non-violent movements asserting faith in converting individuals to his ideology. The very making of Mahatma from Mohan is due the racial injustice he personally faced being thrown out of the train in South Africa. Satyagrah, Swadeshi and end number of historical movements were the result of his ideas that he put into practice with pure means.

Gandhiji's socialism or idea of social justice is distinct from the western liberal (capitalist) or socialistic (Marxist- Hegelian) model. He departs from the communist in violent revolution as the means and centralization of state power at the toll of individual. While unethical market competition and mass production through heavy machinery was at the coast of employment and reason for urbanization that saws the seed of unjust society. He also did not go by the views of John Stuart Mill the utilitarian, 'the saint of liberalism' (Parel xix), with the ethics in On Liberty; as he accepted the civilisational partition of 'industrialised' and non-industrialised or the 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' worlds. Gandhiji's claim to be a true socialist can be understood as:

I have claimed that I was a socialist long before those in India had avowed its creed. But my socialism was natural to me and not adopted from any books. It came out of my unmistakable belief in non-violence. No man can be non-violent and not rise against the social injustice. No matter where it occurred... I have always held that social justice, even unto the last and the lowliest is impossible of attainment by force. I have further believed that it is possible by the proper training of the lowliest by non violence means to secure redress of the wrongs suffered by them. (CW 71: 424 as qtd. in Hay 263)

Thus was the means Khadi (hand spun cloth) or Charkha (Spinning Wheel) as part of his experiment under Swadeshi Movement that had a potential to achieve social justice and transform the society. Gandhuui was addressing a highly polarized milieu, such as the eco-political and cultural: colonial, economical and racial injustice, Hindu Muslim communal divide, the urban rural divide, and the social hierarchies with the Hindu cast system. Khadi was the means to address these issues simultaneously to sought justice for all



against multidimensional subjection.

Swadeshi Movement was in sway in Bengal during the last decade of nineteenth century and was spreading through the nation along with the spurt of agitation against Bang-bhang in 1905. It was the entry of Gandhiji that created a movement by adding the handspun cloth Khadi that people could practice and experiment the mass movement at individual level. It was more of a sacred than an eco-political aspect that Gandhiji envisioned it. Taking note of the chapters pertaining to 1915s in An Autobiography 'The Birth of Khadi' (XXXIX,450) and the following chapter 'Found at Last' (XL,452) Gandhiji had '...never seen a handloom or a spinning wheel' in 1908 when he described it in *Hind Swaraj* 'as panacea for the growing pauperism of India'. It initially seems to be an economical a solution for the poverty of India but gradually a non violent weapon / symbol to replace machinery which was a symbol of capitalist modern civilization and a form of swadeshi. This can be further marked in a the following chapter 'An Instructive Dialogue' (XLI, 454) with the mill owner that 'I swear by this form of swadeshi, because through it I can provide work to the semi-starved, semi-employed women of India. My idea is to get these women to spin yarn, and to cloth the people of India with khadi woven out of it'(456)

It is interesting to perceive how hand spun yarn (Sutar ki atti) becomes a sacred thread for Gandhiji. Gandhiji as categorized with Vivekanand, Gokhale, Ranade and Tagore convinced that the Indian civilization was 'spiritual rather than narrowly religious.., synthetic or pluralise(Ramagundam, 143), an account of his visit to Kumbha Mela held at Haridwar in 1915 an later visiting Laxman Jula he gives his account of meeting a Sannyasi who was pained to see him without *janoi* (a sacred thread) and *shikha* (tuft of hair), the external symbol for any a believing Hindu. Gandhiji in reply spares a page and a half to narrate how he came to dispense the *janoi* and *shikha*. Of the two he willingly accepted to grow *shikha* is very clear about the sacred thread. He out rightly rejects the sacred thread:

'I will not wear the sacred thread, for I see no necessity for it, when countless Hindus can go without it and yet remain Hindus.[I doubt whether in present state of Hinduism and of India, Hindus can vindicate the right right to wear the symbol charged with such a meaning(spiritual regeneration).The right can come only after Hinduism has purged itself of untouchability, has removed all distinctions of superiority and inferiority ... `(My Experiments, 361)

The sacred thread that was on the body of the Brahmins and the Bunyas was for Gandhiji a social injustice tied to religion. He rejected it in his individual case as part of experiment with truth on the



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other hand he accepted the hand spun thread/ yarn as sacred which initially was the product of the labor of weavers who belonged to the untouchable class. He not just embraced it but advocated for Charkha and Khadi to be adopted by all prostitutes in Bengal to his 'heir' Nehru.

Gandhiji, an anti-capitalist/ modernist, had the vision to give the means of productions in the hands of the people rather than the state. The charkha and khadi were the means to empower the people. I G Patel in his account of the Play Mahadevbhai' refers to the metaphor of 'hand' that gandhiji used to communicate to the people on Mondays — the day of Gandhiji's observed moun (silence). Wherein Gandhiji used his five fingers to symbolize Hindu Muslim unity, abolition of untouchability, equality of women, elimination of excess like drunkenness or addiction to opium and finally charkha and all fingers held together as a fist stood for non violence. Enlarging this metaphor Patel aptly remarks on charkha as:

The same applies to the charkha. It would be a travesty to reduce it to reduce it to khadi. The charkha stood for self help, dignity of labour. Decentralization of economic activity, narrowing of the gap between cities and villages- and above all, for ending the enslavement and joylessness of ordinary people without property or skills, who had only their hard physical labour to sell as a means of meager livelihood.(Re-Imagining India 194)

Gandhiji's symbol of charkha and Khadi is multidimensional that refers to social, political, economical, humanitarian and spiritual aspects. Centrally it is to lead us to think of Gandhiji's utopia i.e. Ramarajya. *Hind Swaraj* is regarded as a utopian a text and according to Parel who accounts it as a fundamental work emphasizes its importance as,

'Hind Swaraj is the seed from which the tree of Gandhian thought has grown to its full structure.[] and for those who wish to study his thoughts more methodically, it remains the norm by which to access the theoretical significance of other writings including the Autobiography. '(xiii)

Hind Swaraj a seemingly simple booklet according to Gandhiji was not to go back to dark ages an attempt 'to see beauty in voluntary simplicity, poverty and slowness'. (as qtd. Parel! xvi) This is as against the complicity, competition and hasty modern life with industries and urbanisation. Charkha symbolizes the voluntary acceptance of simplicity, poverty and slowness. It is also a practical solution to avoid the effects of industrialization and urbanization. As Gandhiji put forward his utopian ideal with faith in village life as,



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'You cannot build non-violence on factory civilization, but it can be built on self-contained villages. (as qtd. Parel xvi) and in this practical philosophy based on dharma what one has to learn is 'desire for the welfare of others'.

Gandhiji's attachment to Khadi as a part of swadeshi/ nationalistic movement and practical programme is well defined in the 'Constructive Programme : Its meaning and Place', an address to the members of INC to work out the concrete programme for civil disobedience. Here Gandhiji discusses 'khadi' along with other important programmes as communal Unity, prohibition, Removal of Untouchability, Village Industries, New or Basic Education, Adult Education, Women , Kisans, Economics etc. wherein he states that, 'It connotes the beginning of economical freedom and equality of all in the country.' And further the implications that symbol of khadi takes as:

It means a wholesale of swadeshi mentality, a determination to find all the necessities of life in and that too through the labour and intellect of the villages. That means the reversal of the existing process. That means that instead of half a dozen cities of India, the latter will be largely self-contained, and will voluntarily serve the cities of India and even the outside world in so far as benefits both the parties.(CW 75: 147)

Thus khadi for Gandhiji was symbol of 'unity of Indian humanity, its economical freedom and equality', and moreover it meant 'decentralisation of production and distribution of necessities' as against the centralisation with socialist and monopoly with liberal mentality. To speak of the advice that Gandhiji gave through the example of charkha is that in the conclusion to the above mentioned address, speaks of the importance he gave to charkha as,' ... the charkha in the hands of poor widow brings a paltry price, in the hands of Jawaharlal it is an instrument of Indian freedom.

Jawaharlal Nehru had to reminded of the wrong way the world was going through a letter written by Gandhiji on 5 Oct. 1945 wherein stresses on system of Government that he envisaged in *Hind Swaraj*. He writes:

I am convinced that if India is to attain true freedom and through India the world also, then sooner or later the fact must be recognized that people will have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts, not in palaces. Crores of people will never be able to live at peace with each other in towns and palaces. They will have no recourse to but violence and



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untruth. I hold that without truth and non- violence there can be nothing but destruction for humanity. We can realize truth and non violence only in the simplicity of village life and this simplicity can be found in charkha and all charkha connotes. (Parel 150)

It is Gandhiji's ideal of Sarvodaya (The upliftment of all) on the lines of Ruskin's Unto This Last

from which Gandhi admits to have been highly influenced by his mention of Ruskin's Unto This Last in the appendices to *Hind Swaraj* he drew the humanistic ideals as: 1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all. 2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's in as much as all have the same right of earning livelihood from their work. 3. That life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman is the life worth living. The three principles of 'good of all', equal value/ honour to all types of work, and life of labour can practically be implemented and envisaged from through charka and khadi.



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