CHAPER VI

GANDHI’S ECONOMIC REFERENCE TO KHADI

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GANDHI’S ECONOMIC REFERENCE TO KHADI

“Khadi is the sun of the village solar system. The planets are the various industries which can support khadi in return for the heat and the sustenance they derive from it. Without it other industries cannot grow. But during my last tour I discovered that, without the revival of other industries, khadi could not make further progress. For villagers to be able to occupy their spare time profitably, the village must be touched at all points.”

- M. K. Gandhi

6.1 Introduction

Indian political and spiritual leader, called Mahatma ("Great Soul"). Gandhi helped India's struggle for independence from Britain through a campaign based on nonviolence and civil disobedience. His doctrine of nonviolent action had a profound influence on Martin Luther King Jr., the leader of the civil rights movement in the U.S, and Nelson Mandela, the most prominent figure of the black opposition to apartheid in South Africa. However, Gandhi never received the Nobel Peace Prize.

"Nonviolence and truth (Satya) are inseparable and presupposes one another. There is no god higher than truth."  

"We may read the Gita or the Ramayana or Hind Swaraj", Gandhi said. "But what we have to learn from them is desire for the welfare of others." Gandhi strove to raise the status of untouchables, the caste whom everybody avoided. He gave them the name harijan, or "children of God", and founded the weekly paper Harijan, which was published in
English and Hindi. In an attempt to persuade the orthodox Hindus to wipe out the "blight of untouchability", Gandhi undertook fast in the summer of 1933 for three weeks. In order to promote village self-sufficiency, Gandhi popularized handspinning and made know khadi, hand-spun cloth, the "livery of freedom."  

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the giants of the 20th century, who left an indelible impact on the social, economic and political forces of the day. He was a great revolutionary who even while he fought for the freedom of his country, was aware of the freedom of all the enslaved people in the different parts of the world. As an iconoclast he shook the foundations of the mighty British empire in India through such novel techniques as non-violent satyagarahas, fasting, hartals, non-cooperation, and mass civil disobedience.

Gandhi was a multifaceted person who applied his mind to a large number of problems of human concern. His social ideas exemplify a deep and abiding interest in a fundamental reformation of the society. Though he believed in a strategy of one step at a time yet through his immense wisdom and power of his analytical reasoning he could provide root and branch solutions to some of the obnoxious social evils like untouchability, casteism etc. In the economic sphere, he fervently believed that the economic salvation of India depended upon the economic regeneration of vast millions of Indian living in the rural areas. In the line with such a policy, he championed the cause of small scale village and cottage industries which could provide fruitful employment on a continuing basis to the simple people living in the rural areas. At the political level, Gandhi believed that the state was an instrument of coercion, since it was likely to undermine the cherished fundamental
freedoms of the individuals. As an individualist par excellence, he believed that individuals could enrich their personalities through truth and non-violence, saturated with an atmosphere of freedom. Though Gandhi was a charismatic leader with a mass appeal, yet he symbolized a new trend in the Indian context of an individual wielding immense power and influence on millions without occupying any formal positions of power and authority. He was not very much impressed by the doctrine of a majoritarian democracy since in his values every issue was judged from touchstone of morality rather than in terms of numbers.

Mahatma Gandhi was a towering personality who contributed in large measure to some of the highest values which Indians have stood for since the dawn of civilization. Physically, Gandhi appeared very frail but, he was a man of extraordinary courage, determination and perseverance in the face of adversity.

He had an original mind which probed into the matrix of human problems. His magnetic personality could command the loyalty of men and women of diverse temperaments and differing intellectual endowments.

The first true Indian designer was Mahatma Gandhi when he urged the people of India to wear khadi garments. It was not only a call to create self-reliance but a call to create self-reliance but a call to wear something that could prove the unity of India. Khadi was given a more important status by Gandhi after his return from South Africa. While in search of the charkha, Gandhi felt that for a nation to turn self-reliant, it had to return to indigenous manufactured goods.
Gandhi wrote. Swaraj (self-rule) without swadeshi (country made goods) is a lifeless corpse and if Swadeshi is the soul of Swaraj, khadi is the essence of swadeshi. Therefore khadi became not only a symbol of revolution and resistance but part of an Indian identity.

Gandhi confessed though, When I first discovered the spinning wheel it was purely ascharkha with kargha (handloom).

6.2 What is khadi?

Khadi or khaddar refers to varieties of coarse cotton cloth, which have been hand woven using hand spun yarn. Peasants and artisans in pre-industrial India always wore Khadi that had been made from locally grown Organic cotton, harvested by local labourers, spun into yarn by their womenfolk and woven into cloth by men from various specialist weaving castes. The precise technology involved in the production of Khadi would vary from region to region, as would the techniques used for its decoration (dyeing, embroidery, printing etc)

Khadi shot into prominence in the early twentieth century when the Indian political and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi called for the public burning of British mill-made cloth, and urged patriotic Indians to wear only homespun Khadi.

What I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labor-saving machinery...The impetus behind it is not philanthropy to save labor, but greed

Khadi weaving is labour-intensive. The fabric is hand-spun and hand-woven from cotton, silk or wool. First, farmers pick cotton and remove the seeds. This is rolled into slivers in a process known as
Ginning. These slivers are spun into yarn on a spinning wheel called the charkha, made famous by Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom struggle. The threads are then manufactured and hand woven into cloth. Indian national flag is also made up of khadi.

Unlike cotton, the material is starched and hence, does not crumple as easily. Khadi has the unique quality of being cool in summers and warm in winters. (3)

6.3 Gandhi’s Khadi Movement

Mahatma Gandhi urged Indians to throw out their British colonial rulers with two weapons — non-violence and handspun cloth. A middle aged man when he realized the significance of Khadi as a symbol of independence and self sufficiency, Gandhi did not know how to spin or weave. With great difficulty, he found someone to teach him the skills of the spinning wheel, and spun every day of his life thereafter.

His plan was audacious – not only did he eschew Western wear himself, he also proposed a complete re-clothing of the nation. In its 1920 Nagpur session, the Indian National Congress first stated its aim to promote Khadi, the nationalist fabric. Gandhi henceforth referred to it as the "Livery of Freedom." Overnight, Khadi became the symbol of defiance as thousands of bonfires were lighted across the country and Indians rose up against colonialism by throwing their Manchester textiles into the flames. Thus, Khadi’s growing importance caused a full scale reorganisation of India's textile industry.

Gandhi's Khadi movement was slightly different from the efforts of earlier swadeshi (home industry) activists in Bengal who had contented
themselves with the promotion of Indian produced mill cloth. For he decreed that to qualify as Khadi, cloth had to be not only hand woven and locally produced but also made from hand-spun yarn.  

“Foreign cloth must be totally banished from the Indian market, if India is to become an economically free nation, if her peasantry is to be freed from chronic pauperism, if that peasantry is to find honourable employment during times of famine and such other visitations. Protection of her staple industry is her birthright. I would, therefore, protect the Indian mills against foreign competition, even though for the time being it may result in mulcting the poor people. Such mulcting can take place only if the mill-owners are so unpatriotic as to raise prices owing to the monopoly they may secure. Similarly and consistently, I would protect hand-spun Khaddar against the home mills. And I know that, if only foreign competition is avoided, Khaddar will be protected without difficulty. Foreign cloth will be banished when public opinion becomes effectively powerful. The same power will insure the protection of Khaddar against mills. But my strong belief is that Khaddar will come to its own without any unseemly war with the mills. But, whilst Khaddar has only a limited number of votaries, they, the votaries, must necessarily preach Khaddar in preference to, and to the exclusion of, yarn and cloth manufactured even in our mills. To give the option is to kill Khaddar.”

For Gandhi, it was an effective substitute for violent methods. Just as certain acts, such as abuse, irritating conduct, lying, causing hurt, and murder are symbols of violence, similarly courtesy, inoffensive conduct, truthfulness etc. are symbols of non-violence. And so to him, boycott of foreign cloth was a symbol of non-violence. Revolutionary crime is intended to exert pressure. But it is the insane pressure of anger and ill-will. He contended that non-violent acts exert pressure far more effective
than violent acts, for that pressure comes from goodwill and gentleness. Boycott of foreign cloth exerts such pressure. He said “We import the largest amount of foreign cloth from Lancashire. It is also by far the largest of all our imports, sugar being the next. Britain’s chief interest centers round the Lancashire trade with India. It is the one thing more than any other that has ruined the Indian peasant, and imposed partial idleness upon him by depriving him of the one supplementary occupation he had. Boycott of foreign cloth is, therefore, a necessity if he is to live”.

The plan, therefore, was not merely to induce the peasant to refuse to buy the cheap and nicelooking foreign fabric, but also by teaching him to utilize his spare hours in carding and spinning cotton and getting it woven by the village weavers, to dress himself in Khaddar so woven and thus to save him the cost of buying foreign and, for that matter, even Indian mill-made cloth. Thus, boycott of foreign cloth by means of hand-spinning and hand-weaving, i.e., Khaddar, not only saves the peasant’s money, but it enables us workers to render social service of a first class order. It brings us into direct touch with the villagers.

It enables us to give them real political education and teach them to become selfsustained and self-reliant.” For him Organization of Khaddar is thus infinitely better than cooperative societies or any other form of village organization. It is fraught with the highest political consequence, because it removes the greatest immoral temptation from Britain’s way. He called the Lancashire trade immoral, because it was raised and is sustained on the ruin of millions of India’s peasants. And as one immorality leads to another, the many proved immoral acts of Britain are traceable to this one immoral traffic. If, therefore, this one great temptation is removed from Britain’s path by India’s voluntary effort, it
would be good for India, good for Britain, and, as Britain is today the predominant world power, good even for humanity.\textsuperscript{5}

In 1953 when the Khadi and Village Industries Board was established it had only 156 registered institutions. Today every village however remote or small has it own khadi institutions. Initially the weaving of khadi was rather difficult as it was impossible to weave a full length of cotton with the uneven khadi thread and at one time Gandhi is believed to have threatened to wear a sack if he was not provided with a khadi dhoti.

\textbf{6.4 Gandhi’s Economic Thought}

Gandhi’s economic ideas were in a sense a logical corollary of his political and moral principles such as Swaraj, Sarvodaya, “Truth and Non-violence” and the like. Based on these wider social principles Gandhi derived his economic ideas which if brought together would give a picture of the economic system that he visualized.

The most important principles which influenced Gandhi, and which later became the guiding spirit behind all his ideas, was the principle of Sarvodaya - good for all. This principle originated out of his reading of Ruskin’s Unto This Last which held that the good of the individual contained in the good of all. It was Gandhi’s desire that the good should percolate even to the last of the socio-economic ladder - the poorest of the poor. Given the goal of Sarvodaya Gandhi was confronted with the question of what kind of economic system country should evolve for itself. It was in this context that his wider social ideas of Swaraj, truth and non-violence inspired him to evolve an economic system which was consistent with his political and moral philosophy. From the idea of Swaraj emerged the ideas of Swadeshi and Self-sufficiency. And from the principle of truth and non-violence emerged a series of economic ideas.
like non-exploitation, non-possesion, trusteeship, bread labour and so on. All these ideas which in fact having originated under different context, formed the founding pillars of Gandhi’s economic system.

Gandhi believed that the economic good of all lay in adopting the principle of Swadeshi or self –sufficiency. Though Gandhi used the principle of Swadeshi earlier as a political weapon to boycott the foreign goods, particularly of the British, it actually acquired economic overtones gradually. It would be noted that the concept of Swadeshi inculcated in the minds of Indians the imperative and the value of self – sufficiency both at the national and local village level. He later used this concept with the other economic idea—viz., decentralization, as a technique of building an economic system which was purely Indian and massbased.

His belief that India lived in villages led him to propound the concept of the village Swaraj, which among other things, envisaged village self sufficiency. In its extreme form, village self-sufficiency not merely meant non-dependence of the village on other villages for its economic needs but it also meant self-sufficiency among households. This meant that each household would produce its own requirements—food, clothing, and other things—and never depend on others for its economic needs.

In Gandhi’s system people are expected to live a life of simplicity. This according to Gandhi, is possible by “self-abnegation and abstemiousness” and not falling a victim to the charms of modern civilization which lays the trap of expanding material wants.
6.5 Gandhi’s economic reference to khadi

The Gandhian form of swadeshi sought to nurture forms of technology that were seen appropriate to the needs of the majority of the people. aimed to provide dignity for manual occupations and allow for a more equitable distribution of labour with all forms of work, whether public or domestic, being accorded an equal value. There was a space in this for labour saving devices and technologies, so long as they reinforce this process rather than undermined it, as factory-based production was seen to do at a range of levels. By valourising labour-intensive work so publicly, Gandhi also emphasized that self-reliance through labour would be required by all citizens of a future India. For Gandhi, the winning and maintenance of freedom was impossible without such work-discipline. 

The spinning wheel took pride of place in this campaign, as Gandhi believed that it provided the best means through which poor could earn a supplementary income or save money by by producing their own clothes. For, him it epitomized the spirit of self-reliance.

He launched the spinning campaign in 1919, persuading one of his followers to offer a prize of Rs5000 for the best design for a wheel. A simple and portable wheel was produced in the following year. Gandhian activists raised funds to have these wheels manufactured and distributed to the poor. The thread was then supplied to handloom weavers to make into a cloth called Khadi. Khadi bhandars were opened to market the results, along with other Indian-made products and nationalist literature.

It was in 1921 that Gandhi launched the movement of spin your own cloth and buy hand spun cloth which gained momentum making khadi the fabric of the freedom struggle.
Around that time Gandhi used khadi as the uniform for the first Non Cooperation movement and the Gandhi cap had strong symbolic overtones - that of the Indo-British battle over the looms of Manchester and a bid for a modern Indian identity. So deep rooted was the sentiment attached to this fabric that Pandit Nehru wove for his daughter Indira a wedding sari in salmon pink khadi while he was in jail. This sari is still worn by women of the Nehru-Gandhi family on their wedding day.

In 1953 when the Khadi and Village Industries Board was established it had only 156 registered institutions. Today every village however remote or small has it own khadi institutions. Initially the weaving of khadi was rather difficult as it was impossible to weave a full length of cotton with the uneven khadi thread and at one time Gandhi is believed to have threatened to wear a sack if he was not provided with a khadi dhoti. Today the range of khadi products is unlimited from garments to household linen to furnishings, etc.

The weaving of khadi is preceded by the spinning of the thread on the charkha after which it goes to the bobbin winder, warper, sizer and finally the weaver. While spinning is organized by the khadi Board, weaving is done by the weaver at his home in an individual capacity. Spinning is mostly done by the girls and women in the villages, while weaving is dominated by men. Because of the work involved, the price of the khadi cloth when it reaches the shops is more than that of the mill or handloom cloth.8

"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 the people will have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts not in
palaces. Crores of people will never be able to live in the palaces. They will have no recourse but to resort to both violence and truth.

I hold that without Truth and Non-violence, there can be nothing but destruction humanity. We can realize Truth and Non-violence only in the simplicity of village life, and this simplicity of village life can best be found in the Charkha and all that the Charkha connotes.

I must not fear if the world today is going the wrong way. It may be that India, too, will go that way and like the proverbial moth, burn itself eventually in the flame around which it dances more and more fiercely. But it is my burden duty, up to my last breadth to try to protect India, and through India the entire world from this doom”. M. K. Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi used Khadi less as a garment and more as message to both Indians and the British. Gandhi became, perhaps, the best communicator of his age. The sheer simplicity of clothing as a medium of this communication, was an act of a genius.

“if we have the 'khadi spirit' in us, we would surround ourselves with simplicity in every walk of life. The 'khadi spirit' means illimitable patience. For those who know anything about the production of khadi know how patiently the spinners and the weavers have to toil at their trade, and even so must we have patience while we are spinning 'the thread of Swaraj'. The 'khadi spirit' means also an equally illimitable faith. Even as the spinner toiling away at the yarn he spins by itself small enough, put in the aggregate, would be enough to clothe every human being in India, so must we have illimitable faith
in truth and non-violence ultimately conquering every obstacle in our way.

The 'khadi spirit' means fellow-feeling with every human being on earth. It means a complete renunciation of everything that is likely to harm our fellow creatures, and if we but cultivate that spirit amongst the millions of our countrymen, what a land this India of ours would be! And the more I move about the country and the more I see the things for myself, the richer, the stronger is my faith growing in the capacity of the spinning wheel.”

There is a quaint story of how Gandhi while visiting a poor village spoke to an old woman huddled in her dark dingy hut asking if there was anything she needed. The woman said she had everything pointing to an old charkha in the corner. Gandhi's greatest ambition in life was ‘to wipe every tear from every eye’. Describing his passion for serving the poor he said “God is found more often in the lowliest of his creatures than in the high and mighty... I am struggling to reach the status of these hence my passion for the service of the suppressed (and oppressed) classes.”

Over a period of time Gandhi gave up all privileges. He began to live a Spartan life in ashrams like a sanyasi. As he explained “whatever cannot be shared with the masses is taboo for me”. He wanted to reduce himself to zero for he believed that so long as man does not of his own free will put himself last among his fellow creatures there is no salvation for him. And Gandhi wanted salvation not only for himself but for the oppressed in all of mankind.

Gandhi believed service to others was ‘moksha’ and service to the poorest the highest form of ‘moksha’, that is, liberation, self-realisation. For Gandhi the practice of service to others was not just
one possible route to ‘moksha’, it was the only possible way. ‘Moksha’ therefore meant public service for the poorest, and this inevitably led Gandhi to politics.

The life of millions was Gandhi's religion as well as his politics, as also his economics. He wanted to see that the poor have the basic necessities of life, even though we may have to sacrifice the ‘toys of civilization’. And we have since realised that the ‘toys of civilization’ we have pursued have led us to a culture of inequality, violence, the destruction of the Earth's resources and of Earth itself.

Economic development has a different meaning for each age and for each culture. And it has a different meaning at the center and at the periphery. Gandhi's concerns of economic development were more with the ‘periphery’, that is, with the villages than with large scale industries promoted at the center.

There has been economic and spiritual violence at the way ‘economic development’ has been pursued—violence not only against the poor, with large scale projects of mining, forestry, building dams, in the kind of agriculture pursued, but also against the Earth itself. ‘Development’ seems to have created a milieu from which subsistence workers and subsistence activities have been eliminated. Gandhi’s ‘charkha’ and ‘khadi’ were an expression of economic development which focused on the poor and on the subsistence worker.

Gandhi advocated ‘khadi’ as the beginning of economic freedom and equality for all.

“I think of the poor of India every time that I draw a thread on the wheel...what they (the poor) need is some kind of occupation, and the
occupation that will give employment to millions can only be hand spinning”......

"It is the charkha that enabled the seven hundred thousand villages to become self contained. With the exit of the charkha went the other village industries such as the oil press. Nothing took place of the industries. Therefore the villagers were drained of their varied occupation and their creative talent and what little wealth these brought them.... Hence if the villages are to come into their own the most natural thing that suggests itself is the revival of charkha and all it means.”

“When I say that I want Independence for the millions, I mean to say not only that the millions may have something to eat and to cover themselves with, but that they will be free from the exploitation of people here and outside”.....

"I.....claim for the charkha the honor of being able to solve the problem of economic distress in a most natural, simple, inexpensive and business manner.... It is the symbol of the nations prosperity, and therefore, freedom...” “The spinning wheel rules out exclusiveness. It stands for all including the poorest.”

Further, Gandhi also advocated the charkha as an instrument of service and love for the poor, as a symbol of peace and non-violence, and as a path of inner and spiritual awakening.

“The message of the spinning wheel is really to replace the spirit of exploitation by the spirit of service”......

“The charkha is the symbol of non-violence on which all life, if it is to be real life, must be based”.....
“Since I believe that where there is pure and active love for the poor, there is God also, I see God in every thread that I draw on the spinning wheel”.....

“I have often said that if the seven lakhs of the villages of India were to be kept alive and if peace that is at the root of all civilization is to be achieved, we have to make the spinning wheel the center of all handicrafts”.11

Gandhi’s hope was that the charkha would solve economic and poverty problems of India’s villages. He also hoped that khadi would end India’s exploitation. But we ignored Gandhi, and chose the path of industrialisation, because we wanted ‘speedy’ development. A return to charkha and khadi economy, said our elites and economists, would mean a return to primitiveness, a lowering of our standards of living. “Not so”, said Gandhi, “if by a high standard of living we mean that those who have not enough to eat should have plenty of fresh and wholesome diet, those who are naked should have durable clothes, those who have no shelter should have cosy dwellings.” Gandhi’s development philosophy focused on providing the basic necessities of life for the masses, as his first priority and ignored what he called the ‘toys of civilization’.12

In his dress and demeanour Gandhi almost belongs to the ascetic tradition of the East. Not only in his choice of such and image, but in the essential making of his philosophy and politics, he took recourse to an innovative set of words and symbols. In deed as a mass leader he had an uncanny knack for creating and using symbols and like most popular symbols, In deed as a mass leader he had an uncanny knack for creating and using symbols, Khadi has a complex and different appellation. Gandhi sought to convey multiple messages through
Khadi, arguably the focal one among them was a critique of modernity. Khadi was apt symbol of long Indian tradition on the one hand and a critique of modern western Civilization on the other hand. In relation to three important concepts, which form the very core of modernity in India again Khadi, has been used as a critique. These three concepts are nationalism, industrialism and western education.

“Khadi and Indian Tradition,” Indians have not only been weavers, but even exporters of cotton fabric since time immemorial. Historians have found clear evidence of Harappans supplying cotton textiles to Sumerians around four millennia back in the past. In the more recent history, British themselves imported huge quantities of clothes from India, before they introduced a colonial pattern of made. At the time of arrival of the British in India, next to cultivation weaving was the commonest economic exploitation by the British themselves imported huge quantities of clothes form India, before they introduced a colonial pattern of made. At the time of arrival of the British in India, next to cultivation weaving was the activity in the Indian country side. The saga of the economic exploitation British is replete with reference to the decline of cotton weavers. That the theme of hand –woven fabric, that is, Khadi was brought up and invested with new meaning by Gandhi was nothing but natural. In fact weaving has been a common metaphor, even in the spiritual discourse of many saints and philosophers, the most notable among than was Kabir, himself a weaver. His poetry is replete with reference to warp and woof or the mechanism of weaving. One of his many oft quoted songs is “Jheeni, Jheeni rebeenee chadria “Kabir expresses the spiritual endeavour of man through the metaphor of weaving. While not exactly forsaking the spiritual content, Gandhi reinvented the mundane human endeavor, no less complex through.
Innumerable songs were composed during the years of freedom struggle or afterwards how Gandhi will or did drive out the British with the help of his charka. It became symbol of freedom struggle. “Livery of freedom” as Nehru described Khadi which was however also a means of economic regeneration of the village and much more. Gandhi declared, “My Swadeshi chiefly centers around the hand – spun Khadar and extends to every thing that can be and is produced in India.  

Many of us recall with relish the famous remark of Gandhi on western civilization being yet ‘a good idea’ He in deed had a deep suspicion of the material progress in the west and further, of the whole concept of modernity’. He identified the real enemy of the Indian people not as the British themselves but as their modern civilization. In the preface to the English edition of his seminal work Hindi civilization, which is the Kingdom of God. The one is the God of War, the other is the God of War, My countrymen, therefore believe that they should adopt modern civilization to drive out the English. Hind Swaraj has been written in order to show that they are following a suicide policy, and that, if they would but revert to their own glorious civilization either the English would adopt the latter and become Indianized or find their occupation in India gone. Khadi was reversion to that ‘glorious civilization’ as “The sun of the village solar system”.

Among the borrowings from the modern west, uncritically accepted by the western educated intelligentsia, two crucial ones are the idea of nation state and modern industrialization. Gandhi had a different concept of both. Further down, he rejected the very system of education that made educated Indians modern.\(^{(12)}\)
Against mechanistic and aggressive concept of nationalism in the west, Gandhi proposed a concept of People’s Swaraj based on truth and non-violence for which Khadi was an apt symbol. Moreover, this symbol also linked the concept of Swaraj with the concern for the poor—the last man and village, the supported bastion of backwardness. Prior Gandhi, the nationalist leaders had acquiesced in by an large to a western concept of nationalism; Gandhi not only critiqued that but provided an alternative concept, more deeply rooted in the tradition and encompassing all Indians, rich and poor alike, He gave a moral perspective to the national movement for which a set of new symbols were created by him, Khadi Ramraj, and Satyagraha he was designing a new framework of ideology more appropriate for the teeming millions of India, eighty five percent of them residing in the country side. His critique was not merely, an alternative ideology, it was a plan of mass action that he visualized was again not merely a political programme but a social and economic agenda, to quote one of his sentences: “Khadi service, village service and the Harijans service are one in reality, thought three in name”.14

True economics, according to Gandhi, ‘never militates against the highest ethical standard, just as all true ethics to be worth its name must at the same time be also good economics’.15

He was critical of pursuit of materialism which was the characteristic of the advancement of the west. He was generally opposed to machines and centralization of production and favored on the contrary a life of labour for everyone in the society, succinctly contained in his concept of bread labour. He believed in the ideal of economic self-sufficiency of the villages. He describes his idea of an ideal socio-economic order in the following words:
“Independence must begin at the bottom, Thus every village will be a republic or Panchayat having full powers. In this structure composed of innumerable village there will be ever widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circles whose centre will be individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral parts.

In this there is no room for machines that would displace human labour and that would concentrate power in a few hands. Labour has a unique place in a cultural human family. Every machine that helps every individual has a place.

Khadi is evidently the centre piece of the strategy for such an economic utopia. It not only means compulsion of labour through spinning but a very decentralized mode of production contributing to the possibility of a self-sufficient rural economy. It is both a value system in it self and defines an alternative framework of economy. He writes clearly that ‘Khadi mentality means decentralization of the production and distribution of the production and distribution of the necessaries of life’.

In this years of with – drawal from active politics from 1924, Gandhi devoted himself to the propagation of Khadi turning it into a cult, as a strategy of nation building ‘from the bottom up’ He suggested a ‘Khadi franchise’ for the organization and even ‘envisaged a ‘yarn currency’.
B. R. Nanda comments ‘that Gandh’s almost emotional attachment to the spinning wheel should have baffled both the British and Western educated town – bred Indians, educated town-bred Indians, is not surprising’ for ‘they were both unable, the former form lack of will, the latter from lack of ignorance, to grasp the incredible poverty of Indian village. Even Tagore, otherwise an admirer of Mahatma ,feared that spinning wheel that spinning wheel and the economic stagnation it implied will cause a ‘death – like sameness in the country.’ Gandhi reply was loud and clear:

“I didn’t want the poet to forsake his music, the farmer his plough, the lawyer his brief, and the doctor his lancet. They are to spin only thirty minutes every day as sacrifice. I have every day as sacrifice. I have in deed asked the famishing man and woman, who is idle for work whatsoever to spin for a living and the half-starved farmer to spin during his income.”

Gandhi’s appeal surely had a moral ground and further he would make spinning wheel the centre of his scheme of rural reconstruction building up anti-malaria campaigns, improvement in sanitation, settlement of village disputes, conservation and breeding of cattle and hundred of other beneficent activities required for the resuscitation of the village. He proposed that ‘Khadi is the sun of the village solar system.’

It is well-known that Ruskin’s book Unto This Last had and indelible imprint on his mind. Behind the whole Khadi campaign, it was this last man who was always in Gandhi’s mind. On the other side, he opposed the tendency of ever increasing consumption and multiplication of wants. The self-abnegation and asceticism of Gandhi’s economic prescription has often been criticized as too
idealistic and taken to the extremes. Even if it is true, now environmentalists are veering round to almost a similar position. Excessive consumption may not be sustainable and may result in depletion of the limited resources on the earth. Sidestepping this debate, it may be noted that the Khadi – centered scheme for rural development was typical of Gandhian economic framework, rather, its core principal.

Not withstanding misgivings about the feasibility of his economic ideas, in the first ten years of its existence the. The all India Spinners Association had extended its activities to 5300 villages and provided employment to 220,000 spinners, 20,000 weavers and 20,000 carders and disbursed more than two crores of rupees in Indian villages. Gandhi, of course, knew the limitations of his efforts in the context of the magnitude of the problem. He decided to settle in a village, named, Segaon near Wardha, which was later renamed as Sevagram. Soon Sevagram became a centre of Gandhian Scheme of village welfare and several institutions started there including All Indian Village Industries welfare and several institutions. The Association set up a school for training village workers and published its own periodical, Gram Udyog patrika. Hindustani Talimi Sangh was the other institution which experimented on Gandhi’s ideas of education. Basic Education as Critique of Modernity.

Education was arguably the most important arena for the introduction of modernity in India. Designed as it was by the colonial masters, besides remaining generally divorced from India tradition, it was also oblivious to the needs and problems of the teeming millions in the countryside. Gandhi’s basic education scheme was primarily a
system of rural education and handicraft constituted the medium of instruction. Spinning and weaving was again Gandhi’s preference among the crafts and so his entire pedagogy and educational philosophy was intermeshed with his khadi based approach to life.

From his earliest days in Indian public life Gandhi was critical of the Western system of education for much of what it stood for in his opinion. A sample of his critique can be read below:

“The system of education at present in vogue is wholly unsuited to India’s needs, is a bad copy of the Western model and it has by reason of the medium of instruction being a foreign language sapped the energy of the youths who had passed through our schools and colleges and has produced an army of clerks and office-seekers. It has dried up all originality, impoverished the vernaculars and has deprived the masses of the benefit of higher knowledge which would otherwise have percolated through the intercourse of the education classes with them. The system has resulted in creating a gulf between educated India and the masses. It has stimulated the brain but starved the spirit for want of a religious basis for education and emaciated the body for want of training in handicrafts. It has criminally neglected the greatest need of agricultural training worth the name….”

Judith Brown has rightly observed, it is difficult to appreciate quite how radical and abrasive Gandhi would have sounded to educated Indians as he castigated their educational training and their values and told them they were traitors to their mother land by being willing ‘victims’ of the current system’ (1989, 107). Despite their opposition to British rule, most their nationalists did not reject the British system of education outright, since they viewed it as a means by which India
could became a materially advance nation. But form the beginning of his career Gandhi thought differently.

Alongside Champaran Satyagraha, his earliest foray into local politics, he launched his experiment in education. In November 1917 the first school was opened in Barharwa just a week after. The experiment grew mature and eventually in 1937 after Wardha Conference fully developed was announced, although system was announced although it was indeed a modified version of Gandhi’s won scheme of education. Even in June 1921, writing in Young India he had outlined his views with a great deal of clarity, “I can see nothing wrong in the children, from the very threshold of their education, paying for it in work. The simplest handicraft, suitable for all, required for the whole of India undoubtedly spinning along with the previous processes. If we introduced this in our educational institutions, we should fulfill three purposes. If we introduced this in our educational institutions, we should fulfill three purpose: make education self – supporting, train the bodies of the children as well as their minds and pave the way for a complete boycott of foreign yarn and cloth. Moreover, the children thus equipped will become self-reliant and independent.

It would be erroneous to think that Gandhi rejected ideas form the modern west in to or that remained un influenced altogether. It may be pertinent to not that he viewed his life as ‘experiments with truth’, ostensibly a tribute to science, to which he was sufficiently exposed as a student. Although he claimed that he was what he was ‘in spite of western education’, he didn’t insulate himself from the western influence. Of course, he was both selective and innovative when it came to borrowing from the west. Two persons who deeply influenced
him were John Ruskin and Leo Tolstoy, but neither in deed was a typical representative of ‘modernity’. They themselves were critics of modern civilization.

As Tolstoy saw it the false supposition of modern thinkers such as Renan, Strauss, Comte, Spencer and Marx was the human betterment effected ‘not by moral efforts of individual men towards recognition, elucidation, and profession of truth, but by a gradual alteration of the general external conditions of life.’ They believe that ‘the chief activity of man who wishes to serve society and improve the condition of mankind should be directed not to the elucidation and profession of truth, but to the amelioration of external political, social, and above all, economic conditions… Let all those external conditions be realised’, responds Tostoy, ‘the position of humanity will not be bettered’.

Gandhi read a number of other nineteenth century of western civilization including Thomas Carlyle (1979-1881), Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) and Robert Sherard (1861-1943). A list of such works forms appendix of Hind Swaraj.

In one of his works Bhikhu Parekh has neatly analysed the synthesis of East & West that can be noticed in Gandhi’s Thought: (Gandhi) took over the concept of ahimsa (non-violence) from the Indian Traditions, especially the Jain. But the found it negative and passive and reinterpreted it in the light of the activist and socially oriented Christian concept, yielded the novel idea of an active and positive but detached and non emotive love.

Noted educationist Krishna Kumar too highlights his indebtedness to western thought in his scheme of education. He observes that if it were possible to read his plan as a anonymous text in
the history of world education, one would conveniently classify it in the tradition of (the) western radical humanists.

Khadi was not only a simple economic activity confined to the rural households, it was an active socially-oriented campaign, a drill for the shoulders of national movement and an occasion for creating a social dialogue in a hierarchical society. Khadi was a doubt a critique of the typical western modern civilization based on industrialism, materialism. And yet it shares many a feature of the radical humanist tradition in the west, while remaining firmly rooted in the indigenous tradition. Gandhi himself started his position with regard to influences in a picturesque manner. He declared that he did not want his windows to be stuffed and wanted free air to blow about from all sides. He simply added that he would not like to be swept off his feet.18

“ It was our love of foreign cloth that ousted the wheel from its position of dignity. Therefore, I consider it a sin to wear foreign cloth. I must confess that I do not draw a sharp or any distinction between economics and ethics. Economics that the hurt the moral wellbeing of an individual or a nation are immoral, therefore, sinful. Thus, the economics that permit one country to prey upon another immoral. It is sinful to buy and use articles made by sweated labour. It is sinful to eat American wheat and let my neighbor that grain – dealer starve for want of custom. Similarly it is sinful to wear finery of Regent Street, when I know that I had but worn the things woven by the neighbouring spinners and weaver, that would have clothed me & fed and clothed them. On the knowledge of my sin bursting upon me, I must consign the foreign garments to the flame and thus purify myself, and thenceforth rest content with the rough khadi made by my
neighbours. On knowing that my neighbours may not, having given up the occupation, take kindly to the spinning wheel, I must take it up myself and thus make it popular.”

The environmental problems were also envisaged by Mahatma Gandhi a century ago when actually there was no environmental problem and hence Gandhiji was real visionary. According to Gandhian philosophy problem of environmental degradation is in the mind of individual. He should change himself from inside out for which individual must be spiritual and religious. Hence prayer was made part of daily routine in Gandhi ashram. The root cause is human greed, needs and wants. This gives rise to vicious circle that is consumerism-industrialisation-mass production-huge requirement of raw material and fuel-large storage space-heavy transportation and finish product in bulk quantity. The technology and machinery required will displace labour due to automation. This will give rise to another vicious circle that is displacement of labour-unemployment-poverty-environmental degradation. These two vicious circles will have negative effect on environment. Hence concept of swaraj was put forth by Gandhiji that is total liberation, self reliance and self sufficiency. Hence Gandhiji gave slogan for youth “to go back to villages”. He insisted for village and handicraft industries which are less machine dependent, labour intensive, energy saver and protects environment. Hence Khadi industries were promoted.

6. 6 Economic Decentralization

Gandhi was not a professional economist in the true sense of the term. But in a large and eventful life he had occasion to develop his economic ideas based on the situation in India. Gandhian economic theory provides a new and realistic approach to contemporary
problems of poverty, hunger, and degradation. Beginning with the position that exploitation is at the root of the violence, Gandhi builds his ideas in such a manner that avoids exploitation of man by man. His panacea is to do away with the concentration of economic power by proposing economic decentralization at various levels of the power hierarchy of the Indian society. Gandhi frequently asserted that “if India is to develop along the non-violent lines, it will have to decentralize many things”.

Gandhi took the position that concentration of economic power created the capitalist class which was exploitative of the talent and resources available in the society. It does not require much argument to assert that concentration of economic power has created a gulf between the privileged few and under-privileged majority. In a traditional society, the discrimination of individuals based on wealth made it more difficult for the development of a modern society. It must be observed that the concentration of economic power goes hand in hand with the concentration of the political power, leading to a dictatorial or an authoritarian system. In an underdeveloped country like India, concentration of economic power in the hands of a few provides them with a great deal of privilege in the socio-political and economic milieu of the country. Taking into account all the obnoxious features, Gandhi opted for decentralization of economic power.

In line with this reasoning of Gandhi, the advocacy of cottage and small-scale industries for all-round development of rural areas assumes great significance. Gandhi believed that decentralization of economic power could fruitfully serve the interest of the community by bringing about rapid development of the industries. Gandhi’s advocacy of universal use of Khadi by fostering the patriotic spirit of
Swadeshi is part and parcel of his comprehensive understanding of decentralization through dispersal of economic power. Gandhi’s concept of economic of Swaraj was co-equal with full self sufficiency in economic matters of every village. He visualized a communitarian village that would look after the food, clothing, shelter and educational needs of every individual in the rural area. In such a village of Gandhi’s conception, consumption would be regulated through minimization on the basis of simplicity.

Gandhi gave a very liberal interpretation of the concept of Swaraj. He made it applicable to all spheres of life - religious, spiritual, social, political and economic. In the economic sphere it refers to self-sufficiency of the village as an economic unit. “The broad definition of Swadeshi is the use of all home made articles to the exclusion of foreign things, in so far as such is necessary for the protection of home industries, more especially those without which India will become pauperized”. The spirit of Swadeshi is not contrary to anything that is alien. On the contrary a nation could import those goods that are needed for its growth; but such import should not interfere or hinder the growth of a nation. Gandhi was very eager to preserve and protect cottage and village industries through decentralization of economic power.

A corollary to Swadeshi was Gandhi’s stress on Khadi. In the nature of the thing, Khadi required decentralization of production and consumption. Since Khadi is produced by the common man in every village the economic power is distributed to every village and to every man. Localised production and consumption helps to relieve the temptation to merely speed up production. There would be no unnatural accumulation of hoards in the pockets of the few, and want
in the midst of plenty in regard to the rest.” Gandhi says in unequivocal terms that Khaddar was not meant “to destroy all machinery but it does regulate its use and check its speedy growth. It uses machinery for the poorest in their own cottages. The wheel is itself an exquisite piece of machinery.\textsuperscript{21}

6.7 Gandhi at Sevagram

The establishment of the Sevagram ashram and the experiments subsequently carried out there is one particular period in Gandhi’s life which has received scant attention from the many historians drawn to the study of this phenomenal individual. The Sevagram experiment once represented once the inherently progressive nature of non-violence, and, stood as a guideline for all disposed and developing people struggling for their rights.

To improve the material conditions of the villagers and to provide them with a means of utilising their many hours of idleness a few new industries were begun under the auspices of the A.I.V.I.A (All India Village Industries Association). Khadi and animal husbandry were the first to be established. Gandhi regarded the adoption of the former as recognition of the purity of service and the need to foster a revolution in one’s life. Khadi is a very practical village industry since it requires a very little capital, the implements can all be manufactured in the villages, and the final article is primarily used in the area where it is produced. Critics of the Khadi programme pointed towards the remuneration received from Khadi production as opposed to more productive occupations. Gandhi’s response was always that he never intended the spinning wheel to compete with, or attempt to displace any existing industry. His only claim was that Khadi offered an immediate, practicable and permanent solution to the prevailing
unemployment and underemployment in the rural India. From the beginning Khadi formed the foundation of the various activities started at Sevagram. Lessons in production of Khadi were the only form of industrial instruction offered to the villagers with a potentiality to serve as a permanent safeguard against destitution. Gradually the work developed to provide employment for a large number of people from Sevagram and the surrounding villages.  

“I claim for the Charkha the honour of being able to solve the problem of economic distress in a most natural, simple, inexpensive and business like manner. The Charkha, therefore, is not only not useless, but it is a useful and indispensable article for every home. It is the symbol of the nation’s prosperity and, therefore, freedom. It is a symbol not of commercial war, but of commercial peace. It bears not a message of ill-will towards the nations of the earth, but of good-will and selfhelp. It will not need the protection of navy threatening a world’s peace and exploiting its resources, but it needs the religious determination of millions to spin their yarn in their own homes as today they cook their food in their own homes. I may deserve the curses of posterity for many mistakes of omission and commission, but I am confident of earning its blessings for suggesting a revival of the Charkha. I stake my all on it. For, every revolution of the wheel spins peace, goodwill and love. And with all that, inasmuch as the loss of it brought about India’s slavery, its voluntary revival with all its implications must mean India’s freedom.”

6.8 Khadi and women

Gandhiji thought unemployment to be a women’s issue, and therefore symbolically as well as practically he introduced the ‘charkha’ (spinning wheel) as an instrument of the freedom movement. The
propagation of khadi was to protect the employment of the poorest women. Spinning was an important home industry during the nineteenth century. It was source of livelihood for women of all castes, communities and even for the women of low income levels. Many widows supplemented their family income by spinning cotton yarn. Muslim women, who were not allowed to step out of their homes to earn livelihood, spent their time, spinning cotton thread. Thus spinning wheel brought economic independence, specially for women. For Gandhiji khadi was not a cloth but a thought, a philosophy that aimed at a self reliant economy, a link of concern between the haves and the have nots. Around that time Gandhi used khadi as the first Non-cooperation movement and the Gandhi cap had strong symbolic overtones that of the Indo-British battle over the looms of Manchester and a bid for a modern Indian identity.

In 1915 Gandhiji introduced a few handlooms in the Ashram and learnt the art of weaving. However, the yarn used was produced from Mills. Gandhiji was eager to start hand spinning in Ashram and was in search of spinning, who teach him and the inmates of Ashram of spin. But he would neither get a spinning wheel nor a spinner. The art of had spinning was almost lost. His visit to Champaran in 1916 made him more aware of the pathetic condition in the extent of poverty of the people. Women in Bhitiwara were unable to change their clothes due to lack of availability of another pair.

At this critical juncture, Gandhiji met Smt. Gangaben Mujmuder, an enterprising middle age widow from Vijapur near Baroda in October 1917 to whom he entrusted the important task of finding a spinning wheel.
Though immortalized in Gandhiji’s autobiography and in his speeches and writings, Smt. Gangaben could find carders and after finding them, she trained some youngsters to make slivers form the carded cotton. She hired a house at Vijapur and started staying with her daughter Saraswati, sisters Hiralaxmi and Keshawlabhai and together they started a spinning centre. She faced greater difficulty in getting spun yarn women because handloom weaves at the time only wove finer yarn for mills. She met a Muslim weaver, who helped her to train weavers to weave hand spun yarn. Thus started a production centre of Khadi Vijapur khadi gained a name for itself.  

In 1919 about one hundred and fifty women spinners worked at the centre. Soon she started a weaving unit at the centre and thus her khadi enterprise included Carding, Slivering, Spinning and Weaving. It was the first production centre for khadi manufacture. Gandiji exhorted people and women in particular to follow her example and to start centres of khadi production in villages. Soon Gangaben expanded her activities and her enterprise thrived and prospered under her able leadership. She showed immense organizing capacity and innovative skills. In 1921 she had 2000 spinning wheels at the centre. Thus she restored the lost craft to hand spinning and weaving. Khadi become a new word in the vocabulary of India. Thus, plain and uneducated Gangaben Mujumdar become a pioneer in a new era. Through her, the khadi industry was born. Gandhiji had decided to bring the work of Gangaben to public notice and he published ‘Pateri issue of Sani Vartaman that’.

With Gandhiji’s inspiration and Gangaben’s hard work, the khadi activity began. Gandhiji’s inspiration awakened many women for this khadi activity across different parts of the country. Among these women
were mainly Maniben Nanavati, Mithooben, Maniben Patel, Harshaben and Ushaben Mehta.

Maniben and three of her friends, Jayaben Desai, Shirin Havewala and Sunaben Rao started Khadi Mandir in 1934 at Vile Parle as an effort by women towards the liberation of the Nation. She had put a aboard “Khadi Mandir is run by women”. Women were confident and well equipped to work bringing khadi selling it and maintaining accounts.25

6.9 Khadi - Controversy

Khadi is a controversial subject. Many people thought that in advocating Khadi Gandhi sailing against a headwind and was sure to sink the ship of the Swaraj and that he was taking the country to the dark ages.

To which Gandhi said “I do not propose to argue the case for Khadi in this brief survey. I have argued it sufficiently elsewhere. Here I want to show what every Congressman, and for that matter every Indian, can do to advance the cause of Khadi. It connotes the beginning of economic freedom and equality of all in the country. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Let everyone try, and he or she will find out for himself or herself the truth of what I am saying. Khadi must be taken with all its implications. It means a wholesale swadeshi mentality, a determination to find all the necessaries of life in India and that too through the labour and intellect of the villagers. That means the reversal of the existing process. That is to say that, instead of a half a dozen cities of India and Great Britain living on the exploitation and the ruin of a 700,000 villages in 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 it benefits both the parties.

This needs a revolutionary change in the mentality and tastes of many. Easy through the non-violent way is in many respects, it is very
difficult in many others. It vitally touches the life of every single Indian, makes him feel aglow with the possession of the power of that has lain hidden within himself, and makes him proud of his identity with every drop of the ocean of Indian humanity. This non-violence is not the inanity for which we have mistaken it through all these long ages; it is the most potent force as yet known to mankind and on which its very existence is dependent. It is that force which I have tried to present to the Congress and through it to the world. Khadi to me is the symbol of unity of Indian humanity, of its economic freedom and equality and, therefore, ultimately, in the poetic expression of Jawaharlal Nehru, ‘the livery of India’s freedom’.

Moreover, Khadi mentality means decentralization of production and distribution of the necessaries of life.

6.10 Conclusion

Gandhi incorporated his constructive programme in a people friendly manner comprised of three principles-Swadeshi (home – based production); Sarvodaya (aim of public welfare) and Aparigraha (non-possessiveness). This programme was inaugurated during 1920-21 and was very close to Gandhi’s heart.

A technology appropriate for the majority of people’s needs was to be encouraged. India required labour intensive technology as there were many hands available which would be unemployed if labour – saving technology was head, self-reliance through labour was also considered important for the Indians. The spinning wheel was a key example of this approach. A small portable design of spinning wheel was popularized. People were encouraged to mate Khadi, did not prove to be a very profitable venture. It was expensive as compared to mill-produced cloth. It led to some criticism of Gandhi’s economic theory.
He was accused of promoting time-consuming, back-breaking devices instead of labour-saving devices. Actually to an extent, this criticism was not wrong because technology had made people’s life easier in many ways and which were beneficial.\(^{(25)}\)

Khadi was not however able to compete with mill-made clothing terms of price and hand-spinning did not turn out to be an economically viable occupation. In the long run Khadi production survived through subsidies from the rich obtained through the All India spinners Association, founded by Gandhi in 1925. Khadi was kept alive because of its great symbolic importance for the cause. In strictly economic terms, this work did not provide a good example of self-sufficiency.

This failure gave an edge of criticisms of Gandhian economic theory in general. He was accused of shunning labour-saving devices in favour of older-style labour – intensive methods of production that have historically condemned the poor to long hours of back-breaking labour. Although there was argueably, some truth in this so far as Khadi and other labour-intensive activities were concerned, there were many other areas in which appropriate technologies have proved to be of obvious value to the poor. For example, working conditions for women have been great ky improved through improvements in Chula (stove), design, the development of gobar gas plants and solar cookers, and improvement of hand-pump.

Even Khadi might be made a success. Much of its problems has probably stemmed from the fact that Khadi – spinning and weaving were fetishised, while other elements necessary for sustainable and eco-friendly cotton-growing economy were neglected.\(^{(26)}\)
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