



Gandhi Marg Quarterly

37(1): 7–28

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<http://gandhipacefoundation.org/>

ISSN 0016–4437

Clothing Choices in Gandhi's *Swadeshi* Movement

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ABSTRACT

This is the first of the two articles on Gandhi's Swadeshi Movement. It deals with his sartorial choices involving the organization of persons, objects and events that strategically dethroned a proud empire, liberated a subservient people and ultimately decolonised the world.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, *swadeshi*, clothing, *khadi*, *charkha*, Dandi march, imperialism

Come with me to Orissa, to Puri — a holy place and a sanatorium, where you will find soldiers and the Governor's residence during summer months. Within ten miles' radius of Puri, you will see skin and bone. With this very hand I have collected soiled pies from them tied tightly in their rags [...] The poor sisters of Orissa have no saris; they are in rags. Yet they have not lost all sense of decency; but, I assure you, we have. We are naked in spite of our clothing and they are clothed in spite of their nakedness.¹

M. K. Gandhi

THROUGH THIS ARTICLE – the first of the two studies on the Swadeshi Movement – we wish to commemorate the centenary year of Mahatma Gandhi's return to India: 1915-2015. While it deals with the historical underpinnings of his decisions about clothing for India's liberation, the sequel – to be published in the next issue of *Gandhi Marg* – will focus on the non-verbal communication aspects of his option to 're-clothe' India in *khadi*.

At the outset, it is worth noting that a study of Gandhi's *personal* sartorial history was previously undertaken and published in this journal.² It revealed that Gandhi's 'punctiliousness in dress'³ radically

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transformed his choices from the initial drive to be an English gentleman, through the search for meaning in a context of racial discrimination, to his final decision to be an honest representative of India's poor majority in the struggle for *swaraj*. In this article, however, we will concentrate on the history of Gandhi's attempts to influence and involve *others* in making cloth and clothing choices relevant to the struggle. These others include members of his ashram, the Indian National Congress and the millions who inhabited the vast Indian subcontinent. Needless to say, the task of convincing others was Herculean, not merely because of the gargantuan numbers, but also because of the tremendous diversity in culture, class, caste and creed. The material we will present, therefore, is a brief narrative account of the *Swadeshi* Movement. We shall study its unfolding by focusing on some of the salient components of the Movement, such as: the origin of the concept before Gandhi's arrival in India, his *swadeshi* vow, the role of *khadi* and the *charkha*, the boycott of foreign cloth, the closure of mills, non-cooperation, the Gandhi *topi*, and the march to Dandi.

The Meaning of Swadesh in Indian History

The word *swadesh* literally means 'of one's own country' and can be rendered in constructive terms such as self-help, self-subsistence, self-strengthening (*atmashakti*⁴), self-reliance, and in contemporary parlance, sustainability. "Swadeshi is that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote."⁵ In an exclusivist sense it refers to the 'boycott' of anything foreign, anything that increases dependence on an extraneous power. While the term refers to an option for the indigenous against the foreign, the manner in which this concept was used in the history of the struggle for Indian liberation differs in form.

There were two *swadeshi* campaigns in India, the one that took place in 1905 in the British dominated Bengal, and the other in 1920, under Gandhi's direction. Both used cloth as the chief constituent of unity and action. The origin of the idea, however, began in Poona. In 1872 Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade delivered a series of public lectures, in which he popularized "the idea of *swadeshi*, of preferring the goods produced in one's own country even though they could prove to be dearer or less satisfactory than finer foreign products."⁶ His lectures so inspired the listeners that a few vowed to wear only *swadeshi* articles. Advocate Ganesh Vasudeo Joshi was one of them. He used to spin yarn daily for his own dhoti, shirt and turban; he started shops at several places to popularise and propagate *swadeshi* goods, and on public occasions, made it a point to dress in pure self-spun *khadi*.⁷

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In 1905, under the viceroyalty of Lord Curzon, a policy to partition Bengal came into effect. Indians of Bengal vehemently opposed this move. When the more moderate measures to reverse the decision failed, they sought new ways of protesting by beginning the first *Swadeshi* Movement. Theoretically, the Movement had two major trends, one constructive and the other aggressive. The former encouraged self-help through local industries, schools and village development. The aggressive trend was political extremism which, among other initiatives, organized a rigorous boycott of British goods, civil disobedience, a 'social boycott' of Indian loyalists to the Empire, and the recourse to armed struggle if British repression went beyond the limits of endurance.⁸ The anniversary of the *Swadeshi* Movement was observed on 7 August, 1907, when nearly 20,000 Indians met to decide to continue the boycott until the policy to partition Bengal was withdrawn or modified. The Movement, which began in 1905 and lasted till 1908, finally met with success. The partition was annulled in December, 1911. It was the first successful Indian protest in more than three centuries under increasing British control before Gandhi arrived on the scene.

During these years, Gandhi was in South Africa and, in general, supported the *swadeshi* cause. On 19 August, 1905, he too called for a united opposition to the Bengal partition and supported the boycott of British goods. In November of the same year, aware of the threat of division among the agitators along religious lines, he pleaded for communal harmony. In the *Indian Opinion* Gandhi expressed his praise for the united action of the Bengalis and entitled the article "Brave Bengal."⁹ In another piece, "The Heroic Song of Bengal,"¹⁰ he lauded the song *Bande Mataram*, composed by Bankim Chandra, the Bengali poet, which, at the time of writing, he called "our national anthem."¹¹ In a New Year Message published in the *Indian Opinion* of 2 January, 1909, he exhorted his countrymen in South Africa to adopt *swadeshi* and shared his understanding of the term and its relation to *satyagraha*:

Swadeshi carries a great and profound meaning. It does not mean merely the use of what is produced in one's own country. That meaning is certainly there in *swadeshi*. But there is another meaning implied in it which is far greater and much more important. *Swadeshi* means reliance on our own strength. We should also know what we mean by "reliance on our own strength." "Our strength" means the strength of our body, our mind and our soul. From among these, on which should we depend? The answer is brief. The soul is supreme, and therefore soul-force is the foundation on which man must build. Passive resistance or *satyagraha* is a mode of fighting which depends on such force. That, then, is the only real key [to success] for the Indians.¹²

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A few months after his return to India, he showed how his meaning of *swadeshi* differed from the temporary kind of protest previously propagated in Bengal. This time he emphasised the need to consider *swadeshi* as intrinsically linked to the fulfilment of a duty that all Indians owed to the land of their birth.

And when we have sufficiently cultivated this spirit of fearlessness, we shall see that there is no salvation for us without true *swadeshi*, not the *swadeshi* which can be conveniently put off. *Swadeshi* for me has a deeper meaning. I would like us to apply it in our religious, political and economic life. It is not, therefore, merely confined to wearing on occasion *swadeshi* cloth. That we have to do for all time, not out of a spirit of jealousy or revenge, but because it is a duty we owe to our dear country. We commit a breach of the *swadeshi* spirit certainly if we wear foreign-made cloth, but we do so also if we adopt the foreign cut. Surely, the style of our dress has some correspondence with our environment. In elegance and tastefulness, it is immeasurably superior to the trousers and the jacket. An Indian, wearing a shirt flowing over his pyjamas with a waist-coat on it without a necktie and its flaps hanging loose behind, is not a very graceful spectacle.¹³

Swadeshi for Gandhi was more than a mere opportunity to unite in protest against an unjust law. It included the stuff one wore, how it was manufactured and the way it was worn on the body of Indians. But there was much more to Gandhi's *Swadeshi* Movement than even this.

The Swadeshi Vow and the Birth of Khadi

As soon as he returned to India, Gandhi first established the *Satyagraha Ashram*¹⁴ in May 1915. From 1918 onwards, he began to make people aware of the merits of hand-made cloth over foreign or mill-made cloth. The manufacture of cloth in the mills, whether in England or in India, was a process that constituted a 'triple violence': mill-made cloth was a "violation of truth"¹⁵ because it robbed work and wages from the millions who laboured hard with their hands; because its manufacture involved the *suffering of labourers* who had to bear excessive heat in the mills; and lastly, because "the generation of tremendous heat causes enormous *destruction of life*."¹⁶ Therefore, he included the vow of *swadeshi* in the list of nine vows he drew up for all inmates at the *ashram*. The person who pledged himself to non-violence was not to compromise his position by yielding to the triple violence caused by the rapidly spreading tentacles of England's industrial revolution.

The *swadeshi* vow was developed to heighten the inmates' awareness of the need to simplify one's lifestyle through the exercise

of prioritizing needs over wants and desires – not merely personally but also nationally. The user was supposed to develop the spirit of discernment on the moral and social worth of the items he/she was accustomed to using, especially clothing. The factors that determined their worthiness were the *place of origin*, the *means of production* and the *constructive programme* for an equitable society. This self-imposed scrutiny in the light of truth and non-violence had to penetrate all of one's choices of material possessions.

Gandhi was therefore advocating a *swadeshi* consciousness that was far stricter than that of the Bengali nationalists. To them, the country of origin (Britain) and not the means of production (mills) was the criterion for determining the morality of cloth. Gandhi's Movement was designed to build an Indian consumer awareness that would be respectful of local products made with local labour against imported or industrialized goods that were robbing Indians of their livelihood and their dignity. The purest expression of the Movement was his *swadeshi* vow, voluntarily taken, to live an ethical economy that would be constructive and sustainable for all people, including the poorest, marginalised and outcaste.¹⁷

The first piece of hand-carded, hand-spun and hand-woven cloth was manufactured in the *ashram* during 1917-1918. This cloth was coarse and Gandhi named it '*khadi*.' He saw the use of *khadi* as integral to his now determined thrust towards *purna swaraj* or holistic freedom: "Place *khadi* in my hands and I shall place *swaraj* in yours."¹⁸ Thus, Gandhi's '*Khadi* Movement' began – a campaign for independence by means of re-clothing an entire nation.

Gandhi was insistent on the nation's singular option for *khadi*. He called it his weakness: "Of all my foibles, of all my weaknesses and fanaticisms or whatever you like to call them, *khadi* is my pet one [...]. This is sacred cloth."¹⁹ The sacredness of *khadi* lay in the fact that its production and use encouraged human development. It provided supplementary employment to millions of farmers, especially women; it removed the curse of untouchability; it would promote the self-sufficiency of India's villages and restore once again the pride of place that village handicrafts once had. It was therefore based on the principle of the morality of means. The means were pure, just as the end was pure. *Ahimsa* was at the very heart of the production of *khadi*. Furthermore, *khadi* was a sign of unity and the non-violent symbol for a common struggle for *purna swaraj*.

Not everyone shared his enthusiasm. He tried hard to convince his unbelieving audiences accustomed to wearing foreign cloth, as can be seen in this appeal to an audience in Madras city in 1921:

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Not until the message, the peaceful and sacred message of the spinning-wheel has penetrated almost every home of India is swaraj attainable by non-violent methods. It grieves me to find, therefore, in this audience so very few people expressing the swadeshi spirit on their own persons [...] And if you my dear sisters, have followed the trend of my remarks, I hope that you will change your heart tomorrow, and throw away your foreign silks and foreign fineries and dress yourselves in pure, holy khaddar.²⁰

Some in the Congress disliked his insistence on linking *khadi* with national unity. Others profited from wearing *khadi* through the privileges they enjoyed for being considered 'Gandhi's representatives' in far-flung villages. Gandhi was aware of this reality. He sadly admitted: "Wearing *khadi* and having made people believe that they were men of self-sacrifice, such workers deceive society and refuse to make any amends. Such *khadi*-wearers disgrace *khadi*."²¹

The strategy he used to convert the nation to *khadi* was systematically planned. He began by setting up organizations and associations that would promote it. Training centres were established to teach men and women the craft of spinning and weaving. He persuaded the Congress Party to set an example by wearing *khadi* and by putting *khadi* at the centre of its policies. He organized bonfires to burn foreign cloth as part of the acceptance of the *swadeshi* vow while volunteers sold *khadi* through the streets and made door-to-door collections of foreign cloth which would then be burned as a sign of protest. He encouraged the production of *khadi* through exhibitions, shops and national schools.²² Nearly twenty-eight years after the initial push given by Gandhi, and many non-violent battles fought by *khadi*-clad masses, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, would call *khadi* "the livery of India's freedom."²³

The Charkha

If *khadi* was the livery of India's freedom, the *charkha*, or spinning wheel was the instrument and symbol of the *Swadeshi* Movement that generated it. Gandhi sought justification for his inspiration of the *charkha* from the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Work is more excellent than idleness; [...] he that abstains to help the rolling wheels of this great world, glutting his idle sense, lives a lost life, shameful and vain."²⁴

Already in 1909, in *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi had the basic intuition that only a common and concerted effort on the part of all his countrymen would result in *swaraj*. He believed that spinning was the slow but steady way to move forward: "It was in London in 1909 that I discovered the wheel [...] I saw as in a flash that without the spinning wheel there was no swaraj."²⁵ He explicitly appealed to lawyers, doctors and the wealthy to begin spinning with the rest of

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their countrymen and women. However, as he himself admits, he uses the word 'loom' to mean the 'spinning-wheel,' because he did not as yet know the distinction between the loom and the wheel:

In South Africa, I discovered that if India was to survive and progress non-violently, it could only be through the *charkha*—the *charkha* alone can be a symbol of non-violence. We may draw strength from other symbols as well but such strength may not lead to the world's well-being.²⁶

Sabarmati *Ashram* provided him the platform for experimentation in the use of the spinning wheel. It was here that he saw its utility for the first time. Initially, the members of the *ashram* started with weaving mill-spun yarn and foreign yarn due to its fine quality. But Gandhi did not find this method truthful to the principle of *swadeshi*. With great difficulty, weavers were persuaded to weave *swadeshi* mill yarn.

He rapidly sums up the history of the wheel in his *Swadeshi Movement* as follows:

Though the wheel was discovered to the mental vision in 1909, it saw work only in 1918, after three years' of patient and strenuous effort. The first khadi vow (very much adulterated to suit the fashionable sisters of Bombay) was taken in 1919. The wheel found a place in the Congress programme in 1921. The history of the movement since then is an open book still being written in the lives of the two thousand odd organizers and nearly seventy thousand spinners in whose lives the wheel has brought a ray of hope [...] Multiply the return of one wheel by say one hundred million and the result will convince the most confirmed unbeliever of its potency.²⁷

In 1928, writing to an admirer who praised him for having discovered the role of the spinning wheel as an emancipatory tool, he was able to say that his plea did not fall on deaf ears. Indeed lawyers, doctors and others had begun spinning by way of sacrifice and were also promoting the Movement, although, he lamented, "they are yet far too few for the purpose of waking the millions from their helpless lethargy."²⁸

Gandhi had known village life and its hardships better than most Congress members who were mostly bred in the towns and cities of India. The *satyagraha* campaigns at Champaran, Ahmedabad and Kheda from 1915 to 1918 exposed him to the terrible struggles that farmers and workers had to undergo as the two most oppressed sections of the Indian society. He tried his best to convince certain elitist Congressmen who refused to see the spinning wheel as the means through which poverty could be eradicated:

Probably very few workers have noticed that progress of hand-spinning means the greatest voluntary co-operation the world has ever seen. It means co-operation among millions of human beings scattered over a very wide area and working for their daily bread [...] I have suggested hand-spinning as the only ready means of driving away penury and making famine of work and wealth impossible [...] No scheme of irrigation or other agricultural improvement that human ingenuity can conceive can deal with the vastly scattered population of India or provide work for masses of mankind who are constantly thrown out of employment [...]. If he would visualize the picture of the Indian skeleton, he must think of the eighty per cent of the population which is working its own fields and which has practically no occupation for at least four months in the year and which therefore lives on the borderland of starvation. This is the normal condition. The ever-recurring famines make a large addition to this enforced idleness. What is the work that these men and women can easily do in their own cottages so as to supplement their very slender resources? Does anyone still doubt that it is only hand-spinning and nothing else?²⁹

Another way he tried convincing skeptics was by listing the various advantages of the spinning wheel. It was cheap to produce, involving minimum human drudgery for its operation. It was easy to learn, requiring no special training. It could be plied by children, the aged and the handicapped. It provided dignified employment at one's doorstep. The work could be undertaken according to one's convenience. It was the most potent instrument for securing co-operation among people scattered in remote villages across the vast subcontinent.³⁰

One of Gandhi's greatest preoccupations was to induce the middle classes to spin too – especially those living in cities. He knew that many of them had no need of spinning for any practical gain, yet he wanted them to do so on religious and moral grounds, as 'a sacrament'³¹ and a symbol of unity with their poverty-stricken brothers and sisters. It is for this reason he suggested that Congress pass the 'spinning franchise' – suggesting that Congress members spin for thirty minutes a day instead of their four annas membership fee. However, due to the strong disagreement that ensued, he conceded to those who opposed the move in a speech given at the AICC meeting in Bombay on 23 November, 1924. In *Navajivan* he explained:

The object of the Congress resolution was to make the middle-classes spin religiously. If this effort succeeds, the cult of spinning will be revived and the hungry stomachs of the poor will be filled. Before the spinning-wheel finds a place in every home, faith in its power has to be inspired. This can be done if the middle-classes accept the spinning-wheel as a

sacrament; popularization of khadi is as imperative as the spread of the spinning-wheel. The day when khadi sells as easily as ghee, we may presume that there will be no more starvation deaths in India.³²

Thanks to his efforts at propagating the spinning wheel, the demand for *khadi* increased. He established the *Charkha Sangh* or the All India Spinners' Association (AISA) in 1925 in order to protect the interests of the spinners. It was a voluntary organization, intended to supervise and guide *khadi* work. Ten million rupees of the Tilak *Swaraj* Fund was used for promoting spinning. This brought about a spate of charges against him which he regarded as his 'bouquets'.³³

On many occasions, Gandhi emphasized the symbolic power of the *charkha*. It was not just an instrument of production, nor merely a strategy for a progressive, non-exploitative society. It was above all a symbol of the spirit of unity that he wanted to see and realized in every corner of the land. The holistic inspiration of this symbol could be imbibed only by learning how to use it to spin. In doing so one would attain harmony with one's self and with everything else.

Just as arms symbolize violence the *charkha* symbolizes non-violence, in the sense that we can most directly realize non-violence through it. But it cannot symbolize non-violence so long as we do not work in accordance with its spirit. The sword in Mussolini's hall seemed to say 'Touch me and I will cut you.' It gave a vivid picture of violence. It seemed to ask you to touch it and realize its power. So also we must illustrate the power of the *charkha* so that a mere look at it may speak to us about non-violence.³⁴

It is important to mention, that in 1944, after years of attempting to promote the benefits of spinning through the AISA, Gandhi himself was disillusioned with the association and doubted its effectiveness in carrying "the message of the *charkha* to every home."³⁵ He was disappointed that thousands of villages had not yet been impacted by its influence. He considered disbanding the organisation and decentralising it.

Gandhi's passion for the *charkha* was no secret. He confessed it before Congress leaders in these prophetic words: "I do believe in the capacity of khaddar. I cannot help myself in so believing. In my dream, in my sleep, while eating, I think of the spinning-wheel. The spinning-wheel is my sword. To me it is the symbol of India's liberty."³⁶

Non-cooperation and the Swadeshi Movement

Gandhi gave the Governor notice of the people's non-cooperation with the Government on 22 June, 1920. He issued a press statement on 7 July and, the same day, the Non-Cooperation committee issued a notice to the public on the meaning and methods of non-cooperation. On 1 August, the Movement was officially inaugurated in Bombay with the returning of the three medals and a covering letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford.³⁷ The letter stated that he was returning the medals "in pursuance of the scheme of non-cooperation." It contained these memorable words: "I can retain neither respect nor affection for a government which has been moving from wrong to wrong to defend its immorality."³⁸

On 31 July, 1921, exactly a year after the Non-cooperation Movement was inaugurated, Gandhi addressed a historic meeting to inaugurate the *swadeshi* campaign with a bonfire of foreign cloth near Elphinstone Mill at Parel, Bombay. Later that day, he spoke at the inauguration of a *khadi* exhibition organized by the national women's committee (*Rashtriya Stree Sabha*), and the following day, 1 August, he addressed a public gathering on the seashore at Chowpati, Bombay.

The Non-cooperation Movement and the *Swadeshi* Movement went hand in hand. While the latter was the term often used by Gandhi, popular expressions also referred to it as the '*Khadi* Movement' because of its strong affinity with the use of home-spun *khadi*. However, the term *swadeshi* was conceptually richer as it promoted self-sufficiency and a legitimate respect for all things local. The merging of the *swadeshi* and non-cooperation campaigns also sharpened the focus of the people. It heightened their sense of identity, unity and historical consciousness – all necessary elements to stimulate and sustain their active participation in the public protests that were being organized. Thus, together with the use of powerful symbols like the wearing of *khadi* and the promotion of cottage industries, further symbolism was added to the Movement through the burning of foreign cloth, and the boycott of British titles, loans, courts, schools and councils.³⁹

Rabindranath Tagore had already renounced his titles soon after the Jallianwala Baug massacre in 1919. His and Gandhi's own example urged people to act and the cry of *swadeshi* rent the air. Men and women took to the streets in non-violent protest marches. Even Congress leaders, many who formed part of the middle and upper classes, shed their westernised garb in favour of home spun cotton. Those who had titles and honours renounced them. Lawyers stopped practising, schools and colleges were empty and thousands of volunteers from the city trudged long distances in the villages to

promote non-violent non-cooperation with the British Government. Kripalani offers a vivid description of the highly charged situation.

The people, somnolent for centuries, woke up in the exultation of a new awareness of their human dignity, filled with courage and a spirit of sacrifice. Bonfires of foreign cloth lit up the streets and squares in cities, towns and villages and the hum of the spinning wheel rose like a sacrificial chant in thousands of homes. Women, secluded for centuries in their self-contained domestic worlds, marched in the streets, shoulder to shoulder with men, and, incidentally, freed themselves from age-old shackles.⁴⁰

Swadeshi became the indispensable condition for *swaraj*: "We will not attain *swaraj*, unless we have organized ourselves in a methodical, intelligent and co-operative manner. *Swadeshi* means non-cooperation in the second great department of national life."⁴¹ In his speech at Nagpur in 1921 Gandhi declared that the first condition for *swaraj* was non-violence, the second was Hindu-Muslim unity and the third was *swadeshi*.⁴² He wanted every province and district in India to concentrate all their energy on activity to promote *swadeshi*. He advised every participant in the Non-cooperation Movement to embark on civil disobedience in a peaceful way and to be ready to accept imprisonment without fear. "I have a settled conviction that if we exhibit the strength of character, the faculty of reorganizing and the power of exemplary self-control all of which is necessary for full *swadeshi*, we shall attain *swaraj* without more."⁴³

The Boycott of Foreign Cloth and the Closure of Indian Mills

The *Swadeshi* Movement evoked much criticism from the Indian mill owners from its very inception. They felt threatened by the presence of cloth production in their area. According to one zealous mill owner, there was only one solution to generating self-sufficiency and eradicating dependence on the British: it was through the establishing of more mills run by Indians. He believed that the import of foreign cloth would automatically cease to the extent to which Indians increased their cloth production and its quality. Gandhi was not convinced by the cogency of his economic logic. The intention to promote hand-spun *khadi* was not meant merely to make the supply meet the demand as intended by the profit-oriented mill-owners, but was aimed at providing work for the under-employed masses. Gandhi believed that economics had to be person-centred and community based. Only that community would be respected in which its weakest link became its resilient strength. True economics had to serve the poorest before it could serve the rich.

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It is no use my becoming virtually an agent for the mills. That would do more harm than good to the country. My work should be, and therefore is, to organize the production of hand spun cloth, and to find means for the disposal of the Khadi thus produced. I am concentrating my attention on the production of Khadi. 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 clothe the people of India with Khadi woven out of it. I do not know how far this movement is going to succeed, at present it is only in the incipient stage. But I have full faith in it.⁴⁴

It is significant that Gandhi chose to begin the *Swadeshi* Movement so close to one of Bombay's largest cotton mills. As the boycott of foreign cloth gathered momentum and more bonfires were organized across the country, he campaigned for the closure of profit-driven mills through the promotion of the *charkha* and *khadi*. It did not matter whether the mills were in Bombay or Manchester.

It may be considered a heresy, but I am bound to say that it were better for us to send money to Manchester and to use flimsy Manchester cloth than to multiply mills in India. By using Manchester cloth we only waste our money, but by reproducing Manchester in India, we shall keep our money at the price of our blood.⁴⁵

The price of the blood of the workers who were losing work in England due to the Indian revolution was no less precious to Gandhi than the millions who sought to gain from the spread of *swadeshi* in India. During his visit to England, he insisted on meeting with the workers of Lancashire who were hardest hit by Gandhian ideas. He listened to the unemployed workers with sympathy before speaking about the hardships of their Indian 'brother and sisters'. With acute sensitivity and his characteristic straight forwardness he presented the facts that moved his listeners and won their hearts.

You have 3 million unemployed but we have nearly 300 million unemployed and underemployed for half the year. Your average unemployment dole is 70 shillings. Our average income is 7 shillings and 6 pence a month. [...] Imagine therefore what a calamity it must be to have 300 million unemployed, several million becoming degraded every day for want of employment, devoid of self-respect, devoid of faith in God. I dare not take before them the message of God [...] I can take before them a message of God only by taking the sacred message of work before them. It is good enough to talk of God whilst we are sitting here after a nice breakfast and looking forward to a nicer luncheon, but how am I to

talk of God to the millions who have to go without two meals a day? To them God can only appear as bread and butter.⁴⁶

Gandhi's preferential concern for the employment of millions on the periphery (instead of the accretion of wealth for a privileged few) can be seen against the context of his much broader campaign against the use of machinery. In *Hind Swaraj* he wrote boldly against the industrial revolution that had gripped Europe and the rapid 'craze for machinery.' Many who saw industrialization as an inevitable trend towards technological advancement scoffed at his views, accusing him of taking India back to the Stone Age. In answer to a question as to whether he was against all machinery he replied:

How can I be (against all machinery) when I know that even this body is a most delicate piece of machinery? The spinning wheel is a machine; a little toothpick is a machine. What I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on "saving labour" till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour, not for a fraction of mankind but for all. I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions.⁴⁷

The Gandhi Topi

Gandhi's use of the British *sola topi*⁴⁸ while moving about in Kheda district in the summer of 1918 and the negative reaction he received from locals for wearing it, alerted him to the importance that people in India attached to appropriate head dressing. Amidst the wide variety of Indian cultures and religions and within the divisions of caste itself, the type of headgear a man used identified the community he belonged to. Class distinctions were also clearly evident by the quality and cost of the caps they wore. Headgear, therefore, was a brand that went where a man went and, depending on his social status, it brought him respectability or disdain.

In his zeal for unity and equality among all types of people of the subcontinent, this detail could not escape his attention. He was too aware of the power of symbolization to treat this divisive social stereotyping as inconsequential. He began to look for solutions to make headgear *uniform* and *affordable* for all – two quintessential factors that polarised the masses and threatened national identity. His solution was the *khadi* cap which was affectionately nicknamed the 'Gandhi topi.' In a conversation with a friend, Gandhi reveals the thinking at the base of his final decision:

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I considered carefully all the caps and head-coverings which obtain in the various parts of Bharat [India]. I bore in mind that it is a hot country, and therefore, our heads need to be kept covered. The Bengalis and some South Bharati Brahmins go bare-headed of course, but, as a rule, Bharatis [Indians] always wear something or other on their heads. The Punjabi phenta (turban) looks fine, but it takes up too much cloth. The pugree is a dirty thing. It goes on absorbing perspiration, but does not show it, and so seldom gets washed. Our Gujarati conical Bangalore caps look hideous to me. The Maharashtra Hungarian caps are a little better, but they are made of felt. As for the U. P. [Uttar Pradesh] and Bihari caps, they are so thin and useless that they can hardly be considered caps at all! They are not even becoming. So, thinking over all these various types of headgear, I came to the conclusion that the Kashmiri cap was the best. It is light as well as elegant; it is easy to make; it can be folded, which makes it easily portable. One can put it in one's pocket, or pack it comfortable in one's trunk. The Kashmiri cap is made from wool. I thought it should be made of cotton cloth. Having thus chosen the form, I then began to consider the colour. Which colour would be most suitable for the cap? Not a single colour appealed to me. So I fixed upon white. White shows up dirt and grease, so white caps would have to be frequently washed (a great recommendation!). Also, white cloth is easily washable. The cap being of the folding sort, it would be quite easy to press after washing, and iron out into a fresh, clean, smooth, white cap! What could be better or more becoming? So, having thought this out, I made this cap.⁴⁹

Through the white *khadi* cap Gandhi was eager to create visual uniformity that never existed in Indian headgear. He hoped it would symbolize the unity of purpose and action in the struggle for freedom. This is why he was against coloured imitations of the cap or those made of other materials like, for instance, leather.

The khadi cap can be used by all, the rich and the poor [...] the idea that all should have the same kind of cap on their heads is well worth considering [...] only the khadi cap is to be regarded as swadeshi. Such a cap needs no stamp. A swadeshi cap should be one that can be identified even by children.⁵⁰

As the popularity of the Gandhi cap spread, he began to grasp the full potentiality of its subversive symbolism. British authorities in some parts of India began to prevent its use. Gandhi cap wearers were dismissed from government jobs, some were fined and sometimes had to endure physical beatings.⁵¹ A chief justice of the high court of Ratnagari declared that "any pleader wearing a Gandhi cap in court" would be considered "guilty of disrespect to the Judge."⁵² Gandhi's answer stressed the symbolic value of the cap.

The principle underlying this war against khadi caps is of the highest importance. It shows how innocent but moral and economic movements are attempted to be killed by their adversaries [...] Nor do pleaders who adopt the national cap do so out of any disrespect for the court, but they do it out of respect for themselves and the nation to which they belong. They do it because they do not wish to conceal their religion or their politics, whichever way one regards the adoption of the khadi cap.⁵³

On seeing the power and the popularity of this new symbol of unity that he created, he was moved to say, "thousands will be prepared to die for the khadi cap which is fast becoming a visible mark of swadeshi and swaraj."⁵⁴ Yet there are moments when Gandhi offset British fears by belittling its importance. His reply to the Gwalior State officer who prohibited the cap because he saw it as a symbol of non-cooperation is a case in point.

I am sorry for this unnecessary prejudice against a harmless and cheap cap. I venture to inform the Gwalior authorities that, whilst it is true that many non-co-operators wear what is known as 'Gandhi caps', there are thousands who wear them simply for convenience and cheapness, but who are no more non-co-operators than the Peshi Officer himself.⁵⁵

There were also times when he suggested that the symbolic significance of the cap was more the product of the Government's fears over a tense situation than the result of his own design. In maintaining this ambivalence, Gandhi, on one hand, benefited from the symbolic popularity of the cap, while on the other hand, calmed British apprehensions by emphasising its apparent innocence.⁵⁶

*The March to Dandi*⁵⁷

In 1870, in order to decentralize its power in the colonies, the British Empire decided to generate local revenue. In India, one of the taxed items was salt. An all-Indian ban on manufacturing salt locally was declared in order to safeguard this important source of Imperial income.⁵⁸ The law dictated that anyone breaking the ban committed a criminal offence punishable by law. Thus, the only salt that people could legally consume was that which was taxed by the Government. No Indian could gather or produce salt even though it could easily be collected from the three oceans that touched the vast coastline of the Indian peninsula. The law affected all sections of the population; even the very poor were not spared. Imposed from England, it did not take into account the importance of salt as a biological necessity for the metabolism of the human body in a tropical climate.⁵⁹

In early 1930, Gandhi mulled over the possibility of breaking the

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salt law as a high point in the *Swadeshi* and Civil Disobedience Movements. When he shared his plan with Congress intellectuals many were baffled by the idea of having to challenge the salt tax instead of weightier political matters; or of having to climax the march at a little-known town by the sea instead of at the very centre of governance. The idea met with ridicule by Government officials as well. They called it ‘the kindergarten stage of political revolution,’ and laughed at the idea of the King-Emperor being unseated by boiling sea water in a kettle.⁶⁰

Gandhi, however, was unperturbed. Salt was a clear case of British impropriety that affected the lives of all Indians. After nearly ten years of campaigning at the grass roots in promotion of his ‘Constructive Programme,’ the time was ripe for a groundswell of protest by which people all over India could manifest their unity of purpose and action, a unity that although manifested in the *Swadeshi* Movement needed an international manifestation of non-violent revival and revolt. Through the years it had affected all, enthusiasts and skeptics alike. The enthusiasts literally wore their hearts on their *khadi* sleeves. The skeptics simply wore *khadi*, so as not to appear against the current. This visible manifestation of unity would have a formidably psychological impact on the populace. The opportunity had now come to rally together the enormous moral and psychological energy of the masses around the principles he had been propagating since his arrival in India. Gandhi was ready to put forth his best idea in the practice of non-cooperation, *swadeshi* and *ahimsa*: the Dandi March.⁶¹

Before setting out on the March, Gandhi, as usual, informed the British authorities of his plan.⁶² He explained to the Viceroy, Lord Irwin – addressing him as “Dear friend” – that he meant no harm to the English people; it was only English rule that he considered a ‘curse’. He enumerated the evils caused by the subjugation and respectfully yet forthrightly demonstrated why he considered it opportune that “India must [...] evolve [non-violent] force enough to free herself from the embrace of death [...]”⁶³

But if you cannot see your way to deal with these evils and my letter makes no appeal to your heart, on the 11th day of this month, I shall proceed with such co-workers of the Ashram as I can take, to disregard the provisions of the salt laws. I regard this tax to be the most iniquitous of all from the poor man’s standpoint. As the independence movement is essentially for the poorest in the land the beginning will be made with this evil. The wonder is that we have submitted to the cruel monopoly for so long. It is, I know, open to you to frustrate my design by arresting me. I hope that there will be tens of thousands ready, in a disciplined manner,

to take up the work after me, and, in the act of disobeying the Salt Act, to lay themselves open to the penalties of a law that should never have disfigured the Statute-book.⁶⁴

Gandhi concluded, "This letter is not in any way intended as a threat but is a simple and sacred duty peremptory on a civil resister." And signed off, "I remain, Your sincere friend."⁶⁵

The viceroy's reply was brief. It expressed his regret "at Mr. Gandhi's contemplating a course of action which was clearly bound to involve the violation of the law and danger to public peace."⁶⁶ Irwin did not realize that Gandhi was aiming far higher than a mere disobedience of the salt law. He wanted the March to be his living sermon⁶⁷ to the world on the power of the moral right against the physical might of the greatest Empire on earth. On reaching Dandi he sent a cable to his American friends written in his own hand on 5 April 1930: "I want world sympathy in this battle of Right against Might."⁶⁸

Interestingly, the March began on the morning of the twelfth day of March. He was accompanied by seventy-eight members of the *ashram*, men and women wearing *khadi*, all of them following Gandhi as he led them with nothing but a bamboo staff in hand. It was a historic 24-day march to the sea from the Sabarmati *Ashram* on the outskirts of Ahmedabad to Dandi, a distance of 241 miles.⁶⁹ Here was a sixty-one year old man, weighing forty-five kilograms, dressed in a loin cloth, walking briskly through village roads while thousands of *khadi*-clad men and women began to join him in procession. Villagers flocked from miles around to take a *darshan*⁷⁰ of this unarmed messenger of God. On reaching Dandi, on the morning of 6 April, Gandhi bent down to pick up a handful of sand that contained crystals of salt. In doing so he broke the salt law and courted arrest.

This simple gesture sent ripples across the subcontinent. People everywhere were stirred into defying the salt law. Arrests were made. Leaders were taken into custody. No less than 60,000 Indians were jailed. Moreover, for the first time in the history of India, women emerged from their homes to become equal partners with men in their one struggle for liberation. They took to the streets and picketed liquor and foreign cloth shops. From Dandi, where he had made the first symbolic breach of the Salt Laws, Gandhi sent this message: "at present Indian self-respect is symbolized, as it were, in a handful of salt in the Satyagrahi's hand. Let the fist be broken, but let there be no surrender of salt."⁷¹ Thanks to the cable sent out to journalists on 5 April, the world – especially America – began to take notice. Gandhi was arrested exactly a month later. The British were compelled to

face the leader of the people they had subjugated.⁷² Gandhi was released on 26 January, 1931 and was invited to the Second Round Table Conference held in England in November, 1931. From then on, the struggle for Indian independence continued for another seventeen years and was followed up by the international press because, far beyond the Indian struggle, the future of colonialism was being axed at its very root.⁷³

It is unlikely that this highpoint in the struggle for Indian Independence would have had the same impact were it not for the ten years of the *Swadeshi* Movement and the Constructive Programme that prepared the ground in remote districts. Photographs testify to the *khadi* revolution that gave the entire event its symbolic value. Jawaharlal Nehru summed up the quintessential meaning of the Movement and the March when he declared: "People of common clay felt the spark of life."⁷⁴

Notes and References

1. *Young India*, 15-9-1927, cited by Romesh Diwan, "Mahatma Gandhi, Amartya Sen, and Poverty" in *Gandhi Marg*, vol. 20, no. 4, January-March, 1999, p. 422. A 'pie' was the smallest denomination of monetary coins in British India.
2. See my article: "'Half-Naked Fakir', The story of Gandhi's personal search for sartorial integrity," *Gandhi Marg*, vol. 31, no. 1 (April-June), Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, 2009, pp. 5-30.
3. Cf. M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Henceforth *Autobiography*), Ahmedabad, Navajivan, 2005, p. 48.
4. *Atmashakti* was a term used by Rabindranath Tagore, one of the principal protagonists in the Bengal *Swadeshi* Movement of 1905-08. Cf. *Banglapedia*: http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/S_0628.HTM (retrieved: 21-02-2006)
5. R. K. Prabhu – R. R. Rao, *The Mind of the Mahatma* (Henceforth, *MMG*), Ahmedabad, Navajivan, p. 410.
6. Bipin Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India*, New Delhi, 1966, pp. 122-123, quoted in Susan Bean's "Gandhi and Khadi, Fabric of Independence" in Annette Weiner & Jane Schneider (eds.), *Cloth and Human Experience*, Washington, Smithsonian Books, 1989, p. 363.
7. Cf. Chandra, 123 ff.
8. Cf. *Ibid.*
9. Cf. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Henceforth *CWMG*), vol. 5, p. 114.
10. Cf. *CWMG*, vol. 5, p. 156.

11. *Ibid.*
12. CWMG, vol. 9, p. 118. See his speech at the Gurukul Anniversary in India, on 20 March, 1916.
13. CWMG, vol. 13, p. 261.
14. It was popularly called the 'Sabarmati Ashram' as it was situated on the banks of the Sabarmati river.
15. CWMG, vol.13, p. 93 (italics mine).
16. *Ibid.* (italics mine).
17. Cf. Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters, Dress and Identity in India*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 87.
18. CWMG, vol.23, p. 86.
19. CWMG, vol. 23, p. 106.
20. CWMG, vol. 21, pp. 122-123.
21. CWMG, vol. 31, p. 57.
22. Cf. Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, p. 87.
23. M. K. Gandhi, *Constructive Programme, Its Meaning and Place*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, (1941) 2005, p. 10.
24. CWMG, vol. 21, p.307.
25. CWMG, vol. 37, p. 288. Other sources suggest 1908
26. CWMG, vol. 78, p. 63.
27. CWMG, vol. 37, pp. 288-289.
28. CWMG, vol. 37, p. 288.
29. CWMG, vol. 21, p. 390.
30. Cf. CWMG, vol. 25, p.22. In this passage Gandhi enumerates the many advantages of the spinning wheel of which only a few are mentioned above.
31. Cf. CWMG, vol. 25, p. 11.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Cf. CWMG, vol. 78, p.64.
34. *Ibid.*, p.76.
35. *Ibid.*, p.63.
36. CWMG, vol. 25, p. 351. J. Nehru, a member of the Swarajist Party that had opposed the spinning franchise in 1924 later nicknamed *khadi* the 'livery of India's freedom,' concurring therefore with Gandhi's early conviction.
37. Cf. CWMG, vol. 18, p.104. Gandhi returned all three medals he had received in South Africa: The Kaiser-i-Hind gold medal for humanitarian work in South Africa, the Zulu War medal for his war services as officer in charge of the Indian Volunteers Service Corps in 1906 and the Boer War medal for his services as Assistant Superintendent of the Indian Volunteer Stretcher-Bearer Corps during the Boer War of 1899.
38. The well known quote is retained and is taken from K. Kripalani, *Gandhi: A Life*, New Delhi, National Book Trust, 1968, p. 114. The quotation in the *Letter to the Viceroy*, however, reads: "Events, which have happened during the past month, have confirmed me in the opinion that the Imperial Government have acted... in an

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- unscrupulous, immoral and unjust manner and have been moving from wrong to wrong in order to defend their immorality. I can retain neither respect nor affection for such a Government.” Cf. CWMG, vol. 18, p. 104.
39. Cf. CWMG, vol.18, p.13.
 40. Kripalani, *Gandhi: A Life*, p. 114.
 41. CWMG, vol. 21, p. 108. Here Gandhi also outlines the economic, moral and political aspects of hand-spinning.
 42. Cf. CWMG, vol 19, pp. 446-449.
 43. CWMG, vol. 21, p. 181.
 44. *Autobiography*, p. 456.
 45. Kripalani, *Gandhi: a Life*, p. 85.
 46. Cf. Kripalani, *Gandhi: a Life*, p. 131.
 47. Kripalani, *Gandhi: a Life*, p. 121.
 48. The *sola topi* also called the ‘pith helmet’ was a hat (*topi*) made from the pith of the sola plant. It was an ingenious British adaptation to the hot Indian climate.
 49. Kakasaheb Kalelkar, *Stray Glimpses of Bapu*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Trust, 1950, p. 97-98.
 50. CWMG, vol. 20, p. 385.
 51. Cf. Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, p. 84.
 52. CWMG, vol 22, p.16.
 53. *Ibid.*
 54. CWMG, vol. 21, p. 507.
 55. CWMG, vol. 23, p. 35.
 56. Cf. Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, p. 85.
 57. For the route of the Dandi March see the map inserted between, pp. 64-65 of CWMG, vol. 43.
 58. Cf. Nabendu Sen, *India in the International Economy 1858-1913. Some aspects of Trade and Finance*, Calcutta, Orient Longman, 1992, p. 45. More details appear in Appendix, 3.1, p. 541.
 59. Cf. Mohinder Singh, “The Story of Salt”, *Gandhi Marg*, October-December 2002, vol.24, No.3, web version: <http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/the%20story%20of%20Salt.htm> (retrieved: 7-6-2006).
 60. Cf. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 294.
 61. It is interesting to note that while Gandhi saw that the issue of salt affected all Indians, he himself did not eat it. He maintained a saltless diet from the time he was a non-European prisoner in a South African jail.
 62. Cf. CWMG, vol. 43, pp.2-8.
 63. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
 64. *Ibid.*
 65. Gandhi concluded his letter with these words: “Therefore I am having it specially delivered by a young English friend who believes in the Indian cause and is a full believer in non-violence and whom Providence seems to have sent to me, as it were, for the very purpose.”

The name of the young man was Reginald Reynolds. Referring to it in *To Live in Mankind*, Reynolds observes: "Before I went Gandhi insisted I should read the letter carefully, as he did not wish me to associate myself with it unless I was in complete agreement with its contents. My taking of this letter was, in fact, intended to be symbolic of the fact that this was not merely a struggle between the Indians and the British [...]" CWMG, vol. 43, p. 8, footnote 2.

66. Quoted by Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p.292.
67. Cf. Thomas Weber, "Gandhi's Salt March as Living Sermon" in *Gandhi Marg*, vol.22, no. 4, January –March 2001, p.417.
68. CWMG, vol. 43, 180. The involvement of American reporters in the liberation of India can be seen in the international messages that Gandhi sent through the new cable-radio company that linked Britain to America and the British colonies that had been set up barely a year before, in 1929. See my book: *Clothing for Liberation*, Delhi, Sage, p. 19 and p. 36, fn.93.
69. Weber puts the number of participants at 80 and the number of days at 25. Cf. Weber, "Gandhi's Salt March", *Gandhi Marg*, vol.22, p. 418.
70. *Darshan* is understood to mean 'a divine sight', applied to the receiving of the saintly glance of a holy person because it is believed to confer blessings.
71. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 297.
72. Cf. Weber, "Gandhi's Salt March," *Gandhi Marg*, vol.22, p. 418.
73. See list of countries that became free after India's independence in my book: *Khadi: Gandhi's Mega Symbol of Subversion*, Delhi, Sage, 2012, 256-257.
74. Weber, "Gandhi's Salt March", *Gandhi Marg*, vol.22, p. 419.

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Quarterly Journal of the
GANDHI PEACE FOUNDATION

VOLUME THIRTYTHREE □ NUMBER ONE □ APRIL-JUNE 2011

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