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MAHATMA GANDHI AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

A cause is often greater than the man. Certainly the spinning wheel is greater than myself; with it, in my opinion, is mixed up the well-being of the whole mass of Indian humanity.

– M. K. GANDHI

THE first article of Gandhiji's faith, as he himself has said, was non-violence. Therefore he could not accept a society that produced violence. True civilisation, he said, was to be found where industries had not entered and cast their influence. India, before it felt the impact of industries through the British rule, represented this true civilisation.

Mahatma Gandhi's ideas about self-sufficiency and handicrafts were directly related to his views on industries and industrial society. Gandhiji believed that industrial societies were based on an endless production of commodities. This produced greed and resulted in competition. The end result of this was violence and war.

What I object to is the craze for 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 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.

– M. K. GANDHI

Young India, 13 November 1924



Even in the twentieth century, Gandhiji argued, it was possible to find large areas in India that were untouched by industries. The future of India and of its civilisation lay in these villages which were governed by simple norms of reciprocity and self-sufficiency. Gandhiji wanted to revive these villages, their craft economy and their practices and make them represent a system that was completely different from Western societies based on industry. His ideas about handicrafts were part of this vision.

THE MEANING OF SWARAJ

Gandhiji described this vision in many of his writings, most notably in *Hind Swaraj*, a treatise written in 1909 while he was aboard a ship, coming back from Britain. He wrote about the idea of a self-contained village republic inhabited by individuals whose lives were self-regulated. In Gandhiji's philosophy, *swaraj* for the nation did not mean merely political independence from British rule. *Swaraj*, for him, was something more substantive, involving the freedom of individuals to regulate their

own lives without harming one another. His *swaraj* was one where every individual was his or her own ruler, with the capacity to control and regulate his or her own life. This would remove inequalities of power and status in society and enable proper reciprocity.

Gandhiji certainly did not want British rule to be replaced by another form of rule where Western institutions of governance and civil society would be run by Indians instead of white men. That would be "English rule without the Englishman". He wrote that such a process "would make India English. And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan, but

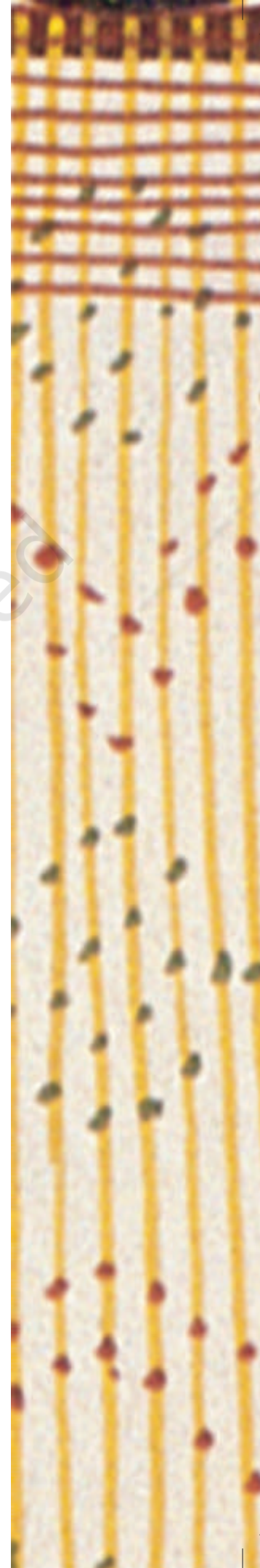


Englistan. This is not the *swaraj* I want". *Swaraj*, from Gandhiji's perspective, would have to be located not only outside the domain of British political control, but also beyond the influence of Western civilisation.

SPINNING THE IDEA OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY

However, for all this to happen, Indians would have to take care to revive and preserve all the village arts and crafts. Among the crafts, the one on which Gandhiji put the greatest emphasis was spinning and weaving. He wrote, "What is the kind of service that the teeming millions of India most need at the present time, that can be easily understood and appreciated by all, that is easy to perform and will, at the same time enable the crores of our semi-starved countrymen to live? And the reply came—that it is the universalisation of khadi or the spinning-wheel that can fulfil these conditions." Spinning, an integral aspect of Indian handicrafts, had to be made an essential part of the lives of the common people. This would make the common people self-sufficient and thus enable them to survive. The poor of India, if they were to prosper, needed a subsidiary source of occupation and livelihood. They could not remain solely dependent on agriculture. Gandhiji suggested that hand-spinning and, to a lesser extent, hand-weaving could become the subsidiary source. He commented, "This industry flourished in India a hundred and fifty years ago and at that time we were not as miserably poor as we are today."

In this way, the villages in which they lived would be less dependent on mills and machinery. For Gandhiji this was very important since machines were an instrument of industrial societies. They produced in massive quantities. Thus the spread of khadi would challenge the influence of mills and machines and the import of cotton to India from England, and would enable the people of India to free themselves non-violently from the negative influences of industries and the violence they inevitably produced.



In 1921, during a tour of South India, Gandhiji shaved his head and began wearing a khadi *dhoti*, rather than mill-made cloth imported from abroad, in order to identify with the poor. His new appearance also came to symbolise asceticism and abstinence—qualities he celebrated in opposition to the consumerist culture of the modern world. Gandhiji encouraged other nationalist leaders who dressed in western clothes to adopt Indian attire. He requested them all also to spend some time each day working on the *charkha*. He told them that the act of spinning would help them to break the boundaries that prevailed within the traditional caste system, between mental labour and manual labour.

– *Young India*, 13 November 1924

Gandhiji was doing a number of things at the same time. He was reviving a handicraft which had been a vital component of village life. Through the revival of spinning and weaving, people would be able to live better since they would have another source of livelihood. Individuals and villages would become more self-sufficient. At the same time, the even bigger purpose of fighting the bad effects of industrialism would also be met.



A Vicious Circle

Through taxes, tariffs and other restrictions the British Government discouraged the production of cotton cloth in India; instead the raw fibre was sent to England for processing. Gandhiji described the process thus:

1. English people buy Indian cotton in the field, picked by Indian labour at seven cents a day, through an optional monopoly.
2. This cotton is shipped on British ships, a three-week journey across the Indian Ocean, down the Red Sea, across the Mediterranean, through Gibraltar, across the Bay of Biscay and the Atlantic Ocean to London. One hundred per cent profit on this freight is regarded as small.
3. The cotton is turned into cloth in Lancashire. You pay shilling wages instead of Indian pennies to your workers. The English worker not only has the advantage of better wages, but the steel companies of England get the profit of building the factories and machines. Wages, profits—all these are spent in England.
4. The finished product is sent back to India at European shipping rates, once again on British ships. The captains, officers, sailors of these ships, whose wages must be paid, are English. The only Indians who profit are a few Lascars who do the dirty work on the boats for a few cents a day.
5. The cloth is finally sold back to the kings and landlords of India who got the money to buy this expensive cloth out of the poor peasants of India who worked at seven cents a day.

— LOUIS FISHER

The Life of Mahatma Gandhi





A few months before India became independent, Gandhiji wrote:

The charkha is the centre of our flag. It is the symbol of unity and the non-violent strength of the millions. The yarn spun by the charkha I consider to be the cementing force which can bind those whom the three colours of the flag represent. That is why I have said that the whole fabric of swaraj hangs on a thread of the handspun yarn and have called the charkha our mightiest weapon.

THE SELF-SUFFICIENT VILLAGE

The idea of self-sufficiency was of crucial importance to Gandhiji. An individual, a village, a country could become independent if only it became self-sufficient. Gandhiji described his ideal Indian village in these terms:

Each village's first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its own cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it could grow useful money crops, thus excluding ganja, tobacco, opium and the like. The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own waterworks, ensuring clean water supply. This can be done through controlled wells or tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the cooperative basis.



Gandhiji emphasised the importance of handicrafts, especially spinning and weaving. But he also spoke of other handicrafts which were part of the hereditary occupation of every villager. The development of handicrafts would add to the total resources of the individual and the village and thus enable both to be self-sufficient and self-regulating. For him a world based on non-violence could only be found in places that were untouched by industries. He found Indian villages to be such places since, in his time, he believed, they were still relatively untouched by industries. For him handicrafts were an integral and vital part of his



programme to revive villages, to make them self-sufficient and to give back to individuals the dignity to regulate their lives. This is the challenge of Gandhiji's vision that India is yet to meet.

Mahatma Gandhi, in the twentieth century, was the single individual who successfully prevented the total eclipse of Indian crafts by relating them to the village economy and the concept of political freedom. He turned the humble spinning wheel into a symbol of defiance by asking people to spin their own cotton at home to weave cloth that was not of British manufacture. It thus became a non-violent and creative weapon of self-reliance and independence.



EXERCISE

1. “The whole fabric of *swaraj* hangs on a thread of the handspun yarn and (that is why) I have called the *charkha* our mightiest weapon.” Explain Gandhiji’s concept of *swaraj*.
2. Explain the idea of Gandhiji’s self-sufficient village. Do you think it is possible to realise this idea in India today? Support your arguments with examples.
3. Describe the meaning of khadi as an essential part of Gandhiji’s philosophy, and its symbolism and meaning today.
4. Write an essay on ‘The Indian Village of my Dreams’.
5. Develop your own strategy for the survival of a craft of your locality in an age of globalisation.

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