

WHEN SPINNING WHEELS SPEAK*

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Abstract

Khadi symbolizes natatioslim, economic freedom, equality, self-reliance and one of the core activities of Gandhi's constructive programmes. It got first priority for the upliftment and making independent of Indian villages. It has also occupied the centre place of village industries. Gandhi sees the inter-dependence of khadi and other cottage industries. The development of these industries will certainly make the village self sustained units that ultimately end the exploitation of villages by cities. Khadi was used as a discursive concept by defining its significance in terms of politics and economics of swadeshi. It also eroded the various Indian shades viz., region, religion, caste, class etc. and put them in only one shade that was Khadi.

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It's Language

Khadi Vastra (cloth) is the product of Charkha (spinning wheel). Gandhi used this charkha as one of the most significant tools to unify the national movement. It symbolises the economic and political activities of the then India that brought closer the diverse population of not only of India but the whole South Asia. Charkha was used as visual symbol as well as symbolic practices. This spinning practices had the potential to overcome labour, gender and religions divisions. It enabled the national movement a pan-Indian national character that went beyond the caste, class, gender, region, race and religious realm. This practice also moulded the Indian population in self sufficiency mode. In 1909

Gandhi made the charkha as the core element of the national movement saying that “without the spinning wheel there was no swaraj.”¹

But Gandhi never clearly revealed its role & importance for the movement, neither limited it either. In fact, the charkha was being discovered, over and over again by individuals and other nationalist leaders Charkha/Khadi's importance also lies in

the growth of the infrastructure around it, including the All India's Spinners' Association. The institutional and verbal setting of Charkha in action reflects the political rhetoric of Gandhi's movement. The numerous impacts came in the forms of news reels, documentary film, posters, banners, art decorations at rallies, the congress flag, political cartoons, photographs and prints relating to the anticolonial movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Spinning took shape at the central point to Swaraj, simply because it was visually easy to read as well as act or to do. Its simplicity transcends regional differences within the sub continent. It also retrieved the lost rural craft. Charkha symbol was not associated with any communal identity viz., Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Parsi, Christian etc. That is why, it played a major role in giving impetus to the national movement in unifying the various communities rural India barring for the elite group. Charkha/spinning is a pre-industrial Indian craft that demonstrates the contemporary success of non-industrial village economy.

Mobilisation through Spinning

Spinning is a symbol, a practice with an object (the wheel and the cotton), a abstract idea. It's efficacy is attached with its simplicity. Gandhi in his writings and speeches often defended “Spinning by charkha against other crafts, even the handloom”.² The Charkha is easily made from local materials- wood or bamboo. Its repair is also simple. There is no need of any expertise of a carpenter. Gandhi further writes in *Young India* that one does not need a charkha to spin- a simple drop-weight mode of spinning of Takli could be basis of spinning practices. Eventually, the whole process of cloth making from growing of cotton, picking, cleaning, ginning and carding it through to weaving and finally selling became the part of national movement. Gandhiji's nephew Maganlal emerged as a leader to impart training of spinning of Sabarmati Ashram. He even developed a new type of spinning wheel (Charkha), which is better in operation and production from the traditional one. The All India Spinners Association (AISA) or Charkha Sangh, as an institutional support ensured the equitable distribution of resources viz. simple Charkhas at various centres of association, easy access to raw materials, high quality of yarn production and finally availability of markets. Although, AISA struggled to meet the needs effectively of the new movement and distribution of Charkhas for its proper use in a manner appropriate to the Swadeshi movement.

Despite the hurdles, Congress launched spinning program in 1920 and also established AISA in 1925. Gandhi linked the spinning with the national movement. He said that a person who is committed to Swaraj (self rule) had to spin at least-half an hour daily. His writings also encouraged

people to engage more in spinning activities. Gandhi appealed schools at all levels to include spinning in their curricula. To have membership of AISA involved spinning either 2,000 yards of yarn in one year or for the higher level of membership, depositing at an approved council office 1,000 yards of self-spun yarn, well twisted and uniform each month. Spinning was the integral part of national movement which also involved people in listening many of Gandhi's speeches as well his day-to-day activities.

Doing properly the things means participation in a right way or 'true participation' in Swaraj. This was the case with the spinning too. Since spinning involved time to learn how to do it properly. So, core element of spinning was commitment participation or complete involvement in it for the political goal-Swaraj. For this purpose a well drafted manual for spinning was published by Maganlal and his associates. Notes available in Young India and discussions with the AISA, the discourse often reflects the problem of imparting training in spinning to the new people. A number of local spinning or charkha teachers used to go out to teach or train other teachers. One teacher taught almost one dozen further teachers. This mode of transferring knowledge required interpersonal contact as well as local networks, ultimately making country vibrant for the national movement, that too with full participation and commitment.

Legible (Readable) in South Asia

The efficiency of Charkha reflects in its easily communicable visual element: the combination of abstract wheel and its practitioner together. The Swadeshi movement was focused on cloth and clothing industry of British or foreign made. The Khadi cloth operated effectively as a symbol, marking the wearer as a participant in the nationalist cause and visually unifying groups of people as they gathered to hear speeches, march or protest.³

Khadi worked as cloth's power, a national symbol, one that taps into long-standing ideas of transformation (cotton into cloth) and traps in its weave the bodily and spiritual elements imbued in it by society, its maker and its wearer.⁴ This was the reason, the wheel appears in a wide range: from various of Indian National Congress flag starting in 1921, to the decorations on the buildings, on the national posters and logos used in the anti-colonial movement. All the Congress meeting, a small flag with charkhas fitted on them was part of the decoration in the political gathering. The wheel played a omnipresent role/symbol at all gathering to mark discernibility of the movement. The meanings and ideas can easily be stimulated around this single and simple logo.

This Charkha/wheel also resonates with the simple wheel i.e. Chakra, a symbol found widely in the Indian traditions. It is often used for the religious and political purposes. It has direct link with the Ashokan wheel of third century BC. Thus, it is recognized in the whole South Asian region as a pious symbol.

The symbol crosses regions because its practice was known in a variety of agricultural as well as rural sectors. “Despite the climate differences, crops and daily activities, one finds spinning in the Himalayas, where often the material spun is wool, not cotton, and in coastal areas where jute is spun or twisted. This pan regional aspect allowed the symbol to communicate across culture: it may not look exactly like the wheel seen in one area, but it represents spinning broadly and that remained something a wide range of Indians could relate to”.⁵

The operation/function of Charkha was easy to read as icon, when positioned in numerous contexts, we conceive in the visual records and mirrored the large numbers of people involved in the national movement. People spinning on Charkha display on flags at the Congress sessions, on its platforms, in logos and in print reappearance of the wheel amplify the importance of Charkha/Khadi and its relation to the Swadeshi.

In addition to transcending regional difference, spinning as both static symbol and symbolic practice – also largely overcame religion and caste distinctions, because it was practised within the domestic sphere as an additional income for agricultural labourers, or as part of a larger family business focused on cloth or net production. The benefit of its role as domestic supplemental labour meant that it escaped codification and restriction in terms of the identity of the spinner, who could be from any religion and sub-caste, and be associated with a wide range of occupations.⁶ Furthermore, its lack of connection to a particular group within the community eased its appropriation as political symbol. Having a spinning wheel/charkha in the home did not mean that the household earned its money primarily from cloth production, while weavers often spun, not all spinner wove.⁷ Even the preparatory stages for spinning, like cotton ginning and cotton carding, took place within a caste-specific and often religious-specific familial context. The pinjari would card and clean your cotton, and the weavers would weave it, but anyone could spin it.⁸

Religion and caste also prevent the allotment of different handicraft traditions viz., leather craft, jute ropes, baskets, painting, terracotta or wood carving. Each of these crafts fulfill the Swadeshi criteria in that they employ individuals who use simple tools and locally available materials. Of course, it lacks in the unifying the subcontinent in the way they spin. The spinning got a jolt by a particular income level i.e. upper class. Here, Gandhian rhetoric failed to make it for every levels of the society. Convincing the upper class was really tough for Gandhi especially the prominent businessmen and politicians. But the national leaders who were close to Gandhi often come forward for spinning except a few. So, spinning never became pervasive among his peers within the Congress as Gandhi wanted.

In making the Charkha or spinning wheel free from gender bias and connecting it as political activity for national movement was tough for the Congress. “The negotiation of masculinity and feminity within Gandhi’s politics as well as the transformation of spinning and the spinning wheel itself allowed spinning to escape its status as a women-only activity. Despite these hurdles, Gandhi’s choice of spinning proved communicable across a range of divisions within the sub-continent, including caste, religion, region and gender. Rather than relying solely on text or print to communicate and build a sense of belonging, Gandhi adopted the additional symbol of spinning and the spinning

wheel. Prolific in his writings in Gujarati, Hindi and English, and recognizing fully the power of media and publications for Swaraj and for producing and unifying the nation as nation”.⁹ Gandhi felt it necessary to employ the charkha more abstract discernible, physical and practical symbol of rural industry that allowed it a national mythology. He saw the ‘Charkha Shakti’ to unite India behind a constructed but powerful village based identity. The ethos of the nation was centered on the villages whereas charkha/khadi representation. Gandhi utilized this deep rooted social conviction for the sake of the nation.

The spinning wheel of the northern Atlantic people was the similar to India. As a result it communicated the message easily across the culture and among the people who were working against the British rule. The sub continental version of the spinning wheel did not sit on legs above the ground, nor did they incorporate foot treadlers. Its size also remained a bit smaller than traditional spinning wheels in Europe as well as North America. However, its shape remained similar enough to translate easily across those context. As each regional culture might have its own narrative related wheel, many of these have similar message that Gandhi wished to tell through spinning.

In northern Atlantic folk literature, the wheel’s transformative powers drive many stories, whether that means a literal spinning of straw into gold or a shift-in bodily chemistry upon picking one’s finger on the spindle. The magic associated with these transformations relates both to the fairytale context of the stories and to an understanding of the power of the spinning wheel to transform raw material into yarn that could then be made into cloth and clothing. The magical aura surrounding cloth, particularly handmade cloth, has been discussed elsewhere, both for Europe and for South Asia.¹⁰

Spinning in these transformative narratives that works as catalyst for this purpose: a woman is able to spin straw into gold, and so she must do so at great speed and at great physical cost, a women pricks her hand on the spindle and falls unconscious, setting the residue of the story in motion. This catalytic power of transformation enabled the Gandhi’s transformative message beyond the sub-continent.

Spinning is done by women in a domestic capacity in Southern Asia as well as the northern Atlantic. It is generally considered as a skill meant for women. The decades around the turn of the twentieth century saw a rise in the interest in spinning in the United States, where the craft became a central part to recover of local historic handiwork. As part of the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain, the demand to pressure spinning wheels as well as the techniques related to spinning came out of the former colonies. One can see in the company painting, a nostalgic desire for a pre-industrial time, which has been lost in Europe but still alive in South Asia. At the end of the nineteenth century the preservation of craft tradition became an salient part of cultural and national identity. The national movement stood upon and participated in this national-cultural activities.

Here, the handicraft served as political ploy in the context of industrialising countries in Europe and North America that see the South Asia as a space which retains so-called purify and authenticity

related to the village life. This visual rhetoric echoed the similar movement for British or American national identity in the form of lost handiwork skills enabled Gandhi's message to travel around the world. It communicated intensely to those who were involved directly in industrial cloth making activities. This whole discourse digs the nostalgia and notion of the world for an idealised past carefully crafted by Gandhi, was turned it towards consolidating an 'Indian nation'. So, the Gandhian rhetoric on handicraft and spinning wheel or Charkha shifted towards forming arguments for self-rule or Swaraj.

Spinning Collectively

Spinning as an activity generally done solely in the domestic sphere either alone or in small groups. It also took on a public face as group spinning demonstrations that revealed images of an United India behind Gandhi's leadership. However, group spinning demonstration appeared less frequently, but the images of Khadi-clad Congress supporters, marching, demonstrating or gathering to hear their leaders speech sent strong messages of united India despite all diversities.

In the early twentieth century, the sartorial unity in both substance-khadi and its neutrality gives united visual impact of the national movement. Alongside the pictures of mass followers wearing white Khadi and Gandhi caps with group spinning demonstrate to both the national as well as international people appealing support for the movement against British. The images of moving spinning wheel with all above decoration says "the fight for national movement in motion".

A political Rhetoric

A demonstration of the group spinning communicates the political message of the national movement to the national and international people. A political symbol like Charkha draws together people of diverse interests, backgrounds and it further motivates them to join for a cause. It also touches the sentiments of those who are outside the movement, even to the opposing political groups / parties.

Finding a symbol which works both in terms of flexibility as well as stability is difficult. In case, once found having combination with verbal and textual, this political symbol works well with durability. It rearticulates the meaning over time and also shapes the political tone and textures. The symbol – charkha or spinning wheel enjoyed its political efficacy for a very brief period i.e. its discovery in 1917 to the mid 1930s. It remained a powerful symbol of Gandhi's movement, it still employed by Gandhian organisations in India and in the World. It taps the idea of salvation of the India's dying rural craft industries, among others. Spinning wheels add in it an emotional appeal of 'national entity'. Here, Swadeshi and Swaraj is embedded in the narrative of Charkha either visual or in motion. In both positions, charkha communicates its embedded messages to all, transcending the barriers viz; caste, region, religion and to lesser extent class. Its ability to speak to the different

audiences across the boundaries of subcontinent while retaining the core element of self rule, the symbol was feasible in fulfilling its purposes.

Charkha comply beautifully the demand of a symbol of both static and enduring; as an abstract visual as well as a symbol in motion ensuring easy participation of the people. Spinning could be done by many people with varied contexts without any negative protest. Protest by spinning was unique, different in nature: just alter of marches, sit-ins and rallies or response to a particular attack etc. Sometimes, it acts as complementary protest as was seen in the gathering at Surat in 1930 after Gandhi's Salt March. Group spinning unifies those people stationed in different places participating in the movement through simple action of spinning. In this way the individuals everywhere might join in the national movement very easily. It also underlines the weight of people participating in the movement under the guidance of Gandhi against those who were in favour to continue the British rule. This rhetoric suggests the Indians unity of all regions, classes and religions.

Gandhi in his writings and speeches emphasized the idea of spinning or doing it represents the 'key to Swaraj'. The spinning action was, in fact, ritualised by Gandhi for the national movement. Charkha in its visual abstract form and also in motion has communicated well the multifaceted meaning connecting to the movement. It also augmented arguments in support of Swaraj and Swadeshi involved in productive action.

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