

MAHATMA GANDHI'S IDEOLOGY OF SWADESHI

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Introduction:

The concept of *Swadeshi* as developed by Gandhi to become a major weapon in his anti colonial strategies had both political and economic dimensions. For Gandhi, *Swadeshi* centered around handspun *khaddar* and extended to everything that could be produced indigenously by the rural masses.¹

Swadeshi as a concept has been defined aptly by Sumit Sarkar in its specifically economic aspect as "a sentiment closely associated with many phases of Indian nationalism— that indigenous goods should be preferred by consumers even if they were more expensive than or inferior in quality to their imported industries and that it was the patriotic duty of men with capital to pioneer

such industries even though profits initially might be minimal or non-existent."As against this definition, an imperialistic definition terms *Swadeshi* to mean anything from the perfectly legitimate and commendable encouragement of Indian industry to the complete exclusion of foreign and especially English goods by a national and often forcible boycott as part of a political campaign against British rule.²

The concept of *Swadeshi*:

The Dictionary meaning of *Swadeshi*

[swə'deɪʃɪ]

adj(Economics) (in present-day India)

produced within the country; not imported

n(Historical Terms) (in British India) the

encouragement of domestic production and

boycott of foreign goods as part of the

campaign for independence

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[from Bengali *svadesī*, from Sanskrit *svadeśin*, from *sva* one's own + *deśa* country]

The concept of *Swadeshi* had a dual aspect to perform under the leadership of Gandhi: One, an ideological aspect and another an economic one. The problem of handloom industry although in essence was an economic one, had in reality two components: One human' and the other functional'. The human element consisted in fact, of a large number of people who were solely or mainly dependent on the handwoven industry for their livelihood and were suffering from certain disabilities and hardships. The functional aspect was concerned with the situation where in methods of producing handloom fabrics and their marketing during the nationalist phase became increasingly, uneconomic, unprogressive and was generally seen as unorganized. This is linked up with the question of how Gandhi himself developed the idea of *khadi* gradually. Earlier, his aim of providing only employment which would earn the weaver a minimum of three *pies* a day, to the final stage of the weaver forming the apex/pinnacle of the *samagra seva* movement, is discussed in detail. What was the primary and final impact on technology or

on the economic sub-structure and finally what was the ideological base of Gandhi's 'charisma? How did he resolve the various contradictory forces and their interplay during the period 1920-'50? For example, the complex competition between the mills and the handloom, the All India Spinners' Association (hereafter AISA) Visa-Vis the Co-operative societies and between the *dallals*, middleman and the Congress ?

With Gandhi's entry into Indian politics after the First World War, a gauntlet was thrown not only to Hindu orthodoxy but also to the British authority. But shrewdly, he stressed political issues when he launched his *Satyagraha* campaigns against the imperial rule and raised social issues during periods of political dormancy. The *khaddar* movement also was in its full swing and had its most lasting impact during the periods between the two major movements, (i.e., Non Co-operation and the Civil Disobedience). Therefore, what is observed is that both for his political and social reform campaigns Gandhi tried to reconstruct tradition so as to the cause of reform. This could be mainly achieved, primarily due to his deep understanding of the nature and mode of discourse and structural on straits of the Hindu tradition. Traditional concepts such as 'satya', *Swadeshi*, 'bramhacharya' were

imparted new meanings by Gandhi and thereby redefining the traditional institution. This transmutation of traditional concepts enabled him to make social and political campaigns intelligible to the teeming masses who could scarcely have been reached by an entirely new rationalist or modern terminology. Some of his interpreters claim that as a method *Satyagraha* itself contain positive elements of coercion'. The tools of Non Co-operation, boycott and strike which were used in *Satyagraha* involved elements of compulsion which may have affected a change on the part of the opponent which is actually against his will.³

History of ideology of Swadeshi :

By the 1870s the concept of *Swadeshi* started gathering a momentum- with emphasis on the promotion of the use of indigenous manufactured goods. In 1872 M. G. Ranade delivered a series of public lectures at Poona on economic issues propagating the use of goods produced in one's country even though they may prove to be dearer or less satisfactory than finer foreign products.¹² This agitation for *Swadeshi* was given a fresh lease in 1896 when the whole country protested against the countervailing excise duties on Indian cloth and received a fresh impetus after the partition

of Bengal in 1905. The view stressed was that Indians should unite irrespective of their religion or other differences and "wake up to the national cause by abjuring the use of Lancashirecloth." Interesting and significant to note, was the fact that the notion of protecting indigenous handicrafts against the severe competition with native machine manufacturers found no place in this phase of *Swadeshi* agitation.⁴

By 1907-08, the emphasis on *Swadeshi* efforts was beginning to shift away from industrial production towards banking, insurance and inland trade where profits seemed much easier to make and capital correspondingly less shy. Therefore, *Swadeshi* ideas as propagated from mainly the economic point of view did not gain the support of every sector. The industrialist class for example, was opposed to these ideas of *Swadeshi* clashing with their entrepreneurial needs and they found it to be an unnecessary waste of public energy and this discontent found expression in their lack of total support to the movement.⁵

The nineteenth century therefore increasingly witnessed the demand for rapid industrialization as a compensation assuming national proportions all over the country. No single newspaper or public worker denied the

advantages to be gained by promoting Western technology in India.⁶

As early as 1900 there was only one voice raised against this mad rush to industrialize. Satish Chandra Mukherjee the Editor of the *Dawn* had the foresight to visualize that it would produce small, highly organized minorities of the capitalist class that would reduce the millions of workers into mere machines and wage slaves and lead the workers to combine in gigantic labour organization

that were bound to be permanent social and political dangers in a country as vast as India. The remedy lay, he propagated, in organizing villages on a corporate basis confining it to a few enterprises like engineering projects, mines, railways, etc.⁷ Along with these indigenously sprouting ideas, the War of Independence of the U.S., and the French revolution inspired the youth of India to react more strongly on the corroding effects of colonial rule on the national character.⁸

This was also a period in which the three major potential streams emerged: Moderates following constructive *Swadeshi*, political extremists using extended boycott and side-by-side the growth of the terrorist movement. By July 1905, the creed of *atmasliakti/self* reliance filled the air of Bengal. With *Swadeshi* schemes of textile

mills, improved handlooms, river transport concerns, match and soap factories, earthenware factories, tanneries, etc., national education through mufassil schools (Aug.1906), the Tarakanath *Palit Society* for the promotion of technical education and efforts to translate Rabindranath Tagore's *Swadeshi samaj* into practice became the highlights of this age.⁹ The chief centres of economic thinking were founded by Gopala Krishna Gokhale, the *Servants of India Society* and in Bengal, *The Dawn Society* which inspired not only a first class institute for higher technical education at Jadhavpur near Calcutta, but was known for its pioneering works in modernized industry and commerce. This gave an added impetus given to this movement.¹⁰

One of the most appealing arguments used by the Indian nationalists to defend and popularize the concept of *Swadeshi* was that since the Government of India had refused to give them the much needed protection to the growing industries of India, the people themselves should undertake to provide protection through the vigorous campaigning for *Swadeshi* goods. Therefore to sum up the nationalist attitude prior to 1905: was one of a "compound of general indifference, positive hostility to measures as the factory acts, which were felt to be threatening the interests

of the nascent Indian bourgeoisie and sympathy for Indians working in British owned factories, mines and plantations.¹¹ Coming to the 1905 *Swadeshi* movement, one sees, its economic aspects had two national objectives: (i.) economic self reliance and (ii.) employment for the people.

¹²

On Aug. 7, 1905 the leaders of Bengal assembled in a public meeting at the Calcutta Town Hall under the presidentship of Maharaja Mahinder Chandra Nandy. It was resolved to declare a

"general boycott of British goods as a practical protest against the proposed partition," after the manner in which the Chinese boycott of American goods had been done. "We" wrote Surendranath Banerjee in 1906, "must be *Swadeshi* in all things, *Swadeshi* in our thoughts and ideas and aspirations- *Swadeshi* in our educational methods and development."

The genesis, growth and economic aspects of *Swadeshi* have been reviewed with the specific purpose of understanding its transformed role under the influence of Gandhi after 1905. It was during the last phase of the *Swadeshi* movement - Gandhian phase (1920-47), that the Congress became truly national in its complexion and its composition changed from that of a western

educated minority group to a mass organization with *swaraj* as its only and ultimate goal.²⁵ A search had begun for a particular path that would preserve the virtues of an Indian traditional society but combined with methods that would solve its economic problems.¹³

The solution to this was given in *The Dawn* of April 1900 which explained that the remedy lay (i.) first in organizing most of the industries on a family handicraft basis confining large scale capitalist industry to only a few exercises like engineering projects, railways, etc., (ii.) second by organizing a corporate ethical life. "By giving to each class a fixed reorganized and independent place in the social organism (sic) but all cooperating in such ordered Coordination as to work for the advantage of whole as to further the spiritual evolution of each ascending grade and of the whole Indian society."¹⁴

To put this very theory in practice came Gandhi, entering the threshold of politics in the first quarter of this century. His rise to power was made possible by events that put an end to the isolation between the different layers of politics. The situation that was prevalent was, where various groups were not longer satisfied with political or the economic mode which they were accustomed

to. The years between the World Wars saw the breakdown of various such barriers, making it both possible and profitable for previously latent groups to erupt and give their support to Gandhi in Indian politics. Simultaneously the earliest terrorist organization in south India also sprouted in Bezwada, established by M.C. Nanjunda Rao, a close associate of Subrahmanya Bharati. They not only provided financial assistance but also vociferously wrote in a journal 'Bala Bharata', (Young India) an English language monthly that was edited by Bharati.¹⁵

Gandhi not only helped the masses to find a standard living wage but also an opportunity for cultivating self-respect by throwing off the symbol of slavery from their backs and gave the craftsmen "a creative joy through the exercise of his credit which forms the true index of civilization."¹⁶ *Khadi* therefore was a programme implemented by Gandhi, a programme remarkable as much for its political importance, as for its continued contemptuous dismissal of foreign domination on economic grounds. It was the first of a series of steps to rehabilitate the under employed rural masses. The role of *Swadeshi* and all that it entailed, i.e., from its finer finish, quality and colour of domestic cloth to a pride in its productive system and

in its own land and culture were all highlighted, thus giving a major impetus to this domestic industry. Just as centralization and divisions of processes were the law of a large scale industry, the effective centralization and integration of processes was the key note of the institution of the All India Spinners' Association (AISA) established in 1925 under the leadership of Gandhi. The concrete work of AISA could be noticed under several heads: (i.) Production and sales, effective marketing of the products by hawking and exhibitions (ii.) Improvement in the quality of raw material and cloth, and lastly, (hi.) reduction in the cost of making and its price.¹⁷ *Khadi* presented a competition in three phases. One of spectacular flourish, one of sad decay and one of optimistic revival. Each of this coincided with a major historical period. The revival of the *charkha* took a different meaning altogether during the modern period. Converted into a symbol of *Sivadeshi*, it represented the willingness of the people to labour and sacrifice for national freedom.

Conculsion :

Gandhi's image conjured up before us until now has been that of a national leader or a saint's or an idealist who did not face the

cruel realities of life. It is not the attempt here to make him appear as a charismatic leader or as a remote superhuman saint."Though, such men are innovation and acknowledge their role as pioneers it should be recognized that their roots and strengths of their greatness lie in the epoch or more concretely in the ethos of the period of material and cultural history".¹⁸

Nevertheless, what this study has aimed at is that, Gandhian ideology and charisma stuck resonant chords in various elements of the Andhra handloom economy. The cult of *Swadeshi* manifesting itself in the economic, social and cultural planes shaped the lives of the Indian weavers in the twentieth century. This it has been demonstrated, had not been as a consequence of an individual power (here Gandhi's) to make history but was a result of a conjuncture of larger impersonal historical forces.

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