

KHADI: A TOOL FOR EMPLOYMENT

A. Annamalai

Gandhiji introduced this small “machine” in Indian society when the whole world was going for industrialization. Mass production for higher profit was the sole motive behind industrialization whereas for Gandhiji production by the masses was the prime concern. He again and again emphasized that India need not copy the west. He warned India that we should not misguidedly be led by the elites.

Gandhiji worked in multiple areas while introducing Khadi. His concern was to empower the rural masses through gainful employment. He thought that the technology should be simple, affordable, and user friendly. Villagers should be engaged in some form of economic activity in the idle hours. Therefore he reintroduced the Charkha to the Indian villages... Gandhiji introduced this small “machine” in Indian society when the whole world was going for industrialization. Mass production for higher profit was the sole motive behind industrialization whereas for Gandhiji production by the masses was the prime concern.

In January 1978, Ivan Illich, author of the concept ‘Deschooling Society’ came to Sevagram to inaugurate a conference. During the stay he spent a great deal of time sitting in ‘Bapu Kutii’ (Gandhiji’s hut). He observed deeply that, “This

hut of Gandhi demonstrates to the world how the dignity of the common man can be brought up. It is also a symbol of the happiness that we can derive from practicing the principles of simplicity, service and truthfulness”.

Even after forty years, ‘Bapu Kutii’ in Sevagram represents the dignity of the people. Gandhiji worked in multiple areas while introducing Khadi. His concern was to empower the rural masses through gainful employment. He thought that the technology should be simple, affordable, and user friendly. Villagers should be engaged in some form of economic activity in the idle hours. Therefore he reintroduced the Charkha to the Indian villages. He toured all over India and witnessed the utter poverty of the people who were living like animals. He observed, “The more I penetrate the villages, the greater is the shock delivered as I perceive the blank stare in the eyes

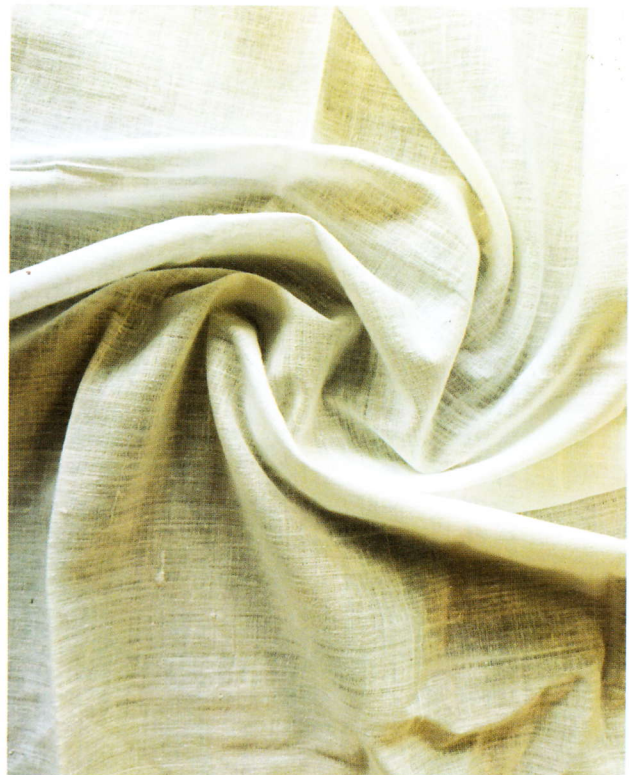


of the villagers I meet. Having nothing else to do but to work as labourers side by side with their bullocks, they have become almost like them. It is a tragedy of the first magnitude that millions have ceased to use their hands as hands. Nature is revenging herself upon us with terrible effect for this criminal waste of the gift she has bestowed upon us human beings. We refuse to make full use of the gift. And it is the exquisite mechanism of the hands that among a few other things separates us from the beast. Millions of us use them merely as feet. The result is that she starves both the body and the mind.

The spinning wheel alone can stop this reckless waste. It can do that now and without any extraordinary outlay of money or intelligence. Owing to his waste, we are living in a state almost of suspended animation. It can be revived if only every house is again turned into a spinning mill and every village into a weaving mill. With it will at once revive the ancient rustic art and rustic song. A semi-starved nation can have neither religion nor art nor organization." (CWMG.,Vol. XXXIII, pp.92-93)

Economic activity through spinning and weaving gave them a confidence. The slave mentality of the masses started vanishing. They experienced the power of economic independence. Agricultural activities were supplemented with spinning and weaving activities. It has a tremendous effect on the minds of the masses. Gandhiji said, "I feel convinced that the revival of hand spinning and hand weaving will make the largest contribution to the economic and the moral regeneration of India. The millions must have a simple industry to supplement agriculture. Spinning was the cottage industry years ago and if the millions are to be saved from starvation, they must be enabled to reintroduce spinning in their homes and every village must repossess its own weaver." (CWMG.,Vol.XVIII, p.72)

Gandhiji introduced this small "machine" in Indian society when the whole world was going for industrialization. Mass production for higher profit was the sole motive behind industrialization whereas for Gandhiji production by the masses was the prime concern. He again and again emphasized that India need not copy the west. He warned India that we should not be misled by the elites. He observed, "... we must not be



entrapped by false analogies. European writers are handicapped for want of experience and accurate information. They cannot guide us beyond a certain measure if they have to generalize from European examples which cannot be on all fours with Indian conditions, because in Europe they have nothing like the conditions of India, not even excluding Russia. What may be therefore, true of Europe is not necessarily true of India. We know, too, that each nation has its own characteristics and individuality. India has her own; and if we are to find out a true solution for her many ills, we shall have to take all the idiosyncrasies of her constitution into account and then prescribe a remedy. I claim that to industrialise India in the same sense as Europe is to attempt the impossible. India has stood many a storm. Each has left its own indelible mark, it is true, but she has hitherto dauntlessly maintained her individuality. India is one of the few nations of the earth which have witnessed the fall of many civilizations, herself remaining scatheless. India is one of the few nations on the earth which have retained some of their ancient institutions although they have been overlaid with superstition and error. But she has hitherto shown an inherent capacity for purging herself of error and superstition. My faith in her ability to solve the economic problem that



faces her millions has never been so bright as it is today especially after my study of the conditions in Bengal.” (CWMG.,Vol.XXVIII, p.32)

Blindly following the West and transplanting the technology developed in these countries into our soil never solve our indigenous problems. Gandhiji’s concept of Sarvodaya, welfare of all, encompasses the philosophy of life. This is the foundation of the Gandhiji’s egalitarian society in which village is the centre. “Khadi is the Sun of the village solar system. The planets are the various industries which can support khadi in return for the heat and the sustenance they derive from it. Without it other industries cannot grow. But during my last tour I discovered that, without the revival of other industries, khadi could not make further progress. For villagers to be able to occupy their spare time profitably, the village must be touched at all points.” (CWMG., Vol.LIX, p.357). Khadi provides employment with dignity and safeguard the life of the millions.

Even during the freedom struggle, the question of following the West was the centre of debate. Gandhiji’s own newspapers were

the platform to discuss this current issue. Many people wrote to Gandhiji of their own point of view. Gandhiji published those letters as well as his reply. For one query Gandhiji replied, “It is said that through highly industrialized processes every American own what is equivalent to 36 slaves. If we use America as our model, and if we allowed only 30 slaves to every Indian instead of 36, out of our 31 crores of human beings 30 crores must perform *hara-kiri* or be killed off. I know that some enthusiastic patriots will not only not mind such a process, but they will welcome it. They will say that it is better to have one crore of happy, contented, prosperous Indians, armed to the teeth, that to have 30 crores of unarmed creatures who can hardly walk... I can only think in terms of the millions of villagers and can only my happiness dependent upon that of the poorest amongst them, and want to live only if they can live. My very simple mind cannot go beyond the little spindle of the little wheel which I can carry about with me from place to place and which I can manufacture without difficulty. In this connection a friend sends me the following paragraph which is going round the press:

"To relieve unemployment in certain industries the Nazis have ordered the stoppage of the use of machines which were displacing human labour. Commenting on this interdiction The Manchester Guardian remarks: 'There has been a great deal of discussion about the effects of machinery in aggravating the unemployment crisis, but it has been left to the Nazis to do the logical thing and stop using it. It is only a little while since the world was asked to admire the miraculous triumph of labour saving rationalization in Germany. Now the Government is bent on fighting the machine, either by prohibiting its use or by compelling employers to work shorter hours and employ more men. Mr. Gandhi's efforts to replace the spinning frame by the handwheel and the mechanical loom by the handloom are being paralleled closely in the German cigar and glass industries'".

That the village industries in Germany are being revived at the point of the sword is not relevant here. What is relevant is that a country, which has shown the highest technical skill and is amongst the most advanced in the matter of industrialization is trying to go back to village industries for solving the problem of her terrible unemployment. (CWMG.,Vol.LVI, pp.147-148)

The choice of technology should also be one of the criteria for suitable development model of our own. The technology which is suitable to our socio-cultural and political conditions may not be suitable to other countries. The way China extracts works from the people may not be suitable to USA and other European Countries. Their use of technology is suitable for them. This appropriateness in using the technology is important and fundamental for development. Choice is ours, whether we are going for a capital intensive technology or labour intensive technology. The decision to select which are the areas we can go with the capital intensive and labour intensive technology solely vests with us. But it needs political will.

"Mechanization is good when the hands are too few for the work intended to be accomplished. It is an evil when there are more hands than required for the work, as is the case in India. I may not use a plough for digging a few square yards of a plot of land. The problem with us is not how to find leisure for the teeming millions inhabiting our villages. The problem is how to utilize their idle hours, which are

equal to the working days of six months in the year. Strange as it may appear, every mill generally is a menace to the villagers. I have not worked out the figures, but I am quite safe in saying that every mill-hand does the work of at least ten labourers doing the same work in their villages. In other words, he earns more than he did in his village at the expense of ten fellow-villagers. Thus spinning and weaving mills have deprived the villagers of a substantial means of livelihood. It is no answer in reply to say that they turn out cheaper, better cloth, if they do so at all. For if they have displaced thousands of workers, the cheapest mill cloth is dearer than the dearest Khadi woven in the villages. Coal is not dear for the coal miner who can use it here and then, nor is Khadi dear for the villager who manufactures his own Khadi." (CWMG.,Vol.LIX, p.356)

Gandhiji was misunderstood by many for his idea of village economy. Gandhiji was criticized by some main stream economists that Gandhiji was trying to set aside the scientific invention of modern times and he try to convince the people to go back to the past. This is far from truth. Gandhiji again and again cleared his stand on science, technology and scientific invention. "I would prize every invention of science made for the benefit of all. There is a difference between invention and invention. I should not care for the asphyxiating gases capable of killing masses of men at a time. The heavy machinery for work of public utility which cannot be undertaken by human labour has the inevitable place but all that would be owned by the State and used entirely for the benefit of the people. I can have no consideration for machinery which is meant either to enrich the few at the expense of many, or without cause to displace the useful labour of many." (CWMG.,Vol.LXI, p.187)

The percolation theory of the modern economic model has failed to distribute the benefit of development to all especially to the lower strata of the society. The reality even today is rich became richer and poor became poorer. The decentralised system of production will certainly lead to equal distribution of income. Rajaji observed, "You cannot distribute the wealth equally 'after' producing it. You won't succeed in getting men to agree to it. But you can so produce wealth as to secure equitable distribution 'before' producing it. That is Khadi".

Therefore Gandhiji's proposition is based on the reality. Gandhiji was not an ideal dreamer but a practical idealist. He said, "Khadi is the only true

economic proposition in terms of the millions of villagers until such time if ever, when a better system of supplying work and adequate wages for every able-bodied person above the age of sixteen male or female, is found for his field, cottage or even factory in every one of the villages in India; or till sufficient cities are built up to displace the villages so as to give the villagers the necessary comforts and amenities that a well-regulated life demands and is entitled to." (CWMG.,Vol.LXIII, pp.77-78)

Therefore Gandhiji insisted that the development of the rural areas is possible only through empowering the rural masses through gainful employment with dignity. Cities are overcrowded and slums are increasing day by day by the migrated population from the villages. Therefore Gandhiji said, "It was by following this line of argument that I hit upon Khadi as a necessary and the most important corollary of the principle of Swadeshi in its application to society. 'What is the kind of service,' I asked myself, '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 country-men to live,' and the reply came that it is the universalization of Khadi or the spinning wheel along that can fulfill these conditions. (CWMG.,Vol.XLVI, p.256)

Now most of the clothing needs are met by the few sophisticated mills which employ very less. Once the Textile Industries were labour industries, but now they have also mechanized their production. Can Khadi co-exist with Textile Mills. The same question was asked during Gandhiji's time. He clarified very carefully. Gandhiji said the following:

- They can standardize their prices, taking the lowest average of a number of top and lean years.
- They can refrain from manufacturing those varieties that can be easily and immediately produced by Khadi organizations, thus freeing their energy for manufacturing more of the varieties they can at the present moment manufacture more easily than the Khadi organizations.
- They can limit their profit to a minimum and let the surplus, if any, be devoted to the improvement of the condition of the labourers.

- This would mean all-round honesty, perseverance, mutual trust, a voluntary and honourable triple alliance between labour, capital and the consumer. It would mean capacity for organization on a vast scale.
- In my humble opinion we are eminently fitted for the task. The organization required for the purpose is not unfamiliar to us. The only question is have we the will? Have the mill owners enough vision, enough love of the country? If they have, they can take the lead." (CWMG., Vol.XXXVI, pp.105-106)

"The 'khadi spirit' means fellow-feeling with every human being on earth. It means a complete renunciation of everything that is likely to harm our fellow creatures, and if we are to cultivate that spirit amongst the millions of our countrymen, what a land this India of ours would be!" (CWMG., Vol.39, p.520) Gandhiji wanted everybody to have the spirit of khadi and spirit of oneness of human beings. Khadi is not a piece of cloth to cover the body but a philosophy to imbibe and follow.

This is the challenge before us. When we celebrate the 150th Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhiji, let us think of Khadi, the icon of Indian Independence. India is now ready to observe the great event. Let us try Khadi and atleast 5 per cent of our cloth should be Khadi during this year. It will definitely have tremendous impact on the mindset of the people as well as in the rural economy. **"INDIA WEARS KHADI"** should be the slogan and we will observe January 30th, the martyrdom day of Mahatma Gandhi by wearing Khadi. Not only you and me, but the whole of India from President, Prime Minister to the masses should wear Khadi on January 30th. Let us make the pledge today.

Let us conclude with the Gandhiji's vision, "If I throw the wheel at the skeletons of Orissa, they will not look at it. But if I begin spinning in their midst, they will take to it like fish to water. The masses do as the great ones do, not as they preach. Hence the necessity for the spinning resolution. It gives us a real sense of responsibility towards the villages, it fills the air with the spinning taste and cheapens Khadi. If the spinning resolution is faithfully carried out by the country, it has a potency of which we have as yet no conception." (CWMG.,Vol.XXIV, p.526)

*(The author is Director, National Gandhi Museum, Rajghat, New Delhi.
Email: nationalgandhimuseum@gmail.com)*