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### KHADI, RELIGION AND CLASS: AN UNDERSTANDING FROM THE GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE

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#### ABSTRACT

In 1915 Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from Africa after successfully fighting against apartheid. From Africa, Gandhi was keeping himself informed about the freedom struggle in India against the colonial powers. After landing in India he travelled across the nation to get an understanding of the nation, its size, demography and cultures. He found cloth to be an element to bind all the people together. And khadi seemed to be the most appropriate choice as it related to the Indian cultural heritage. But under the spell of colonial market policies it lost its space from the Indian homes. He started his rescue operation for the spinning wheel to spin khadi clothes at homes and took to wearing khadi cloths. After changing himself, he appealed to his family and made sure that his ashram members (founded in 1917) followed the khadi life. This article analyses Gandhi's approach to diverse mass, divided into various class and religious practices to unify them all together with a cloth to arouse Indian nationalism against the exploitative colonial rule in India.

#### INTRODUCTION

Gandhi's ashram was the laboratory for him to conduct his experiments with khadi. It was only after seeing success in clothing his family and ashram members Gandhi saw possibility in adopting khadi for the nation. He appealed to Indians to adopt the same. The success was needed to be checked since khadi manufacturing required skilled hands, cotton-yarns, patience and the money to buy it. Therefore, the question was on could public acquire the needed skill to spin and the mind to buy khadi cloth irrespective of its high price. The price of a khadi piece of cloth was much higher in comparison to machine made foreign cloth or Indian mill-manufactured cloth. The reason behind this could be

analysed after reading his book '*Hind Swaraj (1938)*' that machine made clothes were cheaper as they did not require much manual work unlike the spinning wheel which requires manual labour and the cotton yarn to prepare khadi cloth was hand manufactured (unlike those mills produced yarns). It must be remembered that Gandhi started the spinning wheel with an economic aim and hence through the use of this simple machine which is made of a few wooden sticks, he wanted more human resources to get involved in it either as a spinner, cotton carder or as a weaver. For the political aim to create nationalist spirit to fight against the British domination and to free India this inclusion of more people into the khadi campaign would be helpful but the same would not have been possible if big machines of the West was used to manufacture khadi cloth where the use of manpower was less (this resulted into the Great Depression in the West in 1930s).

Khadi had to be linked with different elements like religion, gifts, laws, dress-code for public meetings and the like, to reach to people in largest number and for its acceptability by public. Gandhi presented his visitors with khadi clothes manufactured in his ashram (*Gandhi, 2016*). A resolution was passed and adopted by Indian National Congress in 1920 to wear only khadi but Indian National Congress with its run for power soon rejected khadi and marginalised Gandhi. I shall avoid going into details as it will get detached from the main topic of my research. But still today we see Congress men as well as politicians of other political parties adorning khadi *kurta* and *pyjama* for public appearances. Soon, in his visits from region to region Gandhi appealed to the public who gathered to hear him, to come to his meetings clothed in khadi and with garland of yarns to welcome him instead of flowers.

Gandhi's approach to different groups and communities were of various kinds. And within groups and among groups there were rifts for which an appeal to all to adopt khadi was not enough. The next two sections studies Gandhi's approach to them and also the rifts that got place in the khadi cloth and in its campaign. The two sections are- Religion and Khadi and Class and khadi

### **Religion and Khadi**

Religion has been a major aspect of Indian life. A country divided on the lines of religious sentimental politics can itself portray how much religion matters to Indians and since it holds an emotional place among the Indians, politicians and Britishers used it in their best possible ways to serve their interests. Moreover, the religious sanctions and rituals have always been placed higher even to that of personal gains. Since this research is on Gandhi, an example to check how religion was important can be seen through Gandhi's autobiography itself. His mother as he writes was a religious woman and did lots of fasting. One such fast was observed during the rainy season. If she could see the sun once among the clouds she could eat, if not, then she fasted the whole day. One day, as the sun could be seen in the cloudy sky, Gandhi ran to his home to call his mother to see the sun but before she could sight, the sun already got disappeared behind the clouds. She remained with an empty stomach stating that God might not have written meal for her for that day (*Gandhi, 2016*). During the time period when Gandhi was trying to revive the spinning wheels, it was used only by the

Brahmins basically to prepare their sacred threads. The khadi clothes were replaced by machine made fine, cheap clothes and hence there was no need of the spinning wheel. Under this circumstance since Gandhi could sense the importance of religion, he made it a religious duty to spin one's own cloth. A call was made to use only khadi clothes in the holy places and occasions and insisted priests to be draped in khadi as only then Gandhi 'feels to bow his head'. The argument was that in holy places, only holy clothes should be used and for Gandhi, "*khaddar was the best and holiest of cloths*" (Ramagundam, 2008: 113). So much of socio-political power was accorded and instilled in this particular type of cloth called khadi that it proposed to prostitutes to regain their lost respect by spinning and to become a part of the Indian national movement. Spinning was considered to be a 'sacred vocation' and a way to achieve '*punya*'. The widows who were excluded from the sacred activities, there was this initiative of Gandhi to influence them to contribute in the political sphere in form of accepting remarriage with spinning and Gandhi recognised this remarriage as the purest. Ramagundam (2008), refers to Muslims of Jalandhar, who used khadi as bier to cover coffins. Religious elements were used to reach each section by Gandhi to engage and involve more people in his khadi campaign (Ramagundam, 2008).

But khadi was also used in diverse manners to distinguish religious differences. The Parsi and the Christians as mentioned by Emma Tarlo in her article *The Problem of What to Wear: The Politics of Khadi in Late Colonial India* (1991), rarely wore khadi. The Paris however showed a bit of response towards the khadi campaign by stitching up khadi clothes in the western style, but dyeing them in colours to make them look like the clothes of the English. The article mentions of a khadi cloth dyed black to look like a black cloth. Khadi here was not adopted upon one's own self-instruction but more because others adopted it, therefore, it became a compulsion to be a part of the movement. People who were not in khadi or wearing caps of western cloth material were forced to throw away their hats and caps and their patriotism was doubted upon as khadi got the place of national cloth and has been held upon as India's freedom resides on these threads (which are used to make a khadi cloth). R.K. Narayan's work and of Shankar Nag's direction- *Malugudi Days* (Indian television series telecasted in DD National), telecasted a series based on his novel *Swami and Friends* (1935). The plot is placed around India's Independence Movement. A scene shows people were burning the foreign clothes by piling them in a place. Swami a young boy below ten (10) years was among the mass, excited to see something different from his everyday life. He was quite happy with what was happening as the boycott of educational institutions gave him ample time to leisure around until, when a few protesters came and took away the cap Swami was wearing thinking it to be of western cloth material. It was only on telling his father at home Swami got to know that his cap was of khadi, but was dyed black. This situation arose since people were getting with the English way of dressing and more speedily adopted it, thinking that would equalise them with the colonials, who on the other hands treated Indians as inferiors even on wearing western clothes. Khadi was adopted to fight non-violently against the colonial construction of hierarchy in dress. But irrespective of that, khadi itself was dyed

and sewn to look like English dress. The result was that, in the fire for burning foreign clothes, swadeshi khadi sewn in western style were burnt up.

Besides these, khadi was even made a part of Indian marriages. Brides were made to wear khadi clothes by their families on their wedding day but it did not stop in the dress itself. Marriages in India of religions like Hinduism, Islam and Jainism has the ritual of using and exchanging flower garlands. An appeal was made by Gandhi to exchange yarn garlands in the marriages. Even flower garlands were to be replaced with yarn garlands if any public thought of presenting Gandhi in the meetings (*Ramagundam 2008*). Of course, this reflects that Gandhi did not stop with only wearing khadi clothes. His appeal for yarn garland depicts that how much deeply he wanted khadi, spinning wheel and its equipment to penetrate into the Indian lifestyle. For that even traditional customs were sought to be changed, making khadi the new nationalistic element.

### **Class and Khadi**

Cloth in India represented class and colonial rulers always placed their cloth above others' attires. Khadi as a third world country commodity, which was plain and simple, was placed below as an inferior product to that of western products. Indians too refrained khadi and the spinning wheel as traditional and inferior. The challenge for Gandhi here was to revive khadi and the spinning wheel as top priority for the Indians. The cloth of poor (as thought due to its simplicity and colour) was to be made the cloth of all irrespective of class differences. This section studies the issue of class in adorning khadi.

*“Untouchability of foreign cloth is as much a virtue with all of us untouchability of the suppressed classes must be a sin with very devout Hindu.”*  
M.k. Gandhi, 1921

The above quote of Gandhi was a part of his speech delivered in a meeting in Bombay on August 1, 1921. It was delivered for a mixed religious audience making untouchability of foreign cloth an important practice of their creeds. It was not limited only to the Hindus. He compared foreign cloth with the richest milk which if infected needed to be thrown out. Even people were cautioned against their interest to keep a section of foreign cloth to wear once the movement is over. It would be a futile collection of 'once refused products' which shall be of no use. Neither foreign clothes are like gold whose value increases nor khadi campaign of collecting foreign clothes was like a fund that only a part was to be given (*Tendulkar, 2016*).

Not everyone was ready to accept the idea of 'homogenization' in their clothing. The caste and class structures in India were so strong that to adopt or not to adopt khadi was a conflicting situation for them. The call for khadi adoption was not welcomed by the richer class. Ramagundam (2008) refers to an instance, where the opportunist Indians along with the English to create distrust upon Gandhi, ridiculed him by spreading that Gandhi's dress was 'temporarily and specially adopted' whose aim was to attract the farmers towards his political goal. Ramagundam (2008) also reflected upon Gandhi's reply to the criticism.

Gandhi replied by stating his dress as a national dress, suited to the climate of India and fulfils the hygienic requirements (*Ramagundam, 2008: 33*).

Gandhi did not seek for homogenizing the mass. In a way, he was only creating his group of swadeshists who were ready to overcome luxury for the sake of the nation's freedom. This class creation by Gandhi was flexible enough to include new members on their change of affiliation from the Britishers towards the swadeshi nationalist movement. In the book *Gandhi's Khadi: A history of Contention and Conciliation (2008)*, the writer writes that Gandhi through his khadi campaign did not sought to create a homogeneous mass of all dressed in white khadi but created a line of division between those who acted in the interest of social well-being, in self-sacrificing life goals and those who struck to clung around the British for their selfish interest. However, this class division was not built around water-tight compartments. There was scope left to the Indians to change their affiliation and class through a non-violent pathway unlike Marx's transformation through revolution. The first class referred here were the khadi wearers (*Ramagundam, 2008: 6-7*).

Abbas Tyabji, an elite highlighted his experience upon adapting khadi, as a medium to get closer to masses and how it became helpful for him in engaging himself in social works. He referred to the khadi attire as the 'fakir dress' which broke down all the barriers for him to carry on his social works (*Tarlo, 1991: 144*). Funds were raised, like the Tilak Swaraj Fund out of which money was used to set up Khadi Vastra Bhandar, where girls were engaged to work on homespun khadi cloths. The poor and the depressed class were adopted under this to be a part of the khadi movement. Both economy and protest politics went parallel to each other. Moreover, khadi clothes were sold in the streets, gifted to people of influence who by wearing it can influence many others to wear the same and exhibitions were held (*Forbes, 2008: 45*).

During the National movement, foreign cloths were burnt in public place while khadi was rejoiced upon. To this burning act Andrews, a friend of Gandhi gave an alternative idea to donate those cloths to the poor. But for Gandhi, donation of those foreign cloths, kept for burning, to the poor would not give meaning to the act of swadeshi. For him, burning was a noble act of silently and unconsciously transferring of people's hatred for sinners to their sins. Gandhi applied the logic to his belief- to hate the sin, not the sinner. Going far, he stated giving such clothes to the poor would be an 'insult' to the patriotism of the poor. The hidden interest was that he wanted the poor to be a part of the khadi campaign. Giving them foreign clothes would go against the idea of swadeshi (*Ramagundam, 2008: 29*). He opined burning of foreign clothes should be continued until every foreign cloth have been turned into ashes. He named this fire as the 'sacrificial fire' (*Ramagundam 2008: 28*).

Emma Tarlo (1991) refers to photographs suggesting success of Gandhi in attiring the political persons of Congress. Tarlo as 're-Indianisation' has mentioned attiring people in khadi. The same has been reflected in *Lisa Trivedi's* book *Clothing Gandhi's Nation*. Vijaylakshmi Pandit (sister of Jawaharlal Nehru) writes that she could no longer distinguish the social class of

the politicians who visited their house. She stated of the Congress leaders who thought that spinning cotton to be a solution to eradicate poverty or could be a strategy of political transformation. Unlike the most influential Congress leaders of the time, the Congress members and the public supported Gandhi in his revival of spinning-wheel mission. She also explains that, the middle-class Congressmen who made khadi a part of their lifestyle predominantly popularized Gandhi's nationalist dress. They did not limit khadi only to its use as the national dress; they took it beyond that by using homespun khadi as bed-sheets, curtains and for decorating their homes. However, khadi retained along these uses, its symbol of protest to be used in public against British imperialism. Even in the years to come, khadi as a protest symbol would remain along with being a part of Indian culture and lifestyle (Trivedi, 2007).

An attire to create commonality among Indians, and hence to keep intact its simplicity was the priority behind the idea of calling the khadi movement. But this seemed impossible in a class driven society like India. Unlike other societies of the world, the Indian society is divided into many groups, sub-groups and communities. On one side, there lies the ruler (powerful) and the richer section; on the other lies the ruled and the economically poorer section. Gandhi, by 1921, to reach to the economically lowest ones, adopted that image of 'the Gandhi' which till today is the most accepted pictorial image of Gandhi- 'Gandhi in his loincloth'. Ramagundam (2008) refers to this dress code of Gandhi as 'his patented loincloth'. However, the idea to attire everyone in the same type and quality of cloth was not an easy task. Even in khadi, a class hierarchy was imbibed and, in this case, Gandhi could not erase this hierarchy but tried to stay in the lower level. An incident reflects this presence of hierarchy. Gandhi was in Devakkotah then in 1927 for a meeting. There, he was presented with a piece of khadi, which was 'unusually finely woven'. Gandhi rejected this gift since it would seclude him from the starving millions and his mission for unity through dress would be a failure. The very next day that piece of khadi was sold for rupees one thousand and one. Here Gandhi talked of selling to 'patriotic and wealthy' person from that region who can buy that fine khadi.

Though the rich draped themselves in khadi, their khadi was finely woven and Tarlo (1991) states that it was as fine as 'muslins of Dacca'. Superiority of caste and professions too reflected in the khadi. The khadi worn by the poor labourer were coarse. Even the coarse piece of khadi was not available at low price, and in that situation to think of the finely woven khadi was beyond the reach poor. This coarse piece of khadi was also out of reach for many poor Indians and hence, cheap foreign cloth was their main asset to depend on. To deal with this problem Ramagundam states of Gandhi's approach as- "*While the poor could use mill-made cloth, the affording middle class was to use khadi alone*" (Ramagundam, 2008: 113).

## CONCLUSION

To cover the differences among Indians Gandhi tried to wrap them up in khadi and bring unity among them. But people adopted khadi as an Indian swadeshi cloth by instilling their cultural, economic, religious differences in it. Associations built on political lines also adopted clothes with differences in

colours. Tarlo refers to the khadi uniform of the Congress volunteers, of Muslim volunteers in khadi or green coloured long robes, the red coloured shirts of the Pathans, the saffron saris of the Desh Sevika Sangh and the like. But the aim with which Gandhi adopted khadi as an instrument of protest and a unifying symbol for Indian nationalism was accomplished as India could be freed from British colonial rule.

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